

# Asymmetries of Internationalism: Performing and Remembering Subnational Internationalism in the Age of Developed Socialism

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In 1976, Dushanbe's community of some 150 Iranian socialists traveled 28 kilometers into the mountains to attend the opening of a resort for the exclusive use of the Iranian community in the Tajik SSR. The resort reflected the initiative of several members of the Tudeh Party of Iran exiled to Dushanbe.<sup>1</sup> As one exile noted, "on Saturdays and Sundays, more than fifty to sixty Iranian emigrants gathered there with their families. This resort took on the name "Iran Zone" (*Iran Zon/Mantaqah-ye Iran*)."<sup>2</sup> The opening of "Iran Zone" was but one chapter in a long history of exchange between the Persian-speaking lands of the Tajik SSR, Iran, and Afghanistan during the twentieth century. The Soviet Union had sponsored the creation of Tajikistan as a Union Republic in 1929 partly to offer Iranians and Afghans a socialist model. And against the background of the Tajik SSR's transformation into a "laboratory of socialist development" in the 1960s, Dushanbe also became a place of refuge and education for Iranian and Afghan socialists.<sup>3</sup> The opening of a complex like

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<sup>1</sup>"Qurbān Balūch Kīst?" November 6, 2013, available at <http://qorbanbalooch.blogfa.com/post/2>. All URLs cited in this article were last accessed May 13, 2021.

<sup>2</sup>Atāullah Safavī and Atābak Fath-Allāhzādah, *Kasī Dar Māgādān Pir Mamīshavad: Yādmāndahhā-ye Duktur 'Atāullah Safavī Az Urdūgāhhā-ye Dā'ī Yūsuf* (Tehran, 2005), 294.

<sup>3</sup>Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan* (Ithaca, 2018).

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“Iran Zone” thus reflected patterns of Soviet internationalism that transformed the relationship between Tajikistan, Iran, and Afghanistan.

This article explores encounters between Tajiks, Iranians, and Afghans in the late 1970s and 1980s to show how socialist internationalism deepened misunderstanding between these groups as much as it promoted solidarity. By socialist internationalism, I mean both the aspiration that anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist solidarity would overcome national boundaries, as well as the institutions that translated these ideals into practice. Institutions like the Union of Soviet Societies for Friendship and Cultural Contacts or the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee assumed center stage in these efforts, but Soviet internationalism also enlisted experts, expatriates, and exiles in the performance of socialist solidarity across borders. Given that such peregrinations were often coerced or involuntary, they were not always motivated by idealism accompanied by disillusionment *per se*. Still, all individuals involved in “internationalist” work had to process the gap between the universal aspirations of socialist solidarity and the antagonisms of reality. Given the common language—Persian—and the geographical proximity between the Tajik SSR, Iran, and Afghanistan, the divides that socialism had to bridge in the region appeared modest. Yet even as Soviet internationalism forged unprecedented contact between Tajiks, Iranians and Afghans, perceptions of cultural superiority limited solidarity. And when Soviet foreign policy shifts undermined the geopolitical basis for cooperation between the three groups, they became three nations divided by a common language of internationalism.

Engaging the history of exchanges between Tajiks, Iranians, and Afghans allows scholars to contribute to debates about Soviet internationalism and nationalities policy through the lens of subnational actors. Recent scholarship has underscored how socialist internationalism forged unlikely connections between the Second and Third worlds.<sup>4</sup> Other work on the Soviet Union as a multinational state has explored internal Soviet diasporas and “non-titular nations,” such as Georgians or Soviet Talysh.<sup>5</sup> Fewer scholars, however, have examined subnational actors as objects of study that could unite the study of internationalism with the “domestic” history of the Soviet Union. By subnational actors, I mean here actors beyond the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or official solidarity organizations who nonetheless inhabited the domain of Soviet internationalism. Complexes like “Iran Zone” or Novoslobodskaya Ulitsa 50 in Moscow, a housing complex built for “visible

<sup>4</sup>For recent works see Masha Kirasirova, “Sons of Muslims in Moscow: Soviet Central Asian Mediators to the Foreign East, 1955–62,” *Ab Imperio* 4 (2011): 106–32; David Engerman, “The Second World’s Third World,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12:1 (2011): 183–211; Austin Jersild, *The Sino-Soviet Alliance: An International History* (Oxford, 2014); Jeremy Friedman, *Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, 2015); Tobias Rupperecht, *Soviet Internationalism after Stalin: Interaction and Exchange between the USSR and Latin America during the Cold War* (Cambridge, England, 2015); Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge, England, 2016); Elizabeth McGuire, *Red at Heart: How Chinese Communists Fell in Love with the Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 2017); Elidor Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World* (Ithaca, 2018); Rachel Applebaum, *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia* (Ithaca, 2018); and David Engerman, *The Price of Aid: The Economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, MA, 2018).

<sup>5</sup>Erik R. Scott, *Familiar Strangers: The Georgian Diaspora and the Evolution of Soviet Empire* (Oxford, 2016); Krista A. Goff, *Nested Nationalism: Making and Unmaking Nations in the Soviet Caucasus* (Ithaca, 2020).

political immigrants,” formed spaces where the world met the Soviet Union and where the Soviet Union—in fact, often subnational actors with the requisite linguistic or cultural skills—met the world.<sup>6</sup>

Historians must be careful in distinguishing between subnational actors. Some exiles arrived in the USSR with a substantial political record and the expectation to return to their homeland soon. Others were “political emigrants,” a Soviet political category between refugee and exile. Some Soviet experts sought out “internationalist” work; others were drafted into it by republican elites keen to carve out foreign policy space for their republic. Some subnational actors may not have worked directly for the Soviet Foreign Ministry or solidarity organizations, but they nonetheless remained connected to Soviet institutions like the State Committee for Economic Ties as they traveled across borders. Subnational actors’ position relative to their milieu also matters. In this article, “subnational actors” primarily refers to Persian-language speakers who made up a majority of the population in Iran; a majority of the population in the Tajik SSR, but a tiny minority within the USSR itself; and perhaps a plurality of the population in Afghanistan. In the case of the Tajik SSR and Afghanistan, Persian existed in an ambiguous relationship toward Russian and Pashto. Even in Iran, Persian existed alongside Turkic languages like Azeri and other Iranian languages like Kurdish. The subnational actors in this piece therefore moved within a shared Persian-language space, but they did so performing acts of linguistic and ideological translation, across the linguistic frontiers of Russian and Persian and the developmental divide that separated Afghanistan from Iran and the Soviet Union.

Exploring the history of Soviet internationalism between the Tajik SSR, Afghanistan, and Iran through the lens of subnational actors requires scholars to engage an eclectic source base. As valuable as state and party archives are, they tell us little about how subnational actors themselves perceived the promises and perils of internationalism. Yet, Iranian socialists, Afghan socialists, and Tajik “internationalists” did not leave behind traditional archives familiar to scholars of Soviet history. In the absence of such documents, however, historians can engage Iranian and Afghan memoirs alongside oral history interviews and studies produced by activists in the diaspora.<sup>7</sup> One initiative hosted by George Mason University has digitized dozens of Central Asian memoirs of the Soviet era, while Central Asian scholars have compiled a three-volume collection of interviews with Central Asian veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War.<sup>8</sup> Yet as Artemy Kalinovsky and Isaac Scarborough observe, historians face myriad problems when seeking to enrich accounts of Soviet history through such sources. Among other factors, they point to representativeness, nationalist narratives, and enduring Soviet norms about how the story of one’s life ought to be told.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup>O. I. Zhigalina, *Mulla Mustafa Barzani: Istoricheskii portret* (Moscow, 2013), 122.

