The Soviet Army, Counterinsurgency, and the Afghan War

SCOTT R. McMICHAEL

The military situation that confronted the Soviet army in Afghanistan during its nine-plus years of occupation (December 1979 to February 1989) differed significantly from the Soviets' prewar expectations. Soviet forces were committed into Afghanistan on the false presumption that the the rapidly destabilizing situation could be put right by means of a quick, violent coup-de-main on the model of the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. Soviet planners were fully aware of the growing resistance movement in Afghanistan, yet the Soviet army entered the country expecting little opposition, prepared only to fight a few short, conventional actions if necessary.[1]

Afghanistan, the Soviets found, is not Czechoslovakia. Soviet forces became mired in an extended counterinsurgency campaign against a classic guerrilla force. This article will show how the Soviet army responded to the unexpected dilemma it met. Further, it will analyze how the Soviet ground forces adapted and failed to adapt to the peculiar conditions of counterinsurgency warfare in a large, dry, mountainous region, and it will draw conclusions on the suitability of the Soviet army for such operations.

The Doctrinal Dilemma

Aside from the airborne and elite striking forces employed by the Soviets in the initial coup-de-main in Kabul, the Soviet armed forces inserted into the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan were structured and trained for large-scale conventional warfare. Soviet military doctrine envisioned their employment on flat, rolling terrain like that of Europe. This latter kind of warfare is characterized doctrinally by deep offensive operations carried out by heavy tank-mechanized formations, massed and echeloned to conduct breaches of dense defenses, followed by rapid advance into the enemy rear to encircle

and destroy him. These ground operations are accompanied and supported by simultaneous attack of the enemy throughout his entire depth by aviation, missiles, long-range artillery, and coordinated airborne and airmobile assaults. The doctrine seeks a quick, decisive victory. The unsuitability of such a doctrine and such forces to the situation in Afghanistan is obvious, yet the Soviet army adjusted slowly and painfully to the unconventional tasks that confronted it.

Conventional Soviet doctrine ran aground in Afghanistan against two related obstacles: the physical environment and the threat. Instead of a moderate climate and the open terrain of Europe, Soviet forces found desert and highly restrictive mountainous terrain, with severe extremes of weather and temperature. In addition, the local logistical infrastructure and road and rail networks were quite undeveloped. Besides severely restricting the movement and fires of heavy forces, these factors created severe problems in command and control. Vehicles frequently broke down owing to inferior maintenance, deficient repair, driver inexperience, and general wear and tear. Further, the Soviet logistical organization for both the ground and air components initially was unequal to the task of supporting such an unwieldy force in such difficult terrain.

Soviet forces also were unprepared for the *mujaheddin* resistance. Instead of a coherent, conventional foe in prepared defenses, they found a hardy, resilient guerrilla force which generally refused to stand and fight. Numbering about 80,000 full-time fighters, the mujaheddin were organized into hundreds of small groups operating throughout the countryside and in all the major cities. These small groups of 20 to 50 men were loosely aggregated into *Jabhas*—a local organization approximating a battalion—and occasionally into regiments, regional commands, and even divisions.[2] Equipped primarily with light arms and a limited number of heavy weapons—such as machineguns, mortars, 107mm and 122mm rocket launchers, and short-range antitank rockets—the mujaheddin conducted a classic hit-and-run guerrilla war. The extremely decentralized nature of their activity precluded the mobilization of large forces and coordinated action on a large scale against the Soviets, but it also provided security through dispersion.

In several respects, it is difficult to understand why the Soviets were not better prepared to fight a counterinsurgency. After all, they have paid close

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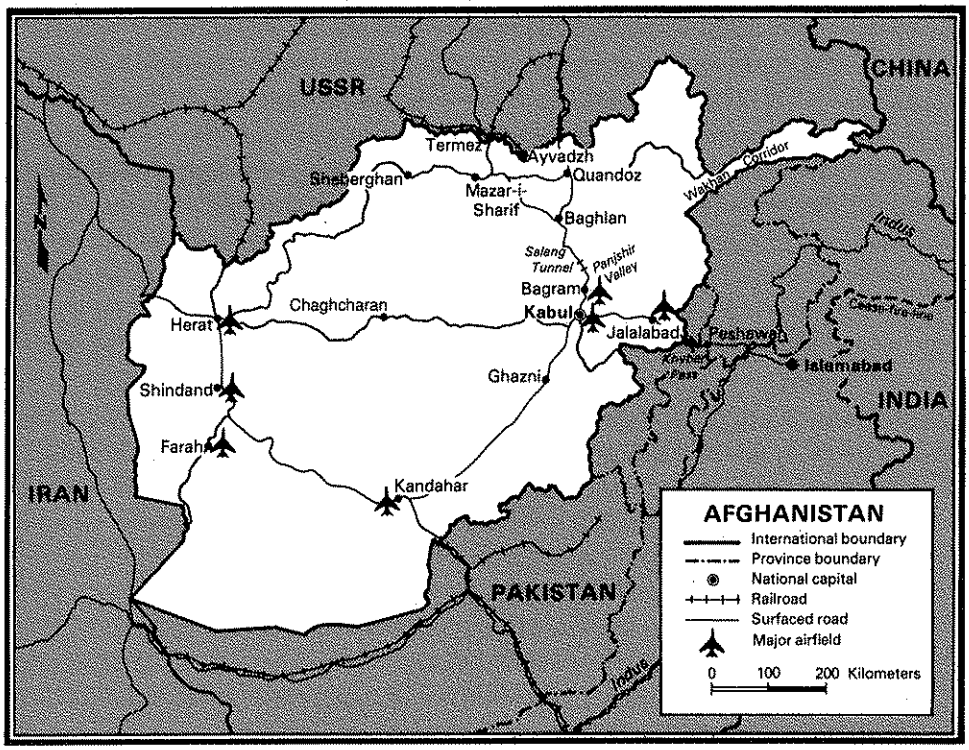
Major Scott R. McMichael, Field Artillery, is a Research Associate at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, where he is working with Professor John Erickson. He holds a B.A. in history from Davidson College and an M.A. in international relations (Soviet concentration) from the University of Chicago, and is a graduate of the Defense Language Institute (Russian), the US Army Russian Institute in Garmisch, and the US Army Command and General Staff College. Major McMichael has commanded artillery batteries in both Alaska and the Federal Republic of Germany. His article on the tactical excellence of Colonel Charles N. Hunter in Burma appeared in the Summer 1986 issue of *Parameters*.



