

Ideology and Electricity: The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan

Saturday 21 April 2012, by [PARENTI Christian](#) (Date first published: 17 April 2012).

In the teahouses and street stalls of Kabul, one sometimes sees the portrait of a stern, round-faced man with dark hair and a mustache. It is the visage of Muhammad Najibullah, the last president of communist Afghanistan. Najibullah joined the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in the late 1960s, ran Afghanistan's highly organized secret police, the KHAD, and then became the country's president in 1986. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Najibullah hung on to power for another three years. Taliban fighters eventually killed him in 1996.

On occasions when I have asked Afghans in Kabul about the Najibullah posters and postcards, their replies have ranged from "He was a strong president—we had a strong army then" to "Everything worked well and Kabul was clean." One teahouse proprietor, using the familiar form of the name, stated simply that "Najib fought Pakistan." In other words, he is remembered not so much as a socialist—a vague term for many in Afghanistan—but as a modernizer and a patriot.

To understand Najibullah's status as a minor icon, it helps to know about the Soviet experience in Afghanistan—the strategy and tactics, the terror and suffering, and the ideals and goals that motivated the Afghan communists and their Soviet allies. One authority on the subject is Rodric Braithwaite, a veteran of cold war-era diplomacy who served as the British ambassador in Moscow during the Soviet Union's collapse and has recently published an excellent and sympathetic account of the Russian invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. *Afgantsy*, which takes its title from the Russian nickname for Afghan war vets, is a sober and balanced antidote to the propaganda and deception that Braithwaite necessarily traded in as a British diplomat posted to the USSR. This is a point he acknowledges obliquely in the book but has touched on more directly in interviews. While writing *Afgantsy* Braithwaite had considerable access to government archives in Russia and key players from the Soviet-Afghan war, and traveled to Kabul to dig even further.

Addressing much of the same history is *Ghosts of Afghanistan* by Jonathan Steele, a longtime *Guardian* correspondent. Steele has visited Afghanistan numerous times over the past thirty years, reporting on the Soviet intervention, the Najibullah era, mujahedeen misrule, civil war, the rise of the Taliban and the American occupation. Like Braithwaite, Steele is fluent in Russian; he was also part of the *Guardian* team that edited the WikiLeaks cables. His understanding of Afghanistan is nuanced and comprehensive, blending a journalistic eye for detail and context with a scholarly long view. Steele's account of the Taliban phenomenon and the current moment is solid, but his book is most impressive when analyzing the forgotten history of Afghan communism and the Soviet occupation.

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The Soviets fought Muslim rebels in their Central Asian borderlands during the civil war of the early 1920s and again in the early 1930s, when they finally managed to crush these so-called basmaci (bandits) with the help of the Royal Afghan Army. Thus stability in Afghanistan was seen as the key to security in Soviet Central Asia. From the early 1950s onward, Afghanistan was one of the top four recipients of Soviet aid. Moscow sent engineers to Afghanistan and invited thousands of Afghan

students, technicians and military officers to Russia for training.

By the late 1950s, the United States had also started investing in Afghanistan, sparking an aid-driven competition between the superpowers. The Helmand Valley Authority, a mini-TVA set up to dam the Helmand River and provide hydroelectricity and irrigation for southern desert regions, was an American effort. The Salang Pass Tunnel, one of the highest tunnels in the world, which links northern and southern Afghanistan, was a Russian project. Both superpowers built parts of the highway system. The infrastructure of the Kabul airport was Russian-built; its electronics, communications and radar were American imports. Perhaps counterintuitively, some military officers who trained in the USSR ended up as early leaders of the mujahedeen: one was Ishmail Khan, who started a rebellion in Herat in 1979. Some of the US-trained intellectuals became communists and government officials, such as Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin.

The communist coup d'état of 1978 was the indirect result of an earlier coup that had been triggered by a famine. Starting in 1969, Afghanistan suffered several years of horrible drought and hunger. In 1973, as people starved to death in central Afghanistan's Ghor province, Gen. Muhammad Daoud led a coup against his cousin King Mohammed Zahir Shah, abolishing the monarchy and creating a republican government with himself as president. The king had marginalized the once powerful Daoud and then did nothing to address the famine. Once in power, Daoud pursued what was then a standard set of economic policies, using state planning and investment to build up private industry and internal markets. He handled his political enemies—the mutually antagonistic Islamists and communists—with a mix of repression and co-optation. But growing repression drove Islamists like the Tajik Ahmed Shah Massoud and the Pashtun Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to armed exile in Pakistan.

