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The Blind Leading the Blind: Soviet Advisors, Counter-Insurgency and Nation-Building in Afghanistan

By Artemy Kalinovsky, January 2010



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The US-led efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan have led to a renewed interest in the experience of “nation” or “state” building. Scholars and policy-makers have looked to these historical examples to help guide them as they look to complement military aspects of the counter-insurgency campaigns in those two countries.¹ This interest emerges in part from a realization that the goals of counter-insurgency can not be achieved with firepower alone; the host country is found to be deficient in infrastructure, political stability, bureaucracy, education, security and basic services, without which the population remains vulnerable to penetration by the insurgents. No wonder, then, that the cornerstone of President Barack Obama’s 2009 strategy for Afghanistan is a “civilian surge” meant to tackle these very issues.

Nation-building of the sort associated with massive modernization projects and political advice delivered at all level of government had its last heyday during the Cold War era. Back then, it was one of a number of tools used in the competition between the USSR, the U.S., and, increasingly by the 1970s, China.² Often, but not always, modernization and nation-building programmes took place in the context of counter-insurgency, most famously, perhaps, in the Vietnam War. For the Soviet Union, the pinnacle of such efforts was its

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¹ See, for example, Mark T. Berger, ed. *From Nation-Building to State-Building* (London: Routledge, 2008) and Aidan Hehir and Neil Robinson, *State-Building: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2007).

² Building security capacity, and often repressive capacity, was often a major aspect of these “nation-building” efforts. See Jeremy Kuzmarov, “Modernizing Repression: Police Training, Political Violence, and Nation-Building in the ‘American Century’,” *Diplomatic History* 33(2), 2009, 191-222.

intervention in Afghanistan (1979-1989). Although the Soviet experience has been referenced with increasing frequency in recent years, it is usually the military failures of the war which are cited; rarely do western commentators mention the non-military aspects of Soviet counter-insurgency.³

When Soviet leaders made the decision to invade Afghanistan in December 1979, they did so for reasons that had little to do with the desire to spread communism or economic modernity. Rather, they were motivated by a desire to stop the deteriorating situation in that country and establish a more stable government there. Soviet leaders believed that without an intervention, Afghanistan might turn towards the US and even become a base for short-range missiles targeted at the USSR.⁴ After a leadership change was effected in Kabul by Soviet special-forces, the Soviet army was sent in to provide security in the cities and give the Afghan armed force a morale boost. Soon after the invasion, however, Soviet troops found themselves shouldering the main burden of fighting against the *mujahadeen* opposition, a task they would carry out for the next decade.

Like most counter-insurgencies, the Soviet intervention was never a strictly military operation. Soviet leaders realized quickly that the war had caused uproar throughout the world and had brought the Cold War to a level of tension unseen in decades. They also realized fairly early on that the situation could not be resolved through military means alone.⁵ They hoped that economic aid and improved governance would help give the Kabul government greater legitimacy. Thus parallel to the military effort of the 40th army, there was

³ For an exception, see Paul Robinson, "Russian lessons: we aren't the first to try nation-building in Afghanistan," *American Conservative*, August 1, 2009.

⁴ The decision-making behind the intervention was complicated and influenced by Soviet perceptions of events like the revolution in Iran, the deterioration in US-Soviet relations, and the situation within Afghanistan itself. The invasion is so far the most thoroughly studied aspect of the war. See O. Arne Westad, "Concerning the Situation in A..." *Cold War International History Project Bulletin 8/9* (Washington: Wilson Center Press, 1996), 128-132, as well as the translated Soviet documents in that same issue; Westad, *Global Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 288-330; Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 260-264, David N. Gibbs, "Reassessing Soviet Motives for Invading Afghanistan: A Declassified History," *Critical Asian Studies* 2006 38(2): 239-263. See also Aleksandr Liakhovskiy, "Inside the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the Seizure of Kabul, December 1979," translated by Gary Goldberg and Artemy Kalinovsky, *CWIHP Working Paper #51* and Vasilii Mytrokhin *The KGB in Afghanistan*, *CWIHP Working Paper #40*, February 2002. On decision-making leading up to the intervention and throughout the war, see Artemy Kalinovsky "Decision Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan: From Intervention to Withdrawal," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Fall 2009), 46-73.

⁵ This became a refrain, particularly on the part of military officers, from as early as 1980. See Kalinovsky "Decision Making," 56, V. A. Merimskii, "Afghanistan: Uroki i vivody," *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal*, No. 1 (January 1994), 29, Yurii Gankovskii, "Afghanistan: From Intervention to National Reconciliation," *Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Spring 1992), 133.

also a smaller “army” of Soviet advisers working to rebuild state institutions, improve the party’s internal cohesiveness and relationship with the population, and carry out agricultural reform. Besides Soviet advisers in the armed force of the DRA, thousands of technicians, educators, and party activists travelled to Afghanistan to help with an un-planned and often improvised counter-insurgency by carrying out a similarly un-planned and improvised nation-building project.⁶

Without any special preparation, in most cases, for work in the cultural, social, and economic conditions found in Afghanistan, these advisers drew largely on their own experience within the USSR. While technical specialists built ditches, operated mines, and extracted natural gas, political advisers wrote speeches on behalf of politicians and memoranda on behalf of ministers and went out into the countryside to help Afghan communists reach out to the local population. Many more were sent to factories, enterprises, and even universities.

Although much has been written about the Soviet war in Afghanistan, historians have made little headway in moving past the decision to invade and certain military aspects of the war.⁷ Nor have there been any works on Soviet nation-building projects in other areas, or on the philosophy behind such projects.⁸ This paper will attempt to plug that gap in the historiography by looking at the crucial role non-military advisers played during the Soviet

⁶ The term “nation-building,” is itself a bit controversial, and these days has been giving way to “state-building,” which implies a slightly less ambitious agenda. See Mark Berger “From Nation-Building to State Building” in Berger, ed. *From Nation-Building to State Building*, 1-21. In any case, this is not a term ever used by the Soviets, which would generally describe what they did in Afghanistan as “fraternal assistance.” I use “nation-building” because this term is still associated with US projects in the Third World during the Cold War; and to highlight the similarities between Soviet and US approaches.

⁷ See footnote 1, above. For western analyses, see Alan Kuperman “The Stinger Missile and Afghanistan,” *Political Science Quarterly* 1999 14(2) and the many articles by Lester Grau, including Grau, Lester W. “The Soviet-Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 2004 17(1): 129-151. The best work on Afghanistan during this period remains Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2000).

⁸ The literature for this is quite sparse. Although there are a number of works that distill Soviet thinking about modernization and transitions to socialism in the Third World, there is no equivalent of Michael Latham’s *Modernization as Ideology: American social science and “nation-building” in the Kennedy era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) or Nils Gilman’s *Mandarins of the Future: modernization theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003) or Bradley Simpson’s *Economists with Guns: authoritarian development and U.S.-Indonesian relations, 1960-1968* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), which are concerned with the ideas and practice of US aid to the third world. There are, however, a number of useful works on the work of party activists in collectivization and industrialization with the USSR, which would serve as an invaluable resource for a broader study of Soviet involvement in modernization and nation-building projects. See, for example, Lynn Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

war in Afghanistan.⁹ It will show that Soviet leaders believed that they needed to undertake a nation-building project in order to stabilize the country and bring their troops home. Nation-building in this context involved developing a successful governing party, extending the reach of the party and the government into rural zones throughout the country, and providing material incentives to help the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) gain legitimacy. Building socialism was not a goal in itself—Soviet leaders believed the country was not ripe for socialism and urged their tutees in the PDPA to move away from a revolutionary agenda.¹⁰ The goal was political stabilization, with nation-building as its major tool. That this often looked like socialism stemmed from two factors: one, that the PDPA leaders thought of themselves as revolutionary Marxists and shed this coat only reluctantly, and two, that the advisers sent by Moscow, particularly the party and agricultural advisers, only knew how to replicate their experience in the USSR and likewise could not (or would not) shed the ideological approach that was natural to them.

I. The purpose, selection, and preparation of advisers

The Soviet tradition of sending advisers to help communist movements grew out of the Comintern. After a Soviet state had been established on the ruins of the Tsarist empire, Soviet communists were in high demand to help replicate their success elsewhere in the world. They played particularly important roles in places like China and Mongolia, where Communist movements were very strong, but they also helped advise nascent groups in Europe, the colonial world, and even the United States. During the Cold War these advisers

⁹ Soviet sources on the post-invasion period are hard to come by. Most of the material declassified in the early 1990s focused on the decision to invade, and precious little has been declassified since then. A really thorough study of the role of advisers would require access to military and KGB archives as well as the International Department of the CC CPSU, which was ultimately responsible for party advisers. Files of the Politburo Commission on Afghanistan, the body that made recommendations on Afghan policy to the Politburo starting in March 1979, would also be invaluable. Afghan sources are unavailable to scholars and will probably remain so for some time. Despite these limitations, I have been able to piece together enough material to at least form an outline for the story which can serve as a basis for more thorough research later. In doing so I have relied on materials from the Gorbachev Foundation Archives, including notes of Politburo meetings, as well as declassified materials in other archives, memoirs and articles by advisers and policy makers, and documents published either as part of those memoirs or separately, as well as interviews conducted in the course of researching my PhD thesis on the Politics and Diplomacy of the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan. The few International Department [RGANI Fund 5] documents used here are no longer available to researchers in Russia, but are still available on microfiche at the Hoover Institution as well as Yale and Harvard Universities.

