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# Building Afghanistan's Security Forces in Wartime

The Soviet Experience

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Olga Olikar

Prepared for the United States Army

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## Preface

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Security force assistance (SFA) is a central pillar of the counterinsurgency campaign being waged by U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan. The outcome of the campaign hinges, in large measure, on the effectiveness of the assistance provided to the Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, and other security forces. In the 1980s, the Soviet Union also carried out a massive counterinsurgency effort in support of Afghanistan's then-government. At that time, too, the development of Afghanistan's security forces was a central component of counterinsurgency efforts. To this day, the memory and lasting impact of that experience continue to affect Afghan attitudes about security assistance and security force requirements. Although there are many differences between current events and the Soviet experience, there are also striking parallels. Both the parallels and the differences can provide insights for those seeking to help rebuild Afghanistan today.

This monograph examines Soviet approaches to SFA in Afghanistan from the 1920s to 1989, with particular attention to the 1980s. It complements work by the author, Terrence Kelly, and Nora Bensahel that separately documents the U.S. and international approaches to building the Afghan National Security Forces from 2001 to 2009. The findings of this monograph, which presents research completed in the summer of 2010, should be of interest to U.S. military and civilian officials involved in preparing and executing SFA, both in Afghanistan and beyond. It should also be of interest to those inside and outside the U.S. government who seek a deeper understanding of historical reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and the key challenges that

those efforts face, as well as to students of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan.

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## Summary

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The ongoing effort by U.S. and allied forces to assist in the development of the Afghan National Security Forces is not unprecedented. Two decades before coalition forces entered Afghanistan in 2001, Soviet personnel were endeavoring to build Afghan military, police, and intelligence capabilities while fighting alongside Afghan counterparts against a growing insurgency. While there are unquestionably many differences between the two undertakings, some notable similarities suggest that there may be lessons the United States and its coalition partners can learn from the earlier experience.

This monograph provides an overview of Soviet efforts to improve and facilitate the training and development of Afghan security forces. It covers the time period from 1920 to 1989, with specific focus on the period of the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan, from 1979 to 1989. To do so, it draws on Western, Soviet, and Russian sources, as well as interviews in Kabul and Moscow with individuals involved on both the Soviet and Afghan sides. It concludes with comparisons with and lessons for ongoing SFA in Afghanistan.

## Historical Overview

The Soviet Union began providing SFA, including advisors, aircraft, and training, to Afghanistan in the 1920s. Although Turkey was Afghanistan's primary security partner into the 1950s and other countries were also involved, the USSR was a consistent assistance provider to successive Afghan governments. In the late 1950s, the USSR became

Afghanistan's biggest provider of military aid, including weapons, equipment, and training. By 1977, some 3,700 Afghan military commissioned and noncommissioned officers had been trained in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union. Still more had received Soviet training in Afghanistan.

Although the Saur Revolution in 1978 was a surprise to the Soviet government, it brought to power the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), self-proclaimed socialists whom the Soviets quickly recognized. The USSR stepped up SFA, quadrupling the advisory team in country to 400 people. Nonsecurity aid also grew exponentially. By April 1979, there were 4,500 Soviet advisors in Afghanistan.

Soviet advisors worked closely with the Afghan military, providing guidance for training, planning, regulation development, and organization. Representatives of the Soviet KGB and the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) began working with, respectively, intelligence/state security and police organizations. Advisors reported some progress during the next year and a half but noted that the starting point for Afghan security forces was very low.

Afghanistan's new government needed the help: It was fighting a growing insurgency against its increasingly oppressive rule. Through most of 1979, the Soviets urged moderation and refused persistent requests from the Afghan leadership to send Soviet military forces to assist. By December, however, Soviet leaders had decided that Hafizullah Amin, who had taken full control of the PDPA and the government in September, had to be replaced. They also decided to send forces. On December 27, Amin was killed by KGB special forces, and Soviet troops crossed the border into Afghanistan.

## **The Soviet Advisory Mission in the 1980s: Senior Leadership and Reporting Channels**

The Soviet advisory effort in Afghanistan in the 1980s was enormous. Thousands of Soviet advisors rotated through Afghanistan, deployed from counterpart ministries in the USSR. In the security sector, the Soviet Ministry of Defense was in charge of advising and developing



the Afghan armed forces. The KGB provided advice and assistance to the Afghan secret police, the State Information Agency (Khadamat-e Etele'at-e Dawlati, abbreviated as KhAD).<sup>1</sup> The MVD supported Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior (MoI) and its Sarandoy security forces. Soviet military, MVD, and KGB advisors were also tasked with coordinating the efforts of the Afghan armed forces, Sarandoy, and KhAD, respectively, with those of the 40th Army, the Soviet fighting force in Afghanistan.

Advisors reported to Moscow through their own separate ministerial chains of command. Efforts were poorly coordinated: Advisors were often at odds with one another and sent home contradictory reports. The Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense of the USSR was tasked to direct and coordinate all activity in the security realm, including the 40th Army and between the various advisory teams. It was, however, based in Moscow until 1987, when, led by General of the Army Valentin Varennikov, it deployed to Afghanistan full time. Within Afghanistan, the senior military advisor was in principle the overall advisor for security issues, but the men in that position were consistently not viewed that way by their KGB and MVD counterparts, who shielded their own Afghan advisees from contacts with the military advisory team.

Such stovepiping among the Soviet advisors was mirrored by stovepiping of the Afghan ministries. Only in 1987 was there a comprehensive effort to coordinate the security services' work. Advisors also often took on command roles, arguing among themselves about courses of action and issuing directives to their Afghan counterparts. They shared limited information, including operational plans, with the Afghans they worked with, both because of personal mistrust and security concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1986 it was upgraded to become the Ministry of National Security, Wezarat-e-Amnyat-e-Dawlatee (abbreviated as WAD in some sources).

## Mol and KhAD Security Forces During the 1980s

Mol forces, the Sarandoy, included a broad range of internal security personnel deployed throughout the country. The forces grew from a starting point of 8,500 people in 1979 to nearly 100,000, although the goal of 115,000 was probably never reached. Their Soviet-provided equipment included a variety of small arms, mortars, armored vehicles, and automobiles.

The Sarandoy's missions included fighting counterrevolutionary insurgents, ensuring the broadening and strengthening of government control (for example, through policing and public order), securing government and party components, and defending important facilities and structures. Sarandoy also worked with Soviet and Afghan military forces, "clearing" areas after a battle by identifying and apprehending remaining insurgents. Sarandoy forces captured draft evaders and deserters and carried out political arrests. Some were reportedly lent as bodyguards to friends and allies by Interior Minister Sayed Mohammad Golabzoy.

Some 5,000 Soviet advisors worked with the Sarandoy, and thousands of Sarandoy went to the Soviet Union for training. This training was geared to developing a paramilitary, gendarmerie-like capability that would enable the Sarandoy to take on more of the counterinsurgency fight and thus take some burden off of Soviet forces.

The Sarandoy experienced higher casualty rates than military forces but lower attrition. Contemporary views of their capabilities were mixed, and some saw them as a militia loyal to the PDPA's Khalq faction, which Golabzoy headed.

KhAD, the notorious secret police of Afghanistan, grew over the 1980s from a few thousand personnel to nearly 70,000. KhAD units included a variety of intelligence, security, guard, and special units, and KhAD roles ranged from political policing (they had arrested some 150,000 people by 1990) to counterinsurgency. KhAD in Afghanistan were trained by KGB elite special forces units created for that purpose. Some also went to the USSR for training. KhAD personnel took part in clearing operations after battles and took custody of enemy personnel identified in this way (as well as those captured in efforts to catch

draft evaders and deserters). They also engaged in small unit actions, including diversionary actions in the mountains, and, like their KGB colleagues, took part in negotiations with local political, tribal, and militia leaders. Of course, KhAD also identified and arrested those seen as opposed to the state.

KhAD were generally respected by Soviet advisors and viewed as effective, although some questioned their loyalty and expressed concerns about enemy infiltration.

## **The Afghan Army**

Developing the Afghan military was a key focus of Soviet efforts, repeatedly described as the key to enabling the 40th Army to return home. Throughout the 1980s, the Afghan armed forces saw numerous reorganizations, and, as with internal forces, their Soviet counterparts put significant resources into providing training (in Afghanistan and the Soviet Union) and equipment. Training, equipping, and evaluation all followed Soviet models and standards on paper, but large numbers of the predominantly conscript force remained undertrained or untrained. Moreover, persistent problems with desertion and other forms of attrition kept the forces under strength, and force size goals of 200,000 personnel were not reached.

Afghan and Soviet forces fought alongside one another. Indeed, officially, the Soviets could operate only together with Afghan forces, and from the mid-1980s, Afghan units were considered to be in the lead for operations. The reality, however, was that Soviets planned and orchestrated operations, and Afghan roles were limited. Soviet advisors' assessments of their Afghan colleagues were persistently disparaging, even as Soviet officials deemed the Afghan armed forces capable of a leading role.

Border forces also reported to the Ministry of Defense and had Soviet advisors. Over time, border forces came to be seen as particularly effective components of the Afghan armed forces, although closing the border remained a task beyond their capabilities.

Soviet military advisors, accompanied by interpreters, were assigned to Afghan military brigades, battalions, and divisions. Advisors were generally of high rank, comparable to the ranks of the Afghans with whom they worked. They coordinated fighting with the Soviet forces, participated in operations, oversaw the construction of infrastructure, and helped train Afghan soldiers.

## **Militias**

A variety of militias operated with government support in Afghanistan during the 1980s. These included citizen militias, recruited in communities, schools, and workplaces, who were trained by KhAD and Sarandoy personnel to take on defensive tasks but were also credited with some “operational” successes.

A different matter entirely were border and tribal militias, also called regional or territorial forces. These were groups of Mujahedin who had been convinced to change sides and tribal groups that agreed to work with the government. Many of them received military training, and most if not all received arms. In theory commanded by Afghan Army officers, these groups actually retained their own commanders. Despite efforts to integrate them into security forces and/or place them under the leadership of security ministries, militias were independent entities with little true connection to or loyalty toward the Afghan government.

## **Afghan Security Forces: Challenges**

Afghan security forces remained continuously under strength throughout the 1980s. Even official numbers, which tended to report units at their highest levels and ignored the practice of padding the rolls to collect ghost salaries, put forces at just over half strength at best. Officer ranks were more consistently filled, but officer training was in many cases insufficient to requirements.

Desertions had been a problem since the revolution and were a major contributing factor to these personnel shortages. Among the conscript ranks, poor conditions, political issues, tribal and ethnic issues, and religious concerns were all believed to have played a role in the level of desertions. Insurgent groups also urged Afghan security forces personnel to desert. Desertion rates were lower among the predominantly volunteer Sarandoy and among the officer corps. Government efforts to curb desertions included both increased conscription and efforts to improve the lives of troops through higher pay, benefits, and religious outreach.

Poor maintenance meant that much of the equipment provided to Afghanistan by the Soviet Union simply did not work. In part because of continued Soviet willingness to provide more when asked, Afghan security forces personnel saw little reason to repair that which could be replaced. Shortages of trained and capable drivers and mechanics did not help matters.

## **Withdrawal and Its Aftermath**

The USSR began planning to withdraw from Afghanistan in the mid-1980s and focused increasing attention on setting conditions to do so. As the 1980s drew to a close, Afghan leaders sought to delay the withdrawal, but Soviet advisors assessed that another year of military presence would not make a difference.

On February 15, 1989, the last of the Soviet troops left Afghanistan. Soviet support continued, however, in the form of weapons, equipment, and other materiel. Some 30 advisors, and associated interpreters and specialists, also remained in place. Trainers continued to train KhAD, Interior Ministry, and Defense Ministry personnel in both Afghanistan and the Soviet Union.

Interestingly, and in contrast to all expectations of Soviet advisors, the Afghan armed forces were sufficient to keep the PDPA in power, albeit with limited reach beyond Kabul, until Soviet support was fully cut off after the collapse of the USSR itself.

## Parallels, Disconnects, and Lessons from the Soviet Experience<sup>2</sup>

A comparison of security force development in Afghanistan in the 1980s and today identifies both similarities and differences. Stovepiping of advisory efforts rings true to any student of security-sector development, anywhere. The emphasis on developing local forces so that the foreign presence can end is familiar in the context of Iraq, as well as in current operations in Afghanistan.

The Soviet effort in Afghanistan, although stovepiped, was probably more wide-ranging than that now under way. Soviet advisors were better matches in rank and age to their Afghan counterparts than most International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) advisors today.<sup>3</sup> Unlike NATO allies, the Soviets were willing to train tens of thousands of Afghans in their own country. Their ability to dispatch large numbers of police advisors is something that the United States and its coalition partners lack. Yet, the actual approach to police, particularly the paramilitary component, is not entirely dissimilar. Familiar, too, are the tendency to translate, rather than adapt, doctrine and the difficulty of ensuring that personnel are adequately (sometimes at all) trained.

The recruiting, retention, and end strength problems currently faced by the Afghan security forces are similar to those faced in the 1980s. The current system, however, of an all-volunteer force, is very different from conscription during the Soviet period.

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<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this monograph to describe the ongoing ISAF effort. Thus, in highlighting some interesting comparisons and discussing how ways forward might be informed by the Soviet experience, it draws on both ongoing and recently completed work in that sphere by the author and her colleagues. All references to current efforts, unless otherwise noted, draw on Terrence K. Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Olikier, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1066-A, 2011, and related research by the author and her colleagues.

<sup>3</sup> ISAF was created in accordance with the Bonn Conference in December 2001. At this time, a United Nations–mandated international force began to assist the newly established Afghanistan government in creating a secure environment in and around Kabul and supporting the reconstruction of Afghanistan. ISAF's mandate was initially limited to providing security in and around Kabul. In October 2003, the United Nations extended ISAF's mandate to cover all of Afghanistan.

Interactions between Afghan and foreign forces are similar in the challenges presented by transferring control, holding territory over time, and sharing information. Also similar is the tendency of personnel and advisors to assess Afghan capabilities as weak. Equipment maintenance and persistently reported shortages also echo the past. There are aspects of similarity between Soviet advisory structures and ISAF's use of advisory teams into late 2009. However, ISAF's new partnering initiatives have no Soviet precedent.

What, then, can be learned from the Soviet experience? How similar efforts fared in the 1980s can inform current approaches to planning and operating with Afghan forces, police training focus, and overcoming cultural challenges. ISAF, the U.S. Army, and others involved in Afghanistan today can also learn from Soviet efforts to overcome personnel challenges, as well as from some of the relative successes in that sphere, such as better retention among the Sarandoy. Today's coalition can take into account Soviet approaches to assessing Afghan security forces, including the contradiction between those assessments and Afghan performance after 1989. Also potentially useful is the object lesson of the increasing reliance on militia forces toward the end of the 1980s, which proved successful in attaining short-term goals but may have come at a substantial cost in the longer term. Current efforts appear to recognize the dangers, but continued diligence in this area may prove particularly crucial.





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insightful thoughts on previous drafts as well and served as excellent sounding boards as I thought through the data and its implications. Adam Grissom also provided comments and suggestions that led to the useful clarification of a number of key points. I am particularly grateful to Antonio Giustozzi, F. Stephen Larrabee, and Arturo Munoz for reviewing the draft and identifying areas where arguments could be sharpened and gaffes and mistakes corrected. Christina Pitcher's able editing greatly improved the flow of the text and its accessibility. Finally, I thank Christin Strifler for her capable assistance throughout the research and writing process.

My thanks to all those above in no way mitigate the fact that all remaining errors, inconsistencies, or omissions in this monograph are mine and mine alone.

## Abbreviations

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ANCOP	Afghan National Civil Order Police
BMP	infantry fighting vehicle
BRDM	combat reconnaissance patrol vehicle
BTR	armored transporter
CC CPSU	Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
KhAD	State Information Agency (Afghan)
KIA	killed in action
MoD	Ministry of Defense
MoI	Ministry of Interior (Afghan)
MVD	Ministry of Internal Affairs (Soviet)
NCO	noncommissioned officer
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
SFA	security force assistance
WAD	Ministry of National Security
WIA	wounded in action



## Introduction

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### The Limited Contingent

The Soviet Union never declared war in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the “Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces” entered the country at the end of 1979 and stayed for a decade. The Contingent’s initial mission was thought to be, in line with the terminology, limited in nature, a short-term deployment in Kabul and other major cities to serve as a deterrent and stabilizing force while the Afghan government consolidated power. Instead, they quickly became the center of the fight against the Mujahedin.<sup>1</sup> The Limited Contingent and the thousands of military and civilian advisors who accompanied it had, whether they were initially intended to do so or not, taken on two missions: (1) in concert with Afghan security forces, to defeat the enemy’s main battle formations where the enemy is based and (2) to support the government of Afghanistan in its efforts to broaden and expand governance throughout the country.<sup>2</sup> Neither the means by which this was to be done nor how success in these two tasks might be defined or measured was made fully clear then or since.

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<sup>1</sup> N. E. Tsygannik, “Afganskii Sobytiia,” in Vladimir Filippovich Nekrasov, ed., *MVD Rossii: Entsiklopediia*, Moscow: Ob’edinennaia Redaktsiia MVD Rossii, 2002. For an overview of the forces initially deployed and their tasks, see also Andrei Mikhailov, “Afganskaia Kampaniia: Nevostrebovanyi Opyt” (Part 12), *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaiia Oborona*, No. 2, April 2010, pp. 70–76.

<sup>2</sup> Nikolai Salmin, “Afganistan, Dorogi Voiny,” (Part 2), *Ural’skie Voennye Vesti*, No. 7, January 27, 2009b, p. 4.

## Purpose and Research Approach

Much could be written and said about the factors that led to the Soviet invasion; about tactics, strategy, and the evolution of the conflict in Afghanistan; and about Soviet efforts to improve the Afghan government's reach and capacity. The first two topics have received some attention; the last very little, most of it focused on economic and social issues. This analysis goes only a small way toward correcting the shortfall. It focuses on one narrow area: Soviet efforts to improve and facilitate the training and development of Afghan security forces during this period. The goal in this context is less to assess Soviet efforts than to chronicle them and consider their repercussions, as well as to identify parallels to and lessons for current projects. To do this, the research effort draws on a substantial review of Western, Soviet, and Russian historical analyses. Most of the sources cited date from 1991 and later, however. Sources contemporary with events were reviewed but found less data-rich and less reliable than those published after relevant Soviet archives were opened and participants felt freer to discuss their experiences. To supplement the literature review, the author also conducted interviews in Kabul and Moscow with individuals involved, at various levels, on both the Soviet and Afghan sides.

Although the purpose of this research effort is narrow, it cannot help but touch also on a number of related tactical and political issues. Without the historical and political context, the analysis at best would be confusing and at worst meaningless, and any conclusions would risk being spurious. Therefore, this analysis begins with a discussion of Soviet security force assistance (SFA) to Afghanistan before 1979 and the events that led up to the Soviet decision to send in forces. Following this, the monograph turns to the overall advisory effort. Succeeding chapters discuss efforts to build the internal security forces, the development of the Afghan military during this period, and citizens and tribal militias. The next chapter outlines the challenges in security force development during the 1980s, and the penultimate chapter addresses the Soviet decision to withdraw and its aftermath. The monograph concludes with a discussion of the parallels with and lessons that can be drawn for today's ongoing security force development in Afghanistan.

## Historical Overview: 20th-Century Security Aid to Afghanistan Before the Soviet Invasion

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### 1920–1978

The history of Soviet-Afghan security cooperation is nearly as old as the history of the Soviet Union. The first Soviet military advisors arrived as early as 1920.<sup>1</sup> In early 1921, the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic signed a friendship agreement with Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> Lenin at the time emphasized the need to ensure that Russia's southern borders were secure.<sup>3</sup> The Soviet Union provided the first three aircraft of Afghanistan's air force in 1924, and Afghan military personnel first came to train in Tashkent (Uzbekistan) in 1925.<sup>4</sup>

Even though Soviet SFA continued to develop, other countries were initially closer partners to successive Afghan governments, particularly Turkey and Germany, and this was reflected in military and security aid. Turkey was the most important provider of security force training into the 1950s, and it continued to play a role well into the 1970s. Pre-World War II Germany and, after the war, both West and

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<sup>1</sup> Nikolai Salmin, "Afghanistan: Dorogi Voyny" (Part 1), *Ural'skie Voennye Vesti*, No. 6, January 23, 2009a, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> This name for Soviet Russia dates from the 1918 Constitution. The Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic was subsequently incorporated into the USSR with the creation of the latter in December 1922. It remained the official name of Soviet Russia until 1937, when it was renamed Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic.

<sup>3</sup> Evgenii Nikitenko, *Vostok Delo Tonkoe*, Moscow: AST Astrel', 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Salmin, 2009a; Nikitenko, 2004.

