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SOVIET ACTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN AND
INITIATIVE AT THE TACTICAL LEVEL:
ARE THERE IMPLICATIONS FOR
THE U.S. ARMY?

A Monograph

by

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The monograph concludes that the Soviet experience in the war must be seen on two levels. On one level they have demonstrated an ability to modify unit organization and unit employment in response to lessons learned. This has resulted in the increased use of helicopters and elite units for deep raids. For the U.S. this should mean an increased awareness of the importance of the rear battle. On another level the Soviets may realize the need for Western style creativity in junior commanders, but inherent cultural tendencies probably preclude its successful adoption into their training system and personnel. The implication is that the Soviet Army of today is vastly different from the victorious, conquering army of 1945. While remaining wary of drawing the wrong lessons from the war in Afghanistan, Mujahidin tactical successes over nine years of war question the ability of the Soviet Army to wage successful operations against a skilled and determined enemy fighting on ground of his choosing.

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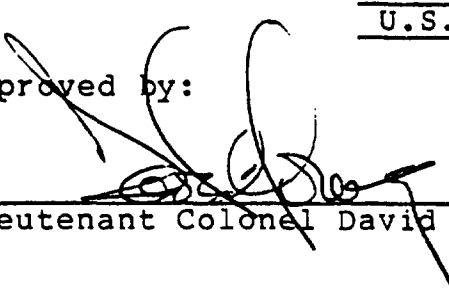
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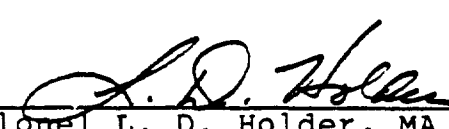
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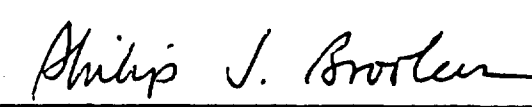
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ABSTRACT

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1. INTRODUCTION

On December 27, 1979, Americans awoke in their holiday spirit to find newspaper headlines reporting a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.¹ Prior to this, few people, save historians and hippies, had heard of this far away land, yet in the weeks that followed what little that remained of detente came crashing down around its frontiers. The spectre of Soviet military transports landing at Bagram and Kabul airfields immediately changed the tone of communications between the two superpowers from one of acknowledged competition to one of hostility.

For the Soviet Army the invasion and its immediate aftermath proceeded relatively well. However, Soviet calculations for a short war and subsequent consolidation of population and communications centers (as in Czechoslovakia in 1968) proved woefully inadequate. In nine years of fighting the Soviets have suffered their share of frustrations. The military doctrine and tactics designed to win on the European battlefield proved inappropriate in the barren mountains and high deserts of Afghanistan. The Soviet Army seemed to fail tactically despite repeated attempts to come to grips with the problems of guerrilla warfare. The reasons behind this are unclear, but the implication is considerable -- just how good is the Soviet

Army in action?²

During the Great Patriotic War the analysis of combat operations on a near 'real-time' basis became a major factor in the Red Army's transformation from a ragtag, ill prepared army to a highly developed and powerful force. After the Battle of Moscow, in its effort to reorganize, systematize, and disseminate vital combat lessons learned, the Soviet General Staff established special billets on Front and Army staffs for officers charged with "the study of war experience."³ Have the Soviets also done this in Afghanistan in attempt to improve their performance?

The purpose of this monograph is to address Soviet Army tactics in Afghanistan and battlefield initiative at the tactical level. It will attempt to answer the question: Have Soviet ground forces in Afghanistan displayed tactical flexibility and initiative or have their operations been indicative of relatively rigid and inflexible military doctrine and tactics?

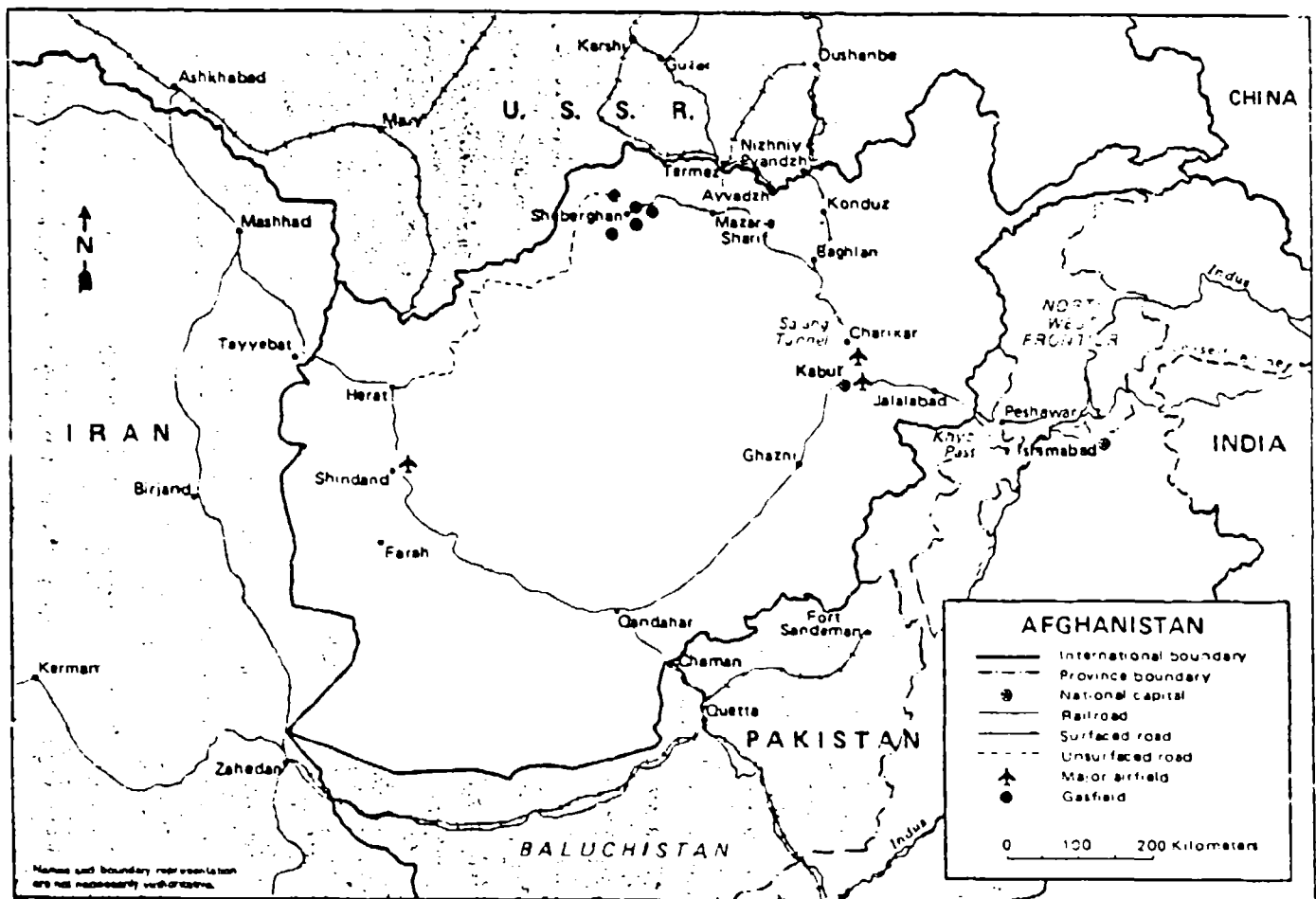
The paper is divided into six sections; (1) and introduction which explains the basis for the paper, (2) the background to the invasion which tells why it occurred, (3) notes on the actual invasion for historical significance, (4) the military experience to tell what happened, (5) lessons learned for both the Soviets and the United