¹⁰ Many contemporary observers did not see it this way, explaining the presence of Soviet advisers as a program of "Sovietization." One observer, arguing that Afghanistan was being "Sovietized" on the Central Asian model, wrote "When Soviet leaders hint at a possible willingness to withdraw military forces, they say nothing about withdrawing their second army—the army of social and cultural transformation, spearheaded by the KGB – or dismantling the programs designed to accomplish this end." A. Rasul Amin "The Sovietization of Afghanistan," in Roseanne Klass, ed. *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited* (New York: Freedom House, 1987), 334.

became an increasingly important part of Soviet foreign policy. Rapid decolonization meant the emergence of many new states whose leaders saw in the USSR an appropriate model for their own efforts at modernization and industrialization. As Moscow established relations with these new states, it sent advisers and specialists to transmit Soviet expertise and bind the new states closer to Moscow in the growing Cold War confrontation.¹¹ They were particularly active in China in the 1950s, until they were effectively kicked out, in Egypt under Nasser, in Ethiopia in the 1970 and 1980s, and in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.¹²

In the above examples, advisers sent by Moscow were expected to draw on their experience of work in the Soviet Union to aid the countries and regimes they were assigned to. Similarly, when they went to Afghanistan, advisers were given general instructions: work for party unity, expand the PDPA's influence in the countryside, push Afghan leaders towards moderate land reforms, and help build up Afghan government institutions. The specific plans were devised by the most senior advisers in each group (the chief military adviser, chief political adviser, and so forth.)¹³

The advisers who worked in Afghanistan could be divided into several groups: military, intelligence (both KGB and GRU¹⁴, as well as Ministry of Internal Affairs), and advisors from state ministries and institutions (like the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), party advisors, and various economical and technical advisers. The latter group will not concern us here, since its assignments in Afghanistan were relatively straightforward, although it should be noted the work of this group was a key part of the nation-building project. The advisers or specialists in each case were nominated by the organizations themselves, and they would then be vetted by the organizational department of the CC CPSU.

¹¹ Zubok even suggests that the Soviet offensive in third-world by the late 1970s was motivated in part by mid-level functionaries who hoped to benefit from opportunities to earn higher salaries and purchase foreign goods while serving as "advisers" in these countries. These functionaries, in Zubok's view, encouraged their superiors to "lobby for internationalist assistance" for their own benefit. Zubok, *Failed Empire*, 249-250.

¹² On Soviet advisers in China, see Lorenz Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split* (Princeton, 2008), 40-41, 64-65; T. Zaverskaia, *Sovetskii Spetsialisty in Formirovanie VoЕННО-Promyshlennogo Kompleksa v Kitae* (2000); on Yemen and Ethiopia, see Karen Brutents *Nezbyvsheesia* (Moscow, 2005), 192-196, 204-208.

¹³ Authors' interview with Andrei Urnov, International Department official, March 2008; Authors' interview with Leonid Shebarshin, former chief of first [intelligence] directorate of the KGB, September 17, 2007; Authors' interview with Yuli Vorontsov, former Deputy Foreign Minister and ambassador to Kabul, Moscow, September 11, 2007.

¹⁴ GRU – Chief Intelligence Directorate, i.e. military intelligence.

Military advisors were, for the most part, senior Soviet officers posted as high as the Afghan General Staff and Ministry of Defence down to the battalion level. The latter served in particularly daunting conditions. They faced difference of language and tradition as well as *mujahadeen* infiltration in the ranks of supposedly loyal Afghan troops. They were responsible for coordinating joint battle operations, convincing often reluctant Afghan officers to do their part in plans conceived by more senior Soviet advisors, and then drawing the brunt of their superiors' ire when the Afghan units did not perform to the Soviets' satisfaction, which was almost always.¹⁵

The senior military advisors were involved in all aspects of military planning, working primarily with the senior political and military leadership but also taking part in inspections of conditions around the country. The most senior advisor (whose official title was "Representative of the USSR Minister of Defence in Afghanistan") also had the most direct access to leaders in Moscow and was the most likely to be called there to present his assessment of the situation before the Politburo. At times, these military advisors were also involved in negotiations with *mujahadeen* commanders.¹⁶

Institutional advisers were attached to the various ministries and departments of the DRA. Usually they were detailed from their normal place of work to help run analogous offices in Afghanistan. Like other advisors, they were sent by Moscow to take on primarily a training role, although in practice many of them took over the running of their respective ministries or departments. Some of these advisors did double duty: a senior counsellor with the Soviet embassy in Kabul might spend the morning attending to affairs there and the afternoon in the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs drafting memos, writing speeches, and taking part in meetings at the most senior level.¹⁷

Representatives of the KGB also often served double duty as both advisors and operatives. As advisers, they helped organize and develop Afghan State Security (KhAD) and counselled Afghan's political leadership. As operatives, they carried out intelligence activities, primarily aimed at undermining resistance groups or their international support.

¹⁵ The Russian General Staff, *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost*, Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, eds (Lawrence Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 50-52.

¹⁶ Liakhovsky, *Tragedia i Doblest*, Varennikov, V.I. Nepovtorimoe tom 5: Afghanistan [Unrepeatable volume 5: Afghanistan] (Moscow, 2002).

¹⁷ B. Padishev, "Najibullah, president Afghanistana" *International Affairs* (Moscow) Jan. 1990, 23; Vorontsov interview; Authors' interview with Nikolai Kozyrev, former adviser to the Afghan Foreign Ministry and later Soviet negotiator at Geneva, Moscow, RF, November 14, 2008.

Like the military advisors they also played a role in negotiating with *mujahadeen* groups; indeed, the efforts of these two groups often clashed.¹⁸

KGB advisors maintained a great deal of influence at the top of the Afghan hierarchy, more so than other advisors. This was particularly true after Babrak Karmal, the *Parcham* leader installed with Soviet help after the death of Amin, was replaced by Mohammed Najibullah, a former head of KhAD, in 1986.¹⁹ The senior KGB representative reported to the chief of the First [intelligence] Directorate and often to the KGB chairman himself; since this post, for most of the 1980s, was occupied by persons with enormous influence on foreign policy within the Politburo,²⁰ the KGB could generally count on support for its activity from Moscow.

The most numerous group of advisers were those detailed from the CPSU apparatus to work with the PDPA. Soon after the Soviet invasion, the chief Soviet party advisor wrote to Moscow outlining his assessment of the PDPA's weakness and proposals for party unity and the extension of its influence beyond Kabul and into the provincial centers. On the last page he pointed out that this would require the aid of Soviet advisors: "experience shows that the party work of the PDPA is better organized and more effective where our party advisors are present. It would be expedient to have, in time, party advisors in each province."²¹ In 1983 the Central Committee of the PDPA alone had 80 advisors and 50 translators working in a separate building in Kabul set aside for their use. Another 50 were attached to the Democratic Organization of Afghan Youth (DOMA - the DRA's *komsomol*). Still others were attached to organizations like the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women.²²

Although some of the advisers were chosen for their experience working in Soviet Republics that neighbored Afghanistan and had historical ties with that country (as well as being closer in culture and agricultural conditions), others came from Russia proper. While it has been suggested that many of these advisers were detailed from the USSR as punishment

¹⁸ For more on the work of the KGB in Afghanistan, particularly in the pre-invasion period, see Mitrokhin, "The KGB in Afghanistan."

¹⁹ Vorontsov interview; Liakhovsky interview; Shebarshin interview.

²⁰ This was Yuri Andropov in the early years of the war and Vladimir Kriuchkov during the Gorbachev period.

²¹ Kulichenko to the organizational department of the CC CPSU, RGANI F.5, Op.77, D. 800, 14.

²² "Report of the group of CC CPSU advisors at the CC PDPA regarding conditions of work for that group," December 12, 1983 RGANI F.5, Op.89, D. 738, 105-106.

for some transgression or as a result of conflict with their superiors, there is no hard evidence to support this fact. Nevertheless, such practice was common in the USSR, and should not be discounted.

