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THE SOVIET APPLICATION OF OPERATIONAL ART DURING THE AFGHANISTAN CONFLICT

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Exercise Solo Flight

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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Maj M.J. Reekie

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INTRODUCTION

By 1979, the Soviet Armed Forces possessed a mature and combat proven theory of operational art. This theory was uniquely shaped by the Soviet way of war and Communist political dogma. The depth and proven effectiveness of Soviet operational art was considerable and very mature. Despite having watched the American counter-insurgency experience in Vietnam with great interest, the Soviets lacked an irregular warfare doctrine of their own. Instead, operational theory had been developed to face the greatest threats to the Soviet Union in Europe. The experience and success of the Second World War reinforced the perceived correctness of this doctrine. Soviet political and military leaders assessed an existential threat to the Soviet Union which was as great during the Cold War as it had been immediately following the 1917 revolution. Consequently, the Soviet Armed Forces employed a military doctrine designed to counter the greatest perceived threat, total war along the Soviet frontier. A crucial component of this doctrine was the theory of *Deep Operations*. Marshal M.N. Tukhachevskii, Chief of the Soviet General Staff following the Soviet Civil War and the principle *Deep Operations* theorist, implemented doctrine such that, “the enemy should be immobilized to the full depth of his disposition, surrounded, and destroyed.”¹ *Deep Operations* was designed to project shock, fragmentation, simultaneity and momentum in a high intensity war against a peer adversary.

How was Soviet operational art applied in Afghanistan and did its core tenets and mature doctrine apply to an unconventional war? This essay will show that despite its proven effectiveness during the Second World War, analysis of the Afghan campaign demonstrates that *Deep Operations* was designed with too narrow a view of conflict. Moreover, the Afghan campaign struggled to effectively apply key tenets of the doctrine; shock, fragmentation, simultaneity, and momentum.

Despite being unsuitable for the Afghan conflict, the doctrine did not preclude limited operational successes, particularly within the invasion and withdrawal phases of the campaign and through the

¹Mikhail N. Tukhachevskii, “What is New in the Development of Red Army Tactics,” In *The Soviet Way of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1982), 58.

application of operational creativity. This paper will outline the development and characteristics of Soviet operational art and provide a background of the Afghan situation and war aims. It will then examine the campaign by phase. Finally, it will analyze the application of operational theory by its four principal tenets, shock, fragmentation, simultaneity, and momentum in order to determine the applicability of the theory for irregular warfare. The full analysis of the Afghan conflict will demonstrate that despite its proven effectiveness during conventional high intensity conflict, Soviet operational art failed to fully prepare commanders for operations in a complex asymmetric environment.

SOVIET OPERATIONAL ART

In the field of operational art, our military theory structured the conduct of an operation on the deep strike against the enemy, achieved by means of joint use of combat arms and types of weapons,[...]. The reliable strike against the entire operational depth expressed the main idea of our theory of operational art.

-G. Isserson, "The Development of the Theory of Soviet Operational Art in the 1930s"²

Origins

Modern Soviet operational art originated in the 1920s and 30s although the idea of the operational level of war pre-dated the Bolshevik Revolution. The Russo-Japanese War exemplified the inept handling of large bodies of fighting men and groups of armies in a single theatre, leading theorists to postulate the operational level as necessary for linking strategic objectives with tactical actions.³⁴ Poor leadership and command and control (C2) issues continued to plague the Imperial Army during the First World War. The rapid and sweeping socio-political change which occurred following October 1917 set the conditions for a dramatic shift in both army leadership and war fighting theory.⁵ Central to these changes were new ideas relating to the nature of modern conventional warfare and the existential threat posed to the fledgling

²G. Isserson, "The Development of the Theory of Soviet Operational Art in the 1930s," in *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art 1927-1991: The Documentary Basis* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1995),49.

³William C. Fuller Jr, "Commentary" in *Transformation in Russian and Soviet Military History* (Washington, DC: United States Air Force Academy, 1990), 76-77.

⁴Richard W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-1940* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 60-61.

⁵D.R Jones, "From Imperial to Red Army: The Rise and Fall of the Bolshevik Military Tradition," In *Transformation in Russian and Soviet Military History...*, 66.

Soviet state. This point of view was expressed succinctly by Soviet Marshal Frunze who stated, “Between our proletarian state and the rest of the bourgeois world, there can only be one condition – that of a long persistent desperate war to the death: a war which demands colossal tenacity, steadfastness, inflexibility, and a unity of will.”⁶ Soviet operational art was designed to suit total war, a condition which far exceeded the limited aims of the Afghan intervention. It also excluded the religious conviction which motivated Mujahedeen resistance, instead emphasizing political-economic issues which were less relevant to Afghans.

