

## Primer on Russian Afghan War, 1979-1989, Lessons Learned

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26 December 2008

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*Yet, technological superiority is not in and of itself a guarantee of success. Insight into our adversary's capabilities, tactics and motivation will provide the decisive edge.*

*When asked what made him [Mujahideen] successful Commander Baloch said, "We intended to fight to the last man and they didn't."*

The Other Side of the Mountain

*Creedy: [desperately shooting at the approaching V] Die! Die! Why won't you die?... Why won't you die?*

*V: Beneath this mask there is more than flesh. Beneath this mask there is an idea, Mr.*

*Creedy, and ideas are bulletproof.*

From the Movie: *V for Vendetta*, 2005

This article is a compilation of lessons learned from the Russian Afghan War 1979-1989. It draws on articles from the CIA and Army Military Intelligence that are available on the web. Additionally, it includes extracts from the web-available article by Leslie Grau in the September/October 1995 issue of *Military Review* entitled "The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War?" and extracts from two books by Mr. Grau, *The Bear Went over the Mountain* and *The Other Side of the Mountain*.

These are the down and dirty lessons learned – no fluff, no commentary – just the power of ideas [idea - from the Greek word *idein* – to see...]

## 1. Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, "*The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Five Years After*," May 1985 (CIA Declassification Release)

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/us5.pdf>

### Intensity

- The intensity of the war – as in all guerrilla struggles- varies in different areas and at different times of the year. Some commanders – particularly in the eastern provinces – maintain fairly constant pressure on government outposts and convoys.<sup>1</sup>

### Road Bound

- Major roads remain insecure despite patrolling and periodic Soviet and regime revenge and retaliatory strikes.<sup>2</sup>

### Soviet Weakness

- Weapons and tactics unsuited to terrain and counter insurgency warfare.
- Poor intelligence and command and control.
- Unreliable, incompetent ally.

### Insurgents Strengths

- High morale.
- Broad civilian support.
- Increasing military expertise.

### Afghan Government Units

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<sup>1</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, Directorate of Intelligence, "*The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: Five Years After*," May 1985 (CIA Declassification Release), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 2.

**Weakness:**

- Desertions.
- Seriously under strength.
- Lack of equipment
- Political factionalism.

**Strengths:**

- No major strengths.<sup>3</sup>

**Insurgent Tactics:**

- Most insurgent operations are quick, small scale attacks on road convoys and military posts. The guerillas usually disperse before Soviet and Afghan forces can strike back, and, as in most guerrilla wars, these attacks generally result in little crippling damage.<sup>4</sup>
- Intelligence: Because they (the guerrillas) enjoy the support of the overwhelming majority of the population, resistance intelligence on Soviet and regime plans is superior to that of the Soviets and the Kabul regime. Good intelligence has been critical to the insurgents' success in avoiding enemy offensives and launching attacks.<sup>5</sup>
- Soviet and regime surveillance networks and informants also hamper the insurgents.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 5.

## **2. *Lessons from the War in Afghanistan*, U.S. Army, May 1989 (Army Department Declassification Release)**

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/us11.pdf>

### **Mujahedeen Strengths:**

- Familiarity with the terrain
- Tactical mobility
- Ability to achieve surprise
- Ability to operate at night
- Rugged and highly motivated fighters
- Sanctuaries in Pakistan and Iran.<sup>7</sup>

### **Tactical Lessons from the Mujahedeen Experience:**

#### **Size of Counterinsurgency Units**

- [Do not form large units] it diminishes one of the principle strengths of an insurgency; namely, dispersal into small and more mobile targets.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Know the enemy's tactics and routines**

- Strict adherence to doctrine or even repetition of innovative tactics is a common characteristic of conventional forces with little experience in COIN warfare.
- Insurgent forces can exploit this weakness if they are familiar with the conventional doctrine or COIN force practices.
- Such knowledge can provide advance warning of COIN forces intentions and allow insurgents to predict COIN tactics.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Army, May 1989, *Lessons from the War in Afghanistan*, (Army Department Declassification Release), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 9.

## Convoy Ambushes

- Although ambushes are common to most insurgencies, the Mujahedeen had several distinct advantages.
  - First the terrain often presented poor off-road traffic ability.
  - Second, there were no railroads, which led to the Soviet practice of using ground convoys for most of their supply efforts.<sup>10</sup>

## Maneuver

- Soviet efforts to place their forces at an advantage over the Mujahedeen were fraught with all the limitations associated with a large, mechanized army facing a low-tech insurgency.
- Moreover, maneuver of combat forces in Afghanistan was severely restricted by terrain and limited road networks. Based on the Soviet's experience, we can draw the following lessons:
  - Use dismounted infantry or air assault to identify and destroy antitank ambushes.
  - Constantly review and reassess the effectiveness of tactics being applied against insurgent forces
  - According to several Soviet sources, logistic support in Afghanistan was unsatisfactory – use air transport whenever possible<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 24.

### **3. Extracts from: *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War?***

<http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/waraf.htm>

#### **Invasion**

The initial active resistance by the Afghan military was confined to a short battle against the Soviet Spetsnaz unit storming the Presidential Palace. Open resistance flared so quickly that only two months after the invasion, (on the night of 23 February 1980) almost the entire population of Kabul climbed on their rooftops and chanted with one voice "God is Great".<sup>12</sup>

#### **War-fighting Soviet Style**

The initial strategic concept, operations plans and tactical methods used by the Soviet military in Afghanistan did not markedly differ from what they-or any strong, modern army-would have undertaken anywhere else in the world. Massive firepower delivered from fixed-winged aircraft, helicopters, artillery, rocket launchers and tanks preceded all advances.

Initially, the Soviets considered close combat by dismounted infantry and mopping up actions superfluous since they felt that the huge expenditure of heavy artillery and rocket shells combined with the bombing and strafing by their fighter bombers had either destroyed their hungry, naive and miserably-equipped opponents or panicked them into permanent exile in Pakistan or Iran.

