

The Contingent and Long-Term Causes of the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979-1989) According to the US Scientific Literature of the Eighties and Nineties

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Introduction

The government of the Soviet Union, after Stalin's death in 1953, began to concentrate more and more on the Third World, because it had come to understand that the exclusion of Western influence in those countries would have weakened the capitalist West, resulting in a long-term advantage for the USSR. As a consequence, humanitarian and technical aid began in Afghanistan, a country that as late as the mid-seventies Moscow still considered outside its direct sphere of influence and as a bordering State whose neutrality, or so-called "Finlandization," – i.e. an equidistance in foreign policy – was to be guaranteed at all costs for reasons of security. This gave Afghanistan the opportunity to become a member of the Non-Aligned bloc and to collaborate in the economic field with several States, Western ones too, without this representing a threat for the security of Soviet borders in the south. Soviet objectives in Afghanistan as from the fifties were the following: dissuading the Afghan government from joining a pro-West alliance, thus safeguarding the security of Soviet borders; making the country as dependent as possible on the Soviet Union; obtaining trade advantages for both countries; making cooperation with Kabul advantageous from the point of view of Soviet foreign policy; turning Soviet-Afghan cooperation into a model for other Third World countries. These were the basic Soviet objectives, to which we must add a steadfast defense of the Afghan socialist revolution of 1978 which, in a context of rapid radicalization of the Cold War in the late seventies, gradually led the Soviet leadership, as a consequence of a gross miscalculation, to the fatal decision of invading Afghanistan.

The Soviet invasion began on 27 December 1979 and marked a breaking point in the history of the Cold War. As from that date nothing was ever to be the same. The Soviet Union began its inexorable decline, also as a result of the joint pressure by several countries, particularly the United States, Great Britain, Japan, China and many Muslim States, which began a sort of Holy War against the Soviet invader. Among the Muslim States, we can emphasize Egypt¹ and Saudi Arabia, countries which provided Islamic warriors for the Afghan camp, including Osama Bin Laden, future organizer of the 9/11 attacks.

¹ In particular The Muslim Brotherhood, an extremist Islamic organization which aims to return to an Islam of the origins.

The United States, however, were in the frontline in opposing the Soviet invasion, already in the final months of the presidency of Jimmy Carter, who put a stop once and for all the conciliatory stance his administration had so far held towards the Soviets and instead undertook a whole range of initiatives to punish the Soviet Union for its enterprise. These included the interruption of technological and food aid, a chill in diplomatic relations to the lowest possible levels, new investments in nuclear weapons aiming at weakening the Soviet Union economically and several United Nations initiatives, strongly promoted by the US administration, to condemn the Soviet invasion.

What led the Kremlin to invading Afghanistan? What were the contingent and long-term motivations for intervention? And, most importantly, how did the Americans interpret this choice at the time and in later years? How much did they understand of the real motivations that had led the Kremlin to invading Afghanistan? An answer to these questions has been attempted by relying on a selection of secondary US sources (which amount to around 300 titles in all), selected according to quality and scientific relevance. Other titles by important US (and occasionally non-US) authors who have dealt with the final decades of the existence of the Soviet Union, but not the Soviet-Afghan war in particular, have also been used. In addition, in order to support or confute the veracity of the theses set forth by the authors under examination, occasional references are made to primary or secondary Russian or Soviet sources². The analysis of primary Russian sources allows us to illustrate the initial phases of the historical facts in question and to shed light on what US scholars actually understood about the real motivations that led the Soviet leadership to the fatal initiative of invading Afghanistan. The main aim of the analysis of the US historiography on the subject, on the other hand, is to reconstruct the long-term historical and cultural context under which the Soviet leadership came to invading Afghanistan. Some of the aspects highlighted by US historiography on the long-term causes that may have pushed the Soviet leaders of the time to invade Afghanistan, such as the fear of the higher population growth in Central Asian Muslim areas compared to the Slavic populations making up the majority of the Soviet Union, do not, however, find sufficient confirmation in the Russian and Soviet archival sources from the Politburo.

US sources are particularly rich, given the political and scientific interest the event aroused in the United States, both at the political and academic level. At that historical moment in the United States Sovietology was a “discipline” in full expansion, and one which responded well to the need to elaborate an answer, both intellectual and political, to the challenges raised by the Soviet Union, which apparently loomed on the horizon as an ever more threatening power. Understanding the mechanisms of the Soviet system hence came across as something essential to analyze and

² Among these, the book by Russian colonel Alexander Lyakhovskiy, *Tragedia i doblest Afgana* (The Tragedy and Valor of Afghanistan), Moscow, Nord, 2004

prevent its more insidious initiatives. The debate was essentially on two levels: a more strictly scientific one, aimed at establishing the determinant causes of the Soviet attack on Afghanistan, and a more operational one, aimed at seeking out strategies capable of opposing the threat. Strategies, however, not without some ideological distortions and a rather casual use of the “image of the enemy”, aimed at accentuating the characteristics of the intrinsic danger of Soviet power, so as to better legitimize the employment of serious measures to counter its expansionist designs.

Among the authors of the former current we can mention academics such as Harvard historian Adam Ulam, who kept up a scientific approach in the analysis of the motivations that had led the Soviet Union to invading Afghanistan, while the latter current includes scholars, mostly of Eastern European origin – such as Edward Luttwak, Richard Pipes, or Polish author Zbigniew Brzezinski – with a background mainly at Harvard, Stanford, John Hopkins and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and who largely adopted a more aggressive and politically militant attitude towards the Soviet invasion, foreseeing an opportunity to deal a fatal blow to their deadly ideological and geopolitical enemy.

Brzezinski interpreted the Soviet decision exclusively in the geopolitical sense, as an attempt by Moscow to reach the warm seas, following a century-old Russian expansionist tendency towards the area of the Persian Gulf, hence taking upon himself the task of developing a political and military strategy aimed at effectively countering it. Indeed, as political advisor for US foreign policy, Brzezinski had an essential role, together with the CIA, in the decision to finance, in an anti-Soviet key, the Afghan Mujahideen. This occurred in stark contrast to a more moderate policy towards the Soviets formulated by the Department of State, led under the Carter administration by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Carter and Vance conception of relations with the Soviet Union was radically different. For Vance relations with the ideological adversary of the US were to be based above all on the SALT 2 treaty, the success of which would have led to substantial general improvements in relations with the Soviet Union, whilst for Brzezinski the strategic *design* of the US to intensify its military and political presence in strategic parts of Western Europe, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, was absolutely not to be sacrificed on the altar of a *détente* with the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Brzezinski theorized a precise causal relationship between the drop in the assertiveness of the US and the rise of Soviet expansionism in the Third World, which he believed should be countered with all means necessary.

With respect to this initial outline, the invasion of Afghanistan marked a radical shift in US foreign policy, leading Washington to deploying military bases in a great many countries around the world. The Afghan crisis therefore also led to a swift turnover from politicians mainly of Anglo-Saxon origin and from the Liberal establishment, to more radical scholars of Eastern European

origin who also served as political advisors. The latter were generally characterized by a fierce anti-sovietism, often deriving from a painful personal experience, but also from deep-rooted ethical and political beliefs on the danger and intrinsic evil of Russian and Soviet Imperialism, and hence of the absolute necessity to destroy it, or at least to resolutely contain any further attempts it made to expand its political and military influence in the world. For them no compromise was possible with the Soviet Union, something which was in contrast with the majority of the US liberal establishment, which sought to find a *modus vivendi*, however precarious. Any attempt to find an agreement with the Soviet antagonist was seen as a sign of a deplorable and even dangerous form of moral weakness which would have had the sole effect of encouraging Soviet expansionism. These scholars converted to politics presented rather bellicose arguments, not so much directed to the scientific analysis of events as to the ultimate destruction of the Soviet Union, which at the time was thought possible thanks to the invasion of Afghanistan. “Impartial” and “objective” scientific analysis was being replaced by clear indications to adopt policies of responsive containment against the Soviet Union. This was also largely due to the overlapping of two roles, more frequent in the United States than in Europe, those of academic and political advisor.³

Hence, in the eighties and nineties a whole series of works on the Soviet-Afghan war were published⁴ essentially for two reasons: on the one hand the great scientific interest in the subject, and on the other the need for the academic, and especially the political, institutions to gain from the event the maximum political advantage, i.e. to considerably weaken the Soviet Union. The historiography, and the US historiography in particular, has not, however, sufficiently highlighted – and this is often due to an insufficient knowledge of the Soviet archival sources I quote in this article for completeness of information⁵ – to what extent Afghan politicians actually insisted in their request for Soviet military intervention and the reluctance of the Soviet leadership to intervene until

³ In the United States an academic career is generally more flexible than in Europe and does not preclude the opportunity of also filling a public or government role. In Europe the role of academician usually implies more limited contacts with the worlds of economics, politics and of the State in general. This, perhaps, also in consideration of a US tradition that takes a more empirical approach to culture, as a means of knowledge to act upon the world and change it rather than as something for its own sake. In Europe, on the other hand, academic culture tends to be more separated from political action, and hence from concrete applications. These two conditions of greater overlapping and separateness can therefore be to a certain extent traced back to cultural and institutional factors, or to professional and personal ones.

