

CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING THE PERFORMANCE OF THE LOGISTIC SUPPORT OF THE SOVIET ARMY IN THE AFGHAN WAR

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Abstract: *The reasons why Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in the 1980s became the subject of disputes, articles, or even inspiration for the books of military analysts. The interest shown around this subject extended to the Soviet military doctrine, tactics, equipment, forces design (architecture), the number of military employees, the pursued purpose, etc. In this regard, in order to identify "lessons learned" possibly useful in the field of current logistical support, this article aims to analyze, from a logistical perspective, the Soviet effort during the 9 years of military actions taken in Afghanistan.*

Keywords: *Afghanistan; logistical support; "lessons learned".*

*"Guerrilla war does not fit into the popular high-tech future war, but it may well be the future war that a high-tech country finds itself fighting."*¹⁷

Introduction

On the one hand, the Soviet experience in Afghanistan is a consistent inspiration for the Russian army and armies of other states. On the other hand, the gradual (possibly final) withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan could lead to a significant destabilization of the area and, at the same time, it could be an object of interest to other states.

The low performance of the Soviets in Afghanistan draws the attention of many tacticians even today. With the main objective of expanding the influence of the USSR in Afghanistan, the military operation was planned to be a short one, but in fact the operation extended over a period of almost 10 years. For the Soviets, the conflict initiated on 27th of December 1979 ended in February 1989, with the withdrawal of the last Russian troops from Afghanistan.

The costs of Soviets actions during the aforementioned decade had implications on both sides: on the one hand, Russian forces reported significant human losses (approximately 55,000 people who died or were injured), financial, economic, political problems and a worsening of the image of the USSR. On the other hand, the Afghans also reported numerous casualties: over 3 million immigrants along the border with Pakistan¹⁸.

Methodology

Starting from the assumption that the problems which appeared at the level of logistic support favored the failure of the operation in the Russo-Afghan war, the shortage of resources being also a constant, through this article our aim is to identify, from a logistical perspective, the dysfunctions emerged during the confrontations between the two armies. The main method of collecting the data for this material is that of the study of "traces" (both documents and other forms of information storage). In addition, I reviewed a number of works whose subject focuses

¹⁷ Valentin Runov, et.al., *The Soviet-Afghan War. How a superpower fought and lost*, The University Press of Kansas, 2002, p. XIII.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. XIV.

on the conflict between the Russians and the Mujahideen. At the same time, in order to provide a coherent picture of the components of Soviet logistics, I used the taxonomy for the existing logistics domains of our national logistic doctrine.

General context

"Afghanistan has an undeniable strategic value, and it has been desired not only by Russians, but also Iranians and Pakistanis, and the decision-makers in New Delphi were obsessed with it."¹⁹ For the main Eurasian economies, China and India as well as for Russia and Iran, Afghanistan was, in terms of converging interests, a true route of transport through Central Asia.

"The geographic position of a state on the globe is the first thing that defines it, more than the philosophy of the government by which it is guided"²⁰. Thus, located in the territorial proximity of the Union Soviet and based on the treaty signed in 1978 between the Democratic Republic Afghanistan and Moscow, which offered the Afghan government the opportunity to ask for military support from the Soviet government, Russian troops entered the territory of the neighbouring state with the mission of providing international assistance to the Afghan people. At the same time, the Soviets intended to establish advantageous conditions in preventing possible actions taken by neighbouring governments²¹.

Afghan-Soviet cooperation, at the military level, is a tradition, initiated around 1919, when the Russians offered financial support and provided weapons to the Afghan army in conflict, at that time, with the British conquistadors²². Through success of these military interventions, Moscow hoped to succeed in attracting the socialist government of Afghanistan in order to represent Soviet interests in the area.

The Soviets entered the conflict, however, by disregarding a possible support from its enemies. So, the Russians did not consider any possible help offered by the Americans to Mujahidin, a contribution that later significantly balanced the scales in favor of the enemy. Pursuing its geostrategic interest, the US indirectly engaged in this conflict considering that its positioning, in the background, is advantageous both in terms of avoiding human casualties as well as the non-involvement of their own troops in a guerrilla war. At the same time, the groups of the rebels also received external support from Iran, Pakistan and China.²³

Features of the logistical support of the Russian Army

The literature focused on the confrontations between the Soviets and the Afghan rebel factions highlighted, prominently, the problems that arose. In publications, references were made to both the problems caused by the Soviets' approach to military involvement in this war as well as to the dysfunctions emerged from the faulty development of some actions. So, significant problems were reported in the resupply process, both material as well as human: the lack of resources as well as their mismanagement prevented the achievement of set objectives. It is known that the logistics of the Russian army could be characterized as "reduced, primitive and located mainly around Kabul",²⁴ and it could not support operations led by fighting forces.

