

Afghanistan: Andropov was right

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***Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89* by Rodric Braithwaite, Profile, 417 pp, £25.00, March 2011, ISBN 978 1 84668 054 0**

***A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* by Artemy Kalinovsky, Harvard, 304 pp, £20.95, May 2011, ISBN 978 0 674 05866 8**

Rodric Braithwaite, British ambassador to Moscow between 1988 and 1992, was in Russia when Soviet troops crossed the Oxus into Afghanistan in 1979. His fascinating account of the Soviet intervention is based almost entirely on Russian sources: interviews with participants, information from veterans' websites and from archives, although those of the GRU and the KGB remain mostly sealed. Each page reads like a warning to Afghanistan's current occupiers. Braithwaite wrote two devastating articles in the *Financial Times* opposing the Iraq War and the atmosphere of fear created by New Labour propaganda but *Afgantsy* is written in a very different register. The Soviet intervention is seen as a tragedy for both the Russians and the Afghans.

The principal aim of Soviet foreign policy in the region had always been to preserve Afghanistan as a neutral state. Lenin was too orthodox a Marxist to believe that tribesmen and shepherds could make the leap forward to socialism: 'Herdsmen can't be transformed into a proletarian mass.' His successors were not at all pleased when, in 1973, Muhammad Daud toppled his cousin King Zahir Shah in a palace coup and proclaimed a republic. Moscow had enjoyed warm relations with the king, a genial old buffer who presided over the tribal confederation that constituted the Afghan state. The Soviet leaders were even less pleased when in April 1978 a group of communist army officers staged a coup and called it a revolution. A few months earlier, two rival communist factions, Parcham (Flag) and Khalq (People), whose members were mostly university graduates and urban intellectuals, along with a few dozen officers and their clansmen in the armed services, had with great reluctance reunited as the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Parcham followed an orthodox pro-Soviet line; Khalq was more independent of the Soviet Union and less in thrall to classic Marxist notions about the prerequisites for a transition to communism. Noor Mohammed Taraki, a Khalqi, was appointed general secretary, with Babrak Karmal of Parcham as his deputy. Hafizullah Amin, another leading Khalqi, was elected to the Politburo, but only after a struggle. Parcham claimed he was a CIA agent, recruited during his time as a student at Columbia.

Such accusations, intended to discredit a political opponent, were not uncommon on the South Asian left and were usually ignored. But Amin didn't deny them. According to Braithwaite he claimed that 'he was short of money at the time and that he had merely been stringing the CIA along.' Heard that one before? Whatever the truth, in the two years that followed, no CIA agent could have done a better job of isolating and destroying the Afghan left and effectively offering up the country to its enemies. The PDPA claimed a joint membership of 15,000; Parcham, which claimed 1500 members, was in a permanent minority. Both figures were exaggerated and such political support as the PDPA

did have in Kabul soon evaporated, forcing the Khalq leaders to rely on their tribal cronies in the army, while Parcham depended on support from the Soviet Embassy to prevent them from being politically and physically eliminated.

The country in which the two communist groupuscules had seized power was one of the most backward in the world. Each Pashtun tribe controlled the land-use, the water and grazing grounds on its territory; the khans or chiefs employed some of their clansmen as tenant farmers and others essentially as serfs. Each tribe had its own band of armed men. A king ruled the confederacy of tribes, but until the late 1930s monarchs were regularly assassinated or exiled after palace revolts or tribal rebellions. King Amanullah, who reigned from 1919 until 1929, tried to modernise the country by proposing a secular state on the Turkish model; his draft constitution envisaged a lower chamber elected on the basis of a universal franchise, coeducation, import substitution through the creation of light industries, a reorganised tax structure, a national bank, new roads and a communications network. But British political agents stirred up a tribal revolt against the reforms, and Amanullah went into exile on the Italian riviera; he died in 1960.

