

From 1980 to early 1989, the once-invincible Red Army became entrapped in Afghanistan. To avoid the same pitfalls, the U.S. need only keep from straying from its original military objectives.

by **Lester W. Grau and Ali Ahmad Jalali**

The Soviet-Afghan War: Breaking the Hammer & Sickle

One does not want to commit mistakes that have been committed by other people in the past,” Gen. Tommy Franks, commander of the Afghan campaign, recently remarked in a thinly veiled reference to the Kremlin’s military venture there. Indeed, there is much to learn from Moscow’s mistakes.

In 1979, the prestige of the Soviet Union was never higher. Countries were voluntarily joining the Communist camp while the United States suffered one setback after another.

Yet in late December, the Soviet Union slipped badly when it sent troops into Afghanistan to prop up its failing Communist regime. This ignited a bloody guerrilla war and started the Soviet Union in a tailspin that finally ended with its collapse.

WALKING INTO THE AFGHAN BEAR PIT

The Soviet Union borders on northern Afghanistan. Moreover, Soviet political, agricultural and industrial advisers lived and worked with the Afghans. Soviet military advisers served with the military of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA).

A Soviet Special Forces (*Spetsnaz*) battalion wearing Afghan uniforms was part of the presidential palace guard. And a Soviet aviation squadron flew aircraft with Afghan tail markings from Afghanistan’s Bagram airfield.

Not satisfied with these ties, the Soviets tried to direct Afghanistan’s politics. This was not easy since the Afghan Communist Party was split between two brawling factions. Those factions fought while Communist reforms were ignored.

Consequently, the Afghan president requested that a three-division Soviet force enter his country and help defeat *Mujahideen* [holy warrior] resistance forces in the countryside. The Kremlin agreed. The chief planning officer from the Afghan General Staff met with Soviet commanders to assist their entry.

Soviet forces invaded the country, occupied the key cities and airfields, killed the president, overthrew his government and put their own president and regime in place. They then claimed that the overthrow was an internal Afghan affair.

The plan: prop up the new government and garrison the cities and airfields, while the DRA fought the rural guerrillas. The Soviets hoped to stabilize the country and to withdraw most of their troops within two to three years.

Within two months, however, it was clear that Soviet forces would have to do most of the fighting. It also was obvious that three divisions were not enough.

So the Kremlin quickly sent another Soviet division into Afghanistan. Soon, the Soviet force was the size of five and two-thirds divisions. This was the largest force that Soviet logistics could support over Afghanistan’s vulnerable road system.

Yet it was never able to control more than 15% of Texas-sized Afghanistan. In fact, 85% of the Soviet force was tied down in security missions—guarding cities, garrisons, airfields and lines of communication or providing convoy escort. The Red Army was locked into someone else’s civil war on some of the most rugged terrain on the planet.

USING A ‘GRIZZLY BEAR TO FIGHT MOSQUITOES’

Despite modern equipment, air domi-

nance and overwhelming firepower, the Soviet superpower did not defeat the guerrilla resistance. The Soviets had trained and equipped for the wrong war. Afghanistan was not Europe nor China. Large, sweeping operations covered a lot of territory but found few of the enemy.

This was “like using a grizzly bear to fight mosquitoes,” Yevgeny Khrushchev, deputy chairman for international affairs at Russia’s Afghan Veterans Union, told *Newsweek*.

Guerrillas were elusive, and tanks, artillery and aircraft found few targets. Infantry tactics were tied to armored personnel carriers that could not climb Afghanistan’s mountains. Soldiers’ boots, web gear, clothing and weapons were not up to the rugged terrain.

Typically, one-fourth to one-third of a unit’s members might be sick with hepatitis, typhus, malaria, amoebic dysentery and/or cholera.

The Soviets needed lots of quality light infantry and engineers. But there were never enough. Battles were seldom large and the normal daily casualty count was small—still, it added up. The Soviet force was dying the “death of a thousand cuts.”

While bigger battles may have resulted in more casualties, one of the most catastrophic fights occurred in February 1985. The “Black Stork” *Mujahideen* surrounded a *Spetsnaz* company near Asadabad. Of the 28 elite troops, only two survived.

It was not a popular war back home, either. Draft dodging was common. As former *Spetsnaz* trainer Pavel Tsatsouline recalled in *USA Today*, “We didn’t have a cause to fight for except avenging our dead comrades in arms.”

