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During more than 70 years of Soviet rule, the authorities seldom admitted that servicemen were regularly sent abroad to fight in different local armed conflicts. Only the participation of Soviet troops in the war in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 was reported at the time, not decades after.

There were, of course, occasional hints concerning Soviet military advisers deployed in Egypt, Syria, Vietnam, Cuba and other countries, and rumors circulated inside the USSR of Russian servicemen killed or wounded in action by Israeli and American fire. But only after the demise of the Soviet Union did concrete information become public on casualties and detailed descriptions of combat missions undertaken by Russian soldiers in local wars.


In 2000 a study was published by the defense ministry’s Institute of Military History, titled Russia (USSR) in Local Wars and Military Conflicts of the Second Half of the 20th Century (general editor: Maj-Gen V.A. Zolotarov). It appears to be a most comprehensive and detailed study, containing not only casualty figures, but also descriptions of Soviet forces’ combat operations in secret wars, deployment patterns, evaluation of military hardware performance, etc.
The first major secret Soviet combat military engagements abroad were the participation in the Spanish Civil War from 1936 to 1939 (3,000 servicemen were deployed, 158 were lost in action) and in China against Japanese forces from 1937 to 1939 (3,665 deployed, 195 lost). Russian military involvement in these conflicts had been disclosed in Soviet times, but only long after the events. Russian generals and other officers assumed Spanish and Chinese names; they were issued local military uniforms and ordered to avoid capture at all costs, including suicide.

Such a pattern of deployment became a rule during the Cold War. In 1970 during the "War of Attrition," a 12,000-strong Soviet expeditionary air defense corps was sent to Egypt to help fight the Israeli air force. None of the officers or troops was told the ultimate destination before they docked in Alexandria, Egypt. The level of secrecy was such that generals, other officers and troops were disguised as civilians, their transport ships supposedly were carrying "farming equipment," the ship captains were allowed to open an envelope containing information on their final destination only after they reached the Eastern Mediterranean, and strict orders were issued to shoot to kill any serviceman who jumped overboard while the transport ships were passing the Bosporus.

Of course, Western intelligence services knew there were Soviet combat troops in the conflict area, but it was impossible to prove this publicly, because there were no prisoners. (Russian pilots were forbidden to fly close to enemy-occupied territory.) In most of such conflicts the Soviet Union provided large amounts of arms, military equipment and ammunition. Russian technicians and specialists trained Koreans, Vietnamese, Arabs and others to use Russian arms. Soviet generals served as advisers, helping local military staffs to deploy forces armed with modern weapons. Soviet combat troops were deployed mostly on temporary bases -- to help train local staff and to perform combat duties until the locals' training was completed, so that modern weapons could be put into action immediately to tilt the military balance.
In the Korean War the Soviet Union deployed the 64th air defense corps, with over 300 fighter jets, over 400 pilots, 2 artillery air defense divisions, and ground staff -- up to 40,000 in all. The 64th was given the task of challenging US air supremacy over the Korean peninsula, but pilots were ordered to fight only defensive battles and not to fly near the front line. From 1950 to 1953 the 64th lost 335 fighter jets and 125 pilots. Overall, Russian casualties in the Korean War are estimated at 316 dead. The US lost some 55,000 men and 1,182 airplanes.

In other local conflicts Russia lost much fewer men than in Korea. From 1964 to 1973, 6,359 Soviet generals and other officers "visited" Vietnam. Soviet-guided surface-to-air missile (SAM) regiments were deployed to encounter US warplanes. Thirteen Soviet servicemen were lost in action during these years. In Indochina the US lost over 60,000 men and 8,612 aircraft.

In Egypt Russia lost 25 military advisers and 35 combat personnel. In Syria and accompanying Syrian troops into Lebanon from 1956 to 1991, Russia lost 3 generals, 39 other officers, 1 non-commissioned officer and 1 private. In Nicaragua no Soviet soldiers were killed in action.

In each of these wars other parties (including Chinese "volunteers" in Korea, Cuban "volunteers" in Angola and in Ethiopia) were engaged in serious ground fighting and suffered heavy casualties. The Soviet Union provided the hardware and the money, and also used local conflicts to test new weapons in action. (In Vietnam the Russians for the first time used modern plastic explosives for diversionary attacks on US bases.) Soviet specialists in the battle zones reported back to Moscow on technical mishaps and the performance of Western weapon systems. Military designers in Russia improved their weapons based on these reports and modernized armaments often were sent promptly to the front.

Soviet military intelligence-gathering teams collected new Western military hardware. In 1968 a new supersonic US F-111A fighter-bomber was shot down near Hanoi and
Russian specialists scrutinized its remains. In 1999 the Yugoslav military shot down a US F-117A stealth fighter and Russian military personnel reportedly also had a chance to investigate its debris.

Russian military involvement in local wars until the 1980s may be considered to be mostly successful. The casualties were relatively low -- much lower than those of the United States. The American military suffered significant losses during the Vietnam War; the Soviets managed to gather important intelligence information and technical data.

But all these successes did not prepare Russia for what it experienced in the 1980s in Afghanistan and, to a lesser extent, in Ethiopia.

Using the experience of local wars against regular armies, the Soviet defense establishment continued to build a heavy mass army with tens of thousands of tanks to fight a global war with NATO or China, or both. Antiguerrilla tactics and the strategy of antiguerrilla wars were not evaluated in any serious way. It was expected that guerrillas would always be Russia's friends, fighting against world capitalism.

