

Russia's Afghan Syndrome

Ewa Kulesza

It is now almost one year since the last Soviet soldier—Lieutenant-General Boris Gromov, commander of the “limited contingent” stationed “temporarily” in Afghanistan, as official terminology would have it—crossed the “Bridge of Friendship” over the river border of Amu-Daria, and for the Soviet Union, even though it continues to pursue intense diplomatic action in the region, the time has come to draw the first lessons from the Afghan adventure of the Soviet regime.

Involved in an enterprise for which it badly miscalculated the consequences and did not foresee (as only it could) all the repercussions, it is clear that the Soviet Union has not survived the test unharmed. The “Afghan lesson” risks weighing heavily on the future of Moscow’s foreign policy, both in strictly regional terms and on a global level. The patent failure of the initial plan to Sovietise Afghanistan has contributed to nourish general reflection by the Soviet leaders as to the means and objectives of their country’s global strategy. Engaged as they are in an unescapable ambitious programme of internal reform, faced with the real risk of weakening the Soviet Union’s international position and of having to adjust their ambitions to the instruments of power still available, the Kremlin authorities will have to respond urgently to their need to preserve Soviet influence “by other means”.

A border war, presented for a long time to the population of the USSR as a “non-war”, the Afghan conflict has had repercussions only lately on Soviet society. Treatment of the Afghan affair in the speeches of those responsible and respective coverage by the official media illustrate and reflect the transformations which have taken place in the political life of the USSR from the Brezhnev epoch to the coming of *perestroika*. The truth was hidden, and

success propaganda was used to exalt the advantages reaped from the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan during the first phase of the conflict. Then there was a progressive awakening of conscience, subsequent to the return of the first veterans and the remains of the dead. Finally there were the appearance and multiplication of growingly poignant articles and reports throughout a *glasnost* -influenced press and television. The "Afghan syndrome" never represented, however, a crisis in the conscience of the entire nation, a crisis comparable to that experienced by American society at the time of the Vietnam war. This phenomenon is mainly explained by obvious differences in the natures of the Soviet and American political systems, but above all, the particularly able treatment of the Afghan question by the Gorbachev administration.

The defeat suffered by the hands of the *Jihad* of the Afghan people, moreover, has not failed to raise the question of the consequences which this war will have had on the tens of millions of Soviet Moslems, and thus on Moscow's policy with respect to growing Islamic sentiment in Central Asia, as also, though to a lesser degree, in the Caucasus. The Soviet leaders are aware of the seriousness, not to say gravity, of the problem recently demonstrated in all its topicality by the events in Uzbekhistan and Khazakstan. In this area too, they are attempting to find a response capable of containing the consequences, both internally (in the search for new policies regarding the "Moslem question") and on a diplomatic level (with a rethinking of Soviet policies regarding Iran and other countries in the Arab and Moslem world).

Without considering that the defeat suffered in Afghanistan marked an "historical turning point" in the global strategy of the USSR, it must be recognised as a matter of fact that the decision and organisation behind the retreat reflected and have contributed to shaping the changes which have now been taking place in Soviet foreign policy for some four years. Important and undeniable, the "Afghan lessons" are not, however, the only reason for the present revision of Soviet foreign policy; it is necessary to acknowledge its contribution, but it would be imprudent to overestimate its importance. Far from being a decisive moment marking the beginning of a reversal in Soviet and Communist expansionism on a world level, the Afghan war has mingled in time, albeit in a particularly dramatic way, with other events and problems which have finally obliged the Kremlin leadership to attempt the re-elaboration of a new approach to Soviet international strategy.

Ideological breakdown

Despite its symbolic value, the retreat of the Red Army troops from Afghanistan can thus not really be considered a "point of no return", in the sense of an end to the era of uninterrupted growth of Soviet power based on the principle of irreversibility of the achievements of communism. From the beginning of the Afghan affair, in fact, the Soviet leaders have remained faithful to the principle which has constituted one of the constants of Soviet foreign policy since the epoch of Lenin, namely the flexibility and elasticity of its ideology, easily adaptable to the needs dictated by the imperatives of the moment.

