THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN THROUGH THE EYES OF SOVIET VETERANS, CIVILIAN EMPLOYEES, AND THEIR FAMILIES

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INTRODUCTION

The Afghanistan war from 1979 to 1989 is often referred to as "the Vietnam war of the Soviet Union". Douglas Borer does this in his book *Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared*.[1] He supports the common image that appears to exist that the two can and should be compared. It is true that both superpowers of the Cold War had far reaching interests outside of their borders, which they chose to start a war over. Both the Vietnam war as well as the Afghanistan war ended in defeat and had a profound impact on society, and therefore the comparison is made. This thesis will explore whether the comparison that Borer makes is actually fair to make.

Little research has been done specifically on how the two conflicts compare in terms of societal consequences, even though it appears that parallels do exist. Hence, this research project will explore to what extent the often-made comparison between the two wars is founded on solid grounds and will focus on the main question of how Soviet soldiers, veterans, civilian personnel, and their families were affected during and after the war both socially and psychologically.

Methodology

The Vietnam war will be taken as a benchmark to which the Afghanistan war will be compared. The section on the Vietnam war will solely be based on the literature review using the most referenced sources within this field. The part on the Soviet-Afghan war will be predominantly based on two primary sources, namely the book *Zinky Boys* written by Svetlana Alexievich and *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan* by Artyom Borovik. The majority of primary sources are subjective in their way of writing and looking at certain aspects. Hence, it is important to give some context to both sources and authors to understand how these contexts might have affected the way in which they wrote about the war. This will be done through analysing what might have influenced the authors. Moreover, before every primary source analysis, an overview will be given of what the academic

[1] Borer, Douglas A. *Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared*. Frank Cass, 1999.

literature has to say on the specific topic. Hence, the arguments will be based on a combination of academic literature and primary sources.

The author of the first source, Svetlana Alexievich, was born in the Soviet Union in what is present-day Ukraine in 1948. She grew up in Belarus and studied Journalism at the University of Minsk. She then worked as a journalist at several newspapers and wrote her first two books. Both books were labelled as anti-Communist and were thus forbidden from being published. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in the 1980s, freedom of speech became less restricted and one of her books, *The Unwomanly Face of the War*, became widely printed and became a big success.

She continued writing and publishing award-winning critical political books.[2] Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Belarus remained an autocratic regime. Since Alexievich was also critical of its leader, Alexander Lukashenka, her phone was continuously tapped and she was banned from appearing in public.[3] Moreover, her critique of the former Soviet regime led to her being labelled as "a dissident journalist", and she was subject to both harassment and intimidation by the state. Her work was furthermore banned and/or censored and she was accused of "slander" and "defamation. Consequently, she moved into exile in Western Europe for a decade.[4]

Alexievich's work stands out in that it is a collection of interviews she has conducted with people who witnessed or were affected by a certain historic event. In this way she gives her readers the story of what ordinary people thought about things. About this she says herself: 'What I am interested in is what happens to the human being, what happens to it in of our time. How does man behave and react? How much of the biological man is in him, how much of the man of his time, how much man of the man?'.

She also explains how she records history and why she does this through interviews with ordinary people. 'But I don't just record a dry history of events and facts, I'm writing a history of human feelings. What people thought, understood and remembered during the event.

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[2] Serafin, Steven R. "Svetlana Alexievich." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 12 Nov. 2018, www.britannica.com/biography/Svetlana-Alexievich.

[3] "Svetlana Alexievich Wins Nobel Literature Prize." *BBC News*, BBC, 8 Oct. 2015, www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-34475251.

[4] Serafin, Steven R. "Svetlana Alexievich." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 12 Nov. 2018, www.britannica.com/biography/Svetlana-Alexievich.

What they believed in or mistrusted, what illusions, hopes and fears they experienced. This is impossible to imagine or invent, at any rate in such multitude of real details. We quickly forget what we were like ten or twenty or fifty years ago. Sometimes we are ashamed of our past and refuse to believe in what happened to us in actual fact. Art may lie but a document never does. Although the document is also a product of someone's will and passion. I compose my books out of thousands of voices, destinies, fragments of our life and being'. She states that for each of her books she spoke to about 500 to 700 people.[5]

Her book *Zinky Boys* is one of her most famous works. It is a collection of interviews with people who were directly affected by the Afghanistan war. Alexievich interviews soldiers, but also Soviet civilians who worked in Afghanistan in service of the army, as well as mothers and widows of those who died during the war. The title *Zinky Boys* refers to the victims, "the boys", whose remains were sent home to their families in sealed zinc coffins.

As opposed to the information above on Alexievich, much less information is available on Artyom Borovik, the author of *The Hidden War*. Borovik was born in 1960. According to the obituary published in The Guardian after his death in 2000, his father was part of the Soviet elite and was a journalist and writer who primarily wrote on and/or from the US.[6] At first he was trained as a diplomat, but after graduating he turned to journalism and started working as a foreign editor for *Ogonyok*, a week current affairs magazine. In this capacity he wrote articles and held interviews on the war in Afghanistan, speaking to Soviet officials and Soviet soldiers. In 1990, he published *The Hidden War*, in which he collected all his experiences of the War. The reason that he could so openly publish was because of the new openness as a result of the glasnost policy under Gorbachev. After publishing *The Hidden War* and a book on the US Army, Borovik went on to establish a newspaper and becoming editor-in-chief of it. He moreover became involved in a television show that, similarly to his newspaper, focussed on exposing corruption cases within the government. He died March 2000 in a plane crash when he was just 39 years old.[7]

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[5] Alexievich, Svetlana. "A Search for Eternal Man: In Lieu of Biography." *Svetlana Alexievich – Voices from Big Utopia*, alexievich.info/en/.

[6] Montgomery, Isobel. "Artem Borovik." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 29 Mar. 2000, www.theguardian.com/news/2000/mar/29/guardianobituaries.isobelmontgomery.

[7] *Ibid.*

Alexievich and Borovik differ from each other in the sense that Borovik was embedded as a journalist within the Soviet forces at the time of the war. Alexievich had never been to Afghanistan and only spoke to people who had remained at home, or who had come back. Moreover, throughout his book it becomes clear that Borovik was against the war. He sometimes even explicitly states so, whereas Alexievich, who was also critical of the war, never explicitly states that she opposed the war. The latter is also not possible since Alexievich's book does not contain her own opinion; it only consists out of interviews, but Borovik's book is more about how he experienced it; its nature is more autobiographic However, despite the differences, both books provide a unique insight into what the war was like for soldiers, as well as for the people back home and puts an emphasis on their thoughts and their feelings. It is for this list of reasons that both books have been chosen as primary source material for this thesis.

Roadmap

This thesis is divided up into four main parts. Firstly, there is the literature review in which an overview will be given of the available literature and the academic debates on both the Vietnam and the Afghanistan war. Based on this review, three remaining chapters have been formed on the basis of three themes: before the war, during the war, and after the war. The idea behind these three themes is the shifting of perspectives to eventually demonstrate the totality of the story of the war and its impact on the people directly involved. The first chapter deals with the Soviet's government narrative as to why the troops were sent to Afghanistan. This is divided up into an analysis of the government narrative throughout the years through the media, the idea of the Afghan war as a means to defend the Motherland, and the notion that the Afghan people needed help in achieving their own socialist revolution. The second chapter discusses the situation for the soldiers and the civilian staff in Afghanistan during the war. Here a division has been made according to the following themes: preparation, healthcare, material corruption, moral corruption, and suicide and self-mutilation. The third and final chapter, deals with how veterans and their families experienced the time after the war when they had just returned home. This will be divided up into the topics of: unjust war, recognition, and anger towards the Soviet government. The red line of these three chapters will be the topic of disappointment in the Soviet government of the veterans and their

families. This thesis aims to provide more insight in how the veterans and their families experienced the war. While much has been written about the Vietnam war, the war in Afghanistan and its effects on the individual young men and women sent there remains largely undiscussed.

CHAPTER 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarship on the Afghanistan war and the Vietnam war is extremely extensive. Scholars have focussed on a wide variety of issues ranging from the military operational factors to the effects of warfare on Vietnamese and Afghan society. To keep this literature review within a reasonable length, it is divided up into three parts. The first part will briefly analyse the literature on the Vietnam war and will focus more specifically on what has been written by two prominent authors on the effects of the war for American veterans and American society. The second part on the Afghanistan war will be more elaborate and will concentrate on the impact of the war on the Soviet Union as a state, its society and its veterans. The third and final part will focus on the literature that has been written that compares the Afghanistan war to the Vietnam war, as it is there where the gap in the literature is which this thesis aims to fill.

Part I – Vietnam War

The Vietnam war has been given a lot of attention by scholars because of its profound impact on American society. Consequently, there is a vast amount of scholarly articles and books on it.[8] Due to the fact that this research will mainly focus on the societal effects of the Afghanistan war and will only use the Vietnam war as a benchmark, this part of the literature review will give an overview of what the overall patterns are that seem to come out of the academic literature on what the effects on American society and American veterans were.

There are two traditions among historians when discussing the Vietnam war. Scholar John Guilmartin explains them as follows: The first one, the orthodox tradition, argues that the drafted men were chosen because of their underprivileged background, and that they had almost no prior knowledge of what the war was about and no proper training. Consequently, they brutally attacked the local Vietnamese and when they came home they suffered from traumas because of that.[9] The second tradition, called the revisionists, claim that the Vietnam

[8] An example of a book that provides an historiographic overview is: Wiest, Andrew, and Michael J. Doidge. *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War*. Routledge, 2010.

[9] Guilmartin, John. "America in Vietnam: A Working-Class War?: Christian G. Appy, 'Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam' (Review)." *Reviews in American History*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1994, pp. 324-325.

war has been taken too much out of context and can militarily be compared to the experiences of World War II and Korea. According to the revisionist tradition, problems only arose when soldiers returned home and had to deal with hostile attitudes coming from the anti-war movement.[10] Since the orthodox tradition is the most mainstream tradition, this thesis will focus on that.

A typical orthodox scholarly author on the Vietnam war is Christian G. Appy. In his book *Working-Class War*, written in 1993, he gives an elaborate analysis of the types of Americans who went fighting, mostly working class, what types of situations they encountered and how they dealt with it, and the eventual coping with their experiences in what many regarded as a "useless" war and with the protest it generated back home.[11] He argues on the basis of a wide variety of primary sources that the promises that were made back in the US about what the troops would be fighting for, did not always match reality on the ground. This led to a lot of discontentment among the soldiers and distrust towards the government.

He moreover describes in detail the tension between the troops who were on one hand disillusioned with the war and saw no real purpose, and hence were angry at their government. On the other hand, the troops also had a real aversion towards the anti-war movement back at home, whom were hoping for the same results; namely to end the war. However, the troops felt a disconnection between with this group since they felt that these people had never truly experienced what they had gone through and therefore had no right to have such an elaborate opinion on the matter.

On that basis, Appy argues that the Vietnam soldiers and veterans felt isolated from both supporters (the government) and opponents (the anti-war movement). This feeling of isolation was moreover enlarged when both veterans, as well as families of soldiers who had been killed, felt they were receiving little to no support for the feelings they had to endure as a result of the war from both the government and the anti-war movement.

