The Violence Curtain: Occupied Afghan Turkestan & the Making of a Central Asian Borderscape

Timothy Nunan, Center for Global History, Freie Universität Berlin

Although less studied than Afghanistan's eastern and southern border with Pakistan, Afghanistan's northern border, which has separated Afghanistan from the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and, today, the Central Asian republics, has long been an arena of transcultural mobility and interaction. Since the nineteenth century, Western interventions have brought in Afghan rulers like Shah Shuja, Nadir Shah, and Hamid Karzai across the Durand Line to the east, southeast, and south of today's Pakistan. Other Afghan rulers who came from the north, such as ʿAbdurrāhman Khan and Babrak Karmal, have been installed through Russian Imperial diplomacy and Soviet military intervention. Labor migration, refugee movement, and international terrorist activity in the Afghanistan-Pakistan borderlands are well known, but few scholars have explored Turkmen pastoral migration across the Russian-Afghan border, the meaning of the Soviet nationalities policy for northern Afghanistan's populations, or how Soviet refugees transformed northern Afghanistan as they fled from collectivization in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the 1930s.[1] The lands of northern Afghanistan may lie beyond the remit of the traditional historiography of both Afghanistan and Russia, but they constitute a case study of how socialist regimes of sovereignty have shaped Afghan history.[2]

One reason for this, of course, is that the Soviet-Afghan border also became a Cold War border—but one that both separated and connected the

1 On migrations from Soviet Central Asia to northern Afghanistan, see Botakoz Kassymbekova, *Despite Cultures: Early Soviet Rule in Tajikistan* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016); on more recent migrations, see Jeanine Dagyeli, "Shifting Grounds: Trans-border Migration and Local Identity in the Secondary City of Kulob" (lecture, Crossroads Asia Workshop, Transregional Crossroads of Social Interaction, Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, 21. March 2014).

2 While this essay does not go into comparing Afghanistan's different borders with one another—a task unto itself—outstanding recent works on encounters across the far more famous Durand Line (Afghanistan's border with British India and, since 1947, Pakistan) include Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); and Martin J. Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge, International Relations, and the Anglo-Afghan Encounter, 1808–1878* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

populations on either side. Soviet travelers often emphasized that crossing the border was like entering another world, but in reality northern Afghanistan had long been in contact with the Soviet Union. The government in Moscow had been the first in the world to recognize Afghan independence in 1919, and the Red Army had driven the so-called *basmachi* (anti-Soviet rebels) into Afghanistan during the 1920s. The USSR had mooted investing in oil and gas fields in northwestern Afghanistan in the 1930s, but exchange between the two countries truly intensified after 1955 as Moscow sought to court non-aligned Afghanistan as a friendly buffer state against American client states in Iran and Pakistan with a large aid package. Seeking to connect Afghan goods and enterprises (such as they were) with Soviet enterprises, Soviet engineers built Afghanistan's largest cargo port in Hairaton (across the Amu River from Termez) in the early 1970s, and in 1964, Soviet engineers completed the Salang Tunnel at an altitude of over three thousand meters through the Hindu Kush, halving the travel time between Kabul and the Soviet Union. And during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan itself (1979–1989), engineers constructed the Friendship Bridge between Termez and Hairaton—opened as a means to funnel more military equipment to Kabul, but later famous as the scene where the last Soviet troops pulled out of Afghanistan on February 15, 1989. Throughout, Soviet specialists, Uzbek and Tajik translators, and ordinary Afghans were linked together in new patterns of exchange as the Soviet Union became Afghanistan's largest trading partner.[3]

All of this makes the Soviet-Afghan border sound like an example of Soviet development aid in action, which it was.[4] Yet the most startling example of transcultural interaction between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan during the Cold War remains underexplored in the historiography. During the military occupation of Afghanistan, sixty-two thousand Soviet border guards normally stationed on Soviet soil conducted a separate intervention into northern Afghanistan. They did so first in order to save local populations from mujāhidīn attacks, but later to extend the Soviet border regime into northern Afghanistan for hundreds of kilometers down to the ring road built by the Soviet Union in the 1960s. This intervention, the present paper argues, generated novel regimes of sovereignty and new inequalities in the value of Afghan and Soviet lives in this border

3 For more on these projects, see Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), Chapter 2.

4 For one comparison, see Artemy Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics, Decolonization, and the Struggle for Welfare and Equality in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

zone. Even as the Soviet Border Forces unleashed a campaign of wanton repression in much of northern Afghanistan, Soviet Komsomol advisers sought to guide Afghan children to an imagined future of Soviet-Afghan brotherhood.[5] Yet as this mission to impose order faltered throughout the 1980s, Soviet advisers changed the tools with which they sought to integrate the borderlands into a socialist project. As the Soviet Army and the Border Forces withdrew from Afghanistan in the late 1980s, northern Afghanistan became marked by a post-socialist, postcolonial condition signified by a fetishization of legality and the market.

How does this investigation contribute to the theme of transcultural mobility? In recent years, scholars of Soviet and Eastern European history have studied cultural exchanges, foreign students, and economic aid in order to understand the many layers of Soviet international engagement.[6] Valuable as much of this scholarship has been, however, it mostly focuses on Eastern European and Soviet actors.[7] This is understandable as most of these interactions were with Eastern European partners, but it also silences interactions with the Central Asians, not to mention the Middle Eastern, African, and Asian populations outside the Soviet bloc. The problem is compounded by the fact that the "global turn" or "transnational turn" seen in so many fields has been slow in coming to the study of Iranian and Afghan history, as well as to the historiography of the Arab

5 Komsomol (All-Union Leninist Communist League of Youth) was the major All-Union institution for preparing and indoctrinating Soviet youth for membership in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, see Robert Hornsby, "The Post-Stalin Komsomol and the Soviet Fight for Third World Youth," *Cold War History* 16:1 (2016): 83–100.

6 Austin Jersild, "The Soviet State as Imperial Scavenger: 'Catch Up and Surpass' in the Transnational Soviet Bloc, 1950–1960," *American Historical Review* 116:1 (2011): 109–132; Anne Gorsuch, *All This is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad After Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World*, ed. Dianne P. Koenker and Anne Gorsuch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Rachel Applebaum, "The Friendship Project: Socialist Internationalism in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s," *Slavic Review* 74:3 (Fall 2015): 484–507.

7 David Engerman, "The Second World's Third World," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12: 1 (Winter 2011): 183–211. As of 2016, this trend is beginning to change. See, among others: Ragna Boden, *Die Grenzen der Weltmacht. Sowjetische Indonesienpolitik von Stalin bis Brežnev* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2006); Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

world.[8] Much of the research literature, in short, reflects and reproduces existing area studies formations—something this article seeks to challenge through its focus on Soviet-Afghan encounters during the period of military occupation.[9]

In terms of sources, this paper draws on the archives of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League (abbreviated as Komsomol) as well as memoirs and interviews of Soviet border guards who served in northern Afghanistan during the 1980s. Clearly, as different as these two actors were, these sources privilege the Russian perspective of this interaction. The safe exploration of the other side has not been possible for many years. The present study will try to make up for this lacuna as much as possible through a careful analysis of the ideological presuppositions as well as the rhetorical strategies underlying these Russian sources.

While the Komsomol is best known as a Soviet mass organization for youths, following the 1978 "April Revolution" of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (Hizb-i Dimukrātīk-i Khalq-i Afghānistān, here abbreviated as PDPA), Afghan Communists requested aid from Komsomol to build their own counterpart. Such mass organizations for youths were an essential part of any single-party Communist regime. Beyond enforcing the Party's monopoly on culture and social organizations among youth, they funneled youths into the ranks of the military, the intelligence services, and the Party (especially in Afghanistan). Leadership in these youth organizations was often a crucial rung in the professional ladder and the network development of a rising Communist Party cadre: Mikhail Gorbachev, for example, served as a secretary for Komsomol organizations in his hometown of Stavropol in the late 1950s and early 1960s following his graduation from university. Similarly, Hu Yaobang

8 On the transnational turn, see, "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History," *American Historical Review* 111:5 (December 2006): 1441–1464. This trend is beginning to change for Central and South Asia as well as the Middle East. See, among others, Afshin Matn-Asgari, "The Impact of Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union on Qajar and Pahlavi Iran: Notes Toward a Revisionist Historiography," in *Iranian-Russian Encounters: Empires and Revolutions Since 1800*, ed. Stephanie Cronin (London: Routledge, 2013); Robert D. Crews, *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); James Pickett, "Soviet Civilization Through a Persian Lens: Iranian Intellectuals, Cultural Diplomacy, and Socialist Modernity 1941–1955," Iranian Studies 48:5 (2015): 805–826; Moritz Deutschmann, *Iran and Russian Imperialism: The Ideal Anarchists, 1800–1914* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016). A February 2017 workshop at Boston University focused on the history of Arab ties with the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, while an ongoing series of workshops in Princeton and Geneva focuses on ties between the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Russian Empire & Soviet Union.

9 See Dağyeli, this issue, 169–196.

in China rose from head of the Youth League in the 1950s to General Secretary of the Party in the 1980s. Such youth organizations were developed on a global scale in communist regimes such as East Germany, China, Vietnam, South Yemen, and Angola, but also in "countries of socialist orientation" like Syria. These organizations circulated and linked youths throughout the socialist bloc and its allies.[10]

The Afghan version, the Democratic Organization of the Youth of Afghanistan (Sāzmān-i Dimukrātīk-i Jawānān-i Afghānistan, here abbreviated as DOYA), was founded after the Revolution with substantial assistance and funding from the USSR. From 1979 (before the Soviet intervention) to 1988, approximately 180 Komsomol advisers were deployed to provincial Afghanistan to assist their Afghan colleagues in making DOYA a functional youth organization that could supply the PDPA with new cadres. In contrast to several other aspects of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Russian archives for these operations are freely available, allowing one to gain a picture of rural Afghanistan during the occupation.[11] Komsomol divided Afghanistan into nine administrative zones (corresponding to eight compass points plus a center zone), with northern Afghanistan, as discussed here, corresponding to the north, northwestern, and northeastern zones.

