

War and Revolution in Afghanistan

The dramatic events in Afghanistan at the end of 1979, with the intervention of Russian forces and the fall of President Hafizullah Amin, come within two years of the uprising of April 1978, through which the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan gained state power. Whilst no-one can predict the outcome of these developments, it is evident that the Afghan revolution is in a gravely weakened condition: it is able to rely on Soviet military support for ultimate survival, but it is, by the same token, all the more vulnerable because of the identification of the new Babrak Karmal government with the army of a foreign power, and because of the dire factionalism within the PDPA that precipitated the new scale of Russian involvement. The key to this crisis lies in the intractable problems which the PDPA has encountered in implementing its revolutionary programme and in the mistakes which it has made in so doing. As in Russia after 1917 a relatively quick seizure of power in the towns has been followed by a much more protracted civil war, waged by counter-revolutionary forces, aided from abroad. Moreover, before the new regime could win the support of the

peasantry with effective, and, to them, meaningful reforms, the counter-revolution has been able to mobilize large numbers of the rural poor, and indeed to attribute the chaos and violence of the civil war to the advent of the new regime to power. We know at what cost, and with what consequences, the Bolsheviks were able to defend their initial gains. The baneful effects of such a civil war are likely to be all the greater in Afghanistan, given some of the policies which the PDPA, allied to the USSR, has chosen to pursue. For although the Bolsheviks, including Lenin, engaged in indefensible forms of repression during the Russian civil war, the PDPA leadership has resorted to systematic violence much more extensively in its struggle to hold off Afghan counter-revolution. Moreover, political differences within the Bolshevik party were settled by votes not, as in Kabul, bullets.

The Roots of Counter-Revolution

The strengths and weaknesses of the PDPA and the manner of its advent to power have already been indicated in these pages and elsewhere.¹ It was a party committed to revolutionary transformation of one of the world's most impoverished societies and could count, for political and strategic reasons, on substantial support from its northern neighbour, the USSR. Russia had already, in the 1950s, established itself as the main supplier of economic and military aid to Afghanistan and was its main trading partner—a relationship unique in the non-socialist third world. In international terms this was a marginal development given Afghanistan's archaic social system and relative US disinterest. At the same time, the PDPA was a small party of probably less than 5,000 members, drawn almost exclusively from urban intellectuals and army officers, in a country with over 90% illiteracy, 87% of the population living in the rural areas and very strong tribal, ethnic and religious structures and ideologies. Whilst the PDPA's triumph and the Soviet willingness to assist provided a very real opportunity for Afghanistan, there was also the danger that the urban-based party would, while expropriating the landowners, fail to win the mass of poor peasants by a bureaucratic imposition of reforms. There was also the risk that the potential for transforming Afghan society would be distorted by the imposition of political models, as distinct from economic or military aid, drawn from the USSR. The example of North Yemen, where, after the 1962 revolution, an urban-based radical regime was in the end drowned by a tribal rising, was a warning instance of what could occur in such instances.

In the North Yemen case, the strength of the counter-revolution derived from two mutually supporting circumstances. The first was the financial and military support given by the neighbouring state, Saudi Arabia, abetted by a range of other countries that included

¹ Fred Halliday, 'Revolution in Afghanistan', *NLR* 112, November–December 1978. See also Louis Duprée, 'Afghanistan Under the Khalq', *Problems of Communism*, July–August 1979, and Selig Harrison, 'The Shah, Not Kremlin, Touched Off Afghan Coup', *Washington Post*, 13 May 1979. The latter brings new inside information to light, showing Iran's responsibility for the fall of the Daud regime in April 1978.

Britain (at that time entrenched in neighbouring South Yemen), Israel and Jordan. In neither case were substantial military forces of the sustaining outside power ever sent in, but Pakistan has provided the bases, both refugee and military, for the Afghan opposition, and has given military supplies and some direct support as well. This time the junior allies include China, which is helping to train the rebels; Iran, which provides financial, propaganda and some logistical support; Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, who give financial support. As yet no substantive evidence of US involvement has been revealed, but a joint position on Afghanistan certainly forms part of the Washington–Peking understanding, and the USA may be content to see its junior allies in Asia shouldering the main responsibility.

The other central factor is the social nature of the hinterland which presents special difficulties for socialist transformation. Although the leadership in Afghanistan is communist in orientation, it was socially even more isolated than the Republic in North Yemen. From the beginning, it faced a cruel dilemma: either to move forward cautiously, not implementing its major reform programme until it had consolidated its position, and thereby running the risk of appearing to be uninterested in the mass of poor peasants and landless labourers in the countryside; or to implement these reforms rapidly, in the hope of providing material benefit to the rural poor, and thereby running the risk of becoming embroiled in social conflicts in the countryside where its own cadre force was almost non-existent. To win the rural oppressed as active allies of the revolution it had to attack precisely those structures of class and tribal cohesion that could then, if antagonized, be used to mobilize a counter-revolutionary rural movement, a *Vendée* in Central Asia.

In particular, four aspects of the rural system that complicated any programme of social transformation can be identified. The first was that social relations in the countryside were not primarily perceived by the peasantry in class terms and were indeed ones in which divisions along lines of economic power intersected with ethnic, religious and tribal factors. Any attempt to reform such a system by appealing to the class interests of poor and landless peasants was bound to run into considerable difficulties, given the vitality of these other forces. This was true especially in the Pushtun areas of the south and east, where landownership differences were small, and where tribal loyalties were strongest, but it was also true for the northern plains where the greatest degree of differentiation of ownership and a longer tradition of settled agriculture existed. This difficulty was compounded by the survival of nomadism in Afghanistan, with up to 15% of the population still living mainly off its nomadic flocks and with very unclear ownership and social class patterns within this sector. The case of Outer Mongolia has shown that revolutionary regimes can successfully develop in nomadic societies, but these certainly require special strategies and sensibilities. A second vital factor was the traditional independence of the mountain tribes, who had in the past been paid subsidies by the central government, and among whom the bearing of arms was a natural feature of adult male life. Clearly, the moves by the PDPA to redistribute land, to extend its control and to limit smuggling across the border with Pakistan were

seen as threats to these tribes, and their natural response was to resort to armed rebellion of a kind in which they were well versed. The traditional armed hostility to central government, which a revolutionary movement based in the countryside might have been able to use against a counter-revolutionary state at the centre, was here available for mobilization by the counter-revolution against the PDPA. A third problem was the weight of Afghan political traditions, which find their echo within the PDPA itself: Afghanistan is a country where political and social issues have tended to be settled by the gun and where the room for peacefully handling conflicts within the state, or between the state and its subjects, is extremely limited. The counter-revolutionaries quickly resorted to a policy of shooting PDPA members on sight, and the regime has for its part used widespread brutality against its opponents, real and suspected. Perhaps the nearest analogy in recent revolutionary history is Albania, again a country where tribal fighting traditions had prevailed until the moment of revolution and where a level of recurrent violence, within the party leadership itself, has marked it off from other Eastern European parties. A final and very potent counter-revolutionary factor is the simple fact that Afghanistan is a Muslim country, i.e. one in which there existed a popular ideology that could be mobilized by counter-revolutionary forces more effectively than is the case with any other religion in the world. Even leaving aside the other problems, this would certainly have made the PDPA's task all the more difficult; yet the force of Islam as a counter-revolutionary ideology was greatly enhanced by the triumph of the Iranian Islamic movement in February 1979, just when the PDPA was encountering its first major internal opposition. As far as Afghanistan is concerned, the Shah's regime would have been less menacing than that of Khomeini: although the organizational ability of the previous regime to assist the counter-revolution might well have been greater, the power of ideological mobilization would have been much less, especially if it is remembered how much the Shah's previous interference in Afghan affairs had been resented.