East Germany also helped train Afghan security forces, particularly for the Ministry of Interior (MoI). On the eve of the Saur revolution of 1978, Afghanistan's officer corps also included personnel who had traveled to the United States for their training.<sup>5</sup>

Starting in 1956, however, Soviet military aid became particularly appealing. Soviet military cooperation with Afghanistan was similar to Soviet military cooperation elsewhere. In most cases, weapons, technology, and other materiel were provided at a discount (e.g., 25, 50, or 75 percent) and on credit. Chief military advisors in a given country would receive requests from the country's leadership and forward them on to Moscow, to the Soviet General Staff, with their recommendations. Orders went first through the Soviet Ministry of Defense (MoD) bureaucracy, then through the Soviet interagency, and on for approval by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU). Any significant broadening of assistance generally required first a special fact-finding mission and then a special decision. That said, the fact-finding missions perpetually supported more aid, and the decisions were often favorable. According to one analyst—because the Soviet advisors in any given country for the most part enjoyed good ties with local officials, received a variety of gifts and benefits from them, and, understandably under these conditions, enjoyed living abroad—these advisors usually recommended that the General Staff give their friends what they wanted. The Soviet MoD and CC CPSU rarely disagreed.<sup>6</sup> As a result, new equipment and specialists to accompany it were generally quickly dispatched.

In the case of Afghanistan, this meant delivery of jet aircraft, helicopters, tanks, and a range of other heavy and light weaponry and materiel throughout the 1960s and 1970s. As Afghan governments succeeded one another, Soviet specialists trained Afghan military personnel on the weapons provided. Afghan military personnel also regularly traveled to the USSR for training. But while the Soviets had supplanted Turkey as Afghanistan's top military aid provider by 1960, Turkey and

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<sup>5</sup> Iu. V. Gankovskii, *Istoriia Vooruzhennykh Sil Afganistana: 1747–1977*, Moscow: Nauka, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> Aleksandr Liakhovskii, *Tragediia i Doblest' Afghana*, Moscow: Eksmo, 2009.



other countries, including West Germany and the United States, also continued to send aid and train Afghan personnel. Moreover, Soviet allies also played a role. East Germany reportedly provided some assistance to Afghan police development, and Czechoslovakia trained some communications officers in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup>

The Afghans even got preferential treatment in some areas. While most Soviet customers received their aircraft in parts, which came by rail, ship, or transport aircraft and then had to be assembled, Afghanistan's aircraft were flown over whole and already assembled.<sup>8</sup>

In 1972, at the request of the Afghan government, the first 100 Soviet military consultants and specialists arrived in Afghanistan to carry out a broader advisory mission and coordinate Soviet SFA efforts. This group was led until 1975 by General-Major Ivan Semenovich Bondarets and after him, until 1978, by General-Lieutenant Lev Nikolaevich Gorelov.<sup>9</sup> Soviet advisors in the 1970s continued to provide assistance with Soviet-provided equipment, as well as general military training, including the development of training plans. Afghanistan in the 1970s had a military force that included a brigade of air defense missiles and two tank brigades. Forces were concentrated along the Pakistan border and around Kabul. According to members of the Soviet advisory mission, internal security forces did not appear to be an Afghan priority and were limited in number and capacity.<sup>10</sup>

Although Afghan officials had varying degrees of support for Soviet aid, some level of assistance remained constant through the 1970s, and Soviet advisors had good relations with the Afghan personnel with whom they worked. These included commissioned officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) in the air defense missile, infantry, aviation, and tank units. Some training was also provided in commu-

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<sup>7</sup> Nikitenko, 2004; Salmin, 2009a; Gankovskii, 1985; author interview with a member of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Viktor Markovskii and Igor' Prikhodchenko, "Istrebitel'-Bombardirovshchik Su-7," *Aviatsiia i Kosmonavtika*, No. 7, July 2007, pp. 29–36. In some ways, this could be seen as a disadvantage, of course, as Afghan mechanics thus had less experience with the technology.

<sup>9</sup> Nikitenko, 2004; Salmin, 2009a; Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

nications and the use of communications equipment.<sup>11</sup> Large numbers of Afghans also went to the USSR for training, a program that involved no vetting by the Soviets, with trainees selected entirely by the Afghan government.<sup>12</sup> But if by 1977 some 3,700 Afghan officers and NCOs had been trained in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union,<sup>13</sup> the senior military leadership in Afghanistan remained dominated by Turkish-trained personnel, at least according to one Soviet specialist, because of people who had come up through the ranks when Turkey was Afghanistan's dominant security partner and, likely, because of those leaders' tendency to promote those with similar education.<sup>14</sup>

## The Saur Revolution

Limited access to the top ranks of leadership may have prompted some of the younger, Soviet-trained officers to support the April 1978 overthrow by the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) of Mohammed Daoud Khan, Afghanistan's first President.<sup>15</sup> Although contemporary Western accounts stated that the Soviet Union had not only provided support to the PDPA but had actually been involved in the coup,<sup>16</sup> in fact, Soviet officials in Afghanistan and in Moscow were taken by surprise when the PDPA announced its seizure of power. They were, however, quick to recognize the new regime, led by General Secretary Noor Muhammad Taraki. The Soviets had enjoyed good relations with Daoud; however, they saw little choice but to support the new Afghan leadership and to do so enthusiastically, composed as it

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<sup>11</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009; Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Richard F. Nyrop and Donald M. Seekins, eds., *Afghanistan: A Country Study*, Washington, D.C.: American University, January 1986, Ch. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Author interview with a member of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Nyrop and Seekins, 1986.

was of friends of Moscow, many with experience in the Soviet Union, espousing socialist goals and rhetoric.<sup>17</sup>

This support meant a substantial step-up of Soviet military aid, one of the primary ways the Soviet Union had to demonstrate its friendship with the new regime. In May 1978, an agreement on military advisors was signed, and the advisory team (previously termed consultants) quickly quadrupled in number to 400.<sup>18</sup> Advisors in a range of other areas came as well, until, by March 1979, the Soviet Union had a total of 4,500 military and civilian advisors in country, assigned to every Afghan ministry at a range of levels. Many of them had little knowledge of Afghanistan and its social, political, and economic situation, which meant that their advisory efforts were sometimes somewhat counterproductive. Agricultural advisors, for example, suggested that Afghanistan develop a system of *sovkhos* and *kolkhos* (collective farms), just as in the Soviet Union.<sup>19</sup>

Advisory efforts with Afghanistan's military forces included live fire exercises carried out by Soviet trainers and Afghan troops.<sup>20</sup> Hand-to-hand combat and marksmanship were also part of the curriculum.<sup>21</sup> Soviet military advisors saw their role as helping rebuild Afghanistan's military into a better, more capable, socialist military. They provided

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<sup>17</sup> Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, New York: Harper Collins, 2009; Liakhovskii, 2009; author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Viktor Merimskii, "Afganistan: Uroki i Vivody, Kabul-Moskva: Voyna Po Zakazu," *Na Strazhe Rodiny*, No. 209, November 2, 2003; Liakhovskii, 2009; Andrei Mikhailov, "Preliudiia k Afganskoi Kampanii" (Part 3), *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaiia Oborona*, No. 6, 2009b, pp. 66–72.

<sup>19</sup> Salmin, 2009a. For a discussion of the overall (rather than security) advisory effort, see Artemy Kalinovsky, "The Blind Leading the Blind: Soviet Advisors, Counter-Insurgency and Nation-Building in Afghanistan," Cold War International History Project Working Paper #60, Woodrow Wilson International History Project, January 2010a.

<sup>20</sup> Dmitri Ustinov, "Soviet Defense Minister Ustinov, Report to CPSU Central Committee on Mission to Afghanistan of Deputy Defense Minister Army General I. G. Pavlovskii," APRF, f. 3, op. 82, d. 149, November 5, 1979, ll. 120–122, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive.

<sup>21</sup> Valeriy Kurilov, "Operatsiia 'Shtorm-333' (Afghanistan-79)," *Nash Sovremennik*, January 1, 2000.

guidance on planning, mobilization, command, combat, and operational preparations. They helped develop regulations for the Afghan Army, built infrastructure, and had significant input into training approaches.<sup>22</sup> Fundamentally, they were providing their Afghan counterparts with a blueprint for how to rebuild the armed forces to do the things the Soviet Army could do.

These efforts were in line with what the new Afghan government wanted. Taraki told Soviet advisors, "We want to build, over the next two years, the strongest military in this region. In you, I see the doctors who must write for us the necessary prescription."<sup>23</sup> The PDPA leadership, particularly Taraki, saw the military as the vanguard of the revolution in their country. The revolution would succeed, Taraki reportedly believed, if the right attitudes could be built in the armed forces. Because the Afghan Army was conscript-based, the logic was that soldiers would return home to their towns and villages at the end of their conscription term as converts to socialism and supporters of the new regime. Literacy training and political awareness were key component of efforts on the books, even if the realities of training lagged these goals.<sup>24</sup> General-Major Vasily Zaplatin, the political advisor to the Afghan Army at that time, took pride in the fact that between May 1978 and May 1979, the Soviets helped build 27 military bases in Afghanistan, as well as scores of barracks, cafeterias, mosques, club buildings, libraries, and educational facilities for military personnel.<sup>25</sup>

Zaplatin oversaw a commission of Afghan and Soviet personnel tasked with adapting Soviet military approaches to Afghanistan. The group's recommendations, forwarded to the Afghan Department of Military Training, were generally accepted. According to a Russian officer involved in these efforts, Ali Jalali, a member of the Afghan team for these discussions, recommended that change be gradual, and much was retained. The shifts that were made were implemented slowly. They

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<sup>22</sup> Ustinov, 1979.

<sup>23</sup> Merimskii, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> IAaroslav IAstrebov, "Ne Povtorit' Prezhnikh Oshibok," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, November 24, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> IAstrebov, 2001.

included shifting from a brigade to a division system over time and elimination of corporal punishment. The overall Turkish model for the force was retained, including its rank structure.<sup>26</sup>

The military was not the only security institution that saw increased Soviet involvement. On August 3, 1978, a delegation of the KGB came to Afghanistan. One of its tasks was to begin building an Afghan counterpart. Initially staffed by only 14 people, the KGB mission was first headed by Colonel L. P. Bogdanov.<sup>27</sup>

May 1978 discussions by Soviet leaders with then–Afghan Interior Minister Noor Akhmad Noor and then–Deputy Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin led to the departure of West German advisors from Afghanistan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs.<sup>28</sup> On August 15, a Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs (abbreviated as MVD, for the Russian Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del) advisory group arrived in Kabul. The team, headed by police General-Major Veselkov, decided to create a permanent advisory mission to their Afghan counterpart structure, with a focus on fighting “banditism” and crime and building up Afghanistan’s Sarandoy, the security forces reporting to the Afghan MoI, particularly their centralized paramilitary component. While the MVD had been involved in some counternarcotics work in Afghanistan in previous decades, this was a much larger mission. The MVD team was to report to the KGB group leaders.<sup>29</sup>

## Events Leading Up to the Soviet Invasion

As has been the case after many a revolution, the PDPA that took power in 1978 was rife with internal tension. Since 1967, the party (which was founded in 1965) had been composed of two major fac-

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<sup>26</sup> Author interview with a member of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Valerii Vasil’evich Malevanyi, *Sovetskii Spetsnaz v Afganistane*, Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2009; author interview with a member of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

tions—Parcham, led by Babrak Karmal, and Khalq, led by Taraki and Amin. The two differed from one another less in ideology than in tactics, with Parcham members more willing to cooperate with elites and the state in the near term (including taking positions in Daoud's government). Parcham members were also socially closer to the pre-1978 ruling elite, and many were urban Kabulis. According to Barnett Rubin, both factions were dominated by Pashtuns at leadership levels. But although Parcham was somewhat more multiethnic than Khalq, neither was exclusively Pashtun by any means.<sup>30</sup> After Daoud purged Parcham members from his government in the mid-1970s, the two factions formally united in 1977 and carried out the revolution together.<sup>31</sup>

The union did not last long. In July 1978, Taraki exiled Karmal, then a deputy prime minister, and other Parcham leaders (in part by giving them ambassadorial posts abroad, for example, sending Karmal to Czechoslovakia). Parcham plans to carry out a coup to overthrow Khalq came to naught and led to the arrests of faction leaders, many of whom were tortured into confessions. According to reports, some 3,200 people were arrested in total—many of them key figures in the April revolution—and 1,800 of them were either shot or died in custody.<sup>32</sup> By November, all Parcham leaders were gone from the government. In Czechoslovakia, Karmal, now a political refugee rather than an ambassador, began seeking Soviet support for the overthrow of Taraki and Amin but was rebuffed.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Afghan specialists, including Afghanistan's former Defense Minister, indicate that Tajiks dominated Parcham (author interview with Shahnawaz Tanai, Kabul, September 10, 2009; other author discussions in Afghanistan, September 2009). However, this may be accounted for at least in part by the fact that over the course of the 1980s Tajik participation in the PDPA as a whole grew, eventually surpassing the Pashtun numbers (Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics, and Society in Afghanistan: 1978–1992*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000, pp. 256–257, charts 12a and 12b). Meanwhile, allegiances to Parcham and Khalq remained strong within the officially united party, and Khalq was disproportionately Pashtun-dominated while Parcham likely included disproportionate numbers of Tajiks.

<sup>31</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 2nd ed., New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Rubin, 2002; see also R. Ul'yanovskiy, "CC CPSU Concerning the Appeal to the Czechoslovak Communist Party About K. Babrak," November 9, 1978, via

In the meantime, Khalq rule grew ever more repressive. The purge of the Parchamis had thinned the ranks of military officers.<sup>34</sup> Political activists of other parties—whether loyalists of the old regime, Islamists who had opposed it, or adherents of non-Khalq Marxist groups—were repressed, as were religious and tribal leaders. Many were murdered. The PDPA had limited backing, particularly in rural areas, and its policies, although meant to broaden support and eliminate opposition, often backfired. The Khalq’s land reform plan succeeded in seizing land from some landowners, but redistribution to farmers was a failure. Not only did it leave many landowners in control, but it actually hurt many mid-range and poor farmers. The result was that both peasantry and landowners were alienated. New laws on the rights of women and on marriage angered some traditional elites (although the laws echoed those attempted by previous Afghan governments).<sup>35</sup> Soviet leaders criticized the repressions and called on Afghan leaders to seek reconciliation to strengthen the government and reduce public opposition. This had little effect, however, perhaps in part because the critiques had no real bite: Overall Soviet backing of the Afghan government continued.<sup>36</sup>

By the end of 1978, Islamist parties that had fled into Pakistan years before began sending forces back into Afghanistan, where they took advantage of growing dissatisfaction.<sup>37</sup> Military desertions were on the rise, and the loyalty of security forces was increasingly unclear.

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Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive.

<sup>34</sup> General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev reportedly once told Taraki, “You cannot expect much from the army if its leadership changes often. This is particularly true if those changes are accompanied by arrests.” (Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007, author’s translation.)

<sup>35</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Giustozzi, 2000; Rubin, 2002; Feifer, 2009; Andrei Mikhailov, “Preliudiia k Afganskoi Kampanii” (Part 2), *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaia Oborona*, No. 4, 2009a, pp. 70–77.

<sup>36</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; see also “Information from CC CPSU to GDR Leader Erich Honecker,” Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv (SAPMO), Berlin, J2/202, A. 575, October 13, 1978, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive.

<sup>37</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Rubin, 2002.

On March 15, 1979, Afghan military personnel stationed in Herat mutinied. Revolts quickly spread to other cities and towns. One thousand people were killed, including two Soviet advisors. The Soviet KGB advisor in Afghanistan asked that special forces troops be prepared to be sent into major cities to protect and evacuate Soviet citizens, and the Defense Ministry took steps to increase readiness in border regions.<sup>38</sup> It was at this time that Afghanistan's leaders began asking the Soviet Union to supplement their support with military intervention. Russian sources and archival documents testify to a Soviet leadership divided on what to do. On the one hand, Soviet leaders were committed to supporting the Afghan government. On the other hand, they were deeply concerned about the international implications of Soviet military involvement (including for arms control goals and entente more broadly), likely popular opposition to Soviet troops within Afghanistan, and Taraki and Amin's repressive tactics and leadership. The Soviets stepped up assistance, including advisory personnel, but refused to send military forces. At the same time, the Defense Ministry began some planning and preparations for possible involvement.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> For supporting material translated into or summarized in English, see "Transcript of CPSU CC Politburo Discussions on Afghanistan," TsKhSD, f. 89, per. 25, dok. 1, March 17, 1979, Il. 1, 12–25, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive; "Transcript of Telephone Conversation Between Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin and Afghan Prime Minister Nur Mohammed Taraki," March 17, 1979, Moscow Russian Television Network in Russian, "Special File" program, July 14, 1992, as translated in FBIS-SOV-92-138 (July 17, 1992), pp. 30–31, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive; "Meeting of Kosygin, Gromyko, Ustinov, and Ponomarev with Taraki in Moscow, 20 March 1979," TsKhSD, f. 89, per. 14, dok. 26, March 20, 1979 [cited by Archive-Information Bulletin as RGANI, op. 14, d. 26, 1993, Il. 15, copy, special file, CC], via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive; "Record of Conversation Between Soviet Ambassador to Afghanistan A. M. Puzanov and Taraki," notes by O. A. Westad, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 76, d. 1044, March 22, 1979, Il. 29–39; for discussion in English, see also Feifer, 2009. Liakhovskii (2009) and Boris Gromov (*Ogranichennyi Kontingent*, Moscow: Progress, 1994) cite even more-extensive archival material (some overlapping with the Woodrow Wilson material). See also Iu. V. Rubtsov, "Sovetskii Soiuz v 'Neob'iavlennoi' Voine v Afganistane (1979–1989 gody): Osmyslenie Proshlogo," *Novaia i Noveishaia Istorii*, No. 1, 2009, pp. 48–70.



Throughout most of 1979, perpetual requests<sup>40</sup> for a Soviet force presence were met with more assistance and advisors. The Soviets sent about 200 more KGB and MVD representatives. They dispatched a paratrooper battalion disguised as a maintenance team to provide security for the Soviet An-12 squadron at Bagram as of June. KGB and possibly other special forces personnel were sent to defend and secure the Soviet Embassy and its staff.<sup>41</sup> Soviet forces near the border were also built up. In August, Soviet Ground Forces Commander Ivan G. Pavlovskii was dispatched to lead a mission to assess Afghan capabilities and improve their capacity to fight the opposition.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, the opposition gained strength and territory (fully or partially controlling over half of Afghanistan by the summer of 1979 and some 70 percent of the country, including most agriculturally productive areas, by the end of the year). Amin's increasingly successful efforts to take power from Taraki were also frustrating some PDPA loyalists in the security forces and elsewhere in the Afghan government. Afghan citizens fled the country in droves, becoming refugees, most of them in Pakistan, even as militants arrived across that same border. It was in this context that the United States began its covert program of assistance to the opposition.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Mikhailov, 2009b, lists the nearly 20 official Afghan requests for Soviet forces throughout 1979 and notes an additional handful that were transmitted in discussions with Soviet officials.

<sup>41</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Rubtsov, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Rubtsov, 2009; Liakhovskii, 2009; Feifer, 2009; Mikhailov, 2009b.

<sup>43</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Feifer, 2009; Mikhailov, 2009b; "Protocol #150 of the CC CPSU Politburo Session, 21 April 1979," TsKhSD, f. 89, per. 14, dok. 28, April 21, 1979 [cited by Archive-Information Bulletin as RGANI, op. 14, d. 28, 1993, Il. 2, copy, special file, CC], via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive; "CPSU CC Protocol #152/159, 24 May 1979," RGANI (formerly TsKhSD), f. 89, per. 14, dok. 30, May 24, 1979, st. 1–3 [cited by Archive-Information bulletin as RGANI, op. 14, d. 30, 1993, Il. 3, copy, special file, CC], via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive; "CPSU CC Politburo Decision and Instruction to Soviet Ambassador in Afghanistan," TsKhSD, f. 89, per. 14, dok. 30, May 24, 1979, Il. 1–3, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive; "Record of Conversation Between Soviet Ambassador to Afghanistan A. M. Puzanov and H. Amin,"

In September 1979, Amin successfully purged Taraki and his supporters. He took power formally on September 16. Taraki was killed soon after.<sup>44</sup> Military officers and party personnel suspected of disloyalty also lost their lives. That month, Amin published a partial list of the executed, which included 12,000 names. According to Aleksandr Liakhovskii, some estimates indicate that 50,000 people had been murdered by that time.<sup>45</sup> Soviet leaders were displeased and frustrated. They were also concerned about what they saw as Amin's growing ties with U.S. representatives in the country.<sup>46</sup> For his part, Amin continued to request that Soviet forces (military and MVD) be sent in to assist him in gaining control of the country. He also continued to ignore Soviet calls to end repression and to reach out to the people. It is in this context that the Soviet leadership decided that Amin had to go. Whether this meant that Soviet troops would go in was less clear. The KGB chain of command favored doing so. Military personnel, by and large, were opposed. Representatives in Kabul were divided. Pavlovskii had advised against it at the conclusion of his two-month effort to assist Afghan forces, but his advice was reportedly not forwarded on by Soviet Defense Minister Ustinov.<sup>47</sup> In December senior-level discussions, General Staff Chief Ogarkov argued strenuously against sending in Soviet forces, telling General Secretary Brezhnev on December 9 that the Soviets would be dragged into combat and alienate Muslims around the world while suffering a political defeat globally. At this time, while postponing a decision on an actual incursion, the Politburo decided to make sure the forces were ready just in case.<sup>48</sup>

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notes by O. A. Westad, TsKhSD, f. 5, op. 76, d. 1045, July 21, 2009, ll. 94–97, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive.

