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THE SOVIET WAR IN AFGHANISTAN: HISTORY AND HARBINGER OF FUTURE WAR?

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One of the enduring lessons from "Desert Storm" is that a nation does not want to stand up against the precision-guided munitions and cruise missiles of the United States unless it has its own large supply of precision-guided munitions and cruise missiles, or, at the very least, an effective air defense. At present, the countries that have a large supply of high-tech weaponry are few and unlikely to go to war with the United States in the near future. Now, the only effective way for a technologically less-advanced country to fight a technologically-advanced country is through guerrilla war. Guerrilla war, a test of national will and the ability to endure, negates many of the advantages of technology. The guerrillas remained when the French left Algeria and Vietnam, the United States left South Vietnam, and the Soviets left Afghanistan. As U.S. forces deploy to areas of civil or ethnic strife such as Somalia, former Yugoslavia and Haiti, the potential for U.S. involvement in a guerrilla war grows. It is increasingly apparent that the more likely type of war that the United States may become involved in during the next twenty years is guerrilla war. The success of the technicals in Somalia and the paramilitary forces in Bosnia suggest that it is in the best interests of U.S. military professionals to review the lessons of the last guerrilla war in which a super power was involved. Afghanistan is both past and prologue.

Soviet military power meets the Afghan warrior society

Fifteen years after its commencement and five years after its cessation, the Soviet-Afghan War remains an enigma in the West. Earlier successful Soviet military interventions in the Ukraine (1945-1951), East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), and Czechoslovakia (1968) and intermittent Soviet military pressure on Poland demonstrated that the stark military power of the Soviet state was an irresistible tool of Soviet political power. The West was thankful that nuclear deterrence maintained the Cold War balance and reluctantly accepted Soviet intervention within its socialist commonwealth and in the Soviet border regions as one cost of that balance.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a repeat of their invasion of Czechoslovakia. For months after the invasion, hardly a political or military expert in the world doubted that Afghanistan was now forever incorporated as a part of the Soviet Empire and that nothing short of a large-scale global war could alter the status quo. And global war was most unlikely as both super powers intended to avoid it. Some Westerners recalled the British experiences in Afghanistan and waited for a Soviet "Vietnam" to emerge, but most Westerners believed that the Soviets would ultimately prevail. Some even projected their European fears to southern Asia and envisioned a bold Soviet strategic thrust from southern Afghanistan to the shores of the Persian Gulf, to challenge Western strategic interests and disrupt Western access to critical Middle Eastern oil.

The initial active resistance by the Afghan military was confined to a short battle against the Soviet Spetsnaz ¹ unit storming the Presidential Palace. However, the stunned citizens of this geographically isolated land immediately rose to defend their land. In defiance of the wisdom of conventional warfare, the citizens armed themselves, gathered into loose formations and began to attack and sabotage the superior occupying force's personnel, installations, depots and transport with any available weapons (to include flintlock muskets). Open resistance flared so quickly that only two months after the invasion, (on the night of 23 February 1980) almost the entire population of Kabul climbed on their rooftops and chanted with one voice "God is Great". This open defiance of the Russian generals who could physically destroy their city was matched throughout the countryside. The Afghan warrior society sent thousands of warriors against their northern invader.

Entry into the Maze

Communist power was established in Afghanistan on 27 April 1978 through a bloody military coup. President Nur M. Taraki, the new president, announced sweeping programs of land distribution, emancipation of women and the destruction of the old Afghanistan social structure. The new government enjoyed little popular support. The wobbly new government was immediately challenged by armed resistance fighters. The Army of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan began to disintegrate as bloody purges swept the officer ranks. In March 1979, the city of Herat rose in open revolt. Most of the Afghan 17th Infantry Division mutinied and joined the rebellion. Forces loyal to Taraki advanced and occupied the city while the Afghan Air Force bombed the city and the 17th Division. Over 5,000 people died in the fighting, including some 100 Soviet citizens. This event may have lead the Soviet General Staff to start intervention planning. ²

Soldiers, units and entire brigades deserted to the resistance and by the end of 1979, the Afghan Army had fallen from about 90,000 to about 40,000. Over half the officer corps were purged, executed or had deserted. In September 1979, Taraki's Prime Minister, Hafizullah Amin, seized power and executed Taraki. Amin's rule was no better and the Soviet Union watched this new communist state spin out of control and out of Moscow's orbit. The Soviet Politburo moved to stabilize the situation.