The military equipment, the weapons used as well as the endowment of the Soviet troops were designed on a much larger scale and the planned actions had, at the same time, the same exaggerated character. The conflict approach was similar to the previous intervention in

¹⁹ Robert D. Kaplan, *Răzbuarea geografiei. Ce ne spune harta despre conflictele viitoare și lupta împotriva destinului*, Editura Litera, București, 2020, p. 438.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²¹ Valentin Runov, et.al., *The Soviet-Afghan War. How a superpower fought and lost*, The University Press of Kansas, 2002, p. 1.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²³ Alexandra Șerban, *Invazia și ocuparea Afganistanului de către trupe sovietice*, URL: <https://www.historia.ro/sectiune/general/articol/foto-invazia-si-ocuparea-afganistanului-de-catre-trupele-sovietice>, accessed on 21.01.2020,

²⁴ Charles A. Russo Jr., *Soviet logistics in the Afghanistan War*, US Army War College, 1991, p. 5.

Hungary and Czechoslovakia (1956, 1962)²⁵, where the Soviets' initial purpose to impose themselves through a significant psychological impact, was hampered by unexpected resistance from the local population. In Afghanistan, too, the initial impact was intended to be a strong one and the war conventional and brief, on the pattern of "Blitzkrieg". Focusing the attention on such warfare disregarded a proper tactical training, the number of procedures practiced by Soviet forces being limited and the possibility of involvement in a guerrilla war was not considered. So, even if the intention of the Soviet army was to engage in a war on a large-scale, of high-intensity, in fact, Russian forces were drawn into a war with a low level of intensity, with actions mainly at the tactical level, taken against an opponent who engaged in direct confrontations only when the terrain and circumstances were on his side.

Soviet military doctrine was based on the experiences of the Russian army in the World War II. Other possible sources of lessons identified were neglected, a previous confrontation of interest could be represented by the Vietnam War. The doctrinal non-alignment with the guerrilla war model led to improper use and inadequate deployment of fighting forces and logistic dysfunctions.

Without a prior analysis of the terrain on which the confrontation was to take place, Soviet troops proved unprepared to act in such a difficult environment such as that of Afghanistan.

The central principle on which the logistical support of Russian troops was built in Afghanistan was set up on the idea of "pushing" the needed supplies to troops based on the forecast determined by the central echelon level. If in the US Army, the commander of a military unit requests from the immediate commander the necessary materials, in case of the Russian troops, the central echelon was the one who made the decision to resupply all subordinated structures. In terms of this principle, the Soviets maintained the decision on resource management as well as on the organization of transport, at the highest levels of command. From a doctrinal point of view, the logistics of the Russian army included the location of the following structures:

- an advanced supply base, located at approximately 150-200 km away from the combat zone limit. This structure was characterized by the presence of specialized warehouses holding all types of materials;
- bases for resupply of combat forces located at about 100 km away from the combat zone limit.

Trucks were used for resupply (land transport) and at the division level, replenishment was conceived as a mobile one, the whole amount of materials being stored on vehicles. This necessity was justified by the location of mobile resupply points situated just 10-30 km away from the combat zone line. Also, the battalions had the necessary stocks on hand, also using their vehicles.

Considering the previously established goal of the Russian troops, that of conducting a short-term confrontation, the intention of logistics was to lineup with the organization described above.

Supply

From a logistical point of view, one of the main challenges of the Red Army was to achieve and maintain the functionality of the supply lines. While during the Vietnam War, more than 500,000 troops were deployed, in Afghanistan, a country 5 times larger than Vietnam, were deployed between 90,000 and 120,000²⁶ Soviet soldiers. The much lower density of military related to the territory transformed the supply into a real challenge.

The Soviet army considered it opportune to place the main resupply hub of forces in the town of Termez (in the north of Afghanistan). Using the Salang Highway (AH 76) they ensured the resupply of the Kabul area – the advanced command post of the Soviet troops. This highway (the only highway in the country), along with an extension of 500 km to southern Afghanistan

²⁵ Valentin Runov, et.al., *The Soviet-Afghan War. How a superpower fought and lost*, The University Press of Kansas, 2002, p. XIII.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. XIX.

