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THE ROLE OF UZBEKISTANI SOLDIERS IN MILITARY OPERATIONS DURING THE AFGHAN WAR (1979–1989)

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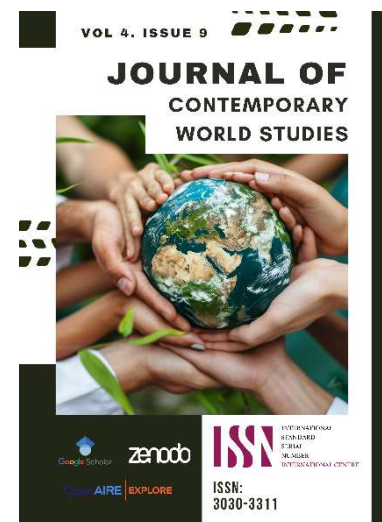
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ANNOTATION:

Approximately 62,000 military personnel from Uzbekistan participated in the Afghan War (1979–1989) as members of the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan. Many of these soldiers fulfilled their military duty under difficult combat conditions, while more than 1,500 lost their lives during the conflict. This article examines the participation of Uzbekistani soldiers in major military operations conducted against Afghan opposition forces, analyzes their role in key combat engagements, and highlights their contribution to the Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan. The study also discusses the military experience of Uzbek servicemen and its historical significance within the broader context of the Soviet–Afghan War.

KEYWORDS:

Soviet–Afghan War; Uzbekistan; Uzbekistani soldiers; Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan (OKSVA); Afghan opposition forces; People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA); Panjshir operations; Tajbeg Palace; Badaber Uprising; military history.



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Introduction

The Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989) was one of the most significant military conflicts of the late twentieth century. It had profound political, social, and human consequences not only for Afghanistan but also for the Soviet Union and its constituent republics, including Uzbekistan.

The origins of the conflict can be traced to the political instability that emerged in Afghanistan during the 1970s following the rise to power of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which maintained close political and military ties with the Soviet Union. As the internal political situation deteriorated and concerns grew within the Soviet leadership regarding the policies of Afghan President Hafizullah Amin and the future of the PDPA government, the Soviet Politburo convened a meeting entitled "*On the Situation in Afghanistan*" on 12 December 1979. Following this meeting, and citing the provisions of the Soviet–Afghan Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation as well as a request from the Afghan government, the Soviet Union decided to deploy the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces to Afghanistan to provide military assistance.[1]

According to historical studies, between March and December 1979 the Afghan government formally requested Soviet military assistance on nineteen occasions.[2] On 27 December 1979, Soviet special forces and military units launched an operation against the Tajbeg Palace, the residence of President Hafizullah Amin, during which Amin was killed. Shortly thereafter, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan came under the leadership of Babrak Karmal, a senior PDPA figure who had maintained close ties with the Soviet Union.[2]

Methodology

This study employs historical and comparative research methods based on archival documents, published memoirs, oral history interviews, and secondary historical literature. Particular attention is given to documentary sources concerning the activities of the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan (OKSVA) and the participation of military personnel from Uzbekistan. Oral testimonies of veterans are used as supplementary sources to reconstruct individual combat experiences and to assess the contribution of Uzbekistani servicemen during the Soviet–Afghan War.

The Soviet military contingent deployed to Afghanistan consisted primarily of the 40th Army, commanded initially by Lieutenant General Y. V. Tukharinov. The force included airborne divisions, motorized rifle units, aviation regiments, helicopter units, engineering formations, and logistical support services. Throughout the conflict, the size of the Soviet contingent increased steadily, reaching approximately 108,800 personnel by 1985, including about 106,000 military servicemen. Soviet forces operated jointly with units of the Afghan Armed Forces and the Sarandoy security forces to secure major transportation routes and strategic facilities.[3]

Research Results.

The participation of Soviet forces in Afghanistan is generally divided into four operational stages:[4]

- Stage I: December 1979 – February 1980
- Stage II: March 1980 – April 1985
- Stage III: May 1985 – December 1986
- Stage IV: January 1987 – February 1989

The mountainous terrain and the guerrilla tactics employed by the Afghan Mujahideen shaped the character of military

operations. Instead of conventional large-scale battles, Soviet forces primarily relied on mobile counterinsurgency tactics, including raids, search-and-block operations, ambushes, convoy protection, and the establishment of defensive positions.

The strength of the Mujahideen increased considerably throughout the conflict. Historical estimates indicate that their numbers grew from approximately 25,000 fighters in 1980 to more than 140,000 by 1988 and exceeded 250,000 by the withdrawal of Soviet forces in 1989.[6] Major Soviet military operations included Mountains-80, Spring-80, Autumn-80, Strike (Blow)-1 and 2, Volley, Maneuver, Trap, Granite, Thunderstorm (Ghazni Province), Jawara, South, Typhoon, and the Tashkurgan and Aibak operations conducted in Samangan Province.[7]

