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IN AFGHANISTAN: WESTERN AND SOVIET METHODS OF COUNTERINSURGENCY

Abstract: The two-decade-long U.S.-led military mission in Afghanistan ended in August 2021 after a chaotic departure of the NATO troops. Power in Kabul transferred back to the Taliban, the political force the United States and its allies tried to defeat. In its failure to achieve a lasting change, the Western mission in Afghanistan is similar to that of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. These two missions in Afghanistan had many things in common, specifically their unsuccessful counterinsurgency efforts. However, both managed to achieve limited success in their attempts to impose their style of governance on Afghanistan as well. The current study compares and contrasts some of the crucial aspects of counterinsurgency operations conducted by the Soviet and Western forces during their respective missions, such as special forces actions, propaganda activities, and dealing with crucial social issues. Interestingly, when the Soviets withdrew in 1988, they left Afghanistan worse off, but the US-backed opposition forces subsequently made the situation even worse. On the other hand, the Western mission left the country better off in 2021, and violence subsided when power in the country was captured by the Taliban, which the United States has opposed.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, the Soviet Union, the United States, NATO, ISAF, the Taliban*

INTRODUCTION

The abrupt withdrawal of the Western troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 has generated quite a stir of media coverage accompanied by various levels of outrage from anyone competent enough to comment on the topic. It would not be reasonable to call the two-decade-long deployment of the US-led Western coalition forces to Afghanistan success. However, at the same time, the Western coalition made definite steps in developing that country. Even though Afghanistan is back in the hands of the Taliban, after the departure of the Western troops, Afghanistan is much better off than it was at the same time exactly 20 years ago. These 20 years have left the country with a mixed bag of successes and failures, especially in combating insurgency and terrorism. It is reasonable to compare the American-led efforts combating insurgency with those conducted by the Soviet Union from December 1979 to February 1988. The current paper explores a few essential similarities and differences between the Soviet and American approaches to counterinsurgency. A thesis explored here suggests that although both campaigns failed, they both demonstrated minor successes in their objectives, while the fiascos were equally significant in both cases.

1. PROVOKING INSURGENCY

The final objective of any successful counterinsurgency is the defeat of insurgency and peace for the host country. There are two basic ways to achieve this goal: through heavy-handed violent suppression of the so-called hearts and minds campaign. The American-led Western campaign in Afghanistan opted for the latter, but after two decades of bloodshed and suffering, the NATO coalition in Afghanistan failed to win the hearts and minds of most Afghans. The tremendous sacrifices by the United States, and allies within the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and after ISAF ended in 2014, produced some tangible results, but the steps forward that were made remained on the shaky grounds of overall insecurity and violence. Progress in the country was primarily associated with certain urban developments, while most of Afghanistan has remained deeply rural with its feudal social order and conservative Islamic traditions. The Western-supported governments in Kabul failed to establish themselves as a legitimate national authority, especially in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988, after almost 9 years of fighting, left behind a war-ravaged country with a decimated population, but it also left in Kabul a functioning government, which managed to survive on its own, made some territorial gains, and even outlasted the Soviet state itself. To be precise, the pro-Soviet government of Najibullah survived primarily due to Soviet military and economic aid and collapsed within months after drying up of supplies occasioned by the dissolution of the Soviet regime in Moscow. Najibullah improvised as much as he could after the Soviet withdrawal, renamed the country from the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan to the Republic of Afghanistan, and in 1990, even introduced 'Islamic' in the constitution and the official name of the state.

The Soviet policy in Afghanistan was, in essence, self-contradictory and schizophrenic: ill-conceived and executed military and security operations generated untold casualties and pain among the civilian population. Military operations originally designed for a large conventional enemy force were used by the Soviets against a largely peaceful civilian population harboring small militia groups. A typical Soviet response to an act of violence by the Afghan resistance was a gross overreaction exhibited as a massacre of innocent people and wanton destruction of property and natural environment (Jalali, Grau, 1995: xix). Ironically, part of the Afghan infrastructure destroyed by the Soviet troops had been built by their countrymen in previous decades (Dörre, Kraudzun, 2012: 432-433). There were logical boundaries for a few creative Soviet policy specialists who tried to solve Afghan problems through civil-military relations and imaginative counterinsurgency efforts, but the foolishness and incompetence of Soviet military planners and leaders had no bounds. The West never pursued such genocidal policies, and its military operations were nowhere near the scale of Soviet offensives. However, the Western policy in Afghanistan suffered from a rather similar delusion: Washington believed that it was possible to conduct military operations in Afghanistan, do development work, and use diplomatic efforts for state-building at the same time. While war and diplomacy always go hand in hand, these two instruments of foreign policy cannot be effectively applied at the same time as they perform the opposite functions at starting and finishing a war – diplomats are often tasked with starting and finishing wars, whereas the military tries to avoid or win wars. As for the economic development efforts in times of war are concerned, notwithstanding the scale, they parallel those failed Soviet policies of shooting the parents while building schools and orphanages for their kids (Bell, 2010: 60-61).

