Chapter 5. The Saur Revolution

The murder of Khyber triggered a confused sequence of events. The net effect was to put Afghanistan under the control of a small Communist movement. The movement was totally unprepared for the power that unexpectedly, even accidentally, fell into its hands. Its misuse of that power with a combination of idealistic reformism and brutal authoritarianism started the country on a downward spiral into civil war and foreign occupation.

In the years just before Khyber was killed, Daoud's police had watched the PDPA with the same inefficiency shown by the rest of his administration. He knew the party had continued to operate underground despite his order that all political parties be abolished except his own. During 1977 he had indirectly received a warning that the reunified party would resist any attempt to suppress it. But until Khyber's funeral on 19 April 1978, he tolerated it on the assumption that it was as small and ineffectual as Parcham had proven to be in 1973–75. The funeral told him otherwise. Had Khyber been murdered by the government, then it logically would have been ready to follow up with arrests of other PDPA leaders, but it was only when Daoud took fright at the crowd that plans were hastily made to crack down. It took six days to decide upon and organize the arrest of the party's leaders. They were, during that time, just as blind as Daoud had been, not realizing that the funeral would cause a strong government reaction. Although Amin later claimed to have been working on a military coup plan for some time, the fall of Daoud came in a hasty, ill-organized manner.

Shortly after midnight on the morning of 26 April, police arrested Taraki and took him to prison. In the PDPA mythology that was later embroidered around this and subsequent events, Taraki and his wife defied them, to no avail. At the same time, police went to the homes of other PDPA central committee members. Most apparently were taken directly to prison, but Amin was only put under house arrest. There followed one of the stranger episodes of a peculiar period.

Amin sent his teenage son Abdur Rahman to find out what had happened to Taraki. At 6:00 A.M. the youth reported Taraki's imprisonment. So at 6:30 Amin sent his son to an air force officer and 1973 coup participant named Sayed Mohammed Gulabzoy with instructions to tell other PDPA members at the air force headquarters in Kabul to attack the government at 9:00 A.M. the following day, 27 April. Amin also used a brother and a cousin to summon party leaders who had not been arrested.

When the first comrade arrived at 7:30 A.M., Amin wrote out for him a plan for the coup, including the assignments of Watanjar to command ground forces, Abdul Qadir to command air force units, and orders for twenty other individuals, according to the PDPA history. At 8:00 A.M. another leader, Ziray, arrived but was blocked by police from going into the house to talk with Amin, so Amin wrote out another set of instructions and sent them out to him. By 10:30 Amin's work was finished; at 10:45 more police came to take him to prison. So the coup was organized while Amin was under house arrest!

Such is the official history. It would be easy to dismiss this apparently amazing development as official Afghan incompetence. Two other explanations are possible, however. One is simply that Amin did not in fact organize and send out orders for the coup as later claimed by media under his control—that instead the coup's military leaders acted pretty much on their own. Their reason for an essentially spontaneous uprising would have been fear.

The government announced on the evening of 26 April the discovery of an "anti-Islamic" plot and its leaders' arrests. Daoud's defense minister, Lt. Gen. Gulam Haider Rasuli, put the armed forces on alert in apparent apprehension of wider plot ramifications—although he also, contradictorily, decreed singing and dancing in military units the next morning to celebrate the plot's defeat. Even if Gulabzoy, Ziray, and others were not spreading plans from Amin, therefore, PDPA members and sympathizers in the armed forces would have learned of the crackdown. They had reason to fear that the arrested leaders might disclose their own connections with the illegal PDPA.

Even persons having known differences with Daoud but no PDPA connection had reason to worry that the crackdown might be broadened into a general roundup of those whose loyalty was suspected by the increasingly paranoid president. For both categories, with and without PDPA connections, a preemptive move against the government might be safer than awaiting unpredictable official actions. Men like Watanjar and Qadir knew that the combination of their roles in overthrowing the royal regime in 1973, their falling out with Daoud over his failure to implement the reforms that they had expected then, and their connections—however tenuous—with the illegal PDPA created considerable risk of severe action against them in Daoud's widening cleanup of potentially troublesome elements on the excuse of a plot. The nature of initial coup announcements tend to support this explanation: that it was not actually Amin's party-directed plan; that the coup's hasty initial purpose was not to permit Taraki's group of Communists to reorder the nation in accordance with the 1966 PDPA statement of principles. But that must remain only an unproven possibility.

The second explanation was offered by some Afghans. They say that even after becoming a Communist, Amin kept his connections with the political police. A senior police officer from his home area, Paghman, maintained close contact with his boyhood friend. The police apparently believed that Amin was a source of information on the PDPA, a line into the underground movement. Whether Amin was playing both sides—maintaining ties with the police against the possibility of the Marxist movement's being crushed, or was outsmarting the police from the beginning, as he later claimed, can never be determined. Those who seize power and manage to hold on to it usually destroy any incriminating records—as did the Bolsheviks with records that might have
shown Stalin to have been a double agent working for the tsarist police as well as for Lenin.

After Amin had been killed by the Soviets and his reputation blackened by Karmal, no public attempt was made to reexamine his role in the coup. That might have been as politically dangerous as investigating Khyber’s murder. If Amin’s claims were true, they would have detracted from the glory of the newly beatified Taraki; if false, the PDPA’s claims to have overthrown Daoud as a consciously Communist action would have been weakened. And any investigation into PDPA members’ ties to Daoud and his police probably would have gotten uncomfortably close to Karmal. Despite the uncertainties, however, there is a strong possibility that the delay while Amin was under loose house arrest was part of a police attempt to use him for the police’s own purposes, presumably to expose more of the PDPA network. If so, the police moved too slowly. The coup that overwhelmed them might have been partially attributable to what was slipped out of Amin’s house that morning without anything more than arrest warnings being sent.

**Coup—Military or PDPA?**

Whatever the genesis of the downfall of Daoud, it was accomplished by a small number of military men. Thursday, 27 April 1978, dawned dull and gray. The coup began to develop about 9:00 A.M., the time supposedly ordered by Amin, with the first reported movement at the military air base side of Kabul International Airport. Only some 600 men, 60 tanks and 20 warplanes were involved in approximately nineteen hours of rebel action against the more numerous loyalist forces.

Watanjar, the deputy commander of the Fourth Armored Brigade at Kabul, led the tanks to attack the Arg, the old walled royal palace in the center of Kabul that contained Daoud’s residence and office complex and the barracks of the presidential guard. The palace came under attack about noon. About 4:00 P.M. Qadir, a deputy commander of the air force, brought MiG-21 and SU-7 jet fighters into the attack, strafing and rocketing the palace in an attempt to break its determined defense by the 1,800 guards there. Taraki said later that only seventy-two persons died in the coup, but his opponents’ estimates went into the thousands. The exact figure is unknown, but Taraki’s count is probably too low. It almost certainly does not include senior officials who were executed during or immediately after the takeover.

Successful coups are later described by the victors to sound inevitable. In fact, chance played a large part in the outcome. Both sides blundered. If Amin did write the plan, it was an incompetent one. It failed to target Daoud’s communications as the first objective. Amin’s lack of military experience could account for that. An alternative explanation is the absence of a plan, and hasty independent movements by various ill-coordinated soldiers happened to succeed.

When the soldiers began to move, Daoud was holding a cabinet meeting in the Arg to decide the fate of the seven arrested Communist leaders and, presumably, what other steps were required to insure security. Word came of rebellious movements by tank units east of Kabul. Rasuli left the meeting to rally loyal divisions around the capital, keeping in contact with Daoud through the untouched telephone exchange. Troops were hard to round up, however. One reason was that the singing and dancing order had temporarily dissolved some units. Usual Afghan army inefficiency could have caused difficulties, too, and there is the possibility that PDPA infiltration blocked orders.

By late afternoon rebels had freed the PDPA leaders from prison, the official history said, and tanks and infantry had captured Kabul Radio, next to the compound of the modern United States embassy building. The delay of six or seven hours from the first rebellious action to the freeing of the PDPA leaders strongly suggests that they were a low priority for soldiers who were not looking to them for orders. There are contradictions about what happened after they were freed. The official history says that Taraki was taken to the radio building, which had become the military command post, along with Amin and other PDPA leaders. The soldiers reported to Taraki on the continuing fight with Daoud’s loyal troops. At the insistence of Karmal, who was described as arguing that the coup would fail and PDPA leaders should flee into hiding in villages, Taraki was moved to the greater safety of the air base, the history says. Amin was left in command at Kabul Radio. Taraki claimed later that he had “issued all orders” during the fighting. But Amin said that, when he arrived at the station, “the officers automatically gave me the command of the revolution. So from 5 o’clock at the evening [although the history said the station was captured at 5:30] until 9 o’clock in the morning of 28 April, I was commanding the revolution.”

There is no independent evidence that either Taraki or Amin was in command. The available evidence suggests otherwise. The first known announcement that Daoud had been overthrown—premature, because the palace was not completely captured and he and his family killed until around 4:00 A.M. on 28 April—was broadcast on Kabul Radio at 7:00 P.M. 27 April by Qadir. “The power of the state fully rests with the revolutionary council of the armed forces,” Qadir declared. He made no reference to the PDPA or a civilian leadership.

Listeners to the Dari broadcast were told that Qadir headed the council, and Watanjar’s name was also mentioned. One version of the official history says Amin suggested that Taraki read the initial announcement, but Karmal opposed this. Taraki broke the deadlock between Amin and Karmal by asking Amin “to allow the Khalqi officers to read the communiqué.” This version does not mention that Amin spoke on the radio. But another version, also official, says Amin introduced Qadir on the radio, and Qadir read a communiqué in Dari, and Amin then introduced Watanjar, who read it in Pashto.

Aside from that version of the history, there is no record that Amin played this role, which seems likely to have been a later invention. The United States
embassy in Kabul, listening to the radio for clues to what was happening, reported hearing only Qadiri's and Watanjar's names, not Amin's. The confusion in the official versions makes them highly suspect. The soldiers seemed to be acting on their own, not under direct PDPA orders and possibly not even under much Communist influence. Amin wanted the history to show his dominant role. The version that says only that Taraki asked Amin to let the officers speak, without saying Amin spoke, could have been concocted to obscure an inability of the PDPA political leaders to control what the officers did.

