



# YOU'RE MAKING THE SAME MISTAKES

In 1979 Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. Nine years on, they left, bloodied and defeated. Now, as Britain and the US head into their ninth year of brutal battle, two war heroes — one Russian, one British — meet to see if Russia's past could save today's allies from the same fate. By Mark Franchetti



**Mirror on the past: Soviet soldiers in the same labyrinthine mountains and dusty plains that today's US and British troops (inset, in Helmand province) are negotiating**





**T**he white flash of explosions and red traces of artillery fire filled the moonlit sky on the night of October 7, 2001, as Britain and the US launched the war in Afghanistan against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

From the roof of a mud-caked house in Tobdara, a mountainside village high above the Shomali valley, 30 miles north of the Afghan capital, Kabul, I watched as allied war planes and cruise missiles streaked beyond a high ridge separating us from the front line.

Loud explosions echoed into the night as I was joined by a group of hardened Northern Alliance fighters, the loose coalition of former mujaheddin rebels who had sided with the West. Armed with AK-47 machine guns and careful not to use even a torch, to avoid attracting incoming fire from an enemy position above, the men had come to witness the twilight of the Taliban.

“It won’t take long,” predicted one, wrapped in an Afghan blanket and wearing a *pakul*, the woollen round-topped hat favoured by the mujaheddin. “The Taliban are finished. A few days of heavy bombardment and then we’ll go in with a ground assault. They’ll either flee or die.”

The confidence was engaging. But in the dusty plains below there were many reminders of another superpower’s bloody attempt to wage war in Afghanistan. Soviet tanks and armoured personnel carriers, burnt out and twisted, still littered the country, more than two decades after Moscow had withdrawn its troops, ending its disastrous nine-year war.

In the shadow of the Taliban front line, a few miles below Tobdara, the Bagram air base was overgrown and abandoned. The spot from where the Soviets launched their invasion in 1979, it is now the US army’s largest base in the country.

The mujaheddin’s predictions did not take long to come true. Five weeks later Kabul fell.



Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were on the run, dispersed in the high mountains along the border with Pakistan. His optimism however proved premature. More than eight years since the war began in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Taliban have made a comeback.

To date, 239 British soldiers have been killed in the war (more than in Iraq), often in ferocious close combat that has been compared to the trench warfare of the first world war. This year, American and British forces will have been in Afghanistan as long as the Soviets. And yet Russia’s experience in the country has been largely overlooked by the allies. It was, say American and British generals, a different war fought in different times by a different army.

Many military experts would now beg to differ. There are compelling parallels between the obstacles faced first by the Soviets and now the allies. Often, the mistakes are the same. What lessons are there to be learnt from the Soviet war in Afghanistan? Just as the allies failed in 2001 to study the fateful Soviet invasion, the Russians before them dismissed Queen Victoria’s foray into a country some have dubbed “the graveyard of empires”. So when in early 1980 the Soviet deputy foreign minister pointed out to his boss, Andrei Gromyko, that three previous invasions



by the British had failed, Gromyko asked sternly: “Are you comparing our internationalist forces to those of the British imperialists?”

“No, sir, of course not,” answered his deputy. “But the mountains are the same.”

One senior British military man to sense he could learn from the Soviet war is Brigadier Ed Butler. The former commander of 22 SAS and 16 Air Assault Brigade in Helmand, Butler, 47, was the original mastermind of Britain’s strategy to fight the Taliban in the southern Afghan province. A soldier for 24 years, mostly with the SAS, he served in Afghanistan in 2001, 2002 and 2006.

For displaying exceptional bravery on daring top-secret operations behind Taliban lines Butler was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. Tipped as a future head of Britain’s armed forces, he shocked many by resigning in 2008. He now heads an international company trying to attract investment into impoverished regions. “I wanted more time with my children,” he told me. “But I was also finding it hard to publicly state that we had enough resources at the same time as talking to parents about the loss of a son, when more resources may have made a difference.”