The Soviets emphasized the scientific approach to the study of war which was seen as being governed by a set of indisputable laws.⁷ These laws were the basis of doctrine and were identified as; the dependence of war on political goals, the importance of economic strength, the importance of state scientific potential, the importance of morale, the correlation of forces, and the influence of a state’s socio-economic order.⁸ It was from this basis that the Soviet operational art was developed. In Afghanistan, the failure to clearly understand the asymmetric nature of the correlation of forces resulted in impacts on morale, the national economy, and ultimately the geo-political influence of the Soviet Union.⁹ More relevant to its application in a dynamic theatre, the new operational art was intended to be highly mobile. Unfortunately, this manoeuvre was intended for a contiguous battlespace, setting conditions for frustration in Afghanistan.

Offensive manoeuvre was interpreted as the dominant form of modern warfare based upon lessons learned from the Russian Civil War.¹⁰ Technological advances, especially mechanization and the

⁶M. Frunze, “Edinaia prepodavaniia taktiki v 1918-1928 gg.” P 56-64 Quoted in Jacob W. Kipp, “Origins of Soviet Operational Art,” In *Transformation in Russian and Soviet Military History...*, 102.

⁷A. Golubev, “Was Our Military Theory in the 1920s Turned to the Past?” in *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art 1927-1991: The Documentary Basis...*, 57.

⁸William P. Baxter, *The Soviet Way of Warfare* (London, Oxford, Washington, New York, Beijing, Frankfurt, San Paulo, Sydney, Tokyo, and Toronto: Brassey’s Defence Publishers, 1986), 9-10.

⁹Anthony Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble: Afghanistan’s Role in the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Novato, California: Presido Press, 1993), 185-198.

¹⁰David R. Stone, “The Russian Civil War, 1917-1921” in *The Military History of the Soviet Union* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).20-22.

rise of airpower, were incorporated into the design of the new Soviet operational art form. The operational level was defined as being the *army* and *front (army group)*, strata at which combined arms and airpower could be synchronized.¹¹ Embracing mechanization and airpower were of paramount importance to the defence of the young revolution and would leave a lasting impact on the Soviet conduct of war.¹² A furious debate between a doctrine of annihilation and a safer policy of attrition raged between Soviet theoreticians in the 1930s. A.A. Svechin, a former officer in the Imperial Army argued that attrition was better suited to the vast geography and military mass of the Soviet Union while Bolshevik General V.K. Triandafillov argued for annihilation, drawing much of his inspiration from British theorists J.F.C. Fuller and B. Liddell-Hart.¹³ While annihilation was determined to be more appropriate for state-on-state conflict, the Soviet prosecution of anti-Mujahedeen operations five decades after the debate more closely resembled attrition.

Deep Operations Theory

Marshal M.N. Tukhachevskii elaborated upon the ideas of both Svechin and Triandafillov and fathered the doctrine of *Deep Operations*. His theories organized the operational level into four primary groupings: the shock element, a holding group, a reserve, and an artillery group.¹⁴ The desired combined effects of *Deep Operations* were shock, fragmentation, simultaneity, and momentum.¹⁵ Tukhachevskii further insisted that commanders were creative in their application of the operational art, a component which would play a critical role in the conduct of the Afghan campaign.¹⁶ Parachute assaults and air support added depth to the battlefield, fragmenting a defending enemy and creating gaps through which

¹¹David M. Glantz, *Soviet Military Operational Art: In Pursuit of Deep Battle* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1991), 10.

¹²Jacob W. Kipp, "The Tsarist and Soviet Operational Art." in *The Evolution of Operational Art: From Napoleon to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 70.

¹³Aleksandr A. Svechin, "Strategy," In *The Soviet Way of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics...*, 37; and M.V. Zakharov, "Problems in Strategy and Operational Art in Soviet Military Works (1917-40)" in *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art 1927-1991: The Documentary Basis...*, 17.

¹⁴Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London and New York: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997), 188.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 211-218.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 236.

armoured and motorized forces could quickly exploit. The maintenance of tempo was ensured by the echeloning of forces and massive fires which would overwhelm the adversary's capacity to regroup and reorient. These ideas were codified in the 1936 *Field Regulations*, although Tukhachevskii along with Svechin and Trianfillov subsequently fell victim to Stalin's 1936-1937 purges.¹⁷ The loss of these eminent figures as well as their ideas cost Stalin severely during the Russo-Finnish War and the early stage of the Second World War. The rediscovery and implementation of *Deep Operations* theory following the Battle of Stalingrad proved beyond doubt the effectiveness of Tukhachevskii's theory during the stunning Soviet counter-offensive of 1944-1945 where the full effects of Soviet shock and momentum overwhelmed the battle hardened Wehrmacht.¹⁸ *Deep Operations* was imminently well suited for massive mechanized combat on the steppes, but was never intended for either the terrain or the type of conflict which the Soviet Army encountered in Afghanistan. Despite the specific scope of *Deep Operations* theory, it found renewed importance during the latter decades of the Cold War due to the threat presented by NATO.