<sup>44</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Feifer, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009 (some archival material is also available in English via the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive).

<sup>47</sup> Rubtsov, 2009; Mikhailov, 2009b; see also Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; see also Feifer, 2009.

## Afghan Security Forces on the Eve of the Soviet Invasion

In November 1979, General Pavlovskii reported the results of his mission to assess Afghan military forces and their needs. He noted that Soviet assistance had resulted in some progress, but that the Afghan armed forces remained far from fully capable. The military regulations that Soviet advisors helped draft were not put into action. Coordination between government and military structures, and within the military, was limited at best. Staffs, including the General Staff, failed to direct combat activity. Morale was low, military discipline lacking, and will to fight questionable. Afghan political leaders sought additional assistance but made little progress in implementing the recommendations they had already received.<sup>49</sup>

Another member of a Soviet delegation in this time frame reported some success in teaching tactics to Afghan forces. He writes that a captured opposition fighter was surprised at the improvement (which presumably led to his capture). This fighter reported that in the past, Afghan forces' approach had consisted of two steps: First, they shot indiscriminately; second, they fled. The Soviet representative was horrified, however, at the overall state of the Afghan forces. Weapons provided by the Soviet Union were in disrepair, and instructions for their use had been ignored in the expectation that they could and would readily be replaced. He saw the living conditions as particularly substandard, with barracks poorly constructed, ill lit, and uncomfortable looking. He noted that soldiers slept outdoors or on the floor on bedding brought from their homes. There were no baths or kitchens, much less dining facilities, and soldiers cooked for themselves as best they could. Some of these comments, of course, reflect the assessment team member's own prejudices and expectations. Perhaps more telling is his concern that Afghan military staffing made no sense: Majors commanded brigades, with colonels officially reporting to them. One Afghan officer reluctantly explained the situation. Because salaries were paid according to rank, not assignment, senior officers could take a job below their rank without material loss. They did this in order to

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<sup>49</sup> Ustinov, 1979.

hedge their bets should the revolution fail. If it did, their having held a lower-level job would, they hoped, mean they could deny a leading role. If, on the other hand, the revolution succeeded, they could still say they had served it honorably. But if the officers distrusted the revolution, they were, at least, aware of it. Soldiers, the Afghan officer told the Soviet representative, had little knowledge and even less understanding of recent events.<sup>50</sup>

Loyalty even among the best-trained officers was cause for some concern. Declassified minutes of a March 1979 discussion between Taraki, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Ustinov, and CC CPSU International Department Chief Boris Ponomarev indicate that Taraki was concerned that a substantial number of Soviet-trained pilots had Muslim Brotherhood affiliation or ties to the pro-Chinese Shol-e-Jawed. Taraki informed them that this was because sending such people to the USSR for training had been a matter of policy under the Daoud regime, and that Taraki and his government were unable to assess who was and was not reliable.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, as more and more Afghans came to the Soviet Union to train, the Soviets never implemented any standardized vetting procedure of their own or made any systematic effort to ascertain the loyalty and trustworthiness of those whom the Afghan government selected for training abroad. Whether the Afghan government ever improved its own vetting over time, or how it carried it out, is not known.<sup>52</sup>

The Afghan leadership did, however, reportedly have some concerns of its own about the Soviet advisors they were hosting. Amin himself reportedly critiqued existing Soviet advisors as insufficiently capable and difficult to deal with. He was quoted as arguing that since the Afghans were following Soviet orders and, indeed, had given the

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<sup>50</sup> Merimskii, 2003. Mikhailov, 2009b, asserts that the Soviets helped provide a large number of barracks equipment, furniture, and so forth, as Afghan soldiers had traditionally been expected to supply themselves from home and sleep on earthen pallets.

<sup>51</sup> Liahkovskii, 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

advisors substantial latitude, it was the Soviets who were responsible for military failures.<sup>53</sup>

Reports of incompetence and malfeasance among the Soviet delegation and advisory staff did make their way to Moscow. While the overall advisory team grew, some personnel were replaced, including Zaplatin, who had come to be particularly trusted by Amin.<sup>54</sup>

## A Decision to Invade?

On December 10, Ustinov, who increasingly favored the use of Soviet forces, called on his staff to prepare for a possible invasion. The actual decision to invade was made at some point after that. A vaguely worded directive signed by Brezhnev on December 12 regarding “The Situation in ‘A’” indicated the approval of certain measures but not what they were. Although generally viewed as the order for war, this directive, as Liakhovskii argues, could have been the approval for the assassination of Amin but not the large-scale entry of forces.<sup>55</sup>

Regardless of when the decision to do so was made, Soviet forces entered Afghanistan on December 27, 1979. On this same day, Amin was killed by KGB special forces—efforts to poison him on December 13 having failed. Babrak Kamal was named General Secretary of the PDPA. His Parcham allies and Taraki’s exiled Khalq ministers returned to form the core of a new government.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Vasilii Mitrokhin, “The KGB in Afghanistan. Vasili Mitrokhin Archive,” February 2002, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive.

<sup>54</sup> Mitrokhin, 2002.

<sup>55</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; see also Feifer, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Feifer, 2009.



## The Soviet Advisory Mission in the 1980s: Senior Leadership and Reporting Channels

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If the mission of Soviet forces in Afghanistan was never as clearly stated as some might have liked, there was no question about the reason they were needed: Afghan security forces were not sufficient to stabilize regions of unrest and help extend government reach throughout the country. Training and developing Afghan security forces' capacity were thus key components of the Soviet effort.<sup>1</sup> These were shifts in focus from the advisory mission of the 1960s and 1970s, which focused heavily on equipment provision and related training (as was typical for a Soviet defense assistance mission). But although the number of advisors and their roles grew substantially after the Limited Contingent entered Afghanistan, the structures of the advisory mission remained an outgrowth of the structures of the mission in the previous decades.

The basic formula was one of dispatching Soviet government specialists from the relevant ministries to build up their counterpart structures and institutions in Afghanistan. MoD was in charge of advising and developing the Afghan armed forces. The KGB provided advice and assistance to the Afghan secret police, the State Information Agency (Khadamat-e Etela'at-e Dawlati, abbreviated as KhAD).<sup>2</sup> The MVD supported Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior and its Sarandoy

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<sup>1</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>2</sup> In 1986, it was upgraded to become the Ministry of National Security (Wezarat-e Amnyat-e-Dawlatee, abbreviated as WAD in some sources).

security forces (which included a broad range of police forces and paramilitary units).

Many advisors were accompanied by their families, contributing to a substantial Soviet presence in Afghanistan, which also included supply and medical personnel. In addition to the ministries and other government structures, advisors were assigned to trade unions, companies, and quasi-governmental organizations. Thousands of senior advisors were in Afghanistan at any given time.<sup>3</sup> Although, starting in August 1980, the Soviet Union began sending advisors to provincial governments (and eventually, every provincial governor had a Soviet advisor for political-military issues<sup>4</sup>), a large proportion of the advisory pool never left Kabul.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, once Soviet troops had crossed the border, yet another massive organization with its own almost completely independent structure—the 40th Army—further complicated this equation, for it would have to fight alongside the Afghan forces that Soviet advisors were working to build.<sup>6</sup>

Each advisory team, both for security ministries and other ministries and organizations, had a senior advisor in Afghanistan and its own chain of command leading back to Moscow.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the ambassador and his staff reported through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Therefore, it is not surprising that the various reports of these groups and individuals were rarely in agreement, and joint reports were often too general to be useful. Each advisory team also requested resources through its own chain (though some actual orders for weapons and other equipment for the MoI and KhAD/WAD [the Ministry of National Security] went through the Defense Ministry).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Kalinovsky, 2010a.

<sup>4</sup> Author interview with a member of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Aleksandr Maiorov, *Pravda ob Afganskoi Voine*, Moscow: Human Rights Publishers (Izdatel'stvo Prava Cheloveka), 1996; Nikolai Pikov, *Voina v Afganistane*, Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1991; Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Although the MVD was, as noted, formally meant to be reporting through the KGB, this was not consistently the case in practice.

<sup>8</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Nikitenko, 2004.



Thus, while the senior military advisor was in principle the overall advisor for security issues, the men in that position were consistently not viewed that way by their KGB and MVD counterparts, who shielded their own Afghan advisees from contacts with the military advisory team. Moreover, KGB and MVD senior advisors fought efforts to create an overall coordinator in country, arguing that this was the job of the Ambassador.<sup>9</sup> For his part, Aleksandr Maiorov, the Chief Military Advisor from 1980 to 1981, was frustrated with efforts by the Ambassador to meddle in what he saw as “military business.” Maiorov furthermore felt that the Ambassador sought to drive a wedge between the 40th Army and the advisory mission. The Ambassador did preside over a Party committee, which included the KGB advisor, as well as representatives of unions, trade organizations, Komsomol (the Soviet youth organization), journalists, and others located in Afghanistan. To an extent, all Soviet citizens in Afghanistan formally reported to this committee, but it did not coordinate security affairs.<sup>10</sup>

When it came to aligning the operations of Afghan forces with the Limited Contingent, Soviet military, MVD, and KGB advisors were tasked with coordinating the efforts of the Afghan armed forces, Sarandoy, and KhAD, respectively, with those of the 40th Army. Insofar as overall coordination went, early on, Defense Minister Ustinov had established the Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense of the USSR. Its job was to provide direction to the 40th Army and coordinate all activity in the security realm, including between the various advisory teams and in regard to security operations between Soviet and Afghan forces. The group was led throughout the conflict by men of the Soviet Army’s highest ranks: Generals of the Army or Marshals of the Soviet Union. The group was not, however, a permanent presence in Afghanistan during most of the conflict. Instead, it was based in Moscow, flying out for periodic visits to assess the situation and provide guidance.<sup>11</sup> Only in 1987, after the Soviet leadership had decided

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<sup>9</sup> Nikitenko, 2004; Evgenii Nikitenko, “Afganskaia Kampaniia: Nevostrebovannyi Opyt” (Part 3), *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaia Oborona*, No. 5, 2008b, pp. 102–113.

<sup>10</sup> Maiorov, 1996; see also Liakhovskii, 2009, on ambassadors’ roles.

<sup>11</sup> Maiorov, 1996.

to end its presence in Afghanistan, did the Operational Group deploy to Afghanistan full time and, thus, become a true coordinating body.<sup>12</sup> Even then, its effectiveness relied largely on the personal leadership skills of General of the Army Valentin Varennikov, who was able to convince the KGB and MVD representatives to keep him well-informed.<sup>13</sup>

This lack of coordination was reflected in Afghanistan's own security structures. Although there were command functions at the local level designed to integrate military, KhAD, and interior ministry forces and their operations, there were, until 1987, no formal centralized mechanisms to develop a consolidated approach. In the spring of 1987, the Operational Group, by then permanently deployed, helped create the position of Commander in Chief of Afghanistan—a position held by the country's leader, at that time Mohammed Najibullah—with the express purpose of ensuring that the work of the military, Interior Ministry forces, and KhAD were coordinated. Ministers and security forces leadership were expected to attend daily meetings with the PDPA General Secretary.<sup>14</sup>

As noted above, Soviet advisors often had little background in Afghan affairs, yet they had a substantial conviction in their own knowledge. They would argue about decisions among themselves, leaving Afghan counterparts on the sidelines.<sup>15</sup> There was also some confusion among advisors as to whether their role was to advise or to dictate. Maiorov reports a conversation with Yuri Andropov (then the KGB chief) in which Andropov told him that he should provide the Afghan authorities with options from which to choose. Maiorov reports that he insisted that he also had to make the final decision, a view to which he says Andropov agreed.<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising that Liakhovskii identifies General Maiorov as among the worst of the advisors in tending to

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<sup>12</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Author interview with a member of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Pikov, 1991; author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Maiorov, 1996.

direct rather than advise.<sup>17</sup> Maiorov, however, was probably like many Soviet advisors in having little faith in the competence of the Afghan leadership. In Maiorov's memoirs, Karmal, particularly, is presented as often intoxicated and made to appear not very intelligent.<sup>18</sup> And Maiorov's views were shared by his staff: In May 1981, his team of senior Soviet military advisors wrote a report to Soviet Defense Minister Ustinov arguing that Karmal's government lacked the capacity to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup>

One report argues that Soviet advisors generally made the decisions, which were then translated into Dari or Pashto and signed by the appropriate Afghans,<sup>20</sup> and most sources concur that Soviet advisors often took charge.<sup>21</sup> It is ironic, given Maiorov's view of him, that Karmal directed the advisory group to "command our forces as if they were your own," a statement cited by Evgenii Nikitenko as emboldening Soviet advisors to take charge.<sup>22</sup>

Soviet advisors' decisionmaking roles, combined with their mistrust of their Afghan counterparts, had important implications for how decisions were made and military operations conducted. Because advisors played a role in defining and planning military operations and missions (largely because they were supposed to be coordinating Afghan forces' participation in those missions), they had to make choices about how much of Soviet plans to share with Afghan leaders and military personnel. The Soviets were convinced that missions had been compromised by the leakage of information to insurgents. As a result, Soviet personnel began developing two maps for each operation,

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<sup>17</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Maiorov, 1996; in contrast, he remembers Karmal's life partner and fellow member of government, Anahita Ratebzad, as an insightful and intelligent interlocutor.

<sup>19</sup> Nikolai Pikov, *Afganskii Zapiski Spetspropagandista*, St. Petersburg: Desiatka, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Oleg Kustov, "Nezazhivaiushchaia Rana," *Voенно-promyshlennyi Kurer*, January 13, 2010, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> See Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Evgenii Nikitenko, "Afganskaia Kampaniia: Nevostrebovannyi Opyt" (Part 11), *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaia Oborona*, No. 1, 2010, pp. 96–103.

one for themselves and one for their Afghan counterparts.<sup>23</sup> While Afghan military, Sarandoy, and KhAD leaders and representatives of their ministries participated in planning sessions, they did so accompanied by their advisors.<sup>24</sup> Starting in 1982, according to Nikitenko, Afghan counterparts were told of operational plans only on the morning of an operation.<sup>25</sup>

The result was, of course, that the Soviets planned the war. This also meant that Afghan leaders not only felt condescended to, but that they could and did blame the Soviets for problems and mistakes, whether these resulted from Soviet action or not.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, some advisors were prone to being dragged into Afghan disagreements, as they built personal relationships and became aligned with specific factions whose interests and goals they would then represent to Moscow.<sup>27</sup>

The advisors themselves often saw things differently, arguing that their selection had been arduous and that they themselves brought useful experience to the table. A number of former advisors note that the Afghans they worked with called them *mushawer*, which they translate as *teacher*<sup>28</sup> (it perhaps translates better as *consultant*).<sup>29</sup> They felt, at the time and in retrospect, that they had been useful and respected.

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<sup>23</sup> Maiorov, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Tsygannik, 2002, makes this note in reference to Sarandoy and Interior Ministry officials, but it seems likely to apply to all.

<sup>25</sup> Nikitenko, 2008b.

<sup>26</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> Arkadii Pinchuk, "Nezabivaemoe; Oleg Zinchenko, 'Nas Zvali Musheverami,'" *Na Strazhe Rodiny*, January 17, 2002, p. 11; author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Special thanks to Ahmad Idrees Rahmani for clarifying this point. He also notes that, often, the terminology used was "mushawer saheb," which denotes tremendous respect.

## Mol and KhAD Security Forces During the 1980s

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### The Sarandoy

Ministry of Interior forces were called the *Sarandoy*. The term referred to the forces reporting to the Ministry,<sup>1</sup> including traffic police, provincial police, and corrections/labor prison facility officers.<sup>2</sup> Personnel included female officers, who (presumably among other things) interacted with female civilians.<sup>3</sup> The Sarandoy were tasked with fighting counterrevolutionary insurgents (and included a special section to fight “political banditism”), ensuring the broadening and strengthening of government control through policing and other actions, securing government and party components, and securing important facilities and structures.<sup>4</sup> They also participated, as did KhAD, in arrests of counter-revolutionaries and those who provided them with support.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As of 1982, the Ministry of Interior also had an intelligence service, with some forces that may not have been considered Sarandoy (Mitrokhin, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> A description of the Sarandoy is found in Anatolii Iakovlevich Voronin, “Tsarandoi,” Art of War website, not dated.

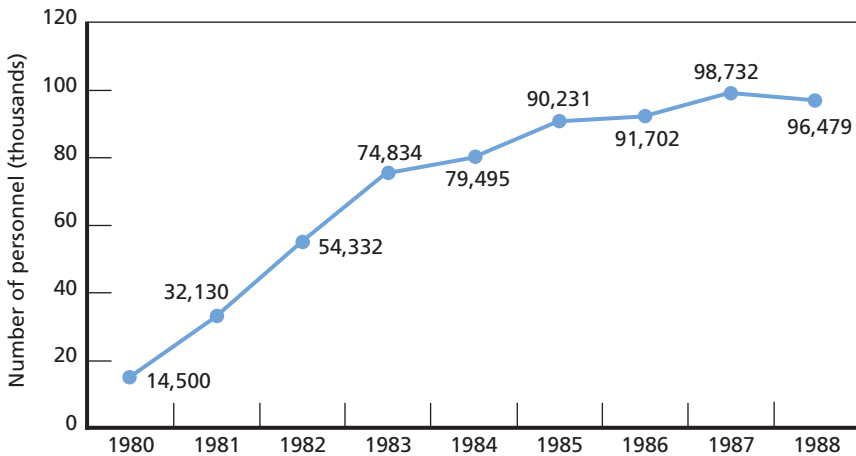
<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Timofeev, “Etot Trupnyi Desiatyi IAnvar,” *Voin Rossii*, No. 1, January 2009, pp. 98–111. There was a combined total of 5,000 women serving on the police force and in the Revolution Defense Group citizens’ militia as of 1986 (Giustozzi, 2000), although one female former Sarandoy officer recalls that her cohort numbered only a few hundred (author interview, Afghanistan 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Tsygannik, 2002; Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Mikhailov, 2010, cites a February 26, 1980, report from Marshal Sokolov to Defense Minister Ustinov that noted that there was sometimes armed opposition to Sarandoy and secret police efforts to carry out nighttime arrests.

Starting from a very small base of local police in 1979,<sup>6</sup> the Sarandoy grew fairly rapidly. Starting in early 1981, Sarandoy operational departments were established in 28 provinces and in Kabul. By that time, the force had grown from the 8,500 it comprised in 1979 to about 30,000 soldiers, NCOs, and officers.<sup>7</sup> The initial goal was to build up to a total force size of 75,000.<sup>8</sup> Goals apparently shifted, however, and numbers grew well beyond that. Figure 4.1 shows MoI personnel growth from 1980 to 1988, as reported by Liakhovskii.<sup>9</sup> Although other sources report slightly different numbers, the general

**Figure 4.1**  
**MoI Number of Personnel over Time**



SOURCE: Based on data from Liakhovskii, 1995, Appendix 14.

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<sup>6</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, speculates that tremendously undermanned police units may be one reason Mujahedin forces were successful in capturing many districts around 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Tsygannik, 2002; Voronin, not dated; the 8,500 and 30,000 numbers are Voronin's, and they track with Liakhovskii, 2009. Tsygannik cites 28,000 at the beginning of 1981.

<sup>8</sup> Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Aleksandr Liakhovskii, *Tragediia i Doblest' Afghana*, Moscow: Iskona, 1995, Appendix 14.

pace of growth through the 1980s is consistent.<sup>10</sup> According to most sources, however, the goal of 115,000 was not reached.<sup>11</sup>

The initial Soviet approach to Afghanistan's police assumed a successful revolution. Advisors assumed that crime might grow as the government sought to cement power but that it would not be outside of the capacity of trained police to manage. Police and gendarmerie forces were thus initially prepared to carry out a variety of policing tasks, as well as some security duties, such as guarding tunnels, bridges, and other important infrastructure. However, the threats that actually emerged were of a different quality. Opposition to the new regime turned ever more violent. Units unwilling and unable to respond to the new threats dissolved, their members taking their weapons with them.<sup>12</sup>

Sarandoy units were spread throughout the territories under government control.<sup>13</sup> They were recruited locally and often served close to home, although they could be deployed throughout the country.<sup>14</sup> An effort was made to ensure that as many of them as possible were volunteers, rather than conscripts, although the majority of the force remained draftees.<sup>15</sup>

The Sarandoy were a centrally commanded force. Companies, battalions, and brigades reported to the Directorate of Defense of the Revolution of the Ministry of Interior. They took part in military oper-

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<sup>10</sup> Tsygannik, 2002; Voronin, not dated; Giustozzi, 2000; Tsygannik also cites the comparatively high figure of 90,000 by 1983, which differs from the other sources. It is worth noting, however, that Tsygannik was the senior MVD advisor in Afghanistan from 1981 to 1983.

<sup>11</sup> The dissident views include Voronin, not dated, who reports that the Sarandoy eventually numbered 130,000, and Giustozzi, 2000, who reports 155,000 in 1989.