The Soviet Union had significant experience with stability operations to maintain its socialist empire. Their experiences in subjugating the Hungarian revolution of 1956 (where they suffered 669 KIA, 51 MIA and 1540 WIA) led to improved methods and techniques. In the 1968 invasion

of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Army lost a total of 96 killed.³ The elements of their invasion plan included the establishment of an in-country Soviet military and KGB element to assist the invasion force and the production of a cover or deception operation to divert attention away from the future invasion. A General Staff group would tour the country in advance of the invasion, under some pretense, in order to assess and fine-tune invasion plans. When the invasion began, the in-country Soviet military and KGB element would disarm or disable the national military forces. Airborne and Spetsnaz forces would spearhead the invasion and seize major airfields, transportation choke points, the capital city, key government buildings, and communications facilities. They would seize or execute the key government leaders. Soviet ground forces would cross into the country, seize the major cities and road networks, suppress any local military resistance, and occupy the key population centers. A new government would then be installed, supported by the armed might of the Soviet Armed Forces.

This invasion plan was also used in Afghanistan. Soviet military and KGB advisers permeated the structure of the Afghanistan Armed Forces. In April 1979, General of the Army Aleksiy A. Yepishev, the head of the Main Political Directorate, led a delegation of several generals in a visit to Afghanistan to assess the situation. General Yepishev made a similar visit to Czechoslovakia prior to the 1968 invasion. In August 1979, General of the Army Ivan G. Pavlovski, CINC Soviet Ground Forces, led a group of some 60 officers on a several-weeks-long reconnaissance tour of Afghanistan. General Pavlovski commanded the invasion force in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The invasion of Afghanistan was launched on Christmas eve, not a major Muslim holiday, but a time when the Western governments were not prepared to react. Soviet advisers disabled equipment, blocked arms rooms and prevented a coordinated Afghan military response. Soviet airborne and Spetsnaz forces seized the Salang tunnel, key airfields, and key government and communications sites in Kabul. Soviet Spetsnaz soldiers killed President Amin. The Soviet ground invasion force crossed into the country, fought with a few pockets of Afghan military resistance and occupied the main cities while the Soviet government installed their Afghan puppet regime.

The Soviets expected the resistance to end here, but it had only begun. The ability to rationalize an intolerable situation that pervades the West did not hold in the mountains of Afghanistan. The Afghans' values, faith and love of freedom enabled them to hold out against a superpower, even though they suffered tremendous casualties in doing so.

How did the Soviets get it so wrong? The Russian Empire studied the area and maneuvered against the British over Afghanistan in "the great game" of the last century. The Soviet Union had diplomatic ties with Afghanistan since 1919 and extensive bilateral trade contacts since the 1930s. Soviet economic and military advisers had been a constant feature in Afghanistan since 1950. The Soviets built much of Afghanistan's road network (including the Salang tunnel) and airfields. The Soviet General Staff must have been quite knowledgeable about the geography, economy, sociology and military forces of Afghanistan. Yet, their force commitment, initially assessed as requiring several months, lasted ten years and required increasing numbers of Soviet forces. It proved a bloody experience in which the Soviet Union reportedly killed 1.3 million people and forced five and a half million Afghans (a third of the prewar population) to leave the country as refugees. Another two million Afghans were forced to migrate within the country. Today, the countryside is ravaged and littered with mines. On a percentage basis, the Soviet

Union inflicted more suffering on Afghanistan than Germany inflicted on the Soviet Union during World War II.

The Soviet concept for military occupation of Afghanistan was based on the following:

- stabilizing the country by garrisoning the main routes, major cities, airbases and logistics sites;
- relieving the Afghan government forces of garrison duties and pushing them into the countryside to battle the resistance;
- providing logistic, air, artillery and intelligence support to the Afghan forces;
- providing minimum interface between the Soviet occupation forces and the local populace;
- accepting minimal Soviet casualties; and,
- strengthening the Afghan forces, so once the resistance was defeated, the Soviet Army could be withdrawn.

War-fighting Soviet style

The initial strategic concept, operations plans and tactical methods used by the Soviet military in Afghanistan did not markedly differ from what they-or any strong, modern army-would have undertaken anywhere else in the world. Massive firepower delivered from fixed-winged aircraft, helicopters, artillery, rocket launchers and tanks preceded all advances. Tanks and armored vehicles would cautiously start moving only after their commanders were convinced that no functioning enemy weapons remained in the zone of advance. The Soviet force would then overrun the contested area, firing indiscriminately at any moving object or even just into the air until they were satisfied that their mission was achieved. Initially, the Soviets considered close combat by dismounted infantry and mopping up actions superfluous since they felt that the huge expenditure of heavy artillery and rocket shells combined with the bombing and strafing by their fighter bombers had either destroyed their hungry, naive and miserably-equipped opponents or panicked them into permanent exile in Pakistan or Iran. In fact, the Afghan freedom fighter came from a traditional warrior society and proved highly resourceful in fighting the Soviets. They saw no point in remaining under aerial and artillery barrages or in facing overwhelming odds and firepower. They were adept at temporarily withdrawing from Soviet strike areas and then returning in hours, days or weeks to strike the enemy where he was exposed. Over time, the mujahideen morale grew, and they became better equipped with modern weapons taken from the demoralized Afghan Army soldiers or acquired from across the national border.

