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Author(s): Lasha Tchantouridzé
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Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: Comparing Canadian and Soviet efforts

Lasha Tchantouridzé
Norwich University, Northfield, VT, USA

Abstract
After a decade of bloodshed and suffering, the western-sponsored coalition in Afghanistan led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has failed to win the "hearts and minds" of locals. The tremendous sacrifices by the United States, Canada, and their allies have produced some tangible results, but steps forward have been made on the shaky ground of overall insecurity and violence and have primarily been associated with certain urban developments, while most of Afghanistan remains deeply rural in its feudal social order and conservative Islamic traditions. Although the Canadian experience in Afghanistan has been very different in its scope and objectives from the Soviet Union's operations of the 1980s, certain important parallels, particularly concerning counterinsurgency, can be discerned.

Keywords
Canada, counterinsurgency, Afghanistan, Soviet Union, NATO, hearts and minds

The endgame of any successful counterinsurgency is the defeat of the insurgency and peace for the host country. There are two basic ways to achieve this goal—through heavy-handed violent suppression, or through the use of a campaign to win so-called "hearts and minds." The Canadian, and generally, western preference in Afghanistan has been for the latter, but after a decade of bloodshed and suffering, the western-sponsored NATO-led coalition in Afghanistan has failed to win the hearts and minds of the locals. The tremendous sacrifices by the United States, Canada, and their allies have produced some tangible results, but the steps forward have been made on the shaky ground of overall insecurity and violence and have been primarily associated with certain urban developments, while most of

Corresponding author:
Lasha Tchantouridzé, Norwich University, 158 Harmon Drive, Northfield, VT 05663, USA.
Email: ltchanto@norwich.edu

Afghanistan remains deeply rural with its feudal social order and conservative Islamic traditions. The western-supported government of Hamid Karzai has failed to establish itself as a legitimate national authority, especially in southern and eastern Afghanistan. Canada has fallen short of achieving a broad set of its goals outlined in the 2006 pamphlet *Canadians Making a Difference in the World: Afghanistan.*[1] In 2013 Afghanistan is as "failed" a state as ever: since 2006, the Taliban, Hekmatyar, and Haqqani insurgents have progressively asserted control over large areas of the country, including in Kandahar province, where the Canadian contingent was deployed. Terrorism, too, continues to flourish in Afghanistan. A 26 July 2012 *Wall Street Journal* report noted that the summer of 2012 witnessed an 11 percent increase in attacks from the same period in 2011. In June 2012 alone there were about 110 registered attacks per day—the highest average since the war began in October 2001.[2]

The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988, after almost 9 years of fighting, left behind a war-ravaged country with a decimated population; but it also left in Kabul a functioning government that managed to survive on its own, made some territorial gains, and even outlasted the Soviet state itself. To be precise, the pro-Soviet government of Najibullah survived primarily thanks to Soviet military and economic aid, and collapsed months after the dissolution of the Soviet regime caused supplies to dry up. Najibullah improvised as much as he could after the Soviet withdrawal, renamed the country the Republic of Afghanistan, and in 1990 even introduced the word "Islamic" to the constitution and the official name of the state.[3] But, in the end, without money from the Soviet Union, his political improvisation and talks with opposition groups were not enough. Canada will have to continue contributing its aid to the Karzai regime, in coordination with the allies, if the Karzai government were to avoid the fate of its Soviet-supported predecessor.

Soviet policy in Afghanistan was, in essence, self-contradictory and schizophrenic: ill-conceived and poorly executed military and security operations generated countless casualties and other forms of pain in the civilian population. Military operations originally designed for a large conventional enemy force were used against a mostly peaceful civilian population harbouring small militia groups. A typical Soviet response to an act of violence by the Afghan resistance was a gross overreaction manifested as a massacre of innocent people and wanton destruction of property and the natural environment.[4] Ironically, part of the Afghan infrastructure destroyed by the Soviet troops had been built by the

1. "Canadians Making a Difference in the World: Afghanistan," Government of Canada, Ottawa, 2006.
2. "In Afghanistan, attacks rise, troop deaths fall," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 July 2012, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444840104577550903318195434.html?mod=googlenews_wsj (accessed 29 April 2013).
3. Ironically, the Islamic republic currently led by western-supported Hamid Karzai was therefore so named by the Soviet-propped erstwhile Marxist-Leninist Mohammad Najibullah.
4. Ali Ahmad Jalali and Lester W. Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Quantico, VA: The US Marine Corps Studies and Analysis Division, 1995), xix.

