

Don't Follow the Bear:

The Soviet Attempt to Build Afghanistan's Military

Major Stephen D. Pomper, U.S. Army

THE SOVIET experience in Afghanistan during the 1980s provides many lessons for contemporary military operations. The apparent similarity to the position the United States finds itself in today in Afghanistan and Iraq warrants giving some attention to Soviet lessons learned. Many of these 20-year-old learning points are negative. Put bluntly, the Soviets' inability to train indigenous Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) military forces was but one facet of a larger, well-documented failure. According to military writer Robert M. Cassidy, "Soviet military experts knew what to do to win in Afghanistan but did not do it because of a cultural reluctance, in other words, cultural inertia."¹ The United States should avoid following the bear into these woods. The proper training of the Afghan and Iraqi militaries is critical to U.S. success and to the region as a whole.

A discussion of the would-be Soviet trainers is important to understanding their failure to properly prepare Afghan forces after 1979. According to two authorities on the war, Mhommas Y. Nawroz and Lester W. Grau, Soviet success in Afghanistan required a train-the-trainer approach that would "reliev[e] the Afghan government forces of garrison duties and [push] them into the countryside to battle the resistance [while] strengthening the Afghan forces, so once the resistance was defeated, the Soviet Army could be withdrawn."²

Basically, the Soviets realized that training indigenous forces was vital for victory or, at least, for a successful exit strategy. They knew that securing Afghanistan's 29 provinces and diverse population would require significant local assistance. Probably because they had based their plan heavily on the use of Afghan soldiers, the Soviets imposed a 115,000-troop ceiling on their 40th Army, which had been tasked with the mission. Not surprisingly, the initial Soviet General Staff planning estimates concluded that it would take 30 to 35 divisions to secure the country—roughly 650,000 soldiers.³

Still, a Soviet focus on Europe and the global situation at that time relegated the intervention to an economy of force mission.

Soviet Campaign Concept

The Soviets' overall concept for the Afghan campaign was ambitious, but clear:

- Stabilize the country by garrisoning the main routes, major cities, airbases, and logistics sites.
- Relieve Afghan government forces of garrison duties and push them into the countryside to battle the resistance.
- Provide logistic, air, artillery, and intelligence support to Afghan forces.
- Minimize interface between the Soviet occupation forces and the populace.
- Accept minimal Soviet casualties.
- Strengthen Afghan forces so the Soviet Army could be withdrawn after defeat of the resistance.⁴

The Soviet strategy was designed around a high-tech, mechanized force intended to win quickly and decisively; in other words, the force was trained and structured for a high-intensity war. Lacking light infantry, the force eventually adopted an ineffective "mobile bunker" mentality to "stabilize the major routes and cities."⁵ Fortieth Army's four divisions, five separate brigades, and three regiments also entered the country without doctrine for the environment or for counterinsurgency; nor were they properly organized or prepared for such combat. Although units created tactics, techniques, and procedures to overcome some problems, the Soviets failed to devise a system for sharing these lessons learned across the 40th Army. Their materiel was generally sufficient—some of it worked well, some of it did not—but poor employment of the equipment in the country's diverse terrain eventually failed both Soviet and Afghan troops.⁶

The Soviets' inadequate doctrine and force structure led to vicious ad hoc tactics that increasingly

alienated the Afghan people. The Soviets booby-trapped toys, emplaced extensive minefields, and instituted a systematic plan to terrorize civilians that included nothing less than a scorched earth policy.⁷ Conscription also brought a microcosm of problems from Soviet society into the ranks. Weak political will, differing ethnic backgrounds, and a clash of cultural norms beset the mission before it began.⁸ War exacerbated these problems. Of 642,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan, 73 percent (or 469,685) became casualties of one kind or another.⁹ Fortieth Army units were chronically short of personnel and “the continual loss of rotating cadre and corresponding loss of developed and tested combat experience, leadership, and techniques had a negative effect on the training [of Afghan forces].”¹⁰