The Western coalition likely hoped for a similar outcome when they withdrew from Afghanistan in summer 2021: a Western-friendly government surviving in Kabul indefinitely, provided the military and economic aid continued to flow from the West. The plan was workable but appeared to be very expensive and difficult. The Afghan military was dependent on the West for every single thing it required to operate, from bullets and bombs to the fuel necessary for the military infrastructure. Afghanistan's neighbors were not willing to do anything to assist Kabul without constant American pressure. Pakistan is not friendly to any but pro-Pakistani government in Kabul and was not willingly cooperating with Afghanistan. Iran does not support a pro-Western government in Afghanistan or anything else pro-Western in the region. In Najibullah's case, he was supplied with fuel by the Soviet Union from its Central Asian republics. Now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, independent states, are net importers of oil products themselves. From the neighbors, only Turkmenistan presents itself as a reliable supplier of energy to Afghanistan, but this country is heavily influenced by Russia's foreign policy priorities, while Western governments have spent very little time cultivating friendship with Ashkhabad.

In the 1980s, the Soviet Union the 2001-2021 Western coalition in terms of the scale of military and counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. These operations produced mass casualties primarily among the Afghan civilians. A typical Russian way of war includes indiscriminate use of firepower against all targets, military or civilian, mass reprisals against 'guilty' population, and deliberate destruction of property and economic infrastructure. The Soviets wanted to eradicate support for Mujahedin in rural Afghanistan, which resulted in the policies of physical eradication of rural Afghanistan itself. The Soviet military bombed granaries, destroyed crops, orchards, cut down and uprooted trees, heavily mined agricultural fields and pastures, destroyed irrigation systems, killed livestock and destroyed herds, demolished buildings large and small, leveled many villages, conducted military sweeps through the countryside and forcibly conscripted young men. As a result, more than a million people died of inflicted wounds, exposure, starvation, deprivation, unsanitary conditions, hundreds of thousands were injured, maimed, and sickened, more than three million people became refugees. The forced destruction of the natural environment altered the landscape around many cities and villages, including Kabul: with the destruction of trees and forests, little brooks and rivers also diminished or disappeared natural spring water, ground water closer to the surface became

contaminated and unsafe to drink – ferrous and non-ferrous metals from used and discarded military ordinance, dangerous chemicals, decaying corpses of people and animals saturated soil around cities and villages. The Canadian military contingent deployed to Kabul in 2002 as part of the NATO mission, found local drinking water unsafe, and ground water close to the surface contaminated. The potable water for the troops had to be shipped from neighboring countries, and later a small water plant had to be installed, which pumped water from deeper reservoirs, purified, and bottled it. Even though the American-led Western coalition had much fewer troops deployed in the Kandahar region than did the Soviets had two decades prior, the Western involvement fared much better. It produced more tangible results for the locals. In the process, the NATO mission also managed with much fewer casualties. In the 1980s, the Soviets never fully succeeded in controlling Kandahar. That is why the city has so little Soviet-built infrastructure and buildings – instead, the Soviets nearly eradicated Kandahar by 1987 through constant barrage from air and land.

Unlike the Mujahedin movement of the 1980s, the Taliban insurgency in the first two decades of the 21st century was not backed by a superpower, and they did not seem to have any major or credible supporters. Despite this, since 2005, the Taliban, Hekmatyar, and Haqqani insurgents and their allies progressively asserted control over large areas of the country. The Taliban and its allies have managed this largely on their own. They have found sufficient support among the local population to maintain firm control over large sections of the country and capture the capital city even before the complete withdrawal of the Western military forces. As the ISAF mandate ended in 2014, and it was decided to withdraw the Western forces from Afghanistan soon after that, the main thing the Taliban had to do was to hold their positions and wait. Plenty of people from NATO countries asked how to avoid losing Afghanistan as the ISAF mission was ending, but as it has turned out, no clear plan was found to avoid losing a pro-Western government in Kabul after the withdrawal (Felbab-Brown, 2013; Otlowski, 2014; Warren, 2010). Even though the United States and its coalition allies in Afghanistan had seven years to plan their withdrawal and leave in a rational and organized way, their departure was more chaotic and confused than anyone could imagine, including those in the Taliban leadership. Summer 2021 witnessed the Taliban quickly advancing all over Afghanistan and finally capturing Kabul – a dramatically different situation from the early years of the ISAF deployment, 2001-2005, when the Taliban were all but gone from the country.