Rebirth of Operational Theory

Following the end of the Second World War, Soviet operational art and conventional forces diminished in relevance in a Cold War which was dominated by nuclear deterrence. By the 1970s, Soviet nuclear numerical superiority and the search for a flexible alternative to *Mutually Assured Destruction* set conditions for a rebirth of the operational art and *Deep Operations* theory.¹⁹ This rebirth was confirmed in an article penned by Marshal N. Ogarkov, extolling the virtues of the theory and signaling a new importance on operational creativity.²⁰ True to its original purpose, the Soviet Army's re-emphasis on

¹⁷Mikhail N. Tukhachevskii, "What is New in the Development of Red Army Tactics," In *The Soviet Way of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics...*, 56-59; and Kliment Ye Voroshilov, "The Base Traitors of the Socialist Motherland Are Unmasked and Crushed," In *The Soviet Way of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics...*, 70-71.

¹⁸Robert N. Watt, "Feeling the Full Force of a Four Front Offensive: Re-Interpreting the Red Army's 1944 Belorussian and L'Vov-Peremshyl Operations," In *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 21 (2008): 675.

¹⁹David M. Glantz, "The Intellectual Dimension of Soviet (Russian) Operational Art," In *The Operational Art: Developments in the Theories of War* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 137.

operational art was for the specific focus of fighting large, state-on-state war against technologically advanced adversaries and not for irregular warfare. This was highlighted by the development of modern tanks, APCs, and aircraft during the 1970s and a renewed emphasis on offensive mechanized operations.²¹ Despite the resurgence in the study of the operational art during this period, the total war focus of *Deep Operations* left Soviet officers largely unprepared for challenges in Afghanistan. The Afghan Mujahedeen represented a unique adversary: irregular by virtue of not representing a state, employing unconventional guerilla tactics, and asymmetric relative to Soviet forces.

Designed during a period of extremely limited command and control (C2) technology as well as the need to conform to a conscription system which produced a mixed quality of recruits and rapid turnover, *Deep Operations* demanded strict tactical rigidity and the complete adherence of orders up to the *division* level.²² Thorough study of force ratios resulted in cause-and-effect planning which demanded that units strictly adhered to operational direction. Tactical inflexibility was necessary during the rapid mobilization of the Second World War but led to numerous problems during the Afghan campaign. Soviet operations have been long criticized as simplistic and brutal, under valuing human life and applying mass to compensate for a lack of command brilliance.²³ These criticisms do not accurately reflect the Soviet prosecution of the offensive against Nazi Germany but do describe many of the flaws of the Afghan campaign due to the narrow scope of conflict envisioned by doctrine.

²⁰Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory...*, 167; and Jacob W. Kipp, "Operational Art and the Curious Narrative on the Russian Contribution: Presence and Absence Over the Last 2 Decades," In *The Russian Military Today and Tomorrow* (Carlisle: US Army War College, 2010), 259.

²¹M.I. Bezhrebtyy, "The Joint Operation – The Main Form of Modern Combat Actions: An Analysis of Historical Experience and Contemporaneity," In *The Evolution of Soviet Operational Art: 1927-1991: The Documentary Basis...*, 230.

²²Peter. G. Tsouras, *Fighting in Hell: The German Ordeal on the Eastern Front* (New York: Ivy Books, 1995), 43.

²³*Ibid.*, 59.

AFGHANISTAN OVERVIEW

Besides a common religion, Islam, only foreign invaders – from Alexander the Great to the British in the 19th century, and the Soviets in the 20th – have united the Afghans.

-Insight Magazine, 9 April 1990²⁴

Afghanistan was not the battlespace for which *Deep Operations* was designed nor were the Mujahedeen the threat which its theorists intended it to defeat. Critical assumptions regarding the resolve of the Afghan resistance and the superiority of Soviet force proved false and would affect the application of the operational art throughout the campaign.

Environment

A country of immense diversity in both its human and physical geography, Afghanistan is a patchwork of numerous ethnicities and complex terrain.²⁵ Despite having maintained a sizable military assistance contingent in the country, the complexity of the challenges which the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces (LCOSF) would face were not well understood prior to the invasion. There was no significant urban workers proletariat which had been a prerequisite for communism in Eastern Europe. The Afghan communists, who had seized power by means of a coup, were both unpopular and fractured. Total communist party membership accounted for less than one half of one percent of the national population.²⁶ The despotic leadership and secular policies of President Taraki alienated Afghans and offended deeply religious elements of Islamic society.²⁷ The defence of Islam consequently became the unifying force for the Afghan resistance. The Soviet Politburo feared that Afghan communism and Soviet

²⁴In: Mohammed Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *The Battle for Afghanistan: The Soviet Versus The Mujahedeen During the 1980s* (Barnsley, UK: Pen and Sword Military, 2007), 128.

²⁵Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion in Perspective* (Stanford, USA: Hoover International Studies, 1985), 1-8

²⁶J. Bruce Armstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (Washington: National Defense University, 1986), 34-39.

