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W Coles

8 April 1982

Policy Unit

PRIME MINISTER

The attached letter from Vladimir Bukovsky, together with an article which I sent him, to which the letter refers, is self-explanatory.

I am copying this minute to Francis Pym.

JOHN HOSKYNS

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Vladimir Bukovsky
240 King's College
CAMBRIDGE
CB2 1ST

2 April 1982

Dear Mr Hoskyns

Many thanks for sending me a copy of an article from the Spectator on Afghanistan. It so happened that I have met the author, shortly after he came back from Afghanistan and his excellent film was shown by ITN.

Unfortunately, the Western countries still do not appreciate the importance of this war. I have just come back from Washington where I tried in vain to persuade some people of influence that, in view of the developments in Poland (which is far from over, and a major crisis could be expected within a few months, with the military Government crumbling down and with Soviets replacing the Polish units with their own), and also in view of the current Soviet plans to instigate an internal feudal fight in Pakistan (there are indications that the Soviets formed a "provisional government of Baluchistan" seated in Kabul), the only thing we can do is to activate all the "hot points", thus overstraining the Soviet resources. Obvious points of such activation are: Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Angola. By doing so, the Americans could relieve the pressure from Central America as well.

Well, regrettably, the people in Washington are too much preoccupied with their careers and intrigues to think wider. I feel enormous frustration after talking with them.

So, that is how we lost our world, piece by piece, for the last 50 years.

All best wishes,

Yours sincerely

V Bukovsky

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are getting a little old for action.

The lesson has been learned in Europe that violence must be met with force. After the first terrorist successes governments pulled themselves together and improved police organisation and arrangements for sharing intelligence. Each country now has its own task force: the SAS in Britain, GSG 9 in West Germany, Marines in Holland, Gendarmes in France, and now special

forces in Italy and Spain. All have won battle honours against terrorists.

Yasser Arafat's decision to stop training other people's terrorists for a while may be a small step but it is a further encouragement to Europeans who have already put their enemies on the defensive. Any sign of conversion to the belief that diplomacy and lobbying are better than bombing and machine-gunning is welcome.

Afghanistan: no going back

Nick Downie

Afghanistan is, or rather was, a very beautiful country, and the road which leads to the Khyber pass from Kabul, the capital city, twists through spectacular gorges and along precipitous cliffs. I first made the journey in 1964 as a teenage hitchhiker, and was awed. Ten year later I travelled the same road, and was appalled.

In 1964 I had been a tourist, but by 1974 I had spent six years as a professional soldier and was on my way home after three years of operational duty in the Dhaufar campaign in Oman. The fighting there had mostly been in rough mountain country, and eventually it required nearly 10,000 men to subdue a handful of ill-armoured Marxist guerrillas. From Kabul I wrote to a friend in Oman, saying that Afghanistan made Dhaufar look like Salisbury Plain. In short, Afghanistan is a regular soldier's nightmare, and a guerrilla paradise.

This is fairly obvious to anyone with a military background, including, I imagine, the Russian general staff. However, the official view of the US State Department and most Western governments is that the Soviet invasion was a monumental blunder, the implications of which are only now beginning to sink into the minds of Kremlin strategists. According to this theory, the Russians' aim is strictly limited and eventually they will be forced to withdraw, which is a comforting idea. Unfortunately, it seems to have been formulated by men who have little practical experience of either Afghanistan or guerrilla warfare.

The same shortcomings also apply to rather too many of the journalists who stagger about with the Afghan *mujahideen*, for periods ranging from three days to three weeks. Their reports on the effectiveness of the resistance sometimes seem to bear a direct relationship to the number of blisters collected en route. The overall reporting of the Afghan war has been rather misleading, and occasionally disgraceful.

The worst examples occurred just after the Russian invasion, when every newspaper and TV station was scrambling to get the most dramatic story. One headline read, 'First Girl in the War Zone' — which turned out to mean that an intrepid young lady had taken a bus to the

tourist observation point on the Pakistani side of the Afghan frontier. A TV report showed a tarmac road which purported to be in Afghanistan. In fact, the cameraman had filmed a main road in Pakistan.

