The Conscriptation of Afghan Writers: An Aborted Experiment in Socialist Realism

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The leftist leaders of the April (Sauer) 1978 coup which brought into being the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) insisted they had arisen from the masses and spoke with the voice of the people. Events proved otherwise as both the rural population and much of the urban middle class violently rejected the revolutionary rhetoric, despite its seductive promises to abolish usury, institute land reforms, provide equal status for the sexes and bring about a cultural renaissance for tribal minorities. Such reforms conformed to basic Afghan-Islamic values, but the language of the rhetoric suggested overly close ties to the “godless” Soviet Union. The “masses,” therefore, remained unconvinced that an unfettered new era had dawned; growing scepticism escalated revolt and the DRA slid toward total collapse.

It was during this political turbulence that the Afghan literati were first mobilized to purposefully deploy socialist realism as a psychological weapon to inject Afghan culture with the ideological objectives of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the PDPA.

THE 1979 SEMINAR OF WRITERS AND POETS

The rhetoric utilized in fielding this stratagem was blatantly forthright in exhorting writers “to arouse millions of toilers . . . and inspire them to sacrifice for the reconstruction of the society.”


The assembly was addressed by Abdul Karim Misaq (1937– ).
Minister of Finance, whose 306-page collection of short stories, *Rah-e Sabz* ("The Green Path", 1978) had been hailed as a reflection of "the depressed life of the people, the toils and afflictions of the past, and the glorious life of the future." Misaq, a self-educated member of the Hazara ethnic group from Jaghatu in central Afghanistan, had risen to his exalted cabinet position after years of service as a lowly employee in various government offices, during which he nevertheless emerged as a respected writer in both Dari and Pashto. Among the revolutionaries he was most admired for his poetic prophetic pronouncement that the massive attendance at the funeral of the assassinated leftist ideologue, Mir Akbar Khyber (17 April 1978), represented "the silence before the storm."

The Seminar, however, reserved its most complimentary kudos for Nur Mohammad Taraki (1917–1979), Secretary-General of the PDPA and President of the Revolutionary Council of the DRA, who was touted as "the founder of realism, shining like a glowing star in the dark atmosphere of Afghan literature" before the establishment of the DRA. The Fundamental Statement issued by the Seminar decreed that writers should "follow his (Taraki's) lead in our literary and creative works." Regimentation reminiscent of the Stalin era in the USSR loomed ominously.

Although he cannot truthfully be called the "founder" of realism in Afghan literature, Taraki was an outspoken critic of socio-political processes in Afghanistan. His life spanned a critical period during which Afghan poets and writers spearheaded increasingly vocal appeals for the creation of a national consciousness to stimulate much needed socio-economic change.

In his novels and short stories, the bulk of which were never published, but circulated hand-to-hand among his associates, Taraki railed against the tyranny of the bureaucracy, the corruption of reactionary religious leaders, grasping money-lenders, oppressive landlords and repressive employers.

These were not novel themes, as will be discussed below, but Taraki went beyond the mere identification of social ills by depicting his characters courageously overcoming adversity in the context of a new socialist political system. Among the best of Taraki's works is *Speen* ("White", 1956), an excellent sociological description of village life in the Ghazni-Kandahar areas.

Although Taraki wrote in Pashto, which limited his influence in general, his reputation as an author gained in stature and he became the center of a coterie of left-oriented poets and writers who formed the nucleus of the PDPA (founded 1 January 1965) which brought the DRA into being on 27 April 1978.

Ideological differences and political in-fighting between rival
The Conscription of Afghan Writers

factions within the PDPA soon surfaced. In July 1978 the Khalq ("The Masses", led by Taraki) faction dispatched the opposing Parcham ("The Banner") faction to diplomatic appointments outside Afghanistan and eventually purged them from the PDPA for being counter-revolutionary conspirators. More disastrously for Taraki, friction between individual leaders within Khalq resulted in his elimination in a shootout on 15 September 1979. Taraki's erstwhile disciple, Hafizullah Amin, came to power.

Amin's tenure was short — and repressive. Growing numbers of distinguished writers fled into exile; others were jailed; still others executed. Opposition quickened. Scarcely three months later, the Soviet military invaded Afghanistan (24 December 1979), bringing in tow the leader of Parcham, Babrak Karmal, whom they installed as the General Secretary of the PDPA, President of the Revolutionary Council, DRA Prime Minister — and, Soviet puppet.

Amin was assassinated, and most of the writers who had remained loyal to the Taraki-Amin governments, including Abdul Karim Misaq, now took the places of those released from jail by a general amnesty proffered by the new rulers.

THE 1980 UNION OF WRITERS AND POETS OF THE DRA

The Soviet military maneuver failed to ameliorate the situation. So, again, a Constituent Congress of Writers was summoned "to put the literary talent at the service of the people and implement the real humanistic aspirations of the Saur Revolution."