In fact, the Afghan freedom fighter came from a traditional warrior society and proved highly resourceful in fighting the Soviets. They saw no point in remaining under aerial and artillery barrages or in facing overwhelming odds and firepower. They were adept at temporarily withdrawing from Soviet strike areas and then returning in hours, days or weeks to strike the enemy where he was exposed.<sup>13</sup>

#### **The Soviet Combat Experience**

The Soviets were slow in adopting new tactics to the realities of the rugged terrain and rugged enemy. When the Soviets finally realized the importance of dismounting conventional motorized rifle troops for close combat and mopping-up, it was too late. The troops and even their officers were reluctant to leave the relative safety of their armored carriers and preferred

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<sup>12</sup> Lester W. Grau, *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War?*, Military Review September/October 1995, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 3.

to use artillery and air strikes instead of close combat. They had lost the willingness to combat a rugged enemy that would not quit. The pressure of an unpopular, lengthy, expensive war had transformed many tough, stubborn and ruthless Soviet soldiers into liabilities whose sole hope was to survive and go home.

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

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

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

The Afghanistan War forced the 40th Army to change tactics, equipment, and training and force structure. However, despite these changes, the Soviet Army never had enough forces in Afghanistan to win. Initially, the Soviets had underestimated the strength of their enemy. Logistically, they were hard-pressed to maintain a larger force and, even if they could have tripled the size of their force, they probably would still have been unable to win. Often, they could not assemble an entire regiment for combat and had to cobble together forces from various units to create a make-shift regiment.

Base-camp, airfield, city and lines of communication (LOC) security tied up most of the motorized rifle forces, but still, the mujahideen constantly interdicted the road and pipelines supplying the Soviet and Afghan forces. The Soviets were never able to completely control their

LOCs, although their forces were performing an important international mission. Consequently, they were never able to consistently transport sufficient supplies into the country to support a larger force. The guerrilla mastery of the roads strangled the Soviet efforts. Soviet equipment losses included 118 jets, 333 helicopters, 147 tanks, 1314 armored personnel carriers, 433 artillery pieces or mortars, 1138 communications or CP vehicles, 510 engineering vehicles and 11,369 trucks. Many of these losses were on the highways, and a key loss was the large amount of cargo-carrying trucks.

On paper, the 40th Army looked to be in good shape, but it was unable to maintain adequate personnel strength in its line units. The Soviets learned, like the Americans in Vietnam, that units need to be filled well in excess of 100% (in some regions of the world) if one hopes to field and maintain a reasonable fighting force. The 40th Army was chronically short of resources to carry out its mission and was an embarrassing reminder to its political masters of their political hubris and miscalculations which pushed this army into the inhospitable mountains of Afghanistan, where it could not be properly supplied and maintained.<sup>14</sup>

### **Soviet Tactical Innovations:**

The Soviet Ground Forces developed the bronegruppa concept to use the firepower of the personnel carriers in an independent reserve once the motorized rifle soldiers had dismounted. It was a bold step, for commanders of mechanized forces dislike separating their dismounted infantry from their carriers. However, terrain often dictated that the BMPs, BMDs and BTRs could not follow or support their squads.

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

The bronegruppa concept gave the commander a potent, maneuverable reserve which could attack independently on the flanks, block expected enemy routes of withdrawal, serve as a mobile fire platform to reinforce elements in contact, serve as a battle taxi to pick-up forces (which had infiltrated or air-landed earlier and had finished their mission), perform patrols, serve in an economy-of-force role in both the offense and defense, and provide convoy escort and security functions.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 7.

## **Soviet Equipment:**

The concept of the motorized rifle force was a marriage of soldiers and armored personnel carriers. The soldier was never supposed to be more than 200 meters from his carrier. His load-bearing equipment, uniform, weaponry, and other field gear reflected this orientation. Yet, Afghanistan was a light-infantryman's war--and the Soviets had very little light infantry.

In general, the Soviet ground soldier remained tied to his personnel carrier and to the equipment which was designed to be carried by that personnel carrier. Consequently, the standard flak jacket weighed 16 kilograms (35 pounds). This was acceptable when dismounting a carrier and assaulting for less than a kilometer. However, a dismounted advance of three kilometers in flak jackets would stall due to troop exhaustion.<sup>16</sup>

## **Lessons Learned**

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

1. A guerrilla war is not a war of technology versus peasantry. Rather, it is a contest of endurance and national will. The side with the greatest moral commitment (ideological, religious or patriotic) will hold the ground at the end of the conflict. Battlefield victory can be almost irrelevant, since victory is often determined by morale, obstinacy and survival.
2. Secure logistics and secure lines of communication are essential for the guerrilla and non-guerrilla force. Security missions, however, can tie up most of a conventional force.
3. Weapons systems, field gear, communications equipment and transport which are designed for conventional war will often work less effectively or fail completely on rugged terrain.
4. Tactics for conventional war will not work against guerrillas. Forces need to be reequipped, restructured and retrained for fighting guerrillas or for fighting as guerrillas. The most effective combatants are light infantry.
5. Tanks have a limited utility for the counter-guerrilla force, but can serve as an effective reserve on the right terrain. Infantry fighting vehicles and helicopters can play an important role in mobility and fire support. Mechanized forces usually fight effectively only when dismounted and when using their carriers for support or as a maneuver reserve. Ample engineer troops are essential for both sides.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 8.

6. Field sanitation, immunization and preventive medicine are of paramount importance in less-than-optimal sanitary conditions. Immediate medical support to wounded combatants is often hard to provide.
7. Journalists and television cameramen are key players in guerrilla warfare. The successful struggle can be effectively aided when championed by a significant portion of the world's press.
8. Logistics determines the scope of activity and size of force either side can field.
9. Unity of command is very important, yet sometimes impossible to achieve.
10. Domination of the air is irrelevant unless airpower can be precisely targeted. Seizure of terrain can be advantageous, but is usually only of temporary value. Control of the cities can be a plus, but can also prove a detriment. Support of the population is essential for the winning side.<sup>17</sup>

### **And In the End:**

According to General Nawroz, the Afghan-Soviet War was a rare confrontation in history as it helped trigger the collapse of the greatest empire of modern times. Lessons learned from this conflict were gathered by both sides. Whatever else these lessons may show, the most fundamental of them is that no army, however sophisticated, well trained, materially rich, numerically overwhelming and ruthless, can succeed on the battlefield if it is not psychologically fit and motivated for the fight. The force, however destitute in material advantages and numbers, which can rely on the moral qualities of a strong faith, stubborn determination, individualism and unending patience will always be the winner. These may not be the optimum qualities always found in the armies of western democracies.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 11.