However, the most spectacular example was an ITN news item which told us that the Afghan way of dealing with the Russian tanks was to pour petrol over some dedicated man, who would then set light to himself and dive into the open hatch of a passing armoured vehicle. Not a shred of evidence was produced to support this claim, but that is hardly surprising since the feat is physically impossible. But the story was widely believed, and it set the seal on the Kiplingque image of 'fearless fighters' — a myth which persists to this day.

The misconception that all malodorous, uneducated tribesmen are natural soldiers is shared not only by diplomats and journalists, but also by many army officers. In Oman I lived with bedouin irregulars for two and a half years, and became deeply attached to their eccentricities. By the end, the only noticeable difference between us was that I stank worse than they did, which may explain why I was given instructions only at quarterly intervals. My orders were invariably short, and sometimes impossible to execute.

On one occasion I was hauled in front of the Brigadier, who calmly outlined his plan for dealing with the main enemy stronghold — a mountainous death-trap which went by the unfortunate, but quite apt name of 'Sheershitti'. He wanted me to collect 100 men and sort the place out. His final words are engraved on my memory — 'I don't want to hear any requests for helicopters, or infantry companies in support. You are

to get in there, live like guerrillas, and kill the enemy.' The man had clearly gone mad, but I saluted and set off for the *souk* to break these tidings to the bedouin. Their reaction was predictable, so I pretended to negotiate for a month before returning to the Brigadier with the news that he would have to find an alternative way of ending the war. Neither he nor his battalion commanders ever really understood how to handle or employ the ragged, bloody-minded, Dhaufari tribesmen — which brings me back to Afghanistan.

The situation there was summed up by the cartoonist Giles with his customary acuity, a few days after the Russian invasion. His caption read, 'I see your old treacherous tribal riff-raff, enemies of the British Raj, are now your glorious allies, Colonel.' This switch of loyalties, combined with the wish for a bit of romantic colour, has tended to obscure the unpalatable truth — our new allies are *still* composed largely of treacherous riff-raff.

A few journalists have attempted to demonstrate the fact on film and in print, at the risk of a certain unpopularity with the pro-Afghan lobby. Similarly, this winter, a television reporter nearly wrecked his career by saying that the Zimbabwean guerrillas were devastatingly incompetent. Accusations of 'racist' and 'fascist' rang round the corridors of my industry. However, a tactical, military judgment does not imply any sort of political sympathy, or lack of it, nor does it necessarily predict the eventual outcome.

Guerrilla warfare is a complicated business, and the ability to shoot straight is only a part of it. Thus, the Zimbabwians won, the Kurds (who were good soldiers) lost, Polisario (who are superb) are winning, and the Eritreans (also very good) are losing. None of this detracts from the idea that treacherous riff-raff are entitled to free and fair elections. Most Englishmen seem to subscribe to this view, the Americans do in Afghanistan and Poland but not in El Salvador or Chile, and the Russians never have, anywhere.

The official Western explanation for the Soviet invasion is that the Afghan government was collapsing and the Kremlin thought that it could stop the rot by marching in with 85,000 men. This so irritated the populace that they set about the Russians with a blind fury, killing and injuring some 10,000 of them. The Russians, it is further claimed, have now realised their error, but are not sure what to do next. It seems that their intentions are basically peaceful and, surprised by the sudden strength of the resistance and the inadequacy of the Afghan army, they are desperately looking for a way out that will not leave the place in anarchy, or cost them too much 'face'. Anyway, this is the official blunder theory. I just wish I could believe it.

It is best to forget the Czars, the Great Game, warm water ports, and Lieutenant Flashman, because this story began a mere 60 years ago. Throughout that time the Russians have been beavering away in



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Afghanistan, building roads, running factories, teaching in schools, training the soldiers, studying the people, and mapping the place in detail. In 1965 I spent ten weeks tramping round the Hindu Kush mountains with four Tadjik porters. We travelled all over an area called Nuristan, and part of it, the Ashkun, was so remote that in places we were the first outsiders ever to clamber along its tracks. However, in several of the Ashkun villages the first question I was asked was whether I had a radio. Two Russians had been in there a couple of years earlier, and they were the first Europeans the people had ever seen. They had had a radio. It is often suggested that the Russians did not understand the Afghans before they invaded. I believe they knew the place and its people like the backs of their hands, and they still know exactly what they are doing. Eighteen years, almost to the day, before the Soviet invasion, an article appeared in the *Daily Telegraph*. It was written by a then Conservative MP, Neil McLean. A member of the wartime SOE, he fought in Albania alongside the resistance. Ever since then, guerrilla warfare has been one of his interests and he has spent time with active guerrilla armies in several far-off places, but 20 years ago he was writing about Afghanistan. His remarks were prophetic.

