



The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was well planned and ruthlessly executed. Soviet airborne units quickly consolidated their hold on the capital city of Kabul and moved swiftly to seize and occupy key government administration and communication centers. Simultaneously, Soviet ground force divisions, operating from secured assembly areas and with air cover, surged across the border along widely separated axes of advance. As these divisions penetrated deep into Afghan territory, the Soviet airborne forces moved toward them to link up and divide the country in two. A series of psychological and covert operations had subverted and neutralized potential resistance to the Soviet forces. Within a month, the Soviets occupied the country's major population centers, crushed civilian opposition, and installed a puppet regime.

It is not surprising that the invasion, which saw the employment of massive combined arms forces, succeeded so well, because the Soviet military forces had been well organized and trained for such an operation. After all, the successful invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 had been remarkably similar. The invasion of Afghanistan is now history, having been only the beginning rather than the end of an arduous guerrilla war. But it illustrates the extent to which the Soviet High Command attempts to integrate both political and military considerations into what has been described as a "lightning surgical thrust."

Soviet interest in Afghanistan dates back to the 19th century when Russia, as well as Great Britain, engaged in what has been called the "Great Game." There has been considerable speculation about why the Soviets decided to invade Afghanistan in 1979. One commentator has suggested that part of the Soviets' motivation lay in their fear that Moscow's grip on a nearby ally was weakening in the wake of Afghan rebel (Mujahideen) successes in the field. The Soviets also feared that the subversive influence of Islamic fundamentalist victories in Afghanistan might spread across the international border into the predominantly Islamic Soviet Central Asian Republics. (Indeed, in March 1984 there was a report that an airstrip at Pyandzh in the Soviet Union — one that was being used to support helicopters operating against targets in Afghanistan — had been attacked by Mujahideen using rockets and mortars. Before that incident, Mujahideen agit-prop teams had crossed regularly into the Soviet Union from Afghanistan to proselytize for their cause among Soviet Moslems there.)

As part of the pre-invasion preparations, General I. Pavlovsky visited Afghanistan between August and October 1979, and his mission was most likely to gather intelligence. If so, he may have received a significant amount of assistance from Soviet military and civilian advisors already based in Afghanistan. By September 1979 there were about 4,000 Soviet military advisors there. Regular Soviet military units, some equipped with Hind-D attack helicopters, had also made their presence

increasingly felt in Afghanistan. Soviet advisers, in fact, often flew combat missions in aircraft bearing Afghan Air Force markings.

Complementing this effort was the role of Soviet civilian advisors. One source has stated that as early as April 1978 "a considerable number of non-military Soviet Central Asians (had been) sent to Afghanistan . . . to service the new round of U.S.S.R.-Afghanistan contacts." These advisors had assumed responsible positions in the upper echelons of Afghanistan's government apparatus, and these positions had enabled them to address key Afghan social, political, and cultural issues. Coincidentally, this influx of civilian advisors peaked in November 1979, one month before the invasion, with the appointment of a new Soviet Ambassador to Afghanistan, Fikat Tabeev, an ethnic Tatar — and a Soviet Muslim. (This same source, however, discounts any involvement on the part of Soviet Central Asians in military operations prior to the December 1979 invasion.)

Despite a body of on-the-scene advisors, and despite the Soviets' experience in fighting Central Asian Islamic guerrillas (during the 1920s and 1930s), the Soviet leadership apparently did not have senior experts who were well-versed in the intricacies of Afghanistan and its tribes. It has been suggested that because of this deficiency the Soviets had misjudged the degree of resistance they would meet, especially in the rural areas, both during and after the invasion. If so, it was a deficiency that has cost them dearly since 1979.

During a visit to Moscow on 13 September 1979, the then-Afghan president Mohammed Taraki, met with Soviet officials who tried to persuade him to either demote or dismiss his prime minister, Hafizullah Amin. Amin, a hardliner in the Afghan government, had alienated much of the Afghan population through his brutal and repressive policies. Additionally, Taraki was warned by his Soviet hosts that Amin was plotting his overthrow, and following this meeting, Soviet officials arranged a meeting between Taraki and Babrak Karmal, another Afghan opponent of Amin.

