



AFGHANISTAN REVISITED: Soviet Lessons Learned

By Captain Aaron A. Danis

In February 1989 the Soviet Union completed the withdrawal of 120,000 troops from its 10-year commitment to the Communist Afghan regime. Rapidly evolving world events have buried the West's interest in the Soviet Afghan invasion. Soviet pronouncements of a new "defensive doctrine," as well as conventional arms cuts, overshadow important military lessons that they learned during their intervention. Since the Soviet military has not released any official after-action review of its performance in Afghanistan (an unlikely event), Soviet lessons must be discerned from Soviet military writings, as well as Western press and civilian military analysts who traveled in Afghanistan with the *Mujahedin* and the Soviets.

The lessons learned in Afghanistan are important because the invasion was the Soviets' first direct military intervention outside the Eastern Bloc since the end of World War II. It also placed the Soviets in the position of directly opposing a guerrilla force instead of supporting one. The fighting in Afghanistan led to a gradual evolution in Soviet tactics, force structure and training during the conflict, and will likely influence them in the future as they face internal dissent.

In order to keep Soviet lessons learned in the proper context, we must examine the Soviet invasion vis-a-vis its goals:

"In 1980 Moscow's primary long-term goal was to develop an Afghan communist government

capable of dominating the country politically and militarily by itself, ultimately making the presence of Soviet troops unnecessary. The 40th Army's combat role was subordinated to this overall political strategy. It was not required to win a victory by purely military means or to suppress the *Mujahedin* resistance fighters completely. The Soviet occupation force remained limited in size in accordance to its constrained mission..."¹

This mission was to keep the insurgency at a tolerable level so the Afghan government could gradually regain its legs, while at the same time keeping Soviet casualties low. To this end, Soviet force levels were maintained at only 80,000 to 120,000 troops throughout the conflict. However, the constraints the Soviet hierarchy placed on the level of military involvement would have important ramifications for its counterinsurgency strategy.

In examining Soviet combat actions in Afghanistan, I will focus on tactical and operational doctrine and the ability to execute it. It is limited to four basic areas where the Soviets showed particular weaknesses and subsequent revisions of prior doctrine:

- Counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy.
- Mountain warfare capabilities.
- Use of airpower.
- Troop/weapon performance.

This study will be kept broad in scope so as to assess the impact on the doctrine and force structure of the Soviet Army as a whole.

Counterinsurgency Strategy

The Soviet military entered Afghanistan without a viable strategy for low intensity conflict (LIC) and was totally unprepared to fight a COIN campaign. This mattered little during the first two years of the conflict for the initial Soviet goal was to gain control of the Afghan government and military, garrison the major cities, and protect the lines of communication (LOC) to the Soviet Union and between garrisons. This stronghold strategy fell back on experience gained in Eastern European "local wars," such as Czechoslovakia in 1968.² This period was marked by multi-division sweeps launched from garrison in order to crush local *Mujahedin* resistance and defeat Afghan army mutinies.

During the winter of 1980, the military hierarchy realized that mechanized sweeps of the valleys, using tactics more akin to Central Europe, had little effect on rebel operations. During a sweep, the rebels would vacate the valley floors in favor of the mountains. When the Soviets left the valleys they often left a hapless Afghan Army outpost behind to fend for itself. Though it would be several years before the Soviets would abandon this tactic, they eventually turned to the experience gained fighting the *basmachi* revolt in Central Asia (Mongolia) from 1919-1928 in order to find a way to pacify the increasingly irksome *Mujahedin*. This occurred because of the religious and ethnic similarities of the rebels in both situations.

In the 1920's, the then Soviet military commander M. B. Frunze, developed five general objectives which his forces used successfully to fight the *basmachi*:

- Establish powerful garrisons to control the cities.
- Protect lines of communication.
- Drive insurgents into isolated areas where it is easier to encircle and destroy them.
- Locate bands of guerrillas and deploy large formations to capture their operational centers.
- Seal border passes and escape routes to cut off avenues of retreat and external support.³

Just as importantly, Frunze realized it would be impossible to win by military force alone. He emphasized the use of political and socioeconomic measures, including rebuilding the local economy and redistributing land to the peasants.