The harsh and inhospitable land and the deadly treatment that the Soviets received from the people in towns and countryside gradually effected the Soviet soldiers' psyche, and the indoctrination they had been subject to during their training soon melted away as they increasingly faced the grim realities of the real war. They realized that they were not fighting this brutal war against the imperialists of America and China, but they were set to destroy a poor but proud nation which was only defending their faith, freedom and way of life.

Several stark realities place the Afghan War in proper perspective and permit its proper assessment in the context of Soviet military, political, and social development. First, although violent and destructive, the war was limited and protracted. Its tempo and decisiveness did not match that of the series of short Arab-Israeli wars which scarred the Cold War years. It lacked

the well-defined, large-scale military operations of the Korean War and the well-defined political arrangements that terminated that war. It also differed significantly from the oft-compared US war in Vietnam. In Vietnam, American military strength rose to over 500,000 troops and the Americans resorted to many divisional and multi-divisional operations. By comparison, in Afghanistan, a region five times the size of Vietnam, Soviet strength varied from 90-104,000 troops. The Soviet's four divisions, five separate brigades and three separate regiments, and smaller support units of 40th Army strained to provide security for the 29 provincial centers and few industrial and economic installations and were hard-pressed to extend this security to the thousands of villages, hundred of miles of communications routes, and key terrain features that punctuated and spanned that vast region.

Second, faced with this imposing security challenge, and burdened with a military doctrine, strategy, and operational and tactical techniques suited to a European or Chinese theater of war, the Soviet Army was hard pressed to devise military methodologies suited to deal with the Afghan guerrillas. The Soviets first formulated new concepts for waging war in non-linear fashion, suited to operating on battlefields dominated by more lethal high-precision weapons. This new non-linear battlefield required the abandonment of traditional operational and tactical formations, a redefinition of traditional echelonment concepts, and a wholesale reorganization of formations and units to emphasize combat flexibility and, hence, survivability. During the early and mid-1980s, the Soviet military altered its concept of the theater-strategic offensive, developed new concepts for shallower echelonment at all levels, developed the concept of the air echelon, experimented with new force structures such as the corps, brigade, and combined arms battalion, tested new more-flexible logistical support concepts (for materiel support), and adopted such innovative tactical techniques as the use of the *bronegrupp*a [armored group].⁴

Afghanistan not only provided a test bed for many of these lower-level concepts, but it also demanded the employment of imaginative new techniques in its own right. Hence, the brigade, the materiel support battalion, and the *bronegrupp*a emerged on the Afghan field of battle, Spetsnaz units sharpened their skills, and air assault techniques were widely employed.

Third, the inability of the Soviet military to win the war decisively condemned it to suffer a slow bloodletting, in a process that exposed the very weaknesses of the military as well as the Soviet political structure and society. The employment of a draft army with full periodic rotation of troops back to the Soviet Union permitted the travails and frustrations of war and the self doubts of the common soldier to be shared by the entire Soviet population. The problems so apparent in the wartime army soon became a microcosm for the latent problems afflicting Soviet society in general. The messages of doubt were military, political, ethnic, and social. In the end they were corrosive and destructive. One needs only review the recently released casualty figures to underscore the pervasiveness of the problem. Soviet dead and missing in Afghanistan amounted to almost 15,000 troops, a modest percent of the 642,000 Soviets who served during the ten-year war. Far more telling were the 469,685 other casualties, fully 73 percent of the overall force, who were wounded or incapacitated by serious illness. Some 415,932 troops fell victim to disease, of which 115,308 suffered from infectious hepatitis and 31,080 from typhoid fever. Beyond the sheer magnitude of these numbers is what these figures say about Soviet military hygiene and the conditions surrounding troop life. These numbers are unheard of in modern armies and modern medicine and their social impact among the returnees and the Soviet population was staggering.

The Armed Forces of the Soviet Union were structured, equipped and trained for nuclear and high-intensity war on the great northern European plain. However, their political leadership thrust them into the middle of the Afghanistan civil war to reconstitute and to support a nominally Marxist-Leninist government. The terrain, the climate and the enemy were entirely different from what they had prepared for. In this locale, their equipment functioned less than optimally, their force structure was clearly inappropriate and their tactics were obviously wrong. The citizens of the Soviet Union did not understand why their sons were being conscripted for battle in a strange land and failed to see how their sacrifices contributed to the security of the fatherland. Those with connections sought to avoid the draft. Unlike their fathers who fought the Nazi invaders, the returning soldiers were not welcomed as heroes or treated with respect. They were shunned and often scorned by their fellow citizens. A gap opened between the Armed Forces and the citizenry and many veterans found they could not fit back into the lifestyle of the complacent and self-centered citizenry. The effects of the Afghanistan war reverberate throughout Russia today.

