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Defeating Guerrilla Logistics: Soviet Operation 'Trap' in Western Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

In preparation for withdrawing from Afghanistan, the Soviets targeted key guerrilla logistics trans-shipment depots located in remote, difficult-to-access regions. One of these was located on the Iranian border in the vicinity of Herat. The Soviet 40th Army and Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan launched a successful, hard-fought battle to take down this mountain fortress and destroyed large amounts of war stocks before withdrawing. It was a blow to guerrilla efforts, but was not decisive. Redundant guerrilla logistics networks were able to sustain the guerrilla effort following the battle.

When the Soviet Union entered Afghanistan in late December 1979, it was with a conventional army whose mission was to restore order in the ruling, badly fractured Afghan Communist party, replace the President/General Secretary with a more amenable leader, and prevent Pakistan and Iran from invading or interfering in Afghanistan. There was an ongoing, small-scale guerrilla war in Afghanistan, but the Soviet 40th Army went there to garrison cities and airfields, guard key infrastructure, and keep Afghanistan's neighbors at bay, thus enabling the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan to devote full attention to defeating the guerrillas (*Mujahideen*). Except for healing the rifts in the Communist Party of Afghanistan, the Soviet entry operation accomplished all this quickly and effectively. However, an unintended consequence of the Soviet entry into Afghanistan was the rapid growth of the guerrilla movement, which rallied Afghans against the atheistic foreigners and against the communist government of Afghanistan. It soon became apparent that the threat was not overt invasions by Pakistan and Iran but the burgeoning primarily rural resistance movement that the Afghan government was unable to suppress. The Soviet 40th Army was drawn inexorably into the fight against the Mujahideen. Pakistan and Iran were key players, but as the eventual provenance of guerrilla logistics, training camps, and political machinations.

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How does a modern military, primarily trained for high-speed maneuver warfare on a nuclear-threatened battlefield deal with an indigenous guerrilla force? The Soviet Red Army had defeated Nazi Germany and Imperialist Japan with superior operational planning and large-scale fire and maneuver. Following these instincts, the Soviet Army set out to smash a fly with a sledge hammer using large-scale operations against the scattered guerrilla bands. During the course of the war, the Soviet 40th Army conducted 220 independent operations (using only Soviet forces) and 400 combined operations (Soviet and Afghan forces).¹ Some of these operations (the incursion, Operation 'Magistral', and the withdrawal) were textbook operations. The bulk, however, were not. Guerrilla war is primarily fought with small-unit tactics, not with the massive shifting of men and machines of war. It is not so much about the temporary application of force as the long-term imposition and acceptance of ideology or belief.

It was not that the Russian and Soviet Army lacked experience in conducting and combating guerrilla war. Napoleon experienced a severe guerrilla problem when he invaded Russia. The Russian guerrilla effort was partly government-controlled and even more (and less effectively) freelance. In the 19th century, the Russians fought a long, successful counter-guerrilla effort in the Caucasus, particularly in Dagestan and Chechnya. The Russian Civil War was fought by small forces scattered over vast distances. Guerrillas fought for both sides and as free-booters. After the Civil War, the Soviets fought a successful counter-insurgency against the *Basmachi* Islamic guerrillas in Central Asia's Fergana Valley adjacent to Afghanistan. During World War II, the Soviets fielded the largest Partisan Army in world history. After World War II, the Soviets fought successful counter-guerrilla campaigns in Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Soviets taught and trained interested 'third world' students attending Soviet schools, particularly at Patrice Lumumba University, in the conduct of guerrilla warfare and followed up on their return to their homelands.²

Based on their history, why did many Soviet operations in Afghanistan not achieve their desired results? The Soviets ended up with some five and two-thirds division equivalents (124,000 personnel) of Soviet Ministry of Defense ground forces and another three brigades of Soviet KGB border forces in Afghanistan, but it was hard to pull together complete units for combat.³ Eighty-five percent of Soviet forces were tied down in securing roads, cities, facilities, base camps, and airfields. Maneuver forces had to be pulled from a variety of combat units that could not completely abandon their overall security duties to fight in an operation. Operations were necessarily composed of ad hoc forces assembled for a finite

¹The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. & ed. L. W. Grau and M. A. Gress, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 2002, p. 73.

²L. Grau and M. Gress (trans. & ed.), *The Red Army's Do-It-Yourself, Nazi-Bashing Guerrilla Warfare Manual*, Casemate, Philadelphia, 2011, pp. ix–xv.

³L. W. Grau, 'Securing the Borders of Afghanistan during the Soviet-Afghan War', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 28(2) (2015), pp. 414–428.

period of time. Once the operation achieved its mission and captured its objective, they did not have the forces to garrison the objective indefinitely. Once the Soviets left, the guerrillas returned. The guerrillas would readily abandon positions after a brief fight, knowing that they could soon return unchallenged or after a brief skirmish with a small garrison. Yet there was one objective that the guerrillas would stand and fight for and large-scale operations could prove effective against. That objective was large guerrilla trans-shipment depots. What were small bands of guerrillas doing with large logistics trans-shipment depots?