The Soviet-inspired directive to form a union of poets and artists in the Soviet image appeared in a DRA Politburo resolution dated 28 July 1980. The organizing committee first met on 27 August; on the 4th of October the Constituent Congress of Writers and Poets of the DRA gathered under the slogan "Towards the Organization of all Talent for the Realization of the Lofty Aims of the Saur Revolution."

Lest any among the politically chaste members of the new Union were in doubt of their propagandistic duties, Kabul's government-controlled, English-language newspaper, Kabul New Times (until 1 January 1980 The Kabul Times), bluntly editorialized that the formation of the Union of Writers and Poets was "another step to organize the people under the leadership of the PDPA, the vanguard of the working class." Eschewing more positive objectives outlined in the PDPA's original greetings to the Congress, such as "exerting great spiritual impact on the masses of readers," the editorial harangued against the "hirelings of imperialism and hegemonism"
and repeated the dictum that "the homeland expects its writers and poets to create such works which would arouse the sense of hatred of the people against their enemies."

Having unburdened themselves of the rhetoric, the drafters of the Fundamental Statement issued by the Congress proceeded to produce a highly creditable appraisal of Afghanistan's rich literary heritage which belied the opening contention that "the past had been characterized by centuries of cultural backwardness in which creative forces had been hamstrung by a yoke of obscure feudal mentalities." In choosing authors to commend, the Congress attested to the fact that Afghan writers have concerned themselves with social injustice and needful change for centuries. Many of the works cited expound on time-honoured themes entirely compatible with socialist realism, but the new focus required that intensely promotional messages surface above the Islamic and Afghan values commended by earlier writers.

In the past, for example, writers sought change by upholding freedom and justice as universal ideals; with the introduction of socialist realism these same ideals were advanced solely for the socio-political function of promoting the Party and the system it sought to impose. Afghan writers have yet to come to terms with this reversal of role. Hence the failure of the experiment in socialist realism.

Contradictions in the Fundamental Statement portend this failure. Although the Congress met while a foreign army occupied their homeland, members were exhorted to perpetuate the best in Afghan literary traditions by according high value to those men of letters who refused to permit literature to be used by oppressive forces.

SOCIAL THEMES IN AFGHAN LITERATURE THROUGH TIME

The authors elevated for acclaim by the Union span eight centuries of literary endeavour in the Afghan area. Numbers of distinguished writers were unheralded, but for the purposes of this discussion only those deemed worthy by those seeking to formulate a new literary policy for Afghanistan will be reviewed. Their work may be divided roughly into six periods; obviously several were active during one or more periods:

I — Humanitarianism: 12th–20th centuries A.D.
II — Political Awakening: 1900–1929
The Conscription of Afghan Writers

III — Romanticism: 1930—1940s
IV — Sentimental Socialism: 1947—early 1950s
V — Scientific Socialism: 1953—1960s
VI — Revolutionary Activism.

I — HUMANITARIANISM: 12th—20th CENTURIES A.D.

The list of commended authors begins with the moral literature of such stellar Sufi poets as Abdul Majid Majdud Sana'i Ghaznavi (d. 1131 A.D.), Mawlana Jalaluddin Rumi Balkhi (1207—1273), Mawlana Abdur Rahman Jami Herawi (1414—1492) and Mirza Abdul Qadir Beidel (1644—1721). The mystical didactic writings of these philosopher-poets taught tolerance and respect for others, claiming there could be no place for oppression or discrimination because Love and Brotherhood are the purest manifestations of God.

Of the above, Beidel perhaps exerted the greatest influence over 20th century Afghan poets. An orthodox Sunni Muslim living in India, Beidel believed in the perfection of Islam’s teachings on social justice, especially for peasants, and endeavored to acquaint men with their true worth as creations of God. He spoke out boldly against zealotry, deploring empty ritual.

Other ancient poets were praised by the Congress for writing in a style simple enough to be understood by the illiterate masses, and for their democratic themes devoted to love of country, social progress, and “wrathful disclosure of injustices, and colourful pictures of nature’s scenery.” Among those so cited were Khwaja Abdullah Ansari Herawi (1006—1089), Mir Ali Sher Nawai (1441—1501), Khushhal Khan Khattak (1613—1689), Rahman Baba (1632—1705), the 18th century female poet Aisha Durrani, and the late 19th century Mirza Mohammad Nabi “Wasel” (“One Who has Arrived at his Goal”), who has been described as the most powerful lyrical poet of his time.

The world-famous Mir Ali Sher Nawai is credited with the creation of a national Uzbek literature through the use of a Turkic vernacular, Chagatai, from which modern central Asian languages evolved. Nawai was born into a prominent Turkish family of Herat, the paramount cultural centre of his age, where he acquired fame as a statesman-scholar, patron of the arts, and adviser-confidant of the Timurid ruler Sultan Husain Baiqara (d. 1506). In his opening message to a subsequent conference entitled “A Decade of Research on Amir Ali Sher Nawai and his Era” (August 1981), Babrak Karmal stated that it was necessary to pay tribute to such scions of the past in order to promote the cause of fraternal co-existence.
among Afghanistan’s multi-ethnolinguistic nationalities, a major pillar in the DRA political platform.