Map by Jim Kistler, USAWC

attention to the participation of Western powers in local wars.[3] The Soviets also have a rich experience themselves both in insurgent warfare (World War II partisan operations) and in suppressing insurgencies (in the Caucasus and central Asia in the 1920s and 30s and in the Ukraine and Baltic regions after World War II). Yet in Soviet doctrine development this experience clearly gave way to an emphasis on the great conventional campaigns of the Red Army against the Germans. When the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan in the fall of 1979, it did so without any counterinsurgency military doctrine. With but a few isolated writings on the subject by some of the great military theoreticians in Soviet military history,[4] the Soviet army found itself sorely handicapped by the absence of a doctrine to guide its military operations.

In the absence of a formal counterinsurgency doctrine and with the belated realization that a quick military victory was not possible, the Soviet command developed an ad hoc counterinsurgency strategy. The Soviet army lacked sufficient forces to defeat the insurgency, and Moscow was unwilling to commit the forces necessary to obtain victory because of the unacceptably high political, ideological, economic, and military costs of such a course. On the other hand, the technological superiority of the Soviet army, particularly its advantages in firepower and mobility, prevented a mujaheddin victory. Soviet forces were able to extend temporary control into any part of the

country, but they were unable to maintain that control beyond a few weeks. When Soviet units were withdrawn, mujaheddin forces reappeared. This alternation of Soviet/Afghan control and mujaheddin control characterized the war throughout most of the country's provinces.

Under these conditions of military stalemate, the Soviet command shifted its emphasis from military operations to long-term political, social, and economic warfare against the insurgents. The several components of this widened effort—political indoctrination, exploitation of tribal differences, education of thousands of Afghan children in the Soviet Union, destruction of the rural economy, genocidal razing of villages, forced resettlement, and the resulting creation of millions of refugees—have been described at length in many publications. The military aspect of this approach to the Afghan counterinsurgency can be described as a *stronghold strategy*. Unable to subdue the country as a whole, the Soviets concentrated their efforts on control of Afghanistan's largest cities, key facilities, and the main transportation network, i.e. those elements vital to the general control of the country and to the support of military operations. In conjunction with this strategy, they established large garrisons in cities and near airports, as well as strongpoints along the major arteries. Thus, by 1981 Soviet military activity in Afghanistan evolved into three primary kinds of operations: static defense of key centers, securing lines of communications and supply (the so-called "highway war"), and direct operations against the mujaheddin.[5] We shall focus here on the latter category because it most directly applies to the question of Soviet adaptation to counterinsurgency warfare.

Periodic Conventional Offensives

For the first several years of the occupation, the Soviet approach to direct military operations reflected a fixed, conventional mind-set. Periodic conventional offensives, generally in division strength, were the early staple of Soviet and Afghan operations against the rebels. These offensives typically were launched after several weeks or months of planning and logistical preparation. They began with an extensive bombardment of the target area over the course of several days, perhaps a week, by fixed-wing aircraft, artillery, helicopters, and missiles. Then mechanized columns of tank and motorized rifle units moved along major roads into mountain valleys, under constant fire support. Soviet units often demonstrated dangerous tactical rigidity, inflexibility, and lack of aggressiveness.

The columns, finding comfort in technical superiority and obsessed with adherence to traditional firepower as the principal supporting means of advance, normally fired to the front and flanks, sometimes at random to suppress suspected mujaheddin positions and to force their advance. The Soviets failed to employ ground probes and tactical reconnaissance, nor did they position security elements to operate on the ridges and high ground, which often closely

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Soviet troops return to their BMP-1 mechanized infantry combat vehicles. Early in the war Soviet motorized rifle units restricted their movement to valley floors such as this, refraining from dismounted operations in tougher terrain.

dominated the axis of advance. Accordingly, the Soviets contributed to the uncertainty of their own situation as their columns moved on.[6]

Such maneuver exposed Soviet units to surprise attacks at close quarters by the lightly armed rebels. Slow to react and unable to exploit their heavy direct fires, the Soviet troops were also quite reluctant to dismount and engage in close combat. Soviet motorized rifle units generally restricted their movement to valley floors, showing a reluctance to enter tougher terrain.