The April Revolution is Checked

The first ten months of the PDPA regime, up to around the end of February 1979, appear to have gone relatively well; the mass of the rural population seemed to be adopting a cautious position, neither actively opposing nor supporting the regime's policies. They were, rather, waiting to see what would happen next. The regime pressed ahead with its various reforms, giving cultural rights to the nationalities, improving the position of women,² spreading educational and health facilities: by August 1979 the government claimed to have opened 600 new schools, and had launched a nationwide literacy campaign, aiming to teach one million illiterates by 1984.³ Probably the two most

² In addition to Decree No. 7 of 17 October 1978 'for ensuring equal rights of women with men in the field of civil law and removing unjust patriarchal feudalist relations between husband and wife', the regime tried to organize literary classes for women among whom the illiteracy rate is 98%, and in 1979 passed a law on maternity leave, guaranteeing 90 days paid leave and up to 270 days off work for women (*Kabul Times*, 19 June 1979).

³ Hafizullah Amin in *Antiimperialistisches Informationsbulletin*, Marburg, October 1979, p. 8.

significant reforms were those known as Decree No. 6 and Decree No. 8. The former cancelled the debts of peasants to richer farmers and landlords. The latter set an upper ceiling on land ownership, of between six and sixty hectares, depending on the quality of the land. By the end of the regime's first year in office, it was claimed that 822,500 acres had been distributed to 132,000 families; by August 1979 the number of recipient families had risen to 300,000.⁴ Some of these families were immediately grouped into co-operatives, and when the Five-Year Plan was announced later in the year, it was declared that by the end of the Plan in 1984, 1.1 million families would be grouped into 4,500 co-operatives.⁵ One should not exaggerate the immediate impact of these measures, but officially, and to some extent in reality, the regime was embarking on an ambitious and enlightened attempt to reform Afghan society.

However, the reforms were administered in such a way as often to alienate the rural population they were designed to win over. The debt cancellation decree did not touch, nor could it have, the main area of rural debt, viz. debts to bazaar merchants and moneylenders. The latter were a substantial and initially irreplaceable force in Afghanistan, but despite PDPA appeals they early turned against the regime because of price controls and measures against hoarding and smuggling which the PDPA adopted. The land reform was not based on any cadastral survey of the Afghan countryside or even on a minimal preliminary investigation of land overshoot. It took little account of the variation in land holding systems and of the conceptions of land tenure in a tribal, and in some areas nomadic, society.⁶ Far too often, a group of PDPA members and army personnel would arrive in a village and start commanding the peasants without proper awareness of local sensibilities and conditions. Moreover, by breaking long-standing ties between the peasants and landlords, the reform cut the poor farmers off from traditional sources of seed, water and implements, without the government being able to offer a practical alternative. Added to this were problems of rural honour and tribal loyalty against which the determined urban-based cadres soon collided. One can identify the particular social interests which were most directly hit by the reforms—the large landowners, of whom there are not so many in Afghanistan, and the tribal chiefs, who lived off the smuggling trade with Pakistan. But because of the way the reform was implemented they were all the more easily able to rally the wider mass of peasants. Even where the latter gained land through the new redistribution policies, they were probably unable to reap any material benefit from it, given the short space of time and the breakdown in rural support systems, and they seem in many places to have seen the appearance of military and PDPA personnel as a menacing intrusion from the centre. A rather dogmatic, and at times harshly administered, set of reforms therefore contributed to widening precisely that gulf between the party and the rural poor which at least some of the leadership had so feared.

⁴ Amin, *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ *Kabul Times*, 9 August 1979.

⁶ I am grateful to Jan-Heeren Grevemeyer for information on the background to the land reform measures. His study of reciprocal landlord-peasant relations in Badakhshan province will be published in *Mardomnameh*, Berlin, 1980.

Three other problems have contributed to checking the initial revolutionary dynamic. The first was the disunity and the extremely undemocratic internal structure of the PDPA itself. Within months of the April advent to power, there were two distinct, if related, disputes. The first was in July 1978, and involved the leaders of the *Parcham* (Flag) faction being exiled to ambassadorships, and the second was in August, when a group of army officers and ministers was arrested on charges of conspiracy, and most of whom were later reported to have 'confessed'. However, the disunity did not cease there, and further arrests of *Parcham* members, such as Radio and TV Director Suleiman Laiq, occurred in early 1979. Even within the ranks of the victorious *Khalq* (People) factional disunity was growing and it was apparently sharpened by the growing crisis inside the country. Whilst Taraki, initially President, Prime Minister and Central Committee Secretary General, had at first been in a dominant position, his standing was gradually challenged by Hafizullah Amin, Vice-Premier, Foreign Minister, and Politburo Secretary. Amin, born into 1927 into a provincial Pushtun family, studied in the early 1950s at the Columbia University Education School in New York, and became a school-teacher by profession. He organized the military rising of April 1978 and ran the security section of the PDPA. Even when only Vice-Premier he exerted almost unchallenged influence within the armed forces and over *Aqsa*, the new secret police force established with Russian assistance in May 1978. He seemed to be a vigorous and ambitious man, capable of considerable political flexibility, not to say opportunism, and the evidence suggests that at least from early 1979 he was engaged in a determined attempt to gain full control of the PDPA at Taraki's expense. Whilst certain PDPA leaders, such as Dastagir Panchsheri, Minister of Education, were opposed to this, the third man in the government, Health and later Foreign Minister Shah Wali, as well as former *Parcham* supporter Bareq Shafie, Minister of Information and later Transport, seem to have sided with Amin.

The second problem was the deterioration in the regional climate, and in particular the impact of the Iranian revolution. As we have seen, the Pakistani government, long hostile to Kabul over the Pushtunistan and Baluchistan issue, was alarmed by events in Afghanistan and soon began giving succour to the Pushtun tribesmen who crossed over the border. In 1978, Zia-ul-Haq was appealing to a greater degree than before to the forces of the Jamiat-i-Islami, the rightwing Muslim party in Pakistan, and his support for comparable elements inside Afghanistan served both to disconcert his Afghan opponents and to increase his Islamic legitimacy at home. Iran has a much less direct interest in Afghanistan, despite a common frontier, and the Shah had done little to oppose the PDPA in 1978. But the triumph of the revolution there in early February 1979 had serious consequences, ideological and material, for the Afghan regime. Ideologically, it provided encouragement to the 'Muslim' opponents of the PDPA; Khomeini soon made the cause of 'Afghanistan' his own, along with such other Muslim causes as Eritrea, Palestine, and the Philippines. Iran was not the major source of support to the counter-revolution in Afghanistan, but no doubt the Islamic propaganda and encouragement had some effect. Much more important, however, were two economic consequences of the Iranian revolution: the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Afghan migrant

labourers from Iran with the consequent loss of remittances vital to the Afghan economy; and the disruption of oil provisions as a result of the Iranian strikes and oil cutbacks. It took some time for new, Soviet, supplies to replace the deficiency.

