

# In Afghan quagmire, Soviets were ground down by their own weapons

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Osama bin Laden's shadowy past and the American involvement in the Afghan war were bound to invite speculation, and vague suggestions have been made that a close working relationship *must* have once existed between the terrorist and the US Government. Pundits and seasoned reporters alike have cast brief references to this assumed link on television news programs and the idea appears to be based on yet another misleading perception repeated by the media — that Soviet forces in Afghanistan were defeated by a "US-armed" coalition of Islamic guerrillas.

In fact, the overwhelming bulk of the weaponry used by the mujahedin guerrillas came from the Soviet Union itself and the money used by bin Laden to finance his Afghan War activities was drawn from Saudi patrons and his own considerable wealth.

Popular resistance in the Afghan countryside began in earnest after a Soviet-backed Marxist coup in April 1978. The Communist Party tightened its control over the government and resistance turned into a full scale rebellion as roughly half of the Afghan Army deserted to the mujahedin — taking their Soviet-supplied weapons with them. By the time of the Soviet invasion in December 1979, the mujahedin were in control of 22 of the country's 28 provinces and were well-stocked with munitions. The grim fighting of the next five years saw increasing amounts of covert foreign assistance from oil-rich Persian Gulf nations, the United States and China .

Some estimates of the total amount of aid run as high as \$40 billion between 1980 and the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Most of this was in the form of humanitarian aid for the five million Afghan refugees --- a staggering number representing fully a third of the country's pre-war population. Yearly covert American military assistance approved by Congress hovered in the \$50 million dollar range but press speculation was that the actual figure was closer to \$100 million.

Chinese small arms and machine guns were particularly plentiful among some guerrilla groups as were American-made weapons like the Claymore mine. Yet the best weapons source continued to be the mujahedin's foes. The Afghan Army continued to dissolve as quickly as the Soviets reconstituted it, and units up to 3,000 strong were known to defect en masse to the resistance. Inexplicably, Soviet combat units remained untrained in counterambush drills throughout the war and regularly left weapons and lightly damaged vehicles behind after fights. The mujahedin were only too happy to collect the booty.

Costly, inconclusive fighting continued as the Soviet forces slowly turned to increased use of special operations, or Spetsnaz, troops bolstered by conventional forces. These special operations units enjoyed a high degree of success against the mujahedin and increased the Soviet's dependence on helicopters for air assault and resupply. Helicopters proved as useful to the Soviets as they had to the United States in Vietnam but were ultimately checkmated by the appearance of the shoulder-fired Stinger missile in late 1986. The made-in-USA Stinger had a much longer range than the portable surface-to-air missiles previously fielded by the resistance.

Effective use of the Stinger forced Soviet and Afghan government air elements to attack their targets from greater distance and, more importantly, radically increased the difficulty of supplying remote bases cut off by the mujahedin. Most of the missile launchers were either bought back after the withdrawal of Soviet forces or were destroyed, and sales of the weapon in the region have since been kept on a tight leash.

Inclusion of the Stinger in military sales to Persian Gulf nations was specifically barred for 15 years but the ban was lifted in October of last year. Passage of the Defense and Security Assistance Act, H.R.4919, allowed Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to exchange earlier models of the Stinger on a one-for-one basis for newer versions.

Stingers of the same design as these early models were approved for distribution to the Afghan guerrillas in April 1986. Yet even before their appearance, the mujahedin had become quite adept at counter-air tactics and their intelligence networks allowed them to set up "air defense ambushes." Hard experience taught the Soviet and Afghan government pilots to be leery of close action long before the Stinger's arrived and the weapon quickly settled the matter. The mujahedin knocked down three of four attacking helicopters when the Stinger made its combat debut on September 24, 1986, and things were never the same for the Soviets.

But while introduction of the high-tech Stinger into the Afghan cauldron grabbed the headlines — and largely shaped public perceptions of America's involvement — less sexy weapons and munitions captured in battle and acquired from defecting units were the mainstay of mujahedin weaponry throughout the war.

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