<sup>7</sup>Atābak Fath-Allāhzāda, *Khāneh-ye Dāi-ye Yusuf: Guftārī Dar Maurid-e Muhājarat-e Fidā’iyān-ī Aksariyyat Beh Shūravī* (Saltsjöbaden, Sweden, 2001); Babak Āmirkhusrawī and Muhsin Haidariyan, *Muhājirat-e Sūsiyālisti Ve Sarnevesht-e Irāniyān. Muhājerat-e hezb-e Komunist-e Irān-Ferqeh-ye Demokrātik-e Āzerbāijān-Hezb-e Tudeh-ye Irān-Sāzmān-e Fedāyān-e Aksariyat* (Tehran, 2002).

<sup>8</sup>“Russian Perspectives on Islam,” available at <https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/>.

<sup>9</sup>Artemy M. Kalinovsky and Isaac Scarborough, “The Oil Lamp and the Electric Light: Progress, Time, and Nation in Central Asian Memoirs of the Soviet Era,” *Kritika* 22 (Winter 2021): 107–36.

How ought historians to approach such sources when writing the history of subnational internationalism? Though these sources can be used as empirical means for writing the history of Soviet internationalism, I would argue that such ego-documents can be especially useful to illuminate how different kinds of subnational actors adopt an ambiguous stance toward Soviet internationalism decades later. Of particular importance in this context are the position of the memoirist after the fact, as well as their anticipated audience. Tajik memoirists place Soviet internationalism within a national story of Tajikistan making its mark on the world stage, whereas Iranian authors writing from the position of exile (often in Western Europe) see internationalism through the lens of misunderstandings, the loss of a national base, and the impossibility of return to their homeland. As such, these conceptions of Soviet internationalism must be read in tandem with the migratory routes of the authors and their shifting relationships to ideas of nationalism. Following a brief first section that contextualizes the emergence of an Iranian socialist diaspora; Soviet aid to Afghanistan; and Tajikistan's role in the USSR's outreach to the Third World, I use two well-documented cases to explore the trajectory of encounters between Tajiks, Iranians, and Afghans. In the second section, I follow a Tajik intellectual who served as an interpreter in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), highlighting how his service underscored differences between him, other Soviet translators and advisors, and Afghans. A final section explores the experiences of Iranian socialists in exile in the DRA, showing how perceived hierarchies of development and the Soviet withdrawal undermined hopes for a revival of the Iranian left. Though the specific details of both accounts are perhaps not representative of all Tajiks or Iranians, both show how memories of internationalism remain structured and processed very differently on distinct sides of the (post-)Soviet border.

### **INTERNATIONALISM IN THE ERA OF DEVELOPED SOCIALISM**

Throughout its existence, the Soviet Union sponsored socialist movements in Iran. Moscow sponsored a Persian Soviet Socialist Republic following World War I, and when it failed, it took in hundreds of Iranian socialists. Iranian socialists were integrated into the Soviet Union's patronage of Iranian culture in a Soviet key, translating Marxist theory into Persian, while Russian translators translated Iranian social novels into Russian. The Purges decimated the ranks of such intellectuals, but the growth of Iranian socialism into a mass movement in the 1940s, together with the Soviet Union's abandonment of Kurdish and Azerbaijani statelets in northwestern Iran in 1946, led to the transformation of the diaspora as thousands of Iranian socialists followed the Red Army back into Soviet Azerbaijan. Further repressions of the party by the Shah following the 1953 coup d'état against Mohammad Mossadeq prompted thousands more to flee to the Soviet Union. Members of the Tudeh Party staffed Radio Moscow, contributed to the translation of Russian literature into Persian, and played an important role in socialist women's organizations.<sup>10</sup> While the most prominent members of this Iranian socialist diaspora were the leaders of the Tudeh Party itself, the diaspora was large, diverse, and dispersed throughout the Socialist Bloc. Beyond core groups in Moscow

<sup>10</sup>Majid Rahbani, "Gāmāyoun ve Kārnamēh-ye Pur-e Bārash: Kitābhā-ye Chāp-e Shūravi Dar Tehrān," *Ensānshenāsi Ve Farhang* (no date), available at <https://anthropology.ir/article/22751.html>.

and Baku, the diaspora included communities in Beijing, Prague, Dushanbe, and Leipzig. The Tudeh Party's radio station itself moved from Moscow, to Leipzig, and then to Sofia, with plans for it to be relocated to Ulaanbataar or Dushanbe before the Iranian Revolution intervened.<sup>11</sup> By the 1980s, thirty thousand Iranians lived in the Soviet Union as so-called political emigrants, perhaps the largest political diaspora alongside Greeks, Spaniards, and Uyghurs.<sup>12</sup>

Parallel to these Iranian peregrinations, thousands of Afghans traveled to the USSR as students and military officers in the 1960s and 1970s. The Soviet Union had been the first country in the world to recognize Afghan independence in 1919, and Afghanistan's modernizing King Amanullah sent a small group of Afghan pilots to the Soviet Union for training.<sup>13</sup> Following the United States' refusal to integrate Afghanistan into the Central Treaty Organization, the Soviet Union leapt into the gap in December 1955 and offered to train Afghanistan's officer corps. In Kabul, pro-Soviet leftist parties enjoyed a powerful position on university campuses, and film festivals and book fairs featured works from the USSR and the Tudeh Party.<sup>14</sup> In 1965, Afghan intellectuals who admired the Soviet Communist party's modernization of a backward country founded the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). This traffic in Afghan students and officers promised to create a pro-Soviet military and technical intelligentsia.

The results of these encounters were, however, ambiguous. Former PDPA member Soraya Baha (1954–) noted that Pashtun members of the PDPA saw the relationship with the USSR in instrumental terms, since Soviet military power could liberate Pashtun-majority territories from Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> In Baha's view, however, Afghans who traveled to the USSR were unequipped to handle life there. In Afghanistan, she wrote, Afghan "youth with cultural backwardness and sexual frustration couldn't so much as sneak a glance at a girl, but in the promised Soviet paradise, they slaked their insatiable thirst every night in the embrace of a plump blonde Russian girl." Such Afghan students, Baha wrote, "returned to their country with a free diploma, a washed brain, and a heart pledged to the closed Soviet system."<sup>16</sup> When Baha traveled to the Soviet Union herself for medical treatment in 1971–72, she lost her own convictions. "What depressed me in Dushanbe," reflected Baha, "was the tragic history of the Soviet Tajiks, who, after the Basmachi uprisings, became a target for the Bolsheviks. The Russians changed their alphabet, which had been in Persian, into Cyrillic, so as to displace Tajiks from connections, customs, and rootedness with their past and culture and created a new generation without any identity, without roots, and without an

<sup>11</sup>Vadim Zagladin, "Pros'ba rukovodstva Narodnoi partii Irana," December 6, 1976, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), f. 89, op. 27, d. 26, l. 4; Iraj Eskandari, Telegram Sent Via Soviet Consulate in Leipzig, November 26, 1976, *ibid.*, l. 7; "Pros'ba rukovodstva Narodnoi partii Irana," *ibid.*, l. 4; Memorandum from Nikolai Talyzin (Minister of Communications) to CC CPSU, November 30, 1976, *ibid.*, l. 8; and Vadim Zagladin, "Pros'ba rukovodstva Narodnoi partii Irana," December 6, 1976, *ibid.*, l. 5.