What is clear is that most did not have any sort of specialized training for the work they were about to undertake. In fact, “training” for a party adviser about to be sent to Afghanistan was a one week course regarding the “political, military, and economic situation in that country,” plus whatever additional reading on Afghan history or politics the soon-to-be adviser might pick up on his own. During the week-long course instructors from the CC CPSU International Department emphasized the importance of the “internationalist mission” about to be undertaken and tried to inculcate a sense of optimism regarding the job.²³

Yet other types of advisers working in Afghanistan were better prepared. Military advisors working with the political sections of Afghan units were largely in the same boat, preparation-wise, as their party counterparts. Some of the Foreign Ministry officials posted in Kabul were specialists on the region, if not on Afghanistan itself, and sometimes even had knowledge of Dari or Pashto.²⁴ Among the best trained were KGB and GRU advisers. They underwent serious preparation before being sent to Afghanistan, including “two years of Dari or Farsi, Afghan history, economy, culture, customs and traditions, religion, and so forth.”²⁵ All of the KGB missions who served in Kabul during the war had experience in the region, and three were academically trained orientalist.²⁶

On the whole, however, such well-trained advisers were hard to come by. The scale of the Soviet involvement meant that there was not enough time to prepare a well-trained cadre. Corners had to be cut and thousands of advisers were sent virtually without preparation.

All of these advisers were sent with general briefs and instructions from their respective organizations and from the party. However, once they were “in country” these advisers had quite a bit of independence. While their work was theoretically coordinated by

²³ Ilya Elvartanov, *Afganistan – glazami ochevidtsa (zapiski sovetnika)*, [Afghanistan through the eyes of an eyewitness (notes of an adviser)] Elista: Kalmykskoe Knizhnoe Izdatelstvo, (2000), 15. See also Yuri Salnikov, *Zapiski Sovetnika Posolstva* (Volgograd: Komitet po pechati, 2005), 3; Urnov interview. Salnikov served as a political advisor in Kandahar in the mid 1980s.

²⁴ Including Yuli Vorontsov and Nikolai Kozyrev, two of the most influential, but not Feokrat Tabeyev, the ambassador from 1980-1986.

²⁵ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopoliti*, i 68. Author’s interviews with Ambassador Yuli Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007, and Leonid Shebarshin, Moscow, September 17, 2007.

²⁶ Vadim Kirpichenko, *Razvedka: Litsa i Lichnosti* [Intelligence: Faces and Personalities] (Moscow: Geia 1998), 360.

the chief political adviser (based in Kabul), in practice each group of advisers often acted independently of each other. As a result, they were often-working at cross-purposes. In some extreme cases, individual advisers took initiatives that were contradictory to Moscow's instructions.

II. Soviet Advisers Before the Invasion

The Soviet Union began sending specialists to Afghanistan as early as the 1950s, when Afghanistan was still a monarchy, to help that country undertake a number of infrastructure projects. Thousands of Afghan military officers also went to the USSR for advanced training. As relations between the two countries grew closer and Afghanistan developed leftist political groupings, KGB officers moved in to provide organizational advice. Military, party, and other advisers began arriving in larger numbers after the Saur revolution (April 1978), and their number increased exponentially after the Soviet invasion in December 1979. Available evidence shows that Soviet advisers were instructed to temper the political ambitions and revolutionary fervour of Afghan communists. The invasion itself raised the stakes for Soviet leaders: they quickly understood that military aid alone would not be enough to secure the PDPA in power, and sent thousands of advisers to help it extend control.

It was on a tour of third world countries undertaken in 1955 that First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev decided to make Afghanistan an ally by providing military and economic aid.²⁷ Not all of his Kremlin colleagues agreed – Lazar Kaganovich pointed out that this could set a costly precedent. Others supported the idea, either on practical grounds (Afghanistan was a neighbour and should be kept as a friendly state) and on broader strategic grounds. Anastas Mikoyan, soon to become Khrushchev's right hand man on foreign affairs, pointed out that "we will have to render assistance to some states, if we wish to enter into more serious competition with the USA. From the point of view of state interests, it is necessary to render assistance."²⁸

²⁷ The origins of the Soviet-Afghan relationship can be traced back to 1919, when the young communist state became the first to recognize King Amanullah's bid for full independence from Britain. A treaty of friendship, signed in 1921, resulted in Soviet subsidies, including arms, to Amanullah. Yet relations soon soured over disagreements on Central Asia, and Afghanistan turned increasingly to Germany for foreign aid. In the post-War period, Afghanistan successfully attracted aid both from the United States and the Soviet Union.

²⁸ Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *Khrushchev's Cold War*, 80-82.

For the next two decades, Moscow provided valuable technical and economic assistance to the Afghan monarchy and, after it was overthrown, to the Republic under its President Mohammed Daoud Khan. In all, Soviet aid to Afghanistan between 1954 and 1980 amounted to 1.5 billion roubles. Of 157 buildings and factories constructed with Soviet help in that period, 73 were operational, most with the continued aid of Soviet specialists.²⁹ Soviet aid helped build power stations, irrigation systems, factories, and natural gas wells. Soviet specialists also helped train skilled labourers, technicians, and engineers – over 70,000 by 1980, according to Soviet government figures.³⁰

Yet Moscow was not just supplying apolitical technical assistance during this period. In 1965, a Communist Party was founded in Kabul, and Nur Mohammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal immediately emerged as its leaders. Disagreements between the two and their supporters led to a split in the party only two years later, in 1967. The two wings that emerged became known as the Khalq (Masses) and Parcham (Banner) after their respective newspapers.

Moscow provided support to both factions, but proceeded cautiously. The PDPA was not even invited to the international party congress in 1968, a slight which Taraki apparently took personally. One reason for Moscow's caution may have been the split between the factions. Over the years the Moscow undertook efforts to bring about a reconciliation. Such efforts were often entrusted to KGB operatives within Afghanistan, in coordination with the Central Committee International Department. In 1974 the Politburo approved a message to both Taraki and Karmal, to be delivered by a KGB operative, informing the two that "In Moscow they regard with deep alarm the reports coming from Kabul about the continuing mutual fighting between the leadership of Parcham and Khalq. This internal strife unfortunately and its prolonged nature are leading to a weakening of both [sides], and is introducing a split in the ranks of the progressive forces and the democratic [movement] as a whole."³¹

²⁹ Memorandum from Chairman of USSR Gosplan N.K. Baybakov "Regarding additional aid to the DRA," October 8, 1980 RGANI, f.5, Op.77, D.802, 45.

³⁰ Memorandum from the Soviet embassy in Kabul: "Economic and technical cooperation between the USSR and DRA." RGANI, F.5, Op.77, D.802, 38-39. The gas wells were particularly important to Afghanistan's economy, as the export of gas to the Soviet Union was used to repay the credits offered by Moscow. This kept the Afghan budget balanced until 1989, when, for several reasons (among them the departure of Soviet specialists) the wells stopped functioning. See also Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (1995), 164.

³¹ Decree of the CC CPSU – An Appeal to the Leaders of the PDPA Groups "Parcham" and "Khalq" January 8, 1974 *CWIHP Virtual Archive: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan*, available at www.cwihip.org.

Another reason for caution with regard to support for the Afghan communists was that Moscow was quite happy with its relationship with Afghanistan. The two countries had grown particularly close after a coup in 1973 which brought Mohammed Daoud (Prime Minister during the first tentative steps to cooperation in the 1950s) to power. As in previous decades, Daoud's government received aid from the United States as well as the USSR, but it was the latter that attracted him as a model of development. For his first four years in power he ruled in collaboration with other urban leftists, including members of the PDPA. Soviet advisers working with the communists urged them to be loyal to Daoud.³²

After the April 1978 revolution, additional Soviet advisers were sent to Afghanistan to help the revolutionary leaders extend control over government functions and begin reforms.³³ Lack of available documentation makes it difficult to assess exactly what instructions the various advisers were given before being sent off to Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Soviet leaders clearly agreed that the revolutionary leaders in Kabul should move slowly with regard to agricultural reforms, generally following the moderate land redistribution programs undertaken under Daoud. The advisers on the ground, however, were divided. While some urged a moderate course that would confirm the protection of private property while ensuring an equitable distribution of land, others argued for a more radical redistribution of land.³⁴

In any event, Kabul took the latter approach. Land was granted to formerly landless peasants, who were now responsible for paying taxes on it. Thousands of Party and DOMA (Afghan Komsomol, or Communist Youth organization), activists from Kabul, supported by police (and organized with the help of Soviet advisers) went out to the provinces to enact the reform. The results were disastrous: among the problems with the reform was that most of the peasants granted land had few means to work it. The land reforms precipitated a refugee crisis and the growth of anti-government sentiment.³⁵

Nor were the advisers more successful at bridging the divide within the Party. The revolutions' leaders, Hafizullah Amin and Nur Mohammed Taraki, were increasingly at odds

³² Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War*, 300-302.