²⁷Joseph J. Collins, *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan: A Study in the Use of Force in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Lexington, USA and Toronto: Lexington Books, 1986), 4.

regional influence were threatened both by Taraki's leadership and by the growing insurgency.²⁸ Lacking modern infrastructure and rich in complex terrain which ranged from the mountain peaks of the Hindu Kush to the arid deserts of the south, Afghanistan was ill suited to Soviet military equipment and an operational concept which emphasized mechanized forces.²⁹ In addition to these physical trials, the military intervention would challenge the cognitive framework of Soviet grand strategy and military science.

Soviet Strategic Aims

Soviet foreign policy identified three types of war in which the state could engage; the defence of the communist commonwealth against a capitalist attack, the provision of assistance to another nation against imperialism, and internal class war (civil war).³⁰ These 'just war' types had been defined by V.I. Lenin and remained extant guidance for policy decisions throughout the existence of Soviet communist rule. The Soviet military intervention did not accurately reflect any of these categories, and Soviet forces found themselves oppressors instead of liberators.³¹ Incorrect policy assumptions led to flawed strategic goals which focused on increasing popular support for the Communist regime and rapidly handing over stability operations to Afghan forces, all while avoiding any significant Soviet casualties.³² As the grueling nine year campaign would demonstrate, the level of resistance to communism and foreign intervention was grossly underestimated and the competence of the Afghan military misjudged. It was

²⁸Anthony Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble: Afghanistan's Role in the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (Novato, USA: Presido Press, 1993), 42-44; and A.Z. Hilali, "The Soviet Penetration into Afghanistan and the Marxist Coup," *In Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 18 (2005): 678

²⁹Scott R. McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan* (London, Oxford, Washington and New York: Brassey's (UK), 1991), 18-23.

³⁰V.I. Lenin, "War and Revolution," *In The Soviet Art of War: Doctrine, Strategy, and Tactics* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1982), 24-26; and Ghulam Dagastir Wardak, Graham Hall Turbiville, Jr. and Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Voroshilov Lectures: Materials from the Soviet General Staff Academy, Volume 1: Issues of Soviet Military Strategy* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1989), 263-264.

³¹Lester W. Grau. "Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *In Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 20 (2007): 237.

³²McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan...*, 9; and Lester W. Grau, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (London and Portland: Frank Cass Publishers, 1996), xvii.

with this policy and strategic guidance that the operational art was applied. On Christmas Eve, 1979, lead elements of the Soviet 40th Army were deployed into Afghanistan, unaware that this act would be the start of a grueling nine year war which would test the Soviet Army and challenge its doctrinal foundation.³³

THE AFGHAN CAMPAIGN

Combat Experience in the Republic of Afghanistan confirms the basic tenants of our directive documents. However, in addition, it confirms the need to reassess some of them which touch on forces and means in special circumstances.

-Frunze Academy Commentary, *The Bear went over the Mountain*

Broadly speaking, the Soviet-Afghan War can be divided into three phases; the initial invasion, the conduct of the counter-insurgency campaign, and the withdrawal.³⁴ While both the initial invasion and the withdrawal demonstrated superb operational planning and execution, the period between 1982 and 1986 identified the shortcomings of Soviet operational art in irregular warfare.

Initial Invasion (1979-1981)

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a textbook example of the application of *Deep Operations*, combining the shock of a large ground invasion with deep penetration and the simultaneous seizure of key infrastructure by air assault forces. As motor rifle regiments expanded Soviet physical control over territory, information operations explained the incursion as a response to requested assistance to protect socialism and improve security.³⁵ Thorough operational security was maintained leading up to the invasion, and the deception provided by propaganda broadcasts dislocated potential opponents within the regime until Amin had been replaced. Soviet advisors operating under the premise of winterization preparations removed tank batteries and restricted fuel for Afghan armoured divisions in the Kabul

³³The Russian General Staff, *Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 31.

³⁴Grau, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan...*, xxix.

³⁵McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan...*, 5-8.

region, ensuring that no resistance would be offered by factions within the army.³⁶ While the invasion itself was superbly executed and stunned the world, not all operational goals were achieved.

The Soviets had hoped that their efforts to secure key regime infrastructure would free up the Afghan forces to combat and defeat the resistance movement. This did not occur due to the weak morale, massive desertions, and poor training within the regime's army and caused the Soviets themselves to assume the brunt of the fighting.³⁷ The Soviets had miscalculated popular discontent for the communist government and unknowingly strengthened support for the insurgency by invading. Further, an effort to win over Afghan support by filling the ranks of 40th Army with ethnic Kazaks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen from Soviet Central Asia backfired due to an under appreciation for ethnic tensions within Afghanistan, furthering the popular view of the invasion as an effort to reinforce northern factions and undermining potential support in the Pashtun south.³⁸

The invasion was a masterstroke which combined the elements of shock, deception, simultaneous action, and rapid force projection. It effectively combined the proven tenets of *Deep Operations* theory with the framework established in Hungary and Czechoslovakia for rapidly repressing anti-socialist revolution where the swift application of mass had been effective in shocking and dislocating anti-regime resistance.³⁹ Despite the operational success of the invasion of Afghanistan, planning assumptions which overestimated the efficiency of local regime forces and underestimated the will of the population to resist ultimately worked against the Soviet Union. Instead of a brief intervention which would reestablish Afghanistan as a stable satellite state, the invasion committed the Red Army to a protracted guerilla war.