Without going into an historical account of the external relations of Soviet Russia, and of the USSR, it is important to remember the intellectual oscillations, largely of tactical inspiration, excogitated by the theorists and practicers of Soviet diplomacy: salvation of the Revolution by the Brest-Litovsk Treaty; abandonment of the Trotskyist concept of immediate world revolution to the advantage of the Stalinist policy of "the construction of socialism in one single country", or even the different phases of "détente" and "overture", corresponding to a taming of ideology followed, however, by periods of reversal and notable ideological aggressivity.

These two tendencies, mainly the result of the eternal ambiguity of the USSR as a "state just like others" and at the same time the herald of revolution, have periodically been able to co-exist, in fact. The beginning of détente, for example, was contemporary to armed Warsaw Pact intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The constant entangling of these diverse motivations behind Moscow's international action has continually posed problems for the Western nations, which have generally preferred to refer to fixed examples of past Soviet behaviour in order to comprehend new Soviet initiatives. It was after this fashion that the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine subsequent to the invasion of Czechoslovakia was accepted by a good number of Western countries after Soviet intervention in Afghanistan on December 27, 1979.

In conformity with this tradition in their foreign policy, and anxious to keep a back door open in case of failure of the Afghan revolution, the Soviets thus demonstrated extreme prudence in their ideological justification of the Babrak Karmal regime and their own military presence in Afghanistan. The decision to intervene can certainly be considered a victory of ideological blindness and

power-politics over the "realistic" or "meditative" faction in the Kremlin. And recent declarations by various Soviet decision-makers and experts attribute Leonid Brezhnev and his closest aides with exclusive responsibility for the Afghan blunder, whilst that of Mikhail Gorbachev, present all the same in the Politburo of the epoch, has been glossed over in silence for obvious political reasons, and finally denounced by Shevarnadze with the famous declaration in which he asserted that Gorbachev, like himself, had learned of the invasion from the radio. On March 11 of this year, during one of his electoral campaign meetings, Boris Yeltsin noted that the decision to invade Afghanistan had been taken personally by Leonid Brezhnev, Mikhail Suslov, Dimitri Ustinov and Andrei Gromyko; similarly certain members of the military establishment have been observed to emphasise that the Red Army leaders—Marshals Ogarkov and Akhromeyev—were opposed to intervention.¹ Apart from usual speculation over the "clans" and internecine struggles within the Politburo (notably those between the KGB, supported by Yuri Andropov and opposed to intervention, and the Brezhnev-military coalition) presented as confrontational or successional bickering between "conservatives" and "reformers", this continuity in the complex and often contradictory nature of Soviet decision-making deserves special emphasis in the case of Afghanistan.

The Soviet intervention of December 1978 and the subsequent stationing of Red Army troops have always been justified to public opinion by the principle of proletarian internationalism, but was really a victory for ideology—a victory for ambitions of "power projection" with the purpose of extending the USSR's political and ideological sphere of influence. And this is a sufficiently vague concept as to allow a justification of Soviet activities in favour of Western Communist parties, "revolutionary" or national liberation movements in the third world, and "progressive" forces in general. With respect to this, the ideological comparison of the intervention in Afghanistan with the participation of the International Brigades in the Spanish War between 1936 and 1939 is particularly illuminating: first introduced in a propaganda brochure published in 1980 on the occasion of a visit of Babrak Karmal in the USSR, this analogy continues to be echoed today in a good number of articles dedicated by the Soviet press to the "internationalist duty" carried out by the soldiers of the forthieth Army.

As far as the notion of the irreversibility of Communist achievements is concerned, this has also never had anything more than vague and uncertain foundations. The Brezhnev Doctrine was only really applied to the socialist

countries of Eastern Europe, and in their case, their belonging to the Moscow-ruled military alliance, their ideological alignment with the USSR and the very existence of a "Sovietised" regime on their territories are inseparable from the USSR's most fundamental need to guarantee its security by assuring political cohesion throughout the region. In comparison with the "people's democracies" of Central and Eastern Europe, the case of Afghanistan is different for several reasons. Even during the central period of the occupation, when the Sovietisation of political institutions and social life was imposed on Afghanistan through the coercion exercised by both the Kabul authorities and the presence of Soviet troops, the Kremlin ideologists were always hesitant to grant Afghanistan the statute of a member country of the socialist community in the sense as exemplified by Poland, Hungary or Mongolia. Since the April 1978 coup, and for the whole of the occupation of Afghanistan, the Soviets never gave any real demonstration of true enthusiasm for the coming to power of a regime which was certainly revolutionary, but which also risked compromising the good neighbourly relations which had existed between the



