

The Muslim Battalions: Soviet Central Asians in the Soviet-Afghan War

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This article concerns the Soviet military's use of soldiers of Afghan ethnicities (Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen, and others) during its war in Afghanistan, both as spetsnaz and more generally in the 40th army. Special Forces Detachment 154 and Special Forces Detachment 177, the first and second 'Muslim Battalions,' would play important roles not only during the palace takeover in December 1979 but also during the 1983 cease-fire in Panjshir. This article challenges earlier views that Soviet Muslims and Central Asians were unreliable soldiers who colluded with mujahedin, and points to a more balanced perspective of their role in Afghanistan.

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan, which lies along the southern border of the former USSR, is home to a plethora of ethnicities, including the titular ethnicities of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. These three ethnic groups composed an estimated 35 percent of Afghanistan's estimated 17 million inhabitants in 1979: Pashtuns constituted a plurality at 9 million, Tajiks numbered 4 million, Uzbeks 1.5 million, and Turkmen about 1.1 million.¹ Afghanistan and the former Soviet Central Asian republics share not only a demographic connection, but also certain customs and traditions, cultural and religious identification with Islam (to varying degrees), and linguistic overlap. Common features between Soviet Central Asians and Afghans were strategically exploited

¹ The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, trans. Lester W. Grau University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, KS, 2001, p. 5. Note that the 1979 census in Afghanistan was never completed, so these are as close as can be derived.

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during the Soviet Union's decade-long war in Afghanistan. Fought from the end of 1979 until 1989, the war pitted the Soviet Union and its client government in Kabul, the DRA (Democratic Republic of Afghanistan) against the *mujahedin* ('warriors of God')—Afghan guerilla fighters who represented Islamic and nationalist opposition to communist reforms in their country, and later to Soviet occupation of it.

This article concerns the Soviet Union's strategic use of the 'ethnic factor' during the decade long war it fought against Central Asia's co-ethnics and co-religionists, focusing primarily on the beginning phases of the war, when a high proportion of Central Asians were deployed in the 40th army of the general armed forces, and also covertly as *spetsnaz* (Special Forces) under the command of the GRU (Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye), or the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Red Army. Central Asian *spetsnaz* served in the so-called 'Muslim Battalions,' which played an important role in the Soviet Union's pre-invasion operations, and afterward continued to be used in Afghanistan open battle maneuvers, reconstruction efforts, ambushes, and even 'peacekeeping' missions. This article will examine the overall effectiveness of the Soviet Armed Forces' ethnic policy with regards to the Soviet-Afghan war, including the interaction and relationship between Soviet Central Asian troops and Afghans. While the use of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen in Soviet forces is often said to have been a failure, the material in this article points at a more balanced conclusion. While there are accounts of Central Asian and Soviet Muslim soldiers sympathizing with the Afghan cause and even defecting to the *mujahedin*, other evidence indicates that many Soviet Central Asian soldiers, if not the majority, served the Soviet Union's cause without viewing it from a separate nationalist or ethnic lens. This perhaps speaks to the strength of the 'Soviet identity' and the successes of Soviet nationality policy.

Few western sources study this particular topic in detail. A series of studies conducted by the Rand Corporation in the early 1980s detailing the 'ethnic factor' in the Red Army, had no knowledge of the critical role that Central Asians played as Special Forces, and their findings in terms of the role of minorities in the military, as well as conclusions drawn about their reliability, are therefore incomplete. Primary sources for this article include memoirs and accounts written by military figures directly involved in the events—Major General Sergei Kozlov (code name Kolesnik), who was the senior GRU representative in Kabul prior to the war, and architect and director of the first Muslim Battalion, and Lieutenant Boris Tukenovich Kerimbaev, who commanded the second Muslim Battalion until October 1983. Military historian Lester Grau's work informs the bulk of the information on the Taj Bek palace takeover.

Other more anecdotal information comes from interviews I conducted with Soviet veteran soldiers, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in March of 2010. These were particularly helpful on the topic of interactions and relations

between Soviet Central Asians and Afghans, and their narratives helped add important insights to the experience of Central Asians in this war. Ten interviews were conducted in total, ranging from an interview with an air base guard who never saw combat, to General Major (then ranked captain) Mels² Sagynalievich Bekboev, vice-commander of the second Muslim Battalion under Lieutenant B.T. Kerimbaev. After the war, Bekboev would go on to become the First Deputy Minister of Defense, and later the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces for Kyrgyzstan.³ All the interviewees served in different battalions and at different times during the war. Veterans were asked a variety of questions regarding their service in Afghanistan, from ethnic divisions in their battalion, their interaction with Afghan troops and civilians, to broader questions about why they felt the war was conducted, and whether they felt there was an ethnic strategy in the Soviet military's deployment plans. All of the interviews were conducted with the help of a Kyrgyz translator, a university student fluent in English, Kyrgyz, and Russian.

Besides two Uzbeks and one Russian, all of the interviewees were Kyrgyz, who, one might note—have no sizeable co-ethnic population in Afghanistan.⁴ Unfortunately missing from the interviewees were former Soviet Tajik soldiers. Tajiks are the second largest population in Afghanistan behind Pashtuns, and speak Farsi—Afghanistan's lingua franca. In fact, hundreds of Tajik officers were recruited as military translators during the war.⁵ Soviet Tajik soldiers would have been most capable of blending in with Afghans in terms of both their physical features and their language. While the interviews were limited, they did help to call into question some of the conclusions of western analysts, on issues such as why Central Asians in the regular army were replaced by Slavic soldiers as the war went on about ethnic cleavages and racism in the Red Army.

LEAD UP TO INVASION

By the end of 1978, the Soviet Union had a firm foothold in key structures of the DRA, including Afghan security forces and military units.⁶ In mid-March 1979, as the fight against the *mujahedin* took a noticeable downturn (the city of Herat mutinied against the DRA regime that month; some 5,000 people

² 'Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin.'

³ Snowball sampling method.

⁴ A small but negligible population of Kyrgyz also exists in Afghanistan, at the northeastern tip, most likely remnants of the *basmachi* movement.

⁵ Alexiev, Alexander, *Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1988, p. 43.

⁶ Grau, Lester, W. 'The Takedown of Kabul: An Effective Coup de Main,' in William G. Robertson and Lawrence A. Yates (eds.), *Block by Block: The Challenges of Urban Operations*. (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 2003), p. 292.

died in the fighting), the DRA President Nur Muhammad Taraki phoned Soviet Premier Kosygin in his first major appeal for intervention:

I ask you to extend assistance. I suggest you place Afghan markings on your tanks and aircraft and no one will know the difference. Your troops could advance from the direction of Kushka and Kabul. In our view, no one would catch on. They'd think they were government troops . . . Why can't the Soviet Union send Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen in civilian clothing? No one would recognize them. We want you to send them. They could drive the tanks because we have all those nationalities in Afghanistan. Put them in Afghan costume and give them Afghan badges and no one will recognize them. It's very easy work, in our view.⁷

Near the end of the conversation, President Taraki again repeated the request that the Soviet Union send 'drivers who speak our language—Tajiks and Uzbeks,' for infantry fighting vehicles. The Soviet Union declined to formally send Soviet troops into Afghanistan for the time being, explaining in meeting with Taraki on March 20, 1979 that it was not a politically expedient move for them. However, President Taraki's other suggestions were not taken off the table: in that same month, the Soviet Union transferred 'eight Mi-8 helicopters, a transport squadron of AN-12s, a signal center, and a paratroop battalion' to the Bagram airbase in Afghanistan. Though aircraft and personnel were Soviet, the aircraft was disguised with Afghan markings and crew, including the paratroopers, were dressed in Afghan uniform. The group would conduct reconnaissance of the country.⁸ Moreover, one month after Taraki's telephone conversation with Kosygin, the Soviet General Staff formed the Muslim Battalion.

The Muslim Battalion was originally created to protect President Taraki.⁹ While the men would ultimately not be used for this purpose, this was not the first time that Soviet military had ceded to a request by an Afghan political leader to use Soviet troops as his own. Fifty years earlier, in April 1929, the Emir of Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan, facing domestic opposition against his modernizing reforms, had also asked for help from the Soviet Union to defeat a conservation opposition movement, which included former *basmachi* (members of the failed Central Asian resistance movement against Soviet expansion). In concern, Stalin sent an expedition of 800–1,000 Red Army soldiers, armed with machine guns, artillery, and even airpower to Afghanistan. These soldiers were dressed in Afghan uniform. Though they

⁷ Moscow Russian Television Network in Russian, 'Special File' program, 14 July 1992, as translated in FBIS-SOV-92-138 (17 July 1992), pp. 30–31, in Feifer, Gregory, *The Great Gamble* Harper, New York, pp. 31–32.

