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This manuscript analyzes the failure of Soviet air and ground forces to defeat the Afghan mujahideen during the nine-year Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. In pursuit of this objective, Soviet military strategy underwent a process of increasing radicalization that eventually resulted in a sanctioned policy of terror by Soviet air and land forces. During this period, airpower played a critical role in this campaign of terror by providing the platforms for punitive bombardment, chemical attack, aerial mining, troop insertion, and fire support. The ability of a relatively ill-equipped and technologically inferior opponent to force the eventual withdrawal of one of the world's most vaunted military powers has broader implications for contemporary political and military leaders. Soviet military operations against the mujahideen in Afghanistan, from December 1979 until the withdrawal of the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in February 1989, provide an instructive case study for evaluating the efficacy of airpower as an instrument of coercion. The Afghanistan example offers an excellent historical case for measuring the inherent limitations of airpower as a coercive instrument in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations.

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THE LIMITS OF SOVIET AIRPOWER:
THE BEAR VERSUS THE MUJAHIDEEN IN AFGHANISTAN, 1979-1989

BY

EDWARD B. WESTERMANN

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About the Author

Major Edward B. Westermann graduated from the United States Air Force Academy in 1984. He is a senior pilot with over 1400 hours in TH-1F, HH-1H, UH-1N, and UH-1D helicopters. As a combat rescue aircraft commander, he flew missions in support of the Vice President's anti-drug task force in the Bahamas. He has served as an exchange instructor pilot with the German Air Force. Major Westermann was also an instructor and assistant professor of history at the United States Air Force Academy. He is a Fulbright-Hays Fellow and a distinguished graduate of the United States Air Force Academy, the Defense Language Institute, and Air Command and Staff College. In July 1997, Major Westermann was assigned to AFIT. He is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in military history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

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Abstract

This manuscript analyzes the failure of Soviet air and ground forces to defeat the Afghan mujahideen during the nine-year Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. In pursuit of this objective, Soviet military strategy underwent a process of increasing radicalization that eventually resulted in a sanctioned policy of terror by Soviet air and land forces. During this period, airpower played a critical role in this campaign of terror by providing the platforms for punitive bombardment, chemical attack, aerial mining, troop insertion, and fire support. The ability of a relatively ill-equipped and technologically inferior opponent to force the eventual withdrawal of one of the world's most vaunted military powers has broader implications for contemporary political and military leaders. Soviet military operations against the mujahideen in Afghanistan, from December 1979 until the withdrawal of the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in February 1989, provide an instructive case study for evaluating the efficacy of airpower as an instrument of coercion. The Afghanistan example offers an excellent historical case for measuring the inherent limitations of airpower as a coercive instrument in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations.

Contents

	<i>Page</i>
DISCLAIMER.....	II
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	III
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	IV
ABSTRACT.....	V
INTRODUCTION.....	1
THE ROAD TO INTERVENTION, 1978-1979.....	9
THE ROAD TO ESCALATION, 1980.....	22
OF BASMACHI AND MUJAHIDEEN, 1981-1983.....	39
AIR ASSAULT COMES TO AFGHANISTAN, 1984-1985.....	57
THE PRELUDE TO WITHDRAWAL, 1986.....	70
MUJAHIDEEN ASCENDANT, 1987-1989.....	85
CONCLUSION.....	98
Airpower as Force Substitute.....	99
Soviet Lessons Learned.....	100
The Failure of Punishment.....	101
The Failure of Denial.....	104
The Punitive Denial Paradigm.....	108
Victory: Attainable or Illusory?.....	110
Afghanistan: Implications for USAF Planners.....	113
Final Observations.....	116
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	121

Chapter 1

Introduction

The power to hurt--the sheer unacquisitive, unproductive power to destroy things that somebody treasures, to inflict pain and grief—is a kind of bargaining power, not easy to use but used often.

Thomas C. Schelling
Arms and Influence

Thomas Schelling's admonition concerning the power to hurt encapsulates the concept of coercion in its basest form. Schelling's words also form an appropriate epitaph for Soviet military operations in Afghanistan from December 1979 until February 1989. The nine-year occupation of Afghanistan included the employment of the full spectrum of Soviet conventional weapons and a diverse range of their chemical weapons inventory in an attempt to defeat the mujahideen (Afghan freedom fighters). In pursuit of this objective, Soviet military strategy underwent a process of increasing radicalization that eventually resulted in a sanctioned policy of terror by Soviet air and land forces. During this period, airpower played a critical role in this campaign of terror by providing the platforms for punitive bombardment, chemical attack, aerial mining, troop insertion, and fire support. Soviet strategy underwent a relatively rapid and fundamental transformation in the early stages of the occupation due to the failure of the Russian-trained and supplied Afghan Army to eliminate the growing Muslim insurgency. Soviet operational planners quickly embraced airpower as a punitive instrument with which to

bludgeon the insurgents as well as the Afghan populace. During the entire period of the Russian occupation, airpower constituted the single most important means for separating the mujahideen from the population while attempting to coerce the insurgents into abandoning their fight.

Before examining the efficacy of Soviet coercive airpower in Afghanistan, however, it is first necessary to define clearly the concept of coercion as used in this work. In its broadest form, coercion involves an attempt to influence the actions of another state or non-state actor through positive inducements and/or negative sanctions.¹ The use of either positive inducements or negative sanctions includes the combined employment of the diplomatic, economic, and military instruments of a state's power. In effect, coercion occurs when one succeeds in changing the cost-benefit or risk calculus of an adversary by either "inducing inaction" (deterrence) or "making one's adversary perform" (compellence).² The 'primary actor,' the 'mechanism,' and the 'target' constitute the fundamental elements involved in the coercive process. This work focuses on the Soviets (the actor) and their employment of military force (the mechanism) during their nine-year battle with the Afghan mujahideen (the target).

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan provides an instructive case study for examining the impact and effect of airpower in an insurgency environment. The ability of a relatively ill-equipped and technologically inferior opponent to force the eventual withdrawal of one of the world's most vaunted military powers has broader implications for contemporary political and military leaders. The Israeli historian Martin van Creveld argues that the end of the cold war and the American victory against Iraq may signal the end of the conventional war paradigm.³ Whether the nature of war will change from

largely conventional to irregular warfare is still unclear. The success of American airpower in the Gulf War, however, led some to embrace it as the panacea for contemporary conflict resolution.⁴ The apparent effective use of airpower in Bosnia may strengthen this perception in the minds of policymakers and military professionals. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan, however, provides a caution to this view, and clearly indicates some of the limits of airpower as a successful coercive instrument in the insurgency environment.

Political scientist Robert Pape, in his work *Bombing to Win*, separates coercion into two fundamental types: “coercion by punishment” and “coercion by denial.”⁵ Pape defines the former as an attempt to raise “costs or risks to civilian population,” while the latter encompasses the use of “military means to prevent the target from attaining its political objectives or territorial goals.”⁶ The “punishment” and “denial” paradigms offer an instructive framework for examining the Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan. It is important to note, however, that Pape’s typology oversimplifies military strategy by artificially bifurcating military operations into punishment or denial. The nature of insurgency warfare compounds this problem by blurring the lines between combatants and civilians. In fact, Soviet military operations in Afghanistan demonstrate the complex interaction and interrelationship between actions that are in one respect punitive, but, at the same time, of clear military value. Therefore, this work uses the term “punishment” to identify actions designed for the primary purpose of inducing terror, suffering, or dislocation within the civilian or predominantly noncombatant population. Obviously, the noncombatant population may be sympathetic to the goals of the insurgency and even may provide a modest level of support. In this case, attacks directed at civilians also

constitute an indirect method for targeting the military capabilities of the insurgency. Likewise, Pape uses the term “denial” to characterize military operations aimed primarily at combatants or the vital infrastructure that supports insurgent operations. For example, the high altitude bombardment of large urban areas constitutes an indiscriminate instrument for punishing the noncombatant population. On the other hand, the interdiction of insurgent caravans carrying food and arms from Pakistan into Afghanistan clearly constituted an operation directly aimed at denying the combatant forces their sources of support.

Soviet actions in Afghanistan suggest, however, the possibility of the existence of a third paradigm, which can be described as “punitive denial.” Punitive-denial operations are activities which employ punitive measures to achieve denial objectives. For example, the burning of a farmer’s crop to drive the population out of a village has aspects of both punishment and denial, but it is an action primarily aimed at achieving denial objectives. Indeed, the Soviet campaign to create a *cordon sanitaire* along the border with Pakistan relied on the mechanism of depopulation through aerial and artillery bombardment, aerial mining, and chemical weapons employment. These punitive instruments were intended to achieve Soviet denial objectives by separating the mujahideen from sources of popular support. In contrast with Pape’s binary model for either punishment or denial, the concept of punitive denial offers a more sophisticated model for examining Soviet and DRA military operations against the insurgents.

Soviet military operations against the mujahideen in Afghanistan, from December 1979 until the withdrawal of the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in February 1989, provide an instructive case study for evaluating the efficacy of airpower as an instrument

for coercion. The Afghanistan example offers an excellent historical case for measuring the inherent limitations of airpower as a coercive instrument in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations. The ultimate failure of Soviet arms to achieve the Politburo's political objectives resulted from a number of factors, including the inability of the Soviets to assess correctly the nature of the insurgency, their inability to isolate the mujahideen from their sources of supply, and the lackluster support provided by the military forces of their Afghan ally. The Soviet failure is all the more striking due to the unrestricted nature of the means they employed in the attempt to compel the mujahideen to do their will. During the nine-year occupation, the Soviets embarked upon a military campaign centering on the use of airpower as *a*, if not *the*, primary instrument with which to eradicate the growing Muslim insurgency and cow the indigenous population in a deliberate campaign of terror.

The Soviet use of airpower as a punitive instrument in a systematic campaign of terror is intriguing, if not extraordinary, based on their traditional use of the air force in combat operations in World War II. Kenneth Whiting described the Red Air Force in World War II "as a tactical air force, operating in close coordination with artillery, mechanized units, and tank armies as a combined arms team."⁷ The primary missions for the Red Air Force during the Second World War included the conduct of air strikes, the support of tank armies, and the interdiction of enemy reserves and retreating forces.⁸

The importance of the Soviet experience in World War II and its impact on the doctrinal development of both the Soviet Air Force (VVS) and the Soviet Army in the postwar period cannot be overestimated. In fact, the Russian airpower historian Von Hardesty argued that "Today, the epic conflict with Nazi Germany remains a powerful

conditioning and limiting factor on the developments of the Soviet Air Force. . . . As recently as the mid-1970s, VVS Commander P. Kutakhov pointed to the Great Patriotic War as a mighty reservoir of strategic wisdom, particularly for air commanders dealing with the application of air power in the contemporary context.”⁹ Paradoxically, the operations of the VVS in Afghanistan not only reflected the lessons learned by the Red Air Force between 1941 and 1945, but also demonstrated the reemergence of an even earlier historical legacy--the use of aerial terror attacks.

Afghanistan was not the first example of a Soviet strategy aimed at punishing a noncombatant population through the employment of airpower. In fact, the historical experience of the Red Air Force included a campaign in the 1930s against the Basmachi tribesmen of Central Asia involving the aerial spraying of Yperite (mustard gas).¹⁰ The precedent established by the use of mustard gas against the Basmachi tribesmen would again find expression in the actions of the Soviet Air Force in Afghanistan almost five decades later. The operations of the VVS in Afghanistan would, however, demonstrate the institutionalized and routine use of airpower as a weapon for coercion through both punishment and denial.

RAND’s Soviet analyst Benjamin Lambeth provides the clearest description of VVS doctrine in the period prior to the invasion of Afghanistan. He states that “In traditional Soviet military doctrine, the army-dominated General Staff subordinated air power to a secondary role as a supporting element in a combined-arms approach to war fought and won mainly by massive infantry and armored forces.”¹¹ The wearing of the green Soviet army uniform by members of the VVS was symbolic of the *de facto* subordinate role of the VVS with respect to the Soviet army.¹² It was the experience of World War II and not

the Central Asian uprisings that most clearly shaped the Soviet air forces entering Afghanistan in 1979. The organization and force structure of the VVS just prior to the invasion also reinforces the picture of the air force as a supporting element in the combined arms team.

The three main components of the VVS in 1979 included: Frontal Aviation, largely concerned with the support of theater warfare in Europe; Long Range Aviation, the Soviet strategic bombardment force, equivalent to the U.S. Strategic Air Command bomber force; and Military Transport Aviation, the Soviet airlift force. In 1977, Long Range Aviation consisted of 794 aircraft, Military Transport Aviation operated 1,500 fixed-wing aircraft and 320 helicopters, and Frontal Aviation included 4,600 fixed-wing aircraft and 3,000 helicopters.¹³ The relatively small number of strategic bombers reflected the Soviet reliance on the Strategic Rocket Forces as their main nuclear striking arm.¹⁴ Likewise, the fact that Frontal Aviation comprised 74 percent of all VVS assets was clearly consistent with the predominant role of these tactical assets in Soviet doctrine. In Afghanistan, Long Range Aviation played a limited role, while Military Transport Aviation proved at times invaluable. However, Frontal Aviation fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters ultimately constituted the critical assets for the conduct of the war against the mujahideen. The large numbers of helicopters included in Frontal Aviation provide an unambiguous indication of the essentially tactical nature of this branch. In fact, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan quickly demonstrated the tactical value of helicopters as both transportation and fire support platforms.

The VVS entered the war in Afghanistan as a capable, well-equipped force focused on providing aerial assistance for combined arms operations to Soviet tank and

mechanized forces. Within this doctrinal framework, Frontal Aviation constituted the critical force adjunct in support of ground operations. However, in a relatively short period the VVS, and especially the forces of Frontal Aviation, experienced a fundamental transformation in character from “force adjunct” to “force substitute.”

As the war in Afghanistan became a prolonged conflict, the VVS became increasingly important as a force substitute employed to minimize Soviet casualties and to compensate for the relatively small Soviet ground force. In addition, VVS operations in Afghanistan rapidly expanded from a primarily combined arms emphasis to encompass the routine employment of Soviet aviation assets as instruments for punishment and terror. The Soviet use of airpower in Afghanistan did not, however, start with terror, but, rather, with airlift.

Notes

¹Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966): 3-6.

²*Ibid.*, 175.

³Martin van Creveld, Kenneth S. Brower, and Steven L. Canby, *Air Power and Maneuver Warfare* (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1994): xiii.

⁴Thomas A. Keaney and Eliot A. Cohen, *Revolution in Warfare? Air Power in the Persian Gulf* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995): 213.

⁵Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996): 13. Pape tends to focus on the use of these terms in the context of strategic bombardment. These terms are, however, appropriate for an operational and tactical discussion of airpower employment.

⁶*Ibid.*, 13.

⁷Kenneth R. Whiting, “Soviet Air-Ground Coordination, 1941-1945” in *Case Studies in the Development of Close Air Support*, ed. Benjamin Franklin Cooling (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1990): 142.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Von Hardesty, *Red Phoenix. The Rise of Soviet Air Power, 1941-1945* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991): 225.

¹⁰Colonel V. Pozdnyakov, “The Chemical Arm” in *The Red Army. The Red Army-1918 to 1945. The Soviet Army-1946 to the Present*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968): 385.

¹¹Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Russia's Air Power at the Crossroads* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1996): 70.

¹²*Ibid.*, 59.

¹³Robert P. Berman, *Soviet Air Power in Transition* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1978): 13-14.

¹⁴William Green and Gordon Swanborough, *The Observer's Soviet Aircraft Directory* (New York: Frederick Wayne & Co, 1975): 104.

Chapter 2

The Road to Intervention, 1978-1979

. . . the road to Paris and London lies via the towns of Afghanistan, the Punjab and Bengal.

Leon Trotsky

The overthrow of Afghan President Mohammed Daoud on April 27, 1978 resulted in the establishment of a communist regime within Afghanistan. The so-called “Saur Revolution” (named after the Afghan month) led to the creation of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) under the control of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA had split into two factions in 1968: the Khalq (Peoples’) faction, under the leadership of Nur Mohammed Taraki; and the Parcham (Banner) faction, headed by Babrak Karmal. The two factions successfully cooperated in the overthrow of Daoud, but their long-standing rivalry quickly led to an internal purge of Parchami supporters by Taraki and the *de facto* exile of Karmal as the DRA’s ambassador to Czechoslovakia.¹⁵

Taraki wasted little time in instituting his plans for changing Afghanistan into a model socialist state. The Taraki regime issued its “Main Guidelines of the Revolutionary Tasks of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan,” calling for “the redistribution of land, equality for the ethnic minorities, emancipation for women, and education for all.”¹⁶ In addition, Taraki ordered the removal of the green band denoting

Islam from the Afghan flag in favor of a solid red flag displaying a star and a sheaf of wheat, both symbols of the Communist party.¹⁷ This latter move proved especially inflammatory to the Islamic clergy and their followers.¹⁸ The program of land redistribution throughout the country also proved to be one of the most contentious issues as fundamentalist clergy and landowners protested the move on religious grounds.¹⁹ Some peasants even refused to accept land taken from its legal owners, further demonstrating the degree of opposition to this measure. Taraki's claim that "We [the PDPA] want to clean Islam in Afghanistan of the ballast and dirt of bad traditions, superstition and erroneous belief" indicated a fundamental misreading of the strength of Islam within the highly tribalised but religiously observant Afghan society.²⁰

In direct opposition to the reforms instituted by the new communist regime, an insurgency arose, seeking above all to free the insurgents' own local areas from government control, and, if possible, to bring about the overthrow of the Taraki regime. By June 1978, areas of anti-government resistance activity included Badakhshan, Bamiyan, Kunar, Paktia, and Nangrahar provinces. In addition, a "steady flow" of desertions within the Afghan army began, a flow that later became a veritable flood after the Soviet intervention.²¹

The growing Muslim insurgency included a diverse mix of moderate and fundamentalist religious groups as well as supporters of the former royalist regime. The varied composition and political backgrounds of the mujahideen resulted in a highly fractionalized resistance devoid of centralized leadership. What the mujahideen lacked in unity, however, they made up for in toughness and determination to resist the Soviet invasion. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Walter J. Stoessel aptly described the nature of

the Afghan people in response to a question before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations: “Their [the Afghan people’s] tradition has been a very long one of resistance against foreign aggression and foreign domination. . . . they are very good fighters. . . . The Afghan people are tough.”²²

The determination of the mujahideen to resist the Soviet occupation rested in large part on their belief in Islam. The call for a *jihad* (holy war) against the regime of Nur Taraki was a powerful force in initially mobilizing the resistance. The December 1979 Soviet invasion to shore up the DRA galvanized the Muslim insurgency in terms of an apocalyptic battle between the defenders of the true faith and the *kafir* (infidel). The Soviet occupation also stimulated Afghan nationalism, and incited their historical antipathy to foreign domination. One mujahideen commander clearly expressed these sentiments by stating, “We are fighting for Islam but we should be fighting for Afghanistan as well.”²³ The twin ideologies of Islam and nationalism provided the metaphysical sustenance to the insurgency, and both proved nearly impervious to Soviet bullets and bombs.

The religious opposition boiled over on March 12, 1979 with a call by the Pakistan-based National Islamic Liberation Front for a *jihad* against the Taraki regime. On the same day, the Afghan Army garrison at the major city of Herat rebelled. During ten days of fighting, 5,000 people died, including a number of Soviet advisers and their families.²⁴ The murdered advisers were among the estimated 1,100 Soviet civilian and military personnel in Afghanistan at the time.²⁵ Soviet authorities were especially angered by the mutilation of Soviet citizens, and the subsequent parading of their bodies through the streets of Herat.²⁶ In combating the rebellion, the Taraki regime did not hesitate to

employ airpower against the insurgents. Airplanes and Mi-24 *Hind* helicopter gunships participated in “a systematic bombing of rebellious tribal villages.”²⁷ The PDPA’s campaign of terror initiated a mass migration into Pakistan and Iran, and established a brutal precedent for later Soviet actions. By November 1979, there were an estimated 314,000 Afghan refugees living in Pakistan alone as a result of DRA army and air force reprisal actions, some two percent of the Afghan population of over fifteen million.²⁸

In September, elements of the 14th Infantry Division mutinied in Ghazni. According to the British historian Edgar O’Ballance,

By this time [September 1979] discontent was spreading through the Afghan armed forces, not only because the effects of the PDPA quarrel, but because Mohammed Taraki’s Communist-type reforms seemed to them to be anti-Islamic. Torn by conflicting military, Islamic, political and family pressures, soldiers were increasingly deserting . . .²⁹

Gérard Chaliand, a French journalist and traveler with the mujahideen, states that the loyalty of Afghan air force pilots became suspect enough during this time that Soviet pilots were used to fly MiG-21 *Fishbeds* in attacks to suppress local uprisings.³⁰ Strengthened by mass defections of DRA soldiers and the equipment they brought, the mujahideen now became a force capable of threatening the existence of the communist government.

In Moscow, the Soviet Politburo was not pleased by the turn of events inside Afghanistan. Initially, General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and the rest of the Politburo had welcomed the new socialist state on their southern border. In fact, the Soviet Union and the DRA celebrated their relationship by signing a twenty-year treaty of friendship and cooperation in December 1978.³¹ The internal rivalry between the Khalq and Parcham factions was, however, of more than passing interest to the Soviet Union. In

September 1979, Brezhnev met with Taraki in Moscow for a series of talks. While Taraki was away, the Afghan Defense Minister, Hafizullah Amin, planned a coup to depose him. Upon Taraki's return to Afghanistan, Amin and forces loyal to him seized control of the government and executed Taraki. A Soviet KGB defector, Vladimir Kuzichkin, later claimed that Brezhnev and the Politburo secretly supported Amin's coup.³² However, Amin soon proved too intractable for Soviet tastes and appeared to be moving towards a more independent, and possibly pro-Western stance.³³

The Soviet decision to invade Afghanistan in December 1979 took place after a period of extensive preparation and deliberation. The first opportunity for large-scale Soviet troop involvement in Afghanistan occurred in the spring of 1979. Already in March 1979, Taraki had requested Russian ground troops to fight the mujahideen. Minutes from the Kremlin archives detail Brezhnev's reply to Taraki's request:

We have examined this question from all sides, weighed the pros and cons, and I will tell you frankly: We must not do this. It would only play into the hands of enemies--both yours and ours.³⁴

Despite Brezhnev's reservations, the Soviets began planning for a possible invasion. In April, the head of the Main Political Directorate, General of the Army Aleksiy A. Yepishev, visited Afghanistan with a delegation of general officers in order to survey the situation. General Yepishev had conducted a similar survey in Czechoslovakia prior to the Soviet invasion there in 1968.³⁵ Then, between August and October, General of the Army Ivan G. Pavlovski conducted a reconnaissance tour throughout Afghanistan accompanied by sixty officers. Pavlovski had also conducted a similar survey of Czechoslovakia in 1968, and subsequently had commanded the Warsaw Pact forces in the crushing of the "Prague Spring."³⁶

Any planned invasion would require a substantial number of forces. In early 1979, Soviet advisers in Afghanistan numbered only about 1,000. By August this number had increased to 5,000.³⁷ This rise reflected the increasing Soviet support of Afghan Army operations against the growing threat posed by the mujahideen. These advisers would also prove instrumental in the subsequent Soviet invasion, during which they disabled Afghan military equipment and blocked access to arms stores.³⁸ In fact, Soviet advisers inventoried ammunition stocks “for safety inspections” and removed tank batteries “for winterization” purposes during the initial stages of the Soviet occupation.³⁹

Meeting in special session on December 12, 1979 the Politburo decided to invade Afghanistan.⁴⁰ A secret letter, approved by the Politburo and circulated among high ranking communist officials, justified the invasion in the following terms, “Things were developing in such a way that the achievements of the revolution and the democratic, progressive regime were in danger of liquidation.”⁴¹ Soviet leaders justified the invasion in a tone reminiscent of Lenin’s belief in the inevitability of a worldwide communist revolution. Soviet leadership framed the intervention in terms of the “forces of world history” and the “irresistible” spread of communism.⁴² Faced with the possibility of “losing” Afghanistan, Brezhnev reversed his earlier opposition to the commitment of large numbers of Soviet ground forces. In fact, the decision to invade was perfectly consistent with the promise to guarantee the continued existence of unstable socialist states--the fundamental precept of the “Brezhnev Doctrine.”⁴³

The Soviet invasion began on December 24, 1979 with the seizure of the strategic Salang Tunnel (the key to the major highway between Termez in the Soviet Union and Kabul), important airfields, and key Afghan government and command and control

centers.⁴⁴ Soviet airlift assets proved invaluable during the early stages of the operation. The aircraft of Military Transport Aviation (VTA) played a crucial role in delivering airborne and *spetsnaz* (special operations) forces into the theater thus allowing for the seizure of key command and control centers, airfields, and important infrastructure targets. In one case, a Soviet airborne brigade had already arrived more than two weeks before the invasion at Bagram, a Soviet-controlled air base 35 miles north of Kabul. This unit's mission involved the planned seizure of the strategic Salang tunnel to facilitate Soviet troop movements into Afghanistan.⁴⁵

In the period between December 22 and 26, Antonov and Ilyushin heavy transports flew a total of 350 sorties into both the Kabul and Bagram airfields.⁴⁶ Prior to December 24, these flights were restricted to Bagram, where Soviet transports landed and took-off at fifteen minute intervals during the initial operation and delivered over 5,000 troops.⁴⁷ According to one estimate, the airlift operation used approximately 30 percent of all Russian military and civil transport aircraft.⁴⁸ The success of the initial airlift operations was a product of careful planning and long practice. In fact, there is strong evidence that the VTA practiced techniques for troop insertion used during the invasion in a deployment from the Soviet Union to South Yemen in the summer of 1979.⁴⁹

On December 26, additional Soviet paratroopers began arriving at the Kabul airport, now under Russian control, in order to strengthen the existing Soviet garrison.⁵⁰ Airborne forces were critical in the early stages of the operation, with the elite 105th Parachute Division providing the bulk of the initial troops used to seize control of the key airfields and main highways.⁵¹ With control of Bagram airfield, the Kabul airport, and

the Salang Tunnel established, the Soviets controlled the principal points of access to the capital.