Beginning in 1980-81, the Soviets introduced some effective modifications to these offensives. They began to emplace light troops—airborne, air assault, and, sparingly, motorized rifle units—by helicopter along the high ground and in the passes that dominated movement along the axes of advance used by the ground troops. Use of these airmobile elements helped to preempt mujaheddin occupation of key terrain and reduced the number and effectiveness of their attacks on the ground columns. Later, growing use of heliborne elements evolved into a kind of blocking tactic aimed at fixing and destroying the mujaheddin.[7]

Still, the overall ineffectiveness of these conventional offensives is borne out by two significant facts. First, the Soviets had to conduct such operations over and over again in the same areas, even when the mujaheddin suffered considerable casualties.[8] Second, these large offensives received little attention in the Soviet military press; this void in self-analysis is tacit acknowledgement of the indecisiveness of the conventional offensives.

The Soviets' tardiness in implementing effective change does not mean they failed to realize the peculiarities of combat in Afghanistan. In fact, Soviet discussions in their military press of actual unit operations show a rather complete understanding that the specific and unusual characteristics of the Afghan counterinsurgency required correspondingly specific and unique tactical solutions.[9] To be more precise, the Soviets identified seven primary features of counterinsurgency warfare which have a strong influence on the conduct of tactical operations and which elicited specific responses.

The first of these features is a new *appreciation for the influence of terrain.*[10] Soviet doctrine for conventional war, even in a mountainous area, overwhelmingly stresses the destruction of the enemy as the primary goal of armed conflict. Terrain was judged important, but only one of many factors that influence the attainment of this goal. In Afghanistan, however, the Soviets came to realize that terrain—and climate—occupy first place above all other factors in terms of their influence on destroying the enemy. In Afghanistan terrain affected everything in combat: maneuver, effects of weapons, fields of fire and observation, physical readiness, logistics, communications, and the operating characteristics of weapons and equipment.

Mountainous terrain also leads to the compartmentalization of military activity. As described above, the Soviets discovered the futility of maneuvering with large units on valley floors. It became evident that the only way to close with the mujaheddin was to pursue them into the restricted gorges and canyons, through passes, and across ridgelines. This activity required a high level of *decentralization*, because the folds of the terrain naturally divide a large unit into small segments. The emphasis necessarily must be on company, platoon, and even at times squad operations. The important decisions, consequently, are those made by captains, lieutenants, and sergeants.

In such conditions, small units must be able to operate independently, often at a significant distance from their parent battalion or regiment. *Independent operations* by small units moving on separate axes with open flanks and an unsecured rear thus appeared as a second Soviet tactical response to the Afghan insurgency.

Decentralized, independent operations further meant that small units must be more self-supporting.[11] In Afghanistan, a company or platoon engaged with the rebels often was not in visual or radio contact with other Soviet units. In many cases, it would have been pracically impossible to support these engaged units with effective fires from supporting organizations. Accordingly, the Soviet command enhanced their capability for *self-support* through the practice of *attachments* at a very low level. These attachments consisted of sections or squads of engineers, mortarmen, grenadiers, retransmission specialists, and augmentation of radio operators and ground reconnaissance assets.[12] One interesting innovation was the attachment of artillery spotter and

adjustment teams.[13] Soviet doctrine provides for the organization of units with such combined arms attachments, but generally at a higher level or in units that have been assigned a special role, such as advance guard or forward detachment. What was new in Afghanistan was the attachment of these squads and sections on a regular basis to infantry platoons and companies so they did not have to depend on support from a higher level of command.

Another feature of the ground war was the necessity of fighting in *dismounted order* to achieve decisive tactical results. Soviet armored personnel carriers and fighting vehicles often were not able to negotiate the trails leading to mujaheddin positions and unit commanders could not rely on them for supporting fires from their on-board cannons and machineguns—another reason why dismounted attachments of mortars and grenadiers were needed. Thus, combat in the Afghan countryside demanded that Soviet personnel muscle their heavy weapons and ammunition loads into position on foot. This newfound stress on dismounted maneuver constituted a fundamental change from the standard Soviet approach to an infantry attack, wherein the infantrymen ride in their armored vehicles to an attack line quite close to the objective and dismount only for the final assault. In Afghanistan, both approach and assault had to be conducted on foot.

Owing to overwhelming Soviet air superiority and firepower advantages, the mujaheddin conducted most of their operations after dark, a practice that forced the Soviet army itself to increase stress on *night operations*. However, despite the heavy emphasis of Soviet writings and training programs on night operations, it is clear that the mujaheddin ruled the night in Afghanistan.[14] Analysis of the Soviet military press shows that the preponderance of Soviet night operations were carried out by the specially trained light troops mentioned earlier. Even these units, it seems, often ceased movement at night and assumed a stationary defensive posture until morning, unless they were charged with conducting a night ambush or attack.