Soviets' own countrymen in previous decades.[5] There were in Afghanistan a few creative Soviet policy specialists who tried to solve Afghan problems through civil–military relations and imaginative counterinsurgency efforts, but the foolishness and incompetence of Soviet military planners and leaders literally had no bounds. Canada never pursued such genocidal policies, and its military operations were nowhere near the scale of Soviet offensives; however, the Canadian policy in Afghanistan was similarly confused: Ottawa believed that it was possible to simultaneously conduct military operations, development work, and diplomatic state-building in Afghanistan. While war and diplomacy go hand in hand, these two instruments of foreign policy cannot be effectively applied at the same time, as they perform opposite functions at the start and end of war. Diplomats are often tasked with starting and finishing wars, whereas the military tries to avoid or win them. As far as Canada's economic development efforts in times of war are concerned, notwithstanding the scale, they parallel failed Soviet policies of, loosely speaking, building schools and orphanages for children while shooting their parents.[6]

The best the western coalition can hope for after troops are withdrawn from Afghanistan in 2014 is the survival of a western-friendly government there, which could be indefinite, provided military and economic aid does not dry up. This scenario is achievable but would be expensive. The Afghan military and security apparatus would be heavily dependent upon western funding, not only for the personnel salaries, but also to cover the costs of equipment, training, and ammunition. Further, delivery of the fuel necessary for the military infrastructure of a country the size of Afghanistan could only be achieved at the cost of significant western pressure on Afghanistan's neighbours. Pakistan is not friendly to anything but a pro-Pakistani government in Kabul; it does not willingly cooperate with a western-backed Afghanistan. Iran does not support a pro-western government in Afghanistan, nor does it support any western influence in the region. Najibullah was supplied with fuel by the Soviet Union from its Central Asian republics. Now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, independent states, are net importers of oil products. Of Afghanistan's neighbours, only Turkmenistan presents itself as a reliable supplier of energy, but it is heavily influenced by Russia's foreign policy priorities, and western governments have spent very little time cultivating a friendship with Ashkhabad. In short, to remain relevant in Afghanistan, and not to let the fruits of its hard labour disappear completely, Ottawa will have to cultivate friendly relations with the whole ugly neighbourhood—an expensive proposition that the Canadian government has yet to undertake.

In the 1980s the Soviet Union far exceeded Canada, and all other western coalition partners, in terms of the scale of military and counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. Soviet operations produced mass casualties, primarily among the

5. Andrei Dörre and Tobias Kraudzun, "Persistence and change in Soviet and Russian relations with Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey* 31, no. 4 (December 2012): 432–433.
6. Colleen Bell, "Fighting the war and winning the peace: three critiques of the war in Afghanistan," in J. Marshall Beier and Lana Wylie, eds, *Canadian Foreign Policy in Critical Perspective* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2010), 60–61.

Afghan civilians. The typical Russian way of war included indiscriminate use of firepower against all targets, military or civilian, mass reprisals against "guilty" populations, and deliberate destruction of property and economic infrastructure. The Soviets wanted to eradicate support for the Mujahedin in rural Afghanistan, which resulted in the policies of physical eradication of rural Afghanistan itself. The Soviet military bombed granaries, destroyed crops and orchards, cut down and uprooted trees, heavily mined agricultural fields and pastures, destroyed irrigation systems, killed livestock herds, demolished buildings large and small, levelled villages, conducted military sweeps through the countryside, and forcibly conscripted young men. As a result, more than one million people died of inflicted wounds, exposure, starvation, deprivation, and unsanitary conditions, while hundreds of thousands were injured, maimed, and sickened. More than three million Afghans became refugees. The forced destruction of the natural environment altered the landscape around many cities and villages, including Kabul: with the destruction of trees and forests, small brooks and rivers also diminished or disappeared, and natural spring water and ground water closer to the surface became contaminated and unsafe to drink as ferrous and non-ferrous metals from used and discarded military ordinance, dangerous chemicals, and decaying corpses of people and animals saturated soil around cities and villages. The Canadian military contingent deployed to Kabul in 2002 found local drinking water unsafe and ground water close to the surface contaminated. Potable water for the troops had to be shipped from neighbouring countries, and later a small water plant had to be installed to pump water from deeper reservoirs and purify and bottle it.

Nonetheless, even though the Canadian Forces (CF) had far fewer troops deployed in the Kandahar region than did the Soviets two decades prior, the Canadians fared much better and produced more tangible results for the locals. In the process, the CF also managed with far fewer casualties. In the 1980s the Soviets never fully controlled Kandahar, and that is why the city has so little Soviet-built infrastructure. Despite the CF's eventual effectiveness in Afghanistan, it appears that the Canadian government never had a comprehensive policy-guided strategy in Afghanistan. When deploying the first regular military contingent in winter 2002, the Canadian leadership evidently did not take the prospect of a decade-long protracted war seriously.[7] As late as 2005, CF in Kandahar were still hoping for a quick victory.[8] The Taliban movement, they maintained, was not backed by a superpower and did not seem to have any major or credible supporters. Afghanistan was tired of the brutalities and harsh measures imposed by the Taliban regime, and most political factions in the country

