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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D. C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

18 February 1987

USSR-Afghanistan: Soviet Military Defectors

Summary

This memorandum addresses why Soviet soldiers have defected from the Soviet army in Afghanistan, recent trends in the numbers of defections, and the impact on the Soviet military and Soviet society. It also speculates on the effects of an increase in defections.

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Most defectors are motivated by personal rather than ideological considerations, primarily abuse from officers and senior soldiers. Potential defectors are strongly deterred by stories of bad treatment from the insurgents, and the number of defectors appears to be dropping, possibly because of increased Soviet security efforts. Moscow is very sensitive to military defections, in part due to rising domestic awareness of this issue, and has recently raised alleged mistreatment of Soviet prisoners in diplomatic channels. Any increase in defections would lead to redoubled security, especially if defectors included older soldiers or officers.

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Third World Activities Division, Office of Soviet Analysis, with a contribution from [redacted] Domestic Policy Division. It has been coordinated with the Office of Near East and South Asian Analysis [redacted] Questions and comments are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Third World Activities, SOVA [redacted]

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There are no reliable numbers for Soviet soldiers now in the hands of the various insurgent groups. Current estimates range from 50 to several hundred scattered around Afghanistan. Of these, some are actual prisoners being held against their will; others are deserters--or former prisoners--who never planned to join the insurgents, but are now cooperating either voluntarily or under pressure; and an unknown but probably small percentage are defectors who actively sought out the mujahideen, either to join the resistance or as a way of escaping to the West.

--Few insurgent groups inside Afghanistan have the resources or inclination to keep prisoners for long, and most Soviets captured, especially in combat, are killed.

--A few are probably kept imprisoned at insurgent bases near the Pakistani border, and a growing number are used for prisoner exchanges. [REDACTED]

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Motivation. The majority of those who remain alive have done so by cooperating to various degrees with their captors. These include Soviet Muslims, who identify to some extent with the insurgents and can expect to adapt readily to life in Afghanistan. Others--probably a majority--are Slavs. Almost all are conscripts in the early months of their Afghan tour--none have been officers. [REDACTED]

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In front of the mujahideen defectors and deserters tend to stress disgust with communism and commitment to Islam as their reasons for deserting, but almost all who have had a chance to talk with Western observers say the immediate causes were personal. Common reasons include loneliness and boredom but above all poor treatment, including repeated physical abuse, by officers and older soldiers. This is sometimes accompanied by racial prejudice. Many had been in trouble for insubordination, black-marketeering, and other offenses and deserted in part to avoid additional punishment. [REDACTED]

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Most potential defectors and deserters are deterred by widespread stories of mujahideen cruelty and mistreatment of prisoners, and uncertainty of how they may be received by Pakistan or the West. Examples of successful defection, especially good treatment by the insurgents, would do more than anything else to encourage imitation. [REDACTED]

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Both defectors and deserters may be vaguely attracted to the West but their first desire is simply to escape the military. Several former POWs exfiltrated to the West eventually went back to the USSR. A Soviet private who sought asylum at the US embassy in Kabul in November 1985 returned after four days.

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Fear of fighting or death in combat is not a major cause of desertion, but defectors often cite their disgust at atrocities against civilians, which they either heard about or experienced firsthand, as contributing factors in their decision. As is often the case, discipline in the rear areas and among support troops--who constitute the majority of Soviet forces in Afghanistan--appears to be lower than in combat units. Most desertions occurred from fixed posts and garrisons by soldiers who knew the local area and could count on help from friends.

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Trends. If anything, there appear to be fewer Soviet defectors and cooperating prisoners than earlier in the war. Most defectors interviewed over the past two years defected between 1981 and 1984. This does not, however, reflect any noticeable improvement in the treatment of junior soldiers or other factors affecting morale.