Having accomplished the first three of Frunze's general objectives during the initial two years of the Afghan invasion, the Soviets

attempted operations in early 1981 to achieve the last two, but their execution was seriously flawed in several aspects. In 1981-1983, the Soviets explored the use of small-unit offensive sweeps as a substitute for the ineffective large-scale operations. The combined arms reinforced battalion (CARB), consisting of three motorized rifle companies, a tank company, an artillery battery and supporting engineers, became the core subunit of the Soviet forces.⁴ The CARB was used in conjunction with airmobile units, attack helicopters and, on occasion, chemical strikes. In operations reminiscent of U.S. forces in Vietnam, the Soviets employed classic "anvil and hammer" and search-and-destroy tactics in an attempt to encircle *Mujahedin* camps.

These operations failed due to an over-centralized command structure and a lack of unit-level initiative, which often allowed the rebels to escape before the cordons closed, and the over-reliance of Soviet infantry on their armored vehicles. In one case, a CARB left the main road near Paktia and was virtually destroyed when its inexperienced troops panicked and hid behind their vehicles until they ran out of ammunition and were killed.⁵ Instead of dismounting to engage the rebels, the Soviets relied on superior weapons, firepower and mobility in an attempt to minimize Soviet casualties.

In early 1983, the Soviets responded to these deficiencies by creating a dedicated COIN force. This force totaling 18,000-23,000 soldiers, was comprised of 10,000 airborne troops; 5,000-7,000 air assault troops formed in at least one air assault brigade and several battalions; 5,000 designated reconnaissance troops; and 3,000-4,000 special operations (*Spetsnaz*) troops.⁶ Taking advantage of their greater initiative, these forces were successful in locating and destroying some *Mujahedin* bases near the border and intercepting arms shipments from Pakistan. However, overall Soviet policy prevented these forces from being employed in large enough numbers. Generally accepted figures state that 20,000 of the estimated 80,000 *Mujahedin* forces were in country at any one time, maintaining a rough parity with the Soviet COIN force. A force ratio of between six to ten to one is the usual figure cited for a COIN campaign to have a reasonable chance for success; this supports the contention that after 1983, the Soviets were trying to maintain a status quo against the rebels, possibly believing that the quality of their COIN force would make up for the one to one ratio in troops. For a military

system which thrives on establishing a proper correlation of forces and victory, this is an unusual and interesting development.

Soviet military-civil relations, a basic tenet in Frunze's plans, also left much to be desired. Frunze had used a detachment of culturally similar Volga Tartars in his campaign in Central Asia to show that Moslem peoples could be integrated into the Soviet state. In 1979-80, the initial Soviet invasion force of 80,000 men was comprised of 30-40 percent Central Asian reservists. Though the Soviet leadership hoped they would set a similar example for the Afghans, this did not occur. The Central Asians were poorly trained and expressed little interest in fighting their "neighbors." In fact, they sometimes defected to them. Also, the *Mujahedin* never took seriously Soviet efforts to portray the Afghan government and military as Islamic in nature. Instead, the rebels elevated their conflict against the Soviet backed government to the level of *Jihad*, or Holy War.⁷ Most Central Asians were subsequently withdrawn by the end of 1980, and by 1982 the Soviets gave up whatever hope they held of winning the loyalty of the populace. Instead, they relied on a campaign of intimidation, subversion and reprisal; killing and displacing thousands of Afghan civilians; and deporting hundreds of children to the Soviet Union for re-education.⁸

Based on the Frunze analogy, the Soviets failed to advance beyond the first three objectives using the tactics described above. They were not successful in insulating the rebels from outside support from Pakistan, China or Iran, nor were they ever able to consistently isolate and destroy *Mujahedin* base camps. This would have required a much larger force which the Soviet hierarchy could not politically justify, internally or internationally. Soviet scorched-earth policies designed to isolate the rebels from their base of support in lieu of co-opting them, forced that base of support across the Pakistan border where it was out of Soviet reach. In the end, the Soviet emphasis on a limited, military conflict against an enemy fighting the equivalent of total war gave them the only result possible: a long stalemate. Even without the restrictions on the size of the Soviet military effort, it is debatable whether Soviet repression tactics would have squelched the insurgency.