(Kandahar) was the main connection between the north and south of the country, that is why many areas were controlled by the Mujahideen. Convoys with materials became attractive targets, being the subject of many incidents.



Image no. 1: The resupply route of the advanced command post of the Soviet forces

The Russian Army's ability to use air in order to transport material was limited, both in terms of not having specialized aircrafts and because of the anti-aircraft system used by the Mujahideen. "Springer" rockets were given by the USA and the Afghan rebels learned how to use them in a decisive manner. In this direction, the impact of these rockets was significant and the Soviet aviation²⁷ rarely used the air supply, mainly limited in borderline situations, when it became the only option (for example: in ambush)²⁸. Although the quantities of materials needed for supporting forces were enormous, the only viable way of supply was the terrestrial one. Moreover, the convoys were used during the day because at night the Russian forces could not protect them.

Water supply was also a challenge. Because of the geography of Afghanistan, the water resources were limited. Building a viable infrastructure and a few water supply points was extremely difficult. Not only Afghans suffered from lack of water but also the Soviet troops.

It is known that Soviet resources represented an opportunity for the Mujahideen. In this context, they used the catches by marketing them in bazaars in order to financially support their families. Moreover, food was used to feed their families and ammunition was used for their weapons (a significant number of Mujahideen came from former Afghan soldiers and had 7,62 mm caliber weapons). It is known that the Mujahideen were not paid for their participation in the conflict, and they had to insure their own revenues.

In the absence of a unique command and concentration of effort, the Mujahideen understood the role which can be played by the psychological impact of organizing ambushes. Based on their efficiency and using the "hit and run" principle, ambushes were constantly used.

Speculating about the deficiency of the order of battle used by Russians in order to move resources from one area to another, the Mujahideen organized several kinds of ambushes. This

²⁷Gregory Fieber, *The Great Gamble. The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, Harper Collins, ebook, p. 216.

²⁸ Mohammad Yousaf, Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan The Bear Trap: The Defeat of a Superpower*, Casemate, 2001, p. 70.

“road war”, next to the extreme natural phenomena throughout the entire year (sand storms, avalanches, extreme temperatures, considerable rainfall quantity), caused major disruptions to supply flows. For example, between 1985 and 1987, in just three years, the Mujahedeen organized and executed about 10.000 ambushes. Moreover, the infrastructure of airports was constantly a target for Mujahedeen. They concentrated their attacks in order to cut air supplies and force the Soviet Army to resupply using land infrastructure which was much easier to address in terms of resources destruction by organizing ambushes.

Arms, military equipment and maintenance

It is known the fact that Ahmad Shah Massoud, a charismatic leader of Mujahedeen, was the main actor that fueled and sustained this conflict. He deemed that the main error of the Soviets in addressing military actions in Afghanistan was the use of heavy weapons. He highlighted the idea that the use of heavy weapons implied a generous logistics footprint. Furthermore, this type of weapons was a grand resources consumer.

Generally, the Soviet armament had a large caliber and it was designated to create a psychological impact. Given the uses of such armaments in predominantly mountainous terrain, the accuracy and possibility of eliminating targets at considerable distances prove to be significantly low.

It is known that maintenance encompasses activities carried out to keep the technique in good order. In this direction, the maintenance is a “power vector” which facilitates achieving the success in military operations. Proper planning, a strong conception and a functional implementation of maintenance represent strong points in accomplishing the mission. The lack of specialized staff and the shortage of equipment needed to perform maintenance bring about problems around technique functionality. It cannot perform to the parameters for which it was designed. During the conflict, the Afghan government built facilities for repairing military vehicles and technique as well as weapons and equipment. However, the ability to repair all pieces of equipment was far from being capable to maintain the functionality of technique, weapons and equipment²⁹.

