Soviet Intelligence in Afghanistan: The Only Efficient Tool of the Politburo

*By Egor Evsikov**

The final years of the Cold War, the late 1970s and early 1980s, were marked by a period of increased tension between the Soviet Union and the United States. Under the presidency of Jimmy Carter, the policy of *Détente* between the Western and Communist blocks began to unravel following the 1979 Iranian Islamist revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These developments left the United States without its most vital ally in the Middle East and brought Soviets within 300 miles of the Persian Gulf. Elsewhere in the region, the United States position looked increasingly vulnerable when American embassy was burnt in Islamabad by Islamic extremists the after the stability of Saudi regime was threatened by the violent seizure of Mecca. The 1979 events were seen as blows to American international prestige and power and many in Washington thought that it was time to strike back at Moscow by outspending the Soviets in the arms race, and turning Afghanistan into a "Soviet Vietnam" by aiding the anti-Communist insurgency there. (Gaddis, 2005:349)

The Soviet governing body that was responsible for its major policies under Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1979, was collectively known as the Politburo (short for the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union). The Politburo employed the KGB (*Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezoposnosti,* translated as "the Committee of State Security"), and the GRU (*Glavnoye razvedovatel'noye upravleniye,* translated as "the Main Intelligence Directorate") intelligence services, as their key foreign policy tools. The KGB and the GRU performed tasks that went far beyond their traditional roles as civilian and military intelligence services. In addition to collecting information about enemies of the Soviet state, these Soviet intelligence services managed Special Forces that were trained to perform all kinds of "sensitive" missions, and in case of the KGB, also played the roles of secret police and border guards, keeping Soviet population under control, and Soviet borders sealed.

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The Politburo decision to invade Afghanistan in 1979 reflected the overall degradation of Soviet relations with the West, and was motivated primarily by their fears of instability spreading across the border into Muslim regions of the Soviet Union, and of either American (via Pakistan) or Iranian Islamist advances into Afghanistan. Correspondingly, the Soviet decision to withdraw from Afghanistan after 1985 was motivated primarily by a desire to improve relations with the West (Halliday & Tanin, 1998:1371). Soviet intelligence services, together with the Soviet military, were tasked with carrying out these two successive strategic tasks assigned to them by the Politburo. In order to create conditions for Soviet intervention, intelligence services initiated the December 1979 removal of Afghan Communist leader - Hafizullah Amin from power and replacing him with their protégé Babrak Kramal. In 1986, in an attempt to create conditions that would allow an eventual Soviet pullout, the KGB orchestrated another regime change by replacing Babrak Karmal with even more closely controlled by KGB leader Mohammad Najibullah (*Ibid.,* p. 1366). On the operational and tactical level intervention was planned to closely resemble the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, but was instead forced to adopt intelligence service methods used for combating *Basmachestvo*, an anti-Soviet movement in Central Asia that occurred between 1918 and 1935 (Oliker, 2008:2-3). Soviet intelligence operations aimed at defeating the insurgency had a mixed record with some success but proved ultimately ineffective due to the failures of the Soviet military to adapt to counterinsurgency warfare, while intelligence operations aimed at regime changes in Afghanistan were successful and fulfilled both political-operational priority missions assigned to them by the Politburo.

This article will examine the role played by the Soviet intelligence services in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It will also provide a background of Soviet historic experience in its relations with Afghanistan, and with combating Muslim resistance in Central Asia. The focus of this article will be on examining Soviet intelligence service operations in Afghanistan, including the operation by KGB and GRU Special Forces units that removed Hafizullah Amin from power in 1979, operations that were aimed at combating the *mujahideen* insurgency, as well as operations aimed at stabilizing the Kabul regime, with the ultimate goal of allowing the Soviets to withdraw from Afghanistan.

