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Elizabeth Clayton

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"Afghanistan and Soviet Central Asia:

One Region or Two?"

Elizabeth Clayton

## Afghanistan and Soviet Central Asia:

### One Region or Two?

The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan has brought out the important question in regional science of whether Soviet Central Asia (the southern republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tadzhikistan, and Kirghizia) is in the same "region" as is Afghanistan. Those who assert a regional unity between the two areas often imply that their similarities transcend the border between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan and weaken it. Countering this assertion is the view that the region is more heterogeneous than it appears at first glance and that the unity, particularly of religion, is more apparent than real.

Nowhere is the heterogeneity of the two areas more obvious than in the level of economic development, which differs considerably on each side of the national border. This paper examines these differences. Altogether, economic development includes the improvements both in the level of economic activity and in the quality of life. On both accounts, there are substantial differences. In 1978 per capita income, the average in Afghanistan was only \$100 per year, but in Soviet Central Asia it was \$1200 per year.<sup>1</sup> There are similar differences in the levels of industrialization. In 1975 (the latest year for which there are comparable data), the share of industry in Afghanistan's national income was 12 percent, while it was 38 percent in Uzbekistan, the largest of the Central Asian republics.<sup>2</sup> The statistics for these indicators are primitive, especially in Afghanistan, where one author calls them "'intelligent estimates,' i.e., wild guesses based on inadequate data!"<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, they show economies that are quite different in development.

One apparent similarity between the two areas is the dominant role of agriculture in the economy, but even this sector differs considerably

between the two. Its share of national income is greater in Afghanistan (about one-half) than in Soviet Central Asia (about one-third). The production methods differ, too. In Soviet Central Asia, agriculture is commercial, mechanized, and large scale. In contrast, the agricultural production of Afghanistan takes place on subsistence farms that lack capital equipment and market little of their product. Only one-half of production in Afghanistan is marketed; despite this low share, the marketed portion provides 80 percent of exports. The average landholding is less than half a hectare, the size of a private garden plot in Central Asia, and only two percent of landholders control 34 percent of the land. In 1975, the entire country had only 700 tractors, about 1/300th of the number held in Soviet Central Asia by about the same number of people.<sup>4</sup>

The goal of economic development includes not only the methods and gains of production but, an improved quality of life. One measure of the welfare of the population is the Physical Quality of Life (PQLI) index developed by Morris David Morris.<sup>5</sup> This index is composed of the equally weighted measures of infant mortality, adult longevity, and literacy. It ranges between zero (where the quality-of-life is very low) and 100 (where it is high). Although the correlation between a high income per capita and a high PQLI score is positive, it is by no means perfect, and material goods are not the only source of a high PQLI score, the quality of life may be improved by concentrating effort on bettering these important social indicators. On the Morris PQLI index, Afghanistan achieves a score of only 18, one of the lowest in the world, while the Soviet Union achieves more than 90, one of the highest. When the data for the Soviet Central Asian republics are separated from the rest of the Soviet Union, they are not strictly comparable to those that David used, but indicate that Central

Asian literacy and longevity are the same as the Soviet national average but in infant mortality, Soviet Central Asia is worse than its national average but better than Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

The indicators of economic development and quality of life relate closely to some demographic differences. The birth rate in Afghanistan is the second highest in the world, about 51 per thousand of population per year. Central Asian birth rates, while high, do not approach the Afghan level and are about 35 per thousand per year in Uzbekistan and 38 per thousand per year in Tadjikistan, with a downward time trend. Despite lower birth rates, the population growth is faster in Soviet Central Asia than in Afghanistan, about 2.8 percent per year in the Soviet area but only 2.0 percent per year in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup> (The data span the period 1975-8.) The difference, of course, arises from the exceedingly high death rate in Afghanistan, particularly among infants, as seen by its low PQLI score.

One consequence of the high birth rate in Afghanistan is the lower participation of women in the labor force. There the birth rate is high, life is primitive and the life expectancy of women is lower than that of men. (On David's PQLI scores, the ranks of men and women in Afghanistan are equal because the life expectancy and literacy of women are lower but the infant mortality of men is higher.<sup>8</sup>) In contrast, in Soviet Central Asia, the women outnumber the men in the population (although the gap was closing in 1970) and they participate actively in paid employment. They provide 30-40 percent of the labor services in white collar occupations and almost 50 percent of collective farm employment.<sup>9</sup> Although the Soviet Central Asian farm women work fewer days per year than men, they contribute an indispensable part of the difference between the two areas in economic growth.