Such an inability is strongly suggested by the issuance at 10:00 p.m. of a policy statement by “the revolutionary council of the national armed forces.” It was short and simple enough to have been just written on the spot. The council's domestic policy “rests on the preservation of the principles of the sacred teachings of Islam, establishment of democracy, freedom and security of the individual, and the promotion of advancement and progress of our beloved people of Afghanistan.” Its foreign policy “consists of the pursuance of the policy of positive active neutrality, supporting peace in the region and world, cooperation and friendship with all countries on the basis of amicable coexistence and respect of the United Nations' charter.”

This sounded like the generalities of many non-Communist Third World coup leaders. There was no mention of the PDPA’s own program or of a civilian leadership, a significant omission. If the soldiers had considered themselves as only a transitional team clearing the way for the PDPA, then there logically would have been no reason for them to issue their own policy statement. The clear implication is that for the first few days the Communists as an organized party were not in control, despite later assertions to the contrary.

But some Communist influence was distinguishable in the soldiers' broadcasts. Marxist rhetoric was used. The initial announcement warned against any “anti-revolutionary element” that might defy the revolutionary council, who represented power “of the people of Afghanistan.” The next day, 28 April, when Qadiri read most radio announcements, he said that those who failed to return to work on 29 April—a Saturday, the beginning of the Moslem work week—would be considered “enemies of the people.” Soldiers with Soviet military training might easily have picked up such Soviet terminology without having been simply PDPA agents. On 29 April, Kabul Radio announced that, “On the order of the Revolutionary Military Council,” four of Daoud’s senior officials had been killed after rejecting the council’s repeated calls to surrender.

The Soviets seemed to think this was another military coup. For the first three days, reports by the Soviet government news agency, Tass, called it a coup d’état and said the armed forces’ council had seized power. An authoritative Soviet journal later avoided claiming that it was a PDPA coup, even after that had become the conventional claim with coup redefined as revolution. The journal only cautiously said instead that PDPA work in increasing “its influence among the popular masses and in the army . . . played the decisive role in ensuring the success of the national-democratic revolution.” This could be read as meaning that the party had only influenced rather than led events. The journal said that “a Military Revolutionary Council was formed during the 1978 April Revolution . . . On April 29 [it] handed over all power to the Revolutionary Council, which was set up as the supreme body of state power and merged with it.” A later Soviet book said the military council “headed by Colonel Abdul Kadir, . . . which directed the revolutionary coup, adopted a decision at 9 p.m. on April 29, 1978, transferring all power to the Revolutionary Council of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.”

The PDPA official history does not mention that Qadiri’s council ever existed or that any domestic and foreign policy statement had been issued independent of the PDPA program. Deliberately obscuring what happened in the first few days, it says that “On the 27th and 28th, the Khalqis made preparations for the meeting of the Revolutionary Council of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and on the 30th the real revolutionary commander, general secretary of the central committee of the PDPA, Comrade Nur Mohammed Taraki, was unanimously elected” president and prime minister. This later version is not, however, what foreign embassies in Kabul were told on 30 April in a foreign ministry circular note requesting their governments’ diplomatic recognition of the new regime. The note said: “The Revolutionary Council of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in its first meeting, dated 7 Saur 1357 [27 April 1978], elected Mr. Nur Mohammed Taraki, who is a great nationalist and revolutionary person, as the president of the Revolutionary Council . . . as well as prime minister.”

Aside from the difference in identification of Taraki, the key point is the dating. There was an apparent effort to claim direct continuity from the Daoud regime, ignoring the armed forces’ council period, by dating the meeting that elected Taraki on 27 April even though it was not held until three days later. There were many such tamperings with the record. On 3 May Taraki said the “revolutionary armed movement” had occurred “under the leadership of patriotic officers and the brave army,” but on 9 May he said it occurred “under the guidance of the PDPA and by the patriotic officers and valiant soldiers.” Two years later Karmal said that “it was the uprising of the progressive forces of the Afghan army that caused . . . the regime of Daoud to be overthrown in 1978.”

By 30 April, then, the soldiers were being shouldered aside by men who had devoted their lives to semi-clandestine political organization while maintaining contacts with the Soviet embassy in Kabul. What happened in those few days has not become known. If the soldiers had not seized power on direct orders of the PDPA, if they had not acted with the intention of turning power over to the party, they at least remained silent when later downgraded. Whether this was a matter of loyalty or of having been so out-maneuvered that they had lost any chance to protest effectively is unclear. There was no attempt to explain the situation to the public, just bald announcements.

“Decree No. 1 of the Revolutionary Council of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan,” read on Kabul Radio 30 April, said the military council had been
disbanded. All the military council's members were included in the new revolutionary council, however, making plausible the Soviet version that the soldiers had merged with the civilian Communist leaders. In addition to reporting Taraki's election, the decree said the new council "shall elect, as soon as possible, the vice president" of the council and members of Taraki's cabinet. It also "will adopt and announce its policy."

Why a delay? Presumably there was a struggle for position underway. The jockeying for power obviously was a three-way contest, among the military leaders and the Khaq and Parcham factions. The decree also declared the next day, 1 May, to be a holiday for all workers. May Day is a traditional Marxist holiday, and the language used to describe it in Kabul was the first clearly Marxist rhetoric heard from the new, little-known Afghan leaders.

At 9:00 a.m. on May Day, Decree No. 2 said that Karmal had been named the new council's vice president, followed in order by Amin, Watanjar, Qadir, and then a number of old PDPA civilian leaders. The decree also named the new cabinet with approximately the same lineup of names as the council's. Karmal was senior deputy prime minister.

Not until 9 May was a policy statement made by Taraki. It was very different from the military council's. Domestically, Taraki promised "democratic land reforms." He said the new regime would "promote and consolidate the state sector of the national economy . . . eliminate imperialist influences in various economic, political, cultural and ideological fields . . . [and] clear the state organizations of anti-revolutionary, anti-democratic and anti-people elements." A purge was thus underway. Taraki promised a foreign policy of nonalignment and good relations with all neighbors, but he singled out such goals as "to further strengthen and consolidate friendly relations and all-round cooperation with the USSR" and to campaign "against the old and the new imperialism and support the national liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America."

The contrast between the two policy statements suggests that the main link between the soldiers and the PDPA leaders was a common hostility toward Daoud—whom Qadir in particular hated for failing to carry out the reforms for which Qadir and Watanjar too had helped lead the 1973 coup. It was the armed forces' victory, and they initially sounded as if they intended to keep control of the result with their own program. Just how the disciplined PDPA stalwarts managed to wrest the command away from them, as appears to have happened, remains a mystery. The one-day delay in agreeing on the full lineup of the new leadership is significant. That the 1 May result of the jockeying for power was an uneasy compromise was soon shown by events. The key point, which Lenin had proven sixty-one years earlier, was that a determined leader, backed by a small but dedicated band of supporters, can dominate a larger number of less well organized, less ideologically inspired persons.

The change of government that started with the arrests early on 26 April and ended with the secret meetings on 30 April, came to be known in Afghanistan as The Great Saur Revolution, from the local name for the month. It was not a revolution, however. It was a palace coup d'état. No mass uprising occurred, no widespread public support was evidenced. In fact, people in Kabul tried to ignore the fighting around the palace, traffic dodging among the tanks, life continuing pretty much as usual until the realization spread that Daoud was under attack. Then, most people and many military units waited to see who would win before committing themselves. Outside of the capital, the country remained quiet.

**Similarity to Bolshevik Revolution**

Of all the times that Communists have come to power in the world since Lenin arrived in Petrograd in 1917, only a few cases, such as China and North Vietnam, can be accurately categorized as revolutions in the strictest sense of the term. The population's being mobilized to seize control of the government. In the majority of the cases, like most of the cases with the present situation, outside military power and police control were used to impose Communist rule. But the Afghan case is the one that most clearly resembles Lenin's own Bolshevik Revolution, which was really a coup. In both cases, a small group was elected and given a mandate, primarily drawn from or later claiming to have represented just one part of a divided and feuding Marxist movement, used armed force to seize the center of the governmental structure and then spread its control over a populace in whose name it claimed to act. Though Lenin actually organized the military move, and Amin may not have, at least the small scale of the seizures was similar.

And just as the 1917 German decision to inject Lenin into the tumultuous Russian situation, by returning him from Swiss exile in the famous "sealed train," was an important foreign factor in the downfall of the troubled post-monarchical Kerensky government to a hold of Bolsheviks, so was Soviet encouragement of the PDPA over a long period a factor in the downfall of Daoud's faltering post-monarchical regime. Civil war followed in both cases, and in both cases some of the original coup supporters ended up fighting what they considered a perverted or even betrayed outcome of the change that they had helped create: Kronstadt sailors in Russia, Khalqi officers who joined the resistance in Afghanistan. Just as a legend had to be created in Russia, so did Afghans and Soviets go to work to deny that it was just another military coup. "It is not necessary that [the working class] should be in the majority so that the working class revolution takes place," Amin said. "But it ought to be noted that the working class revolutionary ideology is the torch of our revolution and its leadership, that is, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. It is on this basis that the same dictatorship of the proletariat has been established in this country and is in the service of the peasants."

A Soviet commentator was more explicit in describing the position of the tiny PDPA, which represented a radical elite group of government employees, military officers, and students. What, he asked, could this "political vanguard
do? Was it supposed to sit impassively on the shore of a vast sea of human privation and suffering? Was it supposed to wait until the political conscience of millions would awake completely? No, they chose another course, namely, leaning on the army to take political power, and, in the process of social transformation, to involve the millions in the revolution.  

In other words, it was not a case of a revolution but of a small group’s arrogating to itself the right to decide what the millions must want. It soon turned out that the decision was wrong, that most Afghans rejected the PDPA version of revolution, that the country was not ready for the excesses of a new ideology.

The ideological inspiration was kept half-hidden at first. Other than the May Day celebrations, the language of Taraki’s policy statement, and a brief use of the title “comrade” in Kabul newspapers before it was dropped, the new regime was cautious. An admission of Communism would automatically antagonize many Afghans as well as neighboring Moslem countries because of the belief—based on observation of what the Soviets had done in Central Asia—that Communism was deadly to Islam. So on 3 May Taraki denied any foreign involvement in “a democratic and nationalist revolution of the Afghan people” and insisted that “Afghanistan never had a party called the Communist Party and there is not a Communist Party now.” A Yugoslav journalist in Kabul, who presumably would be able to recognize a Communist, was not put off. He reported the next day that the new council included “representatives of the reunited Communist Party” as well as soldiers.  