#### **4. Extracts from: *The Bear Went Over the Mountain - Soviet Combat Tactics In Afghanistan***

When the Soviet Union decided to invade Afghanistan, they evaluated their chances for success upon their experiences in East Germany, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Unfortunately for their soldiers, as well as the people of Afghanistan, they ignored not only the experiences of the British in the same region, but also their own experience with the Basmachi resistance fighters in Central Asia from 1918-1933. Consequently, in Afghanistan the Soviet army found its tactics inadequate to meet the challenges posed by the difficult terrain and the highly motivated *mujahideen* freedom fighters.

To capture the lessons their tactical leaders learned in Afghanistan and to explain the change in tactics that followed, the Frunze Military Academy compiled this book for their command and general staff combat arms officers. The lessons are valuable not just for Russian officers, but for the tactical training of platoon, company and battalion leaders of any nation likely to engage in conflicts involving civil war, guerrilla forces and rough terrain. This is a book dealing with the starkest features of the unforgiving landscape of tactical combat: casualties and death, adaptation, and survival.

Senior leaders may find invaluable insights into the dangers and opportunities tactical units under their command may face in limited wars. Above all, the lessons in this book should help small unit leaders understand the need for security, deception, patrols, light and litter discipline, caution, vigilance, and the ability to seize the initiative in responding to unpredictable enemy actions and ambushes.<sup>19</sup>

Having suffered through the trauma of Vietnam, Americans, in particular, watched curiously to see how the vaunted Soviet military machine would deal with the ill equipped tribesmen of this inhospitable region. A few recollected the Afghan experiences of the British in the late Nineteenth Century, when British imperial power was humbled by the ancestors of these very same tribesmen. Few Westerners, however, doubted that the Soviets would ultimately prevail. Some even projected their European fears to Asia, and pondered the applicability of the Soviet theater-strategic offensive to southern Asia. More than a few strategic pundits and military planners envisioned a bold Soviet strategic thrust from southern Afghanistan to the shores of the Persian Gulf, to challenge Western strategic interests and disrupt Western access to critical Middle Eastern oil.

Despite these fears and dire warnings, the Soviet Afghan military effort soon languished as the British experience began to repeat itself. Although appearing to have entered Afghanistan in seemingly surgical fashion and with overwhelming force, the Soviet military

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<sup>19</sup> Lester W. Grau, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain, Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS, ix.

commitment was, in reality, quite limited, and the immense and stark territory of Afghanistan swallowed the invaders up.

Across the largely barren landscape, guerrilla fighters multiplied, and, within months, the hitherto curious word *mujahideen* took on new meaning. The anticipated short sharp struggle became prolonged as the West watched transfixed, wondering when the Soviet military machine would prevail. In time, the question of prevalence imperceptibly faded, and was replaced by doubts over whether the Soviets would prevail at all. In the end, ironically, even the Soviets could not cope, and the disease of the Afghan adventure infected Soviet society and the Soviet body politic itself. What began as yet another step in the expansion of Soviet power ended in a welter of systemic institutional self doubt that exposed the corruption within the Soviet system and ultimately brought that system and its parent state to ruin.<sup>20</sup>

In Vietnam, American military strength rose to over 500,000 troops and the Americans resorted to many divisional and multi-divisional operations. By comparison, in Afghanistan, a region five times the size of Vietnam, Soviet strength varied from 90-104,000 troops. The Soviet's five divisions, four separate brigades and four separate regiments, and smaller support units of the 40<sup>th</sup> Army strained to provide security for the 21 provincial centers and few industrial and economic installations and were hard-pressed to extend this security to the thousands of villages, hundreds of miles of communications routes, and key terrain features that punctuated and spanned that vast region.

Second, faced with this imposing security challenge, and burdened with a military doctrine, strategy, and operational and tactical techniques suited to theater war, the Soviet Army was hard pressed to devise military methodologies suited to deal with the Afghan challenges.

Soviet military authorities were increasingly unable to cope with military-technical realities in the form of a technological revolution in weaponry, which produced the looming specter of a proliferation of costly high-tech precision weaponry. In the short term, while an economic and technological solution was being sought, the military was forced to adjust its operational and tactical concepts and its military force structure to meet the new realities. Coincidentally, this was done while the military searched for appropriate ways to fight the Afghan War.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of these twin military challenges, the Soviets formulated new concepts for waging war in non-linear fashion, suited to operating on battlefields dominated by more lethal high-precision weapons. This new non-linear battlefield required the abandonment of traditional operational and tactical formations, a redefinition of traditional echelonment

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, xi.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, xiii.

concepts, and a wholesale reorganization of formations and units to emphasize combat flexibility and, hence, survivability.

During the early and mid 1980s, the Soviet military altered its concept of the theater strategic offensive, developed new concepts for shallower echelonment at all levels, developed the concept of the air echelon, experimented with new force structures such as the corps, brigade, and combined arms battalion, tested new, more-flexible, logistical support concepts (for material support), and adopted such innovative tactical techniques as the use of the *bronegruppya* [armored group] (An armored group of 4-5 tanks, BMPs or BTR or any combination of such vehicles).

The BMPs and BTRs are employed without their normally assigned motorized rifle squad on board and fight away from their dismounted troops). Afghanistan not only provided a test bed for many of these lower-level concepts, but it also demanded the employment of imaginative new techniques in its own right. Hence, the brigade, the material support battalion, and the *bronegruppya* emerged on the Afghan field of battle, reconnaissance-diversionary [SPETSNAZ] units sharpened their skills, and air assault techniques were widely employed.