It is quite possible that the Soviet Union, as a result of this latter meeting, committed itself to organizing or supporting an anti-Amin coup originally scheduled to take place on 14-15 September 1979. The purpose of the coup would have been to eliminate Amin and then to establish a more moderate coalition government led by Taraki and Karmal. To support this coup, the Soviet Union deployed a number of regular military formations along the Soviet-Afghan border and sent a 400-man airborne contingent to the strategically vital Bagram air force base 40 miles north of Kabul. For reasons that are uncertain, however, Amin struck first. On 14 September Taraki was attacked and wounded in the Darulaman presidential palace just outside Kabul. When he died of his wounds three days later, Amin became president.

The circumstances surrounding the abortive coup attempt are still a mystery. It has been alleged that the Soviet ambassador at the time, A. Puzanov, had been in-

involved in an attempt to assassinate Amin, but the extent of that involvement is unclear. In any event, the Soviet Union apparently decided to accept the outcome at least for the time being, while it intensified preparations for an invasion.

In late November or early December, the Soviet Politbureau sent First Deputy Minister of the Interior, Lieutenant General Viktor Paputin, to Kabul. Officially, his mission was to advise Amin on matters affecting counterinsurgency and internal security, possibly even to provide Amin with personal protection. Actually, Paputin's purpose was to establish contacts with opponents of Amin's government, particularly if they happened to be supporters of Karmal. While this was occurring, Soviet divisions were being mobilized in Turkmenistan with reservists being called to active duty. At the field headquarters of the 40th Army located in the Soviet Union at Termez, a satellite communication (SATCOM) link had been established to enable the Soviet First Deputy Defense Minister, Marshal Sergei Sokolov, to plan and direct the invasion while remaining in close contact with Moscow. (Considering the extremely sensitive nature of the entire operation, it is quite likely that KGB Government Signal Troops rather than the Soviet Army's Signal and Radio-Technical Troops manned and operated the SATCOM link.)

## SECURED ROADS

By mid-December, preparations were almost completed, but Soviet planners wanted to ensure that several strategically important road networks had been secured before they proceeded with the invasion. The principal road net that was essential to the operation's success was the "beltway" extending from Termez across the border into Afghanistan and then southward through the 8,000-foot high Salang Pass to Kabul (see map). From Kabul, this road net stretched westward through Farah and Herat, swinging northward toward Kushka and finally terminating at Mazar-i-Sharif near the Soviet border. To secure these roads, the Soviets dispatched advance elements of airborne units to Afghanistan before the invasion.

On 3 and 4 December the number of Soviet military transport flights into the air base at Bagram tripled. On 8 and 9 December a full strength airborne battalion, reportedly equipped with BMDs and artillery, was airlifted into Bagram. From there, it started to move north to seize and occupy the high ground in the vicinity of the Salang Pass. Simultaneously, several smaller airborne units were airlifted into the Kabul International Airport itself.

On 21 December a Soviet airborne regiment landed at Bagram and secured its hold on the entire airfield. At the same time, up to six ground force divisions were reported to be in place along the Soviet-Afghan border in the Turkestan and Central Asian Military districts.

One final factor had to be dealt with — the Afghan



armed forces. At the time, those forces numbered 100,000, most of them assigned to the army. Equipped with 500 T54/55 and 100 T62 tanks, the Afghan Army consisted of ten infantry divisions, three understrength armored divisions, three independent infantry brigades (variously referred to as commando, mountain, or paratroop brigades or regiments), and one artillery brigade, all of which were organized into three corps commands.

The 1st Afghan Corps had its headquarters in Kabul itself while the 2d and 3d Corps were headquartered in Kandahar and Paktia Provinces, respectively. The 10,000-man Afghan Air Force had 170 combat aircraft, mostly older models (35 MIG-21s, 80 MIG-17s, 24 SU-7s, 30 IL-28s, and 45 helicopters of various makes) and one air defense division. To the Soviets, this formidable force, despite its mediocre performance in the field against the Mujahideen, would have to be neutralized quickly and efficiently.