In addition to these reports, this article draws on the memoirs of Soviet border guards who served in the extension of the Soviet Union's border regime into northern Afghanistan in the 1980s. There is no general history of the Soviet Border Forces (which guarded the longest border in the world), but they were a unit of the KGB since 1957, employing tens of thousands of military professionals until the collapse of the Soviet Union. They had their own academic institutions and training centers, and officers in the Forces often spent their careers rotating between the ten Border districts along the USSR's western borders, the Black and Caspian Seas, the borders with Iran and Afghanistan, China, Mongolia, and North Korea, as well as the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Strait. These Forces were recognizable from the green epaulets on their uniforms—a detail that will become significant later.

---

10 On such exchanges, see Robert Hornsby, "The Enemy Within? The Komsomol and Foreign Youth Inside the Post-Stalin Soviet Union, 1957–1985," *Past and Present* 232:1 (2016): 237–278.

11 The archival *fond* (record group) in question is RGASPI f. M-3, op. 13, "Dokumenty gruppy sovetnikov TsK VLKSM pri Demokraticheskoi organizatsii molodëzhi Afganistana." Several former Komsomol advisers authored a book documenting their activities in Afghanistan, a copy of which is available at RGASPI: *Mushavery* (Moscow: Izdatel'skii tsentr "Nauka, Tekhnika, Obrazovaniie," 2007).

While the ordinary archives of the Border Forces remain closed to outside researchers, post-Soviet history has created a context in which new and valuable sources have emerged. While the members of the Border Forces were eligible for state pensions upon retirement, those who had served in Afghanistan, like members in many other Soviet military missions abroad, were sworn to a regime of absolute secrecy. In contrast to members of the Border Forces serving elsewhere, they were never given official papers certifying their participation in the Afghan conflict. Hence, even as veterans' associations grew after 1991, the border guards, as well as military "internationalists" from forty-six other small-scale conflicts, were not given access to the welfare benefits provided by the Russian Federation to "official" veterans. The passage of a "Federal Law on Veterans" in the Russian Federation in 1994, which granted hitherto excluded veterans access to public resources, partly rectified this legal situation. Yet given the lack of official documentation and access to KGB archives, many of the "veterans" of such conflicts started publishing memoirs describing their experiences abroad. This was part of an effort to prompt the veterans' associations to lobby for access to the relevant documents and benefits. Such memoirs have been recognized in recent scholarship as essential for writing the history of the Cold War and Soviet transnational engagements, an example being studies on the role of Soviet military personnel in the Israeli-Egyptian War.[12]

One must use these kinds of sources with caution. Komsomol and DOYA had, by their own admission, only limited access to the Afghan countryside, and while the Komsomol advisers' reports contain invaluable details, they are classic examples of Soviet bureaucratic style and omission. Any broader history of Afghanistan during the 1980s would also have to include sources like the archives of the Western NGOs that operated in Afghanistan during the 1980s, mujāhidīn publications, and not least the publications and memoirs of the Afghan regime itself. While the border guards' memoirs are far from self-critical, they provide valuable details about the administrative status of the Border Forces' occupation of northern Afghanistan. They also show the lens through which Soviet Border Forces saw the Afghan resistance; they characterized them as "bandits" (rather than an opposing army or even people in violation of the new, extended border regime). This mirrors trends in the Afghan regime at the time, which referred

12 Fredrik Logevall, review of Lawrence Freedman: *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), Washington Post, 3. July 2008, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/03/AR2008070302734.html; for one example of new scholarship, see Isabella Ginor and Gideon Remez, *The Soviet-Israeli War, 1967–1973: The USSR's Military Intervention in the Egyptian-Israeli Conflict* (London: Hurst, 2017).

to its opponents as ashrīr (evildoers). To be clear, this article does not endorse these terms, but instead sees them as evidence of the kinds of attitudes concerning inside and outside, order and disorder that officers in the Border Forces shared even while engaging in a radical transformation of the border regime itself.

Drawing on these admittedly one-sided sources, the present essay will map the hitherto unexplored making of the Soviet-Afghan border region. It hopes to contribute to the historiography of imperial borders in general and those of the Soviet Union in particular. It will bring this historiography into dialogue with recent anthropological literature on borderscapes and the "postcolony."[13] Borderscape here does not just refer to the Soviet-Afghan border as a concrete place, but also to the wider institutions involved in the maintenance and management of this border area, its meaning to the people living in and near it, and the regimes of sovereignty which it created within and beyond the border zone. With the term postcolony, I do not imply that Afghanistan or its northern part was a Soviet colony—it was never formally colonized and its government claimed the Soviet occupation to be an act of collective defense. Rather, this piece engages with other scholarship on Afghanistan that examines how its ambiguous sovereign status has generated discourses and subjectivities similar to more straightforward cases of colonial and post-colonial sovereignty.[14] I am interested in the ways in which the specificities of the Soviet-Afghan case (occupied but not colonized, and with a long history of close ties) did or did not generate the subjectivities and preoccupations characteristic of other, better-studied "postcolonies."

The first section will explore how Soviet Border Forces began their interventions in northern Afghanistan. The second section explores the high point of the border guards' intervention into the north, from 1982–1986, when they undertook active combat missions in the region. A third section explores the period from 1986–1989, as the border guards were reined in

13 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, "Law and Disorder in the Postcolony: An Introduction," in *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony,* ed. Jean and John Comaroff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006): 1–56; *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge*, ed. Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

14 For recent studies looking at these dynamics, see Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Alessandro Monsutti, "Anthropologizing Afghanistan: Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (October 2013): 269–285; Martin Bayly, *Taming the Imperial Imagination: Colonial Knowledge and Anglo-Afghan Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

and Soviet advisers turned to new forms of economic liberalization and "national reconciliation" to manage the north. In doing so, the study hopes to furnish not only a rich empirical account of the Afghan-Soviet border during the Cold War, but also an account of the effects of these regimes of sovereignty on the populations of the region.

Moving to forward border defense

When Komsomol advisers arrived in northern Afghanistan in the autumn of 1980, their mission seemed manageable. The northern Provincial Committees of DOYA were the biggest in the country, save for the capital, with the Badakhshan, Balkh, and Herat cells numbering six thousand, five thousand, and four thousand members, respectively.[15] During their first year in the north, advisers could conduct their work in conditions of peace. Only four percent of the youth in the northern zone belonged to DOYA, but one adviser remarked that the period from November 1980 to February 1981 saw "relatively sustainable people's power and support for it in several districts, sub-districts, and villages."[16] Provincial and district committees built theaters, Houses of Soviet-Afghan Friendship, youth camps, and other institutions that lavished time, money, and care on young Afghans.[17] Many of these institutions were only semi-functional in the provinces, but central institutions in Kabul underscored the vision held out to Afghan youth. A Central Pioneers' Palace in the capital (opened in February 1981), itself modeled on Komsomol-managed Pioneers' Palaces in the Soviet Union, housed a theatre, a driving school, a library, a swimming pool, a cafeteria, and a gymnasium.[18] Institutions like these promised to not only educate and socialize a new Afghan ruling class, but also to fulfill certain Soviet notions about the ideal childhood—secular, "cultured," and sheltered from war.

For Soviet Komsomol and Party advisers, building socialism in northern Afghanistan held particular importance for the construction of a stable Afghan client state. Given the layout of the highways that

15 Kosimsho Iskanderov, *Molodëzhnoe dvizheniie v Afganistane (1945–1990 gg.)* (Dushanbe, 1992), 103, 107.

16 Iu. M. Alekseev, "SPRAVKA o deiatel'nosti DOMA zony 'Sever' za period s 20 noiabria 1980g. do 20 noiabria 1981g.," RGASPI M-3, op. 13, d. 15, l. 27.

17 Grigoriy Semchenko, quoted in *Mushavery* (Moscow: Nauka, Tekhnika, Obrazovaniie, 2005), 161.

18 N.I. Zakharov, "Kak eto nachalos'," in *Mushavery*, 14.

Soviet and Polish engineers had constructed decades earlier, it was only via provinces like Badghis, Jowzjan, Sheberghan, and Balkh, along Afghanistan's northern borders, that Soviet military vehicles could deliver supplies to Herat, Kabul, or areas in the south. Secondly, however, the north held resources that could be extracted to cover Afghanistan's mounting debts to Moscow. Already in the 1960s, it had become clear to Soviet analysts that the Afghan state was not capable of raising the funds needed to repay even the low- or zero-interest loans that the Soviet Union had extended to Kabul, and exports such as dried fruit or karakul wool were inadequate even in barter arrangements. These pressures only increased following the Soviet occupation, but Afghanistan's only resources of value were gas and oil reserves in the country's northeast, so keeping control of these was vital if only to make the occupation less financially ruinous. One border guard summed it up: "The northern provinces had a population higher than two million, extractive industry, gas pipelines, a network of roads, bridges, and tunnels. They constituted the decisive part of the agricultural sector of the national economy of the country."[19] More than just a crucial logistical corridor, the north could provide the foundation for the Afghan working class and peasantry that the PDPA claimed to represent.

Yet the north also constituted a zone to be defended for Soviet strategic interests. From here, Afghan mujāhidīn were able to stage attacks on Soviet territory. The southern border of the USSR along the Tajik SSR's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous *Oblast'* (region) offered hundreds of miles of easy access to Soviet territory. Such fears, moreover, had a long history as well as being grounded in reality. The fear that the CIA was attempting to establish a "New Great Ottoman Empire" on the territory of the Central Asian SSRs had been one of the reasons for the Soviet Union to intervene in Afghanistan in the first place in 1979.[20] Starting in the "early 1980s" at the latest, the CIA began investigating Muslim restiveness in Central Asia and commissioned thousands of copies of the Koran in Uzbek translation for distribution among Soviet Muslims. Later, in the spring of 1985, moreover, Afghan mujāhidīn actually conducted successful raids into the Soviet Union itself with the

19 Petr Ivanchishin, "Zona osoboi otvetstvennost'," in *Po obe storony granitsy*. In addition to these factors, the northeastern "limb" of Afghanistan, Badakhshan, constituted a land bridge and, therefore, transit point to China, home of the virus of Maoism and Chinese weapons.

