

## Comrades on Elephants

### Economic Anti-Imperialism, Orientalism, and Soviet Diplomacy in Afghanistan, 1921–23

SAMUEL J. HIRST

A 1923 cover of the magazine *Ogonek* displays two Afghans and a third man in Soviet military clothing assisting a Russian couple in broad-brimmed hats onto an elephant (fig. 1). The headline proclaims the scene anti-British and anti-imperialist, but the image could easily adorn a Victorian celebration of empire. The photograph is emblematic of the time Fedor Raskol'nikov and Larisa Reisner spent in Kabul: they urged Moscow to provide diplomatic and economic aid to the Afghan state while they themselves collected antique coins to take home with them when they left. Raskol'nikov and Reisner demonstrated a pronounced sense of cultural superiority during their stay in Kabul, and they seem almost to embody the paradox that has led scholars to refer to the Soviet Union as an “anti-imperialist ‘empire.’”<sup>1</sup> Yet Raskol'nikov, Reisner, and the editors of *Ogonek* evidently saw little incongruity in their performance. The magazine confidently drew readers' attention to the Soviet presence in a 19th-century site of imperial rivalry, to a landscape that evoked the Great Game. Sightseeing on elephants was an exotic but irrelevant side-show; the radicalism of the Soviet Union's approach to independent states in what was to become the Third World lay elsewhere. The Bolsheviks cared most about economics, and they were convinced that the imperative to consolidate political independence from and against a global capitalist system defined anti-imperialism.

Raskol'nikov and Reisner were part of the Bolshevik elite, and they promulgated its economic analysis even as many of their gestures evoked another

---

<sup>1</sup> For one use of this phrase, see the 2006 historiographical survey in this journal of the “imperial turn.” The authors' point about our association of Soviet anti-imperialism's revolutionary novelty with national identities—and not economics—still largely holds true (From the Editors, “The Imperial Turn,” *Kritika* 7, 4 [2006]: 705–12, here 710).

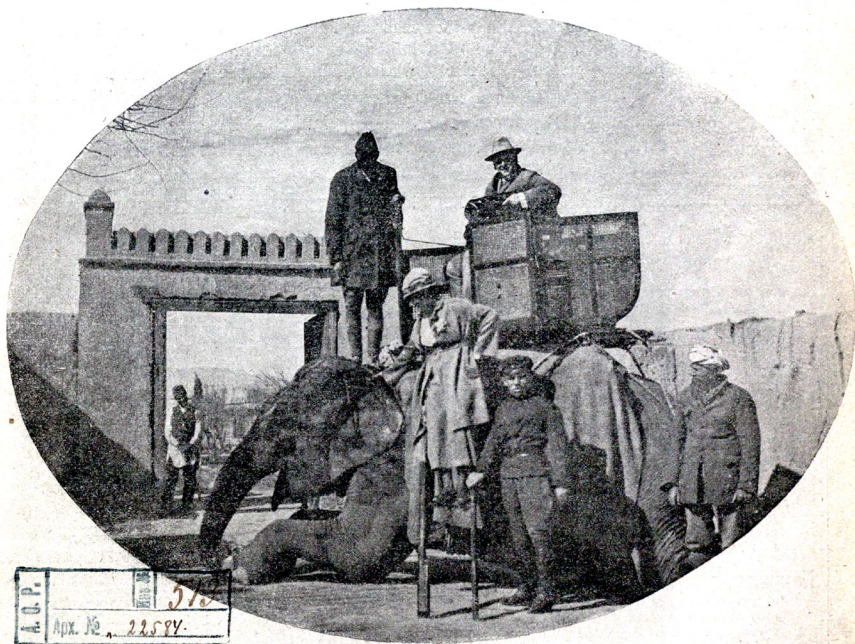
Цена 10 руб.

Издание „МОСПОЛИГРАФ“.

# Огонек

№ 11.

## Бельмо в глазу лорда Керзона.



Полномочный представитель Р. С. Ф. С. Р. в Афганистане Ф. Ф. Раскольников (сидит на слоне), отзыва которого потребовало английское министерство иностранных дел, посещает город и крепость Джелалабад, вблизи Кабула.

Спец. снимок корреспондента „Огонька“.

Figure 1. On 10 June 1923, *Ogonek* featured this photograph of Larisa Reisner and Fedor Raskol'nikov in Afghanistan and described the couple as “A Thorn in Lord Curzon’s Side.” Just a couple of months earlier, British Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon had demanded Raskol'nikov’s recall from Kabul on the grounds that the latter was engaged in anti-British activities.

Source: Rossiiskaia natsional'naia biblioteka, St. Petersburg. Reproduced with permission.

world and time. The moment of transition to a new order offers a revealing view of the often uneasy fit of revolutionary ideology and cultural bias. Early engagements with Afghanistan were part of a broader process in which the Soviet Union and its diplomats generated principles and practices that were to play out in Soviet relations with formerly colonial or semicolonial states for much of the 20th century. Between the summer of 1921 and the fall of 1923, Raskol'nikov and Reisner learned to practice anti-imperialist diplomacy on the ground and on the fly. Their Kabul sojourn began not long after they had led Soviet troops into northern Iran in support of the short-lived republic in Gilan, and they had little prior knowledge of this new posting.<sup>2</sup> In Afghanistan, they had to reconfigure their revolutionary dreams. Raskol'nikov and Reisner brought struggle from the battlegrounds of world revolution to negotiating tables with capitalist states and with states that, like Afghanistan, were nonsocialist but oppressed.

Afghanistan had just fought the British Empire for its independence, and the couple drew on a Bolshevik ideology in which Lenin had identified imperialism as a phase of capitalism characterized by competition among industrialized, imperialist states.<sup>3</sup> But Lenin's key work on imperialism addressed the intra-European conflict of World War I, not the struggle within empires of colonies and metropolises. Lenin's retrospective diagnosis of imperialism endured long beyond the Great War and came to shape economic policies that defended Soviet Russia's predominantly agricultural society against a predatory system. As a result, whether it was the protectionism manifested in the monopoly on foreign trade or the anxiety about sovereignty reflected in strict control of concessions to foreign companies, Soviet economic interactions with the West bore resemblance to those of contemporary nationalists in countries with little industry.<sup>4</sup> Under Lenin's tutelage, safeguarding economic independence rather than defeating reactionary armies became the battleground between socialism and capitalism.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Raskol'nikov's idealistic commitment to the Iranian revolution comes through strongly in the documents in M. A. Persits, *Persidskii front mirovoi revoliutsii: Dokumenty o sovetskom vtorzhenii v Gilian (1920–1921)* (Moscow: Kvadriga, 2009), esp. 51.

<sup>3</sup> V. I. Lenin, "Imperializm kak vysshiaia stadiia kapitalizma (Populiarnyi ocherk)," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1969), 27:299–426.

<sup>4</sup> Ivan T. Berend, *Decades of Crisis: Central and Eastern Europe before World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 234; Roman Szporluk, *Communism and Nationalism: Karl Marx versus Friedrich List* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), esp. 205–24.

<sup>5</sup> V. A. Shishkin, *Stanovlenie vneshnei politiki poslerevoliutsionnoi Rossii (1917–1930 gody) i kapitalisticheskii mir* (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2002), 26.

Events on the ground in Kabul reinforced Lenin's argument, for Raskol'nikov and Reisner saw post-World War I imperialists exporting capital instead of soldiers. The couple witnessed the arrival of German and Italian engineers, who had been invited by the Afghan amir himself. Aman Allah Khan, like many Bolsheviks, was convinced of the need for economic development. He sent delegations abroad to purchase heavy machinery and to persuade Berlin and Rome to help establish factories in his country.<sup>6</sup> Raskol'nikov and Reisner implored the Politburo to support his efforts just as the amir launched a campaign to persuade Afghans to buy clothing made of local textiles.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the Afghan government seemed to be following a Soviet-style domestic plan, albeit on a much smaller scale, of curtailing consumer imports to free up hard currency for the purchase of industrial equipment. Aman Allah's resources were limited, and he sought to exploit the competition among European powers—among which he included Soviet Russia. Soviet-Afghan cooperation in the interwar period was never a whole-hearted anti-imperialist union, but economic development provided a framework for interactions.

Diplomacy and economic policy are not fields that historians of the Soviet Union typically associate with anti-imperialism in the aftermath of the revolution. The Comintern operatives who worked with anticolonial movements to organize communist parties and military struggle seem more representative of Bolshevik politics than the diplomats of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. Since the Soviet Union broke up along national lines, historians have dwelt on the theme of domestic anti-imperialist nation building in the 1920s, but economic questions have not been a prominent part of this literature.<sup>8</sup> Scholars emphasize that Bolshevik nationality policies at home emerged alongside the construction of an integrated Soviet economy and hence were replete with tensions. The Bolshevik leadership considered economic equalization across the Soviet Union and heralded

<sup>6</sup> Francis Nicosia, "'Drang Nach Osten' Continued? Germany and Afghanistan during the Weimar Republic," *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, 2 (1997): 235–57, here 241; Luciano Monzali, *Un re afghano in esilio a Roma: Amanullah e l'Afghanistan nella politica estera italiana, 1919–1943* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2012), 57.

<sup>7</sup> National Archives, Kew, London, Foreign Office (FO) 402/2 N 2345/920/97 (Humphrys to Curzon, 10 February 1923).

