

The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan: Lessons Learned

by Major James T. McGhee

On 24 September 1979, lead elements of the Soviet 40th Army were ordered to cross the border into Afghanistan. Three days later, Soviet Airborne forces had seized the airfields in Kabul and Bagram, and the Afghan President H. Amin had been executed. This was the beginning of a political and military disaster for the Soviet Union that lasted for nine years with a cost of almost 15,000 troops reported killed or missing in action. [1] Thousands of additional Russian soldiers were wounded or died of disease, and millions of Afghans were either killed, wounded or became refugees. The most important lesson that the Soviets learned from their experience in Afghanistan was, according to Cordesman and Wagner, "that it never should have been fought". [2] There are however, a number of other political, strategic and tactical lessons that may be learned from the Soviet-Afghan conflict.

Author Milan Hauner stated, "The immediate political aim of Soviet policy after the invasion was to salvage the Saur Revolution of April 1978 by installing a dependable leadership in Kabul." [3] The political justification may be also be placed within the responsibility of the Soviet leadership to uphold the "Brezhnev Doctrine", described as, "the Soviet view that if any of its client communist regimes is threatened, it has the right to intervene." [4] The Soviets had successfully confronted this type of threat before, 1956 in Hungary and 1968 in Czechoslovakia. There was no reason to believe that the operation would cost them a great deal or not end with a swift Soviet victory. While they were correct in their assumption that the United States was unwilling to prevent the Soviet incursion, they made miscalculations at both the political and strategic levels regarding the responses of the United States, Pakistan, and the Afghan people.

A significant political mistake was the Soviet misperception of the Carter administration and the belief that there would be only token objections to action in an area of traditional Soviet influence. The United States President Jimmy Carter took "serious" measures against the Soviets, canceling grain deliveries to the Soviets, prohibiting the sale of high-technology and boycotting the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. [5] He declared, "The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War. It's a sharp escalation in the aggressive history of the Soviet Union." [6]

The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) received presidential approval to begin a covert weapons program to the Afghan resistance. This later included in 1986, under great pressure from members of the Departments of State and Defense, the delivery of the first 150 U.S. made Stinger Missiles to the Mujahedeen. These new weapons in the hands of Mujahedeen fighters with only limited training proved to be a most effective weapon against Soviet aircraft. [7]

U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who defeated Carter in the 1980 presidential election, was a committed anticommunist who believed that Soviet gains in the third world had to be rolled back. His "Reagan Doctrine was an aggressive initiative designed to increase the cost of Soviet support for Third World socialist governments." [8] He reversed U.S. policy towards Afghanistan's neighbor Pakistan. The United States began shipping large quantities of supplies, weapons and munitions through Pakistan to the different Mujahedeen factions fighting the Soviets. A huge six-year economic and military aid package to Pakistan elevated the country to the third largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid. [9] This was a major change in U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. was now openly supporting a dictatorial Islamic regime that was aggressively pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

Pakistan, like Cambodia during the U.S. war in Vietnam, was a Mujahedeen sanctuary from Soviet forces that were unwilling to cross the international border into the country. These sanctuaries provided the Afghan resistance with a safe area to train recruits, plan combat operations, and build a logistics support structure. Arguably the most important factor in the overall failure of the Soviets to achieve a strategic victory in Afghanistan, Pakistan, according author and scholar Milan Hauner, "was vital for the continuation of the Mujahedeen resistance." [10] Military supplies and weapons were supplied from Egypt, China and the United

States with additional funding coming from Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) coordinated with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) to distribute aid to the resistance. Soviet style weapons such as AK-47 rifles and SA-7 anti-aircraft missiles were delivered, as these "Soviet" weapons were similar to those captured from the Russians and could not be directly traced back to the United States. [11] Eventually, more sophisticated weaponry and equipment such as Stinger missiles, advanced communications equipment, and heavy weapons were funneled through Pakistan to the Afghan resistance.