20 Aleksandr Liakhovskii, *Tragediia i doblest' Afgana* (Moscow: GPI Iskona, 1995), 109.

encouragement of the CIA.[21] As the Soviet occupation faltered, top KGB analysts went as far as toying with the idea of partitioning Afghanistan, with the more "valuable" territories north of the Hindu Kush to serve as a defensible buffer state.[22]

Soviet Border Forces internalized what it meant to protect the border from outside sources of disorder. They believed in the idea that the nation-state—its borders in particular—had to be guarded at all costs. Many knew no other world than the border. Pavel Polianskii, who served "at the southernmost point of the Union—Kushka," recalled his father's service in the Takhta-Bazar battalion. As the foreword to Polianskii's account explained, "Takhta Bazar is a special biographical fixture (ob'ekt) for the Poliankskii family, seen by them as a sign of fate."[23] Igor' Muchler's family history went back even further. His father began his service in Belarus in 1924, but was transferred to Central Asia, where Igor' and his brother (who also became a border guard) grew up.[24] "In my youth," Muchler recalled, "I took in everything connected with the border." He mastered Turkmen and Tajik and "never thought of another destiny than that [of living at the border]." Asked why he joined the guards, his response was direct: "For an idea (za ideiu)." In short, masculine figures like Muchler had invested in the imaginary of the border and its defense. More broadly, these ideas about service, masculinity, and the border belonged to a set of ideas in which individuals' "identity space" was taken to be contiguous with the "decision space" of the states they inhabited, and in which "the defense of identity space was built into the life cycle of male citizens."[25]

Soviet border guards had long seen themselves as guardians of a firm line between two states. But as Afghan resistance to the Soviet-supported Kabul regime intensified, the Border Forces began to conduct forays into northern Afghan territory to protect vulnerable Afghan confessional minorities, namely Ismaili Shi'a living in Afghan Badakhshan. In the spring of 1980, Border Forces invaded the area surrounding Gulkhan,

21 Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004), Kindle Edition, Locations 1738 and 2035.

22 Nikolai Leonov, *Likholet'e* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia, 1995), 206.

23 Pavel Polianskii, "Povtoril by vse snachala [. . .]" in *Po obe storone granitsy*, 227–228.

24 Igor' Muchler, "Proval inzhenera Bashira," in *Po obe storone granitsy*, 277.

25 Charles S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History," *American Historical Review* 105:3 (2000), 816, 824.

a village in Afghan Badakhshan. Commanders met with village elders to explain: "the Soviet unit had come to provide aid to locals; hence, should the inhabitants experience a shortage of some staple (salt, flour, kerosene), they should come to the border guards."[26] Yet the terror that mujāhidīn groups launched against PDPA activists and minority populations gave rise to rumors that the USSR was establishing a safe haven for Afghan refugees. Indeed, not long after this episode, the USSR apparently began admitting small numbers of Afghan refugees. "In the middle of June [1980]," wrote one Soviet border guard of an unnamed location, "around six hundred Afghan women, children, and elders, saving themselves from bandits, were forced to escape into Soviet territory."[27] The Border Forces denied the existence of any official policy, but soon local PDPA secretaries "organized border trade between Tajikistan and Afghanistan." As the Komsomol adviser for the northeast zone reported, the operations helped increase the recruitment figures for Badakhshan; in the course of one year, the organization doubled its membership.[28]

As security conditions worsened, however, the Afghan government petitioned the Soviet Union to extend its own border regime into Afghanistan itself. Gennadii Zgerskii, the commander of the Central Asian Border District, explained: mujāhidīn bands near Moskovskii and Khorog had launched massacres of Afghan communities bordering the River Amu.

> All of this was done deliberately with the goal of provoking the inhabitants of the border area (prigranich'ia) and, of course, the border units themselves. Hence, a clear, direct threat to the inviolability of our [Soviet] border had arisen. Taking all of this as well as the numerous requests by the local populations of the border regions of Afghanistan for defense from the depredations of the bandits into account, a decision was taken by the [Soviet] government [in early 1981] to introduce irregular units from the Central Asian District . . . into several points to increase border security and protect the local population.[29]

---

26 Zgerskii, 11.

27 Iu.I. Zavadskii, "Ot Kushki do Pamira," in *Po obe storony granitsy*, Vol. 2. The author has used an electronic copy of this volume which lacks page references.

28 N. Poliakov, "Spravka sovetnika TsK VLKSM po zone Severo-Vostok za period s dekabria 1981g. po noiabr' 1982g.," RGASPI M-3, op. 13, d. 26, l. 88.

29 Gennadii Zgerskii, *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan: 1979–1989)*, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Moscow: Granitsa, 1999), 10.

This decision prompted a dislocation of the Soviet border regime from the physical space of the border itself. The memoirs of one Iurii Dagdanov, the commander of a repair company based in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe, provide a sense of how the new border regime worked in practice. One day, Dagdanov's company was flown from Dushanbe to a regional base of the Border Forces in Pyandzh, a town on the northern banks of the Amu River. In his recollection, Dagdanov explained how his assignments with the Border Forces had brought him closer and closer to the Afghan border, making a deployment in Afghanistan seem like his destiny. He steeled himself, he explained, trying to be brave like the Native Americans portrayed in the East German "Red Westerns" with which he had grown up.[30] Dadganov did not dwell on the irony of admiring an indigenous resistance fighter against foreign colonialism while waiting to be deployed to Afghanistan. As Dagdanov recalled—think of the earlier description of the Border Forces—he and the other Border Forces officers stood near the landing pad wearing their green epaulets.

Yet Dagdanov's superiors surprised him by first collecting the green gear of the Border Forces members and handing out red Soviet Army epaulets for them to wear while in Afghanistan. "Don't write anything," they ordered. At the time, recalled Dagdanov, "no one was supposed to know that Soviet border guards were serving in 'Afghan.'" Indeed, while Moscow made no secret that the Soviet Army was operating inside Afghanistan within the framework of collective self-defense and the 1978 Soviet-Afghan Friendship Treaty, neither of these allowed for the wholesale extension of the Soviet border regime into the country. While no documents on the Politburo's thinking on this particular matter are forthcoming, public knowledge of the Border Forces' presence in Afghanistan would likely have only strengthened the rumors that the Soviet Union was even contemplating annexing Afghanistan, or at least its northern borderlands. In any event the helicopter transported Dagdanov and his colleagues to Yangi Qala, a village across the Amu River in Afghanistan; lights in Tajik villages were still visible that evening.

Now, instead of protecting isolated Afghan communities on the Soviet-Afghan border (and doing so in their capacity as members of the Border Forces), these officers were operating inside Afghan territory in a clandestine capacity. Dagdanov described his time in Afghanistan

30 Iurii Dagdanov, "Na voine kak na voine," in *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan: 1979–1989)*, Vol. 2, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Voronezh, 1999).

as a period when "we killed without documentation and without insignia [i.e. without Border Forces epaulets]." None of this was a secret to the officers at the time, but Dagdanov was not the only former border guard to mention the strict secrecy of the entire operation. "In letters and scribblings home," wrote Dmitrii Mantsev, "under no circumstances were we to mention any military actions. All of our border guards were officially continuing to carry out their service on native soil (na rodnoi zemle)."[31] A policy of plausible deniability demanded the fiction of the border as a concrete, physical place, even as events were projecting the border regime (with all of its rules of engagement) into Afghan territory.

In spite of the intervention, Komsomol advisers reported throughout 1981 that security conditions had worsened.[32] Of the twenty-four districts in the entire northern zone, the PDPA controlled only seven. In Balkh, PDPA officials could enter only ten of the province's 455 villages "without escort from armored vehicles and military units."[33] Confronted with fifteen thousand rebels from "bandit committees," it was difficult to build a Communist Party. For Komsomol advisers who had arrived thinking, "we would be planting trees, watering parks, oases, and so on [. . .], the reality turned out to be totally different."[34] In less than a year, mujāhidīn managed to kill over a hundred DOYA members. In Deh Kazi, "two paralyzed peasants who had received the land of a feudal lord were chopped to pieces"; in Meymaneh, bandits had "brutally tortured and killed the three sisters of a female schoolteacher for the fact that she had continued to teach and was not wearing the *paranja*[35] in spite of multiple threats from the bandits."[36] Other bandit groups detonated bombs that destroyed the gas and oil lines and interrupted the electrical grid between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. Attacks on the connector road between the ring highway and the port at Hairaton led to backups of military supplies. What was to be done?

---

31 Dmitrii Mantsev, "ChP afganskogo masshtaba," in *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan 1979–1989)*, Vol. 2, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Voronezh, 1999).

32 Alekseev, "Spravka o deiatel'nost," l. 27.

33 Ibid.

34 Ivan Obratsov, "Ia slovno okunulsia v 1361 god [. . .]" in *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan 1979–1989)*, Vol. 2, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Voronezh, 1999).

35 A *paranja* is a Central Asian robe for women, traditionally worn with a horsehair veil. Obravtsov probably should have used the term *burqa* if referring to the garment that Afghan women might have been expected to wear.

36 Ibid., 29.

"Live Work"

Soon, the Border Forces were expanding the violence of the first incursions deeper into northern Afghan territory. At the end of 1981, recalled Zgerskii, "the leadership of our country took the decision to introduce the Border Forces into the northern provinces of Afghanistan." He explained: "the [Border] Forces were assigned a belt of responsibility with an average depth of 100–120 kilometers, the so-called *Zelënka*, up to the radial road (i.e. the ring road) that connects the centers of the northern provinces. Orders were given to liquidate organized banditry in this belt as well as the bases for the storage of weapons, ammunition, and other materials that were located within and near this belt."[37] One border guard explained the rationale: "From the very beginning of the Afghan epic, the Border Forces were given the task of unilaterally creating a buffer zone, one that would firmly separate warring Afghanistan from Soviet soil. Simply speaking, the purpose was that our compatriots living in the border territory wouldn't have to confront direct military actions from the [mujāhidīn] bands."[38] In order to maintain the border as a clean divide between order and disorder, between inside and out, the Border Forces had to extend the actual border regime over a hundred kilometers south.