The third problem was the impact on Afghanistan of the Sino-Soviet dispute. Despite its alignment with the USSR, the PDPA had initially hoped to establish correct relations with Peking, and there was some pressure from within the PDPA itself for Afghanistan to pursue a somewhat independent foreign policy. The breaking of relations with South Korea and establishment of relations with Pyongyang was motivated by this concern, as was the temporary incorporation into the government of Taher Badakhshi, leader of the Maoist political group, *Settam-i Melli* (National Oppression). This policy was not, however, successful for a variety of reasons. First, the PDPA did not display independence even within the small margin available to it: its leadership was criticized from within for the slowness with which it openly backed the Iranian revolution—it only did so after the Russians did, in November 1978—and conversely for the manner in which, appearing to tail the USSR, it announced recognition of the Heng Samrin government in Kampuchea. Taraki also went out of his way, in a press conference in early May 1979, to condemn the Eritrean guerrillas as being the creation of Arab reactionaries. Moreover, the alliance with Badakhshi soon broke down and his group went into opposition, reportedly being responsible for the fatal kidnapping of the US Ambassador to Kabul in February 1979. However, main responsibility rests with the Chinese, whose press was at first cool, and then very hostile, to the Afghan revolution, and who now openly support the counter-revolutionaries.⁷ Events in Indo-China contributed to this polarization. It was around the time of the Chinese attack on Vietnam, in early 1979, that the first indications of material Chinese support for the Afghan rebels, channelled via Pakistan, began to appear. This was China's response to its losses in Indo-China; because pro-Chinese sentiment in Afghanistan is strongest among the non-Pushtun minorities, just south of the Afghan-Soviet border, it suggested a possible longer-term Chinese attempt to win support within the Central Asian Republics of the USSR itself. The degree of direct Chinese involvement may well have been exaggerated by Soviet commentators, but there can be little doubt that later Russian reactions can in part be explained as an alarmed riposte to what was seen as a Chinese counter-attack across the Hindu-Kush in revenge for setbacks in Indo-China. Western newspaper reports have underplayed this Chinese military involvement but, apart from political discretion, this may reflect the fact that reporters are only taken to the refugee camps around Peshawar in Pakistan, and not to the military training camps on the border where Chinese personnel are stationed.

The situation began to deteriorate slowly in the early, winter, months of 1979 as counter-revolutionary operations to pre-empt the PDPA's

⁷ For a characteristic Chinese view of events see 'Afghanistan in Turmoil', *Peking Review* no. 24, 15 June 1979, which stresses Soviet economic and strategic interests in Afghanistan and reports the view of 'public opinion abroad' that it is becoming the 'sixteenth republic' of the USSR.

reforms got underway. Rebels operating from bases in Pakistan carried out raids in Kunar and Pakhtia provinces, and on February 14 there was the first major case of an urban security breakdown when a group of armed men seized the American Ambassador in Kabul, Adolph Dubs. The negotiations with the kidnappers were evidently mishandled by the Afghan police who were intent on demonstrating their toughness to the local population. The police did not go through the conventional psychological erosion techniques; the Ambassador and his four assailants were killed when the Afghan security officials opened fire on the hotel bedroom where he was being held. Beyond its political importance, in unnecessarily exacerbating US–Afghan relations, this incident was indicative of the trigger-happy way the security forces dealt with problems. In late March matters became much more serious. Pakistani militiamen were supporting the rebels in cross-border raids, and there was a major clash in the north-western city of Herat, near the Iranian border. Official Afghan claims that the Herat conflict was due to the infiltration of Iranian troops, on available evidence, are untrue but, whatever the exact cause, several dozen Russian military and civilian personnel were slain.

Kabul's New Course

This combination of urban and rural unrest, the latter at least promoted from abroad, appears to have provoked a major, and in the end disastrous, change of policy at the centre. On 27 March, three days after the start of the Herat uprising, a government reshuffle took place. Taraki, who up till then had doubled as Premier and President, handed the prime ministership to Hafizullah Amin. At the same time a nine-member Homeland High Defence Council was established to run the security forces.⁸ Equally important was the fact that the Russians now took a much more active place in the whole governmental machinery. On April 6 a high-level Soviet delegation arrived led by General Alexei Yepishev, First Deputy Minister of Defence and President of Political Affairs of the Soviet Army and Navy.⁹

Following this visit, which would seem to have been in some way connected to the security situation, overall responsibility for co-ordinating Russian policy was given to Vassily Safronchuk, an official who took up an office next to Taraki's in the People's House in Kabul

⁸ *Kabul Times*, 2 April 1979. The HHDC included four civilians (Taraki; Amin; Sher Jan Mazdooryar, the Minister of the Interior; and Iqbal, the President of Political Affairs of the Armed Forces) and five officers (Major Watanjar, Minister of Defence; Major Yaqoub, Chief of the General Staff; Asadollah, the head of *Aqsa*; Colonel Gholam Sakhi, Commander of Air Defence; and Lt. Col. Nazar Mohammad, Commander of the Air Force). By the end of September Taraki was dead, Watanjar, Asadullah and Mazdooryar in exile in the USSR, and only Amin and Gholam Sakhi definitely still in office.

⁹ *Kabul Times*, 7 April 1979. We do not know if Yepishev was personally responsible for the form which the new policy in Afghanistan took, or whether he was merely implementing instructions agreed on by the CPSU leadership. But he is known to be one of the most hardline Russian generals, a keen supporter of the invasion of Czechoslovakia and, according to Roy Medvedev (*On Stalin and Stalinism*, 1979), one of the military officials who had pressed hardest for the rehabilitation of Stalin.

and who was officially listed as a counsellor at the Soviet Embassy. Alexander Puzanov, who had been ambassador in Kabul since 1973 and had previously been ambassador in North Korea, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, seems for henceforward to have been put in second place. By the end of the summer, up to five thousand Russian civilian advisers were helping to sustain the administrative machinery, large sums of money, running into millions of dollars a day, were being used to subsidize the state, and Russian responsibility for the military campaign became more direct. Russian forces took over the Bagram air base north of Kabul, officers were posted down to the company level, and from the spring onwards most Afghan military planes flew with at least one Russian pilot, to counter political dissatisfaction in the air force. This was an especially important development, since as the situation on the ground deteriorated the government came to rely more and more on air power to fight the rebellion.

The new policy, which Amin and the Russians under Safronchuk implemented, appears to have rested on three main points. First, there would be a relentless military riposte to all signs of counter-revolutionary activity. Whereas in 1978 the air force had been used to warn or intimidate villages, now it was being used to strafe and flatten rural settlements where there was believed to be resistance. In one case a village in Kunar province was bombed merely because a local PDPA official was told that some of the inhabitants had been feeding rebels at night. With the gradual decomposition of the army, the regime came, by the summer, to rely more and more on its air force as the one means of hitting back at the rebel forces. The second plank of the security policy was the attempt to reduce the rebels by denying them food. Air force planes were used to burn crops in such areas as the Kunar valley, in the hope that, with the advent of the snows in November, the rebellion could be crushed, through surrender or starvation. Unofficial estimates indicate that Afghanistan will face a grain shortfall of up to 1.4 million tons this year, or nearly half its normal requirements. The country was hit by famine in the early 1970s and it now faces the prospects of this again. The third part of the policy was to reach an agreement with the Pakistani government that was expected to come to power in the elections scheduled later in 1979. The Kabul authorities were building contacts not only with their old allies such as Wali Khan, but with the People's Party of ex-premier Bhutto. Once these more sympathetic forces had come to power it would be possible, they thought, to shut the door on the rebels from the rear, whilst crushing them through firepower and starvation inside Afghanistan.

