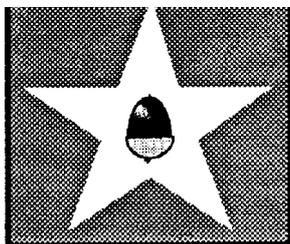


Conflict Studies Research Centre

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**Mujahideen Tactics in the
Soviet-Afghan War**

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Contents

Background: The Forces, Terrain & Nature of the War	2
The Combatants	2
<i>The Mujahideen</i>	2
<i>The DRA & Soviet Armies</i>	4
Terrain	5
The Nature of the War	5
<i>Mujahideen Tactics</i>	6
Offensive Actions	6
<i>Ambushes</i>	6
<i>Blocking Enemy Lines of Communication & Sieges</i>	7
<i>Raids</i>	8
<i>Attacking Strongpoints</i>	9
<i>Urban Combat</i>	9
Defence	9
<i>General</i>	9
<i>Cordon & Search Operations</i>	10
<i>Defence Against Raids</i>	11
<i>Fighting Against Heliborne Insertions & Attack</i>	
<i>Helicopters</i>	11
<i>Counter-Ambush</i>	12
Conclusion	13

Background: The Forces, Terrain & Nature of the War

The Combatants

The Mujahideen

Afghanistan is little more than a geographical expression. Its borders were arbitrarily drawn by outside powers. Its population comprises a loose collection of antithetical tribes and nationalities, the most numerous of which straddle the country's borders, artificial demarcation lines that mean little to them. The basic social units and focus of loyalty are the family and the Qawm, a local grouping defined by kinship, clan membership, residence and adherence to one of Islam's sects. Thus, there is little sense of Afghan nationhood and patriotism has not figured particularly highly as a motivating factor. The grip of central government has normally been intermittent and weak and local issues generally dominated the political agenda for most people, especially in the countryside. Any semblance of national unity has historically been merely the consequence of outsiders trying to impose alien rule on the country, as with the resistance to British occupiers in 1838-42 and 1878-1880.

The war started in the late summer of 1978 as a general uprising against the efforts of the communist Khalq government's efforts to force Soviet-style socialism on a deeply conservative, religious country. After little more than a year, it became clear that the government could not retain control and the USSR, in accordance with the "Brezhnev Doctrine", committed a "Limited Contingent" to assist, though it was soon to take over the direction of the war. Soviet intervention changed the nature of the struggle. Worried by Soviet expansionism, Pakistan, Iran and then the USA (especially), China and some European and Arab states began to supply money and arms to the *Mujahideen*. Most of this aid was funnelled through Pakistan, which distributed it to seven major Islamist factions; Islamabad favoured the four most fundamentalist of these. The religious leaders of the factions thus gained unprecedented political power, undermining the authority of tribal and village leaders. It was these factions that lifted the war from a myriad of local conflicts to something resembling a national struggle.

The resistance was never united, however. Even common loathing for the Soviet occupiers could not accomplish this (except, it would appear, to an extent in Kandahar). There was never a central leadership and clear chain of command. Rather, disunity characterized the resistance, with old disputes and enmities continuing despite the war. Sometimes, factions (themselves more or less loose groupings of sub-factions) would join up temporarily to pursue some venture. Sometimes co-operation was refused, or broke down during an operation. Routinely, factions appropriated aid meant for others. Sometimes they actually fought each other. (The KGB exploited this disunity by creating false bands posing as CIA-supported *mujahideen* which were used to sow confusion, flush out real rebel groups and provoke infighting. Thus, unlike the Americans in Vietnam, the Soviets never faced a monolithic enemy under tight central direction and capable of exercising operational art. For the most part, the war comprised a series of prolonged, largely local conflicts. There was never a prospect of the resistance

2

Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War

proceeding in time to the classic final phase of revolutionary war where the enemy is fought in conventional battle by "regular" forces.

Mujahideen commanders owed their position to their social standing, education, leadership abilities and commitment to their religion. They could not rely on military discipline to gain their warriors' obedience. Rather, they led by force of personality, moral persuasion and by achieving consensus. Not more than 15% of them were former professional soldiers; ex-officers were usually regarded as potential challengers to the authority of faction leaders and were therefore sidelined, especially by Islamic fundamentalists who distrusted those trained by the old regime. However, they made a significant contribution through their understanding of military-technical issues, planning skills and ability to train the fighters.

