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**Veteran Afganistana: Afgantsy Narratives in 21st Century Russia: A case study of how the Sverdlovsk branch of the Russian Union of Afghan Veterans remembers the War and adapts to modern Russia's military-patriotic national myth.**

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**MA Thesis – Russian and Eurasian Studies 2021/22**

***Veteran Afganistana: Afgantsy Narratives in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Russia***

**A case study of how the Sverdlovsk branch of the Russian Union of Afghan Veterans remembers the War and adapts to modern Russia's military-patriotic national myth.**

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## **Introduction**

‘It seems like we are becoming heroes again’, Danilova quotes one veteran to illustrate revisionism of the Soviet-Afghan War under Putin.<sup>1</sup> The veterans of the Afghan War, or Afgantsy, returned to a country deeply changed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. They struggled through the 1990s, striving for recognition of their service, partly through veterans’ Unions. In his 1995 book, Galeotti paints a picture of the interplay of narratives of the war from veteran, state, and societal angles. Just six years after the war ended, he finds the Veterans’ Union to already be dying out in its then-guise, friendly with government structures, but mostly a pressure group for the social causes affecting veterans. In their form today, these groups, whilst still in existence, have a much closer relationship to power than in the time of Galeotti’s research.<sup>2</sup>

## **Case and Procedure**

This thesis focuses on the newspaper of the Sverdlovsk Oblast Regional Branch of the Russian Union of Afghan Veterans (henceforth referred to as the RSVA or simply the Union) titled *Veteran Afganistana*. The newspaper is made with the help of the United Russia party, and frequently features addresses from Viktor Babenko, who is both head of the Sverdlovsk Union and a state Duma representative for Putin’s United Russia party. Its content often pertains to the topics of memorialisation, veterans’ social issues, and military-patriotism within society. This lends itself to an investigation considering the opportunities for voicing the Union’s narrative, as it is in today’s Russia, contextualised by its leadership’s ties to the government, and prevailing trends in Russian memorial culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 125.

<sup>2</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*.

*Veteran Afganistana* is freely distributed and prints six times per year. Research is possible since the RSVA website archives issues backdated to 2006, although it would seem from issue numbers that the newspaper is older than that. Due to the incomplete archive, we can only view a specific snapshot of one local veterans' group's narrative. In analysing issues of the newspaper, more recent issues from May 2016 to present are uploaded in PDF form, so presentation can be considered, however prior to that, only written content is available.

The procedure for the investigation takes place over three chapters, examining articles in *Veteran Afganistana* to explore its creators, their narrative of the past, and their interpretation of their current mission. It is focused on both memory of the war, and myth as it has been created in present day Russia. The first chapter creates a profile of the Sverdlovsk RSVA, analysing its local level relationships with the national level Union, and the government. It will draw on the political aims of the group, their regional identity, and its importance to their work, and their proximity to the government on political and cultural issues. It would be unrealistic to expect this to represent the interests and views of all Afghan veterans in the region, but as a case study of one of the most developed RSVA branches, it should serve well to fit into the larger debate on Afgantsy identity.

Chapter two encompasses the way the war, the subsequent withdrawal, and adaptation to post-Soviet life, is portrayed in the newspaper. From this focus on memory, implications will be drawn as to the changing feelings of veterans towards the war itself, the domestic situation pre and post war, the situation in Afghanistan and any return to pre-1990s feelings among them. Finally, the third chapter is focussed on myth. It seeks to analyse the perceived mission of the branch in modern Russia. Literature on veterans' priorities has suggested a shift of focus in recent years to fit the United Russia party's focus on military-patriotic education, thus correlations can be investigated between this perceived trend and the reality for a particular regional group. The investigation period spans around sixteen years, from 2006 to the present

day, thus the change over time, or perhaps lack thereof will allow implications to be drawn over whether veterans have matched the government's growing focus on this patriotic education.

Among the issues, specific attention is paid to those published in February, the anniversary month of the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan where the most reflection on the past is found. Furthermore, focus is given to certain 'special' issues, for example biographical editions on Viktor Babenko and the Afgantsy-run Shuravi Museum, and two issues from a short-lived series focussing on different regional sub-branches of the Sverdlovsk RSVA. These create an image of the actors within the branch and its regional identity. Lastly, many articles in regular issues pertain to social initiatives, and the involvement of veterans in patriotic education; this is analysed to discover what activities they involve themselves in, what they believe they are teaching the youth of Russia, and why they believe it to be important.

## **Narratives of the Soviet-Afghan War – Literature Review**

### **(i) Central Works**

Whilst much of the literature on the war has focused on the war itself, my thesis concerns social history, and modern day Afgantsy culture, which has been less represented. Nonetheless, some academics have concerned themselves with national myth building, and the subsequent involvement of veterans. Whilst most literature has come from Slavonic studies journals, at times, memory has been approached through psychology or sociology, comparing Eastern and Western memory. My primary concern was the existing research on Afgantsy and government narratives on the war and patriotism, and their interplay, as well as any research on the history of the veterans' Unions, which covers all three chapters of this thesis.

Mark Galeotti's book combines work on narratives from multiple sources and interest groups, while explaining some of the relevance of the interaction between them.<sup>3</sup> It is a good starting point, but being over 25 years old, requires further contemporary research. Danilova, Sieca-Kozlowski, and Galbas have all written key works relevant to this thesis the situation in modern Russia.<sup>4</sup>

## (ii) State Narrative

Literature on the early post-war period shows shifts in official narrative, focused on support for veterans and the efforts of officials to distance themselves from the war.<sup>5</sup> Danilova's 2010 research into the welfare system for veterans in Russia highlights the shift to a more negative narrative once the war had been declared a mistake. Fallen soldiers had been given the award of 'hero of the Soviet Union', but while they were promised a 'mountain of gold on returning', the surviving Afgantsy found indifference or hostility back home.<sup>6</sup> Sheikh too finds that politicians, including Bogomolov and Shevardnadze, began to distance themselves from the war in the aftermath.<sup>7</sup> This raises the discourse concerning recognition of veterans' service.<sup>8</sup> There is recognition from some that praise was heaped on the Afgantsy in official narratives during the war, Danilova describes this as a 'heroization strategy' to promote conscription.<sup>9</sup> However, Galeotti considers the efforts insufficient, since veterans were given paper diplomas instead of medals for their service.<sup>10</sup> Toxicity of the war in political discourse, and lack of

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<sup>3</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*.

<sup>4</sup> Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy"; Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory"; Sieca-Kozlowski, "Russian patriotic education"; Danilova, *War Commemoration*.

<sup>5</sup> Reuveny, and Prakash, "The Afghanistan War and Breakdown"; Sheikh, "Soviet and Western Media Coverage"; Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy"; Danilova, *War Commemoration*; Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory"; Galeotti, *Afghanistan*.

<sup>6</sup> Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy," 905-906; Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 123.

<sup>7</sup> Sheikh, "Soviet and Western Media Coverage," 52.

<sup>8</sup> Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy"; Danilova, *War Commemoration*; Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory"; Galeotti, *Afghanistan*; Sheikh, "Soviet and Western Media Coverage".

<sup>9</sup> Sheikh, "Soviet and Western Media Coverage," 45; Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 121.

<sup>10</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, 55-56.

praise for veterans have been key issues. Literature has shown that recognising veterans has long been a problem in the official war narrative, but recently, it has noted a greater ceremonial appreciation for the Afgantsy, at least rhetorically.<sup>11</sup> Particularly, Galbas supports this with RSVVA head, and Duma Deputy Klintsevich's attempts to overturn the 1989 resolution by the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, calling the Afghan War a political and moral mistake.<sup>12</sup> Yet, there is little literature on how this results in practical benefit for veterans.

Some modern research raises the lack of practical recognition in the official narrative.<sup>13</sup> Danilova's research considers the ease at which veterans in Russia have had access to veterans' benefits, arguing that veteran's policy in Russia hinges on a central exclusivity.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Chandler's researching of 55 court claims over veterans' benefits, finds that claims were less successful when arguing for veterans' rights than average citizen's rights.<sup>15</sup> Both authors raise a central issue that Afgantsy have repeatedly been denied the right to identify as veterans. In general, they have not been afforded the same privileged status as the Great Patriotic War generation, who are the sole group defined as veterans in Russia and are more likely to have legal appeals accepted in court.<sup>16</sup> In her 2015 book, Danilova describes commemorative culture surrounding the Afghan war as well integrated into a 'nationalistic' and 'depoliticised' remembrance with a stress on 'military duty over loss and grief'. She finds that presently, the government is keen to include Afgantsy in the national myth, but their reception in public commemoration such as Victory Day parades shows the remnants of 1990s' apathy.<sup>17</sup> Their work stresses that the centrality of the Great Patriotic War in Russia's national myth has hurt

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<sup>11</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*; Sieca-Kozlowski, "Russian patriotic education"; Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory".

<sup>12</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory," 122-123.

<sup>13</sup> Chandler, "Veterans' Rights"; Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy".

<sup>14</sup> Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy," 896.

<sup>15</sup> Chandler, "Veterans' Rights," 323-331.

<sup>16</sup> Chandler, "Veterans' Rights"; Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy"; Danilova, *War Commemoration*.

<sup>17</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 172.



Afgantsy, by making their experience inadequate for comparative recognition in national mythology.

Recent literature on the official state narrative has focused on the creation of a militarised society.<sup>18</sup> Chandler argues that in trying to ‘reclaim Soviet history’, Putin has ‘less interest... in promoting critical debate’.<sup>19</sup> Behrends emphasises the influence that a ‘state sponsored’ memorial culture can have, describing how Putin has sought to heroize war memory, thus influencing the personal memories of Afgantsy. For that reason, his 2015 article uses accounts from straight after the war, accounting for the alteration of memory over time because of outside factors.<sup>20</sup> The concept of narratives affecting memory over time relates to my research, as I seek the opposite of Behrends, focusing specifically on the memory in the context of modern Russian myth making. This recent work has updated Reuveny and Prakash’s argument that society was demilitarised because of Afghanistan, highlighting the importance of continuing research of war memory into the present day.<sup>21</sup>

Some literature has focused on the government co-opting of Afgantsy to spread the official narrative.<sup>22</sup> An idea that my research explores is that a veteran’s service to the state was not over once he returned from Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> Sieca-Kozlowski used patriotic education schools as a case study for the creation of a courageous ideal of the soldier who is a ‘hero’. In these schools, Afgantsy are increasingly brought in as role models, which they must themselves live up to, showing that even after service, veterans are still called upon to work for the state’s

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<sup>18</sup> Behrends, “Some call us heroes”; Chandler, “Veterans’ Rights”; Danilova, “An Exclusive Veteran’s Policy”; Danilova, *War Commemoration*; Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory”; Sieca-Kozlowski, “Russian patriotic education”.

<sup>19</sup> Chandler, “Veterans’ Rights,” 320.

<sup>20</sup> Behrends, “Some call us heroes,” 722.

<sup>21</sup> Reuveny, and Prakash, “The Afghanistan War and Breakdown,” 703.

<sup>22</sup> Coalson, “The Trauma of War”; Behrends, “Some call us heroes”; Danilova, “An Exclusive Veteran’s Policy”; Danilova, *War Commemoration*; Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory”; Sieca-Kozlowski, “Russian patriotic education”.

<sup>23</sup> Coalson, “Trauma of War”; Sieca-Kozlowski, “Russian patriotic education”.

objectives.<sup>24</sup> Literature raises central themes of how the official narrative has treated veterans, which will influence my investigation. Principally, their historic lack of recognition which continues to manifest through their secondary importance to veterans of the Great Patriotic War, and their incorporation into the state's patriotic goals, will be addressed and updated.

### (iii) Afgantsy narrative

Literature involving Afgantsy narratives has been divided by approach. In some works, academics have sought to use first-hand interviews with Afgantsy to understand their narratives of the war and return home.<sup>25</sup> Problematically, interviews have tended to be from the period just after the war, meaning they require updating. Meanwhile, most recent research has focused on the Afgantsy narrative in relation to the state, taking place through research on a tangentially related issue with the state central.<sup>26</sup> Whilst there is room for research into Afgantsy narratives away from the context of the state, my source base does not allow for it.

My source base focuses on the Afghan Veterans' Unions, which have been underrepresented in existing research. Literature before the Putin-era recognises the early organisation of Veterans, but with limited longevity, and there has been minimal investigation after Putin's coming to power.<sup>27</sup> Galeotti's treats them as part of his larger investigation, focusing on smaller now defunct groups with functions ranging from military-patriotic education to establishing housing cooperatives, but all hoping to help Afgantsy and their families. By the time of his book in 1995, he finds the veterans' movement all but withered away, struggling in the

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<sup>24</sup> Sieca-Kozłowski, "Russian patriotic education," 75-79.

<sup>25</sup> Behrends, "Some call us heroes"; Coalson, "Trauma of War"; Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory"; Galeotti, *Afghanistan*.

<sup>26</sup> Chandler, "Veterans' Rights"; Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy"; Danilova, *War Commemoration*; Sieca-Kozłowski, "Russian patriotic education".

<sup>27</sup> Cicek, "The Quicksand of Afghanistan"; Behrends, "Some call us heroes"; Coalson, "Trauma of War"; Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory"; Galeotti, *Afghanistan*; Reuveny, and Prakash, "The Afghanistan War and Breakdown"; Sieca-Kozłowski, "Russian patriotic education".

economic wilderness of the 1990s.<sup>28</sup> Galbas' work, unusual in its use of modern-day interviews, approaches the now-dominant RSVA<sup>29</sup> in reference to their uniting of veterans around a common worldview; their membership correlating with their co-opting of the state's narratives. He determines that the RSVA today prioritise societal recognition over social benefit, so adopt the narratives of a government who promote patriotism and the importance of historic wars.<sup>30</sup> He updates some of Galeotti's research by filling in that during the 1990s, the state was close to veterans' organisations as both sides tried to get benefits out of the other, the veterans sought social funding, while the government hoped to foster a support base.<sup>31</sup> Such research provides a basis, but leaves room for a case study of a local level RSVA branch, analysing their priorities in comparison to Galbas' findings, and their memory in the context of struggle in the 1990s.

Literature in the 1990s contextualised Afgantsy existence with negativity.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes this is connected to direct memory of the war, and its mental toll on veterans. Coalson highlights post-war PTSD resulting from violence, not just from the enemy, but from military hazing.<sup>33</sup> Galeotti finds that Afgantsy were actually 'forced to mimic the mainstream to avoid ghettoisation'.<sup>34</sup> Other literature has revealed their feeling of being sold a vision of war, and veteran status, that never came to be.<sup>35</sup> Behrends' interviews found that recruits were sold a narrative of the generation of the Great Patriotic War which was shattered by the experience in Afghanistan, they reject that 'Afghanistan makes brothers of us all', denying narratives of

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<sup>28</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, 109-119.

<sup>29</sup> Galeotti investigates is the SVA (Association of Veterans of Afghanistan), which the RSVA replaced after the dissolution of the USSR. Source: Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory," 105.

<sup>30</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory."

