How did a band of ragtag tribesmen manage to defeat the Soviet Union in its own backyard?

The Afghan War

BY RICHARD MACKENZIE

Watching Muslim rebels conceive, plot, and execute a classic guerrilla strike against Soviet-backed outposts in the remote Keran Valley, you get a close-up look at how the war is being won—and lost—in Afghanistan.

In the meticulously planned assault, small units of highly motivated Muslim irregulars, fortified with reasonably good weapons and extraordinary intelligence data, surprise and utterly rout the heavily equipped but slow-footed and demoralized soldiers of the Afghan Army garrison.

The Keran Valley operation, which I witnessed during a bone-wearying, three-month journey through the Hindu Kush mountains with Afghan rebels last fall and winter, was only one battle. Yet it, in a nutshell, sums up the war's basic realities.

Those realities are yielding major consequences. Following Geneva talks in April, Moscow and its client in Kabul agreed to a nine-month timetable for a complete Russian troop withdrawal. The Soviet retreat, the first since 1942, now appears in full swing.

What kind of conflict was the Afghan war, really? How, in fact, did a ragtag band of Muslim tribesman stymie one of the two military superpowers—in its own backyard, at that? How was the conflict fought day-by-day on the ground?

For a look at the eccentricities, tactics, goals, strengths, and weaknesses of the combatants, one need look no further than the planning and execution of the October 29, 1987, battle for Keran.

Planning the Offensive

The Afghan mujahedeen had been planning this offensive for months. The objective was to capture seven Soviet-supported Afghan Army bases in northeastern Afghanistan. Taking the bases would dramatically reduce travel time for supplies from Pakistan. What's more, it would further boost morale for the rebels in their eight-year war against Soviet occupation forces.

The rebels' long logistics tail began in Garam Kishmar, or "Warm Waters," a village at the tip of the northwest frontier province of Pakistan. There, the Muslim forces re-
Though never equipped with a preponderance of modern weaponry, the Afghan rebels have begun to acquire more arms in recent years. Among such arms are mortars, rocket launchers, antimine field weapons, communications gear, and—most critical of all—Stinger antiaircraft missiles from the US.

They are purchased and distributed by Pakistan with $600 million a year in US aid. Then, the equipment had to be trekked overland into Afghanistan.

The extreme dedication of the rebels is evident in such arduous endeavors. In a blizzard, a team of mujahedeen was forced to stop on a mountain path when one of its horses dropped dead under the ammunition load it was carrying. One of the men took up the weight that killed the animal, threw it on his back, and wordlessly continued the climb. Such a sight is not uncommon—not on the guerrilla side.

On the side of the Soviet and Afghan armies, by contrast, morale throughout the war has remained low. Initially, the problem stemmed primarily from the fact that many of the original Soviet soldiers were raw reserves whose units often received third-rate equipment. By the summer of 1980, Soviet military leaders realized their errors, however, and began substituting conscripts for the reserves.

Even then, Red Army forces who entered the fray had only the poorest tactics and most pathetic training.

What's more, the high command felt obliged to send home Muslim soldiers from Soviet Asia for fear that they would sympathize with their rebel coreligionists—as many of them in fact did.

Primitive medical care and hygiene practices took their toll on morale. With little water available, the average Soviet soldier is said to bathe about once every other month. Infectious hepatitis had spiraled out of control. And the hygiene situation was worse among indigenous Afghan troops.

The ordeal of Afghanistan has led to alcohol and drug abuse, not to mention acts of brutality by Soviet soldiers that have been inflicted on fellow troops as well as on civilian Afghans. Bullying of newcomers by "old soldiers"—those who have been in country a year or more—contributed to widespread Soviet desertions. A few of these deserters have actually gone over to the mujahedeen.

"It is hard to imagine a war in which Russia's conscript army would be less well suited than it is in a counterinsurgency in mountainous Afghanistan," says Mark Urban, a British scholar of the war.

Future analysis may yet produce a complete answer as to why the Soviet Union chose to ignore history and invade Afghanistan, a land known throughout history as a graveyard of imperial ambition. Whatever their motives, however, they clearly believed it would be a relatively easy task to subdue a country immediately to their south, about the size of Texas.

Moscow seriously miscalculated. Certainly, Soviet leaders underestimated the tenacity of the Afghan resistance. But it also overestimated the value of armor and massed firepower.

**Soviet Invasion**

The Soviets came in with great force, hoping to score a knockout punch. First came a logistical
Afghan resistance leaders have been able to rely on a widespread network of informants among Afghan government forces and the populace at large. Such inside information has been crucial to the rebels in planning their raids from high in the rugged mountain country that dominates much of the nation.

