

## Afghanistan and Russian History

BY VLADIMIR SOLOVYOV AND ELENA KLEPIKOVA

It is human nature to wish bad luck on one's enemy, and that seems to be the basis for the current suggestion that Afghanistan will become for Russia what Vietnam was for America. But a year after Russia's invasion it is time to realize that this has not happened—and will not happen. It is not merely because, as Richard Pipes has pointed out, the Soviet Union has experience in putting down Moslem uprisings in Central Asia, and the Afghan rebels have received nothing like the massive aid that North Vietnam got from the USSR and China. Those are important reasons, but they are not the main ones. Even if the Soviet Union lacked such experience and even if Zbigniew Brzezinski's military mission to Pakistan had been successful and America had managed thereby to deliver to Afghanistan as many weapons as the Viet Cong received, the Soviet Union would not disengage. Let us go even further and assume that the war will last for more than a decade and cost the Russians 55,000 lives (the sort of "body-count" familiar in the Vietnam war). Still the Soviet Union would not withdraw. For the USSR, 55,000 lives are not what they are for America.

Race, nationality, citizenship—these have nothing to do with the value one places on a human life. That is determined by historical tradition and the political structure of the state—which is either willing or unwilling to sacrifice those lives. The Soviet Union's willingness in this regard is amazing. There are no available official data in this area, but a brief demographic study made by the Soviet scientist Iosif Dyadkin (who was arrested in April, 1979), published in *samizdat* in the USSR, drew upon figures from the official census and information published by the Central Statistical Bureau of the USSR to arrive at a statistical estimate of unnatural mortality. Between 1928 and 1936, 10 to 16 million perished as a result of the campaign against the kulaks and other "undesirable elements." In 1937-38, 1.4 million (plus or minus 200,000) were executed or died in concentration camps. In 1939-40, 1.8 million (plus or minus 200,000) died in concentration camps or in the war against Finland. From 1941 to 1945 the deaths numbered 31 million (plus or minus

a million), of which 20 million were killed in the war, and the rest perished in the Gulag. Finally, from 1950 to 1954 a half-million Soviet citizens died in concentration camps. In sum, during the twenty-six years covered by Dyadkin's investigation, from 43.4 to 52.1 million persons died violent deaths in the USSR.

Dyadkin specifies that when in doubt he opted for the lowest figure. We, to be on the safe side, have reduced his lowest figure by another few million. But it hardly matters. With the exception of China, what other country in the world has such a potential for sacrifice? And what importance does such a country attach to the hypothetical 55,000 lives required to take over Afghanistan?

Similarly, if the Iranian students had seized the Soviet embassy instead of the U.S. embassy, it would not have posed for the USSR the kind of agonizing and insoluble problem that it has for the U.S. To the contrary, it would have provided a pretext for strengthening the Soviet position in Iran—even at the cost of fifty-three Soviet lives. And Iran (not to mention other countries) understands this very well, which explains why the hostages are Americans and not Russians.

The Western democracies' great sensitivity to the loss of human lives is an admirable trait in all respects but one: war. In this it is an Achilles heel. Many contrasting examples could be offered, but to us, as Leningraders, the one closest to home is that of the Battle of Leningrad. What other country would have continued to hang on to its second largest city when almost all of its inhabitants had perished as the result of a nine hundred-day siege?

The loss of 20 million Russians lives in World War II is not, for Russia, an isolated instance but a typical one. This year the Soviet Union is celebrating the six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kulikovo, which Russians regard as one of the greatest—comparable to Borodino in 1812 and Stalingrad in 1942. In the Russian view Kulikovo was a victory, although only one out of ten Russian soldiers was left alive and a few years later the Tatars again captured the chief Russian cities, including Moscow and the Kremlin. From Kulikovo through World War II, Russian military victories have been Pyrrhic. But the Russians think differently, and even our great poet Boris Pasternak wrote:

You yourself must not distinguish  
Defeat from victory.

