

Operation Cyclone: How the United States Defeated the Soviet Union

Robert D. Billard, Jr.
University of Colorado at Colorado Springs

The Soviet-Afghan War was the source of increased hostilities between the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The purpose of this research is to determine how much influence the United States, through covert operations, had over the Soviet Union. My argument consists of sources such as presidential security directives, accounts from intelligence personnel involved, Afghan narratives, embedded journalist accounts, Russian perspectives, and political interviews with leaders of the time to assist in suggesting massive U.S. influence in the failure of the U.S.S.R. This research is driven by three arguments: 1) U.S. involvement impacted détente in a manner which forced the Soviet Union into uncontrollable spending in hopes of expanding their empire, 2) U.S. aid to insurgent Afghans directly attributed to Soviet defeat and 3) U.S. involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War ultimately resulted in the downfall of the Soviet Union. Ultimately my argument is that U.S. involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War forced the Soviet Union into a political and economic situation from which it could not recover.

In December of 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in order to help prop up the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, a communist state that was dependent on the Soviet Union. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan prompted the United States, mostly through covert means, to disrupt Soviet strategy by aiding the Islamic Mujahedeen of Afghanistan. The beginning of the Soviet-Afghan War, which marked the end of détente, can historically signify the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union.

It is important to understand the historical context from which the Soviet-Afghan War emerged. The war itself marked the end of the period known as détente, which was a period of relatively eased tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Détente came to exist by virtue of the recognized aspect of mutually assured destruction that nuclear warfare would cause between the two countries. Though the level of détente fluctuated throughout the Cold War, it was arguably at its highest point during the Nixon administration. However, détente during this time was viewed quite favorably by the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union viewed détente as resulting from a buildup of international favor towards the socialist country, and believed that it would prevent the Western nations from trying to bargain with the

Soviet Union from the context of strength. This would help the Soviet government attain its goals while reducing the risk of war with the West significantly.¹ This Soviet view on détente was based on a justified view of relatively eased tensions with the West on the Communist bloc. Further objectives, such as the ability to pursue goals in central Asia and Afghanistan, could now be attained much easier than previously thought.

Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski commented on this view of détente, noting that “Détente of the kind that existed in the mid-Seventies was really undermined by the Soviets, who thought that they could have détente and a fundamental shift in the balance of power at the same time.”² He later goes on to discuss how the Soviet Union felt entitled to their behavior in the Third World.³ The former National Security Advisor’s point is that any sort of peaceful ambitions the United States may have cherished would ultimately be undermined by the Soviet leadership. Détente, therefore, was not operating as a vehicle to provide a more stable working relationship between the two superpowers. Rather, it acted as a subversive means from which the Soviets could hope to lull the West into a false sense of security, thereby aiding attempts to pursue expansionary objectives, namely Afghanistan. In the spring of 1972, U.S. president Richard Nixon became the first leader to make an official visit to the Soviet Union. The Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev reciprocated this with a U.S. visit a year later, in 1973. Accordingly, there were more agreements between the rival nations signed during these visits than in the entire previous period since the establishment of diplomatic relations.⁴ Détente was made possible not only by mainstream methods but also by “backdoor” means.⁵ These means were enabled by the Nixon administration’s cooperation with the Soviet government in hopes of peaceful understanding, albeit undermined by aforementioned Soviet intentions. “Backdoor” in this case refers to the fact that, during this period, the Brezhnev regime became quite fond of the familiarity with the Nixon administration. There were many meetings of officials between the two countries and a mutual understanding was realized, so the United States felt, towards relations between the two countries. Regardless of Soviet intentions, this fact did leave both countries with a better sense of security, regardless of how warranted it was.

According to Andrew and Gordievsky, despite the perceived ease of tensions, “the United States remained the Main Adversary,” to the Soviet Union⁶ and the resignation of U.S. President Richard Nixon did nothing to help an already paranoid government in Moscow. The succession of President Ford, however, allowed the trusted backdoor methods of communication to continue between National Security advisor Henry Kissinger and the Soviet Union.⁷ The election of Jimmy Carter as president in the United States, however, forced a new relationship between Washington and Moscow. President Carter was still open to the concept of détente, but it was during his term as president that the practice ended.

¹ David Holloway, *Soviet Policy for the 1980s* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1982), 36.

²Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski.” Interviewed by George Washington University, *National Security Archive*, June 13th, 1997.

³ Ibid.

⁴Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 536.

⁵ Ibid., 537.

⁶ Ibid., 539.

⁷ Ibid., 537.

While relations between the United States and the Soviet Union fluctuated, the growing Soviet influence in the Persian Gulf served to foreshadow the war that would be the downfall of the Soviet Union. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union progressively showed more and more support to Afghanistan, particularly the Marxist elements within the country. General Mohammed Daoud was one such individual who would prove to be important to Soviet ambitions in the region. Author Mike Martin, who would spend time with the Mujahedeen fighters in Afghanistan, says that “the country was ripe for takeover and Daoud seized power again in 1973.”⁸ Ideally, Daoud’s plan was to utilize the communist assistance provided by the Soviet Union in order to return to power. Such alliances are not uncommon in the political history of Afghanistan. Daoud’s ambitious takeover was short-lived, however, as his presence thoroughly allowed Soviet backed communist agents to move into positions of power throughout the country, and ultimately, there was little control that Daoud possessed over Afghanistan.⁹

Thus the foundation of a communist Afghanistan began to take shape. Author Mike Martin later described the Communist Party inadvertently forcing political opponents “from the centrist ranks into the arms of the fundamentalist Muslims,”¹⁰ and by the time Daoud realized what was happening it was too late. The Soviets had used a left-leaning general as a full communist puppet. The cementing of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan came in April of 1978 in what would become known as the “April Revolution.” The Communists took over, Daoud was overthrown, and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was established.