The operation itself went smoothly. On December 6, 1979, a regiment of the task force was flown to Bagram, a principal Afghan fighter base north of Kabul. From there, troops fanned out to the Salang Pass, the road route from the Soviet Union to Kabul. For four days beginning December 22, the Soviets flew some 350 transport sorties into Kabul and Bagram, carrying men and supplies in Antonov and Il-lyushin airlifters. Shortly before midnight on December 24, the Soviets began airlifting more troops into Shindand, a key air base in the far west of the country, and others went to Kandahar in the south.

Finally, on December 27, the decisive phase was launched. Paratroopers moved into downtown Kabul, and KGB commandos stormed the Darulaman Palace south of Kabul. There, they executed Hafizullah Amin, leader of the inept Afghan regime, and replaced him with handpicked Babrak Karmal.

All was accomplished in days, with only one and a half air assault divisions and four motor rifle divisions totaling between 15,000 and 20,000 men. Reinforcing troops brought the total to 100,000 by January 5, 1980.

The relatively small size of the invading force suggests the Kremlin pursued only limited objectives—to take key cities and the roads that linked them.

Moscow could not have known it, but this was the high-water mark of Soviet occupation. Nearly nine years of trouble were to follow.

Divided on ethnic, linguistic, and tribal lines, Afghanistan has always been a decentralized country—with a vengeance. For that reason, control of Kabul and major cities does not mean control of the nation. Quite the contrary.

The Soviets seemed to willfully ignore this reality. The US ambassador to Afghanistan from 1966 to 1973, Robert G. Neumann, watched an enormous buildup of Soviet advisors in Kabul. "They had hundreds of them—most of whom should have known better than to try to control the country centrally. But that's what they did." It was, in fact, a guiding military principle.

In the first six months, the Soviets pursued tactics that observers deemed better suited to a land war in the European theater. It was a centrally controlled, high-intensity, mechanized operation totally unsuited to the harsh terrain, climate, and lack of infrastructure in Afghanistan—not to mention the elusive foe.

They even brought along an SA-4 antiaircraft missile brigade, the importance of which was not exactly paramount in a war against guerrillas carrying on their fight without a single plane.

Throughout the war, notes Urban, Soviet infantry firepower was "massively increased" in Afghanistan, particularly with respect to the individual infantryman. Soviet troops now carry the AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher and the RPO flamethrower—a weapon that provides the foot soldier with a portable napalm weapon. Also in use is the new AK-74 automatic rifle. Its round tumbles on impact, causing dreadful wounds. The mujahedeen refer to AK-74 projectiles as "poison bullets."

Exploiting Airpower

The biggest and most successful innovation was the introduction, within a year, of helicopters to the war in massive numbers. In June 1980, for example, it is estimated that there were only forty-five to sixty Soviet helicopters in Afghanistan. A short time later, Western observers began reporting Soviet use of as many as eighteen attack helicopters in attacks on single villages.

Their best weapon became the Hind helicopter gunship, a kind of flying tank, which was used to rain indiscriminate terror on the Afghan people and to soften up rebel positions in advance of a ground assault. It did, at least, until US-supplied Stinger antiair missiles came into widespread use.

All the effects of this massive firepower were on display in the dozens of burned-out villages in the tactical-assembly areas that the Afghan rebels used in preparing for Keran.
A short walk up the Anjuman River from the barren, rocky spot of its confluence with the Kokcha River in the desolate northeast of Afghanistan, perched atop a hill more than 9,000 feet above sea level, sat the ruin of what was once a town called Escarza. Most of the stone and packed-mud houses lay in rubble. Bomb craters marked the spots where other buildings once stood.

Most of the residents were long gone. Dozens were killed in a series of Soviet air raids on the area. Several hundred more fled to neighboring Pakistan, joining more than 3,000,000 other refugees from across their country. This day, a few old women and children left in Escarza were hauling water in buckets up the long hill from the river. There never has been electricity, running water, or conveniences in this forsaken place.

But as night fell, dozens of young Afghan men began arriving, walking silently through the darkness. Some had trekked for more than a week through the rugged, overwhelming mountains of the Hindu Kush range. On the second floor of a ruined house, Mohammad Karim Jalili, a handsome, soft-spoken, twenty-two-year-old man with dark eyes, sat wrapped in an Afghan blanket, explaining his role in the war.

The young fighter epitomized the eclectic ingredients that have gone into the war. Born in Kama, near the city of Jalalabad, the son of a district court judge in Badakshan Province, educated in commerce at a college in Pakistan, he was now a member of the mujahedeen fighting in a primitive war of liberation.

