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On The Margins of Amanullah Era in Afghanistan: The Shughnan Rebellion of 1925*

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The civil unrest which took place in summer 1925 at Shughnan and Rushan – a mountain areas across Afghan-Soviet border, became one of the consequent events, that eventually determined the overthrow of Afghan reformist ruler, king Amanullah. This seemingly secondary political episode, being overshadowed by the preceded Host rebellion, became nevertheless remarkable expression of Amanullah shortcomings and constraints on geographical, social and ethnical periphery of his regime. Simultaneously it illuminated of those times Soviet attitude towards Afghanistan.

The Shughnan/Rushan events of 1925 didn't attracted much attention of experts, - there are just several general remarks on it in existing literature on the subject. This short essay aims to shed light on it in order to investigate some initial, yet distant, causes of Amanullah failure, and cover the interplay of inter-state/inter-regional interests within this particular inaccessible mountain region of Central Asia. The study is based on the data from Russian Center for Reservation and Investigation of the Documents of Recent History – former Soviet Communist Party archive (the files with the correspondence between Soviet diplomatic service, central and regional, and local political leadership).

To the date Shughnan was the second-rank district within Wakhan and Pamir areas, with the underdeveloped economy and

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infrastructure. Local population, with dominating Persian-speaking Tajiks, and confessionals prevailing Ismailis, belonged to most marginalized groups of Afghan society. "The Ismailis' situation improved somewhat in the post-independent period... Although the state did not suppress the Ismailis, the Sunni majority continued to discriminate against them. Ismaili pirs did not have any role in the political decision-making process within the state bureaucracy. Their role was restricted to local politics, in which they commonly acted as intermediaries between the community and government officials"¹⁾. The increase of taxes and conscription, introduced by government, provoked mass civil unrest in the area.

The Course of Shughnan/Rushan Events and its Consequences

On 2nd April 1925 a crowd of Shughnan residents arrested local hakim Mohammad Taher-khan. Next day about 800 rebels armed with 2-3 dozens of slow-match guns, surrounded fort Qala-e-Bar-Panj, cutting its water supplies. The siege lasted till 13th April, during this time they numerously requested Soviet military support, but were rejected. At night 13th April fort garrison made a sortie and defeated rebel core forces. Another attack was made from Ishkashim by 25 horsemen detachment commanded by gundmishr Gul Mir-khan. The losses of both sides estimated about 20. The vast majority of rebels, in all about 8 thousands persons, or 2 thousands households, crossed Amy river (at this place toponym Panj), that is refuge, or emigrated to Soviet territory. Some of them brought with them animals and property, - all this Sodom had been concentrated near Qala-e-Boshar bridge on Russian side of Rushan. It should be noted that Soviet border guard immediately disarmed them on the order of diplomatic agency. Interestingly, Soviets friendly and numerously recommended their Afghan counterparts to prevent fellows Afghans from crossing Soviet border because of hard economical situation and the lack of free lands in Badakhshan. But the events impetuously approached critical line: 4 days before unrest its

inspirers asked through intelligence channels for appointment with Soviet officials, but hadn't been responded.²⁾

Soon after this troublous people influx three Afghan officials, headed by Mohammad Zia-khan, Faizabad hakim, came for negotiations, but refugees rejected any agreement. The situation became more and more deadlocked, because the Soviet authorities of Mountain Badakhshan couldn't really provide arriviers any help. The latter expected to resolve the problem by sending a delegation to Dushanbe, the capital of Tajik Socialist republic. The Tajik leadership, in their turn, discussed the arising issue shortly prior Shughnani delegation arrival, - being confused by real causes of Shughnan affair, it requested directives from Muscovite bosses. Their own general line was as followed: to reject refugee requests on arms so as to avoid complications with Afghan government, and just to shift the latter to cotton-rich inner lands. This project seemed them to be beneficial from economic as well political point of view: the expected waste lands cultivation and the formation of good social base in hardly governed distant area would be quit acceptable output of this challenging Shughnan-Soviet connection. The problem became complicated by refugees request to accept all of them in Soviet citizenship, and than on this "legal" ground to help them to liberate, as they stated, their historical lands.

