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Afghanistan 1979 – 1989: Heroism Or Senseless War?

By Boris Pavlischev

From 1979 till 1989, the Soviet Union took part in military actions in Afghanistan. It is hard to find a family in Russia that has not been touched by this war in this or that way. In total, 620,000 Soviet soldiers and officers took part in it. More than 15,000 of them were killed.

Finally, a decision was taken to withdraw the Soviet army from Afghanistan. This withdrawal started on May 15, 1988. Now, Russia is celebrating 25 years since that date.

The schedule of the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan was worked out at a conference in Geneva. Besides the Soviet Union, the US also supervised this withdrawal. On February 15, 1989, in full correspondence with the schedule, the last Soviet soldier left Afghanistan.

The necessity to withdraw the Soviet troops from Afghanistan had been acknowledged by many people in the Soviet Union long before the official decision was taken. This war was too costly for the Soviet Union from the point of view of money and incomparably more costly from the point of view of human lives – because no money losses, however enormous they may be, can by any means be compared with human losses.

In fact, the Afghan war was more than a war of clans in an Eastern country, the significance of which in the world politics is comparatively small. It wouldn't be a big exaggeration to say that that war was in fact a cloaked conflict between the Communist Soviet Union and the West. In the Afghan conflict, the Soviet Union backed the then official government of Afghanistan, and the US backed the enemies of that government, the mujahidins. It should be also mentioned that the presence of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan was in fact of little help for Afghanistan's government in their fight against the mujahidins, because the mujahidins' main strongholds were not in Afghanistan, but in Pakistan.

If, as it was said, the presence of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan brought no peace to that country, neither did the withdrawal of the Soviet troops. After this withdrawal, the positions of the mujahidins, and, then, of the Taliban, strengthened in Afghanistan. Finally, in 2001, NATO forces overthrew the regime of the Taliban. However, the current Afghan leaders also cannot be called great friends of Russia.

When the Soviet authorities introduced the Soviet forces in Afghanistan in 1979, they probably hoped to establish a Communist, or, at least, a pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan. They never managed to do so. However, it would probably be wrong to say that the Soviet Union lost that war. In a country with a chaotic military conflict that has been lasting for several decades, it is very hard, if possible at all, to say who is the winner and who is the loser.

In fact, the senseless participation of the Soviet army in the Afghan conflict was only one event in a row of ill-conceived actions of the Soviet and, then, the Russian authorities in the 1980s and 1990s, like the ill-considered policy of the Soviet authorities, which, in the end, led to the collapse of the Soviet Union, or the not very successful economic reforms of the 1990s.

But, of course, the fact that the Soviet troops spent as many as 10 years in Afghanistan for some obscure reason by no means annuls the heroism of rank-and-file Soviet soldiers and officers who fought against the mujahidins. So, now, 25 years after the end of that war, we are saying: Glory to the heroes!

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