On the Afghan border

two countries since the 1920s. In fact the Soviet interpretation of the nature of the Afghan regime never went any further than the very first declarations of 1979 (formulated even before military intervention) on the "socialist orientation" and "construction of a new society" under way in Afghanistan. The most recent commentaries certainly recognise the failure of efforts towards the construction of Afghan socialism,² a failure mainly due to the initially underestimated force of Islam, but a lucid and honest analysis of the profounder causes behind the rejection of the Communist model in Afghanistan still remains to be carried out in the USSR.

The mark of the mujaheddin

It must not be forgotten that the ambiguities of the ideological defeat in Afghanistan allow the Soviet leaders today to render rather banal the historical significance of a failure which is presented not as a renunciation of any fundamental principle, but as a simple miscalculation or error of judgement. And it is not possible to separate these ambiguities from the general revision which the Kremlin is carrying out on ideology as an essential instrument of its foreign policy. Faced with the undeniable fact of the declining attraction of this ideology in its classical form, both domestically and internationally, the Soviets are, in fact, trying to minimise its importance. A body of principles elaborated by Mikhail Gorbachev and his friends since 1985, this "new political thinking" thus acknowledges if not the elimination of ideological confrontation, at least its transformation in an international environment which he too has changed. Linked to the internal evolution of the USSR of Gorbachev, the future of this option remains open. In the short and medium term, however, Gorbachev's project can be interpreted as the abandoning of utopian visions for the development of communism in the USSR and throughout the world, to the profit of a realistic and pragmatic approach in handling the problems and obstacles which crop up in the course of the project. The decision to find a solution to the Afghan crisis by means other than military ones, and hence the contribution itself of the "bloody plague of Afghanistan"³ to modifying Soviet thinking, are part of this same phenomenon.

Even though there is still the need for an exhaustive study of the purely military lessons drawn by the Red Army from the Afghan retreat, it is already possible to say that the impossibility of taming the mujaheddin certainly contributed to shaping Gorbachev's "new political thinking", and that one of the main ideas of the latter concerns precisely this fact: the declining importance

of the military factor as an instrument of foreign policy. And the attempt to revise Soviet military doctrine, through the revaluation of the concepts of "non-offensive defence" and "reasonable sufficiency", was also a result of the Afghan experience, despite the uncertainties weighing for the moment on the exact content of of this revision, and above all the real transformations it might have to involve in the concrete defence framework of the Soviet forces.

The setback experienced in Afghanistan is thus not so much a question of the defeat of a military engagement plan on the battlefield, as a failure of the concept itself of the role accorded to Soviet troops. It is a failure which reveals the inability of the Red Army to accomplish the mission entrusted to it. The figures furnished by the propaganda, in this precise case, prove to be exact: the Soviet contingent in Afghanistan remained "limited", with 120,000 troops in all, out of an army of more than two million, and belonging, furthermore, solely to land forces. It would thus seem probable that the presence of Soviet soldiers was only intended as a supporting element, a complementary means destined to guarantee the success of an operation in which the essential part was to be played on a political level.

The insufficient training shown by of the Soviet troops faced with battle conditions in a particularly difficult environment (mountain warfare, disadvantageous climatic conditions, the need for an army trained for the Western menace on a front of Central European flatlands to fight a guerilla war), has brutally forced both military leaders and political decision-makers to reflect on the conditions in which men and materials are to be utilised, rather than on ways of increasing the efficiency of the Red Army in the case of real engagement. The decline in troop morale of the fortieth Army demonstrated the deplorable state of the "human factor", and this now constitutes another source of worry for the Soviet authorities: incomplete and weak technical preparation and patriotic education in the recruits, conflictual relationships between officers and rank and file, national tensions, desertion, and so on. Gorbachev's nomination of Generals Yazov and Moiseyev, both specialists in personnel problems, to the positions of Defence Minister and general Chief of Staff, demonstrates the desire to remedy this crisis within the Red Army alongside the other reforms. And the Afghan war proved that the Red Army was not immune to the same "negative phenomena" of the whole Soviet society.⁴