The organization of a communist regime in Afghanistan, now fully supported by the Soviet Union, was of great importance to strategic interests of the United States. This was especially pertinent when, in February 1979, the Western friendly monarchy in Iran, led by the Shah, was dissolved and an anti-American Islamic Republic established in its place. To add to this, the ruling Ba’athist party (led by Saddam Hussein) of Iraq was strongly supported by the Soviet Union, as well as Soviet influence in Syria, Yemen, and Ethiopia.¹¹

However, while the situation appeared undesirable to the United States, a similar sentiment was shared in Moscow. Embedded Russian journalist Artyom Borovik wrote in his book *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist’s Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*, “in the spring of 1979, the Kremlin¹² was quite alarmed by American activity in Afghanistan. Moscow was convinced that after Washington lost Iran the United States was planning to turn Afghanistan into its anti-Soviet outpost in Central Asia.”¹³ Borovik also described the state of the Kremlin as being paranoid. Accordingly, the Soviet Minister for Foreign Affairs, Andrei Gromyko, exacted “the entire foreign affairs apparatus in order to exert pressure” on the countries supporting anti-Soviet

⁸ Mike Martin, *Afghanistan: Inside a Rebel Stronghold* (New Delhi, India: Heritage Publishers, 1985), 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, introduction section

¹² The Kremlin is used to describe the Soviet government

¹³ Artyom Borovik, *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist’s Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990), 10.

forces and sentiment in Afghanistan.¹⁴ Former United States Secretary of State Alexander Haig also expanded on Soviet urgency in Afghanistan, relating it to the need to “undermine the strengthening of the Islamic fundamentalist belt at [the Soviet’s] southern border,” and in commenting on the potential liberation of Soviet-occupied Central Asian countries, he stated, “the remote possibility that this might really happen at some point in the future is what forced the Soviet Army to enter Afghanistan in 1979.”¹⁵ Both the United States and the Soviet Union had serious concerns about the future of the region. The stage was now set for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Further, and most importantly, American involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War forced the Soviet Union into an economic and political situation from which it could not recover.

In December of 1979, the Soviet Union finally invaded Afghanistan in an effort to prop up the communist government. This, in conjunction with the response that would be elicited by President Jimmy Carter, would effectively mark the end of the *détente* between the United States and the Soviet Union. In his State of the Union address in January 1980, President Carter addressed the situation:

An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States. It will be repelled by the use of any means necessary, including military force.¹⁶

In Presidential Directive NSC-63, not declassified until January 2001, Jimmy Carter outlined the reaction of the administration to Soviet advances in the region. In this document he outlined the following steps he intended to take in response to the onset of the Soviet-Afghan War. His plan detailed the U.S. strategy intended to meet commitments and defend vital interests in the region. His outline intended to address the means through which this would be accomplished by directing that the United States build capabilities, develop military response options, enforce economic and diplomatic sanctions on the Soviet Union, assist other countries in the region, improve access to facilities in the region, and take a regional approach to securing economic and political interests. In the buildup phase, President Carter maintained that the United States must retain a credible force in Central Asia. The broad range of military response options extended to include U.S. force projections, hoping to compensate for the sizeable number advantage the Soviets would possess in actual conventional forces. Economic and diplomatic sanctions internationally filed against the Soviet Union were intended to not only diminish their credibility as a nation, but to make it even more difficult to invade Afghanistan. Assisting other countries in the deterrence and diminishment of Soviet threats to stability were intended by the president as a means of repelling further Soviet penetration into the region. Finally, this security directive helped to ensure that the historic importance played a prominent role in U.S. relations with Afghanistan to help keep the countries stable in this region while helping to ensure U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Ultimately, President Jimmy Carter’s plan was to take a more developed look at the region and to not simply draw a line to specific countries as political entities.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹⁶ President Jimmy Carter, State of the Union Address, January 23, 1980.

¹⁷ President Jimmy Carter, *Presidential Directive/NSC-63: Persian Gulf Security Framework*, Washington, DC: 1981, 1-2.

Now not only had the conflict begun, but almost instantly we see the roots of U.S. intervention into the war. It is important to note the array of responses to which Jimmy Carter was open. This is most evident in the Presidential Directive in which President Carter discussed the importance of local history in the region. In a retrospective interview conducted by the National Security Archive, former National Security Advisor Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski lauded the aggressive stance the Carter administration took in providing assistance to anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan: “in my judgment I thought they would be going into Afghanistan ... and I recommended to the President, that we shouldn’t be passive.”¹⁸ He added that not only were there repercussions as Carter had described in Presidential Directive NSC-63, but that Dr. Brzezinski himself, almost immediately after the invasion, traveled to Pakistan for the purpose of “coordinating a joint response.”¹⁹ In *Red Flag Over Afghanistan*, author Thomas Hammond confirmed Brzezinski’s claims. He wrote that the invasion was seen as an important, while divisive, turning point in Russian and American relations. Accordingly, President Carter wrote a personal letter directly to Brezhnev himself demanding withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in the face of serious consequences.²⁰ This apparently served as a unifying force within the U.S. government, since as Hammond described, “After the invasion, the differences between Brzezinski and the State Department about Afghanistan largely disappeared, since [Secretary of State, Cyrus] Vance and his associates were outraged by what the Soviets had done.”²¹ The United States was now ready to take the next step. Beyond sanctions against the U.S.S.R. and providing monetary aid to insurgents in Afghanistan, the United States was prepared to directly aid an insurgent force: the Mujahedeen.