⁸ Grau, Lester W., 'The Takedown of Kabul: An Effective Coup de Main', p. 292.

⁹ Feifer, Gregory, *The Great Gamble*, Harper, New York, 2009, p. 16.

made some military gains, Amanullah Khan soon left power and the soldiers were ordered back to the USSR.¹⁰

Neither was 1979 the first time the Soviet Union exploited the 'ethnic factor' between Central Asia and Afghanistan. In the late 1940s, Soviet Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen entered into Afghanistan and contacted their Afghan ethnic counterparts and relatives, proselytizing the Soviet cause for 'purposes of espionage and subversion.' This was an unsuccessful endeavor, and the involved parties were turned in by their own targets, who were often either *basmachi* or the sons of Soviet resistance.¹¹ Nevertheless, the use of co-ethnic Central Asian individuals, or at least Soviets dressed in Afghan garb, clearly was not unprecedented.

Special Operations Detachment 154 (SpN oo 154), otherwise known as the 'Muslim Battalion,' was formed by a directive signed by the Soviet General Staff on April 26, 1979, and was fully staffed with 520 soldiers by June 1, 1979. Members were all of Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmen or otherwise Central Asian ethnicity and were the best specialists in the Turkestan and Central Asian Military Districts. Though they were recruited on a voluntary basis, in the absence of volunteers, a good specialist could be enrolled even against his own will. Only a single antiaircraft-gunner position could not be filled with an individual of the required Central Asian nationality. As Colonel Sharipov, who led the Muslim Battalion's 1st Company during the 27 December palace assault put it, 'the idea was to put together a unit of Soviet Central Asians who looked liked Afghans.'¹²

In addition to the command and staff group, the Muslim Battalion was composed of four companies:

The 1st company was mounted on tracked BMP-1s, and the 2d and 3d companies were mounted on wheeled BTR-60PBs. The 4th Company was a weapons company with an AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher platoon, a 'Lynx' RPO flamethrower platoon, and a platoon of sappers. The detachment also included three separate platoons: signal, ZSU 23-4 'Shilka,' and an automotive and material support platoon. A mobile field dressing station with a doctor-anesthesiologist and a surgeon was also assigned to the battalion.¹³

According to the writings of Major Kozlov, the GRU officer who oversaw the unit's creation and headed the palace coup operations, it was the

¹⁰ Krivolapov, O. 'Spetsnazna Afghanskoi voine [Spetsnaz in the Afghan War]' <http://vdv-specnaz1.narod.ru/stat/spec/spec1.htm> (accessed 12 February 2010) and Girardet, E., *Afghanistan: The Soviet War*, p. 89 and Bruce, J., *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation*, p. 14.

¹¹ Dupree, Louis, *Afghanistan*, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 512 .

¹² Demytrie, Rahan, 'Central Asian Role of Muslim Battalions,' BBC News, Feb. 16, 2008.

¹³ 'Shilka' is a mobile antiaircraft weapon system. Major V. Koslov, *Spetsnaz: Pyadesyat let istorii, dvatsat let voiny* [Spetsnaz 50 years of history, 20 years of war] Russian Panorama, Moscow, 2001, p. 101.

first *spetsnaz* force of its kind so equipped. Each of the companies included a translator from the Military Institute of Foreign Languages, but there was little necessity on this front, as 'all the Tajiks, approximately half the Uzbeks and part of the Turkmen knew or could manage Farsi—one of the main languages of Afghanistan.' From June until August, led by their Uzbek commander, Major Habib Halbaev, they were trained as paratroopers, and carried out tactical exercises such as seizing mountain passes, capturing the airfields, urban warfare, and overtaking buildings—all activities they would engage in in Afghanistan.¹⁴ Besides the ethnic requirements, SpN oo 154 would also serve as the prototype for the seven other GRU *Spetsnaz* detachments that were also eventually deployed.

President Taraki was overthrown in a coup by a rival communist faction in September 1979. His successor, Hafizullah Amin, still heavily relied on the Soviet Union, particularly after a failed coup attempt by his own army officers in October, after which he requested a Soviet guard for his protection. This seems to have been granted: small units of Soviet Central Asians began taking over guard duties from Afghan troops in October and November along critical communication links. But, control of these vital routes might very well have been related to the Soviet Union's preliminary plans for invasion.¹⁵ President Amin's brutal methods of rule, his inability to manage the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, as well as suspicions that he was aligned with the west, soon led the Soviet Union to conclude that Amin could no longer remain President. By requesting Soviet intervention against the rising threat of his opponents, Amin had invited to his side the very soldiers that the Soviet Union would use to assassinate him.

On December 4, 1979, KGB chairman Yuri Andropov, and the Chief of the General Staff, Nikolai Ogarkov, sent to the Politburo directive 312/2/0073:

Given the current situation and at the request of Amin consider it appropriate to send to Afghanistan the detachment of the GRU General Staff the 500 persons prepared for this purpose, in uniform which does not disclose their affiliation to the USSR Armed Forces.¹⁶

SpN oo 154 embarked from the Chirchik airfield in Uzbekistan for the Soviet airbase in Bagram, Afghanistan on 9 and 10 December.¹⁷ With their

¹⁴ Colonel Krivopalov, ed. Stoderevskiy, I.Y, <http://154stoder.ru/history.html> (accessed 1 April 2010)

¹⁵ Arnold, Anthony, *Afghanistan, the Soviet Invasion in Perspective*, Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, CA, 1985, p. 91.

¹⁶ Lyakhovskiy, Alexandr, 'Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and Seizure of Kabul, December 1979,' Cold War International History Project, Working Paper #51, pp. 14–15.

¹⁷ Feifer, Gregory, *The Great Gamble*, p. 58. This information is unclear: Major V. Kozlov puts this date of the Muslim Battalion entry into Afghanistan at November 19 and 20, but an interview with General Major Bekboev follows Feifer's assertion that they entered in December.

grave misgivings about President Amin, and pressure from KGB chief Yuri Andropov to take decisive action, the Soviet Politburo made the decision to take Hafizullah Amin out on 12 December two days after the Muslim Battalion had arrived on Afghan soil.¹⁸

The infiltration was to be flawless: Afghan army uniforms had been sewn for the Central Asian soldiers in Moscow, and forged Afghan identification documents had been prepared for them as well. Each of the Muslim Battalion members kept use of his own name, as their Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen names were not unusual for Afghanistan. Two KGB *spetsnaz* groups: the 'Grom' (Thunder) detachment of Group A, and 'Zenit' (Zenith) also arrived in early December. These two KGB *spetsnaz* groups and GRU's Muslim Battalion would be the main agents of the 27 December Taj Bek palace assault.

The Soviets had direct access to Hafizullah Amin on multiple fronts: Amin's security brigade as well as his bodyguards included KGB and Soviet military advisers. Further, Soviet military doctors looked after his health, and Soviet cooks prepared the food that he ate. While most of these individuals were unaware of the plans to assassinate Amin, a few such agents were instrumental in the planning. For example, KGB had infiltrated the kitchens of his presidential palace in Kabul with secret agent Lieutenant-Colonel Mutalin Agaverdioglu Talybov. Talybov was a Farsi-speaking Azerbaijani who could successfully pass as an Afghan. He was hired as a chef in the fall of 1979.¹⁹

The first assassination attempt took place in Kabul on 13 December. Talybov dissolved poison in the president's favorite drink, Coca Cola. In preparation for his death, the Soviet Union's hand-picked successor, Babrak Kamal, was flown into the Bagram airbase. The Zenit *spetsnaz* group, was prepared to assault the presidential palace—the plan being that they would join soldiers of the Muslim Battalion outfitted with BTRs (armored personnel carriers), ram through the palace gates, and storm inside. Those same Muslim Battalion soldiers would break into smaller units to provide cover from outside. Other Muslim Battalion members and a unit of Soviet paratroopers were to take over the Communications Ministry and other key buildings in Kabul. Though they had no knowledge of the coup plot against President Amin—the Turkestan Military District was also ordered to mobilize, and prepare for full combat readiness. Though all the units were prepared for the assault, the Coca Cola attempt failed—carbonation in the soda apparently rendered the poison ineffective.²⁰

¹⁸ Feifer, Gregory, *The Great Gamble*, p. 58.