The decision to launch this policy may well have converted the sporadic counter-revolution of the spring into a country-wide movement, although it is also possible that the momentum of mass Islamic reaction was building up to menacingly national dimensions anyway. No elections in Pakistan ever took place and Zia-ul-Haq has indefinitely postponed them. An amnesty announced at the end of April had almost no effect and by the summer much of the country was in revolt. Provinces such as Kunar and Pakhtia were almost totally in rebel control and in August guerrillas operating in the north of the country hit the road linking Kabul to Mazar-i-Sharif and threatened the Salang Pass that

cuts through the mountains north of the capital.¹⁰ Much of the Hazara mountains in central Afghanistan had also taken up arms, and few areas outside of the main towns were considered safe. This rapid spread of resistance took its toll both on the state apparatus and on the towns itself, for whenever a particular village or region was hit by government forces those in the town who were from that area turned against the PDPA government. As a result soldiers and civil servants began to leave their jobs and take to the mountains, and in July and August whole brigades of the Afghan army (around a thousand men), complete with armoured transport and arms, crossed over to the rebels. In early August, for example, one armoured brigade went over to the rebels in Pakhtia, complete with its tanks (which the rebels, lacking fuel and technicians, cannot use), and reports indicate that much of the 80–100,000-strong army has either gone over to the rebels, or can no longer be fully trusted by the government. However, in October government forces were able to launch a strong counter-offensive in Pakhtia, indicating that, with substantial re-supplying by Russia, they could still regain major enemy strongholds.

Repression in the Towns

The situation in the towns has paralleled that in the countryside; since the April policy change, repression there has become much more intense. The secret police, *Aqsa*, was under the prime minister's office and was, therefore, in theory as well as in practice, under Amin's control from the end of March onwards. Its activities were reinforced by those of the *Sarandoy*, a militarized police force originally trained, prior to the revolution, by West German advisers, and later assisted by East Germans and Russians. On top of this, the PDPA has been building up its own militia, numbers for which are claimed (with some exaggeration even for the lower figure) to be from 70,000 to 300,000. It seems that many, if not most, of the original PDPA members have been killed in the rural fighting, either by rebels or mutinous troops, and the guerrillas have made it their systematic policy to execute on sight any PDPA member they capture, unless they are technicians who can help to run equipment that has fallen into their hands. This haemorrhage has greatly weakened the PDPA as a political force, but whilst the more experienced cadres, those in the party before April 1978, have been decimated, the PDPA has been recruiting from among their constituency mainly educated urban youth, to build up the new expanded party structure. Given the death threat which the rebels have made to all those associated with the government, fear may play a significant cohesive role in holding the PDPA regime's followers together. Amidst the terror and counter-revolution to which they are exposed, they may still support the PDPA as against the Islamic and tribal forces now determined to destroy the revolution altogether.

Aqsa and *Sarandoy* began at some point in 1979 to carry out a policy of pre-emptive detention, arresting people in the towns who were from areas of rural resistance, before they had time to defect or organize

¹⁰ *New York Times*, 3 September 1979. Reports in October indicated that Soviet and Afghan personnel in the two main towns of Badakhshan, Jurm and Faizabad, were under sustained artillery attack by rebel forces.

opposition. This, above all, explains the very large level of urban arrests that have taken place, with many thousands of people being imprisoned on suspicion of counter-revolutionary activity and without any proper trials being held. There can now be little doubt that some of those arrested on political charges have been summarily executed by *Aqsa* personnel. Reports of torture, involving for the first time in Afghan history such modern methods as electrodes, have also become more frequent. Numbers are difficult to establish but it seems likely, on the basis of available evidence, that several hundred people at least have been killed in captivity since the spring of 1979, that over ten thousand were in jail, and that tens of thousands had been killed in the rural fighting in the period up to Amin's fall.¹¹

The situation in the urban areas has on more than one occasion escaped from the control of the regime. The March conflict in Herat was followed by a major outbreak of fighting, again involving Russian personnel, in Jalalabad in April. On 23 June there was the first serious clash in Kabul itself when a group of Hazara seized a *Sarandoy* station in the Jodi-Mewan district and were only subdued by fire from two Mi-24 helicopter gunships. On 5 August a much more serious clash occurred when soldiers in the 444 Commando unit, stationed at Bala Hissar fort, which dominates Kabul, rose against the government. This unit was largely composed of PDPA members but it revolted when *Sarandoy* security units entered Bala Hissar to carry out a pre-emptive arrest. Fighting went on for several hours until, again, using air power, the government was able to crush the revolt with several hundred people killed. A few days later, on 12 August, fighting broke out in the city of Kandahar after an incident in which some Russians had started publicly eating fruit they had purchased in the local market (it was the month of Ramadhan). Clashes started in the market itself and it appears that the local Russian commander and some of his fellow officers were then slain by Afghan troops after the latter had refused to attack the enraged crowds in the market area. The ugly situation that prevailed was, in a way, encapsulated in this incident: whilst initial and underlying responsibility lies with the opponents of the revolution, the Russians and the PDPA seem to have over-reacted in such a way as further to weaken their own position. Moreover, from the first rural and urban incidents of 1979, the regime seems to have used unnecessarily violent means to quell dissent it has encountered. The very brutal traditions of Afghan politics have therefore not only been used by the opposition, but have corroded and shaped the response of the PDPA itself.

As the counter-revolutionaries gained support during the summer, the government showed increasing signs of internal strain. Amin, already in charge of the security forces through his position as prime minister, took over the post of Minister of Defence on 27 July, thereby displacing Colonel Watanjar, a man believed to be closer to Taraki. The President was kept increasingly out of contact with visiting journalists and seemed to be a prisoner of a situation he could not adequately influence. Yet this was concealed by a grotesque personality cult, that at times

¹¹ For a damning and generally accurate account, see Amnesty International 'Violations of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan', London, September 1979.

seemed almost designed to discredit him. Thus it was announced that Taraki's birthplace in Ghazni was to be decorated with red flags and coloured bulbs;¹² that a giant display board at Kabul airport was to be set up with red flags and portraits of the President;¹³ and that members of the newly-formed Writers' Union had decided 'to follow the literary style of the Great Leader of the People of Afghanistan, the Great Taraki, in their literary and art works'.¹⁴ The official press hailed him as 'the genius writer of our country' and 'Great Leader' and for a time showed him addressing meetings with his own figure photographically doctored to make it appear that Taraki was twice as large as all the other participants.¹⁵ Photographs of Amin were also displayed in a ratio of about one to three; he was described as 'the loyal student and heroic follower of the great teacher of the people of Afghanistan',¹⁶ and although he afterwards denounced the personality cult of Taraki he showed no reluctance to engage in it at the time.

