

## Remembering Christmas Day In Afghanistan, 1979

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By Ahmed Rashid

On the morning of December 25, 1979, I was shopping in Kandahar, Afghanistan. Late the previous night there had been garbled news on the BBC and on Pakistani radio that a coup had taken place in Kabul — that [Soviet troops had landed](#), and that the Afghan communist President [Hafizullah Amin](#) was dead (in fact, he would be assassinated three days later, on December 27).

By the morning, Radio Kabul was down and the BBC appeared to have no correspondent in the city to report what was happening.

It was a bright, sunny Christmas Day, and Kandahar was laden with the winter cold from the mountains. The shop keepers sat cross-legged in the doorways of their shops, sipping their green tea and ignoring the news. After all, Kabul had been a mess ever since the communists had [taken over a year earlier](#), and one former president (Nur Mohammad Taraki) had already been killed in his bed a few months before.

Then, at about eleven in the morning, the earth began to shake. A huge trembling began that rocked the flimsy shops, knocking people to the ground as a persistent hum became a permanent roar. Initially everyone thought it was an earthquake; but the earth did not crack. Less than an hour later, with the whole bazaar at a standstill because of the enormous rumbling, we saw the cause.

A vast column of Soviet tanks, armoured cars and trucks came into view, driving down the Soviet-built cement road from the western city of Herat, which is just a few miles from then Soviet Turkmenistan. The column came to a screeching halt in the centre of the bazaar and suddenly there was a pin-drop silence. Nobody moved.

Teenage Soviet tank drivers, wearing goggles and covered in dust and grime, poked their heads above the tank hatches and headed to the tea stalls. Within minutes Afghan shop owners were doing a roaring business as the thirsty soldiers devoured tea, biscuits and bread. The Afghans would not start killing the Soviet soldiers until later.

Afghanistan was an innocent country then, unused to the attention of foreign powers or to being the fulcrum of any war, let alone the mighty Cold War. The Afghans' last war had been with the British, 60 years earlier. When I first visited Kabul in the 1960s as a teenager, the only invaders I saw were hippies from Europe with their beautiful blonde girlfriends and peaceful habits.

Pakistani families would drive up from Lahore or Islamabad to Kabul for the weekend because the city boasted three things that were banned in then military-run Pakistan: Indian movies, duty-free imported goods such as Japanese silk saris and alcohol.

Drunken Pakistanis, cannabis-smashed hippies and weird looking tribesmen down from the hills filled the coffee shops in downtown Kabul, until the earnest but clueless communists seized power and the city in 1978.

Afghanistan then was desperately poor but mostly self-sufficient, with a small but thriving export industry of fruit, nuts and beautiful handicrafts that were all the rage in the west. Who of a certain age has not at some point in their lives owned an Afghan sheepskin coat?

So it is truly sad to see the situation now where, after 13 years of US and Nato occupation, the country must import the bulk of its food, produces next to nothing and has virtually no legal exports. Instead, its economy is measured by the kilos of heroin produced and sold.

After [spending \\$104bn](#) on social welfare and building up the new army, the Americans seem to have forgotten about building the kind of sustainable economy that could have provided jobs and lured the Taliban away from perpetual fighting. Instead, as we heard in mid-December, the government has [no money for salaries](#) and needs still more handouts.

In other words, in the 1960s Afghanistan was self-sufficient in its few but basic needs, whereas in 2014 Afghans have become dependent on other countries for foreign aid, and even to pay their salaries.

Much the same has happened in Iraq, Somalia and Libya — wherever western intervention has occurred. The economies have been left stalled or worse, making another state collapse all but inevitable.

Over this Christmas period we should give some thought to how easily we intervene — but also to how badly we rebuild nations.