States, and (6) conclusions.

A note on reference sources is necessary. The quantity of unclassified information available is extensive and ranges from eyewitness reports and newspaper accounts to an impressive number of excellent secondary sources and translations of Soviet military articles. The quality varies from source to source. Statements and ideas from secondary sources will attempt to be confirmed by writings in the Soviet press. Soviet military writers often focus attention on problem areas. A number of articles praising initiative could indicate a perceived weakness in leadership or repeated articles on mountain operations may indicate a problem in this area. The mere fact that a topic is discussed, however, demonstrates that it is at least recognized. If it is a problem area or a perceived weakness, it is unlikely that the Soviets will sit back and do nothing about it.⁴

BACKGROUND

Afghanistan is a poor and underdeveloped country, yet throughout history it has been important as the gateway between India and Iran. Tsarist Russia and subsequently the USSR, because of its proximity, has long been a dominating influence in Afghanistan. The first Russian intervention in Afghanistan is generally traced to 1837 when a Russian backed military force attempted to seize the city of Herat in what is today western Afghanistan.⁵



The Soviets also have a long history of counter-insurgency warfare in their Central Asian border area. From 1921 to 1924, Soviet-Afghan relations suffered from a serious problem, the revolt of the Basmachi anti-Bolshevik Central Asian rebels. Lenin and the Red leadership judged the problem to be sufficiently dangerous to the safety of the new regime that they sent their best army, the Vith, and their best commander, Marshal Mikhail V. Frunze, to stabilize the situation.⁶ Using a combination of military, political, social and economic programs, Frunze was able to establish at least the semblance of Moscow's formal authority. That his combined actions were generally successful was probably as much a result of Basmachi lack of unity as from Soviet strength.⁷

The political situation in Afghanistan in the late 1970's was one of chaos. The government of Mohammed Daoud became increasingly ineffective and repressive, even arresting the communists who had helped Daoud to power in a 1973 overthrow of the monarchy. In April 1978, a Soviet arranged coup installed what the Kremlin thought would be a more dependable government in Kabul disposing of Daoud with a bullet in the head.⁸

This April Revolution (as it came to be called), put Mohammed Nur Taraki and a supporting cast of Soviet advisors into power. In

addition, on December 5, 1978, the Soviets concluded a 20 year treaty with Afghanistan that set the framework for military intervention. However, the change in government did little to stabilize the situation. In-fighting between various political factions was rampant and the rebels continued to exert their control over the countryside.

By mid-March 1979, resentment to the Taraki government culminated in a bloody Moslem uprising in Herat and in September, Taraki's government was toppled by rival faction leader Hafizulla Amin. Taraki was executed, reflecting the chaotic state of Afghan politics. The situation was such that in April, General Aleksey Yepishev, Chief of the Main Political Administration of the Soviet Armed forces, visited Afghanistan,⁹ and shortly thereafter the USSR began supplying the Afghan military with Mi-24 HIND helicopter gunships and possibly pilots as well.¹⁰

Soviet concern about the deteriorating situation was reflected by an inspection visit by General Ivan G. Pavlovsky, (commander-in-chief of the Soviet ground forces and the Soviet commander in the invasion of Czechoslovakia), twelve other generals and fifty other officers to Afghanistan from mid-August to mid-October.¹¹ Although never publicly acknowledged by the Soviet Union, the Pavlovsky mission is

thought to have reported to Moscow that the Afghan Army and the Kabul regime were unable to stop the rebellion. Subsequent to the visit the amount of military equipment and the number of military advisors increased, with the latter figure rising to over 4,000 by the end of 1979. This, coupled with 1,500 civilian advisors, gave the Soviets tenuous hold on the command structure of government.¹² In the fall of 1979, military advisors were posted down to company level and Soviet helicopter pilots began flying combat missions.¹³

In spite of augmentation, the various rebel groups continued to expand their control of the country capturing one province after another. By the end of the year, at least 22 of the 28 provinces were in rebel hands and the Afghan Army was disintegrating. Against this backdrop, and a resurgence of Islamic nationalism throughout the Muslim world, the Soviet leadership decided to act. The invasion began at 2300 on 24 December 1979, when units belonging to the 105th Guards Airborne Division began to land at Kabul airport.¹⁴ For the Soviet Army it was their first war since 1945, and was to become one of the longest and bloodiest guerrilla struggles of the twentieth century. By the end of 1984, its duration had exceeded that of any foreign war in which the Soviets had engaged since seizing power in 1917.¹⁵

