

# **From Land Reform to Veterinarians Without Borders in Cold War Afghanistan**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Der Beitrag untersucht die Geschichte ländlicher Entwicklungspolitik anhand der Landreformen in Afghanistan während des Kalten Krieges. Während des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts lebte die überwiegende Mehrheit der afghanischen Bevölkerung von der Landwirtschaft. Grundbesitz war jedoch höchst ungleich verteilt. Der Kalte Krieg verwandelte Afghanistan in ein Schlachtfeld westlicher und sowjetischer Visionen ländlicher Entwicklungsprojekte etwa im Bereich der Bewässerung oder der Einrichtung von Staatsgütern. Afghanische sozialistische Intellektuelle forderten eine umfassende Landreform, um die Probleme der ländlichen Bevölkerung zu lindern. Nach einem sozialistischen coup d'état im Jahre 1978 versuchten sie, ihren radikalen Plan einer Umverteilung von Land auch gegen die moderateren Vorschläge der sowjetischen Berater durchzusetzen. Die Geschichte ländlicher Entwicklungspolitik im Afghanistan des Kalten Krieges führt sozialistische Entwürfe in die globale Geschichte der Entwicklungspolitik ein. Sie zeigt, dass für viele Akteure die Umverteilung von Land ein zentraler Aspekt der Entwicklungspolitik war. Und sie verweist darauf, dass sich die Sowjetunion ungeachtet ihrer Erfahrungen mit kollektiver Landwirtschaft sehr reaktiv zu den Forderungen radikaler Akteure des globalen Südens verhielt, um Lösungen für ländliche Armut und soziale Gerechtigkeit zu finden.

It is fitting that Osama bin Laden's main training camp and home near Kandahar, Afghanistan was no purpose-built facility, but rather the hollowed-out ruins of the Tarnak Research Farm, an agricultural research center for strains of wheat and barley.<sup>1</sup> Before

1 Terms of Reference; 'Tarnak Farm' Rehabilitation Master Plan Designer, [http://mrrd.gov.af/Content/Media/Documents/TOR\\_Tarnakfarm\\_2\\_Word200311220102133773.pdf](http://mrrd.gov.af/Content/Media/Documents/TOR_Tarnakfarm_2_Word200311220102133773.pdf) (accessed 3 June 2017).

it became a hub for global jihadism in the 1990s, Afghanistan was a laboratory where ideas about economic development and modernization were tested under conditions of peaceful competition and, later, civil war. Throughout, however, rural development had to take center stage. Rural more so then than now (at least 90% rural until the 2000s, but no reliable census of Afghanistan has ever been conducted), Afghanistan and its economy remained dominated by agriculture, in spite of the fact that only 10% of its land is arable. Hence, Afghan political actors, along with the foreign backers on whom they relied for legitimacy, technology, and money, would have to come to grips with managing the rural economy. Indeed, no less than bin Laden's Taliban hosts had to navigate these dynamics as they sought to balance between the financial windfalls reaped by taxes on opium production, the incentives held out to them by the United Nations for cutting opium cultivation, and UN wheat shipments that kept Kabul from starvation.

In order to explore these themes, this piece examines the history of rural development in Afghanistan during the late 1970s and 1980s. A close examination of that story reveals a number of themes that need to be integrated into the global history of rural development. First among these is the crucial role that socialist ideas played in the history of rural development – not least through an insistence that efforts toward development had to be coupled with land reform or even collectivization. Soviet efforts to provide farmers with fertilizer, seed, and farming equipment went hand in hand with the effort to collectivize Soviet peasantry.<sup>2</sup> And with the Soviet victory in World War II, collectivized agriculture spread to the Eastern Bloc (except for Poland). Beyond the Soviet world, moreover, socialist regimes from Mao Zedong's China to Julius Nyerere's Tanzania enacted land reform programmes that saw state-run communal farms – not “development” per se – as the prerequisite for prosperity.<sup>3</sup> National liberation movements like the Zimbabwe African Nationalist Union and the Zimbabwe African People's Union envisioned the uncompensated redistribution of lands from whites to blacks as a precondition for negotiations for years, and as late as 1985, the African National Congress endorsed Soviet-style collective farms and state farms as the optimal outcome for a post-apartheid South African countryside.<sup>4</sup> As this piece shows, in short, Soviet schemes “went global” not only through military conquest, but through intellectual and material transfers to settings like Afghanistan, South Yemen, Ethiopia, and beyond.

The mention of such conflict-ridden societies reminds us of a second theme: that the history of rural development is central to the history of the Cold War, as well. As Nick Cullather's work on “the foreign policy of the calorie” emphasizes, American economists and foreign policymakers viewed the Green Revolution as “the right kind of revolution”

2 On longer-term trajectories of agriculture expertise in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union, see the 2016 theme issue of *Cahiers du monde russe*, “Terres, sols et peuples: expertise agricole et pouvoir (XIXe–XXe siècles).” For a recent account of agricultural reform toward cooperatives in the late Soviet era, see C. Miller, *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy: Mikhail Gorbachev and the Collapse of the USSR*, Chapel Hill 2016.

3 P. Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World*, Cambridge 2015.

4 Jabulani “Mzala” Nxumalo, “The Freedom Charter and its Relevance Today,” *Sechaba* (March 1985).

as opposed to the bogeyman of communism.<sup>5</sup> Yet those at an array of Soviet research institutes on plant biology, epizootic disease, and the like, were not counting on famine to convince Third World societies of the superiority of socialist agricultural techniques and property relations.<sup>6</sup> Even as the USSR imported grain from the USA from the mid-1970s, Moscow exported agricultural techniques and technologies to Third World clients. This makes the story of rural development as an example of knowledge transfers more capacious than we understand it.<sup>7</sup> Moscow, for example, never sought to export collectivized agriculture to the Third World the way it had Eastern Europe in the 1950s, but many Third World actors remained convinced that land *redistribution* (not just development) was the only option to achieve social justice.