Tajik leading authorities in Dushanbe took into account some considerations, and drafted some measures, excluding the evacuation of Afghan Shughnanis/Rushanis into Pamir or across the border because of area heavy over-population. Refugee replacement far Tajikistan inland was also not available, because such campaign needed urgent and significant subsidy. After careful calculations Dushanbe bosses reserved for their unexpected guests the last and obviously hard choice: go back to Afghanistan, and as soon as possible, because the sowing campaign went to an end. The same agitation was simultaneously started by Afghan authorities: 2nd May their commission from Khanabad arrived at refugee disposal for investigation of Shughnan rebellion. The commission declared Amanullah farman

pardoning its participants/involved and claiming them to return home. Three days later Soviet and Afghan authorities jointly addressed refugee mass rally, - the response was about 80 – 85% return, all just within one week. When Shughnan/Rushan rebel delegation came with the delay to Dushanbe on 15th June, Soviet Tajik leadership didn't made anything, but to persuade them to return, under guaranteed safety (the last didn't referred to 3 – 4 rebel inspirers). The last, but not the least consideration by Dushanbees (Znamensky's, chief of regional diplomatic staff) was, that "it would be madly to expose this part of Afghan Badakhshan, which being secured, will give us the direct way to Chitral through Zebak"³⁾. As it follows from a directive reply by Chicherin, the head of Russian Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, on 2nd August 1925, - Moscow suffered from the lack and delay of information on Shughnan affair, but approved limited refugee settlement on waste lands in a distance from Afghan border. Chicherin explained: "Basically we shouldn't encourage the Afghan Tajik cross-border movement, but those already did, cannot be re-settled to Afghanistan". The important detail was that Soviet side at least shared from the very beginning the responsibility for this mutiny, - the head of a special border division Gerassimov on confidential meeting at 28 March 1925, on the eve of Shughnan events, stated: "Amanullah power is weakening, he may be overthrown by Abdul Kerim-khan, and it's high time to consider the idea of unification of autonomous Mountain Badakhshan region with Afghan Badakhshan..."⁴⁾ Rebel petition to Dushanbe leadership proves, that Shughnan inspirers took into account the suggested Soviet support. Wouldn't have they the explicit promises of any assistance, the armed rebellion couldn't started. This provocative approach by Soviet "specials" was censured by diplomats, - the latter even let it know through agent network to Afghan authorities.

At late September 1925 the situation was shaped by following government measures: the re-location of Shughnan/Rushan refugees back to Afghanistan, jointly, though unofficially operated by Afghan and Soviet authorities; all

administrative staff in Afghan border areas was totally replaced and filled by ethnic Afghans (Pashtoons); the involved population was intimidated by debts, penalties and repression. For this purpose a special Kabuli Hindu detachment came in Darwaz, a large money prize was fixed for Shughnani rebel leader Mahram Bek' head, and commandos team of 8 men was sent for capturing him, dead or alive.⁵⁾

Conclusion

As it leads from the available sources, the Shughnan/Rushan rebellion had been occurred because the local population was among the most handicapped and actually oppressed social stratas of the whole Afghan nation geographically, ethnically, economically, etc.

The course and dynamics of above events was heavily influenced and directed by external factor. This area was of great geo-political importance for Soviets, and they preferred at that moment to maintain good relations with Amanullah regime, despite his numerous political, etc confusions and miscalculations. The Shughnan affair had demonstrated, that Soviets made a hard choice in this challenging political situation, the lack of material resources and supplies were among the imperatives of their policies. This mutiny of Afghanistan ethnic minorities and the method of conflict resolution have had long-run consequences: later, during Inqilab 1929, many of Shomali and border peoples opposed Amani regime. Soviet regional leadership, from his side, didn't managed to maintain pro-Soviet impulses and aspirations among this part of Afghan population: even those, pretty rare, were ignored in favor of geo-political considerations and inter-governmental rapprochement, against some moral obligations before reassured neighboring peoples.⁶⁾ Shughnan events thus proved and exemplified the priority of inter-state relations between USSR and Afghanistan in the midst of 1920s, in comparison with clandestine and similar non-institutionalized activities, which occasionally took place early this period

(accordingly Bolshevik efforts to establish pro- socialist circles across Afghan border and in Herat, and Amanullah pan-islamist initiatives like Central-Asian confederation under his own leadership, etc).

Basically, Shughnan rebellion had never questioned the general lines of Amanullah strategy, but it clearly demonstrated the weaknesses of his state machinery, central as well local, and his incapability to develop the adequate tactics/algorhythm of reforms, so as to avoid the extremes of modernizing policies. The result was, that both sides only mutually undermined their socio-political confidence, and sharpened government – minorities tensions.