³³ Daoud's relationship with the Afghan left eventually frayed, and he decided to arrest PDPA leaders in April 1978. They were able to call on their supporters in the military to launch a coup, depose Daoud, and take power.

³⁴ Aleksandr D. Davydov *Afganistan: Voiny Moglo ne byt' - Krestianstvo i Reformy* [Afghanistan: The War Could Have Been Avoided – The Peasantry and Reforms] (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), 117-118.

³⁵ Davydov, *Afganistan: Voiny Moglo ne byt*, 119-124.

and avoided Soviet advice on state-building. An assessment from the summer of 1979 noted “there is no People’s Front in the country and local bodies of revolutionary authority have not yet been created. The recommendations of our advisers regarding these questions have not been put into practice.”³⁶

For the time being, Afghan leaders were acting independently, and their mistakes were their own. Soviet advisers were still largely “advising,” and their advice was often ignored. As the situation within Afghanistan deteriorated throughout 1979, Soviet leaders gradually agreed on the need to invade Afghanistan, remove Amin (who had Taraki executed in September, despite Soviet protests), and install a more moderate group of people in power.³⁷ As we will see, it also prompted Moscow to make a much bigger commitment not just in terms of military support but also economic aid and advisers.

III. Soviet Advisers after the Invasion

Reports that there were Soviet advisers at every level of the Afghan government began to appear in the western press as early as January 1980. Babrak Karmal, the leader installed with the help of Soviet troops in December 1979, himself later confirmed this, admitting that many Afghans had largely stopped working, preferring to “lay all the burden and responsibility for practical work on the shoulders of the advisers.”³⁸ In a play on the name given Soviet forces in Afghanistan, embassy employees joked about the “limited contingent of Soviet party advisors in Afghanistan.”³⁹

The invasion increased the need for advisers as well as the urgency of their work in Afghanistan. In the months following the introduction of troops, senior military officers and others insisted that the war could not be won by military means alone.⁴⁰ The massive influx of advisers in the years that followed was a response to the need to undertake a nation-

³⁶ Gromyko-Andropov-Ustinov-Ponomarev Report to CPSU CC on the Situation in Afghanistan, June 28, 1979
CWIHP Virtual Archive: Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan.

³⁷ See footnote 1.

³⁸ Thomas T. Hammond *Red Flag Over Afghanistan: The Communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences* (Boulder, 1990), 152.

³⁹ O. Zharov “Sleptsi, navizivavshie sebja v povodyri,” *Azia i Afrika Segodnya* No. 12, 1992, 29.

⁴⁰ Yuri Gankovskii “Afghanistan: from intervention to National Reconciliation,” *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. IV, No. 1 (Spring 1992), 133; V.A. Merimskiy “Afganistan: Uroki i vivody,” *Voенно-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal* 1994(1), 29; Aleksandr Maiorov, *Pravda ob Afganskoy Voyne: Svidetelstvo Glavnogo Voennogo Sovetnika* [The Truth About the Afgan War: Testimony of the Chief Military Advisor] Moscow: 1996; Gai and Snegirov, 204-205.

building program; something that Moscow felt the Afghan communists urgently needed, but, following the experience with Taraki and Amain, did not trust they could undertake on their own.

Soviet strategy after the invasion aimed at uniting the PDPA, giving it greater legitimacy through the use of traditional Afghan institutions, including tribal councils and the clergy, and making the regime more attractive through infrastructure programs and other aid. The so-called *Policy of National Reconciliation*, launched in January 1987 with enthusiastic support from Gorbachev and discussed later in this paper, was largely a reformulation of the policy described below, but under different leadership in both Kabul and Moscow.

The Soviet leadership understood that to stabilize the country, Karmal would need to unify the party as well as convince the rest of the country to accept PDPA rule. The Afghanistan commission presented a plan of action to the Politburo at the end of January 1980.⁴¹ It called for measures to spread the PDPA's influence into the countryside, including the use of youth organizations. At the same time, it tried to take into account the specifics of Afghan power structures. The document called for efforts to reach out to tribal leaders, the use of *jirgas* (traditional tribal councils), and a "long term plan for work with Muslim clergy."⁴² With time, and with prodding from Soviet advisors, these policies were introduced by Karmal's government, although with limited success. These efforts were generally half-hearted, and rarely met the intention of the programs' authors in Moscow. For example, while Soviet leaders urged Karmal to allow political organizations like the National Fatherland Front (established in July of 1981) to function independently of the PDPA, both that organization and the provincial *jirgas* were indeed dominated by the party, a result primarily of PDPA members being unwilling to share power.⁴³

Before the PDPA could spread its influence into the countryside, Karmal would have to achieve a degree of unity within the party that had been elusive since its foundation and that had been further undermined by Amin's purges.⁴⁴ Moscow's concept of unity did not

⁴¹ This was a commission with the Politburo created in March 1979, at the time of the initial request for Soviet troops. Its members were Andrei Gromyko (Minister of Foreign Affairs), Yuri Andropov (KGB Chairman), Dmitry Ustinov (Minister of Defense), and Boris Ponomarev (head of the International Department of the CC CPSU).

⁴² CC CPSU Memorandum "Regarding further measures...in connection with events in Afghanistan" in RGANI Fund 89, Perechen 34, 3. Liakhovsky, *Tragedia i Doblest*, 344.

⁴³ Giustozzi, *War, Politics, and Society*, 137-143.

⁴⁴ Mitrokhin, *KGB in Afghanistan*, 82-83.

always match up with Karmal's, however. Soviet leaders wanted Karmal to form a government that included Khalqis, and helped broker a deal between him and several Khalqi ministers in Moscow before bringing him to Afghanistan. In fact, once in power, Karmal began to edge out Khalqis, even executing some of Amin's closest associates.⁴⁵ The only reason a full scale purge did not take place was that Moscow made it very clear it would be unacceptable. Party advisers pressed Karmal to stop the removal of Khalqi's from party and administrative posts, and a formal CC CPSU request was directed to him sometime in January.⁴⁶ Karmal, for his part, kept trying to gain a free hand, telling Soviet advisers "As long as you keep my hands bound and do not let me deal with the Khalq faction, there will be no unity in the PDPA and the government cannot become strong...They tortured us and killed us. They still hate us! They are the enemies of the party!"⁴⁷

In 1980, KGB advisers helped create a new security agency, the KhAD, to replace the one that functioned under Amin. The new agency had several purposes. First, it was meant to dissociate the security service from Amin's repressive rule. Second, it was meant to be a security service loyal to Karmal, not one in which Amin loyalists would undermine his rule. Mohammed Najibullah, a KGB agent and Parcham member, was installed as its head. The role of KGB advisers in setting up the new agency was crucial, as was the relationship they developed with Najibullah during this period. When Moscow decided to replace Karmal in 1986, the KGB's ties with Najibullah helped insure that he would succeed him.⁴⁸

The work of party advisers posted in the provinces focused on the "widening of state power," in other words expanding the ranks of the population while also convincing influential locals (usually village or tribal elders) to support the government. As in most guerrilla insurgencies, the Afghan *mujahadeen* depended on active or passive support from

⁴⁵ Liakhovsky, *Tragedia i Doblest*, 348, 350.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 350.

⁴⁷ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, (Basic Books, 2006), 407. This problem would never be effectively resolved. Particularly dangerous was the split in the military and security services. A Soviet assessment from 1984 noted that in the senior ranks (colonel and higher) of the army, Parcham had a slight majority (58%) over Khalq (42%). Within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 75 percent of regional commanders were Khalq, as were 85 percent of political officers. "Report on the Condition of the PDPA" 1984, Personal Archive of Marshal Sokolov. Provided to the author by General Aleksandr Liakhovsky. Khalqi domination in the army was probably higher than this document suggests; Giustozzi places it at about 70percent. Further, notes of Politburo meetings from Moscow show that Soviet leaders were concerned by Khalqi domination in the army prior to withdrawal and as late as 1990. See Giustozzi, *War, Politics, and Society in Afghanistan*, 82.

⁴⁸ Andrew and Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way*, 408; Author's interviews with Leonid Shebarshin, September 17, 2007, Yuli Vorontsov, September 11, 2007, and Nikolai Kozyrev.

the local population. Thus measures were needed to ensure that these fighters did not have easy access to recovery or re-supply areas.