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

<sup>32</sup> Behrends, "Some call us heroes"; Coalson, "Trauma of War"; Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy"; Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory"; Galeotti, *Afghanistan*; Reuveny, and Prakash, "The Afghanistan War and Breakdown".

<sup>33</sup> Coalson, "Trauma of War," 52-53.

<sup>34</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, 20.

<sup>35</sup> Behrends, "Some call us heroes"; Coalson, "Trauma of War"; Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy".

unity.<sup>36</sup> This leaves room for investigation of the unity of modern day veterans, remembering that my source base comes from a homogenised group of veterans connected to the state.

Finally, literature has considered the prevalence of patriotism within the Afgantsy.<sup>37</sup> Galeotti's research of *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* showed that even in the post-war period, Afgantsy were less likely to consider the war an object of national shame than most, believing that their sacrifice was not in vain.<sup>38</sup> In recent work, with the turn towards a national myth based on war, this has been exploited by the government. Veterans have worked for the government's patriotic education schemes, perhaps as a form of psychological care, or to gain some recognition, even if it is exploitative.<sup>39</sup> Galbas finds that membership of the Union denies individual memory, those in the Union channel their patriotism into government initiatives, much different to the 1990s where they actively rejected the state's heroism narrative for one based on victimhood.<sup>40</sup> Danilova looks primarily at the state, how military-patriotic myth making becomes a 'master narrative' for the nation. However, she sees post-Great Patriotic War veterans as trapped in a dilemma of rejecting the system or buying in to military culture in the hope their generation will be remembered.<sup>41</sup> The context of increasing existence in reference to the state will be key to my further research. Discussions of individual or collective memory can be updated by research of a local level branch of the RSVA and should update the dichotomy of victimhood versus heroism.

## Wider context

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<sup>36</sup> Behrends, "Some call us heroes," 721-725.

<sup>37</sup> Behrends, "Some call us heroes"; Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy"; Danilova, *War Commemoration*; Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory"; Galeotti, *Afghanistan*; Sieca-Kozlowski, "Russian patriotic education".

<sup>38</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, 48.

<sup>39</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory"; Sieca-Kozlowski, "Russian patriotic education".

<sup>40</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory".

<sup>41</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 125-212.

Whilst this thesis zooms in on the specific narratives of the Sverdlovsk RSVA in relation to the official government narratives, it is worth considering some outside context, to show the varying interpretations of a controversial war. Cultural production on the Afghan War shows a shift in what narratives of the war are considered political acceptable for the liberal elite to promote. This is notable in film production, specifically the releases of Fedor Bondarchuk's 2005 film *9 Rota* (9<sup>th</sup> Company), and Pavel Lungin's 2019 release *Bratstvo* (Brotherhood).

*9 Rota*, based on the real Battle for Hill 3234 in early 1988, was Russia's second highest grossing film since the end of the Soviet Union, and received government funding and production help, and real military equipment provided by the Russian Army.<sup>42</sup> The film depicts the soldiers as an unruly group who find brotherhood amongst each other, and their role within the military unit before all but one perish in a defensive battle waiting for help that comes just too late. The film's closing monologue laments the fact that their medals, for a non-existent country, would become unfashionable, and that the veterans would be 'scattered ruthlessly', some to the top, and some to the very bottom.<sup>43</sup> Secker notes that the film depicts harsh hazing rituals, but shows Russian soldiers in a sympathetic light. The film portrays the Mujahideen as faceless masses 'hell bent on killing the brave Russian troops', flipping the script of Western films on the Afghan War, which used similar hallmarks to depict the Soviet soldiers.<sup>44</sup>

Alternatively, *Bratstvo* received criticism for its depiction of the Afgantsy. Senator Igor Morozov opposed the film's release, arguing that its depictions of robberies, fights between soldiers, and factual distortions meant that 'you cannot educate people on this film'.<sup>45</sup> Responding to the criticism, Lungin told the news outlet *Dozhd*<sup>46</sup>, that the film is naturally anti-

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<sup>42</sup> Secker, "Soviet-Afghan War in Fiction," 438-439.

<sup>43</sup> *9 Rota*, dir. Fedor Bondarchuk (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Secker, "Afghan War in Fiction," 442-445.

<sup>45</sup> "V Sovete Federatsii predlozhili perenesti s 9 maya prem'eru fil'ma Lungina pro Afganistan," *Dozhd*, March 27, 2019, [https://tvrain.ru/news/v\\_sovete\\_federatsii\\_predlozhili\\_perenesti\\_premeru\\_filma\\_lungina-482788/](https://tvrain.ru/news/v_sovete_federatsii_predlozhili_perenesti_premeru_filma_lungina-482788/).

<sup>46</sup> *Dozhd* is frequently critical of the Kremlin.

war, and that ‘a person is bad in war, which does not exclude personal heroism’. He argued that the reaction from Afgantsy was largely positive, blaming a culture where critics feel impunity to tear something down with the mere suggestion that the government feels the same way. He claims that whilst Second World War films frequently showed officers drinking, his film was criticised for it, adding that he believes that *9 Rota* would no longer be approved if it were made in 2019. The film was able to be released, with Vladimir Medinsky calming the situation down, but the debate shows a tightening of the parameters available in which the liberal elite can represent the war. The interviewer Mikhail Fishman argued that the film went against the official ideology which has developed in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. That both sides of the debate claimed the support of the veteran community suggests there is no one unified position on the release of the film.<sup>47</sup>

Whilst *9 Rota* and *Bratstvo* share many bleak representations of the War, there are certain ways the earlier film held back, that are perhaps made Lungin’s film unacceptable in modern Russia. Particularly, the fate of the Afgantsy, *9 Rota* criticises society vaguely for turning their back on the veterans, while *Bratstvo* directly posits ‘did we win?... we did... we did... but we have to leave’.<sup>48</sup> Lungin believes that the criticism shows that many are not ready to accept ‘the truth that Russia wasn’t always the good guy’.<sup>49</sup> The Soviet soldiers’ actions towards the enemy also separate the films. Soldiers in *9 Rota* debate whether it matters who you kill at the beginning of their training, only to be berated by their commanding officer.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, *Bratstvo* ends with a bombing run on an Afghan village on supposed orders from Moscow. The tone taken is scornful of an attack that leads to innocent deaths, thus attaching blame to the government and

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<sup>47</sup> Mikhail Fishman, “«Nyuchom pochuvstvovali vo mne chuzhoe»: interv’yu s Pavlom Lungnim o tsenzure i problemakh s vikhodom ego fil’mao voine v Afganistane,” *Dozhd*, April 19, 2019, [https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/fishman\\_vecheree\\_shou/njuhom\\_pochuvstvovali-484223/](https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/fishman_vecheree_shou/njuhom_pochuvstvovali-484223/).

<sup>48</sup> *Bratstvo*, dir. Pavel Lungin (Pavel Lungin Studio, 2019).

<sup>49</sup> Pjotr Sauer, “Director of ‘Unpatriotic’ Movie Says Russia Not Ready for Truth About War,” *The Moscow Times*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/08/director-of-unpatriotic-movie-says-russia-not-ready-for-truth-about-war-a65500>.

<sup>50</sup> *9 Rota*.

the soldiers involved, directly placing the protagonists in the wrong morally.<sup>51</sup> Whilst both films portray the negative actions of the Afgantsy, *Bratstvo* takes the criticism further, making an uncomfortable situation for the government who, it is agreed, at the time were further incorporating the Afghan War into a military mythology.

The debate over the war in cultural production leads to a scornful attitude from the liberal press regarding the shifting attitude towards a military-patriotic society, and the incorporation of the Afghan War. While official narratives on the Afghan War change, there has been pushback from those in the liberal media, for example *Dozhd* held it up as a warning at the start of the Ukraine conflict in 2014. They interviewed the head of the Union of Committees of Soldier's Mothers who reported forced conscription sending young soldiers to Ukraine, comparing the lack of official documentation to Afghanistan. Specifically, she called official numbers putting deaths at only 14-15,000 a 'blatant lie', and foresaw the same for Ukraine, that soldiers would lie in hospital, but nothing would be formalised, causing struggle for families in finding their lost sons.<sup>52</sup>

Sparked by the 2019 attempt in the Duma to revoke the 1989 decree that deemed that the Afghan intervention deserved 'moral and political condemnation', *Dozhd*'s Oleg Kashin spoke with former Afghan War correspondent Mikhail Kozhukhov. He put the war down to an 'almost religious belief in Bolshevism and the Communist idea', that it could survive in Afghanistan and Cuba as it stagnated in the USSR. His opinion remained that it was a criminal endeavour that killed thousands of Soviet soldiers, while the reason for its re-invigoration in the Duma recently is due to a lack of a lobby of former Afgantsy in the government and current army. He called it an attempt to re-vitalise the image of Russia being good, while America is

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<sup>51</sup> *Bratstvo*.

<sup>52</sup> "Soiuz Komitetov soldatskikh materei soobshchil o nasil'noi otpravke soldat v Ukrainu," *Dozhd*, August 28, 2014, [https://tvrain.ru/news/sojuz\\_komitetov\\_soldatskih\\_materej\\_soobshchil\\_o\\_nasilnoj\\_otpravke\\_soldat\\_v\\_ukrainu-374649/](https://tvrain.ru/news/sojuz_komitetov_soldatskih_materej_soobshchil_o_nasilnoj_otpravke_soldat_v_ukrainu-374649/).

bad, since the Russian public's interest in the Ukraine conflict was dwindling.<sup>53</sup> Kashin argues that the war was an act of imperialism which the Soviet Union could not admit to itself, while today it fits into Russia's view of the world, suggesting human life is less valued than the interests of the state. He remembers the war with remorse, calling the politicians behind it 'senile politburo morons', while he cannot blame the Afgantsy for however they turned out after fighting.<sup>54</sup> The liberal elite continue to see the war from a narrative of victimhood, and Kashin's remarks suggest a feeling of sympathy for the Afgantsy, rather than the literature's descriptions of hostility. This wider view, from the non-state affiliated media, and cultural elite's film production provides context from a group looking from the outside, in on the state and Afgantsy narratives. For the following discussion of a narrow, specific case study, the existence of a liberal press counter-narrative to the government's official memory of the war, and fierce opposition to Lungin's film, which still received veteran support, must be kept in mind.

One, finite conclusion is not likely to be possible to the aspects of this investigation. Instead, I seek to contextualise *Veteran Afganistana* within the literature and the relationship between veterans and the state as it has been during the Putin era. The impact and importance of this contextualisation will be threefold. It will draw the case study into the analysis of a new generation of veterans that are brought into Putin's national myth making, highlight how Afghan veterans treat their own social issues, versus willingly participating in a form of transactional recognition, and judge the importance of military prestige on their ideology. All

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<sup>53</sup> Oleg Kashin, "Eshche odin gvozd' v krishke groba Sovetskogo Soiuzha": Mikhail Kozhukhov ob Afganskoj voine, ee glamurizatsii i tsenzure v te vremena," *Dozhd*, February 15, 2019, [https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/kashin\\_guru/kozhuhov-480524/](https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/kashin_guru/kozhuhov-480524/).

<sup>54</sup> Oleg Kashin, "Afganskaia boinia. Popitka opravdat' bessmislennuiu voinu prekrasno lozhitsia v logiku nineshnikh tsennostei gosudarstva," *Dozhd*, February 15, 2019, [https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/kashin\\_guru/afganistan-480494/](https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/kashin_guru/afganistan-480494/).



the while though, the limits of this research must be recognised regarding ‘veterans’ narratives. The *Veteran Afganistana* newspaper is an effective example of a collective narrative within a Veterans’ Union of a region, and as the visible face of regional veterans it becomes their official narrative, to be compared with the national official narrative. It is not able to account, perhaps deliberately, for individual personal narratives from veterans who may offer alternative interpretations. One blanket experience cannot be imposed on the relationships of individual veterans to state endorsed mythology, and we can speculate that personal memory expressed in *Veteran Afganistana* is unlikely to be subversive. This is important to remember when determining who is included in the collective ‘veterans’ within this thesis.

## **Chapter 1: Investigating the Sverdlovsk RSVA**

Describing itself as ‘one of the strongest and most organised in the country’, the Sverdlovsk Branch of the RSVA is certainly one of the highest functioning.<sup>55</sup> Prior to using the branch as a case study into myth and memory from a veteran’s perspective, it is important to analyse its structure, funding, and its connections. This chapter will first consider the work and role of Viktor Babenko, the head of the Sverdlovsk RSVA who features heavily in articles of *Veteran Afganistana* and the place of the branch within Russian political hierarchies. Secondly, it will focus on the branch itself, how it serves as one of a range of arms perpetuating the memory of veterans and promoting state education, and how these groups relate to government objectives on patriotic education. Thirdly, it will tackle the branch’s regional Ural identity, debating how this compares to overall Russian identity. Throughout, it should be considered that the branch is being analysed through a newspaper of its own making. Although objectivity is the not the primary focus, a healthy scepticism should be maintained about information contained in the newspaper. Far more useful to the investigation is consideration of the lens through which society, patriotism, history, and the military are viewed, and why this might be the case.

In his 2014 article, Galbas claims that, since the turn of the century, veterans’ groups have changed their priorities from seeking better living conditions, to backing the state’s foreign and domestic policy goals in return for financial support. He argues that they place far more focus on social prestige through promotions of heroism and militarism as part of their search for societal recognition.<sup>56</sup> This chapter will introduce the Sverdlovsk RSVA case study and begin to deal with responding to Galbas’ claim. Overall, I argue that the branch, as presented through *Veteran Afganistana* correlates with Galbas’ findings for the most part. Viktor Babenko’s central role has aligned the Sverdlovsk Union with the government, sharing its priorities on

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<sup>55</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 175.

<sup>56</sup> Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory,” 131.

many issues, however, such a view is too simplistic if it means ignoring the continued work done on social issues for veterans under Babenko's leadership. Their connection to political power structures gives them stability, but they still present themselves as a veterans' movement, not a political tool. The desire for better living conditions does largely exist within the status quo but does not equate to a total abandoning of veterans' social needs.

### **RSVA Personnel and Origins**

It is important to understand the structure of the Sverdlovsk RSVAs through its key personnel and their connection to state power structures. *Veteran Afganistana* gives the branch's head, Viktor Babenko, particular focus, often starting issues with an address by him, and dedicating a biographical issue to him in July 2021. The issue ends with Andrei Bannikov, former head of the Nizhny Tagil Union of Invalids of Afghanistan, recounting Babenko's rise. He explains that in the early years after the fall of the Soviet Union, veterans' groups that sprung up would act in a limited manner to serve the benefits of their members. However, at a conference on 18 December 1992, the veterans of Nizhny Tagil decided to 'unite and act in the interests of all, without exceptions' by organising under one united banner. Babenko was elected chair of the newly formed Nizhny Tagil Union of Afghan Veterans, joining together Afgantsy from other districts and members of the 'Granit' military-patriotic club. At this meeting, the decision was taken that alongside the rights of bereaved families, medical care, and other social issues facing veterans, they would also aim to promote the memory of fallen soldiers and participate 'in cooperation with the state, public organisations and local authorities' in education and military-patriotic work.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 221, p. 4.