Smashing a fly with a sledge hammer was not working very well for the Soviets. The small guerrilla bands sidestepped the advancing Soviet and Soviet/Afghan operational forces or blended into the local populace. The guerrillas were local. The population supported the guerrillas, who were mostly neighbors and fellow tribesmen, with food, shelter, and medical care. They provided information on Soviet and Afghan government forces movements and activities in the region. To use Mao Tse-Tung's dictum, the guerrilla was a fish that swam in the ocean of the people. The Soviets decided that it was easier to drain the ocean than to catch the fish.

The Soviet 40th Army included a large complement of fighter-bomber, close-air-support and helicopter gunship aircraft. In addition, squadrons of Soviet bombers were stationed across the border in the Soviet Union in support of the 40th Army. Air power is quite useful when combatting a conventional invasion, but not so useful when fighting guerrillas one is unable to target. However, the villages, irrigation systems, farms, orchards, water sources, and rural peoples that constituted the guerrilla support base could be targeted. The Soviet Air Force began a campaign to destroy the rural economy and drive out the rural population. Afghanistan had a population of some 17 million. Over 5.5 million Afghans became refugees crowding into camps in Pakistan and Iran. Another 2.7 million became internal refugees crowding into the outskirts of Afghanistan's cities in an attempt to escape the Soviet Air Force. Orchards, wheat fields, vineyards, irrigation systems, and animal herds disappeared under aerial ordnance. Where possible, the Soviets bulldozed the sides of the roads out to 300 meters on both sides to protect their convoys from guerrilla RPG-7 antitank rockets. Afghan rural villages and agriculture crowded the sides of roadways before the bulldozing. Before the Soviet incursion, Afghanistan was a food-exporting nation. Now it could not feed itself.

The men moved the old people, women, and children into the refugee camps and returned to their neighborhoods to fight. The Mujahideen resistance was primarily rural and local. Their leaders were local — the police chief, the mayor, or a tribal elder. But now, it was difficult to always have enough to eat and drink, and if a guerrilla was wounded, it might be a two-week trip on mule back to get to a doctor. Weapons were ancient or captured, and ammunition resupply was difficult. The Soviets emplaced

minefields around their camps, so it was difficult to get close enough to use the weapons. Logistics was increasingly difficult for the guerrillas. The Mujahideen, who were used to living off the good will of the rural population, now had to transport rations as well as ammunition from Pakistan and Iran into Afghanistan.

Outside countries, such as the United States, Saudi Arabia, China, Iran, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates, began to supply the guerrillas with food, money, medical care, weapons, and ammunition. Getting these supplies to the hundreds of guerrilla bands was an immediate problem, since the guerrilla movement lacked a comprehensive structure, strategy, and central points of interface. Pakistan provided some organization through the formation of seven Afghan factions or parties. Iran followed suit with the formation of eight Afghan factions. Guerrilla bands now had to belong to one of these factions in order to receive aid. Pakistan and Iran funneled the aid exclusively through these factions (and played favorites, hoping to influence the eventual political outcome). The donor countries began providing mortars, recoilless rifles, heavy machine guns, and anti-aircraft weapons to the resistance. Pakistan and Iran provided training in the use of these new weapons.

The new weapons enabled the guerrillas to engage the Soviet and Afghan government forces at greater range and with greater effect. The main difficulty was that these weapons, and their ammunition, were heavy and hard to transport. Once the weapons ran out of ammunition, the weapons were useless until the guerrillas made a long trek back to Pakistan or Iran. The Mujahideen eventually responded by establishing a series of supply depots, transfer depots, and forward supply points inside Afghanistan. Guerrilla logistic convoys of pickup trucks, mules, and camels moved the supplies to these logistics bases. These logistics facilities made it easier to provision the Mujahideen, but these facilities also had to be defended. The Soviets now concentrated on finding and destroying the Mujahideen logistics facilities. The odds are stacked against a defending guerrilla force since the attacker has the initiative, armored vehicles, air power, and the bulk of artillery and fire power. The Mujahideen tried to offset this with the wise use of terrain and prepared defenses.⁴ The main guerrilla supply depot in Western Afghanistan was built in 1984 at Kokari-Sharshari — a mountain massif on the Iranian border.

Western Afghanistan During the Soviet-Afghan War

The original Soviet incursion into Afghanistan consisted of three divisions. The 5th Guards Motorized Rifle Division (GMRD) moved down the Western

⁴A. A. Jalali and L. W. Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War*, US Marine Corps, Studies and Analysis Division, Quantico, VA, DM-9807011, p. 998, xvii, and chapter 11, p. 1.