One may object that the Third World actors most interested in land redistribution were most often opposition groups, rather than regimes like those in Saigon, Tehran, or Managua or experts from Washington, Rome, or (as this piece will show) Moscow. But this only emphasizes a third theme that emerges from this piece, namely rural development as part of an arena of power. Perhaps because we live in a world after the Green Revolution, it has become possible for us to conceive of a realm of the political divorced from the political economy of calories. But many political actors whose consciousness was formed prior to the Green Revolution did not have that luxury. In a world of limited calories, debates about whether “feudal” classes would continue to dominate peasants, or whether they would be swept away in a socialist revolution, were not just theoretical niceties but questions about who would dominate whom. Arguably, one reason for the violence of so many conflicts in societies during the period covered by this issue was less a clash of ideologies and more a clash between groups that understood themselves to be engaged in a zero-sum competition over land, food, and calories. Following the fortunes of rural development programmes in a setting like Afghanistan – in which resources were indeed scarce – allows us to appreciate this broader story as one in which even superpowers – here, the Soviets – often struggled to impress their own ideas onto elites and opposition groups still locked in zero-sum struggle.

In terms of sources, this piece uses Soviet economic archives, where many of the reports authored by Soviet experts on the Afghan economy are by and large open. The archives of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan as well as the Afghan state were destroyed during the Afghan Civil War (1992–1996); however, this paper draws on materials from the Hoover Institution’s Afghan Partisan Series that bring Afghan ideas about land reform back into the picture. The ongoing mass digitization of much of Afghanistan’s print heritage by institutions in Afghanistan and the United States also allows us to place experiments in land reform in Afghanistan into a longer durée perspective. Finally, the

5 N. Cullather, *The Foreign Policy of the Calorie*, in: *American Historical Review* 112 (2007) 2, pp. 337–364; M. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution*, Ithaca, NY, 2011.

6 D. Engerman, *The Second World’s Third World*, in: *Kritika* 12 (2011) 1, pp. 183–211.

7 K. Gestwa and S. Rohdenwald, *Verflechtungsstudien. Naturwissenschaft und Technik im Kalten Krieg*, in: *Osteuropa* 10 (2009), pp. 5–14.

short observations here on NGO engagement in Afghanistan come from the archives of the French non-governmental organization Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF).

## Buying Time

Before turning to the focus of this paper – the 1970s and 1980s – a bit of orientation may help. While Afghanistan enjoyed autonomy in its internal affairs from 1879 onward, it was in 1919 that it gained formal independence from the British Empire in the Third Anglo-Afghan War.<sup>8</sup> Following a decade of gestures toward modernization under Amanullah Khan, the regime collapsed in early 1929. The former defence minister, Nadir Shah, raised an army from the Pashtun lands of British India and retook the capital later that same year. Nadir was crowned the Shah of Afghanistan, but a rogue high school student in the capital assassinated him in 1933, and so his son, Zahir, was declared as a regent. For the next thirty years, Zahir's uncles and, later, his cousin, Mohammad Daoud Khan, ruled the country as Prime Minister.

While Zahir's relatives continued to oversee the modernization of the Kingdom, the period was marked by political stagnation. Afghanistan held elections for mayoral offices and a national assembly in 1946, and in 1950 a more liberal press law helped stimulate an intelligentsia to debate ideas about constitutional government. Organized political parties were formed, too. Yet once Daoud took power in 1953, he curtailed these reforms, and Afghanistan remained a constitutional monarchy only on paper. Perhaps to shore up his legitimacy among the population, Daoud pushed for the independence of "Pashtunistan" – the Pashtun territories between the Indus River and the Afghan-Pakistan border – from Pakistan. Yet this irredentism led Pakistan to shut down the border with Afghanistan frequently, leading to Daoud's dismissal in 1963.

Efforts toward land reform in Afghanistan followed this parabola of reform and reaction. Following independence, Amanullah announced a major tax reform replacing payment in wheat or livestock (with payments dependent on the harvest in a given year) with a fixed cash payment that had to be paid regardless of the year's harvest.<sup>9</sup> While intended as a means to concentrate capital in the hands of the state and break feudal ties between peasants and the state, the tax reform drove peasants without large cash holdings into the hands of usurious loan markets. This, in turn, produced waves of bankruptcy and seizures of land that peasants had used as security on their loans. Furthermore, inflation reduced the real value of the government's tax income.

Beyond the tax reform, Amanullah also announced the first-ever sale of state lands *not* for government service. According to existing accounts from Soviet diplomats present in Afghanistan at the time, the announced low prices for land sales even generated the

8 For recent overviews of Afghan history, see T. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton 2010; R. Crews, *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation*, Cambridge, MA, 2015.

9 A.D. Davydov, *Agrarnyj stroj Afganistana (osnovnye etapy razvitiia)*, Moscow 1967, p. 54.

impression of a genuine land reform among peasants. However, the high fees for buyers *not* paying 100% cash up front for the land, not to mention bribes often equaling the price for the land itself, locked peasants out of the market.<sup>10</sup> Efforts to improve the land through irrigation schemes or to resettle poor southern Pashtun peasants and Indian refugees into northern lands also proved desultory.<sup>11</sup> Choice lands in the northern lands designated for the southerners and the Indians were already occupied by landowners who had obtained them for free in the 1880s.<sup>12</sup> While the settlers were granted tax relief and state loans, in reality, most ended up working as peons for large landowners.

Amanullah's failure to build a popular base of legitimacy among the peasantry was one of many reasons for the regime's collapse. While some expected Habibullah Kalakani, the upstart who overthrew him in 1929, to be a kind of Afghan Pugachev, Kalakani fell into the same trap when he was forced to announce tax increases on the peasantry to defend Kabul from Nadir Shah's armies.<sup>13</sup> Neither Nadir nor his cousins who ruled for Zahir during the latter's regency reversed the shift to taxes-in-money that Amanullah had introduced. Under the new regime, the state granted regional commercial elites monopolies in the production of certain export-oriented commodities (karakul wool, oil, fruits ...) provided that they invested their capital into a new state bank. While regional uprisings continued under Zahir's stewards, the aforementioned Kabul-based intelligentsia commented on how the government's policies led to an over-concentration of land into the hands of the wealthy. "The wealthy man," wrote an editorial for the state newspaper *Anis*, "having bought land only to save himself from inflation, doesn't concern himself with raising the productivity of his crops." Worse, the same editorial continued, the very wealthy had "transformed poor peasants into sharecroppers and deprive them of any sense of interest in the conscientious working of the land in order to receive larger harvests."<sup>14</sup> The title of the editorial gave a sense of the zeitgeist, at least among reformist Afghan intellectuals: "Land Belongs to the Farmer ...!"