Had the PDPA combined Amanullah's programme with a sensible plan for land reform, they might have been more successful, but the Khalqis, in particular, were fantasists. Hafizullah Amin boasted that they were going to teach the Russians the meaning of revolution: 'After our great revolution the toilers should know that there does exist a short cut from the feudal class to the working class and our revolution proved it.' The PDPA's land reforms were intended to catapult the countryside straight from landlordism to collectivisation. But the peasants were afraid of taking over the land without back-up and the landlords denounced the communists as atheists and infidels. 'Ninety-eight per cent support the reforms,' Amin boasted. But his pledge to exterminate the 2 per cent who didn't was a little rash.

Yuri Andropov, then head of the KGB, and Andrei Gromyko, the foreign minister, were contemptuous of the notion that what had taken place in Kabul was a revolution. Andropov had learned a few lessons from his experience as Soviet ambassador in Hungary during the 1956 uprising. As far as he was concerned what had happened in Kabul was a coup d'état, carried out by a relatively small communist faction in the armed forces. Unlike the South Yemeni revolution of the same period it had limited mass support. That was a huge problem. Sending in the Red Army to support the PDPA would, he concluded, be counterproductive.

The Afghan leaders, faced with a mutiny in Herat and discontent elsewhere, pressed for Soviet ground troops. Andropov warned the Politburo that the general population would see Soviet troops as aggressors. He was strongly backed by the prime minister, Aleksei Kosygin, and the defence minister, General Ustinov. In a phone call to Taraki, Kosygin suggested that the Kabul regime 'should arm the workers, the petty bourgeoisie and the white-collar workers in Herat', emulating the Iranians, 'who had thrown out the Americans with no outside help': 'Could the Afghan government not raise, say, fifty thousand students, peasants and workers in Kabul, and arm them with additional weapons supplied by Moscow?' Braithwaite calls this naivety, but I'm not sure it wasn't rather a way of pointing out that the regime didn't have a social base. Taraki, failing to detect the irony, responded that even in Kabul the workers constituted a tiny minority. This made clear the real problem: a regime without support at home was dependent for survival on military backing from an outside power. Afghanistan wasn't Cuba, where, despite an ill-fated invasion, numerous attempts to bump off Castro and an economic blockade (partially neutralised by Soviet economic aid), the United States failed to bring about regime change. The reason was obvious: the Cuban revolution was real; it had mass support.

The PDPA's lack of a social base was a problem that a repressive regime couldn't surmount. When Vladimir Kryuchkov, a senior KGB official, visited Kabul in 1978 he was horrified to hear Taraki

boast that within a year the mosques would be empty. There were more political prisoners and executions in the first two years of PDPA rule than in the preceding 50 years. When Aleksandr Puzanov, the Soviet ambassador, protested to Amin about the scale of the repression, he was told that the PDPA was merely following the example of the early Soviet Union. The problem, according to the Afghans, was the unwillingness of the Soviet Union to commit ground troops and defend the revolution.

Realising that they were failing to convince the Russians, the Afghan communists turned on one another. It was this brutal settling of scores that finally provoked the Soviet intervention. The dominant Khalq faction purged its Parcham rivals from the government, and three cabinet ministers sought refuge in a Soviet safehouse. They were hidden in containers, taken to Bagram airbase and flown out of the country. Braithwaite reports that their leader, Babrak Karmal, was regarded by the Russians as 'emotional' and 'inclined to abstraction to the detriment of concrete analysis'. The Parcham leadership was mothballed until it was needed, which turned out to be sooner than anyone expected.

Amin decided to get rid of Taraki, using a classic Stalinist ploy: he set up a fake assassination attempt on his own life, in which one of his bodyguards was killed, and blamed it on Taraki. Artemy Kalinovsky, whose book *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* in most respects confirms Braithwaite's account, takes a different view of this crucial episode, suggesting that Amin was indeed the intended victim. But he produces no evidence, and all the evidence there is suggests the opposite. Amin wanted total control and believed his grip on the army was sufficient to ensure his elevation and its acceptance by the Russians. His troops surrounded the presidential palace and arrested Taraki. In Moscow the old men of the Politburo were annoyed but prepared to accept the new leader. Then Amin made a deadly mistake. He decided to have Taraki killed. Three intelligence officers from the presidential guard were deputed to assassinate the man they had sworn to protect.