7. According to Roy Rempel, Parliament was "left totally out of the loop in the decisions made to deploy Canadian Forces [to Afghanistan] to help fight the war on terror." On the other hand, in his 2002 book, *The Chatter Box*, Rempel noted that most parties were not at all interested in discussing war issues. "In the fall of 2001," he explained, "I cannot recall a single question asked in the House by Liberal, NDP or Bloc Québécois members on military readiness issues." Roy Rempel, *The Chatter Box* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2002), 31 and 33.
8. Graeme Smith, "Colonel sees shorter stay," *Globe and Mail*, 26 September 2005, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/colonel-sees-shorter-stay/article599156 (accessed 27 April 2013).

seemed to be open to new beginnings. Indeed, the first 4 years after the overthrow of the Taliban were relatively quiet and peaceful in Afghanistan; there were no major attacks, and the Taliban appeared to be defeated and gone. At the same time, however, special operations teams from the US, Canada, and other countries continued to pursue suspected Taliban and al-Qaeda members, as did a sizable US military contingent deployed in southern Afghanistan. This relentless pursuit of militants may have played a decisive role in driving them back to the battlefield in 2006. In a May 2007 interview, a former senior Jihadi leader in Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's movement blamed "the Americans"[9] for the 2006 resurgence of Taliban:

> The Americans pursued them [the Taliban]. If the Taliban were not pursued seriously, they would have been inactive and joined the madrassas. The coalition forces entered the districts, villages and even houses of the Afghan people in order to find the Taliban. Instead of pursuing the Taliban, the anti-terrorism coalition should have developed the country's infrastructure and strengthened their influence in those regions most vulnerable. Every person, whose chance for life ends, would accept death. And that was the reality the Taliban faced.[10]

It was primarily US forces that pursued suspected Taliban members in southern Afghanistan from 2002 to 2006, while Canadian and other special forces conducted similar smaller operations elsewhere. The differences among the special forces of various nationalities, however, were apparently lost on the Afghan insurgents. Canada, for example, also actively operated small but effective groups of JTF2 (Joint Task Force 2) units that sought out, engaged, and killed the enemy.[11] The Soviet forces and their Afghan clients made similar blunders after taking over Afghanistan in December 1979, albeit on a much larger scale. In some parts of the country, Soviet troops were initially met as liberators, and generally, there was no mass opposition to their entry and deployment (except anti-Soviet rallies in Kabul and protests in a couple of military units). The new regime of Babrak Karmal announced a general amnesty, and the prisons were emptied of thousands of political prisoners. Within a few weeks, however, the situation was turned around at the insistence of Karmal, KGB operatives, and the new leader of KHAD (the Afghan equivalent of the KGB), Muhammad Najibullah. Karmal's priority was to target and destroy the Khalq faction of his own pro-Soviet party, while the KGB and KHAD were itching to fight the suspected Islamic groups. Soon the empty prisons were full again, and KHAD once again was busy torturing

9. In my experience talking with locals in Afghanistan, most of them did not distinguish among the western coalition members in the country. Coalition members were identified as either "Americans" or "eesaf," that is, ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), under which most members of the US-led coalition operated in Afghanistan.
10. "Afghanistan's veteran Jihadi leader: an interview with Qazi Mohammad Amin Waqad," *Spotlight on Terror* 4, no. 1 (3 May 2007).
11. Steven Kendall Holloway, *Canadian Foreign Policy: Defining the National Interest* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2006), 70–71.

and killing people. The KGB directed its own special KASKAD (Cascade) units to fight the Islamic groups by hiring and training local Afghans to attack and kill their countrymen, political opponents of the new regime.[12] Instead of pursuing policies of national reconciliation, or even reconciliation in the ruling party itself, the new pro-Soviet government in Kabul resolved to achieve unity and peace by brutal force alone. Not surprisingly, Afghans resisted and fought back. Initially, protests were peaceful—for example, there were large-scale rallies in Kabul in February 1980—but violence soon followed. A fully blown Mujahedin resistance to the Soviet presence took 18–24 months to mature. It took longer in ISAF's case—more than 4 years—but in 2006 insurgency re-emerged in Afghanistan with a vengeance.

Tackling insurgency

When the Soviet troops were deployed to Afghanistan, it was clear to many, including to some in the political and military leadership of the USSR, that they were stepping into a hornet's nest: Afghanistan was in an open revolt against the ruling regime and was already exhibiting civil war symptoms as outlined in the "Armed conflict of a non-international character" section of the Geneva Conventions.[13] Afghanistan's neighbours, the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan, were openly hostile toward the Soviet Union and did their best to support anti-Soviet factions. The United States, the USSR's superpower rival, had already authorized a plan of assistance to anti-Communist groups in Afghanistan. In contrast, there was no major uprising in Afghanistan when the CF deployed with NATO troops in 2002: both Pakistan and Iran expressed willingness to cooperate with the NATO coalition; the west had no superpower enemy. In fact, the former Cold War enemies, Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Georgia, and others supported western efforts directed against the Taliban regime and al-Qaeda. Despite such broad support and the absence of opposition, the NATO coalition somehow fared only slightly better than the Soviets did after a decade-long military adventure in Afghanistan.