Mountain Warfare Capabilities

Soviet weaknesses in mountain warfare were typical of their tactical and operational vulnerabilities and had a direct negative effect on the

Soviet Army's COIN strategy. Unlike the European theater, with its moderate climate and rolling terrain, Afghanistan is composed of desert and highly restrictive mountainous terrain, with severe extremes in climate and temperature. The Hindu Kush mountain range covers half the country, with peaks as high as 7,000 meters. Forty-nine percent of the country is above the 2,000 meter level. Soviet LOCs ran 450 kilometers from Termez to Kabul, passing through the 2,700 meter-long Salang Pass tunnel, becoming the most important single transportation route in the country.⁹ Though the Soviets had doctrine dealing with warfare in the mountains, it was oriented, predictably, toward armored operations, and no mountain warfare units had been seen in the Soviet order of battle for years.

In the July 1978 edition of *Voyennyi Vestnik*, General Lieutenant D. Shrudnev stated that tanks could operate in the mountains "jointly with motorized rifle and artillery units, and even sometimes independently."¹⁰ The folly of this approach quickly became evident, as tanks without an infantry screen were vulnerable to ambush. Even when BMP or BTR armored personnel carriers (APCs) were in support, Soviet infantry once again showed their unwillingness to dismount. Their small arms weapons were out-ranged by *Mujahedin* Enfield rifles, and Soviet troops were unaccustomed to stalking guerrillas in rugged terrain.¹¹ Tanks and APCs could not provide fire support to dismounted troops due to restrictions in elevating their main guns, and long-ranged artillery was subject to shifting mountain winds that reduced accuracy.

In response, the Soviets started de-emphasizing tanks. Those that were used often had a motorized rifle squad assigned to protect them against antitank weapons and mines. BMPs also used more cautious tactics, adopting a look-move-look approach, using dismounted squads to bound ahead of the lead platoon in terrain where ambushes were likely. On a higher level, the Soviet Army looked at their experience in Manchuria in 1945 and began employing "enveloping detachments," which were self-contained units of platoon to battalion size that would use more restricted alternate routes to envelope the enemy and strike at his flanks and rear. The use of engineers and mortars was increased to assist in mobility and fire support for these detachments.

Envelopment operations were also conducted by air assault troops in very restricted terrain.

The Soviets developed a recurring theme of attacking "from the top down"; that is, seizing the highest terrain first in order to gain surprise and force the rebels to fight uphill.¹² In a "typical attack," air and ground reconnaissance would check route trafficability and possible ambush sites. Enveloping detachments would take the less accessible routes while the main body would take the most accessible. The enveloping detachment would take the commanding terrain along the main route of advance or to the rear of the enemy. The main body would then complete the encirclement and destruction of the enemy. The use of enveloping detachments was one of the more successful lessons the Soviets learned in Afghanistan.

