

AFGANTSY: THE SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL LEGACY OF A
FORGOTTEN GENERATION

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Abstract

Characterized by General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev as a “bleeding wound,” the Soviet-Afghan War left a broad imprint on the domestic front during the Soviet Union’s transition from stagnation to dissolution. From the onset of war on 25 December 1979 to the 40th Army’s withdrawal on 15 February 1989, most Soviet officials spoke only of a Limited Contingent of Soviet Troops in Afghanistan that served its “international duty.” As a result, private narratives and popular myths about those at war – known as the afgantsy – circulated for years before the Politburo chose to assemble heroic icons from the fallen. By focusing on the afgantsy, this dissertation offers a case study in the mobilization of civil protest, popular interpretation of military conflict in times of war, and its translation into postwar culture.

The Soviet-Afghan war filtered through a range of domestic avenues, from emerging grassroots organizations, to conferences aimed at reinforcing the state narrative, to popular cinema. When in the years of glasnost public debate on the war was authorized, the only uniform perception of the afgantsy that emerged was that they were wrongfully deployed by the Politburo. After the Soviet Union dissolved on 26 December

1991 this verdict became redundant for many, and the historicization of the Soviet-Afghan War became a challenge for 15 independent countries.

This study explores the myriad ways in which the Afghan war made an imprint on everyday life in the Soviet Union through the incorporation of a broad range of sources. These include but are not limited to recently declassified archival materials, oral history interviews, memoirs, films, and a vast range of publications that have been made accessible in the online world. More than 20 interviews were conducted, the majority of which were with afgantsy, but included soldiers' mothers, widows, and veterans of other armed conflicts. Archival research took place at a variety of locales, among them the State Archive of the Russian Federation and the International Archive of Memorial in Moscow; the Central State Archive of Political Documentation of the Kyrgyz Republic in Bishkek; and the State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine in Kiev.

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Glossary of Terms and Abbreviations:

<i>afganets</i>	Veteran of the Afghan war (plural: afgantsy)
<i>banderovtsy</i>	Pejorative for Ukrainian nationalists
<i>basmatchism</i>	Anti-Soviet insurgency in Central Asia, 1917 to 1934
BMP	Infantry Combat Vehicle
BTR	Armoured Personnel Carrier
BTSC	Ban the Soviet Coalition
<i>chinovniki</i>	Government bureaucrats
<i>ded</i> or <i>stariki</i>	Senior conscript
<i>dedovshchina</i>	Military hazing
<i>dembel</i>	Conscript nearing demobilization
DOSAAF	Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy
DRA	Democratic Republic of Afghanistan
<i>dushman</i>	Bandit; mujahideen
GKChP	State Committee on the State of Emergency
<i>Glavpur</i>	Chief Political Administration of the Soviet Army and Navy
GONGO	Government-Organized Non-Governmental Organization
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
KSM	Committee of Soldiers' Mothers
<i>neformaly</i>	Unofficial organizations
OKSVA	Limited Contingent of Soviet Troops in Afghanistan

OUN	Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
RLRFE	Radio Liberty-Radio Free Europe
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic
RSVA	Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan
SADUM	Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan
<i>salagi</i>	New recruit
SVA	Union of Veterans of Afghanistan
UPC	Ukrainian Peace Committee
USVA	Ukrainian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan
<i>voenkomat</i>	Military commissariat
VPV	Military-patriotic education
VVA	Vietnam Veterans of America
VVAW	Vietnam Veterans Against the War

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Introduction

Can I ask you a question? What are Canada's national interests in Afghanistan?! Canadians just like you were sent there. How can this be explained? ... You mentioned rhetoric. When the Soviet Union was at war... it was all rhetoric and political games, and ordinary soldiers suffered. ... I'm not good with aggressors. But I respect a man in uniform. He does not decide what land he is sent to trample. It is politicians I do not like.

- Nikolai, afganets¹

Travel one stop north of the Kiev metro station on Moscow's ring line and you arrive ten minutes' walk from the Central House of Writers. Since September 2001 it has issued the annual Artem Charity Fund in honour of journalist Artem Borovik (1960-2000), killed in a helicopter crash one year prior. Upon Anna Politkovskaia's posthumous receipt of the award in 2006, Borovik was praised at the opening ceremony as "a hero... who not only showed great pride, dignity, and mastery in his work... [but] took on a dangerous and difficult profession."² The speaker was Moscow's Mayor, Iurii Luzhkov.

That a conservative ally of President Vladimir Putin would shower Artem Borovik with praise is a perplexing indicator of the sociocultural change that has taken place in post-Soviet Russia. Best known in the West as a consultant for *60 Minutes*, Borovik travelled a different path to fame in the Soviet Union. It was his coverage of the Soviet-Afghan War as a journalist for *Ogonek* in summer 1987 that marked a turning

¹ Nikolai, interview with author, April 2014.

² Cited in N. Vinogradova, *Rassleduiut zhurnalisty* (Moskva: OOO Sovershenno sekretno, 2008), 6.

point in media coverage from stories of blissful ignorance, to disillusion and repentance. His sobering accounts of the war sparked a backlash from many: *Ogonek* demanded more than 200 deletions and revisions to his work, while the Soviet Army issued a sharp denial and condemnation of Borovik's account. The Soviet Union of Writers, meanwhile, rejected Borovik's application for membership in light of his having "shamed the Soviet corps of generals."³

Twenty-five years later, Borovik's collected works sit on display at the Moscow headquarters of the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (RSVA). "It's one of the most honest accounts of the war," beamed Alla Pavlova, the RSVA's press-secretary since 1999. "His death in an airplane crash was a tragedy."⁴

That the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan and Moscow Mayor Iurii Luzhkov endorsed a journalist who published critical accounts of the Soviet-Afghan War and was at first condemned for doing so is indicative of the conflict's place as a transformative event in Russian history. Long characterized as a "forgotten war," or a "Soviet Vietnam" that accelerated a world power's collapse, the Afghan war should be seen instead as an event that left a broad imprint on the domestic front during the Soviet Union's transition from stagnation to dissolution.

I argue that the Soviet-Afghan War's greatest impact lay not in its political consequences, but in the reintegration of its veterans and how Soviet citizens responded to them in light of the Politburo's reluctance to acknowledge those who served in Afghanistan. Over the course of nine years, one month, three weeks plus a day, the war

³ Artem Borovik, *The Hidden War: A Russian Journalist's Account of the Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1990), 280.

⁴ Alla Pavlova, interview with author, August 2014.

contributed to the emergence of social movements and non-government organizations that gained official recognition from the state only after 1987. The most successful NGO to emerge from the consequences of the Afghan war was the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, which championed global human rights as its principle. "Of course, the dissidents would refer to it as well," remarked Valentina Mel'nikova, leader of its post-Soviet successor since 1997. "But we were the first to stand in line with Doctors Without Borders and the United Nations."⁵ The attribution of activism in favour of peace and human rights to dissident individuals rather than grassroots movements limited our understanding of public opinion toward the Soviet-Afghan War. If, for those such as Andrei Sakharov, the war's greatest consequences were the betrayal of the Helsinki Accords and non-ratification of the second Strategic Arms Limitations Talks (SALT II) treaty, he spoke for a vocal minority. Soviet citizens had a greater knowledge of the war than surmised in Western scholarship and divided opinions on the conflict were as much a factor in the lack of protests as belief in propaganda.

A second focus in my research is the popular image of Afghan war veterans – later called the *afgantsy* – and how it changed over time. For much of the war, Soviet officials spoke only of a Limited Contingent of Soviet Troops in Afghanistan (OKSVA) that delivered humanitarian aid to the people. As such, private narratives and popular myths about those at war circulated for many years before the Politburo chose to assemble heroic icons from the fallen. Only after *glasnost* in the late 1980s were the *afgantsy* named regularly in press coverage, literature, and films – by which time the most costly years of war had passed. The only uniformity in public perception of the

⁵ Valentina Mel'nikova, interview with author, August 2014.

afgantsy when their war came to an end on 15 February 1989 was that they were wrongfully deployed by the Politburo of the Soviet Union. After the lowering of the Soviet flag on 25 December 1991 this too lost its meaning for many. Conversely, having served on behalf of a common country ceased to be a unifying factor for the afgantsy, and at once, the historicization of the Soviet-Afghan War along redrawn national lines became a task for post-Soviet states. Taken as a whole the themes of emerging sociopolitical movements in a time of war, of soldiers' depiction in cultural fora, and the melding of antiwar protests with calls for national secession will shed light on the Afghan war's imprint on everyday life in the Soviet Union of the 1980s.

Journalism vs. History

To this day there remains a debate over whether or not topics of the Gorbachev years are too recent to be categorized as history. This is indicative of a selective memory that has long persisted in Soviet studies. When the students of Mikhail Karpovich first emerged to tackle questions of the 1917 Revolution, they too faced a certain prejudice. Yet despite Aleksandr Kerensky settled comfortably in New York and Viacheslav Molotov remaining in the Politburo until 1957, this did not deter the likes of Richard Pipes and Leopold Haimson from breaking new ground. If one wishes to gain insight into the permanent consequences of the Soviet Union's longest war, they need not stand by until its veterans reach senility. More than a generation has passed since the last units of the 40th Army crossed the Friendship Bridge on the Amu Darya River to Termez, on its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Many of its veterans perished during the hardship of reintegration and the political tumult of the 1990s. And the NATO-led war in

Afghanistan has had a dual effect on the surviving afgantsy: it has fuelled a new campaign to justify the Soviet-Afghan War according to narratives of anti-terrorism measures and led governments to reintroduce a “bleeding wound” of recent history for public debate. Particularly if we wish to better-understand the sociopolitical construct of Vladimir Putin’s Russia as it distances itself from the West, the fate of the afgantsy and how they are written into its national history is a useful framework to consider.

A common objection to studies of the Soviet-Afghan War is that archives will be scant in relevant sources and scholars will rehash what we already know. It is true that one will not find an equivalent to the Pentagon Papers for the Soviet-Afghan War in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). But the letters received by the People’s Deputies of the Soviet Union and the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) capture a range of citizens’ voices on the Afghan war, the welfare of its veterans, and the heated debate that took place in congress. The primary shortcoming of archival sources is not so much a lack of relevant material, but their being tied primarily to the Brezhnev Politburo’s decision-making process that led to the war, and the Gorbachev Politburo bringing it to an end after the 1988 Geneva Accords. Documents in the recently opened State Archive of the Security Service of Ukraine (GASBU) offer a partial solution to this conundrum by shedding light on how quickly public knowledge of the Soviet-Afghan War developed; on the other hand, the KGB were obsessed with private deviation from the state narrative to the point of paranoia and their statements must be taken with a grain of salt. I address the shortcomings of archives through a mix of different paths. These include interviews with veterans, the letters of soldiers and mothers gathered from archives and regional museums, memoirs and republished

samizdat now available in the online era. Particularly helpful were the plethora of veterans' personal works available on ArtofWar.ru, itself founded by an afganets. Interviews and time spent at archives and libraries took place over 15 months of fieldwork in 2014 and 2015, spread across Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Moldova-Transnistria, and Poland.

Historiography

The opening of the Soviet archives revealed the Saur Revolution of 27 to 28 April 1978 that brought the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) to power to have been an unforeseen turn of events for the Politburo, and military intervention in Afghanistan on 25 December 1979 to be a reluctant last resort effort to stabilize the regime. This ran contrary to scholarship written during the years of war, which generally cast the Soviet Union as an expansionist power that operated according to the Brezhnev doctrine. Thomas T. Hammond's *Red Flag Over Afghanistan* for example, is one of many works that writes of the Soviet Union's quest for a warm-water port in South Asia.⁶ Another popular exercise was to indulge in comparative politics between the Soviet-Afghan War and the Vietnam War, with Anthony Arnold equating General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev to "a somewhat freakish combination of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon" in his efforts to implement social reform while disavowing the legacy of his predecessors.⁷ Among the most enduring myths of the conflict was that of Central

⁶ Thomas T. Hammond, *Red Flag Over Afghanistan: The Communist Coup, the Soviet Invasion, and the Consequences* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984).

⁷ Anthony Arnold, "Parallels and Divergences Between the US Experience in Vietnam and the Soviet Experience in Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey* 7, 2/3 (1988): 122. To give credit where it is due,

Asian soldiers' camaraderie with the mujahideen. Drawn from a smattering of interviews and eyewitness accounts, they were said to have been "purposely segregated into non-combat construction units," with few seeing combat due to their "fraternization" with Afghan locals.⁸ There are of course some works that stand the test of time. Among them is Ellen Jones' overview of the Soviet military press, a starting point for understanding the social composition of the Soviet Army in 1985 and young recruits' opinions toward mandatory service.⁹ Arguably the strongest wartime observations penned by a journalist came from Jonathan Steele, whose part-memoir and part-rebuttal of Cold War myths, *Ghosts of Afghanistan*, is also a work of fine quality.¹⁰

With the collapse of the Soviet Union came Western triumphalism, a turn of attentions to the European Union, and a dearth of studies on the Soviet-Afghan War. The standout work of the 1990s was Mark Galeotti's dissertation, "The Impact of the Afghan War on Soviet and Russian Politics and Society, 1979-1991."¹¹ Based on meticulous fieldwork that included a postal survey of nine afgantsy organizations numbering 4,409 in membership, Galeotti made a number of observations and diagnoses on the challenges the afgantsy faced at a time of political transformation.¹² By chance, it was by happening

Anthony Arnold wrote an excellent history on the factional split in the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan that has stood the test of time. See: Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan's Two-Party Communism: Parcham and Khalq* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983).

⁸ Alex Alexiev and S. Enders Wimbush, "Soviet Central Asian Soldiers in Afghanistan." RAND Note N-1634/1, January 1981, 10, 16.

⁹ Ellen Jones, *Red Army and Society: a Sociology of the Soviet Military* (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985.)

¹⁰ Jonathan Steele, *Soviet Power: the Kremlin's Foreign Policy - Brezhnev to Chernenko* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984); Jonathan Steele, *Ghosts of Afghanistan: Hard Truths and Foreign Myths* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011).

¹¹ Mark Galeotti, "The Impact of the Afghan War on Soviet and Russian Politics and Society, 1979-1991" (PhD diss., London School of Economics & Political Science, 1992.)

¹² For a breakdown of findings in Galeotti's postal survey, see: *Ibid*, 266-70.

upon his monograph at a Saint Petersburg store during a semester abroad at the age of 21 that I became interested in the Soviet-Afghan War.¹³

The terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 stirred a reassessment of the Soviet-Afghan War in academic circles that began with political science and military studies. Gilles Dorronsoro argued that the Communist reforms led to a tribal revolt; that reconquest under the Taliban cast the war as a clash between communities; and that Islam provided a utopian narrative to contest that of Communism.¹⁴ The counter-revolution was, in Dorronsoro's words, grounded in the mobilization of "local solidarity networks" according to ethnicity.¹⁵ A foil to this work is Antonio Giustozzi's *War, Politics, and Society in Afghanistan: 1978-1992*, which offers a history of socioeconomic reforms introduced by the PDPA and its efforts to rebuild the Afghan National Army.¹⁶ With the onset and maturation of the United States' War in Afghanistan, correctives to Cold War impressions of Central Asian afgangtsy became a new avenue of scholarship on the conflict.¹⁷ Timothy Nunan, for example, explores how the Soviet Union acted as a "developmental state in the third world" by deploying NGO workers such as representatives of Soviet women's organizations, progressive state muftis, and Central

¹³ Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War* (London: Frank Cass, 1995.)

¹⁴ Gilles Dorronsoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present*, trans. John King (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁶ Antonio Giustozzi, *War, Politics, and Society in Afghanistan: 1978-1992* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000). For the nuts and bolts on the military tactics of both sides of the war, see: Lester W. Grau, *The Bear Went Over the Mountain Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1996); Lester W. Grau and Ali Ahmad Jalali, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Quantico, Va: U.S. Marine Corps, Studies and Analysis Division, 1999); Lester W. Grau and Michael A. Gress, trans., *The Soviet-Afghan War: How a Superpower Fought and Lost* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2002.)

¹⁷ See for example: Erica Marat, *The Military and the State in Central Asia: from Red Army to Independence* (London: Routledge, 2010), 33-52; Eren Tasar, "The Central Asian Muftiate in Occupied Afghanistan, 1979-1987," *Central Asian Survey* 30, 2 (2011): 213-26; Jiayi Zhou, "The Muslim Battalions: Soviet Central Asians in the Soviet-Afghan War," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 25 (2012): 302-28.

Asian Komsomol advisers to Afghanistan.¹⁸ Markus Goransson’s dissertation has provided the first comprehensive study of Tajik afgantsy, while Marlene Laruelle’s compilation of 72 new interviews drawn from three Central Asian republics is invaluable as we reassess the war’s impact on the region.¹⁹

Works that offer a comprehensive revamp of Cold War interpretations of the Soviet-Afghan War, however, remain few and far between. Artemy Kalinovsky’s *A Long Goodbye* is a “history from above” that focuses on decision-making in the Politburo and the question of why it took until 1989 for the 40th Army to withdraw.²⁰ It serves as a rebuttal of the popular “three pillars” theory wherein the Communist Party, the military, and the KGB failed to act in unison until Gorbachev came to power, and frames the Afghan war as “a culmination of the USSR’s other Third World involvements... [and] a challenge to colonialism” through modernization.²¹ The greatest reason for the delay in orchestrating a withdrawal from Afghanistan, Kalinovsky argues, is that militarily the 40th Army was never losing. It was a decision taken by Gorbachev only after realizing the degree of growing public opposition to the war. Yet by skimming over the first half of the war and the seeds it planted for dissent on the home front, Kalinovsky tells only the

¹⁸ Timothy Nunan, “From the Finland Station to the Khyber Pass: The Soviet Union in Afghanistan, 1978-1989” (MPhil., University of Oxford, 2011.) See also: Timothy Nunan, “Developing Powers: Modernization, Economic Development, and Governance in Cold War Afghanistan” (DPhil., University of Oxford, 2013).

¹⁹ Markus Goransson, “At the service of the State. Soviet-Afghan War Veterans in Tajikistan 1979-1992,” (PhD diss., Aberystwyth University, 2016); Marlene Laruelle and Botagoz Rakisheva, eds., *Pamiat’ iz plameni Afganistana: Interv’iu s voynami-internatsionalistami Afganskoi voiny 1979-1989 godov*. Central Asia Program Series no. 2 (Astana-Washington, D.C.: Central Asia Program, IERES, George Washington University, 2015). The e-book may be downloaded for free, courtesy of George Washington University at: <https://app.box.com/s/umser0gccid0n6cvrl51kuyrsc8ikm8b>.

²⁰ Artemy Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal From Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.)

²¹ Anthony Arnold, *The Fateful Pebble: The Soviet Invasion in Perspective* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993); Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 216.

political side of the story, much of which confirms what we already knew or assumed. This underscores the need for a greater focus on oral history to provide an alternative perspective. Arguably the finest of surveys comes from former British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Roderic Braithwaite. *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989* is a rebuttal of generalizations about the war and its soldiers. “Most Soviet officers,” he argues, “genuinely believed in their duty” with cynicism taking hold only in the late stages of the war.²² He places emphasis on soldiers’ experiences; in one example, he points to how more than two-thirds of afgantsy hailed from “the countryside or from working class families with no secondary education” and “nearly a quarter came from broken families,” leading to social friction between ranks.²³ Among the shortcomings of Braithwaite’s work are his limited consideration of troops outside of Russia and a longterm habit in Western scholarship: one-sentence summations of landmark articles in the Soviet press. I argue that a key factor in shaping public reception of the afgantsy was the gradual liberalization of the media during the Andropov-Chernenko interregnum, as evidenced by readers’ letters and the discussions they prompted in the Politburo.

A common problem in recent studies of the Afghan war is the recycling of older works in lieu of original research. Enjoying a revival in citation, for example, is a RAND study conducted by Alex Alexiev drawn from interviews with 35 afgantsy in 1988.²⁴ Ten were drawn from third-parties or obtained as *samizdat*, and “close to half” of the

²² Roderic Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989* (London: Profile Books, 2011), 126.

²³ *Ibid*, 170.

²⁴ Alex Alexiev, *Inside the Soviet Army in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1988.)

respondents were “bona fide defectors” who fled in light of abuse by their superiors.²⁵ The reliance on jaundiced accounts of a vocal minority conducted at a time rife with public myths – i.e. the defection of Central Asian troops to the enemy, or arming the mujahideen with Stinger missiles as deciding the war – throws much of Alexiev’s paper into question. Yet despite a wealth of soldiers’ accounts having been published since then, Western scholarship remains focused on testimonies collected in the years of glasnost and the immediate post-Soviet era.²⁶ This has left our studies of the Afghan war chronically outdated. Attentions remain focused on such works as Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich’s *Zinky Boys* and Vladislav Tamarov’s *Afghanistan: A Russian Soldier’s Story*, which capture a moment in time when wartime trauma was at its rawest stage.²⁷ This limits Western scholarship to outdated sources and Cold War nostalgia under the guise of sociological jargon, at times in ad nauseum citation.²⁸ Only recently has the recycling of old works in successive editions come under scrutiny.²⁹ As such, I have placed greater focus on interviews conducted during my fieldwork, letters from the Russian archives, and oral histories of the last ten years.

²⁵ Ibid, 38.

²⁶ See for example: Mark Buser and Gail Broadhead, trans., *Afghanistan Weighs Heavy On My Heart: the Reminiscences of Soviet Soldiers Who Fought in Afghanistan* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1992); John T. Hansen et al, *Parallels: The Soldiers’ Knowledge and the Oral History of Contemporary Warfare* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1992); Anna Heinamaa et al, eds., *The Soldiers’ Story: Soviet Veterans Remember the Afghan War*, trans. A.D. Haun (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

²⁷ Svetlana Alexievich, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992); Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: a Russian Soldier’s Story*, trans. Naomi Marcus, Vladislav Tamarov, and Marianne Clarke Trangen (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2001.)

²⁸ For a particularly egregious case of reinventing the wheel, see: Karen Petrone, “Coming Home Soviet Style: The Reintegration of Afghan Veterans into Soviet Everyday Life,” *Everyday Life in Russia Past and Present*, edited by Choi Chatterjee et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 350-68.

²⁹ For a comparative study of Svetlana Alexievich’s *Zinky Boys* in its 1990 and 2016 editions, see: Holly Myers, “Svetlana Aleksievich’s Changing Narrative of the Soviet-Afghan War in *Zinky Boys*,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 59, 3-4 (2017): 1-25, DOI: 10.1080/00085006.2017.1379115.

Outline

My dissertation begins with the first year of the Soviet-Afghan War, covering December 1979 to December 1980. This period receives relatively little attention in Western studies save for the voice of Andrei Sakharov, and President Jimmy Carter's boycott of the Moscow Olympics in response to the 40th Army crossing into Afghanistan. Closely monitored by the KGB during this time were trends of public opinion toward closer ties with the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA). The range of private reactions to the onset of war was reflected in a spike in the circulation of anti-Soviet pamphlets on the matter, and dissident groups framed the war to back their own agendas. Conversely, the Soviet state poured efforts into grandiose events such as an Islamic Conference in Tashkent from 9 to 12 September 1980 in an attempt to woo political allies.

Chapter two begins with General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev's final Congress of the Communist Party on 23 February 1981 and closes with General Secretary Iurii Andropov's death on 9 February 1984. During this time, questions of the remembrance and reintegration of "wartime internationalists" – a synonym for afgangtsy – began to appear in Soviet journalism. This, paired with tense relations between the Soviet Union and President Ronald Reagan's administration, inspired a new wave of activists to form pacifist organizations. Among them was the Moscow Trust Group, which advocated peaceful collaboration between East and West and endeavoured to operate according to state laws. Authorities were stymied by the polar opposites in youth movements: two months prior to the Moscow Trust Group's formation a motley crew of neo-Nazis rallied

on Puskin Square. What could the Party offer as an alternative vision for the afgantsy's generation? As authorities debated the question, Andropov passed unpublished legislation granting the afgantsy welfare benefits and began to pursue an end to the war through negotiations with UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar.

Chapter three examines the loosening of restrictions on the Soviet media during the abbreviated rule of General Secretaries Iurii Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko from 1984 to 1985, and the changes in state narratives and public myths that ensued. This was mirrored by a shift in the Western press. After five years of propagating a "Soviet Vietnam" the new theme of POWs held by the mujahideen, Moscow's non-acknowledgment of their existence, and Western NGOs' efforts to rescue them became staples in American news coverage. During this time, the CIA experimented with incorporating the few afgantsy who dared criticize the war into its operations, while dissidents in East European republics began to weave anti-war protests with their calls for independence. In this case, I shed light on the curious case of a Polish patriot named Lech Zondek who fought alongside the mujahideen.

Chapter four covers the gradual expiry of Chernenko's gerontocracy, beginning with its boycott of the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1984, and the restraints they placed on Gorbachev to undertake any immediate change of policy in the Soviet-Afghan War.³⁰ The anemic change of the guard in the Politburo was mirrored by the pacifist groups' struggle to retain their members. By September 1986, the Moscow Trust Group had fallen to two primary activists and was overshadowed by Andrei Sakharov's return

³⁰ For a fascinating rebuttal of the revenge thesis, see: Robert Simon Edelman, "The Russians Are Not Coming! The Soviet Withdrawal from the Games of the XXIII Olympiad," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 32, 1 (2015): 9-36.

from exile in December. During this period of gradual transformation its interim leaders revised the Trust Group's agenda by challenging mandatory military service and its effects on Soviet youth. It was a platform that foreshadowed that of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers.

The passage of legislation granting the official registration and recognition of non-government organizations in 1987 is at the root of discussion in chapter five. Their legalization encouraged individuals who hesitated to enter public debate on sociopolitical, economic, and military reforms to step forward in collective groups that ranged from regional clubs of a few members to organizations that multiplied rapidly in loose-knit branches. During this time, the likes of Artem Borovik and prose author Iurii Poliakov produced bold, written accounts of hazing – known as *dedovshchina* – and corruption in the Soviet Army. The sudden exposure of a problem that festered covertly for many years, it placed the military on the defensive; at once, its misconduct became depicted in written and cinematic accounts, seized upon as a rallying point by a growing number of social movements.³¹ The All-Union Gathering of Young Reserve Soldiers orchestrated by the Komsomol from 10 to 20 November 1987 in Ashgabat was in large part an effort to draw the afgangtsy under its leadership as a means of damage control as the Soviet Army fell under scrutiny. It was an action that backfired and left the 2,000 who attended with an impression of what was possible in coordinating as a separate union.

Chapter six begins with the signing of the Geneva Accords on 14 April 1988, and examines the activism overshadowed by the political bombast of the time. As the 40th

³¹ For a chilling account of *dedovshchina* in 1967-69, when the trend is generally regarded to have started, see: Vladimir Rybakov, *The Burden*, trans. J.R. Dorrell (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1984.)

Army withdrew over the course of ten months, the Moscow Trust Group splintered into groups that differed in their prioritization of the Afghan war and their collaboration with new Western allies. Among the latter were members of the Vietnam Veterans of America, who reached out to the afgangtsy beginning with an expedition in September 1988 and remained in contact after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In April 1989 the Committee of Soldier's Mothers registered as a non-government organization and gathered broad public support in a short period of time. Their swift political victories negotiated through the Congress of People's Deputies prompted competition and impersonation from other organizations. Among them was Shield, a motley crew of disgruntled officers dismissed from the Soviet Army after Gorbachev's cuts to the military. Shunned by the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers as a KGB front, I argue that Shield's objectives were more complex and offered another venue for public debate on military reform at a time of political transition.

Chapter seven examines the Congress of People's Deputies' debate on political responsibility for the Soviet-Afghan War and reparations for its consequences, and how it spread across parliament in penned letters from 1989 to 1990. The range of criticism and proposals that took place between deputies – among whom the afgangtsy had significant representation – was lost in the reportage of events. Televised debates sparked a wave of emotive reactions in written words, and viewers' letters offer greater insight into the impressions of the afgangtsy left on everyday citizens. Depictions of the Soviet-Afghan War on film, conversely, spoke to the myths of war that prevailed as popular culture after the 40th Army's withdrawal.

The final chapter examines the place of the afgangtsy during the withering away of

the state in the Soviet Union, culminating in the August Putsch of 1991. A rare development that forced many officers to choose a political side over neutrality, the August alliance of afgangtsy that prevailed in the crisis took only months to crumble due to careerism and personal differences. The dissolution of the afgangtsy as a collective movement was a marked contrast to the rise of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, who received international acclaim for their protests of the First Chechen War. Only after 11 September 2001 and the onset of the United States' War in Afghanistan did the afgangtsy have a second chance to reframe their history.

Chapter 1

Public Knowledge and Reaction to the Soviet-Afghan War, 1979 to 1980

The Presidium of the Supreme Council met to discuss the Soviet-Afghan Treaty of Friendship. Brezhnev presided over it. The whole world knows what condition he is in. He didn't even show up yesterday to mark Lenin's birthday. ...

Everyone was irritated, especially upon sight of the languishing chairman.

Leaving the hall, one man loudly said to another: "This old asshole thinks he's smarter than everyone else and that without his guidance, we wouldn't know what to do – approve the treaty or keep on thinking about it."

- Anatolii Cherniaev, 22 April 1979¹

On Thursday, 10 April 1980, at 7:50 P.M. in the Zakarpattia Oblast of southwest Ukraine, the regional branch of the KGB received a visit from G.I. Mikk. The manager of a nearby Khust department store, Mikk had discovered a slanderous, handwritten leaflet in the women's dressing room:

People! If you value the lives of your sons, husbands, and in general the lives of our soldiers, do not allow them to be sent to death in Afghanistan. Their lives depend on us – the peaceful population. Rise up in the struggle against government power. Re-print this flyer. We do not want to die for a foreign land. We will fight!²

Four days' investigation followed, with a second copy of the leaflet discovered on a

¹ Anatolii Cherniaev, "1979 god," *Dnevnik A.S. Cherniaeva. Sovetskaia politika 1972-1991 gg. - vzgliad iznutri*, accessed 12 July 2016, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Chernyaev/1979.pdf.

² "Proiavleniia," Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sluzhby bezopasnosti Ukrainy (GASBU), f. 16, spr. 1080, l. 257.

passenger train en route from L'vov to Solotvyno. On 14 April, the KGB arrested a culprit. J.E. Sagan, a worker at the L'vov Production Association of *Iskra*. She confessed to having been influenced by “unhealthy rumors spread at the place of her work on the alleged mass deaths of Soviet troops in Afghanistan.”³ She had produced five leaflets, two of which were circulated and the remaining three destroyed. Cooperating with the authorities, Sagan took the Ukrainian KGB on “an operational inspection to determine the real motives and the possible instigators” of the crime.⁴ The investigation was transferred to the federal KGB shortly thereafter.

Sagan's actions were a far cry from the open letters penned by dissidents of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's generation, which the KGB had honed its policies toward. At 20 years of age and as an active member of the Komsomol, Sagan's condemnation of the Afghan war in pamphlets circulated between provinces of the Ukrainian SSR was indicative of a new trend in silent protest that mixed pacifism with a rejection of “international duty” (*internatsional'nyi dolg*) – itself a key policy in the Soviet Union's notion of detente. That Sagan's workplace had a broad knowledge of the war three months into its duration, moreover, was indicative of the KGB's flawed reading of citizens' interest in foreign affairs. The miscalculation of public knowledge and reactions to military intervention in Afghanistan in its first year of duration is the focus of this chapter.

The KGB's misperception of public and private knowledge of, and opinion toward the war, is mirrored by Western historiography on the topic. Both sides judged

³ “Ustanovlenie ispolnitelia listovok,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1082, ll.156-57.

⁴ *Ibid.*

opposition by the lack of mass demonstrations akin to those prompted by the Vietnam War on American soil. Further, politicians and scholars alike continued to cite Andrei Sakharov and his immediate supporters as the lone voices of dissent in a population that remained blissfully ignorant of the conflict. In fact, the lack of vocal opposition was rooted in the splintered opinions on the conflict. Soviet attitudes toward the war may be divided into three general regions: East Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. In each case, the interpretations of the Soviet-Afghan war played a role in the public demands that emerged in the late 1980s: calls for succession in the Baltics, a swing toward nationalism instead of internationalism in Russia, and the partial restoration of Islam in Muslim republics.

Public Opinion Toward International Duty

On 3 December 1978, approximately six months after General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev caught wind of the Saur Revolution in Afghanistan via a Reuters news agency bulletin, President Nur Mohammed Taraki arrived in Moscow to negotiate a Treaty of Friendship with the Soviet Union. Soon after the 20-year agreement was signed on 5 December, the KGB undertook a clandestine study of Soviet citizens' attitudes toward the closer ties with Afghanistan. Circulated on 3 January 1979, shortly before implementation of the new Treaty, the study revealed a broad spread of opinion across three generations of Soviet citizens. The eldest of those noted, N.V. Surovtseva (1896-1985), minced no words in a conversation with an "operational source" after hearing of the escalated military assistance to Afghanistan on a foreign radio station, stating, "This

is the same as the occupation of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and other countries.”⁵ Those whose childhood years were engulfed by the 1917 Revolution and the Civil War, in contrast, praised the Soviet Union for having “fulfilled its international duty” to provide fraternal aid to Afghanistan.⁶ Those of the next generation did not share the same revolutionary furor. V.V. Popuzhin (b. 1936), for instance, was born during the Great Terror and worked as a mechanic at a collective farm. While he expressed his concern that closer ties with Afghanistan “could lead to the mobilization of our people to the army,” and military conflict with the United States, he stopped short of opposition.⁷

It was a different case for those born in the post-Stalin years, who never experienced the labour camps, the Great Terror, or a perpetual state of war. K. F. Khizhniak (b. 1957), a factory worker whose generation would be deployed to Afghanistan, proudly stated that, “had we not met the request of the Afghan government... we would have failed to live up to our words on friendship and cooperation.”⁸ His words were indicative of the culture of “international duty” that encapsulated military service in the Brezhnev era, and were echoed by many of his age. The greatest concern highlighted by the KGB was not opposition, but a growing “dissatisfaction with the lack of... information available... about events in Afghanistan” among those who expressed their approval of military aid. Among them was Ia. I. Maiborod (b. 1949), who spoke for many in a discussion with workers at an assembly plant. “Sending Soviet advisors to Afghanistan was the right thing to do,” he stated,

⁵ “O reagirovanii sovetskikh grazhdan na sobytiia v Afganistane,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1079, l. 16.

⁶ Ibid, l. 14.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, l. 13.

unswayed by the events in Czechoslovakia ten years earlier. “But why are we not informed about events abroad in more detail, as they do on foreign radio?”⁹

If, however, the KGB took note of the post-war generation’s demand for greater information on foreign affairs, the Politburo did not share their concern. Instead, the Politburo’s fixation remained on the preservation of youth interests in military-patriotic heroes of the past, at a time when their generation faced service in Afghanistan. This was evident in rhetoric and legislation alike. On 20 December 1979, with operations in Afghanistan underway, the Soviet Council of Ministers passed a resolution, “On the improvement of living conditions of the Soviet Army and Navy.” Instead of a preparatory measure to deal with the casualties of war in Afghanistan, it saw “the allocation of the Ministry of Defense... living space of 4,000 square meters per year for distribution” among veterans of the Great Patriotic War still in a queue for the apartments they were guaranteed.¹⁰ The competition for rights and benefits between unrecognized afgantsy “entitlement groups” and the “privileged status groups” of Great Patriotic War veterans would become an open wound in the final years of the Soviet Union.¹¹

December 1979 to 30 January 1980

“In recent years,” began an editorial penned in *Pravda* on 23 December 1979, “the Western media... have deliberately spread rumors... that Soviet ‘combat troops’ will

⁹ Ibid, l. 16.

¹⁰ “Protokol № 106,” Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv politicheskoi dokumentii Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki (TsGAPD KR), f. 56, op. 222, d. 48, l. 67.

¹¹ Martin Crotty and Mark Edele, “Total War and Entitlement: Towards a Global History of Veteran Privilege,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 59, 1 (2013): 15-6, 19.

soon enter Afghan territory.” “All of this, of course, is pure fiction.”¹² Four days later, two KGB *spetsnaz* (special forces) organizations, *Grom* (Thunder) and *Zenit* (Zenith), stormed the Tajbeg Palace not far from Kabul. Backed by the Muslim Battalion and the 345th Airborne Regiment, it took only 43 minutes to carry out the mission and eliminate Afghan President Hafizullah Amin.¹³ A reluctant military intervention that took place after rejecting continued requests by the Afghan leadership in the past year, the Politburo nonetheless expressed confidence that few would question the state narrative. Their greatest concern was the population of Afghan students within the Soviet Union. Upon the 40th Army’s deployment on 27 December 1979, the Kiev Institute of Engineering and Construction held a meeting with the leadership of campus Parchamists.¹⁴ It would be their duty to “assume responsibility for the preservation of order and discipline in all schools where Afghans studied.”¹⁵ The education of Afghan students would be permissible only through official materials published by the Soviet press. Of the 522 students of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan enrolled at postsecondary institutions in Ukraine, the majority were “quite encouraged to learn of the overthrow of President

¹² A. Maslennikov, “Napasnye potugi,” *Pravda*, 23 December 1979, 5.

¹³ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 98. The Muslim Battalion was formed as Special Operations Detachment 154 via a directive signed by the Soviet General Staff on 26 April 1979. Composed primarily of Uzbek, Tajik, and Turkmen volunteers to correspond with the ethnic minorities of Afghanistan, it operated in Afghanistan between 9 December 1979 and 10 January 1980. A second Muslim Battalion, Special Operations Detachment 177, was formed in February 1980 and remained active until October 1983, primarily in Panjshir.

¹⁴ Parcham (flag or banner, in Persian) was one of two quarreling camps in the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the other being Khalq (the masses, in Pashto). Parcham was the more moderate of the two, composed primarily of urban and university members who realized that Afghanistan was not sufficiently industrialized to undergo an immediate revolution. Khalq was the radical wing of the party, dominated by ethnic Pashtuns who favoured leaping ahead to a revolution as a means of settling tribal quarrels.

¹⁵ “O reagirovanii na sobytiia v Afganistane i polozenii sredi afganskikh grazhdan,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1078, l. 456.

Hafizullah Amin” in light of his continued persecution of political opponents.¹⁶ Attitudes toward the future, however, were not so rosy. Ali Akhmad, a member of the Peoples’ Youth Organization at the Kiev State University and a supporter of the Saur Revolution, remarked that, “The people who came to power in Afghanistan will not be able to solve [ethnic] problems within the Party peacefully. They have begun to talk about weapons, will continue to use them, and... are killing a lot of good people.”¹⁷ As with the post-war generation’s reaction to the Treaty of Friendship one year earlier, there was speculation about the long-term consequences of “humanitarian aid” in Afghanistan, but no signs of active opposition among Afghan students.

When protests against the deployment of 170,000 troops to Czechoslovakia on 20 August 1968 were limited to a demonstration of eight people on Red Square, it was a reality check for the “morally potent intelligentsia” of the Soviet Union.¹⁸ The refusal of its successors to rise up against the Afghan war marked the intelligentsia’s demise. Between 1980 and 1982 there were but nine public demonstrations across the Soviet Union recorded by the CIA, most of which occurred in small numbers and differed in their agendas.¹⁹ However, these findings were based on a Western notion of “public demonstration” based on the experience of the Vietnam War. There were in fact “a multiplicity of hues and gradations” in Soviet protests, such as J.E. Sagan’s circulation of

¹⁶ Ibid, ll. 456-58.

¹⁷ Ibid, l. 457.

¹⁸ Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 293.

¹⁹ “USSR: Domestic Fallout From the Afghan War,” CIA Directorate of Intelligence (February 1988): 5, accessed 1 November 2013, http://www.foia.cia.gov/sites/default/files/document_conversions/89801/DOC_0000500659.pdf.

antiwar leaflets in commercial space.²⁰ The decision not to demonstrate on Red Square did not reflect a lack of public knowledge of the Afghan war, but the persisting trait of differing public and private behaviour that shaped two generations of Soviet citizens.

As the Soviet Union lurched toward military intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, multiple voices from the General Staff spoke against the idea and voiced their frustration with conflicting orders and a lack of concrete plans.²¹ Among them was General Valentin Varennikov (1923-2009), who barred no words in a terse exchange with Minister of Defense Dmitrii Ustinov, insisting that, “while Afghanistan is a friend of the Soviet Union,” military intervention “cannot be justified to the Soviet people, the Afghan people, or the international community.” Further, the Soviet Union “had a poor understanding of Afghan traditions and Islam, and national-ethnic problems in the country.”²² This said, an order was an order, and Varennikov would spend five years in command of the Ministry of Defence’s Operational Group in Afghanistan between 1984 and 1989. He was granted the title of Hero of the Soviet Union upon his return, despite his private opposition to the deployment of forces to Afghanistan ten years earlier.

Dissenting voices from the Academy of Sciences mirrored those of the General Staff: they were prompt and stinging in their evaluation of the conflict, but took little action beyond private consultation with the authorities. This spoke to an instinctive self-censorship and continued fear that deviation from the Party line could undermine one’s

²⁰ Vladimir A. Kozlov, *Mass Uprisings in the USSR: Protest and Rebellion in the Post-Stalin Years*, trans. and ed. Elaine McClarnand MacKinnon (New York: Routledge, 2002), 154.

²¹ S.F. Akhromeev, and G.M. Kornienko, *Glazami marshala i diplomata* (Moskva: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1992), accessed 6 September 2015.
http://militera.lib.ru/research/ahromeev_kornienko/01.html.

²² As cited in N.A. Salmin, *Internatsionalizm v deistvii: lokal’nye voiny i vooruzhennye konflikty s uchastiem sovetskogo komponenta: voennogo, voennotekhnicheskogo, ekonomicheskogo (1950-1989 g.g.)*, tom 1 (Ekaterinburg: Pechatnye tekhnologii, 2013), 70-1.

career in the Soviet Union. This was evident in a letter put forward to Chairman of the KGB Iurii Andropov and the Central Committee on 20 January 1980. Penned by Oleg Bogomolov, director of the Institute of the Economics of the World Socialist System (Institut ekonomiki mirovoi sotsialisticheskoi sistemy), it outlined a grim forecast of political consequences that might arise from military intervention in Afghanistan. These ranged from “a considerable expansion and consolidation of the anti-Soviet front that encircles the Soviet Union from the west to the east,” to “damaging the role of the Soviet Union in... the Muslim world,” to having “blocked detente and liquidated the political preconditions for disarmament.”²³ Bogomolov’s words fell on deaf ears; the Politburo had already debated such factors over the course of a year. Chief Ideologist Mikhail Suslov was particularly irate at the man’s presumptions, and issued a directive that the Kremlin break all contacts with the Institute soon thereafter.²⁴

Bogomolov and his colleagues’ chose to decline further action after the non-reply to their letter, which highlights the dilemma that Afghanistan brought for aspiring experts in the institution: should one act “principled and yet also powerless,” or “compromise... with the chance of at least salvaging something and correcting the smaller mistakes”?²⁵ The choice among Soviet academics was overwhelmingly the latter, with careerism paired with fear of reparations outweighing moral opposition for many. Following Iurii Andropov’s inheritance of the position of General Secretary in November 1982, Bogomolov worked as his consultant, coining the term of spreading Soviet influence “by

²³ Sergei Chervonopiskii, Anatolii Kostyria, and Vladimir Siroshstan, eds., *Afganskaia arena: voenno-politicheskaia spetsoperatsiia SSSR 1979-1989 gg.* (Kiev: Medinform, 2004), 396.

²⁴ Arkadii Zhemchugov, *Komu my obiazany 'Afganom'?* (Moskva: Veche, 2012), 60.

²⁵ Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War*, 166.

force of example” as an implicit departure from the Brezhnev doctrine.

The exception to muted protest and the foremost voice of dissent during this time was Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov. Well-attuned to foreign affairs and fearful of the Politburo’s actions compromising detente, Sakharov made his first public statement against the war in a 3 January 1980 interview with *Die Welt*. “I believe that the Soviet Union should withdraw its troops from Afghanistan,” he answered, when asked for his thoughts on the conflict. “If not, the Olympic Committee should refuse to host the Olympics in a country at war.”²⁶ Not 24 hours later, Sakharov was contacted by Anthony Austin of the *New York Times* for greater discussion of events. Sakharov regarded the interview with pride when writing his memoirs in exile. “Tony told me about a number of recent reports from Afghanistan and asked me questions about my assessment of the situation, and how to correct it,” Sakharov recalled. He was “extremely grateful” to Austin for allowing him to “review the pages and adjust the responses and their interpretation,” for, “given the extreme importance of the subject, this editing was very important.”²⁷ Thus, it was not simply a headline on unfolding events, but an anti-war statement and reading of events approved by Sakharov himself. Published as a brief column in the *New York Times* one day later, greater excerpts of the interview were broadcast on the Voice of America, making Sakharov’s dissenting voice globally heard within a single week of the war having started.²⁸

Sakharov expanded on his proposed solution to the crisis in Afghanistan in an interview with Charles Bierbauer of ABC News, held in his Moscow apartment on 17

²⁶ Andrei Sakharov, *Vospominaniia*, tom 1 (Moskva: Prava cheloveka, 1996), 764.

²⁷ Ibid, 764-65.

²⁸ See: Anthony Austin, “Sakharov Proposes Soviet Withdrawal,” *New York Times*, 3 January 1980, A13.

January 1980. The immediate danger of a Soviet war in Afghanistan, he argued, was that “such an event... can mark the onset of global war.”²⁹ “In the Iranian conflict, just as in that of Afghanistan, the United States is defending the fundamental principles of international law, democracy, and civilization,” he espoused. “I strongly condemn military actions in Afghanistan.”³⁰ Five days later, Sakharov was exiled to Gorky on charges of having “carried out subversive actions against the Soviet state.” A series of defamatory articles in the Soviet press followed for two weeks after, before disappearing from the headlines as quickly as they had appeared. Ranging from two-sentence snippets to 1,200 word editorials, the articles lacked any mention of the war in Afghanistan, limited to the slander of Sakharov’s past actions, such as “openly call[ing] for the American military to escalate its war against the Vietnamese people” ten years prior.³¹

Despite the publicity of Sakharov’s deportation from Moscow, few stepped forward to defend him. Though morally sound in his call for a swift end to the war, to be carried out according to international law, Sakharov’s day-to-day audience in 1980 remained limited primarily to the intelligentsia and Western admirers. His words did not resonate with a Soviet population whose welfare had changed for the better in the Brezhnev era. Moreover, for the families of those drafted for military service in Afghanistan, the salvation of the Helsinki Accords and rigorous complicity with international law did not rank high in priorities. Indeed, among the first groups outside of Moscow to lobby for Sakharov’s return from exile were bands of *dushmany*, a.k.a. the

²⁹ Andrei Sakharov, “Otvety na voprosy korrespondenta Ei-Bi-Si n’iuz Ch. E. Birbauera 17 ianvaria 1980 goda,” *Materialy samizdata*, AC No. 3858 (1980): 1-3.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ K. Batmanov, “Spravedlivoe reshenie,” *Izvestiia*, 23 January 1980, 5-6.

mujahideen, in Afghanistan. Immensely popular for his voice of opposition, time and time again the mujahideen would propose an exchange of prisoners of war for Sakharov's freedom.³² It was not until glasnost that citizens considered his anti-war stance en masse.

Reactions to the War Outside of Moscow

If someone associates war with the Geneva Conventions, there is a huge difference between wartime and peacetime objectives, combatants and non-combatants... it's nothing like that.

- Serghei, afganets³³

The nationality factor played a key role in how protest actions in the East European and Central Asian republics differed from Sakharov's. This was particularly true of the Baltics. On 14 January, the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution ES-6/2, "strongly deplor[ing] the recent armed intervention in Afghanistan" and "call[ing] for the immediate, unconditional and total withdrawal of the foreign troops," in a vote of 104 to 18.³⁴ The next day, 21 regional activists from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania signed an open letter addressed to the Soviet Supreme Council, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and the people of Afghanistan. In contrast to Sakharov's call for the preservation of detente, the signatories lamented that "our sons must obey the brutal orders of Russian officers and shed both their own and Afghan blood," comparing Afghanistan's Treaty of Friendship to those that their own countries

³² Taras Kuzio, "Opposition in the USSR to the occupation of Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey* 6, 1 (1987): 105n47.

³³ Serghei, interview with author, June 2015.

³⁴ "6th Session - the Situation in Afghanistan and its Implications for International Peace and Security," accessed 27 July 2015, www.un.org/ga/sessions/emergency.shtml.

were forced to sign with the Soviet Union in 1940.³⁵

Also swift to seize on Afghanistan as a means of furthering ethnonational dissent were opposition groups in Ukraine. It took little time for KGB monitors to raise flags on “counter-revolutionary” *banderovtsy* (Ukrainian nationalists) at home and abroad.

Among the first to be noted following the onset of the Afghan war were those on Canadian soil, following the annual celebration of 22 January to mark Ukrainian Unity Day (Den' sobornosti).³⁶ Prime Minister Joe Clark, speaking at a Toronto ceremony, was noted for issuing “a slanderous attack on Soviet foreign policy,” and drawing “an analogy between ‘the suppression of the Ukrainian People’s Republic in 1920’ and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.”³⁷ Shortly thereafter, an extraordinary session of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of the Islamic Conference was held in Islamabad from 26 to 28 January 1980. Citing “eternal bonds of Islamic brotherhood” with the people of Afghanistan, Pakistan’ President Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq called for “the collective defense of the Islamic *Ummah* rather than the defense of the individual countries.”³⁸ A condemnation of Soviet actions from the Muslim world, it saw the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) capitalize on the opportunity to make their voices heard. Led by Iaroslav Stets’ko (1912-86), the OUN submitted a telegram to the venue of the conference expressing “solidarity with the Afghan counter-revolutionaries” and offering

³⁵ “Otkrytoe pis'mo Predsedateliu VS SSSR, General'nomu sekretariu OON i narodu Afganistana s podderzhkoi rezoliutsii inostrannykh voisk iz Afganistana,” *Materialy samizdata*, AC No. 3857 (1980): 1-2.

³⁶ Ukraine declared independence from the Russian empire on 22 January 1918.

³⁷ “O vystuplenii lidera konservativnoi partii Kanady na sborishche ounovtsev,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1079, ll. 34-5.

³⁸ “Documents: December 1979 – May 1980,” *Pakistan Horizon* 33, 1/2 (1980): 249. A second conference on the topic was held by the Organization of the Islamic Conference in May 1980.

“a proposal for a joint struggle for the ‘collapse’ of the Soviet Union.”³⁹ It was published soon thereafter as *tamizdat* in a Munich journal. The OUN’s cooperation with the mujahideen in Pakistan remained a nuisance to the KGB throughout the war. It took only months for the OUN to begin circulating “leaflets... designed for the Soviet military personnel of Ukrainian ethnicity” within Afghanistan’s capital city of Kabul, intended to stir dissent within the ranks.⁴⁰

While the KGB feared that the deployment of conscripts to Afghanistan might fuel separatism in Ukraine due to the craftiness of the OUN, its concerns with the Central Asian republics were more nuanced. Contrary to Western generalizations, the defection of Soviet Muslims to the mujahideen based on a common religion was negligible; a wave of conversion to militant Islam came only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Misperceptions on the topic were, once more, rooted in presumptions that a dissident minority spoke for the Soviet majority. The first Soviet Muslim voice on the Afghan war to be heard was that of Mustafa Dzhemilev (b. 1943). Born a Crimean Tatar, he was exiled to Uzbekistan alongside his parents at six months of age. A longtime member of the Initiative Group of Defense of Human Rights in the Soviet Union, he gained international support during a 303-day hunger strike in 1976. Exiled to Yakutia in February 1979, Dzhemilev wrote to Sakharov on 12 January 1980 and stated, “I sincerely thank you for your interview with an American newspaper about the situation in Afghanistan.” “For me, as a Muslim,” he continued, “your stance on the issue is

³⁹ “O podderzhke banderovtsami afganskikh kontrrevoliutsionerov,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1079, ll. 330-31.

⁴⁰ “O rasprostraneniі ounovskikh listovok v Afganistane,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1081, ll. 211-12.

particularly important.”⁴¹ Dzhemilev’s familiar profile in the West and a temporary ban on foreigners visiting the Central Asian republics made a lasting impression on observers. After the travel ban was lifted in April 1980, subsequent reports on Central Asians’ support for the Afghan war failed to dispel romantic presumptions of fraternal relations with the mujahideen.

In reality, the immediate reaction of conscripts and their families was to regard deployment to Afghanistan as an opportunity to show Soviet Islam as a leading example for Muslim countries to follow. Central Asia did not possess the political will to “fully repudiate Stalin’s religious reforms and their institutional aftermath.”⁴² As such, despite their proximity and overlapping ethnicity with those in Afghanistan, very few in the Central Asian republics shared Dzhemilev’s identification with and sympathy for Afghan Muslims. This was not based on their lack of knowledge on the war; those residing in Ashgabat, Tashkent, Dushanbe and Termez saw their cities become “major military procurement bases for the Soviet troops in Afghanistan.”⁴³ Nor were the injured hidden from the public eye; a pair of American tourists reported “more than 100 close-cropped soldiers sprawled in the sun on the lawn,” upon passing by a military hospital in Tashkent.⁴⁴ Only after two years of mounting casualties would the Central Asian republics see minor public demonstrations and the circulation of pamphlets. Their demands, however, were quite different than those in the Baltics and Ukraine. Rather

⁴¹ Mustafa Dzhemilev, “Pis’mo A. Sakharovu s blagodarnost’iu za tverduiu pozitsiiu, zaniatuiu v sviazi situatsiei v Afganistane,” *Materiialy samizdata*, AC No. 5399 (1980): 1.

⁴² Eren Murat Tasar, “Soviet and Muslim: the Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, 1943-1991” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2010), 337.

⁴³ Marat, *The Military and the State in Central Asia*, 33.

⁴⁴ Craig R. Whitney, “In Soviet Asia, Afghan Thrust Finds Acceptance,” *New York Times*, 11 April 1980, A1, A6.

than an antiwar message or solidarity with the mujahideen the first recorded Central Asian demonstration, held in Kazakhstan in March 1981, demanded proper Muslim burials for soldiers killed in Afghanistan.⁴⁵

A Case Study: The Initiative Group

Those who spoke out against the Afghan war in grassroots organizations separate from the intelligentsia pursued narrower agendas. The first such organization to function for an extended period of time was the Initiative Group for the Defense of Invalids' Human Rights (Initsiativnaia gruppa zashchity prav invalidov v SSSR). Founded in May 1978, its leaders were Iurii Kiselev (1932-95), who at 16 years old had both legs amputated following an industrial accident, and Valerii Fefelov (1949-2008), who was 17 years old when a thirty-foot fall broke his back and confined him to a wheelchair. Their agenda at once embraced the internationalism championed in the postwar era and criticized a perceived *privilegentsiia* in social-welfare benefits for veterans of the Great Patriotic War. "After invalids of war, the most privileged position in the Soviet Union is officially considered to be invalids of labour," penned Fefelov, in an open letter detailing the Initiative Group's agenda. "But is it really possible to claim that invalids of labour are contenders for a dignified existence?"⁴⁶ In its four years as an informal organization (neformaly), the Initiative Group opted not to extend its hand to the increasing number of afgantsy who returned from the war as invalids lacked their predecessors' benefits. It was the first of many cases in which a group of dissidents exhibited a generation gap with the

⁴⁵ Kuzio, "Opposition in the USSR to the occupation of Afghanistan," 101n18.

⁴⁶ I. Fefelov, "Lish' v strane Sovetskoi takoe mozhet byt'..." Arkhiv mezhdunarodnogo memoriala (AMM), f. 103, op. 5, d. 2, l. 819.

afgantsy and echoed Western perceptions of the war instead of collaborating with its veterans.

The Initiative Group published its first *Information Bulletin* on 20 May 1978. A collection of press articles from the past five years and testimonies from invalids, its centrepiece was an open letter to General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev penned by Faizulla Khusainov, a 37-year-old factory worker in Tatarstan. “In 1969, I received a serious injury – a fracture of the spine,” he began. “And I became completely unnecessary for society.”⁴⁷ Khusainov went on to recollect his months in the central hospital of Chistopol, wherein “no action was taken for my salvation” by the callous doctors who staffed the ward.⁴⁸ The nine years that had passed since he became a category one invalid had left him as a dependent residing with his mother. “Half our pensions went to different medications,” Khusainov continued. “We lived on a single potato and loaf of bread, could only dream of meat... And even if you have the money, you cannot find any for sale...”⁴⁹

Such letters presented a different manner of dissent from the Moscow intelligentsia. With its first *Information Bulletin*, the Initiative Group had reached 1,000 kilometres east, collecting testimonies that went against the state’s historical narrative and selectivity in public memory. The KGB took action against Fefelov in October 1978, raiding his apartment for “anti-Soviet documents” and authorizing “street repairs” with an open pit in front of his garage to ensure he remained housebound.⁵⁰ The Initiative

⁴⁷ *Biulleteni initsiativiei grupe zashchiti prav invalidov* 1 (March 1978), AMM, f. 126, op. 1, d. 3, l. 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, l. 6.

⁵⁰ Paul D. Raymond, “Disability as Dissidence,” in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice*, edited by William McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 239-40.

Group was labeled an “illegal organization” following the Soviet Union’s commitment to increased military aid to Afghanistan on 5 December 1978.⁵¹

The crackdown on dissidents was largely because of the upcoming 1980 Olympic Games, and this forced the Initiative Group to alter its approach. The next year saw it lobby for invalids’ rights through open letters to worldwide organizations rather than focusing on national support. In a departure from the likes of Sakharov who expressed moral opposition to the 1980 Olympics being held in the Soviet Union, the Initiative Group appealed to the United Nations to advocate for a Paralympic Games to be held in Moscow.⁵²

When President Jimmy Carter called for a boycott of the Moscow Olympics in reaction to the Soviet Union’s military intervention in Afghanistan, the Initiative Group once more changed its framework of protest. On 27 January 1980, to mark one month since the 40th Army crossed the Afghan border, the Initiative Group issued a statement entitled *To the Parents of Those Killed and Disabled in Afghanistan*:

The Initiative Group... expresses its deepest sympathy to the parents of the soldiers forsaken to combat in Afghanistan. And perhaps, not all parents know that their children have been sent there.

We understand what a hopeless bitterness takes hold of you because of the inability to shield... the most precious thing parents have in their lives. We also express our deepest condolences to the parents and relatives of those killed, and the seriously wounded Soviet soldiers who became invalids in Afghanistan. We

⁵¹ Ibid, 240.

⁵² “Pis’mo predsdateliu komiteta po provedeniiu Olimpiiskikh invalidykh igr g-nu Liudvigu Gutmanu,” AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 1, l. 655.

know only too well what it is like to be disabled in our country... a mountain of responsibility falls on the parents.⁵³

The Initiative Group's statement seized on casualties of the Afghan war to highlight the trials faced by invalids in the Soviet Union, yet was highly selective in its choice of words. Rather than directly express anti-war opposition it seized instead on the human cost as a means of gathering domestic support. The organization's choice of words also reflected a generation gap that would hinder anti-war dissent in the 1980s. Rather than appeal to the generation that found itself deployed to Afghanistan and bore its scars upon return, Valerii Fefelov and Iurii Kiselev's audience of choice was the parents. This not only deterred invalids of the Afghan war from participating in activities and broadening the Initiative Group's support, but courted a Soviet population shaped by the stable years of the Brezhnev era. The Initiative Group's response to the exile of Andrei Sakharov to Gor'kii was also choice in its words: while denouncing the Soviet press for its "lynching" (samosud) of Sakharov, their focus was on the poor treatment of Elena Bonner as a level two legally-blind invalid.⁵⁴

The selective nature of the Initiative Group's dissent toward the Afghan war remained unchanged even as the conflict neared three years in duration. The final *Information Bulletin* issued on 20 June 1982 contained a manifesto on the human costs of war addressed to the Red Cross, Amnesty International, the Moscow Helsinki Group, and the United Nations. The categorization of those in need of aid, however, remained shaped by the Initiative Group's resentment toward the prioritization of veterans in social-

⁵³ "Roditeliami pogibshikh i stavshikh invalidami v Afganistane," *Biulleteni initsiativiei grupe zashchiti prav invalidov* 8 (20 February 1980), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 1, ll. 674-75.

⁵⁴ Valerii Fefelov, "Dokumenty invalidov. Rabochie materialy IGZPI," AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 2, ll. 1-6.

welfare benefits. “No war – as is well known – is without its casualties: those killed, maimed and wounded,” the statement began. It went on to issue a pointed appeal to the international community:

Invalids of the Soviet side receive the same status as disabled veterans of the Great Fatherland War, at least with respect to the provision of medical care and state assistance. As for the Afghans – there, except for invalids injured during direct military action, disabled soldiers or guerrillas – there are a large number of victims among the peaceful population... It is time to determine the number of these invalids... and provide them with assistance and support, as we are obliged to do in our defense of human rights.⁵⁵

The Initiative Group dissolved soon after the publication of this manifesto, with founding member Valerii Fefelov choosing exile to Germany over facing charges of “opposition to authorities” in October 1982.⁵⁶ This marked the end of a first wave dissident group hampered by self-imposed limitations whose founders were detached from the younger generation of afgangtsy, and seized on the war as a complement to their own agenda. Their assumption that the afgangtsy received the same privileges and benefits as veterans of the Great Patriotic War, meanwhile, spoke to the rumours and misperceptions of the Afghan war collecting among the Soviet public.

February 1980: A Change of Plans

On the first day our major was killed when he went to the market to buy

⁵⁵ “Obrashchenie,” AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 1, ll. 741.

⁵⁶ “Valerii Andreevich Fefelov: v SSSR invalidov net,” Ne invalid.ru - entsiklopediia muzhestva, accessed 9 September 2015, neinvalid.ru/valerij-andreevich-fefyolov-valery-fefelov-v-sssr-invalidov-net/.

something. On the road there also were incidents. One time a BTR [Armoured Personnel Carrier] fell into a chasm. Another time a lieutenant stepped out of a combat vehicle, accidentally pressed the trigger of his gun and died an hour later. There were a lot of such stupid deaths.

- Andrei, afganets⁵⁷

As the war approached its second month, the Politburo exhibited no real sense of the conflict's duration and the scores of casualties it would bring. Their first response to veterans' needs and benefits was formulated according to hierarchy, and penned with a sense of victory from the storming of the Tajbeg Palace and elimination of President Amin on 27 December 1979. The decree passed on 19 February 1980, entitled "The Benefits of Military Special Forces and KGB Troops Providing Military Assistance to the DRA, and Their Families," applied only to "officers, warrant officers, and noncommissioned officers" of the KGB (or their immediate kin) who participated in Operation Storm-333.⁵⁸ It was an affordable symbolic gesture to the 54 men who made up the two spetsnaz groups in the offensive, Grom and Zenit. Another 700 KGB operators who participated in coordinating the overthrow of Afghan President Hafizullah Amin would receive the same benefits: two months' pension for one month of service in a period of hostilities, and annual holidays up to 45 days in length.⁵⁹ Women who lost their husbands in Operation Storm-333 would receive a pension upon turning 50 years of age, while the children of those killed in action would receive deposits toward their own

⁵⁷ Andrei, interview with author, May 2015.

⁵⁸ "O l'gotakh voennosluzhashchim osobym otdelov i voisk KGB SSSR napravlennykh dlia okazaniia voennoi pomoshchi DRA, i ikh sem'iam," GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1076, ll. 10-13.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

pensions until they reached the age of 23.⁶⁰ The KGB would fund these and the costs were minor: only 5 KGB operators were killed and 32 wounded.⁶¹ The 520 men who fought in the Muslim Battalion received state awards following their return from Afghanistan on 10 January and were sworn to secrecy about their role in the war.⁶²

The Politburo's outlook on the costs of the Afghan war and its domestic consequences proved premature within a day of signing the decree. On 20 February 1980, a major protest against the Soviet Army's presence in Afghanistan took place in the capital city of Kabul. The demonstration of 300,000 people on the streets shouting slogans against newly installed President Babrak Karmal (1979-86) caught Soviet troops (most of whom were called from the reserves) off guard. The Soviet Embassy came under siege, stores were pillaged, and a major hotel set aflame, with a spike in civilian and military casualties. It took four days for the Soviet Army to quell the riots, and by 29 February 1980, its casualties across Afghanistan had spiked to 245 soldiers over the course of two months.⁶³

The scale of the demonstrations in Kabul and their cost in lives led Moscow to authorize large-scale combat operations, after which the war became much more difficult to hide from the Soviet public. All correspondence with military units stationed in the Central Asian republics, from which a significant majority of the first wave of conscripts

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ The statistics of Operation Storm-333 are disputed. Vasily Mitrokhin, writing in 2002, insisted that "over 100 of the KGB were killed in the attack on the palace," forcing Andropov to "question the expediency of hanging portraits in mourning frames... as this would attract unnecessary attention." This figure was deemed sensationalism by Aleksandr Liakhovskii in the third edition of his archival history on the Afghan war in 2004. I have cited Liakhovskii's statistics. See: Vasily Mitrokhin, "The KGB in Afghanistan," *Cold War International History Project*, Working Paper # 40 (July 2002): 98; Aleksandr Liakhovskii, *Tragediia i doblest Afgana* (Moskva: Eksmo, 2004), 285.

⁶² Zhou, "The Muslim Battalions," 310.

⁶³ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 139.

was drawn was “temporarily suspended” as the Politburo demanded a culprit be held accountable for the protests.⁶⁴ The man seized on by the Soviet press was Robert Lee, an American hitchhiker of the hippy generation detained outside Kabul on 24 February. “There was a constant demand for articles about spies and intervention from abroad,” recalled Gennady Bocharov of *Literaturnaia gazeta*.⁶⁵ “Robert Lee turned out to be a primitive bum [for whom] Afghan mountain trails were the best place in the world to wander through an empty life.”⁶⁶ Nonetheless, Lee was held for a month, facing a military tribunal in Afghanistan on charges of “instigation of anti-government actions,” and portrayed as a CIA agent. After a confession at a military tribunal, Robert Lee appeared on the nightly news program, *Vremia*. Speaking with slurred words and a haggard complexion, he testified that the “Muslim rebellion” in Kabul was sparked by “imperialistic interference in the internal affairs of the struggling progressive state of Afghanistan.”⁶⁷ The carefully scripted news coverage was as much a symptom of Soviet self-deception as it was of government propaganda. Throughout the war, there was “a range of competition, rumours, and posturing between Soviet reporters,” many of whom regarded sensationalist reinforcement of the Party line as fuel for careerism.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Craig R. Whitney, “Soviet Casualties in Afghanistan: Rumours and Questions Abound,” *New York Times*, 9 March 1980, 1, 16. Of the 80,000 soldiers who crossed the border on 27 December 1979, approximately 40% were recruited from Tajikistan in light of sharing a common language with the Afghans in Farsi. Conscripts from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan each accounted for 25% of the first wave, with the remaining 10% a mishmash of other ethnicities. See: Leo J. Daugherty III, “Ethnic Minorities in the Soviet Armed Forces: the Plight of Central Asians in a Russian-Dominated Military,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 7, 2 (1994): 168. Throughout the war, officers stationed in Ashgabat - where two to three months of training before deployment often took place - were well aware of its human costs and the falsifications of Soviet media.

⁶⁵ Gennady Bocharov, *Russian Roulette: Afghanistan Through Russian Eyes*, trans. Alyona Kojevnikov (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), 53.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “Yank Backs Kremlin on Soviet TV,” *The Spokesman-Review*, 2 April 1980, 5.

⁶⁸ Bocharov, *Russian Roulette*, 53.

Spring 1980: Pamphlets, Letters, and Rumours Increase in Frequency

The nastiest thing about army life was the informing: our boss actually ordered us to inform. Every detail, about every sick and wounded patient, had to be reported... The army must keep healthy and we must banish pity from our minds. But we didn't, it was only pity which kept the whole show going.

- Nurse⁶⁹

Despite propagandists' efforts to weave a myth of CIA provocations in Afghanistan in the Soviet media, word of hospitals in Tashkent filled with injured soldiers, and "black tulips" flying home overnight stocked with "Cargo 200" in reference to bodies in zinc-lined coffins were quick to spread after the mass protest in Kabul.⁷⁰ While *Pravda* wrote only of "a small number of casualties among the peaceful population," acknowledging "the sound of automatic rifle fire rattling around Kabul" left ample room for speculation that Soviet soldiers may have been killed or injured.⁷¹ Singled out for its problems by the KGB was the city of Rivne in west Ukraine. Between February and April 1980, eight funerals were held in the region for soldiers killed in Afghanistan. During this time the KGB noted that, "some relatives of the victims... admit that negative remarks and false rumors have spread about events in Afghanistan."⁷² M.I. Ul'ianin (b. 1926), a chauffeur from the Rivne airport, told his friends that on 5 March 1980 an aircraft had flown in seventeen coffins, adding that, "Our soldiers are dying in

⁶⁹ Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 23.

⁷⁰ "Black tulips" quickly became known as a term to refer to the Antonov An-12 that flew coffins home overnight from Afghanistan, oft referenced in bard songs and monuments.

⁷¹ "Otpor provokatoram," *Pravda*, 26 February 1980, 5.

⁷² "O nezdorovykh vyskazyvaniakh po povodu sobytii v Afganistane," GASBU, f. 16, op. 1081, ll. 32-3.

vain for someone else's country."⁷³ Notably, the voices of protest by this time were no longer limited to Ul'ianin's generation. O.A. Doronina (b. 1956), an active member of the Komsomol, gave a sound rebuttal to the military commissar who arrived at her door to report the death of a cousin in Afghanistan, stating, "You are killers, and are sending children to certain death."⁷⁴ Shortly thereafter, "a typewritten leaflet of slanderous nature" was found pasted in a tramcar, alleging "coffins with killed Soviet servicemen are arriving," and appealing to readers to "listen to broadcasts of foreign radio stations on a regular basis."⁷⁵

The increasing number of "anti-Soviet anonymous documents" was already a trend on the eve of the war, in light of the formation of underground "committees" and "groups" of "anti-Olympic orientation" as the Summer Olympics in Moscow drew near.⁷⁶ Among them were "anti-socialist organizations" such as "Czechoslovakia – 10 Years" and "The New Jewish Opposition," which seized on the debate surrounding the Moscow 1980 Olympics to further their causes – not unlike the Initiative Group for the Defense of Invalids Human Rights.⁷⁷ Of secondary concern to the KGB after monitoring domestic opposition to the Olympics was the stubborn resilience of young hooligans. The circulation of "anti-Soviet documents written by anonymous authors" was monitored with care, and their implications from 1978 to 1979 suggested a spike in the number of youth articulating political opinions. Of the 16,648 leaflets, letters, and inscriptions

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 33.

⁷⁵ "Informatsionnoe soobshchenie za 17 apreliia 1980 g.," GASBU, f. 16, op. 1080, l. 304-09.

⁷⁶ "O vrazhdebnoi deiatel'nosti protivnika v sviazi s Olimpiadoi-80," Sovetskii arkhiv – Bukovsky Archive, accessed 19 July 2015, <http://bukovsky-archives.net/pdfs/olympiada/kgb79-2.pdf>.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

intercepted 19% of them were penned by students, of whom 246 were members of the Komsomol and 130 members or candidates of the Communist Party.⁷⁸ The number of anonymous documents spiked by 8,863 from 1980 to 1981, while the proportion of student authors dropped only modestly to 17.1% despite the KGB's efforts. The only significant reduction came in the number of Komsomol members found guilty of circulating slanderous anonymous documents, which dropped by nearly 100.⁷⁹ That 1,514 Soviet soldiers died in Afghanistan over the course of the year did not appear to sway the afgantsy's generation toward greater dissent.⁸⁰

Courting the Younger Generation

As the 40th Army completed its formation at 81,000 troops and 68,800 support personnel in April 1980, a troubling study on attitudes toward the draft was published in the first quarterly issue of *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia* (Sociological Research). Although a majority (58%) of draftees aged 18-19 answered that they were "serving in the army with great interest, having aspired to this while still in my school years," their sense of belief plunged after one's first year in the barracks. Only 34% of those aged 20-21 and 25% of those aged 21+ shared the same enthusiasm.⁸¹ The Politburo also faced a growing trend in the evasion of military service. As memories of the Great Patriotic War

⁷⁸ "Ob itogakh raboty po rozysku avtorov antisovetskikh anonimnykh dokumentov za 1979 god," Arkhiv natsional'noi bezopasnosti - Rossiiskie programmy, accessed 18 July 2015, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB191/01-31-1980.pdf>.

⁷⁹ "Ob itogakh raboty v 1981 godu po rozysku avtorov antisovetskikh anonimnykh materialov," Arkhiv natsional'noi bezopasnosti - Rossiiskie programmy, accessed 18 June 2015, <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB191/03-07-1982.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Salmin, *Internatsionalizm v deistvii*, 69.

⁸¹ N.N. Efimov, and Iu.N. Deriugin, "Puti povysheniia effektivnosti voenn-patrioticheskogo vospitaniia molodezhi," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, 1 (1980): 60-6.

began to fade, youth showed an increasing preference for civilian careers. With their hands tied by ideological doctrine and non-admission of combat operations in Afghanistan, the Politburo's actions were limited to revisions of basic military training. Lessons of civil defense (*grazhdanskaia oborona*), for instance, were introduced to the ninth and tenth grade curriculum of secondary schools for two hours per week, beginning in September 1980 in an effort to rejuvenate military-patriotic fervour among Soviet youth.⁸² The Politburo's concerns were aggravated by the speed with which word of the Afghan war spread in high school gossip. On 28 January 1980, one month after the war began, the Dnepropetrovsk office of the Union of Journalists received "an anonymous letter in which... a group of the students of State Vocational Training School No. 14," issued "slandorous fabrications... concerning the policy of the USSR on rendering assistance to Afghanistan" and "the demand... to withdraw the Soviet troops from Mongolia and Cuba."⁸³ In what spoke to the KGB's obsession over deviation from the state's narrative on the war, it attributed the students' actions to the Politburo's "depriving Sakharov of ranks, titles and government awards" a few days earlier.⁸⁴ That the students' choice of words reached beyond Afghanistan and challenged the notion of "international duty" in the developing world did not register in the KGB's reading of the letter spoke to its tunnel vision as the Brezhnev era wound to a close.

Also hampering the Politburo's ability to moderate Soviet youth were the limitations on the Soviet press. Each individual news article would be "edited

⁸² "O realizatsii postanovleniia Soveta Ministrov SSSR ot 11 sentiabria 1980 goda No. 785-260 'O nachal'noi voennoi podgotovke molodezhi,'" TsGAPD KR, f. 56, op. 222, d. 154, l. 70.

⁸³ "Upravleniem KGB priniaty mery k rozysku uspolnitelia i rasprostranitelia listovki," GASBU, f. 16, op. 1081, ll. 57-8.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

mercilessly,” with Glavlit and the General Headquarters of the Armed Forces applying their own at times contradictory revisions.⁸⁵ Stringently enforced was a quota on the mention of casualties: only four articles on the wounded could be published in a six-month period, spread out accordingly over time. The first admission of a soldier’s death, meanwhile, came only in September 1981; by December 1983 just twelve casualties (six killed, six injured) had graced the Soviet press.⁸⁶

The televised media, tasked with reigniting patriotism among Soviet youth, was no more flexible than that in print, when it came to the war. On the eve of his departure to Afghanistan in spring 1980, longtime journalist and playwright Genrikh Borovik signed an advance contract with Mosfilm to write a screenplay for the first authoritative film on the conflict. The director was to be Evgenii Matveev, a two-time recipient of the State Prize of the Soviet Union who played the role of Leonid Brezhnev in *Soldaty svobody* (Soldiers of Freedom) – a patriotic, ten-hour serial on the Great Patriotic War aired on Soviet televisions in 1977, a few months before the Saur Revolution. Upon his return after six months in Afghanistan, Borovik was disillusioned. “I realized that if I wrote anything at all in a newspaper or in a journal, not to even speak of a script, I would be reprimanded and nothing more,” he recalled in a discussion with Mikhail Gorbachev years later. “Nobody published it, but all the same, I was still reprimanded.”⁸⁷ Upon his return to Moscow, Borovik withdrew from writing the screenplay, returned his advance sum, and confronted the Central Committee to speak of what he had seen. His evaluation

⁸⁵ Bocharov, *Russian Roulette*, 52-3.

⁸⁶ J. Bruce Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years of Soviet Occupation* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1986), 158.

⁸⁷ “Prezentatsiia knigi Mikhaila Gorbacheva ‘Naedine s soboi,’” Ekho Moskvyy, 14 November 2012, accessed 9 July 2015, <http://echo.msk.ru/blog/echomsk/951135-echo/>.

of affairs was damning: the decision to send troops to Afghanistan was “senseless,” those conscripted “were not prepared for war,” and “the true number of casualties was hidden by military authorities.”⁸⁸ Borovik’s words so angered military authorities from the Chief Political Administration of the Soviet Army and Navy (Glavpur), that General A.A. Epishev filed a complaint to Leonid Brezhnev over the words of a “reckless journalist.”⁸⁹ Having co-authored a defamatory pamphlet on Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn just six years earlier entitled *In Answer to Solzhenitsyn: an Archipelago of Lies* (Otvét Solzhenitsynu: arkhipelag lzhi), Genrikh Borovik fell out of favour with Soviet authorities after his criticism of the Afghan war. He would not resume political journalism until after 1985.

The deviation of a longtime media icon such as Genrikh Borovik from the Party line on a hidden war caught the Soviet authorities off guard. Grand plans for a cinematic depiction of the Afghan war were suspended indefinitely, with the first feature coming instead as a TV documentary in June 1980. *The Plot Against the Republic* (Zagovor protiv respubliki) shied away from any mention of Soviet soldiers’ participation in the conflict, seizing on recent events for a revised storyline. “The culmination of imperialist interference was an uprising in Kabul on 22 February,” waxed a *Pravda* reviewer. “Agents crossed the borders, and terrorism was mobilized among groups of the most ignorant people in Afghanistan, who struck against the revolution in its heart – in the capital city.”⁹⁰ Ideological dogma notwithstanding, the documentary was composed of partial truths more so than falsification: Afghanistan’s repeated requests for “military aid

⁸⁸ “Borovik Genrikh Aviezerovich,” Mezhdunarodnyi ob’edinennyi biograficheskii tsentr, accessed 14 July 2015, www.biograph.ru/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=150:borovikga&catid=4&Itemid=29.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ A. Vasil’ev, “Dokumenty svidetel’stvuiut kino,” *Pravda*, 21 June 1980, 4.

from Soviet soldiers,” the Politburo’s reluctance to provide it, and the decision that “to stand by passively would lead to great danger on our Soviet border” are confirmed by archival documents.⁹¹ It is the omission of Soviet soldiers’ combat role from the narrative that stands out, and this would be among the earliest grievances of its veterans.

As the Soviet press heaped praise upon *The Plot Against the Republic* for its “accurate and artistic *meaningful depiction* of the Afghan people,” its words brought little comfort to those affected by the grim realities of war.⁹² On 14 June 1980, A.D. Voevod (b. 1914) of Kamenets-Podol’skii, Ukraine, was notified that his son, M.A. Voevod (b. 1959) had died in “a non-combat vehicular accident” in a training exercise.⁹³ A sealed coffin arrived on the same day, with an impromptu funeral held that evening. After nine days’ grieving, Voevod would live through this trauma once more. Warrant officer Ch. G. Bukevich ordered the excavation and reburial of the remains: they had not in fact been those of Voevod’s son, but a young man named T.S. Kostiv (1961-80) who hailed from L’vov. The story behind his death differed markedly from what A.D. Voevod had been told. Hardly a training exercise, his son and T.S. Kostiv had engaged in a combat operation that took place in a mountain range, where their armoured transport vehicles came under heavy fire and toppled into a nearby river. One of those killed in the ambush was so badly mangled it was impossible to determine his identity. Only after returning from their operation zone did another group inform them that M.A. Voevod was alive and well.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid. Italics as in original.

⁹³ “Ob oshibochnoi identifikatsii lichnosti pogibshogo voennosluzhashchego,” GASBU, f. 16, op. 1081, ll. 288-89.

Voevod's parents and relatives at first refused to believe that the Soviet Army had made such a mistake. "Due to the necessity of persuasion," their son was granted "a short leave for a meeting with them," on 26 June.⁹⁴ The KGB of L'vov, meanwhile, was advised to "take measures to prevent undesirable manifestations in connection with the reburial of Kostiv."⁹⁵ The hurried export of the "zinky boys" (tsinkovye mal'chiki) killed in action and sealed in zinc coffins persisted throughout the duration of the war, and preceded *dedovshchina* (military hazing) as a theme that brought with it a callous picture of the Soviet Army. The negative reception of public grief, however, was not merely a symptom of a military in decay. When Zinaida Chivileva, a Russian mother who lost her son in Afghanistan in 1982, was committed to a psychiatric hospital by request of the military after her outburst of grief at the *voenkomat* (military commissariat), she was received with little sympathy upon returning to her workplace: rather than receiving her with pity, Zinaida's colleagues insisted she undergo "a disciplinary campaign," on the grounds that "her too-visible mourning [was] selfish, abnormal and detrimental to the collective."⁹⁶ Yet this should not be misconstrued as support for or indifference toward the Afghan war: coping with death was appropriate only for the kitchen table and to take it to public dialogue brought an inconvenient truth to the masses.

The 1980 Moscow Olympics

Although many seem to accept the Soviet and the IOC propaganda position that

⁹⁴ Ibid, 1. 289.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Julie Elkner, "Dedovshchina and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers under Gorbachev," *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* 1 (2004), accessed 3 October 2015, <http://pipss.revues.org/243>.

the outcome on attendance at the Olympics was a defeat for the United States... I know of no Soviet dissident or real expert on the Soviet Union who does not believe that the boycott will convey an effective message to the Soviet people.

- Zbigniew Brzezinski, 6 June 1980⁹⁷

The United States' immediate response to the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan was to consider boycotting the Moscow Olympics, raising the idea at a NATO meeting held on 1 January 1980. President Jimmy Carter stated in an address to the American people three days later that the United States might not participate, and issued an ultimatum to the Soviet Union on 20 January: withdraw from Afghanistan in the next month or face a boycott from the United States and its allies. While a short-term success in national approval ratings, the implementation of President Carter's proposal met one obstacle after another. Particularly irate were US Olympians, some of whom argued that sports were separate from politics, while others regarded athletic competition as the best means of protest. "I'm as patriotic as the next guy," remarked an American member of the International Olympic Committee. "But the patriotic thing to do is for us to send a team over there and whip their ass."⁹⁸

While 65 countries went on to boycott the Moscow Olympics held on 19 July to 3 August 1980, those who followed Carter's lead consisted primarily of nations with negligible medal counts. The participation of Great Britain's athletes and some European

⁹⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "NSC Weekly Report #144," *Jimmy Carter and the Soviet Dissidents, 1977-1981 Documents from U.S. Archives*, accessed on 9 January 2016, nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB391/docs/1980.06.06%20Brzezinski%20memo%20to%20Carter.PDF.

⁹⁸ Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "Jimmy Carter's Disastrous Olympic Boycott," 9 February 2014, accessed 31 October 2015, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/02/carter-olympic-boycott-1980-103308#ixzz2t2HOgslC.

allies in the Olympic games, moreover, did not reflect well on the unity of the West. Efforts to woo African states from their allegiance to the Soviet Union went little better. The Carter Administration's choice to deploy a retired Muhammed Ali – who converted to Sunni Islam in 1975 – as the spokesman for the cause, on a mission from Nigeria to India, was savoured by the Soviet media. Nelson Ledsky, the Coordinator of the U.S. Olympics Boycott, deemed the well-publicized trip as “one of our first fiascos.” Explaining the goals of the campaign to Ali was a challenge, in that “He really wasn't sure where Afghanistan was or why the U.S. government was so upset.”⁹⁹ It took little time for Ali to be derailed from his mission, with the Nigerians he met convincing him that “Carter's policy was wrong and that the U.S. athletes should go to Moscow.”¹⁰⁰ Particularly detrimental to the cause was when Ali found himself asked by a Tanzanian newsman “why he should have let himself be used in attempts to drag Africa into a campaign for the stupid interests of the United States' administration.”¹⁰¹ Muhammed Ali pleaded ignorance in response, and by the time he reached Kenya, had veered from his mission to gather support against the Moscow Olympics, speaking instead of “a fact-finding mission” to forestall a nuclear war. Lacking diplomatic etiquette, Ali went on to deem the United States and the Soviet Union “the baddest two white men in history. ... [And] if these two white men start fighting, all us little black folks are going to be caught in the middle.”¹⁰² His final stop in India left Ali convinced that the Olympic boycott and

⁹⁹ Thomas Stern, “Moscow Gets Torched – The Boycott of the 1980 Summer Games,” *Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training*, accessed 9 January 2016, adst.org/2014/02/moscow-gets-torched-the-boycott-of-the-1980-summer-games/.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Baruch Hazan, *Olympic Sports and Propaganda Games: Moscow 1980* (London: Transaction Books, 1982), 164.

¹⁰² Derick L. Hulme Jr., *The Political Olympics: Moscow, Afghanistan, and the 1980 U.S. Boycott* (New

opposition to the Afghan war were mistakes. “By the time Ali returned to the U.S., he was thoroughly confused,” recalled Nelson Ledsky. “We did not use him again!”¹⁰³ History had the last laugh: on 17 November 2002, Muhammad Ali embarked on a three-day goodwill mission to Afghanistan as a United Nations Messenger of Peace.¹⁰⁴

Despite the failure of the Olympic boycott to gather a uniform condemnation of the Afghan war, the campaign exacerbated the difficulty of hiding the conflict from public eyes in the Soviet Union. In its years of preparation, sports facilities and arenas were constructed in five Olympic cities: Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Minsk, and Tallinn. The Olympic Games, moreover, were preceded by the first six-month rotation of conscripts from Afghanistan in June 1980. This put considerable pressure on the KGB to redouble its monitoring of public opinion to halt the spreading of rumours about the Afghan war. Until the boycott came into play, the pre-Olympic *chistka* (a clean-up) was limited to a renewed campaign against “hooliganism, crime, drunkenness, and speculation” focused on dissidents.¹⁰⁵ The Soviet media’s response to the boycott mirrored its handling of Sakharov’s exile: to scour the past for Western agendas and abstain from any mention of Afghanistan. Some editorials pointed as far back as an International Olympic Committee meeting in 1969, wherein “reactionary circles were trying even then at least to postpone the Olympics coming to the country of socialism.”¹⁰⁶ Conspiratorial accusations of “Reactionary forces... Zionists, racists [and] emigrant

York: Praeger, 1990), 109-10.

¹⁰³ Stern, “Moscow Gets Torched...”

¹⁰⁴ “UN Messenger of Peace Mohammad Ali Arrives in Afghanistan,” United Nations News Centre, accessed on 9 January 2016, www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=5382&Cr=Mohammad&Cr1=Ali#.VpHZHZMrI_U.

¹⁰⁵ Christopher Booker, *The Games War: A Moscow Journal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 28-9.

¹⁰⁶ Hazan, *Olympic Sports and Propaganda Games*, 131.

groups” preparing “a blow to the Olympic movement” were common, while the hawkish National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski was alleged to have facilitated “an anti-Olympic team... [composed of] students and alumni of Harvard and Philadelphia universities... to engage in hostile subversive acts against the sportsmen... in Moscow.”¹⁰⁷ Also tightened was the monitoring of the international post. Within the first week of the Olympic games, over 200 letters from France and England were intercepted in Ukrainian provinces alone, “with enclosed posters of a hostile nature, connecting the 1980 Olympics to the Soviet Union’s international aid to the people of Afghanistan.”¹⁰⁸

As the KGB sifted through snail mail from overseas in search of provocative works, Andrei Sakharov penned an open letter to Brezhnev on 27 July 1980. Six months having passed since his exile to Gor’kii, Sakharov once more denounced the Afghan war for having “greatly hampered the ratification of SALT II” and mourned the “thousands of Soviet people killed and maimed, and tens of thousands of Afghans,” putting forward a seven-point proposal for a political settlement of the war.¹⁰⁹ While exalted by the West for his imagined democracy, Sakharov’s call for President Babrak Karmal to transfer his authority to “an Interim Council, formed on a neutral basis with the participation of representatives of the guerrillas,” followed by democratic elections was unrealistic in practice.¹¹⁰ Once more, Sakharov’s voice fell on deaf ears in the Soviet Union. Of greater concern to the KGB was the rise of underground organizations that differed from those in

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 125, 144.

¹⁰⁸ “O zasylyke iz-za granitsy antisovetskikh materialov,” GASBU, f. 16, op. 1082, ll. 230-31.

¹⁰⁹ Andrei Sakharov, “Otkrytoe pis’mo L. Brezhnevu s predlozheniiami po politicheskomu uregulirovanniu afganskogo voprosa i s pros’boi amnistirovat’,” *Materialy samizdata*, AC No. 4034 (1980): 1-4.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

the past. The final such group that it dealt with before the Olympics took place was the Russian Women's Independent Religious Club, better known as Mariia.

A Case Study of Mariia

A shestidesiatnik (Soviet baby boomer), the founder of Mariia was Tatiana Mamonova (b. 1943), who worked in Leningrad as a literary consultant for the youth magazine, *Avrora*.¹¹¹ Mamonova's frustration with Glavlit's suffocating interpretation of socialist realism peaked when she was unable to publish her account of giving birth in a Soviet hospital. Determined to create a publication where Soviet women could discuss such taboo topics, Mamonova was joined by three other recent students of Leningrad State University. Fellow artist Natalia Malakhovskaia (b. 1947) found a sense of kin upon reading Mamonova's *samizdat* article, "Human Birth" (*Rody chelovecheskie*), which addressed a "contempt for women in *samizdat* environment [that] extends to the USSR in all areas of practical life."¹¹² They were joined by Iuliia Voznesenskaia (1940-2015), a former student of the Theatre Institute whom Mamonova first approached to create an almanac on women's rights in 1975. Having declined the offer then, Voznesenskaia was of a different mind by June 1979 after serving three years in a women's prison on charges of "anti-Soviet Propaganda." Tatiana Goricheva (b. 1947), a religious scholar and editor of the *samizdat* journal 37, rounded off the quartet.¹¹³

¹¹¹ "UVKB OON: Vydaiushchiesia bezhentsy," Agentstvo OON po delam bezhentsev Rossiiskaia Federatsiia, accessed 18 October 2015, unhr.ru/index.php?id=19.

¹¹² Ol'ga Pispanen, "25 let zhenskomu al'manakhu 'Zhenshchiny i Rossiia'," Radio svoboda, 17 December 2004, accessed 29 October 2015, www.svoboda.org/content/article/24185707.html.

¹¹³ Iuliia Voznesenskaia, "Les mouvement feministe dans notre pays," in *Maria: Journal du Club feministe Maria*, trans. Anne Coldefy-Fancard (Paris: des femmes, 1981), 38.

It took little time for the four women to be red-flagged by the KGB: their publication of an almanac entitled *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* (Women and Russia) on 10 December 1979 addressed a series of sensitive topics such as abortion, women's prisons and working conditions, and alcoholism in the Soviet Union. Tatiana Mamonova was detained by the KGB soon thereafter and forced to sign a guarantee that she would halt publication of the almanac. This harassment, combined with debate over whether to switch from an almanac to a *samizdat* periodical, saw Mamonova resign from the editorial board. The only self-avowed atheist among its members, she left behind an entirely religious staff in command of the organization, which was renamed Mariia. The Soviet Army's crossing of the Afghan border a few weeks later shaped their future.

As Mariia prepared to blend spiritual dissent and feminism into a written critique of the Soviet state, the KGB intervened on 29 February 1980 and confiscated the draft of their first *samizdat* issue. This was followed by the expulsion of Iuliia Voznesenskaia's 18-year-old son, Andrei, from art school on charges of "forming a group of young people opposed to the occupation of Afghanistan."¹¹⁴ He was called to report to the military commissariat soon thereafter. His mother's intervention was swift and vocal: Voznesenskaia demanded that her son not be deployed, otherwise she would echo those who resisted service in the Vietnam war, and burn his call-up paper on Red Square.¹¹⁵ In the time that this bought, Andrei went into hiding with one of his mother's trusted acquaintances.

As the KGB considered how to respond to Voznesenskaia's resistance, Mariia's

¹¹⁴ "Khronika," *Posev* 5 (1980): 7-8.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

founding conference took place on 1 March 1980. While the conference's debate focused on the place of women in Marxist-Leninism, Mariia's first open letter seized on a very different topic. A manifesto on the Afghan war, entitled "An Appeal to Soldiers' Mothers," it called on mothers to persuade their sons to destroy their call-up cards and "choose an honourable prison sentence instead of the shameful death of a soldier aggressor."¹¹⁶ Penned in December 1979 immediately after troops entered Afghanistan, its author was Natal'ia Lazareva, the graphic designer for *Mariia*. "When I read it, I realized that I wrote very badly," she laughed years later:

I crumpled the piece of paper and for some reason put it in the folder. Then I threw the folder under the bed and forgot about it. The irony of fate is that during a search, I found it. ... No one except for me had read it. The girls wrote that my paper was our appeal, but they had nothing to do with it. They recorded it on a tape recorder. Then they passed it on to Paris, and the word got out.¹¹⁷

Lazareva's hindsight on Mariia's opening cannonshot speaks to the muddled nature of the Soviet dissidents as the Afghan war unfolded. The organization's frenetic path resembled that taken by the Initiative Group for the Defense of Invalids' Rights during the same time period: their message seized on Afghanistan as a means of underscoring their pre-war objectives – which, at the time of Lazareva's writing the manifesto, were to challenge and remedy a patriarchal society headed toward spiritual decay.

As with the Initiative Group, Mariia changed the way it framed the war in

¹¹⁶ Cited in Svetlana Aivazova, "Russkie zhenshchiny v labirinte ravnopravii," accessed 28 October 2015, www.owl.ru/win/books/rw/o2_2.htm.

¹¹⁷ Natal'ia Lazareva, "Po etomu delu v tiur'mu sela ia odna," *Pchela* 12 (1998), accessed 18 October 2015 www.pchela.ru/podshiv/12/punished_alone.htm.

Afghanistan as time went by. When the first *samizdat* issue of *Mariia* entered circulation on 22 May 1980, it struck a different tone. Rather than address the Soviet mothers and their sons, Mariia appealed to the Committee of Afghan Women:

Dear sisters! On behalf of all the women of our country, those who oppose the war, the violence and injustice, we greet you, our courageous friends against the war. Regarding the major role played by Afghan women in recent demonstrations against the Soviet occupation, you have once more opened the world's eyes to the fact that women stand as one of the major groups of fighters for justice. It is in women, oppressed and trampled for centuries, that the world now sees hope for deliverance from the forces of evil.¹¹⁸

Mariia's words addressed the wrong organization, which speaks to the difficult game of telephone on which dissidents had to rely for information on the war. The Women's Committee of Afghanistan in fact fell under government jurisdiction, and was a common destination for Soviet "volunteers" who studied the language of Dari or Farsi at university to be sent to on "mandatory trips" in lieu of conscription.¹¹⁹ The Afghan women of whom Mariia wrote and who took part in the anti-Soviet protests of February 1980, likely referred to the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). Founded in Kabul in 1977 under the leadership of Meena Keshwar Kamal (1956-87) on the campus of Kabul University, RAWA held a vision of women's rights

¹¹⁸ Chleny feministicheskogo kluba 'Mariia', "Obrashchenie v komitet afganskikh zhenshchin," *Materialy samizdata*, AC No. 5400 (1980): 1.

¹¹⁹ Andrei Greshnov, "Pamiati syna," Art of War, accessed 29 October 2015, www.artofwar.net.ru/profiles/sergei_skripnik_andrei_greshnov_p/view_book/pamiati_syna.

that overlapped with that of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan.¹²⁰ The marked difference with RAWA and the government's equivalent organization was that it held a nationalist ideology.¹²¹ Mariia's misdirected letter to its "sisters" captures the imagined notion of Afghanistan that shaped dissidents' outlook on the war.

As the first issue of *Mariia* entered circulation, Iuliia Voznesenskaia, after three months' deliberation, emigrated to Germany with her two sons on 11 May 1980.¹²² She issued an open letter after resettling, and addressed one of Mariia's greatest frustrations at the time: the West's perception of the Moscow Olympics. Citing a French journalist's open question of "Russia, why don't you want the Olympics?" Voznesenskaia attacked their naïveté, arguing that the West had overlooked renewed persecutions in the Soviet Union in the years leading up to the games. "The Free Interprofessional Organization of Workers (Svobodnoe mezhproufessional'noe ob'edinenie trudiashchikhsia) immediately warned the world that the Olympic games will be 'carried out on human bones'," she recalled. "They were the first to speak out, and the first to be punished!"¹²³ In October 1979, she continued, "the authorities began to crack down on leaders of young opposition groups." Drawing from her son's experience, Voznesenskaia argued that:

The Afghan adventure has enabled authorities to solve one problem in a single

¹²⁰ Carol Mann, "Models and Realities of Afghan Womanhood: a Retrospective and Prospects" (Paper prepared for the Gender Equity and Development Section, Social and Human Sciences Sector, UNESCO, Paris, 2005), 6-7.

¹²¹ The Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW).

¹²² The two sons followed their mother's dissident route after settling in Germany: both joined the National Alliance of Russian Solidarists (Narodno-trudovoi soiuz), an organization of anti-Soviet emigres founded in 1930. When the policing of underground organizations softened after glasnost, Andrei, the older son, became especially active in a group known as Closed Sector (Zakrytyi sektor), which undertook "active measures" (aktivnye meropriiatiia) against the Soviet Union from afar. See: Lev Lur'e, "Vykhodnoi Peterburg: Zakrytyi sektor," DP biznes press, 26 September 2014, accessed 28 October 2015, www.dp.ru/a/2014/09/26/Zakritij_sektor/.

¹²³ Iuliia Voznesenskaia, "Leningrad predolimpiiskii," *Posev* 7 (July 1980): 3-5.

stroke: the disposal of unwanted Leningrad youth of military age. Young dissidents and the sons of dissidents are expelled from school, and lose their right of deferment from military service... The number of Leningrad youth who will spend the Olympic summer in Afghanistan is still unknown, but we know that there will be many.¹²⁴

Voznesenskaia's protest against the expulsion of students from school as a means of getting around existing deferment laws breached a theme would become the centre of debate in the late years of the Soviet-Afghan War, as mothers took increasing action to shield their sons from precarious military service.

While the KGB did not follow through on its threats to persecute the members of Mariia after their first eponymous journal entered circulation, it took action after detecting their plans for a second issue in July 1980. Mariia's members in Leningrad, Moscow and Riga had, "with the help of young people... collected truthful testimonies about what is really happening in Afghanistan [and] their return from military service."¹²⁵ The KGB refused to risk the publication of unpatriotic testimonies from "wartime-internationalists" that ran contrary to the state narrative. On 16 July 1980, three days before the opening ceremonies of the Moscow Olympics, Goricheva and Malakhovskaia were arrested. Given the choice of emigration or imprisonment, they opted for the former and arrived in Vienna on 19 July. Upon departure they released a manifesto:

Stop the bloodshed in Afghanistan!

We, the women of the new Russia, demand the withdrawal of all Soviet troops

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Iuliia Voznesenskaia, "The Independent Women's Movement in Russia," *Chronicle* (1982): 335-36.

from the occupied territory of Afghanistan.

Stop the murder and abuse of civilians of another country!

Stop sending our husbands and sons to a shameful death!

We are ashamed to hear the cynical lie with which the government of our country is trying to cover the awful truth about Afghanistan.

We are ashamed to belong to the people in whose names these atrocities are being carried out, trampling the honor and freedom of other peoples.¹²⁶

While the members in exile continued to expound on the triumphs and progress of Mariia, and opened a new branch in West Germany, they were forced to leave their sisters behind. Valeriia Kaliagina, who had hidden Iuliia's son Andrei at her residence after he was drafted, was sentenced to prison in August 1980. One month later Natal'ia Lazareva, the author of Mariia's first statement against the Afghan war, was sentenced to ten months at the Sablino women's prison south of Saint Petersburg after being investigated in relation with Andrei's draft-dodging. "Honestly, I don't want to say anything bad about people," Lazareva reflected in 1998. "But I think that some of them wanted to leave. Although they say that they were pushed out." "Iuliia Voznesenskaia I can understand. But the rest of them... Get over yourselves. Only Tanya Goricheva was a conscientious person by nature."¹²⁷ The Mariia club took a distinctly religious bent after Natal'ia Lazareva's imprisonment, expressing their admiration for the Solidarność movement in Poland as "a moral and Christian movement... that was a surprise to

¹²⁶ ""Prekratit' krovoprolitie v Afganistane!"" *Posev* 10 (1980): 17-8.

¹²⁷ Lazareva, "Po etomu delu v tiur'mu sela ia odna."

everyone, and... counterbalances events in Afghanistan.”¹²⁸ While Voznesenskaia would speak against the Afghan war in Western Europe and detail her battle to save her son from military service, such themes disappeared from the *Mariia* journal by the time its publication ceased in summer 1982.

Although the deportation of *Mariia*'s leaders was swift and their publication of afgantsy testimonies delayed, the Politburo took no chances: those who had served in Afghanistan were barred from attending the Moscow Olympics, as the likelihood of a returnee making contact with foreign visitors was deemed too great a threat to the state's rosy narrative.¹²⁹ Dissident provocations during the games proved insubstantial, limited to an intoxicated quarrel at a nightclub within the Olympic Village on 27 July 1980. Upon closing hour at 11:00 PM, “some 50 [foreign] competitors... began throwing buns and yoghurt at each other, with cries of ‘Free Afghanistan!’ and ‘Russians out of Afghanistan!’”¹³⁰ The delinquents were dispersed by fifteen Soviet policemen and flown home the next day, but captured few headlines in the United States given the lack of media coverage on the Moscow Olympics. The most damning indicator of the war in Afghanistan came not from Western boycotts, but the depleted Afghan hockey team that marched during the opening ceremonies. Most of its players were lost to an ambush by the mujahideen as “punishment for their collaboration” a few weeks before the Olympic Games.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Iuliia Voznesenskaia and Tatiana Goricheva, “En Pologne, un mouvement moral et chretien,” *Maria: journal du club feministe Maria*, trans. Anne Coldefy-Fancard (Paris: des femmes, 1981), 8.

¹²⁹ Viktor, interview with author, August 2014. See also: Andrei Greshnov, *Afganistan: Zalozhniki Vremeni* (Moskva: Tovarishество nauchnikov izdani, 2006), 56-7.

¹³⁰ Booker, *The Games War*, 171.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

Ultimately, President Carter's boycott of the Moscow Olympics was negligible in its effects on the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan. While the Politburo's debate over when to withdraw troops began within weeks, its forecasts ranged from an optimistic "[one] year... maybe even a year and a half" put forward by Dmitri Ustinov, to Andrei Gromyko's murky prerequisites for "the kind of agreed obligations to set between... China, Pakistan, etc." before withdrawal could be considered.¹³² Moreover, the 40th Army's switch to a combat role following the protests in Kabul exposed the stagnation of a military still rooted in the experience of the Great Patriotic War. Carried out between 29 February and 12 March 1980 in the northeast province of Kunar, the Airborne Forces' first confrontation with the mujahideen cost the lives of 37 Soviet soldiers and left 26 wounded with one man unaccounted for.¹³³ The Soviet Army's first airborne assault in thirty-five years, Marshal Sergei Sokolov's report on the battle conceded that the military was unfit for battles on Afghanistan's terrain, pointing to the "inadequate training of units" and the need for "measures to be taken to address deficiencies."¹³⁴ The war in Afghanistan thus transformed from a case of "international duty" in a foreign regime to an experiment in military reform.

As such, the Politburo's immediate concern was the fabrication of unanimity on operations in Afghanistan to stave off criticism of its price in Soviet lives. This culminated in a Central Committee plenum held on 23 June 1980. Noted in the West for

¹³² "CC CPSU Politburo transcript, 7 February 1980 (excerpt)," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 8-9 (1996-1997): 166.

¹³³ Evgenii Muzrukov, "Opyt, oplachennyi krov'iu: pervyi kunar. Bitva trekh batal'onov," *Zhurnal dlia spetsnaza* <Bratishka>, November 2011, accessed 6 November 2015, bratishka.ru/archiv/2011/11/2011_11_3.php.

¹³⁴ As cited in Evgenii Nikitenko, "Afganskaia kompaniia: nevestrebovannyi opyt (13)," *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaia oborona*, 18 June 2010, accessed 6 November 2015, www.vko.ru/voyny-i-konflikty/afganskaya-kampaniya-nevestrebovannyi-opyt-13.

Gromyko's bluster on defending the revolution in Afghanistan, its priority lay in securing the "full approval' of actions taken by the leadership."¹³⁵ This included not only members of the Soviet gerontocracy, but candidate members of the Politburo such as Mikhail Gorbachev and Eduard Shevardnadze who gave their signatures of approval. That the plenum came with the announcement of a withdrawal of "several military units whose presence in Afghanistan now is not necessary" was a ruse: those withdrawn were simply "tanks, missiles and anti-aircraft missiles that the Politburo realized... were ineffective in partisan mountain warfare."¹³⁶ Very few within the Central Committee dared criticize the Afghan war at this time, with longtime advisor Georgii Arbatov (1923-2010) the lone advocate of an immediate withdrawal to voice his thoughts in the lead-up to the plenum.¹³⁷

As renowned Soviet vocalist Lev Leshchenko sang "Farewell, Moscow" and a ballooned effigy of Misha was let go into the sky as part of the closing ceremony to the Moscow Olympics on 3 August 1980, one of the fiercest battles of the Afghan war took place in Badakhshan. A northeast province bordering Tajikistan, 49 Soviet troops were killed and 48 wounded, after which a ceasefire and withdrawal were postponed indefinitely.¹³⁸ The costly battle marked the first of what came to be an annual summer offensive carried out by the mujahideen, and sparked a new wave of rumours about the

¹³⁵ Artemy Kalinovsky, "Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 11, 4 (Fall 2009): 57.

¹³⁶ "CPSU CC Politburo Decisions," 18 June 1980, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, APRF, f. 3, op. 82, d. 176, ll. 101-102; trans. Sveta Savranskaya, accessed 5 November 2015, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111592>. See also: Valerii Ablazov, "Afganskaia arena: Vykhod iz vostochnogo labarinta," 10 February 2014, accessed 6 November 2015, artofwar.ru/a/ablazow_walerij_iwanowich/text_a033.shtml.

¹³⁷ Anatolii Cherniaev, "1980 god," *Dnevnik A.S. Cherniaeva*, accessed 6 November 2015, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Chernyaev/1980.pdf.