¹⁹ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World*, Basic Books, New York, 2005, pp. 401–402.

²⁰ Feifer, Gregory, *The Great Gamble*, pp. 59–67.

Oblivious, President Amin, concerned for his own safety and apparently persuaded by Soviet advisers, soon relocated from the presidential palace in Kabul to the Taj Bek Palace in Darulaman, on the outskirts of the capital. The new location, conveniently away from the urban center, would be the site of the final and successful assassination attempt.

At Taj Bek, Amin was informed that he would be receiving extra protection from Soviet *spetsnaz* officers: the Muslim Battalion. To the Afghan President, the entrance of these new *spetsnaz* was a part of the Soviet Union's commitment as an ally. For the brief days between his relocation and his death on 27 December 1979, Amin trusted the Afghan-looking troops as his second line of defense at the palace, behind only his close company of bodyguards who were headed by DRA Major Dzhandat—an Afghan officer who, not unusually, was trained in a USSR military academy. President Amin also had 2,500 DRA personnel internally and externally protecting the palace, in addition to DRA tank brigades garrisoned near Kabul.²¹

The Muslim Battalion held the eastern side of the palace's external perimeter, billeted in uncompleted barracks on the overlooking mountains. The chief Soviet military adviser, General Magomedov, ordered the Muslim Battalion to establish contacts with Afghan security troops and work out plans for the joint protection of the palace, in what Lester Grau calls a 'preliminary move to minimize resistance.' Thus, two days before the palace takeover, on 25 December the Muslim Battalion organized a reception for 15 high officials of the Afghan Security Brigade.

For this reception, Uzbek members of the Muslim Battalion bought vegetables and ingredients at the market, and prepared traditional foods including pilaf, a Central Asian rice dish. KGB personnel at the Soviet embassy provided vodka and cognac (alcohol was served in teacups to provide 'an appearance of propriety'), as well as delicacies such as caviar and fish.²² The two parties toasted to Soviet-Afghan military cooperation and friendship, but under the influence of alcohol, the Afghan security brigade's political deputy let it slip that former President Taraki had been executed under Amin's orders. This information, relayed back to central command the next day, confirmed suspicions about Hafizullah Amin. Amin had previously used Taraki's life as a bargaining chip in his negotiations with the USSR, promising to keep Taraki alive in exchange for the help of Soviet troops. When Taraki died, the new government's cover-up for his murder, as reported by *The Kabul Times* on 10 October 1979 was that Taraki had died of a 'serious illness, which he had been suffering for some time . . .'²³ Kozlov believes this episode helped his government to act decisively in their next actions. In any case, the plan to take out Amin went forward as planned.

²¹ Grau, Lester W., 'Takedown of Kabul,' p. 298.

²² Ibid.

²³ Bradsher, Henry S., *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention*, p. 59.

Besides the change of location and an increased number of involved Soviet troops, Operation 'Storm-333' of 27 December was largely the same as the abandoned takeover plan of 13 December.²⁴ Between 19:00 and 19:30, the operation began: first, Kozlov's deputy, Colonel Sakhtov, led a 12-man group to capture three dug-in tanks, to prevent them from being used against the assault forces. Fire cover was provided by the Muslim Battalion's 2nd company placed at a designated position. While driving through the Afghan 3rd Infantry's Battalion, Sakhtov's group made a snap decision to capture their commanding officers, and during the ensuing pursuit and gunfire, Kozlov gave orders to begin the direct palace assault. The palace assault itself was conducted by Zenit and Grom—who were transported on BTRs by the 1st Company of the Muslim Battalion, led by Colonel Sharipov. Two groups from the 1st Company would also be involved in the direct assault.²⁵

Earlier that day, President Amin had been poisoned by the KGB during a formal reception; as oblivious Soviet doctors tried to revive him, 'an officer of Group A shot Amin. For good measure, the Soviet assassins rolled a grenade toward him, exploding near his head, killing him.'²⁶ Outside the palace, the Muslim Battalion's 2nd and 3rd companies continued to block and contain the DRA battalions and security forces. The Afghan Security Brigades were all eventually scattered and destroyed, though fighting between the Muslim Battalion and the 3rd Battalion would continue for the bulk of the next day. Altogether, five Muslim Battalion GRU *spetsnaz* were wounded.

Meanwhile, during the assault, groups of KGB and GRU *spetsnaz*, paratroops, advisers, and several pro-Soviet Army units fanned out to seize other key targets in Kabul: the PDPA's communist party building; the buildings of the Ministries of Defense, Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Communications; the Central Army Corps headquarters; the military counterintelligence building; the radio and television center; Pul-e Charki, the infamous prison for political prisoners; and the central post and telegraph offices.²⁷ From the newly captured radio and television buildings, the forces set up a transmission to the public and Babrak Kamal, the Soviet hand-picked successor, declared the formation of a new government. By the next morning the new president was fully in power. The palace assault and takeover of Kabul was a success, and Soviet regular army troops had already begun to enter into Afghanistan to support the new regime.

The Muslim battalion left the country on 10 January 1980, moved back to Chirchik, Uzbekistan, and from there, to their homes. All of them received state awards. Their roles in the war were not revealed to the public, and the list of all the awardees and men involved in this operation is still kept

²⁴ Feifer, Gregory, *The Great Gamble*, pp. 68–69.

²⁵ Grau, Lester W., 'Takedown of Kabul,' p. 300.

²⁶ Feifer, Gregory, *The Great Gamble*, p. 78.

²⁷ Grau, Lester W., 'Takedown of Kabul' p. 296.

secret.²⁸ Special Operations Detachment 154 (154 oo SpN), the ‘Muslim Battalion’, would again soon be reformed, with new recruits, and headed by new commander Major Igor Yujevich Stoderevsky. For the most part it kept its primarily Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen ethnic composition.²⁹ The Muslim Battalion would be deployed to Afghanistan yet again at the end of the October, 1981, along with a second *spetsnaz* force: 177 oo SpN—the second Muslim Battalion.

Special Operations Detachment 177 was formed in February 1980 in Kapchugai, Kazakhstan. Like its counterpart, 177 oo SpN was also a selective group, comprised of soldiers chosen not only for their physical fitness and technical knowledge of how to operate the weapons and equipment, but also by their knowledge of Central Asian languages—Uighur (another Central Asian ethnic group), Uzbek, and Tajik. Recruited into this battalion were 300 Uighurs who had originally been drafted to help build sites for the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. Uighur soon ceased to be a staffing requirement and once those soldiers rotated out, the unit would go on to recruit other Central Asian nationalities: Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkmen, and Kazakhs and Kyrgyz soldiers.³⁰ This new 750-man force was led by Lieutenant Colonel Boris Tukenovich Kerimbaev (born in Kazakhstan), who wrote a memoir recounting the detachment’s activity.³¹ Special Operations Detachment 154 and Special Operations Detachment 177, the Muslim Battalions, were the first two of what would become a total of eight highly trained GRU *spetsnaz* detachments of the 15th and 22nd *Spetsnaz* Brigades involved in the war in Afghanistan. The other six GRU *spetsnaz* battalions would not start entering Afghanistan until early 1984.³²

MUSLIM BATTALIONS IN WAR

B.T. Kerimbaev’s memoirs, as expected from a *spetsnaz* commander, detail his concern with the success of operations, the well-being of his soldiers, and understanding the nature of his *mujahedin* enemy. He describes engineering and reconstruction projects that his battalion was engaged in, major operations that they conducted, negotiations and interactions with local Afghan officials and village elders, but nowhere does he indicate an ethnic dimension to his experience of the war beyond his description of the recruitment

²⁸ Interview with Vice Commander Bekboev.

²⁹ Larsen, Hans Henrik, ‘Commanders for Organic Special Forces Units in the 40th Army in Afghanistan,’ accessed April 19, 2010 http://www.spets.dk/chefer_spets_afghan.htm

³⁰ Kerimbaev, B.T., “Kapchagaiski batalon [The Kapchugai Battalion]”, accessed on <http://war.afgan.kz/index.php> (accessed February 13, 2010) and Demetrie, Rayhan “Afghan role of Muslim Battalions,” BBC News, Feb. 16, 2008.