Appendix A

On behalf of the residents of Afghan Shughnan to comrades staying in power at Dushanbe

Petition

Because our oppression, offences, and violence by Afghans overstepped the limits we can bear, and at the moment, when our brothers in Tajik Soviet Republic may live quietly and forwardly, yet last year we had petitioned to comrades staying in command at Dushanbe, to accept all of us to Soviet citizenship so as to save us from oppression and violations by Afghans. Our petition to Khorogh Soviet authorities didn't have any consequences. Orally we were assumed: just start the struggle against Afghans, and than we lend a helping hand. This year Afghan oppression had been strengthened. Many from our ranks were killed. In the force of this we, in all about 8 thousands men, women and kids, left our places and are seeking protection by Tajik Soviet republic... and again we receive the same reply: let start the struggle against Afghans, and than we support you. Being not satisfied with the given reply by Khorogh comrades, we approach you, comrades, with the request to liberate us from

Afghan chains, and to accept in USSR as an equal citizens. We haven't anymore forces to endure the Afghan oppression. Precisely two months ago we came in to this side of Amy and stay at this mountain area, where only grass is growing. And there aren't any reply to our petition. Addressing the given written petition to you, comrades in command at Dushanbe, we are still awaiting, that you'll help us to be liberated from Afghan oppression and permit us to live in USSR as your brothers and citizens. We also expect, that you get back our lands, so as we'll work safely as an equal citizens ... By the moment the modest supplies we brought with us, already finished, ... the majority of us are aksakals and kids, - all of the men between 14 – 30 were forcefully conscripted to Afghan army. ... So, we are totally depending now from your good will, - to accept or reject our request and given petition. 1304 hijra, 19 ashura.

Signatures are followed.

Appendix B

Entrust/Verdict

We, undersigned, the residents of Afghan Shughnan, the area located between Qala-e-Bashar, from one side, and Chansoor – Rushan, from another side, being reduced to despair by Afghan oppression, decided to seek for Soviet protection. For fulfilling this mission we decided to put our written petition to our aksakal Mahram Bek and direct him as our warrant person, to Dushanbe to comrades in command at TASR for delivering it and holding all necessary negotiations. Everything, that the mentioned Mahram Bek will report and make on behalf of us, is right, and not arguable by us. 1304, 19 ashura.

Aksakal Insara - a stamp
Dowlet Bek ibn Alef Bek, etc.⁷⁾

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- ¹⁾ Hafizullah Emadi, *The End of Taqiyya: Reaffirming the Religious Identity of Ismailis in Shughnan, Badakhshan – Political Implications for Afghanistan// Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, July 1998, p. 110
- ²⁾ The Russian Center for Preservation and Exploration of the Documents of Recent History (former Soviet Communist Party Archive, Russian abbreviation – RTsHIDNI), Collection 62, list 2, file 243, page 138.
- ³⁾ Ibidem, p. 125
- ⁴⁾ Ibidem, p. 140
- ⁵⁾ The Russian Center for Preservation and Exploration of Documents ... Collection 62, list 2, file 1807, p. 5
- ⁶⁾ Shughnani/Rushani pro-Soviet attitudes, in particular their mass desire to become Soviet subjects, looks a bit conjunctural, as a search for considerable external support. This point mainly featured the intra-regional ethno-political situation. Such Shughnani's flexibility may be additionally explained by the state of their religious adherence: according B.Kushkaki, some of them hardly followed even obligatory precepts of Islam, such as salat. – Kattagan i Badakhshan by B.Kushkaki. Russian transl. from Persian (Tashkent, 1926), p. 171. Interestingly, similar, that is pro-Soviet, though much more emphasized, attitudes again took place about 50 years later, during political upheavals of late 1970s. As above-cited H.Emadi states: "The majority of Ismaili elites maintained that only socialism could remedy their social and economic problems and they could see that their fellows Ismailis across the Oxus River in Gorno-Badakhshan and those in Sinkiang in China apparently enjoyed a more comfortable life under socialism", - see his *The End of Taqiyya ...* op. cit, p. 114. Given an expert statement seems exaggerated: some Ismailis followed leftist line because of opportunistic considerations, such as Emadi's referred Taqiyya, etc.
- ⁷⁾ The Russian Center for Preservation and Exploration of Documents... Collection 62, list 2, file 243, pp. 53 – 55, 61. Both these texts, Petition and Entrust/Verdict, a translation from Persian into Russian, were attached to Soviet diplomatic correspondence. The above appendix is a re-translation from Russian into English by author. The same Soviet source also calculated the social structure of under-signed:

1. Aksakals	-	13
2. Clergy	-	13
a/ Halifas (Ismailis)	-	3
b/ Mullahs	-	4
c/ Seyyids	-	5
d/ Imams	-	2
e/ Hojas	-	3
3. Arbabs	-	17
4. Dowlets	-	6
5. Mirzas	-	3
6. Shah-e (the members of old Tajik clans)	-	25

Note: all listed titles, explanatory remarks, as well wrong summing number of clergy are by Soviet diplomatic source.