⁴ In Italy, on the other hand, the historical literature on the causes of the Soviet-Afghan war is rather scant. One exception is the fine text by Elena Dundovich *Dalla Finlandia all’Afghanistan. L’URSS in Afghanistan: la lunga storia di David e Golia* (“From Finland to Afghanistan: The Long Story of David and Goliath”), Centro Stampa 2 P, Florence, 2000, which is, not incidentally, based on the conspicuous US literature on the subject, along with important sources from the Russian archives. This article will also occasionally refer to other prominent authors from the English-speaking world. Many thanks also to Professor Dundovich of the University of Florence for her precious consulting work for this article.

⁵ Russian archives aside, the most important documentation for the primary sources of the Soviet-Afghan war is available in English in the Washington Cold War International Project: http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.browse&sort=Collection&item=Soviet%20Invasion%20of%20Afghanistan. Cfr. the project on the war in Afghanistan based on as yet declassified documents from archives worldwide: http://www.wilsoncenter.org/topics/docs/Toward_an_International_History_of_the_War_in_Afghanistan,_1979-1989.pdf. For Russian archival sources, and the RGANI, the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, in particular, see the website <http://www.rusarchives.ru/federal/rgani/character.shtml>. Also consider the Yeltsin Presidential Fund n. 89 preserved at the Hoover Institution - Soviet Archives of Stanford. The Soviet archives were inaccessible until the early nineties, when Yeltsin decided to discredit the actions of the CPSU in the eyes of the world and within Russian public opinion, and to make public the Presidential Fund n. 89 which contains the most reserved documents from the Politburo, including many on Afghanistan. Therefore, the majority of all those who wrote about the subject before the early nineties had no access to documents from the Soviet archives.

the situation reached the point of no return with the Herat uprising, when the Afghan government seemed on the verge of being overthrown by the rebels. In fact, President Nur Muhammad Taraki had requested intervention by Moscow to sedate the revolt, but Kremlin leaders had always answered negatively in view of the serious political and legal implications of any form of Soviet military intervention in the country. Soviet documents tell us that, faced with Taraki's insistent requests, the Kremlin declared itself ready to supply military aid by sending weapons and technicians, but not troops, because that would have been a manifest violation of international law. In 1978 the Soviet Union had in fact signed a treaty of military assistance with Afghanistan, which did not, however, include the *casus* of a direct deployment of troops in aid of the Country or of the regime in power against its internal enemies, but only in case of aggression by another State. Not respecting such a principle would have created a very dangerous precedent, because it would have represented a blatant violation of international law. Furthermore, in reply to the specific request by Afghan revolutionary leaders to send troops of Central-Asian origins, Moscow replied that they would have been identified as Soviet in any case, adding that dangerous episodes of affiliation between troops and rebels were likely to occur, as did indeed happen.

Soviet leaders, as stated in documents dated March 1979, requested information on the possibility of deploying Afghan troops, but the representatives of the revolutionary regime in Kabul replied that a good part of the Afghan officers trained in Russia had sided with the "Muslim Brotherhood," while those officially faithful to the regime were actually still attached to the monarchy and would have most certainly deserted at the earliest opportunity. The Afghan leadership therefore implicitly frightened the Soviets by representing a grim picture of serious regional instability if the Red Army failed to intervene with a substantial military contingent and, in doing so, they appealed to the communist ideological foundations of both governments. From the Soviet documents we learn that to Kosygin's question "Do you think that if Herat were to fall, Pakistan would decide to intervene from its borders?" Taraki replied: "It is very likely. And Pakistani morale would soar. The Americans support them completely. When Herat falls, the Pakistanis will send their soldiers, who, albeit in civil clothes, will begin to take control of the city and the Iranians will also join in the operation. The key to solving all the other problems connected to the war is a success in Herat"⁶.

In the early months of 1979, when the revolution had already occurred, the Soviets, applying Marxist-Leninist interpretations on Countries without an authentic working class, were fully aware that the possibilities of exporting a fully socialist revolution in a backward country like Afghanistan were limited. The majority of the Afghan population was connoted by a strong sense of religion and

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This conversation between Kosygin and Taraki took place on 18 March 1979: in Vladimir Bukovsky, *Gli archivi segreti di Mosca*, Ed. Spirali, Milano, 1999, p. 472

consisted mostly of peasants, who inevitably opposed the revolution proclaimed by a communist minority in April 1978. The Soviet leadership was also fully aware of the inevitable repercussions in the international domain of the deployment a military contingent. This argument was once again raised by Kosigyn and other members of the Politburo during a later conversation with Taraki dated 20 March 1979: "I wish to remark once again that we have considered every aspect of sending a military contingent. We have carefully considered this type of action and have reached the conclusion that sending a military contingent would not only fail to improve the situation, but, on the contrary, would make it worse. Indeed, it is impossible not to see that our contingent would not only find itself fighting an external aggressor, but also part of the population. And the people never forgive such things. As well as this, as soon as our contingent will have crossed the border, China and other aggressors will be rehabilitated".⁷ In the Soviet archives we also read: "If we were to run the risk of sending our troops, the advantages to be gained would be inferior to the disadvantages. We still do not know how the Afghan army would behave. But if it does not support our action, or if it remains neutral, it will come across as if we were actually occupying Afghanistan with our troops. In that way we would be creating an incredibly difficult solution for ourselves from the point of view of foreign policy. We would thwart everything we have been able to create after so many efforts, détente first and foremost; the SALT II talks would come to an end, no treaty would be signed, (which, from every point of view, is currently one of our biggest political maneuvers), there would be no meeting between Leonid Ilyich and Carter and Giscard D'Estaing's visit would be in doubt too. All our relations with Western countries would be damaged, and with West Germany in particular."⁸ The extreme caution shown by Soviet leaders was, however, to gradually change as a consequence of several factors ranging from the potential Islamic danger represented by the Iranian Revolution, to the NATO decision of 12 December 1979 to deploy Pershing and Cruise Euromissiles against Soviet territory, and above all the openly hostile behavior of Amin towards the Soviet Union, as well as ideologically based motivations concerning the success of the progressive revolution in Afghanistan. The decision to invade was taken on that very 12 December 1979, simultaneously to the NATO decision to deploy its Euromissiles.

To talk of premeditation on Moscow's behalf, would therefore appear as excessive on the basis of the documents in the archives, and therefore it becomes necessary to clearly distinguish between the long-term motivations set on the background of the international context of that historical moment and the more immediate motivations such as the Herat Uprising of March 1979, during which dozens of Soviet military advisors and their families had lost their lives, or, above all,

⁷Ibid 481-482

⁸ Ibid p.479

the “insubordination” of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers Hafizullah Amin. From that moment the Kremlin gradually began to realize that the Afghan government was no longer capable of controlling the situation and, therefore, in the months following the March 1979 Herat Uprising, the idea of intervening to favor a change at the top of the Afghan government began to take shape. In September 1979 Amin ordered the death of Taraki and, in contrast to what the latter had done in the previous months, he did not agree to change his hostile, or at least very ambiguous, policies towards the Soviet Union. Intervention had therefore become inevitable after the numerous and useless attempts at mediation by the Kremlin between the two fierce political rivals that had marked the months previous to intervention, a mediation thwarted by the murder of Taraki. The Kremlin would have preferred Amin to officially agree in writing to the intervention of a Soviet contingent to defeat internal rebellion, something that would have justified military intervention in the eyes of the world. The rebellion had been caused above all by Amin’s fierce and intransigent policy towards other components of Afghan society and of his very political Party, the PDPA, which was divided into two main factions: “The Khalqs” (the People) and “The Parcham” (The Flag). The former was more radical and mainly of rural origin, while the latter was more representative of the wealthier urban bourgeoisie, ideologically less intransigent as far as achieving the reforms the Country needed for its modernization was concerned. It thus became necessary to murder Amin, even if this meant giving up on an official request of intervention on behalf of the Afghan government.

1. The International Historic Landscape in the Late Seventies

The Soviets were constantly looking for a formal equality with the United States. This also derived from a treaty signed by both Countries in 1972 entitled “Basic Principles of Relations Between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” which was based on the recognition of the security interests of both parties based on the principle of equality. Soviet leaders soon became aware that the behavior of the US government did not fully correspond to what the treaty stated. They resented the fact that in 1974 the US Congress had vetoed Most Favored Nation status to the Soviet Union if the latter failed to liberalize its emigration policies⁹. They also deplored Carter’s constant warnings about the respect of human rights in the Soviet Union and in Eastern European Countries. They were also worried about progressive strategic rearmament by the United States. In their opinion, certain representatives of the US political and military spheres missed America’s former military superiority, as it stood in the early fifties at the beginning of the Cold War.

⁹ The 1974 Jackson–Vanik amendment interrelated the respect of human rights in the Soviet Union with the possibility of obtaining “Most Favoured Nation” status in economic relations with the United States.