<sup>12</sup>"Information über die Konsultation des Genossen H. Axen mit Genossen B.N. Ponomarjow, Kandidat des Politbüros und Sekretär des ZK der KPdSU, am 27. Juli 1983 in Moskau," Bundesarchiv – Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR (BA SAPMO), DY 30 IV 2 2.035 58, no document number.

<sup>13</sup>Shair Mohammad Khan Kamrany, *Memoir of Shair Mohammad Khan Kamrany* (2016), available at <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1193&context=afghanuno>.

<sup>14</sup>Soraya Baha, *Rahā Dar Bād* (Kabul, 2013), 114.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 113.

awareness of and perspective for the future.”<sup>17</sup> The Soviet Union was a superpower, but one without a human face. Baha’s perspective is surely colored by her experiences: repressed by the PDPA in the 1980s, she fled Afghanistan for the United States with her husband, the brother of the PDPA’s leader. Writing from California for Afghan publishers and audiences, she sees Soviet internationalism in completely negative terms—and in quite different terms from Soviet Tajiks themselves.

It was not a coincidence that Baha’s first stop on her visit to the Soviet Union was the Tajik SSR, since the postwar years saw a transformation in Tajikistan’s role in Soviet diplomacy. In the wake of decolonization, the Soviet Central Asian SSRs took on a central role in Soviet outreach to the developing world. Tajik poets led the Soviet Committee for Solidarity with Africa and Asia, and Central Asian and Azeri diplomats became ambassadors to countries in Africa and Asia.<sup>18</sup> Tajiks’ fluency in Persian also made them natural intermediaries for Soviet advisors in Iran and Afghanistan. Within Tajikistan itself, moreover, development projects like the Nurek Dam offered living proof of the USSR’s commitment to develop “backward” territories. Yet Tajikistan’s new-found role as the anti-colonial face of the Soviet Union also dovetailed with shifts in how Tajik elites conceptualized their nation’s place in the world. The director of the Oriental Institute of the Soviet Union and former first secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan, Bobojon Ghafurov, reimagined Tajiks as a distinct nation with a primordial history and “laid claim to most of the classical Persian canon.”<sup>19</sup> Tajikistan thus served as a bridge between the Soviet Union and the developing world, but it did so less as part of a Persianate continuum than a nation with a sense of itself as a fountainhead of the region’s civilization, a formalized and “pure” dialect of Persian, and a distinct history from Iran or Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Tajikistan engaged the world, but less as the exemplar of a universal ideology and more as a primordial nation

### INTERNATIONALISM IN A TAJIK KEY

It is in this broader context that Khudoinazar Asozoda (1941–2014) enters our story. Asozoda was born to a schoolteacher father in southern Tajikistan. After working as a schoolteacher in Kolkhozabad, Asozoda studied Tajik literature and history at Lenin State University, where he remained for doctoral studies. In line with the greater role that Tajikistan assumed toward the Third World, Asozoda served as an interpreter for Soviet geologists in Afghanistan from 1971 to 1973. Asozoda returned to Dushanbe, where he taught at the local university’s Faculty of Tajik Literature. In November 1978, however, Asozoda was summoned for a meeting with Jabbor Rasulov, the first secretary of the Communist Party of Tajikistan. Rasulov informed Asozoda and five other men that he had already decided on their

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 142.

<sup>18</sup>Kalinovsky, *Laboratory of Socialist Development*, 19–42;. For memoirs by Central Asians on their international engagements see Tashmuhammed Kary-Niazov, *Razmyshlenie o proidennom puti* (Moscow, 1970); Nuritdin Mukhitdinov, *Reka vremeni: Ot Stalina do Gorbacheva* (Moscow, 1995); and Holmurod Sharifov, *Majmui Eddoshtho* (Dushanbe, 2004).

<sup>19</sup>Kirill Nourzhanov and Christian Bleuer, *Tajikistan: A Political and Social History* (Canberra, 2013), 173.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 174.

appointment as translators in the DRA.<sup>21</sup> Rasulov reminded the men “not to harm the reputation of Tajikistan” and that they were following a tradition of Soviet Tajiks, citing the example of Saifullah Saidov, the first Tajik translator dispatched to Afghanistan in 1960.<sup>22</sup> Within a week, Asozoda flew to Kabul and settled into Microraiion-2, a block of *khrushchevki* built on the left bank of the Kabul River in the 1970s.

Asozoda arrived in Afghanistan at a tumultuous moment. The PDPA had seized power in a coup d'état on April 27, 1978, without Soviet approval, and immediately sought to transform Afghanistan into a model socialist state. On November 30, 1978, the DRA's Revolutionary Council announced land redistribution measures that dispossessed even medium-sized landholders. Combined with Pakistani support for Islamist groups and the Iranian Revolution, the DRA faced domestic challenges and hostile neighbors. Yet the PDPA's leader Nur Muhammad Taraki, took little interest in governing and delegated responsibility to his deputy, Hafizullah Amin. Nonetheless, the DRA had the support of a multinational group of Soviet advisors. Virtually every All-Union Ministry and SSR nominated several specialists to be sent to Afghanistan to work as “consultants” for Afghan ministries. Tajik and Uzbek specialists familiar with the history of collectivization in Central Asia advised on land reform, while a Georgian led Kabul's garbage services.<sup>23</sup> Professional chefs were also brought in from the Soviet Union to cook for Taraki, whereby one of Asozoda's colleagues translated for the new cooking team.<sup>24</sup> The translators assigned to some 150 advisors also represented a cross-section of Soviet society. Many of the Persian-language advisors in Kabul were veterans of Soviet economic projects in Iran, while the head translator for the advising team at the Ministry of Finance (where Asozoda worked) was one Sarkis Badalyan, a young Armenian who had translated for Soviet financial advisors in Iran.<sup>25</sup> Yet Tajiks took on a special role in the advising operation. As one Kazakh sniper recalled, “almost the entire intelligentsia of Tajikistan was [in Afghanistan].”<sup>26</sup>

Soon, however, Asozoda noticed several pathologies in the Soviet advising mission. Rather than supporting the DRA, the Soviet advising mission became a state unto itself. Asozoda noted that “the inclination toward a Sovietization of the Afghan government exceeded its own boundaries. [Afghanistan's own] specialists were ignored.”<sup>27</sup> Asozoda's later work with Soviet customs officials who rebuilt the DRA's customs systems hardened this impression: “A group of advisors had taken all of the institutions of Afghanistan under their control as the eyes and ears of the Soviet state. They wrote dozens of instructions and book after book in their fields so that Afghanistan would become one of the socialist states.”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Khudoinazar Asozoda, *Afghonistoni inqilobī* (Dushanbe, 2003), 4.

<sup>22</sup>“Darguzashti Saifullo Saidov,” *Akhbor.com*, February 13, 2018, available at <https://akhbor.com/-p5160-96.htm>.

<sup>23</sup>Asozoda, *Afghonistoni inqilobī*, 15.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>26</sup>Amangeldy Abdykalikovich Khassenov, interview, in *Pamiat' iz plameni Afganistana: Interv'iu s voynami-internatsionalistami Afganskoi voiny 1979–1989 godov*, vol. 1, Kazakhstan, ed. Marlene Laruelle et al. (Astana, 2016), 66.