'Taraki was in his dressing-gown when the three men came for him,' Braithwaite writes:

"[Lieutenant] Ruzi said: 'We've come to take you to another place.' Taraki gave him some money and jewellery to pass on to his wife ... The party went downstairs to another small room, in which there was a dilapidated bed. Taraki handed over his party card and his watch, which he asked should be given to Amin. Ruzi told Eqbal to bind Taraki's hands with a sheet and ordered Taraki to lie down on the bed. Taraki did so without protest ... Ruzi then covered Taraki's head with a pillow and when he removed it Taraki was dead. The whole business lasted 15 minutes. Not bothering with the cotton shroud, they rolled Taraki's body in a blanket and took him in their Land Rover to the cemetery, where they buried him. They were in tears when they reported back to [their boss]."

The next morning, the *Kabul Times* reported the sudden and tragic death of 'a genius, a great and much-loved leader'. Andropov, shaken by the KGB's failure to predict what had happened, changed his mind about intervention. Amin had to be removed at all costs.

The military high command, though, wasn't convinced that Amin had to be replaced. The most senior Soviet military adviser in Kabul, General Gorelov, described him as 'a man of strong will, a very hard worker, an exceptional organiser and a self-proclaimed friend of the Soviet Union', even if he was also 'cunning, deceitful and ruthlessly repressive'. But the KGB was equally clear that Amin had to go. In their view he wasn't capable of creating a popular coalition that could resist the mujahedin. The Parcham leaders were more likely to be able to do this, they believed, and in any case could be controlled by their Soviet advisers. Nobody seems to have realised that it was already too late. Once they returned to power, Parcham took their revenge on Khalq cadres and many were purged, imprisoned or killed. Babrak Karmal, now president, explained that they were merely punishing those who had repressed 'innocent' Afghans. The Russians themselves killed Amin.

The Soviet 40th Army was formed in great secrecy to fight in Afghanistan. Most of the recruits were drawn from poor families, not from the party or military elite. Braithwaite quotes the historian Grigory Krivosheyev's suggestion that the time had come to reinstate 'the old romantic name of the armed forces: The Workers' and Peasants' Red Army'. This hurriedly assembled force was certainly well-equipped: 'Never before in the history of the Soviet armed forces had an army had its own air force,' the 40th Army's last commanding officer, General Gromov, pointed out. 'It was particularly well supplied with special forces units – eight battalions in all, alongside the highly trained air assault and reconnaissance units.' None of this was much use in a counter-insurgency operation. The Afghan guerrillas – or 'freedom fighters', as they were called in the West at the time – were backed up by 'international brigades' dispatched at Washington's request by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Algeria, among whose number was the late Osama bin Laden. The fear that Soviet Muslim soldiers would desert in droves to the enemy proved to be unfounded. The conflict was brutal. Before killing the Russians they captured, the Afghans tortured, mutilated and occasionally skinned them. Braithwaite describes a horrific incident in Kunar province. When mujahedin there surprised a group of Russians, several soldiers committed suicide rather than surrender; the others were mutilated and burned alive. The sole survivor never recovered his sanity. The 40th Army responded in kind. One veteran wrote:

"The thirst for blood ... is a terrible desire. It is so strong that you cannot resist it. I saw for myself how the battalion opened a hail of fire on a group that was descending towards our column. And they were our soldiers, a detachment from the reconnaissance company who had been guarding us on the flank. They were only 200 metres away and we were 90 per cent sure they were our people. And nevertheless – the thirst for blood, the desire to kill at all costs. Dozens of times I saw with my own eyes how the new recruits would shout and cry with joy after killing their first Afghan, pointing in the direction of the dead man, clapping one another on the back, and firing off a whole magazine into the corpse 'just to make sure' ... Not everyone can master this feeling, this instinct, and stifle the monster in his soul."

Another soldier, Vanya Kosogovski from Odessa, told how, after lobbing a grenade into a village house, he went in to inspect the results. He'd killed an old woman and a few children. A younger woman and some other children were still alive. He shot them dead, hurling in another grenade afterwards – just to make sure.