<sup>12</sup> Malevanyi, 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, reports local recruitment and deployment. Author discussions in Afghanistan, December 2009, indicate a prevalent belief that the force was national, however.

<sup>15</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

ations with ministerial-level coordination. The Sarandoy also, however, had their own commanders at the regional level and in Kabul.<sup>16</sup>

Some 5,000 Soviet MVD personnel were deployed as advisors to the Sarandoy.<sup>17</sup> The initially small deployment grew substantially after a late-1980 directive to the MVD to step up its assistance.<sup>18</sup> Soviet advisory efforts increasingly focused less on regular policing than on building up the ranks of and developing the gendarmerie. The intention was to develop Sarandoy capabilities as quickly as possible to enable them to take on more of the operational burden (and thus reduce the burden on Soviet forces).<sup>19</sup> A small gendarmerie had existed under Daoud's regime, but the new version was to be substantially larger and more capable. It was described by one Soviet advisor as something between the Soviet MVD and the military.<sup>20</sup> Its focus was on securing government control throughout the country, protecting key facilities, and participating in combat operations with military forces against insurgents.<sup>21</sup> The idea was to have a force with combat capabilities, but for combat on a smaller scale than the operations carried out by military forces, and with a policing mission.<sup>22</sup> It would also be responsible for policing, for providing garrisons for villages and towns, and increasingly for protection of economic assets, as discussed below.<sup>23</sup> Starting in 1986, the Sarandoy's paramilitary role was emphasized, with the creation of divisions and brigades for this purpose.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Andrei Sotnikov, "Odin iz 'Dzhenai' Pervogo Nabora," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, July 10, 2001.

<sup>18</sup> Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> E. Salakhov, "Dva Boevykh Ordena Polkovnika Militsii," *Voennyi Zheleznodorozhnik*, No. 46, November 10, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Salakhov, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.



The Sarandoy received from the USSR a variety of small arms, mortars, armored vehicles, and automobiles.<sup>25</sup> Their training, including by Soviet personnel, focused on military tactics and what is described as “solving unique problems under conditions of civil war,”<sup>26</sup> which could be interpreted as counterinsurgency operations. Soviet advisors were deployed as operational groups of 10–12 people in Kabul and in the provinces to work with the Sarandoy.<sup>27</sup> Some 12,000 Sarandoy officers were also trained at MVD facilities in the USSR between 1978 and 1986.<sup>28</sup> Many of them were junior commanders and NCOs, of whom some 2,500, selected for past excellence in combat, were trained each year in Tashkent.

Starting in 1980 or 1981,<sup>29</sup> Soviet MVD “Kobalt” units of police advisors were created to assist Sarandoy gendarmerie commanders (some were also assigned to KhAD units, but their primary mission was to build up the Sarandoy).<sup>30</sup> One source indicates that the total size of the Kobalt deployment was 600 people.<sup>31</sup> Kobalt members were selected from MVD personnel with substantial experience, including with countering violent crime, and strong records.<sup>32</sup> Kobalt groups of about seven people apiece would not only advise the Sarandoy but participate in operations, such as efforts to find and identify insurgents. They also took part in interrogations.<sup>33</sup> The combined work of Kobalt personnel and their Sarandoy counterparts was seen as contributing significantly to reconnaissance and intelligence operations.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Voronin, not dated.

<sup>29</sup> Malevanyi, 2009, cites the summer of 1980 as the start date; Tsygannik, 2002, writes that Kobalt units were deployed starting in January 1981.

<sup>30</sup> Malevanyi, 2009; Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>31</sup> “Kobal’t,” Agentura website, not dated.

<sup>32</sup> Malevanyi, 2009; Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Malevanyi, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Tsygannik, 2002.

Sarandoy forces also took part in missions to catch deserters and, in the process, ensure conscription of other young men of draft age (see below).<sup>35</sup> Sarandoy gendarmerie units also carried out raids in their provinces, attacking enemy bases and routes. They cooperated with Soviet and Afghan armed forces in hostage rescues and were a critical source of intelligence for the Soviet Army.<sup>36</sup>

After a battle in or near a populated area, Sarandoy forces participated in operations to “clear” the area and identify and apprehend remaining insurgents. Once security forces were satisfied, they handed over the area to *munshi*, local government representatives who passed out bread and reallocated land. However, local government often was unable to hold on to power after security forces left.<sup>37</sup>

Starting in 1985, the Sarandoy had primary responsibility for protecting economic assets (partially an army role until that time).<sup>38</sup> Six brigades of the Sarandoy and dozens of battalions and companies were dedicated to the defense of key facilities. These included oil fields, gas pipelines, and the Jalalabad irrigation complex, among others, for a total of some 2,500 facilities and structures. They also provided security for transport on the Hairatan-Kabul road.

Some of the strongest young Sarandoy recruits were selected to be physical training instructors. They were also the core of special units that carried out reconnaissance and attack missions. Wearing traditional clothes with bulletproof vests underneath, they appeared to be unarmed men in a civilian truck as they lay in wait for insurgents.<sup>39</sup>

Toward the end of the Soviet involvement and after troops had substantively withdrawn, Sarandoy units were used as security for Soviet humanitarian missions, also helping to explain to local residents the source and purpose of assistance.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Maiorov, 1996.

<sup>36</sup> Sotnikov, 2001; Malevanyi, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Sotnikov, 2001.

<sup>38</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>39</sup> Malevanyi, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Timofeev, 2009.

According to a Russian source, Sarandoy personnel were also occasionally lent out by Afghanistan's Internal Affairs Minister, Sayed Mohammad Golabzoy, as bodyguards to his friends and allies.<sup>41</sup> Golabzoy was a committed Khalqi, indeed the head of that faction during the 1980s. A 1982 review of the MoI by an Afghan PDPA Central Committee Working Group reportedly accused him of factional activities. The review also was disparaging of Soviet contributions to the development of the Sarandoy. Soviet leadership in Afghanistan convinced the Afghan leadership to remove the accusations against Golabzoy from the report.<sup>42</sup>

Sarandoy fatality rates were high.<sup>43</sup> Although specific data are hard to come by, KGB archivist Vasilii Mitrokhin reports that in one (unspecified) nine-month period, 1,200 Sarandoy were killed, in addition to 2,336 wounded, 850 taken prisoner, and 2,500 who deserted.<sup>44</sup> For the two periods on which he reports numbers, January–June 1987 and April–August 1988, Antonio Giustozzi reports losses (killed in action [KIA] and wounded in action [WIA]) among the Sarandoy of 133 and 580, respectively, per month.<sup>45</sup>

Sarandoy effectiveness and capabilities no doubt varied. A number of Afghan specialists and former officials today remember the Sarandoy as a comparatively able and effective force. At the time, tension between the Khalq and Parcham loyalists likely affected how various forces were perceived. Golabzoy's Khalq credentials and the general Khalq domination of the Sarandoy, for example, meant that many saw the Ministry of Interior forces as a Khalq militia.<sup>46</sup> Some Soviet personnel felt that the Sarandoy were susceptible to enemy infiltration and therefore could and should not be trusted with information. They argued that such information sharing had in the past resulted in the ambush of

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<sup>41</sup> Malevanyi, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Mitrokhin, 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Malevanyi, 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Mitrokhin, 2002.

<sup>45</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, p. 272, Table 35.

<sup>46</sup> Author discussions in Afghanistan, September and December 2009.

Soviet forces. Because of these concerns, the Sarandoy (like KhAD and military forces, as will be discussed below) were not always provided with the same intelligence and plans as Soviet personnel.<sup>47</sup>

## KhAD

KhAD, the Afghan State Information Agency, and its successor, WAD, quickly grew to cover the country, with staff in every province, town, and administrative district, large or small, and agents spread wide. According to Mitrokhin, it consisted of 11 operational sections, a political directorate, a personnel directorate, and 11 support services, although it should be noted that its structures changed over time. It also had a foreign intelligence branch, known as the Tenth Directorate.<sup>48</sup> KhAD agents were trained in the USSR and at a training center in Kabul.<sup>49</sup> KhAD roles ranged from arrests of opposition/counterrevolutionary persons (they had arrested some 150,000 people by 1990) to counterinsurgency.<sup>50</sup> The KhAD force size increased substantially and quickly, as 4.2 shows.

Soviet KGB elite special forces *Kaskad* units, created in 1980 specifically to develop KhAD, were based out of eight regional centers, which included Herat, Faizabad, Kandahar, Ghazni, and Jalalabad. They assisted in KhAD training and force development while also carrying out their own missions to identify and eliminate Mujahedin.<sup>51</sup> KhAD training, both in the field and in training centers, therefore, had a substantial special forces component,<sup>52</sup> but KhAD also included its own special forces battalions attached to each Afghan province.

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<sup>47</sup> Vadim Udmantsev, "Boevoe Kreshchenie 'Vympela,'" *Voенно-promyshlennyi Kur'er*, No. 18, May 16, 2007, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Mitrokhin, 2002; Giustozzi, 2000.

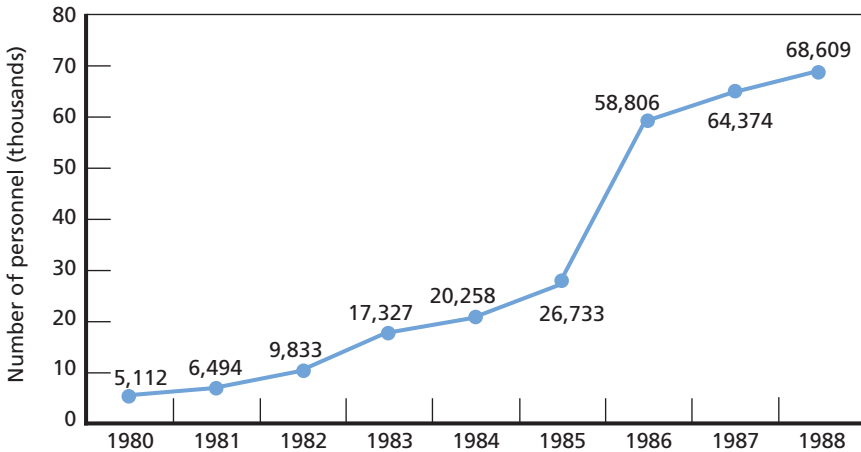
<sup>49</sup> Mitrokhin, 2002; Aleksandr Kolomiets, "Raskazivaiut 'Afgantsi.' Pro 'Komandirovku' Na Voinu," *Suvorovskii Natisk*, February 13, 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Mitrokhin, 2002; Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>51</sup> Malevanyi, 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Kolomiets, 2003.

**Figure 4.2**  
**KhAD Number of Personnel over Time**



SOURCE: Based on data from Liakhovskii, 1995, Appendix 14.

NOTE: Vasilii Mitrokhin reports somewhat different numbers, but only for the early period, a growth from 700 people in early 1980 to 16,650 by 1982 (Mitrokhin, 2002).

RAND MG1078-4.2

Each battalion included 250–300 personnel. They engaged in small unit actions, including diversionary fighting in the mountains.<sup>53</sup>

KhAD personnel took part in clearing operations after battles and took custody of enemy personnel identified in the course of those operations (as well as those captured during efforts to catch draft evaders and deserters).<sup>54</sup> They, like their KGB colleagues, also took part in negotiations with local political, tribal, and militia leaders, offering an end to bombardment of tribal areas and villages if leaders could guarantee that Soviet and Afghan troops would not be attacked.<sup>55</sup> They also, as noted, were responsible for a large number of political arrests of those deemed counterrevolutionaries, as well as of people who

<sup>53</sup> Irek Fatkheslislamov, “Grif ‘Sekretno’ Sniat. Otets Spetsnaza DRA,” *Soldat Otechestva*, February 10, 1999; Malevanyi, 2009.

<sup>54</sup> Maiorov, 1996; Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

were seen as providing support to the enemy. The Sarandoy were also involved in such arrests, which often took place at night.<sup>56</sup>

Because both Sarandoy and KhAD/WAD units were generally acting at the regional level, their centralized national structures exercised limited operational control over the bulk of forces and were responsible primarily for administration, training, and logistical issues.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to the regular KhAD/WAD units, in March 1988, a force called the Special Guard was created and subordinated to WAD. Receiving some of the best weapons and personnel, it was to serve as something of a "strategic reserve" as the ranks of the regular army thinned in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Special Guard would later, after the Soviets withdrew, become the force tasked with policing other security forces, particularly those that grew from tribal militia structures (see Chapter Six).<sup>58</sup> The Special Guard was successful in helping to keep some of the most important highways open. Its end strength was never clear (although claiming 16,000 at the time of Soviet withdrawal, Najibullah tried to raise it to 40,000 in 1990 but was unable to meet that goal).<sup>59</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, KhAD forces were generally respected by Soviet advisors and viewed as effective.<sup>60</sup> A former KhAD advisor cites reports that Pakistanis did not want to capture KhAD Special Forces personnel alive, testifying to their effectiveness. He also lauds them for drawing fire and protecting Soviet (he does not mention Afghan) troops. That this assessment could be maintained even as the KhAD force size grew rapidly may be a testament to the KGB's commitment of quality people and resources and to training these personnel.

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<sup>56</sup> Mikhailov, 2010, cites a February 26, 1980, report from Marshal Sokolov to Defense Minister Ustinov that noted that there was sometimes armed opposition to Sarandoy and secret police efforts to carry out nighttime arrests.

<sup>57</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>58</sup> Antonio Giustozzi, *The Problems of Creating a New Afghan Army and the Critical Dangers of Failure!* Monmouth, UK: International Industrial Information Ltd., 2002.

<sup>59</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, 2002.

<sup>60</sup> Kolomiets, 2003.

That said, as with the Sarandoy and military forces, some Soviet personnel saw KhAD as being particularly infiltrated by insurgents and close cooperation with it as leading to ambushes of Soviet personnel. The result, as with other Afghan security forces, was that KhAD units, too, did not always receive the same intelligence and plans as did Soviet personnel.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Udmantsev, 2007, p. 5.





## The Afghan Military

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The historical development of the Afghan armed forces left the Afghan military with a number of inconsistencies and irregularities.<sup>1</sup> Although structured on the Turkish model, it was developed on the Soviet model. The Afghan armed forces as of December 1979 (that is, at the time that Soviet troops crossed the border) comprised, according to one source,

- three army corps (numbers 1, 2, and 3)
- 12 infantry divisions (numbers 2, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 17, 18, 20, and 25)
- over 20 brigades, including joint brigades, tank brigades, artillery brigades, eight commando brigades, one air defense brigade, 11 border brigades, and two supply brigades<sup>2</sup>
- over 30 regiments, including joint regiments, artillery regiments, commando regiments, engineer regiments, 12 communications regiments, eight air force regiments, six air defense regiments, 11 territorial force regiments, and two supply regiments<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent history of Afghanistan's military development, see Gankovskii, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> The original source, Nikitenko, 2010, reports a total brigade number of 22, which cannot be accurate.

<sup>3</sup> The original source, Nikitenko, 2010, reports a total number of regiments as 39, which cannot be accurate.

- 32 separate battalions or divisions, squadrons of specific forces (special forces) and supply units of the army under central command and in army corps<sup>4</sup>
- 13 military educational institutions, including three training schools (the Harbee Pohantoon, the air forces and air defense school, and the technical school), as well as the 29th educational brigade, higher officer courses "A," new technology courses, a military lycee, a communications forces training center, a border forces training regiment, supply schools, a military musical school, and two other educational centers.<sup>5</sup>

Other sources also note that the Afghan armed forces had civil defense components and a military counterintelligence section. To what extent these lists reflect true numbers and capabilities is unclear, but given the high rates of desertion as of 1979, it seems likely that actual capabilities were more limited.<sup>6</sup>

Reportedly, Karmal, on replacing Amin as General Secretary of the PDPA and thus as Afghan leader, hoped that the existing army would be disbanded and a new one, loyal to him, built from scratch. This would, of course, have placed the entire burden of the counter-insurgency effort on Soviet forces (and, perhaps, Afghan police and secret police forces if Karmal was willing to maintain those). Soviet advisors strongly opposed such a move. In the end, it did not occur.<sup>7</sup>

Soviet efforts to assist and advise the Afghan forces meant a number of reorganizations and restructurings. In the early 1980s, Afghanistan was divided into 21 zones of operation, which were further subdivided into military command areas. Each of these had mili-

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<sup>4</sup> Nikitenko's, 2010, wording is "32 separate battalions (divisions)" (author translation). One can speculate that the parenthetical may be a reference to the incomplete nature of divisions, making some of them battalion strength.

<sup>5</sup> Nikitenko, 2010. This list is similar but not quite identical (some numbers are changed and some items are different) to one in Nikitenko, 2004, which describes Afghan forces at an unnamed date. Because the article is the more recent publication, it is the source I have chosen to use.

<sup>6</sup> Nikitenko, 2004; Mitrokhin, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Nikitenko, 2010.

tary personnel stationed in place, as well as representatives of the MVD and KhAD. They were under the command of the Defense Ministry of Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup>

In 1984–1985, the Afghan armed forces were reorganized. All infantry divisions were restructured to a common design. As noted above, in 1985 Army units were freed from security guard duties, making it possible for more of them to become involved in combat operations. While Afghan officials surely played a role, there can be no question that these changes were Soviet-initiated. Indeed, the reorganizations roughly coincided with General Varennikov taking over from Marshall Sergei Sokolov as head of the Operational Group when Sokolov was named Defense Minister.<sup>9</sup>

Afghan military personnel, along with Soviet 40th Army personnel, took part in efforts to maintain security in Kabul and other cities, both by guarding facilities and by engaging or seeking to deter enemy or suspected enemy forces.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the 1980s, military personnel, along with KhAD and the Sarandoy, were consistently responsible for clearing populated areas. Some Afghan forces fought in joint units under Soviet command. In the early 1980s, for example, an operation might begin with Soviet surprise attacks on key zones of enemy activity. Airborne (helicopter-borne) units would then cover entry and exit points to the area. For the next two to four days, most attacks would be from the air, with efforts of insurgents (or anyone else) to flee being met with helicopter fire. Then, with the area ostensibly subdued, 40th Army and Afghan Army ground forces would enter, spending three to four weeks going through the territory (which would have been previously divided up) zone by zone to eliminate any remaining enemy personnel. The most active of these would be killed; those who acquiesced were taken prisoner. Following this activity, for a period of

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<sup>8</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Nikitenko, 2004; also reported in Nikitenko, 2010. The traditional guard functions had previously been retained by the Zaplatin commission's 1978 review (author interview with a member of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Giustozzi, 2000; Mikhailov, 2010, citing reports from Marshal Sokolov to Defense Minister Ustinov on February 26 and February 28, 1980.

some 10–15 days, a small garrison of Soviet and Afghan forces would remain in place to help establish order before turning over control to local government authorities.<sup>11</sup>

Over time, the Afghan Army took on more of a fighting role, but this remained limited and continued to focus more on “mopping-up” operations.<sup>12</sup> Afghanistan’s military personnel blockaded cities and regions and carried out searches of populated areas, either on their own or with Soviet forces in support. They were generally considered increasingly effective in finding insurgents, insurgent supporters, and weapons.<sup>13</sup>

The Soviets and their Afghan colleagues made some efforts to ensure that Afghan forces were front and center for most operations, at least on paper. Officially, starting in mid-1980, Soviet forces never acted alone, but only in cooperation with Afghan security personnel.<sup>14</sup> Afghan troops, too, almost never fought on their own throughout the first years of the decade. Their independent actions were limited to very narrow and specific tasks well into the mid-1980s. Until 1985, when responsibility for protecting economic assets was shifted to the Sarandoy, the Afghan Army was also spread thin between combat and security (including garrison) duties. But this is not to say that there was no improvement. If in 1983 Afghan forces could be credited with 58 independent actions, the number rose to 83 in 1984 and 101 in 1985. In percentage terms, Nikitenko reports that in 1980–1983, Afghan forces fought independently in 25–30 percent of operations, and that these were generally very small-scale efforts. By 1984–1985, however, their independent actions made up 60–70 percent of all operations. According to experts, the Afghan forces became better capable of utilizing airborne units, destroying enemy forces, overcoming the challenges of heavily mined battlefields, fighting from defended posi-

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<sup>11</sup> Maierov, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Nikitenko, 2004; Evgenii Nikitenko, “Afganskaia Kampaniia: Nevostrebovannyi Opyt” (Part 5), *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaia Oborona*, No. 1, 2009a, pp. 76–83; Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Nikitenko, 2004, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Pikov, 1991.

tions, and avoiding direct confrontation with the enemy.<sup>15</sup> At higher levels, such as the commands of corps, divisions, and brigades, Afghan officers were predominantly Soviet trained and, according to at least some sources, generally competent commanders.<sup>16</sup> That said, no independent brigade-size operations took place prior to 1984, and the first division-size operation by Afghan forces took place in 1985.<sup>17</sup> According to Nikitenko, as of 1986, despite the higher number of independent actions, the Afghan Army lacked the capacity to carry out large-scale, high-intensity combat of the sort required in Afghanistan at that time. Their “independent” activities, moreover, were in most cases dependent on support from Soviet air, artillery, and/or engineer units, with 40th Army personnel available for backup.<sup>18</sup>

Despite this lack of real independence, starting in 1985–1986, the Soviets deemed the Afghan forces ready to take on more autonomy. The decision was made that Soviet forces would begin to reduce their own involvement in combat operations and transition to a role supporting Afghan personnel. The limited progress of the Afghan forces at this point would suggest that this was a political decision, made in the interest of reducing Soviet combat activity regardless of how prepared the Afghans really were. The first effort to carry out operations with only indirect Soviet support, an operation in Zhawar in early 1986, ended with five Soviet battalions entering the fray to support the less-than-fully engaged Afghan Army. Later operations, however, were more successful.<sup>19</sup> In April 1986, Afghan units successfully captured Javara, indicating progress and improving morale (although a few months later, insurgents had control of Javara once again, perhaps suggesting that holding the area was more difficult than seizing control).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Nikitenko, 2004, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Pinchuk, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Nikitenko, 2004, 2009a; Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Nikitenko, 2004, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

But if officially the Afghan Army was the core of the fight against insurgents, with the Soviets in a support role, the fact remained that Soviet soldiers continued to shoulder the bulk of the fighting burden.<sup>21</sup> A few different factors help explain this situation. Because Soviet military leaders planned most of the operations and feared sharing information with the Afghans, involving Afghan forces was generally a matter of integrating them into what the Soviets were doing, for all the lip service paid to joint planning. Moreover, Soviet tactics focused substantially on aviation and artillery barrages of (real and suspected) enemy positions, an approach that relied on Soviet capabilities.<sup>22</sup> Although the Afghans had aviation (discussed in more detail later in this chapter) and artillery, they were not as expert in using these assets, and substantial levels of illiteracy among Afghan personnel made training in these areas particularly challenging. It is plausible to posit that reliance on these techniques made transitioning to an Afghan lead that much more difficult—and ensured that Soviet specialists would continue to view their Afghan partners as overly reliant on Soviet support.