Accounts of the deception measures employed by Soviet advisors to the Afghan Army do much to dispel the conventional stereotype of the Soviet officer as lacking in initiative and imagination. The tactics they employed, in fact, demonstrate a high degree of cunning and resourcefulness. For example, two Afghan armored divisions (one of which was stationed in Kabul) were disarmed when their Soviet advisors convinced their counterparts in the divisions that it was necessary for them to conduct an inventory of the division's ammunition stocks and antitank weapons. This meant off-loading the ammunition that was stored in the tanks. Additionally, electrical storage batteries "had" to be removed for winterizing while some tanks "had" to be turned over to depot maintenance so that "defects" could be corrected.

It has also been reported that in some units the Soviets persuaded the Afghans to turn in their weapons on the pretext that they were about to be re-equipped with new weapons coming from the Soviet Union. While some Afghan units were confined to their barracks, others, especially those in Kabul, were sent into the countryside to fight the Mujahideen. The coup de grace, however,

was a reception the Soviets held in Kabul to honor prominent Afghan army officers; once the reception began, none of these officers were allowed to leave.

The invasion began in full force on 24 December with an airlift of advance parties from the 103d and 104th Airborne Divisions into Bagram. At the same time and continuing through 26 December, a massive airlift of 280 to 300 military transport sorties landed the main body of the 105th Guards Airborne Division at the Kabul International Airport. The round-the-clock airlift primarily involved transport aircraft landing at ten-minute intervals — IL-76 CANDIDs (cargo capacity 90,000 pounds), AN-12 CUBs (cargo capacity 44,000 pounds), and a limited number of AN-22 COCKs (cargo capacity 160,000 pounds). In the latter stages of this airlift, the transports took sporadic sniper fire from rebel-held positions around the Kabul airport, and at least one transport aircraft, an AN-12, crashed on landing because small arms fire had damaged important flight instruments or injured the crew. (All the crewmen died in the crash and the aircraft was left badly damaged with its cockpit burned out.)

A number of IL-76s participating in the airlift had *Aeroflot* markings even though *Aeroflot* had officially cancelled regular flights into Kabul until the airlift had peaked. Older model AN-26 CURLs (cargo capacity 12,100 pounds) assisted the airlift, but only on a restricted basis. Even obsolescent AN-2 biplanes participated, serving as spotter aircraft for MI-24 HIND-D attack helicopters. Once the airlift had tapered off, regular *Aeroflot* service into Kabul resumed with all of the airline's aircraft bearing the legend "Official Olympic Carrier." Interestingly, the East German airline, *Interflug*, which had not previously conducted flights into Kabul, also participated in the early phases of the airlift. (It has been alleged that this airline, rather than *Aeroflot*, carried KGB agents from Poland and East Germany into Afghanistan.) For air cover, the airlift into Kabul received air support from MIG-23s based in Karshi and MIG-21s from Kerki, both located in the Soviet Union.

While the 105th Guards Airborne Division was consolidating its hold on the Kabul airport in preparation for a move against vital government centers, four Soviet divisions moved across the Soviet-Afghan border along two major axes. The first echelon consisted of the 360th Motorized Rifle Division (MRD) and the 357th MRD; while the 201st MRD and the 66th MRD were in the second echelon. The 360th and 201st MRDs crossed from Termez into Afghanistan using a pontoon bridge built across the Amu Darya River. Capturing the airbases at Mazar-i-Sharif and Kunduz, they moved toward Kabul with the mission of linking up with the paratroopers who had moved north from Kabul earlier to secure the Salang Pass and the tunnel through which these divisions had to move. The 357th and 66th MRDs crossed the border at Kushka and occupied the Shindad and Herat airbases. The fact that both echelons consisted of only two divisions was probably the result of a restricted road net that

could not accommodate a broader deployment.

The Afghan Army put up only sporadic resistance to these invading forces. Most of the Afghan Air Force, however, defected to the Soviets, and by early January 1980 Afghan pilots were flying training missions under Soviet ground control. The most notable anti-Soviet resistance on the part of the Afghan Army was that by the 8th Infantry Division, which successfully fought the Soviet forces until 5 January 1980, during which time it suffered 2,000 killed. For the most part, though, the Afghan Army suffered mass desertions, many to go home, others to the Mujahideen with their weapons and equipment. On 10 January 1980 this wave of desertions peaked when an entire Afghan division joined the rebels in Kandahar.