In fact, the Nawai conference heralded a number of week-long international seminars celebrating various anniversaries of literary giants with a Central Asian orientation: i.e., the 1000th anniversary of the compilation of Hudod-ul Alam by Jauzani from northern Afghanistan (October 1982); the 1000th-year anniversary of the publication of the Shah-namah by Hakim Abdul Qasim Firdausi (ca. 935–1020), the master chronicler of Perso-Central Asian conflicts (November 1982); and, the 500th anniversary of Zahiruddin Mohammad Babur (1483–1530) from Ferghana in Central Asia, who established the Moghul Empire after establishing his base in Kabul (April 1983). The Central Asian focus of these meetings indicates a calculated reorientation toward Soviet Central Asia, away from former influences from the Indian sub-continent exemplified by Beidel.

However, the most revered Pushtun poet from lands east of Afghanistan could not be denied. Khushhal Khan Khattak, lauded by the 1980 Congress, represents the ideal in Afghan personality characteristics, the warrior-poet. He refused to submit to Moghul attempts to dominate the Pushtun tribes in the north-west frontier of India (now Pakistan) where he lived, and wrote stirring poems against all forms of subjugation. His reputation as a hero of liberation strengthened from generation to generation.

A seminar on Khushhal Khan had been held in Kabul from 24 November to 2 December 1979, just before the Soviet invasion. The papers presented provide pertinent indications of the future ideological remoulding and reevaluation of classical works in the spirit of socialist realism, according to “didactical analyses of the history of Afghan literature.” There is a need, it was said, to scrutinize the work of Khushhal Khan “on the basis of the general rules of the working class ideology” and “trace the progressive elements in his personality.” And finally, “In order to better recognize the society of his time on a scientific basis, one must make production relationships of his time clear. It would be on this class pedestal that one should see Khushhal and his age in vivid colours.”

II — POLITICAL AWAKENING: 1900–1929

Turning to the beginning of the 20th century, the Congress rightly emphasized Afghanistan’s first liberal reformist, Mahmud Beg Tarzi (1865–1933). Tarzi was the first to advocate prose as a viable
medium for literature, expounding on the need for change through the medium of *Seraj ul-akhbar* ("Torch of the News"), the newspaper he founded and edited from 1906–1918. Tarzi’s vision for the future was essentially concerned with a revitalization of Islam, idealistically combining modernism with Islam, including a scientific and ideological rationale for reform within Islam.

Tarzi called for a political awakening based on the totality of social justice taught in the Koran and interpreted according to present realities and future exigencies. He condemned the obscurantist religious monopolists who retained a suffocating grip on Islam by preaching against education and social reforms, such as the emancipation of women. He held that educated human will could prevail over the environment and castigated the religious hierarchy for perpetuating ignorance, man’s most tyrannical enemy, for their own power-hungry interests, both financial and political.

III — ROMANTICISM: 1930–1940s

Tarzi exercised great influence over King Amanullah (1919–1929) whose precipitous reform programs aroused the conservatives to revolt, bringing about the king’s downfall. King Amanullah was replaced by Habibullah Ghazi (January–October 1929) under whose rule conservatism flourished, but he was defeated by Nadir Shah (1919–1933), a Mohammadzai Pashtun and collateral member of the Amanullah royal family. Nadir Shah attempted measured modernization programs, but these avoided offending conservatives, particularly the religious hierarchy. Religion and progress should be reconciled and march together, he said. Nadir Shah’s reign was totalitarian by intent but the reform attitudes implanted by Tarzi could not be silenced despite the severity with which those who voiced dissent were suppressed. The harsh treatment of the opposition led in part to the assassination of Nadir Shah in 1933 when Nadir’s 19-year-old son, Zahir (1933–1973), succeeded his father.

Zahir Shah reigned, but did not rule. Domestic and foreign policies were dogmatically controlled by the young king’s uncle, Hashim Khan, throughout his prime ministership from 1933–1946. Hashim Khan sought to bring about a cultural renaissance within his own rigidly prescribed concepts, mindful of the rocky road Afghanistan had trod over the past fifteen years. His government continued to speak out in favour of Islamic-oriented reforms, but his programmes were so regimented that only minimal criticism was tolerated; stringent controls guided all intellectual activities. The
outspoken who refused to follow the accepted guidelines were effectively isolated, or silenced. Antipathy for the Mohammadzai ruling elite grew increasingly intense, especially among urban middle-class intellectuals.

During the relative sterility of the authoritarian regimes of Nadir Shah and Hashim Kahn, the fervor for reform initiated by Tarzi gave way in literature to the safer avenues of romantic esthetics and the glorification of nature. Returning to 11th century models, the poets introduced a period of neoclassicism which developed into an era of escapism that continued until the early 1940s. Still, the protagonists of socialist realism at the 1980 Congress did not neglect the leaders of this period.

