

AFGHANISTAN PROPAGANDA POSTERS
1978-1992
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Introduction

Background to the problem:

As a result of Cold War in late December 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in order to extend its dominance to support their communist government of Afghanistan against the *Mujahideen*, the tension between Eastern Bloc and Western Bloc, that resulted in the production of propaganda posters in different countries led by the Soviet Union (USSR), and the United States and its allies both backing up with different ideologies and interests.

Prior to the invasion of Afghanistan USSR already established a regime in Kabul which was called the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). This party have been led the Saur Revolution on 27th April 1978.

Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) one month after the Saur Revolution started their propaganda strategies to attract the mass people of Afghanistan for their support. The DRA was acting as the representative of mass, toilers, and peasants. On the other hand, *Mujahideen* organized different groups to fight against the communist government. *Mujahideen* started using the same method as USSR's propaganda in order to all Afghan people should participate in *Jihad* (holy war) against the communist government and ultimately against Soviet presence in Afghanistan through propagating communism as anti-Islam.

Problem Statement:

In this research, I investigate, what were the defining characteristics of the *Mujahideen* propaganda posters as opposed to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan DRA propaganda posters in Afghanistan? As Zinovia has written, the Cold War was an ideological war. So, both sides' imagery backed by different ideologies. But, because both sides' posters were for the same people, the posters had some share characteristics too.

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Theoretical framework:

I aim to investigate the imagery that was produced during the cold war and its purpose as ideologically, politically, and iconography. I try to find and analyze the posters' messages and glorify the politically charged ideologies through methods of distributions. The posters are visual propaganda, so the icons, they have used, are important to know how and why they have used specific icons and also colors.

Significance of Study:

Right now, people in Afghanistan do not know about the DRA and *Mujahideen* propaganda posters, which even the posters were distributed in Afghanistan, not so long ago. For people like Afghanistan country, which is always in conflict, it is important to know about the propaganda as a whole as an information weapon. These weapons are using for persuasion and deception of the mass to stand against a group, ideology, government and as a tool for policy making.

Literature Review

Text 1

The question in the research, that have published in 2015, is “what kind of communication, and what sort of themes and motifs played a significant role in conveying revolutionary ideology aimed at a society of which a majority, with political potential, could not read and write?” So, for this situation, they used pictures rather than of the printed word. The DRA government had to consider the Afghan society and culture to create understandable posters for people. In this article, the author says that the Afghan communist could not find any formula for making an effective dialogue with the neutral part of the society during the takeover in April 1978. Afghan communist government, DRA, imitated from Soviet propaganda posters which were two types: “(1) the *plakat*, and (2) the more complex *lubok*.” In Afghanistan, both were issued, although they had their visualization form and highly considered for illiterates, and also added calligraphy and miniature. At that time, in the middle of the 20th century, Afghanistan literacy rate was approximately 10%. The role of the poster was to grab the mass attention, then reveal its message and finally, it should affect deeply for a long time to the audiences. Hence, the potential of the picture results from visual elements substituting for the printed text. The poster effects due to the image while the text should be minimal because the addressees subconsciously split their attention. If they are illiterate, the text message remains “wordless” as only the picture reflects the story. One of the socialist realism features is to visualize the presented ideology from political speeches or slogans to a communicable message.

Text 2

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This text is the second part of the first text which is issued in The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture in 2017, and the question is the same. To find the answer to the question, the author has written that to stay in power, the rulers use phraseology that is clear for the people, and behind that, they use their own version of ideology and reflect their own reality. In Afghanistan propaganda posters they used some religious words like *Allahu akbar* “God is the greatest”, the *bismilla* one *b-ismi-llahi-r-rahmani-r-rahimi* “In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”, or the name of the Prophet Muhammad that can be “read” in public by illiterates too because they recognize their complex calligraphic structures rather than particular letters. In this writing, the author studies the posters in three levels: (1) a linguistic message easily distinguishable from (2) a coded iconic one, and finally (3) a non-coded iconic message.