The extension of the frontier not only protected the Soviet Union from attacks; it also made explicit the ways in which the border's logics of inside and outside applied to different kinds of Afghans. While the Border Forces began military operations against "bandits" and villages opposed to the government, Komsomol and its Afghan counterpart DOYA protected youths as the harbingers of a healthy future Afghan society. Sometimes this took the form of enlisting them into paramilitary and social organizations to keep them safe and within the borders of Afghanistan. As one Border Forces officer in the north explained, homeless children in Afghan towns and cities became a "fearsome weapon in the hands of the enemies [. . .]. An Afghan child would come up to a Russian soldier and beg for bread. They'd feed him, of course, but after the child had walked away, an explosion would go off."[39] DOYA kept Afghan children occupied during the school year, but Border Guards noted that children were often targeted for recruitment by the mujāhidīn

37 Zgerskii, *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan: 1979–1989)*, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Moscow: Granitsa, 1999), 10.

38 Dmitrii Mantsev, "ChP afganskogo masshtaba," in *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan 1979–1989)*, Vol. 2, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Voronezh, 1999).

39 Vladimir Pankratov, "'Vatan'—oznachaet 'Rodina,'" in *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan 1979–1989)*, Vol. 2, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Voronezh, 1999).

particularly during school vacations. "[They] had to feed themselves," noted one, "and the enemy gladly offered the children 'internships with food provided' in the territory of Pakistan, from which the students returned after the vacations as quite effectively trained fighters ready for terrorist activity."[40] Komsomol therefore set up Student Labor Divisions to pay the students as a "peaceful alternative to the Pakistani vacation voyages." This resulted in an army of "more than a thousand fighters," according to one border guard. While the source is not precise on how the Student Labor Divisions yielded fighting forces, he most likely meant that such organized youth formed a ready recruitment base for the Afghan Army or KhDA, or that they could be directly armed themselves, as part of another institution, namely the Social Order Brigades. The latter were small, armed squads of youth who guarded DOYA facilities from mujahidin attacks and who themselves were imitations of a domestic Soviet institution that dated back at least to the years following World War II.[41]

Many youths, in short, were integrated into the campaign to turn northern Afghanistan into a stable buffer region managed by a Soviet border regime in cooperation with pro-Soviet local organizations. As a consequence, the border with the USSR ceased to exist in a meaningful sense for many of the children enrolled in DOYA's programs. DOYA actively enrolled orphans as well as children of Afghan Party elites in transnational Pioneer activities. Written Soviet sources on this are scarce, but photographs show the extent to which Afghan youths were present at both the All-Union Pioneer Camps in Crimea and the smaller republic-level Pioneer Camps in Ashgabat and Dushanbe.[42] After 1984, Moscow and Kabul also ran a program of a longer duration whereby children of PDPA elites would come to the USSR for up to ten years for ideological and professional training.[43] Western human rights groups claimed that Soviet institutions had trained some of these children to assemble weapons disguised as toys and to conduct assassinations in a

40 Ibid.

41 Gleb Tsipursky, "State-Sponsored Vigilante Justice and Komsomol Patrols in the Soviet Heartland, 1953–58" (Unpublished Paper).

42 For examples of such photographs, see Stanislav Korytnikov, "Afganskie deti v pionerskom lagere 'Druzhba' v Turkmenskoi SSR" (June 6, 1981) RIA Novosti Online Archive, Image Number 776030; V. Akimov, "Vsesoiuznyi pionerskii lager' 'Artek' imeni V.I. Lenina (teper' Mezhdunarodyi detskii tsentr 'Artek')," RIA Novosti Online Archive, Image Number 874968.

43 "Soviet Influence on Afghan Youth" (United States Department of State Special Report No. 139, February 1986), Jeri Laber Papers, Box 6, Folder 5 (Children / General), Human Rights Watch Papers.

kind of inversion of the Pakistani "vacation voyages."[44] While the Border Forces in the buffer zone were protecting the imaginary of a "hard" border between the USSR and Afghanistan, the Komsomol and DOYA made it easy for Afghans of a certain age and political background to cross the border.

Afghans twenty-five years or older, however, who were too old to qualify for DOYA protection, could be shot on sight by Soviet "border" guards. Zgerskii's choice of words in calling the extended border zone the *Zelënka* was telling—the word means "brilliant green" and refers to a topical antiseptic known for its green stain. "Already by February 1982," the commander wrote, "we began the first systematic cleansing (planomernaia ochistka) of bandit groups from the belt [under our] responsibility." After a first operation in Qala-i Dal, a village in Kunduz Province, Border Forces moved on to the cities Tashkurgan and Andkhoy in adjacent provinces as their next targets. "Whoever was there in 'Afghan,'" reflected one border guard, "knows what a 'cleansing' (zachistka) of villages means. Block off the village from all sides and then [. . .] that's why at first they got armed formations of Afghans who were loyal to the government installed in Kabul to do it."[45]

Other Border Forces officers' memoirs made clear the extent to which their regime went beyond the ordinary, bureaucratic routines of guarding the Soviet border. Many felt liberated. "No more scribbling (pisanina), no more unnecessary paperwork, no more pestering paperwork (nadoevsheisia kantseliarshchina)," reflected Viktor Shevelev.[46] "Only live work (zhivaia rabota)!" Phrases like these underscore the extent to which the border guards quickly saw their mission as divorced from protecting the concrete space of the border any more. Rather than taking pride in defending the physical space of the Soviet Union—with all the bureaucracy it entailed—many border guards celebrated "killing without documentation." "It's fashionable today to criticize 'the Party machine' and 'the totalitarian regime,'" wrote Dmitrii Mantsev. "But I'd note that in many senses it was precisely thanks to this arrangement of Party and political work that our forces succeeded in completing the

44 John Barron, "Trained As a Terrorist—At Age Nine," *Reader's Digest* (August 1985), 72, Jeri Laber Papers, Box 6, Folder 5, Human Rights Watch Collection, Columbia University.

45 Sergei Bogdanov, "Dvazhdy rozdennyi," in *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan: 1979–1989)*, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Moscow: Granitsa, 1999), 199.

46 Viktor Shevelev, "Pamirskii variant," in Ibid., n.p.

tasks laid out before them."[47] One common point of comparison in several accounts was the World War II-era "Road of Life," an ice road across Lake Ladoga that constituted the only access corridor to besieged Leningrad.[48] The obvious difference, however, was that the Road of Life had been part of a war of defense and an operation conducted inside of Soviet territory. Official Soviet propaganda held that Afghanistan was the victim of an "undeclared war," but the Border Forces were unambiguously in a foreign country, and northern Afghanistan was hundreds of kilometers away from any possible front of the "undeclared war."

Yet the Komsomol advisers needed the border guards to do all the "live work" they could manage to be able to complete their mission. The quest to build socialism had to continue—at the very least, to man and expand the technical infrastructure that Soviet specialists had spent decades building. As mentioned, the gas fields of northern Afghanistan supplied Kabul with one-third of all revenues.[49] Soviet geologists continued to survey the area and discovered several new gas and oil fields.[50] However, threats abounded. In August 1981, the leader of a group of Soviet geologists was handed over to anti-government "bandits" by his driver and executed after negotiations over a ransom payment broke down.[51] Additionally, a summer 1983 report from the technical college in Mazar-i Sharif noted how the situation there was deteriorating. Overall enrollment numbers were up, but students came primarily from Mazar-i Sharif itself; it was too dangerous for students from Jowzjan, Faryab, or Samangan Provinces (half the college's former enrollment) to travel to classes.[52] Militants threatened to kill those who

47 Dmitrii Mantsev, "ChP afganskogo masshtaba," in *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan 1979–1989)*, Vol. 2, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Voronezh, 1999), 48-58.

48 Iurii Spiridonov, "Most druzhby," in Ibid., 159–162.; Iurii Miliukov, "Razvedka—glaza i ushi komandira," in Ibid., 192–200.

49 Robinson and Dixon, *Aiding Afghanistan*, 75, 108; "Soglashenie mezhdu pravitel'stvom soiuza sovetskikh sotsialisticheskikh respublik i pravitel'stvom demokraticheskoi respubliki Afganistan ob ekonomicheskom i tekhnicheskom sotrudnichestve," in Ministerstvo Innostrannykh Del SSSR, *Deistvuiushchie dogovory, soglasheniia i konventsii, vstupivshie v silu s 1 ianvaria po 31 dekabria 1985 goda*, Volume XLI (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniia, 1987), 134–136.

50 Robinson and Dixon, *Aiding Afghanistan*, 109.

51 Ibid., 117; Evgenii Evgen'ev, "Pistolety nam vydavali v aeroport" (Interview with Vladimir Snegirev), *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, 29. October 2009. [Accessed on 19. August 2017]. http://www.rg.ru/2009/10/29/snegirev.html.

