

In the modern world, Afghanistan is known as the “Graveyard of Empires,” particularly for its involvement in 20th Century conflicts with the major imperialist powers at the time. During the Cold War, when the US and the USSR wanted to expand their spheres of influence, Afghanistan became one of the most geographically important locations for both nations. The US feared that Soviet expansion into Afghanistan would result in them pushing further west into Iran. The USSR was concerned about the risk of an Islamic fundamentalist takeover in Afghanistan and feared that an Islamist country right on their border could influence the 50 million Muslims in the Soviet Union to trigger an Islamist uprising in Soviet Central Asia. In 1978, the Soviet Union established the Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty, bolstering the already close military and economic relationship between the countries. Despite this close relationship, rebellions by Islamic fundamentalists and the fear of secret US involvement in Afghanistan caused the Soviet Union to invade Afghanistan in 1979 to defend the Afghan communist government. Throughout its history, Afghanistan has always been a region of extreme geographic importance because of its strategic location as the gateway connecting Central Asia, Persia, and South Asia. During the “Great Game” in the 19th Century, the British Empire sought to keep Afghanistan as a buffer zone between India and the Russian Empire to prevent any ambition of their imperialist expansion into India. During the late 19th Century, Afghan foreign policy was managed by the British Empire for forty years after the Second Anglo-Afghan War from 1878 to 1880, although it was not a part of the British Empire. In 1919, following the Third Anglo-Afghan War, Afghanistan eventually regained control of its foreign policy from the British. New Afghan leaders focused on rapidly reforming and modernizing the nation, while maintaining close economic and military ties to the Soviet Union. Afghanistan claimed to pursue a policy of not aligning with either of the global superpowers of the time— the US and the USSR. However, the Soviets funded Afghan military training operations, supplying the nation with weapons, and helped Afghanistan modernize its army, making Afghanistan increasingly dependent on the USSR. The Communist Afghan Progressive Party, later known as the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), was founded in 1965 by Babrak Karmal and Nur Muhammad Taraki. The PDPA assisted Mohammad Daoud Khan in overthrowing King Mohammad Zahir Shah in 1973 in a coup d’etat. The Soviet Union denied any involvement in the coup, though this is heavily debated among historians. Daoud Khan established himself as President of the new single-party Republic of Afghanistan in 1973. Daoud was not a Communist and wanted to reduce Afghanistan’s dependence on the Soviet Union. He announced that Afghanistan would not align with either Cold War superpower, and began to pursue diplomatic relations with anti-Soviet countries nearby, notably Iran and Pakistan, with the US occasionally assisting Daoud Khan. The Soviets feared that US-Afghan relations could lead to US influence in the Afghan government. The USSR wanted Daoud removed to maintain the Soviets’ grasp on Afghanistan and wanted a new regime that would transform Afghan society into a mirror of the Soviet Central Asian Republics. The Soviets facilitated the PDPA’s assassination of Daoud and the overthrowing of the Republic of Afghanistan in the 1978 Saur Revolution. Taraki, Karmal, and Hafizullah Amin emerged as leaders of the new Communist government, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). Taraki became the Prime Minister, Karmal