The Afghan war was fought under four general secretaries-Brezhnev, Chernenko, Andropov and Gorbachev. Many senior Soviet military officers want to blame the Afghanistan debacle solely on the Soviet political leadership, yet, there were high-ranking military accomplices who carried out Politburo directives without protest. And, although many in the West view Gorbachev as a liberal democrat and point out that he ordered the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the bloodiest years of fighting in Afghanistan (1985-1986) were under his leadership. Ideologically, the Soviet leadership was unable to come to grips with war in Afghanistan. Marxist-Leninist dogma did not allow for a "war of national liberation" where people would fight against a Marxist regime. So, initially the press carried pictures of happy Soviet soldiers building orphanages--and did not mention that they were also engaged in combat and filling those very orphanages. By the end of 1983, the Soviet press had only reported six dead and wounded soldiers, although by that time, the 40th Army had suffered 6,262 dead and 9,880 combat wounded. Soviet solutions for Afghanistan were postponed, as one general secretary after another weakened and died and the military waited for a healthy general secretary who could make a decision. It was only during the last three years of the war, under Gorbachev's glasnost policy, that the press began to report more accurately on the Afghanistan war.

The Soviets managed to control the press throughout the war. All journalists allowed contact with the Soviet forces were accredited by communist news agencies and reported only what they were told to report. Thus, the war grew to serious proportions before the average Soviet citizen realized that Soviet troops were actually involved in daily combat. The mujahideen were inadequately covered either by uninvolved reporters in Pakistan or by a few, hardy journalists who made the dangerous, months-long trek into Afghanistan to cover the war. Western reporting always lacked immediacy, graphic impact and continuous coverage. The war in Afghanistan was virtually ignored when compared to other wars in Chad, Iran-Iraq, the Falkland Islands and Lebanon. Inaccessibility and Soviet control prevented the press from carrying the war into the homes of the world's citizenry.

The Soviet combat experience

There are some striking parallels between the Soviet role in Afghanistan and the United States' role in Vietnam. Like the United States, the Soviets had to restructure and retrain their force while in the combat zone. Eventually, military schools and training areas began to incorporate Afghanistan combat experience and to train personnel for Afghanistan duty. Mountain warfare training centers sprang up in many districts. However, unlike in the United States Army, the Afghanistan war was not an all-encompassing experience for the officer corps. Barely ten percent of the Soviet motorized rifle, armor, aviation and artillery officers served in Afghanistan. However, a majority of airborne, air assault and Spetsnaz officers served in-country.

The Soviets were slow in adopting new tactics to the realities of the rugged terrain and rugged enemy. When the Soviets finally realized the importance of dismounting conventional motorized rifle troops for close combat and mopping-up, it was too late. The troops and even their officers were reluctant to leave the relative safety of their armored carriers and preferred to use artillery and air strikes instead of close combat. They had lost the willingness to combat a rugged enemy that would not quit. The pressure of an unpopular, lengthy, expensive war had transformed many tough, stubborn and ruthless Soviet soldiers into liabilities whose sole hope was to survive and go home.

General Nawroz once watched the return of a Soviet motorized column from a day's combat. It's mission was to open a highway for traffic and destroy the enemy blocking it. The Soviets acted like conquerors as they passed by General Nawroz's hiding place. Officers stood inside the turrets of the tanks, firing machineguns in the air and to the sides. One would have thought they had vanquished their enemies for ever. Disabled tanks and trucks were towed, carefully camouflaged, inside the column. When General Nawroz reached the site of the highway battle, he saw swarms of very young, cheerful freedom fighters running to the highway from all directions, armed only with rifles, a few AK47s and a couple of rocket launchers. They were collecting the meager spoils of the combat that had just taken place. The vain-glorious return of the Soviet column was in fact a rout.

Not all Soviet soldiers avoided their duty. Many Soviet soldiers fought valiantly throughout the entire war. In particular, soldiers in Spetsnaz, airborne, air assault, and mountain rifle units, as well as those in separate motorized rifle brigades continually sought to close with the freedom fighters in close combat. But, these forces were accustomed to fighting outside of their armored vehicles and had not developed the "mobile bunker" mentality.

