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The Afghan 80s are back

Nato's failing mission is increasingly coming to resemble the Soviets' disastrous campaign

Jonathan Steele

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It is deja vu on a huge and bloody scale. General Stanley McChrystal, the US commander in Afghanistan, is about to advise his president that "the Afghan people are undergoing a crisis of confidence because the war against the [Taliban](#) has not made their lives better", according to leaked reports. Change the word "Taliban" to "[mujahideen](#)", and you have an exact repetition of what the Russians found a quarter of a century ago.

Like Nato today, the Kremlin realised its forces had little control outside the main cities. The parallels don't end there. The Russians called their Afghan enemies *dukhy* (ghosts), ever-present but invisible, as hidden in death as they were when alive – which echoes Sean Smith's [recent photographic account](#) of the fighting in Helmand and the failure of the British units he was with to find a single Talib body.

The Soviet authorities never invited western reporters to be embedded, but you could track down Afghan war veterans in Moscow's gloomier housing estates. They were conscripts, unlike British and US troops, so perhaps they had a heightened sense of anger. But how many British vets would share the sentiments that Igor expressed, as he hung out with his mates one evening in February 1989 and let me listen? "You remember that mother who lost her son. She kept repeating, 'He fulfilled his duty. He fulfilled his duty to the end.' That's the most tragic thing. What duty? I suppose that's what saves her, her notion of duty. She hasn't yet realised it was all a ridiculous mistake. I'm putting it mildly. If she opened her eyes to our whole Afghan thing, she'd probably find it hard to hold out."

Every time I see footage of British troops riding in armoured cars past shuttered bazaars and empty streets, I think of Yuri, who told me that his first glimmerings of the war's futility

came when he realised how little contact he and his comrades had with Afghans, the people they were supposed to be helping. "Mainly our contact was with kids in the villages we went through. They were always running some kind of little business. Swapping stuff, selling stuff. Sometimes drugs. It was very cheap. You felt the aim was to get us hooked. There was not much contact with Afghan adults except the *sarandoy*, the police."

Only when he got back to Moscow did Yuri feel calm enough to reflect. "The first feeling while you're there is you start to get fed up. You get fed up with the shooting. But you don't think about it. You don't want to. Slowly, very slowly, after the war, you begin to think, to imagine, to remember what happened, the ruined villages, the expressions on people's faces. Not all the Afghan vets understand. Many of them, a substantial proportion, think what they did was necessary and right," he told me.

The details of the Soviet war were different from today's. The enemy used primitive mines rather than today's more sophisticated, remotely triggered roadside bombs. Without infrared night-sights for their sentries, Russian outposts were easy to overrun. Troops travelled in long tank-led columns that were prime targets for ambush. But the basic parameters of an asymmetrical war – hi-tech machines versus agile guerrillas – have not changed. It's just that Nato relies more on drones rather than helicopters to fire its missiles – and civilians still get hit.

Nor is there much difference between Nato's prized techniques of "cultural awareness" and Soviet practice. "They gave us a small piece of paper telling us what not to do and a little dictionary," Igor explained. "That was it. 'Don't fraternise. Don't look at women. Don't go into cemeteries. Don't go into mosques.'" The Russians' contempt for their local allies, the Afghan army, sounded just like that of British squaddies. "Many are cowards. If the ghosts shoot, the army runs away," said Igor as he recalled asking one Afghan soldier what he would do when his conscript service ended. "He said he'd join the ghosts. They paid better."

Nato's war aims echo the Soviets' – prop up a modernising and secular government against the threat from fundamentalist tyranny. The Soviet advantage was that they were operating in an age when nation-building by foreigners was in vogue. The Kremlin did not have to fall back on the claim that terrorism had to be stopped in Kabul in order to keep it from the streets of Moscow.

The big difference, so far, is that after years of remorseless losses the Soviet leadership realised the war was unwinnable. Mikhail Gorbachev tried talking to the enemy to form a coalition Afghan government (shades of the current "Do we talk to the Taliban?" debate), but when they and their western backers refused, he pulled out anyway. Does Obama have the sense to do the same? In January 1989, six weeks before the Russians completed their withdrawal, I wrote in this newspaper: "The Soviet invasion was an outrage which the majority of the world's nations rightly condemned ... But the manner of their departure has been nothing but honourable ... What led to the U-turn was a combination of factors: the political mistakes of their Afghan allies [in 2009 read "the corrupt Karzai government"], awareness that the entry of Soviet troops had turned a civil war into a holy crusade, and recognition that the mujahideen could not be defeated. It required a new leadership in Moscow to accept what Russians had privately known for months."

Yuri put it graphically: "It wasn't a Soviet-Afghan war. It's a civil war. A powerful country like ours can't be defeated. If we had sent in more men, it would have been outright occupation or genocide. We thought it was better to leave."