<sup>27</sup>Asozoda, *Afghonistoni inqilobī*, 15–16.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 19.

In Asozoda's view, an antagonism emerged between the advising apparatus and Afghan institutions, as the latter prevented Soviet reforms while still accepting Soviet resources.<sup>29</sup>

Asozoda also saw the Soviet advising apparatus as degrading Soviet aspirations of internationalism. Though commonly seen as a Soviet puppet even before the Soviet invasion, the DRA presented itself as a vanguard of solidarity. Afghan publishers introduced Afghan readers to the Ethiopian Revolution, Fidel Castro's thought, and the New International Economic Order.<sup>30</sup> For international audiences, they highlighted commonalities between their struggle and the liberation of Palestine. PDPA elites often saw themselves as engaged in a struggle less against Islamism than against Maoism, whose excesses were manifest in Cambodia.<sup>31</sup> Later conferences in Kabul would praise the Soviet Union for eliminating "Afghanistan's Pol Pot"—or, as one Palestinian explained it, Moscow did not want "a new Chile in Afghanistan."<sup>32</sup> Soviet propaganda, for its part, stressed that those who served in Afghanistan were fulfilling their "internationalist duty" (*internatsional'nyi dolg*), a concept named in the 1977 Soviet Constitution as an obligation of all Soviet citizens. Many Central Asian advisors and soldiers embraced their fulfillment of their "internationalist duty," often doing so, however, in terms of "defending the southern borders of the homeland" or as a way for "small" republics to make an outsized contribution to the country. In such accounts, Afghanistan figures less as a front in the global anti-imperialist struggle than a stage on which to serve both the "little homeland" (Tajikistan) and "big homeland" (the USSR).<sup>33</sup>

Compared to other Soviet Central Asians, Asozoda was something of an outlier in his relationship to internationalism. He noted in his memoirs how "we wondered from dawn to dusk whether we would survive or be killed for the sake of an internationalist task (*vazifai internatsionalī*) in Kabul."<sup>34</sup> Describing the bitter winter in Kabul, he noted that "again, our internationalist task forced us to tolerate every kind of problem."<sup>35</sup> Yet, Asozoda's attitude toward internationalism did not mean that he completely abandoned it as a structure of moral aspirations. When Asozoda bade farewell to another Tajik returning to Dushanbe, for instance, he noted how Soviet personnel in the airport's customs hall eagerly exchanged Afghan currency for coupons that could be used to purchase foreign goods inside the USSR. Asozoda mocked them as "Chekists"—a double entendre referring to KGB officers and the highly sought after "checks" that could come at the end of a tour of duty abroad. As Asozoda observed, "in fact, it was these very 'checks' toward which people oriented their dreams and hopes and for which they continued their humanitarian service (*khizmat-e bashardūstonaashro*)."<sup>36</sup> Though Asozoda comes across ironically, the fact that he was so critical of Soviet advisors who saw their mission in terms of pecuniary gain suggests that he

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Fidel Castro, *Buhrān-e Eqtesādī ve Ejtemā'i-ye Jahān* (Kabul, n.d.); Institut Afghanistan Archives, *Mubārāzāt-e Khalq-e Eit'yūpī: Tajārūb Ve Dastāvardhā-ye Ejtemā'ī*, trans. "A.N.F." (Kabul, n.d.); and *Nazm-e Jadīd-e Eqtesādī-ye Bayn al-Melālī Ve Mamālek-e Rū Beh Enkeshāf* (Kabul, 1362/1983).

<sup>31</sup>Arvind Rundberg, *Dar Eshtiyāq-e Nur*, trans. from Swedish to Persian by "Supporters of the People's Fedayan Guerrillas (Majority) Abroad" (February 1982), 4–5.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.; Muin Bseiso, "Afghanistan Is Ours," in *Afghanistan and the Palestine Revolution* (Kabul, n.d.), 7.

<sup>33</sup>Asozoda, *Afghanistoni inqilobī*, 5.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 232.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 47.



had not totally abandoned the aspirations of performing solidarity across borders. Looking back, Asozoda perceived internationalism as a burden without specific anti-imperialist content—but hesitated to ridicule it completely.

As the story from the airport underscores, Asozoda sensed tensions between himself as a Tajik and the Russian-dominated advising apparatus. Asozoda resented how the lead Soviet advisor from the Council of Ministers declined to introduce the new translators alongside the new delegation of advisors—a sign of “Russian chauvinism.”<sup>37</sup> The heads of the advising mission resisted demands to raise translators’ salaries, a sign that the Tajik translators’ qualifications were being disregarded. “Most of the translators in our group had academic titles,” he noted, “and their literacy and knowledge of the world was also higher than that of many of the advisors.”<sup>38</sup> Asozoda himself deferred to non-native speakers of Persian like the Armenian Badalyan (noting, however, his “broken Russian”); these interpreters had years of experience working in Iran. All the same, the relationship between interpreters and the advising apparatus remained tense. Many of the advisors regarded the Tajiks as a mere appendage to the core operation of building an Afghan client regime. That the Soviet Union had presented Tajikistan as a model of socialist development now appeared irrelevant.

The spring of 1979 marked a turning point in Afghanistan and the advising apparatus itself. Not only was the “distribution of land gradually destroying the political situation,” but in March 1979 an army garrison in Herat mutinied and took over Afghanistan’s fourth-largest city for days.<sup>39</sup> The PDPA’s leadership requested that Moscow intervene militarily. Soviet leadership refused, fearing that it would internationalize the Afghan conflict. The DRA’s air force quelled the uprising, but the PDPA’s lack of support had been laid bare. In the wake of the uprising, Asozoda noted how Tajikistan figured into discussion less and less in terms of development and more in terms of counterinsurgency. Rather than seeing themselves as modernizing a backward country, the PDPA saw themselves as engaged in a war similar to that of the Soviet Union against the Basmachi rebels in the early 1920s.<sup>40</sup> Not long after Lenin’s birthday (April 22, 1979), “[Afghan] news programs started to talk about new ways to fight the opposition. They linked this issue with the 1920s and 1930s in the republics of Central Asia. According to them, a similar war had begun throughout Afghanistan.”<sup>41</sup> In this context, Soviet Central Asians assumed less the role of experts from whom Afghans could learn and more the descendants of rebels whom a counterinsurgency campaign had crushed.