Soviet tactics and equipment were designed solely to operate within the context of a theater war against a modern enemy who would obligingly occupy continuous defensive positions. The Soviet Army planned to contend with this defensive belt by physically obliterating hectares of defensive positions through the weight of massed artillery fires and then driving through the subsequent gap to strike deep and pursue the shattered foe. Future war was seen as a lethal, high tempo event where forces and firepower were carefully choreographed. Consequently, Soviet tactics were simple. They were designed to be implemented rapidly by conscripts and reservists and not to get in the way of the unfolding operation. Spacing between vehicles and the ability to dismount a personnel carrier, form a squad line and provide suppressive small-arms fire were prized components of motorized rifle tactics. Tactical initiative was not encouraged as it tended to upset operational timing.

The mujahideen did not accommodate the Soviet Army by fighting conventional war. They refused to dig in and wait for Soviet artillery. The Soviets found that massed artillery and simple battle drills had little effect on the elusive guerrillas. Tactics had to be reworked on site. Air-ground coordination, artillery adjustment and coordination among maneuver units was often poor and required constant "quick-fixes" throughout the war. The most tactical innovation was seen among the airborne, air assault and Spetsnaz forces and the two separate motorized rifle brigades. These forces did the best in counterinsurgency battle. Far less innovation was apparent among the motorized rifle regiments. Tanks were of limited value in this war, but helicopters were a tremendous asset. Engineers were always in demand.

Even in the initial stages of the conflict when the guerrillas had little experience, the Soviets failed to win most of their engagements. Without the helicopter gunship, the Soviets may have withdrawn years earlier. Its firepower and mobility and initial invulnerability put the guerrillas on the defensive. The Soviets used helicopters extensively and ruthlessly against the unprotected guerrillas. But like all innovations in war, this advantage also did not last long. The guerrillas adapted. They fought at night when the helicopter was least effective. Guerrilla intelligence discovered the time and location of planned Soviet attacks and set up air defense ambushes and dug protective bunkers. The guerrillas received newer and more powerful weapons which they used against the helicopters. Finally, the guerrillas received the Stinger shoulder-launched air defense missile—a very effective weapon against low flying aircraft. The masterful employment of Stinger by the Afghan freedom fighters heavily tilted the balance in favor of the mujahideen. Even the extensive Soviet use of their airpower that was stationed across the northern border could not change the situation. The sophisticated, high-flying planes and helicopters from the Turkistan Military District flew a large number of missions against Afghan freedom fighters, but the guerrillas were winning.

Westerners often decry the youth and inexperience of Soviet soldiers and NCOs, but the guerrillas found that the training standard of the Soviet soldier, especially the ethnic Russian, was comparatively high. Some of the POWs that General Nawroz came in contact with showed good technical knowledge and practical skill. But these qualities were not properly used in Afghanistan due to adverse psychological and environmental conditions.

The Afghanistan War forced the 40th Army to change tactics, equipment, training and force structure. However, despite these changes, the Soviet Army never had enough forces in Afghanistan to win. Initially, the Soviets had underestimated the strength of their enemy. Logistically, they were hard-pressed to maintain a larger force and, even if they could have tripled the size of their force, they probably would still have been unable to win. Often, they could not assemble an entire regiment for combat and had to cobble together forces from various units to create a make-shift regiment. Base-camp, airfield, city and lines of communication (LOC) security tied up most of the motorized rifle forces, but still, the mujahideen constantly interdicted the road and pipelines supplying the Soviet and Afghan forces. The Soviets were never able to completely control their LOCs, although their forces were performing an important international mission. Consequently, they were never able to consistently transport sufficient supplies into the country to support a larger force. The guerrilla mastery of the roads strangled the Soviet efforts. Soviet equipment losses included 118 jets, 333 helicopters, 147 tanks, 1314 armored personnel carriers, 433 artillery pieces or mortars, 1138 communications or CP vehicles,

510 engineering vehicles and 11,369 trucks. Many of these losses were on the highways, and a key loss was the large amount of cargo-carrying trucks. The Soviets were still able to field large formations for operations in the Pandshir valley and other locales, and were still able to launch local offensives with overwhelming local superiority, but it required extraordinary efforts to do so.

On paper, the 40th Army looked to be in good shape, but it was unable to maintain adequate personnel strength in its line units. Regiments were often at single battalion strength, battalions at single company strength and companies at single platoon strength. First priority on personnel replacement always went to filling the driver, gunner and vehicle commander slots for the unit combat vehicles. This left a few, reluctant personnel available to dismount and fight the resistance. As noted, disease cut into units' present-for-duty-strength as poor field sanitation practices and poor diet contributed to the spread of disease. From 1/4 to 1/3 of a unit's strength was often sick with hepatitis, typhus, malaria, amoebic dysentery, and meningitis. From October through November 1981, the entire 5th Motorized Rifle Division was combat ineffective since over 3,000 of the divisions personnel were sick with hepatitis. ⁵ Units were filled twice a year from the spring and fall draft call-ups. Conscripts sent to the Turkestan Military District had six months to a year's training before going to Afghanistan for the rest of their service. Further, military districts and Groups of Forces were levied for troops twice annually. These levies were quite large. Yet, the unit field strengths remained appallingly low. The Soviets learned, like the Americans in Vietnam, that units need to be filled well in excess of 100% (in some regions of the world) if one hopes to field and maintain a reasonable fighting force. The 40th Army was chronically short of resources to carry out its mission and was an embarrassing reminder to its political masters of their political hubris and miscalculations which pushed this army into the inhospitable mountains of Afghanistan, where it could not be properly supplied and maintained.

