THE SOVIET WAR IN AFGHANISTAN, 1979–89

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was one of the three most significant conflicts of the Cold War era, the others being the Korean War in the 1950s and the wars in Indochina and Vietnam from 1945 to 1975. Indeed, in many respects Afghanistan eventually became the Soviet equivalent of America's Vietnam War. It was also the only Cold War conflict in which Soviet forces were directly engaged in full-scale combat outside – or at best on the periphery of – what was generally acknowledged to be the Soviet sphere of interest. The impact of Afghanistan upon the Soviet Union, its armed forces – the army in particular – and the outcome of the Cold War was significant. Indeed, the eventual withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989 coincided with the year that is generally considered to be that in which the Cold War ended. But as events since 1989 have demonstrated all too clearly, another importance of the Soviet adventure against its southern neighbour in 1980 was the way in which it unwittingly aggravated the Islamic extremism that was already growing in strength throughout the region. This led not only to later security problems in the former Soviet Union's predominantly Muslim southern republics, but also enabled Islamic radicalism, and the excesses and terrorism from which it is inseparable, to flourish virtually unimpeded in Afghanistan post-1989. The evidence of this eventually manifested itself in the terrorist attack at New York on 11 September 2001.

There was a certain irony in this, as US military support for the guerrillas who fought the Soviet invaders was a decisive factor in the mujahedin victory. Had Washington better understood the new threat then incubating in Asia and the Middle East, whilst at the same time appreciating that the more familiar threat posed by communism was in decline, it might have modified its attitude and response to the Soviet invasion. All that it required was for the United States to do nothing – politically, economically or militarily – when, on 27 December 1979, the Soviet Union embarked upon its ten-year attempt to subdue Afghanistan.

The main invasion began when groups of BMD[152] armoured personnel carriers filled with Soviet paratroopers of the 105th Guards Airborne Division raced to secure key points and installations in Kabul. At the same time long columns of armoured vehicles of the Soviet 66th, 201st, 357th and 360th Motor Rifle Divisions rumbled into Afghanistan at Kushka and Termez on the country's north-west and northern borders. Although the Western intelligence community had some warning of the Soviet action, the early news

agency pictures of northern Afghanistan's few metalled roads clogged with columns of sand-and olive drab-coloured trucks, armoured personnel carriers, self-propelled artillery and tanks on transporters, all heading south, had an almost surreal quality. The Red Army was apparently going to war and much of its progress would be closely followed on television screens across the world, as well as through a mass of analysis and journalistic comment.

So how and why did the Kremlin leadership judge that it was necessary to invade and occupy the mountainous, inhospitable and barely civilised land that had already proved more than a match for the armed forces of the greatest empire of the previous century?

Afghanistan had been of considerable strategic importance during the nineteenth century, lying as it did between Russia and what were then the northern states of British India. The intrigues, border conflicts and wars that attended Anglo-Russian relations were then termed the 'Great Game', in which the two major imperial powers in the region each sought to dominate the area. Britain had a clear interest in maintaining the security of the northern border region of India, although in the 1880s it was clear that Russia did not intend to occupy Afghanistan, and so Britain accorded it neutral status. After 1919 Afghanistan at first enjoyed good relations with the new Bolshevik government in Moscow, but this situation deteriorated during the 1920s and 1930s, when Moscow's operations against the Soviet Central Asian provinces spilled over the border into Afghanistan, given the natural affinity the Afghans felt for their fellow Muslims.

Following Britain's withdrawal from India in 1947, with the creation of Pakistan in what had been northern India, Soviet interest in Afghanistan again intensified, and large quantities of economic aid and military assistance poured into the country in response to requests made by the Afghan Prime Minister, Prince Mohammad Daoud. He had taken power in 1953, and hoped to solicit aid from both East and West, modernising the country while simultaneously maintaining its neutrality. The United States also provided aid during the 1950s, primarily in a bid to match that from the Soviet Union. But by the 1960s, with the war in Vietnam occupying more and more American attention and resources, Washington decided that Afghanistan was of little strategic importance and so by default left the country to the Soviet Union. Daoud resigned in 1963, but was later to make a comeback.

From the 1960s, the Afghan army was organised, trained and equipped on Soviet lines, and many Soviet military and political advisers and officials were stationed in Afghanistan. During that decade, two separate Afghan communist parties emerged, and these groups were instrumental in

supporting Daoud's return to power in a coup on 17 July 1973, which ended the traditional Afghan monarchy, with King Mohammed Zahir going into exile. However, once in power, Daoud's administration attempted to steer Afghanistan back towards neutrality. This was not what the communists and their Soviet supporters wanted, and on 24 April 1978 a further coup resulted in 2,000 deaths including the murder of Daoud. The *Khalq* party – one of the two original communist parties – assumed power, and the Soviets provided extensive support for the new head of state, Nur Mohammed Taraki, who proceeded to adapt every aspect of Afghan life to the Marxist-Leninist communist model.