Brutal Soviet "scorched earth" tactics drove thousands and eventually an estimated three million Afghans into makeshift tent villages in the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan in Pakistan. Pakistan "hosted" these large numbers of refugees, although this area was only moderately controlled by the Islamabad government. These refugees provided what Mark Urban called, "the vital human reservoir for the resistance." [12] Located among these camps, the Mujahedeen were able to recruit, arm and train new "holy warriors" to fight the Soviets. One firm, possibly funded by the CIA, even employed former British army soldiers who trained Mujahedeen in Pakistan. [13]

The refugee camps also provided the United States and other pro-Afghan resistance organizations with an opportunity to provide humanitarian assistance. The U.S funneled significant amounts of aid through Non-governmental organizations (NGO) to help the refugees in Pakistan. Much of this also went to aid and support the resistance groups. By sending large quantities of humanitarian assistance, the U.S. gained favorable press and alleviated some political and economic pressure on Islamabad. [14]

In addition to the political miscalculations towards the United States and Pakistan, the Soviet leadership equally miscalculated the strength, motivations, and will of the Afghan resistance organizations. The Mujahedeen were never a united force fighting for a common goal or centrally led. The resistance in Afghanistan consisted of a variety of ethnic groups who often had very different and conflicting political and military objectives. They were however united against a common enemy, the "Godless Communists". The greatest strength of the Mujahedeen and the Afghan people was their remarkable resilience. The resistance fighters and the Afghan people who supported them carried on the conflict despite heavy civilian casualties, millions of refugees, poor communications, weapons, and equipment, and the overwhelming technical superiority of the Soviet Army. Despite all their efforts, the Soviets, according to Lester Grau, "did not understand who they were fighting." [15]

The main forces of the Soviet 40th Army were positioned in Afghanistan by January 1980. They were completely unprepared for the kind of guerrilla war waged by the Mujahedeen. "It was felt that the mere presence of Soviet forces would serve to 'sober up' the Mujahedeen." [16] The 40th Army was organized to fight using the traditional Soviet military doctrine of executing large-scale offensive operations followed by an exploitation and pursuit. Inherent in Soviet command structure was the attitude that, "the success of offensive combat is directly dependent on the level of training of commanders and staffs: the lower that level the greater must be the degree of centralized control." [17]

Early attempts by the Soviet leadership to deploy large, combined arms formations to conduct a classic offensive and pursuit against Mujahedeen guerrillas proved ineffective in a war that stressed the vital importance of small unit operations. Most engagements were fought at the tactical level where as the Soviet army was trained to operate at the operational level. [18] At the tactical level, battalion commanders needed instant support. Most Soviet combat support elements however, such as artillery, engineers, signals, and aviation, were organized at the divisional or higher levels. These lessons forced a major reorganization within the 40th Army.

Perhaps the most significant consideration during the reorganization was the difficult Afghan terrain. Soviet General Yuri Maksimov provides a good insight into these considerations, "Combat operations in mountains are characterized by a number of features conditioned by the nature of mountainous terrain, such as its extremely rugged character, scarcity of roads with poor traffic ability, and a great number of natural obstacles. All of this forces troops to operate sometimes in comparatively small sub-units and in separate sectors. These peculiarities

make it more difficult to coordinate, control, and maneuver the resources at hand. The lack of close cooperation among the motorized infantry, artillery, and aviation in mountainous areas may result in the failure to fulfill the combat mission assigned." [19]

The Soviets reorganized their forces from highly centralized armor-heavy elements into integrated combined arms battalions, brigades, and division task forces. Special emphasis was placed upon the need for reconnaissance, aviation, engineer, air assault, and special forces organizations. Soviet leadership also recognized the requirement for greater firepower for its infantry formations.