Third, the inability of the Soviet military to win the war decisively condemned it to suffer a slow bloodletting, in a process that exposed the very weaknesses of the military as well as the Soviet political structure and society itself. The employment of a draft army with full periodic rotation of troops back to the Soviet Union permitted the travails and frustrations of war and the self doubts of the common soldier to be shared by the Soviet population as a whole. The problems so apparent in the wartime army soon became a microcosm for the latent problems afflicting Soviet society in general. The messages of doubt were military, political, ethnic, and social.

In the end they were corrosive and destructive. As evidence, one needs only review the recently released casualty figures to underscore the pervasiveness of the problem. Soviet dead and missing in Afghanistan amounted to almost 15,000 troops, a modest percent of the 642,000 Soviets who served during the ten-year war. And the dead tell no tales at home. Far more telling were the 469,685 casualties, fully 73 percent of the overall force, who ultimately returned home to the Soviet Union. Even more appalling were the numbers of troops who fell victim to disease (415,932), of which 115,308 suffered from infectious hepatitis and 31,080 from typhoid fever. Beyond the sheer magnitude of these numbers is what these figures say about Soviet military hygiene and the conditions surrounding troop life. These numbers are unheard of in modern armies and modern medicine and their social impact among the returnees and the Soviet population, in general, had to be immense. This volume puts a human face on the Soviet Afghan experience and begins to add flesh and blood to our previously skeletal appreciation of the war.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, xiv.

The book provides a revealing portrait of war in general, tactics in particular, and, coincidentally, the soldiers' human condition. It also reveals that Western intelligence's picture of how the Soviets operated tactically lagged about 10 years behind reality. It captures the pain and frustration suffered by the Soviet military and, most important, provides acute insights into why and how these military experiences ultimately ignited political and social turmoil in the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup>

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

- stabilizing the country by garrisoning the main routes, major cities, airbases and logistics sites;
- relieving the Afghan government forces of garrison duties and pushing them into the countryside to battle the resistance;
- providing logistic, air, artillery and intelligence support to the Afghan forces;
- providing minimum interface between the Soviet occupation forces and the local populace;
- accepting minimal Soviet casualties; and,
- strengthening the Afghan forces, so once the resistance was defeated, the Soviet Army could be withdrawn.<sup>24</sup>

In the end, the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan and the communist government was defeated. Approximately 620,000 Soviets served in Afghanistan. Of these, 525,000 were in the Soviet Armed Forces while another 90,000 were in the KGB and 5,000 were in the MVD. The Soviets invested much national treasure and lost 13,833 killed. Of their 469,685 sick and wounded, 10,751 became invalids. The Soviets lost 118 jets, 333 helicopters, 147 tanks, 1314 armored personnel carriers, 433 artillery pieces and mortars, 1138 radio sets and CP vehicles, 510 engineering vehicles and 11,369 trucks.

There are some striking parallels between the Soviet role in Afghanistan and the United States' role in Vietnam. Like the United States, the Soviets had to restructure and retrain their force while in the combat zone. Eventually, military schools and training areas began to incorporate Afghanistan combat experience and to train personnel.

The Armed Forces of the Soviet Union structured, equipped and trained their forces for nuclear and high-intensity war on the great northern European plain and the plains of northern China. However, their political leadership thrust them into the middle of the Afghanistan civil war to reconstitute and to support a nominally Marxist-Leninist government. The terrain, the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, xv.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, xviii.

climate and the enemy were entirely different from what they had prepared for. In this locale, their equipment functioned less than optimally, their force structure was clearly inappropriate and their tactics were obviously wrong.

The Soviets soon discovered that Afghanistan was not going to be a repeat of their Czechoslovakian experience. Their force commitment, initially assessed as requiring several months, was to last over nine years and require increasing numbers of Soviet forces. It proved a bloody experience in which the Soviet Union reportedly killed 1.3 million people and forced five and a half million Afghans (a third of the prewar population) to leave the country as refugees. Another two million Afghans were forced to migrate within the country. The countryside is ravaged and littered with mines.

As in Vietnam, tactics needed a major overhaul to meet the changed circumstances. Units which adapted enjoyed relative success while units which did not paid a price in blood.<sup>25</sup>

These lessons learned are not peculiarly Russian. Many of the mistakes and successes fit equally well with the experiences of an American army in the jungles and mountains of Vietnam and should apply equally well in future conflicts involving civil war, guerrilla forces and rough terrain.

This then is not a history of the Afghanistan war. Rather it is a series of snapshots of combat as witnessed by young platoon leaders, company commanders, battalion commanders, tactical staff officers and advisers to the Afghan government forces. It is not a book about right or wrong. Rather, it is a book about survival and adaptation as young men come to terms with a harsh, boring and brutal existence punctuated by times of heady excitement and terror.<sup>26</sup>

Still, these vignettes are an absolute gold mine for any tactician. They are an intimate look at a battlefield where a modern, mechanized army tried to defeat a guerrilla force on rugged terrain in the middle of a civil war. Despite their best efforts, they were unable to achieve decisive military victory and their politicians finally ordered them home. Other armies would do well to study their efforts.<sup>27</sup>

Battalion and regimental-level combat was fought primarily in the mountains against separate detachments of *mujahideen* [insurgents]. The war was fought under conditions where the enemy lacked any aviation capabilities, but had modern air defense systems and modern mines. A lack of front lines and advances along varied axes (which were not mutually

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, xx.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, xxi.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, xxiii.

supporting) characterized the decisive actions of the opposing sides as they attempted to seize the initiative and gain control over certain territories.