One of the primary missions for Soviet *spetsnaz* forces included the storming of the Afghan presidential palace and the execution of Amin. On December 27, an armored column consisting of a few hundred Soviet commandos and a specially trained assault group of KGB officers moved from the Kabul airport towards the Darulaman Palace. The commandos, wearing Afghan uniforms, wiped out an Afghan Army checkpoint and proceeded to take control of the palace. During the attack, Soviet forces executed Amin, although Colonel Bayerenov, the head of the KGB's terrorist training school and leader of the assault, fell victim to his own troops' fire.⁵²

Meanwhile, the Soviets brought Babrak Karmal from Europe to Doshanbay in Tajikistan. The Soviets essentially installed Karmal as the new President of Afghanistan by providing him with secure transport into Kabul while endorsing his claim to the leadership of the PDPA.⁵³ Karmal wasted little time in "inviting" Soviet troops into the country.⁵⁴ In fact, prior to Karmal's invitation elements of the Soviet Army had already crossed into Afghanistan near Termez and were moving to consolidate control over both Kabul and Herat.⁵⁵ The initial Soviet invasion force included the 5th, 108th, and 201st Motorized Rifle Divisions as well as the 103rd Airborne Division and the 345th Separate Parachute Regiment (105th Airborne Division).⁵⁶ The initial stage of Soviet operations proved a resounding success, with aviation and airborne forces playing a decisive role. In addition, Soviet space reconnaissance and communication satellites facilitated information gathering and command and control during the operation.⁵⁷

The ease with which the Soviets took control of Afghanistan belied the problems they would encounter in maintaining control over a now thoroughly aroused Afghan population. The invasion catalyzed resistance throughout the country in the name of both nationalism and, especially, religion. The leaders of the mujahideen and the Islamic clergy now framed opposition to the Soviet occupation in terms of an apocalyptic battle between “the one true religion” and the atheist communists.

The Soviets clearly underestimated the nature and extent of popular opposition within Afghanistan. The initial concept of operations did not envision a large-scale employment of Soviet ground forces for combat operations. Apparently, the Soviets believed that the mujahideen could be quickly defeated through DRA ground operations supported by Russian air and artillery fires. Former Afghan General Mohammed Nawroz and Soviet military analyst Lester Grau argue that the initial Soviet plan for the occupation included:

1. Stabilizing the country by garrisoning the main routes, major cities, airbases, and logistics sites.
2. Relieving the Afghan government forces of garrison duties and pushing them into the countryside.
3. Providing logistic, air, artillery, and intelligence support to Afghan forces.
4. Providing minimum interface between the Soviet occupation forces and the local populace.
5. Accepting minimal Soviet casualties.
6. Strengthening the Afghan forces, so once the resistance was defeated, the Soviet Army could be withdrawn.⁵⁸

This initial strategy did not, however, stand the test of time.

It is clear that the Soviets never intended to engage the insurgents in a prolonged war. Despite their initial intentions, however, Soviet troops “were forced to fight a war of attrition, with the advantage usually going to the enemy.”⁵⁹ Former KGB operative

Vladimir Kuzichkin supports the contention that the Soviets expected an occupation of limited duration, in which the Afghan Army would assume the offensive while supported by Russian firepower. The Soviets believed that the insurgents would be unwilling or unable to resist the combined might of DRA ground forces and Russian artillery and airpower. Kuzichkin asserted that “Soviet troops were just supposed to provide the initial stiffener.”⁶⁰ However, the Soviets seriously miscalculated the willingness of both the Afghan Army and the mujahideen to fight.

The Afghan Army rapidly demonstrated its reluctance to conform to Soviet expectations. It soon became apparent that DRA forces were voting with their feet by deserting in large numbers. By the end of 1980, the Afghan Army had shrunk from a force of nearly 100,000 a year earlier to some 20,000-25,000, largely as a result of desertions.⁶¹ Furthermore, the effectiveness of the remaining force was suspect due to widespread collaboration with the mujahideen.⁶² One report indicated that defections to the insurgents had become so commonplace in 1980 that the Soviets took control of all DRA aircraft and anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons to prevent them from reaching the mujahideen.⁶³

The reluctance of the Afghan Army to fight forced the Soviets to search for new alternatives to the problem posed by a rapidly growing Muslim insurgency, estimated at between 100,000 and 200,000 men during the campaigning seasons.⁶⁴ The Russian occupation forces, under the command of the 40th Army with its operational headquarters in Kabul, opted for the most obvious solution based on existing Soviet doctrinal thought: the use of massed armored and mechanized forces supported by artillery and airpower. However, the adoption of conventional force movements ideal for operations on the

North German plain would quickly prove ill-suited against an insurgent opponent in the mountainous terrain of Afghanistan.

The British had learned firsthand during their campaigns in the 1800s about the inhospitable climate and rugged terrain in Afghanistan. The mountains of the Hind Kush dominate the country and divide it almost in two, with desert plains in the north and the southwest. Only 12 percent of the country's 250,000 square mile land mass is arable. In addition, cold winters and scorching summers combine with the arid climate to tax both man and machine.⁶⁵ Although its territory is as large as Texas, Afghanistan possessed only 3,000 miles of all-weather roads in 1979 and no rail lines. The population numbered about 15,500,000 with no less than 88 percent residing in rural areas.⁶⁶ The combination of environmental elements and the fiercely independent nature of the population, made Afghanistan a difficult country to control. In 1879, British General Sir Donald Stewart had written, "I am in difficulty to know what to do with the country now we have got it."⁶⁷ It was the same question facing Soviet forces one century later.

Notes

¹⁵Alvin Z. Rubinstein, *Moscow's Third World Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988): 151-152. See also Yossef Bodansky, "Soviet Military Involvement in Afghanistan," *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited*, ed. Rosanne Klass (New York: Freedom House, 1987): 237-239.

¹⁶Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988): 16

¹⁷Edgar O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars 1839-1992. What Britain Gave Up and the Soviet Union Lost* (London: Brassey's, 1993): 83.

¹⁸Robert Fisk, "New Afghan Rulers Try Appeasement and Threats," *The Times* (London), 22 Jan 1980, 7.

¹⁹Urban, 17.

²⁰Ibid., 18.

²¹Ibid., 18-19.

²²Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Situation in Afghanistan*, 97th Cong., 2d sess., 8 March 1982, 8.

²³Arthur Bonner, *Among the Afghans* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987): 160.

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²⁴O'Ballance, 85.

²⁵Ibid., 84.

²⁶Urban, 30. Urban places the number of Soviet citizens killed between 28 and 200. Other accounts place the number at approximately 100. The heads of Soviet citizens were reportedly paraded on pikes through the city's streets.

²⁷Gérard Chaliand, *Report from Afghanistan*, trans. Tamar Jacoby (New York: The Viking Press, 1982): 40.

²⁸Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Reports on Refugee Aid: U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, Refugees in Somalia, Refugees in Pakistan, Bataan Refugee Processing Center*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., March 1981, 72.

²⁹O'Ballance, 85.

³⁰Chaliand, 41.

³¹O'Ballance, 95.

³²Vladimir Kuzichkin, "Coups and Killings in Kabul," *Time*, 22 November 1982, 33-34.

³³M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 44

³⁴Michael Dobbs, "Secret Memos Trace Kremlin's March to War," *The Washington Post*, 15 November 1992, A32.

³⁵Mohammed Yahya Nawroz and Lester W. Grau, *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1994): 3.

³⁶Douglas A. Borer, "The Afghan War: Communism's First Domino," *War & Society* vol. 12, no. 2, (October 1994): 128.

³⁷Urban, 32.

³⁸Nawroz and Grau, 4.

³⁹David Isby, *War in a Distant Country, Afghanistan: Invasion and Resistance* (London: Arms and Armour Press, 1989): 23.

⁴⁰Nawroz and Grau, 4. Also Borer, 129.

⁴¹Dobbs, A32.

⁴²Dobbs, A32.

⁴³Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr M. Nekrich, *Utopia in Power. The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present* trans. Phyllis B. Carlos (New York: Summit Books, 1985): 625-626.

⁴⁴Nawroz and Grau, 4.

⁴⁵O'Ballance, 90.

⁴⁶Urban, 44.

⁴⁷Rubinstein, 152.

⁴⁸George W. Collins, "The War in Afghanistan," *Air University Review* vol. XXXVII no. 3, (March/April 1986): 43.

⁴⁹Stephen J. Blank, *Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1991): 30.

⁵⁰Kuzichkin, 34.

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⁵¹Nancy Peabody Newell and Richard S. Newell, *The Struggle for Afghanistan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981): 132.

⁵²Kuzichkin, 34. Bayerenov apparently died as a result of his own orders to shoot anyone leaving the palace. He evidently forgot this prohibition in the heat of heavy resistance from the palace guard.

⁵³Kakar, 51.

⁵⁴Kuzichkin, 33-34.

⁵⁵Urban, 46-47.

⁵⁶Lester W. Grau, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to Edward B. Westermann, Maxwell AFB, Alabama, 31 March 1997. Letter to the author.

⁵⁷Blank, 32

⁵⁸Nawroz and Grau, 4-5.

⁵⁹Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretzky, *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union's Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993): 110.

⁶⁰Kuzichkin, 34.

⁶¹Anthony Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble. Afghanistan's Role in the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993): 125.

⁶²Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion in Perspective* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1985): 100.

⁶³Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan. The Communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984): 158.

⁶⁴O'Ballance, 118.

⁶⁵*The World Factbook*, 1992 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992): 1.

⁶⁶O'Ballance, 87.

⁶⁷Arnold, *Afghanistan*, 96.

Chapter 3

The Road to Escalation, 1980

I hold it a principle in Asia that the duration of peace is in direct proportion to the slaughter you inflict on the enemy.

General M. O. Skobelev
Conqueror of Turkestan, 1881

The initial conduct of military operations in Afghanistan was reminiscent of the earlier Soviet success in the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. British historian Mark Galeotti speculates that the Czechoslovakian experience framed the military and political expectations of the Soviet leadership for the occupation of Afghanistan in 1979.⁶⁸ The similarities between the two operations are striking. The Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia included an initial assault on the Prague airport by Russian paratroopers during the night of August 20-21 1968.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, a largely mechanized force of 175,000 men from various Warsaw Pact countries crossed the border and began to occupy the major urban centers throughout the country.⁷⁰ The Russian plan in Afghanistan was essentially the same as that used in Czechoslovakia in 1968, including the seizure of key government buildings and command and control centers.⁷¹ There was, however, a significant difference in the size of the forces employed, with the Afghan operations initially employing slightly less than 50,000 Soviet troops.⁷²

The initial hope among the Soviet leadership that its forces could quickly stabilize the government and then withdraw from Afghanistan, as they had done in Czechoslovakia, proved unrealistic.⁷³ The desertions within the DRA forces and the Afghan army's lack of initiative led to a progressive increase in the number of Soviet forces in Afghanistan. On January 2, 1980, the Soviet Politburo authorized increasing the size of the Soviet contingent to 50,000 men as well as 2,000 KGB personnel.⁷⁴ The Politburo action constituted *de jure* approval for the deployment of two additional motor rifle divisions, to augment the five Soviet divisions that had entered Afghanistan between December 27 and 28.⁷⁵ Soviet forces, despite sporadic resistance, succeeded in gaining control over the airfields, major Afghan cities, and the Salang Pass, which constituted the key chokepoint along the 450-kilometer highway linking Kabul and Termez. This highway was, in turn, a vital supply line for supporting Soviet combat operations in the country, and in early 1980 Soviet operations focused on the issue of logistics. The forces of the 40th Army concentrated on interdicting the mujahideen supply routes between Afghanistan and Pakistan, while safeguarding their own tightly stretched lines of communication (LOCs).⁷⁶

The unimpeded use of the Afghan highway system was absolutely essential for supplying Soviet forces in the country. The Soviets, however, experienced a number of problems due to the weather, the poor road conditions, and the limited number and carrying capacity of the available routes. One Soviet account provided the following description of the Kabul-Termez highway: "The road winds there in steep and narrow hairpin turns, with a perpendicular cliff on one side and an abyss on the other. The ice-covered route is terrible, and the thousands of trucks which cross the pass every day

polish it to a mirror-like shine.”⁷⁷ In recognition of the dangerous nature of the motor convoy route, Soviet drivers received pennants inscribed with “For Valor and Courage” for every 20, 40, 60, or 80 trips.⁷⁸ The Soviets eventually employed 26 battalions in patrolling the eastern routes, escorting convoys, and garrisoning 199 outposts along the road network. In addition, three battalions provided security for the less vulnerable western routes.⁷⁹ The editor of the Soviet military daily *Red Star*, Major General Oleg Sarin, and Colonel Lev Dvoretzky estimate that fully 35 percent of all troops in Afghanistan were dedicated to protecting LOCs and manning outposts.⁸⁰ The majority of other Soviet occupation forces were stationed in the major urban areas and the 28 provincial capitals.⁸¹

The over-congestion and poor condition of Afghan roads and the complete lack of railroads forced the Soviets to rely on the airlift assets of the VTA for supply into and within Afghanistan as the size of their deployment increased. “It soon [in early 1980] became clear that the Soviets were continuing to rely heavily on the VTA for the routine introduction of military materiel ordinarily transported by road. In addition, helicopters were being used extensively to move supplies within the country.”⁸² The relatively short distances from airbases along the Soviet border to major cities and bases inside Afghanistan helped in the resupply effort by reducing the enroute times of Russian aircraft including the An-12 *Cub*, An-22 *Cock*, and the versatile Il-76 *Candid*. The absence of any mujahideen air defense threat facilitated the Soviet reliance on this vital air link.

While maintaining their own LOCs, the Soviet forces in Afghanistan also attempted to interdict the flow of supplies and manpower from Pakistan to the mujahideen.

However, these efforts proved to be one of the most signal failures of Soviet and DRA forces during the war. The initial Soviet attempts at closing the border focused on the employment of massive firepower from aircraft (both fixed-wing and helicopter) and artillery to support advances by mechanized and armored forces. French journalist Gérard Chaliand visited several Afghan provinces along the Pakistani border in 1980. He states that “During the first six months of 1980, the Russians were concerned above all to control the Pakistani border region, particularly Kunar and Paktia, and, to a lesser degree, Ghazni provinces.”⁸³ Large-scale Soviet ground operations into Paktia, Laghman, and Nangarhar provinces in February, and the six-week occupation of the Kunar valley in March provide examples of the initial Soviet interdiction campaign.⁸⁴

The number of Soviet troops available proved a major limitation in sealing the 1400-mile border with Pakistan. This realization led to the expansion of the “Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces” to 80,000 by the end of summer 1980.⁸⁵ The Soviet general staff viewed this number as still too few. Soviet KGB defector Vladimir Kuzichkin states:

When we began to get bogged down, of course, the army argued for more troops. The Soviet general staff wanted at least twice as many—to seal off the frontier with Pakistan and get better control along the border with Iran. But the Politburo ruled that out. By then, it feared provoking a serious Western reaction.⁸⁶

Not only the number, but the nature of Soviet troops involved in the invasion and initial occupation was adjusted. On the one hand, the units involved in the initial invasion were understrength. On the other hand, Soviet planners compounded this problem by augmenting these units with local reservists from the Turkestan military district. These reservists included a large number of Muslims with limited training and

little desire to fight their co-religionists in Afghanistan.⁸⁷ The plan to use Soviet Muslims as an instrument to calm Afghan resistance failed miserably. Numerous reports indicated that these forces were passing military intelligence and, in some cases, even arms to the mujahideen.⁸⁸ Soviet commanders recognized this problem and moved to replace the Muslim reservists with Russian and other Slavic conscripts by the summer of 1980.⁸⁹ Without a doubt, the deficient performance of the reservists contributed in large part to the overall poor showing of Soviet forces early in the war.⁹⁰

The functional division of Soviet army personnel into either occupation or counterinsurgency forces provides an additional measure for evaluating their readiness and capabilities for combat. Fully 80 percent of Soviet forces in Afghanistan conducted occupation duties, primarily involving security and support activities. Counterinsurgency forces, consisting overwhelmingly of Slavic conscripts, constituted the remaining 20 percent of Russian ground forces and bore the brunt of combat operations.⁹¹ The counterinsurgency forces were clearly more motivated and received better equipment and training than their occupation force counterparts. Both forces suffered, however, from poor living conditions, disease, the brutality endemic in the system of *dedovshchina* (grandfatherliness) in which second-year conscripts had free reign to abuse younger conscripts, and the widespread use of drugs.⁹²

The limited number of ground combat forces and the nature of the problems they experienced made airpower all the more essential as an instrument for achieving Soviet military objectives. These objectives focused on the defeat of the mujahideen and the “pacification” of the Afghan population. The Soviets employed terror in the form of military actions in rural areas, and police control measures in urban centers to achieve

their “pacification” objectives. Airpower played a central role in the operational push towards the Pakistani border. Fixed-wing aircraft extensively supported these initial operations by providing massive firepower in the form of pre-attack bombardment and punitive bombing strikes with napalm and gas, while helicopters provided close air support including the strafing of civilians.⁹³ An Associated Press report of an attack on the village of Chigha Sarai (Kunar) offers an Afghan eyewitness account of Soviet operations along the border:

. . . before dawn on March 1 . . . hundreds of Russian tanks suddenly appeared on the hills on all sides and started shelling the village. Jet planes came and dropped bombs. When most of the village was destroyed, they dropped parachute troops from big helicopters and other helicopters landed troops . . . the rebels continued to resist, . . . but the Soviets then called in planes which “dropped bombs and napalm . . . Two of my cousins were killed. Many, many others were killed. All the people who could still walk fled into the mountains. The last time I saw the village everything was burning.”⁹⁴

Airpower played a critical role in the Soviet strategy for sealing off the mujahideen from their supplies and sanctuary in Pakistan. In fact, the campaign along the border exemplifies the interaction and essential convergence between Soviet denial and punishment actions. For example, in a clear denial operation, fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters heavily bombed suspected guerrilla encampments in Kunar province, after which helicopters landed troops on the neighboring heights for subsequent area sweeps. The operations in Kunar differed little in form from punitive efforts designed to depopulate the areas along the border. In order to clear the border areas of their civilian population, the Soviets conducted an extensive aerial bombardment and artillery campaign aimed primarily against the civilian population, their fields, their workshops, and their warehouses.⁹⁵ In July 1980 alone, Soviet and DRA forces destroyed no fewer

than sixty villages south of Kabul during a two-week operation.⁹⁶ In the cases discussed above, the distinction between suspected guerrilla encampments and “normal” villages seems very fine indeed.

One Soviet veteran, an airborne soldier, described the support his unit received from aircraft by stating that “The airplanes would bomb the whole place flat.”⁹⁷ He also described an operation on February 28, 1980, during which helicopters inserted airborne troops prior to an attack on a village. He recalled that “They bombed the [population] center with all their strength. A couple of days later they took field guns to the place, with these they shot napalm.”⁹⁸ The case discussed by the Soviet veteran, and the series of attacks on Afghan villages described above, conforms strongly to the punitive denial paradigm.

Soviet efforts to intimidate the civil population involved a joint air-land effort. The intensive bombardment of villages by aircraft and artillery served as the prelude for the entry of mechanized and armored forces into the area. These forces then proceeded to conduct a “scorched earth” campaign by destroying the local dwellings, food supplies, crops in the field, irrigation systems, livestock, and wells. One Swedish official, after visiting several villages destroyed by the Soviets noted, “Russian soldiers shot at anything alive in six villages -- people, hens, donkeys -- and then they plundered what remained of value.”⁹⁹ These Soviet operations aimed at driving the villagers out of these areas in an effort to create a *cordon sanitaire* in which the insurgents would find no support.

Village “pacification” was but one tool in the campaign aimed at the destruction of the insurgents’ supply infrastructure. The Soviets also extensively employed air delivered mines in a further attempt to interdict the major caravan routes along the border. In July

1980, *The Times* of London reported that Soviet helicopters “dropped mines and time bombs, including some in the shape of pens, radios, money and toys in mountain passes along the border . . .”¹⁰⁰ The use of mines became routine among Soviet forces in Afghanistan, both as a method for interdicting mujahideen supply routes and for protecting their bases and large urban area such as Kabul.¹⁰¹ Sarin and Dvoretzky estimate that between 1980 and 1985, Soviet engineers laid 91,000 anti-personnel mines. Helicopters alone dropped over a million mines, and, in 1983 and 1984, aircraft using the *Vilyui* system laid an additional 1.7 million mines.¹⁰² A U.S. State Department official estimated that Soviet and DRA forces laid between ten and thirty million mines by the summer of 1988.¹⁰³

The Soviet employment of mines again demonstrates the interrelationship between their aerial campaigns of punishment and denial in Afghanistan. The use of mines to defend camps and interdict supplies involved a clear strategy of denial. However, the use of “butterfly mines” and mines designed as radios, toys, and pens was a measure aimed in large part against the civilian population. According to J. Bruce Amstutz, “Aerial-dropped butterfly mines, which maimed rather than killed, were widely used to intimidate the population.”¹⁰⁴ A Scottish surgeon working as a doctor among the Afghans offered another interpretation of the Soviet mining campaign.

The philosophy of war is truly sinister. Now, you take the Russians. Most of the mines they’ve laid are designed to maim, not kill, because a dead body causes no inconvenience. It only removes the one dead person from the field. But somebody who is wounded and in pain requires the full-time assistance of several people all down the line who could otherwise be fighting. And if you want to depopulate an area, then you want many of the casualties to be small children. The most stubborn peasants will give up and flee when their children are mutilated.¹⁰⁵

The extensive use of aerial mining clearly indicated the willingness of Soviet forces to inflict high collateral casualties within the civilian population. The Scottish doctor's testimony is again evocative of a punitive denial model. In this case, injury to the combatant, rather than his death, results in the loss to the insurgents of a greater proportion of their manpower resources.