¹³⁸ "Boi u kishlaka Shaesta," accessed 6 November 2015, kunduz.ru/boy-u-kishlaka-shayesta.

war as the euphoria of the Olympics began to fade. By this time, activist groups staffed by emigres who resided west of the Berlin Wall had gathered sufficient contacts among participants in the Afghan war to publish regular reports on the conflict. Particularly consistent in their collection of rumours and commentary on the war was the National Alliance of Russian Solidarists' (Natsional'no trudovoi soiuz rossiiskikh solidaristov, or NTS). An anti-communist organization founded by White Russian emigres stationed in Belgrade in 1930 that collaborated with the Russian Liberation Movement (Russkoe osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie) in the Great Patriotic War, its monthly journal of *Posev* (lit: sowing) was first published in Germany in late 1945.¹³⁹ The Soviet-Afghan War quickly became a regular feature in the pages of *Posev* and had a transformative effect on its political narrative. In February 1980 the emigres' diagnoses mirrored those of Western pundits, anticipating that Afghanistan would provide the Soviet Union "a springboard... to escape to the warm shores of the Indian Ocean."¹⁴⁰ Five months later, political sensationalism had faded in favour of anonymous testimonies from those who allegedly served in Afghanistan. "In the assembly hall of a local school there are seventeen zinc coffins... The coffins of yesterday's tenth graders," confided one man in June 1980. "Two pioneers have the honour of guarding them. ... Those with a dark sense of humour call them 'canned goods from Afghanistan' (Afganskie konservy)."¹⁴¹

The new impressions given in *Posev* were notable for how they characterized the

¹³⁹ The Russian Liberation Movement emerged following the outbreak of the German-Soviet War in June 1941. As with the NTS it felt that Stalin could not be overthrown from within. The Russian Liberation Movement's solution was one of wartime improvisation, where White Russian emigres, POWs, and citizens on occupied territories defected to the German side of the war intent on joining a "Russian Liberation Army" that never came to exist.

¹⁴⁰ A. Avtorkhanov, "Strategicheskie raschety Brezhneva," *Posev* 2 (February 1980): 5.

¹⁴¹ Andrei Okulov, "Krov', o kotoroi zapreshcheno govorit," *Posev* 7 (July 1980): 15.

range of participants in the Afghan war. Rumours had to this point been dominated by the polar opposites of young conscripts and callous officers serving their “international duty” in an allied country. After six months in Afghanistan, the composition of the 40th Army became less black and white. One of the first new archetypes of those who served was the young Soviet careerist. “One floor in a residence for foreign students at the Moscow State University offers courses for the recruitment of observers and amateur radio operators... specifically for Afghanistan, and pays a stipend of 400 rubles per month,” reported one man in July 1980. “Clothes are given which they will wear to the border on the date of their dispatch. They will be taken in as foreign students [in Afghanistan], and sworn to secrecy....”¹⁴² Impressions of mercenary careerists were especially bitter, and came at a time of growing cynicism and frustration in the Soviet Union in light of ongoing corruption and stagnation.¹⁴³ Alleged culprits ranged from colonels eligible to receive a Ford automobile upon their return, to nurses paid 40 rubles per day, plus 20 for each day in combat along with benefits.¹⁴⁴

Such impressions spoke more to the Soviet population’s disillusion with day-to-day affairs than the realities of the Afghan war. The heightened level of pay went not to the average Ivan who volunteered to deploy, but to Party, military and Komsomol advisors stationed in Afghanistan. This was a change that took place only after the invasion, with advisors’ monthly pay spiking to about \$700 per month – significantly

¹⁴² Ibid, 16.

¹⁴³ For an excellent sociological novel that captures the cynicism toward careerists of the late Brezhnev era, originally penned in two Russian volumes in 1980, see: Aleksandr Zinoviev, *The Madhouse*, trans. Michael Kirkwood (London: Gollancz, 1986).

¹⁴⁴ “Nam rasskazyvaiut,” *Posev* 9 (September 1980): 14.

more than the salaries of officers in the 40th Army.¹⁴⁵ While the wage gap stirred resentment between the ranks, those with high wages remained exceptions to the rule: of the 149,000 troops and support personnel stationed in Afghanistan in December 1980, no more than 1,800 fell within such a generous income bracket.¹⁴⁶

September 1980: Cracks Appear in Tashkent

One of the suspected mujahideen we detained... he asked me if I was a Muslim, if I could recite an Islamic prayer. I was an atheist and didn't know, but a comrade from Osh in my unit, he knew. He told the mujahid that he was a Kyrgyz Muslim, but I wasn't. It was inconceivable to the man.

- Ravshan, afganets¹⁴⁷

As the Afghan war approached nine months' duration, the Politburo renewed its efforts to harness public belief in the state narrative, with a particular focus on Central Asia. This followed a series of anti-religious initiatives targeting Islamic regions of the Soviet Union, beginning with a resolution passed by the regional committee of the Communist Party of Daghestan on "Measures to Improve the International and Atheistic Education of the Inhabitants of Andi and Gagatli in Botlikh district" on 28 June 1978.¹⁴⁸ Following a year's enforcement in the Northern Caucasus, a directive was copied to the five Central Asian republics "about consolidating the struggle with the illegal actions of

¹⁴⁵ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 149.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 150.

¹⁴⁷ Ravshan, interview with author, June 2014.

¹⁴⁸ Marie Broxup, "Recent Developments in Soviet Islam," *Religion in Communist Lands* 11, 1 (1983): 31.

the unregistered clergy of the Muslim cult.”¹⁴⁹ With the onset of the Soviet-Afghan War on 27 December 1979, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM) was tasked with defending such policies to foreign audiences. The four Soviet muftis, at the same time, were entrusted with a renewed promotion of Soviet Islam on a worldwide scale. Key to their campaign was the announcement of an Islamic Conference to be held in Tashkent on 9 to 12 September 1980, to mark the 15th century of the Hejira.¹⁵⁰ Deemed “the most important post-war political meeting of the Muslim world” by the Soviet press, the conference exemplified how the costs and duration of the Afghan war swiftly penetrated the Soviet borders and reached beyond the Moscow intelligentsia, in terms of those who engaged in dialogue on the matter.¹⁵¹ At a January 1980 planning meeting for events, the Soviet muftis made no secret of the conference’s political function, issuing a declaration against “US imperialists, Israeli Zionists, the traitor [Anwar] Sadat, and Chinese hegemonists’ meddling in Afghan affairs.”¹⁵²

It took little time for SADUM’s International Department to begin receiving letters of opposition from its followers after the Islamic Conference was announced. The plaintiffs were not limited to Soviet dissidents or “Western” countries of opposition: one of SADUM’s earliest reports to the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults, for example, “offered a lengthy exchange of correspondence with a Japanese Muslim, Tosio Kurahasi, who wrote that the entire Muslim world called in unison for an immediate

¹⁴⁹ Erin Murat, “Soviet and Muslim,” 458.

¹⁵⁰ The Hejira refers to prophet Mohammed’s journey from Mecca to Yathrib (Medina).

¹⁵¹ Broxup, “Recent Developments in Soviet Islam,” 32.

¹⁵² Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 57n11.

Soviet withdrawal.”¹⁵³ SADUM’s International Department would at times cast letters to the Soviet mufti in a neutral tone, stating that followers sought “the resolution of purely religious questions currently undergoing debate,” which spoke to “the mufti’s authority as an Islamic jurisconsult.”¹⁵⁴ The opposite, however, was true: in January and May 1980 the Organization of the Islamic Conference, powered by Saudi Arabia, held two high-profile conferences to issue a sharp condemnation of Soviet actions in Afghanistan. This was followed by a call for a boycott from the Muslim World League.

Of the more than 70 countries invited to the Islamic Conference in Tashkent, the majority tersely declined. This included the key states of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt – each of which were contributing arms to the mujahideen in Afghanistan by the time of the conference. Only 33 of those countries invited chose to attend, and this itself was a generous number: the nationalities of West European journalists and Islamic fringe groups from Finland and Japan were counted among them.¹⁵⁵ Taking place shortly after the beginning of the academic year at the Mir-i-Arab Madrasa in Bukhara and the Imam al-Bukhari Islamic Institute in Tashkent on 1 September 1980, the conference aimed to issue a clear statement to Central Asian youth on their role in the Afghan war – in part, a response to Western propaganda targeting Soviet Muslims.

Opening with a grandiose address by mufti Ziyauddin Babakhan (1908-82) hailing “a divine mission to show the humane and progressive character of Islam to the world,” the countries that attended quickly splintered in their priorities.¹⁵⁶ Disregarding

¹⁵³ Eren Tasar, “The Central Asian Muftiate,” 217.

¹⁵⁴ Erin Murat Tasar, “Soviet and Muslim,” 424.

¹⁵⁵ “Soviet-backed Muslim Conference Collapses,” *The Baltimore Sun*, 13 September 1980, A2.

¹⁵⁶ L.V. Blinnikov, ed., *The 15th Century of the Hegira Must Become a Century of Peace and Friendship*

organizers' requests that participants speak only from texts approved in advance, the rector of the Kuwait Islamic Shariat Institute, Sheikh Yusuf Ribai, openly objected to Soviet actions in Afghanistan and appealed for Moscow to "normalize the Afghan situation and work toward the country's neutralization."¹⁵⁷ The only attendant to voice direct opposition to the war, Sheikh Ribai's statement was followed by the proposal of a broadly worded resolution "condemning aggression against Muslim states," that called for "greater religious freedom for Soviet Muslims."¹⁵⁸ Although both resolutions were defeated, the strong show of support for the Soviet-Afghan war that the hosts anticipated never came to fruition. Particularly problematic was that a renewed conflict between the Israel Defence Forces and the Palestine Liberation Organization outweighed Afghanistan in priority for most of those who attended. Many speakers, such as Dr. Muhammad Al-Khatib, Minister of the Awqaf of the Syrian Arab Republic, simply ignored the war in Afghanistan, railing instead about "the new crusade... to undermine and destroy the unity of Muslims... [and] serve the interests of US imperialism, Zionism and Israel" in light of the Camp David Accords.¹⁵⁹ The representatives of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan held the alienating distinction of giving the only speeches that *abstained* from citation of the Quran, opting instead for fanciful allusions on how "Caliph Umar called for socialism and democracy by the deeds of his life. ... [and] in order to exist and develop, mankind must have a planned economy... based on the positive experience of

Among Nations (Moscow: Progress Printers, 1982), 21.

¹⁵⁷ "Soviet-backed Muslim Conference Collapses."

¹⁵⁸ Hal Piper, "International Conferences No Longer Pliable Soviet Propaganda Tools," *The Baltimore Sun*, 8 October 1980, A4.

¹⁵⁹ Blinnikov, *The 15th Century of the Hegira*, 64.

the people.”¹⁶⁰

Particularly striking in the speeches delivered at the Tashkent Islamic Conference were the statements that came from representatives of the Central Asian republics. While Middle Eastern voices fixated on anti-Israel slogans, and those from Afghanistan issued pedestrian Marxist statements, representatives from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan drew extensively from the Quran and emphasized the Afghan war as a unifying cause. Particularly vocal was Sheikh Abdulla Kalanov, Qazi of the Tajik SSR, who proclaimed that:

We, the Muslims of the Soviet Union, wholeheartedly acclaim the revolutions in the neighbouring countries of Iran and Afghanistan. We wish success to our brothers in the Faith in these countries fighting for their independence and prosperity. ... In an effort to distort the essence of the fraternal help given by the Soviet Union... Certain reactionary forces in the countries adjoining Afghanistan are dancing to the tune of imperialists, joining [a] campaign of slander and lies. Being on the threshold of the 15th century of the Hegira, we are obliged to... further develop our religion and apply its sacred principles. Only then can we ensure a peaceful future for our children so that our names go down in history. Glory be to Allah!¹⁶¹

Though laden with ideological jargon, the impassioned statements from Central Asian speakers at the conference overshadowed those of attendees from the Middle East and Africa. It spoke to the fact that a sizeable majority of Soviet Muslims “viewed the war

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 124.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 133-34.

consistently with the Kremlin's official position," a stance that wavered little between 1979 and 1989.¹⁶²

On 12 September 1980, the Islamic Conference concluded with pandemonium and the sound of a gavel rather than standing applause. Those who had travelled to the Soviet Union were presented with a final declaration "describing the United States as the main enemy of Muslims everywhere," scripted in advance by the conference organizers so as to "avoid giving 'extra trouble' to the foreign guests."¹⁶³ A quarrel ensued, with the Soviet chairman reluctantly ceding time to Sudanese religious and political leader, Sadiq al-Mahdi, to propose an amendment. Embarrassment ensued: al-Mahdi called for "an internationally financed independent Muslim centre to be established in Tashkent," the "withdrawal of all foreign troops and bases from all countries," and "the wider teaching of Arabic" within the Soviet Union.¹⁶⁴ As he began to appeal for greater support of Palestine, Mufti Babakhanov interjected and brought a swift end to the final session of the conference. No amendment was agreed upon; no unified statement in support of the war in Afghanistan was issued; and condemnation of the United States' foreign policy went little beyond Mufti Babakhanov's warning of "the aggressive aspirations of imperialist circles and their supporters."¹⁶⁵ The only hint of unity came with a predictable statement of "solidarity with the Palestinian and Lebanese people" and "rejection of Zionist claims to the city of Jerusalem."¹⁶⁶ Three of the four Soviet muftis were replaced

¹⁶² Panagiotis Dimitrakis, *The Secret War in Afghanistan: The Soviet Union, China and the Role of Anglo-American Intelligence* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 163.

¹⁶³ John Kifner, "Marx and Mosque Are Less Compatible Than Ever," *New York Times*, 14 September 1980, 6E; "Soviet-backed Muslim Conference Collapses."

¹⁶⁴ Piper, "International Conferences No Longer..."; "Soviet-backed Muslim Conference Collapses."

¹⁶⁵ O. Volgin, "Radi mira na zemle," *Izvestiia*, 1 October 1980, 5.

¹⁶⁶ "Islamskaia konferentsiia v Tashkente," *Izvestiia*, 13 September 1980, 6.

in the aftermath of the conference, with only Mufti Ziyauddin Babakhanov of Tashkent maintaining his post. His successor, Shamsuddin ibn Babakhanov, would be deposed following public demonstrations against his “un-Islamic lifestyle” in February 1989, in tandem with the conclusion of the Afghan war.¹⁶⁷

Not one week had passed after the botched Tashkent Islamic Conference before the Soviet government faced another embarrassment. On 15 September 1980, Private Aleksandr Kruglov, kalashnikov in hand, sought political asylum at the United States Embassy in Kabul. Drafted from the industrial city of Kemerovo in the Ural Mountains, Kruglov served in a construction battalion and cited a conflict with his superiors as his reason for leaving his post.¹⁶⁸ This came as little surprise to those who had served in the Soviet Army; the construction battalions bore notoriety as a substitute for forced labour, wherein approximately 40% of “disciplinary offenses” took place.¹⁶⁹ To take this public and apply openly to a Cold War rival while serving one’s international duty, however, was blasphemous, and left Soviet leaders afraid that Kruglov “might sign a statement saying he did not want to fight against the freedom-loving-people of Afghanistan.”¹⁷⁰ Politburo member Boris Ponomarev, speaking with Soviet Ambassador to Afghanistan Fikriat Tabeev, scolded the military for the incident. Tabeev, in turn, assured Ponomarev that “schizophrenics and fools would be inspected and removed from the army.”¹⁷¹

Ambassador Tabeev’s initial response to the crisis was to demand the American

¹⁶⁷ John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 183.

¹⁶⁸ V.I. Ablazov, *Nad vsem Afganistanom bezblachnoe nebo* (Kiev: RIA <Marko Pak>, 2005), 280; see also: “Russian Leaves U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan,” *Toledo Blade*, 22 September 1980, 2.

¹⁶⁹ Brenda J. Vallance, “Corruption and Reform in the Soviet Military,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 7, 4 (1994): 708-09.

¹⁷⁰ Ablazov, *Nad vsem Afganistanom bezblachnoe nebo*, 280.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

embassy return Kruglov, “claiming he had been drugged and kidnapped and was being held against his own will.”¹⁷² A non-response from the Americans prompted Soviet authorities to change their stance and demand that Kruglov be turned over to face charges of pointing a weapon at his superior.¹⁷³ A “series of pressuring actions” against the United States embassy in Kabul ensued, ranging from frequent searches of employees who sought to leave; to helicopters buzzing over the chancery at close range; to the periodic cutting of phone lines.¹⁷⁴ For most of the six-day affair, Kruglov endeavoured to communicate with his American hosts in broken German: despite the Soviet-Afghan war nearing its ninth month in duration, there was “not a single Russian-speaking Foreign Service employee” in the United States’ embassy in Kabul, and a fluent American diplomat, Robert F. Ober, was flown in from Moscow only after four days’ standoff.¹⁷⁵ During this time, Kruglov was interrogated by a British diplomat and “claimed that the Soviets were winning, but had already suffered casualties reaching 15,000.”¹⁷⁶ On the morning of 21 September, Ambassador Tabeev visited the embassy and brought with him “letters from Kruglov’s family and friends in Kemerovo.”¹⁷⁷ He promised Private Kruglov that he “would be able to leave the Soviet army immediately and return to his technical education with no charges or penalties against him.”¹⁷⁸ After two hours,

¹⁷² Robert F. Ober, *Tchaikovsky 19, A Diplomatic Life Behind the Iron Curtain* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris Corporation, 2008), 273.

¹⁷³ Vladislav Krasnov, *Soviet Defectors: The KGB Wanted List* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), 151.

¹⁷⁴ Amstutz, *Afghanistan: The First Five Years*, 348-49.

¹⁷⁵ Jack Anderson, “Why Kruglov Returned,” *The Dispatch*, 2 January 1981, 4.

¹⁷⁶ Dimitrakis, *The Secret War in Afghanistan*, 159.

¹⁷⁷ Ober, *Tchaikovsky 19*, 275.

¹⁷⁸ Dan Oberdorfer, “Soldier in U.S. Embassy at Kabul Rejoins Soviets,” *The Washington Post*, 22 September 1980, accessed 1 December 2015,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/09/22/soldier-in-us-embassy-at-kabul-rejoins->

Kruglov agreed, and Ambassador Tabeev put his oral guarantees in handwriting. According to Robert F. Ober, who was flown back to Moscow alongside “a dozen uniformed Soviet soldiers wounded from the fighting,” Ambassador Tabeev later confirmed to the Kabul embassy that Kruglov returned to school.¹⁷⁹ The six-day fiasco highlighted the loose grip that Moscow held on forces deployed internationally, and the inflated number of casualties given by Kruglov told their own story. Although the figure was discounted by British intelligence – the number of soldiers killed in action by 31 December 1980 was about one-tenth of Kruglov’s suggestion, at 1,570 – it illustrated the secrecy of wartime statistics and the spread of rumours on the battlefield.¹⁸⁰ As soldiers returned from Afghanistan with each six-month rotation, speculation ballooned in the Soviet Union.

The Estonian Youth Movement and Afghanistan

While the delinquency of Private Aleksandr Kruglov sparked a short-term scandal in Kabul, its consequences on the home front were negligible. Nor did the event make great headlines in the West; in a case of poor timing for President Carter, the ongoing Iran hostage crisis foiled any chance to seize on the defection of a Soviet soldier in the Afghan war. The paranoia it sparked for the Politburo, however, did not subside: on 22 September 1980, the very day after Kruglov emerged from the United States Embassy, Soviet leaders shifted their focus to reports of dissent in great numbers in the Estonian

[soviets/6ccb043d-5d51-40d3-8cc4-f077f5957a71/](https://www.soviets/6ccb043d-5d51-40d3-8cc4-f077f5957a71/).

¹⁷⁹ Ober, *Tchaikovsky 19*, 275-76.

¹⁸⁰ G.F. Krivosheev, ed., *Rossiiia i SSSR v voynakh XX veka: Poteri vooruzhennykh sil* (Moskva: OLMA-PRESS, 2001), 537.

SSR. While unrelated to the Afghan war, it was the first mass protest of the 1980s to emerge in the Baltics and powered by Soviet youth of the afgangtsy's generation. Having gathered at a football stadium not far from Tallinn for a concert by a popular band called Propeller, the show was put to a swift end by Soviet authorities: a belated inspection of Propeller's lyrics had uncovered "nationalistic motives," and band members were ordered to unplug their equipment.¹⁸¹ Nearly 1,000 Estonian youth took to the streets to protest and were forcibly dispersed by police. Close to 200 high school students were arrested and promptly expelled as a result.¹⁸²

Waves of protests across the country continued until 9 October 1980. Particularly startling to the authorities were the demonstrations of 1 to 3 October in Tallinn, where nearly 2,000 people, most of them students, shouted slogans of "Freedom for Estonia!" and "Soviets – out of Estonia!"¹⁸³ The protests led the Minister of Internal Affairs of the Estonian SSR to give a speech on television warning that demonstrators would be suspended from school and charged with hooliganism. Only on 16 October 1980 did state organs express with confidence that the protests had been quashed, with *Sovetskaia Estoniia* announcing that "appropriate action is being taken against the hooligans and instigators" who incensed "the working people."¹⁸⁴

The protests of 22 September to 9 October 1980 marked the first longterm demonstration carried out by the afgangtsy's generation. This came eight months after

¹⁸¹ A.S. Barsenkov and A.I. Vdovin, eds., "Natsional'naia politika i natsional'nye dvizheniia. 1964-1985," *Istoriia Rossii. 1917-2009*, accessed 2 December 2015, kniathev.info/books/history/010-istoriya_rossii_barsenkov/119-nacionalnaya_politika_i_nacionalnye_dvizheniya_1964-1985.html.

¹⁸² "Demonstratsii molodezhi v Estonii," *Posev* 11 (November 1980): 15.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

Estonian dissidents signed an open letter of opposition to the Afghan war addressed to the United Nations, and should be seen as a transition between the intelligentsia and the last Soviet generation. Particularly resonant in Estonia by December 1980 were whispers of two transport aircraft that departed for Afghanistan from a base in Tartu. A general consensus was that the planes had collided and burst into flames. The population was divided, however, on whether all men on board were killed or if the paratroopers had unloaded from the aircraft beforehand.¹⁸⁵ Although the Estonian SSR played a relatively small military role in the Afghan war – 1,652 soldiers were recruited, 38 of whom were killed in action between 1979 and 1989 – the speculation and rumours mirrored those that circulated in Russia and Ukraine.¹⁸⁶

The first year of the Soviet-Afghan war concluded with a large-scale offensive in the central provinces of Kabul, Parwan and Bamyan. Carried out between 14 November and 5 December 1980 under the codename of Operation Strike-1 (Udar-1), it saw 16,000 Soviet and Afghan troops endeavour to clear the perimeter of mujahideen, inflicting more than 500 casualties and taking 736 as prisoners; it was also among the most costly periods for the 40th Army in 1980, with 86 soldiers killed and 215 injured.¹⁸⁷ Five days after operations concluded it was International Human Rights Day on 10 December, which for Soviet dissidents bore symbolic value: beginning with the show-trial of Andrei Siniavsky and Iulii Daniel' in 1965 they had held annual demonstrations on Pushkin

¹⁸⁵ "Nam rasskazyvaiut," *Posev* 2 (February 1981): 11.

¹⁸⁶ Karl Paks, "Moscow's Afghan War: the Sapper's Story," accessed 2 December 2015, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4090473.stm#Karl.

¹⁸⁷ Aleksandr Okorokov, *Sekretnye voiny SSSR: samaia polnaia entsiklopediia* (Moskva: Eksmo, 2013), 119; Vladimir Pankratov and Boris Tkach, "Afganistan, dekabr' 1980 g.," *Vozdushno-kosmicheskaia oborona*, accessed 9 December 2015, <http://www.vko.ru/voyny-i-konflikty/afganistan-dekabr-1980-g>.

square grounded in the slogan of “Respect the Constitution – the Basic Law of the USSR.”¹⁸⁸ At the time, it was a momentous victory for the 50 to 80 protestors who gathered in what the startled KGB deemed “a riotous assembly (sborishchina) under the guise of respect for civil liberties, beginning with the shouting of demagogic slogans.”¹⁸⁹ 10 December 1980 thus held the potential for a condemnation of the Soviet-Afghan war that could garner international coverage, coincide with demonstrations around the world, and appeal to a younger generation. Instead, the few who participated in the rally that year chose not to speak of Afghanistan and opted for “a minute’s silence in memory of those tortured in Soviet prisons.”¹⁹⁰ This underscored the aloofness of the dissident generation, for whom the Soviet-Afghan War was an afterthought. Moreover, the KGB was by this time familiar with the annual rally. Between 9 and 10 December, “no less than 20 people were subjected to warnings, detentions, surveillance and house arrest.”¹⁹¹ Police took to the square as early as 17:45, and within 40 minutes were joined by “two columns of vigilantes” numbering in the hundreds.¹⁹² When at 19:00 “people standing at the barricade in front of the monument removed their hats – the traditional gesture of respect in demonstrations... the chain of police and vigilantes” drove the 20 to 30 protestors from the square and brought the protest to an end.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁸ “Demonstratsii na Pushkinskoi ploschadi,” Memorial - topografiia terrora - Moskva, accessed 17 December 2015, topos.memo.ru/demonstratsii-na-pushkinskoy-ploschadi. At this time, protests were held on 5 December. The date was switched to 10 December in 1977 in light of the passage of the Brezhnev Constitution two months earlier and the signing of the Helsinki Accords.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ “Minuta Molchaniia na Pushkinskoi Ploschadi,” AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 1.

¹⁹¹ “Razgon mirnoi demonstratsii 10 dekabria na pl. Pushkina v Moskve,” *Materialy samizdata*, AC No. 4208 (1980): 1-2.

¹⁹² “Minuta Molchaniia na Pushkinskoi Ploschadi,” AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 1.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

Moscow Youth Flock From Lenin to Lennon

Western rock bands did more to demolish the Soviet mentality than even

Solzhenitsyn and his “Archipelago.”

- Vladimir Sorokin¹⁹⁴

Armen Takhtadzhian (1910-2009), a professor at Leningrad State University, was among the few to criticize his fellow intelligentsia for their silence on Afghanistan. On 15 December 1980, after the Afghan war went unmentioned in the International Human Rights Day protest, he issued a statement to students and faculty:

Soon it will mark one year to the day that Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. ... I am ashamed of myself and of those of my compatriots who... have remained silent... out of fear for loved ones, fear of losing a favourite job. It may take a great deal of time to overcome this... But we must choose to do so and demand an immediate withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan. ... We owe it to the Afghans being killed in our name.¹⁹⁵

Noble though they were, Takhtadzhian’s words did not resonate at the university. Instead, they were overshadowed by a public exhibition of the generation gap between students and their forefathers when Moscow youth staged a demonstration in the week that followed. Its subject spoke to the “desires of the Imaginary West” among the last generation of Soviet youth in the capital city.¹⁹⁶ Neither human rights, nor the Afghan

¹⁹⁴ Vladimir Sorokin, “On Hearing ‘Whole Lotta Love’ for the First Time in Moscow,” *New York Times*, 11 March 2010, accessed 25 October 2017, www.nytimes.com/2010/03/11/opinion/11iht-edsorokin.html.

¹⁹⁵ Suren Takhtadzhian, “K godovshchine sovetskoi interventsii v Afganistane,” *Posev* 2 (February 1981): 11. On the formation of the Free Trade Union of Writers in Leningrad in December 1980, see: Grigorii Kovalev and Konstantin Kuz’minskii, “Antologiiia noveishei russkoi poezii i Goluboi laguny v 5 tomakh,” accessed 17 December 2015, kkk-bluelagoon.ru/tom5b/lepta2.htm.

¹⁹⁶ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (New

war, nor crimes of the Stalin era fell in their agenda. Instead, it was Mark David Chapman's murder of The Beatles' vocalist John Lennon on 8 December led them to assemble in memoriam.

The death of John Lennon left the Politburo unsure of how to address the public mourning of a Western icon. When the Beatles were active between 1960 and 1970, the Communist Party and KGB selectively approved of "anti-capitalist songs like Eleanor Rigby" for youths' consumption.¹⁹⁷ The band's solo artists, likewise, were regarded as "progressive anti-imperialist Western rock music."¹⁹⁸ Moscow students' impromptu commemoration of Lennon's passing, however, was considered a danger to the Soviet state. On 20 December 1980, flyers with a hand drawn logo of The Beatles were posted in Moscow State University, reading:

TO ALL LOVERS AND FANS OF THE BEATLES' MUSIC!

Tomorrow, on Sunday 21 December at 11:00 AM on the observation deck of the Lenin hills will be a gathering of those who want to pay tribute to John Lennon, who want to say something of him or The Beatles group.¹⁹⁹

The KGB received word of the flyers within hours of them being posted, and Iurii Andropov assured the Politburo that "steps are being taken to identify the initiators of the gathering and seize control over developments."²⁰⁰ Certainly, by the KGB's paranoid

Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 35.

¹⁹⁷ Sergei I. Zhuk, "Detente and Western Cultural Products in Soviet Ukraine during the 1970s," in *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Cultures, Music, and the State in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. William Jay Risch (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 119.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 247.

¹⁹⁹ Boris Valentinovich Antonov, "Miting pamiati Dzhona Lennona," accessed 17 December 2015, www.blogrockology.ru/митинг-памяти-джона-леннона/.

²⁰⁰ Cited in Leonid Mlechin, *Brezhnev. Razocharavanie Rossii* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'skii dom "Piter", 2012), 182.

standards a recitation of “Give Peace a Chance” atop the Lenin Hills as the first anniversary of the Soviet-Afghan War approached posed a threat to security. Boris Antonov, a member of the Komsomol at the time, happened upon this flyer in the evening, by which time someone had written on it: “Those who fear repressions should not attend!”²⁰¹ Undeterred, Antonov departed for the Lenin Hills in the morning.

The turnout for the commemoration of John Lennon dwarfed that of the demonstration for International Human Rights Day, numbering as many as 300 people. In the centre of the crowd, two men held a large felt-tip portrait of Lennon, while a dozen others stood with homemade posters hung around their necks. The keynote speaker was equipped with a microphone powered by a tape recorder and “broke into speech, full of sorrow and despair,” and touched on a number of issues: Lennon was not only “an outstanding musician,” but “a fighter for social justice, for the rights of blacks, and for peace.”²⁰² Although police monitors did not intervene during the address, their sirens blared when a musical tribute ensued with “one Beatles song after another performed not by dozens, but by hundreds of people.”²⁰³ As demonstrators cleared the area, the police detained those they deemed the organizers of the event, giving way to a melee as detainees were taken to police vans. Boris Antonov recalled many years later:

Two plainclothes officers grabbed a guy who quoted from the Soviet constitution.

I could not restrain myself and rushed in, crying out, “Do not give up!” ...

Immediately, someone grabbed me. ... I fought back, calling him Pinochet... Then

another two guards threw me into the bus. ... There were eight boys and four girls

²⁰¹ Boris Valentinovich Antonov, “Miting pamiati Dzhona Lennona.”

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

there. We became acquainted... and thought about what sort of rally we could hold in a year. ... We had to think of something else. But what?²⁰⁴

Antonov's experience on the Lenin Hills highlighted Soviet youths' growing interest in Western peace movements akin to those advocated by John Lennon. The afgangtsy were excluded from such movements: the Soviet Union they returned to was one in rapid change not only in terms of economic recession and aging politicians, but a wave of counterculture from below that had no place for their war.

As the euphoria of the Moscow Olympics subsided; as conferences on Soviet Islam took place in the Central Asian republics; as the dissidents of Sakharov's generation became aloof; Colonel Valerii Ablazov wrote a grim account of the situation in Afghanistan in his diary as the year wound to a close. "In all divisions, there is alarming news about a sharp decline in morale," he noted on his 18th month of deployment. "The troops are exhausted, there is no ammunition, the promises given from the top amount to nothing, and juniors refuse to obey the orders of their commanders."²⁰⁵ Such observations bore no place in the state narrative, in *samizdat*, or in public protest.

"Life in Afghanistan is gradually becoming a normal, peaceful place," stated Leonid Brezhnev on 12 December 1980, one year to the day of his signature on "Concerning the Situation in A." "The fog of misinformation," he insisted, "is fading gradually."²⁰⁶ In fact, it was worsening due to the Politburo's failure to revise its narrative on the Afghan war as general awareness of the conflict spread. Opposition, however, was

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Valerii Ablazov, "Zapiski voennogo sovetnika. Dekabr' 1980 goda," accessed 31 December 2015, www.artofwar.ru/a/ablazow_walerij_iwanowich/text_a081.shtml.

²⁰⁶ As cited in "Vazhnaia vekha," *Pravda*, 14 December 1980, 4.

not strong enough or sufficiently organized to make a difference, and those who did speak out against the conflict in 1980 – such as Mariia, or the Initiative Group for the Defense of Invalids' Human Rights – were too selective in their agendas to gain broader support. The failure of the dissident generation to extend its hand to the afgantsy, moreover, was a missed opportunity to expand their base at a time of political decay. The final years of Brezhnev and the Andropov-Chernenko interregnum saw Soviet youth begin to gain alternative voices of dissent.

Chapter 2

The Soviet-Afghan War as a Tool of Proto-Glasnost, 1981 to 1983

I know a good story. Our officer cried when his brother was killed in Afghanistan, but Chairman of the KGB Iurii Andropov said not to send him because he was now his mother's only son. But do you know what the reason really is? Andropov was afraid that he would take revenge. Can you imagine such a principle? ... It reflected the state mentality.

- Marat, afganets¹

On 19 January 1981, a front-page editorial graced the Soviet Army's newspaper, *Krasnaia zvezda*. A written reprimand to its readers, the article warned that "Certain soldiers, trying to sparkle with information, tell in their letters to relatives and friends about their assignments in the service," and show "careless dealings with important documents."² The strict monitoring of written words from those serving their international duty spoke to the state's suspicion of those who deviated from the Party line during an unofficial time of war. As the 26th Congress of the Communist Party drew near, the wavering adherence of Soviet youth to post-war ideology weighed on the Politburo. Held on 23 February to 3 March 1981, it was the final Congress addressed by Leonid Brezhnev, by this time "incoherent from arteriosclerosis," addicted to benzodiazepines, and working "no more than two hours a day."³ The passing of Aleksei Kosygin (1904-80)

¹ Cited in Laruelle and Rakisheva, *Pamiat' iz plameni Afganistana*, 68.

² Cited in "Soviet Soldiers Get Warning," *New York Times*, 19 January 1981, A11.

³ Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: the Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 50.

alone in a hospital two months earlier on 18 December 1980 spoke to the General Secretary's cult of personality: Kosygin's death was not announced for three days due to its coincidence with Brezhnev's birthday festivities on the 19th. Addressing a Central Committee wherein thirty-nine percent of the members were over 65 years of age, Brezhnev continually made reference to a war being fought by young recruits.⁴ While holding to the narrative of Imperialism's "undeclared war against the Afghan revolution" and an obligation to "render the military aid asked for by that friendly country," Brezhnev and those who took to the podium after him exhibited a new frankness on the unofficial combat role of Soviet soldiers.⁵ No longer was the 40th Army referred to as the Limited Contingent of Soviet Forces in Afghanistan, but a "Soviet military contingent," faced with "the infiltration of counter-revolutionary gangs into Afghanistan [which] must be completely stopped."⁶ This was reinforced by Afghan President Babrak Karmal, who stated that, "As soon as the intervention, aggression and armed provocations... are stopped and firm guarantees are given... we shall arrange with the Soviet Union for the withdrawal of its troops from Afghanistan."⁷ It was an implicit acknowledgment of the 40th Army's combat role, plainspoken and transcribed in Soviet press coverage of the 26th Congress, and readily available to public readers.

Also noteworthy in Brezhnev's speech was a new openness to international

⁴ Robert V. Daniels, *Russia's Transformation: Snapshots of a Crumbling System* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 53.

⁵ Leonid Brezhnev, "Report of the Central Committee of the CPSU to the XXVI Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Immediate Tasks of the Party in Home and Foreign Policy," in *Peace, Plan and Progress: the 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, eds. Marilyn Bechtel, David Laibman and Daniel Rosenberg (New York: NWR Publications, 1981), 57.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Babrak Karmal, "The Foreign Delegations," in *Peace, Plan and Progress: the 26th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, 153.

diplomacy as a means of bringing an end to the Afghan war. Conscious of Western geopolitical readings, he stated that “We do not object to the questions connected with Afghanistan being discussed together with the questions of Persian Gulf security,” extending an olive branch to newly inaugurated President Ronald Reagan.⁸ This was echoed by Karmal, who expressed his “readiness to start political negotiations with... Pakistan and Iran... To settle our differences and normalize our relations.”⁹ Dismissed by Western powers as Cold War bluster, such statements in fact reflected the Politburo’s realization of a guerilla war stalemate and its early efforts to find a diplomatic solution. Most striking in Brezhnev’s speech, however, was his assessment of Soviet youth. “Young people who are between the ages of 18 and 25 today will tomorrow form the backbone of our society,” he began.¹⁰ “[They] are always prepared to defend their country.” In a frank departure, Brezhnev then remarked:

It is no secret that some educated and well-informed young people are at the same time politically naïve, and their professional training goes along with an insufficiently responsible attitude toward work. Much of this is a result of omissions by the Young Communist League. ... Sons and grandsons of heroes of the Great Patriotic War... have not gone through the grim trials that fell to the lot of their fathers and grandfathers.¹¹

Brezhnev’s skepticism toward those of draft age at once reflected the curmudgeonly nature of his generation and their concern for the preservation of Soviet values. As the

⁸ Brezhnev, “Report of the Central Committee of the CPSU to the XXVI Congress...,” 39.

⁹ Karmal, “The Foreign Delegations,” 153.

¹⁰ Brezhnev, “Report of the Central Committee of the CPSU to the XXVI Congress...,” 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 82-3, 87.

afgantsy returned from the battlefield with expectation of the public and political reception awarded to their fathers' generation, the state chose to turn a blind eye. There could only be one category of soldiers deemed veterans of war in the Soviet Union, and those who did not serve in the Great Patriotic War were deemed a lower class.

The KGB Renews its Focus on Dissent

As the Politburo waned of age, its nostalgia for the past was marked by a sharp increase in the policing of suspected dissidents. Between 1976 and the Soviet-Afghan War's first year of duration in 1980, there were 62 people convicted under Article 70 ("anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda") and 285 under Article 190 ("hooliganism" through "the organization or participation in group actions that disrupt the social order") of the Criminal Code of the RSFSR.¹² After Brezhnev's speech at the 26th Congress of the Communist Party these numbers jumped: between 1981 and 1985, those convicted under Article 70 more than doubled to 150, while 390 were sentenced under Article 190; The average number of those convicted each year in the RSFSR alone increased from 70 to 108 individuals.¹³ The tightening of the noose that began as a precaution for the 1980 Olympics thus escalated for the first five years of the Soviet-Afghan War.

Initially, the KGB's focus during this time bracket remained on dissidents of the past. On 11 January 1981, Natalia Lazareva, who authored the Mariia club's manifesto against the Afghan War, was sentenced to ten months in prison. Her admission of the "one-sided nature of her articles" in the organization's journal gave her a lighter sentence

¹² Sheila Fitzpatrick, Vladimir Kozlov, and Sergei Mironenko, eds., *Sedition: Everyday Resistance in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev and Brezhnev* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 44-5.

¹³ *Ibid*, 45.

than others.¹⁴ Lazareva's release in November, however, was short-lived: defying the warnings of the KGB she resumed work in the Mariia club, then preoccupied with the course of Solidarność in Poland. On 13 March 1982 Lazareva was arrested once more under Article 70 and sentenced to seven years imprisonment, followed by five years' internal exile.¹⁵ Before the year's end, she was broken by successive interrogations and named "more than fifty persons in Leningrad, Moscow, and Riga" who participated in Mariia.¹⁶ Its publication of *samizdat* journals ceased soon thereafter.

Still on the radar of the KGB was Andrei Sakharov. Andropov, addressing the Central Committee on the effectiveness of Sakharov's eighteen months of internal exile, remained flustered as he bemoaned the man's "anti-Soviet hullabaloo" and "provocative statements" that continued to enter circulation at home and abroad.¹⁷ No less troublesome was Sakharov's spouse, Elena Bonner, who Andropov felt "incites him to resume his hostile activity" in exile. Speaking on 11 March 1981 Andropov alleged that, "On Bonner's initiative Sakharov prepared 27 malicious anti-Soviet materials, timed to coincide... with the most important political events." "Many of these materials," he continued, "interpret the events in... Afghanistan from positions known to be slanderous."¹⁸ It was under Andropov's initiative that the KGB thus chose to make the liquidation of the Moscow Helsinki Group a priority: founded on 12 May 1976 with a

¹⁴ Peter Reddaway, "The Olympic Hangover," *The Spectator Archive*, 14 February 1981, accessed 18 February 2016, <http://archive.spectator.co.uk/article/14th-february-1981/9/the-olympic-hangover>.

¹⁵ Voznesenskaia, "The Independent Women's Movement in Russia," 336.

¹⁶ John B. Dunlop, *The Faces of Russian Nationalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 292-93.

¹⁷ "Andropov to the Central Committee; The Effectiveness of Banishing Sakharov to Gorky," Andrei Sakharov KGB File, accessed 2 August 2017, http://web.archive.org/web/20150802191034/www.yale.edu/annals/sakharov/documents_frames/Sakharov_147.htm.

¹⁸ Ibid.

press conference held at Sakharov's apartment, the organization's founding principle was to "gather, with the help of the public, any information about violations of the [Helsinki Accords]... and address relevant heads of government and society."¹⁹ While Sakharov himself was not affiliated with the Moscow Helsinki Group, his wife Elena Bonner was among its most active founding members; in this sense, the KGB's renewed focus on the organization was an extension of its paranoid persecution of the couple.

Over the course of 1981, members of the Helsinki Group were sentenced to a total of 60 years in the Gulag and 40 years in exile.²⁰ By 31 December, Elena Bonner, the Moscow Helsinki Group's legal consultant Sofiia Kalistratova, and Naum Meiman, a voice for *refusniks*, were the only remaining members of the organization. Bonner would officially dissolve the group nine months later on 8 September 1982. Nonetheless, Sakharov was undeterred from voicing his stance on the Afghan War. Speaking in a covert interview with the *Washington Post*, he redoubled his call for "decisive countermeasures", stating that "Diplomatic pressure should be increased, new forms of pressure found and, if necessary, additional measures should be employed, including the supply of defensive weapons to the guerrillas."²¹

The younger generation of drafting age, in contrast, remained interested in domestic rather than international affairs, with an ideological fatigue that hindered the formation of grassroots movements among them. Andrei Okulov, conducting interviews with Leningrad youth for the emigre journal of *Posev*, captured a snapshot of rebels

¹⁹ "Ob obrazovanii obshchestvennoi gruppy sodeistviia vypolneniiu Khel'sinskikh soglashenii v SSSR," *Dokumenty Moskovskoi Khel'sinskoi gruppy, 1976-1982*, edited by Liudmila Alekseeva et al (Moskva: Moskovskaia Khel'sinskaia gruppy, 2006), 23.

²⁰ "Moskovskaia Khel'sinskaia Gruppy," www.mhg.ru/english/18e49c2, accessed 22 January 2016.

²¹ "Andropov to the Central Committee; The Effectiveness of Banishing Sakharov to Gorky."

without a cause at this time. “So who are you, exactly,” he asked a young aficionado of Jean-Paul Sartre and Herbert Marcuse. “Are you Trotskyists? Anarchists? Maoists?” “Well, we’re a little of each,” the young man replied. “But the most important thing is that we are opposed to state capitalism. We agree that we must first establish a democratic regime based on a Western model, but we believe that this is merely a first step toward a *true* democracy.”²² The younger generation’s preference for internal rather than external dissent was reflected in their reaction to Sakharov’s exile. One interviewee identified as a monarchist, and expressed his opposition by “writing letters to the Soviet press in defense of Sakharov, reading them aloud in private, then burning them with a clear conscience,” rather than mailing them to authorities or international organizations as his predecessors had done.²³

While the chance of being drafted for “international duty” weighed on the minds of Soviet youth, draft dodging remained an exception to the rule. The obtainment of a doctor’s note through bribery was beyond the financial means of the average citizen; as such, the privileged draft-dodgers were soon subjected to disparaging slang. The term *peregnut’sia* (“to bend over backwards”) for instance, was used toward those who, through their contacts and bribery, were able to avoid the war and serve within Soviet borders. As soon as such a recruit was certain that he would not serve in Afghanistan, he would “immediately sit down to write a patriotic statement,” asking that he be sent “to deliver fraternal aid to the brotherly people of an allied country,” in false solidarity with

²² Andrei Okulov, “Nastroeniia molodezhnoi oppozitsii,” *Posev* 1 (January 1981): 11.

²³ *Ibid.*

the state narrative.²⁴ “They will not burn their call-up papers on Red Square – that it is only for the West,” Okulov surmised. “This is our own way, Soviet-style!”²⁵

With Leningrad youth musing over “true democracies” and showing little interest in the Afghan War, the Politburo’s focus remained on Muslim students enrolled at universities through treaties of friendship between nations. While the students showed little sympathy for the mujahideen, the KGB expressed concern over a splintering along ethnic lines that mirrored the persisting turmoil of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). On 27 April 1981 at the Kiev Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages, a ceremony was held to mark the third anniversary of the Saur Revolution. While the Party Committee of the PDPA in Kiev received orders to hang a portrait of President Babrak Karmal (of the Parcham faction) to mark the event, the majority of the 361 Afghan students in Kiev were supporters of his predecessor, Nur Mohammed Taraki (of the rival Khalq faction).²⁶ In a rejection of the PDPA’s instructions, Afghan students hung a portrait of the late Taraki in anticipation of the gala, rather than the standing president. An action that fell between open dissent and deviation from instructions, Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee of the PDPA, M. Taev intervened, demanding that students adhere to orders from Kabul. Those who refused to do so would be deported from Kiev. After 48 hours of negotiations with the Afghan students, an agreement was reached: a speech approved by the state would be read aloud with President Karmal’s portrait in the background, while Taraki’s portrait would be relegated to a photo exhibition at the event. While Afghan students of the Khalq faction stopped short of

²⁴ Ibid, 12.

²⁵ Ibid, 13.

²⁶ “Ob obstanovke v afganskom zemliachestve,” GASBU, f.16. spr. 1087, ll. 211-12.

public demonstrations, the KGB erred on the side of caution and issued an order to “aid the administration of... educational institutions of the city to prevent any possible negative demonstrations by Afghan students.”²⁷

State authorities were especially cautious at this time in light of reports issued to commanding officers and the Politburo by Colonel Leonid Shershnev (1938-2014). Stationed in the 190th Military Agitation Propaganda Detachment, Shershnev was deployed to Afghanistan with the first wave of troops on 25 December 1979. Over the course of his two years’ service, Shershnev, accompanied by “a Soviet doctor, a cinema operator, a youth adviser, two or three political officers, a group of young Afghan artists, Party propagandists, and a mullah” journeyed to villages to spread the revolution. The futility of such missions led Colonel Shershnev to become disillusioned with the war. In a memorandum to the Turkestan Military District, he bluntly stated that, “Since the end of March 1981 the military and political situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated almost universally.”²⁸ Moreover, “The enemy strikes at the most sensitive targets, killing party activists... destroying... hospitals [and] office buildings... driving out the people’s government... and imposing counter-revolutionary ‘Islamic Committees’.”²⁹

Remarkably, Colonel Shershnev escaped any consequences for his grim assessment of the war. In a growing split within the Soviet Army, a sympathetic General Dmitrii Volkogonov – then writing a biography of Stalin that would go unpublished until the years of glasnost – took Shershnev under his wing as the Chief of Special Propaganda

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Vladimir Snegirov and David Gai, *Vtorzhenie: Neizvestnye stranitsy neob'javlennoi voyny* (Moskva: IKPA, 1991), accessed on 10 June 2016, http://www.e-reading.club/chapter.php/1023044/53/negirev_-_Vtorzhenie_Neizvestnye_stranicy_neobyavlennoy_voyny.html.

²⁹ Ibid.

focused on psychological warfare.³⁰

General Volkogonov's decision to shelter Colonel Shershnev allowed him to become one of the first vocal critics of the Soviet-Afghan War who went unscathed. In spring 1983, not long after General Secretary Iurii Andropov succeeded Brezhnev, Shershnev completed a study of readers' letters concerning the Afghan War that were sent to *Komsomolskaia Pravda*. His report was delivered to the Chief of the Main Political Administration of the Soviet Army and Navy, Aleksei Epishev. Readers were in fact well aware of the grim stalemate in Afghanistan. Some of the prevailing themes in the letters included:

- The authors of the letters were mostly mothers whose sons have died, were serving in, or may be drafted to Afghanistan;
- Opposition to internationalism as military assistance, deeming combat losses in Afghanistan unjustified ("He died without honor or glory in a foreign land");
- Expressing a lack of prestige in serving in Afghanistan ("Service in Afghanistan is... a place of penal servitude {mesto katorgi}");
- Complaints of indifference, callousness, and formality toward the victims and their parents ("the man who delivered the corpse... didn't tell us anything");
- Requests to perpetuate the memory of soldiers killed in Afghanistan ("The Motherland must pay tribute to the victims").³¹

The Question of Remembrance and Memorialization

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

The state's refusal to openly memorialize those killed in Afghanistan, noted in Colonel Shershnev's study, was one of the earliest grievances about the war to be concentrated in letters. On 30 July 1981, the Politburo held a meeting to discuss the issue, chaired by an ailing Mikhail Suslov. Notably absent were Leonid Brezhnev, Andrei Gromyko, and Dmitri Ustinov; of the quartet that first authorized military action in Afghanistan, only Iurii Andropov was present. With casualties mounting, the question of debate was families' rights to place an epitaph on loved ones' headstones. "The matter is not the money," remarked Suslov in his opening comments. "But what we will write about this on... the headstone; in some cemeteries there could be several."³² Of those who partook in the discussion, only Head of the International Department of the Central Committee Boris Ponomarev showed any flexibility on the matter, remarking that "Many letters are coming" and "Parents of the dead especially complain that their children and relatives died in Afghanistan. We need to consider this."³³ Any such consideration was quickly suspended for unanimity, with the aging Nikolai Tikhonov (1905-97) showing near-indifference to the matter. "Of course, they always need to be buried," he conceded. "It's another matter whether inscriptions ought to be made."³⁴ Andropov, too, felt that it was not the time for open acknowledgment of casualties in Afghanistan, remarking that, "regarding perpetuating the memory, we need to wait a while." The Politburo meeting concluded with an addendum that "replies to the parents and relatives... be brief and,

³² Aleksandr Liakhovskii, ed., "CC CPSU Politburo Meeting, July 30, 1981," *Plamia Afgana* (Moscow: Iskon, 1999), translated by Gary Goldberg, accessed 12 June 2016, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111793>.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

moreover, standard.”³⁵ While the very first reported casualty appeared in the Soviet press in September 1981 this official figure increased only to six dead and six wounded by January 1983.³⁶

This question of recognition and remembrance of those killed in Afghanistan was part of a broader debate on collective memory in the Soviet Union as the second year of the war wound to a close. By and large, the Politburo remained focused on enshrining heroes of the past. Having carried out a re-evaluation of high school curriculum on the Great Patriotic War and the need for military service in 1980, authorities were quick to red-flag an artists group known as *Kievproekt* on 23 November 1981. Founded in 1968 by Avraam Miletskii (b. 1918), a man of the Politburo leaders’ generation, Kievproekt had deviated from the rigours of socialist-realism in its proposal for a memorial to the dead in Kiev’s Memorial Park. Deemed “alien to the traditions of Soviet art,” and “degrading to all that mankind lives and fights for” by the KGB, the proposed monument, in the organization’s words, would capture:

The horrific incarnation of death... as it would be in a *contemporary* labour camp. The architectural design would emphasize... hopelessness. Especially noteworthy would be a warning about the *contemporary period*, in which cosmonauts would be ground by the wheel of history. ... This captures the path of mankind, his history, his struggles, his life over time until death. ... It encourages people to hold their dear ones near in their final days, against the frightening idea of the

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Amstutz, *Afghanistan: the First Five Years*, 158.

meaningless of existence.³⁷

Despite the choice use of such stilted ideological terminology as “man’s way of life, his trials and triumphs” and “defense of the fatherland,” Kievproekt’s proposal was soundly rejected and its artists placed under surveillance.³⁸ With such even broadly-worded projects forbidden by the state, the memorialization of those killed in Afghanistan remained out of sight and mind.

The Muted Death of Petr Ivanovich Shkidchenko

There were many terrible cases of PTSD. One woman told me that upon living with her husband after he returned from Afghanistan, she had to lock him in a room of the house at night. Because if he heard a noise he could wake up and start killing everyone. Slit your wrists with glass and so on.

- Vasili, afganets³⁹

The New Year opened with the passing of two men whose deaths marked the onset of gradual change in the state narrative on the Soviet-Afghan War. Chief Ideologue Mikhail Suslov, already battling arteriosclerosis and diabetes at 79 years of age, succumbed to coronary disease on 25 January 1982. His death marked the onset of a struggle between Iurii Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko to determine who would succeed Leonid Brezhnev. In both the Soviet Union and the United States, the death of Suslov and its political ramifications swept newspaper headlines. Lost in the media

³⁷ “Ob ideinoi-khudozhestvennykh proshchetakh, dopushchennykh pri proektirovanii i stroitel’stve memorial’no-pogrebel’nogo kompleksa v g. Kieve,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1091, ll. 325-32. Italics are my own.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Vasili, interview with author, June 2015.

hysteria was Lieutenant-General Petr Ivanovich Shkidchenko (1922-82), who died on 19 January, one week prior to Suslov. A highly decorated veteran of the Great Patriotic War wounded four times over, his wartime experience ranged from the Battle of Kiev in 1941 to the abbreviated Soviet-Japanese War in 1945. On 23 January, four days after his death, an obituary for Lieutenant General Shkidchenko graced the pages of *Krasnaia zvezda*. Opening with the vague announcement that Shkidchenko had “perished in an air disaster while performing his duty,” it quickly reverted to a recitation of a man who “shone with selfless devotion to the socialist Motherland.”⁴⁰ The biography went as far as his undated work as a combat trainer in East Germany and deputy commander of the Odessa Military District, before reverting to a recollection of the man’s ranks and medals.

Omitted from Lieutenant General Shkidchenko’s obituary were the final two years of his life. In June 1980 he was redeployed from Odessa to act as an advisor to the Ministry of Defence of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Shkidchenko was tasked with the planning of joint military operations conducted between the 40th Army and the Afghan National Army. Over the course of his 17 months in Afghanistan, he partook in 25 major combat operations against the mujahideen and was reputed for leading counterattacks against the enemy. On 19 January 1982, Shkidchenko and his crew aboard an Mi-8 chopper were shot down by the mujahideen approximately 16 kilometres from the city of Khost, near the Pakistani border.⁴¹ He was identified only by his charred notebook and a wristwatch he received as a gift from Soviet Defence Minister Dmitrii

⁴⁰ “P.I. Shkidchenko,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, 23 January 1982, 4.

⁴¹ “Geroi Rossisskoi Federatsii Shkidchenko Petr Ivanovich,” accessed 15 June 2016, www.warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=7812.

Ustinov.⁴² A military memorial service was held for Shkidchenko and his crew in Kabul, after which their bodies were flown to the Soviet Union for burial.⁴³ His son, Vladimir Petrovich Shkidchenko, speaking thirty years later, recalled a conversation with his father during his brief vacation from serving in Afghanistan:

He said that he would carry out his duty as necessary, but... was convinced that efforts to move the country from feudalism to socialism were doomed to failure. ... With pain and bitterness, he spoke of treachery in the ranks of the Afghan Army: all planned operations against the Mujahideen became well known to them beforehand.⁴⁴

Word of his father's death reached Vladimir while he served as a deputy tank commander in the Far Eastern Military District, after which he took leave to attend the funeral in Dnepropetrovsk – a closed city that became home to 1 in 131 of those recruited for the Afghan War.⁴⁵ “When my mother returned from the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan with my father's coffin, she opened the door of the apartment and I heard neither tears, nor laments,” he recalled. “She could only say: ‘Children, I couldn't save your father'....’”⁴⁶ During a stopover in the Moscow Military District after his father's funeral, Vladimir was confronted by a high-ranking chief-of-staff. “Did you know that in Afghanistan, Peter Ivanovich was frequently penalized?” he demanded. “Time and time again, he refused to follow the order: ‘Draw your weapon and lead Afghan soldiers on an

⁴² Valerii Ablazov, “Vladimir Shkidchenko: ‘Otets mne zapomnilsia takim...’,” accessed 16 June 2016, artofwar.ru/a/ablazow_walerij_iwanowich/text_a127.shtml.

⁴³ “Soviet General Reported Killed in Afghanistan,” *The Telegraph*, 23 February 1982, 5.

⁴⁴ Ablazov, “Vladimir Shkidchenko.”

⁴⁵ Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War*, 29.

⁴⁶ Ablazov, “Vladimir Shkidchenko.”

attack!” Vladimir, recalling his father’s discontent with the war, replied, “I think such a penalty is a much greater honour than a lot of medals.”⁴⁷

The Emergence of Central Asian Heroes

Public disgruntlement over the lack of remembrance and memorialization paid to soldiers’ sacrifice in Afghanistan became particularly acute in the Central Asian republics during the early years of the war. The first reports of demonstrations came from Almaty, Kazakhstan in March 1981. Western reportage on the event ranged from it being the sign of an anti-war movement to demands for national succession.⁴⁸ This naïveté was reinforced by the U.S. House of Representatives’ Charlie Wilson, who adamantly lobbied to promote militant Islam in Central Asia. The reality was quite different: the demonstrators in Almaty protested not against the war, but against “the burial of Kazakh soldiers killed in Afghanistan in a ‘secular’ (svetskom) city cemetery,” and demanded “a burial according to Muslim rites.”⁴⁹ While small anti-war protests emerged after the redeployment of the second Muslim Battalion from October 1981 to November 1983, their objections were the number of Central Asian casualties and exhibited no sympathy for the mujahideen.

The strong support in Central Asia for military efforts in Afghanistan was a positive that the authorities in Moscow hoped to preserve. Thus, on 25 September 1981 the Central Committee redoubled its persecution of religious deviants and passed a decree

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Kuzio, “Opposition in the USSR to the occupation of Afghanistan,” 101n18.

⁴⁹ “Raznye soobshcheniia, 7-33,” *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, accessed on 13 March 2015, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/category/1981/>.

entitled “On Measures to Counter the Enemy’s Efforts to use the ‘Islamic Factor’ Against the Soviet Union.” This led to increased monitoring of suspected anti-Soviet propaganda and unsanctioned religious organizations. In the Kyrgyz Republic, for instance, an alleged “58 unregistered Muslim groups and 497 unregistered ministers of Muslim cults” were counted by November 1981.⁵⁰ However, in discussing the imposition of the decree, the Central Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic’s Communist Party showed little concern over the danger of radicalization from the Afghan war. Its recommendations included:

1. To accept the decree of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of 25 September 1981... [and] support its implementation;
2. The... intensification of atheist propaganda, and the strengthening of work on the resolute suppression of subversive activities of the Muslim clergy and their supporters...;
3. The... liquidation of illegally operating Muslim communities and neutralization of the activity of unregistered mullahs;
4. The State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting, newspapers, and journals should regularly cover the practice of atheist education... and expose the inhumane nature and immorality of religious ideology... to counter our ideological opponents’ use of “the Islamic factor”....⁵¹

This stance was echoed throughout the Central Asian republics and led to the first posthumous rehabilitation of an afghanets as a Hero of the Soviet Union. At the age of 18,

⁵⁰ “O realizatsii postanovleniia TsK KPSS ot 25 sentiabria 1981 goda ‘O meropriiatiakh po protivodeistviuu popytkam protivnika ispol’zovat’ ‘islamskii factor’ vo vrazhdemnykh Sovetskomu Soiuzu tseliakh,’” TsGAPD KR, f. 56. op. 231, d. 188, l. 2.

⁵¹ Ibid, ll. 2-5.

Khozhanepes Gokovich Charyev (1963-81) was working at a kolkhoz outside the industrial city of Chardzhou, Turkmenistan. On 4 February 1981, Charyev was drafted for military service and deployed to Afghanistan as a grenadier four months later. Killed during house-to-house fighting on 16 September, he was flown home in a sealed zinc coffin and buried upon arrival.⁵² A posthumous recipient of the Order of the Red Star, Charyev was deemed “an example of unfading heroism” in the New Year.⁵³ Bestowing this title upon him was none other than First Secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party, Mukhamednazar Gapurov (1922-99). Delivering a speech to the 27th Congress of the Komsomol of Turkmenistan on 26 March 1982, Gapurov invoked Khozhanepes Charyev’s name to illustrate the patriotic values that the Party hoped to instill in Soviet youth. In a departure from the stilted obituary penned for Colonel General Shkidchenko in *Krasnaia zvezda* in February, Gapurov declared that:

An eternal symbol of fidelity... is provided by the bullet-ridden and bloodstained Komsomol card of the eighteen-year-old lad Khodzhanepes Charyev... who perished in battle on September 16 last year, carrying out the sacred duty of a soldier and internationalist. A son of the Turkmen people... brought up in the spirit of the unfading heroism of the Soviet people and its Armed Forces....⁵⁴

The statement issued by Gapurov ran counter to Moscow’s policy of silence on Afghanistan, and was indicative of the war’s differing reception in individual republics. While the dissident voices of the Baltics captured Western attentions, their losses in the

⁵² “Pamiati pavshikh v Afganskoi voine,” accessed 20 March 2016, afgan.ru/memorial/565hudayberdyev-saparmurat-afgan-.html.

⁵³ Bess Brown, “Turkmen Party First Secretary Praises Young Soldier Killed in Afghanistan,” *Radio Liberty* 152/82, 5 April 1982, 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

war paled in comparison to those of the Central Asian republics even when adjusted for proportion. Despite this, anti-war protests in the Central Asian republics were negligible. This spoke to the broad range of public opinion on the Soviet-Afghan War, whatever its degree of speculation, in its first three years duration.

This oversight speaks to the limitations of the West's reliance on expatriate commentators' interpretation of the Soviet-Afghan War at the time. In the summer that followed the heroization of Charyev, a small demonstration took place in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. Held accountable was Pavel Airapetov (b. 1929), a store manager arrested alongside four others on charges of distributing pamphlets against the Afghan War that advertised "false funerals in order to cause resentment."⁵⁵ His companion, Slava Denisov, was confined to a psychiatric hospital for collecting signatures on the issue. Taras Kuzio, citing the incident in 1987, bemoaned that, while "opposition included many groups, nationalities, individuals, geographic scope and political orientation," their protests were "ignored by most commentators."⁵⁶ While a mournful grievance for Western romantics, the protest of five individuals in Dushanbe was ultimately negligible. Had the Western press taken note of such a small demonstration, it would have only confirmed that very few Soviet Muslims sympathized with the mujahideen, and that the majority of Soviet citizens showed approval or indifference to the conflict. It was a circumstance that allowed the Politburo to focus its efforts on the diagnosis and repression of loosely organized, disgruntled youth groups emerging on the home front, for whom the Soviet-Afghan War remained an afterthought.

⁵⁵ "Raznye soobshcheniia 5-6," *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, accessed 12 June 2016, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/category/1984/>.

⁵⁶ Kuzio, "Opposition in the USSR to the occupation of Afghanistan," 113.

Soviet Rebels Without a Cause

Nowadays, if the police need to frighten the local mafia they come to us afgantsy. “Come on boys!” they say, “give us a hand!” Or if they want to harass or break up some unofficial political group, “Call the afgantsy in!” they say. An afganets, in other words, is a killing machine... No wonder we’re feared and disliked by everyone.

- afganets⁵⁷

Two days after *Krasnaia zvezda*’s announcement of General Lieutenant Shkidchenko’s death on 19 January 1982, a bizarre, handwritten note was found pinned to the door of an apartment in Rubezhnoe, a city in the province of Lugansk:

Anarchists of all countries unite! Down with the Soviet government! Comrades!
The Soviet government promises you an almost paradisiacal life, but in fact it is a lie. The Communists deceive the people. Our motto is that a communist shall hang from every lamppost. Long live social-anarchism!

Social-anarchic Union. 25.2.1981⁵⁸

The absurd nature of the document, its hyperbole, and its coincidence with the burial of a decorated veteran of the Great Patriotic War captured the state of relations between Soviet authorities and a younger generation. Focused on the policing of international affairs and content with its strangulation of the dissident generation, the KGB found itself concerned with adaptation to new domestic movements in the Soviet Union. The first

⁵⁷ Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 94.

⁵⁸ “Proiavlenie,” GASBU, f. 16, str. 1086, l. 98.

such movement to gather major headlines in the West was a demonstration of teenaged neo-Nazis marking Hitler's birthday in Moscow on 20 April 1982. Media outlets reported anywhere from "just more than a dozen to 100 or so" delinquents clad in black shirts with swastika armbands who gathered on Pushkin Square to honour the dictator their parents' generation fought against.⁵⁹ Twice the group of teenagers emerged, at 17:00 and 19:00, flashing Nazi salutes and crying "Heil Hitler!" And twice the Soviet police chose not to intervene, instead recruiting gangs of *fanaty* – a term for loosely organized gangs of soccer fans prone to riots – to physically intervene and "restore justice" (*vosstanavlivat spravedlivost'*). Between two to six youth were detained after the scuffles subsided, and were released soon thereafter.⁶⁰ The incident was a departure from the past and remarkable for the speculation that followed: the neo-Nazis were said to be the offspring of the upper class, with one rumour claiming that "the grandson of Andrei Kirilenko, then a member of the Politburo, took part, and that he bore Hitler's portrait."⁶¹ The police's decision to pit two young social groups – the neo-Nazis and the *fanaty* – against one another marked a revision of anti-demonstration tactics, and stirred a brief wave of Western speculation on the involvement of *afgantsy* in the melee. Jim Riordan, for instance, wrote of disgruntled young veterans whose underground clubs "engage in military-patriotic education of young people, feeling anger at the westernized society they return to after the war."⁶² Others placed them in the opposite political spectrum, citing

⁵⁹ Bushnell, *Moscow Graffiti*, 149.

⁶⁰ "Raznye soobshcheniia, 8-23," *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, accessed 17 June 2016, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/category/1982/>; "Narodnye volneniia v SSSR. 1953-1984 (Chast' 2)," accessed 17 June 2016, afanarizm.livejournal.com/153968.html.

⁶¹ Bushnell, *Moscow Graffiti*, 150.

⁶² Jim Riordan, "Teenage Gangs, Afgantsy and Neo-fascists," in *Soviet Youth Culture*, edited by Jim Riordan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 129.

“reports of pro-fascist demonstrations in Pushkin Square, Moscow, in August 1982 by former airborne troops with service in Afghanistan.”⁶³ Arguably, this spoke to both a lack of unity among the afgantsy after two-and-a-half years of war, and Western reliance on *samizdat* accounts at the time. With the luxury of hindsight, it is much more probable that the afgantsy leaned toward the military-patriotic education of Soviet youth after their return, or struggled privately with reintegration.⁶⁴

The Evolution of Estonian Opposition

While Russian and Ukrainian youth experimented with loose-knit, sporadically active groups – be it student philosophers of Leningrad, Muscovite neo-Nazis, or Ukrainian anarchists – an Estonian movement with greater coherency continued to evolve. The site of prolonged demonstrations by Soviet youth in October 1980, Tallinn remained a hotbed of dissension. The second year of the Afghan War opened with a hearing at the Supreme Court of the Estonian SSR from 5 to 8 January 1981. Facing charges were Mart Niklus (b.1934) and Iurii Kukk (1940-81). Both men were signatories of the open letter to the United Nations from Baltic dissidents on 17 January 1980 that denounced the Soviet-Afghan War and objected to Olympic events being held in Tallinn. One year on, they faced charges for the writing and circulation of “anti-Soviet statements and articles,” “oral propaganda,” and “defamation” in private conversations.⁶⁵ The

⁶³ Kuzio, “Opposition in the USSR to the occupation of Afghanistan,” 102.

⁶⁴ Interviewees in Russia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and Moldova each spoke of visiting high schools to share their own experiences on the battlefield and reintegration. Ironically, statements warning of “neo-Nazis” and “fascism” in Ukraine were frequently issued by the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan following the outbreak of the War in Donbass.

⁶⁵ “Sud v Estonii,” *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, 15 January 1981, accessed 29 February 2016, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/category/1981/>.

sentences that the two men received spoke to the Soviet state's concerns in 1981. Kukk was sentenced to two years in prison for the circulation of "defamatory documents" concerning the Afghan war and providing a letter against Soviet intervention in Afghanistan to a correspondent of the *Christian Science Monitor*.⁶⁶ Mart Niklus, in contrast, was sentenced to ten years in a labour camp and five years' internal exile for the circulation of materials that divulged the secret protocols on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.⁶⁷ The preservation of the state narrative on the Great Patriotic War thus remained of much greater priority to authorities than that of the Soviet-Afghan War. Protest movements in the East European republics, conversely, knit the two wars into a single narrative.

Approximately 10,300 men were conscripted from the Baltics for the Soviet-Afghan War between 1979 and 1989.⁶⁸ Though the smallest in the number of draftees, proportionately Estonia suffered higher losses than Latvia or Lithuania. Moreover, the protest movements in the Estonian republic were characterized "by the youth of its participants."⁶⁹ On 24 February 1980, less than a month after Mart Niklus and Iurii Kukk signed their appeal to the United Nations, an annual, unsanctioned demonstration marking Estonia's pre-Soviet independence took place throughout the country. In

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ "Case of Mart Niklus," *Council of Europe: Thirty-Eighth Ordinary Assembly* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1987), 40; Edward J. Derwinski, "H. Con. Res. 218," 97th Congress (1981-1982), accessed on 29 February 2016, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/97th-congress/house-concurrent-resolution/218>.

⁶⁸ Approximately 5,000 of these men were drafted from Lithuania, 93 of whom were killed. Latvia saw 3,640 drawn from its ranks (63 killed), and Estonia, 1,652 (38 killed). For Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian statistics, see: "Otkrytie pamiatnika – synam Latvii, pogibshim v Afganskoi voine," accessed 3 March 2016, pamjatnikvtihomsadu.jimdo.com/открытие-памятника/; "O voine," Litovskaia assotsiatsiia uchastnikov voiny v Afganistane, accessed 3 March 2016, www.afganai.lt/ru/; "Memorial," Tallinskii Soiuz veteranov Afganistana, lokal'nykh voyn, voennykh konfliktov i voennoi sluzhby <Boevoe Bratstvo>, accessed 3 March 2016, www.relvavendlus.ee/content/2/emorial/1/.

⁶⁹ Liudmila Alekseeva, "Estonskoe natsional'no-demokraticeskoe dvizhenie," Memorial, accessed on 3 March 2015, www.memo.ru/history/diss/books/ALEXEEVA/.

contrast to years past, Estonian flags were inscribed with new slogans: “Long live the anniversary of the republic!” was now accompanied by “All troops out of Afghanistan!”⁷⁰ Five youth were arrested for hooliganism, with another 22 convicted on 24 February on the same charges between 1981 and 1983.⁷¹ The surge of nationalism among Estonian youth and their utilization of the Afghan War as a tool of protest for the cause thus spread much quicker than in other Soviet republics. Moreover, the fate of Iurii Kukk provided the Estonians with their own Andrei Sakharov in terms of martyrs: after a four-month hunger strike Kukk died on 27 March 1981 after being force-fed in a prison camp not far from Murmansk.⁷²

By this time, Estonian voices against the Afghan war were not limited to urban regions or the intelligentsia. On 14 and 15 May 1981, Tiit Madisson, a dissident worker at a fishery kolkhoz (rybolovetskogo kolkhoza), was summoned to the Supreme Court of the Estonian SSR after three months’ detention. Madisson’s written crimes were twofold, having sent letters on the Estonian national question to the German radio station of *Deutsche Welle*, and protested military intervention in Afghanistan through letters to Soviet leaders.⁷³ Although just three months had passed since Iurii Kukk was jailed on similar charges, Madisson faced a sentence of twice the length: four years in the camps followed by two years’ exile for blending the war with demands for secession.

The sentencing of Tiit Madisson was followed one month later by the first

⁷⁰ Aleksei Korolev, Larisa Koroleva, and Aleksei Mol’kin, eds., *Sovetskoe oppozitsionnoe dvizhenie v Pribaltike, 1950-1980-e gg.*, accessed 3 May 2016, history.snauka.ru/2014/04/956.

⁷¹ Alekseeva, “Estonskoe natsional’no-demokraticheskoe dvizhenie.”

⁷² “Estonian Dissident, 40, Said to Die in Soviet Camp,” *New York Times*, 29 March 1981, accessed 3 March 2016, www.nytimes.com/1981/03/29/world/around-the-world-estonian-dissident-40-said-to-die-in-soviet-camp.html; Liudmila Alekseeva, “Estonskoe natsional’no-demokraticheskoe dvizhenie.”

⁷³ “Sud nad Tiitom Madisonom,” *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, accessed 3 March 2016, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/category/1981/>.

comprehensive manifesto of a Soviet dissident group to name the withdrawal of the 40th Army from Afghanistan as a primary demand. In contrast to earlier *samizdat* publications, such as Mariia's eponymous journal, the manifesto entered circulation in multiple regions of the republic simultaneously; the cities of Tallinn, Tartu, and Narva saw ample copies of the document read by Estonian citizens. Credited to the Democratic National Front of the Soviet Union, its opening salvo read:

Although we condemn imperialism, our country has turned into an imperialist, colonial power, imposing our will on the peoples outside our borders. We invaded Afghanistan in hopes of a quick military victory. More than 1.5 million Afghans have since fled from our poisonous needles. The first year of war has claimed more than 5,000 lives of our boys, with 10,000 injured. In the name of what?⁷⁴

Moreover, the Estonian authors showed no fear of persecution, issuing a seven-point list of demands to the Soviet government. Their aspirations went far beyond those who bowed their heads on Pushkin Square to express international solidarity on Human Rights Day. While both groups cited the Helsinki Accords to back their demands, the similarities ended there. "Realizing that external force is not an acceptable way to solve our own problems," the Democratic National Front stated:

We demand that the Soviet government immediately:

1. Withdraw the Soviet Army from Afghanistan to their homeland.
2. Cease interfering in the internal affairs of Poland.
3. Cease all export of foods.

⁷⁴ "Demokraticheskii natsional'nyi front Sovetskogo Soiuza. 'Memorandum' i 'proklamatsiia.' Pervod s estonskogo, sdelannyi na zapade," *Materialy samizdata*, AC4503 (1981): 1.

4. Abolish discriminatory rules of trade.
5. Release political prisoners and abolish sentences of political exile.
6. Reduce the period of compulsory military service to six months.
7. Observe the implementation of the United Nations' declaration on human rights and the Helsinki Agreement.⁷⁵

The Democratic National Front also envisioned demonstrations of greater frequency and duration than those of their predecessors. The group stated that on 1 December 1981, a half-hour of silence would be held in Tallinn from 10:00 to 10:30 A.M., a statement to be repeated on the first working day of each month. The agenda reflected the growing appeal of Western pacifism to Soviet youth in the early 1980s, the proclamation reading:

LET ALL WHEELS GRIND TO A STOP! LET PUBLIC TRANSPORT GRIND TO A STOP! CEASE ANY MOVEMENT AND ANY ACTIVITY... If detained for questions by authorities during the HALF-HOUR OF SILENCE, ANSWER THEM WITH SILENCE.⁷⁶

Advertised six months in advance, the protests ultimately proved unsuccessful. Western correspondents who reported on the half-hour of silence were more struck by the heightened number of police and plainclothes observers than the demonstrators' message. The employees of factories and institutions who did cease their work between 10:00 and 10:30, it seemed, "left their jobs for half an hour to take a smoke" rather than support a

⁷⁵ Ibid, 3.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 4.

noble cause. About 150 people were arrested across the country for partaking in the demonstration and released soon after.⁷⁷

Nonetheless, events in the Estonian SSR offered a snapshot of Soviet youth movements in flux. If the public demonstrations of 22 September to 9 October 1980 were strong in numbers, 1981 saw protesters explore different means of protest that captured the growing preoccupation of Soviet youth with Western culture in the 1980s – a trend that proved alienating for many who returned from Afghanistan. “The war and life back home have one thing in common: neither are anything like the way they’re described in books!” remarked one afghanets who struggled to resettle. “I’ve created a world of my own for myself, thank God, a world of books and music which has cut me off from all that and been my salvation.”⁷⁸

A Shift In Public Interests

The last months of Brezhnev’s tenure as General Secretary thus saw a range of cracks appear in the sociopolitical composure of the Soviet Union. Different organizations had, in a short period of time, begun to incorporate the Soviet-Afghan War into their political platforms, be it the Democratic National Front in Estonia; the Communist Party of Turkmenistan; or delinquent youth groups in Moscow. This was not a uniform trend among the latter, many of which took greater interest in Western themes that ranged from neo-Nazism to pacifism. The Soviet government’s concern over the wealth of underground movements was evident in a study carried out by the Ukrainian

⁷⁷ Alekseeva, “Estonskoe natsional’no-demokraticeskoe dvizhenie.”

⁷⁸ Alekseivich, *Zinky Boys*, 121.

KGB. Submitted on 18 March 1982 as “Questions Received by KGB Authorities in Lectures to Increase the Political Vigilance of the Soviet People,” it noted 250 recurring inquiries from attendees, and the provinces in which they were recorded.⁷⁹ Of these, only two questions addressed the Soviet-Afghan War, one of which (“What is the attitude of the population to the events in Poland and Afghanistan?”) was asked by visiting foreigners in eight provinces.⁸⁰ The Afghan War question posed by Ukrainian citizens in nine provinces went into greater detail, recorded as:

How many of our troops are in Afghanistan, why they are there, and is it true that among them there are many victims? (Dnepropetrovsk, Zaporozhye, Kirovograd, Lviv, Ternopil, Khmelnytsky, Cherkasy, Chernihiv, Chernivtsi.)⁸¹

The Afghan War was in fact the most frequently discussed theme categorized under “Questions Relating to International Relations.” It far outweighed state-approved topics such as “the state of political and economic relations between the Soviet Union and the United States” (noted in one province) the Iran-Iraq War (three), and the United Nations’ “failure to prohibit the transmission of biased information” (one).⁸² Even the state of relations with China, discussed in eight provinces, ranked behind the facts and figures of the Soviet-Afghan War in public interest by this time.⁸³ That Khozhanepes Charyev was enshrined as a posthumous recipient of the Order of the Red Star by the Turkmen Communist Party eight days after this study was, in this sense, a response to the growing

⁷⁹ “Perechen’: Voprosov, postupaiushchikh sotrudnikam organov KGB USSR pri chtenii lektzii o povyshenii politicheskoi bditel’nosti sovetskikh liudei,” GASBU, f.16, op. 1094, ll. 139-58.

⁸⁰ Ibid, l. 158.

⁸¹ Ibid, l. 130.

⁸² Ibid, ll. 140-41.

⁸³ Ibid, l. 141.

public demand for information on the Soviet-Afghan War.

The KGB study of public inquiries in Ukraine also took note of several trends that began to question authority. Among the more notable were:

1. What are the causes of major theft, speculation, and bribery? Why have measures not been taken against those responsible? (ten)
2. What accounts for the shortages of food? (ten)
3. What is the essence of Sakharov's hostile activity, and if he breaks the law, why hasn't he been put on trial? (ten)
4. Is it forbidden to listen to foreign radio stations such as Voice of America, Liberty, BBC, etc.? (eight)
5. What are the causes of the current situation in Poland? (six)⁸⁴

These themes of interest formed a mosaic of public grievances that stopped short of political opposition. The Soviet-Afghan War and its veterans, as time went by, became increasingly woven to such topics of concern, if not in reality, then as popular myths in a time of change.

The Moscow Trust Group

As the Ukrainian KGB mulled over its findings drawn from public questions across the republic, the most significant underground organization to eventually condemn the Soviet-Afghan War and demand a withdrawal of troops prepared to hold a founding press conference. Although its members did not seize on the Soviet-Afghan War as a primary focus until Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension to power, it fit well within their

⁸⁴ Ibid, ll. 128, 131-35.

agenda of pacifism and disarmament. The name its founders chose was the Group for Establishing Trust between the USSR and the USA, (Gruppy za stanovlenie doveriia mezhdru SSSR i SShA), better known as the Moscow Trust Group.

The Moscow Trust Group stemmed from a meeting of the minds at an “unofficial seminar” in spring 1980, wherein topics of discussion ranged from “models of collective behavior, mass psychology... and, finally, the problems of war and peace.”⁸⁵ Their gathering was prompted by the Soviet Union’s economic downturn in the first quarter of 1980, and the two Cold War powers’ reliance on the “old and effective remedy [of] capital investment into long-term military programs... [and] the merging of political positions with those of the military.”⁸⁶ Looking to the “dozens of major pacifistic organizations in the West,” its founders saw no conflict with Soviet legalities in forming an alternative organization to the state-controlled Soviet Committee for the Defense of Peace.⁸⁷ On 4 June 1982, the Moscow Trust Group invited Western correspondents to the apartment of Sergei Batovrin (b. 1957). A 25-year-old artist, Batovrin came from a markedly different background from the dissidents before him. The son of a Soviet diplomat assigned to the United Nations, his childhood years were spent in Washington, D.C. and New York City, where he watched the Soviet Army intervene in Czechoslovakia on American television. His return to the Soviet Union for his high school years saw him expelled for debating the conflict with his teachers. Any solace Batovrin found in the arts was short-lived: in 1975, after repeated warnings from the

⁸⁵ Staff of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Documents of the Soviet Groups to Establish Trust Between the U.S. and and the U.S.S.R.* (Washington, D.C., 22 May, 1984), 28.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 29.

KGB against opening art exhibits without approval of the state, he was sentenced to three months in a mental hospital at the age of 18. In a twist of fate, this made him exempt from military service and allowed him to wage his own war against the status quo in the first years of the Afghan War.⁸⁸

The centrepiece of the Trust Group's founding conference was an appeal to the governments and the people on both sides of the Cold War, calling for a "quadripartite dialogue," wherein "average Soviet and American citizens are included on an equal footing with political figures." This dialogue entailed:

- a. An analysis of disarmament negotiations and the documents of the negotiations;
- b. An exchange of opinions and proposals on possible ways to limit arms, and on disarmament;
- c. An exchange of proposals on the establishment of trust;
- d. An exchange of information on the possible consequences of using nuclear arms.⁸⁹

Batovrin and his colleagues hoped to blaze a path for grassroots organizations to participate in international discussions, without stirring the ire of Soviet government. To do so, they employed a policy of transparency: on 8 June 1982, four days after their press conference, the Trust Group appealed to the Moscow City Council to declare the municipality a nuclear-free zone, announcing that its members would be on telephone duty over the coming weekend to collect proposals from Soviet citizens.⁹⁰ The mailing

⁸⁸ David Corn, "Moscow's Populist Peacenik," *Mother Jones*, December 1983, 60.

⁸⁹ [untitled], *Documents of the Soviet Groups to Establish Trust Between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.*, 1-3.

⁹⁰ "Gruppa za ustanovlenie doveriia mezhdru SSSR i SShA," *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, accessed 21 June 2016, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/category/1982/>.

addresses of eight founding members were attached to *samizdat* pamphlets as the authors waited in hopes of feedback.

As it were, the first visitors to knock on Batovrin's door the next day were the police. Over the next 48 hours each member of the Trust Group was detained for their circulation of "provocative, antisocial, and illegal" materials.⁹¹ Their punishments ranged from a wave of the finger, to the cutting of telephone lines and one month's house-arrest for Batovrin. The Moscow Trust Group's defiant response was to appeal to the municipal soviet for permission to hold a demonstration in favour of disarmament on 27 June, and request official registration as a public organization.⁹² This came at a difficult time for the Soviet government. While aware of a growing taste for change on the home front through studies such as the KGB's collection of public questions in Ukraine, the aging Politburo was in no shape to revise the state mechanics that had been in place for more than thirty years. Leonid Brezhnev, quite sedated after breaking a collarbone on 23 March, was not informed of the Trust Group's activities until late October, after which he ordered that it be "dispersed, but with no more arrests."⁹³

By chance, the last member of the Trust Group to be arrested before Brezhnev's order to cease and desist was the first among them to face charges of "condemning the expansion of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan."⁹⁴ Oleg Radzinskii (b.1958) – the son of screenwriter and pulp historian, Edvard Radzinskii – joined the Moscow Trust Group

⁹¹ "Presledovaniia uchastnikov dvizheniia za mir," *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, accessed 21 June 2016, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/category/1982/>.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ "Reasons for the Repression of the Moscow Trust Group: A Correlational Analysis," *Documents of the Soviet Groups to Establish Trust Between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.*, 43.

⁹⁴ Kuzio, "Opposition in the USSR to the occupation of Afghanistan," 106.

shortly after the police's first penalization of its members. He was fired from his job three days later and expelled from his fifth year at Moscow State University in July, its officials citing Radzinskii's "conversations... about the failings of the educational system."⁹⁵ On 26 October 1982, he was arrested after calling for "an international 10 minutes of peace, during which all work would be stopped in the name of disarmament," inspired by the Estonian manifesto issued one-year prior.⁹⁶ He was eventually sentenced on charges that included having "condemned Soviet expansion in Afghanistan" and having written a film script in which "a parallel is drawn between... the occupation of Afghanistan [and] the Soviet and Nazi regimes."⁹⁷ The penalty was harsher than past persecutions of anti-war dissidents: one year and eight months in prison, followed by five years' internal exile in Tomsk.⁹⁸

By the time of Brezhnev's death on 10 November 1982, the Moscow Trust Group found itself in a paradoxical state of affairs. Its founders had met a similar fate to the dissidents before them, with Batovrin placed under house arrest five times over the course of a month, and referred to a psychiatric hospital for the third time. The psychiatrist who signed off on his internment shrugged on the matter, remarking that, "he'll never get away from us anyway, so he might as well come in voluntarily."⁹⁹ Even the death of the General Secretary did little to stifle the persecution of the Trust Group; to

⁹⁵ "Report on the Trial of Trust Group Member Oleg Radzinsky in Moscow," *Documents of the Soviet Groups to Establish Trust Between the U.S. and and the U.S.S.R.*, 91.

⁹⁶ "Soviets Continue to Harass Moscow Disarmament Group," *The Ukrainian Weekly*, 21 November 1982, 13.

⁹⁷ "Report on the Trial of Trust Group Member Oleg Radzinsky in Moscow," *Documents of the Soviet Groups to Establish Trust Between the U.S. and and the U.S.S.R.*, 91; Kuzio, "Opposition in the USSR to the occupation of Afghanistan," 106.

⁹⁸ "Spiski zhertv," Memorial, accessed 22 July 2016, lists.memo.ru/d27/f424.htm.

⁹⁹ "Report on Persecution of Moscow Trust Group Members (July - December 1982)," *Documents of the Soviet Groups to Establish Trust Between the U.S. and and the U.S.S.R.*, 95.

the contrary, Iurii Andropov ordered a renewed crackdown on the organization after succeeding Brezhnev. Under his command, authorities switched from private confrontation of the Trust Group to public denunciations in the Soviet press, the harshest condemnation coming from Iurii Kornilov of the TASS agency. The most frequent press commentator on Afghanistan, Kornilov deemed the organization a cast of “moral degenerates... trying to infiltrate the peace movement as a Trojan Horse.”¹⁰⁰

On the other hand, the authorities’ renewed persecution of the Trust Group ran contrary to the official policies of the state. For almost three years, the Soviet Union had propagated Western peace movements in an effort to forestall the United States’ deployment of Pershing II missiles in European states. The Trust Group’s embracement of disarmament and fraternal relations with the West differed little from the statements and agendas put forward by the Soviet Peace Committee under its aging leader, Iurii Zhukov (1908-91). And unlike its dissident predecessors, the Moscow Trust Group expanded during the persecution of its founders: branches were established in Leningrad, Novosibirsk, and Odessa by the end of the year, having collected more than 900 signatures in support of the organization’s constitution.¹⁰¹ Despite being just six months old, this tally dwarfed the figures gathered by the Moscow Helsinki Group. This was indicative of the Trust Group’s broader appeal and its focus on the future rather than on crimes of the past. Despite the renewed offensive against its founding leaders, the Moscow Trust Group continued to grow during General Secretary Iurii Andropov’s tenure and sharpened its critique of the Soviet Army.

¹⁰⁰ Cited in “Letter on Yuri Kornilov’s Article, Issued by TASS,” *Documents of the Soviet Groups to Establish Trust Between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.*, 46.

¹⁰¹ Bohdan Nahaylo, “Squashing the Peaceniks,” *The Spectator*, 17 December 1983, 14.

The Andropov Interregnum

I have been told that I have been at dinners and receptions where the whole Politburo was assembled, so I must have met him. But if he walked into this room now, I would probably not recognize him.

- Henry Kissinger¹⁰²

In many ways, Leonid Brezhnev's funeral played out as a metaphor for the stagnation of the Soviet Union. As his coffin was placed on the catafalque for public visitation on 12 November 1982, its bottom collapsed from Brezhnev's weight, requiring an impromptu reinforcement with steel. His burial four days later went no better. In what reflected the Soviet Army's resentment for Brezhnev's gratuitous medals and myths of grandeur, "two plain-clothed funeral attendants" instead of military officers lowered his coffin for burial.¹⁰³ Unaware of the increased weight of steel, "the coffin dropped [and] hit the ground with the sound of an explosion, at the very moment that the first gun salutes shook the air."¹⁰⁴ For some of those watching Brezhnev's burial on television, it seemed an appropriate end to his tenure and a dire way to conclude the 60th anniversary of the Soviet Union's foundation. The third Politburo casualty in three years after Kosygin and Suslov, Brezhnev's funeral lasted just over an hour.

It was Andropov's brief eulogy to Brezhnev that caught the eyes of Western observers. "Less than half" of his brief speech was devoted to praise of the man, with no

¹⁰² "Kissinger: Yuri Who?," *United Press International* (16 November 1982), accessed 28 June 2016, www.upi.com/Archives/1982/11/16/Kissinger-Yuri-who/6909406270800/.

¹⁰³ Zhores Medvedev, *Andropov* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 23.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

mention of “any successes or achievements associated with [him].”¹⁰⁵ Instead, Andropov turned to “the struggle for peace... the relaxation of international tension” and “equal and mutually beneficial cooperation with any state that is willing to cooperate.”¹⁰⁶ Speaking with Pakistani President Muhammad Zia-ul-haq at the funeral, Andropov stated that the Soviet Union would exhibit a “new flexible policy and [a] willingness to bring an early solution to the crisis [in Afghanistan].”¹⁰⁷ He would reiterate this point in February 1983 in the first of numerous consultations with Secretary-General of the United Nations, Javier Perez de Cuellar. A few days later, Andropov was sidelined with kidney failure and put on dialysis, hampering his efforts to find a solution to the war. During the brief period of time before his health declined, Andropov nonetheless oversaw the implementation of three noteworthy reforms that would carry over to the Mikhail Gorbachev’s inheritance of the war: a moderate liberalization of the Soviet media, the first passage of legislation entitling the afgangtsy to benefits, and an effort to engage with the Red Cross on the question of POWs.

A Shift in Soviet Media

While dissidents resettled in the West championed ominous narratives of how “the former chief of the KGB, the top cop of the most dreadful secret police in the world, became the number one personage in the Soviet Union,” Andropov was in fact setting the

¹⁰⁵ Steele, *Soviet Power: the Kremlin’s Foreign Policy*, 3.

¹⁰⁶ “Text of Andropov’s Speech at Brezhnev’s Funeral,” *New York Times*, 16 November 1982, accessed 22 June 2016, www.nytimes.com/1982/11/16/world/text-of-andropov-s-speech-at-brezhnev-s-funeral.html.

¹⁰⁷ Braithwaite, *Afgangtsy*, 270-71.

stage for the reforms that Gorbachev would gain credit for.¹⁰⁸ His ailing health, coupled with President Reagan's hawkish outlook on Soviet relations, essentially stymied any mending of international relations. On the domestic front, however, Andropov set forth to challenge "cardinal problems" that had gone unchecked in the post-war era.¹⁰⁹ These ranged from economic reform, to a downsizing of bureaucracies, to sporadically imposed anti-corruption campaigns. Key to the implementation of these policies was a loosening of restraints on the Soviet press. The shift in its political stance was clear from the January 1983 issue of the Party journal, *Kommunist*, which "mentioned Khrushchev's name three times in a positive context" after his general omission from publications of the Brezhnev era.¹¹⁰ Granted more leeway in their coverage of the Afghan War, journalists were swift to embrace a change in the state narrative.

Soviet correspondents stationed in Afghanistan had for some time privately conveyed their disillusion with the war to those in the Politburo. Among the most prolonged, gloomy forecasts of events was a twelve-page letter from longtime *Pravda* correspondent, Ivan Shchedrov (1933-86). Having begun his career as a journalist in Saigon at the peak of the Vietnam War, Shchedrov was among the first wave of reporters sent to Kabul in 1980.¹¹¹ While he stopped short of comparing the challenges faced by the 40th Army to those experienced by the Americans fifteen years earlier, his observations on 12 November 1981 captured the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan:

¹⁰⁸ Yuri Glazov, *The Russian Mind Since Stalin's Death* (Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1985), 180.

¹⁰⁹ Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 149.

¹¹⁰ Medvedev, *Andropov*, 199.

¹¹¹ "Ikh znaiut i pomniat vo V'etname," accessed on 28 June 2016, archive.ec/2qRhV#selection-1465.0-1471.427; Aleksandr Il'in, "Perevernutyi aisberg: afganskije stranitsy," *Pravda*, 19 March 2004, accessed on 28 June 2016, <https://kprf.ru/pravda/issues/2004/29/article-3755/>.

So far, not one province has been fully liberated. ... The Afghan-Soviet troops as a rule return to their bases and the regions fall back under the control of the rebels. ... Destruction of rebels' nests on their own territory is facing growing criticism... It is quite clear now that even under the most favorable circumstances... the defeat of the counter-revolutionary formations will take years, most likely no less than five years.¹¹²

Any contemplation of affairs that Shchedrov might have stirred with his evaluation of the situation on the ground were quickly suspended by the imposition of martial law in Poland one month later. The frustration conveyed in his letter to the Politburo, however, continued to simmer among journalists in the New Year. During this time, *samizdat* on the Afghan War continued to enter circulation, occasionally receiving hyperbolic praise from Western observers. *Ausra*, a journal of Lithuanian *samizdat*, for instance, reported “anti-Russian demonstrations during the funerals of Baltic soldiers killed in Afghanistan,” its patriotic authors writing that, “under oppression themselves, Ukrainians, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were being forced to obey the brutal orders of the Russian officers, and shed both their own and Afghan blood.”¹¹³ A publication of greater impact, however, graced the pages of *Novyi mir* in February 1982. Authored by Iurii Nagibin (1920-94), “Patience” (Terpenie) seized on myths of the past and unspoken truths of the present in its account of a limbless veteran living in isolation. It was based on a “false myth” that surfaced in 1946-47 wherein Valaam, an archipelago

¹¹² “‘*Pravda*’ Correspondent Shchedrov’s Letter to the CC CPSU on the Situation in Afghanistan, November 12, 1981,” doc. 15, translated by Svetlana Savranskaia, accessed on 28 June 2016, nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/soviet.html.

¹¹³ Aseem Prakash and Rafael Reuveny, “The Afghanistan War and the Breakdown of the Soviet Union,” *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 705.

of 50 islands within the Republic of Kareliia, was said to function as “a dumping ground for thousands of disabled veterans cleared from urban areas.”¹¹⁴ In Nagibin’s short story Valaam is renamed as Bogoiar, wherein Pasha, a legless veteran of the Great Patriotic War, chooses to live in isolation after society’s refusal to accept him in their ranks.

Visited by his ex-lover Anna, Pasha recalls his sorrowful experience with reintegration:

I had tried to live among normal people. ... But it didn’t work out. ... Do you remember how it was after the war? On every street corner cripples were selling single cigarettes. Commerce maintained by the beggars. I didn’t engage in it. ... But each time I would linger on the street, they would throw at me either change or one-ruble bills. ... They took the pittance away from their own mouths. ... [As if] showing me my real place.¹¹⁵

The publication of “Patience” in *Novyi mir* four years before Mikhail Gorbachev’s leadership of the Soviet Union should be regarded as “anticipatory glasnost.” While the Initiative Group for the Defense of Invalids’ Human Rights’ issued appeals to the United Nations to no avail, Nagibin – himself a veteran of the Great Patriotic War who suffered a serious contusion and was married to his sixth wife – blended personal experience with fiction: Pasha’s solidarity with limbless comrades outweighs any love he bore for Anna, as he lashes out at her urbanites as “overfed gluttons and philistines.” Desperate to repent for her failure to aid a loved one, Anna leaps from a departing vessel and drowns before

¹¹⁴ Robert Dale, “The Valaam Myth and the Fate of Leningrad’s Disabled Veterans,” Nottingham Trent University’s Institutional Repository, accessed on 5 July 2016, http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/7697/1/217195_PubSub_656_Dale.pdf.

¹¹⁵ Vera S. Dunham, “Images of the Disabled, Especially the War Wounded, in Soviet Literature,” in *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice*, edited by William McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 161; Iurii Nagibin, “Terpenie,” *Novyi Mir* 2 (1982): 25-53.

she can reach the shoreline. As his fellow invalids gather in curiosity, Pasha simply states, “Let it be fellows. It was my sister.” His comrades “became quiet at once. Not because they believed him, but because Pasha was their commanding officer, their chief, their very own leader, and his word was law.”¹¹⁶

Nagibin chose the Valaam myth as a backdrop for criticizing the negligence of invalids of the Great Patriotic War, but “Patience” so resounded with the Soviet Army that a counterpoint work of fiction graced the pages of *Krasnaia zvezda* in 1984. Entitled “Loyalty” (Vernost’), it told the tale of a woman who overcame the reactions of friends who thought her “crazy to shackle herself to a man with no legs” as she choose to remain committed to an injured “wartime-internationalist” – by that time an unofficial synonym for the afgantsy – following his injury on the battlefield.¹¹⁷

Indeed, it was the state’s indifference toward afgantsy who returned as invalids that gained the attention of the Soviet press in the three years between *Izvestiia*’s publication of “Patience” and *Krasnaia zvezda*’s answer of “Loyalty.” While this did not amount to movements of anti-war opposition, it proved to be a catalyst for grassroots movement among Soviet youth. Among those involved was Alla Pavlova, who went on to become the press-secretary of the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan. A student at Moscow State University’s Faculty of Journalism from 1981 to 1985, she attended night classes while gaining work experience at the journal of *Soviet Soldier* (Sovetskii voïn) from the age of 17. While female journalists were forbidden from working in Afghanistan, the publication was headed by a military colonel and frequented

¹¹⁶ Dunham, “Images of the Disabled,” 163.

¹¹⁷ A. Slobozhaniuk, “Vernost’,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, 23 June 1984, 3.

by an older generation of writers and photographers with tales to tell about realities on the battlefield. In her second year of university, Pavlova set out to cover the consequences of the war on the home front. “The first material that I wrote was about when a man returned from Afghanistan with no legs,” she recalled. “It was a very touching story. A woman was waiting for him, and carried him in her arms to wash.”¹¹⁸ While the story went unpublished, the experience made a lasting impression on Pavlova. “I went on to help that man,” she continued.

He lived on the ninth floor and his wheelchair didn’t fit in the small elevator, so he could only get out when his friends would help him. . . . Emotionally charged, I went to the housing office and yelled, “How can you leave a war hero in such conditions?!” Eventually they switched him to a different apartment. As Fedor Tiutchev once said, “We can not understand how our words resound.”¹¹⁹

While Alla Pavlova’s first effort to document the fate of the afgantsy in the Soviet press came to naught, there was a marked shift in the boundaries of journalism after Iurii Andropov came to power. The past year had been one of stagnant, cliched themes in the media, the most egregious being the declaration of a Week of Solidarity With Afghanistan from 21 to 28 April 1982. Not only were Soviet soldiers absent from the “exhibition, lectures and presentations devoted to friendship with Afghanistan,” the very first monument to the war was to be opened on Kabul’s city square.¹²⁰ Despite the number of Soviet dead being well past 3,000 by this time their names went unmentioned.

¹¹⁸ Alla Pavlova, interview with author, August 2014.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. Fedor Tiutchev (1803-73) was a poet and statesman of the golden literature era, ranked alongside Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov for his verses. (Nam ne dano poniat’ / Kak nashe slovo otzovetsia.)

¹²⁰ “Solidarnost’ s Afganistanom,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, 22 April 1982, 3.

Instead, the article bore a headshot of Musadzhan – allegedly 107 years old – a heroic member of the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan who “defended the revolution in the province of Paktia.”¹²¹ The war’s third anniversary on 25 December 1982 was marked by a front-page story that described only “the dangerous roads in the mountains of Afghanistan... its snow, avalanches, rockfalls,” as Soviet convoys delivered aid to small villages. “With no fear of any threats, no ambush raids... here there were no *dushmany*,” its reporter beamed. “Farmers lined the road... On the shoulder of each was a hoe, on their backs, a rifle. Lenin’s words came to mind: that a revolution is only worth something if it can defend itself.”¹²²

Within a month’s time, the stilted article marking three years of war was eclipsed by a shift in the state narrative. On 12 January 1983, the front page of *Krasnaia zvezda* bore a letter from one Anna Koliada, inquiring of her son’s fate in the Soviet Army:

Dear editors!

My son Igor is serving his international duty in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. We receive letters from him often, but they are quite short, merely stating that he is alive and well. And what kind of mother does not want a bit more, to learn more about how their son lives and serves. If you can tell me about this, I will be very grateful and appreciative.¹²³

The newspaper’s response was at once a recitation of the son’s camaraderie and valiant leadership, and a new degree of allusion to the dangerous environment in which soldiers operated. “One of his arms – a quite formidable weapon – weighs several kilograms,” the

¹²¹ “V ob’ektive - Afganistan,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, 25 April 1982, 5.

¹²² A. Poltavskii and M. Syrtlanov, “Doroga v gorakh,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, 25 December 1982, 1.

¹²³ V. Skrizhalin, “V otrogakh gindukusha,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, 12 January 1983, 1.

respondent began. “When soldiers patrol the mountains, they endure... a debilitating feeling of thirst, heavy equipment on their shoulders... marching several kilometres on a deadly path.”¹²⁴ While elusive in its details, the response was a departure from the tales of electrification and building schools that had dominated the Soviet press for three years. The choice to place a mother’s concerned letter on the front page of the Soviet Army’s official newspaper, moreover, was a plain admission of soldiers’ greater role in Afghanistan and their families’ growing frustration with the fog of information. It was a sentiment shared by soldiers who returned to their country without acknowledgment.

Even those decorated with high honours found their stories clouded in the Soviet press, among them, Lieutenant General Ruslan Aushev. Upon returning from his first of two voluntary tours in May 1982, Aushev was informed that he would be awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. “We thought that Brezhnev would award it, but... the Commander-in-Chief of the Ground Forces gave it to me at the Academy of Frunze,” he recalled on the 25th anniversary of the war’s conclusion. “And the next day, *Krasnaia zvezda* printed: ‘The Commander of the Ground Forces awarded the Order of Lenin and the Golden Star to Aushev for the successful training of a battalion in live-fire exercises’.”¹²⁵

The admission of soldiers conducting dangerous operations in the mountains of Afghanistan eight months after the denial of Aushev’s combat role was thus a departure from prior narratives. But the shift of focus and change of tone among journalists reporting from Afghanistan was very gradual and as subject to self-censorship as it was

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ruslan Aushev, “Vvod voisk byl oshibkoi,” accessed 17 February 2014, <http://republic.com.ua/article/30017-Ruslan-Aushev-Vvod-voysk-byi-oshibkoy.html>.

by Glavlit. M. Syrtlanov for example, writing for *Krasnaia zvezda* on 29 January 1983, penned a vaguely worded report of Soviet troops who “fulfilled their international duty” by braving perilous weather in the mountains to distribute humanitarian aid to “a village robbed of its food by bandits.”¹²⁶ It was only one month later, however, that *Trud* reported “the heroic death of a young infantry and aspiring poet, killed while fighting guerillas” and the posthumous honours he received in Dnepropetrovsk.¹²⁷ This was a marked contrast to the commemoration (or lack thereof) of Petr Shkidchenko one year prior in the same city. Other new themes to emerge in February 1983 included “Russian nurses stranded in dangerous outposts,” the state-approved music group the Blue Guitars “refusing to travel to distant bases,” and the mujahideen’s use of the term “infidels” (nevernye) for Soviet soldiers.¹²⁸

The Afghan War Appears in Cinema

The change in the Soviet media’s depiction of the Afghan War was not limited to the press. Overlooked in Western monitoring of the war was the branching out of its depiction in cinema. Iurii Andropov’s fifteen months as General Secretary saw the debut of two markedly different films addressing the Soviet-Afghan War: *The Afghan Diary* (Afganskii dnevnik) and *The Hot Summer in Kabul* (Zharkoe leto v Kabule). The latter premiered in Soviet theatres on 28 April 1983, to mark the fifth anniversary of the Saur Revolution. Its director, Ali Khamraev (b. 1937), was a decorated filmmaker from

¹²⁶ M. Syrtlanov, “V nebe Afganistana,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, 29 January 1983, 3.

¹²⁷ Serge Schmemmann, “Russians Learn There is a War On in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1983, A2.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

Uzbekistan whose most recent production was *The Bodyguard* (Telokhranitel'), released in 1979. Set in Central Asia during the Russian Civil War, it followed the Red Army's capture of a basmachi leader in the perilous mountains. The movie focused on soldiers' journey through unfriendly terrain as they endeavoured to take their captive to Bukhara, with basmachi rebels in pursuit.¹²⁹ It was a timely theme that mirrored [mis]readings of the Soviet-Afghan War; Western observers often pictured the basmachi revolt as having "left a legacy later resurrected during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan,"¹³⁰ with some pointing to a lone article published in *Kommunist Tadzhikistana* entitled "Basmachestvo – Lessons of History."¹³¹ Andropov himself was not immune to historical comparisons, remarking two weeks after *The Hot Summer in Kabul* debuted in Soviet cinemas, "Let us remember our fight with *basmatchism* [sic]... continued up until the mid-1930s. And so in our relations with Afghanistan there must be both demands and understanding."¹³²

Ali Khamraev thus seemed an ideal choice of director for the first cinematic feature on the Soviet-Afghan War, having directed multiple, well-received films on the basmatchism. *The Hot Summer in Kabul* took its name from a novel written by a champion of Soviet patriotism, Aleksandr Prokhanov. Published one year prior, Prokhanov's novel saw the Soviet Army escort a column of tractors through dangerous territory to help the Afghan peasantry, with President Babrak Karmal an omnipresent

¹²⁹ *Telokhranitel'*, dir. Ali Khamraev (Tajikfilm, 1979), accessed on 1 July 2016, <http://kino-ussr.ru/2100-telokhranitel-1979.html>.