This strategic context, according to journalist Henry Bradsher¹⁰, could have led the CPSU's inflexible ideologue Mikhail Suslov to favor a military solution to the Afghan problem, as it was crucial from an ideological point of view to prove the validity of the communist model of development to become once more the center of political and ideological power of the International Communist Movement in both Eastern and Western Europe, and, at the same time, to become a reference point for those Third World countries wishing to take the path of Socialist edification. This would have obviously reinforced the Soviet Union not only from the ideological point of view, but also from the geopolitical one. Furthermore, as Suslov, strict guardian of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, pointed out, once a Country had entered the Communist community, it became an absolute duty of the latter to come to its aid in case of need. And Afghanistan, as from the April 1978 Revolution, fitted this very description. This position was reinforced by the current opinion in the Kremlin that the Carter administration was undetermined, incapable of reacting strongly to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. One of the Soviet leadership's mistakes was just this; the inability to distinguish between the various components of the US Administration, between President Carter, favorable to a peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union, and a more extremist wing, made up of elements such as political advisor Brzezinski, advocate of the "hardline stance"¹¹. To partially justify the Soviet leadership there were, however, several precedents of US behavior that supported this erroneous assumption. For example, the US president had cancelled the construction of the strategic B1 bomber and had abandoned the project of the so-called neutron bomb, presumably due to its supposed "immorality," insofar as it destroyed life but not inanimate objects. In addition, Carter had been relatively "soft" with the Soviets during the SALT II talks¹². The Soviets had also noticed how the President's approach to the question of the US citizens taken hostage by Khomeini's Iran had been rather cautious, something else they interpreted as a sign of weakness.

As for the Afghan situation itself, the Soviets noticed the scarce attention Washington had devoted to events in the country in recent years, interpreting it as a manifestation of substantial indifference. In addition, after the accidental killing in February 1979 of US Ambassador Dubs by Soviet and Afghan agents, the Carter Administration had significantly lowered its already minimal diplomatic presence in the Country because of the Afghan's government serious negligence in carrying out investigations on the severe diplomatic incident. The US government had also reduced

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Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, Duke University Press, USA, 1985

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Gabriella Grasselli, *British and American responses to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan*, Dartmouth Publishing Company, Aldershot, England, 1995, points out that the Carter Administration too was not monolithic towards the Soviet Union.

¹² Acronym for *Strategic Arms Limitation Talks*: they were suspended by the US as an effect of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

development aid for Kabul. US disinterest towards Afghanistan came across to the Soviets as being absolute. As USSR-US relations were going through a phase that was far from negative, Soviet leaders wrongly predicted that Washington would limit itself to a verbal protest in the eventuality of military intervention by Moscow and that the whole thing would be quickly shelved, as was the case for the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, without seriously undermining relations between the two powers.

The Kremlin, however, had neglected to consider several recent US reactions to USSR initiatives in the Third World, such as, for example, the one against the presence of a naval base in the Democratic Republic of Yemen, as well as one against the presence of a brigade on Cuban soil and the multiple warnings over the Afghan question in the fall of 1979, in reference to a concentration of troops on the Afghan-Soviet border detected by US spy satellites. In addition, Moscow considered that Carter would refuse to jeopardize market relation with the Soviet Union to avoid losing the votes of American farmers in his 1980 election campaign. Instead Carter, in order not to appear too weak before his voters, decided to adopt strong measures against that flagrant violation of international law.

Finally, Soviet leaders had interpreted as a sign of moderation the fact that the US Administration had refused to arm some of the Gulf States, actually because of concern over Israeli security, and had also opposed Pakistan's plans to acquire nuclear weapons, while, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, this was explicitly encouraged. Soviet Leadership had favorably assessed, from its own point of view, elements that indicated a degree of compliance and caution on behalf of the Carter Administration. Moreover, it also believed in a margin of military superiority over the United States, a margin that would have rapidly diminished if *an administration with a firmer foreign policy* had come into power within a few months, as actually happened with Ronald Reagan's victory in late 1980.

2. Contingent Causes of the Decision to Invade Afghanistan

The decision to invade Afghanistan was based on realistic elements of judgment, or rather supposedly realistic ones, because particular dangers were erroneously and artificially exaggerated on the basis of above all psychological projections, while the real entity of other dangers was misunderstood. Calculations of the tactical type were thus successful in the early months of intervention, but in the later phase events were soon to show to what extent the Kremlin had underestimated the serious political and military consequences its rash decision would have led to in the following years. The long-term strategic factors had been examined, but on the basis of assumptions that would turn out to be absolutely fallacious, i.e.: the absence of a firm response by

the US and the Islamic world, an easy victory by the Soviet armies over the Afghan guerrilla fighters, the strong power of attraction of socialist reformist ideology with large layers of Afghan society, and the peasant class in particular, the spread of an “Islamic contagion” in the mid and long term. In short, the Kremlin erroneously believed that the Afghan question would be solved within a few months, after the disturbance factor represented by Amin was eliminated, without this having serious consequences on Soviet policy in the area and at a global level. Rather than an invasion in the strictest sense, the Soviet leaders had in mind a mission by a small agile expeditionary force that would remove Amin and then withdraw. That in the fall of 1979 the problem essentially consisted in the head of the Afghan government and his policies clearly emerges from the documents present in the Soviet archives: “Alarming are also certain signals concerning an attempt on Amin’s behalf to establish contacts with representatives of the right-wing Islamic opposition and with tribal leaders hostile to the government; he has shown his openness to negotiating a cessation of their armed struggle against the ruling government in conditions of <compromise>, basically to the detriment of the progressive development of the Country. Recent evidence would lead us to think that the new Afghan government intends to conduct <more balanced policies > towards the Western powers. In particular, it is known that US representatives, judging on their contacts with the Afghans, are concluding that a change in Afghan policy which would favor Washington is possible”.¹³ The immediate specific reason for the invasion was, therefore, Amin’s behavior, while all the other elements cited by US scholars can be merely considered as elements belonging to the general outlook of that particular historical period.

According to US military analyst Joseph Collins,¹⁴ the immediate specific reasons for the invasion can be summarized as follows: the pressure of events in Afghanistan, Soviet concern for the safety of its borders, the commitments taken and questions related to the prestige of the Soviet Union in several Third World Countries, as well as the near to absolute certainty Soviet leaders held, at least as from September 1979, that they would not be punished for a flagrant violation of international law. Collins concludes by stressing the Soviets’ usual fear of being surrounded by the West and by China, which was seen by the leaders of the USSR as a *de facto* ally of the Western world.

Furthermore, as already mentioned, the Soviet leadership tended to think that resistance against the Communist Afghan government had mainly an Islamic fundamentalist basis, whilst this was true only for a minimal part. It was the invasion itself that acted as a catalyst for Islamic extremism,

¹³ Politburo Resolution P 172/108 of 31.10.1979, in Vladimir Bukovsky, op. cit., pp. 487-488

¹⁴ Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. A study in the use of force in Soviet foreign policy*, Lexington, Mass., Lexington books, 1986

helping it to carry out a qualitative leap. The Soviet leadership immediately associated the internal insurgence to external imperialist support, as Soviet military and political theory expected and conceptualized, with a sort of implicit automatism. The Soviet leaders, on the basis of their mental schema, were unable to conceive of the possibility that it could be a predominantly internal insurrectionist phenomenon, to which the external world was only giving a non-decisive contribution. One of the main concerns of the Soviet leaders was that of a *spillover* effect, i.e. of serious consequences deriving from the expansion of the “Islamic Infection” to Soviet Central Asia.

The arguments of the Moscow leaders did contain elements of truth, even though the fact that most of the military contingents deployed in the initial phases of the invasion were made up of Central Asian elements would seem to contradict their theory. Certain scholars, including Collins, were rather skeptical about the real danger represented by the “Islamic Infection” in the USSR. The religiosity of the Muslim Central Asian Republics in the USSR seemed effectively under control and was funneled towards well tested and functioning political structures. This could be traced back to several factors: the relatively high quality of life, for a Muslim State, resulting from the industrialization process pursued by the Soviets, which had secularized and transformed the traditional lifestyles of the local populations; the thorough indoctrination in the direction of atheism imposed by the Soviet authorities and hence very small numbers of supporters of a return to Islam. The Soviet leadership thus considered the threat of Islamic contagion at the most as a long-term one. One other thing to mention, however strange it may seem, is the substantial lack of knowledge the Soviet leadership had of the doctrinal and political differences between Shiite Iran and predominantly Sunni Afghanistan. This important difference should have led the men at the Kremlin not to overrate the danger of an Islamic “infection.” Furthermore, there was also a major ethnic rivalry in Afghanistan between the Pashtun majority and other groups, such as the Uzbeks and Tagiks, something which prevented internal cohesion in the Country. The contingent cause for the decision adopted by the Soviet leadership was, however, the aforementioned Herat Uprising of March 1979, which in Moscow caused a gradual reconsideration of the need to intervene in Afghanistan had the situation required it.