The first four years after the overthrow of the Taliban in fall 2001 was relatively quiet and peaceful in Afghanistan – there were no major attacks on Western presence there, and the Taliban appeared to be defeated and gone. At the same time; however, special operations teams from the US, Canada, the UK, and other countries continued to pursue suspected Taliban and al Qaeda members, and so did a sizable U.S. military contingent deployed in southern Afghanistan. This relentless pursuit of militants could have played a decisive role in provoking them to eventually return to the battlefield in 2006. In a May 2007 interview, a former senior Jihadi leader in Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s movement blamed “the Americans”¹ for the 2006 resurgence of Taliban:

The Americans pursued them [the Taliban]. If the Taliban were not pursued seriously, they would have been inactive and joined the madrassas. The coalition forces entered the districts, villages, and even houses of the Afghan people in order to find the Taliban. Instead of pursuing the Taliban, the anti-terrorism coalition should have developed the country's infrastructure and strengthened its influence in those regions most vulnerable. Every person, whose chance for life ends, would accept death. And that was the reality the Taliban faced (Waqad, 2007).

It was primarily U.S. forces that chased suspected Taliban in southern Afghanistan from 2002 to 2006, while Canadian, the U.K., and other special forces conducted similar smaller-scale operations elsewhere; however, the differences among the special forces of various nationalities were obviously lost to the Afghan insurgents. Canada actively operated small, but effective groups of JTF2 (Joint Task Force 2) units that sought out, engaged, and killed the enemy (Holoway, 2006: 70-71). The Soviet security services and their Afghan clients made similar blunders after taking over Afghanistan in December 1979, albeit on a much larger scale. In some parts of the country, Soviet troops were initially met as liberators, and generally, there was no mass opposition to their entry and deployment (except Soviet-provoked rallies in Kabul and 2-3 military mutinies). The new regime of Babrak Karmal announced a general amnesty, and the prisons were emptied of thousands of political prisoners. In a few weeks; however, the situation was turned around at the insistence of Karmal, KGB (the Soviet state security service)

¹ In my experience talking with locals in Afghanistan, most of them did not distinguish among the Western coalition members in that country – they were identified as either “Americans” or “eesaf,” that is, ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), under which most members of the US-led coalition operated in Afghanistan.

operatives, and the new leader of KHAD (the Afghan equivalent to KGB), Muhammad Najibullah. Karmal's priority was to target and destroy the Khalq faction of his own pro-Soviet party, while the KGB and KHAD were itching to fight the suspected Islamic groups. Soon the empty prisons were full again, and KHAD once again was super busy torturing and killing people. The KGB directed its own special KASKAD (Cascade) units to fight the Islamic groups by hiring and training local Afghans to attack and kill their countrymen, political opponents of the new regime (Andrew, Mitrokhin, 2005: 409-410). Instead of pursuing policies of national reconciliation, or even reconciliation in the ruling party itself, the new pro-Soviet government in Kabul resolved to achieve unity and peace by brutal force alone. Not surprisingly, Afghans resisted and fought back. Initially, protests were peaceful, e.g. large-scale rallies in Kabul in February 1980, but violence soon followed. However, a fully blown Mujahedin resistance to the Soviet presence still took 18-24 months to mature. It took longer in ISAF's case, more than 4 years, but in 2006 insurgency did come back with vengeance.

2. TACKLING INSURGENCY

When the Soviet troops were deployed in Afghanistan, it was clear to many, including to some in political and military leadership of the USSR that they were stepping into a hornet's nest: Afghanistan was in an open revolt against the ruling regime, and it was already experiencing civil war symptoms. The two other neighbors of Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan were openly hostile to the Soviet Union and did their best to support anti-Soviet factions. The United States, USSR's superpower rival, had already authorized a plan of assistance to anti-Communist groups in Afghanistan. In comparison, there was no major uprising in Afghanistan when the U.S. and NATO-led deployed with NATO troops in 2002: both Pakistan and Iran expressed willingness to cooperate with the NATO coalition, and the West had no superpower enemy. In fact, the former Cold War enemies, Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia and others supported the Western efforts directed against the Taliban regime and al Qaeda. Despite such broad support and no opposition, the NATO coalition somehow fared only a little better than the Soviets after a decade-long military adventure in Afghanistan.