Soviet tactical innovations:

The Soviet Ground Forces developed the bronegruppa concept to use the firepower of the personnel carriers in an independent reserve once the motorized rifle soldiers had dismounted. It was a bold step, for commanders of mechanized forces dislike separating their dismounted infantry from their carriers. However, terrain often dictated that the BMPs, BMDs and BTRs could not follow or support their squads. The bronegruppa concept gave the commander a potent, maneuverable reserve which could attack independently on the flanks, block expected enemy routes of withdrawal, serve as a mobile fire platform to reinforce elements in contact, serve as a battle taxi to pick-up forces (which had infiltrated or air-landed earlier and had finished their mission), perform patrols, serve in an economy-of-force role in both the offense and defense, and provide convoy escort and security functions.

The Soviet Ground Forces adopted bounding overwatch for their mounted ground forces. One combat vehicle, or a group of combat vehicles, would occupy dominant terrain to cover another vehicle or groups of vehicles as they would advance. The advancing group would then stop on subsequent dominant terrain to cover the forward deployment of their covering group. When dismounted, however, the Soviet motorized rifle units normally placed some crew-served weapons in overwatch positions, but did not usually bring them forward periodically to cover the advance. Reconnaissance forces, however, used bounding overwatch when dismounted.

Air assault tactics and helicopter gunship tactics changed and improved steadily throughout the war. However, the Soviet never brought in enough helicopters and air assault forces to perform all the necessary missions and often squandered these resources on unnecessary missions. Helicopter support should have been part of every convoy escort, but this was not always the case. Dominant terrain along convoy routes should have been routinely seized and held by air assault forces, yet this seldom occurred. Soviet airborne and air assault forces were often the most successful Soviet forces in closing with the resistance, yet airborne and air assault forces were usually understrength. Air assault forces were often quite effective when used in support of a mechanized ground attack. Heliborne detachments would land deep in the rear and flanks of mujahideen strongholds to isolate them, destroy bases, cut LOCs and block routes of withdrawal. The ground force would advance to link up with the heliborne forces. Usually, the heliborne force would not go deeper than supporting artillery range or would take its own artillery with it. However, the Soviets sometimes inserted heliborne troops beyond the range of supporting artillery and harvested the consequences. And, although the combination of heliborne and mechanized forces worked well at the battalion and brigade level, the Soviet preference for large scale operations often got in the way of tactical efficiency. Ten, large, conventional offensives involving heliborne and mechanized forces swept the Pandshir Valley with no lasting result.

Enveloping detachments (obkhodiashchii otriad) were used frequently in Afghanistan. Battalion or company-sized forces were split off from the main body and sent on a separate route to the flank or rear of the mujahideen to support the advance of the main body, perform a separate mission, prevent the withdrawal of mujahideen forces, or conduct a simultaneous attack from one or more unexpected directions. If the enveloping detachment was dismounted, it was usually composed of airborne, air assault or reconnaissance forces. If the enveloping detachment was mounted, it was frequently just the unit's bronegruppa.

In general, ground reconnaissance personnel were better trained and better quality soldiers than the average motorized rifle soldier. But, they appear to be used for more active combat than reconnaissance duties. The mujahideen did a better job of reconnaissance than the Soviets. Their country-wide net of observers and messengers maintained constant observation of Soviet forces. The Soviets relied primarily on aerial reconnaissance, radio intercept, and agent reconnaissance for their intelligence production. Quite often, these reconnaissance sources failed to produce usable tactical intelligence. However, since the ground forces were always critically short of combat elements, reconnaissance forces were used for active combat. Why the Soviets failed to bring in more combat troops to free their reconnaissance troops for their primary mission remains a mystery. Consequently, the Soviets often failed to find the mujahideen unless the mujahideen wanted them to.

Soviet equipment:

Many new systems were field tested and introduced during the Afghanistan war, but most had been designed and tested prior to the war. The most notable of these were the BMP-2, the BTR-80, the vasilek 82 mm automatic mortar, the self-propelled mortar, the AGS-17, the BM-22 MRLS, the Mi-8T helicopter, the Su-25 ground support aircraft and the ASU-74 assault rifle. Tanks were present, but were not too useful in mountain warfare. Consequently, the newest tanks

did not fight in Afghanistan and the T-64 was the most modern tank tested there. Several models of the Mi-24 helicopter gunship were introduced during the war.

