WASHINGTON POST
13 January 1986

Soviets Try to Reshape Afghan Culture

Second of five articles

By James Rupert
Special to The Washington Post

BABRA KHEL, Afghanistan—Last month Omar brought his 8-year-old son from Kabul to leave him with relatives in a village near here; the little boy will not go back to the city.

"In Kabul the Soviets are taking the children," Omar explained.

Omar is now a city man. He moved from the village years ago to set up a business in Kabul. Even though life is better there than here in the countryside, he said, his son will stay here. In Kabul, the Soviets are taking children out of the schools and sending them to be brought up in the Soviet Union, he said.

"They are teaching the children to be Soviets, like them," he said. The Soviet authorities had started the practice, he said, soon after they invaded the country in 1979 to prop up Afghanistan's communist government.

Afghans and western specialists say the education of Afghan children in the Soviet Union is only one of many tools the Soviets are using to try to remold Afghanistan's culture along their own lines. Afghans say the Soviets are also manipulating Afghanistan's Islamic faith in their effort to "Sovietize" the country.

The Sovietization program takes on added significance with the apparent intensification of the peace process because it could allow the Soviets to leave behind a dedicated cadre of Moscow-trained communists when they pull out. It also complicates the return of the 3 million refugees in

AFGHANISTAN
THE NEW BATTLEFIELDS

Pakistan—one of the requirements for a settlement—as they may not want to go back to a country that is under such tight control.

Seated on the floor at his brother's house, Omar's western-style trousers and overcoat contrasted with the loose-fitting clothes and blankets worn by his relatives and former neighbors gathered to hear him. Surprised to meet a foreign journalist, Omar spoke impatiently and urgently, asking me repeatedly if I understood his story.

But he was also afraid. "Please," he urged, "you must not write my name or the village's name in the newspaper—or we will be in danger."

Omar said that many children who had gone to the Soviet Union were those of Afghan communist party officials who he thought might have sent them willingly.

But, he said, "I know many families who did not know their children would be taken. The government sent people into the schools, and they took children away. The children's fathers only heard when someone came from school to tell them."

The teachers in the schools help the Soviets, and if people go to ask where the children were taken, the teachers will not talk to them, he said, adding that the parents afterward received letters from their children mailed from the Soviet Union.

At one point, leaning forward, he asked, "Do American people know about this?"

Western diplomats and officials of the Afghan Resistance Movement based in Pakistan also have reported similar stories.

A New Sovietized Elite

A 1984 State Department report said the Soviets began near the end of that year a mass program to bring up thousands of Afghan children in the Soviet Union. The children, ages 7 to 10, reportedly are to be trained there for 10 years in an effort to mold a new Sovietized elite.

Resistance commander Abdul Haq from Kabul said in an interview in Peshawar, Pakistan, that his resistance units have seen the first results of Soviet training of Afghan children. During the past 2½ years, he said, his guerrillas have captured about 15 boys who he said had been trained in the Soviet Union for missions against the resistance.

He described one incident last year in which resistance forces found a 12-year-old boy in a rebel-controlled village carrying a pistol and a photograph of a local guerrilla commander. He said the boy would not give any information until they staged his recapture by other resistance forces posing as Afghan government soldiers.

"His name was Zalmai; he was the son of an Afghan brigadier," Abdul Haq said. "He told us he had been trained [in the Soviet Union] for almost five years, and now they had sent him to kill the resistance commander."

"He told us he liked his teacher more than his mother and father," Abdul Haq said. "What can we do with these children? We cannot kill them, but they are dangerous; so we can only try to keep them with us, and they mostly escape."

Since Soviet and Afghan authorities have closed Afghanistan to most foreign reporters, accounts such as Abdul Haq's cannot be investigated directly. But a broad range of diplomatic and Afghan sources say they are convinced that Soviet training is aimed at producing young Afghans with unquestioning Soviet loyalty.

