

THE AFGHAN-SOVIET WAR: A “CRITICAL FACTOR” IN THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR?

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Many academics insist on the almost insignificant role played by the Afghan-USSR War in the collapse of the USSR between 1989 and 1991. Some¹ use the radical impact of Vietnam in the US to demonstrate the absence of an equivalent effect in the USSR; they believe that their argument is substantiated by the contrast between the economic, human, social and political cost of Vietnam compared to Afghanistan. It is argued that Afghanistan was important in an indirect way, by influencing changes in Soviet foreign policy as well as eventually shaping the Post-Communist world, both in Russia and her former satellites, by stirring up currents such as Muslim fundamentalism, regional nationalism and Russophobia. As Galeotti asserts:

“Afghanistan was not a *critical factor* [in explaining the collapse of the USSR], but it fed into a wide range of other processes, from the retreat from globalism in foreign policy to the rise of the ‘informal’ movements, the seeds of the political changes that eventually led to the post-Communism, [...]”²

In other words, the importance of this war to explain the USSR’s collapse can only be described as an “indirect cause”, a simple falling domino piece triggering other “pieces” which led to the end of the USSR. However, let us imagine that the Soviet-Afghan War did influence this collapse more directly, “that Afghanistan was not the Soviet Vietnam”, as Maley suspects, “but something even worse”.³ What problems arose due to this prolonged conflict that could explain both the breakdown of the Soviet bloc and its aftermath? In order to try to answer this, the aforementioned comparisons

¹ Derleth, J. William (1988), ‘The Soviets in Afghanistan: Can the Red Army Fight a Counterinsurgency War?’, *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 33-54; Sarin, Maj. Gen. Oleg, and Dvoretzky, Col. Lev (1993), *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union’s Vietnam* (California: Presidio Press)

² Galeotti, Mark (1995), *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* (London: Frank Cass), p. 20. Emphasis is mine

³ Maley, William (2002), *The Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Palgrave), p. 164

between Afghanistan and Vietnam will be critically discussed, with the intention of reconsidering the impact of the Soviet-Afghan War.

Some academics have used the small number of troops involved, and the relatively small number of casualties throughout the war to demonstrate that the Afghan conflict exerted only a minor influence on Moscow's politics during the crucial period of 1989-1991. For Derleth, the fact that a maximum of 110,000 men per year were used indicates the Soviet authority's lack of interest in winning the war, suggesting that they must have been content to conduct "just enough operations to keep the guerrillas off-balance while at the same time keeping the Najibullah regime in power and limiting Soviet casualties."⁴ A similar argument has been used by scholars who compare the percentage of the total USSR population that fought in Afghanistan, a mere quarter of a percent, with the USA's 1.7 % in Vietnam.⁵ However, the small number of Soviet troops deployed to Afghanistan and the partial reliance on Afghan forces between 1979 and 1988 could perhaps be explained by how this ten-year war was affecting the Soviet economy. The fact that only 40,000 troops are fighting in Chechnya at present does not illustrate Moscow's lack of commitment, but rather the economic restraints placed on the military effort. As Lambeth argues, "[Russia's] logistics system has been stretched to the breaking point just to sustain some 40,000 troops bogged down in Chechnya".⁶

The number of deaths, almost fourteen thousand out of roughly three quarters of a million soldiers involved throughout the war, has also been used to prove Afghanistan's minor role. Yet the 58,202 US casualties in Vietnam⁷ represent only 1.94% of the almost three million US troops involved throughout the war. This percentage when applied to the Red Army's 750,000 troops gives an estimate of 14,550 casualties, very close to the official Soviet number of 13,833, indicating that both conflicts actually had very similar casualty rates.⁸ Galeotti expands on this point by stating, "in one year almost five times as many Soviets died on the roads as in the whole

⁴ Derleth, J. William (1988), 'The Soviets in Afghanistan: Can the Red Army Fight a Counterinsurgency War?', *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 1, p. 50

⁵ Another illustrative example of this thinking is Jukes, Geoffrey (1989), 'The Soviet Armed Forces and the Afghan War', in Saikal, Amin and Maley, William, eds., *The Soviet Withdrawal From Afghanistan* (Cambridge, NY and Melbourne: CUP), p. 83

⁶ Lambeth, Benjamin S. (1995), 'Russia's Wounded Military', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April, p. 90

⁷ DeGroot, Gerard J. (2000), *A Noble Cause? America and the Vietnam War* (Singapore: Longman), p. 285

⁸ It should be noted that this emphasis on the small number of casualties can be misleading, as in modern warfare the use of helicopters and Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs) as means to rapidly protect, evacuate and attend to the wounded, has greatly increased soldiers' chances of survival.

war”.⁹ The use of these figures to provide evidence of Afghanistan’s relative importance is, at the least, highly controversial; the use of traffic fatalities as means of putting the Afghanistan War “into context when trying to assess the role of the war on the system and society as a whole”¹⁰ trivialises the whole conflict. The fact that the total numbers of US casualties in Vietnam match the 52,627 traffic fatalities in the US in just 1970¹¹ does not make the historical event insignificant.