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If, then, Afghanistan will never become a Russian Vietnam, what will it become? It might be well to bear in mind the Soviet takeovers on the eve of the war with Germany: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and considerable parts of Finland, Poland, and Rumania. Will December 27, 1979, perhaps go down in history as the unremarked beginning of World War III—on a par with July 28, 1914, and September 1, 1939?

### SIR HENRY'S ERROR

In order to verify this hypothesis, one must first understand why the Russians need Afghanistan. Of the many answers that have been suggested the two most frequently heard are: (1) the Russians want to seize the oil fields of the Arabian Peninsula and cut off the West from these vital sources of petroleum; (2) they want ready access to the Indian Ocean and to its warm water ports.

Just how untenable these theories are becomes evident if they are compared with those set forth by Sir Henry Rawlinson over a hundred years ago in connection with czarist Russia's conquests in Central Asia. In 1868, Sir Henry, a leading authority on Asiatic affairs and a world-famous explorer, drafted a memorandum in which he represented Russia's conquests in Central Asia as the beginning of a systematic attack on India. It certainly cannot be said that he was lacking in cleverness. He envisaged parallel lines running southward from three cities recently captured by the Russians—Chimkent, Tashkent, and Samarkand—and realized that the Russian troops were in a better position to conquer India than the British were to defend it. But it was his very cleverness that misled him. He tried to explain the Russians' predatory behavior—which, in fact, was instinctual—in terms of English behavior: as something rational, as a well-planned series of actions with reasonable motives and consequences. Everything turned out differently, of course. The Russian historian Michael Pokrovsky came closer to the truth when he said: "We knew how to conquer; but it was always a long time before we figured out what to do with those conquests."

Rawlinson's error can be ascribed to the basic difference between British colonialism and its Russian counterpart. As a rule Russian military campaigns have outpaced diplomatic moves, strategic planning, and even tactical military preparations. (Almost invariably, right up to last year's blitzkrieg in Afghanistan, Russians have lacked maps of the territories they occupied.) Russians have usually acted from instinct! The rational British tried to calculate those actions almost mathematically, just as the pragmatic Americans are trying to do today. It is this kind of calculation that arrives at the mistaken notion that the Russians will soon be headed for the oil rigs of the Arabian Peninsula or the warm water ports of the Indian Ocean.

As for the "ideological explanation" of the invasion of Afghanistan, it is simply nonsensical. When, in the nineteenth century, Russia conquered three khanates bordering on Afghanistan—Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand—communism was quite unknown to Russia. If we were to confine ourselves to historical and geographical traditions in explaining the occupation of Afghan-

istan, we would be overlooking what is, in our opinion, the chief factor—one that at present is determining Russia's behavior both abroad and at home.

Up through 1976, Soviet military ventures were scattered, incoherent, and had something almost somnambulistic about them. But after Angola, the USSR suddenly cooled toward such regions of the world as Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East and did not undertake a single military action there. Instead it concentrated all its attention on military actions in Afghanistan and Indochina, and on rapprochement with India. These three areas are rather remote from one another and have no common borders. What they do have in common, however, is contiguity with China. As a Soviet diplomat said to one of us: "China is such a closed country that we have to keep an eye on it from Singapore!" Likewise with Afghanistan. Its only strategic value for Russia is its proximity to China; the thousands of Russian troops in Afghanistan are nothing more nor less than reinforcements for the forty-four Soviet divisions already in place on the Chinese border. Paradoxically, it was the first country to fall victim not only to Russia's geographical appetite but to its fear of China and the latter's likely alliance with Japan, Western Europe, and America.

Because of Russia's amazing willingness to sacrifice millions of lives it is not afraid of America, Western Europe, or Japan. But China is a different matter. Its human potential is now four times that of Russia's, and by the year 2000 it will be five times as great. What is happening in the Soviet Union as a result of its growing fear of China can be detected in the Soviet press. But alas! that press—except for two or three Potemkinesque periodicals like *Pravda*—is largely ignored by the American journalists and Sovietologists. It is all rather as if Theseus had flatly refused the spool of thread proffered by Ariadne before he entered the labyrinth. A closed society's press is like an iceberg's tip. By it one can judge the whole.