52 GARF, f. 9606 (Mininsterstvo vysshego I srednego obrazovaniia), op. 11, d. 282, "Otchët o rabote kollektiva sovetskykh spetsialistov Gorno-neftianogo tekhnikuma g. Mazari Sharif za 1982–1983 uchebnyi god," l. 8.

continued to attend this school.[53] At the same time, many students who did continue harbored "anti-Soviet attitudes."[54]

Not only Komsomol advisers at this technical college, but also those in more remote areas of northern Afghanistan needed the security provided by the Border Forces. In his annual report on DOYA activities in Baghlan, Badakhshan, Kunduz, and Takhor Provinces, Nikolai Poliakov, the Komsomol secretary for the northeast zone from 1981–1982 described how the political group Setam-i Melli[55] was exporting valuable lazurite to Pakistan to fund its own arms purchases.[56] Poliakov's report noted that aerial strikes on the lapis lazuli mine had minimized the separatist threat for the moment as "up to five thousand bandits were exterminated."[57] Seeking to detach Northeastern Afghanistan to form an independent republic, this group had taken over the lapis lazuli mines at Sar-e-Sang. Compounding these problems, East German intelligence reported that China (also part of the "undeclared war" in Afghanistan") was supplying Maoist groups in Badakhshan with weapons and—ironically—Chinese border guard uniforms to prepare for the

53 Ibid., l.8.

54 Ibid., l.13.

55 Setam-i Melli (National Oppression) was an Afghan political party founded in 1968 as a splinter group from the PDPA. In contrast to many within the PDPA (who demanded some kind of federal solution to the national question), Setam-I Melli demanded an independent Turkestan so as to halt the supposed domination of non-Pashtun minorities in Afghanistan. The group itself fractured into different wings sometime in the 1970s and is perhaps best known for being involved in the 1979 kidnapping and murder of U.S. Ambassador Adolph Dubs, see Vladimir Basov, "Natsional'nyĭ vopros i politicheskoĭ bor'be v dorevoliutsionnom Afganistane," in V.V. Basov, *Natsional'noe i plemennoe v Afganistane. K ponimaniiu nevoennykh istokov afganskogo krizisa*, ed. V.V. Kravtsov (Moscow: Nauchno-issledovatel'skiĭ tsentr FSKN Rossii, 2011), 64–67.

56 Nikolai Poliakov, "Spravka sovetnika TsK VLKSM po zone Severo-Vostok za period s dekabria 1981g. po noiabr' 1982g.," RGASPI M-3, op. 13, d. 26, l. 117–118. On Poliakov's identity, see Mushavery, 150.

57 Nikolai Poliakov, "Spravka sovetnika TsK VLKSM po zone Severo-Vostok za period s dekabria 1981g. po noiabr' 1982g.," RGASPI M-3, op. 13, d. 26, l. 117–118. Obviously, mujāhidīn committed brutal acts of violence against Afghans too. Nikolai Kommisarov, the VLKSM adviser in Fayzabad from 1982–1983, wrote of an instance in February 1983 where nine Afghan border guards were kidnapped and tortured to death in the town of Khogon, near the Soviet-Afghan border. However—tellingly—the atrocities were only discovered by Soviet Border Forces (whether the Soviet guards were in Afghan territory or not is unclear), see Kommisarov, "V predgor'iakh Pamira" (Afganskie vpechatleniia), in *Mushavery*, 106.

announcement of an independent republic.[58] Even as these intelligence officers inveighed against the illegitimacy of Beijing supplying the technologies of border enforcement to Afghan groups, they overlooked how the Soviet Union was itself taking control of Afghanistan's border spaces with the Border Forces' campaign.

Over the longer term, however, it remained unclear whether the security provided by the Border Forces' operations actually paid off. Key districts in the north did not become paragons of socialist modernity but continued to be rather fragile constructions. In Balkh Province, the Komsomol head adviser, Bakhadyr Kasymkhodzhaev, noted that many districts had "lost" large numbers of members when mujāhidīn captured those districts. DOYA membership in Balkh had proportional representation of Tajiks, but Pashtuns and Uzbeks were under-represented by a factor of two and three, respectively.[59] A cast of transnational Soviet-Afghan actors helped keep DOYA's institutions functioning: In March 1984, a Soviet Uzbek woman married to an Afghan opened an orphanage in Mazar-i Sharif that sent forty-five Afghan children to Soviet orphanages within five months of its opening.[60] However, the quest to cobble together Soviet-Afghan transnationalism was hard-won: The building in which the orphanage was located was a re-appropriated restaurant and club (publichnoe zavedeniie), and the Mazar-i Sharif PDPA *gorkom* failed to provide enough money for its operations.

Yet DOYA was losing money not just in Balkh. Normally, in both the Soviet Union as well as its satellite states, mass organizations were financed through a combination of subsidies from the Party and membership dues. However, such a system obviously depended on both a strong central state, capable of collecting taxes, and territorial control, which allowed the regime to convince or coerce youths and their families to join these mass organizations. The Afghan regime, however, was financed by Moscow, and as reports made clear, its reach rarely extended beyond

58 "Über die Entwicklung und Rolle politisch unterschiedlich motivierter afghanischer Rebellengruppen, die gegen die Regierung der DRA als konterrevolutionäre Gruppen in Erscheinung treten," Docs. 9–16, Folder 27384, Abt. X, BSTU.

59 These calculations are based on Komsomol's own internal assessments of the ethnographic balance of the province, which was difficult to establish in any event. According to several reports from the early 1980s (delo 36 and 60), Balkh Province was 47% Tajik, 32% Uzbek, and 21% Pashtun; by 1984, DOYA's membership was 49% Tajik, 21% Uzbek, and 13% Pashtun. The remaining 17% were made up of smaller ethnic groups.

60 "Otchet o rabote komiteta DOMA provintsii Balkh zony 'Sever' za period s noiabria 1984 g. – oktiabr' 1984g.," RGASPI f. M-3, op. 13, d. 60, l. 11.

the provincial capitals. One financial statement written by an Uzbek adviser to the Jowzjan Provincial Committee of the DOYA shows how Kabul and Moscow had to subsidize such institutions.[61] The salaries for the Provincial Committee's leadership alone amounted to four times the Committee's gross annual income from membership fees. Yet the problem had less to do with a bloated administration than with a lack of members. If the DOYA Provincial Committee had enrolled as little as six percent of the population of Jowzjan, it could have been self-financing.[62] In contrast, Komsomol in the Soviet Union could report approximately 36 million members in the mid-1980s—approximately twelve percent of the population.[63]

Nevertheless, DOYA enrolled less than one percent of the province's potential members and did not control enough territory to enroll more. Nor were these problems unique to Jowzjan. In Baghlan, to the southeast, DOYA spent three times as much money as it brought in.[64] To recoup its expenses, the Baghlan DOYA's Provincial Committee needed to enroll 3.4 percent of the population, but it enrolled less than one percent of the province's estimated population. Without Moscow's dramatically increased spending on Afghanistan and the efforts by Soviet and Afghan militaries to secure the cities and the nearby countryside, the DOYA branches were in a precarious position.

The resources needed to maintain the Soviet-Afghan world forged in northern Afghanistan were large and growing with increasing security threats. Mikhail Gorbachev, who had been named General Secretary of the CPSU in 1985, sensed the crisis, calling Afghanistan a "bleeding wound." Growing tired of the incompetence of Afghan General Secretary Babrak Karmal, Gorbachev, other Soviet elites, and Afghans arranged for his ouster and he departed for Moscow in November 1986.

---

61 O. Shamsuddinov, "Otchët o rabote PK DOMA provintsii Dzhuzdzhan s akraba 1362g. po mizon 1366g.," RGASPI f. M-3, op. 1, d. 60, l. 36.

62 Calculations based on Shamsuddinov (ibid.) and population data from Republic of Afghanistan Central Statistical Office, *Economic and Social Indicators March 1979–1984* (Kabul: 1984), 4.

63 Irinia Lisnichenko, "Byvshiĭ pervyĭ sekretar' TsK VLKSM Viktor Mironenko: 'Na proshchanie ukrainskaq delegatsiia s"ezda komsomola spela mne: ' Oĭ ne gori ta ĭ zhentsi zhnut' …'" *Fakty i kommentary* (September 26, 2011). [Accessed on 19. August 2017]. http://fakty.ua/140505-byvshij-pervyj-sekretar-ck-vlksm-viktor-mironenko-na-procshanie-ukrainskaya-delegaciya-sezda-komsomola-spela-mne-ot-pervogo-do-poslednego-kupleta-oj-na-gori-ta-j-zhenci-zhnut.

64 "Itogovyi otchet sovetnika DOMA zony severo-vostok provinstii Baglan oktiabria 1984 goda," RGASPI f. M-3, op. 13, d. 64, l. 23.

Replacing him was Najibullah Ahmadzai, a gynecologist by training and the former head of the Afghan KGB. In contrast to the secretive Karmal, he was considered competent in addition to being an outstanding orator. From the start, he said all the right things. The north, he argued, was of vital importance to the Afghan state. After his ascension, Najibullah called Balkh Province "a good neighbor of the USSR" and the staging ground for the Soviet Friendship Bridge. "The important issue for [Balkh] and for the entire country," Najibullah stressed, "is that of gas and oil."[65] He announced a policy of "national reconciliation" whereby opposition groups would be brought into the government, the regime would tone down its emphasis on Marxism-Leninism, and a new Constitution would guarantee a more pluralistic political order. Yet with the Soviet Army and the Border Forces still occupying much of the country—not to mention the ongoing jihad from mujāhidīn forces—the shape of Afghanistan's sovereignty remained unclear.

Forging a Soviet postcolony

As Kabul declared a policy of National Reconciliation, the Border Forces shifted their strategy. "There was nothing close to resembling a peaceful situation at that time," recalled Gennadii Zgerskii, but the Border Forces "stopped planning attacks on bandits and acted only in response to active sorties."[66] By 1986, the task of the Border Forces changed from the aggressive mandate to hunt down rebels begun in 1982 to a defensive stance. Tens of thousands of border guards still occupied the north, but they "merely" protected the population and the gas infrastructure.

Intelligence officials and military advisers sought to train replacements for the Border Forces, but problems abounded. Tajiks and non-Pashtuns dominated among the twenty-six thousand men employed by the KhAD (the Afghan KGB) and morale among army officers was low.[67] "The rebels," noted one border guard, "didn't view the Armed Forces of the DRA as a mobile military force; in several instances, they saw it as an arsenal

65 Kabul Domestic Service, May 29, 1986, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report South Asia June 2, 1986, p. Cl.

