

Robinson, Paul; Dixon, Jay: *Aiding Afghanistan. A History of Soviet Assistance to a Developing Country*. London: Hurst & Co. 2013. ISBN: 978-1849042390; XI, 226 S.

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The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 marked the watershed between the „Era of Détente“ and the „Second Cold War“. Accordingly, it has received considerable scholarly attention over the last three decades.¹ However, most of these works were embedded into contemporary political debates and mainly dealt with military and geopolitical questions. The Soviet engagement in Afghanistan was often portrayed as driven by the goals of ideological infiltration, economical exploitation and the creation of quasi-colonial dependence.²

In „Aiding Afghanistan“, Paul Robinson and Jay Dixon have set out to refute this view, arguing throughout the book that the Soviets „did genuinely intend their help to stimulate economic growth“ (p. 4) and that in contrast to „Western Cold War myths, exploiting the country's national resources or creating dependence was not a conscious goal“ (p. 156). To support their argument, the two authors set out to study the economic and technical assistance programs run by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan between the mid-1950s and the early 1990s. Their aim is to understand why „Soviet aid to Afghanistan was substantial, but ultimately unsuccessful“ (p. 11).

„Aiding Afghanistan“ is one of several new studies on the country that have appeared since 2001, when new state-building efforts by the international community triggered a renewed interest in their historical antecedents.³ Like other authors, Robinson and Dixon study the Soviet experience to gain insights for current projects: „It is a story which holds lessons both for current aid programs in Afghanistan and for development programs elsewhere“ (p. 2).

After an introduction that summarizes the current state of research, the second chapter introduces the reader to Western and Soviet development theory from Malthus to the

1990s: Soviet experts changed their opinion on development policies earlier than their Western counterparts: It was not the lack of capital that was preventing progress; efforts to stimulate accumulation were doomed to fail. Instead, they came to the conclusion that it was mainly social and political „institutions“ that determined a country's prospects for socio-economic development.

The next three chapters provide a chronological overview of Soviet assistance to Afghanistan from the 1920s to 1991. With the renewed Soviet interest in the „Third World“, Afghanistan became the third largest recipient of Soviet aid in the 1950s. Following the Soviet model, the Afghans established a system of five-year plans and state intervention (Chapter 3).

According to Robinson and Dixon, Western critics at the time were mostly right in claiming that Soviet assistance was of bad quality and not adapted to local needs. But these problems were by no means unique to Socialist development projects. On the contrary, Soviet and American aid was remarkably similar, focusing on large and visible projects that usually did not create significant growth⁴. More specifically Soviet were the problems of the planned economy, which led to the same consequences of inefficiency and poor quality as in the Soviet Union. However, Robinson and Dixon insist that the Afghans had considerable agency. For two decades,

¹ For an overview of previous and ongoing research cf. Tanja Penfer / Esther Meier (eds.), *Sovietnam? Die UdSSR in Afghanistan 1979–1989*, Paderborn 2014 (forthcoming).

² For example Rosanne Klass, *The Great Game Revisited*, in: *ibid.* (ed.), *Afghanistan: The Great Game Revisited*, New York 1987, pp. 1–29, especially p. 11.

³ For a direct comparison of Soviet efforts in the 1980s and American projects in the 2000s see Martin Kipping, *State-Building: Erfolg und Scheitern in Afghanistan*, Baden-Baden 2011. See also Antonio Giustozzi, *Afghanistan: Transition without End: An Analytical Narrative on State-Making*, LSE Crisis States Working Paper Series No. 2, Nov. 2008; Anton Minkov / Gregory Smolyneč, *4-D Soviet Style: Defence, Development, Diplomacy and Disengagement in Afghanistan During the Soviet Period Part I: State Building*, in: *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 23:2 (2010), S. 306–327.

⁴ Cf. Nick Cullather, *Damming Afghanistan: Modernization in a Buffer State*, in: *The Journal of American History* 89:2 (2002), S. 512–537.

they managed to play the two superpowers off against each other, receiving aid from both Cold War camps. While retrospective Soviet and Afghan accounts tend to blame the other side's shortcomings, the deficits of the Soviet system and Afghan nepotism cooperated splendidly and mutually reinforced each other.

