AFGHANISTAN
The Struggle to Regain Freedom
“We would like to hope that everybody will understand the fruitlessness of attempts to interfere in Afghanistan’s internal affairs and to dictate to its people how they should live and what government they should have....”

Leonid Brezhnev, October 1980
The would-be conquerors have come for centuries to this rugged, haunting land. Alexander the Great, Tamerlane, Babur, Genghis Khan ... later, the soldiers of Czarist Russia and Great Britain. All failed. Now another power has come to Afghanistan. Since launching its invasion in December 1979, the Soviet Union has installed its own government, occupied the major cities, and attempted to suppress a resistance movement that encompasses elements from every regional, ethnic and social group in the country.

But it has neither conquered the nation nor vanquished the spirit of its citizens. As one freedom fighter declared: “The foreigners never learn. They still keep trying to conquer us. This time, it is the Russians, and they will soon learn the lesson we teach anyone who tries to own us.”

In these photographs we see the face of Afghanistan today, the face of a people struggling to regain freedom.
“Afghans are wonderfully hospitable people, but not to foreign invaders.”

Former government advisor
By invading and occupying its smaller neighbor, the Soviet Union has transformed an internal conflict into an example of international aggression. Soviet troops—and the remnants of the Afghan army which they still control—have killed and imprisoned thousands, and so far have forced almost three million persons into exile in Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere. They have reduced villages to rubble with helicopter gunships, destroyed food supplies, seeded roads and trails with antipersonnel mines designed to kill and maim indiscriminately, and, according to reliable refugee and other eyewitness accounts, employed chemical warfare against civilian populations.

Beyond the international political debate concerning Soviet actions, beyond the implications for regional and global stability, there lies the human tragedy of a nation whose people are forced to choose between subjugation, resistance or exile.
“The Afghan people see that every hour of their lives is controlled by the Russians.”

Resistance Leader
In the '70s Afghanistan was a country in political turmoil. Forces led by Mohammad Daoud, former Prime Minister and cousin to the nation’s constitutional monarch, King Zahir, took power in a bloodless coup in 1973. Daoud had committed himself to a radical political and social program; but once in office, he grew increasingly conservative, purging leaders of the Parcham faction of the Marxist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) which had helped engineer the coup that brought him to power.

In 1978 another faction of the PDPA, the Khalq, led by the party’s founder, Nur Mohammad Taraki, staged a coup in which Daoud was killed. The Afghan-Soviet friendship treaty signed that year was the signal for an influx of Soviet military and civilian administrators and advisors. Taraki himself was executed a year later following a clash with supporters of a rival Marxist leader, Hafizullah Amin.

While these Marxist factions contested for power in Kabul, anti-communist dissidence flared in the cities and military resistance mounted in the countryside. Faced with a deteriorating political and military situation, the Soviet Union launched an invasion by land and air in December 1979; Amin was killed and replaced with Babrak Karmal, a member of the Parcham faction who had been in exile under Moscow’s protection.

In a propaganda exercise that deceived no one, the Soviets attempted to claim that they had been invited into Afghanistan by the very government they overthrew. They then congratulated Karmal upon his “election” as President, and broadcast a speech he already had recorded before being flown into Kabul from the Soviet Union. Moscow added to the deception by sending the speech over transmitters claiming to be Radio Kabul but located inside the Soviet Union.
Signs of unrest (above): the February 1980 strike by shopkeepers in Kabul, protesting the Soviet invasion. The strike triggered subsequent demonstrations throughout the city. Violent anti-Soviet protests have broken out in other towns throughout Afghanistan, and resistance forces have had partial control of cities such as Jalalabad and Herat for weeks at a time.
After approximately two years and a commitment of more than 85,000 troops, after a major expenditure of resources and political prestige, Moscow has achieved little more than a tenuous military grip over Afghanistan’s larger cities.

In its fundamental political objective—to establish a client state recognized as legitimate internally and internationally—the Soviet Union has failed.

According to observers, feuds and even armed conflict continue between the ruling Parcham and rival Khalq factions of the party; the Afghan army has suffered massive desertions; Soviet civilians and soldiers walk the streets at their peril; the economy has been damaged severely; and food production and distribution have been badly disrupted.