The Soviet desire to have a friendly state on its southern border and to stem the destabilising Muslim influence adjacent to its Asian provinces was understandable; but its misjudgement of the true nature of the Afghan people was fatal, and this was demonstrated in the way in which Taraki was permitted to take forward his programme of reforms.

First, there was a major redistribution of land – a central feature of many communist programmes in Third World countries worldwide. This failed, and resulted in the collapse of the already frail and rudimentary Afghan rural economy. In parallel with major economic changes that went to the very heart of Afghan life, Taraki instituted a number of reforms to emancipate Afghan women. Laudable and humanitarian though many of these reforms were, they offended fundamental tenets of the Islamic faith that the Afghans had followed for centuries and which had guaranteed the undisputed superiority and authority of Afghan men over their women. In an ill-educated, tribal and predominantly peasant society that adhered faithfully to the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed and the rules and guidance laid down in the Koran, Taraki's attempt to transform Afghanistan into a modern, communist (and therefore, by implication, atheistic) state was doomed to failure. Only in the cities, such as Kabul and Kandahar, did the new regime achieve some success. Elsewhere, the mountain tribesmen viewed the government in Kabul in exactly the same way they had viewed all the other foreign powers, unbelievers and reformers they had overcome in the past. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union's failure to manage and modify the process of reform in Afghanistan under Mohammed Taraki made its future direct intervention a near certainty.

In the mountains, villages and provincial towns of Afghanistan, the fiercely independent mujahedin resistance fighters – united and driven both by their Islamic faith and by their historic mistrust of foreigners – began an armed struggle against the Kabul regime and its Soviet backers. This was a land whose fifteen million people were primarily tribal and essentially feudal in nature. About half were Pushtun, with the balance divided almost

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equally between Nooristanis, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkomans, Hazaras and Hiratis. These close-knit groups lived in a predominantly barren, mountainous and windswept land of some 160 million acres. Only about twelve per cent of that area was cultivatable, and only half of that was irrigated. In 1978 the average annual income per head was a mere 157 US dollars. There were no hospitals beyond the main towns and there was only one doctor for every 16,000 people; fifty per cent of children born in Afghanistan died before the age of five. Three-quarters of the population were illiterate, but followed devoutly their Muslim principles and observed absolutely the lifestyle requirements of Islam. In many respects the Afghans were not and are not a single nation – something that the Soviets in 1979 and Britain and others in the previous century failed to take adequately into account. This fact may still be insufficiently understood by those seeking to create a united Afghan nation in the wake of the disastrous Taliban regime at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

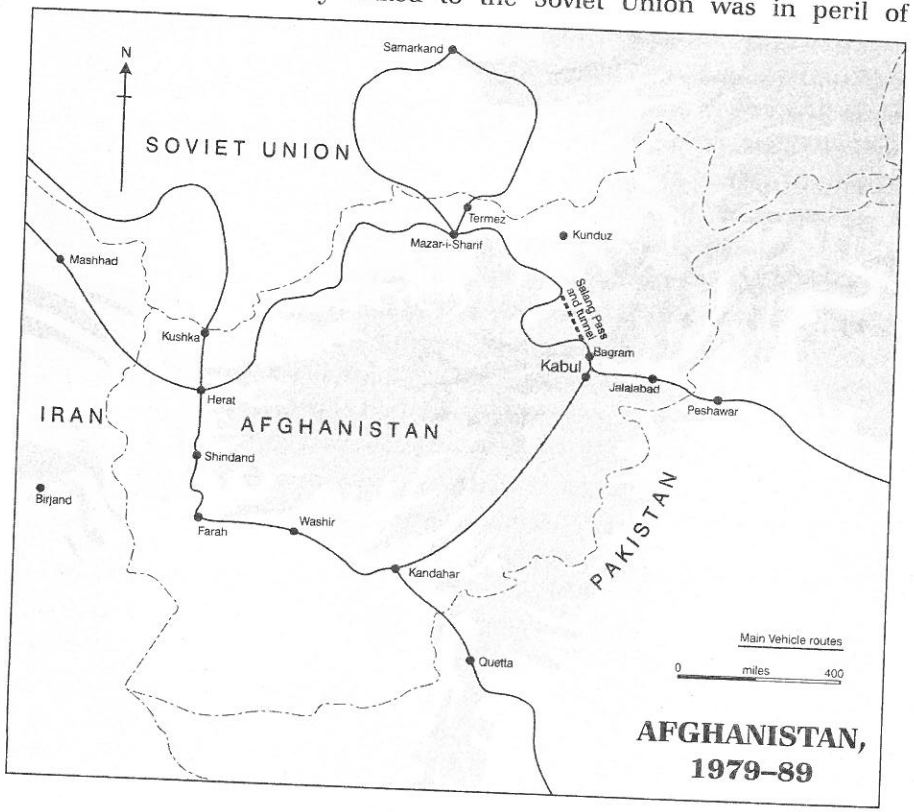
The anti-Soviet guerrilla campaign began in the Kunar Valley close to Jalalabad, an area adjacent to the border with Muslim Pakistan. At the same time, in neighbouring Persia (Iran) the Shah had just been deposed by the Muslim followers of Ayatollah Khomeini. There, the former stable but authoritarian and unpopular pro-West regime was speedily replaced by an Islamic republic, whose policies and actions were directed by a strict interpretation of the words of the Koran and by the universal and often extreme application of the principles of Islamic fundamentalism. Therefore, while Iran began a repressive and dark period in its own history, Afghanistan had potentially supportive Islamic states on two of its three international borders.