From the doctrinaire point of view, the Soviet Army had three categories of maintenance: routine (adjustments, minor replacements carried out at company level), medium (involves the change of at least one entire gear and was carried out at the regiment level) and capital maintenance (represented the complete repair of the vehicle)³⁰. Regarding the organization of maintenance, the designated structures were: a platoon equipped with a repair truck served by four mechanics within a fighting battalion. A regiment had designated a company with mobile technical repair facilities and its evacuation structure and technique. Within a division there was a maintenance battalion which had a mobile repair truck and which was responsible for the establishment of collection and repair points for damaged vehicles. At the Army level, there were mobile maintenance detachments designated to complete the division structures. The Soviets’ choice regarding the adopted way of maintenance was made by using the time principle: if the interval exceeded 5 hours, the vehicle was evacuated and repaired within the maintenance interval.

The use of reservists as specialized maintenance personnel led to improper use of the technique as they did not have the necessary language knowledge to be able to use equipment manuals. Thus, a large number of vehicles and pieces of military equipment were completely damaged. In order to lower the level of loss, the Soviet Army built two permanent maintenance facilities in Herat and Jalalabad.

²⁹ Valentin Runov, et.al., *The Soviet-Afghan War. How a superpower fought and lost*, The University Press of Kansas, 2002, p. 5.

³⁰ Charles A. Russo Jr., *Soviet logistics in the Afghanistan War*, US Army War College, 1991, p. 13.

Services (facilities)

During the operation, the support of the forces requires different services such as: accommodation, food service, bath, cleaning equipment, recovery/evacuation of equipment. Regarding the military uniforms, it was noted that the Soviet soldiers had only one row of equipment they were constantly wearing. Although the improvement of this issue was an important objective, the standards of the Russian Army remained far from reaching Western quality.

The military equipment of Soviet soldiers was also designed for a “*war in Northern Europe or in North China*”³¹. As a result, a significant part of the personal equipment of the soldiers had not proven reliable in Afghanistan: uniforms, footwear, sleeping bags etc.

Initially, the Soviet Army engaged in the conflict the units and great units of the 40th Army. In the 1980, the troops were supplemented with a mechanized division and two distinct regiments. In this condition, the necessities of accommodation increased significantly. Regarding the new context, new accommodation facilities were built. The construction materials were carried from the URSS using land vehicles. Moreover, in the same year, Soviet soldiers had been equipped with more precise conventional arms of infantry (they switched AK-47 – caliber 7,62 mm with AK -74 – caliber 5.45 mm)³². This type of armament, besides the tactical technical characteristics above the previous used (a decisive higher recognized effect) allowed the fighter to be equipped with a larger number of cartridges compared to the same weight.

Food services

The combat ration did not provide enough calories and vitamins and it was characterized by a limited variety regarding the kind of offered food. At the same time, the soldiers were not given enough food. A constant effort made by the Soviet commanders of the Soviet troops, along the lines of feeding troops, was to provide a warm meal for all soldiers every day³³.

The lack of the minimum vital resources (food, water etc.) had fueled the trade in equipment, armament, spare parts and even ammunition. Soviet soldiers used this trade to obtain financial resources in order to buy food, goods, alcohol and narcotics. The forces from the first line were often well supplied, but to a large extent the outposts had significant shortcomings - creating the conditions for major malfunctions³⁴. Afghanistan is recognized as a country where 85% of the population is involved in agriculture (land cultivation or livestock farming by the predominantly nomadic or semi-nomadic population). In peacetime, agricultural products provided the minimum food and a small part of the economic resources for the entire population. But in the years of conflict, Afghanistan was not able to provide food or materials for the local economy. Population migration and the damaged infrastructure were two of the main causes.

Movement and transportation

In the Russian Army, at the level of an infantry division the transport was assigned to a transport battalion. This military unit was able to carry 1000 tons. At the level of a regiment, the transport was carried out by a transport company with a capacity of 200 tons.

The geography of Afghanistan is one of the main obstacles in developing infrastructure and in facilitating the growth of the economy of the country/the national economy. Apart from the geography describing the state, in this context of the precarious development of access roads, the territorial proximity of Afghanistan must also be mentioned: the proximity of both Russian and English, both showing a significant trend toward the expansion of the hegemony. The lack of railways must be noted. The transport is mostly carried out by roads. The few

³¹ Gregory Fieffer, *The Great Gamble. The Soviet War in Afghanistan*, Harper Collins, ebook, p. 320.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

³⁴ *Idem.*

consolidated roads have to cross significant altitudes. Moreover, in some places the construction of tunnels is the only way to connect one area to another. One of these tunnels, the Salang Tunnel, was a key logistical hub. It was built on the road on more than 300 miles and it was the link between the border of Afghanistan with the Soviet Union and Kabul - the capital of the Afghan State. Regarding the design of this road, the Soviets developed along it two key points for their logistics: the logistical base at Pol-e-Khomri and the Bagram air base.