Soviet advisers prepared groups of party activists to enter newly “liberated” villages following operations by the 40th army and Afghan forces. Once these activists had established an HQ they often continued to require the protection of the armed forces. If the advisers were successful in striking a deal with local elders, a quid pro quo was usually involved. Soviet advisers and their Afghan colleagues were expected to deliver, depending on the situation, household items such as cooking oil or matches, motor vehicles, gasoline, farming implements or other agricultural products.⁴⁹

Soviet advisers in the provinces were also involved in a number of pacification measures. These were usually designed by senior Soviet advisers and commanders in Kabul, in collaboration with Moscow. In addition to the process described above, a village might be offered exclusion from bombing in return for a promise to break all ties with resistance groups. On occasion, advisers working with their Afghan counterparts were able to secure the allegiance of former fighters. This too involved massive coordination, since commanders and their followers (and very often family), had to be given assurances of safety and livelihood.⁵⁰

Party advisers were also intimately involved in the effort to build up the country’s economy. In 1979 and 1980, the USSR provided 500 million roubles of economic aid to the DRA, both credits and non-repayable aid, including seed, fertilizer, sugar, oil, agricultural products, and automobiles.⁵¹ Advisers in Kabul took part in preparing economic programs, following directives from Moscow. Political advisers, as well as advisers attached to the Ministry of Agriculture and Agricultural Reform and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs all took part in the drafting of laws on land reform.⁵² The more radical aspects of Taraki-Amin land redistribution plans were abandoned, and some of the land and property confiscated by the regime was returned.⁵³ Advisors posted in the provinces were responsible for overseeing that

⁴⁹ O. Zharov “Sleptsi, navizivavshie sebia v povodyri,” *Azia i Afrika Segodnya* No. 12, 1992, 29; Elvartanov *Afganistan – glazami ochedvitsa*, 19-21.

⁵⁰ Mitochkin, *Afganskie Zapiski*, 79; Salnikov, *Zapiski Sovetnika Posolstva*, 196-201. Mitochkin, a KGB officer, served as an advisor in Afghanistan.

⁵¹ Memorandum from Chairman of USSR Gosplan N.K.Baybakov “Regarding additional aid to the DRA,” October 8, 1980 RGANI, f.5, Op.77, D.802, 44.

⁵² Soviet embassy in the DRA, note on “The continuation of land reform in the DRA,” October 28, 1981 RGANI, F.5, Op.88, D. 945, 36.

these new reforms were carried out. They were also responsible for other aspects of Moscow's economic program in Afghanistan, making sure that economic aid reached the villages. Thus, a party adviser might have to play the role of logistics manager, sometimes seeing to such minute details as the procurement of lorries to deliver goods.⁵⁴

Finally, party advisers, military advisers, and others took part in the effort to draft recruits for the Afghan army, a persistent problem throughout the period. The government's unpopularity, fear of repercussions from opposition fights, inefficiency in the organization of the draft, and corruption were all contributing factors. In fact, in many provinces officials were unable to fill the draft quota by more than 50 percent and in others by 30 percent.⁵⁵ Army units themselves were usually no more than 50 percent staffed, in part because of recruiting shortages and in part because of very high rates of desertion.⁵⁶ Since building up the Afghan army was considered one of the key factors necessary to stabilize the country, the recruiting problem took on particular importance for the Soviets.

Recruitment work involved propaganda, negotiations with local authorities (including tribal elders) and even military operations. Afghan authorities and their advisors apparently resorted to the latter approach with some frequency. In such an operation (which Soviets called *otlov*, or catching) an army unit might surround a village or a school while activists and officers went inside to persuade or force eligible young men to join the ranks of the DRA military. Often such an operation involved a fair amount of violence and cruelty, including severe beating of recruits. Soviet advisors believed that the *otlov* was unavoidable, but also understood that if the recruits were beaten severely even before they entered the army that experience would only heighten their motivation to desert later.⁵⁷

Soviet advisers became an integral part of almost all aspects of Afghan governance and counter-insurgency. Since "nation-building" and counter-insurgency were inextricably linked, the role of non-military advisers was arguably as important as of those in uniform. Unlike before the invasion, they now had more clout and were better able to influence events

⁵³ Davydov, *Afghanistan: Voyni moglo ne byt'*, 125-127.

⁵⁴ Elvartanov *Afghanistan – glazami ochedvitsa*, 21-23.

⁵⁵ Meeting with Party Advisors, handwritten notes, March 31, 1984 Personal Archive of Marshal Sokolov. Provided to the author by General Aleksandr Liakhovsky.

⁵⁶ Antonio Giuztozzi, *War, Politics and Society in Afghanistan* (London, 2000), 70.

⁵⁷ Yuri Salnikov, *Zapiski Sovetnika Posolstva* (Volgograd: Komitet po pečati, 2005), 146-147; Valery I. Mitochkin, *Afganskije Zapiski* [Notes from Afghanistan] (Saransk, 2004), 66-67.

in Afghanistan. This helped stabilize the situation within the ruling party and began the process of expanding government and party institutions.

IV. Problems and Conflicts

Within several years of their arrival in Afghanistan, it became clear that the nation-building project Moscow had undertaken was failing. Economic aid often did not reach its intended destination, as items like trucks, tanks, cotton, and food products were either diverted and re-sold or fell prey to hijackers.⁵⁸ Rather than the PDPA becoming a functioning governing party, it continued to be consumed by internal rivalry. Some of the difficulties in political work were similar to the ones that the Soviets faced in their effort to improve the military situation. As additional Soviet advisors or troops became involved, the less the DRA government seemed able to act independently. The problem of how to restore the ability of the Afghan army to fight independently, or of leaders to make decisions without turning to their Soviet tutors for help was one of the major stumbling blocks in stabilizing the situation in the country and creating the conditions for a Soviet withdrawal.

The presence of Soviet troops and advisers seemed to cause paralysis among Afghan politicians. This may have been due to a sense that the Soviet advisors could do the job better, or it may have been a response to the generally imperial attitude of certain advisors. Often, Soviet advisers preferred to carry out a task themselves, rather than training their subordinates.⁵⁹ It was common practice, for example, to write speeches in Russian for translation into Dari and Pashto. This practice apparently included party documents and, later, the new constitution adopted under Najibullah.⁶⁰ A Soviet assessment of the PDPA from 1983 noted that even at the highest level of the Party, there was a tendency to shy away from decision-making. Karmal, Keshtmand, and the other members lacked initiative, the assessment said, and “turn to advisors not just for counsel, but also to transfer to them their own functions for the composition of working documents, instructions, especially texts of reports and articles.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ruben Nablandiants *Zapiski Vostokoveda* (Moscow: Luch, 2002), 113.

⁵⁹ Valery I. Mitochkin, *Afganskije Zapiski* [Notes from Afghanistan] (Saransk, 2004), 66-67.

⁶⁰ Vorontsov interview.

⁶¹ “Report on the Condition of the PDPA,” 1984, Personal Archive of Marshal Sokolov. Provided to the author by General Aleksandr Liakhovsky.

The domination of advisors in the Afghan party and government was thorough. Najibullah later described a typical meeting of the Afghan council of ministers:

We sit down at the table. Each minister comes with his own [Soviet] advisor. The meeting begins, the discussion becomes heated, and gradually the advisors come closer and closer to the table, so accordingly our people move away, and eventually only the advisors are left at the table.⁶²

Even after Najibullah replaced Karmal, Soviet advisors continued to dominate the Afghan government. Soviet advisors were “everywhere, absolutely everywhere. It was the worst sort of colonial politics. Terrible.”⁶³

The imperiousness of the advisers reached to the top of their Kabul-based hierarchy, to Soviet ambassador Fiakrat Tabeev. A party man who had spent twenty years as the head of the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Republic, he had been appointed in 1979 in part because of his Muslim background.⁶⁴ Over the years Tabeev had begun acting as a “governor-general,” and had apparently been telling the newly promoted Najib “I made you General Secretary.” When Mikhail Gorbachev began working towards a new Afghan policy, he decided that Tabeev needed to be replaced.⁶⁵ Several months later Yuli Vorontsov, a career diplomat with experience in South Asia, arrived in Kabul.⁶⁶

Bureaucratic infighting and inefficiency were a constant problem. Already in 1981, Pravda correspondent I. Schedrov, in a secret memo forwarded to the CC CPSU, noted that Soviet aid was being undermined by the split between the military on the one hand and party, state, and other (presumably intelligence) officials on the other. Each group thought that it should have the dominant decision making role. This led to a situation where “in the provinces and in Kabul there are two centres, often in conflict, with no mediator.” At the same time, the problem was exacerbated by the infighting among Soviet advisors. “Conflicts between our advisors and representatives, the lack of coordination of our position and actions, greatly reduce the effectiveness or USSR aid to Afghanistan...The problem of

⁶² B. Padishev, “Najibullah, president Afghanistana,” *International Affairs* (Moscow) Jan. 1990, 23.

⁶³ Vorontsov interview.

⁶⁴ Interview with Tabeev, December 2000 http://www.amorozov.ru/inviews/tabeev_fikryat/ Accessed February 3, 2008.

⁶⁵ Politburo Session, May 29, 1986 GFA PB 1986, 75.

