

THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

NIC #0542-83
20 January 1983

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
: Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

VIA : Chairman, National Intelligence Council
: National Intelligence Officer for
: General Purpose Forces *ETP*

FROM :
: Assistant NIO for General Purpose Forces

SUBJECT : Soviet Media Coverage of Afghanistan--
: Reading Between the Lines

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1. Recent Soviet press coverage of combat casualties in Afghanistan may portend an intent to intensify that conflict. As reported in the 11 January Afghanistan SitRep article (attached), internal media in the USSR are beginning to report that Soviet troops are engaging in combat and suffering casualties. While three occurrences in a single week do not constitute a trend, this treatment of a highly sensitive subject is a significant departure from previous Soviet practice. For some six months after the invasion, the Soviet press hardly acknowledged the presence of any of their military forces in Afghanistan. This coverage was succeeded over a period of more than two years by numerous articles (mostly in the military press) showing Soviet soldiers assisting Afghans in various social, educational and charitable enterprises. Some minor treatment of combat occurred, but only a single combat death was reported (in September 1981). The Soviets went to great lengths to conceal casualties by treating their wounded in medical facilities in the Southern Asian republics and, some say, in East Germany. Dead soldiers were returned in sealed coffins and usually buried without military honors, many away from their homes.

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2. While some might argue that the new media treatment of casualties is merely acknowledging a reality that can no longer be hidden from the Soviet populace, I believe that if the press treatment continues, particularly on television and in other internal media, it signals more than mere Soviet resolve to persevere. The Politburo is well aware of

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the populace's impatience in bettering its living standards and its lack of enthusiasm for foreign adventures. Further coverage of the realities of the war in Afghanistan could well be a forerunner of Soviet intent to step up the intensity of the conflict and perhaps once more to increase their force levels in country. I have discussed this topic with FBIS analysts, who are monitoring both internal and external Soviet media for further instances of casualty coverage.  

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Attachment:
As stated

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SOVIET COMBAT ROLE, CASUALTIES ACKNOWLEDGED [redacted]

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Breaking the usual practice of playing down the Soviet military's combat role in Afghanistan, Soviet media on several recent occasions have reported Soviet troops coming under fire and suffering casualties. The most graphic and telling portrayal appeared on the 26 December edition of a weekly armed forces television program, which showed film of a Soviet-escorted convoy under attack and carried a brief interview with a wounded Soviet lieutenant. Two items in the army newspaper KRASNAYA ZVEZDA, on the 25th and 28th, likewise described Soviet troops coming under attack, citing in the former case a Soviet private who suffered burns while displaying heroism. [redacted]

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Comment: While these stories contained routine propaganda assertions that the Soviet-backed Afghan regime is winning the battle for popular support, the accompanying film and commentary tended to undercut those claims by conveying the impression that the regime is under attack not only on the highways but even in Kabul. Having pledged itself to persevering in Afghanistan, the new Andropov regime now seems to be warning the Soviet people that the struggle will be long and costly. [redacted]

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Afghanistan Situation Report [redacted]

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[redacted]
11 January 1983

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