In both cases time was a key factor in the activities of the Afghan insurgents. The Soviets did not experience massive problems until 1983. The first generation of the anti-Soviet insurgents were mostly married and/or had family responsibilities – they did fighting in spare time, were not compensated, and were not mobile. In time, a new generation of fighters came online, teenagers and young men, who grew up and matured in the conditions of armed resistance. They joined the struggle as unmarried boys and men, were not burdened by family responsibilities (many of them had no families being orphans of war), were mobile and could move from a base to a base, and could do fighting full time. Some of them were even monetarily compensated for their troubles (Jalali, Grau, 1995: xviii-xix). Similarly, after the sound defeat of the Taliban and al Qaeda forces in winter of 2001-2002 by the US-led coalition, the insurgents largely disappeared from the battleground but came back after 4-5 years: boys who were not part of the insurgent militancy in 2001, as they were only 7-12 years old, were raised and trained by militants in the spirit of anti-American and anti-Western sentiments. Curiously, it does not appear that either the Soviets or the Western coalition anticipated such an inevitable turn of events with the enemy manpower, even though Islamists' main method of 'educating' boys in Afghanistan and Pakistan has never been a secret.

When the Western forces entered Afghanistan in the fall winter of 2001, their footprint was relatively small. The increase in both manpower and aid packages was planned soon afterward, but nothing that was planned got fully materialized: counterinsurgency efforts by the U.S. coalition in Afghanistan remained understaffed from 2006 to 2021. As to the Soviet deployment to Afghanistan in 1979, although they did introduce more than 1,200 tanks, their inadequate preparation and equipment shortcomings were even more pronounced and apparent. To start with, there was no need for a thousand tanks in Afghanistan, not to mention anti-aircraft or anti-battery weapons – indeed, such excesses were soon withdrawn. The Soviet forces were ill-prepared to fight a major insurgency: the officer corps had no relevant preparation and training, the troops lacked proper equipment and uniform, the BTR armored infantry carriers were not designed or equipped to operate in hot and mountainous conditions, the Soviets lacked proper medical supplies and equipment, the engineering troops did not have adequate equipment to build military bases and forward operating bases, etc. More specifically, for instance, the troops initially wore boots that were made by GULAG prisoners in the 1940s and 1950s for the conditions of central Russia and Eastern Europe – it was impossible to run or jump in those boots

on rocky and mountainous terrain, plus they were unbearably hot. Further, the BTR armored infantry carriers proved to be rather slow to maneuver in the hills, and their armor could not withstand modern anti-tank RPGs anyway – these two factors turned them into coffins on wheels. Many field commanders eventually decided to use the army's small 4x4 trucks for troop movements instead – they were poorly protected by armor, but at least they were speedy and could get out of danger spots much better.

Even though there is some obvious dramatic difference in the approaches to the insurgency in Afghanistan between the West and the Soviets, not to mention differences between their ideological preferences and their respective political cultures, in the end, both forces shared some of the same difficulties conventional armies normally experience when dealing with insurgents. In terms of tactics, it remained up to the commanders in the field to improvise and be creative to avoid casualties or outright defeat in battles. Military deception is one method conventional force commanders in the field could use a lot to outmaneuver the enemy that is keen on ambushes and improvised explosive devices (IED). However, because conventional forces had to battle for the same location (a road, a bridge, a tunnel, a mountain pass, city outskirts, etc.) or expect variations of IEDs on the same highway, there were natural limitations to the number of military deceptions they could use successfully: insurgents would normally fall for a given tactic the first time it was used, but with repeated applications, the success rate for the same deception tactic would decrease dramatically (Lobov, 2001: 310-375). Besides, the expeditionary troops rotated periodically (some Western troops more frequently than the Soviets), while the insurgents normally did not – the majority of them were residents of Afghanistan. As battles repeated themselves, the Mujahedin and the Taliban got more and more educated in Soviet and Western tactics and operational art, while as the war dragged on, newly arrived expeditionary platoon, company, and battalion commanders would find that it is increasingly difficult to deceive or outmaneuver the enemy so well versed in conventional force tactics.