Another prominent scholar in this field is Wilbur J. Scott. Scott wrote in 2004 more specifically on the issues that veterans dealt with after the war had been finished in his book *Vietnam*

[10] *Ibid*.
[11] Appy, Christian G. *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*. The University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

Veterans since the War: the Politics of PTSD, Agent Orange, and the National Memorial.[12] He focuses on the different psychological issues that veterans went through such as PTSD, alcoholism and drug abuse, and the efforts they had to make to ensure they would receive proper treatment by the US state. He also writes about the consequent disappointment they felt when this proved to be challenging.

He furthermore analyses the dilemmas surrounding the erection of the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and on the Agent Orange controversies. Scott also analyses Vietnam veterans as one social group and he argues that they had extreme difficulty when it came to joining veterans' groups already existing in the US from earlier wars. Consequently, they found it difficult to reintegrate back into society. He states that this was because of the dilemma most veterans found themselves in. They had become critical of the war they had fought in but were reluctant to join anti-war groups in the population as they often mistrusted veterans because they were seen as potential contributors to the atrocities committed in Vietnam by US troops. Veteran groups on the other hand were often very pro-war, which made many veterans reluctant to join them, since they had become critical of the war. Therefore, this created a unique group within society, similarly to what Appy argues.

The conclusion can be made that Vietnam soldiers and veterans experienced a lot of distrust in the government when it came to two things: 1) the reasons why they were sent to the war, and 2) the (after)care they had expected from the government. Both authors also argue that veterans, and to a certain extent also their families, became isolated groups within society that did not feel understood by either the government, the already existing veteran groups nor by the anti-war movement. Consequently, these two subjects will be used as the baseline to compare the Vietnam war to the Afghanistan war in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. The rest of this literature review will focus on the literature that has been written on the Afghanistan war and on the comparisons that have been made between the two wars, and how this thesis aims to contribute and fill the gap that is there.

[12] Scott, Wilbur J. *Vietnam Veterans since the War: the Politics of PTSD, Agent Orange, and the National Memorial*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2004.

Part II – Afghanistan War

The Afghanistan war has been and continues to be the topic of discussion among both the public as well as scholars. The former becomes apparent in the recent move of the Russian State Duma in declaring that the Soviet invasion was legally justified. Exactly 30 years after the end of the war, its justification remains a sensitive topic, hence the urge of the Duma Representatives to give their blessings retroactively.[13]

Moreover, when looking at how the Soviet press dealt with it at that time it becomes clear how much uneasiness surrounded the war and the eventual defeat. A soldier for example wrote a letter to the Russian newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in 1984 in which he puts very specific emphasis on his fellow soldiers for their bravery and unity, and attacks criticizers back at home and elites who made sure that their sons were not sent to the war. He states: 'But after all, the mere fact that our people are living under a peaceful sky from which no shells, bombs or rockets are falling is reason to rejoice in life. Cherish this, and always remember that when you are studying, working, reading and resting, someone is protecting you and the entire country'.[14]

During the end of the war this becomes apparent. For example, Journalist Bovin who wrote for the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* in 1989, argues that despite some mistakes from the Soviet side, most of the defeat was due to failures on the Soviet-supported Afghan side and that despite the defeat at least 'the revolution and the counterrevolution awakened the masses' political consciousness'.[15]

Besides the popular narrative that was current at the time, scholars also did not fail to look at the war from different perspectives. Hughes for example wrote an overview in 2008 of both the Afghan and the Soviet internal political arena leading up to the war and argues that the Soviet Union underestimated the time and effort it would take to ensure their preferred leader's position as the new ruler of Afghanistan. He furthermore states that the Soviet elite had underestimated the reactions the intervention would cause in the international

[13] Lanting, Bert. "Russisch Parlement Herschrijft Geschiedenis: 'Sovjet-Invasie in Afghanistan Was Volkomen Terecht.'" 11 Feb. 2019, www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/russisch-parlement-herschrijft-geschiedenis-sovjet-invasie-in-afghanistan-was-volkomen-terecht/.
[14] Anonymous Soviet Soldier. "Stationed in Afghanistan: A Letter Home." *Current Digest of the Russian Press*, vol. 36, no. 8, 21 Mar. 1984, p. 14.
[15] Bovin, A. "Afghanistan: A Difficult Decade." *Current Digest of the Russian Press*, vol. 40, no. 51, 28 Jan. 1989, pp. 10–11.

community. The United States quickly concluded that the intervention was part of a bigger Soviet plan to eventually take over control of Iran and other Arab states, which led to new American imposed sanctions on Moscow.

The Europeans on the other hand were much more reluctant to believe this theory and refrained from reacting to the same extent. The reaction from the Muslim world was more in line with that of the US and soon many of these countries started sponsoring the Mujahidin, and allowed thousands of volunteering young men to join them. The different Mujahidin groups were in turn also supported through aid programmes providing both weapons and non-combat assistance by numerous countries throughout the world.[16]

Besides articles that focus on the geopolitical side of the war like that of Hughes, there is also literature that focuses on the impact of the war on the Soviet Union. Within this topic, two different perspectives can be identified. On the one hand, there is a group of scholars that looks at the impact the war has had on the Soviet Union as a state entity and the power of its ruling elite. On the other hand, there are scholars who look at the effect the war has had on Soviet society; the ordinary working class people. Despite this divide, one must to keep in mind that both are in fact almost always interrelated, since the preservation of an autocratic state and its elite depends on its ability to either maintain support or suppress any potential risks.

Within the first group of scholars there is a debate on to what extent the war contributed to the final collapse of the Soviet Union. Scholars Reuveny and Prakash stated in 1999 that the Afghan War played a major role in the collapse of the Soviet Union.[17] They argue that this is because of four effects. They first analyse what they call 'perception effects' and state that the war made a difference in the way Soviet leaders perceived the military to be an effective mean to prevent the Union from collapsing and whether it was an effective way to gain results abroad. They furthermore argue that the second effect was purely military. The war caused a gulf between the Communist Party and the military, and moreover showed that the Red Army could be defeated, which in turn led to Republics within the Soviet Union pushing for more independence. The third effect, according to them, had to do with legitimacy. Non-Russians

[16] Hughes, G. "The Soviet–Afghan War, 1978–1989: An Overview." *Defence Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2008, pp. 326–350.
[17] Reuveny, Rafael, and Aseem Prakash. "The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union." *Review of International Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1999, pp. 693–708.

from the Soviet Union that were fighting in the war started uniting against what they saw as a "Russian War", which in turn also led to more demands for independence. Finally, the fourth effect has to do with an increase in public political participation. Reuveny and Prakash argue that the war caused the war veterans, "the *Afgantsy*", to form new influential groups within society who spoke with one voice which weakened the political domination of the Communist Party. Moreover, the war also transformed the way the public viewed the State, due to frustrations about the lack of transparency on the developments of the war.

The opposite was argued by Bruce Porter in 1990 (the book in which this chapter was incorporated was only published in 2014). He states that 'the domestic backlash against the war in Afghanistan was a small blip on the Soviet political screen by comparison with the profound impact on civil-military relations of glasnost, perestroika, and *demokratizatsiia'*.[18] He comes to this conclusion by analysing the way in which the higher ranks of the Soviet military responded to the invasion, the war, and the aftermath of Afghanistan. He argues that even though there was discontent about many things, amongst soldiers, the officer corps, the state, and the general public, the relationship between the state and the military remained strong despite some tension.

Besides the debate on the impact of the war on the Soviet Union as a state entity, scholars have also discussed as to what extent the Afghan War has impacted its veterans and hence through them also Soviet society. Here a distinction must be made as well. There are scholars who look at the veterans as one group and analyse it more through a sociological point of view like Reuveny and Prakash[19], and there are scholars who merely focus on the roles of specific groups.[20]

There are furthermore academic articles and books that focus more on primary source material through the interviewing of soldiers, veterans, and their families. Scholar Jan Claas Behrends for example analysed in 2015 how Soviet soldiers and civilians experienced violence in Afghanistan. He argues that violence was an integral part of their experiences since it was

[18] Porter, Bruce. "The Military Abroad: Internal Consequences of External Expansion." *Soldiers and the Soviet State. Civil-Military Relations from Brezhnev to Gorbachev*, edited by Timothy Colton, and Thane Gustafson, Princeton University Press, 2014, pp. 285–333.
[19] Reuveny, Rafael, and Aseem Prakash. "The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union." *Review of International Studies*, vol. 25, no. 4, 1999, pp. 693–708.
[20] Zhou, Jiayi. "The Muslim Battalions: Soviet Central Asians in the Soviet-Afghan War." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2012, pp. 302–328.

not only used excessively on the enemy and local civilians, but also within the Soviet camps themselves. He then links it to Soviet society at that time and argues that some of the violence can be traced back to the way in which the Soviet Union was organized. He furthermore makes the comparison to veterans of WWII, who were regarded as heroic freedom fighters within Soviet society. Afghanistan veterans had grown up with such ideas and faced disappointment when their reality did not meet their expectations. Behrends concludes that it is likely that the combination of disappointment and an increased habituation to extreme violence in all aspects of life meant that for some veterans it was very hard to integrate back into a non-violent society.[21]

Mark Galeotti disagrees with this last point and argues in his book *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War* written in 1995 that most veterans 'managed to assimilate themselves back into normal life', despite facing challenges.[22] In his book he illustrates and analyses the *Afgantsys*' experiences from the time they came home. This ranges from how they coped with psychological trauma, how their relatives, co-workers, and friends reacted to them, to how they organized themselves and impacted consequent wars, society and politics. Galeotti is regarded as one of the most prominent authors in this field.

A similar author to Galeotti who has written on the topic of *Afgantsy* is Rodric Braithwaite. In his book *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979–89* published in 2011, he does not only describe what happened in the Soviet Union and Afghanistan from a political historical perspective, but he investigates the personal experiences of Soviet soldiers, civilians, and their families. He then links these experiences to the existing political climate and argues that the two cannot be seen separate from each other.[23] Braithwaite's book is considered to be one of the most comprehensive works on the experiences of the *Afgantsy* and their families.[24] As earlier mentioned in the introduction, this research will focus on *The Hidden War* by Artyom

[21] Behrends, Jan Claas. "'Some Call Us Heroes, Others Call Us Killers.' Experiencing Violent Spaces: Soviet Soldiers in the Afghan War." *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 43, no. 5, Aug. 2015, pp. 719–734.
[22] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, p. 154.
[23] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
[24] Rook, R. "Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89." *Asian Affairs*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2012, pp. 300–301., and Galeotti, Mark. "Rodric Braithwaite, Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979–89." *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2012, pp. 369–370.

Borovik and *Zinky Boys* by Svetlana Alexievich, both primary source materials.[25] Hence, this thesis will aim to make a contribution to this specific field of researching the Afghanistan war.

