

Key Issue

- How did Afghanistan contribute to the collapse of détente in the late 1970s and early 1980s?

THE SOVIET INVASION

The Brezhnev Doctrine was widely attacked. Yet the criticism did not stop Brezhnev using force in Afghanistan, 11 years after Czechoslovakia.

During 1979, Afghanistan became very unsettled. Muslim opposition groups attacked the new Afghan government which was both non-Muslim and pro-Soviet. The USSR looked on uneasily. It, too, had a large Muslim population in the areas nearest to Afghanistan. Soviet leaders were worried that extremist Muslim ideas might soon affect the Soviet Union itself.

What happened next was a textbook example of how the USSR dealt with difficult neighbours. On 28 December 1979, Soviet leader Brezhnev phoned US President Jimmy Carter with some news. He told him that Soviet troops had been invited into Afghanistan to protect the country from attacks.



Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries.

In fact, Soviet troops were already in Afghanistan. The airport at Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, had been captured on Christmas Eve, to allow the USSR to bring in troops and equipment. At the same time, Soviet troops had crossed the northern border into Afghanistan.

A KGB squad attacked the palace in Kabul and assassinated the communist president, Hafizollah Amin. On New Year's Day 1980, a new government was set up in Kabul, led by Babrak Karmal. He was a former Afghan leader who had been in exile in the USSR. A Soviet plane had flown him back specially to take over the government.

ISLAMIC REVOLT

Criticism of the invasion was worldwide. Afghanistan's Muslim neighbours, Pakistan and Iran, both objected. So did western powers. The USA boycotted the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow as a protest. That same year, Ronald Reagan was elected as the next US President after demanding that the United States build more nuclear weapons.

The USSR ignored the protests and its troops stayed. By February 1980, there were 80,000 of them. However, they soon found that putting down opposition in Afghanistan wasn't as easy as in Hungary or Czechoslovakia.

Soviet troops were supposed to support the Afghan army against the Muslim groups which were anti-communist. But they faced two problems. First, the Afghan army was not as good as they had believed. Second, they faced opposition from rebel forces, called the mujaheddin.

The rebels were not just fighting to get rid of Soviet troops. They were fighting to turn Afghanistan into a Muslim country. They were well-equipped because they were given weapons by both the USA and China, who opposed the Soviet invasion.



These boys fought for the Mujaheddin rebel forces. One of them is holding an AK-47 rifle.

SOVIET WITHDRAWAL

The mujaheddin fought a guerrilla war against the Soviet and Afghan armies. Soviet troops controlled the towns where they were based but the mujaheddin controlled the countryside. They attacked Soviet supply routes; they shot at Soviet transport planes. Other nations increased their pressure on the Soviet Union. The USA, for instance, banned grain exports to the USSR. In 1981, the UN General Assembly asked the USSR to leave Afghanistan: the request was ignored.

In addition to this, the USSR faced problems at home. Muslim nations, which had once been friendly, turned hostile. The USSR increasingly became worried that Muslims inside the Soviet Union might revolt. In any case, the war grew unpopular as Soviet casualties increased (see Source A).

In 1985, a new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, decided to withdraw from Afghanistan. Agreement was reached in Geneva in 1988 and the last Soviet soldiers left Afghanistan in February 1989. Over 20,000 Soviet troops had died in ten years of fighting. Under Gorbachev, the media could report the war honestly (see Sources B and C).

The consequences were far greater for Afghanistan itself. About a million Afghans may have died – and the fighting went on even after the Soviet departure. By 1989, almost half the original Afghan population had become refugees. Those who were left could no longer grow enough food because the war had destroyed so much farmland.



An Afghan boy and his mother collecting scrap from ruined houses (1995).

A SOURCE

One Russian mother tried to discover how her soldier son died. She was told the following.

You cannot walk around saying that your son has been killed in Afghanistan. That's classified (secret) information.

B SOURCE

Aless Adamovich, writing in *Moscow News*, a Russian newspaper (1990).

The Afghan people lost a million lives in a war which we had no right to get involved in. We couldn't defeat the Afghan 'bandits' because they were fighting us as invaders.

C SOURCE

One Soviet soldier who fought in Afghanistan said the following afterwards:

We were given medals which we don't wear. When the time comes we'll return them. Those medals [were] received honestly in a dishonest war.

Question

Why did relations between the USA and the USSR worsen following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan? [7 marks]