Not until the mid-1950s, during the Prime Ministership of Mohammad Daoud Khan, were tentative efforts made toward any kind of land reform. In 1956, "for the first and only time in the entire history of the existence of the Afghan monarchy," the Ministry of Finances in Kabul published statistical information on the number of taxpayers in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup> On the basis of this data, it became possible for progressive members of the court and journalists for the state-controlled newspapers to reflect on the connection between the overwhelming concentration of land and the country's sorry economic condition. During the late 1950s, regime-controlled newspapers even went so far as to publish articles on the need for "a limitation of land holdings and a reform to land use," while others noted that land use patterns "lower agricultural productivity, trample upon

10 Ibid., pp. 71-72.

11 I.M. Reisner, *Nezavisimyi Afganistan*, Moscow 1929, pp. 168-169.

12 A.D. Davydov, *Agrarnyj stroj*, p. 75.

13 P. Alekseenkov, *Agrarnyi vopros v afganskom Turkestane*, Moscow 1933, p. 105.

14 "Zamin Mal-i Dehqan Ast ...!" *Anis*, 11 March 1953.

15 A.D. Davydov, *Agrarnoe zakonatel'stvo Demokraticeskoï Respubliki Afganistan*, Moscow 1984, p. 13.

personal freedom, and threaten the very existence of the peasantry.”<sup>16</sup> Showing a global awareness of Afghanistan’s place among more or less “developed” countries, the same article noted that “in developed and even backwards countries, large-scale landholding has been curbed and quite positive results have been achieved. The time for such a limitation has arrived in Afghanistan, too.”<sup>17</sup>

All the same, practical steps toward improving the lot of Afghan peasants remained disappointing. In 1959, the government began conducting surveys of Afghan farmers’ land lease arrangements and found many farmers to be leasing land from larger landowners on short-term contracts with high and frequent payments, limiting their ability or desire to make capital investments.<sup>18</sup> Daoud made a major radio address announcing his intent to redress complaints between peasants and landholders in the same year, and a new Administration for Agrarian Legislation was founded inside of the Ministry of Agriculture in 1960. It began drafting new legal projects, among others one requiring the registration of estates. However, projects like these ran into opposition from landed estates as well as the large number of members of the Kabul merchant class and the state bureaucracy that drew some portion of their income from illegally occupied government lands. Hence, even as the Afghan King, Zahir, forced Daoud out of government in 1963 and introduced elections and a relatively free press in the same year, plans for the registration (much less redistribution) of ill-begotten lands were frozen. The specific law proposed by the Administration for Agrarian Legislation, for example, was tabled by the Afghan Parliament in 1968.<sup>19</sup>

One escape hatch from the contradiction between the domestic political economy and the monarchy’s perceived need to modernize the country was recourse to foreign aid. Since the 1930s, Afghan governments had sought foreign expertise (first Japanese and German) to improve the lands of the Helmand River watershed, and from the late 1940s the American corporation Morrison-Knudsen had been hired on to complete the task. Morrison-Knudsen was later replaced by USAID itself, but for three decades, American hydrological experts sought to turn the marginal lands in southern Afghanistan into a resettlement site for landless Pashtun peasants and nomads from eastern Afghanistan. And in the mid-1960s, the Royal Government of Afghanistan convinced West Germany to carry out an provincial development project in Paktia Province in eastern Afghanistan. The People’s Republic of China ran a similar rural development project in Parwan Province, Saudi Arabia in Herat, and the World Bank in Kunduz and Khanabad.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the most important foreign donor to Afghanistan was the Soviet Union. The USSR had been the first country to diplomatically recognise Afghanistan, and in December

16 Aslah, 1 December 1958.

17 Anis, 14 December 1960.

18 A.D. Davydov, *Agrarnoe zakonatel'stvo Demokraticheskoi Respubliki Afganistan*, p. 14.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-18.

20 “Kredit i bezmozmezdnaia pomoshch’, predostavlennye Afganistanu na tseli ekonomicheskogo razvitiia inostrannymi gosudarstvami i mezhdunarodnymi organizatsiami za gody respublikanskogo rezhima,”), *RGAE* f. 365, op. 9, d. 2347 (obzory, spravki, informatsii), ll. 116-123.

1955, Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev made a surprise visit to Kabul, where he announced a large multi-year aid package and the training of the Afghan officer corps in the Soviet Union. Similarly to the Americans in the south, soon, Soviet aid institutions constructed hydroelectric dams along the Kabul River in the country's east. As part of the infrastructure downriver of the namesake Afghan capital, Soviet engineers built a large complex of state farms around one of the country's largest provincial cities, Jalalabad. The Jalalabad Irrigation Complex soon became a showcase for Soviet agricultural techniques, and Soviet celebrities like German Titov (the second man in space) visited Jalalabad to celebrate the species of olives and oranges transplanted to it by Soviet agronomists.<sup>21</sup> Yet Jalalabad was not a collective farm. Rather, it showed how state-led improvements plus large cooperatives or state farms outproduce the scattered, debt-riddled landscape of the Afghan countryside. If an Afghan state mustered the political will to end debt peonage – but then re-consolidate lands into productive large-scale agro-enterprises – it could transcend its dismal domestic political economy.