The first estimates of the financial cost of the war (45 billion roubles for the nine years of conflict, according to the figures disclosed by Prime Minister

Nikolai Ryzhkov to the tribune of the Congress of the People's Deputies in May 1989) would lead one to think that the Afghan conflict had equally contributed to Moscow's awakening consciousness of the impossibility of continuing to spend the more and more limited resources of the Soviet state in such an inconsiderate way: acknowledgment of the fact that the profits drawn from the Empire do not correspond to the investments made to extend and maintain it, is thus another important element underlying the "new political thinking". It remains to be seen whether the development of *glasnost* has been sufficient to be able to trust these statistics in full.

Finally, the question of the contribution of the Afghan war to changing the decision-making processes in Soviet foreign policy must be underlined. In denouncing the responsibility of the Brezhnev leadership for the decision to invade Afghanistan, the new Kremlin masters do not hesitate to criticise the adventurism and ignorance of their predecessors, in addition to the inadequate analysis of Afghan and regional information on the eve of intervention.

It is interesting to recall that the very first criticism of the 1979 decision was made by representatives of Moscow Institutes for Research in International Relations, the same who are today receiving a more and more important role as aides and experts of Gorbachev. It has also been discovered that certain of these institutes, and in particular the Institute for the Economics of the World Socialist System, directed by Oleg Bogomolev, would seem to have prepared reports during that epoch, which advised against military intervention in Afghanistan.⁵ If it is now easy to see how the opinions of these think-tanks are taken into consideration during the preparation of Soviet foreign policy under Gorbachev, even as far as handling of the Afghan affair after withdrawal is concerned, the structures themselves of decisional powers within the Kremlin, in the field of

**Ewa Kulesza is Research Fellow at the
French Institute for International Relations.
She has published several articles on Eastern Europe
and is presently coordinating a research group on
"Glasnost and Soviet Society in the Gorbachev era".
A French version of this article also appears in *Cosmopolitique*, Paris.**

foreign policy at least, have remained largely unchanged. In fact, even though the Soviet authorities have drawn numerous lessons from the Afghan affair regarding ways of thinking and carrying out foreign policy, the most important specific characteristic of the USSR in this domain, that is, the elaboration of diplomacy without the democratic sanction or agreement on the part of public opinion, remains intact, and this despite all that has been written and said on the emergence of a Soviet public opinion stimulated or brought to the surface by the Afghan affair.

The art of non-war

The Soviet authorities have drawn their conclusions from the Afghan adventure, but have continued to reason in terms of largely "classical" concepts of power and prestige within the Soviet system. The decision to retreat responded to a need dictated by reasons of external policy: it was not taken under the pressure of a Soviet society worried over the moral responsibility for its own country's triggering and pursuing a "dirty war", as was largely the case with the end of the Vietnam war. And similarly, the departure of the Red Army from Afghanistan has not led to the Soviet citizens questioning the international role and influence of their country. It would, however, be inexact to minimise the impact of the Afghan conflict on the conscience of the Soviet people; in fact it is feasible to refer to a "moral crisis" in Soviet society with respect to the Afghan war. This crisis generated by the Afghan affair is, however, essentially a self-questioning of the Soviet society, and not a contestation of the political system in the USSR.

The moral crisis of Soviet society has crystallised in proportion to the introduction of *perestroika*, and above all of *glasnost*. The role played by the official media in this awakening of conscience with respect to the Afghan reality nonetheless raises many questions, and invites the consideration as to just what extent it is a genuinely spontaneous reaction of the social body.

The gap between the reality of the situation on the battlefield and the justifications evoked by the authorities and the press, so characteristic of all the domains of Soviet life up to the beginnings of Gorbachev's *glasnost*, was maintained to some length in the case of the Afghan conflict. Up to 1984, in fact, the "international solidarity" and "fraternal help" offered by the USSR to its southern neighbour had been judged sufficient motives to explain the events in Afghanistan to Soviet society. The Soviet troops, systematically designated

as "internationalist soldiers", were in Afghanistan solely to supply medical, logistical, technical, and only accessorially military aid.