¹³⁰ Leo J. Daugherty III, "The Bear and the Scimitar: Soviet Central Asians and the War in Afghanistan 1979-1989," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 8, 1 (1995): 76.

¹³¹ Alexandre Bennigsen, "Soviet Islam since the Invasion of Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey* 1, 1 (1982): 65-78.

¹³² "Documents on the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan," *Cold War international History Project Bulletin e-Dossier No.4* (November 2001): 177.

figure.¹³³ Khamraev's film was no less propagandistic but took a different route: rather than a soldier, its protagonist was an elderly surgeon named Fedorov, who voluntarily journeyed to Afghanistan after the Saur Revolution of 27 April 1978. Fedorov tends to the wounds of soldiers and counter-revolutionaries alike, a noble task that his wife cannot comprehend. When Fedorov and his crew are ambushed in the mountains by the same mujahideen he aided in the past, he conquers his doubts and returns to his international duty, conversing jovially with locals during a march of the Afghan National Army.¹³⁴

One could not find a greater contrast to Khamraev's propaganda film than Aleksandr Kaverznev's (1932-83) documentary, *The Afghan Diary*, released two months later. A popular journalist best known for the television program *International Panorama*, Kaverznev filmed *The Afghan Diary* in February and March 1983. A man of close relations with the Politburo, he was granted considerable leeway to document the mujahideen's side of the war. Over the course of his month in Afghanistan, Kaverznev traveled deep into the countryside of four different provinces, a marked departure from the bustling city of Kabul in Khamraev's film. While American military arms are plain to see in Kaverznev's footage, they are a complementary factor; his interest lay in those who fired the weapons. As it were, one of the first such individuals that he became acquainted with was a female peasant armed with a rifle for self-defense in a village. Particularly striking are Kaverznev's interviews with mujahideen fighters held in the prisons of Kabul, 18-years-of-age and speaking of their belief that Islam is in danger.¹³⁵

¹³³ Aleksandr Prokhanov, *A Tree in the Centre of Kabul* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983).

¹³⁴ *Zharkoe leto v Kabule*, dir. Ali Khamraev (Mosfilm, 1983), accessed 24 June 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqZFZW6ISi8>.

¹³⁵ *Afganskii dnevnik*, dir. Aleksandr Kaverznev (Gosteleradio SSSR, 1983), accessed 24 June 2014,

Rather than a country defending the benefits of the Saur Revolution, viewers are left with the impression of a civil war with no end in sight.

The Afghan Diary concludes with footage of villagers celebrating Nowruz (the Persian New Year) on 21 March 1983 outside a mosque, before cutting to a photograph of Aleksandr Kaverznev and fading to credits. This is a pointed commentary on the director's fate. Seated at the Kabul Airport that very night, an officer of the Afghan National Army approached him and offered a toast of brandy. While his translator declined, Kaverznev obliged, and died soon thereafter on 29 March of "an unknown substance."¹³⁶ Kaverznev's colleagues nonetheless completed the post-production of the movie, which was screened in the Soviet Union on 16 June 1983 to mark his birthday. This spoke to the shift in the media that took place during Andropov's abbreviated tenure: *The Afghan Diary* could not have been filmed or screened one year prior, and unlike *The Hot Summer in Kabul*, it departed from the state narrative on the war. That Kaverznev's film resonated with the afgangtsy became clear over time: on 16 June 2003, to mark the 20th anniversary of *The Afghan Diary* and posthumously mark Kaverznev's 71st birthday, the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan participated in a screening of the film at Moscow's Central House of Journalists. Among those present was General Viktor Ermakov, the commander of the 40th Army during Kaverznev's month of filming. "Aleksandr was meticulous in his journalism," Ermakov remarked. "He wanted to understand everything. He compared what he saw with what he heard, he gathered and analyzed the facts, and communicated them to viewers clearly and concisely from the

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWw1Yi-VeTg&feature=related>.

¹³⁶ "Stranitsy istorii Afganistana," accessed 1 July 2016, afg-hist.ucoz.ru/photo/gastroljanty/politobozrevatel/107-0-834.

front lines.”¹³⁷ The Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan’s journal at the time, *Gvardiia Rossii* (Guards of Russia), praised the film as “a revelation for many... just as the author intended it to be.”¹³⁸ In the years that followed, Kaverznev’s co-worker on the film, Natal’ia Il’inska, produced a documentary on the man’s life entitled *A Soldier of the Soviet Union*. Fellow journalist Konstantin Tsalogov, speaking in the documentary, recalled how Kaverznev said to him, “I don’t want to give just another report on Afghanistan. I want to capture the complex, historical destiny of its people and... capture its significance for our time.”¹³⁹ Released in 2007, the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan voiced its approval and nominated Natal’ia Il’inska for an Order of Merit.¹⁴⁰

The First Legislation of Afgantsy’s Rights

Whether it’s Gorbachev, or Brezhnev, or Andropov they are still dead-hearted (cherstvaia dusha) *chinovniki* who don’t care about your problems.

- Sergei Chervonopiskii, afganets¹⁴¹

Passed on 17 January 1983 by the Central Committee and the Council of Ministers was a resolution bearing the long-winded title of “On Benefits for Service Personnel, Workers and Government Personnel Included to the Limited Contingent of the Soviet Forces in the Territory of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, and their Families.” In theory, it was a step forward in terms of the afgantsy’s recognition and

¹³⁷ Cited in Roman Shkuratov, “Posleslovie k <Afganskomu dnevniku>,” *Gvardiia Rossii* 5, 10 (2003), accessed 21 July 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20071101060606/http://rsva.ru/rus_guard/2003-06/epilogue.shtml.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Cited in Natalia Iakovlevna Il’inskaia, “Soldat Sovetskogo Soiuz,” accessed 2 July 2016, archive.ec/Pgbdz#selection-499.0-502.0.

¹⁴⁰ “Stranitsy istorii Afganistana.”

¹⁴¹ Sergei Chervonopiskii, interview with author, July 2015.

social-welfare benefits. Similar to the decree of February 1980 that granted benefits to the KGB personnel who participated in Operation Storm-333, the legislation deemed that all of those who served in Afghanistan would receive a pension wherein one month's deployment equated to three months' pay, while those who suffered "concussions, injury, or disease" would receive treatment in hospital "regardless of their length of service."¹⁴² Other benefits included the rights to "the priority provision of housing... pre-emptive admission to vocational education... vouchers to sanatoriums... and the provision of Zaporozhets cars [equipped for the disabled]."¹⁴³

While it provided a framework for generous benefits, the decree proved to be a false glimpse of hope for many. In practice, most afgantsy received only a fraction of these proposed rights. From the very first paragraph, they were referred to as "ex-service personnel... temporarily stationed in Afghanistan," so as to reserve the term "veteran" for those of the Great Patriotic War.¹⁴⁴ Further, the terminology illustrated the "transient nature of the special privileges" granted for the afgantsy.¹⁴⁵ They would be awarded a lump sum that varied according to their place in the military hierarchy. Officers would qualify for three months' salary; non-commissioned officers, warrant officers, and those who served beyond their time of deployment received 500 roubles; conscripts received 300 roubles; and those seriously injured received one month's treatment at a sanatorium free of charge. The wives of those killed in action received slightly higher compensation,

¹⁴² "O l'gotakh voennosluzhashchim, rabochim i sluzhashchim, nakhodiashchimsia v sostave organichennogo kontingenta sovetskikh voisk na territorii Demokraticeskoi Respubliki Afganistan, i ikh sem'iam," *Postanovlenie ot 17 ianvaria 1983 N 59-27*, accessed on 23 January 2016, zakon3.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/v9027400-83.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Natalia Danilova, "The Development of an Exclusive Veterans' Policy: The Case of Russia," *Armed Forces & Society* 36, 5 (2010): 905.

ranging from 500 to 1500 roubles according to the deceased's military rank.¹⁴⁶ The greatest strike against the enforcement of these regulations, however, was a resolution to ensure that they never be published. Instead, "local authorities were simply entrusted to know and honour them, which most of the time, they never did."¹⁴⁷ It was a conundrum that encapsulated the "wall of bureaucratic confusion and obfuscation" that inhibited reform in the Soviet Union's final years.¹⁴⁸ On 3 September 1983, KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov (Andropov's successor from 1982 to 1988) issued an order to "approve the enclosed list of military and KGB personnel who provided military aid to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan" for benefits, and circulate a list of the afgantsy's names and years of service to a range of administrative personnel. The recipients were not merely KGB officials, but "the chairs of educational institutions, business managers, agencies, and organizations."¹⁴⁹ Thus, after eight months' time the implementation of proposals for the afgantsy's welfare was still in limbo. Unable to provide written proof of their entitlement to benefits, regional authorities' common rebuttal of "Well, we did not send you to Afghanistan" became one of the best-known phrases of the war. This lack of sympathy, shared by many, reflected a broader problem in the Soviet Union: the social welfare guaranteed by the state could no longer be realized with consistency in a period of economic decline. At the front of the queue for benefits were veterans of the Great Patriotic War, followed by another generation of workers and Party pensioners, with the

¹⁴⁶ "O l'gotakh voennosluzhashchim, rabochim i sluzhashchim...."

¹⁴⁷ Natalia Danilova, "Veterans' Policy in Russia: a Puzzle of Creation," *Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, 6/7 (2007), accessed on 23 Jun 2016, <http://pipss.revues.org/873>.

¹⁴⁸ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 314.

¹⁴⁹ "Ob utverzhdenii Perechnia organov, voinskikh chastei i podrazdelenii KGB SSSR, napravlennykh dlia okazaniia voennoi pomoshchi Demokraticheskoi Respublike Afganistan," GASBU, f. 9, op. 1076, ll. 29.

afgantsy being the lowest priority. The shortage of housing proved especially burdensome. Even 25 years after the Soviet-Afghan War came to an end, only 19% of Russia's afgantsy had received the apartments they were guaranteed. The few who received them faced a hierarchical Soviet system that remained in place: their free housing, by law, was limited to 19 square metres – half the size of those awarded to veterans of the Great Patriotic War.¹⁵⁰

The Red Cross and Soviet Prisoners of War

After my son's funeral... I was called to see the Commissioner. I went there still dressed in black. "What do you want?" a Major asked me. I explained the situation, to which he replied: "You got 200 rubles, and you want more?" I was horrified and replied, "What if it was your son, brought to you in a coffin, and you received 200 rubles? Is that all you would need?" ... The only answer they gave was: "Well, we didn't send him there."

- Evgenia Alferov¹⁵¹

The decree on benefits for service personnel in Afghanistan was a response not just to growing pressures from returning veterans and the families of those killed in action, but the involvement of foreign NGOs in rescuing Soviet POWs. Already faced with an annual condemnation at the General Assembly of the United Nations – itself a jewel of the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War – the International Committee of

¹⁵⁰ "<Afgantsev> mogu priravniat' k veteranam VOV v plane l'got i zil'ia," *Izvestiia*, accessed 23 June 2016, izvestia.ru/news/565755.

¹⁵¹ Evgenia Petrovna Alferov, "200 de ruble ati primit, ce mai doriti?," *Razboiul Sovieto-Afghan (1979-1989)*, edited by Ion Xenofontov (Iasi: Lumen, 2011), 41.

the Red Cross (ICRC) was next on the list of vocal critics. Having played a humanitarian role in Moscow's armed conflicts dating to the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 to 1878, the ICRC also oversaw the repatriation of German and Austro-Hungarian POWs between the Soviet Union and countries without diplomatic ties in the interwar period.¹⁵² It was a role the ICRC attempted to replicate in mediating the release of Soviet POWs from the mujahideen between May 1982 and April 1984.

First recognized as the Afghan Red Crescent Society in 1951, a delegation of ICRC officials from Geneva were stationed in Afghanistan when the war began and "offered its services" to President Babrak Karmal within days of his appointment.¹⁵³ In what was indicative of Soviet authorities' lack of preparedness, Karmal's government granted the Red Cross full rights to operate in Afghanistan, compliant with international law, on 13 January 1980. This allowed for an immediate picture of wartime conditions accessible to the global public: over the course of four months, ICRC personnel interviewed 427 Afghan prisoners with no guards present and circulated two tons of medical aid to dispensaries across the country.¹⁵⁴ It was not until late May 1980 that the Red Cross personnel were confined to Kabul and forbidden from "discharging their duties properly."¹⁵⁵ They were expelled in June after their visas expired.

Shunted to neighbouring Pakistan, the Red Cross personnel remained unphased and established a surgical hospital for the wounded in Peshawar by the year's end.

¹⁵² For an interesting account of this "quasi-consular" mission, see: Jean-Francois Fayet and Peter Huber, "La mission Wehrin du CICR en Union soviétique (1920-1938)," *Relations internationales* 143 (2003): 89-101.

¹⁵³ Edward Girardet, *Afghanistan: the Soviet War* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 228.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ "The International Red Cross in Afghanistan," Hansard Lords Sitting (19 June 1980) 410, 1204-7, accessed 26 June 2016, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1980/jun/19/the-international-red-cross-and>.

Beginning in June 1981, the organization took a new role in the Soviet-Afghan War. It was then that Mikhail Gorchniski, a 34-year-old pilot from Kiev, was shot down over Nangarhar province in the east and captured alive by the Khalis faction of Hezb-i-Islam.¹⁵⁶ With the Swiss Red Cross officials already engaged in covert negotiations on possible prisoner transfers, the mujahideen opted to smuggle Gorchniski to Islamabad and “display [the] man to the international press,” in search of political capital.¹⁵⁷ Although Pakistani authorities soon “forced the guerrillas to hand him over to the government, who in turn discreetly gave him back to the Soviets,” Gorchniski’s public exhibition prompted Moscow to issue “a formal request to the ICRC for assistance in recovering captured personnel.”¹⁵⁸ This was, essentially, an unofficial confirmation to the Soviet public that its soldiers were in danger and played a role in Afghanistan that went beyond providing humanitarian aid.

Despite the failure to gain an exchange of prisoners through advertising Mikhail Gorchniski, the Khaled faction of Hezb-i-Islam undertook a second effort on 18 August 1981, with the capture of Evgenii Okrimiuk (1914-82) in Kabul. A geologist by profession, Okrimiuk had worked in Afghanistan since 1976 only to be turned over to eight armed mujahideen by his trusted chauffeur.¹⁵⁹ A captive of higher status than Gorchniski, Okrimiuk was a decorated veteran of the Great Patriotic War, a member of

¹⁵⁶ The mujahideen were splintered into seven loose-knit parties under an alliance by the name of Islamic Unity of Afghanistan, within which there were tribal splits. Hezb-i-Islam, the most extreme of them, was composed of two factions. The one that took Gorchniski captive was the more moderate, led by 61-year-old Mawlawi Khalis, who, unlike his rival Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, felt that “Afghanistan needs intellectuals to help rebuild the country.” See: Robert Kaplan, “Driven Toward God,” *The Atlantic*, September 1988, accessed on 27 June 2016, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1988/09/driven-toward-god/376333/.

¹⁵⁷ Girardet, *Afghanistan: the Soviet War*, 227.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 226-27.

¹⁵⁹ Andrei Greshnov, “Afganskii perevod,” accessed 27 June 2016, www.artofwar.net.ru/profiles/greshnov_andrei_b/view_book/afganskii_perevod.

the Communist Party since 1943, and a childhood friend of Soviet Premier Nikolai Tikhonov. Instead of taking him to Pakistan, Hezb-i-Islam held Okrimiuk as a prisoner in Afghanistan and contacted the Red Cross with their demands: the release of 50 Afghan prisoners in exchange for a high-profile Soviet advisor.¹⁶⁰ In contrast to their detainment of Gorchniski, the mujahideen ordered Okrimiuk to write a letter to Tikhonov on 1 October 1981. It was delivered to the Politburo via the Red Cross and published in a variety of emigre newsletters:

Dear Nikolai Aleksandrovich,

A great misfortune has befallen me. I was captured in Kabul by Hezb-i-Izlam guerrillas led by Mawlawi Iunus Khalis, and they demand an exchange for their mujahideen. For seven days I traveled through many villages and saw armed people fighting for their rights to freedom against Barack Karmal. I have not seen any Chinese, Americans, or others. This surprises me. ... I beg you, help me. We must firmly convince Barack Karmal to barter: "War is war, and there are many Russians," in the words of Babrak Karmal... I suggest that you share this with Bulgarians, Czechs and other diplomats.¹⁶¹

The Politburo faced a conundrum after the receipt of Okrimiuk's letter. Two months earlier, they had appealed to the ICRC to help negotiate the release of an afganets held prisoner in Pakistan. The demand for the exchange of 50 prisoners for an esteemed colleague, however, threatened a wave of public realization of the 40th Army's role in Afghanistan. When ICRC vice-president Richard Pestalozzi approached Soviet

¹⁶⁰ Girardet, *Afghanistan: the Soviet War*, 227.

¹⁶¹ "Ukrainets' v poloni zasudzhue invaziiu na Afganistan," *Svoboda Ukrains'kii shchodennik*, 12 December 1981, 1.

authorities in Moscow to find a resolution to the standoff, he received the stern reply that there were no Soviet troops engaged in combat operations in Afghanistan. The 50 Afghan prisoners named by the mujahideen in their proposed exchange were shot soon thereafter, and Okrimiuk was executed six months later.¹⁶²

Despite the failed negotiations for the release of Evgenii Okrimiuk, the global increase in awareness of Soviet POWs prompted a renewed effort in Moscow to find a solution to the matter. Particularly influential was Hezb-i-Islam's willingness to allow foreign journalists to interview two captives: Aleksandr Sidielniko, a 20-year-old Ukrainian tank captain, and Valerii Kissilov, a 19-year-old conscript. The media coverage that came as a result drew Amnesty International to call for a staying of their execution, adding to pressures from worldwide NGOs.¹⁶³ This led to the first comprehensive agreement between the Red Cross and the Soviet Union since 1945, negotiating the internment of Soviet captives in a neutral country. Moscow's proposal was India, the mujahideen argued in favour of Pakistan, and Switzerland was eventually agreed upon between the two parties. The agreement was first put into action on 28 May 1982 with the transfer of three Soviet POWs to a minimum-security internment farm in the mountainous region of Zugerberg. It was agreed that after two years of manual labour, detainees would be given the choice of remaining in Europe or returning to the Soviet Union. The latter was of particular concern for Moscow, with Soviet representatives pointing to Article 118 of the Geneva Conventions on mandatory

¹⁶² Girardet, *Afghanistan: the Soviet War*, 228.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*, 229.

repatriation of Prisoners of War.¹⁶⁴ The Red Cross, meanwhile, was allowed to resume its inspections of prisons in Kabul in August 1982, two years after its personnel were deported from Afghanistan.

The agreement with the ICRC was a promising step forward that seemed in-line with the words that Iurii Andropov spoke on cooperation with state actors as a means to an end of the Afghan War. Its successes, however, were quickly stymied. Despite the ICRC's estimate of 200 to 300 Soviet POWs held by the mujahideen, only 11 were freed between May 1982 and April 1984.¹⁶⁵ The Red Cross's access to Afghan prisoners in Kabul was suspended after two months, during which some of its 338 interviewees claimed that "many of those seen by the Swiss were... informers planted as prisoners [or] pressured by the government to misreport conditions... for reduced sentences."¹⁶⁶ The mujahideen, in turn, alleged that the Red Cross refused to oversee the release of its own men. "We simply do not trust them any longer," stated Abdul Haq, a Hezb-i-Islami commander, in August 1983. "They have forfeited their right to hold our prisoners."¹⁶⁷

Arguably the greatest factor in the cessation of POW exchanges to Switzerland in April 1984, two months after Andropov's death, was the release of the first three afgantsy who served their detentions in Zugerberg. Only one of the three chose to return to the Soviet Union, their release preceded by the escape of Iura, one of the first Soviet POWs

¹⁶⁴ Mary Ellen O'Connell, "Soviet Prisoners in the Afghan Conflict," *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 23 (1985): 502.

¹⁶⁵ "Afghanistan, Soviet Prisoners Transferred to Switzerland," International Committee of the Red Cross, accessed 27 June 2016, <https://www.icrc.org/casebook/doc/case-study/afghanistan-soviet-switzerland-case-study.htm>.

¹⁶⁶ Edward Girardet, "Afghan Rebels and Soviets Trade Bullets but not Prisoners," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 1 September 1983, 6.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

to make his voice heard in the West.¹⁶⁸ Having fled his company in Kabul after a week's deployment, Iura cited *dedovshchina* carried out by senior officers in the Soviet Army as the primary reason for leaving his post. Captured by the mujahideen soon thereafter, he was freed by the Red Cross in January 1983. Aside from the fellow Soviets detained in Zugerberg, Iura found himself among Swiss recruits charged with committing "minor infractions while on their annual three week military training."¹⁶⁹ Their labour tasks were the same: tending to cattle, mowing fields, and chopping lumber with pay of \$4.00 per day.¹⁷⁰ After ten months, Iura boarded a taxi during an excursion to the nearest town and fled to Germany, where he claimed asylum. "In short, I was treated as a man for the first time," Iura recalled. "I knew how they had treated the captives in 1945. And if I would not go home, why drag on for two years in camp?"¹⁷¹ It was testimonies such as Iura's that prompted Moscow to cut short the Red Cross agreement after two years and decline any further assistance. Weary of such detainees becoming Western sympathisers, there soon came accusations of the Swiss "operating a small gulag" in the mountains, a piece of slander met with "shocked indignation" by officials of the ICRC.¹⁷² Obstruction and annulment of the Red Cross agreement on the exchange of POWs and inspection of Afghan prisons quickly reinforced Western polemic on a ruthless empire. "Soviet soldiers who have had the moral courage to defect from the Soviet army in Afghanistan want to tell their stories in the US and in Western Europe," declared one Liudmilla Thorne. "Will

¹⁶⁸ None of the accounts I came across featured Iura's family name.

¹⁶⁹ O'Connell, "Soviet Prisoners in the Afghan Conflict," 502.

¹⁷⁰ Margaret Studer, "Decision Time for Soviet POWs in Switzerland," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 5 April 1984, accessed 27 June 2015, www.csmonitor.com/1984/0405/040541.html.

¹⁷¹ Colonel Lev Dvoretzky and Major General Oleg Sarin, *The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union's Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 167.

¹⁷² Studer, "Decision Time for Soviet POWs in Switzerland."

Western countries demonstrate as much moral courage by giving asylum to these men, or will they defer, so as to not dare antagonize the Soviet bear?”¹⁷³

Andropov’s Death and Legacy

If we talk about Andropov and Gorbachev... I met with Gorbachev and Iakovlev in 1994 at a meeting held in the Kremlin. When Gorbachev took the podium, the entire hall whistled in disrespect. ... Andropov wanted to bring a swift end to the war, whereas Gorbachev chose to fight on for another four years. And those were a very difficult four years. People around him such as Shevardnadze did everything they could to keep the war going and ensure that Soviet soldiers remained there.

- Valerii Ablazov, *afganets*¹⁷⁴

On 27 November 1982, two weeks before Brezhnev’s death, “several senior officers serving in Afghanistan” were summoned to a Politburo session chaired by Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Gromyko, where they were asked to “draw up a plan for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.”¹⁷⁵ This covert change of Soviet foreign policy, however, coincided with a spike in the United States’ funding and provision of weapons to the mujahideen, and a renewal in propaganda. Two of the most stubborn myths of the Soviet-Afghan War entered circulation with Andropov’s coming-to-power: allegations of the 40th Army’s use of biological weapons and the filming of a

¹⁷³ Liudmilla Thorne, “Inside Afghanistan: War of Innocents,” *Wall Street Journal*, 21 September 1983, 32.

¹⁷⁴ Valerii Ablazov, deputy leader of Ukrainian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan, interview with author, March 2015.

¹⁷⁵ Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 67.

documentary “claiming, among other things, that the Soviet military was using bombs disguised as toys to deliberately maim Afghan children.”¹⁷⁶ While Andropov called for a change in foreign policy, the Reagan Administration lurched in the opposite direction, taking the Carter Doctrine to a new level of containment. As a result, Andropov’s revision of state policies on the Afghan War was limited to the domestic front. This took shape as covert legislation awarding the afgantsy social-welfare benefits in theory and greater media coverage of the dangers faced by Soviet troops.

While his reputation in the West was that of “a throwback to a tradition of Leninist asceticism” who crushed the dissident movement of Sakharov’s generation, Andropov’s key role was setting the stage for Gorbachev’s reforms.¹⁷⁷ Having put his signature to the resolution “On the Situation in A” that authorized the deployment of Soviet troops on 12 December 1979, he was the first Politburo member to favour an end to the war. His promotion of key players such as Gorbachev and Nikolai Ryzhkov, and his recall of Aleksandr Iakovlev after ten years of exile as ambassador to Canada, had a much greater impact on liberalization and reform than did the Moscow Helsinki Group. Finally, Andropov’s prioritization of negotiating an end to the Soviet-Afghan War was much higher than that of his successors. Bedridden from August 1983 onward, a draft agreement on bilateral issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan was nearly complete by the time of Andropov’s death on 9 February 1984.¹⁷⁸

The death of Andropov was thus a setback in negotiating an end to the Soviet-

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 71, 72n86.

¹⁷⁷ David Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York; Random House, 1993), 191.

¹⁷⁸ Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 73.

Afghan War, and his geriatric successor General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko would preside over its most costly year in 1984 to 1985. The liberalization of the Soviet press that took place under Andropov, however, continued to evolve and inspired those in favour of peace to adopt bolder motions of anti-war dissent. An example came in December 1983 as the Soviet-Afghan War neared its fourth anniversary, when a fake copy of *Krasnaia zvezda* was circulated in Kabul. Its front cover bore an image of a soldier “breaking his kalashnikov over his legs with the caption ‘Stop the War! Let us go Home!’” A departure from early anti-war pamphlets, it prompted an immediate reaction “from discontented Soviet soldiers,” who sent “articles and letters to the real *Krasnaia zvezda* in Moscow... indicative of the unhappiness among many conscripts.”¹⁷⁹ This sentiment carried over to 1984, and set the stage for the emergence of unrecognized afgantsy clubs that alerted the Soviet government to a growing number of veterans disillusioned with the status quo.

¹⁷⁹ Kuzio, “Opposition in the USSR to the occupation of Afghanistan,” 102-03.

Chapter 3

A Shift in Soviet Media and Changes in Public Myths, 1984 to 1985

A few seconds passed before a weak, formal, very short round of applause. ...

Instantly, frustration pierced the hall... Tikhonov characterized the candidate: at once, Chernenko became a tireless fighter, an outstanding figure, and so on – all of which are indispensable attributes of the deceased these days.

It is a disappointment because this greying old man of little intellect, poorly educated, absolutely uncultured... an apparatchik in the worst sense of the word, has no merit. He is a simpleton. He did not even fight in the war, unlike all the more-or-less good people of his generation.

- Anatolii Cherniaev, 14 February 1984.¹

The death of Iurii Andropov on 9 February 1984 came one month after he shared *Time* magazine's annual title of "Man of the Year" with President Ronald Reagan. While his ailing health was no secret to the West, Andropov left some with the impression of an approaching change of guard in the Politburo. The election of Konstantin Chernenko (1911-85) as General Secretary delayed the political and economic reforms envisioned by his predecessor, and indeed, ran contrary to Andropov's dying wish: his widow confided to Raisa Gorbacheva that Andropov favoured Gorbachev as his successor and stated so in a written instruction to the Politburo from his deathbed. This instruction was "secretly

¹ Anatolii Cherniaev, "1984 god," *Dnevnik A.S. Cherniaeva*, accessed 12 July 2016, nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Chernyaev/1984.pdf.

struck from Andropov's letter" by elder members.² Also contrary to Andropov's vision was the prompt cessation of efforts to negotiate a diplomatic end to the Soviet-Afghan War. Pakistani President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq, fully prepared to conclude the agreement on bilateral issues between Pakistan and Afghanistan that Andropov had pursued, twice requested a meeting with Chernenko at the funeral on 14 February 1984. And twice he was ignored.³ Instead, Chernenko favoured a return to sheer military force as a means to victory. While the number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan remained at no more than 120,000, tactics such as high-altitude carpet-bombings, destruction of the mujahideen's infrastructure, and attacks on refugee camps became the norm during Chernenko's tenure. By mid-1984, a policy of "migratory genocide" had forced 3.5 million refugees to flee to Pakistan and 1.5 million to Iran.⁴

The sharp increase in the number of combat operations in Afghanistan led to swift ramifications for the Soviet Union over the course of Chernenko's 13 months in power. On the homefront, 1984 proved to be the most costly year of the war with 2,343 Soviet soldiers losing their lives. The wartime losses and those rendered invalids became increasingly visible during this time. In the case of the Ukrainian SSR, for example, there were one to two funerals held for afgangtsy each day of the year, 72% of whom were 18 to

² Robert Service, *The End of the Cold War, 1985-1991* (London: MacMillan, 2015), 103.

³ Mary Anne Weaver, "Big Soviet Drive in Afghanistan Reflects Tougher Chernenko Line," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 May 1984, accessed 12 July 2016, www.csmonitor.com/1984/0510/051036.html.

⁴ Galeotti, "The Impact of the Afghan War," 24. The term "migratory genocide" was coined by Louis Dupree (1925-89), an American archaeologist and anthropologist who specialized in Afghan culture and carried out excavations in the country from 1962 to 1978. Deported after the Saur Revolution and labeled a CIA agent in 1980, Dupree declared that "Soviet tactics have two objectives: the rubblization of Afghanistan and migratory genocide." He died on 21 March 1989, shortly after the 40th Army withdrew from Afghanistan. See: Nicholas Wade, "Afghanistan: the Politics of a Tragicomedy," *Science*, 212 (1981): 521-23; "Obituary: Louis Dupree, 1925-1989," *Central Asian Survey* 8, 4 (1989): 1-2.

20 years of age.⁵ This led to an increase in public disillusion with the state narrative on the war, and forced Soviet leaders to undertake a revision of propaganda.

Of greater concern to the Politburo than public opinion, however, was the West's response to the 40th Army's renewed military offensive. President Reagan, re-elected on 6 November 1984, oversaw a sharp increase in financial support of the mujahideen. Introduced by President Carter as Operation Cyclone, its funding began at \$20 to \$30 million per year in 1980, whereas President Reagan oversaw approximately \$3 billion funding in two six-year packages, outweighing "all other CIA covert operations in the 1980s combined."⁶ Also granted support under the Reagan administration were operations carried out by the CIA and American NGOs to rescue Soviet POWs. Having ceased cooperation with the Red Cross after the first release of POWs from Switzerland in May 1984, the Soviet Union faced a renewed Western initiative to propagate veterans' testimonies to the Soviet Army's atrocities and poor morale.

A Changing Narrative in the Soviet Press

It would have been strange, had I begun to question the purpose of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the newspaper. I would have left from Kabul, then from the newspaper, and from the party. And then what? ... Yes, it was the epoch of conformism, when you made a deal with your conscience... and praised the merits of the General Secretary. Or you could refuse to write such editorials and

⁵ Sergei Chervonopiskii and Anatolii Kostyria, *Istoriografiia voiny v Afganistane* (Kiev: MITs Medinform, 2005), 18-9.

⁶ Peter Bergen, *Holy War Inc.* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 68; Steve Galster, "Afghanistan: Lessons From the Last War," The National Security Archive, accessed 18 July 2016, nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB57/essay.html.

find something else where you could express yourself. I think it is the same way now. It always has been.

- Mikhail Kozhukhov, journalist⁷

On 10 January 1984, as Iurii Andropov withered from kidney failure, *Komsomol'skaia pravda* bore a prerequisite article emphasizing the importance of the Great Patriotic War for Soviet youth. Heaping praise upon cinematic features such as *Day of the Commander's Division* (1983), celebrating Marshal Georgii Zhukov, and a serial of *Volokolamsk Highway*, adopted from a 1944 novel of mandatory reading for junior officers, the correspondent beamed that “Cadets are going to these movies by foot, with diamonds in their eyes and smiles on their young faces.”⁸ That same day, a sergeant stationed in Afghanistan wrote a letter to *Komsomol'skaia pravda*. “To be honest,” he began, “I’m surprised at how little is written about Afghanistan and about the Soviet people who are honourably doing their duty, often risking their lives.”⁹

This soldier’s displeasure with a lack of media coverage spoke for many who served in Afghanistan after four years unacknowledged by the state. While the news coverage under Andropov offered glimpses of the dangerous tasks that they faced, it abstained from putting numbers to the casualties of war or acknowledging the hardships soldiers faced upon their return. If Andropov’s aim had been to take a small step toward revealing the truths of the war without stirring opposition, however, it appeared to have been effective. The earliest survey on public opinion toward the Soviet-Afghan War

⁷ Natalia Rostova, “Televvezdy: Mikhail Kozhukhov: Interv’iu zhurnalista-mezhdunarodnika i byvshego sobkora <Komsomolki> v Afganistane,” Meduza, accessed 10 August 2016, <https://meduza.io/feature/2015/11/03/televvezdy-mihail-kozuhov>.

⁸ O. Kuchkina, “Ne pro voinu...,” *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 10 January 1984, 2.

⁹ Cited in Kuzio, “Opposition in the USSR to the Occupation of Afghanistan,” 101.

came from Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) in 1984. Any expectations of opposition to the war from a skewed sample of “predominantly educated, urban males, aged between 30 and 49, Party members” and residents of East Europe “with access to the West” were dashed in the results.¹⁰ Approval and disapproval of the Afghan war from a privileged class were even at 25% each, while 51% chose to express “no clear attitude” toward the conflict.¹¹ Moreover, the divide between those for and against the Soviet-Afghan War changed little after the increase in public knowledge that came with Gorbachev’s first year in power; by 1986 their numbers remained almost equal, with 32% voicing their approval of the war, and 33% voicing disapproval.¹²

While limited in its demographics, the lack of open opposition to the Soviet-Afghan War captured in the RFE/RL survey corresponded to the subtle change of message in the Soviet press in 1984. Public opposition remained minimal, due in part to a shift in journalism that gathered sympathy for those injured in their “international duty” by linking their mistreatment to corruption in government organs. An extension of Andropov’s initiative, it positioned the Soviet-Afghan War as a tool for reforms.

The turning point of Soviet media coverage came on 26 February 1984 in a carefully worded article in *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, entitled “Duty” (Dolg). Penned by Inna Rudenko, the article recounted the experience of an invalid named Aleksandr Nemtsov. Referred to only as a man who served his “international duty,” Afghanistan remained an open secret in his story – unnamed, but clear to readers with even an ounce of knowledge on the conflict. Shot from behind in his left shoulder, chest, and spine, the

¹⁰ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 170.

¹¹ Cited in *ibid.* Poll’s total equation of 101% from original.

¹² Cited in *ibid.*, 170.

23-year-old was confined to a wheelchair. “When the pain overtakes him, he turns his head to the wall immediately, as if taking a bullet in the back,” began Rudenko. Linking Nemtsov’s misfortune to another target of domestic reform in alcoholism, she continued, “He learned to hide pain before, when his father would come home drunk, waving his fists above his head at his mother, as she cried silently. ... Now his mother takes care of him in the hospital, often weeping in silence.”¹³ The effect of “Duty” was to take the familiar struggle with bureaucratic obstruction that rang true for readers, and place it in the jarring context of failing to provide for “wartime internationalists.” Upon his return to a home that he had not seen in three years, Nemtsov “suffered at the stairs... as a thought blazed through his mind: how would he leave the building? With so many steps? After all, their apartment was on the fourth floor.”¹⁴ Already tasked with the burden of caring for her son, Nemtsov’s mother appealed to state organs for assistance and encountered only obstruction and ineptitude. The wait for a transfer to a ground-floor apartment took one year, only for the neighbours to react, “This apartment is yours? It’s been empty for six months.”¹⁵ Another year passed before Nemtsov was awarded a car designed for invalids. Soon thereafter, a policeman arrived at his apartment and ordered that the vehicle be registered and parked in a garage with six steps at its entrance. While the Komsomol agreed to provide free gasoline after some lobbying, it insisted that the construction of a ramp fell outside of its duties. Ultimately, it fell upon Sasha’s acquaintances to compensate for the state’s indifference to his needs. “Do you know the name of this new district, that we live in?” asked his neighbor, Iurii Kuznetsov.

¹³ Inna Rudenko, “Dolg,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, 26 February 1984, 4.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

It's "The Living and The Dead." Many of our residents were killed during the war... their remains were transferred to a mass grave, but the city is growing. ... Have we become short-sighted? We have a long history of seeking heroes, and they live here... and Sasha is also part of our history.¹⁶

It took only ten minutes after Aleksandr Nemtsov's experience was published in *Komsomol'skaia pravda* for the Central Committee's Ideological Department to receive "irate telephone calls" in reaction to the article, marking a first step toward the dissolution of Soviet citizens' "comforting consensual public myth" on day-to-day living.¹⁷ "The real mujahideen doing the shooting here are the journalists!" scorned one plaintiff in response. A more reserved expression of disapproval was to deem the article "a major political mistake by the newspaper."¹⁸

The immediate backlash against "Duty" did not deter younger Party reformists from seizing on its impact. Arkadii Vol'skii, an appointee of Andropov's and the head of the Ideological Department, quickly penned "a resolution in support of the article," while Secretary of the Central Committee Egor Ligachev persuaded an ailing Konstantin Chernenko to sign it.¹⁹ Indeed, the landmark article of "Duty" proved to be a topic of discussion for readers and government officials alike. In March 1984, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine convened to discuss the passage of "a resolution which gives a sharp, fundamental assessment of the... extreme indifference and callous attitude of certain officials in the city of Nikopol' to Komsomol member,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Galeotti, "The Impact of the Afghan War," 117-18.

¹⁸ Inna Rudenko, "10,000 pisem o <Dolge>," *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 15 February 2014, accessed 24 July 2015, <http://www.kp.ru/daily/26195.7/3082323/>.

¹⁹ Galeotti, "The Impact of the Afghan War," 117.

Aleksandr Nemtsov.”²⁰ Although those guilty of Nemtsov’s mistreatment were “severely punished,” Party members abstained from any mention of the Soviet-Afghan War. Instead, they cast a broad net to “ensure the strict implementation of Party and government decisions on improving the lives and living conditions of Great Patriotic War veterans, soldiers injured in their performance of international duty, and the families of fallen soldiers.”²¹ It was a legislative gesture of the same sincerity that a commissar had shown upon awarding Nemtsov an Order of the Red Star in his bedroom, with only his mother present.²² Rather than introduce the Soviet-Afghan War and its human costs as a topic approved for public debate, authorities chose instead to use Nemtsov’s example as a means to attack the bureaucracy, demanding that “the Party, government, trade unions and Komsomol bodies... eliminate any inattention and bureaucratic attitudes toward defenders of the Motherland, and members of their families.”²³

The public response to “Duty” did not deter the editors of *Komsomol’skaia pravda* from publishing further articles that spoke to the difficulties faced by veterans of war upon their return. Three days after “Duty” graced its pages came an article entitled “The Vietnam Syndrome.” Its theme overlapped with anti-American propaganda, but for many afgantsy it told a familiar story: with their country having “rejected them because of their involvement in an unpopular war,” many American veterans withdrew from

²⁰ “O provodimoi v respublike rabote po material’no-bytovomu obespecheniiu voinov, poluchivshikh raneniia pri vypolnenii internatsional’nogo dolga, i semei pogibshikh voenno-sluzhashchikh,” Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv obshchestvennykh ob’edinenii Ukrainy (TsGAOO Ukrainy), f.1, op. 25, d. 2696, l. 16.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Rudenko, “Dolg.”

²³ “O provodimoi v respublike rabote po material’no-bytovomu obespecheniiu voinov, poluchivshikh raneniia pri vypolnenii internatsional’nogo dolga, i semei pogibshikh voenno-sluzhashchikh,” TsGAOO Ukrainy, f.1, op. 25, d. 2696, l. 17.

society.²⁴ “All of them are under 40 years of age,” the article read. “Henry Muldoon, for four years has lived in a log cabin... When he was not even 20 years old, he lost many friends in Vietnam in 1965.” A former marine, meanwhile, stated that, “When I returned to the United States, I got into many fights at bars. And when I began to think that I wanted to kill these people, I went to the mountains. I often feel that I am still in deployment.”²⁵ The experience of Vietnam veterans resounded with the afgangtsy throughout their war, eventually culminating in the emergence of collaboration groups between them in the years of glasnost.

Such articles as “Duty” and “The Vietnam Syndrome” were, of course, balanced out by hackneyed reports of dangers and heroism without mention of Soviet casualties. “The Hot Sky,” a regular column on international duty in Afghanistan since the first year of the war, captured the strict rules still imposed on journalism on 22 April 1984. A snapshot of 27-year-old Lieutenant Aleksandr Mozhaev, it captured a valiant young hero faced with a sandstorm, while “land-mines, spread throughout the mountain’s trails by the mujahideen, had critically injured a Major in the Afghan National Army. He urgently had to be evacuated!”²⁶ Inevitably, a pair of Mi-8 helicopters came to the rescue as Mozhaev defied the perilous conditions. If such news columns were met with cynicism by the afgangtsy and the families of those killed in action, this was not lost on the editors of *Komsomol’skaia pravda*. Reiterating the costs of a silent war, they printed a follow-up article to “Duty.” In a bold symbolic gesture, its editors chose the anniversary of the Saur Revolution on 28 April 1984 for the article’s publication. Credited once more to Inna

²⁴ “Vietnamskii sindrom,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, 29 February 1984, 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ V. Kiselev, “Goriachee nebo,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, 22 April 1984, 4.

Rudenko, “My Duty, Yours, And Ours” was a response to the deluge of letters that the newspaper received in response to “Duty.” It offered an update on the health of Aleksandr Nemtsov, now said to be receiving regular visitors, and a sampling of public reactions to the article. “The first day after ‘Duty’ was published, a call came from Moscow,” Rudenko began. “Then another call from Ashgabat. Then from Kalinin, Tashkent, Kishinev... Karelia, a small village near Novosibirsk... an avalanche of calls! And they all had the same question: ‘What can I do for Sasha?’”²⁷

While *Komsomol'skaia pravda* was cautious in its choice of excerpts from the letters it received, they nonetheless captured a splintering of public opinion. Many readers expressed sorrow and solidarity for Sasha, with the prevailing theme one of anti-corruption, marking a continuation of Andropov’s campaign. (“Let us think together about how to eliminate bureaucracies and deception, to sweep the petty-bourgeoisie from our Soviet family.”²⁸) Notable in the choice of letters was an effort to capture the voices of three generations. Those of drafting age were cast as the most patriotic, with a student of foreign languages expressing his admiration for Sasha, vowing to “do everything I can to make future pupils empathetic and kind.”²⁹ This differed from the reactions expressed by veterans of the Great Patriotic War, who showed greater faith in government institutions. One such man, himself an invalid, expressed his shock at reading of Nemtsov’s experience but stopped short of criticizing those responsible. Instead, he reminisced of how “the first secretary of the District Party Committee... listened to me attentively,” relocated him to “a different house, much better than before,” and “lifted my

²⁷ Inna Rudenko, “Dolg moi, tvoi, nash,” *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 28 April 1984, 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

spirits by finding me a job.”³⁰ Others drew from frivolous comparisons, with a former tank commander stating, “It was my comrades who helped me survive. ... Ill with angina in ’45... I suddenly wanted cranberry juice! And my men somehow found some!”³¹ Perhaps the most out-of-touch gesture of solidarity came from M. Metsechnik, who pointed to an obelisk located in a field outside his city. “A monument to the young kolkhoz tractor driver, Petr Khodnevich, who, at the cost of his own life saved a large wheat field,” he beamed. “But just think about it – these men are with you.”³²

Surrounded by letters that equated sympathies for Aleksandr Nemtsov with patriotism for one’s motherland was a tersely-worded recollection that stood out. Penned by Aleksandr Venediktov from the industrial town of Volkhov, he recalled how, “Once in our region... there was a reburial of a pilot killed in the war. Many people gathered to pay tribute.” After the ceremony wound to a close, “a woman approached its organizer with tears in her eyes. And she began to talk about her son, who returned from the army as an invalid.”

His legs were numb and she did not know what to do or how to help him. It was painful to see the mother’s tears, but it was even more painful to see that some of our comrades disapproved, saying that this was not the time or place. And now we have the article, “Duty.” How similar the two cases are! ... Best of health to Sasha Nemtsov and those like him – they have our admiration. And shame and condemnation upon those who show such callousness.³³

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

The publication of Venediktov's words in a nation-wide paper aimed at Soviet youth was a marked departure from the hard line against criticism of the state during the first four years of the Soviet-Afghan War. If in 1982 a mother's outburst of grief at the military commissariat saw her "committed to a psychiatric hospital," the public expression of such sentiment received tacit approval after Rudenko's article.³⁴ It was a silent concession to the families of those killed or injured in the Soviet-Afghan War, granted by a state that sought to cast a patriotic renewal of its narrative on the conflict.

Moreover, the letters written to *Komsomol'skaia pravda* in reaction to Nemtsov's fate led authorities to re-examine the sensitive issue of veterans' welfare. The purge of the ranks in Nikopol' in March 1984 was followed by two surveys carried out in provinces of the Ukrainian SSR in August and September to evaluate the living conditions of Great Patriotic War veterans, wartime-internationalists (a.k.a. afgantsy), and the families of those killed in action. The committees that carried out the surveys were "composed of workers of Party and Soviet organs, military commissariats, deputies, and representatives of public organizations (predstvitelei obshchestvennykh organizatsii)."³⁵ Their findings and actions reflected the generation gap between Soviet veterans and their rights to benefits. Of the 449 young men of Chernivtsi who served their "international duty," 36 fell within categories of invalids, and 31 families had lost a son; in a sharp contrast, 6,351 families had lost relatives as soldiers in the Great Patriotic War,

³⁴ Elkner, "Dedovshchina and the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers under Gorbachev."

³⁵ "O khode vypolnenniia ukazanii, izlozhennykh v zapiske TsK kompartii Ukrainy 'O korrespondentsii 'Dolg' opublikovannoi v gazete *Komsomol'skaia pravda* ot 26 fevralia 1984 goda'," Partarkhiv Chernovitskogo Obkoma Kompartii Ukrainy (PChOK Ukrainy), f. 1, op. 52, d. 102, l. 16.

with 3,911 disabled.³⁶ The course of history in motion was at the front of the committees' minds: with the fortieth anniversary of "the liberation of Soviet Ukraine from German fascist invaders" approaching on 28 October 1984, the awarding of "valuable prizes" to "all group one invalids of the Great Patriotic War" took priority over the afgangtsy.³⁷ This was clear on 27 December 1984, the fifth anniversary of the Soviet-Afghan War. In a meeting between Chernivtsi's regional Council of People's Deputies and the Department of Social Security, they championed awarding 170 Zaporozhets automobiles to invalids of the Great Patriotic War, the issuance of "monetary compensation" to those who chose not to use their vouchers for sanitariums, and their widows' rights to a 50% discount on the price of apartments and utilities.³⁸ The younger generation of "wartime internationalists" went unmentioned, ten months plus a day after Alesksandr Nemtsov's story became public.

The Soviet state's decision to use Rudenko's article of "Duty" as grounds to review the welfare of Great Patriotic War veterans, rather than that of the afgangtsy, weighed on the minds of the journalists who publicized their needs. This was reflected in their historicization of the article and its significance in the post-Soviet era. On 25 May 2015, "Duty" was republished on the website of *Rossiiskaia gazeta* to celebrate the 90th anniversary of *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, its editors remarking that "the best way to celebrate *Komsomol'skaia*'s jubilee is to read over the best material."³⁹ Rudenko herself

³⁶ Ibid, l. 12.

³⁷ Ibid, l. 16.

³⁸ "Ispolnitel'nyi komitet chernovitskogo oblastnogo soveta narodnykh deputatov. Otdel Sotsial'nogo obespecheniia. 'O dal'neishem uluchshenii material'no-bytovykh uslovii invalidov voiny i semei pogibshikh voinov'," PChOK Ukrainy, f. 1, op. 52, d. 102, ll. 18-20.

³⁹ Inna Rudenko, "Dolg," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 24 May 2015, accessed 25 July 2016, <https://rg.ru/2015/05/24/komsomolka.html>.

was honoured for her 85th birthday with the publication of a book of letters written to her by readers and fellow journalists. Especially praiseful was Lidiia Grafova, the Chairman of the Forum of Migrants' Organizations (Foruma pereselencheskikh organizatsii) in the Russian Federation. "Your articles and speeches, which have now become classics, are very difficult, sometimes painful [to read]," she began. "In seminars and conferences, you are called the guardian of morality in Russian journalism."⁴⁰

Aleksandr Nemtsov, meanwhile, was awarded a spacious apartment with accessibility while six members of the local Communist Party in Nikopol' were expelled for their mistreatment of the man.⁴¹ He refused to take painkillers out of fear of addiction, and struggled to speak at length in the years after "Duty," with his wife Marina helping him communicate. Beyond the public eye, Nemtsov lived what many might call a normal life: he learned to swim, took an interest in photography, and studied woodwork for a post-war profession. He also remained in contact with those at *Komsomol'skaia pravda* who had told his story and celebrated his 50th birthday in Moscow in 2011 with journalists and fellow afgantsy. This proved to be the last time that Inna Rudenko would see Aleksandr Nemtsov. After "Duty" was re-published in 2015, Rudenko phoned him for an interview. The Sasha who answered was in fact his son of the same name: Nemtsov and his spouse had died in a car accident since their last meeting.⁴² "In Moscow... [at] Sasha's birthday, I suddenly remembered that at one point, I had proposed an alternative title for "Duty," Rudenko wrote, reflecting on Nemtsov's death.

⁴⁰ "Vozvrashchenie dolga," *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 3 May 2016, accessed 25 July 2016, <https://rg.ru/2016/05/03/rossijskomu-zhurnalistu-inne-rudenko-ispolnilos-85-let.html>.

⁴¹ Rudenko, "10,000 pisem o <Dolge>."

⁴² Ibid.

“It was ‘The Second Bullet’ (Vtoraia pulia). ... And the older you get, the more these damn second bullets hurt.”⁴³

A Changing Narrative in the Western Press

So far the United States has brought only six Soviet Army deserters to this country, while in 1985, 22 others were killed... It is hard to believe that a superpower like the United States cannot extract a handful of Soviet teenagers out of Afghanistan. I wonder how long it would have taken the Soviet Union to bring American soldiers to Moscow, had they asked for asylum during the Vietnam War. Perhaps 48 hours?

- Liudmilla Thorne⁴⁴

The shift in the Soviet Union’s state narrative on the Afghan War was mirrored by a change in the West’s framing of the conflict. While the Soviet press shed light on soldiers’ combat role in Afghanistan to muster public support for “wartime-internationalists,” the West turned its focus to the POWs. This was, to some degree, a reaction to Western Europe’s growing fatigue with the Reagan administration’s propagation of a Soviet empire seeking expansion and American efforts to “kick the Vietnam syndrome.” Asked to compare the United States’ foreign policy of “giving aid to democratic forces in Central America” with the Soviet Union’s “suppressing the Afghan people,” respondents to a *Eurobarometer* survey in October 1984 saw little difference between the two:

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ludmilla Thorne, *Soviet POWs in Afghanistan* (New York: Freedom House Press, 1986), 32.

Table 1: Opinions Comparing Soviet Policy in Afghanistan with US Initiatives in Central America.⁴⁵

	France	Belgium	Netherlands	Germany	Italy	Ireland	UK
About the same	65.0%	64.6%	57.7%	38.0%	58.2%	65.2%	55.2%
Very different	31.5%	36.5%	36.5%	56.1%	41.3%	29.0%	39.9%
Other	3.5%	4.1%	5.8%	5.9%	0.4%	5.8%	5.0%

Coupled with the massive protests against the deployment of Pershing II missiles in Western Europe, the growing perception of the Reagan Administration as hypocritical in its foreign policy demanded a renewed focus on humanitarianism. It was an initiative that saw the CIA team with an NGO named Freedom House in an effort to negotiate the release of Soviet POWs and gather their testimonies against the Afghan war.

Established on 10 November 1941 “with the quiet encouragement of Franklin D. Roosevelt,” the initial function of Freedom House was to combat isolationism in the United States and advocate participation in World War Two.⁴⁶ By the 1970s, its focus had shifted to the observation of human rights and the defense of Soviet dissidents. Immediately after the onset of the Soviet-Afghan War, an Afghan Information Centre opened within the organization. Serving as its director was Rosanne Klass (1929-2015), who had “taught English in rural Afghan schools with her husband” in Afghanistan’s

⁴⁵ Maria Eleonora Guasconi, “Public Opinion and the Euromissile Crisis,” eds. Frederic Bozo et al., *The Euromissile Crisis and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2015), 285.

⁴⁶ “Our History,” Freedom House, accessed 21 August 2016, <https://freedomhouse.org/content/our-history>.

liberal years of the 1950s, and published an acclaimed memoir after her return to the United States.⁴⁷ In 1965, she worked as a reporter for the *New York Times* to monitor Afghanistan's first democratic election and interviewed a then-unknown Babrak Karmal, who she deemed "a communist on the payroll of the Soviet embassy."⁴⁸ After the Saur Revolution, she correctly predicted his installation as president and later edited a collection of essays on the war, deemed "a work of clear vision and great importance" by the equally hawkish Daniel Pipes.⁴⁹ With Klass functioning as Freedom House's voice of humanitarian aid from New York, duty fell upon Liudmilla Thorne (1938-2009) to carry out POW rescues overseas.

Born on 14 March 1938 in Rostov-on-Don, Liudmilla Thorne – née Zemelis, in light of her father's Latvian roots – left the Soviet Union in 1943 when her parents fled to Europe. Detained in a Nazi labour camp upon entering Poland, they escaped to the western German city of Heidelberg by the end of the war. In light of the Yalta agreement granting the repatriation of Soviet citizens, they identified as Latvians, fearing persecution in Russia. In 1950, the family secured an emigration sponsor in the United States, where Thorne began her work at the CIA-funded station of Radio Liberty at the age of 25.⁵⁰ She rose to fame during the Soviet-Afghan War for leading negotiations on the release of Soviet POWs, making four trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan between 1983

⁴⁷ "Rosanne Klass, Writer and Advocate for the Afghan People, Dies at 86," *New York Times*, 24 July 2015, B9. Originally published in 1964, a second edition of Klass's memoir emerged in 2007 following the United States' war in Afghanistan, with an added subtitle. See: Rosanne Klass, *Land of the High Flags: Afghanistan When the Going Was Good* (New York: Norton & Co.), 2007.

⁴⁸ "Biographical Note," News From Freedom House, accessed 21 August 2016, http://www.svsu.edu/library/archives/public/follett/documents/44_50/KFP046_37b.pdf.

⁴⁹ "Rosanne Klass, Writer and Advocate for the Afghan People, Dies at 86."

⁵⁰ Ivan Tolstoi, "Dom svobody: pamiati Liudmily Torn," *Radio svoboda*, 29 May 2011, accessed 28 July 2016, www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/24208929.html.

and 1988 at times disguised in a burka. From her first mission onward, Thorne recorded interviews with POWs and appealed to President Reagan to extend an amnesty to them. “A systematic method for screening, processing and transporting Soviet Army deserters out of Afghanistan” she argued, would serve both “humanitarian reasons” and “ideological considerations.”⁵¹ Of the 50 Soviet POWs released during the course of the war, 15 were rescued through Thorne’s efforts.⁵²

Liudmilla Thorne’s first detailed report on Soviet POWs came on 21 September 1983, after spending three weeks at a secret mujahideen training camp. Having made one trip prior in February, she had by this time interviewed “more than a dozen Soviet POWs in various parts of Afghanistan.”⁵³ Praising the young men for their “moral courage” in deserting, Thorne cited a number of common themes the soldiers had raised. “None of the Soviet soldiers want to be here,” insisted Kolia, a 19-year-old Russian. “People are dying on both sides.” Echoing earlier reports in the emigre journal of *Posev*, they expressed resentment for “Soviet officers [who] come here for the money... earn[ing] 700 or 800 rubles, while we receive only nine.” The most resounding allegations to come from “practically all of the Soviet soldiers” Thorne interviewed were their accounts of brutal hazing in the 40th Army.⁵⁴

Upon her return to the United States, Thorne reported combat statistics offered by the mujahideen, who claimed that between 20,000 and 50,000 Soviet soldiers had been

⁵¹ Robert D. McFadden, “5 Soviet Defectors in Afghanistan Write to Reagan for Asylum,” *New York Times*, 17 October 1986, accessed 27 July 2016, www.nytimes.com/1986/10/17/world/5-soviet-defectors-in-afghanistan-write-to-reagan-for-asylum.html.

⁵² Dvoretzky and Sarin, *The Afghan Syndrome*, 168.

⁵³ Liudmilla Thorne, “Inside Afghanistan: War of Innocents,” 32.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

killed in action. It was a figure that echoed 21-year-old Sasha's recollection of a battle near Kandahar, when he alleged that "3,000 Soviet soldiers were killed and about three times as many were wounded."⁵⁵ The inflated numbers were much in line with Cold War estimations on the number of Soviet lives lost under the rule of Iosif Stalin before the opening of archives; the total number of Soviet soldiers killed in Afghanistan by the end of 1983 was in fact 6,264.⁵⁶ Thorne's report thus added a new perspective to the United States' understanding of the Soviet-Afghan War with its first-hand accounts from POWs, while reinforcing inaccurate speculation on the conflict.

Thorne's call for the United States to take on a rescue mission separate from that of the Red Cross bore its first results on 25 November 1983, when two 19-year-old conscripts were released after prolonged negotiations and spoke at a press conference at the European Parliament in Brussels. Praised for their "daring decision... to escape to the West from Afghanistan," Nikolai Ryzhkov and Aleksandr Voronov were awarded refugee status by the United States' Immigration and Naturalization Service.⁵⁷ Two days later they arrived in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where they lived with Liudmilla Thorne's mother for their first five weeks on American soil.

Ryzhkov and Voronov both claimed not to have participated in combat operations, speaking instead of poor conditions within the Soviet Army. Echoing Thorne's observations in her September interviews, the military hazing carried out by

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Krivosheev, *Rossia i SSSR v voynakh XX veka*, 537.

⁵⁷ Roman Rollnick, "A Smiling Soviet Army Deserter, Chain-smoking American Cigarettes, Gave..." *United Press International*, 25 November 1983, accessed on 1 August 2016, www.upi.com/Archives/1983/11/25/A-smiling-Soviet-army-deserter-chain-smoking-American-cigarettes-gave/9998438584400/; "Soviet POWs in Switzerland face difficult decisions," *Ukrainian Weekly*, 15 April 1984, 2.

commanding officers and senior conscripts (dedy, or stariki) against new recruits (salagi) was a recurring theme. “I’ve known men who were given such savage beatings that their limbs were broken or their livers were damaged,” Ryzhkov stated, one week after settling in New Jersey. “I personally met about ten other defectors, and most of them defected because of brutality. I also know of two men who were driven to suicide.”⁵⁸ Voronov, meanwhile, testified that he was “badly beaten by another soldier shortly before he deserted, because he refused to fetch him water.”⁵⁹

Just as striking was the endurance of the Soviet state’s original narrative on the Afghan War outside of capital cities. While those in Moscow had the chance to read Iurii Nagibin’s “Patience” and view *The Afghan Diary*, Ryzhkov hailed from Kazakhstan’s countryside and Voronov from the outskirts of Smolensk. Drafted in 1982, neither man questioned the announcement that they would be “defending the southern border of the Soviet Union and would be facing American and Chinese mercenaries,” just as was propagated at the onset of the war.⁶⁰ Their outlooks quickly changed in light of the war’s effects on those who saw combat. Ryzhkov, who worked as a repairman on communications equipment at a base outside Kabul, learned of reckless civilian casualties from those who returned to his base to watch state-approved movies during downtime. “I would overhear them complaining about having to destroy entire villages to punish the people in them for helping the insurgents,” he alleged. “Heavy aircraft would fly over and

⁵⁸ Jim Gallagher, “2 Soviets Tell Afghan Horror,” *Chicago Tribune*, 4 December 1983, 1, 24.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ “Soviets Surprised Afghan Rebels, Invaders Demoralized, Deserter Says,” *The Globe and Mail*, 6 December 1983, 15.

kill everybody. These soldiers were often disgusted with what they had to do.”⁶¹ This was a marked contrast to what Ryzhkov had heard of the war when “a boy from our village... wrote letters home saying that everything was going well.” He discovered soon after being deployed that, “soldiers are ordered to write letters like that. I wrote them myself.”⁶² Abandoning his base on 16 June 1983 while his comrades viewed a movie entitled *A Mercedes Eludes Pursuit*, Ryzhkov made his first and only journey to Kabul, where he surrendered to insurgents roaming the streets.

Voronov’s desertion from a base in Kunduz, in contrast, was difficult and unlikely. The soldier-driver of a BTR in a Combat Agitation-Propaganda Detachment (Boevoi agitatsionno-propagandistskii otriad), Voronov came from a slightly higher position in the 40th Army than Ryzhkov. On a foggy night of snow, he covered himself in a white sheet and left his base through a security checkpoint undetected. What Voronov did not realize was that “he went straight through a mine-field... with ten centimetres of snow on the ground, and couldn’t have seen the mines even if he looked.”⁶³ Despite “a 2-3% chance of passing through a minefield without injury,” Voronov succeeded, and joined Ryzhkov confined to a small garden outside Kabul for five months before Freedom House negotiated their release. Asked for his opinion on the organization’s initiative and its potential for counter-propaganda in the Soviet Afghan War, Ryzhkov beamed that “as word [of it] spreads, snowballing numbers of Soviet soldiers will be

⁶¹ Gallagher, “2 Soviets Tell Afghan Horror,” 24.

⁶² Ibid. The practice of doctored letters remained a practice in armies of the immediate post-Soviet years, according to one of my interviewees who served in the Armed Forces of Ukraine from 1993 to 1995.

⁶³ Nikolai Kuz’min, “Poiski spetsialistov,” Art of War, accessed 1 August 2016, artofwar.ru/k/kuzxmin_n_m/text_0070.shtml.

willing to take that way out.”⁶⁴

Despite the positive reaction of the American press to the arrival of Soviet POWs, Freedom House and the CIA proved naïve in their assumptions of swift integration in the United States. Ryzhkov and Voronov were provided with \$45 per week in allowance and free rent sponsored by the International Rescue Committee, an NGO focused on delivering humanitarian aid to Afghan refugees in Peshawar.⁶⁵ Indicative of the key role played by Soviet emigres in the initiative to rescue POWs, the International Rescue Committee was at this time chaired by Leo Cherne (1912-99). An economist of Russian descent whose father emigrated from Bessarabia, he also acted as Chairman of the Executive Committee of Freedom House. Efforts to mould the two Soviet youth into Western citizens proved futile: over the course of a year, Ryzhkov bounced between seven jobs and eleven places of residence, and failed to attend English classes for more than a few days. On 13 December 1984, he handed his car keys to Soviet dissident Mikhail Makarenko in Washington, D.C., where he had resided since March, and said, “I can’t live any longer in this country.”⁶⁶ It was a setback for Liudmilla Thorne, who stated that “Nikolai simply was not responsible in his behavior,” and admitted that he was the third soldier to return, in light of two POWs offered asylum in Britain who followed the

⁶⁴ “Helping Afghanistan,” *Wall Street Journal*, 19 December 1983, 24.

⁶⁵ Phil Gailey, “Soviet Deserter is Called Unwilling to Work,” *New York Times*, 20 December 1984, accessed 31 July 2016, www.nytimes.com/1984/12/20/world/soviet-deserter-is-called-unwilling-to-work.html.

⁶⁶ Phil Gailey, “A Soviet Deserter in Afghanistan, Living in U.S., Will Return,” *New York Times*, 18 December 1984, accessed 30 July 2016, www.nytimes.com/1984/12/18/world/a-soviet-deserter-in-afghanistan-living-in-us-will-return.html. Mikhail Makarenko (1931-2007) was a dissident from Romania who arrived in the United States in 1979 after serving 11 years in prison on charges of “anti-Soviet agitation,” after holding avant-garde art exhibitions and attempting to form unsanctioned unions in his home country.

same path after receiving “emotional letters and photographs from their families.”⁶⁷ Ryzhkov made his decision to return to the Soviet Union despite TASS’s continued slander in the past year. The state’s news agency told of a soldier’s role having “proved to be too hard for him,” with his “four months at a guerilla base near Peshawar” having seen him drugged and “told enticing things about life in the West.” His defection to the United States, in the TASS narrative, saw Ryzhkov fall into a “vicious circle of sleazy propaganda and dubious love” with a homosexual agent of the CIA, hence his anti-Soviet slander.⁶⁸ The Soviet Embassy’s assurance that he would not be penalized for desertion quickly proved to be a facade, with Ryzhkov sentenced to 12 years in prison upon his return. His pardon in 1988 did not allow him to rebuke the media’s slander. Speaking at a press conference organized by *Novosti*, Ryzhkov stated that “a bunch of bad guys” at Freedom House forced him to issue “made up” accounts of Soviet atrocities in Afghanistan and hazing in the 40th Army.⁶⁹ Even fellow POW Aleksandr Voronov did not escape denunciation, with Ryzhkov labeling him an alcoholic who became “entangled with the CIA.”⁷⁰

The setbacks of Freedom House’s initiative sparked a backlash from the CIA after a year of implementation. Gustav Avrakotos (1938-2005), the Afghan Task Force Chief for the CIA, was particularly blunt in his recollection of rescuing POWs as a means of propaganda. Attending a White House session on the matter and armed with graphic,

⁶⁷ Ibid; Thorne, *Soviet POWs in Afghanistan*, 30.

⁶⁸ “Soviets Admit Defection of Soldier in Afghanistan,” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 January 1985, accessed 2 August 2016, articles.latimes.com/1985-01-17/news/mn-7677_1_soviet-union.

⁶⁹ Vincent J. Schodolski and Mitchell Locin, “Soviet Who Fled to U.S. Recants Story,” *Chicago Tribune*, 28 July 1988, accessed on 2 August 2016, articles.chicagotribune.com/1988-07-28/news/8801180306_1_soviet-defectors-soviet-soldiers-afghan-rebels.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

blown-up photographs documenting mujahideen desecration of prisoners, he demanded, “If you were a sane fucking Russian, would you defect to these people?”⁷¹ Likely alluding to Ryzhkov and Voronov’s rescue, he recalled how “after a prolonged search for living prisoners, the CIA issued a ransom of \$50,000 to the mujahideen for the release of two men.” “These two guys were basket cases,” Avrakotos continued. “One guy had hallucinations of the KGB murdering him. ... The other was an alcoholic. ... I think we brought three or four more over [in 1984-1985]. One guy ended up robbing a 7-11 in Vienna, Virginia.”⁷² Avrakotos’ criticism of the initiative and his allegation that the mujahideen rarely took prisoners were validated upon the war’s conclusion: of the 333 afgantsy missing in action on 15 February 1989, only 38 were identified as POWs, with another 44 having converted to Islam and joined the mujahideen.⁷³ By 1986, the CIA had washed its hands of POW rescues.

A valiant operation (albeit with an ideological tint) that continued until the very end of the Soviet-Afghan War as Freedom House’s initiative, the POW rescues did not bear the results that were hoped for. Particularly damaging were the assumptions that the afgantsy would shun any return to the Soviet Union. Those who chose to do so, such as Nikolai Ryzhkov, faced an unpredictable reception – not only from government organs, but from their fellow afgantsy.⁷⁴ “They make me sick, these traitors,” exclaimed one

⁷¹ Cited in George Crile III, *Charlie Wilson’s War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History* (New York; Grove Press, 2003), 333.

⁷² Ibid, 333-34.

⁷³ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 257.

⁷⁴ Blowback against those who went AWOL and were taken as POWs was by this time an element of military-patriotic education. Iurii Khadzhiev, who served in Afghanistan from 1981 to 1982, recalled how his political commissar once told him, “Iura, should you be captured, your father will receive a letter stating that you are a traitor to the Motherland.” “So if I make it home alive, my father will kill me, that’s, awful....” Khadzhiev ultimately decided: “I always carried a grenade with me. Many of us did. I figured,

sergeant upon reading of their return from the United States. “We were getting our arms and legs blown off while they were going around New York looking at skyscrapers.”⁷⁵ In a memoir published for the 25th anniversary of the war’s end, Nikolai Kuz’min, who served in Voronov’s division, showed nothing short of disdain for the man and others who followed his path, deeming him “a bastard [and]... a scoundrel” who forced his former comrades to search for him over the course of a month in dangerous territory. His arrival in a United States that “bore no resemblance to a happy life in the free world” drew little sympathy, with Kuz’min alleging that Voronov met his fate with “alcohol, narcotics, [and] several years in prison for the stabbing of a woman.”⁷⁶

A Prisoner of War Turned Protester

I spoke a few times with an Afghan commander named Saiaf. They understood that the war against the Soviet Union would be difficult to win and that they needed public opinion in the Soviet Union and across the world to be on their side. “Because of this,” he said, “we treat you well.” This war is not with you.

- Mykola Movchan, former POW⁷⁷

Of the 15 afgantsy rescued through Freedom House’s efforts, only one transitioned from press conferences to active protests against the Soviet-Afghan War.

‘I’ll blow myself up!’ I saw what they do to their prisoners. It’s scary to watch, but you get used to it.” Cited in Laruelle and Rakisheva, *Pamiat’ iz plameni Afganistana*, 64.

⁷⁵ Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 155.

⁷⁶ Nikolai Kuz’min, “Poiski spetsialistov.” At the time of writing, Kuzmin’s sentiment toward Voronov is strikingly similar to those of American soldiers tasked with searching for deserter Bowe Bergdahl in Afghanistan following his release via a prisoner exchange with the Taliban. See for instance: Mark Thompson, “The 6 U.S. Soldiers Who Died Searching for Bowe Bergdahl,” *Time*, 2 June 2014, accessed 9 August 2016, time.com/2809352/bowe-bergdahl-deserter-army-taliban/.

⁷⁷ Vladimir Morozov, “Afganskaia voina Nikolaia Movchana,” *Radio svoboda*, 24 December 2009, accessed 1 August 2016, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/1912966.html>.

Praised by Liudmilla Thorne for “campaigning in the United States and in Europe on behalf of Afghanistan and his fellow POWs,” Mykola Movchan was a young woodworker from village of Ozerianka west of Kiev. Drafted in 1982, he served in the 198th Special Motorized Anti-Tank Regiment assigned to defend a headquarters in the province of Ghazni. As with Ryzhkov and Voronov, Movchan became disillusioned with the war based on its false propaganda of providing “humanitarian aid” to an allied country. Having witnessed the Soviet Army’s “retaliatory action against the civilian population” in scorched villages, he deserted his unit at dawn in June 1983.⁷⁸ With armoured vehicles soon in pursuit, Movchan fled to a nearby village, where a local man gave him his own clothes to elude the army’s search. Speaking to Radio Liberty many years later, Movchan remained grateful to those who sheltered him. “We all know about Muslim terrorists, but they are a minority,” he answered, when asked why he supported “Afghan mercenaries.” “As they explained to me later, their jihad may be a Holy war, but if a person fought against the Afghans five minutes ago and then threw down his weapon, it is forbidden to kill him. Allah does not forgive such a sin.”⁷⁹

Movchan arrived in the United States in August 1984 after a year’s captivity alongside three other POWs – the second group of deserters rescued by Freedom House. Unlike Ryzhkov and Voronov before him, he quickly found residence among a host family in New York and employment at a Ukrainian publishing house. Declining occasional invitations from the Soviet Embassy to drop in and telephone his parents, Movchan went on to become “a devotee of American ice cream, cigarettes, [and]

⁷⁸ Elliott Newton, “Captivity and Conversion: An In-Depth Study of Soviet POWs in Afghanistan,” (master’s thesis, Indiana University, 2015), 59.

⁷⁹ Morozov, “Afganskaia voina Nikolaia Movchana.”

televised wrestling,” with a special affection for films based on the Vietnam War such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Deer Hunter*.⁸⁰ The greatest similarity with Movchan and the two POWs freed in 1983 was his citation of hazing as the primary reason for deserting. Recalling his very first day in Afghanistan, Movchan scoffed,

The seniors [*dembels*] stole our new uniforms. ... [They] would be returning home soon and wanted to look nice in new uniforms. There was no discipline in the ranks except for the seniors making the junior men do everything unpleasant and dangerous. Human life had no value. A month before I left, an enlisted man killed a senior. ... I didn't see how we could go about shooting our own.⁸¹

It was a stance that Movchan maintained 20 years after the Soviet-Afghan War came to an end, affirming that, “First and foremost, it was *dedovshchina* in the army.”⁸²

Movchan stood by his criticism of the Soviet Army, participated in protests against the war in Afghanistan, and went beyond press conferences on the matter after settling in the United States.⁸³ On 4 December 1985, Movchan appeared with two mujahideen, two journalists who had reported from Afghanistan, and two State Department officials in front of the U.S. Congress at a hearing of the Helsinki Commission. After a viewing of documentary footage that captured “villages being bombed and scenes of everyday life” in Afghanistan, Markov told of atrocities carried out

⁸⁰ Jim Stewart, “A Deserter’s Story: The Stealing, Bad Food and Cold Was Too Much,” *Gainesville Sun*, 26 October 1986, 1H, 4H; “Soviet Deserters Face New Enemies: Guilt and Uncertainty,” *New York Times*, 31 May 1989, B1. The Soviet Embassy’s wooing of deserters in an effort to lure them back was hardly unique during the Cold War. My own father, called upon to serve as a sniper in the Vietnam War, dodged the draft in 1968 and resided in France in 1969. Despite an ocean between them, he continued to receive precarious invitations for coffee at the United States Embassy in Paris.

⁸¹ Stewart, “A Deserter’s Story,” 1H, 4H.

⁸² Morozov, “Afganskaia voina Nikolaia Movchana.”

⁸³ Thorne, *Soviet POWs in Afghanistan*, 31.

by soldiers against innocents that were “positively encouraged by giving out awards.”⁸⁴ Echoing Ryzhkov’s statements before him, he recalled, “I heard discontent about the war not only from the ordinary soldiers, but also from the officers... Although there are feelings of despondency, [they] see that there is no way out of the situation.”⁸⁵ Grateful to Freedom House for negotiating his release from captivity, Movchan endorsed the policy of rescuing fellow POWs, arguing that, “If they have... defect[ed] from the Soviet army, you can be sure it is because they no longer wish to be part of the unjust and dirty war in Afghanistan.”⁸⁶

Movchan’s activism peaked with his membership in the Ukrainian Peace Committee (UPC). Formed shortly after the Chernobyl disaster on 26 April 1986, Movchan joined the organization’s ranks and became a dominant voice as a veteran against the Soviet-Afghan War who called for disarmament and Ukrainian independence. The UPC was active for two years, during which it made headlines for its protest against the World Peace Council’s Copenhagen Congress of 15 to 19 October 1986. It was the 14th congress held by the Soviet Union’s international front, its previous two having addressed the deployment of Pershing-II missiles in West Europe (1983), and expressed solidarity with the PLO and Afghanistan (1980). The first World Peace Council congress to take place in Western Europe since its foundation in 1950, the event was held to illustrate the Soviet Union’s solidarity with the United Nations’ International Day of Peace as the Soviet-Afghan War neared its seventh anniversary. The Ukrainian Peace

⁸⁴ Martin Hillman, “Freedom Fighters, Journalists and Others Testify about Soviet Atrocities,” *Fiat Lux*, 13 December 1985, 1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Committee, funded by “a number of [Central Intelligence] Agency devised facilities based in the U.S.,” was given four months notice and began to mobilize for a journey to Copenhagen to collaborate with Danish protest groups.⁸⁷

Movchan’s participation in the UPC saw him issue a statement on the Soviet-Afghan War produced in 500 copies on 9 October 1986, translated to English and Danish for circulation at the conference.⁸⁸ Also in members’ luggage were “20 Russian-language books on Afghanistan” to be distributed to the Soviet delegation, “placards against the occupation of Afghanistan,” stickers that bore “a stop sign with the word Stop, and the year ‘1979-19..?’,” and a banner prepared by Movchan that read in Danish: “NO MORE HIROSHIMAS! NO MORE CHERNOBYLS! FOR A NUCLEAR FREE UKRAINE!”⁸⁹ After the UPC arrived in Copenhagen on 11 October, they immediately circulated copies of Movchan’s statement among “local people involved in anti-Afghan war activities.”⁹⁰ Members hurried to find typewriters and print shops, and contacted the Danish press about their upcoming protests. World Peace Council’s congress began.

Movchan’s press conference took place at the Christianshavns Beboerhus, a nearby community centre. Making headlines in major organs of the Danish press, it was followed by the UPC’s distribution of four-page leaflets entitled *Welcome to the World Peace Congress* on its opening day. Inside was a photograph of Soviet soldiers poised around a tank, labeled “The Soviet Peace Delegation,” with satirical letters on the

⁸⁷ “Field Station Asset Report (1988),” 1, CIA Directorate of Intelligence, accessed 31 July 2016, [https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/QRPLUMB%20%20%20VOL.%204%20%20\(DEVELOPMENT%20AND%20PLANS,%201982-88\)_0019.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/QRPLUMB%20%20%20VOL.%204%20%20(DEVELOPMENT%20AND%20PLANS,%201982-88)_0019.pdf).

⁸⁸ “Re: The World Peace Congress, Copenhagen, Oct. 1986,” 1, 4,” CIA Directorate of Intelligence, accessed 31 July 2016, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/QRPLUMB%20%20%20VOL.%201_0006.pdf.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 5.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 4.

opposite page, the first of which read:

From the 401 Motorized Infantry Division stationed in Kandahar, Afghanistan:
“Dear Peace delegation! We Soviet soldiers involved in our yearly ‘Peace Offensive’ here in Afghanistan send warm greetings from this pacified land. As you know, our division would gladly like to visit Denmark, and we hope that you can arrange for an invitation to be sent to us by the Congress.”⁹¹

The pamphlet went on to encourage support for the mujahideen (“What would you do if... the people who were fighting for your freedom were to be labelled as ‘bandits’ [dushman] by the occupying power?”), urging its readers: “Do not let Moscow and its supporters continue the genocide in Afghanistan.”⁹² Anti-war protests were held on 15 and 17 October. Movchan was engaged in the UPC’s press release on the first day of protest, answering questions from about 20 journalists, and returned to the stage for the second day. After “three Danish peaceniks unfurled a banner on Afghanistan,” Movchan “spoke through loudspeakers in Russian and English” to ensure that members of the World Peace Committee’s congress heard him.⁹³ His interest in human rights was marked by his decision to extend his time in Copenhagen. While all other members of the Ukrainian Peace Committee departed on the 18 October, Movchan attended a hearing organized by the International Sakharov Committee.⁹⁴ Held in collaboration with the

⁹¹ “Welcome to the World Peace Congress,” 1, CIA Directorate of Intelligence, accessed on 31 July 2016, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/QRPLUMB%20%20%20VOL.%201_0005.pdf.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ “Re: The World Peace Congress, Copenhagen, Oct. 1986,” 4.

⁹⁴ The International Sakharov Committee was established in Denmark in 1974 by Hans Kristian Neerskov, a Danish pastor who met with Sakharov several times in an effort to realize his calls for an international human rights committee. After the passage of the Helsinki Accords, the Sakharov Committee conducted hearings on human rights violations in the Soviet Union, financed largely by emigre and religious organizations. See: Bent Boel, “Bible Smuggling and Human Rights in the Cold War,” in *Transnational*

Afghanistan-Danish Friendship Society, the “Afghanistan Tribunal” saw Movchan become acquainted with “a group of Afghans [who] arrived from Pakistan,” and spoke at their hearings.⁹⁵ His closing speech at the Sakharov hearings on 20 October 1986 was “very well received,” with “individual interviews” taken by the Turkish and Middle Eastern press.⁹⁶

The CIA’s assessment of the Ukrainian Peace Committee’s protest was quite positive. On a budget of \$25,000 the UPC “were able to peacefully disrupt a Congress planned by the USSR at a high cost (\$5 million).”⁹⁷ The operation was such a success that covert support for the UPC continued well into the New Year; the UPC published four issues of its expatriate journal and distributed them to unofficial organizations in the Soviet Union – including the Moscow Trust Group, which had by this time expanded to L’vov.⁹⁸ The UPC’s successes were at once an example of the potential role that the *afgantsy* could play in protest movements of the 1980s by placing their wartime experience ahead of rhetoric on human rights, and a triumph for the CIA, which found in Movchan an anti-war voice and a supporter of Ukrainian independence.

However, the Ukrainian Peace Committee’s campaign also showed the limitations on protest groups of the time. The most successful of them by the time Mikhail Gorbachev came to power on 11 March 1985 were those with sufficient financial support from Western dissidents and government agencies. It remained difficult to breach the

Anti-Communism and the Cold War: Agents, Activities, and Networks, edited by Luc van Dongen, S. Roulin, and G. Scott-Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 263-75.

⁹⁵ “Re: The World Peace Congress, Copenhagen, Oct. 1986,” 8.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁹⁸ “Field Station Asset Report (1988),” 3.

Berlin Wall and collaborate with domestic movements such as the Moscow Trust Group, and voices such as Movchan's fell upon a limited audience in the Soviet Union. While attitudes toward the politics of the Soviet-Afghan War became more critical after Gorbachev came to power, "the stereotypes of the Stalin era still predominated" – as evidenced by Nikolai Ryzhkov's ill-fated return to the Soviet Union in December 1984.⁹⁹ "The inescapable impulse was to hate them," admitted one journalist in 1990. "More than once or twice in Afghanistan I was overcome by hatred. But how could one rationalize such hatred when from a political standpoint the war was unofficially acknowledged as a tragic mistake...?"¹⁰⁰

A Polish Hero of the Mujahideen

My great misfortune is that it is hard for me to fight the Russian army in a duel. ... My friends in Kandahar tell me about urban fighting using knives and grenades – battles over certain rooms in a building. The situation is probably close to the fighting in Warsaw's Old City during the Uprising.

- Lech Zondek, 1985¹⁰¹

By the time of Myokla Movchan's arrival in the United States in August 1984 and Nikolai Ryzhkov's ill-fated return to the Soviet Union in December of that year, the state found itself combatting afgangtsy who dared speak out against the war in which they fought. Of particular concern were those such as Movchan who blended anti-war statements with calls for national independence from the Soviet Union. Arguably the

⁹⁹ Borovik, *The Hidden War*, 126.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Lech Zondek, *Bohater trzech narodów*, samizdat publication (1986), 42.

sharpest voice of dissent to pair these two demands came from the Polish People's Republic, where the momentum of Solidarność blended with support for the mujahideen.

The appointment of General Wojciech Jaruzelski as Prime Minister on 11 February 1981 marked a turn of events that brought the Soviet-Afghan War into Polish dissident movements. After Jaruzelski's imposition of martial law on 13 December 1981, "the stout resistance of the Afghans... made the underground press take more notice" of the conflict, and put it to use as a theme of anti-Communist slogans.¹⁰² Particularly vocal was the Committee of Social Resistance (Komitet oporu społecznego) stationed in Warsaw. The first bi-weekly underground bulletin established under martial law, a total of 165 issues were published between 1982 and 1989.¹⁰³ Its writers seized on the Afghan War as a rallying point as years went by, and proclaimed on 4 December 1984 that it was "the particular moral duty of the Poles... to cry out about this crime and not allow the world to forget. For Poles to remember the Afghans is to remember themselves."¹⁰⁴ The Committee's statement was echoed across Poland in different ways, with "a series of stamps commemorating the sixth anniversary of the Soviet invasion [and] devoted to the mujahideen... four brochures on the Afghan cause... [and] an increased number of reprints from the Western press" entering circulation.¹⁰⁵ This was a marked departure from the statements issued by Andrei Sakharov or the Initiative Group to Defend the Rights of the Disabled in the USSR. Likewise, while Estonian youth demanded independence, they stopped short of expressing solidarity with the mujahideen.

¹⁰² Jozef Darski, "Afghanistan in the Polish Opposition Press," *Central Asian Survey*, 6, 2 (1987): 90.

¹⁰³ "Wirtualna czytelnia bibuły KOS," *Encyklopedia solidarnosci*, accessed on 13 March 2016, www.encyklopedia-solidarnosci.pl/wiki/index.php?title=WCB0055.

¹⁰⁴ Kuzio, "Opposition in the USSR to the Occupation of Afghanistan," 91.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Polish opposition to the Soviet-Afghan War was noteworthy for the emergence of a contemporary national hero who travelled to Afghanistan and joined the mujahideen. Lech Zondek (1952-85), born in the city of Grodzisk Mazowiecki 30 kilometres from Warsaw, spent his childhood and teenage years captivated by stories of Polish resistance against the Soviet Army from his father and step-father. While they shared a Polish nationalism, his stepfather – a retired officer of the Polish Army – saw it best to “marry into money and enroll in a military academy” as a step toward Polish independence.¹⁰⁶ Zondek refused to compromise his principles, and on 6 December 1980, having obtained a visa to France, he departed by train, disembarked before arrival and hiked his way across the Czechoslovakian-Austrian border, where he claimed asylum in Vienna.

Over the course of the next year, Zondek’s departure from the Polish People’s Republic took him to Melbourne, Australia. During this time, he became fixated on Western coverage of the 40th Army’s “barbaric actions” in Afghanistan and made an effort to study Pashto.¹⁰⁷ After learning of martial law in Poland, Zondek seized on opposition to the Afghan War as an echo of Polish resistance in Warsaw. Corresponding with his friend Leslaw Deslatynski in April 1983, Zondek exhibited a romantic perception of the mujahideen and rumours surrounding the war. According to his “Afghan friends” in Australia, there was “a group of Poles and Czechs several thousand in strength” on the battlefield against the Soviets.¹⁰⁸ On 16 June 1984, two weeks after receiving Australian citizenship, Lech Zondek embarked to Afghanistan to join the mujahideen in a Holy war against the Soviet Army. As months passed by he would see

¹⁰⁶ Zondek, *Bohater trzech narodów*, 4-5.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

combat in the eastern provinces of Paktia and Logar, and Kandahar in the south.

Zondek took on separate identities in the letters he penned to friends and family from Afghanistan, and myths were quick to enter circulation in Polish *samizdat*. Rumoured to have hitch-hiked to Czechoslovakia at the age of 16 to support Aleksandr Dubcek's reforms in 1968, Zondek was said to have "travelled to the Australian desert equipped only with the most basic items," and "undergone Spartan-like training" in preparation for Afghanistan.¹⁰⁹ Wearing "a Polish Eagle from the uniform of a Polish soldier who fought on fronts of the Second World War," he was praised for aiding the mujahideen against a common foe.¹¹⁰ During his time in Afghanistan, it was said that Zondek was "wounded several times" before he "fell from a Soviet bullet during a battle in the province of Nuristan." According to his *samizdat* readers, Zondek's valour "earned him much admiration and gratitude" from the mujahideen, "who raised a cross on his grave."¹¹¹ Once a troubled dropout at the University of Warsaw, Zondek came to be seen as "a continuator of the Polish 19th century tradition of struggle for independence."¹¹²

The realities of Lech Zondek's foray into Afghanistan were quite different from the legends that came to surround him. One of his friends recalled Zondek stating that he came to "curse his decision a thousand times," with "one of his greatest tortures being that he would not be able to look at a single woman in an Islamic regime, and could lose his head as a result."¹¹³ Indeed, while Polish *samizdat* cast Zondek as a comrade-in-arms with the mujahideen, he despaired of their values. "The mujahideen are like Polish

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 15.

¹¹⁰ Darski, "Afghanistan in the Polish Opposition Press," 97.

¹¹¹ Zondek, *Bohater trzech narodów*, 11.

¹¹² Darski, "Afghanistan in the Polish Opposition Press," 98.

¹¹³ Zondek, *Bohater trzech narodów*, 17.

peasants from the 15th century,” he remarked in a letter soon after his arrival in Afghanistan. “One in a hundred knows how to set up a mortar and fire it, but not a single one knows how to aim it so that you hit the target.” Rather than a valiant resistance group united against a Russian conqueror, Zondek wrote of factions wherein:

There is zero discipline. Training? Such a concept does not exist here. They sit, drink tea, chat, and if they hear any Russian movement, they run over and shoot in that direction. In terms of religion, they make our pilgrims in Częstochowa look like a band of atheists. The biggest problem facing foreigners are the constant attempts to convert them. ... Thanks to the commander and the mullahs, they finally give me a break, seeing that they have no effect.¹¹⁴

Only after seeing combat in Kandahar, many months on, did Zondek express a sense of fulfillment, describing “a strange dream where I was in Poland... doing more or less what my father and grandfather did in their younger years.”¹¹⁵

After successive battles Zondek was wounded in the right arm and hand, and evacuated to Peshawar in neighbouring Pakistan. He received treatment on 21 October 1984 from a local professor of medicine and was cared for by nurses affiliated with Doctors Without Borders.¹¹⁶ During his month’s recovery, Zondek’s letters diverged from tales of a Russian conquest and offered greater detail on everyday life in Afghanistan. In a tale reminiscent of Russian populists a century before him, he wrote of having “dressed as an Afghan peasant” in an effort to venture beyond the “small clay

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 26.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 32.

¹¹⁶ Tomasz Marczak, “Bohater trzech pogrzebow,” *Armia 1* (1999): 18-9.

walls” of a village, to train the locals in self-defense and document Russian atrocities.¹¹⁷ More than once, Zondek wrote of Soviet soldiers’ willingness to trade ammunition for “an amount of hashish and heroin.” “If they give us a Kalashnikov too, we’ll throw in some vegetables” he added, “because all they eat is canned food.”¹¹⁸ The invaders’ shortage of provisions was a recurring observation in his letters. Recalling his time in the village of Baraki Rajan, he described the Soviet Army entering with tanks and pillaging local stores. In a gesture to stagnation in his homeland, Zondek mused, “Examining the stores later, I thought to myself: ‘Doesn’t this scene remind you of something?’ The ‘Soviet brothers’ had achieved one of the stages of building socialism – empty store shelves – at record speed!”¹¹⁹

It was Zondek’s death on 4 July 1985 that sparked the greatest mythology in Polish *samizdat* on the man. Depicted as a hero who died fighting alongside his mujahideen comrades, his place of burial threw this into question. The province of Nuristan, situated in the Hindu Kush Mountains, converted to Islam only in 1895 and operated autonomously from Kabul. The peculiarity of this location was not lost on Radosław Sikorski. Long before his ascension to politics as Poland’s Minister of National Defence (2005-07), Sikorski reported from Afghanistan as a correspondent for *The Sunday Telegraph* beginning in 1986. Upon seeing a photograph of Lech Zondek in a Pakistani hospital with his plastered arm in a sling, Sikorski journeyed to Nuristan to uncover the truth of his demise. Contrary to *samizdat* narratives, “there were no Soviets

¹¹⁷ Zondek, *Bohater trzech narodów*, 39-40.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

there, and no serious fighting.”¹²⁰ Instead, he found a province wherein locals cooperated with the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan and halted guerilla convoys. Rather than honour Zondek as an esteemed comrade, the mujahideen had circulated “a printed photo of Zondek’s grave, with a caption claiming it to be that of a Polish soldier serving in the Soviet Army... through the Warsaw Pact.”¹²¹ Upon interviewing the expatriate who buried Zondek in Nuristan, Sikorski uncovered the truth: crossing through the village, the Polish patriot felt it a good idea to train locals in unarmed combat. “He got a villager to attack him with a knife and threw him to the ground, [and] didn’t realize that this was a terrible slight on the man’s honour,” recalled his friend John, who hailed from New Zealand. “When Lech asked the man to repeat the attack, the fellow pushed the knife for real and cut Lech’s hand, the one which was still weak from the wound.”¹²² Undeterred, Zondek went on to scale the Hindu Kush Mountains, where his wounded hand gave way and he fell to his death. His body was discovered by Haitian expatriate Giancarlo Geddo and a group of fellow travellers on 5 July 1985. A former acquaintance of Zondek’s, Geddo confirmed to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs that the Polish patriot “had been killed approximately one day earlier in a fall from the cliff.”¹²³ “I believe his passport and personal papers were carried away by a friend whose name was John,” Geddo remarked in the report, likely referring to the same man that Radoslaw Sikorski interviewed two years later.¹²⁴ He assisted in burying Zondek that same day in a

¹²⁰ Radek Sikorski, *Prochy świętych. Podróż do Heratu w czas wojny*, trans. Grzegorz Sowula (Warszawa: A.M.F. Plus Group, 2007), 41.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 42-3.

¹²³ “Fotokopia raportu MSZ Australii o smierci Lecha Zondka,” *Lech Zondek: żołnierz solidarnosci*, edited by Marek Cabanowski and Andrzej Sielski (Grodzisk Mazowiecki: Arkuszowa Drukarnia, 2005), 66.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

grave dug on the banks of a nearby river, and erected a wooden cross that read “Lech Zondek, Polish Soldier, 1952-1985.”¹²⁵ The cross was disassembled and taken as firewood by villagers in the winter.

The evolution of Polish opposition to the Soviet-Afghan War captures the flexibility of the conflict as a means for dissent. At first, the Afghan War remained absent from Polish *samizdat*, with the “common conviction that the USSR would carry on the war ‘to the last Afghan’... with the tacit consent of the West.”¹²⁶ The conflict remained overshadowed by the Solidarność movement until the imposition of martial law by General Jaruzelski. The emergence of Lech Zondek as a national patriot saw pamphlets of anonymous signatories give way to a name: an individual whose letters from the front offered such patriotic slogans as “The next ten Russians will be for Father Jerzy Popiełuszko!”¹²⁷ It took shape as a myth despite the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs having reported the facts of Zondek’s death to his next-of-kin in Poland by 13 November 1985.¹²⁸ Arguably his greatest appeal to public imagination was that Zondek stationed himself in the present and sought a broad audience. Armed with a pen and a dictaphone to go with his AK-47, he recorded cassettes in Polish and broken English during his time with the mujahideen. The recordings were sent not only to friends and relatives, but to global media outlets including the BBC, Radio Free Europe, Voice of

¹²⁵ Dariusz Wilczak, “Lech Zondek: Polski mudzahedin,” *Polska Newsweek*, 21 June 2010, accessed 6 June 2016, polska.newsweek.pl/lech-zondek--polski-mudzahedin,60798,1,1.html.

¹²⁶ Darski, “Afghanistan in the Polish Opposition Press,” 89.

¹²⁷ Sikorski, *Prochy Świętych*, 41-2. Father Popiełuszko was a Roman Catholic priest who served in the parishes of Warsaw and broadcast sermons on Radio Free Europe. Vehemently anti-Communist, he partook in the Solidarity movement and was eventually disposed of by officers of the Polish Security Service (Służba bezpieczeństwa) on 19 October 1984, four months after Lech Zondek arrived in Afghanistan.

¹²⁸ Cabanowski and Sielski, *Lech Zondek: żołnierz solidarnosci*, 65.

America, and two publications based in Paris.¹²⁹ The resonance of his work overseas was evident following his demise. Poland's President-in-Exile, Edward Raczyński, posthumously awarded Zondek the Gold Cross of Merit with Swords and deployed a delegate to attend the man's funeral in Melbourne on 7 December 1985. A celebration of his life was held at St. Anne's Church in Zondek's hometown of Grodzisk Mazowiecki, where a street has borne his name following a decision by the city council in 1995.¹³⁰

The Komsomol as a Springboard to Afgantsy Clubs

Everyone!!! [Those] who served in Afghanistan ("DRA") are gathering on 30 June at 15:00 in Kiev, at the entrance to the central stadium. Attendance is obligatory.

- Leaflet in Chernigov, 22 June 1984¹³¹

Whatever you do, don't write about the so-called spirit of brotherhood among us afgantsy. ... The only thing we had in common was fear. ... We all have the same problems – lousy pensions, the difficulty of getting a flat... If ever all that gets sorted out, our veterans' clubs will fall apart.

- afganets¹³²

When the likes of Ryzhkov, Movchan, and Zondek emerged in the foreign press and *samizdat* to challenge the state narrative on Afghanistan during the Andropov-Chernenko interregnum, the gerontocracy's only solution was to press for a renewal of

¹²⁹ Marek Szymanowicz, "Polacy w walce o Afganistan (2)," *Komandos*, 10 (2005): 33.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹³¹ "Obnaruzhenie listovok," GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1105, l. 312.

¹³² Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 19.

military-patriotic education among Soviet youth. Among the letters espoused in Communist Party meetings were those written by young holders of the Order of the Red Star such as Sergei Savchenko, who responded to one of General Secretary Chernenko's speeches to Army Secretaries of the Komsomol. "I was honoured to perform my international duty in Afghanistan," he declared.

Many times I was convinced that our army is strong not only with modern technology... but in its ideological hardening, its high moral and political spirit, its class vigilance, and its heroism for a radiant future. ... I am convinced that Comrade K.U. Chernenko has improved the effectiveness of educating the valiant defenders and brave patriots of our country.¹³³

If in fact Savchenko's words were sincere, this spoke to a renewed effort across the Soviet Union to incorporate the afgangtsy into the same category of heroes that had, for 40 years, been reserved for veterans of the Great Patriotic War. The organ charged with primary responsibility for the task was the Komsomol, and its execution of policy fluctuated largely in response to the liberalization of the Soviet media. In March and April 1984, for instance, after the uproar sparked by "Duty" in *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, members of the Komsomol in Chernivtsi, Ukraine set out to "meet with all residents in the city who served as soldiers in Afghanistan, in order to recruit them for the military-patriotic education of youths."¹³⁴ Of the 71 afgangtsy in Chernivtsi at this time, ten of

¹³³ "Informatsiia: ob otklikakh trudiashchikhsia Ukrainskoi SSR na rech GenSek TsK KPSS... K.U. Chernenko na Vsearmeiskom soveshchaniu sekretarei komsomolskikh organizatsii v g. Moskve," TsGAOO Ukrainy, f. 1, op. 25, d. 2696, l. 147.

¹³⁴ "O sostoianii raboty po okazaniu pomoshchi sem'iam pogibshikh voennosluzhashchikh i voinam, poluchivshim raneniia pri ispolnenii internatsional'nogo dolga v Afganistane" PChOK Ukrainy, f.1, op.52, d. 102, l. 4.

them opted to join “lecture groups... in operational units of the Komsomol.”¹³⁵ This initiative received endorsement from a few older veterans, with Hero of the Soviet Union K.V. Novoselov stating that “on the 40th anniversary of the victory of our people in the Great Patriotic War, I try to meet as often as possible with young people, to tell them about the values of Soviet patriotism... and the invincibility of our socialist system.”¹³⁶ Of the ten afgangtsy recruited by the Komsomol in Chernivtsi, a number of them were “recommended for membership in the elected bodies of municipal and regional Komsomol organizations.”¹³⁷ More striking, however, is that the majority of Chernivtsi’s 71 veterans *declined* to embrace military-patriotic education or Komsomol careerism. This spoke to the fact that “no single, homogenous ‘afganets mentality’” to form the basis of a political movement had emerged after five years of war, and reflected the declining interest in Komsomol activities among Soviet youths.¹³⁸

Yet despite the small number of afgangtsy who responded to the Komsomol’s recruitment campaign, those who partook found a bureaucratic outlet through which they could congregate as a newborn entity under the label of military-patriotic education. The “premises and functions” that formed the basis for “the evolution of the ‘afganets movement’” in the years of glasnost’ found its roots during Chernenko’s short-lived tenure as General Secretary.¹³⁹ Moreover, the recruitment of afgangtsy as instructors

¹³⁵ Ibid, l. 3.

¹³⁶ “Informatsiia: ob otklikakh trudiashchikhsia Ukrainskoi SSR na rech GenSek TsK KPSS... K.U. Chernenko na Vsearmeiskom soveshchanii sekretarei komsomolskikh organizatsii v g. Moskve,” TsGAOO Ukrainy, f. 1, op. 25, d. 2696, ll. 147-48.

¹³⁷ “O sostoianii raboty po okazaniiu pomoshchi sem’iam pogibshikh voennosluzhashchikh i voenam, poluchivshim raneniia pri ispolnenii internatsional’nogo dolga v Afganistane” PChOK Ukrainy, f.1, op.52, d. 102, l. 5.

¹³⁸ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 129.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 131. Sergei Chervonopiskii echoed this in our interview, stating that the foundation of the

addressed the concerns of the Ministry of Education and Department of National Defence, which determined in a 1983 study that “The ideological foundations of military policies... failed to have a motivating effect” on youths’ attitudes to military service.¹⁴⁰ The integration of afgangtsy in state organizations was part of a solution to this problem, and soon gave way to the state’s approval of military-patriotic grassroots organizations. Nearly 4,000 such “unofficial clubs” emerged in the six years that followed and were “usually led by men recently released from active duty.”¹⁴¹

The increasing presence of afgangtsy within the Komsomol also reinforced attentions to the needs of “wartime-internationalists” such as Aleksandr Nemtsov. These duties fell largely upon municipal governments rather than the powers in Moscow, and differed in terms of enforcement according to regions.¹⁴² Beginning in 1984 and 1985 there was a greater effort to monitor the distribution of benefits outlined in the January 1983 resolution. The municipal committees of the Communist Party, the Komsomol, and Pioneer organizations in Chernivtsi, for instance, were tasked with “meeting... those who performed their international duty, and visiting families of the dead” to “study their living conditions, and requests submitted to the relevant organizations for solutions.”¹⁴³ These

organization dated to his time in the Komsomol in Cherkassy, beginning in 1984.

¹⁴⁰ A.M. Katukov and E.N. Tsvetaev, *Voenno-patrioticheskoe vospitanie uchashchikhsia na zaniatiiakh po nachal'noi voennoi podgotovke* (Moscow: Mysl, 1983), 5.

¹⁴¹ The degree of autonomy that these military-patriotic organizations enjoyed varied considerably. Historical groups such as the Red Scouts, for example, simply endeavoured to preserve evidence of Civil War battles. Members of the Young Friends of the Border Guards, in contrast, “actually played games with Border Guards and dogs following a ‘frontier transgressor’ and arresting him.” See: Jean MacIntyre, “Political Socialization of Youth in the Soviet Union: Its Theory, Use, and Results” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, 1993), 48.

¹⁴² Of the afgangtsy I interviewed in Kyrgyzstan, for instance, none spoke of receiving benefits until the post-Soviet years. Some of those in Ukraine however, spoke of applying for one-bedroom apartments and receiving two or three-bedroom ones. Regional studies on the enforcement of the afgangtsy’s benefits would provide greater insight on the successes of the Andropov-Chernenko interregnum.

¹⁴³ “O prodelannoi rabote s voynami, vypolnivshimi internatsional’nyi dolg, shefstve komsomol’skikh

ranged from “assisted employment, admission to educational institutions, and medical treatment” for invalids of war, who were covertly monitored to track their reintegration and return to the workforce.¹⁴⁴ Success stories – which, unsurprisingly, received emphasis in government reports – included M.M. Yashin, who “after demobilization was provided an apartment, installation of a telephone, social security, and a free Zaporozhets mobility car.”¹⁴⁵ At the time of the report, he was working as a security guard in the police department of Pershotravneve. Others, such as S.S. Melenko of Kiev were “not working at this time,” engaged in university studies, and “declined employment assistance... residing with his parents in their own home.”¹⁴⁶ The shortcomings noted by the Central Committee were those who were delayed the provision of benefits to veterans and families of those killed. While the ten families of those killed in action had been “paid a lump sum for what appeared to be necessary assistance,” the six who requested the free installation of a telephone line would have to wait “until the end of the second quarter of the year.” Other applicants were still awaiting “employment assistance and the provision of materials for house repairs.”¹⁴⁷ Particularly common among invalids and the families of those killed was an “increased demand for special shopping privileges” such as access to special stores, deficit goods, and food.¹⁴⁸

If the provision of social-welfare benefits to the afgangtsy was hampered by bureaucratic obstruction and economic decline, the memorialization of those who lost

organizatsii nad invalidami i sem'iami pogibshikh,” PChOK Ukrainy, f.1, op. 52, d.102, l. 6.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ “O sostoianii raboty po okazaniu pomoshchi sem'iam pogibshikh voennosluzhashchikh i voinam, poluchivshim raneniia pri ispolnenii internatsional'nogo dolga v Afganistane,” PChOK Ukrainy, f.1, op.52, d. 102, l. 3.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, ll. 3-4.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, l. 4.

their lives was continually postponed out of political precautions. Of the ten afgantsy from Chernivtsi who had lost their lives in early 1985, only seven had received acknowledgment of “international duty” on their gravestones by 9 May, with two more scheduled for inscription at the end of the year. The most recent casualty, I.F. Markov, was but a name on paperwork at the time.¹⁴⁹ There was, however, a glimmer of hope from a younger generation. While gravestones with inscriptions were approached with caution, Komsomol youth groups and Pioneers were granted significantly more leeway: in “six districts of the province” they were noted as “fighting for the assignment of names to fallen heroes,” and “recording the memories of the comrades and parents of soldiers killed in the war.”¹⁵⁰ As the Soviet-Afghan War approached six years in duration, 38 “schools, enterprises, and organizations” where afgantsy had “studied or worked” bore small plaques in their honour.¹⁵¹ The public exhibition of the afgantsy by their names was, in itself, a step toward memorialization and the public discussion of the war and its consequences that would come with Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ “O prodelannoii rabote s voynami, vypolniaвшimi internatsional’nyi dolg, shefstve komsomol’skikh organizatsii nad invalidami i sem’iami pogibshikh,” PChOK Ukrainy, f.1, op.52, d. 102, l. 6.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Chapter 4

The Soviet-Afghan War as a Component of Sociopolitical Change, 1984 to 1986

Operations have taken on the policing character of punitive actions. As a result we have been pulled into a war with the people with no chance of victory. Inhumane acts carried out by Soviet troops against local populations are systematic and widespread, manifested in robberies, the groundless and unjustified use of firearms, the destruction of villages, [and] the desecration of mosques.

- Colonel Leonid Shershnev, letter to Konstantin Chernenko¹

On 7 May 1984, General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko penned a letter to President Ronald Reagan expressing the Soviet Union's willingness to "conduct affairs with the United States on the basis of equality... [including] non-interference in each other's internal affairs... curbing the arms race and strengthening international peace."² Twenty-four hours later, as Americans marked Victory in Europe Day, the Soviet Union announced that it would boycott the upcoming Summer Olympics in Los Angeles and accused the United States of turning a blind eye to "chauvinistic sentiments and anti-Soviet hysteria" propagated by "extremist organizations and groupings of all sorts."³ A total of fourteen allied countries, including Afghanistan, would join the Soviet boycott of the Los Angeles games.

