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Times Online

West ignores lessons of Soviet humiliation in Afghanistan

Its Afghan war spelt disaster for the USSR and now Nato is making the same mistakes

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7/19/2009

"There is barely an important piece of land in Afghanistan that has not been occupied by one of our soldiers at some time or another," the commander said. "Nevertheless, much of the territory stays in the hands of the terrorists. We control the provincial centres, but we cannot maintain political control over the territory that we seize."

He added: "Our soldiers are not to blame. They've fought incredibly bravely in adverse conditions. But to occupy towns and villages temporarily has little value in such a vast land, where the insurgents can just disappear into the hills."

They could have been the words of a Nato general in the past few days. In fact they were spoken by Marshal Sergei Akhromeyev, commander of Soviet armed forces, to the USSR's politburo in the Kremlin on November 13, 1986.

The Soviet forces were in the seventh year of their nine-year war in Afghanistan and had lost about 12,000 men. Akhromeyev, a hero of the siege of Leningrad in the second world war, had been summoned to explain why a force of 109,000 troops from the world's second superpower appeared to be humiliated, year after year, by a band of terrorists.

Akhromeyev explained about the rough terrain, insisted the army needed more resources – including additional helicopters – and warned that without more men and equipment "this war will continue for a very long time".

He concluded with words that sound uncannily resonant today, in the eighth year of Nato's war: "About 99% of the battles and skirmishes that we fought in Afghanistan were won by our side. The problem is that the next morning there is the same situation as if there had been

no battle. The terrorists are again in the village where they were – or we thought they were – destroyed a day or so before."

The Soviet campaign in Afghanistan is a largely forgotten war. Few strategists from Russia or the West seem to think anything can be learnt from it. But study Soviet archives and many lessons become clear.

As the world was not watching, the Soviet troops could be brutal, yet massive air raids and the destruction of villages, which killed 800,000 Afghans, did not work. Tactics changed over the years, each time accompanied by a "surge" of new troops that temporarily improved security for the Russian-backed communist government in Kabul.

Much of the fighting was in places that have become familiar to us. Soviet troops were sent on sweeps in the most troublesome areas on the border with Pakistan, through which most of the guerrillas' weapons flowed, and the southern provinces of the country, such as Helmand. As soon as they left their fortified bases, the troops were in danger of ambush from bands of mujaheddin – the army of God.

That war, like today's, was characterised by disputes between soldiers and politicians. As newly revealed Russian documents show, the Communist party bosses ordered the invasion against the advice of senior commanders. This caused continual friction in Moscow for many years.

Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, the chief of the Soviet defence staff, and Akhromeyev, his number two, raised doubts shortly before Soviet forces were dispatched on Christmas Day 1979. They suggested to Dmitri Ustinov, the defence minister, that the experiences of the British and tsarist armies in the 19th century should encourage caution.

Ustinov told them to "shut up and obey orders", according to politburo minutes.

Ogarkov went further up the chain of command to Leonid Brezhnev, the party boss. He warned that an invasion "could mire us in unfamiliar, difficult conditions and would align the entire Islamic East against us". He was cut off in mid-sentence.

"Focus on military matters," he was told. "Leave the policy making to us and to the party." Not long afterwards the marshal was fired.

The Soviet troops realised soon after they entered Afghanistan that they had blundered, but Kremlin officials felt trapped. When Mikhail Gorbachev became leader in March 1985 he declared privately that ending the war – "our bleeding wound" – was his priority. But he could not do so for fear of losing too much face. Withdrawing the troops took a further four years as they searched for that difficult prize for armies on the run: peace with honour.

It was an agonising process that marked the beginning of the end of the Soviet empire and eventually the USSR itself. "How to get out of this racks one's brains," Gorbachev despaired to his fellow Soviet magnates in the spring of 1986. He told his generals later that year: "After all this time we have not learnt how to wage war there."

When the last troops left on February 15, 1989, about 15,000 of their comrades had been killed. It was the only war the USSR lost. To Gorbachev, one vital issue was how to "spin" it correctly. As he wrote to his key aides during the last phase of the retreat, presentation was key: "We must say that our people have not given their lives in vain," he said.