3. The Structure of the Soviet State as an Important Factor for the Decision to Invade

Anthony Arnold¹⁵ and Henry Bradsher¹⁶, along with Collins, are the only authors who consider, albeit rather simplistically, the peculiar internal structure of the Soviet State and of its

¹⁵ Antony Arnold, *The fateful pebble*, Presidio Press, Novato, USA, 1993

¹⁶ Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union*, Duke University Press, USA, 1985

constituent branches as a crucial element of the decision to invade Afghanistan, while most authors mainly concentrate on the geopolitical issues related to the international context of the time. The first of these three authors clearly stresses how the decision-making process within the government structures of the USSR, in contrast to the Stalinist times, was not at all monolithic, as the West thought. There were actually different political factions, specific interests and divergences on particular issues, all of which emerged when it came to deciding on an invasion of Afghanistan. This event is interpreted by the authors, and in particular by Arnold and Bradsher, as the ultimate result of a convergence of interests between the State's power structures within the Politburo: the KGB, represented by Andropov, and the army, represented by Brezhnev and Ustinov. According to the two authors, the Soviets were first and foremost concerned with guaranteeing the safety of the Asian country's borders and its internal stability, to avoid the spread of the Islamic "contagion" to Soviet Central Asia and to prevent the formation of a government in Kabul hostile to the Soviet Union, one that could favor a foreign power by, for example, allowing it to install missiles in proximity of the Soviet borders. According to the two authors, the ideologues Suslov and Ponomarev, guardians of the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, expressed concern over a possible fall of the communist government in power, because it would have caused a setback for the international communist movement. Foreign minister Gromyko, on the other hand, was more cautious about the opportunity of invading Afghanistan because of the likely strong international repercussions of such a venture. In turn, the Ministry of Economics expressed its reserves on the possibility of losing all the infrastructures financed by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Such simplifications are only an attempt to establish some historiographical guidelines, but the Politburo's decision-making process was somewhat vaguer and rather more complex, as confirmed by documents from the Soviet archives, and in particular the documentation published by the Cold War International History Project of Washington. Bradsher, in 1985, had already rightly perceived that the monolithism apparently dominating the exclusive circle of the Soviet leadership did not prevent pressing discussions between its members: "The Stalinist Soviet Union in which one man's personal decisions were decisive had been replaced, in many Western specialists' opinion, by a bureaucratic state in which Politbuero members represent different interest groups."¹⁷ Bradsher adds that that the main procedure for reaching a decision consisted of negotiations and discussions until a consensus was attained. The military analyst Collins writes on the subject: "The members of the Politburo may have had diverse opinions on how to solve the Afghan problem, but in the end they all backed the final decision."¹⁸ Records in the Soviet archives also confirm that there were indeed several discussion between Politburo members, but that in the months leading to military

¹⁷ Bradsher pp. 166-167

¹⁸ Collins, op.cit., p. 102

intervention, no one firmly opposed it. Collins, who on this point cites Czech historian Jiri Valenta, ascribes this to Brezhnev's strong personal power and his ability to defeat his most dangerous rivals tactically¹⁹. Leonid Brezhnev, as President of the Politburo, had the right to the final word on the resolution to take, as, according to the statute, he was a real *primus inter pares* (first among equals). The joint committee, to Arnold, was a concrete fact in terms of the discussion within the Politburo, though Brezhnev's opinion at the moment of taking the crucial decision was peremptory. Dissent was not tolerated and only one person had the responsibility of taking the final decision, which was taken in a climate of extreme secrecy, even in absence of the typists who were usually present at sessions and with no explicit mention of the issue in question. The apparent unanimous consensus, from the formal point of view, for whatever decision was taken allowed the leader to effectively share responsibility for the decision with all the other members of the Politburo.

The lack of clear institutional rules, the state's legal and decisional anomy also made the process of collecting information particularly cumbersome and cloudy from the point of view of its management and conveyance to the top levels of the State. Arnold writes: "As long as the KGB had no operational responsibilities for the Kabul regime, it carried out its task of referring on Afghan developments more or less objectively. But once it accepted these responsibilities, the objectivity disappeared; like all other hierarchical bureaucracies, the KGB tended to withhold any negative news within the areas of responsibility assigned to it. In contrast to more open societies, the Soviet Union had no independent channels to assure the truthfulness of information supplied by the KGB. As the only organization trusted to refer the objective truth to the Kremlin leaders, it had nothing to fear from rival organizations or investigative reporters".²⁰ It is evident in this case that the opportunity for a particular structure to gain advantages from the point of view of operational prestige or of a financial nature may encourage it, as ultimately happened, to supply to the Soviet leadership information favorable to intervention in Afghanistan.

Therefore, according to some authors, internal rivalry between the various organisms of the Soviet State was one of the decisive factors that lead to intervention. This could have been avoided, though only partially, if there had been a free and independent press: the latter did not exist, causing a considerable information deficit. The impossibility for the Kremlin to consult independent sources without internal or ideological motivations to issue distorted or non-objective information, was therefore one of the main reasons for intervention. This is confirmed by Christopher Andrew, in a work written with Vasili Mitrokhin, a Soviet archivist who had found refuge abroad. Mitrokhin writes: "By the autumn of 1979 Andropov was convinced that Afghanistan, like Chechoslovakia eleven years later, was threatened with ideological sabotage and that only Soviet military

¹⁹ *Ibidem*

²⁰ Arnold, op. cit. p. 152

intervention could prevent the <overthrow of socialism>. Before the invasion could go ahead, however, Andropov and his colleagues on the Politburo Afghanistan Commission had first to win over the ailing Brezhnev. In order to ensure support for the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Andropov had fed the Politburo with misleading intelligence reports. In order not to alarm Brezhnev, Andropov deliberately underplayed the scale of the Soviet military involvement which would be required- initially giving the misleading impression that the overthrow of Amin would be carried out by the Afghan opposition to him rather than by Soviet forces, who would merely provide back up.

”²¹. Andropov’s *modus operandi* to convince Brezhnev of the necessity of military intervention in Afghanistan consisted in exaggerating the threat and intentionally underestimating the consequences direct military involvement would have for the Soviet Union.

According to Arnold, the lack of political accountability towards the organisms of the State and citizens of the Country, caused by an excessive concentration of power in the hands of a narrow group at the Politburo, should be included among the main factors that led the Kremlin to the decision to invade Afghanistan. What made the choice difficult for the Soviet leadership, on the other hand, was the consciousness of committing a violation of international law which would discredit it in the eyes of the international community. The fear that the Soviet Union would appear as the aggressor was for the men at the Kremlin more important than the possible concrete political and military reactions by the international community. Elements of political analysis, however, gradually and Leninistically prevailed over those important legal considerations linked to a military invasion, considerations which the Soviet leadership had clearly in mind, as confirmed by archival sources too. The absolute political and legal inappropriateness of the invasion is also stressed by an important Soviet dissident, Vladimir Bukovskij, who writes: “The most important aspect of that adventure was not so much the concrete action of the Soviet aggression (the past was already full of similar cases), but rather its extraordinary inopportuneness, and this was something that radically changed the world situation and the whole political context. It is hard to imagine a better illustration of the effects of ‘*pacific coexistence*’ as the Soviet regime envisaged it, especially towards a small country. Furthermore, the aggression arrived at the height of the Soviet campaign for disarmament and *pacific coexistence* based on trust. There could be no better publicity for NATO: even Switzerland began to have doubts about the advantages of its traditional neutrality. Obviously this had consequences on the <<extension of the social and political base>> of the Soviet peace movement”²².

²¹ Christopher Andrew, Vasili Mitrokhin, *The world was going our way. The KGB and the battle for the Third world*, Basic Books, New York 2005, p. 399

²² Vladimir Bukovskij, *op. cit.*, p. 558

4. The military-ideological factor and its theoretical bases

Among the elements that help us understand the motivations or, at least, the concurrent ideological causes for the invasion of Afghanistan, the various US authors mention the strong growth of Soviet military potential in those Third World Countries which were considered to share a similar ideology, along with a rapid evolution of the official military doctrine used. Afghanistan, as from the communist revolution of April 1978, had become, according to the official Soviet terminology, part of the so-called “inner circle” of alliances. This inner circle, as Seweryn Bialer writes, “refers to countries or movements either modeled on the Soviet Union, or which the Soviet Union considers socio-politically progressive, revolutionary, and basically appropriate to their existing circumstances. The alliance here is based on a broad range of common interests, ideological proximity, extensive and direct Soviet help; it includes a relatively high degree of dependence on the Soviet Union (Afghanistan and Ethiopia for example)”²³. Once a Country was officially included in the “inner circle” category of Soviet alliances, it became mandatory to support that Country. That this support came at the expense of a real understanding of the historical and cultural context is, however, confirmed by the author himself, also on the basis of developments in the academic world of new analyses and interpretations on the possibilities of socialism taking root in developing Countries. He refers, for example, to the significant concept of *mnogokladnost*.

