

# The Afghan War (1979-1989) in the Cultural Memory of the Russians<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*The article analyzes the process of building Russian cultural memory based on the events of the past, specifically the Soviet-Afghan conflict (1979-1989). It shows how the perception of the war developed in Soviet / Russian society among veterans, as well as in the circles of politicians and historians. It also shows how the younger generation of the Russians refer to these events now. Attention focuses on the ways memory is constructed, how various carriers of memory construct the Afghan war (including those relating to popular culture), and how popular culture has the most influence on contemporary Russian society.*

Although it has been over twenty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the events of this period still affect the historical consciousness of Russians, and constitute one of the most important traits of their national identity. Apart from the victory in the Second World War (in the Russian tradition called the Great Patriotic War), which was recognized by the Russians themselves as crucial in building national consciousness and pride, the Afghan war (1979-1989) should also be mentioned. It is much more controversial and still shrouded in many mysteries (Levinson; Левинсон 2005).<sup>2</sup> In this text, the process of constructing Russian cultural memory will be traced on the basis of imaging the events associated with the Soviet-Afghan conflict. How the reception of this war evolved, both in the Soviet/Russian society and among its veterans, researchers, historians and politicians will be shown. In addition, it will discuss how a young generation of Russians today looks at these past events, and how the memory of the Afghan war appears in a variety of memory carriers, particularly those falling within popular culture and thus affecting the contemporary Russian society.

The main theoretical concept in this article is the assumption that memory of the Afghan war occupies an important place in the collective memory of the Russians. The cultural memory of the Soviet-Afghan conflict consists of a number of memory carriers: literary works, memoirs, films, serials, songs, monuments, and demotivators (demotivational posters), among others. The multiplicity and diversity of memory carriers allows one to believe that the Afghan war is a factor constituting the collective identity of the Russians that is also affected by the changing position of Russian authorities to the Afghan conflict. One of the applicable methods in the article will be a systematic analysis of exemplary representatives of various memory carriers, aimed at presenting a multi-faceted process of perception the Afghan war by various layers of Russian society. A reconstruction of perceiving and judging by Russian society a series of events on the Soviet-Afghan conflict (based on public opinion polls) will be

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presented. A critical analysis of the literature and an analysis of the socio-cultural phenomena, to varying degrees related to the Afghan war will be carried out, too. The chosen methodological approach provides an opportunity for a multi-faceted presentation of the reception of the Afghan war in Russian society due to the analysis of memory carriers created by its different groups. However, the Afghan war was a war of limited impact, which, in contrast to World War II, had not marked each family; the way it is perceived is different depending on the involvement of members of each Soviet family. In this context it is worth mentioning the limitation of my selected methods, concerning varying degrees of influence of the Soviet-Afghan conflict on Russian society, which makes it difficult to reconstruct the overall picture of the Afghan war in the cultural memory of the Russians.

Memory carriers are the tools for shaping the identity of a group, strengthening its integrity and sense of value. The war in Afghanistan in a relatively short period of time, a quarter century, became the subject for many fields of art—such as literature, cinema, music, graphics—that transmitted memory about it. These specific tangible monuments are the memory of things; they encode certain messages. Marcin Kula has pointed out that the creation of memory carriers for contemporary events and people is sometimes a controversial process. The carrier will play its role and remain active when it is noticed (Kula 2002, 43-45). Memory carriers do not have to accurately reflect the events they symbolize. Nevertheless, the image they transmit is fixed in the minds of recipients (Kula 2002, 155).

Therefore, the artefacts include social memory, which, as Barbara Szacka states, constitutes a set of images about the past of the group, as well as all the characters and events from this past that are commemorated in various ways (Szacka 2000, 52). This form of memory in shaping the individual and collective identity is significant, because, as Marian Golka writes, with its participation the scattered events of the past, usually waking pride, are merged in a more or less coherent form. In addition, this form of memory recalls the values important to the group, which helps to distinguish those who are “other” and “foreign” (Golka 2009, 53). However, the most important source of social memory carriers is the collectivity which this memory concerns (Golka 2009, 67).

In the case of the reception of the Afghan war, it is justifiable to speak of memory of the witnesses—participants and observers, as well as about official and private memory. It is also reasonable to distinguish the phenomenon of transmitted memory—conveyed indirectly in historical or fictional descriptions, as well as in memories that are created, managed, inspired and directed by the authorities, and spontaneous memory (Golka 2009, 26-31). The article will consider memory carriers characterizing subjective memory (individual memory shaped and enriched during the life time under the influence of feelings and experiences), intersubjective (present in a community, and which constitutes the record of the events in the consciousness of the community accumulated during the social evolution of the community and the lives of its individuals), and objective memory (consisting of the records of evolutionary changes and changes made as a result of interaction with the environment preserved

in material objects) (Sztumski 2002, 8). Sources on the presented conflict are extremely rich; there are hundreds of memoirs, literary works, songs, dozens of films, and demotivators. The aim of the author was to present only a small segment of them, to show thematic and semantic variety of memory carriers from different spheres of society in order to prove the thesis that cultural memory of the Afghan war occupies an important place in the collective consciousness of the Russians.

### **The Afghan War and Official Justifications**

Afghanistan lies on the border of South, Central and South-West Asia, and at the same time on the southern borders of the Soviet Union. This geopolitical location resulted in the Soviet Union's keen interest in controlling Afghanistan's internal situation. In December 1978, the Afghan government signed an agreement with the Soviet Union on mutual cooperation and friendship. It provided, inter alia, granting military assistance in case of the threat of territorial integrity of any of the parties signing the agreement. It is this point that was used by the Soviet Union a year later as a justification for intervention in Afghanistan. It started in the night of 24 December 1979 with airborne landings at airports in Bagram and Kabul (Kowalczyk 1994, 5-7).