By April 1979, the *jihad* or holy war against the communists and their Soviet backers spread throughout the country and affected all but three of Afghanistan's twenty-eight provinces. Only the major towns remained under government control, and insurgency and protest were rigorously suppressed wherever they appeared. At Herat, on 21 March, 5,000 rebels died in a single battle and more than 17,000 people were executed in the Pul-e-Charki prison in Kabul during the year. But instead of deterring dissent such incidents fuelled the insurgency, whilst Soviet military aid to prop up the Kabul regime and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) army increased dramatically. In a move reminiscent of the more extreme communist actions in South-east Asia, the Taraki government ordered the elimination of the nation's non-communist professional classes and opinion-formers by a systematic campaign of imprisonment and murder. A major influence in this repressive campaign was the hard-line Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin, who had been appointed in March.

By the middle of 1979 the DRA forces, their morale already seriously affected by mujahedin successes, were being closely supervised by a large number of Soviet advisers. Indeed, ever since July that year Moscow had probably anticipated a direct Soviet intervention, following a visit of the Soviet Deputy Minister of Defence, General A. A. Yepishev, to Kabul just as the DRA army suffered a series of crushing defeats in open battle at the hands of the guerrillas.

Meanwhile, true to Soviet doctrine, the DRA was routinely employing chemical offensive weapons[153] against the insurgents, together with a formidable range of Soviet-supplied armour and artillery. Most significantly, the powerful Soviet Mi-24 Hind-D attack helicopter, introduced in the European theatre only as recently as 1973,[154] made its appearance in Afghanistan. This marked its first extensive use in combat and Western military intelligence analysts awaited reports of its operational performance with considerable interest.

Throughout 1979 the level of violence escalated rapidly. As the security situation deteriorated daily, the Kremlin perceived that a communist government inextricably linked to the Soviet Union was in peril of



succumbing to Islamic insurgency. Events in nearby Iran demonstrated very clearly the implications for Afghanistan of an Islamic fundamentalist regime taking power in that country; but for Moscow, with its huge Muslim population in Soviet Central Asia, the implications of such an occurrence were potentially devastating. Just as the United States had expounded the 'domino theory' of communist expansion in South-east Asia, so the Soviet Union now faced its own 'domino effect' as the religious fervour that had consumed Iran threatened to overwhelm Afghanistan, and then flow onward into the Soviet Union itself. There were also important strategic considerations involved, as Afghanistan was an important military base and transit route for future Soviet operations against Pakistan or into the Persian Gulf region.

The political crisis deepened when Taraki was fatally wounded on 14 September, during a coup staged by Prime Minister Amin; he died three days later. The new head of state was an extremist who objected to the somewhat more moderate line that Taraki had by then been forced to adopt by Moscow; but he had in any case deduced that he risked dismissal and so decided to act first. It was immediately clear to President Leonid Brezhnev and his advisers that the new regime would not follow the line they were promoting, and therefore nothing short of direct military intervention could restore the situation. Accordingly, the plans initiated in mid-1979 were finalised. The advisability of this action was confirmed by Lieutenant General Viktov Paputin, who had arrived in Kabul on 2 December ostensibly to serve as Amin's 'military adviser'. Paputin attempted to persuade Amin both to give way to the more moderate Babrak Kamal and to invite Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan to restore the security situation – a measure already provided for in the 1978 Soviet-Afghan Treaty. Amin, however, rejected these proposals and so the die was cast.