Repression also triggered the bloody communist coup of 1978. It was, Steele notes, “a hastily improvised affair” brought on by the assassination of a well-liked and senior party official named Mir Akbar Khyber. A massive protest by PDPA supporters led to a police roundup. Fearing wholesale liquidation, communist officers in the military attacked the presidential palace, murdered Daoud and seized power.

Soviet officials, including those with the KGB station in Kabul, seem to have been caught off guard and were “distinctly uneasy about what had happened,” writes Braithwaite. In their view, Afghanistan was not ready for socialism, nor was the PDPA prepared to govern. Crucially, the PDPA was composed of two bitterly opposed factions. The larger, more impatiently radical one, the Khalq (meaning “nation”), had staged the coup. It drew support from the Pashtun-speaking population that had recently moved to the cities in search of jobs and education. The smaller, more moderate faction, the Parcham (meaning “banner”), was based in the more established, Dari-speaking urban middle classes.

Early Khalq rule was bloody. Forty of Daoud's generals and political allies, including two former prime ministers, were summarily executed. Among the others killed, jailed or disappeared were Islamists, Maoists and even PDPA members from the Parcham wing. As the violence mounted, the Soviets grew increasingly worried. The Khalq government did, however, promulgate a series of progressive laws and programs that outlawed child marriage, lowered the dowry price, canceled rural mortgages, launched literacy campaigns for men and women (though each group was educated separately) and instituted land reform. However well intended, many of these efforts were poorly managed, and a backlash quickly ensued.

One old communist official, Saleh Muhammad Zeary, whom Steele tracked down to a humble tower block near London's Heathrow Airport, explained the resistance this way: “Peasants were happy at first, but when they heard we were communists, they changed. The whole world was against us. They said we don't believe in Islam, and they weren't wrong. They could see we didn't pray. We

liberated women from having to pay dowry, and they said we believed in free love." Zeary stayed in Kabul until the mujahedeen came to power in 1992. When these soldiers of God murdered his wife and two of his children, he finally fled. Another London-based former PDPA official told Steele: "In power [party leaders] wanted to eradicate literacy within five years. It was ridiculous. The land reforms were unpopular. They were promulgating these so-called revolutionary decrees which they wanted to implement by force. Society wasn't ready. People hadn't been consulted." Steele notes that these old PDPA veterans, despite years of access to large sums of public money, showed no signs of having stolen much of it, if any.

The hastily devised PDPA reforms were a casualty of an old rural-urban divide in Afghan society. The educated young urban idealists did not understand the rural world they sought to remake, and the world of the mud-walled villages did not understand urban officialdom. That the social and cultural dimensions of the reforms threatened the privileges of the traditional mullahs, maliks (village leaders) and large landowners is hardly surprising. What can be confusing is that the economically progressive aspects of the program were also widely rejected by the deeply religious peasantry. Afghanistan, though poor and unequal, was not marked by the extreme land inequality typical of pre-revolutionary Mexico or China. As Steele explains, peasants were in many ways "linked to their landlord by ties of religion, clan and family and were unready to flout his authority." Rural society, always somewhat autonomous from Kabul, and feeling threatened at the root by reforms, turned increasingly to armed resistance, linking up with the Islamist parties that had decamped to Pakistan during Daoud's repression.

Exacerbating the situation for the PDPA were certain technical mistakes. In their haste the urban communists of Kabul redistributed land but not water rights, a blunder that revealed their ignorance of local agriculture. They abolished the oppressive system of bazaar-based money lending but did not establish an alternative credit program to aid cash-poor farmers in planting. (Raja Anwar's *The Tragedy of Afghanistan* is another valuable source on the revolution's reforms and missteps.) For their part, the Soviets repeatedly advised Kabul to abandon or delay the more radical reforms.

