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How Afghanistan became the graveyard of the Russian empire

A Soviet tank patrols Kabul airport in 1980

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979 they thought they were in for an easy victory. But they underestimated the power of the resistance, writes Dave Crouch

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In the early 1990s a common sight in the Moscow metro was young men in military uniform begging for money. They had no legs. These were some of the victims of Russia's disastrous occupation of Afghanistan.

It began on Christmas Eve 1979 and finished when the last Soviet troops retreated into Uzbekistan just over nine years later.

At a conservative estimate more than 15,000 Soviet troops died in the war. They killed half a million Afghans, maimed many more, and turned millions into refugees.

The Soviet Union threw its bombers, napalm, tanks, landmines and helicopters at the Afghan guerilla army, the Mujahadeen, but was still forced out.

Its defeat marked the beginning of the end of the USSR's military power and allowed mass national movements to pull the empire apart.

The Russian defeat in Afghanistan has haunted US and British military leaders. As a US army major wrote in 2005, "Whatever we decide to do, we must not follow the bear into those woods."

But 20 years after the Soviet pullout, the size of the Nato contingent in Afghanistan has grown to equal the number of Russian troops. Does the same fate await them?

Western leaders argue that their war is different to that of the Russians – that US and Nato forces have significant local support among those opposed to the Taliban.

But the Russians also had a puppet government that gave a civilian face to their brutal invasion.

And just like the US, Russia first entered Afghanistan with a small force and limited aims, and became embroiled in a conflict that spiralled beyond their control.

The Russians stepped in to prop up an unpopular Communist government that had seized power 18 months before.

The government was on the verge of collapse – a situation that threatened to bring a wave of Islamic resistance in the southern republics of the USSR.

Russian special forces installed their puppet Babrak Karmal as president. They occupied the main cities and set about training an Afghan army to keep control.

The Russians already had a presence in Afghanistan – which they thought gave them an advantage.

They had enjoyed extensive trade with the country since the 1930s, while Soviet military and economic advisers had been a constant feature since the 1950s. They had built most of the country's roads.

Yet resistance to the Soviet invasion flared immediately.

On the night of 23 February 1980, almost the entire population of Kabul protested against the arrival of Soviet troops by climbing onto the rooftops and chanting, "God is great". Soon the Soviets found themselves facing a people in revolt.

Soviet generals pleaded for more troops. The head of the army, Nikolai Ogarkov, said the planned ceiling on troops numbers of 115,000 was "reckless" – he wanted five times as many. But he was denied.

Instead the Russians believed massive firepower would win the war. They brought the entire terrifying repertoire of an industrial superpower's military technology to bear on the resistance.

But it didn't work. Outside the cities the Soviet troops were in constant danger and exposed to effective attacks by the highly mobile guerrilla resistance fighters.

Provoke

Soviet armoured columns, defended by aircraft, would venture out into the countryside to destroy resistance strongholds – in the process inflicting huge damage on the civilian population and their crops.

This in turn would provoke more Afghans to support the resistance.

During an offensive in 1984, for example, the Soviets destroyed all the suburbs and villages within 20km to the west of the city of Herat.

Having cleared the area of Mujahadeen, they withdrew, and the resistance soon returned.

This mirrors what the US and British troops are doing today. The troops refer to it as "mowing the lawn" – as fast as you kill the resistance, it grows back up again.

Talk of "winning hearts and minds" is a sham. Last month general Stanley McChrystal, the commander of US and other Nato forces in Afghanistan, issued a set of guidelines to his troops that admitted "we sow the seeds of our own demise" by killing civilians, whose relatives then take up arms.

Outside their bases, occupation troops are vulnerable. Every month hundreds of cargo trucks are destroyed by the Taliban as they try to bring in supplies by road.

Like the US today, the Soviets tried to create an army of Afghans to do the fighting for them. It was some 150,000 strong.

But the Afghans didn't trust the Soviets. They felt that they were ordered to do the most dangerous fighting and were given inferior equipment and training. Russian racism towards them fuelled the animosity.

As a result there was considerable sympathy for the resistance within the Afghan army, which often fed valuable intelligence to the Mujahadeen.

The Soviet army consisted of conscripts who lived in dreadful circumstances.

During the nine years of occupation, some 650,000 Russians saw active service. Of those, nearly three-quarters were wounded or incapacitated by serious illness such as hepatitis, dysentery, malaria or typhus.

It was a prize for soldiers to seize sleeping bags or boots from the resistance, because their own were so shoddy. They were told they were fighting for high ideals against an evil enemy, but they soon discovered they were up against poor, proud farmers who were simply defending their way of life.

As a result, morale in the army was abysmal. Drug and alcohol abuse were rife, rape and violent crime were common.

Officers saw serving in Afghanistan as a poisoned chalice – victory was impossible, and they knew they would be blamed for the inevitable defeat.

By 1983 the Soviet press had only reported six Russian casualties – the actual figure was over 6,000 dead and 10,000 wounded.

But the huge number of conscripts in the Soviet army meant that despite the media blackout the word began to spread that young men were being sent to die in a brutal, meaningless war.

Families took desperate measures to prevent their sons being sent to fight.

US military writers looking back on the Soviet defeat all agree that the Russians lost the will to win.

This is what they call the "paradox of asymmetric conflict".

It is a “paradox” because on the face of it a military superpower should always defeat an impoverished enemy. But in reality this is not the case.

Battle

The war was “asymmetric” because it meant much less to the Russian population than it did to the Afghans, for whom it was a matter of life or death – a total war.

The same is true of the Americans today. As a result, the Afghans are much less likely to lose faith in their battle than are the British or US.

The methods that the technologically inferior guerilla resistance fighters were forced to employ also meant that they never presented themselves for set piece battles with the occupiers. Instead they wear them down with ambushes and home-made bombs.

And for the Soviet government in the 1980s other considerations became more important.

The Russian economy was collapsing and there was international outcry over what they were doing in Afghanistan.

At home there was dangerous disillusionment with the Soviet system. The political and economic costs of staying in Afghanistan became too high.

Some argue that US support for the Mujahadeen was a crucial factor in Russia’s defeat.

They point to the provision of advanced Stinger anti-aircraft rockets in 1986 as a turning point in the war.

But even before the resistance was supplied with these missiles, it had shot down or destroyed hundreds of helicopters and tanks.

One of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s first moves in 1985 was to find out from his generals if the war could be won – they told him no. The Soviet defeat was about politics, not technology.

Afghans have repeatedly proven themselves to be fierce fighters, particularly when confronting invaders. They repeatedly defeated the British during the 19th century when Britain was the world’s dominant military power.

They routed the Soviets during the 1980s when the Soviet Union was the world’s second most dominant military power.

As the first US bombs were falling on Afghanistan after 9/11, a CIA chief warned, “The US must proceed with caution – or end up on the ash heap of Afghan history.”