Andropov's fears had been justified. By the time he died in 1984 the Soviet leaders knew the war was unwinnable; that, via Pakistan's ISI, the US and its allies were arming the mujahedin with the latest weaponry, soon to include Stinger missiles (which became black market bestsellers in Pakistan). Above all, they were aware that the government in Kabul was useless. They began to discuss an exit strategy.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev took power, but as Kalinovsky points out, it was three years before he felt able to admit the scale of the disaster. 'By the beginning of May 1988,' he wrote to party members, 'we lost 13,310 troops in Afghanistan; 35,478 Soviet officers and soldiers were wounded, many of whom became disabled; 301 are missing in action ... Afghan losses, naturally, were much heavier, including the losses among the civilian population.' In February 1989 the 40th Army left Afghanistan. General Gromov, ever the drama queen, was the last Soviet soldier to march across the bridge over the Oxus. The Soviets left behind a Parcham government led by the former secret police chief Muhammad Najibullah.

A few months earlier Yevgeni Primakov had met senior figures from the Pakistan foreign ministry and suggested that it was in everybody's interests to put a national coalition government in place in Afghanistan. If Pakistan attempted a takeover, its writ wouldn't extend beyond the Pashtun region. But if nothing was done, Najibullah would fall and the mujahedin would before long be at each

other's throats. His advice was conveyed to Pakistan's prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, but rejected on the say-so of the United States.

Primakov was soon proved right: as the mujahedin fought among themselves the country slipped into chaos. The mujahedin leaders were a mirror image of the divided left, whose leaders they knew well and against whom they had fought for political space at Kabul University in the 1960s. The Afghan Jamiat-e Islami was founded by a theology student called Burhanuddin Rabbani in 1968 and concentrated on winning cadres and defeating the left at the university. It recruited Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a sharp-tongued student from the engineering faculty, but Hekmatyar soon decided he wanted his own outfit and set up the Hizb-e Islami with support from Islamabad. Three years after the Soviet withdrawal, Najibullah's government fell and Rabbani became president; his defence minister was Ahmad Shah Massoud, a charismatic Tajik guerrilla leader from the North. Two years after that, Hekmatyar, by now an asset of the ISI, linked up with a former pro-Soviet warlord, General Dostum, in an attempt to dislodge his old rivals from power. Twenty-five thousand people were killed in Kabul in the course of 1994 as a result of his campaign, and half the city was reduced to dust. A new wave of refugees poured into Pakistan, destabilising its already fragile social structure.

The Bhutto government, made nervous by the increasing activity of Afghan jihadis in Pakistan, now decided to train and arm the children of Afghan refugees who had fled across the border in the 1980s, and use them, bulked out by Pakistani 'volunteers', to take the country. It was the most successful operation in the history of the Pakistan army. The Taliban took Kabul (murdering Najibullah) and ended the disorder by imposing a clerical dictatorship: women in burqas, rapists executed, poppy fields destroyed etc. Gradually, Mullah Omar's government gained autonomy from its patrons in Islamabad and even engaged in friendly negotiations with US oil companies. But its Wahhabi connections proved fatal. The rest we know.

Kalinovsky quotes a *New York Times* op-ed of January 2010, written jointly by General Gromov (now the governor of the Moscow region) and Dmitri Rogozin (Russia's ambassador to Nato), in which they expressed neocon-like reservations about a premature US withdrawal from Afghanistan. 'We are utterly dissatisfied with the mood of capitulation at Nato headquarters,' they wrote, 'be it under the cover of "humanistic pacifism" or pragmatism.' Braithwaite, meanwhile, tells us that a Moscow-based commercial company, Vertical-T, is supplying Russian Mi-8 helicopters and pilots to help Nato: 'When one of these helicopters was shot down in 2008, the Russian ambassador in Kabul contacted the Taliban for the return of the bodies. "You mean they were Russians?" said the Taliban. "We thought they were Americans. Of course you can have them."'

Tariq Ali

P.S.

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http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n12/tariq-ali/andropov-was-right?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=3312&hq_e=el&hq_m=913505&hq_l=17&hq_v=31abeef303

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