A second important route used for transportation by the Soviet troops was Kabul-Jalalabad. It continued to the border with Pakistan and it was the only significant east-west route in the country. Another route involved by the Soviets in supporting the troops begins in the Western part of the country, near the Soviet town Kushka, across Herat, Kandahar to the Kabul area. The aforementioned route facilitated the location of a major warehouse near Herat. It should be noticed that all these three routes were built by the Russians except the section between Kandahar and Kabul which was built by the United States³⁵.

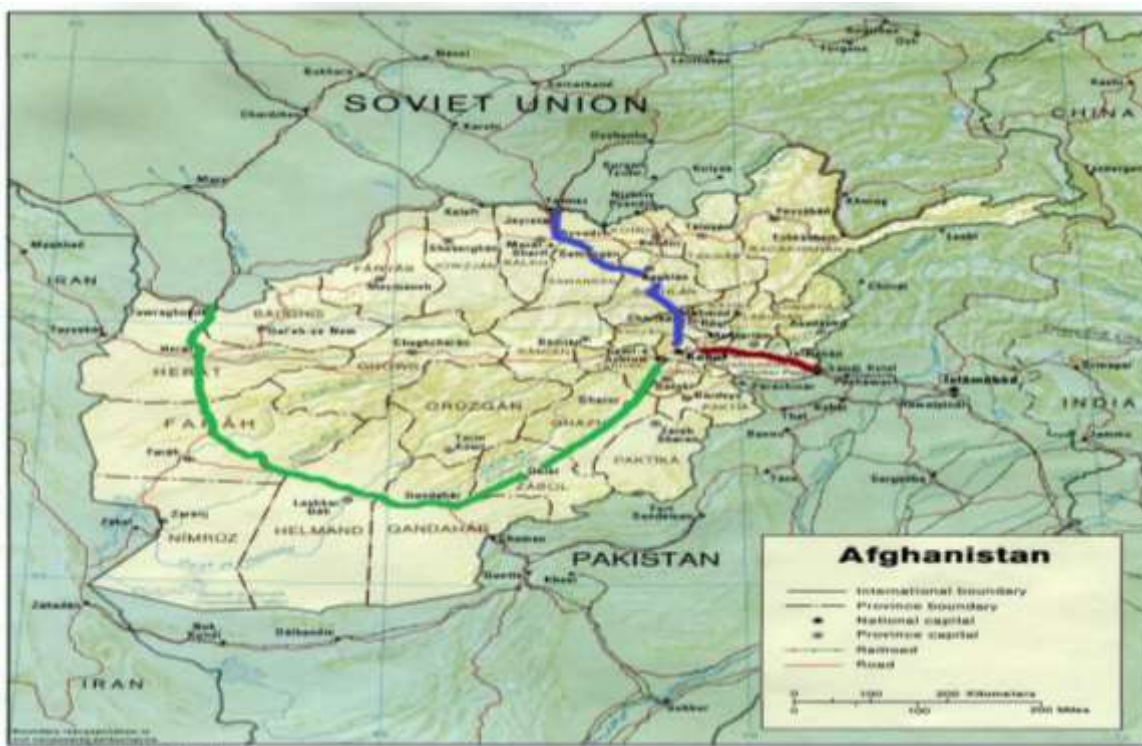


Image No 2: Resupply routes used in order to transport materials

As it can be seen in the previous picture, the necessary resources for Russian troops were provided, mainly on the ground, using the transport routes. Given the weather conditions during winter periods, ice and snow on the roads were significant obstacles to all traffic. In terms of weather conditions, the Termez-Kabul route was considered the most affected, with avalanches, snowfalls or rocks turning the winter route into a less practicable one.

When we talk about air transport, we must mention that in addition to the limitations imposed by the reduced number of aircraft, the small number of airports was a real obstacle. Afghanistan had just two airports: Kabul and Bagram.