The main battle tanks of the Soviet army were ineffective in the mountainous Afghan terrain due to the limited elevation capability of both the main tank gun and the coaxial machine gun. Used early as part of the large but unsuccessful sweeping operations. The Soviets learned quickly that, "the practice of massing a large number of regular forces against a small group of irregular forces to fight guerrilla war on rugged terrain was bankrupt." [20] As a result, Soviet tanks often became stationary pillboxes positioned at Soviet base camps. [21]

Greater emphasis was placed on the use of light armored, wheeled vehicles such as the Soviet family of BMDs. These vehicles proved to be well suited for Soviet operations in Afghanistan. They were twice as light, and shorter than the Soviet BMP. They were well armed with a 73mm cannon, a coaxial machine gun, and two bow-mount machine guns. They had a low silhouette, which enabled them to hide in terrain folds or behind rock formations. Their lightweight proved desirable in a war where there was a wide use of mines, and it allowed the vehicle to be air transportable by a variety of aircraft to include helicopters.

Light infantry formations such as the elite Soviet air assault, airborne and special forces units proved to be the most effective against the guerrilla tactics of the Mujahedeen operating in the rugged Afghan terrain. Typically, the tactical operations of these units were the raid, blocking positions and search, and ambush. Since these formations executed the bulk of Soviet offensive operations, these formations often received the best weapons, equipment and training.

Soviet leadership placed a new emphasis on the firepower of their infantry formations. The older 7.62mm AK-47 rifle was replaced in many units by the new 5.44mm AK-74 rifle. The lighter weight of the new rifle and its ammunition proved to be better suited for operations in Afghanistan. Large numbers of light machine guns, AA guns, automatic grenade launchers, flamethrowers, sniper rifles, and mortars were also provided to the infantry units. The need for longer range, portable and lethal firepower was a key lesson learned by Soviet leadership. [22]

The Soviets required a large number of helicopters for their light infantry formations such as the Soviet air assault or special forces to be effective. Helicopters were essential in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan. They were used to attack enemy forces and equipment, gather intelligence, target artillery fire, insert assault troops, evacuate wounded, deliver supplies, and transfer weapons and equipment. Operating helicopter assets in Afghanistan however proved to be very difficult. Temperatures in Afghanistan can fluctuate from extremely hot in the summer to well below freezing in the winter and at high altitudes. Strong winds are often present, which can limit flying operations, and reduce visibility by creating dust storms. Combat operations were significantly affected at higher altitudes, where the lifting capacity of helicopters was reduced causing the aircraft requirements during an air assault in the mountains to double. [23] Although a recognized shortfall, "the Soviets never had enough helicopters in Afghanistan to meet their requirements." [24]

Surface to air missiles acquired by the Mujahedeen from covert U.S. weapons programs proved problematic for Soviet aviation operations. The introduction of more effective surface to air missiles including the Stinger in 1986 significantly affected Soviet air operations in Afghanistan. The Stinger, a U.S. made man-portable system, weighs 34 pounds, is 5 feet long, and has a maximum range of 5,800 meters and maximum altitude of 3,500 meters. Their use forced the Soviets to greatly increase attack air speed and stop spending time over target. Fighters and bombers were forced to increase attack height from 2,000-4,000 feet to around 10,000 feet. [25]

The Mujahedeen, despite not having received a great deal of training on the missile, were able to hit Soviet aircraft out to a distance of 4,800 meters and up to 2,000 meters in elevation.[26] The greater altitudes forced upon Soviet close air support aircraft due to the effectiveness of the Stingers significantly reduced the accuracy of their bombing. The added danger of flying over target areas thought to have Stingers as part of their air defense arsenal increased the threat to Soviet pilots. As a result, "Soviet pilots proved far less willing to fly as many missions or as demanding high-risk sorties".[27] The sharp decrease in the ability of fixed-wing aircraft to find and kill targets allowed the Mujahedeen to move through the country far more easily and restore their supply lines.