Artemy Kalinovksy states, "The goal of the invasion was to secure infrastructure, free up the Afghan army to conduct raids and operations, and enable the new government to function. Soviet leaders did not envision their army being directly involved in battle after initial invasion—they were there just to prop up the military of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan" (Kalinovsky 2011, 25). The arguments put forward in 1979 justifying the participation of the USSR in the armed conflict seem unreasonable today. The Soviet Defence Minister at that time, Dmitrii Ustinov, believed that the importance of even the largest army can be evaluated only through its combat experience. In turn, the KGB chief, Iurii Andropov, wanted to repeat the rapid intervention of 1968 in Czechoslovakia (Pikhoia, Kondrashov, Osipov; Пихоя, Кондрашов, Осипов). Moreover, supporters of the decision to invade proceeded from the assumption that the "loss" of Afghanistan would be a blow to Soviet prestige (Kalinovsky 2011, 24). It is worth mentioning that the Soviet military was wary of an intervention in Afghanistan. Soviet officers presumed that this involvement would differ from other interventions where they were fulfilling their "internationalist duty" by advising and training local forces. In Afghanistan their assignment would be to command Soviet troops that could end up fighting Afghan insurgents (Kalinovsky 2011, 22). According to Alexander Lyakhovskiy, multi-profile analysis of the situation leads us to believe that the Soviet leaders were drawn into the war by a well-conducted disinformation strategy, which was aimed at the ultimate elimination of the socialist camp and the collapse of the USSR (Liakhovskii 1995, *Ot avtora*; Ляховский 1995, *Ot avtora*).

The Afghan conflict generated, through military confrontation, the interaction between two fundamentally different cultures. The war was conducted by the Soviet Union on a foreign territory by a limited contingent of Soviet troops. It started in the last years of "stagnation" of the Brezhnev era and lasted until the final phase of

perestroika. Despite ten years of armed conflict it was not possible to defeat the armed *mujahideen* opposition (the Soviet soldiers called the partisans *dushmans*). What is more, the pro-Soviet government was overthrown by 1992. Troops began leaving Afghanistan on 15 May 1988 pursuant to the Geneva agreements concluded in April that year (Kowalczyk 1994, 43-44). The process of leading out the military forces lasted until 15 February 1989.

The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was the bloodiest conflict in the history of the Soviet Union since the end of the Second World War. According to Russian statistics, the total number of casualties on the Soviet side was almost 14,500 people. The financial costs of intervention should also be mentioned: to support the government in Kabul, the Soviet Union spent approximately \$800 million, while or the maintenance of the 40<sup>th</sup> Army and the conduct of military operations cost about \$3 billion per year.<sup>3</sup> For several years, the Soviet Union ignored the voices of world opinion, which opposed its presence in Afghanistan. Only after Mikhail Gorbachev's came to power did Soviet leaders decide to withdraw troops because of the rising costs of war and the deepening economic difficulties (Kowalczyk 1994, 49). According to Artemy Kalinovsky the decision to withdraw was delayed due to Moscow's desire to maintain its position:

The single most important reason that Soviet leaders delayed the decision to withdraw for as long as they did is that they continued to believe the USSR could help stabilize Afghanistan, build up the Afghan armed forces, and make the Kabul government more acceptable to its people. (...) Soviet leaders found it difficult to disengage from the Afghan conflict because they feared undermining Moscow's status as a defender of Third World countries against encroaching neo-colonialism (Kalinovsky 2011, 2).

As Mark Galeotti stressed, Gorbachev's decision to withdraw Soviet troops from Afghanistan proved that the USSR was no irresistible military colossus, and that its goal was simple survival, not expansion (Galeotti 2001, 1). The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan had a wide impact on the position of the USSR. According to Kalinovsky, the intervention in Afghanistan had its precedents, but it also became a turning point because it forced Soviet leaders to reevaluate interventions as instruments of foreign policy (Kalinovsky 2011, 1). In Robert Miller's opinion, Gorbachev's decision was an important turning point in the evolution of Soviet foreign policy: "Particularly in regard to policy in the Third World it marked a decisive shift away from the policy of the Brezhnev years to seek out targets of opportunity to increase the compass of Soviet power by the use of the USSR's expanding military power, regardless of the economic and diplomatic costs" (Miller 1989, 117). As stated by Richard Falk, a provisional result of the withdrawal will be to signal an overall withdrawal of the USSR from active engagement more generally in the Third World (Falk 1989, 149). Lyakhovsky stressed that the experience of Afghanistan was an important lesson for Soviet leaders: exacerbation of the situation in Poland in the early 80s, when the issue of the entry of Warsaw Pact troops there was considered, was the main reason for not completing this

action was the Soviet presence in Afghanistan (Liakhovskii 1995, L. Brezhnev reshaet spasat' "narodnuiu" vlast'; Ляховский 1995, Л. Брежнев решает спасти «народную» власть).

The war influenced the people and the government of the USSR. It had a wide social impact:

It touched more than the veterans. It touched every mother whose son served there or whose prayers or cash managed to prevent that fate. It touched every bereaved sweetheart, wife, father, son or daughter. It still touches everyone who has to live or work with the afgantsy, the veterans of this war, or care for them, or speak on their behalf. It is a powerful image in the developing debate of the USSR's and Russia's future in the world, and for many a damning indictment of its past (Galeotti 2001, 2).

However, in 1989 T. H. Rigby supposed that the withdrawal from Afghanistan was unlikely to have persistent and deep-going domestic political implications in the USSR itself. It was connected with the fact that the war has impacted far less massively and obviously the Soviet population than did, for example, the Vietnam war impacted the American population because of the media monopoly in the USSR and efforts of the Soviet regime to protect its policies from serious public criticism (Rigby 1989, 68).

Protests against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan appeared in the Soviet Union already in 1980. Andrei Sakharov called for the widest possible boycott of the Olympic Games in Moscow. His wife Elena Bonner, along with other dissidents, published a statement in which the official version of events was rejected and the international community was called to demand the withdrawal of the Soviet troops (Braithwaite 2011, 108). Within ten years, on the Soviet side 620,000 soldiers were involved (Seniavskaia, *Protivniki Rossii...*; Сенявская, *Противники России...*, 83). The obligatory censorship during the initial period of the conflict meant that many soldiers sent to Afghanistan were not aware of the events and hostilities taking place there (Seniavskaia; Сенявская 1999).

A separate problem was the low level of discipline in the Soviet troops. Widespread violence and soldier brutality, so-called "bullying" (dedovshchina; *дедовщина*) was common (Braithwaite 2011, 171-173). In addition, many soldiers and officers abused alcohol and drugs. Also, the way Soviet soldiers treated the civilian population of Afghanistan can be inferred: In 1989, the Supreme Council of the USSR announced amnesty covering all crimes committed by soldiers in this country (Postanovlenie VS SSSR; *Постановление ВС СССР...*). On the other hand, according to the statistics of the Soviet Military Prosecutor's Office, during the ten-year conflict over 4,300 people were prosecuted (Pochtarev; Почтарев). Thus, the war was also connected with crimes and offences. As Rodric Braithwaite has stressed, soldiers committing individual and group acts, even though aware of severe sanctions, could be explained as follows: "They did it to us, so we have a right to do it to them" (Braithwaite 2011, 227). It happened that crimes were one in cold blood, but most often these acts occurred in the heat of the battle or immediately after it (Braithwaite 2011, 228).