Part III – Comparison

As mentioned, the Afghanistan war has often been compared to the Vietnam war by many scholars as well as in popular culture. Despite the fact that many make the comparison, only few authors really go into depth as to whether such a comparison is a valid one to make.[26]

There is one author who has extensively compared both wars into depth: Douglas Borer in his book *Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared* which was published in 1999.[27] Borer's book acknowledges the existing debate but still compares different aspects of the Vietnam and the Afghanistan war. He starts with a political and historical analysis in which he compares how both the US and the Soviet Union eventually decided to intervene militarily in Vietnam and Afghanistan. He then describes how both countries and war compare in terms of military strategies and in the operational outcome when the decision was made to withdraw. He finishes his book with a comparison on the impact at home. This is primarily focused on the effects that the loss of the wars had on the respective governments and the political decisions that were made as a result of this. He claims that on the American side, politicians have become more cautious to search for domestic support when deciding on military intervention, whereas for the Soviet Union, Borer argues that the failure of the Afghan War led to Gorbachev's reform programme, which in turn, according to him, led to the collapse of the Soviet Union as a state. Overall, the book was well received and scholars applauded that Borer included in his analysis how the two wars were also different from each other, instead of only looking for similarities.[28] Despite his thorough analysis Borer did not

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[25] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990. and Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992.

[26] An example of a scholar who does not go into depth whether such a comparison is valid is for example Orlando Figes. He calls the Afghanistan war in his book *Revolutionary Russia, 1891-1991* 'the Soviet-Union's "Vietnam"'. An example from popular culture is the book *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union's Vietnam* by Oleg Sarin and Lev Dvoretsky.

[27] Borer, Douglas A. *Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared*. Frank Cass, 1999.

[28] Gardner, Lloyd. "Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared." *American Historical Review*, vol. 107, no. 1, 2002, pp. 166–167., Rosati, Jerel. "Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared." *Millennium-Journal Of International Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2001, pp. 144–146., and Saikal, Amin.

look deeper into the societal consequences the Afghanistan war had on the Soviet Union, compared to those of the Vietnam war in the US.

Earlier mentioned Bruce Porter also analysed the similarities between the two wars. He comes to the conclusion that although the comparison is often made, it is not necessarily one that is based on much facts. He argues that the relative commitment of each country in terms of numbers of troops cannot be compared since the American numbers are far higher than the Soviets'. Moreover, he claims that because of this discrepancy, there was much less impact on civil-military relationships in the Soviet Union than there was in the US.[29]

Another earlier mentioned author who has written more in depth on the Afghanistan war is Mark Galeotti. Besides going into depth on *Afgantsy*, and their subsequent impact on society, as discussed earlier, he also often throughout his book makes comparisons with the Vietnam war. He argues that it cannot be stated that Vietnam veterans can be compared to Afghanistan veterans, since their numbers are different proportions, and, as opposed to the Americans, most *Afgantsy* ended up living a normal life and assimilated more easily into society.[30] He continues by even stating that the entire Vietnam and Afghanistan comparison is not a fair one to make (despite the fact that he makes the same comparison continuously throughout his book), and that a better one would be the Algerian War of Independence of 1955-1962 fought by the French. He suggests that the circumstances resemble each other much more since both wars led to a new understanding of world powers' ideas on the concept of being an empire, a changing political climate at the home front, and a changing military doctrine.[31] He moreover argues that Soviet military doctrine was not affected in the same way the American doctrine was. He explains how American doctrine ended up being in a certain extent "traumatized" by 'its lack of institutional memory', whereas the Soviet army did learn from the war and adapted its doctrine and institution accordingly.[32]

"Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared (Review)." *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2002, pp. 133–135.

[29] Porter, Bruce. "The Military Abroad: Internal Consequences of External Expansion." *Soldiers and the Soviet State. Civil-Military Relations from Brezhnev to Gorbachev*, edited by Timothy Colton, and Thane Gustafson, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 294.

[30] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, p. 154.

[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 224.

Hughes disagrees with Galeotti in his 2008 article. He analyses multiple facets of the war and argues that the comparison in military strategy and doctrine between the Soviet Union and the US cannot be made to such extent. He argues that the Soviets did not have the same option to attack Mujahidin hotspots in Pakistan out of fear of a bigger war, whereas the US could attack Viet Cong and North Vietnamese bases in Laos and Cambodia. Moreover, he argues that the Soviet Union was disadvantaged because of the amount of infighting within its own ranks as well as within Afghan side that they supported. This in turn led to less legitimacy for both the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan as well as for the Soviets' reasons for being there.[33]

Conclusion

There are three main conclusions that can be drawn from this literature review. The first one is that American soldiers who fought in Vietnam distrusted their governments regarding the reasons they were sent to war and were disappointed with the way they were cared for and looked after during and after the war. Moreover, veterans, and to a certain extent their families, have felt isolated from the rest of society due to the feeling of not belonging to or being accepted by the anti-war movement, or the pro-war movement that constituted amongst other groups out of older veterans' associations. The third conclusion that must be drawn is that there is still a lot of debate amongst scholars whether the Afghanistan war significantly contributed to the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the question remains to what extent the *Afgantsy* managed to reintegrate into Soviet society. The third and final conclusion that can be drawn is that a variety of authors in both scholarly as well as in popular literature have compared the Vietnam war to the Afghanistan war. However, the few that have backed this comparison with research have not looked into how the societal impacts of the Afghanistan war in the Soviet Union can be understood by means of the experiences of the Vietnam war. Consequently, this thesis will aim to fill this existing gap.

[33] Hughes, G. "The Soviet–Afghan War, 1978–1989: An Overview." *Defence Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2008, pp. 326–350.

CHAPTER 2 BEFORE THE WAR

In both *Hidden War* and *Zinky Boys* it becomes apparent that soldiers were often disappointed in their government regarding the motives for which they were sent to the war. This chapter deals with this specific disappointment and is divided up as follows: first the government narrative is explained and how this was portrayed in the Soviet media, this then followed by an explanation of the narrative of defending the Motherland. Here a distinction is made between the idea that a US threat was being combatted, and the heroic ideal of WWII that many young people wanted to pursuit. This is followed up by an analysis of the Soviet narrative that the troops were mostly just helping the Afghan people in their quest for turning Afghanistan into a socialist state.

Government Narrative

Firstly, it is important to understand in which context the Afghan war took place and what the exact government standpoints were. At its start, it was concealed that fighting even took place. It was known that Soviet troops were in Afghanistan, but the population was informed that they were solely there to do their "international duty": helping the Afghan people and spreading communism. Casualties that were brought home to their families to be buried where done so at night, without the usual ceremony and honours, and families were explicitly warned not to tell anyone what had happened. Soldiers and civilians who came home were told to keep their mouths shut. It appears that, despite the ban, such a significant amount of people who knew what was going on could not be controlled and soon rumours started spreading.[34] The state-run media played a big role in concealing the truth and in broadcasting the narrative of the state. State-run television shows therefore broadcasted images of happy Afghans who were overjoyed with the coming of the Soviet soldiers and doctors and gladly welcomed their help.[35]

When Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power in 1985, at first, the official line of the government did not change much. Journalists were still being held to very specific orders on what they

[34] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 235-239.
[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 235-236.

could write about and what they could publish. This was limited to reporting on 'the death or wounding of Soviet military personnel in the execution of their military duty, the repulse of rebels' attacks, and the execution of tasks connected with giving international help to the Afghan people'.[36] No reporting was allowed on battlefield experiences and there was to be no direct television reporting from the battlefield. It is important to mention that, at that time, there was very little independent journalism in the Soviet Union. Consequently, all Soviet journalists were bound to these rules.[37]

In both Alexievich's and Borovik's work, several references are made to the media and how it affected soldier's and military civilian personnel in their expectations. It becomes clear that a disillusionment existed when it came to the official declaration and the subsequent official media reporting that soldiers were fighting in Afghanistan to protect the Motherland. Borovik himself for example talks about several cases where Soviet soldiers were hit by friendly fire and states 'In short, all kinds of things went wrong in Afghanistan. The reality of the war often wasn't part of the victorious reports that dominated the media coverage at home, particularly from 1986 on'.[38]

A Private from the Motorised Infantry Unit mentions something similar that the reports he read at home after coming back did not match the reality he had endured: 'The newspapers went on announcing that helicopter-pilot X had completed his training etc, etc, had been awarded the Red Star etc, etc. That's what really opened my eyes. Afghan cured me of the illusion that everything's OK here, and that the press and television tell the truth. 'What should I do?' I wondered. I wanted to do something specific — go somewhere, speak out, tell the truth, but my mother stopped me. 'We've lived like this all our lives,' she said'.[39] This quote is particularly interesting because it highlights the faith this Private had in the government media when it came to telling the truth, hence his bigger disappointment when he discovered that this was unjustified.

A Civilian Employee talks about a similar line of reasoning that brought her to sign up for the war. She tells Alexievich: 'How did I end up here? I simply believed what I read in the papers.

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[36] *Ibid.*, p. 236.
[37] *Ibid.*
[38] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, p. 120.
[39] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 21.

There was a time when young people were really capable of achieving something and sacrificing themselves for a great cause, I thought, but now we're good for nothing and I'm no better than the rest. There's a war on, and I sit here sewing dresses and thinking up new hair-dos'.[40] Here she refers to the great cause: she wanted to do something for her country and the things she believed in instead of living a mundane life. The words 'simply believed' imply that she in the end became disillusioned with the reality as it was portrayed by the newspapers that were run by the government.

A defector talks to Borovik about his experiences: 'In Ashkhabad they told us that we would be sent to Afghanistan, but I wasn't frightened. I believed the press, which carried picturesque accounts of how we were not fighting there. This was in 1982. Once, at a hospital in Ashkhabad, I accidentally saw some men who'd been wounded in Afghanistan and realized that there was a war there, that there was shooting there'.[41]

Defending the Motherland

The other narrative that was used to convince people of the necessity of sending troops to Afghanistan was that the Motherland was under attack and hence had to be defended. Here a distinction can be made between two categories: the assumption that the United States was trying to incorporate Afghanistan into its sphere of influence and therefore a direct threat to Soviet borders, and the referencing to World War II as the highest heroic pursuit that could be achieved.