The relatively unrestrained use of ordnance also extended to the employment of chemical agents. On September 4, 1980, in a hearing before the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown stated:

Soviet forces have used non-lethal chemical agents . . . against insurgents. But continuing allegations . . . of deaths resulting from Soviet chemical attacks leave me uncertain about whether either lethal agents such as nerve gas, or lung irritants such as phosgene . . . have also been used."¹⁰⁶

Already in 1980, there was considerable circumstantial evidence to support mujahideen claims of Soviet chemical weapons employment. U.S. satellite imagery identified Soviet TMS-65 decontamination vehicles and AGV-3 detox chambers in the vicinity of combat areas. In addition, the eyewitness account of a Dutch journalist, who filmed Mi-24 *Hind* helicopters in two attacks dropping canisters that released a yellow cloud that killed at least one person, offered persuasive evidence.¹⁰⁷ In a public report of March 22, 1982, the U.S. State Department verified the Soviet use of phosgene, nerve agents, and other incapacitants in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁸ The report stated:

For the period from the summer of 1979 to the summer of 1981, the US Government received claims of 47 separate chemical attacks with a claimed death toll of more than 3,000. . . . The reports indicated that fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters usually were employed to disseminate chemical warfare agents by rockets, bombs, and sprays. Chemical-filled land mines were also reportedly used by the Soviets. The chemical clouds were usually gray or blue-black, yellow, or a combination of the colors.¹⁰⁹

Only seven of these forty-seven documented chemical attacks occurred prior to the 1979 Soviet invasion. These earlier attacks by DRA forces did, however account for over 2,300 of the verified 3,000 casualties.¹¹⁰

The Soviet use of chemical agents in Afghanistan should not have been a surprise. It paralleled their earlier use of these weapons against rebellious Basmachi tribesmen in Central Asia in the 1930s. More importantly, however, the Soviets had invested heavily in creating the “world’s best equipped” ground forces for the employment of chemical munitions.¹¹¹ In fact, Soviet doctrine called for the use of chemical agents in both offensive and defensive roles. This doctrine tended, however, to stress the use of non-persistent agents as a method to prepare the battlefield for follow-on combat operations.¹¹² In short, chemical operations were part and parcel of standard Soviet doctrine for conventional operations.¹¹³

Chemical weapons employment in the battle against the mujahideen not only followed from Soviet doctrine, but also provided the military with an opportunity to test these agents in actual combined arms operations on a scale not previously possible. In addition, Figure 1 (Appendix) shows the distribution of Soviet chemical attacks in Afghanistan. The map clearly indicates the concentration of these areas along the eastern border with Pakistan as well as near the insurgent hotbed of Herat. The majority of attacks occurred in the spring and summer of 1980 and 1981 at the high seasons of mujahideen manpower and supply infiltration into the country.¹¹⁴ The pattern of chemical weapons employment clearly indicates an effort to interdict these movements.

The efforts by Soviet and DRA forces to seal the 1,400-mile border between Afghanistan and Pakistan through the creation of a border free-fire zone, the laying of

aerial mines, and the use of chemical agents, still failed despite the severity of these measures. The Afghan Politburo even considered the construction of an artificial barrier along the length of the border resembling the East German frontier complex of fences, walls, and mines, a clear indication of the level of Soviet frustration.¹¹⁵ In fact, Anahita Ratebzad, a member of the Afghan Politburo, informed members of the Western press in September 1982 that “if we do not reach an agreement with Pakistan soon, we have no recourse but to close off lengthy sections of the frontier, however, expensive that might turn out to be.”¹¹⁶ Soviet and DRA officials ultimately chose not to construct a border barrier, and the problem of interdicting mujahideen reinforcements and supplies plagued the 40th Army throughout the occupation.

If the Russian forces were not capable of sealing the border, they were, however, successful in a campaign designed to depopulate the Afghan countryside through a strategy of targeting civilians. Mao had argued that the guerrilla was like a fish swimming in the sea of the civil population. The Soviet depopulation strategy formed a key element in early military operations, and was designed to dry up the “ocean” in which the mujahideen operated. The number of refugees provides clear evidence of the success of Soviet efforts in their campaign designed to induce forced migration.

Refugees were leaving Afghanistan at a rate between 65,000 and 100,000 per month out of a prewar population of fifteen and a-half million. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees counted 1.15 million registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan by October 31, 1980.¹¹⁷ This number did not include the number of unregistered refugees, estimated by U.N. officials as being in the “hundreds of thousands.”¹¹⁸ These unregistered refugees lived in unofficial camps just inside the Pakistani border. In

addition, an estimated 150,000 Afghan refugees entered Iran from the western provinces during this period.¹¹⁹ By May 1981, the estimated number of refugees in Iran increased to between 300,000 and 400,000, and the number of refugees in Pakistan increased to more than 2 million, for a total of over 15 percent of the entire Afghan population.¹²⁰

The United Nations report clearly identified the proximate cause of the refugee influx by stating, “The Afghans are a hardy people, accustomed to hardship and deprivation. Many of the refugees have suffered at the hands of the Soviet invaders.”¹²¹ An American anthropologist, Louis Dupree, who lived and worked in Afghanistan over a period of thirty years, described the punitive nature of the Soviet actions against the civilian population in the following terms: “They [the Soviets] are using gunships to reduce whole valleys to rubble. Soviet tactics have two objectives: the rubblization of Afghanistan and migratory genocide.”¹²² Dupree’s charges concerning a policy of “migratory genocide” are, in part, supported by a statement in the U.N. High Commissioner’s report that, “Their [Afghan refugees] expectations of life are not great.”¹²³

The Soviet scorched earth tactics not only drove refugees out of Afghanistan into Iran and Pakistan, but also resulted in a large-scale internal migration from the countryside into the cities. Chaliand estimates that several cities grew significantly including Jalalabad, Ghazni, Gardez, Khost, and Charikar.¹²⁴ The population of Kabul, Afghanistan’s largest city, tripled from 600,000 to 1.8 million by 1983.¹²⁵ Driving the population out of the countryside and into the cities not only prevented the refugees from supporting the insurgents, but it also had the secondary benefit of bringing them under closer Soviet and DRA military and police control.

The Soviet policy of destroying villages and driving the population into internal and external exile proved, however, to be a two-edged sword. The great mass of refugees in Pakistan became a ready pool for the recruitment of mujahideen fighters. The refugee camps, in turn, provided a welcome sanctuary to mujahideen returning for a period of rest and recuperation after combat.¹²⁶ In fact, members of the Islamic clergy reportedly organized available men in the camps in groups of 30 to 40 in preparation for three-month tours with the insurgency.¹²⁷ After completing their tours, these groups would return for a nine-month hiatus prior to returning to the field.

Soviet and DRA forces responded to the increasing threat posed by the exiled refugee population by conducting aerial attacks into Pakistan, including the strafing of the camps.¹²⁸ The Pakistani government recorded 615 border violations by Afghan and Soviet aircraft between 1979 and 1985.¹²⁹ In May and June 1980, there were numerous reports of border incursions by Soviet and DRA fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. In some cases, these attacks on the refugee camps also reportedly included artillery shelling.¹³⁰ In one particularly egregious example, six Mi-24 *Hind* helicopters with Afghan markings struck a Pakistani border post, killing two Pakistani soldiers and wounding one. Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq protested the attack and charged that Soviet pilots had conducted the attack.¹³¹

By the end of 1980, the Soviet and DRA forces only could lay claim to controlling an estimated 25 percent of Afghanistan, despite the extensive employment of almost all the weapons in the Soviet conventional arsenal.¹³² The emphasis on the use of conventional mechanized and armored forces in conjunction with massive artillery and airpower support allowed Soviet forces to physically occupy terrain, but not to maintain control of

it after their withdrawal. The mujahideen refused to fight the Russians in fixed battles, and instead followed Mao's dictum: "The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue."¹³³ Despite an overwhelming preponderance of firepower and complete air supremacy, the Soviets could not eliminate the threat posed by a small, fractionalized, and poorly armed insurgency. The mujahideen strengths included a rugged and tough character, a belief in Islam, and a demonstrated ability to quickly grasp the lessons of guerrilla war.

The events of 1980 demonstrated that the Soviets' hopes of repeating their success in Czechoslovakia were overly optimistic. The expansion of Russian forces in Afghanistan to 80,000 by the end of the summer proved insufficient to overcome the resistance or interdict its sources of supply. Faced with a determined adversary, Soviet planners required a new strategy. The Soviet outlook for 1981, although not bleak, did not hold the promise of a rapid victory through a continued reliance on massed conventional operations.

Notes

⁶⁸Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan. The Soviet Union's Last War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995): 12-13.

⁶⁹Heller and Nekrich, 625

⁷⁰"Tanks are not Enough," *Newsweek*, 2 September 1968, 10.

⁷¹Jiri Valenta, "From Prague to Kabul," *International Security* vol. 5, no. 2, (Fall 1980): 134. Valenta provides a detailed and insightful comparison between the two invasions.

⁷²Galeotti, 15. The difference in the sizes of the two forces most probably reflected the Soviet fear of open combat with well-equipped Czechoslovakian forces as had occurred in Hungary in 1956. The threat posed by DRA forces was substantially lower as was the expected level of opposition.

⁷³Kuzichkin, 34.

⁷⁴Michael Dobbs, "Secret Memos Trace Kremlin's March to War," *The Washington Post*, 15 November 1992, A32.

⁷⁵O'Ballance, 89.

Notes

⁷⁶Lester W. Grau, *Road Warriors of the Hindu Kush: The Battle for the Lines of Communication in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1994): iii.

⁷⁷Graham H. Turbiville, Jr., *Ambush! The Road War in Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Soviet Army Studies Office, 1988): 2.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹Grau, *Road Warriors*, iii.

⁸⁰Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretzky, *The Afghan Syndrome. The Soviet Union's Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993): 92.

⁸¹Amstutz, 152.

⁸²Turbiville, 2.

⁸³Chaliand, 63.

⁸⁴Richard Wigg, "Kabul Clashes Between Troops and Crowds Leave 20 Reported Dead," *The Times* (London), 2 May 1980, 10. Also Nancy P. Newell and Richard S. Newell, *The Struggle for Afghanistan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981): 135-136 and *The Times* (London), 19 February 1980, 6.

⁸⁵Galeotti, 15.

⁸⁶Kuzichkin, 34.

⁸⁷Alexander Alexiev, *Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1988): 5.

⁸⁸O'Ballance, 91, 97.

⁸⁹O'Ballance, 97. See also Urban, 66-68.

⁹⁰Alexiev, 5.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, vi.

⁹²*Ibid.*, vi-vii. According to Alexiev, more than 50 percent of Soviet soldiers were regular drug users. In addition, Nawroz and Grau state that during the war "415,932 troops fell victim to disease, of which 115,308 suffered from infectious hepatitis and 31,080 from typhoid fever." Nawroz and Grau, 7.

⁹³Newell and Newell, 136.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 137. As originally quoted from an Associated Press report in the *Des Moines Register*, 11 March 1980, 2.

⁹⁵Chaliand, 64.

⁹⁶Edward Girardet, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985): 39.

⁹⁷Anna Heinämaa, Maija Leppänen, and Yuri Yurchenko, *The Soldier's Story: Soviet Veterans Remember the Afghan War*, trans. A.D. Haun (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 4. The authors identify each of the veterans by their first name and last initial.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁹J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan. The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1986): 145. As quoted from a story in *U.S. News & World Report*, 1 August 1983, 22.

¹⁰⁰*The Times* (London), 8 July 1980, 8.

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¹⁰¹Jan Goodwin, *Caught in the Crossfire* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987): 123. Goodwin interviewed Dr. Shahrukh Gran, a resistance leader in Kabul, who stated, “. . . they [the Soviets] built a ten-kilometer belt. They’ve destroyed all the villages around the city [Kabul], and they’ve put anti-personnel mines everywhere.”

¹⁰²Sarin and Dvoretzky, 120.

¹⁰³Robert D. Kaplan, *Soldiers of God. With the Mujahidin in Afghanistan* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990): 3.

¹⁰⁴Amstutz, 145.

¹⁰⁵Kaplan, 2.

¹⁰⁶Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, *Chemical Warfare*, 96th Cong., 2d sess., 1980, 3.

¹⁰⁷Amstutz, 173-174.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁰⁹U.S. Department of State, *Chemical Warfare in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan*, Special Report No. 98 (Washington, D.C.: 22 March 1982): 15.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹¹Joachim Krause and Charles K. Mallory, *Chemical Weapons in Soviet Military Doctrine. Military and Historical Experience, 1915-1991* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992): 155. In July 1988, Foreign Minister Edvard Shevardnadze criticized the enormous amounts spent on these armaments. See also *Soviet Military Power* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983): 45.

¹¹²*Soviet Military Power* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983): 45.

¹¹³Krause and Mallory, 137.

¹¹⁴U.S. Department of State, *Chemical Warfare in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan*, Special Report No. 98 (Washington, D.C.: 22 March 1982): 14.

¹¹⁵Amstutz, 144.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.* As quoted from a story in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Munich), 17 September 1982.

¹¹⁷O’Ballance, 87. See also David Isby, *War in a Distant Country: Invasion and Resistance* (London: Arms and Armour, 1989): 26. Isby estimates that 75 percent of the refugees in Pakistan were either women or children.

¹¹⁸Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Reports on Refugee Aid: U.N. Commissioner for Refugees, Refugees in Somalia, Refugees in Pakistan, Bataan Refugee Processing Center*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., March 1981, 73-74.

¹¹⁹Chaliand, 65.

¹²⁰Nicholas Wade, “Afghanistan: The Politics of a Tragicomedy,” *Science*, vol. 212 (May 1981): 523. Also Chaliand, 64.

¹²¹Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Reports on Refugee Aid: U.N. Commissioner for Refugees, Refugees in Somalia, Refugees in Pakistan, Bataan Refugee Processing Center*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., March 1981, 76.

¹²²Wade, 523.

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¹²³Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Reports on Refugee Aid: U.N. Commissioner for Refugees, Refugees in Somalia, Refugees in Pakistan, Bataan Refugee Processing Center*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., March 1981, 76.

¹²⁴Chaliand, 64.

¹²⁵Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hidden War: The Struggle for Afghanistan*, 98th Cong., 2d sess., April 1984, 13.

¹²⁶Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Reports on Refugee Aid: U.N. Commissioner for Refugees, Refugees in Somalia, Refugees in Pakistan, Bataan Refugee Processing Center*, 97th Cong., 1st sess., March 1981, 82.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, 81.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*

¹²⁹Goodwin, 48.

¹³⁰Trevor Fishlock, "Afghan agents' bombs sow tension on North-West Frontier," *The Times* (London), 16 June 1980, 5.

¹³¹*The Times* (London), 27 September 1980, 1.

¹³²Amstutz, 132.

¹³³Mao Tse-Tung, *Six Essays on Military Affairs* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1972): 61.

Chapter 4

Of Basmachi and Mujahideen, 1981-1983

[The Afghan people], whether trained soldiers or simple peasants, would sacrifice every drop of blood till the last man was killed, in fighting for their God, their Prophet, their religion, their homes, their families, their nation . . . their liberty and independence.

Abdur Rahman Khan
Amir of Afghanistan, 1880-1901

The Soviets' reluctance to change their emphasis on the use of massed conventional mechanized and armored sweeps continued throughout 1981 despite the limited effectiveness of these operations. The continued unwillingness of Soviet troops to dismount from their vehicles increased their vulnerability to ambush and practically eliminated their ability to conduct pursuit operations. Soviet military analyst Lester Grau attributes the growth of this "mobile bunker" mentality primarily to the regular, rather than the counterinsurgency, forces.¹³⁴ The Soviet aversion to dismounted operations reflected a desire by these forces to avoid close combat in favor of a reliance on air and artillery strikes.¹³⁵ Anthony Arnold, an American intelligence analyst, argues that Soviet forces were slow to adapt to the nature of unconventional operations in Afghanistan. He states, "The original armored sweep evolved into a hammer-and-anvil type of operation, intended to crush resistance forces between the advancing armor and a blocking force deployed ahead of it; so slow, cumbersome, and unimaginative were these attacks that the

resistance could either avoid contact or exploit the situation operationally.”¹³⁶ The severity of the winter weather also tended to limit major military operations. For example, Soviet ground operations in 1982 could not begin until April due to the poor conditions.¹³⁷ By the end of 1981, it was becoming apparent that the use of large mechanized and armor forces did not constitute a strategy for victory. As a result of the poor results in combating the mujahideen, General Ivan Pavlovski was relieved of his command of the 40th Army in December 1981 and returned to the Soviet Union.¹³⁸

During this period, airpower began to play an increasingly important role as a “force substitute” in Soviet efforts to inflict damage on the mujahideen while minimizing their own casualties. At the beginning of 1981, the VVS air order of battle included approximately 130 jet fighters, predominantly MiG-21 *Fishbeds*, MiG-23 *Floggers*, and Su-17 *Fitters* among a total of 300 fighter aircraft and transports.¹³⁹ In addition, the Soviets maintained a force of about 600 helicopters in Afghanistan. Helicopters, including Mi-6 *Hook* and Mi-8 *Hip* transports and, especially, Mi-24 *Hind* gunships proved invaluable to the Soviet strategy, and became the single most significant weapon in the Russian arsenal.¹⁴⁰ The *Hind* was a versatile weapon suitable for escorting convoys, patrolling lines of communication, and providing close air support.

The importance of attack and transport helicopters in combating the insurgency cannot be overstated. Former Afghan General Mohammed Nawroz and Soviet analyst Lester Grau argue that “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.”¹⁴¹ The diverse range of helicopter missions in Afghanistan

included close air support, forward air control spotting for fixed-wing aircraft and artillery, troop transport and resupply, medevac, chemical weapons delivery and reconnaissance.¹⁴² In the rugged mountains of Afghanistan, the Mi-24 *Hind* essentially became a “flying tank,” capable of providing massive firepower in support of ground operations or acting as a lethal instrument for aerial interdiction.¹⁴³

The Soviets employed helicopters as a primary weapon for interdicting the caravan routes between Afghanistan and Pakistan. During the first three years of the occupation, helicopters conducted regular patrols along these trails in the hope of spotting mujahideen supply movements.¹⁴⁴ Soviet General Boris Gromov, the last commander of the 40th Army, discussed the helicopters’ standard operating procedure upon locating a caravan. He simply stated that if people ran they were shot.¹⁴⁵ Mike Martin, a British journalist who traveled with the mujahideen, noted that the insurgents, lacking the weapons with which to combat the heavily armed Mi-24 *Hind* effectively, “feared them more than anything else.”¹⁴⁶ The armored Mi-24 was indeed a formidable weapon system with its 12.7 mm machine gun, guided missiles, and 128 57 mm rockets. Despite this lethal array of armaments, however, the pilot still had to find his target in the mountains or high plains of Afghanistan in order to be effective.

The 1,400-mile border between Pakistan and Afghanistan and the mountainous nature of the terrain made caravan detection from the air an extremely difficult task. In addition, the mujahideen, upon hearing the approach of a helicopter, would fall to the ground and cover themselves with their *patou* (earth-colored cloaks).¹⁴⁷ This tactic was both low tech and astoundingly effective in making the insurgents invisible from the air. Kurt Lohbeck, a journalist who traveled extensively with the mujahideen, described his

own experience as Soviet helicopters twice flew over his group's position at an altitude of only one hundred feet without detecting them.¹⁴⁸ Lohbeck states that "a man standing still or squatting just ten yards away was nearly invisible."¹⁴⁹

Not only the effectiveness, but the frequency of Soviet patrols proved important in interdiction efforts. Edward Girardet presents an anecdotal example of the paucity of patrols that also contributed to the early Soviet failure in interdicting supplies. He was astonished by the ability of the mujahideen to move along a caravan route within one or two miles of the major Soviet airbase at Bagram. The group traveled during broad daylight without seeing one ground or aerial patrol.¹⁵⁰ The frequency of helicopter patrols, however, did subsequently increase during the Soviet occupation.

The success and importance of helicopter operations in Afghanistan had far-reaching doctrinal impact on the entire VVS. The Soviet attack helicopter force doubled in size by 1983, and the number of gunships (*Hind-D/E* and *Hip-E*) facing NATO forces in Europe increased from 400 to 800 between 1978 and 1983. In addition, the Soviets established a distinct Army Aviation branch within the VVS in order to provide more firepower at the divisional level.¹⁵¹ As early as 1983, the Soviets began attaching Frontal Aviation assets to army-level headquarters as well as "mixed helicopter squadrons" to both motorized rifle and tank divisions.¹⁵² Based on early experience in Afghanistan, both the Soviets and their East European satellites embraced attack aviation using helicopters as an integral element within the combined arms concept.¹⁵³

Despite the tactically successful employment of helicopter assets, Soviet operations in 1981 proved disappointing. In July, Soviet forces launched an inconclusive attack into the Sarobi valley employing air strikes and air-landed troops.¹⁵⁴ In September,

mujahideen attacks forced Soviet and DRA forces to withdraw from positions in the Panjshir valley and north of Kabul. In the provincial capital of Kandahar, Soviet aircraft conducted strikes against a section of the city in a successful attempt to dislodge mujahideen forces.¹⁵⁵ The bombing of urban centers provided a short, albeit brutal, respite against mujahideen operations within the major Afghan cities. In one example, the Soviets achieved a limited tactical victory by killing a reported 600 mujahideen in a battle to retake the city of Herat in October.¹⁵⁶ However, in the face of overpowering firepower, the mujahideen still proved capable of hurting Soviet forces by conducting a campaign of a thousand cuts aimed at Russian logistics lines and outposts located throughout the country.

Soviet use of airpower continued to emphasize support of conventional operations. The precedent, however, for the use of fixed-wing and helicopter aircraft as instruments of both punishment and denial was firmly established. Soviet helicopters destroyed three hospitals operated by the French organization, *Médecins sans Frontières* (Doctors without Borders), between October 26 and November 2, despite the hospitals' display of the red cross.¹⁵⁷ Rosanne Klass, Director of the Afghanistan Information Center at Freedom House, testified that "helicopters . . . singled them [the hospitals] out for bombing and rocketing."¹⁵⁸ In addition, the campaign aimed at the interdiction of the border areas continued to involve attacks on civilians and villages.

The employment of Soviet airpower, although far from benign towards noncombatants in 1980 and 1981, underwent an increasing radicalization in 1982. Former U.S. *chargé d'affaires* in Kabul J. Bruce Amstutz states that "By 1982 the Soviets seemingly had abandoned any attempt to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan public.

Instead, they adopted an apparent policy of trying to cow and bludgeon the public into either submission or flight.”¹⁵⁹

Both the Soviets and the DRA government attempted to increase the pressure on the insurgency. In early 1982, Karmal instituted a new program, “From City to Village,” that sought to “take the revolutionary struggle to the provinces, districts, and villages.”¹⁶⁰ This program increased the power of the provincial party secretaries and the officials of the KhAD (Afghan Secret Police). According to M. Hassan Kakar, a former professor of history at Kabul University and a political prisoner of the Karmal regime, the unlimited authority enjoyed by these two groups led to a campaign of “house searches, imprisonment, torture, embezzlement, licentiousness, and a lifestyle of arrogance [that] became common among them,” in which “the known plebeians of yesterday became the hated patricians of the day.”¹⁶¹

The campaign of increased political pressure occurred in conjunction with an expanded use of ground offensives and aerial bombardment. During fighting in the cities of Herat and Kandahar in January and February 1982, the Soviets demonstrated an apparent willingness to employ both airpower and artillery in urban centers despite the risk of high collateral casualties. U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Walter Stoessel testified that, “Soviet troops surrounded Afghanistan’s second largest city, Kandahar, and subjected it to a savage artillery and air bombardment in which hundreds of innocent civilians lost their lives.”¹⁶² According to Stoessel, DRA and Soviet forces successfully retook the city and “engaged in wanton looting and killing among the civilian population.”¹⁶³ A rebellion in Herat, Afghanistan’s fourth largest city, was crushed “with similar ruthlessness, causing great suffering among its population.”¹⁶⁴ In subsequent

operations in the area of Herat, Soviet forces even pushed into Iran in pursuit of the mujahideen.¹⁶⁵ In this case, unlike along the eastern border, the Soviets extracted an agreement from the Iranians both to hand over some insurgents and to restrict future mujahideen operations from Iran.¹⁶⁶ Soviet operations in Herat and Kandahar were qualified successes.

The use of indiscriminate terror within Afghanistan's urban centers illustrated the fundamental bankruptcy of Soviet strategy, as the identity and affiliation of those killed became less important than the total "body count." The employment of airpower against major urban areas also indicated a radicalization of the Soviet punishment strategy. The Soviet policy of bombing villages along the border in support of a depopulation strategy demonstrates the interrelationship of punishment and denial strategies in insurgency warfare. However, striking at major urban centers in the hope of killing some mujahideen with the certainty of killing many noncombatants presents an unambiguous example of punishment in its purest form. The policy of targeting urban centers was also politically counterproductive, as the majority of support for the DRA came from various ethnic groups within the urban minorities¹⁶⁷. The Afghan civilian population in its entirety, whether in the insurgent controlled countryside or within the Soviet and DRA occupied cities, now constituted an open target for Russian firepower.