The communists were not the first Afghan modernizers to face a rural backlash. The so-called Red Prince, Amanullah Khan, who ejected the British in 1919, was dethroned ten years later by a tribal rebellion that opposed his Turkish-inspired modernization efforts. He had imposed a modicum of land reform, given women the vote and started educating girls. Rural elites would accept good roads, but not the taxes to pay for them; the rural masses would accept agricultural improvements and education, but not an assault on patriarchy. Fifty years later, the PDPA faced the same sort of religious rebellion, and to quell it communist officials began making displays of public piety, praying and traveling to mosques. But it was too little, too late. The crisis boiled over in March 1979 with an all-out military mutiny led by Islamist officers in Herat, a major city on the Iranian border. No doubt the will to rebel among religious officers was stoked by events next door: the Shah had fled Iran, and Khomeini had returned to Tehran only a month earlier.

Braithwaite's research indicates that the uprising and the Afghan military's suppression of it, which was aided by Soviet pilots, were not as bloody as is often rumored: "Although the Western press and some Western historians continue to maintain that up to one hundred Soviet citizens were massacred, the total number of Soviet casualties in Herat seems to have been no more than three." Nor was the city carpet-bombed resulting in thousands of casualties.

After Herat, other garrisons mutinied, and the Soviets, along with sending more advisers to Afghanistan, began making contingency plans for the full-scale commitment of ground forces. By that summer the United States had started channeling money and arms to mujahedeen rebels staging assaults on government forces and public infrastructure from Pakistan. Meanwhile, the conflict within the PDPA worsened, with ideological and personal differences triggering Khalq-

Parcham clashes and even bouts of Khalq-Khalq violence. In September 1979 President Noor Muhammad Taraki was tied to a bed and smothered with a pillow: the order for the assassination came from his rival and fellow Khalq, Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin. The Soviet leadership saw Taraki as the more flexible of the two, and his murder outraged them. Paranoia at the Kremlin was also running high. During the 1960s Amin had studied for a PhD at Columbia University, where he was head of the Afghan student union and was rumored to be in league with the CIA. Steele notes that Amin was on record as having admitted to taking money from the agency before the revolution. Braithwaite reports that even US Ambassador Adolph Dubs, after several meetings with Amin, asked the CIA if he was a contact. Most likely, Amin was treading the path familiar to all Afghan leaders: managing a buffer state and navigating between great powers.

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During the crisis year of 1979, the Afghan communist government made thirteen requests for Soviet military intervention. Moscow, in turn, gave all the correct reasons for not deploying ground troops. "We have carefully studied all aspects of this action and come to the conclusion that if our troops were introduced, the situation in your country would not only not improve but would worsen," explained one Soviet official. But the Taraki murder seems to have changed Soviet thinking.

The 40th Army was dispatched south, and when it finally arrived in force in Afghanistan in late December 1979, its mission was not to assist Amin but to assassinate him. Soviet Special Forces attacked the presidential palace, and in a long, bloody room-to-room gun battle they finally cornered and killed the president. The replacement leader picked by the Soviets was Babrak Karmal from the PDPA's moderate Parcham wing. But Karmal was temperamental, erratic and paranoid, and heavy drinking only compounded his incompetence. (If Karmal sounds similar to Hamid Karzai, who is rumored to use narcotics, well, it is just one of many parallels the reader will find in Braithwaite's book.) At first both Moscow and Washington thought the intervention would last a mere six months, and the Afghan population, or at least its urbanized portion, welcomed the Russians and the end of Amin's lunacy.

Along with soldiers, the Soviets sent a wave of idealistic civilian advisers and technicians. But Karmal proved to be incapable of winning the allegiance of rural Muslims, so the capacity of the Afghan state remained limited. To make matters worse, since July 1979 the United States had been arming the seven parties of the mujahedeen. The considerable covert military assistance provided by the United States was initiated by the CIA, generously funded by the Saudi government and jealously managed by Pakistan's increasingly powerful Inter-Services Intelligence. Before long, the Russians were bogged down in a war that would take nine years to terminate.

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Many Soviet troops believed deeply in their "international duty," just as American military volunteers today often see their war in Afghanistan as helping a backward country and confronting a genuine terrorist threat. And like their American counterparts today, the rank-and-file Soviet troops in Afghanistan tended to have working-class and rural or small-town roots. Men (and some women) from the professional classes and party-connected families in the big cities of western Russia were scattered among the air force, KGB and medical units, but were rarely found among the conscripts waiting to get shot while running supply convoys or dug in along barren ridgelines. The bulk of the fighting was done by country boys and the sons of small factory towns.