The last of the seven earmarks of counterinsurgency war in Afghanistan was that the conflict belonged to the *light infantrymen*. The conflict required light infantry skills on both individual and unit levels. The mujaheddin, like all guerrilla forces, constituted a light infantry force. To defeat them in close terrain, the Soviets also needed to be able to fight as light infantry. Thus, the war caused the Soviet army to take a new interest in light infantry skills and tactics.[15]

It is also clear that this kind of war requires very capable unit commanders who can exercise initiative and who possess imagination. These commanders must be able to make quick decisions on their own in the face of unexpected developments, discarding textbook solutions that do not apply. Tactical flexibility, not rigidity, is a prerequisite. Numerous studies by Western analysts have concluded that these are not qualities routinely developed in

Soviet motorized rifle unit commanders, especially at the noncommissioned and junior officer level, the weakest link in the Soviet chain of command.[16]

The Soviet military press also has identified deficiencies in the Soviet tactical military leadership in Afghanistan. The shortcomings most often cited have been lack of initiative, inability to use supporting weapons effectively, lack of trust up and down the chain of command, poor relations between officers and NCOs, and lack of necessary technical skills. The military press also has called for Soviet officers and NCOs to obtain proficiency in certain skills that they are normally not required to possess, such as the ability to operate and do minor repairs on radios, the ability to call for artillery support, the ability to direct fire support from helicopters, and increased familiarity with vehicles and support equipment. These functions are normally performed by specialists, but the Afghan War demanded that commanders and NCOs perform them.[17]

The inability of Soviet commanders to cope with the special characteristics of the light infantry war in Afghanistan is reflected as well in the comments of mujaheddin leaders and other observers. An Afghan army colonel described the Soviets as "oversupervised, lacking initiative, and addicted to cookbook warfare." David Isby, writing in *Jane's Defence Review*, cites reports by eyewitnesses that the Russians were "tactical zeros" and "decidedly third rate."[18]

Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn is that the standard Soviet motorized rifle unit and commander were unable to adapt to the tactical situation. The unconventional features of the war, and the nonstandard tactical tasks that had to be performed, simply exceeded the capability of these conventionally oriented and trained units. It is equally clear that these units could not be trained to effective standards in light infantry skills. The quality of the troops and junior commanders which form the backbone of the Soviet army is apparently so low, and their training programs so rigid and conventionally oriented, that these troops have little utility in a counterinsurgency—except in handling the most basic activities, such as static defense of fixed sites.

The Creation of a Soviet Counterinsurgency Force

In response to these serious deficiencies, the Soviet command developed a novel approach, which began to characterize their operations as early as 1983. Motorized rifle units were for the most part withdrawn from direct operations against the mujaheddin, except when the large conventional offensives were conducted. Instead, the motorized rifle divisions were used to defend cities, airports, highway outposts, logistic centers, and garrisons. They accompanied and protected convoys. They were also employed to carry out the Soviet programs of economic warfare, such as burning crops, destroying the rural

irrigation system, bombarding villages, etc. But analysis of Soviet military press notices demonstrates beyond doubt that these units rarely conducted heliborne assaults, raids, ambushes, pursuit, or dismounted night operations against the mujaheddin.

The Soviets turned to their elite units to create what amounted to a direct-action counterinsurgency force. This force was composed of four kinds of units: airborne, air assault, designated reconnaissance, and special operations (*spetsnaz*) units. Although these kinds of units had been involved in the conflict since its start, their number and missions changed over time; from 1983 to the withdrawal of Soviet troops, they bore the brunt of the fighting and suffered most of the casualties. These units numbered from 18,000 to 23,000 soldiers.[19]

Most of these soldiers were in airborne units: approximately 10,000 troops from three airborne divisions (the 104th and 105th Guards Divisions and the 103d Division). The air assault troops, numbering from 5000 to 7000, came from fairly new Soviet organizations, the air assault and airmobile brigades. In the Soviet Union these formations are usually trained for battalion- to division-level deployment into the enemy rear in support of front offensive operations. In Afghanistan, however, they were generally deployed by helicopter, BMD (airborne combat vehicle), or on foot, in battalion, company, and platoon packets in independent operations.[20]

With respect to the use of reconnaissance units in a counterinsurgency role, each motorized rifle division and regiment in the Soviet force structure includes a specially trained reconnaissance battalion and company, respectively. In conventional conditions, these units operate as mounted advance guards and as security detachments to the flanks and rear of the parent organization. Thus, they are accustomed to the kind of decentralized, independent operations seen in Afghanistan. Approximately 5000 reconnaissance troops (*razvedchiki*) were maintained in the country during the war.

The Soviet military press frequently refers to the operations carried out by the airborne, air assault, and reconnaissance units. Quite a bit less is known, however, about the contributions made by spetsnaz troops; it is thought that they were engaged in some limited small-unit combat as well as special operations such as sabotage, deep reconnaissance, espionage, reprisals, and assassinations.[21]

Employment of the Soviet Counterinsurgency Force

Airborne, air assault, and reconnaissance forces were employed in typical light infantry operations: long-range reconnaissance patrolling; ambushes, mostly at night, along infiltration routes; heliborne raids; combat patrolling to clear areas around sensitive installations; support of conventional offensives as described earlier; and heliborne convoy escort and reaction.