THE INVASION

As early as October, U.S. intelligence had noticed an increased concentration of transport aircraft in the Transcaucasus, Turkestan and Central Asian military districts opposite Afghanistan. Some of this activity took place near the home base of the elite 105th Guards Airborne Division (GAD). In early November, reservists in the Turkestan Military District and adjoining areas were called up to fill the category III divisions (10-30 percent full-time manning, full but old combat equipment) in the district. Additionally, bridging equipment was brought up to the Amu Darya (Darya meaning river) which separates eastern Afghanistan from the USSR. A few weeks later, the headquarters for what was to become the 40th Army was established at Termez and satellite communications were established with Moscow.¹⁶

On 29 November 1979, Soviet transports began flying troops from the 105th GAD to strengthen a battalion that had arrived at Bagram in July. By 6 December there was a full regiment of three battalions, about 2500 men, on the ground at Bagram. Between 8 and 10 December a 600-man armored unit joined them, and on the 20th this unit moved north to secure the highway through the Salang Pass tunnel. This area is a key choke point between Kabul and Termez and later became one

of the two main overland routes for the invasion. Around the same time a small element of this unit took up security duty at the Kabul International Airport. The Soviets now controlled the main road leading into Afghanistan and the two airbases closest to Kabul. The doors to Afghanistan were open and under Soviet control.¹⁷

In Soviet Central Asia, further mobilizations were ordered to supplement the raising of the combat status of divisions that had begun in October. By late December the Soviets were also in the last stages of force mobilization with two other airborne divisions, the 103rd at Vitebsk in Byelorussia and the 104th at Kirovabad in Azerbaijan. These divisions are part of the elite strike force of the Soviet Army.¹⁸

As previously mentioned, the actual invasion began at 2300 on Christmas eve as troops of the 105th GAD began to land at Kabul airport. These were reinforced by elements of the 103rd GAD and a Spetsnaz unit. On December 27, following a three day airlift which averaged 75-120 flights per day, a few hundred Spetsnaz troops deployed to the Darulaman Palace outside of Kabul, forced their way in, and killed Amin.¹⁹ Other Soviet detachments destroyed or captured key locations throughout the city and by the morning of the 28th Kabul was in Soviets hands.

That same morning two motorized rifle divisions began crossing the Amu Darya on pontoon bridges while two more were mobilizing to cross soon after.²⁰ An analysis of units believed deployed to Afghanistan would suggest that the 5th Guards Motorized Rifle Division crossed the border at Kushka and the 360th Guards Motorized Rifle Division crossed at Termez.²¹ The 5th had the aim of securing the important city of Herat and routes south and east around Afghanistan. The 360th out of Termez moved along the main highway across the Hindu Kush and through the Salang Pass towards Kabul. The mission of this operation was probably to secure the most direct main resupply route for the invasion. By the end of the first week of January 1980 approximately 50,000 Soviet soldiers were in Afghanistan. Three more divisions subsequently entered the country bringing the total number of full divisions to six and the number of Soviet troops to around 85,000 by the end of March.²²

The actual invasion appears to have been accomplished with few problems, and comparisons with the invasion of Czechoslovakia are inevitable. In both actions airborne forces used surprise and deception to seize key objectives within a country and then link up with mechanized forces rolling across the borders. In Czechoslovakia the Soviets had major logistics problems but encountered virtually no

resistance from the Czech Army or people. In Afghanistan the Soviets attempted to correct the logistics problem, but this and all other problems were exacerbated by the fierce resistance of the Mujahidin (Muslim holy warrior).²³

In retrospect, Soviet performance in the invasion must be seen in two ways. Army Major Joseph J. Collins, who has studied and written extensively on the Soviet experience, has stated it extremely well by saying that:

"In Afghanistan any final assessment of the invasion (and its immediate aftermath) must be mixed. For their part the Soviet military and security apparatus demonstrated that, (1) they were capable of rapid (though detectable) mobilization; (2) they can perform major operations without severe logistical breakdown (although the logistical effort would be a constant concern over the next eight years); (3) with mobilization they have sufficient ground forces to mount major conventional operations outside the Warsaw Pact or Chinese border areas; and (4) their Spetsnaz and airborne troops are reliable in (sensitive) operations such as assassinations and the disarming of unreliable "friendly" forces."

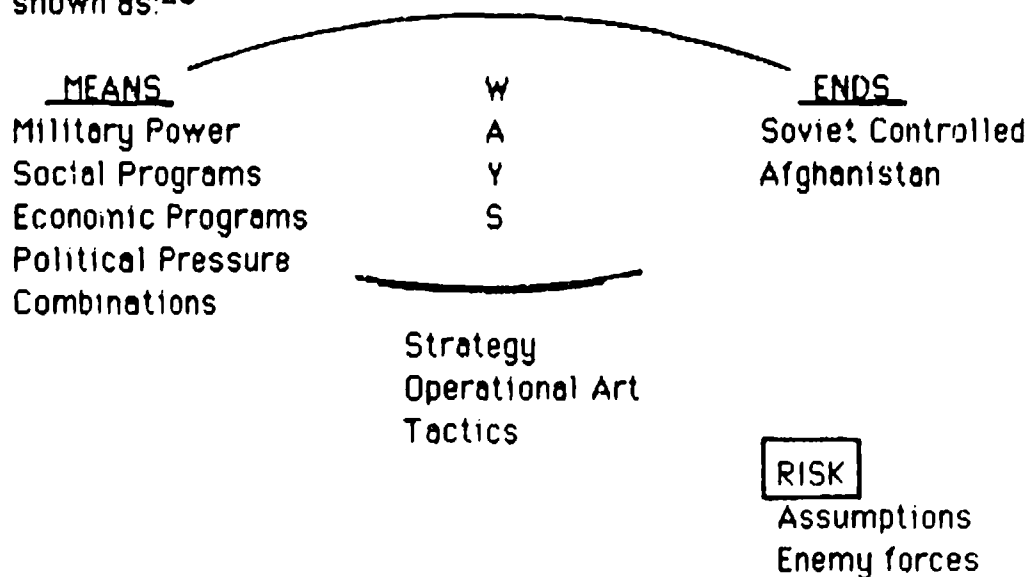
"On the other hand, there were some glaring judgmental errors. The massive use of Central Asian reservists -- evidently designed to facilitate movement and communication with the populace -- was a mistake. Many of these reservists had probably spent their active duty in noncombat units and may have been poorly trained for fighting. Moreover, most of the Soviet Central Asian troops were Tajiks or Uzbeks. This may have alienated some of the Pushtun majority in Afghanistan which tends toward ethnocentricity and ethnic prejudice. Many of these recruits were also guilty of fraternization and a few even defected."²⁴

Perhaps the most glaring weakness to emerge during the initial

period was the inability of junior Soviet officers and NCO's to respond adequately to unexpected tactical situations where a decentralization of command and innovative thinking were required. This will be addressed in greater detail.