³¹ The figure 750 comes from M.S. Bekboev.

³² 40th Army, VDV, Spetsnaz GRU, <http://war.afgan.kz> (accessed March 2010)

process. Nor does he indicate that being Central Asian affected the battle effectiveness of his group in any way.

Presumably, though, being Central Asian did help the two *spetsnaz* groups to gain the trust of local Afghans (at least in the northern and central provinces where they were stationed). ‘They trusted us more,’ said 177 oo SpN vice-commander Bekboev. He said that usually when Soviet troops would occupy a town, the locals would respond in panic by closing down shops and bazaars, shutting their doors, but ‘not when we would enter.’ In one instance, when the second Muslim battalion was stationed in the mountains for over a week with no electricity and only dry food-stuffs, local Afghans took those dry provisions and made hot meals for the soldiers.

The case of Darzob district is another example of good relations between the second Muslim Battalion and locals. Darzob is located in the northern province of Faryab, which is predominately occupied by Uzbek and Tajik populations. The second Muslim battalion found itself there in January 1982. After the successful conclusion of military operations, conducted with other Soviet forces, 177 oo SpN was left behind in the village to help lend support to the DRA reconstruction efforts. Commander Kerimbaev’s memoirs describe how through patient work, reconstruction of the village infrastructure, and the show of good will to the locals, residents of the town who had fled to the mountains (numbering 10,000), started to return. He himself worked closely with a DRA commander to gather village elders to ensure that vital activity in the village could resume. Their presence achieved major successes: not only did a network of local Soviet informants develop, but a local gang/rebel leader, Mavlavi Pahlavan, switched to the side of the DRA, along with a 120–150 of his armed followers. Kerimbaev speaks of sitting down and drinking tea for these negotiations. The Muslim Battalion would leave Darzob with very good relations with the locals—so much so that when 177 oo SpN was ordered out of the area, Darzob village elders petitioned President Kamal for part of the group to stay behind in the village, on the villages’ own allowance.

It is unclear how often *spetsnaz*, who were the most highly trained soldiers of the USSR, engaged in noncombat work openly among civilians. The Muslim Battalion may have been stationed there deliberately as a psychological operation; such activities were often employed by the Soviet military in the Afghan countryside to lend credibility to the USSR’s mission of liberation. Such missions often depended on Soviet Central Asian soldiers who were familiar with local customs and had linguistic skills. The Muslim Battalion, who, in many villages could talk to all the locals without the use of translators would have been perfectly suited for this type of work.³³

³³ Interview with M.S. Bekboev.

But Bekboev admits that in the middle of 1982, as operations became larger-scale, and opposition all across the country increased, relations with the Afghans began to sour. Afghans may have been willing to cook hot meals for the soldiers, but elsewhere they were just as willing to sell them poisoned food, as Commander Kerimbaev recounts.

In 1982, the second Muslim Battalion found itself in the Panjshir Valley—the stronghold of Ahmad Shah Massoud, an area notorious for its strong resistance. Massoud, a Tajik, had prior to that year repelled four Soviet forays into the valley despite being severely outnumbered. The Soviet and DRA forces launched two more large-scale offensives in 1982. The first of the two was launched in May. While the estimated 8,000 Soviet troops and 4,000 DRA troops managed to briefly force the guerrillas into hiding, by July, Massoud was again in control of the Valley. A second offensive had to be launched in September, with 10,500 Soviet-DRA fighters. Within a few weeks, this failed as well. Soviet inability to defeat Massoud was not only an embarrassment; the *mujahedin's* control of the valley also constituted a serious threat for Soviet military supply lines, which needed to get through the Salang Tunnel in order to reach central and eastern Afghanistan.

As a result of the 1982 offensives, Soviet losses at Panjshir numbered an estimated 2,000 dead and wounded. Mujahedin losses as a result of the offensives were estimated at 180. Panjshir civilian casualties numbered 1,200.³⁴ Kerimbaev describes scenes of heavy fighting on the steep slopes of the mountain, and multiple ambushes by the mujahedin. These offensives were also marked by high rates of defection by the Afghan DRA troops, as many as 1,000 by some estimates, who took weapons and nine Soviet tanks with them to be now used against the invaders. According to correspondent Edward Girardet, there were an unconfirmed number of Soviet Muslims from Central Asian republics who also changed sides during the offensive.³⁵

Although approached by senior DRA officials for ceasefire negotiations, the ‘Lion of Panjshir,’ made it clear he was not interested in talking to ‘puppets.’ Thus, by the end of 1982, the Soviet Union directly contacted Ahmad Shah Massoud. In early January, a GRU colonel, Anatoly Tkachev, entered guerilla territory and after tense bargaining over tea, managed to secure a six-month ceasefire.³⁶ The cease-fire would give Panjshiri residents a much needed respite in order to rebuild homes, shops, mosques, and begin cultivating their fields again. Massoud also used the year to retrain men and replenish supplies to boost his forces.

³⁴ Girardet, Edward, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War*, p. 85.

³⁵ Ibid, pp. 80–84.

³⁶ Alexander A. Lyakhov, ‘Ahmad Shah,’ http://artofwar.ru/1/ljahovskij_a_a/text_0010.shtml (accessed February 20, 2010)

Under the terms of the ceasefire, the Soviets kept a limited contingent of troops at a base in Anawa: SpN oo 177—the second Muslim Battalion. Remnants of the Soviet military were kept in the valley presumably in order to prove a point to Massoud, who had earlier sworn that not a single Soviet troop would be left in the Panjshir Valley. ‘It was a challenge, and its answer was a command decision: our team would enter Panjshir and stay there for one month’ wrote Kerimbaev and so Special Operations Detachment 177 would remain in the valley after all the other troops departed.³⁷ Vice-commander Bekboev recalls that during the ceasefire period, it was a peaceful place and that local residents who had fled during the fighting, began to return to the area. Diamond mining, an important part of the Panjshiri economy, was reestablished, and Massoud took personal responsibility for letting Soviets peacefully through Salang pass.³⁸ Bekboev states that Commander Kerimbaev personally met with Massoud for talks; Kerimbaev in his accounts only mentions negotiations with Massoud’s deputy Azmudinom. Ultimately, the Muslim Battalion spent a total of eight months in the Panjshir Valley, and left on 8 March 1983.

As to why the Soviet command chose to leave this particular force in the valley, it begs a few questions: was it a symbolic gesture to leave an ethnically Central Asian force after the cease-fire? Or was it a more practical consideration, one made due to the fact that this GRU *spetsnaz* group was relatively small, flexible, and could operate independently from the 40th army? More information is required from higher up the command chain regarding this. At the very least, the second Muslim battalion played a notable role in the whole episode both in its military operations during the offensive, as well as afterwards. 177 oo SpN from Panjshir was soon relocated to the city Gulbahor in the Parwan Province, according to Kerimbaev, where they established a new post.³⁹

As for the other Muslim Battalion, Special Operations Detachment 154, it was dispatched to conduct similar missions as 177 oo SpN, in different parts of the country. Its most notable combat operations were: overtaking mujahedin bases at Jar Kuduk in Jowzjan province, in December of 1981, overtaking bases in Darzob, Faryab province, in January 1982 (it seems both Muslim Battalions were involved in the offensive operations here), lifting a blockade imposed by the mujahedin in Sancharaka in the province of Jowzjan in April 1982, destroying two opposition gangs in Cooley Yishan in the Samangan province in October of the same year, and taking mujahedin bases in Marmolskom Gorge in March of 1983.⁴⁰ All these operations took place in the northern and central provinces of Afghanistan,

³⁷ Demytrie, Rahan, ‘Central Asian Role of Muslim Battalions,’ BBC News, Feb. 16, 2008.

³⁸ Interview with Bekboev.

³⁹ Kerimbaev, B.T., ‘Kapchagaiski batalon.’

⁴⁰ Colonel Krivopalov, ed. Stoderevskiy, I.Y., ‘154 oo SpN,’ <http://154.stoder.ru/history.html> > (accessed April 1, 2010).

where Afghanistan's minorities (co-ethnics of the Central Asians), predominate. The diary entries of their commander, Major Igor Stodervesky, are short and concern themselves only with the military events of each day.

