Vassily Klimentov’s article discusses the unsuccessful joint diplomatic efforts of Moscow and Kabul, from 1980 to 1988, to win support in the Muslim world by portraying the new Afghan regime as compatible with established religious practices and supporting freedom of religion. This article fits well into the scholarship of superpower involvement in the Third World, which did not receive enough scholarly attention in the 1990s, immediately after the Cold War ended. Interest in this topic revived as scholars started analysing the Third World as the main battleground of the Cold War confrontation.

The story of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has many unanswered questions, such as why Soviet leaders decided to launch a military invasion of the country in the first place. Afghanistan’s case is also puzzling since the country had been friendly with the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s before the Republican (1973) and then Communist coups (1978/79). In 1979, Hafizullah Amin, one of the leaders of Afghan Communists, overthrew Afghanistan’s head of state Nur Taraki and became the sole leader of the country. Presumably, the political chaos made Moscow wary of the possibility of Afghan Communists losing power. Soviet leaders opted in this context for a full-scale military invasion in order to ensure control over the political order and install its vision of Communism in Afghanistan. Afghan Islamist guerrilla groups, the Mujaheddin, became the most organized and successful forces to fight against the Soviets and the new Communist government. The Mujaheddin quickly gained political support from the Soviet Union’s main Cold War rival—the US. More importantly the Mujaheddin enjoyed major support in the Muslim world through pro-American Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, then Egypt, and even had approval by the anti-American revolutionary Iran. Egypt’s ruling party characterized the Soviet invasion as “anti-Islamic” and many Muslims in the Middle East saw it this way.


Along with their Soviet supporters, the Afghan Communists found themselves surrounded by more enemies than allies, with India as an exception. The Soviet Union began quickly losing its hard earned anti-western, anti-colonialist support in the Third World, especially within the Muslim countries. In this context, Moscow and Kabul decided to portray Afghanistan internationally as a Muslim country, to prove that the new regime was not anti-clerical and allowed religious freedom. Vassily Klimentov’s article fills a gap in scholarship on diplomatic efforts of Kabul to gain credibility among Muslim countries in order to promote the anti-western solidarity of the Third World.

Klimentov discusses how Kabul began a campaign of incorporating religion in the socialist ideology to seek support among other Muslim countries that were keen to back anti-Soviet and anti-Communist Mujahedin forces in the Afghan war. Afghan authorities made up an information program that heavily relied on Soviet news agencies and publications to present a shared position (7). The article points out the complexities of political reforms that were designed in Moscow because domestically the Soviet authorities had suppressed religious activists for decades, called them dissidents, in many cases used “punitive psychiatry” against religious activists, as abundant scholarship on Moscow’s repression against religious revival in the USSR in the 1970s has demonstrated.

In terms of the Soviet Union’s foreign policy during the Cold War, by the 1970s Moscow had managed, at least it had tried, to create anti-western solidarity between the Eastern Bloc and the Third World. More than that, in accordance with Cold War logic, the USSR had followed a staunch policy of supporting Arab countries against Israel. Israel had been the main, American ally in the Middle East. However, these achievements did not create an advantage for Moscow when it invaded Afghanistan. Much to the surprise of Soviet leaders, Muslim countries that were leaning toward the left, like Algeria and Iraq for example, criticized the invasion. The perceived Afghan Communist anti-clericalism isolated Afghanistan internationally, especially among other Muslim countries (5). Thus, the anti-Soviet sentiment in the Arab world significantly damaged the Soviet strategy of making the Second World-Third World anti-Western solidarity. In the early 1980s, the Afghan war tied the US closer to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iran despite of the continuing American support of Israel. Many observers in the Third World saw the Soviet war in Afghanistan as a war of a more developed country against a developing country, therefore an imperialist undertaking similar to Western military interventions in the decolonized countries of Asia and Africa.

The Afghan Communists’ eagerness to support religion went as far as to call the 1978 revolution a national liberation revolution, not a proletarian one, and thus to link it as part of global Muslim anti-colonial nature to keep the solidarity with other Muslim countries (7).

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3 For Soviet attempts to create anti-western, left-leaning ideological movement, see Rossen Djagalov, From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and Third Worlds (Kingston, ON: McGill-Queens University Press, 2020).