Finally, and on a strategic level, the Soviet decision makers appear to have ignored Afghan history and culture. Led by officers who were key participants in the 1968 Czech operation, they apparently came to believe the Afghan operation would be a replay of this experience. In this respect they made a fundamental miscalculation and failed to identify the nature of the conflict and to gauge accurately the relationship between means and ends in Afghanistan.²⁵

Using the SAMS theoretical model, this miscalculation can be shown as:²⁶



In the critical area of RISK the Soviets made a major error on the nature of the conflict and in underestimating the determination and skill of the enemy.

THE MILITARY EXPERIENCE

This most recent direct military presence has gone on for nine years during which the Soviets have varied both style and intensity of their action. For purposes of organization and clarity it is useful to divide this period into four phases:

Phase 1; Conventional warfare with standard tank and motorized rifle units. December 1979 - Fall 1980.

Phase 2; Small unit offensive sweeps using conventional units but increasing use of helicopters. Winter 1981 - Spring 1983.

Phase 3; Special Operations predominate with conventional motorized rifle and tank units limited to guard and blocking force missions. Spring 1983 - Summer 1986.

Phase 4; Combinations with the emphasis on holding cities and minimizing personnel losses while exploring how to withdraw from Afghanistan. Summer 1986 - present.²⁷

A deeper look at each of these phases is necessary to understand the tactical implications of changes in the style and nature of the operations.

Phase 1, conventional war, which roughly encompassed the first year of the war, was characterized by large scale military operations with the motorized rifle and tank units brought in during the invasion and initial buildup. During this period Soviet objectives appear to have been to establish bases and to secure lines of communication

(LOC's) from which to conduct military operations. The subsequent operations were designed to eliminate the Mujahidin, isolate the population from them, and seal the borders to prevent the flow of people and resupply from Pakistan and China to Afghanistan.

By the spring of 1980 it had become apparent that the force structure and strategy did not match the situation. Armored and heavy mechanized forces were confronted by an enemy and by terrain for which they had not been trained. Soviet operational and tactical doctrine emphasized heavy armored and mechanized attacks to the depth of an enemy's defense. These operations stress quick and complete victory using maximum force in minimum time. Instead they found a tactical situation where an illusive and lightly armed enemy melted into difficult mountainous terrain when confronted with superior force and reemerged to strike at isolated units and logistic convoys.²⁸

Specific weaknesses in tactical doctrine that began to emerge during this initial phase include; (1) soldiers not being trained to operate outside their armored vehicles, (In fact, Soviet forces apparently have no counter ambush drills as are found in Western armies);²⁹ (2) junior leaders being allowed little initiative, and rarely taking any, often resulting in the failure to exploit a favorable

situation; (3) and extreme difficulty in supplying even modest forces in mountainous terrain with no railroads and very few roads.

One Soviet reaction to these initial problems was an increasing use of aviation, especially helicopters, to enhance their tactical mobility and logistic resupply. This period also saw the rapid replacement of Central Asian troops with other Soviet soldiers not ethnically similar to the Afghans. In addition, this first year evidenced the initial use of chemical warfare. At first, the Soviets used such agents as mustard gas and nerve agents against known military targets. Eventually they moved to mycotoxins such as "Yellow Rain", "Blue X", and "Sleeping Death".³⁰

A tally of this first phase of the war shows the Mujahidin retaining control of the countryside with the Soviets controlling the major towns and cities. As they had done in the Great Patriotic War, the Soviets were also evaluating the performance of their army and discussing what modifications or changes were necessary. Their concern is evidenced by the increasing frequency of articles on Mountain Warfare in VOYENNNYY VESTNIK (Military Herald) from 1975-1981. This number increased from zero in 1978 to three in 1979, six in 1980 and 15 in 1981.³¹

Realizing that their military doctrine was unsuitable for

Afghanistan, the Soviets began a second phase of the war, building on their learning effort in Afghanistan. Phase 2 began in the Winter of 1981 and lasted until the Spring of 1983. This phase saw the Soviets change their methods as they fully integrated helicopters into their operations. Also, they emphasized small scale military actions and increased political and economic activity to separate the Mujahidin from their popular support base. The entire package of actions during this phase makes it the closest phase to general Western counter-insurgency doctrine.

Significant military events other than the continued integration of helicopters and air assault operations center on the emphasis toward combined arms warfare and the expanding use of chemical agents.

Yossef Bodansky, a well known writer on the Soviet military in Afghanistan, writes that during this period the combined arms reinforced battalion (CARB) became the core subunit of the Soviet force in Afghanistan.³² A CARB consisted of an artillery battery, three motorized rifle companies, a tank company and a variety of specialized supporting units. These battalions worked in close coordination with specially trained air assault forces and helicopter gunships for fire support. In conjunction with the development of the CARB, the Soviets also began a redefinition of the role of their junior

commanders.³³

The trend toward combined arms operations did not begin in Afghanistan but is a reflection of Soviet organizational changes and doctrinal writing over the past 15 years.³⁴ The practical experience in Afghanistan only serves to accelerate the changes, and numerous articles in Soviet military journals publicized this increased emphasis. Representative among these articles are: "In Coordination With Artillery" in the July 1982 issue of Military Herald emphasizing how junior officers should coordinate artillery with maneuver operations;³⁵ "Acting Independently from the Main Forces" in the September and October 1982 editions of Military Herald concerning how battalion and smaller units operate independently;³⁶ and "Heliborne Operations in Mountainous Regions" in the December 1982 Aviation and Cosmonautics which stressed the close cooperation between helicopter pilots and maneuver unit commanders.³⁷

The use of chemical agents also expanded during this phase as the Soviets increased their use from only known military targets to denial operations in inaccessible mountain areas as an economy of force measure. Apparently these tactics were only marginally effective and the targets were further expanded to attacks on villages and civilians. On 13 and 20 September 1982, the Soviets

pumped chemical agents into the water supply of two villages in the Logar Valley, south of Kabul.³⁸ Since then, there has been little documented use of chemical weapons by the Soviets.