In the attack, Soviet light units first conducted very thorough reconnaissance in greater depth and breadth than normally done by Soviet infantry. Once the best approach routes were selected, commanders typically directed simultaneous attack from two or more directions. Great stress was placed on the use of enveloping detachments sent on concealed, round-about routes to attack the objective from the rear. The attacking units were strongly reinforced by attachments. Particularly important were engineer detachments to clear routes of mines and obstacles, mortars—preferred because of their mobility and trajectory—and the new AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers.[22]

Soviet units assumed the defensive in Afghanistan under various conditions.[23] Defensive positions had to be organized on a multilayered, 360-degree basis, providing fall-back positions, intersecting fires, and coverage of all dead spaces by observation, fires, or mines. Early warning was achieved by means of listening posts, dogs, flares, and minefields, but rarely through local patrols.[24]

In general, the counterinsurgency units were far more effective than the motorized rifle troops. Near the border, operations by light troops and spetsnaz, combined with bombing and aerial mining, cramped the ability of the mujaheddin to bring supplies into the country in truck caravans. The rebels were forced to spend more time and effort on their own security.

The Soviets also started ambushing resistance groups. These operations were carried out not by ordinary soldiers but by groups of specially trained troops. In one instance, because a more direct route had been closed, mujaheddin going to the north were taking a longer route through the mountains in an area where the special units were active. In the ensuing Soviet ambush, more than 40 mujaheddin were killed.[25] All in all, the improved performance of the Soviet counterinsurgency forces kept the rebels off balance, restricted their initiative, complicated their resupply, and caused them to be more cautious.

On the other hand, the Soviet elite troops had weaknesses of their own. Soviet literature and mujaheddin reports indicate that they remained quite vulnerable to ambush. Asked how he countered the enemy's action, mujaheddin leader Abdul Haq responded:

> In order to discourage the enemy we simply ambush the ambushers. With reliable information about the time and place of the ambush, we took position before the arrival of the enemy. We carried out five operations of this kind, and each time we killed 10 to 15 Russians, all the elite commandos whom the Russians were not very eager to lose.[26]

Many articles in the Soviet military press lauding the performance of their light units start out by describing how they managed to extricate themselves from rebel ambushes and then drove the rebels off.[27] It also

appears that these units were not able to match the mujaheddin in dismounted tactical mobility, speed, and terrain negotiation. Further, they often did not achieve surprise and they limited themselves by refusing to venture out of range of artillery support. Use of light forces in the conventional offensives did not measurably increase their decisiveness, nor did night patrols lead to a significant reduction in rebel mortar and rocket attacks against fixed sites.

No discussion of the counterinsurgency warfare in Afghanistan would be complete without mention of the Soviet use of helicopters. Like the US Army in Vietnam, the Soviet army discovered in Afghanistan that helicopters are exceptionally well-suited for use in counterinsurgency warfare owing to their range, mobility, armament, and multiple capabilities. Given the decentralization of operations and vast territory to be covered, the Soviets could not have maintained pressure on the mujaheddin without the helicopter. Helicopter employment was the most dynamic feature of Soviet tactical operations during the war. Helicopters provided a mobility of combat power that the rebels in no way could match, enhanced surprise, reduced rebel reaction time, enabled Soviet units to respond to guerrilla threats rapidly, and provided Soviet forces their best means of exercising initiative. Moreover, the low air-defense threat enabled the Soviet command to test its pilots and helicopters thoroughly and allowed them to engage in relatively danger-free tactical trial and error. The experience in helicopter employment obtained in Afghanistan was probably the most important military benefit achieved there by the Soviets.[28]

However, Soviet employment of helicopters also had many negative aspects. Maintenance was poor, and mechanical breakdowns and accidents were frequent. Attack helicopters sometimes attacked designated objectives even when it was clear that no enemy forces were present. Air-ground coordination suffered from imperfect communications, poor target identification, and untimely response.[29]

Moreover, Soviet helicopters remained vulnerable to mujaheddin air defenses—initially heavy machineguns and the SA-7 missile—often because of failure to identify the threat or to take effective evasive action. Hundreds of helicopters were destroyed on the ground and in the air, perhaps as many as 700 through 1985.[30] The introduction of the Stinger missile in the spring of 1987 sharply increased the threat to Soviet aircraft, owing to its superior range and performance. However, the limited number of Stingers, restrictions on reloads, and the uneven territorial distribution of the missiles reduced the effect they might have had.

Conclusions

Overall, the Soviet army in Afghanistan adapted slowly to the unexpected conditions that confronted it. In time, the Soviet command developed a counterinsurgency strategy that included a military component tailored to

the particular conditions of anti-guerrilla warfare in a large, underdeveloped, mountainous region. But neither the counterinsurgency strategy as a whole nor the military response produced decisive results.