This political climate deepened divides between Tajik interpreters and non-Central Asian advisors. When one Armenian advisor announced that he no longer wished to serve in Afghanistan, Asozoda egged him on by describing to him how the Basmachi had burned Red Army officers alive. “In this atmosphere, the topic of terrorist attacks became more common among the advisors. Every morning, before [the Armenian advisor] sat down at

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 47–48.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 104.

his desk, he searched everywhere in his office and only afterwards sat down at his chair.”<sup>42</sup> One low point came when Asozoda hosted a group of Tajik professors who had been assigned to teach at Kabul University. Not only were the senior professors stuffed two to a room in the microrayon, but the Soviet Embassy demanded to inspect a Russian-language translation of their lectures before they spoke to Afghans.<sup>43</sup> If embassy officials feared collaboration between Soviet Tajiks and Afghans, however, they were misguided: ordinary Afghans held Soviet Tajik advisors in contempt, arguing that “we [Tajiks] had blood on our hands from the killing of Muslims. One of them looked at several of us Soviet Tajiks and said, ‘Well, you sold Tajikistan to the Russians and now you want to sell Afghanistan?’”<sup>44</sup> Other Soviet Tajiks who later served in Afghanistan shared this impression, noting, however, the difference between the relative “sympathy” they experienced from Uzbeks and Tajiks in northern Afghanistan and the attitude of Pashtuns of southern Afghanistan, who had “no love lost” (*nedoliublivali*) for all Soviets.<sup>45</sup>

The Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 did little to improve these circumstances. And if relations between ordinary Afghans and Tajik interpreters were strained, matters were little better among Soviet Central Asians or between Afghan elites and Soviet Central Asians. Disputes over the “Uzbek” or “Tajik” character of cities such as Samarkand in the Uzbek SSR or the northern regions of the Tajik SSR plagued relations between nationalists in both Soviet republics. Now, the extension of socialism to the lands between the Hindu Kush and Amu Darya River in northern Afghanistan only added to these tensions. Primarily populated by Afghan Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmen, the region had also been settled by Pashtuns through Afghan government initiatives during the twentieth century. During his time in Kabul, for instance, Asozoda grew concerned that Soviet Uzbek elites would demand an independent and Uzbek-dominated Turkestan in northern Afghanistan. Asozoda was so concerned that he urged a high-ranking Tajik figure to talk Soviet officials out of the idea and bad-mouthed Soviet Uzbek leaders during a banquet held between Soviet Uzbek scholars and an Afghan Uzbek activist.<sup>46</sup> Asozoda thus used his memoirs to highlight his own anti-Uzbek internationalism as much as the positive contributions of his Soviet internationalist work. In another context, the Afghan poet Sulayman Laeq pleaded for a “belt of unified resettlement of Pashtuns” in northern Afghanistan, where such “politically insulating material” could protect the USSR and the DRA from “the interference of the opponent in our national kitchen.”<sup>47</sup> As Pashtuns constituted the “numerically largest nationality from the Urals to the Sindh,” they represented a natural ally for a Russian nation whose demographic core lay west of the Urals.<sup>48</sup> Even as suspicions of “Muslim” solidarity spread, the reality was one of subnational actors suspecting one another of irredentist plots.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 364.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>45</sup>Kudratbek El’chibekovich El’chibekov, interview, *Pamiat’ iz plameni Afganistana*, vol. 3, *Tajikistan*, 226.

<sup>46</sup>Asozoda, *Afghonistoni inqilobī*, 370–71.

<sup>47</sup>“Zapis’ besedy Polianichko s Suelimanom Laiekom, prezidentom AN DRA” (1985), *RGANI*, f. 117, op. 1, d. 15, l. 21.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

By June 1981, Asozoda's tour of duty in Kabul had come to an end. At a banquet held in his honor, Asozoda bade farewell to the Afghan deputy minister of finance and his staff, reading the poem "My Mother" by Soviet Tajik poet Mirzo Tursunzoda. The poem was apolitical, focused on the struggles of an adult to recapture childhood memories of his mother, but Tursunzoda was an apt symbol of the resources the Soviet Union had invested into Tajiks as internationalist intermediaries. Tursunzoda had led the Soviet Solidarity Committee for the Countries of Africa and Asia and written several poems about national liberation movements. Like Tursunzoda before him, Asozoda provided a Tajik face to Soviet diplomacy, even presenting his Afghan hosts with an Persian-script version of the poem (in contrast to the modified Cyrillic script in which the Tajik poem would have been written).<sup>49</sup> Yet as Asozoda's encounters with the Soviet advising apparatus in Kabul showed, Soviet institutions designed to engage the Persian-speaking world bore the memory of counterinsurgency and assumptions about hierarchy. Soviet engagements in the Third World created opportunities for Tajiks, but these opportunities could harden borders as much as they could dissolve them.

### LABORATORY OF SOCIALIST INTERNATIONALISM?

Afghan socialism cannot be understood without reference to its Iranian roots. The lack of censorship in Afghanistan from 1963 to 1973 allowed Iranian opposition texts to circulate uncensored. Many members of the PDPA had only a rudimentary grasp of Russian or other European languages, making Iranian Marxist ideologues, writers, and poets into conduits for socialism writ large.<sup>50</sup> And the near simultaneous collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy and the "April Revolution" in 1978–79 appeared to augur the triumph of the left in both countries. Both the Tudeh Party of Iran as well as other Marxist groups such as the Organization of Iranian People's Fedayan (OIPFG) defended the Afghan experiment in socialism. Journalists for the Tudeh Party's newspaper *Mardom* were among the few reporters allowed into Kabul following the Soviet invasion.<sup>51</sup> The Tudeh Party intellectual Mahmoud Etemadzadeh traveled to Kabul for a November 1981 Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization Session, where he reflected that the "dusty and sun-baked city strikes one as familiar: like Qazvin [a provincial capital in northwestern Iran] twenty years ago, but with wider dimensions."<sup>52</sup> Afghanistan was developmentally decades behind Iran, but it represented a vision of the socialist future.

Soon, however, Afghanistan assumed an unexpected role for members of the Tudeh Party and the OIPFG. The Tudeh Party had hailed the Ayatollah Khomeini as an

<sup>49</sup>Asozoda, *Afghonistoni inqilobī*, 392.

<sup>50</sup>Abolfal Mohaqeqi, interview by author, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, March 24, 2019.

<sup>51</sup>Nureddin Kianouri, *Tahawwūlāt-e Afghānistān Ve Masā'il-e Bughranj-e 'Asr-e Mā* (Tehran, 1982), Hoover Institution Archives, Iranian Political Opposition Collection, Box 5, Folder 5. Afghan socialists also sought to make their revolution intelligible to Tudeh Party members. See *Dar Afghānistān Che Mīguzarad? Main-e Kāmil Shudeh-ī Sukhūrānī-ye Yek Rafīq-e Enqilābī-ye Afghānī* (n.d.), *ibid.*, Box 59, Folder 59.3; and Houshang Asadi, *Letters to My Torturer: Love, Revolution & Imprisonment in Iran*, trans. Nushin Arbabzadeh (London, 2012), 112–41.

<sup>52</sup>Mahmoud Etemādzādeh, *Guwāhī chesm-o-gūsh-e Afghānistān. Rah Āward-e Safar-e Rafīq Beh Ādin Beh Jumhūrī-ye Dimokrātik-e Afghānistān* (Teheran, 1359/1982), 6.

“anti-imperialist” leader, but in February 1983, Iranian authorities arrested the party’s leadership. The crackdowns forced thousands of Iranian socialists to flee both to the Soviet Union as well as to the Iranian-Afghan border near Zahedan and Nimruz, where they were processed as “political immigrants.” During the summer of 1983 the DRA resettled several hundred Iranian leftists into the Hotel Ariana in central Kabul, where they were assigned Afghan identities. One member of the OIPFG, Abolfazl Mohaqeqi, recalled his transfer from Nimruz to Kabul during Eid al-Fitr (July 12–18, 1983) in terms similar to Etemadzadeh’s: the courtyard of the Hotel Ariana “reminded me of the first time I traveled to Qazvin at the age of ten, when I traveled to the Imamzade Hossein with my sister’s sons. ... After twenty years, these forgotten images, these childhood images re-entered my consciousness and revived a familiar and pleasant sense in me. It was as if I had come from Zanjan to Qazvin.” (Imamzades are shrines for the descendants of Shi’a imams; they are, however, often places for leisure, conversation, and rest for Iranians.) Afghanistan still lagged behind Iran, but it had now become a welcome refuge.