The Soviet forces encountered several unique combat characteristics which necessitated that they adopt more effective methods for combating guerrilla forces of *mujahideen*. Combat experience disclosed that the principal types of combat included: company, battalion and regimental raids; blocking off areas where the enemy was located prior to searching out and destroying guerrilla forces; and the simultaneous attack on several groups of the enemy located at various depths and locations. The specific combat conditions influenced the way in which the advance through mountains and inhabited areas was conducted; led to a change in air assault tactics; changed the methods of conducting marches and providing convoy security; and caused a change in the tactics of organizing and conducting ambushes.<sup>28</sup>

Research on the combat experience acquired by the Soviet forces in Afghanistan showed that one of the fundamental methods for fulfilling combat missions was to block off a region in which guerrilla forces were located and then to thoroughly comb the region to find and destroy the *mujahideen*. Successful accomplishment of this task required thorough preparation of personnel and weapons for combat; skillful coordination between the blocking and combing forces, their *bronegruppa*, artillery and aviation; the application of military cunning and the application of reasoned initiatives; and the brave and decisive actions of the commander and personnel. Excellent results were achieved by suddenly blocking-off those regions which had been the site of military activity several days prior.<sup>29</sup>

However, firepower is not an absolute substitute for maneuver and close combat. During the war in Afghanistan, like the United States in Vietnam, the Soviets chose to expend massive firepower in order to save Soviet lives and to compensate for their lack of infantry. It was an expensive, indiscriminate and, probably, ineffective practice. Unlike World War II, the Soviet Army in Afghanistan does not push on despite heavy casualties. They transition to the defense after moderate casualties and call for fire support.<sup>30</sup>

Unlike the U.S. Special Forces and the British SAS, SPETSNAZ were mounted on personnel carriers in Afghanistan, but when they were airdropped, the carriers functioned as a *bronegruppa*. This provided more flexibility in the employment of these rugged soldiers and gave them much more maneuverability.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, xxvii.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 59.

The Soviets adopted bounding overwatch in this vignette and apparently throughout the Afghanistan War. Bounding overwatch was not in the European battle book since it slowed down movement tempo. However, bounding overwatch is essential when moving over rough terrain or when your enemy is not totally occupied with your artillery and air strikes.

The Soviets did not commit sufficient force to win the war. They committed forces to bolster the Marxist-Leninist government of Afghanistan and hoped that they could buy enough time for the Afghan government to build up its own forces to fight its own war. This is not to say that the Soviets did not try to win the war militarily. The Soviets controlled the country and were able to effectively intervene at any point in Afghanistan at any time they desired. However, such intervention was effective only as long as they remained in the area. They could not conquer the country.

Why did the Soviets fail to achieve military victory in Afghanistan? First, they were unable to seal the border with Pakistan and Iran to prevent the *mujahideen* resupply of their forces.

Second, they were unable to bring enough force into the country due to public opinion (particularly in the third world) and their inability to provide the logistic support necessary with a larger force.

Third, Afghanistan is a country of strong beliefs and traditions and the population opposed the Soviets and the hostile communist ideology of the government of Afghanistan. The communist ideology directly attacked the ethnic structure, community structure and religious beliefs of the people and the people violently rejected this ideology.

Fourth, the Soviets had little respect for the people of Afghanistan. They used the Afghan Peoples Army, Sarandoy, the Khad and the local militias ("Defenders of the Revolution") as cannon fodder. These demoralized and inefficient forces regained some of their lost respectability only when the Soviets left. Further, the Soviets conducted indiscriminate air and artillery attacks against the rural population in order to force them out of the countryside in order to dry up the *mujahideen* supply lines.

Finally, the Soviets were reluctant to accept the casualties necessary for such a victory and tried to substitute fire power for infantry close combat. What is equally apparent from the book is that the Soviet Union failed to maintain adequate personnel strength within its units.

Apparently, units need to be filled well in excess of 100% in some regions of the world if one hopes to field a reasonable fighting force.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 74-76.

Guerrilla warfare is a platoon leader's and company commander's war. Lower level initiative is essential for survival and success. Success in guerrilla war is hard to define and body count is certainly a poor criteria. However, example after example shows blocks, sweeps and raids into areas supposedly containing hundreds of guerrillas. At the end of a battle or operation, the *mujahideen* casualties are in the dozens and the action is termed a success because the guerrilla force has been smashed. From Vietnam experience, a guerrilla force is very difficult to destroy. After very rough handling, the majority of them seem to bounce back. It seems that what the Soviets were normally engaging were the rear guards and the slow or uninformed guerrillas.<sup>33</sup>

Soviet air assault tactics and techniques evolved rapidly in Afghanistan. The Soviets relied on helicopter maneuver to replace the mobility that they were unable to realize from their tanks and armored personnel carriers on Afghanistan's rugged terrain. Armored vehicles were restricted to the roads and valley floors.

Soviet infantry were uninspired conscripts who were generally reluctant to close with the dedicated and motivated *mujahideen*. The Soviet advantage was found in the skies. The Soviet helicopter gunship was a very significant system in the war. The Soviet military would have liked to employ far more helicopters in Afghanistan; however, the lack of maintenance facilities, the increased logistics demand and the lack of secure operating bases prevented this. The Soviets were unwilling (or unable) to make a larger logistic and psychological commitment to the war.<sup>34</sup>

The *mujahideen* learned to take out command vehicles early in the battle. Command vehicles were always distinguished by extra antennae and convoy commanders usually rode in the first vehicle of the main column. Consequently, when the commander's vehicle was hit, communications were usually lost and the commander, if he survived, could not control the fight. The Soviets used radio almost exclusively to control the battle. Although the *mujahideen* had little jamming capability, once they knocked out the Soviet vehicles with the multiple antennae, they usually had disrupted the tactical control net.<sup>35</sup>

The Soviet ground invasion force crossed into the country, fought battles with pockets of Afghan military resistance and occupied the main cities while the Soviet government installed their Afghan puppet regime. The Soviets expected the resistance to end here. It did not. The rationalizing that pervades the West did not hold in the mountains of Afghanistan. The

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 139.

Afghans' values, faith and love of freedom enabled them to hold out against a superpower, although they suffered tremendous casualties in doing so.

### **How did the Soviets get it so wrong?**

The Soviet Army that marched into Afghanistan was trained to fight within the context of a theater war against a modern enemy who would obligingly occupy defensive positions stretching across the northern European plain. The Soviet Army planned to contend with this defensive belt by physically obliterating hectares of defensive positions through the weight of massed artillery fires and then driving through the subsequent gap to strike deep and pursue the shattered foe. Soviet tactics and equipment were designed solely to operate within the context of this massive strategic operation. Future war was seen as a lethal, high tempo event where forces and firepower were carefully choreographed. Consequently, Soviet tactics were simple. They were designed to be implemented rapidly by conscripts and reservists and to not get in the way of the unfolding operation.