The concept of the motorized rifle force was a marriage of soldiers and armored personnel carriers. The soldier was never supposed to be more than 200 meters from his carrier. His load-bearing equipment, uniform, weaponry, and other field gear reflected this orientation. Yet, Afghanistan was a light-infantryman's war--and the Soviets had very little light infantry. In general, the Soviet ground soldier remained tied to his personnel carrier and to the equipment which was designed to be carried by that personnel carrier. Consequently, the standard flak jacket weighed 16 kilograms (35 pounds). This was acceptable when dismounting a carrier and assaulting for less than a kilometer. However, a dismounted advance of three kilometers in flak jackets would stall due to troop exhaustion. The reconnaissance flak jacket was lighter and better, but in short supply.

The Soviet field uniform was inappropriate for Afghanistan. It was restrictive and uncomfortable. The camouflage pattern was designed for northern Europe, not the high mountains. Soviet boots were noisy and unsuited for climbing in mountains. When possible, commanders put their soldiers in tennis shoes.

Most Soviet load-bearing equipment and rucksacks were not designed for continuous field use outside of an armored personnel carrier. The technology was from the 1950s. Some modern rucksacks, boots, ice axes, and load bearing equipment were issued to mountain rifle battalions and SPETSNAZ, but it was in short supply.

The Soviet sleeping bag was made of cotton and was not waterproof. When it rained, which it did in the mountains, the sleeping bag soaked up water and gained several pounds in weight. It is hard to stay warm in this bag. The premier trophy for a Soviet soldier was a mujahideen sleeping bag from the West. They were lightweight, waterproof and warm.

Dry rations (field rations) were also a problem. They were unpalatable and consisted of a series of shiny tin cans which reflected sunlight. Digging garbage pits in the mountains was difficult and the Soviet soldier usually just threw his empty cans around his fighting or ambush position. This aided mujahideen reconnaissance. The heat tabs for heating rations frequently crumbled or were not available.

The Soviet emphasis on massed firepower instead of accuracy meant that the dismounted soldier carried a lot more ammunition than his Western counterpart would. Further, heavy crew-served weapons always accompanied the dismounted force. The 12.7 mm heavy machine gun weighs 34 kg (75 pounds) without its tripod and ammunition. The AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher weighs 30.4 kg (66 pounds) and each loaded ammunition drum weighs 14.7 kg (32 pounds). Dismounted Soviet soldiers were less agile and could not catch up with the Afghan guerrillas.

Experimental systems were developed during the war. The AGS-17 was mounted on trucks and BTRs. Various ordnance racks were developed for helicopter gunships. New mine-clearing gear, mine plows and mine rollers were tried with varying success. Dogs were trained to detect mines and guerrillas. The Soviets developed a new helmet which provided better protection.

Soviet force structure:

The Soviets experimented with several force structures during the Afghanistan war. They constituted self-sustaining separate motorized rifle brigades and separate motorized rifle battalions for independent actions. They formed mountain rifle battalions. They experimented with combined-arms battalions and motorized rifle companies with four line platoons. All of this was done to come up with an optimum troop mix for counterinsurgency and independent actions. Materiel support brigades and battalions were formed to provide more effective support to the combat units. Airborne, air assault and SPETSNAZ forces were refitted with roomier BTRs and BMPs instead of their BMDs. Forces were up-gunned with extra machine guns, AGS-17 and mortars. The Soviets used these new formations as a test bed and the post-Afghanistan force structure for the Russian Army currently envisions a mix of corps and brigades for maneuver war and non-linear combat and divisions and regiments for conventional, ground-gaining combat.

Morale:

During the war, draft-age Soviet youth increasingly tried to avoid the draft and Afghanistan duty. Large bribes were paid to exempt or safeguard the children of the privileged. A disproportionate number of youth from factories and collective farms served in Afghanistan. The conscript's morale was not great when he was drafted. At the training centers, they were told that they were going to fight Chinese and American mercenaries. When they got to Afghanistan for their eighteen-month tour, they soon discovered that they were unwelcome occupiers in a hostile land. Morale further plummeted at this realization. As in other armies, the field soldiers were too busy to get into much trouble, but those soldiers in the rear with routine supply, maintenance and security duties had too much time on their hands. Many conscripts developed a narcotics habit in Afghanistan. They financed their habit by selling equipment, ammunition and weapons. Many turned to violent crime. Soviet soldiers robbed merchants and passersby. At Soviet checkpoints, the soldiers would search Afghan civilians' luggage for weapons. Routinely, those Afghans carrying large amounts of money were "sent to Kabul". Being sent to Kabul meant isolating the civilian and his luggage behind a wall and out of sight of the checkpoint. There, the soldiers would kill the civilian and take his money.

