

# **“We Have Not Learned How to Wage War There” The Soviet Approach in Afghanistan 1979–1989**

**Matt M. Matthews**



**Occasional Paper 36**



**Combat Studies Institute Press**  
US Army Combined Arms Center  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas



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## Foreword

The Combat Studies Institute (CSI) is pleased to present its latest publication in the Occasional Paper Series, “*We Have Not Learned How to Wage War There*” *The Soviet Approach in Afghanistan, 1979-1989*, by Mr. Matt Matthews. For this work, Mr. Matthews collected a wide variety of sources on the subject, many of them of primary accounts, and used these materials to provide an overview of the evolution of the Soviet operational approach in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989. This Soviet experience offers a number of useful insights for American military professionals who are, as of this writing, conducting operations in Afghanistan.

Mr. Matthews begins his study by examining the Soviets’ planning for its invasion of Afghanistan and initial goals for that campaign. The author then looks closely at how the Soviets adapted their tactics and organization to meet the committed and resilient insurgent threat that emerged to do battle against Soviet forces. Despite conventional interpretations of this campaign in Afghanistan which emphasize the rigidity of Soviet methods, Matthews’ study suggests that the Soviets were flexible in their overall approach. The Soviet government did, for example, launch nation-building initiatives that would look familiar to American military officers who served in Afghanistan in the first decade of the 21st century. These efforts, however, were seriously hindered by a Soviet military culture that opposed a more comprehensive campaign to foster a popular central Afghan government. Matthews concludes his study by examining Soviet operations to extract their forces from Afghanistan while nonetheless leaving a viable, if not popular, Afghan government in place.

We at the Combat Studies Institute believe in our mission to support the warfighter with historical research relevant to their current tasks. Achieving a better understanding of the past can only assist in the execution of present and future missions. *CSI – the past is prologue!*

Dr. William G. Robertson  
Director, Combat Studies Institute



## Introduction

*We have been fighting in Afghanistan for already six years. If the approach is not changed, we will continue to fight for another 20-30 years . . . . Our military should be told that they are learning badly from this war. What can it be that there is no room for our General Staff to maneuver? In general, we have not selected the keys to resolving this problem. What, are we going to fight endlessly, as a testimony that our troops are not able to deal with the situation? We need to finish this process as soon as possible.*

Mikhail Gorbachev to the Soviet Politburo,  
CPSU CC Politburo Transcript, 13 November 1986

Over the course of the last eight years, a plethora of new primary research material related to the Soviet war in Afghanistan has emerged. With Lester W. Grau and Michael A Gress's important translation and editing of the Russian General Staff history, titled *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, in 2002 to the recent work of the Woodrow Wilson International Center Cold War International History Project and The National Security Archive, the conflict has now come into sharper historical focus. Recent secondary sources such as Gregory Feifer's *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, and David Loyn's *In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation*, have also helped shed new light on the war. Additionally, Stephen Tanner's revised edition of *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* has examined the long history of the many conflicts in Afghanistan.

It is interesting, however, that many Western military analysts have viewed the Soviet experience as a failure, an episode from which few lessons can be gleaned.<sup>1</sup> In fact, there is not a single reference to the Soviet experience in Afghanistan in the US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual FM 3-24 published in 2006. A military analyst who suggested including the Soviet conflict in the manual concluded that, "Pentagon officials seemed to have little awareness about what Moscow had been trying to do there or for how long."<sup>2</sup>

When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, senior Soviet political leaders sincerely believed that it would be a short



campaign. Indeed, initial Soviet designs in Afghanistan were exceedingly limited, calculated only to construct a viable Afghan central government that could withstand the attacks of its internal enemies. "They hoped," wrote historian Artemy Kalinovsky, "that while Soviet troops provided training and logistical support to the military of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, [DRA] economic aid and a massive advising effort would help build up the governing ability of the main political party. The Kabul government would then have the legitimacy and the defense capability to stand on its own two legs without Soviet troops."<sup>3</sup> However, like other great powers before them, the Soviets failed to grasp the peculiarities of Afghanistan, causing their original plans to go terribly awry. Within weeks of the invasion, the Soviet military found itself engulfed in a rapidly escalating war. It would prove a costly 10-year struggle that would take the lives of approximately 13,833 Soviet soldiers and roughly 9 percent of the Afghan population.<sup>4</sup>

Over the course of this decade-long conflict, the Soviet military establishment frequently altered its approach as it sought to achieve victory over the Mujahideen, as the Afghan anti-government insurgents were known, and strengthen the Afghan government and armed forces.<sup>5</sup> Early in the war, the Soviet army was hindered by a paucity of tactical expertise, over-centralization, and the lack of a counter-insurgency doctrine. It was also encumbered with a heavily mechanized force unsuitable for the Afghan terrain, an unreliable Afghan army, and an almost complete lack of cultural and historical insight. More important, while the initial Soviet force that intervened in 1979 was arguably large and capable enough to achieve the original aims of the campaign, as those aims increased in scope and complexity, it became clear that the Soviet Union had neither the will nor the capacity to commit the number of troops needed for success.<sup>6</sup>

The Soviets certainly underestimated their opposition and continually struggled to find a formula for victory over anti-government forces, yet when they finally withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989, they left in place a viable government that managed to outlive the Soviet Union. The Soviets also left behind a fairly competent Afghan military. According to historian Mark Galeotti, "The success of the operation to withdraw and the longevity of the Soviet-retrained government forces they left behind attest to the fact that the [Soviet] General Staff was beginning to master this new style of war, for all the problems associated with getting a modern bureaucratic military machine to reform itself."<sup>7</sup> This Long War Occasional Paper will examine the shifting approaches to the Soviet military effort in Afghanistan and its attempts to transform units that were designed and

trained for large-scale conventional combat operations into a tactically proficient and successful counterinsurgent force.

Chapter 1 of this study provides a concise history of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. The rationale behind the Soviet foray into Afghanistan is examined as well as the planning concept for the military occupation. This chapter will also address the initial problems encountered by the Soviet army as anti-government forces began to conduct guerrilla operations against it.

Chapter 2 focuses on the beginning of active operations against the Mujahideen, as well as the Soviet recognition of initial problems related to the conduct of counterinsurgency operations. The chapter further includes an overview of operations from 1980 to 1984 and Soviet army modifications to its tactical doctrine, as well as its flawed counterinsurgency operations (COIN) approach.

Chapter 3 of this study explores the Soviet quest for a way out of the quagmire. This discussion also considers Soviet military operations under General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, and his decision to give the Soviet army one year of free rein in carrying out the war. Additionally, Gorbachev's exceedingly successful withdrawal from Afghanistan will be addressed, as will the failure of the Soviet military to respond to national reconciliation efforts and the challenges of COIN.

The Soviets experienced innumerable tribulations during their decade long struggle in Afghanistan, and while they almost certainly never truly grasped the complexities of the situation, they did achieve a few striking successes.<sup>8</sup> They managed to leave behind an Afghan government and army capable of withstanding the Soviet withdrawal. As historian Lester W. Grau recently noted, "The withdrawal was based on a coordinated diplomatic, economic and military plan permitting Soviet forces to withdraw in good order and the Afghan government to survive."<sup>9</sup> This serves as an important lesson, which should not be overlooked by Coalition forces currently involved in Afghanistan.

## Notes

1. Victor Sebestyen wrote, “Few strategists from Russia or the West seem to think anything can be learnt from it.” Victor Sebestyen, “West ignores lessons of Soviet humiliation in Afghanistan,” *TimesOnline*, 19 July 2009, 2, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article6719240.ece> (accessed 1 March 2010).

2. Artemy Kalinovsky, “Afghanistan Is the New Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy*, 4 September 2009, 1–2, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/04/afghanistan\\_is\\_the\\_new\\_afghanistan](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/04/afghanistan_is_the_new_afghanistan) (accessed 1 March 2010).

3. Artemy Kalinovsky, “Afghanistan Is the New Afghanistan,” *Foreign Policy*, 4 September 2009, 1, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/04/afghanistan\\_is\\_the\\_new\\_afghanistan](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/04/afghanistan_is_the_new_afghanistan) (accessed 1 March 2010); Artemy Kalinovsky, *The Blind Leading the Blind: Soviet Advisors, Counter-Insurgency and Nation-Building in Afghanistan*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project, Working Paper No. 60 (January 2010), 2, [http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.publications&group\\_id=11901](http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.publications&group_id=11901) (accessed 1 March 2010).

4. Lester W. Grau, ed., *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 1998), xix; Robert F. Baumann, *Russian-Soviet Unconventional Wars in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1993), 136.

5. Throughout this text, the terms *Mujahideen*, *Mujahidin* and *Mujahadeen*, the transliterated Arabic word for “those who struggle or fight,” are used interchangeably in various quotations. The author will use *Mujahideen*, the more common transliteration.

6. Scott R. McMichael pointed out that, “Perhaps 500,000 troops would have been required. The political, economic, and ideological costs of such an approach were unacceptable.” Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London, UK: Brassey’s, 1991), 52.

7. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 1995), 19.

8. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress wrote that, “Despite the passage of time and the authors’ unprecedented access to materials about the war, there is ample evidence that the Soviets never really understood their enemy or the neighboring country in which they were fighting.” The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. and ed. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 310.

9. Lester W. Grau, “Soviet COIN in Afghanistan,” slide presentation at the Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 11 May 2010.

## Chapter 1

### Is There Still Anyone on Your Side?

#### Invasion and Consolidation December 1979–February 1980

*When the highest political leaders of the USSR sent its forces into this war, they did not consider the historic, religious, and national particularities of Afghanistan.*

The Russian General Staff

#### Background

Soviet interest in Afghanistan began in 1919, when Lenin's fledgling Marxist government became the first country to acknowledge the new Afghan regime. Afghanistan promptly returned the goodwill, becoming the first country bordering the Soviet Union to recognize the new state. By the early 1920s, the Soviets were assisting Afghanistan with various infrastructure projects, as well as supplying military aircraft and trainers for the country's new air force.<sup>1</sup> The two countries maintained good relations over the next three decades and, by the 1950s, the Soviet Union was pouring massive amounts of money into Afghanistan. As military historian Stephen Tanner pointed out, they "invested in Afghanistan by building dams, roads, airfields, schools, and irrigation systems, as well as by searching for natural resources."<sup>2</sup> While the United States also contributed hundreds of millions of dollars to Afghan infrastructure projects during this timeframe, the Americans turned down requests for military aid. According to Tanner, the United States deemed Afghanistan "indefensible against a potential Red Army attack, and just plain strategically unimportant."<sup>3</sup>

Deprived of armaments from the United States, Prime Minister of Afghanistan Mohammed Daoud turned to the Soviet Union. The Soviets were more than happy to assist. By the early 1960s, historian J. Bruce Amstutz wrote, "Soviet military instructors had completely replaced the longstanding contingent of Turkish officers, traditionally the military advisers to the Afghan army. Of the almost 4,000 Afghan military officers who went to the USSR for training, all were obliged to take one or more courses in communism."<sup>4</sup> Afghan officers who showed interest in Marxist philosophy were often enticed into the ranks of the budding Afghan Communist Party, known as the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).<sup>5</sup> By the 1970s, the Afghan military was totally reliant on the

Soviets for day-to-day operations. As Amstutz acknowledged, "One effect of almost total Afghan dependence on Soviet logistical arms support, including spare parts, ammunition, and gasoline, was that Afghanistan implicitly could never act militarily against any foreign country without Moscow's approval."<sup>6</sup> Conversely, this state of affairs doomed any chance of a significant military response to a Soviet incursion into Afghanistan.

In 1973, with the assistance of the PDPA, Prime Minister Daoud ousted his cousin, King Zahir, in a coup and seized the reins of power in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> While he had used the PDPA to help overthrow Zahir, Daoud quickly removed PDPA ministers from the government and began to slash the number of Soviet military advisors within the ranks of the Afghan Army. He imprisoned many of his opponents and outraged Islamists by his heavy-handed tactics. Daoud also sought to reach out to other countries and maintain a middle-of-the-road policy in his dealings with both the Soviets and the West. After a combative meeting with Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev in 1977, Daoud's days were numbered.<sup>8</sup>

In April 1978, PDPA officers deposed Daoud in a bloody coup. Daoud was executed along with 18 members of his family.<sup>9</sup> The new communist regime wasted little time in implementing sweeping radical reforms within Afghanistan. "The communists changed the national flag, painted schools red, encouraged education for girls and rights for women, canceled all rural debt and started to impose land redistribution measures that upset the clan and tribal system of the Afghan countryside," wrote journalist David Loyn.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the new revolutionary alterations created a firestorm of rebellion against the new communist government of Nur Mohammed Taraki. Reciprocal violence spread rapidly as Taraki's regime found itself locked in a battle with various elements of Afghan society opposed to radical reform. The greatest challenge came from Islamist guerrillas trained by the Pakistani government. "To them," declared Loyn, "both Daoud's gradualist approach to democracy and the shock tactics of the communists came to the same thing: a threat to their way of life. They went to war to defend traditional Afghan rural conservative values against democracy, progress, the education of girls and godless communism."<sup>11</sup>

In 1979, Islamist guerrillas dubbed "mujahideen," a term that roughly translated to "Holy Warriors," managed to capture the government stronghold at Asadabad near the Khyber Pass. It was an easy victory, as the Afghan commander joined forces with the rebels.<sup>12</sup> In March, the 17th Division was sent into the city of Herat, in western Afghanistan, to quell anti-government rioting. Once again, sizable elements of the Afghan army mutinied, with the soldiers of the 17th Division joining the rioters. Taraki

quickly surrounded the city with forces still loyal to his government and with the help of Soviet supplied IL-28 bombers managed to retake Herat. According to former diplomatic officer Martin Ewans, the aircraft were “possibly piloted by Russians.”<sup>13</sup> By the time the insurrection ended, approximately 5,000 Afghans were dead along with 100 Soviet advisers and family members. According to one historian, during the brief time the rebels held the city, “decapitated Soviet heads had been paraded around the city on poles.”<sup>14</sup>