The Muslim Battalions were a highly trained and effective Soviet fighting force, and as their successes attest, they were loyal to the Soviet cause. Bekboev says that though Tajiks in the battalion would be questioned by local Tajiks, 'our Tajiks were first of all Soviet soldiers.' Regarding desertions or defections, he said that 'during battles and operations, you of course couldn't monitor everything that was going on . . . there were occasions when people were lost, and their bodies weren't found, but not in our battalion.' By the time left in 1983, he says 52 soldiers had died and 200 were wounded, but everyone was accounted for. Commander Kerimbaev's memoirs are roughly the same: 'In just two years in our unit 50 men were killed, two were missing.'⁴¹ The first Muslim Battalion, 154 oo SpN, losses as of May 1, 1983 were 34 men, with one soldier missing.⁴²

This is a partial story of the Muslim battalions. As the war went on, Slavs would also enter Afghanistan as *spetsnaz* forces, and ethnic requirements within the Muslim battalions also loosened.⁴³ As for the effectiveness of the Soviet military's ethnic policy, Bekboev says that it was only useful initially. He says that the necessity of the Muslim battalion decreased as war escalated. While the Muslim Battalion members may have been ethnically closer to Afghans, and more culturally and linguistically more attuned than their Slavic counterparts—based on the information obtained, it seems that these *spetsnaz* soldiers kept firm sight of their identity as Soviet soldiers.

THE BREZHNEV STRATEGY

That Central Asians 'looked' like Afghans, came from similar cultural backgrounds, and spoke dialects similar to Afghans, was utilized in both covert and open military operations. But in the diplomatic and political arena, there was also a broader aim on the part of the Kremlin to employ and station Central Asians and Muslims in Afghanistan. What one author calls the 'Islamic strategy' of Brezhnev included the widespread use of Soviet Muslims as representatives of the socialism to showcase the benefits and the success of socialist development to their fellow Muslims, and to disprove the idea that Islam and communism were incompatible. This would first occur in Middle Eastern countries, where Tatars, Caucasians, and Central Asians were used in increasing numbers as 'experts, interpreters, propagandists, political,

⁴¹ Kerimbaev, B.T., 'Kapchagaiski batalon [The Kapchugai Battalion].'

⁴² Krivolapov, '154 ooSpN,' <http://154stoder.ru/history.html> (accessed April 1, 2010)

⁴³ Krivolapov, O. 'Spetsnaz na Afghanskoi voine [Spetsnaz in the Afghan War]' <http://vdv-specnaz1.narod.ru/stat/spec/spec1.htm> (accessed February 12, 2010)

administrative and technical cadres.⁴⁴ In Afghanistan, Soviet Muslims began to fill these positions after Nur Mohammad Taraki came to power in the Saur Revolution of 1978. These non-military Central Asians, 'moved into critical sectors of Afghanistan's bureaucracy, the universities and institutes, and into other positions where they could deal with key political, social and cultural issues in Afghan society.'⁴⁵ The highest level appointment of this kind occurred only a few weeks before the Soviet invasion, when a Tatar, Fikryat Tabeyev, was appointed Soviet ambassador to Kabul. He would continue to serve as Soviet ambassador to Afghanistan throughout most of the war, up until 1986.⁴⁶

The influx of Soviet Muslim specialists again increased after the assassination of Hafizullah Amin in December 1979,

... a great many Central Asians came to Afghanistan in their traditional roles as interpreters and technicians ... they came as consultants and experts in solving problems in almost all social, political, cultural and economic dimensions of the Afghan society. They also came to fill in bureaucracy ... They stayed in Afghanistan that ranged from a few days, to several weeks or months. Most of these Central Asians were ideologically committed to the establishment of a socialist regime in Afghanistan.⁴⁷

The use of Muslims and Central Asians so substantially as technocrats as well as in the general armed forces may, on the one hand, be seen as a strategic ploy by Moscow to win over Afghan support, but on the other, it may also show the sincerity of Soviet 'internationalist' motives.

CENTRAL ASIANS IN THE GENERAL ARMED FORCES

In mid-September of 1979, months before the actual invasion, Soviet reserves in the Turkestan and Central Asian military districts (headquartered in Chirchik, Uzbekistan and Kapchugay, Kazakhstan, respectively) were mobilized. Naturally, a substantial number of these soldiers were of Central Asian descent. Westerners reported that the initial deployment included anywhere from as few as 30 and as high as 90 percent Central Asian soldiers.⁴⁸ The exact statistic remains elusive.

⁴⁴ Alexander Bennigsen, 'Soviet Muslims and the Muslim World,' in *Soviet Nationalities in Strategic Perspective*, S. Enders Wimbush, (ed.), p. 218.

⁴⁵ Alexander Alexiev and S. Enders Wimbush, 'Soviet Central Asian Soldiers in Afghanistan,' Rand Corporation, January 1981.

⁴⁶ Naby, Eden 'Ethnic Factor,' p. 251.

⁴⁷ M. Mobin Shorish, 'Soviet Central Asians in Afghan Affairs since the April 1978 Coup,' November 14, 1978.

⁴⁸ *Christian Science Monitor*, 'Soviets Crush Afghan Resistance,' Jan 10, 1980, and J. Bruce, p. 169.

By November, two fronts were established along the border region, led by the 40th army headquartered in Termez, Uzbekistan.⁴⁹ These divisions from Central Asia, with the exception of the airborne division were largely not fully combat-ready (or Category I) at the time of call-up. They were filled with local reserves and available construction units and it is doubtful that the soldiers had received any more than minimal combat and weapons training.⁵⁰

There are a few explanations for why Central Asians were deployed in such high proportion during the war's initial phases. The most practical explanation is that of proximity and logistical convenience: troops stationed in western parts of the USSR would not have been able to be transferred to Afghanistan as readily and quickly as troops on the immediate border. In a 1981 article in *Kommunist*, the Soviet chief of staff highlights the importance of efficacy: 'If an aggressor unleashes a war, the prepared reserves of personnel and equipment assigned to formations and units must reach them in extremely short periods of time.'⁵¹

But another likely reason that Central Asians were used so substantially in the initial invasion was as a strategic effort to 'blunt the political impact of the violent invasion.'⁵² Both the Russian General Staff, and a defecting KGB general reported, it was believed that the affinities between the Central Asians and the Afghans, 'the common bonds of the invader and his victim,' might be able to reduce the opposition and facilitate successful Soviet takeover.⁵³ Certainly linguistically and culturally, Central Asians were in a better position to operate in the country. An Uzbek, who served in artillery and intelligence from 1980–1982, remarked that in the beginning of the war more Muslims were deployed because, 'we as Central Asians knew their culture.'⁵⁴ Interestingly, in other military maneuvers in Eastern Europe, the Red Army often made a point of stationing soldiers far from areas where they might be likely to sympathize with locals. They do not seem to have been initially concerned with this possibility in Afghanistan.

A few of the Central Asian veterans interviewed emphasized another dimension to this policy, that Central Asians were physically more suited to conditions in Afghanistan. Another Uzbek soldier said that Central Asians were used because they were 'more durable,' could better withstand the climate, were more suited to Afghanistan's terrain (and were generally

⁴⁹ Burgess, William, *Inside Spetsnaz: Soviet Special Operations*, Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1989, p. 190.

⁵⁰ Grau, Lester W. 'The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains,' Foreign Military Studies Office, article previously published in the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 17, <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/miredinmount.htm> (accessed April 2010), and Alexander Alexiev and S. Enders Wimbush, 'Soviet Central Asian Soldiers in Afghanistan,' Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, Jan. 1981, p. 13.

⁵¹ Collin, Joseph J., *The Soviet-Afghan War: The First Four Years*, 1984, p. 59.

⁵² Alexiev, Alexander and S. Enders Wimbush, *Soviet Central Asians in Afghanistan*, p. vi

⁵³ Ibid., p.4; *The Russian General Staff, The Soviet-Afghan War*, p.23–24; and 'The Soviet: Coups and Killings in Kabul,' *Time*, 120(21), (Nov. 22, 1982)

⁵⁴ Interview with Tohtakhunov Muhtar Turdamedovich.

physically fitter). He states that Russians had difficulty adapting.⁵⁵ A Kyrgyz veteran also insisted that 'Central Asians were more durable. If you look at it physically, Russians were weaker than Central Asians.'⁵⁶ The question of geographic compatibility is addressed also by a veteran respondent in an older interview: 'Many of the personnel in the landing-assault unit were from Siberia and the Altai region. Why?, maybe because they used to live in the mountains, maybe because they can stand cold better and are of greater endurance than the Europeans.'⁵⁷ Perhaps this was taken into consideration by military leaders and strategists, but barring hard evidence, such speculations can also reveal soldiers' own perceptions, and their regional and ethnic biases. In interviews conducted in the 1980s by the Rand Corporation, many European-featured Red Army soldiers likewise showed little faith in the capabilities of Central Asian soldiers.