Two themes that recurred in statements by the Government indicated the difficulties it was going through. One was an increasingly frequent invocation of Islamic rhetoric in PDPA speeches. From early on, Taraki and Amin would argue that their government was not against Islam, and that indeed the enemies of the revolution were not 'Muslim Brothers' but 'Satan's Brothers'. Taraki, as head of state, led the prayers at the end of Ramadhan; on Mohammad's birthday and in August the Ulama Jirgah, or assembly of religious leaders, proclaimed it legal to kill the enemies of the revolution who were members of the Muslim Brothers.¹⁷ Groups of religiously orientated tribal leaders were brought to Kabul to be addressed by Amin or Taraki and to profess loyalty to the regime; but many of these had been paid by Amin's office to attend. Large sums of money were received by tribal organizers and smugglers who specialized in producing such superficial demonstrations of the regime's following.

The other theme, significant even if one questions the way in which Marxist concepts were being used by the PDPA, was the claim that Afghanistan was already a workers' state, although a clear difference of emphasis can be noted between Taraki, who wanted to qualify this claim, and Amin, who expressed it in the most overblown manner. Taraki acknowledged the small size of the working class in Afghanistan but stressed that this was compensated for both by the fact that many peasants were 'potential workers' and by the international support of the working class (i.e. the USSR).¹⁸ Amin, for his part, claimed that the working class strictly defined made up 6% of the Afghan population (a grossly inflated figure) and indeed that the originality of the Afghan revolution lay in its making the transition from feudalism to socialism.

¹² *Kabul Times*, 22 April 1979.

¹³ *Kabul Times*, 14 April 1979.

¹⁴ *Kabul Times*, 15 August 1979.

¹⁵ *Kabul Times*, 17 and 18 June 1979; such distorted photographs of Taraki did not subsequently appear, but similar presentations of Amin were later to be published, *Kabul Times*, 18, 25 October 1979.

¹⁶ *Kabul Times*, 12 April 1979.

¹⁷ *Kabul Times*, 22 August 1979, quotes the ulama who enjoined the populace to support the PDPA, quoting the Koran 'Obey God, the Prophet and Your Ruler'.

¹⁸ *Kabul Times*, 8 April 1979.

He claimed that the April 1978 revolution was 'a working-class revolution' and that through it 'a proletarian leadership took power'.¹⁹ In so far as this categorization avoided the conventional euphemisms about a 'national democratic phase' and a 'non-capitalist path', it was welcome. Moreover, a strong assertion of Afghanistan's 'proletarian' character was also probably designed to appeal to the Russians—although they continued to classify Afghanistan with Ethiopia, Madagascar, South Yemen and Algeria, rather than as a fully matured member of the socialist camp. However, as far as internal political conditions were concerned, it had a definitely ideological function. The 'working class' (i.e. the PDPA) is entitled to exercise control over the rest of the country, and the peasantry are demonstratively excluded from a leading place in the revolution. All who oppose the state are counter-revolutionaries. The dictatorship of a small urban-based radical party is thereby justified. This wild claim is not therefore merely a distortion of reality, but provided an important means of justifying the PDPA's own method of rule. If to this is added the solidarity of the 'international working class', i.e. the military support of the USSR, then a number of difficult political and theoretical questions are all too neatly foreclosed.

The Forces of Counter-Revolution

By the end of the summer of 1979 it seemed that the regime had lost the allegiance of many of its previous and potential supporters, as a result of counter-revolutionary advance and its own mistakes. In the towns the intelligentsia and state employees were alienated by the mass arrests and the climate of terror for which *Aqsa* and the *Sarandoy* were responsible. A portion of this social group had been physically eliminated. In the countryside the regime had been unable to win the majority of the poor who faced starvation later in the year and who were rallying to the opposition forces. Even the nationalities policy, so central to the

¹⁹ *Antiimperialistisches Informationsbulletin*, pp. 8–9. In a characteristic address to party cadres Amin declared: 'A new thesis has been brought about to enrich the epoch-making theory of the working class, according to which feudal society gave birth, through the heroic struggle of the working class party, to a working class revolution . . . As the working class plays the leading role in toppling the capitalist regimes in the advanced capitalist countries providing it is armed with working class ideology and it works as a party in the light of the epoch-making working class theory, our great leader discovered that in the developing nations, due to the fact that the working class has not yet developed to form a power, there does exist another source that can overthrow the oppressive feudal government and it was constituted by the armed forces in Afghanistan. So he speedily issued definite orders that working class ideology be spread among these forces . . . We take pride both in our party and in our beloved leader who led our party and our Khalqi colleagues in the armed forces in such a way that it enabled us successfully to stage the working class revolution in Afghanistan . . . Our party spread its roots into the hearts of the working people in Afghanistan and enjoyed everyone's respect and each supported the revolution so that it was victorious. That is why we say that the PDPA members brought the revolution to success with the support of the working people', *Kabul Times*, 19 April 1979. The obvious theoretical device of saying Afghanistan was going through a 'national-democratic phase', the conventional Soviet description for such regimes, was partly precluded by the fact while the April 1978 revolution was anti-imperialist in its regional effects, indeed triggered by manoeuvres of the Shah, it was not primarily directed against a ruling class that was dependent on a major power. Afghanistan had been independent since 1919 and the dominant foreign power was already the USSR.

PDPA's programme, had backfired. Radio programmes and newspapers in local languages won few hearts when they merely repeated government propaganda and were, all too often, scripted by Soviet advisers. The Hazaras, the most oppressed of all the nationalities are, being Shia, especially susceptible to Khomeini's appeals, and were in open revolt by the late spring. The majority of the Baluch nomads had fled to Pakistan and Iran. The northern plains, where landlords were most influential, had risen more slowly but by July heavy fighting was reported from there too. And at the centre most of the non-Pushtun cadres had defected, leaving an almost totally Pushtun government team. Amidst the demagogic invocations of a 'working-class' regime, few mentions were now made of the national diversity and problems of Afghanistan. Indeed official PDPA statements gave very little sense of any attempt by the leadership to comprehend the specificity of Afghan society, to face up to the complexities of the country beyond their offices in Kabul. The appeals to Islam and their meetings with tribal chiefs were a facade, a substitute for any serious political strategy based upon the social forces in play.

A major asset remained, however, the disunity of the opposition movement itself, within which at least eight different groups could be discerned and with much of the fighting carried out on a local basis. These local tribal groups were not directly under the command of any political organization, and attempts to unify even the different factions based in Pakistan failed. The Jamiat-i-Islami Afghanistan group led by Bahranuddin Rabanni was an extremely conservative group, linked to the Pakistani Jamiat, whereas others professed themselves to have a more modern or reformist approach. The Islamic Party of Afghanistan of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar had opposed the Zahir Shah and Daud regimes and had a following amongst the urban intelligentsia; the Afghanistan Islamic Nationalist Revolutionary Council was led by a religious leader and large Kabul landlord, Pir Syed Ahmed Gilani, and included a number of US-educated officials.²⁰ Beyond regional and factional issues there was one enormous issue of disagreement, namely the place of the non-Pushtun nationalities in a post-PDPA Afghanistan. For the main Maoist groups, *Settam-i Melli* and *Shola-i-Javid*, had been able to gain ground among the Hazaras and Tajiks, who are opposed to the reimposition of traditional Pushtun control along the lines envisaged by the Islamic forces. Were one of the Pushtun-based groups to come to power in a successful counter-revolution then it is likely that this would lead to a new civil war, along ethnic lines.