Karim was part of the Central Corps of the most renowned and effective resistance commander in the war, thirty-five-year-old Ahmad Shah Massoud. He was one of Massoud's Stinger operators, trained in Pakistan in the use of the surface-to-air missile. He explained that he was the first in the corps to use a Stinger to down a Soviet plane, a MiG-21.

The increasing firepower of the guerrillas themselves was only too apparent at numerous stops on the journey to Keran. The small squad of men with whom I traveled moved down the Anjuman River to where it meets the Kokcha. After another five hours—and two stops for prayers—they reached another bombed-out village that, in the darkness, at first seemed deserted.

Inside a mosque, some forty other young guerrillas pushed closer together to make way for the newcomers. Every rebel sported a Soviet Kalashnikov assault rifle. Stacked in an adjoining stable were a dozen or so recoilless rifles and fifty or so Chinese-made rockets.

Across Afghanistan, the story is much the same. The US has reportedly stepped up supplies of bazookas, heavy mortars, grenade launchers, and recoilless rifles to the mujahedeen. Especially welcome is the arrival of new antinminefield rockets used to clear obstacles placed by the Soviet Army. Some authorities report that the mujahedeen even possess short-range surface-to-surface rockets with which to hold Soviet strongholds at risk.

Growing Professionalism

Secretly, silently, over the ensuing days, 530 mujahedeen gathered in half a dozen villages throughout the area, preparing for an assault on the seven bases of Keran.

That the guerrillas could put together such an operation, getting tactical orders across hundreds of miles to dozens of their troop sites while maintaining security, was evidence of what is plainly the growing professionalism of the fighters and greater local military coordination.

Part of this is due to the emergence of young, well-educated leaders who have taken over from many of the older, more suspicious tribal chieftains who have tended to fight in clan organizations and defend specific pieces of territory—even against fellow rebels.

In the northeast quadrant of Afghanistan, this impressive network
of fighters is the handiwork of Ahmad Shah Massoud—known as "the Lion of Panjshir."

When the war began, Massoud, then twenty-seven, began to emerge as the commander of resistance efforts in the strategic Panjshir River valley, which runs for 100 miles from Kabul to the northeast. A son of an Afghan Army general, Massoud adopted his third name, which means victory, as a *nom de guerre*.

A brilliant leader, quite serious in demeanor but not without a sense of humor, Massoud has learned the skills and tactics of the best guerrilla fighters, having long studied the methods of Mao, Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh.

He was only fifteen in 1967 when the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War broke out. Classmates recall how he pinned a map on the wall to give daily briefings on the movements of the opposing forces, explaining to friends why the Israelis were so effective in battle.

Though he is young, Massoud's experience is extensive. Long before the 1979 Soviet invasion, he had been involved in resistance efforts against the Soviet-backed Communist regime in Kabul, moving back and forth between resistance bases in Pakistan, where he was given some basic military training, and the anti-Communist underground in Kabul.

Massoud's personality has drawn in some impressive young intellectual fighters. In a nation of almost total illiteracy, many of his troops are college graduates. He has also developed an intelligence-gathering operation that reaches into the heart of Kabul.

Like other young Muslim commanders, Massoud's approach to war has matured greatly. In the early years, he says, his attacks were sporadic, consisting mainly of ineffective hit-and-run ambushes along the Salang Highway between Kabul and the Soviet border.

As time passed and Massoud's tactics became more sophisticated, he became a far greater concern to Soviet military men in Afghanistan. Indeed, the perceived power and prestige of Massoud engendered nine major Soviet invasions aimed at driving him from his home turf in the lush Panjshir Valley—though with notable lack of success.

![Mobility in the forbidding terrain of Afghanistan is imperative for the Afghan resistance. Rebels often lug artillery by hand over dozens of miles.](image)

**The Panjshir Offensives**

The first Soviet offensive, later known to the Afghan war analysts as "Panjshir 1," was launched in late 1980. Panjshir 9 was unleashed in 1985. There has been none since. The Soviet Army is apparently reeling from the reality of Massoud's iron grip.

The Panjshir operations provide a kind of microcosm of the Soviet military fiasco in Afghanistan: the ability to win tactical victories at will while strategic gains remain elusive.

Of the nine Soviet offensives, Panjshirs 5, 6 (1982), and 7 (1984) were the biggest. In each case, some 15,000 Soviet and Afghan Army troops pushed up the valley. More Soviet troops came down from the north in a pincer action. Once the ground troops had sealed off the valley, Soviet fighter-bombers began bombing from Bagram and bases across the Soviet border. Soviet Su-25s, Su-17s, and MiG-21s were used, blasting many villages into oblivion.