66 Zgerskii, "Kak eto bylo," in *Po obe storone granitsy*, 15.

67 BStU, Abt. X, Folder X–843, Documents 000149-000152, "Über das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit der DRA."

to top up their manpower and technology."[68] When a Pashtun officer stabbed a classmate at a military academy in East Germany, the East German secret police pressed the Afghan Embassy to send the offending student home.[69] But the Afghan attaché rebuffed them. "In Afghanistan there are many peoples with partly different languages," wrote the East German processing the case. "The biggest tribes there are the Daris (sic) and the Pashtos (sic). The Attaché and [the guilty student] both belong to the Pashto, but [the wounded student] is a Dari. As a result of his belonging to the same tribe as Dil Agha, the Attaché is anxious to support the student, even if Agha obviously bears responsibility."[70] A Stasi spy surveilling a similar institute came to similar conclusions. "The present situation is nothing other than smoldering gunpowder," he wrote. "Now we have to unconditionally think over and decide what is going to happen with these people if the whole thing doesn't work like we had thought."[71]

The fact that both the Afghan Embassy and the Stasi officers were thinking more of Tajiks and Pashtuns—or "Daris" and "Pashtos," the two groups' languages—rather than socialists and counter-revolutionaries signaled a change of approach towards the Afghan body politic. For much of the first half of the 1980s, the Afghan Communists and their Soviet advisers had spoken of the power that unadulterated violence had to remake the nation. PDPA killers had been blunt in proclaiming that they "only needed a million Afghans to build socialism" or, in an even more extreme statement, that they had "no use for the population of Afghanistan—only the territory of Afghanistan."[72] In a world of imperialist encirclement, socialism's only hope was to exploit the privileges of the sovereign nation-state to apply class justice to secure its hold. Institutions like DOYA (or its counterparts in, for example, Syria or South Yemen) were to play an important role in this project, seeking to forge a homogenous socialist cadre out of the reality of postcolonial heterogeneity.

---

68 Iu. A. Neshumov, quoted in Petr Ivanchishin, "Zona osoboi otvetstvennost," in *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan 1979–1989)*, Vol. 2, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Voronezh, 1999).

69 BStU, Abt. X, Folder 301, Documents 000007–000012, "Abschlußmeldung 'Unerlaubte Entfernung, Körperverletzung'–S 1/3 (Erstmeldung) vom 04.02.1988."

70 Ibid., Document 000008.

71 BStU, Abt. X, Folder HA XXII–242/7, Document 000088, "Information zur Lage afghanische AMK," January 21, 1989.

72 Michael Barry, "Repression et guerre sovietiques," Les temps modernes July–August 1980 (No. 408–409), 171–232.

With the rise of Gorbachev, however, these ideas lost their hold. In early Politburo discussions about Afghanistan, Gorbachev and his advisers were modest about their goals in the country. "We clearly set our goals," noted foreign policy hand Anatolii Chernyaev about a November 13, 1986 Politburo meeting. "Accelerate the process whereby we have a friendly, neutral country and get out of there. We do not want socialism."[73] Nor was this just the sentiment of Gorbachev and the idealists around him. "A leading role for the PDPA is never going to work," explained Chief of the General Staff Sergei Akhromeyev in a May 21–22, 1987 meeting. "No matter what [the Afghans] do," explained Akhromeyev, "within a year we'll have a 'bourgeois government' on our bayonets."[74] This was unavoidable—the real problem was breaking the news to the government in Kabul, "since they proclaim themselves to be revolutionaries fighting against imperialism."[75] Very quickly, not just foreign policy hands but also military men were dismissing terms such as "imperialism" and "bourgeois government" which had been fundamental to Communist Parties claiming a "leading role" for themselves in the first place.

However, this move away from grand narratives of socialist internationalism and the accompanying institutions had effects in Afghanistan that were similar to those identified by scholars for "postcolonies" elsewhere. By "postcolony," scholars like Jean and John Comaroff and Achille Mbembe refer not merely to the state of postcolonial sovereignty, but also to the condition in which postcolonial disorder and mayhem coexists with "self-imaginings and identities grounded in the jural [i.e. legal]."[76] As Najibullah announced his plans for National Reconciliation, Komsomol and DOYA operatives in the provinces polled local youth on their understanding of the government's new stance.[77] In some cases, moreover, the Komsomol advisors who helped to organize these polls recorded Afghan youths' responses. Iurii Kovch, the Komsomol adviser for

73 Anatolii Chernyaev, Notes of Politburo Meeting (November 13, 1986), Anatolii Chernyaev Papers (St. Antonys College, Oxford University) Folder 2, 91.

74 Anatoliĭ Cherniaev, Notes from May 21–22, 1987 Politburo Session, Folder 2, Anatoliĭ Cherniaev Papers, Russian and Eurasian Studies Centre Library and Archive, St Antony's College, Oxford University.

75 Ibid.

76 Comaroff and Comaroff, 26.

77 "Itogovyi otchet sovetnika TsK VLKSM pri PK DOMA provintsii Baglan oktiabr' 1986g. – sentiabr' 1987g.," l. 33, l. 48.

Baghlan Province, summarized the top five demands that local youth made in response to the polls on National Reconciliation:

> 1. The Party and state leaders of the DRA should personally conduct negotiations with the leaders of the counter-revolution in Pakistan;
>
> 2. Limit the drafting of youths into the Army;
>
> 3. Have the Soviet forces leave the DRA as soon as possible (obespechit' skoreishii vyvod Sovetskikh voisk iz DRA);
>
> 4. Free prisoners from the prisons;
>
> 5. Improve security for those carrying out agricultural work in the hills.[78]

The role of the Soviet Army or the border guards in protecting socialism in Afghanistan had no purchase among these locals. Whether they used the term "counter-revolution" themselves or Kovch inserted it into the text we do not know, but what is clear is that these youths had little time for the PDPA or an Afghan state involving them in the way DOYA had been designed to do. The youths criticized the Army and demanded that Kabul halt the "harvesting" (otlov) of youth, reduce the period of service, and increase pay. At the same time, however, the surveyed youths were ambiguous about the new beginning promised by National Reconciliation. If, they said, "rebels" did not seek reconciliation with Kabul, then "government power should actively and ruthlessly exterminate [them]." In spite of hopes that National Reconciliation might create a durable and legitimate political settlement, the respondents seemed to agree that an "equitable, just, ethically founded, pacific polity" could only be founded on the threat of indiscriminate violence against opponents.[79]

As mentioned, Najibullah had proposed a new constitution for Afghanistan, a theme about which the DOYA workers in Baghlan had also asked. The youths were forthcoming, but here, again, they seemed to suspect that Najibullah's promised "reconciliation" through a new constitution was but a tool to secure power by means of law. They were concerned about constitutionally-secured entitlements for those who had died for the Revolution, asking: "Does the Constitution envision the same freedoms

78 Ibid., 1. 35–36.

79 Comaroff and Comaroff, "Law and Disorder in the Postcolony: An Introduction," 22.

and rights for rebels, counter-revolutionaries, and the members of their families as it does for peaceful citizens of the Republic?" If the earlier model of state- and nation-making had sought to eradicate difference, DOYA's respondents thought in terms of a national community legally divided into victims and perpetrators: "those who died for the Revolution" and "counter-revolutionaries," in Komsomol's summary of the youths' answers in Baghlan Province.[80] Rather than assuming that a sense of civic Afghan identity was winning out, the respondents seemed to imagine that back-door complicity—rather than the quest to erase it through reconciliation—was the driving force of Afghan politics for times to come. These assumptions, but also the constitutions actually promulgated by Kabul in 1987 and 1990, reflected, to borrow the terms suggested by the Comaroffs, a "nervous, xenophobically tainted sense of heterogeneity and heterodoxy" rather than a shift towards the nation as a homogenous "imagined community."[81]

This tendency became clearer in other attitudes towards the new constitution. The two most common demands that Kovch received from respondents spoke to the extent to which youth imagined themselves as members of a Muslim Afghan nation. The constitution, they insisted, had to have the Bismillah ("In the name of God . . ." in Arabic and the first word of the Quran) printed on the title cover and it should note, "Afghanistan is above all a Muslim country."[82] Not only the universal civil law, but the imaginary of Afghanistan as a homogenous Muslim country, affirmed through the law, would provide citizens with tools to negotiate divides across otherwise unbridgeable chasms. This may sound like Kovch's respondents were indeed clamoring for an "imagined community," but that would ignore the faith they placed in a new written constitution as a response to the criminal violence around them, in spite of the state's manifest inability to protect the rights of its citizens.[83] More important than this move from print capitalism to law and constitutions *per se*, however, was the shift in the vision of the nation that the respondents sought in a new constitution. Rather than affirming equality between all citizens, responses suggested, the new constitution would permanently divide the nation into different groups based on their nationality and their status vis-à-vis the order that the

80 "Itogovyi otchet sovetnika TsK VLKSM pri PK DOMA provintsii Baglan oktiabr' 1986g. – sentiabr' 1987g.," l. 36.

81 Comaroff and Comaroff, "Law and Disorder in the Postcolony: An Introduction," 32.

82 Ibid., l. 33, l. 48.

83 Comaroff and Comaroff, 23.

constitution claimed to be erasing. Respondents, for example, demanded the "formation of a Committee for the Realization of National Equality, the strengthening of its legislative rights, and [. . .] the delivery of direct aid to the most deprived national minorities."[84] Even though these Afghan youths did not discard their sense of belonging to an Afghan nation (i.e. defined in terms beyond that of a specific ethnicity), they clearly did not consider it to contradict notions of ethnic citizenship or their identification with groups such as Tajiks, Uzbeks, or Hazara.[85] And as noted above, respondents questioned whether the constitution would provide "the same rights and freedoms," not to mention "material aid" for "rebels, counterrevolutionaries, and members of their family" as it would for "peaceful citizens."

Notable, too, was the respondents' insistence that the law itself should codify and guarantee these tensions between unity and peculiarity. This marked a turn from the previous order—while the PDPA issued ID cards that noted Afghans' ethnic nationality, it did not rewrite the 1976 Constitution after its 1978 coup d'état so as to guarantee specific ethnic rights. The more Afghanistan descended into chaos, however, the more the different ethnic groups demanded legal recognition of their difference—such as "Turkic" or "Mongol" in the case of the Hazara.[86] Indeed, more recently, many groups opposed the rollout of digital identification cards on the grounds that they embedded ethnicity only as electronic data and not on the face of the card itself.[87] Like Kovch's youth respondents, rather than seeking to escape identity politics as such, some Afghans view the legal and constitutional registration of identity as a resource they can mobilize to obtain scarce resources and jobs.

