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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.

THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR: ANOTHER LOOK



by
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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature Mark S. Caren

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17 June 1994

Paper directed by CAPT D. WATSON, USN
Chairman, Department of Military Operations

94-25877



3188

DTIC QUALITY INSPECTED 1

94 8 16 067

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION UNCLASSIFIED		1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS	
2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY		3. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY OF REPORT DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED	
2b. DECLASSIFICATION / DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE		5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)	
4. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)		7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION	
6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT	6b. OFFICE SYMBOL (if applicable) C	7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)	
6c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code) NAVAL WAR COLLEGE NEWPORT, R.I. 02841		9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER	
8a. NAME OF FUNDING / SPONSORING ORGANIZATION	8b. OFFICE SYMBOL (if applicable)	10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS	
8c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)		PROGRAM ELEMENT NO.	PROJECT NO.
		TASK NO.	WORK UNIT ACCESSION NO.
11. TITLE (Include Security Classification) THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR: ANOTHER LOOK (U)			
12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S) CAREN, M.S., CDR, USN			
13a. TYPE OF REPORT FINAL	13b. TIME COVERED FROM _____ TO _____	14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day) 940617	15. PAGE COUNT 30
16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Operations. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.			
17. COSATI CODES		18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)	
FIELD	GROUP	SURPRISE, OPERATIONAL MANEUVER, CHEMICAL AND MINE WARFARE	
19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)			
<p>This research effort reviews the Soviet military's involvement in Afghanistan from 4 general perspectives: (1) systemic problems in Soviet military culture, (2) the use of surprise, (3) operational maneuver and preeminence of aviation and (4) employment of mines and chemical weapons, as an extension of maneuver warfare. This paper concludes that the lessons of this war have been learned by the Russians. There is every reason to believe that they can achieve the level of Doctrinal changes required to be successful in future "local" interventions. It must be accompanied, however, by corresponding socio-military reform.</p>			
20. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT. <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS		21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION <i>Unclass</i>	
22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL CHAIRMAN, OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT		22b. TELEPHONE (Include Area Code) 841-3414	22c. OFFICE SYMBOL C

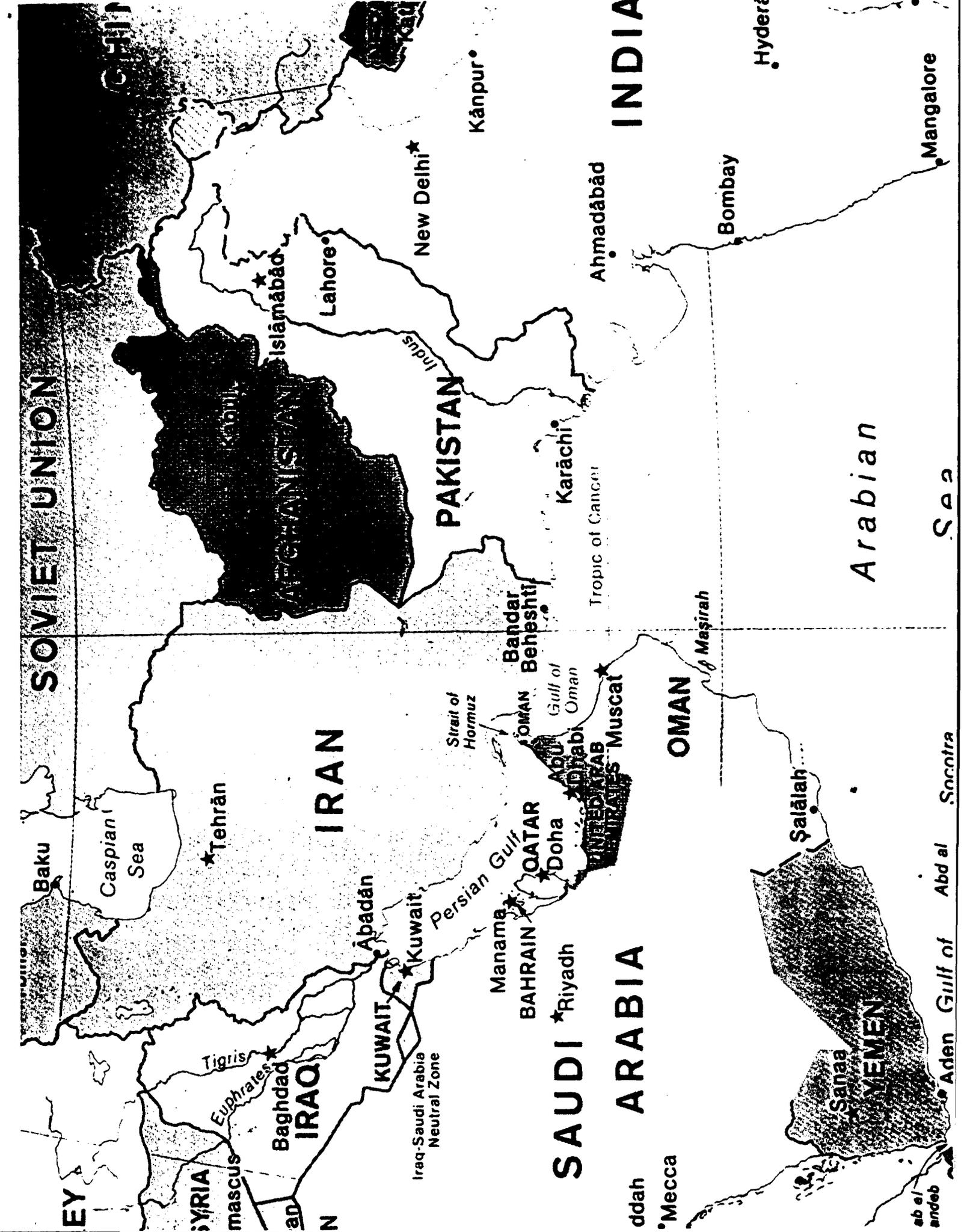
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ABSTRACT