¹ Cited in "1984 god," *Kniga pamiati*, accessed 24 September 2016, www.rsva-ural.ru/library/mbook.php?id=178.

² "May 7, 1984: Chernenko Message to Reagan," *Letters Between President Reagan and General Secretaries Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko and Gorbachev*, accessed on 24 September 2016, <http://www.thereaganfiles.com/19840507.pdf>.

³ Anonymous, *Serving Youth Through Sport: The Legacy of the 1984 Olympic Games* (Los Angeles: AAF, 2004), 19, accessed 3 November 2016, library.la84.org/10ap/aaf20thAnniversary.pdf.

Western observers' immediate diagnosis was that the Soviet Union's actions came out of spite for President Carter's boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, but archival documents have suggested otherwise. Indeed, as early as 14 August 1980, the Politburo passed a secret resolution – supported by Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko alike – that emphasized the need for the Sports Committee of the Soviet Union to “make recommendations by November 1980 to prepare Soviet athletes for the Olympic Games in 1984.”⁴ The best revenge for the United States' boycott and economic sanctions would be to defeat the Americans in medal standings on their own soil.

As with the question of military intervention in Afghanistan, the boycott of the Los Angeles Olympics was debated for some time and implemented at the last minute. On 24 April 1984, Marat Gramov, the Head of the Soviet National Olympic Committee, met with Western counterparts in Lausanne to “iron out remaining misunderstandings” and reiterated that the Soviet Union “had no intention of boycotting the LA games.”⁵ Shortly thereafter, on 5 May, the Central Committee “passed a resolution to stay home.”⁶ The decision not to attend the Olympics came from a paranoid reaction to the swelling of American protest groups that followed the Soviet downing of Korean airline KAL 007 on 1 September 1983.

Over the first four years of the Soviet-Afghan War, the KGB's efforts to quash anti-war dissent had been generally successful. Andrei Sakharov remained in exile with a limited audience; the Moscow Helsinki Group, the Initiative Group for the Defense of Invalids' Rights, and Mariia had been dismantled; and newer movements such as the

⁴ Edelman, “The Russians Are Not Coming!,” 13.

⁵ Ibid, 23.

⁶ Ibid.

Moscow Trust Group found themselves geographically scattered without leadership. The same could not be said of organizations powered by Soviet emigres. Be it the OUN's collaboration with the mujahideen, Freedom House's efforts to bring Soviet POWs to the United States, or Lech Zondek weaving a contemporary myth of Polish heroism in the ranks of the mujahideen, there were an increasing number of anti-Soviet groups centred in or supported by the United States. Of foremost concern to the Politburo in the leadup to the Los Angeles Olympics was the Ban the Soviet Coalition (BTSC).

Formed on 26 September 1983, the BTSC was led by David Balsiger. A California businessman and longtime activist of the Republican Party with a fancy for speculative history – his works at the time included *In Search of Noah's Ark* (1976) and *The Lincoln Conspiracy* (1977) – Balsiger assembled a coalition of East European and Cuban exiles to campaign against Soviet participation in the Los Angeles Olympics. Their immediate action was to launch a petition campaign for one million signatures in favour of banning Soviet athletes from attending. Having gathered only ten thousand after a month's time, Ban the Soviet Coalition switched to written letters and hyperbole directed to American and Soviet politicians.⁷ Balsiger's words to the federal government resembled those of a conspiracy theorist. "Based on reliable information," he claimed, "we are concerned about the distinct possibility that the Soviets will inspire and orchestrate various terrorist activities both during and after the Games."⁸ Balsiger insisted that the BTSC, composed of "ethnic, religious, political, social, education, and veterans organizations," had uncovered Soviet plans for "5,000 KGB agents and operatives..."

⁷ Brad Congelio, "Before the World Was Quiet: Ronald Reagan, Cold War Foreign Policy, and the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Summer Games" (PhD diss., University of Western Ontario, 2014), 149.

⁸ *Ibid.*

disguised as Olympic spectators” to carry out disruptive operations in the United States.⁹ His words were rejected by President of the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee, Peter Ueberroth, as “nutty” and “inflammatory language” that spoke for “a group of nobodies.”¹⁰ State Department spokesman John Hughes emphasized that the BTSC “does not have the support of the United States government.”¹¹

Despite the absurdity of Balsiger’s claims, the Politburo struggled to determine how it should respond to his rhetoric. It took little time for the BTSC to begin mailing leaflets and “threatening letters” to Marat Gramov himself, “top Soviet officials,” and “the parents of Soviet athletes.”¹² Peter Ueberroth recalled how the group “used inflammatory language” in its promises of demonstrations and in one case circulated a pamphlet that “graphically depicted an American eagle clawing the back of a Russian bear.”¹³ Finding solidarity with Soviet emigres, the BTSC boasted of its plans to erect 25 to 30 billboards in Los Angeles, penned in Russian and German, “touting a toll-free telephone number for defectors to call.”¹⁴

It was not just the hyperbole of the Ban the Soviet Coalition that left the Politburo apprehensive, but the network of organizations it collaborated with. Among Balsiger’s allies were Vladislav Pavlovskis, the President of the Baltic American Freedom League; David Finzer, the former leader of the World Anti-Communist League’s youth organization; the Cuban exile groups Alpha 66 and Independent Democratic Cuba; the

⁹ Ibid, 148-49.

¹⁰ Ibid, 151-52.

¹¹ Bernard Gwerzman, “Soviet Criticism Surprises U.S. and Games Officials; Cooperation is Cited,” *New York Times*, 10 April 1984, accessed 2 November 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/04/10/sports/soviet-criticism-surprises-us-and-games-officials-cooperation-is-cited.html>.

¹² Edelman, “The Russians Are Not Coming!,” 21.

¹³ Congelio, “Before the World Was Quiet,” 151.

¹⁴ Ibid, 152-53.

United Patriotic Front of El Salvador; and the Nicaraguan Democratic Force.¹⁵ President Reagan's renewed financial backing of anti-communist organizations was regarded as a significant threat by the aging Politburo. They had grown increasingly adept at incorporating the Afghan war into their platforms and begun to reach out to pacifist groups in the Soviet Union. The Ban the Soviet Coalition built on these new traits by introducing staunchly religious dissidents to its ranks, the most established of which was the Church Universal and Triumphant.

Deemed a cult by many for its prophecies of the Soviet Union launching nuclear missiles, the Church Universal and Triumphant was founded by Elizabeth Clare Prophet (1939-2009), a minister as politically charged as she was religious. Her first impression of the Soviet Union dated to an U.N. internship carried out in Geneva in 1956, when she witnessed an influx of refugees as the Soviet Army crushed the Hungarian Uprising. "The newsreel was horrible," Prophet recorded in her diary at the age of 17. "The city [is] completely in shackles, the dead lying helter skelter. Russian tanks are wiping out the townspeople like flies. And... the U.N. afraid to step in & lay down the law."¹⁶ With the onset of the Soviet-Afghan War, Elizabeth Prophet wasted little time collaborating with the Committee for a Free Afghanistan. Several members of Church Universal and Triumphant became involved with the organization over time, "providing financial and political support to the mujahideen," and "record[ing] songs about the Afghan resistance

¹⁵ Sara Diamond, *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 68.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Clare Prophet, *Preparation for My Mission*, edited by Erin Prophet and Tatiana Prophet (New York: iUniverse Inc., 2009), 176.

fighters... for fundraising.”¹⁷

Preceded by a series of geopolitical squabbles in Soviet-American relations – the downing of Korean Airline 007, the United States’ invasion of Grenada, and the simulation of a nuclear attack in the United States’ military exercise of Able Archer 83 – the rallying of anti-Soviet organizations on American soil proved to be a last straw in international relations as the Los Angeles Olympics drew near. That David Balsiger had formed Ban the Soviet Coalition on 26 September 1983, the same day as a nuclear false alarm in the Soviet Union, seems in hindsight a perfect storm of deterrents from participation in the Olympic games.

The trans-atlantic hyperbole over the Soviet Union’s boycott of the Los Angeles Olympics overshadowed an unusual editorial published in *Krasnaia zvezda* on 9 May 1984. A departure from the typical articles of patriotic nostalgia that marked Victory Day, it focused instead on the present and the immediate future. Penned by the Chief of General Staff, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov (1917-94), the article was a critique of the Soviet state’s doctrine that absolute war could, hypothetically, be avoided after a first strike with nuclear weapons. To the contrary, Ogarkov argued,

The possibility of waging a so-called “limited” nuclear war now has no foundation. It is utopian. Any so-called limited use of nuclear forces will inevitably lead to the immediate use of the whole nuclear arsenals of both sides.

This is the terrible logic of war.¹⁸

Marshal Ogarkov’s words were particularly disconcerting to Soviet leaders after

¹⁷ Stephen A. Kent, “Post-World War II New Religious Movements,” *The World’s Religions: Continuities and Transformations*, edited by Peter Clarke and Peter Beyer (New York: Routledge, 2009), 500.

¹⁸ Service, *The End of the Cold War*, 106.

President Reagan's "Star Wars speech" on 23 March 1984. Rather than the continued renovation of nuclear means of attack and defense, Marshal Ogarkov alluded to their neutralization.¹⁹ Priorities, he argued, should be the research of high-technology weaponry and "halving the number of officers and troops, to... provide the resources to train the Soviet Army to a higher level of professional competence."²⁰

Marshal Ogarkov had been long resented by senior members of the Politburo, for he stood as the highest-ranking voice of private opposition to the Soviet-Afghan War.²¹ When, during its planning stages, he was asked by the Commission on Afghanistan (then composed of Ustinov, Gromyko, Andropov, and Ponomarev) to prepare a written report on the prospect of military intervention, Marshal Ogarkov strongly objected to the idea and argued that it was "impossible and inconceivable, first and foremost from the political standpoint."²² Soon thereafter, Marshal Ogarkov reluctantly signed off on the deployment of 500 soldiers to Kabul on 6 December 1979 to guard the residence of President Hafizullah Amin. On 10 December he was informed by Defence Minister Ustinov that 75,000 to 80,000 troops would enter Afghanistan instead. Calling the decision "reckless," Marshal Ogarkov was rebuked by Ustinov, who replied, "Are you going to teach the Politburo? Your sole duty is to carry out orders...."²³ That Marshal

¹⁹ Mary C. Fitzgerald, "Changing Soviet Doctrine on Nuclear War," *Research Memorandum* (Virginia: Center for Naval Analyses, 1986): 9, accessed 27 September 2016, www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a187722.pdf.

²⁰ Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Politics in Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 122; Service, *The End of the Cold War*, 106.

²¹ Regarding Ogarkov's criticism of military doctrine, see: Bruce Parrot, "Political Change and Civil-Military Relations," in *Soldiers and the Soviet State: Civil-Military Relations from Brezhnev to Gorbachev*, edited by Timothy Colton and Thane Gustafson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 44-93.

²² Anatolii Cherniaev, "1985 god," *Dnevnik A.S. Cherniaeva*, accessed 5 October 2016, http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Chernyaev/1985.pdf.

²³ Aleksandr Liakhovskii, *Tragediia i doblost' Afganistana* (Moscow: Iskon, 1995), 109-12.

Ogarkov retained his position as the Chief of General Staff for nearly five years spoke to a growing rivalry between the military brass and the Politburo. His tenure came to an end on 6 September 1984, four months after his controversial editorial. On vacation in the Crimea at the time, Marshal Ogarkov received a phone-call from Defence Minister Dmitrii Ustinov, who fired him for questioning government authority.²⁴

From Anonymous Letters to Collective Statements

Regarding the escalation of the war in Afghanistan, where our Ukrainian children have been deployed with an occupying force of the USSR...

We as Christians, as the clergy of the Catholic Church, and as members of the Ukrainian Nation, express our opposition to the deployment of our Ukrainian youth in the unjust war in Afghanistan...

The Ukrainian Catholic Church takes under its care and protection all Ukrainians who are sent to Afghanistan... We appeal to the many influential circles of the world: please do not consider the Ukrainian soldiers who are in Afghanistan to be war criminals. They are there against their will, and the blame lies entirely with the government of the USSR.

- Letter to Defense Minister Ustinov, 21 June 1984²⁵

As Defense Minister Ustinov brooded over Marshal Ogarkov's continued dissent, a letter addressed to Ustinov was sent to the Politburo and Central Committee. A denunciation of the Soviet-Afghan War, it was credited to the Action Group for the

²⁴ Raymond Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994), 186.

²⁵ Vasilii Kobrin, "Zaiavlenie," *Materialy samizdata*, AC No. 5410 (1985): 40-1.

Defence of the Rights of Believers and the Church, a dissident group stationed in L'vov. Not even six weeks after the Politburo boycotted the Los Angeles Olympics out of concern over the Ban the Soviet Coalition and its Christian supporters, they faced an anti-war statement from a religious organization within Soviet borders. Eventually published in its *samizdat* journal, *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Ukraine*, the Action Group's letter paired nationalism and religious dissent with opposition to the Afghan war. "Our statement is an official document, through which, in a future international tribunal, Ukrainians forced to partake in the war in Afghanistan will be rehabilitated," the authors proclaimed. "The deplorable war in Afghanistan was instigated by the highest military circles of the Soviet Union and driven by Russian chauvinism."²⁶

The Action Group also distinguished itself from dissident predecessors by striking a balance between appeals to international organizations and local initiatives. Beginning in July 1984, *The Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Ukraine* adopted a regular feature in which the number of known Ukrainian afgangtsy killed, wounded, and bearing symptoms of illness were published according to region.²⁷ Names were not given, but select experiences were detailed to expose the state's indifference toward its soldiers' needs. Of the 190 afgangtsy seriously wounded and the 91 with lighter injuries accounted for in three districts of Zakarpattia, for instance, only ten allegedly received pensions of 35 to 54 rubles per month, while the remainder were forced to rely on their parents for care.²⁸ Other accounts came from the families themselves. In the city of Svaliava, the relatives of those killed in action reached a compromise with local authorities that

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ "Khronika katolicheskoi tserkvi na Ukraine, no. 7," *Materialy samizdata*, AC 5413 (1985): 8-9.

²⁸ Ibid.

allowed for a cross to be placed next to the gravestones of “wartime-internationalists,” which bore only a Red Star. It was a short-lived victory: weary of religious revival, the government removed the crosses six months later.²⁹

On 27 September 1984 soon after he dismissed Marshal Ogarkov, Defence Minister Ustinov made his final public appearance at an awards ceremony for General Secretary Chernenko before disappearing to a hospital. So dire were his accumulating health woes that Colonel General Igor Illarionov (1913-2008) later told of a how “his bodyguards, hospital workers, and others with matching blood types” were forced to donate for a complete transfusion over 24 hours, to remedy Ustinov’s thin blood levels before emergency surgery for an aneurysm in his aortic valve.³⁰ His swan song was a ghost-written memoir published in November that captured the chief priority of the gerontocracy: to “faithfully preserve the memory of the Great Patriotic War” and to introduce “thoughtful work at local history museums... to collect, organize, and exhibit materials... in the name of education and future generations.”³¹ On 20 December 1984, shortly before the anniversary of the Soviet-Afghan War, Ustinov died of cardiac arrest.

Little better in health at this time was General Secretary Chernenko. Working but a few hours each day with frequent breaks for use of a breathing apparatus, he too took a leave of absence from the Politburo beginning in September. Intended as a vacation, he was relocated to a sanatorium in Kislovodsk for treatment. This proved to be an ill-fated decision: having entered on his feet Chernenko departed on a stretcher, the high altitude

²⁹ “Afganistan,” *Materialy samizdata*, AC 5444 (1985): 13.

³⁰ Evgenii Zhirnov, “Samyi stalinskii ministr,” *Kommersant*, 20 November 2001, accessed 3 October 2016, kommersant.ru/doc/294423.

³¹ Dmitri Ustinov, *Vo imia pobedy*, accessed 3 October 2016, militera.lib.ru/memo/russian/ustinov/07.html.

of 1,000 metres above sea level having worsened the state of his lungs.³² He spent more time at the Central Hospital Clinic in Moscow than at the Politburo in the months that followed. By the end of the year, a concealed escalator had been added to Lenin's mausoleum to allow the aged trio of Chernenko, Tikhonov, and Gromyko to reach the top for marches and ceremonies.³³

The Soviet boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and the withering of the Politburo overshadowed the most costly year of the Afghan war, wherein the number of troops deployed at a given time peaked at 120,000, as did those killed in action at 2,343.³⁴ The 40th Army also underwent a number of changes over the course of the year. For the first time in the war, there was a decline in the number of conscripts and an increased focus on their replacement with professional soldiers.³⁵ It was a shift that went beyond combat troops and saw female civilian contract workers introduced to Afghanistan; by the time the war came to an end, 1,350 such women had received state awards.³⁶ On the home front, meanwhile, came the first notable shift in public opinion on the war, "not so much in articulated opposition, but an increasingly divided society." While intellectuals remained "the most strongly opposed to the war," many held the perception that Soviet youth were "increasingly being polarized into 'hippy/pacifists' and 'nationalistic thugs'."³⁷ "I don't know if you would call this a popular war," remarked one Moscow

³² Evgenii Zhironov, "Golova u Chernenko ostavalas svetloi," *Kommersant*, 25 September 2001, accessed on 3 October 2016, kommersant.ru/doc/283990.

³³ Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted*, 53.

³⁴ Krivosheev, *Rossii i SSSR v voynakh XX veka*, 537.

³⁵ Nasir Shansab, *Soviet Expansion in the Third World: Afghanistan, a Case Study* (Austin: Bartleby Press, 1986) 109-10; Julian Gearing, "Evolution of Soviet Military Tactics," *Afghanistan: a Spirit of Resistance* 1 (1985): 6.

³⁶ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 155.

³⁷ "USSR: Domestic Fallout From the Afghan War," 2.

scholar in December 1984. “People just don’t worry much about it. ... I don’t know if the stories they tell are actually true... but they seem to fit the mood of the public.”³⁸

As such, the state remained focused on foreign anti-war groups old and new that incorporated solidarity with Afghanistan into their platforms. In October 1984, for instance, the KGB red-flagged “a series of meetings in New York between three leaders of the *banderovtsy* and Pakistani representatives of Afghan counter-revolutionaries.”³⁹ Their alleged provocation was to discuss “bandit actions against the OKSVA based on the experience of *banderovtsy* in Ukraine during the wartime and postwar years.” With both parties having agreed to meet in the future, the trio of OUN members provided the Pakistani representatives “libelous and seditious materials in Russian and Ukrainian languages for distribution among Soviets serving in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.”⁴⁰ In the months that followed, the mujahideen were said to have successfully distributed “anti-Soviet leaflets in Ukrainian, Russian, and Farsi in mass-circulation,” as a means to spur discussion on “the Afghan question.” The OUN’s ultimate goal in the eyes of the KGB was:

To express to soldiers of Ukrainian nationality the need to abandon the war with the “Afghan freedom fighters”; to demand that their Ukrainian commanders “protect the native land”; and to propagate that “the deliberate intention of sending Ukrainians to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan was to destroy the

³⁸ Seth Mydans, “Afghan War: The Russian Public Is Still a Believer,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1984, A2.

³⁹ “O kontaktakh glavarei banderovtsev s afganskimi kontrevoliutsionerami,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1107, l. 97.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Ukrainian people.”⁴¹

The KGB’s paranoia over foreign agents’ interference in the state narrative thus continued to outweigh public opinion in priority as the Soviet-Afghan War neared five years in duration. This was epitomized by the widely publicized First Festival of Friendship Between Soviet and Afghan Youths, held in Dushanbe on 12 to 16 September, 1984. The event saw no credit awarded to the 40th Army for bearing the brunt of combat operations. Instead, praise was heaped upon the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan for fostering a youth organization that carried out “the liquidation of illiteracy [and] spread of irrigation” in the country, their legacy enshrined in “cinematography and documentaries... in Kabul’s movie theatres.”⁴² Aired for Tajik and Afghan youths’ viewing at the festival was *One Spring in Kabul* (Etoi vesnoi v Kabule), while “young artists and photographers of the USSR and Afghanistan... held an exhibition at the Palace of Culture.”⁴³ The keynote event was a workshop entitled “Youth and the Revolution,” wherein a series of meetings took place between Tajik members of the Komsomol and their equivalent in Kabul, the Democratic Organization of Afghan Youths. The focus of the discussion was “how to intensify the collaborative activities of youth organizations in the Soviet Union and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan,” to defend the gains of the Saur Revolution.⁴⁴ While the theme of discussion differed little from those in the first years of the war, the decision to hold the festival in Tajikistan in

⁴¹ “O sovместnykh vrazhdebnykh aktsiiakh ounovtsev i afganskikh kontrrevoliutsionerov,” Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sluzhby bezopasnosti Ukrainy, GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1108, l. 274.

⁴² A. Kamanov and E. Ovcharenko, “Verny zavetam revoliutsii,” *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 14 September 1984, 3.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Nabiev Vakhob Mashrafovich, “Znachenie festivalei druzhby i pokhodov po istoricheskim mestam v ukreplenii druzhestvennykh svyazei molodezhi (60-e - 90-kh godov XX v.),” *Vestnik Tadjikskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta prava, biznesa i politiki* 3, 59 (2014), 183.

1984 spoke to continued Central Asian participation in the conflict. This ran contrary to generalizations in Western scholarship; for many years, it was presumed that the deployment of Central Asians to Afghanistan ceased in 1980 due to the Politburo's fear of religious solidarity with the mujahideen. Dushanbe's hosting of the First Festival of Friendship Between Soviet and Afghan Youth during the most costly year of the war goes against this generalization.⁴⁵ The second festival, moreover, was held in Tashkent on 15 September 1986.

As the final year of the gerontocracy's predominance in the Politburo wound to a close, it remained on-guard against changes in public opinion toward "international duty" and by extension, the Soviet-Afghan War. Since the publication of "Duty" in *Komsomol'skaia pravda* in February 1984, citizens showed less hesitation to put their names to paper in criticism of the state; in its review of "anti-Soviet anonymous materials of politically harmful content" circulated in 1984, the number of leaflets, letters, and inscriptions circulated fell by 1,238 while the number of authors held accountable declined by 76.⁴⁶ The themes of written dissent that would be tolerated were changing, but it remained forbidden to question the state narrative on the Great Patriotic War when the military-patriotic education of youth appeared to be waning in efficiency.

Among those flagged by the KGB for questioning the state's historical narrative was N.F. Salabun (b. 1908). A veteran of the Great Patriotic War and a member of the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Viktor Chebrikov, "Ob itogakh raboty organov KGB v 1984 godu po rozysku avtorov antisovetskikh anonimnykh materialov," Arkhiv Natsional'noi bezopasnosti: Rossiiskie programmy, accessed 15 December 2016, [http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Dissident/55.%20\(04.02.1985\)%20KGB%20hunt%20for%20samizdat.PDF](http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Dissident/55.%20(04.02.1985)%20KGB%20hunt%20for%20samizdat.PDF). Arkhiv Natsional'noi bezopasnosti is George Washington University's collection of National Security Archive documents in Russian.

Communist Party of Ukraine since 1953, he held positions in “a senior security group that defended public order,” and went on to serve as “the chairman of a village council and deputy chairman of a kolkhoz.”⁴⁷ Since his hospitalization in 1983, however, he had “paid little attention” to the official position of “fellow veterans of war and labour,” and “repeatedly produced letters addressed to local government organs.” He was reported on by family members in February 1984, who had “destroyed his letters” and since been tasked with the “operational supervision and control” of the man.⁴⁸ As he lay bedridden in hospital, Salabun’s Communist Party membership was revoked after 30 years’ loyalty, while that of a 93-year-old Viacheslav Molotov was restored. The contrast between the Chernenko leadership’s renewed patriotic historicization of the Great Patriotic War for Soviet youth and the declining welfare of its veterans could not have been greater.

A second trend to emerge during the most costly year of the Soviet-Afghan War was a spike in the number of rebellious youth on the home front. On 30 April 1984, five days before the boycott of the Los Angeles Olympics, the Ukrainian KGB arrested two hooligans of the afgangsy’s generation, N. F. Kuntsevich (b. 1962) and I.A. Basenko (b. 1967). Residents of Simferopol, they were convicted of leading a group of six hooligans known as The Seventh Army of Adolf Hitler.⁴⁹ Contrary to common KGB paranoia, it had “no visible means of support” from the West and was homegrown. Their meetings and hazing rituals took place in an “abandoned basement” with swastikas painted on the

⁴⁷ “Ob ustanovlenii ispolnitelia anonimnogo pis'ma,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1108, ll. 299-300.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “Ob antiobshchestvennykh proiavleniiakh na pochve podrazhaniia natsistam,” GASBU, f.16, spr. 1109, ll. 81-2.

walls alongside an inscribed slogan of “Death to the Reds!”⁵⁰ With the symbolic celebration of International Workers’ Day due to take place the next morning, the Seventh Army of Adolf Hitler planned to “tear down national flags on the streets” in a refutation of Soviet celebrations.⁵¹ Over the course of the next year, the Ukrainian KGB red-flagged similar organizations in the provinces of Voroshilovgrad, Dnepropetrovsk, L’vov, Zaporozh’e, Rivne, Chernigov, and Khmel’nitski. While their membership was low in numbers, the hooligans’ age range of 15 to 20 years old was disconcerting for a state that sought to renew a national identity rooted in the Great Patriotic War. Further, those who took part in these “politically harmful and anti-Soviet manifestations” across seven provinces were not the children of the intelligentsia, but those of the disenfranchised social classes that Soviet rhetoric claimed to assist and were more often drafted for military service. Of those who participated in alleged neo-Nazi groups, 45 were high school students; 42 were students of vocational schools; 49 were workers; 19 were students of other levels; and 42 were youth “evading socially-useful work.”⁵² It was a trend of rebellion against the patriotic values that formed the core of “international duty” and did not bode well for the reintegration of the afgantsy. “We hate the younger generation,” remarked one afganets who served in a grenadier division. “They spend their time listening to music, dancing with girls... Officially we have the same status as the Great Patriotic War veterans. The only difference is... we’re seen as the Germans – one young lad actually said that to me!”⁵³ “Our society is a very cruel one,” remarked another

⁵⁰ Ibid, 1. 82.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Alexeivich, *Zinky Boys*, 19.

afganets upon his return. “Which is a fact I never noticed before.”⁵⁴

Three General Secretaries in Three Years

At 14:00 it was announced on the radio. The Plenum took place at five o’clock.

Everyone stood up to honor [Chernenko]... But there was not a drop of sadness or distress in the air... A suppressed “satisfaction,” if not joy, reigned in the atmosphere... the time has come for Russia to have a real leader.

- Anatolii Cherniaev, 11 March 1985⁵⁵

The New Year was marked by the absence of Konstantin Chernenko from the public eye. Absent from Dmitri Ustinov’s funeral on 24 December 1984, he made a brief, five-minute appearance on television to bestow awards on a group of Soviet writers three days after, and exhibited respiratory difficulties while mumbling scripted words. He disappeared for 59 days afterwards, leading to the postponement of a mid-January summit of the Warsaw Pact in Sofia, the cancellation of a meeting with Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou on 12 February 1985, and the Foreign Ministry’s announcement that Chernenko would not address his voters on upcoming elections to the Supreme Soviet.⁵⁶ Rumoured to have died, he appeared on Soviet television on 24 February as a frail elder dragged from his hospital bed by Politburo member Viktor Grishin to cast his ballot. So “superficially inept” was his television appearance – half-heartedly propagated as taking place at a polling station – that some viewers suggested it

⁵⁴ Ibid, 121.

⁵⁵ Cherniaev, “1985 god.”

⁵⁶ “Chernenko Cancels Election Speech,” *The Dispatch*, 22 February 1985, 2; Stephen White, “Soviet Politics Since Brezhnev: a Survey of Political Developments, 1982-85,” *Journal of Communist Studies* 1, 2 (1985): 124.

was intentional, “perhaps to prepare the Soviet people for a leadership change.”⁵⁷

Chernenko’s final public appearance came on 28 February with a brief statement on his re-election, slumped in an armchair.⁵⁸ Moscow was “full of anecdotes and laughter” after the television broadcast.⁵⁹

On 10 March 1985 Chernenko fell into a coma and died. The public and political indifference to his passing was clear in the press coverage that followed: Gorbachev’s biography took the front-page of *Pravda*, with Chernenko’s obituary relegated to the second. The funeral held that same day marked an opportunity for Western diplomats to become acquainted with the new leader of the Soviet Union. Particularly impressed was British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who relayed her thoughts to President Reagan three days later. “I do not think that Gorbachev will necessarily prove more accommodating to the West,” she remarked. “But it is to the general good that the second super-power should no longer drift in the hands of a generation so obviously out of touch with the modern world.” A far cry from his predecessors, Thatcher’s impression of Gorbachev was that of “a leader that can be relied upon to... eliminate... pockets of power in the party and the bureaucracy which have for so long hampered change.”⁶⁰

A Changing of the Guard?

We are all terribly concerned about the fate of the Afghan people, the fate of our

⁵⁷ R. Judson Mitchell, *Getting to the Top in the USSR: Cyclical Patterns in the Leadership Succession Process* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1990), 131.

⁵⁸ Seth Mydans, “A Halting Chernenko is on TV Again,” *New York Times*, 1 March 1985, accessed on 5 October 2016, www.nytimes.com/1985/03/01/world/a-halting-chenenko-is-on-tv-again.html.

⁵⁹ Cherniaev, “1985 god.”

⁶⁰ “Prime Minister’s Meeting with Mr Gorbachev,” Margaret Thatcher Foundation, accessed 19 September 2016, <http://09b37156ee7ea2a93a5e-6db7349bced3b64202e14ff100a12173.r35.cf1.rackcdn.com/PREM19/1985/PREM19-1646.pdf>.

southern borders, and the bold and correct step taken in regard to Afghanistan was expected by every Soviet citizen in his heart. ... And subsequent events have confirmed that this was the only correct decision.

- Eduard Shevardnadze, 7 June 1980⁶¹

Listen to Western propaganda, and you'll hear that the cause of all the problems in the world are rooted in the introduction of martial law in Poland, which, as you know, saved the country from anarchy and counter-revolution; or Soviet aid to revolutionary Afghanistan, to defend against subversion from abroad... It is difficult to imagine any greater hypocrisy.

- Mikhail Gorbachev, 28 March 1982⁶²

Seen by many as a reformer from the next generation of Soviet politicians, Mikhail Gorbachev's participation in Politburo discussions of the Afghan war dated to January 1980.⁶³ Invited to a meeting with Brezhnev, Gromyko, and Ustinov, he was tasked with reporting on the state of agriculture in Afghanistan. Following Gromyko and Ustinov's glowing assessment of the campaign against "counter-revolutionaries," Gorbachev spoke of "the alarming rain shortage" in the country and "the problem of preparing a plan to free us from the necessity of importing grain," putting a damper on the meeting.⁶⁴ He first learned of the 40th Army's intervention while on vacation in Tbilisi with First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party Eduard Shevardnadze, with

⁶¹ Cited in Yegor Ligachev, *Inside Gorbachev's Kremlin*, translated by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, Michele A. Berdy, Dobrochna Dyrz-Freeman, and Marian Schwarts (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 169.

⁶² Mikhail Gorbachev, "Rech'na v s'ezde kommunisticheskoi partii V'etnama," *Izbrannye rechi i stat'i*, tom 1 (Moscow: Ves' mir, 2008), 328.

⁶³ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 117.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

whom he claimed to share an immediate disapproval of the conflict. His comments on the war between 1980 and 1985 tell otherwise. In fact, Gorbachev was present as a candidate member of the Politburo for the passage of a protocol “On Further Steps with Regard to the Changing Situation in Afghanistan” dated 27 December 1979, and “knew very well how and when the war began, and the price it came with.”⁶⁵ A full member of the Politburo beginning in 1980, Gorbachev regularly attended meetings of the Commission on Afghanistan and was well informed of the situation on the ground. It was only in 1984, according to his foreign policy advisor Anatolii Cherniaev (1921-2017), that Gorbachev became critical of the war and “encouraged Marshal Akhromeev... to tell the Politburo his frank judgments that the war was being waged against the people of Afghanistan and could not be won.”⁶⁶

Conflicting opinions on Gorbachev’s legitimacy as leader of the Politburo were clear upon his election as General Secretary on 11 March 1985. Decided by a vote of 5-4, it was Gromyko who chaired the meeting and cast his vote in favour so as to break a tie.⁶⁷ Were it not for the absence of three Politburo members, he may not have been elected. The slim victory left Gorbachev faced with a bureaucracy that grimaced at any prospect of change. Undeterred, he placed a military withdrawal from Afghanistan on his list of immediate priorities. His first meeting with Afghan President Babrak Karmal took place on 14 March, two days after their acquaintance at Chernenko’s funeral. Familiar with the unflattering term of “Karmalism,” a.k.a. “an ideological rigidity combined with inaction,”

⁶⁵ Chervonopiskii and Kostyria, *Istoriografiia voiny v Afganistane*, 21.

⁶⁶ Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, 726n125.

⁶⁷ Mark Galeotti, *Gorbachev and His Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 49.

Gorbachev wasted little time confronting the man with a change in foreign policy.⁶⁸ “Of course you remember Lenin’s thought that one criterion of survival for any revolution is its ability to defend itself,” he began. “You, comrade Karmal, naturally, understand... that Soviet troops cannot stay in Afghanistan forever.”⁶⁹ Karmal’s reaction was to insist that if military forces “could ensure reliable protection of the borders,” it would allow his government to focus on forming “a united, cohesive party... [that] can save the revolution.”⁷⁰ Gorbachev replied that “It would be nice... if by the time of our next meeting, the Afghan friends could achieve new progress and success in their work, about which we could talk then.”⁷¹

That same day, Gorbachev met with President Muhammad Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan and took an immediate dislike to the man as one of “pure demagoguery with a perversion of facts,” who claimed himself “a victim of a situation where there are about three million so-called Afghan refugees....”⁷² Unwilling to stand for ul-Haq’s assurance of “friendly feelings,” Gorbachev coined a term that would make Western headlines in the year that followed, and reported to the Politburo that “We pointed out to the President of Pakistan that somebody would like this *bleeding wound* to remain for long years to come.” “We know in the most precise way what is going on in Pakistan right now,” he

⁶⁸ Christian Ostermann, “New Evidence on the Afghan War,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 14-15 (2003-04), 140.

⁶⁹ “Memorandum of Conversation Between cde. M.S. Gorbachev and General Secretary of the CC NDPA, Chairman of the Revolutionary Council of DRA B. Karmal,” National Security Archive, accessed 23 October 2016, nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB272/Doc%201%20Gorbachev-Karmal%20conversation.pdf.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² “Conference of Secretaries of the CC CPSU, Held in the Office of CC CPSU General Secretary Comrade M.S. Gorbachev,” National Security Archive, accessed 28 October 2016, nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB172/Doc5.pdf.

continued. “Camps are functioning that train the dushman... supplying them with money and all other necessities. Thus, overall, we put quite serious pressure on Zia ul-Haq, and he left the room clearly unhappy.”⁷³

After his meetings with Babrak Karmal and Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, Gorbachev received a detailed memorandum from Politburo adviser Georgii Arbatov. Entitled “Toward a Revised Approach to Foreign Policy,” it outlined a list of priority issues that included “an immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan.”⁷⁴ It was at Arbatov’s suggestion that Gorbachev agreed this be moved from “seventh or eighth” to number one.⁷⁵ Shortly thereafter, Gorbachev ordered the Commission on Afghanistan to conduct a policy review and investigate “the consequences, pluses, and minuses of a withdrawal.” His renewed attention on the Afghan war, however, “did not represent a radical break with policy.”⁷⁶ The Commission, six years after it was formed, remained under the leadership of Andrei Gromyko with fellow geriatrics Defence Minister Sergei Sokolov (1911-2012) and Chairman of the KGB Viktor Chebrikov (1923-99) filling the shoes of Andropov and Ustinov. This did not bode well for any new thinking in foreign affairs.

As a result, Gorbachev’s efforts to steer the 40th Army toward a withdrawal were limited to private, cyclical debates. This left an impression on the CIA, which in its first report on Gorbachev’s stance on the war argued that “We see no signs that Moscow is now prepared to seek a genuine political solution that requires abandoning Soviet

⁷³ Ibid. Italics are my own.

⁷⁴ Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 77.

⁷⁵ Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, 726.

⁷⁶ Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 81.

objectives and withdrawing from Afghanistan.”⁷⁷ Subsequently, on 27 March 1985, President Reagan signed off on National Security Decision Directive 166.⁷⁸ It targeted both the state of affairs on the battlefield and within the Soviet Union, favouring an initiative to “bring news of the war home to the Soviet people to reduce their confidence in the Soviet Union.” Within Afghanistan, the Reagan administration authorized a surge in the provision of weaponry to the mujahideen. This included but was not limited to “satellite reconnaissance data of Soviet targets,” “wire-guided anti-tank missiles,” and “chemical and electronic timing devices and remote control switches for delayed bombs and rockets.”⁷⁹ As Gorbachev considered proposals on how to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, the United States took action to prolong the conflict.⁸⁰

The Soviet-Afghan War remained a private theme of discussion in the Politburo in the spring, albeit with a change in style. 4 April 1985 marked Gorbachev’s first reading of a series of letters written to *Pravda* and government officials regarding the Soviet lives lost in Afghanistan. In a departure from the past, there were “very few anonymous anti-Soviet letters.” Instead, noted Cherniaev, “Almost all of them are signed. The main theme: why do we need this war, and when will it end?!” The development of public opinion had picked up speed since the escalation of combat operations in

⁷⁷ Dimitrakis, *The Secret War in Afghanistan*, 211.

⁷⁸ Ronald Reagan, “Remarks on Signing the Afghanistan Day Proclamation,” The American Presidency Project, accessed 28 October 2016, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=42248>.

⁷⁹ “National Security Decision Directive Number 166: U.S. Policy, Programs and Strategy in Afghanistan,” Federation of American Scientists, accessed on 15 October 2016, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/nsdd-166.pdf>; Steve Coll, “Anatomy of a Victory: CIA’s Covert Afghan War,” *The Washington Post*, 19 July 1992, accessed on 15 October 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/07/19/anatomy-of-a-victory-cias-covert-afghan-war/1bd10b14-a0cc-441c-99cc-d2b5d1ba6e2d/>.

⁸⁰ Kalinovsky, “Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan,” 60. See also: Vladislav Zubok, *A Failed Empire: The Soviet Union in the Cold War from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 297-98.

Afghanistan in 1984. “There are no alternatives,” wrote Cherniaev after Gorbachev’s reading of parents’ letters. “We must withdraw. ... Gorbachev should not delay this. ... It would be his equivalent to Khrushchev’s anti-Stalinist report at the 20th Congress.”⁸¹

The Changing Themes of Private Letters

When I wrote letters home, of course they were censored. Would you write to your wife or family that you are in danger? Would you say, “I was there. I was shot, I fell to the ground, I was frightened,” or “I took a bullet for another soldier and killed X-number of people.” Would you say that? You wouldn’t. Because it would traumatize your loved ones. So to some extent, we kept things closely guarded. But at the same time, there was also a censor.

- Mikhail, afganets⁸²

Written correspondence underwent a series of changes in themes during the Soviet-Afghan War. In the early years, letters from the front were restricted to such themes as one’s good health, mundane reports of the weather, or access to Japanese electronics. Public illusion began to ebb following the Soviet media’s coverage of the poor living conditions that “wartime-internationalists” could face upon their return, beginning in 1984. A silent concession around the same time came in the form of permitting written correspondence as a coping mechanism for those affected by casualties of war. It was in early 1985 when Vadim, a soldier stationed in Kabul, wrote a letter of condolences to Aleksandra Purice, the mother of Rustam Abdulin, a member of his

⁸¹ Cherniaev, “1985 god.”

⁸² Mikhail, interview with author, June 2015.

company whose aircraft was downed by a rocket on 22 January.⁸³ Aleksandra and her partner Dima, who resided in Kishinev, replied with a grieving letter of thanks that recalled her son's history.⁸⁴ "I cannot explain what an impression it left on me," Vadim wrote on 1 March, one week after receiving her letter. "I passed it around in my company but no one could read it to its end. ... Never had I seen so many grown men with tears in their eyes."⁸⁵ Looking to the future, Vadim continued, "Having taken over Rustam Rustavelievich's position... it now feels as if I have a second pair of parents. When I return, I promise to visit. I will bring Rustam's photographs. It is best not to mail them, as none of those we have sent home ever arrived."⁸⁶

As correspondents grew bolder, their letters foreshadowed some of the *neformaly* that became legalized in the years of glasnost. It was on 8 June 1986 that Aleksandra Purice received a letter from Liubov Eliseevna, who resided in the city of Briansk, southwest of Moscow. "Forgive me for causing you to re-live negative emotions," Eliseevna began. Her son, Iurii Nikolaevich, was onboard the same aircraft as Rustam when it was shot down by the mujahideen. "I received your address from Afghanistan. I have all six addresses – although there were eight men in the crew, two were from another military unit."⁸⁷ Unlike Purice's experience with Rustam, Iurii never informed his mother that he was transferred to Afghanistan on 15 June 1984. Eliseevna learned of

⁸³ "Abdulin Rustam Rustavelievich," Soiuz veteranov voyny v Afganistane Respubliki Moldova, accessed 22 June 2017, afgan.md/kniga-pamyati/abdulin-rustam-rustavelievich.html.

⁸⁴ Rustam's father was an aviator who died in a plane crash in 1974. Eleven years later, Rustam met a similar fate as an aircraft technician in Afghanistan. See: Alexandra Purice, "Nora a dat nastere unui Rustam, iar eu am inmormantat un Rustam," *Razboiul Sovieto-Afghan (1979-1989): Studiu de istorie verbala. Perceptii. Documente.*, ed. Ion Xenofontov (Iasi: Lumen, 2011), 324-25.

⁸⁵ Ion Xenofontov, *Razboiul din Afghanistan (1979-1989): in memoria participantilor din Republica Moldova* (Iasi: Lumen, 2010), 341.

⁸⁶ This excerpt is from a 1 March 1985 letter to Rustam's parents, provided to me by Ion Xenofontov.

⁸⁷ Xenofontov, *Razboiul din Afghanistan (1979-1989): in memoria...*, 335-36.

her son's death on 30 January 1985, eight days after his aircraft was downed. "I was sick with the flu when a lieutenant knocked at my door that evening and they carried him in in a damn box," she detailed. "All the lieutenant said was, 'Liubov Eliseevna, there's a war going on over there.'"⁸⁸ Shocked and in disbelief, Eliseevna told of writing to her son's commander in Afghanistan, who informed her that the aircraft was 8,000 metres high when it was destroyed and none of its crew identified. "To this day, I struggle with the idea that my son is dead," she concluded.

He always told me that he was deployed elsewhere, and I am kicking myself for not having pried open that coffin to see what was inside. Most likely, there was nothing. . . . How old was your son? Was he married? Was there a small window in your son's coffin? Please write to my husband and I.⁸⁹

With correspondence between the parents, widows, and friends of those killed in action growing bolder and emotionally charged, it seemed a prime opportunity for Gorbachev to authorize and encourage public discussion of the war as he planned for the 40th Army's withdrawal. Instead, the Soviet-Afghan War disappeared from his priorities. On 7 April 1985, President Reagan rejected Gorbachev's proposal for a halt to the deployment of SS-20s and Pershing II's in Europe, and ten days later refused to agree to a moratorium on nuclear tests. A resolution to the Afghan war thus faded from Gorbachev's list of ambitions. The KGB, too, placed a withdrawal from Afghanistan low in its priorities at this time, more concerned with its indirect consequences. On 22 April 1985, for instance, the KGB raised the name of G.G. Fomin, an afganets killed in 1980. Their concerns were

⁸⁸ Ibid, 336. By "a damn box," Eliseevna refers to quite literally to a sealed coffin that lacked any window for vision of the deceased.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

not linked to anti-war sentiment from Fomin's friends and relatives or negative attitudes toward the afgantsy. Highlighted instead was "the desecration of G.G. Fomin's grave with two swastikas in oil paint carried out by an unknown man... for the second time since December 1984."⁹⁰ Three years after the rally of aspiring neo-Nazis on Pushkin Square, the KGB remained more concerned with ghosts of the past than the consequences of the Soviet-Afghan War.

The Badaber Uprising and its Ramifications

I knew Aleksandr Rutskoi. When I was in Afghanistan he was a pilot and was shot down over Pakistan. ... But he bounced back immediately, and was Yeltsin's vice-president while many others remained in captivity... In 1985, in Badaber, Soviet POWs tried to take up arms and escape. They held out for three days, but Rutskoi didn't say a single word about it, and we found out only later. He chose not to address the issue, so Rutskoi is not well respected among the afgantsy.

- Vladimir, afganets⁹¹

Gorbachev's hesitation to introduce a withdrawal from Afghanistan to public debate was exemplified at the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party held on 23 April 1985. The Soviet-Afghan War was entirely absent from his speech, for Gorbachev turned his attention to "the acceleration of the socioeconomic development of the country," introduced as the soon-to-be-famous term of perestroika, or restructuring.⁹²

⁹⁰ "O nadrugatelstve nad mogiloi pogibshogo voennosluzhashchego," GASBU, f.16, spr. 1108, l. 306.

⁹¹ Vladimir, interview with author, May 2015.

⁹² "Reformy i novovedeniia v gorbachevskii period. Spravka," RIA Novosti, 28 February 2011, accessed 18 October 2016, https://ria.ru/history_spravki/20110228/337418349.html.

The days that followed revealed where the Afghan Question lay in Gorbachev's priorities: when on 26 and 27 April 1985 there was an uprising of Soviet POWs in Badaber, Pakistan, he judged the Soviet public not yet ready for the revelation of wartime realities and enforced a policy of secrecy on the matter.⁹³

Located 24 kilometres south of Peshawar, Badabar was home to a U.S. Air Force secret intelligence post between 1959 and 1970. Following the onset of the Soviet-Afghan War it functioned as a storage base for Pakistani arms and munitions, and a training site for mujahideen recruits to Jamiat-i Islami, a faction led by Burhanuddin Rabbani (1940-2011).⁹⁴ Beginning in 1983 Soviet and Afghan POWs were held in underground cells on the site, sometimes termed *zindans*, the Persian word for dungeons.⁹⁵ On 26 April 1985, an estimated 12 Soviets and 40 Afghans held captive in Badaber seized on the opportunity of all but two guards having left their posts for prayer at 18:00. The prisoners overwhelmed the men and seized control of an armoury. At their disposal was a wealth of heavy machine guns, M-62 mortars, and anti-tank grenades. Having barricaded themselves, the POWs demanded access to the Soviet ambassador and representatives of the Red Cross.

The POWs' calls for diplomatic negotiation and the assistance of international

⁹³ Despite its 1982 to 1984 trilateral agreement with the Red Cross and the mujahideen, the Soviet Union did not officially recognize POWs of the Afghan war until 1988.

⁹⁴ A former professor of Islamic theology at Kabul University, Burhanuddin Rabbani was elected leader of Jamiat-i Islami (Islamic Society) in 1972. Among his followers were future mujahideen leaders Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Ahmad Shah Massoud. An organization that emerged in the 1960s with predominantly Tajik membership, Jamiat-i Islami was inspired by a Pakistani group of the same name, which propagated "true Islam" as an antidote to secularism. Ordered in 1973, Rabbani fled to Pakistan. He returned to Afghanistan soon after the Soviet-Afghan War began.

⁹⁵ The term "zindan" became part of soldiers' vernacular in Afghanistan along with other terms derived from Persian such as "shuravi" (Soviet) and "dushman" (enemy). "Zindan" found its way into popular phraseology with the Second Chechen War. The pit in which naïve British reporters are imprisoned in the 2002 Russian blockbuster film, *Voina* (War), would be a "zindan" in the modern sense. See: *Voina*, dir. Aleksei Balabanov, CTB Film Company: Moscow, 2002.

NGOs were rejected by Rabbani, after which the Pakistani military and its allies made a series of attempts to capture the fortress. Rabbani narrowly avoided being killed by a rocket-propelled grenade during the standoff and ordered a full-fledged assault the next morning. Following a Pakistani pilot's bombing of the armoury, a chain reaction of explosions from the munitions killed all but three prisoners; the collateral damage was immense, with 120 mujahideen, 90 Pakistani soldiers including 28 officers, and six American instructors losing their lives.⁹⁶

The aftermath of the POWs' standoff in Badaber saw both Soviet and Pakistani governments take action to keep the uprising a secret. Although a lone Pakistani newspaper, *Safir*, reported the incident and its aftermath, the issue was recalled and destroyed within hours and the vicinity sealed off to journalists and foreigners.⁹⁷ As a result, the Badaber Uprising gave way to rumours and speculation among Soviet citizens, fuelled by Western reportage of the event. On 28 April, an American satellite captured photographic evidence of a mujahideen training camp eradicated by the explosion, leaving in its place a crater 80 yards long.⁹⁸ Within four miles of the camp, locals reported coming across "fragments of shells, rockets and mines, as well of human remains," while artillery could be heard in Peshawar.⁹⁹ Beginning on 2 May, Western news correspondents in Islamabad reported of "vastly outnumbered" Soviet and Afghan troops battling against Pakistani forces, with the Voice of America the first to put

⁹⁶ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 266; Aleksandr Sitnikov, "The Badaber Uprising and Its Aftermath," *Russia & India Report*, 6 May 2015, accessed 11 December 2016, https://in.rbth.com/arts/2015/05/06/the_badaber_uprising_and_its_aftermath_42973. The question of three surviving POWs is disputed. The number was given by Rabbani in his visit to Moscow shortly after the war's conclusion, but authorities were unable to confirm soldiers' fates.

⁹⁷ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 267.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Sitnikov, "The Badaber Uprising and Its Aftermath."

numbers to the casualties, alleging that “12 Soviet and 12 Afghan prisoners had been killed in an explosion at a mujahideen base.”¹⁰⁰ Only on 9 May 1985 were facts of the Badaber Uprising reported to the Soviet Embassy in Islamabad by David Delanrants, the representative of the International Red Cross. The Soviet Union’s response spoke to the authorities’ careful balance of international and domestic narratives on the war. On 11 May, the Soviet Ambassador to Pakistan Vitalii Smirnov issued a warning to President Zia ul-Haq, alluding to future retaliation:

The Soviet side holds the government of Pakistan fully responsible for what happened, and expects it to draw appropriate conclusions about the consequences of its participation in aggressions against the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, and thereby the Soviet Union.¹⁰¹

Five days later, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan issued a letter to United Nations Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, also circulated among the General Assembly and the Security Council. While Pakistan did not suffer any consequences, reportage of the event sparked testimonies of prisoner abuse to the United Nations Human Rights Commission by the handful of Soviet-Afghan War POWs released between 1983 and 1986.¹⁰² Unofficial Soviet retaliation for the Badaber Uprising came two years later.¹⁰³

Coverage of the Badaber Uprising in the Soviet press differed markedly from the

¹⁰⁰ “O vosstanii sovetskikh i afganskikh voennoplennykh v Pakistane,” *Sekretnye materialy po Afganistanu*, accessed 11 December 2016, <http://www.economics.kiev.ua/index.php?id=1094&view=article>.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ While unconfirmed in available KGB and ISI archive documents, suspected acts of retribution include a series of 1987 raids by Soviet troops across the Pakistani border killing 234 mujahideen and Pakistani soldiers; an explosion in an ammunition depot at Camp Odzhiri not far from Islamabad that killed 1,000 to 1,300 people in 1988; and the plane crash of 17 August 1988 that killed Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq. See: Sitnikov, “The Badaber Uprising and Its Aftermath.”

statements of U.N. diplomats. Refusing to tarnish the pomp and circumstance of Victory Day, the incident went unmentioned until 27 May when *Novosti* reported that in Kabul:

Popular meetings are continuing... in protest against the death[s] in an uneven fight with counter-revolutionaries and regular units of the Pakistan army of Soviet and Afghan soldiers kidnapped by the rebels... Peasants, workers, and representatives of the tribes are condemning the barbaric action of Islamabad, which is crudely distorting the facts in a clumsy attempt to evade responsibility.¹⁰⁴

Only years later were any truths or documentation on the Badaber Uprising disclosed to the public. In December 1991, Rabbani and Pakistan's Deputy Foreign Minister visited Moscow to negotiate the cessation of military aid to President Najibullah. As a gesture, the names of five Soviet soldiers assumed dead in the Badaber Uprising were disclosed.¹⁰⁵ The search for deceased prisoners' names continued in the years that followed. Between 28 May and 3 June 1992, a Russian-American bilateral Commission on the Fate of Prisoners of War and Missing In Action During and After World War Two was formed. Colonel General Dmitrii Volkogonov led the Russian side, and the unknown prisoners of the Badaber Uprising were on its list of priorities. Also contributing to the search for survivors was Liudmilla Thorne, who on 25 August 1992 penned a letter to former Ambassador to the Soviet Union (1977-79) Malcolm Toon, then acting as co-chair of a U.S. – Russia Joint Commission on POWs/MIAs.¹⁰⁶ Recalling her interviews

¹⁰⁴ Cited in Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 268.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ The U.S. – Russia Joint Commission on POWs/MIAs was established in 1992 by Presidents George H.W. Bush and Boris Yeltsin, with Colonel General Dmitrii Volkogonov as its Russian co-chair. The Joint Commission's aim was to determine the fates of POWs and MIAs on the sides of both Cold War powers from World War II, the Korean War, "reconnaissance missions" of the Cold War, the Soviet-Afghan War, and the Vietnam War. For a look at the project, see: "POW/MIA Databases & Documents," Library of

with Soviet POWs of the Afghan war between 1983 and 1986, Thorne wrote:

As you may know, on April 27, 1985, there was an explosion in a Jamiat camp near the border village of Zingali, outside of Peshawar, in which 12 Soviet prisoners and 12 other people were killed. In 1986, a representative of the Jamiat party told me that Matvey Basayev, Mikhail Arutunian, and Nikolai Shevchenko were NOT among those who were killed.¹⁰⁷

The search for Soviet POWs and MIA soldiers was suspended after the coming-to-power of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 1996, resuming only in 2003 under the leadership of General Ruslan Aushev, then leader of the Warriors-Internationalists Affairs Committee. As of 2011, eleven Badaber POWs were identified and awarded posthumous medals.¹⁰⁸

Policies and Personnel in Transition

I don't believe in anything now, let alone in fighting for something. What's there to fight for? ... If the newspapers start saying it was right, it'll be right again. Now they're starting to say we're murderers. Who to believe? ... They write one thing today and the opposite tomorrow. I don't know where the truth is. I have three friends I trust. ... I've been home six years now, and I've seen it all.

- afganets¹⁰⁹

Having struggled to keep the Badaber Uprising a secret, Gorbachev refocused on

Congress Federal Research Division, accessed 22 January 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/rf/frd/powmia-home.html>.

¹⁰⁷ "Memorandum to Ambassador Malcolm Toon and Gen. Dmitry Volkogonov, Co-Chairmen, Joint US / Russian Commission on POW/MIA Affairs," Box 1, Folder 7, Malcolm Toon Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Capitalization as in original.

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 268.

¹⁰⁹ Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 57.

the grandeur of the 40th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War. On 9 May 1985 he gave a speech to the Soviet Union that differed little from his predecessors. Gorbachev ridiculed the West for the Munich Agreement and their “connivance at Hitler’s aggression,” and declared that “time will never absolve them of their responsibility for the catastrophe that could have been averted.”¹¹⁰ “Unfortunately,” he continued, “history repeats itself. . . . American imperialism is at the forward edge of the war menace to mankind.”¹¹¹ While the bulk of Gorbachev’s rhetoric was devoted to the threat of nuclear weapons, he added ongoing proxy wars to the myriad of problems, noting that “A policy of state terrorism is being followed against Nicaragua and an undeclared war waged in Afghanistan.”¹¹²

While it did not venture toward a thaw in relations with the United States, Gorbachev’s Victory Day speech marked a watershed in his political discourse. In the week that followed, Gorbachev embarked on a publicity trip between St. Petersburg and Moscow that he deemed “the first act of glasnost.”¹¹³ In contrast to his predecessors, Gorbachev engaged in “face to face contact with people . . . and halted his motorcade without forewarning his security agents, to mingle with everyday citizens . . . speaking without papers or prior consultation.”¹¹⁴ So ensconced with the campaign were Soviet and Western observers that a momentous event went unnoticed: on 20 May 1985 in the Armenian SSR’s capital city of Erevan, some 200 protesters – largely composed of

¹¹⁰ “Excerpts from Gorbachev Speech on the War Anniversary,” *New York Times*, 9 May 1985, accessed on 12 October 2016, www.nytimes.com/1985/05/09/world/excerpts-from-gorbachev-speech-on-the-war-anniversary.html.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Natalia Rostova, “Rozhdenie rossiiskikh SMI - 15 maia 1985,” *Rozhdenie rossiskikh SMI - epokha Gorbacheva (1985-1991)*, accessed 18 October 2016, gorbymedia.com/post/05-15-1985.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

soldiers' mothers – “gathered outside the city’s military commissariat” in a demonstration against their sons being deployed to Afghanistan.¹¹⁵ Soon after the standoff began, policemen charged at the crowd of protesters, several of whom “fled to the nearby mountains.” About 40 protesters were arrested and imprisoned on charges of hooliganism. By the time the first mass protest against the Soviet-Afghan War graced the pages of *Le Monde* on 16 June 1985 it had been swept under the rug by authorities, but not without leaving an impression: ten days prior the Politburo had convened to discuss a withdrawal from Afghanistan for the first time in two months.¹¹⁶ The meeting saw General Varennikov – now serving as the head of the Defense Ministry’s Operational Group in Afghanistan – give a comprehensive report on the state of affairs in Afghanistan. While the 40th Army had adapted to guerilla warfare after six years, “combat actions for stabilizing the situation” had “a temporary character,” with insurgents retaking lost territory after battles subsided.¹¹⁷ Gorbachev responded not with a change in foreign policy, but the resurrection of “Soviet-American regional security talks on Afghanistan... after a three-year hiatus.”¹¹⁸ It was a concession to the lingering Politburo members of Brezhnev’s generation that spoke to the limitations Gorbachev faced during his first year in power.

Partly in response to the failure to take action on the Afghan Question, Gorbachev spent much of the summer conducting a purge of the ranks. The highest-ranking political retirement to come of his sweep was Andrei Gromyko, who had served as Minister of

¹¹⁵ “Manifestation a Erivan,” *Le Monde*, 16 June 1985, 3.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Kalinovsky, “Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan,” 61.

¹¹⁸ Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, 726.

Foreign Affairs since 1957. The last surviving signatory of “Concerning the Situation in A,” Gromyko was relieved of his position on 29 June 1985 and appointed to the symbolic role of Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet. His proposals of Georgii Kornienko (1925-2006) and Iulii Vorontsov (1929-2007) as successors were ignored by Gorbachev, who nominated Eduard Shevardnadze.¹¹⁹ A watershed in Party leadership, it marked “the end of Gromyko’s monopoly and the power of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ staff over foreign policy.”¹²⁰ With the Politburo unwilling to sacrifice the guise of unity, Shevardnadze was confirmed the next day. He seized on the deployment of troops to Afghanistan as an example of how “the principle of collective leadership” had been violated, and decisions “made by a narrow group, bypassing even the Politburo... the Communist Party... and the Central Committee.”¹²¹

The surprise choice of Eduard Shevardnadze as Minister of Foreign Affairs was followed by the appointment of Aleksandr Iakovlev as Head of the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee on 5 July 1985. The change of tone in the Soviet media was visible almost immediately. On 22 July, a directive was issued to Soviet newspapers and television stations with instructions to begin new coverage of the war in Afghanistan. For the first time, they were granted permission to show “individual cases

¹¹⁹ Georgii Kornienko seemed a logical heir to the position, having worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 1949 and as deputy to Gromyko since 1975. In his memoirs, he claimed to have been one of the first officials to oppose the Soviet-Afghan War and criticized Gorbachev for “wavering in his commitment to withdrawal and shifting between different positions.” Iulii Vorontsov was a Soviet diplomat, the Ambassador to France at the time of Gromyko’s unofficial retirement. He was named Ambassador to Afghanistan on 13 October 1988. See: Artemy Kalinovsky, “A Long Goodbye: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan, 1980-1992” (PhD diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, 2009), 17; William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 123-24.

¹²⁰ Cherniaev, “1985 god.”

¹²¹ Gorbachev, *Memoirs*, 197-98.

of Soviet soldiers being wounded or killed during the course of their duties,” albeit only once per month.¹²² Yet the Supreme Soviet remained prone to contradiction and issued a decree aimed at curtailing the number of draft dodgers before the summer’s end.

Unmoved by the demonstration against the draft held by soldiers’ mothers in Erevan, the decree stated that “anyone of call-up age” who refused to serve “would be liable to prosecution, and fines could be imposed on college and institution principals... who failed to provide conscription centres with the names of young men under their supervision.”¹²³ It was a direct challenge to youths’ increasing rate of draft-dodging in the Soviet Union and rejection of “international duty,” answered by a spike in public protests. According to the CIA’s estimates, by December 1985 the year had seen (among others) “demonstrations at draft board” in Tbilisi with “hundreds involved”; another held at a Moscow cemetery “by mothers of soldiers killed in war”; and yet another in Khar’kov, where *samizdat* accounts reported the “public self-immolation of [a] mother whose son perished in combat... followed by a riot.”¹²⁴ For six years there had been minimal opposition to the Soviet-Afghan War, but a new wave of protests appeared to be on the rise.

The XII World Festival of Youth and Students

¹²² Michael Dobbs, “Dramatic Politburo Meeting Led to End of War,” *The Washington Post*, 16 November 1992, accessed on 19 October 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/11/16/dramatic-politburo-meeting-led-to-end-of-war/4d17778f-5c07-4aea-8731-ebacf9d61b5c/>.

¹²³ “Internal Political and Security Situation,” *Keesing’s Record of World Events* 31 (November 1985), accessed 20 October 2016, web.stanford.edu/group/tomzgroup/pmwiki/uploads/2054-1985-11-KS-a-EYJ.pdf. Prior to 1954, only 3% to 9% evaded service annually. Between 1974 and 1978, this figure increased to 38%. See: Roger R. Reese, *Red Commanders: a Social History of the Soviet Army Officer Corps, 1918 – 1991* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 204.

¹²⁴ “USSR: Domestic Fallout From the Afghan War,” 4.

At the Politburo there was a discussion about the results of the youth festival in Moscow... It is important that foreigners make direct contact with the Soviet people to get a true impression. There is no need to be afraid.... The Americans who went on the Volga after the festival and met simple Soviet people did more to expose the myth of the “Soviet threat” than all of our propaganda.

- Anatolii Cherniaev, 27 August 1985¹²⁵

Gorbachev’s cautious approval of liberalization in written words and the media was thus balanced with a reinforcement of stiff legalities from the past. Arguably his greatest tool for diverting the afgangtsy generation’s attentions from the shortcomings of the Soviet system was his greater tolerance of Western cultural figures and social trends. Among the earliest examples was the XII World Festival of Youth and Students, which took place in Moscow between 27 July and 3 August 1985, soon after the instructions for greater television coverage of the war in Afghanistan. Attended by 26,000 participants from 157 countries and welcomed under the slogan of “For Anti-Imperialist Solidarity, Peace, and Friendship,” the event was a mix of the old and the new.¹²⁶ Gorbachev’s opening address to the crowd highlighted “the urgent need to preserve and strengthen peace” for the future and noted that the festival was “taking place on the 40th anniversary of the defeat of Hitlerite fascism and Japanese militarism.”¹²⁷ The festival’s program, however, marked a departure from the past: its chief themes of discussion included “the

¹²⁵ Cherniaev, “1985 god.”

¹²⁶ Kirill Lobanov, “Istoricheskie khroniki: XII vsemirnyi festival’ molodezhi i studentov,” accessed 29 November 2016, vkomsomole.ru/articles/874--xii-.

¹²⁷ Ibid. Gorbachev opted not to use the term “Great Patriotic War” in his address.

fight against poverty and unemployment” and “rising environmental problems.”¹²⁸ While suspected protesters were expelled from Moscow, the festival’s primary themes mirrored those promoted by the Moscow Trust Group.

The activities that took place at the festival included a series of “anti-imperialist tribunals” promoted as an “open forum” for discussion.¹²⁹ Among the first topics raised was the struggle against “counter-revolutionaries” in Afghanistan. Attended by 500 delegates, the forum resembled a Soviet filibuster aimed at obstructing any semblance of debate. Paradoxically, there were very few Russians in the audience: its organizers feared that Western attendees would express “dangerous ideas” about the war and “admission was by a complex system of passes and written invitations,” while “ordinary Russians were kept away by a phalanx of police and security men.”¹³⁰ The organizers’ tool of choice was a series of propaganda films. The first to air was a documentary on Phan Thi Kim Phúc (then seated in the audience), better known to the West as “the napalm girl” captured in an iconic photograph from the Vietnam War. When it was announced that another two films would be screened to expose the “war mongering” role of the United States’ support for the mujahideen, approximately 60 youth rose up jeering the organizers and chanting, “We want discussions.”¹³¹ The representative of the British Youth Council openly accused organizers of “going back on their promise of free speech during the festival... [to] prevent if at all possible any discussions of the Afghan question.” When at last the Swedish youth delegation’s representative, Katerina Larson, was given the floor,

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Nigel Wade, “Russian Forum on Oppression Backfires,” *Free Afghanistan* 2 (Summer 1985): 4.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

it had reached 10:30 p.m. Having worked with the United Nations in Afghanistan in 1978 and 1979, Larson reiterated the U.N.'s demand for the withdrawal of the 40th Army, and condemned the Moscow hosts for "pouring bombs" on civilians. "These troops were not invited," she declared. "What the United States did in Vietnam, the Soviet Union is doing in Afghanistan."¹³² The presiding panel immediately ruled that Larson had exceeded her speaking time, but this did not deter her supporters from giving her a standing ovation.

Also indicative of the forthcoming policy of glasnost and local authorities' uncertainty over how to police it was the choice of musical acts to perform at the XII World Festival of Youth and Students. Among them was the popular underground rock band, *Mashina vremeni*, performing in Moscow for the first time since 1980 after being banned for their lyrical themes and Western sense of fashion.¹³³ The addition of Bob Dylan to the lineup, meanwhile, clashed with the KGB's continued arrests of John Lennon fans since 1980.¹³⁴ Indeed, in its review of security measures taken against suspected neo-Nazis since 1983, the KGB deemed youths' actions as "primarily motivated... due to systematic listening to foreign anti-Soviet radio and the recordings of Western music groups... which openly propagate fascist, racist, and anti-Soviet ideas."¹³⁵

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Founded in Moscow in 1968, *Mashina vremeni* were inspired by the hippie movement in the West and began their career singing covers of British and American groups. They gained a significant following as a live act in the 1970s before being targeted by Soviet authorities in the late Brezhnev era. They were barred from playing "official" concerts in Moscow from 1980 to 1986, and released their first official album only in 1987. The state's denunciation, published in *Komsomol'skaia pravda* on 11 April 1982, is exhibited on their website as part of the band's history. See: N. Krivomazov, "Ragu iz sinei ptitsy," accessed 29 November 2016, www.mashina-vremeni.com/slova9.htm.

¹³⁴ One of the first Western acts invited to perform in the Soviet Union during Gorbachev's rule, Bob Dylan's participation in the XII World Festival of Youth and Students resembled a modern Russian tragedy and has taken on a number of urban myths. See: John Freedman, "Did Bob Dylan Shed Tears of Rage in Russia?," *The Moscow Times*, 26 October 2009, accessed on 30 November 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/did-bob-dylan-shed-tears-of-rage-in-russia-34103>.

¹³⁵ "Ob antiobshchestvennykh proiavleniakh na pochve podrazhaniia natsistam," GASBU, f.16, spr. 1109,

Turning a blind eye to Bob Dylan's arrival on Soviet soil, the KGB focused instead on suspected threats to security at the festival. It was "Afghan emigrants" that fell under scrutiny.¹³⁶ According to First Deputy Chairman of the KGB, Filipp Bobkov (b. 1925), one year before the festival took place,

Pakistan recruited a selection of Afghan militants trained by CIA specialists. ...

They settled in Moscow, were fully funded, expected to receive plastic bombs and armaments, and were preparing to plant explosives in... the Luzhniki stadium and Manezh Square... Their actions were foiled thanks to operational measures.¹³⁷

The emergence of radicalized Islamic militants led the KGB to recruit afgantsy hardened by wartime experience to monitor attendees at the event; among them was Vladimir Pozdnyakov, who served as an advisor to the Democratic Organization of Afghan Youth in the war-ridden province of Kandahar in 1983 to 1984.¹³⁸ The KGB also cast a broad net in terms of potential offenders and "neutralized" five Afghan delegates from Paris who "wanted to plant explosives in the metro and Central Department Store."¹³⁹ Also red-flagged by the KGB were representatives of "the religious extremist organizations 'Muslim Brotherhood,' 'Hezbollah,' and representatives of delegations from a number of Arab countries," who intended to carry out "provocative actions against their opponents."¹⁴⁰ Having taken measures to "tighten customs inspection and political

l. 82.

¹³⁶ "O rabote po obespecheniiu gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti v period XII Vsemirnogo festivalia molodezhi i studentov," GASBU, f.16, spr. 1109, ll. 209-10.

¹³⁷ Filipp Denisovich Bobkov, *Kak gotovili predateli*, accessed 30 November 2016, www.x-libri.ru/elib/bobkv000/00000070.htm.

¹³⁸ "Pozdnyakov Vladimir Georgievich," accessed 12 December 2016, <https://kprf.ru/personal/pozdnyakov>.

¹³⁹ Cherniaev, "1985 god."

¹⁴⁰ "O rabote po obespecheniiu gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti v period XII Vsemirnogo festivalia molodezhi i studentov," GASBU, f.16, spr. 1109, ll. 209-10.

control” of foreigners in attendance, the Ukrainian KGB alone turned away 33 suspected members of the Muslim Brotherhood, “19 of whom were enrolled in higher education institutions of the republic.” Another nine attendees were identified as “Afghan extremists” and placed under “intensified behavioural observation.”¹⁴¹ The resurgence of religious movements, be it due to the approaching 1,000-year anniversary of Orthodox Christianity, the growth of militant Islam, or the resurgence of Catholicism in the Polish People’s Republic, was of greater concern to Soviet authorities than a withdrawal from Afghanistan and accommodation of the afgantsy. As a result, the Reagan administration remained wary of Gorbachev’s intentions. In its evaluation of his first 100 days in office, the CIA argued that Gorbachev “bristled at efforts to raise human rights issues,” while “Soviet forces in Afghanistan continue to pursue the more aggressive military approach that we began to see last year.”¹⁴²

Gorbachev Raises the Question of Afghanistan

International duty? In the name of what? Do the Afghans themselves want it? Is it worth the lives of our children, who do not understand why they were sent there, what they are fighting for, killing old people and children? And you throw brand new soldiers against professional killers armed and trained with the best weapons, capable of opposing an entire brigade with ten of their own?

- Letter to the Politburo, 17 October 1985¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² “Gorbachev, the New Broom,” CIA Directorate of Intelligence, accessed 6 November 2016, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005332240.pdf.

¹⁴³ Cited in William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (Yale University Press, 2000), 251.

Gorbachev returned to the question of withdrawal from Afghanistan on 10 October 1985, when he invited President Karmal to Moscow for a secret tete-a-tete. Having urged Karmal to “moderate his social [and] economic forms so as not to upset Afghan Islamic customs,” Gorbachev announced that “By the following summer, the Soviet troops would withdraw and allow the regime to deal alone with the mujahideen.”¹⁴⁴ According to Karmal’s future successor, Mohammed Najibullah – then serving as Chairman of the KhAD [Khadamat-e Aetela’at-e Dawlati, a.k.a. Afghanistan’s KGB] – the president reacted with “surprise and consternation” before sputtering that if the 40th Army were withdrawn, “next time you will need to bring in a million soldiers.”¹⁴⁵

Before discussing his meeting with Karmal at the Politburo, Gorbachev prefaced their exchange by reading aloud letters from crippled soldiers and grieving mothers, stating plainly that “The Politburo made a mistake that should be rectified, [and] the sooner the better because every day is taking lives.”¹⁴⁶ His disparaging opinion of the Afghan president drew no opposition from his colleagues. “With or without Karmal,” he insisted, “we will follow this line firmly, [and] in a minimally short amount of time lead to our withdrawal from Afghanistan.”¹⁴⁷ His motion was supported by Defence Minister Sergei Sokolov (1911-2012), who took to the floor twice to back Gorbachev’s proposal. Despite this, the renewed call for a withdrawal was not greeted with enthusiasm. “There was no objection and no strong endorsement,” recalled Soviet Ambassador to the United

¹⁴⁴ Dimitrakis, *The Secret War in Afghanistan*, 213; Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, 728.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Cherniaev, “1985 god.”

¹⁴⁷ Kalinovsky, “Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan,” 61.

States Anatolii Dobrynin, “but rather reluctant silent agreement.”¹⁴⁸

It was a silence that remained with the Soviet Union’s official stance that year. At the Geneva Summit of 19 and 20 November 1985, Gorbachev highlighted a withdrawal from Afghanistan as merely “part of a general political settlement between us” in his first meeting with President Reagan.¹⁴⁹ The lack of any details gave Reagan and his advisors little reason to believe him. Even in the Politburo’s annual review of state policies on 30 December 1985, the Afghan war remained largely absent from consideration. It was noted only that Gorbachev had met with the Afghan president, and that “the military-political situation and the question of rendering international aid to the DRA is of special concern to the Central Committee.” Soviet military advisors were given soft praise for “meeting with government officials of Afghanistan on the consolidation of the gains of the Revolution,” but combat troops were unmentioned.¹⁵⁰ Soldiers’ farcical consolation prize was the introduction of a booklet with the long-winded title of *The Life, Habits and Customs of the Peoples of Afghanistan: Rules and Norms of Behaviour for Military Personnel Serving Outside Their Own Country*. After six years of war the 40th Army was bestowed with a basic guide to the Afghan people’s religion, their cultural inclination toward vendettas, instructions not to interfere with Muslim prayers, and basic sanitary advice.¹⁵¹ It offered those deployed to Afghanistan such words of advice as “It is prohibited to make use of water from unknown sources for drinking, cooking, and other

¹⁴⁸ Anatolii Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to America’s Six Cold War Presidents* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 447.

¹⁴⁹ Garthoff, *The Great Transition*, 728.

¹⁵⁰ “Nekotorye dannye o deiatel’nosti politbiuro i sekretariata TsK KPSS v 1985 godu,” Arkhiv natsional’noi bezopasnosti: Rossiiskie programmy, 30 December 1985, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Perestroika/1985.12.30%20CC%20CPSU%20in%201985.pdf.

¹⁵¹ “Dokumenty,” *Afgan. Pamiat’*, accessed 6 November 2016, https://vk.com/album-18487074_118811450.

technical needs,” its illustration a soldier drinking from a poisoned flask.¹⁵² This spoke to Gorbachev’s failure to undertake an immediate change of policy in his first year of tenure, his hands tied by the stubborn inertia of the generation before him and his own reluctance to compromise the Soviet Union’s role as a guiding power in the Third World.

On 8 January 1986, the Soviet press struck a new tone in its characterization of the afgantsy. In the city of Tol’iatti, a group of afgantsy became disgusted with the traits they saw among fellow citizens and upon their return, “formed a vigilante squad, waging their own private war against ‘money-grubbers’ and ‘scroungers’... taking the law into their own hands.”¹⁵³ It was a contrast to the story of Aleksandr Nemtsov that graced the pages of *Komsomol’skaia pravda* two years prior, and spoke to increasing public speculation on the war and its veterans. While Nemtsov was a “wartime-internationalist” shot three times from behind and neglected by the state, this article cast the afgantsy as an alienated minority characterized by their “antisocial behaviour.”¹⁵⁴

Other domestic themes of focus came from an increased publication of letters to the editor that criticized non-recognition of the afgantsy’s welfare benefits. One young invalid wrote of his experience going to the front of a line to purchase a train ticket, a right he was entitled to with the card issued to him after demobilization. “The people in line started muttering: so young, where you pushing?” he recalled. “My pass went flying out the ticket window right onto the floor, and the ticket-seller yelled, ‘you’ve been to

¹⁵² “Dokumenty,” *Afgan. Pamiat’*, accessed 6 November 2016, https://vk.com/photo-18487074_347602895.

¹⁵³ Bohdan Nahaylo, “When Ivan Comes Marching Home,” *The American Spectator*, July 1987, 16.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

war, huh, milk-sop? What are you doing pushing a war invalid's pass?"¹⁵⁵ The greater leeway awarded to the Soviet media foreshadowed Gorbachev's decision to broach the topic of the Afghan war at the 27th Congress of the Communist Party.

Held on 25 February to 6 March 1986, the 27th Party Congress saw a very different cast of participants than partook in Leonid Brezhnev's swan song five years prior. Gorbachev had by this time replaced one-third of republican Party Secretaries and government ministers, with approximately 40% of key posts held by new names.¹⁵⁶ When he took to the podium, Gorbachev laid forth a plan for the Soviet Union that was by-and-large a resumption of Andropov's campaign against corruption and bureaucratism. In an openness to Party criticism unseen since the days of Lenin, Gorbachev emphasized the need "to tell the Party and the people honestly and frankly about the shortcomings in our political and practical activities," criticizing his predecessor for having "lagged behind the needs of the times and of life," and contributed to stagnation.¹⁵⁷ His choice of words was strong yet carefully knit. Gorbachev abstained from naming names and spoke instead of collective groups that bore "a distinct proprietary mentality and a scornful attitude to the interests of society."¹⁵⁸ His harshest criticism was aimed at the Central Asian republics, three of which had undergone a change of leadership since November 1985.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁵ Serge Schmemmann, "Soviet Coverage of Afghan War: Heroic Youth and Tales of Danger," *New York Times*, 12 November 1985, accessed on 14 November 2016, www.nytimes.com/1985/11/12/world/soviet-coverage-of-afghan-war-heroic-youth-and-tales-of-danger.html.

¹⁵⁶ Galeotti, *Gorbachev and His Revolution*, 53.

¹⁵⁷ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Political Report of the CPSU Central Committee to the 27th Party Congress* (Novosti Press Agency Publishing House: Moscow, 1986), 6.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 59.

¹⁵⁹ Sacked as part of Gorbachev's campaign against corruption and clan-based patronage by this time were First Secretaries Turdakun Usabaliev of the Kyrgyz SSR (9 May 1961 to 2 November 1985), Rakhmon Nabiev of the Tajik SSR (20 April 1982 to 14 December 1985), and Muhammetnazar Gapurow of the Turkmen SSR (24 December 1969 to 21 December 1985).

“Not everybody can see the need for restructuring,” Gorbachev remarked, pointing to falsified cotton production in Uzbekistan as the “most glaring form of negative processes stemming from an absence of criticism and self criticism,” leading to “toadyism” and the “laudation” of a gerontocracy.¹⁶⁰

Consistent with the Brezhnevites before him, however, was Gorbachev’s esteemed value of the Great Patriotic War. Rather than acknowledge those who served their “international duty” he insisted that “concern for the older generation... should rank as one of the top priorities.” An “instrumental” tool in this process would be “first of all in educating the rising generation” on military-patriotic duties.¹⁶¹ His characterization of the Soviet-Afghan War as “a bleeding wound” soon thereafter made headlines worldwide as observers pointed to his admission of an armed conflict as a turning point in Soviet foreign policy. Yet many neglected to consider Gorbachev’s statement in its entirety:

For instance, counter-revolution and imperialism have turned Afghanistan into a bleeding wound. The USSR supports that country’s efforts to defend its sovereignty. *We should like, in the nearest future, to withdraw the Soviet troops stationed in Afghanistan at the request of its government.* Moreover, we have agreed with the Afghan side on the schedule for their phased withdrawal *as soon as a political settlement is reached that will ensure an actual cessation and dependably guarantee the non-resumption of foreign armed interference* in the internal affairs of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.¹⁶²

The only difference between Gorbachev’s statement and those of Brezhnev, Andropov,

¹⁶⁰ Gorbachev, *Political Report... to the 27th Party Congress*, 100-02.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 65-6.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 88. Italics are my own.

and Chernenko before him was the public admission of the war's cost in blood. On the one hand, Gorbachev had no definite plan for a military withdrawal from Afghanistan at this time and named the same prerequisite as his predecessors, demanding a cessation of Western assistance to the mujahideen. On the other hand, a General Secretary's admission of a "bleeding wound" that cost Soviet lives each day legitimized much of what had been expressed only in *samizdat* and anonymous pamphlets until then. While not as momentous a statement as characterized in the Western press, Gorbachev's speech was a watershed moment that showed he was serious about bringing the war to an end.

It took nearly eight weeks for the Politburo to discuss any change of policy in Afghanistan after the Party Congress wound to a close. According to KGB Chairman Viktor Chebrikov, it was "Afghan leaders" who first "appealed to Gorbachev to speak with Karmal and persuade him to resign voluntarily."¹⁶³ The Politburo convened to discuss the matter on 27 April and concurred that a shift toward "national reconciliation" should be undertaken by a new Afghan leader. Three days later, Gorbachev summoned President Karmal to Moscow under the guise of an invitation for hospital treatment over kidney trouble. Encouraged to step down on false charges of health difficulties, Karmal stubbornly refused and returned to Kabul. The task of persuasion fell upon Deputy Chairman of the KGB Vladimir Kriuchkov (1924-2007), who flew to Afghanistan on 1 May to confront the man. In their first meeting, Karmal's discussion of resignation took shape "almost in the form of a monologue," interrupted by a parade of Afghan youth marching down the street "crying out praiseful slogans" in honour of their leader. "Look, see how people think of me?" exclaimed Karmal, gesturing to the window. "How can I

¹⁶³ Vladimir Kriuchkov, *Lichnoe delo*, tom 1 (Moskva: Olimp, 1996), 226.

go against their will?” Kriuchkov, having no time for scripted spectacle, replied that “If the guards were removed from palace square and the public truly allowed express their opinions, within an hour, half of Kabul would be here with completely different slogans.”¹⁶⁴ While Karmal ultimately stepped aside and was replaced as General Secretary of the PDPA by Mohammad Najibullah on 4 May 1986, his exit from politics was a stubborn one: twice in two weeks Kriuchkov returned to Afghanistan, exerting 20 hours of pressure between meetings and phone-calls before Karmal finally agreed to cede his position.¹⁶⁵ At a November meeting of the PDPA, members voted to relieve Karmal of his chairmanship of the Revolutionary Council (an equivalent to the Supreme Soviet) and exiled him to Moscow, where he received a state-owned apartment and a dacha.¹⁶⁶

With a changing of the guard in Moscow and Kabul, it seemed that Gorbachev could at last take real steps toward the withdrawal of the 40th Army. Yet he proved hesitant to take action. “There is now a new leadership in Kabul,” remarked Gorbachev at a 26 June 1986 meeting of the Politburo.

[But] where will it go? We need to name a new ambassador and cut in half the number of advisers. . . . Maybe we should just announce: “look, two years have passed, we said we would take our forces out and we have started doing just that.” We need to be sure that the final result does not look like a humiliating defeat, having lost so many men and abandoned them all. In other words, we need the process to continue. . . .¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 227.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 98.

¹⁶⁷ “Politburo Session, 26 June 1986,” *Notes of Anatolii S. Cherniaev*, translated by Jason Stoinski and

Ultimately, it was decided to withdraw six regiments at the end of the summer, “to demonstrate that the Soviet Union will not remain in Afghanistan, and is not in search of ‘a port on the warm seas.’”¹⁶⁸ Gorbachev announced the decision at a speech in Vladivostok on 28 June 1986. “One armored regiment, two motorized rifle regiments and three antiaircraft artillery regiments... will return to their areas of permanent deployment... [and] anyone interested can easily verify it,” he began. Calling it a “unilateral step” toward a political settlement, Gorbachev underscored his expectation that the gesture “must be answered by the curtailment of outside interference.” “As soon as a political settlement is finally worked out,” he concluded, “the return of all Soviet troops can be speeded up.”¹⁶⁹ The Reagan Administration responded by providing FIM-92 Stinger missile launchers to the mujahideen, beginning in September 1986.¹⁷⁰

A Transition From Dissidents to Pacifists

My friend returned from Afghanistan in 1982 or 1983 and wrote a book that was more or less truthful. For the first time, real combat was shown... And the publisher said, “We like it. But we will change all the Russian names into Afghan

Svetlana Savranskaia, accessed 25 October 2017, <http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB272/Doc%204%201986-06-26%20Politburo%20Session%20on%20Afghanistan.pdf>.

¹⁶⁸ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Poniat' perestroiku... pochemu eto vazhno seichas* (Moscow: Al'pina, 2006), 137.

¹⁶⁹ “Excerpts From Gorbachev’s Speech,” *The New York Times*, 29 July 1986, accessed 28 November 2016, www.nytimes.com/1986/07/29/world/excerpts-from-gorbachev-s-speech.html.

¹⁷⁰ The Stinger is a lightweight infrared surface-to-air missile guided by an infrared homing system. Stinger missiles led to an enduring myth in Western scholarship, wherein a spike in aircraft losses led the Soviet Army to withdraw from Afghanistan. In fact, assessments of the missiles’ effectiveness were mixed. While the United States claimed in December 1986 that the mujahideen had downed 90 to 100 Soviet helicopters in three months, reports from the mujahideen themselves put numbers as low as 23. The rate at which aircraft were downed at the end of the war was in fact the same as at the beginning. See: Sarah E. Mendelson, *Changing Course: Ideas, Politics, and the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 99-100; Steele, *Ghosts of Afghanistan*, 112-15.

names, then publish it.” And that’s what they did. The title was something like *Afghan Revolution on the Move*. The truth was just the opposite. The soldiers and officers described in the book knew it was them and they were embarrassed... By that time Afghanistan was like prostitution, drugs, corruption with party officials, and alcohol problems [in negative press].

- Artem Borovik, 4 June 1988¹⁷¹

As Gorbachev struggled with the question of how to reach a “peace with honour” in Afghanistan, activist groups were in a state of transition. The Moscow Trust Group had by this time ceased to function. Of its eleven founding members, nine had immigrated by September 1986.¹⁷² This spoke to a weakness of the opposition groups that emerged in the tumultuous 1980s: while the Moscow Helsinki Group retained its core membership in the years between its foundation and closure, the younger generation treated membership as an open door. Indeed, the Trust Group’s initial growth spurt was due in part to “an influx of more *refusniks*, many of whom were allowed to emigrate after joining the group.”¹⁷³ As a result, the Trust Group was left with only two members in command of its direction. Following Gorbachev’s speech at the 27th Party Congress, Nikolai Khramov (b. 1963) and Aleksandr Rubchenko (b. 1960) took the group forward in a year of transition.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ “Interview with Artem Borovik,” Box 98, Folder 7, Hedrick Smith Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁷² “Directory of Soviet ‘Informal’ Political Organizations and Samizdat Publications, Part I (Moscow and Leningrad),” Box 32, Folder 11, Hedrick Smith Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Metta Spencer, “Interview with Nikolai Khramov (Group for Trust), 1992,” *The Russian Quest for Peace and Democracy*, accessed on 30 November 2016, russianpeaceanddemocracy.com/nikolai-khramov-1992.

Khramov and Rubchenko were well known to the police by this time in light of their continued participation in the pacifist movement. A student of journalism at Moscow State University, Nikolai Khramov became a member of the Trust Group in 1983. He was expelled from MGU one year later for his “anti-Soviet activities” with the organization. Soon thereafter, he was drafted for military service and responded with an open letter to the Minister of Defense, refusing to serve out of principle. After four months of military detention, he was released when a medical review board determined that he was visually impaired.¹⁷⁵ Aleksandr Rubchenko, meanwhile, grew up in the military city of Liubertsy, accessible only with a pass, where his father was stationed after graduating from the Zhukovsky Air Force Academy. He became acquainted with the Moscow Trust Group’s founder, Sergei Batovrin, in September 1982, during his activity in a separate peace group under the name of Free Initiative (Svobodnaia initsiatiiva). Beginning in 1983, Rubchenko participated in annual demonstrations on Children’s Day (1 June) and in remembrance of John Lennon (11 December). Rubchenko’s continued activism in such movements proved costly for his parents: after he joined the Trust Group in 1984 his father was removed from the General Staff and forced to retire, while his mother was informed by the MVD that if her son did not cease and desist, the family would be expelled from Moscow province.¹⁷⁶ Mikhail Gorbachev’s greater leeway for dissent saw authorities choose instead to place Rubchenko under periods of house arrest – the 27th Party Congress on 25 February to 6 March 1986 being one of them.

¹⁷⁵ “Nikolai Khramov,” accessed 5 December 2016, www.peoples.ru/state/politics/nikolay_hramov/.

¹⁷⁶ “Biografiia Aleksandra Rubchenko,” *Materialy samizdata*, AC 5338 (1984): 4.

Undeterred by the depleted membership of the Trust Group, Khramov and Rubchenko seized on the Soviet-Afghan War as a new theme of focus soon after it was deemed a “bleeding wound.” Their actions were prompted by a personal experience. On 7 May 1986 Khramov and Rudchenko were assaulted by five or six spetsnaz trainees scheduled to deploy to Afghanistan.¹⁷⁷ Standing witness to the incident were ten civilians and a Volga car with a KGB license plate.¹⁷⁸ What followed was perhaps indicative of growing liberalization from below: despite continued threats from the authorities, Nikolai Khramov laid charges against their assailants in July. The verdict took many by surprise: in what was hailed as “an unprecedented victory for civil liberties in the Soviet Union” by Western observers, the leader of the spetsnaz graduates, A. Malikov, was sentenced to “two years of correctional labour without imprisonment, and a deduction of 20% in his salary.” Another two attackers received two and three-year sentences in labour camps.¹⁷⁹

The court ruling in favour of Khramov and Rudchenko in August 1986 was followed by a flicker of *samizdat* publications critical of the Soviet Army and its place in popular culture. Among them was one penned by a newer member of the Trust Group, Andrei Krivov. Dated 16 October 1986, Krivov’s essay was autobiographical and questioned the patriotic upbringing of Soviet children. Recalling how “even at the age of three, I had learned to take a toy gun and shout ‘bang-bang!’” Krivov admitted that “I, like many of my comrades, wanted to be the same as my parents’ generation, and

¹⁷⁷ “Polozhenie gruppy doveriia,” *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, accessed 5 December 2016, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/2014/06/22/1986-год/>.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ John Bacher, “The View From the East,” *Peace Magazine*, June-July 1988, 23; “Polozhenie gruppy doveriia,” *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, accessed 5 December 2016, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/2014/06/22/1986-год/>.

regretted that we were born too late and the war was over.”¹⁸⁰ This militarization of childhood, he argued, was a relatively recent phenomenon:

In the early 20th century... although military toys were imported, the military did not hold games. ... The first guide for military and paramilitary sports games appeared in 1928 but was not published between 1945 and 1960. ... War games and toys for children have become widespread only in the past 20 to 30 years.¹⁸¹

Repetitive, at times simplified, at times pretentious with citations of Swiss child psychologist Jean Piaget, Krivov’s essay read as a blueprint for a theme that soon would be at the forefront of public debate: mandatory military service and its consequences for Soviet youths.¹⁸² “To call for the demilitarization of childhood,” Krivov insisted, “means to call on parents to be more attentive to their children” and push for “an alternative to war games [and] the nature of cinema and media.”¹⁸³

On 28 October 1986, not two weeks after Andrei Krivov’s essay against the militarization of Soviet youth entered circulation, Soviet authorities burst into the apartment of one Sergei Troianskii (b. 1954) at 9:00 a.m. A co-founder of Free Initiative, he was by this time known to the police for his emulation of the American hippy movement; in this case, they arrested the man under Article 224 of the RSFSR’s law code for “possession of narcotics.”¹⁸⁴ Troianskii was also a long-standing author of anonymous pamphlets against the Soviet-Afghan War. His earliest statement on the topic came from

¹⁸⁰ Andrei Krivov, “Problemy antivoenogo vospitaniia detei,” AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 6, ll. 2-3.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, l. 8.

¹⁸² Notably, Khramov would be actively involved with the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers during the First Chechen War. See: Amy Caiazza, *Mothers and Soldiers: Gender, Citizenship, and Civil Society in Contemporary Russia* (Routledge: New York, 2002), 131, 138, 148-51.

¹⁸³ Andrei Krivov, “Problemy antivoenogo vospitaniia detei,” AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 6, l. 11.

¹⁸⁴ I.A. Gordeeva, “<Vse liudi - brat’ia> : Iura Diversant i gruppa <Svobodnaia initsiativa>,” *Khippi u L’vovi: Al’manakh*, vip. 3 (L’viv: APRIORI, 2015), 301.

a meeting with fellow self-declared hippies in Tsaritsyno Park on Children's Day. A manifesto entitled "Toward 1 June 1981," it was an effort to link the emerging pacifist generation with the protesters before them. Citing a demonstration held by Soviet youth that same day in 1971 as the foundation of a movement, Troianskii hailed his predecessors for having "proclaimed withdrawal from a vicious society of lies and violence, to a personal world of love and flowers," some of whom "paid dearly" for doing so in a "totalitarian state."¹⁸⁵ In the ten years since then, there had been "a revival of the movement [and] hippies became known as pacifists," whose generation faced the war in Afghanistan as a national shame:

How do you, a pacifist, feel about that those of your age who have died in Afghanistan? Have you wondered why they were there? Is it because Afghanistan attacked us? Or is it because your country of 250 million people is armed with modern weapons while Afghanistan has 15 million people and is defenseless? Once a state feels strong enough... they will not hesitate to attack. The war in Afghanistan proves this once more. To protect the lives of your children and those worldwide requires the effort of you and your friends.

Long live a collective frenzy (kollektivnoe pomeshatel'stvo) against the state's nuclear weapons, against the war in Afghanistan, and *for* the lives of Afghan Children!¹⁸⁶

Five years after this manifesto circulated, Troianskii had not ceased his production of anti-war documents. Confiscated from his apartment in the 28 October 1986 raid were a

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 294.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 294-95.

typewriter and five copies of a brochure that spoke against the Soviet-Afghan War.¹⁸⁷

Upon a second search of the apartment, authorities discovered “traces of spraypaint upon the man’s shoes and clothes” and charged Troianskii for vandalism in light of recent graffiti slogans, which read, “End the shameful war in Afghanistan!” “Gorbachev – the killer of Afghan children” and “Children’s skin is just as sensitive to napalm as Afghan skin.”¹⁸⁸ While there were by this time signs of authorities’ greater tolerance of dissent and willingness to go against the grain – Khramov and Rubchenko’s court victory over three spetsnaz recruits a foremost example – five years of participation in public demonstrations and written criticism of the state proved too much for the authorities to concede. Troianskii was sentenced to Moscow’s Matrosskaia Tishina, a detention centre that made Western headlines in the post-Soviet years for housing prisoners such as the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovskii and Ukrainian pilot Nadiia Savchenko.

The arrest of Sergei Troianskii, if intended to be a message to anti-war dissidents, proved ineffective. Only a few weeks later, Aleksandr Rubchenko penned a *samizdat* article entitled “Not Only In Asia.” Writing of the assault that he and Khramov suffered at the hands of A. Malikov and his fellow spetsnaz recruits that summer, Rubchenko told of how “in a lively neighbourhood of central Moscow” they each “suffered fractures, with Khramov sustaining cuts to his face and his glasses broken.” Malikov, he added, initially was not arrested for his crime, “based on the fact that he... would soon deploy to fulfill his ‘international duty’ in Asia.” The Soviet Army and its recruits were, in Rubchenko’s opinion, a group that used their patriotic repute as a means to defy the law.

¹⁸⁷ “Aresty chlenov gruppy ‘Svobodnaia initsiativa’,” *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, accessed 6 December 2016, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/2014/06/22/1986-rod/>.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid; Bushnell, *Moscow Graffiti*, 120-21.

Malikov's defense in court, he recalled, was not to deny having carried out the assault, but to ask that the judge consider his "letters of commendation and award for marksmanship from his training." Rubchenko and Khramov, in contrast, were "forbidden to take notes during the court proceedings."¹⁸⁹ Having outlined the privileged legal position awarded to military personnel, Rubchenko abstained from mentioning the guilty verdict. Instead, he linked the Soviet-Afghan War to the emergence of "openly fascist youth groups" in his home city of Liubertsy – itself another sign of changing times.¹⁹⁰

Characterizing the "dreadful thugs of Liubertsy" as a movement that formed "a sub-culture of pre-conscription training with... an arrogant admiration for fitness equipment and musclebound torsos, instilled with a xenophobic hatred for Western culture," Rubchenko pointed to the Soviet media's heroization of the afgangtsy as successors to veterans of the Great Patriotic War as a cause of such trends.¹⁹¹ "The emergence of such openly fascist youth groups confirms our worst fears about the long-term moral damage inflicted by the ongoing war in Afghanistan," he argued. Symptomatic of this was the media's willingness to "make heroes out of them" in propaganda, aimed at "those who do not know of our compatriots' defeat, thousands of kilometres away from the Soviet Union." Rubchenko pointed not only to headlines, but blockbuster movies such as *The Detached Mission* (Odinochnoe plavanie) and Aleksandr Prokhanov's most recent short story set in Afghanistan, *Lighter Than Azure* (Svetlei lazuri) as mediums that projected the idea that "one should admire these fictional heroes,

¹⁸⁹ Aleksandr Rubchenko, "Ne tol'ko v Azii," AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 6, l. 1.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, l. 2.

patrolling the Salang Pass in armoured vehicles, machine-guns at the ready.”¹⁹² Also complicit, he argued, were “organizations of the veterans of the war in Afghanistan [which] conduct official meetings, courting youths,” assuring them that “it is a citizen’s duty” to serve in the army.¹⁹³ “Former soldiers are seen as ‘comrades in arms,’ ‘green caps,’ ‘commandos,’ or ‘afgantsy,’ so as to shield people from frightening ideas,” Rudchenko insisted.¹⁹⁴ Echoing Troianskii’s citation of the hippies’ values, he argued that the afgantsy showed “a contempt for defenseless spirituality” (*prezreniia k nezashchishchennoi dukhovnosti*) upon their return.¹⁹⁵ “It is important for everyone to understand just how dangerous the moral climate of a state at war can become,” Rubchenko concluded. “If one does not publicly condemn such brutality, we are doomed to an immoral poisoning of the mass consciousness... To preserve the spirit of such militancy is a threat to the social process that allowed us to reach detente in the 1970s.”¹⁹⁶

Aleksandr Rubchenko’s “Not Only In Asia” at once echoed the dissidents’ generation in its reference to *détente* and drew from his conflict with Malikov to criticize what he saw as a trend toward negative social movements among Soviet youth. Rather than accept the afgantsy as successors to the Great Patriotic War veterans, he cast them as troublemakers with a fancy for hate groups and thuggery. It spoke only for a small minority of the afgantsy and such groups were hardly limited to them in membership, but this did not deter Western scholars from seizing upon Rubchenko’s article for

¹⁹² Ibid, l. 1.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, l. 2.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, l. 4.

generalization in studies of subcultures in the Gorbachev years.¹⁹⁷ Rubchenko's hyperbole and blissful ignorance of the afgangtsy's difficult living conditions spoke to the limited scope of information available to activists even in the years of glasnost. Paired with the stresses of economic decline and a renewed arms race, the realities of the time could be lost in day-to-day tumult. The participation of afgangtsy in anti-authoritarian groups, for instance, differed little from the actions undertaken by "other bands of vigilantes" before them.¹⁹⁸ While their list of grievances differed from many, the sentiment of the afgangtsy came from similar grounds as their non-military delinquents. The same was true of speculation on the afgangtsy's drug use and the Soviet-Afghan War as a cause of draft-dodging: both trends had steadily increased in the decade beforehand.¹⁹⁹ As John Bushnell observed in his study of Soviet subcultures in the 1980s, "Veterans of combat or not... social frustration plays a part in their hostility to the indiscipline and indifference to proclaimed Soviet values that they see all around them."²⁰⁰ In fact, the number of afgangtsy who rejoined the military or sought employment in the realm of police and security far outweighed those who clashed with the law: as of 1991, approximately 3,000 afgangtsy were in prison, while 70,000 remained in the armed

¹⁹⁷ See for instance, Jim Riordan, "Teenage Gangs, 'Afgangtsy' and Neofascists," *Soviet Youth Culture*, 122-42.

¹⁹⁸ Bushnell, *Moscow Graffiti*, 147.

¹⁹⁹ As with the inflated numbers attributed to the casualties of the Soviet-Afghan war, soldiers' abuse of drugs and alcohol was exaggerated in media and scholarship alike. The CIA however, remained in touch with reality and observed, "Although drug use appears to be a growing phenomenon in the Soviet Union, the problem is still small by Western standards... [and] drug use among Soviet troops in Afghanistan is based on fragmentary information... [with] no conclusive evidence indicating that... [it] has reached epic proportions." See: "The USSR and Illicit Drugs: Facing Up to the Problem," 3, 8-9, CIA Directorate of Intelligence, accessed 22 June 2017, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000500703.pdf.

²⁰⁰ Bushnell, *Moscow Graffiti*, 148.

forces and 14,000 in the MVD.²⁰¹

As public speculation on wartime losses, the criminality of the afgantsy, and a decline in support for “international duty” continued, the Politburo found itself no closer to a withdrawal from Afghanistan after a year’s deliberation. Meeting on 13 November 1986 its members were pessimistic. “The situation is worse than it was six months ago,” remarked Gorbachev, who saw little progress since the appointment of Mohammed Najibullah in May. “On all fronts, our political, diplomatic and economic measures have not achieved any progress whatsoever.”²⁰² Tribal infighting, meanwhile, continued to plague the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, with Anatolii Dobrynin pointing out that “not a single member of the Politburo of the PDPA supports Najibullah’s ‘national reconciliation’.”²⁰³ It was a roadblock to any change in policy that spoke to the Committee on Afghanistan’s naïveté toward the nationality question – itself a threat to stability in the Soviet Union by this time.²⁰⁴ Following an airing of the grievances over the lack of process in bringing the war to an end, the session wound to a close with two future objectives: an official state meeting with Najibullah in the New Year and the withdrawal of the 40th Army from Afghanistan over the next two years.²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 254.

²⁰² “Zasedanie politbiuro TsK KPSS ‘O dal’neishikh meropriiatiakh po Afganistanu’,” Arkhiv national’noi bezopasnosti: Rossiiskie programmy, accessed 11 December 2016, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Perestroika/1986.11.13%20CC%20CPSU%20discussion%20on%20Afghanistan.pdf.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Six weeks after the Politburo’s discussion of problems faced in Afghanistan, Gorbachev dismissed First Secretary of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, Dinmukhammed Kunaev. His appointment of a trusted Russian ally in Gennadii Kolbin sparked resentment not only among everyday citizens, but the Kazakh elite, who fanned anti-Russian sentiment and even “bussed in their supporters to swell the mob[s]... using violence and local politics to resist reform.” Over 300 people were wounded in the riots that ensued. See: Galeotti, *Gorbachev and His Revolution*, 79; Anatolii Cherniaev, “1987 god,” *Dnevnik A.S. Cherniaeva*, accessed 5 October 2016, http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Chernyaev/1987.pdf.

²⁰⁵ “Zasedanie politbiuro TsK KPSS ‘O dal’neishikh meropriiatiakh po Afganistanu’,” Arkhiv national’noi

As the seventh year of the Soviet-Afghan War wound to a close, Mikhail Gorbachev undertook the first step toward a reversal of his predecessors' policies, authorizing the return of Andrei Sakharov to Moscow after six years in exile. Gorbachev believed that it would improve relations with the United States and "deprive the remaining dissidents of a martyr."²⁰⁶ This was a particularly true in light of the Chernobyl disaster on 26 April and the global criticism of Gorbachev for his reversion to "the political habits [of] a local party apparatchik" in his blackout of the Soviet press.²⁰⁷ The Politburo agreed to Sakharov's release in principal on 1 December 1986 after months of deliberation and opposition from Egor Ligachev and Viktor Chebrikov. One week later, dissident and human rights campaigner Anatolii Marchenko (1938-86) died at the young age of 48 in a hospital of Chistopol, Tatarstan, due to complications from a three-month hunger strike. A founding member of the Moscow Helsinki Group whom Sakharov once deemed "the first to tell the truth about the post-Stalin labour camps and prisons," the publicity that came of Marchenko's death gave the Politburo even more reason to seek a diversion.²⁰⁸ The installation of a telephone at Sakharov's apartment on 15 December was followed 24 hours later by a call from Mikhail Gorbachev, who informed him that he and Elena Bonner could return to Moscow and that his membership at the Academy of Sciences and series of awards would be restored. His arrival and 40 minutes addressing a crowd of reporters on 22 December were a watershed moment in Soviet history. While

bezopasnosti: Rossiiskie programmy, accessed 11 December 2016, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Perestroika/1986.11.13%20CC%20CPSU%20discussion%20on%20Afghanistan.pdf.

²⁰⁶ Jay Bergman, *Meeting the Demands of Reason: The Life and Thought of Andrei Sakharov* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2009), 326.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 325.

²⁰⁸ Cited in "K 70-letiiu Anatoliia Marchenko," Prava cheloveka v Rossii, accessed 14 December 2016, www.hro.org/node/914.

his response to a question on the Soviet-Afghan War was limited to a statement that “more resolute measures” must be taken to bring the conflict to an end, it marked Sakharov’s first step into the political arena.²⁰⁹ A departure from the “rhetorical moral exhortation” without compromises that he knew as a dissident, Sakharov’s condemnation of the Soviet-Afghan War offered a valuable foil to the path taken by the printed media, which remained focused on the welfare of the afgantsy and a callous bureaucracy’s indifference toward them. This was increasingly clear in the publication of letters from the afgantsy. As the year wound to an end, *Sobesednik* (Interlocutor) cited a number of statements penned by an afganets who signed off only as “V.K.” Contrary to the past six years’ propagation of “international duty” as an honour for Soviet youths, V.K. was “fed up with reading about how ‘happy’ draftees were... going to fight in Afghanistan,” stating plainly that he regarded this notion as “crazy.”²¹⁰

While Sakharov and the Soviet press were granted new liberties in their commentary on the war in Afghanistan, the afgantsy themselves remained silenced in terms of detailing their experiences on the battlefield and mourning fallen friends in the public sphere. In the city of Lutsk, in northwest Ukraine, for instance, the KGB red-flagged “certain former soldiers” among the 284 local afgantsy who had “expressed politically immature comments that distort the nature of international aid to Afghanistan, and claimed that ‘atrocities’ were carried out by Soviet soldiers against the civilian population of the country.”²¹¹ Despite their criticism of Soviet atrocities having taken place in private, the KGB took action against the offending afgantsy to thwart an

²⁰⁹ Bergman, *Meeting the Demands of Reason*, 328-29.