The senior partners in the Afghan coalition, the Americans, had a wealth of experience from Vietnam, and so did the British, the French, and some other coalition members. It is entirely possible that experience does not transcend a generational divide in the military, as the U.S. military itself was as poorly prepared and ready for this challenge as any other coalition

participant (Bird, Marshall, 2011). U.S. Army and Marine Corps Field Manual FM 3/24 *Counterinsurgency*, which was officially approved in 2006 and written by a group of scholars and military experts under the leadership of General Petraeus, addressed exactly that gap within the U.S. military strategy and culture. The same manual was crucial at influencing other Western military's counterinsurgency actions in southern Afghanistan Bolduc, Vachon, 2010: 45-56). Incidentally, the same field manual became an inspiration behind the contemporary Russian military concept of “hybrid war.” The U.S.-led coalition did not have to deal with a structure similar to the KGB either, which was running its own large-scale operations in Afghanistan.

3. INFORMATION OPERATIONS

Both Western and Soviet forces did well in certain aspects of the operations known in the West as public relations, and what the Soviets used to call Agitprop (agitation and propaganda) and/or “socialist aid.” Agitprop activities did not specifically distinguish between the informational and material side of counterinsurgency operations like it has been done in the American experience. Aid-related operations represent a few things that both American and Soviet forces did well in Afghanistan, and they more than anything else contributed to their ‘success’ in that country. The Soviet Union got engaged in massive construction projects in Kabul and elsewhere in Afghanistan. Blocs of Soviet-style apartment buildings that quite justifiably many find pretty ugly are still one of the most desirable areas for the Afghan middle class to reside in Kabul. Building and distribution of descent quality dwellings to Soviet political allies and fellow travelers helped to buy peace and security in Kabul – the city was primarily peaceful and quiet during the nine years of Soviet occupation, civilian visitors from the Soviet Union and other countries did not need military escorts to get around, improvised explosive devices were rare, and suicide bombings even more so. Similarly, northern Afghanistan was primarily peaceful – it did not experience major battles until the Taliban invasions of the late 1990s. The 2001-2021 Western engagement in Afghanistan resulted in massive investments and rebuilding of the country, the most remarkable result of which was the population growth in Afghanistan. The Soviet counterinsurgency efforts resulted in a net population decline for the country from about 13.4 million to 11.6 million. In comparison, between 2001 and 2021,

Afghanistan's population grew significantly from 21.6 million to nearly 39 million (The World Bank).

It is clear that Soviet practices in various areas of engagement often contradicted each other, one very good initiative was negated by a few ill-conceived and backward ones. Soviets especially excelled in the areas of civil-military relations, and propaganda. The latter had to come to them naturally, but apparently, the Soviet contingent was not initially prepared for this at all – the Agitprop material they produced in the early years of the war was directed at the Soviet troops themselves. This was soon corrected and propaganda material was reoriented toward the Afghan population. After realizing that the ideas of communism or socialism were entirely foreign to most Afghans, the Soviet Agitprop officials adopted narratives that were understandable and dear to the locals. Leaflets and pamphlets were distributed through airdrops, rockets, and even artillery. Surprise visits by Agitprop groups, operated early by Soviet specialists, but eventually staffed by Afghans were effective as well. Most Afghans residing in rural areas are illiterate, but traditionally they have a lot of respect for the printed word. The Soviet leaflets were collected and preserved by many, including Mujahedin. There were instances when the Mujahedin leadership organized buybacks of these leaflets from the population or their own troops. It was not unusual for Soviet troops to find Soviet propaganda leaflets on detained or dead Mujahedin (Fogel, 2017; Krisko, 1999).

Soviet radio propaganda was also found to be effective, but it took the Soviet leadership 5 years to decide on organizing direct radio broadcast efforts from Afghanistan itself. Until 1985, most of the radio programs for Afghanistan were produced in Tashkent, Dushanbe, or Moscow – in Soviet capitals and far from the daily events of Afghanistan. Therefore, most of it was irrelevant to the current events, and the Soviet troops could not use most of the radio material for the ongoing operations. At the same time, anti-Soviet radio propaganda worked very well, and in all major languages of Afghanistan. Afghans especially favored BBC and “Voice of Free Afghanistan.” Mujahedin groups had their own field radio broadcast done on high-quality Western equipment. Regardless, Soviet radio shows found their fan base that taped and distributed the shows, including to groups in Pakistan, even though the Mujahedin strictly forbade and punished such acts. Soviet troops and Agitprop brigades extensively used loudspeakers both to reach the enemy and civilians. In cities and villages, the loudspeakers were

often used for the benefit of women, who were normally forbidden by their male relatives to listen to radio shows.