By the end of 1982, the frustration of not being able to defeat the Mujahidin in battle decisively brought on a campaign of terror that combined military, political and economic means. While small-scale military operations continued, a scorched earth policy sought to destroy Mujahidin food sources and a terror campaign was instituted which included the use of booby-trapped toys and the leveling of villages suspected of aiding the resistance.³⁹ The impact of these policies was to force the people to follow the instructions of the Soviet controlled government, leave the country in exile, or die.⁴⁰

During this second phase of the war it became increasingly apparent that the most successful operations were those that emphasized the use of elite airborne/air assault and Spetsnaz units. Their use increased to the point that the third phase can be called the Special Operations phase. The bulk of conventional ground warfare was left to the Afghan army with occasional large operations involving Soviet mechanized forces. However, these were generally involved in only route and base security operations. The reasons for the change in method probably include the monetary cost of large

scale operations, the greater number of Soviet casualties caused by large operations, and the generally below par performance of regular units.

In an interview in Jane's Defense Weekly, Abdul Haq, one of the Mujahidin's leading field commanders, noted common problems which the Soviets seemed to experience. These include lack of driving skills and difficulties in mountain and night fighting even though they are receiving more training in these areas than before. In addition, he further stated that at the time of the invasion the Soviets used a large number of conscript troops but after two or three years they had to change to heliborne forces because they needed better trained, more experienced soldiers and better equipment.⁴¹ Also, Soviet military journals continued to print articles stressing the importance of mountain training, physical fitness and low level initiative, all lessons from Afghanistan.⁴²

These mid-years of the war can be characterized as a time when the Soviets totally integrated the helicopter into their combat operations and used their elite forces for raids and ambushes. These methods allowed them to generally abstain from the large scale military operations which cause excessive friendly casualties. They also continued to build and use an Afghan army and were constantly

frustrated in this attempt by extreme cultural and ethnic differences. Looking to the future, they maintained educational training and socialization for young Afghans in the USSR while intensifying the economic warfare and scorched earth policies designed to starve the Mujahidin into submission.

The final phase of this current war had its genesis in March 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev became general secretary and began instituting a wave of domestic and foreign policy changes. Saddled with a war he could not win politically or militarily, and which was running counter to his goals, he made the decision to withdraw the Soviet Army from Afghanistan. This intention was announced in a 28 July 1986, speech in Vladivostok when he announced the withdrawal of six regiments, less than 10 percent of the total forces structure, by the end of 1986.⁴³ This date marks the formal beginning of the final phase of the war.

One of the most important military events of this phase was the introduction of the U.S. made Stinger anti-aircraft missile. As reported by John Gunston in Aviation Week and Space Technology,

"The use of U.S. made General Dynamics Stinger missiles by the Afghan rebels has forced the Soviet and Afghan government to alter their air-to-ground attack profiles by raising the minimum altitude for bomb release, thereby reducing the effectiveness of air attacks on friendly units....As the air threat has diminished, Mujahidin commanders have been able to concentrate their forces

and move them freely around the country.⁴⁴

Throughout the remainder of 1986 and 1987, the Soviets continued to explore through diplomatic channels a means to a political settlement and a withdrawal of their forces. A program of national reconciliation instituted by the new Afghan leader, Najibullah,⁴⁵ was a failure and Soviet frustration and disillusionment with the situation continued to grow. The Stinger missiles used by the Mujahidin forced the Soviets to stop flying their helicopters in daylight and ground troops were increasingly blocked by rebel minefields. In addition, letters and articles in the Soviet press reflected a public uneasy about a war they could not seem to win.⁴⁶ By mid April 1988, diplomatic maneuvering had produced a peace accord signed by the United States, USSR, Pakistan and Afghanistan. It was designed to guarantee Afghanistan's neutrality and to see the withdrawal of Soviet forces beginning on 5 May 1988.

As they prepare to leave Afghanistan, the Soviet forces continue holding the cities and securing LOC's while at the same time attempting to limit infiltration and destroy local resistance at minimum cost. The chief means of doing this has been to exploit their mobility and technological advantage. By May 1988 Soviet casualties had reached 13,310 killed, 35,478 wounded and 311 missing in action.⁴⁷ Their international prestige had suffered greatly. For the

Soviets, the costs of continued direct involvement outweighed the benefits. It was time to leave.

Lessons Learned and Principles Reaffirmed

Looking back over nine years of war it is useful to examine the many "lessons learned". It is equally important to discuss the tactical principles reaffirmed by both the Soviets and the United States.

Soviet Union

For the Soviets, perhaps the most important of the lessons learned was that their magnificent army could not easily defeat a loose confederation of poorly organized and poorly equipped revolutionaries. In light of U.S. and French experience in Viet Nam, and past British experience in Afghanistan, this should not have surprised them. The war revealed that in spite of an enormous military budget there are deficiencies in the training of the Soviet conscript soldier. A prime example is the problem the regular motorized rifle units have had in desert and mountain operations. Although these special environments are addressed in doctrinal publications,⁴⁸ it was readily apparent that the initial complement of regular Soviet forces were not trained in desert or mountain warfare techniques or familiar with operations in that type of terrain. Joseph Collins states that:

In December 1981, a Soviet source reported that "it took a while for (an Afghan) soldier to believe that the majority of Soviet servicemen had first seen mountains here--in Afghanistan".⁴⁹

This lack of training in a specific special environment is not an uncommon problem in a large conscript army, but the experience in Afghanistan has revealed some unique Soviet problems as well. The first of these is the political unreliability and ethnic unrest of Soviet Central Asian soldiers. Joseph Collins further reports that:

"Collusion with the freedom fighters was commonplace. Ghafoor Yussofzar, a former lawyer and now a resistance leader, gave this eyewitness testimony:When the Soviets first entered our country in 1979...most of the soldiers were Central Asians....When these people realized that the only people they were fighting in Afghanistan were Afghans...then these Soviet Central Asians began helping us. They began leaving us packages with weapons and ammunition....They left it in the ground and covered it with earth and just left a little of it emerging....When we finally recovered these things, we found out they were parcels of weapons and ammunition....The Russians finally became aware of this and have since withdrawn Soviet Central Asian troops...and now they have just brought their own red-faced troops".⁵⁰

The poor performance of standard formations was a key reason for the formation of the CARB and also for the formation of "BRIGADES" in the Soviet order of battle. Since their formation in the spring of 1980, much of the fighting in the eastern provinces has been conducted by the 69th and 70th Motorized Rifle Brigades of the 201st Motorized Rifle Division. These units are believed to have been formed to implement lessons learned and, as brigades are not

normally part of the Soviet order of battle, they are an example of Soviet "field improvisation".⁵¹

Perhaps the area in which the Soviets have received the most criticism, and have been most critical of themselves, is a low standard of junior leadership. Just as the Soviet military press has been teeming with articles on mountain warfare, it has been equally active with articles on combat creativity and initiative, especially in junior commanders. In fact, contemporary Soviet writing on initiative and innovation is far richer than it was in previous decades. This can be taken as an indication of greater appreciation of the need for initiative.⁵² In essence, the decentralized nature of the war in Afghanistan has frequently forced decision making down to the level of battalion, company, and platoon commanders and NCO's. While in theory the men in these positions are supposed to act independently when required by the tactical situation, their prior training was as part of a larger unit where decisions were made by the higher unit commander. They have generally been deficient in making independent decisions.

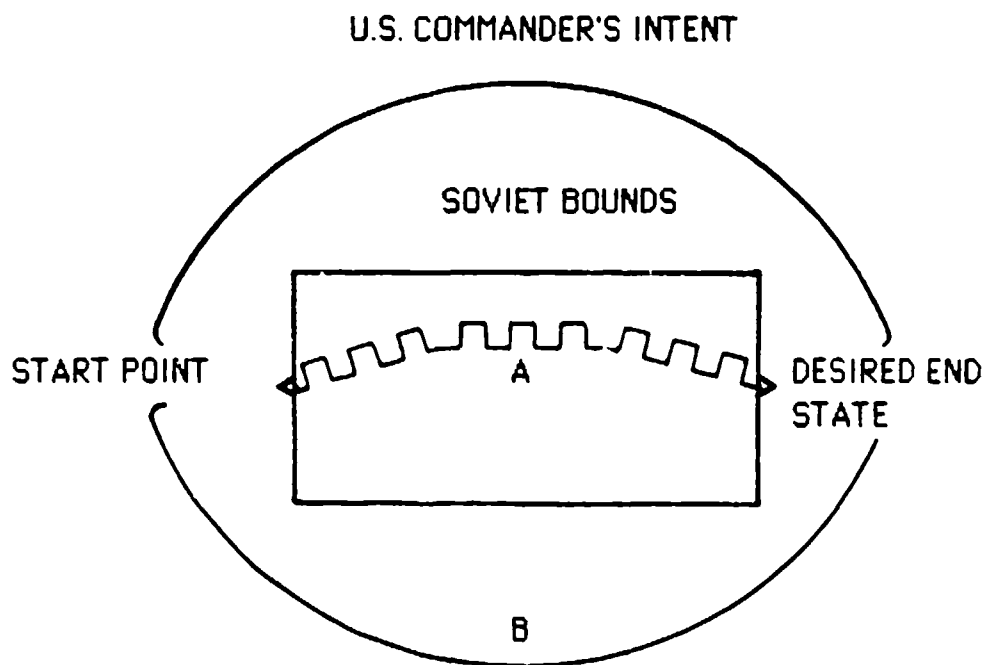
That initiative is defined differently in Soviet and U.S. military literature is well known and it is useful to review the different concepts.

"In the Soviet literature, initiative is said to presuppose ideological conviction, a sense of the military art, concrete knowledge of tactics and weaponry, strong will, strict responsibility for one's actions and decisiveness. The military writings concentrate on three different and distinct conceptualizations of initiative (1) fulfilling an order to the best ability and in the best manner available, (2) taking the initiative from the enemy in order to surprise them, and (3) making a creative decision in battle based on situation characteristics and a learned set of scenarios.⁵³

In contrast, the U.S. view of military initiative is best explained by FM 100-5 Operations which states:

"Initiative means setting or changing the terms of battle by action. It implies an offensive spirit....Applied to individual soldiers and leaders, it requires a willingness and ability to act independently within the framework of the commander's intent. In both senses, initiative requires audacity which may involve risktaking and an atmosphere that supports it. In the chaos of battle, it is essential to decentralize decision authority to the lowest practical level because overcentralization slows action and leads to inertia...at the same time, decentralization risks some loss of precision in execution. The commander must constantly balance these competing risks, recognizing the loss of precision is usually preferable to inaction....Decentralization demands subordinates who are willing and able to take risks and superiors who nurture that willingness and ability in subordinates.⁵⁴

These differing views of initiative in battle can be demonstrated by the use of the following diagram.



Line A represents the Soviet view of initiative, an acceptable solution within given bounds. (This is closest to the third definition of Soviet initiative, finding a solution within a learned set of alternatives). Area B represents the U.S. concept of a creative solution. Almost anything is permissible within the commander's intent and the Law of Land Warfare (legal bounds). The contrast may be seen as one between resourcefulness and creativity.⁵⁵

An example of this difference is manifested in the way the Soviets and the West approach battle drills. The Soviets believe the typical battle of a war with NATO would be the meeting engagement where one or both sides are moving and the situation is characterized by a lack of intelligence with a quick, violent struggle as each side tries

to impose its will on the other. In this environment, speed into action is seen as a prime advantage of the battle drill, but also important is the easing of the command and control problem in an atmosphere of danger, jamming and what Clausewitz described as the "friction of war".⁵⁶ A negative manner of stating it is that the Soviets use battle drill because they can't trust the individual soldier to do anything.