Yet this vision of the Afghan countryside did not sit well with intellectuals in Kabul. After watching liberal constitutionalist reform fail to deliver on agrarian reform for a generation, both older radicals like Nur Muhammad Taraki and a younger student generation at Kabul's universities wanted radical change. When the socialist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan was founded on 1 January 1965, it set immediately to preparing its own agrarian programme, which it managed to publish a year later in one of the few issues of its newspaper, *Khalq*, published before the newspaper was banned. Its demands went far beyond the de facto Soviet programme of state farms and capital investment. The programme, for instance, argued for a "cardinal land reform in favor of the landless and land-poor peasants, with the participation of the entire peasantry with the goal of the liquidation of the existence of the existing antiquated productive relations and the development of the productive forces of the agrarian economy."<sup>22</sup> The plan in *Khalq* did not deny the need for more cooperatives and state farms, but these had to be side projects to the primary goal of liquidating feudal relations. Government-sponsored newspapers, such as Muhammad Haschemi Maiwandwal's *Musavat* ("Equality"), pushed back against this rhetoric by promising "the formation of just and effective forms of land ownership," but they still emphasized the primacy of private property as the basis for any reformed agrarian economy.<sup>23</sup> But as Afghan scholars themselves noted at the time, time was running out on a liberal solution.<sup>24</sup>

21 Leon Sudzhan, "Olivkovaia vetv," *Vokrug sveta* 8 (1987).

22 *Khalq* 63 (11 April 1966).

23 Cited in A.D. Davydov, *Agrarnoe zakonodatel'stvo Demokraticeskoi Respubliki Afganistan*, p. 20.

24 A. Hamidullah, *Nazarī bih jughrāfiyā-yi zirā'atī-i Afghānistān*, Kabul 1974.

## Head Fake?

Whether an agrarian situation that Soviet advisors in the mid-1950s the first Soviet advisors had identified as “extremely backwards” could have been resolved in the parliamentary system that Zahir Shah introduced in 1963 remains an academic question. In the summer of 1973, Mohammad Daoud Khan staged a bloodless coup against his cousin Zahir Shah and declared Afghanistan a Republic. Yet Daoud’s coup d’état required the muscle of Soviet-trained army officers affiliated with the PDPA. Daoud pledged in an August 1973 “Message to the Nation” “deep transformations in the social structures of the country,” and he explicitly promised “land reform in the interests of the majority of the people.”<sup>25</sup> In June 1975, Daoud’s government announced a Law on Land Reform, whose centerpiece was to be a limit on land holdings (the precise number of hectares depended on the quality of the lands). The government committed itself to buy lands above these limits from owners. Landowners would receive compensation for their lands to be paid through a 25-year installment plus 2% annual interest.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the confiscated lands would be redistributed to peasants (preferably those already working the land) on a 25-year lease. The peasants, however, had to pay into a redemption fund plus 3% administrative fees in order to finance the state’s reimbursement of landowners; otherwise, they would lose their rights to the land after three years.

The Law on Land Reform went into effect in early 1976. An Administration for Land Reform, formed in April 1976, was to be the “boots on the ground” in visiting the provinces and collecting taxes. And in June 1976 the government forbade the private sale of land altogether. By August of that same year, teams from the Administration for Land Reform had fanned out to Kabul Province; by November, they had extended their work to ten other provinces, and by March 1977, seven others had been surveyed. By that time, the teams had completed their initial work in Kabul Province in central Afghanistan as well as Samangan Province in northern Afghanistan and populated Nimruz Province in the country’s southeast.<sup>27</sup>

Soviet advisors present in Kabul followed Daoud’s land reform programme. One March 1977 report issued by the Soviet advising apparatus at the Embassy, however, was skeptical. Agricultural reforms were, the report explained, desperately needed in order to meet the demands of “economic and social development,” but also by “the necessity of solving the pressing agrarian contradictions connected, above all, with the significant concentration of landed property.”<sup>28</sup> While “development” mattered, Soviet advisors also spoke in terms of Marxist “contradictions”—contradictions, however, that could be solved via land reform, rather than the peasants seizing the land. Yet the report went on to criticise

25 Jumphuriyat, 23 August 1973, cited in Davydov, *Agrarnoe zakonatel'stvo Demokraticeskoi Respubliki Afganistan*, pp. 20–21.

26 A.D. Davydov, *Agrarnoe zakonatel'stvo Demokraticeskoi Respubliki Afganistan*, p. 21.

27 B. Titov, “O khode osushchestvleniia zemel'noi reformy v Afganistane” (15 March 1977), *RGAE f. 365, op. 9, d. 2347 (obzory, spravki, informatsii)*, l. 190.

28 *Ibid.*, l. 188.



Daoud's plans as "petty bourgeoisie" in character and poorly thought out. Little thought had been given to how land would be purchased from large landowners, or how it would be redistributed to poor peasants. Worse, the reforms seemed focused on distributing land to individual peasants rather than using it as a means toward "the forced development of agricultural cooperatives."<sup>29</sup> Since many of the lands that would be redistributed were untenable for sole ownership, it was hard to see what concrete gain their distribution to individual peasants would bring about. Against a background of double-digit price inflation, Afghan peasants were continuing to receive a raw deal.<sup>30</sup>

All of these criticisms, however, assumed that the reforms were even taking place. Yet as the Soviet advising apparatus ascertained, this was not the case. Even in Kabul, Nimruz, and Samangan Provinces, the majority of the land confiscated was from farmers illegally squatting on government lands, not from large landowners. Land had not been confiscated from large landowners at all, "and the resolution of this question has been put off for an indefinite period of time." On top of this, the Administration for Land Reform had not contemplated how to redistribute government lands and was still working its way through peasants' applications. "Hence," concluded the advisor, "the reforms have only a limited character and this, obviously, determines their relatively calm reception among the population."<sup>31</sup>