³⁶ Arnold, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion in Perspective...*, 94.

³⁷ McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan...*, 10.

³⁸ Armstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation...*, 169.

³⁹ Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble: Afghanistan's Role in the Fall of the Soviet Empire...*, 58.

Conduct of the Counter-Insurgency Campaign (1982-1986)

Before analyzing the operational art during the counter-insurgency phase of the Afghan campaign it is necessary to re-emphasize the Soviet classification of the operational level. Unlike the West's flexible interpretation of the operational level as the connection between strategy and tactics, the Soviets specifically linked the operational level to the conduct of *army* and *front* combat actions. Given the nature of the counter-insurgency, some historians have questioned the relevance of the operational level writ large during this stage.⁴⁰ Certainly, the inflexibility and resistance to adaptation of the Soviet tactical level was a major factor during this period where the bulk of combat actions were conducted by *companies* and *battalions*. This is not to say, however, that the operational art was irrelevant. Over 220 operations were conducted by 40th Army in Afghanistan although commanders came to the recognition that although an operation may be planned and led at the *army* level, it would like be executed at the *division* or *regimental* level, frequently by an ad hoc composition of units drawn from numerous force generators.⁴¹

Between 1982 and 1986, the LCOSF conducted numerous combined operations with Afghan security forces. Following the success of the initial invasion, the bulk of Mujahedeen forces withdrew from populated and agricultural areas seeking refuge in remote mountainous terrain. In classic insurgent fashion, they established an external support base in Pakistan and received the support of external agents in the form of fellow Islamic nations and the West. Soviet ground equipment, designed for conventional combat in Europe, proved of limited value in the high elevations of the mountains, limiting both the effectiveness of direct and indirect fires as well as mobility. To counter the environment, additional light infantry formations were deployed to 40th Army which also received a massive increase in helicopters and supporting aircraft.⁴² Mortars, air assaults, attack helicopters and dismounted movement were all adapted as means of reorienting traditional Soviet combat methods. Less innovative and more brutal methods

⁴⁰McMichael, "The Soviet-Afghan War." in *The Military History of the Soviet Union...*, 268.

⁴¹The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost...*, 73.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 42.

included the use of chemical weapons and mines to dislocate insurgents from their rural support areas. The imprecise application of force, however, resulted in strengthened support for the Mujahedeen, particularly in the massive refugee camps which housed the displaced population.⁴³ The requirement to defend key infrastructure and lines of communication resulted in approximately 40% of the LCOSF tied to terrain and unavailable for offensive operations.⁴⁴ This created a separation between security and counter-insurgency forces, one which largely saw motor rifle forces guarding territory while an insufficient number of light forces pursued the Mujahedeen.⁴⁵ By 1986, it was clear to the Politburo that that military force alone would not defeat the Afghan insurgency and orders were issued to shift efforts to capacity building and the withdrawal of Soviet forces.

Withdrawal and Capacity Building (1986-1989)

By 1986 it was clear that military efforts alone would be insufficient to quell resistance. Soviet priority was realigned to support Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) government capacity building. The total strength of the Afghan security forces was brought up to over 300,000, creating a combined Soviet-DRA counter-insurgent to population ratio of 26:1,000, one of the highest ratios in any modern campaign.⁴⁶ Information operations and a comprehensive approach were implemented through the addition of specialist *Agitprop* units and the formation of a Soviet intra-governmental task force known as the *Operations Group*.⁴⁷ These adaptations were used effectively to complement classic operational art and set necessary security conditions for the withdrawal of the LCOSF and a hand-over to DRA control. Incorporating these modifications, Operation Magistral was conducted between November 1987 and January 1988. Magistral was the largest operation conducted in the Afghan theatre since the

⁴³McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan...*, 108-111.

⁴⁴Yousaf and Adkin, *The Battle for Afghanistan: The Soviet Versus The Mujahedeen During the 1980s...*, 46-47.

⁴⁵McMichael, *Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan...*, 66.

⁴⁶Anton Minkov and Gregory Smolyne, "4D Soviet Style: Defence, Development, Diplomacy and Disengagement in Afghanistan During the Soviet Period Part II: Social Development," In *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 23 (2010): 324.