The *Mujahideen* warrior fought for his family, his tribe and his religion. He did so out of a love of freedom and sense of duty, as a volunteer without pay. For the most part, fighters were local men with family responsibilities. As such, they were untrained and necessarily part-timers; the spoils of war (eg, weapons to sell in the bazaars of Pakistan) were important to them as a source of income. As the war dragged on, though, mobile groups emerged. These comprised mostly young, unmarried men, sometimes paid, with higher standards of training.¹ Controlled by the major factions, these ranged over wider areas and made possible some larger-scale operations. In many ways, the *Mujahideen* rank and file were natural guerrillas. They were hardy, stoical, courageous, accustomed to the use of weapons in a land where conflict was endemic. They knew the terrain intimately in their own localities and could move rapidly over considerable distances. They were excellent in night combat (which was feared by their foes). They enjoyed the support of the population whence they sprang, with all that meant for the supply of recruits, food, shelter and intelligence.

They also suffered from the drawbacks common in a guerrilla force. Enthusiasm was considerable, but discipline was generally poor. It was often difficult to persuade volunteers, who wanted their share of the honour, excitement and loot that came from fighting, to perform the unglamorous tasks of logistic support and flank and rear area security. Sentries could not always be relied on. Poor fire discipline sometimes compromised good plans. And prolonged operations were vitiated by the tendency of fighters to drift home after a tactical success (or, for that matter, a reverse, or through boredom); exploitation to build on a tactical victory was a rarity.

The main weapons of the *Mujahideen* were the AK-47 (though the old British .303 inch Enfield, with its long range and power to penetrate Soviet flak jackets had its adherents), PK light machine guns and the RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launcher. As time went by, they acquired increasing numbers of heavy, crew served weapons. Most significant actions featured the use of 60mm, 82mm and sometimes 107mm mortars (the former described as the "guerrilla mortar"), 82mm recoilless anti-tank guns, BM-1 single 107mm rocket launchers, 7.62mm and 12.7mm heavy machine guns and sometimes howitzers; air defence was provided by 12.7mm and 14.5mm weapons, often surprisingly effective, especially in ambushes in mountains, and from 1988, the Stinger SAM, a show-stopper for Soviet aviation's low-level actions.

¹ There were also some volunteers from the Middle East. The Afghans regarded these Arabs as little more than prima donnas, there for Jihad credit whose interest was less in fighting than in making videos glorifying themselves.

The *Mujahideen* were also enthusiastic proponents of mine warfare (during the war, the Soviets lost 1,191 vehicles and 1,995 men to mines). They mostly employed anti-vehicle mines (often piling three on top of each other for a catastrophic kill) and delighted in improvising huge home-made mines. Mines, sometimes command detonated, were usually covered by fire and dug up for reuse if not set off by enemy vehicles.

The DRA & Soviet Armies

The army of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) collapsed as an effective fighting force after the Soviet invasion, defections reducing it from about 90,000 men in 1979 to 30,000 in early 1981. The remaining troops were generally of limited combat value. They were ill-equipped and badly trained. Worse still, they were unmotivated. The government enjoyed little popular support to begin with, and that little was steadily eroded by the way it and its Soviet masters behaved. The Soviet attitude, increasingly evident as the war dragged on, that DRA troops were expendable and should be given the most dangerous jobs did not help. Some officers who apparently remained loyal to the regime often secretly supported the *Mujahideen* and provided the resistance with information and arms. Most others showed little enthusiasm for real combat. The soldiery, both regular and militia were even more unwilling (the latter defecting *en masse* in 1984). Morale was very low and conscripts rarely put up much of a fight. Indeed, on many occasions whole units either fled or deserted to the resistance. It was common for *Mujahideen* groups to give captured conscripts a choice between going home or joining the resistance (usually, initially, in logistic support roles).

The Soviet Army that invaded Afghanistan was prepared only for a high tempo, mechanized war. Everything was geared to the demands of operational art within the context of strategic offensive operations. It was not equipped or trained for the sort of war it had to fight. It lacked an appropriate doctrine for counter-insurgency, and it took an astonishingly long time for the 40th Army (or rather, elements of it) to learn and adapt. Of course, adaptation was hampered by systemic limitations built in to an army designed for a single variant of warfare. Company-level officers were taught only basic tactics unsuited to conditions in Afghanistan and were unskilled in such tasks as adjusting mortar or artillery fire that were not normally expected of them. Low level commanders often displayed little capacity for independent action, lacked initiative and often displayed poor leadership. A particular weakness was the lack of an effective, professional NCO corps; tasks happily entrusted to British sergeants and corporals required officers in the Soviet system.