Taraki’s new Marxist regime was rapidly unraveling. Following the Herat uprising, the Afghan president made at least 20 appeals to the Soviets for troops and also an increase in military aid for his embattled government.<sup>15</sup> Well into the spring of 1979, the Soviets refused Taraki’s request. According to Afghan specialist Gilles Dorronsoro, “the prospect of a massive direct intervention continued to be rejected by all the Soviet officials responsible for Afghan affairs, highly aware as they were of the diplomatic costs and the risk of becoming bogged down.”<sup>16</sup> In his recent work *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, Gregory Feifer described a telephone conversation between Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin and Taraki that took place in March 1979. The exchange reveals the absolute desperation of Taraki’s government and provides an early glimpse into the problems the Soviet military would face after its invasion of Afghanistan. “Do you have support among the workers, city dwellers, the petty bourgeoisie, and the white-collar workers in Herat?” Kosygin asked. “Is there still anyone on your side?” “There’s no active support on the part of the population,” Taraki replied. “It’s almost wholly under the influence of Shiite slogans—follow not the heathens, but follow us. That’s what underpins the propaganda.” Kosygin went on to ask Taraki, “Hundreds of Afghan officers were trained in the Soviet Union, where are they all now?” Taraki told Kosygin that, “Most of them are Muslim reactionaries. We’re unable to rely on them, we have no confidence in them.”<sup>17</sup> Afterward, Taraki flew to Moscow for further discussions with the Soviet leadership. In Moscow, Kosygin informed the Afghan president that, “If our troops were introduced, the situation in your country would get worse.” Kosygin told Taraki a Soviet troop commitment, “would immediately arouse the international community, and would invite sharply unfavourable many-faceted consequences.”<sup>18</sup>

On returning to Kabul from a trip to Cuba and Moscow in September 1979, Taraki found himself challenged by competing members within the PDPA. After an erratic series of shootouts and ambushes, Taraki’s life came to a swift end when Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin took control of the

government and ordered Taraki to be smothered to death with a pillow.<sup>19</sup> While Amin endeavored to scale back many of Taraki's revolutionary reforms, the insurrection against the government continued unabated.<sup>20</sup> The Soviet leadership was shocked by the whole affair. A report by the Politburo painted Amin as, "an ambitious, cruel, treacherous person . . . insincere and two-faced." When the new Afghan President began to reach out to Pakistan, the Soviets grew even more alarmed. According to David Loyn, "Amin had spent time in the West, and Soviet intelligence reports suggested he was a Central Intelligence Agency stooge. The suspicion alone was a death sentence."<sup>21</sup>

The Soviet political leadership's attitude toward intervention changed markedly after the assassination of Taraki. While the Soviet Union certainly wanted to salvage its client state from complete disintegration, there were far larger issues that concerned the inner circle of the Soviet politburo.<sup>22</sup> According to former Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy M. Kornienko, the Soviet political bosses were seriously concerned about "the stationing of American military ships in the Persian Gulf in the fall of 1979, and the incoming information about preparations for a possible invasion of Iran, which threatened to cardinaly change the military-strategic situation in the region to the detriment of the interests of the Soviet Union."<sup>23</sup> Kornienko noted that, the KGB added fuel to the flame, by portraying Amin "as an American agent" and "exaggerated the power of the USSR to change the situation."<sup>24</sup>

As the political leadership careened closer to the brink of intervention, senior Soviet military commanders remained one of the last bulwarks of reason. Kornienko revealed that among the higher military leadership, "the idea of sending troops to Afghanistan did not inspire any enthusiasm . . . . For understandable reasons, they justified their objections against it by professional rather than political considerations, supporting them by [referring to] the American experience in Vietnam: the impossibility to cope with Afghanistan with the forces that could be used [for it] without substantially weakening the Soviet groups of forces in Europe and along the border with China, which was not acceptable in those years."<sup>25</sup>

### **"The Measures"**

On 10 December 1979, the Chief of the Soviet General Staff, Marshal Nikolai Vasilyevich Ogarkov, was summoned to the office of the Soviet Defense Minister, Marshal Dmitri Ustinov. The Defense Minister informed Ogarkov that a decision had been reached by the Politburo to temporarily commit Soviet troops to Afghanistan. Ustinov instructed his Chief of Staff to begin planning for the commitment of 75,000 to 80,000 soldiers. The



pronouncement by the Defense Minister shocked and dismayed Ogarkov. Displaying a firm grasp of military history and of the current situation in Afghanistan, Ogarkov called the idea “reckless” and stated that “he was against the introduction of troops.”<sup>26</sup> He also informed Ustinov that 75,000 soldiers “would not be able to stabilize the situation.”<sup>27</sup> As Ogarkov continued to elucidate his opposition to the plan, Ustinov quashed his objections. “Are you going to teach the Politburo? Your only duty is to carry out the orders,” Ustinov informed the marshal.<sup>28</sup>

Later in the day, another meeting was held in the office of General Secretary Leonid I. Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party and overall leader of the Soviet Union. Key members of the Soviet political leadership, known as the “small Politburo,” attended this gathering. Once more, Ogarkov tried to persuade the political chiefs and the head of the KGB against invasion. Alexander Lyakhovsky, a former high-ranking Soviet Army officer wrote, “He cited the traditions of the Afghan people, who never tolerated foreigners on their soil, warned them about the possible involvement of our troops in military operations—but everything was in vain.”<sup>29</sup> Lyakhovsky noted that the ultimate decision was made by the “small politburo” on 12 December. “The final decision,” he pointed out, “was made unanimously—to introduce Soviet troops into Afghanistan, although in the interest of secrecy, it was called ‘the measures.’ The Soviet leaders believed that that step was intended to promote the interest of strengthening the state, and pursued no other goals.”<sup>30</sup>

The available Soviet documents suggest that, contrary to Cold War mythology, the decision to invade had almost nothing to do with advancing communism in the Middle East. The Soviets believed they had only one alternative: to salvage and bolster the friendly communist government in Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup> “When the Soviet leaders made the decision to invade Afghanistan in December 1979,” Artemy Kalinovsky recently observed, “they did so for reasons that had little [to] do with the desire to spread communism or economic modernity. Rather, they were motivated by a desire to stop the deteriorating situation in that country and establish a more stable government there. Soviet leaders believed that without an intervention, Afghanistan might turn toward the US and even become a base for short-range missiles targeted at the USSR.”<sup>32</sup> Senior Soviet political leaders appear to have believed the military undertaking would be quick and decisive and that their soldiers would be able to return to the Soviet Union within several months.<sup>33</sup>

On 24 December, Ustinov and Ogarkov signed and released a directive approving the commitment of Soviet forces. “Considering the military-



political situation in the Middle East,” the directive read, “the latest appeal of the government of Afghanistan has been favorably considered. The decision has been made to introduce several contingents of Soviet troops deployed in southern regions of the country to the territory of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in order to [give] international aid to the friendly Afghan people and also to create favorable conditions to interdict possible anti-Afghan actions from neighboring countries.”<sup>34</sup> Not mentioned in the new directive was the Soviet plan to kill Amin and replace him with one of Afghanistan’s most zealous communists, Babrak Karmal.<sup>35</sup>

Although forewarned by his senior military commanders, Soviet Defense Minister Ustinov remained confident that Soviet troops would be out of Afghanistan within a year. “He believed,” wrote David Loyn, “that the mujahidin would throw down their weapons when faced by the Soviet Army, although he was warned by the Soviet General Staff that it was more likely that the rebellion would worsen.”<sup>36</sup> Ustinov anticipated that most Soviet soldiers could remain in garrison after the invasion, and for the most part, avoid direct combat. It was hoped that the Soviet military could provide support to Afghan government forces that in turn would take the fight to the Mujahideen.<sup>37</sup> Until this point, the Soviet military approach had been to give their political leaders a blunt assessment of the situation, as well as a valid appraisal of the risk involved in committing Soviet soldiers to Afghanistan. It was a message that the Soviet political leadership chose to disregard.

## **The Invasion**

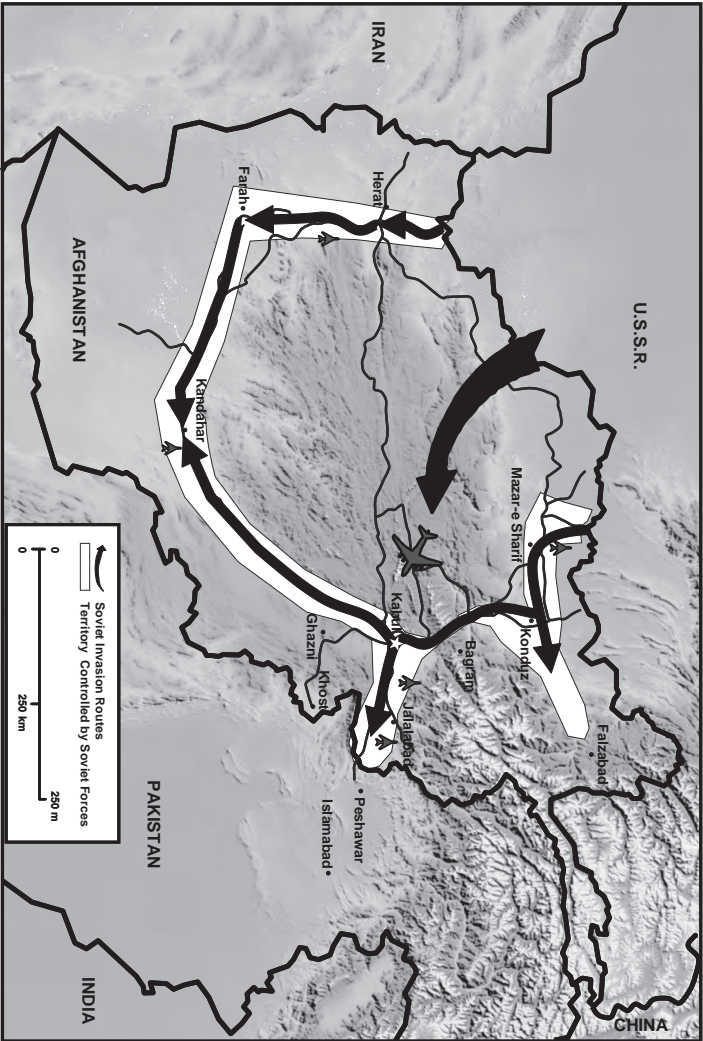
While senior Soviet military commanders opposed the intervention, planning was well under way by the time Ustinov and Ogarkov issued their directive. Senior Soviet leaders decided the best blueprint for the overthrow of Amin’s government and the occupation of Afghanistan was their highly successful interventions in Hungary in 1956 and in Czechoslovakia in 1968. According to Stephen Tanner, “both operations had succeeded in restoring a regime against public unrest, in the process precluding further rebellions or any possible chain reaction in neighboring states.”<sup>38</sup> However, Afghanistan was nothing like Hungary or Czechoslovakia. As the Russian General Staff history would later make clear, Soviet political leaders “did not consider the historic, religious, and national particularities of Afghanistan. After the entry, these particularities proved the most important factors as they foreordained the long and very difficult nature of the armed conflict.”<sup>39</sup>

On the eve of the invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet military operational approach was exceedingly limited. According to Soviet

military expert Lester Grau, the concept was based on the following goals and tasks: stabilizing the country by garrisoning the main routes, major cities, airbases and logistics sites; relieving the Afghan government forces of garrison duties and pushing them into the countryside to battle the resistance; providing logistic, air, artillery, and intelligence support to the Afghan forces; providing minimum interface between the Soviet occupation forces and the local populace; accepting minimal Soviet casualties; and, strengthening the Afghan forces, so that once the resistance was defeated, the Soviet Army could be withdrawn.<sup>40</sup>

Colonel General Yuri Vladimirovich Tukharinov's 40th Army would lead the assault. The Russian General Staff history noted that, "The concept of the operation was to commit the LCOSF [Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces] into Afghanistan along two ground approaches and an air corridor. The LCOSF would quickly seize all the important population centers and support the planned *coup de main* to seize the government."<sup>41</sup> For months, Tukharinov had been assembling his forces in the Turkestan Military District (TMD) north of Afghanistan. The 40th Army would serve as the operational headquarters for ground forces.<sup>42</sup> "The 40th Army received the operational plans for entering Afghanistan on 12 or 13 December," wrote Dr. Robert F. Baumann. "The plan called for Soviet forces to garrison the major centers along the two major routes, which would serve as lines of communications throughout the war: Termez-Khairaton-Pul-e-khumri-Kabul and Kushka-Herat-Shindand-Kandahar."<sup>43</sup> Historian Scott R. McMichael pointed out that "it was imperative that the Soviet invasion force should immediately obtain control of the main highway arc [Ring Road] encircling the country and the other major airbases. Accordingly, they planned to conduct the ground invasion from two directions, the points of origin being Termez and Kushka. The western arm would proceed via the main highway to occupy Herat, Shindand, Farah, and Kandahar in sequence. The eastern strike force would move from Termez to Kabul, again along the main highway."<sup>44</sup> While these ground movements were underway, Soviet airborne troops would capture the key airbases at Herat, Shindand, Kandahar, and Jalalabad.<sup>45</sup>

The Soviets launched their invasion on 27 December 1979. Hundreds of transport planes carrying paratroopers landed at airfields in Kabul and Bagram. Soviet troops quickly secured the capital while others rushed to capture the strategically important Salang tunnel that ran through the Hindu Kush. Soviet advisors with the Afghan Army resorted to all manner of subterfuge to disarm and dislocate Afghan government forces. These clever stratagems succeeded in keeping Afghan Army resistance



Map 1. Soviet Invasion, 1979

to a minimum. "In one case," wrote Stephen Tanner, "Soviet advisers requested an inventory of faulty ammunition, which meant unloading tanks of their shells; in another, 200 vehicles were immobilized by ordering their batteries to be removed for 'winterization.'"<sup>46</sup> Within days, Soviet Motorized Rifle Divisions (MRDs) were slicing south out of Kushka and Termez, while Soviet Airborne troops descended on Shindand airbase in the west and occupied Kandahar and Jalalabad.<sup>47</sup> In Kabul, Amin managed to survive a botched KGB poisoning attempt, but was later shot down by a Soviet Spetsnaz (Special Forces) soldier who also tossed a grenade at the president's head that killed him and his five-year-old son.<sup>48</sup> With Kabul secured and Amin eliminated, Babrak Karmal became the new prime minister and general secretary of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan.