⁴⁷Anton Minkov and Gregory Smolyne, "4D Soviet Style: Defence, Development, Diplomacy and Disengagement in Afghanistan During the Soviet Period Part I: State Building," In *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 23 (2010): 401.

initial invasion and incorporated both light and mechanized formations to break the siege of Khost.⁴⁸ It involved numerous air assaults and was both well planned and executed. While Operation Magistal reflected many of the traditional *Deep Operations* principles, its planners incorporated lessons learned regarding the specialized requirements of complex terrain and unconventional warfare.⁴⁹ Following the completion of Operation Magistral, the final withdrawal of Soviet forces also combined traditional elements of the operational art with flexibility to conform to changes in the security situation. This ensured an orderly withdrawal and solid handover plan to Afghan security forces.

While the application of the traditional form of Soviet operational art was highly successful during the invasion, it was largely irrelevant to the counter-insurgency operations. The operational creativity characteristic of *Deep Operations* allowed for the crafting of innovative theatre specific modifications, however, the core principles of the theory proved nearly impossible for the LCOSF to achieve. The next section will analyze the fundamentals of Soviet operational art as they were applied during the Afghan campaign.

APPLICATION OF THE OPERATIONAL ART

[O]ne must visualize the sequence of disruption of the enemy's combat dispositions – in other words one must combine the front and the power of the combined arms strike with the successive movement by bounds and breakout into the area whose seizure signifies the defeat of the enemy. Synergetic command and control must ensure synchronization between the forces involved at all stages of the fighting.

-M.N. Tukhachevskii, "Novye voprosy voiny"⁵⁰

The LCOSF struggled to apply the *Deep Operations* tenets of shock, fragmentation, simultaneity and momentum. The mechanized orientation of Soviet forces and insufficient light forces reduced the effectiveness of shock in complex terrain. The decentralized Mujahedeen network proved highly resilient

⁴⁸Grau. "Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," In *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*., 246; and Lester W. Grau. "The Battle for Hill 3234: Last Ditch Defense in the Mountains of Afghanistan," In *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 24 (2011): 219.

⁴⁹A.N. Shishkov, "An Airborne Battalion Seizes the Satukandau Pass," in *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan*..., 62.

⁵⁰Naveh, In *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory*..., 235

to fragmentation. Simultaneity was rarely achieved due to the centralized nature of Soviet C2.⁵¹ Momentum could not be achieved because of the requirement for massive garrison forces which resulted from the desire to control terrain, a feature of conventional warfare. These failures were the result of the singular focus of Soviet doctrine on high intensity war and reliance on cybernetic planning models, elements which had served the Soviets so well in the past.⁵² Commanders sought creative means to compensate for doctrinal shortcomings, but these means were insufficient given the state-on-state focus of the extant operational art. Despite the limitations of the doctrine, the LCOSF still attempted to apply elements of *Deep Operations* throughout the campaign

Shock

While used effectively during the opening phase of the war, maintaining operational shock proved difficult for the LCOSF. Defined as the combination of high tempo, firepower, and maneuver, the Soviet Army traditionally achieved shock through the combination of massive artillery barrages and armoured forces.⁵³ This had been a key characteristic of the Soviet conduct of the Second World War. Unfortunately for Soviet operational commanders, neither tanks nor artillery were well suited for the Afghan theatre requiring new and innovative techniques. Although *Deep Operations* explicitly emphasized the combined use of armour and indirect fires to achieve shock, Soviet commanders effectively improvised modifications to suit the Afghan battlespace. The combination of rapid air assaults and attack aviation was adopted by the LCOSF to achieve this *Deep Operations* tenet.⁵⁴ Despite these innovations, both aircraft and light infantry forces were in high demand and under resourced for much of the conflict indicting a lack of foresight caused by the operational focus on high intensity mechanized war. Firepower was often used to mitigate these shortages, evident in the frequent massing of large

⁵¹A.P. Pivovarenko, “Combing the city of Bamian and its outlying towns during the course of a raid,” in *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan...*, 13.

⁵²Antoine Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 209.

⁵³Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory...*, 190.

⁵⁴The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost...*, 78-79.

artillery and multiple rocket launching systems.⁵⁵ While true to *Deep Operations* doctrinal concepts, the use of massed indirect fires proved largely ineffective against dispersed guerilla squads sheltered by complex terrain. While shock was used effectively during the initial invasion and large scale operations such as Magistral, it proved much harder to achieve during the smaller scale combat which typified the second phase of the war. Although localized shock could be achieved at a tactical level, the inability to maintain massed forces at an operational scale was a distinguishing feature of the of the war.