In 1982, Soviet airpower would also play a substantial role in striking at the insurgents directly. The 1982 operations in the Panjshir valley offer a clear picture of a combined punishment and denial campaign. Edward Girardet described the importance and impact of Soviet aviation assets in an account of an operation in Panjshir during the summer:

From dawn to dusk, they doggedly came. First, one heard an ominous distant drone. Then, as the throbbing grew louder, tiny specks appeared on the horizon and swept across the jagged, snow-caped [sic] peaks of the Hindu Kush. Like hordes of wasps, the dull grey helicopter gunships came roaring over the towering ridges that ring this fertile valley. Soon the hollow thuds of rockets and bombs resounded like thunder as they pounded the guerrilla positions entrenched among the mountain slopes. Intermittently, pairs of MIG-23 jetfighters or the new, highly manoeuvrable SU-24 [sic] fighter-bombers shrieked across the skies to dislodge their loads over the huddled villagers hiding among the deep ravines and gorges to the sides. As small groups of front-line resistance fighters bitterly fought against specialised Soviet heliborne assault troops, a massive onslaught of tanks, armoured personnel carriers and trucks ground forward along the main valley floor in long dust-billowing columns, determined to crush whatever resistance blocked their path.¹⁶⁸

Girardet's vivid prose offers a clear picture of a typical combined arms operation, and is supported in its authenticity by the memories of a Soviet airborne soldier, Igor P. Igor P. entered Afghanistan in November 1981 and remained throughout 1982. He described an operation conducted in pursuit of suspected mujahideen in the following words: "The guerrillas' area was bombed by airplanes and helicopters. The MIGs flew in the first squadron. We followed the explosions of the bombs from a mountain ridge. After they had done enough bombing, the MIGs left. The helicopters came in their place. Our turn came third."¹⁶⁹ In another example, a Soviet infantry veteran described villages that looked like "ploughed fields" after sustained aerial bombardment.¹⁷⁰ Igor P. also discussed the standard operating procedures for clearing villages as including the practice of using hand grenades prior to entering any house.¹⁷¹

The Soviet operation in the spring of 1982 into the Panjshir valley included the commitment of 12,000 Soviet and DRA troops and more than 200 sorties by fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters.¹⁷² The objective of the combined Soviet and DRA thrust centered on destroying the 3,000-man force of Ahmad Shah Massud, thereby securing the

northern approach to the Kabul-Termez highway.¹⁷³ Massud had learned of the impending operation and attempted to preempt it by ordering several hundred mujahideen to strike Bagram airbase on the night of April 25. The mujahideen claimed to have destroyed 23 aircraft in the attack although Soviet sources conceded only the loss of “some” aircraft.¹⁷⁴

The initial stages of the spring offensive in Panjshir again relied heavily on airpower. The Soviets also demonstrated increasing ingenuity in the use of their aviation assets. The Soviet offensive began on May 10 with converted An-12 *Cub* transports serving as aerial reconnaissance and target designation platforms. In addition, the Su-25 *Frogfoot* ground attack aircraft made its debut in the theater, and proved to be capable and effective in the close air support role. During the campaign, the Su-25 *Frogfoot* supplemented MiG-21 *Fishbed* and Su-17 *Fitter* strikes using conventional high explosive bombs.¹⁷⁵ The daylight aerial bombing operations continued for an entire week until May 17 when a large-scale heliborne insertion of the 103rd Air Assault Division began. In support of the 103rd, the 108th Motor Rifle Division began pushing up the valley in a classic hammer-and-anvil maneuver.¹⁷⁶ Soviet and DRA forces soon ran into trouble as land mines and insurgent ambushes from tributary valleys inflicted heavy losses, including at least six BTR-60 armored personnel carriers (APCs) and six or seven T-62 tanks.¹⁷⁷

The mechanized forces, unable to maneuver or elevate their guns to fire at the surrounding heights, requested close air support. Groups of six Mi-24s arrived at the requested points and loitered overhead in the so-called “circle of death.” Forward air controllers with the ground units vectored the helicopters onto suspected mujahideen positions which were then attacked with cannon fire and rockets.¹⁷⁸ Despite their success

against the Soviet mechanized forces, the mujahideen had little chance against Soviet airpower, and they were forced to withdraw back into the tributary valleys. The offensive did eventually succeed in reestablishing DRA control over the floor of the Panjshir valley, for the first time since 1978, at the cost of between 300 and 400 Soviet casualties.¹⁷⁹ However, the offensive was only a partial success, as the besieged mujahideen simply disappeared into the surrounding hills to await the inevitable Soviet withdrawal. After a few weeks the Soviet forces did leave, making the victory decidedly pyrrhic for the Russians and their DRA allies.

The Panjshir valley campaigns of the spring and summer of 1982 illustrate the essential nature of Soviet strategy, writ small. The insurgent success against personnel carriers and tanks clearly demonstrated the vulnerability of mechanized forces in mountainous terrain. The apparent protection offered by the APCs resulted in an unwillingness among Soviet troops to dismount. The use of the vehicles' firing ports afforded the troops a limited field of view and reduced their ability to concentrate fire. The troops' refusal to leave the BTRs also essentially prevented pursuit of withdrawing insurgents. This problem continued to plague subsequent Soviet operations throughout the war.

The Panjshir offensive also highlighted the Soviet emphasis on using airpower in a number of roles including aerial fire direction, observation, troop transport, and CAS in support of the combined arms offensive. The week-long aerial bombardment prior to the start of the ground offensive demonstrated a "Somme-like" reliance on intensive bombardment in preparation for the attack. The Panjshir campaign also illustrated the importance of helicopters in combined arms operations. These assets provided the key

platform for rapidly delivering air assault troops to their blocking positions, and, subsequently, providing direct fire support. The use of *blokirovkas* (blocking maneuvers) usually involved a coordinated thrust between mechanized forces pushing towards the objective with a helicopter insertion of VDV (airborne) or DShB (air assault) troops behind the objective in order to prevent the escape of encircled enemy forces.¹⁸⁰ The reliance on the Mi-24 *Hind* for CAS also indicated its effectiveness in this role. In addition, the Soviet tactics of establishing a high orbit clearly demonstrate the lack of effective air defense capabilities on the part of the insurgents in 1982. Finally, operations in Afghanistan illustrated the importance of having forward air controllers (FAC) to direct CAS.¹⁸¹ It is worth noting, however, that these forward air controllers were predominantly army members without flying experience, while the best FACs in the war proved to be former pilots and navigators disqualified from flying duties.¹⁸²

In the final analysis, the offensives into Panjshir failed despite the Soviets' ability to organize their forces into a powerful combined arms team. Soviet commanders were learning a bitter and frustrating lesson, much as their American counterparts had fifteen years earlier in Vietnam. This was that insurgents, based on their tactics and their use of terrain, may prove relatively invulnerable to conventional operations even when these operations are supported by massive firepower. The Soviets, however, continued to hope for a set-piece victory and repeated the offensive into Panjshir in late August with the same results. In this offensive, the Soviets lost approximately 300 men in occupying the valley floor, and again withdrew after several weeks, leaving the valley once more in the hands of the mujahideen.¹⁸³

President Karmal indicated his unhappiness with the existing situation in an August 1982 broadcast, during which he admitted that DRA forces would need to increase their efforts to “clear the country of rebel bands” and “counter-revolutionary gangs.”¹⁸⁴ After two and a half years of fighting, the Soviet and DRA forces still controlled only the country’s main cities and major roads.¹⁸⁵

By the end of 1982, Soviet frustration with the situation in Afghanistan was apparent as well. The death of Leonid Brezhnev in November and his replacement by Yuri Andropov did little to change the tactical or strategic situation for members of the 40th Army. Soviet Politburo minutes indicate that Andropov’s “model for the war against the Afghan mujaheddin [sic] was the brutal campaign to establish Soviet rule in Central Asia following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.”¹⁸⁶ In a Politburo session on March 10, 1983, Andropov stated “Miracles do not happen. . . . But let us remember our own struggle with the basmachi.”¹⁸⁷

Andropov’s guidance provided a renewed impetus for a strategy of terror and reprisal against the Afghan population. The Soviets revealed the nature of this strategy in an attack on the city of Pagman in September. According to Western diplomats, Soviet jets and helicopters bombed and strafed the main marketplace for over two hours, killing and wounding several dozen people.¹⁸⁸ In the Panjshir valley, in the spirit of “divide and conquer,” the Soviets signed a six-month truce with Massud in January 1983.¹⁸⁹ The majority of the Afghan population would not, however, benefit from Massud’s arrangement, as Soviet forces, unable to corner the insurgents, increasingly resorted to reprisals in order to punish the civilian population for mujahideen actions. In April 1983, the Soviets responded to a general uprising in the ever-volatile hot bed of Herat by

conducting an indiscriminate “carpet bombing” campaign against the city of 150,000. The campaign, described by U.S. officials as “extremely heavy, brutal, and prolonged,” resulted in the destruction of half the city and the deaths of an estimated 3,000 noncombatants.¹⁹⁰ In addition, Soviet and DRA forces began a reprisal policy of targeting villages in the vicinity of mujahideen attacks against convoys or outposts. British journalist Mike Martin, who traveled with the mujahideen in the early 1980s, discussed the Russian policy of targeting nearby villages in retaliation for insurgent attacks by stating that the Soviets were “reduced to deliberately killing civilians in the vain hope they would abandon their fighting men.”¹⁹¹ Soviet and DRA aircraft or artillery bombarded the selected villages, and in some cases destroyed cultivated fields. The destruction of crops constituted a continuing element in an ongoing Soviet “starvation policy.”¹⁹² According to Doctors without Borders, this starvation policy had the added side-effect of increasing infant mortality rates to 85 percent during the winter of 1984-1985.¹⁹³ In addition, the destruction of irrigation systems also resulted in malarial outbreaks within these areas.¹⁹⁴

British historian Edgar O’Ballance argues that the evolving Soviet strategy “no longer sought to seize and hold territory; their ground operations became punitive, rather than empirical.”¹⁹⁵ In fact, in September 1982, Soviet troops entered a village 35 miles from Kabul and executed 105 of its inhabitants, including women and twelve children. These villagers had sought protection in an underground irrigation canal upon learning of the approach of Soviet forces. Despite Russian demands to come out, they refused to leave their hiding place and the Russian troops used a mixture of “gasoline, diesel fuel and an incendiary white powder” to clear the canal.¹⁹⁶ In another incident in July 1983,

Soviet forces executed at least twenty elders in the village of Ghazni in retribution for the deaths of several Soviet soldiers. Finally, reports surfaced in the West that Soviet forces had killed at least 360 civilians in three villages in the vicinity of Kandahar, also in retribution for the deaths of Soviet troops.¹⁹⁷

The Soviets clearly were not reluctant to employ airpower in support of their preparations for ground atrocities. Soviet air and ground operations in mid-October 1983 against the village of Istalif demonstrate this point. Between October 12 and 19, aircraft and artillery pounded the village in preparation for a ground assault. According to eyewitness accounts, this operation destroyed 80 percent of the village and resulted in 500 dead and another 500 wounded among the inhabitants.¹⁹⁸ Soviet actions in the above examples demonstrate the ready acceptance, and even the institutionalization, of atrocity. By 1983, both Andropov and the 40th Army were willingly pursuing a policy of punishment and terror reminiscent of Soviet actions some six decades earlier against the Basmachi tribesmen of Central Asia.

Martin argues that “By the middle of 1983 the Russians seemed bankrupt of military ideas and had resorted to the widespread use of terror.”¹⁹⁹ He describes combined attacks on villages by helicopters and jet fighters in which the helicopters marked the target for subsequent attack by their fixed-wing counterparts. He also discusses the use of a helicopter as a “slow FAC” in an operation aimed at insurgents hiding in a forested area. Again, the slower helicopter marked the point of attack with smoke in preparation for a two-ship fighter strike.²⁰⁰ Martin also witnessed the use of jets for reprisal attacks on at least four occasions during his stay in Afghanistan.²⁰¹ In one case, the Russians bombed a village for two weeks in retaliation for an attack on the outpost at Tagob.²⁰² He

described the Soviet attack as follows: “For days the jets flew low over the valley bombing the houses to dust. The worst destruction left you with a feeling that there had been no life there anyway: just mounds of rubble”²⁰³

In almost every respect, Soviet air and ground operations underwent an increasing radicalization in the years between 1981 and 1983. (One significant exception, however, proved to be the almost total lack of evidence of chemical weapons employment in 1983.)²⁰⁴ Soviet forces increasingly employed airpower as both a “force substitute” and an instrument of terror and reprisal against Afghanistan’s civilian population. The inability to fix the mujahideen, the desire to avoid casualties, and the resulting Soviet frustration with the *status quo* certainly combined in the adoption of a seemingly simple and low cost solution. It soon became apparent, however, that a policy of institutionalized atrocity would not result in a victory over the mujahideen--a new strategy was needed.

Notes

¹³⁴Mohammed Yahya Nawroz and Lester W. Grau, *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1994): 9.

¹³⁵Ibid.

¹³⁶Anthony Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble. Afghanistan’s Role in the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993): 128. Arnold served at one time as an intelligence officer in Afghanistan.

¹³⁷*The Times* (London), 21 April 1982, 7. Also Urban, 75. Urban discusses the impact of the weather on delaying operations in 1981. See also Kurt Lohbeck, *Holy War, Unholy Victory. Eyewitness to the CIA’s Secret War in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1993): 177.

¹³⁸Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan. The Soviet Union’s Last War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995): 16.

¹³⁹Urban, 68. Also Amstutz, 157.

¹⁴⁰Amstutz, 170

¹⁴¹Nawroz and Grau, 10.

¹⁴²Amstutz, 170.

Notes

¹⁴³Edward Girardet, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985): 36.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 37-38.

¹⁴⁵Boris V. Gromov and Sergey Bogdanov, *Ogranichenny kontingent* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1994): 202. Translation excerpts of this material provided by Lester W. Grau.

¹⁴⁶Mike Martin, *Afghanistan: Inside a Rebel Stronghold* (Poole, U.K.: Blandford Press, 1984): 74.

¹⁴⁷Jan Goodwin, *Caught in the Crossfire* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987): 3.

¹⁴⁸Lohbeck, 210. Lohbeck is regarded as one of the journalists who spent the most time among the mujahideen during the period of the Soviet occupation.

¹⁴⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰Girardet, 38.

¹⁵¹*Soviet Military Power* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983): 40-41. Rotary-wing aviation was transferred from the VVS to the Soviet army in 1990. See also Lambeth, *Russia's Air Power*, 228.

¹⁵²David C. Isby, "Soviet Tactics in the War in Afghanistan," *Jane's Defence Review* vol. 4, no. 7, (1983): 681.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*, 683. Isby discusses the adaptation of helicopter tactics used in Afghanistan to the European theater.

¹⁵⁴Urban, 84.

¹⁵⁵*The Times* (London), 23 September 1981, 6.

¹⁵⁶Michael Binyon, "600 Rebel Afghans Killed," *The Times* (London), 17 October 1981, 5.

¹⁵⁷Joseph John Collins, *Afghanistan: A Case Study in the Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1984): 273.

¹⁵⁸Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Situation in Afghanistan*, 97th Cong., 2d sess., 8 March 1982, 71-72. Rosanne Klass described the Freedom House as "a nonpartisan, nongovernmental, nonprofit organization which has for more than 40 years worked to support freedom and democracy in a world of widespread institutionalized oppression, identifying the forces of oppression wherever they may be and whatever they may be."

¹⁵⁹Amstutz, 145. Amstutz was the U.S. *chargé d'affaires* in Kabul between 1977 and 1980.

¹⁶⁰M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan. The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 197.

¹⁶¹*Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁶²Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Situation in Afghanistan*, 97th Cong., 2d sess., 8 March 1982, 3.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵*The Times* (London), 8 April 1982, 8.

¹⁶⁶Urban, 97.

¹⁶⁷Kakar, 126.

Notes

¹⁶⁸Girardet, 30. Girardet most probably confused Su-24 with the Su-25 *Frogfoot* in this account. Also Urban, 102. Urban claims at least 15,000 troops were involved.

¹⁶⁹Anna Heinämaa, Maija Leppänen, and Yuri Yurchenko, *The Soldier's Story: Soviet Veterans Remember the Afghan War*, trans. A.D. Haun (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994): 39.

¹⁷⁰Svetlana Alexievich, *Zinky Boys. Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*, trans. Julia and Robin Whitby (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990): 18.

¹⁷¹Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko, 35-36.

¹⁷²Girardet, 35. See also Urban, 102. Urban states that the fixed-wing sorties were flown between May 10-17.

¹⁷³Urban, 101.

¹⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 101-102.

¹⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁷⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁷⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰Alexiev, 23-24.

¹⁸¹Sarin and Dvoretzky, 119. See also Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London: Brassey's, 1991): 87-88

¹⁸²Lambeth, 206. See footnote 28.

¹⁸³Urban, 107-109.

¹⁸⁴Richard Owen, "Russia Worried over Kabul Split," *The Times* (London), 20 August 1982, 4.

¹⁸⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶Michael Dobbs, "Dramatic Politburo Meeting Led to End of War," *The Washington Post*, 16 November 1992, A16.

¹⁸⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸*The Times* (London), 30 September 1982, 5.

¹⁸⁹Arnold, *Fateful Pebble*, 131.

¹⁹⁰Jeff Trimble, "Update: Russia's "Hidden War" in Afghanistan," *U.S. News and World Report*, 1 August 1983, 22.

¹⁹¹Martin, 137. See also Kakar, 215-216.

¹⁹²Edgar O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars 1839-1992. What Britain Gave Up and the Soviet Union Lost* (London: Brassey's, 1993): 121.

¹⁹³Jean-Francois Revel, "The Awful Logic of Genocide," *National Review* vol. XXXVII no. 19, 4 October 1985, 27.

¹⁹⁴Robert D. Kaplan, *Soldiers of God: With the Mujahidin in Afghanistan* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990): 126.

¹⁹⁵O'Ballance, 119.

¹⁹⁶Kakar, 234. The American anthropologist Mike Barry related this story.

¹⁹⁷Amstutz, 146. Amstutz describes the three incidents cited.

¹⁹⁸Collins, 274.

¹⁹⁹Martin, 141.

Notes

²⁰⁰Ibid., 144-145. See also Anthony A. Cardoza, "Soviet Aviation in Afghanistan," *Proceedings* 113, no. 2 (February 1987): 87.

²⁰¹Ibid., 72, 212, 220, 234.

²⁰²Ibid., 85.

²⁰³Ibid., 86.

²⁰⁴"Battle Study: The Soviet War in Afghanistan," *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 70 no. 7, (July 1986): 61. This article was prepared by the Amphibious Warfare School Conference Group on Afghanistan.

Chapter 5

Air Assault Comes to Afghanistan, 1984-1985

I never got round to telling her [my wife] about the sheer joy of our helicopter pilots when they were dropping their bombs. It was ecstasy in the presence of death.

Soviet veteran recalling
his service in Afghanistan

British historian Mark Galeotti sees the ascension of Konstantin Chernenko as the new General Secretary of the CPSU on February 13, 1984, as a pivotal event influencing a Soviet shift towards a policy of the “iron fist” with respect to Afghanistan.²⁰⁵ Galeotti states that Chernenko “came closest to trying to win a military victory in Afghanistan, both owing to his personal inclinations and his desire to win for himself at least one triumph before succumbing to his emphysema.”²⁰⁶ It was not, however, the “iron fist” that was missing from Soviet strategy, but rather an appropriate doctrine for counterinsurgency operations.²⁰⁷

In 1984, the Soviets began to modify their air and ground strategy in an effort to more effectively employ their assets against the insurgents. Stephen Blank describes this shift in strategy and tactics as “moving in the direction of greater reliance upon mobility, long-range ordnance from air power, vertical rather than tank-led encirclement, [and the] use of specially assigned forces.”²⁰⁸ The Soviet lessons drawn from the first three years of the war involving the necessity for rapid mobility and massive, responsive fire support

in essence constituted a restatement of traditional Soviet doctrinal precepts. The focus on the idea of “vertical envelopment,” however, established a new emphasis for Soviet operations involving the massed use of heliborne operations by specially trained airborne and air assault forces.

The 1930s witnessed the birth of *desant* (air landing) forces in the Red Army. In fact, during this period the Soviet Union was the first country to employ large-scale parachute operations in its field exercises. By 1941, the Red Army possessed the world’s largest airborne force, with twelve airborne brigades.²⁰⁹ During World War II, however, Russian forces conducted very few large-scale air drop operations. After the war, the Soviets maintained their airborne forces as a *corps d’élite* with seven divisions of approximately 10,000 men each available for operations in 1955.²¹⁰

By 1979, Soviet *desant* forces included not only airborne forces (VDV), but also a developing air assault (DShB) force. These initial air assault forces largely consisted of elements taken from regular airborne divisions. According to U.S. Army Major James Holcomb and Soviet analyst Graham Turbiville, their doctrinal mission focused on cooperating “with the forward detachments and OMGs [Operational Maneuver Groups] of the army and front and assist[ing] their penetration to operational depths, as well as performing other missions at operational-tactical depths.”²¹¹ Helicopters provided a versatile and flexible platform for inserting air assault troops in the enemy’s rear areas without the risk of massed, exposed paradrops. These air assault forces could be inserted well behind the forward area of the battlefield, operating independently to disrupt an enemy’s lines of communications. They could also act as the blocking force in operations designed to trap enemy forces between the hammer of an advancing force and the anvil of

the air assault formation. It seems fair to speculate that the advances in helicopter capabilities in the 1970s and the American experience with air assault operations in Vietnam both combined to convince Soviet strategic planners of the value of such operations. Afghanistan provided the test bed and the baptism of fire for these nascent Soviet forces, and, in turn, for the concept of tactical *desant* operations.

Soviet airborne operations involving actual parachute drops were relatively rare in Afghanistan.²¹² As discussed earlier, however, airborne forces proved vital in conducting operations to secure key installations throughout the country during the initial invasion. As the war progressed, VDV forces pioneered many of the Soviet irregular warfare tactics, and, in turn, these forces became a primary element for conducting counterinsurgency operations either as dismounted infantry or by helicopter insertion.²¹³ The following eyewitness account by a former mujahid demonstrates the special capabilities of VDV forces in unconventional warfare:

We had taken positions close to the top of a mountain overlooking a valley and were shooting at the Soviets with BM-12s [rockets] and mortars. . . . Then all of a sudden a VDV company of about 90 men appeared and attacked us from behind. They had climbed straight up the mountain during the night. . . . We fought for two days there, and many people were killed. Before that I had thought that the Soviet soldiers are not worth anything . . . These were really tough guys.²¹⁴

This story not only illustrates the capabilities of the VDV, but it also points to a shift in Soviet strategy toward night operations during this period. Soviet Guards Major General F. Kuz'min discussed the early weaknesses of Soviet night operations in an article for the military daily, *Red Star*, in November 1982. Kuz'min stated that "the performance evaluation has shown that command and control of diversified forces in night combat continues to remain a stumbling block for some officers."²¹⁵ By 1984,

VDV, DShB, and specially trained reconnaissance troops constituted the primary forces for conducting night attacks and ambushes.²¹⁶ Sarin and Dvoretzky identify the growing emphasis on night actions in their discussion of operations from December 1983 to November 1984 in Herat, Kabul, Kapisa, Farah, and Parwan. According to Sarin and Dvoretzky, these operations consisted of airborne units seizing dominant terrain features in order to facilitate the movement of mechanized units, with artillery and aviation support provided as needed. They also contend that “whenever possible, the troops’ movements were performed at night without fire support and battlefield illumination, allowing them to hit the enemy unexpectedly in their flanks and rear.”²¹⁷

By 1984, helicopters, and the mobility they provided, began to play a much expanded role in the war against the insurgents. Both VDV and DShB forces counted on helicopters to provide them with increased mobility and firepower support in contrast to the vulnerable and slow-moving mechanized convoys. One veteran of the *desant* forces, Vladislav Tamarov, states “It was a lot easier on us when the helicopters took us into the mountains: you went to the airfield, boarded the copter, and in an hour you were there.”²¹⁸ Tamarov also detailed the four major types of military actions carried out by *desant* forces in Afghanistan, including: large-scale operations with the 103rd Airborne Division using artillery and aviation support to destroy large groups of mujahideen; small-scale operations by regiments with artillery and aviation support aimed at destroying a specific group of mujahideen; the “combing” of villages to identify weapons stores and field hospitals; and company-sized ambushes near roads, major trails, or villages.²¹⁹ Tamarov’s discussion clearly indicates that the Soviet counterinsurgency forces relied heavily on dismounted operations in contrast to their motorized rifle counterparts.