By any measure, the invasion and coup proved highly successful and although the occupation had produced a firestorm among the Afghan population, the Soviets, at least initially, were optimistic about the future of the operation. According to the Russian General Staff history, "By mid January 1980, the main body of the 40th Army was located in Afghanistan. The 40th Army consisted of two motorized rifle divisions, an airborne division, an air assault brigade, and two separate motorized rifle regiments. In all, there were some 52,000 personnel. This was considered sufficient to guarantee the viability of Afghanistan. It was thought that Soviet forces would not have to fight during the invasion and subsequent stationing of Soviet forces. It was felt that the mere presence of Soviet forces would serve to 'sober up' the Mujahideen. Soviet military assistance would primarily be moral support to the DRA."<sup>49</sup>

In Moscow, high-ranking Politburo members also remained confident. Many of their initial objectives in Afghanistan were surprisingly similar to a number of objectives established by Coalition forces after they arrived in Afghanistan in 2001. At a Politburo session on 28 January 1980, for example, Ustinov and several other senior members recommended, "the creation of opportunities for representatives of tribes and national minorities to participate with full rights in the work of the [jirgas] and local councils."<sup>50</sup> They also suggested, "The establishment of contacts and the conducting of negotiations with the leaders and elders of the most warlike tribes in the DRA and the search for ways to achieve the quickest compromise on conditions for their ceasing the anti-government struggle."<sup>51</sup> The Politburo went on to recommend the "realization of a line on a gradual attack on the position of the tribal reaction, the showing of flexibility and a differentiated approach to the various tribes and socio-economic strata."<sup>52</sup>

The members proposed “the working out of a long-term plan of work with the Moslem clergy which envisions attracting moderate Moslem leaders to cooperate with the authorities, the isolation of representatives of reactionary clerical circles, the establishment of contacts with the Shiite clergy, [and] the inadmissibility of any form (including economic) of discrimination against the Shiites.”<sup>53</sup> The members realized that spring could bring with it “a further activation of the insurgent movement” and wanted to reach agreements with the new Afghan government “which defined the status and legal position of the Soviet military contingents.”<sup>54</sup> More importantly, the leadership wanted “the quickest creation of a militarily prepared, organized and equipped people’s army.”<sup>55</sup> The members also proposed the “consolidation of the PDPA’s position among the command staff, and also the intensification of training of the army in the spirit of devotion to the people’s power of Afghanistan.”<sup>56</sup>

Clearly, in articulating their plans for Afghanistan, the Soviets considered actions and measures that today could be categorized as key elements of counter-insurgency (COIN) and nation-building. As Artemy Kalinovsky wrote, “the Soviet intervention was never a strictly military operation.”<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, the Soviet leadership “realized fairly early on that the situation could not be resolved through military means alone. They hoped that economic aid and improved governance would help give the Kabul government greater legitimacy. Thus parallel to the military effort of the 40th Army, there was also a smaller ‘army’ of Soviet advisors working to rebuild state institutions, improve the party’s internal cohesiveness and relationship with the population, and carry out agricultural reforms.”<sup>58</sup> Unfortunately, this parallel effort between the 40th Army and Soviet advisors attempting to carry out nation-building projects, would prove disastrous, as many combat officers did not comprehend or were reluctant to adjust to this approach.<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, Soviet political leaders did not think Afghanistan was prepared for a collectivist type of government and endeavored to steer the PDPA away from many of its Marxist programs. Instead, the main goal for the Soviets was to stabilize and legitimize the Afghan government.<sup>60</sup>

Throughout January and February 1980, Babrak Karmal’s newly installed government continued to battle anti-government forces. As his shaky Afghan army floundered against the Mujahideen, Karmal constantly pressured the Soviet military for direct support. However, as Alexander Lyakhovsky stressed, “the USSR leadership and our military command tried to avoid responding to Babrak Karmal’s request for help in fighting with the military formations of the opposition. Leaders of the operative

group of the USSR Defense Ministry Marshal of the Soviet Union S.L. Sokolov and General of the Army S.F. Akhromeev argued that they did not envision participation of the units and formations introduced into Afghanistan in combat activities in the DRA territory. They [the troops] could only respond if forced to do so under immediate fire impact on the part of the rebels, or undertake operations for the liberation of our military advisers.”<sup>61</sup>

Indeed, one of the major goals of the Soviet military during these first few months was for the Afghan army to carry the fight to the enemy. “The hope,” noted the Russian General Staff history, “was that the principal mission of armed combat with the opposition would be accomplished by the Afghan army, but this did not occur. Measures to raise the combat potential of the government forces were weak and ineffective.”<sup>62</sup> The Afghan army was poorly trained and to make matters even worse, almost all of its combat units were far below full strength. Not surprisingly, the Soviet military found early on that they could not depend on the Afghan army. Thus, its plan to push government forces into the countryside to destroy the Mujahideen was clearly unworkable.<sup>63</sup>

During this early period, the Soviet Army did achieve some initial success against the Mujahideen. At first, the anti-government forces attempted to grapple with Soviet combat units in large formations, and despite taking grievous casualties, refused to break contact with their more powerfully armed opponent.<sup>64</sup> The Russian General Staff history noted that this approach by the Mujahideen, “allowed the Soviet forces to destroy strong antirevolutionary groupings near Faizabad, Taleqan, Takhar, Baghlan, Jalalabad, and other cities.”<sup>65</sup> Before long, however, “The leadership of the Afghan opposition, having clashed with a mighty military power, quickly realized that if they maintained their large fairly conventional forces, they would be destroyed. They abandoned their large-scale tactics and divided their formations into guerrilla groups and detachments of 20 to 100 men that began to conduct guerrilla warfare.”<sup>66</sup>

These new tactical adjustments certainly saved the Mujahideen from complete destruction and greatly enhanced its chance for victory. At the same time, the new adaptive approach exposed the Soviet military’s absolute lack of knowledge in combating guerrilla forces. The Soviet Army soon realized that it could not hunt down and destroy these small guerilla units with large mechanized forces. As the Russian General Staff history made clear, “Attempts by the senior leadership to deploy large, combined-arms formations to conduct a classic offensive and pursuit against Mujahideen detachments did not work.”<sup>67</sup> Two former Soviet officers would point out



after the war that during this early period, their soldiers were well trained on their equipment. However, they wrote, “this was only true while operating on flat terrain. Massive employment of armored vehicles was hindered by the mountainous nature of much of the country, where steep slopes as well as narrow ravines limited their movement, preventing tanks and infantry fighting vehicles from being fully deployed.”<sup>68</sup>

The Russian General Staff history recorded an example of problems encountered by a mechanized battalion in February 1980. The battalion, moving on a road march through mountainous terrain, failed to post flank security and was hit by 60 to 80 insurgent fighters in a deadly ambush. According to the Russian General Staff, “the enemy action was so unexpected that the commanders at all levels were confused and dumbfounded and not a single commander gave the order to return fire.”<sup>69</sup> By the time the Soviets soldiers regained their composure, the enemy had fled, “unimpeded and unhurt.”<sup>70</sup>

While certainly involved in vicious combat, during this opening phase of the war, the bulk of the Soviet Army was occupied in protecting government buildings and lines of communication. “Up to 35 percent of the force was committed to this mission,” stated Russian military historians.<sup>71</sup> They also pointed out that, “There were additional security missions that involved security and defense of airfields, military installations, and Soviet-Afghan economic cooperative projects. Convoy escort demanded still more security forces.”<sup>72</sup> Having trained and prepared for decades to fight large conventional wars, the myriad special tasks involved in conducting a counter-insurgency campaign was something for which the Soviets were totally unprepared. As the Russian General Staff history pointed out, “The Soviet forces did not have the experience or knowledge to carry out these missions, and the hierarchy had not foreseen the need to train officers to fulfill these tasks. There were no answers in the regulations and manuals, so these missions had to be conducted by trial and error.”<sup>73</sup> As Karmal’s government faced growing opposition and as Soviet forces came under increased attacks from anti-government forces, the Kremlin scrambled to change its approach.

## Notes

1. Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* (Revised Edition) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 221.
2. Tanner, 225.
3. Tanner, 226.
4. J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1986), 22.
5. Amstutz, 22–23.
6. Amstutz, 22.
7. M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979–1982* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 306–307.
8. According to foreign correspondent David Loyn, Daoud informed Brezhnev, “We will never allow you to dictate to us how to run our country and whom to employ in Afghanistan.” Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* (Revised Edition) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 229–230; David Loyn, *In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 138.
9. M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979–1982* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 307.
10. David Loyn, *In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 138.
11. Loyn, 139.
12. Loyn, 139.
13. Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2002), 143.
14. Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* (Revised Edition) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 232.
15. David Loyn, *In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 139.
16. Gilles Dorransoro, *Revolution Unending Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present*, trans. John King (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 91.
17. Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 31–32.
18. David Loyn, *In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 140.
19. Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* (Revised Edition) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 233; Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 47–48.
20. Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the*



*Great to the War against the Taliban* (Revised Edition) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 233.

21. David Loyn, *In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 140–141.

22. According to Robert F. Baumann, “A third and more satisfying explanation of the Soviet decision is that Moscow acted to rescue a neighboring client regime on which it had lavished considerable resources and attention.” Robert F. Baumann, *Russian-Soviet Unconventional Wars in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1993), 133.

23. Georgy M. Kornienko, “Georgy Kornienko’s Account of the Politburo Decision to Send Soviet Troops” in *Afghanistan in The Cold War: Testimony of a Participant*, trans. Svetlana Savranskaya, The National Security Archive, Document 10 (Moscow, Russia: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, 1994), 193–195.

24. Kornienko, 1–2.

25. Kornienko, 2.

26. Alexander Lyakhovsky, “Alexander Lyakhovsky’s Account of the Decision of the CC CPSU Decision to Send Troops to Afghanistan” in *The Tragedy and Valor of Afghanistan*, trans. Svetlana Savranskaya The National Security Archive, Document 8 (Moscow, Russia: Nord, 1995), <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/soviet.html#docs>.

27. Lyakhovsky, Document 8.

28. Lyakhovsky, Document 8.

29. Lyakhovsky, Document 8.

30. Lyakhovsky, Document 8.

31. Stephen Tanner wrote, “At this point, the Soviet Union had been reduced to only one option: the military rescue of a beleaguered fellow regime; or as the rest of the world called it, invasion.” Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* (Revised Edition) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 235.

32. Artemy Kalinovsky, *The Blind Leading the Blind: Soviet Advisors, Counter-Insurgency and Nation-Building in Afghanistan*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project, Working Paper No. 60 (January 2010), 2, [http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.publications&group\\_id=11901](http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.publications&group_id=11901) (accessed 1 March 2010).

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34. Alexander Lyakhovsky, “Plamya Afgana” (“Flame of the Afghanistan Veteran”), trans. Gary Goldberg, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=5034E02C-96B6-175C-944CF54E250A1889&sort=Collection&item=Soviet%20Invasion%20of%20Afghanistan](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=va2.document&identifier=5034E02C-96B6-175C-944CF54E250A1889&sort=Collection&item=Soviet%20Invasion%20of%20Afghanistan) (accessed 5 March 2010).

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and *American Occupation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 141; see also Alexander Lyakhovsky, "Alexander Lyakhovsky's Account of the Decision of the CC CPSU Decision to Send Troops to Afghanistan" in *The Tragedy and Valor of Afghanistan*, trans. Svetlana Savranskaya The National Security Archive, Document 8 (Moscow, Russia: Nord, 1995), <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/soviet.html#docs>.

36. David Loyn, *In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 143.

37. Loyn, xviii–xix.

38. Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* (Revised Edition) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 233–234.

39. The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. and ed. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 304.

40. Lester W. Grau, ed., *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 1998), xviii–xix. For these concepts, Grau cites Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London, UK: Brassey's, 1991), 10; Boris Gromov, Ogranichennyy contingent [Limited contingent] (Moscow, Russia: Progress, 1994), 172.

41. The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. and ed. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 15.

42. Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London, UK: Brassey's, 1991), 4.

43. Robert F. Baumann, *Russian-Soviet Unconventional Wars in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1993), 138.

44. Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London, UK: Brassey's, 1991), 5.

45. McMichael, 5.

46. Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* (Revised Edition) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 235.

47. Tanner, 235–236.

48. Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 78.

49. The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. and ed. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 17–18.

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72. The Russian General Staff, 19.

73. The Russian General Staff, 20.



## Chapter 2

### A Deviation from the Original Plans

#### The Search for Victory 1980–1984

*Yet, from the very first days of its invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet Army was hobbled by a serious doctrinal short-fall—it had no counter-insurgency (CI) doctrine to guide and organize its activity.*

Scott R. McMichael

*Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in  
Afghanistan*

*There is barely an important piece of land in Afghanistan that has not been occupied by one of our soldiers. Nevertheless, much of the territory stays in the hands of the terrorists. We control the provincial [centers], but we cannot maintain political control over the territory that we seize.*

Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, Commander of the Soviet  
Armed Forces

*The operations have become of a police character, with punitive measures, and as a result we have been pulled in to a war with the people with no prospects of a positive outcome.*

Soviet Political Officer to Politburo Chairman, 1984

#### The Beginning of Active Operations

By March 1980, the Soviet invasion and occupation had ignited a conflagration inside Afghanistan. Many Afghan tribes, who had not openly opposed Amin's government, now declared war on Karmal's Soviet sponsored regime. The Afghan population grew increasingly inflamed as Soviet forces became involved in quelling riots in Kabul and Herat. Soon, Soviet convoys found themselves under attack from newly formed anti-government forces that proudly announced a jihad against the foreign invaders. Money and supplies quickly began to flow into the Mujahideen from various countries around the world. Afghan army units continued to desert en masse to the anti-government forces, making matters even worse for the

Soviets. Karmal became increasingly alarmed and continued to plead with the Soviets for immediate combat support.<sup>1</sup>

On the last day of February 1980, the initial Soviet strategy for Afghanistan changed dramatically when senior commanders received a categorical order from Moscow to “begin active operations for the destruction of the formations of the armed opposition together with the DRA Army.”<sup>2</sup> General Alexander Lyakhovsky, a veteran of the Soviet-Afghan War, asserted, “Of course, this was a deviation from the original plans, but the order came from the government, and the troops were obligated to carry it out. From the beginning of March 1980, the formations and units of the LCST [Limited Contingent of Soviet Troops] began their operations in the Kunar Province. They found themselves pulled into the internecine war in Afghanistan and began to fulfill tasks related to the suppression of the rebel movement, which initially did not figure in the USSR plans at all.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Initial Problems Recognized**

In March, the Soviet army began its first large-scale counterinsurgency operation against the Mujahideen in the Kunar Valley in eastern Afghanistan. The Soviet army however, was wholly untrained and ill equipped for this type of warfare.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Afghan specialist Olivier Roy suggested that, “The [Soviet] army’s failure in this regard seems to have been acknowledged from the beginning by the Soviets themselves. They probably knew that the army would not perform well, but mistakenly assumed that they would never be involved in direct combat, much less a protracted guerrilla war.”<sup>5</sup> A 40th Army order of battle for 1980 to 1981, compiled by Lester W. Grau, identified the major ground combat units and revealed a force dominated by heavy mechanized forces. The 40th Army in this period included the 5th, 108th and the 201st Motorized Rifle Divisions; 103d Airborne Division; 66th and 70th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigades; 56th Air Assault Brigade; 191st and 860th Separate Motorized Rifle Regiments; 345th Parachute Regiment; 28th Separate Multiple Rocket Launcher Regiment and the 45th Engineer (Sapper) Regiment. These units were supported by major 40th Army air assets, which included fighter and fighter bomber regiments, as well as helicopter regiments and separate squadrons.<sup>6</sup> The major problems encountered by the 40th Army as it began offensive operations included an exceedingly heavy force structure, a lack of tactical expertise, over-centralization, a nonexistent counterinsurgency doctrine, an unreliable Afghan Army and an ethnically flawed force structure.