This dysfunction owed in part to the lack of proper leadership to carry out the reforms. The Administration for Land Reform (founded in 1976) was staffed with Afghan civil servants but rather "temporary workers, mostly youths." Of the 1,500 people employed by the Administration, only 400 had any background in government administration; 300 were soldiers or officers in the Afghan Army, while the remaining 800 were either university students or recent secondary school graduates.<sup>32</sup> Few of these workers were qualified or educated to determine land reform policy or make the political decisions necessary to determine the reform's goals. But another political body, the Council on Land Reform, on whom sat several government ministers, could not be formally staffed until the calling of a Loya Jirgah. Even the kind of national cadastral survey that would be required to carry out the land reform plan (the survey would take a minimum of ten years itself!) had to be confirmed by the Council on Land Reform, the composition of which remained dependent on Daoud's domestic political considerations.<sup>33</sup>

Daoud's land reforms left Soviet advisors confused, but they did not view his regime as deviating too far from a "progressive" line or Soviet interests in Central Asia. Yet Afghan Communists had a rather different line. Daoud's land reform constituted a structural reversal from four decades' worth of the government selling lands to large landowners, but it was far from clear that the result would be mass peasant prosperity, and, after all,

29 Ibid., I. 191.

30 "Obzor razvitiia ekonomiki Respubliki Afganistana" (April 1976), RGAE f. 365, op. 9, d. 2347, I. 311

31 Titov, "O khode osushchestvleniia zemel'noy reformy v Afganistane," I. 190.

32 Ibid., I. 190.

33 Ibid., I. 194.

landowners would still *earn* money on the “confiscations.”<sup>34</sup> Reflecting on Daoud’s land reforms in early 1979, Afghan agricultural economist Muhammad Saleh Zerai wrote in the Soviet-backed theoretical journal *Problems of Peace and Socialism*:

*Muhammad Daoud tried to speak a ‘revolutionary’ language at first and started with a relatively revolutionary programme that progressive forces supported. But behind the pretty words and ‘revolutionary’ phrases there hid reactionary ambitions and anti-democratic and anti-national goals. During the five years of Daoudist rule practically nothing was accomplished in the realm of social and economic progress.*<sup>35</sup>

By the mid-1970s, then, a split had emerged between Afghan socialists and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union seemed content to live with Daoud as a predictable partner on their southern border, while both the Khalqist and Parchamist wings of what was to become the PDPA sought his overthrow. More than that, however, they had drawn different conclusions from Daoud’s brief tenure regarding how to solve the agrarian question in Afghanistan.

### **With Friends Like These ...**

Daoud’s experiment in land reform and republicanism proved short-lived. His tightening of the screws on Afghan Islamist groups by and large worked (one coup d’état failed in 1975, and most Islamists fled to Pakistan), but Daoud ended up reliant on the Soviet Union as an international backer and its PDPA partners. (Moscow, for its part, was concerned about splits within the PDPA, and it forced the two wings to unite on 3 July 1977). Hence, when Daoud attempted a crackdown on the PDPA in the spring of 1978, PDPA leaders in the military launched a surprise attack on the Presidential Palace in Kabul on the evening of 27–28 April 1978. Daoud and his family had been murdered. The PDPA soon declared the coup d’état the “April Revolution” and was convinced that it now possessed a mandate to enforce its radical reform programme on Afghan society. Even erudite Soviet specialists spoke now of how Daoud’s regime had “exhausted its historically necessary, and therefore objectively progressive, function, since this system had led to its logically inescapable collapse”-as if the sheer weight of contradictions rather than a bullet to the head had brought down the regime.<sup>36</sup>

As PDPA General Secretary Nur Muhammad Taraki confirmed in an interview after the Revolution to Pakistani television, land reform constituted “the main task of the revolution.”<sup>37</sup> Soon, Soviet advisors descended upon Kabul to consult on the reforms.

34 A 1977 addition to the Law on Land Reform removed the 2% annual interest rate on state reimbursements to landowners entirely. See: Jarida-yi Rasmi, 1 January 1977, cited in A.D. Davydov, *Agrarnoe zakonatel'stvo Demokraticeskoi Respubliki Afganistan*, p. 21.

35 Saleh Muhammad Zerai, “Afghanistan: nachalo novoi ery,” *Problemy mira i sotsializma* 1 (1979), p. 57.

36 A.D. Davydov, *Agrarnoe zakonatel'stvo Demokraticeskoi Respubliki Afganistan*, p. 24.

37 Kabul Times, 29 July 1978.

But opinion among the advisors was divided. Many who came from the Soviet Central Asian SSRs assumed that the experience of agricultural transformation in settings like Uzbekistan or Tajikistan would form the model to be copied by the Afghans.<sup>38</sup> Others, like a team of advisors sent in June 1978 insisted that while the Central Asian experience offered lessons, it need not be followed slavishly. Even in Soviet Central Asia, they noted, it had taken seven years since the Revolution for all lands (as opposed to just the lands of the Romanovs or lands confiscated in the revolutionary chaos of 1917–1918) to be redistributed.<sup>39</sup> (In contrast to much of Russia, peasants in Russian Turkestan did not engage in mass land seizures following the abdication of the Tsar; instead, measures initiated in 1917 redistributed land from landlords to sharecroppers for private use, although the subsequent purchase or sale of land was forbidden. This was a distinct process from collectivization, which began only in late 1929.) Still others argued that a continuation of Daoud's land reforms would be the best option – including, it bears underscoring, “consistent observation of the right to private property and compensation for land.”<sup>40</sup> The Soviet advising teams were divided, in other words, but there was a consensus against rash moves.

The Afghans ignored these voices. After nearly a half-year of preparations, Decree Number 8 of the Revolutionary Council, released on 30 November 1978, made clear the revolutionary intentions of the new regime. The decree had four major components: firstly, the absolute ceiling on land ownership for any one family was limited to 30 *jeribs* (6 hectares), or a third less than the Daoud-era reforms had allowed. Secondly, all lands that surpassed this limit (as well as the entire land holdings of the Afghan royal family and any land holdings whose deeds were held illegitimate) were to be confiscated by a Department of Land Reform *without* compensation. The only exception in this regard applied to improvements “relating to the land” such as irrigation systems, built since 1969. Thirdly, rather than seeking the consolidation of any confiscated lands into government-run estates, Decree Number 8 declared that all lands were to be distributed directly to landless peasants and nomads. Fourthly, all Afghans who received land were forbidden from reselling or leasing it to others. In other words, as Soviet expert Aleksandr Davydov noted, the reform was not so much a transfer of land ownership as a redistribution of the right of use and inheritance of parcels of land to peasants. Along these lines, Decree Number 8 expected that peasants would use the land with government-supplied fertilizers, seeds, and equipment, and work it upon receipt.