Text 3

This text is the third part of (Visual Propaganda in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan) by Mateusz M. Kłagisz. In this article, the author is investigating photograph and postage stamps which are related to land reforming to find the answer to the question. He focuses on the photographs and postage stamps that they are related to the land reform. He finds that the rulers use some familiar and clear phraseology to convince the people to support them and be remain in power. They reveal their ideology and their own realities from behind the photos to affect the mass. Actually, they try to have full access over the information sources and means of communication to control. They want to determine which information should be received by the people and which should not. to reflect your reality into Socialism, the graphic designer needed to use the familiar and local elements to the addresses. For instance, they DRA used the calligraphy as a visual element more than verbal and they reflect their own slogan

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“*Zamin māl-e kasi-st ke bālā-ye ān kār mi-konad* (The land belongs to those who till it)”
(Kłagisz, 2018)

Text 4

Zinovia in this text (Cold War Propaganda), described the Cold War as an ideological war. The element of ideology is essential in understanding the real nature of this non-conventional form of confrontation and its consequence. The role of propaganda, the strategies, and the techniques employed for its implementation are directly related to the ideological character of the Cold War. From this point of view, the Cold War can be a battle of competing propaganda. In this situation, every power trying their best effort to propagate the majesty of their economic and social model. In literature, the questions about the ethical aspects of the Cold War have been raised. Because social scientists and communication experts were working with the US government to observing and shaping public opinion. The main features of the American model which they wanted to implement to the rest of the world were liberal democracy, capitalism economic and mass consumption patterns. The US used this as an anti-communist strategy to stop the influence of the soviet on other countries.

Text 5

The *Art of Engagement* is the title of a book has written by Peter Selz. He discusses visual politics in California. Because, propaganda posters are also a kind of political art, so I reviewed this book too. In this book has written that socioeconomic situation acting as a catalyst during the cold war for political artworks. Actually, the Cold War was combat between two models of socioeconomic; (1) Communism and (2) the Capitalism. Artists in California have created artworks independently. like Ann Chamberlain, Robert Arneson, Rupert García, Martha Rosler, and Kim Abeles... They didn't follow the government vision in their creation.

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They have created agitprop, mostly, slogans on trains, streets, and boats against the war. Because, these places are using by the public, so they were trying to shape the public idea about the war. The author compares the political art in the US with the Soviets too. The Soviet government did not allow independent artists to create everything that themselves wanted, instead, the Soviet government wanted the artists should glorify the Soviet ideology by any means of image production.

Text 6

As Joseph J. Colli titled his writing (*Understanding War in Afghanistan*), talks about the war in different periods in Afghanistan. It is important, when study about a war in a country, to know about the different aspects of that country to find the factors of war or whatever we want to find. So, the author in this writing also discusses culture, people, land, and politics. He has written about the Sour revolution and its factors. As he wrote, in 1978, President Daoud's regime which was the fifth year of the government, realized that the leftists had been growing and becoming strong during his power, he started to tack the right, contact the United States while relations with Moscow became less important. Flag of Afghanistan before the communist government was 3 colors; black, red, and green. But, after the Saur Revolution, the flag has changed to socialist red by the DRA. The DRA is an abbreviation of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. The revolution takes place by the People Democratic Party of Afghanistan, PDPA. The main program of the PDPA or DRA, that revealed on speeches, slogans and propaganda posters was land reforming.

Methodology

In this research, I investigate the question, what were the defining characteristics of the *Mujahideen* propaganda posters as opposed to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan political posters in Afghanistan? For finding this question I reviewed 6 articles. These articles are discussing visual propaganda in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, Cold War propaganda, political art, and war in Afghanistan. Three articles that issued in The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture (2015, 2017 and 2018), investigate the question, “What kind of communication, and what sort of themes and motifs played a significant role in conveying revolutionary ideology aimed at a society of which a majority, with political potential, could not read and write?” (Kłagisz, 2017). the author analyses the posters culturally, politically and ideologically.

I could not find any sources about *Mujahideen* propaganda posters in English and Persian. So, I reviewed some other articles to figure out some information about. The fourth text (Cold War Propaganda) which has written by Zinovia Lialiouti, discusses the Cold War and the ideologies, Socialism, and Capitalism, which were against each other. In addition, it discusses the American prestige in using the propaganda in foreign countries as anti-Soviet propaganda. The fifth text, Art of Engagement, is about visual politics in California. The topic is talking about independent artists who were engaged in politics and war, like Ann Chamberlain, Robert Arneson, Rupert García, Martha Rosler, and Kim Abeles... It was generally useful to understand about the anti-Soviet propaganda. I reviewed these two texts because the *Mujahideen* have been supporting by the US. So, the *Mujahideen* propaganda can be sorted part of US anti-Soviet propaganda too. In addition, I reviewed the text (Understanding War in Afghanistan). In this text the author discussing reasons for conflicts in Afghanistan. I also observe the posters of both sides and compare them visually to find their characteristic. In addition, I apply my findings from the literature review to the posters.