Tamarov's description of Soviet operations also illustrates the *desant* forces' reliance on air support as well as the routine use of these forces in counterinsurgency roles. In fact, DShB forces began to conduct surprise heliborne attacks against both villages and suspected mujahideen way stations (*chaikhana*, literally "tea house"). In one example, two helicopters landed approximately two dozen troops at a *chaikhana*. They surprised and, in about ten minutes, killed 30 insurgents before departing by helicopter.²²⁰

VDV and DShB forces were not, however, the only units involved in the conduct of large-scale air landings. The Soviets also tasked units from the motor rifle divisions for these operations, although these forces were generally regarded as "less suitable" for these tasks.²²¹ U.S. Army Colonel Scott McMichael, in his work *Stumbling Bear*, states that "the Soviet command discovered that their motorised rifle troops, units, and commanders did not possess the light infantry skills needed to defeat the mujahedin. They accepted the fact that the complexity of the required tactical skills simply exceeded the capability of the average MR unit and commander."²²² Despite their deficiencies, motorized rifle units still played a significant role in support of VDV and DShB units in the conduct of sweeps, large raids, and *blokirovka*-style operations.²²³

An operation in October 1984 in the area of the Pizgoran ravine demonstrates increasing reliance on large-scale air landings involving motorized rifle and counterinsurgency forces. On October 25th, 24 Mi-8 *Hip* helicopters airlifted 1,280 men into the area. During the operation, Mi-24 *Hinds*, MiG-23 *Floggers*, and Su-25s provided fire support for the landing force. Sarin and Dvoretzky state that this type of operation allowed Soviet forces to inflict losses on insurgents holding defensive positions while projecting "concentrated fire at distant operational locations beyond the front line."²²⁴

Main force units subsequently accomplished a link-up with the airhead forces in this operation prior to a further advance against enemy positions.²²⁵ In this instance, the air assault landing had essentially acted as the force with which first to outflank, and then to crack the mujahideen defensive line.

The relative success of the new combined arms strategy employing air assault techniques led to a growing optimism among the Soviet leadership concerning their ability to eventually defeat the insurgency. Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail S. Kapitsa stated in 1986 that the war would be over in five years.²²⁶ Kapitsa's assertion proved prophetic, but not in the intended sense of a Soviet victory. Prior to 1984, Soviet control of the skies was largely uncontested. The mujahideen lacked the armaments with which to construct an effective air defense system, and achieved their greatest successes against Soviet air units in mortar and rocket attacks against their airfields. However, this situation began to change as the insurgents acquired a greater number of heavy machine guns and manportable surface-to-air missiles (SAMs).

The sources of arms to the mujahideen were as varied as the motives of the suppliers in providing them. During the occupation, the insurgents received arms and/or monetary assistance either directly or indirectly from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Iran, and Pakistan. In addition, the mujahideen received limited amounts of arms and materiel from DRA and Soviet defectors. As early as January 6, 1980, Egypt offered to train members of the mujahideen for the fight against the Soviet occupation.²²⁷ In January 1980, General Kamal Hassan Ali, the Egyptian Defense Minister, announced the establishment of a number of bases inside Egypt in order "to provide military training facilities and weapons for Afghan guerrilla groups."²²⁸ In fact,

the United States asked Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to provide arms to the mujahideen from Egypt's existing stock of Soviet-made weapons.²²⁹ In 1981, President Ronald Reagan greatly increased the amount of U.S. aid above that provided covertly by the Carter administration.²³⁰ The Reagan administration subsidized the greatest part of the initial arms shipment with an aid package amounting to \$500 million by the end of March 1981.²³¹ Iran also provided a modest amount of aid, mainly to Shia co-religionist groups in 1981. This aid included heavy machine-guns, mines, RPG-7 anti-tank rockets, and monetary assistance.²³² However, Pakistan served as the primary conduit for aid shipments from the West.²³³

The initial arms shipments to the mujahideen from Pakistan consisted largely of small arms. The mujahideen, however, desperately required heavy machine-guns and surface-to-air missiles in order at least to threaten Russian control of the skies, especially Soviet helicopter operations.²³⁴ The Soviet confiscation of DRA weapons stores in 1980 was largely successful in preventing the loss of the Afghan armed force's SA-7 manportable SAMs to the mujahideen. The United States, in turn, made a concerted effort to supply the insurgents with SA-7s from third party sources.²³⁵ John Gunston, a former British army officer and journalist, reported that the mujahideen acquired a number of SA-7s from Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) stocks in Lebanon.²³⁶ Still, prior to 1984 the mujahideen possessed few surface-to-air missiles. By the end of 1984, however, the Chinese had emerged as the major supplier of anti-aircraft systems to the insurgents. The PDPA accused the Chinese, in a letter dated January 30, 1985, of having delivered "approximately 2,000 heavy machine-guns, 1,000 anti-tank rockets and nearly half a million rounds of ammunition."²³⁷

The Chinese also began delivering SA-7 manportable SAMs to the insurgents, and their effect became quickly noticeable on Soviet tactics. Apparently some missiles arrived as early as 1983 either from Chinese or other third party sources.²³⁸ According to an Afghan air force defector, the Soviets lost eight Mi-8 helicopters to SA-7s during a 1983 operation in Paktia province.²³⁹ In 1984, evidence emerged indicating that Soviet pilots were releasing their ordnance from higher altitude.²⁴⁰ By this time, observers also noted the routine use of infrared decoy flares by pilots of both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters.²⁴¹ The higher flight profiles allowed the pilots more reaction time, and the flares provided an effective means for deceiving and defeating the SA-7's relatively unsophisticated infrared seeker head.²⁴²

Prior to 1986, the mujahideen's most effective anti-aircraft weapon proved to be the "Dashka" 12.7 mm and the "Zigriat" 14.5 mm heavy machine-guns. A Soviet defector, Alexander Zuyev, noted that, although the mujahideen air defense tactics were "relatively primitive" in 1984, "their 12.7 mm and 14.5 mm antiaircraft guns could be dangerous below an altitude of about 4,500 feet."²⁴³ These heavy machine-guns began arriving in greater numbers as a result of increasing Chinese deliveries. For example, there were only 13 mujahideen heavy machine-guns in the Panjshir Valley in 1982. By the end of 1984, there were almost 250.²⁴⁴ The mujahideen became quite proficient in the use of these weapons to conduct "lateral ambushes." They situated gun sites at positions along opposing ridge lines in order to provide enfilade fire of Soviet aircraft operating in the area below the ridge or along the valley floor.²⁴⁵ A Soviet veteran described the irony in his unit's capture of several "Dashka" heavy machine-guns which had found their way

from the Soviet Union to China, and on to Afghanistan, where they were now being used to kill Russian soldiers.²⁴⁶

Mujahideen air defense attacks were not only confined to the battlefield, however. In fact, the insurgents achieved some dramatic results by infiltrating areas in the vicinity of Soviet airfields in order to attack Russian aircraft. Soviet Military Transport Aviation (VTA) played a key role in resupplying Russian forces in Afghanistan. For example, mujahideen attacks on the Kabul-Termez highway just prior to the 1984 Soviet offensive in Panjshir disrupted overland fuel supplies and forced the VTA to airlift the necessary fuel for the planned operation into Kabul.²⁴⁷ The VTA was, however, not able to escape the effects associated with the mujahideen's increased number of SA-7s. On 28 October 1984, the insurgents shot down a Soviet An-22 *Cock* heavy transport using a SA-7 just after it took off from the Kabul airport. In another example, an Afghan Airlines DC-10 with 300 passengers aboard was hit by a SA-7, but managed to land safely.²⁴⁸ Surrounded by a series of low hills, the airport at Kabul remained particularly vulnerable to the SAM threat throughout the remainder of the war. Kabul was not the only airfield put at risk by the mujahideen's manportable SAMs. In September 1984, the insurgents shot down a Bakhtar Airlines aircraft with a SA-7 just after it took off from the Kandahar airfield.²⁴⁹ The Soviets countered the growing SAM threat with on-board decoy flare systems as well as helicopter flare ships orbiting the airport prior to take-offs and landings.²⁵⁰ However, the increasing SAM threat throughout the theater resulted in the redeployment of Soviet electronic intelligence (ELINT) aircraft and long-range bombers based at Shindand back to the Soviet Union.²⁵¹ Bases inside the Soviet Union, such as Termez, provided greater

security for these assets, and still allowed for their effective employment within Afghanistan.

By the end of 1984, Soviet airpower, in all its various forms, carried the lion's share of the burden in prosecuting the war against the mujahideen. Operations ranged from the use of 36 Tu-16 *Badger* bombers in a mini "ARC LIGHT" campaign against the Panjshir Valley in April 1984 to the employment of VTA An-12 *Cubs* and An-26 *Curls* as master bombers.²⁵² Transport aircraft acting as flare ships for battlefield illumination also played an important role in discouraging or combating mujahideen night attacks.²⁵³ In addition, the use of helicopters in support of air assault, CAS, and interdiction operations formed a crucial element in the Soviet air strategy to defeat the insurgents. Stephen Blank correctly argues that "Between 1980 and 1986 Soviet strategy in Afghanistan gradually came to rely almost exclusively on airpower, staking everything on airpower's capabilities to deliver ordnance, interdict supplies and reserves, isolate the battlefield from the rear, destroy the agricultural basis . . . and rapidly move troops from point to point."²⁵⁴

By 1985, barring a massive influx of Soviet forces, it was clear that Soviet airpower would have to play an even greater role in order to win the battle against the mujahideen. The relatively small size of the Soviet contingent, estimated at 115,000 troops by early 1985, precluded a ground solution to the campaign.²⁵⁵ In addition to the 115,000 ground troops, there were approximately 10,000 VVS personnel, with these forces receiving added support from approximately 30,000 VVS personnel based in the southern USSR.²⁵⁶ By the end of the year, Soviet strategy mirrored the proverb "live by the sword, die by the sword." A survey in 1985 by Swedish relief workers illustrated the continued willingness of the Russians to employ the sword of airpower as a punitive weapon. The survey

indicated that the fields of over half the farmers who remained in Afghanistan were bombed, and over a quarter of these same farmers had their irrigation systems destroyed and livestock shot by Soviet and DRA forces.²⁵⁷ The Soviets were in fact living to a great degree by the airpower sword, but the mujahideen were becoming increasingly adept at blunting the blows of the Soviet aerial cutlass.

By the beginning of 1986, the mujahideen had clearly demonstrated an increased ability to combat Soviet airpower, and had at least forced Russian jets to operate at higher altitudes thereby decreasing their accuracy. The greater number of heavy machine-guns among the insurgents also led to an increasing capability to threaten the mainstay of Soviet aviation in Afghanistan, their helicopters. The Mi-24 *Hind*, almost impervious to small arms fire, was vulnerable to concentrated fire from either the 12.7 mm or 14.5 mm heavy machine-guns, and the SA-7. In the end, the numbers tell the story. One Afghan defector estimated DRA aircraft losses between December 1979 and early 1984 at 164 aircraft (both fixed-wing and helicopter).²⁵⁸ By the end of 1984, Soviet analyst Joseph J. Collins estimated Soviet losses at 600 total aircraft.²⁵⁹ The years of 1984 and 1985 witnessed the first successes of the mujahideen in somewhat blunting the might of Soviet aviation. However, the best was yet to come, for in 1986 the Stinger missile came to Afghanistan.

Notes

²⁰⁵Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995): 18.

²⁰⁶*Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰⁷Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear. Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London: Brassey's, 1991): 38.

²⁰⁸Stephen Blank, "Imagining Afghanistan: Lessons of a 'Small' War," *The Journal of Soviet Military Studies* vol. 3, no. 3 (September 1990): 474.

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²⁰⁹Kurt Student, "Airborne Forces," *The Red Army. The Red Army--1918 to 1945. The Soviet Army--1946 to the Present*, ed. B.H. Liddell Hart (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968): 376-377.

²¹⁰*Ibid.*, 381.

²¹¹James F. Holcomb and Graham H. Turbiville, "Soviet *desant* Forces," *International Defense Review* 9 (1988): 1081.

²¹²Alexander Alexiev, *Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1988): 26. Alexiev verified only three instances in his interviews with the mujahideen.

²¹³*Ibid.*, 27. Also Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam*, trans. Naomi Marcus, Marianne Clarke Trangen, and Vladislav Tamarov (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992): 28. See also Galeotti, 39.

²¹⁴Alexiev, 27.

²¹⁵David C. Isby, "Soviet Tactics in the War in Afghanistan," *Jane's Defence Review* vol. 4, no. 7, (1983): 689.

²¹⁶McMichael, 139. See footnote 5. Also Galeotti, 38.

²¹⁷Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretzky, *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union's Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993): 105.

²¹⁸Tamarov, 28.

²¹⁹*Ibid.*, 20.

²²⁰*Ibid.*

²²¹Sarin and Dvoretzky, 108.

²²²McMichael, 65-66.

²²³*Ibid.*, 68.

²²⁴Sarin and Dvoretzky, 102-103.

²²⁵*Ibid.*, 103.

²²⁶Blank, "Imagining Afghanistan," 474.

²²⁷*The Times* (London), 7 January 1980, 4.

²²⁸Christopher Walker, "War Training in Egypt for Guerrillas," *The Times* (London), 9 January 1980, 5.

²²⁹Nicholas Hirst, "Sadat Tells Secret of Afghan Arms," *The Times* (London), 24 September 1981, 6.

²³⁰Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan. The Communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984): 158.

²³¹Gérard Chaliand, *Report From Afghanistan*, trans. Tamar Jacoby (New York: The Viking Press, 1982): 99.

²³²"Khomeini Helps the Afghans," *Foreign Report*, 22 September 1983, 1.

²³³McMichael, 30.

²³⁴Edgar O'Ballance, "Soviet Tactics in Afghanistan," *Military Review*, vol. LX no. 8, (August 1980): 52.

²³⁵McMichael, 30.

²³⁶John Gunston, "Special Report: Afghanistan War," *Aviation Week & Space Technology* vol. 121, no. 18, (29 October 1984): 40.

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²³⁷John G. Merriam, "Arms Shipments to the Afghan Resistance," *Afghan Resistance: The Politics of Survival*, eds. Grant M. Farr and John G. Merriam (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987): 74.

²³⁸McMichael, 89.

²³⁹Amstutz, 164.

²⁴⁰Dov S. Zakheim, "New Technologies & Third World Conflicts," *Defense* 86 (July/August 1986): 16.

²⁴¹"Soviets Use Flares to Counter Missiles," *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 26 March 1984, 54-55.

²⁴²Merriam, 88.

²⁴³Alexander Zuyev and Malcolm McConnell, *Fulcrum: A Top Gun Pilot's Escape from the Soviet Empire* (New York: Warner Books, 1992): 127-128.

²⁴⁴"Battle Study: The Soviet War in Afghanistan," *Marine Corps Gazette* vol. 70 no. 7, (July 1986): 60. This article is the product of the Amphibious Warfare School Conference Group on Afghanistan.

²⁴⁵Telephonic interview with Lester W. Grau, 18 November 1996.

²⁴⁶Tamarov, 102.

²⁴⁷Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion in Perspective* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1985): 100.

²⁴⁸Urban, 156. See also O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars*, 145.

²⁴⁹O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars*, 145.

²⁵⁰Jan Goodwin, *Caught in the Crossfire* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987): 111, 123, 153.

²⁵¹O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars*, 145. See also Peter Arnett, *Live from the Battlefield. From Vietnam to Baghdad 35 Years in the World's War Zones* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994): 426.

²⁵²Anthony R. Tucker, "The Soviet War Over Afghanistan," *Jane's Soviet Intelligence Review* vol. 1 no. 6, (June 1989): 270-271.

²⁵³Robert D. Kaplan, *Soldiers of God. With the Mujahidin in Afghanistan* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990): 59.

²⁵⁴Stephen J. Blank, *Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan, 1979-90* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1991): 73.

²⁵⁵Girardet, 33.

²⁵⁶Joseph J. Collins, *Afghanistan: A Case Study in the Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1984): 268.

²⁵⁷Kaplan, 11.

²⁵⁸Gunston, 43.

²⁵⁹Joseph J. Collins, "The Soviet Military Experience in Afghanistan," *Military Review*, (May 1985): 21. A great percentage of these numbers must be attributed to flying mishaps due to weather, maintenance problems, or poor flying skills. Nevertheless, it is clear that the increased introduction of SA-7s and heavy machine-guns played a key role in raising aircraft losses in 1984 and 1985.

Chapter 6

The Prelude to Withdrawal, 1986

Such, in brief, was the country; and such were the peoples who, with no outside assistance, with no artillery but what they could capture from the enemy, with no trust but in Allah and His Prophet, their own right hands and flashing blades, defied the might of Russia for more than half a century; defeating her armies, raiding her settlements, and laughing to scorn her wealth, her pride, and her numbers.

Unidentified Englishman's
account of Russian actions
in the Caucasus during the
18th and 19th centuries

The offensives of 1984 and 1985 had proved costly to Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Western intelligence reports estimated that 2,343 Soviet personnel were killed in action (KIA) in 1984 and another 1,868 were KIA in 1985.²⁶⁰ The ascension of Mikhail Gorbachev to the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in the spring of 1985 coincided with what would become the third costliest year of the war for the Soviets.²⁶¹ Soviet frustration with the war was becoming increasingly apparent. From the platform of the 27th Party Congress in February 1986, Gorbachev described Afghanistan as a “bloody stump.”²⁶² In addition to the cost in lives, the Soviet Union was spending an estimated 5 billion dollars a year in prosecuting the war.²⁶³ In fact, 1986 was destined to be the year of decision for Soviet policymakers concerning their continued involvement in the Afghan quagmire.

British defense correspondent Mark Urban states that “From early 1986 the Soviet Army switched to a more defensive strategy. Rural operations were reduced and defences around towns increased . . .”²⁶⁴ Urban estimates that there were six offensives involving more than 5,000 Soviet troops each in 1984-85 while there was only one such operation during the last three years of the war.²⁶⁵ Urban’s argument is correct with respect to the involvement of Soviet ground forces, as the burden of large-scale ground fighting began to shift to DRA forces. In fact, Soviet casualties in 1986 dropped to their lowest levels since 1981.²⁶⁶ The Soviets did not, however, completely abandon offensive operations.

In February 1986, Soviet forces conducted a large-scale operation into the Charikar valley, approximately 40 miles north of Kabul, which demonstrated the increasing proficiency of Soviet forces in the conduct of *desant*-type combined arms operations. For example, on the first day alone, helicopters conducted a tactical insertion of three airborne battalions, reconnaissance troops, and three motor rifle companies. Later, an additional seventeen battalions were landed in support of the operation.²⁶⁷ The Charikar valley operation illustrated the ability of Soviet forces to conduct massed air assault operations with both airborne and regular troops by 1986.

In early April, Soviet and DRA forces launched a joint operation aimed at capturing the rebel base at Zhawar, a mere three kilometers from the Pakistani border. The attacking force consisted of 12,000 troops of which only 2,200 were Soviet forces. Soviet airpower again played a critical role in assembling the forces and supporting the attack, airlifting 4,200 DRA and Russian troops into the airport at Khost just prior to the start of the operation.²⁶⁸ During the initial stages of the operation, DRA mechanized and ground forces pushing south from Khost encountered heavy resistance that slowed their advance

to between 2 and 3 kilometers per day.²⁶⁹ In attempting to break the mujahideen resistance, the offensive on the road to Zhawar relied heavily on large-scale heliborne operations in order to provide the anvil for the hammer of the advancing mechanized forces. Brigadier Abdol Gafur, the DRA commander for the operation, employed elite Soviet and DRA battalions in air assault landings behind the mujahideen lines. Soviet aircraft also supported the DRA forces by conducting strikes on the mujahideen positions. For example, Soviet Su-25 *Frogfoot* ground attack aircraft with laser-guided bombs struck the insurgents' cave/storage complex at Zhawar.²⁷⁰ After almost three weeks of fighting, Zhawar fell to the DRA and Soviet forces. Although modest in terms of Soviet ground participation, the campaign clearly indicated the continuing importance of Soviet airpower in all its forms. The Zhawar campaign provided an example of Soviet airpower's effectiveness when the mujahideen chose to stand and fight a fixed battle.

During this period, the Soviets also adapted their tactics to better suit the nature of unconventional warfare by employing small groups of specially trained commando forces (*spetsnaz*) to conduct hit-and-run raids against the mujahideen. Edward Girardet, a journalist with extensive experience traveling with the mujahideen, states "The special troops are swift, silent and deadly. Swooping down in a single December [1985] raid, they slaughtered 82 guerrillas and wounded 60 more."²⁷¹ A mujahideen commander, Amin Wardak described the ambush: "They attacked at night in a narrow gorge. At first, we didn't know we were being shot at because of the silencers. Then our people began falling."²⁷² A Soviet correspondent, Artyom Borovik, described a similar ambush along a caravan route in early 1987. The ambushes were effective, but relied on small numbers

of specially trained forces. In addition, these forces relied largely on the mobility provided by helicopters for insertion and exfiltration.²⁷³

If Soviet ground operations were reduced in 1986, the nature of Soviet air operations remained essentially the same. One estimate of Soviet aircraft in Afghanistan in 1986 included 80 MiG-21 *Fishbeds*, 40 MiG-23 *Floggers*, 80 Su-17 *Fitters*, 30 Su-25s, and 27 reconnaissance aircraft.²⁷⁴ The number of helicopters in the country dramatically declined between 1985 and 1988. Compared to a high of approximately 600 aircraft in 1982, the number of helicopters declined from 350 in 1985 to 325 in 1986, and, finally to 275 by February 1988.²⁷⁵ In 1986, the Soviet helicopter inventory in Afghanistan included 140 Mi-24 *Hinds*, 105 Mi-8 *Hips*, 40 Mi-6 *Hooks*, and 40 Mi-2 *Hoplites*.²⁷⁶ The greatly reduced number of helicopters appears to be directly tied to the restricted size and nature of Soviet ground operations. In addition, the growing vulnerability of rotary-wing assets to the increasing missile threat certainly played a role in the decision to reduce these forces.

The heavy preponderance of Mi-24 *Hinds* allowed for the continued conduct of both CAS and interdiction missions along the borders. The Mi-24s, with their 12.7 mm machine-gun, 4 anti-tank missiles, and 128 57 mm rockets, proved ideal for patrolling the “free fire” zone created along the border during the major offensives in both the Kunar valley and Paktia province in 1985.²⁷⁷ Robert Kaplan, an American traveling with the mujahideen in 1988, described the effectiveness of the Soviet campaign in his description of a typical scene in the border province of Ningrahar:

Morning found us in a paradise lost. This lush valley, . . . had become a zone of death. Bomb-cratered fields lay fallow. Anti-personnel mines lay not far from the path. Once-soaring minarets were cut off at their

midsections, and village after mud brick village that we passed through was nothing but a roofless jigsaw of collapsed wall adjoining mounds of rubble.²⁷⁸

The Soviets also intensified their attacks on the civilian population by using Su-25 *Frogfoot* attack aircraft with cluster bombs in a continuing effort to depopulate rural areas by the strict enforcement of free fire zones.²⁷⁹

The Soviet air campaign along the border once again demonstrates the interrelationship between punishment and denial operations in the war against the mujahideen. The renewed Soviet attacks along the Pakistani border provide a clear example of punitive denial type operations. The Su-25 *Frogfoot* with cluster munitions acted as the punitive instrument for striking indirectly at the mujahideen, through the mechanism of area depopulation. The mujahideen, as the primary target, could only be targeted through attacks aimed at the area's noncombatants. This series of operations again illustrates the employment of punishment as a means for achieving denial objectives.