The term *Mujahedeen* is an Arabic word meaning freedom fighters. This is both from the translation of the Arabic, and also the term that was applied by President Ronald Reagan.²² Though the term was not invented by President Ronald Reagan, it was the preferred method used by himself and the administration in referring to the unification of various insurgent groups in Afghanistan that the U.S. worked with in order to defeat the Soviet Union. The Mujahedeen were a group of people willing to repel any foreign invasion and certainly lived up to this aspect of their culture. The Mujahedeen were comprised mostly of an assortment of local tribes who had banded together to fight the Communist takeover of Afghanistan, but also consisted of many foreign fighters who were called into service by the Pakistan special service, the ISI.²³ The *Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence*, or ISI for short, is Pakistan’s equivalent of the American CIA. The ISI played a large role in America’s aid of the Mujahedeen by helping transport armaments across the mountainous border between the two countries and further providing both monetary and military aid to the insurgency.

¹⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski,” Interviewed by George Washington University, *National Security Archive*, June 13th, 1997.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Thomas Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan: The Communist Coup, The Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 120.

²¹ Ibid., 121.

²² John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee publisher, 2006), 475.

²³ Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 129.

As previously reported, funding and support for this group began under the Carter administration. Under the Reagan administration, however, funding, arming, and training were taken to a much higher level.²⁴ In Reagan's *National Security Decision Directive Number 75*, declassified years after the events took place, the President detailed how he intended to deal with the Soviet Union. In regards to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Reagan detailed specifically what the tasks of the United States were: contain Soviet expansion, exploit Soviet weaknesses, and exert maximum pressure on the Soviets' Afghan invasion force. With regard to Soviet expansion, Reagan outlined that it was the mission of the United States to effectively compete against the Soviet Union in "all international arenas."²⁵ The arena of military balance in relation to certain parts of the world was heavily emphasized. Reagan argued that the effort to not only contain, but to reverse Soviet expansion, should be the primary focus of U.S. policy towards the Soviet Union. Second, the president explained that the United States should work to exploit the multitude of weaknesses that had been made available by the Soviet Union. Though he did not describe exactly what those weaknesses were, he added that the United States, through its policies, should encourage Soviet bloc allies whenever possible to distance themselves from the government in Moscow. Also, this move intended for domestic democratization of such countries to occur. Finally, on the topic of the Soviet-Afghan War directly, Reagan wrote that it was important not only to exert maximum pressure on the Soviet invasion but to ensure that the Soviets' costs, both military and political, remain very high throughout the occupation.²⁶ The directive properly articulated the attitude that the Reagan administration would maintain throughout the duration of the war. Historian John Prados chronicled the role of the CIA and the White House throughout this war, and noted,

In its first year the Reagan administration doubled the size of the previous CIA budget for the Afghan project. Once the Saudis matched that, Pakistan's ISI [secret service] had real money to play with... Through the year the rebel groups averaged almost 500 attacks a month. According to Soviet figures more than 500 vehicles were destroyed that year and 4,550 security troops killed.²⁷

In this respect, the importance of U.S. aid to the Mujahedeen is revealed. The instant response by the Carter administration and the subsequent increase by the Reagan Presidency started to make Soviet deployments to the region quite difficult. This war was anything but cold. An even more important observation to be made about Prados' commentary is that it shows the Saudi contribution, a matching one at that, to the U.S. cause. This will become very important later as it will suggest a swaying of allegiance for the Saudi monarchy to the United States, and make the procurement of oil very difficult for the Soviets. Author Hugh Seton-Watson, in *The Soviet Union after Brezhnev*, adds: "By the time that Reagan became President, the world 'détente' had become unpopular in the United States."²⁸ Seton-Watson later struggled to understand the

²⁴ John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee publisher, 2006), 475.

²⁵ President Ronald Reagan, *National Security Decision Directive Number 75: U.S. Relations with the USSR*, Washington, DC: 1983.

²⁶ President Ronald Reagan, *National Security Decision Directive Number 75: U.S. Relations with the USSR*, Washington, DC: 1983.

²⁷ John Prados, *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee publisher, 2006), 476.

²⁸ Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Soviet Union after Brezhnev* (New York, NY: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1983), 149.

foreign policy of President Reagan. The author, having published his work in 1983, was clearly operating under the ignorance of classified information. Seton-Watson, of course, would have been ignorant to that information since the true policy of the Reagan administration, towards the Soviet-Afghan War, as outlined in Reagan's 75th National Security Decision Directive, would not have been available to the general public at that time. Unbeknownst to contemporaries such as Seton-Watson, therefore, the importance of aid to Afghani Mujahedeen would continue to grow throughout the 1980s.