The main targets of the Mujahedeen were Soviet helicopters, which also proved to be vulnerable to the Stingers. This meant according to author and historian Lester Grau, "The Soviet Command had to severely limit the employment of helicopters, especially during daylight".[28] The forced changes in Soviet aviation tactics had profound effects on the battlefield. Helicopters were less effective in providing direct fire support as pilots reduced the amount of time over targets thought to have Stingers.

More than just combat missions were affected. Casualty evacuation, once predominantly executed by helicopters, was significantly reduced. A Soviet combatant remembered, "Until 1987 all of our wounded were evacuated by helicopter to the hospital in Kabul. The arrival of Stinger missiles put an end to our massive use of choppers. We were forced to cram the injured into armored carriers-fifteen in each one-and send them down the local roads to Kabul."[29] Certainly, the fear of being wounded and not having adequate casualty evacuation capability had a negative effect on the soldiers fighting on the ground.

The rugged terrain combined with the guerrilla tactics of the Mujahedeen called for the application of new methods of conducting offensive operations by the Soviets. "Combat showed that, as a rule, frontal attacks by Soviet and Afghan forces did not succeed."[30] Mujahedeen forces were able to retreat into the mountain passes when attacked. The Soviets were able to displace the Mujahedeen but unable in most cases to inflict significant casualties on the elusive guerilla fighters. Among the new methods tried by the Soviets was the cordon and search. The cordon and search was designed to trap the Mujahedeen in a valley between a main Soviet force and a tactical envelopment of the enemy by air assault forces. This combination action when conducted correctly prevented Mujahedeen from maneuvering or escaping into the mountains.[31] These cordon and search operations were however routinely unsuccessful as they were often compromised by Mujahedeen intelligence sources who warned of Soviet units departing base camps or the insertion of the blocking forces.[32]

The lack of a professional NCO corps represented a critical problem in the 40th army; especially an army fighting counter insurgency operations.[33] Soviet sergeants were conscripts who had to attend a six-month NCO course and Lieutenants were inexperienced having been recently commissioned. Counter insurgency, defined by the British as, "an NCO war", was directly opposed to the well know aspects of Soviet military doctrine, which discouraged independent action by junior officers.[34] At the tactical level, the Soviet small unit leaders were hard pressed to match the Mujahedeen. Soviet experience showed that success at the tactical level often involved small unit maneuver at night with the use of night vision goggles and applying discipline to achieve surprise.

Junior officers were in many cases negligent in maintaining discipline and morale within many of their units. Due to poor leadership, the 40th army suffered from a lack of discipline that resulted in low morale. Many soldiers suffered from depression and turned to abusing narcotics or alcohol. There was racism, theft and violent crime both within units and against the Afghan population. Many soldiers murdered civilians or destroyed villages in retaliation to an ambush or fallen comrade.

Throughout the Soviet war in Afghanistan, up to 33% of the personnel in the Soviet 40th Army were affected by an infectious disease every year. Of the 620,000 Soviets deployed to Afghanistan during the conflict, 415,932 or 67% were hospitalized for some kind of serious illness or disease. These illnesses included infectious hepatitis, typhoid fever, plague, malaria, cholera, diphtheria, meningitis, dysentery, heat stroke, and

pneumonia.[35] A great number of these casualties were directly related to poor hygiene, poor waste removal, or poor drinking water.

Active leadership by a professional Non-commissioned officer corps could have prevented many of the sources of disease. For example: Soviet troops were often forced or chose to drink from natural water sources or local wells. The quality of these sources in many cases was very poor and contained high bacteria levels, typhus, and amoebic dysentery.[36] To combat the spread of illnesses caused from drinking from local sources, the Soviets issued a pantocide water-purification tablet. These tablets were effective when used properly. However, soldiers in many cases failed to wait the required 30 minutes for the tablet to purify the water while others simply found the taste of the treated water to be repulsive and refused to use them.[37] Many of these casualties may have been prevented if small unit leaders had enforced discipline in their soldiers regarding such disciplines as field sanitation and drinking from approved water sources.