Butler began early on to read detailed accounts of the Soviet invasion. “I found it useful and fascinating, as their tactical experience



Brigadier Ed Butler  
praises his troops after a  
six-month operation in  
2006 in Helmand province

Top left: Lt Gen Ruslan  
Aushev (second from right)  
during the Soviet  
war in Afghanistan

Bottom left: Ed Butler  
(right) and Ruslan Aushev  
in Moscow last November



turned out to be very similar to ours,” he said.

Then, as he planned the 2006 British operation in Helmand province, Butler invited a Soviet colonel who had commanded a helicopter regiment in Afghanistan over to his headquarters in Colchester. “He gave us a very good first-hand account of the ground and enemy which reinforced our assessment that in such a harsh environment it would be as tough to survive as it would be to fight,” recalled Butler. “He also told us that to reduce the number of helicopter crashes, each pilot’s one-litre weekly vodka ration should be cut down by a third. It was a wonderfully Russian way of looking at things.”

To gain a better sense of the parallels between the Soviet and allied campaigns, and consider what lessons can be drawn from the past, *The Sunday Times Magazine* flew Butler to Moscow to exchange views and compare notes with Lieutenant General Ruslan Aushev. Awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union, the former communist state’s highest military award, for his service in Afghanistan, Aushev, 55, spent four years and eight months in the country. He was seriously wounded, rose to regiment commander and is one of the war’s most respected veterans.

During a long and animated exchange on a chilly Moscow morning, a few hundreds yards

from Red Square, the two war heroes talked frankly about their time in Afghanistan.

Aushev, strong-willed and moustached, castigated the West for still being there and for what he sees as a doomed attempt to impose our institutions and way of life on a country deeply steeped in feudalism – but he also spoke candidly about the many Soviet mistakes.

**‘HE TOLD US THAT TO REDUCE THE NUMBER OF HELICOPTER CRASHES, EACH PILOT’S VODKA RATION SHOULD BE CUT DOWN. IT WAS A WONDERFULLY RUSSIAN WAY OF LOOKING AT THINGS’**

Sharp and thoughtful, Butler, who retains the stiff and trimmed demeanour of a senior military man, challenged some of Aushev’s advice on how best to extricate the allies, and defended some decisions taken by Britain and the US.

Most striking, however, was how little the two disagreed, given the passing of three decades since the Soviet invasion and the fact that they were brought up believing rival ideologies. “Most tactics used by the Taliban against us are very similar to those the mujaheddin used against the Soviets,” said Butler. “Many of the mistakes are the same, as are the difficulties faced. Listening to the general’s advice was fascinating and

frankly I found myself mostly agreeing with him.”

Contrary to the cold war picture painted by our propaganda, the Kremlin’s decision to send troops into Afghanistan in December 1979 was not conceived as an imperialist land-grab. Moscow went in to prop up the Afghan communist government, which had come to power in a coup the previous year. It did not plan to stay long. The Politburo had resisted numerous calls by the Afghan government for troops to help quash armed rebellion to its socialist reforms – which had angered tribal and religious leaders. Moscow finally went in mainly because it feared that the Afghan communist president, Hafizullah Amin, was cosying up to America. Elite KGB special forces were flown into Bagram to help stage a coup. In a textbook raid, they took the presidential palace, killed Amin and installed the pro-Soviet Babrak Karmal as leader.

The regime change was supported by “a limited troop contingent”. Its task, so Soviet documents have since shown, was to stabilise the situation in the county and withdraw after about six months, leaving behind only political advisors and intelligence agents. “We thought it would be over quickly,” Aushev recalled. “We believed that when such a powerful army as ours goes in, things would calm down. The opposite happened. The civil war only intensified.

“We took sides. It’s the same mistake now being committed by the coalition. You’re supporting one element of Afghan society against the other. To them, you’re outsiders just as we were. History and past experience show the Afghan people don’t like it when outsiders come in, whatever their purpose.

“The longer the war, the more resistance will last. You need to understand that the Taliban are not terrorists. They may use terrorist tactics but they are a part of the Afghan people. You must acknowledge that your forces are now fighting with a section of the population, just as ours did.” But the coalition’s view, said Butler, is that most

Afghans are opposed to the Taliban and want rid of them. Only partly true, said Aushev. If the Taliban are so unpopular, who is feeding and harbouring them if not the locals? But Butler said there is an element of terror. “Why then aren’t they taking up arms against the Taliban to defend their own villages?” said Aushev.

