



In the shadowy pages of history, certain figures stand as beacons of courage and foresight. Ahmad Shah Massoud, the legendary Afghan commander was undoubtedly one such luminary. His life's narrative weaves a tapestry of resistance and sacrifice. Today, we revisit the story of a man who could have altered the course of history, had he lived a few days more.

Massoud, an engineering graduate from Kabul Polytechnic University, found himself thrust into a different destiny with the events that gripped Afghanistan in the late 1970s. In 1979, as the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan, Massoud rose to lead small groups of mujahedin, or holy warriors, in the rugged Panjshir Valley, in staunch defiance of the Soviet-backed communist regime.

For a decade, from 1979 to 1989, Massoud stood as a bulwark against the relentless onslaught of the Soviet-backed Afghan government forces, decisively thwarting eight offensives launched by the Soviet army.



In memory of Ahmad Shah Massoud

Untold story of legendary Afghan freedom fighter

A 'Che Guevara figure'

A more romantic picture of a guerrilla leader rallying his troops can scarcely be imagined. This black and white photo on the top of the page shows Massoud at 27, addressing his followers in an orchard outside his mother's native village of Rokheh, in northeastern Afghanistan.

The period is late 1980. In time, Massoud will become famous as the "Lion of the Panjshir," celebrated for his courage and charisma.

American journalist Steve Coll wrote in *Ghost Wars*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction,

that Massoud was seen as "a Che Guevara figure, a great actor on history's stage."

"Massoud was a poet, a military genius, a religious man, and a leader of enormous courage who defied death and accepted its inevitability."

Here in this photo, he is not yet known to the outside world. He stands, arm outstretched to his Tajik followers in the Panjshir Valley, less than a year into his David and Goliath campaign against the invading Soviet army. It is a rare photo, almost certain-

ly the first of Massoud to be disseminated internationally. The photographer was Fereydoun Ganjour, a 32-year-old Iranian freelancer who had spent five months taking pictures of the mujahedin in Afghanistan.

Ganjour said he had crossed into Afghanistan by foot from Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province and marched with a group of weapons carriers over the Hindu Kush mountains. "There was no oxygen," he recalled laconically. "Three horses died on the way." He was possibly the first pho-

tographer to enter the Panjshir Valley after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Ganjour arrived in August 1980, more than a year before an American journalist writing for the *Christian Science Monitor* provided a detailed account of Massoud's war in the Panjshir Valley.

Once in the Panjshir, Ganjour continued to follow the mujahedin, marveling at their stamina. "They would travel all day, sometimes with only a small piece of hard bread to eat," he said. "I found out how weak I was in comparison."

Rokheh is where he took most of his pictures. One day, the Soviets passed nearby in a convoy of about 60 small tanks mounted with machine guns and dozens of trucks and jeeps carrying food and ammunition. Ganjour witnessed the mujahedin pick off stragglers and shoot down two helicopters. Then the guerrillas were chased in turn, he said, into the hills.

"He is an amazing man," Ganjour also said of their leader, whom he identified in his notes simply as Massoud.

Unheeded warning

As the Red Army finally retreated in 1989, the Afghan political landscape underwent seismic shifts. A government composed of diverse mujahidin factions emerged but was riddled with internal and ethnic divisions, laying fertile ground for the ascent of the Taliban toward Kabul.

Massoud valiantly held the gates of Kabul against the Taliban forces for a grueling 18 months, backed only by his indomitable

spirit. It was only through extensive financial, logistical, and military support from Pakistan and some Persian Gulf Arab states that the Taliban managed to seize Kabul in the autumn of 1996.

The US Defense Intelligence Agency's documents leaked in November 2011 reveal that Massoud had "limited information" about Al-Qaeda's looming attacks against the United States. He had, in fact, sounded the

alarm months before, only to see his warnings go unheeded.

His foresight did not stop there. In an address to the European Parliament in Brussels, Massoud had conveyed to the Americans that the path to peace in Afghanistan was intertwined with the cessation of Pakistan's support for the Taliban. He had cautioned that Afghanistan's problems would inevitably snowball into a global crisis if swift action was not taken.

But as fate would have it, on September 9, 2001, just two days before the September 11 attacks on the United States, Massoud's life was tragically cut short. He was assassinated by two Al-Qaeda suicide bombers posing as television journalists.

Under the government of former Afghan president Hamid Karzai, Massoud was honored with the title of "National Hero," and September 9 was designated as "Massoud Day." Today, his legacy

endures beyond the borders of Afghanistan.

His son, Ahmad Massoud, now leads the opposition against the Taliban, striving to keep the torch of resistance ablaze. In a world where the Taliban once again hold sway over Afghanistan, Massoud's memory serves as a reminder of bravery, vision, and sacrifices.

*A John Goddard story published by the *Toronto Star* in 2005 contributed to this article.