The 40th Army's real goal was to win hearts and minds. But it was not to be. When Soviet and Afghan government ground forces were pinned down, air support and artillery were called in, and if the mujahedeen were firing from inside villages, those villages were bombed and destroyed. Braithwaite

dismisses all the old cold war canards about the Russians setting out booby-trapped toys or using chemical weapons. Contrary to the Western press reports of the 1980s, Soviet brutality toward civilians was not the intent of policy but its predictable and inexcusable side effect. But the irrationality and contradictions of counterinsurgency ran even deeper. The Soviets tried hundreds of their soldiers for crimes ranging from rape and murder to drug use, petty theft and bullying (a persistent problem in the Russian Army, from czarist times to today). Yet they could not or would not rein in the abuses committed by the KHAD: some 8,000 Afghans were executed by the PDPA government and many thousands more jailed and abused.

According to Braithwaite, Afghans generally rate the Russians as better soldiers than the Americans, if for no other reason than they were less cautious, less armor-clad and in many ways culturally closer to the Central Asian peasant ways of the Afghans. Of those Afgantsy who made it home, some adjusted well enough, but others, haunted, battled drug addiction and alcoholism, and the physically maimed became mired in endless fights with vast medical bureaucracies. The vets also found many citizens on the home front increasingly bored by news from a seemingly pointless war.

By the time Gorbachev came to power in 1985, Soviet leadership was increasingly committed to withdrawing from Afghanistan. A quiet but large and persistent antiwar letter-writing campaign by soldiers' families, veterans and even some active officers had helped push Moscow toward this inevitable conclusion. Perestroika and glasnost were in the air, and in Afghanistan the newly appointed Najibullah was moving increasingly from Marxism-Leninism to something more like pragmatic nationalism. In 1988 Najibullah changed the PDPA's name to Watan, or Homeland, and by the end of his tenure, he even considered offering the position of defense minister to the mujahedeen commander Ahmed Shah Massoud.

These moves, beginning with Karmal's departure and Najibullah's rise, were all part of a formal policy called National Reconciliation. A very good account of the diplomatic aspects of these last attempts at stabilization is offered by Artemy Kalinovsky in *A Long Goodbye*. "From 1985 to 1987," Kalinovsky notes, "Moscow's Afghan policy was defined by an effort to end the war without sustaining a defeat.... Gorbachev was almost as concerned as his predecessors about the damage a hasty Soviet withdrawal might do to Soviet prestige, particularly among his Third World partners. Yet Gorbachev was also committed to ending the war, and for the most part had the support of his Politburo to do so. This meant looking for new approaches to developing a viable regime in Kabul that could outlast the presence of Soviet troops."

To work, National Reconciliation required cooperation from the United States, the primary patron of the mujahedeen. Kalinovsky devotes a whole chapter to US-Soviet negotiations over Afghanistan. Unfortunately for Afghanistan and the Soviets, the Reagan administration was divided between "bleeders" and "dealers." Secretary of State George Shultz was, at one point, a central "dealer" and argued for meeting the Soviets halfway: if the Red Army withdrew from Afghanistan, the United States should, the dealers believed, cut off aid to the mujahedeen. On the other hand, the bleeders, heavily represented in the CIA and the Congressional "Afghan lobby," were out for more blood and insisted that aid to the mujahedeen would end only when all aid to the Najibullah government stopped. In the end, the bleeders won. Viewed from Moscow and Kabul, the Reagan administration's position was "completely uncooperative."

In February 1989 the last Soviet tank finally crossed the Friendship Bridge north over the Amu Darya River. But Moscow continued to supply Najibullah, and the Afghan government defied everyone's expectations. In March 1989 Afghan troops, now fighting alone, turned back a massive mujahedeen siege of Jalalabad, in eastern Nangarhar, not far from the Pakistan border. Had the insurgents taken that city, Kabul would have been their next target. Thereafter the mujahedeen's seven parties remained fragmented and strategically incoherent despite their superb battlefield

tactics.