## The Military Advisory Mission

The 40th Army itself did not have an overt advisory role. Its personnel participated in operations with Afghan forces but were not embedded with them. Soviet soldiers and officers paid visits to Afghan military facilities and assisted in construction tasks there and in nearby villages (for instance, reconstruction of local homes, building roads, and digging irrigation ditches). Other than that, contact between Soviet and Afghan personnel consisted of occasional days of “Soviet-Afghan combat friendship.” Under these auspices, Afghan personnel visited

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<sup>21</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Nikitenko, 2004, 2009a; Mitrokhin, 2002; Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Nikitenko, 2009a. This article provides an overview of approaches over time, as do Evgenii Nikitenko, “Afganskaia Kampaniia: Nevostrebovannyi Opyt” (Part 4), *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaiia Oborona*, No. 6, 2008c, pp. 76–83, and Nikitenko, 2004.

Soviet facilities and attended meetings and events (including concerts and film screenings) held in an effort to build mutual understanding.<sup>23</sup>

The advisory teams, in contrast, were the ones embedded with the forces. They lived with the Afghans, took part in combat operations (although they were not, in theory, authorized to do so<sup>24</sup>), and carried out some training.

In the beginning of the 1980s, some 1,600–1,800 Soviet military advisors were assigned to Afghan military brigades, battalions, and divisions, 60–80 of them general officers.<sup>25</sup> Most of the rest were majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels.<sup>26</sup> For the most part, these were experienced military personnel, but few had advisory experience or any particular regional or local knowledge.<sup>27</sup>

Soviet military advisors served in 47 garrisons of the Afghan Army. A given battalion might have three or four advisors, a brigade five or six, and a division 11 to 15 per echelon. Each unit also had one or two interpreters, with two or three assigned to each division or corps staff. An Afghan brigade's advisory group might comprise the advisors, a lieutenant serving as an interpreter, and a radio operator. If they were deployed in a combat brigade—say, near the Pakistan border—advisors faced daily attacks and consistently fought alongside the Afghans. Once a month, one of the advisory group members would fly to Kabul to pick up everyone's pay and mail, as well as some supplementary rations.<sup>28</sup>

One task of military advisors was to coordinate the actions of Afghan forces with 40th Army forces. Based on a system put in place by Soviet Defense Minister Ustinov in 1980, monthly plans for combat operations were developed by the senior military advisor, working

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<sup>23</sup> Nikitenko, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Larisa Kucherova, "Pamiat' Afganskikh Gor," *Voin Rosii*, No. 12, December 2008, pp. 103–109.

<sup>25</sup> Maiorov, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Pinchuk, 2002; Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Nikitenko, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Pinchuk, 2002; Giustozzi, 2000; Maiorov, 1996.

with Soviet and Afghan military forces, and approved by the Soviet Defense Ministry. As noted, military advisors, like KGB and MVD advisors, often took active part in combat operations.<sup>29</sup> One former advisor reports an instance in Orgun in the summer of 1983 when the Afghan 38th brigade withdrew in defeat, leaving the brigade advisor and interpreter in the field of battle (they were rescued by Soviet helicopter later).<sup>30</sup>

One former advisor reports that advisors' training efforts with the Afghan military focused on tactical and special operations. They oversaw what the Afghans did and sought to address identified problems in future training.<sup>31</sup>

Military advisors also supervised the construction of infrastructure, namely housing and other facilities for military personnel. The Soviets built the Harbee Pohantoon military training facility (which was closed by Najibullah before it could graduate anyone).<sup>32</sup>

Soviet advisors faced numerous challenges. Not least among these was that of language. Effective interpreters were in short supply. Soviet soldiers were issued phrasebooks, but these were of limited utility, although they did enable one to congratulate Afghans on the anniversary of the April revolution and assure them that the Soviet forces were there to help. Central Asian soldiers and a small handful of language specialists were the core of the interpreter pool well into the war. This meant that most of the interpreters for the Soviet forces and advisors spoke Tajik and Uzbek, not Pashto. While this was likely useful when working with Afghans of Tajik and Uzbek backgrounds, Giustozzi posits that it may have helped increase Pashtun opposition to the

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<sup>29</sup> Salakhov, 2008, p. 13; Nikitenko, 2004; Evgenii Nikitenko, "Afganskaia Kampaniia: Nevostrebovannyi Opyt" (Part 10), *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaia Oborona*, No. 6, 2009b, pp. 74–83.

<sup>30</sup> Valerii Pozdniakov, "Afganistan i Rossiia," *Molodaia Gvardiia*, No. 10, October 2009, pp. 144–161.

<sup>31</sup> Pinchuk, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> Pinchuk, 2002.



Soviets and their Afghan government allies.<sup>33</sup> While Soviet military academies stepped up their teaching of Afghanistan's languages, the first 11 Pashto speakers were not graduated until 1983. The first six Dari speakers produced by the Soviet military academy structure did not graduate until 1986.<sup>34</sup>

## Training of Afghan Military Personnel

Efforts to reorganize and strengthen the Afghan armed forces continued throughout the period of Soviet military presence.<sup>35</sup> Training plans were developed by the advisory team in Kabul, and some may have been sent to Moscow for approval. Afghan and Soviet forces, although they fought together, trained separately. Afghan conscripts were, in principle, to receive between 45 days and two months of training before being sent out to fight. In practice, not everyone received the training allotted them, and some none at all. Generally, the situation was better closer to the center and in the north: Soldiers in Kabul, Mazr-i-Sharif, and Bagram received more training than those elsewhere in the country. The training program during this period also included, in theory at least, a minimal literacy component for all personnel who could not read and write. How well this was implemented is not clear. Officers, however, were required to be literate.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to Afghanistan's military academy training, reserve officers were also trained through civilian universities, an effort that was expanded to a total of four institutions of higher learning in the

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<sup>33</sup> Tajik and Dari are mutually intelligible, being both varieties of Persian. Uzbek is a Turkic language, with some influence from Persian and others. Pashto is, like Persian, an Indo-Iranian language, but Pashto and Persian are substantially different from one another.

<sup>34</sup> Nikolai Salmin, "Vremia 'CH' Dlia Strany 'A'" (Part 12), *Voennyi Zheleznodorozhnik*, No. 9, March 2, 2009d, p. 15; Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Salmin, 2009b.

<sup>36</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

mid-1980s.<sup>37</sup> Some military personnel, of course, were also sent to the Soviet Union for training, as had been done for decades.

In January 1987, the Soviet Operational Group under General Varennikov, having recently become a permanent presence in Afghanistan, recommended the creation within each army corps (in Herat, Kandahar, Gardez, Kabul, and Mazr-i-Sharif) of a six-month course to prepare junior officers (second lieutenants). Specialized educational programs for key capabilities and tasks were created, and Operational Group members helped select Afghan trainers from among the officer pool.<sup>38</sup> Finally, because the goal of many of these efforts was to facilitate the withdrawal of Soviet forces, another area of effort was preparing Afghan personnel to take control of military bases and supply sites.<sup>39</sup>

The training and equipping of Afghan forces was on the model of the Soviet armed forces.<sup>40</sup> There did not appear to be particular thought or attention paid to the notion that the bulk of the Afghan Army's mission was counterinsurgency and that the forces should be prepared and armed accordingly.<sup>41</sup> After all, the Soviet troops doing the bulk of the fighting had not received such training, and the goal was to prepare the Afghan forces to take over for them.

Nikitenko argues that fighting alongside Soviet forces was a form of training in and of itself, helping to instill in Afghan soldiers and officers Soviet approaches. Joint planning and operational control, he feels, also helped improve Afghan capabilities.<sup>42</sup>

The evaluation of forces was also based on Soviet standards and comparison with Soviet forces. Combat readiness, rapid readiness capability, and use of weaponry were among the assessment criteria

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<sup>37</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>40</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, March 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Nikitenko, 2010.

by which Soviet trainers evaluated the Afghan Army.<sup>43</sup> Approaches to evaluation shifted somewhat when Varennikov took over the Operational Group. He and his staff revised the assessment process, providing more leeway to advisors in the field with the Afghan forces. They eliminated some of the more standardized reporting on force development and capabilities in favor of impressionistic, effects-based assessments, which included judgments on overall stability in the region (or, more accurately, the capital of the region) that forces were ostensibly meant to control.<sup>44</sup>

Generally speaking, Soviet advisors were not impressed with their Afghan colleagues. Even after ten years of effort, on the eve of Soviet withdrawal, MoD representatives reported to Moscow that the Afghan military was capable of withstanding opposing forces only when in large formations. Anything up to the size of a garrison battalion they judged unstable. Advisors (including the Operational Group) complained of poor shooting skills and discipline, weak command and control, and failure to care for equipment.<sup>45</sup>

The situation was complicated, however, by the fact that Moscow held embedded Soviet advisors accountable for Afghan forces' performance, desertion rates, and other problems (or successes). This metric of success and failure at the individual level may have contributed to the tendency of advisors to take control of Afghan forces, rather than advise their leaders, and could have slowed the actual development of Afghan capabilities.<sup>46</sup> It also raises questions regarding the validity of positive assessments and reports of progress in the Afghan security forces made by lower-level advisors throughout the 1980s.

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<sup>43</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Author interview with a member of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>46</sup> Nikitenko, 2010.

## Aviation

Because of the high technical requirements and relative success of Afghan military aviation during the Soviet period, it is worth considering these forces separately from the rest of the Afghan military. At the start of the 1980s, Soviet and Afghan Air Force aircraft were collocated at four of Afghanistan's air bases: Kabul, Bagram, Shindand, and Kandahar. Soviet forces were also based at Kunduz, Faizabad, and Jalalabad. Only Afghan air assets were located at Mazr-i-Sharif. Over time, however, these arrangements varied, and air assets moved around.<sup>47</sup> Training also took place in Herat.<sup>48</sup> Bagram was generally judged the best facility, and it was the one that had hosted Afghanistan's most-modern aircraft in the 1960s and 1970s. Even here, however, tires painted white served as ground targets for combat flight training.<sup>49</sup>

In many ways, pilots were considered the elite of Afghanistan's armed forces. According to one source, within those ranks, fighter pilots were the most highly regarded and generally came from the wealthiest families. Bomber pilots, by contrast (and presumably transport aircraft and helicopter pilots, as well), came from less well-to-do roots. If true, this suggests at least some corruption in the selection process. Promotions also were not a meritocracy. Rather, time served determined promotions, and high ranks, including that of colonel, were in no way limited by specialty or skill set.<sup>50</sup>

Getting enough pilots to fill planes and helicopters was a challenge. Only a handful (four or five) of every 400 candidates passed the medical requirements.<sup>51</sup> This was presumably after both health and educational standards had been lowered from the Soviet standards initially in use, because Afghan conditions simply could not support

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<sup>47</sup> Evgenii Nikitenko, "Afganskaia Kampaniia: Nevostrebouvannyi Opyt" (Part 2), *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaia Oborona*, No. 4, 2008a, pp. 104–113.

<sup>48</sup> "500 Chasov v Nebe Afghana," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, January 12, 2002.

<sup>49</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007.

<sup>51</sup> "500 Chasov v Nebe Afghana," 2002.

them.<sup>52</sup> Petr Safranov, who was sent to advise the Afghan Air Force in the fall of 1980, was originally given the mission of building a single squadron. He took it upon himself to improve the system, pulling people previously assigned to a wide range of specialties (mechanics, drivers, etc.) to train as pilots. By March 1982, some 40 of the 80 he had assembled could fly independently.<sup>53</sup>

After the Saur Revolution and the Soviet incursion, Afghanistan continued to get aircraft delivered assembled, as it had in the prewar years. The Soviets also promised better aircraft, but while they replaced Afghanistan's MiG-21 PFs with MiG-21bis, they never fully replaced Su-7BMKs with Su-22Ms, as promised. One reason was simply that training on the more complex Su-22M lagged, and there were not enough pilots to fly these aircraft. Meanwhile, there were already pilots in place who had been trained on the Su-7.<sup>54</sup> One area of focus of the prewar period, high-speed, low altitude maneuvers that made for, among other things, particularly impressive flying during parades, was less useful as conflict accelerated. Instead, combat skills became more important.<sup>55</sup>

Aviation played an important military role as the 1980s continued. One aspect was psychological—air assets tended to have a strong effect on the enemy. Another was practical—air support was crucial to the ground forces, particularly when they faced enemy units that had acquired, through desertions or other means, tanks and artillery that had once belonged to Afghan forces. This meant a high operations tempo, particularly for the Su-7 aircraft.<sup>56</sup> Giustozzi reports Afghan pilots flying five or six sorties daily.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007.

<sup>53</sup> "500 Chasov v Nebe Afghana," 2002.

<sup>54</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007. Indeed, the Su-7 remained in service in Afghanistan longer than it did anywhere else in the world.

<sup>55</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007.

<sup>56</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007.

<sup>57</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

This said, there were reports that some Afghan aircraft purposely missed targets rather than be responsible for bombing their countrymen and fellow Muslims. Afghan bombardiers also showed a marked preference for lighter bombs, avoiding, for instance, 500-kg weapons. Pilots also eschewed being photographed and asked that their successes not be publicized, for fear of enemy reprisals against their families (Afghan personnel assigned to the 355th regiment forcibly exposed the undeveloped film belonging to a Soviet advisor for these reasons).<sup>58</sup>

Despite (or perhaps because of) the high sortie rate, Soviet advisors complained there was not much appetite for flying when the Afghan pilots did not deem it absolutely necessary.<sup>59</sup> Fridays posed a particular challenge, as did fasts.<sup>60</sup> According to one report, the chief mullah refused a 1981 request from the air force commander to let pilots abstain from the fast.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, some felt that the very presence of the Soviets had lowered morale and led to an attitude that Soviet personnel, with their better training and capabilities, should take on a larger share of the burden. Tactical preparation before missions was, by Soviet standards, minimal—at best limited to a glance at a photograph or other reconnaissance data. Weather reports were persistently ignored.<sup>62</sup>

Soviet advisors to the air force were consistently disappointed by their Afghan trainees. They saw them as lacking in diligence and more interested in skills that contributed to showing off than they were in those that supported the mission. Substantial numbers reportedly exhibited “fear while in flight, passivity and inaction in the face of nonstandard situations, confusion and bewilderment, [and] rapid exhaustion when working.” “Banal laziness, lack of work ethic, and a tendency to avoid challenges” were also noted.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007.

<sup>60</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007; Pozdniakov, 2009.

<sup>61</sup> Pozdniakov, 2009.

<sup>62</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007. Author's translation.

Accident rates were high and considerably worse than Soviet rates for similar aircraft. Conditions no doubt played a role, but so did what Soviet trainers saw as irresponsibility. Common problems included failure to fully fuel the aircraft, the mixing of kerosene with other substances, hatches left open, and drag chutes not properly set up. Safety checks were anything but routine. Soviet advisors, however, often did not press the Afghans on these issues, feeling this was the best that could be expected given the “14th-century” state of the country. This said, to this day, Soviet-trained Afghan aircraft and helicopter pilots continue to be among the most effective in the country.

## Border Forces

Afghanistan’s Border Guard reported to the Defense Ministry. It was charged with preventing infiltration of Afghanistan from without. The Border Guard was created in 1980. Its predecessor force, which had existed for many years, comprised a mere 1,200 people and focused on customs. By 1981, border troops had reached a total of 8,000 personnel, and by 1983, according to Mitrokhin, 27,725.<sup>64</sup> Mitrokhin also reports KGB involvement in organizing and training the border troops.<sup>65</sup> As will be discussed in the following chapter, border militia forces were eventually formally integrated into the Border Guard.

Border troops were reportedly more active and effective near the borders with Pakistan than were, say, army units, which failed to take action to prevent infiltrator movement. However, the task of closing the border was too large to succeed because of the many possible routes into the country. Even with extensive mining and an increase of the border force to 30,000 in 1987 (not a very impressive increase if Mitrokhin’s 1983 figure is correct), the border remained porous. Starting in 1987, focus shifted to controlling the heights near the borders to provide the ability to see what went on along the routes, rather than

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<sup>64</sup> Giustozzi, 2000; Mitrokhin, 2002.

<sup>65</sup> Mitrokhin, 2002.

trying to control them directly. This approach was, reportedly, more successful.<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, as Soviet forces prepared to pull out, the border troops as a whole were assessed as comparatively competent, well-equipped, and making a substantial contribution. This was not, however, seen as sufficient to control the porous border, a job that Soviet advisors judged to be beyond the ability of uniformed border guards. Indeed, as part of their proposal for Afghan security force operations as the Soviets withdrew (discussed in the penultimate chapter of this monograph), advisors recommended that border units be shifted to defend lines of communication and attack enemy supply routes. Actual border defense, they suggested, could be carried out by tribal border forces (described in the next chapter).<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>67</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.



## Militias and Other Forces<sup>1</sup>

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### Citizen Militias

The Afghan government mobilized citizens into a variety of militia structures in addition to the security forces already discussed. These should not be confused with the tribal and regional militia structures, discussed in the next section, although there were some areas of overlap. Citizen militias were countrywide and varied greatly in their composition and tasks. Members were recruited in communities, schools, and workplaces. PDPA members were particularly pressured to join militias. These groups are credited with some “operational” achievements throughout the 1980s, including attacks on Mujahedin.<sup>2</sup> One former advisor reports that female members of the PDPA youth organization were sometimes drafted to take part in house searches.<sup>3</sup> The citizen militias’ primary purposes, however, were defense and propaganda. They were trained, to the extent they received training, by KhAD and Sarandoy personnel, and some militia members, at least, were paid by the government.

Among the more substantial militias were the Revolutionary Defense Groups, which were recruited and formed throughout the country (including, albeit sparsely, in rural areas). Their numbers

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter draws heavily on Giustozzi, 2000. His discussion of militias is recommended for those who are interested in learning more about the development of militias during the 1980s.