As the Mujahideen broke down into smaller guerrilla units, the large, cumbersome, highly mechanized Soviet Army that was designed to fight

“operationally” and not tactically, proved ineffective against the anti-government forces.<sup>7</sup> As Lester W. Grau pointed out in the chronology of his celebrated work, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*, “Modern armies think in terms of tactics supporting operations and operations building campaigns. This theoretical framework failed in the Soviet Army in Afghanistan as large-scale operations proved ineffective and were practically a hindrance . . . Historic Soviet victories were operational and Soviet war-fighting was operationally oriented (compared to Western armies which had a more tactical orientation). Afghanistan, however, was a tactical war and Soviet tactics were initially inadequate for fighting guerrillas.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, this would be a “platoon leaders’ war,” a struggle that would require strong small unit leadership skills. Regrettably, for the Soviet army, these capabilities were in short supply early in the war.<sup>9</sup>

Over-centralization of command was also a key source of tactical tribulations for the Soviet army. “Its operations against the guerrillas had to be carried out at the battalion and regimental level or very occasionally at the divisional level,” reported defense correspondent Mark Urban. “The formations that entered Afghanistan had most of their combat support resources (like artillery, engineers, and signals) organized at the divisional level. Other support elements (including aviation) were grouped at an even higher level or organization—the 40th Army. It was entirely unsuitable for a guerrilla war where battalion commanders need instant, dedicated support rather than having to go through regimental, divisional and even army HQs to get it.”<sup>10</sup>

The 40th Army also faced another disquieting dilemma. The Soviet army lacked a counterinsurgency doctrine. “From the very first days of its invasion of Afghanistan,” wrote Scott R. McMichael, “the Soviet Army was hobbled by a serious doctrinal shortfall—it had no counter-insurgency (CI) doctrine to guide and organize its activity.”<sup>11</sup> The Russian General Staff history concluded that the Soviets had been poorly prepared to confront an Afghan guerrilla force. “The massive experience that Soviet forces gained in their fight with the Basmachi movement was simply forgotten.<sup>12</sup> The more recent experience of Fascist Germany during the Second World War and the experience of other armies that conducted counter-guerrilla actions in local wars were practically ignored. Therefore, the Soviet forces in Afghanistan had to use trial and error to formulate a new military art to combat their unaccustomed foe. This decreased the effectiveness of their combat actions and resulted in unwarranted casualties.”<sup>13</sup> Olivier Roy underscored this assessment when he concluded that, “As early as 1980 they



[The Soviet army] correctly identified the main problems—lack of adequate training, excessive centralization, lack of initiative and mobility and the irrelevancy of the military doctrine.”<sup>14</sup>

Another major problem confronting the Soviets was the unreliability of the Afghan army. “No dilemma confronting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan proved more politically complex or morally enervating than that of trying to forge a reliable and self-sustaining army of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan,” wrote Dr. Baumann.<sup>15</sup> Clearly, desertions and draft evasions had devastated the force. By 1980, the strength of the Afghan army had fallen to perhaps 25,000 soldiers.<sup>16</sup> According to David Loyn, “The Afghan army was an unreliable ally. It faced constant defections from the start as not only individuals and units but also whole divisions went over to the mujahidin, taking their personal kit and rifles as well as tanks and armored vehicles. When units were ordered to go on operations, there was always the risk that they might defect.”<sup>17</sup> The original Soviet plan to push the Afghan army into the field to combat the Mujahideen fell by the wayside. The Afghan army’s limited numbers, lack of training and questionable loyalties made this project too risky to implement. Fighting the Mujahideen would be a joint effort until the Afghan army could be appropriately structured and trained to carry out operations on its own.

Another unsettling difficulty facing the 40th Army was its use of large numbers of reserve soldiers from Central Asian countries, mainly Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmen as part of the initial invasion force. As Russian military historians have pointed out, “These Central Asian peoples were also national minorities in Afghanistan. The High Command’s hopes that Soviet soldiers of these nationalities would have a greater understanding of their kinsmen in Afghanistan were not realized. The [Pashtun] tribes, which had composed the most active part of the antigovernment movement, had historically always fought with the national minorities in the north, and the appearance of Uzbeks and Turkmen from a foreign land only strengthened the nationalities’ discords and fanned the flames of a war into which thousands of Soviet citizens were being drawn along with the Afghans.”<sup>18</sup> The decision to use these Central Asian soldiers clearly underscores the lack of cultural and historical awareness on the part of the Soviet leadership and serves as an additional example of an army inexperienced in planning for and conducting counterinsurgency operations.

### **Into the Breach 1980-1982**

Consequently, as the orders arrived from Moscow to “Begin active operations,” the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces (LCOSF) found itself limited in both tactical proficiency and counterinsurgency skills. Their

heavy mechanized equipment would prove no match for the terrain or the Mujahideen. Furthermore, a relative shortage of combat troops severely limited their ability to hold key terrain once it was captured. The Soviets also found that they could not rely on Afghan government forces. At the same time, the ethnic composition of the 40th Army continued to inflame the Pashtun tribes. Once again the Soviet army would find itself searching for a new approach. It was a quest that would prove daunting.

In March 1980, the 40th Army resolved one of its major problems by withdrawing the Central Asian reserve soldiers from Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> It proved an easy fix. Their inclusion in the initial invasion force, however, had already caused enormous problems by driving more Pashtuns into the ranks of the anti-government forces. As the 40th Army began its offensive operations, the Mujahideen moved into the mountains or blended in with the local inhabitants. Unfortunately for the Soviets, their heavy combat equipment was rendered nearly useless in the rugged, mountainous terrain. The Russian General Staff history recorded that it was “practically impossible to use modern combat equipment” in these areas.<sup>20</sup> According to David Loyn, the Mujahideen now “had textbook conditions to mount an insurgency: support in the Afghan villages, a safe haven across the mountains [in Pakistan] with access by narrow tracks that suited them but were impassable for the Soviet forces, and a ready supply of young men willing to die.”<sup>21</sup>

The anti-government forces had adapted quickly to guerilla warfare and their expertise increased daily. According to one expert in the field, the Mujahideen established three major objectives during this timeframe. The first was “to deny the legitimacy of the Kabul regime and maintain opposition to it among the population.”<sup>22</sup> The second and third goals were to “establish a guerrilla infrastructure and set up parallel administrative control in liberated areas” and to “maintain a military stalemate through a war of attrition making the Soviet effort too costly to continue.”<sup>23</sup> The similarity between Mujahideen objectives and those of the Taliban in the first decade of the twenty-first century are evident.

Anti-government forces also made enormous progress in the tactical arena. “The Mujahideen were able to employ various tactical techniques,” wrote the authors of the Russian General Staff history:

Thus, when they would encounter a superior Soviet force, they, as a rule, would withdraw from battle. At the same time, the Mujahideen would never miss an opportunity to launch a surprise strike, usually with a small force. As a rule, during this phase, the armed opposition forces aban-

doned positional warfare and widely employed maneuver. The Mujahideen could only be forced to accept battle under compelling circumstances. These circumstances included defense of a base or base region or when the Mujahideen were encircled and had no other options. In this case, the blocked Mujahideen detachments moved into close combat, where it was practically impossible for the Soviets to use their aviation and which sharply restricted their possibility of using artillery, especially from indirect firing positions.”<sup>24</sup>

### **The Soviet Decision to “Drain the Sea”**

Throughout 1980, the 40th Army conducted large-scale operations in the Panjshir and Kunar Valleys in the northeast portion of Afghanistan. Offensive operations conducted by the 201st Motorized Rifle Division near Jalalabad were marked by the heavy use of tanks and artillery and the destruction of Afghan villages. The obliteration of these villages was part of the Soviet army’s master plan to drive the population out of the countryside so they could not support the anti-government forces. Evidently, the Soviets had recognized Mao Zedong’s maxim that the victorious guerrilla should move through the people like a fish through the water. The Soviets therefore would work to drain the sea of the people who supported the Mujahideen by depopulating the countryside. The editors of the Russian General Staff history concluded that the “Soviet leadership determined that the strength of the Mujahideen was greatly enhanced by the popular support they enjoy among the local populace . . . . Subsequently, the Soviets decided to break the link between the people and Mujahideen by driving the population from the countryside. Soviet aircraft bombed and strafed the countryside while helicopter gunships shot up herds of sheep, goats, and camels. Soviet artillery pummeled the countryside. The countryside was blanketed with scatterable mines, particularly on paths, pastures, and farm land.”<sup>25</sup>

While this undertaking did in fact greatly affect the Mujahideen’s logistical capability, forcing them to carry more and more of their supplies over the rugged mountains from Pakistan, it was certainly not the way to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. It undoubtedly thwarted Soviet attempts at nation-building and establishing a more stable government. Indeed, there was a major disconnect between the proposed nation-building efforts of the Soviet government and the Soviet military’s approach. A letter to a member of the Politburo, written by a military political officer in 1984, revealed a great deal about the problem. The political officer wrote

that, "The operations have become of a police character, with punitive measures, and as a result we have been pulled in to a war with the people with no prospects of a positive outcome. Inhumane acts by Soviet troops with regard to the peaceful population are widespread and systematic and manifest themselves in the form of robbery, unjustified and unfounded use of firearms, destruction of villages, [and] dishonoring mosques."<sup>26</sup>

Artemy Kalinovsky in his recent paper, "The Blind Leading the Blind: Soviet Advisors, Counter-Insurgency and Nation-Building in Afghanistan," described the dilemma. "Economic aid in such situations tends to be undermined by the massive destructive power of modern weapons unleashed on behalf of the government," he wrote. "The problem was exacerbated in the Afghan case because the Soviet military adjusted slowly to the demands of counter-insurgency warfare in the Afghan terrain and relied heavily on aerial bombardment. At the same time, military leaders may have pointed out to Moscow that the Afghan problem could not be solved by military means alone, but they either did not realize that their actions often made the situation worse or were unable to find a different approach."<sup>27</sup> One Soviet officer's rationale for such conduct, Kalinovsky explained, was that "warriors receive medals on their chest and stars on their epaulettes and money not for reconciliation, but for conducting combat operations."<sup>28</sup> These heavy-handed methods only served to produce greater numbers of anti-government fighters and undermine the Soviet government's nation-building projects. In the end, seven million Afghans would become refugees.<sup>29</sup>

While the Soviets pounded the countryside, the Mujahideen continued to fight back. An early operation in March 1980 in Paktia Province in the eastern part of the country destroyed an entire Soviet battalion.<sup>30</sup> After taking out the officers and radio operators in the battalion, the Mujahideen swept in for the kill.<sup>31</sup> According to Mark Urban, "The Soviet conscripts apparently stayed inside their personnel carriers, firing inaccurately until their ammunition ran out and they were overcome by the guerrillas."<sup>32</sup> This incident clearly illustrated the tactical ineptitude of the Soviet soldier and the shortcomings of the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) early in the war. Urban highlighted the problem with Soviet NCOs, writing that, "In the Soviet army, corporals and sergeants are conscripts with no more experience than the men they are supposed to lead."<sup>33</sup> As the Soviets quickly found, their military was simply not designed to conduct counter-insurgency operations. The large, clumsy, sweeping operations could only temporarily clear out the Mujahideen. The Soviets could remove the threat, but they could not hold key terrain in the countryside. By the summer

of 1980, it was obvious to the Soviet high command that changes were needed in both the composition of their forces and the manner of their employment.<sup>34</sup>

### **The 40th Army Adapts**

Some of the adjustments made by the 40th Army in 1980 included replacing poorly performing Soviet reservists with conscripts and sending large artillery formations, anti-aircraft units and hundreds of tanks back to the Soviet Union. The Soviets also began to increase the size of their helicopter fleet. By the end of 1980, this force would grow from 60 to 300 helicopters. The 40th Army also increased the number of fighter jets.<sup>35</sup> At the ground level attempts were also made to decentralize the force structure by forming seven new military districts, each with its own brigade or division-level headquarters and dedicated air support. According to Scott R. McMichael, "It is quite likely that the establishment of these regional districts meant that the regional headquarters assumed a greater, more detailed role in the actual planning of operations, the 40th Army giving up some of its responsibility in this regard."<sup>36</sup> Bulky, heavy divisions were also made more flexible by sending number of division headquarters back to the Soviet Union and replacing them with independent regiments and brigades. Engineers and rocket artillery were attached to these independent formations in an attempt to improve their combined arms capacity.<sup>37</sup> Although the Soviets were once again willing to alter their approach, they would soon find that these adjustments were insufficient to defeat anti-government forces. Furthermore, large offensive sweeps against the Mujahideen, which the 40th Army continued to mount, would remain an enormous impediment to success.