The land-locked Asian kingdom of Afghanistan was first featured in Russian geopolitical calculations during the Napoleonic wars of early

nineteenth century. In 1801, Russian emperor Paul II was considering a joint Franco-Russian invasion of India and sent his Cossacks on a scouting mission to collect information and to create maps of Central Asia and Afghanistan (Riasanovsky, 1993:275). British fear of a Russian invasion of India via Afghanistan played an important role in the British desire to incorporate Afghanistan into the British Empire, and led to two Anglo-Afghan wars in the nineteenth century (Ewans, 2005:18). By playing off both European empires against each other, Afghanistan managed to remain independent throughout the nineteenth century despite losing vast territories to the British after the imposition of the Duran Line in 1893 (Kakar, 1995:3). In 1907, in order to reconcile its differences in the period leading up to the First World War, the Russian Tsar signed a pact with the British agreeing that Afghanistan lay outside its sphere of influence (Grau & Gress, 2002:xxii). After the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia, they were the first power to recognize Afghanistan as an independent nation in 1919 and during the same year sent weapons to help Afghans fight the British "imperialists" (Feifer, 2009:21).

Soviet Union enjoyed friendly relations with the Afghan monarchy despite its growing support of Afghan pro-Soviet leftists. Most Western countries had little interest in Afghanistan at the time. In 1954 United States Secretary of State John F. Dulles described Afghanistan as a country of no "security interest" to Washington. This neglect, in combination with increasingly hostile relations with Pakistan due to numerous border disputes dating back to the Duran Line agreement, left Afghanistan with no other option but to approach the Soviet Union for economic and military aid (Kakar, 1995:9). In 1973 Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud overthrew King Mohammad Zahir in cooperation with pro-Moscow leftist officers (much of Afghanistan's officer cadre went to schools in the Soviet Union since 1950s) and declared Afghanistan a republic (*Ibid.*, p. 12).

Two leftist pro-Soviet factions grew increasingly prominent in Afghanistan in the 1970s: Parcham (Banner), predominantly Dari-speaking, urban and upper-class, and the Khalq (Masses), a more orthodox Marxist-Leninist movement comprised mostly of Pashtun-speaking middle class and military officers (Harrison, 1995:18). There was also a separate military faction headed by Abdul Qadir with direct ties to the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence apparatus. The Parcham faction had close KGB links via the International Department of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), and was considered more reasonable by Moscow than the

Khalq faction, which was viewed as too radical and unpredictable (*Ibid.*, p. 19). The Khalq and Parcham factions united into the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1977, but deep divisions within the party remained (Halliday & Tanin, 1998:1360). In April of 1978, a small group of Pashtun military officers who were mostly members of the Khalq faction, seized power in Kabul. The coup plotters, angered by Daoud's government rapprochement with Pakistan and alleged "sell-out" over the Durand Line issue, were led by Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin. On April 27th of that year, a column of approximately fifty T-62 tanks, supported by six hundred soldiers and helped by several MiGs and SU-25s, rolled into Kabul and bombed the presidential palace. After a night of fighting on the streets of Kabul with troops loyal to Daoud, they murdered him and his family; and by next morning were in control of the capital (Harrison, 1995:26). The Communist coup in Afghanistan caught the Soviets by surprise. It was a last-minute operation orchestrated primarily by Khalq, in which "support from Soviet intelligence agencies and military advisers, if any, came only after they were confronted with a virtual fait accompli" (*Ibid.*, p. 25).

Reacting in an ad hoc manner to the developments in Kabul, Soviets decided to welcome the new Communist regime. Taraki met with Brezhnev and was able to secure massive Soviet assistance, which allowed the new regime to launch sweeping programs of land distribution, emancipation of women, and mass education. However, majority of rural Afghans saw these reforms as a destruction of the traditional Afghan social structure (Grau, 2002). The new government, which failed even to reconcile the divisions within the PDPA, and whose power base itself was confined to the military and major Afghan cities, lacked popular support and soon faced open armed resistance from the opposition. In March of 1979, the Islamist opposition in Herat organized an army mutiny and seized control of the city. As many as forty Soviet advisers, their wives and children, and a number of KGB residents, were massacred along with hundreds of Afghan government officials, and their body parts were triumphantly paraded through the streets (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2005:392). Reports from the Kabul KGB residency, which had a network of well-placed agents in the Afghan official establishment, forecasted that unless Amin was removed, an "anti-Soviet Islamic Republic" would replace the Communist regime (Andrew & Gordievsky, 1990:480). During the Politburo meeting that followed, Defence Minister Dmitry Ustinov and chief Soviet ideologue Mikhail Suslov supported Soviet troop commitment

to Afghanistan while KGB leader Yuri Andropov urged more cautioned approach (Feifer, 2009:12).