Providing adequate logistics support in Afghanistan was a constant problem for the 40th Army. The harsh climate and rugged terrain quickly wore out vehicles and equipment. Vehicle fuel systems, cooling systems, and road wheels were particularly susceptible to the harsh conditions. As a result, Soviet maintenance personnel were forced to accelerate scheduled maintenance and services on a variety of weapon systems and vehicles. Although the 40th Army had a Material support Brigade and separate tank, motor vehicle, and artillery repair battalions, it still "lacked sufficient maintenance personnel and facilities during the entire war." [38] The inadequate support resulted in poor readiness, poor maintenance procedures, unsafe repairs, cannibalization of repair parts and a tendency not to conserve the use of vehicles.[39]

Many Soviet units were stationed in remote locations or far from supply bases. Logistics units within the 40th Army were woefully lacking in their ability to supply the troops. As a result, combat units often had to endure significant supply shortages. In addition to fresh water, the most significant supply shortage was the shortage of fresh, perishable foods.[40]

The hot climate made it extremely difficult to provide fresh foods such as meats and vegetables, which require a refrigeration capability for storage and transport. Units were routinely supplied with a mixture of canned goods and food concentrates. Dry rations consisted of 200 grams of rusks, 250 grams of canned meat, 250 grams of canned fish, 30 grams of sugar, and four grams of fruit extract.[41] Hot meals were provided by the unit cooks when available but were often according to Grau, "a mixed blessing, since a primary source of infection was the cooks." [42]

The mountainous terrain combined with the dry desert climate created special conditions for Soviet soldiers who had to endure both exhausting heat during the day in lower altitudes and freezing temperatures at night in higher altitudes. Special uniform requires were needed in order to protect soldiers from the extreme weather conditions. The standard Soviet issue of uniforms and equipment was designed for the European theater and proved inadequate for operations in Afghanistan.[43]

The climate and terrain of Afghanistan demanded uniforms made from rugged, lightweight materials capable of protecting soldiers from the cold, wind, and moisture. The Soviets developed and issued special uniforms and accessories but the quantity and quality were insufficient. The Soviet issue sleeping bag for example did not provide enough warmth or protection from moisture. Pakistani or English sleeping bags were a highly prized find. As a result, Soviet soldiers were often exposed to the elements.

One of the most notable shortfalls was the issue of an acceptable mountain boot. The mountainous terrain destroyed the standard issue boots in a short period of time. Soviet soldiers improvised, utilizing alternative sources to acquire acceptable footwear. "All of us walk in virtually indestructible sneakers. They are far more reliable than even the best *Adidas*. Soldiers pay for them out of their own pockets; a pair costs 24 rubles in the commissary." [44]

The major lessons the Soviets learned during the war in Afghanistan were according to Cordesman and Wagner that, "It is virtually impossible to defeat a popular guerrilla army with secure sources of supply and a recovery area; it is extremely difficult-if not impossible –to use modern weapons technology to cut off a guerrilla force from food and other basic supplies; and the success of pacification techniques depends on the existence of a popular local government, and the techniques must be seen as the actions of the local government and not of foreign military forces." [45]

The Soviet leadership completely miscalculated the political and military situation in Afghanistan. They were unable to anticipate the anti-Soviet reaction that was generated in the United States and around the world. They failed to understand their enemy and the power Islamic Nationalism had on the will of the Afghani people to endure extreme hardships. They were unable or unwilling to prevent the Mujahedeen from operating from sanctuaries in Pakistan.

The 40th Army itself deployed into a theater of operations woefully unprepared for the war they had to fight. Constantly short of the required number and trained personnel, and adequate equipment, the 40th Army was forced to fight a limited war with limited objectives against an extremely resilient and capable guerrilla force. Over the years however, the Soviets did improve their tactics in conducting counter insurgency operations. They were able to introduce and test new weapons and new combat formations, and record many lessons learned regarding Soviet doctrine and leadership. In the end however, the Soviets failed to reach their political or military objectives in Afghanistan.

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