In both cases, time was a key factor in the activities of the Afghan insurgents. The Soviets did not experience massive problems until 1983. The first generation fighters of anti-Soviet insurgents were mostly married and/or had family responsibilities. They did their fighting during their spare time, were not compensated, and were not mobile. In time, a new generation of fighters joined the ranks of the Islamists—teenagers and young men who grew up in the conditions of an armed resistance. They entered the struggle as unmarried boys and men not burdened by family responsibilities. (Many of them had no families, being orphans of war.) They could move from base to base and could fight full-time. Some of these fighters

12. Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 409–410.
13. "Qualification of armed conflicts," RULAC Rule of Law in Armed Conflicts Project, http://www.geneva-academy.ch/RULAC/qualification_of_armed_conflict.php (accessed 2 May 2013).

were even monetarily compensated by the insurgency.[14] Similarly, after the sound defeat of the Taliban and al-Qaeda forces by the US-led coalition in the winter of 2001–2002, the insurgents largely disappeared from the battleground, to come back within 4–5 years: boys who were not part of the insurgent militancy in 2001, as they were only 7–12 years old, were raised and trained by militants in the spirit of anti-American and anti-western sentiments. Curiously, it appears that neither the Soviets nor the western coalition anticipated such a demographic shift in enemy manpower, despite the fact that the Islamists' main method of "educating" boys in Afghanistan and Pakistan has never been a secret.

When the CF was deployed to maintain security Kabul in 2002–2005, it did its job well. The environment in and around the capital city was relatively secure by Afghan standards, and although there were occasional attacks and troubles, the Canadian contingent there was never seriously tested in battle. Things changed when the CF moved to Kandahar province, easily one of the most dangerous places in the word at the time, in early 2006. With this move, the CF's shortcomings in preparation and equipment deployment became clearer. The most glaring error probably was the absence of tanks: the Canadian government had decided in 2005 to eliminate tanks from the armaments of the land forces.[15] It remains a profound mystery how Ottawa expected its troops not to lose many lives while fighting infantry battles in southern Afghanistan without tanks. As to the Soviet deployment to Afghanistan in 1979, although the Soviets introduced more than 1200 tanks, their inadequate preparation and equipment shortcomings were even more pronounced than were those of the Canadians. To start with, the Soviets did not need over 1000 tanks in Afghanistan, not to mention anti-aircraft or anti-battery weapons. Indeed, such excesses were soon withdrawn. The Soviet forces were ill-prepared to fight a major insurgency: the officer corps had no relevant preparation and training; the troops lacked proper equipment, uniform, and medical supplies; the Soviet BTR armoured infantry carriers were not designed or equipped to operate in hot and mountainous conditions; the engineering troops did not have adequate equipment to build military bases and forward operating bases; etc. More specifically, for instance, the troops initially wore boots that were made by GULAG prisoners in the 1940s and 1950s for the conditions of central Russia and Eastern Europe. Not only were these boots unbearably hot, but they also made it impossible for troops to run or jump on a rocky and mountainous terrain. Further, the BTR armoured infantry carriers proved to be slow to manoeuvre in the hills, and their armour could not withstand modern anti-tank RPGs—they were coffins on wheels. Many field commanders eventually decided to instead use the army's small four-wheel drive trucks for troop movements, since though these trucks were poorly protected by armour, they were at least fast enough to drive out of dangerous areas.[16]

14. Jalali and Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, xviii–xix.
15. "Canada's International Policy Statement: Defence," Government of Canada, Ottawa, 2005, 15.
16. From fall of 1984 to fall of 1986, I served in a Soviet regiment that trained a company of conscripts every three months for service in Afghanistan. Naturally, I received reports of experience and lessons learned both through formal and informal channels.

Even though there are some obvious dramatic differences in Soviet and Canadian approaches to counterinsurgency in Afghanistan, not to mention differences in ideological preferences and political cultures, the two forces experienced many of the same difficulties—as can be expected of conventional armies dealing with insurgents. In terms of tactics, both forces found that it was up to the commanders in the field to improvise to avoid casualties or outright defeat in battle. Military deception is one method conventional force commanders in the field could use to outmanoeuvre an enemy keen on ambushes and improvised explosive devices (IEDs); however, because conventional forces had to battle for the same location (a road, a bridge, a tunnel, a mountain pass, city outskirts, etc.) or expect variations of IEDs on the same highway, there were natural limitations to the number of military deceptions they could use successfully: insurgents would normally fall for a given tactic the first time it was used, but with repeated applications the success rate for the same deception tactic would decrease dramatically.[17] Also, the expeditionary troops rotated periodically (the Canadians more frequently than the Soviets), while the insurgents, mostly residents of Afghanistan, normally did not rotate. As battles were repeated, the Mujahedin and the Taliban became better educated in Soviet and western tactics and operational art, while as war dragged on, newly arrived expeditionary platoon, company, and battalion commanders found it increasingly difficult to deceive or outmanoeuvre the enemy so well versed in conventional force tactics.