Rahman Beg, a twenty-seven-year-old Panjshiri who grew up in Jishta, a small village in the north of the valley, recalls the black day in 1984 when the Soviet planes came. He grabbed his four-year-old sister in his arms and started to run. A bomb struck nearby, and he spun around, cradling the little girl to his chest to protect her. He was hit in the face, shoulders, back, and legs by shrapnel. He saved the child, but lost nine brothers, his father, and two uncles.

After a week of such bombardment in May 1982, the raids stopped, and a regiment of air assault troops landed in helicopters, all from the 103d Air Assault Division. They showed little experience of the terrain, failing to dig in or conceal themselves, exposing themselves to constant ambushes by the mujahideen, who escaped unscathed into the hills.

In Panjshir 5, the destruction was particularly brutal. In that 1982 action, Soviet attacks into tributary valleys were so successful that Massoud reluctantly ordered a temporary evacuation of the Panjshir inhabitants. He also worked out a temporary truce between his forces and the enemy. This was a controversial move that brought Massoud great criticism from other mujahideen groups. It proved to be a strategic masterstroke that allowed his fighters to regroup and, probably, to survive to continue the war.

In any case, by April 1984, Massoud was back, again on the attack against the critical Salang Highway. His success in this endeavor led directly to the Soviets' Panjshir 7, again performed by 15,000 Soviet-led troops, and this time with little result. After trying two more of their Panjshir operations, the Soviets pulled back.

**Why the Soviet Failures?**

Why do these gigantic Soviet operations turn out poorly, not just against Massoud, but nearly everywhere in Afghanistan?

One principal reason, say many, is that these sweeps are almost always conducted using large numbers of nervous, frightened, and inexperienced recruits. They rarely dismount from their fighting vehicles. Because they seldom leave the roads, they do not pursue fleeing Afghan forces.

"The mountains," observed one of Massoud's guerrillas, "are our best friends."
These Soviet units, mostly motorized rifle infantry forces, have scant knowledge of their Afghan enemy. What’s more, most have no idea how to handle their own equipment.

It is true, say experts, that portions of the Red Army improved in performance over time. Analysts note that the Soviets developed a substructure of the Red Army in Afghanistan, a kind of antiguerrilla or quasicounterinsurgency force.

With units once totaling an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 crack troops, the force was filled with airborne or air assault soldiers, but long-range patrol and intelligence forces were included. The emphasis was on speed and stealth rather than brute force and mass. Members of the units got special training in combat skills peculiar to Afghan conditions.

In their heyday, the units conducted imaginative, even daring, operations— including dangerous and unheard-of nighttime ambushes in the countryside. Soviet helicopters, on occasion, have swooped into gatherings of unsuspecting rebels, as commandos would blaze away.

Yet the elite forces tended to function only in short-term operations. Even the isolated commando operations have tailed off significantly in recent years. One possible reason: high casualty rates. The Soviet garrison army, rarely leaving its bunkers, loses few troops. The counterguerrilla forces, however, took extremely high casualties, with some units losing up to two-thirds of their fighters within a year.

As he labored to prepare his forces for the attack on the Keran forts, Massoud betrayed little concern about attack from the Soviet units. He had divided his several thousand men into three groups. They are his Central Corps, other mobile units, and stationary defense forces in the villages of his region. All were relatively well protected.

Their biggest concern, said one Massoud fighter, was the possibility that Soviet MiG aircraft would be dispatched from Kabul or from inside the Soviet Union, scramble, and be on the scene of the battle in quicktime. The young man was philosophical. “Inshallah,” he said. If God is willing.

When it comes to combating Soviet air operations, it’s now clear that the turning point came in 1985 when the United States began supplying Stingers to the resistance. Massoud Khalili, a political officer in the Jamiat-e-Islami Afghanistan party, agrees that Stingers changed the face of the war. He says the impact of the weapon became apparent within one year. Whereas up until 1985 the Soviets used the skies over Afghanistan with impunity, Soviet helicopters and low-flying bombers were rarely seen by late 1987. They remain absent.

Stinging the Bear

It is clear that the ubiquity of the Stinger has had a major impact on Soviet air combat operations. Soviet pilots clearly fear its effectiveness and have been careful to avoid most low-level engagements that could leave them prey to the weapon.

Bombing raids on the Kunar River valley, which I witnessed late last year, were all conducted from altitudes of at least 20,000 feet. This put the raiding jets far out of Stinger range. It also made the Soviet bombing inaccurate and ineffective.