Curiously, the Western political and military leaders never gave serious consideration to mounting a concerted counterinsurgency or anti-Taliban propaganda in Afghanistan. Information operations or influence operations play a very important role in modern counterinsurgency efforts, and so do civil-military relations. This fact is well understood by the leadership of any military force, but for some reason, such NATO-led operations in Afghanistan remained local, sporadic, and small. There was no specialized radio broadcast set up, and no efforts were made to deploy propaganda via television or cinema.

The Soviets especially excelled in the area of cinematic propaganda – this proved to be tremendously popular among all Afghans. In the years preceding the rise of the Taliban, the religious conservatives in Afghanistan were not ideologically opposed to a public showing of cinema, music, or dance, provided they contained no blasphemy or scenes that could be construed as erotic. The Soviet funded Agitprop teams staffed by both Soviet servicemen and Afghan professionals would visit an Afghan village, play popular music among the locals, distribute printed propaganda, display posters with ideological and/or public service announcements, deploy loudspeakers with radio programs and/or messages, and eventually play a movie. Such events were well attended and welcomed by villagers and seldom attacked by Mujahedin. In the areas of the country that were under the firm control of the pro-Soviet forces, an Agitprop team could show movies with a clearly stressed anti-Mujahedin message, primarily produced in Afghanistan, while in the contested areas of the country a Pakistani or an Indian film with some socially significant content could be shown. Especially popular among the Afghans are Bollywood movies from India. Soviet, European movies could also be played or films from other countries, but they had to have some kind of socially significant message: the struggle of workers or farmers for justice, resistance to backward practices and traditions, etc. From Soviet-produced films, the priority was given to those from Soviet Central Asian republics, especially from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, both feature presentations and documentaries depicting lives of Soviet (often, nominal) Muslims or workers and farmers.

Western counterinsurgency efforts in Kandahar never seriously involved art as a tool of political propaganda to win hearts and minds. Unlike their predecessors from the 1980s, the

modern Taliban forces oppose any visual art and representation on ideological grounds. Public demonstration of cinema in Afghan towns and villages would have been a public testament of their retreat and their defeat by the Western coalition. The Soviets used feature film presentations primarily as a draw to attract the locals, while the real meat of such enterprise was composed of small propaganda featurettes, audio announcements, and poster displays that preceded and/or followed the film. For the Western coalition partners, it would have been enough just to screen a film, and any film with moving images would have challenged Taliban influence and diminished their ideological dominance in the eyes of the locals.

The cinematic propaganda was probably the most successful information operations effort by the Soviet Union. Those who proposed designed and carried it out cleverly used Lenin's positive characterization of cinema as 'the most democratic of all arts' – the founder of the Soviet State loved films, and rightfully regarded cinema as the most excellent ideological tool. As a result, the Soviet film community from the 1920s on developed the best ever propaganda film school, with subtle and explicit ideological messages woven into many different film genres. Soviet television, on the other hand, never had such powerful advocates as Lenin, and Soviet television failed to reach the heights enjoyed by Soviet cinema in ideological work or otherwise. Consequently, although they tried hard in Afghanistan, the Soviets easily lost a competition in TV propaganda, especially in the border areas with Iran and Pakistan. Soviet-sponsored television programming did not achieve the same level of influence in Afghanistan as did Pakistani and Iranian television channels, which never failed to remind the viewers of the importance of fighting those infidels in Kabul and Moscow. Soviet TV propaganda was undermined by both the low quality of the programming, and a limited number of broadcast hours. Towards the end of the war, the Soviets deployed a new satellite and started broadcasting regular Soviet channels to Afghanistan from Moscow, Tashkent, and Tajikistan, but it was too little too late. In comparison, the Karzai (2001-2014) and Ghani (2014-2021) governments in Kabul used some of the aid money received from the West and elsewhere to assist local efforts at organizing 'modern' television broadcasts. The Western-sponsored Afghan regime also enjoyed more support of better organized and transmitted television channels, but still faced a significant challenge from anti-Western Iranian and Pakistani stations. The West, in general, did not engage in propaganda wars on television or radio, and although the anti-Kabul counterpropaganda by the

Taliban in 2006-2021 was not as strong as it had been in the 1980s, the indigenous pro-government Afghan TV and radio channels could not win the propaganda war.