The partnership between Iranian socialists and the PDPA soon deepened. In an audience with Tudeh Party First Secretary Ali Khavari, PDPA leaders offered Iranians employment and were frank about the ideological debt that the PDPA owed to the Tudeh Party. “Afghanistan,” explained the deputy head of the PDPA Central Committee’s International Department, “is our and your common homeland!”<sup>53</sup> The PDPA soon secured the Iranians positions in Afghan hospitals, universities, and kindergartens. Mohaqeqi found a position at the PDPA newspaper, *Haqiqat-e Inqelab-e Saur* (*Truth of the April Revolution*). He established a rapport with the newspaper’s editor, the poet Sadiq Kawun, and a Soviet journalist from *Pravda*, Vadim Okulov, who had been seconded to the newspaper. As Mohaqeqi moved into the Soviet-built microrayon recently vacated by Asozoda, the Afghan capital became a laboratory for internationalism in a new key. While biding their time for a comeback of the left at home, Iranians could become the professional class and intelligentsia that that the PDPA needed to run a modern state.

Mohaqeqi’s work was but one example of such cooperation. The PDPA supported a radio station—Toilers’ Radio (Radio-ye Zehmatkeshan)—for the Tudeh Party and OIPFG.<sup>54</sup> The PDPA provided resources (border guards, military officers) to allow the Tudeh Party to conduct missions from southwestern Afghanistan into Iran itself. The PDPA even sponsored transnational film projects with Iranian directors and Czechoslovak studios. In 1985–86, Iranian director Shahid Sohrab-Saless traveled to Kabul with a TV crew from Bratislava to produce a film on the war. In the film, *A Letter from Kabul*, Sohrab-Saless captured the DRA’s internationalist aspirations: While a child narrates the challenges faced by Afghan children, the camera pans over rooms festooned with banners proclaiming solidarity with the African National Congress, Chile, Vietnam, and Palestine.<sup>55</sup> Slovak viewers would have recognized the room for Afghan Pioneers as a copy of the Pionýr organization in Czechoslovakia, which in turn would have also featured such anti-imperialist

<sup>53</sup> Ali Khoda’i, *Naguftahha*, Rāh-ī Tudeh (2008), available at <https://www.rahetudeh.com/rahetude/mataleb/nagofteha/html/nagofteha-77.html>. Rāh-ī Tudeh is an online newspaper/website run by remnants of the Tudeh party.

<sup>54</sup> Abolfazl Mohaqeqi, interview by author, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, March 24, 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Sohrab Shahid-Saless, dir., *List z Kábulu*, Bratislava, 1987.

posters. Iranian directors made Afghanistan recognizable for East Europeans and highlighted how both Afghans and Slovaks owed a debt to national liberation movements.

Iranians in the Afghan capital like Mohaqeqi, however, harbored doubts about the interest of Soviet actors in socialism as they understood it. Within two days of his arrival in Kabul, Mohaqeqi was notified that a Soviet Tajik official wished to speak with him. Mohaqeqi looked forward to debriefing the official and talking “about the country of Soviets.”<sup>56</sup> Yet Mohaqeqi was disappointed to discover that the Tajik was primarily interested in the Iranian pop singer Faegheh Atashin, better known as Googoosh. The most successful pop singer in Iran, Googoosh had gained fame in the USSR through songs and Iranian films like *Throughout the Night*, which were shown in the Soviet Union. Mohaqeqi was incensed that the Tajik official showed no interest in Iranian traditional music like that of Mohammad-Reza Shajarian, much less Iranian politics. Encounters like these highlighted how divides between Iranian leftists and their Soviet hosts persisted. The Tajik embraced a simulacrum of popular music patronized by the Pahlavi regime, not the classical Iranian music tradition embodied by Shajarian (and which was banned in the Islamic Republic). Soviet Tajik cultural attaches would invite the Soviet Uzbek folk band Yalla to perform concerts for Afghan audiences, but their interest in “high” Iranian national culture remained limited.

The high point of Afghan investment into the Iranian left came in May 1985, when the DRA hosted the Tudeh Party’s “National Conference,” an opportunity for the Tudeh Party to reconstitute itself. From 1983 to 1985 the Tudeh Party was in disarray, its cadre scattered between Eastern Europe, the USSR, and Afghanistan and divided over the party’s prior support for Khomeini. The DRA and the USSR sponsored the conference to reunite cadre and establish a new ideological line. The event, hosted at the Chehel Sotoun Palace in Kabul, featured an exhibit of photographs of imprisoned party members and letters smuggled out of Tehran’s prisons, testifying to the reach of the party’s underground networks. As one Tudeh Party member explained, the event also testified to the solidarity between Iranians and Afghans: “We viewed [Afghanistan] as our homeland [*mihān*] and, in terms of mental belonging [*ta’alūq-e khātir*], as an extension of Iran.”<sup>57</sup> (Suffice to say that many Afghans, not least the country’s Sunni Pashtun majority, would have disagreed with this assessment.) The conference ended with a joint declaration of the Tudeh Party and the OIPFG demanding the overthrow of the Islamic Republic.<sup>58</sup>

Such lofty rhetoric ignored, however, several fracture lines in the project of Iranian-Afghan solidarity. The National Conference had secured unity in part by expelling members of the Tudeh Party who advocated for less dependence on the Soviet Union.<sup>59</sup> Attempts by

<sup>56</sup>Abolfazl Mohaqeqi, “Az Tarīq-i Moskū Dar Masīr-i Jāddeh-yi Abrīshom – Tājīkistān,” August 16, 2019, available at <https://bepish.org/node/2427>.

<sup>57</sup>Ali Khoda’i, *Nagufiahha*.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.; “Bayāniyeh-yi Mushtarak-i Kumiteh-ye Markazī-ye Hezb-e Tūdeh-ye Irān Ve Komiteh-ye Markazī-ye Sāzmān-e Fadā’yān-e Khalq-e Irān (Aksarīyat). Pīrūz Bād Mubārazeḥ-ye Khalq Dar Rāh-i Sarnagūnī-ye Rezhīm-e Jumhūrī-ye Islāmī!” *Nameh-yī Mardūm* 48 (12 Ordibehesht 1364/May 2, 1985), available at [http://10mehr.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Bayaniyeh\\_Moshtarek.pdf](http://10mehr.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Bayaniyeh_Moshtarek.pdf).

<sup>59</sup>“Ancheh Dar Hezb Guzasht Baksh-e Sevvūm – Dar Bāreḥ-ye ‘Planūm-e 19’ Ve ‘Kanfarāns-i Mellī,’” interview with Farham Farjad, *Mehr* 29 Azar (December 20, 2013), available at <http://10mehr.com/maghaleh/21102013/700>.

Soviet officials to bring Iranian Kurds back into the Tudeh Party faltered, as the Tudeh Party's leadership refused to form a "Kurdish state committee" and denounced Iranian Kurdish activists as Kurdish nationalists.<sup>60</sup> As critics of the Tudeh Party noted, the party's leadership derived their authority in large part from their monopolization of access to Soviet resources, had spent most of their adult lives in Eastern Europe, and were uninterested in transforming the Tudeh Party into something other than a "democratic centralist" organization. The Tudeh Party remained dependent on the protection of Soviet military power and the good graces of Afghan hosts—conditions that could not be guaranteed indefinitely.