But Western literature on the 'ethnic factor' in the Red Army tends towards this latter view, that Central Asian soldiers on the whole were less equipped to be good soldiers. Russian language incompetency often prevented Central Asian or other minority soldiers from taking on technical roles in the military, which required high communication skills, as well as positions of seniority. They were over-represented in construction battalions and ground force infantry.

Structural barriers to minority advancement in the Red Army may have been exacerbated by what seem to have been prevalent attitudes of racism in the Soviet military, as described by western analysts. Though ethnic prejudice was a punishable offense, interviews with ex-Soviet servicemen reveal what one author calls 'a military establishment in which racial segregation has both social and functional manifestations and in which racial discrimination is accepted and routinized.' One Soviet officer, commenting on the practice of always sending Central Asians to kitchen duty while other soldiers engaged in weapons training remarked that Soviet Centrals did not even try to protest because 'they realized that they were incapable of doing anything more.'⁵⁸ And a Ukrainian soldier in the construction units remarked that,

. . . from the beginning we, the white people, considered ourselves somewhat higher and with more privilege than the churkas [highly derogatory term for minorities] . . . that is why, when it is necessary to do some unpleasant work, say clean a toilet, a Kazakh would be sent and the Russians would make him do it. . . . It has always been this way in the army. If I worked with a screwdriver, the Central Asian works with a shovel.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Interview with Abdigapparov Maimurdhson Abdrahmanovich.

⁵⁶ Interview with Batirbekov Samat Myrzakmatovich.

⁵⁷ Alexiev, Alexander, 'Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan,' p. 29.

⁵⁸ Szayna, Thomas, 'The Ethnic Factor,' p. 45.

⁵⁹ Cockburn, Andrew, *The Threat: Inside the Soviet Military Machine*, p. 58.

Interestingly, former Soviet Minister of Defense, Marshal Andrei Antonovich Grechko, tried to defend against what he called ‘the slanderous assertion of Western ideologists to the effect that many peoples of Russia are allegedly not capable of military matter and are useless for military service’ (‘many people of Russia,’ he later defined as ‘non-Russian ethnic groups’). He contrasted ethnic military policy in the Soviet Union’s Army with the United States’:

The minority question in military development is an insoluble problem for capitalistic society based on social, racial and national oppression. However, in a socialist state, where equal rights of peoples has been proclaimed and is assured indeed, such a problem does not exist.⁶⁰

The extent to which this claim was true is difficult to measure; Soviet military journals rarely referred to ethnic tensions as a matter of principle.

Interviews I conducted fell more into line with the work of Ellen Jones, who asserts that while racism was a real problem, western analysts had a heavy tendency to exaggerate what one article written in 1976 referred to USSR’s ‘ticking time-bomb of suppressed minorities.’⁶¹ She claims that there were many cases in which ex-Soviet military men recalled no ethnic problems at all during their service, and sometimes even repeated the Soviet assertion that ‘multiethnic soldiers serve together in friendship and harmony.’⁶² When asked, all the general army soldiers I interviewed had very little to say, and little interest in the topic of racism, no matter how I pressed. Nearly all of those interviewees served in ethnically mixed units.

Certainly, the prevalent 1980s western idea that Central Asians were deemed as ‘unfit’ by the Soviet military establishment has a clear counterexample in the existence and activities of the Muslim Battalions, whose *spetsnaz* members not only represented the highest echelon of Red Army training, expertise, and fitness but they were allowed to operate relatively independently in a country in which, as Central Asians, they might be presumed to be able to identify with the local population.

RELATIONS BETWEEN CENTRAL ASIAN SOLDIERS AND AFGHANS

Relations between Soviet Central Asian soldiers and Afghans (DRA troops and Afghan civilians) seem to have been better compared to relations

⁶⁰ Grechko, A.A., *The Armed Forces of the Soviet State*, Moscow: USSR Ministry of Defense, 1975, p. 112.

⁶¹ E. L Keenan, ‘Soviet Timebomb: A Majority of Suppressed Minorities,’ *The New Republic* (August 1976).

⁶² Jones, Ellen, *Red Army and Society*, 175 (8–9) p. 192.

between Slavic troops and Afghans. A French ethnologist, who travelled around Afghanistan in 1980, noted only one instance of good-will among Afghans and the occupiers:

On his way to Mazar-i-Sharif, he observed one his fellow passengers [on the bus], a Mongolian-featured Afghan Turkmen, wave to a Soviet Kirghiz soldier, also Mongolian-featured, in a long, straggling column of tanks. The soldier returned the greeting with a smile.⁶³

Most of the interviewees confirm that Afghan DRA troop and Afghan civilians had better relations with Soviet Central Asians than with Soviet soldiers of other backgrounds. One Uzbek interviewee who served in the general armed forces says that in contrast with Soviet Central Asians, 'Russians almost didn't even interact with [Afghans].' He says he once asked some DRA troops what they would do after their service was over, and they responded truthfully, 'join the enemy.'⁶⁴ I am doubtful that such a conversation could have occurred between an Afghan soldier and a Slavic or European-featured soldier with the same ease. Edward Girardet wrote that DRA soldiers and civil servants who defected to the resistance, often spoke of 'Russian,' as opposed to Central Asian, disrespect and contempt towards them. The Russians, they say, have also adopted 'brusque, unfriendly and even racist attitudes [towards Afghans].'⁶⁵ Different attitudes and levels of comfort Afghans felt towards Slavic rather than Central Asian Soviet troops are confirmed by a Kyrgyz sergeant, who says that when the Soviet troops stood together, Afghans would first approach the Central Asian soldiers.⁶⁶ But, the relationship might have been a two-way street:

An Afghan soldier of Uzbek ethnic origin, who defected to Pakistan in 1981 . . . said that while serving in Kandahar airport he had become friendly with a Soviet Uzbek soldier with whom he could converse in the Uzbek tongue. The Soviet soldier complained to him that although he and his fellow Central Asian soldiers wore Soviet uniforms, they were not allowed to move freely about the airport, as were ethnic Russians. He also confided that when he and other Central Asians engaged in fire fights with mujahidin, they deliberately aimed their rifles inaccurately.⁶⁷

Interviewed veterans' views of DRA troops were mixed; one Kyrgyz intelligence officer said that when Afghan soldiers walked next to them, and that they 'knew each other as brothers. We would not shoot each other.' But

⁶³ Edward R. Girardet, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War*, p. 46.

⁶⁴ He recognized that this was partly because they faced death threats from *mujabedin*.

⁶⁵ Edward Girardet, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War*, pp. 46–47.

⁶⁶ Interview with Abdrahmanov Shamgaly.

⁶⁷ Armstutz, J. Bruce, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation*, Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1986, p. 170.

other Central Asian interviewees expressed clear contempt for the DRA soldiers, who they imply were cowards. These ‘Afghan “brothers”’ (as we call them), Kerimbaev wrote somewhat bitingly, ‘wanted to establish a socialist life at the expense of our forces. They did not care how many of our children we [sent to Afghanistan].’⁶⁸

Souring relations between Afghan and occupier would increase overall as the war dragged on. But while captured Slavs could expect rapid trial and execution under Islamic law, with no interpreter provided, ‘if someone was a Central Asian soldier and captured, there was hope that they would survive.’^{69, 70} An Uzbek intelligence officer said, ‘Russians were killed right away, while they tried to convert Central Asians, offering them things.’⁷¹ Soviet soldiers were uniformly referred to also as *kafir*, or infidel, even though a good proportion of the Soviet Central Asians soldiers were Muslim.⁷²

CENTRAL ASIAN-AFGHAN COLLUSION

Did Central Asians defect at a greater rate than other Soviet soldiers? Based on anecdotal evidence, the answer seems to be yes. Western analysts saw Soviet Central Asian and Afghan collusion as the reason why in around 1982–83, Central Asians began to drastically decrease as a proportion of the Red Army soldiers deployed in Afghanistan.