Remaking a Country

Afghanistan's war, which most observers initially thought would end in a quick victory for the technologically superior Soviet Army and Air Force, is now six years old—and both sides appear to recognize the growing importance of a new battlefield: the loyalties and cultural identity of the next generation of Afghans.

"The Soviets are using every tool they can find to remake this country in their image," said Prof. Sayd Majrooh, a former dean of Kabul University now based in Peshawar.

Various observers said the Soviets are using education—from kindergarten to the university level-cultural exchanges, religious insititutions and the mass media to accomplish three main goals in Afghanistan:

- Prevent the growth of nationalist sentiment by sharpening the splits among the country's many ethnic and linguistic groups and strengthening ties between northern Afghans and their Soviet ethnic counterparts.

2.

- Popularize a reinterpreted Islam more amenable to communist doctrine.
- Build a new elite of pro-Soviet Afghans that would be free of the internal rifts that have paralyzed the current ruling communist party.

The ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan has long been bitterly divided between two factions: the Khalq (Masses), predominantly urban, Persian-speaking and seen as more politically pragmatic, and the Parcham (Banner), dominated by Afghans of rural origin who speak Pashtu and are thought more ideological. The vendetta resembles a civil war, including assassinations and bombings, and hampers government efforts to establish full control, even over the capital.

Various Afghan academics and politicians in Peshawar said the Soviets' most important weapon in the cultural battle is education—notably education programs in the Soviet Union. Estimates of the numbers of Afghans who go there for study varied widely, although most suggested it might number about 6,000 a year.

Abdulbaqi Mehraban questions how well the Soviet education campaign is working. He studied veterinary medicine for nearly six years in the Soviet Union before returning to Kabul in 1981 and fleeing to Pakistan in 1984.

Mehraban said he believes most Afghan university students continue to go to the Soviet Union for the same reasons he did: the better technical education and living standards. "Many students also like it because you can get vodka and meet girls, unlike in Afghanistan, [and] you can stay out of the Army," he said. "When we had been there a short time, I was impressed. 'People had jobs and weren't hungry.'

"But after a year, I could speak good Russian and talk to people and found out that you can't talk about your ideas," he said. "Studying a long time in Russia doesn't make everyone into a communist."

Reinterpreting History

Afghan exiles in Peshawar say the Soviets have been unable to consistently mold loyal functionaries for the Afghan regime with their university courses or training programs for adult Afghans. Not only do some Afghans—such as Mehraban—defect, but resistance groups say they place their supporters in various programs in both Afghanistan and the Soviet Union for technical training.

According to Majrooh and other Afghan academics, the Soviets have retooled the Afghan education system—installing Soviet teachers, a Marxist-Leninist curriculum and a reinterpretation of Afghan history that describes Russia as the historic friend of Afghanistan. Last March authorities replaced the French-style program for primary and secondary education with the Soviet system, including compulsory Russian-language study from the fifth grade onward.

Last year at a conference on education at Kabul's teachers college, most of the papers were by Russian professors, according to a program smuggled from the country. Abstracts of the papers stressed the need for a Marxist-Leninist orientation in Afghan education, largely to help overcome the influence of Islam on Afghan students.

Resistance leaders and Afghan intellectuals say Soviet radio broadcasts and publications aim particularly at Afghanistan's northern ethnic groups.

"We have seen increasing numbers of Soviet journals aimed at the Tajiks, Turkmens, and Uzbeks, and designed to show them how life is better for people of the same groups in the [neighboring] Soviet republics," said Prof. Rasul Amin, formerly of Kabul University's social sciences faculty.

Amin said he is especially worried that new programs to teach regional languages—Baluchi, Turkmeni and Uzbek—will lead to a deemphasis on Pashtu and Persian (called Dari in Afghanistan), which serve as the common languages among ethnic groups.

But for most Afghans encountered during a seven-week assignment in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the most angering and worrisome part of the Sovietization campaign is the taking of children to the Soviet Union.