In mid-December a full-scale call-up of the Soviet reserves began. Up to 100,000 men were returned to military service. Most of these personnel were Muslims from the Soviet Central Asian and Turkestan Military Districts – a rather perverse decision by the Soviet high command given that their forces would be opposed by Afghan Muslims. At that stage, however, the Kremlin doubtless believed that a benevolent form of invasion was still possible, in which case the use of Muslim soldiers might well have proved beneficial. In the event, with no prospect of a policy change by Amin, the stage was now set for a war that would eventually shake to its very core the confidence and morale of one of the greatest military machines that the world had ever seen.

The invasion was launched on 27 December 1979 and was similar in concept to the operations in Hungary and Czechoslovakia in 1956 and 1968 respectively. Although the Termez-based headquarters of the Soviet 40th Army, commanded by General V. Mikhailov, was nominally in command of

the operation, Moscow maintained a direct satellite communications link that enabled the Kremlin to control the Soviet forces on a day-to-day basis. Initially, *spetsnaz* units seized key points and communications facilities, as well as the strategically vital tunnel at the Salang Pass, while the two leading motor rifle divisions of the ground invasion force crossed the Soviet-Afghan border in the north and west of the country. As the 105th Guards Airborne Division – 5,000 men strong – moved out from Bagram airport and secured Kabul, including the Duramalan Palace, Soviet advisers had already neutralised most of the DRA tank units. The Afghans had been informed that their armoured vehicles were about to be removed to the Soviet Union, prior to their replacement with new equipment; so they had already taken most of these vehicles out of service and had stripped out much of the communications, add-on weaponry, fire control and instrumentation.

The long convoys of T-54/55 and T-62 tanks, BMP armoured personnel carriers, trucks, missile launchers, and towed and self-propelled artillery motored south from Kushka to Herat and Shindand, and from Termez towards Kabul and eventually to Kandahar. Overhead, flights of MiG-21 and MiG-23 fighter bombers screamed by, ready to deal with any Afghan force that threatened to impede their progress.

Meanwhile, at the presidential palace two battalions of paratroopers supported by BMDs and ASU-85 airborne self-propelled artillery met brief resistance from a DRA tank regiment. In the course of this clash, Soviet Lieutenant General Paputin was apparently shot by one of Amin's personal guards; possibly while attempting to persuade Amin to relinquish the presidency. Shortly afterwards Amin was himself shot by the Soviet paratroopers.[155] Despite the earlier attempts to present the Soviets as allies assisting the friendly government of a beleaguered neighbouring state, these events finally dispelled any pretence that their intention was other than to subdue and control Afghanistan on their own terms. The immediate Western responses to the invasion were predictable, although their subsequent extent and repercussions had probably been underestimated by the Kremlin when planning the invasion.

Alongside universal international condemnation of the Soviet action, in Washington President Jimmy Carter moved swiftly to implement trade sanctions – specifically restrictions on grain sales – and the transfer of technology to the Soviet Union. The US Congress was also persuaded to postpone ratification of the SALT 2 treaty that had already been negotiated with Moscow. Another target of Western displeasure was the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games, which were boycotted by the United States and others. Later in 1980 the Soviets were also censured by the Non-Aligned Movement, the UN General Assembly and the Organisation of Islamic Nations.

Meanwhile, the United States – with a view to neutralising any threat to the oil-rich Persian Gulf region – indicated an intention to bolster its military presence in that area, in order to deter any Soviet expansion beyond Afghanistan. Washington also took a fateful decision to provide military aid to the mujahedin resistance fighters, and thereby committed America to assist these Muslim 'fighters for the faith' in the conduct of their *jihad* against the communists. By so doing, the United States indirectly enabled the coming to power of the Taliban regime that later supported, sheltered and sustained Osama Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda – the Islamic extremist organisation identified as responsible for the terrorist atrocity in New York on 11 September 2001.

Not surprisingly, Pakistan and certain other Muslim states also supported and provided weapons to the mujahedin. Following the US lead, Britain likewise provided weapons to the mujahedin later in the war – a double irony in light of the British defeats at the hands of earlier generations of Afghan tribesmen during the previous century, and Britain's and the West's present-day problems with Muslim extremism. Pakistan's role was a decisive factor, and the early internationalisation of the conflict by the Afghan resistance was crucial to its ultimate success. The CIA, MI6 and Saudi Arabia worked closely together to support the insurgency and generally agreed that while 'the Pakistanis would run the war, the Western-Arab anti-Communist coalition would foot the bill'.[156] (Incidentally, Afghanistan was to be one of the few sites of Cold War conflicts where Western forces – such as members of the British SAS Regiment – may have been directly engaged in combat against Soviet troops while serving as advisers to the mujahedin.) Western funding notwithstanding, there was also a significant influx of funds from Muslim states and individuals across the world. Much of this activity was coordinated by the Muslim Brotherhood, a politically conservative Islamic organisation which had originated in Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century, and now channelled the considerable sums it raised to the mujahedin via Pakistan.