At the tactical level, Soviet military performance was subpar. The conventional orientation, tactical rigidity, and generally poor quality of Soviet motorized rifle troops and their commanders prevented them from being used effectively in a direct counterinsurgency role. Although Soviet doctrine describes the functions performed by light infantry troops as legitimate functions for mechanized units, these units could not be converted into light infantry. To speak bluntly, they were not capable of being trained in the skills and to the standard necessary to defeat the mujaheddin. Strangely, however, there are no indications that the Soviets intend to develop and maintain a separate counterinsurgency force. They obviously view counterinsurgency operations as an anomaly not likely to be repeated, and they appear content to rely once again on the use of their elite troops in this role should it be necessary.

Even so, these higher-quality units did not adapt perfectly to the Afghan tactical situation. They were not able to match the mujaheddin in many light infantry skills. They continued to rely overmuch on technical superiority and not enough on tactical superiority. In their defense, however, one must note that the limited number of these units probably precluded them from achieving a decisive victory over the resistance.[31]

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan also demonstrated that there is a wide gap between what is prescribed in Soviet tactical writings and what their units can actually perform, including the elite units. All military units, of course, lack proficiency in certain areas; it is impossible for any unit to be constantly ready for every potential mission. That is, indeed, why units train. What is surprising about the Soviet experience in Afghanistan is the *breadth* and *longevity* of the gap between tactical doctrine and tactical proficiency, particularly in regard to motorized rifle units. Even after years of fighting the mujaheddin, Soviet units continued to fall short of the standards demanded for tactical success. It must be remembered that the rebels also had to maintain tactical proficiency despite losses in manpower and the absence of a formal training system. Why were they able to maintain a high level of tactical performance while the Soviets were not?

There is no reason to believe that this deficiency, an inability to adapt to nonstandard battlefield conditions, is peculiar only to those Soviet units deployed to Afghanistan. In fact, recent articles in the Soviet military press indicate that the Soviet high command has taken note of an endemic, debilitating, parade-ground approach to training, which causes units to tackle all tactical problems in the same way, regardless of complicating conditions.[32] Undoubtedly, analysis of unit performance in Afghanistan is contributing to a fuller Soviet understanding of the nature of this deficiency.

It is clear that the Soviet army is trying to transfer the lessons learned in Afghanistan to the army as a whole, particularly for units training in or expected to operate in mountain theaters. Nevertheless, a close reading of the Soviet literature shows that the conventional context prevails. Dismounted maneuver is still rarely performed by motorized rifle troops. In Soviet exercises, guerrilla groups like the mujaheddin are never played. The enemy is always conventionally armed and disposed. Major air and air-defense operations are conducted by both sides, and nuclear, biological, and chemical conditions are occasionally invoked.[33]

The units that appear to have benefited most from the Afghan War are Soviet special troops; the Soviet military press shows a concerted effort to pass the lessons learned by the engineer, communications, and reconnaissance troops to like units. Some lessons learned, however, are not taking hold in the rest of the Soviet army. There is little evidence, for example, that the experiences of Soviet forces in Afghanistan have led to significant improvements in the exercise of initiative, the decentralization of decisionmaking to lower levels, or the use of imagination in training programs. Frequent articles in the military newspaper *Red Star* and the journal *Military Herald* reflect the alarm felt by many Afghan-veteran officers about the lack of realism and the rigidity they find in the training programs of the units they have joined after leaving Afghanistan. However, the new high-level interest in Soviet training problems mentioned above may mean that the protests of the Soviet veterans of the Afghan War are having an effect.

On the positive side, the Soviet army has undoubtedly benefited and will continue to benefit from its technical and tactical experimentation in Afghanistan with new weapon systems and organizations—including the Mi-24 Hind gunship, the AGS-17 grenade launcher, new types of mines, and the use of air assault units.[34]

All things considered, the Soviet command cannot be much encouraged by the performance of its units in Afghanistan. Over the course of more than nine years, the Soviet army was not able to pacify a single Afghan province on a permanent basis, nor to stop the flow of arms to the rebels. The performance of its motorized rifle units, the foundation of the Soviet force structure, remained consistently low, and that poor performance was matched by the units' leadership. The conclusion is inescapable that given these many revealed deficiencies, the Soviet army is ill-suited for employment in counterinsurgency warfare—and will remain so.

NOTES

1. The Soviet army did, in fact, have to fight two stiff battles in 1980 to subdue mutinies by two Afghan divisions, the 8th Infantry and the 14th Armored divisions (*Afghanistan: A Country Study* [Washington: The American University, Foreign Area Studies, 1986; produced for the US government], p. 306).

2. Ali Jalali, "The Soviet Military Operation in Afghanistan and the Role of Light and Heavy Forces at Tactical and Operational Level," *Report of Proceedings, Light Infantry Conference, 1985* (Seattle: Boeing, 1985), pp. 165-67.

3. Extensive reading of Soviet analyses of local wars clearly reveals the flawed tendency to pay attention only to those features that are applicable to conventional, large-scale warfare. For example, the Soviets have virtually ignored guerrilla tactics in such writings. They noted that American reliance on firepower and technology in Vietnam did not achieve decisive results, yet they themselves made the same mistake in Afghanistan. Few writings in the open Soviet press discuss counterinsurgency warfare in meaningful detail. The prime Soviet text on local wars is I. Shavrov, *Local Wars* (Moscow: Military Press, Ministry of Defense, 1981), and it is fully illustrative of this defect.