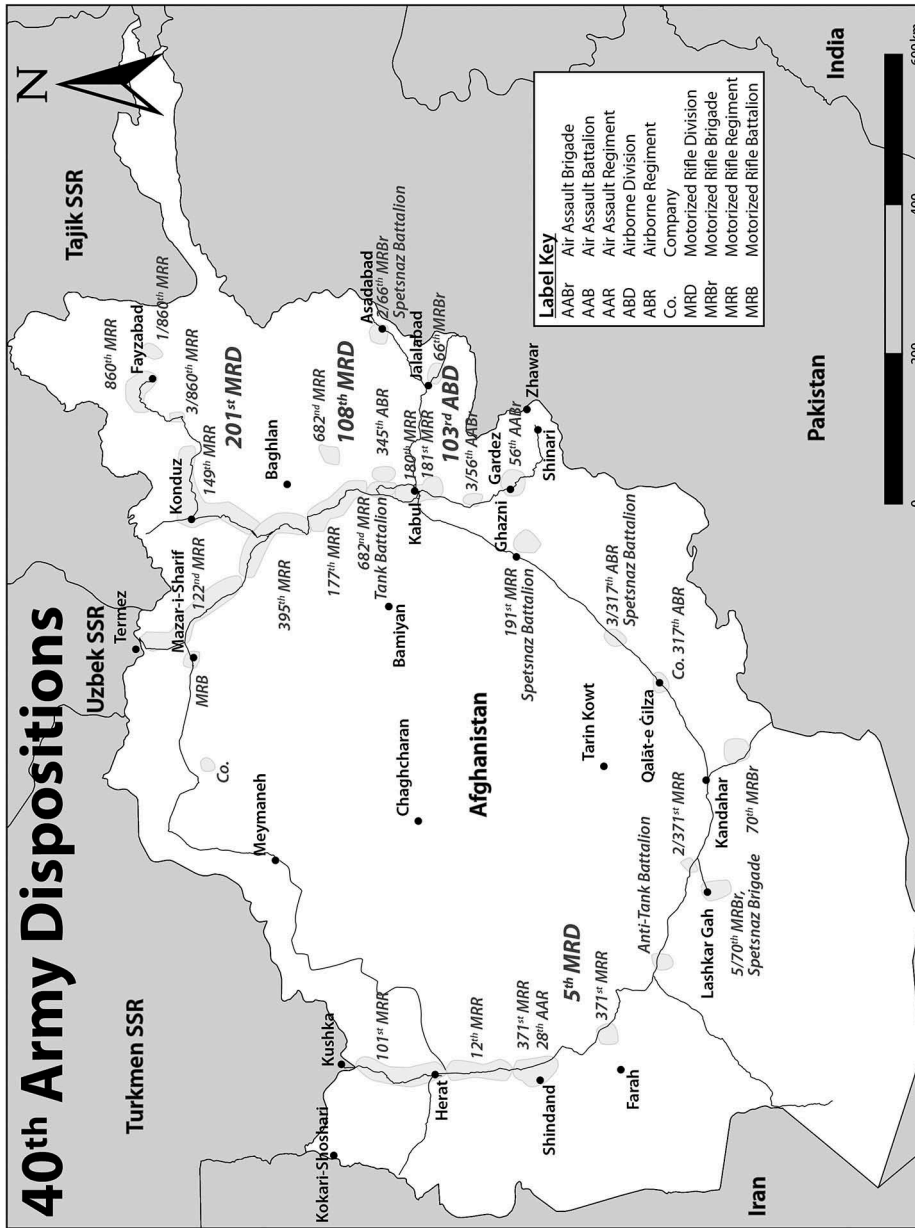


Figure 1. 40th Army Dispositions.
Note. Map created digitally by Charles K. Bartles of FMSO.

Corridor of the Ring Road from Kushka to Kandahar, garrisoning Herat, Shindand airbase, Farah, Delaram, and Gereshk. The 5th GMRD would be the primary Soviet force securing Western Afghanistan throughout the war. The 108th Guards Motorized Rifle Division moved down the Eastern Corridor to Kabul, while the 103rd Guards Airborne Division air-landed at Kabul and Bagram Airbases. Subsequent Soviet forces moved into the

country to complete garrisoning the country — primarily along the ring road and its main feeder road to Jalalabad. The 40th Army was not positioned so much to repel a conventional ground force invasion from Pakistan or Iran; rather it was positioned to control the economic and population centers of Afghanistan (see [Figure 1](#)).⁵ Not shown on this map are the three brigades of Soviet KGB Border Guard Troops that held a de facto border within Northern Afghanistan that extended to the foothills of the Hindu Kush.⁶

Afghanistan is dominated by mountains and desert with fertile ‘green zones’ (agricultural areas) hugging the rivers and irrigation canals. The mountains of Eastern Afghanistan are higher and more difficult to transit than those of the west, but the western mountains are still difficult. Eastern and Southern Afghanistan is populated by ethnic Pashtun who practice Sunni Islam and have kinsman across the border in Pakistan. Western Afghanistan is populated by Aimak, Hazara, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen. The Hazara practice Shia Islam and share this special religious connection with Iran. Iran was involved in a major war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988 (during most of the Soviet-Afghan War) but still supplied military aid and sanctuary to the guerrillas in Western Afghanistan. According to Soviet estimates, some 600,000 Afghans were living and working in Iran at the time of the Soviet entry.⁷ That number swelled after the Soviet entry as refugees made their way to Iranian refugee camps.