<sup>8</sup> On the dearth of work on the economics of nationality policy, see Adeeb Khalid, "Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization: Early Soviet Central Asia in Comparative Perspective," *Slavic Review* 65, 2 (2006): 231–51, here 232. For signs that this is changing, see Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 158–61; and Beatrice Penati, "The Hunt for *Red Orient*: A Soviet Industrial *trest* between Moscow and Bukhara (1922–1929)," *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 2406 (2016).

some industrialization projects for their potential to create a proletariat on the periphery.<sup>9</sup> Economic independence, however, was out of the question, so Soviet nation building for the non-Russian nations was compensated with political and cultural consolations.<sup>10</sup> The subordination of national economies to all-union interests produced the contradictions that have led scholars to refer to the Soviet Union as an anti-imperialist empire.<sup>11</sup> Abroad, the tensions were different.

While Raskol'nikov's and Reisner's eventual support for Afghanistan's economic independence and industrial development was not particularly original, the way they arrived at their position reveals much about the formation and indeed the melding of attitudes and policies that long shaped Soviet relations with foreign states.<sup>12</sup> Later nationalists in the Third World sought economic aid from the Soviet Union and found attractive elements in a protectionist model of industrial development.<sup>13</sup> But they also bristled at a Soviet arrogance that reminded them of imperialists taken from a mold not of Lenin's making. Moscow and Kabul haggled over trade deals, but the clear economic agenda of anti-imperialist development held them together. Nevertheless, beyond Soviet borders the Bolsheviks felt little pressure to grant the cultural concessions they made at home.

Larisa Reisner seems the very emblem of the Soviet approach. She showed unmistakable condescension toward a country that she described as a "pastoral idyll in European dress." Even as she persuaded Moscow to devote its scant resources to Afghanistan, she worried that the smoke of Kabul's

<sup>9</sup> Terry Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 14; Matthew Payne, *Stalin's Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., Christian Teichmann, "Canals, Cotton, and the Limits of De-Colonization in Soviet Uzbekistan, 1924–1941," *Central Asian Survey* 26, 4 (2007): 499–519; Benjamin Loring, "'Colonizers with Party Cards': Soviet Internal Colonialism in Central Asia, 1917–1939," *Kritika* 15, 1 (2014): 77–102, esp. 78–79; and Sara Brinegar, "The Oil Deal: Nariman Narimanov and the Sovietization of Azerbaijan," *Slavic Review* 76, 2 (2017): 372–94, here 374.

<sup>11</sup> Two of the most cited works on Soviet nationality policies take Bolshevik anti-imperialism seriously but also bear the word "empire" in their titles: Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*; and Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> On the recurrence of these ideas about Afghanistan during the Cold War, see Timothy Nunan, *Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), esp. 63–64.

<sup>13</sup> For a related argument, albeit an asynchronous one in which the Soviet model emerges in the interwar period and postcolonial elites engage with it in the post–World War II period, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. 92.



first national factory would only superficially cover the country's potholes.<sup>14</sup> Yet her sense that economic development might not be an unalloyed good was born of more than just her Afghan experience. When she returned to Moscow, she was similarly worried. The New Economic Policy and the Soviet Union's own opening to trade with capitalists had created a Moscow in which she found "something very American."<sup>15</sup> Unlike Soviet diplomats after World War II, those of the 1920s had a stronger sense of the Soviet Union's own weaknesses, and hence a more personal appreciation of the overlap between its predicament and that of postcolonial states. Raskol'nikov's and Reisner's mission to Afghanistan points to the economic affinities between the Soviet Union and formerly colonial or semicolonial states that formed the basis of a new and ideological approach to international relations.

### Revolutionary Diplomacy and Afghanistan

Raskol'nikov and Reisner were posted to Kabul just when diminished prospects for world revolution forced the Soviet government to refashion the older tools of international engagement. Raskol'nikov became the formal head of the Soviet mission and took a more prominent role, but Reisner enabled much of his diplomatic success. Like many of her comrades in the postrevolutionary wave of Soviet foreign service appointments, she could be trusted in company. Reisner confided to Aleksandra Kollontai—another Bolshevik whose privileged upbringing qualified her for duties abroad—that the "un-Soviet manners" she had learned from her parents endeared her to Afghan royalty.<sup>16</sup> Once inside the Afghan palace, Reisner mocked her British counterparts with her French, her facial gestures, and the little Farsi that she could muster.<sup>17</sup> The couple suited the Politburo because they could move in diplomatic circles and because their revolutionary credentials were impeccable. Raskol'nikov went on to occupy a central place among the first generation of Bolshevik scholar-diplomats who looked to Marx and Lenin to shape their approach to a set of countries they unhesitatingly referred to as "the

<sup>14</sup> L. M. Reisner, *Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1980), 536 (Reisner to her parents, 12 July 1922).

<sup>15</sup> Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI) f. 562 (Personal collection of F. F. Raskol'nikov), op. 1, d. 3, l. 98 (Reisner to Raskol'nikov, 26 June 1923).

<sup>16</sup> Rossiiskaia natsional'naia biblioteka, Nauchnyi otdel rukopisei (RNB NOR) f. 245 (personal collection of L. M. Reisner), op. 5, d. 7, l. 1 (Reisner to A. M. Kollontai, 1922); on the transition to a postrevolutionary diplomatic cohort and on Kollontai's background, see Alistair Kocho-Williams, *Russian and Soviet Diplomacy, 1900–1939* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), chap. 3, esp. 102.

<sup>17</sup> Reisner, *Izbrannoe*, 523 (Reisner to her parents, 7 May 1922).

East.”<sup>18</sup> Although Raskol’nikov and Reisner frequently displayed a sense that the category had cultural meaning, they adhered to Soviet orthodoxy, which attributed the East’s cohesion to oppression by the imperialist West.<sup>19</sup> When Aman Allah showed a decreasing desire to openly confront the British, the couple slowly came to realize that the protection of independence alone could be a Soviet objective in a country like Afghanistan and in analogous states like Iran and Turkey.

After the excitement of revolution and war, neither Raskol’nikov nor Reisner enjoyed the routine of diplomatic life in Kabul.<sup>20</sup> Reisner was only 26 when she arrived in Afghanistan but had already managed both to live abroad and to enter fin-de-siècle St. Petersburg literary circles. Her father was a Russified Baltic German whose criticism of Russian autocracy and degree in law earned him a professorship at Petrograd University and a prominent place in the Bolshevik intellectual world; she enlisted in the Civil War of her own accord and acquired a reputation for daring at the front. In letters to her parents, she likened Afghanistan to quicksand from which she could not break free.<sup>21</sup> Raskol’nikov was three years her senior and from a background more typical for Bolsheviks. The son of a priest, he joined the Bolshevik Party at the age of 18 and was involved in its newspapers. He trained for naval service during World War I, and party credentials plus naval experience allowed him to rise quickly through the ranks to command the Soviet navy on the Caspian Sea. On that sea, he and Reisner were first drawn into an international revolutionary conflict that stretched beyond the borders of the former Russian Empire, into Iran. But Afghanistan was different. When Raskol’nikov begged Lev Trotskii to arrange his recall from Kabul, he claimed the Soviet embassy was like a monastery and that he lived a hermit’s life.<sup>22</sup> Revolution was part of Reisner’s and Raskol’nikov’s romance—they served together during the taking of Kazan as well as on the Caspian. In Petrograd in 1920–21, Raskol’nikov

<sup>18</sup> On this group, see Denis V. Volkov, *Russia’s Turn to Persia: Orientalism in Diplomacy and Intelligence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), chap. 5, esp. 199, reviewed in *Kritika* 21, 2 (2020): 434–41.

<sup>19</sup> Masha Kirasirova, “The ‘East’ as a Category of Bolshevik Ideology and Comintern Administration: The Arab Section of the Communist University of the Toilers of the East,” *Kritika* 18, 1 (2017): 7–34.

<sup>20</sup> Reisner and Raskol’nikov have both been the subject of previous research, but historians have largely focused on their roles in the revolutionary center rather than on Soviet Russia’s periphery. See, e.g., G. A. Przhiborovskaia, *Larisa Reisner* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2008); Cathy Porter, *Larissa Reisner* (London: Virago, 1988); and Norman E. Saul, “Fedor Raskolnikov, a ‘Secondary Bolshevik,’” *Russian Review* 32, 2 (1973): 131–42.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., RNB NOR f. 245, k. 7, d. 53, l. 2.

<sup>22</sup> N. A. Myshov, “‘Miatezhnaia cheta’ v Kabule: Pis’mo F. Raskol’nikova i L. Reisner L. Trotskomu (1922 g.),” *Otechestvennyi arkhiv*, no. 3 (2003): 74–86.

misplayed his cards in intraparty struggles, and Afghanistan was an escape, perhaps even a punishment.<sup>23</sup> Even more than he, Reisner yearned to be back in the revolutionary center, but both of them accepted that they had a role to play in Kabul.

The anticolonial wave crashing across postrevolutionary Eurasia ensured that the couple's mandate included more than bilateral diplomacy. The previous Soviet ambassador, Iakov Surits, had negotiated a treaty that Aman Allah's government had yet to ratify, and Raskol'nikov's first task was to convince the amir to accept an agreement that obligated Moscow to provide financial and military aid. Raskol'nikov's instructions from the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs praised the progressive elements of Aman Allah's reforms but warned the Soviet emissary not to become an open supporter of "enlightened absolutism," a term that encouraged him to think about Afghanistan in terms of Russia's own distant past.<sup>24</sup> The Comintern forbade him to spread communism within Afghanistan but ordered him to assist Indian revolutionaries.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, Moscow's early interest in Afghanistan was predicated on the hope that Aman Allah would fight the British indefinitely or at least allow the Bolsheviks passage to support anti-British activities among the tribes on the Indo-Afghan border.<sup>26</sup> In the treaty Surits negotiated, Soviet Russia obtained the right to open consulates in Afghanistan's south, right on the edge of British India. Raskol'nikov arranged the treaty's ratification shortly after his arrival, but conflicts on their mutual border subsequently undermined Soviet-Afghan relations. For much of 1922, the Soviet government refused to dispatch the promised aid because of reports that Afghan elites were supporting the anti-Soviet resistance led by the former Ottoman officer Enver Pasha in Bukhara.<sup>27</sup> Gradually, Raskol'nikov and Reisner came to fight for an interstate Soviet-Afghan relationship against alternative visions in which Afghanistan was merely a key to India or a supporter of anti-Soviet forces.