The Soviet Union concentrated its civil-military relations efforts on constructing cheap or affordable housing for Afghans, especially in the Kabul region. These apartments were given to state officials and employees, teachers, soldiers, and also to members of the pro-Soviet ruling party, supporters of the Soviet policies, and were used to bribe those who were thinking of switching sides. According to Soviet views and policies, housing was part of public infrastructure projects both in the Soviet Union and as part of ‘socialist aid’ packages provided to developing countries. Many of the housing complexes built by Soviets are still in existence and use today, obviously its inhabitants now being free from specific ideological obligations. In comparison, the Western efforts in Afghanistan have primarily addressed public infrastructure, especially schools. Hundreds of schools were built in Afghanistan by various Western sponsors. The value of this effort is undeniable; however, building schools turned out to be much more controversial than the Soviet housing projects. For one, public schooling, especially for girls, has been a hot political issue in Afghanistan for a very long time. Conservative Islamic groups are adamantly opposed to schooling for girls, and more traditionalist conservatives are opposed to secular schooling for boys. Taliban and like-minded groups have retaliated by bombing schools, killing teachers and headmasters, and some instances even targeting children. On the other hand, terror attacks on individuals’ dwellings have been rare in Afghanistan – terrorists have primarily concentrated their violence on individuals and infrastructure that belong to the public sphere, while housing, although developed and funded by enemy forces, remains in the private sphere of people’s lives. Constant attacks on public buildings like schools communicated to ordinary Afghans that those who sponsored and built those buildings were vulnerable, and since they were vulnerable, they could lose the war.

Both the Soviet Union and the West contributed significant funds to improving health care in Afghanistan. Soviet and Eastern European-trained Afghan doctors traveled throughout the country offering services free of charge. Their work was not frequently impeded by the Mujahedin – in the country chronically deprived of health care, their services were generally well-received and welcomed. Only in 1988, the doctors’ teams served more than 20 thousand Afghans. Medical help was also accompanied by pro-Soviet propaganda – while medics were

attending the sick, accompanying agitators would address the local population (Nabatov, 2011). The West engaged in health care efforts in Afghanistan by actively supporting the fight against polio. Such projects have and will have a lasting impact on Afghanistan, regardless of who is in power in Kabul. Overall, some scholars have noted the preference for massive infrastructure projects in Soviet development efforts as opposed to primarily community-level development preferred by the Western allies (Dörre, Kraudzun, 2012: 425-426).

4. WAR CASUALTIES: MILITARY AND CIVILIAN

The fatalities sustained by all Soviet forces in Afghanistan during the nine years of conflict were just under 14,500. Out of almost 700 thousand people deployed, and fatalities exceeding one million people on the enemy side, this does not look like a substantial number, but most of these people were killed by hospital-acquired infections, untreated or poorly treated wounds, carbon monoxide poisoning, vehicular and other accidents, etc. Further, the Soviet troops in Afghanistan had very little personal protection: bulletproof vests were very rare, and the available ones, were rather useless. In other words, the vast majority of the Soviet fatalities occurred not because of outstanding military performances by the Mujahedin, but due to incompetence and negligence of Soviet military officers, planners, and leaders. The massive Soviet retaliations for Mujahedin staged ambushes or skirmishes were gross overreactions that killed or injured thousands of Afghans for every Soviet soldier killed or injured. This indiscriminate bloodshed, more than anything else, contributed to the prolonged and pointless war, and the eventual Soviet defeat – the Soviet Union failed to achieve a single political objective in Afghanistan and left the country and its pro-Soviet government regime worse off than they found it 9 years earlier.

Western casualties were relatively minor in absolute numbers compared to those sustained by the Soviet Union. Over the 20-year war, about 50 NATO and partner countries contributed troops to Afghanistan. At its peak in 2011, about 140,000 coalition troops were deployed in Afghanistan – President Obama’s “surge” (*Al Jazeera*, 2021). However, on average, there were about 30,000 Western coalition troops deployed in Afghanistan a year, the majority of which were in support roles. Overall, from 2001 to 2021, more than 3,500 coalition members lost their lives in Afghanistan. During the same period, there were more than 30 thousand suicides

among U.S. service members and veterans of the post-9.11 wars (Watson Institute, 2021). Lower combat fatalities could be explained by less intense combat the Western coalition experienced compared to the Soviets and the fact that the Taliban insurgents and their allies were neither supported with massive military aid nor equipped with sophisticated weapons. More importantly, the lower Western casualty among the deployed men and women was due to the highest priority the U.S., ISAF, and its successor military commands gave to the safety and well-being of their troops. Obviously, the same cannot be said about the wellbeing of the war veterans, especially those of the United States: they were largely left on their own after separating from the military.