<sup>2</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Pozdniakov, 2009.

reached 18,000 at the end of 1983 and stood at about 35,000 in 1988. Soldiers of the Revolution was a smaller grouping, probably never more than 200 in number, of young Party and youth organization members who served three- to six-month terms in towns and sometimes rural areas. Self-defense groups—part-time organizations that formed starting in 1983 on the basis of unions, youth groups, and other social and professional structures—were also broadly distributed (and included some 8,000 women). Their purpose was to defend villages and places of work from the enemy, though they, too, saw considerable combat as the conflict continued.<sup>4</sup>

While they were not without value, it would be difficult to argue that these citizens' militias played a particularly important role, except perhaps in propaganda terms. By the end of the decade, the enemy was sufficiently capable and Revolutionary Defense Groups so small that the groups focused primarily on providing security in their local villages and along roads.<sup>5</sup>

## Border and Tribal Militias

The border and tribal militias, formally assigned to the Defense Ministry, were a different matter than the citizen groups. Armed tribal groups preexisted the revolution, of course, with Amin's government having provided some with support (and Afghan officers to supervise them) in 1978–1979. This practice continued during the 1980s. In addition, some tribal militias, also called regional or territorial forces, represented groups of Mujahedin who had been convinced to change sides and tribal groups that agreed to work with the government.<sup>6</sup> Particularly in the late 1980s, with the policy of national reconciliation

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<sup>4</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Giustozzi, 2000; also, author discussions in Afghanistan, September 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Giustozzi, 2000. The effort to cut deals with local tribes and Mujahedin forces continued throughout the conflict and ranged from short-term agreements to avoid hostilities against Soviet and Afghan forces to former Mujahedin agreeing to work with the government. Soviet 40th Army officers were often engaged in the lower-level discussions, with KGB and KhAD taking the lead at higher levels. Presumably, there was also Afghan government involve-

in full swing, many Mujahedin groups who signed cooperative agreements with the government joined these forces.<sup>7</sup>

While some specific militias were recruited to perform unique tasks in their region,<sup>8</sup> tribal militias generally fell into one of two categories: (1) regional or tribal regiments or forces and (2) border militias. In all cases, including whether or not they were former Mujahedin, tribal militia groups continued, in theory, to be commanded by Afghan Army officers. In practice, they retained their own commanders, who were given military rank and reported to army or KhAD leaders. The army provided training, though not everyone received it.<sup>9</sup>

Border militias were charged with the specific task of securing and closing the border. Possibly originally under the Ministry of Nationalities and Tribal Affairs, which continued to play a key role in their recruitment, they were assigned as of 1982 to the Defense Ministry and later integrated into the Border Guard. Military personnel were assigned to the border units as advisors, with less pretense to control over these forces than was the case for other militias. In addition, some militias worked closely with KhAD and took part in KhAD and KGB special operations.<sup>10</sup>

Border militia personnel were recruited primarily from the rural population. The Ministry of Nationalities and Tribal Affairs oversaw tribal jirgas whose job was, in part, to build those militias. Through this mechanism, tribal leaders approved the assignment of fighters to the militias.<sup>11</sup>

The driving forces behind the recruitment of militias in the early 1980s were therefore several. Two aspects were compromise and reconciliation with tribal groups, which the government had decided were

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ment. See Nikitenko, 2004; Nikolai Salmin, "Afganistan: Dorogi Voiny" (Part 3), *Ural'skie Voennye Vesti*, No. 8, January 30, 2009c, p. 4; Salmin, 2009d.

<sup>7</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> See Rubin, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>11</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

necessary despite the inherent counterrevolutionary aspects. Another was simple need, in the course of military operations, to ensure that areas were not hostile without having to fight for each kilometer of land.<sup>12</sup> An additional factor, which grew more important with time, was reliance on these forces to do things that regular security forces, for any number of reasons, could not, whether that be local pacification or combat operations. Finally, the development of tribal militias was a means of integrating former Mujahedin who had gone over to the government's side.

While there were former Mujahedin groups in the border militias, most former Mujahedin became part of the regional/tribal regiments. In the early 1980s, the government tried to integrate former Mujahedin into civilian militias or the Sarandoy, but by the mid-1980s, while some continued to join the Sarandoy, most had become part of the tribal militia structure. In fact, the Interior Ministry managed its own equivalent of the regional regiments, composed of plainclothes local personnel who performed their service in their own villages.<sup>13</sup>

The job of these regional militias was to maintain control of the countryside and, in Giustozzi's words, "hamper the movement of rebel groups."<sup>14</sup> He notes that it was also a way to make use of personnel who would not be inclined to join the formal Afghan Army structures. Some also had close relations with KhAD/WAD and the KGB, and, indeed, some were formally integrated into the KhAD/WAD structure. Prior to the Soviet withdrawal, the WAD took over control of most tribal militias. By this time, several substantial units, making up new infantry divisions, had already been transferred to the Afghan Army.

Training for these militia forces varied, with some deployed with no additional preparation, while others received substantial support and were even sent to the Soviet Union for periods of study. Their alignment with formal structures was minimal—even some of those who were formally subsumed by the Afghan Army (including, nota-

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<sup>12</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, p. 201.

bly, the 53rd Division commanded by future Northern Alliance leader Rashid Dostum) continued not to wear uniforms.

Militia numbers grew substantially in the late 1980s as the government came to rely on them more and more as auxiliary forces, and Najibullah's government offered increasing enticements to encourage additional groups to join. As of 1990, after the Soviet withdrawal, estimates for militia size ran at 60,000–70,000 personnel, although it is difficult to be certain what those numbers did or did not encompass. We do know that in the late 1980s and early 1990s remaining citizens' militia groups were transformed into regional militias, and the tasks of the militias grew beyond local defense. With Sarandoy and military capabilities insufficient, the militias began to take on more roles, including combat, security, and recruiting. Militia salaries also grew, surpassing those of regular security personnel, as financial incentives were used to convince Mujahedin to change sides. By the time the Soviets withdrew, militias were also being provided with armored vehicles, tanks, and a wide range of weaponry.<sup>15</sup>

The militias were independent structures with little true connection to or loyalty toward the Afghan government. Their reasons for cooperating with the government varied but included local disputes with other groups and the knowledge that the Soviets would provide them with weapons, including heavy equipment. Some sought, and received, benefits for their villages. Among former Mujahedin, some cited the shrinking of financial support from insurgent groups as their motivation. Others made deals with Soviet forces to stop aerial and artillery attacks but would later regroup and resume fighting. Some former rebel commanders threatened to defect back to the insurgents as a means of receiving more weapons, pay, or other benefits. As a result, while a number of militia groups, former Mujahedin and otherwise, fought consistently for the government and had even come to believe in the PDPA ideology, many groups changed sides more than once.<sup>16</sup> Although Giustozzi argues that reports of defections from the

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<sup>15</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Giustozzi, 2000; Liakhovskii, 2009. One contemporary U.S. source argues that weather played a role, with tribal groups joining with the government to receive pay in the winter

government by those who had previously defected from the Mujahedin are exaggerated, Rubin, among others, cites some notable cases.<sup>17</sup>

The tribal militias were also substantially independent of the Afghan government and Afghan security forces, even if they were, ostensibly, fighting on their side. Although, as noted, all were supposed to have political officers assigned to them, by the end of the 1980s, few had even regular Afghan Army personnel incorporated in their structures. Efforts to carry out social and political propaganda among the militias had limited success, at best. Joint operations between regular army units and militias were rare. The capacity of these militias to use their weaponry and capabilities not just in the service of the counterinsurgency effort but as a means to cement their own power was therefore substantial. Looting, drug use, harassment, and outright abuse (rape and kidnapping) of the local population were common problems, and militias ostensibly on the same side clashed with one another. As the 1980s drew to a close, efforts were again made to integrate the more effective militia units with the Afghan military, but the power of key militia leaders had grown tremendously by this time, with many commanding thousands of personnel and governing large swaths of land.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, it is not surprising that Soviet advisors at the tail end of the decade were concerned about the possible repercussions of the reliance on militias. To this day, some Afghan former government officials from this period feel that the dependence on local and tribal forces, at the expense of regular forces and the formal government structure, was what eventually led to the collapse of Afghanistan's government in 1992.<sup>19</sup> Giustozzi agrees. Noting the importance of the cutoff of Soviet support, he adds that "the mutiny of pro-regime militias was the most immediate cause of his [Najibullah's] demise."<sup>20</sup>

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and with the insurgents in warmer weather (Craig Karp, "Afghanistan: Seven Years of Soviet Occupation," *U.S. Department of State Bulletin*, February 1987).

<sup>17</sup> Giustozzi, 2000; Rubin, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Author discussions in Kabul, September 2009. It is worth noting that reliance on militias increased still further after a coup attempt against Najibullah in March 1990, which was led by Defense Minister Tanai (but not supported by the Sarandoy) (Rubin, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> Giustozzi, 2002.

## Afghan Security Forces Challenges and Responses

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### Force Size and Desertion

The security forces as a whole remained perpetually understrength throughout the war, with the Army manned on average at 65 percent in 1980 and about 53 percent in 1987. Moreover, these official numbers tended to report units at their highest strength levels and failed to account for senior personnel padding the rolls in order to keep the additional paychecks for themselves—for instance, by reporting deserters as still on duty.<sup>1</sup> Low manning overall and manning at only 25–40 percent of full strength in some key units (particularly combat units and/or units where Mujahedin activity was high) limited the Afghan Army's ability to carry out large-scale intensive combat operations and to take on the bulk of the fight, as was needed to support Soviet draw-down and withdrawal. People with specialized capabilities—such as mechanics, drivers, and gunners—were in particularly short supply and often insufficiently capable when available. Officer ranks were generally better filled than those of troops, but many of these officers had as of 1983 either not completed their officer training (74 percent) or had received none at all (43 percent). This likely worsened over time as the officer ranks came to be filled more and more by promoted NCOs (with about 1,000 NCOs promoted annually in a force of 10,000 offi-

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<sup>1</sup> Giustozzi, 2000; Mikhailov, 2009b.

cers), a practice that also further depleted the NCO ranks.<sup>2</sup> The goal, an army force of 200,000 and Sarandoy ranks of 115,000, remained out of reach.<sup>3</sup>

As Table 7.1 indicates, desertions were a tremendous problem, precluding force growth. Moreover, the practice by officers of continuing to report deserters as present for duty for some months so as to pocket their pay ensured that desertion numbers lagged reality.<sup>4</sup> The desertion challenge dated from the revolution. In the early months after the PDPA took power, increased violence combined with disaffection with PDPA rule led substantial numbers to flee service. Mikhailov, indeed, argues that PDPA influence throughout the military was not high, and many were opposed to revolutionary goals—a situation that deteriorated further as a result of PDPA infighting. Circumstances were not helped by PDPA efforts to universalize conscription to social groups that had long been able to avoid it (but not to the PDPA itself—Party work provided exemption from the draft).<sup>5</sup> As the conflict worsened, desertions from the security forces remained persistent. Desertions climbed in the winter cold, the summer heat (and need for field work), and prior to operations. Border troops sometimes faced desertion rates as high as 60–80 percent.<sup>6</sup>

The Sarandoy reportedly had somewhat lower desertion rates, numbering in the thousands rather than tens of thousands. This might be explained in part by one or more of the following: The force was more selective of its personnel, many Sarandoy were demobilized from the Army (from which they had, therefore, not deserted), fewer people

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<sup>2</sup> Giustozzi, 2000; Nikitenko, 2004, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> The goals are as of 1986. Nikitenko, 2004; Giustozzi, 2000, p. 267, Table 29 (although per Giustozzi, 2000, the 200,000 goal confusingly does not include border forces, which are listed as having an aspirational end strength of 160,000 in and of themselves). According to Giustozzi, 2000, goals for 1988 were even higher: 240,000 for the Army, 160,000 for the Sarandoy, and 100,000 for WAD.

<sup>4</sup> Mikhailov, 2009b.

<sup>5</sup> Pinchuk, 2002; Nikitenko, 2004; Liakhovskii, 2009; Mitrokhin, 2002; Mikhailov, 2009a.

<sup>6</sup> Pinchuk, 2002; Nikitenko, 2004; Liakhovskii, 2009; Giustozzi, 2000; Mitrokhin, 2002.



**Table 7.1**  
**Army Forces Size and Attrition**

Year	Force Size	(1) Desertions <sup>a</sup>	(2) Desertions <sup>b</sup>	KIA/WIA <sup>b</sup>	Missing <sup>b</sup>
1980	< 45,000 <sup>c</sup>	22,000	25,342	1,629	721
1981	< 89,000 <sup>d</sup>	20,000– 30,000 <sup>e</sup>	30,680	6,721	8,644
1982	43,000–115,000 <sup>f</sup>	28,000	30,945	2,516	1,918
1983	54,000–140,000 <sup>g</sup>	41,000	42,544	2,485	401
1984	98,000 <sup>h</sup>	32,000	35,058	2,675	1,870
1985	79,000–146,000 <sup>i</sup>	25,000	28,550	2,421	2,853
1986	141,500 (Feb 1) <sup>j</sup>	29,500	32,433	2,821	2,905
1987	93,000–130,000 <sup>k</sup>	26,600	29,048	2,484	2,773
1988	90,000 <sup>l</sup>	8,300 (Jan–May only)	30,941	2,843	5,917

<sup>a</sup> Pikov, 2007, except as otherwise noted. The same numbers cited by Pikov are also cited by Mikhailov, 2010.

<sup>b</sup> Liakhovskii, 1995, Appendix 14.

<sup>c</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, Table 27. The higher number reflects the “total Ministry of Defense” entry. There is no separate entry for “Army” for that year.

<sup>d</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, Table 27. The higher number results from subtracting the figure for “Border Guards” from that for “total Ministry of Defense.” There is no separate entry for “Army” for that year.

<sup>e</sup> The 30,000 number is from Mitrokhin, 2002.

<sup>f</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, Table 27. The higher number takes the higher of two “total Ministry of Defense” entries for that year. There is no separate entry for “Army” for that year. The lower number subtracts 67,000 from the lower number offered for “total Ministry of Defense” (110,000) by Giustozzi, 2000, as that is the largest differential between the “Ministry of Defense” and “Army” totals reported in that chart for the period of the Soviet presence.

<sup>g</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, Table 27. The higher number takes the higher (March) of the two “total Ministry of Defense” entries provided for that year. There is no separate entry for “Army” for that year. The lower number subtracts 67,000 from the lower number offered for “total Ministry of Defense” (121,000) by Giustozzi, 2000, as that is the largest differential between the “Ministry of Defense” and “Army” totals reported in that chart for the period of the Soviet presence.

<sup>h</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, Table 27, figure for “Army.” The “total Ministry of Defense” for that year has two figures: 139,000 and 150,000.

**Table 7.1—Continued**

<sup>i</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, Table 27. The higher number is “total Ministry of Defense.” There is no separate entry for “Army” for that year. The lower number subtracts 67,000 from the “total Ministry of Defense” entry, as that is the largest differential between the “Ministry of Defense” and “Army” totals reported in that chart for the period of the Soviet presence.

<sup>j</sup> Nikitenko, 2004, 2010. He notes that this is 60 percent of the full force as planned, indicating a planned size of 235,000; Giustozzi, 2000, Table 27, does not report “Ministry of Defense” or “Army” numbers for that year.

<sup>k</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, Table 27, The higher number takes the “total Ministry of Defense” number (160,000) minus the entry for “border guards” (30,000). There is no separate entry for “Army” for that year. The lower number subtracts 67,000 from the “total Ministry of Defense” entry, as that is the largest differential between the “Ministry of Defense” and “Army” totals reported in that chart for the period of the Soviet presence.

<sup>l</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, Table 27, figure for “Army.” The figures for the “total Ministry of Defense” in that chart for that year are 132,000, 157,000, and 148,000.

were forcibly conscripted into the Sarandoy, and Sarandoy personnel were able to serve closer to home.<sup>7</sup> Pay may also have been higher, reflecting the more elite nature of the force. In the Army, officers were far less likely to desert than were the rank and file, comprising 2–3 percent of total desertion rates (with the exception of 1989, when 3,000 officers deserted, bringing the proportion to 12.3 percent).<sup>8</sup>

If officers were less likely to desert, some of them may have helped create the conditions that led others to do so. Analysts argue that incompetence among junior officers was an important contributor to troop disaffection and that there was little effort among officers to improve morale. Afghan officers’ treatment of soldiers is described by one Russian writer as including public beatings and other “medieval” punishments (a violation of the ban on corporal punishment that had been a component of previous reforms). He notes that officers also hoarded

<sup>7</sup> This could be seen as conflicting with evidence of lower desertion rates among troops serving among ethnic populations other than their own, discussed below.

<sup>8</sup> Giustozzi, 2000 (figures reported are from p. 261, chart 21).

soldiers' rations and pay. Over time, Soviet advisors made progress in ameliorating, albeit not eliminating, these practices.<sup>9</sup>

Some believe that political issues created difficulties. Many army commanders were from the Khalq faction of the PDPA. Indeed, the numbers had been even greater, but a large number of Khalqi officers were replaced in the early 1980s, a broader purge being averted only through pressure from Soviet advisors.<sup>10</sup> The Sarandoy, too, as noted above, were Khalq dominated. By contrast, KhAD/WAD was Parcham led.<sup>11</sup> There is no question that factionalism remained a key component of Afghan politics, and it was not unreasonable to see the security forces on the one hand as one more area of competition between the factions and on the other as the armed extensions of the two camps. Continuing hostility and confusion regarding religious issues may also have played a role (efforts to incorporate religious practice are discussed below).<sup>12</sup> Fear of sexual assault in the ranks likely also led many young men to avoid military service.<sup>13</sup>

Tribal conflicts may have been a factor, as well. Some analysts argue that personnel with ties to Pashtun tribes closely involved in the insurgency were more likely to desert, while those serving in areas populated by ethnic groups other than their own were less likely to do so. Indeed, over the course of the 1980s, Tajiks became increas-

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<sup>9</sup> Mikhailov, 2009b. Of course, it is worth noting that Soviet advisors were also not immune to corruption, per a story of a Soviet advisor who was selling medicine, food, and alcohol to the enemy and who, rather than being publicly demoted, was quietly returned to the Soviet Union (Kucherova, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Pinchuk, 2002; Nikitenko, 2004, 2010; Liakhovskii, 2009; Giustozzi, 2000; Mitrokhin, 2002; Mikhailov, 2009b. Mikhailov is the source of the description of punishments as "medieval," as well as the assessment that there was improvement over time. There is some irony in the description of corporal punishment as medieval, given the vicious "hazing" tradition of *dedovshchina* in the Soviet and Russian armed forces, which has cost many soldiers their lives.

<sup>11</sup> Giustozzi, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Pinchuk, 2002; Nikitenko, 2004, 2010; Liakhovskii, 2009; Giustozzi, 2000; Mitrokhin, 2002; Mikhailov, 2009b.

<sup>13</sup> Author discussions with Afghans and with Russian specialists in 2009 indicate that rumors of sexual assault of young soldiers by older personnel in the armed forces were widespread.

ingly overrepresented in Afghanistan's security forces. Pashtuns had previously dominated the ranks of the army, but by 1987, Tajiks comprised 35 percent of army senior and political officers and 35–40 percent of troops, as well as 41 percent of Sarandoy officers and NCOs.<sup>14</sup> With other minorities also taking disproportionate roles in the security forces, Pashtuns were particularly underrepresented in lower and middle ranks until the 1980s. When Najibullah came to power in 1986, his policies of Pashtunization increased Pashtun presence in the military leadership. This, however, angered other groups in the rank and file.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to problems within the forces, active efforts of the enemy were specifically geared to increasing desertion. Mujahedin propaganda sought to convince Afghan security forces personnel to change sides. These efforts met with increasing success, particularly toward the end of the decade. The KGB reported high rates of support for militants within army forces (including border troops). The national reconciliation and peace process also had a negative effect on morale, according to Liakhovskii, as soldiers saw no reason to fight given that the government had given up on eventual victory. In 1988, battalions from the 3rd, 4th, 7th, and 8th border forces joined the insurgents, bringing their equipment with them.<sup>16</sup> In 1989, 15th Tank and 37th Assault Brigades troops deserted, and a new armored brigade lost over half its personnel en route to Kabul.<sup>17</sup> The Sarandoy, despite their overall lower desertion numbers, were also not immune. In 1987, a Sarandoy battalion and part of a Sarandoy regiment, along with an army battalion, changed sides.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, p. 276, chart 43.

<sup>15</sup> M. KHaneev, "Politicheskaiia Nestabil'nost' v. Afganistane: Voina Idei ili Bor'ba Klanov?" *Azia i Afrika Segodnia*, No. 11, November 2008, pp. 51–56.

<sup>16</sup> Pinchuk, 2002; Nikitenko, 2004; Liakhovskii, 2009; Giustozzi, 2000; Mitrokhin, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

## Efforts to Increase Numbers and Improve Morale

A variety of approaches were tried to stem the desertion problem. Some were more self-evidently geared to it than others: One Western analyst reports that minefields around Army outposts served a double purpose—of keeping conscripts in as well as enemy personnel out.<sup>19</sup> Such creativity aside, continued and increasingly far-reaching conscription campaigns were the most consistent solution. In 1981, the conscription age in Afghanistan was set at 20 years.<sup>20</sup> In 1982, Soviet advisors reportedly recommended lowering it still further, to 18, while extending the time of conscription from two years to three. They also recommended a wage increase.<sup>21</sup> Pay was probably not the issue, however: Afghan Army personnel were not paid badly.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, with the population still confused about the goals and purpose of the new, foreign-supported government and disinclined to take up arms for it, military service remained unpopular.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, conscription was mainly forcible: Only some 20 percent of conscripts showed up voluntarily at *komissariats* to register and take up arms (indeed, some Soviet personnel who served in Afghanistan were not aware that *komissariats* existed there at all<sup>24</sup>). The rest were press-ganged.<sup>25</sup>

Even with forced conscription, meeting targets was a challenge, particularly in some areas. In June 1981, there were only 500 draftees in Kandahar, despite a goal of 20,000. In Herat that year, the early months brought in only 4 percent of the region's quota.<sup>26</sup> *Oblav* (catch) operations were carried out to recapture deserters but were also the

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<sup>19</sup> Grau, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Pikov, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Mitrokhin, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> O. F. Zhemaitis, "Vospominaniia. Afganskii Dnevnik," *Voprosy Istorii*, February 28, 2008, pp. 85–102.