The court poet Abdul Ali Mustaghni (1876–1934), literary editor for Seraj ul-akhbar and editor of the Kandahar paper Tuli-i-Afghan (“Afghan Sunrise,” i.e., Afghan Ascendancy), as well as teacher at the Habibiya School, was praised for treating progressive subjects such as patriotism, education, dignity of work and an equitable social order.

Abdullah Khan Qari (1871–1944), tutor to the royal family, teacher at Habibiya in 1903, poet laureate in 1936, and leader of a 12-member literary society founded during the 1930s, was also lauded, as was his successor as poet laureate, Sufi Abdul Haq Beitab (1880–1969), also a professor of literature. Beidel’s influence is evident in the ethical and mystical qualities of most of the work of both these poets. In spite of the fact that they utilized “medieval styles,” they were selected by the Congress because their poetry exhibited social characteristics in propagating goodness, patriotism, and man’s right to prosper. However, the inclusion of Qari and Beitab is intriguing since a good number of their works consist of homages and court panegyrics to Nadir Shah and his successors, the Mohammadzais most reviled by the DRA political ideologues.

IV — SENTIMENTAL SOCIALISM: 1947–EARLY 1950s

More significantly, the Congress gave well-deserved recognition to Sulaiman Ali Jaghori, author of Begum (“Lady”, 1930s), and Mohammad Ibrahim Alimshahi, author of Sham Tarik, Sub Roashan (“Dark Night, Clear Dawn”, 1948), two early Afghan novels. Representing a genre typical of this period, they combine critical descriptions of social inequities with such ideals as personal and national honor, duty to nation, hospitality, virtue, kindness and genuineness. Their purpose was a nascent attempt to awaken a national consciousness by providing creative criticism during a
The Conscription of Afghan Writers

period in which direct criticism of the ruling elite was politically impossible and writings on fundamental human problems subjected to heavy censorship.

Both novels idealize the peasantry. Jaghori was a Hazara, a minority ethnic group which still suffers from discrimination. In *Begum* he describes the conditions of the Hazara living in villages in the Jaghori area of the Hazarajat in the central mountains of Afghanistan. Through its heroine the author makes a direct plea for women's rights based on Koranic injunctions, and highlights the abuses of forced marriage, the misuse of the bride price by grasping parents, the wastefulness of lavish wedding feasts, and the levirate as customs "which contradict the message of the Holy Koran and the tenets of Islam." Though *Begum*'s critique of prevailing conditions is harsh, the work closes on a positive note, championing the benefits to be derived from patriotism and the essential virtues of the peasantry which represent the hopes of the future.

Alimshahi, a lawyer educated in Turkey, was one of the first to portray petty government harassment in the rural areas as inhumane, un-Islamic and unpatriotic. In *Dark Night, Clear Dawn* he takes up the plight of women entrapped by unjust parental attitudes and religious custom which permit them to be manipulated as pawns. A well-drawn contrapuntal theme depicts extractive schemes launched by government officials.

The writings of these authors, together with other novelists not mentioned by the Congress, stirred the political consciousness of Afghan intellectuals, especially those with Western educations or experience. Because of their impetus the power elite initiated an experiment in democracy under the premiership of the more liberal-minded Shah Mahmud (1946–1953), brother of the dictatorial Hashim Khan. A progressive literary–political group, the *Wish Zalmayan* ("Awakened Youth") founded in 1947, flourished, and 40–50 dedicated reformers sat in the 120-seat "Liberal" parliament elected in 1949. This parliament passed legislation bringing into being a "free press" which the reformists utilized primarily to voice opposition.

The writers who moved in the forefront of this movement produced an Afghan version of sentimental socialism by melding the mysticism of Rabindranath Tagore with Maxim Gorky's polemical championship of the common man. These writers were hailed by the Congress as pioneers who further developed a realistic approach to life and the environment through their deep sense of humanity. The poets Abdur Rauf Benawa (1913–1985), dean of the *Wish Zalmayan*, and his colleague, Gulpacha Ulfat, best represent these
sentimental socialists.

Benawa was primarily a journalist, with periods of service in the diplomatic corps and as Minister of Culture (1967). An early advocate of indigenous oral literary forms, Benawa encouraged young authors to experiment with new meters when dealing with the themes he promoted: love of country, revival of historical glories, and the struggles of a virtuous peasantry and urban poor. The injustices suffered by women caught in the web of customary discriminatory practices were also sympathetically treated. After serving as DRA Ambassador to Libya for four years, Benawa resigned and went into exile.

Gulpacha Ulfat, poet-philosopher, was educated in Islamic theology, and combined mysticism with a pragmatic championship of the common people, reminiscent of Gorky. In addition to the familiar themes glorifying nature and traditional Afghan courage in resisting foreign encroachments, Ulfat stressed the need to spurn favours, even from God, if they are received at the expense of others. Furthermore, in a long eulogy to poets entitled *The Poet* he reminds poets of their task to fearlessly record reality, and underscores their duty to stand in the vanguard of needed change:

"Revolutions he can set, 
   bells of change he chimes; 
   time-worn customs he discards 
   to revive the breath of times."  