Before the invasion of Afghanistan, Soviet army and intelligence services had previous experience in fighting against native Islamic resistance in Central Asia in the 1920s and early 1930s. Following the 1917 Communist Revolution, and during the Russian Civil War, Bolsheviks encountered strong resistance in Turkestan (historic name for Soviet Central Asia, which today includes modern Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan) from the local forces known as the *Basmachi* (Oliker, 2008:1-2). The social and political structures of the local population were barely affected by the Russian Imperial conquest in the nineteenth century, and remained virtually untouched since the Middle Ages, when Turkestan had been an important centre of Islamic civilization (Olcott, 1981:353). The Bolshevik attempt to restructure Muslim society met with strong local opposition and led to years of armed conflict, known as the *Basmachi* revolt. There were a number of similarities between the Afghan *mujahideen* insurgency in the 1980s and *Basmachi* insurgency that occurred 60 years earlier.

Basmachi insurgents were initially led by traditional authorities such as feudal aristocracy, tribal leaders, clergy, landowners and merchants, who successfully rallied deeply conservative and religious Central Asian Muslims, primarily in rural areas, to defend Islam and resist Russian oppression (Ritter, 1985:484). At the end of 1919 there were over 20000 *Basmachi* active fighters, and Soviet control of Central Asia was limited to the city of Tashkent, with most rural areas and small towns under rebel control (Olcott, 1981:355). However, a year later, the Red Army, aided by the disunity among the rebels, drove the *Basmachi* from nearly all of the Central Asian cities, into small towns and mountain villages (*Ibid.*, 358). Organized large-scale resistance by the *Basmachi* ceased in 1924, however, localized small-scale resistance, which took on the characteristics of a true guerrilla conflict, continued for another ten years. This resistance was particularly strong in Tadzhikistan, where the physical and cultural landscape, with its rugged mountainous terrain and conservative Muslim and tribal population, closely resembled that of Afghanistan. Under the leadership of local mullahs, and warlord Ibrahim Bek, who called for *jihad* against the Soviets, the *Basmachi* resistance in Tadzhikistan lasted for years, and was not fully crushed until 1935 (Ritter, 1985:485). Soviet authorities adopted extremely harsh measures to eradicate the *Basmachestvo*, including

scorched-earth campaigns and mass deportations of the local population. According to some estimates, over 1200 villages were destroyed by the Red Army, while the Cheka arrested and deported over 270000 Central Asians accused of aiding the *Basmachi* (*Ibid.*, 488). Soviet military intelligence and OGPU troops (the predecessor of the KGB) had special detachments who masqueraded as *basmachi* forces in order to intercept weapons and rebels crossing Soviet borders, and to ambush real *basmachi* rebels (Pogranichnyye voiska KGB SSSR v Afganistane 1979-1989, Undated). Central Asia was finally tamed by a combination of brutal terror, effective intelligence operations, indigenous forces (many local Muslims joined the Red Army) and economic modernization that undermined the influence of traditional feudal and clerical elites. The same methods were relied upon by the Soviets in their attempt defeat the *mujahideen* rebels in Afghanistan, but failed because unlike Turkestan the Soviet leadership had no long-term commitment to the occupation of Afghanistan.