### FEAR AND DESPERATION

In late 1978 the magazine *Novy Mir* published the famous Marshal Chuikov's memoir of his four trips to China on orders from Stalin and the meetings he had there with Communist and Kuomintang leaders. Chuikov's account is a memoir in name only. Actually, it is a warning of inevitable war with a dangerous enemy, and its tone is hardly triumphant.

"China is invincible," Chiang Kai-shek said to him in early 1941. "For China, war is only an illness; and illnesses run their course...."

"But some of them are fatal," Chuikov objected.

"No!" was the response. "We don't believe that they cause death. Death is not an illness; it comes as something separate."

The reasons for Chiang's enigmatic optimism are to be sought, not in the philosophy of Confucius or the poetry of Tu Fu, but in some remarks by his chief political rival, Mao Zedong. The setting: Moscow, 1956, during the anti-Stalinist 20th Party Congress. The Israeli Communist leader Samuil Mikunis was there and reports in his memoirs that Mao's favorite topic of conversation was World War III, which he regarded as

inevitable. Mao, he tells us, was convinced that one had to be ready for it at any moment, and he thought only in terms of that war, as if it had already begun.

"Nehru and I," Mao said, "have been having a little argument as to how many people will be killed in an atomic war. Nehru says a billion and a half, but I say only a billion and a quarter."

At this point Palmiro Tagliatti asked the Chinese leader. "And what will happen to Italy as a result of such a war?"

Mao looked at him intently, then replied coolly: "Who told you Italy has to exist? There'll be 300 million Chinese left, and that's enough to keep the human race going."

Similar remarks by Mao—with some slight variations—have been recorded by other Soviet memoirists. It may well be that China's demographic invulnerability is considerably exaggerated in Moscow. Fear makes mountains out of molehills. But even if we grant that we are dealing here with that "false imagination" that Plato talks about in the *Timaeus*, the fact remains that this fear determines the Russian state of mind at all levels of consciousness. (Among the many defeatist jokes going the rounds in Moscow, the shortest one is: "All is quiet on the Chinese-Finnish border.") The recent and still painful memory of the many millions of lives lost in World War II, plus the inevitable parallels—both historical and ethnic—with the three hundred-year Tatar occupation, intensifies the feelings of a threat to the empire's existence. And the Russians take this to be a threat to their own existence as a nation, since they have experience of no other form of state but empire.

Once again it is in the Soviet press that we find a striking confirmation of this. One week after the inva-

sion of Afghanistan the newspaper *Sovetskaya Kultura* (an organ of the CC-CPSU) published an essay by the well-known Russian writer Valentin Rasputin containing the following out-and-out militaristic warning, "Is Fate not bringing closer to us the time when we shall again go forth onto the Field of Kulikovo to defend Russian soil and Russian blood?"

Russia itself is impatient for a war, regarding it as something inevitable, defensive, and preventive—so long as China has not outgrown its atomic diapers. Within the context of the Chinese threat even the humble aspirations of the subjugated nations are now taken by the Russians as an encroachment upon their national, state, and territorial integrity.

Given the ethnic isolation of the Russians within the boundaries of their own empire, the fear of China serves very well to unite and inspire the Russian people and to justify various measures taken by the regime. Fear dictates Russia's diplomatic behavior and military strategy and is responsible for the return to Stalinism and for the ideological revolution now taking place there. Russia is preparing for war not only militarily but by means of ideological rearmament. (One of the first to call for such a revolution was Solzhenitsyn, who, in his "Letter to Soviet Leaders" in 1973, advised them to switch from a Communist to a nationalist ideology in view of an impending war with China.) Today, with the nation in a hazardous situation, Stalin almost seems the ideal model for behavior. In this context the seizure of Afghanistan looks like a smaller version of the war with China, or a prelude to it—a warm-up exercise for stale troops. For a preventive war with China is a temptation that the Soviet leaders have had constantly to resist—and one that will ultimately prove impossible to overcome. [WV]



"So much for the Games—back to the fun . . ."