This research effort reviews the Soviet military's involvement in Afghanistan from four general perspectives: (1) systemic problems inherent in the Soviet military culture, (2) the use of surprise, (3) operational maneuver and the preeminence of aviation and (4) employment of mines and chemical weapons as an extension of maneuver warfare. This paper concludes that the lessons of this war have been learned by the Russians. There is every reason to believe that they can achieve the level of doctrinal changes required to be successful in future "local" interventions. It must be accompanied, however, by corresponding socio-military reform.

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SOVIET UNION

CHINA

INDIA

SYRIA
Damascus

IRAQ
Baghdad

IRAN
Tehran

KUWAIT
Kuwait

Iraq-Saudi Arabia
Neutral Zone

BAHRAIN
Manama

SAUDI ARABIA
Riyadh

YEMEN
Sanaa

Mecca

OMAN
Muscat

Persian Gulf

Strait of Hormuz

OMAN
Gulf of Oman

Bandar Beheshti

Karachi

Tropic of Cancer

Ahmadabad

Bombay

Hyderabad

Mangalore

Arabian Sea

Aden

Gulf of

Abd al

Socotra

THE SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR: ANOTHER LOOK

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet involvement in Afghanistan can be considered to be the initial event of Communism's final steps -- a path chosen which would ultimately lead to the repudiation of communism and the dissolution of the United Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This eight year war underscored the failure of Soviet foreign policy and exposed the illegitimacy of the Brezhnev doctrine.¹ It also highlighted the incompetence and corruption of its senior military leaders and political leadership. Finally, it revealed the inability of the Soviet's command economy to absorb the war's extreme financial consequence.

With the Russian military now holding the "trump card" in the delicate political maneuvering (and legitimacy) of Boris Yeltsin and his opposition, their influence upon domestic political stability and future foreign policy will continue to grow.

In the aftermath of the dissolution of the USSR a disturbing trend of ethnic violence and regional instability has emerged in the area comprising the former Soviet Union. The new independent republics faced with real freedom for the first time, find

¹ Anthony Arnold, Afghanistan, the Soviet Invasion in Perspective (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1985), p.133. The Brezhnev Doctrine is an ideological trademark attributed to the late General Secretary which codifies the Soviet obligation to defend socialism, by force of arms if necessary, anywhere in the world that it is threatened.

themselves trying desperately to reach consensus on issues of national identity and ethnic makeup and the legitimacy of geographical borders -- with little success. Meanwhile Russia has steadily increased its involvement and military support in most of the former Soviet republics -- areas from Georgia to Kazakhstan -- essentially making their help indispensable to the recipient. As Russia seeks to establish stability in the "near abroad" the potential for armed intervention beyond its borders increases. In this event the experiences and lessons learned from the Afghan war may be more critical than we would otherwise like to believe.