Also commended by the Congress in this category were the lyric poets Qiyamuddin Khadim (1912–1982), whose works lauding patriotism, science, learning and progressive subjects are infused with religious fervour, and Zia Qarizada (1921–), who extols patriotism, peace, dignity of work, equality of women, and learning as paths to a bright future. Zia Qarizada was a major innovator, one of the first to eschew the imagery of classicism and employ a simple style close to colloquial speech. He also represented Afghanistan on cultural missions to the Soviet Union, beginning in the mid-1950s (1956) when the Soviets initiated extensive economic development programmes in Afghanistan. Nur Mohammad Taraki, who emerged during this period, is conspicuous by his absence from the roll selected by the 1980 Congress.

In spite of professed concern for reform during the period of the "Liberal" parliament (1949–1952), the failure to implement meaningful political-economic programmes caused the opposition to become increasingly vocal, particularly in their personalized attacks on the ruling Mohammadzai elite and the religious establishment. Their demands for abrupt overnight change were in many instances
bids for power at the expense of the Mohammadzai. Fearing the complete disruption of the status quo, the government retaliated by arresting key opposition leaders (1952), effectively bringing this liberal period of experimentation to a close.

V — SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM: 1953–1963

Younger members in the ruling elite, however, chaffed at the inactivity which becalmed Afghanistan. The leader of this group, Mohammad Daoud Khan (1909–1978), nephew of Prime Minister Shah Mahmud and peer cousin and brother-in-law of King Zahir, organized a palace coup in 1953, ushering in a period of dialectic socialism characterized by the energetic promotion of economic development.

During his premiership from 1953–1963, Daoud brooked no open opposition from the intelligentsia, although he maintained close ties with many of them, including Qiyamuddin Khadim and Zia Qarizada. As a result, Daoud was patently disliked by the intellectuals who accused him of neglecting social and political reforms while over-concentrating on economic programs. Even the government's truly revolutionary support for the voluntary removal of the veil from women failed to placate his detractors even though this positive move effectively ended discriminatory seclusion for scores of women in 1959 and struck deeply into the power of the religious hierarchy whom the intelligentsia held in such high contempt.

After Daoud stepped down in 1963, disaffection was transferred to the governments of the constitutional period (1963–1973) which were no more successful in mollifying those who clamored for greater freedom of expression, despite the fact that a degree of creativity surfaced during a second period of relative freedom of the press (1965–1972). Several newspapers devoted space to poetry and short stories, providing potential innovators with the opportunity to expound on political ideologies and social comment while they struggled to integrate their ideals with reality.

This period of relaxation was effectively silenced by the return of Daoud as founder of the Republic of Afghanistan (1973–1978), which ended the monarchy. His reappearance was predictably greeted with cynical skepticism. So implacable was the opposition to the Mohammadzai that they dismissed all the political-economic-social reforms, including free elections, two new constitutions, penal/civil codes, and land reforms, as mere window dressing designed solely to perpetuate the dynastic rule of one family over a
people denied a voice in their destinies. The consistent refusal of the rulers to allow the formation of political parties discouraged moderates, alienated leftists, and ensured the rule of the privileged Mohammadzai.

VI — REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVISM

The generation of Afghan writers who emerged after the “Liberal” parliament experiment, between 1953 and 1978, were greatly influenced by Iran’s leftist writers who were forced underground in 1953 when the Tudeh Party was dissolved following the overthrow of Mossadeq and the overnight reinstallation of the Shah of Iran. It is this group of Afghan poets and writers who were most lavishly praised by the 1980 Congress for their strong revolutionary content in depicting life’s realities, while exposing despotism and oppression. Their role, it was stated, had been the most effective in mobilizing the people for revolution.

Indeed, many of this group form the hard core of the present power elite; numbers were members of the leftist coterie gathered around Nur Mohammad Taraki. With 90–95% of the Afghan population illiterate, however, the real effectiveness of writers mobilizing a true revolution is dubious. Furthermore, publishing facilities in Afghanistan were, and still are, almost totally non-existent outside the government-controlled installations and, as in the past, most literary works appeared first in the press. Those works which did appear during sporadic periods of leniency were often subsequently suppressed. The most substantive works were largely limited to private circulation among the literati and their friends.

The following assertions by the Congress would seem, therefore to be overly exhuberant: “In spite of severe censorship under the reactionary regime, in spite of exploitive systems in the past, revolutionary and militant poetry has always been a consolation for the vast masses of the people... and has invited the oppressed people to fight on the way toward happiness and prosperity. There is no doubt that the best examples of such works have joined the roaring waves of progressive world poetry which praises democracy, social progress, humanism and the glowing life of the toiling masses.”