²¹⁰ Cited in Nahaylo, “When Ivan Comes Marching Home,” 16.

²¹¹ “O protsessakh sredi lits, prokhodivshikh sluzhbu v DRA,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1114, ll. 465-66.

apolitical public gesture: on 27 December, “said individuals planned to gather at Theatre Square and proceed to the cemetery to lay flowers on the graves of the 72 locals who died carrying out their international duty.”²¹² Public memorialization of those who fell in Afghanistan remained forbidden. This marked a common point for two key groups of everyday citizens to rally around in the year that followed: the afgantsy themselves, and the soldiers’ mothers once courted by Mariia to shield their sons from military service.

²¹² Ibid.

Chapter 5

The Emergence of *Neformaly* and Fragmentation of Public Opinion, 1987 to 1988

People began to learn the truth about Afghanistan only after 1986, because there were so many losses it became impossible to hide. Another factor was when the trafficking of narcotics began. Generally speaking, however, in the Soviet Union there were no protests against the war. Nothing changed after Gorbachev came to power, in this sense.

- Valentina Mel'nikova, Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia.¹

If Mikhail Gorbachev's first year in power was spent combatting the bureaucratic inertia of his predecessors and his second establishing the foundations of a reformative government, it was his third year that saw glasnost give way to a myriad of actions from below. Of particularly strong impact was the rapid spread of unrecognized *neformaly* groups and their gradual legalization between 1987 and 1990. Having proposed the establishment of "a national mass organization of war and labour veterans" at the 27th Party Congress on 25 February 1986, Gorbachev paved the way for the emergence of citizens' groups that "could be instrumental in involving highly experienced people in social and political affairs."² It was at once the official recognition of organizations long deemed criminal by the KGB, and a chance for the last Soviet generation to articulate a public voice. Coupled with the ongoing liberalization of the Soviet press, the rapid emergence of social movements – of which 30,000 registered by December 1987 –

¹ Valentina Mel'nikova, interview with author, August 2014.

² Gorbachev, *Political Report... to the 27th Party Congress*, 66.

brought the Soviet-Afghan War into popular debate.³

The wave of public voices that came with the maturation of glasnost did not, however, amount to an anti-war movement. This was due in part to the competing narratives of the Soviet-Afghan War that emerged in televised and printed media. After Gorbachev's "bleeding wound" speech, the majority of reportage from Afghanistan in the past seven years was suddenly discredited and its authors thrown into question by Soviet citizens. At the same time, dissident voices historically confined to *samizdat* publications joined the debate on democratization of the Soviet Union and its adherence to international human rights; the year of 1987 saw the likes of Andrei Sakharov and a handful of the remaining dissidents in the Soviet Union transition to political careers. It took little time for new competing voices on the merit of the Soviet-Afghan War and the urgency of the 40th Army's withdrawal to come to the forefront of public debate.

On 1 January 1987 at 16:00, five members of the Moscow Trust Group gathered on Pushkin Square with lighted candles in their hands. Following their predecessors' calls for "ten minutes of peace," heads were bowed and a prayer for peace read aloud. In contrast with past gatherings the Trust Group was joined by an American peace activist.⁴ Though small in numbers, the successful collaboration with an American ally in public space was an achievement for the Trust Group and built upon a similar feat five weeks prior. On 22 November 1986, its members had coordinated a meeting between two veterans – one American and one Soviet – of the Second World War in Jurmala, Latvia

³ Galeotti, "The Impact of the Afghan War," 134.

⁴ *Den' za Dnem* 1 (January 1987), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 2.

for a dialogue.⁵ Detailing its feat in an open letter to the Soviet and American governments, the Trust Group argued that “such meetings are necessary for the development of fruitful dialogue between our two countries... as a step towards mutual trust and complete disarmament by the end of the century.” It was at once an embracement of heroes of the past, and a call to refocus on the immediate future. “If there is an outbreak of war between one another it will not be between veterans, but youths,” the authors continued. “But war can be prevented by following up on the meeting of veterans, of young officers and soldiers on active duty, and reservists” from the East and West.⁶ The Moscow Trust Group continued to work within the lines of state policy at this time and pointed to “an exhibition dedicated to sports at the Goodwill Games in Moscow” as a means of reinforcing their agenda.⁷ Among the best works, the Trust Group argued, was “a drawing of a Soviet boy... [with] two soldiers having a friendly conversation [in the background] while seated in the stadium,” which captured “the most critical demand of our time: that the future of our planet belongs to the young, and the better the youth of our countries know and understand each other, the sooner humanity will come to a stable world without weapons and war.”⁸

⁵ “Obrashchenie k glavam pravitelstv SSSR i SShA,” AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 6.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. Held in Moscow on 5 to 20 July 1986, the Goodwill Games were a sporting event conceived of by CNN’s founder, Ted Turner. After his first journey to the Soviet Union in 1984, Turner was dismayed at the distrust between two Cold War rivals. After the Soviet Union announced that it would boycott the Los Angeles Olympics, Turner gathered a team of those in sports media who supported the idea of an alternative event. Turner recalled meeting Mikhail Gorbachev shortly before the Goodwill Games began and “encouraged [him] to be patient with us because we had a military-industrial complex with a vested interest in continuing the arms race... and that he... was in a much better position to make the first moves.” See: Bill Burke and Ted Turner, *Call Me Ted* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2008), 259-60.

⁸ “Obrashchenie k glavam pravitelstv SSSR i SShA,” AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 6.

Reconciliation in Afghanistan and Renewal Among *Neformaly*

Reconciliation in Afghanistan would mean the early return home of our troops... Our boys would stay alive and “death notifications” would no longer bring untold grief to Soviet families. Lastly, we would be able to release additional forces and means which are so needed by our economy. I do not know how much internationalist aid costs our people, but I think the price is not small.

- Evgenii Ambartsumov, 1 February 1987⁹

The Moscow Trust Group’s letter on the importance of dialogue between American and Soviet veterans coincided with Afghan President Mohammed Najibullah’s first proposal of a unilateral cease-fire with the mujahideen, due to begin on 15 January 1987. It marked the beginning of the Policy of National Reconciliation. Penned by advisors from over a dozen Soviet ministries, Party committees, and government offices, it was a reassertion of the policies that Gorbachev urged Karmal to enforce in 1985: an expansion of the PDPA’s social base, dialogue with tribal leaders, gathering support from the clergy, and an easing of left-wing economics.¹⁰ In an effort to distance himself from his predecessors, Najibullah granted a “general amnesty” to “prisoners who have served four or more years of a seven-year sentence, all prisoners sentenced to five years or less, [and] all women in prison.”¹¹ Rather than unflinching opposition toward “counter-revolutionaries,” Najibullah appealed to them for negotiations, including those “based on

⁹ Cited in Bohdan Nahaylo, “More Selective Glasnost’ About Afghanistan,” *Radio Liberty* 167/87, 28 April 1987, 2. Evgenii Ambartsumov was a liberal journalist of *Moskovskie novosti* who favoured the radicalization of perestroika and the acceleration of democratization in the Soviet Union.

¹⁰ Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye*, 100.

¹¹ Philip Taubman, “Afghan Truce Said to Begin, But Kabul Claim is Doubted,” *New York Times*, 16 January 1987, accessed 12 January 2017, www.nytimes.com/1987/01/16/world/afghan-truce-said-to-begin-but-kabul-claim-is-doubted.html.

foreign soil” and “representatives of the past regime” as a step toward a coalition government.¹² Mujahideen supporters’ response was to stage a demonstration in Peshawar, 40 miles from the Afghan border, wherein a crowd of up to 100,000 chanted slogans of “Death to the Russians” and “God is Great!”¹³ The reply of the Peshawar Seven differed only in its formality. A loose-knit alliance of the seven primary mujahideen groups in Afghanistan, they refused to compromise with “the enemies of our religion and homeland” and stated,

How is it possible to stop our armed resistance and join a coalition government in which communist elements and murderers of our people are included? ... Only after the withdrawal of the Russian troops, the overthrow of the atheist regime and the establishment of an Islamic government can the fighting and bloodshed be stopped and peace and security prevail.¹⁴

The Moscow Trust Group seized on President Najibullah’s proposed ceasefire for their first statement that focused purely on the Soviet-Afghan War. The expansion of the Trust Group’s platform was spurred in part by new members. With Nikolai Khramov and Aleksandr Rubchenko having weathered the transition years of 1984 to 1986, the New Year saw the likes of Evgeniia Debrianskaia (b. 1953) and Valeriia Novodvorskaia

¹² Roy Medvedev and Giulietto Chiesa, *Time of Change: An Insider’s View of Russia’s Transformation*, trans. Michael Moore (London: Tauris & Co., 1991), 149.

¹³ “Afghan Rebels Again Reject Truce,” *Los Angeles Times*, 18 January 1987, accessed 12 January 2017, articles.latimes.com/1987-01-18/news/mn-5719_1_afghan-government.

¹⁴ Cited in Nathaniel Sheppard Jr., “Afghan Rebels Can’t Shake Doubts About Soviet Truce,” *Chicago Tribune*, 27 January 1987, accessed 12 January 2017, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1987-01-27/news/8701070949_1_cease-fire-peace-talks-afghan-mujahedeen. Najibullah’s efforts to carry out national reconciliation have since compared to measures carried out by Afghan President Hamid Karzai (2004-14). “In terms of reconciliation initiatives directed by the intelligence domain, the PDPA-era KhAD was significantly more innovative and effective than the contemporary version,” remarked one analyst. “National reconciliation... should be recognized as contributory factors in the regime’s ability to stave off defeat... [and] has left an enduring legacy.” See: Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), 16-20.

(1950-2014) join the organization.¹⁵ Both women were veterans of KGB arrests over the years: Debrianskaia was under frequent monitoring for dabbling in the forbidden fruits of “mysticism” and “Sufism,” while Novodvorskaia’s first arrest dated to 5 December 1969, for her circulation of anti-Soviet poetry and pamphlets criticizing the military intervention in Czechoslovakia one year prior.¹⁶ The two of them went on to found a political party, the Democratic Union, on 8 May 1988, and organize a series of unsanctioned demonstrations in the Soviet Union.¹⁷

Meeting on 13 January 1987 to discuss a draft statement on Najibullah’s peace initiative, the Trust Group issued what was deemed an anti-war manifesto by Western observers the very next day. The authors deemed Najibullah’s proposals a “not only palliative, but... questionable solution” to the conflict, arguing that “time and time again, agreements on mutual ceasefires give way to even more violent clashes, as we saw between rival forces in Lebanon.”¹⁸ With the mujahideen “determined to continue their

¹⁵ Expelled from the Komsomol during her student years, Debrianskaia was first drawn to the dissidents via the Iuzhinskii Circle (Iuzhinskii perelok), a group of bohemians that met at the apartment of underground poet Iurii Mamleev, an “enthusiast of the occult,” to pontificate on forbidden fruits of the Soviet days. Briefly married to fellow Iuzhinskii Circle frequenter Aleksandr Dugin before his rise to fame as a Eurasianist, Debrianskaia became a voice for LGBT rights in the Russian Federation in the 1990s. Regarding the Iuzhinskii Circle, see: Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia’s New Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 151-75; for Debrianskaia’s recollection of her early years, see: Aleksei Alikin, “Vy slovno khodite po lezviiu nozha,” *Ruskaia planeta*, accessed 13 January 2017, rusplt.ru/society/debranskaya-10104.html.

¹⁶ Valeriia Novodvorskaia fell in line with a traditional Western perception of a dissident. She spoke fondly of her collaboration with the Moscow Trust Group in her autobiography, describing the organization as “young, cheerful, toothy and with the profile of a green-pacifist group [which] had already protested against the Afghan War and Soviet conscription.” Novodvorskaia also noted the generation gap between herself and the Trust Group’s founders, writing that “Of course, I was much more Soviet than them. I was anti-Soviet, but closer to a Soviet than the purely European, non-Soviet Position of the Trust Group.” See: Valeriia Novodvorskaia, *Po tu storonu otchianiiia* (Moskva: Izd-vo Novosti, 1993), accessed on 14 January 2017, www.lib.ru/MEMUARY/NOWODWORSKAYA/novodvorskaja.txt.

¹⁷ While defunct since 2014, the Democratic Union has uploaded a documentary history of its career from 1989 to 2010. See: “Arkhiv DS,” accessed 14 January 2017, www.ds.ru/arch.htm.

¹⁸ “Zaiavlenie po povodu mirnoi initsiativy pravitelstva DRA,” *Den’ za Dnem* 1 (January 1987), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 6.

resistance,” no reconciliation would be possible “without eliminating the cornerstone of the Afghan problem – the presence of Soviet troops.”¹⁹ While their call for the Soviet Army’s withdrawal from Afghanistan was applauded by the West, the primary theme of the Trust Group’s statement was ignored: its focus fell not upon the 40th Army’s withdrawal or the displaced refugees of the war, but the fate of the afgantsy. “The 9,000 Soviet soldiers killed in Afghanistan highlights another disturbing aspect of this problem,” the authors began.

We are approaching the dangerous condition in which our “battle-hardened generation” (obstreliannoe pokolenie) returns to society, telling their peers of their horrific experiences. It is well known that American veterans of the Vietnam War experienced psychological and moral difficulties upon returning to normal human relationships at home.

...

The greater the impact on the lives of yesterday’s soldiers, for whom there are damaged concepts of human life... the more confident the enemies of detente, open society, and human rights will become.²⁰

Signed by 20 members of the Trust Group, their statement on the Afghan War and its veterans encapsulated the nature of many grassroots movements that emerged in the final years of the Soviet Union. A fusion of the Moscow Helsinki Group’s priority of universal human rights and a renewed focus on domestic affairs, their statement on the peace initiative in Afghanistan reiterated their founding principle of “authentic and free

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, ll. 6-7.

participation by Soviet citizens in the four-sided dialogue on peace.”²¹ The Trust Group’s statement on Najibullah’s peace initiative entered circulation in their new *samizdat* journal, *Den’ za dnem* (Day by Day), published in an average of 40 copies per issue beginning in January 1987.²² It marked a spike in the Trust Group’s audience and saw a shift in its membership to Leningrad, where a new core of 30 people joined the cause by 1988.²³

It was not only the youth of the Moscow Trust Group who stepped forward to voice their position on the Soviet-Afghan War. The day after the Trust Group issued its statement, *Molod’ Ukrainy* (Youth of Ukraine) published a series of excerpts from a letter penned by S. Berezovska, a mother of two draft-aged sons who resided in Ivano-Frankovsk. Rankled by a glorified eulogy for Valerii Ars’onov, a teenager drafted from the Donbas and posthumously decorated for his service in Afghanistan, Berezovska criticized the journalist, Oleksandr Klymenko, for his article on the matter. Indeed, Klymenko’s words were as contrived as propaganda written 40 years prior:

I don’t know how he fell – with his face to
the earth or to the sky. Perhaps he no
longer saw anything – neither the sun, nor the
parched grass, which by some miracle clung to
the hot rocks. But if he managed to see it,

²¹ Liudmilla Alekseeva and Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, *Nyeformaly: Civil Society in the USSR* (United States: Helsinki Watch Committee, 1990), 49.

²² “Directory of Soviet ‘Informal’ Political Organizations and Samizdat Publications Part I (Moscow and Leningrad),” Box 32, Folder 11, Hedrick Smith Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²³ *Ibid.*

that blade of grass, I know, I'm certain,
that he smiled at it.²⁴

“This is not the first time I’ve read an article about soldiers-internationalists,” Berezovska began. “I see that for you they’ve become like plays or films... But no mother who has sons can read such an article calmly. You always think: this is not the Great Patriotic War, where our people died defending their land....”²⁵ Yet Berezovska’s criticism stopped short of an anti-war stance and instead expressed discomfort with the liberalization of the Soviet media. “You write, or remind us on television, about how people are dying over there,” she complained. “There’s no need to rankle our spirits. All the more so, because only the children of simple workers take part in the battles....”²⁶

It was not only the publication of Berezovska’s criticism that marked a shift in the Soviet press, but the space afforded to the accused journalist to respond. Klymenko’s answer mixed criticism of the status quo with a cautious nod to ideological restraints. Key to his words were an emphasis on the social status of Valerii’s parents. The boy’s father, a coal miner in Donetsk for 28 years, “worked no less than three shifts” on the very day his son was killed, speaking to the economic hardship of the time. Moreover, upon the posthumous awarding of medals to Valerii, “representatives of the local television station came to see the parents [and] asked them not to cry before the camera and say what was necessary for television and not what their emotions dictated.”²⁷ This response was, at once, a guarded critique of restrictions imposed on Soviet journalism,

²⁴ Cited in Bohdan Nahaylo, “Ukrainian Mother Protests Soviet Media Coverage of the War in Afghanistan,” *Radio Liberty RL* 34/87, 22 January 1987, 2.

²⁵ Cited in *ibid.*, 1.

²⁶ Cited in *ibid.*, 2.

²⁷ Cited in *ibid.*

and “the first time a Soviet journalist... publicly apologized for treating the Afghanistan theme in a glib and insensitive manner.”²⁸ Although Klymenko ultimately sided in favour of military intervention in Afghanistan, drawing a parallel to the 2,000 Soviet citizens who fought in the Spanish Civil War, he struck against Berezovska for her objection to increased media coverage. Even without it, she would “still know that some return from there as invalids and that some don’t return at all.” Without such articles as his eulogy for Valerii, Klymenko argued, the afgantsy would be “buried and forgotten.”²⁹

As with *Komsomol'skaia pravda*'s publication of “Duty” three years prior, *Molod' Ukrainy* followed up on the exchange between Berezovska and Klymenko with a compilation of readers' letters in response. Their publication in May 1987 saw Klymenko remark, “Today we no longer remain silent. But... we still haven't learned to speak forthrightly... still look over our shoulder, are frightened, [and] hint at things.”³⁰ The choice of letters from which excerpts were drawn captured a greater range of opinions than those published in response to “Duty” in 1984. Some were critical of the press's depiction of the afgantsy as heroes, with Oleh K. recalling a scene in Donetsk wherein “a group of Afghanistan vets, all wearing paratrooper berets, some with open shirts revealing the initials ‘DRA’ tattooed on their chests, and some wearing their medals, had behaved loudly in public.” “It is scarcely possible to speak of everybody who has served in Afghanistan as though they are persons of an almost ideal morality,” he continued,

²⁸ Ibid, 3.

²⁹ Cited in *ibid*, 3-4.

³⁰ Bohdan Nahaylo, “Ukrainian Mother's Protest Attracts Numerous Letters on the Afghanistan Theme,” *Radio Liberty RL 188/87*, 18 May 1987, 4.

Does service there make them this way? ... A decent person who ends up there will remain so. ... And the claim that those who end up there are the better ones – is clearly far-fetched. As is the idea that notification of being posted to serve in Afghanistan is received with joy.³¹

Other readers echoed Berezovska's claim that it was primarily the working class drafted to serve in Afghanistan, with a writer from Ivano-Frankovsk pointing to two sons of a First Secretary serving their years of conscription in a military museum. Conversely, one father was criticized by others for not having “done something to help his son evade,” while a mother was “accused of being too ‘stingy’ to want to ‘buy’ her son out of having to serve in Afghanistan.”³² Even among those who had come to oppose the war in 1987, there was no consensus on the best way to express one's stance in the public sphere.

The increasing number of letters on the Afghan war was a recurring topic of discussion for the authorities by this time. It provided not only a sample of public opinion on the matter, but a means to “continue to monitor the implementation of the 17 January 1983 decision” granting benefits to the afgangtsy. On 31 March 1987 the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party convened to discuss two articles published in *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, “The Return of a Soldier” (Vernulsia soldat) and “Anemia” (Anemii), which prompted debate. “The Return of a Soldier,” published on 5 August 1986, dealt with the “callous attitude toward the fate of a disabled soldier” shown by bureaucrats in the Petrovskii district of Donetsk.³³ The First Secretary of the Komsomol

³¹ Cited in *ibid*, 3.

³² *Ibid*, 4.

³³ “O l'gotakh voennosluzhashchim, rabotnikam i sluzhashchim, nakhodiashchimsia v sostave Organichennogo kontingenta sovetskikh voisk na territorii Demokraticheskoi Respubliki Afganistan, i ikh

had since been dismissed from his position and another member expelled, with a personal warning issued to its First Secretary of the Communist Party. The invalid and his family received a three-room apartment.³⁴ Military districts, too, were not immune to the renewed focus on corruption and indifference toward veterans' welfare. The 19 March 1987 article of "Anemia" discussed "the administrative service of the medical board" at a military hospital in Kiev. Some of its staff were "held responsible for callous attitudes toward wounded officers" and disciplined accordingly, while Party committees were deployed to military hospitals to "strengthen attention to the wounded."³⁵

Of particularly strong impact on public debate were two articles on the Soviet-Afghan war published in *Pravda*. On 4 April 1987, "A Time of Hardship" (*Vo chas ispytaniia*) offered a compilation of soldiers' profiles and snapshots of their "post-Afghan lives." It began with a sketch of the late Captain Kudinov, a "decorated commander" who survived a series of mujahideen ambushes, two injuries from landmines, the lethal sting of a scorpion, and was storied for having "thrown his body upon a grenade to save the life of another soldier."³⁶ Kudinov's eulogy then gives way to stories from surviving afgantsy that are a marked contrast in terms of patriotism. Iurii Zobnin found work as a policeman upon his return and recalled his first postwar acquaintance with Soviet youth who did not serve. "I was greeted by metalheads," he remarked. Among their words for him were "Well, what about Afghanistan?! One usually goes there with a cheque to buy a few

sem'iam," TsGAOO Ukrainy, f. 1, op. 25, d. 3196, l. 18.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ A. Efimova, S. Fedeorova, and V. Paradin, "V chas ispytaniia," *Pravda*, 4 April 1987, 6.

things and, and if they're lucky, they'll put a medal on their chest...."³⁷ Although Zobnin echoed state rhetoric on the need for Soviet youth to overcome "spiritual emptiness" (*dukhovnaia pustota*), it underscored the alienation that the *afgantsy* faced among their own generation.³⁸ The most resonant of accounts came from Iu. Vetokhin of the Crimea. "I served in Afghanistan for two years," he began. "Eventually I became seriously ill and was dismissed from the Soviet Army. I returned home and was treated, but the callous indifference of the doctor really hit me. Once he even said, 'I didn't send you to Afghanistan.'"³⁹

Vetokhin's citation of the doctor's words resonated in the remaining years of the war and beyond. Indeed, it remains disputed to this day; some *afgantsy* deny that any such phrase was ever uttered by citizens upon their return.⁴⁰ This downplays the significance of the phrase and its impact on public discussion of the war and its veterans. Vetokhin's citation of the phrase provoked such a wave of letters from readers that a follow-up to the article was published four months later. It was preceded, however, by an unofficially sanctioned march of "about 200 young men in blue berets... followed by two or three militia cars" on Nevskii prospect on 3 August 1987.⁴¹ According to a foreign scholar who reported the event, the young veterans "were clearly from Afghanistan," and

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Indeed, in a history of the Soviet-Afghan War endorsed by the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan to mark the 25th anniversary of the war's end, General Lieutenant Viktor Ermakov argued that the "bureaucratic phrase" (*fraza chinovnika*) of "I didn't send you there" "probably wasn't heard a single time by any veterans who fought in Afghanistan." See: Viktor Ermakov, *Afganskii znoi: istoriia voiny i mira glazami komandarma* (Eksmo: Moskva, 2014), 255.

⁴¹ Dennis Kimmage, "Soviet Afghan Veterans Find They Are the Forgotten Soldiers," *New York Times*, 30 August 1987, accessed 16 February 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/30/opinion/1-soviet-afghan-veterans-find-they-are-the-forgotten-soldiers-073687.html>.

Proceeded to Marsovo pole, a park with a memorial to Russians who died during the Civil War... They knelt... for a moment of silence and then laid a wreath... They were increasing public awareness and advocating a memorial. The young veterans marched down Nevskii several times that day, until 1:00 AM.⁴²

“The Russians I spoke with were very curious about the march,” remarked the observer. “Some expected a report in the television news or... *Pravda*. [But] this type of news and reporting is not what glasnost is about.”⁴³

The American observer was only partially correct. While the march of afgantsy on Nevskii prospect indeed went unreported, it was just two days later on 5 August that *Pravda* printed a “forceful and graphic story” of “returning veterans [who] are not provided promptly with... housing, therapy, etc.,” wherein readers criticized the “stingy scraps of unrealism in press coverage of Afghanistan.”⁴⁴ The article in question was entitled “I Didn’t Send You To Afghanistan...” and consisted of a series of letters in reaction to Vetokhin’s story.

Deemed an article that “promoted the policy of glasnost and the need to eliminate the blank pages of history” by some veterans, “I Didn’t Send You To Afghanistan...” sparked harsh criticism of public indifference to the afgantsy.⁴⁵ “I am convinced,” wrote one V. Smirnov of Leningrad, that “such blasphemous words as ‘I didn't send you to Afghanistan’ could be uttered only by one who never served, and whose children will

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Edwin H. Rutkowski, “What Glasnost Means In Soviet Society,” *New York Times*, 13 September 1987, accessed 16 February 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/09/13/opinion/1-what-glasnost-means-in-soviet-society-734987.html>.

⁴⁵ Chervonopiskii and Kostyria, *Istoriografiia voyny v Afganistane*, 9.

never serve or face such danger.”⁴⁶ Others were enraged by what they felt was editors’ censorship. “Why didn’t you publish the family name of the doctor who said ‘I didn’t send you to Afghanistan?’” demanded P. Surko of Donetsk. “I hate people who callously dismiss youth who have experienced the brutality of war. And we must ensure that such bureaucrats are despised by all....”⁴⁷

Key to the article was the account of A. N. Shevchenko, the father of an afghanets killed in action, who penned a 27-page typewritten letter to the editors.⁴⁸ “What about us, the parents who do not see their son for more than half a year and then witness them buried underground in a sealed zinc coffin?” Shevchenko challenged.⁴⁹ Recalling a radio broadcast on 13 November 1986 that reported an offensive carried out by the mujahideen one day prior, Shevchenko’s fears had proven correct: his son Iurii was mortally wounded in that very battle and died in hospital. When on 20 November his son’s body arrived in a sealed coffin, Shevchenko was informed that the parents had 36 hours to prepare for his burial. Despite the short notice, Shevchenko alleged, “1,000 people attended the funeral in the cemetery.” When he appealed to the regional newspaper to publish an obituary for his son, however, Shevchenko was informed that “We do not write on such victims as your son in our newspaper.”⁵⁰ Inscribed upon his son’s grave were simply his dates of birth and death. “There is a glaring indifference toward the fates of these young boys,” Shevchenko lamented. “Why haven’t we spoken out and

⁴⁶ P. Studenikin, “Ia vas v Afganistan ne posylal...,” *Pravda*, 5 August 1987, 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

challenged this?”⁵¹

Shevchenko’s question sparked over 1,000 letters in response in the months that followed, some of which were less than sympathetic. “You shouldn’t have published an article like ‘I Didn’t Send You To Afghanistan...’” wrote M. Plavinskii, himself stationed on the battlefield.

It upset a lot of the guys, who thought, “Is this what it’ll be like for me when I return home?” Let’s face it. No woman is going to have time for an unskilled cripple who will struggle to adapt and hasn’t received an apartment. Aside from a heartbroken mother, nobody will need you.⁵²

Readers’ questions and observations on “I Didn’t Send You To Afghanistan...” were directed to the Head of the Department of Organizational Party Work in Belarussia, who had previously worked in Afghanistan, and the First Deputy of the Belarusian Council of Ministers.⁵³ Their stilted replies were predictable, laden with choice welfare statistics to quell readers’ concerns. However, it was the grieving father’s letter and the accounts of public indifference penned by afgantsy that resonated with readers, prompting discussion among state officials. The Ukrainian Communist Party, for instance, convened on 15 August 1987 to discuss the article ten days after its publication, and agreed that the article “correctly criticized the soulless, formal-bureaucratic attitude shown toward wartime-internationalists and their families.”⁵⁴ Its members went on to single out apparatchiks in Volyn, Dnepropetrovsk, and Crimea as particularly “callous and indifferent” toward

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² A. Simurov and P. Studenikin, “Net v dushe blagodarnosti...,” *Pravda*, 25 November 1987, 6.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ “Redaktsiia gazety *Pravda*,” TsGAOO Ukrainy, f. 1, op. 25, d. 3196, l. 23.

veterans' needs, given to "procrastination" in recognizing "the benefits of military personnel, workers and employees who were part of the OKSVA, and their families."⁵⁵ Ultimately, their response was to advocate "the increased involvement of wartime-internationalists in public political life and educational work with youths, to create an atmosphere of respect for heroes of war and labour."⁵⁶ Despite their adherence to ideological terminology, state and regional authorities were, by this time, committed to a revision of the Party line on the Soviet-Afghan War and stricter enforcement of the afgantsy's benefits.

A Clash of Soviet Dissidents

As the Moscow Trust Group and soldiers' parents challenged the status quo in written words, Andrei Sakharov wasted little time granting his first interview with the Western press since returning from Gor'kii. Speaking to Zora Safir of *Voice of America* on 23 January 1987, approximately seven years to the day of his exile, Sakharov refused to budge from his position on the war. "In 1980, I addressed a letter to the United Nations Security Council," he began. "My position remains the same. ... I will be very happy if a truce is reached... initiated by the Government of Afghanistan. But I think it will only be effective with the withdrawal of Soviet troops."⁵⁷ His stance had expanded to address the flood of Afghan refugees from the war, with Sakharov adding that in a period of transition, "the Soviet Union must provide the right to asylum for those who fear for their

⁵⁵ Ibid, ll. 23-24.

⁵⁶ Ibid, l. 24.

⁵⁷ "Interv'iu korrespondentu radiostantsii 'Golos Ameriki' Zore Safir," Arkhiv Sakharova (AS), f. 1, op. 3, d. 203, l. 7.

safety and seek refuge in the USSR. All those who wish to take refuge in the West, too, should have that right and opportunity.”⁵⁸ Originally an advocate of democratic elections in Afghanistan supervised by international monitors, Sakharov now admitted “dangers exist,” and “it would be very useful to deploy the armed forces of the United Nations to stabilize the situation during the... transition to peace.”⁵⁹

Sakharov’s return to the spotlight as a voice of conscience in the Soviet Union reinvigorated his fellow dissidents who resided overseas to step into political commentary. Their skepticism toward Gorbachev’s reforms was clear in an op-ed published in the *New York Times* on 22 March 1987.⁶⁰ Its signatories included, among others, Vasilii Aksenov (1932-2009), Vladimir Bukovskii (b. 1942), Ernst Neizvestny (1925-2016), and Aleksandr Zinov’ev (1925-2006). The authors questioned whether perestroika and glasnost marked “the end of oppression and misery in the Soviet Union,” or “a short-lived thaw, a tactical retreat before the next offensive, as Lenin put it in 1921?”⁶¹ Dismissing the release of Sakharov as “selective mercy” and the rehabilitation of Boris Pasternak as a “macabre scene of body-snatching,” the authors scoffed at Gorbachev’s “announced desire to end the war in Afghanistan,” arguing:

... If the Kremlin really means to end the war, why does it not simply withdraw its troops? If the purpose of the delay is to leave behind a stable government, why not allow free and fair elections under strict international supervision? Since neither of these solutions seems to satisfy the Kremlin, we are forced to conclude

⁵⁸ Ibid, ll. 7-8.

⁵⁹ Ibid, l. 8.

⁶⁰ Cited in Philip Taubman, “Emigres’ Letter, Printed in Soviet, Draws Harsh Reply from Pravda,” *New York Times*, 26 March 1987, A10.

⁶¹ “Is ‘Glasnost’ a Game of Mirrors?,” *New York Times*, 22 March 1987, 218.

that all it really wants is the appearance of leaving Afghanistan.⁶²

The stubborn unwillingness of the emigre dissidents to discard their naïve solutions to a military conflict, or shed their impressions of a Soviet system as it was in the past, underscored their tunnel vision at the time of Gorbachev's reforms. Western observers' decision to idolize such commentators as prophets of truth hampered our understanding of sociopolitical reform in the Gorbachev era. Homo Sovieticus was, in the eyes of many Cold War scholars and emigres, a being that remained unchanged between 1945 and 1991.⁶³ Unlike those who enjoyed the security of Western shores, however, Andrei Sakharov was willing to compromise and worked within the bounds of Gorbachev's reforms. In what may have been a shock to the dissidents who authored the op-ed, their letter was printed in full in *Moskovskie Novosti* (Moscow News), then circulating in 230,000 copies and six languages.⁶⁴ *Pravda* responded to the dissidents' letter with a rhetorical question: "What moral right do these deserters have to raise the issue of reforms in our country if they themselves abandoned it?"⁶⁵

The Politburo's Debate Continues

Our heads are splitting from this. Of course we can just pull out fast, without thinking of anything and blame the former leadership who started all this. But we cannot act this way. ... A million of our soldiers have [gone] through

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ The term "Homo Sovieticus" was especially popular at the time of the Afghan War, in light of Zinov'ev's work of the same name. See: Aleksandr Zinov'ev, *Homo Sovieticus*, translated by Charles Janson (London: Paladin, 1985).

⁶⁴ Taubman, "Emigres' Letter, Printed in Soviet, Draws Harsh Reply from Pravda," A10.

⁶⁵ Cited in *ibid*.

Afghanistan, and it turns out, all for nothing. The mission is not accomplished, and we will not be able to account for our actions to our people. They will say that we have forgotten about the casualties and we have forgotten about the reputation of this country. There will be bitterness: for what then were those lives lost?

- Mikhail Gorbachev, 23 February 1987⁶⁶

From 5 to 7 January 1987, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze and Head of the International Department of the Central Committee, Anatolii Dobrynin, visited Kabul to confer with President Najibullah on plans for national reconciliation. Among their chief priorities was the transfer of combat roles from Soviet troops to those of the Afghan National Army. It was not unlike the United States' policy of "Vietnamization" in the closing years of the Vietnam War, with Dobrynin remarking to General Secretary of the GDR Erich Honecker two weeks later that, "practically everything is agreed except for the timetable for the withdrawal," and "now is the time for the Afghans to take power into their own hands, not to count on the Soviet troops, looking on as they fight."⁶⁷ Upon Shevardnadze's report of his trip to Kabul, the Politburo did not share Dobrynin's optimism. Gorbachev in particular was dismissive of Najibullah's commitment to reconciliation, remarking, "Each village there is full of such personalities."⁶⁸ Politburo

⁶⁶ "Politburo Session, 23 February, 1987: Notes of Anatoly Chernyaev," translated by Jayson Stoinski and Svetlana Savranskaia, National Security Archive, accessed 15 January 2017, nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB272/Doc%207%201987-02-23%20Politburo%20Session%20About.pdf.

⁶⁷ "Memorandum of Conversation between CPSU Secretary for International Relations Anatoly Dobrynin and Socialist Unity Party (SED) General Secretary Erich Honecker in Berlin," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen im Bundesarchiv, Berlin, translated by David Wolff, accessed 16 January 2016, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117271>.

⁶⁸ "Notes from Politburo Meeting, 21-22 January 1987 (Excerpt)," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow, translated by Gary Goldberg, accessed 16 January 2016,

members were quite conscientious of being the first Soviet leadership to lose a war, with Egor Ligachev arguing that, “If the question is put before the people: ‘is it better to let our people, our soldiers die, or to give every kind of aid?’ I think that every person to the last man will favor the second path. . . . But to leave like the Americans did from Vietnam – no, we still have not come to this, as they say.”⁶⁹ It was a point on which Gorbachev agreed with his conservative rival. In a Politburo meeting one month later, he argued that a swift withdrawal “would be a blow to the authority of the Soviet Union in the national liberation movement.”⁷⁰ Gorbachev’s unwillingness to relinquish the Soviet Union’s role as a guiding power for the developing world was one of the greatest obstacles to bringing an end to the Afghan war. No less of a factor was the Reagan Administration’s unwillingness to cease military aid to the mujahideen, with Gorbachev remarking on 27 February that the United States “has set itself the goal of obstructing a settlement in Afghanistan by any means, [to] present the Soviet Union in a bad light in the eyes of world public opinion.”⁷¹

The Legalization of Grassroots Movements

The social opposition must provide Soviet citizens, particularly young people, with the intellectual material and ideas which correspond with their level in

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117230>.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ “Notes from Politburo Meeting, 23 February 1987 (Excerpt),” History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow, translated by Gary Goldberg, accessed 16 January 2016, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117235>.

⁷¹ “Record of a Conversation of M. S. Gorbachev with Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Giulio Andreotti (Excerpt),” History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow, translated Gary Goldberg, accessed 16 January 2016, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117234>.

society... and with their permanent interests. All this means the opening of a new period in the Soviet dissident movement. ... The time has come to regard the problems of opposition in a spirit of historical responsibility, and to lay in a stock of historical patience to fortify oneself for the task ahead.

- Aleksandr Zinov'ev, 1989⁷²

With the Politburo locked in debate over a timetable for withdrawal, the KGB relegated some of its monitoring of public opinion on the war to authorities in the Komsomol. In 1986 the Komsomol established an Administration for Afghan Questions in an effort to lasso the growing number of *neformaly* afgantsy clubs and “incorporate the[ir] energies... as a potent weapon in the VPV (military-patriotic education) armoury to defeat ‘pacifist tendencies’ in Soviet youth.”⁷³ This coincided with the Komsomol’s approval of a statute on Amateur Associations and Hobby Clubs in May 1986, intended to set up “youth recreation departments” to monitor the conduct of *neformaly*. Upon securing approval and “official sponsorship and premises” from the local Komsomol, such organizations were legalized and availed state facilities for their activities.⁷⁴ Intended to extend state-monitoring of grassroots organizations, the statute quickly backfired. The legitimization and recognition of subcultures was left to the “arbitrary policies of local officials,” which varied according to region. The “antipolitics” (antipolitika) espoused by Soviet youth groups made them harder to judge than

⁷² Aleksandr Zinov'ev, *Katastroika: Legend and Reality of Gorbachevism*, translated by Charles Johnson (London: Claridge Press, 1989), 124.

⁷³ Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War*, 106.

⁷⁴ Jim Riordan, “The Komsomol,” 27.

organizations such as the Moscow Helsinki Group.⁷⁵ Those who chose not to register or were refused approval found themselves “meeting clandestinely.”⁷⁶

In September 1986, four months after the passage of the statute on Amateur Associations and Hobby Clubs, *Sobesednik* (a weekly supplement to *Komsomol'skaia pravda* started in 1984) invited readers to voice their thoughts on the “sensitive issues of Komsomol activity.” Intended to gather suggestions on how to reinvent the Komsomol for a younger generation, the editors were greeted instead by harshly critical letters. Even Igor Cherniak, *Sobesednik's* Head of Communist Youth Education, wrote to decry the “Komsomol leader in his black limousine and three-piece suit who turns up at *subbotniks* (voluntary work days) just to declare about the public-spiritedness of youth.”⁷⁷

As Komsomol leaders struggled to address readers' criticism, the Central Committee of the Communist Party washed its hands of responsibility for any consequences. At its plenary session of January 1987, it stressed that “the success of perestroika depended on increased citizen participation in political life” and that “a loosening of laws restricting ‘anti-Soviet propaganda’” was as the ideal way to encourage citizens to “become active in political life.”⁷⁸ Only a few months later, at the 20th Komsomol Congress on 15 to 19 April 1987, it was proposed that the Komsomol “should become merely a leisure group for young people.”⁷⁹ While the motion did not pass, it spoke to the quandary in which the state organ found itself as the 70th anniversary of the

⁷⁵ Marc Garcelon, *Revolutionary Passage: From Soviet to Post-Soviet Russia, 1985-2000* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 48.

⁷⁶ Jim Riordan, “The Komsomol,” 27.

⁷⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁸ Marc Garcelon, *Revolutionary Passage*, 46-7.

⁷⁹ Jim Riordan, “The Komsomol,” 35.

Revolution drew near. Approximately 38% of Komsomol members at this time were students, oft regarded as passive toward state narratives and ideology. Their growing disbelief in Marxist-Leninist rhetoric was evident when the Higher Komsomol School (Nauchno-informatsionnyi tsentr vysshei komsomolskoi shkoly) released an extensive survey of *neformaly* that year. Drawing from respondents in ten areas of the Soviet Union, it found that “only 5.3% believed restructuring was actually underway in their branches.”⁸⁰ The survey was cited frequently in the press afterward, albeit with differing interpretations. Among its findings were:

- 60% of youth (aged 17 to 30) considered themselves members of *neformaly* groups;
- 56% of such groups confirmed links with other *neformaly*;
- 47% of respondents joined *neformaly* groups due to ‘dissatisfaction with formal social institutions’ and ‘in order to satisfy leisure interests’;
- 40% of *neformaly* were prepared to work with the state establishments, while 33% wished to be recognized by the state;
- 23% of *neformaly* had gone to the Komsomol for help; 13% had received help;
- 6% of respondents felt their opinion could influence the work of the Komsomol.⁸¹

Sobesednik’s Igor Cherniak was by this time a voice for disgruntled youth who demanded change, writing that “the manipulators [are] essentially aliens among their own people who are doubly dangerous: their weapon is phrase-mongering... They make our appeals sound trite and people mistrustful of change... [and] are ever ready to report that

⁸⁰ Ibid, 28.

⁸¹ Cited in Hilary Pilkington, *Russia’s Youth and its Culture: a Nation’s Constructors and Constructed* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 123-24.

perestroika is over.”⁸² The reality that Gorbachev’s Politburo faced was paradoxical: despite the official registration of former *neformaly* en masse, the majority were characterized by their “political weakness” and unwilling to rise to the call of the 19th Party Congress and participate in reform.⁸³

Lost amid the *neformaly* in search of official recognition were the afgantsy. Although Mikhail Gorbachev spoke at the opening day of the 20th Komsomol Congress and “went out of his way to praise the thousands of afgantsy, saying their country was proud of them,” three days later Soviet television aired a frank discussion with an afganets who lamented “No one needs us now.”⁸⁴ The few afgantsy who endeavoured to mobilize into registered non-government organizations in 1987 lacked the solidarity or cohesive platform on which to lobby for benefits. Their membership usually came in small numbers, and their legalization as a collective entity came at a time when citizens struggled with their everyday welfare in light of continued economic decline. Moreover, a significant number of Soviet citizens remained fastened to black and white notions of military patriotism. When in late 1986 *Sobesednik* published a letter signed by youth of Novokuznetsk who expressed solidarity with “the hippies, punks, skinheads and bikers,” and thus with fascism,” it received a written backlash from readers who deemed such youth “traitors to the motherland” who should be “sent to Afghanistan” to learn from true patriots. Such delinquents, one reader insisted, were “not fit to live alongside us.”⁸⁵ Such was the atmosphere as Gorbachev’s second year as General Secretary wound to a close:

⁸² Cited in Riordan, “The Komsomol,” 29.

⁸³ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 134; Garcelon, *Revolutionary Passage*, 48.

⁸⁴ Cited in Nahaylo, “When Ivan Comes Marching Home,” 17.

⁸⁵ Pilkington, *Russia’s Youth and its Culture*, 114.

despite a gradual increase in public opposition to the Soviet-Afghan War and calls for greater support of its veterans, there remained a considerable pillar of belief in the state narrative issued on 25 December 1979.

A Grassroots Movement Challenges the Soviet Army

Among those to take advantage of regional Komsomols' inconsistent enforcement of laws on the legalization of *neformaly* was the Moscow Trust Group. Having gathered Western attention with its criticism of Najibullah's proposed truce on 14 January 1987, the Trust Group's leaders refocused on the question of "alternative civilian service for people who could not serve in the army for reasons of conscience."⁸⁶ In retaliation for its continued advocacy of pacifism and questioning "international duty," three of the Trust Group's conscientious objectors were drafted for military service beginning in late 1984. Among them was Lev Krichevskii, who, despite having lost 97% of vision his right eye, was called up on 24 December 1986.⁸⁷ For two months Krichevskii's whereabouts were unknown. On 7 March 1987, however, the Moscow Trust Group published an update on his fate in *Den' za dnem*, based on a letter he penned one day prior. Initially stationed with a military unit in Golitsyno, 60 kilometres outside of Moscow, Krichevskii "refused to take the oath due to his pacifist beliefs" and was "subjected to systematic cruel beatings and threats" as a result.⁸⁸ The military command stated that he was sworn in on

⁸⁶ Cited in Eduard Koznetsov, "The Independent Peace Movement in the USSR," *In Search of Civil Society: Independent Peace Movements in the Soviet Bloc*, edited by Vladimir Tismaneanu, (New York: Routledge, 1990), 62.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ "Zaiavlenie po povodu uchasti L'va Krichevskogo," *Den' za dnem* (March 1987), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 5.

7 January, a claim that Krichevskii denied, insisting that “for days beforehand, he was kept under the influence of unknown drugs.”⁸⁹ By the time Krichevskii’s letter was received by the Trust Group, he had been relocated to another military camp. As a result, the Trust Group called upon Gorbachev’s reformers to “change the role of the military in perestroika, for it is directly linked to such negative phenomena.” “The introduction of alternative civilian service,” they argued, “would provide a humane way to prevent these tragedies.”⁹⁰

Updates on Krichevskii’s fate were sporadic and unpredictable in the months that followed. On 6 May, he was permitted a brief visit to Moscow from Golitsyno to register his marriage with Rimma Aronovna. Immediately after his return to the military camp, Krichevskii declared that he would undertake “an indefinite hunger strike” and demanded that authorities “recognize his refusal to serve in the military, be it through a trial or his release.”⁹¹ The military’s response was to transfer Krichevskii to another outpost. Only on 19 July did his whereabouts become known: Aronovna was notified by a military hospital outside of Moscow that her husband lay in critical condition, “unconscious for several days” and dependant on an IV. On 25 July she was permitted to visit him for an hour. Conscious by this time, Krichevskii confessed that in the 50 days since his announcement of a hunger strike, his commanders had proven indifferent, leaving him to his malnourished fate. Only after Aronovna witnessed his poor health was Krichevskii’s hunger strike “artificially interrupted” (*iskusstvenno prervana*) by tube feeding.⁹² Rather

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid, ll. 2, 6.

⁹¹ “Polozhenie L’va Krichevskogo” *Den’ za dnem* (July 1987), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 21.

⁹² Ibid, l. 22.

than being dismissed from military service, he was transferred to a hospital in the industrial suburb of Podol'sk, wherein a military-medical commission would decide whether or not he was fit to remain in the army. "If he is found fit," the Trust Group declared, "it means a continuation of military hazing and coercion to serve, or a trial and seven years' imprisonment in a concentration camp." "And Krichevskii's case is not an isolated one," the Group concluded,

It has happened in the past, and this inhuman practice will be repeated in the future. ... Only the introduction of an alternative civilian instead of military service for pacifists can turn things around, and erase a blot that in society that remains in place during this facade of perestroika....⁹³

Having alluded to a common struggle between the afgangtsy and veterans of the Vietnam War in its response to Najibullah's peace treaty, the Trust Group echoed their Western predecessors once more by calling for an end to the draft. This put the organization firmly at odds with the Soviet Army. "We... are opposed to the presence of foreign troops in foreign territories, first of all, the presence of Soviet troops in Afghanistan," its authors stated. Outlining their platform, the Trust Group's objectives included opposition to "the growing militarism of public consciousness" and "the military-patriotic education of youth," and the guarantee of the right to pacifism.⁹⁴ "Genuine detente," the Group concluded, "is possible only from below, through... grassroots peace initiatives."⁹⁵

The state's reaction to the Moscow Trust Group and the surge in newly legalized sociopolitical groups was to redouble KGB infiltration of them. Among the KGB's

⁹³ Ibid, ll. 22-3.

⁹⁴ Cited in Eduard Koznetsov, "The Independent Peace Movement in the USSR," 58.

⁹⁵ Cited in *ibid*, 59.

successes was the wooing of a pacifist group under the name of Friendship and Dialogue. Having splintered with the Trust Group in January 1983 to pursue its own peace initiative, Friendship and Dialogue appealed to Rubchenko et al to merge in 1986 and was rejected. Among its ranks was G. Samoilovich, “one of the oldest activists of the independent peace movement.”⁹⁶ Backed by KGB agents, Samoilovich’s faction founded “a parallel Trust Group” that became a “faux competitor,” and issued a series of statements contrary to the real organization’s principles. Among its claims were that members of the Moscow Trust Group “were not subjected to any persecution in the USSR,” and that any demonstrations in 1987 to mark one year since the Chernobyl catastrophe would be “unconstructive.”⁹⁷ The real Trust Group was so vexed by the imposters that its members contacted Soviet dissident Aleksandr Ginzburg (1936-2002) in Paris to circulate an appeal addressed “To All Those Who Receive the Trust Group’s Documents,” reading:

The KGB has conceived a major new provocation... People have been found who are interested in the splitting of the Group... Writing filthy, slanderous statements and signing them as the Trust Group. They hold parallel seminars. ... Foreign peace activists, who mistakenly end up at these seminars, say that the Trust Group is completely disintegrating. ... Pay attention to the signatures on the Group’s documents. We fear that the KGB could plant documents defaming the Group.⁹⁸

Despite such successful operations, the KGB remained quite paranoid about the rise of “individuals from hostile and anti-social elements who use the process of democratization

⁹⁶ Ibid, 61.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 61-62.

⁹⁸ Cited in *ibid*, 61.

of Soviet society... to inspire political immaturity” among Soviet youths.⁹⁹ In a memorandum dated 16 April 1987, the Ukrainian KGB fretted over those who partook in groups “focused primarily on youths... influenced by the ideas of pacifism... in Kiev.” While only 30 such individuals were detected in the capital city and just over 60 estimated to be in the republic as a whole, the KGB remained on high alert.¹⁰⁰ Pointing to such “independent social forces” as the International Peace Initiative and the Movement for a Nuclear-Free Europe, the Ukrainian KGB singled out “the so-called Trust Group” for having “spread defamatory manuscripts among ‘hippie pacifists’ [and] ‘misguided youths’.”¹⁰¹ The KGB was particularly frustrated with the Trust Group’s overlapping themes of focus with the Soviet Peace Committee (SPK).

As a result, the aging Iurii Zhukov (1908-91) was removed as chairman of the Soviet Peace Committee and replaced with none other than Genrikh Borovik in March 1987, in an effort to renew the SPK’s image and distinguish it from non-state actors such as the Moscow Trust Group. Unofficially removed from journalism in 1980 after he lectured the Central Committee on the realities of the Soviet-Afghan War, Borovik’s appointment to the Soviet Peace Committee should be seen as part of Gorbachev’s efforts to promote a state-sanctioned narrative in the peace movement of the 1980s. Immediately after he became chairman of the Soviet Peace Committee, Genrikh Borovik flew to Kabul to interview President Najibullah. On 18 March, Borovik reported his impressions on a Moscow news program. Speaking for the SPK, he “blamed the continued Soviet occupation of Afghanistan on the U.S. and asked ‘writers, journalists, and scientists,

⁹⁹ “O negativnykh protsessakh sredi chasti sovetskoi molodezhi,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1116, l. 147.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, l. 148.

actors, directors, and religious figures' to 'put pressure' on the U.S. Government to stop the war in Afghanistan."¹⁰²

Dismissed by the Reagan Administration as "a tactical move" aimed to convince Soviet NGOs of "Moscow's genuine commitment to dialogue and flexibility in its relations with Western pacifist groups," Borovik's appointment as chairman of the Soviet Peace Committee was much in line with Gorbachev's cautious approach to reform. The CIA's profile of Borovik was short-sighted, fixated on allegations of his past as a KGB agent "responsible for recruiting foreign journalists" in the 1960s and "close ties" to his brother-in-law Vladimir Kriuchkov, who headed the First Chief Directorate of the KGB responsible for foreign intelligence operations at the time.¹⁰³ Unmentioned in the CIA's evaluation of Genrikh Borovik were his rebuttal of the Central Committee on military intervention in Afghanistan in 1980, his refusal to pen a screenplay for a high-budget propaganda movie on the war, and the growing profile of his son Artem Genrikhovich as a journalist of the glasnost period.

However resistant Borovik may have been to publicly question government orders, he made a significant concession to grassroots movements two months after becoming chairman of the Soviet Peace Committee. Held on 13 May 1987 was an international seminar sponsored by the SPK and held under the name of the Fourth Meeting Dialogue in Moscow.¹⁰⁴ Representatives of peace movements from the United States, Britain, Australia and West Germany "insisted that the official organizers give the

¹⁰² "Moscow and the Peace Movement: The Soviet Committee for the Defense of Peace," *Foreign Affairs Note* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State, May 1987): 3.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰⁴ "Raznye soobshcheniia," *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, accessed 24 January 2017, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/2014/06/22/1987/>.

floor to a Trust Group representative,” leading Borovik to concede ten minutes’ speaking time to one Irina Krivova.¹⁰⁵

A member of the Trust Group for less than six months at this time, Krivova was among those who spurred the organization toward a more assertive platform. Vital to the Trust Group’s future, she argued, was collaboration with and learning from international peace movements. “In our country, people are like children,” she had written in an open letter to international peace activists preceding the Moscow seminar. “Citizens are helpless and infantile when it comes to matters beyond their personal lives.”

However, the time has come when the threat of nuclear war is as real as ever, and politics cannot eliminate it. ... [E]ven the Chernobyl accident has not taught the people that it is impossible to rely on those in power, and that social forces must contribute to the resolution of problems and... a peaceful future.¹⁰⁶

In her ten minutes at the podium, Krivova reiterated the Trust Group’s call for a “four-sided dialogue” between state and citizen representatives from East and West, and criticized Soviet authorities for their obstruction of “access to Western literature, peace movement publications” and travel abroad, hindering the Trust Group’s efforts to establish “bridges for peace.”¹⁰⁷ While the Soviet Peace Committee replied that, “cooperation with the Trust Group is possible” it declined the invitation to meet with Krivova.¹⁰⁸ Their refusal to do so was influenced at least in part by a recent event: on 10 May 1987, shortly before the international seminar took place, 11 people held a protest

¹⁰⁵ Alekseeva and Fitzpatrick, *Nyeformaly: Civil Society in the USSR*, 49.

¹⁰⁶ Irina Krivova, “Pis’mo mirnym aktivistam,” AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 6.

¹⁰⁷ Alekseeva and Fitzpatrick, *Nyeformaly: Civil Society in the USSR*, 49.

¹⁰⁸ “Raznye soobshcheniia,” *USSR News Brief Bulletin* accessed 24 January 2017, <https://kronid.wordpress.com/2014/06/22/1987/>.

on Gogol boulevard in downtown Moscow. Fronted by Nikolai Khramov and Aleksandr Rubchenko, their slogans included “Remember the Helsinki Charter of Human Rights!” “KGB and the Interior Ministry! Protect the rights of citizens! Respect the Constitution! Respect the dignity of the individual!” and “All people are our brothers!”¹⁰⁹ For more than an hour, the 11 demonstrators took questions from passers-by, despite “the presence of agents and police officers in civilian clothes who tried to provoke a fight.”¹¹⁰ It was only when “a few people with military bearings broke away from the crowd, shouting, ‘We spilled our blood for you in Afghanistan!’” that the protesters disbanded, fearing an escalation to violence.¹¹¹ After exiting the area they were attacked by a cast of plainclothes agents and detained for four hours.¹¹² In its report of the violent arrests, the Trust Group stopped short of naming the afgangetsy as complicit in the event. Instead, they erred on the side of caution and stated that those “impersonating veterans of the Afghan war” were in fact “officers at the fifth police station.”¹¹³

The Grapevine Effect

Mama, I’ll say it one more time: do not watch TV. What you are seeing there is really fiction. That’s my one piece of advice. Turn it off for a year. I’ll be back in 11 months – along with the TV. What you see on TV doesn’t apply to me.

- Iurii Islamov, afgangets, 23 October 1987¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Nikolai Khramov and Aleksandr Rubchenko, [untitled], *Den’ za Dnem* 5 (May 1987), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, ll. 2-3.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ I. Ol’shanov, *Ballada o “karavanshchikakh”*: dokumental’naia povest’ (Tashkent: Izdatelstvo, 1990),

The degree to which public speculation and urban myths on the Soviet-Afghan War multiplied with the liberalization of the Soviet press – be it bloated statistics on casualties or rumoured collaboration with the MVD – was captured in polls conducted by Radio Liberty’s Soviet Area Audience and Opinion Research (SAAOR).

Table 2: Public Sources of Information on the Soviet-Afghan War, 1984 to 1987¹¹⁵

Source	1984	1986	1987
Soviet Press	52%	53%	55%
Soviet TV	33%	42%	50%
Word of Mouth	37%	34%	46%
Foreign Radio	40%	45%	45%
Soviet Radio	41%	31%	26%
Agitprop Meetings	38%	21%	15%

Western observers’ immediate reaction to these findings was to point to the decline in Soviet citizens’ belief in state propaganda on the Afghan war expressed at agitprop meetings or in radio broadcasts. This overlooked the marked *increase* in respondents’ attentions to state news outlets. The number of those who named Foreign Radio as a key source of information on Afghanistan, for instance, increased by a modest five percent between 1984 and 1987. Those who turned their attentions to Soviet television broadcasts, however, spiked from 33% to 50% during this time, while those who named

118. Islamov was killed in action eight days after writing this letter.

¹¹⁵ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 115.

the Soviet press as their primary source of information rose from 52% to 55%. Most tellingly, those who relied on “Word of Mouth” for information on the Soviet-Afghan War nearly doubled between 1986 and 1987, increasing from 24% to 46%, matching the number of respondents who named “foreign radio” as their primary source. This spoke to the “tabloid nature” of the Soviet media in the years of glasnost: at once, journalists lacked the “experience and sensitivity” to report on wartime losses, while readers were unprepared to discuss such sensitive issues in the public sphere.¹¹⁶ The increasingly open media coverage on the conflict thus “did not prevent a growth in public disapproval of the war,” nor did it reign in public speculation on its human costs.¹¹⁷

A series of studies by SAAOR first released in 1985 gauged public opinion on the war in Afghanistan based on “Soviet visitors to the West” – i.e. an educated upper class of Party members and residents of East European republics – 10% of whom “refused to take part in the survey.”¹¹⁸ Despite its limitations the study captured some key trends that appeared to hold through the remainder of the war. While 51% of respondents bore “no clear attitude” toward the Soviet-Afghan War in 1984, this shifted significantly toward “disapproval” by 1987. Yet the 25% who *did* approve of the war in Afghanistan “held steady” in their stance over this three year period.¹¹⁹ This spoke to the resilience of the state narrative on “international duty” and defending Soviet borders against the “Islamic factor.”

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 117.

¹¹⁷ Ellen Jones, “Social Change and Civil-Military Relations,” *Soldiers and the Soviet State*, 247.

¹¹⁸ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 170.

¹¹⁹ R. Eugene Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener An Empirical Assessment of Radio Liberty and Western Broadcasting to the USSR during the Cold War* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2007), 47.

Table 3: Public Opinion on the Soviet-Afghan War, 1984 to 1987¹²⁰

Year	Strong Approval	Approval	No Clear Attitude	Disapproval	Strong Disapproval
1984	14%	11%	51%	16%	9%
1986	13%	19%	34%	19%	14%
1987	4%	20%	31%	28%	17%

Moreover, the accumulating casualties and the liberalization of the Soviet media failed to even halve the number of respondents with “no clear attitude” on the war between 1984 and 1987. This spoke to citizens’ greater concern with national and domestic affairs than the question of the Soviet-Afghan War at the time, and reinforced the class structure of anti-war oppositionists. Rather than the working class from which a majority of the afgangtsy were drafted, it was members of the Communist Party who showed a significant change of heart: while in 1984 only 8% of Party members disapproved of the war, this number spiked to 37% by 1987.¹²¹ For the average Ivan Denisovich (provided he had no sons in Afghanistan) however, the conflict did not feature prominently in their concerns. It was not until the conclusion of the Soviet-Afghan War and its sombre depiction in cultural fora that citizens began to come to terms with its human costs.

Memorialization of the Afgantsy Begins

Vladislav Tamarov was a 19-year-old student at the Leningrad Pedagogical

¹²⁰ Cited in Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 203.

¹²¹ Parta, *Discovering the Hidden Listener*, 51.

Institute when he was drafted to serve in Afghanistan in 1984. Cast in the perilous role of a minesweeper, he spent 20 months on the ground without injury, during which time a monument was built at his military base. Erected in 1985 and inscribed in Russian, Pashtun, and Dari alike, it memorialized only “wartime-internationalists,” and bore no soldiers’ names. “We felt differently about it,” recalled Tamarov, six years after demobilization.

For us it was a giant gravestone... a symbol of revenge. We took revenge on *them* for our friends... *They* took revenge on us for their brothers... And the longer we were here, the more vicious this circle became. And *that* was the true symbolism of this monument.¹²²

The world to which Tamarov returned was markedly different from that which he had known. At the time he was recruited, Tamarov had seen the Komsomol make little acknowledgment of the war, save for the rare lionization of those killed in action. By the time he returned in 1986, the Komsomol’s Administration for Afghan Questions was targeting afgantsy clubs as “a potent weapon in Military-Patriotic Education,” to defeat “pacifist tendencies in Soviet youth.”¹²³ Among the first tactics that the Komsomol employed to do so was building monuments to an ongoing war.

The very first monument to the Soviet-Afghan War to be erected on Soviet soil was inaugurated on 9 May 1987 in the Dzerzhinsk region of Sverdlovsk. Behind its construction was the local Komsomol, which organized a competition for its design. Fundraising came from a variety of sources, the most generous donors being

¹²² Tamarov, *Afghanistan: a Russian Soldier’s Story*, 110-11. Italics in original.

¹²³ Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War*, 106.

Sverdlovsk's chief car manufacturing plant, Komsomol members, and the regional police department. It proved to be a departure from Soviet monuments of past: a tilted star one half-meter high, it was "lined with red granite representing soldiers' blood" and bore the names of 19 locals who had perished.¹²⁴ The Afghan war itself went unnamed; instead, a desert camouflage hat and a black tulip were centered in front of the star.

From One Borovik to Another

Artem first arrived in Afghanistan in 1986. ... Sometimes he made it tough for us: with stubborn determination, he would charge into the most dangerous of places. The other generals and I... came up with reasons not to send Artem far from Kabul. But he'd out-craft us... and go deep into Afghanistan... soar into the sky onboard an aircraft, and enter the mountains with the paratroopers.

- Colonel General Boris Gromov¹²⁵

At the same time as the monument in Sverdlovsk was unveiled, Artem Borovik (1960-2000) ventured into the public criticism of the Afghan war that his father stopped short of putting to paper. The son of a well-regarded journalist and screenwriter, Artem himself was never called upon to serve in Afghanistan and stated plainly in a Western interview that his friends "studied in Europe... were happily living in Paris... [or] working in Washington," as knowledge of the war spread among the Soviet public.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ "Nizhnii Tagil," Rossiiskii soiuz veteranov Afganistana - Sverdlovskaiia oblast', accessed 13 May 2016, www.rsva-ural.ru/library/memory.php?id=493.

¹²⁵ As cited in "Artem Borovik: sovershenno sekretno TV," accessed 25 February 2017, sovsekretno.tv/артем-боровик/.

¹²⁶ "Interview with Artem Borovik, 9 June 1988," Box 98, Folder 7, Hedrick Smith Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Following his father's steps, he graduated from the Faculty of Journalism at Moscow State University in 1982 and appealed to his employers at *Sovetskaia Rossiia* to report from Kabul. Rejected for his inexperience, Borovik asked instead to report from Nicaragua and was sent to Managua three weeks later.

It was Artem Borovik's coverage of the Nicaraguan Revolution that drew the attention of one Vitalii Korotich (b. 1936). A Party member of 20 years and secretary of the board of the Union of Soviet Writers since 1981, Korotich was appointed editor-in-chief of *Ogonek* in May 1986. Under his leadership, the bi-weekly journal became a progressive voice of support for Gorbachev's reforms. A political chameleon, Korotich had received the State Prize of the USSR in 1985 for his novel *The Face of Hate* (Litso nenvisti), wherein a Russian immigrant despairs of living conditions in the United States; that same year, Korotich served as a member of a Soviet peace delegation and joined retired Canadian Major General Leonard Johnson in Winnipeg, Manitoba to praise the provincial government for declaring its land a "nuclear weapons free zone."¹²⁷ In 1987 Korotich contacted Artem Borovik and invited him to join the fulltime staff of *Ogonek*, stating plainly that, "I'll send you to Afghanistan for the period that you want... [and] will call the Chief of General Staff and ask him about what you would like to do there."¹²⁸ Borovik had by this time travelled to Afghanistan for *Sovetskaia Rossiia* in June 1986 with a group of reporters, only to have his articles soundly rejected. Having touched upon the "death[s] of soldiers and officers" and the grim conditions of a Kabul

¹²⁷ "Disparate Trio Joins to Combat Nuclear Weapons," *The Saturday Windsor Star*, 8 June 1985, F15.

¹²⁸ "Interview with Artem Borovik, 9 June 1988," Box 98, Folder 7, Hedrick Smith Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

hospital, Borovik was scorned for having detailed “too much blood” in his reports.¹²⁹ His only article to be published in the journal was “Life on a MiG” (MiG v zhizni), an observational report aboard a fighter plane.¹³⁰ Disgruntled with state censorship at a time of Gorbachevian slogans, Borovik agreed to Korotich’s invitation to join *Ogonek*. Just as promised, Korotich contacted Chief of the General Staff, Marshal Sergei Akhromeev and requested that Borovik be permitted to “participate in forward action... with special forces and the infantry.”¹³¹

Borovik’s debut as a critical voice of the Soviet-Afghan War came in the form of three articles published in summer 1987 under the title of “We’ll Meet at the Three Cranes” (Vstretimsia u trekh zhuravlei). In stark contrast to the patriotic eulogies of years gone by, Borovik drew from the diary of a deceased pilot who “described how his flight suit had smelled for two days of charred flesh, from the corpses of three comrades he had recovered from the burned ruins of their downed helicopter.”¹³² *Ogonek*, despite its pro-glasnost orientation, demanded a plethora of revisions, leading to a three-month struggle with the censors. A series of attacking articles and pre-emptive, scathing reviews were published in the military press during this time, while Afghan President Najibullah condemned the man. The Soviet Union of Writers, meanwhile, rejected Borovik’s membership in light of his written words.¹³³ His reaction was to appeal to General Valentin Varennikov and report that the censors balked at an honest account of wartime

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Sergei Kniaz’kov, “Pamiati Artema Borovika,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, 28 April 2004, accessed 26 February 2017, http://old.redstar.ru/2004/04/28_04/4_05.html. The Russian title of the article, “MiG v zhizni,” is a play on words, with “mig” translating as either a MiG fighter aircraft, or a moment in time.

¹³¹ “Interview with Artem Borovik, 9 June 1988,” Box 98, Folder 7, Hedrick Smith Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹³² Hedrick Smith, *The New Russians* (New York: Random House, 1990), 103n5.

¹³³ Borovik, *The Hidden War*, 280.

conditions “because they think you guys are staging a ballet in Afghanistan.”¹³⁴ According to Borovik, General Varennikov was furious, and ordered that the military grant Borovik its approval.¹³⁵ The publication of his articles carried immediate consequences on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. To Western observers, it was a concession to freedom of the press that left a greater impression than Gorbachev’s many decrees, with American journalists comparing Borovik’s reports from Afghanistan to Michael Herr’s *Dispatches* from Vietnam.¹³⁶ In the Soviet Union, meanwhile, Borovik’s articles “were met with little enthusiasm by officials” but were openly endorsed by high-ranking military personnel such as Colonel General Gromov, whose official statement of “All that Artem Borovik writes is true!” was echoed by General Varennikov and Soviet Ambassador to Afghanistan, Iulii Vorontsov.¹³⁷ After Artem Borovik returned from Afghanistan in 1987, he was awarded with a medal for Service in Battle from the Ministry of Defence. It was a stark contrast to the Central Committee’s rejection of Genrikh Borovik’s report after six months in Afghanistan, his father remarking that “it would have been impossible to protect Artem, had glasnost not unfolded.”¹³⁸

***Dedovshchina* as a Debate in the Public Sphere**

If there were no *dedovshchina* rules, then the army would not be at the level it should be at. ... I was young, but I have also been a *ded* and I don’t claim to have

¹³⁴ Cited in Smith, *The New Russians*, 103.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Bill Keller, “Home From Afghanistan; Russia’s Divisive War,” *New York Times*, 14 February 1988, accessed 16 February 2017, www.nytimes.com/1988/02/14/magazine/home-from-afghanistan-russia-s-divisive-war.html?pagewanted=2.

¹³⁷ Sergei Kniaz’kov, “Pamiati Artema Borovika,” *Krasnaia zvezda*, 28 April 2004, accessed 26 February 2017, http://old.redstar.ru/2004/04/28_04/4_05.html.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

been a saint. If I had to wash floors or go on a night patrol instead of someone else, I did just that. Sometimes there are real cases... One night in Turkmenistan they beat me for two hours... Like a child, I was tender... “Don’t tell anyone!” one of them said. I wanted to kill him, but there were also good rules....

- Petru, afganets¹³⁹

It was not only journalists’ reports from the battlefield that stirred unease within the Soviet Army. As Borovik reported from Afghanistan, citizens were exposed to a debate on *dedovshchina* (military hazing) of young recruits in military barracks. Key to the debate was the question of whether *dedovshchina* stemmed from Russian or uniquely Soviet roots. Those who argue that *dedovshchina* has a continuity with the Tsarist era argue that the Red Army reverted to its past incarnation after the Civil War, with officers embracing an Imperial Russian thinking of *edinonachalie*, “the method by which some commanders adopted authoritarian measures and attitudes in dealing with troops.”¹⁴⁰ As a result, military careerists became “divorced from their humble origins,” causing “a chasm in the relationship with their enlisted men.”¹⁴¹ “A general of the Imperial Army of 1895” argued one scholar, “if transported into... 1985, would have felt right at home with his elevated social status.”¹⁴²

The other side of the argument claims that *dedovshchina* was a phenomenon unique to the Soviet Army. Military officers in 1918 were markedly different than their

¹³⁹ Petru Flora and Vladimir Popescu, “Stiau toate ascunzisirile, taote celea,” in *Războiul Sovieto-Afghan (1979-1989)*, edited by Ion Xenofontov (Iași: Lumen, 2011), 316.

¹⁴⁰ Brenda J. Vallance, “Neotraditionalism and the Military: the Challenge of Reform in Communist Systems,” (PhD diss., UCLA, 1982), 86.

¹⁴¹ Roger R. Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience: a History of the Soviet Army, 1917 - 1991* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.

¹⁴² Reese, *Red Commanders*, 10.

predecessors, for “more than 95%” held membership in the Communist Party.¹⁴³ This led to “a greater centralization and micro-management of the armed forces from above” until 1941.¹⁴⁴ The Soviet Army that emerged from the Great Patriotic War, however, marked an end to this founding principle. Swamped with wartime trainees, advisors, and bureaucrats, an army corps drawn overwhelmingly from the peasantry presided over better-educated conscripts during the Cold War. The gap in morals, cultural values, and long-term ambitions led to a Soviet Army that bore little resemblance to its predecessor. This was reinforced by passage of the Soviet Law on Military Service in 1967.

Intended to restructure Soviet forces for the Cold War, the 1967 law aimed to produce a body of trained reserves for swift mobilization in the case of a nuclear war. As such, conscription was reduced from three years to two (four to three in the case of the navy), with revised high school education to substitute for basic training. The drafting age, meanwhile, was reduced from 19 to 18 years of age. The legislation exemplified the gap between military leaders and Party apparatchiks that emerged during Brezhnev’s tenure. During the formulation of the 1967 Law On Military Service, the General Staff lobbied for *longer* terms of conscription and the elimination of deferrals for college students. The law that was instituted possessed neither. Further, those enrolled in postsecondary education “could defer their conscription until age 20,” a key means of avoiding military service during the Soviet-Afghan War.¹⁴⁵

As the bureaucratization of the Soviet Army increased alongside draft-dodging rates, sergeants continued to leave senior conscripts in charge of the barracks. As a result,

¹⁴³ Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 36.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 37.

¹⁴⁵ Reese, *Red Commanders*, 196.

dedovshchina became an unwritten hierarchical code of conduct. It brought with it its own linguistic terminology and ranks, broken down according to seniority.

Table 4: Military slang according to time of service

0 – 6 months	<i>dukhi</i> (ghosts), <i>tela</i> (bodies), <i>salagi</i> (little fish), <i>karasia</i> (carp), <i>synok</i> (sonny), <i>chmo</i> (breast-feeder)
6 – 12 months	<i>skvortsy</i> (starlings), <i>shnurki</i> (shoestrings), <i>chainiki</i> (teapots), <i>slon</i> (bishop)
12 – 18 months	<i>kandidaty</i> (candidates), <i>limony</i> (lemons), <i>cherpaki</i> (buckets)
18 – 24 months	<i>stariki</i> (old men)
24+ months	<i>ded</i> or <i>diadia</i> (grandfather), <i>dembel</i> (about to be demobilized), <i>grazhdanin</i> (civilians who wear military uniforms)

Following the 1967 reforms, new recruits were drafted every six months, finding themselves at the bottom of the totem pole in the barracks. The degree of abuse that *dedovshchina* could entail varied depending largely upon the commander. Some *dukhi* could be obligated to perform menial tasks or personal services for *stariki*, such as collecting money to gift to a *dembel* upon their return home.¹⁴⁶ Those less fortunate could be subjected to physical abuse, food deprivation, and sadistic punishment. State authorities were well aware of *dedovshchina* and the increasing public knowledge of it, and began to take action after 1985 when approximately 4,000 soldiers were convicted of violent hazing in the barracks.¹⁴⁷ Key to the onset of public debate on the topic was the arrest of Arturas Sakalauskas in Leningrad in February 1987. Charged with the murder of three higher-ranking soldiers and subsequent desertion, Sakalauskas' trial gathered

¹⁴⁶ Sergei Chervonopiskii, interview with author, July 2015.

¹⁴⁷ Reese, *The Soviet Military Experience*, 151.

considerable coverage in the Soviet media, which reported a different history of events: in fact, Sakalauskas was said to have been “continuously tortured and raped by three other soldiers” and “shot them in self-defence.”¹⁴⁸ Despite reporters’ documentation of the trial, Sakalauskas was sent to a mental hospital. Such clashes in civil-military relations set the stage for the publication of a short story that brought *dedovshchina* to the mainstream press.

***Dedovshchina* Enters Popular Literature**

There were such writers as Prokhanov and then there were others who wrote about what was being done in the army. And what they said was not true. “100 Days Before the Order” was one such example... It was written in a very rough (gruboi) form. But for some military units, it became something of a script on “how one should not conduct themselves.”

- Vladimir, afganets¹⁴⁹

It was soon after Sakalauskas’ case wound to a close that Iurii Poliakov (b. 1954) attended the 20th Congress of the Komsomol on 15 April 1987. A Moscow-based author and screenwriter, Poliakov had pushed for the publication of a short story entitled “100 Days Until the Order” (Sto dnei do prikaza) since 1980.¹⁵⁰ Based in part on what he saw during his two years of military service in the German Democratic Republic, it tells the

¹⁴⁸ Elena Zdravomyslova, “Soldiers’ Mothers Fighting the Military Patriarchy: Re-invention of Responsible Activist Motherhood for Human Rights’ Struggle,” *Gender Orders Unbound? Globalization, Restructuring and Reciprocity*, eds. Barbara Fersch, Ilse Lenz, and Charlotte Ullrich (Pladen and Farmington Hills: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2007), 210.

¹⁴⁹ Vladimir, interview with author, May 2015.

¹⁵⁰ Iurii Poliakov, “100 dnei do prikaza,” accessed 2 February 2017, lit.lib.ru/d/dedovshchina/polyakov--100days.shtml.

story of an intelligent city boy with 100 days left until his discharge from the army. During this time, Elin, the young recruit, deserts the military base in light of continued abuse from Corporal Zubov. The narrator's unit is sent to search for him, and ultimately discovers that he has committed suicide. Particularly controversial was Poliakov's unflattering depiction of higher-ranking personnel, ranging from the "sadistic Corporal Zubov" to "the often drunk battery commander" to "the man everyone despises, the battalion political officer Osokin."¹⁵¹ Daily life in the barracks was cast as that of "a last refuge of Soviet mythology" on "the paradise island in the middle of gloom."¹⁵²

To the chagrin of many delegates at the 20th Congress of the Komsomol, Poliakov attended a panel discussing the future of military-patriotic education for Soviet youth and took to the floor, where he argued that the Main Political Directorate of the Soviet Army and Navy's opposition to his story's publication was a symptom of *dedovshchina*. Poliakov faced a stern rebuttal from one Igor Chmurov in response. A Hero of the Soviet Union born to a working class family in Smolensk, Chmurov left high school after the tenth grade to work as a machinist at a furniture plant and was drafted at the age of 18 to serve in Afghanistan. Faced with a man twelve years his elder who never saw combat, Chmurov insisted that *dedovshchina* was "not typical" in the Soviet Army, and "did not exist at all" in Afghanistan.¹⁵³ Poliakov refused to withdraw his argument and gained a degree of support from participants, but the debate clips aired on television sided entirely with Chmurov. With the publication of "100 Days..." still in limbo, military journals

¹⁵¹ Sergei Zamascikov, "Insiders' Views of the Soviet Army," *Problems of Communism* (May-Aug 1988): 115.

¹⁵² Cited in *ibid*, 116.

¹⁵³ Cited in *ibid*, 114.

published a series of letters from “angry readers,” with one editorial deeming the story “a flight of imagination of a mama’s boy.”¹⁵⁴

The eventual publication of Poliakov’s story in *Iunost*’ captured the long-standing overlap between Russian literature and politics. On 28 May 1987 the teenaged delinquent Mathias Rust of the Federal Republic of Germany piloted a Cessna aircraft from Helsinki to Moscow, landing just outside of Red Square. Rust’s self-proclaimed “peace mission from Germany” was an embarrassment to the Soviet military that provided an opportune moment for reformers: two days later, Marshal Sokolov was dismissed as Minister of Defence and chief editor of *Iunost*’ Andrei Dement’ev contacted the military censors to inform them that Poliakov’s story would be published. When the censors protested “But we haven’t approved him,” Dement’ev answered, “It would have been better if you hadn’t approved Rust!”¹⁵⁵

Dement’ev’s instincts proved to be correct, for “100 Days Until the Order” was voted the third most popular story of 1987.¹⁵⁶ The positive reception of Poliakov’s story, like Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* 25 years prior, brought a topic that was once unacceptable into the public sphere for debate. When the Central Committee of the Komsomol congregated in Moscow on 19 November, many considered the publication of “100 Days...” to be “a great achievement.” Among the dissenting voices however, was Vladimir Frunze, the lone afghanets in attendance. “I told them to their faces, ‘You have made a mistake. You are awful people for having published such a

¹⁵⁴ Cited in *ibid*, 116.

¹⁵⁵ As cited in “<Knizhnaia kolleksiia>, tom shestnadsatyi: Iurii Poliakov, <Rossiia v otkate>,” *Argumenty i fakty*, 19 August 2009, accessed 29 January 2017, www.aif.ru/culture/person/13007.

¹⁵⁶ Zamascikov, “Insiders’ Views of the Soviet Army,” 114.

story. You portray everyone as disobeying orders, and some readers will strongly object to this book.’ Everyone was taken aback,” he recalled many years later.¹⁵⁷ Like many who challenged the portrayal of *dedovshchina* as problem unique to the military, Frunze argued, “How many violations of the law are there within the army? And how many in civilian life? Military discipline is better observed.”

Any soldier or officer, regardless of their rank, is obliged to abide by the charter of the military... Yes, there were occasions where some of the younger guys were hurt because they refused to do the same thing as a soldier who had served longer. ... In the late 1980s they tried to spread information about *dedovshchina* in the army. But for every one man broken in the army, in civilian life there are 100 such people. And civilian life should be held to the same accountability.¹⁵⁸

Despite the military’s criticism of “100 Days...,” Poliakov’s momentum as a voice of glasnost carried into the new year, when he authored a screenplay for 1988’s *The Incident on a Regional Scale* (Ch. P. raionnogo masshtaba). The tale of Nikolai, a high-ranking Komsomol secretary who oversees “the dishonest initiation of inarticulate, alienated young people” and enjoys a certain decadence behind closed doors, his regalia downspiral into unforeseen divorce after the ransack of his Komsomol office by delinquent youths.¹⁵⁹ Echoing *Komsomol’skaia pravda*’s documentation of state indifference to wartime invalids, one hooligan steals Nikolai’s Komsomol flag and uses it as decor for “his humble one-room abode, in which he lives in substandard conditions together with

¹⁵⁷ Vladimir, interview with author, May 2015.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Michael Brashinsky and Andrew Horton, *The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 59.

his mother and an invalid grandfather.”¹⁶⁰ Having stirred the ire of the military with “100 Days Until the Order,” Poliakov now found his work boycotted by the Komsomol.¹⁶¹

The Komsomol as a Counterweight to Delinquents

In the army, there are beatings and even looting, robbery and other cases of violations observed in our troops in Afghanistan... I’m afraid that there is no proper order... Cases of addiction are being seen. ... Of course this reflects our common shortcomings. But discipline should be higher in the army. ... We have been at war in Afghanistan for eight years. ... Why are 100,000 of our troops demonstrating such helplessness in this country?

- Eduard Shevardnadze, 30 May 1987¹⁶²

The Komsomol sought to reign in the Poliakovs and Boroviks who dared venture beyond the Party line in their characterization of the Soviet Army by holding an increasing number of congregations to woo “wartime-internationalists” to their side. On 28 August 1987 in Kirovograd, Ukraine, 1,800 afgangtsy attended a meeting for a “frank discussion” of their “transition to the reserves,” their rights and benefits, and their “studies at colleges and universities.”¹⁶³ Staffed by local and regional members of the Communist Party and People’s Deputies, Komsomol activists, the ritualistic awarding of medals and laying of flowers gave way to “discussions that revealed a number of

¹⁶⁰ Anna Lawton, *Kinoglasnost: Soviet Cinema in Our Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 190.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁶² “Zasedanie politbiuro TsK KPSS 30 maia 1987 goda,” Box 25, Reel 17, Folder 5, Dmitrii Volkogonov Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶³ “O proshedshikh v gorkomakh i raikomakh partii Kirovogradskoi oblasti vstrechakh s voenam zapasa, vopolniavshimi internatsionalnyi dolg v DRA,” TsGAOO Ukrainy, f.1, op. 25, d. 3196, l. 67.

unresolved problems.”¹⁶⁴ More than 250 of the afgantsy who attended the meeting – several of whom were invalids – were entitled to receive priority housing from the state, yet remained in a queue without any sign of relief. Others complained that “not enough is being done to memorialize the dead,” while “soldiers are not receiving the help and support they need to overcome difficulties immediately after returning home, leading some of them to a life of crime.”¹⁶⁵ Key to the meeting were officials’ efforts to “familiarize participants with relevant documents” and offer “necessary explanations and advice” with regard to the unpublished decree of 17 January 1983. Indeed, even “some of the leaders in the field who saw combat in Afghanistan” did not know of “the legal benefits available to them,” a problem that “sometimes led to conflict.”¹⁶⁶ The Ukrainian Communist Party, upon reviewing the data gathered from the 1,800 “wartime-internationalists” in attendance, underscored the need for government organs to “implement necessary measures to further improve relations with wartime-internationalists and the families of those killed, and to ensure the full implementation of the law guaranteeing their rights and benefits.”¹⁶⁷

The congregation of 1,800 afgantsy in Kirovograd was, perhaps, a blueprint for the event that followed ten weeks later. Arguably the peak of the Komsomol’s efforts to reign in the afgantsy came in the form of a ten day conference held in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, on 10 to 20 November 1987. Hailed as the first ever All-Union Gathering of Young Reserve Soldiers (*Vsesoiuznyi sbor molodykh voinov zapasa*), 2,000 afgantsy

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, l. 68.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, l. 69.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, l. 70.

clad in battle fatigues were flown in from across the Soviet Union to mark “20 years of patriotic battalion commanders” since the passage of the 1967 Law On Military Service.¹⁶⁸ A carefully orchestrated event, foreign correspondents were greeted by “afgantsy in three-piece suits” who spoke of “the deep love of the Afghan people for the Soviet Union” and “fraternal Soviet soldiers... teaching Afghans how to read.”¹⁶⁹ Soldiers’ activities ranged from sharpshooting matches, to workshops on military tactics, to jeep driving contests, as Komsomol officials wooed the afgantsy with promises of financial assistance. The conference culminated in the creation of a 50-member council of military reservists, each of whom held membership in the Komsomol or the Communist Party. Their first statement issued after the conference showed the Komsomol to be a stubborn monolith in decay. Absent from its words were any mention of invalids, veterans’ welfare, or memorialization of the dead. It was a marked contrast to the Kirovograd Komsomol’s consultation with afgantsy three months prior, with its focus on problems of reintegration and non-enforcement of the 1983 legislation. Instead, the 50-member council of reservists criticized the “extremely slow pace of perestroika” in the military-patriotic education of Soviet youths and declared that its members “realize their personal responsibility” to aid the Komsomol by persuading newly formed clubs to be in “close contact” and collaboration with military units.¹⁷⁰ Plans were announced for memorials dedicated to wartime-internationalists to be erected in Moscow and Tashkent. While the regional Komsomol in the Dzerzhinsk region of Sverdlovsk had erected a

¹⁶⁸ V. Verstakov, “Dvadtsatiletnie kombaty,” *Pravda*, 9 November 1987, 12.

¹⁶⁹ Bill Keller, “Home From Afghanistan: Russia’s Divisive War,” *New York Times*, 14 February 1988, accessed 7 February 2017, www.nytimes.com/1988/02/14/magazine/home-from-afghanistan-russia-s-divisive-war.html.

¹⁷⁰ “V odnom riadu so vsem narodom,” *Pravda*, 22 November 1987, 2.

monument to the Soviet-Afghan War on 9 May, the 50-member council assembled at Ashgabat bristled at the thought: rather than commemorate those who lost their lives in Afghanistan the memorials would honour those who “fought in the Spanish Civil War, aided the Cuban Revolution, or helped quash the 1968 ‘Prague Spring’.”¹⁷¹ As the Soviet-Afghan War neared its eighth year in duration, Komsomol officials tasked with overseeing events in Ashgabat were unwilling to deviate from the old Party line.

Dismissed by Western observers for its rehash of ideological jargon, the gathering in Ashgabat nonetheless marked a turning point in the mobilization of Soviet veterans’ organizations. State officials admitted that “despite the tremendous preparatory work,” it would be “difficult and to some extent unpredictable” to enforce discipline on 2,000 attendees. So much so that on the day before the All-Union Gathering of Young Reserve Soldiers took place, A. Pivovar, one of its organizers, warned on the radio that “discipline would be rigidly enforced, with the slightest infraction punishable by expulsion from Ashgabat.”¹⁷² Reporters noted that there were a number of “unplanned, difficult meetings” between the afgangtsy “on the central streets of Ashgabat,” wherein they “discussed the burning question: ‘Do we need a patriotic movement of young reservists that is centralized and bears an All-Union charter?’”¹⁷³ In fact it *was* a key question for those in attendance: to work within the old boundaries of the Komsomol, or to venture into the Great Unknown as *neformaly* were given the chance to register with the state.

Further, while the attendees profiled in the Soviet press echoed the Party line on military-patriotic education, some of their comments spoke to the broader problems that

¹⁷¹ Bill Keller, “Home From Afghanistan: Russia’s Divisive War.”

¹⁷² V. Verstakov, “Dvadtsatiletnie kombaty,” *Pravda*, 9 November 1987, 12.

¹⁷³ V. Verstakov and M. Volkov, “Ostaiutsia v stroiu,” *Pravda*, 14 November 1987, 6.

faced newly emerging clubs. Iurii Smirnov of Krasnogorsk told of his efforts to form a club under the name of Searcher (Iskatel') that focused on the historicization of the Great Patriotic War and the Napoleonic War. Their activities ranged from archival research to excursions to Borodino, where club members – more than half of whom were afgantsy – found a number of artifacts to donate to state museums. “However, when we went to the bank to open an account,” recalled Smirnov, “they categorically refused, stating, ‘You are not a real Afghan club and we cannot allow you to do so.’”¹⁷⁴ Regional authorities’ suspicion of grassroots movements was a general obstacle to public participation in Gorbachev’s reforms, exacerbated by the KGB’s tendency to highlight “anti-social elements using the process of further democratization of Soviet society... [to] inspire political immaturity among youths.”¹⁷⁵

The All-Union Gathering of Young Reserve Soldiers in Ashgabat should thus be seen as a large-scale effort to make a “positive impact” on Soviet youth who might be drawn to “imitations of Western trends” or “fall under the influence of pacifism.”¹⁷⁶ Intended to “sensitize them to the need to perform their civic duties,” it served instead as blueprint for the establishment of veterans’ organizations, provided the afgantsy with a better understanding of how to make use of the permissions granted in unpublished decrees, and encouraged collaboration with the Komsomol on a regional level. In 1988 for example, soon after events in Ashgabat wound to a close, the Ukrainian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (USVA) held its founding conference in Sevastopol. The regional Komsomol assisted in organizing the event and did not stir government fears of

¹⁷⁴ V. Verstakov and M. Volkov, “Voiny v zapas ne ukhodiat,” *Pravda*, 20 November 1987, 2.

¹⁷⁵ “O negativnykh protsessakh sredi chasti sovetskoi molodezhi,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1116, l. 147.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, ll. 148-49.

national movements; instead the formation of the USVA was accepted as a step toward the reintegration of the afgantsy as part of Soviet society, with the popular bard Aleksandr Rosenbaum performing at its conference.¹⁷⁷

Popular Fiction in Transition

Rosenbaum's authorized performance at the founding conference of the Ukrainian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan spoke to the increasing presence of the afgantsy in Soviet popular culture. In May 1987, as the Moscow Trust Group protested on Gogol boulevard and Irina Krivova spoke at the Soviet Peace Committee's international seminar, the Union of Soviet Writers congregated to discuss the revision of literary themes in accordance with glasnost. Among the speakers was Aleksandr Prokhanov.¹⁷⁸ One of the few authors to pen fictional works on Afghanistan over the years – indeed, he himself could name only three others to do so by this time (Kim Selikhov, Valerii Povoliaev, and Viktor Verstakov) – Prokhanov felt that “another rank” of authors should seize on the Afghan war as a theme in their writings.¹⁷⁹ Taking to the podium, he “excoriated writers who knew nothing of the war in Afghanistan.”¹⁸⁰ His own work had changed accordingly with the state's narrative, ranging from *The Tree at the Centre of Kabul* (Derevo v tsentre Kabula, 1982), with its banal story of a convoy travelling the mountains; to his admission that “various illusions have disappeared” in *Notes on Armour* (Zapiski na brone, 1985); to his interviewing of “disgruntled but militant” afgantsy in a

¹⁷⁷ Sergei Chervonopiskii, interview with author, July 2015.

¹⁷⁸ “USSR: Domestic Fallout From the Afghan War,” 3.

¹⁷⁹ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 176.

¹⁸⁰ “USSR: Domestic Fallout From the Afghan War,” 3.

two-part televised news program in January and February 1987.”¹⁸¹ Prokhanov’s call for greater support of the state narrative on the Soviet-Afghan War was echoed by Colonel General Dmitrii Volkogonov, also in attendance at the Writers’ seminar, who denounced the “pacifistic writings” of the younger generation as “political vegetarianism.”¹⁸² That Volkogonov had defended Colonel Leonid Shershnev’s criticism of the Afghan war during Chernenko’s rule, yet objected to the journalism of the glasnost years, illustrated the precarious state of civil-military relations. The increasing animosity between the two became increasingly evident in the new year: already deemed a *gosudarstvennik* (a servant of the state) by many in the Union of Soviet Writers, Prokhanov was nicknamed “the nightingale of the General Staff” for his strict adherence to the Party line on the Soviet-Afghan War.¹⁸³

Yet Aleksandr Prokhanov was not alone in his reluctance to embrace the realities in of the Soviet-Afghan War in written words. Even Sergei Zalygin, the editor-in-chief of *Novyi mir* who would oversee the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, hesitated to print stories penned by afgantsy and insisted that those submitted were “too personal or just not good enough.”¹⁸⁴ Between the sensitive politics of the Afghan war, its authors’ alleged lack of writing skills, and literary journals’ fixation on works of the past, the printed word remained a difficult venue through which to address the conflict. As a result, cinema was quicker to flourish as an outlet for

¹⁸¹ Cited in Anthony Hyman, “Through the Looking Glass: a Look at the Official Soviet Version of the War in Afghanistan,” *Free Afghanistan* 4 (Summer 1986), accessed 1 February 2017, https://archive.org/stream/azu_acku_serial_ds371_2_a341_n4/azu_acku_serial_ds371_2_a341_n4_djvu.txt; Nahaylo, “When Ivan Comes Marching Home,” 17.

¹⁸² “USSR: Domestic Fallout From the Afghan War,” 3.

¹⁸³ Alla Latynina, “Kolokol’nyi zvon - ne molitva,” *Novyi mir* 8 (1988): 243.

¹⁸⁴ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 177.

popular depiction of the afgantsy.

Soviet-Afghan War Films in Transition

Gorbachev didn't understand the situation on the ground... But it's good that he withdrew the troops in 1989 because the situation was similar to that of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. ... Remember the film *Born on the Fourth of July*, directed by Oliver Stone, himself a Vietnam veteran? Remember Erich Maria Remarque's *Three Comrades*? They all end with the same moral: were it not for war, life would be fine.

- Oleg, afganets¹⁸⁵

In the four years that had passed since *A Hot Summer In Kabul* propagated the Saur Revolution, cinema had become a powerful outlet for stirring public debate. Even the romanticism of the Great Patriotic War came under question, with 1985's *Come and See* (*Idi i smotri*) drawing 29 million viewers to its depiction of wartime trauma and suffering in the Belarusian SSR.¹⁸⁶ The afgantsy, however, were slower to emerge in Soviet cinema, still relegated to sub-plots or offhand references. *Attack* (*Ataka*, 1986), for instance, sees Lieutenant Timofei Ermakov graduate with honours from a military college to serve at a base in the Karakum desert of the Turkmenistan SSR.¹⁸⁷ Casualties in Afghanistan are a backdrop to the story; only in one scene is the war referred to directly, when a soldier remarks, "Herat is a shit-hole (*dyra*), and Kabul is just a city. *Sen'ka*

¹⁸⁵ Oleg, interview with author, April 2014.

¹⁸⁶ Denise J. Youngblood, *Russian War Films: On the Cinema Front, 1914–2005* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 197.

¹⁸⁷ *Ataka*, dir. Igor' Nikolaev, (Kinostudiia im. M. Gor'kogo, 1986), accessed 16 February 2017, <http://kinofilms.tv/film/ataka/23683/>.

Monakhov stepped on a mine....”¹⁸⁸ Yet this allusion to the war is used to justify Ermakov’s strict training of recruits who might be deployed to Afghanistan. *Dedovshchina* is also an unspoken theme, with Lieutenant Ermakov’s mother warning him, “Do not humiliate the soldiers, for they depend on you.”¹⁸⁹ Indeed, the role of women in *Attack* seems a counterbalance to the mothers of the afgantsy who dared criticize the Afghan war. Annagul’, the widow of a recently deceased officer, at first regards Ermakov as an “arrogant, self-absorbed lieutenant with the manners of an insolent boy,” but comes to sympathize with his duty of training wartime-internationalists.¹⁹⁰ The Soviet-Afghan War was also a side-story in *Courier* (Kur’er, 1986), a comedic drama that drew 31.9 million people to the screens. It covers a short-lived romance between the 17-year-old Ivan Moroshnikov, working as a courier after not being admitted to university, and an upper-class woman named Katia.¹⁹¹ Katia returns to her environment of bourgeois luxury, while Ivan is faced with deployment to Afghanistan. The rare films that dealt directly with the ongoing war were tailored with fantasy to avoid fanning public debate. *The Man Who Interviewed* (Chelovek, kotoryi bral interv’iu, 1986), for instance, was loosely based on the career of Soviet journalist Aleksandr Kaverznev, the director of *Afghan Diary* who died of mysterious poisoning after his return from Kabul.¹⁹² The protagonist is a Soviet journalist named Aleksandr Rusanov, reporting from Afghanistan, who witnesses the outbreak of an incurable

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ *Kur’er*, dir. Karen Shakhnazarov (Mosfil’m, 1986), accessed 23 February 2017, <https://youtu.be/QSc3uk8Q5w4>.

¹⁹² *Chelovek, kotoryi bral interv’iu*, dir. Iurii Marukhin, (Belarus’fil’m, 1986), accessed 16 February 2017, <https://rutube.ru/video/863f57d1d0c27670e4652f3f76937668/?ref=logo>.

disease. Its victims, however, are Afghan citizens and livestock, and the culprit, a CIA agent who spreads disease via mosquitos produced in a hidden laboratory.¹⁹³ Only on 17 January 1987 would the names and faces of afgantsy grace the screens of Moscow cinemas for the first time, with the breakout success of a documentary entitled *Is It Easy To Be Young?* (*Legko li byt' molodym?*).

A snapshot of Soviet youth at a time of sociopolitical reform and economic decline, director Iurii Podnieks' (1950-92) *Is It Easy To Be Young?* focused on a 6 July 1985 concert attended by 5,000 youth and the delinquent actions carried out by “at least 150” of them after its conclusion. Having crammed aboard a train destined for Riga, the riotous teenagers vandalized and destroyed two railway cars, allegedly “singing songs” and “shouting slogans such as ‘Let there be darkness, darkness’.”¹⁹⁴ The trial that ensued – wherein a lone teenager was sentenced to three years in a labour camp to follow his completion of high school – is spliced into scenes between interviews with disgruntled youths, who range from punks, to a mortuary worker, to a Hare Krishna follower. Given the most speaking time are demobilized afgantsy struggling to re-adapt in their home country. “I am still very sad about people like Guntis,” remarked Vents, referring to a photograph of a fellow afganets on crutches. “I got out without a scratch. But for people

¹⁹³ Notably, one of the movie's screenwriters was Iona Andronov of *Literaturnaia gazeta*, who went on to become leader of the International Committee for the Salvation of Soviet Soldiers in Afghanistan (Mezhdunarodnyi komitet za spasenie sovetskiikh voennoplennykh v Afganistane) in 1988, an organization that sought to assure deserters and former POWs that they could return to the Soviet Union without penalty.

¹⁹⁴ *Vai viegli būt jaunam?*, dir. Juris Podniak (Rīgas kinostudija, 1987), accessed 17 February 2017, <https://youtu.be/ZBuD45btXxU>. The band in question, Pērkons (Thunder), was banned from playing in the Soviet Union since 1983, but continued to perform under the guise of a kolkhoz ensemble, “Soviet Latvia” (Padomju Latvia). Following the riots carried out by its fans on 6 July 1985, the group was banned once more, and did not play in the Soviet Union again until 1987.

like him... His health has improved a lot, [but] he is crippled for life.”¹⁹⁵ In one scene, having cut to a village, Podnieks interviews the mother of an afganets. “I tried not to watch television or read newspapers because I thought it best that I know less,” she remarked. “Every day I wondered whether he would return home.”¹⁹⁶ Her son did indeed return, but with an injured leg and alcohol dependant to cope with life’s hardships. After his leg healed, he found solace as a firefighter. “The tension never leaves,” he admits, as footage of his crew battling flames is shown. “I started working here because in some ways, it’s a bit like down there. The uncertainty, fighting danger, saving lives....”¹⁹⁷ The question of how to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder – a foreign notion in the Soviet Union at the time – surfaces among each of the afgantsy that Podnieks interviews. “I try to be like everyone else, and I’d really like to belong,” began one afganets. “I read this book that sums up perfectly what it’s like coming back from war.”

It says that soldiers are returning to another life, where people are going to work, have friendships, and love each other. They return to a place without explosions, where no one is dropping bombs, and so they have to re-learn civilian life. When I returned, I was still living. Now I have to survive until the end.¹⁹⁸

“When you see only blood, and your brothers fall,” he continued, “you can do horrible things... So you shut yourself off and bury the idea that you are a human being. Only a shell remains, and you are no longer yourself.”¹⁹⁹

The resounding success of *Is It Easy To Be Young?* marked a victory for those

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

with little appetite for Soviet ideology in everyday living. “Here we have our own Lost Generation,” wrote one young critic in April 1987. “We were told those kind of characters existed only for foreign writers, for the Hemingways, the Remarques and the Dos Passoses... As you well know, for a long time, it seemed we didn't have any invalids either.”²⁰⁰ Also encouraged by the success of the documentary were those of an older generation. The Initiative Group of Hippies, spread primarily across Moscow, Kiev, and L’vov, issued a six-page essay entitled “The Ideology of Soviet Hippies” in July 1987 wherein the authors incorporated *Is It Easy To Be Young?* into their platform. The film was praised for being “especially true in one segment that shows young boys who fought in Afghanistan offering their opinions on war and life.” “Each of them are morally crippled (moral’no iskalecheny),” the authors declared. “Afghanistan has had as great an impact on people as the war in Vietnam [for the Americans].”²⁰¹ Yet the Initiative Group of Hippies’ sympathy for the afgantsy was limited. Rather than call for better treatment of them, the hippies pointed to “the emergence of committees of international soldiers, and their clubs” as provoking “constant clashes between the afgantsy and different youth groups... in which the police refuse to intervene.”²⁰² Just as Aleksandr Rubchenko had written in his essay “Not Only In Asia” one year prior, the hippies segued from the afgantsy to the liubertsy, whom they deemed “a cult of power, karate, sambo, and bodybuilding that assaults members of different youth groups in Moscow... justifying

²⁰⁰ Nicholas Galichenko, *Glasnost - Soviet Cinema Responds*, edited by Robert Allington (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 112n20.

²⁰¹ “Ideologiya sovetskikh khippi, 1967-1987,” *Den’ za dnem* (July 1987) AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 18.

²⁰² Ibid.

their crimes behind pseudo-patriotic slogans... of fascist ideology.”²⁰³ The Initiative Group of Hippies’ response to the matter was paradoxical. At once, they proudly cited a demonstration in Moscow “attended by 2,000 representatives of different groups” as a show of unity among newborn grassroots movements. Yet their choice of message was to express “our dismay with authorities’ failure to... protect the population from fascist groups,” and demand greater administration by the state in a period of democratization.²⁰⁴

The Soviet hippies’ readiness to link the afgangtsy to the liubertsy and fascist groups was one of the various anti-war interpretations that surfaced with glasnost. A markedly different approach came from *Pamiat’* (Memory), a Russian nationalist movement that combined “a despairing spiritual wail with low cunning” and “rebelliousness with the most abject lackeydom.”²⁰⁵ Founded under the umbrella of the Society for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments (*Obshchestva okhrany pamiatnikov istorii i kul’tury*) in the late 1970s, it took only a few years for *Pamiat’* to degenerate into a xenophobic crew of anti-Semites who gave warped interpretations of Gorbachev’s reforms. Among the first it seized upon was the anti-alcohol campaign in 1985, when *Pamiat’* circulated a lecture against drunkenness wherein “Russian alcohol abuse” (*alkogolizatsii Rossii*) was pinned on “Zionists, Trotskyists and imperialist agents.”²⁰⁶ It made headlines for holding an unsanctioned demonstration on Manezhnaia Square in Moscow on 6 May 1987, in opposition to any redevelopment of Poklonnaia Hill. In contrast to rallies held by the Trust Group, the police did not intervene and the

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, l. 19.

²⁰⁵ Zinoviev, *Katastroika*, 102.

²⁰⁶ “Antisemitizm v 1970-89-e gg.,” *Elektronnaia evreiskaia entsiklopediia*, accessed 23 February 2017, <http://www.eleven.co.il/article/15402#0401>.

organization was granted a meeting with Moscow's Party Secretary, Boris Yeltsin, prompting speculation on state sympathies with its nationalist agenda. On 8 December, as the anniversary of the Soviet-Afghan War drew near, Pamiat' issued "An Appeal to the Russian People and to Patriots of All Countries and Nations." Western observers were most struck by its anti-Semitic tirade on Zionism and Freemasonry as a "vanguard of imperialism" that "has been inciting terror in the country for 70 years."²⁰⁷ Omitted from most English translations, however, were the latter half of the manifesto's title (reading simply as "An Appeal to the Russian People"), and Pamiat''s denunciation of the Soviet-Afghan War, which read:

DAMN ALL THOSE WHO INSTIGATE WARS! Who among today's politicians will answer for the criminal carnage in Afghanistan? Who among them is taking the blood of thousands of our men, putting them to their deaths far away from their homeland?!!

WE DEMAND AN IMMEDIATE HALT TO THE CRIMINAL WAR IN AFGHANISTAN, AND AN INTERNATIONAL MILITARY TRIBUNAL OF ALL THOSE WHO INSTIGATED THE CONFLICT!!²⁰⁸

Pamiat''s decision to seize on opposition to the Soviet-Afghan War as a means of gathering support from Russian nationalists was not lost on the CIA, which noted the group's two short paragraphs on the topic.²⁰⁹ Western scholars failed to do the same:

²⁰⁷ Luba George, "Pamyat's 'appeal to the Russian people,'" *Executive Intelligence Review* 15, 8 (8 July 1988): 44.

²⁰⁸ "Vozzvanie patrioticheskogo ob'edineniia <Pamiat'> k russkomu narodu, k patriotam vsekh stran i natsii," accessed 23 February 2017, http://old.nasledie.ru/oborg/2_18/0010/01.htm. Capitalization as in original.

²⁰⁹ "USSR: Domestic Fallout From the Afghan War," 3.

while East European dissidents' equation of the Soviet-Afghan War to the occupation of their own countries remained popular as independence movements grew, Pamiat's denunciation of the conflict ran contrary to narratives of Russo-Soviet expansionism.

From Isolated Demonstrations to Coordination Between Republics

As the Soviet-Afghan War neared its eighth year in duration, the Soviet media and grassroots organizations were increasingly vocal. Over the course of 1987, the Moscow Trust Group alone staged 30 demonstrations, 17 of which were dominated by peace slogans and 13 by human rights banners.²¹⁰ This illustrated the growing membership in the organization (despite its revolving door) and its increasing confidence in gaining public sympathies: the violent arrests of Nikolai Khramov, Aleksandr Rubchenko, and others on Gogol boulevard in May 1987 for instance, were condemned in an article of *Komsomol'skaia pravda* on 3 July. The police actions were deemed “a recurrence of old thinking” that demanded a “comprehensive investigation to expose those responsible.”²¹¹ Similarly critical responses were published after policemen used brute force to quash an art exhibit held in a Moscow park that summer and an improvised concert that followed.²¹² The Trust Group chose to renew its opposition to the Soviet-Afghan War on 7 October 1987, when four members of the Leningrad branch gathered near the Peter and Paul Fortress and unfurled banners that read “Stop shedding the blood of our brothers in Afghanistan!” and “We demand the withdrawal of Soviet troops from

²¹⁰ Alekseeva and Fitzpatrick, *Nyeformaly: Civil Society in the USSR*, 51.

