

The Soviet War in Afghanistan

NARRATOR:

The Panjshir Valley in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan, a rural, traditionally Islamic country of 15 million people. Foreign nations have tried to conquer it for centuries; none succeeded. But civil war and years of Cold War conflict would bring the people of Afghanistan a terrible toll of death and destruction.

In the 1970s, Afghanistan became a focus for superpower rivalry. Close to the Persian Gulf's oil and the Indian Ocean ports, it bordered Iran in the west and Pakistan in the south and east. In the north, it shared a border with the Muslims of the Soviet Union's central Asian republics. To Moscow, a friendly Afghanistan was vital.

[cheering crowds] Kabul, Afghanistan, April 1978. A military coup brings a left-wing regime to power. Soviet cameras portray it as a romantic popular revolution. Crowds were organized to celebrate the change of power. Nur Mohammad Taraki, Afghanistan's new leader, looked to the Soviet Union for support. Moscow sent hundreds of Soviet advisors to advance Socialism.

ABDUL RASHID JALILI, Afghan Minister of Education:

[via translator] The vast majority of Afghan people had no jobs. Afghanistan was an agricultural country. We thought it was best to introduce land reforms and give land to the landless. It would enable them to work their own land and raise their standard of living.

NARRATOR:

The left-wing regime set about reforming Afghanistan by decree. Land was taken from large owners and handed to the peasants who worked it. Women were encouraged to stop wearing veils and were put into literacy classes alongside men. In the countryside, the reforms were seen to threaten ancient customs and the authority of the Islamic priests, the mullahs.

SAHAR GUL, Mullah, Laghman Province:

[via translator] The Communists were trying to change the law of God. They wanted to destroy Islamic traditions, to rid Afghanistan of poverty and make everyone equal. This is against the law of Islam; God has decided who is rich and who is poor. It can't be changed by Communists. It's beyond imagination.

NARRATOR:

To counter Communist efforts to spread their new doctrine, opponents of the reforms burnt down schools and universities. Thousands of Afghans fled to Pakistan to avoid the revolutionary turmoil. Resistance was growing throughout the country.

GENERAL VLADIMIR KRUICHKOV, Deputy Head of KGB:

[via translator] Brezhnev and the Politburo tried to talk sense into Kabul. We couldn't understand how they could build Socialism in just five years. [4:15] We said, you can't

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do that; we've been building Socialism for 60 years and we're still not finished. But they thought it was us that had got it wrong. Naïveté was coming out of their every orifice. It was in their every word.

NARRATOR:

In neighboring Iran, crowds joined the call of the Afghan resistance for a jihad, or holy war, against the godless Communists. Other Islamic countries took up the cry.

In Washington, National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was convinced the left-wing regime in Afghanistan was a major threat.

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI:

[video footage, on phone] Yeah. And that will deal first with Iran, then with Afghanistan and the regional implications.

NARRATOR:

Brzezinski told President Carter that Moscow might use the Afghan crisis to move south and seize the oil of the Persian Gulf. [Brzezinski talking to Carter] Brzezinski's fears for the stability of the region gained weight when mass demonstrations in Tehran led to the overthrow of the Shah of Iran. [riots] The Shah's fall lost America its most important ally in the region.

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI, US National Security Advisor:

We were faced with the possibility that one way or another, before too long we may have a hostile Iran on the northern shore of the Persian Gulf facing us, or we might even have the Soviets there.

NARRATOR:

The Islamic groups fighting the Communists received covert American aid for the first time in July 1979. President Carter began by sending communications equipment. The rebels called themselves the mujahedin, the soldiers of God. They were mostly peasants, organized by village mullahs and landowners. Many of their weapons were captured from the Communist regime. From the refugee camps in Pakistan, recruits for the jihad walked for days across the mountains to reach the fighting.

Ranged against the mujahedin was a mechanized Soviet-trained Afghan Army. Soviet film depicted a highly motivated fighting force; in fact, each month thousands of soldiers deserted. Kabul pleaded with Moscow to send Soviet troops. In the Kremlin, Soviet leaders repeatedly met to discuss the Afghan crisis. After mobs massacred Soviet advisors and their families in Herat, Kabul's request for Soviet troops moved up the agenda.

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VASILY SAFRONCHUK, Soviet Foreign Ministry:

[via translator] The Afghans wanted us to introduce a limited contingent of Soviet troops to guard military bases. [8:03] They just couldn't cope with the mujahedin themselves. At first they spoke about a battalion, then about a brigade. They kept insisting and pushing for Soviet troops, but we kept refusing and refusing and refusing.

