

## **A Very Brief Primer on Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is a country of extremes. The center and eastern portion of the country is made up of mountains reaching up to more than 24,557 feet (7485 meters) above sea level. Yet in the north and southwest there are arid plains with an average elevation of less than 1500 feet (500 meters). Temperatures range from more than 120 degrees Fahrenheit (50 degrees Celsius) in the Summer to way below zero (-17 Celsius) in the Winter. It is entirely landlocked, bordered by Iran in the west, Pakistan to the south and east, China for a mere 50 miles (76 kilometers) and the states of the former Soviet Union to the north. It is only slightly smaller than the state of Texas. While it is believed to contain significant deposits of natural gas and petroleum products, these have gone largely untapped due to the almost constant state of conflict that has engulfed the country since 1979.

Afghanistan is almost exclusively Muslim with more than three-quarters being of the Sunni sect. There are significant numbers of Shi'a near the border with Iran. There are also a few Hindus and Sikhs living in some of the larger cities. Before the Soviet invasion, there were approximately 17 million people living in Afghanistan, most of which (about 85%) lived in rural communities. The rural areas depended almost exclusively on agriculture to survive. The literacy rate was about 10% with most of the intelligentsia living in the larger cities. The population of Afghanistan is made up of numerous ethnic groups. The largest group is the Pashtuns (also known as Pathans), a highland people with a long tradition of bearing arms against any rival. While many languages are spoken, the two most common are Dari, a form of Persian, and Pashto, the language of the Pashtuns.

Afghanistan has been invaded numerous times throughout history. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC, the Persians pushed into Afghanistan and supplanted the Aryans who had previously moved in from the north. Alexander the Great passed through on his way to India, although it took him several years to do so. Mauryas from India then took control of portions of the country and brought Buddhism with them. Then it was the Persians and the Sassanids who ruled most of Afghanistan, despite successful invasions by many different peoples, including the Huns. An army of Arab Muslims defeated the Persians at the Battle of al Qadisiyyah in the seventh century. The Muslim religion then spread throughout Afghanistan. The area was known as Khorasan and flourished, as did much of the Muslim world in this period. Genghis Khan and the Mongols invaded in 1219. Various Asians ruled what was now called the Mughal Empire from Kabul. Their command of the countryside was not ironfisted, however, and by 1700 several groups had risen to power. The Uzbeks ruled the north, the Safavids held the west, while the remainder of modern Afghanistan was ruled by the Mughals or by local Afghan tribes.

The first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century saw seesaw fighting between the Shi'a Safavids and Persians, and the predominantly Sunni Pashtun armies from around Khandahar. Eventually Nadir Shah of Persia conquered Khandahar in 1738. He ruled the area until he was assassinated in 1747. A loya jirga, or council meeting, was called and Ahmad Shah was chosen as the new king. He is considered to be the founder of modern Afghanistan. Ahmad Shah and his Afghan army conquered all of modern day Afghanistan, portions of modern Iran and India before he died in 1772.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century saw the beginning of the “Great Game” between the United Kingdom and Russia. The Russians continually attempted to expand their influence southward. The British felt that the Russians were trying to reduce the English Empire and to reach a warm water port. For each expansion by the Russians southward, the British pushed back from India. The first conflict was the First Anglo-Afghan War of 1839-1842. After much hard fighting and drastic losses, the British withdrew, but not without obtaining concessions from the Afghans. In 1869, the Russians were able to push their border to the Amu Daryu River. In 1878 they sent a delegation to Kabul, which triggered another British invasion. Not having learned their lesson the first time, the British again suffered heavy losses and eventually withdrew, but again winning some political concessions in the process. In 1907, the Russians signed a treaty that stated that Afghanistan lay outside their sphere of interest. The last Anglo-Afghan War occurred in 1919, shortly after the overthrow of the Czars and the formation of the Soviet Union. Later that year, the United Kingdom granted independence to the Afghans and the modern borders were established. The Pashtun’s mountain homeland was split between India (and later Pakistan) and Afghanistan. This caused conflicts between the two countries, but also meant that there were strong bonds that crossed the border. These bonds continue to this day.

## **Soviet – Afghan War**

In 1978, the communist People’s Democratic Party, led by a group of Soviet-trained military officers, overthrew the government of Afghanistan. The Prime Minister, Daoud Khan, and his family were murdered during the coup. Mohammad Taraki emerged as the new head of state. However, there was a second communist faction led by Hafizullah Amin and Babrak Karmal. They had united with Taraki for the purposes of the coup, but went back to fighting amongst themselves soon after taking over the country.