Discussion

One of the most significant episodes of the conflict was the Badaber Uprising of 26 April 1985. The uprising occurred at the Badaber prison complex in Pakistan, where Soviet and Afghan prisoners of war were held. During the revolt, Soviet prisoners succeeded in seizing weapons and temporarily taking control of parts of the facility before the uprising was suppressed after intense fighting. The event remains one of the most dramatic episodes involving Soviet prisoners during the Afghan War.[9] The participation of Uzbekistani servicemen in military operations demonstrates their substantial contribution to the Soviet military campaign. Among them was Captain Rofi Pardayev, Deputy Chief of Staff in the Asadabad sector between 1981 and 1983. Under his command, reconnaissance teams successfully installed surveillance sensors in enemy-controlled areas and collected intelligence during operations in the Jalalabad and Kunar regions.[12]

Another distinguished participant was Tal'at Pardayevich Muradov of Samarkand, who served as an officer-interpreter in Afghanistan between 1984 and 1985. For his courage during combat operations, he was awarded the Order of the Red Star in 1985.[13]

Similarly, Shukhrat Shoymardonovich Norkoziyev served as both an interpreter and an intelligence officer in Kabul, Ghazni, Panjshir, and Paktia Provinces from 1983 to 1985. His participation in numerous combat operations earned him the Medal "For Courage" and the Order of the Red Star.[12]

Border Guard officer Rustam Sultanovich Sultanov played an important role in securing military supply routes while serving with the 107th Border Detachment. According to his memoirs, his unit was responsible for ensuring the safe delivery of food, ammunition, and military equipment to Soviet forces operating in northern Afghanistan despite repeated attacks by Mujahideen forces. He was subsequently decorated with several military awards, including the Veteran of the Afghan War and Afghan Glory medals.[13]

Oral history interviews further illustrate the experiences of Uzbekistani veterans. Senior Sergeant Abdurazzoq Abdujalilovich Samatov, who served in the Panjshir Valley during 1985–1986, recalled sustaining two combat wounds while defending his unit and rescuing fellow soldiers. For his bravery, he received the Order of the Red Star.[12]

Reserve Senior Lieutenant Mamirzhan Kenzhayevich participated in thirteen combat operations and survived a landmine explosion near Kabul in 1983. Despite suffering a severe concussion, he continued his military service. Reflecting on the Soviet intervention, he described it as a consequence of the geopolitical circumstances of the period.[14]

Another Uzbek veteran, Mirzhamol Sobirov, served in Afghanistan from 1985 to 1987 after completing military training in Turkmenistan. He subsequently served in reconnaissance units stationed in Tashkurgan and Hairatan as a machine-gunner, participating in several combat missions. Among the Uzbekistani servicemen who distinguished themselves during the conflict was Mirzhamol Sobirov, who served in Afghanistan between 1985 and 1987. Following military training in Turkmenistan, he was assigned to reconnaissance units stationed in Tashkurgan and Hairatan, where he participated in combat operations and guarded three major fuel supply pipelines. For his military service, he was awarded the Medal for Combat Service, the 70th Anniversary of the Soviet Armed Forces Medal, and several other military decorations.

Veterans' memoirs also provide valuable insights into the Soviet government's policy regarding casualties during the conflict. According to Captain Rofi Pardayev, servicemen who died in Afghanistan were initially buried under strict regulations that prohibited the installation of tombstones identifying Afghanistan as the place of death. This policy changed following the resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU issued on 17 January 1983, which authorized standardized memorials and allocated state funds for their installation. Pardayev further noted that the evacuation of fallen soldiers from the battlefield was treated as a military priority.[13]

The oral history materials also reveal the heavy human cost of the war for Uzbekistani servicemen. Many witnessed the deaths or severe injuries of their comrades during combat. Temur Saidov from Kashkadarya was seriously wounded by a landmine explosion while performing

combat duties near the village of Piramakon.

Similarly, Muhammad Ergashev of Tashkent, who served as a combat engineer (sapper), sustained severe injuries that resulted in permanent disability. In his memoirs, he recalled surviving an explosion and credited Colonel Grishin with preventing the removal of his injured eye, an act for which he remained deeply grateful.

Another veteran, Boymurat Mamanov from Shahrissabz, was wounded while clearing mines in Kandahar Province. He suffered a serious leg injury during the disposal of an improvised explosive device ("fugas"), illustrating the constant danger faced by engineering units throughout the conflict.

A defining moment for Soviet servicemen came on 15 February 1989, when Lieutenant General Boris V. Gromov, commander of the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan, officially announced the completion of the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Crossing the Friendship Bridge over the Amu Darya River to Termez marked the end of nearly a decade of Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan. Returning servicemen were welcomed by their families, military officials, and representatives of the domestic and international media.

Conclusion

Between 1979 and 1989, more than 64,500 men and women from Uzbekistan served in the Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan. According to available statistics, 1,545 lost their lives, while 3,067 returned home with permanent disabilities.[16]

The participation of Uzbekistani servicemen formed an important component of the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan. Their roles ranged from combat operations and reconnaissance to

engineering, logistics, border security, and interpretation. Their wartime experiences, preserved through archival records and oral testimonies, constitute a valuable source for understanding both the military history of the Soviet–Afghan War and its lasting social consequences for Uzbekistan.

Many Uzbekistani participants were awarded Soviet military decorations, including the Order of the Red Star, the Medal for Courage, and the Medal for Combat Service, in recognition of their bravery and professional service during the conflict. These awards reflect the official acknowledgment of their contributions while also illustrating the significant human cost borne by Uzbekistan during the Soviet–Afghan War.

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