Throughout 1981, the 40th Army continued to conduct large-scale operations primarily along the major highway networks or lines of communications (LOC) as well as in eastern Afghanistan. All of these actions were carried out at the operational level. As the units were heavily committed to other missions, such as securing LOCs and government facilities, units from several different divisions were often used to form what Russian military historians called an "operational command."<sup>38</sup> According to these military historians, "In Afghanistan, the understanding of the term operation included several different possibilities and forms in the action of forces. The required size of operational formations and the issue of who would direct the combat actions saw operations devolve down to armies, divisions, and even regiments. As a rule, the conduct of army operations called for a force of one or two rifle units, as well as airborne, artillery, and engineer units and subunits—a total of 10,000 to 15,000 personnel. These

operations were planned by the army staff and directed by the army commander. Division and regimental operations were conducted by the forces of the division and regiment and directed by their commanders.”<sup>39</sup>

This approach created large, unwieldy operations that proved costly and ineffective as the Mujahideen could at anytime simply slip away.<sup>40</sup> In one operation alone, the Soviets and their dubious DRA allies suffered a staggering 3,000 casualties.<sup>41</sup> One of the key reasons for the anti-government forces’ success was the fact that the Soviets still lacked basic tactical skills. A Mujahideen commander maintained that, “Soviet soldiers are not trained very efficiently for mountainous conditions.”<sup>42</sup> Although he praised the behavior of the air assault troops, he concluded, “Their weakness was that they had not seen war. As soon as they came down and took losses, they evacuated.”<sup>43</sup>

The 40th Army only managed to inflict limited damage on the Mujahideen and ended each operation by withdrawing from areas for which they had strenuously fought. Once gone, anti-government forces easily filtered back in. “By this time,” wrote Baumann, “a persistent pattern, quite congruent with past Russian experience, was already emerging: Soviet command of an area lasted only so long as its forces remained in physical occupation of the ground. As soon as Soviet forces departed, control reverted to the resistance.”<sup>44</sup>

Soviet military historian Scott R. McMichael highlighted these issues in his book, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan*. He concluded that there were numerous causes for the lack of success in this period. “First,” he wrote, “the small size of the Soviet contingent and the ineffectiveness of the DRA army and militia excluded the possibility of maintaining strong garrisons in all the locations where they were needed. Second, the nature of the offensives and the general Soviet approach to operations failed to take into account fully the problems presented by the terrain and climate. Third, the Soviets also were unable to solve the riddle of how to neutralize the special capabilities of the *mujahedin*. Fourth, the Soviets were hampered by an ideological and military blind-spot, that is, a complete lack of counter-insurgency doctrine, which might have better guided these initial efforts.”<sup>45</sup>

### **A Flawed COIN Approach**

While it took some time to put into action, the Soviets did, in fact, establish a counterinsurgency methodology. By 1983, the Soviet military clearly understood the significance of terrain and climate, decentralization, night operations and the value and importance of light infantry in

Afghanistan. To implement this new approach the 40th Army turned to its airborne, air assault, special reconnaissance and Spetsnaz units. According to Scott R. McMichael, these elite units built “what amounted to a direct-action, counter-insurgency (CI) force.”<sup>46</sup> The units, whose numbers would never exceed 23,000, would conduct the majority of the fighting in Afghanistan and sustain the greatest amount of casualties.<sup>47</sup>

While the units quickly developed new counterinsurgency tactics and techniques, including enveloping detachments, ambushes and reconnaissance skills, the mindset was purely combat-oriented.<sup>48</sup> The Soviet military’s counterinsurgency approach was solely a tactical solution, utterly disengaged from political attempts at nation-building. The Soviet military’s counterinsurgency process was completely at odds with transforming the DRA government and helping it gain legitimacy. In the end, as Robert F. Baumann concluded, “the very Soviet offensive actions aimed at neutralizing the resistance often had the effect of strengthening it.”<sup>49</sup>

While vast amounts of money and energy went into Soviet nation-building projects in Afghanistan, “the water was already poisoned before it started to arrive,” wrote Lester Grau.<sup>50</sup> “When the aid arrived, it seldom got to where it was supposed to go. DRA officials siphoned it off. The military had its hands full fighting the guerrillas and securing the LOCs, cities and airfields. The last thing they wanted was to have a CA [Civil Affairs] effort loaded on top of their mission load.”<sup>51</sup> The Politburo seems to have had little say in the matter, for as Baumann pointed out, “In terms of the behavior of the military, the Army had always operated with considerable autonomy.”<sup>52</sup> Soviet military advisers and civilian technicians were also often thrown into the breach and were required, according to Artemy Kalinovsky, “to help with un-planned and often improvised counter-insurgency by carrying out a similarly un-planned and improvised nation-building project.”<sup>53</sup> Baumann maintained the approach reflected “the usual inefficiencies that pervaded the Soviet system.”<sup>54</sup>

Adviser missions included rejuvenating Afghan government institutions that attempted to help enhance government solidity and improve the relationship with the people. Soviet advisers also assisted in training and supporting the Afghan military. Furthermore, advisers aided the government by building or repairing the industrial base and providing their agricultural expertise. The training of the vast majority of Soviet advisers, however, left much to be desired. “What is clear,” wrote Kalinovsky, “is that most did not have any sort of specialized training for the work they were about to undertake. In fact, ‘training’ for a party



adviser about to be sent to Afghanistan was a one week course regarding the 'political, military, and economic situation in the country,' plus whatever additional reading on Afghan history or politics the soon-to-be adviser might pick up on his own."<sup>55</sup> Some of the best-trained advisers came from the ranks of the KGB and GRU, having undergone extensive training, including two years of Dari or Farsi. Most advisers however, were ill prepared for the challenging demands of Afghanistan. As Kalinovsky made clear, "such well-trained advisers were hard to come by. The scale of the Soviet involvement meant that there was not enough time to prepare a well-trained cadre. Corners had to be cut and thousands of advisers were sent virtually without preparation."<sup>56</sup>

In the end, the 40th Army made tactical adjustments and continued to carry out conventional operations. However, it wanted little to do with state building. The Soviet advisers and technicians tasked with conducting the nation-building effort also faced a difficult dilemma. "The main problem," wrote Grau, "was that most efforts to provide nation-building and assistance were aimed at the more liberal urban population (who already acquiesced to DRA control, mostly). Yet it was primarily a rural, conservative guerrilla war and the DRA was hard-pressed to maintain a presence at district level or below, let alone provide security and the goods and services a competent government provides."<sup>57</sup> Clearly, the Soviet COIN effort was highly flawed and disjointed and with the 40th Army disinclined to play its part in nation-building efforts, the war would remain deadlocked.

### **Tactical Modifications**

In late 1981, the Soviets made more adjustments to their offensive operations against the Mujahideen. Recognizing the limited capability of their tanks and motor-rifle units, the 40th Army started to incorporate light infantry from their airborne and air assault units and began dismounting limited numbers of motor-rifle infantry. Helicopters now played an important role in moving these "enveloping detachments" of light infantry in an effort to capture key terrain, occupy the high ground and conduct blocking missions against anti-government forces.<sup>58</sup> The Russian General Staff history stated that, "By 1982, the operational base element for a raid operation had become the reinforced battalion. The wide variety of possible battalion maneuvers included flanking and enveloping attacks as well as air assaults by air assault forces landing from helicopters."<sup>59</sup> Colonel Ali Jalali, a former Mujahideen commander, described the new Soviet technique at a light infantry conference in 1985:

with the increased use of heliborne units and teams, a new form of combined arms operations has been devel-



oped featuring a heavy infantry advance along the major ground axis supported by local militias and permanent military outpost, and heliborne detachments landed deep in the rear and flanks of the *mujahedin* strongholds with the tactical mission of isolating the resistance strongholds, destroying *mujahedin* bases, and cutting their supply and infiltration routes.

The heliborne action phase normally involves 50–60 and sometimes even more helicopters (in groups), landing commandos, militias, air assault units or infantry troops at keypoints in the rear and flanks of *mujahedin* concentrations and passes in combined operations. The action normally starts when mechanized and tank columns charged with the mission to destroy the resistance forces in the areas are in position to link up with the heliborne elements at the appropriate time suitable for tactical interaction of both elements. At the tactical level, it is apparently 15–20 kilometres since the land forces have to support the heliborne teams by their artillery. However, on more than one occasion, the Soviets have been forced to withdraw the airborne elements by air where a timely link up was not possible and the heliborne troops were in danger of being destroyed by *mujahedin* forces.<sup>60</sup>

While the Soviets did show some imagination, in general, these types of operations proved unproductive. The 40th Army had some success in combining mechanized units with heliborne assaults at the battalion and brigade level, however, as Retired Afghan General Mohammad Yahya Nawroz and Lester W. Grau explained, “the Soviet preference for large-scale operations often got in the way of tactical efficiency.”<sup>61</sup> The Soviets were forced to conduct the same operations time and time again in the same locations. In the Panjshir Valley alone, the Soviets conducted 10 large offensives, but the Mujahideen always returned. The Soviets could clear, but they could not hold. The limited number of troops and the incapability of DRA soldiers precluded the occupation of all vital areas.<sup>62</sup> As Russian military historians candidly if obliquely pointed out, these operations “did not always result in the desired outcome.”<sup>63</sup>

### **Chernenko's Quest for Victory**

In November 1982, General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, died. He was replaced by Yuri Andropov, a communist party leader who was also advanced in age. Due to health concerns and “succession”

issues, the war in Afghanistan was not Andropov's top priority and the new leader made no major changes in the Soviet approach in the conflict.<sup>64</sup> Throughout 1983, Soviet military forces in Afghanistan continued to conduct offensive operations, with especially large operations near Herat and Ghazni and in Paktia province. A cease-fire arrangement in January 1983 with Mujahideen commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, the commander of anti-government forces in the Panjshir Valley, allowed the Soviets to launch a major offensive in the Shomali valley near Kabul.<sup>65</sup> While the cease-fire stopped Massoud's attacks on the Salang highway and improved the Soviets line-of-communications with Kabul, the war remained a stalemate throughout 1983.<sup>66</sup> Massoud rejected a Soviet offer for an extended ceasefire in the spring of 1984, and on 1 April, launched new attacks on the Salang highway. By this time Andropov was dead, replaced by Constantine Chernenko. Unlike Andropov, Chernenko took an active interest in the war and was determined to produce a military victory in Afghanistan.<sup>67</sup>

With Chernenko at the helm, the Soviet military unleashed a torrent of brutality and carnage on the Afghan population. Massive aerial bombardments combined with mines dropped from Soviet aircraft quickened the pace of depopulating the countryside.<sup>68</sup> Nation-building efforts were weakened and once again fell by the wayside as the bombs and mines rained down on the Afghan population. The "conduct of the war did much to undermine government programs," wrote Dr. Robert F. Baumann. "Military operations too often proceeded with little regard for the civilian populace or its good will."<sup>69</sup> Large ground offensives also increased as Chernenko and the Soviet high command sought a quick and decisive military victory.

## **Panjshir 7**

The Soviet military struck back at Massoud's new attacks with one of the largest offensives of the war. Named Panjshir 7 it was the seventh major offensive into the Panjshir Valley. Unlike past offensives, the Soviets made a number of tactical improvements before initiating Panjshir 7. According to Mark Urban, "The experience of the previous offensives, that [Massoud's] men could take to the side valley and if necessary leave the [Panjshir] altogether through high passes, had been learnt [by the Soviets]. The new plan involved widening the area of operations considerably."<sup>70</sup> Badger Tu-16 bombers were positioned inside Soviet territory in the nearby Turkestan Military District while the 108th Motorized Rifle Division, the 180th Motorized Rifle Regiment and battalions from the 66th Motorized Rifle Division and the 191st Independent Motorized Rifle Regiment, as well as 5,000 Afghan government soldiers assembled for the assault into the valley. Soviet air assault troops were also assembled at Bagram

air base. The entire ground force would consist of about 15,000 soldiers.<sup>71</sup>

Massoud was well prepared for the coming Soviet offensive. During the ceasefire the Mujahideen commander had managed to collect 5,000 fighters and a large assortment of anti-aircraft heavy machine guns, as well as a few tanks and three D-30 122mm gun-howitzers. Massoud was the first to strike, launching a series of destructive attacks on bridges and convoys along the Salang highway between 16 and 19 April. On 21 April, as his forces launched an attack on Bagram air base, the Soviets began their offensive. While Massoud knew the offensive was coming, as Mark Urban pointed out, "the actual timing and the form of it seem to have surprised him."<sup>72</sup>

Flying from the Soviet Union at high-altitude, the Soviet Tu-16s stunned Massoud and killed a number of his fighters who were caught unaware by the bombers. The Mujahideen commander quickly ordered the remaining civilians out of the valley and began laying mines to thwart the Soviet motorized forces moving up the Panjshir. These did little to impede the Soviet advance. Before long, motorized units covered by a rolling barrage of artillery reached the town of Khanj. Here, the Soviet units found their advance up the valley hindered by snow. Unlike past offensives into the valley, the Soviets made no effort to pursue the Mujahideen fighters down the many tributaries of the Panjshir. As he had done previously, Massoud moved his forces off into the tributaries and waited to strike Soviet advances from ambush positions. Having learned much from their earlier forays into the Panjshir, the Soviets stunned Massoud and his anti-government fighters with their next move.

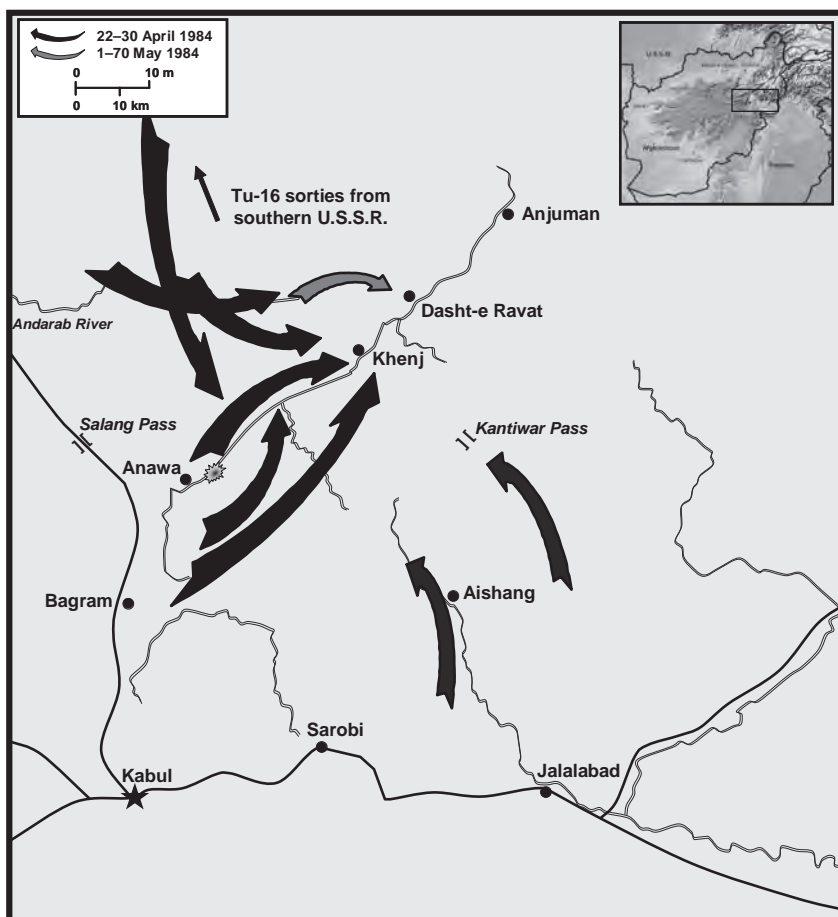
In early May, the motorized units occupying the floor of the Panjshir began attacking up the tributaries. Unlike past offensives, however, this time a number of elite air assault battalions began landing at strategic passes out of the Panjshir. Large heliborne forces landed at Dasht-e-Rawat and in the Alsihang Valley. Stephen Tanner wrote that, "While these Soviet battalions plugged up mujahideen escape routes, main force units began splitting off from the Panjshir to hammer the enemy onto multiple anvils. Tagging behind the airborne assaults were Hind gunships, hovering above the savage firefights on the ground to pounce on Afghan resistance fighters who had been flushed out."<sup>73</sup> Taking increasing losses, the Mujahideen fighters climbed higher into the mountains, repulsed but by no means defeated. Both the Soviets and Babrak Karmal's government were convinced they had defeated Massoud and proudly announced over Kabul radio that his "criminal band . . . no longer exists."<sup>74</sup> The Soviets were so certain that they had destroyed Massoud's forces in the Panjshir that they established

outposts in the valley for the first time to secure the newly won territory and protect the Salang highway.<sup>75</sup>