The Afghan war accelerated the erosion of the Soviet Union as a state, because the public began to inquire about the atrocities committed by their troops on Afghan civilians, in addition to reports of widespread drug abuse among soldiers and desertion (Kowalczyk 1994, 49)<sup>4</sup>. Philipp Casula compared the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the two Russian wars in Chechnya in order to show changing interpretations of violence. In the Afghan war violence was physical and cultural, while in the Chechen wars excessive physical violence was the main type what was connected with the character of the conflict—focused on the recapture of territory (Casula 2015, 700-718). As Jan C. Behrends claimed, the Soviet Army was not interested in enforcing international law, so Afghanistan quickly turned into a violent space. The Soviet soldiers had to adapt to these conditions: the brutality of the war and crimes committed by both sides. After their return from Afghanistan, many veterans found it difficult to find their place in civilian life (Behrends 2015, 719-734).

As T. H. Rigby stressed, there has been much in experience of hundreds of thousands of “Afgantsy” to bind them together. Their combat turned out to be utterly different from the war their fathers had participated against the Germans. Moreover, for years they had felt forgotten by their country, they were rarely mentioned in the official media because the Soviet government wanted to play down the role of the USSR’s so-called “limited contingent” for political reasons (Rigby 1989, 76-77). After the war, it was difficult for the soldiers to find their place in society, which resulted in the fact that they began to have a devastating impact on it. The “Afghan syndrome” was a great threat: in the families of veterans, the number of divorces and family conflicts was as high as 75%. More than two thirds of the veterans were not happy with their jobs and often changed them because of increasing conflicts; 90% of student-veterans were characterized by poor performance in studying, and 60% had problems with alcoholism and drug addiction. Research conducted in the early 1990s has shown that at least 35-40% of veterans urgently needed professional help of a psychologist (Lupookov; Лупооков). Thousands of young people who learned to steal and murder in Afghanistan very easily turned to a life of crime upon returning (Feifer 2009, 259). Soviet soldiers who had served in Afghanistan often had difficulties with jobs, housing, and medical care:

The attitude of the general public towards them was also at best ambivalent, and they often felt embittered by the contrast between what had been demanded of them and the cynical materialism and corruption of life back home. Small wonder that they tended to band together for mutual solace and protection, that they were sharply antagonistic towards the predominant semi-westernised youth culture, and that they sometimes formed themselves into vigilante groups that took the law into their own hands (Rigby 1989, 77).

As the years went by and historical circumstances changed, the reception of the Afghan conflict also changed. Initially, it was hidden in a cloud of mystery. The Political Bureau undertook measures to prevent the escape of information about the war to the public.

Soldiers who were sent to Afghanistan were ordered to be silent about the place of their service. Those who returned to the USSR were not allowed to go to Moscow during the Olympics for fear that they might talk about the situation with foreign guests. Families of those killed were forbidden to tell about the circumstances of their children's deaths. According to the official version presented on TV and in newspapers based on the official reports of the Kremlin, the soldiers had an "internationalist mission" in Afghanistan without taking part in hostilities. TV broadcasts showed Soviet and Afghan soldiers in friendly embraces, Soviet physicians treating Afghan children, soldiers distributing food, and so on (Braithwaite 2011, 235-236). Events in Afghanistan were not considered in these official accounts as war at the time, but as a kind of humanitarian aid to the allied Afghan people. Until 1987, efforts were made to conceal the very fact of war, including burying the bodies of the slain soldiers in zinc coffins, under cover of the night. There was a ban on writing memorials to soldiers killed in Afghanistan (Braithwaite 2011, 236-237). The despair of mothers, of soldiers, who fought and died in Afghanistan is noted in Svetlana Alexievich's work *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War* (*Цинковые мальчики*), that shows how this conflict divided their life tragically into "before" and "after" the war. The author gives voice to direct participants of the war, from whose memories the brutality and cruelty of the Afghan conflict emerge, as well as psychological trauma which war has left them.

Braithwaite states:

The fallen were not greeted on their return with military honour and municipal ceremony as [...] they would have been in America. Instead, they were returned to their families by night, buried in hugger-mugger, in a miasma of threats of retribution if the shroud of secrecy was broken (Braithwaite 2011, 237).

Although many soldiers received state awards and the titles of the Hero of the Soviet Union, the press reported that they are the result of participation in the manoeuvres, battles with a conventional opponent, as well as a reward for helping the Afghans in economic activities (Seniavskaia, *Protivniki Rossii...*; Сенявская, *Противники России...*, 83).

Despite the information blockade, alternative messages seeped into the Soviet society. As the flow of credible reports about events in Afghanistan increased, public opinion gradually began to turn against the war and the army, and the anti-war attitudes became more intense (Braithwaite 2011, 237-244). However, since 1987, information about events in Afghanistan was becoming increasingly overt and the war was presented as a heroic event in the spirit of revolutionary romanticism. The tendency to portray the heroic image of "militant-internationalists" prevailed until 1989. Critical publications on the Soviet participation in the war began to appear only on the wave of glasnost (Seniavskaia, *Voiny...*; Сенявская, *Войны...*). The Soviet press sharply criticized the incursion into Afghanistan, calling the war a row. A wave of critical speeches swept through the media also when the troops were being lead out from Afghanistan. As Galeotti stressed it: "Even after Gorbachev's accession, genuine

glasnost about the war came but slowly and patchily, and losses in Afghanistan were to be hushed up, thus depriving the bereaved of even the psychological support and catharsis of public approbation for the departed" (Galeotti 2001, 85). Lyakhovsky indicated that the 40th Army did not suffer defeat, in spite of the fact that after the war it was implicitly criticized (a similar situation applied to Americans fighting in Vietnam). "Afgantsy" were soldiers in a foreign war, which was a thankless role, because their effort was not perceived by the 'liberated'. In this context, Lyakhovsky recalls Soviet soldiers who fought the Nazis during World War II—they also could not foresee that, after almost fifty years, they would be considered as "occupiers" and their monuments and graves would be devastated. Afghan veterans' fortune turned out to be even worse, because 'the Afghan war' has been declared criminal, even in the USSR, which made them outcasts in their own homeland. Media accused them of killing civilians, drug use. Such a negative attitude towards "Afgantsy" can be explained by the fact that, unlike the Great Patriotic War, which affected almost every Soviet family, the Afghan war not affected many people in the Soviet Union directly, so it not become a common misfortune for the entire Soviet people. On the contrary, for many it remained distant, alien, unfamiliar and unfair (Liakhovskii 1995, Glava X; Ляховский 1995, Глава X).