Western Afghanistan had a history of resistance to the communist Afghan government — the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). In March 1979, the city of Herat rose in rebellion, and personnel and units of the Afghan 17th Infantry Division, stationed in Herat, mutinied and joined the rebellion. Captain Ismail Khan, who would become a leading Tajik guerrilla leader in Western Afghanistan, was one of the military who joined the rebellion. The rebels had full control of the city for a week before the regime regained control by sending ground forces from Kabul and subjecting the city and 17th Infantry Division to heavy aerial bombardment. Reportedly, thousands of people died in the fighting including some Soviet citizens. This uprising was not the first anti-regime rebellion in Afghanistan, but the resistance was spreading across the country. Kabul urgently requested that the Soviet leaders send troops (disguised as Afghan soldiers) to Afghanistan to prop up the regime. The Soviet leadership decided not to respond but began taking steps that would aid their entry nine months later.⁸

⁵L. W. Grau, ‘Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan’, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 20(2) (2007), pp. 235–261.

⁶L. W. Grau, 2015, op. cit.

⁷A. Lyakhovskiy, *Трагедия и доблесть Афгана*, [The Tragedy and Courage of the Afghan], Iskona, Moscow, 1995, p. 217.

⁸A. A. Jalali, *A Military History of Afghanistan: From the Great Game to the Global War on Terror*, The University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2017, pp. 359–361.

Western Afghanistan has belonged to the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the Median-Persian Empire, the Macedonian Empire, the Sassanid Empire, the Arabian Empire, the Mongolian Empire, the Timurid Empire, the Persian Empire, and Afghanistan. Herat and large parts of Western Afghanistan have changed hands between Persia and Afghanistan on several occasions. Iran still feels an affinity with Western Afghanistan and has involved itself in the political and daily affairs of the region on a fairly regular basis. After the Soviet incursion, Iran's ideological solidarity with the Islamic-led Afghan resistance was constrained by Iran's revolution and subsequent war with Iraq. Iran's policies were directed more toward influencing events in Palestine and Lebanon than toward their co-religionists in Afghanistan. Iran's approach was narrow and sectarian — focusing on Afghanistan's Shia minority in the central Afghan mountainous area of Hazarajat. Iran's ideological campaign in the area created a major social upheaval and struggle between the traditional establishment and the reformists.⁹

Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps helped set up the pro-Khomeini Nasr party recruited from young Hazaras trained in Iran and the pro-Iranian Guardians of the Afghan Islamic Jihad. These two groups were instrumental in instigating bloody clashes in 1983–1984 that forced out moderate Hazaras from Bamian and led to the domination of two-thirds of the Hazarajat by the pro-Iranian factions. Their policies and brutal treatment of locals forced thousands of Hazaras to refugee camps inside Afghanistan or as far off as Pakistan.¹⁰ Iran provided arms, ammunition and supplies, and political support to these factions as well as lessened support to the other six factions headquartered in Iran.

However, the Tajik Jamiat-e Islami faction, headquartered in Pakistan, also held sway in Northern and Western Afghanistan. Its two most famous commanders were Ahmed Shah Masood in the North and Ismail Khan in the West. Ismail Khan fought the Soviets in the streets of Herat and in the nearby mountains and valleys. More arms and supplies from Pakistan flowed into Ismail Khan's Kokari-Sharshari supply depot (35°17'13"N 61°11'45"E) than Iranian arms into the depots of the Iranian-supported factions — even though the distance from Pakistan was much greater than the distance from Iran. The regional supply bases provided a place to store, maintain, and repair weapons, train guerrillas, and to provide medical care for the sick and wounded. The primary Mujahideen supply bases in Afghanistan were Marul'gad, Rabati-Dzhali, Shinari, Kokari-Sharshari, Zhawar, L'markhauza, Angurkot, Khodzhamul'k, Mianpushta, Anandar, Shagali, and Tangiseidan.¹¹

⁹Ibid., p. 379.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹A. Lyakhovskiy, 1995, op. cit., p. 232.