The Soviet fear of conservative reaction and pan-Islamism is how Afghanistan usually enters accounts of Soviet history.<sup>28</sup> From a vantage point

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 74–86.

<sup>24</sup> *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1960), 4:165 (Chicherin to Raskol'nikov, 3 June 1921).

<sup>25</sup> See Iu. N. Tikhonov, *Afganskaia voina Stalina: Bitva za Tsentral'nuu Aziuu* (Moscow: Iauza, 2008), chap. 11.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., chap. 6.

<sup>27</sup> S. B. Panin, *Sovetskaia Rossiia i Afganistan, 1919–1929* (Irkutsk: Irkutskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii universitet, 1998), chap. 5.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas Northrop, *Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 39–40, 136, 168; Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 44–48;



in Tashkent, and certainly from any military installation along the Soviet-Afghan border, Kabul was as much Soviet enemy as ally.<sup>29</sup> The historian Marianne Kamp has shown that, even as the Afghan government embarked on an unveiling campaign with strong parallels to the Soviet *hujum*, the newspaper *Qizil O'zbekiston* "presented Afghanistan not as a model of successful modernization, but as a channel for the British military."<sup>30</sup> *Qizil O'zbekiston* was typical of many Soviet observers in the 1920s, for whom Afghan connections to anti-Bolshevik resistance within Soviet borders placed Afghanistan in the camp of pan-Islamism, which was, by Bolshevik definition, reactionary.<sup>31</sup> Evidence of border conflict has contributed to a narrative in which scholars emphasize the cynical nature of Moscow's engagement with Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup> When historians have considered the connections between Soviet and Afghan interwar politics, it has largely been from a comparative perspective and not in terms of how Soviet actors engaged with events in Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup>

With a little imagination, Raskol'nikov and Reisner might have seen anti-imperialism in the nation building unfolding around them in Kabul. Afghan rulers before Aman Allah had experimented with social and political reform, but the young king sought to carry wartime momentum into a radical program of domestic transformation. He pursued a broad array of military, legal, educational, and economic changes that had a strong if indirect Russian connection. The amir had studied at the Ottoman-inspired Harbiye Academy in Kabul and drew heavily on Turkish models.<sup>34</sup> His court was divided between a radical, pro-Turkish faction that pushed state building and moderate and

---

Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 67; Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*, 146.

<sup>29</sup> On the porous border, see Charles Shaw, "Friendship under Lock and Key: The Soviet Central Asian Border, 1918–1934," *Central Asian Survey* 30, 3–4 (2011): 331–48.

<sup>30</sup> Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 180–81.

<sup>31</sup> Kamoluddin Abullaev challenges pan-Islamist readings of Aman Allah's border politics and argues that this too was a form of state building ("Emir Amanulla i Sovetskaia Sredniaia Aziia," in *Afganistan i bezopasnost' Tsentral'noi Azii*, ed. Aleksandr Kniazev [Bishkek: Ilim, 2005], 2:148). Raskol'nikov reported Afghan ties to anti-Soviet resistance in terms of pan-Islamism, even as he dismissed their significance (RGASPI f. 159 [personal collection of G. V. Chicherin], op. 2, d. 49, l. 92 [Raskol'nikov to Chicherin, 5 April 1922]).

<sup>32</sup> M. S. Noorzoy, "Long-Term Economic Relations between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union: An Interpretive Study," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, 2 (1985): 151–73, here 156.

<sup>33</sup> Adrienne Edgar, "The Soviet 'Emancipation' of Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Perspective," *Slavic Review* 65, 2 (2006): 252–72, esp. 263.

<sup>34</sup> Faiz Ahmed, *Afghanistan Rising: Islamic Law and Statecraft between the Ottoman and British Empires* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), chaps. 4 and 5.

conservative groups that sought to maintain ties with British India.<sup>35</sup> Many of the Turkish advisers present in Kabul had come through Soviet Russia.<sup>36</sup> The first Turkish-Afghan diplomatic treaty was signed in Moscow on the day after the Soviet-Afghan Treaty. Like the Bolsheviks, the Turkish nationalist government sent aid to the Afghan state, albeit in the less expensive form of military and educational instructors.<sup>37</sup> The British embassy worried about this Soviet-Turkish-Afghan triangle and reported that Soviet support for Turkey's War of Independence had dramatically improved Soviet-Afghan relations.<sup>38</sup> For much of the time that Raskol'nikov and Reisner were in Afghanistan, Turkey was fighting an anti-imperialist war with Soviet aid, and Turkish advisers' prominent role at Aman Allah's court pointed to the connections between anti-imperialist revolutionary war and post-independence nation building.

Raskol'nikov's and Reisner's relations with the most prominent Turk in Kabul, Cemal Pasha, illustrate their initial focus—and Cemal's as well—on world revolution. Cemal was a member of the triumvirate that had governed the Ottoman Empire during World War I and had fled Istanbul on the eve of Allied occupation. Even after Aman Allah declared war against the British Empire, the Politburo remained hesitant to support Afghanistan. Cemal was a safe conduit for aid because he appeared driven by true anti-British fervor rather than what Moscow suspected were Aman Allah's local dynastic and religious ambitions.<sup>39</sup> Raskol'nikov highlighted Cemal's value as a non-national actor and his own disregard for the mundane work of legal reform when he compared Cemal positively with Osman Bedri Bey, the former Ottoman mayor of Aleppo. Bedri had "joined the constitutional commission and turned into a genuine Afghan, concerned only with his career."<sup>40</sup> Cemal, when he returned from Kabul to Moscow after the ratification of the Afghan-Soviet Treaty, convinced Stalin that additional gold would be well-spent in Afghanistan, but Stalin's report to the Politburo tellingly placed the conversation in the context of revolution in India.<sup>41</sup> Cemal, in his letters to Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk), was equally frank that Afghan affairs were only

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 172–73.

<sup>36</sup> Cemal Pasha, Abdurrahman Peşaveri, and Osman Bedri all traveled through Soviet Russia on their way to Afghanistan (ibid., 176; *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*, 4:414 [Raskol'nikov to Mahmud Tarzi, 12 October 1921]).

<sup>37</sup> Bilâl N. Şimşir, *Atatürk ve Afganistan* (Ankara: ASAM, 2002), 61.

<sup>38</sup> FO 402/1 N 1450/59/97; FO 402/1 N 8664/59/97.

<sup>39</sup> RGASPI f. 5 (Lenin's secretariat), op. 2, d. 208, l. 7 (Karakhan to TsK, 26 January 1921).

<sup>40</sup> RGASPI f. 159, op. 2, d. 49, l. 90 (Raskol'nikov to Chicherin, 5 April 1922). On Bedri's role in Afghanistan's constitution, see Ahmed, *Afghanistan Rising*, 223–4.

<sup>41</sup> RGASPI f. 558 (I. V. Stalin's personal *fond*), op. 2, d. 21, ll. 1–2 (Stalin to Trotskii, 2 November 1921).

of secondary interest to him. His intention, he declared, was to tell Aman Allah as a pretext that he wanted to discuss the danger posed “to Islam and to the Western Turks,” but that his “real purpose” was to establish contact with Indian revolutionaries.<sup>42</sup> Cemal’s letters to Mustafa Kemal further suggest that his Indian goals were not a product of abstract anti-British rage but of a calculation of Anatolia’s best interests—his task, he claimed, was “to create an Indian headache for the English who have created a Greek headache for us.”<sup>43</sup> For the Bolsheviks, Cemal was initially useful because he could be trusted to draw Afghanistan into the revolutionary anti-imperialism that sought to subvert the British Empire.

Cemal was more statesman than revolutionary and achieved better results orchestrating Soviet-Afghan rapprochement than revolution in India; his efforts helped Raskol’nikov think about Afghanistan in national terms. The former Ottoman leader claimed in a letter to Mustafa Kemal that he was personally responsible for the Soviet-Afghan Treaty of 1921 and he did not exaggerate. A number of Bolsheviks—in Kabul, Tashkent, and Moscow—agreed that Cemal provided the impetus for the treaty.<sup>44</sup> Upon arrival in Kabul, Raskol’nikov, along with Surits and Cemal, met with Aman Allah to discuss ratification. The amir pushed for new concessions that would turn an anti-British coalition into an interstate agreement. He challenged Moscow’s desire to carry out propaganda and requested that Soviet Russia refrain from opening consulates on the Indian border. He also asked for a trade agreement. Raskol’nikov had been instructed to get the treaty signed at all costs, and he agreed to make what he called “concessions” in his own name, without consulting Moscow. He offered no explanation of their significance other than that they were necessary to guarantee ratification.<sup>45</sup> Aman Allah was already thinking about using the relationship with Soviet Russia to further his country’s economic development, but it would take another year for Raskol’nikov to come to this position.