It should be noted that the Soviet army did not suffer a single defeat in Afghanistan but, in the opinion of politicians, the assessment of events was very different. This can be considered as a confirmation of the belief that a war is lost when the government and the public recognize themselves as defeated (Seniavskaia, *Protivniki Rossii...*; Сенявская, *Противники России...*, 84). The war in Afghanistan was not a military but a political defeat—not only did the Soviet government decide to withdraw the troops, but it abandoned its recent ally. When introducing the troops, the Soviet government did not consider the power of tradition defining the mentality of the peoples of this country. The Soviet leadership's mistake was introducing troops into the country, which was torn by the social and ethnic conflicts (Khodakov; Ходаков 2009). There are opinions that, during the entire post-Afghan period, Russia was not able to learn political and military lessons from the conflict and the war was a result of erroneous actions of the Soviet politicians: "В Афгане мы не понесли военного поражения и не победили. Мы просто заплатили за ошибки политических деятелей, своих и афганских, десятками тысячами человеческих жизней народов обоих государств" ("In Afghanistan we have not suffered military defeat and we did not win. We just paid for the mistakes of political activists, our own and the Afghan, with tens of thousands lives of peoples of both countries") (Musienko; Мусиенко).

In the mass-media, the negative image of the war was portrayed until the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The impulse for that was given by an emotional speech of Sakharov at the First Congress of People's Deputies in 1989, when he stated that Soviet airmen in Afghanistan executed their own soldiers who found themselves surrounded so that they were not taken prisoners. Especially after the Second Congress, the war began to be portrayed as a defeat. A political decision was then adopted to introduce Soviet troops to Afghanistan, and its conclusion was that this decision deserves a political

and moral judgment. In subsequent years, both the right-wing politicians as well as the leaders of veterans' organizations endeavoured to invalidate this resolution (Seniavskaia, *Voiny...*; Сенявская, *Войны...*).

### Remembering War

In this context, it is worth considering the attitude of the Soviet Union as an example of a manifestation of imperial consciousness shaped over the centuries. Imperial consciousness consists of, among other things, elements of the political doctrines used by governments to justify their imperial policies and ideologies and religious ideas current at the moment. Imperial consciousness changes over time and is dynamic as the very empire changes. However, unlike the empire, consciousness does not die at once and impacts both the policy and public opinion long after empire formally ends. The concept of imperial consciousness corresponds with the idea of creating a barrier shaped from the late eighteenth century, a barrier that would protect Russia, constitute its colonies and half-colonies. (For example, at the time of Peter I, Finland was conquered to protect Petersburg against the Swedes). A similar principle was the background for the decision to introduce troops into Czechoslovakia, and then into Afghanistan (Anisimov; АНИСИМОВ).

Appealing to the past uses traditional justifications of the existing order or its individual components. As stated by Lev Gudkov, individual or collective memory is always an alternative to the "history." It is also random, episodic, and subordinated to the logic of private or group action:

"История" как содержание времени прошлого в коллективных представлениях представляет собой относительно систематизированные или упорядоченные массовые проекции на прошлое современного положения вещей, т.е. различные версии "происхождения" и "развития" больших коллективов или институтов – государства, "народов", "искусства", "религии", философии, науки, нравов [...], которые продвинули "вперед все человечество" или стали существенным вкладом отдельных народов в общий процесс цивилизации человечества ("History" as the content of the past time in collective imaginations is a relatively structured or organized mass screenings of the past that concern the modern state of affairs, that is the various versions of the "origin" and "development" of large communities or institutions—the state, "nations", "art", "religion", philosophy, science, morals [...], which pushed "forward the whole of humanity" or became a significant contribution of individual nations to the common process of the civilization of mankind) (Gudkov; Гудков 2009, 89).

Stable structures of collective identity cannot function without historical components, as they play the role of a fictional genesis of the current situation. As the research shows, social transformations in post-Soviet societies are accompanied by noticeable tensions in the structure of collective identity. This aspect is evidenced by the strengthening of mass interest in the past and the attempts to answer the following questions: "Who are

we?” or “What can we be proud of, and on the contrary, what causes our shame?” among other questions. Sociological studies indicate a steady increase in interest in historical literature concerning the past of the nation (the interest in fiction, documentary prose, memoirs). New national myths and legends are created that justify the past and the glory of a given nation. The objects of pride are war winnings. Various political forces and groups—both parties of power, as well as the Orthodox Church—compete for the right to the “right” interpretation of the past (Gudkov; Гудков 2009, 89).

It is good to discuss the mechanisms of reception of the Afghan War in memory carriers by beginning with memoirs. The Afghan war left a significant imprint on the consciousness of Russian society in formulating its cultural memory. One of the most important manifestations of memory carriers are memoirs. When considering the reception of the conflict, one should distinguish individual, private memories of war and group perceptions about it. The importance of memories depends on who their author is, and who the addressee is: “Процесс ‘вспоминания’—это всегда интерпретации, выстраиваемые в более или менее явной полемике, дополнениях или иллюстрациях общепринятых риторических изложений содержания или смысла соответствующих событий” (“The process of ‘recollecting’—is always interpretation, constructed in a more or less overt polemic, additions or illustrations to the generally accepted rhetorical presentations of content or meaning of appropriate events”) (Gudkov; Гудков). Memories can be seen as manifestations of communication memory, which consists of active memory and experience of living generations. They are passed on in an interactive way by non-formalized actions like every day oral communication: family stories, friendly conversations between the generations (Traba 2008, 13). Communication memory includes memories of the immediate past, in which the individual shares with his contemporaries. In the case of communication memory, images of past events are formed on the basis of eyewitness’ accounts, passed on in an intergenerational dialogue (Assmann 2008, 66). Yet, as Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska points out, when communication memory begins to fade along with passing away of history witnesses, the commemoration of the past is transferred to the outer spheres: ritual and material ones. Then the cultural memory begins to emerge. However, it is difficult now to separate the time of domination of the communication and cultural memory, because the commemoration process takes place simultaneously at the interactive and medial level (Saryusz-Wolska 2009, 31-32). According to Aleida Assmann cultural memory plays an important role in every society:

pamięć kulturowa służy obywatelom społeczeństwa do komunikacji w długiej, historycznej perspektywie, wykraczającej poza okres życia, a przez to do upewniania się w tożsamości, która powstaje dzięki przynależności do ponadpokoleniowej tradycji i szeroko zakrojonych doświadczeń historycznych (Cultural memory serves citizens of the society for communication in a long historical perspective, reaching beyond the period of life, and thus for ascertaining in the identity that is created by belonging to a supra-generational tradition and extensive historical experience) (Assmann 2009b, 171).