The Supply and Transfer Depot at Kokari-Sharshari

The base was located just across from the Iranian border, northwest of Herat, on the Kuh-e Sang Surakh Mountain massif in the Safid Kuh Mountains of the Paropamisus Mountain Chain. The base is located in the border hills about 70–80 kilometers north of the main highway that connects Herat to the Iranian border. It faced the Iranian border city of Torbat-e Jam. Its location was also some 30 kilometers south of Afghanistan's and Iran's border intersection with Soviet Turkmenistan. The north-flowing Harrirud River wrapped around the western and northern edge of the depot and forms the North-South boundary between Afghanistan and Iran at that point. The depot's high point is 1061 meters, which is 511 meters above the river. The mountain slope is steep, and there are no apparent roads and few neighboring villages on the Afghanistan side of the border. Like most Mujahideen supply and transfer bases, Kokari-Sharshari consisted of a complex of above-ground and subterranean structures. The tunnels were dug 15–20 meters below the surface. The base held provisions and military supplies and included a command post with integrated wire and radio communications, classrooms for training and ideological indoctrination, barracks, a large supply of weapons and ammunition, a hospital, a mosque, a jail, repair shops for vehicles and weapons, and even an ammunition factory that produced .303 caliber ammunition for the older British-manufactured Lee-Enfield and Lee-Metford bolt-action rifles. The base had its own power generation and water supply. There was an administrative building and a guest house for visiting high-ranking guerrillas and foreigners. The base had three defensive lines overlooking the base with strong points and bunkers. The base was well protected with shoulder-fired air defense guided missiles, .51 caliber DShK anti-aircraft machineguns, and ZPU 14.5 mm anti-aircraft heavy machine guns.¹² Functioning Soviet World War II towed automatic anti-aircraft guns such as the 25 mm 2-K, 37 mm 61-K, and the 76 mm M1938 were still lethal and positioned in well-constructed fighting positions. They were supplemented by newer ZU 23-2 twin-barreled 23 mm anti-aircraft machine guns and even a self-propelled ZSU 23-4 radar-guided anti-aircraft system employing a quad-barreled 23 mm machine gun. British 'Blowpipe' shoulder-fired air defense missiles completed the anti-aircraft arsenal. Chinese 75 mm and 82 mm recoilless rifles and 50 mm, 82 mm, 120 mm, and 160 mm mortars provided direct and indirect artillery support.¹³

¹²Ibid.

¹³Online Academic Dictionary and Encyclopedia, 'Кокари-Шаршари это: [Kokari-Sharshari Is:]', <http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/ruwiki/1524896> (accessed 31 May 2017).

The depot was well constructed (some sources credit West German and Iranian fortification engineers), and structures were constructed from cement, mountain stone, iron channeling, and framing. Fighting positions were sited at various elevations to cover various approaches and were connected by deep communications trenches. Some of the tunnels supposedly led to Iran for emergency evacuation. The depot was defended primarily by forces of Ismail Khan, the leader of the ‘Western Combined Group’ of Afghan Mujahideen-Tajiks and other Western Afghanistan ethnic groups, including tribal militia belonging to Pashtun Alizai and Baluch tribes, as well as the Pashtun ‘Yunis Khalis Hezb-i-Islami’ Mujahideen front affiliated with commander Safiullah.¹⁴ There was also reportedly a detachment of ‘Black Storks’ — reputedly Arab and Iranian volunteers selected for their height, bravery, fearlessness, tactical skills, and high morale.¹⁵ The Karakari-Sharshari base served as both a tactical-logistic hideout and a staging area.

Preparing for the Offensive Against Kokari-Sharshari Supply Depot

In 1986, the Soviet 40th Army was at its maximum strength but was preparing to pass the bulk of the fighting to the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. To do so, the Soviets mounted major operations against key Mujahideen Supply/Transfer Depots in order to ease the strain on the DRA. In April 1986, they mounted their second (and finally successful) operation against Zhawar. Kokari Sharshari would be next. Shinari would be overrun in late 1987, in conjunction with Operation ‘Magistral’ — designed to open the road to Khost and destroy the depot.¹⁶

The Soviet 40th Army commander at this time was General-Lieutenant Victor P. Dubynin, who commanded all Soviet Ministry of Defense Ground and Air Forces in Afghanistan. However, the Soviets also assigned an Operational Group of the Ministry of Defense to Afghanistan, which was headed by General of the Army Valentin I. Varennikov. It was not uncommon for the Operational Group to conduct operations in Afghanistan. General Varennikov commanded the operation to capture and destroy the

¹⁴Z. Azimi, interview with A. A. Jalali, 27 July 2017, in Berlin, Germany. Major General Azimi led a Mujahideen group in Herat during the Soviet occupation in 1980s and was in the field during the 1985 Soviet-DRA offensive against the Karkari-Sharshari Mujahideen base. Of interest here is that the presence of the Yunis Khalis faction at the supply depot meant that the Iranian-supported guerrillas were not drawing many supplies here. Yunis Khalis was very opposed to the Shia practice of Islam — which was a predominant practice among the Hazara population.

¹⁵Союз ветеранов Афганистана Кубышевский р-н г. Донецк [Veterans of Afghanistan Association in the Kuibyshev Region, City of Donetsk], 1986, <https://sites.google.com/site/usvakujbysevskijdoneck/home/istoria-vojny/hronika-afganskoj-vojny/1986> (accessed 4 June 2017). The ‘Black Storks’ pop up in numerous Russian retellings of Afghanistan battles. They are also reputedly part of the fighting for the Shinari Supply/Transfer Depot during Operation Magistral.