The difference in economic development arises not only from people but from capital investment, particularly in arable land. The climate of both areas is arid and continental (with wide extremes of temperature) and land for cultivation is scarce. Nomadic herding is one appropriate use of such land and in 1978 about 14 percent of Afghanistan's population was in this classification.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, a nomadic life requires that the density of population is low. If the output of agriculture is to expand to provide more food or exports, it requires expensive investment in irrigation to overcome the intemperate climate and establish sedentary farming. Financing this investment differs between the two areas. In Afghanistan, investment has been financed primarily by foreign assistance, which often was undependable and sporadic.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, in Soviet Central Asia, the other republics of the union steadily financed investment and the southern tier retained more of its own tax receipts than the other republics to finance its own investments.

Capital investment for economic development includes not only physical equipment and land, but investment in people. In nutrition, the population of Soviet Central Asia are no longer nourished only by subsistence agriculture; in 1978, the average rural Central Asian purchased food at retail stores that was valued at \$215 (157 rubles). These food purchases alone exceeded the average income in Afghanistan (\$100 per year), and were accompanied by additional non-food purchases of \$267 (195 rubles).<sup>14</sup> In health, the services and facilities available to the population in Soviet Central Asia exceed those in Afghanistan. In literacy, both men and women are literate in Soviet Central Asia but only one percent of women and twelve percent of men in Afghanistan.<sup>15</sup>

Literacy contributes to economic development not only in better communication but in changing traditional attitudes and skills. The Soviet Central Asians share an ethnic heritage with Afghanistan where the social structure is rigid, patriarchal and religious. This structure retards economic development in that it rewards people less on their efforts than on their status. Decades ago (in 1927), the Soviet Union closed the clerical schools, sent non-native educators to Central Asia, and established a secular and technical social education structure.<sup>16</sup> One clear effect is the changed status of women in Soviet Central Asia. In turn, this new social structure has reduced the birth rate and infant mortality and contributed in other ways to economic development.

Despite the changes, the Soviet Central Asians and the Afghans do share groups who have the same ethnic identification. On an ethnic basis, the two countries share 20 million people.<sup>17</sup> In the Soviet Union, the ethnic groups are located almost wholly in the four southern border republics of Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Kirghizia, and Turkmenistan). Indeed, some of the Afghans are people who escaped from the Soviet Union when the Russians introduced the changes in social and educational systems. The largest shared ethnic group is the Uzbeks, almost 10 million in the Soviet Union and one million in Afghanistan. Almost as large a group are the Tadjiks, who number 3 million in the Soviet Union and 6 million in Afghanistan. However, the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan is the Pushtun, located on the southern border with Pakistan. This group is not found in the Soviet population and its ethnic heritage is shared with Pakistan.

These ethnic groups do not share a single language, or even a single language family. Although a shared language measures national unity only inadequately, its absence surely represents a source of divisiveness. In Afghanistan, the principal languages are Dari (Afghan Farsi) and Pashto, which is the official language. The source of both languages is the

Indo-European language family (in its Indo-Iranian branch), but the two are not mutually intelligible.<sup>18</sup> Various governments have tried to impose Pashto as a single official language, but have failed, in part because the traditional language of government has been Dari. In addition, the Afghans speak languages from other language families: Ural-Altaiic, Dravidian, some Semitic. The languages spoken in the Soviet Union on the southern border are predominantly from the Ural-Altic family (Uzbek, Kirghiz, the Turkic group). Only the Tadjik language is related to Pashto, through the Indo-European family. Further, most Central Asians' second language is Russian, rather than another Central Asian language.<sup>19</sup> The lack of success in imposing a common language, as in Afghanistan, continues to be an obstacle to any regional unity.

Another bond between the two areas is the Islamic religion. The majority of Afghans (80 percent) belong to the Hanafi rite of the Sunni sect; the remainder, to the Sh'ia sect.<sup>20</sup> The two sects differ in their beliefs about the political succession to Muslim leadership and in their codes of law. Among Soviet Central Asians, the majority continue to accept the cultural parts of the Islamic religion but have rejected the ritual and codes that are widely accepted in Afghanistan. One might expect that the Islamic bond would be strong in principle but strained in practice if the traditional and non-literate Afghans were to unite with their more modern and secular counterparts in the Soviet Union.