For the most part, stereotyped, unsuitable tactics remained the norm. In defence, there was a "bunker mentality" with the *Mujahideen* being allowed to manoeuvre largely unchallenged and to own the night. Ground recce and flank and rear security were neglected, with recce troops, whose quality and training standards were higher, being misused as combat sub-units. There was excessive reliance on artillery, air and AFV-delivered firepower at the expense of manoeuvre and dismounted infantry closing with the enemy. Motor rifle troops were reluctant to leave their armoured vehicles (especially the DRA) and engage in close quarter battle; tanks were disinclined to advance against RPGs without them. Wise to these failings, the *Mujahideen* would "hug" the enemy as close as possible to make it impossible for him to use his artillery and attack helicopters.

There was also an endemic shortage of infantry. The "Limited Contingent" was just that. It never rose above 104,000 men. Over three quarters of Soviet troops were

Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War

tied down in defence of cities, base camps, airfields and lines of communication. To compound the problem, units were not maintained at full strength, with regiments being reduced to the size of battalions, battalions to companies, etc, a problem due in large part to the fact that, at any given time, a quarter to a third of personnel was sick with hepatitis, amoebic dysentery, typhus, malaria and meningitis.

The Soviets did eventually create some effective light infantry and air-mobile units which employed appropriate tactics. These were integrated with artillery, attack helicopters and specialist ground attack aircraft to pose real problems for the *Mujahideen*, but there were too few of them to make a significant difference, and the advent of the Stinger SAM in 1988 drastically curtailed the activities of aviation.

For the most part, morale in ordinary Soviet motor rifle units was poor to start with, and it deteriorated as the war dragged on. Soldiers found themselves in an alien land, universally loathed as oppressive occupiers. Nor were they buoyed up by support from home as the war was far from popular in the USSR. Some elite units, airborne, air assault, *spetsnaz* and the two special separate motor rifle brigades performed well, but the majority displayed a marked reluctance to engage in serious combat.

Terrain

Afghanistan is almost the size of England and France combined. Little of its terrain is suited to the mechanized, firepower-reliant force committed by the Soviets. Most of it is inhospitable, largely roadless desert or mountain, much of the latter covered by thick forests. Even the relatively populous areas proved difficult. The "green zones" were intersected by numerous irrigation ditches and were thick with trees, vines, crops and tangled vegetation. The flat plains contained many swampy terraces for rice growing and river banks were often swampy too. There are no railways and only 18,000km of road, less than one sixth of that surfaced. In other words, the country is ideally suited to the sort of guerrilla warfare practised since ancient times by its inhabitants against invaders.

The *Mujahideen* made full use of possibilities offered by the ground for concealed manoeuvre, dispersion, ambush and defence. The Soviet advantage of air-mobility was only able to offset terrain difficulties to a limited degree. It did enable them to maintain some isolated garrisons deep in enemy territory, but there were insufficient helicopters deployed to reduce significantly their reliance on ground manoeuvre to carry the fight to the enemy.

The Nature of the War

The war was a contest of endurance and will. The *Mujahideen* did not fight in the expectation of victory on the battlefield. They fought because it was the right thing to do. They were prepared for a long, perhaps endless, struggle in which they, and the Afghan people, would suffer many more casualties than their enemies. The Soviets tried to win through the largely indiscriminate use of overwhelming firepower. However, at the end of the day, sensitivity to casualties and Third World opinion combined with the difficulty of maintaining larger forces in theatre and the fact that Afghanistan was not of fundamental importance to the USSR prevented the Soviets from deploying sufficient strength to destroy their implacable foe.

Strategically, the war resolved itself into a fight where each side tried to strangle the other's logistics.