¹⁶The Russian General Staff, 2002, op. cit., pp. 26–34. For an account of the Soviet takedown of Shinari Depot, see L. W. Grau, ‘The Battle for Hill 3234: Last Ditch Defense in the Mountains of Afghanistan’, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 24(2) (2011), pp. 217–231. For an account of the Soviet takedown of Zhawar Depot, see L. W. Grau and A. A. Jalali, ‘The Campaign for the Caves: The Battles for Zhawar in the Soviet-Afghan War’, *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 14(3) (2001), pp. 69–92.

Kokari-Sharshari supply depot. The exercise was named Operation ‘Западня’ [Operation Trap]. General-Major G. G. Kondrat’ev, a Deputy Commander of the 40th Army served as the Deputy Commanding General of Operation ‘Trap’.¹⁷ The Soviet-DRA offensive was mostly aimed at downgrading the Mujahideen operational capability in the northwest triangle of Herat Province in the Gulran District where the district is bordered on Iran in the west and the Soviet Turkmenistan in the north. The Karkari-Sharshari base was anchored at the mountainous border tract of Dahan-e-Zulfeqar bordering Iran and the USSR where a nominal Mujahideen regiment affiliated with Ismail Khan and some other resistance groups were based. From there the Mujahideen made several cross-border incursions into the USSR to lay ambushes and in some incidents seized weapons from USSR isolated border posts. The Soviet-DRA offensive was intended to neutralize Mujahedin activity in that area.¹⁸

Although the Kokari-Sharshari supply depot was located in the area of operations of the 5th Guards Motorized Rifle Division, the 5th GMRD could not undertake the mission alone. It still had to secure division key points during the operation. The division committed its organic 12th, 101st and 371st Guards Motorized Rifle Regiments (GMRR) and the 1060th Artillery Regiment to the fight. In addition to TO&E 122 mm and 152 mm howitzers and 122 mm multiple rocket launchers (MRLS), the attached 11th MRLS battery of the 28th Artillery Regiment brought the 220 mm MRLS along for the fight. The 149th GMRR of the 201st GMRD was airlifted from Kunduz in Northeastern Afghanistan to Herat Airbase in Western Afghanistan as part of the operation. It was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel A. I. Skorodumov. The 345th Parachute Regiment of the 103rd Guards Airborne Division airlifted from its base at Bagram to Shindand Airbase. The DRA 17th Infantry Division and the famed DRA 5th Tank Brigade were attached for the fight.¹⁹ A KGB Border Guards unit, Motorized Maneuver Group (MMG) Kaisar, was also assigned to the operation.²⁰ Transport aviation from Bagram, Jalalabad, Herat, and Shindand airbases participated in the operation. Bomber aviation of the 17th Separate Aviation Regiment from Mari Airbase in Soviet Turkmenistan provided bombing and jamming support for the operation. Fighter protection against Iranian airstrikes was provided by the 190th Fighter Regiment from Shindand Airbase. Close-air support (SU-25) was

¹⁷Online Academic Dictionary and Encyclopedia.

¹⁸Zahir Azimi.

¹⁹Online Academic Dictionary and Encyclopedia. Part of the 17th Infantry Division had earlier revolted against the communist government in Kabul but was retained, retrained, reeducated, and repopulated with more-trust-worthy soldiers. The 5th Tank Brigade was part of the DRA strategic reserve and was an elite force that often turned the battle during its history.

²⁰*Боевой путь мотоманевренной группы ‘Кайсар’* [Combat Path of the Motorized Maneuver Group ‘Kaisar’], <http://mmg-kaisar.ru/military-way.html> (accessed 31 May 2017). *Kaisar* is a Kirghiz word meaning ‘decisive’, ‘courageous’, or ‘strong’. It is also the name of a popular Kirghiz soccer team. Evidently MMG ‘Courageous’ was originally stationed on the Soviet border with Afghanistan in Kirghizia.

provided by the 378th Separate Attack Regiment from Bagram and Kandahar Airbases and the 200th Separate Attack Detachment from Shindand Airbase. Helicopter support (Mi-8 and Mi-24) came from the 302nd Separate Helicopter Squadron at Shindand, the 303rd Separate Helicopter Squadron at Herat, and the 335th Separate Helicopter Regiment at Jalalabad. The 50th Composite Air Regiment from Kabul provided communications and air-borne command post support.²¹

The operation lasted from 18 to 26 August 1986. It began with gathering the force. LTC Skorodumov recalls how he was summoned to the 201st GMRD headquarters in Kunduz on the morning of the 19th, where he was directed by the division commander to immediately move his regiment by AN-12 transport aircraft to the Iranian-Afghan border to participate in Operation 'Trap'. Late that evening, the regiment was at Herat airbase drawing ammunition and provisions. LTC Skorodumov gathered his staff and senior commanders and gave them the orders for the upcoming mission. Within 40 minutes, the regiment was broken into boarding chocks for Mi-8 Transport helicopters.²² The regiment then got what sleep it could.