Similarities with the 'Islamic movement' in Iran are rather misleading, despite the mobilizing role played by Muslim ideology in both cases.²¹

²⁰ It is probable that the closest CIA links are with this section of the opposition, which has a following amongst Afghans in the USA and which also receives support from China.

²¹ In characteristic vein Radio Tehran assailed the Amin Government some days after the fall of Taraki: 'Afghanistan will remain ablaze until right wins victory. This is the oath made in the mountains and valleys with the rising of the sun every day by thousands of Afghan fighters who are advancing toward the bastion of atheism in Kabul from every inch of the land of Afghanistan . . . In the end, the throne of Hafizullah Amin will kneel to the will of the people in the same way Taraki and his companions knelt.' BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, 22 September 1979; the *Kabul*

Leaving aside the obvious political differences between the internal and international characters of the Pahlavi and the PDPA regimes, two other distinctions can be made: first, that whereas the Iranian movement was overwhelmingly urban, in a society where 50% of the population lived in towns, the Afghan movement is predominantly rural, in a country with only 13% urbanization; secondly, whereas in Shia Iran the clergy played a leading role in the movement itself, in predominantly (80%) Sunni Afghanistan leadership tends to be in the hands of tribal leaders and intellectuals or, as with the Gilani family, of the descendants of Muslim saints, rather than of the clergy as such.²²

The September Clash

This critical situation seems to have led Taraki and the Russians to attempt a change of line. The President was in Cuba for the non-aligned summit in early September and on his way back to Kabul he met in Moscow with Brezhnev on 10 September.²³ However, his attempt to unseat Amin was a failure. After his return, on 14 September, he summoned Amin to the People's House and, in circumstances that are still unsure, a gun-battle began accompanied by explosions. It was first announced that two ministers, Watanjar of the Interior and Mazdooryar of Border Affairs, had been sacked but two days later, on 16 September, Taraki himself was reported to have resigned for reasons of health. Whether he was killed immediately or not is unknown, but on 9 October Kabul radio announced that he had died that morning of his 'illness'. A considerable number of other people are said to have participated in this clash, among them the head of *Aqsa*, Asadollah Sarwari, who, it transpired, was a covert Taraki sympathizer. The only person to die and receive a state funeral was Major Daud Taroun, who had been Taraki's aide-de-camp and, conversely, a supporter of Amin's.²⁴

While not conclusive, the evidence suggests very strongly that these events were indeed a result of a Russian attempt to remove Amin and to support Taraki in a more cautious policy. First of all, Taraki had received an especially high-level reception in Moscow, of a kind not even accorded to Pham Van Dong who passed through at the same time on his return to Hanoi.²⁵ The Soviet leadership would not have given Taraki such a welcome if they had been planning to get rid of him in a few days. Moreover, Russian reactions to Amin's victory were hesitant, and a Russian journalist, who was in the Moscow TASS headquarters on the day, recently confirmed that the news of Taraki's fall had come as a complete surprise there. Indicative too is the fact that Soviet premier Kosygin who returned to the USSR from India a few days later overflew

Times has supported the Kurdish struggle in Iran, denouncing Khomeini as a 'corrupt and religious fanatic' and supporting the struggle against 'these mindless Ayatollahs' (20 August 1979).

²² For accounts of the rural opposition see *Le Monde*, 20-22 March 1979, and 8-10 August 1979.

²³ There were unconfirmed reports that Taraki had met members of the *Parcbam* leadership in Moscow on his way home to Kabul.

²⁴ *Le Monde*, 18, 19, 20 September 1979 gives details of the clash.

²⁵ *Le Monde*, 25 September 1979.

Afghanistan but did not make a stop in Kabul, something that would have been expected had relations with Amin been correct. A further sign of Russian discomfiture was the removal in November of Ambassador Puzanov and his replacement by Fikryat Tabeyev, a member of the CPSU central committee and Secretary since 1960 of the Tatar Autonomous Republic.

The one countervailing consideration is the simple fact that the ouster of Amin did not succeed. This can only be explained by assuming that, despite the presence of Safronchuk, and possibly Puzanov, in the People's House at the time, the organization of the encounter was left to Taraki and his false aide, Taroun. Once the operation was bungled, the Russians recognized Amin, presumably because they did not have a viable alternative in position. Amin's moves showed that, whilst in practice pursuing the extremely repressive policy associated with his premiership, he would affect to distance himself from the past by adopting Taraki's new line. He announced that a 58-person committee would be set up to draft a constitution—the country had been ruled by decree of the Revolutionary Council since April 1978. He released some political prisoners and commuted the death sentences allegedly passed on the 'conspirators' arrested in August 1978. He criticized the previous system of personal rule by Taraki. Yet few were convinced by these moves. Not only was Amin, more than Taraki, held responsible for the earlier arrests and killings, but mass detentions continued, overtaking the paltry number of people released after he came to power. Whilst *Aqsa* was dissolved, it was replaced by a duplicate security force KAM, the Workers' Intelligence Organization, headed by a nephew, Asadollah Amin. Although the cult of the new President did not, at least immediately, reach the heights to which the *Kabul Times* had raised Taraki, the new President was soon being hailed as 'the brave commander of the April revolution', distorted photographs of Amin were printed in the *Kabul Times* and Decrees of the Revolutionary Council were announced simply as having been issued in his name. Amin, like Taraki, began to attempt a dialogue with opposition forces in an attempt to broaden the regime's base, but none of the major groups opposed to the PDPA seemed likely to accept any compromise with it. One small urban-based reformist party, *Afghan Mellat*, does seem to have responded in some way to the PDPA's appeal, but this initiative came to nothing when army officers sympathetic to *Afghan Mellat* mutinied at the Rishkur army base on the southern outskirts of Kabul a month after Amin's advent to power.

The Fall of Amin and the Russian Intervention

Despite his disagreements with the Russians, and his own unpopularity, Amin pressed ahead with the policies he had previously advocated. In October a government offensive against rebel forces in Pakhtia was undertaken with considerable success, and up to four thousand supporters of Taraki, military and civilian, were arrested in the towns. So confident was Amin that he let it be publicly known that he held the Russians responsible for the September events: his Foreign Minister, Shah Wali, told eastern bloc ambassadors in Kabul in early October of the Russian role, and a document circulating among PDPA members

blamed the September crisis on the Russians, Taraki and the four members of the 'Taraki clique' as he called them, who had escaped to the USSR (Asadollah Sarwari, Watanjar, Mazdooriyar, Gulabzoi).²⁶ The Russians, for their part, continued to supply economic and military aid, but coverage of Afghanistan in their press was demonstrably reduced.

Although requiring what was in international and economic terms a major imposition on the USSR, the removal of Amin came at a tactically convenient moment: whilst the advanced capitalist world was distracted by the Tehran hostages affair and the imminent anaesthetization of Christmas, and with the onset of winter snows winning them some respite against the Islamic rebels in the mountains. In the last two weeks of December, following Soviet military concentrations along the Afghan frontier, the Russians sent several thousand troops into Kabul. These were not, as previously, advisers, but combat troops and they ostentatiously used Kabul's civilian airport rather than military fields such as Bagram. On December 27, following some hours of fighting in and around government buildings in Kabul, it was announced that Amin had been overthrown. Together with his brother and Asadollah Amin, the nephew appointed to head the secret police, the ex-President had been tried and executed. A new PDPA regime, headed by *Parcham* leader Babrak Karmal, had, it was said, now taken over.

