

To What Extent Was the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan
in December 1979 Strategically Motivated?

Word Count: 2176

Table of Contents

Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources.....	2 - 4
Section 2: Investigation	5 - 10
Section 3: Reflection	11 - 12
Bibliography	13 - 14

Section 1: Identification and Evaluation of Sources

This investigation will examine the research question: “To What Extent Was the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 Strategically Motivated?”. The invasion led to a protracted war, caused the breakdown of détente and renewed superpower confrontation, which was a factor in the demise of the USSR.

A letter from the Soviet leader Brezhnev to President Carter on 29 December 1979, exploring and justifying the invasion is relevant to this investigation as it gives insight into the official rationale presented to the US at the time. The academic book *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Post-war American National Security Policy* published in 1982 by the renowned US historian John Lewis Gaddis is an academic analysis of the invasion and is relevant to this question as it develops the broader context of Soviet strategic motivations during the Cold War.

A value of the origin of the letter from the leader of the USSR, Leonid Brezhnev, is that it would express the rationale for Soviet action, and as a communique to the US, offers insight into the official diplomatic position given at the time, on 29 December, 21 days after the invasion. A value of the purpose is that it is a classified letter to the Carter administration and gives insight into the justification given by the Politburo. A value of the content is Brezhnev’s use of the first personal pronoun as this suggests an attempt to be frank with the US administration and it includes details of the ‘defensive’ case. A limitation of the origin is that Brezhnev was the leader of the Soviet government and had to ‘justify’ its actions. The Soviets were unlikely to reveal expansionist ambitions to its superpower enemy. The limitation of the purpose is its intent to persuade the US that Soviet motives were benign.

Furthermore, Brezhnev's authority was in decline by 1979 due to his health¹ and some historians believe that the Soviet military pursued the invasion, an act Brezhnev subsequently had to support. The content is limited as it only focuses on the 'security issues' faced by the USSR in the region and neglects to develop other strategies or expansionists aims.

A value of the origin of the secondary source is that the historian John Lewis Gaddis is a professor at Yale University, and a specialist lecturer in Cold War history². Furthermore, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Post-war American National Security Policy* which was published in 1982 which means Gaddis had the benefit of hindsight. A value of the purpose is that Gaddis attempts to assess the invasion in the broader context of the superpower confrontation and not as an isolated action³. A value of the content is that Gaddis writes a balanced appraisal of the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan. However, a limitation of the origin is that Gaddis has a close relationship with George F Kennan and George W Bush, and has a Conservative Republican political view, possibly influencing his perspective on the Soviet invasion⁴. Furthermore, the Soviet archive was only opened in the 1990s and Gaddis revised much of his work from the 1980s when he gained access to Soviet sources from the time. A limitation of the purpose is that it focuses on the strategic motives of the invasion in line with the title and theme of the book and does not develop other possible motives such as economic interests. The content is limited as

¹ Lawrence K. Altman, "4 Serious Ailments Plagued Brezhnev," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), November 13, 1982, accessed October 30, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/11/13/world/4-serious-ailments-plagued-brezhnev.html>

² "John Gaddis," Yale University, last modified 2016, accessed September 4, 2016, <http://history.yale.edu/people/john-gaddis>.

³ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1982), viii, accessed September 4, 2016, <https://www.questiaschool.com/read/98423571/strategies-of-containment-a-critical-appraisal-of>.

⁴ Jonathan Haslam, "George F Kennan: An American Life by John Lewis Gaddis - Review," *the guardian*, last modified April 17, 2012, accessed September 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/17/george-f-kennan-american-life-review>.

it has a broad scope and lacks relative depth on the events in Afghanistan that drew in Soviet forces.

Section 2: Investigation

In January 1979, an Iranian revolution destabilised the balance of power in central Asia, a region of superpower competition and confrontation. The revolution also caused anxiety in the USSR regarding its influence in the region and in Afghanistan in particular. Afghanistan was strategically important due to its location and resources. When the Soviets decided to invade Afghanistan on 8 December 1979, its actions marked the end of a period of Détente between the USSR and the USA which had lasted since 1968⁵. The invasion led to a brutal war that lasted over nine years and led to the deaths of 25,000 Soviet soldiers and over one million Afghans⁶. This essay investigates the reasons for the invasion of Afghanistan, and assesses the role of strategic concerns, ideological ambitions and economic interests, as motives for Soviet intervention.

