

No, the Soviet Union did not invade Afghanistan because terrorists were crossing the border into Russia

 chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-soviet-union-afghanistan-20190103-story.html

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Afghan officials on Thursday denounced President Trump's praise of the 1979 Soviet invasion and occupation of their country, which he described this week as a fight against terrorism, breaking with decades of Republican anti-communist tenets.

According to the revisionist historical account Trump delivered during a Cabinet meeting Wednesday, "the reason Russia was in Afghanistan was because terrorists were going into Russia." He added: "They were right to be there. The problem is, it was a tough fight."

The comments marked a surprising split with U.S. conservatives dating back to President Ronald Reagan, who saw the invasion as an attempt to spread communism and aided insurgent forces fighting Soviet troops.

"The most shameless Soviet propagandist never claimed that Afghan terrorists were attacking Russia," said Barnett Rubin, an Afghanistan expert at New York University. "You can read all Soviet media in the 1980s and never find anything this ridiculous."

There was ultimately a problem with extremism in Afghanistan, but it developed largely after the USSR left, and the mujahideen groups that sprang up to fight the Soviets devolved into the Taliban.

On Friday, the conservative Wall Street Journal editorial board ripped the president, writing, "This mockery is a slander against every ally that has supported the U.S. effort in Afghanistan with troops who fought and often died." The board called Trump's representation of the Soviet invasion "reprehensible" and "false."

The remarks also raised eyebrows among officials in Afghanistan at a time when Kabul has voiced frustration with Trump's sudden announcement of a plan to withdraw up to half of U.S. troops as peace talks with Taliban insurgents continue without Afghan government involvement.

A statement from President Ashraf Ghani's office described the battle against the Soviets as a "national uprising for gaining freedom" and noted that the Soviet invasion was condemned by the United Nations and the United States at the time.

"All presidents of America not only denounced this invasion but remained supporters of this holy jihad of the Afghans," read the statement, which added that the government would be seeking clarity from the United States.

Foreign Affairs Minister Salahuddin Rabbani said the Soviet occupation violated Afghanistan's national sovereignty.

"Any other claim defies historic facts," he said on Twitter.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Saleh Mohammad Saleh, a lawmaker representing Konar province, also noted that the United States funded the rebels fighting the Soviets. To now hear Trump justifying the invasion was "really strange," he said.

"Our war against the Soviets was righteous. The international community stood by us. We gave more than enough sacrifices," Saleh told The Washington Post. "This man proves to be more mad than people think."

He also criticized the plan to pull out at least half the 14,000 U.S. troops in the country as bad for Afghanistan's stability, especially in the midst of peace negotiations.

Sayed Ikramuddin Masoomi, a lawmaker representing Takhar province who also fought the Soviets, said their occupation "was crystal clear and was specifically for supporting [Moscow's] puppet communists in Afghanistan."

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Trump's invitation for Russia and India to join the fight against the Taliban — along with Pakistan, where the militants have enjoyed safe haven — further complicated matters, Masoomi told The Post.

Rahmatullah Nabil, a former head of the Afghan intelligence agency, blasted Trump in a string of tweets.

"Even Russia no longer says that or tries to justify it," he said about the invasion and occupation. "Those that fail to learn from the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it; hopefully you are smart enough not to make the same mistake when it comes to abandoning [Afghanistan]."

Trump also puzzled officials when he suggested the December 1979 invasion and decade-long occupation, which ended in a Soviet withdrawal in 1989, was the principal reason the Soviet Union collapsed two years later, and not a costly and escalating arms race with the United States.

"I think most scholars would agree that Afghanistan was a contributing factor in the Soviet collapse, but I don't think anyone would go so far as to pin sole blame for the collapse on Afghanistan or to say that the Soviets went 'bankrupt fighting in Afghanistan,'" said Sarah Cameron, a historian who studies Russia and the Soviet Union at the University of Maryland.

Afghanistan's role in the collapse was more military- and perception-based than economic. A world power that helped defeat Nazi Germany and had crushed uprisings within its borders was suddenly viewed as weak and unable to control a small country.

"The moral, social and political costs of the war were substantial and contributed to the crisis of the Soviet Union, but it wasn't a decisive financial burden," said Eric Lohr, another expert at American University. "By far, the Soviet Union's biggest financial problem was declining oil prices through the '80s. Then Perestroika [a political and economic restructuring] unleashed all kinds of problems that hit the performance of the state economy, the state budget. The costs of Afghanistan were significant, but not on anything like that scale."

Soviet occupation was a grave violation of Afghanistan's territorial integrity & nat'l sovereignty. Any other claim defies historic'l facts. Invasion was condemned by UN&int. comm. Heroic resistance & sacrifice of millions of Afghans 4 freed'm & independence ingrained n history.

— Salahuddin Rabbani (@SalahRabbani) [January 3, 2019](#)

Mr. President [@realDonaldTrump](#) you have endorsed and justified the 1979 soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Even Russia no longer says that or tries to justify it. <https://t.co/OPjwlrilWI>

— Rahmatullah Nabil (@RahmatullahN) [January 2, 2019](#)

Looks like the Republican tent is too small to fit integrity. Today, Republicans attacked a Senator for truthfully calling out the President for his lack of character, while staying mute as he proved it by lying about Jim Mattis and approving the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

— James Comey (@Comey) [January 3, 2019](#)