Raskol’nikov did see the more immediate ramifications of transition from world revolution to anti-imperialist diplomacy. Just two weeks after the treaty’s ratification, he decided that Cemal’s success facilitating Soviet-Afghan diplomatic relations meant that the Turk’s broader revolutionary goals were now a threat. Raskol’nikov requested that Moscow recall Cemal

<sup>42</sup> Published in Hülya Baykal, “Millî Mücadele Yıllarında Mustafa Kemal Paşa ile Cemal Paşa Arasında Yazışmalar,” *Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Dergisi* V, 14 (1989): 379–439, here 384.

<sup>43</sup> In *ibid.*, 409.

<sup>44</sup> In *ibid.*, 409; RGASPI f. 159, op. 2, d. 49, l. 80 (Surits to Chicherin, 26 December 1921); RGASPI f. 670, op. 1, d. 52, l. 24 (Sokol’nikov to Karakhan, 15 October 1920); RGASPI f. 159, op. 2, d. 49, l. 3 (Chicherin to Trotskii, 14 October 1921).

<sup>45</sup> RGASPI f. 159, op. 2, d. 49, ll. 51–63 (Raskol’nikov to Chicherin, 25 August 1921).

because the latter now posed a risk with his desire to march on British India.<sup>46</sup> Raskol'nikov also suppressed his own militant leanings. He assured Moscow that he would not meet personally with Indian revolutionaries but would use three or four intermediaries.<sup>47</sup> Kabul at this time was a hub of transnational revolutionary and reformist networks, and given Raskol'nikov's background and his boredom, it must have taken great restraint to confine himself to the Soviet embassy.<sup>48</sup>

Toward the end of 1921, with Cemal gone, Raskol'nikov sought to develop his own relationship with Aman Allah but still showed little interest in Afghan reforms. He stressed to Moscow that he and the Afghan leader did not discuss the "sociopolitical situation in Afghanistan" and confined their conversations to questions of foreign policy. Raskol'nikov found the Afghans' independence frustrating, for his attempts to cultivate an anti-British policy floundered against the Afghans' "national pride." He wished that Afghanistan were more like Iran, as he believed that the Iranians had "grown used to being a blind tool in the hands of this or that power." The two powers to which Raskol'nikov alluded were the Russian and British Empires, and his frame of reference is revealing. In this early understanding of diplomatic confrontation with Britain, he was thinking of geopolitics in bipolar terms, with Afghanistan either for or against an international coalition against imperialism. He was adapting to diplomatic life but thinking in a customary model that did not yet foresee Lenin's idea of isolation from the imperialist system. The amir engaged with Moscow, he argued, as insurance against events in an India that was "pregnant with revolution."<sup>49</sup> Raskol'nikov's own predilections came through here; it was a way of thinking that encouraged him to view Kabul as either Moscow's or London's ally.

### Economic Anti-Imperialism

As Raskol'nikov and Reisner came to think about economics, their anti-imperialism transformed into a commitment to Afghanistan's independence in and of itself. Their dismissal of Aman Allah's reforms deprived them of the language of nation building, and they spoke more frequently of what they did

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., I. 68 (Raskol'nikov to Chicherin, 10 September 1921). Cemal left of his own volition and with every intention of returning to Afghanistan with more supplies and ammunition, but he was assassinated in Tbilisi.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., II. 69–70.

<sup>48</sup> See Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*, 105; Carolien Stolte, "'Enough of the Great Napoleons!' Raja Mahendra Pratap's Pan-Asian Projects (1929–1939)," *Modern Asian Studies* 46, 2 (2012): 403–23; and Nile Green, "The Trans-Border Traffic of Afghan Modernism: Afghanistan and the Indian 'Urdusphere,'" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, 3 (2011): 479–508.

<sup>49</sup> RGASPI f. 159, op. 2, d. 49, ll. 76–77 (Raskol'nikov to Chicherin, 26 November 1921).

not want than of what they did. They feared most that the Afghans would succumb to the “influence,” “hegemony,” or “subjugation” of the British or imperialism in general. Strikingly, they voiced no hope that Afghanistan would be ready for socialism even in a distant future. Instead, they advocated economic aid intended to strengthen the country’s autonomy within what they saw as a cutthroat imperialist system.

Raskol’nikov and Reisner began to pay more attention to Afghan politics as they assimilated at the court and in diplomatic society. The first half of 1922 had been particularly dull because fighting in Bukhara soured Soviet-Afghan relations—he spent his time writing his recollections of the October Revolution and she spent hers reading Marx.<sup>50</sup> By mid-summer, they felt they were making a breakthrough. Enver was killed in early August, and Kabul had lost hope in him even earlier. Meanwhile, the Russian couple tailored their revolutionary lives in diplomatic dress. The amir was just a few months younger than Raskol’nikov, and their families got on well. Raskol’nikov reported to Trotskii that Aman Allah had used his hands to gouge out his own uncle’s eyes, but this indulgence of unsubstantiated rumors did not prevent Reisner regularly playing tennis with the amir.<sup>51</sup> After she rode horseback through Paghman with the amir’s Ottoman-born wife, Reisner wrote to her parents with a clear sense of triumph.<sup>52</sup> She and Raskol’nikov benefited from the arrival of a new ambassador from Ankara, Fahreddin (Türkkan). Fahri Pasha, as he was more commonly known, was a former Ottoman military officer who had achieved renown during the defense of Medina against the British in World War I. He refused to interact with London’s ambassador, visited Raskol’nikov to say that they must collaborate, and created a strong anti-British element in Kabul’s diplomatic life.<sup>53</sup> Reisner, with her un-Soviet manners and anti-British proclivities, helped host a reception that Fahri organized at the Turkish embassy in honor of Ankara’s victory in the War of Independence.<sup>54</sup> By the time they left Kabul, Raskol’nikov was the dean of the diplomatic corps and delivered the honorary foreigner’s remarks next to Aman Allah at the national independence celebrations in 1923.<sup>55</sup> This diplomatic success was a source of amusement for the couple, and she teasingly referred to him in French as *doyen* after they parted. More significantly, access

<sup>50</sup> Reisner, *Izbrannoe*, 529 (Reisner to her parents, 1–2 July 1922); Myshov, “Miatezhnaia cheta,” Letter no. 1 (Raskol’nikov to Trotskii, 5 April 1922).

<sup>51</sup> Reisner, *Izbrannoe*, 529; Myshov, “Miatezhnaia cheta.”

<sup>52</sup> Reisner, *Izbrannoe*, 541 (Reisner to her parents, 5 September 1922).

<sup>53</sup> RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2179, l. 138 (Raskol’nikov to Karakhan, September 1922).

<sup>54</sup> Reisner, *Izbrannoe*, 543 (Reisner to her parents, 19 September 1922); see also RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2179, l. 159 (Raskol’nikov to Karakhan, 18 October 1922).

<sup>55</sup> FO 402/2 N 3031/22/97 (Humphrys to Curzon, 10 March 1923).

to high society allowed Raskol'nikov and Reisner to hope that they could play a more prominent role in Afghanistan's domestic politics.<sup>56</sup>

Increasing European competition for shares of postindependence Afghanistan's economy commanded the Soviet compound's attention in the spring and summer of 1922. Wedged between Soviet Russia and British India, Aman Allah reached out to countries he thought would be less readily able to turn economic clout into political influence: France, Italy, and Germany.<sup>57</sup> German engineers were first to arrive to participate in the amir's construction projects. Raskol'nikov asked Moscow, in light of Soviet Russia's limited resources, to consider the use of "German exotic capital." This strange phrase reflected his lack of familiarity with what he was seeing, but his recommendations demonstrated a vision not unlike the amir's own. He hoped the restrictions of the Versailles Treaty would deprive Germany of international political power, and he suggested that German investment be channeled through Moscow to develop infrastructure in northern Afghanistan.<sup>58</sup> Raskol'nikov was responding not only to events in Kabul but also to a broader Soviet-German attempt to cooperate against British economic hegemony in Eurasia. Beginning in May 1921, Soviet, German, and Iranian diplomats had sought to facilitate Soviet-German economic cooperation in northern Iran.<sup>59</sup> Soviet diplomats in Ankara, like Raskol'nikov in Kabul, sought to apply this model to Turkey and did in fact help arrange German financing from the Garantie- und Kreditbank für den Osten for Soviet-Turkish trade.<sup>60</sup> Raskol'nikov's reports were the basis for a Commissariat of Foreign Affairs report that approved economic cooperation with Germany in Afghanistan, provided it could be ascertained that Germany's interests were at odds with those of Great Britain.<sup>61</sup> Raskol'nikov thus found ideological endorsement of his reading of events in Afghanistan.

That same commissariat report placed no qualifications on its recommendation to pursue economic cooperation with Italy and reflected Raskol'nikov's conviction that Moscow could exploit competition between Italy and Great

<sup>56</sup> RGASPI f. 562, op. 1, d. 3, l. 92 (Reisner to Raskol'nikov, undated).

<sup>57</sup> FO 402/1 N8864/59/97 (Humphrys to Curzon, 17 August 1922).

<sup>58</sup> RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2179, l. 112 (Raskol'nikov to Karakhan, 26 April 1922).

<sup>59</sup> Jennifer Jenkins, "Iran in the New Nazi Order, 1933–1941," *Iranian Studies* 49, 5 (2016): 727–51, here 731–33.

<sup>60</sup> Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki (RGAE) f. 413, op. 2, d. 842, l. 27 (Aralov to Lezhava, 25 February 1922); RGAE f. 3514, op. 1, d. 2, ll. 11–19 (Russotiurk report to shareholders, April 1925).