84 "Itogovyi otchet sovetnika TsK VLKSM pri PK DOMA provintsii Baglan oktiabr' 1986g. – sentiabr' 1987g.," l. 36.

85 Ibid.

86 Melissa Kerr Chiovenda, "Hazaras as a Turkic People of Afghanistan—Historical Imaginings," Conference Paper, "Transregional Crossroads of Social Interaction: The Shifting Meaning of Regional Belonging in South and Central Asia" Conference (Berlin, Germany; March 21, 2014).

87 Sean Carberry, "Afghans Confront Sensitive Issue of Ethnicity," NPR (May 8, 2013). [Accessed on 19. August 2017]. http://www.npr.org/2013/05/08/179079930/afghans-confront-senstive-issue-of-ethnicity.

Accompanying this shift "from ideology to ID-ology"—this turn from socialist borderscape to postcolony—was an embrace of the market.[88] This itself was evocative of other cases of postcolonies, which, according to the analysis of Comaroff, Comaroff, and Mbembe, glorify the abstraction of "the private sector" as a panacea for societal ills in spite of the fact that much of the economy was based in criminal activity. "Forget about socialism," Gorbachev had advised former Afghan leader Babrak Karmal in a 1985 meeting before sacking him in favor of Najibullah. "Protect private commerce, because it will take you a long time to create a different kind of economy."[89] Following Najibullah's appointment, Gorbachev advised him that "all of the impediments in Afghan society need to be removed and the road opened to private enterprise, primarily small property owners and tradesmen."[90] Article 25 of the 1987 Afghan Constitution recognized the inviolability of domestic private capital (foreign capital was not protected), and Najibullah went on to call the private sector one of the driving forces of National Reconciliation.[91]

Soviet media now promoted commerce as an engine of peace. In 1988, for example, a team of Soviet journalists published an interview with the model Afghan businessman Rasul Barat, a Pashtun from Mazar-i Sharif who had inherited Soviet trading contacts from his father, an importer of Soviet goods since 1943.[92] When not running his factories, Barat imported and sold Mercedes, Toyotas, Volgas, Moskviches, and Nivas to locals. However, Barat's life was also full of tragedy. "I lost my father and my brother in the fire of the civil war," he said. "If one of my cars breaks down, I can buy another one, or a third one for that matter. But I won't be able to ever find a new father or brother." Barat's eyes welled up as his son wandered into the room. "There's my hope," he said. "He'll have to continue our family business, our contacts of business and friendship with the USSR."[93] The decision to open up

88 Jean Comaroff, quoted in "Africa in Theory: A Conversation Between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe," in *Anthropological Quarterly*, 83:3 (Summer 2010), 670.

89 Anatolii Cherniaev, "The Afghanistan Problem," *Russian Politics and Law*, 42:5 (September–October 2004), 32–33.

90 *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, Issue 14/15, 175.

91 Such declarations represented more a concession than real policy: as of 1987, the private sector still accounted for ninety percent of agricultural production, seventy percent of logistics business, and more than fifty percent of industrial and handicraft production.

92 Aleksandr Gorianov, "Torgovliia—sestra mira," *Novoe Vremia* 15 (1988): 14–15.

93 Ibid., 15.

direct commercial contacts between Central Asian oblast's and the provinces of Afghanistan had opened up new opportunities, explained Barat:

> Soon in Tashkent a store and a restaurant will open under the same name, "Balkh." It will be a joint enterprise between my firm, Barat, and the Soviet side. The Director will be Soviet, but I'll appoint the Afghan who will be the Deputy Director. It's with the credits that the USSR has started to make available to Afghan entrepreneurs that I've begun to build three more factories in Balkh: two will produce glass jars, while a third will prepare juices and refreshments. I've started to think about and negotiate the joint construction of big hotels in Tashkent and Mazar.[94]

Yet there is more to Barat's story than meets the eye. Because ninety-five percent of Afghanistan's trade was with the Soviet Union, *biznesmen* like Barat had more in common with the oligarchs about to proliferate across the post-Soviet world than with modest traders like his father. One American reporter who visited Mazar-i Sharif in May 1988 noted that Barat, "who recently signed a contract to build a chain of restaurants in the Soviet city of Tashkent, was the host at this week's lunch for Soviet officials." Afghan officials leaked that "Barat has been able to accumulate considerable personal wealth as the result of his dealings with the Soviet Union. Barat's residence suggests that he has in fact prospered. His home is set in a large garden planted with grapes, plums, and mulberries. There are two swimming pools, several Mercedes-Benz cars, and a Japanese four-wheel-drive vehicle. He also breeds horses [. . .] some of his horses cost more than the Mercedes."[95] As figures like Barat enriched themselves in the zone of ambiguity between the disappearing Afghan state and the Soviet Union, it was no wonder that some people saw murder as an appropriate means of "redistribution."

The administrative landscape was changing to adapt to the new order. In 1988, Kabul detached the southern portions of Balkh and Jowzjan provinces and united them into a new province, Sar-i Pol, containing "essentially the geographically 'expendable' portions of Balkh and Jowzjan—the poor, mountainous southern regions that lack irrigation systems, are more difficult to control, and are inhabited in part by potentially

94 Ibid.

95 Rone Tempest, "Northern Area Seen As Fallback Position for Afghan Regime," *Los Angeles Times*, May 20, 1988. [Accessed on 19. August 2017]. http://articles.latimes.com/print/1988-05-20/news/mn-3816_1_soviet-union.

troublesome Hazara Shi'ites."[96] The gas and oil infrastructure of the north was confined to Sheberghan and northern Balkh and Jowzjan provinces: export pipelines went west to Keleft in the Turkmen SSR and supply lines east to Mazar-i Sharif and Kabul. The regime sponsored an Uzbek militia, headed by `Abd al-Rashid Dostum, to guard the road from Hairaton to the Salang Pass.[97] The reorganization further testified to the new post-colonial technologies of sovereignty with which Najibullah was willing to experiment: an embrace of legality, the market, and now, a devolution of central control to local militias. To quote Steven Solnick, new "emergent forms of spatialized order and disorder" were being tested whose "logic [was] not simply one of an ever-expanding homogenization and standardization."[98] Protecting a necklace of provinces that the government in Kabul needed to survive mattered more than enforcing a territorial grid of national power.

Komsomol and DOYA sought to adapt to the situation. In the Soviet Union under Gorbachev, local Komsomol committees had been encouraged to form, in effect, private enterprises (called Centers for the Scientific-Technical Creativity of Youth) that could obtain loans, engage in private commerce, and were subject to minimal taxation. These enterprises became vehicles for private fortunes, and many of the "oligarchs" of post-Soviet Russia were former Komsomol leaders who had managed to take ownership of these enterprises.[99] In Afghanistan, DOYA boasted a much less impressive infrastructure that could be privatized or stolen, but local Provincial Committees nonetheless turned to a more informal kind of privatization to sustain themselves. In Balkh, the PC continued to organize visits to the families of those killed defending the Revolution, where DOYA members provided the families

96 Joseph Newman, Jr., "The Future of Northern Afghanistan," *Asian Survey* 28:7 (July 1988), 731.

97 Barnett Rubin and Helena Malikyar, "The Politics of Center-Periphery Relations in Afghanistan, in Barnett Rubin, *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 117.

98 Ferguson, "Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa," *American Anthropologist* 107:3 (September 2005), 381. According to one of my interlocutors, cultural disputes played a role too. Sheberghan was an oil town with a tiny indigenous intelligentsia; elites in Sar-i Pol felt marginalized by the fact that they were ruled from a town that lacked the standing of other northern cities like Meymaneh or Mazar-i Sharif. Author Interview, Berlin, Germany, January 15, 2014. The person interviewed for this information requested to remain anonymous.

99 Steven L. Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 60–124.

with "material aid" and tilled their land at a discounted rate.[100] DOYA members also visited wounded veterans, secured medical supplies, and donated blood. Notably, however, the Komsomol adviser in Balkh, Viktor Ovsiannikov, encouraged his Afghan colleagues to found a "youth cooperative" to transform child labor into cash. The Revolution had "redistributed" more than thirty jeribs[101] of land from wealthy landowners to DOYA, where, with the help of Afghan agricultural specialists, teenagers tilled the fields to grow corn, alfalfa, onions, greens, and tomatoes, which the cooperative sold to generate profits of some two hundred thousand Afghanis from October 1987 to May 1988.[102] The PC also rented out youth labor to local peasants, which generated 64,737 Afghanis in profit for DOYA over the same time period. It is impossible to situate these numbers in the local context without more information, but as Ovsiannikov's report underscored, the point was that they represented avenues for the Provincial Committee to fund itself and restore its relations with DOYA's Kabul Central Committee. Indeed, as the same report noted, the DOYA Central Committee in Kabul had ceased funding Pioneer Camps in Balkh because of an outstanding debt of 100,000 Afghanis.[103]

Yet as Najibullah encouraged economic liberalization, DOYA faced a new conundrum. DOYA's limited efforts to become self-funding by renting out teenagers' labor was unlikely to make the institution profitable in the long run, and the institution's Soviet-built properties in Kabul were not worth much. Most young peasants in the countryside were obviously too occupied with farming their own land for profit to become engaged as unpaid laborers for DOYA.[104] More than that, few of Balkh's industrial enterprises wanted to hire young workers, or would only do so on a temporary or at-will basis. Factories, once vaunted as the crucible of an Afghan proletariat, now constituted revolving doors of under-employment. "As long as this continues," wrote Ovsiannikov, "the question of the increase in the layer of workers [i.e. the number of workers] in the youth organization will remain open." As the brutal demands of the marketplace told young Afghan men that their labor was worthless and as DOYA's subsidies ran out, the great experiment to mobilize Afghan youth came to an end.

---

100 "Otchet sovetnika TsK VLKSM pri PK DOMA Balkh Osviannikova V.I. za period oktiabr' 1987 po mai 1988 goda," RGASPI f. M-3, op. 13, d. 173, l. 10.