Taraki soon gave a classic definition of a Leninist organization: “The Afghan People’s Democratic Party, led by the central committee, guides, leads and controls the country’s affairs. The revolutionary council and the . . . government execute government affairs.” On another occasion, he said that “We consider ourselves to be radical reformers and progressive democrats. Marxism-Leninism is not a formula which we apply or claim.” Amin told interviewers who asked if the PDPA was Communist, “Call us whatever you want . . . We will never give you a clear-cut answer.”  

But over the next few months speeches became more obviously Marxist. On 7 November 1978, the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, Amin said the Saur Revolution was a continuation of the Russian event. “Though we are not the first socialist country of the world, we have the honor of being the neighbor” of it, Amin said. Afghanistan’s duty is to defend “its evolution on the basis of scientific socialism.” This was pure terminology from the Soviet Union, which says it is using “scientific socialism” to reach the eventual goal of true Communism.

Soviet Role in the Coup

If this was a continuation of the Bolshevik Revolution, what were the Soviet role and attitude? A direct role had not been identified by outsiders, but the buildup to the coup was an indirect role as old as the inculcation of dissatisfaction with the Afghan regime in the minds of military personnel sent to the Soviet Union for training. The Soviet-urged unification of Khalq and Parcham just nine months earlier, when Daoud’s turn to the Moslem world and the West had antagonized Moscow, was an important element in the background to the coup.

When the coup suddenly erupted, however, the Soviet embassy in Kabul acted as surprised as other embassies—and as Daoud. Soviet Ambassador Aleksandr M. Puzanov, an alcoholic seventy-two-year-old castoff from Kremlin political struggles two decades earlier, was off trout fishing in the Hindu Kush, and the embassy was being run by his deputy, Yurii K. Aleksyeyev, an experienced Asian hand. What the KGB team in Kabul was doing is uncertain. The CIA—which for years kept in Kabul a man with previous Soviet experience to watch the Russians there—had by 1978 eliminated that position in a budget cut; however, the CIA station chief and the United States ambassador spoke Russian and were under instructions from Washington to regard watching Soviet activities as a higher priority than monitoring Afghan domestic affairs. Some of the 350 Soviet military advisers then in Afghanistan observed the rush of activity, or perhaps were informed by the leftist-inclined Afghan officers whose friendship they had cultivated. These advisers joined in the coup activities. Soviet officers were observed with the Afghan armored units that seized control of Kabul airport’s military section early in the coup. Other Soviet advisers were known to have helped organize and launch the MiG-21s and SU-7s from Bagram air base. The accuracy of some of those warplanes’ rocket attacks on the palace inspired rumors among Western observers that Soviet pilots had flown them, but that seems to have been an unjustified vestige of a colonial mentality that denied mere Afghans such competence. Western intelligence reports concluded that Soviet advisers, whose technical expertise played an important continuing role in Afghan armored and air forces, had taken a significant role in the coup. It is not possible to say if it was a decisive role, if it developed only after some initial hesitancy when word of the coup began to go around, or if the advisers took the time or effort to obtain political clearance from the Soviet embassy before participating.

It is possible to speculate, however, that sometime during the approximately thirty-two hours between the arrests of PDPA leaders and the beginning of the coup, reports about a military move against Daoud reached the Soviet embassy and Moscow. Soviet military advisers are always under tight political control. It is completely unbelievable, if not actually impossible, that they would get involved in a coup without high-level authorization. Therefore, the least assumption that foreign governments and others have drawn is that the Soviet Union prepared the way for a Communist coup in Afghanistan over many years, saw it coming, and might have helped block or thwart it had Moscow wished to warn Daoud, but did not plan it in advance or trigger it—not then, not when the PDPA was still so weak, the country so unready for tight Leninist central control, and anyway Daoud was likely to die naturally before too long. A
greater assumption that governments and others have seriously considered without taking as definite is that Moscow authorized a Soviet role in helping the coup succeed while not becoming publicly committed in case it failed. A significant delay points toward the greater assumption. Moscow denied “imperialist propaganda” of Soviet involvement in the 1973 coup immediately after it occurred. In 1978 the essentially same Soviet leadership only felt compelled by nine days of mounting Western suspicions of a Kremlin hand to issue a belated denial.

Recognition Granted

While Soviet diplomats rushed around Kabul trying to find biographical information on many of the new leaders, there was something happening behind the scenes that enabled Moscow to preserve its record dating back to Amanullah of being the first capital to recognize a new Afghan government. At 5:00 P.M. on 30 April Kabul Radio reported in Decree Number One that Taraki was in charge. Kabul Radio later said that at 5:30 P.M. Puzanov had met the new president in his office and given him a message of diplomatic recognition. The United States embassy in Kabul did not receive until 6:25 P.M. its copy of the circular note from the foreign ministry requesting recognition. Curiously, Tass mentioned only India in reporting two days later that some countries had recognized the regime. When Moscow Radio finally reported the Soviet recognition, on 3 May, it cited Kabul Radio as the source, although the Afghan broadcast would not have been quoted by Moscow without official guidance there.

Also on 3 May, Brezhnev and Kosygin’s “hearty congratulations” were sent on what they called Taraki’s election as president, and wishes for great success, while Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko sent a similar message to Amin, who had become Afghan foreign minister. But aside from saying that “the Soviet people have heard with satisfaction” that May Day was being celebrated, Soviet media were carefully noncommittal about events in Afghanistan for some days. Pravda finally pronounced the official Soviet attitude on 6 May; “The interests of social development demanded a fundamental break with obsolete social relations.” It added cautiously, “Complex tasks of forming the new power, the intrigues of internal and external reactionary forces, and struggling for a better future for the Afghan people, lie ahead.” The Soviet attitude gradually grew warmer after that. By mid-May Soviet media were reporting favorably on planned reforms. This meant that the Kremlin had decided to go a significant step beyond just recognizing the new regime by endorsing it as a healthy new development to be encouraged—and embraced.

The public embrace was given by Gromyko to Amin. The new Afghan foreign minister stopped in Moscow 18 May on the way to a meeting of nonaligned countries in Havana. Soviet media, and the joint communiqué on their talks, identified the two men not only by their government positions but also as members of the political bureaus, or politburos, that controlled their two parties, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the PDPA. This was a clear signal that the Kremlin had accepted the PDPA as a Marxist organization. When Gromyko meets foreign ministers from non-Marxist countries, only his and the visitor’s governmental titles are used. But on this occasion the rhetoric was Communist. Amin “stressed that as a result of this revolution . . . power went over into the hands of the people under the leadership of the PDPA,” the communiqué said, and he praised Soviet friendship. Gromyko conveyed, “on behalf of the CPSU, its central committee, the politburo of the CPSU CC [central committee] and personally Leonid Brezhnev,” wishes of success to the Afghan people, PDPA leaders, and republic. Amin cautiously extended best wishes in the name of Taraki, other Afghan leaders, and the Afghan people, but he did not name the PDPA. This was a milestone in the evolving Soviet attitude.

Non-Communist Views

It was not generally noticed in the non-Communist world. There, some mystification existed about the nature of the new Afghan regime. Alarms in 1973 that Daoud’s coup had been communist, with “the Red Prince” planning to take Afghanistan into the Soviet bloc, had proven so unfounded that chas- tened Western observers were hesitant in reading the small amount of available evidence in 1978. While some British commentators declared that the “Great Game” was over, with the Russians as winners, United States officials carefully avoided pronouncements that might make it difficult to keep open lines for possibly influencing the new regime or that could trigger the terms of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, which prohibited aid for “any Communist country.”

Some American officials regarded the little-known PDPA leaders as more nationalistic than communist. This was supported by Dupree, who had drunk tea and talked over many years with Kabul leftists. “The term ‘Communist’ is, in my opinion, unjustified—as yet,” Dupree said in mid-May. “Governments, like persons, should be considered innocent until proven guilty.” In a surprising use of a term that a quarter-century earlier had caused United States political controversy because it had been applied to Chinese Communists, a leading American newspaper published the view that “Taraki and his cabinet colleagues are agrarian reformers, intensely nationalistic and likely to be formidably opposed to direct Soviet intervention.”

Adolph Dubs was more skeptical. He had been accepted by the Daoud government as the new United States ambassador to Afghanistan shortly before the coup. Taraki’s government reaffirmed the acceptance. Before leaving for Kabul, Dubs recommended that the Carter administration do some contingency planning for a Soviet military takeover of Afghanistan, but South Asia special-
ists in the State Department dismissed this as mad. Within a few months of arriving in Kabul, Dubs repeated the recommendation, and a junior official in Washington half-heartedly drafted some later-unused ideas.54

On 13 July the State Department’s third-ranking official, David D. Newsom, visited Kabul, and he and Dubs met Taraki and Amin. The two Afghans, who had within two and a half months shared some thirty new aid and cooperation agreements with the Soviet Union, asked more United States aid than the $20.6 million programed for 1978. The United States wanted friendly relations, but “we are not going to make a special effort to compete or do anything dramatic” on aid, an official said later.55

Afghanistan’s non-Communist neighbors also took a cautious attitude. Pakistan’s President Zia was disturbed by the collapse of his agreement with Daoud to improve relations and by the revival of Afghan propaganda on Pashtunistan and Baluch problems. Zia decided to go talk with the leaders in Kabul. They tried to put him off, but he insisted, and on 9 September he met Taraki and Amin. Zia offered to talk over any problems that Afghanistan perceived, to provide technical assistance, and to insure that transit routes were unencumbered. Taraki replied with oratory about his popular support and vagueness about specific issues. Zia went away perplexed and finally in May 1979 branded Afghanistan a Soviet satellite, saying the buffer state had ceased to exist. He met Taraki again at the nonaligned summit meeting in Havana in September 1979. By then Taraki was besieged with troubles and he seemed more friendly, telling Zia that any Afghan leadership had to make verbal attacks on Pakistan. They embraced for television cameras, a politically important move for Taraki as he sought to broaden the popular appeal of his regime—as the Soviets were then advising. Taraki invited Zia back to Kabul for full-scale discussions, but within two weeks Taraki had been overthrown.56

The shah of Iran was also disturbed by the Afghan coup. Two days after it occurred he told an American visitor, George H. W. Bush, that he considered it one more example of the Soviet grand design and further proof of a Communist drive to encircle Iran.57 Later, he told diplomats that it would not have occurred if the United States had taken a stronger stand in Angola, Ethiopia, and other places where Soviet power had recently been displayed. While blaming Moscow for the coup, the shah did not feel that his own wooing of Daoud might have been a factor, diplomats reported. A limited amount of Iranian aid continued on projects underway.58 Other Moslem countries also continued existing aid programs, and a few new commitments were made early in the Taraki government.

