

## 'It's impossible to conquer the Afghans'

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MOSCOW — Head bowed, exhausted, the statue of a young soldier back from Afghanistan's killing fields is flanked by long, grim, lists of his dead comrades. It's a cautionary monument for Western politicians and generals who boldly boast they will succeed where the Soviets failed.

In Russia, a country chock full of heroic memorials to enormous military sacrifice, the uniquely dejected pose of the helmetless Afghan combat veteran in the Ural city of Yekaterinburg is a sobering reminder that great powers have an unhappy history of overreaching and then being driven ignominiously from Afghanistan.

“Canadians and Americans are learning the hard way. You have been there seven years and you have no prospect of early victory,” said Ruslan Aushev, a highly decorated combat veteran who served two tours, totalling nearly five years with the Soviet army in Afghanistan. “We knew by 1985 that we could not win,” he recalls. It then took Moscow four more years to extricate hundreds of thousands of troops from Afghanistan, while claiming victory on the way out. Afghanistan was plunged into civil war.

In Russia, there's a widespread view that the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan has failed to heed the lessons of history.



[Enlarge Image](#)

An Uzbek woman cries as she looks for her son among Soviet troops near the town of Termez in Uzbekistan, some 30 kilometres from the Afghan-Soviet border. Moscow's forces pulled out of the country in 1989 after a decade of war in which tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers and many more Afghans died. (*Sergei Karpukhin/Reuters*)

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“You are just repeating our mistakes,” Mr. Aushev said in an elegant, memento-filled office close to the Russian Duma. While some Russians – perhaps many – take some satisfaction in watching the U.S.-led coalition struggle in Afghanistan, Mr. Aushev knows better than most the dangers of a defeated superpower leaving the wreckage of Afghanistan to violent and radicalized factions.

“Most Afghans still live in a feudal society, in villages far from the cities,” he said. “For them, there is no difference between being bombed by the Soviets and now being bombed by the Americans ... and it won't succeed.”

In the West, the bloody, decade-long Soviet war in Afghanistan is viewed as the last gasping failure of a blundering Communist giant, eventually defeated by the proud and fierce Afghan *mujahedeen*, armed and backed by billions of dollars worth of sophisticated U.S. weaponry, and *jihadists* from throughout the Islamic world. Tagged as the Soviet's Vietnam, the Afghan quagmire helped sink the USSR. But the view from Russia – tempered by experience and the passage of two decades that allowed some lessons to sink in – suggest the West may, too, have overestimated its welcome and its capacity to rebuild Afghanistan at the point of a gun.

“We could take any village, any town and drive the *mujahedeen* out,” Mr. Aushev said, recalling his two combat tours, first as an infantry battalion commander and later in charge of a full Soviet regiment – roughly the size of the Canadian contingent in Afghanistan. “But when we handed ground over to the Afghan army or police they would lose it in a week.”

If that formula for eventual defeat sounds eerily familiar, so does much of what Mr. Aushev and other Afghan veterans recall about their efforts in Afghanistan.

Mr. Aushev, 53, is no apologist for Russian military adventurism. In the post-Soviet era, he served as president of Ingushetia for eight years, and during the war in neighbouring Chechnya he decried incursions by Russian soldiers and even threatened to sue the Defence

Ministry. An able soldier – the youngest to reach the four-star rank of lieutenant-general in the Russian army – Mr. Aushev now heads an international organization for veterans. And he is no stranger to dealing with extremists. He helped broker the release of more than two dozen hostages during the bloody Beslan school siege by Islamic terrorists in 2004.

“The Taliban may not be able to win militarily but they can't be defeated and sooner or later the Western alliance will be forced with pullout,” he warned. Support for the insurgents will grow the longer the foreign armies remain in Afghanistan, he said. Although the Soviets deployed more than 100,000 soldiers across Afghanistan – roughly double the number of U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops currently deployed – and trained an Afghan army three times the size of Kabul's current security forces, it was never enough, Mr. Aushev said.

“If we wanted stability we would have needed 800,000 soldiers,” he said, echoing the estimates of some unheeded American generals who called for much larger occupation forces in Iraq.

But no matter how many soldiers are sent (and Washington is expected to significantly increase its deployments to Afghanistan next year as the long-awaited drawdown in Iraq frees up some units), Mr. Aushev said, there can be no military solution.

“There will have to be an accord with the Taliban, because at least 50 per cent of the Afghan population supports them,” he said.

The Soviet Union invaded in 1979, setting off a decade-long effort to occupy and pacify Afghanistan.

Former sergeant Igor Grigorevich, 46, now stands watch over a tiny, seldom-visited museum, tucked away on the ground floor of a hulking building on Moscow's outskirts. Unlike the Great Patriotic War, as Russians refer to the Second World War, there is little about the Afghan war to remember proudly. Instead there are deep scars, both on the national psyche and among hundreds of thousands of largely ignored veterans.

“It's impossible to conquer the Afghans ... Alexander the Great couldn't do it, the British couldn't do it, we couldn't do it and the Americans won't do it ... no one can,” said Mr. Grigorevich, still trim and determined not to let the war be forgotten. The museum began largely as a volunteer effort by veterans, although the government now provides some funding.

The exhibits are striking. If the Soviet army looks vaguely dated, the pictures of Afghan villagers would be instantly familiar to Canadian soldiers now serving in Afghanistan. So, too, would the lumbering four-engined military transports with honour guards solemnly carrying flag-draped coffins into the waiting holds on Kandahar air field. The Russians called those flights “Black Tulips.”

But there are also poignant reminders of the brutality of a lopsided war that pits the military of a modern superpower against insurgents. Photos show bombed-out villages, a crayon drawing by a young Afghan boy depicts helicopter gunships unleashing a torrent of death and destruction. In another corner is a mock-up of a *mujahedeen* fighter shouldering a U.S.-made Stinger surface-to-air missile that wreaked havoc with Soviet air power and helped tip the balance to the *jihadists*.

Russian veterans say the huge effort by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to arm and support the *mujahedeen* from bases in Pakistan was crucial to the eventual Soviet defeat.

But even without the active backing of a hostile superpower, the current insurgency has new tactics and new funding that the Russians never faced. Suicide bombers and sophisticated roadside explosives were unknown to Russian occupation forces.

For all the broad similarities between the Soviet efforts to pacify Afghanistan in the 1980s and the current U.S.-led campaign, there are also significant differences. U.S. and NATO troops, including Canada's, are in Afghanistan at the request of a democratically elected government headed by President Hamid Karzai. Although dismissed by critics as the “mayor of Kabul” because of his government's limited reach beyond the capital, Mr. Karzai nevertheless represents the first Afghan leader elected in a free and fair national election.

There are other lessons still being learned from the Russian experience in Afghanistan. A lost war or a war that has lost public support leaves a different set of scars on its veterans, says Zurab Kekelidze, deputy director of the Serbsky psychiatric centre in Moscow. “The Afghan Syndrome,” he says, afflicts many of the thousands of Russian veterans, and, he predicts, Canadian and other Western soldiers will similarly suffer.

“If a society sees a war as a good thing ... then that's a form of therapy that helps,” he said at his clinic. Soldiers readjust to society after all the horrors and stresses of battle.

“But if a war is unpopular or is seen as lost or pointless, then the situation is reversed and returning soldiers are forced to try and find some justification for what they have done,” he added. The Americans suffered it in Vietnam, the Soviets faced it after Afghanistan and Canadians may have to deal with the problem if the public stops backing the current war, he said.

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