Braithwaite reports that Eduard Shevardnadze—not wanting to be the first Soviet foreign minister to preside over a defeat—was Najibullah’s greatest champion, insisting that with a steady flow of fuel and weapons the Afghans could fight on indefinitely. Indeed, Najibullah held on for three more years. But when Yeltsin pushed aside Gorbachev and the USSR unraveled, Afghanistan’s lifeline was cut.

The Soviet defeat in Afghanistan did not lead to the collapse of the USSR, as is often supposed. It was the other way around. As *The Economist* recently explained, “The Soviet system collapsed when top officials decided to ‘monetise’ their privileges and turn them into property.” Once that happened and Yeltsin took power, the Najibullah regime collapsed. Braithwaite reports that Yeltsin, while still merely head of Russia, and before the fall of Gorbachev and the Soviet Union, had opened secret channels to the mujahedeen. As soon as Russian supplies were cut off, one of Najibullah’s key generals, Rashid Dostum, defected to the rebels. In April 1992 Najibullah was finally overthrown. Various bands of holy warriors and ethno-nationalist fanatics descended on Kabul. After a very short experiment in joint governance, the factions turned to fighting among themselves while the last of the PDPA fled the country or went underground.

Najibullah tried to escape, but Dostum’s men blocked him from reaching the airport. Over the next four years Kabul descended into barbarism, with the warring mujahedeen factions bringing actual and metaphorical darkness: streetlights and the power lines for electric buses were looted; public services ceased; factional fighting leveled half the city; and an estimated 100,000 people, most of them civilians, were killed. All the while Najibullah remained holed up in a United Nations compound. When the Taliban finally took the city in 1996, they grabbed the ex-president, beat, tortured and castrated him, and then shot him to death. His corpse was dragged through the streets and hung from a lamppost.

These days, NATO forces occupy Afghanistan, yet a few pictures of Najibullah still hang in Kabul. Why? Then as now, the war in Afghanistan was not simply between invaders and Afghans. It was also a conflict between Afghans: between the populations in the cities supporting modernization, even forced modernization, and those in the countryside violently opposed to any social change. And each force has been allied with powerful outside backers. During the cold war the Soviets supported Kabul, while the United States and Pakistan supported the rebels. Today, for an array of perverse reasons, the United States supports the aspiring state builders in Kabul (many of whom are the very same people who served with Najibullah), while Pakistan, America’s nominal ally and well-funded vassal, still supports the religious and traditionalist rebels.

There is a class of urban Afghans for whom the core political question has always been: Does that ideology come with electricity? These are people who have sought to extend the writ of Kabul over the countryside, and ever since the 1920s they have faced violent opposition. Once their vehicle was constitutional monarchy. Then it was a presidential republic, then Soviet-style socialism, and then Najibullah’s last-ditch nationalism. Now it is the deeply flawed experiment in liberal democracy imposed by NATO. Not surprisingly, former communists are still modernizers and can be found throughout the more competent portions of what is nominally known as the Afghan government.

One such technocrat is Muhammad Hanif Atmar. From 2002 to 2010 the highly respected Atmar held a succession of ministerial portfolios in the Karzai government, from rural development to education and finally the interior ministry. In his youth Atmar was a member of the KHAD Special Forces (like the KGB, the Afghan secret police had a military wing). He lost one of his legs defending Jalalabad against the mujahedeen siege. When the Najibullah government fell, he went to study in Britain. After the US invasion, he returned to Kabul and soon earned a reputation as a competent

and honest manager, “someone the West could work with.” The National Directorate of Security, the successor agency to the KHAD, is today so heavily populated by the former Parcham cadre that many people simply call it the KHAD. Another of these ex-PDPA technocrats is Zahir Tanin. Currently Afghanistan’s permanent representative to the United Nations, in the 1980s he was on the PDPA’s central committee.

That, in short, is why they still hang pictures of Najib in Kabul—because, for all the man’s faults, his worldview came with electricity. But alas, electricity cannot be delivered by war.

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* April 17, 2012 | This article appeared in the May 7, 2012 edition of The Nation.

<http://www.thenation.com/article/167440/ideology-and-electricity-soviet-experience-afghanistan>

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