Individual memories are associated with private history and its core values and assessments, whereas the collective ideas are constituted by values that have significance for the whole community. These are “reconstructions” of historical processes and events, the function of which is connected with the rituals of collective (national, group) solidarity, or with the presentation of collective myths, whose task is the legitimacy of the social institutions or political actions (Gudkov; Громов).

Memoires of the Afghan conflict began to emerge in the 1980s, and others were written down some time after the end of hostilities, which allowed for a greater distance to the events described. They are the expression of subjective, personal memories of the witnesses. Colonel General Boris Gromov, commander of the 40th Army offers one such perspective in his book, *Ограниченный контингент* (Limited contingent, 1994). It is an analysis of the reasons for the introduction of Soviet troops into Afghanistan, the description of the war, as well as the problems of the Soviet contingent. He expresses the opinion that in the case of intervention in Afghanistan one cannot speak about Soviet victory, nor about the Soviet defeat:

Я глубоко убежден: не существует оснований для утверждения о том, что 40-я армия потерпела поражение, равно как и о том, что мы одержали военную победу в Афганистане. Советские войска в конце 1979 года беспрепятственно вошли в страну, выполнили – в отличие от американцев во Вьетнаме – свои задачи и организованно вернулись на Родину (I am deeply convinced: there are no grounds to believe that the 40th army was defeated, just as well to say that we won the war in Afghanistan. The Soviet Army in late 1979, without barriers, entered the country, fulfilled their tasks, in contrast to the Americans in Vietnam, and in an organized way went back to their Homeland) (Gromov; Громов, 275).

Memoirs such as this one by Gromov, constituting expressions of biographical memory, can be considered as a kind of autobiographical story. As stated by Harald Welzer, the reception of the event, which the author tells about in his story, depends on media patterns: biographical eyewitness narratives are shaped according to ready and available models, both at the level of the experience as well as the story about it. In this sense, it is rather stories that create their authors than the authors creating their stories (Welzer 2009, 43). Thus, we can conclude that the memoirs are biased, just like their reception perspectives.

As Kalinovsky stressed, it is almost axiomatic among senior Soviet officers who fought in Afghanistan, and then spoke or wrote about it, that the military was able to carry out its duty and did not lose the war (Kalinovsky 2011, 37). One of the best known books written by Afghan’s veterans is *Трагедия и доблесть Афгана* (Tragediia i doblest’ Afgana) by Major General Alexander Lyakhovskii. His book includes a large number of primary sources, previously unpublished and secret, as well as memories of direct participants in hostilities. This made it possible to show the complex decision-making process by the Soviet leadership to start interventions in Afghanistan and an

analysis of the Soviet army's actions (Liakhovskii 1995, *От автора*; Ляховский 1995, *От автора*).

Afghan veterans admit that their attitudes to the conflict were gradually changing. Initially, many of them believed in the official statements concerning "internationalist aid"; however, with the expansion of the sphere of hostilities the question appeared: "Why are we here?" The Soviet presence was at that time justified by the defence of the southern boundaries of the state. However, once the decision about withdrawing the troops was taken, there were frequent discussions between soldiers: "'Если эта война – политическая ошибка, то почему мы должны и дальше рисковать своей жизнью?' 'Кто мы теперь и как нас после всего этого встретят дома? Как будут называть? Жертвы политической ошибки? Убийцы?'" ("If this war is a political mistake, why should we continue to risk our lives?' 'Who are we now, and how will they welcome us home after all that? How will they call us? The victims of a political error? Murderers?"). In the army there was a widespread opinion that the soldiers were betrayed and were no longer needed. Thus, many soldiers began to associate the birth of democracy with treason. In the letters, diaries, and memoirs of privates who were sent to the front usually directly from the school benches, the high degree of emotionality can be noticed. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers found themselves in a foreign country, completely incomprehensible and culturally alien (Seniavskaia, *Protivniki Rossii...*; Сенявская, *Противники России...*, 87-88).

Braithwaite recalled that the "Afghans", the soldiers involved in the fighting in Afghanistan, came from all parts of the Soviet Union. Returning to normal life was for them a big challenge, with which not everyone was able to cope: "Many took years to find their feet again in civilian life. Some never did. None shook free of the memories of their common war" (Braithwaite 2011, 8). The researcher also added that the experience of the terrible things that they had observed or which the soldiers had done came back in memories that torment them. Stories of heroism and brotherhood are helpful in coping with the past. They also give the experiences a specific meaning. Some even claim that the war years were the best years of their lives (Braithwaite 2011, 336).

On the one hand, a negative attitude to the war itself in society began to affect the soldiers. Veterans of the war in Afghanistan turned out to be unwanted, useless, not only for the authorities but also for the whole society. Certain freedom of the Soviet press, introduced by Gorbachev, resulted it becoming possible to publish without restrictions negative opinions about the war. This, in turn, was associated with the critique of the army activities in Afghanistan. A difficult experience for soldiers returning home was a discrepancy between their inner feeling that they had suffered a lot while fulfilling their duty, and indifference or even hostility they encountered from the society (Braithwaite 2011, 245). Braithwaite writes, "The contrast between the reality of the fighting and the almost total inability of the civilians to understand what was really going on was sometimes too much to bear" (Braithwaite 2011, 249).

On the other hand, the Soviet society's dominant attitude was to forget this war as soon as possible, which was one of the manifestations of the "Afghan syndrome," that

is post-traumatic neurosis associated with the war in Afghanistan. This tendency was a mechanism of social forgetting, which can be regarded as a change of attitude towards the past. Only years later there began to appear more rational attempts to explain the causes, course, outcome and consequences of the war in Afghanistan, but in fact they are limited to a narrow circle of specialists, not to mass awareness (Seniavskaia, *Protivniki Rossii...*; Сенявская, *Противники России...*, 88).