Despite KGB attempts to maintain unity of PDPA personal, ethnic and ideological rivalries among Afghan Communists escalated. In September of 1979, new Afghan Prime Minister Amin seized power from President Taraki, and then secretly murdered him. Amin, who was an even more ideologically dogmatic Marxist than Taraki, initiated radical modernization reforms that were rapidly alienating conservative rural majority of Afghanistan. Amin also unleashed a campaign of terror against his rivals within the PDPA by murdering hundreds of Parchamis (Giustozzi, 2000:3). Although Moscow remained quiet publicly and maintained economic and military aid to Amin's government, KGB reports from Kabul became increasingly negative. In addition to being frustrated by Amin's purges against KGB-friendly Parchamis and his reckless radical reforms, the KGB suspected that Amin had links with the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (in his younger years he had studied at the Columbia University), could not control his temper, conspired with the Chinese, intended to steal Afghan government funds, and was secretly planning to switch sides in the Cold War (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2005:392). Most of the rumours that eventually convinced the KGB that Amin was contemplating turning to the Americans were in fact spread by Amin's Parcham rivals. Defected KGB Major General Kalugin admitted that KGB made a crucial mistake by taking the bait and suspecting that Amin was indeed a CIA agent (Harrison, 1995:44). However, it was Politburo rather than KGB that made a decision to get rid of Amin, a decision that ultimately created even more problems for the Soviet Union. Brezhnev,

who was personally impressed by Taraki whom he met in Moscow on several occasions, was outraged by his murder (Halliday & Tanin, 1998:1372). The Politburo was also unable to see the world without the ideological prism of Marxism-Leninism. Even Andropov the most cautious member of the Politburo saw Afghanistan as a part of a worldwide struggle for influence with the United States (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2005:413). Personal bias, spy paranoia and ideological bias all contributed to Politburo's decision to start a series of actions that eventually committed the Soviet Union to ten years of war in Afghanistan.

After Taraki's murder, the Politburo on Brezhnev request met to weigh its options in Afghanistan (after the public exposure following Bulgarian writer Giorgi Markov assassination in London all KGB operations against foreign political leaders had to be approved by the Politburo [Andrew & Gordievsky, 1990:480]) These options included the possibility of just removing Amin from power or his removal in combination with large-scale Soviet military intervention in order to ensure a more secure pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. Contrary to the Western rhetoric of the time still supported even to this day by many, Kremlin's geopolitical calculations did not include driving "Soviet tanks south to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean" or bringing "the Persian Gulf within strike range of military aircraft" (Marshall, 2007:70). In fact, as it was correctly pointed out by chief architect of Cold War era containment George F. Kennan, Afghanistan represented a natural security concern for Moscow and its intervention was defensive rather than offensive in nature (Gibbs, 2006:241).

In order to implement its foreign policy and create the desired outcome in Kabul, the Politburo turned to Soviet intelligence services. After some debate within the Politburo, there was a consensus that the desired outcome included a removal of Amin from power, and his replacement with the Parcham leader with KGB links, Babrak Karmal (Halliday & Tanin, 1998:1372). Initially, the KGB allegedly tried to engineer the death of Amin by covert means, but a number of assassination attempts failed. This failure, in combination with the unexpected resilience of Amin's regime (Soviets expected his fragile hold on power to last for only few weeks, but despite these predictions, Amin managed to secure the loyalty of Khalq supporters in the military and major cities, which gradually strengthened his position), brought the option of a military intervention to the table (Halliday & Tanin, 1998:1362).

Intelligence services were entrusted with carrying out Special Forces action against the presidential residence of Amin, which was to coincide with a rapid Czechoslovak-style military intervention. Just as in the previous invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, an elaborate campaign of deception, or *maskirovka*, was organized to avoid suspicion that intervention was imminent. Amin was still receiving military and economic aid from the Soviet Union days before the December 1979 coup (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2005:400). According to an expert on Soviet military affairs Stephen Blank:

> Moscow obtained complete operational surprise vis-à-vis Kabul, Pakistan, and the United States, despite numerous warnings and intelligence analyses suggesting that this was in the offing. This operation also successfully implemented Maskirovka (cover, concealment, and deception). Western analysts and governments were completely fooled. This use of Maskirovka applies to all levels of a military operation and even a war since Soviet commanders were directed to employ all forms of it at each level: tactical, operational, and strategic. (Blank, 1993)