This myth has remained intact, and the guiles of propaganda worked in just this way up to the beginning of 1984, the date after which the Soviet press became more precise regarding the activities of the "limited contingent", even though it still only referred to the civil aid furnished by the contingent to an Afghan people suffering from the activities of "counter-revolutionaries" financed by American imperialism and Moslem extremism.

Even though Soviet society was carefully kept ignorant of the reality of the situation during the first few years of the conflict, truth in the end was victorious over fiction. Radio reception of Western broadcasting and "word-of-mouth", as well as the spectacular development of *glasnost* in the media from the end of 1985 and the beginning of 1986, all favoured the appearance of the social factor in the handling of the affair by the authorities, at the very moment when Gorbachev, having launched his great project of change and reform, found himself obliged to find a means of influencing Soviet society.

In fact it seems clear that the Afghan conflict will prove to have been one of the catalysts underlying an important process of social discontent in the USSR. The conflict confirmed the fragmentation of Soviet society and revealed the difficulty the authorities had in justifying from a political point of view the enterprise into which they had got themselves entangled. Careful study of the Soviet press allows the identification of certain phenomena which profoundly affected mentalities, and this over a sufficiently long period to make the traces last.

In the first place, the war in Afghanistan contributed to revealing the existence of numerous cracks in Soviet society, previously thought to be much more homogeneous. The attitude of young people with regard to military service on Afghan territory consequently showed the radical opposition between urban and rural backgrounds, without underestimating the importance of the "lucky few" from influential families who for the most part managed to avoid departure.

The anguish due to the prospects of military service in Afghanistan was mainly a specific prerogative of city dwellers, as the inhabitants of the larger towns have always been better informed of living conditions in the camps and of combat involving the Red Army. Since 1986 traces of this reality have been

noticeable in the Soviet media, which have mentioned the advantages enjoyed by the sons of higher government and administration officials, of higher ranking military officers and of conformist intellectuals, compared with the sons of workers and peasants. Recourse to corruption in order to avoid departure for Kabul similarly confirmed this inequality: it cost three hundreds roubles to be stationed on Soviet territory instead of in Afghanistan, whilst the average salary is around 130 roubles. More surprisingly the Soviet press has suggested that young delinquents were more likely to be sent to Afghanistan.

Alongside these emargitated elements, however, there were also volunteers. Again, the Soviet press has abundantly quoted examples of young Soviet citizens who did all they could to do their military service in the 40th Army. Needless to say, the reality of this situation was more complex: the volunteers were recruited from sections of society for whom this was the only chance to travel abroad and thus gain access to goods unavailable in the USSR, goods which were then sold on the black market on return from Afghanistan.

The Afghantzis' lot

In spite of the development of *glasnost*, the exact account of human lives lost in the Afghan war is not known for the moment, and this. In June 1988, General Alexei Lizichev, head of the Political Directorate of the Defence Ministry, declared that the number of victims from December 27, 1979 to May 1, 1988, was 13,310. On February 7, 1989, the spokesman for the Foreign Ministry announced that at the moment of retreat this figure was close to 15,000. According to the Estonian journal *Noorte Haale*, more than 50,000 Soviet soldiers found their deaths in combat in Afghanistan. On 17 August last, *Pravda* published for the first time a list of Soviet losses in Afghanistan for each of the years of the conflict, including the first seven months of 1989. According to these latter figures, 1982 was the bloodiest year, with 1,948 killed, of whom 238 were officers.

More than the number of victims, however, it is the return of the veterans (of the order of 2,000,000, of whom at least 50,000 invalids or wounded veterans)⁶ which constitutes a problem today for both the Soviet authorities and society as a whole. And alongside the classic problem of their re-insertion into civil life (comparable, if not similar, to that of the Vietnam veterans), they constitute a particularly representative sample—a kind of enlarging mirror of all the ills suffered by Soviet society as a whole.

On their return to the USSR, the veterans (or *Afghantzi*, as they are called in Russian) had to face the most painful of the fractures provoked by the war within Soviet society. The veterans found themselves up against the "others": the "non-fighting" youth, leisured and carefree, but also almost the whole of the population, insensitive to the veterans' lot and disoriented by official propaganda and by the press which had both long preferred explanations empty of any substance, faithful to the "propaganda" of the Brezhnev era, over true reporting.