<sup>23</sup> Author discussions with members of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Zhemaitis, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Nikitenko, 2004, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Pozdniakov, 2009.

means by which first-time conscripts were brought into the ranks (some of those who had already served were likely brought back in as well, in violation of policy but in keeping with the need for warm bodies<sup>27</sup>). In some regions, a curfew would be established for three to four days; streets into and out of a city would be blocked off; and Sarandoy and KhAD forces, supported by the 40th Army, would go door to door at night to identify young men of military age. Those who were caught as deserters were sent to the north or northwest of the country, where escape would be more difficult. Those who were not yet in service were issued weapons and uniforms. Any enemy personnel caught in these operations were turned over to KhAD (resisters were shot, which some may have deemed preferable to detention by KhAD).<sup>28</sup>

In the end, the conscription age remained at 20 (although recruitment officers may well have recruited the underage as well), but length of service was adjusted, reportedly becoming two and a half years starting in 1981. Then, in 1982, demobilized soldiers were called on to join the Sarandoy, and reserve duty was extended to two years rather than one. Exemptions from the draft were reduced, with those for government employees and businesspeople abolished in August 1981. These changes caused a substantial number of people to leave the country, and after Interior Minister Golabzoy publicly stated opposition to the measure, the policy was changed in September 1981, allowing exemptions for some government workers, certain laborers/drivers, and traders. The government was also forced to reverse itself after its October 1982 plan to eliminate exemptions for members of border tribes spurred substantial protest.<sup>29</sup>

In theory, one mechanism to improve morale and decrease desertion was the Afghan Army's program of having religious leaders embedded in its ranks. Party representation in the security forces had clearly failed to be sufficient to prevent problems, but the need for reconciliation with Islam was seen early on, including by Soviet advisors. From about 1981, the PDPA had softened its stance on religion and began

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<sup>27</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>28</sup> Maiorov, 1996; Zhemaitis, 2008; Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

building contacts with the clergy.<sup>30</sup> Officially, the army had 95 trained mullahs on its staff in the mid-1980s (in practice, only 47 were actually in service). These were supplemented by about 210 unofficial mullahs, soldiers with other duties who also carried out religious work based on their prior relevant training. Official and unofficial mullahs were tasked with, among other things, providing spiritual leadership to soldiers, leading services, providing religious explanations of government policies and goals, and preventing alcohol use.<sup>31</sup>

The incorporation of religion in the Afghan Army, although conceptually impressive, was undermined as an effective force by a number of factors. The prevalence in the officer corps of PDPA members, who had a tendency to discount religion, was one. Many officers did not pray or carry out other religious precepts and generally showed disdain for religious observance. Facilities designated for religious use were in poor condition and did not receive necessary repairs. Sometimes they were used to store weapons or for other mundane uses. This surely created an unwelcoming environment for the more devout among the soldiers. It also likely left mullahs, official and unofficial, less inspired to support army and government goals and deliver their messages. Nor did they have any real input into the training and development of the force. As a result, the religious programs of the army looked far more impressive on paper, and the mullahs who were in service were more of a showpiece than a reflection of the reality of service life.<sup>32</sup>

In early 1987, Varennikov's Operational Group called for increased pay for military personnel, just as advisors had five years before, as well as for the establishment of special stores for members of the armed forces to ensure their access to key goods.<sup>33</sup> Other policies to boost recruitment and retention included a mid-1980s effort to increase voluntary service, which promised better pay than one would receive as a conscript and a commitment of only two years. According

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<sup>30</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>31</sup> V. S. KHristoforov, "Musul'manskoe Dukhovenstvo v Afganskoi Armii," *Voeno-istoricheskii Zhurnal*, No. 10, October 2006, pp. 39–43.

<sup>32</sup> KHristoforov, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

to Giustozzi, “efforts were made to improve the living conditions of the soldiers,” and in 1987, length of service was once again reduced to two years. In 1989, however, many of these measures were reversed and exemptions cancelled.<sup>34</sup>

## Equipment

As of February 1986, Afghanistan's military equipment included 763 tanks, 129 BMPs (from the Russian *boevaia machina pekhoty*, or infantry fighting vehicle), 1,225 BTRs (from the Russian *bronetransporter*, or armored transporter) and BRDMs (from the Russian *boevaia razvedatel'naia dozornaia machina* or combat reconnaissance patrol vehicle), 2,609 field and reactive artillery and mortars, and about 13,000 automobiles.<sup>35</sup> Afghanistan's air and air defense forces as of the mid-1980s comprised 19,400 people, 226 fixed wing aircraft (217 of them combat ready), and 89 helicopters (62 combat ready).<sup>36</sup>

Much of the equipment, however, remained ineffective. As an advisor who visited in 1979 found, Afghan personnel saw little reason to repair equipment when more could easily be obtained.<sup>37</sup> One advisor reports that in the summer of 1983 an Afghan tank brigade commander left five tanks and a BTR in the battlefield because of a lack of fuel and other “irreparable” problems.<sup>38</sup> Even in the Air Force, “normal” conditions were when two out of three planes were fully equipped and flight capable, and theft of fuel was a persistent problem.<sup>39</sup>

Although training local personnel on the equipment provided was a core component of Soviet assistance missions globally, this training did not translate into effective use and repair in Afghanistan. In

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<sup>34</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>36</sup> Nikitenko, 2004. It is unclear as of what date the numbers are accurate.

<sup>37</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Pozdniakov, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Markovskii and Prikhodchenko, 2007.



part, these problems can be attributed to limited literacy and education on the part of the Afghan security forces' rank and file (Giustozzi cites a figure of 60-percent literacy for the Afghan armed forces<sup>40</sup>). The problems can also be attributed to ineffective training by the Soviets, who lacked local language skills. The continued Soviet willingness to provide additional equipment, however, cannot be ignored as a key reason for this continuing problem. The steady stream of weapons, vehicles, and other goods, even as Afghan security forces' personnel numbers shrank, suggests that Soviet leaders were either not fully cognizant of the situation or failed to draw the right conclusions. Afghan leaders asked for more and received more, creating less and less of an incentive to ensure effective use and capable repair. When Soviet forces departed, Afghanistan's storehouses were filled with supplies, in some cases months' worth.<sup>41</sup>

The Afghan armed forces had more vehicles than they had drivers, both for automobiles and for armored BTRs, BMPs, and tanks. Indeed, 20–40 percent of the BTRs, BMPs, and tanks lacked personnel, according to an August 1988 report by Varennikov. The situation in KhAD and the MVD was similar. Varennikov wrote that Afghan security personnel in all of the services wasted ammunition, shot without aiming, and destroyed weaponry and equipment rather than move it when relocating. Afghan ministers, he noted, tried to cover up these problems.<sup>42</sup> Despite Varennikov's report, in mid-November 1988, the USSR dispatched a team to study what additional needs the Afghan security forces might have in the face of the planned Soviet withdrawal. Afghan officials took this opportunity to ask the team for another 2.1 billion rubles worth of equipment and weaponry. Their request was readily accepted, and further assistance followed.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>41</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Pinchuk, 2002; Pozdniakov, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; "January 1989 USSR Council of Ministers Instruction," January 1, 1989, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive.

## Division of Labor Among Afghan Security Forces

Although one former Afghan Defense Ministry official argues that the Defense Ministry had operational control over all security forces, representatives of the other security forces would likely disagree with that assessment.<sup>44</sup> There is no question that the Afghan Defense Ministry was in charge of coordinating the army, self-defense forces, and border tribal units. Beyond that, the picture becomes murkier. From about 1982 onward, KhAD played the lead role in its joint efforts with the Sarandoy and army forces. In 1986, KhAD was elevated to the cabinet level when it became the WAD and given formal operational control of some Sarandoy units. In 1987, however, border troops and operational WAD and Sarandoy units became subordinate to army division commanders, who thus had control of all forces in their area of responsibility.<sup>45</sup> Further complicating matters were the growing responsibilities of local government officials. As provincial leaders became more autonomous over the course of the 1980s, security force commanders (both police and army) were charged with cooperating with and “obeying” provincial leaders’ directions.<sup>46</sup>

With the advisory missions often stovepiped from one another, it is not surprising that Afghan forces might be as well. Indeed, it was one of the issues Varennikov’s Operational Group took on. Their initiatives assisted the PDPA General Secretary (Afghanistan’s President Najibullah) in enforcing coordination of the various security forces through more regular interaction, as described earlier, but these changes came late in the game and thus had limited impact.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Author interview, Afghanistan, September 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>46</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

<sup>47</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

## Transferring Control

The challenges that plagued Afghan force development also made it difficult for Soviet forces to truly hand over much of the warfighting to the Afghans. The Afghan military remained dependent on Soviet aviation, artillery, engineering, and other units.<sup>48</sup> If in 1986 the Soviet Union appeared to have withdrawn several substantial components, the actual number of Soviet forces participating in the Limited Contingent remained the same.<sup>49</sup>

In 1988, when the effort to transition to an Afghan lead had been ongoing for over two years, Soviet representatives in Kabul reported to Moscow that the Afghan military was able to fight effectively against opposition forces only when in large formations. Small groups, up to the level of a garrison battalion, remained unstable. With Najibullah's support, they recommended that the Afghan Army be concentrated in key locations of vital government interest, rather than seek to maintain overall control. They also recommended the elimination of structures that could not function without Soviet support and their integration into larger military groups (the recommendations are discussed further in the following chapter).<sup>50</sup> In his August 1988 report, General Varennikov identified Afghan helicopter pilots as a particular weakness, one that continued despite the efforts of Soviet advisors. He noted that in the previous month, Afghanistan had lost four planes and eight helicopters.<sup>51</sup>

According to some sources, the Soviet decision to withdraw made things worse, as Afghan forces became even more likely to avoid combat and other risks and to ensure that the Soviets took on the burden.<sup>52</sup> The Soviet decision to withdraw also had an impact on the advisory mission. Advisors reported that Afghans' attitudes toward them changed

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<sup>48</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>49</sup> Salmin, 2009c.

<sup>50</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; a total of 24 planes and 44 helicopters were lost that year by the Afghan armed forces.

<sup>52</sup> Salmin, 2009c.

for the worse. Some threats against Soviet-trained Afghans and those with ties to Soviet advisors were noted. Sometimes these threats were attributed to senior government officials.<sup>53</sup>

A different perspective is provided by one former member of the Soviet mission, an experienced officer who served as an interpreter at several levels and with a range of different units throughout the 1980s. He argued that the Afghans actually fought well enough when the Soviets were not around. Indeed, they did better at independent missions than when they fought alongside Soviet troops. With the Soviets there, Afghan officers did not have to lead and organize their forces—the Soviets did it for them. Moreover, the Soviets tended to rely on the more ideological of the Afghan personnel, who may not have been the most capable. But when the Soviets stepped out of the picture, the Afghan officers and their soldiers became more effective.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Pinchuk, 2002, p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Author interview with a member of the Soviet advisory mission, Moscow, April 2009.

## The Soviet Decision to Withdraw and the Legacy of Soviet Efforts to Build Afghan Security Forces

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### Dissenting Voices

A number of Soviet officials expressed their concerns about the conduct of the conflict, and the counterproductive effects of Soviet and Afghan forces' repressive tactics, throughout the war. Although these dissents are not the subject of this monograph, two of these reports are worth noting for contextual purposes. On October 10, 1980, the commander of the Turkestan Military District (to which the 40th Army was subordinate) reported to Defense Minister Ustinov that he recommended military efforts be slowed to prevent escalation and alienation of public opinion. Instead, Soviet and Afghan operations to eliminate enemy actors from the provinces of Afghanistan and to establish government rule continued apace.<sup>1</sup> Soviet authorities, indeed, reported progress. For example, in June 1980, Soviet Ambassador to Afghanistan Fikrat Tabeev told the Soviet community's Party conference that, "We have already freed from the counterrevolution nearly 100 urban and rural districts of some 300 in the country as a whole. By the end of 1980, we will free all the rest and withdraw Soviet forces from Afghanistan" (author's translation).<sup>2</sup> This, of course, proved to be an overly optimistic assessment. A few years later, in 1984, General Leonid Shershnev, head of the Soviet political department, wrote to then-General Secretary

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<sup>1</sup> Salmin, 2009d.

<sup>2</sup> Kustov, 2010.

Konstantin Chernenko describing the worsening situation in Afghanistan. He noted the increasing strength of enemy forces and the lack of public support for the Soviet mission. He argued that the fight had become fundamentally a police operation, which implied the need to offer positive incentives to the local population. Instead, Soviet forces were making things worse. Massive and systematic human rights violations by Soviet troops, robberies, inappropriate use of force, destruction of homes, and desecration of mosques were contributing to popular antagonism. Shershnev recommended a change of course: prioritizing nonmilitary solutions, a focus on political work among the Afghan people, and increased propaganda aimed at the enemy. Although some efforts along these lines were made, Soviet bombing and artillery campaigns continued to decimate villages and farmland (and, presumably, the abuses continued as well).<sup>3</sup>

## Preparing to Leave

Neither the decision to withdraw nor its implementation was sudden. By the late 1980s, Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*, or openness, combined with continued Soviet casualty numbers and returning traumatized and wounded veterans to ensure that the lack of popular support for the war was increasingly clear. But in fact, withdrawal had been the Soviet goal since the middle of the decade, and an important component of Gorbachev's approach was effecting a responsible withdrawal of forces.<sup>4</sup> Getting Soviet troops out became the official policy in December 1986, by which time Karmal had been replaced as Afghanistan's leader by Najibullah. That same year, the Soviet Union had also cut back on its development assistance in Afghanistan, having made a conscious decision to center its efforts on the security side of the equation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Salmin, 2009c.

<sup>4</sup> Artemy Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan: From Intervention to Withdrawal," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4, Fall 2009, pp. 46–73.

<sup>5</sup> Artemy Kalinovsky, "Afghanistan, More Echoes of the Soviet Experience," *LSE Ideas Blog*, October 15, 2010b.

Building up Afghan security forces was seen by the leadership as the means to getting Soviet forces out. Varennikov's Operational Group deployed full time in January 1987 to oversee the process. Capabilities, readiness, and independent action were the areas in which group members most sought to facilitate improvements in the Afghan security forces.<sup>6</sup> As described above, they initiated a number of approaches and changes at both the political and operational levels. Recognizing that withdrawal could not be instantaneous, they sought to improve staffing and armaments at border control sites near the Pakistani and Iranian borders (from where Soviet forces would withdraw first). As already discussed, they worked with advisors and the 40th Army to reduce Soviet involvement in combat operations and increase the Afghan armed forces' roles, including for command and decisionmaking functions.<sup>7</sup> Soviet advisors recommended (ostensibly with Najibullah's approval) shifting various forces around, as described above, concentrating Afghan Army forces in areas where the government's vital interests were located and eliminating groups that could not operate without substantial Soviet support (specifically noted were units in Barikot, Panjsher, and Badakhshan). They also suggested that the Sarandoy focus in part on defending the most important government sites, key cities, economic targets, and communications, and especially on supporting civil order in Kabul and its suburbs. Border forces, they noted, would not be able to prevent the incursion of enemy caravans—only the tribes could do this. Instead, those border forces personnel who were not involved in regular patrols should be shifted to work with the army and to cover the routes that enemy forces used for supply and other lines of communication.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Nikitenko, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009. The recommendations on the border troops had not been cleared with Najibullah.

## The Withdrawal and After

In February 1988, Gorbachev announced that Soviet forces would start drawing down in May of that year. The Geneva Accords signed in April 1988 committed him to finish the job in nine months.<sup>9</sup> After a decade of fighting, the Soviets and the PDPA were losing. The Soviet Union had sought to support the PDPA social transformation mission and to broaden and cement PDPA control over the country—both these efforts were experiencing reversals. Food and humanitarian assistance provided by the Soviets and the Afghan government were not credited to them.<sup>10</sup> Quality of life throughout the country not only dropped but was in some cases worse in those areas under PDPA control. But those were increasingly few in number. By 1986, the Afghan government controlled only 23 percent of Afghanistan, a portion of the country that included primarily urban areas and the main roads (which Soviet forces patrolled). Mujahedin strength had grown from 45,000 people in 1981–1983 to 150,000 in 1986.<sup>11</sup>

The imminent Soviet withdrawal was not welcomed by the Afghan leadership, who saw Soviet forces as their bulwark and their security against government collapse. Najibullah was increasingly concerned that he would not be able to hold on to power if Soviet troops left. The course of fighting seemed to uphold his fears. In August 1988, Afghan forces lost Kunduz, Khanabad, and Talogan (again leaving weapons and equipment as they withdrew). Afghan officials blamed Soviet forces for providing insufficient support and failing to destroy the enemy.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to his and his government's requests for ever-more weapons, Najibullah repeatedly asked the Soviets to reconsider their plans to leave. However, Najibullah's requests to the Soviet leadership that their troops stay was countered by Varennikov's reports, which argued that another year of Soviet presence would not make a dif-

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<sup>9</sup> Feifer, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Pinchuk, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Salmin, 2009c.

<sup>12</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.



ference. The 40th Army commanders generally concurred with this assessment.<sup>13</sup>

Soviet forces started to pull out in May 1988, as promised, handing over bases and facilities to the Afghans as they left and providing some training to those who would take charge.<sup>14</sup> Najibullah, meanwhile, accelerated his policies of Pashtunization, reliance on the tribes (and, increasingly, militias), and reversal of PDPA initiatives. Political workers were removed from the army.<sup>15</sup>

After February 15, 1989, when the last of the Soviet troops had left, Soviet deliveries of weapons, equipment, and other materiel were stopped. However, despite the large stockpiles, by mid-March Najibullah was reporting that supplies were running low and that Afghanistan would be lost if deliveries did not resume. Najibullah's government also requested air support. The Soviets refused to return their forces to the country, although they did agree to fly aircraft near the border. The Politburo also agreed on March 12 to resume arms and other deliveries. Because flying directly into Bagram or Kandahar was deemed unsafe as of May 1989, supplies moved over land on trucks driven by Soviet civilians and via an air bridge from Tashkent to Kabul. This assistance effort was meant to support the Afghan MoI, the WAD, and the MoD. It included ammunition, fuel, weaponry (aircraft, rockets, and thousands of Shmel flamethrowers), and funds to pay fighters.<sup>16</sup> The Soviets

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<sup>13</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Timofeev, 2009. For the mechanics of the withdrawal, force movements, and so forth, see Lester W. Grau, "Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, April–June 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Pinchuk, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; Oleg Gorupai, "O Shuravi—Dobrym Slovom," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, April 30, 2008; "CPSU Central Committee Memo, Excerpt from Protocol #149/23 and an Attached Report," RGANI (formerly TsKhSD), f. 89, per. 10, dok. 25, March 12, 1989, st. 1–2 [cited by Archive-Information Bulletin as RGANI, op 10, d. 25, 1993, II. 2, copy, special file, CC] via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive; "CPSU CC Politburo Decision, with Report by Zaikov-Shevardnadze-Yazov-Kryuchkov," TsKhSD, f. 89, per. 10, dok. 35, May 13, 1989, via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive; "CPSU CC Memo, Excerpt from Protocol #159/20," RGANI (formerly TsKhSD), f. 89, per. 10, dok. 36, May 19, 1989, st. 1–7 [cited by Archive-Information Bul-

also provided supplies to the families of fallen Sarandoy officers: Parents and spouses received seven tons of rice and seven tons of kerosene apiece.<sup>17</sup>

Some 30 advisors, and associated interpreters and specialists, remained in place after Soviet forces had left Afghanistan. Soviet trainers continued to train the WAD, Interior Ministry, and Defense Ministry personnel in both Afghanistan and the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> An August 1989 Central Committee memorandum credits Soviet advisors with having helped the Afghan armed forces reach a level of capability that enabled them to independently fight the enemy five months after the Soviets had withdrawn.<sup>19</sup>

Soviet agents also continued to play a role and were sometimes helpful in convincing Mujahedin to support the government. A 2000 article by Aleksandr Zhukov in *Orientir* describes one Soviet agent, an ethnic Tajik woman, who was particularly successful in turning opposition leaders in this time frame.<sup>20</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that the Soviet withdrawal may have made the government's job somewhat easier, eliminating one important motivation for opposition to it and making it possible for various groups that had joined to fight the Soviets to turn against each other, even striking deals with that government to do so. But the strongest groups remained opposed to Najibullah's regime, and many of the deals and alliances that were struck proved short-lived and fluid. Groups shifted sides repeatedly both to garner resources and to receive

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letin as RGANI, op. 10, d. 36, 1993, ll. 3, copy, special file, CC], via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive; "CPSU CC Memo, Excerpt from Protocol #163/44," RGANI (formerly TsKhSD), f. 89, per. 10, dok. 39, July 22, 1989, st. 1–26 [cited by Archive-Information Bulletin as RGANI, op. 10, d. 39, 1993, ll. 22, copy, special file, CC], via Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Cold War International History Project Virtual Archive.

<sup>17</sup> Timofeev, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Liakhovskii, 2009; "CPSU CC Memo, Excerpt from Protocol #163/44," 1989.

<sup>19</sup> "CPSU CC Memo, Excerpt from Politburo Protocol #164," August 5, 1989.