On the night of the invasion, Kabul was infiltrated by the "Muslim battalion" of the GRU Spetsnaz, which was comprised of Special Forces recruited in southern Soviet republics (with many Tajiks and Uzbeks who spoke Farsi) dressed in Afghan Army uniforms. Supported by KGB Spetsnaz Groups codenamed "Thunder" and "Zenith", they conducted a daring assault on Tadzh-Bek presidential palace, overpowered stiff resistance from Amin's presidential guard, and killed the Afghan leader (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2005:402). According to some allegations, hours before the assault started, Amin was poisoned during the reception held in honour of the PDPA anniversary, and was treated by Soviet doctors when Spetsnaz troops entered his palace (Grau, 2002). During the same night, KGB and GRU Spetsnaz, together with Soviet army paratroopers, secured other important targets in Kabul, including the Afghan Defence and Internal ministries, and the secret service headquarters and communications centers (*Ibid.*). On the morning after the assault, there was a radio broadcast claiming to be from Radio Kabul announcing that Babrak Karmal had assumed power and requested "fraternal Soviet military assistance". In fact, the broadcast was coming from the Soviet Army headquarters, to the great confusion of Radio Kabul staff (Andrew and Mitrokhin, 2005:402). The initial December 1979 incursion into

Afghanistan resulted in Soviet losses of 24 killed in action, 44 killed in accidents, and 74 wounded in action (Grau, 2002). Despite these losses (most were in fact incidental and fratricidal) Special Forces of KGB and GRU successfully completed the task of neutralizing Amin's loyalists and liquidating the Afghan leader before Afghan military, leadership or population could realize what was going on.

While organizing regime changes in Kabul, the KGB and the GRU were also involved in combating *mujahideen* insurgency in order to strengthen pro-Moscow regimes in Kabul. Soviet intelligence services faced a number of difficulties in this endeavour, but nonetheless proved to be by far more innovative than the Soviet army. It soon became clear to them that the Soviet Union faced resistance in Afghanistan of a very different nature than its latest experience in Czechoslovakia, or even its more rough experience gained in Hungary in 1956, when they had to fight armed Hungarians in the streets of Budapest. Soviet intelligence services were forced to recall the lessons of *guerrilla warfare* learned during and immediately after the Second World War, and even recall the experience of fighting against the *basmachi* of Central Asia in the 1920s and early 1930s (Mitrokhin, 2002). They were also forced to innovate and adapt to unfamiliar situations encountered while fighting a protracted counterinsurgency campaign. The KGB and the GRU came up with a number of ways to combat the *mujahideen* on operational, political, and tactical levels, including campaigns of disinformation, Special Forces operations that involved infiltration, sabotage, terrorism, recruitment of local support, and even of operations outside Afghan borders, striking at Pakistan and other *mujahideen* backers. For this purpose, in 1980 they assisted with the creation of an Afghan intelligence service closely modelled after the KGB, called the Department of State Information Services (riasat-i khidmat-i ettela'at-i doulati), more commonly known as KhAD (after 1986 it was renamed the Ministry of State Security, or WAD (vizarat-i amniyat-i-daulati)). Officially, it was a department within the prime minister's office, but in reality it functioned as a powerful independent ministry (Halliday and Tanin, 1998:1366). KhAD agents were trained in the KGB school at Balashikha, Uzbekistan, as well as in other KGB training facilities. After 1979, KhAD played a major role in consolidating the Afghan state and overall constructions of the PDPA institutions, a much more important role than is normally undertaken by a security organization. The KhAD became a major player within the politics of Afghanistan (*Ibid.*, p. 1366).

Disinformation and deception played a major role in the Soviet intelligence effort to defeat the insurgency. Among more successful intelligence disinformation operations was one that targeted Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a prominent *mujahideen* leader (and one of the present leaders of the insurgency in Afghanistan). The KGB falsified a personal letter from Hekmatyar to one of the *Hizbi Islami* leaders that was later published in a newspaper. The letter discredited Hekmatyar in the eyes of other *mujahideen* leaders and the Pakistani authorities. This KGB disinformation encouraged hostility between the Pashtun forces of Hekmatyar and the Tajik forces of Rabbani and Massoud that led to violent clashes amongst the *mujahideen* (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2005:418). Disinformation contributed to an atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion within the *mujahideen* that even outlasted the Soviet occupation, and led to a bloody civil war in Afghanistan in the 1990s. On a tactical level, Soviet intelligence services managed Special Forces teams known as "false bands" that would pose as the *mujahideen* groups. Especially notorious were KGB "Cascade" units, according to KGB defector Vasili Mitrokhin:

> The KGB 'Cascade' units operated in parallel throughout the country. They were given broad powers. As well as terrorist actions, sabotage and the recruitment of agents, they were active among the tribes, in disrupting the activities of the Mujahedin, and in the setting-up of self-defence units. They recruited informants, guides and other agents to expose the hiding places of the rebels in the towns and drew up plans of their houses and their approaches. In many ways the KGB compared the national liberation struggle of the Afghan Mujahedin to the *basmachestvo* in the USSR. It therefore thought it appropriate to carry over to Afghanistan the methods and tactics the Cheka had used against the *basmachi*. (Mitrokhin, 2002)

The KGB, GRU and KhAD also actively recruited local collaborators in order to undercut the insurgency. A number of pro-government militias and self-defence units were set up under the control of these intelligence services. The largest of such militias was the *Jebhe-yi Melli-yi Paderwatan* (National Front for the Fatherland), however, it relied primarily on ethnic Uzbeks, and had difficulty recruiting from other Afghan ethnic groups (Marshall, 2007:72). Irregular military forces set by the KhAD also included militias organized from government employees as 'self-defence groups' in government buildings, factories, educational establishments and residential areas. A number of Afghan tribes were recruited into militias,

either bribed by economic incentives or lured by prospects to settle scores with *mujahideen* rivals. These militias were also joined by a number of ex-*mujahideen* who surrendered and co-operated with the government (Halliday & Tanin, 1998:1365). Despite the widespread animosity that the Soviets were facing in Afghanistan, a number of tribal factions either supported the Kabul regime or shifted back and fourth between the PDPA government and the resistance (Harrison, 1995:148). According to Vasili Mitrokhin: "KhAD had talks with 315 tribal elders representing 18 large tribes accounting for 1 million people altogether. Some tribes were given material assistance through KhAD. The leaders were bribed and armed units hired to cover some parts of the borders with Pakistan and Iran" (Mitrokhin, 2002). Hazaras an ethnic minority long persecuted in the Tadjik and Pashtun dominated Afghanistan were for the first time in history were given some representation in the government in attempt to bring ethnic minorities on the side of the regime. Despite this effort great majority of rural Tadjiks and Pashtuns comprising some two thirds of the population remained deeply hostile to the policies originated in Kabul and Moscow, the policies that they perceived as un-Islamic and hostile to their way of life (Giustozzi, 2000:242).

As the *mujahideen* insurgency spread KGB assessments increasingly blamed foreign – especially American and Pakistani – arms supplies as the root causes of this escalation (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2005:413). The Soviet Union was severely handicapped by a non-benign regional security environment in which China, Iran, Pakistan and the US conspired, to varying degrees, to undermine its efforts in Afghanistan (Marshall, 2007:83). The only regional power that was friendly to the Soviet Union was India. Delhi provided some crucial intelligence support to Moscow, mostly with regards to information about Pakistani aid to the *mujahideen* (Bradsher, 1999:106). Despite their limited options, the Soviet intelligence services, through its proxies in KhAD, did try to turn the tables on Islamabad. In 1982, Mir Khozar Khan, the leader of a Baluchistan separatist movement, which was desperate to win independence for the Baluchis in Pakistan and Iran, asked Babrak Karmal for financial and military assistance. KhAD opened several secret camps for Baluchis, who underwent guerrilla warfare training there (Mitrokhin, 2002). However, Moscow orders kept the Soviet and Afghan intelligence services from escalating the conflict. The KGB avoided confrontations with Pakistan which had the potential to escalate into war, since Islamabad enjoyed close ties with both Washington and Beijing. Overall, the KGB assessed wider