- The *Mujahideen* launched never-ending attacks on the Soviets' long, vulnerable lines of communication, both back to the USSR and within Afghanistan. Security of the open, western LoC required only three battalions, but the difficult eastern part needed 26 battalions manning 199 outposts and constantly patrolling or escorting convoys. Generally, at any given time, over three quarters of the Limited Contingent was tied down in essential security missions of various sorts, drastically reducing the numbers available for offensive action. Essentially, the initiative lay in the hands of the *Mujahideen*.
- The Soviets started from Mao Zedong's famous premise that the guerrilla is a like fish that flourishes in the sea of a friendly population; he requires this benign environment for food, shelter, recruits and intelligence. But there was no attempt win the hearts and minds of the Afghan peoples in order to make the environment hostile to the resistance; probably such an attempt would have been foredoomed to failure. Instead, the Soviets set about draining the sea. From 1981 to 1985, they depopulated the countryside and intimidated those who remained. Villages, granaries, crops, herds and irrigation systems were destroyed and fields and pastures were mined. Afghanistan became a land of refugees; 5.5 million Afghans, one third of the pre-war population, were driven into exile and a further two million became IDPs (with the young men returning as guerrillas thirsting for vengeance). With the rural economy largely destroyed, the *Mujahideen* could no longer obtain the sustenance they needed locally. Food as well as arms, munitions and medical supplies had to be brought in from Pakistan and delivered to base camps established within Afghanistan. From 1985 until their withdrawal, the Soviet offensive effort centred on finding and destroying these bases and interdicting the hundreds of routes from Pakistan into Afghanistan over which the \$4 billion worth of US and others' military aid flowed to the guerrillas.

***Mujahideen* Tactics**

Offensive Actions

Ambushes

The ambush is a traditional and key feature of Afghan warfare, whether fighting the government, other tribes or foreign occupiers. Ambushes were used to great effect to interdict Soviet/DRA lines of communication, thus both limiting the size of force the Soviets could sustain, tying down the bulk of that force in security tasks and, an important factor, providing much needed supplies for the *Mujahideen*. Most ambushes were used to interfere with general logistic effort, both from the USSR and within country. However, they were sometimes deployed in support of other operations, as, for instance, when an ammunition resupply convoy for a 70 Separate Motor Rifle Brigade's search and destroy mission was hit.

Many, perhaps most ambushes were based on good intelligence as to the route, timing and composition of columns. Sites were selected where terrain offered good fire positions and withdrawal routes and where enemy manoeuvre or escape would be difficult. They would generally be occupied at the last minute, eg after a recon

Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War

helicopter sweeping ahead of the convoy had passed by. The ideal time for an ambush was late afternoon as failing light would hamper Soviet/DRA reactions, especially by aviation and artillery.

The size of ambushes varied from a few dozen men up to 350 or more on stretches of road up to 10km or so. Determining factors were: the number of men available; the amount of cover available; the length of the column to be hit; and the importance of the target. The duration of actions varied from quick fire-and-withdraw harassing actions up to fire-fights of 1-2 hours, followed where possible by the looting of the damaged vehicles and weapons collection.

The most successful larger ambushes were characterized by: good intelligence; secrecy; surprise; detailed planning; good co-ordination (often difficult as the *Mujahideen* usually lacked radios); well-prepared, concealed fighting positions with overhead cover to give protection from artillery fire; and sound organization into indirect and direct fire support groups with heavy weapons, 1-2 assault groups, a resupply and casevac group and flank security groups (ideally with air defence weapons).

The success of *Mujahideen* ambushes often owed much to Soviet/DRA adherence to stereotyped organization and tactics, incompetence and excessive passivity. Route opening detachments were not deployed in advance or counter-ambushes set. Neither were choke points or dominating terrain to the flanks occupied beforehand (the need to picket the heights, a lesson learned painfully by the British in Afghanistan, was never really grasped). There were rarely even pre-planned artillery concentrations on likely ambush sites. Recce to the front and flanks was often deficient. Even previously employed ambush sites were not reconnoitred by dismounted infantry (motor rifle troops were always loath to leave their armoured protection) and the guerrillas used favourable sites (and field works) time and again. When ambushes were sprung, often after the strong forward security element had passed through, the armoured vehicles deployed throughout the convoy would stop and return fire while trucks endeavoured to motor out of the killing zone. Attempts to counter attack, especially by infantry on foot, were rare, thus ceding the initiative to the enemy. Command and control was sometimes lost, the *Mujahideen* being adept at taking out command vehicles early as they knew that junior leaders were often unable to take over effectively. Artillery, and especially air support, was often disgracefully tardy. There were rarely rapid reaction forces, particularly air assault troops, to come to the rescue of beleaguered columns or pursue withdrawing enemy forces.