The emergence of now powerfully backed Mujahedeen fighters would leave the Soviet Union in an uncomfortable position. This was especially important since expansion into Afghanistan was preceded by the Soviet Union's inherent need to extend its influence. Donald Barlett, of *Time Magazine*, commented,

The [CIA] concluded that the Soviet Union, which had been self-sufficient in oil, was running out and would soon become a major importer. 'During the next decade,' the report said, 'the U.S.S.R. may well find itself not only unable to supply oil to Eastern Europe and the West on the present scale, but also having to compete for OPEC oil for its own use.' Two years later, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan.²⁹

This is a very important point in the discussion of why the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and how, in ultimately losing, the Soviet Union gave up quite a bit more than just a foothold in central Asia. An inability to provide self-sustainment would therefore require oil purchase from other countries, specifically Saudi Arabia, which by this point was in support of the United States. This would cause unsustainable price increases for oil by the Soviet Union that it could simply not afford. Yegor Gaidar, writing for the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, confirmed this in his paper, *The Soviet Collapse: Grain and Oil*. In this document, Gaidar offered some comparative perspective on this matter by mentioning the fact that, in 1974, the United States suffered an economic shock when oil prices increased. The effect was far more dramatic for the Soviets when the same thing happened during the 1980s. For comparison purposes, the United States suffered a negative 15% rate on gross domestic product, but for the Soviet Union, the effect of the same problem was measured in hundreds of percentage points.³⁰ The U.S. policy and action regarding the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan coerced the Saudi monarchy to join in on the side of the Americans. In doing so, the problem of oil importing was made much worse for the Soviets as the Saudis quadrupled oil prices for them. This could not be sustained by the Soviet Union, and thus we see the beginning of the Soviet downfall, as a direct result of U.S. involvement in the Soviet Union's Afghan excursion. Ironically, the invasion of Afghanistan was due in part to the Soviet Union's effort to expand in response to their newfound inability to produce oil, and it was this need to expand that caused an even greater expenditure of

²⁹ Donald Barlett, "The Oily Americans." May 13th, 2003.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,450997-92,00.html> (accessed April 21st, 2010).

³⁰ Yegor Gaidar, "The Soviet Collapse: Grain and Oil." April 19th, 2007. <http://www.aei.org/issue/25991> (accessed April 22nd, 2010).

oil revenue.³¹ Therefore, the result of the Soviet collapse was due in part to its overzealous efforts to prevent it. Gaidar offers an important explanation of this:

The timeline of the collapse of the Soviet Union can be traced to September 13, 1985. On this date, Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, the minister of oil of Saudi Arabia, declared that the monarchy had decided to alter its oil policy radically. The Saudis stopped protecting oil prices, and Saudi Arabia quickly regained its share in the world market. During the next six months, oil production in Saudi Arabia increased fourfold, while oil prices collapsed by approximately the same amount in real terms.

As a result, the Soviet Union lost approximately \$20 billion per year, money without which the country simply could not survive.³²

Had a deal been worked out with the now U.S.-friendly Saudi monarch (friendly at least in terms of stance towards the Soviet Union), then the invasion of Afghanistan could have halted, resources could have been allocated to Soviet infrastructure growth, and oil importation could have been handled at a much cheaper rate, all of which would have allowed the Soviet Union to survive. The Soviet Union's plan to simply disregard the issues it faced forced it to begin borrowing money from abroad, and by the latter part of the 1980s the state debt rose to exponential levels.³³

As a result of the Soviet Union's ill informed plan to invade Afghanistan, the overall infrastructure of the country started fell apart throughout the decade. The United States' gamble on the Mujahedeen was about to pay off. The CIA acted quickly in arming Mujahedeen fighters in a timely fashion in order to adequately prepare them for fighting use against the Soviets. Further, the Reagan administration was responsible for this rapid deployment of troops, weapons, and training, and funding was approved by the administration within months of Reagan's assumption of office. It was thereby presented by the CIA, in a move corresponding to Reagan's *National Security Decision Directive Number 75*, as an act meant to prevent Russian progress in the region.³⁴ In a fitting complement, Don Barlett continues,

When Ronald Reagan replaced Carter in the White House a year later, he turned up the heat. Administration officials insisted that the Soviet Union's interest in Afghanistan was a prelude to a communist takeover of the Middle East oil fields. The CIA report on the Soviets' running out of oil gave the Reagan Administration the ammunition to secure more money from Congress to arm Afghan insurgents and establish a permanent military presence in the Persian Gulf. Soon after Reagan took office, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger announced that it was essential for the U.S. to establish bases in the Persian Gulf region "to act as a deterrent to any Soviet hopes of seizing the oil fields." The Reagan

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 475.

Administration began building those bases, sold sophisticated AWACS planes to Saudi Arabia, and conducted joint military exercises with Egypt and other countries. And the CIA began one of its longest and most expensive covert operations, supplying billions of dollars in arms to a collection of Afghan guerrillas fighting the Soviets. The arms shipments included Stinger missiles.³⁵

The introduction of the Stinger missile weapon system, along with all other surface-to-air rocket launchers, would prove to be the last major blow to the already crumbling Soviet Empire. The reason for the Stinger came about as a result of the need for a more accessible anti-aircraft weapon in mountainous terrain. The importance of this weapon system is even greater due to the fact that it existed as a transportable weapon; in the mountains of Afghanistan this is exactly what the Mujahedeen needed to take down the Soviet invasion.³⁶ The late representative Charles Wilson, who remained in charge of the covert operation, insisted on providing easily transportable weaponry in large quantities.³⁷ Crile, referencing a document that remains classified, wrote that Wilson was able to acquire this by virtue of President Reagan's *National Security Decision Directive 166*: "The object of the CIA's campaign, [Reagan] wrote, was now to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan 'by all means available.'"³⁸ Not only was the President advising full support for any and all means necessary, but the need for American involvement to stay secret was diminishing. Early on in the United States' involvement in this conflict, the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI, had banned CIA operatives from having any direct contact with Afghani Mujahedeen. This policy was loosened over time and eventually forgotten all together. The CIA could now directly smuggle weaponry across the border and provide it directly to Afghan insurgents, and thus the supposed need to hide the fact that the Americans were directly aiding them became obsolete. This too assisted in the introduction of the Stinger weapons system, capable of clearing the skies of the dangerous "Hind" Russian helicopter.³⁹ Therefore the CIA was now directly providing access to the Stinger missile for the insurgency. Outside of access to weapons provided by the Egyptians, the Mujahedeen were now in possession of a powerful American weapon system that could remove the Russian Hind helicopters, which by this point had killed many Afghan fighters.⁴⁰ Crile also described another technological victory to be had by the Mujahedeen, and more importantly the critical blow to Soviet morale that it inflicted:

The Spanish mortar, for example, was rarely deployed and may only have succeeded because the Pakistani ISI advisers were along to direct the fire. But the Soviets didn't know that. When the weapon was first used it wiped out an entire Spetznas [Incredibly lethal and skilled Soviet Special Forces, akin to American Green Berets] outpost with a volley of perfect strikes. And as soon as Bearden learned from the CIA's intercepts that the commander of the 40th Army had

³⁵ Donald Barlett "The Oily Americans". May 13th, 2003.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,450997-92,00.html> (accessed April 21st, 2010).

³⁶ George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (Waterville, ME: Thorndike Press, 2003), 518.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 589.

³⁹ Ibid p. 616

⁴⁰ Ibid

helicoptered to the scene, he knew that from that day on, the Soviets would have to factor in the possibility that the mujahideen had acquired some deadly targeting capability. For that reason alone, the weapon was a success even if it never fired again.⁴¹

Weapons and training were now funneling into Afghanistan from multiple legitimate sources and there was nothing the Soviet Union could do to stop it.

Embedded Russian journalist Gennady Bocharov, in his memoir *Russian Roulette: Afghanistan through Russian Eyes*, wrote, “At the beginning of the war the choppers flew as they liked around here, at any altitude they fancied.”⁴² Bocharov also wrote later how this changed the flying mentality of helicopters, like the Hinds, in their war fighting strategy. In this, he said that Russian helicopters were forced to fly very low to the ground, which exposed them to heavy machine gun, and sub machine gun, fire. This would prove, however, to be less dangerous than the risk of flying too high and getting blown out of the sky by missile fire.⁴³ The introduction of surface-to-air missile systems caught the Soviet military off guard; thus the military aspect of the weaponry was not the only useful part of providing such weapons. The mental aspect that lingered in the minds of Soviet military personnel added a terrifying dimension to combat that wore heavily on their minds. Early on in the combat phase of the war, when the insurgents were not getting desired armament, Russian propaganda still touted the Western aid to the country. Despite this, however, there was the question of why the Mujahedeen were not able to receive the kind of weapon systems, such as the Stinger, that would ultimately shift the war in their favor. This was clearly no longer an issue.⁴⁴ It was already recognized that the introduction of Stinger missiles would tip the balance of power before it was actually introduced. Of course, this turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy as the balance would indeed tip in favor of the anti-Soviet forces. The psychological impact alone of such weapons required that they rarely be used. Therefore a single usage would have sufficed. Not content with this, however, the United States began introducing such weapon systems en masse.

The arming of Afghan rebels was inherently linked to the decline of the Soviet Union. The Soviets were now losing their ability to deal with the Saudi Arabian government, and even unknowingly losing control of certain facets within their own government. The United States’ plan was to inflict as much loss and damage on the Soviet Union as possible during their tenure in Afghanistan, making the ill-advised invasion as difficult as possible. As this continued, certain aspects of the Soviet bloc would themselves become more susceptible to corruption. As former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski described in his interview with the National Security Archive:

... the second course of action [the first being sanctions] led to my going to Pakistan a month or so after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, for the purpose of

⁴¹ Ibid p. 648

⁴² Gennady Bocharov, *Russian Roulette: Afghanistan through Russian Eyes*, Translated by Alyona Kojevnikov, (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 145-146.

⁴³ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁴ Mike Martin, *Afghanistan: Inside a Rebel Stronghold* (New Delhi, India: Heritage Publishers, 1985), 146.

coordinating with the Pakistanis a joint response, the purpose of which would be to make the Soviets bleed for as much and as long as is possible; and we engaged in that effort in a collaborative sense with the Saudis, the Egyptians, the British, the Chinese, and we started providing weapons to the Mujaheddin, from various sources again - for example, some Soviet arms from the Egyptians and the Chinese. We even got Soviet arms from the Czechoslovak communist government, since it was obviously susceptible to material incentives; and at some point we started buying arms for the Mujaheddin from the Soviet army in Afghanistan, because that army was increasingly corrupt.⁴⁵

Not only were China and Egypt now complicit in the matter, but more importantly the Soviet bloc itself was, perhaps unknowingly, directly contributing to its own downfall. First, the admission that the Czech government was accepting bribes for arms is already an alarming display of disarray within the Soviet controlled countries. However, the fact that weapons were provided directly by the Soviet Army in Afghanistan at some point in the war suggests a real breakdown of order within the Soviet organization. The U.S.S.R. was not immune to poetic justice, after all.