regional escalation of the Afghan war as counter-productive, since instability along the Soviet southern borders and in the Indian subcontinent would do little to harm the "main enemy" located in another hemisphere, but could easily spread to the Soviet Union itself.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the general secretary of the Soviet Communist party and the chairman of the Politburo. The new Soviet leader wanted to ease the international tensions and tone down the Cold War. Gorbachev considered Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan as a way to achieve this goal. Soviet intervention in Afghanistan lacked international legitimacy, was loudly opposed by the Reagan administration, and negatively affected the Soviet image in the Third World, especially among the Muslim countries. This was the most important motive for Gorbachev's decision to pullout; this was a calculated action by Moscow rather than defeat of the Soviet army by the *mujahideen*. The latter myth, in fact, became accepted by many in the West, and indeed in Russia itself. Another commonly believed myth is that it was Gorbachev, who, because of his strong pacifist beliefs, convinced "the reluctant military and the KGB to stop the Afghan war" (Marshall, 2007:75). As of early 1983, Andropov and the KGB privately accepted the need for a settlement that fell short of a Soviet military victory (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2005:413). The Soviets wanted to create conditions in Afghanistan that would allow the Kabul regime to stand on its own feet with minimal Soviet military assistance. In November 1985, Gorbachev invited Karmal to Moscow and lectured him on the measures he needed to enact in order to stay in power. These measures included the abandonment of dogmatic Communism, and an end to radical economic reforms aimed at building a socialist economy (Halliday and Tanin, 1998:1367). These suggestions were based on KGB reports coming from Kabul which correctly assessed that the root causes feeding the insurgency were reckless Marxist reforms imposed too quickly upon the conservative rural Afghan population. These modernizing reforms were mismanaged by a small, urbanized minority of radicals who were dangerously detached from the great majority of their own people.

By 1984, the Politburo realized that Karmal was unable to create a regime that could survive without Soviet support. Desertions and poor morale plagued the Afghan army, (it shrunk by half after the Soviet intervention, with many former soldiers joining the rebels) which was unable to fight the *mujahideen* on its own (Ewans, 2005:129). As early as 1982 KGB Afghan commission report assessed the situation as following:

> The situation in Afghanistan remains complicated and tense. The class struggle, represented in armed counter-revolutionary insurrections, encouraged and actively supported from abroad, is occurring in circumstances where a genuine unity of the PDPA is still absent, where the state and Party apparatus is weak in terms of organizations and ideology, which is reflected in the practical non-existence of local government organs, where financial and economic difficulties are mounting, and where the combat readiness of the Afghan armed forces and the people's militia is still insufficient. (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2005:407)

Based on KGB assessments from Kabul, the decision was reached to replace Karmal with a more capable leader. This time no special force operation was required. In 1984, the Deputy Chief of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, visited Kabul and met with Karmal, in effect giving him notice that, if the situation did not improve in the near future, he would be replaced (Sherbashin, 2001). A number of recommendations were given to Karmal: among them, the establishment of a broad coalition government, dropping the name "socialist" from PDPA ideology and instead calling it "national democratic", and paying greater respect to mullahs and Islam (Ewans, 2005:130). However, the Kabul leadership became progressively weaker and more incompetent, with Karmal himself increasingly prone to heavy drinking. After 1985, another factor came into play, Gorbachev was determined to improve Soviet relations with the West, and demanded a stronger Kabul government that would allow the Soviets to extract themselves from Afghanistan. In the spring of 1986, Kryuchkov once again visited Kabul and encouraged Karmal to step down and hand over the power to KhAD leader Mohamed Nadjibullah. Karmal was given a dacha outside of Moscow, where he retired, and complained bitterly about Moscow's decision for the rest of his life (Halliday & Tanin, 1998:1374). KGB carried out a second regime change operation in Afghanistan without any help from the Special Forces and indeed without a single shoot being fired.