Syria and Iraq were the countries with which Afghanistan maintained diplomatic contacts by the 1980s. It failed in establishing ties with western-leaning Muslim countries. Later in that decade, Abdul Wakil, the Afghan foreign affairs minister, tried to diversify diplomatic channels and visited Kuwait, Libya, Syria, Jordan, then Turkey and Iran, although Afghan foreign policy remained under tight Soviet control (10). The Soviets organized Islamic conferences in Tashkent and Baku. A peculiar moment in the story involves the Soviet and Afghan hope of Soviet and Afghan leaders to form an alliance with the new Islamist regime in Iran. Even when the Iranians did not support Afghan Communists the latter continued to offer conciliatory rhetoric toward Iran. The last hopes for Iranian support ended when Moscow showed decisive support of Baghdad in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

The last section of Klimentov’s article sheds light on new details about the ultimately unsuccessful Afghan and Soviet attempts to play a vocal role in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which was established in Saudi Arabia in 1969 and managed to gain weight in international relations as one of the main anti-western voices of the Muslim world. The author concludes by suggesting that Afghan Communists failed to promote the Islamic image of Afghanistan because they had to rely on the USSR, which made them look like passive recipients of Moscow’s policies. Thus, with the Cold War ending, the Muslim world “saw Islamic solidarity prevail over Cold War realpolitik” (23).

Klimentov’s article is a major contribution to the field of Cold War studies in a global perspective. Indeed, the legitimization of religion by the Communists in the Cold War has not previously been thoroughly studied in the literature on Moscow-Third World relations and as a new Soviet foreign policy strategy. This outlook changes the perception of the Communists as intrinsically anti-religious and complicates the history of the Cold War confrontation. The article thus brings a new dimension in Cold War studies and opens an important debate on the compatibility of state socialism and religion.

The article, moreover, contains important openings that merit further research. As the article points to the eagerness of Afghan Communists to show a new image of Afghanistan to the Muslim world, it is necessary to investigate how such efforts played out internally in Afghanistan. It appears that there was a certain mismatch between Moscow’s policies in Soviet Central Asia and in Afghanistan. If there indeed was a mismatch, what can historians make of it? Did that mean that there was more religious freedom in Afghanistan than in the Soviet Central Asia? If that is the case, how did Moscow relate to this—as an example to follow or a temporary tactical move to win the war? As a larger question, one might wonder whether such tactics were part of the disintegration of the Soviet regime, at least ideologically. Did Moscow stop following its own revolutionary ideals for the sake of short-term goals, or this rehabilitation of religion was a sign of future democratisation of Perestroika reforms?

It would be interesting to analyse the different aspects of the motivation of Afghan Communist leaders for promoting religion, moving away from an analysis of diplomacy to one of ideologies. What was so attractive

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in the Afghan version of Islam to the population? Was it only the assumed traditionalism? And what this traditionalism meant in economic terms? The whole story of Afghanistan and the Third World in general in the Twentieth century is a story of the process of the modernization of societies with urbanization, industrialisation and the consequent societal change. The Communists presented their modernization model as more adequate for this transition to the inevitable future. This debate on whether Islamism is against Modernity remains. It may be legitimate to suppose that Afghani traditional religious ideas already had answers to economic and development questions and problems that, moreover, might have been close to socialist collectivist aspirations. Therefore, the Afghan population might have found the former more attractive. It is thus important to investigate where Socialism and Islamism competed in the vision of economic development, especially given that currently there is no comprehensive research on this topic. Such a study would also contribute to the understanding of more recent developments in Afghanistan and another superpower’s failure in bringing about changes in that country.

I believe it would be possible to pursue these points of analysis by looking more closely at Afghan-Soviet pro-religion publications. Another track would be to look at what the main Soviet theorists on the Third World published at Moscow’s Institute of Oriental Studies (Institut Vostokovedenia). Presumably, these theorists discussed the possibilities of adapting Soviet Marxism-Leninism to developing world realities, including the importance of religion in the Islamic world and the possibility of the coexistence of socialist order and Islam. These new questions for further research are applicable to many other case studies during the last decade of Cold War and the rise of Islamism, when Marxist ideology, seemingly, lost its cause in the developing world.

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