Opposition to the communists started almost immediately. Their atheist beliefs and new policies, such as equal rights for women, were foreign to the predominantly Muslim population. Religious leaders declared *jihad* against the government, now called the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). Support for the communist government, including military advisors and modern equipment, flowed into the country from the Soviet Union. Yet, the Mujahideen (holy warrior) opposition continued to grow, supported by funds from the Muslim World, Europe, China, the United States and especially, Pakistan. Desertion was rampant in the DRA Army. In March, 1979, the city of Herat in the western portion of the country rebelled against the government. The 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, garrisoned in Herat, mutinied en masse. Several Soviet advisors in the city were killed. The DRA responded by bombing the city, killing thousands of civilians and mutineers alike and eventually regained control of the shattered city. Civil war spread throughout the country, with the Communists controlling the cities, while the Mujahideen controlled the rural areas.

Soviet troops started to move into Afghanistan to protect Soviet personnel and assets. A battalion of paratroopers was assigned to protect Taraki. The Soviets also supplied helicopters and fighter-bombers with Soviet crews, although they wore Afghan uniforms. These units actively participated in strikes against the Mujahideen. The civil war raged, but neither side was strong enough to gain the upper hand. In September, 1979, Amin and his followers staged

another coup and Taraki was killed. Amin did no better than Taraki in controlling the country and started to look beyond the Soviet Union for assistance, including to the United States.

The leaders of the Soviet Union started to consider the possibility that they would have to intervene in Afghanistan to bring control to their southern border and to their satellite state. They had previously conducted interventions into Hungary and Czechoslovakia and did not believe that Afghanistan would be any different. Military officers conducted detailed reconnaissance missions of the country under cover of advising the DRA. On December 24, 1979, Soviet troops crossed the border in strength. A regiment of the 105<sup>th</sup> Airborne and the 103<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Division easily seized control of the central government in Kabul and of Bagram Airfield to the north. The only real fighting occurred at Amin's palace on the outskirts of Kabul. He was killed and the Soviets installed Babrak Karmal in his place.

The Soviet invasion force, The Limited Contingent of Armed Forces of the Soviet Union, was built around the 40<sup>th</sup> Army. It was initially made up of two motorized rifle divisions, the 103<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Division, and several independent brigades and regiments. The 5<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Division entered the western part of Afghanistan from Kushka in the Soviet State of Turkmen. It quickly seized and then garrisoned the areas around Herat and Shindand. Engineers from the 108<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle Division quickly built a pontoon bridge across the Amu Daryu River just south of Termez. The division then rushed south to support the paratroopers in Kabul and continued on to Kandahar in the south. The 201<sup>st</sup> Motorized Rifle Division followed the 108<sup>th</sup> shortly after the invasion, and garrisoned the areas around Mazar-e Sharif and Kunduz in the northern part of Afghanistan, securing the supply line back to the Soviet Union.

The Soviets envisioned that they could secure and garrison the cities, leaving the DRA troops free to engage the guerillas in the deserts and mountains. However, it soon became apparent that the DRA forces were far too under-strength and demoralized to actively engage the enemy. Soon, Soviet troops were conducting sweeps and raids attempting to engage the light infantry of the Mujahideen. The Soviets intentionally included a large percentage of conscripts who were Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmen in the 40<sup>th</sup> Army. They felt that the Afghans might accept these troops more willingly than soldiers from other areas. However, the majority of the Mujahideen were Pashtun and had been fighting against these northern tribes for a thousand years. They saw no reason to stop now.

Initially the Mujahideen operated in larger groups commanded by community leaders. They were armed with a mixture of weapons: Lee Enfield rifles left behind by the British after their last invasion in 1919, AK-47 rifles captured from the DRA, and even a few Martini-Henry rifles seized from the British 100 years before. When they engaged the Soviets, on Soviet terms, the outcome was predictable. The Soviets could bring their overwhelming fire support to bear, and the Mujahideen suffered large losses as a result.

The Mujahideen quickly adapted, however. They moved away from the larger groups and retreated to their mountain and desert villages. Now the village leaders led the Mujahideen units and they blended into the countryside. Few of these leaders had serious military training,

but many had been conscripted into the Afghan Army in the past and had some rudimentary training in small arms and tactics. Added to their strong beliefs in protecting their country and their way of life, they became a formidable opponent for the Soviets. The early Mujahideen were still family men and farmers. War was a part time occupation for them and they needed to return to their homes and fields on a regular basis. Consequently, they did not maneuver far from home. An important part of the struggle was looting the battlefield after a firefight. Normally, half the spoils and the heavy weapons went to the group's commander to help him fund and supply the group. The other members of the group took the rest of the spoils and would either keep the food and weapons for themselves or sell them in Pakistan to help support their families.