Most Soviet Afghan war veterans now view the 1979 invasion as ill-judged. The conflict killed 15,000 Soviet soldiers and some 1.3m Afghans. A third of the country’s pre-war population went into exile. Many also believe it accelerated the collapse of the Soviet Union, two years after Mikhail Gorbachev, the ➤➤➤

father of glasnost and perestroika, pulled out troops in February 1989.

At the height of the conflict, there were nearly 120,000 Soviet troops deployed in Afghanistan — the same as the current total figure for Nato, US and British troops. In all, 620,000 soldiers served there. Aushev said the Soviets lost 300 helicopters in the war — compared to the coalition's 56. So far some 800 US soldiers have died along with the British total.

The mujaheddin could never defeat the Russians in military terms — “No Soviet garrison or major outpost was ever overrun,” said General Lieutenant Boris Gromov, the last commander of the 40th Soviet Army in Afghanistan and its last soldier to leave the country.

But the Russians could never keep long-term control of areas they seized — a problem the coalition has become painfully familiar with. In a 1986 memo that could mostly have been written today, the Soviet army's chief of staff stated gloomily: “After seven years in Afghanistan there is not one square kilometre left untouched by the boot of a Soviet soldier. But as soon as they leave the place, the enemy returns and restores it all the way it used to be. We have lost this war.”

Then as today, Afghanistan's lack of a railway meant that all supplies and ammunitions had to be transported mainly by land — across treacherous mountain passes and harsh deserts — making military supply columns exceptionally vulnerable to hit-and-run attacks.

“The terrain, especially in the mountains, is so impenetrable that you could lose sight of an entire battalion,” said Aushev, who spent months fighting there and recalls having to drink water from puddles to stay alive. “All the mujaheddin had to do is hit the first and last vehicle and the whole column would get bogged down.”

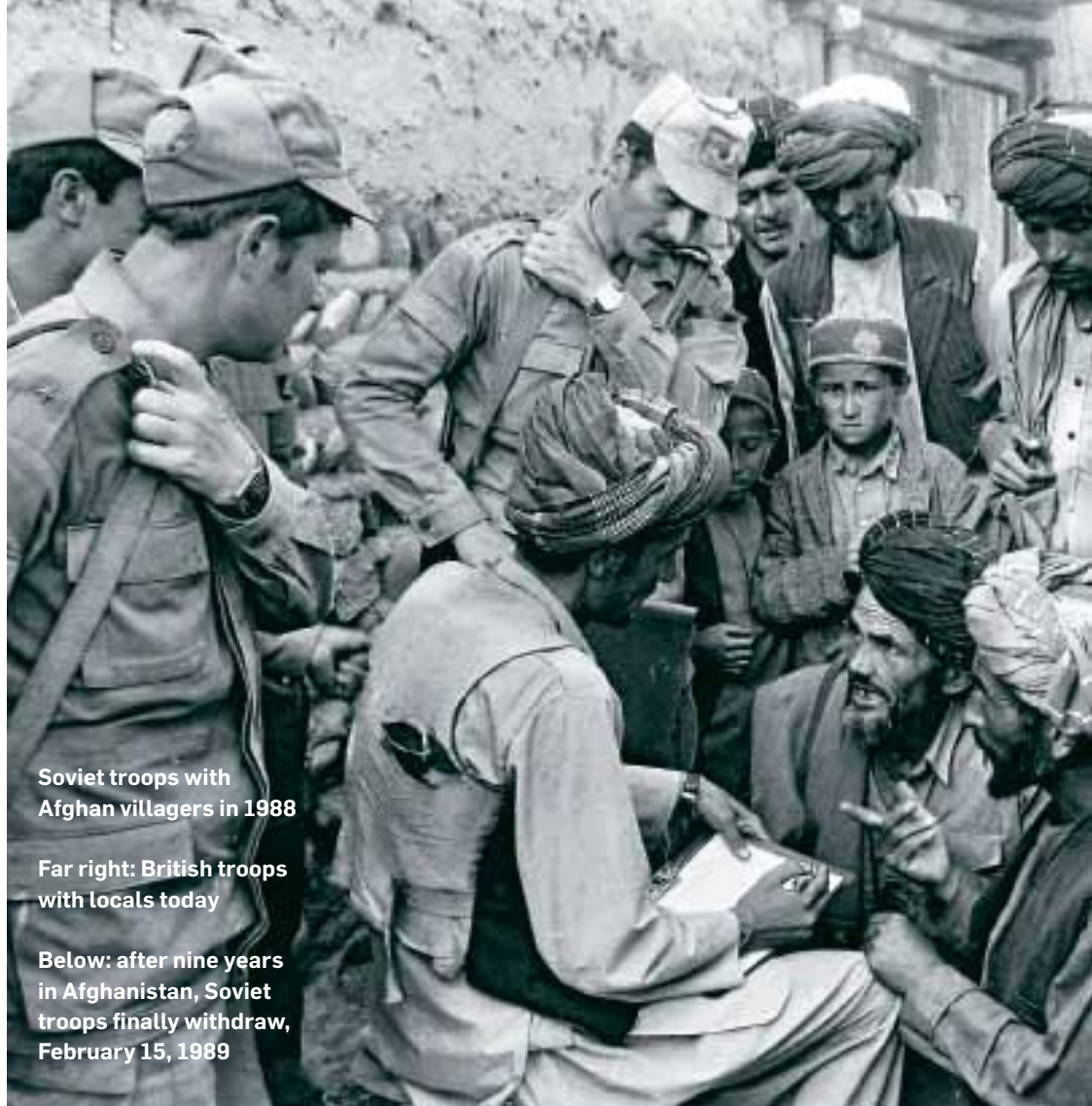
In October 1986, while protecting an artillery regiment on the move along the narrow mountain road to the Salang pass in the north of the country, Aushev was badly wounded in an ambush. Hit by fire from an AK-47, he returned to the war several weeks later.