Bialer writes “The concept of *mnogokladnost*, meaning <multi-dimensionality>, refers to the social, cultural and political structure of less developed countries. It opposes the artificial and forced application of the traditional Marxist concepts of class and social structure derived from industrial and industrializing countries to the analysis of less developed countries. It stresses the specificity of the social, cultural and political forces of diverse regions and individual countries. The policy implications of the Soviet work on multidimensionality is to advocate a multiplicity of approaches to diverse regions and countries, the abandonment of dogmatism in the classifications of the <progressive> potential of social and political groups in these countries, and the search for political allies and for groups worthy of Soviet support in places untried by Marxist-Leninist doctrine. It suggests the impossibility and counterproductivity of devising one general line of Soviet policy toward Third World countries except for the indication of some general preferences”.²⁴

It therefore seems evident that in the mid-seventies Soviet academic reflections distinguished themselves considerably in terms of the levels of sophistication of scientific analysis regarding the potential for development of socialism in Third World countries compared to the

²³ Seweryn Bialer, *Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability and Change in the Soviet Union*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 269

²⁴ Bialer, *op. cit.* p. 294. In the footnote the author quotes a Soviet expert on the social and political development of the Third World, P. A. Ulianovski and his work, *Očerki nacionalnoi-osvoboditelnoi borbi. Voprosi teorii i praktiki* (Profiles of the National Liberation Struggle. Questions of Theory and Practice), Nauka, Moscow, 1976.

more dogmatic and highly ideologized, in the Marxist-Leninist sense, military theory publications by the army, of which I quote a significant example taken from a Soviet author: “In their struggle for the non-capitalist road of development [...] these people rely on the compressive assistance of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, including also their help in setting up and developing their national armed forces and in organizing the armed defense of their countries against imperial aggressors. The Soviet Government has repeatedly declared that it has always given and continues to give various assistance to peoples fighting against imperialist intervention in their affairs, and will assist victims of imperialist aggression by all, including military, means. In modern conditions, when the relation of forces in the world continues to change in favor of peace, democracy and socialism, while imperialism intensifies its aggressive ventures, the defensive might of the USSR and other socialist countries, [and] the combat efficiency and readiness of their armed forces are a most important factors in securing historical progress.”²⁵ We can therefore observe that in the case of the invasion of Afghanistan there was a massive gap between academic research at high scientific levels and the mainly ideological reading of Afghan events on behalf of the Soviet Armed Forces and, in some cases, on behalf of the governing *nomenklatura*. Academic research, however, was unable to influence the political choices of government leadership in any significant way.

Collins repeatedly insists on the almost exclusively deterrent value of the Soviet armed forces towards the West, while on the other hand Bradsher stresses their avoidance as much as possible of any reference to military strength in the traditional sense, as military power void of any ethical and socially progressive characterizations²⁶. What was meant by the concept of the progress of communism, of its superiority compared to the West, was first of all its supposed moral superiority and secondly its economic superiority. The two authors thus fully agree on this point. According to both, Soviet doctrine suffered, more than from tactical or strategic limitations of a merely technical nature, from operative limitations, due to prominently ideological considerations which seriously damaged its military effectiveness. On this subject the journalist Bradsher writes: V “The claim that Communism is the wave of the future is supposed to rest on superior social and economic organization, not on the tips of the bayonets” Thus the paradox was that the Soviet military, when referring to the change in the balance of power between socialism and capitalism, tried as far as possible not to explicitly refer to it in military terms, insofar as that would have been considered “politically incorrect” in Marxist-Leninist terms. Indeed, the concept of pure military strength caused some embarrassment from the ideological point of view. In this way the paradox came about that a military superpower like the Soviet Union, for ideological reasons regarding the

²⁵ Collins, op. cit. p.114, quoting the book by Soviet Army colonel B.A. Byely, a military theory and Leninist ideology expert, entitled *Marxism Leninism on War and Army*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1972, p. 166.

²⁶ Bradsher, op. cit., p. 128

basic rejection of militarism and imperialism in the traditional sense, insofar as it was a power characterized by definition by a progressive ideology, could not avoid feeling embarrassed about its superpower status.

Indeed, the balance of power implied the concept of relative strength of the two antagonist systems in the struggle between capitalism and socialism, and regarded several political and economic aspects, but in talking about it any reference to military power was carefully avoided²⁷. The excessive insistence on the need to use the armed forces to support the establishment of a communist regime abroad meant implicitly admitting that the communist ideal did not in itself possess the necessary appeal to affirm itself and, above all, that Afghanistan's definitive shift to the socialist camp, as well as solving the problem of securing the borders against Islamic infiltration, would also have changed the "balance of power" in favor of the Soviet Union.

For similar reasons, in the Soviet leadership's cautious expressions we find a reference to the ideological premises of the 1977 Constitution; these premises contemplated at the same time the need to consolidate socialism in the world, and hence to support the anticolonial war fought by oppressed peoples on the basis of socialist solidarity, and Soviet non-interference in their internal affairs. In the Soviet attitude there was, therefore, a constant alternation and overlapping of ideology and *Realpolitik*, of tactics and strategy. The paradox mainly resided in the fact that, though the Soviet Union was a super-power armed even to an excessive degree, it did not have the political will to resolutely use its military strength, partly because of the afore-mentioned political and diplomatic conditioning, but also because its time-worn salvific and internationalist ideology prevented it from resorting it exclusively to military power. Marxist-Leninist theory officially conceived of the latter merely as an aid to the inherent expansive power of socialist doctrine, which would have assured historical progress, teleologically considered a necessary and inevitable landing place for humankind.

5. The Ideological Factor

Most US historians stress the role of ideology in the Soviet leadership's decision to invade Afghanistan. Hannes Adomeit, a political scientist of German origins, described as early as the early sixties the elements that influenced the executive deliberations of the Soviet leaders:

"1) analytical or cognitive function

2) Operational or tactical function

3) Utopian, revolutionary or missionary function

4) Legitimizing function

²⁷ *Ibidem*

5) Socializing function

Briefly, the analytical function refers to a conscious process and asks questions such as <How do the Soviet leaders see the world? and < What in the view of the Soviet leaders, are the basic structural elements of the international system, the sources of conflict, the factors accounting for stability or change and so on?> The second function is more difficult to define. It can be taken as meaning (a) that the Soviet leadership is acting on the basis of the results of analysis (the impact of perception on behavior);(b) that the Soviet leadership codifies and formalizes the main line of a particular era in world affairs, defines the scope of peaceful coexistence, sets forth its view on the correlation of forces and the like, and arrives from there at the main tasks to be pursued(that is, the impact of doctrine on behavior);or (c) that there exist deeply engrained operational principles formed by ideology(the impact of socialization and experience on behavior).

The third function of ideology- the utopian, revolutionary or missionary function-is often(but incorrectly) taken to be the only one that matters. It is also the one that is at the basis of the dichotomy of ideology versus <the national interest>.The fourth function has two important dimensions-one domestic, the other international. Legitimacy of power in the URSS is based on Marxism-Leninism; although other forms of legitimacy may eventually emerge, at the present stage of development it would appear that any Soviet leader, or leadership, attempting to deviate from that basis would be destroying the very ground on which he or it is operating. The last function rests in the dialectical interplay between ideology and the education, upbringing, experience and career patterns of the top leadership”. The author also argues that the ideology of a classless society would have progressively lost importance in the scale of priorities of the Soviet leadership, but that the conception of a struggle between ideologies and world powers would have remained a determinant factor in international relations. So, according to Adomeit, “even if the credibility of Soviet ideology is wearing thin and, in international politics, is becoming more of a liability than an asset, it is still a fallacy to argue that that ideology is <nothing but ex post facto rationalization> (*Rechtfertigung*) and has nothing to do with motivation (*Antrieb*).Rationalization and motivation, for an individual, a political leadership or a state(and particularly when it comes to a state conforming to the notion of <an ideology in power>), can be *mutually reinforcing mechanism*”.²⁸

For Adomeit, ideology and the use it was made of it, whether instrumental or not, represents a fundamental legitimizing factor in internal and foreign policy, because it was essential to keep a cohesion between the various nationalities within the Soviet Union while at the same time assuring an ideological supremacy at the international level. The mix of ideology, experienced as an

²⁸ *Ibidem*, in Labeledz “Ideology and Soviet policies in Europe”, contribution submitted to the Twentieth Annual Conference of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) 7-10 September 1978, p.6. -*Published in the volume edited by Christopher Bertram, “Prospects of Soviet Power in the 1980s”, London, Macmillan, 1980.

irrational inner faith, and concrete national interest become, according to Adomeit, constant and indistinguishable elements, even though their constituent factors are so different. He also points out how for “scholars reared in the Anglo Saxon tradition of empiricism and pragmatism, the very thought that leaders in the practical real of politics in the twentieth century should be guided in their actions by a rigid belief system appears incredible or inconceivable”²⁹. A result of this is, as we saw, the considerable cultural difficulty many US analysts have in correctly analyzing the actions of the Soviet leadership, attaching to it merely rational motivations, like economic ones or an interest in progressively expanding towards the Persian Gulf, without considering ideological motivations or those concerning security. For example, one of these analysts, Thomas Hammond, writes: “The crucial question about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, therefore, is the one Muskie referred to: will the Soviets use Afghanistan as a stepping stone to the Gulf. As indicated before, I do not think this objective was the main motivation for the Soviet invasion; there were other reasons having to do with Afghanistan itself that were more compelling. But the Soviet leaders can look at a map as easily as we can and they are hardly ignorant of the fact that the occupation of Afghanistan put them much closer to the Strait of Hormuz.”³⁰ For US analysts or historians like Hammond or Richard Pipes (a major critic of détente), the invasion of Afghanistan was dictated also, but not uniquely, by strategic issues, such as the opportunity of coming closer to the Persian Gulf and exert political pressure, in particular on the Western Europeans, who depended on the Gulf area’s energetic resources.

According to Adomeit, on the other hand: “in addition to that, other aspects of ideology have become more pronounced (legitimacy, for instance, which will be dealt with presently) and still others have been retained. To be counted among them are the ideas that life, including <international life> is an unending struggle, that this struggle can only end with the victory of one socio economic system over the other, and that to stand still and not to plan for advances and gains, means falling behind and to be thrown on the rubbish heap of history”³¹.