Despite efforts by the Soviets and their Afghan collaborators, the regime of Babrak Karmal has been unable to attract supporters from any significant segment of Afghan society: the regime’s political base today is narrower than when the Soviets installed it in 1979. The Karmal faction remains a minority within a Communist Party that is itself a tiny minority as well. Without the protection of Soviet forces, it would not last a day.

Apart from a few states aligned with the Soviet Union, almost the entire international community has censured the Soviet actions in Afghanistan. The United Nations General Assembly, for example, has called for the withdrawal of Soviet troops by votes of 104 to 18 in January 1980 and 111 to 22 in November 1980; similar resolutions have been passed by the UN Human Rights Commission, the Foreign Ministers of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), the European Economic Community and, perhaps most significantly, by the Islamic Conference. (In the UN Security Council, the Soviet Union twice has vetoed resolutions deploring armed intervention in Afghanistan.)

The Soviets have continued to reject all reasonable proposals for the withdrawal of their troops and the restoration of Afghanistan as a genuinely nonaligned nation free from outside interference. Instead, they have offered a succession of diplomatic initiatives that are designed to accomplish what two years of occupation have not: internal control of the country and international recognition of the legitimacy of the regime.
Beyond the cities, the occupation has desolated large areas of the countryside: above, father carries his wounded child, a woman gleans a field. At right, two Soviet tanks entrenched behind a snow-covered embankment in a village outside Kabul.

“The toll of the Soviet occupation is apparent everywhere—but nowhere more so than on the faces of the children. They rarely laugh or play games.”

Western Journalist

Right, ornate jewelry and bright colors distinguish this child as a member of one of Afghanistan’s nomadic tribes, many of whom have been forced into refugee camps by the fighting.
“The government is totally unnerved. Its only objective is to survive.”

Asian Diplomat in Kabul
By day the Soviet presence in Kabul is most visible at the airport, where entrenched antiaircraft weapons, rockets and tanks guard rows of MiG fighters, air force transports, helicopter gunships, armored personnel carriers and thousands of Soviet troops. At nightfall, journalists and other observers report, tanks and armored vehicles move through the city and take up positions on main thoroughfares and street corners. Yet even this military presence doesn’t insure peace or halt resistance, and the sound of gunfire and streak of tracer bullets regularly punctuate the night.

When city-wide, anti-Soviet strikes and demonstrations erupted in 1980, according to eyewitness accounts reported in the Western press, the Soviets and Soviet-directed Afghan troops suppressed them with armored vehicles and helicopters, gunning down hundreds of massed demonstrators who were trapped in narrow streets. Violent demonstrations also have occurred in Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad and other towns. In response to such widespread opposition, the regime has imprisoned tens of thousands of Afghans, many of them in Kabul’s Pul-i-Charki prison.

Faced with hostility in the cities and guerrilla opposition in the countryside, the Soviets have made little effort to protect civilian populations from the conflict. The destruction of food supplies, some experts have asserted, for example, appears to be part of a deliberate policy to destroy agricultural production in areas of nationalist resistance. In addition to indiscriminate bombings, the Western press also has reported numerous instances of mass killings and torture, as well as the alleged use of lethal chemicals and other poisonous substances that are illegal under international law.

Stark contrasts between the new regime and traditional Afghanistan: veiled women in Kabul (above) beneath banners of the faction-torn People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan; aerial view (left) of Pul-i-Charki prison, which houses thousands of political prisoners and, according to news reports, has been the scene of countless instances of torture and execution without trial; opposite page, one of the country’s many mosques, symbol of Afghanistan’s enduring Islamic faith.
“The Karmal government would not survive 24 hours without the Soviets there.”

Traveler in Afghanistan
The Afghan army, which has lost as many as 50,000 troops through defections and desertions, has required massive Soviet support to maintain its facade as a cohesive force. At right, the Afghan army on parade in the 1960's; below, Afghan soldiers today outside an office building in Kandahar.