The elusive nature of the enemy in Afghanistan has also changed little. Acting in small, highly mobile groups, the mujaheddin — as the Taliban today — were hard to spot, let alone distinguish from civilians. The Russians referred to the mujaheddin as *dukhi*, or ghosts.

“I'd be passing with my regiment,” Aushev says. “There'd be a man by the roadside with a shovel in his hand. He'd smile and wave, and I'd wave back, but I knew he'd just planted a mine.”

“It's very similar,” said Butler. We used to say that the Afghan farmer standing in his field could just as easily have an AK-47 hidden in the ditch. Moreover, he's smiling at you.”

The *zelonka*, as the Russians called the narrow labyrinth of greenery and mud houses typical of Afghan villages, is as perilous a war theatre as the country's steep mountain passes. There, say



Soviet troops with Afghan villagers in 1988

Far right: British troops with locals today

Below: after nine years in Afghanistan, Soviet troops finally withdraw, February 15, 1989

Aushev and Butler, a network of underground tunnels were used by the mujaheddin, and now by the Taliban, to vanish after an attack.

Close proximity and ample cover for the enemy make rocket propelled grenade (RPG) attacks exceptionally difficult to escape.

“The tactics have not changed,” said Butler. “The mujaheddin used mines against the Soviets, often with devastating effect, whilst the Taliban are now using improvised explosive devices (IED) and roadside bombs against us.”

While the Soviet army was mostly made up of conscripts, coalition forces are all professional. They are better trained, have far superior technology than the Russians in the 1980s, and crucially, are better fed and equipped. Some Soviet soldiers became so desperate they traded weapons and ammunition with the enemy in exchange for food and clothing.

Disease, especially infectious hepatitis, took a devastating toll on Russian troops. It is estimated that more than 400,000 soldiers, two thirds of those who served, fell sick.

But state-of-the-art technology and kit aside, combat in Afghanistan has not become easier.

“Imagine fighting day in and day out for 20 hours a day,” said Butler, “in 50-degree heat, carrying 70lb of equipment, drinking hot water, with the knowledge that there is a good chance of being either killed or wounded every time you leave the base. That was a typical paratrooper's day in Helmand in 2006. Just getting from A to B

is logistically very tough.”