It is clear from these words that he believed the Soviet leadership was inspired in its conception of international affairs to a Darwinian struggle of survival of the fittest, or at least of the best to adapt. Without specifically referring to Afghanistan, according to Adomeit, for the Soviet leaders détente did not mean stasis, but simply abandoning the global struggle in favor of a series of regional conflicts, like those in the Horn of Africa, in Angola or in the Mozambique, with the

²⁹ Adomeit, op. cit., p. 273

³⁰ Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag over Afghanistan, the communist coup, the Soviet invasion and the consequences*, Westview Press, USA, 1984, p.203. On p. 201 of his book, Hammond reports that Muskie, in a conversation with Gromyko, had explained that US interest for Afghanistan was essentially dictated both by its proximity to the Persian Gulf, rich in oil, where conservative-minded governments appeared rather vulnerable, and to the destabilizing presence in the Gulf area of the Iranian Islamic regime.

³¹ Ibid., p. 329

participation of other Countries of the communist bloc, like East Germany or Cuba: the so-called *war-by-proxy*. In this the Soviet leaders were inspired by the Leninist teaching of a continuous war against capitalism, even through limited or regional conflicts aimed at consuming, though in contained form, the enemy forces or those of their regional allies.

In the case of Afghanistan, on the other hand, the Soviet leaders, though still inspired by this Leninist concept, applied it as a prevalently defensive tactic: here we find a contradiction between the strong ideological appeal and the low profile in operational terms chosen by the Soviet leadership, at least from the point of view of the relatively limited military contingent of 115,000 men. The concept of *détente* was thus inspired by a dynamic and not static principle, as an endless struggle between two irreducibly antagonistic socio-economic systems, but a struggle that should never reach the point of global nuclear conflict. Here we see an intrinsic tension between an attitude dictated to a certain extent by extreme caution and an ideological inclination, of Leninist derivation, towards interpreting coexistence between different systems as irremediably marked by an relentless ideological conflict. This necessarily led to seeing the Afghan problem, from the essentially local question that it was, as an element concerning the global clash taking place between the two superpowers. Also according to Collins the Soviet leadership perceived an essentially local problem as an element of the international order. For the Soviet leaders it was inevitable that “the forces of imperialism launched inevitable counteroffensives to keep nations of the Third World in their neocolonial status”³². In short, this perception of the situation conditioned the decisions of the Soviet leaders and was influenced by the psychological and ideological projections of the men at the Kremlin.

Détente, seen mainly as a tactical tool to allow the importing of Western technology and currency, was not to decrease the emphasis placed on exporting the socialist revolution, meant above all as class struggle³³ rather than military conflict between States, around the world. With a partial logical contradiction, according to Soviet theory, *détente* was conceptually part of “balance of power” between capitalist and socialist states³⁴. *Détente* was pragmatically seen by the Soviet leadership as a “Soviet desire for more Western economic help for a troubled economy and a hope of slowing down Western military modernization while the Soviet arms build up went rapidly ahead”.³⁵

³² Collins, *op. cit.* p. 110

³³ Collins, *op. cit.* p. 116

³⁴ Bradsher, *op. cit.*, p. 128. In fact, if socialist revolution had been successful in one Country or the other, the balance of power would have shifted in favor of the socialist camp.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Bradsher³⁶ - author of the latter statements – also adds the problem of the ideological component in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the scenario of the Brezhnev doctrine, which in this case was applied to a State that officially was not part of the socialist community, but whose leadership claimed to be Marxist-Leninist and that Moscow was therefore interested in aiding against the counter-revolutionary forces, defined as ideologically bourgeois and feudal. To achieve this, the Soviet doctrine referred to communist internationalism, appealing to the necessity of supporting communist movements wherever in the world they may be, even if this meant going against the dictates of international law, which wanted to determine burning political situations with empty legal formulas. Moscow, basing itself on Leninist theory, disclaimed the validity of International law as a highly bourgeois legal construction. For the Soviet leadership the defense of the socialist community explained and justified, if not legally, at least politically, the invasion of Afghanistan. The necessity to “save” the communist revolution in a nearby Asian country was thus indicated as the formal and substantial cause of intervention, with explicit reference to the Brezhnev doctrine³⁷. What was not made explicit was the geopolitical motive for intervention, i.e. the safety of the Soviet Union’s southern borders, but the formal and the substantial declarations coincided almost completely. The necessity to save the socialist revolution and the geopolitical need to safeguard Soviet borders coincided perfectly and were intimately connected³⁸. According to Bradsher, the Kremlin thought it advisable for ideological reasons to prove to the communist parties of the Third World the intrinsic validity of its doctrine and also its capacity for support and aid, in order to be able to claim its leadership not only *de jure*, but also *de facto*.

6) The Cultural Factor. The Problem of Ethnic and Religious Balances in the Soviet Union

Milan Hauner³⁹ is a US historian of the Department of Eastern European Studies at Washington’s Woodrow Wilson Center, who analyzes events related to the Afghan war in a historical and geopolitical perspective: according to Hauner we should consider the cultural and partly ideological motivations behind Russia’s and the USSR’s struggle with the East and their ambition to conquer it (*stremlenie na Vostok*), to a certain extent comparable to the German *Drang nach Osten* and the civilizing mission of the British in India, but also connoted by considerations on border security. The difference between the Russian, and then Soviet, Empire, and the British Empire is that the former did not base its action mainly on economic advantages, but on a natural

³⁶ Ibid., p.137

³⁷ On this subject it is useful to consult the book by Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine*, The University of North Carolina press, 2003. The Brezhnev Doctrine was officially proclaimed by Brezhnev himself during a speech held in Warsaw on 13 November 1968 at the Fifth Congress of the Polish Communist Party, i.e. after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the troops of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968.

³⁸ On page 88 of his book Ouimet writes: “The tug of war between Socialist internationalism and Soviet National interests surfaced again at the end of the 1970s in the Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan”.

³⁹ Milan Hauner, *The Soviet war in Afghanistan, Patterns of Russian Imperialism*, University Press of America Foreign Policy Institute, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1991

and irrational, if not messianic, expansive tendency and also on the rational need to safeguard its borders. Rational and irrational motives characteristic of the Russian Imperial tradition play a role in the Soviet leadership's decision to invade Afghanistan, because Leninist doctrine officially recognized the Soviet Union's right and duty to fight to spread socialist ideology throughout the world as a progressive force against the economic and cultural backwardness that characterized part of the Muslim world.

Hauner writes: "The Soviet war in Afghanistan revealed similar racist states of mind. Some of these have even been expressed in some recent Soviet literature on the subject, although official propaganda still harps endlessly on with Marxist incantations about the forces of progress doing battle with Islamic obscurantism"⁴⁰. And he continues: "In truth, Russian nationalism is more than a link to the monarchical past and a possible bridge to the future. This is because Soviet ideologues have never displaced historical images of Asia for their <revolutionary >work. Even though Marx did not foresee the incorporation of Asia into the European dynamic of the class war, immediately after the October Revolution the Bolsheviks appealed to the toilers of the Orient to <overthrow the robbers and the enslavers>. Yet even this appeal can be seen as a recrudescence of the old <Russian Idea> in new guise, a deep seated Russian national Messianism reworded into the Marxist lexicon of world proletarian revolution. Even the directorate established to set the Orient ablaze, the Comintern, had an alternate name, the Third International. This sounded, however unintentionally, like a metamorphosis of the notion of the <Third Rome>, the traditional image of Holy Russia."⁴¹ This association of ideas put forward by Hauner is actually quite debatable, because the concept of Third Rome⁴² is essentially a religious one and concerns the primacy of the Orthodox church within the Christian world and in particular the primacy of the Balkan Slavic Orthodox Church. The latter considers Moscow the spiritual, but also political, heir of Byzantium (the second Rome), while the Third International of 1919 set itself the universalistic political objective of the expansion of the communist movement at the international level, even among non-European civilizations, therefore not only Christian but Muslim too. In the former theory the religious and identity-making elements represented by the profession of the Orthodox religious faith prevailed, while the organization founded in 1919 was based on communist internationalism, which made no racial or religious distinctions but took into consideration exclusively the factors of social class, regardless of the historical and religious context. In the case in question we have instead a Russian-Soviet expansion towards the South-East, essentially motivated by geopolitical and political reasons, but also by older

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 53

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 52

⁴² Regarding the political and religious implications of the Third Rome myth see, for example, the volume by Vladimir Averchev et al., *La Terza Roma, mito, realtà o provocazione?* (The Third Rome: Myth, Reality or Provocation)", Franco Angeli, Milano, 2002.

and irrational civilizing and expansionistic cultural tendencies rooted in the already mentioned traditional Russian cultural context. In the context of the Soviet-Afghan war, the religious factor, in contrast to the prominent role it plays in the concept of a Third Rome, was obviously totally absent or, at the most, merely hinted at.