The economic cost of Afghanistan should be considered when analysing Gorbachev’s decision to withdraw. In 1968 the New York Federal Reserve Bank President, Allan Sproul, told a friend that “our involvement on the Asian mainland [is] at the core of much of our domestic and international political, social, and economic difficulties”.¹² Could Gorbachev have said the same about Afghanistan? The true economic cost and impact of the Afghan-Soviet War is not really known, though there are some estimations: in 1983 a US State Department official noted that by the end of that year the USSR would have spent around \$12 billion on the war.¹³ In an article from 1986 Khalilzad estimated the “direct cost of the six years of war [...] at 18 to 36 billion US dollars”.¹⁴ Different figures are given in Arnold’s *The Fateful Pebble* when he quotes an unidentified Soviet economist who claimed in 1989 that the occupation of Afghanistan cost about \$8.2 billion per year plus approximately \$300-400 million per month for weapons supplies. He also mentions an Afghan specialist working for the Soviet government who stated that some \$14.2 billion was spent in 1989 alone.¹⁵ The reality behind these figures is that “at the present time”, as *The Military Budget 1985/86* stated, “it is impossible to develop estimates of Soviet defence expenditure which could be used for precise comparison with the American defence effort”.¹⁶

The amounts the USSR spent not only on the fighting the war but also on

⁹ Galeotti, Mark (1995), p. 30

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 224

¹¹ USA Bureau of Transportation Statistics - www.bts.gov/publications/nts/html/table_02_17.html

¹² Kolko, Gabriel (1994), *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the US, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: The New Press), p. 288

¹³ Collins, Joseph J. (1985), ‘The Soviet-Afghan War’, in Harkavy, Robert E. and Neuman, Stephanie G., *The Lessons of Recent Wars in the Third World*, Vol. 1 (Lexington, Mass., and Toronto: D. C. Heath and Co.), p. 197

¹⁴ Khalilzad, Zalmay (1986), ‘Moscow’s Afghan War’, *Problems of Communism*, Jan-Feb 1986, p. 1

¹⁵ Arnold, Anthony (1993), *The Fateful Pebble: Afghanistan’s Role in the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (California: Presidio Press), p. 185

¹⁶ The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance, 1985-86* (Oxford: OUP), p. 19

winning Afghan “hearts and minds” through the construction of infrastructure, houses, hospitals, salaries and so on are also not known at present. Significant Soviet defence budget increases such as the official 12% in 1984 were justified as a direct response to Ronald Reagan’s 13% rise in defence expenditure in 1982. However, the extent to which the USSR’s increased spending on defence can be explained by the military failure in Afghanistan is completely unknown. What seems clear however is that Afghanistan represented “an immense if not ruinous expense at a time when the Soviet economy was in an ever-steeper decline”.¹⁷ As it is still only possible to make estimates of the whole cost of the USSR’s involvement in Afghanistan, it seems reasonable to conclude that the mere numbers of troops deployed cannot be used as decisive evidence to demonstrate Soviet lack of interest in the war.

The waste of life in Afghanistan and the returning veterans did not provoke social unease on such a great scale as it did in the US after Vietnam. Any potential dissatisfaction within Soviet society was largely unable to express itself until after 1987, mainly due to State control of the media. Hence, compared to the social instability that media broadcasts of the Vietnam War provoked in the US during the late 1960s and 1970s, the media coverage of the Afghanistan War did not have such radical consequences in the USSR. This media impact could only have occurred in a democratic society in which freedom of opinion and speech were considered fundamental pillars of civil society. This is well illustrated by the Russian journalist Borovik when he explains the difficulties he had in getting his book *The Hidden War* published even as late as 1990:

“When I got the manuscript back from the military censor I discovered more than two hundred serious deletions, distortions, additions, and corrections made by the heavy hand of colonel-censor”.¹⁸

However, once Gorbachev secured his position and could implement his policy of *glasnost*, the media started to become a major tool through which social unrest could be expressed, partially explaining the decline of popular support for the Soviet leadership as well as for the USSR’s armed forces. Greater freedom of speech gave the