Afghanistan was politically unstable by 1979, and the Soviet Union was concerned that the establishment of a 'non-socialist regime' would pose a serious strategic threat on the border of the USSR. Afghanistan borders the south of the USSR, and an unfriendly regime in the country would mean the Soviets encircled from the east by Japan and in the west by Norway⁷. Historian John Lewis Gaddis argues that the invasion was primarily strategically motivated to prevent this encirclement⁸. In addition, an independent Afghanistan may have decided to join a

⁵ Paul G. Pierpaoli, "Détente," *World at War: Understanding Conflict and Society*, last modified 2016, accessed August 30, 2016, https://worldatwar.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1905863?terms=soviet%20invasion%20of%20afghanistan&webSiteCode=SLN_WAR&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1905863%3fterms%3dsoviet+invasion+of+afghanistan&token=5C0B1BDC0A0204954438258EF334D9CD&casError=False.

⁶ Keely Rogers and Jo Thomas, *The Cold War: Superpower Tensions and Rivalries*, 2nd ed. (London, UK: Pearson Education, 2015), 197.

⁷ Alfred L. Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1981), 19, accessed April 14, 2016, <https://www.questiaschool.com/library/85861642/the-soviet-intervention-in-afghanistan>.

⁸ Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 60

bloc consisting of China, the United States and Pakistan, all with great influence in the region⁹. Direct Soviet control of Afghanistan would give them a 'buffer state'¹⁰. Furthermore, after the fall of the Iranian Shah in 1979, the US had expanded its influence in the region and this increased the USSR's perception of the importance of Afghanistan¹¹. As Détente stalled, Afghanistan's vulnerability to US influence became a key concern. Leonid Brezhnev stated in a Pravda press conference on 12 January 1980, that the failure to move Soviet troops into Afghanistan would create a "serious threat" to "Soviet security"¹². Also, in line with the United Nations Charter, Brezhnev argued that the Soviet Union should "enjoy the right to individual self-defence", as described in article 51 of the UN charter and a chaotic Afghanistan posed a threat¹³. Thus, Brezhnev believed the invasion was in line with international law and was merely a Soviet matter¹⁴. In a letter to US President Carter, Brezhnev said that it was the Soviet's 'diplomatic right' to invade and that they did not breach any international peace clauses¹⁵. The Soviets asserted at the time that they were just "providing assistance" and repulsing "external aggression"¹⁶.

In addition, the Soviet Union had broader strategic ambitions for central Asia and Afghanistan's location was vital to these plans. Afghanistan would provide a secure base for further advances into the Middle East and South Asia¹⁷, and

⁹ Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 20

¹⁰ Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 20

¹¹ Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 3.

¹² Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 21

¹³ "Cold War: Brezhnev Letter to Carter (defending Afghanistan Invasion) [declassified 1995]," Margaret Thatcher Foundation, last modified January 29, 1979, accessed April 19, 2016,

<http://www.margarethatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=110481>.

¹⁴ "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978–1980," Office of the Historian, accessed May 20, 2016, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/soviet-invasion-afghanistan>.

¹⁵ "Cold War," Margaret Thatcher Foundation.

¹⁶ "Cold War," Margaret Thatcher Foundation.

¹⁷ Eden Naby and Ralph H. Magnus, *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 122, accessed May 2, 2016, <https://www.questiaschool.com/library/1282947/afghanistan-mullah-marx-and-mujahid>.

facilitate Soviet control of key commodities such as oil¹⁸. Historian Milan Hauner argues that the Soviet invasion stemmed from its desire to gain control of warm water ports and the Gulf oilfields¹⁹. This view is supported by the historian, Richard Pipes, who asserts the intervention was to progress the Soviet ambition to gain influence to the south "in the direction of the Persian Gulf"²⁰. Furthermore, if the USSR failed to respond to the power struggle in Afghanistan, it would harm its credibility and reputation as a world superpower. The Soviets could not 'abandon'²¹ the territory and permit its fall to outside influence as it would weaken the USSR's regional status²².