Although the Soviet's experience in Afghanistan closely parallels our own in Vietnam, this research effort has avoided comparative analysis and concentrated solely on areas that defined, in broad operational terms, the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. Specifically the Soviet's use of surprise, particularly during the invasion itself, heliborne assault and maneuver and excursions into use of chemical weapons and mines will be examined. Equally important is the need to amplify on the link between Soviet military culture -- the "human factor" -- and overall operational performance. Without this examination of the human side, the foundation for understanding and assessing future Russian military capabilities would be flawed.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December 1979 was launched on the heels of intense diplomatic maneuvering and Soviet foreign policy reassessment caused by domestic upheaval within Afghanistan. Although the internal struggle in Afghanistan existed primarily as a fight between bitter political rivals (the Parchamis and Khalqs), Moscow was reasonably assured that communist rule there was secure. This security began to evaporate quickly in September 1979, when the head of the Afghan government, Mohammed Nur Taraki, a favorite in Moscow, was first removed from power and then assassinated by Taraki's deputy and successor, Hafizullah Amin. Although clearly pro-communist in nature, Amin's (and Taraki's) policies had alienated the Afghan people and influenced the establishment of fierce resistance elements (the Mujaheddin). Amin's increasingly repressive actions and growing personal divide with Moscow quickly brought him unwanted attention.

In its most basic form, the Soviet invasion which inevitably followed, was meant to replace a "disintegrating and recalcitrant regime with a pliable one and provide a shield and breathing space behind and during which the Afghan army could turn things around."²

It is generally believed that Moscow began to consider military intervention months in advance of the actual invasion.

² Stephen J. Blank, Afghanistan and Beyond: Reflections on the Future of Warfare, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 28 June 1993), p.3.

General Alexei Epishev, the head of the Main Political Administration of the Soviet Armed Forces made an inspection tour of Afghanistan in the spring of 1979, followed by General Ivan Pavloskii, commander-in-chief of Soviet Ground Forces and deputy minister of defense. Pavloskii's arrival in the late summer was significant in that he had made a similar trip, in exactly the same capacity, immediately prior to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.³

With Pavloskii's departure in October 1979; his planning and inspection complete, Moscow was ready to proceed. On Christmas Eve 1979, Soviet troops crossed the border into Afghanistan. What followed was an intense propaganda campaign meant to discredit "the West" (in one instance the Soviets accused Amin of being a CIA operative) while attempting to provide legitimacy to Soviet actions. This attempt ultimately failed and was subsequently met with overwhelming international disapproval.

There was general expectation among the Soviet political and military hierarchy that the invasion would merely be a repeat of the 1968 crushing of Czechoslovakia. It was assumed that there would be a swift transfer of power followed by some sort of limited occupation force. But almost immediately guerilla attacks began and by the end of January major civil unrest had erupted in many areas including key urban areas. In retrospect, the Soviets had totally underestimated the tenacity and warrior fierceness of the

³ Thomas T. Hammond, Red Flag Over Afghanistan, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), p. 97.

Mujaheddin -- descendants of Genghis Khan. What they got for their trouble was a full blown counter-guerilla war.⁴

⁴ Mark Urban, War in Afghanistan, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 41.

CHAPTER III

SOVIET MILITARY CULTURE

To adequately assess the Soviet soldier's performance during the Afghan war it is helpful to examine, in broad terms, the socio-military context in which they operated. Too often when we assess the capabilities of the Soviet (and now Russian) armed forces, we tend unconsciously to give more weight to those factors that can be easily and objectively determined (troop strengths, number of armored personnel carriers etc.). Factors more subjective in nature (morale, unit cohesion etc.) tend to be overlooked and given limited press.⁵ The "human factor" -- the ability and willingness of the individual and his unit to fight in combat -- is difficult to assess but has no less relevance, particularly for the Soviet soldier in Afghanistan.