⁶⁶ Prior to 1986, Vorontsov had enjoyed a long career at the top of the Soviet diplomatic hierarchy. After earning his degree at the elite MGIMO, he served for many years in the Soviet mission to the UN, then as ambassador to India.

creating in Kabul a single Soviet coordinating organ with the corresponding powers is pressing and demands speedy resolution.”⁶⁷ This problem did not seem to abate with time, as senior Soviet representatives were still discussing its effects in March 1984.⁶⁸

Infighting and lack of coordination among advisers and other Soviet officials had numerous practical consequences that undermined the Soviet mission. In a number of cases, “liberation” of villages and successful efforts to win over rebel commanders floundered when some Soviet advisers or Afghan officials refused to cooperate. The party adviser Ilya Elvertanov recalls the difficulty he had both securing the agreement of ministers in Kabul and Soviet officers to leave an armed detachment for his exposed team and making sure that the established trade links with Soviet enterprises in Tajikistan actually worked like they were supposed to.⁶⁹

Advisors who were involved in successful efforts to win over minor (but locally important) rebel commanders found their efforts undermined when local authorities refused to cooperate on the “payoff.” For example, in 1985 KGB advisor Valery Mitochkin, working with the KhAD (dominated by the Parcham), was able to convince a commander (along with his family and 300 fighters loyal to him) to make peace with the government. In exchange, all of the militants and their families would be given housing, employment, and were allowed to keep their weapons. However, the local governor (a Khalqist) refused to cooperate in providing housing, while the local military commander insisted on seizing some of the weaponry to send back to Kabul. Further, according to Mitochkin, the Soviet party advisor refused to cooperate and mediate between the Governor on the one hand and Mitochkin and the KhAD on the other.⁷⁰ Other advisors faced similar difficulties; such problems damaged the reputation of advisers, Afghan authorities, and pacification efforts in general, making repetition of the effort on a large scale impossible.

Indeed, one of the biggest sources of division among Soviet advisers was their tendency to take sides in the PDPA split. From early in the war Soviet military officers had developed a closer relationship with Khalqis, largely because that group tended to make up

⁶⁷ I. Schedrov’s note on the situation in Afghanistan, forwarded from Pravda to CC CPSU, November 1981, RGANI, F.5, Op.84, D.855, 53.

⁶⁸ Meeting with Party Advisors, handwritten notes, March 31, 1984 Personal Archive of Marshal Sokolov. Provided to the author by General Aleksandr Liakhovsky.

⁶⁹ Elvertanov, *Afganistan – glazami ochedvitsa*, 21-23.

⁷⁰ Mitochkin, *Afganskie Zapiski*, 79-80.

most of the officer corps. The KGB, however, supported Parcham, in part because KGB efforts had helped re-establish Parcham within the top of the hierarchy in December 1979. Since KGB advisers were intimately involved with the creation of KhAD (dominated by Parcham), they were also partisan in their support of that agencies rivalry with the military. Kim Tsagalov, a military adviser, told the deputy chief of the CC CPSU international department in 1982 that installing Karmal was a mistake, “not because Karmal is not worthy of being a leader – he is a founder of the PDPA, but because there are many more Khalqis, and they are the ones spilling their blood, while many Parchamists are sitting in government offices, preferring to become apparatchiks.”⁷¹ The military felt that Khalqis were the ones “doing the fighting.”⁷²

Of course, even if party unity had been achieved, it is far from certain that this would have led to the party making big gains with the population and attaining the kind of legitimacy that would allow it to run the country peacefully. The party continued to exist primarily in cities; its presence in the countryside was largely on paper. At a meeting with Marshal Sokolov and Fiakrat Tabeev, the Soviet Ambassador, in March 1984, one party adviser admitted that in his region only 10percent of the villages had any sort of PDPA presence. At the same time, he lamented, the centre didn’t seem to mind that PDPA functionaries were not making their way into the countryside.⁷³ The figure of 10percent was probably an estimate, and it covered only one region, not the country as a whole.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, it is clear that in the fourth year of the occupation very little progress had been made in terms of “widening the social base of the party,” a goal that Politburo leaders in Moscow had set in January 1980.

Other problems stemmed for the advisers’ lack of preparation for the kind of work they were undertaking. The most numerous were communist party advisers, who often proved doctrinaire in their suggestions, ignorant and insensitive to local customs. Party programs were almost literally copied from CPSU documents. In one incident, an advisor posted to Khost had a mosque shut down and Marxist dialectics played through its loudspeakers. Less damaging but similarly bizarre efforts included the spread of Brezhnev’s

⁷¹ Gai and Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, 195; Interview with Leonid Shebarshin, Moscow, September 17, 2007.

⁷² Gai and Snegirev, *Vtozhenie*, 195.

⁷³ Meeting with Party Advisors, handwritten notes, March 31, 1984 Personal Archive of Marshal Sokolov. Provided to the author by General Aleksandr Liakhovsky.

⁷⁴ For a broader overview, see Giustozzi, *War, Politics, and Society*, 36-40.

works among largely illiterate people.⁷⁵ The move was not only dangerously insensitive to local tradition; it went against Moscow's own policy. It is perhaps indicative that when requesting books for the office library in Afghanistan, the Soviet advisers attached to the Central Committee of the PDPA requested 300 volumes of works by Lenin, Marx, and Engels, as well as related commentary. The request contained no mention of works on Afghan culture, language, history, or anything at all about Afghanistan.⁷⁶

To be fair, it would have been difficult to train several thousand persons specifically suited to work in an advisory capacity in Afghanistan. Many Soviet advisers were particularly ill equipped for their task, and this affected not only their relationship with local party officials and the population, but also their reporting. As late as December 1987, when Moscow had undertaken a major restructuring of its effort in Afghanistan, a colonel in a DRA political battalion complained that Soviet advisers "were simple-hearted and naïve. Not knowing the situation in the country, they listen first and foremost to their own advisees." Rather than speaking to the population, Soviet advisers listen to the words of the party functionaries and believed them. "Do you think," the colonel said "that I am ever going to speak poorly of myself? No, I will always put myself and my work in a favourable light. It's elementary."⁷⁷

Crucially, advisers had an impact not only the implementation of Soviet policy within Afghanistan, but also on the way policy was formulated back in Moscow. They provided written reports of their activities and oral reports to senior officials visiting from Moscow. There was a tendency in such reporting to focus on the positive: the growth of the party ranks, its authority throughout Afghanistan, the attitude of the population, and so on. Inflated numbers were often taken at face value. The refrain seen in Politburo conversations and Afghan commission memorandums regarding the "strong growth of the Afghan party" may have been part wishful thinking on the part of senior Soviet officials, but it was also informed based on the information coming from people "on the ground." Positive assessments

⁷⁵ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopoliti*, 68; Mitochkin, *Afganskije Zapiski*, 73; Author's interviews with Ambassador Yuli Vorontsov, Moscow, September 11, 2007, and Leonid Shebarshin, Moscow, September 17, 2007.

⁷⁶ "Report of the group of CC CPSU advisors at the CC PDPA regarding conditions of work for that group," December 12, 1983 RGANI F.5, Op.89, D. 738, 105-106.

⁷⁷ "Record of conversation with Colonel Mohammed Sarwari," December 18, 1987, Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitii*, 206-207.

supported the arguments of those in the Politburo who argued for the extension of the Soviet presence in Afghanistan.⁷⁸

Not all advisers limited their contact to Afghan officials, and some did their best to learn about the country they were working in and to change Soviet efforts in the country to reflect local conditions. One example was a political officer in the military who worked with the political detachments in the DRA military. Colonel Shershnev developed a reputation as a different sort of advisor, one who reached out to the local population. In 1984 he sent a report, addressed to Politburo Chairman Konstantin Chernenko that stated “The operations have become of a police character, with punitive measures, and as a result we have been pulled in to a war with the people with no prospects of a positive outcome. Inhumane acts by Soviet troops with regard to the peaceful population are widespread and systematic and manifest themselves in the form of robbery, unjustified and unfounded use of firearms, destruction of villages, dishonoring of mosques.” Chernenko made a point of saying that Shershnev was not to be touched. Shershnev was not touched, but his promotion to general was held back for about two years, and after the war he was pushed into retirement.⁷⁹ His case suggests that advisers operated in a rather rigid environment, and dissent was not always tolerated.

Shershnev’s report also underscores another problem with the nation-building aspect of counter-insurgency. Economic aid in such situations tends to be undermined by the massive destructive power of modern weapons unleashed on behalf of the government. The problem was exacerbated in the Afghan case because the Soviet military adjusted slowly to the demands of counter-insurgency warfare in the Afghan terrain and relied heavily on aerial bombardment. At the same time, military leaders may have pointed out to Moscow that the Afghan problem could not be solved by military means alone, but they either did not realize that their actions often made the situation worse or were unable to find a different approach. As one officer put it “warriors receive medals on their chest and stars on their epaulettes and money not for reconciliation, but for conducting combat operations.”⁸⁰ As Shershnev’s reports suggests, this feeling was widespread among senior Soviet officers.