Unanticipated shortcomings also plagued the Soviet effort to establish a new Afghan military. The Russian General Staff identified a Soviet soldier’s lack of time in the country as a major factor in the failure to train DRA forces. Junior personnel could expect to be in Afghanistan for 18 to 21 months, and officers usually served for 2 years. One role for midgrade and senior soldiers was adviser, but being an “adviser to a DRA unit was considered a hardship assignment by Soviet officers.”¹¹ Living conditions were poor, language and cultural barriers were ever-present, and advisers felt insecure because of covert mujahideen activity. Finally, DRA duty was not considered a “stepping stone to promotion.”¹² Soldier and tactical problems were compounded by a lack of national political will: “[Soviet] political will even for this limited level of commitment [in Afghanistan] was not sustainable in the long term.”¹³ Deterioration and eventual loss of the will to fight might seem surprising considering the usual picture we have of a heavyhanded, tightly controlling Soviet Government, but as the war wore on, the Kremlin slowly and inevitably folded to public opinion and the bleak reality of the situation.

Nawroz and Grau summarize the Soviet commitment to Afghanistan: “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.”¹⁴ Historian and Soviet expert Robert F. Baumann suggests that Soviet soldiers were told to expect one thing about their role in Afghanistan—that they were liberators—but they quickly discovered this was not the whole truth or even close to it.¹⁵ A Spetsnaz soldier from unit “Recon 66” recalls the varying messages, or “political training,” for the Afghan campaign: “First they told us we were defending our southern borders,

then we were doing our international duty, then there was some other nonsense.”¹⁶ As the troops became frustrated and then angry, they focused their aggression counterproductively on the Afghan people. In short, the Soviet military was not ready for the fight they found in Afghanistan.

Assessment of Afghan Forces

Before the Soviet invasion, an increase in Islamism and nationalism across the country fostered a new ideological crusade that would set the tone for the next 10 years.¹⁷ In March 1978 one Afghan infantry division mutinied and joined a small but growing rebel force. After a coup by the Afghan Communist Party in April, the DRA army began to deteriorate more quickly. The communists instituted reforms to address the decline, but the changes only decreased support for the government. By the end of 1979, the army had fallen from 100,000 to 40,000 soldiers (some sources say to as little as 25,000), while nearly half of the officers had been executed or purged from the ranks or had deserted.¹⁸ The situation would only worsen.

The Soviet assessment of Afghan forces over the decade provides additional insight about the poorly conditioned and ineffective troops they trained. The general staff was sure DRA force levels remained consistent at between 120,000 to 150,000 throughout the occupation; however, a less biased source indicates the army’s top strength (40,000) was achieved in 1986 and never went higher.¹⁹ That air and security forces covered this delta is unlikely. In addition to force-size misconceptions, the Soviet command ineptly reorganized the DRA military. The command thought “[t]he large number of organizations with varying structures had a negative impact on the overall readiness of their [Afghan] armed forces.”²⁰ The Soviet solution and result were predictable: Separate companies were combined into regiments that were then stacked into larger and larger organizations. The Soviets thus imposed a standard, large-scale table of organization and equipment structure on what remained of the Afghan forces.²¹ Yet, these forces were not preparing for a Fulda Gap-type high-intensity battle; they were fighting an irregular insurgency.

Afghan forces were primarily armed with Soviet equipment, but it was not as sophisticated as their Slavic brothers’ arms. Poor training on the equipment led to incorrect use and premature breakdown. Deplorable maintenance rates were the inevitable result, and the lack of trained mechanics, signal operators, and other technicians prevented a long-term solution.²² Inadequate resupply by Soviet advisers (and the DRA system), looting by rebel forces, defections, and a tendency to trade equip-



Soviet motorized troops receive orders shortly before the evacuation from the Panjshir Valley, summer 1986.

Soviet troops ride shotgun at the head of a truck convoy.



Members of a Soviet reconnaissance company move out from their position near Jalalabad.

Soviet fuel trucks destroyed by mujahideen dukhi or ghosts.



Soviet and Afghan soldiers engage in training with a shoulder-fired antitank weapon.