The career of Sulaiman Layeq (1930— ) provides a good example of the evolution of these poetic activists who marched in the vanguard of Afghan socialism. Son of a prominent freedom-fighter in the Third Anglo-Afghan War (1919), Layeq was educated in
The Conscription of Afghan Writers

mosques and schools of Islamic law before graduating in 1958 from Kabul University’s Faculty of Letters. Throughout his school years Layeq earned a reputation for dissident pronouncements and activities. Two attempts to win election to parliament as a candidate for the PDPA (1965; 1969), of which he was a charter member, were thwarted by the government. Nevertheless, he was variously employed in journalism and bureaucratic positions with Radio Kabul and the Ministry of Information and Culture. In 1968, Layeq became publisher/editor-in-chief of the PDPA’s second weekly paper Parcham, which, however, was closed by the government in 1969.

During the 1950s Layeq wrote (primarily in Pashto, but with proficiency in Dari, Arabic and English) religious poems on Islamic unity, stressing nationalism in anti-imperialist, anti-monarchy terms, with occasional lapses into nostalgia for Afghanistan’s lost historic glories. His works initially won government literary awards, but as he moved toward scientific socialism, featuring revolutionary reforms for labourers and peasants, his works appeared less and less palatable to the arbiters of literary respectability.

When the PDPA assumed power in 1978, Layeq was appointed Minister of Radio and Television, but lost out during the ensuing PDPA political in-fighting and was imprisoned until released by Parcham’s leadership in the wake of the Soviet invasion. Layeq was then elevated to the PDPA Central Committee and the DRA Revolutionary Council and charged with the sensitive task of enlisting the support of tribal leaders in the eastern provinces.

In December 1980, he was appointed President of the Academy of Sciences of Afghanistan, in which position he heads cultural delegations to the Soviet Union and other satellite countries. The Academy’s Department of Dari published a 288-page collection of 65 of Layeq’s Dari poems entitled Badban (“The Sail;” August 1981).

More significantly, in a major government shake-up, announced on 11 June 1981, Layeq returned to the cabinet as Minister of Nationalities and Tribal Affairs, a new organization with more sinister dimensions. This ministry ostensibly professes to cement unity between Afghanistan’s multi-ethnolinguistic groups. Behind the facade, the nefarious machinations of the State Information Service (KHAD, Afghan equivalent of the Soviet KGB, headed by Dr. Najibullah) orchestrates various levels of penetration into the rural population.

Furthermore, the concept of ethnic brotherhood is central to the promotion of the National Fatherland Front (NGG; Jabhai Milli Padar Watan) launched with great fanfare on 15 June 1981 as a propaganda tool to promote “revolution.” Sulaiman Layeq was
President of the *Loya Jirqah* ("Great Assembly") of tribal representatives which founded the NFF, and became Vice-President of the NFF National Committee. Since then, appearing either as Cabinet Minister, President of the Academy or Vice-President of the NFF NC, Sulaiman Layeq, together with Dr. Najibullah, members of the PDPA Central Committee and DRA Revolutionary Council, are featured speakers at all literary functions. Their highly visible participation is evidence of the state’s close involvement in controlling ideology in Afghanistan.

Bareq Shafiyee (1932– ), another revolutionary lauded by the Congress, experienced a transition similar to that of Sulaiman Layeq. He studied at the Theological School in Kabul and then served as announcer on religious programmes at Radio Afghanistan, in addition to holding sporadic bureaucratic and journalistic positions, including editor of *Zhwandoon* ("Life") Magazine (1962) and the PDPA’s first newspaper *Khalq* ("The Masses;" April–May 1966), which was closed down after six issues for being anti-Islamic, anti-Constitution, and anti-monarchy.

Safiyyee’s early religious poetry was a source of inspiration for Muslims and he continued to use religious imagery even after joining the ranks of the socialists. This ultimately caused him grief when he published a poem called *Bugle of Revolution* (1970), a revolutionary eulogy celebrating the centennial of Lenin’s birth.\(^\text{12}\) To praise Lenin, Shafiyee used a religious term reserved almost exclusively for the Prophet Muhammad and this sparked off a series of demonstrations by the religious establishment who demanded the poet’s incarceration, and at one point almost stoned him to death.

After the 1978 coup, Bareq Shafiyee served as Minister of Information and Culture, moving to Minister of Transport in 1979, but later he was placed in limbo until redeemed by the Soviets in 1980 and appointed to the PDPA Central Committee and DRA Revolutionary Council. In June 1981 both Shafiyee and Layeq were elected to the Politburo of the Revolutionary Council. Shafayee now (1985) serves as Vice-President of the NFF Central Council, but he has failed to retain respect among the younger literati.

In fact, neither Layeq nor Shafiyee has time for creative efforts and Afghan poets who oppose those collaborating with the Babrak regime scornfully describe their erstwhile colleagues as “minstrels on pacification missions who have foresworn poets for rhetoric.”

A fine example is the hours-long speech entitled “The course of revolutionary literature in the process of the Saur revolution” which was delivered by Sulaiman Layeq on the occasion of the Scientific Conference on the Saur Revolution (23 June 1983).\(^\text{13}\) After defining the role of writers as one of provocation against exploitation and
The Conscription of Afghan Writers

nurturing ethical standards, a single sentence vaguely recalls the poetical past of this neo-propagandist: “If literature fails to be a mouthpiece for the Saur Revolution and fails to irrigate and give buds of hope to the frost-stricken hearts of the rural peasants, it will not be considered a revolutionary literature.”