Initially, during the Afghan War, in order to resupply the troops, the Russian Army used convoys of considerable length (100-300 vehicles/convoy). A distance of 300 miles was covered in about 14 days. All in all, this activity was an extremely difficult one. The fact that the Russian Army had estimated in a wrong manner the necessary number of soldiers in order

³⁵ Charles A. Russo Jr., *Soviet logistics in the Afghanistan War*, US Army War College, 1991, p. 4.

to fight with the Mujahedeen contributed to an unworkable distribution of most of the personnel and means. In addition, the importance of ensuring transport security was minimized. While in Vietnam War, a mean of fighting was designated to assure protection and safety of 5, in Afghanistan the report was that of 1 to 15-20 trucks.

Thus, many shipments were carried out to resupply troops using large convoys. A well-known incident, considered a real disaster for the Soviet Army, occurred in 1982 when a convoy crossing the Salang tunnel was devastated by an explosion (resulting from an accident or an attack by the Mujahedeen). More than 800 people were killed³⁶ and an impressive number of damaged vehicles were registered.

Other issues about the resources in the Afghan War

In terms of human resources, Soviet expeditionary forces were composed of two functional categories: “*occupational forces and counterinsurgency forces*”³⁷. The counterinsurgency forces carried out the most important operations (assault, recognition etc.). They were made up of specialized human resource, recruited using a rigorous process. At the other pole, about 80 % of all troops, represented the regular army (mechanized units and a number of support units) based on unspecialized personnel. Their human resource came from recruits with a criminal past, people who had significantly broken the law. Many young people were also minimally trained and then transported, by air, to Afghanistan (in order to keep the secret of where they would be disembarked). Their lack of training generated was inefficient. This fact could be highlighted at the level of Soviet logistical support.

An armed conflict provides permanent stress. In general, in order to maintain a mental balance, the logistics considers important to provide facilities for relaxation and recreation of the staff. Some armies have also allowed alcohol consumption (obviously in a controlled environment and in clearly regulated quantities). Although the predilection of the Russian people for the consumption of vodka was known, it was not allowed and not provided to Russian soldiers. In the Afghan War, the sale of alcohol was officially forbidden. However, the black market was the one which supported the alcohol traffic through “*helicopter pilots and military convoys*”³⁸. Regarding this fact, the military discipline had been significantly affected.

The lack of functionality within the information system conducted to the engagement of oversized forces in various confrontations. When the Afghan Army asked for support, the Soviets involved military structures that were oversized in relation to the number of Mujahedeen and the combat facilities they had. In this way, significant amounts of resources had been unduly wasted.

Conclusions

The guerrilla fight is not among the predictions of the future war. However, regarding the direction that contemporary societies are heading for, we deem that this will be one of the forms in which advanced technological countries will find themselves fighting. An intelligent army trains its troops for future wars by learning from confrontations. Moreover, assuming the identified lessons is not about fighting as in previous conflicts, but it is about the critical analyses of the whole context. This kind of lessons about the fighting past should always guide the future war.

To sum up, we deem that the main problems regarding the real logistical support of Soviet Army in the Afghan War were the following:

- Entire logistics was rigidly designed, with limited adaptability to the changes required by the operations of the fighting forces;

³⁶ Charles A. Russo Jr., *Soviet logistics in the Afghanistan War*, US Army War College, 1991, p. 11.

³⁷ Alexander Alexiev, *Inside the soviet Army in Afghanistan*, Arroyo Center – The Rand Corporation, 1988, p. VI.

³⁸ Valentin Runov, et.al., *The Soviet-Afghan War. How a superpower fought and lost*, The University Press of Kansas, 2002, p. 320.

- The Soviet logistics doctrine was based on the principle used in World War II, which turned out to be significantly incompatible with the requirements of a guerrilla war;

- The soldiers involved in the Afghan War did not meet the requirements regarding the needed specialization. Furthermore, all logistical branches were neglected and the result became evident: the resources management was a really bad one. A significant part of the resources (food, ammunition etc.) was captured by the Mujahedeen and a large number of vehicles and military equipment was dumped (the lack of specialized personnel in maintenance led to the abandonment of the damaged vehicles).

- A significant number of Asian soldiers were recruited. They did not have knowledge of the Russian language and they had difficulties in reading manuals and instructions used by the Soviets. Moreover, the impossibility of communication became a barrier for achieving the established objectives of the logistical support

- A vital target of logistics was not achieved: main types of supply products were not provided to the Russian fighting troops. Most of the time, they did not have enough food, water or ammunition.

All in all, it is true that the War was not lost only because of the logistics. However, the logistics had and still has a strong word in the economy of the Afghan War.

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