A Soviet soldier and Afghan Army allies await orders.



Photographs courtesy of Vladimir Grogoryev from <www.afghanwar.spb.ru/index_e.html>

ment for drugs made the situation even worse. Late in the war, the mujahideen, or dukhi (ghost spirits) as the Russians called them, were often better equipped than their superpower-backed rivals.²³

The Soviets created three training centers in Kabul: one for combined arms officers, a second for air force and air defense officers, and a third for officers in specialty skills. Some officers attended schools in the Soviet Union for required training. Another school, for higher ranking officers, ran from 3 to 6 months. But the schools do not seem to have been efficient: In 10 years only 3,000 officers, a relatively small number, received training. Moreover, there was no system to determine which officers required training and when. Problems with the officer corps were further compounded by culture: Family connections, friendships, and Communist Party affiliation, not merit, usually determined rank and position in the army.²⁴

The remainder of the Afghan force—enlisted and noncommissioned officers (NCOs)—was 70 percent conscript and 30-percent volunteer. Afghan law required 100-percent service from the male population, but local procedures to enforce this were only successful about two-thirds of the time. Coupled with high casualty rates, the result was a 25- to 40-percent unit strength.²⁵ This low manning level led to “round-ups” for new recruits.²⁶ Under such circumstances, low morale was almost inevitable.

Once in, the new soldier usually attended a short (1-month) basic training program in one of about 15 national training centers, although some

local divisions and brigades conducted their own initial-entry training. NCO training was somewhat less expeditious, at 3 to 4 months. Prior to combat, DRA units were supposed to conduct 7 days of high-intensity training; however, this did not always happen. After combat, they were allotted only 20 days to reorganize and refit.

Manning problems, insufficient training, and rushed recovery from combat were not the only problems afflicting the lower ranks. Fifteen hundred to 2,000 troops a month, or 24,000 a year—half the DRA army or all of it, depending on some sources—deserted. The most commonly cited cause was a lack of will. The conscripts did not know what they were fighting for.²⁷

Path to Failure

Although some units fought effectively, most operations involving DRA soldiers were largely unsuccessful. The effective units were normally composed of soldiers with common ethnicity and culture who were fighting in or around their home areas. Units that failed did so because their tactics were poor, their training weak, and they could not communicate, often because of yet another maintenance issue—broken radios. Large-scale DRA operations floundered because Soviet forces rarely shared information with their coalition partners for fear of being compromised.²⁸ (Given that mujahideen sympathizers had filled the ranks of DRA units since 1979, and to the highest levels, the Soviets’ fear was not unreasonable.²⁹) Soviet and DRA units did, however, conduct regular smaller

scale missions together, but even these bred distrust and enmity. For example, in a typical block-and-sweep operation, Soviet forces blocked while Afghan troops were given the more dangerous job of sweeping. Other Soviet plans “usually put DRA forces forward to draw fire.”³⁰ The distrust ran deep and was caused by more than security risks. Racial, cultural, and language differences were widespread. They generated suspicion and were detriments to cooperation and success in training camps and on the battlefield.

No single cause led to the Soviets’ failure in Afghanistan; rather, a combination of factors created the “USSR’s Vietnam.”³¹ Weak political support, of which both the USSR and the DRA were guilty, crippled training and the occupation. This absence of political support and resolve led to a corresponding lack of will that sapped Soviet and Afghan troops, as well as their leaders. Add to this poor doctrine, equipment, and organization, and the Soviet mission bordered on the impossible. Finally, the Russians’ “my way or the highway” insistence on conventionalizing DRA forces added icing to the funeral cake.

Of course, the longevity of this war also worked against Soviet success. The longer the conflict lasted, the more technology and firepower the Soviets poured in, a strategy that yielded fewer trained soldiers, increased the number of civilian deaths, and bred hatred of the war and those who had started it. Over time, too, the resistance solidified, became more capable, and gained allies—namely the United States.

The results of this ghastly conflict have burned into the minds of a generation of Afghans who will not forget easily. Yet, it did not have to be this way. If the Soviet high command had only overcome its military and “cultural reluctance [and] inertia,” an alternate ending might have been possible.