Blocking Enemy Lines of Communication & Sieges

While the hit and run ambush was the normal means of interdicting Soviet/DRA LoCs, there were occasions when the *Mujahideen* established road blocks at river crossings or in mountain passes which were intended to hold for days or even weeks. This was done in support of other operations, to deny access to *Mujahideen* bases, to prove a point or, on occasion, simply because an ambush developed into a prolonged battle, with supporters streaming in (the British in the 19th Century noted the magnetic attraction of a good fight for Afghans). Indeed, towards the border with Pakistan, where the ground was as favourable to the guerrillas as it was vital, some roads were blocked for months, even years. Several isolated DRA garrisons were besieged for years. The town of Khost, for instance, was permanently sealed off from the rest of the country and besieged, and the DRA garrison had to be supplied by air; in Operation *Magistral* (November 1987), the

Soviets demonstrated that there were no "no-go" areas by opening land communications to it – but they were able to keep the road open for only 12 days.

Such reversions to semi-conventional warfare required extremely favourable terrain and elaborate fortifications to withstand overwhelming enemy artillery and air power. Of course, these battles required large numbers of men and posed a considerable, often insuperable, challenge to the *Mujahideen's* limited logistical and command and control systems. They were most successful where only, or largely, local *Mujahideen* were involved as mobile groups lacked the necessary supplies and commitment and inter-factional co-operation was not always forthcoming. Towards the end, as the Soviets were winding down their involvement, they did, however become more frequent.

Raids

Raids served several purposes. Such high profile attacks as those on the Soviet embassy and the DRA KHAD (secret police) headquarters and MoD in Kabul, and on district HQs demonstrated the ability of the *Mujahideen* to strike anywhere, with consequent effects on the morale of both sides. They were used to destroy enemy facilities and/or to draw government or Soviet troops into ambush. Raids on security outposts undermined enemy morale. Above all they were a primary source of arms and ammunition for the guerrillas.

Like ambushes, raids depended for success on good intelligence (often coming from within DRA/militia ranks), careful recce, covert deployment and concentration, flank and rear security, surprise and careful co-ordination. Fire suppression of supporting posts, quick execution and withdrawal were usually important to negate enemy reactions. The *Mujahideen* generally preferred quite large raiding parties, from scores to a few hundreds of fighters, rather than the dozen or so used by special forces. In part, this was due to the need for manpower to carry off spoils and casualties. Late afternoon and, more commonly, night were the times of choice for raids as darkness generally inhibited enemy reactions and rendered artillery and air support ineffectual.

Two major problems beset raiders. Protective minefields were effective against fighters lacking mine detection and clearance means more effective than a nearby flock of sheep to drive into the obstacle or the use of boulders as stepping-stones. And lack of radio communications often hindered co-ordination of fire support, assault, logistic support and security groups.

Night fire raids were also a popular tactic. The bombardment of outposts, bases, airfields and city targets with rockets, mortars, recoilless anti-tank weapons and sometimes howitzers was a daily event. The aim was to destroy materiel, harass the enemy, deprive him of sleep and demonstrate the depressing ubiquity of the *Mujahideen*. Multiple, pre-surveyed fire positions would be established to enable weapons to "shoot and scoot", avoiding retaliatory counter-bombardment.

Soviet and DRA failings usually contributed to the success of raids. DRA and militia posts were always preferred targets as the defenders would usually run away or give up after token resistance. Both government and Soviet troops were operating blind as they lacked intelligence, and both, partly for this reason, suffered from a "bunker mentality", preferring to hole up in their field works rather than dominate the surrounding countryside. The *Mujahideen* owned the night, a precondition for successful approach marches and withdrawals. Often, fearing

Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War

ambush if they sallied forth, Soviet/DRA forces near enough to intervene actually confined themselves to speculative artillery fire. Counter-attacks were rare and never appeared to be pre-planned, and withdrawals were not followed up immediately.

Attacking Strongpoints

Attacks on strongpoints were similar in execution to raids, though they usually employed greater numbers of fighters – sometimes over 1,000. The main difference rested in the purpose. Government administrative centres were occupied for a period of days for the propaganda value of the act. However, the *Mujahideen* leaders found it difficult to co-operate with each other, to organize, control and re-supply large numbers in conventional combat and to keep their forces together. The resultant counter-attacks were usually successful and inflicted heavy casualties on the guerrillas, who had forfeited their greatest advantage, their mobility. Thus such actions were undertaken in only two phases of the war: at the start when the DRA was losing control and the Soviet intervention was in its early days; and towards the end when the Soviets had abandoned offensive operations and were withdrawing, the DRA morale was at rock bottom and the *Mujahideen* could sense victory.