Despite the passage of the years, the assessment of the Afghan conflict is still very divergent, both in the environment of the politicians, and its direct participants. After 25 years since the end of the conflict, Vasilii Likhachev, the deputy to the State Duma of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, stated that one can agree with the opinion that Russia was fulfilling then its internationalist obligation, and Soviet troops were introduced into Afghanistan at the request of the governing bodies of this country. However, if the foreign policy of the USSR was at that time conducted on the basis of a deeper geopolitical analysis, many problems could have been solved with the help of such organizations as the UN or the OSCE. The obstacle to this, however, was also euphoria induced by power and strength of the state. The history of Afghanistan has also not been taken into account, as well as the fact that this country has never been seized by anyone. According to the deputy, Russia should learn a lesson from this, namely—it should be politically and technologically strong, so that there was no possibility to break its borders from any side. Russia should be a non-aggressive country, civilized, wise, but at the same time strong and ready to fight (Andreev; Андреев [et al.]). Konstantin Sokolov, a vice president of the Academy of Geopolitical Problems, views the political aspect of this conflict in a different way, stating that both, the introduction and the withdrawal of the troops was a mistake. This first step was poorly organized, but it should be kept in mind that it not only started the war, but also the beginning of the transformation of Afghanistan. After ten years, when the stabilization of the country was nearing, the withdrawal of the Soviet troops led to the transformation of Afghanistan into the powerful drug manufacturer (Andreev et al.; Андреев et al.).

### **Veterans Remember**

The perception of the Afghan war in the veteran environment focused on diverse aspects. There are opinions that the public should not forget the direct participants of those events. As Valerii Marchenko, a veteran of the Afghan war, stated: “Их, солдат своей страны, не в чем упрекнуть—они с честью выполнили свой долг перед Родиной. Никто не должен быть забыт” (“The soldiers cannot be blamed—they fulfilled their duty to their Fatherland with honours. No one should be forgotten”) (“*Kto ne pomnit...*; “*Кто не помнит...*”). It is to them that Marchenko dedicated his books: *Афган: разведка ВДВ в действии* (Afghan: Espionage of the Airborne Troops in Action, 2009), *Вектор Афган* (Vector Afghan), *Там, где небо касается гор* (Where the Sky Touches the Mountains). There are also publications that interpret activities of the Soviet Army in Afghanistan with a laudatory tone. As Nikolai Marchuk, the author of *Необъявленная война в Афганистане: официальная версия и уроки правды* (Undeclared War in Afghanistan,

1993), states: the official version and the lessons of truth:

Никакие перемены политической конъюнктуры не смогут принизить величие подвигов, совершенных советскими людьми. Жизнью и смертью своей они укрепляли авторитет нашего Отечества, утверждая верность таким святым понятиям, как патриотизм, честное выполнение союзнических обязательств (No changes in the political situation will be able to diminish the size of heroic deeds made by the Soviet people. They strengthened the authority of our Homeland with their lives and deaths, confirming fidelity to such holy concepts like patriotism, true fulfilment of allied commitments) (Marchuk; Марчук 1993, 7).

Despite many memoirs which describe the events of the conflict in detail, websites run by veterans, in the minds of the public, journalists, and filmmakers there still persist beliefs about the “mindless bloody war”, “mountains of corpses”, “rivers of blood”, as well as veterans, many of whom had mental problems and then fell into addictions (alcoholism, drug addiction) before finally becoming bandits. In contrast to the Chechen campaigns, the Afghan conflict was a secret and the public had little information about it, which contributed to the shaping of myths and distorting the image of the war. Their analysis was undertaken by a journalist and a veteran of the Afghan war, Aleksei Kozlachkov. According to one of them, it was a thoughtless and criminal war. This slogan is repeated by both, the veterans and the authors of books about the conflict. From this myth other ones originate. Kozlachkov stresses, however, that the control of border territories is the basis of geopolitics. The introduction of troops was dictated by the real danger that the Afghan government would enter into an alliance with the U.S., so it is unreasonable to speak of thoughtlessness of the conflict. The loss of life was also smaller than the American losses in Vietnam and the Russian losses during the first Chechen campaign. In a historical perspective one can even say that the Afghan campaign was one of the best organized wars of the USSR, and perhaps of the Tsarist Russia (modern Russia was considered to be much less organized in the military sense). The lives of the soldiers were under special protection, and commanders were responsible for the loss of life. The perception of poor training is also false: every soldier who landed in Afghanistan had a minimum half-year training. In over two years of service, Kozlachkov did not witness any act of violence or plunder. In his opinion, war was a more natural state for humanity than peace, therefore, not every participant in the Afghan war had to lose his mind, get addicted, or become a criminal. He admitted that among his friends, only one veteran fell into alcoholism, and the rest without a problem found their place in a country free from war. Many of them had additional war experiences, after which they have been educated, and currently lead a successful life (Kozlachkov; Козлачков).

However, soldiers' return to civilian life was in fact very difficult: there was no work, prostheses, wheelchairs, cash benefits were low. The biggest problem was the issue of housing. The veterans had to deal with the trauma and abandon their (not uncommon) brutal behavior acquired in Afghanistan. In February 1989, the

“Afgantsy” received the formal status of “Warrior-Internationalists”. However, they wanted to gain the same status as veterans of the Second World War (Braithwaite 2011, 313-315). The demands of veterans also included a review of a negative assessment of the political conflict. In their opinion, a too-hasty assessment of the war led to a reduction in their social security benefits (*7 istoricheskikh...; 7 исторических...*). The Act on veterans, revised in 1995, granted the “Afgantsy” full status and the title of “veterans.” Although it guaranteed them extensive social benefits, the issue related with paying the benefits was for a long time complex (Braithwaite 2011, 318).