Going into this war, and for the beginning portion of it, the Soviet Union had all the momentum an invading superpower could hope for. Oil production was still self-sustaining for the Soviets. The fall of U.S. support in Iran, coupled with a very strong Soviet presence in Iraq and other countries in the region, opened a large power vacuum from which the Soviets presumed they could easily step in and solve their oil importing problems. At the time of the invasion the Mujahedeen were nothing more than a minor insurgent group only causing minor problems to the massive Soviet Union. To the Kremlin, the occupation of key central Asian prospects was perhaps little more than routine business to which the Mujahedeen were neither well enough equipped nor properly motivated to defeat. Therefore, it was truly the addition of anti-air weaponry that allowed Afghanistan to evolve from the business as usual client state for the Soviets to the ultimate proving ground between two superpowers.⁴⁶ Early in the war, the intelligence community of the United States, such as the CIA, might not have expected to fare any better in Afghanistan than in previous attempts, such as Nicaragua or Lebanon.⁴⁷ Therefore, early support for the Mujahedeen did prove helpful, but it was not quite enough to repel the Russian superpower. Retired Brigadier General Theodore C. Mataxis, a U.S. veteran who served with the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, wrote of this, and the subsequent turnaround:

Helicopter gun ships, the 'Frogfoot' close air support aircraft, and well-trained Spetsnaz forces were increasingly effective, and Mujahedeen morale plummeted as casualties soared. 1985 was the year of decision. Gorbachev [General Secretary and later President of the Soviet Union] ordered his commanders to win the war during that year, and the Soviets launched an all-out effort. The battered

⁴⁵ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski." Interviewed by George Washington University, *National Security Archive*, June 13th, 1997.

⁴⁶ Robert Kaplan, *Soldiers of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2001), 217.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Mujahedeen held on and began receiving the ‘Stinger’ shoulder-launched air defense missile. ‘Stinger’ changed the dynamics of the battlefield. Soviet jets and helicopter gun ships were forced to fly much higher and lost most of their effectiveness ... Gorbachev realized that he had to expand the war significantly or withdraw. He prepared to withdraw.⁴⁸

It is now evident that not only was Western assistance necessary in order to foil the Soviet plans in Afghanistan, but that it also required a certain technology. In that same publication, the editor added to the logistical problems created by the armament of Afghan Mujahedeen. He described how, at first, the guerilla fighters only had aged British rifles from the First World War to utilize.⁴⁹ The Afghans progressively received more modernized weapon systems, such as the AK-47, an assault rifle that was standard among Soviet bloc countries at the time. Ironically, the upgraded weapons forced the Soviets to reevaluate how close they were willing to get to insurgents. Three hundred meters would become the designated standoff distance desired by Soviet forces, and with this additional room the Mujahedeen were capable of being supplied with greater munitions.⁵⁰ Therefore, the continuation of arms dealing to the Afghans allowed for progressively better materiel to be supplied. As willing and motivated as the Afghan rebels were, they stood little chance of victory without the ability to remove the air component from the Soviet arsenal. In allowing for this, U.S. covert operatives successfully stalled Soviet plans for expansion into the region. This would cost the Soviets more than just Afghanistan.

The social structure of the Soviet Union, too, was now starting to inhibit a great deal of dissent. Confusion might be at the root of this, however. In *Russian Roulette*, Russian journalist Bocharov detailed an account in which he interviewed a Russian soldier about the war. While at first the soldier seemed uncomfortable to speak his mind, Bocharov’s journalistic capabilities unveiled an attitude among the Russian populace that was not uncommon. The soldier admitted that he knew nothing of Afghanistan and was ignorant of its very existence until just before being conscripted into the Army.⁵¹ More alarming yet was the fact that the soldier in question did not know why the Soviet Union was involved in Afghanistan, other than to assist a “fraternal country,” and to perform his “international duty,” (a theme very common among Russian veterans).⁵² When confronted on whether the Soviet government had made the right choice to enter Afghanistan, the soldier, named Andrei, responded that it was the generals who knew that sort of thing. When asked the same question, General Gromov [Russian general in charge of Soviet forces in Afghanistan] deferred, stating that he was in control of the army, and that sort of question should be posed to someone else.⁵³ Bocharov concluded that the consensus seemed to be that the average Soviet soldier was without a clue as to the reasoning for the invasion of Afghanistan. The general in charge of Soviet forces refused to answer any questioning regarding why forces were deployed. Therefore, there does not seem to be any reliable contemporary

⁴⁸ Theodore Maxis, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost and The Russian General Staff* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), xiv.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Gennady Bocharov, *Russian Roulette: Afghanistan through Russian Eyes*. Translated by Alyona Kojevnikov (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 137-138.

⁵² Ibid., 138.

⁵³ Ibid., 138-139.

Russian source to argue why the Soviets continued the occupation of Afghanistan.⁵⁴ No one from the Soviet Union seemed to know why they were in Afghanistan.

It is, therefore, important to understand the role of media in the Soviet Union's failure. In the U.S.S.R., the media was entirely state-sponsored and -controlled. This left the Soviet government able to present the Afghan incursion in any manner it deemed appropriate. It did just that, and in a manner that is quite unfamiliar to U.S. audiences. In the Soviet news, the government decided it would not broadcast a great deal of information on the war and chose to market it as Soviet assistance, once more to a fraternal government. The sole Soviet news program, one that existed as a mouthpiece for the Kremlin, was instructed by Soviet propaganda experts to only suggest that Soviet military activities in Afghanistan were at the request of the Afghan government. It was stated that the Soviet Union was there in an effort to assist the people of Afghanistan. As far as the war was concerned, this was about all that would ever be discussed on television.⁵⁵ The media was also told to "rebuff claims that the Soviet Union was interfering in Afghanistan's internal affairs."⁵⁶ Something of the magnitude of the Soviet-Afghan War would prove to be very difficult to hide from the Soviet population. The fact that army deaths were not allowed to be reported by the media did not go over well with the populace.⁵⁷