Urban Combat

The *Mujahideen's* main interest and base of support lay in the countryside and the refugees, not, by and large, in the towns. Indeed, often indiscriminate shelling of urban areas may have demonstrated the inability of the government to protect its citizens, but it also antagonized many town dwellers. Even so, there was enough popular support, especially from IDPs, to ensure good intelligence and freedom of movement and action, especially in the suburbs. The DRA was never in full control of Herat or Kandahar, and, while things were better in Kabul, it was unable to prevent attacks.

Urban guerrilla groups were usually small, not least through fear of KHAD informers. They lacked the same level of organization, command and control, equipment, training and cohesiveness as their rural counterparts. For these reasons, actions tended to be small-scale and of short duration. They sought political and psychological rather than military impact. Ambushes and raids (for example on the Soviet embassy and the DRA's MoD) were practised. The favourite tactic, however, was the bomb attack. The aim was usually the elimination of selected individuals or targets and the consequent inculcation of fear amongst government servants and supporters.

Defence

General

Like all successful guerrilla movements, the *Mujahideen* preferred to keep the initiative through offensive action. There were circumstances, however, when they were forced onto the defensive. This happened during the course of blocking actions and sieges, as mentioned above. Even more important was the defence of bases. As Soviet denial operations took their toll of the rural population and local food sources, the *Mujahideen* were forced to bring in food and medical supplies, mainly from Pakistan, as well as the weapons and ammunition being provided in

increasing quantities from abroad. These had to be stockpiled in a series of dispersed base depots, sited in inaccessible areas. Such bases were also needed for training and rest and the treatment of wounded. Still valuable, but less critical because they were smaller, were forward supply points established to support current operations. The latter could be moved relatively quickly and frequently to avoid attack. The former, on the other hand, required defending

In defence, the guerrillas exploited rugged or otherwise difficult terrain and their detailed knowledge of it. They also put immense efforts into preparing their bases for defence, as for instance in the Zhawar cave and tunnel complex in Paktia province or the green zone of Baraki Barak district between Kabul and Gardez. All other advantages lay with the Soviet/DRA forces. Where the *Mujahideen* were compelled to hold ground, their enemy could make full use of his immensely superior artillery and air supremacy and could concentrate superior numbers of motor rifle troops and back them with ample armour. From the mid '80s, the Soviets also started to use airmobile forces more aggressively in combination with strong ground elements; vertical envelopment made hitherto secure bases more vulnerable and posed threats to the guerrillas' ability to withdraw if defeated. In fact, the *Mujahideen* found it increasingly impossible to hold onto large bases and staging areas and these were pulled back over the Pakistani border.

Cordon & Search Operations

Rather than seeking to defeat the guerrillas through the cumulative effect of a myriad of successful tactical actions, defensive and offensive, the Soviets preferred large-scale cordon and search operations, involving as many as 20,000 men, to deal with large areas of *Mujahideen*-dominated territory and bases. Often, particularly latterly, Soviet troops would establish the cordon and provide the artillery and DRA forces would be left to sweep the area and root out the guerrillas from the local population. This arrangement suited 40th Army as it gave the most dangerous role, with likely attendant casualties, to the Afghans. It also suited the Kabul government as it enabled the DRA to extort taxes and press-gang conscripts for the army. It did not suit the Afghan soldiers, who were reluctant to run the risks required to push home attacks.

In the early days, the *Mujahideen* were vulnerable to search and destroy operations. However, they quickly learned through experience to prepare their heartland areas for defence. Capitalising on their intimate knowledge of the terrain, they created large numbers of well-camouflaged field fortifications with deep, artillery-proof shelters and communications trenches;² redundancy was an important feature as the intention was to conduct an active, area, manoeuvre defence which exploited interior lines. Their forces would be organized in small groups for manoeuvre between fortifications and the launching of small counter-attacks from many directions. A central reserve was kept to reinforce critical sectors at critical times. The search force would precede its sweep with heavy artillery and air attack, usually of minimal effectiveness. When it advanced, however, it would find that the *Mujahideen* defence and local counter-attacks slowed and fragmented its efforts and that the intermingling of forces and the poor nature of the targets provided by the guerrillas reduced the effectiveness of supporting artillery and aviation. The problem of fighting through was further compounded by generally poor tank-infantry co-operation. Each element was often used separately and neither wished

² The typical two-man fighting position was a 2x3m pit with a log roof topped with 1.5m of earth and rocks.

Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War

to risk close-in combat with a determined and effective opponent, especially at night. At the end of the day, the *Mujahideen* were prepared to die for their cause, taking as many of the enemy with them as possible. The Soviet troops, and still less the DRA men, were not so prepared. Attacks tended to founder as soon as casualties were taken.

Neither the DRA nor Soviet forces tried to break cordoned areas down into more manageable sub-sectors, clearing each systematically and thoroughly in turn. Rather, if the offensive made progress at all, the sweep tended to be perfunctory, missing many guerrilla groups. Moreover, large cordons, even when established on favourable ground, tended to be porous and large numbers of *Mujahideen* (expert in the role) would exfiltrate at night as individuals or in small groups. There was seldom any pursuit.

Sometimes, if a battle was prolonged enough, the beleaguered *Mujahideen* were reinforced by other factions, or attacks were mounted against the enemy's lines of communication to deny him the immense quantities of ammunition without which nothing was usually attempted.

Defence Against Raids

As well as major cordon and search operations, the Soviets mounted smaller raids for more limited objectives, eg, the destruction of a small guerrilla band or the elimination of a commander. These were often successful where KHAD infiltrators or informers in the local population provided intelligence to government forces and/or the people failed to give early warning of an enemy approach. This could happen in war-weary areas where the people wished to be left in peace, where the *Mujahideen* had taken reprisals against collaborators or where the locals were of a different tribe or faction to the guerrillas. *Mujahideen* security tended to be lax in areas they controlled or where the enemy had not visited for some time. Security posts were frequently placed too near the target to give adequate notice of an enemy approach so that the guerrillas could not deploy or withdraw in time; and sentries were often inattentive. The problem could be compounded by the lack of fighting positions, plans (preferably rehearsed) for reaction to attack and standard drills to cope with emergencies.

Fighting Against Heliborne Insertions & Attack Helicopters

For the most part, superior weapon systems gave the Soviets little tactical advantage during the war. Strategically, air power played a critical role in depopulating the countryside and denying it through the scattering of mines. But tactically, neither fixed wing aircraft (except the Su-25, when it appeared) nor artillery proved battle winners save to an extent in set-piece engagements. There were insuperable problems of target acquisition, and when the *Mujahideen* did present targets, they tended to be small and often fleeting. Plentiful armoured vehicles did not give the Soviets much of an edge either. Motor rifle troops tended to cling to the frequently dubious protection of their BTRs/BMPs and tanks were reluctant to approach RPG-armed guerrillas too closely. There was a marked tendency to stand off from the enemy and engage areas with indiscriminate fire from AFVs rather than to employ manoeuvre and then close with the guerrillas with tanks and dismounted infantry working together intimately. The tactics used by the *Mujahideen's* 19th Century predecessors against the British worked well enough against the Soviets.

The exception to this generalisation was the attack and transport helicopter and the Su-25. The *Mujahideen* had great difficulty in coping with heliborne assaults supported by gunships and ground attack aircraft. Soviet/DRA troops inserted by helicopter could achieve surprise in a way that ground forces could rarely do. They could also reach places inaccessible to the latter. Attack helicopters could deliver a high volume of fire accurately against small, point targets that were invisible to tanks or artillery observers. For this reason, they were feared and their arrival often silenced heavy weapons and could be the signal for breaking-off an action and withdrawing.

At first, the Soviets seem to have used airmobile troops largely in small-scale raids to snatch or kill local *Mujahideen* commanders. They were also used to insert ambush parties and elements of the cordon in search and destroy operations. As time went on, however, air assaults went deeper and became more aggressive, even against more formidable groupings. Several mountain bases that had proved impervious to purely terrestrial attack fell to a combination of vertical envelopment and a ground thrust; a link up by ground forces was usually considered essential if lightly-equipped heliborne troops were to stay for any great time in an area where the guerrillas were strong (eg, to destroy supplies and facilities in a captured base depot).

The *Mujahideen* suffered from inadequate air defence until the war was approaching its closing stages. Heavy machine guns could be effective when firing from ambush, eg, from caves against passing aircraft, from mountain tops downwards or from fire positions sited away from the target on likely approach routes. Sometimes, bait was offered to attract aircraft into an ambush. However, only the advent of the Stinger made it unsafe for Soviet low-level flight wherever they wished. Another favoured *Mujahideen* tactic was to destroy aircraft at their bases with rocket and mortar attacks.