NARRATOR:

President Taraki had an apparently devoted prime minister, Hafizullah Amin. Amin was the regime's strongman. In spite of the unrest, he was determined to drive on with the reforms. Amin launched a campaign of terror. He had opponents arrested and shot.

VASILY SAFRONCHUK:

[via translator] I said to Amin that his policies were too harsh, that they were turning the Muslim population against him, like the land reforms which did not take into account Afghan traditions. But he used to reply, did Stalin make the revolution in white gloves?

NARRATOR:

Afghan President Taraki flew to Moscow to discuss with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev how to curb Amin's excesses. They decided to oust him, hoping the Kabul government could get popular support by slowing the reforms and ending the terror. Moscow's secret plans leaked out. When President Taraki returned to Kabul, Amin had him seized and executed.

Amin realized the Soviets wanted him out. He began to seek better ties with the West. The KGB even imagined Amin might be a CIA agent.

GENERAL VALENTIN VARENNIKOV, Commander, Soviet Forces Afghanistan:

[via translator] Andropov, the head of the KGB, became very concerned about Amin flirting with the Americans. Andropov felt that if we didn't introduce Soviet troops, Amin would claim that Moscow hadn't fulfilled its obligations. He would then turn to the Americans for help, and they would put their own troops in.

NARRATOR:

In Moscow the arguments were mounting in favor of using an invasion to remove Amin. In the past, Soviet military action to topple troublesome foreign leaders had worked in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

In Europe the nuclear arms race was gathering speed. NATO wanted to counter the Soviet Union's mobile missiles. On December 12, 1979, the West announced it would deploy hundreds of cruise missiles in response. Moscow now felt it had little to lose internationally by intervening in Afghanistan with troops. That evening, the Politburo held an emergency meeting.

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VASILY SAFRONCHUK:

[via translator] Our major concern was the security of the southern borders of the Soviet Union. We also feared the spread of Islamic fundamentalism into Afghanistan from Iran.

KAREN BRUTENTS, International Department, Communist Party:

[via translator] I said that military intervention in Afghanistan would be very difficult for our army. [11:47] It would not necessarily lead to success. One only has to consider the conditions in Afghanistan: its geography, its history, and especially the independent nature of the Afghans.

VLADIMIR KRUICHKOV:

[via translator] We also felt that if we didn't go into Afghanistan, then some other countries would. The intervention of these states could destabilize the situation on the Soviet-Afghan border, and in the region as a whole.

NARRATOR:

The Politburo took its fateful decision. By December 25, 1979, tens of thousands of men in tanks and trucks started to trundle across the border. Moscow hoped they could complete their mission within weeks.

The old royal palace on the edge of Kabul was Prime Minister Amin's favorite residence. KGB special forces stormed the building. Amin tried to hide, but they shot him dead. Moscow replaced Amin with a more manageable leader, Babrak Karmal.

Since the Cold War started, the Soviet Union had never invaded a country beyond the borders of the Warsaw pact. Now Soviet forces were stepping across the line.

JIMMY CARTER:

[January 23, 1980] The implications of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan could cause the most serious threat to the peace since the Second World War. The vast majority of nations on Earth have condemned this latest Soviet attempt to extend its colonial domination of others.

[in interview] I had to put restraints on the Soviet Union. One of them was to issue a public statement that if the Soviets did invade either Pakistan or Iran out of Afghanistan, that I would consider this a personal threat to the security of the United States of America, and I would take whatever action I desired or considered appropriate to respond. And I would let it be known that this would not exclude a nuclear reaction.

AMBASSADOR:

[at UN] The military intervention of the Soviet Union cannot be justified. There can be no question of any country other than the Soviet Union having interfered in Afghanistan's internal affairs.

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NARRATOR:

At the United Nations, the Soviet invasion was widely condemned. President Carter blocked grain deliveries to the Soviet Union, launched a boycott of the Olympic Games in Moscow, and stepped up US spending on arms. Détente was over.

US National Security Advisor Brzezinski flew to Pakistan to set about rallying resistance. He wanted to arm the mujahedin without revealing America's role. [15:04] On the Afghan border near the Khyber Pass, he urged the soldiers of God to redouble their efforts.

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI:

[video footage, Afghanistan] We know of their deep belief in God, and we are confident that their struggle will succeed. That land over there is yours. You'll go back to it one day because your fight will prevail and you'll have your homes and your mosques back again, because your cause is right and God is on your side.