Logistical problems in mountainous terrain were even greater than tactical ones. Soviet military journals in 1980 documented numerous breakdowns, inadequate preventative maintenance and poor driving skills. Because of the high altitude, consumption rates were 70-90 percent greater for gasoline and 30-40 percent greater for diesel than those in Europe. Helicopter loads were also decreased by 25 percent. To keep the roads open and to guard important LOC points, the army used fortified security posts manned by the Highway Commandant's Service consisting of motorized rifle and combat engineers. Similar troops also made up "movement support detachments" to conduct route reconnaissance, clear mines and obstacles, and repair small sections of road. Despite these efforts, the Soviets still relied heavily on air transport to bring in a large amount of the supplies usually carried on roads, rail and pipelines subject to frequent interdiction by the rebels.¹³

As a result of their mountain warfare experience, the Soviets increased efforts to expand doctrine and training for this area. Military journals showed a steady increase in articles on mountain warfare. Some military districts established mountain warfare training centers for combat and combat support units. Training emphasized independent action below company level, sniper training, overcoming obstacles, mountain climbing and infiltration tactics. Special driver training was provided for wheeled and tracked vehicle operators highlighting vehicle maintenance, ascending and descending steep slopes, and fording streams.¹⁴ Though specialized mountain units have not been identified in the Soviet force structure, at least in open sources, it appears that Soviet combat units committed to such areas will

not be caught by surprise by mountainous conditions in the future.

Airpower

Most analysts have described Soviet employment of helicopters as "the most dynamic feature of Soviet tactical operations during the war,"¹⁵ and that the Soviets have learned what the West already knew: "The helicopter is the most important single weapon in counter-guerrilla operations."¹⁶ Though there are analysts who would argue that the Soviets, like the West, were "seduced" by the helicopter (because helicopter mobility gives the illusion that one controls the countryside), the fact that the Soviets gained extensive experience in helicopter employment in Afghanistan is irrefutable. Though the Soviets employed 500-600 helicopters during a peak in 1982, they averaged 250-350 helicopters in-country per year, still more than the average Soviet ground army could expect in normal circumstances. This emphasis on the helicopter was mandated by the vast and difficult terrain, as well as the limited and decentralized nature of later Soviet operations. Given the relatively small number of Soviet troops and their restricted operations in and around well-established garrisons, the helicopter was the only way to exercise initiative and maintain pressure on the *Mujahedin* in the countryside.

Another reason for the reliance on helicopters was the rather lackluster performance of fixed-wing aircraft. Fixed-wing aircraft performed basically two combat missions: strategic bombing and close air support (CAS)/battlefield interdiction. The strategic role consisted of supporting large-scale offensives and high-altitude carpet bombing of guerrilla bases, though there was never a concerted campaign comparable to the U.S. "Rolling Thunder" operations in Vietnam. The medium-range Tu-16 Badger, Su-24 Fencer and, in 1988, the Tu-26 Backfire, performed these missions. Though effective in hitting fixed targets such as cities, they proved to be too inaccurate to hit guerrilla positions. Early in the war the Soviets relied on the MiG-21 Fishbed for CAS, and it proved to be ill-suited for ground attacks in mountain terrain due to its lack of maneuverability. It was replaced by the swing-wing MiG-23/27 Flogger and Su-25 Frogfoot in 1982.

The Frogfoot, whose design was similar to the U.S. Northrop A-9 (unsuccessful competitor to the A-10), proved to be the most effective ground attack aircraft due to its low-speed maneuver-

ability and firepower. The Frogfoot was armed with a Gatling-type cannon, rockets and 4,500 kilograms of bombs. One guerrilla commander in the Panjshir Valley claimed it had "fantastic power."¹⁷ Even so, Soviet pilots often conducted attacks as if they were worried about anti-aircraft fire, well before the *Mujahedin* acquired large numbers of hand-held surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). They would drop bombs from 5,000 feet and fire rockets out of range of the target. After the introduction of Stinger and Blowpipe SAMs, pilots would avoid them by simply flying above their roughly five kilometer range.¹⁸ The CAS missions thus fell to the workhorses of the helicopter fleet, the Mi-24 Hind and Mi-8 Hip.