Afghanistan has no railroads and only a very rudimentary road network. At the time of the invasion there was an oval-shaped road network that connected the cities of Mazar-e Sharif, Kabul, Kandahar, and Herat. There were spokes off this road network that led to the bordering countries, including the city of Termez in the Soviet Union, but few that led into the Hindu Kush Mountains in the center of the country. There were also few airfields so it became apparent that the supplies required by the Soviets and their allies would have to be transported by truck convoy. These convoys became favorite targets of the Mujahideen forces, which meant that more and more Soviet forces were forced into convoy escort duties. Some areas, such as that surrounding the Salang Tunnel on the main supply route from Termez to Kabul, saw combat on an almost daily basis. The Salang Tunnel went underneath a portion of the Hindu Kush Massif and was 2500 meters long. The road approaching the tunnel on both sides consisted of numerous steep switchbacks and was a perfect place for ambushes. The guerillas also made life hard for the Soviet engineers and transportation troops by mining the roads, blowing bridges, causing earth slides or avalanches and plugging culverts, causing massive erosion of roadbeds. The Mujahideen soon learned that the guns in the turrets of Soviet BMP, BTR and heavy tanks could not elevate enough to engage them in the steep ground above the road. The Soviets countered by adding anti-aircraft vehicles, such as the ZSU 23-4 to the convoys and the struggle continued.

Meanwhile, the Soviets also tried to choke off the supplies reaching the Mujahideen. They were aware that the guerillas lived amongst the rural population, much as fish live in the sea, obtaining food and shelter from their hosts. The Soviets decided that they would kill the fish by removing the sea. They did this by destroying the agriculture infrastructure of the Afghans. They used helicopters and aircraft to bomb and strafe herds of animals, irrigation systems, orchards and rural villages. Mines were delivered in the millions by aircraft, helicopters and artillery into fields, paths or areas where the Afghans might congregate. The most common mine used was a small plastic device with wings that could be delivered from the air. Called a butterfly mine due to the shape, they were colored green or sand to blend into the area where they were dropped. Depending on which source you want to believe, they may or may not have self-destructed at some point in the future. The butterfly mines had only a minimal explosive charge, rarely enough to kill, but enough to maim in a country where medical attention was primitive at best and required a long, excruciating journey to reach.

The Soviet efforts at depopulation were successful and more than five million (out of a population of about 17 million before the war) refugees fled to Pakistan and Iran. Another two million refugees fled from the rural areas to the cities of Afghanistan. Only belatedly did the

Soviets realize that these refugee camps were prime recruiting areas for the Mujahideen.

As the Mujahideen started to import food and supplies from Pakistan and Iran, the face of their forces changed also. The part-time, family-man soldier who fought near his home was slowly replaced by larger groups of single, young men, organized by charismatic leaders in the refugee camps. They received training in their host countries and would range far afield once they returned to Afghanistan. They were also able to obtain modern small arms, such as AK-47s and RPG-7s, either by capture of Soviet/DRA weapons or purchase on the black market of Chinese (or locally) manufactured goods with funds supplied by their assorted allies.

The Soviets and DRA troops soon learned to try and stay 300 meters (the effective range of the above weapons and a safe distance from friendly artillery or airstrikes) or more from the Mujahideen. The Soviets hoped to use their overwhelming fire support to destroy the guerillas. The Mujahideen countered by obtaining heavy weapons of their own, allowing them to pin down the Soviets in order to close the range and use their small arms effectively. However, the heavy weapons exacerbated their difficult supply situation even more. The Soviets attempted to interdict these supply routes by ambush and used larger operations to try and destroy the supply network.

Money continued to flow to the Mujahideen from several sources, including the United States and China. The Pakistani Intelligence Service was given the responsibility of dispersing these funds and the supplies they purchased. The Pakistanis demanded that all support would go to the seven recognized groups of Mujahideen; to receive supplies, you had to belong to one of these groups. The seven factions included a wide range of religious beliefs, from almost secular to fundamentalist Muslims. The Pakistanis tended to favor those groups that were more religiously conservative.

The Soviets were trained and equipped for a conventional conflict in either Central Europe or in China. They quickly found that large-scale operations involving multi-division forces were not successful in bringing the guerillas to battle. They continued this practice throughout the war, however, but increasingly with the use of air-mobile forces to try and trap the guerillas. As there were limited forces available for these operations and considerable areas that needed to be secured and garrisoned, the Soviets employed commands made up of subunits from several divisions. An example of such an operation was the Panjshir Valley Operation in the Spring of 1982.