The Soviets would continue to have tactical military success with large-scale and smaller-scale operations throughout 1984. New upgrades in weapons systems, such as the BMP-2 Infantry Fighting Vehicle and increased elevation of main tank guns, as well as the introduction of the AK-74 assault rifle, greatly enhanced both the firepower and protection of Soviet soldiers. Highly trained Special Forces units called *Spetznaz* were also proving valuable. These battalion-sized units spread terror among the Mujahideen with a spate of ambushes and raids. The *Spetznaz* also attacked villages dressed as Mujahideen warriors in an attempt to spread suspicion and mistrust within the ranks of anti-government fighters.<sup>76</sup> The Soviets had made strides in improving the capabilities of the Afghan army. Their increased participation in operations in 1984 clearly represented at least a step in the right direction.<sup>77</sup> However, factionalism within the ranks of the Afghan army and the mistreatment of Afghan conscripts remained a major concern.<sup>78</sup>

While Panjshir 7 certainly demonstrated that the 40th Army had improved its combat skills, the war was far from over. Although the Soviets would enjoy continued tactical success in 1984, the Mujahideen were still a force to be reckoned with. In September 1984, for example, Massoud's reconstituted forces began attacking the newly established outposts in the Panjshir Valley, forcing the Soviets to launch a new offensive, Panjshir 8. As Gregory Feifer pointed out, Massoud's fighters also, "drew solace from the knowledge that the concentration of so much Soviet force in the valley prevented the enemy from operating elsewhere."<sup>79</sup> It was indeed a serious dilemma for the Soviets. There were simply not enough Soviet or Afghan soldiers to accomplish the mission. By 1985, the total number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan would reach a meager 81,800.<sup>80</sup> Scott R. McMichael observed, "a quick, decisive victory was out of reach. The Soviet Union did not have sufficient military force at its disposal to impose its will and it was unwilling to deploy the number of troops necessary to achieve a military decision within a reasonable period of time. Perhaps 500,000 troops would have been required. The political, economic, and ideological costs of such an approach were unacceptable."<sup>81</sup>

Not surprisingly, senior Soviet military commanders continued to recommend to their political leadership a withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>82</sup> In the end, as historian Mark Galeotti pointed out, "Chernenko's iron fist did not lead to a convincing military success, just temporary victories which, in turn, sparked a more assertive response from the USA and other back-



Map 2. Panjshir 7 April–May 1984

ers of the rebels.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, by the end of the year the United States would provide \$400 million to the anti-government forces while new and more sophisticated weapons systems made their way into the hands of Mujahideen fighters. By 1985, the war was increasing in intensity. By this time, nearly 3,900 Soviet soldiers had been killed, and, although the Mujahideen suffered considerable losses and continued to experience infighting within its ranks, their numbers continued to swell.<sup>84</sup> At this point, the conflict appeared to be stalemated. However, new Soviet political leadership was emerging that would soon alter the course of the war.

## Notes

1. Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 98.
2. Alexander Lyakhovsky, "On the Changing Mission of the Soviet Forces in Afghanistan" in *The Tragedy and Valor of Afghanistan*, trans. Svetlana Savranskaya. Moscow, Russia: Nord, 2004, The National Security Archive, Document 14, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/soviet.html>.
3. Lyakhovsky, Document 14.
4. Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 99.
5. Olivier Roy, "The Lessons of the Soviet/Afghan War," *Adelphi Papers*, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Vol. 259 (Summer 1991), 51.
6. The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. and ed. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 315.
7. Robert F. Baumann, *Russian-Soviet Unconventional Wars in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1993), 139; Lester W. Grau, ed., *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (London, UK: Frank Cass, 1998), xxix.
8. Grau, xxix.
9. Grau, xxviii.
10. Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 65.
11. Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London, UK: Brassey's, 1991), 38.
12. The Basmachi were resistance fighters in Central Asia who resisted the imposition of Red rule from 1918 to 1933. The Bolsheviks' attempt to extend their revolutionary order into Muslim Asia was resisted by hit-and-run raids and ambushes. A good English-language account of the Basmachi resistance is in Robert F. Baumann, *Russian-Soviet Unconventional Wars in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1993); see also the Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. and ed. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 330.
13. The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. and ed. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 19.
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15. Robert F. Baumann, *Russian-Soviet Unconventional Wars in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1993), 165–166.
16. Baumann, 166.
17. David Loyn, *In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 152.

18. The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. and ed. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 305.
19. Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 105.
20. The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. and ed. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 20.
21. David Loyn, *In Afghanistan: Two Hundred Years of British, Russian and American Occupation* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 147.
22. Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban* (Revised Edition) (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 248.
23. Tanner, 248.
24. The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. and ed. Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 20.
25. The Russian General Staff, 29.
26. Artemy Kalinovsky, *The Blind Leading the Blind: Soviet Advisors, Counter-Insurgency and Nation-Building in Afghanistan*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Cold War International History Project, Working Paper No. 60 (January 2010), 2, [http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic\\_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.publications&group\\_id=11901](http://wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.publications&group_id=11901) (accessed 1 March 2010).
27. Kalinovsky, 2.
28. Kalinovsky, 2.
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## Chapter 3

### Are We Going to Be Stuck There Indefinitely?

#### The Search for a Way Out 1985–1989

*People are asking themselves: what, are we going to be stuck there indefinitely? Or maybe we should just end the war? Otherwise we're going to be ashamed of ourselves in all respects.*

General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, Politburo Session  
13 November 1986

*Who would have guessed at the time that the Communist regime in Afghanistan would outlast the Soviet Union itself?*

Stephen Tanner  
*Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War against the Taliban*

#### Gorbachev Gives the Soviet Military Free Reign

In March 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the new Soviet General Secretary. He had made it quite clear to the Politburo before taking power that, in his opinion, “Soviet troops must be withdrawn from Afghanistan.”<sup>1</sup> However, as the new General Secretary sought to enact new reforms within his own country, he could ill afford upsetting the defense establishment during his first year in power. As Gregory Feifer pointed out, “Opposition by many Party leaders forced him to seek support where he could find it, including the military. Partly to cultivate it, he decided to give the Red Army a year of full freedom to carry out the war in Afghanistan as it saw fit, before winding down.”<sup>2</sup> While the Soviet high command was more than willing to carry out the mission, it still faced a host of obstacles.

During this time frame (April 1985–April 1986), the 40th Army would grow to its highest strength levels. The Russian General Staff history recorded that in this period, Soviet forces boasted “29,000 major pieces of equipment . . . 6,000 of which were tanks, BTRs [armored personnel carrier] and BMPs [amphibious infantry fighting vehicle].”<sup>3</sup> Soviet units included the 5th, 108th, and the 201st Motorized Rifle Divisions; as well as the 103d Airborne Division; the 66th and 70th Separate Motorized Rifle

Brigades; the 56th Air Assault Brigade and the 15th and 22d Spetsnaz Brigades; the 345th Separate Parachute Regiment and the 191st and 860th Separate Motorized Rifle Regiments.<sup>4</sup> In total, there were 108,000 soldiers of which 73,000 were assigned to combat units.<sup>5</sup> While the total number of soldiers had increased from approximately 81,000 at the beginning of the conflict, the additional forces were still nowhere near enough to accomplish the mission in Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

The 40th Army also faced another vexing problem. For the duration of the war, the airborne, air assault, Spetsnaz soldiers and the two separate motorized rifle brigades carried out the vast majority of combat operations. The other motorized forces were, for the most part, used in security missions such as guarding lines of communication, airfields and major cities.<sup>7</sup> Incredibly, over 85 percent of all Soviet forces in Afghanistan were committed to these protection missions.<sup>8</sup> One of the primary reasons the other motorized rifle forces were not used more aggressively was because of their inability to adapt to the challenges of counterinsurgency warfare. According to Scott R. McMichael:

Tactically, the Soviet command properly [analyzed] the requirements of combat operations against the *mujahedin* only to discover that the Soviet motorized rifle troops were entirely unsuited for this role. Although Soviet tactical doctrine describes the (light infantry) functions needed for the Afghan War as legitimate functions for mechanized troops, the conventional orientation, tactical rigidity, and generally poor quality of the MR [motorized rifle] units and their commanders prevented them from acquiring the necessary skills. The continuing poor tactical performance of the MR [motorized rifle] force throughout the course of the war severely limited the tactical utility of the force.”<sup>9</sup>

For the already undersized 40th Army, this problem served to further reduce the number of soldiers that could be employed in large combat operations.

As the number of combat support soldiers remained diminutive, the Soviets faced severe logistical hindrances that helped exacerbate rampant cases of typhus, dysentery, and other diseases among Soviet troops.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the editors of the Russian General Staff history concluded that, “The Soviet 40th Army lacked sufficient logistics personnel and transport throughout the entire war.”<sup>11</sup> What wheeled logistical transport they did have came under almost constant attack by anti-government forces. By 1985, general larceny of supplies and drug and alcohol abuse by Soviet soldiers served to further compound the problems. A lack of uniforms,

equipment, and decent food for combat soldiers in the field also lowered morale and combat efficiency.<sup>12</sup> The editors of the Russian General Staff history also pointed out that, “The conscript’s morale was not great when he was drafted. At the training centers, conscripts were told they were going to fight Chinese and American mercenaries. When they got to Afghanistan, they soon discovered that they were unwelcome occupiers in a hostile land. Morale further plummeted at this realization.”<sup>13</sup>

Although the 40th Army greatly increased the number of helicopters in Afghanistan, they were still nowhere near the number needed to accomplish the mission.<sup>14</sup> By 1985 there were four aviation and three helicopter regiments. While the airborne and air assault soldiers assigned to use the helicopters were certainly better trained and more highly motivated than the vast majority of the motorized rifle troops, there were simply not enough of these forces to conduct counter-guerilla operations across Afghanistan. As retired General Mohammad Yahya Nawroz and Lester W. Grau observed:

Air assault tactics and helicopter gunship tactics changed and improved steadily throughout the war. However, the Soviets never brought in enough helicopters and air assault forces to perform all the necessary missions and often squandered these resources on unnecessary missions. Helicopter support should have been part of every convoy escort, but this was not always the case. Dominant terrain along convoy routes should have been routinely seized and held by air assault forces, yet this seldom occurred. Soviet airborne and air assault forces were often the most successful Soviet forces in closing with the resistance, yet airborne and air assault forces were usually under strength . . . And although the combination of heliborne and mechanized forces worked well at the battalion and brigade level, the Soviet preference for large-scale operations often got in the way of tactical efficiency. Ten, large, conventional offensives involving heliborne and mechanized forces swept the Pandshir [Panjshir] Valley with no lasting result.<sup>15</sup>

One of the few bright spots for the Soviets was the improved capabilities of the Afghan Army. By 1985, they were heavily involved in supporting and sometimes even directing offensive operations against anti-government forces.<sup>16</sup> As the Russian General Staff history concluded, the Afghan government “adapted measures to strengthen military discipline [and] began a decisive battle against desertion, and proclaimed complete

freedom of religion. TO&E slots for mullahs were created in military organizations and steps were taken to implement their incorporation.”<sup>17</sup> By January 1985, the Afghan Army consisted of three Corps Headquarters, 11 divisions and a host of non-divisional units. These non-divisional units consisted of commandos, paratroopers, separate armored, mechanized and artillery brigades, as well as independent reconnaissance, engineer, transport and signals regiments. While information related to the training of the Afghan Army remains sketchy to non-existent, one factor is certain: by 1985 the Afghan Army had been revitalized.<sup>18</sup>

While the Afghan army had made some solid strides forward, the political picture still remained bleak. Gorbachev sought to quickly stabilize Afghanistan and bring nation-building programs back to the forefront. He was determined to withdraw at some point and he wanted to do so without the client government collapsing. President Karmal, however, had become a major liability. Gorbachev and his senior advisors had been pushing the idea of “national reconciliation” and making the following recommendations to the Afghan leadership: “Widen your social base. Learn, at last, to lead a dialogue with the tribes, to use the particularities [of the situation]. Try to get the support of the clergy. Give up the leftist bend in economics. Learn to organize the support of the private sector.”<sup>19</sup> His entreaties to the Afghan president, however, proved unsuccessful and Karmal’s government made little gains towards legitimacy.<sup>20</sup> Senior Soviet military officials were also displeased with the Afghan president. According to one source, many were “fed up with what was seen as Babrak Karmal’s weak authority, counter-productive policies, and fondness for drink.”<sup>21</sup> It was against this backdrop that the Soviet military continued its campaign against the Mujahideen in the spring of 1985.

### **New Operations and the Return of Massoud**

In January 1985, the 40th Army launched a number of search and destroy missions in the center and eastern parts of Afghanistan. The intent of these missions was to demolish anti-government bases.<sup>22</sup> While not entirely successful, Gregory Feifer wrote that, “the Soviets and their Afghan government allies were gaining the upper hand in severe fighting that caused heavy casualties on both sides . . . The Afghan Army, its numbers growing and the troops better trained, took a prominent part in many of these attacks.”<sup>23</sup>

The 40th Army was given free reign by Gorbachev to launch several major actions in the spring of 1985. In April, they commenced operations in the Maidan Valley south of Kabul, unleashing the Frog-7 artillery rockets that delivered a package of 60 extremely deadly cluster bombs. In May,

the Soviets launched another major offensive in the Kunar Valley north of Jalalabad. The force involved included two air assault regiments and a sizable Afghan force drawn from two divisions totaling about 10,000 soldiers. The objective of the operation was to relieve a besieged garrison at Barikot and to disrupt the infrastructure of anti-government forces. The mission succeeded in bringing in supplies and reinforcements to Barikot, but the task force withdrew from the area within 24 hours.<sup>24</sup>

Shortly after these operations, the new commander of military forces in Afghanistan, General Valentin Varennikov, sidestepped Karmal's government and successfully bargained with Afghan elders near Barikot. The villagers agreed not to support the Mujahideen if the Soviets agreed to stop bombing their villages. According to Gregory Feifer, Varennikov was "struck by the simplicity of the proposition."<sup>25</sup> Varennikov was convinced that Karmal's continued appointments of unknown bureaucrats to these areas, "only fed distrust of the government. His meeting with elders further convinced him that his forces would be much better off if locals were allowed to run their own affairs."<sup>26</sup> The episode clearly illustrates the Soviet commander's misgivings about the capacity of Karmal's government to govern outside of Kabul and his willingness to seek some sort of effective dialogue at the local level. While Varennikov continued to haggle, his forces, however, continued their large-scale military operations.