Fragmentation

Complimenting shock action, *Deep Operations* theory calls for a combination of deep strike air and ground fires as well as airborne assaults to fragment the enemy and keep him from concentrating in an effective fashion.⁵⁶ The LCOSF was unable to effectively apply this *Deep Operations* tenet against an enemy who, by its very nature, was already fragmented. The numerous guerilla factions, the irregular nature of the Mujahedeen fighters, and the lack of a contiguous battlespace minimized key nodes which could be targeted by deep strikes. While both air support and air assault forces were used extensively during the campaign, their main employment was as manoeuvre forces given the lack of available targets for fragmentation. In their stead, the LCOSF sought to employ special forces as well as Afghan KHAD special police. The employment of special forces in a fragmenting role is exemplified by an action which took place during March, 1987 where a SPETSNAZ platoon raided a critical Mujahedeen arms depot based on intelligence provided by KHAD. The operational level nature of this action is reflected by the fact that its execution was personally supervised by the Commander of the Turkestan Military District.⁵⁷ Further, KHAD agents acting under Soviet direction were used to infiltrate resistance networks on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. In addition to providing key information, these agents actively

⁵⁵The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost...*, 170.

⁵⁶Von Hardesty, "Roles and Missions: Soviet Tactical Air Power in the Second Period of the Great Patriotic War," In *Transformation in Russian and Soviet Military History...*, 161.

⁵⁷S. Yu. Pyatakov, "Assaulting Xadighar Canyon and seizing weapons and ammunition caches," in. *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan...*, 57.

worked to pit Mujahedeen groups against one another and create impressions that one faction was providing information on rival dispositions and intentions to Soviet forces.⁵⁸

While targeted direct actions and information manipulation proved useful, they did not achieve the level of fragmentation desired by *Deep Operations*. The fact that Mujahedeen leadership had a solid command and support base in Pakistan minimized the effect of LCOSF fragmentation operations. Peshawar was a safe haven for Mujahedeen leadership and the refugee camps on the Pakistani side of the frontier doubled as both sources of recruitment and training camps for the insurgency. Political restraints intended to limit the spread of the conflict prevented Soviet forces from kinetically targeting either the camps or Mujahedeen leadership once they had crossed the border. Further, that the insurgency was supported by foreign governments created strategic lines of communication which were outside of the active theatre.⁵⁹ Efforts to block internal lines of communication were largely unsuccessful due to the popular support afforded to the insurgency, the unreliability of Afghan allies and a lack of sufficient Soviet forces to both disrupt the insurgency and garrison Afghanistan. As a whole, efforts to fragment the Mujahedeen were unsatisfactory for the LCOSF and largely irrelevant against an enemy which was fundamentally asymmetric.

Simultaneity

Simultaneity refers to both the coordination of multiple axes and the combined effect of all arms cooperation.⁶⁰ Akin to the frustration which Soviet commanders felt trying to achieve fragmentation, their inability to achieve simultaneity at an operational level was largely a result of the asymmetry between the conventional Soviet Army and the irregular Mujahedeen. While the invasion itself was an operational masterstroke which synchronized the actions of multiple *divisions*, this *Deep Operations* principle was almost impossible to achieve after the transition to theatre wide counter-insurgency combat. There were

⁵⁸Armstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation...*, 267.

⁵⁹Yousaf and Adkin, *The Battle for Afghanistan: The Soviet Versus The Mujahedeen During the 1980s...*, 78-84.

⁶⁰Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory...*, 191.

some local successes which offer insight into how operational creativity was applied to create all-arms simultaneity in a non-contiguous battlespace. While the *army* was traditionally the element which synchronized combined arms activities, the dispersed nature in Afghanistan forced the Red Army to reallocate combined arms groupings to a much lower level than that set by doctrine. It was not unusual for *battalions* or even *companies* to receive attachments from different arms, often including engineers, armour, air defence, and air support control parties.⁶¹ While these sub-units are clearly tactical, the willingness of Soviet commanders to accept delegation down to these levels represents operational flexibility and creativity in attempting to solve an unorthodox problem.

While specific operations coordinated the effects of multiple tactical events across broad areas, the Soviet Army C2 network was challenged by complex terrain and often lost the ability to maintain effective situational awareness.⁶² This in turn impaired the operational commander's ability to maintain the necessary synchronization across a dynamic battlespace. As Soviet doctrine placed so much emphasis on the decision making authority of the operational level of war, the restraints on tactical initiative demanded by *Deep Operations* prevented rapid decision making. The fact that the Mujahedeen factions were largely dispersed and unsynchronized, also meant that they lacked a traditional centre of gravity, and thus provided no target against a conventional Soviet operational concept. Excepting the initial regime change and a modest level of tactical level combined arms cooperation, achieving operational simultaneity was elusive for Soviet commanders because of their conventional focus, centralized C2 system, and tactical rigidity.

Momentum

Momentum, or the maintenance of constant pressure, was also lost by the Soviet Army following the initial invasion. The allocation of such a massive portion of 40th Army to garrison duties severely

⁶¹The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost...*, 93-94.