Babenko's origins predate the source base of this thesis and so cannot be corroborated, but it would demonstrate a shift in priority towards military-patriotic education earlier the Putin era as it is presented by Galbas. It would also make the Nizhny Tagil branch contrary to Galbas' claim that veterans' unions opposed state institutions and focusing on a narrative of victimhood rather than heroism.<sup>58</sup> Here, the effect of present veterans' and state narratives must be considered. Likely, those the publishing *Veteran Afganistana* would prefer to paint an image of the organisation focusing on their current priorities of patriotic education and remembrance to fallen soldiers from the very start of their regional organisation.

Alternatively, it must be asked if Babenko was ahead of the curve on patriotic education. Sieca-Kozlowski notes that even before the Putin era, there were cases of Afghan and Chechen veterans engaging in patriotic education programmes of their own volition, including in schools, and running their own camps. She suggests this may have been a front for organised crime in the period, but this is hard to argue based on available evidence.<sup>59</sup> Either way, this interpretation gives Babenko more credit in setting the agenda of Sverdlovsk Veterans' Organisations for a long period and does not require total rejection of Galbas's argument. It is entirely possible that Babenko's organisation both opposed the government and portrayed themselves as victims of incompetent leadership, while running patriotic education on independent principle.

Babenko's Nizhny Tagil branch joined the larger Russian Union of Afghan Veterans in 1993, headed by Franz Klintsevich, giving them 'additional weight'. The 'mature' and 'collected' Babenko, was offered the role of head of the Sverdlovsk RSVA for recognition of his work in 2004, which he accepted on persuasion from the regional board and RSVA head Franz

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<sup>58</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory," 130-131.

<sup>59</sup> Sieca-Kozlowski, "Russian patriotic education," 78.

Klintsevich.<sup>60</sup> Klintsevich sits above Babenko in the Union hierarchy and is an occasional feature in *Veteran Afganistana*, such as his meeting reported in 2006 with the Governor of Sverdlovsk Oblast Yevgeny Kuyvashev. Klintsevich called on Kuyvashev for the region to become a ‘centre of patriotism, designed to preserve the true spiritual and moral values’, while he spoke to Ural State University students on ‘the issue of forming the qualities of a socially active citizen and patriot’. The article calls him an ‘ideologist of Russian patriotism’, and his position as a United Russia Duma Deputy raises questions of who outranked whom in his talks with Kuyvashev.<sup>61</sup> By focusing on values endorsed by the Union, while focusing on the demand rather than the governor’s response, the newspaper presents the meeting in a manner designed to favour the Union leader.

Babenko and Klintsevich’s roles as Duma Deputies for United Russia constitute the most obvious point of alignment between the Sverdlovsk RSVA and national power structures. References to Babenko’s government position typically portray him as a mundane yet humble public servant. In his biographical issue, he describes meeting with constituents through official email, telephone, and his meeting centres. He recalls that his constituency receives the least amount of citizen complaints out of the whole Sverdlovsk Oblast, only 162 in the last year. Whilst not surprising, the conflict of interest between his roles in the Union and the government are not raised beyond asking how he finds the time. He is portrayed as a man who never stops working for veterans and his constituents, presenting him as a sort of unifying figure. He argues that the work of the Union and the party line are interchangeable, thus the assumption is made that the line has become blurred between the RSVA and the government.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 221 p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, Issue 137.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Issue 221, p. 6-7.

The proximity to the state is evident in some examples which appear like instructions passed down from government level to veterans' union leaders. A 2015 article recalls Putin's meeting with representatives of the nation's three 'most reputable' veterans' organisations, including Babenko. The President told them 'we rely a lot on people like you', adding 'I would ask you to stay in line, to do the very necessary work that you are doing now: in non-governmental organisations, some of you in parliament - but all of you are connected in one way or another with youth organisations, with patriotic work'.<sup>63</sup> That the Sverdlovsk RSVA is included in the most reputable organisations is testament to the progress under Babenko's control, however, this interaction suggests top-down pressure on veterans' group leaders. As much as the ideologies of veterans' organisations match the government on patriotic education, the payoff Galbas raises, of transactional recognition of their service in return for involvement in patriotic education, could supersede work on the betterment of veterans' living conditions. This is hard to prove though, especially using a source directly funded by the government, and made by the RSVA who would be unlikely to divulge their internal pressures.<sup>64</sup> Considering Babenko's apparent commitment to patriotic education prior to Putin's presidency, it seems likely that Sverdlovsk RSVA does not require much top-down pressure to follow such policies. Having considered the branch within state power structures, it is clear that Babenko has been central to both the growth of the Sverdlovsk RSVA, and its cooperation with the government. His ideological consistency has helped foster stability, yet the suggestion remains that there is top-down pressure to fulfil the Union's side of a transactional form of remembrance.

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<sup>63</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 212, p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

## Representation of Babenko

As head of the branch, Viktor Babenko gives an address at the beginning of each issue. His role in the development of the Sverdlovsk RSVA is considerable, however I argue that his representation within *Veteran Afganistana* reporting constitutes a near cult of personality. Danilova explains that in 1984, several newspapers began to produce a normative narrative of Soviet soldiers killed in Afghanistan. The template would depict a young man who was a member of Komsomol and volunteered to fight in Afghanistan to fulfil his internationalist duty. He would have died heroically, to be remembered posthumously with streets and schools named after him. This ‘heroization strategy’, used to recruit young men, would evoke lineage and the ‘imagined continuity in war commemoration by depicting Soviet soldiers as successors of their heroic grandfathers’. Eventually though, with the arrival of *Glasnost*’ and *Perestroika*, reporting of mistakes, hazing, drug use, violence, and social problems upon returning home became more prevalent. The image of the soldier changed from an internationalist hero to a flawed killer of civilians and victim of the ideologically driven decision making which created the Afghan War.<sup>65</sup>

In Babenko’s biographic issue, he is presented in line with many of the traits of early reporting of Afghan soldiers, his wife Yulia calls theirs a simple, honest, working family valuing loyalty. His time in Afghanistan is recounted humbly, asking ‘what wealth does a Faroudian<sup>66</sup> Special Forces soldier have in a closed garrison?’. According to his biography, Babenko got to live the continuation of the model Soviet soldier’s life after the war. He studied at technical college and went to work in a factory, where he valued being needed, and was soon promoted by factory veterans.<sup>67</sup> Not only did Babenko survive the war physically unscathed, but this reporting

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<sup>65</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 121-124.

<sup>66</sup> Faroudian denotes the Farah Rud village in the province of Farah in Western Afghanistan where Babenko was stationed.

<sup>67</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 221, p. 3.

suggests none of the mental toll of war, perhaps aiming to depict Babenko as a strong leader free from affliction, or to avoid parallels to the 1990s' negative depiction of the Afgantsy.

Conversely, one soldier who did not make it home alive was Babenko's former comrade Yuri Islamov, after whom the Sverdlovsk RSVA is honorarily named. Islamov was a young soldier from Talitsa who sacrificed himself to cover retreating soldiers on 31 October 1987. He was posthumously awarded Hero of the Soviet Union on 3 March 1988, and on 14 October 2004, the Sverdlovsk RSVA, under Babenko's control, named their branch after him. Reporting in Babenko's dedicated issue presents this as if Babenko were doing justice to his fallen comrade.<sup>68</sup> It would be inappropriate to comment on Islamov's possible beliefs were he alive today, but it is inescapable that his death makes him a symbol, and the Sverdlovsk Union branch being named after him inextricably links him to its actions. He never lived past the Soviet era, and therefore the nationalist mythmaking of the Putin era may be done in his name freely. He is brought into the collective narrative tying the Union to the state without his consent. Yet, his mythologisation epitomises the transactional aspect of recognition raised by Galbas, making him the ultimate image of the rejection of the 1990's anti-heroism rhetoric. He is a prototypical humble Soviet soldier, but instead of a school, he lends his name to the organisation representing his former comrades.

These rejections of the *Glasnost*' and 1990s era reporting, devoid of negativity, with focus on labour and humble beginnings, resemble the society from which Babenko left to fight originally. However, such Soviet imagery is combined with tropes of the Putin era. Perhaps surprisingly, the connection between Babenko and his grandfather is not much explored beyond the implicit comparison of their military service and the need to re-build their lives after wartime. He is mentioned mostly through childhood memories as Babenko recalls his

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 1.



grandfather's bullet injury from the Great Patriotic War and his reluctance to tell of experiences from Nazi POW camps.<sup>69</sup>

Yet, Babenko's life is represented through Putin era ideals through his continued belief in the role of military in education. His wife explains that Viktor is 'concerned with the fate of the country' and that as a family they are close to the Suvorov Military Schools. Their son Vsevolod's education was cut short in his graduation year due to the 'reforms' of Minister Serdyukov<sup>70</sup>, causing the number of military schools in the area to be reduced from 64 to 10. Such focus on military and its place in education may explain further the importance of military-patriotic education under his management of the Sverdlovsk RSVVA which is the focus of Chapter three. Babenko was awarded the medal 'For Merit in Commemorating the Fallen Defenders of the Fatherland' by politician Sergei Shoigu, while Sverdlovsk governor E.V. Kuyvashev noted Babenko's contribution to helping preserve the 'historical truth about Ural soldiers'.<sup>71</sup>

The idea of historical truth arises in reference to the debate over 'positive nationalism' in Edele's work. He compares former Culture Minister Vladimir Medinskii's desire to build a 'usable past', claiming that one who loves their country will write history positively, regardless of the facts, with Putin's more optimistic view that historical truth naturally falls in Russia's favour. To this effect, Russia's 2014 Memory Law defined the factual retelling of the Great Patriotic War as one glorifying the fight of the Soviet Union against a foreign aggressor. Edele criticises this for not respecting historical ambiguities that naturally occur in 'real history'.<sup>72</sup> That Babenko receives acclaim for promoting a version of the Afghan War deemed historically

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Serdyukov became increasingly unpopular with the military 'old guard' for suggesting drastic cuts to the military. Source: Tim Whewell, "Inside Russia – Military Reforms," *BBC News*, March 17, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/7947082.stm>.

<sup>71</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 221, p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> Edele, "Fighting Russia's History Wars," 90-101.

*true*, signals his ideological proximity to the collective narrative desired by the government. Babenko claims to have been an advocate of United Russia since its founding, calling it ‘the party of real action’. He challenges those criticising the government from the side-lines to ‘try to do at least half of it’, recalling the party handing out 52,000 free phones to veterans for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Great Patriotic War.<sup>73</sup> With Babenko’s commitment to veterans and military-patriotism dating to before the Putin era, it becomes clear that patriotic thought was a factor in endearing many veterans to the government after the 1990s. Furthermore, he is far from extraordinary, since the RSVA political party NPP joined Putin’s United bloc which became United Russia in 2001.<sup>74</sup>

Despite *Veteran Afganistana*’s self-evident biases, there is no obvious reason to doubt that Babenko played a large hand in the branch’s rise. The newspaper is praising in its description of Babenko’s ideas and his leadership skills. In his biography issue, the 1990s are described as a time when the ‘young soldiers, whom the country honoured only yesterday, suddenly found themselves on the outside’ despite the ‘right and necessary objectives’ of early veterans’ movements. It illustrates that current veterans’ organisations aim to put right the wrongs that were done to veterans at that time.<sup>75</sup>

His biography explains that Babenko was offered the role of head of the regional RSVA for his esteemed work in his previous city branch role, where he ‘got rid of internal conflicts and streamlined the content of work’. He is particularly praised for having attracted large numbers of people to memorial events to join in respecting the fallen, thus supporting Galbas’ assertion that focus has shifted to social recognition in broader society over veterans’ issues individually.<sup>76</sup> One of Babenko’s goals has been to grow the RSVA in Sverdlovsk Oblast, as

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<sup>73</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 221, p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory,” 121.

<sup>75</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 221, p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

far back as 2006, Babenko mentioned his desire to expand work in cities in the region. He reasons that when a branch is installed in a city, the lives of veterans are ‘immediately livened up’ and their interaction with the local administration is improved.<sup>77</sup> In 2014, Babenko’s goals included reaching veterans serving time in prison as well as the continuous goal of expanding to other cities.<sup>78</sup> This appears to demonstrate genuine ambition, and shows how far Babenko will go to bring all veterans under the RSVA umbrella. Furthermore, the inclusion beyond 2006 of new city organisations, such as Nizhneturinsky in *Veteran Afganistana* suggests success at expanding the Union regionally.<sup>79</sup>

Despite Babenko’s ties to the government, and its implied top-down pressure of conformity, he is keen to push a narrative of bottom-up public pressure. He called the renovation of the Yekaterinburg Black Tulip memorial a major milestone in 2013, and thanked those who ‘pushed the idea forward in powers structures, signed documents in high offices, spoke at meetings, put down a modest contribution to the common money box’.<sup>80</sup> In many ways, he has tied veterans’ lives to the local administrations and recognition may be the return for contributions to patriotic-education, yet achievements continue to be presented as the result of the veterans’ work. It is certain that Babenko presents himself as on the side of veterans even though he sees the goals of the veterans and United Russia as the same. Much like his personality blends Soviet and Putin-era characteristics, Babenko unifies the aims of his two allegiances.

To finish this section, it is pertinent to mention the homogeneity created by the source base, and the collective narrative which might exist to the detriment of individual narratives. Alas, this shows the weakness of the source material as it is not possible to find if the views of the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., Issue 137.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., Issue 177.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., Issue 175.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., Issue 175.

Sverdlovsk RSVA are held by all veterans in the area, or whether all their needs are completely met. Whilst Babenko is keen to mention that the region is one of the leaders in Russia for realising social programs for Soldiers-Internationalists, his team at the top of the Sverdlovsk RSVA include honorary citizens, veterans, and the Secretary of the Sverdlovsk United Russia party. Babenko claims communication within upper echelons is so good because ‘you need a team of like-minded people’, adding ‘I believe that our veteran organisation has it’.<sup>81</sup>

This should not be to say that the Sverdlovsk Union does not act in the benefits of local veterans, but such rhetoric tends to support Galbas’ claim that the militaristic patterns of thought in the veterans’ movement are both a mechanism of social coherence, and a barrier stopping some veterans from joining, making them above all a group based on common memories.<sup>82</sup> In this case, the militaristic patterns of thought can be tied to the United Russia party’s influence in the RSVA. The coming chapters will explore the self-perceived military-patriotic role for veterans in society presented by *Veteran Afganistana*, but on a structural level, it is possible that Babenko has developed the Sverdlovsk RSVA in an insular nature which increases the likelihood of untold personal narratives that are not given a voice.

### **Affiliated Groups**

Shifting focus from national to local level connections, reporting in *Veteran Afganistana* suggests that the Sverdlovsk RSVA works as one of a range of arms, largely veterans’ interest groups, which promote patriotic education. The specifics of activities will be broached in chapter three, but this chapter considers the interplay of these groups with the RSVA, their funding, and what their priorities can reveal about shared narratives.