In combination with these sizeable offensive operations, the Soviets also continued to use their helicopters and highly trained Spetsnaz units to conduct raids on anti-government forces, sometimes even crossing the border into Pakistan. "The outcome however," wrote British diplomat Martin Ewans, "was little different from that of previous years. Both the *mujahidin* and the Russian and Afghan forces took casualties, but the latter were still unable to interdict the *mujahidin* supply routes or dominate the countryside."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, little had changed. The Soviets and the Afghan army could not be everywhere and these large offensive operations pulled soldiers away from other important duties. Not surprisingly, anti-government attacks continued on the Soviet lines of communications and other locations. Mujahideen rockets continued to fall on Kabul and anti-government forces continued to infiltrate into the city.<sup>28</sup>

In June, Ahmad Shah Massoud unleashed a major offensive operation in the Panjshir Valley. In a masterful plan of subterfuge, his forces attacked a base at the town of Rokka, setting an ammunition dump on fire. When Soviet and Afghan government forces turned their attention toward Rokka, Massoud struck a fort located near Pechgur that was garrisoned by 500 soldiers as well as two T-55 tanks, four 76mm guns and five BTR-60



Armored Personnel Carriers. A ring of minefields, sandbags, and barbed wire served as the outpost's protection. The size of Massoud's force was estimated as no larger than that of the government soldiers inside the fort. While a small contingent of Mujahideen fighters forged a path through the minefield, others launched artillery and rocket fire into the fort. The party removing the mines was covered by small arms suppressive fire. With lanes created through the minefield, Massoud's men launched their assault on Pechgur. "Such was the measure of surprise," reported Mark Urban, "that they found a senior Afghan army delegation inside the base."<sup>29</sup> In all, the Mujahideen captured 110 officers and 350 enlisted personnel.<sup>30</sup>

In response to this setback, the Soviets launched Panjshir 9. The aim of this operation was to capture Massoud and free his captives. The operation was smaller than previous offensives in the area, involving only one motorized rifle regiment, two battalions of Afghan soldiers and a sizable contingent of heliborne air assault troops. The Soviets easily retook Pechgur as Massoud simply chose to move back into the mountains. However, the attempted rescue of the prisoners by air assault forces went terribly wrong. As the Soviets approached, the Mujahideen allegedly killed the 130 remaining captives.<sup>31</sup>

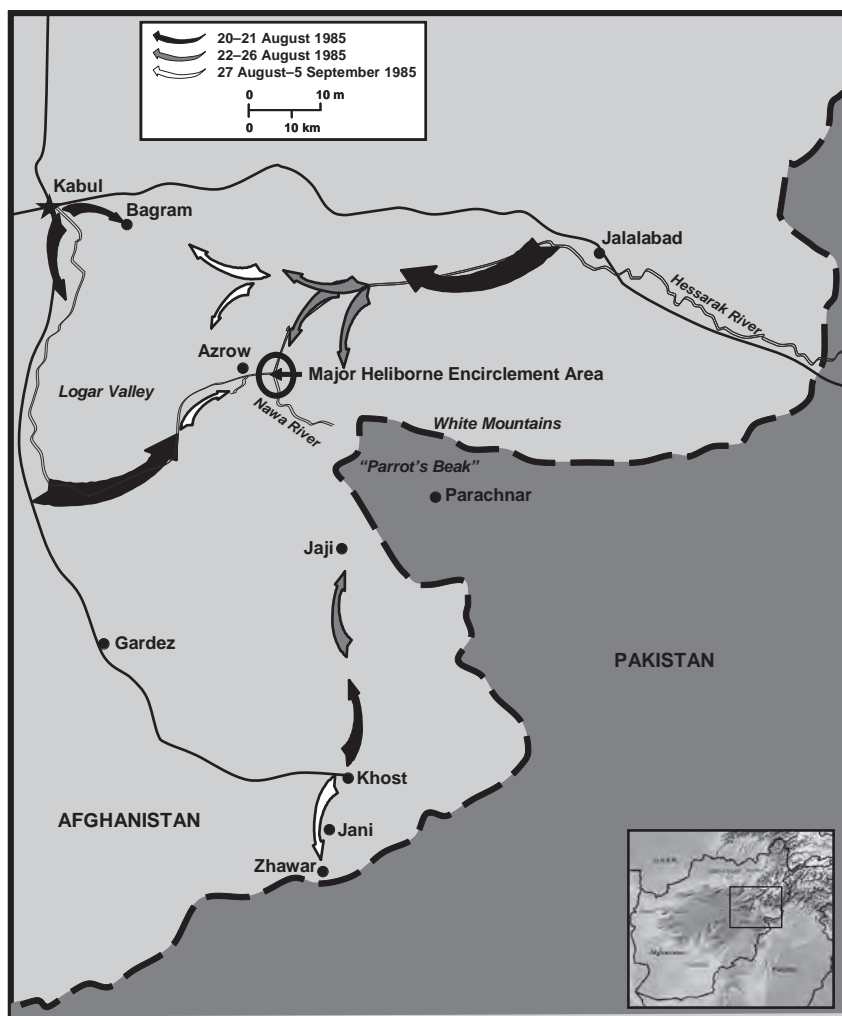
### **Reliance on Large Offensive Operations: Summer 1985 to Spring 1986**

Determined to make the most of the leeway offered by Gorbachev, the Soviet military prepared to launch additional, larger operations. Unfortunately for the 40th Army, the futility of these types of operations had still not registered with the high command. In late August 1985, in response to Mujahideen attacks on the city of Khost, the Soviets and elements of the Afghan Army launched a major offensive involving 20,000 soldiers. It was a three-pronged attack with motorized rifle forces moving from Kabul into the Logar Valley and another mechanized column moving southwest from Jalalabad. Another taskforce would attack out of Khost into the surrounding mountains in the direction of Jaji and then turn south to deal with anti-government forces in Zhawar. The battle groups from Kabul and Jalalabad were to link up at a location known as the "parrot's beak." This landmark, according to Mark Urban, was "the closest guerrilla infiltration point to Kabul."<sup>32</sup> The surrounding area also contained significant amounts of Mujahideen food and other supplies. Soviet forces involved in the offensive included a motorized rifle regiment from the 108th Motorized Rifle Division, most of the 103d Airborne Division and the 66th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade. Afghan government forces came from four different divisions, as well as elements from a commando brigade, a

commando battalion and several border brigades.<sup>33</sup> According to historian Scott R. McMichael, “the commandos and paratroops were considered to be the best and most reliable . . . These units received priority issue of the best available equipment and weapons and they were often trained by Russian instructors, including training in air assault and independent reconnaissance . . . They were also used as an urban police/security force and in forced recruitment.”<sup>34</sup> Even though they were considered elite troops, McMichael noted that, “Morale, generally, was low, just as it was in the regular units; many commando soldiers deserted at the first opportunity.”<sup>35</sup>

The offensive was launched on 21 August, and after two days of fighting Soviet and Afghan units reached the Logar region. As the motorized forces closed in on the Mujahideen, an entire regiment of air assault troops landed at nine separate locations setting up a ring around several Mujahideen base camps. In five days of fighting, the Soviets managed to kill 100 anti-government fighters and wound 41 others.<sup>36</sup> On 28 August, the Soviet and Afghan forces that had attacked out of Khost toward Jaji turned south toward Tani in an attempt to capture the Mujahideen stronghold at Zhawar. Anti-government forces, however, put up a stiff resistance to the advance. By 11 September, Soviet and Afghan forces were within a few kilometers of Zhawar where they were met by massive Mujahideen reinforcements from Pakistan that had rushed to the defense of the base. Long time Mujahideen adversaries set aside their hostilities toward one another in the face of their common enemy. In the end, even with their superiority in mechanized firepower and air support, the Soviet and Afghan forces could not take Zhawar.<sup>37</sup>

By mid-September, the offensives had ended. The Soviets and the Afghans had been somewhat successful in the area around the parrot’s beak, managing to capture and destroy many Mujahideen bases. In fact, Pakistani Brigadier Mohammad Yousaf, the former head of the Afghan Bureau from 1983 to 1987, stated that “The Soviet/Afghan forces had shown that their tactics and techniques were improving,” by the fact that, “they had been able to penetrate into areas long held to be inaccessible.”<sup>38</sup> While there is no doubt that both the Soviets and Afghan army had made enormous tactical improvements, their bold and innovative offensives around the parrot’s beak and Zhawar accomplished little at the strategic level. As Brigadier Yousaf pointed out, “the Soviets had not inflicted any serious defeat on the battlefield; in fact the border engagements although intense, had been indecisive.”<sup>39</sup> Not surprisingly, the Mujahideen continued to attack government installations and ambush Soviet supply columns throughout Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup>



Map 3. Second Eastern Offensive of 1985

### The Pashtun *Jirga* and the National Reconciliation Campaign

One small glimpse of hope for the Soviets and Afghan government emerged in 1985. In this new initiative, led by the chief of the KhAD (*Kheda-mati-i-Etal'at-i-Dolati*) or Afghan secret police, Mohammed Najibullah was to win over support from the Pashtun ethnic group whose members dominated the insurgency.<sup>41</sup> When the Pakistani government cracked down on Pashtun tribes in Pakistan's North West Frontier province, Najibullah took full advantage of the situation. Many Pashtuns in Pakistan's North West Frontier resented the Afghan refugees who were now occupying

much of their territory and taking away a great deal of the lucrative arms and drug business from local tribesmen. When the Pakistani government refused to help them, some tribesmen turned to Najibullah and the Afghan government. In September 1985, 3,700 Pashtun tribal leaders from both sides of the border conducted a *jirga* with Najibullah in Kabul. According to Mark Urban, they “endorsed a plan to prevent *mujahedeen* infiltration” in return for guns and cash.<sup>42</sup> “The DRA government had its greatest political success in establishing peace with the Pushtun [sic] tribes located on the Pakistan border,” concluded the Russian General Staff history. “These talks with local leaders and religious authorities had positive results in various regions of the country—especially in the north.”<sup>43</sup>

In truth, however, these inroads with the Pashtuns would produce only limited results. While two of the tribes on the North West Frontier did in fact fight against the Mujahideen and another tribe near the Khyber Pass endeavored to stop new road construction, these episodes produced extremely limited results. As Olivier Roy pointed out in his paper for *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, “the Pakistani military’s ability to handle these tribes exceeded that of the Soviets and such disturbances were kept under control.”<sup>44</sup>

While Najibullah reached out to the Pashtuns, the Soviets pressed President Karmal to reach out to the Afghan population and to cast off the doctrinaire socialist agenda. In an effort to broaden its appeal, the DRA instituted the National Reconciliation Campaign. According to Robert F. Baumann, “the campaign offered for the first time a comprehensive program of concessions and inducements to demonstrate the benefits of cooperation and the good will of the PDPA [People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan].”<sup>45</sup> Once again, the Soviets were attempting to cobble together some sort of nation-building effort, but it was simply a case of too little too late. As Baumann pointed out, the “conduct of the war did much to undermine government programs. Military operations too often proceeded with little regard for the civilian populace or its good will.”<sup>45</sup> In simple terms, Karmal could not make National Reconciliation work as long as the Soviet military continued its “counterproductive” tactics.<sup>46</sup> One of the central problems according to Artemy Kalinovsky was the fact that the Soviet “military seemed reluctant to do its part in political work.”<sup>48</sup>

### **The 1986 Zhawar Campaign**

According to recently released sources, by the summer of 1985, Gorbachev and other high-ranking politicians became convinced that the Soviet effort at nation-building in Afghanistan was floundering. “They realized,” Artemy Kalinovsky summarized, “that Karmal had made little

progress in reaching out to the population, that economic aid was not reaching its intended destination, and that the *mujahedeen* as a whole still had the widespread support of the population. The Kabul government had not made major gains in legitimacy.”<sup>49</sup> As Gorbachev attempted to devise a solution and consolidate his political power inside the Soviet Union, the war dragged on.

The Russian General Staff history recorded that during this phase of the war, “the approach to the employment of the 40th Army changed.”<sup>50</sup> The war, they wrote “was being depicted as a harmful phenomena imposed on the country and the people by a small group of old politicians. In conjunction with this discussion, there was a tendency to continually withdraw Soviet forces from active combat, to lessen the frequency and scale of operations and combat, and to shrink the boundaries of guarded regions . . . The Soviet high command undertook large-scale operations only in extraordinary situations.”<sup>51</sup> Whether or not it could be classified as an “extraordinary situation” could be debated, but, in April 1986, the Soviets returned to Zhawar, intent on settling old scores. This time, however, the Afghan army would have tactical control of the operation and its soldiers would make up the bulk of the combat forces.<sup>52</sup> Certainly this was a new approach and clearly demonstrated that the Afghan army had greatly improved since 1980.

By this time, the Mujahideen had more heavily fortified Zhawar. The base had become a showplace for visiting journalists. A system of trenches guarded by anti-aircraft guns, a few tanks and heavy machine guns, protected a series of cavernous workshops.<sup>53</sup> In the vicinity of Zhawar, Mujahideen commanders controlled approximately 10,000 fighters, however only 400 insurgents actually defended the Zhawar base camp itself.<sup>54</sup> Recent anti-government proclamations declaring the area as “liberated” had riled both the Soviets and the Afghan government and they were determined to capture Zhawar.<sup>55</sup> While the 40th Army planned the operation, tactical control would fall to Afghan Major General Shahnawaz Tanai and his deputy, Brigadier Abdol Gafur.<sup>56</sup>

In March, units from six Afghan divisions began to assemble around Khost. Other Afghan combat forces included the 37th Commando Brigade and the 466th Commando Battalion. The sole Soviet ground combat unit, an air assault regiment from the 103d Air Assault Division, was also moved to Khost during this time frame.

The attack began in the first week of April with the commandos leading the assault toward Tani. Within days, Tani was captured and occupied by Afghan government forces. As the offensive continued south toward



Map 4. Zhawar Campaign, 1986

Zhawar, the Mujahideen fought back aggressively, even managing to fire rockets onto the airfield in Khost in an effort to interrupt helicopter operations. As his forces advanced toward Zhawar, Afghan Brigadier Gafur employed what he called “‘hammer and anvil’ tactics.”<sup>57</sup> The maneuver aimed at pushing the Mujahideen against the mountains and destroying them. According to Urban, “His usual device for doing this was the battalion heliborne landing.”<sup>58</sup> After 10 days of bloody fighting, Afghan and Soviet forces reached the outskirts of Zhawar. At one point, an Afghan commando battalion descended by helicopters into the middle of a well-

laid Mujahideen “kill zone.” The anti-government forces killed 320 of the 400 men in the battalion. However, as Su-25 bombers blasted Mujahideen caves and defensive positions around Zhawar, Gafur’s forces moved in for the kill. After four days of violent close combat, the Afghan government forces finally captured the base. Estimates suggest that anti-government forces lost somewhere between 300 and 1,000 fighters.<sup>59</sup>

The capture of Zhawar was a tactical victory for the Soviets and Afghan government forces. The battle clearly demonstrated that the Afghan army was in fact trainable. “The performance of the Afghan army in the battle for Zhawar is remarkable when compared to its dismal efforts in 1980–81,” wrote Urban.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, less than 300 of Gafur’s men deserted and they had stood toe-to-toe with a formidable adversary. Nevertheless, in the end, the battle had little effect on the overall war effort. Pakistani Brigadier Mohammad Yousaf, who was closely involved in the defense of Zhawar, recalled that, “Although Zhawar base fell, other nearby strong points did not, and within a few hours the enemy [Soviet/Afghan government forces] pulled back to Khost, making no attempt to hold the ground they had won.”<sup>61</sup> As they had found many times before, the Soviets could clear, but they could not hold, and Zhawar once again highlighted the inconsequentiality of large-scale offensives operations.