Politics is the most striking difference between these two areas. The centralized, stable, and authoritarian regime of the Soviet Union in Central Asia contrasts strongly with the anarchy that has been endemic in Afghan politics for decades. Even before the Soviet invasion, one scholar



listed four separate political struggles within Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

- (1) uncoordinated guerrillas who opposed any regime;
- (2) religious leaders who were conservative and opposed those who are moderate; their struggle is primarily over funds from friendly Arabs;
- (3) mujahidin (freedom-fighters) who seek regional autonomy from the central government in Kabul;
- (4) internal opponents who oppose each other within the Marxist camp, primarily the Khalq and Parcham parties.

To these internal struggles now is added the Soviet invasion, and it is unclear whether the Afghans can unite against the foreigner.

Nevertheless, the cost to the Russians of imposing order on this area is high. Already their casualties reportedly number 1000 dead and 6000-8000 wounded from a force of 80,000, and domination is not in sight. Refugees from Afghanistan number one million in Pakistan and 100,000-600,000 in Iran.<sup>22</sup> The unification of Afghanistan seems unlikely under any circumstances, including a Russian military domination. A scholar who has studied Afghanistan for years says: "The hawks will pick the bones of the Afghan nation until nothing is left, but many Russian soldiers will pay the price."<sup>23</sup>

One reason for focusing on the broadly-defined economic differences between Afghanistan and Soviet Central Asia is that the early reports in the Soviet Union of the invasion into Afghanistan asserted that the Russians had been "invited" for purposes of economic development. Accepting for a moment this argument, it is possible that the opposition in Afghanistan represents a rebuke to modernization as well as to the Russians. The

intellectual history of attitudes toward development and its political, social, and economic change has swung between optimism and pessimism. Tracing these attitudinal cycles, Samuel P. Huntington has shown that the Victorians were optimistic as they espoused evolution and an inevitable success. This was followed by the pessimism of the 1930s, as the disintegrative effects of industrialization and democratization were followed by a totalitarian response. After World War II, optimism returned with lively prospects for world wide economic development.<sup>24</sup> The political disputes internal to Afghanistan suggest a return to pessimism about economic development.

This is not to say that the Russian invasion is irrelevant or justified, but that it may have exacerbated an opposition to modernization that already was in place. This paper started with the suggestion of regional unity and homogeneity, but this includes a hidden belief that political unity is likely to follow, and this outcome seems impossible in the near future even by military domination. Some political instability inevitably accompanies economic development, especially when it is rapid and when it overrides local choices concerning investment and demographic policies. One response is to impose an authoritarian government, but this has failed.<sup>25</sup> Another is to reject economic development. A third prospect is to weld development to a traditional and conservative society. Afghanistan and its surrounding area are a microcosm of these social choices, quite apart from the Soviet invasion.

Footnotes and References

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4. Data from Kurian (Afghanistan) and Khan-Ghai.
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7. Kurian: p. 29; Khan-Ghai; p. 9
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10. Ester Boserup, Woman's Role in Economic Development, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1970.
11. Kurian, p. 29.
12. Dupree, pp. 630-34, pp. 644 ff; p. 661 outlines the history of development assistance in Afghanistan. Kurian and Dupree also sketch the disputes between Afghanistan and Iran (Helmand River) and the Soviet Union (Amu Darya).
13. James W. Gillula, "The Economic Interdependence of Soviet Republics," Soviet Economy in a Time of Change, Joint Economic Committee, Washington D.C. p. 627. The major donor republics probably were the Ukraine, Latvia, and Moldavia.
14. Narodnoe Khoziaistvo SSSR v 1978 g., Moscow, p. 436
15. Morris, p. 154.
16. William K. Medlin and William M. Cave, "Social Change and Education in Developing Areas: Uzbekistan" Comparative Education Review, 8(2), October 1964, 166-75 provides an overview of this period. I am indebted to Joel Glassman for this reference.

17. Soviet data: Itogi, Moscow, 1970, Vol. 4: pp. 267, 208, 291, 300.  
Afghanistan data: Kurian: p. 29-31.
18. Dupree: p. 70.
19. For example the 1970 census shows that Uzbeks were 26 percent of the population in Tadzhikistan but fewer than 1 percent of them knew the Tadzhik language. Similarly, Tadzhiks were 4 percent of Uzbekistan's population but less than 1/10th of 1 percent knew the Uzbek language. Although similar data for Afghanistan are not available, they probably would show less integration because of level of education is low and illiteracy is widespread.
20. Dupree, Chapter 8, provides an excellent reference on this point.
21. Dupree, p. 776-7.
22. Wall Street Journal, August 29, 1980, p. 1.
23. Dupree, p. 778.
24. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Change to Change: Modernization, Development, and Politics," Comparative Politics, April 1971, 283-322.
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