Faced with the nonchalance of their comrades, with the inertia and immobility of everyday life, with administrative headaches and the aberrations of bureaucracy, the Afghanistan veterans have not been indifferent to the temptation of rebellion. In their revolt and drifting they have had a choice between two extreme attitudes. On the one hand there is the rejection of Western values, or of values considered as such in a Soviet society pursuing the objective of individual enrichment, indifferent to any appeal to collective aims, in imitation of foreign models. And the indignation felt at what the veterans judge as a renunciation and betrayal explains the adhesion of certain of them to the xenophobic ideology of the *Pamiat* group, or, more often, their aggressivity towards the social order as they see it in everyday life, an aggressivity which is being repressed less and less. There are abundant examples of these *Afghantzi* protesting against what they reject as a "degeneration" of society.

On the contrary, the second extreme group consists of those who were "Westernised" by the very fact of having been in contact with a non-Soviet reality whilst on service in Afghanistan. These veterans have been "perverted" by drugs, and deluded by the gap they were made aware of "down there," between the political and ideological education they had received previously, and life in the camps, combat and defeat.

Understanding the need to channel these sentiments in order to avoid any excessive destabilisation in social life, the Soviet state has taken a series of adequate measures to favour the insertion of the *Afghantzi* such as facilitations in employment, lodging, and Party or university access. And this is another negative phenomenon revealed by the Afghanistan affair within social life: these "privileges" are often envied, as is proved by the appearance of "false veterans" looking for favouritism, and criticism is voiced by the population which does not understand, for example, why a group of "young people" have the right not to have to queue just at a time of worsening retail penury.

Sent to Afghanistan by the leadership of the Brezhnev era, a leadership to which the entire responsibility is attributed today, and suffering on their return from social ills also attributed to "deformations" in the system engendered by "stagnation", the Afghanistan veterans thus appear as scapegoats perfectly corresponding to Gorbachev's political needs. In order to correct and justify all the "negative phenomena" linked with the veterans' re-insertion, the Soviet authorities today present them as faithful Communists and victims of past policies, and thus the partisans and "objective" supports of *perestroika*. Their revolt and their indignation are thus presented as the expression of offended patriotism, and their instinct to fight against speculators and the marginals as a desire to rediscover an original Soviet purity, free of the deviations engendered during the Brezhnev era. It would seem that the authorities want to give the Kabul veterans the same function as the Stalingrad veterans, raising them to the rank of "heroes of the nation", and positive models for the "new men" of *perestroika*. Alongside the image of relics destroyed by war, the Soviet media today project an iconography which recalls the image of the model citizen succeeding in his re-insertion (more often than not by a career as professional soldier or member of the military), devoted to the Country, the Party and the President-General Secretary and not hesitating to place himself at the service of the project to return to a sane society by voluntary pedagogical work in the schools.

Even though it is impossible to deny the desire to make use of the problem of the veterans for the purpose of *perestroika*, it is equally necessary to recall the genuinely positive and unedited decision, announced on July 4, 1988, by the Attorney General of the USSR, to amnesty the Soviet soldiers made prisoners in Afghanistan. Contrary to their predecessors who fell into the hands of the Germans during World War II and who were sent to a *gulag* as soon as they were liberated from their *stalag*, the Afghanistan prisoners are to benefit from equality of treatment with all the other survivors.

Value for the future

There remains the question of the psychological impact on the Soviet myth. Although they blame the Brezhnev leadership, the present-day authorities take good care not to interfere with the idea of "internationalist duty", which permanently serves as supreme justification for use with the common citizen. In this way they try to prevent society from posing more fundamental questions with regard to the military failure, the

international repercussions of the Afghan conflict and the internal stability of the Soviet Empire.

The strength and vivacity of the Afghan resistance in the face of the Soviet army have contributed to raising the issue of the impact of the Afghan war on the various national groupings in the Soviet Empire. Well before retreat, the echoes of successive setbacks of the Soviet troops during offensives by the mujaheddin had provoked a number of speculations, not only about the contribution of this war to the worldwide decline of communism, but also about the fact that all the non-Russian peoples in the USSR and Eastern Europe were awaking to the realisation that it might finally be possible for the nations of the periphery of the Empire to free themselves from the yoke of Moscow.