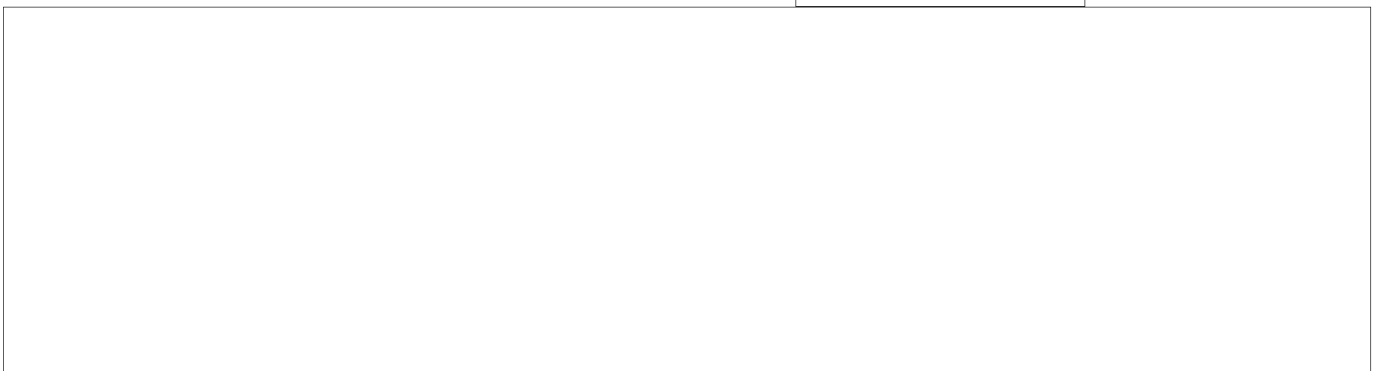
--Soviet security at fixed garrisons has gotten tighter, with more extensive minefields and perimeter positions. Opportunities to fraternize with the local population, never great, have been reduced.

--The increase in information about the war in the Soviet Union and in pre-tour briefings of Soviet troops makes it less likely that soldiers will be shocked by the reality of the war and desert in reaction to an unexpected situation. Early on, soldiers were told they would be fighting US and Chinese mercenaries, and that the local population was firmly on their side. Many defectors say growing awareness that the Afghans almost universally oppose them contributed to their distrust of military authorities and, in some cases, to disillusion with the Soviet system altogether.

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Impact on the Military. The effect on military morale of past desertions is probably slight. The numbers are small, and in most cases the authorities can cover up the truth or plausibly claim the deserter was an obvious malcontent.

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A higher desertion rate would raise Soviet fears of a collapse of morale and lead to more stringent security measures. It might also result in more serious attempts to reform the military's deeply entrenched tradition of abusing junior soldiers by holding officers more responsible for the welfare of their men.

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Domestic Implications. Most Soviet citizens probably know little about specific defections, although they are generally aware that such actions take place. Several deserters who made their way to the West and later redefected have received domestic press coverage. Soviet media have followed a contrived scenario in presenting these cases--the "deserter" was captured or kidnapped, and criticized the Soviet system only under the influence of drugs or torture. Official efforts to indoctrinate the Soviet population, however, are undermined to an extent by foreign radio, the rumor mill, and samizdat. Interested segments of the population, including soldiers themselves, know that some deserters have made it to the West, that deserters are pursued and fired upon, and those who redefect receive sentences of 10-15 years for treason, regardless of promises of leniency.

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Over the last two years, Moscow has shown greater concern about getting its prisoners back, possibly reflecting more domestic awareness of this issue.

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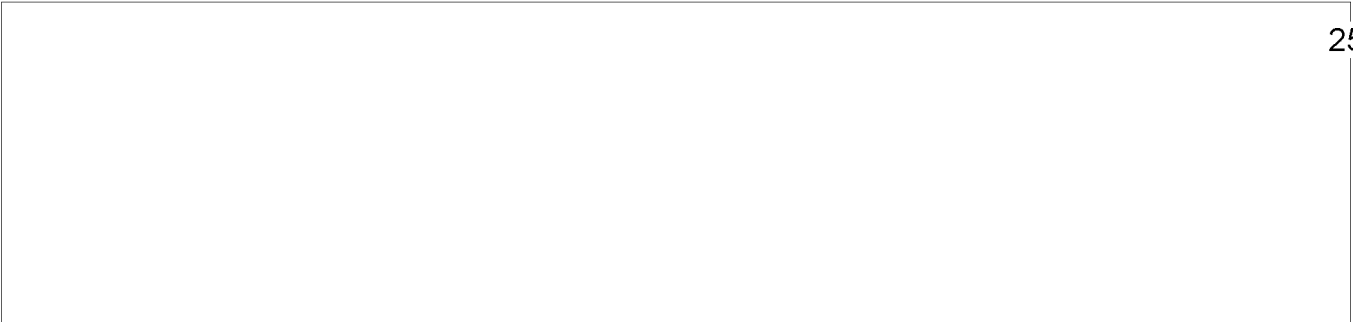


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--In December 1986 the Soviet ambassador to Washington presented the State Department with a demarche implying it held the US responsible for alleged POWs being held in Pakistan.



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SOVA/TWAD
19 Feb 1987

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