Even as plans were announced to implement Decree Number 8 starting in eastern and southern Afghanistan in January 1978, Soviet advisors in Kabul voiced their disapproval with the PDPA's land reform project. Rather than dividing large landowners from the PDPA's natural social base of landless farmers *plus* middle-tier farmers, the PDPA seemed

38 A.D. Davydov, *Voïny moglo ne byt': Krestianstvo i reformy*, Moscow, 1993, p. 115.

39 M.F. Slinkin, *Narodno-demokraticeskaja partiia Afganistana u vlasti. Vremia Taraki-Amina (1978-79 gg.)*, Simferopol, 1999, p. 25.

40 A.D. Davydov, *Voïny moglo ne byt': Krestianstvo i reformy*, p. 117.

obsessed with class war. And rather than redirecting confiscated lands to state farms like the one in Jalalabad, the PDPA instead seemed hell-bent on creating an entire nation of unproductive subsistence farmers. The leader of the Soviet agricultural advising mission in Kabul, P.S. Fedorchuk, noted as much in a December 1978 missive to Moscow:

*The land reform according to Decree Number 8 affects 272,000 middle-tier and large landowners, even though this is in no way necessary at this stage. The point is that the fundamental enemies of the April Revolution can be only those large landowners, and not even all of them. Among the 22,000 largest landowners, there are only 7,000 whose property approaches 1 million hectares of the best land. Hence, it would be necessary to start the confiscation of lands with them, with the resulting redistribution of land among landless peasants and model state enterprises. As far as the 250,000 landowners possessing a medium amount of land are concerned, it would make sense to bring them to the side of the people's government through support and stimulation of the middle-tier farmer in agricultural production until such a time that the state agricultural sector has been strengthened.*<sup>41</sup>

In spite of these profound misgivings (not to mention the lack of reliable land registers for most of the country), land redistribution efforts were launched ahead of schedule in southern Afghanistan on 20 December 1978 (two days after Fedorchuk's memorandum). Some 100 teams of government agents were to implement the reform decrees across Afghanistan from south to north from January to June 1979, leaving enough time for spring planting depending on climate. Yet the attempt to reform the rural economy faced immediate difficulties. A lack of vehicles prevented teams from reaching many rural localities, and the attempt to expropriate all middle-sized landowners (rather than the 7,000 that Fedorchuk had suggested) helped spur the Afghan resistance. The March 1979 mutiny of an entire Afghan Army garrison in the western city of Herat prompted delays to the land reform programme. And when land reform teams reached northern Afghanistan later in 1979, twenty-three government operatives were killed over just one summer.<sup>42</sup>

### Reading Between the Lines

Critical readers might question whether the analysis thus far – coming mostly from Russian-language and Soviet sources – denigrates Afghan socialists as “irrational” subaltern actors unable to live up to the standards of their Soviet tutors. However, an examination of PDPA newspapers confirms the stereotypes about the fanatical nature of Afghan socialists. It bears stressing that such newspaper articles went unread outside of Kabul:

41 P.S. Fedorchuk, Private Memorandum (16 December 1978), cited in Slinkin, *Narodno-demokraticeskaja partiia Afganistana u vlasti. Vremia Taraki-Amina* (1978-79 gg.), pp. 30-31.

42 B.B. Basov and G.A. Polyakov, *Afganistan: Trudnye sud'by revoliutsii*, Moscow 1988, p. 27.

most Afghan peasants could not have read them, as they were almost all illiterate. However, they provide a view into the thinking of Afghan socialist intellectuals trying to justify a project that was disintegrating before them. Agricultural reform (*aslahat-i arzi*) was a prominent topic in issues of the official Party newspaper *Khalq* in the spring of 1979. The third issue of *Khalq* devoted a centerfold to the accomplishments of the land reform programme that featured facsimiles of Decree Number 8, as well as a sample card attesting ownership of the new regime. The latter was decorated with a hand-drawn border of a harvest of grapes, watermelons, wheat, apricots, and other fruits and vegetables. Yet the two pieces in the centerfold devoted to explaining land reform repeated the kind of ideological cant that had troubled advisors like Fedorchuk and Davydov.

One unsigned article, "A Summary of the Land Reforms," explained how unequal property relations had trapped Afghanistan and its peasants in a cycle of low wages, low agricultural productivity, and weak terms of trade. The PDPA, the summary continued, had enacted agricultural reform to solve this problem, but it took a moment to explain what it meant by land reform. Often, the piece explained, governments around the world had enacted land reform under the name of "integral reform" (*rifurm-i antagrati*). Integral reform, the piece noted, sometimes entailed land redistribution along with technical assistance. However, "integral reform" all too often meant that "land redistribution either completely disappears from the agenda or that it is very ineffective." Yet the only meaningful kind of land reform worth its name had to be directed toward land reform *qua* reform of property relations themselves. Only if land reform aimed to change class relations could it be deemed land reform. The piece, in short, challenged the Soviets' assertion that gradualist reform could serve the interests of socialism. Land reform had to be all or nothing, now or never.<sup>43</sup>

