

*Politburo, October 17, 1985.* Gorbachev proposed making a "decision on Afghanistan," meaning that it's time to end it. He described his meeting with Karmal. He said Karmal was dumbfounded. He had expected anything but this from us, he was sure we needed Afghanistan even more than he did, he's been counting on us to stay there for a long time—if not forever. That is why Gorbachev had to make himself perfectly clear; by the summer of 1986 you'll have to have figured out how to defend your cause on your own. We'll help you, but with arms only, not troops. And if you want to survive you'll have to broaden the base of the regime, forget socialism, make a deal with the truly influential forces, including the Mujahideen commanders and leaders of now-hostile organizations. You'll have to revive Islam, respect traditions, and try to show the people some tangible benefits from the revolution. And get your army into shape, give raises to officers and mullahs. Support private trade, you won't be able to create a different economy any time soon. And so on, and so forth.

Then he read us some heartbreaking letters. They were all different, but the common theme was "International duty? In whose name? Do the Afghan people want it? Is it worth the lives of our boys, who don't even know why they were sent there, what they are defending, killing old people and children?" Gorbachev read on: "And how can you (the Soviet leadership), send green recruits against professional killers, well trained and armed, ten of them able to take on a whole brigade?"

Apart from grief and tears, the letters included direct accusations and demands. The Politburo had made a mistake and must correct it as soon as possible—every day precious lives are lost. Gorbachev was apparently quoting all this to raise the emotional tension, but he sidestepped the underlying issue of whether the entire venture had been a mistake or not. Though it was evident what he really thought about it. "With or without Karmal's consent, we'll take a firm line on the matter of our rapid withdrawal from Afghanistan."

Marshal Sokolov took the floor, making it clear that he was ready to "wrap things up" and was not going to be soft with Karmal. Gromyko also spoke. He proposed some modifications to the formal "recommendations" going out to Kabul. You had to see the ironic expressions of his colleagues—Gorbachev's glare was truly withering. Those looks said it all: "You ass, what are you babbling about, giving us advice? You got us into this dirty business, and now you're pretending that we're all responsible!"