It would clearly be exaggerated to say that the defeat in Afghanistan (given its capital historical importance, comparable to Russia's defeat with Japan in 1905) has not left any trace in the collective subconscious of the hundred or so national groups of the USSR. There can be no doubt that from Poland to Estonia, the failure of the design to sovietise Afghanistan has contributed to the formation of political demands and the appearance of troubled spots that can be run today from one end of the Empire to the other, and to the same degree as all the other signs of weakening within the Soviet Empire (economic crisis, relaxing of control by a centre petrified by its own contradictions, carrying out of the order to proceed towards economic *perestroika* and political "democratisation").

It may certainly not be denied that all the various nationalities in the USSR and Eastern Europe could not but rejoice in the defeat. Nevertheless, from rejoicing to rebellion there is a long road to take, and in the crises shaking the USSR at the present moment, the endogenous causes are much more important than any effects of contagion.

On the other hand, the consequences of the Afghanistan war are much more direct among Soviet Moslems. Our supply of knowledge about the contacts effectively established between Afghan and Soviet believers (via the circulation of religious publications, or taping of preaching, and the penetration of clandestine *mullahs* made possible by the increased permeability of the Soviet-Afghan borders), is still too incomplete to be able to measure with any precision the real impact of Islamic propaganda from Afghan sources on the consciences of the Prophet's believers in the USSR.



Russia wants you

Even though the Islamic revival in Central Asia is a reality recognised by the Soviet authorities (including Gorbachev, who himself attributed the June 1989 anti-Meshket pogroms to Islamic sentiment still alive within the Uzbeki population),⁷ the situation to be observed today amongst these peoples would rather tend in favour of the thesis that the Stalinist model of nationalist policy

has been a success. In fact the latter policy always consisted in dividing Soviet Islam by emphasising the internal differences in language, writing or customs amongst the national groups. Now the trouble cropping up to date has been essentially of an inter-ethnic character, not only opposing local populations to Russians or non-Moslems, but also the various Moslem national groups amongst themselves, as with the Uzbekis and Meshkets in June 1989 or the Uzbekis and the Tadzhikis. This may be observed by reading the speeches of the Uzbeki, Khirghiz or Tadzhiki delegates presented during the tribune of the 19th Party Conference in June 1989, or from the literary and intellectual revival observable over the last few years amongst the cultivated elites of the Central Asian republics. In effect they are constructed around national and cultural claims amongst which the Islamic factor certainly constitutes an essential component, but at the same time they do insist on the need to rehabilitate the historic heroes of *national* independence, to privilege further the teaching of the *national* languages parallel to the rediscovery of Arabic, the language of Islam, and to review the borders in order to eliminate the injustices committed in other periods towards one specific *national* group in the region.

To counterbalance this fact, however, it is necessary to recognise the undeniable progress, even though slow and rather latent, of Islamic practices amongst the peoples of Soviet Central Asia. Clandestine mosques have been opened (and are estimated to be on the order of some 1,800); there has been an increase in clandestine preaching; and above all there has been a spreading of the increasingly open practice of typically Moslem customs, such as the "purchase" of future wives, circumcision, or the construction of tombstones indicating the religion of the deceased person. A "double moral code" (both Soviet and Moslem) not being anything new in the USSR, the affirmation of Moslem identity is—even among members of the local Asian *nomenklatura*⁸—judged sufficiently serious as to deserve being publicly denounced.

Conscious of the importance of this problem, the Soviet authorities are still only at the stage of reflection and debate at the present day. Will the publication of a new law on religious liberty, appreciably more liberal and created essentially in order to re-integrate Soviet Orthodox citizens into the public life of the nation, also have the merit of bringing these Moslem practices back into the field of Soviet legality, thus facilitating their control? All things considered this would only be a question of a practice well-known to the Soviet authorities, and would be a decision with a double significance; on the one

hand it would demonstrate Moscow's ability to handle the question, whilst on the other it would acknowledge the strength of the Islamic factor. The Soviet press has carried news of proposals directed at legalising clandestine mosques, as well as adopting measures which would allow the practice of circumcision in public hospitals, not to mention the spectacular participation of the President of the Iranian Parliament, Hashemi Rafsanjani, at the Friday service in the great mosque of Baku on June 22, 1989, and these news items would seem to indicate that Moscow is oriented towards this solution.

