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Afghans Resist Conscription By the Soviets

Like the brutal press gangs of King George III, Soviet "recruiters" in Afghanistan are having their problems trying to enlist natives to fight against their countrymen. Afghans are understandably reluctant to sign up as cannon fodder—or, more likely, sniper targets—in the army of the Soviet-backed Kabul regime.

Confidential State Department intelligence reports describe some of the difficulties the Soviets have encountered in their heavy-handed attempts to draft Afghan males into the so-called "people's army." Here are some of the details, contained in documents seen by my associate Lucette Lagnado:

- The press gangs' activities "reached unprecedented proportions" last winter, when massive desertions had decimated the Afghan army. "Men in their 50s and boys in their early teens were often seized from the street and sent out of Kabul before their families could attempt to intervene."

- There are reports that the communist puppet regime is preparing to raise the draft age to 45. Mean-

while, to make more males available for recruiting, the government has reportedly decided to allow only women and former soldiers to enter Kabul University this year.

- Dragnet operations in sealed-off sections of Afghan cities are used in addition to the roving press gangs. "There have been periods of more intensive search-and-seizure efforts in Kabul and provincial cities. Last week, the search for conscripts in Kabul intensified; areas of the city are once again being surrounded and searched, often using cadets from the military academies."

- Bazaars and secondary schools are frequent targets of the mobile recruiting gangs, as they seek out any male deemed physically capable of carrying a gun.

- One incident described in a confidential report involved a youth "who could not have been more than 15 years old." Stopped by a press gang, the lad punched the officer in charge. He was "quickly beaten to the ground and thrown into the back of the gang's truck."

- Two boys, aged 14 and 15, found in their home during their father's absence, were forcibly dragged away "and are now in uniform."

- Veterans who have already completed their military service since the Soviet invasion more than three years ago reportedly are being called up again.

- "The regime has gone so far as to draft baggage handlers at Kabul airport," according to one cable.

The Afghans have devised certain expedients to "cope with the regime's hunger for cannon fodder," according to one intelligence report. Families with draft-age sons hide them in their homes, send them to live with relatives in rural areas or—shades of the Vietnam era—send them out of the country.

Occasionally, families have succeeded in bribing the press gangs to "come back tomorrow" for a house search, then spirited their sons out of harm's way that night.

In the bazaars, gangs of under-age street urchins keep watch for the roving recruiters, and give enough warning to let draftable shopkeepers close up or at least duck behind their wares.

U.S. intelligence analysts believe the Soviets' increasingly desperate conscription efforts are giving them an Afghan army of dubious value, and driving those who elude the press gangs out of the country.

But the Kremlin obviously doesn't care how many Afghans are killed by the guerrillas or become refugees. The Soviets want the country, not its unquenchably independent people.