Spacing between vehicles and the ability to dismount a personnel carrier, form a squad line and provide suppressive small-arms fire were prized components of motorized rifle tactics. Tactical initiative was not encouraged as it tended to upset operational timing.

The *mujahideen* did not accommodate the Soviet Army by fighting a northern-European-plain war. They refused to dig in and wait for Soviet artillery. The Soviets found that massed artillery and simple battle drills had little effect on the elusive guerrillas. Tactics had to be reworked on site.

The most tactical innovation was seen among the airborne, air assault and SPETSNAZ forces and the two separate motorized rifle brigades. These forces did the best in the counterinsurgency battle. Far less innovation was apparent among the motorized rifle regiments. Tanks were of limited value in this war, but helicopters were a tremendous asset. Engineers were always in demand. The Afghanistan War forced the 40th Army to change tactics, equipment, training and force structure. However, despite these changes, the Soviet Army never had enough forces in Afghanistan to win.

From the entire book, it is apparent that Soviet forces were spread very thin. Often, they could not assemble a single regiment for combat and had to cobble together forces from various units to create a make-shift unit. Base-camp, airfield, city and LOC security tied up most of the motorized rifle forces. KGB border troops were also stationed in Afghanistan in a security role.

This book shows that the Soviet Union failed to maintain adequate personnel strength in its line units. Regiments were often at single battalion strength, battalions at single company strength and companies at single platoon strength. First priority on personnel replacement always went to filling the driver, gunner and vehicle commander slots for the unit combat

vehicles. This left few personnel to dismount and fight the resistance. There was also an evident dislike of close combat and a preference to use massive amounts of fire power instead.

The unit field strengths remained appallingly low. The Soviets learned, like the Americans learned in Vietnam, that units need to be filled well in excess of 100% (in some regions of the world) if one hopes to field and maintain a reasonable fighting force. The 40th Army was chronically short of resources to carry out its mission and was an embarrassing reminder to its political masters of their political hubris and miscalculations which pushed this army into the inhospitable mountains of Afghanistan.

Once the Soviet Armed Forces were in Afghanistan, it was very difficult to get out. The political-military climate and the subsequent decisions belong in another book. What remains is to examine tactical-level change in the Soviet Ground Forces in Afghanistan.

### **Tactics**

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

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

Air assault tactics and helicopter gunship tactics changed and improved steadily throughout the war. However, the Soviet Army never brought in enough helicopters and air assault forces to perform all the necessary 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. Air assault forces were often quite effective when used in support of a mechanized ground attack.

Heliborne detachments would land deep in the rear and flanks of *mujahideen* strongholds to isolate them, destroy bases, cut LOCs and block routes of withdrawal. The ground force would advance to link up with the heliborne forces. Usually, the heliborne force would not go deeper than supporting artillery range or would take its own artillery with it. However, as the book demonstrates, the Soviets would sometimes insert heliborne troops beyond the range of supporting artillery and harvested the consequences.

And, although the combination of heliborne and mechanized forces worked well at the battalion and brigade level, the Soviet preference for large scale operations often got in the way of tactical efficiency. Ten, large, conventional offensives involving heliborne and mechanized forces swept the Pandshir Valley with no lasting result.

Enveloping detachments were used frequently in Afghanistan. Battalion or company-sized forces were split off from the main body and sent on a separate route to the flank or rear of the *mujahideen* to support the advance of the main body, perform a separate mission, prevent the withdrawal of *mujahideen* forces, or to conduct a simultaneous attack from one or more unexpected directions.

If the enveloping detachment was dismounted, it was usually composed of airborne, air assault or reconnaissance forces. If the enveloping detachment was mounted, it was frequently just the unit's *bronegruppa*. In general, ground reconnaissance personnel were better trained and better quality soldiers than the average motorized rifle soldier. But, they appear to be used for more active combat than reconnaissance duties.

The Soviets relied primarily on aerial reconnaissance, radio intercept, and agent reconnaissance for their intelligence production. Quite often, these reconnaissance sources failed to produce usable tactical intelligence. However, since the ground forces were always critically short of combat elements, reconnaissance forces were used for active combat. Consequently, the Soviets often failed to find the *mujahideen* unless the *mujahideen* wanted them to.

Force structure: The Soviets experimented with several force structures during the Afghanistan war. They constituted self-sustaining separate motorized rifle brigades and separate motorized rifle battalions for independent actions. They formed mountain rifle battalions. They experimented with combined arms battalions and motorized rifle companies with four line platoons. All of this was done to come up with an optimum troop mix for counterinsurgency and independent actions. Materiel support brigades and battalions were formed to provide more effective support to the combat units. Airborne, air assault and SPETSNAZ forces were refitted with roomier BTKs and BMPs instead of their BMDs.

Forces were up-gunned with extra machine guns, AGS-17 and mortars. The Soviets used these new formations as a test bed and the post-Afghanistan force structure for the Russian Army currently envisions a mix of corps and brigades for maneuver war and non-linear combat and divisions and regiments for conventional, ground-gaining combat.

And in the end, the soldier and officer returned to a changing Soviet Union. Many were unable to fit back into this staid, bland society. Many of the officers asked to go back to Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan lasted almost 10 years and inflicted heavy casualties on all sides. The effects of the war will last for decades. The tactical lessons that the Soviets learned are not uniquely Soviet, but equally apply to other nations' forces caught in the middle of a civil war on inhospitable terrain.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 201-208.