However, there were also ideological reasons for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as it aimed to establish a Soviet-style state. Aleksandr Mikhailovich Puzanov, Soviet ambassador in Kabul between 1972 and 1979 and his advisors had planned the development of a 'socialist economy in a socialist state'²³. Puzanov wanted to reduce its dependence on 'feudal oppression' and on the West²⁴. But in his final years as President, Mohammed Daoud implemented policies unfavourable to the Soviets. These included a policy of 'independent nonalignment'²⁵. The assassination of a communist activist, Mir Akbar Kyber, in April 1978 led to protests against the new policies of the government and Daoud arrested communist political

¹⁸ Monks, *The Soviet*, 32.

¹⁹ Milan Hauner, *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: Patterns of Russian Imperialism* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1991), 71.

²⁰ Ralph H. Magnus, ed., *Afghan Alternatives: Issues, Options, and Policies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1985), 14, accessed May 8, 2016, https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=6s4mFWsCAUoC&pg=PA14&lpg=PA14&dq=richard+pipes+afghanistan&source=bl&ots=pOYEKlbnEq&sig=_nhg_u_VWOGhcPoTlh6tejqEcck&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjKiMDwkMvMAhVOG6AKHSDrDYU4ChDoAQgaMAA#v=onepage&q=richard%20pipes%20afghanistan&f=false.

²¹ Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 19.

²² Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 19.

²³ Odd Arne Westad, *Prelude to Invasion: The Soviet Union and the Afghan Communists, 1978-1979* (n.p.: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 55, accessed April 19, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40106851.pdf>.

²⁴ Westad, *Prelude to Invasion*, 49-69.

²⁵ Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet*, 22.

leaders²⁶. Historian Erik P Hoffmann suggests that it was Daoud's anti-communist policies that led to the invasion. He argues that there was a genuine Soviet concern about the potential use of political Islam to undermine communism in Afghanistan²⁷.

Furthermore, the Soviet Union had broader ideological aims. In mid-October 1979, the KGB reported on the growth of anti-Soviet ideologies promoted by the Iranian revolution²⁸. A month after the subsequent invasion, it was decided at an Islamic conference in Pakistan held in January 1980, that economic assistance for Afghanistan would be conditional upon the withdrawal of Soviet troops²⁹. Historian Alexandre Benningsen argues that the perception was that the USSR's influence in the region was challenged after 1979. He suggests that before, the Middle East had been relatively stable, but that the Iranian Revolution "changed dramatically this peaceful picture"³⁰. The US had also become more involved in Afghanistan, and Hafizullah Amin had had secret meetings with the CIA³¹. The Soviets believed that Amin's meetings with the CIA were the beginning of a shift towards the West and this view was espoused by the chairman of the KGB³². An anti-socialist challenge in Afghanistan had to be countered in line with the Brezhnev Doctrine, that once a country had become socialist, the USSR would not let it transition into a capitalist state³³.

²⁶ Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet*, 23.

²⁷ Erik P. Hoffmann, *The Soviet Union in the 1980s* (New York: Academy of Political Science, 1984), 108, accessed May 20, 2016, <https://www.questiaschool.com/library/97629067/the-soviet-union-in-the-1980s>.

²⁸ Westad, *Prelude to Invasion: The Soviet*, 63.

²⁹ Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 18.

³⁰ Will Meyer, *Islam and Colonialism: Western Perspectives on Soviet Asia* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 189, accessed May 2, 2016, <https://www.questiaschool.com/read/102913988/islam-and-colonialism-western-perspectives-on-soviet>.

³¹ Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet*, 12.

³² Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet*, 12.

³³ "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978–1980," Office of the Historian, accessed May 20, 2016, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/soviet-invasion-afghanistan>.