## AIRLIFT COMPLETE

By 27 December the Soviet airlift into Kabul was virtually complete with two full regiments belonging to the 105th Guards Airborne Division plus support units deployed on the ground, a total of 5,000 men. That evening, Soviet paratroopers equipped with BMD airborne infantry fighting vehicles and backed by ASU-85 85mm air-transportable armored self-propelled assault guns moved into Kabul itself to secure critical points in the city. Other airborne units, similarly equipped, moved to surround the Darulaman Palace. At Paputin's insistence, Amin had withdrawn here a few days earlier along with trusted aides and some of his bodyguards.

The Soviet assault on the presidential palace and Amin's subsequent death have raised many interesting questions about that evening in Kabul. Apparently, the Soviet forces in Kabul had the mission of deposing Amin and installing Karmal, who had been in exile in Czechoslovakia following Taraki's death, as the new president. Before the assault, Paputin once again met with Amin to try to persuade him either to step down from power or to issue a formal request for Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. What immediately followed is still unclear. Apparently, Amin refused to do either, and during the ensuing argument one of his bodyguards shot and killed Paputin. At 1930 on 27 December, Soviet troops began their attack on the palace, which was defended by an Afghan tank regiment.

Although most reports say that Soviet paratroopers participated in the action, one source, based on defector reports, tells a different story. According to this version, Soviet *Spetsnaz* troops led by a specially trained KGB assault group stormed the palace. This KGB unit, disguised in Afghan army uniforms and equipped with military vehicles bearing Afghan markings, killed Amin, his family, and several of his most important advisors. But during the confusion of the attack, the Soviet commander of this unit, a Colonel Bayerenov, the head of the KGB's terrorist training school, was inadvertently shot and killed by his own troops.

While this attack was taking place, pre-recorded radio broadcasts by Babrak Karmal were beamed into Afghanistan from the 40th Army headquarters as part of a disinformation campaign. These broadcasts, from a station identifying itself as Radio Kabul, announced the fall of Amin's government and requested Soviet military assistance in stabilizing the situation in the country. Similar broadcasts were made once Soviet troops had actually seized Radio Kabul. (Ironically, Karmal himself did not return to Afghanistan until four days after Amin's death.) Since Soviet troops had destroyed or occupied all of the radio, telephone, and telegraph facilities in Kabul, communications between the capital city and the outside world were controlled by Soviet signal and radio-technical troops.

Despite the apparent success of the coup itself, the timing of Amin's death was a diplomatic disaster for the Soviets. If Amin could have been persuaded to step down in favor of the more compliant Karmal, a request by Karmal for Soviet intervention would have provided some legitimacy to the invasion. As things turned out, Amin's death was viewed as an assassination by an occupying military force.

## LINK UP

Once the airborne units had seized control of the important facilities in Kabul, they moved northward mounted on BMDs with the mission of linking up with the advance elements of the 360th MRD, which were moving south from Termez. This maneuver caught rebel forces operating against the Termez-Kabul road in a pincer movement from which they had to withdraw or risk annihilation.

As the Soviets moved into the countryside to secure their lines of communication, they encountered stiffening resistance. In the northeastern portion of Afghanistan, approximately 5,000 Soviet troops became heavily involved in fighting for Feyzabad, Eshkashem, and Zibak in Badakhshan Province. Similar fighting broke out in the mountains north of Kabul and in the Logar Valley to the south of it. Additional fighting soon occurred in Paktia Province and along the road to Jalalabad.