Mujahideen guerrillas, though, enjoyed popular support and were fed and shel-

tered by rural villagers. The Soviets decided to cut off this support by forcing the people from the countryside. The Red Air Force bombed farms, irrigation systems and orchards. It dropped mines on fields and pastures, and machine-gunned livestock.

Of Afghanistan's 17 million people, some 5.5 million fled to refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. Another 2 million fled to shantytowns crowded around Afghanistan's cities. Without the villagers, the guerrillas now had to carry their own food as they moved into battle.

'POWER OF FAITH'

The *Mujahideen* were defending their country against an atheistic ideology, an oppressive government and a foreign invader. As *Mujahideen* Commander Gulzarak Zadran stated: "We were a very desperate people without much equipment or armaments, but we had the power of our faith, love for our homeland, love of freedom and reliance on the Almighty."

The United States, Britain, France, Saudi Arabia, China, the United Arab Emirates and other Western and Islamic nations provided aid to the *Mujahideen*. Military aid was distributed by Pakistan's intelligence service, along with military training to the guerrillas.

The guerrillas were particularly effective in close combat. They hit Soviet forces where and when their AK-47 assault rifles and RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launchers were deadliest. Meanwhile, the Soviets could not use their artillery fire and air strikes closer than 300 meters to their own troops. So they tried to keep the *Mujahideen* at a distance by bulldozing roadsides and knocking down neighborhoods.

When *Mujahideen* were kept from close battle, they simply introduced heavy weapons. Mortars, heavy machine guns, rocket launchers and recoilless rifles added range and punch. But this restricted guerrilla mobility and created logistics difficulties.

Then they built supply bases and supply points to support their needs. The Soviets concentrated on destroying guerrilla lifelines while the guerrillas kept attacking Soviet truck convoys.

The war became a logistics fight where each side tried to cut off the other's supplies. Tough Soviet *Spetsnaz* became particularly adept at their primary mission—ambushing *Mujahideen* supply convoys.

Soviet minefields and plastic anti-personnel landmines dropped from aircraft became a major problem for the *Mujahideen*. Helicopter gunships were another obstacle until U.S.-supplied Stinger missiles forced the Soviets to keep their helicopters back over friendly forces.

In the end, Afghanistan showed that a guerrilla war is not a war of technology versus peasantry. Rather, it is a contest of endurance and national will. Victory is determined by morale, obstinacy and survival.

'NESTS ALL OVER THE WORLD'

By late 1985, the Soviets realized that they were not going to win the war. They negotiated a settlement and completed their withdrawal in February 1989. Afghanistan was, by then, devastated. At least 1.3 million Afghans were killed. The country has never recovered.

About 620,000 Soviets served in Afghanistan, with officers doing a two-year tour and enlisted men putting in 18 months.

Official Soviet casualties total 14,453 dead: 9,511 killed in action; 2,386 died of wounds; and 2,556 lost from disease and accidents.

Some 53,753 were wounded. An incredible 415,932 men were hospitalized for a serious disease during their tour of duty.

Soviet combat equipment losses included 118 aircraft, 333 helicopters, 147 tanks, 1,314 armored personnel carriers, 433 artillery pieces and 11,369 cargo and fuel tanker trucks.

In the aftermath, 10,751 Soviets were invalidated because of the war. Afghan veterans groups help them out, with about 29% of the war's veterans belonging to such an organization. Afghan veterans groups are particularly active in politics and in working with Russia's youth.

Now, a new generation of Afghanistan veterans of a different nationality is being forged. U.S. armed forces are on Afghan-

istan's soil with a far different mission and under varied circumstances. Still, the U.S. must deal with security, hunger, disease and ignorance, as well as the legacy of the bloody Soviet-Afghan War.

Russian veteran Timothy Gusinov supports the U.S. effort. "Remember, the success of your mission...will stop the spread of terrorism in the world," he wrote in the *Washington Times*. "It is an honorable mission."

These same sentiments—and a warning—were shared by Viktor Kot, former commander of the Soviet Air Force, in a *Washington Times* interview: "If the U.S. does not finish the Taliban whatever it costs, Taliban leaders and militants will become like a disturbed nest of bees that will fly out of Afghanistan and create their nests all over the world. This won't eliminate terrorism, but just spread it around the globe." ☪

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