¹⁷ Arnold, Anthony (1993), p. 187

¹⁸ Borovik, Artyom (1990), *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist’s Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Grove Press), p. 279

Afgantsy (as the Afghanistan veterans were known) the opportunity to express their anger with the Soviet leadership, who not only sent them to war, but also ignored them on their return. Veterans created newspapers such as *Pobratim*, *K sovesti*, and *Kontingent* in order to communicate their Afghan experiences; this in turn increased public awareness. Reports about drug and alcohol abuse, poor discipline and low morale, harassment of new recruits, racism, prostitution, and other daily occurrences in Afghanistan, put pressure on the Soviet Army. Deviant and incompetent behaviour in Afghanistan was considered an import from the Red Army barracks in the USSR, as Odom explains “[...] the Soviet Army took many of these problems with it when it went to Afghanistan. The war aggravated these worries and added new ones”.¹⁹

Although the pressure of the media did not directly influence the Red Army’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, it should not be dismissed as a potentially key factor. Defeat in Afghanistan did not provoke widespread social unrest and mass protest; however, it is possible that the Soviet media of the late 1980s played an important role in shaping social opinions in the USSR’s peripheral socialist states, more than in the Russian Republic itself. “The greater knowledge of Soviet failures which became widespread during the Gorbachev era”, Brown reasons, “[...] produced something of an ideological vacuum which nationalism was the most obvious candidate to fill”.²⁰ From the point of view of Muslim, Caucasian, Baltic, and Ukrainian nationalists the impact of the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan as a direct influence on the collapse of the USSR cannot be denied. The behaviour of these Central Asian troops within the Red Army deployed in Afghanistan clearly shows growing sympathy with fellow Afghan Muslims. In 1979, the Soviet invasion force included a large percentage of Asian ethnicities such as Uzbeks, Kirghiz, Tajiks, and Turkmen, most of who were relieved of their combat roles and moved to form the rear guard, primarily because of Russian mistrust and a deep-rooted racism towards them. Openly despised by their Russian comrades, some of these troops began to support the *mujahideen* fighters by supplying them with weapons, ammunition and first aid kits, also eventually by defecting from the Red Army and joining Afghan guerrilla units. The fact that the Soviet Army was unable to overcome Afghan resistance and the loss of the Soviet military’s image of invincibility,

¹⁹ Odom, William E. (1998), *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 248

²⁰ Brown, Archie (1997), *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford: OUP), p. 259

encouraged the rediscovery of the “Muslim brotherhood” and explains to some degree the progressive politicisation of Islam as an ideology.²¹ An example of this are the anti-Russian riots that occurred in Alma Ata, capital of Kazakhstan, in December 1986, when Gorbachev decided to replace the republic’s first party secretary, who had been in office for 20 years, with a Russian anti-corruption figure. “Those who have a personal knowledge of the political situation in Kazakhstan”, writes Bennigsen, “[...] cannot doubt that the riots in Alma Ata are an indirect backlash from the war in Afghanistan”.²² What seems clear however is the Russian feeling of ‘no-more-Afghanists’,²³ a clear warning that the Soviet military should not impede these secessions by force of arms, as Shervardnadze indicated in no uncertain terms when he described the invasion of Afghanistan as “illegal” and an infringement of “universal human values”.²⁴

The Baltic States were another region of the USSR where the Afghanistan war fuelled nationalism, especially through emotive rumours which claimed that the Russians were using Baltic troops to bear the brunt of the fighting. “The Balts”, Galeotti asserts, “[...], proved particularly energetic and prolific producers of *samizdat* critical of the way the flower of their youth was dying in distant mountains on Moscow’s behalf”.²⁵ In this way Afghanistan was used to assert the Baltic States’ right to self-determination. The invasion and defeat in Central Asia proved very tempting for some political figures that started to rouse nationalistic feelings in order to distance themselves from Communist Russia, especially at a time when Communism had just shown oppressive and imperialistic behaviour in Afghanistan. This trick proved particularly successful in Lithuania, which announced its independence on 11 March 1990. This proved too much for Gorbachev who decided to control the situation by using the armed forces. On 13 January 1991 the army units faced a public protest, which resulted in the death of sixteen Lithuanians and hundreds of wounded. The use of force as a legitimate instrument to control secession movements did not have strong foundations. Odom asks why Soviet troops should control Afghanistan or the Warsaw Pact States, and concludes that; “without solid answers for such questions [doubts] were

²¹ Bennigsen, Alexandre (1990), ‘Afghanistan & The Muslims of the USSR’, in Rossane Klass (1990), ed., *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited* (New York: Freedom House), p. 291