Many believe that the dwindling of direct Soviet air support has been a severely demoralizing factor for Soviet and Afghan Army troops.

With its air arm constrained, the Soviets began to rely more on artillery than on airpower, with predictable results. Mujahedeen simply moved to heavily fortified strongholds high in the Afghan mountain gorges, impervious to artillery fire.

Even so, Massoud left no possibility untended during the time that he prepared in a little village called Jangal for the battle of Keran. In the days before he gave his major briefing on the battle, his intelligence officers and cartographers painstakingly built a giant sandlot replica of the entire Keran Valley to give a vivid, three-dimensional view of the battlefield.

Starting with a grid almost the size of a football field end zone, they built up the hills and the surrounding mountains, putting in every ridge and craggy tip. They created the river that ran down the middle, put in cardboard replicas of every house, hut, and barricade. They also made replicas of their weapons and the enemy’s from cigarette packets.

His advance intelligence was phenomenal, in part because the second in command of the Army base at Keran had been a Massoud spy, working inside for him for two years. Some days before, four of Massoud’s officers met with the man, Abdul Rias, a thirty-two-year-old Afghan army captain. For almost two months, he helped Massoud’s intelligence office come up to speed, pointing to weapons caches and troop concentrations.

The results were startling. The day before the attack was to take place, Massoud called his key officers together, placing each in the position around the model where he would lead his men. For two hours he paced back and forth, repeating again and again every significant detail.

Massoud was able to tell his men not only which buildings to attack and when but also which windows to fire into. He knew how many
Rebel leader Ahmad Shah Massoud, gesturing at right, briefs his troops minutes before the battle at Keran. In a scant forty minutes, his rebels overran the Afghan army base, capturing more than 300 government soldiers and inflicting twenty-nine casualties. Massoud's careful preparations held his losses to fourteen mujahedeen killed and eleven injured. Other government bases up the valley were later taken without firing a shot.

— Photo by Richard Mackenzie

Weapons the enemy possessed. He knew where each of the 300 Army soldiers and the hated Khad secret police agents slept. Also, Massoud knew the exact locations of mines on the valley surrounding the target.

"The first company is in the garrison," says Massoud. "It has three officers and thirty-seven soldiers." He lists the number of rounds of ammunition. There are 340 Kalashnikovs. He also knows that they have 200 bags of flour and one barrel of oil. "Understand?" Massoud asked. "Any questions?"

In retrospect, the outcome of the battle at that point was foreordained. Throughout the night, rebels gathered their weapons, hauling some onto their backs and strapping others onto the few horses and donkeys they had on hand, heading for positions.

A Clear Victory

The battle was scheduled to begin shortly after 6:00 a.m., but half an hour before that, an enemy soldier walked out of his barracks and headed toward an open area used as a lavatory. When he unexpectedly came upon a squad of mujahedeen who had slipped into a garden at the edge of the perimeter, he sounded an alarm, and the battle commenced.

Above, on a mountainside, Massoud's heavy-weapons men were still struggling as they tried to haul guns into the prearranged spots. Even so, reluctant to sacrifice the tactical initiative, Massoud gave the order to attack—though he realized that fewer than half the heavy weapons were where they should be.

"God is great!" he cried into a two-way radio, and the valley exploded with bullets, rockets, and tracer shells.

The Army base fell in forty minutes. As mujahedeen raced across the valley floor, following paths they had been told were clear of mines, the enemy soldiers and the hated Khad secret police agents were captured alive. They are so hated by Afghans at large for their atrocities and torture that they knew what kind of end they could expect to meet. "They fight to the last bullet," says one guerrilla, "and keep that for themselves."

Help in the form of Soviet airpower never came. Toward the close of the fighting, two MiGs roared high overhead, obscured in part by thick clouds. The guerrillas glanced up nervously and waited. The sounds continued for a some seconds before they passed on by, their pilots apparently oblivious to the defeat being administered below.

Mohammad Karim Jalili, the Stinger operator, simply shrugged, disappointed at the missed opportunity. The attack was supposed to be only the first of a series of assaults on Soviet-supported forces in the area. But other bases operated by Afghan militia further up the valley were less of a challenge. To take them, Massoud sent an elderly local resident with a letter, offering to treat them well if they surrendered. About half did. The remainder fled.

Today, Soviet fortunes have come full circle in the war in Afghanistan. They began by establishing a static defense around key bases and important roads. When that didn't work, they began to venture out, as in the attacks on the Panjshir. But by 1987, they were figuratively back in their bunkers again, looking for a way out.

The Battle of Keran helps to explain why.

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