<sup>20</sup> Aleksandr Zhukov, "Ochen' Lichnoe. Ei Modzhakhedy Darili Tsvety," *Orientir*, February 1, 2000.

support against their own enemies, and Afghanistan's war developed into a large-scale ethnic conflict with myriad combatant groups.<sup>21</sup>

In the end, the Afghan forces that Soviet advisors had assessed as largely incompetent held on and kept the government in power far longer than either the Afghan or Soviet government might have expected. Indeed, they held on as long as Soviet aid kept coming—it was only after the USSR had collapsed and Russia agreed to end aid to Afghanistan that the Najibullah regime failed. This fact has potentially interesting implications. It is difficult to believe that the few Soviet advisors left behind after the withdrawal worked miracles that the much larger pool that preceded them could not, as the August 1989 memorandum noted above suggests. It may simply be that Soviet assessments of Afghan capabilities were not appropriate to the environment. By judging Afghan forces against Soviet standards, and in the context of a Soviet presence, they were not able to adequately appraise what those forces truly could do if they had to.

## Evaluating Soviet Efforts in Hindsight

Even with two decades having passed, clear identification of Soviet successes and failures in the development of Afghanistan's security forces remains a challenging task. Certainly, the Soviet Union was not able to build a security structure that could sustain a peaceful, functioning Afghanistan after Soviet troops left. However, neither at the time that the 40th Army first crossed the border into Afghanistan nor at any period during their presence there did a successful, functioning Afghanistan exist for security forces to sustain. Because the broader effort to build an effective state in Afghanistan was a failure, prospects for success in developing the security forces of that state were, in retrospect, bleak at best.

The Soviets did leave behind them forces that could carry out certain tasks, including protecting the government that remained. Soviet technology and know-how contributed to a number of key Afghan

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<sup>21</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

capabilities, from piloting aircraft to managing personnel systems, which remain assets for Afghanistan to this day. However, the Soviet legacy also includes public distrust of service in the security forces and systems prone to corruption and bureaucracy.

Some of the structures put in place during the 1980s collapsed fundamentally. Others held on. Many Interior Ministry forces became components of militias answering to strongmen, though other institutions of the ministry survived even the departure of Golabzoy in late 1988.<sup>22</sup> Many, but not all, Afghan Defense Ministry structures similarly degenerated. KhAD, arguably the most successful of the security forces, continued to operate even after the Taliban took over, integrating itself into Northern Alliance structures. One can draw only tentative lines between these successes and Soviet approaches. KhAD got some of the best training and many MoI trainers also came from the cream of the Soviet crop, while Defense Ministry advisors often had little advising experience, but this only hints at a possible contributing factor. It is not in itself sufficient to conclude that training was what had made the crucial difference.

Moreover, successful security forces are not simply capable security forces. Effectiveness is not just a function of either quality or quantity. The best force in the world will fail if its numbers are insufficient. It will also fail if its training and capabilities are the wrong ones for the task at hand. Where numbers are concerned, it is clear that goals were not met and that getting an accurate count was consistently beyond the capabilities of Soviet or Afghan leaders. In regard to quality, the Soviets sought to use their own standards to evaluate the Afghan security forces they were helping to build, and the Afghan security forces fell short. However, it is worth noting that Soviet forces, too, fell short of success, as measured by, for example, the ability to defeat the insurgency. At best, the combination of Soviet and Afghan capabilities could only hold it off. This leads one to ask whether the security forces developed

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<sup>22</sup> Golabzoy was made ambassador to the Soviet Union in late 1988. In 1990, he was accused by the Najibullah government of participating in Defense Minister Tanai's coup attempt of that year. Golabzoy, no longer ambassador, remained in exile in Russia until after the fall of the Taliban.

in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s, however successfully or unsuccessfully, were the right ones for the job that needed to be done. The answer is almost certainly not. But the question of what the right forces might have looked like was never truly raised. It would fall to the next coalition of powers, embarking on another decade-long (if not longer) effort in Afghanistan, to start asking it.



## Conclusion: Parallels, Disconnects, and What the International Security Assistance Force Can Learn from the Soviet Experience

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The Soviet experience in developing Afghan security forces holds many possible lessons for others who seek to build indigenous forces in the midst of a counterinsurgency effort, and particularly for those who seek to do this in Afghanistan. Certainly, any student of U.S. and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) efforts in Afghanistan today will see a number of parallels, as well as some interesting differences. It is beyond the scope of this monograph to describe the ongoing NATO effort. It can, however, highlight some interesting comparisons and discuss how current SFA efforts might be informed by the Soviet experience. In order to do so, this concluding analysis draws on both ongoing and recently completed work in that sphere by the author and her colleagues.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to find parallels between the Soviet experience in Afghanistan and many other efforts to develop indigenous government and security capabilities during wartime. Descriptions of KGB work with KhAD, military advisors' efforts with the Afghan military, and Ministry of Interior development of the Sarandoy—and all three sets of advisors' limited and often ineffective communication and coordination with one another and the embassy representing their govern-

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<sup>1</sup> All references to current efforts, unless otherwise noted, draw on Terrence Kelly, Nora Bensahel, and Olga Oliker, *Security Force Assistance in Afghanistan: Identifying Lessons for Future Efforts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1066-A, 2011, and related research by the author and her colleagues.

ment—have a familiar ring to anyone who has participated in or studied security-sector development efforts in Iraq, Vietnam, and elsewhere. So does the emphasis, both in the 1980s and the 2000s, on rapidly building up Afghan security forces' capabilities so that, respectively, the Soviets and ISAF could turn over security to their Afghan counterparts. Yet many differences can also be identified. Among other things, the Soviets deployed a far more whole-of-government effort than has the current coalition (although stovepiping arguably mitigated the benefits of doing so) and had police trainers with policing background available to deploy.

## Overall Approaches

The assistance effort the Soviets undertook in Afghanistan, even before 1979, was more comprehensive and holistic in its intentions than that of the international coalition that embarked on an SFA effort in Afghanistan 23 years later. The substantial MVD effort to build and strengthen the Sarandoy from the start presents a stark contrast to the very limited German police-building enterprise in the early 2000s.<sup>2</sup> The dispatch of Soviet MVD staff to build their Afghan counterpart agency is also markedly different from the U.S. State and Defense departments' efforts to develop the Afghan police and Interior Ministry through the use of contractors and military personnel. Of course, the United States does not have an MVD-equivalent structure that could help carry out these tasks, but the substantial lag in police development, and the continued challenges of that enterprise, make the Soviet police-building effort appear to be the better model, despite its own inherent problems.

Overall approaches to training for police, military, and intelligence personnel were in some ways similar to those undertaken by NATO and the United States and in other ways substantially different. Similar is the tendency to model training efforts and force employment approaches on the donor country's own structures and experiences. The Soviets, however, sent thousands of Afghan police, intelli-

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see Kelly, Bensahel, and Oliker, 2011, Chapter Two.



gence, and military personnel to the USSR for training among Soviet and foreign counterparts. The United States and its other ISAF partners have conducted almost all of their training within Afghanistan, with some small-scale exceptions. Moreover, while coalition training efforts offer shortened and scaled-down versions of their own military training (including for police, although some policing course materials are incorporated), the Soviet training for police and for senior military personnel were more likely to be similar in length and content to what counterpart Soviet trainees received, with specialized training for specialized units a priority. In both cases, however, the training was based on what the trainers knew, and it could be criticized for not being sufficiently adapted to Afghan needs and society. Also, in both cases the training for military rank-and-file personnel was of short duration. Finally, in both the 1980s and 2000s, a persistent problem was personnel, particularly of lower ranks, having received only some or none at all of their intended training.

An interesting difference between SFA of the 1980s and that of the 2000s, which was noted by some in Afghanistan, is in the rank of advisors. Most Soviet advisors were officers, including very senior officers, who worked with Afghans of similar rank. Most were also older than their Afghan counterparts.<sup>3</sup> ISAF advisors tend to be significantly junior, in age and in rank, to the Afghans they advise. The implications for success cannot be judged—some Afghans interviewed for this project saw this as a problem, while others did not. Moreover, the Soviet military was substantially top-heavy, with rather more generals to spare for advisory roles. However, a few Afghans who spoke with the author argued that a condescending message is conveyed by advisors of lower rank and younger age than their advisees, particularly in a hierarchical military or police setting. Indeed, U.S. Army doctrine notes the challenges inherent in working with forces under these circumstances: “Advisors likely advise counterparts much more senior in

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<sup>3</sup> As a result of the revolution and purges, many senior Afghans were quite young. A military counterintelligence advisor in Khost was working with a department chief aged all of 25 (Kucherova, 2008).

rank. They must understand that rank on the uniform is important to many armies.”<sup>4</sup>

## Recruiting and Retention

Recruiting is also a key difference. All soldiers and police in Afghanistan today are volunteers. During the 1980s, and historically in Afghanistan, conscription was a primary mechanism for filling the ranks. Therefore, any conclusions for the present from disparities or similarities in attrition, for example, must take this key distinction into account. That said, difficulties accurately estimating the numbers of local security forces personnel because of confused and confusing reporting are similar in both decades. Just as during the 1980s it was known that the official figures reflected ideals of units at highest strength and that senior personnel padded the rolls to pocket paychecks, there is ample evidence of the same problems today. Moreover, continuously increasing force size goals coupled with recruiting and retention challenges echo from the 1980s into the present.

## Policing

Police deployments in Afghanistan today are strikingly different from what they were in the 1980s. At that time, Sarandoy units were spread throughout all territories under government control.<sup>5</sup> They were recruited locally and often served close to home, although they could be deployed anywhere in the country.<sup>6</sup> An effort was made to ensure that as many of them as possible were volunteers, rather than con-

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Army, Field Manual 3-07.1, “Security Force Assistance,” May 2009, p. 7-3, paragraph 7-15.

<sup>5</sup> Tsygannik, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Giustozzi, 2000, reports local recruitment and deployment. Author discussions in Afghanistan, December 2009, indicate a prevalent belief that the force was national, however.

scripts, although the majority of the force remained draftees.<sup>7</sup> At the end of the 1980s, while some Sarandoy left their posts, others remained on the job, and the overall structure remained in place. Today, police are also for the most part recruited locally and usually serve close to home (with some exceptions, including, notably, the Afghan National Civil Order Police, or ANCO). They are, of course, all volunteers. Their operational deployment, however, is primarily on static checkpoints, where they are frequently targets of insurgent attacks. While police are deployed in most areas that Afghanistan's government controls, advisors do not cover all, or even most, police districts.

Police roles in the two periods have some things in common. In both the 1980s and the 2000s, Afghanistan's police were increasingly expected to carry out a counterinsurgency mission, and they had higher losses in the process than did military personnel. During the 1980s, however, they generally had heavier equipment for this mission, and those who were trained received longer-term training. They were also advised by Soviet special police, personnel with experience carrying out a domestic security mission in the context of an authoritarian state. While this is a long way from most concepts of rule-of-law policing, it does fit into a policing, rather than a military, model. By contrast, in today's context, Afghan police are advised (to the extent that they receive any support at all, which, as noted, many do not) mainly by military personnel from coalition countries, and their training (for those who receive it) is increasingly focused on survival.

## Counterinsurgency and Military Training

If the Afghan police were intended for a counterinsurgency role during the 1980s, the training that Afghan military personnel received was standard Soviet training, focused on a conventional mission, just like the training received by the Soviet forces themselves. The appropriateness of this approach was not questioned, as there was, in the Soviet SFA context, a clear sense of how to build militaries regardless of their

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<sup>7</sup> Giustozzi, 2000.

actual purpose. The tendency to export one's own doctrine and training approaches is also seen today. Although ISAF seeks to impart a more counterinsurgency-focused training approach, continued tension is evident in the unwillingness of many Afghan military leaders to carry out the "hold" component of the "clear, hold, build" mission.<sup>8</sup>

### **Interaction Between Afghan and Foreign Forces and the Challenges of Transferring Lead Responsibility**

There are also similarities between the roles played by Afghan forces vis-à-vis foreign forces in the 1980s and today. Efforts to use Afghan police and military units to interface with the public while foreign military forces engage in combat operations and then to hand over control to Afghan police and government after areas were cleared are hallmarks of tactics in both time frames. These similar approaches are also marked by some of the same challenges, particularly the difficulty of maintaining control of that territory over time. In the 1980s, it is possible that the focus on counterinsurgency on the part of most of the Sarandoy contributed to these challenges, as it is not clear if anyone had responsibility for public-order policing tasks. However, the advisory concepts themselves are different: The Soviets maintained an advisory team separate from the 40th Army, part of whose role was to interface with their countrymen to coordinate operations. The coalition has shifted approaches to advising in Afghanistan over time. In having a separate command chain and, depending on the country, a willingness to engage in operations, the ISAF advisory model into late 2009 is similar to the Soviet approach. It was, however, even more divided from the coalition's operational force than was its Soviet counterpart. The new ISAF "embedded partnering" approach, which is based on a much closer integration of advising and partnering, has no Soviet precedent.

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<sup>8</sup> That is, they are not interested in taking on the tasks required to cement control and help provide public order once territory has been taken. Author discussions in Afghanistan, December 2009.

Today, as 30 years ago, foreign security forces face continuing challenges in their efforts to ensure that their Afghan colleagues can be deemed ready to take control. In recent years, there have been indications that reporting of Afghan readiness has been exaggerated, and anecdotal accounts from trainers indicate that police and military personnel do not have the capabilities that they need to secure their country. In the 1980s, formal designations that Afghan forces were “in the lead” for every operation contrasted with advisors’ assessments of those forces’ capabilities. Interestingly, while analysis today suggests that Afghan forces are most capable in smaller units, Soviet advisors complained that Afghan units were unable to take action unless in large formations, although their large-scale independent actions remained very limited. That the Soviets judged smaller units unstable may reflect the lack of loyalty of those units to the regime, an issue that might be better controlled in the context of a larger force. It may also be related to the size of enemy forces, in that the Mujahedin of the 1980s themselves fought in much larger formations than do today’s insurgents.

It is interesting that these challenges may also reflect the difficulty of a modern force placing less-capable indigenous forces “in the lead” or even effectively working with them, particularly when there is political pressure to demonstrate progress in handing over responsibilities to the local authorities. In the 1980s, numerous reports indicated that joint planning with Afghan forces was not particularly joint and that Soviet leaders and advisors were the ones who were really in charge. Moreover, security concerns made Soviet officials and military personnel nervous about sharing strategic or tactical information with their Afghan counterparts. The same problems are evident today. Interviews with coalition personnel in Afghanistan in December 2009 revealed that Afghan police and military units have limited if any input into plans for efforts conducted with coalition forces, and that worries about security continue to shape the information that ISAF personnel pass on to their Afghan counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

One possible reason for these challenges is important to highlight. To the extent that the Soviets (and today ISAF) planned operations,

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<sup>9</sup> Author discussions in Afghanistan with ISAF personnel, September and December 2009.

they tended to plan them based on their own capabilities and assets. Therefore, Afghans learned to participate in operations with fairly sophisticated equipment, air support, and other capabilities enjoyed by their partners, while they themselves, despite Soviet efforts, had much lower levels of skills and less advanced equipment. It is perhaps not surprising if this limited Afghans' capacity to function independently without these supports.

## **Afghan Capabilities**

Consistent parallels can also be found in advisor accounts of capabilities and maintenance. Both Soviet and ISAF advisors complain(ed) of poor shooting skills, weak discipline, limited command and control, and leadership failures. Equipment maintenance is another problem from the 1980s that has recurred, with the added wrinkle that those who remember the Soviet presence also remember the Soviet willingness to provide ever-more weapons, vehicles, and other materiel—with limited if any accountability (making ISAF look comparatively less generous). Now, as then, Afghan military and police personnel report persistent equipment shortages, while their advisors marvel at how this is possible, given the amount of equipment already provided (although the emphasis on accountability that exists among ISAF countries was largely lacking in the USSR). Then, as now, an additional problem was posed by the inability to consistently and sustainably convey key skill sets to Afghan security forces personnel, with the result that vehicles remained unused or unrepaired because of shortages of both effective drivers and capable mechanics.<sup>10</sup>

## **What ISAF Can Learn from the Soviet Experience**

In many ways, the Soviet experience in developing Afghan security forces is a cautionary tale for those undertaking SFA in Afghani-

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<sup>10</sup> Author discussions in Afghanistan with ISAF personnel, December 2009.

stan today. Simple awareness that many of the same approaches were tried, and an understanding of how they fared, could have usefully informed U.S. and coalition planning at the start of the current effort. Today, returning to the Soviet experience can still enrich analysis and planning.

These lessons range widely, and some are clearer than others. The fact that the Soviets were able, for example, to build security forces that included women in the Afghanistan of the late 1970s may suggest that concerns about the cultural unacceptability of such moves today are misplaced. Conversely, some might argue that policies of this sort might have been among the seeds of the Najibullah government's downfall. A careful assessment, however, would suggest that such initiatives were most successful in areas where they were most acceptable—among more urban and educated Afghans, for example, where women, their families, and their communities remain proud of such service. The lesson here, of course, is the importance of recognizing that Afghan culture is anything but monolithic and that policies that account for the differences between regions and groups stand to reap considerable rewards.

In areas where there are clear similarities between Soviet and ISAF approaches, it is worth considering how the efforts in each area fared in the 1980s. In the 1980s, the failure to include Afghans in planning and to make operations truly joint made it difficult to accurately assess their capabilities and, indeed, to develop those capabilities. Continuing problems with attrition then, as now, contributed to an undertrained, understrength force. However, much can be learned for current operations from studying where attrition was then and is now more or less of a problem. One might even reap some interesting lessons from the experience of the Sarandoy, which had lower desertion rates than other forces and which were composed at least partially of volunteers. The Sarandoy were more, rather than less, selective of their personnel than was the military, and even allowed some forces to serve close to home. The officer corps, including that in the military, also had less attrition. The fact that more-elite units may have had lower attrition rates overall may suggest that despite the need for more personnel, it might be easier to maintain forces who see their service as something of an

accomplishment, rather than those who know that the bar for entering and remaining in service is very low.

Another interesting parallel lies in the Soviet decision to focus on counterinsurgency and paramilitary training for the Sarandoy, at a cost to (and perhaps at the expense of) public-order policing. It is plausible to question whether the lack of an effort to develop those capabilities contributed to the difficulty Afghan authorities had holding on to territory once it was cleared by security forces. If this is the case, it has echoes in today's challenges for Afghan police development, which also provides little in the way of traditional policing skills.

The Soviet experience can also be viewed as simply more evidence of how to approach key issues. Today's advisors and leaders may be able to take a useful page from the Soviet leadership's decision, in the mid-1980s, to change the ways advisors reported on the progress of their Afghan counterparts. ISAF has had a continuing challenge as ostensibly objective accounts have exhibited an unfortunate tendency to devolve into unreliable numbers and lose the nuance of genuine assessment as they moved up the chain of command. Facing a similar problem, Varennikov and his team shifted the process in favor of more subjective accounts, which incorporated such outcome measures as overall stability rather than simple counts of personnel and equipment. Today, many in ISAF are also thinking in this direction. Getting this mechanism right and making it appropriate to Afghanistan, however, will remain a complex challenge. This monograph has noted that despite the poor grades given to Afghan forces by their Soviet advisors, those forces held on against the enemy far longer after the Soviets withdrew than those advisors had expected. On the one hand, this is an important lesson regarding the importance of basing assessments on the right things and the difficulties of carrying out assessments while a foreign presence remains in place. Judging Afghan capabilities according to the standards of what is needed for Afghanistan is a difficult undertaking, and the Soviets' assessments were clearly flawed. On the other hand, Afghan forces' continued reliance on Soviet financial, training-focused, and materiel support for years after the Soviets withdrew is also a useful caution. It was when Soviet support ended, after all, that the Afghan government fell. The Afghan forces being built



today are also not ones that the Afghan government can maintain on its own in the foreseeable future.

A commonly raised solution to the problem of sustainability is the use of and reliance on militias. Here, too, the Soviet experience offers food for thought. Initially, the effort to utilize militias in the 1980s sought to integrate them into existing structures. Later, they were given increasing independence and political power as the state endeavored to use their extant capabilities to make up for the failings of military and police forces. This approach had early successes, so much so that Najibullah came to rely on militias more and more. But militias, whether former Mujahedin or not, often proved unreliable, and they certainly had their own goals quite aside from the interests of Najibullah's regime. It is understandable why some Afghans argue that reliance on the militias contributed to the eventual collapse of the state. Certainly, it helped to arm and equip a number of the fighting groups that went on to challenge each other in Afghanistan's civil war. Of course, the same could be said for the development of Afghanistan's national security forces.

Ongoing ISAF efforts to assist in the creation of local defense forces appear to recognize the inherent challenges exemplified by past experience. Efforts are geared locally, and there are no plans to integrate local forces into the Afghan National Army, either as auxiliary or regular units, although current programs do subordinate such units to the Interior Ministry as part of the police. Maintaining this historical awareness and ensuring that the lessons of the past are both well understood and appropriately integrated into current efforts (both with local armed groups and with reconciliation policies geared toward former insurgents) could well prove crucial in the continuing effort to stabilize Afghanistan and lay the groundwork for a more peaceful future.



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