Social organizations uniting former soldiers, including The Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (Союз ветеранов Афганистана, 1989), the Russian Fund for Invalids of the War in Afghanistan (Российский Фонд инвалидов войны в Афганистане, 1991) —now called All-Russian Society of Afghanistan War Invalids and War Injuries —“War Invalids” (Общероссийская общественная организация инвалидов войны в Афганистане и военной травмы - “Инвалиды войны”), the Brotherhood of Arms (Боевое братство, 1997, under the leadership of General Gromov) engage in the struggle for the rights and benefits for veterans (Braithwaite 2011, 358-359). Organizations of veterans from Afghanistan began to be formed around 1985, and in some regions as early as in 1983. Since 1986, the governing bodies began to call for the establishment of such organizations just as such needs emerged (Danilova; Данилова). In 1990 a social organization was established, the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (Российский Союз ветеранов Афганистана), a member of the World Veterans Association. It has about 500,000 members and has 78 regional offices throughout Russia. Its task is to fight for improved conditions of veterans’ lives, commemorating the fallen, the military-patriotic education of youth, the creation of clubs with the military-patriotic and sports profile, as well as youth ranger clubs (*Rossiiskii Soiuz...; Российский Союз...*).

One of the first web servers devoted to the Afghan war was started in 1997 by veteran Vladimir Grigoriev, [www.afgan.ru](http://www.afgan.ru). The server provides a platform for contacts between veterans, a database of their rights, as well as a place of commemoration of fallen comrades. The website also collects works of veterans and photographs of the conflicts in which they participated. The online project “ArtOfWar” ([www.artofwar.ru](http://www.artofwar.ru)) is also worth mentioning. It is dedicated to the veterans of various wars, including Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Chechnya. The site was opened in 1998 and consists primarily of multi-profile veterans’ literature works. It also allows one to find comrade-veterans and resolve legal issues regarding the post-war existence.

These institutions and websites were created in order to protect the memory about the dedication and commitment of the Soviet soldiers, which can be justified by words of Aleida Assmann: “Historyczna trauma wspólnego doświadczenia bycia ofiarą osadza się w pamięci zbiorowej jako niezacieralny ślad i zapewnia silny związek dotkniętej grupy” (“The historical trauma of the joint experience of being a victim is deposited in the collective memory as an unfading track and provides a strong relationship of the affected group”) (Assmann 2009b, 166). The above mentioned organizations are examples of direct communication in a social group, associated with the mission to

pass on personal experience in the community memory. Today the Internet allows veterans to skip organizational structures and to establish direct contacts between themselves, as well as to search for brothers in arms (Braithwaite 2011, 325-326). It is worth mentioning that individual memory could not exist or continue without frames of social reference. An individual, who would grow in complete solitude, would not have memory because memories, including those of a personal nature, are created through communication and interactions within social groups. The individual memory is formed by the participation of an individual in the processes of communication. Thus, we can conclude that memory lives in and is due to communication (Assmann 2008, 50-53).

### **The Public Remembers: Carriers of Russian Social Memory**

Considering the impact of the Afghan war on the cultural memory of the Russians, it is worth analysing public opinion surveys devoted to this conflict. Public opinion surveys from different years show evidence that in Russian society the memory of the war in Afghanistan is considered painful chapter of the native history; moreover, the perception of the war is very different depending on whether or not a person had a direct experience of war in Afghanistan. According to a survey conducted in December 1989 among approximately 15,000 respondents (half of which experienced the war in Afghanistan), the presence of the Soviet troops in Afghanistan has been assessed as “the fulfillment of internationalist duty” by 35% of respondents who were veterans and only 10% of respondents from non-military groups. 19% of the veterans and 30% of non-soldiers considered war as “discrediting the notion of internationalist duty,” whereas 17% of veterans and 46% of non-soldiers described it as “our disgrace.” On the other hand, 17% of veterans chose the answer “I’m proud of it!” Only 6% of non-soldiers selected this answer (Seniavskaia, *Protivniki Rossii...; Сеньевская, Противники России...*, 88).

In 1991, the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Centre conducted a survey aimed to analyse the evolution of the attitude of the Russians to the events in Afghanistan. The study showed that as many as 89% of Russians thought that it had been unnecessary to introduce the Soviet army to Afghanistan. Only 3% believed that these actions were necessary. One percent more said that the war should have been conducted up to a victorious end. On the other hand, 83% of respondents did not agree with this opinion. As many as 69% of respondents stated that sending the troops to Afghanistan had been a national crime. According to 57% of the Russians, this step was primarily a political disturbance, and 19% said that it was necessary to protect the geopolitical interests of the Soviet Union (*Военные авантюры...; Военные авантюры...*).

It is worth noting that despite the passage of time, the majority of Russians negatively evaluated the discussed conflict. A public opinion poll conducted at the beginning of 2014 (by Iurii Levada Analytical Centre) among 1,603 people living in 45 regions has revealed that the Russians are convinced that there was no need to conduct this war: as many as 68% believed that it was not necessary to introduce Soviet troops to Afghanistan, while 9% believed it was the right step and 23% were not

able to clearly answer the question. 44% of respondents believed that the introduction of troops was a state crime, 22% was of a different opinion, and 34% did not choose any of these options. Almost half of the respondents (45%) agreed with the statement that the introduction of the troops was a political disturbance into which the Soviet Union was involved by its leaders. 23% of respondents felt it was a necessary step to protect the geopolitical interests of the USSR, to prevent the strengthening of American influence in this region. Every tenth respondent was of the opinion that the Soviet army in Afghanistan fulfilled its internationalist duty, helping the local population. Only 7% believed this war to be fair (*Rossiane schitaiut...; Россияне считают...*).

The previously mentioned studies show that the Russians' social memory is actively processing this difficult history period even in the present. As Golka stated, the continuation of the social memory is a manifestation of the continuation of the community and culture (Golka 2009, 7). At the same time, such a reception of the Afghan conflict in Russia proves the words of the researcher that this kind of memory is usually prone to change; social memory creates social order, but its stability is dependent on this order (Golka 2009, 8). The war in Afghanistan has found its place in the metaphorical cultural memory of the Russians. This type of memory is expressed in a conscious relationship of the group to the past, embedded in a specific cultural space, passed through various forms of social communication: writings, holidays, rituals, images, and so on. This form of memory is distinguished by a more sacred, symbolic or abstract nature, therefore it cannot be created by individuals but by organized institutions. They form a system that constructs a group identity. Through a conscious choice of the remembered past and modified forms of communication, a specific awareness of the past is created (Traba 2008, 15). According to Jan Assmann, this kind of memory is inherited from generation to generation through cultural communication (Assmann 2008, 68.104).