In assessing the systemic problems present in Soviet military culture during this period, key areas that should be considered are: the lack of a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) corps, hazing, and issues associated with multi-ethnic integration and employment.

NCO CORPS

The Soviet military, and its Russian counterpart since, uses a system of forced conscription to fill its ranks. The typical tour length is two years for the Army and three for the Navy. There

⁵ Howard T. Prince, The Human Factor in the Soviet Armed Forces: Leadership, Cohesion and Effectiveness, Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 15 February 1990, p.1.

is no career non-commissioned officer (NCO) corps that would be comparable to those found in many Western armies -- the NCO corps is usually developed out of the entering group of new conscripts and are given only basic leadership training from which to prepare them for their duties.⁶ "There are other NCO's on extended duty but their numbers are relatively small and by no means make for a career force on the scale found in many Western armies."⁷ The consequence of this situation combined with the problem of high personnel turnover encourages by default a process where tasks typically associated with a well filled NCO corps are forced to be performed by junior officers (who in many respects can be equally inexperienced). Operationally, the loss of a functional NCO corps manifests itself in the lack of combat initiative and flexibility. In counterinsurgency operations the need for agility, swiftness of maneuver and independence of action make this deficiency critical. In Afghanistan, repeated attempts to adopt flexible and independent tactics never materialized and subsequently the ability to exploit tactical surprise at that level was wasted. Additionally NCO's and junior officers not only suffered from inadequate training and competence, they were often barred from developing these qualities by the way headquarters' rigidly planned offensives.⁸

⁶ Ibid., p.12.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Blank, Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan, 1979-90, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, September 1991), p. 72.

ETHNIC INTEGRATION

One of the most severe challenges the Soviet military faced in this period is the integration of diverse ethnic backgrounds into its armed forces. With over 100 different ethnic groups and an almost equal number of languages to deal with, the task of assimilation of these groups into the military had been a daunting and not altogether successful task. It has been estimated that approximately 15-20% of the enlisted conscripts lacked fluency in Russian. Typically this problem was overcome through a careful assignment program which essentially segregated ethnic minorities from their Russian speaking Slav counterparts. "Typically the overwhelming majority of these ethnic minorities (Soviet Central Asians in the Afghan experience) who serve in the Soviet armed forces are carefully and purposefully segregated into non-combat construction units; those few who are conscripted to combat units usually serve in support roles."⁹

In Afghanistan, in departure from previous Soviet policy, a significant number of recruits of multi-ethnic backgrounds from the bordering republics of the USSR were used, at least as part of the initial invasion force. "The use of Soviet non-Russian soldiers in situations where these soldiers have ethnic, linguistic, cultural or religious ties to the population under attack apparently is a

⁹ Alex Alexiev and S. Enders Wimbush, Soviet Central Asian Soldiers in Afghanistan, N-1634/1 (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1981), p. 10. The Soviet Central Asian republics border Afghanistan to the north and include Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kirgiziya and Tadzhikistan.

departure from established Soviet political-military practice."¹⁰

One source quoted in the Los Angeles Times concluded that the invading force was almost 90% Soviet Central Asian recruits. Although there is disagreement with this estimate, whatever the magnitude, the facts still point to considerable reliance on these non-Russian conscripts during the early phase of the operation. Contrary to the belief that their use was a departure from policy, use of ethnic minorities in this capacity more likely reflects an underestimation by Soviet leadership, of the level of resistance expected in Afghanistan. More practically, the Soviets may have assumed that they could use these ethnically mixed troops to mitigate the expected hostility of the Afghan national resistance. With similar languages and looks, it was believed they could "win over" the opposition.¹¹ As it turned out, the policy backfired.

There is no evidence to indicate that the Afghans found the invasion any more palatable just because some of the Soviet soldiers were ethnic and religious brothers. Furthermore the fraternization appears to have worked against the USSR, rather than for it, resulting in sympathy for the Afghans among Soviet soldiers rather than sympathy for the Soviet Union among Afghans.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

¹¹ Ibid., p.16.

¹² Hammond, p. 101.

HAZING

Of consequence as well, is the hazing of new conscripts and ethnic minorities. Unlike the good-natured harassment evident in our own armed forces this level of persecution can border on personal violence and abuse.