## 5. Extracts from: *The Other Side of the Mountain*

Yet, technological superiority is not in and of itself a guarantee of success. Insight into our adversary's capabilities, tactics and motivation will provide the decisive edge.<sup>37</sup>

The Qawm [tribe], not Afghanistan, is the basic unit of social community and, outside the family, the most important focus on individual loyalty. Historically, the collapse of the central government of Afghanistan or the destruction of its standing armies has never resulted in the defeat of the nation by an invader. The people, relying on their decentralized political, economic, and military potential, have always taken over the resistance against the invaders. This was the case during two wars with Great Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, (1839-1842, 1878-1880). This happened again in the Soviet-Afghan War.<sup>38</sup>

The strategic struggle for Afghanistan was a fight to strangle the other's logistics. The Mujahideen targeted the Soviet lines of communication – the crucial road network over which the Soviet supplies had to travel.<sup>39</sup>

It is not ideal terrain for a mechanized force dependent on fire power, secure lines of communication and high-technology. It is terrain where the mountain warrior, using ambush sites inherited from his ancestors, can inflict "death from a thousand cuts".<sup>40</sup>

The Mujahideen did vary ambush positions in the same ambush site. Their primary concern was to hit the column where it was the weakest - usually in the middle or rear - unless the purpose was to bottle up the column. In most ambushes, a small number of highly-mobile Mujahideen were able to move and attack with little logistic support, but were unable to conduct a sustained fight. The RPG-7 was probably the most effective weapon of the Mujahideen. When used at close quarters, and with the element of surprise, it was devastating.<sup>41</sup>

The Mujahideen were quick to key on Soviet and DRA (Democratic Republic of Afghanistan) tactical patterns and procedures and came to rely on them.

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<sup>37</sup> Lester W. Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain, Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War*, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, KS, vii.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, xiv.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, xix.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, xx.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 12.

Deciding where to ambush a long convoy is usually driven by geography, intent and escape routes. If the terrain at the ambush site is very constricted, the guerrilla may want to attack the head of the convoy and block the route with a combination of a road block and burning vehicles.

Security of the lines of communication was a constant challenge facing the Soviet forces in Afghanistan. Security of the lines of communication determined the amount of forces which the Soviet could deploy in Afghanistan and also determined the scale and frequency of offensive combat directed against the Afghan resistance forces.<sup>42</sup>

The Soviet surrendered the initiative in movement control to the Mujahideen and never regained it. Consequently most of the Soviet actions in the area were reactive. In a guerrilla war, the loss of the initiative becomes decisive in the outcome of the tactical combat.

What mostly contributed to Mujahideen success in inflicting heavy losses on the enemy was their elaborate planning, secrecy in movement and coordinated action. This became possible through detailed information about the enemy including the size, direction of movement and estimated time of arrival of the enemy convoy to ambush site.

The decentralized nature of the resistance, factionalism and lack of unified command were both a Mujahideen strength and weakness.<sup>43</sup>

First of all Mujahideen groups generally operated on their home turf. Acting outside their home turf could have unfavorable political and support ramifications. Secondly, the Mujahideen wanted to harass their enemy as close to the capital as possible for political and propaganda reasons. Attacks at the gates of Kabul were more significant than attacks further out.<sup>44</sup>

The Soviet soldiers customarily rode on top of their APCs since it is safer if the APC hit a mine. A powerful anti-tank mine blast might merely hurl the soldiers off the APC whereas it would almost certainly kill everyone inside. Furthermore, the inside of an APC is crowded, is hard to see out of and, in August, is unbearably warm.<sup>45</sup>

The Soviets had a set a pattern of behavior which enabled the Mujahideen ambushes. They used the same roads and paths regularly. Their [Soviet combat troops] behavior toward the villagers made the villagers willing accomplices in setting the ambushes and hiding the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 37.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 51.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 53.

Mujahideen and their weapons. The DRA had traveling propaganda/civil affairs teams which provided entertainment, medical treatment and pro-regime propaganda throughout Afghanistan. Their actions, however, did not offset the effects of poor behavior by Soviet combat forces.<sup>46</sup>

The Mujahideen conducted ambushes for harassment or for spoils. Often, harassing ambushes were small-scale ambushes which would only fire a few rounds into the convoy to destroy or damage some vehicles. Then the ambushers would withdraw without attempting to loot the column before the convoy commander could react. Ambushes conducted for spoils (weapons, ammunition, food, clothing and other military supplies) were normally conducted by larger forces who could maintain their positions for up to an hour. Still, the ambush was a short-term action designed to capitalize on surprise and terrain.<sup>47</sup>

Although the popular concept of the Mujahideen combatant is a hardened warrior clutching a Kalashnikov assault rifle, the most important Mujahideen weapon in the conflict was the RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launcher. The Soviet –manufacture, short-range weapon allowed the Mujahideen to knock out tanks, trucks and, occasionally, helicopters. The RPG was a great equalizer and a great weapon in an ambush. Although the Mujahideen were light infantry, heavier crew served weapons gave them more staying power in a fight. Mortars, rocket, recoilless rifles and heavy machine guns were essential to the force that intended to hold its ground for a time against mechanized Soviet and DRA forces.<sup>48</sup>

The war was a contest by both sides to control the other's logistics. The Soviet lines of communication (LOC) were a double lane highway network which wound through the Hindu Kush Mountains – some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth. The Soviet presence depended on its ability to keep the roads open. Much of the Soviet combat in Afghanistan was a fight for control of the road network. The resistance destroyed over 11,000 Soviet trucks. The DRA truck losses were reportedly higher. The Mujahideen ability to interdict the LOC was a constant concern to the Soviet and prevented them from maintaining a larger occupation force in Afghanistan.<sup>49</sup>

The Mujahideen learned to counter air assaults with thorough planning, immediate action drills, an early warning system and air defense ambushes. They learned to mine LZs, employ massed RPG fires against hovering or landing helicopters, and to try and overrun a LZ

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 148.

before the air assault forces had an opportunity to get organized and oriented. They also learned to “hug” soviet forces so that helicopter gunships could not fire at them.