Changes in leadership in both Moscow and Kabul soon threw doubts on the future of the Tudeh Party. New Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev sought to extricate the Soviet Union from foreign adventures like Afghanistan. As part of his strategy for doing so, in May 1986, Gorbachev replaced PDPA General Secretary Babrak Karmal with the head of Afghan intelligence, Mohammad Najibullah. Najibullah drew down Kabul's role as a hub for socialist and national liberation movements. While Tudeh Party members noted Najibullah's familiarity with Iranian Marxist ideologues, Najibullah prized "dialogue and understanding" (*goftegū ve tafāhhum*) with the Islamic Republic of Iran—a stance that could not be combined with support for left-wing Iranian revolutionaries.<sup>61</sup> Najibullah closed the transit routes across the Iranian-Afghan border used by the Tudeh Party and the OIPFG since 1983.<sup>62</sup> If Kabul had once opened its doors to leftist groups from Pakistan and Iran and presented itself as a beacon of anti-imperialism, now neither Gorbachev nor Najibullah had the ambition to continue these policies.<sup>63</sup>

Against the background of this drawdown in support for the Iranian diaspora, the Soviet Union made efforts to encourage unity within the Tudeh Party. From April 14–21, 1986, Soviet officials hosted a broad plenum in Tashkent for all members of the Tudeh Party living in emigration in the Soviet Union and the DRA, as well as members of the OIPFG, to unify the Iranian left. "Leftists" within the party advocated for the armed overthrow of the regime, while "rightists" advocated for peaceful transition. Mohaqeqi found the discussions exhausting and opted to explore the Uzbek capital. There, he was inspired by the "organic" internationalism he found in Tashkent's neighborhoods. He sat down at an Azerbaijani tea house and surprised the guests with his fluent Azeri (but still disapproved of their love of Googoosh). Elsewhere, Mohaqeqi met with Greek communists who had moved to Tashkent following the Greek Civil War. Compared to official Soviet internationalism, "domestic internationalism" in Uzbekistan offered a human scale.<sup>64</sup>

In the months that followed the Tashkent conference, however, the structures that had held together a world of Soviet-Afghan-Iranian internationalism dissolved. At some point

<sup>60</sup>Ghani Balourian, *Āleh Kuk / Barg-e Sabz*, trans. Reza Khīrī Matlaq (Tehran, 2000), 444.

<sup>61</sup>"Yādmāndahha-yi 'Alī Khodā'ī. Aqbnashīnī Az Afghānistān. Az Nāmejhā-ye Rahbarī-ye 'Gorbāchev,'" available at <http://www.rahetudeh.com/rahetude/mataleb/nagofteha/html/nagofteha-89.html>.

<sup>62</sup>Mohsen Heydarian, correspondence with author, January 20, 2019.

<sup>63</sup>Andrei Urnov, "Ob otvete t. Nadzhibu," October 4, 1986, RGANI, f. 89, op. 13, d. 5, l. 5. Najib's request (only referred to in this document) had arrived from KGB officials in Kabul on September 21, 1985; "Ob otvete t. Nadzhibu," October 9, 1986, *ibid.*, ll. 1–2.

<sup>64</sup>Abolfazl Mohaqeqi, "Mujaherat. Bakhsh-e Sī-o Haftom. Mihmān-i Tāshkandiha. Muhajirat," September 28, 2020, available at <http://asre-nou.net/php/view.php?objnr=50441>.

in the middle of 1986, members of the Tudeh Party and the OIPFG in the USSR were allowed to emigrate, a sign that the Soviet Communist party no longer valued them as a fifth column.<sup>65</sup> And when the USSR received requests for funding from other Iranian dissident groups, such as the People's Mujahidin of Iran (PMOI), Moscow displayed scant interest.<sup>66</sup> Iranians committed to regime change now had only Iraq as a backer, while what remained of the Tudeh Party and the OIPFG migrated to Scandinavia and Western Europe. Mohaqeqi, for his part, spent much of 1987–88 at the Higher Party School in Pushkino, which solidified his conviction that Marxism-Leninism held no future. Weeks after Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan on February 15, 1989, Mohaqeqi sold his belongings, booked a plane ticket to Stockholm, and followed thousands of other Iranian socialists into a second exile.<sup>67</sup>

## CONCLUSION

By the spring of 1989 the institutions that once sustained interactions between Tajiks, Iranians, and Afghans had frayed. Not only had the Soviet Union withdrawn its forces from Afghanistan in February, it also began to expand its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Within the Soviet Union itself, economic stagnation, population growth, and misguided investments placed stresses on the Tajik SSR. On February 11, 1990, elites from southern Tajikistan incited or at the very least exploited protests in Dushanbe against the supposed “resettlement” of Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan. The protests turned into a five-day riot that saw 850 people injured and 25 people killed before Interior Ministry troops from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan regained control. What began as a protest against solidarity with Armenians descended into a revolt against the multiethnic society that had coalesced in Dushanbe. Hospital statistics revealed the injured were disproportionately Russian speakers, and eyewitness accounts reported that gangs had raped Russian women and Tajik women in European dress.<sup>68</sup> The February 1990 riots triggered an outmigration of non-Tajik minorities; the number of Russians living in Tajikistan fell from 388,000 in 1989 to 68,000 in 2000.<sup>69</sup> Any visions for Tajikistan as a laboratory for the “friendship of peoples” gave way to a civil war that devastated the USSR’s poorest republic.

Asozoda and Mohaqeqi struggled to make sense of the now inverted patterns of socialist internationalism. As fighting engulfed Tajikistan in 1991–92, Asozoda saw how practices

<sup>65</sup>Shiva Farahmandrad, *Qatrān Dar ‘Asl* (Stockholm, 2014), 259.

<sup>66</sup>Letter from Farhad Olfat to CPSU CC, January 7, 1986, RGANI, f. 89, op. 15, d. 24, l. 69 (original and Russian translation by V. Gudimenko); Letter from Farhad Olfat to CPSU CC (January 7, 1986), *ibid.*, l. 66 (original), ll. 64–65 (Russian translation by Gudimenko); Rostislav Ulianovskii, “Ob otvete na obrashcheniie rukovodstva Organizatsii modzhahedov iranskogo naroda,” (February 12, 1986), *ibid.*, l. 69 (original and Russian translation by Gudimenko).

<sup>67</sup>Abolfal Mohaqeqi, interview by author, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, March 24, 2019.

<sup>68</sup>“Soobshchenie komissii prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta Tadjhikskoi SSR po proverke sobytii 12–14 fevralia 1990g. v Dushanbe,” *Sogdiana* [Moscow], no. 3 (October 1990): 2–8, cited in Muriel Atkin, “Thwarted Democratization in Tajikistan,” in *Conflict, Cleavage and Change in Central Asia and Caucasus*, ed. Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrot (Cambridge, England, 1997), 297.