In 1979 Soviet forces marched into Afghanistan with tanks, APCs and regiments of badly trained motorized infantry that turned out to be of no use in swift encounters with elusive guerrillas in the high mountains and hot dusty plains.

It soon turned out that special forces ("Spetsnaz") units, backed up by air-mobile paratroopers and supported by helicopter gunships and attack planes, could relatively easily do the job that a tank brigade with infantry on APCs could never accomplish without heavy losses. The US military had learned that lesson earlier; now it was Russia's turn.

Before the war in Afghanistan, Spetsnaz brigades of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) were training primarily for intelligence gathering -- not for combat per se. Soldiers and officers were trained to know the languages of the people of the potential theaters
of war to which their unit was designated, so that small units could interrogate prisoners behind enemy lines. The GRU Spetsnaz was trained to be landed deep in enemy territory to gather information and perhaps organize diversions at strategically important targets, but mostly to keep out of sight. There were strict orders (still observed in Chechnya today, and before that, in Afghanistan) that all prisoners, civilian or military, disregarding age or gender, should be executed after investigation and their bodies hidden, so the group could avoid detection.

In Afghanistan the Spetsnaz was called to perform totally different tasks: Stage ambushes, perform seek and destroy sweeps 10 to 80 km from base, direct air attacks on enemy positions they uncovered, and cooperate in battle with air-mobile paratroopers and heavy guns.

In Afghanistan, tank and motor-rifle regiments -- the core of the Soviet army -- mostly performed garrison duties or took part in big, but ineffective, "mopping up" operations. Active offensive antiguerrilla operations were the domain of the paratroopers, the Spetsnaz and the air force. Since there were not enough Spetsnaz units in the regular Soviet army, new ones were improvised: First of all the KGB created and deployed a number of "Kaskad" special units.

The Soviet airborne troops -- VDV -- were prepared to perform large-scale strategic operations: landing by parachute in large numbers behind enemy lines with airborne light armored combat vehicles (BMD), guns and other equipment. In Afghanistan the VDV performed relatively small-scale air-mobile operations, typically landing from helicopters on mountaintops to help pin down the guerrillas, while heavy guns and bombers smashed the opposition.

The 103rd VDV division in Afghanistan never conducted a single operation as a full division. It was split into tactical groups of one or two battalions operationally connected with regiments of transport and gunship helicopters, spread over all of Afghanistan. But helicopters cannot carry BMD vehicles or other special equipment specially designed for
the VDV. The paratroopers often had to go into action only with hand and shoulder weapons.

The Russians improvised in Afghanistan, but the resistance also constantly improved its tactics and received better equipment. Since only a fraction of the occupying force in fact was operationally active, the rebels and the Russian regulars were basically on a par. The result was strategic stalemate from which the Russians withdrew after suffering some 15,000 dead and more than 500,000 wounded.

During the Russian wars in Chechnya in the 1990s the Afghan pattern repeated itself: Badly trained motorized infantry, backed by tanks, was incapable of countering effectively dedicated guerrillas, supported by the local population. To match the guerrillas, the border guards, interior ministry, emergency ministry, and the justice ministry created different Spetsnaz units. These substitute crack infantry units, trained for different purposes (according to different manuals) still are fighting in Chechnya -- trying to suppress the rebels -- with limited successes. The result, again, is strategic stalemate. The end result may be eventual Russian withdrawal in defeat. In Chechnya from 1994 to 1996, Russia lost 5,551 servicemen, with 51,387 wounded. Today this toll is rising daily.

Since 1996, Russia covertly has been supplying the anti-Taliban opposition Northern Alliance in Afghanistan with arms and ammunition. Earlier this month, Putin officially acknowledged this "secret" and promised to give the Northern Alliance more arms. It has also been well known that unmarked Russian bombers have attacked military targets in Afghanistan on behalf of the Northern Alliance.

Soldiers of the 201st division are openly training Afghan tank crews and are helping to maintain military hardware. Northern Alliance commanders also are admitting that there are many Russian pilots, advisers and other military personnel directly involved in combat with the Taliban militia inside Afghanistan. Moreover, 1,500 soldiers recently
were airlifted into Tajikistan to join the 201st division. But defense ministry officials say many more are needed for the task at hand.

The lesson of Russia's secret local wars is simple: Do not engage guerrillas, especially in direct combat, while the population supports them. For decades the Soviet Union generally was conservative, and so mostly successful, in its allocation of force in foreign local wars. The Soviet Union perished when it began to believe that it could win no matter what, and that its forces could do "all it takes" to win any war.

The publication of previously secret data on the extent of Soviet Cold War commitments is a positive step in the right direction. Now at least it's possible to discuss the problem that a great power faces when it tries to solve differing and widespread world problems by military means. But open discussions do not guarantee that the same mistakes will not be repeated. After the war in Chechnya in 1994-1996, officers from the VDV staff advocated radically new tactics for future engagements, based on the belief that relatively small numbers of highly trained and well-equipped Spetsnaz units would be more effective than badly trained tank/motor-rifle divisions. Our tank generals roundly dismissed these "revolutionary" ideas and Russia marched into Chechnya again in virtually the same formation.

Notes:

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