Internal Tensions

While the outside world wondered about Afghanistan, tensions inside the country rose rapidly. The old conflict between Khalqis and Parchamis erupted anew, and new conflict developed between the regime and virtually the entire rest of the population. The Soviet Communist Party, aware of the PDPA’s internal strife, sent an official to Kabul in May 1978 to try to keep the 1977 unification intact. Suspiciousness and outright hostility were too much for him, however.59 Khalqis led by Amin felt that they had won control and owed nothing to old rivals like Karmal. Amin suspected Parcham of keeping its own secret cells within the armed forces even after the coup, creating a possible future threat. Karmal, worried about his position, reportedly sought support from Qadir, a nationalistic leftist not committed to either PDPA faction, but was rebuffed, and the Soviet embassy was still some months away from directly intervening in Afghan internal affairs.60 By 15 June, Karmal had disappeared from Kabul media, and he was rumored to be under house arrest.

Parchamis Exiled

On 26 June Amin’s foreign ministry asked the United States to agree to the appointment of the Parchami interior minister, Nur Ahmad Nur, as ambassador to Washington.61 Kabul Radio announced that appointment and Karmal’s as ambassador to Czechoslovakia on 5 July.62 Anahita Ratebzad became ambassador to Yugoslavia; A. Mahmud Barialay, who is both her son-in-law and Karmal’s younger brother, ambassador to Pakistan; and two other Parchamis also became ambassadors.63 This is a traditional Third World way of getting rid of political opponents gently, but both Karmal and Nur reportedly resisted being exiled. They finally left quietly.

The regime then lurched on into measures that alienated the Afghan people. It is debatable whether the Parchamis—who had always advocated a gradual approach to Communism—were banished partly because of policy differences, or whether if left in the leadership they might have been able to soften the Khalqi policies that stirred up armed resistance.

Taraki’s Purges

After “lengthy discussions,” a reorganization of the PDPA was announced 8 July.64 Amin, who was in control of the new political police named the Organization for the Protection of the Interests of Afghanistan (AGSA in the initials of its Dari name), increased his power by becoming a party secretary. In the government, Amin became Taraki’s sole deputy prime minister and Watanjar replaced Nur as interior minister. Known Parchamis in the government, schools, and the armed forces were fired and in many cases arrested, with some 800 expelled from the military alone. Many of them were tortured in efforts by Amin and his acting police boss, Assadullah Sarwari, to discover the names of secret Parchamies. Nur said later that some “professional party cadres . . . were forced to emigrate or go underground, others were arrested, and some paid with their lives.”65 By 19 July, Taraki could say that “There was no such thing as a Parcham party in Afghanistan, and there is no such thing now.”66 The entire government is run by Khalqis, Taraki claimed on 1 August, and all military
officers are either Khalqis, Khalqi sympathizers, "or are bound to become Khalqis. In other words, the PDP is in full control of the army." 67

However, anywhere in the world it is in the nature of radical civilians boosted into power by soldiers to worry about continuing military support. Taraki soon denied his own statement about full control of the army by presiding over—Amin's growing power makes it impossible to say flatly that Taraki was responsible for—a second wave of purges that struck at the military leadership. Kabul Radio announced 17 August the discovery of an "anti-revolutionary network" led by Defense Minister Qadir, the army chief of staff Maj. Gen. Shapur Ahmedzai, and others, who were arrested. 68 They were not Parchamis but essentially Moslem nationalists who might disapprove of the regime's radical new course, if they had not already done so, and reportedly opposed Amin's efforts to control all military appointments. But they were accused of being part of a Parchami conspiracy. The PDPA politburo, which had become its key ruling group as the central committee expanded from a handful of members, decided that Taraki would take over the defense ministry, and Amin "shall also help in the affairs of it." Within a few days two real Parchamis, Planning Minister Keshtmand and Public Works Minister Mohammed Rafi, had also been arrested as part of the plot. 69 Widespread arrests followed. Virtually everyone known to be, or suspected of being, a Parchami was imprisoned. Some were tortured to death. The regime took a harsh attitude that those involved in leftist politics who were not for it were against it. 70

This culminated with a PDPA central committee meeting 27 November that denounced "an anti-Saur Revolution and an anti-Khalqi regime conspiracy plotted under the leadership of Babrak Karmal," 71 with Qadir, Keshtmand, Rafi, Nur, Anahita, and others named as participants. 72 Confessions were made public, including one by Keshtmand—who had been personally tortured by Sarwari—saying that "Karmal argued that the present Khalqi state was isolated from the people and the latter were dissatisfied." 73 The truth of that was already apparent, but the leaders did not want to hear it. They focused on an alleged plan for an uprising at the end of the Moslem holy month of fasting, which in 1978 fell on 6 September, with Qadir to be made the head of state. The central committee expelled nine plotters from the party and reaffirmed a 6 September order summoning the banished Parchamis home from their embassies, but instead of going home the ambassadors had all disappeared 74—presumably with Soviet help, because the first reappearance was when Karmal returned behind smoking Soviet guns more than a year later.

The PDPA meeting on 27 November also reaffirmed Amin's key role. Taraki announced that Amin had become a party politburo member at the time of the Saur Revolution, and he said separately that Amin had been elected a party secretary without specifying that it happened in July. Taraki thus made it clear that Amin held the key jobs in any Leninist party. Now, Taraki said, Amin and Shah Wali "are administering the party and Khalqi organizations affairs through related commissions." 75 This wording suggested that some Khalqi nucleus was being kept separate from the PDPA as a whole.

Taraki was by then well on his way to becoming a figurehead. By early November there were persistent rumors in Kabul of resentment in the leadership about Amin's high-handed behavior, and an Asian official noted that Amin no longer treated Taraki with the deference he had shown immediately after the coup. 76 Though Taraki must bear blame for what happened during his presidency, Karmal's later regime tried to preserve his reputation. The official line became that "Amin and his group, taking advantage of Taraki's credulity, wove behind his back a conspiracy inimical to the people and hounded honest patriots and revolutionaries, not stopping even at the killing of the finest cadres of the Afghan revolution." 77

Brutality of the Regime

Parchamis were only a minority of those to feel the brutal wrath of the new regime. There has throughout history been a savage streak in the characters of most revolutionaries who come to power, perhaps because they realize that the same violent forces that thrust them to the top could be unleashed against them. Communist revolutionaries have been among the most savage. Men who endured imprisonment as Communists, who even in many cases obtained educations in prison and were converted there to Communism, as in East Europe before World War II, in Vietnam under the French, or in Afghanistan itself, came out able to continue their struggle for power. But once attaining it, they insured that those who went into the same prisons now under their control did not get a later chance as they had gotten. Royalists, capitalists, non-Leninist socialists, liberals, and neutrals—all political types have felt the brutality of Communist regimes as present resistance and future questioning is smashed. Perhaps the reason is the ideological dictate that Marxism is the wave of the future, which is interpreted to mean that no alternative future can be left possible and any means of preventing it is permissible. To keep the wheel of history from turning back, those who had, before the Communists came to power, shown them some civilized tolerance have to be crushed under it. So it was in Afghanistan, where a primitive savagery had always kept in practice forms of man's inhumanity to man more typical of the Middle Ages than the modern world.

Many foreign observers felt that the Communist coup was greeted by most Afghans with relief. The Daoud regime had failed to satisfy popular demands. The PDPA therefore started with hopes that it would carry out reforms that Daoud had promised in vain. 78 Those hopes were quickly shattered. Members of the extended royal family and those who had served them over the years, many of them nonpolitical technocrats, were arrested without pretense of judicial process. Ministers of Daoud's and previous governments were picked up, and most Western-educated officials. Entire familes were imprisoned. Many former officials, certainly in the hundreds, perhaps in the thousands, were killed. One of the first to die was Moosa Shafiq, beheaded according to some reports. At the large prison at Pul-i-Charkhi, on the eastern outskirts of Kabul,
executions averaged about fifty a night. In addition to the armed forces, where few above the rank of major kept their jobs, the first round of purges hit hardest at the interior ministry which controlled police and intelligence, at the technical communications network as well as the media, at the foreign ministry, at educators, and at provincial governors who were all replaced by military men.

A decree issued 14 May, abrogating Daoud's 1977 constitution, established "revolutionary military courts" to dispense summary justice for "any behavior running contrary to the interests of the people and the state," whatever the PDPA decided that to be. The decree also established AGSA, the new political police that Tass explained would "protect the young state from encroachments upon its independence and internal security." West Germans had trained and advised Afghan police; East Germans and Soviets soon replaced them. AGSA became very busy. Taraki explained that "The criterion of our judgment regarding the removal of unhealthy elements from the administration is sabotage, anti-revolutionary action, corruption, bad reputation, bribery, cruelty, oppression and administrative inefficiency of the officials."

Results of the Revolution

There were three quick results: greater administrative inefficiency because large numbers of trained people were purged, a resulting greater dependence on Soviet advisers, and alienation of the educated class. Karmal complained later that "there was not the necessary number of managers and specialists at all levels who could combine devotion to the revolution with sufficient vocational and theoretical training." As a result, some parts of the government almost ceased to function.

Dependence on Soviet Advisers

The PDPA turned to the Soviet Union for help. The number of Soviet military advisers doubled to 700 within three months, some of them helping to run the defense ministry. Many of the estimated 650 Soviet civilians who had been working on aid projects around the country before the coup were summoned to Kabul to show Khalqis how to run various other ministries, or to run the ministries for them. Because of language similarity, Soviet Tajiks and other Central Asians were rushed south to fill gaps, but many of them were phased out when trained Russians became available because the Kremlin did not want to expose its own people with a Moslem heritage to the growing religious intensity of Afghan resistance. The number of Soviet advisers in Afghanistan grew so steadily throughout Taraki's and Amin's regimes that the Soviet embassy had to build new four-story apartment houses for them. Some educated Afghans who tried to work for the regime were antagonized by compulsory lectures on "epoch-making ideology," a euphemism for Marxism-Leninism.

Alienation of the People

The masses of ordinary Afghans were quickly alienated, too. Organized opposition first developed among the Moslem traditionalist groups that had been fighting the leftists on Kabul University campus and in the streets for years. Unlike the outside world, they never had any doubts about the nature of the people who had seized control. By late May, within a month of the coup, a National Rescue Front was founded by nine Islamic and anti-Communist organizations. Under the leadership of a Kabul University law professor, Dr. Syed Burhanuddin Rabbini, it claimed the support of more than 100 members of Daoud's 374-member parliament.