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., Issue 221, p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory,” 129-130.

Recurrent in *Veteran Afganistana*, albeit diluted by articles about military-patriotic initiatives, are references to the branch's involvement in initiatives for the direct benefit of veterans' lives. One 2006 article highlights the cooperation between the Sverdlovsk Organisation of Afghan Invalids with the region's Ministry of Social Protection. The outcome of the meetings were proposals to increase the funding from the regional budget to implement the current regional programme of social support and to increase Afghan invalid enterprises' production capacity.<sup>83</sup> 10 years later, in 2016, a charitable donation from the gas company JSC Uralsevergaz to the tune of one million roubles was specifically used on 'charitable assistance' for families of victims, veterans and invalids in Sverdlovsk region. The RSVA made a 7-person commission to hear appeals and ended up accepting 52 out of 55 claims for assistance, mostly going to those in small towns or villages. It is mentioned that they worked with local branches of veterans' organisations, committees of soldiers' mothers, social policy departments and social service centres.<sup>84</sup> This demonstrates that the Sverdlovsk RSVA does cooperate with outside groups on social issues and has done so since the beginning of the recorded period. However, there is a greater number of articles which highlight cooperation with outside groups prioritising military-patriotism and remembrance. It seems the donation from Uralsevergaz was a one-off bonus to the regular work done for veterans.

In 2014, the group 'Invalidvoin' in Krasnoufimsk were given a subsidy from the regional budget to implement a patriotic education program with a film about the Afghan War, a CD with patriotic songs and poems by schoolchildren.<sup>85</sup> More recently, in 2019, the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs held a rally at Yekaterinburg's Black Tulip memorial which was attended by regional government representatives, veterans and members of veterans' organisations among others. The rally fell under the project titled 'Let's Glorify the Heroes of

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<sup>83</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 137.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, Issue 186.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, Issue 177.

the Fatherland’ and was supported by the Ministry of Social Policy of Sverdlovsk Oblast, with a speech from the Deputy Minister of Public Security in the region Oleg Torgashev.<sup>86</sup> Not only are initiatives along military-patriotic lines reported more frequently, but they appear more likely to receive some form of government funding, demonstrating the benefit of conforming to top-down priorities. Those focused on the veterans themselves appear to rely on more sporadic third-party funding, suggesting a lack of government motivation to fund projects without military-patriotic uses.

Some organisations have long-standing relations with the Sverdlovsk RSVA, closest of all appear to be the Union of Paratroopers, and the Shuravi Museum. A 2020 article explained the long-standing cooperation between the regional Union of Paratroopers and Boarding School no. 27, a cadet school directed by E.N., Chentsov. The Union of Paratroopers falls under the umbrella of being a ‘collective member’ of the RSVA, and has cooperated with the school on four occasions, beginning with the creation of a military-patriotic club named ‘Winged Guard’. The article highlights the creation of a ‘Museum of Military Glory’ with exhibits of the Great Patriotic War and modern army.<sup>87</sup> This is not wholly tied to the Afghan War aside from the proximity of the group to the RSVA, and therefore the newspaper also becomes a mouthpiece for other groups promoting military-patriotic messages in the Sverdlovsk region.

The Shuravi Museum is first mentioned in a 2006 interview with its director N. Salmin on the topic of collaboration with Ural State University to offer guided tours of the museum to students.<sup>88</sup> The Shuravi Museum, like Babenko, had its own dedicated issue in 2016 for its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and is constantly mentioned in connection with RSVA activities. In 2007, Babenko thanked the Paratrooper Club at Zarechnoye for training ‘hundreds of young men for the armed

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., Issue 212, p. 4.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., Issue 137.

forces’, the Shuravi Municipal Museum of Soldiers-Internationalists, and the ‘Winged Guard’ Museum in his address for the anniversary of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.<sup>89</sup> The Babenko era has thus shown consistent support for initiatives prioritising patriotic education and military practices.

A final point worth mentioning is the focus on patriotic groups without concrete ties to veterans, here the Union may be an outside observer, a guest of honour, or not involved at all. This is the case in a 2014 article about the military-patriotic sporting event *Soyuz-2014*. The competition, between youth groups from around the country, was won by a team from the Ural region, with Babenko, and the regional chair of the Union of Paratroopers, on hand to hand out awards and meet the victors from their area.<sup>90</sup> This suggests a shift to a wider focus on military-patriotism regardless of veteran involvement, possibly of more interest to the RSVA’s civilian membership. The RSVA has been open to regular civilians as well as veterans since at least 2012. Therefore, it is reasonable to speculate on the resulting priorities of the newspaper, to report on the increasingly mainstream nature of military-patriotic events, foregoing the need to constantly focus on veterans.<sup>91</sup> Chapters 2 and 3 address the branch’s ideological focuses, but this section introduces the running theme that the Babenko era has seen little change in the branch’s priorities. Instead, if a significant event must be determined, the inclusion of more civilians in the Union contextualises much of *Veteran Afganistana*’s reporting in the 2010s.

## **Regional Identity**

Regional identity is a recurring theme in *Veteran Afganistana* insofar as it is mentioned on several occasions, however I would argue that it serves mostly to promote patriotism and show

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., Issue 141.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., Issue 175.

<sup>91</sup> Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory,” 123.

the cohesiveness of the regional Union. To this extent, there is little mention of the Ural region and its characteristics that it would not apply to other areas of Russia. Rather than Ural culture, regional identity is evoked in the context of Russian patriotism, and examples of heroism that relate to people from the region. The Ural region is called ‘the centre of high state patriotism’ during the 2006 meeting between Klintsevich and Governor Kuyvashev. In the meeting, Klintsevich called for the region to become a hub for preserving ‘the history of the formation and development of the state, and its contribution to world events’.<sup>92</sup> He conveys that the Ural region is strong in character, but that strength is due to its patriotism for the nation, rather than a specific regional culture. The focus is therefore far more on the veterans of Sverdlovsk Oblast, and their promotion of military-patriotism, than the region itself.

*Veteran Afganistana* released two issues in 2014 which cast a spotlight on the northern and western administrative district branches of the Sverdlovsk RSVA. Again, these issues do not focus particularly on regional identity, but they serve an obvious purpose of highlighting work done by groups that might usually get less attention. More notable is the Northern Administrative District, where initiatives have been run such as one in Kachkanar where the townspeople restored monuments to dead Afgantsy in their small city of around 45,000 people. At the time of writing, they had restored 4 monuments in a self-funded project. The article promotes regional identity through the local commitment to their war dead, although there is no real reference to regional pride. Therefore, once again, the article notes local achievements in reference to nationwide patriotism. Published in 2014, the article also arose when the Union was open to civilians, and while not relating to veterans’ activities, it shows the bleeding of Afghan War memory into mainstream culture.

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<sup>92</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 137.



In another article, sparked by the story of a monument's repair, the origin of the veterans' organisation in the city of Nizhneturinsky is told. A disabled veterans organisation formed in 1994 was disbanded in the late 2000s when they stopped working with combat veterans. In 2013 though, a military-patriotic group called 'Rusichi' headed by a V.N. Orlov called a meeting with Afghan and Chechen veterans, and decided to form a new organisation, with Orlov the leader. At the time of writing, the group totalled 41 veterans and was already involved with the city administration, various veterans' movements, the military enlistment office and the 'Rusichi' patriotic group.<sup>93</sup> These two stories highlight the work done by the citizens of the district, as well as the history of certain branches of the district that might get less publicity than those from larger cities in the region like Nizhny Tagil or Yekaterinburg. They suggest a focus on the perpetuation of veterans' memory within regional subdivisions, but once again there is no suggestion that regional identity separate from national identity is prioritised.

Thus, regional identity in the Sverdlovsk RSVA is telling in its absence. The Sverdlovsk Union aims to promote regionality as far as its strong sense of adjacency to the ruling party in Moscow and its values. The proximity to the central line in its priorities of patriotism and militarism can be compared to its proximity to the homogenous Russian nation, in fact its patriotism likely relies on this. In 2020, the Black Tulip reopening had speeches to the 8500 soldiers from the region who went to Afghanistan, and the 242 who never came home.<sup>94</sup> Regional focuses like this are natural, due to veterans' families who remain in the area, and their desire to remember specific local soldiers. Yet, the Ural identity is no different from Russian identity in *Veteran Afganistana's* reporting. Once again, this can tie to a collective narrative in line with a homogenous identity between Ural veterans and the veterans of any other part of Russia.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., Issue 175.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., Issue 212, p. 4.

## Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, the Sverdlovsk RSVA has developed due to the work of Viktor Babenko, who finds himself the subject of a cult of personality which combines the facets of pre-Soviet dissolution reporting on the Afghan War, with commitment to Putin-era ideals of patriotism. Within the representation of Babenko as a man, his history is essentially wiped clean of negativity, there is no reference to the mental strain of the war. For upcoming chapters, it is important to consider the rejection of 1990s' narratives about the war and about Afgantsy.

As well as developing the working practices of the branch, Babenko ties it to the state hierarchy through his ideals, and his position as a Duma representative, much like Klintsevich who heads the national level RSVA. Its focus on patriotic education has existed since the beginning of Babenko's control, and I argue it should be considered a constant due to Babenko's ideological proximity to the United Russia party. Babenko's advocacy for military-patriotic education appears to have existed since before the Putin era and equates to an example of how the shift in narrative under Putin has drawn so many veterans on side. Overall, the structure of the Sverdlovsk RSVA supports the assertions of Galbas that the Union is above all organised upon collective memory. As he claims, these may turn away veterans with contrasting viewpoints. It should be considered the dominant, and collective narrative of veterans in the region, with which this thesis analyses in the coming chapters.

The importance of regional identity is used largely in the context of the Ural region's support for the United Russia party, and its status as a centre for patriotic action. It is almost telling in its absence, that nation comes before region in the identity of the Sverdlovsk RSVA. As previously mentioned, the connection of the branch to the local government suggests a lens through which myth and memory are approached, especially considering the funding of *Veteran Afganistana*. The Sverdlovsk Union works alongside various other branches of

patriotic education in the region, specifically those comprised of veterans such as the Union of Paratroopers, and the leadership of the Shuravi Museum. The Union is also closely linked to other veterans' and patriotic groups, some of whom have run projects with government funding, as well as local institutions. This cooperation, paired with the previously mentioned insular leadership suggests that the Sverdlovsk RSVV is part of a web of groups with the goal of promoting a similar military-patriotic narrative, that receives direct support at times from the state power-structures. Above all, the structure and funding of Sverdlovsk branch, supports Galbas' view that the priority of veterans' movements has shifted to a focus on gaining societal recognition over social benefits.

## Chapter 2: Memory – War, Return, and Commemoration

This chapter comprises an investigation into how *Veteran Afganistana* represents memory within Sverdlovsk Oblast's veteran community. In the first of three sections, this chapter will look at the presentation of war and return, considering the efforts to approach justification of the war, and the narratives of how soldiers conducted themselves. Secondly, it will consider the perception of heroes and villains domestically and abroad, before finishing with memory focused on the military, and its ties to heroism and a grander lineage of Russian soldiers. This section will also consider the unavoidable importance of the Great Patriotic War on interpretations of military memory.

As a contemporary analysis of Afgantsy memory, Behrends' 2015 article can serve as an interesting comparison. He argues that a 'state sponsored' memorial culture can influence recollection of memory, therefore he only uses accounts from directly after the war.<sup>95</sup> By considering modern veteran narratives, this investigation can test Behrends' judgement to avoid those accounts at risk of outside influence. Afgantsy narratives are contextualised by shifting public opinion towards the war and military. They must be compared against how Galeotti saw their early post-war existence, as 'society's scapegoats, the state's victims'.<sup>96</sup> Some literature on the early post-Soviet Afgantsy explores themes of abandonment relating to psychological issues, for example veterans who avoided seeking treatment for alcohol and drug problems upon arriving home.<sup>97</sup>

The investigation of narrative memory in the context of what Danilova calls the 'new wave of revisionism' since 2000 shows the Afgantsy continuing the shunning of the 1990s' narrative that was demonstrated in chapter one.<sup>98</sup> This change has taken place partly on the political

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<sup>95</sup> Behrends, "Some call us heroes," 722.

<sup>96</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, 62-63.

<sup>97</sup> Coalson, "Trauma of War," 56-57.

<sup>98</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 125.

level, contextualised by the attempts made by Frants Klintsevich to revise the 1989 condemnation of the Afghan War. Klintsevich called for an official revision in 2014, describing it as the Duma's 'sacred duty to all those who laid down their lives in the Afghan War.'<sup>99</sup> Most recently, Klintsevich backed a 2018 bill in the Duma calling for the 1989 judgement to be recognised as 'not consistent with the principles of historical justice'. The parliamentarians behind the bill argued that the Duma deputies, and the entire Russian people, 'bow their heads' in honour of those who 'defended the interests of the Fatherland at the cost of their lives'.<sup>100</sup> However, in early 2019, Klintsevich told *The Independent* that it failed to receive 'necessary backing', adding 'We will continue to fight for it. I don't know if we will be successful'.<sup>101</sup> This chapter takes the context of passionate, yet ultimately unsuccessful attempts to redefine the Afghan War into an analysis of how memory in *Veteran Afganistana* fits into the wider break with 1990s' narratives.

## The War and Return

*Veteran Afganistana* appears to keenly quote government officials whenever they express positive memory of the Afghan War. In a 2020 meeting with high-ranking veterans' union members, Putin is reported to have said that Afghan soldiers 'acted out of necessity to execute military orders'. He claims that life presents the nation with harsh and brutal manifestations, and they must fight for the Fatherland's interest, emphasising the importance of understanding the necessity of this, and that it was highly significant.<sup>102</sup> The same sentiment is reflected in a

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<sup>99</sup> "Klintsevich: Gosdume sleduet dat' novuiu otsenku znacheniia Afganskoi voiny," *RIA Novosti*, December 24, 2014, <https://ria.ru/20141224/1039884797.html>.

<sup>100</sup> "V Gosdume predlozhili peresmotret' otsenku vvoda sovetskikh voisk v Afganistan," *RIA Novosti*, November 21, 2018, <https://ria.ru/20181121/1533259696.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Oliver Carroll, "Thirty years on, Soviet war in Afghanistan continues to divide Russia," *The Independent*, February 15, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/soviet-afghanistan-war-russia-30-years-impact-defeat-invasion-deaths-a8781501.html>.

<sup>102</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 212, p. 3.

2014 issue quoting Chair of the Government of Sverdlovsk Oblast, D.V. Pasler, who recalls that the Afgantsy ‘played a progressive role in the life of the Afghan people and in the fate of the world’, resisting ‘the advance of the forces of international terrorism and drug trafficking to the borders of the Fatherland’. While later in the same issue, a letter from the chair of the State Duma claims soldiers were ‘striving to bring peace and tranquillity to the Afghan land’. This last quote is less revisionist in terms of the results of the war, but Pasler’s claims imply that the Soviet involvement was popular among the Afghan public, while both he and Putin promote the more recent nationalistic idea of a victorious war to protect home borders.<sup>103</sup> The inclusion of such quotes in *Veteran Afganistana* suggests that government and Union narratives align, however it raises the rather unanswerable question of whether ideological agreement, or the desire to break from negative 1990s narratives, takes precedent in their decision.