[in interview] The purpose of coordinating with the Pakistanis would be to make the Soviets bleed for as much and as long as is possible.

[to military officials in Afghanistan] Do we know whether any Soviet units have reached these border posts?

MILITARY OFFICIAL:

No.

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI:

They're holding back?

MILITARY OFFICIAL:

They are holding back.

ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI:

[in interview] We started providing weapons to the mujahedin, from various sources again. Some, 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 mujahedin from the Soviet army in Afghanistan, because that army was increasingly corrupt.

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NARRATOR:

Brzezinski sought the help of General Zia-ul-Haq, Pakistan's military ruler. Pakistan always had a keen interest in Afghanistan. Pakistan wanted a friendly and strongly Islamic neighbor.

The US Congress had earlier cut US military aid to Pakistan. General Zia had a bad human rights record. He was developing a nuclear bomb. He had failed to curb drugs trading. Now the Americans set aside their displeasure.

CHARLES DUNBAR, US State Department:

I think we had a double standard with respect to the Pakistanis, and we knew that there were big problems with drugs and that there were big problems with nukes. And we were prepared in various ways, in any way that we had to, to turn Nelson's eye to those problems, as long as the Afghan resistance was being supported by the government of Pakistan. And that's what we did. [17:33]

NARRATOR:

In Afghanistan, the Red Army guarded cities, roads, and airports, leaving the Afghan army free for combat. By 1980, almost 100,000 Soviet troops would be deployed around the country. It was a civil war, but many of the Soviet conscripts were told they were coming to Afghanistan to confront Americans.

SOVIET SOLDIER, Afghanistan:

[via translator] After we took our first Afghan prisoners, we started to realize that the Americans were not there. We said, Americans? What Americans? They're not here. But the KGB officers said, oh, they're in the rear. They're advising the mujahedin just like we advised in Cuba. Maybe they're teaching them how to fight. But the more operations we carried out, the more we realized that the Americans were not there.

NARRATOR:

Against their wishes, the Soviets were soon sucked into combat. They started with textbook sweep offensives devised to defeat NATO in Europe and Chinese troops on the plains of Manchuria. In mountainous terrain against guerrilla fighting, their approach was a disaster.

ARTYOM BOROVIK, Soviet Journalist:

Well, I would say 99% of all the battles that we fought in Afghanistan were won by the Soviet side. But the problem is that the next morning, we had the same old situation as if there was no battle. Mujahedin were again in that village where we thought we destroyed them just the other day. So it was an absolutely useless war.

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RONALD REAGAN:

[inauguration, 1981] I, Ronald Reagan, do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States. [applause]

NARRATOR:

A fervent anti-Communist, Ronald Reagan won the 1980 election with an image of forceful leadership and a promise to rebuild US military might. To many Americans, Carter's foreign policy had seemed weak. Reagan stepped up aid to the Afghan rebels.

The mujahedin were made up of numerous factions. They were split on tribal and ethnic lines. When the mujahedin weren't fighting the Soviets, they sometimes fought each other.

MUJAHEDIN FIGHTER:

[combat footage, via translation] Move your fat ass and shoot the f***ing rocket!

NARRATOR:

The mujahedin often captured military equipment in working order, but were so disorganized that within hours it would be made useless by looting. [20:40]

FRANK ANDERSON, CIA Director, Afghan Taskforce:

I made the comment that gratitude in the Afghan dictionary is going to be found somewhere after gimme and gotcha. [Afghans quarreling] On the other hand, there was a constant undercurrent of understanding that while we were providing the means to wage this war, they were waging it, and that it is entirely true that this was a war that was fought with our gold but with their blood.

NARRATOR:

The Reagan administration increased its covert military supplies to the mujahedin. Money and arms were channeled through camps in Pakistan. [mujahedin distributing arms] By controlling the way aid was distributed, the Pakistanis hoped to install a fundamentalist regime in Afghanistan. They favored the extremist, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

ELIE KRAKOWSKI, US Department of Defense:

The Pakistanis then needed to have people that they could manipulate. It is for that reason that American aid, whatever it was – and in the early period it was minimal, later it became more significant – was essentially directed by the Pakistanis to Gulbuddin at the expense of other groups.

AHMED SHAH MASSOUD, Mujahedin Leader:

[via translator] The arms were not distributed fairly. Despite our military successes, Pakistan only gave us eight missiles. For two years they cut all aid to my group. The

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Pakistanis had their own agenda. They gave the lion's share of weapons to the hard-liner, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

[artillery, gunfire]

NARRATOR:

Inside Afghanistan, the ferocity of the civil war increased. After heavy casualties, the Red Army changed tactics. They abandoned massive armored sweeps, and took to the air. Soviet commandos would be dropped in by helicopters to cut the mujahedin's escape routes.