The Soviet/DRA Attack

The evident plan was that beginning on 18 August, the 5th GMRD units would drive cross country to Kuh-e Sang Surakh Mountain massif (Kokari-Sharshari) and establish a perimeter to prevent reinforcement or escape and establish artillery firing positions. This was a straight-line distance of 150 kilometers (93 miles), but moving on the primitive roads and trails, it was more than a day's undertaking. The division would be accompanied by the KGB Border Guards MMG *Kaisar*, the Afghan 17th Infantry Division and the Afghan 5th Tank Brigade. The Soviet-DRA columns would move from Herat through the Dasht-e-Hamdab (the Hamdam-Ab desert) and Dasht-e Hawz (the water pool desert), which are located northwest of the main highway, to attack the Karkari Sharshari base.²³ The ground force would be in position on 19 August. On the morning of 20 August, the 149th GMRR would conduct an air assault to seize the commanding heights of the mountain massif. The 345th Parachute Regiment would be held in reserve, ready to land by helicopter where and when needed.

BMNT [Beginning Morning Nautical Twilight] on Wednesday, 20 August, was at 0445, and shortly after that, the lead battalion of the 149th GMRR

²¹Операция «Западня» [Operation "Trap"], https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%9E%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%8F_%C2%AB%D0%97%D0%B0%D0%BF%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%BD%D1%8F%C2%BB (accessed 31 May 2017).

²²I. Daudi, 'Операция "Западня": Из летописи боевого пути Советских войск в Республике Афганистан' [Operation 'Trap': From the Annals of the Combat Path of the Soviet Forces in the Republic of Afghanistan], *Армейский Сборник* [Army Digest], August 2016, p. 90.

²³Zahir Azimi.

began its air assault on an LZ partially down from the mountain top close to the hamlet of Kokari-Sharshari. The lead battalion reported that as soon as it had touched down, it was met with concentrated mortar and small arms fire and was taking casualties. Retreating from the landing zone, the battalion went to ground in a perimeter defense. The factor of surprise was gone. The landing zone was hot, and the isolated battalion continued to draw accurate mortar and direct fire. Eight M-8 helicopters (carrying the reconnaissance platoon and much of the second battalion) were en route to the same LZ and due to land at 0530. Sunrise was at 0545.²⁴

LTC Skorodumov landed with the second lift. He brought a staff officer and radioman with him to help with command and control. Not only was the LZ under fire, but it also proved to be an anti-personnel minefield full of Italian-manufactured mines. Casualties mounted. The mountain acoustics made it impossible to determine the trajectory of incoming mortar fire so that soldiers could not determine which side of any nearby rock to shelter behind. LTC Skorodumov ordered both battalion commanders to move their forces outside the impact area and see to the evacuation and treatment of the wounded. He ordered the second battalion commander to move the scouts and his battalion up the mountain to seize the mountain top and quickly close with the Mujahideen fighting positions.²⁵

It was a hard uphill slog for the second battalion, and the Mujahideen mortars continued to seek out the Soviet troops. The troops would sidestep to avoid the impact zones, but the battalion ranks thinned as the battalion struggled to the mountain top. After three hours, the battalion seized the top and established a defensive perimeter. While the 2nd battalion climbed, the rest of the 49th Regiment had continued to land and take up defensive perimeters deep in the midst of the Mujahideen mountain defense. Now the Soviets could direct accurate answering artillery fire and close air support on the Mujahideen mortars and recoilless rifles. Now Soviet infantry could assault Mujahideen positions — not maneuvering from the bottom up but from the flanks, the rear, from above.²⁶ Night fell. The Soviet troops improved their defenses. The Mujahideen crept around the Soviet positions to regain the crowning heights and to place new mines on the mountain paths to frustrate the resupply of ammunition and water and the evacuation of the wounded.²⁷

Thursday, 21 August 1986, began with the morning insertions of the remainder of the 49th GMRR to expand the regiment's perimeter. The reserve, the 345th Parachute regiment, was also committed that morning. The paratroopers leapt from their Mi-8 helicopters onto the sub-step of the other high ground on the

²⁴I. Daudi, 2016, *op. cit.*, and Veterans of Afghanistan Association in the Kuibyshev Region, City of Donetsk, 1986, *op. cit.*

²⁵I. Daudi, 2016, *op. cit.*, pp. 90–91.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 91.

²⁷Veterans of Afghanistan Association in the Kuibyshev Region, City of Donetsk, 1986, *op. cit.*

mountain massif. Both LZs were mined and covered by observed mortar fire. Both regiments fought uphill, leapfrogging forces to seize their respective peaks. Artillery and aviation strikes suppressed but did not stop the Mujahideen mortar fire. The quantity of Mujahideen anti-aircraft heavy machine guns and shoulder-fired air defense missiles prevented helicopter airdrops of ammunition and water to the forward positions. The four days of heavy uninterrupted combat expended large quantities of ammunition and water, and resupply was difficult. Daytime temperatures reached 50°C [122°F].²⁸ The 49th GMRR ran out of ammunition and water during the first two days of fighting. The Harirud River was a dry course during the hot summer, and so water had to be hauled in from Herat. During the day, the 5th GMRD and the KGB Border Guards MMG Kaisar, the Afghan 17th Infantry Division, and the Afghan 5th Tank Brigade began shrinking the encirclement — pushing forces up the mountain sides.