In some cases, it appears that memory is used loosely to tie to ideological trends, such as historical truth, or nationalist nostalgia. In his meeting with the Oblast Governor, Franz Klintsevich argues ‘the world has been turned upside down’ and that truths need to be told to the youth of the country lest they lose it.<sup>104</sup> Although more applicable to the Great Patriotic War, this shows how the language of memory can be used to promote ideology without explicitly mentioning the war. Moreover, it can draw upon various wars to make one larger ideological collective memory. However, Galbas draws upon interviews to reveal that not all Afgantsy support the government’s revisions to war memory and historical truth. Galbas’ Afgantsy interviewee with the pseudonym Igor argues, ‘the state does not remember the war’, that it only uses the veterans for promoting militarism: ‘if the state has such experience in the form of veterans, it will use them for educational programs’. His opinion of the collectivisation of memory stretches to the RSVA narrative of the war, claiming that ‘the website of the RSVA

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., Issue 175.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., Issue 181.

is one of these sites which does not tell the truth about the war'. Such a case is used by Galbas to show that connection to the RSVA demonstrates a similarity of thought, that the group holds a collective narrative, which is largely aligned to the government. Igor is not a member, unlike Galbas' other interviewee given the pseudonym Andrei, who is far more aligned to the Union's expressions of militarised thought and memory. It seems that a veteran like Andrei, a member of the RSVA, would be more likely to view themselves as comparable to Great Patriotic War veterans, and support Klintsevich's claims about memory being forgotten. That his claims are published in *Veteran Afganistana* shows a conscious choice to compare the wars in reporting to fellow veterans.<sup>105</sup>

However, not all the RSVA's associated members share a positive memory of the war, as is seen in the case of the Shuravi Museum, who display a more nuanced approach, despite ultimately still participating in many patriotic education systems. In a 2016 issue specially dedicated to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the museum, its founder Nikolai Salmin explained its creation and its narrative on war memory, describing that during the formation of the museum in the 1990s 'the Afghan war was definitely considered criminal'. Salmin explains that the museum receives fewer donations since many veterans are reluctant to remember their past, upon returning home they 'were made half-citizens of their country' reflecting a public opinion depicting them as criminals and thugs.<sup>106</sup> His memory of the 1990s correlates with the negative opinions Galeotti found during his own research, and furthermore, it shows that the memory of how the veterans were treated has not vanished with the revisionism of the Putin era. It demonstrates why certain Afgantsy are so keen to change the narrative around the war, but this has now been adopted by the government to promote military-patriotism, and some veterans, like Galbas' interviewee, fail to see the efforts of the government as anything but exploitative.

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<sup>105</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory," 128-129.

<sup>106</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 190, p. 3.

Salmin describes the museum as anti-war, explaining that some in the military criticise them ‘for not calling on everyone to go to the front, to “throw themselves on the grenade”’. The museum creators view themselves as patriotic, but in a less militaristic way; according to Salmin they explain to students who visit the museum that ‘the tragedy of the Afghan war does not have to be equated with patriotism’. Rather, they hope to show that ‘war is a hell, a tragedy. We should not strive for it, we must always avoid it’. Therefore, the museum refuses to turn their projects into recreations of military procedure; ‘we would never make our schoolchildren or students dress in camouflage and crawl through our corridors. That would probably be “cool”. But we want to refrain from such tricks’. This seems to differ from the perceived military-patriotic collaboration between the government and the RSVA. Their rhetoric on the war appears to suggest they want a more fact-based teaching of the war’s events which the RSVA is happy to publish, demonstrating that, while the Shuravi Museum meets a high bar for patriotism, there is room for more than one interpretation in RSVA memory.<sup>107</sup>

Whilst it is hard to say with the lack of evidence of personal memory elsewhere in the RSVA reporting, the perception is that the Shuravi Museum present memory of the war along their own lines with a more independent, and personal slant. Their collection was started by the materials brought home from Afghanistan by Salmin himself, and they do not appear to criticise the Putin-era re-telling of the war, rather they continue to fight the shame tied to Afghanistan in the 1990s. In some ways, they continue the victim narrative from which Galbas argues the Union has deviated. Salmin explains that ‘we could have avoided sending troops to Afghanistan’. In this respect, the Shuravi Museum focuses on the negativity of the 1990s and aim to teach from an anti-war platform and criticise the government at the time for sending off Soviet men.<sup>108</sup> Whilst Babenko too explains that he ‘hates war’ in his biographical issue, the

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.



victimhood narrative is far less common in *Veteran Afganistana* as a whole than in the issue dedicated to the Shuravi Museum.<sup>109</sup> It could be argued that their continued engagement with sources of the time causes the Shuravi Museum to hold a more 1990s approach to war memory. Either way, it appears the closest to a version of personal memory being available in *Veteran Afganistana* which does not come from one of the Union leaders like Babenko.

Memory of the war gets foggier when considering the recognition, or lack thereof, of the negative impacts on Afgantsy and their own crimes when fighting in Afghanistan. Whilst perhaps expected in a veterans' newspaper, the crimes such as drug use and violence against civilians which came out in *Glasnost*' era reporting are largely omitted.<sup>110</sup> Rather, the image of wartime activity paints the Afgantsy as the destroyers of drug caravans; 'risking our lives every day'. Babenko recalls in a 2014 issue that 'we fought with gangs of Mujahideen, smashed their caravans with weapons and drugs, accompanied our convoys with humanitarian aid to distant mountain villages'.<sup>111</sup> Of course, it should not be argued that these events never happened, but the omitting of negative experiences both caused by, and affecting the Afgantsy is a trend which never presents the character of the Afgantsy as flawed.

Much like how chapter one saw Babenko as untouched by the negative experience in the war, *Veteran Afganistana* suggests that, rather than trauma, veterans returned with friendship and an unbreakable bond rooted in patriotism. Babenko recalls 'that many of us, veterans of the war in Afghanistan, understood there exactly what patriotism, true male friendship and military comradeship are'.<sup>112</sup> Yet, Behrends' research finds that in early interviews after the war, the idea that 'Afghanistan makes brothers of us all' was rejected.<sup>113</sup> The shift towards such a narrative highlights why Behrends used a source base fresh from the end of the war. This also

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., Issue 221, p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 123.

<sup>111</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 175.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Behrends, "Some call us heroes", 725.

correlates with Galbas' work, which found that the veteran who was not a member of the RSVA was far less inclined to identify with militaristic values like camaraderie and fraternity.<sup>114</sup> Yet, some victimhood narrative does appear to remain. Babenko recalls returning to posters greeting soldiers that read 'the people of *Perestroika*', but he was confused as 'we couldn't understand what *Perestroika* had to do with it'. Then, he remembers realising he had returned to a changed country when he asked a bewildered barmaid for sugar, finding it to be in shortage.<sup>115</sup> It may be absent from the official narrative, but under the surface the return to chaos continues to drive a form of victimhood that drives the veterans to distance themselves from the 1990s.

Babenko's biographical issue denies the existence of everyday heroism in war, arguing that the Afgantsy were highly trained soldiers simply doing a job. By removing it from the individual, this implies that narratives of heroism are tied more to service to the state, patriotism, and the overall morality of the war. Babenko recalls the banality of day-to-day life in Afghanistan, where going to ambushes on foot was the hardest part, marching for 1-2 days with no padding to stop heavy backpacks from rubbing. He remembers that he was, 'in general, prepared for Afghanistan', explaining the initial stress of his role as a radio telegrapher, but that the forceful support of trainers prior to deployment drummed 'personal responsibility' into the minds of the operator. Combining the everyday drudgery with focus on the Afgantsy's level of training perhaps creates the insinuation that mistakes cannot be attributed to the soldiers themselves, rather the trainers. Babenko claims that 'there are no bad subordinates, just a lousy leader who can't come to an understanding with them'. This quote refers to his post-war job in the factory, but the line retains significance as one of his core beliefs when considering his portrayal of the

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<sup>114</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory," 132.

<sup>115</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 175.

regular Afgantsy. Babenko's memory suggests professionalism and omits the existence of error attributable to the Afgantsy.<sup>116</sup>

Babenko argues, 'someone who looks for daily heroism in war... must be disappointed by the routine of combat work', and that 'a feat is an extraordinary event.'<sup>117</sup> Heroism is retained for figures like Yuri Islamov, who blew himself up to kill enemies around him and save his comrades, only to die in his comrade's arms on the way to a helicopter.<sup>118</sup> Other than these exceptional cases though, it seems apparent that heroism is seen as a trait more associated with the militaristic aspects of their character. Danilova claims that Afgantsy have been remembered exclusively for their duty to military service, rather than their sacrifice to the Motherland, or a patriotic duty.<sup>119</sup> While this may agree with the evidence of *Veteran Afganistana* to an extent, it seems reasonable to say that the Afgantsy hope to portray themselves as carrying out a service to the Motherland and regularly talk about their patriotic duty. This can be seen in the event titled 'there is such a profession – defending the Motherland', and Pasler's reference to defending Russia's borders from drug smuggling.<sup>120</sup> Thus the memory of the war sees contradictions. Whilst war is seen as hell by some, others emphasise the brotherhood. Then, whilst the government remembers them in the context of their military service, the RSVA stresses a narrative of patriotic service in which they tangibly defended Russia, allowing for greater proximity to the Great Patriotic War generation.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., Issue 221, p. 2-3.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., Issue 175.

<sup>119</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 161.

<sup>120</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 137.

## Heroes and Villains

This next section addresses how memory in *Veteran Afganistana* portrays the heroes and villains of the Afghan War. It finds plenty of evidence to call the Afgantsy underappreciated heroes, but surprisingly little evidence of the villainization of Soviet officials, rather, friendly Afghan forces are remembered as scapegoats and a hurdle to the success of the war. The newspaper often reports on openings and rallies held by the Sverdlovsk RSVA, remembering the Afgantsy through memorials. One article tells of plans for a memorial park for war veterans in Talitsa. The district Union committee, municipal administration, and architecture department chose an infantry vehicle on a central pedestal, with the names of Afgantsy, Chechen veterans, and police killed by ‘bandits’ engraved in black marble.<sup>121</sup> This type of memorial resembles those from the 1990s featured in Danilova’s research. The inclusion of military vehicles was a hold-over from Soviet memorialisation, whereas 1990s memorials typically lumped all post-Soviet war dead together due to public ambivalence to the Afghan War. It is hard to say whether this article, from an early issue in 2006, also demonstrates lack of public engagement to fund the project, since today it might be just as likely that the combination was deliberate in demonstrating military lineage.<sup>122</sup>

Contrastingly, Danilova analyses the 1996 Afghan memorial at the Alley of Heroes in St Petersburg. The memorial depicts six young boys, and 140 empty shell casings with the names of the dead. Danilova argues that the boys ‘defy any associations with war or military settings and therefore challenge the frame of Soviet heroic war commemoration’. On the other hand, the focus on the military vehicle in Talitsa explicitly draws upon militarism in its memory of the soldiers. Thus, it has more resemblance to the modern memorials that Danilova deems ‘insensitive’ to individual memory, which focus on ‘the collective experience of hero-soldiers

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<sup>121</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 137.

<sup>122</sup> Danilova, *Politics of War Commemoration*, 155-157.

and soldier-martyrs by emphasising the ideas of heroic masculinity, patriotism and sacrifice for the country'. Danilova stresses that official war memorialisation is not necessarily the same as community memorialisation. Therefore, this indicates that memorialisation like in Talitsa, with government and RSVA involvement, comes from above, whereas memory of the war individually, and in broader society, does not necessarily follow this blueprint.<sup>123</sup> A monument erected in Revda in 2014 by the Council of Arts, and Committee of Soldiers' Mothers features the words 'It was not for nothing that my star lived, twinkling in the sky with moonlight. I did everything that the Motherland expected... and I just ask you not to forget about it now'.<sup>124</sup> Danilova highlights a similar monument reading 'but the memory about it is still alive. The years will pass by and someone who was lucky to come back will be dead in the future. Remember us!'. Danilova concludes that the veterans are the embodiments of memory but also guardians of it. That is to say, the abandonment in the 1990s contextualises Afgantsy memory, that they must cling to their fallen comrades, and share their memory through memorial culture.<sup>125</sup>

Afgantsy heroism leads to a narrative of retrospective appreciation among the Afghan people. A 2014 article recounts a trip to Afghanistan taken by 5 Afghan veterans, including Ye.P. Teterine, the Chair of the Sverdlovsk Union of Paratroopers, and accompanied by Alexander Sladkov, a war correspondent for VGTRK.<sup>126</sup> They hoped to place a plaque 'perpetuating the memory of the fallen soldiers' in Afghanistan, for which they needed to negotiate with the Afghan Embassy. The story claims the Afghan people remembered how the Afgantsy helped build schools, which is compared to the present day building of monuments.<sup>127</sup> It follows War-

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<sup>123</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 155-164.

<sup>124</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 177.

<sup>125</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 172-173.

<sup>126</sup> The All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company.

<sup>127</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 175.

era reporting almost word for word in its focus of the Afgantsy's charitable activity.<sup>128</sup> Similarly, the article legitimises the Soviet mission in hindsight by comparing it with the recent American occupation. The article argues that nowadays, Afghan people realise how good they had it during the Soviet conflict. 'We listened to the wrong people', the article tellingly claims; in comparison to the Soviet soldiers, the American's 'finger is always on the trigger. First they shoot, then they look where'. They add that in the winter, Russians would give food if approached, while Americans will not let anyone near them; 'we hate them for that'. On the withdrawal, the article claims that an agreement was made in Geneva which was adhered to by the Afghans and the Soviets, but America and Pakistan 'trampled on these agreements'.<sup>129</sup> This account, which the reader is told second hand by an ideologically motivated actor, shows memory in the context of recent developments in Afghanistan, and rivalry with the USA. It returns to the fight for historical truth, and leaves no room for the possibility that the US and Soviet operations were both negatives for Afghanistan by placing the Soviet Union on the moral high ground. This thesis is not to debate the legitimacy of the US occupation, but the re-telling of this account suggests that the negatives of the Soviet operation are overlooked, and legitimacy is created, in comparison with a period judged to be worse.

Aside from the Mujahideen, who are largely absent from recollection, the reporting in *Veteran Afganistana* remembers the war's villains differently to what might be expected. The Soviet leaders are also mostly absent from reporting. Whilst there is some criticism, there is no stabbed-in-the-back narrative as might be seen after an unsuccessful war. As mentioned earlier, Babenko criticises the use of Afgantsy in promoting *Perestroika*, which laments the collapse of society for which the war had been fought, more than those who sent the soldiers to fight originally.<sup>130</sup> Salmin provides the most negative view of those behind the war. In the Shuravi

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<sup>128</sup> Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy," 904.