Unlike U.S. Army practice, Soviet helicopters belong to the Soviet Air Force's Frontal Aviation. Ground support is done by attaching one or more air armies to a front-level ground headquarters (two or more ground armies constitute a front). Though this allows for centralized command and efficient utilization of resources, the Afghanistan experience revealed that this did not allow for rapid responsiveness or access to reconnaissance information. Therefore, the Soviets attached Frontal Aviation units directly to 40th Army Headquarters in Kabul.¹⁹ They utilized a number of independent mixed helicopter regiments and squadrons, with some of the squadrons attached down to division level (a practice previously seen in the Western Group of Soviet Forces). Not only was there an attempt for closer air-ground coordination, but Hinds were also used with Su-25s and MiGs as part of a CAS "team," similar to the U.S. Joint Air Attack Team concept.

Tactics originally used by the Hinds could be devastating to the target but left the gunships vulnerable. They often hovered at a low altitude to engage targets or used several gunships in a circular pattern of passes firing 57mm rockets and dropping 250kg cluster and high-explosive bombs from a 1,000 meter altitude. Both the pilots and Hinds initially experienced difficulty using nap-of-the-earth tactics. By late 1980 tactics began to change, most notably with the use of Hinds and Hips in the scout helicopter role. Soviet scouts would stay high and out of range in order to direct attack helicopters. East German Hinds used the Mi-2 Hoplight utility helicopter in the scout role in 1981 in Germany, perhaps demonstrating Afghan lessons.

Because of a large amount of hype, it is difficult to assess the effects of American Stinger and British Blowpipe shoulder-fired SAMs (as well as

captured SA-7s and anti-aircraft guns) on Soviet air operations. By the spring of 1988, the U.S. government estimated Stinger kills at 250, though other estimates are higher. It is certain that initial losses were high before the Soviets began to develop technical and tactical countermeasures. Technical countermeasures included flare dispensers, infrared jammers and exhaust baffles to reduce passive infrared signatures. Tactical adjustments included flying higher (at the expense of accuracy), flying at night, using the sun to reduce infrared signature, and calling for artillery suppression prior to an operation. A primary tactic was to capture the missiles. KGB-KhAD agents would try to track missile supplies from Pakistan and use *Spetsnaz* forces to launch raids against the sites. This was particularly effective against larger, immobile *Mujahedin* anti-aircraft guns like the ZU-23 or Oerlikons.²⁰

Because 75-85 percent of Soviet helicopter losses were due to accidents and poor maintenance, perhaps the true effect of *Mujahedin* air defenses on Soviet air operations was giving the Soviets a realistic training environment for their pilots. As one Soviet author stated, "Flying in the mountains and above the desert, plus the possibility of coming under fire by anti-aircraft weapons which are making their way from Pakistan to the bandits . . . this is a real training school."²¹

Troop and Equipment Performance

Conducting COIN operations in a tough, Third World environment was a test for both Soviet men and machines. In general, it "demonstrated that there is a wide gap between what is prescribed in Soviet tactical writings and what their units can perform....even after years of fighting the *Mujahedin*, Soviet units continued to fall short of the standards demanded for tactical success."²² Another analyst stated, "reports from the fighting show repeated failures and mistakes exceeding those of which Western armies are normally capable. The Soviets still seem to fail tactically on the ground despite their improvements and attempts to come to grips with the problems of guerrilla warfare."²³ The primary reason for these problems lies at the weakest point of the Soviet command structure, the inability of non-commissioned officers and junior officers to perform on their own initiative.

COIN requires decentralized command and control. Yet the Soviet command structure, particularly at lower levels, is trained in "cookbook"

warfare, where most tactical situations are approached with the same thought process. As previously noted, dismounted tactics, night operations and infiltration techniques require greater leadership than basic motorized combat tactics. However, the Soviet Army did have a high turnover rate for officers, trying to give as many of them "experience" as possible. As many as 60,000 officers had served in Afghanistan by 1986.²⁴ The end result, in the words of one guerrilla, an ex-Afghan Army officer trained in the Soviet Union, was that the Soviet regular forces were "tactical zeros."²⁵