The Panjshir Valley lay to the northeast of Kabul and was within striking distance of Bagram Airfield and the Salang Tunnel, two of the Mujahideen's favorite targets. It ran for more than 250 kilometers through the Hindu Kush. The valley floor was a significant agricultural area and there were large deposits of valuable gems, which the Mujahideen mined to finance their struggle. The valley was also used as a route to bring supplies from Pakistan into the country. There were numerous side canyons that allowed a guerilla force to retreat into the highlands. It was probably the most fought over piece of ground in Afghanistan with the Soviets launching operation after operation to try to seize and secure the area.

In May of 1982, the Soviets brought one regiment from both the 108<sup>th</sup> and 201<sup>st</sup>

Motorized Rifle Divisions, portions of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Division, the 66<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Brigade and other smaller units into the Panjshir. The 66<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Brigade was designed for a counter-insurgency role, with both motor rifle and air assault battalions as well as an artillery battalion assigned to it. Two divisions of DRA infantry, the DRA Commando Brigade and other combat units, were also part of the operation, although the DRA troops were not told the entire plan until after the operation began. The total attack strength was about 12,000 men or about two-and-half times the expected defending force. The attack started with a diversionary attack into the adjacent Gorband River Valley. This attack was moderately successful and confused the Mujahideen command as to where the actual blow would fall. The main assault started the following day, with several battalions of paratroopers and commandos air lifted into the valley, as far as 60 kilometers ahead of the front lines. These troops were to act as blocking forces to try and prevent the Mujahideen from escaping the onslaught as well as destroying nearby objectives. Due to mines, other manmade obstacles, and the rugged terrain, the advance of the motorized troops was slow. The Mujahideen were able to give combat on their own terms and often were able to escape into the surrounding mountains after causing significant losses. The operation continued to grind ahead with a 30-minute artillery barrage on suspected Mujahideen positions each morning. After four days, the advancing troops had linked up with all of the airborne troops. Additional air assaults were conducted to extend the operation, but the Mujahideen were able to retreat into the mountains without excessive losses. At the end of the month, the Soviets were in complete control of the valley as far as Evim. After doing what they could to destroy the valley's infrastructure, they withdrew, letting the Mujahideen return.

In 1985, the Soviets made a last attempt to win the war through military means. Additional troops were brought into the country and large operations were conducted in the mountain strongholds near the Pakistan border. The Mujahideen resisted strongly, staying to engage the Soviets rather than retreating into the highlands. Losses were high on both sides. The Soviets made some gains, but could not completely reduce the mountain strongholds in the Kunar Valley and near Khost. The following year, the Soviets started to withdraw some of their troops and pushed the DRA to take the lead in combating the Mujahideen. The Soviets continued to supply air and artillery support, but fewer troops participated in active ground operations. The exception were the Spetsnaz, the Soviet Special Forces, and other recon troops who continued to set ambushes on the Mujahideen supply lines and to gather intelligence behind enemy lines.

The DRA continued to launch operations aimed at the supply bases along the Pakistan border, but without the assistance of Soviet infantry, they were rarely successful. By 1988, the Soviets had started to withdraw most of their troops. This was completed in 1989, almost ten years after the conflict started. Surprisingly, it took another three years for the guerillas to overthrow the DRA government. While they had become experts in guerilla warfare, they had trouble-organizing units large enough to take control of the major cities of Afghanistan.

The Soviets were well prepared for large-scale conventional battles. They emphasized tactical predictability over tactical innovation. The Soviets were slow to respond to the changed battlefield of Afghanistan. It was difficult for junior officers, platoon and company commanders, to deviate from policy. They continued in the same manner and the Mujahideen

took advantage of their predictability. It took several years, but eventually they developed “block and sweep” tactics on a smaller scale that often generated positive results. Real innovation occurred in the air assault troops as they were used more and more to conduct blocking actions and ambushes, far in the Mujahideen rear. It was a tactical war, a war of small unit leaders, and it was a war the Soviets were not prepared for nor ever really adapted to. It would behoove the armies of several other countries to study this conflict, however, as this type of struggle will be the norm, rather than the exception.