Despite the pre-emptive action of the Soviet advisers, some DRA units did resist the invaders, and more than 2,000 Afghan soldiers died during the first two days of the Soviet invasion. However, the bulk of the 80,000-strong DRA was disarmed by the Soviets without any resistance. More than half of these men deserted early, and a number of them subsequently joined the mujahedin in the mountains. The Soviet intention had always been for the DRA to conduct most of the eventual ground war against the mujahedin forces in the countryside and mountains, while the Soviet forces would provide air power and fire support, and secure the capital, the provincial towns, strategic installations and the main road links. By and large this concept was

followed, and the DRA bore the brunt of the fighting, especially during the first four or five years of the conflict. The arrangement was also intended to minimise Soviet casualties, whilst reducing the ability of DRA units to oppose the Soviets in the future. But a series of military defeats at the hands of the guerrillas and the consequent decline of the self-confidence, military capability and morale of the DRA – which also stemmed from its pre-emptive treatment by the Soviets during the first few days of the invasion – meant that Moscow had no choice but to involve Soviet ground forces more and more against the mujahedin in the hinterland.

The initial phases of the invasion were completed with an efficiency cultivated over three decades of preparing and (in East Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia) carrying out such operations to maintain Soviet control of the communist bloc countries. Once the main roads and the capital were secured, headquarters 40th Army relocated to Kabul, although the high command in Moscow still maintained direct control of the operation, as indeed it did throughout the war. Babrak Karmal was installed as prime minister. He had previously been living in East Germany and was therefore a known quantity, having cultivated some support within the Soviet military, and considered to be both politically reliable and controllable. Despite this, it soon became clear to Moscow that Karmal was incapable of leading the Kabul regime in the coming guerrilla war, and the Soviets subsequently contrived the appointment of Dr Muhammad Najibullah as Afghan president. Najibullah was a former head of the Afghan secret police, the KHAD, and so was well qualified to oversee the counter-insurgency campaign.

Within a month two more Soviet motor-rifle divisions – the 16th and the 54th – reinforced the original four motor-rifle divisions and one airborne division that had carried out the initial invasion. This raised the in-country Soviet force level to about 80,000, with a further 30,000 men readily available from the Soviet Union. Later in 1980 many of the reservists who took part in the original invasion were rotated out of Afghanistan and replaced by regular conscripts. In January and February of 1980, as the severe winter weather constrained operations by both sides (other than in the urban areas), the Soviet forces settled into their newly-acquired territory and prepared for the renewed guerrilla campaign that would begin in the spring. In the mountains the mujahedin also readied themselves for the next part of the conflict.

Veterans of the Vietnam War might well have recognised several of the operational techniques and tactics of the Soviet and DRA counter-insurgency campaign. However, the base-line rationale for the Afghanistan conflict was fundamentally different. Whereas the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies had been defending a beleaguered South Vietnam against the formidable military threat from North Vietnam, the Soviets and

their Afghan allies were conducting a campaign against the people of a country that they had invaded and now sought to subdue. Necessarily, therefore, the Soviet campaign was in many respects punitive, divisive and suppressive, and as such it could never have gained popular support in the country.

The course of the conflict was familiar. At first, there were many popular demonstrations against the Soviets and the Karmal administration. However, these were vigorously suppressed wherever they occurred. Typically, a demonstration in Kabul on 22 February 1980 was dealt with by DRA and Soviet troops and resulted in some 300 civilians lying dead on the streets. Strikes were robustly broken by the authorities and student demonstrations were speedily crushed, so that by mid-1980 the main focus of resistance was the mujahedin.

During 1980 Moscow had maintained its original strategy. While the DRA operated on the plains and in the hills and mountains, the Soviets secured the lines of communication, population centres and military bases, and provided airmobility and fire support to the DRA units. Soviet military advisers (about 2,000 in total) also accompanied the DRA units and formations at virtually every level of command. Early in the war, there were also more than one hundred Cuban military and civilian advisers in Afghanistan, while East Germans, Bulgarians and others were also variously involved as consultants to the Kabul regime.

Central to the DRA campaign were extensive clearance operations which often encountered severe resistance, resulting in high casualties. This led to a greater use of Soviet troops from 1981, and to smaller, more focused actions. However, by the end of the year they too had suffered a succession of defeats by the mujahedin. Moscow increased its force levels, but despite the extensive use of air power and helicopter airmobility, further defeats followed in 1982 when the Soviets resumed their large-scale search-and-destroy operations. These costly actions acknowledged the elusive nature of the mujahedin, and were intended to deny the insurgents whole areas of territory that were within striking distance of urban areas and key military targets. Nevertheless, the tempo of guerrilla ambushes, attacks and sabotage – including within Kabul – remained generally unchanged, and although there was no countrywide coalition of the mujahedin forces, the guerrillas still managed frequently to defeat Soviet and DRA units in open battle.