<sup>61</sup> RGASPI f. 159, op. 2, d. 49, l. 32 (Chicherin to Stalin, 31 December 1923). In the long run, the Soviet Union worried that German engineers helped London more than they did Moscow (Nicosia, "'Drang Nach Osten' Continued?," 245–46).



Britain to Afghanistan's advantage. Reisner helped, for she had taken to riding with the Italian ambassador and his wife by the time Raskol'nikov heard that the amir was going to offer a mining concession to Italy.<sup>62</sup> Gino Scarpa, who led an Italian expedition on a tour of northern Afghanistan, had been consul in Calcutta, and there he had developed relationships with Indian nationalists.<sup>63</sup> Raskol'nikov and Reisner were right to see the Italians as a strategic partner against British imperialism.<sup>64</sup> Later in the 1920s, top Soviet diplomats continued to hope Italians would assist against Great Britain, this time in the Red Sea but again in coordination with Raskol'nikov's Kabul allies, the Turks.<sup>65</sup> In 1922, the Italians had Raskol'nikov thinking in terms of economic development because, at Aman Allah's request, they were considering investments in mining and infrastructure. Raskol'nikov told Reisner that he had a "heart-to-heart" talk with the Italian representative, Gaetano Paternó di Manchi di Bilici, just before the latter's departure, and he reported that they had agreed Paternó would work in Rome to convince his government to recognize the Soviet Union because of shared interests in the East.<sup>66</sup> As it turned out, Paternó was posted immediately to Moscow, where he did contribute to Italy's official recognition of the Soviet Union a few months later.<sup>67</sup> Raskol'nikov's and Reisner's intimacy with Italian representatives impressed upon them that Afghanistan was becoming a site of inter-European economic competition.

Even when Raskol'nikov and Reisner came to see Afghanistan's quest for economic development as a continuation of the military struggle against reactionary forces, they avoided some of the more predictable Marxist terms. Their writings contain remarkably little class analysis. The purpose of industrial development was to lessen Afghanistan's dependence on Britain, not to create a proletariat or end feudalism.<sup>68</sup> They demonstrated the same faith in the reality of the Afghan nation and its rights that characterized Bolshevik

<sup>62</sup> Reisner, *Izbrannoe*, 528 (Reisner to her parents, June 1922); RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2179, l. 151 (Raskol'nikov to Chicherin, 18 September 1922).

<sup>63</sup> Mihir Bose, *The Lost Hero: A Biography of Subhas Bose* (Noida: Wide Canvas, 2014), 154.

<sup>64</sup> Massimiliano Fiore, *Anglo-Italian Relations in the Middle East, 1922–1940* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010).

<sup>65</sup> RGAE f. 5240, op. 18, d. 387, ll. 50–54 (Karakhan to the People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade [NKVT], March 1928). I am grateful to Aleksandr Kondrashev for sharing his research.

<sup>66</sup> Fedor Raskol'nikov, *O vremeni i o sebe: Vospominaniia, pis'ma, dokumenty*, ed. I. P. Kossakovskii (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1989), 444 (Raskol'nikov to Reisner, 28 July 1923).

<sup>67</sup> G. N. Sevost'ianov, *Moskva-Rim: Politika i diplomatiia Kremliia, 1920–1939. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: Nauka, 2003), 123–27.

<sup>68</sup> Raskol'nikov learned this language later and employed it in a preface he wrote for his ex-wife's brother's book on Afghanistan (I. M. Reisner, *Afghanistan* [Moscow: Krest'ianskaia gazeta, 1929], v–viii).

approaches to the peoples of the former Russian Empire.<sup>69</sup> But even though they were just across the border from Soviet Central Asia, the ideas that provided the basis for nation-building policies there did not help them understand what they confronted in Afghanistan.

Instead, Raskol'nikov and Reisner found guides in Moscow's attempts to maintain the independence of Soviet Russia itself. Over the course of the year before the couple departed for Afghanistan, the topic of commercial concessions had dominated debates within the Bolshevik Party.<sup>70</sup> Concessions were symbolically important, for the presence of foreign companies with capitalist values on Soviet territory entailed a sacrifice of sovereignty. Speaking about concessions in 1920, Lenin referred to foreign intervention during the Civil War and argued that while military conflict had ended, "now we are moving toward economic war."<sup>71</sup> Lenin did not argue for autarky—he was, after all, an advocate of concessions—but he argued that the nature of capitalism in its imperialist phase forced nonimperialist states to defend themselves.

The connections between Soviet Russia's economics and those of formerly colonial or semicolonial states were readily apparent. In his work on concessions and monetary policy, the historian Iurii Goland has shown that the Bolshevik elite repeatedly voiced fears that Soviet Russia could be turned into a colony of the industrialized West.<sup>72</sup> The prospect was more than hyperbole, as was demonstrated in the aftermath of the 1922 Genoa Conference that focused on Western recognition of Soviet Russia and the establishment of economic exchange. A proposal at the follow-up meeting in The Hague foresaw the administration of Soviet state revenue by an international commission with explicit reference to the precedent set by the European Public Debt Administration, which had taken control of the Ottoman Empire's finances in 1881. The Soviet representative, Maksim Litvinov, responded that Russia had fought for five years to avoid Turkey's fate.<sup>73</sup> Georgii Chicherin, head of the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, translated the Soviet-colonial convergence into a programmatic declaration of

<sup>69</sup> Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, 2 (1994): 414–52.

<sup>70</sup> See A. G. Dongarov, *Inostrannyi kapital v Rossii i SSSR* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1990), esp. 45–47.

<sup>71</sup> Ivan Berend cites similar words from Mustafa Kemal Pasha as part of an argument about the similarities between Soviet economic policy and economic nationalism in Turkey (*Decades of Crisis*, 234; V. I. Lenin, "Sobranie aktiva Moskovskoi organizatsii RKP[b] 6 dekabria 1920 g.," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 42:55–83, here 74–75).

<sup>72</sup> Iu. M. Goland, *Diskussii ob ekonomicheskoi politike v gody denezhnoi reformy, 1921–1924* (Moscow: Ekonomika, 2006), 181–98.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

Soviet diplomacy in the first issue of the commissariat's journal. He built on Lenin's analysis of imperialism and argued that the essence of world politics had become a struggle between two groups—he excluded the Soviet Union—the “colonial and metropolitan countries.” Chicherin wrote in the context of the Lausanne Conference and Ankara's negotiations for Western recognition, and hence his focus was on Turkey, but he also mentioned Iran and could easily have included Afghanistan. In these countries, he claimed, the imperialists had forsaken violence and adopted the “methods of peaceful and gradual penetration.” In response, Chicherin promised the Soviet Union would assist Eastern countries in their attempts to establish industrial production of their own, and he insisted that Moscow supported Eastern states’ “independent development in the broadest possible sense.”<sup>74</sup> Chicherin's vision clearly identified three categories of states, with anti-imperialism uniting the Soviet Union and formerly colonial countries.

Chicherin's statement came on the eve of Raskol'nikov's departure from Afghanistan, but it was a crystallization of ideas already present in Bolshevik circles. Raskol'nikov's predecessor, Surits, thought through the transition from military to economic anti-imperialism early on. Surits had arrived in Kabul in 1919 but ceded his status as senior Soviet representative to Raskol'nikov upon the latter's arrival. The two agreed on much, but in December 1921 Surits sent a dissenting opinion to Moscow. Surits insisted that Afghanistan's foreign policy was no longer an issue, that Aman Allah had turned his focus inward and war with anyone was no longer a possibility. In other words, he took issue with Raskol'nikov's early position, which predicted that Aman Allah would ally with either the British or the Soviets. But he warned that Britain had embarked on a new quest for economic domination. “This is the path of concessions,” Surits argued, referring to the topic that generated such anxiety in Moscow at that moment, “the path of the infiltration of the economic organism and all aspects of economic life, and then the exertion of political influence.”<sup>75</sup> Surits acknowledged the Bolsheviks' limited economic capabilities but urged confidence. As British politics moved into an “inevitable ‘colonizing’ phase,” the Bolsheviks' task was to offer unwavering diplomatic support for Afghanistan and whatever economic assistance they could. Surits put the word “colonizing” in quotation marks—this was a reference to gradual economic domination, not military conquest—and emphasized that the Bolsheviks' goals were no longer to win Afghanistan as an ally against the

<sup>74</sup> G. V. Chicherin, “Vmesto predisloviia,” *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, no. 1 (1923): 3–8.

<sup>75</sup> RGASPI f. 159, op. 2, d. 49, l. 81 (Surits to Chicherin, 26 December 1921).