⁷⁸ Urnov interview.

⁷⁹ D.Gai & V. Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, 202-207.

⁸⁰ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki*, 83.

V. National Reconciliation and Soviet Advisers after 1986

Soon after Mikhail Gorbachev took over as General Secretary in 1985 he began to look for new approaches to the Afghan problem. Although he believed that the Soviet Union must withdraw from Afghanistan, he departed only slightly from his predecessors in that he continued to look for ways the Soviet Union could withdraw without facing the collapse of its Kabul client and the loss of prestige and reputation as a defender of third world states. Until late 1987, at least, that meant leaving Afghanistan with a stable, functioning government and a self-reliant military. At the same time Gorbachev and other leaders came to realize that certain aspects of their nation-building approach had failed and sought to find a new approach. They realized that Karmal had made little progress in reaching out to the population, that economic aid was not reaching its intended destination, and that the *mujahadeen* as a whole still had the widespread support of the population.⁸¹ The Kabul government had not made major gains in legitimacy.

From 1985 and through most of 1987, the policies undertaken under Gorbachev were a case of new bottles for old wine. Only when Gorbachev and the Politburo in general came to agree that their hope of achieving stability in Afghanistan through nation-building and pacification programs was not achievable in any reasonable time-frame, did Soviet policy in Afghanistan undergo a substantial shift.

The first few years under Gorbachev were spent tinkering with pre-existing approaches. Babrak Karmal was replaced with Mohammed Najibullah, who had been groomed for the take-over by KGB advisers. Under the new ruler the Policy of National Reconciliation, planned and written by Soviet advisers, with representatives of the military, foreign ministry, and KGB all taking part, was launched.⁸² National Reconciliation was largely what Moscow had been preaching, and the PDPA had theoretically been doing, since 1980. The principles of what Moscow urged Karmal and Najib to do were quite similar. Gorbachev's injunction when Karmal came to Moscow in October 1985 was part of a continuing leitmotif: "Widen your social base. Learn, at last, to lead a dialogue with the

⁸¹ This was, in fact, how Gorbachev saw the problem by the summer of 1985, if not earlier. See Cherniaev Diary, October 16, 1985, posted on the National Security Archive website <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/> Cherniaev was not present at the conversation but saw the transcript right after. See also B. Papishev, "Najibullah, president Afganistana," *International Affairs* (Moscow) Jan. 1990, 19-27.

⁸² Shebarshin interview. The term itself was borrowed from the process taking place in post-Franco Spain at the time and apparently the christening took place on a flight from Kabul to Moscow.

tribes, to use the particularities [of the situation]. Try to get the support of the clergy. Give up the leftist bend in economics. Learn to organize the support of the private sector...”⁸³

Broadly speaking, national reconciliation embodied not just a set of guidelines for Afghan leaders, but a set of instructions for Soviet agencies as well. Some of these reflected newer approaches to old efforts – the KGB, the ministry of the interior, and the ministry of defense, for example, were tasked with engaging with frontier tribes to help close the border. Both the KGB and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were to take part in encouraging opposition groups to come over to the government side. Overall, a dozen Soviet ministries, government and party committees were drafted to take part in national reconciliation, many of which had already played a part in supporting the Afghan government.⁸⁴ At the same time Moscow looked for ways to improve its nation-building strategy, in part by appealing for help to Eastern European allies. For example, Bulgaria, which had already provided many millions in aid, agreed in 1987 “to respond to the Soviet comrades’ proposal, and respond to PDPA’s appeal to provide assistance to the PDPA’s policy of national reconciliation in Afghanistan.”⁸⁵ Moscow made similar appeals to other Eastern European allies, all in the name of “furthering the goal of National Reconciliation.”⁸⁶

The biggest aid package, of course, came from the USSR itself. In February 1987 the Politburo agreed to provide 950 million rubles worth of aid, more than the USSR had ever given to any one country.⁸⁷ This was as much a political as an economic move. Najib needed to show that the Soviet Union would support him and his government and did not plan to abandon him. In March, Gorbachev also promised Najibullah that after the withdrawal had taken place absolutely all of the military infrastructure would be handed over to the DRA armed forces to help them protect the “independence and sovereignty” of Afghanistan. Some of the economic aid would even go to helping Najib develop the private sector, considered a necessary precondition for the success of National Reconciliation.⁸⁸

⁸³ Aleksandr-Agentov quoted in Gai & Snegirev, *Vtorzhenie*, 367.

⁸⁴ “Regarding the talks with Comrade Najib,” Politburo Protocol, December 25, 1986, Volkogonov Papers, Box 26/Reel 17.

⁸⁵ Memorandum of the CC BCP Department of Foreign Policy and International Relations, CWIHP Documents on Afghanistan.

⁸⁶ Presidium of the CC of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, 35th session, May 6, 1987, CWIHP.

⁸⁷ Politburo Meeting, February 28, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 125.

Soviet policy in 1986 and 1987 aimed to address some of the problems discussed above. Measures were taken in the belief that without them the Afghan government would never be able to stand “on its own two legs.” Many advisers were withdrawn in 1986 and there was an effort to change the way relations with Afghans at every level were conducted. Experience showed that this was far from easy, and imperiousness as well as fractiousness continued to be a problem. In May 1986 the Politburo had discussed removing Tabeev so that relations with the Afghan leadership could have a fresh start; in June and July the Politburo moved to recall many of the advisers and specialists.⁸⁹

In Afghanistan, the new Soviet Ambassador Yuli Vorontsov was charged not only with overseeing the implementation of national reconciliation program, but also changing the way Soviet advisors operated. He had undertaken the task earlier, after returning to Moscow from France and being promoted to Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Vorontsov’s first task was coordinating the work of the various institutions involved in Afghanistan – the KGB, the military, the Foreign Ministry, and the political advisors. Gorbachev was aware that there was a difficult relationship between them and their recommendations often contradicted each other. Vorontsov was given a “mandate” to coordinate their work and provide the Politburo with recommendations that everyone could agree on. It was tough work – the discussions between the representatives of these various institutions could become quite heated. But the “mandate from the General Secretary” helped.⁹⁰

The Soviet effort to unite the PDPA largely failed, due both to the strength of internal divisions and the failure of Soviet advisers to be impartial in the split. The fractiousness of the PDPA by 1987 was not limited to the Khalq/Parcham split, but included intra-faction groupings that formed around the more senior members. Aside from the Khalq/Parcham divide, there were groups loyal to individual figures: “Karmalists” “Nurovists” “Wakilists” and “Keshtmandists” which included both Khalqis and Parchamis. In the military there were cliques loyal to Shanawaz Tanai and M. Rafi.⁹¹ As late as December 1987 the head of the

⁸⁸ Politburo Meeting, February 28, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 124; Notes for telephone conversation with Comrade Najib, March 3, 1987, GFA Document #577.

⁸⁹ Records of Politburo Discussions, May 25 and June 11, 1987. GFA PB 1986.

⁹⁰ Vorontsov interview.

⁹¹ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki* 78-79; “Record of conversation with Colonel Mohammed Sarwari,” December 18, 1987, Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki*, 203-204.

Afghan army propaganda said that a formal split would almost be preferable, with each wing choosing its own leader and Najibullah remaining as president.⁹²

At the same time, the Soviet military sometimes seemed unwilling to radically alter its tactics during the national reconciliation program. In 1987 Plastun tried to convince Colonel-General Vostrov that military attacks on Kandahar province were counterproductive. Vostrov chided Vladimir Plastun, a GRU officer trained as an orientalist, “To hell with national reconciliation. Warriors receive medals on their chest and stars on their epaulettes and money not for reconciliation, but for conducting combat operations. This is something that you, expert, do not understand!”⁹³ Although not all officers took such a hawkish approach, the military seemed reluctant to do its part in political work. In March 1988 its most senior officer, General Valentin Varennikov, complained: “our army is not just a warrior with a sword. It is a political warrior...over the last year, meetings between Soviet and Afghan soldiers have ceased, as have those of Soviet soldiers and the population.”⁹⁴

It was not only the military that had trouble radically changing the way Soviet-Afghan relations were conducted. At every level there were vestiges of the “colonial” approach that had taken root since 1980. Although Tabeev had been removed, and there was much talk about making Najib “more independent,” even Shevardnadze often seemed to relate to him as a colonial subject. General Ziarmal, chief of the political directorate of the DRA army, noted in January 1988 “it is not clear why the President of an independent Afghanistan should be meeting the minister of foreign affairs at Kabul airport. This is a minor political and diplomatic point that which in the eyes of international opinion makes Afghanistan a satellite of the USSR.” Ziarmal went on to complain that even the Soviet press did not take this point seriously: “Shevardnadze for us is a comrade, but Najib for Shevardnadze is – your Excellency the President of the Republic of Afghanistan. The Soviet press needs to speak about him as a president, not the general secretary of the PDPA.”⁹⁵ In other words, it was often difficult to shake off the colonial flavor of the relationship, even though there was no intention of carrying out an “imperialist” policy.