Many of the country's estimated 320,000 mullahs were soon assumed to be supporters, too, as the regime began to implement new policies. Taraki charged that religion was being used as an obstacle to "the progressive movement of our homeland." He later insisted that only "an insignificant minority" opposed his government because the Afghan branch of the Moslem Brotherhood plus "leftist, extremist, conservative and nationalistic elements" had been swept away.

This became a pretense that continued after the Soviet invasion: that basically the Afghan people liked their government, and only outside provocation was responsible for opposition to it; not until late 1980 was a more realistic appraisal admitted. The first reported armed opposition to PDPA rule occurred too soon for any outsiders to have organized, however. The takeover of local administrations by young Khalqis in Kabul in May 1978 was reportedly resisted in the northeast, especially Badakhshan province and adjacent areas of Nuristan. By removing experienced administrators with some understanding of provincial areas, and replacing them with detribalized, urbanized youths, the government unwittingly enhanced the authority of traditional local leaders—who were the most resistant to its attempts at social reforms. The mullahs in particular were treated as enemies, and they reacted as such. Eventually, Karmal's regime would recognize that "the thinking of the predominately illiterate population is still being formed mainly by the mullahs," but by then the damage had been done.

Land and Language Reforms

Hardly had it finished the first round of post-coup executions when the new regime began working on implementing the reforms outlined in the 1966 Khalq policy statement. Its dedication to them was partly an ideological conviction that such things as land reform were necessary to prove the Marxist credentials of the new leaders, partly a determination not to let PDPA promises prove as empty as Daoud's similar reform statements and thus risk weakening leftist support, partly a lack of reality by teashop radicals without a proper appreciation of conditions or attitudes outside Kabul, and partly a result of having
eliminated the experienced officials who might have been able to offer sensible advice about how to achieve change in a demonstrably change-resistant society.

Reforms seemed to build a reckless momentum of their own. At his first news conference as president, Taraki said (6 May) that technical aspects of land reform were being studied, and a month later he declared, "I believe it will be a year or two before we can go through with our plans for land reform. . . . We do not want to overt-hasten our reforms; we want to implement them step by step." He also said 6 May, "We believe that social development will only be possible after the economic changes." Yet just half a year later sweeping land-reform and radical social changes had been decreed. And the regime had literally waved a red flag in the face of the Moslem peasantry, replacing Afghanistan's flag of black, red, and Islamic green with a new all-red flag strikingly similar in appearance to the flags of Soviet Central Asian republics. Taraki claimed that "We respect the principles of Islam . . . but religion must not be used as a means for those who want to sabotage progress and to continue exploiting and suppressing the people . . . . We want to clean Islam in Afghanistan of the ballast and dirt of bad traditions, superstitious and erroneous belief. Thereafter, we will have progressive, modern and pure Islam."44

After announcing the "Main Directions of the . . . Government's Revolutionary Tasks" on 9 May 1978, the revolutionary council issued four reform decrees between 15 May and 28 November. Karmal later claimed that he helped write them before being exiled. 95

The first was intended as a cheap, quick way to win favor among the Uzbeks, Turkmen, and other ethnic minorities while at the same time emphasizing the end of the old royal-style Pashtun dominance. The new regime promised "essential conditions for evolution of the literature, education and publication in mother tongues of tribes and nationalities resident in Afghanistan." In the early 1970s there had been some caution deviation from the traditional use of only Pashto and Dari as national languages, but Daoud curtailed it. Fearful of Persian (Dari) cultural dominance, he insisted on Pashto as the link language for all peoples, while Dari speakers resisted the spread of Turkic tongues because it would reduce the importance of their language. Those Afghans for whom neither Pashto nor Dari were mother tongues were educated—if at all—in one of the two languages and went on to learn English as a compulsory foreign language until the regime changed that to Russian.

While the use of all significant languages was a theoretically desirable policy, especially with the linkage it was given to a literacy campaign, it had several consequences. One was an immediate need for materials in the newly legalized languages. This need was met for Uzbeks and Turkmen by Soviet advisers and the reprinting of Soviet textbooks, with Taraki's name substituted for Lenin's as the founder, thus hastening the Sovietization of northern Afghanistan. Another consequence was the enhancement of provincialism. The language decree accused previous regimes of a language policy that practiced "the administrative approach of colonialists, divide and rule." But the effect of the new policy has been to divide up Afghanistan in such a way that Russian might become the common language of educated people, which would enhance Soviet control. This was the result of a similar policy in Soviet Central Asia, where in the 1920s the Russians had, over regional objections, broken up the cultural unity of the area by imposing deliberately distinct languages on previously only different dialects of related peoples.99

The second decree was intended to eliminate land mortgages and rural indebtedness.100 Mortgages and loans contracted before 21 March 1974 were cancelled on the assumption that interest payments had already more than repaid the original balance. Later debts of tenants and farm laborers were also cancelled, while owners of less than 4.77 acres of "first-grade land" (double-cropped irrigated land, or orchards or vineyards) were assigned an easy scale of payments. It was claimed that some 11 million peasants benefited from the cancellation of $700 million in debts, on which a 50 percent rate of interest had not been unusual.101

The decree provided that the existing Agricultural Development Bank would provide credit for productive purposes—much of the indebtedness had been incurred for weddings and funerals—but the bank was incapable of filling the role that bazaar moneylenders and big landowners had played. As a result, many villagers lacked money to buy seeds and other essentials, and agriculture suffered.102

But Taraki, the unrealistic theorist, was proud of what he had done; it seemed ideologically right. The decree had "sharpened the class struggle in Afghanistan," he said. "The class struggle which we awaited for many long years is now gaining in intensity."103 Many debtors who cited the decree in refusing to pay were reported to have been murdered by angry lenders, hardly the kind of class struggle a Communist party would approve. Taraki's hope of rallying the peasantry to the PDPA cause, in opposition to landowners and moneylenders, showed his lack of understanding of rural Afghan society. Villagers were united by bonds of mutual dependence and common hostility to outside interference, and this proved stronger than Marxist theory about class conflict.104

Since a decree by Abdur Rahman in 1884, successive Afghan governments had tried to ameliorate the system of a groom's family paying money and goods to a bride's family, regulate the age of marriage, enhance the status of women, and make related social changes. Effects had been minimal. The PDPA government's next decree put a low limit on bride payments and on payments in case of divorce or separation, promised freedom of choice in marriage, said girls must be sixteen years old and boys eighteen to marry, and provided for six months' to three years' imprisonment for violations.105 In what was considered by villagers to be a related move, the government tried to bring girls into new schools. These changes challenged traditional customs at the heart of Afghan Islamic society. Rural economic relations were partly based on brideprice payments and the related brides' dowries. They were a form of social security for women, who
lacked any other guarantees in the male-dominated society. Arranged marriages, often between first cousins, were the glue that held social relations together. And allowing young women to go to school with boys and outsider teachers was considered an insult to honor, made worse by the fact that Khalq teachers were more concerned with party propaganda than basic education. The reaction to this decree was the opposite of that intended. By stirring up the resentment of rural males, it actually set back the slow development of women’s rights, foreign observers felt, and it left women with less security, because of the ceiling on divorce or separation money.\textsuperscript{106}

The last of the major reform decrees was potentially the most significant, but it produced more controversy and opposition than effect. Daoud had announced land reform in 1975 but never implemented it.\textsuperscript{107} The Communist regime decreed an even more sweeping program, proclaiming that it would eliminate “feudal and pre-feudal relations from the socioeconomic system of the country.”\textsuperscript{108} A family was limited to 30 \textit{jeribs} (14.3 acres) of first-grade land, or more poorer land according to productivity. Land above that limit was to be confiscated without compensation and distributed free to landless workers on it or other “deserving persons” in shares of five \textit{jeribs} (2.4 acres) of first-grade land or equivalent.

With a foreign-aided cadastral survey and land registration moving slowly in the 1960s and 1970s, the land ownership situation was only vaguely known. Surveys indicated that the poorest 80 percent of the owners held just 29 percent of land, albeit often the more productive tracts, and the number of peasant families owning no land was reported from 400,000 upward.\textsuperscript{109} No one knew just how much land would become available under the decree or how many people qualified as deserving. The official press published contradictory statistics. Behind them lay ignorance. This was the most extreme case of economic and social engineering in a vacuum, teashop theories unimproved by being clothed in a newly captured governmental authority.

\textbf{Failure of Reforms}

Tenant farmers had been dependent on landowners for seeds, various forms of credit, and in some cases implements. Where carried out, the reforms cut them off from these necessities. The decree mentioned cooperatives and new credit facilities to deal with such problems, but little was done about them because the skills, experience, and capital to establish them were lacking. Many poor Afghans, fearful of being severed from their long reliance upon their relatively rich and successful landlords, resisted change because it went against the Koran to usurp another’s possessions. Some rich Afghans sabotaged efforts of others to work their land. But in general the tradition of villagers’ sticking together against outside interference hindered the efforts of young Khalq administrators to implement a change which the poor—for whom they claimed to speak—had not been enlightened to want or expect. Coming on top of the earlier decrees, land reform’s main result was further arousing and disrupting the countryside and turning it against Kabul.\textsuperscript{110}

It is, however, human nature as well as a Communist tradition firmly established in the Soviet Union to claim that whatever program is currently in official favor is working splendidly, regardless of the evidence. Afghan land reform was no exception. Implementation began in January 1979. Reports soon said that its success “is indeed beyond dispute. . . . [It] met with the people’s ardent support and approval.”\textsuperscript{111} On 15 July Taraki announced that land reform had been successfully completed ahead of schedule, and despite poor rainfall the reform and other government measures had resulted in abundant crops.\textsuperscript{112} On results of the plan to distribute about 1.5 million acres to 676,000 families, claims varied, the biggest saying that more than 1.6 million acres had gone to 285,000 families, and 964 cooperatives of 257,500 acres for 140,000 families had been established. It was, Taraki said, “an immense triumph achieved through the joint efforts of the party, the government and the entire Afghan people.”\textsuperscript{113}

Only after Taraki and Amin were both dead was it admitted to have been a disaster that caused armed resistance and cut agricultural production, but it never was admitted that the program had under Soviet urging been abandoned prematurely in an effort to contain rural opposition. Farmers had proven unwilling to plant redistributed land, because of uncertainty of ownership, or to market their produce. An estimated one-third of arable land went untilled. “The lack of effective, scientific and practical agricultural plans, the lack of timely provision of improved seed and fertilizer to farmers, the nonexistence of effective publicity and encouragement to farmers on planting” were conceded later by Karmal.\textsuperscript{114} Others discussed “the destructive implementation of agrarian reform” that caused large numbers of peasants to abandon the land.\textsuperscript{115} This was, naturally, blamed on Amin by Karmal’s regime, but Karmal’s claim to have helped draft the reforms showed the absence of realism throughout the PDPA leadership that led it into failures. “Ordinary people lost faith in the revolutionary regime,” a Soviet writer admitted.\textsuperscript{116}

Discussing “deviations from the correct and principled course, [as a result of which] the revolution got off the right track,” Karmal blamed “the general backwardness of the country [and] insufficient maturity by the PDPA” as well as blaming Amin.\textsuperscript{117} The party “lacked the necessary experience in carrying out government affairs, and how to guide economic and cultural development,” he said.\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Pravda} said there had been “flagrant errors of the recent past . . . unbridled tyranny . . . [that] led to deep rifts among the people and in the ruling People’s Democratic Party . . . Slogans incomprehensible to simple people and far removed from the real situation in the country were advanced. This not only undermined the masses’ enthusiasm but also their trust in the leadership.”\textsuperscript{119}

An unidentified Afghan Marxist told a sympathetic Pakistani journal that

The principal mistakes were: (1) the strong degree of financial and ideological dependence on the Soviet Union, (2) an obscured vision of the realities of rural Afghanistan, and the rural classes, (3) lack of a clear program of action among the party leadership, (4) lack of discipline, and the degree of corruption within the party, since most of them had personally been underprivileged
before coming to power, and (5) total lack of control over their immediate families, who exploited their kin ties to the leadership exactly as members of the royal family had done.  