They are almost universally subjected to severe treatment as new members of their units although "hazing" and "hooliganism" are a matter of official concern. New soldiers are often beaten and have their new military clothing and individual equipment taken from them by older members of their unit. New soldiers even have to give their food to older soldiers in some cases.¹³

The net impact of this practice, as wide spread as it is, can force a division of a unit into "new guys" and "old hands" - an element with dire consequences: deterioration of unit morale and cohesion. Viewing the full scope of the life of a conscript, it is not difficult then to understand the reluctance for them to stay beyond their designated tour length.

As a postscript, one needs to recognize the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan as a full scale tragedy, not only for the Afghan's but in a perverse and ironic way, the Soviets. In Afghanistan the general breakdown of good order and discipline was manifested in Soviet soldiers engaging in black marketeering, looting, robberies, rape, murder and drug use. It is even claimed that the Mujaheddin had bought arms from Soviet soldiers on the black market, or stole their guns after getting them high on

¹³ Alexiev and Wimbush, p.13.

hashish.¹⁴ At the other extreme, it is important to appreciate the loss of prestige and respect of such a proud group as the Soviet Army and to recognize as well the degree of personal tragedy left in its wake. For instance, in 1989, 85 officers were reported to have been killed by civilians and over another four year period 15,000 conscripts are said to have died in service.¹⁵

¹⁴ Hammond, p.162.

¹⁵ Blank, Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan: 1979-90, p. 3.

CHAPTER IV

SURPRISE AND THE SOVIET INVASION

From an operational perspective, the use of surprise employed by the Soviets in the opening round of the Afghan conflict was an unqualified success. The invasion combined deception and trickery with the use of high quality airborne and Spetznaz (Special Forces) troops to effectively disarm disloyal Afghan army elements, neutralize key command, control and intelligence (C3I) facilities and secure major air and ground transportation nodes. The use of Maskirovka (deception) was particularly effective. To ensure that the Afghan armed forces would be unable to attack Soviet transport planes when they unloaded their troops, Soviet advisors collected batteries from Afghan tanks, saying they had to be winterized; tank and anti-tank ammunition was called in for inventory and communications equipment sabotaged.¹⁵ As Soviet advisors streamed into the country, stories were fabricated to give an air of legitimacy and normalcy to their presence and to "anesthetize" the Afghan resistance. Special Forces personnel added to the deception by passing themselves off as communications or maintenance technicians; complete with appropriate insignia. The time chosen (Christmas Eve) for the commencement of the invasion added to the magnitude of the surprise achieved -- catching the entire U.S. military and political branches unaware. Although U.S.

¹⁵ Thomas T. Hammond, Red Flag Over Afghanistan, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), p. 99.

intelligence services had noticed considerable Soviet military activity north of Afghanistan, enough contradictory information (some from East-Bloc diplomats) was present to delay and effectively undermine its use. By the time they saw elements of five and a half divisions the Soviets had already begun their penetration of Afghanistan.¹⁶

By the commencement of hostilities on the 24th of December 1979, the Soviets already had a significant number of personnel in country; waiting further orders. The Afghan government, clearly unaware of the buildup going on under their noses either disregarded what they saw or interpreted it as business as usual. The operation began with the seizure of key political targets (Ministry of the Interior and Khalq loyalists) in the capital of Kabul by a reinforced Air Assault Division, subsequently reinforced by two additional regiments of paratroops. One of several key C3I targets assigned, the paratroops assumed control of Radio Kabul almost immediately. They were joined by Spetznaz forces who closed in on the palace and in a violent shootout with the palace guard, killed Amin and members of his family. Rounding out the force were four motorized rifle divisions which sealed off roads and lines of communication into and out of Kabul.¹⁷

Despite the Soviet's initial success, follow on operations

¹⁶ Stephen J. Blank, Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan, 1979-1990, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, September 1991), p. 31. and Thomas T. Hammond, Red Flag over Afghanistan, p. 99.

¹⁷ Mark Urban, War in Afghanistan, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1990), pp. 42-46.

reflect an Army "out of its element" -- doctrinally unprepared to fight a counter-insurgent war.¹⁸



Crashed Soviet helicopter is captured by insurgents. The gunships terrify rebels but are accident-prone in thin air of Afghanistan's mountains.

¹⁸ David Ray Johnson, Soviet Counterinsurgency, (Monterey, CA: Naval Post Graduate School, June 1990) p. 73.