British but to help protect the country's economic independence.<sup>76</sup> Cemal Pasha too, despite Raskol'nikov's belief that the Turkish officer dreamed only of marching on India, had advocated an economic approach toward the end of his stay in Kabul. In one of his last letters to Aman Allah, Cemal urged the amir to establish a national bank that could fund the establishment of a railroad system in the north and the exploitation of Afghanistan's national resources.<sup>77</sup>

Raskol'nikov finally put the quest for economic independence in his own words in October 1922. Kabul had been quieter than he had ever seen it, and Afghan politics, after "swinging" back and forth between Russia and Britain, had entered a "calmer and more stable phase." He warned that calm did not mean safety and summarized his observations of Italian economic activity over the past several months. He concluded that he was observing the same clash of interests that was visible in Italian-British positions on Turkey. He described Britain's position as "economic and communications hegemony," and he foresaw a "serious economic war." Although he hoped the Italians could be useful in the short run, he acknowledged that they too sought the economic domination of Afghanistan. Ultimately, he argued, Moscow had no choice but to dispatch the aid that had been promised in the Soviet-Afghan Treaty of 1921 and delayed since the Afghans' support for Enver's uprising in Bukhara.<sup>78</sup>

Even as Raskol'nikov felt his way toward economic anti-imperialism, Soviet policy continued to be shaped by Civil War insecurity and an older disdain for non-European partners. At the end of Raskol'nikov's first report, in which he had explained the additional concessions to the amir, Stalin had written a dismissive four-word response—"Terrible swindlers, these Afghans."<sup>79</sup> After Enver's death, the Politburo still hesitated to dispatch the annual subsidy guaranteed in the 1921 Soviet-Afghan Treaty, let alone commit additional funds.<sup>80</sup> Raskol'nikov's pleas became increasingly frantic, but the Politburo continued to think in terms of Central Asian security.<sup>81</sup> On 1 March 1923, the Politburo finally decided that Raskol'nikov should organize

<sup>76</sup> On the evolution of the word (*kolonizatsionnyi*) that Surits used, see Alberto Masoero, "Territorial Colonization in Late Imperial Russia: Stages in the Development of a Concept," *Kritika* 14, 1 (2013): 59–91.

<sup>77</sup> Halil Bal, "Afganistan-Türkiye İlişkilerin Başlıca Yönleri," in *Afganistan Üzerine Araştırmalar*, ed. Ali Ahmetbeyoğlu (Istanbul: TATAV, 2002), 243–76, here 255.

<sup>78</sup> RGASPI f. 5 op. 1, d. 2129, ll. 45–50 (Raskol'nikov to Chicherin, 10 October 1922).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., d. 2128, l. 12 (Raskol'nikov to Lenin, 25 August 1921).

<sup>80</sup> RGASPI f. 159, op. 2, d. 49, l. 11 (Chicherin to Stalin, 24 March 1923).

<sup>81</sup> RGASPI f. 558, op. 11, d. 31, l. 7 (Stalin to Rudzutak, 3 February 1923); RGASPI f. 17, op. 3, d. 336, l. 2.

the transfer of military aid, but only on strict conditions that he could guarantee that the arms would not be used against the Soviet Union.<sup>82</sup> That same month, at a moment when their frustration with the Politburo's intransigence was at its peak, Reisner and Raskol'nikov received the long-awaited word that their exile would soon be over.

Reisner set out for Moscow on horseback alone, with Raskol'nikov planning to follow her soon, and her letters from the road tell the story of a personal campaign to obtain support for Afghanistan. The British ambassador, whom she considered her sworn enemy, confessed that this "woman of marked ability and initiative" might actually convince Moscow to commit resources to Kabul.<sup>83</sup> Reisner was humbler and quickly realized the odds were against her. At the consulate in Kandahar, just a little bit closer to the Soviet border, she discovered that one of her recent essays had received negative reviews in Moscow because it was not an "appropriate moment" to write "sympathetically" about Afghanistan. She found Soviet comrades shared Stalin's condescension, and she was furious with what they saw as Kabul's support for bandits—this was no longer about organized anti-Soviet resistance but about livestock rustling. She became worried that Moscow had been "overcome by an epidemic of information from Tashkent and Kushka."<sup>84</sup> When she reached Kushka, a Soviet border post that Afghanistan claimed as its own, Reisner assailed the local security concerns that blinded many to the larger story of imperialism and Afghan independence. She described the Bolshevik officer who met her as "a half-drunken border 'general'" with "weak nerves" and argued that 90 percent of border incidents could be solved with a bit of rationality.<sup>85</sup> In Tashkent, she despaired that the common refrain was, "we have no grounds for economic rapprochement with Afghanistan." Reisner wrote to Raskol'nikov that she "gnawed her pillow and sobbed all night."<sup>86</sup> In a sign of how much she had identified with a national cause, in Reisner's estimation it was not world revolution that would suffer from Soviet myopia but Afghanistan and its "poor amir."

When Reisner arrived in Moscow, she saw ideological conservatism everywhere. She hated the New Economic Policy and what she saw as the sacrifice of revolutionary achievements.<sup>87</sup> Nonetheless, she fought for her anti-imperialist vision. She first received the support of Raskol'nikov's patron,

<sup>82</sup> RGASPI f. 17, op. 3, d. 338, l. 8.

<sup>83</sup> FO 402/2 N7488/920/97 (Humphrys to Curzon, 15 August 1923).

<sup>84</sup> RGASPI f. 562, op. 1, d. 3, l. 80 (Reisner to Raskol'nikov, 25 March 1923).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 85 (Reisner to Raskol'nikov, 3 April 1923).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 94–95 (Reisner to Raskol'nikov, undated).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 98 (Reisner to Raskol'nikov, 26 June 1923).

Trotskii, and then went to Chicherin at the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs. Chicherin informed her that Stalin believed the Afghans to be a “tribe of thieves,” who could be bought by whoever paid the largest sum. Chicherin’s language suggests that Stalin’s view had not changed over two years. Since the Bolsheviks could not hope to match British bids, Stalin saw no point in providing support. Chicherin advised her, instead, to see Ian Rudzutak, a Stalin ally and head of the Soviet Central Asian Bureau. In a letter to her husband, Reisner claimed to have argued with Rudzutak for two and a half hours. Rudzutak’s anxiety about Central Asian border security prompted Reisner to swear, “To hell with your Bukhara!”<sup>88</sup> Ultimately, she felt that she had won. Rudzutak promised to persuade Stalin to begin the dispatch of aid to Afghanistan. The Politburo even took the unusual step of allowing Raskol’nikov to receive a medal from the Afghan government. The Politburo affirmed that Soviet diplomats were not and would not be allowed to receive medals from capitalist governments but decided “as an exception to allow Comrade Raskol’nikov to accept a medal from the Afghan government, as it is the government of a country oppressed by imperialism.”<sup>89</sup> The Politburo’s decision was explicitly extraordinary, and it offered a significant recognition that, in addition to socialist and capitalist states, there was a third category out there.

### Soviet Orientalism in Kabul

Raskol’nikov—and to a much lesser extent Reisner—pops up at dramatic moments in histories of Soviet-Afghan relations.<sup>90</sup> The couple arrived in Kabul at a moment when the horizons of possibility were open, an anomalous period of Soviet “revolutionary adventurism.”<sup>91</sup> They consorted with the amir and funded Indian revolutionaries, but many days at the Soviet embassy were full of boredom and frustration. Despite their unequivocal advocacy of support for Afghanistan, they displayed a consistent sense of cultural distance from their hosts. In one quiet moment, Reisner complained to her parents that she occupied her days reading a “very thick, self-satisfied” book on Pope Innocent III: “I see how the West rides against the East ... forcing the Latin

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., I. 106 (Reisner to Raskol’nikov, 6 June 1923).

<sup>89</sup> RGASPI f. 17, op. 3, d. 373, I. 1.

<sup>90</sup> See, e.g., Tikhonov, *Afganskaia bitva Stalina*, chap. 11.

<sup>91</sup> Adeeb Khalid uses this term to describe a study by Vladimir Genis, an author whose work features Raskol’nikov prominently. See Khalid, “Between Empire and Revolution: New Work on Soviet Central Asia,” *Kritika* 7, 4 (2006): 865–84, here 870; V. L. Genis, *Vitse-Konsul Vvedenskii: Sluzhba v Persii i Bukharskom khanstve (1906–1920 gg.)*. *Rossiiskaia diplomatiia v sud’bakh* (Moscow: Sotsial’no-politicheskaia mysl’, 2003); and Genis, *Krasnaia Persiia: Bol’sheviki v Giliiane, 1920–1921. Dokumental’naia khronika* (Moscow: MNPI, 2000).



faith, feudalism, and jurisprudence on a country just as inexpressibly empty and beautiful as this one.” Reisner situated herself in an Afghanistan frozen in time and compared the futility of her own revolutionary efforts to that of the Crusaders’ civilizing mission: “How similar to us—we are also deputies, of the Commune, at a court that is not quite Alexander the Great’s and not quite Genghis Khan’s. How many cultures the skies above us have swallowed—hot, blue, and smoky, every two weeks their heat turns the red flag above our embassy to ash.”<sup>92</sup> Both Reisner and Raskol’nikov were aspiring writers, and their more literary moments reveal how Orientalizing views mixed with economic anti-imperialism.

Soviet Orientalism—in the sense of the academic study of the Orient—was characterized by a frequent critique of Western imperialism. Even before the Bolshevik revolution, and certainly afterward, Russian Orientalists argued that Russia’s geography and history allowed scholars to understand and empathize with the East better than their Western counterparts.<sup>93</sup> Historians have demonstrated that Bolshevik nationalities policy drew on tsarist-era Orientalists, whose sympathies for their subjects translated into support for non-Russian peoples within the Soviet Union. Raskol’nikov and Reisner were neither academics nor specialists trained to serve in the East, but they were close to the prominent centers of Russian Orientalism. Reisner’s brother Igor’ spent two years in Kabul just before she arrived, and he went on to become one of the most prominent Soviet specialists on Afghanistan. Reisner and Raskol’nikov had much in common with their academic acquaintance, Vladimir Aleksandrovich Gurko-Kriazhin, who described his own path to Oriental studies as that of an “idealistic Orientophile in Tolstoy’s style.”<sup>94</sup> Raskol’nikov and Reisner admittedly differed from Gurko-Kriazhin, Igor’ Reisner, and many others who were assigned to work for the Soviet government in Asia in that they did not make much effort to learn Farsi or study the country in which they spent two years. Nevertheless, the couple could have been expected to draw on the self-conscious posturing of Soviet Orientalism for a noneconomic sense of proximity to their Afghan hosts.