The CF had no experience fighting major insurgencies, whether independently or in a coalition. When the war began, conventional wisdom credited the senior partners in the Afghan coalition, the Americans, with a wealth of experience (from Vietnam), and assumed the same applied to the British, the French and some other coalition members, but it is entirely possible that experience does not transcend a generational divide in the military, as the US military itself was as poorly prepared and unready for this challenge as any other coalition participant.[18] US Army and Marine Corps Field Manual FM 3/24 *Counterinsurgency*, which was written by a group of scholars and military experts under the leadership of General David Petraeus and was officially approved in 2006, addressed exactly that gap in dealing with US military strategy and culture.[19] The same manual was crucial in influencing the CF counterinsurgency actions in southern Afghanistan.[20] Independently of this initiative, the CF quickly responded to new demands of insurgency: in 2006, the first cohort of the CF Joint Information Operations (Info Ops) officers' course

17. Jalali and Grau describe a number of tactical operations that demonstrate the steep and often painful learning curves Mujahedeen had to experience. Vladimir Lobov, a former chairman of the General Staff of the Soviet armed forces, discussed military deception used in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Vladimir Lobov, *Voennaia khitrost'* (Moscow: Logos, 2001), 310–375.
18. For a good summary of US blunders in Afghanistan, see Tim Bird and Alex Marshall, *Afghanistan: How the West Lost Its Way* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 2011.
19. *Counterinsurgency*, David H. Petraeus and James F. Amos, Department of the Army, Washington, December 2006, http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf (accessed 27 April 2013).
20. Major C. Bolduc and Captain J. Vachon, "Making strides at the heart of the insurgency," *Canadian Army Journal* 13, no. 2 (summer 2010): 45–56.

graduated from a program sponsored by the Canadian Expeditionary Force Command (CEFCOM) and held at the Peace Support Training Centre (PSTC), CFB Kingston.[21] In 2007, the new Conservative government first leased and then purchased new air-conditioned Leopard 2 tanks from Germany and the Netherlands. Overall, the smaller Canadian military was better able to respond to the changing demands of the war theatre in Afghanistan than the massive and bureaucratized Soviet army had been. Paradoxically, the smaller size of the CF could have been an advantage in the adaptability game. Also, the CF did not have to deal with a structure similar to the KGB (the Soviet state security agency), which was running its own large-scale operations in Afghanistan. Finally, the ideological burden imposed by a single-party political regime has been thankfully absent in Canada—no small blessing for those searching for innovations in military affairs.

CIMIC, Agitprop, and Information Operations

Both Canadian and Soviet forces did well in certain aspects of the operations known to Canadians as CIMIC (civil–military relations) and called Agitprop (agitation and propaganda) and/or "socialist aid" by the Soviets. Agitprop activities did not specifically distinguish between the informational and the materiel sides of counterinsurgency operations, as Canadian CIMIC did, although more recently information operations (sometimes called "influence operations") are often mentioned together with CIMIC in CF dispatches. The Soviet Union engaged in massive construction projects in Kabul and elsewhere in Afghanistan. Blocs of Soviet-style apartment buildings, which many justifiably view as ugly, are still among the most desirable areas for the Afghan middle class to reside in Kabul. The Soviets' building and distribution of decent dwellings for political allies and fellow travellers helped to buy peace and security in Kabul. The city was primarily peaceful and quiet during the 9 years of Soviet occupation—IEDs were rare, and suicide bombings even more so. Also, civilian visitors from the Soviet Union and other countries did not need military escorts to get around. Similarly, northern Afghanistan was primarily peaceful. It did not experience major battles until the Taliban invasions of late 1990s.

It is clear that Soviet practices in various areas of engagement often contradicted each other: one good initiative would be negated by other ill-conceived and backward ones. The Soviets especially excelled in the areas of civil–military relations and propaganda. The latter came to them naturally and without much planning but, curiously, the Agitprop material the Soviets produced in the early years of the war was directed at the Soviet troops themselves. Propaganda material was later reoriented toward the Afghan population. After realizing that the ideas of communism and socialism were entirely foreign to most Afghans, the Soviet Agitprop officials adopted narratives that were understandable and dear to the locals.

21. Steve Fortin, "Information operations, an essential tool," *Maple Leaf* 11, no. 21 (4 June 2008), http://www.forces.gc.ca/site/commun/ml-fe/article-eng.asp?id=4439 (27 April 2013).