The Soviet employment of airpower in Afghanistan in 1986 also witnessed the introduction of increasingly advanced technology in the fight against the insurgents. As mentioned above, Su-25 *Frogfoot* aircraft launched laser-guided bombs against caves suspected of housing mujahideen supplies in the April campaign against Zhawar.²⁸⁰ The use of the retardable RBK 250 cluster bomb and 12,000 lb. bombs illustrated continuing Soviet efforts to use airpower as a "force substitute" in their military operations. The use of Tu-26 *Backfire* bombers in 1988 for high-altitude bombing provided the ultimate expression of this strategy.²⁸¹ The ability of heavy bombers, including both the Tu-16 *Badger* and the Tu-26, to deliver larger bomb loads than the MiG and Sukhoi fighter-

bombers also appears to have contributed to the decision to employ them against the mujahideen. The introduction of these weapons also reflected, in part, a Soviet desire to use Afghanistan as a test bed for munitions and other weapons systems.²⁸²

It was, however, the mujahideen and not the Soviets who employed the most decisive weapons system of 1986. After a period of prolonged deliberation, the U.S. government finally decided to supply the mujahideen with heat-seeking Stinger surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) in 1986. In hindsight, it is clear that the both the psychological and physical impact of the Stinger proved decisive. The very presence of the missile, whether used to full effect or not, forced a fundamental alteration in the nature of Soviet air tactics throughout Afghanistan. The Stinger, however, constituted the second phase in attempts by the West to improve the organic air defense capabilities of the insurgents.

Already in the beginning of 1986, the mujahideen received the first shipments of the British-manufactured Blowpipe manportable SAM.²⁸³ The optically guided Blowpipe proved large and unwieldy in the eyes of the insurgents. The Blowpipe required the operator to guide the missile with a thumb-controlled joystick while tracking the target with a monocular sight.²⁸⁴ Paul Overby, an American who traveled with the mujahideen in 1988, described the reaction of one insurgent when comparing the fire-and-forget Stinger with the Blowpipe: “Gulaly asked me if the Stinger was American. I told him it was. ‘Stinger ... *klak!* Blowpipe...*kherab!*’ Stinger tough, Blowpipe bad, he repeated over and over, like an incantation.”²⁸⁵ It is important to note that *klak*, or toughness, was a trait valued by the mujahideen and indicated admiration for the weapon, and not the fact that it was difficult to use. In fact, it was true that even the Stinger was not a user friendly missile. Tests conducted with trained U.S. Army personnel indicated that only 45 percent

achieved a kill.²⁸⁶ This result, however, proved largely irrelevant in the case of the mujahideen. The most difficult step in firing the missile centered on its complicated IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) process.²⁸⁷ In Afghanistan, the insurgents had no need for this step. The elimination of IFF did not make Stinger a “point and shoot weapon,” but it did greatly facilitate the relative ease of its use.

In any event, the Stinger was by all indications a great improvement over the Blowpipe. Daoud Rams, a former MiG-21 pilot with the Afghan air force, stated that “The Blowpipe missile didn’t present as serious a problem to fighter aircraft as Stinger. Both Stinger and Blowpipe were real problems for helicopters, but we were more concerned with Stinger.”²⁸⁸ The Blowpipe did not prove the answer to the insurgents’ prayers, but the introduction of the Stinger in mid-1986 fundamentally weakened the Soviets’ most effective and lethal weapon in the war, airpower.

By October 1986, the mujahideen had received approximately 200 Stinger missiles.²⁸⁹ The Stinger, with its maximum speed of 2.2 Mach and maximum effective range of 5.5 kilometers, provided a quantum leap in performance over the SA-7 with a maximum speed of 1.4 Mach and maximum effective range of 3 kilometers.²⁹⁰ More importantly, the Stinger was an all-aspect missile while the infra-red passive homing SA-7 could only be launched from the rear quadrant of aircraft moving away from the missile operator. The SA-7’s constrained launch envelope and its relatively low speed thus limited its effectiveness against high-speed fixed-wing targets. The impact of the new missiles was immediate, with the reported downing of eleven helicopters and one jet during the first two weeks of November.²⁹¹ Exaggerated mujahideen claims that they were destroying an aircraft every day should not be allowed to overshadow the Stinger’s

dramatic tactical impact on Soviet and DRA air operations, especially helicopter operations.²⁹²

Soviet and DRA reactions, not mujahideen claims, provide some of the strongest evidence concerning the initial impact of the Stinger. One Soviet veteran recalled that his unit was briefed that anyone capturing an intact Stinger missile would be automatically awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal.²⁹³ Sarin and Dvoretzky state that the Stingers “inflicted heavy losses on Soviet pilots,” and that “the combat effectiveness of Soviet air operations was lessened greatly when the Stinger was introduced into Afghanistan.”²⁹⁴ In a study for the RAND corporation, Alexander Alexiev provided a “conservative estimate” crediting the Stinger with a kill rate between 30 and 40 percent, and crediting it with destroying 270 Soviet aircraft between October 1986 and September 1987.²⁹⁵

The physical impact of Stinger found expression in a variety of ways. For example, a Soviet doctor discussed the missile’s impact, stating “Until 1987 all of the wounded were evacuated by helicopter . . . But the arrival of Stinger missiles put an end to the massive use of choppers.”²⁹⁶ Not only were medevac missions affected, but the essential nature of air tactics changed with the arrival of the Stinger. In an interview, Daoud Rams, the Afghan air force defector, said “Before Stinger, we were free to do almost anything we wanted. After Stinger was introduced, we changed all our tactics, altitudes and speed--everything. We did not like to fly down low, and when we had to, we flew very fast, and even at high altitudes, we flew as fast as we could. . . . We were no longer able to operate at will whenever and wherever we wanted to.”²⁹⁷

Without a doubt, the Stinger forced a change in flight profiles for both fixed-wing and helicopter aircraft. Overby remarked that “In Peshawar the word was that the Stinger had almost eliminated low level bombing.”²⁹⁸ Overby’s observation is, however, only partially accurate. Stinger did force Soviet and DRA fighter-bomber pilots to fly at higher altitudes. Conversely, mujahideen use of Stingers forced both the Su-25 *Frogfoot* and helicopters to fly lower nap-of-the-earth profiles.²⁹⁹ Artyom Borovik, a Soviet journalist who traveled with Russian troops in Afghanistan, writes “Last year [1986], the Mi-8s were flying at their maximum altitude--approximately six thousand meters. But now, with the appearance of the Stinger missiles, they descend from above and race along, just five meters or so off the ground, at a speed of two hundred and fifty kilometers per hour.”³⁰⁰ Driving helicopters and attack aircraft down to the deck now exposed them to increased danger from small arms fire even in areas where the Stinger was not deployed. Additionally, the Soviets increased the number of night sorties in an attempt to reduce losses.³⁰¹ The greater reliance on night missions diminished effectiveness in two respects. On the one hand, night sorties increased problems with target identification and location and decreased the accuracy of aerial fire support. On the other hand, the greater night sortie rate also acted to limit the number of available day sorties.

By the end of 1986, the psychological impact of the Stinger was profound, as both Soviet and DRA pilots had to assume that the missile was now operational throughout the entire country. One member of the mujahideen succinctly described the behavior change among attacking pilots in the following words: “They don’t like suffering casualties, so they drop their bombs and fly home as quickly as they can.”³⁰² John Gunston, a former British army officer and journalist for *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, after

observing a six-ship Soviet jet strike in the beginning of 1988, remarked on the poor results of the bombing. “It appeared,” he said “that the pilots involved were putting survival before accuracy.”³⁰³ The psychological impact of Stinger was clearly significant. Stinger’s operational impact was also profound, as it provided the mujahideen with a capable and lethal fire-and-forget weapon that greatly increased the threat to Soviet and DRA aircraft.

The interdiction of supplies and manpower along the border had formed one of the cornerstones of Soviet strategy from the outset of the war. By 1986, the Soviets came increasingly to rely on airpower rather than ground forces to enforce a literal no man’s land in the Afghan provinces bordering Pakistan. By the end of 1984, the majority of supply caravans moved at night in order to avoid the threat of Soviet air attack. In the period from November 1983 to March 1984, the Soviets used specially trained reconnaissance troops to monitor thirteen points along the major infiltration routes from Pakistan. These forces detected 579 movements out of Pakistan of which 463, or, 80 percent, were conducted at night.³⁰⁴ The increased Soviet efforts in using counterinsurgency forces for night ambushes in 1985 and 1986 were apparently one attempt to interdict this traffic, and to overcome the earlier poor performance of regular troops in night operations.³⁰⁵ In one case, the Soviets used satellite thermal imagery and air reconnaissance during an operation in 1987 to identify a mujahideen caravan. Helicopters then inserted *spetsnaz* forces to successfully ambush the caravan.³⁰⁶ In response to the improving Soviet capability for conducting night ambushes, the mujahideen successfully adapted their own tactics by increasing their march security, using more patrols, and establishing counter-ambushes.³⁰⁷ By the beginning of 1988,

Gunston observed that “The fear of air attack that had prevailed among the mujahideen in 1985 and 1986 has disappeared and supply caravans now travel with ease during the day, something they were loathe to do two years ago.”³⁰⁸ The introduction of the Stinger not only allowed supply caravans to travel during the day, but it also allowed mujahideen forces to mass in preparation for offensive operations.

Anthony Tucker argued that “The introduction of Stinger ended the Soviets’ ability to conduct heliborne operations and airborne operations with impunity. This over-reliance on helicopters meant they had no other options when it came to interdicting the insurgents’ operations, making the war once and for all unwinnable [sic], contributing to their decision to withdraw.”³⁰⁹ An analysis of the chronology of Russian decisionmaking only partially supports Tucker’s argument. Gorbachev had already ordered a partial troop withdrawal in the summer of 1986. The decision to “get out” of Afghanistan, however, did not occur until a Politburo meeting of November 13, 1986.³¹⁰ During this seminal meeting Gorbachev argued “We have been fighting in Afghanistan for six years now. If we don’t change approaches we will be fighting for another 20 or 30 years . . . We must finish this process in the swiftest time possible.”³¹¹ In a tone distinctly reminiscent of American military leaders after Vietnam, Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev stated:

There is not a single piece of land [in Afghanistan] that the Soviet soldier has not conquered. Despite this, a large chunk of territory is in the hands of the rebels. We control Kabul and the provincial centers, but we have been unable to establish authority over the seized territory. We have lost the struggle for the Afghan people.³¹²

The appearance of the Stinger, in addition to the increased number of SA-7s and Blowpipes, may have played a small role in the Politburo’s decision based on the missile’s early success. It appears, however, that Gorbachev was reacting to a prolonged

and costly struggle that offered the Soviets no real advantage besides the opportunity to increase the roll call of fraternal socialist states--domestic political and economic considerations apparently outweighed protocol victories.

By the end of 1986, a little over two years of fighting still remained. It was clear, however, that the center of gravity of Soviet operations in Afghanistan revolved around the ability of the VVS to quickly and accurately deliver both fire support and forces throughout the country.³¹³ The introduction of the Stinger missile effectively reduced the Soviets' greatest advantage. The Soviets no longer "owned" the air. The loss of air supremacy precluded any chance for Russian victory in the near future.

The Soviet military had made airpower a force substitute for large-scale troop deployments, and the loss of freedom in the air left them with few available alternatives. Their dilemma centered on finding a new strategy to combat the mujahideen. Increased high altitude bombing or the reintroduction of chemical agents were two possibilities. The former would only work if the insurgents could be accurately located and targeted, while the latter threatened to provoke a new storm of international protest. The Soviets were indeed caught on the horns of a dilemma, and, barring a major increase in ground troops, withdrawal appeared the only logical solution. At the Politburo meeting in November 1986, Marshal Akhromeyev addressed the failure of interdiction efforts by stating, "We have deployed 50,000 Soviet soldiers to seal the border, but they are unable to close all channels through which arms are being smuggled across the border."³¹⁴ The head of the KGB, Viktor Chebrikov, acknowledged the geographic difficulties involved in closing the frontier. However, he argued that "the lack of success in sealing the border is also due to the fact that not everything was done that could have been done."³¹⁵

Chebrikov was wrong. Short of a politically disastrous invasion of Pakistan with the associated danger of a major superpower showdown, the Soviets had done their best. The simple and unpalatable fact for Soviet planners was that neither advanced technology nor a fresh influx of troops would break the spirit of their mujahideen opponents, who appeared prepared to fight to the last man.

Notes

²⁶⁰Mark Urban, "Soviet Operations in Afghanistan--Some Conclusions," *Jane's Soviet Intelligence Review* vol. 2 no. 8, (August 1990): 366.

²⁶¹Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretzky, *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union's Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993): 187.

²⁶²Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988): 189.

²⁶³Michael Dobbs, "Dramatic Politburo Meeting Led to the End of War," *The Washington Post*, 16 November 1992, A16. See also Anthony Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble: Afghanistan's Role in the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993): 185-187. Arnold provides an extensive discussion of the various cost estimates for the Soviet occupation. These estimates range from 3 to 8.2 billion dollars a year, depending on the source and the method of calculation.

²⁶⁴Mark Urban, "Soviet Operations," 366-367.

²⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 367.

²⁶⁶Sarin and Dvoretzky, 187.

²⁶⁷*Ibid.*

²⁶⁸Urban, *War in Afghanistan*, 191.

²⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 193.

²⁷⁰*Ibid.*

²⁷¹Edward Girardet, "Behind New Soviet Tactics in Afghanistan," *U.S. News & World Report*, 20 January 1986, 30. See also Kurt Lohbeck, *Holy War, Unholy Victory. Eyewitness to the CIA's Secret War in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1993): 200.

²⁷²Girardet, 30.

²⁷³Alexander Alexiev, *Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 1988): 33.

²⁷⁴Dov S. Zakheim, "New Technologies & Third World Conflicts," *Defense* 86 (July/August 1986): 16.

²⁷⁵Anthony R. Tucker, "The Soviet War Over Afghanistan," *Jane's Soviet Intelligence Review* vol. 1 no. 6, (June 1989): 270. See also Zakheim, 16.

²⁷⁶Zakheim, 16.

²⁷⁷George W. Collins, "The War in Afghanistan," *Air University Review* vol. XXXVII no. 3, (March/April 1986): 44-45.

²⁷⁸Kaplan, 118-119.

²⁷⁹Zakheim, 16.

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²⁸⁰Tucker, 270. See also Kurt Lohbeck, *Holy War, Unholy Victory: Eyewitness to the CIA's Secret War in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1993): 208. Lohbeck states that caves were specifically chosen as storage sites in order to prevent their detection from the air.

²⁸¹*Ibid.*, 270-271.

²⁸²*Ibid.*, 271.

²⁸³Mark Urban, "Soviet Operations," 367.

²⁸⁴Tony Cullen and Christopher F. Foss, eds., *Jane's Battlefield Air Defence* (Surrey, England: Jane's Information Group, 1988): 19.

²⁸⁵Paul Overby, *Holy Blood: An Inside View of the Afghan War* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993): 108.

²⁸⁶Larry Grossman, "Stinger Success," *Military Forum* 4, (April 1988): 54.

²⁸⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸⁸George A. Neranchi and Floyd C. Painter, "An Exclusive Defense Electronics Interview with Daoud Rams," *Defense Electronics* vol. 20 no. 11, (October 1988): 148. Daoud Rams received his pilot training in the Soviet Union, but later defected to Pakistan in a MiG-21 during a combat mission near the border.

²⁸⁹Tucker, 271.

²⁹⁰Cullen and Foss, 13,23. The Blowpipe has a maximum speed of Mach 1 and a maximum effective range of 3.5 kilometers.

²⁹¹Tucker, 271.

²⁹²John Gunston, "Stingers Used by Afghan Rebels Stymie Soviet Air Force Tactics," *Aviation Week & Space Technology* 128, (4 April 1988): 46. Gunston compiled this report after traveling with mujahideen forces in 1988.

²⁹³Anna Heinämaa, Maija Leppänen, and Yuri Yurchenko, *The Soldier's Story: Soviet Veterans Remember the Afghan War*, trans. A.D. Haun (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994): 76.

²⁹⁴Sarin and Dvoretzky, 101.

²⁹⁵Alexiev, 33.

²⁹⁶Artyom Borovik, *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990): 135.

²⁹⁷Neranchi and Painter, 148.

²⁹⁸Overby, 157.

²⁹⁹Gunston, 46.

³⁰⁰Borovik, 45.

³⁰¹Kaplan, 118. See also A. A. Kiyanenko, "Combat Employment of the Air Force in the Republic of Afghanistan," in *JPRS Report. Soviet Union: Military Thought* no. 8 (August 1991): 16. Article translated from Russian from *VOYENNAYA MYSL*.

³⁰²Gunston, 47.

³⁰³*Ibid.*

³⁰⁴Sarin and Dvoretzky, 114.

³⁰⁵David C. Isby, "Soviet Tactics in the War in Afghanistan," *Jane's Defence Review* vol. 4 no. 7, (1983): 689.

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³⁰⁶Galeotti, 191. See also O'Ballance, 155. O'Ballance also discusses the use of satellite imagery for caravan detection, and estimates that there were seven *spetsnaz* regiments in Afghanistan in 1986.

³⁰⁷Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London: Brassey's, 1991): 75.

³⁰⁸Gunston, 46.

³⁰⁹Tucker, 271.

³¹⁰Douglas A. Borer, "The Afghan War: Communism's First Domino," *War & Society* vol. 12, no. 2, (October 1994): 133.

³¹¹*Ibid.*

³¹²Dobbs, A16.

³¹³William McManaway, "Stinger in Afghanistan," *Air Defense Artillery* (January/February 1990): 7.

³¹⁴Dobbs, A16.

³¹⁵Dobbs, A16.

Chapter 7

Mujahideen Ascendant, 1987-1989

We do not really need aid. We will take anything we are given, but we do not owe to anyone. We have the jihad.

Unnamed Mujahideen Commander

Soviet actions in the final two years of the war in Afghanistan were in many respects reminiscent of the American withdrawal from Indochina more than fifteen years earlier. The Zhawar campaign in April 1986 signaled a shift in the burden of fighting to the forces of the DRA much like the American strategy of “Vietnamization.” Soviet aviation assets would, however, continue to support DRA forces in their garrisons and in the field just as the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy had done in the waning days of the U.S. ground withdrawal from Vietnam. The low tempo of Soviet ground operations in 1987 and 1988 mirrored the sluggish pace of the negotiations between the representatives of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. concerning the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan.

The Soviets sought a solution that would guarantee the continued existence of the PDPA and the current DRA regime, now under the leadership of President Najibullah Ahmadzai. Najibullah replaced Karmal as the leader of the PDPA in May 1986. Karmal subsequently left Afghanistan in May 1987 for “medical treatment” in the Soviet Union.³¹⁶ The U.S., although seeking a complete Soviet withdrawal, was unwilling to abandon the mujahideen or to cut off supplies until the Soviets actually left the country.³¹⁷ The number of parties involved further complicated the negotiation process as any agreement had to be acceptable to the two superpowers, the DRA, Pakistan, and the

mujahideen.³¹⁸ The question by this time was not whether the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces would leave Afghanistan, but instead when and under what conditions.

Already, on January 15, 1987, President Najibullah had declared a unilateral cease-fire in conjunction with his “National Reconciliation Policy.”³¹⁹ President Najibullah offered the mujahideen a general amnesty and promised the complete withdrawal of Soviet forces, contingent upon the insurgents’ abandoning any further armed resistance.³²⁰ In reality, all the parties viewed the cease-fire as a “fiction” and it was universally ignored.³²¹

By 1987, the mujahideen felt little need to accept conditions that constrained their operations, and were enjoying renewed success in the eastern border areas. In May, the mujahideen defeated a combined Soviet and DRA effort aimed at interdicting supplies entering Afghanistan through the border province of Paktia. During a 24-day joint Soviet and DRA campaign, the mujahideen used SAMs and land mines to negate Soviet advantages in airpower and tactical mobility.³²² The Soviet and DRA forces withdrew in mid-June having failed to stop the flow of supplies, and leaving the area once again in the hands of the mujahideen. Soviet and DRA forces would, however, return to Paktia in late 1987 in an attempt to break the siege of Khost.

The major Afghan garrison in the city of Khost was under an increasingly debilitating siege by mujahideen forces in October 1987.³²³ The city is approximately 80 miles southeast of Kabul and within 10 miles of the Pakistani border, and dominates a major supply route between Afghanistan and Pakistan. By November, between 9,000 and 20,000 mujahideen surrounded the city with its 40,000 civilian inhabitants, 8,000 man DRA garrison, and several hundred Soviet advisers.³²⁴ The insurgents had essentially

severed the city's supply by road, and it appeared that the garrison would soon fall to the mujahideen. One report indicated that the Soviets were airlifting up to 50 tons of supplies per day into the city by the end of November.³²⁵ However, mujahideen rocket attacks on the airfield at Khost threatened to cut the garrison's one remaining lifeline.³²⁶

Both the Soviets and the DRA government recognized the importance of maintaining the garrison at Khost. Its primary purpose and its military significance lay in its ability to threaten the insurgent supply lines into Paktia province. In addition, the loss of the garrison would constitute a disastrous blow to the prestige of the Afghan army already demoralized by the impending Soviet withdrawal. The selection of General Boris V. Gromov, the head of the 40th Army, as the commander for a planned Soviet-DRA effort to break the siege demonstrated the importance attached to "Operation Magistral."³²⁷

In preparation for the operation, the DRA assembled parts of five divisions and auxiliary forces for a total of at least 8,000 men. This was in fact a relatively large DRA force. Despite the use of press gangs and extended enlistments, DRA regular forces never exceeded 40,000 during the entire period of the occupation.³²⁸ Soviet forces for the operation included approximately 10,000 paratroops from the elite 103d Guards Air Assault and the 56th Air Assault Brigade as well as an estimated 6,000 men from the 108th Motor Rifle Division. The force was further reinforced by mechanized and armored vehicles as well as 70 jet fighters.³²⁹ Sarin and Dvoretzky state that Gromov and his planners carefully studied the surrounding terrain and known defensive positions of the mujahideen. In addition, they assert that the planners "compared this operation to similar campaigns in the Caucasus and the Carpathians against the Germans during

World War II.”³³⁰ The stage for the last large-scale Soviet ground offensive of the war was set.

The offensive began on November 18, 1987, with Afghan ground forces pushing down the 122 kilometer-long highway from Gardez towards Khost. DRA ground forces spearheaded the offensive with Soviet forces occupying the flanks in overwatch positions.³³¹ These forces immediately ran into stiff resistance, and required Soviet airpower support in order to continue forward. In fact, Soviet aircraft operating out of Bagram airfield expended an average of 400 tons of ordnance per day during the offensive.³³² In addition, Soviet artillery fired new “beehive” antipersonnel rounds containing thousands of dart-like flechettes in support of the advance.³³³ DRA forces once again demonstrated their continuing dependence on Soviet aerial and artillery support.

Soviet airpower proved to be the key element in supporting the slow but steady advance of Afghan forces into the Shamal valley, 20 miles to the west of Khost. The DRA assault on the village of Kot included an airborne drop of 900 Afghan paratroopers in support of an armored thrust on 30 November. The total DRA losses in the assault included 80 KIA, 260 captured paratroopers, and the loss of five tanks.³³⁴ By December 4, DRA forces pushed into the Zadran valley, losing another 37 KIA and seven tanks.

The mujahideen counterattacked on December 9, and by December 12, they had destroyed another 13 tanks.³³⁵ Strikes by Soviet jets proved key in blunting the insurgents’ counter-offensive. Additionally, Soviet airborne troops entered the fray on December 19, during the last major push towards Khost. Soviet airborne troops and aviation operated as a combined arms team, in the by now familiar air assault attack. The

final push included the use of the classic air assault formula with troops occupying the heights by leapfrogging forward, and Mi-24 *Hinds* providing fire support for the advancing columns.³³⁶

The Soviets supplemented the standard air assault formula with at least one example of tactical innovation and deception at the Satekundav Pass. As the advance neared Khost, the combined Soviet-DRA forces faced a difficult tactical situation in moving through the Satekundav Pass. The mujahideen, recognizing the value of the position, had constructed a strong defensive network of obstacles and camouflaged firing positions throughout the pass.³³⁷ The Satekundav Pass had constituted a major concern for Gromov during the operational planning stage for the offensive. Gromov's plan for the capture of the pass included an airborne drop followed by a massive artillery and air bombardment of the insurgents once they identified their positions by opening fire. In a postwar interview, Gromov described the operation:

The paratroopers were carried to the drop zone in the vicinity of the Satekundav Pass by aircraft of the military transport aviation. A gust of fire fell on them. Anti-aircraft machine guns and cannons fired on them. And at that moment the firing positions of the mutineers were revealed for the blows of Soviet and Afghan attack aviation. Then this was followed by an artillery attack. In the course of an hour the entire system of fire of the mutineers was destroyed.³³⁸

Gromov's willingness to accept the sacrifice of airborne troops in an exposed operation in order to fix the mujahideen firing positions appears at first reckless, if not irresponsible. However, in a classic example of *maskirova* the airborne drop involved "dummy" paratroopers, and not their human counterparts.³³⁹

By December 30, Soviet and DRA forces pushed into Khost with 4,500 tons of supplies, effectively breaking the siege.³⁴⁰ In an effort to capitalize on their success, the

VTA dropped 7,000 Soviet airborne troops 60 kilometers to the north of Khost in an attempt to encircle the retreating mujahideen. Another 1,500 airborne troops deployed in the hills surrounding the city.³⁴¹ Despite the audacity of the airborne plan, the mujahideen avoided the trap and the Soviet net remained empty.