CHAPTER V

OPERATIONAL MANEUVER

At the war's outset the Soviets were convinced that once Kabul had fallen and Babrak Karmal (the Soviet's hand chosen successor) had assumed the Afghan leadership, Mujaheddin resistance would dissolve. That they should feel this way was not surprising, after all the interventions in Hungary and Czechoslovakia were testimony to Soviet military efficiency. This misunderstanding of the real nature of the war, however, forced them on a costly road, in both financial and human terms.

As was mentioned earlier, air assault divisions played significantly in the initial efforts to take down the Afghan government. Follow on operations, however, settled into a conventional strategy of occupying the cities, maintaining strict control over major road networks and establishing government strongholds and logistics staging areas. Soviet forces sought to engage the enemy by means of conventional armored columns employing traditional artillery to prepare the battlefield. Because of the inflexible nature of the tactics, these sweeps were quite standardized in preparation and execution, and in turn forfeited surprise to the Mujaheddin. This approach highlighted the deficiency of Soviet training, at least at the tactical and operational commander levels, where drills associated with the traditional large set piece European theater armored sweeps were conducted without consideration for those small scale operations

needed in a low intensity conflict like Afghanistan.¹⁹ Armored and heavy mechanized forces were therefore confronted by an enemy and by terrain for which they had not been adequately trained. Instead they found a tactical situation where an illusive and lightly armed enemy melted into difficult mountainous terrain when confronted with superior force and reemerged to strike at isolated units and logistic convoys.²⁰

It soon became apparent that in order to maintain even a minimum degree of flexibility and maneuver the Soviet military would need to adopt methods that would provide that capability. Slowly they introduced tactics and methods of operational maneuver utilizing the increased mobility of aviation assets, particularly helicopters, to match that of their opponent while in turn, exploiting tactical use of surprise.

Aerial platforms, fixed and rotary wing, became the main conveyors of both fire and mobility for offensive operations, while the regular general purpose forces mainly conducted static defense behind expanded fortifications and mine networks to protect key installations, cities and roads.²¹

Despite the operational advantages to such employment, the Soviets never did accomplish the level of success they had hoped.

¹⁹ Blank, Afghanistan and Beyond: Reflections on the Future of Warfare, p. 11.

²⁰ John D. Frketic, Soviet Actions in Afghanistan and Initiative at the Tactical Level: Are there Implications for the U.S. Army?, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army Command and General Staff College, 1988), p.15.

²¹ Blank, Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan, 1979-90, p.73.

Their effectiveness was undermined by severe mountainous terrain, mechanical failures, inadequate pilot training and to a great extent, introduction of the Stinger missile (1986).

The Soviets further refined the use of the "air arm" in maneuver operations by developing a "combined arms rifle battalion" (CARB) which integrated to a much greater degree, the air and ground assets under the battalion commander's authority. Because they were given greater independence in the missions they performed and furnished with more capable assets, command and control (C2) subsequently improved. "The effort to create such flexible multipurpose forces capable of conducting air and ground operations and able to act independently through a more decentralized and flexible command and control is one of the most significant outcomes of Afghanistan."²² Changes in force structure as a result of this shift in focus became inevitable. Over time, Soviet tanks went from some 1000 in 1980 to about 300 in 1981 while helicopters rose from 60 to 300.²³

²² Ibid., p.77.

²³ Ibid., p.73.

CHAPTER VI

CHEMICAL AND MINE WARFARE

CHEMICAL WARFARE

During the opening stages of the Afghan War multiple reports surfaced which documented the extensive use of chemical weapons against the Afghans. Although confirmation of the use of these agents was difficult, the sheer number of reports (47 cases in the two year period 1979-81) corroborates what everyone knew -- that the Soviets had chosen to undertake an extensive and dedicated campaign of chemical warfare against the Afghan populace. Although the Mujaheddin were considered the primary focus, it appears that the Soviets had no reservations about its use on others. This point -- the indiscriminate use of chemicals against the general population -- underscores more than any other, the bankruptcy of soviet counterinsurgent doctrine. Had the Soviets employed one, they may have recognized the critical importance of winning over the populace. Without this sensitivity, the Soviets condemned themselves to a commitment in a long and costly conflict.