Leaflets and pamphlets were distributed through airdrops, rockets, and even artillery. Surprise visits by Agitprop groups, operated early by Soviet specialists but eventually staffed by Afghans, were effective as well. Most Afghans residing in rural areas are illiterate, but traditionally they have a lot of respect for the printed word. The Soviet leaflets were collected and preserved by many, including Mujahedin. There were instances when the Mujahedin leadership organized buybacks of these leaflets from the population or their own troops. Indeed, it was not unusual for Soviet troops to find Soviet propaganda leaflets on detained or dead Mujahedin.[22] Canadians, too, utilized printed propaganda in southern Afghanistan, reportedly with better quality and care and in a manner more responsive to the unfolding developments on the ground than the Soviet propaganda was able to achieve.[23]

Soviet radio propaganda was also found to be effective, but it took the Soviet leadership 5 years to organize direct radio broadcast efforts from Afghanistan itself. Until 1985, most of the radio programs for Afghanistan were produced in Tashkent, Dushanbe, or Moscow, far from the daily events of Afghanistan. Therefore, most of it was irrelevant to current events, and the Soviet troops could not use most of the radio material for ongoing operations. At the same time, anti-Soviet radio propaganda worked well and in all major languages of Afghanistan. Afghans especially favoured the BBC and a program called "Voice of Free Afghanistan." Mujahedin groups produced their own field radio broadcast using high-quality western equipment. Regardless, Soviet radio shows found a fan base that taped and distributed the shows. That base included groups in Pakistan, even though the Mujahedin strictly forbade and punished such acts. Soviet troops and Agitprop brigades used loudspeakers to reach both the enemy and civilians, and in particular for the benefit of women, who were normally forbidden by their male relatives to listen to radio shows.

Curiously, Canada's military leadership also took a few years to develop an organized and systematic approach to information operations. Initially, the CF conceived CIMIC and information operations as separate areas of activity; only later did the military combine them. Information operations, or influence operations, play an important role in modern counterinsurgency efforts, as do civil-military relations. Like the Soviets, the Canadian contingent in southern Afghanistan used loudspeakers, printed propaganda material, and supported local radio stations, but it shied away from other Soviet methods of dissemination.[24] The Canadian efforts, for instance, were not directed at

22. Here and elsewhere, information on Soviet Agitprop activities is based on personal experience, as well as the following sources: S. G. Fogel, *Osobennosti propaganda SSSR vo vremia voennoi aktsii v Afghanistane (1979–1988 gg)*, http://psujourn.narod.ru/vestnik/vyp_3/fo_afg.html (accessed 27 April 2013); Krisko Vladimir Gavrilovich, *Sekreti psikhologicheskoi voini*, Minsk, 1999, http://www.x-libri.ru/elib/krysk000/index.htm (accessed 27 April 2013).
23. "Afghanistan battles Taliban in south," *Washington Post*, 19 June 2008, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2008/06/18/ST2008061803071.html (accessed 27 April 2013).
24. "Canadians, Taliban Battle in Information War for Hearts, Minds of Afghans," *Canadian Press*, 29 October 2008, http://www.psywar.org/forum/index.php?topic=370.0 (accessed 27 April 2013).

local clerics;[25] there were no specialized radio broadcast sets up; and no efforts were made to deploy propaganda via television or cinema.

The Soviet propaganda, especially in the area of cinematic propaganda, proved to be tremendously popular among all Afghans. In the years preceding the rise of the Taliban, the religious conservatives in Afghanistan were not ideologically opposed to public showings of cinema, music, or dance, provided they contained no blasphemy or scenes that could be construed as erotic. The Soviet-funded Agitprop teams, staffed by both Soviet servicemen and Afghan professionals, would visit an Afghan village, play popular music among the locals, distribute printed propaganda, display posters with ideological and/or public service announcements, deploy loudspeakers with radio programs and/or messages, and eventually play a movie. Such events were well attended and welcomed by villagers, and seldom attacked by the Mujahedin. In the areas of the country that were under firm control of the pro-Soviet forces, an Agitprop team could show movies, primarily produced in Afghanistan, with a clear anti-Mujahedin message, while in the contested areas of the country they could show a Pakistani or Indian film with some socially significant content.[26] The Agitprop team could even show a Soviet or European movie, so long as it had some kind of socially significant message—the struggle of workers or farmers for justice, or the importance of resisting backward practices and traditions, for instance. Of Soviet-produced films, priority was given to those from Soviet Central Asian republics, especially Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, that depicted lives of Soviet (often nominal) Muslims, or workers and farmers.

Canadian counterinsurgency efforts in Kandahar never seriously involved art as a tool of political propaganda to win Afghan hearts and minds. Unlike their predecessors from the 1980s, the modern Taliban forces oppose any visual art and representation on ideological grounds. Public demonstration of cinema in Afghan towns and villages would have been public testament of the Taliban's defeat by the western coalition. The Soviets used feature film presentations primarily to attract the locals, while the real meat of such enterprise was composed of small propaganda featurettes, audio announcements, and poster displays that preceded and/or followed the film. For Canadians and the other coalition partners, it would have been enough just to screen a film—any film with moving images would have challenged Taliban influence and diminished the Taliban's ideological dominance in the eyes of the locals.

