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Soviet and Afghan War

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The geography of Afghanistan was a major contributing factor to the Soviet Union's defeat in the war. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on Christmas Eve, 1979 following the coup of Afghan president Noor Mohammed Taraki, a pro-Soviet Communist leader.

Unbeknownst to the Soviet military leaders and frontline troops, the climate and terrain would play a pivotal role in the Soviets inability to achieve their military objectives, thus leading to their defeated withdrawal.

The Soviet Union did not expect the level of resistance they encountered from the Mujahideen, nor did they expect the difficulty of executing large scale operations in the geography of Afghanistan. The rugged terrain of Afghanistan proved to be as formidable a foe as the Mujahideen. For starters, it is mountainous and jagged and to some degree impassable at times. It is also fragmented with regional warlords and tribal chiefs exerting more power and influence than the central government. The huge mountain ranges separated and isolated tribal communities from the cities which made the people within the tribes aligned more with their respective leaders than with the central Afghan government. Ironically, the one thing that united all Afghans to a common cause was an invasion of their country by a foreign entity. Although the Afghan central government had an army, it was seldom strong enough to repel an external invasion. The true combat power and defenders of Afghanistan lied with the tribal leaders and warriors throughout the remote areas of the country. Though the Soviets had the support of the central government and the Afghan army during the initial stages of the war, they failed to achieve security of the entire country because of the resistance from tribal leaders and warlords that reign supreme in the rural areas and high ground.

Soviet military doctrine of applying combat operations was practically useless due to the extremely difficult geographic conditions in Afghanistan. The mountains clearly made

movement of large units very difficult and dangerous for the Soviet military which had been geared entirely for combat operations on the European continent, primarily Germany. Prior to the invasion, Soviet military planners estimated that they would need 3-5 divisions to invade, conquer, and control Afghanistan (Grau, 2004). It soon became clear that this was a miscalculation. The geography of Afghanistan forced the Soviets to bring in an additional two divisions to try and stabilize the country. To add to their failures, Soviet military leaders were very slow at changing their conventional tactics even as they realized how the terrain was negatively impacting their maneuvers. It wasn't just the mountains, but the entire geography of Afghanistan that played a role in the Soviets inability to operate effectively. The vast trackless deserts and massive rivers were terrain in which the Soviets were not initially equipped to operate in. The road networks in Afghanistan were limited to the major cities around the capital. They were also very old and not well maintained. Because of the terrible road conditions, military operations to include logistical resupply were a challenge for even a superpower.

The Soviets had planned to use theater logistic support out of the Soviet districts, however, this planned failed at the Afghan border (Girardet, 1985). Even the Soviet motor transport columns had severe problems traveling throughout the country. As noted earlier, the roads in Afghanistan were very poor and ran across some of the most treacherous mountain-desert terrain on earth. Consequently, alternate routes in most circumstances were simply not available. This prevented the Soviets from establishing dedicated routes altogether. To add to their problems, these same limited routes were being used not only for military troop movements and logistical convoys, but also for the civilian motor transports that was so critical in supporting and sustaining the Afghanistan economy. Beside the poor road network, lack of rail was another obstacle the Soviets did not overcome. Throughout the 20th century, railroad had been

the primary means of transporting massive amounts of troops and equipment during war. This was not the case in this conflict. The railroads in Afghanistan were limited, consisting of only 24 kilometers of rail, which were split into two unconnected segments and provided little to no strategic advantage to the Soviet forces. Ironically, these were railroads built by the Soviet Union during a past invasion.

One of the tactics the Soviets used to overcome the challenges of the terrain was to destroy it. They did this by indiscriminately destroying many villages and mountainsides with artillery fire and air sorties. These tactics caused unnecessary death and destruction while failing to root-out the Mujahideen guerrillas. The Mujahideen just simply disappeared into hide-a-ways throughout the rugged hills leaving the Soviets frustrated and depriving them of any meaningful targets. The local populace that the Soviet displaced became extremely anti-Soviet and began to provide more support to the Mujahideen insurgency. It was obvious the Soviets had superior military equipment than the Mujahideen. However, the unfamiliar and rugged Afghan terrain made use of armor and tanks very limited. The terrain also affected how the Soviets executed air operations. Take the Mi-24 Hind helicopter. It was the workhorse for the Soviets during their initial invasion and early years of the war. It was considered an extremely lethal weapon, with thick armor underneath its belly. It was thought that downing one of these flying tanks using small arm fire would be impossible. To the contrary, the Mujahideen became very successful in downing the Hind helicopter. They fired down on it from positions high in the mountains hitting the helicopter's weak points which caused it to land or crash. Though fixed wing aircraft fared better with fewer losses, they too had to employ new tactics by flying higher above the mountains, making them less effective. At the end-of-the-day, the air campaign failed to immobilize the Mujahideen. It became apparently clear to the Soviets that air dominance in this

war was of little relevance unless it could be employed on precise targets. The mountains and elusiveness of the Mujahideen made for very few targets.

Another factor the Soviets failed to adapt to was the seasonal fighting by the Mujahideen. Snowfall closes the mountain passes around November. The people are forced from the mountains down into the valley to wait out the winter and very little fighting occurs, except in the lower regions. Once the snow begins to melt around March and April, fighting resumes. May through June is when the highest level of combat activity exists, while the heat in July and August causes the pace of combat to slow. In addition, the heat and dust of summer created maintenance and visibility problems for the Soviets that in many locations constrained road movement. The months of September and October were again excellent months for combat. The Mujahideen were good at dictating when and where to fight the Soviet forces.

There were other things that demonstrated the Soviet's lack of understanding and preparation for the elements of Afghanistan. For example, the Soviet field uniform was very restrictive and uncomfortable. It was not design for the geography of Afghanistan. It had been designed for military operations in northern Europe. The combat boots Soviet Soldiers wore became another issue. They were unsuited for scaling the rugged Afghan mountains. According to Grau (2004), several Soviet commanders forced their Soldiers to wear tennis shoes in certain circumstances to protect their feet. Even the load-bearing equipment and rucksacks could not take the continuous field use in the rugged Afghanistan terrain. Lastly, the Soviet sleeping bag was made out of cotton. It was neither insulated nor waterproof. When it rained in the mountains, which it did quite often, Soldiers became soaked. It was hard for them to stay warm. These issues ultimately took a toll on the physical and mental state of the Soviet forces as the war dragged-on.

The Soviet Union was defeated in Afghanistan because they failed to plan for geography of land in which they invaded. On the other hand, the Mujahideen used the land as home court advantage. And though they had inferior equipment and weapons, the Mujahideen skillful use of the terrain was effective at preventing the Soviets from fully occupying and controlling their country. Although they didn't destroy the Soviet forces, they fought them to a standstill until they no longer had the will to continue fighting.

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