US TRHEAT

Another often-mentioned motive was that the Motherland had to be defended from the Americans, who were supposedly on the brink of taking over control of Afghanistan and therefore a threat to the Soviet Union's southern borders. At the time of the first interventions, there was a fear amongst the Soviet leadership that the president of Afghanistan, Hafizullah Amin, and his supporters, were secretly dealing with the US. This was in the interest of the US because it would compensate for the loss of its American ally Iran to

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 39.
[41] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, p. 174.

the Islamic revolution.[42] Both books also refer to a similar narrative that was given by the Soviet state. A Sergeant-Major, Medical Instructor in a Reconnaissance Unit for example expresses: 'The political officer gave this lecture about the international situation: he told us that Soviet forces had forestalled the American Green Berets airborne invasion of Afghanistan by just one hour. It was so incessantly drummed into us that this was a sacred "international duty" that eventually we believed it. I can't bear to think of the whole process now. Take off your rose-tinted spectacles! I tell myself. And don't forget, I didn't go out there in 1980 or 1981, but in 1986, the year after Gorbachev came to power. They were still lying then'.[43] In Borovik's book a Soldier talks about being in the field for over six months: 'I was the same person, yet somehow I was different. During the whole time of my military service, my submachine gun hadn't hit a single American. I'd wake up and think: Why won't the government tell us the whole truth? You see boys, this is the story, we need you to conquer the Afghans. Everything is clear and simple. But no, they deceived us, their own soldiers. They played with us as if we were toys, while we were dropping like flies'.[44]

World War II

Another recurring motive was the need to fight for the Motherland in a similar way in which the generations before them had done in WWII. Within the Soviet Union WWII veterans often had a status that bordered on heroism. They were the defenders of the Motherland and the reason it had become the great world power it was. Hence, many young people wanted to achieve a similar status.[45] For example an Artillery Captain tells Alexievich: 'Just when we were complaining that we'd been born too late for World War II — eureka! A ready-made enemy appeared on the horizon. We were brought up to find inspiration in war and revolution — and nothing else'.[46] However, many were quickly disillusioned with this idea. A Civilian Employee states how she quickly changed her mind after arriving: 'I wanted to be in a war, but not like this one. Heroic World War II, that's what I wanted'.[47] A Private Gunlayer also states how he

[42] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, p. 11.
[43] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 44.
[44] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, p. 183.
[45] Behrends, Jan Claas. "'Some Call Us Heroes, Others Call Us Killers.' Experiencing Violent Spaces: Soviet Soldiers in the Afghan War." *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 43, no. 5, Aug. 2015, p. 724.
[46] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 79.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

became embittered after he realised that the *Afgantsy* were not viewed the same way as the WWII veterans: 'I was brought up to believe that only those who killed in peacetime were condemned as murderers. In war such actions were known as "filial duty to the Motherland", "a man's sacred work" and "defence of the Fatherland". We were told that we were reliving the achievements of the heroes of the Great Patriotic War against the Nazis, and who was I to doubt it? It was continually hammered into us that we were the best of the best, so why should I question whether what we were doing was right? Later, when I began to see things differently, my army mates said: Either you've gone mad or you want to go mad. And yet, as I said, I was too fatalistic to try to change anything'.[48]

Helping Afghans

As states previously, the official line of the Soviet government was not only that the troops were defending the Motherland, but also that they were fighting to help the Afghan people whose will it was to form a socialist republic. Building upon the earlier mentioned narrative that the US was trying to take over power through influencing and infiltrating Afghanistan's elite, Soviet authors declare from the end of the 1970s onwards that the US is fighting the will of the Afghan people for a socialist republic. Consequently, reports are published on alleged training centres in Pakistan for armed mercenaries supported by the "imperialists". Hence, was argued, not only did the Soviet Union have the duty to protect its own borders from potential US aggression, it also bore the moral responsibility to help the Afghan people on their road to the victory of socialism.[49] Therefore, it was essential that Soviet troops were sent on this internationalist mission to support the Afghans. This narrative remained the main one until 1987.[50]

Some soldiers talk in the books about how this promise that they were going there to provide aid to the Afghans filled them with pride. For example, a Private from the Grenadier Battalion states: 'At our training-camp in Vitebsk everyone knew we were being prepared for Afghanistan. One guy admitted he was scared we'd all be killed. I despised him. Just before

[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.
[49] Borer, Douglas A. *Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared*. Frank Cass, 1999, p. 131.
[50] Behrends, Jan Claas. "'Some Call Us Heroes, Others Call Us Killers.' Experiencing Violent Spaces: Soviet Soldiers in the Afghan War." *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 43, no. 5, Aug. 2015, p. 722.

embarkation another guy refused to go. First he said he'd lost his Komsomol card! Then, when they found it, he said his girl was about to have a baby. I thought he was mad. We were going to create a revolution, weren't we? That's what we were told and we believed it. It was kind of romantic'.[51] Another Private tells Alexievich something similar: 'I volunteered to "go to the aid of the Afghan people". Radio, TV and the press kept telling us about the Revolution, and that it was our duty to help'.[52] This idea of providing help is also combined with the earlier mentioned notion that the Motherland was under attack. A Soldier talks to Borovik about his training: 'In two and a half months we took our oath of allegiance. We were all lined up and told that we were very lucky, that we had the great honor to be trusted by the Party to fulfil our international duty in Afghanistan. We had to help the Afghan people retain the conquests of the April Revolution, they said, and defend them from the bloodthirsty actions of imperialism, which by invading the territory of our ally, threatened our southern border'.[53]

However, it becomes clear that after an amount of time some soldiers and civilian employees began to realize that what they have been told they would do did not exactly match reality on the ground. A Nurse for example tells Alexievich: 'We were told that this was a just war, that we were helping the Afghan people to put an end to feudalism and build a wonderful socialist society. There was a conspiracy of silence about our casualties; it was somehow implied that there were an awful lot of infectious diseases over there — malaria, typhus, hepatitis, etc'.[54] A Mother also mentions: 'This was in 1981. There were all sorts of rumours of wholesale slaughter going on in Afghanistan, but how could we believe that kind of thing? We knew very few people; on television we saw pictures of Soviet and Afghan troops fraternising, tanks strewn with flowers, peasants kissing the ground they'd been allotted by the Socialist government…'.[55] In these quotes it becomes clear that many people, sometimes maybe naively, believed what the government was telling them.

This also becomes clear in the interview of A 1st Lieutenant, Battery Commander by Alexievich: 'Once we surrounded a caravan, which resisted and tried to fight us off with machine-guns, so we were ordered to destroy it, which we did. Wounded camels were lying

[51] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, pp. 15-16.
[52] *Ibid.*, p. 146.
[53] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, pp. 181-182.
[54] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 22.
[55] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

on the ground, howling … Is this what we were awarded medals from 'the grateful Afghan people' for?'[56] Another soldier, a Private from the Artillery Regiment, talks about how he soon realized that he had been lied to about the Afghans' wishes for a socialist state: 'We thought the new government would give the land they had taken from the old feudal barons to the peasants, and the peasants would accept it with joy — but they never did accept it! We thought the tractors, combines and mowers we gave them would change their lives, but they destroyed the lot!'[57] Borovik also details his conversations on similar disillusionment during the war that he had with a Soviet defector called Mochvan. Mochvan describes how he slowly realized that the supposed political support did not exist: 'We didn't see any friendly Afghans anywhere – only enemies. Even the Afghan army was unfriendly. Only one village in the whole area had a more or less tolerant attitude toward our presence. When the propagandists would go out to solicit support for Soviet rule, so to speak, they would take along a company of men and tanks'.[58] He subsequently describes how he slowly began to question what was going on: 'Then I began to doubt the goals and methods of international aid. I had a difficult time deciding what I really believed. I just knew what I had to say during the political instruction meeting: that we were fighting "American aggression" and "Pakis". Why had we mined all the approaches to the regiment? I asked myself. Why were we aiming our machine guns at every Afghan? Why were we killing the people we came here to help? Whenever a peasant was blown up by a mine, no one took him to the medical unit. Everyone just stood around, enjoying the sight of his death. This is an enemy, the officer said. Let him suffer'.[59] He then describes how he eventually ran away and joined the Mujahedin for a year: 'It was during this year that my attitude toward the war was formed and became a conviction. I realized that all of our – er, I mean all of the Soviet – propaganda about the war in Afghanistan is a complete lie from the beginning to end. I started to learn the Afghan language and eventually came to speak it pretty well. I was willing to do anything to atone for my sins before these people, even though I hadn't come to their country of my own free will. I couldn't see any difference between

[56] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 160.-161.
[58] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, p. 174.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 175.

myself and a Nazi in my native Ukrainian land. It's the same thing: rolled up sleeves, submachine guns, cries, villages…'.[60]

Conclusion

It becomes clear in both books that people became disillusioned with their government. They had trusted the authorities and the state-run media that the motives for which they were sent to the war were just, but instead discovered the opposite when they were on the ground. The US did not appear such a big threat as they were told and the WWII heroic image did not match reality in Afghanistan. Moreover, many soon discovered that the majority of Afghans were not all necessarily eager for the help of the Soviet Union and some even actively fought against it. This led to disenchantment towards the Soviet state.

[60] *Ibid.*, p. 176.

CHAPTER 3 DURING THE WAR

When it comes to distrust towards the government, the Soviet Union also lacked in caring for the soldiers, the civilian employees, and their families during the war. An essential part of any military operation is to properly look after the needs of the troops. This entails that soldiers and civilian employees receive proper military training before being sent into action, adequate healthcare, materials, and facilities on the ground, and suitable mechanisms in place to prevent both moral as well as material corruption. This section will be divided up into five subthemes: preparation, healthcare, material corruption, moral corruption, and suicide and self-mutilation.

Preparation

A factor that played a role in the increase in distrust towards the Soviet government was the lack of transparency and the lack of proper military training of conscripts before being sent to Afghanistan. Some conscripts were not told they would be sent to Afghanistan, and only found out when arriving, where they were told where they were accompanied with a round of vodka to make the truth easier. Some were told, and given the choice whether they wanted to go or not. However, many succumbed to group pressure and did not dare to refuse.[61]

Concerning the transparency about where they were being sent, Alexievich mentions a Private Driver who only found out on the plane itself, through information given by the crew, which he was not going to where he had been told they were going. He had been informed that he would be serving in the *tselina*[62], but instead was flown to Tashkent. 'We were lined up in rows and informed that in a few hours' time we would be flying to Afghanistan to do our duty as soldiers in accordance with our military oath. (…) When my wife enquired why I was in Afghanistan she was told that I'd volunteered. All our mothers and wives were told the same. If I'd been asked to give my life for something worthwhile I'd have volunteered, but I was deceived in two ways: first, they lied to us; second, it took me eight years to find out the truth about the war itself. Many of my friends are dead and sometimes I envy them because they'll

[61] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 171.
[62] Tselina refers to the "virgin lands" of the Volga region, northern Kazakhstan and southern Siberia. This were fertile underdeveloped lands. The Soviet state wanted to develop these regions in big agricultural zones.

never know they were lied to about this disgusting war — and because no one can ever lie to them again'.[63]

Besides in some cases being lied to about where they were going in the first place, soldiers, Soviet civilians, and their relatives also make mentions of lack of training in combination with a lack of proper equipment in both Borovik's work as Alexievich's. To prepare for operational combat, usually, conscripts were trained for one month in which they received basic military training. In the case of Afghanistan, after the first month, they were most of the time sent into "quarantine" for three months in one of the Central Asian Republics to train in similar climatic circumstances as Afghanistan.[64] However, the training that was offered often did not match the needs of the conscripts. The Soviet army was under the perception that the conscripts would have been carefully prepared for their conscription time through the youth movements, organisations, and school curricula of the Party. The training was therefore prepared with the assumption that the new recruits would already have a certain basis in military discipline and basic military skills, and would be physically fit. Hence, the preparation phase and the subsequent work environment came to many as a shock.[65]

