

Poland and Catholicism

The Catholic Church in Poland occupied a unique position in the Eastern bloc. Although Marxism meant that religion was not supposed to be allowed, attempts to curb the power of the Church in Poland had only boosted its support among the Polish people. In fact, after 1970 the leader of Poland, Edward Gierk, had allowed religion to be taught in schools. Catholicism in Poland was given a further boost by the appointment of the Polish Pope John Paul II and his visit to Poland in 1979, which seriously undermined the whole concept of the Communist, atheist state. Gaddis writes, 'When John Paul II kissed the ground at the Warsaw airport on June 2, 1979, he began a process by which Communism in Poland – and ultimately everywhere else in Europe – would come to an end' (Gaddis, *The Cold War*, p.193).

Tok Time

Many totalitarian and/or authoritarian states view artists as a danger to their control. Discuss why poets, musicians, writers and painters are often persecuted by governments. Consider the extent to which artists can 'tell the truth'. In what ways are 'truth' and knowledge in the Arts similar to truth in other areas of knowledge?

The challenge from Poland in the 1980s

In the late 1970s, dissatisfaction with the poor economic situation in Poland resulted in industrial unrest, food shortages and strikes. The opposition to the government centred on the port city of Gdansk, and in 1980 the Gdansk shipyard workers went on strike. They were led by an unemployed shipyard worker named Lech Walesa, and were successful in securing economic and political rights, including the right to strike and form free trade unions. This led to the establishment of the independent trade union movement called Solidarity. By 1981, Solidarity claimed a membership of 10 million and was seen as a threat to the USSR. The Red Army sent troops to the Polish border, but did not invade. Stanislaw Kania, the new leader of Poland, convinced Brezhnev that he could restore order himself, and it is also possible that American warnings against the use of force kept back the Soviet troops. However, reliable elements of the Polish army were used to seize control of the government in December 1981. The loyal General Wojciech Jaruzelski was installed as prime minister and he declared martial law, banned Solidarity and arrested thousands of activists. By 1983, the government was in firm control, but the economic problems, along with continued support for Solidarity, remained (see Chapter Seventeen).

The declaration of martial law in Poland along with the invasion of Afghanistan helped to weaken détente, which was already struggling to survive at this point.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Review exercise

Copy out the grid below and summarize the challenges to Soviet control:

	Nature of challenge	Soviet reaction	Western reaction	Consequences
Yugoslavia 1948				
East Germany 1953				
Poland 1956				
Hungary 1956				
Czechoslovakia 1968				
Poland 1980				

To what extent were Soviet leaders following Stalin's structural legacy?

The system set up by Stalin in Eastern Europe – his 'legacy' – is outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Although Khrushchev attempted to carry out de-Stalinization and to improve relations with Tito, there was no fundamental change in the relationship between the Soviet Union and the satellite states as established under Stalin. This was even more the case during Brezhnev's leadership:

- Power remained centralized in Moscow; economically the satellite states continued to develop their economies to suit that of the Soviet Union. After the Brezhnev Doctrine was introduced, all economic experiments in the Soviet bloc aimed at modernization and increased competitiveness came to an end.
- The leaders of the satellite states remained men who were loyal to Moscow.
- When any of the states attempted to resist or deviate from this situation, the Red Army was used ruthlessly to restore order and maintain the system; the Brezhnev Doctrine justified this as necessary for preserving socialism throughout the Eastern bloc.

The challenge from Afghanistan

The Brezhnev Doctrine was also used as a reason for invading Afghanistan in 1979. Although not part of the official Soviet sphere of influence, the USSR was anxious to prevent a situation developing in Afghanistan that might threaten Soviet security.



This map shows the instability of the regions bordering the Soviet Union during the 1980s.

Why did the Soviets intervene in Afghanistan?

In April 1978, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) of Afghanistan seized power. This was a pro-Soviet organization and received economic assistance from Moscow. However, the new government's social and economic policies, which included land reform, women's rights and secular education, were resisted by both the fundamentalist Muslim groups and factions within the PDP. One faction was led by Hafizullah Amin, who came to power in a coup in September 1979.

However, there was continued instability in the country because of anti-Muslim policies, and Afghan Muslims began joining the *Mujahedin*, which declared a *jihād*, or holy war, against the supporters of Amin. Amin's regime became increasingly dependent on Soviet aid. However, relations between the Soviets and Amin were strained and Amin also began to initiate contact through the CIA with the U.S. government. This triggered rumours that Amin himself had been recruited by the CIA. To the Soviets there seemed to be no alternative but to intervene militarily and replace Amin with the pro-Soviet Babrak Kamal.

The official Soviet reasons for invading Afghanistan included the following:

- The USSR did not want the 'Afghan Revolution' defeated and Afghanistan turned into a Shah's Iran.
- The USSR believed that the victory of the 'counter-revolution' would result in a 'bloodbath' caused by religious zealots and vengeful feudal lords.
- The USSR believed that a victory for the counter-revolution's forces would allow for massive American military involvement in Afghanistan. This was a country bordering the USSR, and thus a threat to Soviet security.
- The USSR claimed that it would have 'ceased to be a great power' if it turned away from taking 'unpopular, but necessary, decisions'.