The ubiquitous Soviets: from top, airborne troops patrol a road on the outskirts of Kabul shortly after the invasion; auto with curtains drawn carrying high-ranking officials is followed by second car with security agents; soldiers guard facilities of Radio Kabul.
The true dimensions of the Soviet occupation can be measured in its toll upon individual lives. It is the village that has been razed by repeated rocket and bomb attacks, the family forced to flee into exile, the child whose foot has been mangled by an antipersonnel mine. It can be measured in the accumulation of thousands of individual stories of suffering, exile, imprisonment, injury and death. These are some of their faces, and a small sampling of their stories.

VICTIMS

Soviet planes attacked this village on March 26, 1981. The toll: 13 dead.
“The Soviets see nothing wrong in killing civilians. When you ask them about it, they say, ‘This is a revolution, and in a class struggle you eliminate the enemy.’”

Third-world diplomat in Kabul

Opposite page, villagers warily examine and unexploded antipersonnel bomb containing thousands of pieces of shrapnel. Bombs such as this ravage farm lands as well as destroy buildings. Above, this child stepped on a small plastic-covered mine which the Soviets, according to eyewitness accounts, have dropped by the hundreds of thousands along roads and trails throughout the country. Many are disguised as toys, pens or other objects which attract children. Villager (far left) displays another type of Soviet antipersonnel mine; at left, Afghans endure with prayer and patience.
“The government can do little against us on the ground... The helicopters are the only Russian weapons that can hurt us badly.”

Freedom fighter

Soviet Mi-24 helicopter gunship (right) launches a rocket at an Afghan village. Gunships, which carry machine guns and four pods containing 32 rockets each, have wrought enormous damage throughout the country, and the mujahidin have few heavy weapons with which to counter them effectively. Below, small boy with a toy rifle sits next to a pile of containers for Soviet mines; Afghan youths grow up skilled in the use of rifles and hand weapons.
'The Russians are trying to annihilate us... There is not a single day when they do not bomb villages full of civilians. But they do not control the countryside, Despite their overwhelming firepower, they cannot win.'

Resistance leader
Left rocket pod from a downed Soviet Mi-24 gunship. Resistance forces often remove the explosives from such Soviet ordinance and reuse them in their own bombs and mines. Below, volunteer French doctors, here operating a makeshift underground hospital inside Afghanistan, are able to treat only a small number of the casualties among Afghan civilians and resistance fighters.
The Russian officer climbed out of his car and fired at me and my flag. The bullet did not hit me, but my friend standing next to me. The bullet hit her in the throat. As I picked her up, her blood spilled all over my head, face and hands and my flag fell from my hands.

The account is by Nahid, an 18-year-old girl who survived the April 29, 1980, massacre in which Soviet troops fired on schoolchildren in Kabul. She testified before the U.S. Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe. An estimated 70 students-most of them between 12 and 17 years of age-were killed and another 300 wounded during the demonstration protesting the Soviet occupation.

Nahid is not alone. One Saturday in May 1980 Soviet troops killed 40 Afghans while they were praying in a mosque in the small orchard town of Guldara, according to the testimony of survivors. A relative of one who died recalled that the victims were not freedom fighters. He said Soviet troops shot them because 11 some Afghan Communists” said there were “mujahidin inside the mosque who wanted to kill the Russians when they finished their prayers.”

A family of refugees told a journalist about the tragedy that drove them from their home near Rajan.

“The Russians first burned down the mosque before gathering us to tell us that Afghanistan no longer needed any Muslims. Five mullahs were killed with knives, then they took the young people to indoctrinate them. They destroyed our harvest with bulldozers. On the following day, the hamlet was empty.”

A survivor of a massacre reportedly directed by Soviet officers in Kerala, a small town in Kunar Province, recounted how more than 1,000 people were murdered in cold blood in April 1979.

“They forced all the men to line up in crouching positions in the field just outside the town and then opened up with their machine guns from behind. Then they spread out through the town gunning down all the remaining men they could find.”