Cinematic propaganda was probably the single most successful information operation effort by the Soviet Union. Those who proposed, designed, and carried out cinematic propaganda cleverly used Lenin's positive characterization of cinema as "the most democratic of all arts." Indeed, the founder of the Soviet State loved films and rightfully regarded cinema as an excellent ideological tool. As a result, the Soviet film community from the 1920s on developed the best-ever propaganda film school, with subtle and explicit ideological messages woven into many different film

25. Former senior Canadian officer in Kandahar, interview with the author, Winnipeg, September 2010.

26. Still especially popular among the Afghans are Bollywood movies from India.

genres. Soviet television, on the other hand, never had such powerful advocates as Lenin and failed to reach the heights enjoyed by Soviet cinema in ideological work or otherwise. Consequently, although they campaigned hard in Afghanistan, the Soviets easily lost a competition in TV propaganda, especially in areas of the country bordering Iran and Pakistan. Soviet-sponsored television programming did not achieve the same level of influence in Afghanistan as did Pakistani and Iranian television channels, which never failed to remind the viewers of the importance of fighting infidels from Kabul and Moscow. Soviet TV propaganda was undermined by both the low quality of the programming and the limited number of broadcast hours. Toward the end of the war, the Soviets deployed a new satellite and started broadcasting regular Soviet channels to Afghanistan from Moscow, Tashkent, and Dushanbe, but it was too little too late.

In comparison, the Karzai government in Kabul has used some of the aid money it has received from Canada and elsewhere to assist local efforts in organizing "modern" television broadcasts. The current Afghan regime also enjoys more support of better organized and transmitted television channels but still faces a significant challenge from anti-western Iranian and Pakistani stations. Canada, or the west in general, has not tried to engage in propaganda wars on television or radio, and although the anti-Kabul counterpropaganda is not as strong as it was in the 1980s, the indigenous pro-government Afghan TV and radio channels cannot win the "propaganda war" against the Taliban and other religious extremists alone. A Canadian contribution to the propaganda war would require significant creativity and imagination but, if deployed, it would be a relatively inexpensive and potentially highly effective counterinsurgency measure.

The Soviet Union concentrated its efforts in fostering civil–military relations on constructing affordable housing for Afghans, especially in the Kabul region. Apartments were given to state officials and employees, teachers, soldiers, members of the pro-Soviet ruling party, and supporters of the Soviet policies. They were used to bribe those who were thinking of switching sides. Housing was part of public infrastructure projects both in the Soviet Union and in Soviet "socialist aid" packages for developing countries. Many of the housing complexes built by Soviets are still in use today, their inhabitants, of course, now free from ideological obligations. In comparison, Canada's CIMIC efforts in the area of public infrastructure concentrated on building and rebuilding schools; more than 50 have been built or rebuilt in the Kandahar province.[27] The value of this effort is undeniable; however, these schools turned out to be much more controversial than the Soviet housing projects were. For one, public schooling, especially for girls, is a hot political issue in Afghanistan. Conservative Islamic groups are adamantly opposed to schooling for girls, and more traditionalist conservatives are opposed to secular schooling for

27. "Canada's education signature project: Canada's engagement in Afghanistan," Government of Canada, Ottawa, 18 May 2012, http://www.afghanistan.gc.ca/canada-afghanistan/projects-projets/education.aspx?view=d (accessed 27 April 2013).

boys. Taliban and likeminded terrorist groups have retaliated by bombing schools, killing teachers and headmasters, and in some instances even targeting children.[28] In comparison, terror attacks on individuals' dwellings have been rare in Afghanistan—terrorists primarily concentrate their violence on individuals and infrastructure that belong to the public sphere, while housing, although developed and funded by an enemy force, remains private.

Both the Soviet Union and Canada contributed significant funds to improving healthcare in Afghanistan. Soviet and Eastern European-trained Afghan doctors travelled throughout the country offering services free of charge. Their work was not frequently impeded by the Mujahedin—in a country chronically deprived of healthcare, these services were generally well received. In 1988 alone, the doctors' teams served more than 20,000 Afghans. Medical help was also accompanied by pro-Soviet propaganda. While medics were attending to the sick, accompanying agitators addressed the local population.[29] Canada engaged in healthcare efforts in Afghanistan by actively supporting the fight against polio. Through the Polio Eradication project more than 400,000 children have been vaccinated in Kandahar province and more than seven million have been vaccinated across Afghanistan.[30] Such projects have and will have lasting impact on Afghanistan, regardless of who comes to power immediately after the withdrawal.