The new bureaucracy lacked the restraint that previous ones in Kabul had to observe, because it had Soviet military power behind it and thus thought it could ignore domestic opposition, the Marxist said. Therefore, he said, responsibility for the rebellion against Khalqi rule “has to be shared jointly by the PDPA leadership and the Soviet advisers.”

**Soviet Support**

The willingness of the Soviet Union to rush advisers to the help of the new Afghan regime showed a conscious choice to back up the PDPA rather than letting this Communist party founder from its own ineptness. Ziray, who emerged as perhaps the most important single party organization man, said almost three years later that comrades from the Soviet Communist Party “helped us organize party work. In April 1978 our party took power immediately. It emerged from deep underground. When it became the ruling party it did not know what state leadership meant. Now we have ... a well-organized PDPA which is strengthening daily and a party apparatus which is gaining experience.”  

Gromyko’s embrace of Amin on 18 May 1978 as a fellow Marxist as well as just a fellow foreign minister was a signal of the decision to move in and build up the PDPA in the Soviet image.

But Moscow tried to keep a low profile. An agreement in July 1978 to provide another $250 million in aid to the Afghan armed forces was not made public, and Soviet media did not report on the quick buildup of advisers or the increasingly critical roles they were playing in running the modern part of the Afghan government and economy. The Soviet Communist Party’s unsuccessful attempt to prevent the Khalqi-Parcham split was kept secret. Moscow was reticent about party relations, focusing public comments on the governmental relationship.

It is the nature of the Soviet system to require an ideological categorization for things. The Afghan party’s status and general situation required some generalization in Moscow. Sometimes the ideological label put on foreigners is a purely pragmatic result of Soviet national interests that works its way into Marxist-Leninist thinking. At other times, however, that thinking can guide national policy, so that ideology can become a formative influence on policy decisions. Thus, it was significant later, when the decision was taken in late 1979 to invade Afghanistan, that Soviet ideologists had come to accept it as a country that had chosen socialism, which is the stage toward supposedly true Communism that the Soviet Union considers itself now to be in. The most influential ideologist in the Kremlin, and one of the top two or three Soviet leaders, Mikhail A. Suslov, named Afghanistan in a speech 28 February 1979 as one of the “new states of a socialist orientation [that have emerged] in the last five years.” In April 1979, the Soviet journal *World Economics and International Relations* said that “the Afghan people, under the PDPA’s leadership, have begun the task of building socialism.” Pravda’s report from Kabul on the first anniversary of the Saur Revolution hailed Afghanistan’s “socialist choice.” In late May, Tass listed Afghanistan among “countries of the socialist community” attending a conference in Mongolia. Ideologically, the Soviet Union had become committed to the success of the PDPA regime, whatever the regime’s incompetence in everything except antagonizing the Afghan people.

Militarily, it became committed also when Taraki visited Moscow from 4 to 7 December 1978. He and Brezhnev signed on 5 December a treaty of friendship and cooperation that became the justification used by Moscow a year later for the invasion. Although the Soviets were not bound under the treaty to prevent the downfall of the new Communist regime in Afghanistan, they clearly were already preparing the possibility of saving it from its failure and keeping that country under Soviet influence by force if necessary.

The Soviet Union had already shown that it sometimes signed such treaties with specific purposes in mind. Two of the ten friendship treaties it made with Third World countries during the 1970s, with India in 1971 and with Vietnam in 1978, were followed shortly afterward by those countries’ invasions of neighbors, East Pakistan (which became Bangladesh) and Cambodia, respectively. In both cases, Moscow had given the backing which helped make the invasions possible. But the other nine treaties were not so specific as the one with Afghanistan, not even the commitment with Vietnam to assist each other in “defending socialist gains.” Most of the treaties provided only for the development of defense capabilities and for consultation without any commitment to action. The Soviet-Afghan treaty was more comparable in its provision for taking action to Moscow’s ties to Mongolia, a satellite but not part of the automatic military commitment in the Warsaw Pact of Eastern Europe. The 15 January 1966 Soviet-Mongolian treaty, which was aimed at China, said the two “will jointly undertake all the necessary measures, including military ones, aimed at ensuring the security, independence and territorial integrity of both countries.”

The treaty that Taraki and Brezhnev signed in the Great Kremlin Hall said:

The high contracting parties, acting in the spirit of the traditions of friendship and good-neighborliness, as well as the United Nations’ Charter, shall consult each other and take by agreement appropriate measures to ensure the security, independence, and territorial integrity of the two countries. In the interests of strengthening the defense capacity of the high contracting parties, they shall continue to develop cooperation in the military field on the basis of appropriate agreements concluded between them.

After formal talks with Taraki—Ponomarev participated in them, showing that the PDPA was regarded as a Third World Communist party—and the treaty signing, Brezhnev said that relations “have assumed, I would say, a qualitatively new character—permeated by a spirit of friendship and revolution-
ary solidarity.” The treaty expressed this, he added. 131 In reply Taraki endorsed the full list of Soviet-backed causes around the world but, perhaps to maintain his membership in the nonaligned group, qualified his position by saying the Afghan and Soviet positions “coincide on most of the major international problems.”

The treaty preamble endorsed the 1969 Brezhnev anti-Chinese proposal on Asian collective security that Daoud had considered detrimental to the Push- twinistan case. Taraki mildly said he hoped the Pushuntistan issue would be “settled with due account taken of the historic background of this problem, through friendly talks and by peaceful means.” 132 Ponomarev wrote soon after Taraki’s visit that the new treaty was an expression of the Soviet duty to “render support to peoples of former colonies taking their first steps along a path which can lead to the building of a socialist society.” 133 On 20 April 1979 the Supreme Soviet gave official governmental approval to the treaty at a session of the rubberstamp parliament that criticized China. Approval was given in terms of the friendship aspects of the treaty. There was no mention of the military aspects. 134 The treaty went into effect with the exchange of ratifications on 27 May 1979.

The visit produced two other signs of Afghanistan’s being drawn into the Soviet orbit. One sign was a statement in the joint communiqué summarizing the visit that contacts between the PDPA and the Soviet Communist Party would be expanded. 135 This confirmed and extended the CPSU’s attempt to restructure the disorganized PDPA in its own image of rigidly disciplined and bureaucratically operations permeating every aspect of national life, a daunting undertaking in Afghanistan. The other was the signing at the same time as the treaty of an agreement to establish a permanent inter-government commission on economic cooperation. 136 Fleshed out later with numerous specific agreements tying various aspects of the Afghan economy to the overpoweringly larger Soviet economy, this was to lead to a virtual takeover of the Afghan economy. It proved costly for Moscow as Kabul’s policies ruined the economy. After the Soviet invasion, the Soviet Union had to assume responsibility for keeping Afghanistan functioning economically.

Death of Dubs

The growing Soviet role in Afghanistan was tragically called to United States attention on 14 February 1979 by the death of Ambassador Dubs. “Spike” Dubs had found it impossible to have meaningful conversations with Afghan officials, seeing them only occasionally and then usually on formal business, 137 but his background in both Soviet and South Asian affairs had qualified him to monitor the situation.

On 14 February he was kidnapped by four Afghans and held hostage at the Kabul Hotel in the center of the capital. The four were members of Setem-
officially apologized and assumed responsibility for Dubs’ death and agreed to provide “adequate protection” for all United States government personnel in the country, or “substantially changed circumstances” justified more aid in the American national interest.\(^{147}\)

Other non-Communist countries halted their aid programs about the same time because of the turmoil and insecurity in Afghanistan. The World Bank and other international aid-giving organizations, which had provided $100.4 million in grants and “soft” low-interest loans to Afghanistan in 1978, began cutting back in 1979. By 1980 only a $2 million grant from the United Nations’ Development Program was forthcoming.\(^{148}\)

The final twist of the bizarre and tragic Dubs case came after Amin had been killed by Soviet troops and denounced by Karmal as a CIA agent. The Afghan interior ministry announced 30 March 1980 that “new discoveries” showed the kidnappers to have opposed “Amin’s oppression and suffocating pressure.” They recognized Amin as “an imperialist agent” and wanted to force Dubs to “expose the secret link of Amin with the U.S. embassy,” the new version said. Fearful of being exposed, Amin instructed Tarooon to attack the hotel room and kill everyone in it. Amin had to “destroy all members of this group for his own security,” the ministry said.\(^{149}\) The United States government, which had failed to receive cooperation from Afghan authorities in investigating the case, found this version sadly ludicrous.\(^{150}\)

**Armed Resistance**

Armed resistance to the Communist regime mounted during the winter of 1978–79. Winter is a period when farmers have time on their hands to feud and fight. The government’s reform efforts, and its purges that broke links between villagers and their friends and patrons in Kabul, provoked increasing numbers of outraged Afghans to use force against official attempts to impose the PDPA’s will on them. Spontaneous opposition to governmental interference developed into guerrilla warfare as the government showed more determination to have its way. That determination was sapped, however, by the reluctance of an Afghan army made up of conscripted villagers to fight other villagers. Desertions began, a small start to what developed into a large flight in the winter of 1979–80 as Soviet advisers assumed more control over the army and the Soviet invasion occurred.