Contrast this with the accepted Western concept of battle drills. While speed of action and ease of command and control are positive aspects of drills, the reason goes much deeper. Writing in On Infantry, John English states that battle drills were "...not intended to stifle individual initiative but to infuse soldiers at all levels, and junior officers and NCO's in particular, the will to win."⁵⁷ Carried to its zenith, this is a concept of drills where the junior leader is conditioned to quickly reason through the situation rather than just react. It is an environment where the small unit leader is taught how to think rather than what to think. The Soviet concept envisions the leaders and soldiers being trained in a number of drills that will cover most or all tactical situations. This is a "what to think" environment.

The experience in Afghanistan has shown that initially the soldiers were not trained to operate independently in that

environment. They were not trained in the special environments of desert, mountain and counterinsurgent war. The question then becomes what form will their next war take? What if their prevalent doctrine of high speed conventional operations is incorrect and special environments become the norm? In this case, junior leaders knowing what to think, but not how, will be equally as ineffective as they were in Afghanistan.⁵⁸

The paradox for the junior Soviet commander is that he appears to be hearing two different things. The tone of the articles he reads hints at a style of initiative incorporating the U.S. and Western idea of creativity, yet it is constantly caveated with traditional Soviet reserve. While Col Gen Vostrov (Chief of Training for the Ministry of Defense) says that "Too many instructors remain wedded to outworn ideas and refuse to open their minds to recent developments in warfare, military technology and social change",⁵⁹ the junior commander also reads articles such as "When It Pays To Take Risks".⁶⁰ The title reads like it is advocating Western style initiative, yet a close look at the article reveals it to be risk taking and initiative within narrow bounds.⁶¹ The result appears to be that the Soviets desire to push the concept of Western style initiative and creativity lower and lower in their command structure but Soviet

cultural reluctance to take risks and mixed signals from the higher command mitigate against their success.

UNITED STATES

As the United States looks at the Soviet effort in Afghanistan there are some important lessons to be noted. The first is that the Soviets continue to study war and will apply their lessons learned. Yossef Bodansky writes,

"In order to optimize their lesson learning effort in Afghanistan, the Soviets have established a sophisticated system that identified these lessons, studied and tested them, reached conclusions and recommendations and implemented them in Afghanistan and elsewhere. General of the Army Yazov is in charge of this system. Since spring 1981, the influence of the solutions implemented by him has been felt in the fighting in Afghanistan."⁶²

Among the changes implemented have been the extensive integration of helicopters and combined arms units into combat operations. There has also been a readiness to use new or different units (such as air assault brigades) and equipment to meet the tactical situation.

An area that has received remarkably little publicity, but has been an important part of the war for both sides, has been the use of mines. Published Soviet doctrine emphasizes the use of Movement Support Detachments (MSD) to clear mines in the offense and Mobile

Obstacle Detachments (MOD) to emplace mines in the defense. Combat engineers are assigned at regiment and division level in all Soviet maneuver divisions to accomplish these tasks, and platoons are sometimes detailed to battalions for specific operations.⁶³ Soviet combat operations in Afghanistan have seen both the offensive and defensive use of mines emplaced by hand, air and artillery. As an example, by December 1985, the U.S. State Department said that the Soviets had dropped or planted an estimated two million mines since the invasion.⁶⁴ By mid 1988 this number had increased significantly; Jane's Defense Weekly reported:

The Afghan Media Resource Center quoted a defecting Afghan army officer as saying that Soviet troops have planted more than three million mines in Afghanistan. The Soviet daily PRAVDA said on 12 September that 2131 minefields were laid in Afghanistan (three quarters of which have been cleared.)⁶⁵

During the war, the Soviets frequently scattered mines in front of caravans, bringing them to a halt, and making them sitting targets for helicopter attack. Mines were also randomly dispersed along Mujahidin lines of communication to create confusion and cause casualties. Without mine detection equipment the rebels are forced to seek out these mines on their hands and knees and to detonate them by throwing stones.⁶⁶ During deep air assault operations, Soviet

elite troops used minefields to protect their flanks and rear, and also for the protection of their landing and ambush sites.⁶⁷

The learning point for the United States is that Soviet doctrine stresses the use of mines and their tactical units have organic combat engineers to carry out these tasks. They say they are going to do it, they are organized and equipped to do it, and in their most recent combat they have had extensive experience at it. It seems probable that if we have to fight them, mine/counter-mine operations will be extremely important and we must be prepared to accomplish these missions.

Another area where the U.S. needs to take a close look at the Soviets for future implications is the use of "elite" units. While they have been disappointed with the performance of their regular motorized rifle formations, the Soviets appear to be pleased with the performance of the elite or special airborne, air assault and air mobile units. Throughout the war these units have shown a level of combat capability that exceeds that of regular formations. They are better trained, more physically fit, and exhibit a degree of initiative which allows them to work in independent small units. During the war they have been used to block Mujahidin movement, seize high ground, surround villages and other objectives, conduct deep raids and

ambushes, and for convoy protection. This last mission is accomplished by establishing outposts on crests ahead of the columns. Helicopter mobility has given them a capacity for maneuver that ground combined arms columns lack.⁶⁸ Soviet Spetsnaz troops have also been reported operating dressed as Afghan Army soldiers and as Afghan shepherds to conduct surprise attacks.⁶⁹

The lesson for the U.S. seems clear. Our doctrine recognizes the existence of deep, close and rear battles and the equal importance of each. Should we have to fight the Soviets in the future, they will employ units developed and trained specially for the disruption of the enemy's rear area. These elite units are tough and well trained and, at least for the present, have combat experience. For us to be successful against them will require more than just a recognition of their existence.

