

# The new Soviet order of battle

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## Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan

by Alexander Alexiev

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Read between the lines, this report offers further indications that the Stavka (Soviet High Command) is rapidly shifting its military forces to a new order of battle that emphasizes the role of small units of highly trained and highly motivated elite special combat troops. Evidence is also presented which demonstrates that "Pavlov is a Russian soldier's weak flank" (See book review by that title in *EIR*, Sept. 4, 1987, Vol. 14, No. 35).

The report was undertaken by the U.S. Army's Arroyo Center, which is housed in and operated by the Rand Corporation. Alexiev avers that it is "the first analytical examination of the Soviet armed forces under conditions of war in the post-World War II period that incorporates a substantial body of first-hand information." Though we would normally avoid anything that incorporates the "cost-benefit systems analysis" approach that Rand has pioneered, and which has wreaked horrifying damage on America's war-fighting potentials and capabilities, the present report is not of that genre. The "first-hand information" referred to has been gleaned from interviews with 35 former Soviet servicemen who actually served in Afghanistan, as well as mujahideen leaders.

Alexiev points out that the Soviet forces in Afghanistan can be divided, by function, into two distinct groups. First, about 80% of the total Soviet forces in the country are "occupation forces," which perform support duties, such as transportation, or provide security, i.e., stand guard at a fixed post. These forces rarely participate in the large sweeps, called "blocking operations," that the Soviets have periodically conducted against the mujahideen.

Second, are the "counterinsurgency forces," which conduct all Soviet-initiated combat operations in Afghanistan.

These are the elite corps which would be the spearhead and backbone of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. *These are not spetsnaz troops*; rather, these are three different types of troops that are as important in the new Soviet order of battle as the *spetsnaz*. The most highly trained are the airborne troops (VDV), followed by the air-assault troops (DShB), and the reconnaissance troops (*razvedchiki*). Rough American equivalents would be: troops of the 82nd Airborne Division (VDV); troops of the 101st Air Assault Division (DShB); and Army Rangers, Army Green Berets, or Marine LRP's (*razvedchiki*).

In the Soviet literature, these three types of forces are generally referred to as "landing troops," *desantniki*. The *desantniki* have borne the brunt of all combat in Afghanistan. When the Soviets conducted their large "blocking" offensives, the procedure followed was to have the motorized rifle units that were assigned to occupation duty surround a predetermined area, and then insert *desantniki* to conduct the actual combat. Alexiev writes that the *desantniki* "are the units in which most of the Soviets' tactical adaptation, operational innovation, and experimentation have been exhibited. They have been the most successful Soviet units operationally." In one operation, recounted by an interviewee, two helicopters landed two dozen *desantniki* near a remote house; they killed all 30 mujahideen inside in less than 10 minutes. In another operation, about 90 VDV troops "climbed straight up the mountain" to attack the rear of a very secure mujahideen position. An eyewitness said the fighting lasted two entire days, and he concluded, "Before that I had thought that the Soviet soldiers are not worth anything, but I must say that I had never seen anything like that. We had good food there and I was in good shape, but I would not have been able to climb that mountain. It was simply impossible for me. These were really tough guys."

As can be expected, the *desantniki* place a premium on physical fitness. In the VDV, "many of the recruits have already achieved a degree of mastery in sports such as boxing, wrestling, and the martial arts, or have acquired paramilitary skills in sky-diving or marksmanship in DOSAAF courses prior to being drafted." Their training includes marches of over 15 kilometers a day, swimming underwater across a river whose surface has been set ablaze, mountain climbing, and free use of live ammunition.

One of the major qualifications for selection into the *desantniki* is political reliability. Not surprisingly, very few recruits are of other than Russian ethnic origin. And it is striking that of the 35 ex-servicemen interviewed, only two were *desantniki*, and none were VDV. It must be pointed out that the VDV accounts for half of the *desantniki* deployed in Afghanistan—at least 10% of the total Soviet expeditionary force. That there was not one VDV troop among the 35 interviewed, indicates an exceptionally high reliability and *esprit de corps* in the VDV.

## Airborne dominance

Looking at the new Soviet order of battle, the implications are chilling. The Soviets now field seven VDV divisions, as compared to the one airborne division fielded by the U.S. And while the 82nd Airborne is based at Fort Bragg in the United States, at least five of the VDV divisions are based with the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany, or are under the command of the Western TVD.