When the couple first saw Afghanistan, their references drew on a fascination with an exotic East that was common among fin-de-siècle Russian

<sup>92</sup> Reisner, *Izbrannoe*, 526.

<sup>93</sup> Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), esp. 47–60; Slezkine, “Naturalists versus Nations: Eighteenth-Century Russian Scholars Confront Ethnic Diversity,” *Representations* 47 (Summer 1994): 170–95; Vera Tolz, *Russia’s Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Early Soviet Periods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), esp. 31–32 and chap. 6.

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Volkov, *Russia’s Turn to Persia*, 200.

cultural elites.<sup>95</sup> Reisner appears to have become an “Orientophile” in the St. Petersburg literary world during an affair with the poet Nikolai Gumilev.<sup>96</sup> In her letters to Gumilev while he was at the front during World War I, Reisner addressed him as “My Hafiz,” after the 14th-century Iranian poet who figures in Gumilev’s play, *Child of Allah*.<sup>97</sup> From wartime Petrograd, she begged him to send her a sonnet “about Janissaries, about seven-headed Cerberus ... let lies and fantasies again be decorated with all the shades of a peacock feather and become my Madagascar.”<sup>98</sup> For his part, Gumilev suggested that he seek a transfer to the Caucasus front, so that by the end of the war, “in addition to glory, I will also have a magnificent collection of Persian miniatures.”<sup>99</sup> Reisner and Gumilev’s affair ended abruptly, but the obsession with the Orient carried over into her relationship with Raskol’nikov. In 1919, when Reisner and Raskol’nikov were in the midst of civil war on the Volga, Reisner sent her parents a “pile of Perso-Chinese paintings. I have kept for myself, for luck, only a magnificent Buddha taken from an earthen temple on the parched Kalmyk steppe.”<sup>100</sup> There was little anti-imperialist in this romantic and predatory attraction to things Eastern.

Despite their lack of background, Raskol’nikov and Reisner hoped to contribute to a new and Bolshevik body of knowledge about Afghanistan. Once Reisner had returned to Moscow in 1923, Raskol’nikov forwarded photographs of “Greco-Buddhist statues” and asked her to have them published in the journal *Novyi Vostok*, a publication whose name—*The New East*—proclaimed the ideological novelty of Soviet Orientalism.<sup>101</sup> Raskol’nikov did eventually publish in the journal, where he declared it his duty “to attract the attention of the masses to Afghanistan.”<sup>102</sup> Reisner’s sketches of life in Afghanistan had equally immediate political aims. Raskol’nikov forwarded his wife’s literary works, including some that he designated as classified, to Tashkent as reports on Afghan politics.<sup>103</sup> Raskol’nikov

<sup>95</sup> Jane Ashton Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West: Natal’ia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), esp. chap. 9.

<sup>96</sup> Przhiborovskaia, *Larisa Reisner*, 168–87.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>100</sup> Reisner, *Izbrannoe*, 514.

<sup>101</sup> RNB NOR f. 245, k. 7, d. 52a, l. 16 (Raskol’nikov to Reisner, 25 June 1923).

<sup>102</sup> Raskol’nikov, *O vremeni i o sebe*, 441.

<sup>103</sup> RGASPI f. 62, op. 2, d. 23, l. 13 (Raskol’nikov to Lena, 28 July 1922), and l. 289 (Raskol’nikov to Lena, 1 November 1922).

and Reisner were thus embedded in the broader patterns of Soviet Orientalism.

Their writings are suffused with an essentialist sense of insurmountable difference between East and West.<sup>104</sup> Economic aid was not connected to a hope that the distance between Europe and the Orient that they found in Afghanistan would diminish. Soraya Tarzi, with whom Reisner went riding, took on a public role that complemented the amir's drive for reform. Yet when describing Aman Allah's wife, Reisner did not celebrate social transformation but suggested that Westernization in the East corrupts.<sup>105</sup> Soraya and the ladies around her, Reisner wrote to her parents, "are a bouquet of painted flowers, who have lost their scent on account of electricity and European lies."<sup>106</sup> Kabul featured an increasing number of European façades, for Aman Allah's transformation stretched to the architectural sphere and he favored monumental styles popular in Paris and Berlin.<sup>107</sup> In a literary depiction of a royal wedding, Reisner lamented that the "European halls" of the palace were "foreign to everything" in Afghanistan and uninhabitable.<sup>108</sup> Reisner published her Afghan stories in a 1925 book that was replete with condescension toward the hosts she had lobbied so hard for in Moscow. Some of Reisner's and Raskol'nikov's skepticism presumably stemmed from an association of Europe with bourgeois culture, but the ease with which they incorporated Orientalizing assumptions into their revolutionary activities fed their dismissal of Aman Allah's social and cultural reforms.

A sense that the East was homogeneous sometimes strengthened Raskol'nikov's and Reisner's faith in the region's anti-imperialist potential. As they found common cause with Cemal and Fahri, they struggled to understand why the Turks were not on better terms with their Afghan counterparts. Raskol'nikov condemned Fahri's haughtiness toward Aman Allah because it ostensibly inhibited the anti-British understanding the two should

<sup>104</sup> They shared much with Mikhail Pavlovich, one of the most prominent figures of 1920s Soviet Orientalism. See Michael Kemper, "Red Orientalism: Mikhail Pavlovich and Marxist Oriental Studies in Early Soviet Russia," *Die Welt des Islams* 50, 3 (2010): 435–76, esp. 476. It is, however, in contrast to what a number of scholars have argued was a Russian approach characterized by the lack of essentialism. See Nathaniel Knight, "Grigor'ev in Orenburg, 1851–1862: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire," *Slavic Review* 59, 1 (2000): 74–100, esp. 95; Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient*, esp. 47–68; and Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, chap. 6.

<sup>105</sup> On earlier versions of this idea, see Victor Taki, "Orientalism on the Margins: The Ottoman Empire under Russian Eyes," *Kritika* 12, 2 (2011): 321–51, esp. 346–49.

<sup>106</sup> Reisner, *Izbrannoe*, 522–23.

<sup>107</sup> Nancy Hatch Dupree, "Early Twentieth Century Afghan Adaptations of European Architecture," *AARP: Art and Archaeology Research Papers* 11 (June 1977): 15–21, here 20.

<sup>108</sup> RNB NOR f. 245, k. 1, d. 43, l. 1 (Sketch, "A Palace Wedding").

have reached.<sup>109</sup> Reisner, in contrast, thought the Iranian ambassador was too close to European diplomats in Kabul and was delighted that Fahri “forced” the Iranian representative “to remember that he was Muslim.”<sup>110</sup> Lev Nikulin, a budding Soviet author who shared the embassy with Reisner and Raskol’nikov, thought it ironic that Turks had “long ago adopted a European, or rather a German, guise for their people,” and hence in Afghanistan “appeared to be a variety of Europeans.” Since Fahri’s otherness was obvious to Nikulin, he found it humorous that Afghan merchants were reported to have been unsure whether Fahri was Muslim.<sup>111</sup> Raskol’nikov and Reisner confronted diversity in Kabul, and their constant references to Afghans, Iranians, Turks, and Indians reflect a sense of the importance of national identity. Their Orientalist conflation of all peoples Eastern, in contrast, contributed to dreams of Muslim solidarity against imperialism.

The condescension so evident in Reisner’s and Raskol’nikov’s comments about Afghanistan was entirely compatible with their mission. Indeed, their perspective overlapped with their Turkish counterparts’ ideas about the shape of progress. Reisner and Cemal visited Tashkent at different times, but both described the city in terms of backwardness. Reisner thought Tashkent “even more barbaric and bestial than Kabul,” while Cemal wrote upon his arrival that Turkestan was “stuck in a state of utter ignorance.”<sup>112</sup> Raskol’nikov’s disappointment with Fahri does not seem to have been the result of an isolated occurrence, for the British ambassador also noted Fahri’s public intolerance of Afghan “failings.”<sup>113</sup> If Central Asia was mired in the past, then both Russians and Turks were convinced that they brought help. Raskol’nikov was delighted that Reisner’s presence brought Aman Allah “for the first time into the company of European women”; when Cemal requested that Mustafa Kemal send more Turkish officers to aid in the training of the Afghan army, he asked that their wives accompany them—but only the wives who could “present an example of Turkish women’s enlightenment.”<sup>114</sup> While Reisner frequently questioned what was lost as Afghans adopted foreign ways, Raskol’nikov saw Europeanization of the military in a positive light. After observing a military demonstration of Afghan troops that Cemal had trained, Raskol’nikov praised “Afghan maneuvers that had been, for the first time in

<sup>109</sup> RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2129, l. 50 (Raskol’nikov to Chicherin, 10 October 1922).

<sup>110</sup> RNB NOR f. 245, k. 5, d. 17, l. 8 (L. M. Reisner to I. M. Reisner, 10 November 1922).

<sup>111</sup> Lev Nikulin, “Afganistan i Angora,” *Novyi Vostok*, no. 2 (1922): 289–96, here 295.

<sup>112</sup> RGASPI f. 562, op. 1, d. 3, l. 95, in Baykal, “Milli Mücadele Yıllarında,” 392.

<sup>113</sup> FO 402/2 N 920/920/97 (Humphrys to Curzon, 6 January 1923).