Alexievich's and Borovik's works shed new light on this. Many people report some training, but often not to the extent that the academic literature describes it. A Private from the Motorised Infantry Unit for example states: 'The local newspapers calmly announced that our regiment had completed its training and firing practice. We were pretty bitter when we read that, because our 'training' was escorting trucks you could pierce with a screwdriver — the perfect target for snipers. (…) They were so short of things over there we didn't even have a bowl or spoon each. There was one big bowl and eight of us would attack it'.[66] It was not only on the battlefield that lack of adequate preparation became apparent. A mother states the following: 'I know nothing about military matters, so perhaps there's something I don't understand here. But I wish someone would explain to me why my son was kept busy bricklaying and plastering when he should have been training for war. The authorities knew what they were sending those boys into. Even the papers published photographs of the mujahedin, strong men thirty or forty years old, on their own land and with their wives and

[63] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, pp. 27-28.
[64] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 170.
[65] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, p. 33.
[66] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 20.

children beside them (…) How did he come to join the paratroop battalion one week before flying off to Afghanistan? Even I know that they choose the toughest boys for the paras, and then put them through specially gruelling training. Afterwards the Commandant of the training-camp wrote to me. 'Your son was outstanding in both his military and political training,' he said. When did he become outstanding? And where? At his furniture factory? I gave my son to them and they didn't even bother to make a soldier of him'.[67] Borovik's work also talks about lack of preparation, albeit it in a less straightforward manner. When he is talking with a battalion commander named Ushakov, he gets reprimanded for writing about and publishing in the Soviet Union about a group of soldiers in which Borovik was earlier embedded. These soldiers used English sleeping bags and preferred walking on trainers as opposed to the military prescribed and Soviet-made sleeping bags and boots. He states rather aggressively: 'While a normal officer's soldiers are dressed according to the regulations, you showed a band of bums who were decked out in trophy garb. That's despicable!' … 'There's already enough crap in the army as it is.'… 'There's no need to propagandize it'.[68] In these quotes it becomes clear that many were appalled by the lack of proper training; they had expected more from the Soviet military. Borovik talks more about the lack of proper equipment, but highlights the sensitivity amongst higher ranks in making this inadequacy public.

Healthcare

The state of the healthcare services and facilities in Afghanistan for the troops was appalling. According to Braithwaite 69% of all people serving in Afghanistan was affected directly by illness and infections. Many of the infectious diseases could have been prevented by better personal health and more hygienic facilities. Of the diseased, 28% suffered from hepatitis, 7,5% from typhoid fever, the remaining from dysentery, malaria, and other illnesses. He estimates that overall, at any point in time during the war, up to 25% to 33% of the army was ill and could therefore not perform his/her duties. At some point in 1985 half a brigade was even infected with cholera. As mentioned, the general circumstances in the camps were

[67] *Ibid.*, p. 109.
[68] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, pp. 150-151.

unhygienic, and lacked clean water and food, sanitation facilities, and an adequate sewage system. This led to the development of a lot of infections and made it difficult as well to further contain the spread of the diseases.[69]

Consequently, many people interviewed in the two books expressed their frustrations. For example, in *Zinky Boys*, a nurse mentions: 'We flew to Kabul in early 1980. The hospital was the former English stables. There was no equipment: one syringe for all the patients, and the officers drank the surgical spirit so we had to use petrol to clean the wounds. They healed badly for lack of oxygen, but the hot sun helped to kill microbes. I saw my first wounded patients in their underwear and boots. For a long time, there were no pyjamas, or slippers, or even blankets'.[70] She then continues and links this very specifically to disappointment and distrust in the government as to why they were sent to Afghanistan in the first place: 'Gradually we began to ask ourselves what we were all here for. Such questions were unpopular with the authorities, of course. There were no slippers or pyjamas, but plenty of banners and posters with political slogans, all brought from back home. Behind the slogans were our boys' skinny, miserable faces. I'll never forget them…'.[71] Here she specifically links the motives for the war to the lack of proper healthcare facilities, hence expressing her disbelief of the situation she was in. Another nurse encountered similar situations when she describes the medical equipment: 'When I looked for surgical clamps I discovered there weren't any, so we had to hold the wound together with our fingers. When you touched the surgical thread it crumbled into dust — it hadn't been replaced since the end of the last war in 1945'.[72]

Another nurse makes remarks about the combination of the lack of proper training and adequate materials: 'We lost so many because we didn't have the right drugs, the wounded were often brought in too late because the field medics were badly trained soldiers who could just about put bandages on; the surgeon was often drunk. We weren't allowed to tell the truth in the next-of-kin letters. A boy might be blown up by a mine and there'd be nothing left except half a bucket of flesh, but we wrote that he'd died of food poisoning, or in a car accident, or he'd fallen into a ravine. It wasn't until the fatalities were in their thousands that they began

[69] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 175.
[70] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 22.
[71] *Ibid.*
[72] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

to tell families the truth'.[73] In this quote it becomes clear that she is appalled by the situation; many lives could have been saved if a basic medical standard would have been upheld. She also refers to the authorities as 'they began to tell families the truth'. This indicates that she was discontent with how she first had to lie about how men died, and that she finds it hypocritical that only after thousands had died the truth was told.

A Sergeant-Major who was a Medical Instructor in a Reconnaissance Unit talks about how the Soviet medical supplies as well as basic army and soldier equipment were all of substandard quality: 'In the last nine years our country has made no progress and produced nothing new in this field — and that goes for dressings and splints. The Soviet soldier is the cheapest in the world — and the most patient. It was like that in 1941, but why fifty years later? Why?'[74] Borovik also talks to a doctor who said the following: '… we didn't – and still don't have – a single piece of factory-made medical equipment or a conventional operating room. I had to build everything with my bare hands. … The Rescuers [planes specially equipped for transporting wounded soldiers] have been reluctant to fly out here. I know that there's an excellent operating room at the KamAZ base. There are only two such operating rooms in our entire armed forces – I saw pictures of them. One of them was sent to the Turkestan Military District for exercises, but they wouldn't sent it to war. They were afraid that we'd wreck it. Isn't that absurd? We've suggested an entirely new system for setting up a first aid station and a medical battalion in wartime conditions, but it's been ignored by our command. For nearly fifty years we prepared for a global war, but in Afghanistan we've had to conduct small-scale warfare. We weren't prepared for it at all. If we can't make it in a small-scale war, how can we possibly handle a big war?'[75] In these quotes it becomes not only clear that both soldiers are angry at the authorities for not having adequate facilities, but they are also outraged that the state had years to prepare but failed to do so.

Material Corruption

Corruption within the Soviet troops during the deployment in Afghanistan was widespread. Most men were not paid much, so they turned to looting, stealing, and corruption to

[73] *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
[74] *Ibid.*, p. 48.
[75] *Ibid.*, pp. 134-135.

supplement their salaries. This took many forms. Soldiers would stop Afghan vehicles or enter Afghan houses and take everything they would find of value. Or they would steal army supplies they were supposed to transport or even go as far as selling their own weapons to exchange it for the many Western products that could be found in the Afghan bazaars.[76]

Corruption is also discussed many times throughout both books. However, what stands out the most is how these examples of corruption are linked to the distrust versus the commanding officers and the regime of the Soviet Union. Borovik has numerous conversations with a battalion commander named Ushakov. Ushakov talks about how his battalion was under fire almost daily and that consequently his superiors were too afraid to fly down. However, when the superiors picked up the courage to come, they were not happy: 'They would be livid by the time they left. First, we wouldn't give them any cars; they were all being used. Second, we wouldn't give them any vodka or baksheesh. We didn't have direct contact with the *dukhanshiki*[77], so we instituted a dry law. That's why they weren't happy when they left and why our regiment was in ill repute. Our commander, a d-d-decent man, didn't know how to stick up for himself at the Party meetings. … A real worker in the army always stays in the shadows, while the worthless bastards who knows how to click his heels or kiss a general's butt always climbs to the top. It's the same old s-s-story'.[78] Here it becomes clear that Ushakov is not only frustrated by the lack of support from his superiors, but also with the corrupt hierarchical system.

Ushakov also talks about his resentment regarding corruption through the illegal sales of Soviet weaponry: 'A little farther south there's a battalion commander who never sees a single pay check here – he has it all transferred back to the USSR. He's made a killing. D-D-Do you want to know how? V-V-Very easily. He sells submachine guns to Basir but writes them off as lost in combat. It's all very sad. A s-s-soldier sees something like that and immediately follows suit. And if you start fighting any of this they'll say: He's crazy – send him to the psych ward!'.[79]

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[76] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 188-190.

[77] The word dukhanshiki refers to Afghan shopowners

[78] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, pp. 156-157.

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 158.

Alexievich describes similar descriptions of corruption. A Private from the Signals Corps explains: 'Then I remember seeing planes taking off for home with a cargo of zinc coffins, plus suitcases full of leather jackets, jeans, women's underwear, China tea…'.[80] A 1st Lieutenant from the Battery Commander tells her: 'Only a madman will tell you the whole truth about what went on there, that's for sure. There's a lot you'll never know. When the truth is too terrible it doesn't get told. Nobody wants to be the first to come out with it — it's just too risky. Did you know that drugs and fur coats were smuggled in in coffins? Yes, right in there with the bodies! Have you ever seen necklaces of dried ears? Yes, trophies of war, rolled up into little leaves and kept in matchboxes! Impossible? You can't believe such things of our glorious Soviet boys? Well, they could and did happen, and you won't be able to cover them up with a coat of that cheap silver paint they use to paint the railings round our graves and war memorials …'.[81] Especially this lieutenant's reference to 'our glorious Soviet boys' is interesting. It implies a level of sarcasm and irony, that before the war he had expected that this would never happen, but that after the war nothing surprised him anymore.

Moral Corruption

Moral corruption, in this case bullying as well as mental and physical abuse, had long been a problem within the Soviet military system. Since the 1960s, a habit became more entrenched called *dedovshchina*, the "grandfather system". It basically entailed a hierarchy between soldiers of the same rank, on the basis of the time they had been in the army and the time they still had left. The highest level within the hierarchy was "a grandfather" who could essentially let new recruits do whatever he wanted. This resulted in continuous humiliation and injuries. According to Braithwaite, *dedovshchina* was less prominent in Afghanistan than in other places because soldiers were less bored. However, that it occurred less than normal does not mean that it was not a rampant problem. 33% of the crimes from the 40th Army that were brought before a military court in 1987 fell under the category "military bullying".[82] Galeotti also examined the perseverance of *dedovshchina*. He agrees that in Afghanistan it occurred less than in other locations to which conscripts were sent, but he argues that this is

[80] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 56.
[81] *Ibid.*, p. 110.
[82] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 171-173.

more due to the fact that men higher up in the hierarchy sometimes could lose their lives due to sabotaging by fellow comrades whom they had first bullied.[83]

Despite the academic verdict that moral corruption was not as high as rampant as normally within the Soviet Army, it still had a significant impact on the soldiers on the ground. As mentioned before, the militaristic and heroic ideal of soldiers fighting for the Motherland was still rampant amongst the people who were sent to Afghanistan. In *Zinky Boys*, a Private Gunner states: 'So much for the big happy family! What a fool I was. The new recruit is an object. He can be out of bed at night and beaten up with chairs, sticks, fists and feet. In the daytime, he's beaten up in the toilet, and his backpack, personal possessions, his cans of meat and biscuits from home (if any) are stolen. There's no television or radio or newspapers, so entertainment goes according to the law of the jungle. "Wash my socks, sweetie-pie!" That's nothing compared to "Now, lick my socks, sweetie-pie, lick them good so that everyone can see you!"'.[84] This soldier is not the only person who refers to the ideal image that existed before the deployment, and the subsequent disappointment when this did not seem to be reality.