On the positive side for the U.S., the Soviets appear to have some operational deficiencies that may be exploited in future operations. The poor performance of line units in the "special" environments of Afghanistan has already been noted, and in this respect they have shown that the Soviet Army of today is not the army of 1945. This has been manifested in other ways also. Much has been written on successful Soviet deception (maskirovka) during the Great Patriotic

War, especially prior to the Battle of Kursk in 1943, and the Vistula-Oder and Iassy-Kishinev operation's in 1945. Also, maskirovka is a common topic in Soviet military literature today.⁷⁰ However, Soviet combat operations since 1980 suggest that they have shortcomings in this area. It has already been stated that U.S. intelligence had noticed preparations for the invasion and Joseph Collins writes that:

"Soviet operational security, the ability to conceal one's plans, intentions and movements from the enemy, is generally poor. Not only do their Afghan allies "leak" like a sieve, but the Soviets also seem to go out of their way to advertise impending offensives. For example, they openly build up their forces near future objectives and conduct lengthy air and artillery preparations, many of which are ill-conceived and poorly targeted. In the Panjshir Valley campaign in 1982, even the Pravda military correspondent admitted that the resistance apparently had the Soviet battle plan before the operation had begun. The onset of their 1984 campaign was predicted in Western newspapers a week before the battle began."⁷¹

While this does not mean that it is impossible for the Soviets to surprise the U.S., these deficiencies indicate that Soviet operational security is not as good as it was in 1945, when they were successful in concealing intentions and major troop movements from the Germans and Japanese. These problems also highlight the additional difficulties of security when operating with allies, and they should be even more evident when working against modern surveillance and analysis techniques

Another lesson the U.S. needs to learn from the Soviet experience in Afghanistan is that even after nine years of war they do not have a distinct counter-insurgency doctrine or strategy. As David Isby has written,

"As is so often the case, large amounts of historical experience do not yield tactical effectiveness.... The lessons of old counter-insurgency campaigns had to be relearned, while the differences between history and the current Afghan situation also had to be understood."⁷²

Despite experimentation with special units, tactics, and equipment, the Soviets still appear dominated by conventional forces and tactics. A prime example of this is TAKTIKA (tactics), the Soviet equivalent of FM 100-5 Operations.⁷³ A perusal of this book does not yield any lessons from Afghanistan, with the vast majority of historical examples coming from the Great Patriotic War and a few from exercises such as ZAPAD-81. Speculation as to the reasons for this lack of a specific counter-insurgency doctrine center on (1) a basically conservative military command structure still governed by the lessons and memories of the Great Patriotic War,⁷⁴ and (2) acknowledging that there are insurgent forces working against a communist government flies in the face of the inevitable communist world movement. There are ideological difficulties accepting that a state on the road to communism can backslide. That the Soviets don't

have a distinct counter-insurgency doctrine is even more surprising when one considers that a number of Soviet client states have insurgencies operating at varying levels of effectiveness (Afghanistan, Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Nicaragua). The lesson for the U.S. is that although the Soviets have a well developed doctrine and organization for high-intensity conventional war, their development has been at the expense of other areas of military thought, specifically, limited war, and reinforces the dictum that "You can't be strong everywhere".

A final lesson the U.S. should take from the war is that Soviet implementation of a scorched-earth policy, chemical warfare and the use of "political" murder has demonstrated the Soviets know few limits or moral bounds.⁷⁵ The underlying point is that war is a violent business. As the number of U.S. officers and NCO's with combat experience decreases, the horror of war recedes from memory and two quotes from Clausewitz are worth noting:

"War is an act of force, and there is no logical limit to the application of that force".

and

"To someone who has never experienced danger the idea is attractive rather than alarming".⁷⁶

Our training program must prepare leaders and soldiers for the

horrors of war to the greatest extent possible in a peacetime environment.

CONCLUSION

The research question this monograph has attempted to answer is:
Have the Soviet ground forces in Afghanistan displayed tactical flexibility and initiative or have their operations been indicative of relatively rigid and inflexible military doctrine and tactics?

The answer must be seen on two levels. On one level the Soviets have shown themselves to be extremely flexible in their application of lessons learned and the employment of new types of units, new equipment (helicopters) and different tactics. This is evidenced by the change from conventional large-scale operations to small units sweeps to special unit operations through the various phases of the war. On another level they appear to have been generally unsuccessful in attempting to develop a degree of Western-style creativity and initiative in their junior leaders. The result of this paradox has been stated by Mujahidin military commander Abdul Haq:

"Since we were invaded nine years ago the Soviets have changed, step by step, their tactics. Soviets can change tactics but they cannot change their forces. The Soviets have conscript soldiers, a frontier force, heliborne forces, and Spetsnaz. They can only change tactics when they change their forces".⁷⁷

It appears that constant indoctrination cannot overcome the lack of individual initiative which the Soviet system inculcates, especially when that indoctrination is couched in terms that reflect

both old and new ideas. The fact that they have been unable to develop this sense of creativity and Western style initiative in junior commanders is a paradox of Soviet society. That this occurs is not surprising when you consider that "It is a society that builds the world's best tank but cannot feed its own population."⁷⁸

Among the lessons the Soviets learned in Afghanistan was that success does not always come from the top. They found that an army trained, resourced and equipped for success at the operational level in a high-intensity conventional conflict could not win a war for which norms had not been established and their standard drills did not apply. This is one factor in a massive review of the Soviet training system that is taking place today.⁷⁹

The direct implications for the U.S. Army are less easy to discern, and we must be careful not to draw the wrong lessons from Soviet military performance in Afghanistan. However, while Soviet doctrine emphasizes success at the operational level, their tactical shortcomings in this war call into question whether Soviet soldiers are capable of fighting the high-tempo/non-stop war their doctrine intends them to fight. This is another probable reason for the ongoing training review and the spate of articles on the low quality of junior officers and NCO's and indiscipline within the Soviet forces.⁸⁰ The

war further reaffirms that no amount of training can equal the actual experience of war.

Should we have to fight the Soviets in the near future, their combat performance in Afghanistan shows that a way to be successful against them is by making every effort to fight on ground of our choosing (unfamiliar ground to him), and by disrupting and eroding his battlefield control by every means possible. Unique weapons application, the unusual timing of counter-attacks, and employing surprise and deception of all types are useful items to consider.

Finally, in emphasizing the fact that it is necessary to use caution and not draw the wrong lessons from the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, it is also important to reemphasize that the Soviet Army of today is vastly different from that of 1945. The success of the Mujahidin over nine years of war underscores the difficulty of conducting successful offensive operations against a skilled and determined enemy on ground of his choosing. This is the lesson the U.S. should take from the war in Afghanistan.

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