### **Gorbachev Takes Command**

On the heels of the Zhawar campaign, Mujahideen attacks continued across Afghanistan, supported by its supply line that reached into Pakistan. Gorbachev announced to the Politburo that the war had become a “bleeding wound” for the Soviet Union, and he was determined to end it.<sup>62</sup> After giving his generals free reign for over a year and with no end still in sight, Gorbachev stepped more boldly into the fray. In May 1986, Babrak Karmal was removed and replaced with Mohammad Najibullah, the former head of the KhAD security forces.<sup>63</sup>

With renewed energy, Najibullah pushed forward with the national reconciliation policy, but, as Stephen Tanner observed, “after such a long and bitter war found that popular support for both him and the regime was scarce.”<sup>64</sup> Much of this bitterness was a direct result of the Soviet military’s brutal behavior toward the Afghan population and their wholly combat-oriented approach. They simply would not or could not modify their tactics to meet the challenging demands of counterinsurgency warfare.<sup>65</sup>

Gorbachev vented his frustration with his generals at a Politburo session on 13 November 1986, where he discussed the Soviet Army’s flawed approach in Afghanistan. “Our generals are not learning their lessons,”



Gorbachev told the members of the Politburo. "It could be that they cannot apply themselves fully there! But we do have the past experience from Angola, Ethiopia, and Mozambique. There must be a learning curve. They took lessons from Vietnam . . . Here you cannot move large formations or tank armies. We need to find the keys to this war."<sup>66</sup> Evidently Gorbachev was alluding to the 40th Army's obsession with large-scale operations and its failure to apply any lessons from the Soviet experience in Africa. At this meeting, Gorbachev also made his intentions clear: the Soviets would withdraw from Afghanistan. "Our strategic goal," he told the Politburo, "is to complete this war and pull our forces out in one or, at the most, two years . . . our goal is set clearly: to speed up the measures that would ensure that we have a friendly nation there and leave."<sup>67</sup>

While the Soviets searched for a diplomatic arrangement to help facilitate their withdrawal, the Soviet military continued efforts to win some sort of compromise with Pakistan. "To compensate for their inability to seal the borders," wrote Olivier Roy, "the Soviets applied heavy pressure on Pakistan to end its support for the Mujaheddin."<sup>68</sup> This involved the bombing of refugee camps in Pakistan as well as terrorist attacks aimed at the Pakistani population.<sup>69</sup> However, these measures had little effect. Massive amounts of ammunition and other vital supplies continued to flood into Afghanistan.<sup>70</sup>

According to the Russian General Staff history, from January 1987 on, "the Soviet forces for all practical purposes, ceased offensive combat and fought only when attacked by the Mujahideen."<sup>71</sup> The introduction of the CIA supplied Stinger missile to the Mujahideen played a key role in the cessation of offensive operations, particularly airmobile operations.<sup>72</sup> As Roy pointed out, "Soviet air superiority was over; by the summer [of 1987], half of Afghan airspace was free of Soviet aircraft. Afghan resistance forces secured areas of sanctuary in which their main bases and ordnance were safe from Soviet troops and air forces."<sup>73</sup> In July 1987, the Soviets launched one last massive offensive operation to relieve the garrison in the town of Khost in eastern Afghanistan. "Operation Magistral" as the operation was named, was the largest of the war involving a total of 24,000 Soviet and Afghan soldiers. In the end, the offensive opened up the roads to Khost, but, as with other large-scale offensives, did nothing to neutralize the power of the Mujahideen.<sup>74</sup>

By April 1988, negotiations in Geneva were concluded, which forecast an almost complete Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan by February 1989. On 15 February 1989, the last soldier of the 40th Army crossed the border back into the Soviet Union. Although the Soviets left behind



hundreds of advisors, the war was now Najibullah's to win or lose. His government would in fact outlive the Soviet Union, a testament perhaps to the one Soviet success in a decade otherwise marked by frustration and missed opportunities.

## Notes

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## Conclusions

*As important as they are in achieving security, military actions by themselves cannot achieve success in COIN. Insurgents that never defeat counterinsurgents in combat still may achieve their strategic objectives.*

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*One has to admit that essentially we put our bets on the military solution, on suppressing the counterrevolution with force. We did not even fully use the existing opportunities for neutralization of the hostile attitudes of the local population towards us.*

Document 21, CC CPSU Letter on Afghanistan,  
10 May 1988, Alexander Lyakhovsky,  
*Tragedy and Valor of Afghanistan*

While the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the toppling of President Amin's government in December 1979, proved swift and decisive, the 40th Army soon found itself locked in nightmarish circumstances. After installing Babrak Karmal, the Soviets expected to temporarily garrison key sites, train the Afghan army to battle anti-government forces and provide economic aid to the new government. It would appear that senior Soviet political leaders assumed this mission could be accomplished within a matter of months.<sup>1</sup> The Soviet military however, found itself engulfed in a bloody domestic insurgency, a struggle it was inadequately prepared to fight. Some Soviet generals knew that their forces were unprepared and ill equipped to battle an insurgency, but like the politicians, believed they would not face such a scenario.<sup>2</sup> Once the Soviet military came to grips with the reality of the situation however, they sought to correct the initial problems. These major difficulties included a culturally insensitive force, the lack of tactical proficiency, over-centralization, an extremely heavy force structure, a shortage of logistical support, no counterinsurgency doctrine and a poorly trained and unreliable Afghan army. As the war progressed, two other impediments to success would emerge: a prolonged reliance on large-scale operations and the inability to adjust to nation-building and COIN.

To their credit, the Soviets dealt quickly and efficiently with some of these problems. When they realized that their Central Asian reserve soldiers were further aggravating the Pashtun tribes and broadening the flames of discord, they were sent back to the Soviet Union. Additionally, the 40th

Army was also able to overcome some of its difficulties with tactical proficiency and over-centralization. While much of the Soviet mechanized force was never able to adjust to the rigors of counterinsurgency warfare in Afghanistan, the airborne and air assault units made great strides in tactical know-how and soon mastered the art of both closing with the enemy and working successfully with mechanized ground assaults.<sup>3</sup> As the war proceeded, the Soviets were also able to decentralize their force structure by forming new military districts and assigning air, artillery and engineer assets down to the brigade and regimental level.<sup>4</sup>

By 1982, the Soviets recognized the limited value of their heavy forces and sent hundreds of tanks, anti-aircraft units, and large artillery formations back home. The 40th Army also increased the number of helicopters and incorporated air assault and airborne light infantry into its force structure. Although these measures helped improve the tactical situation, they still fell far short of what was required for success. For the duration of the war, the 40th Army would remain too heavily mechanized and suffer from a paucity of helicopters and light infantry necessary to perform all the required missions. Whatever the force make up, in the end, the Soviets never possessed enough soldiers or equipment to successfully accomplish their objectives given the breadth and depth of the Afghan insurgency.<sup>5</sup> As Coalition forces continue their prolonged efforts in Afghanistan, the Soviet struggle to promote the proper force structure and troop levels should not be disregarded.

In the logistical arena, the 40th Army faced a daunting challenge, one they were never able to overcome.<sup>6</sup> Anti-government forces constantly attacked the Soviet army's lines of communication. The Mujahideen persistently assailed Soviet convoys. And, as retired General Mohammad Nawroz and Lester Grau observed, "The guerrilla mastery of the roads strangled the Soviet efforts."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the 40th Army lost 11,369 trucks during the course of the war.<sup>8</sup> Lack of supplies and equipment for the soldiers in the field served to further reduce the morale of an army already plagued by severe drug and alcohol problems. The magnitude of Soviet logistical problems can be gauged by the fact that 67 percent of soldiers serving in Afghanistan were hospitalized with dangerous diseases.<sup>9</sup>

The 40th Army entered Afghanistan with no counterinsurgency doctrine. The initial forces committed to the country were trained to fight conventional wars in Europe or China. The army was designed and trained to fight large complex campaigns with vast mechanized and armored columns, supported by massive air and artillery strikes, piercing the frontlines and moving rapidly into the rear of the enemy. As the editors of the Russian General Staff history pointed out, "In this type of war,



tactical predictability was preferred to tactical agility. The war would be won on the operational level. Soviet force structure, weaponry, tactics, and support infrastructure were all designed to support this operational vision. These were all inappropriate for a long counterinsurgency effort in Afghanistan.”<sup>10</sup> The Soviets, therefore, were forced to learn by “trial and error” how to conduct tactical missions, such as raids, blocking operations, ambushes, sweeps and convoy protection. It would prove a bloody and frustrating ordeal for the Soviet army.<sup>11</sup>

The improvement of the Afghan army is perhaps one of the most noteworthy achievements for the Soviets in Afghanistan. At the beginning of the war, the Afghan army was far below strength, badly trained and plagued by mass desertions. By 1986, however, the Soviets had managed to train and equip the government soldiers well enough to conduct their own large-scale operations. In 1989, when the Soviet army finally left Afghanistan for good, the Afghan army proved strong enough to defend Mohammad Najibullah’s government. When the Mujahideen launched all-out assaults on Jalalabad in March 1989, the Afghan army beat back the attacks. According to Nikolas K. Gvosdev, the victory “rocked the alliance of anti-Najibullah forces; meanwhile, morale inside the government skyrocketed, and Najibullah’s efforts to convince local leaders to back his rule began to bear greater fruit.”<sup>12</sup> Najibullah’s regime would outlive the Soviet Union. However, once the Soviet Union collapsed and military and economic aid was cut off, Najibullah’s days were numbered. The Taliban eventually killed him in 1996. “Had the Soviet Union not collapsed,” wrote Artemy Kalinovsky, “the regime in Kabul might have grown and survived indefinitely.”<sup>13</sup>

The Soviet army’s fixation with large-scale military operations during the war proved completely unproductive and did little to further Soviet war aims. Rarely did the 40th Army or the Afghan army hold terrain after clearing it of anti-government forces. In 1986, the commander of the Soviet armed forces told the Politburo that, “There is no single piece of land in this country which has not been occupied by a Soviet soldier. Nevertheless, the majority of the territory remains in the hands of the rebels . . . There is no single military problem that has arisen and that has not been solved, and yet there is still no result. The whole problem is in the fact that the military results are not followed up by political [actions]. We control Kabul and the provincial centers, but on occupied territory we cannot establish authority. We have lost the battle for the Afghan people.”<sup>14</sup> This observation clearly shows the major defect in Soviet COIN operations. For the Soviet military there was “no single military problem” they could not work out.<sup>15</sup> There was no political follow-through because the Soviet Army was not



in the business of nation-building. Added to this, was the ruthless, relentless campaign to drive the Afghan population from the countryside. It is therefore not surprising that the 40th Army lost its “battle for the Afghan people.”<sup>16</sup>

While the Soviets and their Afghan allies could successfully attack Mujahideen fighters and inflicted serious losses on them, once they left the captured area anti-government forces would quickly reoccupy their previous base of operations. Due to a lack of soldiers, the Soviets could clear, but they could not hold key terrain outside the cities and their lines of communications. While the problems associated with Soviet large-scale operations were recorded by military historians, the US Army and coalition forces in Afghanistan launched operations that were in some ways similar in approach. Especially in the first six years of the coalition campaign in Afghanistan (2001-2007) military forces conducted missions not designed to clear, hold and build, but rather to dislocate and defeat the Taliban and then move on. As with the Soviet experience, once soldiers relinquished the ground anti-government forces quickly returned.

Large Soviet offensive operations also hindered COIN and nation-building efforts. As previously discussed, Soviet combat forces terrorized the Afghan population, and, as the editors of the Russian General Staff history concluded, “did little to win them over to the government’s side.”<sup>17</sup> Soviet combat officers were unwilling or unable to support nation-building programs such as national reconciliation. In 1987 when a Soviet political officer tried to explain to a colonel-general that combat assaults in one of the provinces were not conducive to the new program, the commander responded, “To hell with national reconciliation.”<sup>18</sup> The lack of military support for what they deemed “political work” almost certainly played a role in the rejection of the nation-building approach by the Soviets in 1987.<sup>19</sup>

In the end, the Soviets were not defeated in Afghanistan. Their decision to extricate themselves was a political decision and the withdrawal was accomplished in good order. The Soviets left behind a viable Afghan government and army supported by advisers in addition to massive amounts of economic aid. Inasmuch as the Soviets were unwilling to commit their full resources to the conflict and the 40th Army was unwilling to fully support nation-building efforts, this arrangement was perhaps the best solution after the decade long conflict. The Soviet experience demonstrated that a purely military solution to counter-insurgency in Afghanistan did not work. “One has to admit,” affirmed a communiqué from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on 10 May 1988, “that essentially we put our bets on the military solution,

on suppressing the counterrevolution with force. We did not even fully use the existing opportunities for neutralization of the hostile attitudes of the local population towards us.”<sup>20</sup> Clearly, it was the wrong approach.

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Matt M. Matthews joined the Combat Studies Institute (CSI) in July 2005. For 16 years he was a member of the World Class Opposing Forces (OPFOR) of the Battle Command Training Program (BCPT) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Enlisting in the Army at age 17, he served in the light infantry from 1977 to 1981. Mr. Matthews also served as a Cavalry officer in the US Army Reserve from 1983 to 1986, and as an Armor Officer in the Kansas Army National Guard from 1986 to 1991. He graduated from Kansas State University in 1986 with a BS in History and continued his graduate studies there. Mr. Matthews is the author of several CSI Press publications including *The Posse Comitatus Act* and the *United States Army: A Historical Perspective*, *Operation AL FAJR: A Study in Army and Marine Corps Joint Operations*, *The US Army on the Mexican Border: A Historical Perspective*, and *We Were Caught Unprepared: The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*. He also contributed the chapter titled “Hard Lessons Learned A Comparison of the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War and Operation CAST LEAD: A Historical Overview” in the CSI publication *Back To Basics: A Study of the Second Lebanon War and Operation CAST LEAD*.

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