An estimated 1.3 million Afghans lost their lives during the war. This is a greater percentage than that lost by the Soviets during World War II. The Soviets admitted to losing about 14,000 men with another 50,000 wounded. About one man in eight became a casualty, with a higher rate for officers (about one in six). As the conscripted troops returned home, they spread their disillusionment to their communities. This caused a small, but significant part in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The following list of major Soviet operations is taken from The Soviet-Afghan War by the Russian General Staff, translated and edited by Lester Grau and Michael Gress.

1979

December 24-27: Soviet airborne division beings air landing in Kabul. Soviet divisions cross the border and begin advance south along the eastern and western highways. Soviet airborne and Spetsnaz forces overthrow the government and kill the president

1980

February: Soviet sweep of the Kunar Valley.

March: The Soviet push into Paktia results in the loss of a Soviet battalion. Soviet sweep of the Kunar Valley.

April: Soviet offensive in the Panjshir Valley.

May: Soviet sweep of Ghazni. Soviet sweep of the Kunar Valley.

June: Soviet sweep of Ghazni.

September: Soviet sweep of Kunar Valley. Panjshir I.

October: Panjshir II

November: Soviet sweep of Kunar Valley. Soviet sweep of Wardak Province. Lowgar Valley offensive until Mid-December.

1981

February – May: Fighting in Kandahar.

April: Panjshir III

June – July: Nangahar offensive.

4 July: 108<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Division (MRD) offensive in Sarobi Valley. Heavy fighting in Herat.

August: Panjshir IV.

5 September: 5<sup>th</sup> MRD offensive in Farah Province

October: 5<sup>th</sup> MRD sweeps around Herat. Unsuccessful DRA operation at Marmoul Gorge, Balkh Province. Soviet offensive in Kandahar.

December: Combined sweeps with DRA and 66<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Brigade (MRB) in Nangahar. Fighting in Herat.

1982

January: Fighting in Herat.

February: City fighting in Kandahar.

May: Panjshir V, largest operation yet launched in retaliation for attacks on Bagram Air Base. 108<sup>th</sup> MRD governing headquarters for composite force drawn from three divisions (108<sup>th</sup> MRD, 201<sup>st</sup> MRD and 103 Airborne Division (ABD)).

July: Sweep against Paghman Hills near Kabul.

August – September: Panjshir VI

November: Laghman Valley offensive.

1983

January: Lowgar Valley offensive. Soviets negotiate cease-fire in Panjshir Valley.

April: Sweeps around Herat.

June: Ghazni offensive.

August: Paktia Province offensive

November: Shomali offensive

1984

April: Gora tepe offensive. End of cease-fire in Panjshir Valley. Panjshir VII, largest operation yet, launched under control of 108<sup>th</sup> MRD. Operation also includes push up Andarab Valley and Alishang Valley. Soviets garrison lower valley and fighting continues throughout summer.

June: Lowgar Valley offensive. Herat and Kandahar offensives.

July – August: Lowgar and Shomali Valley offensives.

August – October: Relief of the Ali Khel garrison in Paktia by the 70<sup>th</sup> MRB and 345<sup>th</sup> Airborne Regiment (ABR).

September: Panjshir VIII

October: Fighting in Herat.

November: Paktia offensive.

December: Kunar Valley offensive with the 66<sup>th</sup> MRB and the 345<sup>th</sup> ABR. Lasts until February.

1985

April: Maidan Valley offensive.

May – June: Kunar offensive and the relief of Barikot garrison.

June: Panjshir IX launched in retaliation for the fall of Pechgur.

July: Heavy fighting in Herat and Kandahar.

August – September: Paktia Province offensive. Largest offensive since Panjshir VII. Relieved Khost, but failed to take Zhawar.

1986

March: Offensive around Andkhoy.

April: Paktia offensive takes Zhawar.

May: Offensive in the Arghandab near Kandahar.

June: Khejob Valley offensive.

November: 66<sup>th</sup> MRB offensive in Naizan Valley.

1987

January – February: Temporary cease-fire for national reconciliation.

May – June: Arghandab offensive. Paktia offensive near Jajji.

14 July: Loss of Kalafghan garrison in Takhar Province.

November – January: Operation Magistral to relieve Khost.

1988

March: Offensive to relieve Urgun in Paktia Province.

April: Khandahar to Ghanzi offensive.

14 April: Geneva Accords signed.

April: Soviet withdrawal from Barikot, upper Kunar Valley and Ali Khell, Chowni and Chamkani in Paktia and Qalat in Zabul.

May: 66<sup>th</sup> MRB withdrawal from Jalalabad.

15 October: Half of Soviet force withdrawn from Afghanistan.

1989

15 February: Last Soviet combat units withdrawn.

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