

When and Why the Decision to Send Troops [to Afghanistan] Was Made.

[from Georgy M. Kornienko, *The Cold War: Testimony of a Participant*, Moscow, Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1994, pp. 193-195]

[In the period] from March to October 1979, A. A. Gromyko and I often exchanged opinions regarding the requests from the Afghan government to send in Soviet troops, and every time we came to a shared understanding that such a step would be impermissible. I have not noticed any doubts on that issue on the part of Yu. V. Andropov or D. F. Ustinov either until October. However, some time in October, after the physical removal of Taraki by Amin, Gromyko became “locked in”—in his conversations with me he no longer touched upon the issue of the expediency (or in expediency) of sending Soviet troops into Afghanistan. From my conversations with him, already after the introduction of troops, I concluded that it was not Gromyko who said “A” in favor of such decision, but that he was “pressured” into it by Andropov and Ustinov together. Which one of those two was the first to change their initial point of view and spoke in favor of sending the troops, one may only guess.

Additional evidence that became available to me recently, leads me to suggest that it was Ustinov after all, who said “A” in this sad affair. The push to change his former point of view of in expediency of sending Soviet troops in Afghanistan came from the stationing of American military ships in the Persian Gulf in the fall of 1979, and the incoming information about preparations for a possible American invasion of Iran, which threatened to cardinaly change the military-strategic situation in the region to the detriment of the interests of the Soviet Union. If the United States can allow itself such things tens of thousands of kilometers away from their territory in the immediate proximity from the USSR borders, why then should we be afraid to defend our positions in the neighboring Afghanistan?—this was approximately Ustinov’s reasoning. As far as Andropov is concerned, who at that time was Chairman of the USSR KGB, in this situation he was a hostage of his own apparatus, which on the one hand exaggerated the danger for the USSR of Amin’s continuation in power, because he was being portrayed as an American agent, and on the other hand, exaggerated the power of the USSR to

change the situation in the desirable for the USSR direction. I was aware of the existence of such mood and perceptions in the KGB apparatus.

Among the leadership of the General Staff, people like Chief of General Staff N. V. Ogarkov, his First Deputy S. F. Akhromeev, and Head of Main Operations Department V. I. Varennikov, the idea of sending troops to Afghanistan did not inspire any enthusiasm, according to my information. For understandable reasons, they justified their objections against it by professional rather than political considerations, supporting them by [referring to] the American experience in Vietnam: the impossibility to cope with Afghanistan with the forces that could be used [for it] without substantially weakening the Soviet groups of forces in Europe and along the border with China, which was not acceptable in those years. However, in the end, Ustinov disregarded their opinion. As far as I know, experts of the International Department of the CC CPSU regarded the decision to send troops to Afghanistan as a mistake as well, and tried to let their considerations on that issue be known to the highest leadership, but without any success.

As far as I was able to reconstruct the development of the events later, the difficult deliberations of the “three” over the problem of whether to send the troops or not continued all through October, November, and the first part of December. On December 10, 1979, Ustinov gave an oral order to the General Staff to start preparations for deployment of one division of paratroopers and of five divisions of military-transport aviation, to step up the readiness of two motorized rifle divisions in the Turkestan Military District, and to increase the staff of a pontoon regiment to full staff without setting it any concrete tasks.

However, the final political decision to send Soviet troops into Afghanistan was made in the second part of the day on December 12, 1979 by a narrow group of Soviet leaders: Brezhnev, Suslov, Andropov, Ustinov, and Gromyko (some publications also mention Kosygin, but according to my information, he was not present there because he was ill on that day). Thus the fateful decision was made by not even full CC CPSU Politburo, although a handwritten Resolution of the Politburo was prepared after the fact, which was signed by almost all the members.

After that, accelerated preparations of [military] units and formations that were assigned [the task of] entering the neighboring country began in the military districts on the border with Afghanistan. On December 24, Ustinov convened the highest leadership of the Defense Ministry and made an announcement of the decision to send Soviet troops into Afghanistan without explaining the purpose of that mission. On the same day, the first printed document signed by the Defense Minister was prepared—the directive, which said that the decision was made to “send several contingents of Soviet troops deployed in the southern regions of the country into the territory of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan for the purposes of rendering internationalist assistance to the friendly Afghan people, and also to create favorable conditions to prevent possible anti-Afghan actions on the part of the bordering states.”

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