The impact of the revolution in Iran on the Soviet Union

In January 1979 the Shah of Iran (who had been backed by the USA) was removed in an Islamist uprising and replaced by the Ayatollah Khomeini – a Muslim fundamentalist. The implications of this for the United States have already been discussed (see Chapter Thirteen, page 159). However, this new regime threatened Soviet security as well. The Central Asian Republics of the USSR – bordering Afghanistan – had significant Muslim populations and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism could destabilize these areas.

In a letter to Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov wrote:

We have been receiving information about Amin's behind-the-scenes activities which may mean his political reorientation to the West. ... In closed meetings he attacks Soviet policy and the activities of our specialists. Our ambassador was practically expelled from Kabul. These developments have created, on the one hand, a danger of losing the domestic achievements of the Afghan revolution, and, on the other hand, a threat to our positions in Afghanistan ...

In addition, there were unofficial reasons for the invasion:

- The moderate Western response to the invasion of Czechoslovakia may have encouraged the Soviets in their decision to invade Afghanistan.
- Détente was already in difficulties, so the impact that the invasion might have on relations with the USA was not so much of a concern to the Soviet leadership as it might have been several years earlier.

From this point on, the new Kamal regime that replaced Amin was dependent on Soviet military strength to maintain its control against the popular revolutionary troops of the Afghan Islamist forces. However, the problem was, as Westad comments, that Afghan Communism had already 'self-destructed' well before the Soviet invasion:

The basic policy failure of the Soviet Afghan invasion was the belief that foreign power could be used to secure the survival and ultimate success of a regime that demonstrably could not survive on its own.

Odd Arne Westad in The Global Cold War (CUP, 2007) p.326

What was the American response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan?

The Soviets completely miscalculated the impact that their actions would have on the West. Generally, the invasion was seen in the West not as evidence of maintaining control in an already existing sphere of influence, as had happened in Czechoslovakia, but as evidence of Soviet expansionism. President Carter stated that the invasion might pose the most serious threat to world peace since World War Two and imposed stringent measures against the USSR (see also Chapter Thirteen). As a response, the Carter administration took the following actions:

- The 'Carter Doctrine' was announced – it pledged U.S. intervention in the Persian Gulf if the Soviets threatened its interests there.
- Carter's National Security team decided to resist the Soviet invasion by 'proxy', that is, providing the *Mujahedin* rebels with weapons.

After 1981 President Reagan's more aggressive stance towards the Soviet Union involved a more direct approach in Afghanistan. Reagan increased levels of aid and, in the mid-1980s, began to send U.S. supplies of arms to the *Mujahedin* and their Afghan allies, some via Pakistan:

By 1985, a very complex web of foreign support for the Mujahedin was in place in which the United States worked and co-operated closely with conservative Arab governments and voluntary organizations to jointly fund and operate key initiatives.

From Odd Arne Westad, The Global Cold War (CUP, 2007) p.355

As the war of attrition continued to the end of Brezhnev's rule, and through that of Andropov and Chernenko, the impact of direct American aid probably gave the rebels the upper hand:

... in Afghanistan, a large covert operation was mounted to arm the Mujahedin rebels through Pakistan. It was, however, only in Reagan's second term, after 1985, that the crucial Stinger anti-aircraft missiles were provided. Easily portable and fired by a single soldier, the Stingers turned the tide of the Afghan War by challenging the Soviet command of the air.

From Martin Walker, The Cold War (Vintage, 1995) p.287

The war in Afghanistan cost the lives of more than one million Afghans and 25,000 Red Army soldiers. It also cost the USSR in the region of \$8 billion per annum. The reason that the Soviets ultimately pulled out was very much down to the political thinking of the new Soviet leader – Mikhail Gorbachev. He believed that this money was desperately needed for his domestic reforms. Also, the war itself did not fit in with his new philosophy for Soviet foreign policy – the USSR was no longer to foot the bill for supporting the cause of world Communism. Gorbachev announced his intention to pull Soviet troops out of Afghanistan in February 1988. By the following February, the USSR had completed its military withdrawal.



◀ Mujahedin fighters in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan and its impact on détente

The view of the rightwing in the United States is that the invasion of Afghanistan was a key example of how the Soviets were still pursuing the 'Marxist-Leninist' expansionism embodied in their political doctrine. Thus the Soviets were responsible for the breakdown of détente.

The Post-revisionist view is that the Soviet Union was responding defensively to a genuine threat to its security. This threat was also in its 'sphere of influence'. The U.S. response was cynical, and intended to take advantage of the unstable situation caused by Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan. It was in fact changes in U.S. foreign policy – as championed by Carter's adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and then by Reagan's government – that led to the second Cold War and renewed tension, not the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.