"What will happen to these children?" asked Mehraban, the former veterinary student. "When I was in Kiev I had Islam and my own mind to help me understand what I was seeing—but these children will have nothing."

"They will be robots," he said. "And when they come back, the Russians will just use them, and the Afghan people will hate them."

Harnessing Islam

"Islam is the key to Afghanistan's culture," said Akhtar Mohammed, a young university graduate, "so to change Afghanistan, they want to change our Islam."

"They" are the Soviets. Like many other Afghan intellectuals, Mohammed worries about the Soviets' efforts to harness Afghanistan's Moslem faith as a means of controlling the country.

In their campaign to reshape Afghanistan's culture, Soviet authorities have taken control of official religious institutions and are reinterpreting Islamic doctrine.

"The Soviets were very sophisticated about using religion," said Fazle Akbar, an Afghan journalist here. When the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, Akbar was director of Radio Afghanistan.

The Afghan communists who took power in 1978 "were very anti-Islamic," Akbar said. "They walked into the mosques with their boots on and smoked cigarettes inside."

"The Russians had to teach them how to use Islam as part of their propaganda," Akbar said.

Rasul Amin, a former Kabul University professor who now coordinates an organization of exiled Afghan intellectuals, said the Soviets have stepped up efforts to control religious life in Afghanistan. Last year, the Soviet-dominated regime of Babrak Karmal established a Religious Affairs Ministry, which, Amin said, has two roles.

"The Soviets know they will never change the ideas of the older generation" of Afghans," Amin said. "So for them, the government just wants to appear benign." Amin and others said the new ministry had made a great show of painting and cleaning mosques, to demonstrate its commitment to the religion.

"For young people," however, Amin said, "they want to change the very idea of Islam." During the past year, he said, the authorities had removed many independent mullahs from their mosques, after having tolerated them since the invasion.

Continued

It has taken the government several years to train its own mullahs, Amin said, and only now are they emerging to take over mosques in the cities controlled by the Soviets and the government. "The independent mullahs had never opposed the government in six years," Amin said, "but the official mullahs are more reliable for the authorities."

According to Afghan intellectuals and political leaders here, the Soviets and the Kabul government rely on the new mullahs to help spread a "Sovietized" Islam that emphasizes the obligations of a believer to the Islamic community, but that omits references to belief in God.

Amin said the Soviets would prefer to limit the distribution of the Koran, as they have done in their own Moslem republics, leaving the state freer to offer its own interpretation of the Koran's teachings.

"They could not change the Koran because too many Moslems, even in the Soviet Union, can recite it from memory," he said.

Soviet and Afghan broadcasts argue that Islam as a religion is under attack from the corrupting values of western imperialist powers, from the "medievalism" of Iran's Islamic revolution and from Israeli expansionism. Adopting a theme of Moslem fundamentalists, Soviet propaganda for years has portrayed western aid workers in Afghanistan—especially women—as anti-Islamic and corrupting influences.

Last fall, when the Jamiat-i-Islami Party turned back a French medical team that included women, western aid workers feared the Afghans had succumbed to Soviet propaganda.

Jamiat-i-Islami leader Burhanuddin Rabbani denied that his party had stopped accepting women but he acknowledged that "we do have problems with the Soviet propaganda about the women."

But western aid workers from various regions of Afghanistan agreed that Soviet propaganda is combining with the influence of conservative Iranians and Arabs who play supporting roles in the jihad, and making the westerners' presence in Afghanistan more difficult.

One British nurse said she met Arabs from the Persian Gulf states and Syria while working last summer near Mazar-i-Sharif, in northern Afghanistan.

"They were very negative about westerners," she said in an interview here. "They said non-Moslems didn't belong in a jihad."

Washington Post staff writer Stuart Auerbach contributed to this story.