Nevertheless, there were also economic factors that drew the Soviets into military intervention. The Soviet Union had invested heavily in projects, public works, land and infrastructure in Afghanistan. Investment developed from the Russo-Afghan treaty signed in February 1921³⁴, which outlined the Soviet provisions for commerce, non-aggression and technical assistance, the return of Afghan territory and the payment of a yearly subsidy consisting of one million gold/silver rubles to Afghanistan³⁵. When Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev visited Kabul in December 1955, he sanctioned a loan of \$100 million to enable Afghanistan to construct new roads, develop industrial and irrigation facilities and construct a new airport in Kabul³⁶. Furthermore, the Soviet Union strengthened its economic commitment by providing the state with \$437 millions of economic credit in 1975 and signed a new trade agreement in 1976³⁷. These agreements had increased trade by 65% by 1979³⁸. With this level of economic commitment, the USSR decided to invade to protect its investment. Immediately after the invasion, President Jimmy Carter declared that Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviets as a "steppingstone to possible control" of the majority of the world's oil supplies³⁹. Indeed, Afghanistan was geographically important to a power that wanted close proximity to the Gulf states. The historian Alfred L Monks believes that the primary factors for the invasion were to secure specific economic interests⁴⁰.

³⁴ Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 8.

³⁵ Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 8.

³⁶ Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 13.

³⁷ Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 14.

³⁸ Monks, *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*, 14.

³⁹ Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "Jimmy Carter: Address to the Nation on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan," The American Presidency Project, last modified 2016, accessed April 15, 2016, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=32911>.

⁴⁰ Monks, *The Soviet*, 22.

In conclusion, the primary motive for the Soviet invasion were strategic due to the significance of the location of Afghanistan both on the border of the USSR and in the central Asian region. In addition, Soviet strategic security had been undermined by Amin's opposition to communist ideology which was a significant factor in the intervention. Soviet economic investments and ambitions were secondary to defending its position as a global superpower.

Section 3: Reflection

Conducting this investigation into the motives for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has enlightened me to the challenges that historians face. An obstacle I

10

found when gathering primary sources was that sources created during the time of the event often showed only the 'official' stance of a state. An example is the letter that Brezhnev wrote to Carter on 29 December 1979, which expresses the motives the Soviets wanted to present to the US⁴¹. This is also the case with CIA documents and analysis from the time which are based on assumptions of Soviet expansionism. In addition, in the last decade, the Soviet archive has become less accessible and as a result, government documents, in particular, Soviet military documents, have become more difficult to access. Therefore, like historians, I had to 'fill in the gaps' with regards to perspectives which may have been omitted from the record or inaccessible, and carefully evaluate the origin, purpose and content of the primary sources utilised. Furthermore, Brezhnev's use of 'selectivity' in explaining Soviet motives illustrated a challenge to historians when interpreting the intent of a document and assessing what might be omitted.

Historian John Lewis Gaddis viewed the invasion with the benefit of hindsight and may have had to overcome the challenge of hindsight bias. As the Soviet invasion led to a protracted war, it may be concluded with hindsight that this was not a well-supported interference in the country. In addition, historians writing in the 1980s did not have access to the Soviet archive, and therefore the evidence Gaddis used to develop his arguments relied heavily on Western sources⁴². Furthermore, the historiography of the Cold War has evolved over time, with revisionist historians arguing the Soviets offered 'defensive reasons' in contrast to post-revisionists who viewed the invasion as economically motivated. This suggests that the geopolitical context and environment of a historian can influence their perspective. I found that I

⁴¹ "Cold War," Margaret Thatcher Foundation.

⁴² Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, ix.

was inclined to use US sources because Soviet and Pashto sources were more difficult to access. My own political beliefs influenced both my choice of sources and how I interpreted them. As a Malaysian, my familial heritage was affected by the Malayan Communist insurgency during the 1950s, which influenced my own personal perspective of Communist expansionism being aggressive. Overall, this investigation gave me the opportunity to engage in the methods used by historians and offered valuable lessons regarding the challenges to writing an objective and well-balanced investigation.