Officer's morale also suffered. Although an officer got four years service credit toward his pension for his two-year Afghanistan tour, he saw that the officer corps had been given an impossible task and would be the scapegoat for its failure. There was constant tension within the officer corps at base camps as they vied for the affections of the female PX cashiers, nurses and secretaries. Afghanistan service saw the rebirth of the Soviet World War II tradition of the field wife. But, with a shortage of women, competition was fierce and sometimes violent among the officers. Vodka was the officers' drug of choice and some quarrels were settled with grenades and small arms.

In the field, villages were razed and the occupants murdered in retaliation for ambushes or suspected aid to the guerrillas. Some of these seem to have been officially sanctioned while others appear to have resulted from a break-down in discipline. Clearly, the guerrilla's morale overmatched the Soviets.

Lessons learned

Modern, mechanized forces are still in peril when committed to fight guerrillas in the middle of a civil war on rugged terrain. The Soviet-Afghanistan war demonstrated that:

1. A guerrilla war is not a war of technology versus peasantry. Rather, it is a contest of endurance and national will. The side with the greatest moral commitment (ideological, religious or patriotic) will hold the ground at the end of the conflict. Battlefield victory can be almost irrelevant, since victory is often determined by morale, obstinacy and survival.
2. Secure logistics and secure lines of communication are essential for the guerrilla and non-guerrilla force. Security missions, however, can tie up most of a conventional force.
3. Weapons systems, field gear, communications equipment and transport which are designed for conventional war will often work less effectively or fail completely on rugged terrain.
4. Tactics for conventional war will not work against guerrillas. Forces need to be reequipped, restructured and retrained for fighting guerrillas or for fighting as guerrillas. The most effective combatants are light infantry.
5. Tanks have a limited utility for the counter-guerrilla force, but can serve as an effective reserve on the right terrain. Infantry fighting vehicles and helicopters can play an important role in mobility and fire support. Mechanized forces usually fight effectively only when dismounted and when using their carriers for support or as a maneuver reserve. Ample engineer troops are essential for both side.
6. Field sanitation, immunization and preventive medicine are of paramount importance in less-than-optimal sanitary conditions. Immediate medical support to wounded combatants is often hard to provide.
7. Journalists and television cameramen are key players in guerrilla warfare. The successful struggle can be effectively aided when championed by a significant portion of the world's press.
8. Logistics determines the scope of activity and size of force either side can field.
9. Unity of command is very important, yet sometimes impossible to achieve.
10. Domination of the air is irrelevant unless airpower can be precisely targetted. Seizure of terrain can be advantageous, but is usually only of temporary value. Control of the cities can be a plus, but can also prove a detriment. Support of the population is essential for the winning side.

And in the end:

According to General Nawroz, the Afghan-Soviet War was a rare confrontation in history as it helped trigger the collapse of the greatest empire of modern times. Lessons learned from this conflict were gathered by both sides. Whatever else these lessons may show, the most fundamental of them is that no army, however sophisticated, well trained, materially rich, numerically overwhelming and ruthless, can succeed on the battlefield if it is not psychologically fit and motivated for the fight. The force, however destitute in material advantages and numbers, which can rely on the moral qualities of a strong faith, stubborn determination, individualism and

unending patience will always be the winner. These may not be the optimum qualities always found in the armies of western democracies.

Endnotes:

1. Spetsnaz are "forces of special designation" or special troops and can include a variety of branches and jobs. In Afghanistan, the highly-trained, hardened Spetsnaz were commandos who performed long-range reconnaissance, close combat and special forces functions. [BACK](#)

2. Very few endnotes are included in this report since General Nawroz is a primary source and LTC Grau has extracted his material from his own book *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Tactics and Tactical Lessons Learned During Their War in Afghanistan*. [BACK](#)

3. G. F. Krivosheev (editor), *Grif sekretnocti snyat: Poteri Vooruzhennykh Sil SSSR b voynakh, boevykh deystviyakh i voennykh konfliktakh* [Removing the secret seal: Casualty figures of the Armed Forces of the USSR in war, combat action and military conflicts], Moscow: Voenizdat, 1993, 397-398. [BACK](#)

4. The bronegruppa is a temporary grouping of four-five tanks, BMPs or BTRs-or any combination of such vehicles. The BMPs(tracked combat vehicles) or BTRs (wheeled combat vehicles) are deployed without their normally assigned infantry squad on board and fight away from their dismounted troops. The grouping has a significant direct-fire capability and serves as a maneuver reserve. [BACK](#)

5. Boris Gromov, *Ogranichenny kontingent* [Limited contingent], Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1994, 275. [BACK](#)