One of the more successful Mujahideen air defense ambushes involved digging in heavy machine guns into caves in canyon walls. When the Soviet/DRA helicopters flew down the canyon, the machine guns would fire across the canyon filling the air with bullets. The helicopters could not attack the machine guns and were hard pressed to avoid the bullets.<sup>50</sup>

When asked what made him [Mujahideen] successful Commander Baloch said, “We intended to fight to the last man and they didn’t.”<sup>51</sup>

“Our ambulance was two sticks and a piece of cloth. Theirs was a helicopter. The secret of our success was that it was a popular cause. Everybody knew we were hurting the occupiers. This was not a war but an uprising. Therefore it was not guerrilla war.”<sup>52</sup>

The Mujahideen were quick to pursue a retreating enemy. Unless a force has established a strong, cohesive rear guard, it is disorganized during withdrawal and unable to concentrate combat power. This instant transition to pursuit was characteristic of the Afghans when fighting the British earlier this century and last.<sup>53</sup>

Guerrilla warfare is no different from conventional warfare in that a reserve can drastically change the situation through quick and effective commitment before the opponent consolidates this tactical success.<sup>54</sup>

The Mujahideen safe-havens in Pakistan and Iran were absolutely essential for the survival of their force. Pakistan was particularly important since most the external aid came through Pakistan. These safe havens allowed the Mujahideen a place to shelter their families, resupply, treat their wounded, train, sell war booty to support their families, rest and exchange tactical information and intelligence.

The Mujahideen became very adept at field fortifications and developed and developed shelters which protected them from intense air and artillery attack.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 287.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid 299.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 300.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 316.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 330.

Soviet assaults on Mujahideen defenses were initially hampered by their reluctance to fight at night, their over-reliance on firepower at the expense of maneuver, and their reluctance to operate far from their armored vehicles. As the war progressed, the Soviets developed better light infantry, began conducting more night combat and more skillfully employed air assault and ground combat tactical elements together. Still, throughout the war, the Soviets were hampered by lack of sufficient infantry forces.<sup>55</sup>

The Mujahideen urban warfare tactics were low-level and fairly unsophisticated. Their actions were usually limited to a single strike followed by an immediate withdrawal to avoid decisive engagement with a better-armed and supported regular force. Survival dictated the tactics, but the impact on the war effort was political and psychological rather than military. The work and risk that the urban guerillas accepted was great and the results were often minimal or not immediately evident.<sup>56</sup>

The urban guerrilla attacks the credibility of the government by chipping away at morale, attacking notable government targets and disrupting the daily life of the populace.<sup>57</sup>

The Mujahideen understood that guerrilla war is a contest of endurance and national will. Battlefield victory is almost irrelevant, provided that the guerrilla survives to fight the next of a thousand battles before passing the torch to his children. The Mujahideen did not necessarily expect to win this war but fought because it was the right thing to do – it was a religious and national obligation. They accepted an asymmetry of casualties which eventually, but unexpectedly, led to the Soviet withdrawal.<sup>58</sup>

In many respects, the tactics of the Anglo-afghan Wars (1839, 1852, 1878-1880, 1919) still applied. Technology has added range and accuracy, but the terrain still dictates tactics and the Mujahideen were quite comfortable applying their time-honored tactics against a modern foe. Much more innovation was required from the Soviet forces. Two modern systems, the helicopter and the antipersonnel mine, created severe tactical problems which were outside the Mujahideen historical experience. Tactical innovation occurs only where tactical innovation is required and the Mujahideen eventually found ways to work around the problem technology. Where innovation was not required, the Mujahideen stayed with the tried and true. Thus the basic Mujahideen ambush and pursuit were little changed from last century whereas their

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 340.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 381.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 386.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 399.

actions against an air assault or a fortified security post were quickly developed out of necessity.<sup>59</sup>

Technology can provide advantages but it is not decisive in this type of war. Soviet smart bombs had a decided impact when an appropriate target set could be identified. U.S. supplied, shoulder fired Stinger air defense missiles, in the hands of the Mujahideen, created a great deal of consternation and led to a dramatic change in Soviet air tactics. Neither system, however, was a war winner. The Soviet equipment was designed for a different war on different terrain. It failed to function optimally in the mountains and deserts of Afghanistan. The Kalashnikov assault rifle was not always better than the World War I designed British bolt action Enfield rifle. The Enfield shot further accurately and would penetrate flak jackets designed to stop Kalashnikov bullets.

The RPG-7 antitank grenade launcher was the Mujahideen weapon of choice. It is a light weight technology killer that destroys tanks, armored personnel carriers, trucks and helicopters. The Soviets and DRA tried to stay at least 300 meters away from the Mujahideen – out of Kalashnikov and RPG-7 range. This tactical timidity led to Mujahideen acquisition of crew served weapons. Over time, heavy machine guns, recoilless rifles, mortars and portable multiple rocket launcher systems became an essential part of the Mujahideen arsenal which the Mujahideen used to pin their enemy in place in order to get close enough to use their Kalashnikovs and RPGs. Crew served weapons also limited guerrilla mobility.

Soviet high performance jet fighters and bombers played a significant strategic role, but not a tactically significant one. The Soviets used their air forces to devastate the countryside and force the populace to leave in order to deny food to the Mujahideen. However, the Mujahideen seldom presented a target set that the Soviet air force or artillery could fully exploit to influence the tactical fight.

On the tactical level the Mujahideen were prepared for a long war. Their goal was to hit, survive and fight again.<sup>60</sup>

Guerrilla warfare demands quantities of quality light infantry on both sides. The Soviets never fielded enough. The Mujahideen were natural light infantry. They were hardy, tough, courageous and local. They had high morale, the warrior spirit and excellent tactical intelligence. They were naturals at ambush and pursuit. They were raised from childhood with weapons, but they lacked unit training and discipline.

The Mujahideen had warrior spirit and their focus was on battle, not easy LOC targets. They wanted noise, excitement, personal glory and the spoils of war.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 399.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 400.

Although disinclined to dig in the hard, rocky soil of Afghanistan, the Mujahideen soon learned the value of field fortifications against Soviet artillery, armored vehicles and airstrikes. Field fortifications came to play a dominant role in the war as the Mujahideen learned to build sturdy, redundant, camouflaged bunkers and fighting positions which ensured their survivability.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 404.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 406.

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