<sup>129</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 175.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

Museum's biographical issue, Salmin justifies his view that war could have been avoided by arguing that 'politicians start wars and ordinary people die'. This criticism of government and the beginning of the war is rare in *Veteran Afganistana*, and still it takes a vaguer tone, using the unspecific 'politicians' and 'ordinary people'.<sup>131</sup> Salmin does not go as far as Galbas' non-RSVA affiliated veteran interviewee, who argues that Brezhnev was too old, that 'certainly there was something wrong with his brain', and that the government was cynical and foolish in its deployment of soldiers to Afghanistan.<sup>132</sup> This suggests that even Salmin's criticism, the strongest in *Veteran Afganistana*, has a limit that is less repressed in personal memory found outside the Union. Salmin's memory portrays the war as tragic and hasty, but he stops short of other critics who lambast it as negligent.

Salmin is far more critical of the political situation in Afghanistan, essentially scapegoating the friendly Afghan government, who were unable to maintain support within their country. He does recognise that the Afghan government were unpopular, arguing that supporting a people's regime established by force was not easy without popular support, however, he claims that this led to the friendly Afghan army pushing for the Soviets to enter the war. With many Afghans unwilling to fight their countrymen, within Afghan power circles there was an expectation that the Soviets would oversee the revolution. Salmin is scathing of the leader of the Afghan Communist Forces B. Karmal, who he says enjoyed the 'benefits given by the authorities', believing that the Soviets would be in Afghanistan for an indefinite amount of time and protect the regime. When the Soviets tried to leave in 1985, Salmin claims that there was a recognition that the problem could not be solved by military means, but the Afghans' reluctance to work in a bipartisan manner meant that the Soviets were pressured to keep fighting by their Afghan comrades.<sup>133</sup> Overall, Salmin critiques the beginning of the war and its necessity more than

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., Issue 190, p.3.

<sup>132</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory," 126.

<sup>133</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 175.

most in *Veteran Afganistana*, but still he perpetuates the shift in narrative to a Russian nationalistic war, burdened by the Afghan forces, rather than an ideological war of solidarity between Communist regimes. This shift towards a nationalist memory encompasses the collective RSVA memory which focuses on military duty, supported through memorial culture of their war dead.

### **Memory and the Russian Military Pantheon**

The final section of this chapter will cover presentation of the army in memory. Here, the veterans' desire to be recognised for their service defending Russia re-emerges, although their presentation in relation to the wider military canon does not share the humility of Babenko's individual memory. The memory of militarism fits into a wider reverence for the Great Patriotic War, and military tradition focused on glory and heroism. Babenko is keen to highlight the line of succession within the military, and the reverence of Great Patriotic War soldiers. In a 2016 article regarding Afgantsy involvement in Victory Day, Babenko echoes fears over historical truth with the narrative that Soviet involvement in the Great Patriotic War is belittled. He argues that the Afgantsy are 'worthy successors of front-line soldiers of the Great Patriotic War', who march behind Great Patriotic War veterans in the Yekaterinburg Victory Day parade, 'symbolising the continuity of the military traditions of different generations'.<sup>134</sup>

Such attention on military tradition, being 'worthy' to continue it, and symbols such as the return to uniform for the marching veterans create a picture of a lineage of the Russian and Soviet soldier. Danilova notes that mythmaking in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Russia's militarised society consists of 'heroic militarised masculinity, patriotism, duty and the Russian Orthodox discourse'. She argues that the focus on this militarism prevents any alternative interpretations

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., Issue 186.



of the war, claiming that the emphasis on military duty is played up by Afghan veterans in hope of recognition from the state, ‘this fatalistic hope prevents any search for alternative interpretations of war experiences’.<sup>135</sup> Thus, while they continue to seek recognition, the RSVA will remain as Galbas sees it; a group aligned by collective memory, deterring the differently minded.

Galbas references the 2004 unveiling of a monument in Moscow to internationalist fighters, and the 2010 announcement of a commemorative day to those who fought outside the homeland, as evidence that Putin rewards veterans for adherence to the collective narrative. This narrative recognises the Afgantsy through militaristic memory and their service to their country. This line of thought is echoed by Andrei, Galbas’ interviewee, and member of the RSVA. He links the internationalist duty to a national issue; ‘the intervention with patriotic and militaristic patterns of thought’. He goes so far as to regret the recall of Soviet troops, linking the modern drug problem in Russia with Afgantsy leaving. The military succession that connects the Great Patriotic War veterans to the Afgantsy is merely continued to modern problems within Russia, the solution to which is deduced to be more military involvement. Contrastingly, Galbas’ other interviewee does not see the military necessity, even though he recalls the war as an internationalist duty.<sup>136</sup> This suggests that the duty aspect of remembrance is not solely unique to the RSVA, but involvement in the group, and its connections to the government, make continuation of military thought and lineage more prevalent.

Illustrations used in *Veteran Afganistana* also express strong themes of military lineage. Above all, attention should be drawn to the cover images of the issues from May 2017 and February 2020 which both make explicit references to the idea of inheriting the tradition of Russian militarism. On the cover of the May 2017 issue, the text ‘Veterans of Combat Actions – worthy

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<sup>135</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 174.

<sup>136</sup> Galbas, “Our Pain and Our Glory,” 116-126.

heirs to the front-line soldiers of the Great Patriotic War' accompanies a montage of photos featuring World War Two soldiers, contemporary marching veterans, and a snapshot of the Immortal Regiment parade within a star decorated to resemble the Saint George's Ribbon.<sup>137</sup> The symbolism of all the groups marching in tandem while encapsulated in a symbol of the Soviet and Russian militaries suggests joint progression towards a common goal for the benefit of the Motherland. Meanwhile the Immortal Regiment's inclusion encompasses the public in the militarised society with the Union open to all. Such symbolism cements military duty at the heart of commemoration, with the individual veteran overlooked for the inclusion of civilians. Similarly, the issue from February 2020 shows the military lineage in visual form, but it puts more focus on the historic tradition of militarism. The cover calls 2020 the 'year of memory and glory', and features a montage of Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan, modern soldiers at memorial ceremonies, and even drawn images of chainmail-wearing, spear-wielding soldiers on one side, and Peter the Great leading troops with rifles and bayonets on the other.<sup>138</sup> The inclusion of soldiers of all different time periods creates a mythologised history which draws upon the 'loyalty, combat brotherhood and militarised masculinity' highlighted by Danilova. She argues that these goals have enabled the rehabilitation of the Afghan War through its central militaristic traits. She also explains that the inclusion of different periods, seemingly incompatible for creating a coherent narrative due to ideological differences, is not unique. Many memorials to Soviet heroism include Orthodox symbolism such as Victory Park in Moscow, which Danilova calls 'a puzzling example' for its combination of red stars and symbols of Russian statehood and the Orthodox Church.<sup>139</sup> The comparison clarifies how, in

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<sup>137</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 193.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, Issue 212, p. 1.

<sup>139</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 125-154.

the creation of military lineage, ideology is rendered meaningless as a form of differentiation, since their Russianness is used to amalgamate them all into one mythology.

Yet, the Great Patriotic War veteran continues to take the centre stage, given large chunks of *Veteran Afganistana's* reporting. That the Afghan veterans march behind the Great Patriotic War veterans in the Victory Day parade shows clear reverence among the veterans. Moreover, February 2020's issue for the anniversary month of leaving Afghanistan also highlights the end of the siege of Leningrad and the end of the battle of Stalingrad, with one page out of eight featuring two character-pieces to Great Patriotic War veterans.<sup>140</sup> It demonstrates the priorities of Russian society, where still the status of veteran applies exclusively to those who fought in the Great Patriotic War, with Afgantsy officially falling under the umbrella of 'veterans of combat operations'.<sup>141</sup> As Danilova explains that state traditions too, like the newly created Saint George ribbon, are not for supporting the troops as a whole, but 'pride in the remembrance of the Second World War'.<sup>142</sup> Thus, it is demonstrated how the Afgantsy get an unfair deal even while they are recognised for perpetuating the state narratives. The RSVA memory is interwoven with that of the state, supporting its official remembrance. The state's initiatives, such as the St George Ribbon, are designed to construct the 'imagined sense of historical continuity, positioning the post-Soviet society as the legitimate successor of the Russian and Soviet Empires'. Danilova demonstrates that they are designed to push the Great Patriotic War generation to the highest rung of the ladder of 'war dead', encouraging their exclusive commemoration.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 212.

<sup>141</sup> Danilova, "An Exclusive Veteran's Policy," 910.

<sup>142</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 214.

<sup>143</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 200-210.

## Conclusion

In this chapter on memory, it is apparent that outside influence has altered memory of the war among veterans in the three decades since Soviet forces left. The rejection of 1990s' narratives of the war raised in chapter one has continued to be relevant and characterise modern day memory. Ideas of military brotherhood and patriotic masculinity are central to how the RSVA remembers the war, although the accounts from the Shuravi Museum rector Salmin provide a much more negative view of war as a concept. The reasons, and subsequent morality for the war have shifted to one praising the work done by veterans while ignoring any negativity, either the impact on the war on the Afgantsy outside of the rigorous nature of fighting a war, or the crimes committed by the soldiers themselves while abroad. The role played by the Afgantsy, and the militaristic reasoning for their remembrance carries into their memorialisation, which makes up a large part of *Veteran Afganistana's* content. The Soviet leadership are not always portrayed glowingly, but they escape the most criticism, even Salmin's claims that the war could have been avoided tend to draw more general conclusions about war. This demonstrates the collective memory of the RSVA, while Galbas' non-affiliated interviewee demonstrates quite a different personal memory. Rather, the Afghan government, soldiers, and political situation come under fire in *Veteran Afganistana*, for burdening the Afgantsy, and seemingly being willing to take a back seat. Blame is taken away from the Russian actors in the war, and failure is made a foreign issue. This continues a nationalistic narrative of the war, which extends to rationalising intervention, with the war now becoming a defensive campaign to stop drugs being smuggled over the southern border.

Finally, the newspaper is keen to highlight the Afgantsy position within the military pantheon as heirs to the Great Patriotic War soldiers' glory. The illustration of the newspaper draws parallels to a created history involving imperialist, Soviet, and modern Russian soldiers, while the reverence to the Great Patriotic War generation means that they often take up significant

space in the Afghan veterans' own newspaper. In corresponding with an official narrative, the Afgantsy remain below their elders in both public memorialisation, and seemingly the state's favour. The final chapter will consider how a collective memory centralised on military duty shapes the current priorities of the RSVA.

### **Chapter 3: Myth – The Afgantsy Cause in the Modern Day**

This chapter will take the lessons learned in the first two chapters to analyse the practical work and perceived mission of the Sverdlovsk RSVA in the modern day. In combination with the overarching trends in Russian political and historical memory, it will tie their actions to the myth of the Afghan War, and wider military-patriotism. First, it recognises the Sverdlovsk RSVA's perceived mission, how Babenko portrays their priorities, and considers any changes over time. Then, it will consider the implications on veterans, referencing Sieca-Kozlowski's argument that patriotic education schemes under Putin equate to a duty of service even after the end of a veteran's military career.<sup>144</sup> It will consider the practical means of targeting youth in this patriotic education, before separating examples from the newspaper into two categories. First, those which perpetuate the memory of individual Afghan veterans, and second, those which emphasise military service itself.

The chapter will give some reaction to works by academics like Galbas and Sieca-Kozlowski. Galbas has claimed that the veterans exist as 'stakeholders in patriotic values' instilled by the Putin government, since his militarisation of society aligns with the social recognition sought by the RSVA. Overall, the values strengthen the moral sense of responsibility towards veterans in society at large.<sup>145</sup> Meanwhile, Sieca-Kozlowski highlights many of the ways in which veterans are deployed in patriotic education. Particularly, she refers to patriotic education largely in two camps, either propagandist, where military service is promoted, or symbolic, where mythologised events are commemorated. The final two sections of this chapter are based around her categorisations, the propagandist actions which promote militarisation in society, and the symbolic, which focus on individual Afghan veterans who have been mythologised by memory. Sieca-Kozlowski and Galbas agree that veterans gain a sense of recognition from

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<sup>144</sup> Sieca-Kozlowski, "Russian patriotic education," 79.

<sup>145</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory," 122-123.

military-patriotic education, hence it is unevenly favoured.<sup>146</sup> The majority of this chapter concerns itself with analysing the engagement in this patriotic education, but contextualised by the limitation of the source base, where the intangible reader interest must be considered, where patriotic education likely draws the readership more than less eye-catching social work.

In his seminal 1995 work, Galeotti describes that veterans' groups received little money from the Komsomol or local authority in the bankrupt 1990s state, so they were forced to set up businesses to support themselves. Longevity relied on mobilising local momentum, and in early *Perestroika*, groups like the Leningrad Association of Veterans of the War in Afghanistan hoped to foster cooperation between the different veterans' movements, which became crucial. They supported the *K Sovesti* newspaper, while the SVA, with their own newspaper *Pobratim*, could not connect to the Leningrad group and died out sooner. There was involvement in military-patriotic education, as was seen with 'The Association', whose focus was solely on this activity.<sup>147</sup> The examples of Galeotti's book show the veterans' Unions' mission as it was in the mid-1990s, which research from *Veteran Afganistana* seeks to update.

### **A Perception of the Current Mission**

It is important to first consider the mission, as is acknowledged by the RSVA themselves. In *Veteran Afganistana*, Babenko repeatedly claims that the Sverdlovsk Union does not focus solely on patriotic education, rather it is just one of a range of equal priorities. The content of the newspaper does not fully support this, but it should be recognised that there is more scope for reader-friendly content with a focus on patriotic education over social projects. Reflecting upon the Union's activities in 2015, Babenko highlights the 'patriotic education of youth',

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<sup>146</sup> Sieca-Kozłowski, "Russian patriotic education", 76-81.

<sup>147</sup> Galeotti, *Afghanistan*, 104-117.

‘rendering assistance to disabled people and the families of victims, treatment and social rehabilitation of veterans’, and ‘providing veterans with housing’ among the most important.<sup>148</sup> Whilst these are not represented in equal measure in *Veteran Afganistana*, the majority of the social projects recorded come from the RSVA itself, while its affiliated groups only receive attention for their patriotic contributions. In 2006, Babenko explained his belief that the Union had ‘taken up the baton... from the veterans of the Great Patriotic War’ on the topic of patriotic education. In evidence of this, he directs attention to the Paratrooper Club, Shuravi Museum and ‘Winged Guard’ Museum of Airborne Troops, who all help to promote patriotic narratives.<sup>149</sup>

In early 2015, *Veteran Afganistana* detailed the workplan for the Sverdlovsk RSVA for the year ahead in eight categories. Military-patriotic education is one category, but many other categories could also fall under the same definition. The categories include organisational efforts to grow the Sverdlovsk Union in terms of members and branches (and continue publishing six issues per year of *Veteran Afganistana*), participation in events for Defenders of the Fatherland month, the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War, and the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Airborne Forces (three separate points), military-patriotic education, organisation of military sports competitions, perpetuation of the memory of their dead comrades, and support for veterans and their families including medical, social rehabilitation, and material assistance.<sup>150</sup> With the exception of the first and last points, the majority of these categories are considered patriotic education in all but name as per the conventions of this thesis. Whether they take that meaning for the veterans is hard to prove, but certainly events like military sports competitions are presented as if they are patriotic education events in

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<sup>148</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 186.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, Issue 137.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, Issue 181.