Worse yet was the Kremlin's direct refusal to support the families of fallen soldiers. In a disturbing meeting, it was brought up by Russian politician Mikhail Suslov whether or not the Kremlin ought to support the families of fallen soldiers with 1000 rubles, an ample amount of money to cover the cost of a tombstone at the least. Since this would require something as simple as a public acknowledgement that the war even existed, and Suslov recognized this, the move was terminated. The Soviet successor to Brezhnev as minister, Yuri Andropov, argued that it was just not appropriate to recognize these dead fighting men.⁵⁸ If the war in Afghanistan were going as well as the Soviet government claimed, such censorship would not have been required. The government did not, however, waste time in providing an enemy figure for which the population could rally around the Afghanistan cause. A former Sergeant-Major from a Soviet reconnaissance unit wrote,

... when I was called up I naturally volunteered for Afghanistan. The political officer gave this lecture about the international situation: he told us that Soviet forces had forestalled the American Green Berets airborne invasion of Afghanistan by just one hour. It was so incessantly drummed into us that this was a sacred 'international duty' that we eventually believed it.⁵⁹

At first the Soviet propaganda machine seemed to be yielding positive results. There was an inverse relationship, however, with Soviet propaganda effectiveness compared to that of the

⁵⁴ Ibid., 147.

⁵⁵ Laura Roselle, *Media and the Politics of Failure: Great Powers, Communication Strategies, and Military Defeat* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 84.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Svetlana Alexievich, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*. Translated by Julia and Robin Whitby (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 43-44.

overall success of the Mujahedeen. When, by the latter half of the war, the Soviet Union was failing in its attempts to secure a communist state in Afghanistan, not even the state run media could stop the public outcry. The failure to achieve political or strategic success in any form, coupled with the loss of thousands of young Russian men, was not something that could be hidden by the Kremlin.

In many respects, we begin to see a comparison to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Certainly the result of the Vietnam War, in conjunction with the regional situation, made the decision for the United States to bleed the Soviet Union much easier. There are indeed some similarities to the mistakes both nations made in their respective wars. However, the result of the American involvement in Southeast Asia was not the collapse of American government, as would be the case for the Soviet Union in Southwest Asia. During the Vietnam War, the administration of President Lyndon Johnson simply chose to downplay the importance of the U.S. involvement in southeast Asia, and not all of the actions that occurred during the war were made public. This, while perhaps seeming deceptive, represents a fundamental difference between U.S. and Soviet strategy. The Soviet Union chose instead to not simply diminish the perceived importance of their Afghan War, but rather completely hide it as best possible.⁶⁰ In *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam*, veteran Vladislav Tamarov describes the similar sentiments to be had between veterans of both wars.⁶¹ As previously mentioned, the Soviet invasion into Afghanistan may bear some resemblance to the U.S. war in Vietnam, but the two are not synonymous. Both saw the popular support turn against them, both served as proxy wars with intense covert action by both sides, and both did not turn out the way in which the invading country had hoped. On a large scale, that is about where the similarities end. The Vietnam invasion by the United States was not a prerequisite to survival of the country whereas the same cannot be said for the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. While there are certainly some correlations, it is important to dispel the overall connection between the two wars since they are two different wars waged by different countries at different times. While it is hard to resist at times, the same must be said of the Soviet-Afghan War and current war in which the United States is involved.

On the 15th of February, 1989, the last Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan. The effects of U.S. intervention and aid to the Mujahedeen could no longer be reasonably faced by the Soviet military. Further, domestic support for the war was now largely nonexistent. The Soviet withdrawal, while a sign of Soviet defeat, created many issues. On the prospect of developing a future framework for an Afghanistan infrastructure, Ronald O'Connor, in *Health Care in Muslim Asia*, writes:

The prospect of Soviet troop withdrawal made the health planning issues more imminent. The prospect of building a new health system for the nation brought to many committee concerns about organization, coverage, and sustainability. But

⁶⁰ Laura Roselle, *Media and the Politics of Failure: Great Powers, Communication Strategies, and Military Defeat* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 84.

⁶¹ Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam*. Translated by Naomi Marcus et al. (San Francisco, CA: Mercury House, 1992), 1.

the complexity of the issues, as well as the competing interests and perspective of the participants, made progress difficult.⁶²

The importance of developing a health care framework in Afghanistan was that it would have showed vested U.S. interests in Afghanistan outside of repelling the Soviet Union. It would also signify U.S. desire to remain in Afghanistan following the Soviet defeat. This would not happen, however, and almost instantly the money and resources being allocated to Afghanistan were significantly reduced following the departure of the Soviets. This readiness to leave as soon as U.S. interests were taken care of signified a lack of care by the U.S. for the people of Afghanistan, and this image would of course force the U.S. to return to Afghanistan in later years.⁶³