'The main external force pressing against Afghanistan to-day is the growing power of Russia in Asia. . . . Perhaps the most alarming result of Russian aid is that, although the Russians may at present have little direct political influence in Afghanistan, they will soon have established up-to-date air bases and road communications which they could take over with great ease whenever they might wish. . . . At this point, however, it seems unnecessary for the Russians to take over Afghanistan and, as one Russian diplomat put it, to become "responsible for looking after 12 million armed Afghans in smelly turbans" But if Afghanistan were to disrupt in anarchy, Russia would surely intervene and Pakistan might be faced with the Russians on her own frontiers.'

This warning was totally ignored, which in 1961 was perhaps forgivable. Twenty years later, after two years of Soviet occupation, we are still ignoring all the evidence, preferring to believe that the Russians will one day pack up and go home. It is no longer forgivable: it is irresponsible.

In 1979 I spent four months with the *Imjahideen*, in the foothills of the Hindu Kush. By sheer coincidence, I left Afghanistan four days before the Russians attacked, and I heard the news on the radio. I thought then that the Russians had arrived to do a thorough job, for which they would need at least 500,000 men. The first 85,000 I assumed to be a holding force. Eighteen months later it was still only 85,000 men and the reports which filtered out didn't quite make sense. So, very reluctantly, I decided to have another look.

I have just spent two months there — in Kandahar, the country's second largest

city, and in the mountains to the south-east of Kabul. The latter was useful because the area straddled several important supply routes, and I was able to spend hours chatting to men from all over Afghanistan, so building up a picture of events elsewhere. Without trying to offend the citadels of academia, I will outline what I believe is actually happening in the place.

First the Russians are conducting a holding operation, at minimum cost to themselves in both casualties and cash. They are holding most, but not all, of the main towns, and their supply route north to the frontier, and they are holding a string of useful military bases.

Second, the Afghan army is doing most of the fighting, and then only when it absolutely has to. It has been seriously depleted, but does not yet seem on the point of collapse; and, judging by the number of garrisons that it occupies, it must consist of more than the 25,000 men that Washington would have us believe.

Third, the guerrilla resistance is still badly fragmented by innumerable political and tribal divisions, which is an unmitigated disaster. It lacks effective leadership, and is very short on military expertise. It has neither the strength, the organisation nor the weapons seriously to affect the main garrisons or the Russian bases, but it can hold on to its mountainous territory indefinitely, particularly if no real effort is made to attack it.

Fourth, the cost to the Russians of trying to pacify the country would be enormous, because it is murderous terrain to fight in and they would be taking on almost the entire rural population. At the end of the war they would merely have gained one of the poorest countries in the world, whose only natural asset is gas, which they were buying anyway.

Fifth, the Russians are not military or political idiots. Unlike a large number of Western adventures, the Soviet moves seem to come off — Hungary, Czechoslovakia, South Yemen, Vietnam, Ethiopia (where they acted brilliantly in the Ogaden), Angola, and now Afghanistan. They are worried by Poland, but who isn't? They do not waste time on places like El Salvador.

Sixth, Afghanistan has absolutely no value whatsoever except as a strategic salient. It can be, and is being allowed to rot. So long as the Russians can hold on to their bases and the main roads, they have all they need. They should be able to do this for the next 20 years without any great difficulty. In purely military and economic terms, the cost of their presence in Afghanistan is less to them than is the cost of Northern Ireland to the British.

As to their long-term objective, they now have so many options open that it is difficult to pin down a single target. They can threaten Baluchistan, Pakistan, Iran, the Gulf, and the West's oil supply. A threat may be all they want, or they could, if necessary, move forward whenever it suits them. One thing, however, seems certain — they do not intend to go back.