From eyewitness reports we can now piece together how the Soviets integrated chemical use into the doctrine of maneuver warfare. Initially it seems, the Soviets employed chemical agents, typically air-dropped, only after a conventional attack was deemed unsuccessful. After withdrawing, the Soviets would dispense chemicals, typically by air -- although other means have been documented, wait approximately 30 minutes and reattack. Over time

the Soviet tactics matured to the point that chemicals were dispersed in advance of mobile units, and following the proper waiting time, entry into the affected area could be accomplished. A further refinement appears to be the tactic of bombing with napalm to eliminate any trace of the chemicals.²⁴

A disturbing postscript to the Soviets use of chemicals has been the apparent exploitation of the war to conduct further chemical experimentation. "Detailed survey and monitoring operations following some of the strikes showed that the Soviets were obviously interested in studying the after-effects, lethality, or some other quasi-experimental aspect of a new chemical weapon."²⁵

The Soviet use of chemical weapons stopped abruptly in 1983. Whether this was a result of increased international scrutiny is a matter of conjecture -- it more likely reflects the difficulty in employment and the impact of its use upon their own troops.

As we look to the future, it may be important to remember the huge investment the Soviet Union and now Russia has made in the field of chemical and biological weapons. More threatening is the proliferation of these weapons, if not by physical means then by transfer of technology, to countries who may have even less compunction to use them.

²⁴ Reports of the Use of Chemical Weapons in Afghanistan, Laos and Kampuchea. Supplement, p. 1,12.

²⁵ Collins, p.148, quoted from Chemical Warfare in South Asia and Afghanistan, p.23.

MINE WARFARE

Mines were used extensively by both sides during this conflict. The Mujaheddin used Chinese plastic mines and any others they could acquire, and employed them only after being introduced to them, however violently, on the battlefield. The Soviet "butterfly" mines were the most troublesome -- dispensed by helicopters or by artillery, they tended to blend in well with the terrain and were designed to maim, not kill.²⁶ Especially distressing was the insidious method in which they were packaged. Soviet plastic mines disguised as toys targeted Afghan children with predictable results. The Soviets in some perverse way may have viewed this development as a force multiplier, after all it managed to remove the victim of the blast as well as those who would be needed to transport the victim to an area with medical facilities. This in no small part contributed to the Soviets policy of "migratory genocide".

This indiscriminate application of violence produced further enmity within the Afghan populace and reinforced the Mujaheddin's commitment to continue the struggle. At this point the Soviets had completely undermined their cause and made their ideological crusade a joke.

²⁶ Richard J. Dick, Afghanistan: Eight Years Later, (Quantico, VA: U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College, May 1987), p. 44.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

As we survey the international landscape in the post-cold war era, it is distressing to bring attention to the level of violence and disintegration appearing throughout the world. Although a negative assessment, it nonetheless gives credibility and impetus to those who seek to discover lessons from previous conflicts which in turn may provide tools to understand the next. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan has the potential to provide this focus.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that the Russian Republic, as the successor to the Soviet Union, is poised to reassert itself in the areas she considers the "near abroad". In an ironic twist, several independent republics have reestablished their reliance on Russia and repudiated democratic reform. Out of sight behind the diplomatic scene, the Russian military has quietly assumed ever increasing importance and influence. Russian military intervention outside her borders, either to reestablish the army's lost prestige or as a means to distract the masses from the problems at home, is becoming increasingly plausible.

The primary lessons to be gleaned from the Soviet-Afghan war particularly in the context of conducting another low-intensity conflict are: (1) that the Russians will modify current counter-insurgency doctrine to reflect Western theory, (2) that they understand the nature of maneuver warfare including the need for decentralized C2 and independent action, (3) that they will further

develop air assault forces and associated doctrine, (4) that they recognize the need for initial surprise with the coincident application of overwhelming force to accomplish the strategic objective and (5) that they fully understand the ramifications (both positive and negative) of employing chemical weapons.

Given the increasing position of the Russian military the potential for them to accomplish the changes from a doctrinal perspective are good. The difficulty, however, will stem from the ability of the soldier to utilize the new doctrine, particularly in view of the systemic problems inherent in current Soviet military culture. Without reform here, all the intermediate effort is wasted.

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