The speed with which the central authorities responded to the needs of the population of Tashkent, who had taken to the streets in February 1989 in order to demand the dismissal of the *Grand Mufti*, guilty of having violated the prescriptions of the *charia*, also demonstrated the pains taken by the Kremlin to account for the growing vitality of Islam as from immediately, in order to prevent any future destabilising effects.

In this decade-long development of Soviet Islam, what respective parts were played by the Afghanistan war and the revolution in Iran, which took place almost simultaneously? The answer to this must be a balanced judgment. On the one hand, even though the potentially most critical mass of Soviet Islam is in Central Asia, which is also the nearest to Afghanistan (geographically as well as ethnically, and religiously due to the Sunnite majority), the means available to Teheran's propaganda are infinitely more powerful and better organised (in particular, radio broadcasts towards the Caucasus and Iranian speaking populations of Central Asia, and Mecca pilgrimages "by proxy" organised by the Iranians for their co-religious Shi'ite neighbours in Azerbaijan) than Islamic subversion across the Soviet-Afghan borders; subversion which is not professional, even though undeniably present.

On the other hand, given that the character of Soviet Islam is essentially cultural rather than spiritual (although this statement must be qualified in the light of growing activity in the Sufi communities), it would thus be inexact to overestimate the opposition between the Caucasian Shi'ism stimulated by Iran and the Sunnism of Central Asia, encouraged by the Afghan developments. Finally, the importance of socio-economic and political factors behind the recent uprisings in Uzbekistan and Khazakstan (poverty and inequality generated by extensive cotton monocultivation and the all-embracing power of local mafias) has contributed to the confusion.

Enriched, then, by these "Afghan lessons", will the USSR under Gorbachev be able to find a working solution to the group of problems born with the invasion and still remaining in suspense after the retreat? Today consists of conciliating the objectives of stability and influence. The impossibility of resolving the Afghan question by military means and the decline of ideology as an instrument of Soviet international policy added to the Islamic factor, oblige the USSR today to create a new regional environment, using essentially diplomatic means, and responding to the need to insert coherently this new regional policy in present-day Soviet foreign policy as a whole. Any rigidity and blunder in its Afghan policy might risk compromising the advantages gained from retreat, disengagement from Afghanistan being considered by the international community one of the most important proofs of the "change" taking place in the very essence of Moscow's foreign policy.

References

- ¹ - Cf. in particular the declarations by Colonel-General Dimitri Volkogonov in *Sovietskaya Rossia* of 14 March 1989, and by Army General Valentin Varennikov (chief of the group of experts in the general staff briefed to prepare the intervention), in *Ogoniok*, no. 12, 1989.
- ² - On this subject cf. in particular an article by Alexander Prokhanov, "The Afghan Questions", which appeared in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* of February 17, 1988.
- ³ - This formula was used by Gorbachev in the report he presented to the XXVII Congress of the CPSU in February 1986.
- ⁴ - Cf. the article by General René Ernould, "Afghanistan: les leçons d'un échec militaire", published in *Le Figaro* of February 20, 1989.
- ⁵ - In a letter addressed to *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and published in the same weekly on March 16, 1988, the Academician Bogomolov recalls the conditions in which the recommendations of his Institute were rejected by the decision-makers at the time.
- ⁶ - According to the Soviet Health Minister Evgeni Chazov, the number of war invalids was no higher than 2,000. Apparently six rehabilitation centres were on the point of being opened for their use in the Moscow region, in the Ukraine, and in various localities in the RSFSR (*Reuters*, February 10, 1989).
- ⁷ - During a visit to Bonn in June 1989 the Secretary-General of the CPSU had blamed "Moslem fundamentalists" as those mainly responsible for the anti-Meshket pogroms.
- ⁸ - Gorbachev himself was worried, in particular in a speech made in Tashkent on November 24, 1986, in which he deplored the shortcomings of atheist upbringing vis-à-vis that of Islam.