⁶²S.Z. Zelenskiy, "Blocking and searching in the Arghandab River," In *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan...*, 17.

diminished the Soviet ability to maintain momentum.⁶³ This affected the grouping of specific counter-insurgency forces such as the SPETNAZ, airborne formations, and attack aviation, and garrison forces which were comprised principally of motorized infantry and armour. Given that such a vast quantity of the force was assigned guard duties for infrastructure and extended lines of communications, the LCOSF's ability to actively defeat the insurgency was handicapped by a lack of resources.⁶⁴ While the provision of security is of vital importance to counter-insurgency operations, security is principally intended to improve the living conditions of the local population. This was not the primary objective of Soviet security forces that were tasked to protect key regime infrastructure and essential supply routes. Effectively, this force protection orientation drained vital LCOSF resources needed for the counter-insurgency fight without providing the dividend which could have been rendered had garrison forces assumed a more population centric approach.

Attempts were made to regain lost momentum such as the large scale operations in the Panshir Valley; however, poor coordination and the low morale of accompanying DRA security forces often slowed tempo.⁶⁵ Operational security breaches by host nation forces also pre-empted the momentum of massed offensives, warning off the Mujahedeen and causing them to seek shelter or withdraw prior to commencement. Efforts to deny Mujahedeen momentum by restricting freedom of manoeuvre were successful, but the wide spread use of indiscriminate fires, anti-personnel mines, and chemical agents strengthened the resolve of the resistance and did not gain back lost Soviet momentum.⁶⁶ Due to the limited LCOSF manpower, momentum was the *Deep Operations* principle which was the most difficult to achieve during the Afghan campaign. The force protection posture assumed by the Soviet Army was tactically necessary, but denied them the ability to maintain consistent operational pressure.

⁶³Yousaf and Adkin, *The Battle for Afghanistan: The Soviet Versus The Mujahedeen During the 1980s...*, 46-47.

⁶⁴The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost.*, 149.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 77.

⁶⁶McMichael, "The Soviet-Afghan War." in *The Military History of the Soviet Union...*, 109.

Operational Creativity

Due to its design as a counter to a technologically advanced conventional threat, Soviet operational art as a whole was less than ideally suited for unconventional warfare in a non-contiguous environment. However, the Soviet theoretical embrace of operational creativity did pay dividends as traditional forms of warfare were adopted for the unique challenges of the Afghan environment. The efforts to improve whole-of-government collaboration, the addition of specialist civil-military and propaganda units, the decentralization of all arms groupings, and increasingly dynamic targeting procedures were all evidence of operational creativity.⁶⁷ Less creative approaches which dominated the counter-insurgency phase emphasized brutality verging on genocide, defaulting to the combat centric nature of achieving massive shock through firepower.⁶⁸ While scorched earth policies and programmes to target insurgent support bases were effective in reducing Mujahedeen freedom of manoeuvre, they had unintended consequences of strengthening resistance and further alienating the population. The strict Marxist dogma which lay at the root of both Soviet foreign policy and military theory made it difficult to relate the concept of socialist liberation on a people who neither desired it nor had a similar class construct. Vague strategic goals made operational assessment very difficult. While innovative solutions were implemented, Soviet patience often succumbed to frustration resulting in the application of unnecessary force. By 1986, it was clear to both Soviet strategic and operational leadership that these methods would not result in decisive victory.⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

The Soviet-Afghan War demonstrated the ultimate unsuitability of the Soviet version of operational art in an asymmetric setting. *Deep Operations* theory was both combat proven and deeply mature. Its tenets had proven decisive in the Second World War, and the Red Army was well educated,

⁶⁷Minkov and Smolyneec, "4D Soviet Style: Defence, Development, Diplomacy and Disengagement in Afghanistan During the Soviet Period Part 1: State Building," In *Journal of Slavic Military Studies...*, 309.

⁶⁸Arnold, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion in Perspective...*, 99.

⁶⁹The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost...*, 26-27.

trained, and equipped for high intensity mechanized war. Soviet operational theory was superbly suited to defeat a peer adversary in Europe. However, the application of shock, fragmentation, simultaneity, and momentum which had proven so effective against the Wehrmacht, seemed impossible to achieve against small bands of Mujahedeen which eluded decisive engagement and sought to dominate popular opinion rather than terrain. The success of the initial invasion was overshadowed by the steady deterioration of the security situation. By applying operational creativity, Soviet commanders were able to achieve some limited success including a renewed emphasis on air-land cooperation and information operations as well as the formulation of an integrated whole-of-government approach. Campaign analysis confirms that Soviet operational commanders that this creativity came too late in the campaign and that the guiding tenants of an operational concept designed for mechanized total war were insufficient to overcome the plethora of asymmetric challenges faced in Afghanistan. *Deep Operations* was developed for conditions which did not exist during the Afghan conflict and despite an impressive effort to modify its application to suit the theatre, Soviet operational art was ill suited for this campaign. The Soviet experience in Afghanistan offers many lessons on the application of operational art in a counter-insurgency campaign as well as the danger resident in doctrine which is too narrowly focused on a single portion of the spectrum of conflict. Given the rising challenges presented by hybrid warfare, radical ideologies, and Third World instability, the Soviet lessons from the Afghan conflict should be of great interest to all students and practitioners of the operational art.

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