Although Sulaiman Layeq and Bareq Shafiyee are the most prominent political luminaries amongst the revolutionary literati, the Congress took note of a number of others whose contributions to Afghan literature have been stimulating and provocative. These include, among others, Mohammad Shafie Rahguzar, Dr. Asadullah Habib, Dr. Mohammad Akram Osman, and Azam Rahnaward Zaryab.14

Rahguzar (?ca. 1917— ), a well-known journalist and recipient of the Lenin Prize, served for many years as editor-in-chief of Anis, one of the country’s oldest leading dailies, and also followed a long career in the Ministry of Information and Culture. He is the author of Afghanistan’s first important political novel, Hakim (“Sub-Governor”, 1956).15 Set in the year 1928, Hakim attempts to define meaningful relationships between provincial officials and the rural population, a goal which still eludes the ruling elite. The hero mirrors the visionary Party workers of the 1970s who set out confidently to “serve the people” only to find their urban naivete thwarted by the not so simplistic peasantry. It is this same peasantry and their leaders who have set the country aflame today because of the Soviet invasion.

Dr. Asadullah Habib (?ca. 1940— ) published Sapid-i-Andom (“The White-limbed”, 1965), a novel which again took up unfair marriage customs and scheming parents. Dr. Habib, who received a degree for literature from the Soviet Union, and maintained a long-time association with Kabul University as a professor in the Faculty of Literature, is exceptionally skillful in describing village life and prevailing superstitious practices.

He has also proved to be most adept in describing the traumas which urban youths experience as they move from traditional lifestyles into a modern milieu. In his script for Afghanistan’s first full-length film, Andarz-i-Madar (“A Mother’s Behest”, 1973), Asadullah Habib dealt sympathetically with an engaged couple happily enjoying all the outward manifestations of middle-class modernity in Kabul. When the miniskirted heroine appears to be compromised by a blackmailer, however, the young man reverts to traditional attitudes toward male/female honour, in which sexual purity of women symbolizes both male and family honour. Only his mother’s pleas for compassionate understanding save the couple from tragedy.

Asadullah Habib’s versatile talents place him among the best of
today’s writers, a fact the 1980 Congress recognized by electing him President of the Union of Writers and Poets of the DRA. He pledged an activist’s role for intellectuals, but in February 1983 he was replaced as President of the Union by Ghulam Dastagir Panjsheri (?ca. 1930— ), a founding member of the PDPA, whose past positions included that of Director of Censorship at Radio Kabul (1963). Asadullah Habib became Rector of Kabul University. The shift provides further evidence for the placement of the literati under the command of a small group of old-time Party trustees.

The short stories of Dr. Akram Osman (?ca. 1930s) and Azam Rahnaward (?ca. 1947— ) represent another genre more akin to the writings of European socialist-existentialists such as Jean-Paul Satre and Albert Camus which first influenced literary circles in Iran and then filtered into Afghanistan to attract a large group of writers born in the 1930s and 40s. This group was particularly active in popularizing the short story. Their themes are somber in the extreme: futility, inadequacy, loneliness, madness, discrimination, deception, duplicity, cruelty, treachery, enslavement. Islam, not openly mentioned, lingers in the background where Sufi mysticism mingles with existentialism.

The abject resignation which pervades many of these stories runs contrary to both Afghan and Islamic traditions. Nor do the introspective concerns for the ineffectual and the emphasis on subjective idiosyncracies conform to the concept of rejuvenation demanded by socialist realism. There is no attempt to enrich the reader’s perception of self; no attempt to instil a consciousness of purposes.

Akram Osman’s last story, entitled “Dracula and His Disciple,” a too thinly veiled account of Taraki and his repressive associate, Hafizullah Amin, landed him in jail. Presumably released by Babrak’s general amnesty in January 1980, he reportedly disappeared from Kabul soon after.

Azam Rahnaward, a prolific short story writer,16 dwells on the transience of human existence. His most ambiguous characters are lonely individuals, living while not living, having no sense of belonging, either to family or society, and, filled with feelings of helplessness, inadequacy and self-doubt, they are unable to cope with the injustices which threaten to engulf them. His settings are most often painted in shades of grey — misty, cold, damp, half-way existences straddling lightness and darkness, hovering between being and not being.

Despite such brooding melancholia, Rahnaward was appointed editor-in-chief of the Kabul New Times in January 1980, and then became President of Culture in the Ministry of Information and Culture.
I.
The Conscription of Afghan Writers

THE PRESENT

It is evident from these few examples that even writers lauded by the 1980 Congress have failed to comply with the guidelines of their Union which state that “it is the duty of writers to sow the seeds of goodness and happiness. The creation of a hero who sees life as beautiful, with revolutionary blood running in his veins, loves his independent and prideful country and is a confident defender of the revolution, is the task of our present writers.”