From 1983 the Soviets used bombers to destroy isolated villages and extended the ground denial programme by rendering whole areas uninhabitable. This increased rural hatred for the occupying forces and further fuelled a process begun in 1979, when the Soviets had deliberately set out to destroy Afghanistan's already rudimentary agricultural economy. Clearly,

such policies were hardly designed to generate popular backing for the invaders in a land where the threat of starvation was ever-present. The Soviet and DRA forces did, nevertheless, at last achieve a number of battlefield successes in 1984, although the low-level guerrilla attacks continued largely unchecked.

By 1985 armed clashes were taking place at division-level, with both sides suffering heavy casualties, although the mujahedin managed not only to avoid any major defeats but also to overcome entire Soviet and DRA units. The war became increasingly bitter with each passing month, even though it was largely conducted unseen and unreported, as relatively few photo-journalists gained direct or uncensored access. The Afghan tribesmen lived fully up to their savage reputation, and any Soviet soldier unfortunate enough to fall into their hands alive usually suffered a horrific fate. The Soviets repaid the many mujahedin atrocities in kind and – with the full range of modern weapons such as tanks, bombs, napalm and chemical agents available to them – on an even larger scale. War correspondent Doris Lessing filed a first-hand report of insurgent fighters 'tied back to back by Soviet troops, drenched in gasoline, and left ablaze'.[157] The annihilation of whole villages in reprisal or pre-emptive operations by air strikes or ground actions occurred on a number of occasions. The correspondent Eric Margolis, one of the very few journalists who reported the war from the mujahedin side at first-hand, recorded:

> As Afghan resistance spread, the Soviets and their Afghan allies, unseen by the outside world, embarked on a ferocious scorched-earth campaign that combined the merciless destructiveness of Genghis Khan's Mongols with the calculated terrorism of Stalin. Villages that had sheltered mujahedin were razed. Crops were burned; farm animals machine-gunned. Tiny butterfly mines, no bigger than a tea saucer, but capable of blowing off a man's foot, were strewn by the millions. Booby-trapped toys were dropped from the air; Afghan children picked them up and had their hands blown off. Irrigation systems that had provided water for eight hundred years were destroyed; wells were poisoned. The dreaded Afghan KHAD secret police, trained and led by the KGB, imprisoned, tortured, and executed tens of thousands of Afghans … Gravediggers could not keep up with their workload, and complained bitterly to the authorities that their quotas were impossible to meet.[158]

Among the massacres of insurgents and civilians by the Soviet forces those at Kerala in 1979, Rauza in 1983 and Baraki Barak in 1984 are well documented.

However, in Afghanistan relatively few Western journalists made the perilous journey into the country to report on the war. Margolis spent three years reporting the conflict and noted:

> Afghanistan was a most inconvenient, difficult war for journalists. Places like South Africa or the Mideast (sic) had decent accommodation and good telecommunications. You could cover a battle, or the latest bloody outrage, and be back in your Intercontinental Hotel in time for a hot bath and dinner. Getting into Afghanistan usually meant trekking in from Pakistan through the mountains, an arduous and dangerous trip that could take weeks, during which hepatitis and food poisoning were as much a danger as Soviet bullets, rockets, or mines. And every step deeper into Afghanistan meant a longer, more perilous return voyage to the safety of Pakistan. Equally discouraging, TV teams were far too expensive to send on lengthy, dangerous missions into a remote war in the mountains of the Hindu Kush … Afghanistan was a media-unfriendly war. The few Western news teams that ventured into Afghanistan usually penetrated no more than a few miles, had themselves filmed in Afghan garb beside a knocked-out Soviet tank, and then returned before dark to Pakistan. One American TV newscaster, decked out in Afghan garb, even had a small fake battle staged for his benefit.[159]

Margolis also highlighted the difficulties that he and others experienced trying to have their hard-won stories published in North America, due to 'Afghanistan's remoteness and the West's desire to avoid disturbing the supposed détente with the USSR for the sake of what one newspaper "described as a few Afghan bandits" [which] made people deaf and blind to the industrial-scale butchery in Afghanistan.'

Although the mujahedin were content to combat the DRA forces in the field, they were also prepared to negotiate local ceasefires and other arrangements with them. This revealed the true nature of a war that was still tribal and traditionally Afghan in nature; where the common enemy was the non-Muslim Soviet invader. Consequently, despite the very marked differences between the several mujahedin groups involved in the war, virtually all of Moscow's attempts to capitalise upon these divisions failed.