Friday, 22 August, was a day of stubborn fighting during which neither side gained an advantage. Artillery and air sought out the Mujahideen mortars and machine guns. On Saturday, 23 August, three SU-25 'Frogfoot' close air support aircraft were attacking Mujahideen positions when a ZSU 23-4 and a British-manufactured 'Blowpipe' shoulder-fired surface-to-air-missile engaged them. The missile hit a 'Frogfoot', destroying its steering controls. As the aircraft heeled over, Captain A. G. Smirnov ejected from his aircraft. The aircraft smashed into the ground, but Captain Smirnov was picked up uninjured by a Mi-8 helicopter.²⁹

On Sunday, 24 August, the Soviets launched a multi-pronged offensive against the defending Mujahideen. The Mujahideen were unable to concentrate the fires of their remaining mortars and machine guns while being attacked from several directions. The Black Storks put up a spirited defense, but at the height of the fight, their morale snapped. The Soviet prongs pushed deep into the Mujahideen defenses, splintering them into isolated pockets.³⁰

Monday, 25 August, dawned with a heavy artillery preparation and was followed by mopping up actions by Soviet sub-units. The Mujahideen were no longer capable of a coordinated resistance. Those defenders who were able grabbed weapons and ammunition and fled through the tunnels or communications trenches to Iran. Ismail Khan was among them. Soviet forces destroyed 26 weapons and ammunition dumps, 25 rammed-earth defensive works, and 32 underground structures.³¹ The Soviet forces evacuated or destroyed captured material and blew up what they could. Then they evacuated the area and returned to their bases. Casualties for all sides were not disclosed.

Despite all this, it turned out that Karkari-Sharshari was not the sole main supply source in Herat Province for all the Mujahideen. It was key to Tajik

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid. and I. Daudi, 2016, op. cit.

³⁰Veterans of Afghanistan Association in the Kuibyshev Region, City of Donetsk, 1986, op. cit.

³¹Ibid.

and Pashtun forces in the northwest, but most of the Mujahideen supplies reached the province and adjacent provinces through the Musa-Abad border crossing south of the main Herat-Islam Qalah highway. Musa-Abad faces across the border from the Iranian town of Sangan. The supply route from Musa-Abad ran south of the border towns of Ghorian and Zendajan, which were under Mujahideen control, and branched out to reach Herat, Ghor, and the southern districts of Herat. Sensitive supplies (including Stinger missiles) were not allowed to be sent from Pakistan through Iran after a batch of Stingers were seized by Iranian forces (or sold to them by a Mujahiden group). Such supplies were sent to Herat fronts through Helmand Province to the south.³²

Conclusion

Focusing on the tactical fight with guerrillas is similar to Cadmus sowing the dragon's teeth — 10 armed men spring up from each tooth. The tactical fight must be fought, but it is not practical to kill one's way to victory one guerrilla at a time — unless that one guerrilla is a leader every time. New combatants can always be found or come of age. The guerrilla's potential weaknesses are logistics, loss of sanctuary/anonymity, and ideological commitment. Determining the guerrilla's logistics structure, key nodes, and locations can go a long way to bringing the situation under control. Guerrilla logistics points are located for ease of defense, not ease of access, transport, and distribution. If one is involved in a guerrilla war in a mountainous country, one must frequently go deep into the mountains to influence the logistics flow. In 1986, the Soviet forces were readying Afghanistan's forces to assume the fight against the guerrilla by going after key logistics facilities. They could not go after all of them, and so they went after major facilities. They succeeded in capturing them, evacuating or blowing up stores, and disrupting the logistics flow. However, the Soviets held the facilities only for hours or days and then withdrew. They feared a guerrilla counter-attack or expending combat power holding remote terrain. Stay-behind forces could prove difficult to support and more difficult to extract. The Soviets left underground structures fairly intact, since collapsing tunnels is time consuming, expensive, and difficult. When the Soviets left these remote logistics sites, the guerrilla logistics effort again reached to and through these sites.

Soviet artillery, air strikes, and air mobility played a key role in capturing Kokari-Sharshari as well as Zhawar and Shinari. Air assaults rapidly put Soviet forces near the top of these logistics mountain fortresses. However, the Mujahideen had learned to mine likely landing zones and cover them with direct and indirect fires. The crowning heights tend to attract air attack and air assault landings.

³²Zahir Azimi.

War, conventional or guerrilla, remains about controlling one's own lines of advance retreat and communications/logistics while disrupting the other commander's same lines. Determining what and where the other commander's lines are should be a priority task of the intelligence staff. Often the lines of advance and retreat may match part of the communications/logistics line. Supply dumps and depots along the lines of advance and retreat may permit the force to extend its culminating point. The Soviet capture of key logistics facilities hurt the guerrilla effort, but the redundant guerrilla logistics routes and smaller depots were able to continue the fight.

Notes on contributor

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