Caution for Today

The caution today is to respect past failures, but the goal must be to learn from them. Clearly, the past does not offer blueprint solutions for current and future operations, but sometimes history is all we have. Today it seems implausible that the U.S. military would ever resort to destroying farmland, terrorizing civilians, or booby-trapping toys; however, the U.S. military has sometimes failed to heed the miscalculations and misfortunes of others. We can learn from the Soviet misadventure in Afghanistan: Do not look at Iraq as a short-term commitment or as a 10-year job to be done 1 year at a time; do not adopt a mobile-bunker mentality that separates the soldier from the probable solution—the people; do not underestimate the enemy or overestimate your chances of success. On the other hand, do commit the required material resources and will to the important task of training an indigenous capability. Avoiding the mistakes that plagued the Soviet 40th Army in Afghanistan requires the U.S. military to question itself, remain agile, and change when necessary. If we are reluctant to learn, question, and adapt, we could find ourselves bogged down in an Afghanistan “Vietnam” of our own. Whatever we decide to do, we must not follow the bear into those woods. *MR*

NOTES

1. Robert M. Cassidy, *Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), 11, available on-line at <www.carlisle.army.mil/ssipubs/2003/rusafgan/rusafgan.pdf>, accessed 27 July 2005.
2. Mhommaz Y. Nawroz and Lester W. Grau, *The Soviet War in Afghanistan: History and Harbinger of Future War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, Undated), 4-5. The same article also appeared in *Military Review* (September-October 1995): 17-27.
3. Scott Peterson, “Afghanistan’s Lesson for Iraq,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (20 November 2003), on-line at <www.csmonitor.com/2003/1120/p06s01-woiq.html>, accessed 29 July 2005.
4. Nawroz and Grau, 4-5.
5. Peterson.
6. Cassidy, 28, 33.
7. *Ibid.*, 14-15.
8. The ethnic and cultural mix of the 40th Army, not to mention Afghan forces, is too involved to discuss in this article. The diversity likely affected DRA training both positively and negatively, but I have chosen to highlight the negative aspects, specifically the lack of cooperation and the inability to overcome differences.
9. Nawroz and Grau, 2, 6-7.
10. Russian General Staff, *The Soviet Afghan War, How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. and eds., Lester Grau and Michael Gress (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 47.
11. Russian General Staff, 52.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Cassidy, 28.
14. Nawroz and Grau, 17.

15. Robert F. Baumann, interview by author, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 17 November 2004.
16. Unlike U.S. Special Forces, the Spetsnaz role in the war was direct action and not training. See Timothy Gusinov, “Soviet Special Forces (Spetsnaz): Experiences in Afghanistan,” *Military Review* (March-April 2002): 105-107, available on-line at <www.leavenworth.army.mil/milrev>, accessed 27 July 2005; Bill Powell (reported by Vladimir Volkov, Owen Matthews, and Yana Dlugy), “The Haunted, In the Realm of the Spirits, Back into the World,” *Newsweek*, International ed. (22 February 1999): 37.
17. Cassidy, 27.
18. Nawroz and Grau, 2.
19. Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience* (London: Routledge, 2000), 167.
20. Russian General Staff, 49.
21. *Ibid.*, 49-50.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Nawroz and Grau, 5.
24. Russian General Staff, 49-51.
25. *Ibid.*, 50.
26. Baumann interview.
27. Russian General Staff, 50.
28. Reese, 167-69.
29. Baumann interview.
30. Russian General Staff, 52.
31. The author admits “USSR’s Vietnam” is more a figure of speech than a reality. The correlation between the two wars is often overstated. Detailed study and understanding are necessary when comparing the two wars.

Major Stephen Pomper, U.S. Army, is a G3 maneuver planner, 1st Cavalry Division, Fort Hood, Texas. He received a B.S. from the University of New Hampshire, an M.M.A.S. from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, and is a graduate of the School of Advanced Military Studies Program. He has served in various command and staff positions in the continental United States and Korea.