As if there were any lack of clarity on this matter, the centerfold on agricultural reform also featured a signed article by Dr. Saleh Muhammad Zerai, the Minister of Agriculture and Land Reform to whom the Soviet advisor Fedorchuk had emphasized the need for a gradualist approach. In the piece, Zerai explained how land reforms had been halted by an alliance between capitalists, imperialists, and feudalists. Often, this alliance of reactionaries had called for land reforms whereby peasants had, in effect, been obligated to sell their lands to feudal landlords. In other cases, capitalist interests had been strong enough to force land reforms that broke down feudal relations and introduced brutal market relations, thus preventing the formation of cooperatives or other associations that could protect peasants' interests. In contrast to all of these sham efforts at land reform, noted Zerai, the PDPA had introduced "democratic land reform" whose ultimate aim was "the foundation of a society in which the exploitation of man by man does not exist." Zerai went on to summarize the other elements of Decree Number 8, making it clear that Afghan peasants' lack of ownership of the land (in contrast to the obligation to maintain it with state support) was not a design flaw but rather a feature of the re-

43 "Makhtasari darbareh-yi Aslahat-i Arzi," *Khalq* 3 (28 April 1979), 8, Afghan Partisan Series, Hoover Institution Archives (hereafter cited as APS, HA).

form. Only through these measures and the ongoing redistribution of land, Zerai noted, could harvests increase, the standard of living of the peasants grow, and “all the laborers rise”.<sup>44</sup>

The writers for *Khalq* did not merely discuss ideology in abstract terms. Reporters for the newspaper visited existing Soviet-built projects, like those in Nangarhar. One 7 November 1979 piece explained how the cooperative farms built under Daoud had been shambolic, since they were run “in the service of feudal farmers and not for the poor, and they were run as a means of whatever best allowed for the exploitation of needy peasants.”<sup>45</sup> However, the April Revolution had done away with both these “anti-people” cooperatives and the “social parasites” who ran them. The same piece went on to explore how both the number of cooperative farms as well as the number of members had grown since Decree Number 8. A later piece of reporting from the farm complex in Nangarhar started similar in tone, noting how the cooperative farms there had not only brought “green and light to Nangarhar,” but would also occupy a prominent position as an example for economic, industrial, and social reform.<sup>46</sup> Yet there was a lack of ideological consistency between these two and other pieces. Whereas the former piece saw pre-1979 agricultural cooperatives as a tool of capitalist domination, the latter piece praised them as a valuable example of Soviet-Afghan cooperation that had given peasants control over their own lives. As the accompanying photograph of Afghan peasants (some in suits and hats, others in *shalwar kameez* and turbans) showed, now peasants could “enjoy the fruits of their labors” (one of Nangarhar’s specialties was citrus).

Exacerbating these hardline ideological positions were the twists and turns in Afghan politics during the autumn of 1979. When PDPA General Secretary Nur Muhammad Taraki returned from a visit to the Non-Aligned Movement’s Conference in Havana, his deputy Hafizullah Amin had him killed and unleashed a wave of arrests and executions against the Taraki-aligned Party elite. Most of the important anti-Amin elite escaped as Ambassadors to socialist countries, but Amin’s erratic behavior, not to mention his American educational background, made him suspicious to Moscow. In the meantime, however, the regime extended and intensified the land reform policies. In several areas, land reform officials redistributed land without measuring plots’ borders, leading to conflict. Further, Amin redistributed land to his favored functionaries and engaged in programmes of forced resettlement (often moving one ethnic group to another’s territories). Making Amin’s situation worse, on 12 December 1979, NATO announced its intention to deploy medium-range missiles in Europe, thus signaling (in Moscow’s eyes) that it had no intentions to extend détente.

Worried that Amin would turn toward the Americans, or that his regime would collapse in the face of the Islamist opposition, Moscow opted to liquidate Amin and replace him

44 Saleh Muhammad Zerai, “Tahlil-i teorik va praktik-i farman nambard-I hashtom va jebnah-ha-yi nazari va amali-yi an,” *Khalq* 3 (28 April 1979), p. 9, APS, HA.

45 “Kuperativha-yi zira’ati tusi’eh-yi miyaband,” *Khalq* 37 (7 November 1979), p. 3, APS, HA.

46 “Hasalat-I satrus va zaytun farmha-yi nangarhar va sadfisdad afsayash yafteh ast,” *Khalq* 39 (17 December 1979), p. 3, APS, HA.

with Babrak Karmal (the Afghan Ambassador in Prague) as a “limited contingent of Soviet forces” invaded the country in late December 1979. Karmal and the new Afghan press proceeded to explain in *Problems of Peace and Socialism*, the flagship theoretical journal in the Eastern Bloc, how “subjectivism and Leftist excesses had broken such important measures as land reforms.”<sup>47</sup> The PDPA’s 1981 Programme for Measures on Land Reform went so far as to denounce the land reform as carried out under Amin as “hasty and rash,” not to mention “carried out in violation of the law.”<sup>48</sup> Yet this new-found respect for the rule of law and due process was late in coming. Later articles by Karmal in *Problems of Peace and Socialism* elaborated how 300,000 families had received land through the reform, but “the majority of them had been stripped of their rights, especially during the period of Amin’s rule, or by fear of the landowners.”<sup>49</sup> The strawman of Amin now permitted Afghan socialists to avoid coming to terms with the debates they had *not* had with Soviet advisors during the crucial autumn of 1978, when they issued Decree Number 8.

## Game Change

An examination of the Afghan government’s land reform policies from 1980 to its collapse in 1992 remains beyond the scope of this paper. For the moment, it bears stressing how the Islamist opponents of the regime shifted the rules of the game by which leftist regimes had to play. The most important opposition to the regime were the Islamist mujahidin groups that massed in Peshawar, which blasted the regime in Kabul on several fronts (their emancipation of women, their initial disrespect toward religion, and their invitation to the Soviets to occupy the country). But while a comprehensive investigation of *mujahidin* publications remains necessary, another reason for the resistance was material. After all, land reform’s self-defined goal was to change social relations, democratize land ownership and to increase production to change Afghanistan’s position in the international political economy. In response, empowered and well-funded Islamist ideologues in the refugee camps in Pakistan propagated the idea that land reform itself violated a verse in the Quran sanctioning the *inheritance* of land.<sup>50</sup>

Yet as Soviet analysts noted at the time, the authority of this verse was quite shaky. It was, they noted, ambiguous at best whether the Qur’an’s sanctioning of inheritance amounted to an unrestricted right to private property.<sup>51</sup> Further, early Muslim historians had, Soviet analysts argued, made clear that early Caliphs had redistributed economically

47 Babrak Karmal, „Narod Afganistan otstoit revoliutsiiu!” *Problemy mira i sotsializma* 1980 (4), pp. 40–41.

48 Program-i tadabir-i amali-yi edama-yi tadbik-i eslahat-i demokratik-i marhala-yi enkelab-i melli-yi demokratik, Kabul 1982.