While more weapons poured into Afghanistan, the United Nations sought a diplomatic solution. Undersecretary Diego Cordovez tried to broker a deal for the Soviet Union to withdraw if military aid to the mujahedin was stopped. His shuttle diplomacy made little headway with Afghan President Babrak Karmal.

[funeral procession] Moscow, November 1982. After 18 years in power, Brezhnev is dead. The state funeral was used for a new Afghan initiative. After the ceremony, Yuri Andropov, the new Soviet president, told Pakistan's foreign minister that he might accept the United Nations plan. But the Americans didn't trust Andropov.

CHARLES COGAN, CIA Head of Covert Ops, Near East:

We never considered that the Soviets would actually back out of Afghanistan and negotiate their way out. [24:45] It didn't seem a credible thing for them to do, because we didn't think that they were at all disposed to do that. So naturally when we talked with the Pakistanis, we pressed them always to continue the pressure.

RONALD REAGAN:

[at UN] The Bible tells us there will be a time for peace, but so far this century mankind has failed to find it. In these times when...

NARRATOR:

The United States and Pakistan were not ready for a deal with Moscow. For Washington, the UN's peace plan was a sideshow.

RONALD REAGAN:

[at UN] ...the peace-loving nations of the world must condemn aggression.

NARRATOR:

Throughout Afghanistan, Soviet aircraft were now bombing indiscriminately. They pummeled village after village into oblivion.

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In a typical attack, on April 8, 1985, the villages of Kutz(sp) and Minjavar(sp) on the Kabul-Jalalabad highway were bombed, then overrun by Soviet troops.

BIBI SARDARA, Villager, Laghman Province:

[via translator] The Soviets destroyed the whole village. It's impossible to count how many they killed. The men were dragged out of their houses and sent off to the Afghan army. Those who refused were taken aside and gunned down, butchered.

MOHAMMAD HANIF, Villager, Laghman Province:

[via translator] The Russians took 14 of us and made us stand in a line near this wall. Two Russian soldiers stood in front of us with machine guns. We began reciting the holy Kalima from the holy Koran, because we knew we were about to die. They machine-gunned every one of us. I fell. There was a pile of bodies, all on top of me. The bullets missed me. The soldiers searched us and took our money. They moved me, but I just pretended to be dead.

MAJNOON, Villager, Laghman Province:

[via translator] The rockets were falling all around us like leaves off a tree. My daughter's head was smashed open. Her brains were hanging from a branch. I lost everything. My cousins, my nephews, everybody was killed, my wife, my four children.

SOVIET SOLDIER #1:

[via translator] There was no such thing as a peaceful population. They were all guerrilla fighters. I remember how we once rounded up all the women and children, poured kerosene over them and set fire to them. Yes, it was cruel. Yes, we did it. But those kids were torturing our wounded soldiers with knives. [28:20]

SOVIET SOLDIER #2, Afghanistan:

[via translator] When you kill, you don't feel calm, you just feel indifferent. You're paranoid; you lose your morality. You become very cold-blooded. Your soul grows cold, because you're confronted with something you don't like doing.

SOVIET SOLDIER #1:

[via translator] A young soldier might kill just to test his gun, or if he's curious to see what the inside of a human being looks like, or what's inside a smashed head. But there is also the fact that if you don't kill, you'll get killed. It's a feeling of being drunk on blood. Often you kill out of boredom, or because you just feel like doing it. It's like hunting rabbits.

GULAB SHAH, Villager, Laghman Province:

[via translator] We have cried so much that we can no longer cry. Even if we do cry, who will wipe away our tears? So you see there's nobody to turn to anyway. We can only pray to God to take our revenge for us, because we are helpless.

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NARRATOR:

Thousands of civilians were killed in similar Soviet atrocities throughout Afghanistan. The mujahedin committed their own war crimes, often executing Soviet and Afghan prisoners in cold blood. [gunshots] With increasing ruthlessness and daring, the mujahedin attacked Soviet convoys, the lifeline bringing oil and weapons to the Red Army. [battle]

The toll of Soviet dead rose to as much as 2,000 a year. [man singing in Russian] Many Soviet conscripts were raw recruits sent to Afghanistan after only three months of basic training. Sickness, drunkenness, and drug abuse sapped the army's strength. The wounded got minimal care. The war seemed pointless.