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The Great Game: The KGB and Pakistan

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THIS country cannot last. This was the conclusion of Joseph Stalin as the Soviet Politburo examined the map of the two winged Pakistan that emerged from the Partition of the subcontinent in August 1947.

A quarter century later, General Secretary Brezhnev and KGB Chairman Yuri Andropov, the Russian spymaster who literally changed the map of the world, vindicated Stalin's prophecy. Most students of Pakistani politics are obsessed by the symbiotic relationship between the CIA, the Pentagon, the White House and the successive military dictatorships that have ruled Pakistan. My interest lies in the other great game played in the shadow world from Moscow Centre by the Soviet KGB, arguably the most ruthless and powerful secret intelligence agency on the planet at the time.

You still meet them in Moscow, St Petersburg, London, Geneva and Istanbul. Fluent Urdu or Pashto/Dari speakers, elegant Russians in their fifties now, men and women who once worked for various KGB residents in Kabul, Rawalpindi, Lahore and Karachi. The intelligence caches provided by KGB archivist Vasili Mitrokhin to an enigmatic English don at Corpus Christi College, deep in the Cambridge fens, exposed the KGB's systematic infiltration of Pakistan's GHQ and diplomatic corps, confirmed that Chairman Andropov and his agents of the KGB First Chief Directorate waged a secret war against my country from the moment of its creation.

This was the secret world's Great Game of the 1980's, was the modern equivalent of the struggle between the late Victorian British Raj and the Romanov empire, fought in Afghanistan for the sake of the jewel in the crown. I had no idea at the time but, as a

teenager in London, I attended several “Save Bhutto” campaign rallies for the first elected prime minister of Pakistan then awaiting the hangman’s noose in Rawalpindi. I saw Mir Murtaza and Shahnawaz, the sons of Bhutto.

A seventeen year old knows nothing about the cynical calculations of intelligence agencies or the surreal logic of the Cold War. I was simply motivated by outrage that a military dictator named Zia had usurped the power that the people of Pakistan had bestowed on ZA Bhutto, my boyhood hero for whom I had sworn to dedicate my life as a diplomat, to learn French, Spanish German, Russian and Arabic in a lifelong quest that still continues. But on April 4th 1979, when Zia hanged Bhutto, something died in me. I vowed never to work for any government of Pakistan ruled by a military dictator and I never did.

Fate decreed tragic deaths for the Bhutto brothers I knew as a kid. Mir Murtaza was gunned down in September 1996 in Clifton after a lifetime of paranoia and tragedy, a Harvard alumnus turned crown prince of terror who died while his sister (a Radcliffe lady, no less!) was prime minister. Mir Shahnawaz was poisoned in his Cannes apartment, possibly by a hit team sent by Zia. But their lives touched mine in London before they disappeared to Kabul, the USSR’s Kabul of 1981.

The Kremlin’s “special relationship” on the subcontinent was with India, not Pakistan. Mrs Gandhi could not have won the Bangladesh war without New Delhi’s Friendship Treaty with the USSR. December 1971 was a Cold War proxy battlefield in the rice paddy fields of East Bengal. Andropov distrusted ZA Bhutto, thought him a Chinese agent of influence ever since he joined Ayub Khan’s Cabinet as foreign minister in 1964, was disgusted by the idea of a Berkeley–Oxford educated Sindhi feudal landowner donning a Mao cap and waving his little Green Book. Bhutto visited Moscow twice but neither Brezhnev, Podgornyn or Gromyko reciprocated with a state visit to Islamabad. The Kremlin distrusted Bhutto’s new friends and patrons in the Islamic world – the Pahlavi Shah of Iran, Saudi King Faisal, Colonel Gaddafi, the Gulf oil shaikhs. They were right. Mr Bhutto was no Marxist Leninist ideologue but a student of Machiavelli, Napoleon and Sun Tzu. He had no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, only permanent interests. His cynicism cost him his life.

Mir Murtaza Bhutto knew that the Americans would embrace Zia after Carter’s NSC Advisor Brzezinski showed up at the GHQ and posed at the Khyber Pass waving an AK–47 soon after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Who gave a damn about vengeance for ZA Bhutto’s judicial murder in Washington when the Reagan White House had decided to bleed the Soviets to the last Afghan in payback time for Vietnam? But a son’s love for his father is limitless. Had not Mr. Bhutto written from the death cell “My sons are not my sons if they do not drink the blood of those who dare shed my blood today”? So Murtaza founded Al–Zulfikar in Kabul, declared war against the Islamic world’s most powerful military regime, something not on the curriculum of the Karachi Grammar School or Harvard College. Disaster, tragedy and death were now inevitable.

Saain Bhutto and his Comedy Central groupies of rookie guerrillas hung out in Kabul’s derelict Dracula House, firing AK-47’s, strutting in military camouflage with the chic Che look, drinking Scotch with Afghan intelligence chief Dr Najibullah, a de facto KGB

general. Najib, of course, was also the president of Afghanistan hanged by the Taleban in 1996 three months before Murtaza met his nemesis in a Clifton ambush.

Al-Zulfiqar began covert-ops against Zia's Pakistan in earnest, with KHAD/KGB support. The Kremlin, of course, also wanted to punish General Zia for allowing America, China and Saudi Arabia to finance the Afghan mujahideen revolt against its Marxist Kabul vassal regime. Murtaza's men bombed the Sindh High Court, assassinated Zia cronies in the Punjab who had signed his father's death warrant, used the terrorist Tipu (a Karachi Shipowners Collage gun freak!) to hijack a PIA airliner at Karachi to divert it to Kabul. Dr Salahuddin (Murtaza's code name to his self-styled PPP revolutionaries) welcomed Tipu on the tarmac at Kabul airport with the KGB resident [chief of station to the Christians In Action (CIA!)] watching and listening to everything in the control tower. Women and children were released from the hijacked PIA plane and a triumphant Tipu spoke to Dr Babrak Kamal, the president of Afghanistan installed by the USSR after the invasion. Then came the dance of death.

An ADC to PM Bhutto who the paranoid Tipu thought was an ISI agent, Captain Tariq Rahim, was machine gunned, thrown to the tarmac to bleed to death. The KGB had armed Tipu and his men with grenades, explosives, timers, machine guns, money. Out raged by the killing, Andropov ordered Najibullah to order the flight to Damascus, where President Assad negotiated the end of the hijack. Al-Zulfikar's stock soared in Kabul and the Kremlin. Murtaza was a hero to the Sindh and Baluchistan secessionists. It was a message from Andropov to Zia, KGB to ISI. You hit us in Paktia, Kunar and the Panjsher Valley, we hit you in Quetta, Larkana and the Marri Hills. After all, there were two million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and hundreds were agents whose ultimate boss was Yevgeny Primakov of Lubyanka Central's Oriental Institute.

It was all downhill for Mir Murtaza after the PIA hijack, apart from the birth of his lovely daughter, the poetess, writer and Columbia grad Fatima Bhutto. Two assassination attempts against Zia's Falcon private jet went wrong. Al-Zulfikar's shooters bungled the SAM-7 missile's viewfinder and aircraft heat sensor. Had Zia been killed as his plane landed at Chaklala by an assassin's missile in 1982, the world would have been so different now. Benazir as PM, an immediate end to the Afghan jihad, Osama Bin Laden still an unknown Jeddah construction company boss, no Taleban, the ghosts of the Twin Towers, the Afghan and Iraq war still alive? But fairy tales never have happy endings in the KGB or in my great grand uncle Mr. Jinnah's Pakistan I once loved and lost.