*Veteran Afganistana*. Meanwhile, others fulfil the requirements of the mythologised event considered a categorisation of patriotic education.

Babenko is keen to argue that the Sverdlovsk RSVA takes no matter more seriously than any other. In 2016, he claimed that ‘all tasks that are set by the Sverdlovsk regional organisation are core ones’. He used the opportunity to reference the scope of the organisation’s work with Afgantsy and Chechen veterans, border troops, special forces, and more. As well as highlighting the Union’s involvement with providing medical support he calls it a ‘powerful unifying force’.<sup>151</sup> Babenko has referenced patriotic education from the first available issue, and his embrace of it has been recorded as far back as the 1990s, as Andrei Bannikov’s memory showed in chapter one. Aside from greater specificity in describing the Sverdlovsk Union’s work, *Veteran Afganistana* displays no grand change of tack towards patriotic education to the detriment of other veterans’ issues. Furthermore, the shift towards patriotic education does not totally disprove loyalty to veterans within the Union, and unequal focus does not mean a lack of focus on veterans’ needs altogether.

Whilst they are not as frequent as military-patriotic stories, the newspaper has always referenced the Union’s social work. Examples from oldest available issue include a passing mention to the solving of a housing issue for the mother of Yuri Islamov, and an active call upon veteran readers to submit documents required to receive health resort treatment on the Black Sea Coast, with information on how to apply.<sup>152</sup> From the issues researched, this is the most obvious example of the newspaper reaching out to inform the reader of a social scheme. It may be less seen nowadays due to a shift towards patriotic education, or alternatively, the increase in non-veterans to the RSVA in recent years means such calls are less relevant. The latter would mean that recently, the newspaper serves more as an outwardly facing Union

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., Issue 186.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., Issue 137.

mouthpiece, than a community tool for veterans, which arguably also shows that they are less of a priority.

Recent issues continue to report on social schemes. One interesting 2014 initiative described a ‘unified social telephone’ line which can give residents of the region information on social support. This line is largely aimed at older residents, and while not solely veteran orientated, it shows a combination of focus on veterans’ issues and older civilian issues.<sup>153</sup> The income from the Uralsevergaz donation in 2016 is another example of the Sverdlovsk Union’s social activity. The newspaper lists how the money was divided between the provision of services, which included the installation of plastic windows, dentures and the organisation of a funeral, and also the purchase of household appliances, including 9 refrigerators, 7 washing machines, and a gas stove.<sup>154</sup> These two more recent examples rely on outside work, including a large private donation, rather than independent work by the Union, or any wider state funding. However, with the comparative lack of articles, it is hard to discover a trend over time for how *Veteran Afganistana* reports social programmes. Instead, they show a steady, but infrequent discussion of veterans’ issues.

The Shuravi Museum also appears to have not changed its mission since the earliest issue. In 2016, Salmin explained that their mission included teaching people about a variety of wars, since many do not know that the USSR also fought in Somalia, Korea, and Vietnam. They partnered with the Department of Culture to create two books about such wars, and while they will keep working with them, they will not stoop to ‘lowbrow projects’, favouring history and not the glorification of war.<sup>155</sup> In 2006, they offered guided tours for Ural State University students. One student, Anna Ivanova, recounted that the museum gave her contradictory

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid., Issue 177.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., Issue 186.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., Issue 190, p. 3.

impressions: the huge amount of information impressed her, but it would still be better if there was no need for the museum and had been no war. Meanwhile, to Sergey Zhidovinov the museum breathed a ‘harsh truth’ about the war, and that he could not help thinking about how innocent people often suffer because of wrong policy.<sup>156</sup> The content of their tour is unknown, but their feedback suggests that the museum’s opinion of war has not changed, while they have retained their patriotic intention, and *Veteran Afganistana* is willing to publish it.

### **Continued Service in a Mobilised Society**

Sieca-Kozlowski reasons that the military press has long stressed the obligations of veterans, quoting various publications such as *Veteranskoe* and *Vzaimodeistvie* to argue that the ideal veteran would be a ‘model of organisation and discipline, and must inspire heroic acts in the younger generations’, while organising ‘military education to ensure the production of a new generation of defenders of the homeland’.<sup>157</sup> This section considers how these pressures upon veterans appear in the Sverdlovsk RSVA, within a wider trend of society being mobilised.

Whilst not stated explicitly, hierarchical praise for those engaged with patriotic education implicitly tells of such pressure upon veterans. In his address at the beginning of one 2020 issue, Babenko expressed his ‘sincere gratitude to the veterans of combat operations who continue to actively serve the interests of Russia, to educate and teach young people how to be faithful to their duty and to love their country’.<sup>158</sup> This sentiment is shared by the Governor of Sverdlovsk Oblast, quoted in 2014 as saying ‘I am sure that all of you will continue to... pass on your invaluable experience to the younger generation’.<sup>159</sup> This implies a homogeneity in the

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., Issue 137.

<sup>157</sup> Sieca-Kozlowski, “Russian patriotic education”, 79.

<sup>158</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 212, p. 2.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., Issue 177.

*correct* position for veterans to take by not referencing those veterans who fought bravely, but do not share a commitment to patriotic education. Reports of patriotic education initiatives appear in all analysed issues of *Veteran Afganistana*. Sieca-Kozlowski argues that the 2000 and 2006 Patriotic Education programmes encouraged veterans ‘to work hand in hand with the Programme’s partner ministries in a societal project based on the military-patriotic education of the population... in exchange for – the esteem of the Russian state’.<sup>160</sup> In 2006, Afghan veteran Vladimir Sergeevich Vshivtsev gave a talk to schoolchildren organised by the chair of the Nizhny Tagil RSVA for ‘Defender of the Fatherland Month’.<sup>161</sup> Similarly, in 2014, children of schools in the city of Asbest in the Western Administrative District of Sverdlovsk Oblast met with hero of Russia and Reserve Colonel S.N. Voronin, asking him questions such as ‘how do you kill while at war?’, and ‘how do you overcome fear?’.<sup>162</sup> Of course, it is not possible to suggest that these veterans were unwilling to be involved, in fact, should the Union truly serve as a group based on common patterns of thought, they likely were willing, but it is unavoidable that their involvement is seen as *proper* veteran behaviour.

Sieca-Kozlowski sees that veterans are drawn into a wider mobilisation of society, particularly noting sports targeting youth, including ‘exercises and military formations aimed at placing state administrations and civilian society in a dynamic of wartime-like mobilisation’.<sup>163</sup> *Veteran Afganistana* demonstrates a range of methods to target different groups of youths. It reports high profile sports competitions are held for those already involved in patriotic clubs, for example ‘Soyuz-2014 Heirs of Victory’, in Naberezhnye Chelny. Sverdlovsk region sent a team of pupils from both the ‘Guard of the Urals’ patriotic club from Verkhnyaya Pyshma, and SMERSH from Asbest, to compete against others from around Russia. Aside from competing,

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<sup>160</sup> Sieca-Kozlowski, “Russian patriotic education”, 79.

<sup>161</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*. Issue 137.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, Issue 177.

<sup>163</sup> Sieca-Kozlowski, “Russian patriotic education”, 76.

the students learned survival in the woods, were taught to neutralise an enemy with melee weaponry by the Olympic Champion freestyle wrestler Khadzhimurad Magomedov, and other classes including the ‘Information Wars’, and ‘Modern Military Threats to Russia’. The Sverdlovsk team won the tournament and were congratulated by Babenko, and Teterin, the Regional Chair of the Union of Paratroopers.<sup>164</sup> The involvement of the RSVA and an Olympic champion shows the coordination of such mobilisation, while the content of the classes appears to prepare for warfare, a theme in similarly directed patriotic schemes.

One 2016 article describes a three-day training camp organised by the Afgantsy group, ‘Invalids of War’ for 40 cadets from the ‘Cascade’ and ‘Berserk’ patriotic clubs. They practiced storming of enemy positions, hand to hand combat, shooting, and medical training, while learning about ideological issues. Specifically, cadets studied a decree by Putin on the creation of a ‘Russian movement of schoolchildren’, and the concerns of educating a new generation of Russian patriots. The article was written by the head of ‘Berserk’ group who thanked Oleg Noskov, a veteran who was involved, and Ilya Rusinov, a graduate of ‘Berserk’ and current soldier.<sup>165</sup> Their militaristic activities are clearly designed as preparation for the students, while choice of guests shows the line of succession in practice, with Noskov helping Berserk produce more graduates who, like Rusinov, will go on to defend the homeland. Moreover, the ideological issues discussed show that there is no sleight of hand at play, cadets are told the internal logic of patriotic education, and ideologically drawn to the military pantheon.

Such open discussion is seen in other meetings between veterans and cadets in *Veteran Afganistana*. In 2020, the acting Chair of the Ural Association of Heroes spoke to members of the ‘Nadezhda’, ‘Freestyle’, and ‘Seeker’ patriotic clubs in Yekaterinburg. He told them of his group’s goal to replicate the actions of the Heroes of Socialist Labour from the Great Patriotic

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<sup>164</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 177.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, Issue 186.

War in helping young people prepare to go into the forces.<sup>166</sup> Patriotic groups offer the most militarised audience, and therefore receive advanced patriotic education from veterans. Their practical engagement equates to combat preparation and does not appear to reduce the likelihood of the continuation of a cycle of 'glorious dead' which Danilova deems central to continuing military hierarchy topped by the ever-shrinking Great Patriotic War generation.<sup>167</sup>

The RSVA use schools to connect with youths unaffiliated to patriotic groups, they teach a patriotism based on loving one's country, and military sports, although perhaps more casually than with patriotic clubs. In 2006, the newspaper reported two collaborations in the town of Alapaevsk for means of promoting patriotic education. First, a patriotic museum named 'Memory' was opened at a school, helped by the school director described as 'well aware of the importance of military-patriotic work for young people and supports the patriotic undertakings of combat veterans'. Second, a sports base was created for 'difficult' young men to learn about military applied sport activities. The base was the creation of the head and deputy head of Alapaevsk regional administration along with the leader of the local Chechen veterans' group, Mikhail Melkozerov. Whilst the RSVA appears to have had little applied involvement with the base's creation, it is reported as an important example for educating younger generations 'in the spirit of patriotism and readiness to defend the Fatherland'.<sup>168</sup>

In one other example, in 2016, the newspaper reported the first 'unique military-sports patriotic centre' opening in Yekaterinburg in a former factory workshop. The local Union of Paratroopers and the Centre for Military-Patriotic Education and Pre-Conscription Training for the Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army collaborated on the project with more than 6 million roubles invested into it. Free access for patriotic clubs is mentioned, and the

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<sup>166</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 212, p. 4-5.

<sup>167</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 209.

<sup>168</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 137.

Union of Paratroopers notes its interest in holding future regional and national training at the centre, since there is a gym, cinema, interactive shooting range, and space for airborne training courses, educational programmes, and martial arts. It shows that funding is available, although not stated where from, for large patriotic-education projects which the organisers believe will keep young people off the streets, channelling their energy into patriotism and preparation to defend the country.<sup>169</sup> The examples show that, in the absence of purpose-built patriotic clubs, veterans can spread patriotic education directly through schooling, and through community orientated infrastructure, this being a hub seen by the community as a benefit for young Russians and promoting positive values.

Thirdly, commemorative events have even been used to simultaneously impart military-patriotism. In 2020, the newspaper features an advert for a rally for the 31<sup>st</sup> anniversary of troops leaving Afghanistan. To be held at the Black Tulip memorial, the rally invited regular veterans and their relatives, but also students from educational organisations and any concerned citizens of the region. In the events would be a guard of honour, a wreath band and military orchestra as well as a display of military equipment.<sup>170</sup> The open invitation allows further teaching opportunities focused on the Russian youth, while combining education of Afgantsy experience with commemoration. This appears a less organised, and more personal form of education for the veterans, possibly with more opportunity for personal narratives to be passed on, but also likely with less involvement and funding from the state.

Part of the mobilisation of society is the exaggerated danger of what might happen without it. One 2020 article explains a research group called Derzhava's attempts to 'return the theme of mass civilian deaths in the Great Patriotic War to the centre of public debate'. They argue that the truth of the Soviet Union's exploits in the Second World War is falsified in the West, and

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., Issue 186.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., Issue 212, p. 8.

so they want to spread ‘reliable’ information about the crimes committed against civilians in occupied Soviet territories.<sup>171</sup> Previously, in 2016, a Plenipotentiary Representative of the President spoke to heroes of the Fatherland, Ural residents, and Heroes of Russia, stressing the necessity to retain Russian identity, and linking the education of young people to ‘whether Russia can save itself and grow’.<sup>172</sup> This creates an attitude of superlative danger for the Russian way of life. Patriotic education is not just a positive thing, but essential for the very preservation of the nation. The second example typifies the pressure on veterans to take up a mentorship role. Sieca-Kozłowski argues that veterans have two possible roles: either a mentor of the future fighting forces, or a member of law enforcement.<sup>173</sup> One may see the superlative nature as a direct result of the recognition that the Great Patriotic War generation is dying out, and therefore it is essential for the perpetuation of the status quo that new veterans be brought in to fill the void.

### **Patriotic Education regarding veterans**

These final sections note two categories of military-patriotic undertakings that arise in *Veteran Afganistana*. Firstly, those which Sieca-Kozłowski describes as symbolic, which largely perpetuate the memory of individual Afgantsy, and secondly, those which are propagandistic and promote the military more broadly.<sup>174</sup> Commonly, a single war hero is remembered with an event in their honour. Two 2020 articles detail a cross country skiing competition in Verkhny Tagil for Afghan veteran Alexander Kharlamov, and a boxing tournament honouring Chechen veteran Dmitry Slinkin in Sredneuralsk. Both were organised by the local communities, and both praise the combining of memory for the honoured veteran with healthy

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<sup>171</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 212, p. 4.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, Issue 186.

<sup>173</sup> Sieca-Kozłowski, “Russian patriotic education”, 77.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.



activity which draws together young people from the surrounding area, before remembering the veterans' heroism. Verkhny Tagil city Unions including the RSVA, and teachers from the town school named after Kharlamov, organised the first event. They remember Kharlamov with the Suvorov commandment 'perish yourself and save your comrade', as he was killed by a sniper after saving a group of young soldiers under fire.<sup>175</sup> Similarly, the boxing event honouring Slinkin was organised by his old comrade, now Mayor of Sredneuralsk. Slinkin is commended for his noble death on the outskirts of Grozny, wounded in battle, but continuing to fight off 'terrorists' to stop them getting to an arms depot, thus saving countless lives.<sup>176</sup> Thus, both events demonstrate how the RSVA uses patriotic education to keep hold of their comrades' memory while epitomising Babenko's belief that heroism is in the individual event rather than everyday military life.