Next: Attack on a Soviet-held town

A Key Part of the War Is Fought in the Schools

BABRA KHEL, Afghanistan—Seated in rows on the dried mud floor of the village mosque, the young boys of Babra Khel shouted their lessons. The high-pitched cacophony stunned the ears.

The boys, between 6 and 12, read texts that were designed to teach them Persian and stressed the themes of jihad, or holy war. Hamdullah, a benign-looking mullah, sat at the front of the room, where boys occasionally came for help with difficult passages.

Here and in similar village schools throughout Afghanistan, the resistance forces fight the cultural war. "We must teach the children the Moslem way of thought," Hamdullah said. "Only this will help them resist Soviet propaganda."

Like their military battle against the better equipped Soviets, the resistance movement's educational campaign must be fought guerrilla style: in small-scale operations with few material resources. One of the resistance commanders in Wardak Province, Amin Wardak, can send only a few books and supplies for the 16 boys of Babra Khel. Girls traditionally are not sent to school in Afghanistan.

As some resistance leaders concede, the education is often not even basic. When they leave the schools to begin training at a guerrilla base, rural Afghan boys may not yet be able to read.

The response of the guerrillas to Sovietization also has been splintered by cultural differences that emerged as Afghanistan's elite began to encounter western-style modernism early in the century. These differences are now reflected in the resistance movement, especially at its top.

Some of the resistance leadership springs from the same small, westernized, largely urban class that spawned Afghanistan's communist leadership. Such men, often educated by foreign teachers in Kabul's western-style schools, generally favor more secular and technical education to improve the resistance movement's ability to handle both sophisticated weapons and civil administration.

But many fundamentalist Moslem Afghans, regarding their faith—rather than technical skills—as the key to victory, argue for an almost exclusive emphasis on religious training.

"It was, after all, a lack of religious training that enabled the communists to take over in Afghanistan," said Mohammed Salim, a press officer of the Hezb-i-Islami (Islamic Party) led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

"We will be able to teach the physical and natural sciences after the liberation of our country," Salim said, "but for the jihad, we must study Islam."

The Afghan political parties based in Peshawar, Pakistan, each with its own education committee, fight bitterly over religious issues in education.

"We're trying to write a science textbook, and we can't even discuss the structure of matter, or decide whether to have pictures in the book," said Stephen Keller, an American professor helping to design education programs for Afghans. "Some of these guys are saying it's un-Islamic," he said.

Alongside the disagreement over how to combine religious tradition and western modernism,

Continued

4.

Afghanistan shares a problem of many Third World countries whose borders were drawn by colonial powers: the lack of a uniform culture. Before the Soviet invasion, American anthropologist Louis Dupree identified 21 distinct ethnic groups, speaking numerous languages and dialects, in Afghanistan.

Much of Afghanistan's indigenous elite is not even in the fight to build and keep its own cultural identity. Prof. Sayed Majrooh ticked off a long list of former colleagues who were killed or imprisoned soon after the first Afghan communist government came to power in April 1978.

The Soviets and the Afghan communists "wanted to eliminate anyone who could have built an alternative cultural model [to their own] for Afghanistan," Majrooh said.

Even among the survivors, many of Afghanistan's educated elite are scattered through Europe and North America, and remain reluctant to help the resistance in Pakistan or Afghanistan—partially because of the political bickering among the Afghan parties, according to several Afghan intellectuals in Pakistan.

Not only the Afghans and the Soviets, but conservative Arabs and Iranians seem involved in the battle for Afghanistan's future identity. A number of Afghan intellectuals and resistance commanders complained that, in the rivalries among the Afghan parties, Arabs and Iranians are favoring fundamentalist Afghan leaders whose political line they approve.

In addition to discreet official aid from Arab governments, wealthy Arab businessmen give cash to pay for arms and supplies, and their transportation into Afghanistan, but several commanders said the Arab donors pressure the Afghans to adopt fundamentalist practices.