Indeed, Wasseg Bakhtari (1942– ), a poet from the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif who holds a degree from Columbia University and now sits on the Presidium of the Union while editing Zhwandoon, has observed that Afghan writers have a long way to go before these objectives can be realized. For too long, he said, writers have sought “the banished spirit of mankind, looking at life through mirrors of their own being. Too many are hollow and hackneyed, scoring daily victories against originality.”

A poet-in-exile goes further, heaping contemptuous condemnation on those who cooperate with the Soviets and their puppets: “Not a single original work in poetry, prose, song or drama has been created since the Soviet takeover; most writers merely chew the cud of what they produced before. The fervor and zeal which pervaded the optimism of the first year of the Saur Revolution when socialist realism was at its loudest bray has come to a deadly stop. In short, socialist realism has gone to pieces in Afghanistan; its production is zero, nay, its antithesis has been put in motion and the momentum is gaining with unprecedented impact. Maybe this in itself is realism; only anti-socialism.”

Current trends shaping literary policy in Afghanistan would indicate the Soviets wholeheartedly agree with this assessment. At international conferences and in their own media, Soviet rhetoric dwells on the “primitive state of Afghan culture” and the inability of the Afghans to bring about a renaissance by themselves; only through the beneficent assistance of the Soviets can the Afghans be uplifted above woeful backwardness.

Afghan writers are no longer prompted to forge “links between pens, hands and rifles in the arena of revolutionary struggle.” There is almost a total black-out in the media. In a lengthy discourse (10 January 1985) categorizing the achievements of the PDPA since its founding twenty years ago, Babrak made only passing reference to the “unions of creative intellectuals” — a throw-away mention in association with cooperatives, youth, women and other organizations — all of which, he stressed, “belong to the National Fatherland Front,” the primary institution of “revolution.”
In short, Afghan writers have been relegated to the role of propaganda hacks whose most creative efforts are largely limited to highly politicized congratulatory messages welcoming international delegations. For instance, in their message to the “International Day of Women’s Struggle for the Cause of Peace and Disarmament,” (12 November 1981), the valiant women of the socialist world were praised for promoting a more humane world in contrast to “numbers of sick and delirious women like Thatcher” in other parts of the world. Such tracts are hardly worthy additions to Afghanistan’s literary heritage, and over the years the media have ceased to take note, except in a most perfunctory manner.

Creative assaults on Afghan minds are no longer entrusted to Afghan writers, but carefully programmed by the Soviets. At the signing of an agreement between the DRA and USSR Writers’ Unions (24 November 1981) it was announced that henceforth cooperation would be “tremendously increased.” In fact, the scheme to involve Afghan writers in the reconstruction of Afghan society has been replaced by an intense sovietization campaign which has been superbly discussed by Professor Rasul Amin. The deployment of this new tactic reveals as consummate a failure on the ideological front as the escalation of troop deployments acknowledges a singular lack of success on the military front.

NOTES

1. The Kabul Times, 14 August 1979, p. 4.
8. For general discussions on the literature of this and subsequent periods, see Rene Dollot, L’Afghanistan (Paris, Payot, 1937); Huges-Jean de Dianous, “La literature Algahne de langue persane,” Orient, 8, 31 (1964), Paris; Nancy Hatch
The Conscription of Afghan Writers

14. For German translations of a collection of 11 Pashto and 21 Dari short stories by contemporary fiction writers, plus two essays on modern Afghan prose, see Hartmut Geerken (ed.), *Afghanistan* (Stuttgart, Horst Erdmann Verlag, 1977).
16. Several English translations, most of which are far from inspired, appeared periodically in the *Kabul New Times* during 1980. Also see *Aryana (Afghanistan Republic)*, (Kabul, Ministry of Information and Culture, January 1975).
Dr. Akram Osman (p. 84) reportedly disappeared from Kabul soon after his release from jail in January 1980.

He later emerged, to win literary acclaim as a "celebrated Afghan" and "famous author" of many literary works portraying the "inner life of an individual," his entire soul," and his "moral quest." A film based on a short story about a kite-flyer is said to have been popularly received in Kabul. The characters in all his stories relate to his close association with humble citizens living in the back alleys of the old city of Kabul, the Shor Bazaar.

In 1984, the Writers' Union published a collection of his works entitled "When the Reeds Flower." Another short story, "The Vagrant," won the first literary prize of the State Committee for Culture in 1364 (1985-86; Kabul New Times, 13 January 1986:4).

Sulaiman Laeg (p. 81) in December 1985 was Alternate Politburo Member of the PDPA CC, Minister of Nationalities and Tribes, and Chief of the Academy of Sciences of the DRA. He has received several national and international awards, including the Lotus Prize awarded by the Afro-Asian Writers' Association.

In December 1985, the Kabul New Times published a series of English translations of selected Pashto essays and short stories from his book Da Abasin Spide (Dawn Over Abasin). All were written prior to the Saur Revolution. A sample: one