Elsewhere, in 2006, the patriotic event 'There is a certain profession – defending the Motherland'<sup>177</sup> rounded out with a patriotic writing competition which mostly involved young people. The article welcomes the theme of the feat of war veterans which entered most works, and notes 'there will be someone to pick up the heroic baton of generations'.<sup>178</sup> Such a competition does not honour one veteran but perpetuates the cult of the war veteran by encouraging young people to be creative in their expression of patriotism. Moreover, it promotes a remembrance of veterans as heroes, however the contestants celebrate veterans through archetypal creations rather than the real people who fought. A 2014 article on the 'Memory Run' in Asbest returns to athletic competition, this time on the anniversary of the deaths a helicopter brigade who died in Chechnya. The local RSVA take a role in the event, described as a 'real military-patriotic holiday', and were able to attract Olympic boxing

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<sup>175</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 212, p. 4.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>177</sup> "Есть такая профессия - Родину защищать".

<sup>178</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 137.

champion Yegor Mekhontsev to the 2014 edition. Babenko was an honorary participant while pupils of patriotic clubs joined Great Patriotic War veterans and Internationalist soldiers in the commemoration.<sup>179</sup> These two articles show that veterans can be remembered in more general terms, but also that heroism and military credentials are central.

Finally, some articles show incorporation of personal memories in patriotic education, although heroism remains a central characteristic. One Ural State University visitor to the Shuravi Museum in 2006, Yulia Polyakova, said that the war had touched her family, that her father was among those who fought in Afghanistan and she ‘was filled with a feeling of pride that we in Russia had and have such people’.<sup>180</sup> Her prior connection to the Afgantsy, and the fact that her account comes through the lens of the *Veteran Afganistana* editors aside, this seems to suggest at the very least a catharsis for the families of veterans achieved through educating about the war. Interestingly, it comes through the Shuravi Museum and their non-glamorised version of history. Elsewhere, the competitions ‘Heroes Among Us’, and ‘The Great Patriotic War in the History of my Family’ show the focus of personal memory within the work of the Sverdlovsk RSVA. The first was a drawing competition for children asking them to draw a real hero of Afghanistan, Chechnya, or a similar war, while the other asked children to write about their family narratives of the Second World War, the Ural region’s participation, or the causes and consequences of the war.<sup>181</sup> Whilst the first appears to promote direct recognition of the veterans themselves for their efforts in the war, it limits itself to remembrance within the veterans’ families, while encapsulating Sieca-Kozłowski’s remarks on the ‘soldier-hero’ where children are encouraged to find evidence of their relatives being heroic in the Great Patriotic War.<sup>182</sup> It can be seen in all these cases, that patriotic education schemes shown in *Veteran*

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., Issue 177.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., Issue 137.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., Issue 181.

<sup>182</sup> Sieca-Kozłowski, “Russian patriotic education”, 76.

*Afganistana* do successfully honour the memory of their fallen comrades, but they are always combined with patriotic objectives, either through promoting heroism or physical activity. I am inclined to agree with Sieca-Kozlowski, that recognition directly correlates with continued usefulness to the state's objectives.

### **Patriotic Education Regarding the Military**

As Danilova argues, the feeling among Afgantsy in the late 1980s was one of betrayal, and the low prestige of the military after a controversial war made remembering their fallen comrades even more important. It should be seen then that patriotic education focused on the military has been a method of raising its prestige once more, a priority of the veterans and the state. Danilova notes a rise in military prestige from 2006, where 71% of Russians thought the situation in the military was bad, and only 3% positive, to 2014, where only 9% responded negatively, and 25% positively.<sup>183</sup> A common tactic is to teach military skills at day events. In a 2020 article, the newspaper celebrates a patriotic event in Polevskoi, allowing children to see exhibitions around a school including displays of World War Two weaponry, where they could take photos with helmets. The event organised team activities teaching the assembly and disassembly of a Kalashnikov rifle, and first aid, before quizzes on military history and the awarding of prizes to the winners.<sup>184</sup> Once again, the school environment is used to reach children outside of patriotic clubs, while the event passed on military skills with a focus on competition and cemented the reverence for the Great Patriotic War.

In 2006, the Union of Paratroopers' regional 'Winged Guard' Museum, whilst amid repair work, toured for a month visiting various locations in the area and seeing 8197 visitors. The

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<sup>183</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 124-181.

<sup>184</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 212, p. 5.

tour included a film on the history of the Airborne Troops, and round table discussions on how to improve their military-patriotic work. The article argues that the month was a success with the group over-excelling their quota of field trips and signing up over 50 students for Paratroopers' clubs.<sup>185</sup> Overall, Danilova argues that Putin-era patriotic education is not wholly successful in encouraging army conscription, at least in comparison to the Soviet-era equivalent. She says it is unclear whether increased public opinion of the army is down to patriotic education, but ultimately, the agenda is more cultural than professional, perpetuating the national myth centred on military-patriotism rather than necessarily creating new soldiers.<sup>186</sup> Based on examples in *Veteran Afganistana*, it seems likely that the explicit goal of creating future soldiers is most tied to work with patriotic clubs, whereas examples aimed at school children are much more likely to have a cultural agenda.

Yet, there is government support for the teaching of military skills, both seen in the large Yekaterinburg building project in 2016, and in the more recent 'socially significant project' run by the Union of Paratroopers in Kamensk-Uralsk which received support from the Presidential Grant Fund. The project ran sponsored parachute jumps from a parachute tower, teaching skydiving and health and safety for the participants, who were mostly students of patriotic clubs and cadets.<sup>187</sup> These events demonstrate the fun, and even charitable context used to spread militaristic skills, while for the veterans, it gives them a way to use the skills they acquired in the army to be helpful in the patriotic-education effort. Ideologically, the military is promoted as a 'school of life' by veterans, such as in a 'recruits' day' talk at Achitsk District House of Culture.<sup>188</sup> This phrasing, denoting the military as a rite of passage for young Russian men, was used by Putin in 2004 when calling the Afghan War as a protective war over

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., Issue 137.

<sup>186</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 177-182.

<sup>187</sup> *Veteran Afganistana*, Issue 212, p. 6.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

Russia's southern borders. Galbas argues that Putin's lack of critical perspective and comparison of Afghanistan to the Vietnam War, reduced the Soviet culpability for invasion, while his support for the war raised its relevance in wider society.<sup>189</sup> Sieca-Kozłowski argues that the patriotism of veterans gives meaning to their survival, which is seen in this section on the propagandistic side of patriotic education, ultimately supporting Danilova's argument that the priority is more cultural than literal.<sup>190</sup> Comparatively, there is more room for personal remembrance within symbolic patriotic education focused on veterans, although these ultimately continue to adhere to the central myth of heroism.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude this chapter, the collective memory centralised on military duty developed in chapter two is put into practice through a range of military-patriotic actions which reach youths of patriotic groups, and schoolchildren to focus on either the memory of fallen veterans, or to venerate the military more broadly. As Danilova argues, the priority of the government may well be more focused on centralising the Russian military-patriotic myth within society, but the de facto actions still go some way to familiarising youths with weaponry and engaging them in sports and military skills. It seems that the most overt militaristic activities are focused on cadets, the most fertile ground for promotion of the military to be received. The opportunities for the veterans to promote the military as a 'school of life' and show the energetic and even fun sides of military activity are often taken.

It appears that the focus on gaining recognition is a central driving factor in accepting their integration with mythmaking. As Galbas argues, the Union is tied together by a set of

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<sup>189</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory," 118.

<sup>190</sup> Sieca-Kozłowski, "Russian patriotic education", 76.

militaristic tendencies, explaining their keenness to keep the military a 'school of life', and driving their inclusion in fighting the government's paranoia that the West is ignoring the Soviet Union's involvement in the Great Patriotic War. Practical actions take the form either of remembrance of individual veterans, or wider celebrations of the military with emphasis on teaching skills. Understandably, these are typically kept separate, as they would create a jarring juxtaposition.

The leadership of the Sverdlovsk RSVA assert that no one area of policy is approached with more importance than another. However, the actions as portrayed in *Veteran Afganistana* certainly lean towards the efforts to promote military-patriotic education based on the myths of heroism and military lineage. There is frequent mention of their social work for the betterment of veterans' lives, but the proportion is less than that of reports of exciting efforts in the field that demonstrate the new role that Afgantsy play in Putin's Russia. It is reasonable to suspect though, that this is partially reader related, as the exciting work done to promote military-patriotism is more likely to reach a new audience made of more than just veterans. This too goes to explain the newspaper seemingly abandoning its early public service announcements for a more explanatory function of the Sverdlovsk Union's activities, both social, and patriotic in nature. It should not be said that veterans' interests are ignored, yet there is no mention of it receiving official budgeting, rather the money comes from private donations, like Uralsevergaz. The government funding goes to patriotic education actions like the Socially Significant Event run by the Union of Paratroopers. It still seems unfair to argue that veterans are left behind for the priority of patriotic education, but, as Galbas argues, there is more focus on their memory in the wider public eye than before, perhaps taking advantage of the increased prestige of the military, or perhaps central to it.

## Conclusions

As mentioned at the start of this thesis, Danilova calls memory among veterans ‘nationalistic’, and ‘depoliticised’.<sup>191</sup> The content of *Veteran Afganistana* indicates that the Sverdlovsk RSVA is not immune to this vision of memory. Yet, it is worth noting that the Shuravi Museum, of all groups under the umbrella of the Sverdlovsk RSVA, offer the most contrasting narrative. They manage to combine the centrality of loss and grief in their memory with a continued sense of military duty and patriotic nationalism. This both creates the opportunity for an interesting future investigation, while creating difficulty in drawing specific conclusions in this thesis, a problem mentioned from the outset.

It should not be forgotten that this investigation, the earliest sources coming from 2006, is entirely contextualised by Victor Babenko’s chairmanship of the Sverdlovsk RSVA which began two years earlier. The Sverdlovsk Union produces a newspaper for an unspecified audience, but one presumably not exclusively made up of veteran Afgantsy. It seems to align its members along ideological patriotic grounds, which in turn aligns it with official government ideology. It is important to the interpretation of the evidence that the newspaper is not seen as internal discussion among veterans, however, nor is it a simply outward facing ideological tool. It may look outwards as a presentation of the work of the Union, but it is unlikely that it reaches outside a likeminded readership, probably including the civilian membership of the RSVA.

Placed within literature, the Sverdlovsk RSVA corroborates the views of academics on commemorative culture within Russia, led by Danilova, who see that the Afghan War is largely considered a Russian war rather than Soviet, protective against a threat to the south, with the central tenets of modern nationalism fundamental to its memory. Furthermore, it supports

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<sup>191</sup> Danilova, *War Commemoration*, 172.

Danilova's impression of Russia's two-tiered system of commemoration, in which the veterans of the Great Patriotic War are given greater reverence. Danilova sees this through the practical benefits given to veterans, and the exclusive definition of the *veteran* title. It is furthered in *Veteran Afganistana*, which demonstrates the Afgantsy desire to integrate into the Russian military pantheon, and the esteem to which they consider the Great Patriotic War generation, demonstrated by the numerous articles to their memory rather than the Afgantsy's own. Again, the context of the wider readership of *Veteran Afganistana* should be recognised, whose interest may lie with broader Russian patriotic narratives rather than Afgantsy issues.

*Veteran Afganistana* sees some agreement with academics who look at the Afgantsy today. Sieca-Kozlowski focuses on their inclusion in the patriotic education process, and the evidence suggests that her arguments, that the veterans are required to remain active long after their military duty has ended, while forming part of a larger militarised society, are justifiable. Much like her work, this thesis notes heroism as a main tool of the patriotic narrative sweeping modern Russia, set as a standard for veterans to live up to. Their reasons for accepting the resulting pressure cannot be wholly known, but this thesis considers it linked to the central idea that a key objective of all elements under the Sverdlovsk RSVU umbrella is to change society's negative stereotypes of the Afgantsy that existed in the 1990s.

There is both agreement and disagreement with Galbas' work, who manages to interview individual veterans to obtain more personal narratives. This thesis agrees with his points on the social makeup of the Union, that it joins together like-minded veterans which can be just as exclusionary as inclusionary to others. He mentions the inclusion of non-veterans to the Union, but does not draw significant attention to it, which this thesis argues may be insufficient. Whilst difficult to conclude definitively, the focuses of the Sverdlovsk Union on the patriotic education side of Afgantsy work may well be down to the need to connect with a readership outside of the group. This, however, should be taken to mean likeminded civilians rather than



veterans who think differently. Galbas may respond to the larger content of patriotic education by saying that the Union has shifted to cooperation with the state with the goal of recognition rather than benefiting their members with social programmes, but this is not a hard and fast rule throughout *Veteran Afganistana*. Whilst there is more focus on patriotic education, and Galbas is right that there is *more* focus on that, there is not a total lack of inclusion of talk of the social responsibility in helping veterans and their families. It seems more likely that the content of *Veteran Afganistana* is a combination of a weighted focus on patriotic education, as well as a conscious knowledge that the newspaper is an outward facing bulletin of the work on this topic to the greater Russian public holding patriotic views.

Finally, the thesis updates Galeotti's work on the structure of the veterans' movement in Russia, continuing from his work from 1995. Whilst there has been much other work on the modern veterans' movement, including all the work already mentioned, it seems relevant to note that the structure of the Sverdlovsk RSVA differs from that which Galeotti described. Rather than the faltering movement from the mid-1990s, the Sverdlovsk Union today is well organised with ambitions to reach as many veterans as possible, while existing in various settlements, large and small, around the region. It no longer exists in any large way against the government as Galbas further claimed of the 1990s' veterans' organisations, but has been co-opted into the government narrative, with figures like Babenko and Klintsevich holding governmental positions as well as key roles in the Union.<sup>192</sup> The shift has been one of strengthening in line with a renewed esteem for the army in Russian society, which has strengthened the Sverdlovsk Union's ties with the government, while making patriotic education more of a focus than it was in the 1990s. Similar to how it is incorrect to view the 1990s as an era when veterans' unions focussed solely on veterans' issues, it is incorrect to

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<sup>192</sup> Galbas, "Our Pain and Our Glory," 114.

view their present day actions as limited to patriotic education. Yet, the emphasis has switched, meaning patriotic education is the favoured mission today.

All in all, the RSVA today is a stable organisation, one that still aims to help its members, but has changed considerably since the 1990s. With such a shift, it can only be concluded that the Sverdlovsk RSVA is a thorough encapsulation of the shifting attitudes to war, patriotism, and military in Russia's national myth. It may remain a veterans' union, but with civilian membership, local government funding, and expectations upon its veteran members to live up to national mythology, social policy seems to exist as a transactional benefit for helping continue a patriotic status quo. In a modern context, this thesis demonstrates how shared patriotic goals bind United Russia to veterans' unions. The next generation of Russian veterans will not have the baggage of Soviet dissolution, nor the negativity of the 1990s. Yet, examples from this thesis show how a Putin government may bring them into a military lineage, providing new heroes for a patriotically mobilised nation.

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