A female bacteriologist mentions: 'Before I arrived I imagined an elevating and inspiring atmosphere of self-sacrifice, with the womenfolk fulfilling their role of protecting and caring for our boys. If men were spilling their blood for the cause I would give my blood too! I realised just how wrong I was even before I left the clearing-centre in Tashkent'.[85] Here it becomes clear again that there was at first an ideal image but that this was soon caught up with reality due to the disappointing behaviour of fellow soldiers. Besides abuse between informal hierarchies (soldiers of the same rank distinguished by the amount of time they had spent in the field), *Zinky Boys* also talks about misconduct between formal ranks. A soldier, a Private Gunlayer, discusses how he had his leg broken by beatings from his own battalion. His commander wants him to give the name of the perpetrator, but he refuses to give them knowing it would make things worse: 'I kept quiet. The authorities were powerless against the unwritten rules of army life, which were literally life and death to us. If you tried to fight against them you always lost in the end. Near the end of my two years I even tried to beat up

[83] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, p. 37.
[84] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 58.
[85] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

someone myself. I didn't manage it, though. The 'rule of the grandads' doesn't depend on individuals — it's a product of the herd instinct. First you get beaten up, then you beat up others'.[86] Hence, this soldier suggests that even if his commander would have known who did it, the military leadership would not have been able to serve him justice.

Borovik also makes mention of similar behaviour. He explains how he has just arrived in Afghanistan and runs into a Soviet woman who is hysterically crying who says: 'I was sent here from Mazar-i-Sharif to do an abortion on a *blatnaya* [a well-connected woman]. They promised to send me back –all my things are still there – but then forgot about me. This morning I went to the airfield, and all of us were loaded into a transport plane. We were supposed to be taking off any minute, but then. … They kicked us out and started to load some army archives. I'll bet all my things are stolen by now'.[87] Hence, the woman implies that her situation was caused by the inadequacy of the Soviet leadership.

Suicide and Self-Mutilation

The combination of poor preparation, inadequate facilities and healthcare, and both material and moral corruption led many men into despair.[88] Cases of suicide were often covered up for the public back home, even though they did occur.[89] What took place on a more widespread scale was self-mutilation where men would drink infected urine or shoot off their own thumb to get sent home.[90] The two books also mention suicide and self-mutilation amongst soldiers that were specifically linked to the war.

Zinky Boys deals more with suicide and self-mutilation than *Hidden War* does. This could be explained through the fact that Borovik spoke with fewer people than Alexievich, and due to the huge stigma that surrounded suicide and self-mutilation. Borovik states: 'The war was full of mindless suicides: two nations, dozens of Soviet soldiers and officers. I wasn't sure which was more absurd, nor was I privy to instances of suicide among the rebels'.[91] Alexievich also

[86] *Ibid.*, p. 120.
[87] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, p. 107.
[88] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 172.
[89] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, p. 73.
[90] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 174.
[91] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, p. 121.

mentions how a Private from the Signal Corps talks about how soldiers tried to be discharged to escape their deployment: 'For a few foreign currency vouchers the medics would sell you a couple of glasses of urine from a hepatitis patient. You drank it, fell ill and then got yourself discharged from the army. Some of the lads shot their fingers off or mutilated themselves.[92] She also illustrates how the stigma that surrounded these actions affected those around them by stating a nurse: 'If it wasn't the war-wounded, it was the self-mutilators, soldiers who shot themselves in the knee or fingers. A sea of blood and a shortage of cotton-wool … Such men were generally despised, even by us medics. "There are lads getting killed out there, and you want to go home to Mummy? You think you'll be sent back home? Why didn't you shoot yourself in the head? I would, if I were you!" That was the sort of thing I used to say, I promise you. At the time they seemed the most contemptible of cowards; now I'm beginning to realise that perhaps it was a protest as well, and an unwillingness to kill other people'.[93] Even though these quotes do no directly link to the mutilating and suicidal soldiers being disappointed in their government, it does demonstrate the sense of pure desperation that these men were in and the inability of the Soviet government and armed forces to adequately combat this.

Conclusion

As mentioned, the inadequate conditions and the harsh environment led many to give up hope. However, through Alexievich's and Borovik's work it becomes clear that many soldiers, civilian employees, and their families linked their experiences to their feelings towards the Soviet government and regime. As can be seen, in the many quotes above, many were disappointed and angry with the government for the lack of adequate care, materials, weaponry, and the missing of a competent military accountability system to keep unacceptable behaviours to a minimum.

[92] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 56.
[93] *Ibid.*, p. 137.

CHAPTER 4 AFTER THE WAR

This chapter deals with the aftermath of the war. It is structured in multiple sections, namely: government narrative, an unjust war which is divided up into political mistake and war crimes, and recognition which is divided up into informal and formal recognition. The accumulation of these topics eventually led to anger towards the government amongst veterans and their families, and this will be discussed in the last section.

Government Narrative

The official government narrative and the state-run Soviet media played a significant role in the way the war was perceived and consequently also affected the expectations of both soldiers and civilian personnel, and also the view Soviet society had of what was happening in Afghanistan. In the beginning everything was perfect, but after the war progressed soon it became clear that it was not all going as violent-free as they had been told.[94] This of course also had an effect on the soldiers after they were sent home.

In the beginning years of the war it becomes clear in both *Zinky Boys* and *Hidden War* that coming home was hard for veterans as the media did not reflect their own experiences. Borovik for example talks about a Battalion Commander who states: 'I've read so much about battles that never even happened, while not a word has been written about real battles. We've proclaimed so many cowards to be heroes, while the truly brave have been ignored by the newspapers. A *chizhik* [military bureaucrat] is covered with medals, while the soldier…'.[95] It was also hard for relatives to deal with the discrepancy between the image that was portrayed in the media and the reality in their own lives. For them it was harder to go through the grieving process as in the beginning the victims of the war had to be surrounded by an air of secrecy.

A mother states: 'Time passed, and I wanted to find out how my son was killed. I went to the local recruitment HQ. 'Tell me how and where my son was killed,' I begged. 'I don't believe he's dead. I'm sure I've buried a metal box and my son is alive somewhere.' The officer in

[94] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 235-236.
[95] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, pp. 152-154.

charge got angry and even started shouting at me. 'This is classified information! You can't go around telling everyone your son has been killed! Don't you know that's not allowed?'[96] The fact that everything had to be kept quiet also made it harder for veterans to readjust when they came back to a society where the official narrative was that nothing negative went on in Afghanistan. Before leaving to be discharged, soldiers were specifically instructed: 'The farewell address from the political education officer to the departing *dembels* was a list of what we could and could not talk about back home. No mention to be made of fatalities, nor of any "unofficial activities", because we are a "great, powerful and morally healthy army". All photographs and films to be destroyed. We did not shoot, bombard, use poisons or lay mines here. We are a great, powerful and morally healthy army'.[97]

After some time the official media discourse started to change. The state allowed more critical voices to be heard and also became more critical and open about the war itself. Despite the official secrecy, it soon became a public secret that there was an actual war going on and from 1983 onwards there was an increase in criticism noticeable among Soviet public opinion. From that time on, the public also became more critical towards the veterans who had just come back from Afghanistan. They were often accused of having committed war crimes and crimes against humanity. This resentment towards both veterans and the government's willingness to continue the war only grew throughout the 1980s. Parallels were drawn with the Vietnam war and it was argued that they had the same illegal basis.[98] What increased the criticism of the war, was also the fact that under Gorbachev's rule Soviet press became much more open and was allowed to also divert from the official government line. Consequently, also critical opinion pieces on the war could now be published.[99]

Consequently, veterans who had left amidst the time when people who were going to Afghanistan were seen as doing their "internationalist duty", came back in a society that had become much more critical and was sometimes even hostile towards the Soviet effort. A quote from a Major from the Propaganda Section of an Artillery Regiment illustrates the logical anger many veterans had: 'To begin with the media kept quiet about us, then we were

[96] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 83.
[97] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
[98] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 243-245.
[99] *Ibid.*, p. 245.

all heroes for a time, and now we're being knocked off our pedestals again so we can be forgotten about'.[100] A Private from the Signal Corps expresses a similar frustration by stating: 'My lips used to tremble when I said the word "Motherland". I don't believe in anything now, let alone in fighting for something. What's there to fight for? And who against? We fought. Fair enough. Perhaps it was justified, after all. If the newspapers start saying it was right, it'll be right again. Now they're starting to say we're murderers. Who to believe? I don't know. I don't believe anything. Newspapers? I don't read them or buy them. They write one thing today and the opposite tomorrow. I don't know where the truth is'.[101] From this quote not only the frustration, the anger, and the confusion become apparent, but also the disillusionment with "the Motherland" as an ideal.

A soldier speaking to Borovik expresses his frustration with not only the government but also with the people in Soviet society who have now all of a sudden become openly critical. He states: 'I know that in the USSR they're now starting to speak badly of the guys who fought in Afghanistan. They started to talk when it became safe to talk and to criticize the war. They should have spoken out sooner'.[102] A Lieutenant Colonel tells Alexievich: 'While we fight here our names are being dragged through the mud. It's disgusting"'.[103] These quotes clearly express the anger and the frustration these soldiers feel. Besides the resentment towards the media, the government, and Soviet society, one quote from a soldier shows the extent in which the change in stance was also confusing: 'When we read articles in the Soviet press about our "achievements" we laughed, got angry and used them as toilet paper, but the strange thing is this: now I'm home, after my two years out there, I search through the papers to find articles about "achievements" and actually believe them'.[104]

[100] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, pp. 92-93.
[101] *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.
[102] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, p. 177.
[103] *Ibid.*, p. 236.
[104] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 128.

An Unjust War

Political Mistake

Besides the change in media landscape and public opinion of the war, the fact is also that in the mid-80s a lot of things changed politically in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev came to power and announced at the 28th Party Congress in 1986 that the war was a 'bleeding wound'. [105]This opened the floodgates and open political criticism on the war was on a rise since then.

Consequently, not only did veterans have to deal with the traumas they had endured, they were now also victim to critical voices once they had arrived home. Many veterans had the feeling they now had to defend themselves against Soviet society, while they had been sent away with the notion that they were actually going to protect them and that they would be returning as heroes. On the contrary, after the war progressed the Soviet government increasingly spoke of the war as being a political mistake. This caused a lot of anger among the veterans. For example, a Private, Grenadier Regiment tells Alexievich: 'I had a talk with an old lecturer at college. You were a victim of a political mistake, he said. You were forced to become accomplices to a crime. I was eighteen then, I told him. How old were you? You kept quiet when we were being roasted alive. You kept quiet when we were being brought home in body-bags and military bands played in the cemeteries. You kept quiet over here while we were doing the killing over there. Now all of a sudden you go on about victims and mistakes (…) Anyhow, I don't want to be a victim of a political mistake. And I'll fight for the right not to be! Whatever anyone says, those boys were heroes!'[106] It becomes apparent that this Private was not only frustrated with the fact that the war was now declared to have been a mistake, but also that he felt that he has to defend himself against people who agree with that. He feels as if they could have spoken out earlier since he did not have much of a choice in going to Afghanistan.