Also beginning that first winter was the development of a network of guerrilla training camps and supply routes across the Durand Line in Pakistan\(^{151}\) and, to a lesser extent, across the Iranian border. A pamphlet circulated among Afghans in Pakistan said killing one Khalqi was equal to offering 80,000 prayers to Allah. But as the first anniversary of the Saur Revolution approached, resistance was still limited to sporadic attacks in relatively remote areas, while urban areas seemed cowed and under control. Both the government and its Soviet friends acted as if the situation were well in hand.

Then came the Herat uprising. It was a major turning point in the Afghan situation. Moscow’s reaction to it led on inexorably, even inevitably, to the Soviet invasion nine months later. With a population of some 150,000, Herat is one of Afghanistan’s major towns, the economic and administrative center for the western part of the country. There in mid-March a popular rebellion erupted against PDPA officials, starting with or quickly joined by the army garrison. Mobs surged through the town hunting down and butchering Khalqis. And not just Khalqis: The hatred turned also on Soviet advisers in an explosion of historic enmity for Russians. Those who were found were slaughtered in ancient barbaric ways, some dying slowly, horribly, and their corpses were disfigured in the ultimate primitive expression of contempt. At least twenty Soviet men, women, and children are definitely known to have died, but the toll of Soviet citizens probably was much higher, 100 or more.\(^{152}\) The government said 3,000 Afghans were killed before loyal troops brought in from Qandahar restored order; other estimates of the four-day battle said 5,000 died.

Unwilling to admit that its own people had rejected it, the government charged that 4,000 Iranian soldiers in disguise had infiltrated across the nearby border and caused the trouble but, it added later, had all been wiped out. No evidence was offered. Iran flatly denied the charge,\(^{153}\) which might have been inspired by the presence in Herat of thousands of Afghans who had lost their jobs in Iran because of the economic turmoil caused by the shah’s ouster two months earlier. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the Iranian religious leader, said in June: “The present government in Afghanistan is oppressing people in the name of Communism. We have been informed that 50,000 people have been killed in Afghanistan and that Islamic religious leaders have been arrested there . . . If Taraki continues his ways, he will suffer the same fate as the shah.”

Khomeini held Moscow to blame for the “killing going on in Afghanistan, thanks to the Soviet interference.”\(^{154}\)

**Government Response to Resistance**

The Herat uprising produced two important results. One was in the Afghan government, the other in Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. But the logical result, a softening of government policy and a greater effort to win popular support rather than trying to force the people to accept the dictates of a PDPA leadership that was isolated from reality, did not develop. Herat was a warning unheeded. Instead, it served to increase the power of the man most responsible for blindly and doggedly trying to impose a dictatorial will on the nation. That was Amin.

On 27 March he became prime minister, taking over direct responsibility for the government from Taraki. Taraki remained president and became the head of a new High Council for the Defense of the Homeland, but increasingly he
became just a figurehead. A new cabinet announced 31 March made Watanjar the defense minister, Sher Jan Mazdooyar minister of interior, and Sarwari head of AGSA, the political police. At his first news conference as prime minister, Amin was asked if Soviet troops would enter Afghanistan. “We have not so far raised this issue with them,” he replied. This was one of many such statements that assumed significance later when Moscow claimed that its troops had repeatedly been invited into the country.

Soviet Response

But if not regular Soviet Army units at that time, hundreds or thousands of additional Soviet military personnel did enter Afghanistan shortly after the Herat uprising, while Soviet women and children living there were sent home in April. The Soviet Union’s first reaction to the uprising was an alert for its nearest airborne strike force, an elite Russian division at Ferghanah in Uzbekistan. If the trouble had not been contained in Herat, and if Soviet citizens working elsewhere in Afghanistan and their families had become similarly endangered, the division presumably would have intervened to protect or evacuate them. The second reaction was to rush military aid to Kabul. On 26 and 27 March Soviet cargo planes delivered to the Afghan capital light tanks, armored personnel carriers, and helicopter gunships. The tanks and APCs were familiar to Soviet-trained Afghans and simply supplemented their weaponry, but the helicopter gunships were new. They were MI-24 Hind helicopters, the Soviet Army’s latest, best, and most expensive, firing rockets and heavy machine guns. They had to be flown and serviced by experienced Soviet crews, although ostensibly they were used as part of the Afghan army. Overnight, the traditional guerrilla warfare of ambush and surprise attack by men climbing the rugged Afghan hills had been given a new dimension. The MI-24 “changed the face of the fighting here,” an Asian military attaché noted. By late summer thirty of them were reported operating in Afghanistan, along with MI-6 troop-carrying helicopters, hundreds of new tanks and APCs, and some additional MiG-21 fighter-bombers equipped with napalm, which was used on hostile villages.

The first new weapon deliveries were soon followed by a visit of the general in charge of ideology, morale, and discipline in the Soviet armed forces, Alexei A. Yegoshin. During the “Prague spring” of 1968, Yegoshin had visited Czechoslovakia to assess the situation there and had returned to Moscow favoring Warsaw Pact military intervention to prevent the loss of Soviet-style political control. He arrived in Kabul 5 April at the head of “a delegation of Soviet political workers,” including six other generals, and stayed for about a week. They found that “effectiveness was quite low” of ideological work in the army. “The low level of political training, the extreme religiousness and downtrodden nature of the masses of soldiers, and the social heterogeneity of the servicemen” made it possible for opponents of the regime to demoralize the army. One of Yegoshin’s generals, Lt. Gen. V. Balakirev, said that “Our delegation had many interesting, frank and pithy talks with the organizers of party work and political education” in the Afghan armed forces. The “frank and pithy” part apparently consisted of telling those organizers to do a better job of building military support for the regime and motivating soldiers to fight for it, not against it.

The Soviet Union was plainly worried about the country’s holding together. Although Pravda much later described the trouble in Herat as a mutiny, on 19 March it showed the worry with unusual front-page coverage of the Afghan accusation of Iranian interference in Herat. It went on to accuse Pakistan, China, Egypt, and “some Western countries” of instigating unrest in Afghanistan. This was the most serious expression of Soviet concern over Afghan stability since the Saur Revolution. Pravda thus began a series of worried reports in Moscow media indicating that Soviet concern was growing parallel with the arms buildup and expanding attempt to instruct the Afghan armed forces.

There was no direct mention of the new friendship treaty in the context of possible Soviet intervention, but another authoritative Pravda article on 1 June accused the Pakistani government of direct complicity in guerrilla operations across the Durand Line and warned that a crisis “cannot leave the Soviet Union indifferent.” With the situation moving toward “a conflict in our immediate vicinity,” it was “a case of actual aggression against a state with which the USSR has a common border,” Pravda declared. Brezhnev spoke even more pointedly, while still avoiding citing the treaty, by saying 11 June that “we shall not leave in need our friends the Afghan people, who have the right to build their lives the way they wish.” All this was, of course, predicated on the pretense—which continued, reinforced, after the Soviet invasion—that the guerrilla resistance to the Communist regime in Kabul was essentially a result of outside influences and interference rather than a widespread, genuinely popular rejection of the regime.

Safronchuk

Along with weapons, ideological advice, and a show of international backing, the Soviet Union took another step as a result of the Herat uprising and its review of the subsequent situation. It strengthened its effort to give political guidance to the PDPA and its government. The main agent for this became Vasily S. Safronchuk, who arrived in Kabul a few weeks after the uprising. A trained economist and a career diplomat—his record reads like a genuine diplomat’s, not one of many KGB men disguised as diplomats—Safronchuk had been the Soviet ambassador to Ghana after President Kwame Nkrumah had fallen and then the deputy permanent Soviet representative to the United Nations from 1971 to 1976.

It is unclear why the Kremlin chose a man with that background, rather than someone experienced in Afghanistan or at least in Moslem Asian countries, for the job of trying to teach the PDPA how to govern the country better and win
more popular support. Perhaps the Soviet experts on Afghanistan were already discredited either in Moscow or with the Kabul regime. While ostensibly part of Puzanov's embassy, but working from the Afghan foreign ministry or from the old royal palace (now known as the House of the People), Safronchuk acquired a status vaguely independent of the embassy. It was also only vaguely influential.

Some changes that might be attributed to him soon appeared, such as Taraki's and Amin's making a show of going to mosques for prayers in an effort to placate aroused Moslem feelings. They began meeting frequently with tribal and provincial representatives, religious leaders, and military officers to explain PDPA aims. The regime made minor admissions of excesses and promised better. The land reform program was halted on the pretense that it had been accomplished.

Safronchuk urged Taraki to broaden the government's base by bringing in non-Communists. Moscow media reported on 13 July a PDPA politburo decision for the establishment of a "united national front" to include all "progressive public and political forces," but significantly this was not publicized inside Afghanistan. But nothing happened on it until, two years later, when, after great difficulty, the Soviets were finally able to have Karmal carry out the idea with the creation of a National Fatherland Front—which failed to rally the desired "progressive public and political forces" to a regime hated for its own policies and for its Soviet sponsorship.

Safronchuk's advice, and other aspects of Soviet pressure, had little or no effect on the Afghan regime. PDPA leaders made it clear that they were not going to welcome Parchamis back into authority—or let survivors of the Parcham faction or other political elements out of Pul-i-Charki prison, where some 12,000 persons were being held by late summer.

Amin reportedly maneuvered to keep Safronchuk or Puzanov from seeing Taraki, as they tried to do almost daily, thus insuring that he became the main contact man with the Soviets. Obdurate, proud of the PDPA's narrow popular base rather than embarrassed by it, determined to do things his own tough and often violent way, Amin became an obstruction to the Soviet effort to save the regime from its own mistakes.

As early as May 1979, intelligence reports reaching the United States government "suggest[ed] that the Soviets are already moving forward with plans to engineer replacement of the present Khalqi leadership of the DRA, perhaps with the exiled Parchamist leaders including former Deputy Prime Minister Babrak Karmal, now believed hiding in Europe." About the same time, however, the United States embassy in Kabul reported, a Soviet embassy official there expressed frustration with the politically inexperienced Afghan government but observed that "at this time" there was no apparent alternative leadership.