⁹² Record of conversation with Major General A. Wakhed, December 1, 1987, in Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki*, 201.

⁹³ Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki*, 83.

⁹⁴ Meeting of Political Advisors, March 9, 1988 in Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki*, 211.

⁹⁵ Record of Conversation with General-Major Ziarmal, January 4, 1988, Plastun & Adrianov, *Najibullah. Afghanistan v Tiskah Geopolitiki*, 226-227.

The realization that Soviet aid was not going to stabilize the situation in Afghanistan pushed Gorbachev towards withdrawal and forced him to focus primarily on international diplomacy to provide a dignified exit for Soviet troops and reconciliation within the country. Up to this point Soviet involvement in international diplomacy (particularly the Geneva talks on Afghanistan) were secondary to efforts within the country, while the question of the PDPA stepping aside was anathema. By the middle of 1987 most of the leadership was willing to accept a secondary role for Moscow's client within a future Afghan government.⁹⁶ Gorbachev himself was coming around to the view that the situation on the ground in Afghanistan would not change significantly before Soviet forces withdrew. Talks with Najib had left him disappointed, he told the Politburo on July 23.⁹⁷ Although the Afghan policy seemed to be failing, there was still some reason for optimism. US-Soviet relations were improving. The effort to get the US on board for an agreement would characterize Moscow's Afghan policy from the fall of 1987 until the signing of the Geneva Accords in April 1988.⁹⁸

The divisions that had formed during the war continued to affect Soviet policy after the withdrawal. The KGB and remaining military advisers pursued different policies, on questions as varied as the role of Najibullah as well as which rebel commanders Soviet advisers should help the DRA reach out to.⁹⁹ In summer and fall of 1988 these divisions were highlighted in a series of policy debates that were invariably won by the KGB, with Shevardnadze's support.¹⁰⁰ Rival DRA leaders tried to take advantage of the divisions among Soviet officials to gain advantage in their own power struggle. Their disagreements echoed uncertainty at the level of the Soviet Politburo, whose members were divided about the best

⁹⁶ The new consensus in the Politburo was that the PDPA would be only one of the political forces in power after Soviet troops left. Even Kriuchkov agreed that reconciliation would have to take place not around the PDPA, but with its participation. Gromyko, too, said that the PDPA should be one of the parties in the government, but not the leading one. See Politburo meeting, May 22, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 319.

⁹⁷ Notes from Politburo meeting, July 23, 1987, GFA PB 1987, 429. To Gorbachev, Karmalism meant "elements of Marxism combined with dependence on the USSR."

⁹⁸ For this phase of Moscow's effort to withdraw from Afghanistan, see Kalinovsky, "Old Politics, New Diplomacy, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Cold War History* Volume 8, Issue 3, 2008, 381-404.

⁹⁹ The military supported Ahmad Shah Massoud, for whom many of the officers had developed a great deal of respect during the war and with whom they had successfully arranged truces on several occasions. The KGB supported Najibullah's efforts to establish ties with Hekmatyar and his refusal to talk to Massoud.

¹⁰⁰ By 1988, KGB Chairman Vladimir Kriuchkov and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze had come to dominate Soviet decision-making on Afghanistan, causing much dissatisfaction among the military. See Kalinovsky "Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan," 64-65.

course to pursue in Afghanistan. Shevardnadze and Kriuchkov continued to believe that Moscow had to put all its weight behind Najibullah, while others were willing to see a Najibullah-less PDPA enter into a coalition with opposition movements.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

The Soviet experience in Afghanistan was a culmination of its other Third World involvements during the Cold War. For decades it had been offering its own version of modernization, sending its military, political, and technical advisers to emerging states that were socialist or leaning that way. Soviet modernization was a challenge to colonialism and to the American model – although as practiced in the context of counter-insurgency warfare (for example, in Vietnam), they looked remarkably similar. In both cases, the superpowers experimented with various clear and hold strategies to show that their client could bring economic well-being to the population.¹⁰² Not surprisingly, the problems encountered by (and often caused by) Soviet officials were not unique: painted in broad strokes, they could easily describe any number of advising or nation-building programmes, including that undertaken in Afghanistan since 2001.¹⁰³

Contrary to what some western observers at the time thought, Soviet leaders were generally aware that Afghanistan was not the place to repeat the socialist experiment. Their decision-making throughout the entire Afghan story was largely reactive – responding to events rather than driving them. Indeed, the entire story, with its internal intrigues and

¹⁰¹ This confusion is reflected in a conversation between Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Petrovsky and Perez de Cuellar on October 21, 1988. Although Moscow seemed to be throwing all its weight behind Najibullah, Petrovsky “indicated” that [Najibullah] would leave the scene.” Record of Conversation, Yale University, Sterling Memorial Library, Perez de Cuellar Papers, Box 10.

¹⁰² As Michael Latham reminds us, Lyndon Johnson once hoped to create a “TVA on the Mekong;” the purpose of nation-building in the counter-insurgency context was to give the South Vietnamese government more legitimacy (as if legitimacy was something that could be “given”): “Throughout the bulk of the war US officials clung to the hope that they could create a South Vietnamese government with sufficient political legitimacy to win the war.” Michael Latham, “Nation-Building in South Vietnam,” in Berger, ed. *From Nation-Building to State-Building*, 34-35.

¹⁰³ Consider the lament of a former USAID officer who worked on development projects in Argentina and Pakistan: “It was my firm belief that locals should be directly responsible for making policy decisions in their own country. Foreigners who become embroiled in local politics may be successful for a while, but sooner or later they become rivals of local politicians for power and influence and lose credibility as independent professional experts. [...] [In Argentina] instead of helping to incorporate local counterparts in policy making, I replaced them. Policy makers preferred to turn to me personally for advice, bypassing the very institution that we were trying to build up.” Robert Mallon, *The new missionaries: memoirs of a foreign adviser in less-developed countries* (Cambridge, MA : Harvard Institute for International Development, 2000), 47-48. On problems of coordination, planning, and corruption in recent years, see, for example, Rajiv Chandrasekaran, “U.S. Pursues a New Way To Rebuild in Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, June 19, 2009.

damaging rivalries among Soviet advisers, unsuccessful efforts to bring some sort of coordination to the situation as a whole, leaves one with the impression of a constantly improvised, long-term fire-fighting operation on a national scale. The “nation-building” program in Afghanistan was composed of “off the shelf” components, not a master plan. Advisers, sent with vague instructions and little preparation, worked with what they had in their toolkit, composed of organizational methods and approaches developed in the post-war Soviet Union. This pattern was not unique to the Soviet effort in Afghanistan, but the urgency of the situation highlighted the deficiencies of this approach.¹⁰⁴

The nation-building approach also reveals something about the mind-set of Soviet leaders, as the study of US nation-building and modernization experiments does about the liberal Democrats of the 1960s. This was their belief in a sort of universal rationality, according to which people would respond positively to the promise of economic aid and improvement in livelihood. The abandonment of the nation-building approach in Afghanistan after 1987 and the turn to methods of pacification that focused primarily on reaching out to the major rebel leaders, reflected not only a rejection of previous Soviet efforts but also a fundamental reassessment of this belief.

Although Soviet leaders may have recognized that a replay of the Soviet experiment was not the prescription for Afghanistan, they clearly had only a vague idea of what could be a way forward. Soviet advisers cannot take all the blame for failing to understand the country they were working in; their leaders, too, were guilty of this. Again, this was a problem that went beyond Afghanistan. Karen Brutents, who was intimately involved with various Soviet projects in the third world, writes “There was not enough experience of communication with developing countries, and most importantly- there was no particular desire to acquire such experience, to learn the specifics of each country, the role of tradition, of religion in communal life, of the particularities of a people’s psychological make-up.”¹⁰⁵ There is much necessary work to be done on the subject of Soviet advising and modernization efforts, for the history of Soviet aid to the developing world (and the history of those countries during the Cold War) was defined in part by such nation-building experiments, founded on ideas but improvised in practice.

¹⁰⁴ Brutents, writing about the work of Soviet advisers in Yemen, noted: “Although Moscow warned about rushing ahead, many Soviet advisers, [political] instructors tried to transfer our experience as well as familiar methods of management, work, and communication, to South Yemen. They had neither the opportunity nor the time to learn the specifics of local condition, even if they wanted to do so.” *Nesbyvsheesia*, 194.

¹⁰⁵ Brutents, *Nesbyvsheesia*, 168.