"The Arabs are using their aid to promote, in Afghanistan, their own interpretations of Islam," Wardak said.

The Afghan elite, which lived in Kabul before the war, had strong cultural links with European countries, notably France. One exiled Afghan academic said this part of the resistance leadership worries about the cultural effects of the Arab aid: "They are trying to break our ties with the West," he said.

Fundamentalist Arabs working with the Afghan resistance denied that there was any organized Arab pressure, and argued that Afghans themselves are choosing to limit their contacts with the West. Iran reportedly tries to exert its own influence on the Afghan resistance through its domination of ethnic Hazara factions in the center of the country. The Hazaras, a Shiite Moslem minority in predominantly Sunni Moslem Afghanistan, long have had close links with Iran.

The central Hazarajat region is controlled mainly by two groups that identify with Iranian leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and that long have fought more against the traditional Hazara leadership than against the Soviets. A Hazara commander of the traditionalist Shoura faction said his group has captured Iranians fighting within the pro-Khomeini Sepah and Nasr factions.

Last summer, a senior Iranian, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, hosted a meeting of six Afghan Shiite factions, directing them to unify against the Soviets instead of fighting other resistance groups.

It is not only the Islamic loyalties of the Afghans that are being fought over in this war. The Afghan resistance forces explain proudly that they are campaigning actively for an Islamic revival in the Moslem Soviet republics north of their border.

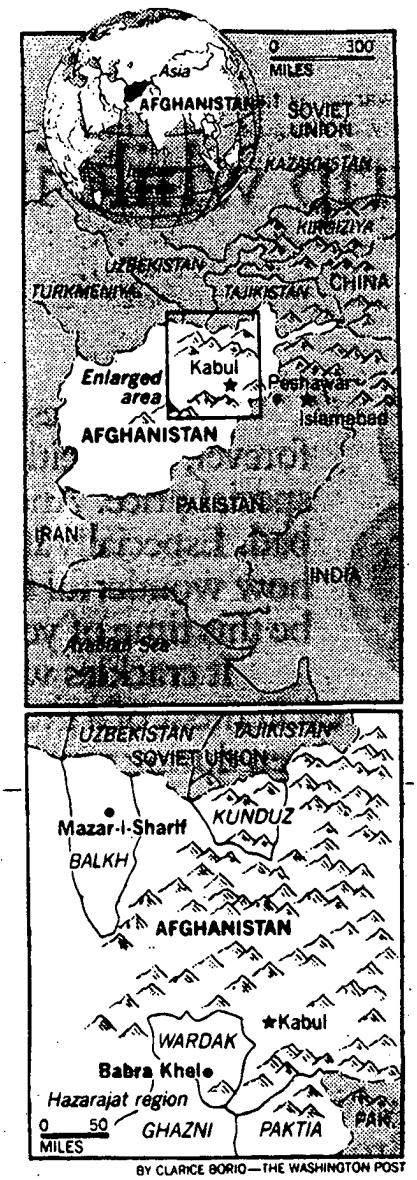
In the rhetoric of the jihad, the struggle is not for the liberation of Afghanistan, but for the elimination of Soviet atheistic rule over all Moslem lands. The Soviets' "inevitable retreat from [Moslem] Asia will begin with its military defeat at the hands of the Afghan resistance forces," senior commander Jalaluddin Haqqani declared in an interview with a Pakistani magazine.

Matthew Erulkar, a former pro-resistance lobbyist in Washington who is now organizing a private aid program for the rebels, explained in Pakistan last month how he had visited the Afghan-Soviet border in Kunduz Province with guerrillas who, he said, run a cross-border missionary campaign.

"A couple of times each week, they would go to the border to give Korans and religious pamphlets to Soviet Tajiks who would come to meet them," Erulkar said.

"For them, this was the most important thing they did," he said. "They would walk around singing songs about liberating Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan."

— James Rupert



BY CLARICE BORIO—THE WASHINGTON POST