An estimated 241,000 people were killed in Afghanistan during the U.S.-led war there, of which more than 71 thousand were civilians (*Al Jazeera*, 2021). The 10-year long Soviet occupation and war killed at least 500 thousand (Afghans Mass Atrocity Endings, 2015). However, the true casualties of the two-decade-long Western mission in Afghanistan have been young Afghan boys. Mullah Omar and his allies started the Taliban movement in the early 1990s primarily to combat and root out the pernicious ancient tradition of Bacha Bazi (Rashid, 2010). This is a tradition of child slavery and sexual exploitation by influential Afghan men. In Afghanistan, there is a well-known saying: “women are for children, boys are for men.” Historically, many of these boys were either sold into sexual slavery or kidnapped by their captors (Mondloch, 2013). The Taliban had virtually eliminated this barbaric practice by 2001, but it made a surprising comeback after the U.S.-led troops displaced them. There is no credible data about Bacha Bazi during the Soviet occupation except that the Western-funded Mujahidin practiced it. So did many field commanders of the Northern Alliance, who with the U.S. help captured Kabul in November 2001. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviets had eliminated the practice in Soviet Central Asia by simply shooting the perpetrators as class enemies. It is unlikely that they tolerated this practice in the parts of Afghanistan controlled by the Soviet forces. On the other hand, the U.S.-led forces were either unwilling or unable to challenge the Bacha Bazi practice, except in isolated cases when American soldiers decided to stop the abuse of boys by their initiative (*The New York Times*, 2015). The Bacha Bazi practiced under the Karzai, and Ghani governments with the thousands of young boys held captive and sexually exploited by influential Afghan men (*The Week*, 2020). On the other hand, the Taliban continued to fight the practice by executing everyone involved in exploiting young boys. There is an excellent reason to suspect that their opposition to the Bacha Bazi institution helped find recruits

and volunteers and justified their struggle in the eyes of ordinary Afghans (Prey and Spears, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

There are distinct historical parallels and differences between the experiences of the Soviet and Western forces in Afghanistan. Both Soviet and Western invasions took place to deter third parties from gaining control of Afghanistan. In neither case, the military occupation produced effective and lasting results. The Soviets and the West aimed at arming and training more than 300 thousand Afghan military and security personnel before the withdrawal. Neither the Soviet Union nor the West attempted to resolve the land distribution issue and destructive agricultural policies that caused the Afghan war in the 1970s in the first place. In both cases, the withdrawal of the troops took place after negotiated agreements. The Soviet drawdown and withdrawal from Afghanistan were subject to international negotiations and promises made through bilateral and multilateral channels. The Western withdrawal was negotiated directly with the insurgents, the Taliban. In other words, there was significant international pressure and interest in seeing the Soviets out of the country, while the Western coalition withdrew because the U.S. leadership lost faith in the Afghan mission. The plight of civilians in Afghanistan, millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Iran, and elsewhere and other related or similar humanitarian concerns were the primary motivating factors behind the international pressure exerted on the Soviets. In comparison, no international pressure has been brought upon the U.S.-led coalition – the only parties with significant interest in the process have been primarily within the domestic political contexts of coalition members.

The Soviets completely misjudged and butchered Afghanistan by failing to meet their political objectives – they did not have to go in, once there, they did not have to stay that long, and when fighting the insurgents, they did not have to use vastly disproportionate military force. – All parties of the 1980s war, especially the Soviet side, would have been better off had they stayed away from Afghanistan. In comparison with the soviet experience, the American enemy in Afghanistan was neither imaginary nor potential. An attack on the United States on September 11, 2001, originated from the Afghan soil that triggered the Western invasion in late 2001. However, the Western coalition similarly misjudged and lost Afghanistan after 20 years of fighting. They committed some of the same mistakes the Soviets had made two decades prior,

albeit at a lower scale. In the end, despite the modest successes of the American-led mission, after the withdrawal of the Western troops from the country, Afghanistan is edging closer to collapse. Primarily triggered by the cessation of Western aid to the country and the freezing of Afghanistan's hard currency accounts held in Western banks, the lack of financial resources cripples the new Taliban regime's ability to maintain security and coherent policies throughout the country they now rule.

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