Nahid and the inhabitants of Rajan, Guldara and Kerala face an uncertain future. Those who remain in Afghanistan must cope with food shortages and the constant fear of injury or death. A letter smuggled out of Kabul describes life under Soviet occupation:

“Nobody, no matter to what group he or she may belong, feels safe and secure anymore ... The Russians eliminate mercilessly and without discrimination whoever would create obstacles against their nightly robberies of property and trespassing into the homes of the defenseless people of this country ... thousands ... all innocent, have lost their lives under the merciless bombardments of the enemy.”

In cities and throughout the countryside, according to journalists and expert government sources, Afghans young and old are victims of the Soviet Union’s devastating weaponry. Incapacitating gases. Incendiary weapons. Bombs that leave a residue of long, gelatinous strings which explode and burn on impact. Green plastic mines with small ailerons that allow them to land smoothly on the ground. Camouflaged bombs in the form of toys and pens capable of blowing off limbs. Refugee hospitals are filled with thousands critically wounded by such devices.

“The majority of dead and wounded are the result of bombings,” a French medical doctor reported. “Since there is absolutely no surgical infrastructure ... the wounded are often condemned to die ... the first victims are the women and children, both of malnutrition and of problems of infection.”
“We accept death, but we will never accept the Russians.”
Freedom fighter

Village graveyard: white flag commemorates someone who has fallen in battle.
While women and children remain in the refugee camps, mujahidin such as these return to their devastated villages and continue the resistance against Soviet attacks.

Crossing a river using a hand-held cable (top), trekking through a mountain pass with their belongings on the backs of donkeys (above), two groups of refugees escape the fighting for the sanctuary of camps in Pakistan.
“Over there Russian planes destroyed everything with their bombs, Our homes, Our fields, We came here to seek shelter with our women and children, We came with nothing, Just the clothes we are wearing, Now we must live like nomads.”

Afghan refugee
With no end of the conflict in sight, it is difficult to determine how long these influxes will continue. Whenever reports of heavy fighting come through, we get new steams of refugees.”

International voluntary refugee worker

Most arrive destitute. After long treks over mountainous terrain, they are weary, hungry, their feet often bloodied and unshod. Many have witnessed homes bombed, crops destroyed, family members killed or wounded.

Tens of thousands of homeless Afghans cross over into Pakistan each month. The largest and fastest-growing refugee group in the world, their numbers swelled to more than two million just 19 months after Soviet troops invaded and occupied their homeland. Together with those in Iran, they total nearly three million, or approximately 20 percent of Afghanistan’s pre-invasion population.

More than 70 percent of the refugees are women or children under the age of 12. Many of the rest are old men.

Most of the refugees inhabit sprawling tent villages located near the Afghan border. In certain regions, authorities have supplied refugees with the necessary materials to build themselves traditional dwellings, the flattopped mud huts seen throughout Afghanistan.

The Afghan refugees must rely on the Government of Pakistan and international assistance for the essentials of food, clothing, shelter and medicine. They also must depend on outside help to finance the primary schools, vocational training and other programs in the refugee villages.
Estimates are that the Government of Pakistan itself bears about half the direct cost of the total Afghan relief effort. Pakistan also absorbs all the indirect costs for land and water resources caused by the growing concentration of refugees.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees oversees the international Afghan relief program, which is administered by the Pakistanis. The World Food Programme, United Nations Children’s Fund, and the World Health Organization are among the contributors to this effort.

But no relief program can answer the overriding question: when will the Afghan refugees be able to return home?
“Why should our homeland be like this?
Why should we be homeless vagrants?
Aren’t we human beings?
Don’t we have the right to freedom?”

Afghan refugee
Refugee children in Pakistan.
“Words cannot stop bullets—but bullets cannot stop words.”

This Afghan proverb easily could be the battle cry for millions of Afghans resisting Soviet occupation. Through strikes, demonstrations and guerrilla warfare, the Afghans are sending a signal to the Soviet Union, and to the rest of the world that they will not submit. One Western journalist, returning from a trip to the strategic Panjshir Valley, a stronghold of the resistance, has described the conflict as “one of the most popularly supported anti-communist revolts of this century.”

RESISTANCE

Freedom fighters at prayer (above): their most powerful bond is their faith.