A Soviet KGB major who defected to the west, Vladimir Kuzichkin, said that Central Asian soldiers: ‘. . . showed little interest in fighting their neighbors . . . in no time at all they were black-marketeering (including selling army equipment), buying Korans and robbing the local population.’⁷³ Reporter Edward Girardet wrote that ‘according to various estimates, as many as 300 Soviet POWs were being held alive by different guerilla organizations in 1984 . . . includ[ing] a small, but undetermined, number of Soviet deserters, many of Central Asian origin, known to be actively operating with the resistance or living in relative freedom among the Afghans.’⁷⁴ And Ghafoor Yussofzai, an Afghan *mujabedin*, gave this testimony:

When the Soviets first entered our country in 1979 . . . most of the soldiers were Soviet-Central Asians. This is because they speak a language akin

⁶⁸ Kerimbaev, Kapchugai Battalion

⁶⁹ Interview with Tohtakhunov Muhtar Turdahmedovich.

⁷⁰ Moynahan, Brain, *Claws of the Bear: A History of the Soviet Armed Forces for 1917 to the Present* London: Hutchinson, 1989, p. 317.

⁷¹ Interview with Abdugapparov Maimuurdhson Abdrahmanovich.

⁷² Interview with Beknazarov Bakytbek Bekmahmetovich, Abdugapparov Maimuurdhson Abdrahmanovich, and Cholponbek Ismailovich.

⁷³ ‘The Soviet: Coups and Killings in Kabul,’ *Time* 120 (21), (Nov. 22, 1982).

⁷⁴ Edward R. Girardet, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War*, p. 231.

to our own. And the Russians certainly thought that through the use of Soviet-Central Asian troops they could more easily control us. And these Soviet-Central Asian soldiers were told that they [were] coming to defend us in Afghanistan from American, Chinese, and Pakistan military attacks. When these people (Soviet-Central Asians) realized that the only people they were fighting in Afghanistan were Afghans . . . then these Soviet-Central Asians began helping us. They began leaving us packages with ammunition and weapons and caches. They left it in the ground and covered it with earth and just left a little of it emerging. In the beginning we were very suspicious and cautious and poked at this with sticks afraid that they would be mines. And when we finally uncovered these things, we found that they were parcels of weapons and ammunition that these Soviet-Central Asians were leaving for us. The Soviet (Russians) finally became aware that this was going on and [have] since withdrawn Soviet-Central Asian troops from Afghanistan and now they have just brought their own red-faced troops.⁷⁵

Most of the veterans whom I interviewed did not believe that Central Asian soldiers defected at any greater rate than Slavs, though one previous intelligence officer said that regular soldiers captured by the mujahedin were occasionally known to ‘convert to Islam.’⁷⁶ By ‘convert to Islam’ he is likely to have just meant defected to the *mujahedin*. Besides the fact that at least a good number of the Central Asians probably had at least a Muslim cultural background,⁷⁷ being a Soviet soldier in Afghanistan did not necessarily conflict with the soldiers’ religious views.

One interviewee, ironically a self-proclaimed communist, and the first secretary of his battalion, spoke of attending mosque in Afghanistan, which he claimed the Soviet Union had no problem with. He said he was allowed in local mosques, but one needed permission from the local Afghan mullahs, and that you could not bring weapons in with you. He recalled that a local mullah told him, ‘I see that you’re Kyrgyz and Muslim; don’t shoot at someone unless they are shooting at you.’⁷⁸ I asked another soldier what he felt about being called *kafir*, or infidel, by Afghans. He paused, but said he didn’t feel anything. ‘I’ve always believed in Allah,’ he said, ‘but I didn’t think about it. I was just following Soviet orders.’⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Joseph J. Collins, ‘The Soviet-Afghan War: The First Four Years,’ *Parameters*, 14 (2), 1984, p. 61.

⁷⁶ Interview with M.T. Attokurovich. In another interview, an Uzbek, T.M. Tudrahmedovich, even claimed that Russians would more often switch for the other side, and told me that Massoud’s closest and most trusted advisor was originally a Russian paratrooper. This last piece of information is totally unconfirmed.

⁷⁷ One Kyrgyz interviewee, B.S. Myrzakmatovich, himself atheist, says that 80 percent of Central Asians in his battalion (which was 80 percent Central Asian), were Muslim.

⁷⁸ In an interview with Choponbek Ismailovich and B.S. Myrzakmatovich, they said that Soviet Muslims were not allowed by their superiors to go to mosque.

⁷⁹ Interview with A. M. Abdrahmanovich.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS

As previously mentioned, the ethnic composition of the Soviet soldiers changed after the first few years in Afghanistan, beginning in late 1980 and continuing to shift as late as 1983. Almost all the western sources state that the pull-out of Central Asian soldiers was due to their ineffective as fighters, pointing to Central Asians' 'low-combat readiness' and lack of training, as well as putting into question their loyalty and reliability. Yet there may be other explanations for why the proportion of Central Asians decreased.

First, Central Asians simply rotated out. The first two divisions into Afghanistan were drawn from the Central Asian and Turkestan Military District, and most were reservists who had only a 12-month commitment to serve. As time ran out, they were replaced by new conscripts drawn from all over the Soviet Union. To extend the Central Asians reservists' time in Afghanistan would have required the Supreme Soviet to pass a new law, and 'it was not worth it.'⁸⁰

Another explanation given by the Russian General Staff, as written by Colonel Runov, was that Soviet Union sent soldiers of Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmen nationality, believing that they would be better accepted. However, the appearance of the Soviet counterparts of Afghan minorities only fueled Pashtun opposition.⁸¹ M. Mobin Shorish, a specialist on ethnic relations in Afghanistan, wrote in 1978 that a Pashtun-sympathizing government in Afghanistan would have preferred to have Slav bureaucrats and technicians than Soviet Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen, 'who the Pashtun majority may fear will form some sort of rapprochement with their Afghan relatives.'⁸²

Speaking to Central Asian soldiers themselves—nearly all of the respondents, without prompting, gave a third explanation for the changing demographic composition of the army: protests in Central Asia over the high rate of deaths. As Central Asians were over-represented in the armed forces during the first years of the war, they were also over-represented in casualties. M.T. Atturkovich, an intelligence officer said that in Tashkent, mid-summer of 1981, a major protest occurred involving the mothers and families of serving or dead soldiers. He pointed to this as one of the key factors in the armed forces' decisions to change the composition of the soldiers, as did another Uzbek soldier, A.M. Abddrahmaiovich.

⁸⁰ Lester W. Grau, *The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains*, Foreign Military Studies Office, article previously published in the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17 (March 2004), <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/miredinmount.htm> (accessed April 2010)

⁸¹ 'The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*,' trans. Lester W. Grau, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence KS, 2001, p. 24; 'The Soviet: Coups and Killings in Kabul,' *Time*, 120 (21), (Nov. 22, 1982)

⁸² M. Mobin Shorish, 'Soviet Central Asians in Afghan Affairs since the April 1978 Coup,' November 14, 1978.

One Krygyz soldier who served from 1980 to 1981, had never heard of the Tashkent riot, but noted that there was a high Central Asian casualty rate in early 1980s. Some soldiers say that the demographic composition of the army began to change in 1982, some say 1983. General Major M.S. Bekboev, who also attributes the decrease to protests in Central Asia, said that in the spring of 1983, there was an official decree that the armed forces should decrease the amount of Central Asians deployed.⁸³ The Afghan war was not a popular war by any means, and protests would periodically occur throughout the republics of the Soviet Union, but General Major Bekboev claims that the early Central Asian protests were not due to discontent with the war itself, only its consequences in terms of casualties.

VIEW OF THE WAR IN CENTRAL ASIAN REPUBLICS

Briefly, it is useful to mention the view of the war in the Soviet Central Asian republics as it constituted the political backdrop from which Central Asian soldiers entered the battlefield. Western reports from the region at the time indicated that despite linguistic, ethnic, and religious ties to Afghanistan, Central Asia as a whole did not identify with the Afghan resistance cause. According to Craig R. Whitney, writing from Tajikistan in 1980:

All over the Moslem southern crescent of the Soviet Union, the echoes of the military intervention in Afghanistan still resound but with few audible overtones of discontent or protest . . . there seems little support here for an idea sometimes advanced in the West that the Soviet Union may have withdrawn Tadzhik and Uzbek reservists from Afghanistan because of dangers they might be 'infected' by the Moslem fervor of the rebels.⁸⁴

He wrote further that Central Asians showed a wider acceptance of Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan than even Russians 'in Moscow's critical intellectual circles.' Whitney explained that the Soviet Central Asians witnessed their conditions improve under Moscow's rule, and saw little reason to protest the Soviet attempt to transform Afghanistan in the same way.