²¹¹ [untitled] *Den' za Dnem* 7 (July 1987), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 2.

²¹² Bushnell, *Moscow Graffiti*, 125.

Afghanistan!”²¹³ In their response, policemen sought to avoid sparking criticism from an emboldened media: the protest continued for 40 minutes before the demonstrators were arrested, three of whom received a warning over the consequences of “petty hooliganism” while the fourth was fined 30 rubles.²¹⁴ It was a marked departure from the past, when members of the Trust Group would face internment in psychiatric hospitals.

Rather than heed the authorities’ warning, the Trust Group went on to coordinate demonstrations against the Soviet-Afghan War that took place in Leningrad, Moscow, and L’vov simultaneously on 24 October, to mark United Nations Day. Declaring their actions part of a global “Wave of Peace,” the banners waved ranged from “The Soviet Army is an instrument of imperialist aggression!” to “Freedom for Lev Krichevskii!” in reference to their fellow Trust Group member.²¹⁵ Despite the KGB’s foreknowledge of events, they stopped short of halting the protest and chose to target the Trust Group’s leaders. In Leningrad, Evgeniia Debrianskaia was arrested alongside four others on their way to the demonstration. Nonetheless, “20 young pacifists were able to gather on Arts Square, chanting slogans” before policemen surrounded them. Although “repeatedly ordered to discard their banners... not a single member of the protest was arrested.”²¹⁶ In Moscow, authorities detained all but one of those who intended to protest on Old Square in front of the Central Committee of the Communist Party’s headquarters. The lone voice to reach the site was none other than Valeriia Novodvorskaia. As KGB and police officers stood by, reluctant to stage an arrest in front of a nearby tourist group,

²¹³ [untitled], *Den’ za Dnem* 10 (October 1987), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 4.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ “Voina mira,” *Den’ za dnem* 10 (October 1987), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, ll. 22-23.

²¹⁶ Ibid, l. 23.

Novodvorskaia unfolded a banner that read “If you want peace, do not prepare for war!” and took questions from pedestrians for 20 minutes before she was detained.²¹⁷

It was the Trust Group’s branch in L’vov that sparked the strongest reaction from the KGB for its demonstration on United Nations Day. It was in 1983 that its founder and self-avowed hippy Alik Olisevich (a.k.a. L’vovskii) became acquainted with the Moscow Trust Group and partook in one of its earliest demonstrations. During this time, Olisevich met Aleksandr Rubchenko, who informed him of “how to access a dozen global radio stations” and proposed that they establish a branch in L’vov.²¹⁸ Indeed, Rubchenko himself travelled to join Olisevich and the L’vov Trust Group in the 24 October 1987 protest. Fifteen members gathered outside the State Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet, armed with banners that read “For an alternative to military service in the USSR!” “Stop militarism!” and “Soviets – out of Afghanistan!”²¹⁹ “Within a few minutes of putting up posters, we were surrounded by agents in civilian clothes and activists from the Komsomol volunteer squad,” recalled Olisevich many years later.²²⁰ As Rubchenko was arrested, Eduard Polunin, a Pentecostal member of the L’vov Trust Group, “tried to photograph the scene” only to be beaten by authorities and detained alongside him, the camera and film “seriously damaged.”²²¹ Both men were taken to the Headquarters of the

²¹⁷ Ibid, 24. It is worth noting that being a tourist did not absolve one of participation in Soviet activist movements. The Moscow Trust Group was monitored for what the KGB deemed “tourist emissaries” who “aggressively seek contacts among misguided youths” and provide them with “pacifist literature.” See: “O negativnykh protsessakh sredi chasti sovetskoi molodezhi,” GASBU, f. 16, spr. 1116, l. 148.

²¹⁸ Ekaterina Gladkaia, “Khippi Alik Olisevich: ‘Volosy byli dlia nas simvolom svobody,’” *Zerkalo nedeli, Ukraina*, 27 February 2015, accessed 15 February 2017, gazeta.zn.ua/personalities/hippi-alik-olisevich-volosy-byli-dlya-nas-simvolom-svobody-.html.

²¹⁹ Alik L’vovskii, *Khippi vo L’vove*, translated by Liubava Malysheva, accessed 15 October 2016, <https://www.lubava.info/txt/show/675>.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ “Voina mira,” *Den’ za dnem* 10 (October 1987), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 23.

Voluntary People's Guards (Shtab dobrovol'noi narodnoi druzhinoi). Rather than cease and desist, however, the remaining protesters gathered outside the building and picketed it, demanding the release of Rubchenko and Polunin. Its banners having been confiscated, the L'vov Trust Group chose a different means of protest: rather than chanting slogans, they sang an American protest anthem in "We Shall Overcome," almost 25 years after Joan Baez performed it at the Civil Rights March in Washington, D.C.²²² The two men were released after three hours detainment, upon which the authorities' parting words to Rubchenko spoke to their concern over the swelling of nationalism in the republics. "Tell them in Moscow and Leningrad that you can hold such things on your [Russian] territory," they ordered, "but you cannot hold a single demonstration in L'vov – and we will know of such actions well ahead of time."²²³

If the harsh response to the L'vov Trust Group's anti-war protest was intended to deter its members from further actions, it backfired. According to Alik Olishevich, the branch responded by declaring itself an "independent pacifist group." Its core membership doubled to thirty and its agenda expanded to calls for Ukrainian independence, with as many as eighty to one hundred people joining its rallies.²²⁴ The calls for peace in Afghanistan, however, never disappeared from its platform. On 26 December 1987, the L'vov Trust Group collaborated once more with its partners in Moscow and Leningrad to mark the eighth anniversary of the war, placing leaflets the night before.²²⁵ As with the protest two months prior, it was quashed by the authorities

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid; L'vovskii, *Khippi vo L'vove*.

²²⁴ L'vovskii, *Khippi vo L'vove*.

²²⁵ "Demonstratsii protiv voiny v Afganistane," *USSR News Brief Bulletin*, accessed 15 February 2017,

soon after its members took to the streets at 17:00. The 26 December demonstration outside the Kazan Cathedral in Leningrad, meanwhile, was notable for its high turnout: approximately 150 people were estimated to be among the protesters, 30 of whom were members of the Trust Group, poised in a circle to guard those holding posters that read “Stop the dirty war in Afghanistan!” and “Withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan.”²²⁶ Although the police moved to bring an end to the demonstration after just ten minutes, clashes with “those in the audience who sympathized with the demonstrators” lasted about an hour.²²⁷ Yet it was the demonstration in Moscow that marked the Trust Group’s greatest progress. In the leadup to the event, the Moscow Trust Group applied for permission to hold an anti-war demonstration. In a break from the past, the executive committee of the city council voted in favour of granting the request. Moscow’s Deputy Mayor Anatolii Kostenko, however, rejected the decision, and insisted that a demonstration at the Trust Group’s proposed location outside Arbat subway station would blockade a vital “transport artery” in the city.²²⁸ This did not deter city council members who favoured the protest, and on 23 December, Evgeniia Debrianskaia, Aleksandr Rubchenko, and Nikolai Khramov were invited to speak with them about the matter. While the meeting concluded with a warning that they “would not be excluded” from arrests if they chose to protest “military assistance to Afghanistan,” about 20 people turned out armed with signs nonetheless.²²⁹ They were promptly dispersed, but not before

<https://kronid.wordpress.com/2014/06/22/1987/>.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

Debrianskaia distributed 150 anti-war leaflets in the vicinity.²³⁰ Despite security agencies' swift interventions in the L'vov, Leningrad, and Moscow protests, the Trust Group's actions gathered such numbers that the Western press that took note of events. The very day after, the *New York Times* reported of "extremely unusual protests" against the Afghan war that took place in the Soviet Union.²³¹ Already, its Moscow correspondent had contacted Nikolai Khramov to gather details on the protests. "Almost all [of us] were beaten," Khramov reported, including a 17-year-old Elena Grigorieva, who was taken to hospital after a conflict with plainclothes officers.²³² A total of 16 protesters had been arrested by the 50 uniformed police in Moscow, while "hundreds of people... watched silently as the protesters were shoved and dragged from the scene."²³³ Penalties ranged from stern warnings against future protests, to fines of up to 50 rubles, to prison sentences of up to 15 days.²³⁴

Thus, as the eighth year of the Soviet-Afghan War wound to a close, the Politburo was faced with an emboldened and increasingly sophisticated protest movement that had begun to gather Western news coverage, damaging the impressions of Gorbachev as a reformer. Further, public discussion of the war had expanded from dissidents of the past to "younger members of the intelligentsia who have served in Afghanistan" and brought with them a mix of personal stories and speculation from the battlefield. In one "informal seminar" attended by "a group of 'intellectuals' including about 30 veterans and a U.S.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ "Soviet Seizes 30 Protesting Afghan Role," *New York Times*, 27 December 1987, accessed 15 February 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/12/27/world/soviet-seizes-30-protesting-afghan-role.html>.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

diplomat,” an afganets spoke of 150,000 soldiers killed in action and 350,000 wounded – greatly exaggerated numbers that spoke to the continuity of public speculation during glasnost.²³⁵ With the negotiation of the 40th Army’s withdrawal still ongoing, the sharp rise in the number of registered non-government organizations following their legalization brought with it a new chorus of competing narratives on the Afghan War.

²³⁵ “USSR: Domestic Fallout From the Afghan War,” 5.

Chapter 6

From Reconciliation to Reintegration, 1988 to 1989

I do not think that there will be much opposition to the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. ... But at the same time, the theme that all this was “in vain” or “a mistake” should be excluded from our propaganda. ... God forbid we create the impression that our men put their heads there in vain, struggled in vain, became invalids for life all in vain... People should be given the opportunity to work and speak with the participants themselves. ... So that they will... understand the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan, seven years ago and now.

- Aleksandr Iakovlev, 23 February 1988¹

While the casualties of the Soviet Union’s “bleeding wound” in Afghanistan declined with each year of Gorbachev’s time in power, the same could not be said of its economic costs. On 8 January 1988, Nikolai Ryzhkov presented Gorbachev with a memorandum on the State Planning Committee’s assessment of material expenditures in Afghanistan and since March 1985, financial assistance had more than doubled with approximately three-quarters going to military aid.² Nonetheless, the costs of the war were not a deciding factor in swaying Gorbachev toward bringing an end to the conflict. Between 1984 and 1987 the cost of military aid to the Democratic Republic of

¹ “Stenogramma Soveshchaniia, provedennogo A.N. Iakovlevym s otvetstvennymi rabotnikami TsK KPSS i SMI pomezhdunarodnym problemam; o razreshenii politicheskogo konflikta v Afganistane v sviazi s resheniem o vyvode sovetskikh voisk; ob ustanovke, slozhivsheisia vokrug Narodnogo Karabakh,” GARF, f. 10063, op. 1, d. 248, ll. 12, 16-17.

² “Spravka o raskhodakh SSSR v Afganistane,” Arkhiv natsional’noi bezopasnosti: Rossiiskie programmy, accessed 15 March 2017, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Afganistan/1988.01.08.Memorandum-on-cost-in-Afganistan.pdf.

Afghanistan plus the 40th Army's expenses came to a total of \$7.5 billion. To put this in perspective the "entire Soviet military budget as late as 1989" after significant cuts was \$128 billion.³ This reality was not lost on the CIA after eight years of funding the mujahideen: in a February 1987 assessment of the war's economic costs for the Soviet Union, its analysts found that "the war in Afghanistan has been relatively inexpensive for the Soviets," accounting for between 2 and 2.5% of its total defense spending.⁴ Indeed, the CIA correctly predicted that the Soviet Army's withdrawal from Afghanistan "would be based on political and military considerations rather than economic factors."⁵ Indeed, Soviet criticism of stubbornness and ineptitude among the PDPA was increasingly frank. In a 10 January 1988 report to Defence Minister Dmitrii Iazov (b. 1924), General Varennikov spoke of Afghan leaders' reluctance to "reexamine the attitude toward authoritative [rebel] leaders" and invite them to participate in the creation of a coalition government prior to the 40th Army's withdrawal.⁶ "Not all of them understand this issue," he remarked, noting the Revolutionary Court's refusal to revoke a 1986 "death sentence in absentia" issued to the Peshawar Seven. "Threats are directed against them on Afghan television, and this will not help establish contact with them."⁷

While Afghan President Mohammed Najibullah firmly supported Soviet proposals for National Reconciliation the same could not be said for the broader membership of the PDPA, which remained fraught with tribal and political rivalries. It

³ Kalinovskii, "A Long Goodbye: The Politics and Diplomacy...", 111.

⁴ "The Costs of Soviet Involvement in Afghanistan," FOIA Electronic Reading Room, February 1987, accessed 18 November 2017, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000499320.pdf.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Liakhovskii, *Plamia Afgana*, 397-98.

⁷ Ibid.

was a reality that weighed upon Gorbachev as the Politburo debated a schedule for withdrawal. Speaking with Anatolii Cherniaev in September 1987, he lamented that were Afghanistan to fall back into Civil War after the 40th Army withdrew, “we would not be forgiven, either by the Third World, or by the shabby Western liberals who have spent the last ten years lambasting us for occupying the place.”⁸ It was with this in mind that Gorbachev issued a formal statement on the matter, almost two years to the day of coining the term “a bleeding wound.” Speaking on 8 February 1988, he announced that the forthcoming round of talks between Afghanistan and Pakistan in Geneva would likely be the last after six years of on-again, off-again negotiations. The PDPA and the Soviet government had agreed that 15 May 1988 should be the “specific date for beginning the withdrawal of Soviet troops,” an operation to be carried out over ten months.⁹ The withdrawal from Afghanistan, Gorbachev emphasized, would be “a reflection of our current political thinking” and an action that “reaffirm[s] our commitment to the tradition of good-neighbourliness... which trace back to Vladimir Lenin and the first Soviet-Afghan treaty signed in 1921.”¹⁰ In a departure from his predecessors, Gorbachev turned his attention to concerns “about our boys, our soldiers in Afghanistan,” as he neared the end of his statement.

Our people profoundly respect those who were called to serve in Afghanistan.

The state provides for them, as a matter of priority, good educational opportunities and a chance to get interesting, worthy work. The memory of those

⁸ Cited in Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 281.

⁹ “Text of Gorbachev Statement Setting Forth Soviet Position of Afghan War,” *New York Times*, 9 February 1988, A14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

who have died a hero's death in Afghanistan is sacred to us. It is the duty of Party and Soviet authorities to make sure that their families and relatives are taken care of with concern, attention and kindness.¹¹

In choosing such words for a public statement on the war and its domestic consequences, Gorbachev challenged state officials to ensure that the afgantsy and their kin receive due social-welfare benefits, and that existing policies were not sporadically enforced or subject to biases. If Gorbachev's intention was to encourage public debate on the matter, he succeeded. A few days later Artem Borovik spoke of the need to "combat public indifference toward the sacrifice of Soviet soldiers, and to embarrass officials into giving the veterans better treatment." And if Gorbachev were to hold state bureaucrats accountable, Borovik regarded it as journalists' duty to communicate the trials and tribulations of the afgantsy to the broader population. "We have to make our society understand that we *did* send these people to Afghanistan, and to think about how to reintegrate them into society," he insisted. "Otherwise, they may be a lost generation."¹²

Almost immediately after Gorbachev announced the 40th Army's withdrawal, the Central Committee passed a Resolution on Propagandistic Support of the Afghan Settlement on 13 February 1988.¹³ Its proposals were surprisingly cautious, given the bold statements emerging from journalists and grassroots organizations. The state narrative on the war cast Soviet troops as having "fulfilled their international duty" and

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Cited in Bill Keller, "Russia's Divisive War: Home From Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 14 February 1988, accessed 15 March 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/14/magazine/home-from-afghanistan-russia-s-divisive-war.html?pagewanted=1&pagewanted=all>.

¹³ "O propagandistskom obespechenii politicheskogo uregulirovaniia vokrug Afganistana," Arkhiv natsional'noi bezopasnosti: Rossiiskie programmy, accessed 16 March 2016, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Afganistan/1988.02.13.Resolution-on-Propaganda-Support-on-Afganistan-Settlement.pdf.

“thwarted the attempts of imperialism to impose its own path of development” on Afghanistan, creating the “objective conditions for implementing the policy of national reconciliation.”¹⁴ The “peaceful solution to the Afghan problem” was to be incorporated into Gorbachev’s narrative of “new political thinking, and its ability to resolve the most complex of situations and regional conflicts.”¹⁵ Key to reframing the war under Gorbachev’s narrative was a revision of popular wartime phraseology. This ranged from a rebuttal of the West’s fanciful myth of a Soviet quest “to obtain a port on the warm seas through Afghanistan,” to the terms accorded to enemies on the battlefield. “We should move on to new terminology in our propaganda,” the resolution declared.

It is hardly appropriate to speak of reconciliation in a “counter-revolution,” or members of a coalition government drawn from “bandits” or “dushman” (which translates as “enemies”). To be used are the terms: “opposition,” “opposition forces,” “Islamic parties,” and expressions such as “armed opposition” or “military opposition forces” with regard to their armed groups.¹⁶

Finally, while propaganda organs would “continue to publish material about the Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan... revealing heroic deeds worthy of their fathers,” they were ordered to shift their focus to the future of the afgangtsy in the Soviet Union. “Show in the press the fates of wartime-internationalists after they return to their homeland,” the resolution read as it neared its conclusion, “[but] do not avoid the objective disclosure (raskrytiia) of the social and psychological problems that arise for them.”¹⁷ It was this

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

encouragement of public discussion of “the Afghan syndrome” that proved most complementary to glasnost.

The Signing of the Geneva Accords

One would have thought I would have been happy: no more coffins were coming home. No more deaths, no more drain on our resources... It was hard for me to accept that I was the Foreign Minister who had signed what was certainly not an agreement about a victory. There are few such examples in Russian or Soviet history. I couldn't stop thinking about the people we had trained, deployed to a revolution, and were now abandoning to face the enemy alone.

- Eduard Shevardnadze¹⁸

With the new boundaries of propaganda set, the details of the 40th Army's withdrawal were finalized by the Central Committee on 3 March 1988. Approximately 109,000 people, 30,000 vehicles, and 513 aircraft would exit in two phases, the first to take place between 15 May and 15 August 1988.¹⁹ During this time, military units would withdraw from most parts of Afghanistan with troops remaining in Kabul to defend Najibullah's government and the highway to Termez, Uzbekistan. The remaining soldiers would not withdraw until three months into the second phase (15 August 1988 to 15 February 1989), while border troops would remain in full force until 15 February 1989.²⁰

On 1 April, Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze received a letter from

¹⁸ Cited in Gai and Snegirov, *Vtorzhenie*, 307.

¹⁹ “O plane vyvoda sovetskikh voisk iz Afganistana,” Box 26, Reel 17, Folder 11, Dmitrii Volkogonov Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁰ Ibid.

American Secretary of State George Shultz, stating that the United States was prepared to sign an agreement in Geneva “if the issue of continuing to supply the Mujahedin with military aid is dropped.”²¹ The stipulation was by this time a ruse for the Politburo; whether or not the Geneva Accords were ratified, the 40th Army would withdraw from Afghanistan. Gorbachev asked “each member of the Politburo personally” that day for their stance on the matter, with the pros having a clear majority.²² President Najibullah was informed by Gorbachev of the Soviet Union’s intention to sign the Geneva Accords at a meeting in Tashkent on 7 April, and pens were put to paper one week later.

The Geneva Accords signed on 14 April 1988 were a broadly-word agreement that saw Mikhail Gorbachev enjoy diplomatic praise for turning his words of a “bleeding wound” into action. The Accords were preceded by a statement agreed upon by the United States and the Soviet Union, read aloud by Diego Cordovez, the United Nations’ undersecretary general for political affairs. Its choice of language spoke to the precarious, fragile conditions in Afghanistan after the 40th Army’s withdrawal:

It has been consistently recognized that... [a] comprehensive settlement implies the broadest support and immediate participation of all segments of the Afghan people and that this can best be insured by a broad-based Afghan government.

It is equally recognized that any questions relating to the Government of Afghanistan are matters within the exclusive jurisdiction of Afghanistan and can only be decided by the Afghan people themselves. The hope was therefore expressed that all elements of the Afghan nation, living inside and outside of

²¹ Anatolii Cherniaev, “1988 god,” *Dnevnik A.S. Cherniaeva*, accessed 15 March 2017, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Chernyaev/1988.pdf.

²² Ibid.

Afghanistan, will respond to this historic opportunity.²³

However, the Geneva Accords also left President Najibullah and the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan – neither of which were named, due to the United Nations' non-recognition of the government – to fend for themselves against the mujahideen. The United States and the Soviet Union, meanwhile, “maintain[ed] their rights to support their preferred contestants.” Hundreds of millions of dollars in military assistance continued to pour into Afghanistan from the Cold War powers in the three years that followed.²⁴

The Accords consisted of four primary agreements between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan:

1. An agreement on the interrelationships for the settlement of the situation relating to Afghanistan signed by Afghanistan and Pakistan, witnessed by the USA and the USSR;
2. Bilateral agreement between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan on the principles of mutual relations, in particular on non-interference and non-intervention;
3. Declaration on international guarantees, signed by the USSR and the USA;
4. Bilateral agreement between Pakistan and Afghanistan on the voluntary return of Afghan refugees.²⁵

Espousing such lofty goals as “Desiring to normalize relations and promote good

²³ Diego Cordovez and Selig Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 362.

²⁴ Doug MacEachin, Janne E. Nolan, and Kristine Tockman, “The US and Soviet Proxy War in Afghanistan, 1989-1992: Prisoners of our Preconceptions?,” *Working Group Report 4* (15 November 2005): 4-5.

²⁵ Farouq Azam (introduction), “The Geneva Accords of 1988,” accessed 17 March 2017, www.badloon.net/english/articles/pdf/THE%20GENEVA%20ACCORDS%20ON%20AFGHANISTAN.pdf.

neighbourliness and cooperation” and forming “mixed commissions” to supervise “the voluntary, orderly and peaceful repatriation of Afghan refugees” over 18 months, the implications of the Accords were clear. “Washington was predisposed to reject out-of-hand a UN plan for an inter-Afghan dialogue to reach agreement between all the warring factions,” remarked one group of analysts. “As well as to reject pleas from both Moscow and Najibullah to help form a new government of national unity.”²⁶ The mujahideen “were neither party to the negotiations nor to the Geneva Accords” and rejected the agreement immediately.²⁷ Afghanistan had for eight years been a focal point of geopolitics in the Cold War. Following the signing of the Geneva Accords it became an afterthought.

As the withdrawal of the 40th Army proceeded it left those in the Politburo divided on its implications. For the Soviet Union’s chief negotiator in Geneva, Deputy Foreign Minister Iulii Vorontsov, the priority was to avoid a repeat of the United States’s exit from Vietnam and Cambodia; at one point he stated bluntly to his American compatriots, “We’re not going to have a solution that leaves us with our last people leaving Kabul on the struts of helicopters.”²⁸ In this sense the Accords were a diplomatic victory. Particularly dissatisfied, however, was Eduard Shevardnadze, who berated the Politburo after reluctantly signing the treaty and demanded a revision of state propaganda. “We will leave the country in a deplorable situation,” he began. “We must at least announce that the introduction of our troops was a gross error... We may not be able

²⁶ MacEachin, Nolan, and Tockman, “The US and Soviet Proxy War in Afghanistan, 1989-1992: Prisoners of our Preconceptions?,” 9.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Cited in Tad Daley, *Afghanistan and Gorbachev’s Foreign Policy* (California: RAND / UCLA Center for Soviet Studies, May 1989): 4.

to distance ourselves easily from the past by arguing that we do not bear responsibility for our predecessors.”²⁹ Time and time again in the months leading up to the complete withdrawal of the 40th Army on 15 February 1989, Shevardnadze called for 10,000 to 15,000 Soviet troops to remain in Kabul to support Najibullah, a motion backed by Minister of Defence Dmitri Iazov and soon-to-be Chairman of the KGB Vladimir Kriuchkov. And time and time again, Shevardnadze was sternly rebuked by Gorbachev. For the General Secretary a graceful military withdrawal was of greater priority than the survival of Najibullah. That the Geneva Accords failed to put in place any cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union afterwards and doomed Afghanistan to a renewed Civil War were absent from coverage of the topic in the Soviet media, which aired on news broadcasts “only after 20 minutes of domestic reporting.”³⁰

Vietnamtsy Meet the Afgantsy

You know how the Russians are supposed to be conducting biological warfare in Afghanistan... Well now two scientists from Harvard and Yale claim that the evidence we have of yellow rain may be nothing more than bee droppings. ... I ain't no fan of the Russkys [sic] – what with their invasion of Afghanistan.... However, I would want more evidence before I believe they are involved in biological and chemical warfare. ... Remember, the people who are bringing us evidence of these Russian activities are the same people who couldn't count NVA troops, used the smell of VC urine to call in airstrikes and manufactured the Gulf

²⁹ Cited in Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 282.

³⁰ Philip Taubman, “Relief for the Russians,” *New York Times*, 15 April 1988, A1.

of Tonkin incident. They didn't know shit from Shinola then, so why expect them to know bee shit from beeswax now.

- Vietnam veteran, 1983³¹

As the 40th Army began to withdraw from Afghanistan and the fates of the afgantsy began to feature regularly in the Soviet press, interests spiked among a particular audience in the West: the Vietnam veterans of a previous generation. For eight years and counting, the phrase of “a Soviet Vietnam” had been used by American pundits to refer to the Afghan war, with Democratic Representative Charlie Wilson’s quip of “there were 58,000 dead in Vietnam, and we owe the Russians one” entering circulation as a phrase of political payback.³² For many in the ranks of the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), however, it was the struggle with reintegration and the callous public attitude of “I didn’t send you to Afghanistan” which rang true to their experience. With the onset of glasnost, the VVA became one of the first Western organizations to reach out to the afgantsy.

Founded in 1978, the Vietnam Veterans of America began on modest grounds. Its founding principle of “Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another” spoke to their poor reception among the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion. It was not uncommon for those who fought in the First and Second World Wars to scoff at those who served in Vietnam with such phrases as “Well, that wasn’t really a war,” or “Oh, you’re just a malingerer.”³³ Vietnam veterans’ parallels with the afgantsy

³¹ “Fraggin’,” *The Veteran* 13, 4 (Fall 1983): 4.

³² Douglas A. Borer, *Superpowers Defeated: Vietnam and Afghanistan Compared* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 186.

³³ Mary Stout, President of VVA (1987-91), interview with author, November 2014.

stretched well beyond the generation gap with their elders. Only in 1980 had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) been recognized as a diagnosable condition by the American Psychiatry Association after years of lobbying; only in 1982 was the Vietnam Veterans Memorial constructed and the names of the deceased inscribed; as of November 1986, a Gallup poll found that 66% of respondents felt “the Vietnam war was more than a mistake; it was fundamentally wrong and immoral”; and in 1988 the battle for compensation to those poisoned by Agent Orange was ongoing.³⁴

Vietnam veterans’ organizations also faced a degree of government obstruction that paralleled those of informal afgangtsy clubs. Writing on 12 February 1982, a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) recalled the opening ceremony for a Mobile Vet Centre in Alabama wherein officials from the Federal Attorney’s Office, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the state’s Bureau of Investigation intervened without a warrant. Clients’ files and the records of the Alabama Veterans’ Services were confiscated, seven of its eight staff members “involuntarily placed on administrative leave,” and allegations filed that “various members” of the organization were spotted smoking marijuana on Veterans Day, three months earlier.³⁵ “The VA [Veterans Affairs] and... our government have insured [sic] that Alabama Vietnam-era veterans have gotten their message,” the VVAW concluded, “you shall gather together neither for therapy nor as an organization.”³⁶

Sympathies for the afgangtsy and a questioning of the Reagan Administration’s

³⁴ Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 13.

³⁵ Don Reed et. al, “Vet Center Ambushed: Files Seized, Meetings Wired,” *The Veteran* 12, 3 (1982): 17.

³⁶ Ibid.

narrative on the Soviet-Afghan War thus quickly emerged among veterans of the Vietnam War; on rare occasions, some even journeyed overseas armed with tape recorders in an effort to learn of the afgantsy's experience.³⁷ The first official expedition of Vietnam veterans to the Soviet Union took place in September 1988. Sponsored primarily by Earthstewards Network, an NGO based in Seattle, a group of specialists in "veteran readjustment problems" such as "psychologists, prosthetists and wheelchair specialists" travelled to Moscow to confer with afgantsy and Soviet doctors.³⁸ In a scenario inconceivable a few years earlier, the Vietnam veterans were "hosted by an archbishop of the Russian Orthodox church" during their stay and offered "help in supplying prostheses" to the afgantsy.³⁹ It was during their visit that Soviet psychiatrists and psychologists in attendance learned of the term PTSD, still a raw topic for the Vietnam veterans. "Before 1980, meaningful, sensible treatment by the VA for delayed stress was unheard of," recalled Larry Heinemann. "A Vietnam vet... might have been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic, invited to enter the psychiatric ward and join the Thorazine shuffle. ... The Soviet response to treatment has also been psychotropic drugs, and plenty of them."⁴⁰

Heinemann himself was among a second group of 20 Vietnam veterans who traveled to the Soviet Union in December 1988.⁴¹ A diverse cast of characters, its ranks included "lawyers, graphic artists, linguists, mental health workers... administrators of

³⁷ Dr. W. David Harrison, correspondence with author, 2015.

³⁸ Peter P. Mahoney, "The Wounds of Two Wars," *New York Times*, 11 June 1989, accessed on 23 March 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/06/11/magazine/the-wounds-of-two-wars.html>.

³⁹ Jonathan Steele, "Ivan, We Hardly Knew You," *The Guardian*, 13 February 1989, accessed 12 March 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/century/1980-1989/Story/0,,110278,00.html>.

⁴⁰ Larry Heinemann, "The Road From Afghanistan," *Playboy*, July 1989, 163.

⁴¹ Howard Rosenberg, "A Big Story for a Small Station," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 1989, accessed 23 March 2017, http://articles.latimes.com/1989-02-24/entertainment/ca-159_1_small-station.

nonprofit organizations, juvenile probation officers... alcohol rehabilitation counselors, [and] small-business owners.”⁴² The group divided its time between various districts in Moscow and Alma-Ata, and upon landing in the Russian capital was welcomed by a “profuse... and astonishingly friendly” group of afgangtsy, several of whom “walked with canes, limping deeply, or leaned on crutches.”⁴³ Armed with personal photographs and keen to share their stories, an “immediate bond” formed between the two groups.⁴⁴ The Vietnam veterans’ visit to Moscow culminated in the laying of red carnations at Friendship Park in the northwest outskirts of the city. For three years, the afgangtsy had unsuccessfully lobbied municipal authorities for a piece of land on which to erect a memorial. Exasperated by bureaucratic obstruction, “a group of them simply went out and ‘liberated’” a field of seven-and-a-half acres, “galvanizing public support for the project.”⁴⁵ It was embraced by the city soon thereafter, and following a “simple but well-attended unofficial dedication in June 1988,” the Moscow City Council donated the land to the local afgangtsy club.⁴⁶ Still a work in progress, the memorial consisted of “a huge chip of quarystone” with a bronze plaque that read, “A MEMORIAL WILL BE ESTABLISHED HERE FOR THE INTERNATIONALISTS WHO DIED IN AFGHANISTAN.”⁴⁷ Its unpretentious nature resonated for Peter Mahoney, who recalled his return from Vietnam in 1971. “The next day,” Mahoney wrote, “nearly 1,000 Vietnam veterans gathered in front of the Capitol.”

⁴² Mahoney, “The Wounds of Two Wars.”

⁴³ Heinemann, “The Road From Afghanistan,” 114.

⁴⁴ Mahoney, “The Wounds of Two Wars.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Heinemann, “The Road From Afghanistan,” 163.

⁴⁷ Ibid. Capitalization in original.

Each man walked up to the chain-link fence and threw back the medals he had won in Vietnam... In my mind, it was undoubtedly the most powerful anti-war demonstration that ever took place. I did not take part. ... I told myself I wasn't ready yet... But the truth is that I simply lost my nerve.

Now I will leave my medals all over the Soviet Union to make my own small antiwar statement 17 years later.⁴⁸

On the night that followed, the Vietnam veterans departed to Kazakhstan and arrived to a different pomp and circumstance. In what spoke to how sharply divided regional and republican Komsomols could be in terms of political orientation in the years of glasnost, their reception in Alma-Ata was a carefully orchestrated act of “flowers and handshakes and songs, [with] an official film crew taking pictures.”⁴⁹ The afgantsy to whom the Vietnam veterans were introduced were “unwilling to share more than mundane experiences” and were “carefully chosen by the local Komsomol,” whose officials skulked about the outskirts of the proceedings.⁵⁰ The illusion imploded two days later as the veterans prepared to travel to Riskulova Cemetery to lay flowers upon graves and speak with soldiers' mothers. No sooner had everyone boarded a bus than the Komsomol officials announced that the trip was cancelled, fearing any deviation from propagandistic propriety. Infuriated, an afganets named Baikal tore off his military jacket and declared to an official, “we are going to the cemetery and there isn't anything [you] can do to stop us.”⁵¹ In what spoke their growing disillusion with state organs of the past,

⁴⁸ Mahoney, “The Wounds of Two Wars.”

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

one afganets remarked to the Vietnam veterans, “All the Komsomol bureaucrats have to lose is their position and their privilege. All we have to lose is our chains.”⁵²

Solidarity in Mourning

We got to know each other at the cemetery, by the gravesides. You’ll see one mother hurrying from the bus in the evening after work; another already sitting by her gravestone, crying; a third painting the railing round her son’s grave. We talk about only one thing – our children, as if they were still alive. I know some of their stories by heart.

- Soldier’s mother⁵³

When the party of Vietnam and Afghan war veterans arrived at Riskulova Cemetery, they began to travel from one grave to another of afgantsy 19 to 20 years of age. At each grave, the Vietnam veterans’ translator told the story of the deceased according to their mother or a fellow afganets. It took little time for the tour to give way to an emotional blowout for all involved, with Larry Heinemann and Peter Mahoney highlighting a particular instance that resonated for both of them. “Most of all, I remember the Mother,” wrote Mahoney after he returned to the United States.⁵⁴ Unnamed in both men’s accounts, the Mother’s words were:

Just before my son was to come home, he wrote that I should make something sweet. For months after he was killed, I cooked these dishes. . . . My life has no meaning. Night is the same as day. There’s no pain in the world like the pain of a

⁵² Heinemann, “The Road From Afghanistan,” 162.

⁵³ Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 123.

⁵⁴ Mahoney, “The Wounds of Two Wars.”

mother who has lost her son.⁵⁵

As the translator and the veterans around her shed tears for the death of a soldier, an afganets named Sergei approached and locked eyes with the Mother. Reaching to his coat pocket, he gave her a folded photograph of her son's body in a coffin that he smuggled home from Afghanistan. "I am luckier than most mothers," she stated after viewing it. "Because even though my son is dead, at least I have proof, *here*, in this photograph."⁵⁶

Brothers in Arms

Our feelings pained through the war are very much in common. You are older and more experienced and we believe that our communication would help us to solve many problems.

... The dirty war was over at last. But... had left thousands and thousands of injured individuals, broken souls and saddened fates.

An Afghan syndrome – a heavyache [sic] disease – are suicides, drunkenness, drug addiction, bumming, crimes. Is it normal?

...

It is very important for us to know your experience of overcoming Vietnam syndrome. ... Let us communicate together, live together and further.

- afganets, letter to Vietnam Veterans Against the War⁵⁷

The September and December 1988 visits of Vietnam veterans to the Soviet Union were remarkable for the long-term ties that followed. In February 1989, shortly

⁵⁵ Cited in Heinemann, "The Road From Afghanistan," 166.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ "Afghan Veteran Addresses VVAW," *Veteran* 20, 2 (Summer 1990): 17.

after the 40th Army's withdrawal, a documentary entitled *Brothers in Arms* aired in the United States. Shot by King Harris, who served with the navy in Saigon, it focused primarily on the December 1988 group's time in Alma-Ata. Interviewees ranged from American and Kazakh veterans, to mothers of the deceased, to an everyday citizen who stated that the invasion of Afghanistan was "a mistake of our government."⁵⁸ A departure from previous American coverage of the conflict, it focused on "post-war stresses such as suicide, alcohol and drug abuse and guilt."⁵⁹ Widely praised by its viewers, ABC News – the nation-wide network that had declined Harris's proposal for a documentary – followed the example of *Brothers in Arms* with its own broadcast on the topic in an episode of *20/20*.⁶⁰ Many years later, with the United States engaged in its own war in Afghanistan, King Harris was praised as "the first TV news reporter to record this historic event," with his documentary "as relevant today as it was in 1988" and screened at American film festivals.⁶¹

The broadcast of *Brothers in Arms* was followed soon after by the first visit of afgantsy to meet with Vietnam veterans in Washington, D.C. in April 1989. It began with a viewing of the Vietnam War memorial, after which the afgantsy were introduced to Western practices of psychological rehabilitation. Among the visitors was Vladislav Tamarov, who "first heard about PTSD" from Vietnam veteran John Messmore when he "went with the Vietnamsy to the 'terribly secret' hospital for the disabled afgantsy" in

⁵⁸ Howard Rosenberg, "A Big Story for a Small Station," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 February 1989, accessed 23 March 2017, http://articles.latimes.com/1989-02-24/entertainment/ca-159_1_small-station.

⁵⁹ "Investigative & Documentary," *Broadcasting* 117, 23 (4 December 1989) accessed 22 March 2017, americanradiohistory.com/Archive-BC/BC-1989/BC-1989-12-04.pdf.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "14th Annual San Luis Obispo International Film Festival," 19 March 2008, accessed 23 March 2017, www.americantowns.com/ca/sanluisobispo/news/14th-annual-san-luis-obispo-international-film-festival-86348.

September 1988.⁶² His education from the VVA was a revelation; his nightmares about the Afghan war had not come into play until two years after his return and suddenly had context.⁶³ “In the US there are 186 psychological rehab centres open to help Vietnam vets,” he recorded in his notes from the visit. “We don’t even have one such centre. And so we look for... help from people. That is when we run against misunderstandings. From these misunderstandings... comes the turning inward, into oneself.”⁶⁴ Tamarov, who “secretly photographed whatever he saw around him with a cheap camera [and] rigged up a darkroom at his base camp,” went on to hold an exhibit at a San Francisco gallery in 1992 that coincided with the translation of his memoir.⁶⁵ John Messmore, by now a friend of Tamarov’s, praised his work, stating “He knows what we went through... it was the same for the Russian soldier. In some ways, they have it worse. If you lost your arm and leg because of the war, you are doomed to being hidden in your family’s home. You become an embarrassment.”⁶⁶

Vietnam veterans continued to travel overseas to assist the afgantsy as the Soviet Union neared its collapse. Particularly noteworthy was Bob Coalson, twice wounded in action, who travelled to Moscow alongside six other veterans in August 1990. A collaboration between the Vietnam Veterans of California, the Leningrad District Afgantsy Club, and the Western-trained Dr. Valera Mikhailovskii, it was “the first known

⁶² Tamarov, *Afghanistan: a Russian Soldier’s Story*, 174.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 164

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

⁶⁵ John Boudreau, “The Faces of War: A Russian Soldier Smuggled a Camera to the Front in Afghanistan,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 July 1992, accessed 23 March 2017, [articles.latimes.com/1992-07-21/news/vw-4425_1_russian-soldier](https://www.latimes.com/1992-07-21/news/vw-4425_1_russian-soldier). Tamarov’s memoir was re-published in November 2001 following the onset of the United States’ war in Afghanistan.

⁶⁶ Cited in John Boudreau, “The Faces of War: A Russian Soldier Smuggled a Camera to the Front in Afghanistan,” *Los Angeles Times*, 21 July 1992, accessed 23 March 2017, [articles.latimes.com/1992-07-21/news/vw-4425_1_russian-soldier](https://www.latimes.com/1992-07-21/news/vw-4425_1_russian-soldier).

attempt at a joint Soviet-American psychotherapeutic effort involving veterans and professionals.” Their aim was to lobby state authorities to discard the “antiquated treatment system founded after 1945” and go beyond beyond the “sanitarium approach” in the treatment of veterans.⁶⁷ The workshop in which Coalson participated saw the seven Vietnam veterans paired with seven afgangtsy at a “remote lakeside camp known as Belina” 50 miles outside of Moscow, where they “shared cabins, did camp chores, prepared meals and conducted activities” with interpreters.⁶⁸ During this time, stories of trauma and mourning were shared, with soldiers’ mothers visiting to share their stories.

Coalson’s observations contributed to Western studies of Soviet psychiatry in its final years. The notion of *dedovshchina* as “intensive forms of hazing” which differed from that of the U.S. Marine Corps required that professionals “focus on the traumatic nature of military indoctrination” in their counseling of afgangtsy.⁶⁹ Unique to their struggles, Coalson argued, was the military’s recall of those who had served in Afghanistan to disband public protests in their own republics. Most notable at the time he wrote was the violent dispersion of a demonstration in Tbilisi, Georgia on 9 April 1989 in which army units were said to have used “clubs, shovels, and chemical and nerve-paralyzing agents against the people,” leaving 19 dead and hundreds injured.⁷⁰ Other examples included the violent dispersal of demonstrations in Azerbaijan, and the recruitment of afgangtsy to “provide earthquake relief in Armenia,” with one of the seven

⁶⁷ Bob Coalson, “The Trauma of War: Homecoming After Afghanistan,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 33, 4 (1993): 49, 56.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 50.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 53.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 54; Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 351.

afgantsy at the Belina camp telling Coalson of his guilt and “recurring nightmares” after “trying to rescue a small girl trapped under a wall.” Drawing a comparison to veterans ordered to “suppress riots caused by minority unrest and antiwar demonstrations” in America, Coalson highlighted that “this is a traumatic postwar experience often overlooked in PTSD assessment and treatment of Vietnam vets.”⁷¹

Reflecting on the two-week workshop, Coalson was optimistic: despite “limited access to trained counselors and therapists” and the political instability of the time, the afgantsy were developing approaches to PTSD which focused on the “teaching and practice of self-management.” Among the most refined was what Dr. Mikhailovskii termed “self-regulation” (samoregulatsiia), which mixed “Taoist philosophy, yoga theories, Eastern folk medicine... and cultural traditions representing the different ethnic groups in the USSR.”⁷² In other words, a blend of practices that were forbidden until the years of glasnost.

The Splintering of the Moscow Trust Group

As the number of grassroots movements and officially recognized NGOs in the Soviet Union increased, so too did their politicization and internal debate. In the case of the Moscow Trust Group this came in summer 1987 following surge in popularity that followed a seminar coordinated by Valeriia Novodvorskaia entitled “Democracy and Humanism.” The new members drawn to the group, in contrast to its young pacifist founders, hailed largely from those “hardened by their labour camp experiences... [and]

⁷¹ Coalson, “The Trauma of War: Homecoming After Afghanistan,” 54.

⁷² Ibid, 59.

repression.”⁷³ This was followed by Irina Krivova’s speech at an International Seminar on Humanitarian Affairs and Human Rights in which she proposed a “much broader” program that went beyond opposition to the Soviet-Afghan War, and “urged ending the widescale military training conducted in Soviet schools and guaranteeing the right of conscientious or religious objectors to an alternative to universal compulsory military service.”⁷⁴ As founding member of the Moscow Helsinki Group Liudmila Alekseeva observed from overseas, “In the spring of 1988, the Trust Group divided into two factions... which radicalized some and repelled others.”⁷⁵ Those who remained in the group and continued to publish their thoughts in *Den’ za dnem* included Aleksandr Rubchenko and Nikolai Khramov. Andrei Krivov and Irina Krivova, meanwhile, formed a separate group that published a bulletin entitled *Doverie* (Trust). The latter placed opposition to the Soviet-Afghan War higher in their priorities. Indeed, their debut issue featured a declaration penned by Krivova entitled “Peace to the Land of Afghanistan!” that expressed frustration with a docile Soviet public. “For eight years, Afghanistan has been in the flames of a brutal war, as Soviet soldiers try to bring the rebellious Afghan people to their knees,” she began.

And for eight years, the Soviet people have silently supported this lawlessness and abuse of human rights... Consoled by justifications of “supporting the revolution” or “the threat of imperialist aggression” and more recently the so-called “policy of national reconciliation.” Even glasnost did not remove the veil from people’s eyes over the real situation in Afghanistan; even the thousands of

⁷³ Alekseeva and Fitzpatrick, *Nyeformaly: Civil Society in the USSR*, 50.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 53.

dead and mutilated “heroes” of the war did not shake their faith in the “peace-loving mission” of the Soviet state and the army.⁷⁶

Yet despite her criticism of public inaction, Krivova saw progress in the Moscow Trust Group’s actions. Recalling the demonstrations on 25 to 27 December 1987 coordinated in Moscow, Leningrad, and L’vov, she praised the “separate voices of protest against the inhuman destruction of the Afghan people” which “for the first time... set forth with posters on the streets.”⁷⁷

Indeed, Krivova seized upon this momentum to stage a demonstration on Pushkin Square on 19 February 1988. Though small in numbers with just two fellow activists by her side, their verbal and written slogans were immediately provocative, among them “Recognize the right to refuse to serve in the army!” and “Alternative service contributes to the cause of Peace!” It took little time stir a public reaction as citizens accused Krivova and her two supporters of being “provocateurs,” attempted to tear down their posters, and demanded, “You may not WANT to serve, but who will defend the Motherland?”⁷⁸ Among those who confronted Krivova was the mother of a future recruit. “My son will serve in the army this spring, and I am proud of him for doing so,” she declared. “But how can he defend the Motherland with confidence when behind him are pacifists!”⁷⁹ The disgruntled mother of a conscript went on to be one of six “witnesses” who testified against Irina Krivova and her fellow activists for their unsanctioned demonstration. Yet according to Krivova, the mother became less agitated upon hearing the trio’s defense of

⁷⁶ Irina Krivova, “Mir zemle Afganistana!,” *Doverie* 1 (January 1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 20.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Irina Krivova, “Demonstratsiia za al’ternativnuiu sluzhby v Moskve,” *Doverie* 2 (February 1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 16.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

their actions: true to the Moscow Trust Group's founding principle of working within the boundaries of Soviet laws, they cited "a directive on alternative service passed by the Council of People's Commissars and signed by Lenin" on 4 January 1919, which granted "the right to refuse service in the army for reasons of conscience."⁸⁰ "They were quite surprised," recalled Irina Krivova. "In the Polish People's Republic and the GDR, the law was recognized. ... How can one put forward a demand that is unconstitutional?"⁸¹ In a lenient response from the authorities, Krivova and her colleagues were detained for only an hour and had their posters returned. Reflecting on the event, she was optimistic. "To [the conscript's mother] and many like her, it is difficult to understand us," she admitted, "and yet, if one day she will think about it, tell her son, her neighbours, her colleagues... perhaps our ideas will spread."⁸²

Thus, for Andrei and Irina, the Afghan Question was a springboard for discussion on a range of topics that went beyond annual protests against the war. These ranged from an alternative to universal military service; to polemic on ongoing affairs ("Who will guarantee that today's murderers in the Erevan airport will not be sent to another Afghanistan tomorrow?"); to interviews with Western scholars.⁸³ Published in the

⁸⁰ Ibid, ll. 16-17. Krivova's choice of words omits the fact that the 1919 directive granted release from military service only to individuals' whose religious beliefs ran contrary to military service. Nor was their exemption a foregone conclusion. Each case required an examination by the United Council of Religious Communities and Groups (Ob'edinennogo soveta religioznykh obshchin i grupp), and individuals were expected to carry out "sanitary work primarily in infectious hospitals, or other relevant labour" as an alternative. See: "Dekret soveta narodnykh komissarov ot 4 ianvaria 1919 g. ob osvobozhdenii ot voinskoi povinnosti po religiozным ubezhdeniiam," *Den za dnem* 10 (1987), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, ll. 33-34.

⁸¹ Irina Krivova, "Demonstratsiia za al'ternativnuiu sluzhbu v Moskve," *Doverie* 2 (February 1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 17.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ [untitled], *Doverie* 9 (September 1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 5. This refers to a clash between protesters and Soviet troops at Zvartnots Airport on 5 July 1988, in light of the KPSU's refusal to grant Armenia unification with Nagorno-Karabakh. It left one dead and thirty-six injured. See: Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization*, 187.

September 1988 issue of *Doverie* was an interview with Dr. Barnett Rubin of Yale University, who wrote extensively on the Soviet-Afghan War beginning in 1985.⁸⁴ Hosted at a Trust Group member's apartment, Dr. Rubin answered a range of questions that addressed the course of Soviet-Afghan relations from 1965 onward. His interview was dismissive of Cold War myths propagated by the Soviet Union ("As far as I know, there was never any plan to open an American military base on Afghan territory") and the United States alike ("I'm quite sure that 'toy mines' {min-igrushek} are not used by the mujahideen, and I'm not even sure they are used by Soviet troops"), and focused largely on questions unaddressed in the Soviet media.⁸⁵ How did the United States aid refugees from Afghanistan? What of the Sunni-Shia conflict? Would the 40th Army's withdrawal give way to Civil War? The choice of questions posed in the interview captured at once the freedom of speech that came with the maturation of glasnost, and grassroots organizations' growing fascination with the Western perspective on Soviet affairs. The fates of the afgantsy themselves, just as in the mindset of Sakharov's generation, went unmentioned in the interview with Dr. Rubin.

The tone struck by Nikolai Khramov, Aleksandr Rubchenko and those who remained at *Den' za dnem* was notably different than that of *Doverie* for its omission of the Afghan war from its pages. Their April-May 1988 issue, for example, gave no mention of the Geneva Accords and the 40th Army's withdrawal from Afghanistan. Instead, the only reference to the war was one of KGB responses to public

⁸⁴ Prior to this, Rubin focused on Indo-Pakistani politics. See: Barnett R. Rubin, "Private Power and Public Investment in India" (Ph.D., University of Chicago, August 1982); "Feudal Revolt and Statebuilding in India" (M.A., University of Chicago, March 1976).

⁸⁵ Barnett Rubin, "Afganistan vchera, segodnia, zavtra," *Doverie* (September 1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 4, 9.

demonstrations and a private seminar held one month prior. While Khramov could boast of leaflets spread in advance having drawn “more than 100 people” for a “demonstration against the war in Afghanistan and the militarization of Soviet society” on 23 February, the same method proved in vain for the Trust Group’s seminar on democratization: the only 20 people who showed up were the organizers, and the KGB shut the activity down within three minutes.⁸⁶ Six years after its foundation the Trust Group remained active but struggled to expand its audience. Perhaps the greatest missed opportunity came in the way it chose to advocate for soldiers’ mothers.

On 15 April 1988 the Moscow Trust Group copied an open letter to the Ministry of Defense, the Central Committee, and the Soviet Peace Committee to address a mother’s case against the Soviet Army. Her son, Oleg Balak was conscripted in July 1984 and refused to serve based on pacifism grounded in religious belief; they were one of five families belonging to an unregistered community of Evangelical Christians in the Sums’ka province of the Ukrainian SSR. As a result, he was sentenced to two years and six months in a labour camp, the “inhuman conditions” of which “almost left him an invalid.”⁸⁷ Despite having served his sentence, Oleg Balak was drafted again in spring 1988 with employees of the military commissariat informing his mother that, “if Oleg refuses to serve this time, then she ‘will not see her son again’.”⁸⁸ The Trust Group’s open letter called for its readers to lobby Soviet institutions for Balak’s freedom, and to abolish the Soviet Army’s right to recall an individual “who has already served a

⁸⁶ Nikolai Khramov, “Gorbachev, gde Krichevskii?” *Den za dnem* 4 (1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 11.

⁸⁷ “Zaiavlenie v zashchitu Olega Balaka,” *Den za dnem* 4 (1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 6.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 7.

sentence for his convictions.”⁸⁹ Absent from the 16 signatories of the letter was Raisa Balak – the mother of Oleg who first began the war of letters with the Ministry of Defense and appealed to the Trust Group for help. It was a letter that mirrored those of the Moscow Helsinki Group before them, its only difference being easier circulation at a time of glasnost.

The breakaway faction of the Trust Group led by Andrei Krivov and Irina Krivova took a different approach to addressing the concerns of soldiers’ mothers. Rather than pen an appeal to authorities on her behalf, they handed the pen to V.V. Tokareva herself to write in *Doverie*. What followed was a 12-page account of her son’s grueling experience with *dedovshchina*, his repeated hospitalization, and the army’s refusal to discharge him. Vladislav Tokarev’s service began in May 1985, and when his parents first saw him after Basic Military Training he was covered in bruises. Asked why he hadn’t informed his commander of the hazing, Vladislav replied, “They pretend that they don’t know anything at all. And if you say anything, you’ll be seen as a snitch (*stukach*) and they’ll either kill you or leave you as an invalid.”⁹⁰ Vladislav’s letters from the barracks were just as frank, and Tokareva received them without obstruction from the censors well before the years of glasnost. “On my third night here I was woken up and beaten into a concussion,” Vladislav wrote on 17 September 1985. “Now my head aches, my heart beats irregularly... and my money has been stolen.”⁹¹ In the New Year he went further, and began to give names. “The *stariki* are mocking us, especially Bashkatov, Kravchenko and Mel’nik,” he detailed on 29 January 1986.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “Pis’mo materi Tokareva V.V.,” *Doverie* 2 (1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 18.

⁹¹ Ibid, l. 19.

They wanted me to buy electronic watches from them. I refused. But they said: “Quit bullshitting and give us money.” ... If I don’t give them 60 rubles per week, they’ll damage my kidneys and tell the company’s deputy political officer that I’ve stolen a watch... If I don’t find the money, they will make me a thief. ... And if I go to the medical unit to be treated, they will kill me.⁹²

This letter led Tokareva to travel to her son’s barracks in an effort to retrieve him from his superiors. By the time she arrived, he had been hospitalized with a range of physical injuries and mental trauma. During her seven days at the medical unit, Tokareva met the *stariki* who justified beating her son because he was allegedly drunk at the time. “Each of them asked for forgiveness, and at the same time, told me: ‘Don’t forget that your son has served only eight months and has more than a year to go,’” Tokareva wrote in her February 1988 article. “That means that they will kill my son. They are not soldiers, but a motley crew of gangsters. ... This is not an army, but a concentration camp.”⁹³

Following his dismissal from the hospital, Vladimir was redeployed from Leningrad to Vologda, from Vologda to Kuchera, from Kuchera to Kirovograd. And at each camp, the result was the same: physical and mental abuse followed by hospitalization, with his mother’s pleading for Vladimir’s discharge falling upon deaf ears. When in summer 1986 she confronted a Dr. Tymbalo and demanded that her son “quickly be transferred to a mental hospital to see a doctor,” Tokareva drew only laughter from the man. “If you have a referral, let’s see it,” he scoffed. “In fact, you can put it in a frame, hang it above your bed, and enjoy. I’m the doctor here, and I know whether or not

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid, l. 20.

he needs to be treated!” According to Vladimir’s letters, Dr. Tymbalo’s medical advice included such suggestions as “Why don’t you hang yourself? I’ll give you a rope and watch while you do it.”⁹⁴

Having exhausted her efforts to persuade military and medical authorities, Tokareva penned a letter to Gorbachev himself and asked that he intervene on the matter. It was an action that backfired immediately, as she discovered in a letter from her son dated 26 November 1986. “Everyone knows that you complained to the Central Committee,” he explained. “The company told me: ‘You knew that she would complain to the Central Committee. Why didn’t you tell us? We took you to a psychiatric hospital in Leningrad on 19 November, on the agreement that it would be kept quiet....’”⁹⁵ With his mother’s letter having stirred resentment, Vladimir’s psychiatrist was contacted ahead of time by his commanding officer and instructed not to admit him to hospital. Instead, he was diagnosed with “light stress” and returned to the barracks. When his mother received notice of Vladimir’s medical evaluation, it read as “psychosis and obsessive ideas” – the same as Soviet psychiatric diagnoses of dissidents in the past.⁹⁶ He was sent home on 28 December 1986 due to worsening physical and psychological conditions. Any relief the parents might have felt was short lived: in what echoed the phrase of callous indifference to the afgantsy’s well-being, the family psychiatrist refused to treat Vladimir and stated “I didn’t promise you anything.” A procurator, likewise, refused to press charges over the abuse he experienced in the army. As it turned out, Vladimir’s case had been assigned to a military tribunal on 13 and 14 April 1987. Tokareva threatened to turn to the United

⁹⁴ Ibid, l. 24.

⁹⁵ Ibid, l. 25.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Nations Commission on Human Rights when she learned of this, so that “the global public will learn of what is done in our army.”⁹⁷ Her words fell on deaf ears and Vladimir was sentenced to four years at a corrective labour colony, where he remained at the time Tokareva’s article was printed.⁹⁸

The contrast in how the editors of *Den’ za dnem* and *Doverie* treated the Soviet-Afghan War and the accounts of soldiers’ mothers spoke to the creative differences in activism that came with glasnost. In 1987 the Moscow Trust Group had penned a manifesto in response to President Najibullah’s policy of “National Reconciliation” that marked resurgence in its activity after a change in membership. By 1988, its members shared common goals of peace, disarmament, and an alternative to military service but differed in terms of their means and priorities. Khramov and those at *Den’ za dnem* remained true to the form of open letters signed by the intelligentsia on behalf of the masses and refocused on the past, be it the 20th anniversary of the Prague Spring or the legacy of “informal Stalinism” exhibited by Nina Andreeva in her essay “I Cannot Forego My Principles” (*Ne mogu postupat’sia printsipami*), which deemed Gorbachev’s policies a betrayal of the political foundation of the Soviet Union.⁹⁹ Those who broke away from the Trust Group, in contrast, extended authorship to everyday citizens and focused on newborn topics such as the “Afghan syndrome.”¹⁰⁰ With its key members having split on issues of priority and Valeriia Novodvorskaia and Evgeniia Debrianskaia

⁹⁷ Ibid, l. 29.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ See: “Novoe myshlenie ili doktrina Brezhneva?,” *Den’ za dnem* 8 (1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, ll. 3-5; Nikolai Khramov, “Dvadtsatiletie vtorzheniia v Chekhoslovakiiu: miting v Moskve,” *Den za dnem* 8 (1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, ll. 6-11.

¹⁰⁰ Ia. Krasnorutskaia, A. Mananinkov, and A. Novikov, “Afganskii Sindrom,” *Doverie* 5-6 (1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, ll. 7-19; Nikolai Khramov, “Rotaprintnaia revoliutsiia?,” *Den za dnem* 9 (1988), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, ll. 8-13.

having registered a political party named the Democratic Union on 8 May 1988, the Moscow Trust Group essentially dissolved by the end of the year.

The Mobilization of Soldiers' Mothers

If you will be my Russian mother, I will be your American son.

- Vietnam veteran¹⁰¹

I really want to talk to American mothers. There must be something *we* can do. ...

How can they treat our boys like cannon meat? Not cannon fodder but *meat!*”

- Soldier's mother¹⁰²

On 24 May 1987, approximately seven years after the Russian Women's Independent Religious Club (Mariia) called on soldiers' mothers to persuade their sons to choose a prison sentence over military service, an open letter penned by ten female signatories graced the pages of *Den' za dnem*.¹⁰³ “Dear friends!” it began, “We appeal to you to take action for Nuclear Disarmament on Children's Day. It is the participation of women in the peace process that can lead to children sleeping... and not having to think about war!”¹⁰⁴ Echoing Mariia's religious bent, the authors declared that “The time of Holy Wars has passed,” and stated:

Ares, the god of war... and personal cruelties continue to excite men's foolish hearts. Young men like to play war. Growing up, they become soldiers... [and] politicians [who] decide issues at gunpoint in this frozen peace of the “Cold War.”

¹⁰¹ Cited in Heinemann, “The Road From Afghanistan,” 167.

¹⁰² Cited in Ibid. Italics as in original.

¹⁰³ Svetlana Aivazova, “Russkie zhenshchiny v labirinte ravnopraviia,” accessed 28 October 2015, www.owl.ru/win/books/rw/o2_2.htm.

¹⁰⁴ Irina Krivova et al, “Dorogie podrugii!” *Den' za dnem* (May 1987), AMM, f. 103, op. 5, d. 7, l. 8.

... More and more money is burned in the furnace of their wartime ambitions. ... Today our husbands and children are killed in Afghanistan, in Central America... while our children are losing their fathers.¹⁰⁵

The manifesto was at once a renewal of Mariia's calls to shelter Soviet sons from conscription, and a product of Gorbachev's concessions to religious freedom. "Think of the goddess Athena," it continued. "She was able to protect people from Greek strife, hatred, and war. ... A patroness of women's peace work... She took up a shield and... prevented the destruction wrought by forces of evil."¹⁰⁶ The authors argued that women "should have the right to a voice in deciding matters of war and peace" and proposed cuts to the military budget in order to accommodate reforms such as:

- Reducing women's work days by two hours, with full pay;
- The elimination of women's employment in heavy physical labour;
- Paid maternal leave for raising children to the age of two;
- The requirement for pediatricians to make home visits.¹⁰⁷

Such demands reinforced traditional notions of motherhood, a principle that played a key role in the platform of one of the most successful NGOs to come of the Gorbachev era: the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. "Feminism for me, is a movement for women's rights," remarked the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' Press-Secretary Valentina Mel'nikova in 1995.

But the thing is... in our country, *nobody had rights*... We shouldn't make separations: we're just citizens. Maybe when basic rights are observed... then

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, ll. 8-9.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, l. 9-10.

there can be some... supplementary women's struggle... Nobody in this organization thinks that women are particularly oppressed.¹⁰⁸

This was a marked contrast to the dissidents affiliated with the Moscow Helsinki Group and its emulation of Western values. Liudmilla Alekseeva, one of its founding members, rejected Mel'nikova's principle. "When the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers began... my 'maternal instinct' told me *not* to [get involved]," Alekseeva remarked. "Because it could reverberate negatively on the fate of my sons. ... I had *other* motives than maternal instinct. ... I want my children to live in a democratic country...."¹⁰⁹ As with the split between the Moscow Trust Group members affiliated with *Den' za dnem* and *Doverie*, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers and the Moscow Helsinki Group – which reorganized in July 1989 – were not opposed to one another but operated differently in their observation of human rights.

The Foundation of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers

The duty of a mother is to prepare her son for the defense of the Fatherland, so that he may serve with honor. But how should she respond to her son when he talks about "*dedovshchina*" in his letters from the army?

- Mariia Kirbasova, 1990¹¹⁰

Born in the Kalmyk Autonomous SSR, Mariia Kirbasova (1941-2011) was an engineer of Buddhist faith with pacifist ideals and a believer in "the friendship of the

¹⁰⁸ Cited in Valerie Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia: Engendering Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 72. Italics as in original.

¹⁰⁹ Cited in Caiazza, *Mothers and Soldiers*, 125. Italics as in original.

¹¹⁰ Cited in Françoise Dauce, "Les mouvements de mères de soldats à la recherche d'une place dans la société russe," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 28, 2 (1997): 123.

peoples protected by the big brother of Russia” until her 18-year-old son, Petia, was drafted in 1988.¹¹¹ Kirbasova’s initial reaction was not anti-military in sentiment. Rather, she penned “a series of letters to officials at the Ministry of Defence, protesting her son’s assignment to a training program in radar technology rather than in his specialty of computer science.”¹¹² Their responses ranged from indifference to rejection, although officials agreed “to transfer Petr to a computing centre... after he completed his training.”¹¹³

Kirbasova’s objection to her son’s military service at a time of post-secondary education spoke to a surreptitious revision of laws on students’ rights to deferral that took place during the Soviet-Afghan War. The first wave of full-time students to be drafted since the 1967 Law on Military Service came in spring 1982, and the number of those granted deferments dwindled in the years that followed. Beginning in 1985, even students of the prestigious Faculty of Physics at Moscow State University were called up for military service. By the time they completed their rotation in 1987, professors had initiated a debate on the challenges student draftees faced upon their return. This culminated in the publication of a roundtable discussion in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, wherein educators argued that the Soviet draft bore “a serious impact on the health of the nation’s educational and research establishments,” with one historian adding that “Those returning from the army follow instructions well... but there will be no Newtons among them.

¹¹¹ Sophie Lambroschini, “Mère poule courage,” *Libération*, 26 juin 1996, 44.

¹¹² Steven Lee Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 196.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

Apparently their creative capacities atrophy and die.”¹¹⁴

Petia Kirbasov was among the top-ten first-year students enrolled at the Moscow Energy Institute when he was drafted.¹¹⁵ While Mariia Kirbasova later admitted that her son “did not deploy to Afghanistan, he did not die of hunger, [and] he was not tortured by his elders,” he lost 14 kilograms in weight and endured racial discrimination as a Kalmyk in the army.¹¹⁶ It was the latter that drove Kirbasova to demand that her son be transferred “to a regiment where he would not have to suffer the bullying of his peers,” after she received word that one of his officers complained of “all those black asses (chernozhopyi) who are in the barracks.”¹¹⁷ After officers’ non-response, Kirbasova argued that her son was “on the brink of suicide.” A colonel answered, “So what? Look, when he hangs himself, we’ll look into what happened.”¹¹⁸ It was this attitude toward her son’s welfare that drove Kirbasova to recruit soldiers’ mothers to challenge military authorities as a registered NGO.

To question the conduct of a Soviet Army storied for its victory in the Great Patriotic War was to challenge public perceptions ingrained in the collective conscience for more than 40 years. Recalling readers’ responses to his gritty reportage from Afghanistan, Artem Borovik remarked:

A lot of my letters were from sisters of women who had their sons fighting in Afghanistan. ... They said, “How did you dare write so many bloody scenes. Now, imagine my sister reading it, how she’ll feel, all about this war, having her

¹¹⁴ Cited in *ibid*, 194.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 195.

¹¹⁶ Lambroschini, “Mère poule courage,” 44.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*. The pejorative “black asses” is used to refer to those from the Caucasus.

¹¹⁸ As cited in Caiazza, *Mothers & Soldiers*, 124.

son there. How did you dare to write it?”¹¹⁹

Such letters were symptomatic of the “considerable resistance below the elite level to attempts to reduce secrecy” in Soviet society.¹²⁰ It was not only conservative state authorities that bristled at such aspects of glasnost, but everyday citizens.

The Ministry of Defence was at first dismissive of Kirbasova’s criticism, and recycled old statements on the army being “an important school for building character,” pointing to “studies showing that 85% of student-conscripts completed their studies after their release from the armed forces.”¹²¹ The addition of mothers’ voices to the debate on military service, however, led military authorities to undertake new measures of rebuttal. It was one thing to attack Iurii Poliakov in the pages of *Krasnaia zvezda* over his depiction of *dedovshchina* in “100 Days...,” or to carry on a war of words with those at the Academy of Science. It was another to attack the mother of a conscript with first-hand accounts of abuse. As a result, the Ministry of Defence adopted a new strategy of organizing “staged military settlements” (*pokaznye voyennyye gorodki*) to appease outside inspectors. Among soldiers’ tasks were “turning mess halls into restaurants” and relocating to different quarters to impress visitors, “while the real needs of the servicemen were ignored.”¹²² It was a ruse that so backfired, even mothers who were not opposed to the draft visited the barracks and reported seeing “their talented boys, promised a bright future, lodged in miserable conditions and occupied with tasks that

¹¹⁹ “Interview with Artem Borovik, 4 June 1988,” Box 98, Folder 7, Hedrick Smith Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹²⁰ Mikhail Tsyarkin, “The Soviet Military: Glasnost? Against Secrecy,” *Problems of Communism* 40, 3 (1991): 51.

¹²¹ Solnick, *Stealing the State*, 194-95.

¹²² Tsyarkin, “The Soviet Military: Glasnost? Against Secrecy,” 51.

were entirely unrelated to the military.”¹²³

As civil-military relations worsened, the clash between Gorbachev’s reformers and the military brass became increasingly clear. In October 1988, despite Mariia Kirbasova and post-secondary educators having lobbied against the conscription of students, 17 recent graduates of the National University of Kiev were called up for a *second* tour of duty in the Soviet Army, prompting protests on campus.¹²⁴ Soon thereafter, on 29 October, Gorbachev “suggested for the first time to a group of students that the terms of the draft could be open for review.” In his speech to the United Nations on 7 December 1988, he announced a unilateral reduction of 500,000 men in the Soviet armed forces, which was seen by many as a “concession to the educational community.”¹²⁵ While the Chief of Combat Training for Ground Forces stated that the drafting of post-secondary students “had always been regarded as a temporary measure,” for many this announcement was the latest in Gorbachev’s series of attacks on the Soviet Army, after having retired 1,200 generals in the past two years.¹²⁶

On 15 February 1989, the 40th Army completed its withdrawal from Afghanistan just as planned in the Geneva Accords. As soldiers crossed into Termez they were greeted by local Party and government officials, journalists, and mothers whose sons had not returned. Press coverage of the event was a throwback to the years before glasnost. “An orchestra played as the Nation welcomed the return of her sons, as they arrived home

¹²³ Anna Colin Lebedev, “Du souci maternel à l’action en commun: Le Comité des mères de soldats de Russie et ses requérants (1989-2001)” (PhD diss., Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Paris, 2009), 74.

¹²⁴ Solnick, *Stealing the State*, 195.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 196.

¹²⁶ Ibid; Robert V. Barylski, *The Soldier in Russian Politics: Duty, Dictatorship and Democracy Under Gorbachev and Yeltsin* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 48.

after fulfilling their international duty,” proclaimed *Pravda*.¹²⁷ Other publications opted for the tried-and-true emphasis on favourable statistics. “For 10 years, Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan repaired, rebuilt, and constructed hundreds of schools... over 30 hospitals... some 400 blocks of flats and 35 mosques,” beamed one such paper. “They were also engaged in guarding military and civilian installations in trouble.”¹²⁸ Nowhere in Termez was there a single representative from the Politburo, the Communist Party, or the Ministry of Defense. The Soviet-Afghan War wound to a close the same as it began, absent of public endorsement by those who set the 40th Army in motion.

On 17 March 1989, approximately one month to the day of the 40th Army’s withdrawal, *Komsomol’skaia pravda* reported of an afganets who had chosen suicide by hand grenade and over the course of the year Leningrad’s Hospital № 27 treated ten afgantsy who opted for poison.¹²⁹ It was to this backdrop that the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers registered as an NGO under the leadership of Mariia Kirbasova in April 1989. Hardly anti-state in its platform, the organization could point to the thousands of sons lost in Afghanistan as a call for both remembrance and military reform. With broad appeal to the parents, spouses, and relatives of those affected by conditions in the Soviet Army, the movement spread at a rapid pace that saw “a mix of local women’s organizations in multiple republics” appear in the years that followed. Those in Moscow alone hosted “weekly meetings of hundreds of parents, and a constant flow of young men” in search of deferrals.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Iu. Glukhov, “Podvodna chertu,” *Pravda*, 15 February 1989, 1, 4.

¹²⁸ Cited in Alexievich, *Zinky Boys*, 9.

¹²⁹ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 98.

¹³⁰ Caiazza, *Mothers & Soldiers*, 124.

The formal registration of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers came at a time of significant political reform, with the first general election to the Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR having taken place on 26 March 1989; runoffs were held on 2 and 9 April, with repeated elections on 20 April and 14 to 23 May for ridings that lacked an absolute majority.¹³¹ In its final composition the People's Deputies consisted of 2,250 members from a broad range of backgrounds. Among many others, 75 seats went to members of the Komsomol; 75 to those in the relatively new All-Union Organization of Veterans of War and Labour (Vsesoiuznaia organizatsiia veteranov voiny i truda) founded in December 1986; 75 to members of the Committee of Soviet Women; and 325 to those affiliated with organizations such as the Academy of Sciences. Also among its members were 120 afgangtsy and a range of high-profile individuals who had commented on the Soviet-Afghan War over the years such as Andrei Sakharov, the poet Evgenii Evtushenko, and dissident historian Roi Medvedev.¹³² Particularly valuable to the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers was Galina Starovoitova (1946-98), an advocate of ethnic minorities' rights who travelled to Armenia and Azerbaijan alongside Sakharov in December 1988 to negotiate reconciliation over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.¹³³

By the time of the Congress of People's Deputies' election, the debate over post-

¹³¹ "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics: Parliamentary Elections, Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, 1989," accessed 5 March 2017, www.ipu.org/english/parline/reports/arc/2263_89.htm.

¹³² Ibid; for statistics on afgangtsy deputies, see: N.I. Pikov, ed., *Voina v Afganistane* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1991), 308. Evgenii Evtushenko was notorious among the afgangtsy for his 1983 poem, "The Afghan Ant," (Afganskii muravei), which detailed an insect's thoughts as it traversed the face of a dead soldier. Leonid Molchanov, who served in Afghanistan in 1984 to 1986, wrote a poem in response to Evtushenko in January 1989. For the dueling verses between the two men, see: No author, "Pishu ia o tebe, Afganistan....," accessed 5 March 2017, www.bmks.ru/tsentralnaya_biblioteka/literaturnyj_navigator/kniz_vystav_obzory/pishu_ya_o_tebe_afganistan. Roi Medvedev, no stranger to the West after his critique of Stalinism in 1972's *Let History Judge*, commented on the Soviet-Afghan War throughout its duration, his earliest remarks coming in May 1980. See: Roy Medvedev, "The Afghan crisis," *New Left Review* 1, 121 (1980): 91.

¹³³ Valentina Mel'nikova, interview with author, August 2014.

secondary students' deferrals had spread nationwide and become part of the competition for votes. It was due at least in part to this that the Supreme Soviet opted to reinstate their deferrals as one of its final acts on 12 April 1989. This contributed to the defeat of "several senior military officials" and longtime Party apparatchiks "by younger officers promising military reform."¹³⁴

While the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers was encouraged by the reinstatement of post-secondary students' deferrals in April, many took issue with the wording of the order: it would not be implemented until 1989, and the 176,000 students drafted in 1988 – such as Mariia Kirbasova's son – were expected to complete their two years' service in the Soviet Army. The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers immediately appealed to the people's deputies for "the immediate release of all students from the ranks of the military."¹³⁵ Their approach was quite sophisticated compared to the stale rhetoric of their opponents. Army officers' statements reported by disgruntled recruits, such as "We'll beat the higher education out of you" had staying power in the Soviet press, while soldiers' mothers dug into history to support their stance. Among their key discoveries was "a little known decree from 1943 releasing students from service at the wartime front."¹³⁶ As the debate gained traction, Soviet youth who were ineligible for early dismissal from their military service began to vocalize their opinions on the matter. Among their targets of appeal was the increasingly popular, anti-establishment deputy, Boris Yeltsin. On 28 May 1989, with the first Congress of People's Deputies underway, D.A. Pershin wrote an appeal to Yeltsin. A former university student one year into his

¹³⁴ Solnick, *Stealing the State*, 196-97.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 197.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*.

military service, Pershin saw in Yeltsin “someone who is ready to deliver our request to our deputies’ committee.”¹³⁷ Targeting the recent law, he noted “They have offered to demobilize the students who are already taking one year off, as well as those entering university... in autumn 1989.” “We feel that this is unfair to us,” he continued.

Our peers were given the opportunity to learn calmly, without fear that tomorrow they could be removed from school, negating their semester’s work. For those who return from the Army, it is sometimes impossible to recover the progress they’d made. And with each passing month, our worries about this increase. ... So why not give the students called up in 1988 the same right?¹³⁸

As time went by, students began to sign their letters as a collective, rather than as individuals, with Group of Servicemen (*Gruppa voennoslizhashchikh*) and Group of Conscripted Students (*Gruppa voennosluzhashchikh srochnoi studenty*) becoming common titles, sometimes with note of their localities.¹³⁹

With university students having joined their chorus of voices, the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers undertook what one member referred to as “Gandhi’s method” of achieving change in a nonviolent manner. On 25 June 1989, the mothers gathered in Moscow’s Gor’kii Park to protest the conscription of their sons from post-secondary institutes in the past year.¹⁴⁰ The choice of date and location was of no coincidence, for the Moscow Komsomol was holding an annual youth festival on site. Between 300 and 400 mothers joined the unsanctioned protest under Kirbasova’s leadership and marched

¹³⁷ “Obrashcheniia grazhdan po povodu uvomneniia studentov vuzov iz redov armii,” GARF, f. A-664, op. 1, d. 282, l. 2.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 1. 52-3.

¹⁴⁰ Caiazza, *Mothers & Soldiers*, 127.

to Red Square.¹⁴¹ Key to the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' actions was conducting a poll of 263 student-soldiers.¹⁴² The results were passed to journalists and featured on the morning news. While hardly scientific, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' poll of student-soldiers – listed by their names, post-secondary institutes, and military assignments – was cited in Soviet publications from then on.

The poll of student-soldiers was a topic of heated debate in the week that followed. On 3 July, Dmitrii Iazov came forward to be confirmed as Minister of Defense by the newly assembled Congress of People's Deputies. Instead of the ritualistic unanimity shown in the past, deputies criticized Iazov for his "evasive answers to questions of *dedovshchina*," with several citing the "mothers' appeal" and the "question of the 176,000" as grounds for voting against him.¹⁴³ In what foreshadowed Iazov's defection to Gorbachev's conservative critics, he took a hawkish stance on the matter and insisted that those drafted in 1988 were "the best trained component of the Soviet Armed Forces" and "should serve out the term of service dictated by law."¹⁴⁴ Iazov's words fell on deaf ears. The opposition to his confirmation remained strong enough that Gorbachev was forced to insist on "a temporary amendment" to the very rules he had approved as part of his reforms: rather than requiring an absolute majority of the Supreme Soviet's 542 members, Iazov was confirmed with the votes of only half of those present.¹⁴⁵ On 11 July he was soundly rebuked when Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov proposed that the

¹⁴¹ Valentina Mel'nikova, interview with author, 2014. Mel'nikova gave the number of 400 demonstrators during our interview, but in the past has given 300. See for instance: Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia*, 206.

¹⁴² Solnick, *Stealing the State*, 314n108.

¹⁴³ Cited in *ibid*, 198.

¹⁴⁴ Cited in *ibid*.

¹⁴⁵ As a result, Iazov remained Minister of Defense with just 256 votes, 16 short of a majority. See: Donald Murray, *A Democracy of Despots* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 63-4.

176,000 students be released with a two-sentence resolution. The resolution was overwhelmingly approved by the deputies, only five of whom dissented.¹⁴⁶ This was a resounding victory for the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, after which, recalled Kirbasova, "everything happened so precipitously that nobody thought of sanctioning our actions."¹⁴⁷ The role of Yeltsin and other reformists in realizing this appeal was not lost on Soviet youths, who expressed their written gratitude in postcards that read: "University students thank you for your great contribution to solving the question of allowing them to continue their studies."¹⁴⁸

The Evolution of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers

For parents, it is a plus to know that they can help their son. But for the commander... it can be a minus. I believe that it is a positive overall. If the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers discovers shortcomings, I think that is good. Because such defects must be eliminated. If we don't eradicate *dedovshchina*, then it will become greater in scale and give way to chaos.

- Mikhail, afganets¹⁴⁹

Having secured the 176,000 sons' discharge from the Soviet Army, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' nucleus in Moscow fell to only four members.¹⁵⁰ As a result, the organization faced the paradoxical challenge of rebuilding itself after achieving

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 199.

¹⁴⁷ Dauce, "Les mouvements de mères de soldats à la recherche d'une place dans la société russe," 132.

¹⁴⁸ "Obrashcheniia grazhdan po povodu uvomneniia studentov vuzov iz redov armii," GARF, f. A-664, op. 1, d. 282, ll. 52-3.

¹⁴⁹ Mikhail, interview with author, May 2015.

¹⁵⁰ Valentina Mel'nikova, interview with author, August 2014.

its goal. Key to the organization's renewal was the arrival of Valentina Dmitrievna Mel'nikova (b. 1946) as the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' press-secretary in August 1989. A mother of two sons, she drew her impressions of conditions in the Soviet Army from her five years in the German Democratic Republic; her husband worked as a member of Vismuth, a USSR-GDR collaborative enterprise that supplied uranium ore to the Soviet Union's nuclear industry, which allowed Mel'nikova to visit military garrisons alongside him. "I saw what kind of bribes they gave to get to Europe," Mel'nikova recalled years later. "To get to a good garrison, you had to pay an amount equal to the cost of a car."¹⁵¹ "I remember my first visit to the garrison on Leninstraße in Karl-Marx-Stadt," she continued.

Two soldiers gave a third soldier 8 Marks – his "salary." All three men had boils and bruises. Another time, I passed through a training ground at 10:00 AM.

Officers were standing at attention when a loud, intoxicated colonel staggered in and began to bellow profanities at them.¹⁵²

After the 40th Army entered Afghanistan, Mel'nikova was determined never to allow her sons to be conscripted. With the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' having lobbied successfully for the early discharge of 176,000 recruits, she believed that it should build on its momentum and demand the abolition of mandatory service.¹⁵³ As a result, Mel'nikova helped organize a second demonstration in August 1989. Particularly valuable in the leadup to the event was Mikhail Pasternak, a reporter of *Moskovskii*

¹⁵¹ Valentina Mel'nikova, "Glukhi k prizyvam," 22 July 2010, accessed 5 March 2017, <https://esquire.ru/soldiersmothers>.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Natella Boltianskaia, "Kontrudar Valentina Mel'nikova," *Radio ekho Moskvyy*, 25 April 2004, accessed 6 March 2017, echo.msk.ru/programs/kontrudar/25490/?=top.

komsomolets who supported the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' agenda. "The Energy Institute is ready to provide the premises," he insisted. "Let's print an announcement."¹⁵⁴ *Moskovskii komsomolets* thus published an appeal to "everyone with questions about military service," that encouraged them to attend the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' meeting. Approximately 40 people "all with different problems" turned out and formed its new core of members.¹⁵⁵ Among the most valuable of new recruits was a soldier's mother from Vilnius, Lithuanian SSR.¹⁵⁶ That autumn, she approached a member of the local military commissariat armed with a bottle of cognac for bribery. In return for it, she received hard copies of Ministry of Defense Orders 260 and 317, which outlined medical classifications exempting citizens from military service.¹⁵⁷ Immediately after, the Lithuanian mother took three sick days off work and travelled to Moscow armed with the Orders in 286 pages. As with the 4 January 1919 directive championed by the Moscow Trust Group two years prior, Orders 260 and 317 were an unspoken secret not classified by law. As such, it was within the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' rights to produce and circulate copies. "Since then, we have had a terrible weapon," Mel'nikova beamed in 2010. "It was personal for me: I learned that my older son was unsuited for military service because he sleepwalks. But most people are unaware of what can be deemed a disease or a condition."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Valentina Mel'nikova, interview with author, August 2014; Boltianskaia, "Kontrudar Valentina Mel'nikova."

¹⁵⁶ Mariia Kirbasova told Steven Lee Solnick of this esteemed Lithuanian member in an interview on 12 April 1991 but did not disclose her name. Valentina Mel'nikova showed the same precaution when she spoke of the matter in our August 2014 interview. See: Solnick, *Stealing the State*, 315n134.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Mel'nikova, "Glukhi k prizyvam."

Soldiers' Mothers Turn to MIAs and POWs

Of course, no one can return a mother's son. But we do not have any moral right to belittle this mother in a store or at work. Even in order to erect a tombstone for her son she must shed tears and grovel. Is this really merciful?

- Deputy Pavel Shet'ko, *afganets*¹⁵⁹

In contrast to the majority of NGOs that emerged between 1987 and 1991, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers expanded their range of objectives, leading to a growing public interest in their activism. Having made ties with members of the Congress of People's Deputies to recall post-secondary students from military service, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers shifted its focus to new grounds: the search for MIAs and POWs of the Soviet-Afghan War. It was only one year prior in May 1988 that TASS News Agency shocked its readers by publishing the numbers of 13,310 killed in action, 35,478 wounded, and 311 MIA.¹⁶⁰ Until then, it had fallen upon informal organizations and individual efforts to keep records on such cases. Evgeniia Poplavskaia, for example, was an actress by trade who became the founding leader of a volunteer organization under the name of Hope (Nadezhda) in 1986, and endeavoured to document MIAs and POWs in Afghanistan by word of mouth. Despite the organization's absorption by the state-sponsored People's Committee for Release of Prisoners of War (Narodnyi komitet za osvobozhdenie voennoplennykh) in 1988 and Poplavskaia's receipt of a medal questionably dedicated "To Wartime-Internationalists with Thanks from the Afghan People," Hope amassed a file of 415 cards on different cases by the time the Committee

¹⁵⁹ Patrick J. Rollins, ed., *First Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR, 25 May - 9 June 1989*, vol. 2, (Florida: Academic International Press, 1993), 93.

¹⁶⁰ Cited in Smith, *The New Russians*, 104.

of Soldiers' Mothers took on the cause.¹⁶¹

Also contributing to the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' search for MIA and POW sons were the Vietnam Veterans of America, who acted for some as a bridge to Amnesty International.¹⁶² Bob Coalson twice conferred with a soldier's mother named Anna Kashirova during his visit to Moscow in August 1990. A military commissar had once informed her that her son, Vladimir, was killed in action on 6 December 1983 when his BTR came under heavy fire. Captain Chekrygin, his commander, insisted that he "searched for... the remains of the dead in the area" and found only those of two crew members.¹⁶³ Ordered to bury the dead on 9 December, Chekrygin concluded that Kashirov's body was torn apart in the explosion and placed his suspected remains in a coffin. Eight months later, Anna Grigorievna received a parcel sent from France that contained a photograph of her son bearing gauze over an injured eye, and a letter scribbled in his handwriting:

Mama! I, your son Vladimir, am alive and well, being held prisoner in Afghanistan, our BTR was hit and destroyed, two men died, I survived, so don't bury me early, I'm giving this letter to a doctor, a good man from Paris, our *dembels* have gone home, I miss you mama, write so that I can be exchanged for Afghan people. You see, instead of going home I ended up in Panjshir, I'm just

¹⁶¹ "Poplavskaiia Evgeniia Iur'evna," accessed 6 March 2017, eurasian-defence.ru/?q=node/10345. For Hope's accounting of POWs and MIAs, see: Dvoretzky and Sarin, *The Afghan Syndrome*, 167-69.

¹⁶² While cybernetician Valentin Turchin and physicist Andrei Tverdokhlebov founded a Moscow branch of Amnesty International in 1973, its lifespan was short: Tverdokhlebov was exiled to Siberia in 1976 and Turchin forced to emigrate in 1977. The London-based NGO would not make a visit to the Soviet Union until a two-week venture in March to April 1989. See: Masha Hamilton, "Soviets Win Praise From Amnesty International," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 April 1989, accessed 8 March 2017, articles.latimes.com/1989-04-02/news/mn-1416_1_amnesty-international.

¹⁶³ "Pandzhsherskii uzbek," accessed 20 June 2017, afg-hist.ucoz.ru/photo/afgancy/pandzhsherskij_uznik/105-0-988.

unlucky, today is 22 December. My dear mother, I close with a kiss. Vladimir.¹⁶⁴

Credited with bringing the documents from Afghanistan was a doctor from Paris known by the pseudonym of Marat, who likely served with Médecins Sans Frontières, and treated Vladimir Kashirov's wounds at a makeshift hospital in the city of Astana, approximately 95 kilometres north of Kabul. After Marat turned the package over to the Soviet Embassy in Marseilles, it was expedited to the Soviet Union's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the General Staff, and finally to Anna Georgievna. With a surge of hope, she began to pen letters to the Ministry of Defense and urged them to search for Vladimir. Her efforts drew the ire of state bureaucrats as time passed by. "Anna Georgievna, we have repeatedly informed you that, unfortunately, no one has reliable information about the fate of your son," wrote one official on 13 June 1986:

We do not have access to the Afghan counter-revolutionaries' bases in Pakistan, one of which may hold your son. We understand your pain, anxiety, and concern... Please understand that the Ministry of Defense... like yourself, has an interest in determining his fate, and continues to take all measures necessary to obtain confirmed information about it.¹⁶⁵

By the time Bob Coalson met with Anna Georgievna four years later, her son's survival of the 1983 ambush had given way to a blend of myths and tributes endorsed by the state. Beginning in 1988, Kashirov's story had taken the form of history in letters. Those his mother received between 1981 and 1983 were printed in local publications

¹⁶⁴ Muzeia vozdušno-desantnykh voisk <Krylataia gvardiia> (MKG) 1811/1, Pis'mo V.N. Kashirov iz Afganistana ot 22.12.1983, adresovannoe materi.

¹⁶⁵ MKG 1806, "Pis'mo ministerstvo oborony SSSR ot 13.06.1986, adresovannoe A.G. Kashirove."

such as *Vechernii Sverdlovsk* and *Ural'skii rabochii*.¹⁶⁶ Hesitant to believe state authorities after a false burial of her son, Kashirova submitted a Prisoner Data Questionnaire to Amnesty International via Bob Coalson and his translator. At once, Vladimir Kashirov's story entered the records of a Western NGO, with Coalson detailing:

A 27-year-old crewman in a BTR military formation in Afghanistan... Captured during an ambush in which driver Askhat Gabbasov and another soldier were killed when BTR # 347 was blown up, throwing Kashirov clear from BTR, thus saving his life.

A handwritten note by Kashirov to his mother [was] smuggled to France by a French medical doctor... The last known place was in a hospital located at the basecamp in Astan, [sic] Afghanistan.¹⁶⁷

After six years of jousting with Soviet bureaucracies, Kashirova's cooperation with the Vietnam Veterans of America and Amnesty International renewed her drive to discover the fate of her son. In 1991 she travelled to Afghanistan to search for her son Vladimir, meeting President Najibullah to express her wishes. Among the search crew that accompanied her were a number of afgangtsy that included Evgenii Teterin, who served in the Panjshir valley where Vladimir was imprisoned. Teterin "distributed his photograph to the village elders, former mujahideen, and asked them to try to remember if they knew whether he was alive or dead."¹⁶⁸ Kashirov remains among the 264 Soviet soldiers

¹⁶⁶ MKG 1813, 1813/1, "Zaratee ne khronite...", 1988; MKG 1814, 1814/1, "Zaratee ne khronite menia...", 15 October 1992.

¹⁶⁷ MKG 1809/2, Bob Coalson, "Amnesty International Questionnaire," 20 January 1991.

¹⁶⁸ Kseniia Momot, "Sud'ba soldata: propavshego bez vesti Geroia Afgana ishchut 30 let," Sverdlovskoe oblastnoe televidenie, 3 February 2014, accessed 31 July 2017, www.obltv.ru/news/society/sudba_soldata_propavshego_bez_vesti_geroja_afgana_ishhut_30_let/.

missing in Afghanistan.¹⁶⁹

Disgruntled Officers and Competing NGOs

Since 9 April 1988, we have fought the lawlessness and cruelty of the bureaucratic apparatus. ... They don't have to stand in queues! They have comfortable, spacious apartments! ... We need a veterans' organization that will demand implementation of the law and protect us from administrative arbitrariness. ... The lack of glasnost has allowed them to maintain an impregnable "fortress" of armchairs and offices, a quiet pullback to Stalinism.

- Committee for the Protection of Homeless Officers, 30 March 1989¹⁷⁰

As soldiers' mothers took action to defend their sons from military hazing, members of the Armed Forces who sympathized with calls for reform were penalized by senior officers. It was in February 1989 that Lieutenant Colonel Vitalii Urazhtsev (1944-2000) was expelled from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union after 25 years membership and dismissed from the Soviet Army in light of his "demagogic statements about the Armed Forces of the USSR."¹⁷¹ A former speechwriter for the Ministry of Defense, Urazhtsev's ideological impropriety was having put forward his candidacy in the election to the Congress of People's Deputies as an alternative to the "old

¹⁶⁹ The most recent soldier discovered in Afghanistan was Bakhretidin Khakimov of Samarkand, Uzbekistan, who served with a motorized rifle unit and was wounded in 1980. See: "Soviet War Veteran Found in Afghanistan After 33 Years," BBC News, 5 March 2013, accessed 31 July 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21668541.

¹⁷⁰ "Obrashchenie: sobraniia bezdomnykh ofitserov i praporshchikov zapasa," GARF, f. A-664, op. 1, d. 289, ll. 9-12.

¹⁷¹ Sergei Shargunov, "Vremennyi geroi," *Russkii zhurnal*, 19 August 2011, accessed on 10 April 2017, www.russ.ru/layout/set/print/pole/Vremennyj-geroj.

‘reactionary’ head of the Military-Political Academy of Moscow.”¹⁷² Fired from his teaching position at the same institute, Urazhtsev reinvented himself as a “journalist in uniform.”¹⁷³ On 29 March, he coordinated a meeting of about 100 people to form the Union for the Social Protection of Servicemen, Reservists and Members of their Families, better known as Shield (Shchit). An initiative group that participated in the electoral campaigns of choice candidates, Urazhtsev’s goal was to muster support for the formation of a professional military trade union that catered to “officers who have been illegally dismissed.”¹⁷⁴ The election results in April were reason for cautious optimism: they brought a series of “embarrassing defeats for high-ranking military officers,” and when the People’s Deputies convened on 25 May to 9 June, Shield called for “a new Russian army free of bureaucratism... barrack-room bullying, and political supervision,” a proposal that found support among the radical reformists of the Inter-Regional Deputies’ Group (Mezhregional’naia deputatskaia gruppa).¹⁷⁵ In the two years that followed, Shield’s path resembled that of a political party as it competed with other NGOs for public support.

Key to Shield’s momentum were Gorbachev’s cuts to the military in 1988.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ “‘Shchit’ - Rossiiskii soiuz sotsial’noi zashchity voennosluzhashchikh, voennoobiazannykh i chlenov ikh semei ‘shchit’ (RSSZV ‘shchit’),” accessed 12 April 2017, old.nasledie.ru/oborg/2_18/0127/index.htm.

¹⁷⁴ Michael Dobbs, “Soviet Army Officers Form Union,” *The Washington Post*, 22 October 1989, Accessed 9 April 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1989/10/22/soviet-army-officers-form-union/ee6a4bcf-27e9-4f88-b887-7e71871d41ed/?utm_term=.1ae1030f46e0.

¹⁷⁵ Daria Fane, “After Afghanistan: the Decline of Soviet Military Prestige,” *The Washington Quarterly* 13, 2 (1990): 10; John P. Moran, *From Garrison State to Nation-State: Political Power and the Russian Military under Gorbachev and Yeltsin* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 32. The Inter-Regional Deputies Group was a council of 25 radical progressive members, among them Andrei Sakharov, and five co-chairmen, including Boris Yeltsin. Its formative process captured the delicate alliance between reformers in the Congress of People’s Deputies, with heated debate over whether or not to appoint Sakharov as a co-chair. See: Elena Bonner, “The Interregional Deputies Group and Andrei Sakharov,” 10 December 2008, accessed 13 April 2017, www.sakharov-center.ru/asfconf2011/english/articleseng/6.

Defense Minister Iazov put the number of forced retirees at 100,000 officers, 35,000 of whom “had not served long enough to be entitled to pensions.”¹⁷⁶ Moreover, many of those recalled from the East European republics were greeted with comparatively substandard material and living conditions in the RSFSR. As a result, Shield was one of many organizations that catered to disgruntled officers after the Soviet-Afghan War wound to a close. Among the organizations that Urazhtsev sought to replicate was the Independent Committee of the Social Protection of Soldiers and Sailors of the Soviet Army, which held its constituent assembly on 15 October 1989. Its resolution to “defend soldiers and their mothers against lawlessness, violence, and arbitrary hazing carried out by officers” predated that of Shield’s by a week.¹⁷⁷ It drew the attention of people’s deputies who sympathized with the cause, and the Independent Committee authored a pamphlet that was widely circulated in the lead-up to the Second Congress of People’s Deputies. A treatise on the need for military reform, it dated the emergence of *dedovshchina* to approximately 1967, when the age for military service changed to 18 and its duration to two years. “The mother” meanwhile, had “become the private detective – desperate to learn the truth about the death of her son.”¹⁷⁸ “Any perestroika undertaken in the military is seen as a mask for *dedovshchina* in the army,” the committee concluded. “Only the public is able to implement real change and intervention in the life of military units.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ William Charles Vogt, “The Soviet Coup of August 1991: Why it Happened, and Why it was Doomed to Fail” (Master’s thesis: Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, 1991), 50.

¹⁷⁷ “Uchreditel’nogo sobraniia nezavisimogo komiteta sotsial’noi zashchity soldat i matrosov sovetskoi armii,” GARF, f. 10026, op. 1, d. 2460, l. 3.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, l. 5.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, l. 12.

It was on 21 and 22 October 1989, one week after the Independent Committee of the Social Protection of Soldiers and Sailors of the Soviet Army held its founding conference, that Shield followed suit at Moscow's Palace of Culture. The event was attended by delegates from 49 cities and four republics, which included eight members of the Inter-regional Deputies Group. Among the latter was Boris Yeltsin, who would also attend the Second Congress of Shield on 15 to 16 December 1990.¹⁸⁰ In what spoke to growing tensions between NGOs and conservatives in the Soviet government, Defense Minister Iazov strongly disapproved of Shield. Asked for his opinion of the organization in a television interview, Iazov scoffed. "The army doesn't need any sort of help or shield," he replied. "We don't need any retired officers to defend us."¹⁸¹ The Soviet media was not as dismissive. Shield's organizers were given ample opportunity to explain their platform, allowing them to highlight sensitive issues, with one interviewee naming the return of officers "from Afghanistan and East Europe to inadequate housing" a chief concern, adding that some afgangtsy were "stuck living in tents."¹⁸² *Izvestiia*, meanwhile, linked Shield to a "rampant discontent in the officer corps... creating a crisis situation in the army" that could lead Soviet youth to favour demobilization.¹⁸³

In the months that followed, Shield's activities were at once productive and opportunistic. In November 1989, it replicated the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' demands and "submitted a draft law on social support [for soldiers] to the Congress of

¹⁸⁰ David Thomas Twining, *Strategic Surprise in the Age of Glasnost* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 257; "‘Shchit’ – Rossiiskii soiuz sotsial’noi zashchity...".

¹⁸¹ Twining, *Strategic Surprise in the Age of Glasnost*, 257.

¹⁸² Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 195.

¹⁸³ Bill Keller, "Soviet Military Officers Pressing for Changes and a Trade Union," *New York Times*, 22 October 1989, accessed 9 April 2017, www.nytimes.com/1989/10/22/world/soviet-military-officers-pressing-for-changes-and-a-trade-union.html.

People's Deputies." That same month it staged a demonstration in Moscow, demanding "better pay for soldiers" and "an end to the Communist Party's influence in the Soviet Army."¹⁸⁴ The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers were invited to join the protest and speak out against *dedovshchina*, essentially to complement Shield's agenda. Few members obliged, with the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' leader Mariia Kirbasova scornful of "disaffected field-grade officers like Urazhtsev," whom she believed to be "sent by the KGB to destroy our movement from within."¹⁸⁵ Press Secretary Valentina Mel'nikova dismissed Shield as a group of self-interested opportunists. "A lot of political propagandists were fired from the Soviet Army and disliked Gorbachev," she recalled many years later. "So they formed organizations and tried to infiltrate our human rights movement, speaking in defense of 'Soviet Ideals'."¹⁸⁶

The reality was not so simple. While Shield did indeed borrow from other organizations such as the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, it was hardly unusual for newborn NGOs in the Soviet Union to capitalize upon each other's agendas. Further, Shield found genuine, separate audiences in opportunistic officers willing to feign rebellion in light of being discharged, and a younger generation who felt that curmudgeons had stymied their careers. Among the latter was Captain Igor Stupak (b. 1961), who joined the armed forces in 1978. The leader of a reconnaissance company, he took exception to his commanding officer Major V. Zhuravel'. In a letter dated 7 May 1989, Stupak described Zhuravel' as "driven by self-interest" and regularly carrying out the "egregious action... [of] prosecuting others for even a single word's criticism of the

¹⁸⁴ Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 196.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 197.

¹⁸⁶ Valentina Mel'nikova, interview with author, August 2014.

Party.”¹⁸⁷ Major Zhuravel’ replied with his own letter to the regional communist party, in which he deemed Stupak “an undisciplined officer who... requires constant monitoring” and “pays little attention to the combat readiness of his unit.”¹⁸⁸ In what spoke to the generation gap between them, Major Zhuravel’ despaired of Stupak’s “habit of constantly challenging his superiors.”¹⁸⁹ Soon thereafter, Stupak was dismissed from the Armed Forces. The young delinquent responded with a letter that echoed the grievances Shield claimed to combat. “Major Zhuravel’ began his activity by violating the human rights and personal dignities of officers,” Stupak alleged. “He aimed to transform people into puppets.”¹⁹⁰ Having “dared to assert my rights and demand respect... I was liquidated as a result,” Stupak insisted, recalling how over four months, he was penalized three times as much as he had been in ten years.¹⁹¹ For Stupak, Major Zhuravel’ was symptomatic of a problem in the military’s upper ranks. “For them, perestroika is like a fairy tale,” he remarked in his closing words. “If a junior officer talks about something new they look at him as if he is a madman.”¹⁹² Shield was an organization with genuine appeal to those in Stupak’s circumstances. So much so that on 20 December 1989, the Central Committee ruled that “every officer who joins the Shield union is subject to dismissal from the Armed Forces within 24 hours.”¹⁹³

The relations between Shield and the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers went from

¹⁸⁷ “Zaiaviteli i voennosluzhashchikh na nezakonnoe uvol’nenie iz armii,” GARF, f. A-664, op. 1, d. 283, l. 4.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, l. 5.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, l. 7.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid, l. 8.

¹⁹³ Andrei Nuikin, “Chances of Military Coup Considered,” *JPRS Report - Soviet Union: Military Affairs* (9 November 1990): 8.

mimicry of policy to competition for members and publicity in 1990. The New Year began with Shield's registration as a trade union and a series of rallies in Moscow demanding the resignation of General Igor Rodionov (1936-2014) as a People's Deputy, in light of his soldiers' violent dispersal of protesters in Tbilisi. As the year went by, Shield participated in a number of unsanctioned demonstrations, even joining Valeriia Novodvorskaia in picketing the Ministry of Defense. With the election of Vitalii Urazhtsev and 14 other members of Shield as People's Deputies of the RSFSR on 4 March 1990, it seemed that the organization was poised to exert greater influence in political reform.¹⁹⁴

It was on 1 June 1990 that the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers held a memorial for sons lost in the Afghan war and those fallen victim to incidents on the home front, such as vehicle accidents or acts of *dedovshchina*. Taking place that same day was "a founding conference" planned by Urazhtsev and Shield's executive "to sculpt their own social organization." Its target audience was the parents of deceased soldiers. "Their goal was to cause a split, and they did just that," recalled Valentina Mel'nikova. "They... appointed our ex-friend there... [and] hoped that we would fade."¹⁹⁵ The name of Shield's replica organization was Mothers Against Violence (*Materi protiv nasiliia*), and the "ex-friend" to whom Mel'nikova referred was K.V. Babkova, then leader of the Kamchatka branch of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. Come September 1990, Babkova would resurface in Moscow as the chairwoman of Mothers Against Violence at a highly-touted congress. In August, perhaps upon news of her collaboration, Babkova

¹⁹⁴ John P. Moran, *From Garrison State to Nation-State: Political Power and the Russian Military under Gorbachev and Yeltsin* (Westport: Praeger, 2002), 32.

¹⁹⁵ Mel'nikova, "Glukhi k prizyvam."

was replaced as the leader of Kamchatka's Committee of Soldier's Mothers by Oksana Rybakova. It was also in August when Deputy Boris Yeltsin, riding a new wave of celebrity after his resignation from the Communist Party, embarked on a tour across the Russian SFSR. Yeltsin was by this time no stranger to written appeals from soldiers' mothers; indeed, before he was ousted as Moscow's Communist Party boss on 12 November 1987, Yeltsin "claimed that a third of the letters received by the Moscow *gorkom* (city committee) concerned the Afghan war."¹⁹⁶ As a result, beginning on 11 August 1990, Oksana Rybakova penned a series of letters to Yeltsin that highlighted the Committee of Soldier's Mothers' agenda, two weeks before he reached Kamchatka. "We fully support the resolution expressed at the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' rally held in Moscow on 1 June, in the Gor'kii Park, dedicated to those in the Armed Forces who lost their lives in peacetime," she began:

It protested the steady flow of zinc coffins from the Armed Forces of the USSR. Every year, more and more of our sons die from hazing, from hooliganism in the barracks, from ethnic rivalries, from accidents. The totalitarian system has turned the army into a school of atrocities.¹⁹⁷

Rybakova's second written appeal to Yeltsin, dated 17 August, took a different approach: she cited Article 62 of the Constitution of the RSFSR ("That conscripts will serve within their republic, and deploy outside its borders only with voluntary consent") to call for an end to the Brezhnevian notion of "international duty." "We believe, Boris

¹⁹⁶ Solnick, *Stealing the State*, 311n71.

¹⁹⁷ "Dokumenty po rassmotreniiu pisem i obrashchenii Komitetov Soldatskikh Materei i drugikh obshchestvennykh organizatsii po voprosu rassmotreniia prichin gibeli i travmatizma voennosluzhashchikh v mirnoe vremia," GARF, f. 10026, op. 1, d. 2460, ll. 62-3.

Nikolaevich,” she insisted, “that you, an ardent opponent of the War in Afghanistan, will not allow our children to die *within the territory of the Soviet Republics*. ... We do not want a second repeat of Afghanistan.”¹⁹⁸ Rybakova’s call for Yeltsin to spurn “international duty” not only warned of “a second Afghanistan,” but reflected the growing split in national interests between the fifteen Soviet republics. Indeed, rather than express solidarity with their mothers, Rybakova demanded “the immediate return of OUR sons from Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and the Baltics.”¹⁹⁹ The Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers thus faced a similar challenge as the veterans groups that emerged between 1987 and 1991. In the case of the afgantsy, this became clear at the second mass-assembly in Ashgabat, held in September 1990. While the first such occasion in November 1987 “marked the beginning of the afganets movement’s entry into the wider political and social world,” the second proved to be “a purely Turkmen event... frequently putting a specifically Turkmen slant on matters, underlining their respect for elders” rather than common objectives or “Afghan brotherhood.”²⁰⁰ It was that same month when the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers was challenged by Mothers Against Violence in a competing congress in Moscow.

Scheduled for 6 September 1990 was the founding forum for the Committee of Soldier’s Mothers. Entitled “Mothers Against Violence: What Army Do We Need?” its 24-point agenda followed four primary themes: to “demand respect for the physical rights and moral integrity of soldiers,” to “improve the material conditions of military service,”

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, ll. 60-1. Italics are my own.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, ll. 60-1. Capitalization as in original.