As the war drew on, the Soviets again increased their force level. By mid-1985 there were three motor-rifle divisions (5th, 108th, 201st), one airborne division (103rd) and twelve independent brigades, regiments and specialist combat and KGB border security units in Afghanistan. There were also two

additional motor-rifle divisions (357th, 360th) just over the border in the Soviet Union, which conducted operations into northern Afghanistan from bases at Kushka and Termez. In 1985 the Soviet strength in Afghanistan was about 115,000 combat and combat support troops, plus 40,000 more in the USSR. They were reinforced by about 10,000 air force personnel, with 50,000 support personnel in the USSR. But the overall total was actually somewhat higher, due to the deployment of at least 5,000 KGB border troops and MVD interior ministry troops to Afghanistan. By the mid-1980s the total strength of the guerrillas probably well exceeded 700,000, although the disparate nature of the mujahedin makes any direct comparison of force levels difficult.

The guerrilla casualties were significantly higher than those of the Soviet and DRA forces, and mujahedin losses probably numbered several hundred thousand dead by the mid-1980s, while those of the Afghan civilian population overall (including the guerrilla casualties) may have been as many as a million. Meanwhile, by the end of 1986 the Soviets had lost up to 15,000 killed in action, with about 45,000 wounded. The DRA had lost more than 18,000 killed in action, plus significantly more personnel wounded, missing in action or deserted. Disease also claimed many lives. As the war proceeded, so the casualty toll rose inexorably, and – just as it had in America during that country's war in Vietnam – public opinion in the Soviet Union turned increasingly hostile. Another aspect of the war that mirrored the US experience in Vietnam was the escalating incidence of drug abuse – mainly heroin – by the young Soviet soldiers who were operating in a region that was the world's greatest cultivator of the opium poppy, from which heroin was produced.

The war continued. In Moscow, President Brezhnev died, to be succeeded by Yuri Andropov, and then, following the latter's early death, by Konstantin Chernenko. Against the political changes and trends emerging elsewhere in the world during the 1980s, all of these traditionalist leaders persisted with the Brezhnev doctrine for the security and perpetuation of the Soviet Union and communist bloc. And so, as growing dissent and disquiet led to waning confidence and morale within the Red Army in Afghanistan, the way was finally opened after 1985 for Mikhail Gorbachev to pursue a dramatically different policy, while simultaneously offering the West a pathway to the end of the Cold War.

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan the United States had significantly enhanced the military capability of the mujahedin by the provision of air defence weapons, including hand-held SAM systems.[160] This enabled the guerrillas to combat the helicopters and other low-flying aircraft that were so essential to all Soviet operations. The journalist Eric Margolis witnessed an early use of the American Stinger SAM by the mujahedin:

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> Fadil pointed. 'There, there, at about two o'clock.' Squinting against the sun, I could just make out dark shapes approaching us from the north, moving fast in the cobalt-blue sky. There was no cover anywhere. The dark shapes drew closer. Fadil watched them calmly through his field glasses. 'Sukhoi-25s. Three!' these were Soviet-built, heavily armoured attack aircraft, probably flying out of the huge Bagram airbase near Kabul. The 25s were configured for ground attack, carrying cannon, rockets, and anti-personnel bombs. The Sukhois were coming because another group of mujahedin had just shelled and were assaulting an isolated Soviet outpost a mile to the west of us. Fadil and his team were in an overwatch position, providing air defence cover for the attack. Intent on the besieged outpost, the Soviet pilots failed to see our group. They deployed their dive brakes, slowed down, and prepared for a strafing run on the mujahedin attacking the outpost's heavily wired perimeter. Fadil directed two of his men who held Stingers on their shoulders. He carefully adjusted their aim points: 'five degrees left, Selim … Lead more, more … wait, wait, wait … Fire,' Fadil said, his voice flat and emotionless. The two Stingers launched with an intense backblast. They flew toward the three Sukhois, corkscrewing slowly … We heard an explosion in the distance, then saw a puff of black smoke where the Sukhois had been. The first Stinger had found its mark. The other one continued its flight, disappearing from our sight. Moments later, we saw a wing tear off one of the Sukhois. The plane nosed up, then began to cartwheel down, until it smashed into the earth. The two other Soviet aircraft immediately went to full military power, pulled maximum-G turns, and fled the scene at speed … 'Allah Akbar! Allah Akbar!' Fadil and his men cried out, shaking their fists at the fleeing Soviet warplanes.[161]

The provision of American Stinger SAM systems to the mujahedin quickly forced major changes upon Soviet air operations.