4. A major stumbling block to the development of a Soviet counterinsurgency doctrine is the Marxist-Leninist idea that only traditionalist and capitalist regimes will have to deal with insurgencies. The Soviet Union, as the world's most progressive socialist country—so the theory goes—may have to suppress counter-revolutionary "bandits," but a counterinsurgency per se will not occur in a developed socialist regime. Thus, a counterinsurgency doctrine is not needed. Soviet military theoreticians have written sparingly on the subject. One example is Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevskii's "Battle of the Bedbugs," published in *M. N. Tukhachevskii. Collected Works* (Moscow: Military Press, Ministry of Defense, 1964), pp. 106-08.

5. It should be noted that Soviet military formations also participated in certain aspects of the economic warfare against the mujaheddin and their supporters. Examples of such activity are indiscriminate bombing of rebel population centers by artillery, air, and missiles; mining operations; burning of crops; destruction of the rural irrigation system; and forced resettlement of villagers.

6. Jalali, p. 174.

7. Ibid., 175. Colonel Jalali, a former Afghan army officer and mujaheddin leader, describes how heliborne detachments were "landed deep in the rear and flanks" of mujaheddin areas with a tactical mission to isolate the resistance strongholds, destroy mujaheddin bases, and cut their supply and infiltration routes. These heliborne desants were coordinated with the approach of ground columns.

8. The Panjshir Valley, for example, was the object of at least eight such offensives, yet it remained almost continuously under rebel control. The relatively small size of the Soviet contingent in Afghanistan, the ineffectiveness of the Afghan army and militia, and the indecisive results of the offensives combined to prohibit permanent pacification of strong rebel territories.

9. This article is based on an analysis of more than 60 such articles from a number of different publications. However, primary attention has been given to the Soviet military publication *Military Herald*, because it is generally considered to be the most comprehensive and professional journal of those reasonably available in the West. Most of the sources are Russian-language; citations are in English to aid the reader.

10. G. Shevchuk, "Maneuver in Mountains," *Military Herald* (No. 12, 1985), pp. 29-31; General of the Army I. Tretiak, "Organization and Conduct of Offensive Battle in Mountain-Taiga Terrain," *Military History Journal* (No. 7, 1980), pp. 42- 49; General-Lieutenant V. Kozhbakhteev, "Development of Combat Tactics in Forested-Mountain Terrain," *Military History Journal* (No. 2, 1981), pp. 36-37.

11. The Soviet term used to denote self-sustainment and self-support is *samostoyatel'nost*, meaning, in general, independence.

12. N. Stepanov, "Grenadiers in the Mountains," *Military Herald* (No. 9, 1985), p. 23; A. Fel'dt, "Motorized Rifle Troops Attack in the Mountains," *Military Herald* (No. 11, 1985), pp. 25-28; General of the Army Yu. Maximov, "Mountain Training," *Soviet Military Review* (No. 12, 1984), p. 6.

13. Yu. Churkin, "Come up on the Air," *Military Herald* (No. 5, 1988), p. 76; V. Kurochkin, "In the Green Zone," *Military Herald* (No. 3, 1988), p. 36; Maximov, p. 7.

14. Soviet units supposedly conduct 30 percent of their field training at night. However, in Afghanistan the common practice of motorized rifle troops was to take shelter at night in prepared garrisons and strongpoints. Virtually every account of a Soviet night operation in Afghanistan, as reported in *Military Herald* from 1983 to 1988, involved airborne or air assault troops, not motorized rifle units. Accounts of motorized rifle units conducting night operations in mountains appear almost exclusively in connection with training exercises in the USSR.

15. What kind of light infantry skills are needed? The most important are rapid and quiet negotiation of difficult terrain, stealth, use of the terrain for protection and concealment, individual field-craft, tracking, expert marksmanship, skillful siting of heavy weapons, controlled expenditure of ammunition, technical skill with mountain gear, coordinated dismounted maneuver by individuals and units, and a high level of physical fitness.

16. In regard to the question of preparing NCOs for service in Afghanistan, a report in *Afghanistan: A Country Study*, p. 307, indicates that some NCOs were sent to a training division for six months before being posted to Afghanistan. In addition, a large number of the NCOs in the occupation force, plus some enlisted men, were trained in Ashkabad in the Turkestan Military District before assignment.

17. See, for example, N. Zaitsevskii, "Not by the Numbers, but with Imagination," *Military Herald* (No. 4, 1986), pp. 28-29; R. Aushev, "Without Communications, Reliable Command and Control Is Not

Possible," *Military Herald* (No. 8, 1986), pp. 79-81; N. Goryachev, "Don't Chew Out Sergeants, Teach Them," *Military Herald* (No. 5, 1988), pp. 33-35; Kurochkin, p. 36; Maximov, pp. 7-8.