Ultimately, the collapse of the Soviet Union is a complex issue with no single cause-effect explanation. However, this study reveals that 1979 was a pivotal moment in the history of the Cold War. Indeed, both the United States and the Soviet Union were at a crossroads. The pro-American Shah in Iran had been disposed of, and the Soviet Union had significant allies in Iraq and Syria, as well as Ethiopia and parts of Yemen. With the leftist coup, the April Revolution of 1979 in Afghanistan, all the Soviets had to do was ensure the communist government remained intact. Had that happened, the Soviets would have controlled, or had significant influence over, the entire Persian Gulf region. Further, with continued access to be able to effectively import oil, now that self-sustainment was out of the question, the Soviet Union would have remained a superpower. The United States had much at stake during this time as well. After losing its influence in Iran, America could not afford to let Afghanistan fall to the Soviet Union. In putting up a significant fight, which resulted in the failure of the Soviets to secure Afghanistan, the United States effectively prompted the Soviet Union to misallocate resources in an effort to hold the communist regime in Kabul. This also allowed the Saudi monarch to come in on the side of the Americans and by 1985, the price of oil for Soviets had quadrupled. At a rate of over \$20 billion a year, the Soviet Union could not afford to sustain its own existence. The largest covert operation in the history of the United States has therefore had very long-reaching effects, and was crucial in the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan. As it turns out, the U.S. aid to the Mujahedeen not only cost the U.S.S.R. the prospect of winning in Afghanistan, but also cost the government its very existence. Afghanistan would thus prove itself to be the final battle of the Cold War. Therefore it is evident that U.S. involvement in the Soviet-Afghan War forced the Soviet Union into an economic and political situation from which it could not recover.

⁶² Ronald O'Connor, *Health Care in Muslim Asia: Development and Disorder in Wartime Afghanistan*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994), 109.

⁶³ George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (Waterville, ME: Thorndike Press, 2003), 852-855.

References

Primary Sources

- Bocharov, Gennady. *Russian Roulette: Afghanistan through Russian Eyes*. Translated by Alyona Kojevnikov. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990.
- Bonner, Arthur. *Among the Afghans*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987.
- Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990.
- Brzezinski, Zbigniew. "Interview with Zbigniew Brzezinski." Interviewed by George Washington University, *National Security Archive*, June 13th, 1997.
<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-17/brzezinski1.html>
 (accessed 13 October 2010).
- Carew, Tom. *Jihad! The Secret War in Afghanistan*. Edinburgh, UK: Mainstream Publishing Company, 2000.
- Carter, Jimmy. *Presidential Directive/NSC-63 : Persian Gulf Security Framework*. Washington, DC: 1981.
- . *State of the Union Address*, January 23, 1980.
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=33079> (accessed 13 October 2010).
- Chaliand, Gerard. *Report From Afghanistan*. Translated by Tamar Jacoby. New York, NY: The Viking Press and Penguin Books, 1992.
- Goodwin, Jan. *Caught in the Crossfire*. New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1987.
- Grau, Lester and Michael Gress, eds. *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost and The Russian General Staff*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002.
- Kaplan, Robert. *Soldiers of God: With the Mujahidin in Afghanistan*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990.
- . *Soldiers of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan*. New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2001.
- Martin, Mike. *Afghanistan: Inside a Rebel Stronghold*. New Delhi, India: Heritage Publishers, 1985.
- Pazira, Nelofer. *A Bed of Red Flowers: In Search of My Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Free Press, 2005.
- Rashid, Ahmed. *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Reagan, Ronald. *National Security Decision Directive Number 75: U.S. Relations with the USSR*. Washington, DC: 1983.
- Schroen, Gary. *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan*. New York, NY: Presidio Press, 2005.
- Tamarov, Vladislav. *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam*. Translated by Naomi Marcus et al. San Francisco, CA: Mercury House, 1992.
- United States Dept. of State. *Afghanistan: Soviet Occupation and Withdrawal*. Washington, DC: United States Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of Public Communication, Editorial Division, 1988.
- Vollman, William. *An Afghanistan Picture Show: Or How I Saved the World*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1992.

Yousaf, Mohammad and Major Mark Adkin. *The Bear Trap: Afghanistan's Untold Story*. London, UK: Leo Cooper, 1992.

Secondary Sources

Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*. Translated by Julia and Robin Whitby. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992.

Andrew, Christopher and Oleg Gordievsky. *KGB: The Inside Story of Its Foreign Operations from Lenin to Gorbachev*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990.

Barlett, Donald L. and James B. Steele. "The Oily Americans." May 13th, 2003.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,450997-92,00.html> (accessed 21 April 2010).

Bradsher, Henry. *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Brown, Archie and Michael Kaser, eds. *Soviet Policy for the 1980s*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982.

Coll, Steve. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2004.

Crile, George. *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History*. New York, NY: Grove Press, 2003.

Donaldson, Robert, ed. *The Soviet Union in the Third World: Successes and Failures*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981.

Duncan, Walter, ed. *Soviet Policy in the Third World*. Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1980.

Gaidar, Yegor. "The Soviet Collapse: Grain and Oil." April 19th, 2007.
<http://www.aei.org/issue/25991> (accessed 22 April 2010).

Hammond, Thomas. *Red Flag over Afghanistan: The Communist Coup, The Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984.

Hosmer, Stephen and Thomas Wolfe. *Soviet Policy and Practice toward Third World Conflicts*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1983.

Kanet, Roger, ed. *Soviet Foreign Policy in the 1980s*. New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1982.

McCauley, Martin. *The Soviet Union after Brezhnev*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983.

O'Connor, Ronald. *Health Care in Muslim Asia: Development and Disorder in Wartime Afghanistan*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994.

Prados, John. *Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA*. Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2009.

Ro'i, Yaacov, ed. *The USSR and the Muslim World: Issues in Domestic and Foreign Policy*. Winchester, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1985.

Roselle, Laura. *Media and the Politics of Failure: Great Powers, Communication Strategies, and Military Defeat*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

White, Anthony. *A Military Look at the Afghanistan Invasion: A Selected Bibliography*. Monticello, IL: Vance Bibliographies, 1986.