Research Design

To know the characteristics of propaganda posters in Afghanistan, we should look at posters and analyze them. Therefore, I selected two posters; one from *Mujahideen* and the other from DRA, to analyze and compare to each other. As Mateusz M. Kłagisz says about the DRA poster in his article, we can study these posters on three levels: “(1) as a linguistic message the (2) as a coded iconic one, and finally (3) a non-coded iconic one” (Kłagisz, 2018), we can apply it on *Mujahideen* posters too. Because the audience of both posters are the same people which most of them were not able to read and write.

DRA Propaganda Poster:

One month after the Saur Revolution (the April events in 1978), propaganda started by DRA. The communist government wanted to create the poster in a specific characteristic which should be understandable for illiterate people. Their poster had to consist of a wide spectrum of symbolism and newly defined lexemes. This was important to start a dialogue with their society. The Afghan socialist propaganda posters should have been implemented verbally and visually version to persuasion the mass.

I selected a poster from DRA that shows a peasant holding an official land tenure certificate by his right hand, and by his left hand, he carries a sickle. This poster can be considered as a model of DRA posters that reflects the program and ideology of the communist government.

Linguistic message in this poster which the audience notices at first is in Persian/Dari language: *Doulat-e J[omhuri-ye] D[emokratik-e] A[fghanistan] melkiyat-e dehqanan va sayar-e zamindaran-ra motabeq ba ahkam-e qanoon mohtaram shomorda va tazmin mi-konad* (The government of the DRA respects and guarantees the property of the peasants and other

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landowners in accordance with the provisions of the law). The second linguistic message in the DRA poster is written in the Pashto language on booklet: *De zemaki de milkiyat rasmi sanad* (official land tenure certificate). In the linguistic message, they had presented their program for land reforming. They propagated that the main owner of the land is who is working on.

The second level of the (coded iconic) message in this poster is the sickle holding by the peasant, the tractor in the background, and the red colors of the peasant's jacket and tractor. By showing the sickle shows the symbol of communism and the tractor as the development of agriculture and the red color as the color of the communist flag. The red color has used hiddenly to show the symbol of communism internationally as well as the revolution of the communist party of Afghanistan. And after a few months, the red color has used for the Afghan government flag too.

The third level of the (non-coded iconic) message in the DRA poster appears as a figure of a peasant holding a land certificate and a sickle. The communist government was acting that they are the representative of the mass, toilers, and peasants, and they are working for them. Most of the people of Afghanistan at that time were peasants and they were leaving out of the cities. So, by using the peasant figure they wanted to satisfy the peasant for supporting the communist government.

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Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1: DRA propaganda poster (Klagisz, 2018)

Characteristics of *Mujahideen* Propaganda Poster:

poster from *Mujahideen* which shows Babrak Karmal¹, president of DRA, in a red background. At the heart of Babrak Karmal, the communist symbol has placed and he has shown that he is saying *Kalema-e Tawhid* (the Islam monotheism) *la ilaha illallah*. We can consider this poster as *Mujahideen*'s propaganda posters model, which reflects the ideology of *Mujahideen*. *Mujahideen* in its posters acts as anti-communism. Unlike the DRA, the *Mujahideen* do not show their programs for Afghanistan developments or people's prosperity in the posters. They, in every poster acting as the defender of Islam and introduce the communist government as anti-Islam.

In *Mujahideen* poster, the first linguistic message is the deformation of the Iman (faith) by the communist government. They present the DRA as anti-Islam by using a sentence in the Arabic language: *Iqrar bil-lisan wa takzeeb bil-qalb* (the verbal profession and the heart-felt impugn). It has changed from a sentence of the Holy Quran, *Iqrar bil-lisan wa tasdeeq bil-qalb* (the verbal profession and the heart-felt conviction). The second linguistic message, as well as first, is in Arabic: *la ilaha illallah* (there is no God to be worshiped but Allah). This message is connected to the first one, which shows that Babrak Karmal just by his tongue says Islam monotheism but not by his heart.

The second level of the (coded iconic) message in this poster is the red color of the background. The *Mujahideen* also has used this color in this poster as communists color. But, in some other posters, *Mujahideen* has used red color as bleeding.

¹ Babrak Karmal was the president of DRA when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan

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The third level of the (non-coded iconic) message is the figure of Babrak Karmal and the communist symbol in the heart of him. The *la ilaha illallah* (there is no God to be worshiped but Allah) also can be considered as a visual non-coded iconic message.