²⁰⁰ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 144.

to impose public transparency on the Soviet Army, and “to oppose the deployment of conscripts into combat zones.”²⁰¹ Demand for the latter was particularly strong in light of 26,000 troops having deployed to impose military law in the Azerbaijan SSR on 19 and 20 January 1990.²⁰² Indeed, Anatolii Cherniaev noted demonstrations held in “Krasnodar, Stavropol, Rostov-on-Don, Tuapse... [and] the North Caucasus” at the time, which caused “a wave of protests: ‘No to a new Afghanistan!’ ‘Why must Russian men die because of these Armenians and Azerbaijanis!’”²⁰³ With the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers focused on the needs and assurances of young soldiers and their parents, it was the 23rd point of the agenda that would become the organization’s focus in its post-Soviet incarnation: the “transition to a professional army.”²⁰⁴

Two days after the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers’ forum wound to a close, Mothers Against Violence held their own function in an effort to woo attendees to their side. Advertised as the All-Union Congress of Parents of Soldiers and Sailors, it took place on 8 and 9 September with Urazhtsev as its chairman. Indeed, it was at Urazhtsev’s last-minute suggestion that the name of the congress was changed from “Mothers of Soldiers...” to “Parents of Soldiers...” so as to “enlist the testimony of fathers as well as mothers for the good of the cause.”²⁰⁵ To some degree, the congress was a success: 389 people attended, ranging from “mothers of the dead” to “officers of different

²⁰¹ Lebedev, “Du souci maternel à l’action en commun,” 76.

²⁰² Kenan Aliyev, “Twenty Years After ‘Black January,’ Azerbaijan Still Struggles For Freedom,” *RFERL*, 20 January 2010, accessed 16 May 2017, https://www.rferl.org/a/Twenty_Years_After_Black_January_Azerbaijan_Still_Struggles_For_Freedom_/1934366.html; Lebedev, “Du souci maternel à l’action en commun,” 76.

²⁰³ Anatolii Cherniaev, “1990 god,” *Dnevnik A.S. Cherniaeva*, accessed 12 May 2017, http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Chernyaev/1990.pdf

²⁰⁴ Lebedev, “Du souci maternel à l’action en commun,” 76.

²⁰⁵ Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 197.

generations,” to “deputies of the Supreme Council of Russia” and “representatives of the Ministry of Defense.”²⁰⁶ The platform expressed by Mothers Against Violence, however, was borderline plagiarism of that articulated by Mariia Kirbasova’s organization: a “parade of speakers” recounted their sons’ experience of *dedovshchina* and gave a figure of 15,000 to 20,000 as the number of soldiers lost to “non-combat deaths over the past four years,” while speakers called for Gorbachev to “issue a decree protecting servicemen before the fall conscription call-up.”²⁰⁷ In fact, Gorbachev issued such a decree that very month; it was his response to continued pressure from Kirbasova’s organization after he met with them in the summer. While Mothers Against Violence was sarcastically termed a Government Organized Non-Government Organization (GONGO) soon thereafter, it sparked resentment among the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers and was followed by a series of successors that persist to this day.²⁰⁸

While Shield’s efforts to replicate the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers’ platform were opportunistic, its criticism of the Soviet Army nonetheless contributed to a spread of dialogue on the need for reform among military families. Urazhtsev and other officers

²⁰⁶ “‘Shchit’ – Rossiiskii soiuz sotsial’noi zashchity...”

²⁰⁷ Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 197.

²⁰⁸ Correspondence with Dr. Anna Lebedev. GONGO is a rare acronym that translates the same into Russian as it does in English. (Gosudarstvom organizovannye negosudarstvennye organizatsii.) Among the series of GONGOs to emerge after the dissolution of Mothers Against Violence were the Council of Russian Military Parents in 1991 (Sovet roditelei voennosluzhashchikh Rossii), the Union of Russian Military Parents (Soiuz roditelei voennosluzhashchikh Rossii) in 1993, and the Council of Families of Military Personnel (Sovet semei voennosluzhashchikh) in 1998. The Council of Russian Military Parents’ competition with the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers became personal following its rejuvenation under the patriotic state narrative of President Vladimir Putin. In 2009, its founding Chairman Galina - whose son died of injuries from *dedovshchina* in 1988 - falsely stated that the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers charged parents money for consultations, and was dismissive of Kirbasova’s and Mel’nikova’s stance because “their sons did not even serve.” Mel’nikova “sent Shaldikov some harsh words” in response to her “fairy tale,” and charged that her council’s “main task is to schlep around to military units and tell everyone to serve.” See: Vadim Udmantsev, “Nashi deti v Nashei armii!” *Voенno-promyshlennyi kur’er*, 25 March 2009, accessed 14 March 2017, vpk-news.ru/articles/2124; and Mel’nikova, “Glukhi k prizyvam.”

who joined Shield may well have been focused on careerism but this was not necessarily true of its supporters as a whole. When a People's Deputy spoke at Shield's Second Congress in 1990 and deemed the Soviet Army "a machine of the system for the destruction of the future of our country," he was followed at the podium by young deserters.²⁰⁹ Such emotionally charged statements, even if cast as a tool for political leverage, nonetheless contributed to the national debate over military reform. This was evident in the state's disapproval of Shield's involvement in the All-Union Congress of Parents of Soldiers and Sailors. In the month that followed, *Krasnaia zvezda* recruited Lieutenant Colonel S. Budko, a former assistant to Urazhtsev in the Congress of People's Deputies and a member of Shield, to write a scathing article on the man:

Shield's rank and file is not able to recognize its democratic potential, because it has run up against the harsh authoritarian opposition, which... Urazhtsev... is putting up against it. ... [He has] made its primary mission an aggressive struggle against the Ministry of Defense... The emotional and psychological tension in Shield have reached their zenith. ... I am unable to support [Urazhtsev] in his far right extremist activities.²¹⁰

The article proved damaging to Urazhtsev's reputation, with *Krasnaia zvezda*'s editor even suggesting that his intention was "to prepare for the collapse of the political system in our country."²¹¹ Urazhtsev responded by speaking out on the military's "illegal actions," alleging that "the Ministry of Defense has understated the number of deaths" in

²⁰⁹ "'Shchit' – Rossiiskii soiuz sotsial'noi zashchity...".

²¹⁰ S. Budko, "Former Shchit Aide Discusses 'Schism'," *JPRS Report - Soviet Union: Military Affairs* (9 November 1990): 11.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

Afghanistan by not including “those who died while being transported to the USSR” or “froze to death in the mountains... [in] this criminal war.”²¹² His last stand as the leader of Shield came on 15 January 1991 when the organization issued an “Address to the Soldiers, Sergeants, Ensigns and Officers of the Armed Forces.” Its choice of target was the Bloody Sunday in Lithuania that took place two days prior wherein tanks and soldiers dispersed a crowd of 1,000 protesters by force, leaving 13 dead and more than 140 injured.²¹³ The choice of words, if not sincere was still quite strong. “Fellow citizens!” it began:

Blood was shed in Lithuania, and again in turn in Latvia, Estonia, Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia...

... After waging an open economic war against their own people, the ruling elite has taken a path of bloody slaughter in various regions of the country.

Soldiers and officers! The bureaucracy of the KPSS has given you the shameful role of traitors and the stranglers of perestroika.

... You swore to be brave, but does it take courage to advance on unarmed people with tanks, or to defend the interests of the partocracy with gunfire?

Shield calls upon its members, all servicemen, and their families to stop the bloodshed and lawlessness against their own people. ... Eternal disgrace will be upon those who shed innocent blood!²¹⁴

²¹² Mikhail Sokolov, “Shchit Official Defends Coup Charges,” *JPRS Report - Soviet Union: Military Affairs* (9 November 1990): 10.

²¹³ “1991: Bloodshed at Lithuanian TV Station,” accessed 14 April 2017, news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/13/newsid_4059000/4059959.stm.

²¹⁴ “K soldatam, serzhantam, praporshchikam i ofitseram Vooruzhennykh sil [Obrashchenie SSZV ‘Shchit’ v svyazi s sobytiiami v Litve i ugrozoi ispol’zovaniia vooruzhennykh sil SSSR protiv naroda],” 15 January 1991, accessed 14 March 2017, old.nasledie.ru/oborg/2_18/0127/05.htm.

It was after this open letter that cracks appeared in Shield's ranks. Its co-chairman, Nikolai Moskovchenko, repeatedly stated to the media that Urazhtsev's statements did not reflect the opinion of its members as a whole and violated the organization's charter. A war of words between the two men escalated over the course of the year, culminating in Urazhtsev's dismissal from Shield at the organization's Third Congress on 5 April 1992. His supporters might claim a draw rather than a defeat: Urazhtsev's debate with Moskovchenko ultimately "lead to a scuffle... eventually requiring the use of tear gas," with both men and their supporters ejected from the premises.²¹⁵ While the debate on military reform and veterans' benefits was also heated in each Congress of People's Deputies, the results were more constructive.

²¹⁵ ""Shchit' – Rossiiskii soiuz sotsial'noi zashchity...."

Chapter 7

Post-War Debate and the Battle for Veterans' Benefits, 1989 to 1991

I cannot shake the feeling that our congress is going, to be honest, in the way I... envisioned it. A certain spontaneity, a certain jerkiness, and organizational improvisation... [and] outbursts of emotion.

- Deputy Chingiz Aitmatov, 25 May 1989¹

Every official who is deemed an organizer of this war should be held accountable to both present and future generations of the Soviet people. ... Politicians, historians, and specialists should understand everything that happened during these nine years.

- Deputy Rizoali Odzhiev, afganets, 24 December 1989²

The five Congresses of People's Deputies that took place from 25 May to 9 June 1989 and 2 to 5 September 1991 marked the peak of raw, unfiltered debate on the historicization of the Soviet-Afghan War and the state's collaboration with NGOs to address its domestic consequences. The sensitivity of the topic was clear early on: when Gorbachev gave his speech on the fifth day of the opening congress, his reference to the 40th Army's withdrawal from Afghanistan drew no applause.³ Yet as each session of congress progressed, broadcast live on Soviet television over two weeks, a Pandora's box of grievances between competing factions grabbed citizens' attentions. The consequences

¹ Rollins, *First Congress of People's Deputies*, vol. 1, 128.

² *Vtoroi s'ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 12-24 dekabria 1989 g., stenograficheskii otchet*, tom 4 (Moskva: Izdanie verkhovnogo soveta SSSR, 1990) 441.

³ Rollins, *First Congress of People's Deputies*, vol. 1, 189.

for the afgantsy were full of contradiction; after nine years absent from popular and political discussion the afgantsy were represented in congress and advocacy groups, with a recurring presence in the media – be it through investigative news, printed memoirs, or popular cinema. Yet there was such a wave of collective demands in the years of glasnost that the Soviet-Afghan War became a topic that deputies framed for particular agendas – not unlike the first protest groups that seized on the conflict. It was during the ninth session of the opening congress that the Afghan war came to the forefront of debate, in light of comments made by Andrei Sakharov during the 40th Army’s withdrawal.

On 18 February 1989 after three-day visits to Ottawa and Winnipeg on an expedition organized by the *Ottawa Citizen*, Andrei Sakharov and Elena Bonner published an open letter in the newspaper that called for the release of all POWs on both sides of the Soviet-Afghan War. Among the 15,000 Soviet soldiers who “died senselessly” according to Sakharov, were Soviet POWs fired upon by their own aircraft.⁴ An allegation that complemented the Western myth of Soviet soldiers employing PFM-1 landmines dropped from helicopters as “toys of death” against Afghan children, it was a remark that Sakharov made without checking the validity of his sources.⁵ It drew an

⁴ Ilya Gerol, “Plea for Prisoners: Sakharov, Bonner Call for Afghan-Soviet Talks,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, 18 February 1989, A1. The open letter reinforced allegations Sakharov made at his Ottawa press conference a few days earlier, when he stated: “During the Afghan war there were periods when Soviet soldiers were captured by Afghanis. Soviet helicopters were shooting them so they could not be taken by the Afghanis. The Soviets never acknowledged the mujahideen as a party in the military conflict.” Cited in Gerald Nadler, “Commander Denies Soldiers Killed By Other Soviets,” *United Press International*, 1 March 1989, accessed 19 June 2017, www.upi.com/Archives/1989/03/01/Commander-denies-soldiers-killed-by-other-Soviets/1641604731600/.

⁵ The term “toys of death” was popularized in late 1985 and referred to the *protivopekhotnaia fugasnaia mina* or anti-infantry high-explosive mine. Visible due to its green colour on Afghan terrain and unusual shape, a United Nations report suggested that the PFM-1 mines were designed “to look like toys” and targeted Afghan children. While the UN Mine Action Coordination Centre established in Kabul later deemed this a false allegation that “gained a life for obvious journalist reasons,” the notion of Soviet invaders using “little bombs shaped like a bird” remains a popular generalization. The United States’ BLU-

immediate rebuttal from Colonel General Boris Gromov, who led the final contingent of the 40th Army out of Afghanistan three days prior. In an interview with *Krasnaia zvezda*, he was adamant that “there had not been nor could there have been facts so monstrous. . . . I personally spent five and a half years there, [and] there had never been an instance when a Soviet unit was left at the mercy of their fate.”⁶ Andrei Sakharov did not respond; rather, his son-in-law, Efrem Iankelevich, insisted, “he has heard it and he believes it. . . . And he’s not the first to make these accusations.”⁷

It was on 2 June 1989 that Deputy Sergei Chervonopiskii, First Secretary of the Cherkassy Komsomol, advanced to the podium on crude prosthetic legs that did not bend at the knees and delivered a speech that closed with a rebuttal of Sakharov’s comments on behalf of his fellow afgantsy.⁸

We, the soldiers, sergeants and officers... who for 9 years carried out our international duty in Afghanistan, strongly urge you to provide from the rostrum of the congress an explanation... as to on what grounds... Sakharov [alleged] that... pilots fired on our own Soviet soldiers, who were surrounded, so that they could not be taken prisoner. To the depths of our souls we are indignant over this irresponsible, provocative trick by a well-known scientist, and view his impersonal accusation as... a belittling of the honour, dignity and memory of

43/B “Dragontooth” cluster mine dropped from helicopters during the Vietnam War was much the same, aimed at loss of limbs and head trauma rather than deaths. See: Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 223; “Soviet Toys of Death,” *New York Times*, 10 December 1985, accessed 17 April 2017, www.nytimes.com/1985/12/10/opinion/soviet-toys-of-death.html#h%5bIleBfA,3,4,TtoTto,1%5d.

⁶ Cited in Gerald Nadler, “Commander Denies Soldiers Killed By Other Soviets,” *United Press International* (1 March 1989), accessed 19 June 2017, www.upi.com/Archives/1989/03/01/Commander-denies-soldiers-killed-by-other-Soviets/1641604731600/.

⁷ “Sakharov Hears of Soviet Firing on Own Troops,” *Los Angeles Times*, 1 March 1989, accessed 8 June 2017, articles.latimes.com/1989-03-01/news/mn-586_1_soviet-troops.

⁸ “Steps Toward Independence,” *Detroit Free Press*, 23 October 1989, 59.

those sons of our motherland who to the end carried out its orders.⁹

Most cited in Western publications are Chervonopiskii's closing words of "we must all fight for... the state, the motherland, and communism" and the two standing ovations he received.¹⁰ It is overlooked that Chervonopiskii's speech focused not on stilted ideological claptrap, but the welfare gap between long-time apparatchiks and the afgangtsy's generation. Indeed, he began with the sarcastic statement that "I would like first of all to express my gratitude for the fact that after several days, the representatives of youth have finally been given the floor."¹¹ Chervonopiskii placed his comrades not among the Brezhnevites, but those depicted in *Is It Easy To Be Young?*, stating:

The most insulting thing is that you, the elder comrades, our fathers and grandfathers, have not left for us, for the youths, even any acceptable ideas by which we can build our lives, that we can work for, that we can fight for...

As for the Komsomol, the comrades who criticise it without grounds are clearly judging from the days when they themselves were working there or, more accurately, were not working.¹²

Essentially, Chervonopiskii cast the afgangtsy as a movement that could extend a hand to troubled Soviet youth on the home front. Their instrument for doing so was the series of afgangtsy clubs that had emerged in recent years. "In our small city of Cherkassy, there are almost 15 clubs with 800 students, run by former internationalist soldiers," he began.

These are involved not in the production of "cannon fodder," as some have

⁹ Rollins, *First Congress of People's Deputies*, vol. 2, 92.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, 90.

¹² Ibid.

alleged, but rather in educating... [those] whose hands will build a renewed society... These clubs... are often misunderstood and not supported by the bureaucrats from DOSAAF... At the dawn of Soviet power, palaces were given to the children. Now we are driving them into basements.¹³

Chervonopiskii did of course touch upon the grievances of his fellow afgantsy, be it the embarrassment “to the point of tears” that came from the everyday phrase of “I didn’t send you to Afghanistan”; the “so-called preferential lines” for apartments queued to the year 2000; or a prosthetics industry that remained “at a Stone Age level.”¹⁴ The latter was personal for Chervonopiskii, who said of his artificial limbs, “I would not even wish it upon my enemies to have to move around with such a deformity at the end of the 20th century.”¹⁵

The focus of Chervonopiskii’s speech thus was *not* the rebuttal of Andrei Sakharov, but a call for greater social assistance to the afgantsy and an outreach to Soviet youths. Moreover, the statement on behalf of his fellow afgantsy was co-authored with Colonel General Boris Gromov and a Captain from the Khakas Autonomous Region. As Chervonopiskii recalled many years later, “It just so happened that I was given the floor. I spoke just as Gromov would have.”¹⁶ Even the most authoritative Western observers dismissed the statement as “a bitter and personal attack on Sakharov” from “Party hack agitators.”¹⁷ Had Colonel General Gromov, praised as “a no-nonsense guy with a good head for the political significance of his command” by the Bush Administration, read the

¹³ Ibid, 91.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sergei Chervonopiskii, interview with author July 2015.

¹⁷ Galeotti, *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union’s Last War*, 125.

statement instead, Cold War pundits would have given a different assessment.¹⁸

Instead, attentions turned to Deputy Andrei Sakharov's response to Chervonopiskii. Faced with a heckling audience that sensed an opportunity for scapegoating, Sakharov reiterated his stance on the Afghan war. "I do not insult the soldier who shed his blood there," he insisted. "[But] the war itself in Afghanistan was a criminal one... undertaken by unknown persons." In what echoed his calls for public repentance for the crimes of the Stalin era, Sakharov spoke of a war that "cost the lives of almost a million Afghans... [and] rests on us as a terrible sin." Unflinching in the eyes of scornful deputies, he reiterated: "I came out against sending Soviet troops into Afghanistan. And for this I was exiled to Gor'kii... I am proud of this exile to Gor'kii as a decoration which I received."¹⁹ With regard to his statement in the *Ottawa Citizen*, Sakharov emphasized that the subject was not one of politics, but the negotiation of Soviet POWs' release in Pakistan. On his allegation that helicopters fired on their own soldiers, Sakharov admitted that he first heard such words on "foreign radio broadcasts." This was echoed in a letter he received that called firing on troops "with the aim of avoiding captivity" an unofficial policy in the Air Force. "I am constantly receiving new facts," he admitted, "[But] no one has the right to accuse me that I have said a mistruth."²⁰

The exchange between Chervonopiskii and Sakharov sparked a wave of hyperbole from hardliners in congress, who rained blows upon a "voice of conscience"

¹⁸ Bill Keller, "Man in the News: Boris V. Gromov - Afghanistan - Last Man Out," *New York Times*, 16 February 1989, accessed 23 April 2017, www.nytimes.com/1989/02/16/world/man-in-the-news-boris-v-gromov-afghanistan-last-man-out.html.

¹⁹ Rollins, *First Congress of People's*, vol. 2, 93.

²⁰ Ibid.

who stood for all that they despised in Gorbachev's reforms. A stern rebuttal came from former Chief of the General Staff Sergei Akhromeev, who served two-and-a-half years in Afghanistan:

We did not receive any such savage instructions from the political leadership of our nation, to destroy our own soldiers who had fallen in an encirclement. All of this is a pure lie, a deliberate untruth, and Academician Sakharov will not find any documents to substantiate it.²¹

Those who joined the melee against Sakharov reached far across the social spectrum. G.I. Kravchenko was the leader of a state farm (sovkhoz) in Vladimir province. "Who gave him the right to insult our children?" he demanded.

I have two sons. One has already done his service and the other soon will. ... And to say such a thing! I would assume that this could be said by a worker who actually did not understand... But, comrades, such a major scientist! ... Being here at the congress... I have a completely different opinion of this man.²²

Fellow worker N.A. Polikarpov, who lost his 23-year-old brother in Afghanistan, echoed Kravchenko. "Up to now neither I nor anyone knows why he died or under what circumstances," he stated. "I agree... that in the future a Soviet soldier should never die for interests incomprehensible to us. But, comrades, the statement which was made... I consider to be slander."²³ Far less couth was high school teacher Tursun Kazakova of Tashkent, who berated Sakharov for having "eradicated" his achievements and "insulted

²¹ Ibid, 94.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

the entire people, all our fallen who gave up their lives.”²⁴

Following Kazakova’s grandiose statement, congress disbanded for a recess to calm deputies’ nerves. The lone dissenting voice was Deputy Leonid Kudrin of Sverdlovsk, who criticized his fellow deputies for having indulged in “mass psychosis” against Sakharov rather than pursue an investigation into his statement.²⁵ Speaking to Western reporters, Kudrin expanded on the event and its implications. “Sakharov doesn’t have complete information, and yet he’s making statements,” he began. “Sometimes he’s been given some speculative papers in hope[s of] abus[ing] his popularity. . . . He should apologize publicly [and] admit his own mistakes.”²⁶ Nonetheless, Kudrin expressed his frustration with the outpouring of hyperbole from the old guard. “I feel indignant by the things that happened on the Congress floor,” he stated.

It is simply a mob-like, vicious attack. . . . His statements deserve a discussion, and if he disagrees, let him say so. . . . But today’s slogans call for crossing out all the good deeds ever done by Sakharov. [His] name symbolizes a fight against Brezhnevism, against stagnation, therefore I strongly disagree with these criticisms.²⁷

Some who remained silent in congress chose instead to voice their thoughts to the foreign press. Among them was Deputy Arovit Granovskii of Latvia who stated, “I support in full the academician Sakharov’s statement,” and rejected Marshal Akhromeev’s denial of

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Cited in Francis X. Clines, “Sakharov Draws Wrath in Stormy Soviet Congress,” *New York Times*, 3 June 1989, accessed 25 April 2017, www.nytimes.com/1989/06/03/world/sakharov-draws-wrath-in-stormy-soviet-congress.html.

²⁶ “Interviews, ‘C’, Miscellaneous, 1989,” Box 99, Folder 2, Tape 118, Hedrick Smith Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

²⁷ Ibid.

orders to fire on POWs. Seizing on Akhromeev's choice of words ("Sakharov will not find any documents to substantiate it") Granovskii argued, "Every child knows and understands that these documents will never be found. But he... should say that *this order was never given by me*, and he didn't say so. ... Such an argument is worthless."²⁸

Deputy Roald Sagdeev sympathized with Sakharov as a "victim of misinformation," but regarded his opponents' lambasting of the man as "an attack against perestroika, against Gorbachev."²⁹ Others were struck by the uniformity of the attack against Sakharov.

"What was surprising," opined one deputy "was the reaction of the women. Instead of asking the government who was to blame in the death of their sons, they were demanding some sort of honour."³⁰ Deputy Roi Medvedev, meanwhile, felt that "it was naïve for [Sakharov] to say that. In this case he is wrong. He really did insult the Soviet Army and Soviet people. He should have apologized."³¹ Least sympathetic was Mikhail Gorbachev, who even years later felt that "Sakharov's associates fed him 'cooked' facts and he used them, without bothering to check... [he] was clearly embarrassed."³²

Soviet public opinion, however, was overwhelmingly in favour of Andrei Sakharov. A national poll taken soon after the exchange after found that 55% of respondents "agreed with Sakharov that the war in Afghanistan was criminal."³³ This sentiment was echoed in a survey of public opinion toward deputies' performance drawn from 15,000 postcards and letters mailed from all 15 Soviet republics. Positive

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "Interviews, 'C', Miscellaneous, 1989," Box 99, Folder 2, Tape 119, Hedrick Smith Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁰ "Interviews, 'C', Miscellaneous, 1989," Box 99, Folder 2, Tape 120, Hedrick Smith Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³¹ Cited in Francis X. Clines, "Sakharov Draws Wrath in Stormy Soviet Congress," 3.

³² Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 299.

³³ Vera Nikitina, "God za godom: 1990," *Informatsionnyi biulleten' monitoringa* 5, 31 (1997): 38.

impressions lay with Sakharov and those who backed his stance on the Afghan war, such as Boris Yeltsin, Evgenii Evtushenko, and Anatolii Sobchak – the latter of whom recalled that, “during those minutes the entire audience breathed the air of 1937. As deputies... we had become blindly obedient members of a Stalinist crowd facing our victim. ...

Sakharov stood, wavering. And we, his fearful pupils, cowered in our seats.”³⁴ Those who criticized Sakharov for his statement to the *Ottawa Citizen* or joined the lynching that followed were regarded negatively.

Table 5: Assessments per 1,000 letters on which side deputies showed at Congress³⁵

Deputies	Very best	Worst
Andrei Sakharov	609	79
Evgenii Evtushenko	287	21
Anatolii Sobchak	258	8
Sergei Chervonopiskii	24	219
Igor Rodionov	10	136
Roi Medvedev	32	33

The debate between Sakharov and his critics remained a topic of public interest in the form of letters as the first congress wound to a close. In the first three days after he weathered the storm, Sakharov received 478 letters and telegrams signed on behalf of

³⁴ Anatolii Sobchak, *Khozhdenie vo vlast’: rasskaz o rozhdanii parlamenta* (Moskva: Novosti, 1991), 48.

³⁵ The study in question was conducted by the All-Union Centre for the Study of Public Opinion on Social Questions. See: “Poll Rates Congress Deputies’ Performance,” *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* XLI, 43 (1989), 16.

2,818 people.³⁶ Those documented by the Sakharov Centre offer a sample of public reactions to the debate. I.M. Kuznetsova and N.M. Terent'eva of Moscow wrote of how:

Soon after the end of Congress's session, people poured onto the streets, where an exchange of views took place ... Posters reading "Academician Sakharov – the Conscience of the People" and "Hands off Sakharov" appeared, and were covered with thousands of signatures. Telegrams and letters were then compiled and sent to Congress....³⁷

Other letters came from soldiers' mothers such as G.A. Markova of Saratov, who thanked Sakharov for "his role in stopping this carnage," her own son having served in Afghanistan. Especially vocal in their defense of the man were those involved in national movements such as the Initiative Group of Crimean Tatars, which denounced Sakharov's critics as hindered by a "chauvinistic and slavish way of thinking."³⁸

Yet the Sakharov Centre's choice of letters uploaded to the online world for historicization bears a degree of selectivity. Most notably, Chervonopiskii's statement on behalf of the afgantsy and Sakharov's response are not offered in full. Instead, the only words cited from Chervonopiskii are his allegations of Sakharov's "irresponsible statement" and his rally call for "the state, motherland, and communism."³⁹ Omitted from Sakharov's response is his answer to the question of where he obtained information on the Soviet air force targeting its own soldiers. Further, the majority of letters come from authors predominantly in Moscow and Leningrad, many of whom are academics. The

³⁶ Vladimir Dolgii, ed., "Pis'ma k Sakharovu, narodnomu deputatu," *Sakharovskii tsentr*, 2008, accessed 23 April 2017, www.sakharov-center.ru/sakharov/dolgiy.html.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

afgantsy who wrote to Sakharov are absent from the website save for A.E. Romanov of Kazakhstan, whose letter is cited in excerpts that recall how the debate “seized his attention” and convinced him that “there is a mess in the country.”⁴⁰ This is unfortunate, as some afgantsy penned sympathetic, detailed letters to Sakharov in an effort to explain his being mistaken about helicopters firing on POWs. Among them was Iurii Popov.

“I was sad to see that there are still such naïve people present at this congress,” wrote Popov on 9 June 1989, one week after tempers had cooled. “Do they really think that the war went smoothly?”⁴¹ Troops died of pilots’ friendly fire “more than once” he recalled, “especially in 1980.” The reason for this, he explained, was that:

When the army entered an area of hostilities, they had no air control officers.

They would try as best they could when issuing the command to attack targets on the ground, but these could be misunderstood or inaccurate, leading to fatal errors in the identification of targets. Later on the army fixed this... [But] as they say, “war is war.”⁴²

Especially informative was Popov’s recollection of “another case, which may have formed the basis for your statement on this subject.” “In summer 1980 an operation was conducted in Jalalabad,” he began.

One day in the operation, 11 men were cut off from their unit by mujahideen. To mark themselves, they lit a fire in the mountains. Night began to fall. As helicopters returned to base, a command came from the ground: “Please stay, our group is surrounded! We need help urgently!” Next came a premature command:

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ “Pis’ma k A.D. Sakharovu,” Arkhiv Sakharova (AS), f. 1, op. 8, d. 8, l. 1.

⁴² Ibid, ll. 1-2.

“Look, there’s a bonfire directly ahead in the mountains...” followed by a pause. During the pause the pilot replied “Understood,” ... and began shooting rockets at the fire. As a result, eight were killed and three wounded.⁴³

“As you can see,” Popov concluded, “the tragedy occurred as a result of two mistakes: the sluggishness of air control to give a command and the extreme stupidity of the pilot.” The incident was first noted as combat losses and the pilot redeployed to the Far East. After some time had passed “the crew was summoned to Tashkent for an investigation.”⁴⁴ Popov’s corrective to Sakharov’s error was a sharp contrast to the polemic of Marshal Akhromeev and Western observers’ selective quotation of Chervonopiskii. After tempers cooled, Sakharov admitted privately to afgangtsy deputies in the First Congress that “he was misinformed and that soldiers couldn’t surrender as prisoners [to the mujahideen] or they’d be shot.”⁴⁵ “We had a normal relationship with Sakharov after that,” Chervonopiskii insisted. “We’d speak with him. He had no complaints to me and we treated each other fine. I was not angry. I did not execute a grandfather.”⁴⁶

Igor Rodionov and Reactionaries in Waiting

Down with the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, the murderer of women, children and the elderly!

General Rodionov is a fascist bastard.

During perestroika, the likes of General Rodionov should not be in the legislative

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 2-3.

⁴⁵ “Ruslan Aushev: “Vvod voisk byl oshibkoi.”

⁴⁶ Sergei Chervonopiskii, interview with author, July 2015.

council. He and all the officers who took part in the killings in Tbilisi should be stripped of their rank and file.

- Postcard to Deputy Yeltsin from Gor'kii.⁴⁷

The broadcast of the First Congress of People's Deputies on private televisions brought with it a wave of citizens' voices to the public sphere as they found interim answers to the age-old question of "Kto vinovat'?" ("Who is guilty?") for grievances old and new. Among the first military-political figures to come under scrutiny was Deputy Igor Rodionov, who was accused of having ordered the violent dispersion of a peaceful demonstration in Tbilisi on 9 April 1989. The charges leveled against him bore an indirect affront to the afgantsy by association: General Rodionov commanded the 40th Army from 1985 to 1986 and was generally well-regarded by those who served under his command. Particularly supportive of the man was fellow afganets Lieutenant General Aleksandr Lebed, who participated in the event and insisted that Rodionov "strongly protested against Patiashvili's call for additional troops" against protesters "but was overruled and not allowed to appeal to Moscow."⁴⁸ Others were more cynical, with an afganets from Novosibirsk writing "Rodionov must have considered deploying tanks against the people and decided to use shovels instead, to avoid killing anyone. After all, people have crushed each other in panic at the sight of tanks, but not shovels."⁴⁹ Lost in the debate was that many of those who followed General Rodionov's orders to disperse

⁴⁷ "Kollektsiia pisem Eltsinu," GARF, f. A-664, op. 1 d. 286, l. 2.

⁴⁸ Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 258. Jumber Patiashvili was First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party from 1985 to 1989.

⁴⁹ "Pis'ma k A.D. Sakharovu," AS, f. 1, op. 8, d. 8, l. 3.

Tbilisi protesters were “paratroopers who had recently returned from Afghanistan.”⁵⁰ Thus, when Deputy Rodionov defended soldiers’ actions in Tbilisi the themes he touched upon spoke to the general obstacles that the afgangtsy faced as the Soviet Union they fought for fractured along national lines. According to Deputy Rodionov these ranged from chants of “The USSR is the prison of the people!”; to vilifying rumours of having “forced a 72-year-old woman to walk three kilometres and finally dumped her somewhere in the bushes”; to “malicious newspapers” emboldened by glasnost.⁵¹ Deputy Rodionov emphasized the latter in his forecast of rising nationalism in the republics. “Here we are talking about how bad 1937 was,” he remarked, “but I think it is worse now than in 1937. Now people can talk about you on television, write about you in newspapers, and the mass media can defame you however they wish....”⁵²

Tasked with leading an investigative commission on the Tbilisi massacre was Deputy Anatolii Sobchak, who put forward a series of recommendations based on Western models of civil-military relations that challenged the old guard of the Soviet Army. Among the most controversial were the prohibition of military personnel being used as domestic police and the prevention of “former Communist Party organizations from issuing orders to the military and other armed forces.”⁵³ The Sobchak commission’s report also cast light on the growing autonomy enjoyed by hardliners and future coup d’etat supporters. Indeed, Defense Minister Dmitrii Iazov was named as the man who issued “a verbal instruction” to Generals Rodionov and K.A. Kochetov to deploy to

⁵⁰ Barylski, *The Soldier in Russian Politics*, 65.

⁵¹ Rollins, *First Congress of People’s Deputies*, vol. 1, 228-30.

⁵² *Ibid*, 230.

⁵³ Barylski, *The Soldier in Russian Politics*, 68.

Tbilisi on 7 April and “act in accordance with the situation as they saw fit.”⁵⁴ Chief of the General Staff M.A. Moiseev was named for having “issued a directive on behalf of the Minister of Defense to send an airborne regiment to... place the most important facilities under guard” in Tbilisi, while Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs I.F. Shilov was named for having ordered subunits of the MVD to redeploy to Tbilisi from different regions of the country.⁵⁵ The report bore incriminating evidence of a conservative faction in the Communist Party capable of mobilizing soldiers without Gorbachev’s authorization.

Deputy Sobchak announced the committee’s recommendations at the Second Congress of People’s Deputies in December 1989. Rather than denounce the culprits of the Tbilisi massacre, Gorbachev – ever a pragmatist – offered the podium to General Rodionov. With six months of economic decline and political unknowns having accumulated since the First Congress, Rodionov’s apocalyptic diagnosis of events in Tbilisi gathered applause. The military procurator who gave his evaluation of the tragedy then “exonerated the military and held the [Georgian] nationalists primarily responsible.”⁵⁶ Infuriated, Foreign Minister Shevardnadze demanded to speak only for Gorbachev to refuse him. “It wasn’t just the ‘series of proofs’ that disturbed me,” Shevardnadze remarked. “He was applauded so enthusiastically and with... vengeful pleasure. It was the same atmosphere as that which had greeted the public dishonour of Sakharov.”⁵⁷ Although he penned a letter of resignation, Shevardnadze stopped short of

⁵⁴ “Findings of the Commission of the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies to Investigate the Events which Occurred in the City of Tbilisi on 9 April 1989,” translated by Gary Goldberg, accessed 22 September 2017, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117183>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Barylski, *The Soldier in Russian Politics*, 69.

⁵⁷ Cited in Murray, *A Democracy of Despots*, 65.

submitting it and remained in Gorbachev's administration for another full year.⁵⁸ During this time, plans for a coup d'etat fermented among Gorbachev's conservative appointees.

A War of Written Words Between Veterans

Dear Deputy Boris Nikolaevich!

I am writing to you as a disabled veteran of the Great Patriotic War to ask for help. How long will Comrades M.S. Gorbachev, N.I. Ryzhkov, and the country's leaders mock veterans and invalids of the Great Patriotic War with their actions? These "afgantsy" in the course of six months have received everything – sanatoriums, pensions, wheelchairs, cars, apartments – while we have been filling coffins for 45 years.

How much can you promise and deceive us?!

When will it end?!

Where is our veteran's organization, and why is it deaf, blind, and silent?!

Help us regain our rights, and put the afgantsy where they belong.

- Mikhail Stepanenko, 14 August 1989⁵⁹

Overshadowed by the spectacle of the Sakharov debate and the Sobchak committee's investigation of Rodionov's actions in Tbilisi was the debate over the afgantsy's right to equal welfare with veterans of the Great Patriotic War. It challenged the older generation's monopoly on the title of "veteran" and was a component of liberal proposals on military reform. "We do not want to be the victims of a political mistake,"

⁵⁸ Eduard Shevardnadze, *Moi vybor* (Moscow: Novosti, 1991), 324.

⁵⁹ "Kollektsiia pisem Eltsinu," GARF, f. A-664, op. 1, d. 48.

declared afganets Deputy Pavel Shet'ko on 2 June 1989. Echoing the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers, Shet'ko cast the afgantsy's mission as "making certain that no one would dare send our children outside our motherland without the permission of the highest body."⁶⁰ To reform the Soviet Army was sacrilege to many; to broaden the definition of "veteran" and expand its social-welfare benefits to a younger generation was no less controversial and prompted a wave of letters as citizens competed for priority.

It was on 5 August 1989 that Iu. I. Griaznukhin penned a letter to Nikolai Bosenko (1918-95), a fellow pensioner serving as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Committee for Veterans and Invalids. Entitled "A Generation Without a Future," it addressed what Griaznukhin felt was an omission from Soviet history: the heroism of "participants in the war of 1921 to 1922... who selflessly restored the national economy, public education, health care, and culture."⁶¹ Unlike the afgantsy's generation, Griaznukhin argued, his own "went where they were deployed, without asking how much they will be paid."⁶² Those who penned the laws on veterans' welfare were "mostly people born in 1926 or 1927."⁶³ As a result, "participants in the Civil War, its Group II invalids, and those with chronic illness cannot work, are often unable to use public transport, and are not entitled to free medicines." Pointing out that veterans of the Civil War had only a few years to live, Griaznukhin urged that Bosenko fight for them to be "equated to the disabled of war."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Rollins, *First Congress of People's Deputies*, vol. 2, 92.

⁶¹ "Dokumenty o deiatel'nosti Komiteta po delam veteranov i invalidov," GARF, tom 1, f. P-9654, op. 7, d. 1311, l. 106.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

While Bosenko promised Griaznukhin that he would address his concern at the Committee for Veterans and Invalids' next meeting, any momentum the Civil War veterans gained was soon overtaken.⁶⁵ After the Second Congress of People's Deputies of 12 to 24 December 1989, Bosenko received an appeal signed by 125 Great Patriotic War veterans in Omsk.⁶⁶ The authors pressured deputies "to solve the question of equity between veterans and invalids of the Great Patriotic War" and "invalids with common injuries," arguing that veterans who became invalids in the postwar years did not receive equal benefits.⁶⁷ Allegedly, a representative raised the issue at the Second Congress on their behalf only for Chairman of the State Committee for Labour and Social Affairs, Vladimir Shcherbakov (b. 1949), to "categorically object" to the question.⁶⁸ "He lacked any just arguments to defend his position," the authors argued, "and deputies should publicly apologise to the soldiers who served on the front line... and now receive no support from the government."⁶⁹

Other veterans of the Great Patriotic War wrote to despair of a military they no longer recognized. "When will *DEDOVSHCHINA* be liquidated?" demanded one such man in a letter to Deputy Yeltsin. "When will order and discipline be reestablished in our Soviet Army? I do not see proper leadership in command for this."⁷⁰ Indeed, some turned away from their wartime experience to advocate memorialization of the forgotten. As the 45th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War drew near, a group of such veterans

⁶⁵ Ibid, l. 107.

⁶⁶ Ibid, l. 56.

⁶⁷ Ibid, l. 55.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, ll. 55-6.

⁷⁰ "Kollektsiia pisem Eltsinu," GARF, f. A-664, op. 1, d. 286, l. 1. Capitalization as in original.

wrote a letter to *Pravda* also copied to the Deputies of the Supreme Soviet, its Deputy Chairman Anatolii Luk'ianov, and General Secretary Gorbachev. "We, veterans of the Great Patriotic War, including invalids of groups I, II, and III, turn to YOU on behalf of 2,000 citizens," it began.

If we speak of the number of deaths... during the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, during the Civil War... in Spain, in the PATRIOTIC WAR, in the performance of international duty in Afghanistan, or those killed behind the lines during these wars, or even in peacetime – for example, in Chernobyl – as well as those killed in the ABSOLUTE BUTCHERY OF THE STALIN ERA! Then in TOTAL this... WOULD BE 60-70 MILLION people!!! IF NOT MORE! ... And we still do not even have a MEMORIAL DAY.⁷¹

"Throughout the civilized world," the veterans continued, "countries have established such holidays. Is it not shameless to refer to this date as 'Victory Day' instead?"⁷² That the clustered, sensational appeal was dated 14 February 1990, one day to the first anniversary of the Soviet-Afghan War's conclusion, highlighted the competition for memorialization between different generations in the years of glasnost.

At times, the new focus brought upon the afgantsy and draft-age students stirred resentment among veterans of the Great Patriotic War. "Internationalists who served in Afghanistan receive priority for privileges," complained one such man in a letter dated 14 September 1989. "Why have our years of service at the front been forgotten? Are we not

⁷¹ "Dokumenty o deiatel'nosti Komiteta po delam veteranov i invalidov," GARF, tom 1, f. P-9654, op. 7, d. 1311, l. 23. Capitalization as in original.

⁷² Ibid.

worthy of obtaining the same benefits?”⁷³ Particularly irate was an invalid of the Great Patriotic War who resided in Kiev. “So a bunch of guys (kuchka liudei) created a union of afgantsy,” he wrote in a letter to Deputy Yeltsin. “Glasnost and truth are all a fog! The government does what it wants without asking the people. Help *us*, the liberators of Europe, to improve *our* lives and tell the truth!”⁷⁴ The Great Patriotic War veterans’ resistance to the changing notion of heroism, paired with the decline in public support for the Soviet Army, left its spokesmen prone to gaffes. Among the most prone was Defense Minister Dmitrii Iazov.

In 1988 Defense Minister Iazov had lashed out at the younger generation by summoning journalist Dmitrii Zakharov (b. 1958) “for a sharp dressing-down” after he featured Iurii Poliakov on *Vzgliad* to discuss military hazing.⁷⁵ The arguments in favour of greater transparency in civil-military relations advocated by the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers and its supporters in congress goaded him further. At a 1989 news conference, Iazov was caught off-guard by a reporter’s inquiry about the Soviet government’s actions to rescue POWs held by the mujahideen. His response was to bark, “There are no such prisoners!” and insist that any individuals deemed missing in action “were actually dead.”⁷⁶ At once, Iazov seemed insensitive and politically out of touch; official statistics on the matter had circulated for more than a year. The next day, after a lashing from his superiors, Iazov met with soldiers’ mothers who were present at the

⁷³ Ibid, 142-45.

⁷⁴ “Kollektsiia pisem Eltsinu,” GARF, f. A-664, op. 1, d. l. 48.

⁷⁵ Smith, *The New Russians*, 169.

⁷⁶ Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: the Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009), 267.

news conference and provided them with an updated list of 314 MIAs in Afghanistan.⁷⁷

Defense Minister Iazov's refusal to do away with notions of a Soviet Army formed during the Great Patriotic War – one where deferral was not an option, where *dedovshchina* did not exist, and where MIAs and POWs were regarded with suspicion – stayed with him until the very end of his time in the position. Asked by Deputy Yeltsin to address questions raised about lethal hazing by Kamchatka's Committee of Soldiers' Mothers in August 1990 "to try to ease their suffering," Iazov was less than enthused.⁷⁸ "I carefully examined the letters and took each one very seriously," he insisted. "Over the past five years, the loss of people to crime and accidents in the Soviet Armed Forces has been reduced by almost 25% ... but it was not possible to completely eliminate the deaths of personnel."⁷⁹ The army Iazov found in his investigation was not one hampered by callous officers and miserable living conditions, but one wherein:

Quite often the tragic consequences result from youths' carelessness, their lack of caution, and their disregard for security measures... facilitated by the complex socio-political and criminogenic situation in various regions of the country. All cases of death, as well as the abandonment of military units by servicemen, are regarded as grave offenses.⁸⁰

Further, while Iazov offered Yeltsin details on four cases of conscripts who died while serving in Central Asian republics, he insisted that many "letters and 'stories' were

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ "Dokumenty po rassmotreniiu pisem i obrashchenii Komitetov Soldatskikh materei i drugikh obshchestvennykh organizatsii po voprosu rassmotreniia prichin gibeli i travmatizma voennosluzhashchikh v mirnoe vremia," GARF, f. 10026, op. 1, d. 2460, l. 21.

⁷⁹ Ibid, l. 44.

⁸⁰ Ibid, ll. 44-5

fabricated by an experienced journalist to discredit the army,” and those signed anonymously from the chief military hospital in Termez were unfounded in their allegations.⁸¹ The aloofness and self-denial of Defense Minister Iazov’s generation at a time of military reform greatly hampered any sense of solidarity with the afgantsy.

The Second Congress of People’s Deputies

It is our women who weep for their sons and husbands who died in Afghanistan. . . . In thousands of pages of letters mailed throughout the country, so much sorrow is poured upon their unknown fates, their inhuman living conditions, and the lawlessness in their bases.

- Deputy Valentina Matvienko, 13 December 1989⁸²

We are convinced that... no professionals are able to replace the indispensable role of “*neformaly*” societies – those of the afgantsy, pensioners, trade unions, *Miloserdie* (Charity)... Without public assistance and support we will not achieve the desired results.

- Minister of Internal Affairs, Vadim Bakatin, 21 December 1989.⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid, l. 46.

⁸² *Vtoroi s'ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 12-24 dekabria 1989 g., stenograficheskii otchet*, tom 1 (Moskva: Izdanie verkhovnogo soveta SSSR, 1990), 444. Known in the West for her role as governor of Saint Petersburg from 2003-11, Matvienko was at this time the Chairman of the Soviet Committee on Women, Family, Motherhood and Childhood Affairs (Komitet po delam zhenshchin, okhrany sem'ei, materinstva i detstva).

⁸³ *Vtoroi s'ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 12-24 dekabria 1989 g., stenograficheskii otchet*, tom 3 (Moskva: Izdanie verkhovnogo soveta SSSR, 1990), 414. *Miloserdie* was as much a “nationwide phenomenon” as it was an NGO. Independent branches formed in Leningrad and Moscow in 1987, and by 1988, 5,000 volunteers had spread across the RSFSR in 17 registered branches. An apolitical movement, it focused on “self-help groups” for those in need. In the case of the afgantsy, *Miloserdie* focused on issues of prostheses and the establishment of a rehabilitation centre. See: Anne White, *Democratization in Russia Under Gorbachev, 1985-91: the Birth of a Voluntary Sector* (London: MacMillan Press, 1999), 103-08; Galeotti, *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*, 116.

On 12 December 1989 the People's Deputies reconvened to build upon the proposals made in the summer. In its second session, Deputy Evgenii Mal'tsev (1929-2003) of the Leningrad Organization of the Union of Artists of the RSFSR announced that on the question of the Soviet-Afghan War, "The Committee of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on Foreign Affairs... After eight days has summarized the results and is ready to give its report to the Congress."⁸⁴ Speaking for the Committee was Deputy Aleksandr Dzasokhov (b. 1934). Born and elected in the North Ossetian Autonomous SSR, he worked for 20 years in the Soviet Committee for Solidarity with Asian and African Countries before serving as Soviet Ambassador to Syria in 1986 to 1988. Speaking of the Committee's "political evaluation" of the Politburo's decision to deploy the 40th Army to Afghanistan, Deputy Dzasokhov spoke highly of "the opportunity to meet many Soviet citizens who served, and see how events developed." Particularly valuable, Dzasokhov continued, was his consultation with afganets and fellow deputy Sergei Chervonopiskii. "He insisted that I not hurry, because some comrades, particularly those in their elder years... could not participate in our committee," he explained. "A lot of material has been collected, but... we need another few weeks in order to complete our work."⁸⁵ In a strike against the sincerity of deputies' two standing ovations for Chervonopiskii in the first congress, the vote on granting the Committee additional time to present its findings was sharply divided, with 1,175 deputies in favour, 792 against, and 52 who abstained.⁸⁶ This was followed by a proposal from Deputy Vladislav Shapovalenko, a member of the Inter-regional Group, that a vote on the disclosure of "information on the privileges enjoyed by

⁸⁴ *Vtoroi s'ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 12-24 dekabria 1989 g.*, tom 1, 145-46.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 153.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 158.

certain categories of citizens” be made public. While the result was overwhelmingly in favour (1,666 votes, among them Ruslan Aushev, Boris Gromov, Gennadii Borovik, and Boris Yeltsin), President Mikhail Gorbachev and General Valentin Varennikov were among the 273 members who voted against the motion.⁸⁷ Deputies’ reluctance to grant additional time for a political evaluation of the Afghan war, and senior Party members’ entitlement to confidentiality spoke to the resistance that reformists faced in congress.

After the Committee of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on Foreign Affairs was granted an extension to prepare its report on the Afghan war, the Second Congress of People’s Deputies was thrown off-guard by the death of Andrei Sakharov on 14 December 1989. Scheduled to deliver a speech the very next day, Sakharov experienced a fatal heart attack in his study just after 21:00 P.M. With his passing, the congress lost its sharpest, unswerving critic of the Soviet-Afghan War before Deputy Dzasokhov could deliver the Committee’s report. Sakharov’s death was announced by Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, Vitalii Vorotnikov, at 10:00 A.M.

“Comrade deputies!” he began:

The life of one of the country’s greatest scientists, a major public figure, was cut short. His contribution to the defense capability of our state... was enormous and unique, his tireless social activity stirred a response across the world, and an objective analysis of his activities is the province of history. All that Andrei Dmitrievich did was dictated by his unburdened conscience and deep humanitarian convictions.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ibid, 159-64.

⁸⁸ *Vtoroi s'ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 12-24 dekabria 1989 g.*, tom 2,145.

Nowhere was there any mention of the dissident movement, Sakharov's exile to Gor'kii for his criticism of the Soviet-Afghan War, or his foundation of the Inter-regional Group as a party of opposition. Nor would there be any day of national mourning for the man. It was a stilted announcement that illustrated hardliners' contempt and reformers' willingness to capitalize on his death. Gorbachev, who resented Sakharov's celebrity and calls for a radicalization of reforms, declined to speak on his passing and reserved his comments for *Moskovskie Novosti*. When Chairman of the Soviet Union Evgenii Primakov announced that congress's 17 December session would be suspended from 13:00 to 17:00 P.M. to allow deputies to visit Sakharov's funeral, "the conservatives hissed."⁸⁹ Little better was Evgenii Evtushenko, who "scurried around the Congress buffet" at lunch hour that very day, "handing out to correspondents (in Russian and English) a copy of the poem that he had written, instantly, in honour of Sakharov." "Maybe you will print it on your editorial page?" he suggested hopefully, upon handing his magnum opus to David Remnick of *The Washington Post*.⁹⁰ In what foreshadowed the cutthroat capitalism of the 1990s, "exclusive videotape of Sakharov's last days" was advertised in TASS soon after, "available to foreign television stations for \$1,500, hard currency only."⁹¹ The fragile union between left-wing intellectuals and Mikhail Gorbachev's reformers began to disintegrate.

⁸⁹ *Vtoroi s'ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR*, tom 2, 198; David Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Random House, 1994,) 284.

⁹⁰ Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 284.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

From Political Evaluation to Moral Condemnation

I have heard great claims from the intelligentsia of our republics. Why did you remain silent for all these years? Even now, during perestroika, we have not heard your voices and opinions about this war. You carry your share of responsibility, and no less than the apparatus that launched this war.

- Deputy Rizoali Odzhiev, *afganets*, 24 December 1989⁹²

On 24 December 1989, as the Second Congress of People's Deputies wound to a close in the shadow of Andrei Sakharov's passing, two decrees were adopted which addressed the open secrets of separate generations. The first, "Regarding the Political and Legal Evaluation of the Soviet-German Nonaggression Pact in 1939," denounced the signing of secret protocols and subsequent partitioning of "spheres of influence" and declared them invalid.⁹³ The second, "Regarding the Political Evaluation of the Decision About Sending Troops to Afghanistan in December 1979," marked a step toward reconciliation with the *afgantsy* and those affected by wartime losses. It was touted in Western scholarship for declaring Politburo members' authorization of military force in Afghanistan "a decision [that] deserves moral and political condemnation."⁹⁴ This choice excerpt oversimplifies the extent of the Committee on International Affairs' research and report on the matter and the significance of the decree that followed. As Deputy Ruslan Aushev emphasized 25 years later, "The first congress... was our greatest representation. ... The decision... was thought out, we sat down with lawyers and economists..."

⁹² *Vtoroi s'ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 12-24 dekabria 1989 g., stenograficheskiĭ otchet*, tom 4 (Moskva: Izdanie verkhovnogo soveta SSSR, 1990), 443.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 612-14.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 616.

members of the Politburo... leadership of the Armed Forces of the USSR – and everyone voted in favour.”⁹⁵ Gathering fewer headlines than the “moral and political condemnation” of the war were two clauses of the decree that addressed cases of MIA and POW soldiers, and the social-welfare of the afgantsy:

3. The Supreme Soviet of the USSR is to consider the question of setting up a commission to consider cases of former servicemen who were members of the contingent of Soviet troops sent to Afghanistan.
4. The Council of Ministers of the USSR is charged with the formulation of a national program aimed at settling questions connected with organizing working and living conditions of former servicemen and other persons in the contingent of Soviet troops in Afghanistan, and of families of deceased soldiers.⁹⁶

This was in essence the result of six months’ lobbying by the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers, and the afgantsy were, in theory, granted the rights to housing, higher pensions, and the provision of prosthetic appliances and wheelchairs to invalids.

Deputies who held political aspirations, meanwhile, were conscientious of their public image after public reactions to Sakharov’s death. “Unfortunately, the behavior of some deputies gave rise to the spread of unfounded rumors about deputy privileges, which casts a shadow over us all,” remarked Evgenii Primakov. “After some consideration... we recommend the transfer of a building on Sivtsev Vrazhek lane – intended for deputies’ residence – to Moscow citizens, primarily veterans and invalids of

⁹⁵ “Ruslan Aushev: “Vvod voisk byl oshibkoi.” In fact, the tally was 1,678 votes for, 18 against, and 19 abstentions. However, it was not a public vote. See: *Vtoroi s’ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 12-24 dekabria 1989 g.*, tom 4, 450.

⁹⁶ *Vtoroi s’ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 12-24 dekabria 1989 g.*, tom 4, 616.

war, including the afgantsy.”⁹⁷ After the applause that followed, the floor was given to Deputy Dzasokhov, who requested 20 minutes time to deliver the Committee’s report.

Drawn from interviews with “individuals who held office in the late 1970s in Party and government bodies, military commanders, and heads of various agencies related to the development of Soviet-Afghan relations,” the report exemplified the opportunities that glasnost brought with it to reconsider national history.⁹⁸ Classified documents were provided by the Central Committee, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the KGB, while meetings were held with “people’s deputies of the USSR... soldiers who passed through Afghanistan, and a number of experts.” Deputy Dzasokhov ultimately concluded that, “Decision-making in December 1979 was influenced by the excessive ideologization of Soviet foreign policy” in reference to the Brezhnev Doctrine, “as was our interpretation of the April Revolution.”⁹⁹ Emphasized in the report was that it was not simply the quartet of Brezhnev, Andropov, Ustinov, and Gromyko that led to military intervention, but “serious flaws in the system of defining practical policies and the mechanism for executing decisions.” The Committee concluded that even had the path to war been given due process, “the decision... would most likely have been approved. The Party, the people, and our foreign relations, were in essence set before the fait accompli.”¹⁰⁰ It was a sobering report that condemned the Soviet system as much as it did foreign policy decisions. The Committee went as far as to echo Soviet

⁹⁷ Ibid, 423.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 432.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 433.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 434.

dissidents by arguing that military intervention violated the 1977 Constitution.¹⁰¹

Absent from Western accounts of the Committee's report on the Soviet-Afghan War was its emphasis on the need to memorialize those killed in action and provide "all possible assistance and support... to the disabled and the families of the deceased."¹⁰² It was a demand that spoke to a confluence of priorities between people's deputies and the Committee of Soldier's Mothers. Indeed, Deputy Shet'ko stated as much when he remarked, "I think that many mothers of dead and living participants in the Afghan war are prepared to put pencil to paper and write of who caused the excessive ideologization of the country and decided the foreign policy issues of the mid-1970s."¹⁰³ The betterment of civil-military relations was a recurring theme in Shet'ko's statements; he also called for the compilation of a *Book of Memory* "to involve both the Komsomol and party bodies and public organizations," rather than be assigned to military bureaucrats.¹⁰⁴

Perhaps most distinct from their predecessors was the afgangtsy's acute sense of history in motion. "The war," argued Deputy Odzhiev in the First Congress, "was a logical continuation of the period of stagnation."¹⁰⁵

In historical retrospect, the war in Afghanistan is still a living part of today's history, which... incorporates a range of political and social forces. There must be

¹⁰¹ In particular, Article 73, paragraph 8 read: "The jurisdiction of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, as represented by its highest bodies of state authority and administration, shall cover... issues of war and peace, defence of the sovereignty of the USSR and safeguarding of its frontiers and territory, and organisation of defence; direction of the Armed Forces of the USSR." See: "Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," accessed 4 June 2017, www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/const/77cons03.html; *Vtoroi s'ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 12-24 dekabria 1989 g.*, tom 4, 435.

¹⁰² *Vtoroi s'ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 12-24 dekabria 1989 g.*, tom 4, 436.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 443.

¹⁰⁴ Rollins, *First Congress of People's Deputies*, vol. 2, 92.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 440.

a great, multifaceted work between politicians, diplomats, and scientists to offer a comprehensive assessment of this historical event.¹⁰⁶

Indeed, the proposals put forward by afgantsy deputies were as concerned with the historicization and preservation of personal accounts for the future as they were with immediate needs. After the Committee's report came to an end, Deputy Shet'ko cried out "Comrades! Communists! Name the names of those who protested against the war and sought the truth. Those who out of protest surrendered their membership cards or shot themselves. You have had enough time. Tomorrow will mark ten years."¹⁰⁷ Deputy Ruslan Aushev, in contrast, argued in favour of more inclusive legislation on veterans' benefits and felt it should begin "with those who served in the Spanish Civil War, ending with those who were in Afghanistan."¹⁰⁸ Discussion even extended to "mutually beneficial cooperation... with the Republic of Afghanistan" in the postwar era. The latter was emphasized by Deputy Odzhiev, who deemed "the termination of economic or other assistance to Afghanistan... a short-sighted and unjustified proposal." "Speaking as someone who became an invalid in this war," he continued:

The creation of Soviet-Afghan enterprises can have a positive impact on both our domestic situations. For example, the city of Khorog, Tajikistan on the Afghan border ranks first in our country in terms of higher education per capita and has a surplus of workers. This could be an opportunity.¹⁰⁹

Deputy Odzhiev's statement captured the cautious optimism of afgantsy deputies on 24

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 436.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 444.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 440.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 442.

December 1989. It was that day that a decree was passed issuing toughly-worded condemnation of the Soviet-Afghan War with broad appeal passed overwhelmingly with 1,678 votes for, 18 against, and 19 abstentions.¹¹⁰ For the first time the afgantsy became a subject of year-round public debate: from the 40th Army's withdrawal from Afghanistan in February, to the election of people's deputies in March, to the televised debates that took place at the two congresses, 1989 saw popular interest in the afgantsy and their wartime experience peak – and with it, their depiction on the big screen.

From Kandahar to *Kinoteatr*

Afghan Breakdown (Afganskii izlom) came out in 1990. My wife and I saw it in a theater. After that, my wife changed... I never told her how it was there. What was I supposed say? Especially when my mother and father... They'd ask me and I'd say, "What do you need to know? I served." And service was nerve-wracking, so I tried to shield them from my personal emotions. After my wife saw *Afghan Breakdown* she asked: "Was that really how it was?" "Yes, that's how it was. And if you have any more questions, don't ask me. You've seen the film."

- Vladimir, afganets¹¹¹

The introduction of the Soviet-Afghan War to televised political debate with the Congress of Peoples' Deputies in May 1989 coincided with a changing public image of the afgantsy in popular culture, many of which echoed depictions of Vietnam veterans as troubled individuals prone to vigilante justice. Key to this was a Supreme Soviet vote in

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 450.

¹¹¹ Vladimir, interview with author, May 2015.

November 1989 that granted amnesty “to all former soldiers who committed crimes while serving in Afghanistan, including 2,540 soldiers already convicted.”¹¹² Intended as an outreach to those who committed crimes under the pressures of war, it also reinforced a popular image of the afgantsy as cold killers prone to a life of crime. This was particularly true of their image in Soviet cinema. Among the films to grace the screens that year was *Burnt By Kandahar* (*Opalennye kandagarom*), which follows the story of an afganets discharged from the military with PTSD. During his search for employment he becomes acquainted with a mafia boss linked to the oil industry. Having questioned the man’s ethics, the protagonist is assaulted by the boss’s henchmen and states defiantly, “I served in Afghanistan. I’m not afraid of you.” His enemy replies without hesitation, “I was there too.”¹¹³ The new, unwelcome presence of so-called mafiosi in the Soviet Union and their greater sense of unity as a class of criminals than the afgantsy possessed as brothers of war are resonating themes of the film. Also released that year was *Cargo 300* (*Gruz 300*). The tale of a convoy that journeys toward Kabul along a mountainous path, a band of mujahideen under the leadership of an American officer foil the operation by destroying a vital bridge and inflict significant casualties.¹¹⁴ The film was notable for the acting roles of military personnel from the Turkestan Military District who played extras in the 40th Army; for students of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan who studied in Dushanbe and played mujahideen; and for Evgenii Buntov, an afganets who co-starred as Sergeant Anatolii Chebakov and recorded a ballad that plays during the film’s somber

¹¹² Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military*, 250.

¹¹³ *Opalennye Kandagarom*, dir. Iurii Sabitov (Uzbekfil’ m, 1989), <https://sovetskie.net/filmy-boeviki/3062-opalennye-kandagarom-smotret-onlajn.html>.

¹¹⁴ Cargo 300 refers to the transportation of wounded soldiers from combat operations, and should not be confused with Cargo 200, which refers to transporting the dead.

conclusion.¹¹⁵ This was a stark contrast to the propaganda of *A Hot Summer In Kabul* and the allusions to an off-screen war in *Courier*. The change of tone was mirrored in ceremonial spectacle: on 7 November 1989, the annual military parade to mark the Revolution was stripped down to a modest layout with fewer weapon systems than in the past and faced “dramatic anti-military demonstrations across the country, including an unprecedented one of 10,000 people in Moscow” prompted largely by citizens’ fatigue with the Afghan war.¹¹⁶

The most enduring and well-praised movie on the conflict to come of this time was *Afghan Breakdown* (Afganskii izlom). A drawn-out work in process released in 1990, director Vladimir Bortko spoke of how he would “write something, modify it, rewrite it many times, but... what I needed was someone who had been there himself... and assessed it... without political bias.”¹¹⁷ The candidate settled on was Mikhail Leshchinskii, the primary Soviet television reporter on the conflict. Leshchinskii reported on military news for ten years prior to the war, travelled to Afghanistan of his own accord well before Gorbachev’s liberalization of the media, and was frustrated with the Politburo’s unflinching stance on propaganda.¹¹⁸ Upon teaming with Bortko, Leshchinskii visited Kabul and Kandahar for research. Contributing as a screenwriter was

¹¹⁵ While *Gruz 300* was the beginning and the end of his acting career, Evgenii Buntov, who served in 1987-88, went on to have a successful career as a bard, singing of his wartime experience. He remains active at this time of writing, having broached the topic of the Donbass War in Ukraine. See: “Lichnyi fotoarkhiv E. Buntova,” accessed 17 May 2017, www.rsva-ural.ru/library/?id=637; “<Batal’ony upyreï rasfasuem po grobam>. Muzykal’naia reaktsiia i tonkii namek na reshenie ukrainskogo konflikta,” 13 November 2014, accessed 17 May 2017, <https://ura.news/news/1052194391>.

¹¹⁶ Daria Fane, “After Afghanistan: the Decline of Soviet Military Prestige,” *The Washington Quarterly* 13, 2 (1990): 10.

¹¹⁷ “V Sankt-Peterburge vspominali <Afganskii izlom>,” Baltiiskoe informatsionnoe agentstvo ,15 August 2009, accessed 19 June 2017, www.baltinfo.ru/2009/08/15/V-Sankt-Peterburge-vspominali-Afganskii-izlom--99702.

¹¹⁸ Mikhail Leshchinskii, “Kogda zabyvaesh’ voïnu, ona k tebe vozvrashchaetsia,” *Kommersant’* (16 May 1988), accessed 18 June 2017, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/198420>.

Leonid Bogachuk, who worked in Kabul from 1982 to 1984 as an adviser to the Central Committee of the Democratic Organization for Youth of Afghanistan. By the time he returned to the Soviet Union only 12 casualties had been reported in the press.¹¹⁹ In *Afghan Breakdown*, Bogachuk found an opportunity to combat the myths composed by the state. “Bogachuk, who had a successful business at the time, sponsored the film,” remarked Bortko in hindsight. “I promised that the film about Afghanistan would be shown all over the world, but it was a difficult [economic] time....”¹²⁰ Doubly problematic was the place of shooting: in search of convincing backdrops, Bortko chose to film in the Tajik SSR, which broke into a Civil War.

Starring in the film as Major Bandura was Italian actor Michele Placido, immensely popular in the Soviet Union for his role in *The Octopus* (*La piovra*), a serial drama about the mafia. Set in late 1988 as the 40th Army’s withdrawal nears its conclusion, Major Bandura dreads the prospect of adaptation to life in the Soviet Union. What follows are snapshots of Major Bandura and his soldiers’ everyday lives in Afghanistan: the boredom of life in the barracks and inane patrols of convoy paths leading to vodka for officers and *dedovshchina* among young recruits; the willingness of warlords who receive military aid to ambush Soviet allies; the aircraft strikes of retribution; and soldiers’ coffins, nailed together as an indifferent officer checks off their cities of destination.¹²¹ The film’s poor performance at the box office is generally attributed to the “moribund state of the Soviet distribution system.”¹²²

¹¹⁹ Amstutz, *Afghanistan: the First Five Years of Soviet Occupation*, 158.

¹²⁰ Cited in “V Sankt-Peterburge vspominali <Afganskii izlom>.”

¹²¹ *Afganskii izlom*, dir. Vladimir Bortko (Lenfil’ m, 1991), <https://youtu.be/sWOf-QqtWCU>.

¹²² Peter Rollberg, *Historical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Cinema*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield,

A markedly different approach to translating the Soviet-Afghan War to cinema came from a pair of Ukrainian films, *Afganets 1* (1991) and *Afganets 2* (1994). Both features were directed by Vladimir Mazur (b. 1945) – not to be confused with the afganets songwriter of the same name – and starred a young actor named Petr Iarosh (1977-2005) as Ivan Koval’, the afganets of the title. Loosely based on the Badaber Uprising, *Afganets 1* begins with Koval’ and a handful of fellow POWs held in Pakistan. Spat upon by a mujahideen guard who calls him a Russian, Koval’ answers, “I am not Russian. I am Ukrainian.”¹²³ From then on, the movie transitions to fantasy: having overcome their guards, Ivan Koval’ and the POWs hold out against a siege of mujahideen until they are overrun. Rather than execute Koval’, a warlord takes him prisoner, admits his fascination with Russian history over tea, and Koval’ is given two choices: convert to Islam, learn Arabic and memorize the Koran, or spend his life in prison. Not only does he choose the former, but upon receiving an invitation from Soviet officials to return home Koval’ is suspicious of their guarantees and chooses to remain with the mujahideen. Eventually, he tries to escape their headquarters only to be captured by the very man who gave him the choice between conversion and imprisonment. *Afganets 2* sees Ivan Koval’ escape to his homeland of Ukraine, having knocked out a policeman and made use of the man’s uniform and documents. His return home proves to be short-lived: his mother is shocked, and having just visited her son’s grave, storms angrily to an officer the next day.

2016), 123.

¹²³ *Afganets 1*, dir. Vladimir Mazur (Kotrebalt, 1991), accessed 8 July 2017, http://voenhronika.ru/news/afganec_1991/2017-04-12-1195.

“You told me my son – a wartime internationalist – was dead. But he has returned!”¹²⁴

With authorities having learned of Ivan Koval’s survival, he flees to Kiev and finds employment within an informal security organization charged with defending mafiosi and drug smugglers. Double-crossing and conflicts ensue, in allusion to the gang warfare that enraptured post-Soviet countries in the 1990s.

Afganets 2 was notable for the participation of the Ukrainian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan. While the veterans union was credited as a sponsor of *Afganets 1*, the sequel saw its Chairman, Sergei Chervonopiskii, as its producer five years after he challenged Andrei Sakharov in the Congress of People’s Deputies. Deputy Chairman Valerii Ablazov was cast in the same role he played in the veterans union at the time – as the man tasked with accounting for POWs.¹²⁵ In a brief cameo, he leads the exhumation of Ivan Koval’s grave in an effort to identify the buried man. “We felt it was necessary to promote our organization and to advertise ourselves as afgantsy so that we would not be forgotten,” remarked Chervonopiskii in 2015. “We thought that the film could make it easier to solve social issues... And it fulfilled its role as far as popularization goes, with good results.”¹²⁶ Indeed, *Afganets 2* saw many afgantsy cast in bit parts and touched on a range of topics: from the burial of wrongfully identified soldiers, to PTSD, to citizens in a queue refusing to acknowledge Ivan Koval’s right to priority as a veteran. The positive reception of the film so encouraged the Ukrainian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan that it prepared a script and film test for *Afganets 3* alongside director Vladimir Mazur. While

¹²⁴ *Afganets 2*, dir. Vladimir Mazur (Videovostok, 1994), accessed 8 July 2015, https://youtu.be/X7Qo_Ffi0jg.

¹²⁵ For a documentary history of the search for POWs in Pakistan in the early 1990s, see: Valerii Ablazov, *Dolgi put’ iz Afganskogo plena i bezvestiia* (Kiev: RIA <Marko pak>, 2005.)

¹²⁶ Sergei Chervonopiskii, interview with author, July 2015.

the project fell through due to lack of funding, it would have followed the same route of *Afganets 2* and focused on the afgantsy's place in post-Soviet society. "The idea was very interesting," Chervonopiskii recalled. "It reflected the drug mafia and corruption, and how veterans of the Afghan war joined the fight against them."¹²⁷ Fifteen years after the Soviet-Afghan War began, its cinematic depiction had shifted from propaganda absent of soldiers, to echoes of *Apocalypse Now*, to the afgantsy's search for a role in newly independent countries.

A Year of Rehearsals for the August Putsch

I was a naïve man and I thought they were all true democrats. I remember how stunned I was when I first met Sakharov. When I told him about the situation in Latvia and about my fear that it would leave the Soviet Union, he answered that that was the way it should be. I was shocked and disappointed.

- Deputy Viktor Alksnis¹²⁸

With the dawn of a New Year in 1990, the observation and enforcement of legislative gains won by the afgantsy and their supporters fell under threat as conservative opposition to Gorbachev's reforms mounted. Over the course of the year afgantsy deputies were forced to choose political sides as hardliners worked toward a coup d'état, beginning with the deployment of Soviet troops to Baku on 19 to 20 January 1990. It marked a renewal of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' demands for military reform and was the first in a series of efforts to preserve the Soviet Union ordered by a

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Cited in Murray, *A Democracy of Despots*, 72.

recurring cast of characters. Deployed to Baku to address anti-Armenian pogroms at the beginning of the month was General Valentin Varennikov, now serving as Deputy Defense Minister. His advisor was Colonel General Boris Gromov, who had earned “the scorn of Ukrainian nationalists” as head of the Kiev Military District since leading the 40th Army from Afghanistan.¹²⁹ Earlier that month KGB Chairman Vladimir Kriuchkov informed the head of the KGB in Baku that due to his shortcomings, “everything in Azerbaijan would be decided by the MVD and the Ministry of Defense of the USSR.”¹³⁰ Stationed at a military command post on the outskirts of Baku when troops deployed was Defense Minister Iazov, who claimed that the insurgents’ network “included 40,000 militants armed with automatic weapons”; First Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Soviet and future coup supporter Anatolii Luk’ianov, in contrast, stated that it would take 40,000 troops to restore order to the city.¹³¹ Over the next 18 months each of these men worked toward deposing General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev.

The counter-revolution against Gorbachev’s reforms and greater autonomy for the republics gained a collective voice in February 1990 with the formation of *Soiuz* (Union), an alliance of disgruntled patriots who accused their opponents of having “set fire to our common home with the aim of warming their hands at the embers.”¹³² Among the spokesmen who led *Soiuz*’s political charge was Colonel Viktor Alksnis. Elected a deputy by a military institute in Riga, he was a snapshot of Homo Sovieticus at its finest.

¹²⁹ Galeotti, *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union’s Last War*, 180.

¹³⁰ Cited in Odom, 263.

¹³¹ Bill Keller, “Upheaval in the East: Soviet Union; Force as a Last Resort: Armed Power Salvages Moscow’s Facing Authority,” *New York Times*, 29 January 1990, accessed 29 August 2017, www.nytimes.com/1990/01/29/world/upheaval-east-soviet-union-force-last-resort-armed-power-salvages-moscow-s.html?pagewanted=2.

¹³² Cited in William Charles Vogt, “The Soviet Coup of August 1991: Why It Happened, and Why It was Doomed to Fail” (Master’s thesis: Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, 1991), 22.

His grandfather, a former head of the Soviet Air Force, stood as the Chief Judge of the June 1937 military tribunal in which Chief of Staff Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevskii was sentenced to death – only to be executed six months later. His father, raised in an orphanage remained a believer in Marxist-Leninism, and Alksnis himself joined the Communist Party at the age of 23.¹³³ A disgruntled member of the Russian minority in the Latvian SSR, Alksnis at first shared some values with the reformists in congress. Indeed, he “believed the economic structure of the country was rotten,” attended the founding convention of the Inter-regional Group led by Deputies Andrei Sakharov and Boris Yeltsin, and participated in debates on its agenda until autumn 1989 when he left disillusioned with their lack of Soviet patriotism. It was Alksnis who authored *Soiuz*’s manifesto and “used the Armed Forces special postal service to mail it to 1,500 deputies.”¹³⁴ The organization claimed 103 deputies in its ranks by February 1990 and set forth a platform:

- 1) To fight to preserve the federal system and state integrity of the USSR.
- 2) To resist separatism, nationalism, and chauvinism within the country in any form or expression.
- 3) To strive towards the free development on a basis of equal rights of all the peoples, nations, nationalities, ethnic groups and of every citizen throughout the territory of the federal state.
- 4) To promote the acceleration, development and adoption of a package of most important economic laws, ensuring a way out of the social and economic crisis

¹³³ Murray, *A Democracy of Despots*, 72.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

and the dynamic development of the country.

5) To create constructive foundations for substantially improving the quality of the environment and the living conditions of the population throughout the territory of the federal state.¹³⁵

There was just as much quarrelling among members of *Soiuz* as in the factions of liberal reformists, for they shared only the preservation of the Soviet Union and the use of hyperbole as commonalities. Nonetheless, *Soiuz* had a series of short-term political victories in the year that followed and claimed to represent “more than 700 of the 2,250 deputies... from all 15 republics.”¹³⁶ Deputy Alksnis became known as “the Darth Vader” of the hardliners who sought to restore “the honour of the military” after its withdrawal from Afghanistan and Eastern Europe.¹³⁷ He was among the first cult figures in contemporary Russian politics; his own aunt even traveled door-to-door in an effort to campaign against him, to no avail. It took little time for the KGB to capitalize on *Soiuz*’s popularity to paint “a frightening portrait of the dangers of democratization” and provide Alksnis with what he recalled as “all sorts of secret documents... [and] materials on the activities of the Inter-regional Group.”¹³⁸

The election of a Congress of People’s Deputies of the RSFSR on 4 March 1990 brought with it an unforeseen cast of competitors for *Soiuz*, armed with Russian nationalism as opposed to Soviet patriotism. This was followed by Boris Yeltsin’s resignation at the 28th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on 12 July

¹³⁵ Cited in Vogt, “The Soviet Coup...,” 22-23.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 23.

¹³⁷ Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb*, 385.

¹³⁸ Cited in Murray, *A Democracy of Despots*, 73.

1990. Gorbachev's political pivot to collaborate with Yeltsin and economic reformers a few weeks later to draw up what became known as the 500 Days Program stirred a panic in his conservative rivals. An ambitious plan to "create a market and redistribute power... dedicated to private property... the breakup of state farms, [and] impose draconian credit squeeze on loss-making giants of industry," it prompted a backlash.¹³⁹ Almost immediately, KGB reports that cast the 500 Days Program as an anti-communist operation sponsored by the CIA became regular reading for Gorbachev. It took little time for rumours of a coup to enter circulation, with Commander in Chief Marshal Viktor Kulikov and Colonel General Gromov among its frequent deniers.¹⁴⁰

On 1 September 1990, the 500 Days Program and 20 draft laws approved by the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR were submitted to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, only for Chairman of the Council of Ministers Nikolai Ryzhkov to balk and demand a compromise between the two, otherwise he would resign. It marked the latest scrum in a "War of Laws" between sovereign republics and the Soviet government in Moscow.¹⁴¹ The very next day, the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic inhabited primarily by ethnic Russians and Ukrainians declared independence from the Moldavian SSR and gave Deputy Alksnis the platform for a renewed attack on Gorbachev's reformers. After Moldovian police opened fire on residents occupying the local Council, Court and Prosecutor's Office in Dubăsari on 3 November 1990, Alksnis attacked Interior Minister Vadim Bakatin as "fully responsible for the blood spilt in Moldavia" having "rendered concrete support to the [Russian] separatist forces," questioning his belief in the

¹³⁹ Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 359.

¹⁴⁰ Vogt, "The Soviet Coup...", 9.

¹⁴¹ Murray, *A Democracy of Despots*, 215.

preservation of the Soviet Union.¹⁴² His campaign led to a success: Bakatin resigned on 1 December and was replaced by former chief of the Latvian KGB and Communist Party, Boris Pugo the very next day, who named Colonel General Gromov his deputy.

As the hardliners' counter-offensive to the 500 Days Program escalated, so too did public speculation on the chances of a coup d'état. On 10 September at 3:00 A.M. the KGB's elite Dzerzhinskii Division was put on full battle alert and a convoy of paratroopers from the Riazan Airborne Division ordered to travel 200 kilometres north to Moscow. At 6:00 AM three-dozen military transport planes arrived in Riazan with two armed regiments onboard.¹⁴³ In what spoke to the growing boldness of the press and hardliners' detachment from reality, it took little time for *Komsomol'skaia pravda* to break news on the matter. Military authorities' denial ranged from claims of rehearsals for the 7 November 1990 parade, to soldiers contributing to the potato harvest, to Defense Minister Iazov's claim that rumours of a coup were "circulated by left-wing forces... [to] take peoples' minds off of empty shelves."¹⁴⁴ A bold rebuttal came from Shield's leader, Deputy Vitalii Urazhtsev. Having just chaired the All-Union Congress of Parents of Soldiers and Sailors, he stated to *Moskovskie Novosti* on 13 September that, "the military leadership already has a clear plan to take control of the situation in the country," and named Colonel General Gromov as a likely leader of the coup.¹⁴⁵ Urazhtsev also claimed that the coup would entail a "neutralization" of foreign journalists and national media justified by state allegations that "ethnic tensions had gotten out of control, the economy

¹⁴² Erika Dailey, Jeri Laber, and Lois Whitman, eds., *Human Rights in Moldova: the Turbulent Dniester*, (Washington, D.C.: Human Rights Watch, 1993), 54; Cited in Vogt, "The Soviet Coup...", 28.

¹⁴³ Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 365-66.

¹⁴⁴ Cited in Vogt, "The Soviet Coup...", 14.

¹⁴⁵ Cited in *ibid*, 10.

was collapsing, and socialism endangered.”¹⁴⁶ Two days later Colonel Sergei Kudinov, a clandestine member of Shield, was dishonourably discharged for “publishing a report on ‘the deteriorating situation in the Soviet Army.’”¹⁴⁷

These military manouvres ignited public speculation and political inquiries on the prospect of a coup d’etat. On 12 October Major Mikhail Postubaev, who partook in Operation Storm-333 at the onset of the Soviet-Afghan War, penned a letter to *Komsomol’skaia pravda* and appeared on television to speak on *Vzgliad* about September’s events. Without hesitation Postubaev “stated that exercises were always planned months in advance,” and “likened the situation to 12 December 1979 when his unit was altered to fly troops into Afghanistan.”¹⁴⁸ According to Major Postubaev, his regiment was put on emergency readiness and flew to an airfield on the outskirts of Moscow on 9 September. There, paratroopers trained for combat operations in a nearby forest the next day, which never took place, and withdrew on 13 September.¹⁴⁹ In light of his statements, Major Postubaev was “threatened with time in prison and a psychiatric hospital,” forced to write that his “emotions prevailed over reason” in an issue of *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, and dismissed from the army four months before he qualified for a pension.¹⁵⁰

On 15 October 1990 President Mikhail Gorbachev received the Nobel Peace Prize “for his leading role in the peace process which today characterizes important parts of the

¹⁴⁶ Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb*, 366.

¹⁴⁷ Vogt, “The Soviet Coup...,” 12.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 16.

¹⁴⁹ Igor’ Rozenfel’d, “Perestroika. Stat’i 1990-1991,” accessed 31 August 2017, kripta.ee/rosenfeld/1990/03/14/perestrojka-1988-91-xod-sobytij-stati-1988-1991/.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid; Vogt, “The Soviet Coup...,” 16.

international community.”¹⁵¹ In her ceremonial speech, Chairwoman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee Gidske Anderson praised him for leading the Soviet Union to “a dramatic period of transformation... [wherein] dictatorship is to be replaced by greater democracy... [and] a command economy by a freer market.” Acknowledging that political transition would entail “great sacrifice,” Anderson praised the boldness shown by Gorbachev and “the many peoples of the Soviet Union too in rewriting history.”¹⁵² Gorbachev’s acceptance speech, read aloud by First Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Kovalev, was a stark contrast to Anderson’s. Rather than draw from the nationwide struggle for reform in the Soviet Union, Gorbachev’s words ranged from an Immanuel Kant reference, to vague rhetoric about a European continent “based on the rule of law... and humane attitudes,” to referencing perestroika as “innovative political thinking” that “no longer belongs only to us, the people of the Soviet Union.”¹⁵³ For Gorbachev knew that the Nobel Prize mattered little to the average Soviet citizen in light of domestic hardship. When Luk’ianov announced Gorbachev’s receipt of the prize to the Supreme Soviet, applause lasted no more than five seconds.¹⁵⁴ The very next day, Gorbachev withdrew his support for the 500 Days Program. It marked the onset of an alliance with hardliners in congress that left a coup d’etat inevitable.

The closing two months of the year saw Gorbachev make a series of concessions to those affiliated with the military-industrial complex. He rejected the proposals put

¹⁵¹ “The Nobel Peace Prize 1990,” accessed 31 August 2017, https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1990/.

¹⁵² Gidske Anderson, “Award Ceremony Speech,” accessed 31 August 2017, https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1990/presentation-speech.html.

¹⁵³ Mikhail Gorbachev, “Acceptance Speech,” accessed 31 August 2017, https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1990/gorbachev-acceptance.html.

¹⁵⁴ Jonathan Steele, “Gorbachev Wins Nobel Peace Prize,” *The Guardian*, 16 October 1990, accessed 31 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/century/1990-1999/Story/0,,112409,00.html>.

forward by leader of the parliamentary commission for military reform, Major Vladimir Lopatin, who envisioned “a smaller, all-professional Army and the creation of territorially based units” in line with the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers’ proposals.¹⁵⁵ On 13 November, Colonels Viktor Alksnis and Nikolai Petrushenko of *Soiuz* were summoned to meet with Gorbachev in an effort to recruit them to his side. Instead, they berated him over “nationalist excesses, high desertion rates, draft evasion, poor living conditions” and further grievances.¹⁵⁶ In their press conference, Alksnis and Petrushenko stated that Gorbachev no longer had the support of the military. Two weeks later Defense Minister Iazov announced on television that soldiers could use force to break up independence demonstrations held in the vicinity of military installations. This was a sharp rebuttal of the recommendations made by the Sobchak commission in light of the Tbilisi protest. The most ominous television forecast came from KGB Chairman Vladimir Kriuchkov on 11 December 1990. In a call for order that he claimed to deliver “on the instructions of the USSR president,” Kriuchkov spoke of “foreign special services,” “organized crime,” and “dealers of the shadow economy” who threatened to destabilize the Soviet Union.¹⁵⁷ Nine days later another key reformer resigned.

When Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze took to the podium on 20 November 1990 his words took congress by surprise. “This is the shortest and most difficult statement of my life,” he began.

Comrade democrats, you have dispersed. Reformers have slunk into the bushes. A

¹⁵⁵ Vogt, “The Soviet Coup...,” 25.

¹⁵⁶ Cited in *ibid*, 24-5.

¹⁵⁷ J. Ransom Clark, “Internal Front Groups: Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and the ‘Centrist Bloc’,” *Soviet Active Measures in the ‘Post-Cold War’ Era 1988-1991*, accessed 1 September 2017, intellit.muskingum.edu/russia_folder/pcw_era/sect_07.htm.

dictatorship is coming. ... No one knows what this dictatorship will be like, what kind of dictator will come to power and what order things will take. I resign. Let it be my personal... protest against a dictatorship. I express my deep gratitude to Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev. ... But... I cannot reconcile myself to what is happening in our country and the trials awaiting our people.¹⁵⁸

In the eyes of Colonel Alksnis and *Soiuz*, Shevardnadze's resignation was a great victory; for these men, Shevardnadze was not just a tool of Gorbachevism, but the Foreign Minister who signed as a witness to the Geneva Accords in 1988; who agreed to the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Eastern Europe; and who "abandon[ed] Iraq, a former ally."¹⁵⁹ Gorbachev himself did not take to the podium until a few hours after Shevardnadze's resignation. "Now, perhaps, is our most difficult time, and to leave at this time is unforgivable," he stated. "This must be condemned."¹⁶⁰ Immediately after Gorbachev's response, deputies voted overwhelmingly (albeit in vain) to ask Shevardnadze to remain Minister of Foreign Affairs, with 1,540 in favour, 52 against, and 11 abstentions.¹⁶¹ For the reformers in congress it was an ominous night of reckoning. "[Dmitrii] Likhachev, [Sergei] Zalygin, [Roi] Medvedev, and [Fedor]

¹⁵⁸ Cited in "Shevardnadze Resigns: Gorbachev Says He's 'Stunned'," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 December 1990, accessed 4 September 1990, articles.latimes.com/1990-12-20/news/mn-9704_1_shevardnadze-resigns; "Shevardnadze Uses Resignation to Warn of Coming Dictatorship," *The Spokesman-Review*, 21 December 1990, A1, A5.

¹⁵⁹ "Shevardnadze Uses Resignation to Warn of Coming Dictatorship," A5. Immediately after Iraqi President Saddam Hussein occupied neighbouring Kuwait on 2 August 1990, Foreign Minister Shevardnadze and US Secretary of State James A. Baker III read a joint statement demanding "that all countries cut off arms supplies to Iraq" and that Iraq withdraw its troops. Shevardnadze remarked that despite 30 years' allegiance, Iraq's invasion "contradicts the principles of new political thinking and the principles of civilized relations between nations." See: "U.S., Soviets Join to Put Pressure on Iraq," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 August 1990, accessed 4 September 1990, articles.latimes.com/1990-08-03/news/mn-1368_1_soviet-union.

¹⁶⁰ "Shevardnadze Uses Resignation to Warn of Coming Dictatorship," A1.

¹⁶¹ "Shevardnadze Resigns: Gorbachev Says He's 'Stunned'."

Burlatskii took to the podium in hysterics... all about the threat of dictatorship,” Anatolii Cherniaev recorded in his diary.¹⁶² Yet it was not just a war in hyperbole between deputies that followed Shevardnadze’s resignation. On 23 December, “an estimated 1,500 people” rallied in Moscow “to denounce dictatorship in the Kremlin” and to support Shevardnadze in his stand against the hardliners.¹⁶³ The implications were not lost on Cherniaev. “In general, Congress has turned into a mob,” he wrote, as the year neared its end. “Both congress and the people... are in great danger. The institution should be disbanded as soon as possible.”¹⁶⁴

The Final Veterans’ Gains Before the Putsch

President Gorbachev is tied to a bleeding wound, to the fate of our “afgantsy.” We have reviewed how those who served in Afghanistan are living today. Virtually no government decision on the afgantsy’s rights to housing or medicine is being implemented. We are talking about attention to families of the dead, about attention to the crippled. We are talking about prostheses... medical, social and psychological rehabilitation.

- Deputy Nikolai Engver, 15 May 1990¹⁶⁵

Despite hardliners having gathered momentum by the end of 1990, their political theatre overshadowed a number of developments linked to veterans’ affairs. The

¹⁶² Cited in Cherniaev, “1990 god.”

¹⁶³ “Hundreds in Moscow Rally Against Dictatorship,” *New York Times*, 24 December 1990, accessed 3 September 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/24/world/hundreds-in-moscow-rally-against-dictatorship.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Cherniaev, “1990 god.”

¹⁶⁵ *Vneocherednoi tretii s’ezd narodnykh deputatov SSSR, 12-15 marta 1990 g., stenograficheskii otchet*, tom 3 (Moskva: Izdanie verkhovnogo soveta SSSR, 1990), 9.

Committee of Soldiers' Mothers remained active in gathering data on their sons' welfare and demanding military reform according to its list of 26 fundamental problems in the Soviet Army. Throughout 1990 the mothers held demonstrations on Manezhnaia Square in Moscow to demand an end to "slave labour" in construction battalions, which ultimately proved successful by the end of the year.¹⁶⁶ The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers also continued to circulate previously unpublished documentation on medical deferments, and the numbers that came of their efforts spoke to their increasing base of support: the Ministry of Defense was alarmed to discover that "only 22% of the draft pool was actually drafted in 1990, with medical exemptions more than doubling since 1988."¹⁶⁷

The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers also maintained a voice among liberal deputies in 1990, even as the political pendulum swung to the right. Among their allies was the committee charged with formulating a report "On the Preparation and Conduct of Military Reform in the USSR." It stated plainly that, "the state of the Armed Forces of the USSR does not meet prerequisites to ensure the country's security," and detailed how:

The unsuitable state of material, social, and everyday life, the poor provisions for servicemen and their families, as well as negative processes (protectionism, military bureaucracy, the death and injury of personnel...) lead officers to... break with their profession, marking a decline in public interest in service.¹⁶⁸

The influence of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers was clear from the points deemed key to the "transition to a professional Armed Forces, smaller in number and better

¹⁶⁶ Sperling, *Organizing Women in Contemporary Russia*, 206.

¹⁶⁷ Solnick, *Stealing the State*, 205.

¹⁶⁸ "O podgotovke i provedenii voennoi reformy v SSSR," GARF, tom 1, f. P-9654, op. 7, d. 1311, l. 29.

quality.”¹⁶⁹ Among them were:

- To appoint a civilian to the post of Minister of Defense;
- To humanize the army and to change the social status (polozhenie lichnosti) of the soldier and the closed character... of life in the barracks;
- To guarantee military personnel the right to professional unions and military-social organizations;
- To allow soldiers the right to participate in political parties and organizations only in accordance with the law.¹⁷⁰

The report met staunch opposition from those who matched the Soviet Union in age. Particularly irate were Deputies Nikolai Bosenko and Marshal Viktor Kulikov (1921-2013), who responded with an open letter “On the Draft Concept of Military Reform Proposed by a Group of People’s Deputies of the USSR” dated 23 May 1990. With Deputy Bosenko still serving as Chairman of the Committee for the Affairs of Veterans and Invalids, and Marshal Kulikov having served for 12 years as Commander-in-Chief of the Warsaw Pact (1977-89), it was a rebuttal from two men who carried political clout. “The people’s deputies do not understand the question of a prepared reserve,” the letter began. “The system they propose is absurd... [and] the transition to a professional, voluntary army is put at four to five years which is entirely unrealistic.”¹⁷¹ The two men found it disturbing that “parties and public organizations are offered the chance to interfere in the formation of military policy” and that deputies “want to allow servicemen

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, l. 33.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, ll. 31, 33-4.

¹⁷¹ “O proekte kontseptsii voennoi reformy, predlozhennoi gruppoi narodnykh deputatov SSSR,” GARF, tom 1, f. P-9654, op.7, d.1311, l. 43, 47.

to participate in political organizations.”¹⁷² The notion of a Soviet Army composed of soldiers who “when called to fulfill their national duty will profess diametrically opposed political views” was foreign to Bosenko and Kulikov. So much so, that they labeled the proposed military reforms “dangerous to the state” and argued that they would “inflict irreparable damage to the defense capability of the USSR.”¹⁷³

Bosenko and Marshal Kulikov, however, were one voice in a chorus of competing narratives on military reform. The Ministry of Defense for instance, responded to a letter from Oksana Rybakova, the leader of Kamchatka’s Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers, on 1 October 1990 and addressed her demands from past correspondence. While her call for sons to be “deployed only in the territory of their republic in their region” was deemed “unconstitutional and illegal,” Rybakova was assured that the remainder of her proposals would be “carefully considered and, if possible, taken into account in the preparation of new legislative acts on... the reform of the Armed Forces.”¹⁷⁴ The Ministry of Defense signed off by asking Rybakova to “familiarize the soldiers’ mothers of the Kamchatka region with this answer and explanations.”¹⁷⁵

Perhaps the most striking counterpoint to the conservatism of Marshal Kulikov and those affiliated with *Soiuz* came from Colonel Aleksandr Rutskoï (b. 1947). From 1985 to 1986 and in 1988 he served in Afghanistan, where he flew 453 missions as the commander of an Air Assault Regiment and was twice ejected from his plane.¹⁷⁶ The

¹⁷² Ibid, l. 46.

¹⁷³ Ibid, l. 47.

¹⁷⁴ “Dokumenty po rassmotreniiu pisem i obrashchenii komitetov soldatskikh materei i drugikh obshchestvennykh organizatsii po voprosu rassmotreniia prichin gibeli i travmatizma voennosluzhashchikh v mirnoe vremia,” GARF, f. 10026, op. 1, d. 2460, ll. 64-5.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ The number of missions that Rutskoï flew varies between publications. I have chosen the total number

second occasion saw him captured on 9 August 1988 by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's mujahideen, after which he was handed over to authorities in Islamabad and released in a prisoner exchange overseen by KGB Chairman Kriuchkov. In December 1988 Ruskoi was named a Hero of the Soviet Union and made his first venture into politics after joining a Russian nationalist group by the name of *Otechestvo* (Fatherland) based in Moscow. Supported by conservative publications such as *Nash sovremennik* and *Molodaia gvardiia* with "notable military representation" in its ranks, *Otechestvo* registered with the city council in April 1989 and held its founding conference in May.¹⁷⁷ This coincided with the election of people's deputies, in which Ruskoi ran as a candidate. In the years since his first tour of Afghanistan public opinion of the war had shifted significantly. Rather than be welcomed as a Hero of Our Time, Ruskoi's venture into politics was met by a journalist's cry of "How can you vote for a man whose arms are drenched up to his elbows in blood?" and an open letter to voters signed by a dissident priest, Father Gleb Iakunin (1936-2013), who alleged that Ruskoi enjoyed the "active support of both the military and the fascist group Pamiat'."¹⁷⁸ The election saw Ruskoi lose decisively to Valentin Logunov, the chief-editor of *Moskovskaia pravda*. As a result, he donned a moderate profile and ran successfully for election as a People's Deputy of the RSFSR on 4 March 1990 in his home riding of Kursk. Rather than a bellicose patriot, Ruskoi emerged as the Chairman of the Committee of the Supreme

given by the Scientific Research Institute of Social Systems at Moscow State University, which counted 356 flights in 1985-86 (121 of which were night missions), and 97 flights in April - August 1988 (48 of which were night missions). See: "Ruskoi, Aleksandr Vladimirovich," Nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut sotsial'nykh sistem, accessed 13 June 2017, www.niiss.ru/sf_ruskoi.shtml.

¹⁷⁷ John B. Dunlop, *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 135.

¹⁷⁸ Galeotti, *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union's Last War*, 128.

Council for the Invalids, Veterans of War and Labor, and Social Protection of Servicemen and Their Families.

In his new position, Ruskoi dealt regularly with the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. On 21 September 1990 as the media speculated on rumours of military manoeuvres between Riazan and Moscow, Ruskoi corresponded with members of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers employed at a psycho-neurological dispensary in Volgograd. "Under instructions from the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, I write to inform you that your demands have been included in an open letter to the President of the USSR," he began. Emphasizing that "only the President decides in what cases and with what purposes troops will be used," Ruskoi provided his readers with relevant legislation passed in recent months by presidential decree.¹⁷⁹ Their concerns remained among Ruskoi's priorities in the months that followed. When on 15 November 1990 President Gorbachev implemented a decree "On Measures to Implement the Proposals of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers," Ruskoi chaired the committee established to investigate 96 cases of *dedovshchina* and deaths during peacetime in the Soviet Army. The committee's membership was drawn from representatives across the Soviet Union, among them, members of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. This was a sharp rebuttal of Soviet hardliners' opposition to military collaboration with NGOs.

In a letter penned to Yeltsin soon after the passage of "On Measures to Implement the Proposals of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers" in November 1990, Ruskoi described how "Mothers whose sons died in peacetime while in the Armed

¹⁷⁹ "Dokumenty po rassmotreniiu pisem i obrashchenii komitetov soldatskikh materei i drugikh obshchestvennykh organizatsii po voprosu rassmotreniia prichin gibeli i travmatizma voennosluzhashchikh v mirnoe vremia," GARF, f. 10026, op. 1, d. 2460, l. 86.

Forces of the USSR addressed our Committee... [and] we gave them all kinds of help and support, which finally allowed them to meet with M.S. Gorbachev.”¹⁸⁰ Attached to Rutskoi’s letter was the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers’ request to Boris Yeltsin. “According to the decree of the President [Gorbachev], a commission is to investigate the deaths of their sons, as well as human rights in the Armed Forces of the USSR,” Rutskoi explained. “But the mothers want not only members of the USSR to participate in this commission, but members of the RSFSR. They have asked us to forward a statement to you.”¹⁸¹ In Rutskoi’s opinion, the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers’ demand overlapped with the Russian SFSR’s interests of greater autonomy in the Soviet Union. “We cannot... undermine the authority of the Russian parliament,” he stated in closing. “I ask you to give an order to create such a group... of [Russian] deputy experts, law enforcement bodies, [and] a human rights committee....”¹⁸²

Under Rutskoi’s leadership, the special commission created by Gorbachev’s decree carried out a three-month investigation that probed “the causes of death and traumatization of soldiers and those serving in military construction units in the RSFSR during peacetime.”¹⁸³ In a rebuttal of hardliners’ opposition to civil-military operations, Vice President Rutskoi summarized their findings by stating:

The nature of the primary causes of deaths and injuries... as well as significant shortcomings in the preventive actions of the Soviet Army... require the broad, joint participation of state bodies and public organizations to reduce the impact of

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, l. 77.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. Curiously, the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers’ letter to President Yeltsin was not included with Rutskoi’s document in the GARF archives.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid, l. 85.

unfavorable factors in the military.¹⁸⁴

The primary obstacles that Rutskoi's commission faced echoed Deputy Dzasokhov's criticism of a self-defeating political structure in the Second Congress of People's Deputies. "There is no state body for comprehensive study and analysis of these problems, nor are there legislative measures currently in place for them," Rutskoi remarked. His commission proposed "the creation of an organ for military servicemen and their families under the President of the USSR." What seemed a logical venture was then stymied by bureaucrats, a challenge exacerbated by the surge of national demands for secession. "Many ministries and departments," Rutskoi remarked, "felt that it would be more effective to create similar organs for each sovereign Republic."¹⁸⁵ He wrote bitterly of how "Parliaments of other Soviet republics... on whose territory a much smaller number of troops are stationed than in the RSFSR have already created such a structure," and pointed to President Nursultan Nazarbaev's actions in the Kazakh SSR.¹⁸⁶ Rutskoi's report closed with seven recommendations for "an objective and complete investigation" into the peacetime deaths of soldiers that echoed those highlighted by the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers. "In the RSFSR," he concluded, "the following issues are acute."¹⁸⁷

- 1) The preparation of legislative acts of government bodies on issues related to the problems of servicemen and their parents;
- 2) The analysis of statements from soldiers and their relatives on *dedovshchina*

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, ll. 85-6.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, l. 86.

and the deaths of servicemen in the Soviet Army and Navy;

- 3) The formation and dispatch of emergency groups specializing in the death and injury of servicemen;
- 4) Maintaining contacts on legal issues with the Ministry of Defense, Military units and institutions, and military commissariats;
- 5) The protection of the rights and interests of parents who lost sons serving in the army, and servicemen themselves;
- 6) A study of the causes and conditions for emergence of hazing groups in the army, including on nationalistic grounds, and the elimination of crime in garrisons. Those guilty will be held responsible;
- 7) Verification of an objective, complete investigation into the causes of deaths and injuries... in peacetime.¹⁸⁸

That the commission's report was submitted on 16 March 1991 and was no less critical than Sobchak's report on events in Tbilisi speaks to the autonomy it enjoyed. The coalition of hardliners and changes in ministers in November 1990 benefited those who supported a coup d'etat but did not lead to an immediate change in policies.

¹⁸⁸ "Dokumenty po rassmotreniiu pisem i obrashchenii Komitetov Soldatskikh materei i drugikh obshchestvennykh organizatsii po voprosu rassmotreniia prichin gibeli i travmatizma voennosluzhashchikh v mirnoe vremia," GARF, f. 10026, op. 1, d. 2460, l. 86.

Chapter 8

From Rehearsals for an August Putsch to a Stillborn Afgantsy Movement, 1991 to 1996

I was an active participant in the events in the Baltics. The Leningrad parliament was then democratic, and we coordinated parliamentary relations to confront the crimes of the Soviet Army. ... The Union did not have information about what was happening in Vilnius. ... So we drove Baltic newspapers around the city... and organized a picket in front of the Kazan Cathedral. We took a Lithuanian flag, handed out the newspapers, and spoke to citizens about the situation.

- Ella Poliakova¹

The final year of the Soviet Union began with military intervention to crush national unrest in the Lithuanian SSR. Despite the small republic having quarreled with Moscow since its declaration of independence in March 1990, Western attentions in the New Year were focused on a looming war with Iraq. Soviet paratroopers thus entered Vilnius on 9 January 1991 allegedly to arrest draft dodgers. Two days later Soviet troops seized control of Lithuania's National Defense building and press centre, shut down the Vilnius airport, and "surrounded the radio and television transmission towers." Their actions prompted a mass nonviolent defense of the Parliament and remaining transmission towers with protesters "estimated to number between 20 and 60,000."² On

¹ Cited in Andzhei Belovranin, *Chernaia kniga* (Moscow: ArsisBooks, 2011), 138-39. Ella Poliakova is the founding chairwoman of the Soldiers' Mothers of Saint Petersburg, established in 1991, which operates separately from the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia based in Moscow.

² "USSR Violence in the Baltic Republics," Human Rights Watch, accessed 6 September 2017,

13 January at 1:50 A.M. ground forces under the command of General Valentin Varennikov encircled the Radio and Television Committee building and opened fire on its civilian defenders. Tanks crushed bystanders as they passed, leaving 14 dead and 702 injured.³ Future coup supporter Valentin Pavlov was appointed Prime Minister the next day, while President Mikhail Gorbachev abstained from any condemnation of military actions. Interior Minister Boris Pugo, another coup supporter, argued that protesters were the first to open fire. The series of events reflected the political sway hardliners held in Moscow and was later deemed a “dress rehearsal” for the August Putsch.⁴

Yet the military action taken against demonstrators in Vilnius also foreshadowed the gaffes of the coup plotters that followed in the summer. Efforts to silence and control the media after five years of glasnost were halfhearted. While the primary transmitters in Vilnius were seized, the national publication *Respublika* continued to print daily first-person accounts of events. A television station two hours outside of the capital, meanwhile, “jacked up its signal and rebroadcast footage aired on CNN and BBC.”⁵ In Moscow, the head of Gosteleradio (state television and radio), Leonid Kravchenko – another conservative appointee of November 1990 – banned *Vzgliad* and a number of independent news programs on 10 and 11 January in preparation, and “cracked down on all information broadcast about Lithuania” in an effort to beguile the masses with Western pulp programming instead of relevant coverage.⁶ His efforts were in vain: while television stations in Moscow were censored, viewers in Leningrad witnessed footage of

<https://www.hrw.org/reports/1992/WR92/HSW-05.htm>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 215.

⁵ Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 389.

⁶ Ibid, 392.

“coffins, corpses, sobbing women, [and] tanks with rotating turrets.”⁷

Particularly bold among Russian activists was future chairwoman of the Soldiers’ Mothers of Saint Petersburg, Ella Poliakova. As a member of the informal political organization known as the Leningrad People’s Front, Poliakova’s activism had by this time taken her to hot spots that ranged from Tbilisi to Nagorno-Karabakh. Holding a protest in front of the Kazan Cathedral, she appealed to passers-by “to write letters to their soldiers urging them not to kill innocent people in Lithuania.”⁸ Many citizens obliged, and Poliakova journeyed alongside Assistant Deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR Iuliia Kondratieva to the Lithuanian border armed with copies of letters addressed to the Vilnius parliament. After some persistence the two activists convinced the border guards to lead them to the commanding officer. Poliakova informed him “that we were human rights activists, that we do not want people to kill each other... and we realized that the commander, Vladimir Uskhopchik, knew perfectly well what was going on [in Vilnius].”⁹ While the officers “listened with bewilderment,” they nonetheless accepted the letters from Poliakova and Kondratieva and did not silence the one who escorted them from the checkpoint. Instead he stated frankly that soldiers had “absolutely no information about what was happening in Lithuania” and were simply “shown a film explaining that the city was captured by fascists.” He himself had participated in the 11 to 13 January events in Vilnius and claimed that, “behind soldiers’ backs, the spetsnaz forces from Alfa Group fired on protesters and set up the army.” “I served in the

⁷ Anatolii Cherniaev, “1991 god,” *Dnevnik A.S. Cherniaeva*, accessed 20 September 2017, http://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/rus/text_files/Chernyaev/1991.pdf.