Whatever the precise course of events, there can be little doubt that it was Russian initiative and action which removed Amin. Their reason for so doing was the same as that which had prevailed in September, namely the impossibility of any government headed by Amin being able to withstand and turn back the counter-revolution; in retrospect it was a serious miscalculation on Amin's behalf to believe that he could hold out indefinitely against the country upon whose support the PDPA regime so heavily relied. Yet the price of bringing down Amin is likely to be an extremely high one, especially as it further debilitates the state machine. Amin had, both before and after the September crisis, built up a strong following in the armed forces and militia, and he had removed, and in some cases killed, those suspected of loyalty either to *Parcham* or Taraki. By December it therefore seems to have been impossible to remove Amin merely by organising a conspiracy within the armed forces. Moreover, the direct entry of Russian troops into Afghanistan inevitably provoked nationalist resistance from some sections of the army, so that many either deserted or resisted the change of regime. The forces available to the new government were therefore depleted by the previous twenty months of factional fighting, by the counter-revolutionary executions, and now by resistance to the December purge of Amin.

The composition and policies of the new government reflects a desire to appeal to as wide a political spectrum as possible; yet in so doing it internalizes within the new regime some of the factional disputes that had rent the previous ones, so that they could, in the future, lead to additional conflict. Babrak Karmal is Prime Minister as well as Presi-

²⁶ *Le Monde*, 22 December 1979.

dent and his cabinet includes the main *Parcham* leaders who had been expelled from Afghanistan by the *Khalq* faction in the summer of 1978: apart from Babrak himself, this includes Anahita Rabtezzad, now Minister of Education, Faiz Mohammad Faiz, now in charge of Frontier and Tribal Affairs; Abdul Wakil, Finances; Shah Mohammad Dost, Foreign Affairs; and Nur Ahmad Nur, Member of the Revolutionary Council Praesidium.²⁷ It also includes *Parcham* associates imprisoned in 1978 on charges of conspiracy: Sultan Ali Keshtmand, now Minister of Planning, and Lt.-Col. Mohammad Rafia, now Minister of Defence, as well as General Abdel-Kader, a former *Parcham* supporter who played a central role in both the 1973 and 1978 coups. But the new administration also includes the four members of the 'Taraki clique' denounced by Amin after September. Asadollah Sarwari becomes Vice-President of the Praesidium, Watanjar becomes a Praesidium Member, Sher Jan Mazdooriar becomes Minister of Transport, and Mohammad Gulabzoi becomes Minister of the Interior.

Babrak's Karmal policy statements indicate a more far-reaching withdrawal from the earlier PDPA positions than even Taraki had intended, or Amin proclaimed. He announced that all political prisoners would be released, freed two thousand prisoners from Kabul jail on January 6, offered unconditional amnesty to the rebels, and promised, perhaps unconvincingly, to allow political parties to organize, provided they did not support the counter-revolution. He stressed that the new regime sought a political not a military solution to the country's problems, in sharp contrast to Amin who had threatened his opponents with a panoply of modern armaments. Babrak Karmal also paid special attention to Islam, stressing his government's support for it, and, in an implicit retreat from the 'workers' state' positions of Taraki and Amin, he designated Afghanistan's revolution merely as a 'national democratic' one.

There were several reasons for doubting how far this new coalition, backed by Soviet forces, could handle the situation it has inherited. Given the bitterness of the previous factional fighting and purges, there must be considerable bad blood between the Parchamite and former Taraki supporters, and in particular the nomination of Asadollah Sarwari as Vice-President was not one that would reassure those who, whether members of the PDPA or not, had suffered under *Aqsa's* repression. Moreover the weakness of the party, army and administration was compounded by the dual crises of September and December. Apart from consolidating itself in the wake of Amin's overthrow, the new regime is expected to seek a longer-term political solution over a period of months, and even years, offering some increased liberties and the promise of material improvement to the rural population and

²⁷ For the previous political history of these Parcham leaders see *NLR* 112, pp. 37, 41. 'Of the fifteen people in the new government three (Babrak, Keshtmand, Nur) were among the nineteen original members of the PDPA Central Committee of 1965 and six (Babrak, Watanjar, Abdel Qader, Nur, Keshtmand, Ratabzad) were among the twenty-one members of the first PDPA cabinet of April 1978.

playing on the tendency of tribal rebels to accept a central state once the latter had demonstrated that it was permanently established.

Over all these issues stands the question of the Russian presence in Afghanistan and the consequences it might have. The Russian intervention reflected the fact that, in the wake of the failure of the Taraki initiative, the USSR faced three options, each in its own way uninviting: to withdraw support from the PDPA altogether, thereby suffering a major political defeat and abandoning Afghanistan to Islamic reaction and probably years of inconclusive civil war; supporting Amin, who was incapable of attempting any political solution and was further weakening the base of the regime; or moving in with sufficient force to oust Amin and protect the new government long enough for the latter to establish itself more securely. The comparison of this intervention with those in Hungary or Czechoslovakia is quite inapposite: in these two cases there was no substantial counter-revolution sustained from abroad, and the ousted regimes, headed by Imre Nagy and Alexander Dubcek respectively, were, on the available evidence, rather popular ones. In Afghanistan, by contrast, it was precisely the scale of this counter-revolution which had brought matters to a head, and Amin was an extremely unpopular President whose very position relied on day-to-day Russian support.

The Russians can and must be blamed for their policy in Afghanistan prior to the December intervention, i.e. for the solutions and models they encouraged the PDPA leadership to pursue. The intervention itself reflected the disastrous consequences of this line, and it also involved the Soviet Union in extremely heavy costs—economic ones, in a commitment to sustain the PDPA for some years to come, militarily, in the deployment of tens of thousands of troops and the heavy casualties they may suffer, and above all politically, in the deterioration of the international situation. Both its relations with the USA and with China, the latter for some months improving, were prejudiced by the Afghan events, as were its relations with the Muslim world, which, self-righteous as ever, keenly supported the brigands who were leading the counter-revolution.²⁸ In the new climate the imperialist powers will find it easier to mount their own military interventions. The Russians have bought time for the PDPA with their intervention, but only if they can encourage an alternative policy, and do not compound their previous militaristic errors, will their action contribute to an ultimately successful solution of the problems which the Afghan revolution now faces. The critical error of the Russians was less that they intervened in December 1979 than that they had allowed matters to reach such a point that they were confronted by the options then existing.

²⁸ See, for example, the report by John Dale in *Now*, 30 November, 1979 who writes: 'Here, as with all my encounters with the Mujahideen, the greetings were warm and friendly. I never met hostility or aggression. Yet I fully accept these are the same forces capable of horrifying acts of cruelty—the massacre of women and children, the skinning alive of Soviet soldiers'. The rebel commander is quoted as saying: 'We execute educated soldiers, who know they are defying the people; and with the politicians, their fate is the same as that they imposed upon our supporters.' A British cameraman, Nick Downie, who spent four months with Pushtun rebels in the east reported that they were 'leaderless, bitterly divided and fought mainly for loot', *The Guardian*, 31 December 1979.

What were the Alternatives?