Problems also existed at the troop level. Of these, low morale was one of the most overlooked aspects of troop performance. Soviet troops were two-year conscripts with little training or experience, and they were told that they were going to Afghanistan to fight American, Chinese and Pakistani aggression. It did not take them long to realize this was not the case. "What aggression? This is a complete lie. We couldn't find any evidence of aggression here; only the Afghan people who had taken up arms to defend their country."²⁶ Low morale led to drug abuse and rampant black market activity. Soviet soldiers often sold pieces of equipment, including weapons, in order to buy hashish. Officers of lieutenant and captain rank usually held the conscripts they commanded in contempt. Only the elite troops such as airborne and *Spetsnaz* had the necessary training and initiative to conduct the COIN operations. The Soviets used these troops almost exclusively in offensive actions against the guerrillas in 1988-89. The rest of the Soviet Army was not psychologically suited for COIN warfare.²⁷

Some Soviet weapons were equally bad. For all the ballyhoo in the Western press about the simple, rugged reliability of Soviet vehicles, the majority of Soviet equipment losses were due to breakdown, not combat. "There is a lesson of Afghanistan that equipment must correspond to the conditions of the area where the action takes place."²⁸ Weaknesses in recovery and maintenance from rear services, an area not emphasized for high-tempo combat in the European theater, became woefully apparent. By 1982, the Soviets tried more consistently to recover military material damaged in combat, especially tanks and APCs. The over-reliance on helicopters to perform combat and logistics missions, as well as dust, ice and altitude, caused engines to overheat and break down more often.²⁹ The Soviets not only learned how their older equipment performed,

but they tested a new generation of high-technology small arms, mines, munitions, vehicles and aircraft in order to avoid future problems. Action in Afghanistan reinforced lessons learned in other Third World conflicts from the Arab-Israeli Wars to Africa — a large amount of Soviet equipment is not built to last.

Conclusions

In light of the the Soviet pull-out from Eastern Europe and their new emphasis on defensive doctrine, it is difficult to pinpoint how Afghanistan's lessons will be applied in the future in the Soviet military. Changes in airpower tactics, logistics and weapons systems are probably easiest to transfer to the army as a whole. The results of lessons learned in these areas have shown up already in the Western Group of Forces. Lessons concerning the ability and initiative of Soviet soldiers, as well as the practicality of the army's COIN doctrine, are a different matter.

While there will probably be no rush to "westernize" Soviet training and move towards a more professional army, Soviet "think tanks" and several Soviet officers at all levels have raised the idea of abolishing the present conscript system. The main benefit of Afghanistan seems to have fallen on a new generation of young military "grand masters" like General Lieutenant Boris Gromov, who engineered the withdrawal from Afghanistan.³⁰ Whether or not the experience of senior and mid-level officers will filter down to the lower ranks remains to be seen. Such a filtering process must compete with the obstacles presented by the huge Soviet military bureaucracy, and the lack of a professional NCO corps to pass on such knowledge is a serious handicap.

The Soviets have apparently made no effort to establish any sort of permanent COIN force or school. It is likely that the Soviets believe that Afghanistan was a special experience, one not to be repeated during the Gorbachev era. In view of its limited goals and forces committed, the military probably believes that no changes in COIN or limited war doctrine are necessary. After all, it may very well have militarily defeated the *Mujahedin* if more ground forces had been committed. Arguably, the Soviets can claim that despite their dismal military performance, their overall political goal was achieved because the Afghan government still stands (an event which probably surprises the Soviets more than the West). The Soviet military performance in the ongoing Armenian-Azerbaijan crisis indicates that LIC doctrine

at troop level still translates into the brutality and repression which was so evident in Afghanistan.

Many of the tactical lessons of the conflict will benefit primarily those special forces who carried the brunt of the fighting over its last few years. These troops may prove valuable in putting out the various internal ethnic fires which the Soviets will face in the near future. In total, however, Afghanistan proved that the Soviet Army is ill-suited for employment in a LIC environment. Changes in the Soviet military in the Gorbachev era will determine if it will remain so.

Footnotes

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