Another soldier shares something similar: 'Don't try and tell me we were victims of a mistake. I can't stand those two words and I won't hear them spoken. We fought well and bravely. Why are we being treated like this? I knelt to kiss the flag and took the military oath. We were brought up to believe these things were sacred, to love and trust the Motherland. And I do

[105] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, pp. 143-144.
[106] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 78.

trust her, in spite of everything'.[107] These two quotes show how disappointed the veterans were with the way in which they were being treated and also their frustration with that the official narrative around the war had changed.

War Crimes

Building upon this narrative that the war had been a political mistake was the veterans their experiences that they were now treated as if they had committed serious war crimes. One soldier speaking to Borovik specifically blames the government for this phenomenon: 'In the last few years, our government itself has headed the anti-war movement. Naturally, the ostentatious statements of the government's communiqué could not abolish all the wars in the universe, but they did give all the numerous enemies in the country's social structure the right to loosen the very foundations of the army, using the government's authority as their cover'.[108] He argues that because of the change in the official narrative, people who blamed veterans for all kinds of things have gained more legitimacy. This notion of all of a sudden being seen as war criminals also comes back multiple times. A Lieutenant Colonel talks to Borovik and states: 'I wasn't the one who started this war, was I? … What did I need it for? The government said go, so we went. And now they're blaming us for it. (…) Now they'll come home and be harassed – murders, assassins!'[109]

A Major from the Propaganda Section of an Artillery Regiment also tells Alexievich: 'I don't want you to think we were supermen, with cigarettes clenched between our teeth, opening cans of bully beef over the bodies of the enemy and carelessly eating water-melons after battle. That image is utter rubbish. We were ordinary boys and any other boys could have taken our place. When I hear people accusing us of 'killing people over there' I could smash their faces in. If you weren't there and didn't live through it you can't know what it was like and you have no right to judge us'.[110] Even though the majority of soldiers denied that war crimes had occurred, research suggests otherwise. The war was a guerrilla war which entailed that any Afghan could potentially be an enemy. Consequently, many soldiers took proactive

[107] *Ibid.*, p. 149.
[108] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, p. 233.
[109] *Ibid.*, p. 236.
[110] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 89.

measures to prevent being attacked, often killing innocent civilians in the process.[111] In 1984 the United Nations decided to investigate to what extent human rights abuses were taking place and appointed the UN Commission of Human Rights. The Commission found much proof of war crimes including indiscriminately targeting and massacring innocent civilians, the use of poison gases, the bombing of hospitals, rape, torture of civilians and POWs, and the execution of POWs.[112] The report moreover mentions the Soviets using "booby-trap toys", small bombs that would explode causing serious damage to the limb it was touched with. These were disguised as pens or small animals and were often picked up by children who would then be seriously wounded.[113]

It was not only veterans who had a hard time dealing with the changed social climate at home. Relatives of Soviets who had died during their time in Afghanistan also had to deal with the judgements within their own social circles. Relatives often reported feeling alone with no support in their grieving. A mother for example tells Alexievich: 'Another time I was sitting near the grave and a mother came by with her children. What kind of a mother would let her only daughter go off to war at a time like this? I heard her tell them. Just give away her daughter? The gravestone had "To My Only Daughter" carved on it. How dare they. How can they? She took the Hippocratic Oath. She was a nurse whose hands were kissed by a surgeon. She went to save their sons' lives. People! I cry inside me. Don't turn away from me! Stand by the grave with me for a little while. Don't leave me alone'.[114] A widow also makes the comparison with WWII stating: 'In the last war everyone was in mourning, there wasn't a family in the land that hadn't lost some loved one. Women wept together then. There's a staff of 100 in the catering college where I work, and I'm the only one who had a husband killed in a war which all the rest have only read about in the papers. I wanted to smash the screen the first time I heard someone on television say that Afghanistan was our shame. That was the day I buried my husband a second time'.[115] In these quotes it becomes apparent that both women feel misunderstood, lonely and attacked.

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[111] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 230-231.
[112] United Nations. *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan Perpared by the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Felix Ermacora, in Accordance with Commission on Human Rights Resolution 1984/55 Commission on Human Rights*. United Nations, 1985, pp. 28–32.
[113] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[114] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, pp. 154-155.
[115] A *Ibid.*, p. 168.

Recognition

Another factor that was extremely significant in the homecoming of the Afghanistan veterans was formal and informal recognition of their deeds. Formal recognition entails being officially recognised by the state as a soldier and/or veteran and receiving compensation and honours for it. Informal recognition encompasses being respected by society for the efforts and sacrifices made. Getting these recognitions proved to be harder than most veterans had expected. As mentioned, at first the war was supposed to be a secret so veterans and/or families of died soldiers received little to no understanding and appreciation of what they had just gone through. Hence, when more information came through of what was going on in Afghanistan, things changed. The war became increasingly unpopular, leading to less recognition from both the government and society for the veterans and their families after they came back.[116] Here a distinction can be made between different categories. At first there is informal recognition, which is more specifically linked to how the veterans of WWII were being treated and to how whether people care about what went on in Afghanistan. Second, there is formal recognition which comes in the way of formal military hero status and compensations, allowances, and help for the veterans their efforts.

Informal Recognition

Informal recognition for veterans and their families consisted of getting understanding and respect from other people in society for their time in the armed forces. The lack of informal recognition also comes back in *Zinky Boys* and *Hidden War*. The notion that the war was unjust and a mistake has already been discussed in an earlier chapter, but here specific focus will lie on the comparison that was made with WWII and on the fact that a lot of people also did not care what was going on in Afghanistan.

One of the motives for people to apply and/or be excited about the Afghan war was because of the heroic status WWII veterans had in the Soviet Union. Joining the war would mean gaining a similar status.[117] Hence, it made it harder when they came back that they did not receive a similar treatment and were often even accused of being Nazis. A Private from a

[116] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, pp. 143-144.
[117] Behrends, Jan Claas. "'Some Call Us Heroes, Others Call Us Killers.' Experiencing Violent Spaces: Soviet Soldiers in the Afghan War." *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 43, no. 5, Aug. 2015, p. 724.

Grenadier Battalion tells Alexievich: 'The young people ignore us. There's absolutely no mutual understanding. Officially we have the same status as the World War II vets. The only difference is, they were defenders of the Fatherland, whereas we're seen as the Germans — one young lad actually said that to me! We hate the younger generation. They spent their time listening to music, dancing with girls and reading books, while we were eating uncooked rice and getting blown up by mines'.[118] Here it becomes clear that he did expect to be treated the same as WWII veterans, which made it even harder when the exact opposite happened.

Another Major tells Alexievich how he felt misunderstood by other soldiers who had not been to Afghanistan: 'I gave a talk at the officers' club. Tell us about the romantic side of service life in Afghanistan, I was asked. Did you personally kill anyone? Young girls were especially keen on bloodthirsty questions. Ordinary life is a bit dull, I grant you, but can you imagine anyone asking about the romantic side of World War II? Three generations fought side by side against the Germans — grandfathers, fathers and sons. This war was fought by naïve boys looking for adventure'.[119] Here it becomes clear that he is disappointed that they are not being treated with the same respect as WWII veterans, despite the fact that he does acknowledge that the type of soldier that was sent was different. A 1st Lieutenant from a Mortar Platoon is much angrier about his experiences when he came back: 'Now the war's over they're trying to forget all about us, or else hide us out of sight. They treated the veterans of the war with Finland the same way. Thousands of books have been published about World War II but not one about the Finnish war. Our people are too easy on their rulers — and I'll have accepted it myself in ten years or so'.[120] Here it becomes clear that he is not only angry but also a sense of loneliness and desperation comes through: he wants to be recognized similarly to the WWII vets. However, he acknowledges that not only the government is to blame but also the Soviet people for letting this happen.

Besides the comparisons made to WWII, many veterans also claim that they feel as if Soviet society did not care about what they had just gone through. At first there was no widespread knowledge of what was actually going on and when information became more available, Galeotti argued, not that many people cared because it did not affect them directly. He asserts

[118] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 19.
[119] *Ibid.*, p. 93.
[120] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

that the number of soldiers sent was relatively small. He states that in total only around 750.000 Soviets went to Afghanistan, making it only 0,25% of the total Soviet population at that time. Even when only looking at boys of conscript age, they only made up 3.4%. Compared to the United States, about 1.7% of Americans went to Vietnam.[121] Moreover, the majority of the fighting forces in Afghanistan consisted of conscripts. Conscription was not popular and many parents with money and influence bribed their sons out of the army. This had always been the case but increased after the start of the war. Consequently, the majority of the Soviet forces fighting in the Afghan war were from the lower classes. Braithwaite refers to a survey taken in 1986 which revealed that 'more than two-thirds were from the countryside or from working-class families with no secondary education, at a time when nearly two-thirds of the population already lived in cities'. A quarter was also from broken families and none from the elites.[122] Mark Galeotti agrees with the notion that it was "a blue-collar war", arguing that the majority of the conscripts came from 'blue-collar centres of the Slavic proletariat'. Consequently, this meant that the impact of the war was mostly centred on a few hotspots, but outside of these areas and social classes, there was much less notion of importance.[123]

This made coming back home difficult for many people. They had the feeling that their efforts and pain were not being recognized by the people they thought they had had gone to war for. A Major commanding a Mountain Infantry Company for example states: ‘A lot of people now claim it was all a waste of time. I suppose they want to carve ‘It Was All In Vain’ on the gravestones. We did our killing over there but we’re being condemned for it at home. Casualties were flown back to Soviet airports and unloaded in secret so the public wouldn’t find out. You say that’s all in the past now, do you? But your ‘past’ is very recent. I came home on leave in 1986. ‘So you get a nice suntan, go fishing and earn fantastic amounts of money, do you?’ people asked me. How could they be expected to know the truth, when the media kept quiet’.[124] Here again he makes the reference to the earlier mentioned media. Other veterans also report that the idea of an unjust war also made it harder to be recognized as war heroes. A Private from the Grenadier Regiment for example states: ‘When it was our time to go home we expected a warm welcome and open arms — then we discovered that people

[121] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, p. 30.
[122] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 170-171.
[123] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, p. 29-30.
[124] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 132.

couldn't care less whether we'd survived or not. In the courtyard of our block of flats I met up with the kids I'd known before. Oh, you're back — that's good, they said, and went off to school. My teachers didn't ask about anything either. This was the sum total of our conversation: I, solemnly: We should perpetuate the memory of our school fellows who died doing their international duty. They: They were dunces and hooligans. How can we put up a memorial plaque to them in the school?' People back home had their own view of the war. So you think you were heroes, were you? You lost a war, and anyhow, who needed it, apart from Brezhnev and a few warmongering generals? Apparently my friends died for nothing, and I might have died for nothing too'.[125] Another Private also reports that he did not feel the recognition he believed he deserved, and that he would have rather stayed in Afghanistan than come back: 'Because there you know who are your friends and who are your enemies. Here I'm tortured by one question which won't go away: What did my best mate die for? For these fat speculators and black marketers, you see everywhere? It's all wrong here, and I feel like a stranger in my own country'.[126] In this case it entails informal recognition in the sense that he feels as if he can become part of Soviet society again.