By the middle of January 1980 the airlift had slowed its pace. The 40th Army field headquarters (minus its SATCOM terminals) had been relocated to Bagram air base. Also, two more divisions, the 54th MRD in the northwest and the 16th MRD in the northeast, entered Afghanistan. In an attempt to cover its move into Afghanistan, the 54th MRD left some dummy equipment at its previous location at Kizyl-Arvat near the Iranian border. By the end of January the Soviets had a force of seven divisions along with elements of two others (the 103d and 104th Airborne Divisions) in Afghanistan for a total of 90,000 men. The 6th MRD was reportedly preparing to enter Afghanistan while specialist units (communications, engineers, maintenance, for example) were being

transferred in from East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. This move has been assessed as being one that was designed to replace conscript and reservist formations that were leaving Afghanistan for a variety of reasons — the most notorious being fraternization between Soviet Central Asian troops and the Islamic population of Afghanistan.

The exact nature of the role of Soviet Central Asian troops during the invasion of Afghanistan has been a matter of controversy for some time. One source has stated that these troops (primarily Tadjiks, Uzbeks, and Turkomens) formed the bulk of the invasion force, although the officers involved were overwhelmingly European Soviets. If this is true, then as another report notes, the use of soldiers with the same ethnic, cultural, and religious ties as the target population represented a departure from past Soviet political-military policy. (Such a policy has attempted to avoid the use of non-Russian soldiers in operations designed to project Soviet power abroad in situations where they might have some type of rapport with the population of the invaded nation.)

The same report concludes that Central Asians were deployed to Afghanistan for three primary reasons: Since Central Asians generally man construction and support units in the Soviet Army, their presence in the military districts where the divisions were mobilized provided Soviet planners with a readily available manpower resource base, particularly for the establishment of a logistics and support infrastructure in Afghanistan; ethnic Slavic troops were not readily available to fill out understrength units mobilized in the Central Asian military districts; and the use of Central Asian troops may have been a propaganda ploy to weaken grass-roots resistance among the Afghan population.

As a propaganda ploy, the use of Central Asian troops was a failure since many of them openly fraternized with Afghan civilians. Many European-officered Soviet units manned by Central Asian troops had severe disciplinary problems. One incident, an extreme one at that, states that during January 1980 "all the personnel of a Soviet combat brigade [sic] were executed for refusing to fight fellow Moslems in Afghanistan."

The performance of Soviet Central Asian troops in Afghanistan has led to apprehension within Soviet leadership ranks that pro-Afghan, fundamentalist Islamic, nationalistic, and anti-Soviet ideologies could spread into the Soviet Union itself. For this reason, and the fact that the initial logistical support effort had been

completed, most of the Central Asian troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan by February 1980, although some may still be deployed in Afghanistan for purposes of installation security and convoy duty. Similarly, certain elite paratroop and *Spetsnaz* units may contain Central Asians who have been selected for their political reliability.

Despite this and other setbacks, the Soviets have continued to ruthlessly prosecute the war in Afghanistan against the Mujahideen. For the Soviets, nothing less than a totally favorable political settlement, possibly followed by troop withdrawals, seems to be acceptable. For now, the Soviet Union is prepared to settle for a long, drawn-out conflict in Afghanistan so long as its level of military commitment in that country remains manageable and does not significantly interfere with its commitments elsewhere. Its overall strategy involves the pacification, however brutal, of one region of the country at a time, in much the same manner as the Czarist regimes conquered the Central Asian tribes during the 19th century. The Mujahideen, for their part, have continued to resist the invaders and now discuss more frequently taking the war across the border into the Soviet Union itself. Their ultimate objective, in some instances, is the creation of conditions for a *jihad* — a holy war — among the Muslim population of the Soviet Central Asian Republics.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a unique development in that it was the first time in the post-World War II era that the Soviet Union had overtly invaded a sovereign nation not already under its tutelage.

For all that has been and can be said about the fighting qualities and the effectiveness of the Soviet armed forces, the invasion of Afghanistan underscores the Soviets' willingness to use force in pursuit of their objectives, military or political. And this is a lesson the West cannot afford to ignore. Neither can the West afford to ignore the military lessons of Afghanistan, whether at the strategic, operational, or tactical level, because they provide deep insights into the Soviet theory and practice of war.



Captain David F. McDermott is an Army Reserve Military Intelligence officer now serving with the 91st Division (Training) at the Presidio of San Francisco. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy, he served at Fort Hood in military intelligence assignments while on active duty

