



THE LONG ROAD ★ TO KABUL

THE SOVIET UNION & AVIATION IN AFGHANISTAN, 1921–30

For most of us, the predominant mental image conjured by the phrase “Soviet aviation in Afghanistan” is probably grainy 1980s film footage of a red-starred helicopter gunship unleashing a salvo of rockets into a remote Mujahideen hideout — but the Soviet Union’s aviation activities in Afghanistan date back almost a century, reveals **VLADIMIR KOTELNIKOV**



THIS ARTICLE IS not about the participation of Soviet aircraft in combat operations in Afghanistan in the 1980s, about which much has already been written. Here we tell the story of events that happened some 60 years previously, when Afghanistan was going through one of the most turbulent times in its history. Located in the rugged mountains between India and Central Asia, Afghanistan was historically of strategic and tactical interest to the British, who saw the country as a valuable colonial asset of the sprawling British Empire, and who had occupied Afghanistan during 1839–42 and later established a protectorate over the country from 1879 to 1919.

To make matters more complicated, the Afghans were not a united people, but rather a collection of tribes, subservient to their chiefs, who would by no means always support the sovereign ruler — the Emir. In February 1919 Emir Hābibullāh Khān, who had ruled since 1901, was assassinated in a coup, and Prince Amānullāh Khān took power. The latter, by local standards, was a progressive leader, abolishing slavery, introducing a series of relatively democratic reforms and declaring a constitutional monarchy. For the leadership of Soviet Russia, however, his anti-British position was of rather more interest.

EARLY AIR POWER IN AFGHANISTAN

By April 1919 the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR — the predecessor of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics during 1917–22) had established diplomatic relations with Afghanistan and recognised its borders. Great Britain, however, refused to recognise Afghanistan’s independence and on May 3 the Third Anglo-Afghan War began when poorly equipped Afghan troops crossed the frontier at the western end of the Khyber Pass with a view to invading British India. In the ensuing conflict, British forces were supported by aircraft, which undertook bombing sorties on Kabul and concentrations of Afghan troops. The fighting culminated in the signing of an armistice in June 1919 and was officially concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Rawalpindi on August 8 that year, in which Britain finally recognised Afghanistan’s independence.

The same month the Ambassador of the Republic of Turkestan in Central Asia arrived in Kabul. At this time, Soviet Russia was cut

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP A Polikarpov R-1 (licence-built D.H.9A) of the Afghan Air Force in June 1925, bearing the flag of Prince Amānullāh Khān’s Emirate. **ARTWORK** by ANDREY YURGENSON © 2020. **OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM** One of the Afghan Air Force’s R-1s at Kabul in the mid-1920s. The inscription beneath the port lower wing reads “Allahu Akbar” (“God is Great”).

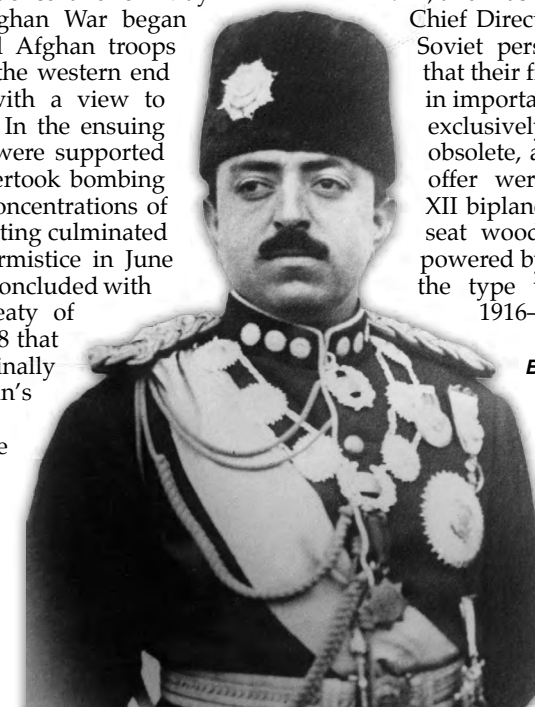
ALL IMAGES VIA AUTHOR

off from the Afghan border by the various front lines in the ongoing Russian Civil War between the Red (Soviet) and White (Tsarist) Armies. The Afghans expressed their interest in acquiring a range of weapons, including aircraft. On August 18 a telegram was sent from Tashkent in Turkestan (now Uzbekistan) to Moscow stating that the Afghan Consul was requesting three aircraft. In October an Afghan delegation reached Moscow, and in December RSFSR Ambassador Plenipotentiary Ya.Z. Surits arrived in Kabul.

In February 1921, following a British attempt to assassinate Amānullāh Khān the previous year, a non-aggression pact between the High State of Afghanistan (as it was officially known) and the RSFSR was formalised. Attached to this treaty was an additional agreement dated February 28, 1921, which provided for military assistance to the Afghans, for which the Soviets were obliged to supply 12 aircraft, two four-gun anti-aircraft-artillery batteries, 5,000 rifles with cartridges and equipment for a gunpowder factory, as well as establish a flying school in Kabul. Furthermore, all this had to be done within two months.

AFGHANISTAN’S FIRST AIRCRAFT

Problems arose with the aircraft order immediately, the latter not being issued to the commanders of the Turkestan Front until June 1921, and was made “over the head” of the Chief Directorate of the Air Force. The Soviet personnel in Turkestan stated that their front was considered inferior in importance to others, and equipped exclusively with “third-category”, i.e. obsolete, aircraft. The best they could offer were eight serviceable Lebed XII biplanes then in Tashkent. A two-seat wooden reconnaissance biplane powered by a 150 h.p. Salmson engine, the type was manufactured during 1916–19 at the V.A. Lebedev



Born near Kabul on June 1, 1892, Prince Amānullāh Khān was the third son of Emir Hābibullāh Khān. Upon the latter’s assassination in February 1919 he assumed power as Sovereign Prince of Afghanistan, as which he ruled until 1926; and as “Master King” until forced into exile in Europe in 1929.