Besides being accepted and respected by Soviet society, some female veterans also felt it was difficult to be recognized by male veterans. A female civilian employee talks about how women serving in Afghanistan were only seen as whores and how she even experienced sexual discrimination when she came back home: 'You'll often hear soldiers who've served here say things like this: 'If I hear that a certain girl's been in Afghanistan she just doesn't exist for me.' We got the same diseases as they did, all the girls got hepatitis and malaria, we were shot at too, but if I meet a boy back home he won't let me give him a friendly hug. For them we're all either whores or crazy'.[127] The notion that female veterans, *Afganka*, were treated more harshly is also supported by Galeotti. He argues that not only did women in Afghanistan have to deal with sexual discrimination during the war, they were often also judged to have been working as a prostitute by society once they had returned. However, despite the fact that some women did indeed sell sex for extra privileges, the vast majority was there as a nurse, an advisor, a cook, or a teacher.[128]

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[125] *Ibid.*, p. 77.
[126] *Ibid.*, p. 59.
[127] *Ibid.*, p. 74.
[128] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, p. 40-43.

Formal Recognition

Besides informal acceptance and respect, formal recognition is also important when it comes being able to properly reintegrate back into society. It is usual that when soldiers die in a war fighting for their country, they are given appropriate memorials and are buried with military honours and ceremonies. However, as mentioned earlier, the extent of the Afghan war was supposed to be a secret, so families often received threats if they were to speak openly of their loss and grief.[129] Moreover, usually, the soldiers who do come back alive are often paid for their service through extra benefits and are often taken care of, to a certain extent, medically in the case of any physical injury as a result of the war. However, within the Soviet Union many of these things were lacking. Invalid veterans often had to rely on the willingness of family and friends for support, and received only the minimum amount of compensation and/or assistance from the state. In the early beginnings of the war lack of help from the state for veterans makes political sense, since there was officially no war. Nonetheless, as Galeotti argues, the inadequacy of the authorities was also representative of its functioning at that time. Anything bureaucratic in the Soviet Union took forever and, moreover, local governments often lacked the necessary funding, organizational skills, and capacities.[130]

The most common and apparent aspect in the primary sources is the lack of care they were given by the state and the subsequent condemnation they got from society for complaining about that. An NCO from the Security Service for example tells Alexievich: 'More coffins came over than cassette-recorders, I can tell you, but that's all been forgotten about … Damn you, Afghanistan! My daughter's growing up. We share a single room in a communal flat, although I was promised that when I got home we'd get a place of our own. I went to the housing committee with my documents. Were you wounded?, they asked. No, I came home in one piece. I may look OK, but that doesn't mean I'm not damaged inside. Aren't we all? It wasn't us that sent you there. I was queuing for sugar one day and heard someone say: they brought suitcases full of stuff back with them and now they want special privileges …'.[131] Here it becomes clear that not only the failure of the state to provide let to frustration, but also the judgements from others in society.

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[129] Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89*. Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 237.
[130] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995, pp. 74-77.
[131] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 148.

Another illustrative example on the lack of aftercare offered by the state and the subsequent frustration of veterans becomes apparent through how another soldier, a 1st Lieutenant from a Mortar Platoon states: 'Have you ever tried our Soviet-manufactured prostheses? I've heard that abroad people with artificial limbs go skiing, play tennis and dance. Why don't the authorities use foreign currency to buy decent arms and legs instead of wasting it on French cosmetics, subsidised Cuban sugar or Moroccan oranges?'[132] Here it becomes clear that he specifically blames the government for the lack of aftercare. The same Lieutenant continues and recalls sarcastically the discrepancy between what the authorities expected of him and what they were willing to give in return for it. He states: 'We were sent to Afghanistan to obey orders. In the army you obey orders first and then, if you like, discuss their merits — when it's all over. 'Go!' means exactly that. If you refuse you get thrown out of the party. You took the military oath, didn't you? And back home, when you ask the local party committee for something you need, they tell you, 'It wasn't us that sent you!' Well, who did send us?'[133] As mentioned, the authorities did not only lack in specific financial and medical support for its Afghanistan veterans, it also often failed to officially acknowledge the sacrifices the veterans had made which also led to a lot of frustration.

A Private from the Signals Corps talks about how he tried to meet up with and organise fellow veterans, but that he felt he was thwarted by the government: 'They were frightened of us, because they knew that if we organised we'd fight for our rights and they'd have to give us flats and so on. We made them give some help to the mothers of those boys in the cemetery here and we're going to insist on memorials and railings for the graves. The authorities don't give a damn'.[134] Here the Private makes it eminently clear that he is resentful with the Soviet government.

Anger Towards the Government

The red line in the above is the anger and the frustration towards the Soviet government. It was the government that changed its narrative, liberalized the media, and consequently also changed public opinion. And it was the government that failed to provide formal aftercare and

[132] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[133] *Ibid.*
[134] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

let the veterans receive the recognition they deserve. It becomes clear in both books that eventually the veterans and their families felt isolated and misunderstood by the authorities and eventually started to lose faith in them and became bitter. For example, a Private Gunner says: 'I used to love those parades on Red Square, all that weaponry going by. Now I realise that there's nothing particularly admirable about it. Those tanks and armoured carriers would be better off kept under their wraps. Better still, they should parade all the Afghan *protesniki*, the veterans with artificial limbs, including me, through Red Square'.[135] Also when it came to the relatives of fallen soldiers and civilian employees, distrust in the government was a common factor.

Borovik for example illustrates how a commander accompanied a local military official to tell parents their son had died: 'The mother wailed at the funeral; the father tore his few remaining strands of hair. 'How could they let this happen?, he cried. How could they let this happen? He looked at me as if I were the one who had killed his son. The relatives surrounded us, speaking very rapidly in their own language. I asked the military commissioner what they wanted. They're asking, Why did you bring this black load?, he replied. Then he took me to the airport as soon as possible; there have been cases in which the officers accompanying a soldier's corpse have been stoned to death'.[136] Hence, what we can see here is the anger towards the war from the parents and the family that is being taken out on the military officials.

The people Alexievich interviewed are more specific when it comes to expressing their anger towards the state. For example, a mother describes how her son was and how he died in Afghanistan and says: 'Now they say it was all a dreadful mistake — for us and for the Afghan people. I used to hate Sasha's killers … now I hate the State which sent him there'.[137] Besides despising the state, many veterans also felt lonely. A soldier tells Alexievich: 'I soon realised we were surplus to requirements. We might just as well not have made it — we're unwanted, an embarrassment'.[138] But even here the anger towards the authorities slips through: 'we're

[135] *Ibid.*, p. 58.
[136] Borovik, Artyom. *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan*. International Relations Publishing House, 1990, p. 170.
[137] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1992, p. 66.
[138] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

expected to feel guilty and justify ourselves. To whom?, may I ask. We were sent by our leaders and we trusted in them. Don't confuse those who sent us with those who were sent'.[139]

Conclusion

Reintegrating back into Soviet life was hard for many. Not only did the government narrative change, the Soviet government as well as society failed to properly recognise and compensate for the efforts of the veterans. The narrative changed from the war being a humanitarian mission to the war was a political mistake. Moreover, after a while, rumours of war crimes started to circulate. The veterans and their families did also often not receive proper formal and informal recognition. This made it hard for many to start a new life and feel at home in Soviet society.

[139] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

CONCLUSION

The men and women who were sent to Afghanistan did not have an easy time. At first they discovered upon arrival that the motives for which they were sent to the war were not in line with what the authorities and the state-run media had told them. Instead of giving aid, they were fighting a guerrilla war against the people they were supposed to be helping achieving a socialist revolution. In addition, the narrative of the US trying to invade the Soviet Union through Afghanistan did not match reality. Moreover, on the Soviet side itself, there was a significant amount of inadequacy. There was an almost constant lack of adequate training, healthcare, materials, weaponry, and a functioning military accountability system to keep unacceptable behaviours to a minimum. Consequently, many soldiers died of the rampant diseases and of the lack proper healthcare. There was also a lot of corruption, both moral as well as material. This meant that soldiers would sell their weaponry to locals in exchange for luxury goods, and that the extreme Soviet system of military hierarchy led to a lot of severe bullying among soldiers. The toxic mix of these factors led to high numbers of suicide and self-mutilation. When the soldiers, if they had survived, returned to Soviet life they were confronted with a new government narrative, claiming that the war had been a political mistake and a changed society that had become more aware of the war crimes committed. As a consequence of this changed narrative, but also because of inadequacy of the Soviet system, and lack of caring from Soviet society, many veterans and their families did not receive formal and informal recognition for their efforts. This led to a lot of embitterment towards society and the state.

Comparing Borovik and Alexievich to one another, the conclusion can be made that although both sources are similar in nature: they are both primary sources and give insight into the thoughts and feelings of soldier and civilian employees on the ground, there are still some differences. Alexievich's book was used more because it contained solely interviews, whereas Borovik's book was also full of descriptions of the situations Borovik was in or of the people he was talking to. Consequently, there are more quotes used from Alexievich than from Borovik. This does however not mean that one book was more useful than the other. Borovik might have a lesser quantity of quotes but the fact that he got to know his interviewees on a deeper level, also gives more insight into the lives and motives of each individual in his book.

Referring back to the original comparison with the Vietnam war, it can be concluded that the wars are more difficult to compare to each other in terms of societal impact because of the earlier mentioned numbers of the population involved. Despite this, the comparison can be made in the context of the changing official narrative from supportive to more critical and the subsequent change in societal opinion, and to what extent veterans found it easy to reintegrate back into their societies upon return. What can moreover without a doubt be concluded in both wars is that veterans from both the Vietnam as well as the Afghanistan war were disillusioned, frustrated, and angry with the attitudes of both their societies and their governments. Hence, referring back to the literature review in the beginning of this thesis, this thesis can be placed within the emerging and existing body of academic literature on the societal consequences of the war with a particular focus on the veterans. It is therefore an addition to the work of Galeotti and Braithwaite.[140] Both authors look at the impact of the war on veterans and Soviet society but do not specifically look into primary source materials. Moreover, considering the comparison between the wars in Vietnam and Afghanistan, this research also contributes to the work of Douglas Borer.[141] In his book *Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared*, he analyses many sides of the war but does not go into depth on the personal consequences for Soviet veterans. This research hence fills in that gap and gives more insight into the effects of the war on the young men, women, and their families that were sent to Afghanistan.

[140] Galeotti, Mark. *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*. Frank Cass, 1995. and Braithwaite, Rodric. *Afgantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-89.* Oxford University Press, 2011.
[141] Borer, Douglas A. *Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared*. Frank Cass, 1999.

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