<sup>114</sup> RGASPI f. 159, op. 2, d. 49, l. 72 (Raskol’nikov to Chicherin, 26 November 1921); Baykal, “Milli Mücadele Yıllarında,” 412.

history, organized on a European scale.”<sup>115</sup> He wrote this in a report to the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, with no sense of irony that an Ottoman officer had introduced European qualities and that a Soviet onlooker was particularly appreciative. Raskol’nikov’s and Reisner’s writings were rife with contradictions, but they made no attempt to escape the idea that they were Europeans in an Afghanistan that was backward and Eastern.<sup>116</sup>

## Conclusion

Afghanistan was a difficult posting for Raskol’nikov and even more so for Reisner. She suffered a miscarriage at the end of their stay and announced her divorce by letter from Moscow before Raskol’nikov had even returned from Kabul. These were trying years, especially for a woman with Reisner’s force of character and ambition. She resented Raskol’nikov’s coldness to her in public, a coldness that she attributed to his attempts to dispel murmurings about his subordination to her.<sup>117</sup> In Moscow, she learned of denunciations made in her absence; she insisted that the Politburo punish her detractors to demonstrate her innocence and to avoid the impression that she was protected only because she was the wife of a prominent party member.<sup>118</sup> The end of her relationship with Raskol’nikov was also the end of her time in the East. She turned to Fedor Rotstein and reflected on what was now a closed chapter of her life. Rotstein, who had just returned from the Soviet embassy in Iran, had fought a similar battle for interstate relations against colleagues who wanted to support revolutionary movements in the country’s north. Reisner saw much in common between her own frustrations in obtaining support for Kabul and his efforts in Teheran. Together, they would “drink tea and curse Stalin” for Moscow’s failure to support Eastern states against Western imperialism.<sup>119</sup> Reisner died of typhoid just a few years later, but ultimately she was right about Stalin’s politics. It was only after his death that the Soviet Union truly committed to aid Third World states.

At the very end of Raskol’nikov’s Kabul posting, the Soviet Union and Afghanistan reached their first significant trade deal. The Politburo had decided that, while trade with the West was a form of socialist-capitalist

<sup>115</sup> RGASPI f. 159, op. 2, d. 49, l. 72.

<sup>116</sup> On the Soviet language of “European” progress in Soviet Central Asia, see Botakoz Kassymbekova and Christian Teichmann, “The Red Man’s Burden: Soviet European Officials in Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s,” in *Helpless Imperialists: Imperial Failure, Fear, and Radicalization*, ed. Maurus Reinkowski and Gregor Thun (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 163–86.

<sup>117</sup> RGASPI f. 562, op. 1, d. 3, l. 110 (Reisner to Raskol’nikov, 4 September 1923).

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 98 (Reisner to Raskol’nikov, 26 June 1923).

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 99 (Reisner to Raskol’nikov, 26 June 1923).

competition and had to be strictly regulated, restrictions on trade with Eastern states could be relaxed.<sup>120</sup> Here, at last, was a full acknowledgment of economic convergence between the Soviet Union and states oppressed by imperialism. But the acknowledgment had limits. Soviet trade organizations were initially allowed to pursue trade deals with Afghanistan, and with Iran and Turkey too, without concern for bilateral trade balances. This proved an important concession, for Aman Allah received almost no foreign aid and financed economic development through trade, including a significant amount with the Soviet Union.<sup>121</sup> But as Soviet-Afghan exchanges grew over the course of the decade, the Soviet government became anxious about a trade imbalance that ran heavily in Afghanistan's favor.<sup>122</sup> The Politburo was itself desperate for hard currency and gradually sought to regulate Afghan imports, but it offered assistance to the Afghan state in less financially onerous ways. When Aman Allah faced rebellion against his reforms in 1924, the Soviet Union supplied his army with weapons; by 1925, more than 30 Soviet pilots were flying Soviet planes for the Afghan air force.<sup>123</sup> The tables were turned, and now the British ambassador worried that the Soviets would "get the Ameer into their clutches."<sup>124</sup> Raskol'nikov figured less directly in these events, but he continued to influence Moscow's policy toward Afghanistan. He worked in the Eastern Section of the Comintern, taught at Moscow State University, and contributed to academic works on Afghanistan and Turkey.<sup>125</sup> His views of Afghanistan's economic development aligned with those of other Bolshevik specialists who believed that the Soviet Union should help Eastern states go through a period of nationalist development.<sup>126</sup>

The elephant-riding image on *Ogonek's* cover suggests Raskol'nikov's and Reisner's behavior resembled that of their imperialist foes, and the same

<sup>120</sup> "Rezoliutsiia po voprosu o politike vneshnei torgovli v otnoshenii Vostoka," *Torgovlia Rossii s Vostokom*, no. 1–2 (1924): 42.

<sup>121</sup> Leon B. Poullada, *Reform and Rebellion in Afghanistan: King Amanullah's Failure to Modernize a Tribal Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 136–38.

<sup>122</sup> Panin, *Sovetskaia Rossiia i Afganistan*, 161–87.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 191–92.

<sup>124</sup> FO 402/6 N 151/151/97 (Humphrys to Chamberlain, 14 December 1925).

<sup>125</sup> M. P. Pavlovich, V. A. Gurko-Kriazhin, and F. F. Raskol'nikov, *Turtsiia v bor'be za nezavisimost'* (Moscow: Nauchnaia assotsiatsiia vostokovedeniia pri TsIK SSSR, 1925); Ia. V. Vasil'kov and M. Iu. Sorokina, eds., *Liudi i sud'by: Biobibliograficheskii slovar' vostokovedov-zhertv politicheskogo terrora v sovetskii period (1917–1991)* (St. Petersburg: Peterburgskoe vostokovedenie, 2003), 323–24. Raskol'nikov also continued to challenge Soviet Central Asian interests and played a key role in the territorial conflict over the island of Urta-Tugai. See S. B. Panin, "The Soviet-Afghan Conflict of 1925–6 over the Island of Urta-Tugai," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 12, 3 (1999): 122–33; Panin, *Sovetskaia Rossiia i Afganistan*, 110–35; and RGASPI f. 62, op. 2, d. 532, l. 18 (Raskol'nikov, report of 24 February 1926).

<sup>126</sup> Volkov, *Russia's Turn to Persia*, 202.



could even be said of their economic support for Afghanistan. Britain's representatives drew related conclusions when they saw that Aman Allah sent delegations to Germany and Italy. In a collective letter to London, the top British officials in India argued, much as Surits had, that the amir's attempt to develop his country's resources made him less likely to pursue expansionist policies that threatened British interests. They admitted that encouraging economic development was a departure from years of British policy but pointed out that it was in keeping with broader trends after World War I.<sup>127</sup> Raskol'nikov and Reisner had responded, like their British counterparts, to a common trend: the new states in Eastern Europe and along the Soviet Union's southern periphery were seeking to strengthen political independence, and economic development was the goal of many nationalists.<sup>128</sup> The Bolsheviks in Kabul did differ, however, from their counterparts in the British embassy. Francis Humphrys, London's ambassador to Kabul for almost all of the 1920s, maintained a position very close to that of the Indian government's report. Neither saw the possibility—or need—for Afghan economic independence. Both believed that Aman Allah would ultimately decide of his own accord that industrial development was too difficult alone and could be accomplished only under Britain's tutelage.<sup>129</sup> In contrast, nothing in Raskol'nikov's and Reisner's papers indicates that they doubted the wisdom of Aman Allah's pursuit of economic independence. After all, their comrades in Moscow also sought to control their engagement with international markets to encourage industrialization without sacrificing independence.

Raskol'nikov and Reisner were fully embedded in the revolutionary processes around them, and their actions challenge the idea that diplomacy is a closed and rarefied sphere.<sup>130</sup> Shortly before she left Kabul, Reisner admitted to her parents that she would not have wanted to watch the "petty bourgeoisie elbowing its way to the top" in Moscow and was glad she had had the chance to see "the East, camels, and the Middle Ages." Separation from her family had been difficult, she assured them, but she had, after all, "married a crazy revolutionary."<sup>131</sup> Husband and wife were equally committed to

<sup>127</sup> FO 402/1 N3998/59/97 (Government of India to India Office, 23 March 1922).

<sup>128</sup> For an international approach to economic development with beginnings in the 1920s, including Soviet aid, see Timothy Nunan, "Graveyard of Development? Afghanistan's Cold War Encounters with International Development and Humanitarianism," in *The Development Century: A Global History*, ed. Stephen J. Macekura and Erez Manela (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 220–39, here 222.

<sup>129</sup> FO 402/1 N 8664/59/97 (Humphrys to Curzon, 27 August 1922).

<sup>130</sup> On this closed quality, see Kocho-Williams, *Russian and Soviet Diplomacy*, introduction.

<sup>131</sup> Reisner, *Izbrannoe*, 545–46.

revolution, and they saw nothing contradictory in their condescension toward the Eastern nations whose independence they desired.

Political necessity at home ensured that Soviet nationalities policy awkwardly balanced cultural autonomy and economic integration. Abroad, Lenin's understanding of imperialism and the nature of the postwar era contributed to Soviet diplomats' unambiguous commitment to the economic independence of postcolonial states. Yet the political imperative for a cultural corollary was lacking. Many of the most revolutionary Bolsheviks, Raskol'nikov and Reisner certainly included, inherited and subscribed to Orientalist attitudes and prejudices that could subvert the broader anti-imperialist cause. When Raskol'nikov and Reisner downplayed the cultural and social issues that Aman Allah targeted, they appear as much relics of the empires they denounced as the anti-imperialist partners of the Afghans they proclaimed themselves.

Dept. of International Relations  
Bilkent University  
Ankara 06800, Turkey  
samhirst@bilkent.edu.tr