101 A jerib is a unit of land measurement in Afghanistan and Iran. Thirty jeribs is approximately six hectares (60,000 square meters), or about the size of eight and a half football (soccer) fields.

102 Ibid., l. 14–15.

103 Ibid., l. 12.

104 Ibid., 1, 15.

Aftermath

This glut of unemployed young Afghan men, however, was now Najibullah's problem. A new task confronted the Soviet Border Forces in the north: covering the retreat of the Fortieth Army. Following the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1988 (putatively guaranteeing Pakistan's non-interference in Afghan affairs), the Soviet Army began its retreat from the country. Rather than withdrawing ahead of them, however, the border guards secured the highways from Herat to Kushka and Pul-i Khumri to Termez as the withdrawal proceeded in two phases: one in August 1988, the other in February 1989.

As the border was closing again, however, PDPA members saw their last chance to cross a border that had formerly been permeable at least for young Afghans. One Border Forces officer recalled "a not entirely ordinary operation" which he oversaw in September and October 1988.[105] "We had to evacuate an entire settlement of the families of activists who had supported the new regime. They moved them from the north of the country to near the Soviet border. On a modest square, there gathered some six hundred people in lingering expectation: men, women, old people, children. What limitless belief these people had in us, the Soviet people!"[106] The officer was vague as to whether the Border Forces provided the ex-PDPA members with asylum in the USSR. Those few Afghans with connections, wrote one Afghan survivor, "came to Russia in the hope of finding refuge, but unfortunately their hopes were not realized, and even former senior politicians were left to fend for themselves."[107] Logics of socialist internationalism, once capable of bringing young Afghans all the way to Crimea, no longer sufficed to bring pro-Soviet Afghans across a border that had become impermeable.

By February 1989, the border regime that once extended over one hundred kilometers into Afghanistan had retreated to its original location. As Viktor Pastukhov, a KGB officer in the Asian Border District, returned to the USSR via Kuskha in the Turkmen SSR, he felt a wave of relief as he strolled among the Soviet Turkmen in whose "*kazans* there stewed the soup and *plov* prepared by the denizens of the Turkmen villages, hot tea,

105 Roman Bezrukov, "Ne ogrubeli ikh serdtsa," in *Po obe storone granitsy*, 261.

106 Ibid., 261–262.

107 Omar Nessar, Interview, in "Moscow's Afghan War," BBC News, 17. December 2004. [Accessed on 19. August 2017]. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4090557.stm

too. This war had ended."[108] The occupation was over, but the logic of separation and violence that had once been contained within the Soviet border belt resumed. As Afghanistan descended into internecine warfare, Sunni murder squads targeted Ismaili Shi'ia in Badakhshan for extermination. As one group of border guards, led by Vyacheslav Aboimov, discovered in the spring of 1989, mujāhidīn groups had threatened to murder the entire Ismaili-populated village of Zangiryoh, Afghanistan. "The Ismailis understood," reflected Aboimov, "that their only chance of being saved was to turn to Soviet border guards for aid."[109]

Soon, Aboimov and the local commander from the Khorog District arrived in Pyandzh in the Tajik SSR. The mujāhidīn groups reached out to the Border Forces for negotiations, but it was a ruse to attack Zangiryoh. "Shells and mines flew onto our territory. The circle [of mujāhidīn] around the village grew tighter and tighter."[110] Aboimov's crew fired shells across the river, providing cover to the Border Forces who mounted an amphibious assault into Afghanistan. After three days of fighting, the "bandits" had been scattered. "I know that peace and quiet remained in that far-flung village of Zangiryoh," reflected Aboimov. "None of us received any government awards for that operation, but the very fact of saving people friendly to us became a great moral satisfaction."[111] Even as the border regime rejected Afghan refugees, the notion of the Soviet border as constituting some kind of humanitarian regime for vulnerable Afghan populations persisted.

Official Soviet responsibility for Afghanistan had ended, but the idea of a Soviet protectorate remained.[112] When Tajikistan declared independence on September 9, 1991, twelve thousand Soviet Border Troops remained stationed there. Dushanbe was unable to raise its own border guard as civil war consumed the country, and Moscow was already overwhelmed by tens of thousands of former Soviet Border Forces guards returning home from newly "independent" borders (the Polish-Ukrainian borders, or the Azerbaijan-Iran border, for example). Hence, the renamed "Group of Russian Border Guards

108 Viktor Pastukhov, "Kaisar," in *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan: 1979–1989)*, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Moscow: Granitsa, 1999), 127.

109 Vyacheslav Aboimov, "Kishlak Zangirë," in *Po obe storony granitsy (Afganistan: 1979–1989)*, ed. V.I. Gribanov (Moscow: Granitsa, 1999), 110.

110 Ibid., 111.

111 Ibid., 112.

112 Maier, *Among Empires*, 81. Aboimov's comment hearkens back to the domestic Russian political context in which memoirs of non-recognized "veterans" of the Afghan conflict began to appear following the 1994 law.

in Tajikistan" stayed where they were to defend the Moscow-backed government in Dushanbe.[113] As refugees and anti-government groups in the Tajik Civil War used northern Afghanistan as a safe haven, the border guards constituted the sole line of defense for Dushanbe. The "Russian" officers oversaw an unusual recruitment regime: Tajik citizens could serve with the border guards and earn more as a Private than the Commander-in-Chief of the Tajik border guards earned.[114] By the 2000s, many of the twenty thousand "Russian" border guards overseeing the border were ethnic Tajiks.[115]

The former Soviet-Afghan border disappeared only gradually. In 2005, when Russian officers handed over formal control of the border to their Tajik counterparts, officials in Dushanbe trumpeted it as a confirmation of their claim to national sovereignty (davlatdori mali). Yet it was European and American cash, border technology, and legal advice that made the new institution tenable. At the time of writing this article, the regional border guard training center in Khorogh uses American money to train Tajik and Afghan border guards to protect a former Soviet borderline. All the same, a Russian military base remains in Tajikistan—secured there until 2042—and when asked in 2015 whether Moscow would ever contemplate resuming responsibility for the Tajik-Afghan border, the Russian Deputy Minister of Defense replied, "I don't rule it out."[116]

---

113 Michael Orr, "The Russian Army and the War in Tajikistan," in *Tajikistan: The Trials of Independence*, ed. Mohammad-Reza Djalili, Frederic Grare, and Shirin Akiner (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998), 156.

114 V. Strugovets, "The Southern Borders of the CIS: Who is Protecting them and How," *Krasnaia Zvezda*, August 4, 1994. Not only that, but according to a May 1993 agreement on the legal status of the Russian Federation's forces in Tajikistan, individuals in the Russian Armed Services in Tajikistan retained the right to remain indefinitely in Tajikistan following their military service, as well as "the right to obtain [Tajikistani] citizenship equal with citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan, entitled to leave the country as they wish (svobodno po sobstvennomu zhelaniiu pokidat' stranu)." The basis for this arrangement was that the combined service of men in Russian and Soviet border institutions fulfilled the period necessary for obtaining Tajikistani citizenship.

115 Stephen Kotkin, "Trashcanistan," *The New Republic*, April 15, 2002, 29; John Heathershaw, "The Global Performance State: A Reconsideration of the Central Asian 'Weak State,'" (Working Paper), 11.

116 Denis Dyomkin and Raushan Nurshanayeva, "Russia is Thinking about Taking over Tajikistan's Border with Afghanistan," *Business Insider*, 15. October 2015. [Accessed on 19. August 2017]. http://www.businessinsider.com/r-russia-mulls-re-establishing-control-of-tajik-afghan-border-2015-10?IR=T.

Conclusion

What does the history of the Soviet Union's engagement in northern Afghanistan in the 1980s contribute to the history of trans-regional interaction and migration more broadly? Firstly, the history outlined here demonstrates the profound effects of Soviet models of state building and authoritarianism on the world outside of the Soviet Union. As records like the border guards' memoirs show, not only Soviet technical advisers but also tens of thousands of military advisers and personnel were deployed beyond the borders of the USSR to engage in military operations. In societies like South Yemen, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan (Third World countries where full-blown Communist Parties seized power), but also in Soviet client states like Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, Soviet contingents, clearly modelled on the operations of US forces abroad, not only shaped foreign militaries but also engaged in direct military operations. Future work on trans-regional encounters might assess the meanings of these other Soviet encounters in the Third World, or other instances of authoritarian internationalism (for example, the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia from 1979–1991). It also might assess the meaning of the withdrawal of such authoritarian internationalism from these same theaters, which in Afghanistan was not only often marked by a turn to ethnic warfare, kleptocracy, and religious fundamentalism—but also by an interest in universal languages of law or human rights that could, in turn, resolve such mayhem.[117]

Secondly, however, the history of the Soviet "belt" developed in northern Afghanistan during the 1980s suggests the importance of treating authoritarian internationalism not as a phenomenon sui generis, but as belonging to the same framework as its competitors and counterparts. While the Soviet-Afghan border had its own peculiarities, the 1980s in general were a period marked by new experimentation with border regimes around the world. In North America, as recent anthropological work has shown, the United States sought to reinforce its aquatic and legal border with Haiti as Haitian migrants sought to gain entry to the United States.[118] Throughout the same decade, transnational humanitarian NGOs challenged traditional norms of state sovereignty in Cambodia and Afghanistan in order to rescue lives and cultural treasures that they

117 Fred Halliday, "The Other 1989s," Open Democracy, 6. November 2009. [Accessed on 19. August 2017]. https://www.opendemocracy.net/fred-halliday/other-1989s.

118 Jeffrey S. Kahn, "Islands of Sovereignty: Haitian Migration and the Borders of Empire" (PhD Diss., University of Chicago, 2013).

viewed as threatened by socialist authoritarian states.[119] In adopting these perspectives, the extension and eventual disappearance of the Soviet Union's border belt in northern Afghanistan appears less like an episode in Cold War history and more like an episode in the global story of new regimes of sovereignty that emerged in the 1980s.

119 Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, trans. Rachel Gomme (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Peter Redfield, *Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors without Borders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013); Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion*.