Operation Magistral had succeeded, but the cost was high. The DRA forces lost an estimated 1,000 killed, 2,000 wounded, and 346 captured. DRA equipment losses included 110 mechanized vehicles, of which 47 were tanks. Soviet forces lost 320 killed and 600 wounded. In contrast, the mujahideen lost between 150 and 300 killed.³⁴² In addition, seven Soviet aircraft were lost, including three helicopters.³⁴³ The victory at Khost did not come cheaply for a force that was already committed to withdrawal. In fact, Soviet casualties in Magistral constituted 32 percent of the entire combat losses for Russian forces in 1987. Soviet and DRA forces had earned a hard-fought victory, but it was at a cost that neither was willing or able to afford over the long run.

Magistral proved to be the last major Soviet offensive undertaken before the Russian withdrawal. The operation again demonstrated the important role of the VVS in not only providing fire support, but in its ability to move troops rapidly with both fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters. The expenditure of 400 tons of ordnance per day also highlighted the key role of the VVS in supporting its own and DRA forces in the field. In the future, without Soviet ground forces in the field, the DRA would come to rely even more heavily on Soviet air support during the last full year of Russian involvement in the war.

The emphasis on airpower complemented a Soviet move to “Afghanize” the war, by shifting ground operations to DRA forces. On December 19, 1987, Soviet television

showed its first-ever coverage of *current* fighting in Afghanistan by highlighting the DRA's role in the offensive on Khost. Prior to 1984, the Soviet press avoided any discussion of combat operations in Afghanistan. British historian Mark Galeotti noted that Soviet actions in Afghanistan "could not be discussed freely in the press" even in the early *glasnost* period between 1985 and 1987.³⁴⁴ During this period, reports focused on the heroic efforts of specific individuals, and not the strategic situation within the country.³⁴⁵ In contrast, the report concerning the Khost operation emphasized the DRA's combat capabilities in the ongoing operation, and signified the Soviet shift towards a policy of DRA self-sufficiency in ground operations. This television report clearly constituted a Russian attempt at the "Vietnamization" of the war against the mujahideen.³⁴⁶ After Magistral, the burden of ground combat operations rested squarely on the shoulders of the DRA.

The pressure on the DRA to take over the conduct of the ground war increased with Gorbachev's announcement on February 8, 1988 of plans for the Soviet withdrawal.³⁴⁷ The initial Soviet troop withdrawal on May 15, 1988 intensified this pressure on the DRA political and military leadership. The first Soviet forces to leave included the entire Russian garrison at Jalalabad, consisting of 3,000 vehicles and 12,000 men.³⁴⁸ John Hill, a military analyst at the Orkand Corporation, argues that "From that point on, their [the Soviet] contribution to the war would be primarily confined to artillery and air support."³⁴⁹ By August 15, 50 percent of Russian forces had been withdrawn, leaving between 50,000 and 60,000 Soviet personnel in Afghanistan. While Soviet strength declined, the number of insurgents grew. During the spring of 1988, large numbers of

mujahideen fighters who had spent the winter in Pakistan returned to Afghanistan with clear hopes of a quick victory over increasingly demoralized and isolated DRA forces.

The mujahideen, in addition to consolidating their control over the eastern border provinces, also increased the frequency and effectiveness of their rocket attacks on both Soviet and DRA positions. In June, a rocket struck an Su-25 *Frogfoot* at Bagram air base causing an explosive chain reaction that destroyed a total of eight aircraft. In addition, an insurgent rocket attack in August caused extensive damage to the munitions storage area at Kalagay. Again, in September, another rocket attack destroyed a Soviet aircraft loaded with munitions at Kabul airport.³⁵⁰ The Egyptian-supplied four-barrel SAKR 122 mm rocket launcher, with its 20 kilometer range, became an extremely effective weapon in the hands of the insurgents, especially for striking airfields.³⁵¹ Chinese-supplied 107 mm rockets also proved valuable in raids against garrisons and isolated outposts.³⁵² The mujahideen did not, however, confine themselves to simple harassment actions.

The battle for the border city of Kandahar between June and December 1988 provides an example of the nature of the war during the final stage of Soviet involvement. Kandahar's importance was both strategic and symbolic. It constituted the linchpin for controlling southeast Afghanistan, and the city enjoyed a historical legacy as a center of Afghan resistance during the Anglo-Afghan Wars of the nineteenth century.³⁵³ Already in May, mujahideen forces pushed across the border from Pakistan to occupy the Afghan border post at Sar Kelizay. From there, they began to conduct operations to capture another DRA garrison at Spin Boldak, a key outpost on the highway to Kandahar. Although the Soviet 70th Motor Rifle Brigade was still stationed in Kandahar, the Soviets primarily supported the DRA garrison with the massive employment of high altitude

aerial bombardment against the insurgent forces.³⁵⁴ The Soviet decision to let DRA forces carry the burden of ground operations was a direct reflection of their efforts to minimize Russian casualties.³⁵⁵ The Soviet air attacks inflicted substantial casualties among the mujahideen, and halted their advance on the city. By August, both Soviet and DRA officials believed that DRA forces could hold Kandahar, and Soviet forces were withdrawn from the city.³⁵⁶

The Soviet withdrawal from the area precipitated a renewed insurgent offensive against the DRA border outpost at Spin Boldak. The DRA garrison fell, enabling the mujahideen to move forward quickly to the outskirts of Kandahar. By October 15, after the failure of a DRA counter-attack, all that stood between the insurgents and the capture of Kandahar was Soviet airpower. In fact, the Soviets initiated intensive air attacks including the employment of 30 newly-arrived MiG-27 *Flogger D* attack aircraft and the resumption of high altitude strikes with Tu-26 *Backfire* bombers.³⁵⁷ The *Backfire* bombers provided added punch to area attacks with their large bomb loads. In addition, Soviet transports airlifted DRA reserves into the city along with supplies and ammunition. By December, DRA forces still held the city, but Soviet transports were forced to avoid rocket attacks during their continuing resupply effort.³⁵⁸ Mujahideen rocket attacks impeded, but did not halt the Soviet attempts at aerial resupply.³⁵⁹

The Soviets also employed massed airpower in the form of fire support and airlift in retaking the provincial capital of Kunduz in August 1988. The massive use of Soviet airpower, including high altitude bombardment, again inflicted heavy casualties on the insurgent force.³⁶⁰ The ability of Soviet airpower to “save” Kunduz and Kandahar indicated the importance of Soviet aviation for the continued viability of DRA forces in

the field. The question remained as to what the fate of the DRA forces would be after the complete Soviet pull-out. The long-term outlook for DRA ground forces, stripped of Soviet air support, was decidedly pessimistic.

The final demonstration of Soviet airpower involved a four-day operation in support of the last stages of the withdrawal. The Soviet introduction of MiG-27 *Floggers* and *Scud-B* missiles together with the slowed pace of withdrawal resulted in a mujahideen campaign to interdict the Kabul-Termez highway near the Salang Tunnel.³⁶¹ In early November, Soviet forces had launched fifteen *Scud* missiles at targets within the border province of Ningrahar.³⁶² The introduction of the *Scuds* constituted a heavy-handed Soviet warning aimed at inducing an end to third party arms supply to the mujahideen.³⁶³ The U.S. State Department identified Soviet actions as an attempt to stop the flow of arms from Pakistan by intimidating the Pakistani political leadership.³⁶⁴

The mujahideen responded to the Soviet arms escalation by interdicting the crowded Kabul-Termez highway, the major route for the withdrawal of Russian forces leaving Afghanistan. Insurgent spokesman Wasil Noor stated that, “When the mujaheddin heard about the Scud missiles . . . being brought into Kabul from the north by the Soviets, they closed the roads. . . to stop [more] weapons from coming in.”³⁶⁵ The insurgent attacks practically shut down the highway while inflicting heavy Soviet casualties and destroying numerous vehicles.³⁶⁶ In response to the insurgent attacks, at the end of January 1989, Soviet and DRA forces launched their final joint offensive, “Operation Typhoon.”³⁶⁷ Operation Typhoon began with a massive push by DRA ground forces against the southern approaches of the Salang Tunnel. On January 24 and 25, Soviet aviation assets delivered 600 total air strikes, including 46 close air support missions. The final total of

sorties during the four-day operation numbered over 1,000, again including the employment of Tu-26s for high altitude bombardment.³⁶⁸ In addition, Soviet artillery forces conducted over 400 fire support missions during the operation.³⁶⁹ The combined DRA-Soviet offensive led to the reopening of the highway, and the withdrawal resumed.

The ferocity of the Soviet aerial assault led to repeated U.S. diplomatic protests and the charge that the Russians were conducting a “scorched earth policy” in their withdrawal from Afghanistan.³⁷⁰ Typhoon constituted a fitting aerial *dénouement* for Soviet aviation in Afghanistan. Soviet airpower left Afghanistan as it had entered--conducting operations involving aspects of both punishment and denial.

At the end of January, Soviet aviation assets began their final departure for home. These aircraft would, in turn, be unavailable to DRA forces in their ensuing battles with the mujahideen. The last Soviet soldier in Afghanistan, General Boris Gromov crossed the “Friendship Bridge” into the Soviet Union on February 15, 1989, officially ending Russian involvement in the nine-year war. Upon crossing the bridge, Gromov declared “We have fulfilled our international duty to the end. . . [and] have shown the greatness of the Soviet soldier’s intellectual and political maturity and devotion to Socialism.”³⁷¹ Despite Gromov’s *bravura*, the mujahideen had extracted a high price in Soviet manpower and equipment during the conflict, including losses estimated at 15,000 men, 118 jet aircraft, 333 helicopters, 147 tanks, 1,314 armored personnel carriers, 1,138 communications and command post vehicles, 510 engineering vehicles and 11,369 trucks.³⁷² The Soviet occupation clearly demonstrated to the Kremlin, the General Staff, and the world the limits of Soviet military power. The DRA forces were left alone to fight the continuing Afghan civil war against the mujahideen.

Notes

³¹⁶Edgar O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars 1839-1992, What Britain Gave Up and the Soviet Union Lost* (London: Brassey's, 1993): 166.

³¹⁷Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, *Developments in Afghanistan*, February 1988, 100th Cong., 2d sess., 17 and 25 February 1988, 97-99. This portion of the hearings includes the statement of Vincent Cannistraro, Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs.

³¹⁸Anthony R. Tucker, "Operation Magistral," *Jane's Soviet Intelligence Review* vol. 1 no. 10, (October 1989): 449.

³¹⁹O'Ballance, 165.

³²⁰Tucker, 449. See also O'Ballance, 165.

³²¹O'Ballance, 165.

³²²David C. Isby, *War in a Distant Country. Afghanistan: Invasion and Resistance* (London: Arms and Armour, 1989): 42.

³²³Tucker, 449.

³²⁴*Ibid.*

³²⁵John Greenwald, "Fighting for the Road to Khost," *Time*, 11 January 1988, 49.

³²⁶O'Ballance, 175.

³²⁷Paul H. Vivian, "The Soviet Army: Coming to Terms with Its Afghan Experience," *Infantry* vol. 80, no. 1 (January/February 1990): 14.

³²⁸Isby, *War in a Distant Country*, 81.

³²⁹Tucker, 449-450. All numbers on troop strength for the operation are taken from this source. In the article, the 56th Air Assault Brigade is misidentified as the 38th Air Assault Brigade.

³³⁰Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretzky, *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union's Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993): 109.

³³¹Isby, *War in a Distant Country*, 47.

³³²Artyom Borovik, *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990): 197-198.

³³³Isby, *War in a Distant Country*, 47.

³³⁴Tucker, 450.

³³⁵*Ibid.*

³³⁶O'Ballance, 175.

³³⁷Vivian, 15.

³³⁸*Ibid.*

³³⁹*Ibid.*

³⁴⁰Tucker, 451.

³⁴¹*Ibid.*

³⁴²Isby, *War in a Distant Country*, 47.

³⁴³Tucker 451.

³⁴⁴Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995): 90.

³⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 89-90.

³⁴⁶Tucker, 451.

Notes

³⁴⁷Constantine C. Menges, ed., *Afghanistan and the 1988 Agreement* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1988): i.

³⁴⁸O'Ballance, 183.

³⁴⁹John Hill, "Afghanistan in 1988: Year of the Mujahideen," *Armed Forces Journal International* (March 1989): 72.

³⁵⁰O'Ballance, 186-187.

³⁵¹Hill, 74.

³⁵²Isby, *War in a Distant Country*, 102, 104, 117.

³⁵³O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars*, 47.

³⁵⁴Hill, 74.

³⁵⁵Isby, *War in a Distant Country*, 39. Russian casualty aversion became increasingly pronounced during the final two years of the conflict.

³⁵⁶Hill, 74-75.

³⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 75.

³⁵⁸*Ibid.*

³⁵⁹*Ibid.*

³⁶⁰O'Ballance, 187-188. See also Hill, 78.

³⁶¹Hill, 78.

³⁶²Richard Weintraub, "Soviets Press Afghans Militarily, Politically," *The Washington Post*, 12 November 1988, A20.

³⁶³Richard Weintraub, "Scud Missiles Displayed in Kabul," *The Washington Post*, 2 November 1988, A1.

³⁶⁴Kurt Lohbeck, *Holy War, Unholy Victory. Eyewitness to the CIA's Secret War in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1993): 257-258.

³⁶⁵Timothy Weaver, "Afghan Rebels Block Soviet Route to Kabul," *The Washington Post*, 14 November 1988, A13.

³⁶⁶Lohbeck, 250.

³⁶⁷Boris V. Gromov and Sergey Bogdanov, *Ogranichenny kontingent* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1994): 326-328. Translation excerpts provided to author by Lester W. Grau. See also O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars*, 194. O'Ballance makes reference to the use of Tu-22 aircraft in this operation. These are most probably Tu-22M/Tu-26 aircraft.

³⁶⁸*Ibid.*

³⁶⁹*Ibid.*

³⁷⁰Don Oberdorfer, "Soviet Bombing Raids in Afghanistan Alleged," *The Washington Post*, 31 January 1989, A-23.

³⁷¹O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars*, 196.

³⁷²Mohammed Yahya Nawroz and Lester W. Grau, *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1994): 7,11.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

The end of the cold war-era conflict does not signal the end of all global conflict. Indeed, just the reverse will undoubtedly be true. The absence of a relatively straightforward bipolar struggle leaves a power vacuum, an unstable environment in which the potential for low-intensity conflicts is greater than ever before. Tribalism, extreme nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and hold-over Marxist ideology all provide fodder for small-scale wars--wars likely to be fought within existing states rather than between them.

Senator David L. Boren
in *Low-Intensity Conflict*

At the outset of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, military and political pundits were nearly unanimous in their predictions of a rapid Soviet victory. Few believed that a fractionalized and ill-equipped insurgency could long stand against the armed might of one of the greatest military powers in the world. However, the pundits were proven wrong, and the mujahideen did triumph. Afghanistan should serve as a caution to both U.S. military strategists and to an American public inebriated by the overwhelming success of coalition arms in the Gulf War and the apparent NATO success in the Balkans. Today, the armed forces of the United States enjoy a position of preeminence among the world's militaries. Paradoxically, the current U.S. position of military preeminence may be threatened less by budget cuts than by a changing paradigm in warfare. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan demonstrates the dangers inherent in

equating conventional military strength with the capability to achieve victory in the environment of unconventional war.

Former U.S. ambassador David Corr and American political scientist Stephen Sloan, in *Low-Intensity Conflict: Old Threats in a New World*, present a convincing argument concerning the changing paradigm from conventional to irregular warfare.³⁷³ The post-cold war era has, indeed, initiated a period in which U.S. political and military efforts must focus on the exigencies of low-intensity conflict. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 provides numerous insights and cautions for American military planners, who contemplate the employment of force in “non-trinitarian” conflict.³⁷⁴ The Soviet failure clearly demonstrates the potential danger in relying on airpower as a primary instrument for coercion. Soviet actions in Afghanistan showed that air supremacy does not constitute a panacea for guaranteeing success in contemporary military operations. The Soviets’ inability to achieve their political objectives in Afghanistan also illustrated the limits of Russian military power in the low-intensity environment. Despite an overwhelming advantage in firepower and complete mastery of the air, Soviet and DRA forces failed to coerce the mujahideen into ceasing their attacks against the Russian occupation forces and the DRA regime.

Airpower as Force Substitute

The conflict in Afghanistan witnessed a definitive shift in the standard Soviet employment of airpower in the conduct of military operations. Soviet doctrine in 1979 emphasized the use of airpower as a force adjunct for the direct support of ground forces. This doctrinal disposition relied heavily on the historical legacy of the Soviet experience

against the Germans in World War II. In the initial period of the Afghan war, Soviet airpower conformed to this existing paradigm of ground support operations. However, the unwillingness of DRA forces to fight, Moscow's reluctance to increase Soviet troop levels, and the desire to minimize casualties led to the employment of airpower as both a "force multiplier" and a "force substitute" in the battle against the mujahideen. The Soviet use of airpower as a force substitute extended to both punishment and denial operations. In turn, the employment of airpower as a stand alone instrument found its most brutal expression in the VVS campaign of aerial terror. In the end, barring a massive additional commitment of Soviet ground forces, airpower constituted the single remaining viable option with which to defeat the Muslim insurgency. Airpower clearly became the Soviet "force of choice" in Afghanistan.

Soviet Lessons Learned

The Soviets learned a number of airpower lessons and gained experience using new weapons systems during their occupation of Afghanistan. The major lesson of the war involved the realization of the versatility and diverse capabilities of aviation assets in general. The concept of heliborne air assault operations was fully tested and validated. In addition, operations in Afghanistan demonstrated the versatility of helicopters as observation, transport, and firepower platforms in a permissive environment. Operations in Afghanistan clearly validated the concept of helicopter attack aviation as a major element in the combined arms team. The Afghan experience also showed the value of forward air controllers, and the need for increased initiative and responsiveness within Soviet aviation. The initial combat employment of new weapons systems including the

Su-25 *Frogfoot*, the MiG-27 *Flogger D*, and the Tu-26 *Backfire* provided the Soviets with an opportunity to test these systems in battle. In addition, the use of laser-guided bombs, cluster bomb units, and chemical munitions offered empirical data for evaluating these weapons. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the Stinger missile indicated the need for improved counter-measures and tactics.

The Failure of Punishment

Regardless of the labels used, the Soviet strategy for both punishment and denial failed to achieve its desired military and political objectives. Soviet operations aimed at achieving coercion through punishment failed because of the following factors:

- (1) Punishment operations could not overcome the mujahideen determination to resist the Soviet occupation based on the insurgents' religious and nationalistic beliefs
- (2) Punishment operations proved counterproductive. Instead of pacifying the population these actions incited even greater resistance.
- (3) Punishment operations could not generate subservience to a regime viewed as illegitimate by the majority of the Afghan population.

These factors, acting in combination, frustrated Soviet attempts at achieving punishment through coercion.

The determination of the mujahideen to resist the Soviet occupation rested in large part on their belief in Islam. The call for a *jihad* against the regime of Nur Taraki was a powerful force in initially mobilizing the resistance. The Soviet invasion galvanized the Muslim insurgency in terms of an apocalyptic battle between the defenders of the true faith and the *kafir* (infidel). The Russian occupation also stimulated Afghan nationalism, and revived the Afghans' historical antipathy to foreign domination. One mujahideen commander clearly expressed these sentiments by stating, "We are fighting for Islam but we should be fighting for Afghanistan as well."³⁷⁵ The twin ideologies of Islam and

nationalism provided the metaphysical sustenance to the insurgency, and both proved nearly impervious to Soviet bullets and bombs. It is clear that the Soviets, like the British in the nineteenth century, greatly underestimated the rugged nature and the steadfast determination of their adversary.

In terms of casualties inflicted, the Soviet campaign to punish the Afghan population was a decided success. Soviet analyst Lester Grau and former Afghan General Mohammed Nawroz estimate the number of Afghan civilian casualties at 1.3 million.³⁷⁶ Vincent Cannistraro, Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, testified before a Congressional committee that Soviet operations resulted in “one million casualties to innocent civilians bombed by Soviet air power, dismembered by indiscriminate use of landmines, and shelled by Soviet artillery”³⁷⁷ In total, civilian deaths represented between 6 and 8 percent of the estimated pre-war Afghan population.³⁷⁸ In addition, the number of Afghans affected by the Soviet use of “scorched earth” tactics and the prosecution of a policy of “migratory genocide” is equally staggering. Cannistraro estimated that the war produced over five million refugees with over three million sheltered in Pakistan alone.³⁷⁹

Despite the severity of these effects, Soviet attempts to break the will of the Afghan people through punishment still failed to produce the desired strategic results. Robert Kaplan, a journalist who traveled with the mujahideen, stated “The [mujahideen] ability to endure, year after year, such a monastic existence, as barren and as confined by self-denial as that of the most disciplined desert anchorites, constituted the most lethal weapon the Pathans had in their battle against the Soviets.”³⁸⁰ Muhammed Sadeqi, a mujahideen commander, stated, “We cannot be defeated,Although we are short of

arms, ammunition and food, and they are well equipped, we have determination on our side. They [the Russians] have no heart for the struggle.”³⁸¹ The rugged and fiercely independent Afghan character combined with their religious faith to make the insurgents and the populace largely immune to Soviet terror and intimidation.

The final factor involved in the failure of Soviet punishment operations centered on the perceived illegitimacy of the Soviet sponsored DRA regime, whether under the leadership of Karmal or Najibullah. Trevor Fishlock, a journalist for *The Times* of London, aptly described the acceptance of the Karmal regime among the populace in the following words:

The Karmal regime, weak and detested, is held up only by a frame-work of Russian arms and administration. Mr. Karmal, once known as a champion of people’s causes, is a pariah in his own land. He keeps to his palace, presiding over a crumbling economy, a ramshackle and untrustworthy army, a dispirited civil service, a fleeing middle class and a truculent population.³⁸²

The mass desertions within the DRA armed forces provided one indication of the illegitimacy of the DRA regime. The DRA desertion rate averaged at least 10,000 men per year, leading one mujahideen commander to remark that “the [DRA] army is becoming like a room with two doors. You go in through one and leave through the other.”³⁸³ The government’s inability to prevent members of the armed forces from deserting led to the introduction of “press gangs” to provide sufficient manpower for the DRA military. These press gangs, much like their eighteenth century predecessors, kidnapped and impressed young men into military service during sweeps of urban centers and rural villages.³⁸⁴ The periodic mutinies of Afghan army garrisons provide yet another indicator of the inherent illegitimacy of the Soviet-sponsored DRA regime.³⁸⁵ One of the

most dramatic examples involved a revolt on June 12, 1985, by Afghan pilots at Shindand airbase during which they destroyed 20 jets.³⁸⁶

The Failure of Denial

Soviet attempts to achieve coercion through denial proved as disappointing as their punishment efforts. The major factors contributing to the failure of Soviet denial efforts included:

- (1) The availability of insurgent sanctuaries
- (2) The failure of Soviet interdiction efforts
- (3) The logistical parsimony of the mujahideen
- (4) The small size of Soviet forces, especially counterinsurgency forces.
- (5) The lack of appropriate counterinsurgency doctrine
- (6) The introduction of effective manportable SAM technology, thus negating Soviet air supremacy

First, the Soviets never succeeded in preventing the mujahideen from using Pakistan as a sanctuary, nor in halting the flow of supplies from Pakistan into Afghanistan. Despite numerous Soviet diplomatic warnings and repeated air and artillery attacks, the Pakistani leadership refused to comply with Russian demands to close the border to the insurgents. In fact, the Soviet frustration led to their sponsorship of “the world’s most extensive campaign of state-supported terrorism in Pakistan, using the Kabul regime’s intelligence service [KHAD] as executive agents.”³⁸⁷ The Soviets sponsored a wave of bombings and terror attacks within Pakistan aimed at coercing the withdrawal of Pakistani support for the mujahideen.³⁸⁸ This terror campaign proved as ineffective as previous Soviet strong arm tactics.