Large amounts of financial assistance continued to flow in from Western and Muslim sources, and by 1988 more than 600 million US dollars was reaching Pakistan annually, for use in supporting the mujahedin campaign. The Americans had expanded the USAF presence in Pakistan and had established a worldwide Rapid Deployment Force (RDF). Both measures reflected Washington's continued concerns over the long-term security of the Gulf oilfields and any future Soviet intention to gain control of them. At the time of the invasion in January 1980 the Persian Gulf supplied thirty-two per cent of America's oil needs, seventy per cent of Europe's and seventy-seven per cent of Japan's.[162]

In fact, Washington need not have worried about Soviet intentions, and by supporting the mujahedin whilst limiting Soviet ambitions in the region it actually ensured the stranglehold of the Arab and other Muslim states over the world's principal sources of high-quality crude oil. Indeed, US support for the mujahedin eventually created an even more complex situation in the region, together with a potentially much greater threat to world stability than that posed by the Soviet Union at that stage of the Cold War.

In Pakistan, the government headed by General Zia al-Haq had assessed that the invasion was but the first part of a wider Soviet military campaign designed to overwhelm Pakistan and end at the coast of the Arabian Sea. Accordingly, in early 1980, he had directed General Akhtar Abdul Rahman Khan, the Director General of Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), to take all necessary action to organise, arm and supply the Afghan resistance fighters. This policy created a safe haven and base for the mujahedin in the south-east of the country and ensured that the insurgency could be prosecuted indefinitely. It also laid a firm foundation of support which the Islamic extremist Taliban movement later exploited with alacrity, to the considerable future discomfort of the Pakistan government.[163]

By the late 1980s the war was threatening the process of East–West détente. It was also prejudicing the rapidly improving bilateral US-Soviet and Anglo-Soviet relations that characterised the years during which President Reagan was in the White House, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was in Number 10 Downing Street, and Mikhail Gorbachev – a man with whom both these Western leaders and Chancellor Helmut Kohl in Bonn at last believed they 'could do business' – was in the Kremlin. Militarily, the war was virtually stalemated, although the enormous financial and human costs to the Soviet Union – where the economy was failing and public awareness of the conflict in Afghanistan was widespread – were still escalating.

Consequently, by late 1987 a Soviet withdrawal had become all but inevitable, and following a wide-ranging and pragmatic review of the situation a withdrawal was finally ordered by Gorbachev. This began in May 1988 and was generally completed in February 1989, with the last Soviet elements departing Afghanistan by April that year. Elsewhere, less than a year later the Berlin Wall was little more than a tourist site, the Warsaw Pact was in a state of collapse and would shortly be consigned to oblivion, Russia was on the verge of emerging from the political debris of the former Soviet Union as a sovereign state once more, the Confederation of Independent States (CIS) was in embryo, and the Cold War was to all intents and purposes at an end.

The Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan had ended, but the Najibullah regime, using the vast quantities of matériel inherited from the departing Soviet forces, continued the counter-insurgency campaign. Then,

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in late 1991 the mujahedin launched a major offensive, several units of the DRA army mutinied, and in May the following year Kabul fell. Najibullah was replaced as head of state by Mojadidi, who was in turn replaced shortly afterwards by Burhanuddin Rabbani. In the inter-factional fighting that persisted throughout 1993 some 10,000 Afghans died, and by the end of 1994 much of Kabul lay in ruins while the country as a whole was in varying states of chaos. From this situation, with the connivance and active support of Pakistan and (to a lesser extent) Iran, there emerged in southern Afghanistan a new Islamic fundamentalist force called the Taliban.

This little-known extreme religious group was headed by Mullah Mohammad Omar Akhund and it speedily transformed itself into a guerrilla army. After a two-year campaign against the Kabul government troops, most of the country was under Taliban domination, and Mullah Omar's forces finally took control of Kabul on 27 September 1996. The strict imposition of Islamic *sharia* law was accompanied by an orgy of killings, reprisals and repression, in which the inhabitants of Afghanistan in general and of Kabul in particular exchanged an authoritarian communist dictatorship for a new and less predictable tyranny: one driven by exclusivity, intolerance, and religious fanaticism. The turbulence continued with a series of campaigns against the Uzbeks and other tribes and factions. By mid-1998, however, it was generally correct to describe the Taliban as the governing power. Thereafter, it mirrored the sort of support it had enjoyed from its Pakistani sponsors by providing a safe haven and active support for organisations such as the Al-Qaeda terrorist movement.

Thus the Soviet invasion in 1979 and its failed military campaign in Afghanistan produced one of the most significant long-term consequences of the Cold War. For from the conflict in Afghanistan there emerged a new threat to world peace and security, the nature and scale of which may yet eclipse the fears, excesses and horrors that characterised the very worst days of Stalin's communist empire. Indeed, although the Taliban regime was finally removed by the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan in 2002, the volatile nature of Afghanistan and its disparate peoples are such that true peace and democracy will probably continue to elude the country. Afghanistan's longer-term future remains almost as uncertain today as it has been during the last two or three centuries.