²² *Ibid.*, p. 294

²³ Gaddis, John Lewis (1992), *The United States and the end of the Cold War: Implications, Reconsiderations, Provocations* (Oxford: OUP), p. 181

²⁴ Fane, Daria (1990), ‘After Afghanistan: The Decline of Soviet Military Prestige’, *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 6

²⁵ Galeotti, Mark (1995), p. 27

soon bound to arise about Soviet rule in the Baltic republics, in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and even in Ukraine”.²⁶ What was needed were not solid answers, but rather a strong leader with no remorse in institutionalising the use of force. This is one of the key lessons learnt from Afghanistan. As a general confessed to Borovik: “Every cloud has a silver lining. If Soviet troops hadn’t gone to Afghanistan, they probably would have been sent to Poland. And that would’ve been an even greater disaster”.²⁷

One of the reasons that the USSR collapsed was because forces of the Warsaw Pact Treaty were not ordered to intervene in Eastern Europe, in contrast to the military action undertaken in the former GDR in 1951, Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland in 1981. It is vital to question to what extent the Afghanistan War influenced the Soviet leadership to refrain from issuing such an order. At the moment, any answers to this question can only be provisional, due to the lack of data available. Potential answers must also take into account, not only Moscow’s decision to remain inactive, but also the degree to which Afghanistan influenced the initial rebellion of the Eastern European Soviet bloc in the first place. It is in this uprising that Afghanistan plays a seminal role: the loss of the Red Army’s aura of invincibility showed the limitations of Soviet interventionism. This is well illustrated by Arnold who speculates to what degree “the Afghan resistance has inspired the Polish workers [and *Solidarnosc*] to defy their own government [in 1981]”.²⁸ This demystification led to a progressive demilitarisation of Soviet society, primarily in the Soviet bloc but also in the Russian Republic itself. For instance, avoiding military service became a key factor in promoting nationalism, especially in Lithuania and Georgia, where young people were encouraged “to refuse to serve in the occupation forces of the Soviet Union”.²⁹

To diminish the importance of the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan because of the small number of troops and casualties compared to Vietnam is to summarily neglect a whole range of other vital military and social factors associated with the war. To say that the Soviet leadership was not interested enough in Afghanistan because they did not intensify the war, as the US government did in Vietnam, implies that if the USSR had wanted it could have deployed up to half a million men per year. This is very difficult to prove especially when no one in the West knew, or knows, the true economic cost of

²⁶ Odom, William E. (1998), p. 271

²⁷ Borovik, Artyom (1990), p. 14

²⁸ Arnold, Anthony (1981), p. 99

²⁹ Fane, Daria (1990), p. 7

Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, or the degree to which Moscow could have intensified the war effort without bankrupting the already very delicate Soviet system. How much the USSR really spent in defence has been one of the many unresolved questions of the Soviet administration, to the extent that even Soviet generals were forced to use Western estimations of Soviet defence expenditure.³⁰

Finally, the role played in the key events of 1990 and 1991 by high military officers who also fought in Afghanistan has not been properly researched. Chief of the General Staff in 1991 Gen. Lobov, Commander-in-Chief of the Warsaw Pact in 1991 Gen. V. Lobov, First Deputy Minister in 1991 Col. Gen. Grachev,³¹ and the Commander of the Kiev Military District between February 1989 to December 1990, and later the First Deputy Commander of the USSR Ground Forces from December 1990 to August 1991 Gen. Gromov,³² are a few examples of military personnel who occupied important positions. How Afghanistan influenced these men's actions when they were confronted with the secessionist movements first in Eastern Europe, and then in the Ukraine, Lithuania, Georgia and elsewhere, is something that would need to be investigated further to provide a more convincing portrayal of the Afghan war's effects.

Finally, as one general confessed to Borovik: "All of the wars that Russia lost led to social reforms, while all of the wars it won led to the strengthening of totalitarianism".³³ If this proves to be correct, then the impact of Afghanistan would cease to be just another crack in the Soviet system, and become a major critical factor in explaining the collapse of the USSR. In the meantime however, and in the absence of more solid facts and reports in the areas outlined above, we cannot presume to know for certain Afghanistan's real impact and any study on the subject would do well to at least acknowledge this.

³⁰ Zhong, Yang (1992), 'The Transformation of the Soviet Military and the August Coup', *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 62

³¹ Galeotti, Mark (1995), p. 177

³² Wilcox, Mark R. (1994), 'Colonel General Boris Vsevolodovich Gromov, Deputy Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation: A Biographical Study', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 272

³³ Borovik, Artyom (1990), p. 14