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In Russia, foreboding about America's war in Afghanistan

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MOSCOW — Thirty years ago this week, the Red Army began its invasion of Afghanistan, a move that sank the Soviet Union in a decade of guerrilla war and hastened the collapse of the Cold War empire.

Today, as former Soviet soldiers watch American troops trying to pacify the same stretches of Afghan land they once fought for, aging Soviet generals and grunts alike are reminded of a war they'd rather forget.

While Russians are willing, and often eager, to predict utter defeat for U.S. efforts based on their own failure in Afghanistan, they're much less comfortable talking about the pain of reportedly having lost more than 14,000 lives in a war that ended in retreat.

Comparing wars is a process riddled with inconsistency — the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan was far different from the American presence today — but on the eve of the anniversary of the Soviet war, the somber and at times anguished way that veterans in Russia spoke of their time in Afghanistan was a disturbing reminder of the hurdles that American forces now face.

The retired soldiers talk about Afghanistan in terms that echo the American experience in Vietnam: of winning battles but losing the campaign, watching the local population throw its support behind an insurgency and, finally, coming home to a country that no longer understood or supported their war.

As the Obama administration sends in 30,000 to 35,000 more troops by next summer — raising the total of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan to at least 140,000 — men such as Alexander Tsalko say they can't fathom why anyone would want to fight in that land of sharp mountain ridges and hot desert sands.

"Nothing was achieved while I was there. ... There wasn't anything good there; they fired at us, we fired at them," said Tsalko, who commanded a helicopter unit in Kandahar from 1982 to 1983.

Tsalko was later the deputy head of a Soviet state defense committee and then a member of a Russian government commission for veterans affairs. He's spent the last several years working for an organization that helps disabled veterans.

What are his thoughts in late December, the period when the Soviets thrust into Afghanistan with a troop buildup on Dec. 24 and Dec. 25 and then the overthrow of the government on Dec. 27?

"Bitterness and regret that we were drawn into this war," Tsalko replied.

In short, he said, "those who fought there do not want to talk about it when they're not drunk."

Unlike Russia's springtime celebration of its World War II victory over Nazi Germany, a national holiday that includes a triumphant, sparkling military parade in Red Square, the anniversary of the Soviet war in Afghanistan is hardly mentioned in the cold, dark days of December.

"It's especially difficult to remember those episodes that so many would like to leave behind," said Vladimir Kostyuchenko, a helicopter pilot for three tours in Afghanistan who's now active with an Afghan veterans group in Russia. "These generals at the top, they had no sense of reality. They gave us murderous orders. I still bear a cross because I fulfilled those orders."

Kostyuchenko, a slightly pudgy man with a friendly face whose helicopter was shot down in 1988, continued the thought: "Later we saw the results, and they were terrible."

Igor Rodionov, who from 1985 to 1986 commanded the Soviet 40th Army, its main military force, said it wasn't just the troops who were conflicted.

"On one hand, I was indignant when I understood what this decision to invade Afghanistan would result in. I could say that to my friends, but I could not say it out loud because I was a general," said Rodionov, who retired as a four-star general and later was a Russian defense minister and then a parliament deputy. "Our sacrifices were not needed."

Rodionov, who's now 73, looked down at a table in front of him and arranged a pen, plate of crackers and a napkin to demonstrate the flanks of a troop position. He gazed at them for a moment with a bemused expression, as if to recognize the absurdity of talking about the violence of war while pointing at a napkin.

Pushing the items forward, Rodionov said that commanders often sent their men to hunt for the enemy in villages on either side of mountain gorges near vital transport routes.

"We could fight for two weeks in this gorge, killing the Afghans," he said in a gravelly voice. "In return they kill our guys. We have used all our water, ammunition and food, and then we must go back to our rear position."

Rodionov pulled the pen, crackers and napkin back to their starting places: "Then the mujahedeen" — meaning holy warriors, the term used by Afghan fighters — "would return to the gorge, and the whole thing continues."

The Soviet experience, of course, isn't proof that the same fate will befall the United States, which is now more than eight years into its Afghan war.

While the Soviet invasion in 1979 was widely seen across the world as an act of wanton aggression, a broad coalition of countries supported the U.S. decision in the aftermath of 9/11 to topple the Taliban government in Kabul and hunt down al Qaida.

The Soviets were badly hobbled by Western and Arab financial and arms support for the Afghan fighters, especially U.S. Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, which American pilots haven't had to face.

The current collection of insurgents and terrorists — though they include some of the same men the U.S. backed against the Soviets — aren't thought to receive anywhere close to that level of foreign help.

Still, the men who took part in the Soviet fight for Afghanistan say that no matter how smart the Obama administration's plans are for turning the tide, they stand little chance in a country that's known as the graveyard of empires.

"Afghans will fight foreign troops as long as foreign troops are there," said Lev Serebrov, whose time there was bookended by the Soviet invasion and retreat. He arrived in 1979 and stayed through 1981 as a lieutenant colonel and deputy division commander, and returned from 1987 to 1989 as a major general and deputy to the Soviet operations commander for the Afghan war.

"No one should go there armed," said Serebrov, who's now a deputy in Russia's lower house of parliament.

Kostyuchenko, the helicopter pilot, hosts a neighborhood remembrance of the war on Dec. 27, the date that Soviet forces murdered Afghan President Hafizullah Amin in order

to replace him with a more loyal pawn. Killing Amin was the point of no turning back, Kostyuchenko explained.

On Sunday night, a group of old women, some of them wearing black scarves, will shuffle into a drab apartment on Mikhailov Street and light candles for their dead sons. The candles, from a nearby church, are thin so that they'll fit into the spent bullet cartridges that Kostyuchenko lines up in a row at a small exhibit about the war that he tends.

Tsalko, the veterans' issues advocate, didn't say whether he'd be attending any memorial services.

After speaking of the bad dreams and drinking that come after a war ends, Tsalko thanked a reporter for his time and headed toward the door. Putting on his scarf, long winter coat and thick brown fur hat, he had one last thought: "It's very hard to fight in Afghanistan. Your leadership will have to find a way out."