<sup>69</sup>Soviet Union Census (1989), available at <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/census.php?cy=6>; Tajikistan Census (2000), available at <http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/037/evro04.php>.

he associated with Afghanistan now played out in the streets of Dushanbe: “The injustice grew to such an extent that [militias] took anyone with Arabic-script books in his possession and killed them for being Islamic or a *vovchik* (that is, a Wahhabi). Having seen similar days in revolutionary Afghanistan, I packed dozens of books printed in Iran or Afghanistan into cellophane bags and buried them in my yard.”<sup>70</sup> As militias from southern Tajikistan seized power, Asozoda saw how “many of the practices of the October Revolution and Afghanistan’s revolution could be seen in the first five or six years of Tajik sovereignty.” In particular, Asozoda referred to how militias from Kulob took over Tajikistan’s “power ministries” and purged other ministries of technocrats—similar to what Hafizullah Amin had done in Afghanistan in 1979.<sup>71</sup> No longer a developmental model, Tajikistan now imported the pathologies of Afghan socialism.

Likewise, when Mohaqeqi traveled to Moscow in the early 1990s, he was startled by the “Koreans, Cubans, Vietnamese, Palestinians, Ethiopians, Iraqis, Afghans, and dozens of other nations” huddled across the street from Moscow’s Central Post and Telephone Office, seeking to return home.<sup>72</sup> The dormitories of Moscow’s universities heaved with former PDPA cadre who sought appointments at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees office—or, failing that, with human traffickers. In the 1980s, Mohaqeqi had once been self-conscious about the OIPFG’s lack of history compared to Communists like the Cubans or Vietnamese; now, however, the impossibility of return to Iran, and the possibility of obtaining asylum in Western Europe, made him a privileged member of the former socialist commonwealth. Iranian “political emigrants” could don the hat of the asylum seeker, whereas students or expatriates from Afghanistan had a homeland to return to—and a Communist past that asylum officers might scrutinize.

Seen from the nadir of the early 1990s, Soviet internationalism could seem like a story of failure. Instead of looking at internationalism in terms of the success or failure of actors to “export” or “import” models of state-building and culture, however, we might borrow from Asozoda’s reflections and pay attention to how these exchanges produced novel hybrids, not carbon copies. Soviet institutions patronized Iranian culture, translating hundreds of books by Iranian authors into Russian, Azerbaijani, Armenian, Georgian, Kazakh, Tajik, Uzbek, and Estonian.<sup>73</sup> Printed in large print runs, translations of social novels like Kazemi Morteza Moshfeq’s *Dreadful Tehran* (1921–24) and Iraj Pezeshkzad’s *My Uncle Napoleon* (1973) made the urban texture of Tehran and Iranian humor intelligible to Soviet readers beyond Orientalists or the intelligentsia.<sup>74</sup> Uzbek calligraphers, Iranian artists in exile, and Soviet translators combined Central Asian calligraphic traditions with graphics derived from Yugoslav children’s cinema to produce attractive translations of Soviet literature for

<sup>70</sup>Asozoda, *Dostoni zindagi*, vol. 3 (Dushanbe, 2008), 85.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>72</sup>Abolfazl Mohaqeqi, “Az Tariq-e Moskū Dar Masīr-e Jāddeh-ye Abrīshom,” *Beh Pish*, July 31, 2019, available at <https://bepish.org/node/2344>.

<sup>73</sup>Masoud Kouhestani-Nejad, “The Relations of Iran & the USSR,” in *Kāghaz-e Sorkh: Intisharat-e Idiyūlūzhīk Rāder Shodeh Az Shuravī / Red Paper: Ideological Publications Issued by the Soviet Union* (Tehran, 2020), 263 (English layout)/123 (Persian layout).

<sup>74</sup>Morteza Moshfeq Kazemi, *Tehrān-e Makhkūf* (Tehran, 1926); Iraj Pezeshkzad, *Dā’ī Jān Nāpol’ūn* (Tehran, 1973). For the Russian translations see Kazemi Mortaza Moshfek, *Strashnyi Tegeran* (Ashkhabad, 1960); and Iradzh Pezeshk-zod, *Diadiushka Napoleon* (Moscow, 1981).



Iranian children.<sup>75</sup> Afghan intellectuals combined readings of Tudeh Party texts with their understanding of Soviet history to build the DRA, itself modified again by Russian advisors, Tajik and Armenian translators, and Georgian garbage collectors. And as the 1980s saw setbacks to socialist parties, channels of influence were reversed, as Iranian socialists taught in Kabul's kindergartens and Tajik militias learned the art of state-building from Afghan officers. These attempts to export "Soviet," "Iranian," or "Afghan" culture or institutions, however, did not result in facsimiles but hybrids bearing the trace of intermediaries and influences beyond the Persian-speaking world.

Examining Soviet internationalism at the individual scale of Tajik interpreters like Asozoda and Iranian "political emigrants" like Mohaqeqi also sheds light on the role that subnational actors have played in the making of Soviet internationalism. Though Soviet nationalities policy and archival practice can obscure such actors' presence in the archive, historians can read official archives alongside ego-documents and community archives to explore how the USSR mobilized subnational groups as agents of foreign policy. For instance, while recent scholarship has explored the international dimensions of the Sino-Soviet Split, we know little about the Soviet engagement of Uyghur diasporas in the Kazakh SSR. At other moments, the Soviet Union sought to insulate subnational actors from international politics. During the Gulf War, Soviet officials worried about the impact of a "safe zone" for Iraqi Kurds on the hundreds of thousands of Soviet Kurds scattered between Kyrgyzstan and the southern Caucasus.<sup>76</sup> Attention to these experiences and the way they are processed in post-1991 memory could enrich discussions about Soviet nationalities policy and the intersections of post-Soviet and post-colonial memory.

Finally, engaging the voices of figures like Asozoda and Mohaqeqi remind us that socialist internationalism is a story of continuities and reinventions, not only caesurae. Asozoda used the Afghan manuscripts he collected in Kabul to write a dissertation on the development of genres in Dari prose writing and lay the base for a successful academic career in independent Tajikistan.<sup>77</sup> Many members of the PDPA fled into exile in Russia or Western Europe, but others were reincorporated into the post-2001 Afghan military alongside former *mujahidin*. Mohaqeqi moved back from Sweden in the late 1990s to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where he would use his familiarity with the region to work as a consultant for Iranian businesses in the region. And against the background of current talks about the future of Afghanistan, it is worth noting that the current Russian Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, is an Uzbek-Tatar native of Tashkent with experience in the Soviet embassies in Tehran and Kabul and conversant in Persian.<sup>78</sup> As these examples show, time spent in the Soviet networks as an interpreter, a military cadet, or a "political emigrant" is seldom a blank spot on one's resume, but rather a resource to be redeemed in

<sup>75</sup>Peyman Pourhosein, interview by Kianoosh Gharibpour, fall 2019, in *Kāghaz-e Sorkh*, 27–28 (English layout) / 356–57 (Persian layout); Mahsa Tehrani, interview by Jamal Mirsadeghi, in *Kāghaz-e Sorkh*, 43–44 (English layout) / 341–42 (Persian layout).

<sup>76</sup>O. V. Vostrukhovyi, "Kurdskaia problema: Mezhdunarodnye i vnutrennie aspekty," April 19, 1991, Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, f. 10026, op. 4, d. 2824, ll. 27–39.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>78</sup>John F. Burns, "An Old Afghanistan Hand Offers Lessons of the Past," *New York Times*, October 20, 2008, A11.

new networks. Seen through these new lenses, the locales and artifacts that populate the background of this piece—a sanatorium on a Tajik highway, a hotel courtyard in Kabul, a Slovak made-for-TV movie—appear less as ruins and more as way-stations between past and present.