Total Word Count: 2176 Words

Bibliography

12

- Altman, Lawrence K. "4 Serious Ailments Plagued Brezhnev." *The New York Times* (New York, NY), November 13, 1982. Accessed October 10, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/11/13/world/4-serious-ailments-plagued-brezhnev.html>.
- DeHart, Bruce J. "Soviet-Afghan War: Cold War." *World at War: Understanding Conflict and Society*. Last modified 2016. Accessed September 1, 2016. <https://worldatwar.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/758932?terms=soviet-afghan+war&sType=quick>.
- Feifer, Gregory. *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010.
- Gaddis, John Lewis. *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1982. Accessed August 30, 2016. <https://www.questiaschool.com/read/98423639/strategies-of-containment-a-critical-appraisal-of>.
- Haslam, Johnathan. "George F Kennan: An American Life by John Lewis Gaddis - Review." *theguardian*. Last modified April 17, 2012. Accessed September 4, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/17/george-f-kennan-american-life-review>.
- Hauner, Milan. *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: Patterns of Russian Imperialism*. Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1991.
- Hoffmann, Erik P. *The Soviet Union in the 1980s*. New York: Academy of Political Science, 1984. Accessed May 20, 2016. <https://www.questiaschool.com/library/97629067/the-soviet-union-in-the-1980s>.
- Kakar, M. Hassan. *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1978-1982*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.
- Magnus, Ralph H., ed. *Afghan Alternatives: Issues, Options, and Policies*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1985. Accessed May 8, 2016. https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=6s4mFWsCAUoC&pg=PA14&lpg=PA14&dq=richard+pipes+afghanistan&source=bl&ots=pOYEKIbnEq&sig=_nhg_u_VWOGhcPoTlh6tejQEcZk&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjKiMDwkMvMAhVOGsAKHSDrDYU4ChDoAQgaMAA#v=onepage&q=richard%20pipes%20afghanistan&f=false.
- Margaret Thatcher Foundation. "Cold War: Brezhnev Letter to Carter (defending Afghanistan Invasion) [declassified 1995]." Margaret Thatcher Foundation. Last modified January 29, 1979. Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=110481>.
- Meyer, Will. *Islam and Colonialism: Western Perspectives on Soviet Asia*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2002. Accessed May 2, 2016. <https://www.questiaschool.com/read/102913988/islam-and-colonialism-western-perspectives-on-soviet>.

- Monks, Alfred L. *The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 1981. Accessed April 14, 2016. <https://www.questiaschool.com/library/85861642/the-soviet-intervention-in-afghanistan>.
- Naby, Eden, and Ralph H. Magnus. *Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx, and Mujahid*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998. Accessed May 2, 2016. <https://www.questiaschool.com/library/1282947/afghanistan-mullah-marx-and-mujahid>.
- Peters, Gerhard, and John T. Woolley. "Jimmy Carter: Address to the Nation on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan." The American Presidency Project. Last modified 2016. Accessed April 15, 2016. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=32911>.
- Pierpaoli, Paul G. "Détente." *World at War: Understanding Conflict and Society*. Last modified 2016. Accessed August 30, 2016. https://worldatwar.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1905863?terms=soviet%20invasion%20of%20afghanistan&webSiteCode=SLN_WAR&returnToPage=%2fSearch%2fDisplay%2f1905863%3fterms%3dsoviet+invasion+of+afghanistan&token=5C0B1BDC0A0204954438258EF334D9CD&casError=False.
- Roberts, Jeffery J. *The Origins of Conflict in Afghanistan*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. Accessed May 2, 2016. <https://www.questiaschool.com/library/119699561/the-origins-of-conflict-in-afghanistan>.
- Rogers, Keely, and Jo Thomas. *The Cold War: Superpower Tensions and Rivalries*. 2nd ed. London, UK: Pearson Education, 2015.
- TV-Novosti. "Lessons Learned? 25 Years since Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan." RT. Last modified February 18, 2014. Accessed May 8, 2016. <https://www.rt.com/news/soviet-us-afghanistan-anniversary-130/>.
- United States Department of State. "The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978–1980." Office of the Historian. Accessed May 20, 2016. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/soviet-invasion-afghanistan>.
- Westad, Odd Arne. *Prelude to Invasion: The Soviet Union and the Afghan Communists, 1978-1979*. N.p.: Taylor and Francis, 1994. Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40106851.pdf>.
- Yale University. "John Gaddis." Yale University. Last modified 2016. Accessed September 5, 2016. <http://history.yale.edu/people/john-gaddis>.