



Afghani rebels with Soviet whirlybird they downed.

Afghanistan rebels target Soviets

In April, Aleksei Yepishev, political commissar of the Soviet Army and a key figure in the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, flew into Afghanistan. Yepishev was not vacationing in the mountainous, Texas-sized Asian nation. He was there to prop up the pro-Moscow government of Nur Mohammed Taraki, which is losing a rapidly escalating civil war with Islamic guerrillas.

The Khalqi Party, which Taraki heads, seized control of the country in a military coup, which they have since dubbed a "socialist revolution", early in 1978. Opposition at first was limited — the dictatorship of Mohammed Daud, also pro-Soviet, had done nothing for the desperately poor Afghani masses.

But Taraki instituted a series of ill-considered social reforms and backed them with repressive laws. The government did not take into account local custom and tradition or the fact that the small Khalqi Party had little firm support among the common people. Ignoring or attacking religion at a time of a nationalistic resurgence of Islam throughout the Middle East was a fatal error.

Taraki also sold out the national interests of the Afghani people. Soviet advisors were everywhere, running things openly and behind the scenes. Alienation from the government grew, even among patriotic intellectuals and leftists, as a result of steps like the dumping of Afghanistan's traditional flag in favor of a new, red banner.

By late last fall, the traditional-

ly independent mountain tribesmen were in revolt against the government. This rebellion spread and became a direct threat to Taraki's rule. Tens of thousands fled government reprisals and became refugees in Pakistan.

During a mid-March uprising in Herat, the third largest city, large numbers of soldiers and police deserted. On April 20 it escalated to armed mutiny in the Jalalaba garrison near the Pakistan border.

Government officials have tried to backtrack. "Socialism" is seldom mentioned and Taraki gets himself photographed praying in mosques, but it's too little, too late. Nearly every section of the population is hostile to the regime.

Taraki's main answer has been to lean on the U.S.S.R. even more. Yepishev's visit was followed by an airlift of T-60 tanks, MiG fighter-bombers, Mi24 rocket-armed copters and over 2,000 Soviet "advisors" to use this hardware.

Russians have become a natural target for the rebels. Over 200 have been reported killed so far. Other Europeans describe close calls in city streets when angry crowds armed with clubs and knives surrounded them on the assumption they were Soviets.

The rulers of the U.S.S.R. are in a real bind. They have committed themselves to the defense of the faithful Taraki regime — losing control of Afghanistan would be a practical and prestige setback. But they worry that the country may become, in the words of one Soviet diplomat, "our Viet Nam".