

Tracking the Russians and the One That Got Away

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PESHAWAR, Pakistan — In this Pakistani city that serves as a listening post for events in Afghanistan, there had been many rumors of Russians who had joined the Afghan rebels.

According to some, Soviet defectors had even been seen in Pakistan, where the insurgents come to visit their families in refugee camps and to resupply and recuperate after months of fighting Soviet and Soviet-backed Afghan Army troops in their country.

But since last spring, when 12 Soviet prisoners died in an explosion at an Afghan rebel camp in Pakistan, the insurgents have refused to discuss the subject of Russians on Pakistani soil.

It would be different, rebel commanders said, if a reporter looked elsewhere, in northern Afghanistan near the Soviet border.

"Are you looking for Russians?" a rebel spokesman in Peshawar asked. "There are 15 or 16 prisoners in Baghlan."

16-Day Journey Into Area

After a 16-day journey to the area, a young commander casually pointed to a man in the rebel escort.

"There is our Russian," he said. "He has joined our holy war."

The man, wearing a turban and Afghan clothes, grinned at being pointed out.

But there was no time for questions; the area was too dangerous. The group was urged forward, and about an hour later, the escorts were changed. The man identified as Russian disappeared into the night.

A few days later, one of the commanders in Baghlan Province was asked about the Russian.

'There Are No Russians'

"There are no Russians in Baghlan," he replied.

"But I saw one on the way here, and your spokesman in Peshawar said there were 15 or 16 prisoners in Baghlan."

"He was mistaken," came the response. "There are no Russians in Baghlan."

The subject was closed, and arrangements

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Soviet defectors were interviewed in or near Khanabad, Fulool, Qiligai and Waliyan.

were made to travel north to Kunduz Province, bordering the Soviet Union.

Five days later, at the Afghan town of Ishkamish, the reporter's guide and interpreter, Qudratullah Arif, said there was a Russian with a commander just a few days ahead. A lift was offered by a rebel commander in a captured Soviet truck. Then came more encouraging news: Not one, but two Russians were in the area.

The problem was to bring the reporter and the Russians together, which became like a game of checkers. With the threat of Soviet capture, the Soviet defectors and the American reporter had

to be moved constantly.

Finally, 23 days after leaving Pakistan, the hops and jumps coincided and the reporter interviewed his first Soviet defector, a shy young man who had adopted the Afghan name of Faiz Mohammed, in a village near the Afghan city of Khanabad, now in ruins because of the fighting.

More hops and jumps and another former Soviet soldier, who called himself Naik Mohammed, was interviewed in the same area a day later.

Mr. Arif, the guide, said he had learned of another Russian at a rebel ammunition base at Fulool, south of Ishkamish.

A four-day journey by truck and horseback into the mountains produced an interview with the third soldier, called by the Afghan name of Ahmed.

One more attempt was made to find the Russian seen three weeks earlier.

"Of course there is a Russian here," said Mohammed Khalid, a rebel commander. "I will bring him to you tomorrow."

Elusive Russian Sent Elsewhere

But the next day, Mr. Khalid returned and said he had been mistaken. The Russian, he said, had been sent elsewhere, he did not know where. Apparently the rebels had decided that this Russian should not be interviewed.

But Mr. Arif said he had learned of two other Soviet soldiers who could be found to the south.

Horses were procured for the trek high up into the Hindu Kush, passing from rebel commander to rebel commander, with halts of as much as two days for ceremonial visits and dinners while escorts were found for the next leg.

Forty days after leaving Pakistan, the fourth Soviet soldier, who gave his name as Nasratullah, walked down a trail from a secret location to a rebel base in the mountains east of the Soviet garrison at Qiligai.

Then, after five days of traveling to circle the base and cross a strongly defended highway, the fifth Russian, who had taken the name Rahmatullah, was found 10 miles south of Qiligai.

All that remained was to get back to Pakistan.