The fatalities sustained by all Soviet forces in Afghanistan during the 9 years of conflict were just under 14,500, a relatively small number out of almost 700,000 deployed (with fatalities exceeding one million on the enemy side). Most of those Soviet fatalities were due to infections acquired in hospital, untreated or poorly treated wounds, carbon monoxide poisoning, and vehicular and other accidents. The Soviet troops in Afghanistan had little personal protection: bulletproof vests were rare, and the ones that were available were rather useless. In other words, the vast majority of the Soviet fatalities occurred not because of outstanding military performance by the Mujahedin, but because of the incompetence and negligence of Soviet military officers, planners, and leaders. The massive Soviet retaliations for Mujahedin-staged ambushes or skirmishes were gross overreactions that killed or injured thousands of Afghans for every Soviet soldier killed or injured. This indiscriminate bloodshed, more than anything else, contributed to the prolonged and pointless war and the eventual Soviet defeat. The Soviet Union failed to achieve a single political objective in

28. "Two Afghan children beheaded in separate incidents," *Reuters*, 31 August 2012, http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/08/31/us-afghanistan-beheading-child-idUSBRE87U0J420120831 (accessed 27 April 2013); "Afghan: boy suicide bomber kills children in attack on Kabul NATO headquarters," *Telegraph*, 8 September 2012, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/9530095/Afghan-Boy-suicide-bomber-kills-children-in-attack-on-Kabul-Nato-headquarters.html (accessed 27 April 2013).

29. "Medpomoshch pod pritselom. Zhenskaia istoria Afganskoi voini," *Argumenty i fakti Omsk*, 11 February 2011, http://www.omsk.aif.ru/society/article/17487 (accessed 27 April 2013).

30. "The polio eradication signature project," Canada's Engagement in Afghanistan, Government of Canada, 18 May 2012, http://www.afghanistan.gc.ca/canada-afghanistan/projects-projets/polio poliomyelite.aspx?lang=eng&view=d#polio (accessed 27 April 2013).

Afghanistan and left the country and its pro-Soviet government regime worse than it had found it 9 years earlier.

Canadian casualties were relatively minor in absolute numbers compared with those sustained by the Soviet Union, and the CF's ratio of those who died (around 160) to those who served in Afghanistan over 10 years (about 40,000) is also much lower than the Soviets'. This difference could be due to the fact that the CF experienced less intense combat than the Soviets did, as well as by the fact that the current Taliban insurgents and their allies are neither supported by massive military aid nor equipped with sophisticated weapons. The difference could also be due to the high level of care Canada's military command gave to the safety and wellbeing of its troops.[31] The Canadian base Camp Julien in Kabul was an exemplary military compound, exceptionally well designed and equipped for both safety and comfort. The deployed troops were equipped with body armour and a personal protection kit; the medical teams were fully staffed and equipped; food was excellent, and sanitation outstanding.

Conclusion: Surge and withdrawal

There are distinct historical parallels and differences between the exits of the Soviet and western forces from Afghanistan. Both the Soviet and western drawdown of troops took place after a final surge. In both cases the surge witnessed occasional incursions into neighbouring countries, primarily Pakistan. In neither case was the surge effective. Both the Soviets and the west aimed at arming and training more than 300,000 Afghan military and security personnel before the withdrawal. Neither the Soviet Union nor the west attempted to resolve the land distribution issue and the pernicious agricultural policies that had caused the Afghan war in 1970s in the first place. When it came, the Soviet drawdown and withdrawal from Afghanistan resulted less from a sense of its mission having been accomplished and more from significant international pressure and interest in seeing the Soviets out of the country. In other words, there was significant international pressure and interest in seeing the Soviets leave. The plight of civilians in Afghanistan and millions of Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Iran, and elsewhere, along with other humanitarian concerns, were the primary motivating factors behind the international pressure. In comparison, there has been no international pressure on Canada, the US, or any other western ally to withdraw from Afghanistan. The ongoing withdrawal by Canada and the allies has only been subject to self-imposed deadlines and domestic pressures. In Canada's case, the fact that the war lasted more than a decade was put forward as a logically limiting factor on the military commitment to the country.

The Soviets completely misjudged and butchered Afghanistan and failed to meet their political objectives. They did not have to go in; once there, they did not have to stay so long; and when fighting, they did not have to use vastly disproportionate

31. I visited Camp Julien in Kabul in December 2004.

military force. All parties, especially the Soviets, would have been better off had there had been no Soviet invasion. In contrast, the western invasion was prompted by an attack on the US that originated from Afghan soil in September 2001. Yet the western coalition committed many of the same mistakes the Soviets made two decades prior, albeit on a lower scale. It appears that the west overstayed its mission in Afghanistan by at least 7 years: Afghanistan is worse off now than it was in 2005, just as it was in 1989 after 9 years of Soviet occupation.

Author Biography

Lasha Tchantouridzé is associate professor and director of the Diplomacy Program at Norwich University, the Military College of Vermont.