Left, after a three-day battle in the Hassan Keel Valley, mujahidin forces destroyed this Soviet-Afghan convoy and captured more than 700 AK-47 rifles.
Freedom fighter display one of the green Islamic flags that have become a widespread symbol of resistance to Soviet occupation. Inscription is from the Koran.
“Nobody incited us to fight against the enemy. We ourselves started fighting for the glory of Islam. We are believers in God, and these people wanted us to leave our faith, Tell me, how can I renounce my religion?”

—Tribal leader
Resistance to the Soviet invaders is not limited to the freedom fighters. In one form or another it has been embraced by Afghans living throughout the world as well as within the country. Citizens demonstrate their defiance by distributing, during curfew hours, hand-written or mimeographed “night letters”; closing down shops; boycotting classes; and offering aid to tired and hungry mujahidin. Seven Afghan wrestlers hiked across the mountains for three days to Pakistan rather than participate in the Moscow Olympic Games, and more than 200 employees of the Afghan airline Ariana, many of them pilots, fled to Western countries to avoid flying Soviet military personnel and materiel into Afghanistan’s war zones.

The Afghan army has virtually disintegrated because of defections. Since the Soviet invasion, their numbers have dwindled, in the estimates of journalists and government experts, by 50,000 or more; many of the former army men have joined the mujahidin, often providing much needed arms and expertise to the freedom fighters.

The Muslim mujahidin are bearing the brunt of the fighting. What the freedom fighters lack in sophisticated weaponry and modern military training, they make up in courage, commitment and religious faith. The mujahidin have learned to make the best use of their limited resources, including the rugged terrain. The craggy mountains provide excellent places from which to attack, and give the mujahidin effective shelter from helicopter and rocket fire.

A West European doctor helping to treat the Afghans witnessed a tactic of the freedom fighters which has been documented frequently by other eyewitness accounts: “They dig deep trenches across narrow mountain dirt roads and cover them. The lead tank falls in, blocking the road. The mujahidin run to the other tanks and smear mud over the slits so the crews are blinded. Then they destroy the tanks with gasoline.”

Engaged in a battle many analysts initially said they could not win, the freedom fighters have refused to acknowledge defeat. Although their spirits are high, so are casualties. Lack of prompt medical attention sentences many of the wounded to die. And when food is scarce, the mujahidin sometimes must subsist on little more than black tea and a flat bread called nan. Yet their degree of success has been remarkable. One Western journalist, after a month inside Afghanistan, wrote: “It is no exaggeration to say that the Afghan resistance commands almost the entire countryside.”
“Of course it is difficult. But we can get food on donkeys along mountain tracks.... The worst shortage is of medical supplies and doctors. Many of the wounded have died because we have no medicine to stop their bleeding.”

Freedom fighter

Top, mujahidin camp in Afghanistan; in the background are captured Afghan army trucks. Resistance forces are largely self-sufficient and independent. Cooks (above left) prepare the flat wheat bread that is a staple of the Afghan diet; other resistance members assemble a homemade land mine (center), and a blacksmith fashions a part for a rifle.
At first glance, the air war would seem to favor Soviet forces entirely. Helicopters such as the one at top left, with attached rocket launchers, carry enormous firepower; one example is the home of a resistance leader in Wardak Province (left) which was bombed repeatedly by planes and helicopters. But the mountainous landscape, combined with guerilla tactics, often have enabled the mujahidin to counter Soviet strength in the air. In several instances resistance units have destroyed Mi-24 helicopter gunships, which are heavily armored underneath, by firing down on them from mountain peaks with concentrated bursts from semi-automatic rifles.

At top right, low-flying helicopter gunship photographed from higher altitude; top left, lookouts use mountain vantage points to monitor air and ground movements of Soviet and Afghan forces. Above, resistance forces in northeast Afghanistan stand atop a Soviet-made, Afghan army helicopter shot down in March 1979, prior to the Soviet invasion.
The Soviets have followed their strategic error of occupying Afghanistan with a series of tactical miscalculations. Their military campaigns consist largely of unwieldy forays by tanks and armored vehicles, preceded by air strikes from MiG fighters and helicopter gunships. Such assaults tend to be enormously destructive, but in the long term they accomplish little: as soon as the Soviet and Afghan forces return to their bases, the mujahidin reoccupy the area. As one Western military analyst has observed: the Soviets do not “win any territory, and they continue to expose their troops to Afghan mines, booby traps and sniping.” As a result, they find themselves fighting an essentially defensive struggle from inside armored vehicles, aircraft or occupied cities, able only to conduct punitive raids that do little to change the military status quo.