According to R.W. Apple, another foreign correspondent who wrote that same year from Uzbekistan, 'people in this remote region see the Soviet Union as a friend attempting to prevent the re-imposition of a feudal order on a neighboring country that has strong ethnic links . . . and is as economically

⁸³ Interview with M.S. Bekboev.

⁸⁴ Whitney, Craig R., 'In Soviet Asia, Afghan Thrust Finds Acceptance,' *New York Times*, Apr. 11, 1980.

backward as the Tadzhik and Uzbek republics once were.⁸⁵ This assertion, that Central Asian peoples saw themselves as having moved towards modernity under the auspices of Soviet rule while Afghanistan remained undeveloped, seems supported not only by individuals quoted in the articles, but also by veterans I interviewed.

Soldiers experienced first-hand just how startling different conditions in Afghanistan were from their own Soviet-developed republics. An Uzbek, who served as an intelligence officer in the 108th division, expressed his surprise upon entering Afghanistan. 'Quite frankly, it was like going back to the 17th century,' referencing his surprise at the burqas, and the rampant poverty he saw there. This Uzbek officer had petitioned to join the army, because he 'wanted to help the Afghans.' However, when asked if he felt kinship with Afghan Uzbeks there, he said no. 'How could I feel kinship with them?' he said, 'Our lifestyle was like a fairy tale to them. They were all dumb and poor.' He said that he was not driven by a national or ethnic identity, but by a Soviet, international, humanitarian-motivated mission to help them.⁸⁶

One opposing view, of course, is that the Soviet-Afghan war played a role in Islamic radicalization in Central Asia. For instance, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan—a militant group that was associated with the Taliban—was established by Jumaboi Khojayev, a former paratrooper inspired by his experience in Afghanistan.⁸⁷ On the whole, however, Fergana fundamentalism arose not as a response to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, but emerged after the Soviet Union's collapse. At the same, both the defection rates and the influence of the Soviet-Afghan war in radicalizing veterans should not be exaggerated:

Neither the Islamic Revolution in Iran nor the Soviet-Afghanistan war seems to have had much responsibility for the development of Fergana fundamentalism . . . As for Afghanistan, while there is no question that Islamic fighters from Tajikistan were definitely receiving direct support from groups within Afghanistan's Islamic government in 1992 and 1993, there is little evidence to suggest that there was any contact during the Soviet occupation. Some Central Asian soldiers serving in the Soviet Army in Afghanistan did go over to the mujahedin, but they seem to have numbered no more than a few hundred; only a handful of these have returned home with the intention of establishing Islamic states there.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ R. W. Apple, 'In Soviet Central Asia . . .', *New York Times*, Nov. 6 1980.

⁸⁶ Interview with Tohtakhunov Muhtar Turdahmedovich, March 23, 2010.

⁸⁷ BBC News, 'Afghan Role of Muslim Battalions,' Feb. 16, 2009.

⁸⁸ Martha Brill Olcott, 'Islam and Fundamentalism in Central Asia,' in *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies* Yaacov Ro'i (ed.). Frank Cass, London, 1995, p. 34.

CONCLUSION

This article may make generalizations about 'Central Asians' including Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Kazakhs, and Uighurs, as well Afghan populations. There are in fact substantial differences among these groups—regarding secularization and Russification—much stronger in Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, than, for instance, Uzbeks in Uzbekistan. There are also regional subtleties even within each ethnic group. For instance, In Tajikistan, the Tajiks of the south may be closer culturally to Afghans than even northerners in their own country. A closer look at how the war affected each particular Central Asian group may have been necessary. Furthermore, war is inherently political; this article cannot of course give an accurate presentation of the mosaic of views that surely exists regarding Soviet intervention in Afghanistan.

There were some subtleties of the interviews that did not fit in this article; for instance a Kyrgyz bomb dismantler (unnamed) said that he could speak and understand Farsi and communicate with locals, but never let his commanders know. Another Kyrgyz veteran claimed that he had never even heard of or considered that there was such a phenomenon as a culturally or ethnically based sympathy for Afghans—though he said he felt sympathy for Afghans' poverty, and for civilian suffering the war caused.⁸⁹ There are a multitude of stories I heard in Bishkek from the veterans, not all of which I was able to fit into the confines of this article.

Overall, while Western reports of Central Asians manifesting solidarity with Afghans are numerous and indisputable, they may be extrapolated too far. Renowned British foreign correspondent Robert Fisk, who was in Afghanistan in early 1980, saw two Soviet Tajik soldiers standing beside a military depot, missing the red star of the Soviet state on their grey fur hats. 'No more telling portent of the imminent collapse of empire could have confronted me in Afghanistan,' he wrote, decades later.⁹⁰ But in fact Central Asian unrest played a limited role in the Soviet Union's collapse, and many of the now independent nations of Central Asia have retained comparatively close relations with Moscow in the years after the USSR's fall.

Ironically, the romanticized belief that Central Asians would tie themselves to the fate of their co-religionists in Afghanistan is most clearly expressed by Lenin, who in 1919, on behalf of the nascent USSR, welcomed Afghanistan to the world stage as 'the only independent Muslim country in the world . . . destined for the historic task of uniting around itself all the enslaved Moslem peoples and leading them on the road to freedom and

⁸⁹ Interview with Abdrahmanov Shamgaly.

⁹⁰ Fisk, Robert, *The Great War for Civilization*, London: Harper Collins, 2005, p. 87.

independence.⁹¹ But what freedom, independence, and imperialism mean truly depend on who you are asking. One Krygyz interviewee, a former airbase guard, said that an Uzbek DRA soldier once approached him and speaking to him as a fellow Central Asian told him, 'you guys are enslaved by Russians.' To prove to the Afghan soldier otherwise, the Krygyz walked over to a Russian soldier and slapped him on the head to show the Uzbek that the Soviets were all equal.⁹² He told this story laughingly and with great humor.

Although I pressed them, none of the Central Asians that I interviewed indicated that they saw the war in an ethnic light. General Major Bekboev says that for his soldiers it was 'an honor to serve' not only because entering the army was a selective process, requiring 'physical fitness and moral preparation,' but that soldiers assumed that they would receive post-war benefits such as free education. Many interviewees stressed that at the time they believed in their 'international duty,' and that there was no difference in the way they and soldiers of other nationalities viewed the war. Ultimately, as a communications specialist who served in the last years of the war put it, 'there was a false doctrine in the beginning, recruiting Muslims from all over the USSR—but the mentality of Soviet Muslims and Afghans was totally different.'⁹³

The Soviet Union did try to use Central Asians to its strategic advantage in Afghanistan. Though Central Asians performed successfully as elite *spetsnaz*, their effectiveness and even loyalty may have been questionable in the general armed forces. However, cases in which there was collusion between the Central Asians and the Afghans are probably far outweighed by the number of Central Asians who committed themselves to the Soviet cause, and did not question it, despite their ethnic and religious affiliation with Afghans.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research for this article was conducted with the help of a travel grant from the University of California, Berkeley's History Department. I am grateful to my translator in Kyrgyzstan, Nurbek Ababakirov, as well as to the veterans who were kind to be willing to speak to me. Victoria Frede served as my advisor.

⁹¹ Lenin wrote this in a correspondence to Amanullah Khan; 1919 was the year Afghanistan won its independence from Britain. Quote is cited in Moynahan, Brian, *Claws of the Bear: A History of the Soviet Armed Forces from 1917 to the Present*, Hutchinson, London, UK, 1989, p. 310.

⁹² Interview with Beknazarov Bakytbek Bekmahmetovich.

⁹³ Interview with Cholponbek Ismailovich.

LIST OF INTERVIEWEES (BISHKEK, KYRGYZSTAN
IN MARCH 2010)

- Matymytbekov Taalai Attokurovich
- Mels Sagynovich Bekboev
- Abdugapparov Maimuurdhson Abdrahmanovich
- Cherkovich Sergei Ivanovich
- Tohtakhunov Muhtar Turdahmedovich
- Abdrahmanov Shamgaly
- Bekzazarov Bakytbek Bekmahmetovich
- Cholponbek Ismailovich
- Unnamed bomb/mine dismantler
- Batirbekov Samat Myrzamatovich