The idea the Russian leadership developed of the Afghan problem is, according to Hauner, quite ambivalent even in the months leading to the invasion: a mixture of Russian nationalism, with its traditional messianic components, of socialist internationalism, intended to fight against the obscurantist forces of internal and external reaction to Afghanistan, together with elements of more explicit racism against the Afghan population, towards which the Soviet leadership nourished mistrust and contempt and which the ignorance of the Country and its customs contributed to strengthen considerably. The officially deprecated racism against Asiatic peoples, deep-rooted in the Russian cultural tradition had not, therefore, been by any means eradicated by the democratic-internationalist Marxist-Leninist one and according to Hauner was at the very basis of the invasion, while remaining very much in the background for the whole length of the war. All these elements, in particular the Russian image of the East, perceived as wild and mysterious, played a leading role, according to this author, in the Soviet leadership's decision to invade Afghanistan. The "darker" and more racist aspects of traditional Russian imperialism and its motivations intricately intertwined with the "word" of Marxist-Leninist socialist internationalism, obviously striking out any Christian-Orthodox religious components.

Since the nineteenth century the Russian ruling and intellectual class felt invested with a special "civilizing" mission in the East and in some cases this took on markedly paternalistic tones. It was fully conscious of the composite and multicultural nature of the Russian State, partly European and partly Asian. In Europe it was under many aspects considered an Asian power⁴³, while in the East its image was that of an European power. On the subject of the basically inherent dualism in relations between Russia and Europe the German Historian Dieter Groh writes: "If at the time of Peter the Great a certain pride was taken in the fact the Russians had welcomed the superior Western civilization, in the second half of the century intense criticism became more and more widespread – from impressions offered by historical experiences – towards the way the Russians had adopted Western ideas and methods. There were no civil progresses to note. but instead an ever-growing Russian power that threatened to disrupt the European balance"⁴⁴. The East, therefore, represented for the Russians an opportunity and also a "redemption" for Russian civilization. A constant factor, common both to the Russian conquest of Central Asia and the Soviet invasion of

⁴³ Cfr. Dieter Groh, *La Russia e l'autocoscienza d'Europa: Saggio sulla storia intellettuale d'Europa*. Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, Torino, 1980

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 63

Afghanistan, is the assumption of dealing with weak States, easy to conquer for a European-style army. This was not the case in Afghanistan, which was indeed a backward Asian State, but with inhabitants who proved to be brave fighters and indomitable warriors. Ultimately, some of the elements of the Russian cultural tradition were to some extent to be found in the motivations that led the Soviet leadership to including Afghanistan in the Soviet area of influence.

It is worth remembering an interpretation that diverges strongly from that of the US authors examined so far. French historian H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse, well-known for being one of the first to identify the tensions between nationalities as one of the main causes of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, relates in an original way the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to the issue of nationalities, indicating it as the main reason for Moscow's choice. She too, however, did not fail to recognize, like other authors, the more generic need for the Soviet leadership to prove to the world, and in particular to the international Euro-Western and Euro-Eastern communist movement that the ideological and economic driving force of communism had not exhausted itself and that there existed a long-term far-sighted and ambitious Soviet strategy that took into consideration the gradual modification of the worldwide power balances. As she points out, here we are faced yet again with a mixture of utopia and *Realpolitik*. This strategy was based on adopting a foreign policy that presented the USSR to the vast Eurasian geographical area made up mainly of Islamic Countries (including the States of the Persian Gulf, Iran and Pakistan), but also to China and India, as a Muslim power, or at least as a power with a strong Muslim presence and therefore as a universalistic cultural and political model with a substantial compatibility or symbiosis between Islam and communism. This would have allowed the USSR to extend its circle of alliances and hence its status as a great power within a rapidly evolving international context. This long-term strategy, though apparently founded on a third-worldism with strong ideological connotations, actually concealed a lucid and ambitious geopolitical strategy that reflected the changes taking place in the world in that particular historical moment.

The project was founded on the hypothesis of a probable *shift of power* in the decades to come, a change in the gravitational center of international relations from West to East and in particular to Central Asia. Carr  re d'Encausse writes: "Everything began in 1955, at the conference of Non-Aligned countries in Bandung, Indonesia. The USSR, which was coming out of Stalinism and the isolation it had found itself in until then, had been excluded from the conference because in the eyes of the participants it belonged to the world of the great industrial powers. From that moment Soviet leaders would conceive of international relations in a new way on the basis of several convictions. From 1955 they are convinced that the centre of gravity of world politics will move from industrialized Western Countries towards the non-Western world and the Third World.

They foresee a decisive role for the Third World for a long historical period in two areas: the areas where Islam and oil meet, i.e. Central Asia and the Middle East. In these two priority areas, according to the Soviet perception, the clash between world powers would take place between the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century in Central Asia— Soviet and non-Soviet— i.e. in Iran and Afghanistan. Because this is their vision of the future, as from 1955 the Soviet leaders try to penetrate the Muslim world where they believe it to be more vulnerable and at the same time decisive for achieving their aims. And to achieve this, they use an Islam forgotten by all, Soviet Islam. Accused of being a great Western power like the others, the USSR reacts by appealing to its Muslim population and presenting itself as an Islamic power. As from 1956 Soviet Muslims become instrumental to a staggering demonstration, i.e. proving the compatibility of a materialistic ideology, Marxism, with the Muslim religion”⁴⁵. In concrete terms, Soviet Central Asia served as a showcase to prove to Muslim peoples the compatibility between communism and Islam and this was the assumption Soviet policy towards the Muslim world was based on for over two decades. For this reason the Soviet leadership adopted a relatively tolerant policy towards the rebirth of the religious phenomenon in Central Asia, but underestimating its political dangers, because in Islam the religious dimension is inevitably connected to the political and social one.

Conclusions

The authors examined here all seem to generally agree on the fact that the invasion of Afghanistan was due largely, rather than to an opportunistic choice, to a policy dictated by the need to act, by an *ananke* or destiny, determined by ideological motives but also by defensive and deterrent ones. All point out how the invasion of Afghanistan was an event due to multiple factors, i.e. determined by a series of intricately connected political, strategic, cultural and military elements. There is no proof, however, that the military invasion was planned as part of an expansionistic Soviet grand design, as the documents from the Soviet archives, which became accessible to scholars only during the nineties, widely confirm. It was rather a necessary consequence of a phase marked by a serious regional instability, which had the effect of increasing the sense of danger in the Soviet leadership regarding the vulnerability of its southern borders. In this mixture of national interest and ideology, the two soon became indistinguishable in the eyes of outside observers, but in those of the Soviet leadership too. Ideological considerations and incorrect military judgments on the possibility of achieving victory in a Third World country made up the basic motivations for the invasion. From this point of view, the invasion was not only the product of bad calculations from a military point of view (as was clear from the earliest phases of the conflict),

⁴⁵ H el ene Carr ere D’Encausse, *L’empire  clat , La r evolte des nations en U.R.S.S.*, Flammarion, Paris, 1978, p. 344.

but also represented a failure of the whole Soviet conceptual apparatus. Beyond the abstract political-ideological or military doctrines, what concretely contributed to the decision of invading Afghanistan – as several authors point out, Arnold and Bradsher in particular – were the specific concrete interests of particular organisms of the Soviet State, above all military and diplomatic environments, which saw an intervention in Afghanistan as an ideal opportunity to acquire prestige and/or economic rewards for their structures or for themselves. According to a good part of US historiography, therefore, specific corporate interests ensured that news on the dangers of Afghanistan underwent a radical manipulation aimed at influencing the Soviet leadership, which relied directly on those specific interests (the diplomats, the army, the military-industrial complex, the KGB) for information. In addition, in the Soviet context there were no “independent” sources of information which could refer on Afghan events objectively and impartially. Those who made a profit from the Afghan “adventure” were mainly the Soviet “intermediaries”, those high-ranking military men and diplomats who were handsomely rewarded by Afghan readers for the quantity and quality of supplies they managed to have sent to Afghanistan. This too is confirmed by Soviet documents.

Cultural factors also partially contributed to the Soviet leadership’s decision to invade Afghanistan: the difficulty to understand the Afghan cultural context, perceived as an exotic world dominated by incomprehensible tribal customs, the hubris of bringing a European-style civilization to the country, the Soviet one, and above all the “progressive” Marxist-Leninist doctrine as opposed to Afghan Islam, believed to be a religion marked by obscurantism and unjust social relations. It was this deep-rooted sense in the Soviet leadership of a “civilizing mission”, of a sort of idealistic and equally irrational Russian-Soviet Messianism, that contributed to the decision of invading Afghanistan. All this in the wake of the peculiarities of Russian and then Soviet Imperialism, with its idea of a fight without quarter against Islamic obscurantism as perceived by the Soviet leaders.

Some US authors, Hauner in particular, stress the basic contradiction of the bitter criticism on behalf of the Soviets against the colonialism of the Western powers, while Russian and then Soviet colonialism was described as having redemptive virtues of socio-economic and scientific progress typical of the European enlightenment tradition. Russian and then Soviet colonization was hence awarded a moral superiority compared to Western colonialism, and US colonialism in particular, which was accused of being directed at a mere economic exploitation of developing countries. This conception, characterized by a strong humanism, hid an anti-Islamic and implicitly racist prejudice that Marxist-Leninist doctrine had not managed to erase from traditional Russian cultural thinking.