49 Babrak Karmal, „Narastorzhimoe edinstvo s narodom,” *Problemy mira i sotsializma* 1981 (6), p. 25.

50 The Qur’an, Al-Araf 7:128.

51 Davydov, *Agrarnoe zakonodatel'stvo*, Moscow 1984, 92.



inactive holdings.<sup>52</sup> Other analysts noted that Afghan intellectuals like Gul Pacha Ulfat had promoted the idea of “Islamic socialism” in the late 1960s, promoting economic equality as the only expression of a “truly Islamic society.”<sup>53</sup> Iranian intellectuals like Ali Shariati and groups like the Mujahidin-i Khalq had championed “Islamic socialism” in the 1970s. Outside of Afghanistan’s immediate region, countries at the core of the Arab world, such as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq had carried out land reform without inspiring the international jihad that the PDPA had. Tiny, arid South Yemen had even gone so far as to create collective farms without creating the jihadist vortex that formed in Peshawar.<sup>54</sup> The real issue was that the kinds of demands that Islamist ideologues felt empowered to make had changed since the 1960s.<sup>55</sup>

Undaunted in its pursuit of solving the land question, the PDPA continued to carry out land reform—although now, it repeated that it was doing so with respect for private property.<sup>56</sup> Citations of the PDPA’s founding documents (which acknowledged private property *provided* that it was used to raise production and cultural levels) notwithstanding, the announcement amounted to a tactical retreat from the earlier insistence on removing exploitation altogether.<sup>57</sup> Yet even this retreat failed to appreciate the tectonic shifts in the politics of solidarity during the 1980s. Just as the PDPA continued to speak of “social parasites,” many Western leftists had moved on from the dictatorship of the proletariat as well as national liberation movements. Individual empathy towards populations at risk of genocide trumped an international solidarity toward workers and peasants threatened by capitalists and landowners.<sup>58</sup>

Many former anti-colonial European leftists flocked to the Afghan-Pakistani border, to provide services to the Sunni Islamist resistance, not the “anti-imperialist” Afghan government. Some groups provided not just emergency medical aid but also longer-term agrarian aid programs. By the end of the 1980s, to take one example, the French group Veterinarians Without Borders (VSF) provided not only animal feed but also diagnoses and prevention of epizootic diseases to the herds of Afghan farmers living in the north-eastern reaches of the country.<sup>59</sup> However, few of these programmes called into question basic property relations or issues of finance and debt in the Afghan countryside. The earlier debates about private property and land dating at least to the 1960s had been re-

52 Ibid., 93. Davydov was referring to Umar’s treatment of Bilal ibn Rabah.

53 Gul Pacha Ulfat, “Susiyalisti,” *Anis*, 10 September 1966, p. 3.

54 F. Halliday, *Catastrophe in South Yemen: A Preliminary Assessment*, in: MERIP Middle East Report 139 (March–April 1986), p. 37.

55 A. Jalal, *An Uncertain Trajectory: Islam’s Contemporary Globalization, 1971–1979*, in: *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective*, Cambridge, MA, 2011, pp. 319–326.

56 Haqiqat-i Enqelab-i Saur, 21 April 1980.

57 Khalq, 11 April 1966.

58 T. Nunan, *The Anti-Colonial Origins of Humanitarian Intervention*, in: *Jadaliyya* (15 September 2016), <http://voxpop.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/25107/the-anti-colonial-origins-of-humanitarian-interven> (Accessed 6 June 2017).

59 For an example of VSF’s work, see Jo Daisniere and Michel Bouy, “Rapport de Mission Juli 89 – May 90,” (VSF Jurm Badakhshan), *Medecins sans Frontières Archives*, Box “Badakhshan,” Folder “VSF”.



solved, albeit through the appearance of new Islamist and NGO groups whose presence few could have foreseen.

## Concluding Thoughts

What emerges from this story as far as scholars of rural development are concerned are two themes. Firstly, socialist ideas about “the agrarian question” mattered. Remembering this in our accounts matters, because often the most interesting debates still remaining to be explored took place among socialists. As we have seen, the Soviets were not the revolutionaries in debates with their Afghan colleagues, yet we still lack for synthetic history of why Third World socialists pushed for redistribution vs. collective farms vs. villageization – and why and where the Soviets were willing to push back or suggest alternatives. Reconstructing these debates is crucial to understanding the woes of societies such as Afghanistan, Yemen, and Ethiopia and Eritrea today, and historians should be able to offer perspective on the rural poverty that drives conflicts in those countries.

Secondly, taking into account the socialist perspective matters not just because of its difference, but also because of its *continuities* with state capitalist or NGO-led development. Of the primary advisors dispatched to Kabul to advise on land reform in the autumn of 1978, two (Abdusattor Kakharov and M.B. Babaeva) were experts in epizootic diseases – the same kind of expertise that NGO operatives working with VSF would bring to bear on Afghanistan only a few years later. And the cartographers who worked with VSF were not just anyone, but Iranian development experts who had worked in earthquake-ridden areas for the Pahlavi regime. Here, again, the events in Afghanistan in the 1980s emerge not just as a battle between communism and capitalism, but rather a field onto which diverse actors transferred knowledge bases useful for rural development to a Cold War battlefield. Bringing in socialist perspectives matters, then, because it helps take in the global Cold War as a field not just defined by ideology but also by rival “high modernisms,” embodied in these cases by veterinary sciences or cartography. It is by connecting these themes with the road to Osama bin Laden’s Tarnak Farms compound that we may better understand the end of the Cold War and the beginning of our times.