⁸ Belovranin, *Chernaia kniga*, 139.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Caucasus, and there everything is clear, nothing is scary,” he continued. “You shoot at them, they shoot at you. Here in the Baltics, you go in armed and those you are against... pray.”¹⁰ The mission left a strong impression on Ella Poliakova. “We were like a bridge,” she reflected in 2016. “We got into the military unit and they were always closed in the USSR like the district committees of the party. I spent all my childhood in military camps, and from that moment on I looked at it quite differently.”¹¹

Unobstructed in Moscow and Leningrad alike during events in Lithuania were radio programs, which buzzed with “insults and accusations against Gorbachev” as calls aired from across the Soviet Union.¹² “Black colonels [are] running the show!” and “Gorbachev is worse than Hitler!” were among callers’ hyperbole. “In a word, I am again facing Czechoslovakia 1968,” wrote Anatolii Cherniaev after recording a day of public outcries from the radio. “The Lithuanian affair has finally ruined Gorbachev’s reputation.”¹³ On 14 January the radio station *Ekho Moskvy* (Echo of Moscow), founded approximately five months earlier by a mix of MGU faculty, journalists at *Ogonek*, and disgruntled employees at Gosteleradio, seized upon events in Vilnius as its political “baptism by fire.”¹⁴ The broadcasters announced plans for a demonstration in defense of Lithuanian and Russian interests under the slogan of “Gorbachev’s team must resign!” with its march leading to *Staraiia ploschad’* (Old Square), a site organizers labeled the source of “a Party-military coup.”¹⁵ The backlash in the media and the public

¹⁰ Ibid, 140.

¹¹ Ibid, 139-40.

¹² Cherniaev, “1991 god.”

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Svobodnoe radio. Ostal’noe – vidimost’,” *Itogi* 34, 220 (21 August 2000), accessed 28 January 2018, www.itogi.ru/archive/2000/34/115109.html.

¹⁵ Ibid.

demonstrations that followed underscored how poorly the coup plotters understood the sociocultural change that took place in the years of glasnost.

Arguably the greatest long-term consequence of armed intervention in Vilnius – and the public and political condemnation that followed – was its exacerbation of political fatigue among Soviet soldiers. While General Varennikov stood by the actions taken, others began to split from the ranks.¹⁶ General Pavel Grachev was stationed in Riga in 1991 and on 8 January as the first military vehicles entered Vilnius, he stated that, “troops under his command should not participate in political processes.”¹⁷ As a result, General Grachev was recalled to Moscow the next day. Deputy Defense Minister Air Marshal Evgenii Shaposhnikov was appalled at the event. “After Vilnius, after the images seen on television of one of our soldiers beating a civilian with the butt of a machine gun, I understood that a decisive and final end had to be put to that,” he remarked a few years later.¹⁸ Leaning toward hyperbole was Colonel Rutskoï, who bellowed in the Supreme Soviet, “Who can guarantee that tomorrow we will not see tanks on the embankment of the Moscow River approaching the White House?”¹⁹ One week later on 21 January, Rutskoï “spoke out passionately . . . against Soviet actions in the Baltics” and lambasted the federal government’s refusal to ratify a law passed by the RSFSR “that forbade the use of Russian troops in ethnic conflicts in other republics without the permission of

¹⁶ Craig Whitney, “Soviet Crackdown: Overview,” *New York Times*, 15 January 1991, accessed 6 September 2017, www.nytimes.com/1991/01/15/world/soviet-crackdown-overview-gorbachev-puts-blame-for-clash-on-lithuanians.html?mcubz=0.

¹⁷ “A Chronicle of the Events of January 1991 and Later Months,” Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania, accessed 6 September 2017, www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter/w5_show?p_r=4111&p_d=62825&p_k=2.

¹⁸ Cited in Serhii Plokhy, *The Last Empire: The Final Days of the Soviet Union* (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2015), 117.

¹⁹ Cited in Ivan Illarionov, “Chetvertoe padenie letchika Rutskogo,” *Figury i litsa* 12, 75 (2001), accessed 6 September 2017, web.archive.org/web/20060603231600/http://faces.ng.ru/dossier/2000-11-02/4_ruckoy.html.

Russian authorities.”²⁰ Rutskoi’s sympathies for Russian autonomy distanced him from Colonel General Gromov, his former commander in Afghanistan whom he once identified as “one of three men to whom he was closest... with identical ideas.”²¹ In the months that followed, Rutskoi and Gromov took opposite sides in a presidential election and an attempted coup d’etat.

The seven months between military intervention in Vilnius and the August Putsch saw a whirlwind of events take place as Gorbachev became politically isolated. Only on 22 January 1991 after much cajoling from speechwriters Anatolii Cherniaev and Evgenii Primakov did Gorbachev denounce “the use of troops without orders” in Lithuania and issue condolences.²² February saw military forces undertake “a wargames exercise to hold Moscow against serious unrest” while the Ides of March saw hardliners attack the novelty of archival history.²³ A primary target was Colonel General Dmitrii Volkogonov, who in late 1990 submitted a draft volume of history on the Great Patriotic War that addressed Stalin’s purge of the officer corps from 1937 to 1939. On 7 March 1991, the Ministry of Defense convened with 57 generals, Central Committee members and academics to berate the man. Particularly vocal were General Varennikov and Marshal Akhromeev, the latter of whom deemed Volkogonov “a traitor serving Yeltsin” whose work “would have done great harm,” leading to his dismissal from the work’s editorial committee.²⁴

²⁰ Jerry F. Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR, 1985-91* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 413.

²¹ *Ibid*, 412.

²² Cherniaev, “1991 god.”

²³ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 215.

²⁴ Cited in Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb*, 402-03.

To mark the festivities of 9 May 1991, Aleksandr Prokhanov's conservative newspaper *Den'* published a roundtable that saw Generals Varennikov and Rodionov allude to a change of power, remarking that "The defense industry has much greater organizational experience than... politicians who are incapable even of ensuring garbage collection on the streets of Moscow."²⁵ On 17 June, five days after Boris Yeltsin's electoral victory, Prime Minister Valentin Pavlov gave a damning speech about the "ongoing 'War of Laws' between the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union and the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR," and argued in favour of a transfer of power from President Gorbachev to himself and the Cabinet of Ministers with the gesticulating support of Deputy Viktor Alksnis.²⁶ The vote was stymied by Deputy Speaker of the Supreme Soviet Ivan Laptev, who continued to give the floor to deputies and demanded supporting statements from the KGB, the MVD, and the Department of National Defense.²⁷

It was on 23 July 1991 that an open letter signed by a dozen military, political, and artistic figures graced the pages of *Sovetskaia Rossiia*. Among them were Colonel General Gromov; Deputy Iurii Blokhin was a co-chairman of *Soiuz* alongside Deputy Alksnis; Party apparatchik Gennadii Ziuganov had gained celebrity for an anti-perestroika open letter addressed to Aleksandr Iakovlev entitled "The Architect Among the Ruins"; the authors Aleksandr Prokhanov, Iurii Bondarev and Valentin Rasputin were well-known for their criticism of Gorbachev; while General Varennikov, Chairman of the Peasants Union of the USSR Vasilii Starodubtsev, and Deputy Chairman of the

²⁵ Cited in *ibid*, 435.

²⁶ Murray, *A Democracy of Despots*, 215.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 110-11.

Scientific-Industrial Union Aleksandr Tiziakov would each be among the “Gang of Eight” who staged the August Putsch.

Entitled “A Word to the People” (*Slovo k narodu*), the letter was a manifesto against the reforms of the past five years that abstained from naming Gorbachev. Warning of “an enormous, unforeseen calamity” in “our land, a great power, given to us by... glorious ancestors,” the authors proclaimed a state of crisis wherein “our home is already burning in four corners, [and] extinguishing this has to be done not by water, but by our own tears and blood.”²⁸ Notably, the rhetoric was free of Soviet jargon. The Communist Party was berated not for ideological shortcomings, but for giving rise to “frivolous and clumsy parliamentarians who have set us against each other and brought into force thousands of stillborn laws.” Soviet youth were cast as victims of phenomena that gained a new public exposure in glasnost such as “corruption by false idols... idleness... drug use [or] crime.” In a statement that would have made Lenin recoil, the authors heaped praise upon “the Orthodox Church, which passed through Golgotha... [and] shone a spiritual light on Russian history in times of darkness.” Even the call for unity hinged on contemporary references rather than words of class struggle, appealing for readers to join as one to “halt the chain reaction of the disastrous collapse of the state... to transform into a genuinely popular government and not a trough for the hungry *nouveaux riches*...”²⁹ The implications for a coup d’etat were clear to many. Particularly heated in their reaction, according to Gennadii Ziuganov, were Russian President Yeltsin and Vice President Rutskoi who “when speaking of this document called it ‘Iaroslavna’s

²⁸ “Slovo k narodu,” *Den*’ 15 (1991), accessed 7 September 2017, web.archive.org/web/20131014202353/http://www.zavtra.ru/denlit/050/12.html.

²⁹ Ibid.

Incantation' (Plach Iaroslavny) and threatened the authors with prison."³⁰

To observers in Washington, D.C., the conservative manifesto of "A Word to the People" came as little surprise. On 10 April 1991 the CIA forecasted that, "the Gorbachev era is effectively over" and compiled a list of "traditionalists" who commanded "the most critical levers of power and repression."³¹ In June, the Bush Administration warned Gorbachev at least three times of possible plans for a coup d'etat. Yet in each case Gorbachev was dismissive of the possibility.³² When Yeltsin travelled to Gorbachev's dacha on 29 July 1991 to finalize the wording of a New Union Treaty (Novyi soiuznyi dogovor) that would convert the USSR to a federation of nine independent republics with a common president and foreign policy, diplomacy gave way to quarrels.³³ Yeltsin deemed Kriuchkov and Iazov opponents of reform while Nursultan Nazarbaev listed Pavlov and Lukianov among the traitors, only for Gorbachev to offer vague assurance that the suspects would be replaced after the treaty was signed on 20 August. His departure to Foros, Crimea for a summer vacation was his final gaffe.

³⁰ Valentina Chikina, "Chetyre voprosa Gennadiiu Ziuganovu," *Zavtra*, 30 June 2004, accessed 7 September 2017, zavtra.ru/blogs/2004-06-3021. "Iaroslavna's Incantation" is the third verse from *The Lay of Igor's Campaign*, wherein Igor's wife invokes her powers with nature to facilitate his escape from the Mongols. I have opted for Vladimir Nabokov's translation, its cynicism being appropriate to the scenario. More common are "Iaroslavna's Tears" or "Iaroslavna's Lament". For Nabokov's translation, see: Vladimir Nabokov, trans., "The Song of Igor's Campaign," accessed 7 September 2017, lib.ru/NABOKOW/slovo.txt.

³¹ David Gompert and Ed. A. Hewett, "The Gorbachev Succession," CIA Memorandum (10 April 1991), accessed 9 September 2017, nsarchive2.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=2755713-Document-13.

³² Dan Oberdorfer, "U.S. Secretly Studied Possibility of Gorbachev Coup, Soviet Collapse," *Washington Post*, 17 January 1993, accessed 7 September 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/01/17/us-secretly-studied-possibility-of-gorbachev-coup-soviet-collapse/de8306a9-65f1-42c1-9ff7-4eafc4866fa9/?utm_term=.44c77ecd4b04.

³³ The drafting of a New Union Treaty began on 1 January 1991 and was flawed from the outset with the three Baltic republics, Moldavia, Georgia, and Armenia refusing to participate. While a referendum held in the nine republics that participated on 17 March saw more than three-quarters of voters support the preservation of the Soviet Union, opposition remained strong in cities such as Moscow and Leningrad.

The August Putsch Begins

Had it succeeded, [Gorbachev] could have said, “I told them so, it is my achievement.” If the GKChP had failed, he could have fired everyone and said he knew nothing. That was his manner: with regard to events in Tbilisi and Vilnius, he said he had not known anything. Of course he had known. Up until the last day, we thought Gorbachev was an inept man, without a vision, a coward always ready to set someone up. We understood he was weak, but we did not think he was a traitor.

- General Valentin Varennikov, 17 August 2001.³⁴

The August Putsch was a three-day series of events that exposed the delusions of the Gang of Eight and left an open battlefield for aspiring democrats to compete for political spoils. Immediately after Gorbachev’s departure to Foros on 6 August 1991, KGB Chairman Kriuchkov ordered two aides and General Grachev to compose a memorandum on the prospect of declaring a state of emergency. On 8 August they reported that such actions would be “extremely complicated, difficult to enforce, [and] might cause [a] spark of disorder in the country.”³⁵ Kriuchkov rejected their findings and demanded they act in light of the impending ratification of the New Union Treaty. In the week that followed, Kriuchkov and his faithfuls finalized their plan of action and drafted a declaration of the State Committee of the State of Emergency, or GKChP (Gosudarstvennyi komitet po chrezvychainomu polozheniiu). Gorbachev, having conversed four times with Kriuchkov by telephone on 18 August, appears to have been

³⁴ Andrei Zolotov Jr., “GKChP Couldn’t Finish What It Started,” *The Moscow Times*, 17 August 2001, 1.

³⁵ Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb*, 448.

caught off-guard when at 4:50 P.M. a delegation arrived at his dacha. Representing the State Committee were General Varennikov, Head of the KGB's Ninth Directorate Iurii Plekhanov, Politburo member Oleg Shenin, Deputy Chairman of the Defense Council Oleg Baklanov, and Presidential Chief of Staff Valerii Boldin. Upon his efforts to dial Kriuchkov on the matter, Gorbachev realized that his phone lines were cut. The five men demanded that Gorbachev either declare a state of emergency and scrap the ratification of the New Union Treaty, or resign, and appoint Ianaev acting president. To the delegation's dismay Gorbachev refused to do either and they departed at 7:30 P.M. empty-handed, leaving him under house arrest. Greeted in Moscow by Vice-President Ianaev and Prime Minister Pavlov, the delegation claimed that Gorbachev was incapacitated due to a heart attack or a stroke. Hesitant though he was to sign the State Committee's declaration without communication from Gorbachev, Vice President Ianaev capitulated and put pen to paper. What followed was a series of half-measures that amounted to a stillborn coup.

The State Committee for the State of Emergency's first broadcast to the Soviet people took place on 19 August at 6:00 A.M., with Chairman of Gosteleradio Leonid Kravchenko given 40 minutes notice to "create a somber atmosphere akin to a state funeral."³⁶ The State Committee's announcement echoed "A Word to the People" in its ominous forecast and departure from Soviet vocabulary. "The policy of reforms, launched at Mikhail Gorbachev's initiative, entered for several reasons into a blind alley," it began. "All democratic institutions created by the popular will are losing weight... a result of purposeful actions by those who... are in fact staging an

³⁶ Artem Krechetnikov, "Khronika putcha. Chast' II," BBC Russian, 18 August 2006, accessed 15 September 2017, news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/russian/russia/newsid_5261000/5261982.stm.

unconstitutional coup[!] and striving for unbridled personal dictatorial powers....”³⁷ The State Committee took necessary precautions to guarantee its hold on power. In the days beforehand 250,000 pairs of handcuffs were delivered to Moscow, KGB personnel were recalled from vacation, and the Lefortovo Prison was emptied in anticipation of new detainees.³⁸ Acting President Ianaev also signed off on a memorandum “Regarding Certain Axioms of the Extraordinary Situation” that bore such recommendations as “If you want to proceed with a minimal amount of bloodshed, suppress contradictions at the very beginning,” and “The population should know who is being punished and for what evident reasons....”³⁹ With 4,000 troops deployed to Moscow at 7:00 A.M., the arrest of Shield’s founder Deputy Urazhtsev on charges of “propagandist work among servicemen” at 8:30 A.M., and tanks having surrounded Moscow City Hall by 9:00 A.M., the coup d’etat seemed well in motion.⁴⁰ By the end of the day however, the emperors’ new clothes were exposed. Particularly telling was the reluctance of afgantsy officers to carry out orders issued by the Gang of Eight.

The August Putsch Unwinds

Last year when foreign journalists were speculating on the chances of a military coup, I said it was impossible for two reasons. First the country and the army are too big. In places like Portugal, the Captains could gather... in one cafe and

³⁷ Cited in Remnick, 461-62.

³⁸ Marc Garcelon, *Revolutionary Passage: From Soviet to Post-Soviet Russia, 1985 - 2000* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 159; Christopher Andrew and Vasilii Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive: The KGB in Europe and the West* (Eastbourne, UK: Gardners Books, 2000), 513-14.

³⁹ Cited in Remnick, 464-65.

⁴⁰ Krechetnikov, “Khronika putcha”; Sergei Shargunov, “Vremennyi geroi,” *Russkii zhurnal*, 19 August 2011, accessed on 10 April 2017, www.russ.ru/layout/set/print/pole/Vremennyj-geroj; “‘Shchit’ – Rossiiskii soiuz sotsial’noi zashchity....”

discuss the revolution... In our case, even the Kremlin would not be big enough to hold all our Generals... The second problem is that we don't have a Marshal Zhukov, we have Defence Minister Marshal Iazov.

- Deputy Viktor Alksnis, 6 September 1991⁴¹

In the year leading up to the August Putsch there were recurring state efforts to foster a sense of “Afghan brotherhood” among afgantsy who chose to remain in the armed forces. Among the cheerleaders for the cause was Acting President Ianaev, a founding member of the Supreme Soviet Committee for Soldier-Internationalists’ Affairs in April 1990. The All-Union Conference of Soldier-Internationalists held in Minsk one year later saw Defense Minister Iazov, Colonel General Nikolai Shliaga, and General Varennikov each speak at the podium in an effort to weave a successful appeal to the afgantsy as a collective ally.⁴² Their efforts proved futile when the August Putsch took place. Indeed, “delays in conveying orders, foot-dragging, and insubordination by a handful of KGB, military, and police officials” who counted 84,000 afgantsy in their ranks “allowed many of the designated detainees to elude capture.”⁴³ Among the first to reject orders from the State Committee was KGB Major General Viktor Karpukhin, who on 27 December 1979 led 38 spetsnaz troops to dispose of President Hafizullah Amin at the Tajbeg Palace. Ordered to detain Russian President Boris Yeltsin at his dacha, Karpukhin chose instead to allow him to depart to Moscow and take command of the

⁴¹ Anya Chernyakhovskaya, John Jirik, and Nikolai Lamm, eds., “Had They Invited Me, I Would Have Joined Them,” *Voices From An (Attempted) Soviet Coup*, accessed 21 September 2017, <https://sites.google.com/site/jiriksoviet/alksnis>.

⁴² Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 81.

⁴³ Garcelon, 159.

White House.⁴⁴ Among the first afgantsy to side against the State Committee according to Yeltsin was General Pavel Grachev, whom he dialed at 6:30 A.M. after the GKChP's address on television. After their conversation Yeltsin declared to his allies, "Grachev is ours!"⁴⁵ Vice President Rutskoi, meanwhile, began to speak on broadcasts from a makeshift radio station in the White House at 10:00 A.M.:

Comrades! I, an officer of the Soviet armed forces, a colonel, a Hero of the Soviet Union who has walked the battle-torn roads of Afghanistan and knows the horrors of war, call on you, my brother officers, soldiers and sailors, not to act against your own people, against your fathers, brothers, and sisters.⁴⁶

Rounding out Yeltsin's military supporters was Colonel General Konstantin Kobets (1939-2012). Having led a battalion into Czechoslovakia in 1968, he sided with Yeltsin after the president's speech from atop a T-72 tank that afternoon. Kobets was later ordered to organize a defense of the White House; in addition to "approximately 1,500 young volunteers with experience in the army," he had 300 afgantsy and 300 police officers at his disposal.⁴⁷

As with military actions in Vilnius earlier that year, soldiers and journalists outside of Moscow operated according to their own will during the August Putsch. In Leningrad, television and print media continued to issue anti-State Committee reports. The local afgantsy organization established a committee in support of Mayor Anatolii Sobchak, created "over 250 manned barricades" against potential coup supporters, and

⁴⁴ Ibid; "Geroi sovetskogo soiuza Karpukhin Viktor Fedorovich," accessed 15 September 2017, www.warheroes.ru/hero/hero.asp?Hero_id=1091.

⁴⁵ Cited in Krechetnikov, "Khronika putcha."

⁴⁶ Cited in Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 467.

⁴⁷ Krechetnikov, "Khronika putcha."

produced special issues of its journal (*K sovesti*) on 20 and 21 August to stand against the Gang of Eight.⁴⁸ While the commander of the Leningrad Military District General Viktor Samsonov – a former classmate of Boris Gromov’s at the Frunze Military Academy – initially bowed to the orders of the State Committee, he stepped back after a heated exchange with Mayor Sobchak, who demanded “General, remember Tbilisi? You were the only one there who acted as a reasonable man. ... Don’t you realize you are liquidating your own Party?”⁴⁹

The State Committee’s televised press conference at 17:00 P.M. was perhaps the arrow in the heart of the Gang of Eight’s attempt to save the Soviet Union. Five of its members partook, stationed uneasily at a table. News coverage on both sides of the Atlantic focused not on the State Committee’s decrees but allegations of Acting President Ianaev’s drunkenness and his trembling hands.⁵⁰ Tania Malkina of *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, unfazed by a decree banning independent newspapers, asked the men “if they realized that they had just attempted an anti-constitutional coup d’etat.” Another reporter pressed Ianaev for his opinion of “Yeltsin’s call for a nation-wide strike,” thereby granting televised publicity to the event.⁵¹ Particularly telling was an editorial printed in *Izvestiia* on 24 August after the coup collapsed, in which the authors recalled:

The people sitting behind the table on the platform were no longer invoking fear – they were loathsome and pathetic... Television just loves showing the panorama

⁴⁸ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 64; Galeotti, *Afghanistan: the Soviet Union’s Last War*, 118.

⁴⁹ Cited in Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb*, 468-69.

⁵⁰ For various accounts, see: Victoria E. Bonnell, Ann Cooper, and Gregory Freidin, eds., *Russia at the Barricades: Eyewitness Accounts of the August 1991 Coup* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 12, 42, 107, 136.

⁵¹ Rodric Braithwaite, “The Dog Days of the Soviet Union: The Coup,” *Open Democracy*, 18 August 2011, accessed 18 September 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/rodric-braithwaite/dog-days-of-soviet-union-coup>.

of these faces. ... The junta was doomed as soon as it showed itself to the people. How could these people with shaking hands, trembling lips, and shifty eyes lay claim to power...?⁵²

Indeed, one journalist at the press conference even inquired whether the State Committee had contacted General Augusto Pinochet of Chile for advice.⁵³ While there was ample tabloid speculation too – Lieutenant General Aleksandr Lebed was said to have committed suicide one day only to be “held hostage by the White House” the next – journalists provided a sound rebuttal of the GKChP’s platform.⁵⁴

Rumours of an attack on the White House spread quickly among the growing crowd of protesters on 20 August, with Boris Yeltsin informed of plans for an offensive shortly after the Gang of Eight’s press conference concluded. Frequently in touch with him was General Grachev, who “used the network of Afghan war veterans to send word to Russian leaders that a decision to storm the building had been made” and insisted that the best deterrent was soldiers’ reluctance to shoot unarmed civilians.⁵⁵ Yeltsin’s call for a renewed demonstration came at 10:30 A.M and was parried at noon by commander of the Moscow Military District Colonel General Nikolai Kalinin, who announced that there would be a curfew between 23:00 P.M. and 5:00 A.M. With a time bracket put forward, military officials congregated to discuss the seizure of the White House. Deputy Defense Minister Vladislav Achalov, a hawkish appointee of December 1990, chaired the meeting. Present for the discussion were four decorated afgantsy in Boris Gromov, Pavel

⁵² Cited in Vogt, “The Soviet Coup...,” 45.

⁵³ Ibid, 46.

⁵⁴ General Aleksandr Lebed, *My Life and My Country* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1997), 311.

⁵⁵ Michael Dobbs, *Down With Big Brother: The Fall of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Random House, 1996), 399.

Grachev, Viktor Karpukhin, and Valentin Varennikov. “Operation Thunder” was to take place at 2:00 A.M. and begin with Grachev’s paratroopers establishing a secure perimeter that stretched 1,000 yards around the White House. Gromov would lead MVD forces to “drive a wedge through the crowds of Yeltsin supporters.” Karpukhin’s Alfa Group of KGB forces would follow Gromov and “storm the building, firing grenade launchers as they went.” Upon penetrating the White House, Alfa Group forces were to arrest the Russian leaders and open fire on any resisters, with photographers instructed to document “defenders using firearms” so as to place any blame for casualties.⁵⁶ An operation that depended on unwavering cooperation between military, KGB, and MVD commanders with mixed feelings on the August Putsch, Grachev insisted that General Aleksandr Lebed be given the floor to report on a reconnaissance mission. Lebed spoke of “about 100,000 people at the Supreme Soviet building... fortified by numerous barricades,” a “well-armed security guard unit,” and warned that “any use of force would lead to great bloodshed.”⁵⁷ Varennikov, the only member of the Gang of Eight present for the planning of “Operation Thunder” lashed out. “General, it is your duty to be an optimist,” he bellowed. “You are bringing pessimism and uncertainty into this room.”⁵⁸ The exchange reflected the GKChP’s denial of reality and afgangtsy officers’ weariness of its orders.

As the day progressed public resistance grew bolder. With Leningrad’s General Samsonov having withdrawn his support of the State Committee, Mayor Sobchak addressed a mass demonstration on Palace Square, the protesters armed with boldly

⁵⁶ Ibid, 396-97.

⁵⁷ Lebed, *My Life and My Country*, 311.

⁵⁸ Cited in Dobbs, *Down With Big Brother*, 397.

worded signs that called for “Civil disobedience against a cohort of black colonels!”⁵⁹ In Moscow, defenders of the White House assembled barricades from scrap metal, debris, and vehicles provided by a local transportation company. Some demonstrators “carried pocket transistor radios... tuned to the independent *Ekho Moskvy* station” for updates on troop maneuvers, while a contingent of women formed a human shield armed with signs that read “Soviet Soldiers: Don’t Shoot Your Mothers.”⁶⁰ By nightfall the Ukrainian parliament had condemned the coup and Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbaev had resigned from the Politburo and Central Committee in protest. Shortly after 20:00 P.M., President Yeltsin called upon citizens over an *Ekho Moskvy* broadcast to “oppose the tanks and armoured personnel carriers with the united determination not to permit dictatorship.”⁶¹ Among those drawn to the streets by Yeltsin’s appeal was Dmitrii Komar’ (1968-91), who served as a paratrooper in Afghanistan in 1987.

In defiance of Colonel General Kalinin’s curfew, Dmitrii Komar’ set out after 23:00 P.M. alongside many other protesters to patrol the streets. At 0:40 A.M. they crossed paths with a column of 12 infantry combat vehicles (Boevaia mashina pekhoty, or BMPs) approaching the Foreign Ministry. The division’s orders from the Chief of Staff of the Moscow Military District were to patrol the entrances of the Garden Ring and “prevent the transportation of firearms, explosives, and ammunition into the city.”⁶² The route taken saw them follow an underpass beneath Kalinin avenue one half-mile from the White House. As the column of BMPs advanced the drivers realized that the path was

⁵⁹ *Sobytiie*, dir. Sergei Loznitsa, (Netherlands-Belgium: Atoms & Void, 2015.)

⁶⁰ Dobbs, *Down With Big Brother*, 399; Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb* 481.

⁶¹ Cited in Dobbs, *Down With Big Brother*, 402.

⁶² Cited in Roi Medvedev, “Zhertvy GKChP,” *Novaia i noveishaia istoriia* 1 (2003), accessed 18 September 2017, vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/JOURNAL/NEWHIST/RAM.HTM.

barricaded with trolleybuses, debris, and motor vehicles. Gathered along the side ramps of the Garden Ring were Komar' and hundreds of other defenders, who pelted the column with debris and Molotov cocktails, chanting "Russia! Russia!" "Fascists!" and "Get out of here!"⁶³ When the crew of a leading BMP panicked and began to slam against the bus barricade in an effort to break free, a nearby protester's leg was broken. This prompted Dmitri Komar' and others to charge the BMPs, leading to casualties.

Familiar with the vehicle from his time in the army, Dmitri Komar' and an ally climbed atop BMP № 536 to obstruct the drivers' line of vision with a tarpaulin. With the rear hatch knocked loose from "repeated collisions with the barricade," Komar' attempted to enter the vehicle only for the gunner to fire a round of warning shots.⁶⁴ While none of the bullets struck Komar', he fell from the vehicle and was crushed beneath its tracks. His allies responded with anger, prompting BMP № 536's gunner to fire another round of warning shots that ricocheted and left a second protester, Vladimir Usov, lying dead in the vehicles' path. A third protester, Il'ia Krichevskii, "began throwing stones" and "died instantly" after troops fired shots from a BMP set aflame.⁶⁵ The soldiers eventually surrendered to Deputy Oleg Rumiantsev, who argued that they were "at risk of lynching" and would be guaranteed safety in the White House.⁶⁶ Among those taken captive was Lieutenant General Andrei Smirnov, who testified at 4:20 A.M. that "no military commanders issued orders to storm the parliament" and "no troops will

⁶³ Dobbs, *Down With Big Brother*, 404.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Dobbs, *Down With Big Brother*, 405; "Calls for Recognition of 1991 Soviet Coup Martyrs on 20th Anniversary," *The Guardian*, 16 August 2011, accessed 18 September 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/16/soviet-coup-martyrs-anniversary>.

⁶⁶ Rodric Braithwaite, "The Dog Days of the Soviet Union (2): The Plot Thickens," *Open Democracy*, 19 August 2011, accessed 19 September 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/rodric-braithwaite/dog-days-of-soviet-union-2-plot-thickens>.

attempt to seize the White House either tomorrow or the following day.”⁶⁷

Lieutenant General Smirnov spoke the truth: those who met for the planning of “Operation Thunder” each stopped short of carrying out their orders. Late that evening Air Marshal Shaposhnikov telephoned General Grachev and complained that the Gang of Eight “wanted to use him as a scapegoat,” floating such ideas as the deployment of paratroopers to arrest the State Committee or bombing the Kremlin in retaliation for shots fired on the White House. Grachev ruled in favour of non-aggression and stated, “No, that will lead to complete confusion and endanger lives. Let’s just sit by our phones, and try to avert any stupidities.”⁶⁸ Following their agreement on non-participation in “Operation Thunder” Grachev and Shaposhnikov forwarded their positions to Yeltsin. When word of attacks on the BMPs and civilian casualties reached Grachev, he called Colonel General Gromov to inquire whether or not the MVD would deploy troops in response. “They are standing still. And they are not going anywhere,” Gromov replied.⁶⁹ Shortly thereafter, Grachev received a call from KGB Major General Karpukhin, who “announced that his men would not be participating in the operation.”⁷⁰ Defense Minister Iazov received multiple accounts of the conflict as the night wore on and was aware of soldiers’ fatigue with bearing the brunt of public anger over political misadventures. As a result, he ordered a halt to troop movements and did not inform KGB Chairman Kriuchkov until 2:00 A.M. When summoned to the Lubianka to confront the State Committee, Iazov chose instead to send Deputy Defense Minister Achalov. He was

⁶⁷ Bonnell et al, 209.

⁶⁸ Cited in Dobbs, *Down With Big Brother*, 403.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 406.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

“greeted by shouts of rage” as “quarrels broke out over who was responsible for the fiasco” and “KGB officials accused the military of cowardice and incompetence.”⁷¹ At 3:00 A.M. Kriuchkov dialed the White House to concede defeat.

With Grachev, Gromov, Karpukhin, and Lebed each opposed to military action; with Komar’ and 300 afgangtsy volunteers having defended the White House against it; and with Rutskoi himself piloting Gorbachev from Foros to Moscow on 21 August, the afgangtsy’s political representatives seemed poised to take a leading role in the foundation of a post-Putsch Russia. The afgangtsy who played a role in the stillborn coup were quickly swept up in a purge of the armed forces. General Varennikov was arrested, MVD Interior Army Commander Iurii Shatalin was forcibly retired, and General Gromov – who Vice President Rutskoi regarded as “implicated in the coup” for having signed “A Word to the People” – was removed as First Deputy Interior Minister and quietly reshuffled into the Ministry of Defense.⁷² Marshal Akhromeev, who had returned from vacation in Sochi to support the State Committee, hanged himself in his Kremlin office. The suicide notes he left behind ranged from one addressed to the cafeteria staff “to pay back the money he owed,” to a farewell to his family in which he stated: “I cannot live when my Fatherland is dying and all that I have made my life’s work is being destroyed. My age and all I have done give me the right to leave this life. I struggled to the end.”⁷³

Akhromeev’s suicide on 24 August 1991 coincided with a ceremony dedicated to a trio of men two generations younger than him. It was on that day that a public funeral one

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Gerald Nadler, “Akhromeyev a Suicide,” *United Press International*, 26 August 1991, accessed 19 September 2017, www.upi.com/Archives/1991/08/26/Akhromeyev-a-suicide/8425683179200/.

⁷³ Cited in Peter Vincent Pry, *War Scare: Russia and America on the Nuclear Brink* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999), 81.

million people strong took place on Manezhnaia square to honour Dmitri Komar', Vladimir Usov, and Il'ia Krichevskii. According to British Ambassador Rodric Braithwaite's record of the event, it was a conglomerate of competing histories:

Armenians and Azerbaidjanis, Georgians and Lithuanians, march with their flags to commemorate the people that they too have lost. A couple of Orthodox priests carry the portrait of Nicholas II... There is a small group of scruffy ruffians wearing the uniform of the Tsar's cossacks: they look like typical Black Hundreds from the pogroms. ... The ambassadors of the European Community march gallantly but... don't know what their role is... An Afghan veteran recites some of his poetry. An Orthodox choir sings magnificently... A Rabbi intones the Kaddish in memory of the Jewish boy killed....⁷⁴

President Gorbachev, yet to grasp that his three days' confinement in Foros did not amount to public sympathy, faced the first mass rally of his political career and read a brief statement. "Looking at these young faces and the eyes of their parents, it is difficult to speak," he began.

I bow low to the men who gave their lives against those who wanted to return the country to the dark age of totalitarianism... In remembering these young people, we are obligated to continue to follow our chosen path... There will be no mercy for those who participated in the putsch. Today I signed a decree posthumously conferring the title of Hero of the Soviet Union upon Dmitrii Komar', Il'ia

⁷⁴ Rodric Braithwaite, "The Dog Days of the Soviet Union (3): The Plot Fails," Open Democracy, 22 August 2011, accessed 22 September 2017, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/rodric-braithwaite/dog-days-of-soviet-union-3-plot-fails>.

Krichevskii, and Vladimir Usov. ... They did all that they could.⁷⁵

Following Gorbachev's speech, a public march in honour of the three young men proceeded from Manezhnaia Square to Vagan'kovskoe cemetery where the funeral procession was led by Vice President Rutskoi.

President Yeltsin's speech at a separate rally reflected his greater ear for public opinion. The coup artists he deemed "cockroaches in a jar" as they turned on one another during interrogations and he appealed to the parents of those who died for forgiveness, "for I failed to defend and save your sons."⁷⁶ However, neither Gorbachev nor Yeltsin's words healed the wounds of the bereaved. The mothers of Komar', Krichevskii, and Usov were each awarded a pension supplement of 250 rubles per month and the gift of a free Zhiguli. "But the car turned out to be a reject," recalled Liubov Komar'. "I was tormented for a year and half having to pry spare parts out of the factory. They operated according to the sarcastic notion that 'God gives to you what we don't want' (na tebe, bozhe, chto nam negozhe)."⁷⁷ While "equivalent to a good salary" at the time, their pensions were not adjusted to cope with inflation until 2002 when they were raised to 370 roubles.⁷⁸ "The United States paid more attention to our sons over there than anyone did here," added Liubov, pointing to the sponsorship of Russian exchange students in memory of the three

⁷⁵ Cited in Eduard Glezin (ed.) "Mikhail Gorbachev v dni putcha 1991 g. Vyzvolenie i vozvrashchenie," accessed 22 September 2017, ed-glezin.livejournal.com/844513.html.

⁷⁶ David Remnick, "Gorbachev Abandons Party," *The Washington Post*, 25 August 1991, accessed 22 September 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/08/25/gorbachev-abandons-party/3024a76f-eafd-444b-a78e-b0b108072445/?utm_term=.603934552a24.

⁷⁷ Natal'ia Gridneva, "Pobedu demokratii otmetili skromno," *Kommersant*, 22 August 1998, accessed 22 August 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/203861>.

⁷⁸ Tom Parfitt, "Calls for Recognition of 1991 Soviet Coup Martyrs on 20th Anniversary," *The Guardian*, 16 August 2011 accessed 4 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/16/soviet-coup-martyrs-anniversary>.

boys in 2011. “I never heard a word from Yeltsin.”⁷⁹ A blunt counterpoint to politicians and mothers alike came from Lieutenant General Lebed’, for whom the real hero of the clash on 21 August was the “19-year-old boy, a sergeant, [who] under a hail of sticks, rocks, and insults” evacuated his crew from the BMP set aflame by protesters and extinguished the fire himself. Lebed insisted that, “if... the fire spread... The earth would be scorched dead for a 150 to 250-foot radius, and... not 3, but 303, or maybe 1,333 people would have paid with their lives.”⁸⁰ The gesture taken by President Gorbachev only hardened his cynicism toward politicians. “I am sorry that lives were lost,” he wrote in 1994. “But the fact that they became the last Heroes of the Soviet Union... posthumously from the hands of the people who were getting ready to liquidate the Soviet Union, sounds more and more blasphemous with each passing day....”⁸¹

The Dissolution of the August Alliance

When the tension near the walls of the White House was at its peak, there were no more than 100,000 people – one percent of the population of the heroic city of Moscow. What were the other 99% doing? They were feverishly buying up macaroni... By the time of the spectacle’s denouement, there was nothing left but an enormous crowd, not united by any idea that rose above ethnic preoccupations....

- Lieutenant General Aleksandr Lebed⁸²

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Lebed, 318-19.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid, 321.

The failure of the August Putsch was a watershed moment in the political mobilization of the afgangtsy. Those who emerged as voices against military action – General Grachev, Major General Karpukhin, Lieutenant General Lebed, and Vice-President Rutskoi – were a generation younger than coup supporters General Varennikov and Marshal Akhromeev. Their decision to reject orders from the State Committee did not mark solidarity with Gorbachev or Yeltsin, but the “emancipation of the military from the Party state.”⁸³ It was a bold move made with the assumption that military reform and the provision of social welfare to fellow afgangtsy would remain a priority in the RSFSR. It took little time for such idealism to falter in light of competing demands from Soviet citizens and the harsh realities of economic collapse. Particularly damaging for the afgangtsy was the dissolution of the Soviet Union along national lines.

The surge in nationalism was immediately evident after the State Committee on the State of Emergency ceded power on 21 August. On the day that followed the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR was the site of a parliamentary rally to mark “the end of the 70-year old nightmare... in the rebirth of Russia.”⁸⁴ Rather than outline a vision for the future, deputies tapped into an “atmosphere of vengefulness” among the thousands of people who gathered; chants of “Ros-si-ia! Ros-si-ia!!” transformed into calls for Gorbachev to resign and putsch supporters to be shot. Perhaps the greatest hyperbole came from ex-Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, who called for Dmitrii Komar’, Il’ia Krichevskii, and Vladimir Usov to be the first additions to the Kremlin Wall Necropolis since Minister of Defense Dmitrii Ustinov in 1984. “We can dig up some of

⁸³ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 225.

⁸⁴ Braithwaite, “The Dog Days of the Soviet Union.”

those who are already there to make way for them,” he suggested.⁸⁵

Overshadowed by such hyperbole that day was an open letter addressed to President Yeltsin and the deputies of the RSFSR from a cast of military and security personnel who sought to build a new political alliance. “We, the servicemen of the Armed Forces, the MVD, and the KGB of the country,” it began:

Loyal to the military oath, defending the House of Soviets of Russia during the coup d’etat, [we] appeal to you with an urgent demand for the immediate removal from their posts of generals, admirals, and other high-ranking officers who voluntarily carried out the orders of the anti-constitutional GKChP.⁸⁶

The letter spoke to a new political faction composed of veterans from the officer corps for whom the Afghan war, perestroika, and the August Putsch brought a revolution in professional identity and core values. Having stood against the Putsch brought promotions and special merit for many. Shaposhnikov became Minister of Defense with Grachev as his deputy, while the rank of Major General was conferred upon Rutskoi and Kobets. Kobets quickly grew to be despised by many in the Old Guard after heading a commission charged with “analyzing the role of the senior staff of the armed forces in the August Putsch,” which led to the dismissal of more than 100 generals from the Ground Forces by 17 September 1991.⁸⁷ Absent from the open letter penned to President Yeltsin in the name of servicemen in the Armed Forces, MVD, and KGB however, were any concerns for conscripts, who shouldered the brunt of combat operations and had neither

⁸⁵ Cited in *ibid.*

⁸⁶ A. I. Kamenev, “Pir pobeditelei: novye naznachentsy El’tsina,” *ArtofWar*, accessed 7 October 2017, http://artofwar.ru/k/kamenew_anatolij_iwanowich_pirpobeditelej.shtml.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

“military tradition to fall back on... nor the energy to get mixed up in high politics.”⁸⁸

They were similarly absent from deputies’ priorities in the last four months of the Soviet Union. While the failure of the August Putsch initially gave way to “a climate of receptivity and sympathy to maternalist thinking” that echoed the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers’ proposals for military reform, conservative factions soon remobilized.⁸⁹

Beginning on 23 August, President Yeltsin’s supporters undertook the first of many vengeful humiliations of Gorbachev. Reception of his speech to the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR changed from cheers for his praise of Yeltsin’s role in defusing the crisis, to jeers when he insisted that the Communist Party “contained not only plotters but also loyal and faithful members.”⁹⁰ Yeltsin then demanded that he read aloud the minutes of the USSR’s Cabinet of Ministers’ meeting, wherein most members supported the Gang of Eight in their venture. Faced with accusations of personal involvement in the August Putsch, Gorbachev had little choice but to “approve all edicts issued by Yeltsin over the previous three days” and follow his actions by calling for “the dissolution of the Communist Party and a ban on party cells in the army, KGB, and police.”⁹¹ They were the first of many legislative actions to render Gorbachev a powerless president without a state. Particularly consequential for citizens employed by the military was Gorbachev’s decree of 29 August 1991 “On the Abolition of Military and Political Organs in the Armed Forces of the USSR, KGB troops, MVD troops, and Railway Troops,” which set the stage for the Soviet Army to be divided among post-Soviet nations; in the week of 24

⁸⁸ Braithwaite, *Afgantsy*, 313.

⁸⁹ Elkner, “Dedovshchina and the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers under Gorbachev.”

⁹⁰ David Marples, *The Collapse of the Soviet Union, 1985-1991* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 87.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 87-8.

to 31 August 1991 alone, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan declared independence from the Soviet Union.

After the final week of August saw the rapid passage of decrees on radical reform, September saw the first attempts at their implementation. The results were muddled at best. On 18 September for instance, Deputy Urazhtsev – not one month after he accused the military of “complicity in drawing up the arrest lists” in the Putsch – announced state plans for the creation of a Russian National Guard.⁹² It would “consist of 40,000 people... who would report to the President of the RSFSR, and serve to protect him and Russian authorities.” Proposed monthly salaries were quite lucrative: an ordinary soldier would make 1,000 rubles, an officer 2,000 rubles, and a commander 2,500 rubles plus rations and benefits. “If memory serves me right,” remarked one officer bitterly, “at that time a colonel’s salary was 400 to 500 rubles.”⁹³ In a matter of days 33,000 people applied, of whom only 1,219 were hired: funding for the project was pocketed by insiders almost immediately.⁹⁴

Compounding the afgangtsy’s struggle to coordinate a national movement was a rapidly changing public opinion toward the Soviet Union for which they had served. By October 1991 one quarter of Russians polled believed that “there should be no union at all.” Those who favoured its preservation were “equally divided among those who wanted an economic union only, those who wanted an economic *and* political union... and those who favoured a union with a central control over military affairs.”⁹⁵ Further,

⁹² Barylski, *The Soldier in Russian Politics*, 101.

⁹³ Kamenev, “Pir pobeditelei...”

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge:

the heroes of the Soviet-Afghan War who gathered political clout after the August Putsch soon left the conflict behind them. It was on 27 October 1991 that Major-General Dzhokhar Dudaev, highly decorated for his bombing raids with the Soviet Air Force in Afghanistan, was declared president of an independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria with 90.1% of the vote in a contested election.⁹⁶ The people's deputies of the RSFSR refused to recognize the republic's independence, and on 7 November President Yeltsin issued a decree that stated Russian soldiers would "enter at 5:00 A.M. on 9 November and remain until 9 December" to enforce a state of emergency.⁹⁷ It was one of Soviet President Gorbachev's last standing powers that the armed forces remained subordinate to his orders. As such, 9 November 1991 saw Russian Vice President Rutskoi unleash a bellowing telephone diatribe against Gorbachev as he "tried ardently to prove something" that justified the deployment of soldiers.⁹⁸ Gorbachev placed the phone on his desk and read papers for ten minutes before interjecting:

Aleksandr, relax. You are not at the front. To besiege them from the mountains, form a blockade so that not a single Chechen could escape, arrest Dudaev, and isolate others? What are you talking about? Do you not see how it will end? ... They are united against us. Do not speak of such nonsense.⁹⁹

The sharp divide along national lines between Dudaev and Rutskoi two years after the war they fought for a common motherland wound to an end spoke once more to the

Cambridge University Press, 2002), 435.

⁹⁶ A.V. Cherkasov and O.P. Orlov, eds., "Rossiia-Chechnia: tsel' oshibok i prestuplenii," Memorial, accessed 10 October 2017, old.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/chechen/itogi/xp90.htm.

⁹⁷ "Ukaz prezidenta RSFSR ot 07.11.1991 g. № 178: o vvedenii chrezvychainogo polozheniia v Checheno-Ingushskoi Respublike," Prezident Rossii, accessed 10 October 2017, kremlin.ru/acts/bank/390.

⁹⁸ Cherniaev, "1991 god."

⁹⁹ Cited in *ibid*.

romanticism of “Afghan brotherhood” as a concept immune to political dogmatism. As the few afgantsy with political leverage exchanged rhetoric over redrawn borders, the silent majority was buried under the rubble of history and selective memory.

A Splintering of Generals and Grunts

As post-Soviet borders were drawn, national animosity unfolded among the estimated 25% of veterans who “played an active role in the afganets movement” and the NGOs that claimed to represent them.¹⁰⁰ If the standoff between Rutskoï and Dudaev were the first post-Putsch conflict between generals, the escalation of skirmishes into military conflict in the Moldovan Republic was the first conflict that saw the afgantsy take arms against one another in numbers.

When the Moldovan Republic declared independence from the Soviet Union on 27 August 1991, the parliament in Kishinev deemed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact “null and void” and ordered its “political and legal consequences... be eliminated.”¹⁰¹ Russian-speaking separatists responded that the union of Moldova and the eastern region of Transnistria under one flag was itself a “legal consequence” of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and thus negated by parliament’s action. Presidential elections took place in Transnistria on 1 December 1991 and skirmishes escalated to war in on 2 March 1992, when Moldovan President Mircea Snegur authorized military force against separatists. Two weeks later the Moldovan Ministry of Defence introduced conscription to rebuild its

¹⁰⁰ Galeotti, “The Impact of the Afghan War,” 257.

¹⁰¹ “Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Moldova,” accessed 11 May 2016, https://web.archive.org/web/20070617065530/http://pridnestrovie.net/moldova_declaration_of_independence.html.

armed forces. President Yeltsin placed the 14th Army – situated in the breakaway region’s capital city of Tiraspol’ – under Russian jurisdiction by decree on 1 April. Deployed on a mission of diplomacy four days later were Vice-President Rutskoi and Colonel General Gromov. The two Heroes of the Soviet Union arrived with different messages. At a meeting with local afgangtsy, Gromov deemed the 14th Army’s role one of “blue helmets” between two sides of a conflict.¹⁰² Rutskoi, in contrast, delivered a speech to 5,000 people on City Square that endorsed Transnistrian independence. Calling the four months since the collapse of the Soviet Union “a difficult period,” he endorsed redrawn borders. “All nations must decide their own fate,” Rutskoi argued.

The Transnistrian people have made their decision, and nobody has the right to kill them for it, to rape, burn, and torture them through the most barbaric methods. ... We want the 14th Army to become a dividing line, so that the Transnistrian people can gain their independence and work in peace.¹⁰³

Over four-and-a-half months the Transnistria War swung from ad hoc ceasefires between Moldovan troops and separatist militias, to an escalation of combat, to a frozen conflict on 21 July 1992. Among the returning cast of afgangtsy were Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev and Lieutenant General Aleksandr Lebed’. During Lebed’s time as a student at the Airborne Forces Academy in Riazan, Grachev was his commander and their relationship was “based on healthy mutual respect.”¹⁰⁴ The Transnistria War saw it fall victim to political careerism. On 23 June, Lieutenant General Lebed’ was flown into

¹⁰² Aleksandr Pilat and Gennadii Blagodarnyi, “Dlia chego perevozit’ chto-to iz rossii v rossiiu? Aleksandr Rutskoi v Krymu i Pridnestrov’e,” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 7 April 1992, accessed 10 May 2016, www.ualberta.ca/~khineiko/NG_92_93/1141641.htm.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Elletson, *The General Against the Kremlin*, 23.

Tiraspol' to command the 14th Army and ordered by Grachev to ensure that it “kept out of the fighting between the Moldovan volunteers and the separatists.”¹⁰⁵ This was regarded by many as an effort to find a scapegoat for a war that Moscow saw no value in fighting. Unswayed, Lebed' rejected Grachev's orders and led the 14th Army in Tiraspol' to barrage the Moldovan Armed Forces as they tried to cross the Dniester river. A war of telegrams between the former allies ensued, with Lebed's willingness to “spread rumours of his brutal service record, including atrocities in Afghanistan, and... ordering a full scale attack on Moldovan territory” granting him political repute as a defender of Russians in foreign nations.¹⁰⁶ Defense Minister Grachev, in contrast, seemed a careerist detached from realities on the battlefield.

For the 12,500 Moldovan afgangtsy the Transnistria War became a competing source of identity: the conflict took 585 lives or approximately twice the number of Moldovans killed in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁷ “My second war, the Transnistria War, was even more difficult than the Afghan war was for me,” remarked one Moldovan afgangka who fought in both conflicts. “Because they were my people and it was my homeland. ... My heart was aching afterward.”¹⁰⁸ It was under General Nicolae Petrica, who participated in 26 combat operations in Afghanistan that the Moldovan Armed Forces first repelled an offensive carried out by Lieutenant General Lebed' and the 14th Army. “My comrade from the far east fought against me,” General Petrica recalled. “And we decided to meet

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 170.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 172.

¹⁰⁷ Vladimir, interview with author, May 2015; Ol'ga Osipova, “V Pridnestrov'e prozhivaet poriadka 2 tysiach voinov - afgantsev,” *Novosti Pridnestrov'ia*, accessed 10 May 2016, newspmr.com/novosti-pmr/obshhestvo/5732; “UCDP Moldova,” *Uppsala Conflict Data Program*, accessed 11 May 2016, ucdp.uu.se/#country/359.

¹⁰⁸ Ol'ga, interview with author, June 2015.

with 60 people on my side and 60 people on his side. Soldiers hugged and cried, as they grew up together and always knew one another.”¹⁰⁹ The two men negotiated a ceasefire and appealed to the government in Kishinev to preserve a united Moldova. “The Transnistrian President [Igor Smirnov] responded and offered to negotiate until the conclusion of a peace agreement. But our President said nothing,” recalled General Petrica. “Because of that we lost Transnistria.”¹¹⁰ Any sense of victory for the 2,000 afgantsy who resided in Transnistrian borders proved superficial.¹¹¹ As of 2015 they had splintered into 33 competing veterans organizations and were outweighed for political influence by the Union of Defenders of Pridnestrov’ia, which enjoyed greater political weight in the unrecognized country’s history.¹¹² “We are getting cases when people demand a new identification card from us to prove our rights to benefits,” remarked one Transnistrian afganets. “There are even times when we are asked to show the decision of the Central Committee of the KPSU from 17 January 1983.”¹¹³ The Moldovan afgantsy, in contrast, have functioned under a single veterans union since 1990.

The Post-Putsch Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers

I was the deputy chairman of the Moldovan Union of Afghan War Veterans, and then I set up a Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers. For many years I’ve helped the mothers of those killed in Afghanistan. Last year I went to villages and towns to

¹⁰⁹ General Nikolai Petrica, interview with author, May 2015.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Osipova, “V Pridnestrov’e prozhivaet poriadka 2 tysiach voynov - afgantsev.”

¹¹² Mikhail, afganets, interview with author, June 2015.

¹¹³ “Prezident priniial uchastie v otchetnoi konferentsii Pridnestrovskoi assotsiatsii veteranov voyny v Afganistane,” Soiuz veteranov Afganistana gorod Tiraspol’, accessed 14 May 2016, afgan.ucoz.net/index/prensa_o_nas/0-9.

bring them food and money. ... I wrote a book in memory of those killed in Afghanistan and another in memory of those killed in Transnistria – true stories about those who died based on interviews with their families, not just archives... When you are at war, feelings escalate. You feel stronger. If someone is a scoundrel you immediately know. Who is your friend, who is mediocre....

- Ol'ga, afgangka¹¹⁴

As the flag of the Soviet Union was lowered on 26 December 1991 the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia had much to be proud of. Despite the Soviet Union having swayed from one political-economic crisis to another in the past year, the organization continued to broaden its membership. When in January all eyes followed Soviet military actions in Vilnius, the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia celebrated a legislative victory by establishing a life insurance system for their sons and future draftees, followed by a decree stipulating that "only volunteers can be sent for military service in the Transcaucasian regions."¹¹⁵ They remained focused despite the August Putsch and the change of the military guard that followed, and in autumn 1991 a new law "on the medical examination of conscripts before military service" was passed after months of lobbying.¹¹⁶ Armed with legislative victories, the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia's immediate task was to ensure that their gains not be lost in post-Soviet transition. Key among them was the three-month investigation of 96 military servicemen's deaths and injuries in the RSFSR led by Aleksandr Rutskoi's commission. Beginning in September 1991 the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia made reference to this study as they lobbied for the removal of one Deputy Anatolii Alekseev

¹¹⁴ Ol'ga, interview with author, May 2015.

¹¹⁵ Dauce, "Les mouvements de meres..." 138.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

as chairman of a state commission responsible for investigations of soldiers' deaths.

In their correspondence with Deputy Chairman of the RSFSR Ruslan Khasbulatov, the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia pointed to the Yeltsin government's failure to act on Vice President Rutskoi's investigation and observe federal obligations to military servicemen. "Mothers of Russia receive 25 to 30 zinc coffins every day," they wrote on 16 September 1991. "The sons' bodies are disfigured. Eyes are missing, ears are cut off, sexual organs are torn out, many corpses lack internal organs, and often the body of a son arrives without a certificate of death."¹¹⁷ Despite Rutskoi's committee having drawn from 96 criminal cases in the Soviet Army:

The Presidential Commission... came to the conclusion that 92 of the cases were falsified. ... The guilty go unpunished which leads to new victims. In the army, our children are not guaranteed the right to life or human dignity. ... Meanwhile, guardhouses, psychiatric wards, and hospitals are full of innocent soldiers.¹¹⁸

Their call for the removal of Deputy Alekseev as chairman of the commission responsible for investigating military servicemen's deaths and injuries was grounded in the fact that "Many of the criminal cases are closed on an absence of *corpus delicti* (concrete evidence)," with "at least 80% of criminal cases submitted for consideration falsified by the bodies of inquiry and written off as suicides or accidents." Instead of cooperating, Deputy Alekseev had "hindered the progress of the investigation of criminal cases." As a result, the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia argued:

None of the 13,000 applications were reviewed and 1,000 complaints simply

¹¹⁷ "S'ezd narodnykh deputatov RF, verkhovnogo soveta RF i ikh organov," GARF, f. 10026, op. 5, d. 136, ll. 18-20.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

disappeared. We express our distrust of A.A. Alekseev and we beg you to receive the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia. ... Anatolii Alekseevich pursues careerist goals, and does not express our interests.¹¹⁹

Ruslan Khasbulatov replied to the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia on 27 September to address their demands. He disputed the number of criminal cases discarded, stating that, "At present, 42 of the 96 cases have been canceled... Of these 42, seven are crimes... which have been transferred to investigators under the General Prosecutor of the RSFSR as particularly important."¹²⁰ He assured them that "the question of amnesty for servicemen who left their military units in fear of threats to their lives, honour and dignity" was under consideration, and that a decree on the matter was in progress. "Benefits and compensation to the families of deceased servicemen" were almost finalized, and soon to be discussed at the State Council of the USSR.¹²¹ It was the Soldiers' Mothers' demand for the removal of Alekseev that led to a standoff. "Your personal reasons are not a sufficient basis," Khasbulatov insisted. "Comrade Alekseev conducts great work to eradicate the deaths and injuries of servicemen, establish law in the army, and enjoys respect among deputies and members of the commission. We hope that you will reconsider your attitude...."¹²² More sympathetic to the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia was President Gorbachev, who responded on 5 October 1991 with a decree that suspended Alekseev's powers as chairman of the committee.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Ibid, ll. 13-15, 20.

¹²⁰ Ibid, l. 21.

¹²¹ Ibid, ll. 21-2.

¹²² Ibid, l. 22.

¹²³ "Ukaz prezidenta soiuza sovetskikh sotsialisticheskikh respublik o predsedatele komiteta pri prezidente SSSR po delam voennosluzhashchikh i chlenov ikh semei," *Sistema dostupa k BD zakonodatel'stva SSSR*, accessed 25 June 2017, www.ussrdoc.narod.ru/ussrdoc_narod/usr_19602.htm.

Soldiers' Mothers in Post-Soviet Transition

In 1992 after the break-up of the USSR things could have changed. The greatest mistake is that the intelligentsia believed it could control politicians. In fact, the politicians quickly emancipated themselves.

- Valentina Mel'nikova¹²⁴

Of first priority for the post-Soviet Soldiers' Mothers of Russia was to strike down any surviving legislation that might obligate their sons to serve their "international duty." What they proposed as a solution was "an amendment to the Law on Military Duty that should allow soldiers to go through military service in the republics of the Russian Federation."¹²⁵ In a letter dated 9 January 1992, the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia invoked patriotism as a justification for their demands. Pointing to redrawn borders, they declared:

We cannot be indifferent to the fates of our soldiers and officers in the Baltics, who are subject to severe psychological and economic pressures from national extremists.

We are shocked by the passive attitude of the Russian leadership, which overnight can lose the Black Sea Fleet and the city of Sevastopol, which historically has belonged to Russia.¹²⁶

Arguing that "hundreds of people, including officers and soldiers," had died in international conflicts as the Soviet Union collapsed, the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia

¹²⁴ Cited in Dauce, "Les mouvements de meres...", 139.

¹²⁵ Elena Zdravomyslova, "Peaceful Initiatives: Soldiers' Mothers Movement in Russia," accessed 25 June 2017, www.indepsocres.spb.ru/zdrav2.htm.

¹²⁶ "S'ezd narodnykh deputatov RF, verkhovnogo soveta RF i ikh organov," GARF, f. 10026, op. 5, d. 136, l. 51-2.

modified their demands “to ensure the social protection of officers, sergeants, priests, soldiers and sailors who refuse to swear allegiance to other sovereign states.”¹²⁷ It was an appeal that resonated with public opinion and led the Russian government to “practically stop sending those from the North to the South, and from the South to the North,” and move in favour of localized military service.¹²⁸ The questions of border security and secessionist movements, however, remained points of contention for the Yeltsin administration, with military intervention composed largely of conscripts and reservists its fallback response to calls of emergency.

Defense Minister Grachev emerged as a prominent voice against the soldiers’ mothers. Rather than speak of amnesties for deserters or the formation of a professional army, he stated, “If one chose to serve for pleasure no one would be in the army. I will argue in favour of alternative service *within* the armed forces. There are many non-combat positions in which one can serve.”¹²⁹ Grachev’s defense of the status quo foreshadowed a decree issued by President Yeltsin in September 1992 that brought the 201st Motor-Rifle Division in Tajikistan under Russian control. A division that participated in the December 1979 invasion of Afghanistan and remained in Kunduz for much of the conflict, it found itself engulfed once more in the civil war of a foreign nation.¹³⁰ And once more, recalled Valentina Mel’nikova:

It quickly became clear that a contingent of conscripts was sent to fight there,

¹²⁷ Ibid, l. 52.

¹²⁸ Mel’nikova, “Glukhi k prizyvam.”

¹²⁹ Cited in Dauce, “Les mouvements de meres...,” 144. Italics are my own.

¹³⁰ While the Tajikistan Civil War between a former Soviet elite and an alliance of liberal reformers and conservative Islamists began in May 1992, the forced resignation of President Rahmon Nabiyeov on 7 September and the threat of Dushanbe falling to the rebels prompted Russian military intervention.

without their consent in most cases. Young boys... were leaving for an unknown country – the USSR no longer existed and Tajikistan was a foreign land – armed with a rifle to shoot alleged enemies they would hear of for the very first time.

The shadow of the war in Afghanistan hovered once more over our country.¹³¹

As a result, meetings of the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia quickly increased to more than 100 people, their chief complaint that of "receiving letters from their children deployed to Tajikistan."¹³² It led the organization to demand that "military service outside the borders of Russia take place only on a voluntary basis and with a soldier's signature of a contract." According to Mel'nikova, the initiative prompted a new core of about 80 mothers to "make banners, organize rallies, gather the attention of the military... and bring their sons back alive."¹³³ It was a victory that carried over to the New Year. In February 1993 a new Law on Military Service was passed that saw conscription shortened from 24 to 18 months and "introduced a new series of generous exemptions that would allow 84% of eligible conscripts to avoid induction."¹³⁴ A parliamentary committee tasked with examining each of the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia's complaints was formed in the Supreme Soviet in April, and on 1 May a law was passed guaranteeing pensions to the parents of soldiers killed during military service.¹³⁵ It was after the Duma was redrawn and presidential powers increased with the passage of a new constitution on 12 December 1993 that it became difficult to translate lobbying into legislative reform.

¹³¹ Cited in Lebedev, "Du souci maternel...", 121.

¹³² Cited in *ibid*, 79.

¹³³ Cited in *ibid*, 79-80.

¹³⁴ William Alex Pridemore and Andrew L. Spivak, "Conscription and Reform in the Russian Army," National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, accessed 19 October 2017, https://www.ucis.pitt.edu/nceeer/2004_817-13_Spivak.pdf.

¹³⁵ Dauce, "Les mouvements de meres...", 127.

Soldiers' Mothers and the First Chechen War

We did not raise our sons to abandon them to their fate. They were sent to serve in the army, not to fight a war for an unknown cause. Our 19-year-old boys return with white hair. And it scares us to say that they too, the invalids, the wounded, and the sick, like their elders of Afghanistan, will one day face those abominable words from a bureaucrat: "It wasn't me who sent you there."

- Letter from a soldier's mother¹³⁶

In what spoke to Defense Minister Grachev's stubborn determination to remedy falling conscription rates, on 2 March 1994 he signed a joint declaration and cooperation agreement with Patriarch Aleksii II to establish a coordinating committee between the Orthodox Church and the Russian Army. Soon after, the Patriarch appealed to the first generation of post-Soviet youth to cast aside the reservations shown by the children of glasnost. "Dear young men, the hope of our Church!" he began.

The time has come for you to join the army and serve your Fatherland, to guarantee its defense from enemies at home and abroad, to strengthen its power. ... The Lord invites you to serve the Fatherland in these difficult times. Go forth to the army with faith and hope in God's aid....¹³⁷

It was as much a counterweight to political opponents as an appeal to Russian patriotism through religious hyperbole, for a draft Alternative Service Act was put forward for debate in parliament that year by Deputy Vitalii Savitskii – himself a co-chairman of the

¹³⁶ Cited in Lebedev, "Du souci maternel..." 123.

¹³⁷ Cited in Dauce, "Les mouvements de meres..." 133-34.

Russian Christian Democratic Union. The draft law proposed that “citizens have the right to substitute alternative service for military service when their belief or their faith runs contrary to military service, bearing arms, or the use of force.”¹³⁸ By the time the Alternative Service Act was presented for a first reading on 14 December 1994, however, it was too little and too late: Russian forces had begun to advance on Grozny three days prior with the onset of the First Chechen War.

Ever since President Gorbachev’s decision to stymie the deployment of Soviet forces against Dzhokhar Dudaev in December 1991, the Yeltsin administration had been unable to return to the matter of the self-declared Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. The year that followed saw an outmigration of non-Chechen ethnicities, the secession of Ingushetia from the former Chechen-Ingush Republic, and the culmination of armed conflicts in post-Soviet territories drawing Russian troops – among them wars in Transnistria (1992), Abkhazia (1992-93), and Nagorno-Karabakh (1992-94). The rebellion of White House deputies in 1993 in light of economic turmoil led to what Prime Minister Egor Gaidar deemed a “year of *dvoevlastie*” (dual power) where internal struggles obstructed any “coherent policy in Chechnya.”¹³⁹ By the time President Yeltsin gathered enough power to take action after the ratification of a new Russian constitution he faced pressure to produce a short, victorious war in light of the patriotic bombast of Vladimir Zhirinovskii. The leader of the misnamed Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, his blend of nationalist hyperbole, populist rhetoric, and televised showmanship gathered 22.9% of the popular

¹³⁸ Cited in *ibid*, 141.

¹³⁹ Yegor Gaidar, *Days of Defeat and Victory*, translated by Jane Ann Miller (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 279.

vote in the parliamentary election on 12 December.¹⁴⁰ In the year leading up to the deployment of 40,000 soldiers on 11 December 1994, a mentality took hold of the Yeltsin administration wherein despite Dudaev's independence platform having lost its zeal as living standards in Chechnya plunged, military intervention prevailed over negotiations. In late November, Defense Minister Grachev showed the same naïveté as Dmitrii Ustinov 15 years prior and boasted that "one regiment of his paratroopers could seize Grozny in two hours."¹⁴¹

While the hawks in the Yeltsin administration had not learned from deputies' "moral and political condemnation" of the Soviet-Afghan War, the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia was quick to build upon the foundation it took from the conflict. The First Chechen War was a transformative event for the organization. Its regional branches multiplied, it developed new forms of collective action, and it gained significant international support as a movement. Chance also played a key role: it was on Chechnya's initiative that first contact was made with the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia. "Around 20 December 1994 a group of Chechen women arrived at our committee's office in Moscow with a list of Russian prisoners," recalled Valentina Mel'nikova. The list of approximately 100 names was sent by the order of President Dudaev, who stated that he was prepared to release prisoners to prove that "the Chechens are not the bandits

¹⁴⁰ Timothy J. Colton and Jerry F. Hough, eds., *Growing Pains: Russian Democracy and the Election of 1993* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 22-3. Ironically, Zhironovskii seized on the Western myth of the Soviet-Afghan War as one of a conquest in search of a warm-water port and transformed it into an electoral punchline, remarking on the campaign trail that he dreamed of the day "when Russian soldiers can wash their boots in the warm waters of the Indian Ocean." See: "Zhirinovskiy: Russia's Political Eccentric," BBC News, 10 March 2000, accessed 29 January 2017, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/667745.stm.

¹⁴¹ Cited in Anatoly M. Khazanov, *After the USSR: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Politics in the Commonwealth of Independent States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995) 220.

and barbarians that the military likes to describe them as, but a people forced to defend themselves which understands the distress of families whose children are sent to combat.”¹⁴² The list of POWs was key to launching the Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia’s campaign against the war. It was published in *Izvestiia* at the end of December with an appeal to those who found their sons’ names to contact the Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia. President Yeltsin so resented the organization’s boldness that before the year was over he “commissioned a report... ‘On Appeals From Soldiers’ Mothers’, which concluded that the ‘emotionalism’ of these women’s groups was being exploited by political parties and movements ‘to advance their own political demands’.”¹⁴³

The women who responded to the list of POWs published in *Izvestiia* were recruited to join “several convoys” to Chechnya in search of their children in the New Year.¹⁴⁴ Led by chairwoman Maria Kirbasova and accompanied by journalists, the mothers departed to a Chechen-controlled military zone in Grozny on 6 January 1995 and remained there until 7 February. Over the course of a month they negotiated with Russian and Chechen military commanders, leading to “dozens of soldiers being released.”¹⁴⁵ The successful mission inspired “several hundred mothers of soldiers from Cheliabinsk, Ekaterinburg, Tula, Vladimir, [and] Astrakhan” to travel to Chechnya in search of their

¹⁴² Cited in Lebedev, “Du souci maternel...,” 84.

¹⁴³ Kathryn Pinnick, “When the Fighting is Over: the Soldiers’ Mothers and the Afghan Madonnas,” *Post-Soviet Women From the Baltic to Central Asia*, edited by Mary Buckley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 145.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid; Dauce, “Les mouvements de meres...,” 127.

¹⁴⁵ “Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia Campaign Against the War in Chechnya 1995,” Global Nonviolent Action Database, accessed 23 October 2017, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/committee-soldiers-mothers-russia-campaign-against-war-chechnya-1995>.

sons over the duration of the war.¹⁴⁶ It had an immediate impact on public opinion: surveys conducted in late January found that 71% of those polled “disagreed with the deployment of Russian forces to Chechnya,” and 75% approved of “mothers who took their sons from the battlefields to bring them home.”¹⁴⁷ Moreover, it signaled an emboldened generation of soldiers’ mothers who did not hesitate to follow Kirbasova’s lead. “We meet with the parents of ‘chechentsy’ and talk with them,” remarked one mother of an afganets in 2014. “How much they’ve gone through...! ... We weren’t allowed to open coffins and the glass was painted over from the inside... One told me of how she searched for her son among the corpses. How can a mother survive this?”¹⁴⁸

The swift awakening of public consciousness to the costs of the First Chechen War led the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia to expand its principles to the provision of humanitarian aid to wounded soldiers and refugees in a theatre of war. Soon after Kirbasova’s mission the organization declared that it could not “limit its activities exclusively to the defense of soldiers’ rights,” and stated that the conflict posed a threat to “democracy in Russia.”¹⁴⁹ The Kremlin’s uneasiness with the soldiers’ mothers’ political actions was clear on 20 February 1995, when Kirbasova led “a one hour anti-war vigil” of 15 people on October Square in Moscow that was “outnumbered by the press and police.”¹⁵⁰ This was followed by the First International Conference of Soldiers’ Mothers For Life and Liberty on 25 and 26 February. Attended by approximately 200 representatives of regional committees, independent NGOs, and military organizations,

¹⁴⁶ Dauce, “Les mouvements de meres...,” 128.

¹⁴⁷ Lebedev, “Du souci maternel...,” 82, 84.

¹⁴⁸ Viktor Bakin, *Voina materei* (Kirov: O-Kratkoe, 2014), 18.

¹⁴⁹ Cited in Lebedev, “Du souci maternel...,” 82.

¹⁵⁰ “Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia Campaign Against the War in Chechnya 1995.”

Valentina Mel'nikova regarded the conference as “an effective means of action” through which to unify activists opposed to the war in Chechnya. “Adopting concrete resolutions” was “quite unusual in Russia” at the time, she remarked. Most “were happy to make tearful statements” without supporting them in actions.¹⁵¹

The peak of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia's activism during the First Chechen War came on 8 March 1995, coinciding with International Women's Day. About 100 people armed with anti-war banners gathered outside the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow, laid flowers in memory of those killed, and delivered readings of poetry followed by speeches. After ceremonies concluded, 20 soldiers' mothers from 15 regions of the country departed on a bus destined for Grozny.¹⁵² Known as the March of Peace and Compassion it gathered international acclaim; particularly strong support came from Germany, where 50,000 signatures were gathered in favour of the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia's nomination for the Right Livelihood Prize (also called the Alternative Nobel Prize), which they received in 1996.¹⁵³ The five-week march was frequently obstructed by the MVD beginning on 18 March at Mineral'nye vody, a town in Stavropol Krai. The first of many threats to halt the march and redirections of transit, the mothers were transferred to a bus that took them to Nazran, the capital of the Republic of Ingushetia. By chance the President of Ingushetia was Lieutenant General Ruslan Aushev, who made a concerted effort to “persuade Yeltsin to sit down at the

¹⁵¹ Cited in Levedev, “Du souci maternel...,” 83.

¹⁵² “Startoval antivoennyi marsh materinskogo sostradaniia ‘Moskva-goroda Rossii-Groznyi’,” Interfax, 8 March 1995, accessed 23 October 2015, www.interfax-religion.ru/buddhism/?act=archive&div=598.

¹⁵³ Valerie Zawilski, “Opposing Militarism: Soldiers' Mothers in Russia,” in *The Gender Imperative: Human Security Vs State Security*, edited by Asha Hans and Betty A. Reardon (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2010), 267.

bargaining table with Dudaev... [to] avoid a calamity” in the weeks leading up to the war and “expressed full support for the march.”¹⁵⁴ On 23 March the mothers reached their destination of Nal’chik in the Kabardino-Balkar Republic, where their numbers peaked at over 300 marchers.¹⁵⁵ They entered Chechnya through the village of Sernovodsk soon after the Samashki massacre took place on 7 and 8 April.¹⁵⁶ As the soldiers’ mothers awaited the arrival of survivors to provide aid and record atrocities Deputy Anatolii Shabad, who travelled with them in disguise, entered Samashki on 12 April “in an attempt to shed real light on what was taking place in the war.”¹⁵⁷ The Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia issued their own statement on the atrocities on 16 April. Five days later they arrived triumphantly in Grozny.

By the time the First Chechen War concluded on 31 August 1996, the official number of casualties dwarfed that of the Soviet-Afghan War in its first year and eight months with 3,726 dead, 17,892 wounded, and 1,902 MIA. The Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia disputed these figures and argued that 10,000 Russian soldiers had died in Chechnya with 100,000 wounded. In what spoke to Lieutenant General Aleksandr Lebed’s stance on the war, he sided with the figures put forward by soldiers’ mothers

¹⁵⁴ “Mothers’ March to Grozny,” *War Resisters’ International*, 1 June 1995, accessed 23 October 2017, <https://www.wri-irg.org/en/story/1995/mothers-march-grozny>; Gaidar, *Days of Defeat and Victory*, 281. Yeltsin “set up a meeting with Aushev to hear out the latter’s arguments, but the morning after that promise, the mass media broadcast a statement that the President would never negotiate with Dzhokhar Dudaev.”

¹⁵⁵ “Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia Campaign Against the War in Chechnya 1995.”

¹⁵⁶ A small town of 15,000 people, Samashki held strategic value due its being situated on a primary railway line and highway to Grozny. Chechen militants would thus take up positions in Samashki to halt Russian troops from shipping munitions to the capital. While “up to 200 were stationed there early in the war,” most had fled by the time the Russian Army launched its offensive on 7 April, leaving more than 100 dead. See: Michael Specter, “Russians’ Killing of 100 Civilians in a Chechen Town Stirs Outrage,” *New York Times*, 8 May 1995, accessed 23 October 2017, www.nytimes.com/1995/05/08/world/russians-killing-of-100-civilians-in-a-chechen-town-stirs-outrage.html.

¹⁵⁷ “Mothers’ March to Grozny.”

when he ran as a candidate in the 1996 Russian presidential election.¹⁵⁸ The lasting impact of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia's five-week campaign captured grassroots movements' potential for political activism unhindered by state ideology in the 1990s. "The March did not fail," remarked Ella Poliakova. "We demonstrated our will and [the] determinacy of our peaceful initiatives."¹⁵⁹ The greatest obstacle to their campaign, she mused later, was public inertia. For until the casualties of war became widespread, much of the Russian public remained blissfully ignorant of its costs. "In Kamenka... shortly before the First Chechen War, they began to call up new recruits," she recalled, alluding to the 45th Guards Motor Rifle Division's base in the Leningrad Province. "Their documents were hastily rewritten, and... at gunpoint they were driven to Gromovo, from which they were flown to Chechnya."¹⁶⁰ The Soldiers' Mothers of Saint Petersburg caught word of this after the war began and contacted NTV journalists for transport to Kamenka. "At the checkpoint we saw an eerie scene."

The parents were saying goodbye to their children, handing them food – despite everyone already knowing what was happening in Grozny, how many soldiers had died there. We told them: "Take your sons away!" "Get them out of here!" "You do not have to send them to their deaths!" But they brushed us off (otmakhivalis') like flies.¹⁶¹

"Never had these people been free, and never had they known what it feels like to be

¹⁵⁸ Dauce, "Les mouvements de meres...", 129.

¹⁵⁹ Cited in Zdravomyslova, "Peaceful Initiatives...." The 1995 March of Peace and Compassion was a rare event that saw the leaders of non-affiliated mothers organizations such as Maria Kirbasova and Ella Poliakova collaborate

¹⁶⁰ Cited in Belovranin, *Chernaia kniga*, 141.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 141.

free,” Poliakova reflected in 2011. “The resources are there, they simply need to be used. The main task is education (prosveshchenie).”¹⁶²

The Collapse of the Veterans Movement

The Union of Invalids, that’s a dark story. The organization laundered money in elections. There was infighting and explosions. It was a moment when people were obsessed with money and went into politics. Combat Brotherhood and others appeared. There are no organizations that really help people.

- Oleg, afganets.¹⁶³

While the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia entered the 1990s with a series of legislative victories and rose to international fame with its campaign against the First Chechen War, the Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (SVA) was not as fortunate. Registered in March 1989 it was chaired by Aleksandr Kotenov, who took dual leadership of the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan and remained at the helm of both organizations until 1995.¹⁶⁴ Badly injured when his vehicle drove over a mine in the first months of the war, Kotenov entered university in 1983 with a jaundiced perspective on “international duty.” His dissertation penned during the Gorbachev years “argued that the Soviet Army was sent to Afghanistan not against forces of opposition, but against an entire people.”¹⁶⁵ With Kotenov at the helm of a Union of Veterans of Afghanistan that numbered over 300,000 members across nine republics in July 1991, and the Committee

¹⁶² Ibid, 142.

¹⁶³ Oleg, interview with author, 2014.

¹⁶⁴ The Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (RSVA) was formed on 20 November 1990.

¹⁶⁵ Kotenev, A.A., *Neokonchennaia voina*, accessed 27 April 2016, www.rsva.ru/content/kotenev-neokonchennaya-voina.

of Soldiers' Mothers having lobbied people's deputies in favour of granting benefits to the afgantsy, they had reason for cautious optimism.¹⁶⁶ The August Putsch and the swift dissolution of the Soviet Union along national lines that followed saw political promise give way to chaos, leading to "a Second Afghan War" between non-government organizations. At the centre of the debacle was the Russian Foundation of Invalids of War in Afghanistan.

Founded on 18 May 1991, Invalids of War in Afghanistan was chaired by Colonel Valerii Radchikov (1956-2001), who lost both feet to a landmine in Panjshir as part of a spetsnaz unit in 1982. Two surgeries later he began the road to recovery in a pre-glasnost society. His tenure with Invalids of War in Afghanistan resembled a period of revenge on a broken political system. The Union of Veterans of Afghanistan and the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia had for two years lobbied for equal benefits with those who served in 1941 to 1945. However, "given the complexity of the country's economic situation" the Committee on Social Security of Military Personnel ruled it "impossible to fully extend the benefits established for the participants of the Great Patriotic War to veterans of the war in Afghanistan."¹⁶⁷ As an alternative, the Union of Veterans of Afghanistan, the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan, and the Russian Foundation of Invalids of War in Afghanistan were granted a series of lucrative tax breaks and grants intended for financial, business, and industrial activities.¹⁶⁸ In the years that followed only 9% to 24%

¹⁶⁶ Braithwaite, 317.

¹⁶⁷ "Otdel truda, zaniatosti i sotsial'noi zashchity naseleniia," GARF, f. 10200, op. 4, d. 1906, l. 52.

¹⁶⁸ These privileges were granted by a series of decrees: "O Rossiiskom fonde invalidov voiny v Afganistane" (1991), "O deiatel'nosti Soiuzu veteranov Afganistana" (1992) and "O merakh gosudarstvennoi podderzhki deiatel'nosti obshchestvennykh ob"edinenii invalidov" (1992). Instead of cooperation, this stirred animosity and distrust between other NGOs.

of this funding was transmitted to rehabilitation and reintegration programs as intended.¹⁶⁹ Colonel Radchikov became emblematic of such corruption and was deposed as the chairman of Invalids of War in Afghanistan at their August 1993 congress, replaced by Mikhail Likhodei. A legal battle over rights to the organization's name ensued, and on 10 November 1994, Likhodei was killed by a bomb in his elevator.

It was against this backdrop that the Law on Veterans was passed on 16 December 1994 at the White House after much lobbying by the Soldiers' Mother of Russia. A legal victory, it made "absolute commitments to provide social welfare benefits" to the *afgantsy*, who were deemed "veterans of combat operations outside of Russia" and guaranteed that the "rights and privileges, and also other measures of social protection for veterans and members of their families, earlier established by USSR legislation... cannot be repealed without replacements of equal value."¹⁷⁰ The law captured post-Soviet idealism in its last stand, for there was "little direct consideration of the costs or the mechanism for delivering these benefits."¹⁷¹ Moreover, public and political support for its enforcement had ebbed considerably. Contract killings between rival groups of *afgantsy* tarnished their reputation, the plain corruption of individuals such as Radchikov even leading a Moscow Mothers' Council spokeswoman to label the Union of Veterans of Afghanistan "a commercial outfit whose management ostensibly misdirects profits away from the relief of the needs of bereaved families."¹⁷² For soldiers'

¹⁶⁹ Sergei Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2009), 167.

¹⁷⁰ Cited in Andrea Chandler, "The Social Promise: Rights, Privileges, and Responsibilities in Russian Welfare State Reform Since Gorbachev," *What is Soviet Now?: Identities, Legacies, Memories*, edited by Thomas Lahusen and Peter H. Solomon (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 198-99.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹⁷² Kathryn Pinnick, "When the Fighting is Over: the Soldiers' Mothers and the Afghan Madonnas," 150.

mothers of the post-Soviet generation the Law on Veterans was an especially bitter pill to swallow: despite the First Chechen War having broken out five days before the law was passed, the “chechentsy” would not be covered by it until 2002.

On 29 October 1995 Colonel Radchikov survived six bullets from an assassination attempt and travelled overseas for treatment. Employed with the GRU (Glavnoe razvedyvatel’noe upravlenie) at the time, Radchikov paid two afgantsy \$60,000 to plant a bomb at the Kotliarovskoia Cemetery on 9 November 1996. Invalids of War’s chairman Sergei Trakhirov and 14 others were killed and 24 wounded the next day when they gathered to mark the second anniversary of Mikhail Likhodei’s death.¹⁷³ Government cooperation with afgantsy organizations was essentially cut as a result and the tax breaks and in-kind benefits eliminated.¹⁷⁴ Radchikov and his collaborators were held in custody for three years only to be released despite incriminating evidence. On 31 January 2001, two days after he announced that he would take his case to the European Court of Human Rights, Radchikov met his end in a car crash.¹⁷⁵

A decade that began on a note of cautious optimism for the Russian afgantsy, it took only a few years for the 1990s to give way to pandemonium and public disfavour. Aleksandr Kotenov disbanded the original SVA and resigned from his leadership of the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan in February 1995, succeeded by Franz Klintsevich. A reconnaissance chief fluent in Dari, Klintsevich was tasked with “taking

¹⁷³ “Kotliakovskoye Bomber Gets 15 Years,” *Moscow Times*, 20 December 2006, accessed 4 July 2017, <http://old.themoscowtimes.com/sitemap/free/2006/12/article/kotlyakovskoye-bomber-gets-15-years/200097.html/>.

¹⁷⁴ Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*, 168.

¹⁷⁵ “Con Man’s Death Caps Bloody Russian Saga,” *The Guardian*, 1 February 2001, accessed 8 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/feb/01/russia.iantraynor>. Radchikov’s collaborators were retried and sentenced to 14 and 15 years in prison in 2003 and 2006.

back the union from criminals” by Defense Minister Grachev soon after he became chairman of the organization. During this time he received “very serious support” from Director of the FSB Mikhail Barsukov, later remarking that “without it, I wouldn’t have been able to solve much.”¹⁷⁶ Klintsevich became a deputy of the State Duma in December 1999 and a party member of United Russia in 2001, coinciding with his re-election as leader of the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan. With the United States having entered its own war in Afghanistan and President Vladimir Putin begun to mine the recent past for sources of post-Soviet patriotism, the stage was set for a renewed debate on the afgantsy’s place in national history.

¹⁷⁶ Frants Klintsevich, “Bez durakov,” Ekho Moskvyy, 3 May 2014, accessed 10 November 2014, echo.msk.ru/programs/korzun/1310982-echo/.

Conclusion

What is the main problem for the afgantsy? All of our problems are rooted in the fact that in 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. As a result, it fragmented into 15 pieces – each with its own country, its own state, its own policies... If the Soviet Union still stood, the afgantsy would have built a uniform line.

- Ruslan Aushev, 15 February 2014¹

Over the course of its nine years, one month, three weeks plus a day, the Soviet-Afghan War made a broad and lasting imprint on the Soviet Union. Among its earliest consequences was the accelerated demise of a fractured dissident movement that placed international politics and personal prophecies ahead of the afgantsy in priority. Rather than extend a hand to a younger generation, those renowned for the formation of the Moscow Helsinki Group and their willingness to challenge state authorities remained focused on crimes of the past. The fate of the afgantsy remained an afterthought as they returned from the battlefield. With most eyes fixated on the Olympic boycott and questions of General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev's ailing health, the domestic consequences of the Afghan war in its early years went unnoticed in Western literature.

Indeed, there remains some faith in the simple equation that propaganda remained effective until glasnost unveiled the consequences of the war to the Soviet public. The reality was not so simple. KGB surveillance noted a general knowledge of and interest in the war from its first year onward, though it did not equate to opposition. Public opinion shifted gradually throughout its duration, with opposition the strongest in the Baltics and

¹ "Ruslan Aushev: 'Vvod voisk byl oshibkoi.'"

support for the war relatively stable in Central Asia until its final year. Yet it was not simply propaganda that maintained a degree of support for the war in Afghanistan. Some officers, for example, would volunteer to serve two years at war as means to escape ten years in a desolate military outpost.² Others chose to serve in the 40th Army simply because it paid better than employment in the Soviet Union, a trend that continued even after glasnost.³ It was not the naïveté of Soviet citizens that kept people quiet, but splintered private opinions that lacked a model for translation into public action.

The rapid succession of cultural trends among Soviet youth, meanwhile, contributed to the challenges that the afgantsy faced in reintegration. With each passing year of the war Western novelties filtered through the Berlin Wall. If in 1980 youths' memorialization of John Lennon drew Western headlines and Soviet police batons, in 1982 it was a neo-Nazi rally on Pushkin Square that drew the same attention. As each year passed by "international duty" seemed a concept of the past to Soviet youth – particularly in urban centres. Ironically, it was General Secretary Iurii Andropov who took the first action to address the needs of the afgantsy with his passage of legislation on their welfare and a loosening of restraints on the war's depiction in state media. Were it not for Andropov's initiation of proto-glasnost in 1983, public reaction to the demythologization of the Afghan war under Gorbachev would have been much harsher.

General Secretary Konstantin Chernenko's abbreviated period of rule gathered little attention save for a spike in the carpet-bombing of Afghanistan and the peak number of troops deployed. Speculation on his looming death and the Soviet boycott of the 1984

² Mikhail, interview with author, May 2015.

³ Ol'ga, interview with author, May 2015.

Los Angeles Olympics overshadowed a new wave of group-based and vigilante opposition to the Soviet-Afghan War that fuelled Cold War narratives from below. These ranged from Freedom House's rescue of POWs (1983-88) in an effort to gather afgantsy testimonies against the war; to the *Chronicle of the Catholic Church in Ukraine* recording local casualties (1984-89) as ammunition for tribunals against Russian chauvinists; to Polish nationalist Lech Zondek joining the ranks of the mujahideen (1984-85). There was a growing trend of mixing antiwar protests with calls for national secession. With post-Soviet nations continually scouring the past for heroes it is well worth revisiting such cases. In 2010 a documentary aired on Discovery Historia entitled *The Polish Mujahideen* (Polscy mudzahedini). It echoed *samizdat* penned a generation earlier and cast Lech Zondek as "a daredevil and adventurer... who saw the fight against Communism as the only point of existence" and "helped Afghans defend the country."⁴

Studies of the Soviet-Afghan War during General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev's tenure have long used his reference to a "bleeding wound" at the 27th Party Congress on 25 February 1986 as a starting point. This trend in historiography mirrors Gorbachev's own selective memory and the available archive documents, which volley from 1978 to 1981, to 1986 to 1990 with little in between. This overlooks a number of key concessions silently granted to the Soviet press and those affected by the war, be it the increasing news coverage of "wartime internationalists" in poor living conditions, greater allowance of private correspondence as a coping mechanism, or increased recruitment of afgantsy to the Komsomol. Also undervalued for their contribution to public knowledge of the war

⁴ "Afgańska misja Radosława Sikorskiego na Discovery Historia – we wtorki o godz. 22.00!," Radosław Sikorski, accessed 23 November 2017, www.radeksikorski.pl/aktualnosci/afganska-misja-radoslaw-sikorskiego-na-discovery-historia/.

and its consequences are pre-glasnost events such as the XII World Festival of Youth and Students in 1985, and the World Peace Council's Copenhagen Congress in 1986, both which saw the Afghan war become a forced topic of debate for attendees. Gorbachev's "bleeding wound" statement should be seen as the culmination of a gradual movement toward a public dialogue on the Soviet-Afghan War.

The intelligentsia played a key role in spurring public discussion and speculation on the character of the afgangtsy, their acts carried out on the battlefield, and their needs upon reintegration in the glasnost years. With Gorbachev's "bleeding wound" statement having discredited the majority of press narratives issued between 1979 and 1986, Western eyes fell upon trusted dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov and Vasilii Aksenov for commentary. This was problematic, for their outlooks remained largely unchanged and they themselves detached from the war's consequences. Overshadowed by their celebrity (and Soviet fascination with its legalization) was the role of grassroots organizations in shedding light upon the afgangtsy's hardship. The Moscow Trust Group's manifesto against the Soviet-Afghan War, for example, was given passing reference in Western literature as a *political* statement without analysis of its words, which highlighted the afgangtsy's psychological trauma and compared their experience to that of Vietnam veterans. Similarly, there was a tendency to judge public protests in the Soviet Union by their numbers in turnout rather than their messages; activists' demands ranged from a withdrawal from Afghanistan, to an alternative to military service, to calls for independence from the Soviet Union. A final element of domestic debate on the war that remains limited to brief summaries in Western scholarship, rather than direct citations or new research, is the journalism of the glasnost era and the letters it drew from readers.

Pravda's "I Didn't Send You To Afghanistan..." for instance, prompted significant discussion among Communist Party officials documented in various archives, and remains a bitter topic of discussion among afgantsy to this day.

The array of NGOs that registered after their legalization in 1987 led to a myriad of organizations with similar goals and different routes toward them, at times in competition for public support. One case of this came with the overwhelming success achieved by the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers and efforts made by Shield to replicate their agenda under military berets. Perceptions of grassroots organizations in this period remain largely shaped by first impressions and have left a simplified understanding of the paths they followed. Before the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers achieved international fame for its campaign against the First Chechen War, it had to rebuild its membership almost entirely after its legislative victory against students' conscription in May 1989. Shield, likewise, gradually moved from a club of embittered ex-officers to one that began to gather its own platform and political representatives before it imploded. The fate of glasnost era social movements is a topic deserving of further study, the afgantsy's welfare a founding cause in their platforms.

When the First Congress of People's Deputies took place three months after the Soviet-Afghan War reached its end, it marked a convergence of public and political debate on the war's long-term consequences. For the afgantsy it seemed a time of promise with significant political representation and overdue legislation granting them entitlement to social-welfare benefits. Deputies' gradual sway to the right, culminating in the August Putsch, led to the loss of two years' progress toward the accommodation of its veterans. The collapse of the Soviet Union four months later left observers with a

fragmented impression of the debates that took place and the competition the afgangtsy faced for priority in the queues for housing and welfare benefits. Correspondence between deputies sheds light upon how well attuned they were to domestic affairs at this troubled time. Aleksandr Rutskoi's recommendation that the Soviet Army cooperate with public organizations after his investigation of peacetime deaths and injuries, for example, is a strike against the popular impression of him as a Russian nationalist who seized the White House in 1993. Likewise, Boris Yeltsin's request that Defense Minister Iazov investigate the Kamchatka Committee of Soldiers' Mothers' reports of *dedovshchina* is a departure from his image as a rambunctious Russian president.

The Time of Troubles in the 1990s marked a decade of historical amnesia for those who claimed to represent the afgangtsy. Forgotten as a collective that suffered wrongdoing at the hands of the Politburo, they entered post-Soviet memories as criminals such as Colonel Radchikov, failed politicians such as Vice President Rutskoi, and cinematic caricatures such as “the Russian Rambo.”⁵ After the Soldiers' Mothers of Russia and their allies in congress refocused their attentions on the First Chechen War, the afgangtsy who benefited from the legislative victories between 1989 and 1994 were left to fend for themselves at a time of rampant corruption and infighting. The few afgangtsy who maintained political sway were sharply divided by the Chechen War. Deputy Defense Minister Boris Gromov was an outspoken critic of the conflict from its very beginning, accusing the Russian Army of being ill-prepared for its mission and

⁵ *Dezertir*, dir. Aleksandr Zviagintsev, (Teleradio-Moldova / ZHI-VI OOD Bolgariia studiiia SOIUZ, 1997), accessed 19 November 2017, kinossr.ru/дезертир-1997-смотреть-онлайн/.

using “barbaric methods.”⁶ Fellow afganets Lieutenant General Lev Rokhlin was acclaimed for taking Grozny in 1995, only to resign from the army in disgust and refuse the title of Hero of the Russian Federation. To the chagrin of Defense Minister Pavel Grachev it was Lieutenant General Aleksandr Lebed’ who negotiated the armistice in Chechnya, four years after they fell out over the Transnistria War. With the dismissal of Grachev from his position after the war concluded, Gromov’s resignation in protest against the conflict, and Lebed’s short-lived appointment as Secretary of the Security Council from June to October 1996, the afgantsy lost their key voices in federal Russian politics. Only with the onset and maturation of the United States’ War in Afghanistan did a reassessment of the Soviet-Afghan War begin to take place.

From Wartime Trauma to Post-War Nostalgia

I do have nostalgia for those years. I would go back but I would not fight. Wouldn’t you like to plunge into your childhood, into those past years, for something to remember? I would close my eyes, set out on the road, and head to the mountains....

- Mikhail, afganets⁷

A reassessment of the Soviet-Afghan War under President Vladimir Putin proved to be a much more sensitive process than the remoulding of dissidents as national

⁶ Michael Specter, “Yeltsin Declares Chechen War Over, and Ousts 4 Critics in Military,” *New York Times*, 20 January 1995, accessed 19 November 2017, www.nytimes.com/1995/01/20/world/yeltsin-declares-chechen-war-over-and-ousts-4-critics-in-military.html.

⁷ Mikhail, interview with author, June 2015.

heroes.⁸ Although the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan re-registered with the Ministry of Justice on 18 February 2002 and bore political representation with Deputy Frants Klintsevich a member of United Russia, an appeal to the Russian public to reconsider the afgantsy's place in history was postponed until 2005 for symbolic value: if in 1985 the Soviet press likened "wartime internationalists" to their fathers in the Great Patriotic War to mark the 40th anniversary of Victory Day, the stance was reinforced on 9 May 2005 to mark its 60th anniversary. It was then that a public ceremony took place wherein "veterans of the Great Patriotic War handed over a symbolic Victory Banner to a veteran of a younger generation... commander of the 40th Army, General Viktor Ermakov."⁹ The gesture was followed four months later by the first movie based on the Soviet-Afghan War to be released in quite some time, *The 9th Company* (9 rota).¹⁰ Loosely based on the 345th Guards Airborne Regiment's experience under heavy fire on 7 and 8 January 1988, it took only a month for the film to gain repute as "the biggest post-Soviet film blockbuster" to date, based on "a topic many Russians would rather forget."¹¹ After a pre-screening with director Fedor Bondarchuk, President Putin praised *The 9th Company* as "a very good film... [that] takes on the soul." "It is about time to stop all this political noise around the events that took place in Afghanistan," he continued. "Clearly, these events should be... studied by politicians, historians... militaries, and so on. But it

⁸ On the successful reframing of Soviet dissident, see: Ben A. McVicker, "The Creation and Transformation of a Cultural Icon: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in Post-Soviet Russia, 1994-2008," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 53, 2/4 (2011): 305-33.

⁹ "O soiuze: istoricheskaia spravka," Rossiiskii soiuz veteranov Afganistana, accessed 6 December 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130913082008/http://rsva.ru/union>.

¹⁰ *9 rota*, dir. Fedor Bondarchuk (Moscow: PK <Slovo> / <Art Pictures Group>, 2005.)

¹¹ Sophia Kishkovsky, "From a Bitter War Defeat Comes Russia's Latest Blockbuster Action Movie," *New York Times*, 29 October 2005, accessed 8 December 2016, www.nytimes.com/2005/10/29/movies/MoviesFeatures/from-a-bitter-war-defeat-comes-russias-latest.html.

is just as clear that those who fought in Afghanistan have nothing to be ashamed of.”¹²

Reception of *The 9th Company* among the afgantsy was mixed. Frants Klintsevich and three afgantsy who participated in the battle acted as consultants, only for the director to abandon their suggestions.¹³ Personal grievances ranged from “People laughed, as if one regiment fought while others just sat around!” to “This is not a Soviet or a Russian film. It is a Hollywood film and only left people confused.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, *The 9th Company* introduced the Soviet-Afghan War to a younger generation and stirred a renewed debate on its place in history.¹⁵ As a result, the veterans union organized “500 free screenings” of the film and awarded Bondarchuk a “special commendation” for his role in “memory recovery.”¹⁶ It was a step toward reframing the afgantsy’s experience as a piece of the cultural jigsaw puzzle left by glasnost rather than a “forgotten war.”¹⁷

The Reopening of a Bleeding Wound

When we celebrated the 15th anniversary of the end of hostilities in Afghanistan, the President attended our event and disavowed the decisions made at the

¹² Cited in Stephen M. Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia: Movies, Memory, and Patriotism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 151.

¹³ Oleg, interview with author, April 2014.

¹⁴ Viktor, Nikolai, interviews with Author, April and August 2014.

¹⁵ The most vocal critic of *The 9th Company* was Dmitrii Puchkov, known as Goblin for his voice-over translations of Western films in Russian equivalent phrases (rather than a literal word-for-word approach). Puchkov did not serve in Afghanistan but was left irate at Bondarchuk’s effort add an air of tragedy to the film. In February 2008 he released a video game entitled *The Truth About The 9th Company* to address “the deliberate destruction of the historical memory of the people, the introduction of idiotic stereotypes... [and] frenzied lies about our recent history.” See: “Pravda o deviatoi rote,” accessed 7 December 2017, www.pravdao9rote.ru; for a discussion of Puchkov’s rebuttal of *The 9th Company* and how its producers responded, see: Norris, *Blockbuster History*, 154-66.

¹⁶ Norris, *Blockbuster History*, 152.

¹⁷ Bondarchuk echoed this one-month after the movie’s release, stating, “I didn’t make a film about the Afghan war. I was making a film about the... state I remember from being 18 in the army in 1985.” See: Kishkovsky, “From a Bitter War Defeat....”

Congress. But it was spoken verbally. ... [T]oday there are demands, especially from families of the dead, for a political assessment. ... On 14 February at our request... Army General Kovalev will open this discussion.

- Frants Klintsevich, 11 February 2014¹⁸

If Frants Klintsevich wants to catch some tailwind on this trend of reevaluation, all I want to say is that I was at that Congress of Peoples' Deputies. ... And there is no need to scratch if you can't find an itch. ... Let Klintsevich do as a deputy does with all social questions in the Duma, introduce the motion and contest it. You can't change what happened 25 to 30 years ago.

- Ruslan Aushev, 15 February 2014¹⁹

With a quarter-century having passed since the 40th Army withdrew from Afghanistan, 15 February 2014 seemed a key time to reopen a "bleeding wound" of the past for historical debate. A reception was held at the Kremlin to mark the anniversary, with select participants in NATO's security mission in Afghanistan invited to attend. "There was nothing but good feelings between us as American veterans and the afgantsy," remarked one attendee:

One guy who was a pilot in Afghanistan complained to me about stinger missiles, but he... recognized the difference between the political decision of nations and the shared realities of soldiers in combat. At the end we had a couple of shots

¹⁸ Tikhon Dziadko, Iuliia Taratuta, "Frants Klintsevich: veterany Afganistana sdelali gosudarstvu neudobnoe predlozhenie," accessed 8 January 2018, https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/here_and_now/frants_klintsevich_veterany_afganistana_sdelali_gosudarstvu_neu_dobnoe_predlozhenie-362592/. General Nikolai Kovalev served twice in Afghanistan with the KGB and chaired the Duma's Veteran's Committee at the time Klintsevich called for a reevaluation of the war.

¹⁹ "Ruslan Aushev: "Vvod voisk byl oshibkoi."

together and I agreed to invite him to our “withdrawal from Afghanistan” celebration whenever we have it.²⁰

An occasion of pomp and circumstance followed by expressions of solidarity between veterans of war, the 25th anniversary of the 40th Army’s withdrawal seemed an opportune moment to challenge popular memory. Emboldened, the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan’s leader Frants Klintsevich denounced the Congress of People’s Deputies’ 24 December 1989 decree as a “politically and legally groundless assessment of the Afghan war as a failed and reckless attempt.”²¹ The United States, he argued, had exonerated the 40th Army by fighting a perpetual “war on terrorism” against the very mujahideen it financed and trained. While the motion for a reassessment gained little traction in the Duma, it echoed *The 9th Company* in its wave of media coverage and the divided opinion it stirred among the afgantsy. “I do not think [Klintsevich’s] decision speaks for the entire union of veterans of Afghanistan,” remarked Lieutenant General Ruslan Aushev upon learning of his statement at a fundraiser.²² Colonel General Boris Gromov was less diplomatic and dismissed the idea as “stupid.”²³ While stillborn in terms of rewritten legislation, Klintsevich’s campaign for a “reassessment” of the Soviet-Afghan War gathered enough support from the state to furnish a revised popular narrative for the 21st century. Gone were Soviet justifications of “international duty,” “a friendship of nations,” and humanitarian aid, replaced instead with a 40th Army that “froze the threat

²⁰ Private correspondence, March 2014.

²¹ Cited in “Russian Veterans Request Political Reassessment of Afghanistan War,” 11 February 2014, accessed 8 January 2018, <https://www.rt.com/politics/russian-afghanistan-war-reassessment-536/>.

²² “Ruslan Aushev: “Vvod voisk byl oshibkoi.”

²³ “Russia Praises Veterans of War in Afghanistan,” *The Moscow Times*, 16 February 2014, accessed 8 January 2018, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russia-praises-veterans-of-war-in-afghanistan-32148>.

of terrorism,” “struck the first blow against jihad,” and made “unprecedented efforts to... eradicate the drug trade in Afghanistan.”²⁴

A framework with broad appeal in light of the Global War on Terrorism, any common ground this revised narrative might have fostered between the Russian afgantsy and their Western kin was compromised by the annexation of Crimea on 18 March 2014. It took little time for Klintsevich and the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan to endorse the action and open a regional branch.²⁵ The organization’s decision showed its indebtedness to the Putin administration and its hesitation to deviate from the government line; as Klintsevich admitted on 15 February “Benefits appeared, by and large – at least some measures of social support – only when Putin became president.”²⁶ The union’s decision to back the annexation over political neutrality rejected the calls of mass protests that took place on 15 March 2014.²⁷ The escalation from annexation to a War in the Donbass region of Ukraine brought with it a surge in Russian propaganda, the arming of insurgents, and military intervention that peaked in August 2014. It took little time for whispers of another Afghan war and parallels of its unspoken human costs to enter circulation, stirring anti-war protests of more than 26,000 people in Moscow to mark

²⁴ “Klintsevich: sovetskie voiska v Afganistane ostanovili tam narkotorgovliu,” RIA Novosti, 15 February 2015, accessed 8 January 2017, <https://ria.ru/world/20150215/1047803340.html>.

²⁵ Many members of the Ukrainian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan in Crimea did not qualify as “combat veterans under Russian law,” as membership was previously open to a broader range of candidates such as veterans of the War in Yugoslavia. One year after the annexation only 3,500 of the 5,300 Crimean afgantsy had re-registered with the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan. See: Aleksandr Volitskii, “Lider afgantsev Kryma Aleksandr Volkov: <Pravitel’stvo nas osobo ne zhaluet>,” 23 February 2015, accessed 13 October 2015, ru.krymr.com/content/article/26864444.html.

²⁶ Klintsevich, “Bez durakov.”

²⁷ An action unfathomable on 25 December 1979, the “March of Peace” against Crimea’s secession was legally sanctioned and took place in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, numbering in the tens of thousands. See: “Ukraine Crisis: Moscow Rally Opposes Crimea Intervention,” BBC News, 15 March 2014, accessed 11 January 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26593249.

United Nations' International Peace Day on 21 September.²⁸ Overshadowed by its spectacle were two small protests composed of afgantsy that took place on 5 and 13 September in Briansk, approximately 180 kilometres northeast of the Ukrainian border. Armed with signs that read "No war with Ukraine" and "Let's not allow a second Afghanistan," the rallies were led by Vladimir Barabanov, an afganets who served from 1986 to 1988. The leader of a district branch of the regional veteran's union, Barabanov echoed those who felt an eerie sense of historical déjà vu. "They told us, the last Soviet soldiers, that Afghanistan would be the last war," he began. "That our comrades died so that such wars would never be repeated. The war that is now going on in Ukraine with Russia's participation nullifies those losses. ... [And] the blame will be on all of us."²⁹

²⁸ "Thousands March Against War In Moscow, St. Petersburg," RFE/RL, 21 September 2014, accessed 11 June 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-antiwar-marches-ukraine/26597971.html>.

²⁹ Arslan Saidov, "Obeshchali, chto vtorogo Afganistana ne budet," Svoboda, 5 September 2014, accessed 11 January 2017, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/26568348.html>.

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