It has to be asked whether, prior to December 1979, the regime faced any real choice. Reprehensible as some of its policies may seem, a critique of the Afghan revolutionaries only acquires its full political force if it can be shown that they had other, realistic, alternatives. Some doubt could be expressed as to whether, knowing their limited following, they were correct in seizing power in April 1978 at all, but here it seems that their action was justified. They did not simply decide to stage a coup, as a voluntarist or Blanquist act; rather, faced with the very real threat of physical annihilation by Daud, as part of his reconciliation with Zia and the Shah, they decided to strike first, even though they had not expected to be able to make such a move for at least two years. Criticism of their decision to launch a reform programme as such is also dubious: rather their concern for a socialist transformation, and their impatience with the archaic legacy of the previous regime, was demonstrated by the fact that they enacted so many measures within months of coming to power.

In the revolutionary programme of the PDPA, there are, however, specific points which, on available evidence, can legitimately be criticized. First of all, the structures of party and state were, from the start, marked by a complete absence of concern for the most elementary democratic norms. One need not be idealist about what was possible in a country like Afghanistan to argue that the PDPA was unnecessarily authoritarian, a party in which political disagreements were settled by fiat, a tendency that exacerbated rather than reduced the impact of the factionalism such centralization generated. The division with *Parчам* and the subsequent purges, so soon after the April coup, were very costly ones which, with a different political system within the Party, could have been avoided. Similarly, it took eighteen months after the advent of the PDPA to power for it to start talking about a Constitution: Amin's adoption of the Constitutional cause was, given his record, a dubious one, and it is something that should and could have come much earlier on the agenda. Secondly, whilst the major reforms decreed by the PDPA were progressive ones, it does seem that they were implemented in such a way as to increase avoidable antagonism on the part of the rural masses. This applied to the land reform and the decree on marriage, both of which the regime did not have the resources to explain properly and implement democratically, and which became issues around which the counter-revolutionaries were able to rally support. Given the lack of an active rural base, and of either the party cadres or the state functionaries needed to implement the reforms in a non-coercive manner, the PDPA should have proceeded much more cautiously with the peasantry than it has done. In retrospect, the risk of losing support through apparent neglect was less than the danger of promoting resistance by brusque intervention. The absence of a democratic potential for the reforms also affects the way in which the regime appears to have wasted one of its best assets, the nationalities issue. No doubt it would have taken time to arouse support from the non-Pushtun nationalities, but the lack of any popular participation in the state, and the highly propagandist content of the new materials produced in the minority

languages, seems to have entailed that the nationalities were the more easily drawn into counter-revolution after the first few months. Indeed, it is a much more serious indictment of the PDPA that they have faced armed rebellion amongst the Tajiks and Uzbeks of the north, and among the Hazara of the central highlands, than that they face opposition from the Pushtun tribes, whose social organization and previous ethnic dominance were most directly threatened by the reforms.

The form of the regime's alignment with the USSR is also one that seems unnecessarily to have caused problems. The regime was led by a pro-Soviet Party, and had, even before the full outbreak of civil war, to rely heavily on Soviet aid. These are not, in themselves, matters at issue. But given the underlying current of anti-Russian feeling in Afghanistan, for nationalistic and religious reasons, and given the current of pro-Chinese sympathy among parts of the intelligentsia and Tajik populations, the alliance with the USSR need not have been presented in such a loyalist manner. By trying to convince the Russians that they were fully worthy of Soviet support, the PDPA leadership would seem to have provoked unnecessary hostility at home, even prior to the December 1979 intervention.

The most serious criticism of the PDPA, however, concerns the level of repression to which it has resorted in its fight against the counter-revolution, and which can be justified on grounds neither of morality nor of necessity. Undoubtedly, prime responsibility for the level of fighting, and for the attendant brutalities, lies with the forces of counter-revolution: before the PDPA had even initiated its reforms counter-revolutionary leaders had begun to oppose them, and it is the counter-revolution which exceeded even the normal excesses of civil war by deciding not to take prisoners, but to execute PDPA personnel it captured. Reports from rebel-held areas testify indeed to their mutilation of prisoners. Such a level of brutality goes a long way to explain the response of the PDPA, yet, whatever the provocations, it does not excuse this response. The indiscriminate form of rural counter-offensive and the mass repression in the towns are not only morally reprehensible, but they also seem to have fuelled the flames of counter-revolution and enabled the enemies of the PDPA to mobilise wider support.

'The Russian intervention has not, of course, reversed this situation, i.e. rendered the new PDPA government popular again, for the resentment at PDPA policies pre-dated Amin's access to the Presidency and must have received further encouragement from the shock of a direct involvement by large numbers of Russian troops in the country itself. The criticism which the Soviet intervention has occasioned on much of the left has tended to avoid discussion of what alternatives the Soviet leadership faced, viz. sustaining Amin or withdrawing altogether. At the same time it has gone from a justified disbelief in some of the Russian claims (that Amin was a CIA agent, that there was *direct* foreign aggression against Afghanistan) to an unduly complacent silence on the very wide-spread indirect contribution of foreign countries to the growth of the counter-revolution. Above all, it has rested on the assumption that all forms of foreign military intervention are to be

condemned by socialists. Most forms of foreign intervention by revolutionary forces are both morally indefensible and politically counter-productive, and there have been such flagrant violations of arguments in justification of Soviet actions (e.g. Hungary and Czechoslovakia) that there must be serious grounds for reserve in the Afghan case. But socialists cannot argue that military action abroad in support of revolutionary movements are in all situations impermissible: indeed faced with counter-revolutionary intervention by imperialism, such action may become a necessity. Even in civil war situations, i.e. where the government being supported may not command general assent, such interventions may be defensible. To be so they must satisfy two criteria: (1) that such interventions either already command a genuine basis of popular support in the country concerned or have a reasonable chance of subsequently winning that support; and (2) that the international consequences, in terms of provoking imperialist retaliation, are not such as to outweigh the probable advantages. The role of the Cuban troops in Angola clearly satisfied these criteria. By contrast the Russian role in the Spanish Civil War must be criticised, not for the fact of intervention as such, but for the inadequate level of the assistance the USSR furnished to the Republic, and for the repression which the Soviet police agencies perpetrated within the Republican areas.

In Afghanistan itself events alone will show whether Russia's gamble can in the long run succeed, producing the sort of social advance now seen in Mongolia, where the Communist regime was established in 1921 by comparably direct military intervention in support of a small revolutionary movement.²⁹ Alternatively, a pervasive Russian presence and Russian political models may help permanently to alienate wide layers of the population, with the result that no stable post-revolutionary government can emerge. In international terms, it has already precipitated a grave diplomatic crisis, threatening the remnants of détente, encouraging the most belligerent western leaders to a renewal of the Cold War, facilitating US adventures in Central America or the Gulf, making it more difficult for Soviet aid to reach Southern Africa where it may be sorely needed, and fostering the repressive reflex in Moscow itself. The Carter Administration which torpedoed SALT-11 and has unleashed the Cruise missile programme in Europe bears primary responsibility for the deterioration in international relations, removing pre-existing restraints on Soviet actions. It is revolutionary forces across the world who will pay the price for the ravages of the Afghan counter-revolution, the authoritarian record of the PDPA leadership, the mistakes of Russian policy and the current imperialist offensive.

²⁹ E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923, Vol 3*, London 1966, p. 508.