The Soviets also have been unable to pit one ethnic or regional group against another successfully; quite the opposite, the common effort against the Soviet invader has proven to be a greater unifying force than any other factor in recent Afghan history. At the same time, the decentralized, even disunited, character of the resistance has prevented the Soviets from mounting a single decisive military blow, or even responding quickly to successive attacks in scattered parts of the country.

While the resistance forces have few antiaircraft and other advanced weapons, they have grown stronger and more sophisticated in the last year. They have become adept at springing ambushes, setting mines, avoiding armored and air attacks, and reducing their own casualties. And even in areas which the Soviets control by day, the nights, in classic guerrilla style, belong to the mujahidin.

The regime’s Afghan army, in the estimation of journalists who have observed the war, remains ineffectual in offensive operations, prone to desertions and politically unreliable. Soviet troops, also according to experts, suffer from low morale and frustration, and from a casualty rate estimated at between 8,000 to 12,000 killed and wounded.

The war is a tragedy as well for the young Soviet soldier fighting an enemy he rarely sees, in a conflict he does not understand.

Mujahidin gunner (left) wearing a captured Soviet tanker’s helmet, holds a flag in one hand and a Soviet RPG-7 anti-tank weapon in the other. Above, mujahidin gather in a circle and listen intently as the gunner, kneeling, demonstrates how to aim and fire the RPG-7. The man standing beside him is holding a model of a Soviet helicopter.
Reared in a warrior culture and perfectly adapted to their mountainous homeland, the mujahidin have proven to be a formidable foe. At top, two soldiers descend a steep hillside; right, surrender of a crewman from a captured armored personnel carrier.

Above, wreckage of a tank in a riverbed.
Resistance unit on the march (above) stops for a water break. Mujahidin in the field carry little equipment except for their weapons and ammunition, subsisting for long periods on water, sugared tea and bread.

“The Afghans have always been the best resistance fighters in the world.”

Pakistani government official
“They are a superpower and we are among the poorest of peoples... But the Russians have never before fought a people who were fighting for their faith.”

Freedom Fighter

Much of the Soviet military equipment introduced into Afghanistan, such as heavy tanks and large rocket launchers (bottom), have proven unwieldy and virtually useless against the guerilla tactics of the Afghan resistance. The critical difference may not be hardware, but the endurance and determination of the freedom fighters as they train their sons, whether with toy guns and sticks (below left) or AK-47s (right), in the event that they must continue the fight against Soviet occupation.
By invading and occupying Afghanistan, Moscow finds itself in a deteriorating situation internally and internationally. Yet the Soviets have shown no inclination to acknowledge their mistake. Their refusal to withdraw means continued privation, exile, suffering and death for the people of Afghanistan. Only sustained international pressure, plus the efforts of the Afghan freedom fighters, can convince the Soviet Union to seek an acceptable political solution that grants the Afghan people their fundamental right to self-determination and freedom.

Sporadic outbursts of criticism against Soviet actions in Afghanistan, followed by calls for accommodation, or by the silence of indifference, can only prolong the conflict. The international community must avoid a double standard which allows it to condemn the actions of the United States or other Western nations, in Southeast Asia for example, and then acquiesce in a blatant act of aggression and imperialism by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

The people of Afghanistan are demonstrating an extraordinary measure of courage and fortitude in the face of great adversity. Individuals, groups and nations around the world can show support by insisting upon the full withdrawal of Soviet troops, condemning the indiscriminate destruction of villages and bombing of civilian populations, providing aid to the more than two million Afghan refugees, and calling for the reestablishment of Afghanistan as a nonaligned, independent nation.

The people of Afghanistan are defending a culture, a religion, a history, a homeland. Their struggle continues, their spirit remains unvanquished.
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