Recognizing many of these problems, Soviet experts abandoned their fixation on heavy industrialization, nationalization and economic autarky during the 1970s. They now favored integration into the „socialist division of labor“ and a limited private enterprise. An essential precondition for this approach was the transformation of „institutions“.

After their coup in April 1978, the Afghan communists took this advice very seriously: Despite repeated warnings, they embarked on a course of rapid transformation of the Afghan society that triggered heavy resistance (Chapter 4). Despite serious reservations, the Soviet Union increased its material and financial support and sent additional advisors. It was exactly this determination not to let the Afghan revolution fail that eliminated any incentives for the Afghan communists to moderate their policies and thus contributed to the eventual Soviet invasion in December 1979.

For about two years, Soviet aid continued much as before. When the expected military success did not materialize, the Soviets pursued a more comprehensive approach: Deliveries of fertilizer to local farmers, educational exchanges and the training of Afghan experts gained importance as parts of a new „hearts and minds“ campaign. However, the desolate security situation thwarted most of these projects and the Afghan economy all but collapsed. Deliberate sabotage destroyed bridges, pipelines and other infrastructure: „The Soviets were in a chicken-and-egg situation. Improving the security situation relied on economic development; but economic development proved impossible given the security situation.“ (p. 123)

Only after Mikhail Gorbachev's election in 1985 did the Soviet approach slowly change (Chapter 5). The new General Secretary told the Afghan leadership to „forget about Social-

ism“ (p. 140) and urged them to seek national reconciliation. However, with the impending Soviet withdrawal, aid became even more important to prepare the Afghan government to stand on its own feet; expenditures peaked in 1987. The modalities of aid were now fundamentally transformed: Funds were provided for the private sector and short-term humanitarian relief gained importance over long-term development projects. After all troops and most civilian advisors had been withdrawn in February 1989, Soviet aid continued (Conclusion). But as the security situation deteriorated, most Soviet-trained Afghan specialists fled the country. When Boris Yeltsin ended all aid for Afghanistan in 1992, the regime collapsed.

In „Aiding Afghanistan“, Robinson and Dixon have impressively assembled all currently available information on Soviet aid to Afghanistan. Linking theory and practice, they convincingly show how both mutually influenced each other. Based on interviews and archival sources from the Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE), they provide an extensive summary of different forms of aid: Charts in the annex (pp. 157–177) list 142 completed projects, ranging from power plants and dams to bakeries and bicycle factories. Tens of thousands of Afghans were trained in the Soviet Union and the experience of Soviet advisors in Afghanistan is considered as well.⁵

From a historian's perspective, however, the study's focus on current relevance is cause for some criticism: Current development theory and the historical experience intermingle in several parts of the book, the perspectives of various actors and different layers of time are not always differentiated very thoroughly. When Robinson and Dixon analyze factors that inhibit economic progress in Afghanistan (pp. 14–18), it is not always clear if these are contemporary assessments or a deduction from current development theory. While changing views on how to develop „backward“ countries are presented in much detail, the basic assumptions of „moderniza-

⁵ Cf. Artemy Kalinovsky, *The Blind Leading the Blind: Soviet Advisors, Counter-Insurgency and Nation-Building in Afghanistan*, CWIHP Working Paper #60, January 2010, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/WP60_Web_Final.pdf> (13.10.2014).

tion“ and „development“ and their heterogeneous meanings for Soviet, American and Afghan actors are rarely put into question.

But this is a task for future research. Despite some reservations, „Aiding Afghanistan“ is an important book. Robinson and Dixon break new ground with their comprehensive study of Soviet civilian development efforts in Afghanistan. If the available sources permit, their work will hopefully stimulate further studies on the perspective of Afghan actors, on their interactions with Soviet advisors and on the repercussions of the Soviet experience in Afghanistan for the course of the history of the two countries and international politics in general.

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