Unlike the coalition, which planned the war from scratch in a record 26 days, the Soviets had intimate knowledge of Afghanistan prior to their invasion as Moscow had KGB agents and political advisors on the ground assisting the country's communists. “That's a big advantage,” Butler told Aushev. “We went in cold and had very little information about what we'd face. For instance, we had hardly any understanding of the country's very complex tribal tapestry.”

Nor were totalitarian Soviet leaders ever constrained by domestic public opinion or the body-bag count — arguably the most pressing worry for the coalition. True casualty figures were not released until after the collapse of communism. Relatives of those killed in the war were forbidden from engraving Afghanistan on the tombstone of the fallen. There were no anti-war demonstrations, and for much of the conflict most Soviets received only rosy propaganda reports from the front. Nonetheless, the Soviets had one particular disadvantage; unlike the current campaign their conflict was fought against the backdrop of the cold war. America, first secretly and then overtly, funnelled billions of dollars in ammunition and weapons to the mujaheddin in a proxy war against its rival superpower. The CIA helped train insurgents, and Britain, Pakistan, most Arab Gulf states and even China contributed to arming the rebels. In what most Soviet veterans including Aushev





consider a turning point, by 1986 the CIA began supplying the mujaheddin with hand-held Stinger surface-to-air missiles — which in part explains the high number of Soviet helicopters downed. Less trumpeted is the conviction now held by most that the covert operation inadvertently helped create Al-Qaeda, whose early leaders, including Osama Bin Laden, were

mujaheddin armed by the West.

“We had much of the world against us,” said Aushev. “Today most countries are on your side. And the mujaheddin had very good weapons, the best mines and better medical equipment than us. Imagine if the Taliban had Stingers.”

The solution, however, Butler and Aushev agreed, is not military. The decorated British war

Nation-building alone is not enough either. The Soviets implemented a programme far more extensive than the coalition has so far. They built roads, factories, hospitals and schools and trained the Afghan elites, often by sending them to Moscow. “We got into nation-building long before we went in,” said Aushev. “Most Afghans loved us. That changed when we sent in the military because inevitably civilians get killed.”

The Soviets and the coalition made one fundamental mistake, according to the general. Both went in with a clear and limited objective but allowed themselves to get bogged down in pursuit of unattainable goals.

The Russians sent in troops to stage a coup and stabilise the situation but then sought to Sovietise Afghan society. The coalition went in to remove Bin Laden and the Taliban but is now trying to “democratise” the country. “In 2001 you told the world you were going in to remove a terrorist threat, not impose democracy, but now you are trying to stage western-style elections in a country where most people can’t read,” says Aushev. “You dispersed the Taliban and had some local support. That’s when you should have gone home leaving the Afghans in charge. We made the same mistake, seeking to impose our Soviet way of life, telling them they should have collective farms, pioneer camps and so on.”

The historical parallels go further. With Karmal, the Soviets backed a weak, unpopular president who rarely ventured outside Kabul for fear of assassination. A hostage in his own country, he was guarded round the clock by KGB special forces. The same, argued Aushev, is true of Hamid Karzai, the western-backed Afghan president who, shadowed by US special forces, is back in power for another five years following the country’s recent hotly-contested elections.

In 1987, the Kremlin replaced Karmal with Mohammed Najibullah who oversaw the Soviet withdrawal and ruled for over four years with substantial financial aid from Moscow. That quickly changed when Boris Yeltsin cut off all funds and cheap gas supplies. In 1996 the Taliban finally caught up with Najibullah, dubbed the “Ox of Kabul”, when they tortured, castrated and hung him from a traffic light post.

## THE ELUSIVE NATURE OF THE ENEMY HAS CHANGED LITTLE. THE MUJAHEDDIN, LIKE THE TALIBAN TODAY, WERE HARD TO SPOT, LET ALONE DISTINGUISH FROM CIVILIANS

veteran was noncommittal when I asked him about proposals to send in extra troops — the so called surge which for a while at least helped reduce violence in Iraq.