On the basis of military and strategic reflections, most of the authors examined firmly confute the thesis that the Soviet leadership may have conceived Afghanistan as a base to gain control of for further expansion towards the Persian Gulf or Pakistan. In fact, in the seventies Soviet military technology was already quite advanced and did not need an advanced base such as Afghanistan to conquer other areas held to be strategically vital for the Soviet Union, nor did the USSR of the late seventies suffer from a depletion of its oilfields or from any technical problems regarding oil extraction that would have led it to consider seizing Gulf oil. Such a choice would have triggered off a world-wide conflict with the US, though not with Western Europe, evidently interested in an understanding, however precarious, with the Soviet Union because of strong and inevitable economic and political relations. The motivations of the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan were not then predominantly logistic or economic. The divide and rule policy with the United States and Western Europe had been meticulously developed by the Soviets, who in the months immediately preceding the invasion had accurately calculated that the differing political and economic interests of the two sides of the Atlantic – and in particular those related to Soviet energy exports towards Western Europe – would have caused serious divergences between the United States and Western Europe on how to confront the Afghan crisis and its consequences. And indeed, these different viewpoints and diverging interests between the United States and its European allies did cause a substantial disagreement on how to respond to the Soviet aggression on Afghanistan: the Europeans preferred to respond in very moderate terms to this serious violation of international law. There was, for example, as a consequence of US sanctions, a further strengthening of political ties, but also of economic and technological ones, between the Soviet Union and West Germany. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan therefore caused a thorough reshuffle of alliances at an international level.

In the same way as Washington, because of internal resistances against any further military involvement, could not reinforce its military presence in Vietnam beyond a set limit or resort to nuclear weapons, the Soviet Union, due to considerations mainly related to the international context, but partly to the internal one too, could not increase its military contingent as its military had requested. The former was divided between “ideologists” and “technicians”, between those who preferred a “low profile” solution and those who supported a full-scale attack; and also between those favorable to intervention, like Jepišev, and those who declared themselves to be firmly against it, in particular Ogarkov, because of the nature of the conflict. A conflict inevitably characterized by an adversary who employed guerilla techniques rather than a regular army. The obvious analogies with the US-Vietnam conflict regarding the strategic and operative limitations of the use of military force by a super-power against a developing Country in a Cold War context, are confirmed in the

analyses of certain authors, who also point out some important differences between the two cases: for example, the absence of a free press in the USSR, or of a Soviet public opinion free to express its views or of a Parliament like the US Congress, by no means dominated by the will of the President. This fact is highlighted because some authors, for example Arnold, argue that even though decision-making power was concentrated within a small group, the Politburo, it too had to some extent consider public opinion, which however indirectly, for example with an exponential rise of “draft-dodgers”, did manifest its strong opposition to the war (an ever-rising opposition as the conflict dragged on). This deterrent factor – the Soviet public opinion’s opposition to what was interpreted as a new form of military adventurism, harshly repressed by the State’s security organisms, the KGB first and foremost – was not however sufficient to prevent the Kremlin from deciding in favor of military intervention, which in its intentions was to be brief and relatively painless. Proof of this is the limited publicity given to the operation, which was announced by the Soviet media several days after the beginning of events and presented as an operation to defend socialism and its values against a counter-revolution headed by reactionary forces, and later as a defense of the Soviet Union’s southern borders: all motivations rejected by most Soviet citizens, who’d had enough of seeing their children die in remote parts of the world for reasons they were unable to understand. Afghanistan therefore found itself side to side with other crucial concurrent and interconnected events, such as the economic crisis, the Chernobyl disaster, growing nationalism, the psychological weariness of the population due to a loss of trust in the system, which all contributed to the process of dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Soviet system imploded because of the Country’s internal contradictions which surfaced also as a consequence of the Afghan war. The Soviet population gradually lost trust in its leaders because of their reticence on the real motivations that led to invading the nearby Asian Country. Expressions like “internationalist duty”, monotonously repeated by the official propaganda, had at that point become void of any meaning and most citizens had stopped believing in them long before. From 1985, Gorbachev’s *glasnost* made it possible for the discontent due to the ruinous outcome of the Afghan war to come out into the open, with the afore-mentioned disastrous results. The Afghan war did not by itself cause the collapse of the Soviet system, but it most certainly contributed to it, because of the considerable expenses of a war that lasted almost ten years, because of the embargo and because of the concurrent growth of nationalism in the non-Russian Soviet republics. On top of the national question, the war also brought to the surface a social question, as those called to fight in Afghanistan were those who had no influential acquaintances in military or civil circles and therefore could not avoid being drafted. Thus the myth of social equality between citizens, which was supposed to represent the very constitutional basis of the Soviet state, also came

to an end. Studying the Afghan war helps us understand particular dynamics that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Ultimately, as many authors agree, the decision to invade Afghanistan brought to the surface the inadequacy of the Soviet system to respond to the complex challenges of the contemporary world, because of an excessively rigid and monocratically structured State system: the Soviet model of the vertical power structure. A system that was by then universally considered inadequate to responding to difficult situations that require articulated solutions to govern an ever more complex and interconnected world. Responses, therefore, that cannot depend on a single individual or a select power group at the top of the State. In short, there was a lack of the so-called checks and balances, a lack of institutions that could freely and effectively express their opinions, even if in contrast with those of the Politburo, when it came to taking decisions on matters crucial to the life of the State. What would have been called for was an efficient parliament, and not the Supreme Soviet, which limited itself to dutifully and unanimously ratifying the invasion as a *fait accompli* in January of 1980. The decision-making power exercised by the Kremlin proved its rigidity and inadequacy to responding to the challenges of the contemporary world, thus also spotlighting the fiction, or perhaps the utopia, of a substantial union of the State, which instead was full of contrasts that did not always find a straightforward settlement. The highly bureaucratic Soviet decision-making mechanism, concentrated in the hands of a small élite of leaders, was therefore incapable of absorbing and “compensating for” dissent, but only of repressing it with the use of violence, the only means left to obtain the consensus of citizens for a conflict that had become more and more unpopular.

The Soviet leadership’s choice of invading Afghanistan, rather than a rational decision in the current sense of the term, i.e. one based on carefully calculating the elements at stake, appears to the various US authors as a risky probability calculus, a sort of *brinkmanship*, foolish and laden with consequences, which ultimately resembled a real gamble, the variables of which had been miscalculated. From this point of view, the Kremlin’s decision, though apparently founded on reasonable but erroneous assumptions, was actually based on the concept of “zero-sum game”, i.e. on the assumption that the victory of the non-communist forces in Afghanistan would have necessarily meant a victory of Islamic forces or in any case of powers hostile to the Soviet Union, such as the United States or China. These fears had a basis of reality, but it also appears obvious how strongly influenced they were by the psychological projections of the Soviet leadership. The perception it had of the situation was therefore influenced by real elements, but also by ideological ones characterized by a certain degree of paranoia regarding the security of the Soviet Union’s borders. The phobia of invasion and encirclement by the enemy continued to effect the minds of the

Soviet leaders, despite the impressive military potential at their disposal. Reality principle and the subjective fear within the Soviet leadership of a possible encirclement by superior forces therefore merge in this context into an inseparable *unicum* of motivations along with a strong socialist Messianism and a far-reaching political and geopolitical project. In this sense, to refer to the intervention with terms like “offensive” or “defensive” is clearly insufficient and conceptually misleading, because it implies a false dichotomy between offensive and defensive motivations and suggests approximate definitions which are of little use when it comes to analyzing the actions of a super-power.

The Manichean vision of the world, for which there was no third alternative (*tertium non datur*) in the endless struggle between capitalism and socialism, between progress and reaction, contributed to the occurrence of events that the Soviet leadership meant on the contrary to prevent and exorcise. We must not forget that in its judgment, as well as the fear of an external threat, it was conscious of the fact that low economic growth was a potentially destabilizing element: a military victory in Afghanistan could have contributed to overshadowing this negative data before a public opinion weary and demoralized by growing economic difficulties. These, however, were also due to the significant military expenses and to the equally onerous aid policy towards the communist revolutionary regimes in the Third World during the seventies. In the intentions of the Soviet leaders all this should have served as compensation: the Soviet population was supposed to feel proud for the “internationalist achievements” of the Soviet Union in foreign policy, and this was supposed to compensate for the shortages and the growing material discontent. Instead Soviet military expansionism became one of the reasons that solicited the ethnic tensions which were to lead, within a decade or so, to the crumbling of the Soviet Union and to the independence of the fifteen Republics it was made up of.

The choice of the Soviet leadership fits perfectly within the context of a “win-or-lose-all” model. The Soviet leaders, conscious of the increasing economic limits and lack of resources, decided to attack before the opposing coalition, potentially far superior from the economic and hence military point of view, could gain even more strength. In particular, several authors underline that the perception the Soviet leadership had of the Carter administration, as a basically remissive one and the possibility that a more aggressive administration in terms of foreign policy would come into power, convinced the Soviet leadership to invade Afghanistan, despite the fact that it was not an integral part of the communist bloc like Hungary or Czechoslovakia. The importance of the latter element was not sufficiently understood by the Soviets. In fact, there existed, thanks to a tacit agreement between the two super-powers, a right of influence over neighboring areas and freedom of movement within one’s area of influence, as explicitly set out in the Brezhnev doctrine, but not

outside of it. The decision to invade Afghanistan ultimately felt the effects of the most desperate Manichaeism which characterized the bipolar context of the final phase of the Cold War.