The nature of the mujahideen logistics system and the insurgents’ minimal requirements constituted two additional difficulties for Soviet military planners. The

inability to successfully sever the mujahideen supply lines within Afghanistan constituted a major failure of the Soviet strategy. At the same time, the third element of Soviet failure, their underestimation of their adversary and the fragility of his logistics requirements, also played a key role in contributing to the failure of the Soviet interdiction campaign. Arthur Bonner, an American journalist who traveled with the mujahideen in 1985, described the insurgents' use of small groups of men and animals for resupply. In one example, prior to crossing an exposed plain, a caravan consisting of 700 men and hundreds of animals was divided “. . . into groups of ten and sent forward at ten-minute intervals as a precaution in case of an air attack.”³⁸⁹ Edward Cody, a journalist with *The Washington Post*, accompanied the mujahideen during an 11-day trek along one caravan route. During this trek, his party fluctuated between as few as two and as many as fifty members.³⁹⁰ The ability of the mujahideen to parcel-out their resupply columns complicated Soviet detection efforts, and prevented the Russians from finding lucrative or decisive interdiction targets. Furthermore, as discussed above, the Soviets seriously overestimated the insurgents' supply requirements.

During the Korean War, the ability of a Communist Chinese division to operate on 50 tons of supplies per day astounded American commanders and greatly complicated United Nations interdiction efforts.³⁹¹ Later, during the war in Vietnam, the ability of over 200,000 Communist forces to operate on 380 tons per day doomed the American Rolling Thunder interdiction campaign to failure from its inception.³⁹² In Afghanistan, the frugality of the mujahideen logistical requirements appears even greater than those of the Chinese and Vietnamese communists. The evidence concerning the parsimony of the mujahideen with respect to logistical requirements is anecdotal, as no written record of

shipments and exact tonnage exists. The experience of numerous foreign observers with the insurgents is, however, instructive and convincing. Paul Overby discussed a typical dinner as consisting of flatbread, boiled beef, and potatoes cooked in a communal bowl with water being shared from communal pitcher.³⁹³ In another example, Overby describes a breakfast of “stale” pieces of flatbread and oranges.³⁹⁴ In one case, a group of mujahideen existed on turnips and flatbread alone for six days.³⁹⁵ Numerous other accounts by western observers indicate the ability of the mujahideen to operate on a diet centered on flatbread, lard, and heavily sweetened tea.³⁹⁶ These same observers also indicate the routine ability of the mujahideen to march for twelve or thirteen hours without a break through the rugged mountainous terrain.³⁹⁷ In the end, it was clear that the Soviets had greatly overestimated the logistical needs of their adversary.

The fourth factor involved in the failure of Soviet denial efforts centered on the small size of available regular and counterinsurgency forces. The small size of Soviet ground forces and the unwillingness of the Afghan army to fight greatly handicapped Soviet pacification efforts. Soviet forces, totaling between 118,000 and 120,000 men at the high point of the occupation, were clearly insufficient for gaining control over a largely mountainous country the size of Texas.³⁹⁸ The fact that only 20 percent of these forces were specially trained for counterinsurgency operations further limited the usefulness of the available manpower for this mission. Former U.S. *chargé d'affaires* to Afghanistan, Charles Dunbar, stated that “the Soviets would have to bring in something in the order of a half-million men if they were to hope to do a great deal more than they are now [1983] in the way of suppressing the resistance.”³⁹⁹ According to Dunbar, the Soviet leadership’s failure to increase the size of the occupation force was based on their

unwillingness to incur casualties, and a desire not to provoke renewed diplomatic protests.⁴⁰⁰ In practical terms, however, it is also doubtful that the Soviet logistical system could have sustained a dramatic increase in personnel in Afghanistan.⁴⁰¹

Fifth, the absence of an appropriate counterinsurgency doctrine severely handicapped Soviet operations during the first three years of the war.⁴⁰² Improvements in Soviet tactics for dealing with the insurgency included the increased use of helicopters and air assault techniques, the expanded employment of *spetsnaz* forces, and improved training and equipment for all forces. The Soviet army validated the usefulness of air assault techniques employing heliborne VDV and DShB forces. In fact, Soviet Major General Grekov, Chief of Staff of the 40th Army, identified the perfection of heliborne *desant* operations as the major lesson of the war.⁴⁰³ *Spetsnaz* forces successfully conducted a number of raids and ambushes in the course of the occupation. In addition, the war witnessed the introduction improved Soviet weapons systems including infantry fighting vehicles (BMP-2), mortars (*Vasilek* 82 mm), grenade launchers (AGS-17), aircraft (Su-25 *Frogfoot*), and automatic weapons (ASU-74 assault rifle).⁴⁰⁴ In the end, however, improved Soviet counterinsurgency forces, techniques, and equipment proved too little and too late.

Finally, it was the mujahideen's acquisition of reliable and effective manportable surface-to-air missiles that constituted the *coup de grace* for the Soviet denial strategy in Afghanistan. The introduction of the Stinger missile clearly raised the ante beyond the Soviet ability to pay, although it did not significantly impact the Soviet decision to leave. Stinger's ability to neutralize the major source of Soviet military strength crippled the Russian interdiction efforts and allowed the mujahideen to mass their forces for the

conduct of large-scale operations. Stinger clearly eroded the efficacy and accuracy of fixed-wing operations, and, in turn, it sounded the deathknell for heliborne attack, either in the form of air assault landings or attack aviation.⁴⁰⁵ The Stinger was equally decisive in its psychological impact among Soviet and DRA pilots. Stinger clearly achieved a high level of respect among Afghan and Soviet pilots, who became increasingly unwilling to expose themselves or their aircraft to its lethal envelope. The accuracy and effectiveness of subsequent air operations suffered even more from the exaggerated belief in both the availability and capabilities of this missile among Soviet and DRA pilots. The mujahideen played on Soviet fears by discussing their possession of Stinger missiles in radio communications, even if their group did not have the missile. The Soviets intercepted these communications and received an exaggerated picture of the availability of Stinger among the insurgent groups.⁴⁰⁶

The Punitive Denial Paradigm

The conflict in Afghanistan clearly demonstrates the interrelationship between “punishment” and “denial” operations in the prosecution of unconventional warfare. The theoretical separation of these elements in the environment of irregular warfare is both simplistic and artificial. The Soviet campaign to depopulate the area along the eastern border provides a clear example of a mechanism involving both punishment and denial. In fact, the use of airpower as the primary instrument for enforcing a *cordon sanitaire* between Afghanistan and Pakistan raises the possibility of a “punitive denial” archetype, applicable to both conventional and unconventional warfare. This punitive denial paradigm centers on the use of punitive measures as a means to achieve denial objectives.

If one accepts the stated intent of World War II military planners, both the fire bombing of Dresden to impede German troop movements against Soviet forces and American incendiary raids to destroy Japanese factories provide examples of punitive denial in conventional warfare. Likewise, Soviet aerial mining operations and the use of chemical munitions to impose interdiction barriers to mujahideen resupply, offer examples of punitive denial in the unconventional warfare environment.

The punitive denial paradigm offers a more nuanced model for evaluating the actor's intent, and his desired objective in punishment-type operations against a designated target. The line between punishment and punitive denial will often be exceedingly fine. However, this line can also be quite stark. For example, actions taken for the sake of reprisal or retaliation are almost always intended to achieve a punitive objective. Likewise, many military actions aimed at the civilian population may constitute an indirect method for attaining a denial objective. This distinction may prove important in determining the military protection to be provided to the civilian population, and in framing a military response to these actions. This determination is not unimportant. Indeed, the response to the collateral deaths of workers during World War II bombing strikes against industrial areas contrasted sharply with the response to strikes aimed at residential areas, whether in Coventry or Lübeck. In such cases intent and objective will go far in determining either an adversary's response or the danger of escalation.

Victory: Attainable or Illusory?

Could the Soviets have won the war in Afghanistan? Would a different political or military strategy have changed the outcome? Would a larger or alternate force structure have resulted in an eventual Soviet victory? These counterfactual questions are difficult to answer, but the available evidence suggests a variety of possible alternatives that might have changed the final outcome of the war in Afghanistan.

The first alternative scenario involves Soviet force structure, and centers on the size and composition of the Soviet contingent in Afghanistan. Some analysts have indicated that the Soviets required 500,000 men in order to win. Would this increase in total troop strength have changed the outcome? If the Soviets had increased their manpower to 500,000, they certainly would have inflicted a greater number of casualties on the mujahideen. However, they would have themselves suffered more casualties. This is an important point as casualty avoidance was clearly a limiting factor throughout the Soviet occupation. Additionally, based on the available evidence, the ability of the Soviets to supply a half-million troops is also highly questionable. In the absence of an appropriate military strategy, more was not necessarily better.

The introduction of greater numbers of specially trained counterinsurgency forces constitutes another alternative. The primary problem with this solution was that the Soviets lacked an effective and comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy during the first three to four years of the occupation. Absent a coherent counterinsurgency doctrine, the Soviets were forced to start from ground up. Therefore, one cannot base assumptions on non-existent or poorly articulated doctrine. VDV and DShB forces did prove effective in combating the mujahideen. Their success, however, was relative. By themselves, they

could not have attained a long-term victory, but larger counterinsurgency forces might have increased the blood price paid by the insurgents.

As a further alternative, the Soviets might have attempted a “Boer strategy” reflecting the British experience between 1899-1902 in the Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. During this period, British forces, numbering approximately 250,000, conducted a scorched earth policy by “burning Boer farms, imprisoning Boer populations in concentration camps, and crisscrossing the open veldt with block houses and barbed wire.”⁴⁰⁷ The actual Soviet conduct of the war in Afghanistan contained many elements of this strategy. The destruction of the Afghan agricultural infrastructure and the creation of fortified posts along the border and along major lines-of-communication did occur. In addition, the Soviet depopulation strategy did lead to a massive migration to refugee camps in Pakistan, and a forced internal migration to major Afghan urban centers. In many respects, this strategy resulted in the creation of *de facto* concentration camps. However, a “Boer strategy” did not hold the promise of Soviet victory.

The mountainous terrain of Afghanistan, unlike the grasslands of southern Africa, prevented the creation of an effective cordon and observation system throughout the country. Additionally, the mujahideen, unlike the Boers, received outside assistance and enjoyed areas of sanctuary. The mujahideen sanctuary in Pakistan was instrumental in their victory. The Soviets could not afford the potential military and political risks associated with an invasion of Pakistan. The risk of escalation to direct military confrontation between the superpowers was prohibitive. In addition, the damage to Soviet standing and foreign policy initiatives in the Third World would have been

catastrophic. In the end, the British lessons of the *fin de siècle* in southern Africa did not hold the key to a Soviet victory in Afghanistan.

Could improved technology have changed the outcome? Would a Soviet force equipped with more precision guided munitions and more advanced sensor technology have prevailed over the mujahideen? Advanced technology is clearly a force multiplier on the modern battlefield. Technology is, however, never a substitute for sound strategy and appropriate doctrine. The Soviets enjoyed an exponential technological advantage over the mujahideen between 1979 and 1985. This “technological supremacy” by itself was insufficient to defeat the insurgents. In addition, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan demonstrated that technology designed to support military operations in conventional war may be inappropriate or ineffective in the unconventional warfare environment. The introduction of the Stinger missile helped to redress the technological imbalance between the two sides. However, between 1986 and 1989, the Soviets maintained a decided technological superiority. Technology remained a tool and not the solution for success in the battle against the mujahideen.

Paradoxically, *less* rather than *more* direct involvement might have offered the best chance for Soviet political and military success in Afghanistan. Such an alternative strategy would have focused on the Soviet leadership’s use of a holistic approach involving political, economic, and military assistance. In this scenario, increasing the legitimacy and acceptance of the DRA government among the Afghan populace would have been the ultimate aim of Soviet direct and indirect assistance. Efforts to strengthen the Afghan military’s loyalty to the PDPA, and reforms designed to accommodate

concerns among the Islamic clergy could have constituted two possible initiatives for increasing the support and legitimacy of the DRA government.

Perhaps the last measure the Soviets should have taken, and the first measure they did take, was the introduction of large numbers of Soviet forces into Afghanistan. The introduction of these forces framed the conflict in stark religious and nationalistic terms. The conflict became, for the mujahideen, an apocalyptic confrontation which only victory or death could resolve. Abdul Haq, a well known mujahideen commander, simply stated, “We will win--or we will die. There are no other choices.”⁴⁰⁸

The decision to intervene in Afghanistan presented the Soviet political and military leadership with the ultimate “Catch-22.” Failure to intervene could lead to the “loss” of the socialist republic of Afghanistan, while intervention offered no guarantee of success and serious repercussions in the court of world opinion. In the end, the determination and character of their adversary, the availability of sanctuary and supply, and the nature of the terrain in Afghanistan doomed the Soviet invasion to failure.

Afghanistan: Implications for USAF Planners

The failure of Soviet air and ground forces in the battle against the mujahideen provides a caution for contemporary USAF planners with respect to the employment of airpower in unconventional war. The Prussian military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, in his *magnum opus On War*, wrote:

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgement that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.⁴⁰⁹

Clausewitz's advice is as relevant today as it was in the nineteenth century. American military strategists must understand that unconventional warfare presents a multitude of unique difficulties and challenges concerning the employment of airpower. These difficulties are compounded by a decided penchant within the U.S. armed forces for conventional military operations. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan clearly demonstrates that airpower can play a major role in unconventional operations. However, it alone does not constitute the instrument for achieving victory. Air and space assets can facilitate the attainment of superior firepower, adequate logistical sustainment, and improved intelligence and communication services, but the nature of the conflict and the determination of one's adversary form the crucial elements determining the success or failure of military operations.

The mujahideen willingness to endure an enormous degree of punishment illustrates not only the limits of airpower, but the limits of military power as well. The mujahideen example demonstrates that there are situations when nothing short of the annihilation of one's adversary can lead to victory. However, genocide, whether conducted from the air or the ground, is morally indefensible and does not constitute a viable alternative for the contemporary Western military strategist. Not only the problem of direct, but also, indirect targeting is problematic in unconventional warfare. Soviet airpower could not strike "vital centers" that did not exist, nor could it create a vulnerability in a supply system *designed* to be invulnerable. American military planners experienced this same problem in their repeated efforts to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the war in Vietnam.⁴¹⁰ If air and ground forces cannot effectively isolate the insurgents from their sources of supply, then only limited success in interdiction efforts may constitute a

misallocation of resources. It may be possible to eliminate 80 percent of the insurgents' supply, but this is a pyrrhic victory if they require less than 20 percent to operate effectively.

The advanced technology involved with contemporary intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems offers an improved ability to view the modern battlespace. The increased "transparency" of the battlefield does not, however, necessarily translate into greater success in unconventional warfare. Unconventional warfare is in large part a political struggle aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the target state's population. Technology cannot determine which person or persons, in a household of five or fifteen, are sympathetic to the insurgents' cause. Nor can technology accurately predict the impact of a given military operation, or bombing strike, in either catalyzing increased opposition or breaking the enemy's will to fight. In the unconventional arena, technology remains a tool, and not a guarantee for success.

Airpower, like technology, is but one of a number of tools for conducting unconventional operations. The mobility, intelligence, and firepower provided by modern air assets can be decisive in attaining success at the tactical or operational level. These successes must, however, ultimately be translated into strategic victory. Soviet military planners in Afghanistan, like their American counterparts in Vietnam, learned that triumph on the battlefield does not necessarily result in political victory. Airpower constitutes but one of a number of means to be used in achieving the desired political objective. In an insurgency environment, airpower is not a panacea, and it cannot compensate for a deficient political or military strategy. The superpower's experiences in Afghanistan and Vietnam demonstrate that neither unconventional warfare or airpower

are exempt from the Clausewitzian paradigm. The successful employment of military force in unconventional war requires both a clear understanding of the nature of the conflict as well as the limitations of airpower as an instrument for achieving limited political objectives.

Final Observations

Soviet airpower in Afghanistan, whether used as a force adjunct in support of ground operations, or as a weapon of terror for punishing the civilian population, still did not lead to the attainment of Russian political and military objectives. The strategy aimed at the depopulation of the eastern border areas through a campaign of air and artillery bombardment in mid-1980, and the massive aerial mining campaign to interdict the caravan trails into Afghanistan with “butterfly mines” and “disguised” mines provided an indication of both the Soviet intent and willingness to inflict large-scale collateral casualties. The employment of chemical munitions, although doctrinally predictable, introduced yet another instrument for denying the insurgents support and punishing the civilian population. Finally, the initiation of air bombardment of major urban centers including Herat and Kandahar demonstrated the end of all Soviet restraint with respect to the non-combatant population. The adoption of a policy of reprisal and retaliation in 1983 symbolized the *de facto* rejection of moral constraints concerning the action of Soviet forces. Soviet policy, however, still failed to coerce the desired response from the mujahideen, despite the Russian willingness to essentially employ unlimited means to achieve their objective.

Despite their large-scale use of punishment-type operations, Soviet forces continued denial operations during the nine-year occupation. Their initial attempts to use airpower assets in coordination with mechanized and armored forces in an effort to destroy the insurgency in set-piece battles failed only because the mujahideen wisely refused to fight a conventional war. The development of the helicopter as a “flying tank” for supporting Soviet operations in the field proved a resounding success in the years prior to the introduction of the Stinger missile. Indeed, the helicopter became a critical platform for supporting the combined arms team with firepower and transport, as well as a lethal instrument for aerial interdiction along the border and the major lines of communication.

In the final years of the Soviet occupation, Russian airpower did achieve a few notable successes against the mujahideen. The campaigns against Zhawar in 1986 and Khost in 1987, and the battles for Kunduz and Kandahar in 1988, demonstrated the effectiveness of Soviet aerial bombardment when the mujahideen either attempted to hold a fixed position or massed their forces for attacks against major urban areas. In these examples, the full force of Soviet firepower could be brought to bear on the insurgents. These victories were, however, not won without considerable cost to Soviet and DRA forces. By the end of 1986, Afghanistan constituted a nagging and painful bleeding ulcer for the Soviet empire. By November 1986, the Soviet Politburo realized that it was time to leave.

In the final analysis, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan indicates the strengths and weaknesses of airpower, whether employed as part of the combined arms team or as a stand alone force substitute. The use of independent aviation operations ranging from the conduct of high altitude bombardment to aerial mine laying and interdiction denoted a

move towards a fuller understanding by the Soviet military of the “potentialities” of airpower. In the end, however, the clearest lesson involved the limitations of airpower in the prosecution of counterinsurgency warfare. Afghanistan demonstrated that superior firepower and technology do not guarantee victory, even when married to a large-scale and institutionalized punitive campaign aimed at the civilian populace. Terror, whether from the air or the ground, proved far too blunt an instrument with which to excise the cancer of insurgency. Despite the relatively unrestricted employment of airpower in Afghanistan, it still did not prove to be an instrument for effective coercion--it is an important caution for those seeking an airpower solution to the dilemma of insurgency war.

Notes

³⁷³ Edwin G. Corr and Stephen Sloan, eds., *Low-Intensity Conflict: Old Threats in a New World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992): supra.

³⁷⁴ Non-trinitarian warfare refers to non-traditional or unconventional warfare. It rejects the Clausewitzian paradigm centering on the government, the population, and the armed forces.

³⁷⁵ Arthur Bonner, *Among the Afghans* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987): 160.

³⁷⁶ Lester W. Grau and Mohammed Yahya Nawroz, *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1994): 4.

³⁷⁷ Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, *Developments in Afghanistan*, February 1988, 100th Cong., 2d sess., 17 and 25 February 1988, 98.

³⁷⁸ M. Jamil Hanfi, *Historical and Cultural Dictionary of Afghanistan* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1976): 2.

³⁷⁹ Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, *Developments in Afghanistan*, February 1988, 100th Cong., 2d sess., 17 and 25 February 1988, 99.

³⁸⁰ Robert D. Kaplan, *Soldiers of God: With the Mujahidin in Afghanistan* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990): 143.

³⁸¹ Trevor Fishlock, “Tribesmen Exult at Killing of Russians,” *The Times* (London), 17 November 1980, 9.

³⁸² Trevor Fishlock, “Discredited Afghan Leader Reports to his Kremlin Masters,” *The Times* (London), 13 October 1980, 6.

Notes

³⁸³J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1986): 162.

³⁸⁴Jeff Trimble, "Update: Russia's 'Hidden War' in Afghanistan," *U.S. News & World Report*, 1 August 1983, 23. See also Trevor Fishlock, "Press Gangs Are Out on the Streets of Kabul," *The Times* (London), 4 August 1982, 5.

³⁸⁵M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 47, 136. See also Edgar O'Ballance, *Afghan Wars 1839-1992. What Britain Gave Up and the Soviet Union Lost* (London: Brassey's, 1993): 85.

³⁸⁶O'Ballance, 145.

³⁸⁷Corr and Sloan, 212.

³⁸⁸O'Ballance, 189-190. Two outstanding examples include the destruction of the Pakistani Munitions and Ordnance Depot near Islamabad and the suspected involvement of KHAD agents in the deaths of Pakistan President Zia and U.S. ambassador Arnold Rafael in the mid-air explosion of a C-130 aircraft in August 1988. See also Kurt Lohbeck, *Holy War, Unholy Victory: Eyewitness to the CIA's Secret War in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1993): 191.

³⁸⁹Bonner, 106.

³⁹⁰Edward Cody, "An Arduous Trek along the 'Jihad Trail,'" *The Washington Post*, 17 October 1983, A20.

³⁹¹Robert Frank Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea, 1950-1953* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1983): 153.

³⁹²Pape, 192.

³⁹³Paul Overby, *Holy Blood: An Inside View of the Afghan War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993): 70.

³⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 67.

³⁹⁵Lohbeck, 108.

³⁹⁶See Jere Van Dyk, *In Afghanistan: An American Odyssey* (New York: Coward-McCann Inc., 1983), *supra*. Mike Martin, *Afghanistan: Inside a Rebel Stronghold* (Poole, UK: Blandford Press, 1984);, *supra*. See also Overby, *Holy Blood* and Bonner, *Among the Afghans*, *supra*. The description by western observers on the nature of the mujahideen diet is overwhelmingly consistent on this point.

³⁹⁷Overby, 85. This is again but one example among many present in the various first-hand accounts.

³⁹⁸Hanfi, 2. For maximum troop strengths see Anthony Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble: Afghanistan's Role in the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993): 137 and Joseph J. Collins, *Afghanistan: A Case Study in the Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1984): 268.

³⁹⁹Jeff Trimble, "Update: Russia's 'Hidden War' in Afghanistan," *U.S. News & World Report*, 1 August 1983, 24. Interview with Charles Dunbar.

⁴⁰⁰*Ibid.*

⁴⁰¹Mohammed Yahya Nawroz and Lester W. Grau, *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies

Notes

Office, 1994): 10. Nawroz and Grau state that “logistically, they [the Soviets] were hard-pressed to maintain a larger force.”

⁴⁰²Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear. Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London: Brassey’s, 1991): 38.

⁴⁰³Stephen Blank, “Imagining Afghanistan: Lessons of a ‘Small War,’” *The Journal of Soviet Military Studies* vol. 3 no. 3, (September 1990): 475.

⁴⁰⁴Nawroz and Grau, 13. See also David C. Isby, *War in a Distant Country. Afghanistan: Invasion and Resistance* (London: Arms and Armour, 1989): 67-73.

⁴⁰⁵Michael Mecham, “U.S. Credits Afghan Resistance with Thwarting Soviet Air Power,” *Aviation Week & Space Technology*, 13 July 1987, 26. Mecham states that the mujahideen SAM threat led to a decreased use of helicopter transport, and forced the Soviets to employ between 300 and 500 armored personnel carriers during a 1987 offensive into Paktia province.

⁴⁰⁶Kaplan, 126.

⁴⁰⁷Larry H. Addington, *The Patterns of War since the Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984): 113.

⁴⁰⁸Lohbeck, 120.

⁴⁰⁹Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976): 88.

⁴¹⁰Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989): 132-134.

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