was the Deputy Prime Minister, and Amin was a foreign minister. During the rule of the DRA, Taraki oversaw a significant modernization program involving education of women and declaring full gender equality, land redistribution, and a complete dissolution of the tribal social structure in many rural areas. The DRA also abolished the traditional credit system in these areas, causing agricultural production to plummet. These reforms, along with many others, had adverse effects on Afghan society. The DRA was very repressive in the implementation of its reforms, arresting civilians, tribal leaders, Islamic fundamentalists, and religious leaders. *Mujahideen* revolts soon exploded across Kabul, with many Islamic fundamentalists proclaiming *jihad* (holy war) against the communist government. This caught the attention of the Soviets, who were very concerned about an anti-communist revolution occurring right on their border. Furthermore, the Iranian Islamic Revolution had resulted in the establishment of Islamist government right next to Afghanistan. The Soviet Union wanted to prevent Afghanistan from joining Iran and Pakistan in the bloc of US-supported conservative Islamic countries. The DRA's power over the country had diminished and the Soviets suspected the United States was involved in inciting the rebellions. In 1998, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the National Security Advisor to President Carter, stated in an interview: "We didn't push the Russians to intervene, but we knowingly increased the probability that they would... That secret operation was an excellent idea. It had the effect of drawing the Soviets into the Afghan trap ... The day that the Soviets officially crossed the border, I wrote to President Carter 'We now have the opportunity of giving to the Soviet Union its Vietnam War.'" The US expected and was well-prepared for a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and had planned to draw the Soviets in, knowing full-on that the Soviets would fail. Brzezinski mentions a "secret operation" in reference to the US covertly training the Mujahideen to fight against the DRA. The Soviets, although not informed of this, feared the US was assisting the Islamists regardless, and the USSR was prepared to back the DRA to prevent the Islamists from gaining control. The Soviets were concerned that an Islamist government set up in Afghanistan would incite further Islamist uprisings in the predominantly Muslim Soviet Republics of Central Asia. The USSR, fearing the fall of Taraki's government and US intervention in inciting the Islamist rebellions, summoned Taraki to Moscow in December 1978. The USSR, seeking to further bolster its relationship with Afghanistan, offered a deal of mutual economic and military cooperation.. As a result, the Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty was signed to solidify this. The treaty essentially confirmed Moscow's dominance of Taraki's government. However, the treaty did benefit Taraki in that the Soviets promised aid in the case of an Islamic insurgency that would threaten his government. Amin had also formed a deep personal resentment for Taraki, who had begun to dismiss Amin's suggestions and Amin knew that Soviets wanted to strengthen Taraki's power at his expense. In September 1979, Taraki was informed that Amin was plotting against him, and Taraki planned to have Amin assassinated. However, Amin was soon informed of the assassination plot and had Taraki assassinated in October 1979. Amin announced that the country would be ruled by the Revolutionary Council, the Council of Ministers, and the Khalq Party. The collapse of the Soviet-backed communist regime in Afghanistan infuriated Moscow. The Soviets considered the policies of the Khalq Party too radical and tried to advise Amin's government to revoke unpopular land

reform policies and even to include non-communists in the government to stop the Islamic rebellions that continued to sprout throughout the country. Amin ignored this advice and sought to lessen Afghanistan's dependence on the USSR by improving diplomatic relations with Pakistan and Iran. The Soviets prepared for combat to maintain communist control because they did not want to risk the formation of an anti-communist Islamist state right on their border, as they feared the spread of Islamic fundamentalism to neighboring Muslim-majority Soviet Republics. The Soviets also feared that the chaos in Afghanistan and Amin's movement away from dependence on the USSR could result in him turning to the US for help. On December 24th, 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. To justify their actions, they invoked the Brezhnev Doctrine and added a doctrinal change that extended Soviet protection to all Marxist States in the Third World. Soviet troops entered Afghanistan in December 1979, unprepared for the Mujahideen guerilla-style warfare. Although the Soviets managed to capture large cities and towns, the Mujahideen were able to travel through the countryside freely and easily avoided Soviet attacks. The US provided the Mujahideen with the FIM-92 Stinger, a portable anti-aircraft missile launcher, which neutralized Soviet helicopters. Despite a decade-long invasion of Afghanistan, the USSR essentially failed in its goals of establishing a permanent communist government in Afghanistan. The USSR had to sign an agreement with Afghanistan, the US, and Pakistan to withdraw its troops in 1988. Western media later coined the term "the Soviet Union's Vietnam" as a way to describe the failure of a global superpower to defeat the smaller, unorganized Afghan forces. To summarize, the fear of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism was one of the driving factors that led to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The Soviet Republics in Central Asia were mostly populated by Muslims, and the USSR feared Islamic fundamentalism would spread there. Especially after the Iranian Revolution in 1979 led to an Islamist takeover, rebellions against the DRA increased and it seemed more likely that Taraki's government would fall. Moreover, Amin's policies in the region resulted in further conflict across the country. The Soviets recognized that Amin would be unable to maintain control for much longer, which would result in an anti-communist Islamist takeover of Afghanistan. The USSR also feared that the United States was involved in inciting these rebellions and training the Mujahideen. The loss of communist control in the region would allow the US to gain a foothold in Central Asia, from which it could threaten communism in neighboring Soviet Republics in the region. They also recognized that an Islamic government in Afghanistan could inspire the majority-Muslim Soviet Republics in Central Asia to rise up against the USSR. The Soviet-Afghan War was a result of the culmination of Soviet concerns about the weakening of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan due to rebellions by US-backed Islamic fundamentalist fighters. These concerns emerged as a result of a mix of fear of the spread of Islamist ideas to Soviet Republics in Central Asia and the fear of US involvement in Afghanistan.