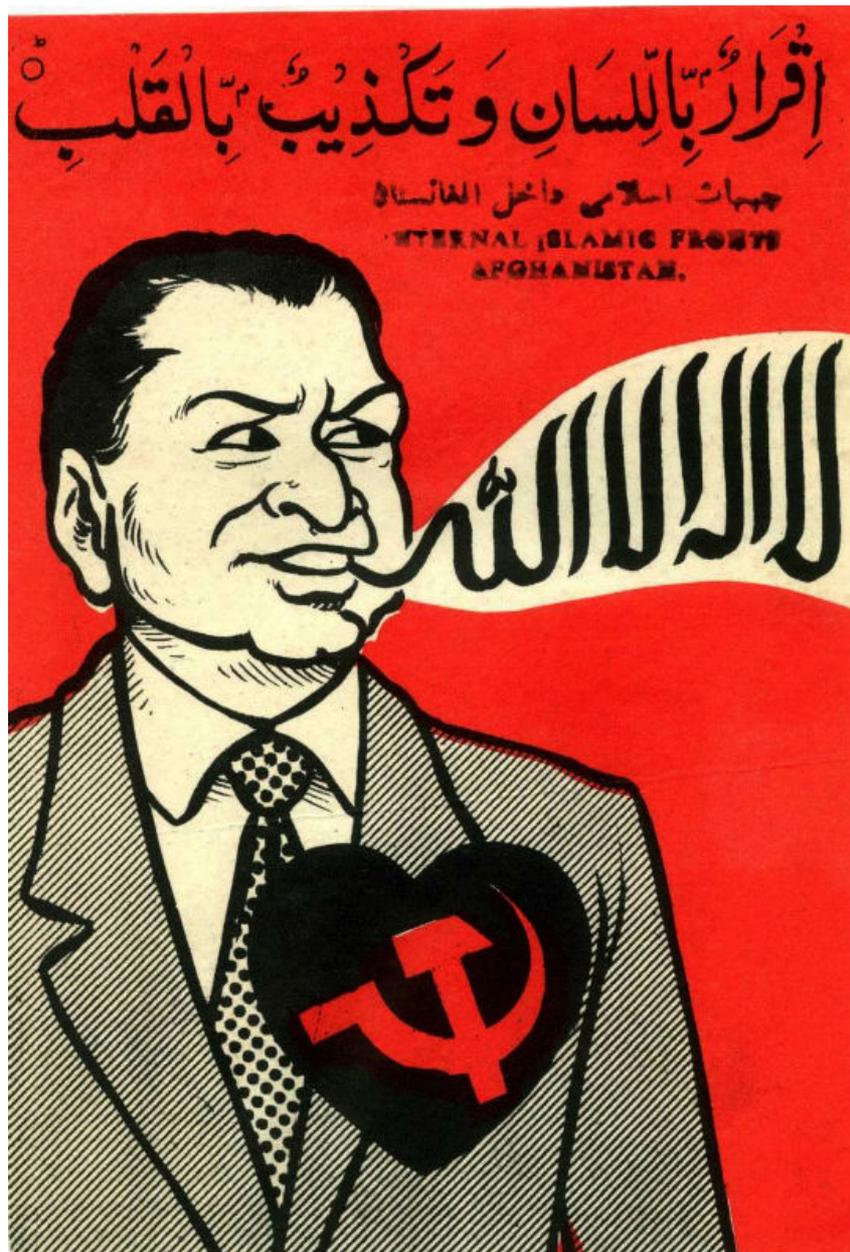


Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 2: Mujahideen propaganda poster. Retrieved from <https://i.imgur.com/wyatb1O.jpg>

Conclusion

The question that I wanted to find the answer in this research is, what were the defining characteristics of the *Mujahideen* propaganda posters as opposed to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan propaganda posters in Afghanistan? I found that we can study both sides of posters in the same way; linguistic message, coded iconic, and non-coded iconic. DRA tried to propagate its program for mass and for the development of Afghanistan. On the other hand, the *Mujahideen* propagate themselves as the defender of Islam and anti-communist, and they illustrate the communist as anti-Islam.

I wish this research forward by others to analyze more about propaganda posters especially about *Mujahideen* posters, finding the artists of these posters, finding the research strategy for creating these posters, and finding the answer to the question, how were the two kinds of political posters received within society? When I started my research, this question also was part of my research question. But I could not find any article to find the answer.

My research has done in lockdown time. So, I faced lots of problems. I emailed to Afghanistan Resources Center in Kabul to find some information, but they did not replay. In addition, I wanted to interview some *Mujahideen* or communist members to find more about the question, especially about (how were the two kinds of political posters received within society?), but I could not. Because of the lockdown and the internet limitation in Afghanistan.

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