

# THE LEFT AND AFGHANISTAN 'MILITANT' ON THE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION

UNLIKE most other would-be Trotskyists, Workers' Action opposed the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and called for the withdrawal of the troops. John O'Mahony examines the arguments put forward in favour of supporting the Russian occupation by 'Militant'.

"What characterises Bolshevism on the national question is that in its attitude towards oppressed nations, even the most backward, it considers them not only the object but also the subject of politics. Bolshevism does not confine itself to recognising their 'rights' and parliamentary protests against the trampling upon of those rights. Bolshevism penetrates into the midst of the oppressed nations; it raises them up against their oppressors; it ties up their struggle with the struggle of the proletariat in advanced countries; it instructs the oppressed Chinese, Hindus or Arabs in the art of insurrection, and it assumes full responsibility for their work in the face of 'civilised' executioners. Here only does Bolshevism begin, that is, revolutionary Marxism in action. Everything that does not step over that boundary remains centrism".

Leon Trotsky, 'What Next'.

THE Russian invasion of Afghanistan was a test case for the attitude of political tendencies towards Stalinism and towards the rights of oppressed nations.

Militant took some time to hammer out its response to the invasion. It took a very long article by Ted Grant and then, a month later, another long article by Lynn Walsh supplementing it, before their line was clear. The following article examines the emergence of Militant's line on the invasion of Afghanistan as expressed in those two articles and in an article by Alan Woods, published in July 1980, which brutally expressed the satisfaction with which this 'Trotskyist' tendency greeted the prospect of a Stalinist transformation in Afghanistan.

Militant's first response to the invasion was a three-page long article by Ted Grant (Militant, 18.1.80). The last third of the article fell apart into an unintegrated series of musings and reflections, not too far above the stream-of-consciousness level. We shall see the consequences. Despite that it was a knowledgeable analysis of the events that preceded the Russian occupation. Though the analytical framework was different, the essential features of Grant's description paralleled that presented in Workers' Action (12.1.80 and 19.1.80).

In contrast to the fantasies peddled by others who call themselves Trotskyists, (especially the SWP-USA and the large part of the USFI which consists of its international satellites), Grant knew quite well who it was that had made the original so-called revolution, that is the military coup of April 1978.

"The April 1978 coup was based on a movement of the elite of the Army and the intellectuals and the top layers of professional middle-class people in the cities". But he does not know what it was that they made. His definition of the regime that resulted rings strange in the ears of a Marxist. "... Conditions of mass misery and the corruption of the Daud regime resulted in a proletarian Bonapartist coup. Proletarian Bonapartism is a system in which landlordism and capitalism have been abolished [when?], but where power has not passed into the hands of the people, but is held by a one-party, military-political dictatorship".

He goes on. "After the seizure of power, they abolished the mortgages and other debts of the peasants, who were completely dominated by the usurers, and carried through a land reform".

Now if this is what happened, it becomes impossible to explain why the regime had so little popular support, why its initial support declined, and why it needed the Russian Army to keep it in power.

## What the PDP did

They *did* decree an end to usury and a cancellation of debts; they decreed steps towards equality for women; and they legislated a land reform — *but they could not carry them out*. Everywhere and in everything, they proved to have *neither* popular support that would move to gain through mass actions what the regime decreed, *nor, alternatively*, the strength and resources to manipulate from the top and to wean people from the age-old network of dependence on landlords, usurers, and priests (often the same people). They had neither a banking system to offer instead of the system around the usurers, nor an agricultural supply system to carry through the land reform. Their efforts from on high alienated the people, and their good intentions found real expression mainly in bureaucratic/military repression of their own people.

The whole experience was shaped by these facts. The Afghan 'revolution' was a coup by the officer corps of the air force and a section of the officer corps of the army, differing from other efforts by officers in backward societies to take the role of developers of the country (e.g. the coup of 1968 in Peru) in that the officers, trained and equipped by the USSR since 1955, took the bureaucratic USSR as their social model. And they took the bureaucracy itself as their model for their own future role.

Because of the link with the USSR and the magnetic attraction of the Stalinist states on the central state forces of Afghanistan, the PDP gained its major forces in the Army and among the urban

middle class, especially in Kabul. Estimates of its strength at the time of the coup range from 2000 (in an extremely well-informed article in the Financial Times in 1978) to 10,000 (Intercontinental Press, publication of the SWP-USA, which, give or take a few ritual criticisms, acted for six months after the invasion as vulgar propagandist for the USSR and the PDP in the style of the CPs in the 30s).

How extraordinary this was is best seen if translated into British figures. Its equivalent would be for a 'party' of between 5,000 and 25 or 30,000 to seize power in Britain via the Army! Even this comparison is inexact, because of the structure of society in Afghanistan. The divide separating town from country, centuries and even millennia wide in terms of culture and development, meant that the Party and the upper layers of the Army were sealed off from the masses in a way that would be impossible for even a small party in Britain.

Thus the PDP began alienated from the masses; and *their behaviour* deepened the alienation and drove masses into the hands of the landlords and mullahs. This happened because of the extraordinarily elitist, bureaucratic, militarist, commandist attitude adopted by the regime. (It was absolutely typical of such military regimes, whether of right or 'left' persuasion, though there are examples of radical state-capitalist regimes far less elitist than was the PDP/Army regime). Brute military force was their essential tool, at least outside of the main towns; and a severe permanent police-state terror decimated even the supporters of the April coup. The PDP used force from the beginning with terrible abandon, sending the airforce with bombs and napalm against recalcitrant villages. They seem to have thought this would be sufficient to implement their programme.

One gets a strange feeling from the accounts of the brutal regime of government ukases backed by napalm. It was as if they knew neither their own society nor themselves. They acted as if 'the revolution' was already made, as if the government could command the forces and the tides by its very word.

## State capitalist

It was as if they were mimicking the established Russian bureaucracy. The PDP was a bureaucratic, militaristic social formation in control of the state apparatus (though a state apparatus not even traditionally in full control of the society — one whose rural subjects are accustomed to bearing arms and acting for themselves). But the PDP stood on one side of a revolutionary transformation which had yet to be won, led, or even