New Afghan leader Nadjibullah proved himself to be more capable and at least tried to implement the policies what KGB advised him to do. These measures named "National Reconciliation Policy" tried a variety of ways aimed at expanding the power base of the Kabul regime. Millions of roubles were spent to bribe village mullahs and tribal elders, the government proclaimed that it does not seek to build socialism in

Afghanistan anymore and will rule according to Muslim laws (Andrew & Mitrokhin, 2005:415). The government of Nadjibullah was successfully fighting *mujahideen* insurgency even after the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan in 1989. In fact, after Soviet withdrawal, Afghan army won several major victories including one at Jalalabad that sent the insurgency back to the square one, despite the massive aid and an impressive arsenal of modern weaponry, including the stinger missiles, that the rebels processed at that point (Marshall, 2005:77). The regime of Nadjibullah collapse only in 1992 after the Soviet Union itself disintegrated. The reasons behind this collapse were political divisions (most importantly defection of General Dostum to the *mujahideen* side), economic crisis (Soviet economic aid to the regime ended in 1991), and increasing tribalism and ethnic nationalism throughout Afghanistan and not the military superiority of the *mujahideen.* (*Ibid.*, p. 80-81)

Soviet intelligence performed successfully in accomplishing missions assigned to it by the Politburo. Surprisingly, at the time when the Soviet society was dominated by a strong anti-war public sentiment and the army faced increasing draft evasion and desertions, KGB applicants for Afghan postings actually exceeded the jobs available. Young and ambitious KGB officers looked on the war as an opportunity to make their reputations and advance their career (Andrew & Gordievsky, 1990:482). Intelligence services were also able to correctly assess the situation in Afghanistan realizing as early as 1983 that the victory over the insurgency by military means was unachievable. However, there were a number of flaws that negatively affected the performance of Soviet intelligence services. In 1983, during the final year of his life, KGB head Andropov was obsessed by a belief that the Reagan administration had plans for a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union. Andropov made collection of intelligence on these non-existent plans a top priority for both the KGB and the GRU, diverting resources from intelligence efforts in Afghanistan (Andrew and Mitrokhin, 2005:414). The GRU vs. KGB rivalry also harmed both agencies efforts in Afghanistan. According to Colonel Alexander Morozov, deputy KGB station chief in Kabul from 1975 to 1980 the KGB would often not share intelligence data with the GRU. In fact, military intelligence operated "largely independent" of the KGB and had its own closely guarded network of agents and informers (Harrison, 1995:19). KGB actions on many occasions run contrary to the wishes of the Soviet military in Afghanistan. For example, General Varennikov who was a personal representative in Kabul of the Soviet Defence Minister would often engage

in "stormy arguments with KGB representatives". Afghanistan became a proxy battleground for Soviet security ministries, who continued their domestic bureaucratic conflicts (Marshall, 2005:84). Despite these flaws, all major missions given to the KGB and GRU in Afghanistan by the political leadership were completed (even than their completion created more problems than it solved, as was clearly the case with the removal of Amin from power).

In contrast to the flawed performance of the conventional Soviet military in Afghanistan, as well as the abysmal record of PDPA leadership, Soviet intelligence services performed well in Afghanistan, being especially effective at organizing regime changes in Kabul. In order to achieve political objectives required by the Politburo, they had to change the Afghan Communist leadership twice. In December 1979, Soviet intelligence services managed to replace President Hafizullah Amin with Babrak Karmal, by a daring Special Forces operation. Once the decision was made in 1985 to oust Karmal, and replace him with a new and more efficient leader, in order to allow the Soviet military to withdraw from Afghanistan, successful behind the scenes arm-twisting was used to install Mohamed Nadjibullah as president. Soviet intelligence services were less successful in their secondary tasks of combating the *mujahideen* insurgency and strengthening the Kabul regime. However, unlike the Soviet Armed Forces, which were unable to adapt to an unconventional style of warfare in Afghanistan, Soviet intelligence services, and their special forces, adapted well, and even pioneered a number of effective counterinsurgency strategies and tactics. Soviet intelligence services, to a much greater degree than the army, retained the lessons learned during their fight against the *basmachi*, and used the tactics that proved effective in defeating the Muslim insurgency in Central Asia that occurred 60 years before Afghanistan. These measures were partially successful, and left the regime of Nadjibullah in a much stronger position in 1989, the year of the Soviet withdrawal, compared with the situation faced by Karmal at the beginning of the Soviet intervention. Therefore, the Kabul regime was able to survive on its own longer than anyone expected, until it eventually collapsed for internal reasons in 1992, which in turn created an opportunity for the *mujahideen* to finally seize power. (Marshall, 2005:80-81)

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