18. The Afghan colonel is quoted in Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan* (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Co., 1986), p. 149; for the David C. Isby citations, see his article "Soviet Tactics in the War in Afghanistan," *Jane's Defence Review*, 4 (No. 7, 1983), 689.

19. Steve Sego, "US Experts Discuss Soviet Army in Afghanistan," *Radio Liberty Report 302/87*, 24 July 1987.

20. Sometimes these units deployed directly from bases in the Soviet Union into immediate action in Afghanistan (David C. Isby, "Soviet Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan, 1979-1985," *Report of Proceedings, Light Infantry Conference, 1985* [Seattle: Boeing, 1985], p. 187).

21. Ibid., pp. 185, 187.

22. See, for example, C. Korobka, "Reconnaissance in Mountains," *Military Herald* (No. 10, 1985), pp. 13-15; G. Ivanov, "Reconnaissance of a Mountain Pass," *Military Herald* (No. 1, 1985), pp. 25-27; M. Shepilov, "In a Mobile Security Detachment," *Military Herald* (No. 3, 1986), pp. 34-36. Engineers accompanied the main attack force as well as recon and security detachments, and they sometimes were the first to land in heliborne desants in order to clear the landing zones of mines. With regard to the AGS-17, this new weapon exhibited outstanding utility in the mountains because of its range (beyond 1000 meters), high rate of fire, potent explosive force (30mm grenade from a 30-round drum), and trajectory, which permitted it to be fired into dead spaces.

23. The defensive was assumed when Soviet units established a blocking position, took up a night defensive position, preemptively occupied dominating terrain, defended key facilities through a system of strongpoints, or halted for any lengthy period of time.

24. It has not been reported that the Soviet army in Afghanistan used remote sensors for early warning such as were used by US forces in Vietnam. The lack of aggressive patrolling at night is another indication that Soviet units generally ceded control of the night to the mujaheddin; it is also an indication of the Soviets' absence of proficiency in this basic dismounted infantry skill.

25. Isby, "Soviet Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan," p. 189. See also, Charles Dunbar, "Afghanistan in 1986: The Balance Endures," *Asian Survey*, 27 (February 1987), 132-33.

26. Isby, "Soviet Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan," p. 189.

27. For example: Yu. Konobritskii, "Sergeants—Reliable Assistants to Officers," *Military Herald* (No. 9, 1985), p. 30; Yu. Protasov, "Battalion Commander Litenov," *Military Herald* (No. 8, 1985), p. 39; Yu. Protasov, "That is the Very Person," *Military Herald* (No. 7, 1985), p. 53; N. Kravchenko, "On Internationalist Duty," *Military Herald* (No. 4, 1985), p. 81.

28. The number of helicopters deployed in Afghanistan ranged over time from 500 to 650, with approximately 250 of these being the heavily armored Mi-24 Hind gunship. Other helicopters used by the Soviets included the Mi-4 Hound, Mi-6 Hip, Mi-8 Hook. Soviet helicopter operations during the war fell into six main categories: logistical support and resupply (consuming the bulk of the sorties), reconnaissance, convoy escort, tactical lift, medevac, and fire support.

29. Isby, "Soviet Tactics," p. 683; "Firing on Abandoned Trenches," *Red Star*, 16 July 1982.

30. Jalali, p. 167, cites 700 as the number of aircraft losses by 1985. Collins, p. 147, cites 600 by that time.

31. Could the Soviet elite units have increased their effectiveness by adopting a "pure" guerrilla approach? Tactically, of course, the light infantry style practiced by the Soviet counterinsurgency force did resemble guerrilla tactics to a certain degree. However, the limited numbers of the Soviet counterinsurgency troops (18,000 to 23,000, compared to 80,000 mujaheddin), the vast expanse of territory, and the inability of Soviet units for security reasons (i.e. the hostility of the populace) to disperse and base out of the countryside eliminated this option.

32. On 7 January 1988, the editors of *Red Star*, the newspaper of the Soviet armed forces, opened a dialogue on the question of the military readiness of the forces. They invited their readership to correspond with the newspaper in order to identify deficiencies in training programs and tactics and to share ideas on the solutions to these problems. The introductory article for this dialogue, "Revival (of Tactics) as Art," was written by General-Lieutenant B. Khazikov, Deputy Chief of the Main Administration of Combat Training of the Ground Forces. This article was quite pointed in its criticism of unimaginative training, slavish adherence to textbook tactics, and incompetent commanders.

33. A good example of Soviet adaptation of lessons learned in Afghanistan to a conventional context was the exercise, *Kavkaz* (Caucasus) 85, as described in Yu. Protasov, "In a Tactical Air Desant," *Military Herald* (No. 11, 1985), pp. 10-14; Jalali, p. 174.

34. *Afghanistan: A Country Study*, p. 315; Collins, p. 147; J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Occupation* (Washington: National Defense Univ. Press, 1986), p. 172. In addition to those cited in the text, the Soviets also fielded or tested many other items in Afghanistan including chemical weapons, fuel-air explosives, the Su-25 Frogfoot ground attack aircraft, the BMP-2 infantry combat vehicle, the new AK-74 rifle, a new 81mm mortar, and liquid-pressure-sensitive mines.