Soviet Search for an Alternative

If that were true in May, the Soviet embassy was by July beginning to look for an alternative to Amin. By mid-summer Soviet advisers were running much of the government behind a facade of unqualified Khalqis, but Amin tried to keep control of basic policies. Arrests continued, some widely respected religious leaders who objected to the violation of Islamic traditions were murdered, entire villages were wiped out for individuals' acts of opposition. While the Soviets urged conciliation, the regime conducted new purges. Amin later was assigned the blame, but it was Taraki who said in May 1979 that "whoever stands against our revolution—whoever he may be—we will put him in jail and will really punish him." A reign of terror was conducted against real and suspected opponents of the PDPA, its policies, and its Soviet friends. Urban purges and reports reaching the towns of rural atrocities encouraged opposition, however. An anti-government demonstration occurred in Kabul on 23 June.

Something had to be done, despite Amin.

Sometime in July foreign diplomats in Kabul became aware of Soviet efforts to try to make leadership changes. Amin presumably was also aware of them. He tightened his grip. On 27 July Taraki assumed formal control over the armed forces and designated Amin as de facto defense minister to "implement in practice" directives supposedly originating with Taraki. Cabinet changes were "made on the proposal" of Amin. Watanjar was shifted from defense to the interior ministry, Mazdooryar from interior to frontier affairs. At the same time, the PDPA politburo called for deepening intraparty democracy through "enhancing collective leadership of party organs" and other party reforms.

According to a secret source providing information to the United States embassy, "Soviet machinations to alter the Afghan regime ... moved into a more active phase" in the last week of July. The source, apparently a dissident member of the PDPA hierarchy, said the Soviet efforts were being supported by non-Pushtun cabinet ministers. "An important part of the current political problem is the excessive Pushtunization tendencies of the current Khalqi leadership," the source said. Other charges being whispered around the capital accused Amin of a growing "cult of personality," nepotism, personal profiteering, violent suppression of PDPA dissent, collusion with unidentified foreign enemies, and policy miscalculations.

Reporting the Soviet machinations, the American embassy added: "We frequently hear rumors that the Soviets are still trying to build a new regime around former royalist prime minister [Mohammed] Youssuf," the head of King Zahir Shah's government from 1963 to 1965. Either simultaneously or later—the timing is unclear—the Soviet embassy was also holding late-night talks with Nur Ahmed Etemadi, the king's prime minister from 1967 to 1971. A Westernized career diplomat who had become known to the Soviets as Afghan ambas-
sador in Moscow after 1971, he was ambassador to Pakistan at the time of the Communist takeover. Etemadi had just been called up from Pakistan for consultations with Daoud’s government when it was overthrown, and he was imprisoned at Pul-i-Charki shortly after that. Sometime in the summer of 1979 a Soviet embassy car surreptitiously picked him up at prison several times for talks. The ability to take him out of prison not only showed Soviet power in Kabul but also indicated cooperation by some disaffected Afghan officials.

Night Letters

Even stronger signs of opposition to Amin within the ruling group soon appeared. Clandestine leaflets, the traditional Afghan dissidents’ shabnamas (“night letters”), began to circulate in August. The police made no apparent effort to stop them, and police boss Sarwari was later accused of having encouraged the dissidents who wrote them. One shabnama, at least the second to attack Amin from within the Khalq membership, appeared in Kabul on the morning of 29 August. It went far beyond, and made more specific, the earlier whispered accusations. It claimed to speak for “a number of Khalqis . . . [who] decided not to be indifferent to the treachery and rascality of the corrupted band of Amin.” Listing fourteen types of mistakes or failures, beginning with “excess of selfishness and personality cult in the leadership,” the leaflet charged that “loyal revolutionary personalities” were being dismissed and “thousands of Khalqis . . . who did not come to terms with” Amin were jailed. “Amin’s behavior and tyranny are an embarrassment to the [PDPA and have] . . . caused the oppositionist elements to unite to threaten the security and safety of the country,” it added. The shabnama concluded:

Although we informed the general secretary of the party [Taraki] of Amin’s acts and behavior many times, he told us with much regret that Amin is in charge of everything and he (the general secretary) cannot do anything and every responsibility rests with Amin.

Therefore, it is evident that all Khalqis should join hands against Amin and disarm him of his power. The political bureau of the central committee and the revolutionary council should also take timely action. Otherwise, the loyal members of the party will lose faith in them.

This description of Taraki as helpless to stop the downward spiral of the regime was later contradicted by the version of recent events circulated when Amin had become president. It accused Taraki of having conspired in August to assassinate Amin. The alleged co-conspirators included Sarwari, the AGSA boss, and the last three important military leaders of the 1978 coup left in the national leadership after the purge of Qadir and others. They were Watanjar, who in his new job of interior minister had nominal control of the normal police that were separate from Sarwari’s political police; Mazdooyar, now in the frontier ministry dealing with Pashtun tribes that had become hostile to the regime; and Gulabzoy, the communications minister. Amin supposedly learned of the conspiracy and blocked it. Whether in fact opposition to Amin ever got as far as an assassination plot during August—what happened on 14 September could have been something else—is unknown. The military men had proven in 1973 and 1978 that they were capable of it, but Taraki had never shown the decisiveness or ability to organize such an action. The accusation might well have been an exaggeration or even an invention intended to justify Amin’s own actions.

While privately working against Amin, and publicly urging national reconciliation, the Soviets were, in the summer of 1979, showing no conciliatory spirit on the military front. Amin attributed to Soviet advice the summer tactic of burning crops to deprive resistance forces of food, saying Moscow had promised to make up any deficits. Food had been a Soviet weapon in fighting the basmachi, and first the French and then the Americans had destroyed crops as a tactic against Vietnamese Communists. This was a time-honored way of fighting guerrillas who controlled rural areas, despite the fact that women and children usually suffered more than fighters. It was also a way of insuring that rural alienation increased rather than lessened.

A major army rebellion occurred in Jalalabad in June but was crushed. Daoud had built the modern Afghan army to impose his will on the countryside and tribes more than to defend the nation as a whole, but it was never prepared for the emotional strains that the PDPA put on it. It began to buckle under the pressure, despite a doubling in August of soldiers’ meager pay. Rather than be used to oppress those unwilling to accept PDPA policies, whole units deserted. Some soldiers simply went home to their villages. Some units joined the resistance intact, taking with them their Soviet-made weapons.

This process was well underway at the time of the Jalalabad mutiny, but that event seems to have triggered something in the Soviet Union. In late June, Western intelligence agencies picked up indications of unusual military movements, or preparations for movements, in the southern part of the Soviet Union. At first it was unclear whether the Kremlin was preparing for possible military intervention in Iran, then in the early stages of the Khomeini turmoil, or in Afghanistan. Only later, in retrospect, was it possible to date the first signs of Soviet preparations for possibly sending Soviet Army units into Afghanistan as early as June 1979, six months before the invasion. In early July a specially trained 400-man strike unit from the Soviet division at Fergana, the elite 105th Guards Airborne Division, was stationed at Bagram air base, the key military communications and logistical center for the Kabul region. Moscow wanted to insure that it had an unshakable foothold, an “aerial bridgehead,” inside a country that seemed to be coming apart.

A further sign that it was coming apart was an army mutiny on 5 August (well publicized because it occurred within view of Kabul’s foreign community). An army regiment at Bala Hissar, the ancient fortress overlooking the old section of Kabul, reportedly rebelled because the political purge of a popular
officer caused other officers to feel threatened. Three tanks started from the fortress toward the regime’s power center, the House of the People. Mi-24 gunships, which received radio orders in Russian, destroyed them with missiles. Then the helicopters and tanks from other units bombarded the fortress. The battle lasted four spectacular hours. The rebellion was crushed.189 But if Amin, who as defense minister had responsibility for army reliability, was disturbed, he tried to hide it. He continued to reiterate that “We are proud that we have not asked any foreign country to fight for us or to provide our country with security and safety. . . . So far, we have never thought of utilizing foreign forces to defend and protect our revolution,” he said 9 September.190

The Soviets were less confident of the regime’s ability to cope with the widespread opposition, to fight what had become a civil war, without outside help. What further needed to be done about the overall problem was the question assigned to the Soviet deputy defense minister and commander of ground forces who had planned and commanded the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, General Ivan G. Pavlovskiy. He arrived in Kabul in August accompanied by a large team of officers. His team spread out all over Afghanistan to assess the situation.191 Their secret mission, never publicly acknowledged by the Soviet Union, found that such Soviet-urged steps as setting up “revolutionary defense committees” to broaden support for the government and reduce guerrilla support existed more on paper than in fact. Large areas of the country were out of Kabul’s control. In some, such as the Hazara area in the center of the country, resistance forces had begun to try to operate alternative administrations. The army was becoming unreliable.

Under these daunting circumstances, the Soviet Union showed some hesitancy about how much further to get involved. On 16 August a Soviet radio commentary beamed to Afghanistan in Dari pointedly reminded listeners that “the Soviet people were themselves forced to defend the Great October cause [the Bolshevik Revolution] against the conspiracies and sudden hostile attacks of imperialism and foreign reaction which has now attacked the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.” The Soviet people won, and “we are confident” that the Afghan people can, too, the commentary said.192 Another commentary the next day in English said, “The Afghan people are capable of defending their right to independence. Today they are proving their ability to defend the gains of the revolution.”193 The message was clear: Solve your own problems; don’t count on us.

The day after that, 18 August, Afghanistan’s national day, Brezhnev and Kosygin sent congratulations that omitted any mention of the friendship treaty.194 The Kremlin thus seemed to be following a two-track policy. It was preparing to take a larger role in Afghanistan, including a direct military role. At the same time, it was still leaving itself room to back away from the problem.

In these circumstances—Pavlovskiy in Kabul making contingency plans; Safronchuk seeking unsuccessfully to budge Amin on the political necessities for trying to bring the rebellious country under control; Safronchuk also trying
to undermine Amin’s authority and depose him; Moscow hesitant about having to save the PDPA from its own barbarous and bloody folly; and strong elements within KHALQ moving secretly to try to restrict or remove Amin—an opportunity presented itself for the Soviet leadership to talk the situation over directly with Taraki. After Amin’s interference in contacts between Soviet officials and “the great leader of the Afghan people,” it was a chance for discussions without obstruction from the man whom Moscow had come to be convinced was Taraki’s evil influence. Taraki went to Havana for a nonaligned summit meeting. Watanjar was prominent at the Kabul airport departure 1 September, a fact unjustified by his protocol standing—he was not even a PDPA politburo member—and surprising to onlookers,195 but perhaps explicable in terms of the later accusations by Amin that Taraki and Watanjar had been plotting against him. Taraki stopped on the way home from Havana for talks in Moscow with Brezhnev.