First, in Butler’s view, the government must clearly state its objectives. “What do victory and defeat look like for us in Afghanistan?” as he put it. “What exactly are we trying to do there and how much can we afford to spend? Only then can one make a poised decision on the surge.”

Aushev by contrast had no doubts. Any troop increase is destined to fail. “What difference will another 40,000 men make? None. You’d need a million to control it but you’d still have terrorist attacks,” he says. “Militarily we could do pretty much what we wanted. We had no problem landing 2,000 troops somewhere, just like that. But that is not the way out.”



**G**ordon Brown hopes a UN-sponsored conference in London later this month will set a timetable for a transition to Afghan security forces of their own country, paving the way for troops to come home.

When Butler asked him what advice he would give the coalition, Aushev, who in August was invited to share his views on Afghanistan with the Pentagon, was resolute. Western-style elections should be scrapped. The country should be ruled by a *jorga*, or council, made up of respected tribal elders and ethnic leaders.

Karzai and his government should take responsibility for the country. The president ➤ 27

should be given a strict ultimatum. He should state his aspirations for Afghanistan and plan for achieving them. The West should assist him, but remove him unless he has made progress within a certain timeframe. Replacing his US bodyguards with Afghans would stir Karzai into action, added the Soviet general mischievously.

“The Afghans must tackle their own problems, Aushev told Butler. “They have governors, ministers, a president. Let them talk to their own people. Why are you going in? Give government envoys trucks of medicines, potatoes and flour when they travel outside Kabul, but let them talk to each other.”

But that is exactly what he did in Musa Qala in 2006 when he personally sat down with local tribal leaders who wanted to take charge of their own security reaching a compromise to put an end to the fighting. “Give us money and we will rebuild but don’t come into our villages and we’ll keep control on the Taliban. It worked for only a few months until the Taliban came back in and started the fighting again,” recalled Butler.

The answer, Aushev insists, would have been to put in a self-defence unit made up of locals. “Give them weapons but let the people of Musa Qala defend their Musa Qala.” Crucially, he went on, the coalition must help build up a strong and independent Afghan army, police and intelligence agency capable of tackling the country’s security problems. By the time the Russians left Najibullah in charge they had trained an Afghan army three times the current size. But that did not save him once the Kremlin cut supplies.

In the general’s eyes no viable political solution can fail to include the Taliban, even if they insist on imposing sharia law in regions where their influence is at its strongest. “What’s wrong with that? It’s the same law used in Saudi Arabia but you are not seeking to impose democratic elections there,” said Aushev.

When it comes to possibly the single most pressing factor in shaping Afghanistan’s future, Butler and Aushev could not have found more common ground.

Combined, the two war heroes may have served over five decades in the army, but in their eyes the solution to the country’s complex problems is not military – despite the urgency of strengthening the Afghan armed forces.

It must focus on an ambitious long-term programme to help develop Afghanistan’s economy to improve the lives of millions of Afghans. This through aid but also direct investment, to build factories and businesses which generate revenues for local communities rather than the authorities.

It is a concept Butler has embraced with enthusiasm since retiring and heading CforC, which provides political, business and cultural advice to investors interested in emerging and frontier markets. “It’s difficult because of the cycle of violence, but I’m a huge believer in the importance of attracting investment into post-conflict zones. We are facilitating business recovery, through foreign direct investment, in Africa and it could work in Afghanistan. Regrettably, development budgets there are only a fraction of what is spent on the military.”

“Turn to a tribal leader,” hypothesised Aushev. “Tell him you want to build a local leather factory which will bring jobs. Of course he’ll provide security. Get the locals involved on all fronts. Build milk, meat factories. Surely that’s not so difficult for a coalition of 40 countries. What’s cheaper, to keep a 100,000 strong army there or build 100 new factories? Today the Afghan leadership is hiding behind your shoulders and worrying only about private matters, just like they did with us.”

Failure to develop Afghanistan and improve the life of the ordinary Afghan, the two veterans agreed as they exchanged military souvenirs and posed side by side, could lead to the chilling threat of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism spreading far beyond the region’s borders. To some it may seem an unlikely scenario. But then again, as I watched the firepower lighting the sky in Tobdara, few ever imagined America and Britain would still be fighting here eight years later ■