The key to understanding the new Soviet order of battle, is to realize that the Stavka is not interested in achieving Russian suzerainty over a Western Europe reduced to smoldering ruins by prolonged combat. Hence, the first Soviet objective is to nullify, to the greatest extent possible, the Western will to resist, and to induce within the West as great a degree of, if not admiration, then at least tolerance, for the intense chauvinism of Great Russian messianic expansionism.

This, of course, brings into play the question of cultural warfare. The second Soviet objective must therefore be to devise a means of *blitzkrieg* attack that minimizes, or, ideally, eliminates, the potential for damaging the economic infrastructure and capability of Western Europe, which would be needed to produce the tribute the Stavka intends be rendered to Imperial Muscovy after the war.

In the wake of the INF Treaty, with short-range U.S. nuclear weapons removed from Europe, the Soviets are relying on their irregular forces in the Western "peace" and "green" movements to make it unthinkable for NATO to resort to its submarine-based and ICBM strategic nuclear weapons in the event of conflict. With respect to Western Europe, then, the question for the Kremlin is reduced to training and deploying the type of special combat forces that can *surgically* eliminate NATO's key leadership, facilities, and capabilities in the shortest possible amount of time. *Spetsnaz*, VDV, DShB, and *razvedchiki*, equipped with new magnetic effect weapons, would be *ne plus ultra* for this mission.

Under such conditions, the *desantniki* would be among the most highly valued of Soviet military assets. This consideration allows us to make sense of a particular pattern of Soviet behavior in Afghanistan which Alexiev notes, but finds incomprehensible. In its use of *desantniki*, "the Soviet command seems to have become especially sensitive to losses in the past two or three years. Several of our respondents," Alexiev continues, "were aware of efforts to keep casualties to a minimum, even at the cost of operational constraints. A former DShB sergeant recalled that two blocking operations in which he participated were called off because of excessive casualties, despite the fact that they were progressing well. In one case, the Soviets had surrounded a 500-man mujahideen force in the Paghman highlands, when a DShB unit inserted in the area ran into an ambush and lost about 50 of its men. The operation was called off immediately after the

commanding officer learned about the losses, even though, according to our interviewee, it was only a matter of time before the resistance group would be liquidated. Such historically atypical behavior would indicate that there are at least some political constraints, real or perceived, that affect the Soviet army's operational decision-making in Afghanistan at present."

The significance of the rapid rotation of these *desantniki* forces through Afghanistan, should be abundantly clear. Since these forces are intended to be the spearhead of a Soviet assault on NATO, the Stavka has striven to have as large a proportion of the total Soviet *desantniki* force experience combat in Afghanistan. The widespread dissemination of this experience also ensures that the Soviet Category II and Category III divisions would be fleshed out with a highly significant proportion of combat veterans during a mobilization.

## Weaknesses

Alexiev's report also makes clear that, despite the apparent invincibility of Soviet forces, as thus far portrayed, they suffer from extremely debilitating weaknesses. Besides the well-known problem with ethnic conflict within the ranks, the non-commissioned ranks are beset with a major conflict between the "newcomers" and the *starsiy*, "oldtimers" who have served more time in a unit, and therefore enjoy "informally" enforced "rights" of seniority. Soldiers who arrive new in a unit, are subject to often sadistic and brutal "hazing" by the *starsiy*. Alexiev's respondents recounted many cases of "newcomers" being beaten so severely that they required hospitalization. In at least one case, a respondent attributed his defection to the extremely brutal hazing he was subjected to as a "newcomer." This particular problem may be more debilitating to Soviet combat effectiveness than the factor of ethnic tension.

Another major problem for the Soviet forces in Afghanistan was a critically severe failure to maintain basic conditions of hygiene and sanitation. Alexiev's respondents reported numerous cases of epidemics sweeping the Soviet contingent in Afghanistan, with some units having a quarter, or even a half, of their personnel stricken with diseases such as hepatitis. At times, diseases were so widespread in a unit, that the unit ceased sending ill soldiers to the hospital.

## For further reading:

Michael Liebig, "Airborne operations: spearhead of 'post-nuclear' warfare" *EIR* Vol. 15, No. 38, September 30, 1988.

F.A. von der Heydte, *Modern Irregular Warfare in Defense Policy and as Military Phenomenon*, with a foreword by Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., 1986.

*Global Showdown Escalates*, Second Edition, 1988. An *EIR Special Report*.

*Electromagnetic-Effects Weapons*, 1988. An *EIR Special Report*.