The guerrillas learned through experience that certain measures were necessary to counter heliborne raids, or at least to minimize their impact. Early warning from outposts and air defence ambushes were important. So too was contingency planning and the establishment of drills for quick reaction and the creation of a rapid reaction force. An effective answer was to hit the assault force as it was landing, helicopters being vulnerable to massed RPG and light machine gun fire, and then to overrun the LZ before the assault troops could get organized. However, the *Mujahideen* often failed to establish in advance air defence and/or minefields on likely LZs, despite the fact that the Soviets used some mountain ones repeatedly. Better prior preparation would have prevented the establishment of an effective cordon in many search and destroy operations.

Counter-Ambush

The Soviets/DRA did not make much use of ambushes for the local protection of garrisons. They were, however, a favourite Soviet tactic in the on-going struggle to interdict guerrilla lines of communication; long columns of pack animals offered vulnerable targets. These ambushes, often by *spetsnaz*, were usually well laid with due attention to security; for instance, parties would be delivered by helicopter to a LZ distant from the ambush site, with the approach march conducted in the hours of darkness.

When moving through what they considered safe territory, the *Mujahideen* often failed to establish route security outposts in advance. Sometimes they even

Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War

neglected to send out forward and flank security patrols. Not infrequently, they paid the penalty for over-confidence.

When ambushed, the guerrilla command and control often broke down, leading to increased casualties. Counter-ambush procedures and drills were often neglected, leading to costly errors such as fighting back from within the enemy kill zone.

More savvy *Mujahideen* commanders took tedious, time-consuming precautions before moving supplies or combat forces. They would check with local guerrillas for intelligence and to arrange co-ordination, probe the route and establish security posts on dominant terrain and likely ambush sites. They would vary the routes they used and times of travel. Columns would move well spread-out and in groups with an hour or so between each (not least through fear of air attack); forward, flank and rear security patrols would be formed. Anti-ambush drills would be established and rehearsed: if the ambushers were outnumbered, efforts would be made to roll them up from a flank; if the ambush was too strong (they grew up to company-sized), an attempt would be made to bypass and head for the nearest cover.

Conclusion

It is to be hoped that British and other western troops will not become embroiled in conflict with guerrillas in Afghanistan while helping to rebuild that unhappy country. Were that to happen, however, today's coalition forces would presumably not make the mistake of alienating virtually the entire population, as did the Soviets/DRA. They would be operating only at the request of an Afghan government which enjoyed wide popular legitimacy. The enemy would comprise fringe factions and would not, it can be expected, succeed in provoking peacekeepers into the sort of reprisals that proved such good recruiting material for the *Mujahideen*. In such circumstances, the advantage in the all-important intelligence struggle would lie with the government and its allied forces.

Modern western armies have technology that will have more impact on combat in Afghanistan than did the Soviets'. Contemporary communications and navigation aids impart a flexibility and firmness of command and control that did not exist in the eighties. Night combat has no fears for a force well equipped with night vision and sighting equipments, even on aircraft. Helicopters, both attack and transport, are not only much more capable but are also available in numbers the 40th Army could only dream of. Precision weapons can engage point targets effectively without excessive collateral damage. Above all, perhaps, contemporary surveillance and target acquisition systems would hinder the guerrilla's ability to manoeuvre, concentrate and deploy undetected.

Even more important than equipment is the man that uses it. The Soviets displayed appallingly low skills levels in the minor tactics that characterized most of the fighting. They also suffered from very low morale. Professional western soldiers with a sound counter-insurgency doctrine and high levels of training ought to be able to do much better, even with less - provided always that they are not given an impossible task and that their determination is not undermined by lack of support at home.

This paper is largely a paraphrase of two excellent books. These are:

- Lester W Grau (ed): "The Bear Went Over The Mountain" (National Defence University, Washington, DC, 1996). The book comprises a series of tactical vignettes translated from a Frunze Military Academy study of the war, together with perceptive comments by the editor, a one time American infantry lieutenant colonel with Vietnam experience.
- Ali A Jalali and Lester W Grau: "The Other Side Of The Mountain" (US Marine Corps Studies and Analysis Division, Quantico, Va, 1998). Ali Jalali was an Afghan colonel who attended both the British Staff College and the Frunze and was a member of the resistance in Afghanistan. He, and an assistant, conducted dozens of interviews of *Mujahideen* veterans (several his former students at the Afghan Staff college) to produce vignettes from the resistance point of view. Again, the authors' comments are invaluable.

I wish to acknowledge the work of my two friends of over a decade and thank them for producing such valuable insights into a bygone war that has suddenly acquired such contemporary relevance.

Disclaimer

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