Currently, living memory more often gives way to memory constructed by the media. This type of memory is backed by some material carriers, such as monuments, memorials, museums and archives (Assmann 2009a, 106). Memorials honouring soldiers fighting in Afghanistan are in many cities of the former USSR, including Yekaterinburg, Norilsk, Ulyanovsk, Khabarovsk, Kiev, Odessa, Vilnius. They form a kind of a communication system that points to the commemoration policy of the state, society, and veterans. Monuments do not serve practical purposes. They are symbols, social memory carriers, constructing cultural memory (Traba 2008, 36-37). Through them the memory of the Afghan conflict is supported and passed on. As it will be shown below, the memory carriers—in this case, monuments—do not carry the same memory of all the people. Joanna Kabrońska indicated that the content of collective memory is the subject of disputes both within a community, as well as between communities and nations. Therefore, the canon of memory, by which the generally accepted version of historical events is to be understood, must be negotiated. This applies both to the content of memory and the interpretation of events (Kabrońska 2008, 38). Memorials can also be considered a place of forming and educating successive generations, whose task is to fill empty places in the collective consciousness of the community.

Kabrońska called the ritual of building a monument to commemorate the victims as the deep need of spiritual healing, stressing the fact that only commemoration can ease the pain of loss (Kabrońska 2008, 98-108).

Nataliia Danilova, a sociologist, emphasized that the war in Afghanistan has become one of the first experiences to commemorate a military conflict, which generally is not regarded as heroic. War memorials may be considered in this context not only as the embodiment of national history, but also as symbols, reflecting the parameters of modern society functioning. The culture to commemorate the Afghan war can thus be understood in the following way: “одновременно, как конструируемый и в то же время структурно обусловленный феномен, зависимый от политики государства в отношении войны и ее участников, а также от коллективного чувства утраты, испытываемого участниками коммеморации” (“[A]t the same time, as a constructed and simultaneously structurally conditioned phenomenon, dependent on the state policy towards the war and its participants, as well as on the collective sense of loss, experienced by commemoration participants”) (Danilova; Данилова). Brothers in arms feel the duty and responsibility towards those who died. Families painfully feel the inability to compensate the loss of their relative. Therefore, the participation in commemoration allows them at least to some extent to feel compassion of the society by recognizing the symbolic significance of their loss. From the moment of establishing the veterans' organization, the sacralisation of memory of the fallen has become their most important task. This type of activity is even more important than the fight for the protection of the rights and benefits of participants of the war. In order to collect funds for the construction of monuments, public events are organized that are intended to attract public attention to this problem. In the early 1990-ties, veterans almost could not count on help from the federal government, which explained its lack of commitment by the fact that it is not responsible for sending troops to war. This approach of state authorities changed at the end of the decade, when political reassessment of the Afghan conflict started. In 1999, according to statistics of the Russian Union of Afghan Veterans, there were 332 monuments in Russia (Danilova; Данилова).

The researcher distinguished three types of monuments, showing different approaches to commemorate the war: brotherhood of war; repentance or political contract; triumph of power or a small version of the “big” war. Monuments dedicated to the theme of brotherhood are the typical form of the memory of the fallen. It should be emphasized that in these monuments there are no symbols depicting society, parents of the dead, and the weeping mother—a traditional theme in the Russian commemoration culture. Thus, the locality and the closed nature of the group is emphasized. The sense of betrayal on the part of civil society was manifest in the abandonment of symbols of public involvement in the war. Personages used in these representations are those grieving alive and fallen soldiers, rescuing the wounded (a combatant is carrying out the wounded from the battlefield), and symbols of death (“The Black Tulip”<sup>5</sup>). The monument in Murmansk contains a touching epitaph: “Простите нас за то, что мы остались живы” (“Forgive us that we survived”). The symbolism of airborne forces is often used.<sup>6</sup> Danilova drew attention to the fact that in some cities, monuments

are located at a military cemetery or opposite of a monument to the heroes of the Great Patriotic War. This way they fit into the space of commemorating the Second World War, which symbolizes the succession and the connection of experiences. The second group of monuments shows religious subjects using the symbols of the dome, a contour of the Orthodox Church, the cross (for example, at Omsk). Religious themes can be interpreted as a kind of “repentance” of society towards the participants of the war. Also, it is noteworthy to mention the political role of the Orthodox Church: monuments with religious themes appear from the late 1990s, the time when Orthodoxy began to occupy a permanent place in the political space of Russia. Thus, the Orthodox Church has been instrumentalized by the authorities to strengthen their position in the society. The third group of monuments includes those that reproduce the war, which is traditional for the Soviet context as far as commemorating the dead is concerned. They are monumental. They use the symbols of eternal fire and the figure of a weeping mother. They are located in public places next to monuments of soldiers of the Second World War. In this context, a monument to the fallen in Afghanistan begins to function as a tool of the state ideology and its national project re-shaping memory of the Afghan war (e.g. a monument at the Prospect of Glory in St. Petersburg). The formality of such compositions makes them less popular among veterans and relatives of the dead. This is because there is a clash of official form of sacralisation of memory and the individual memory of the participants in the war (Danilova; Данилова).

Important memory carriers which will be also analysed in this text are works of literature, songs, films and TV series. They have the possibility to deliver their message to a wide variety of diverse audiences, which makes them having a significant impact on the formation of the cultural memory. Literature is an essential medium shaping cultural memory, serving as the medial framework for the construction of autobiographical memories taking place in social contexts (Erll 2009, 226-228).<sup>7</sup> The stories *Жизнь и смерть сержанта Шеломова* (The Life and Death of Sergeant Shelomov, 1992) by Andrei Zhitkov and *Десантная группа* (The Landing Group, 1992) by Vladimir Rybakov describe the Afghan war. Both were published in 1992, and both were most likely written by eyewitnesses to the events. The stories end in tragedy; the main characters die. These works are examples of the prose of the soldiers and officers, continuing the tradition of military literature, especially the one devoted to the Great Patriotic War. As noted by Paweł Malov-Boichevskii, it is a completely different war and completely different soldiers taking part in it. The first story presents the phenomenon of bullying in the army. Evocative descriptions of violence between soldiers stand in vivid contrast to the efforts undertaken for years by the authorities aiming to convince the public that in Afghanistan this pathology has not occurred due to the brotherhood of soldiers which flourished there. Zhitkov shows, however, that older soldiers bully those of lower rank, beat them, force them to work beyond their strength, and stand at the checkpoint in a different order. The story also presents other negative aspects of the war in Afghanistan: drunkenness, drug addiction, and marauding. Nevertheless, the main character of Rybakov’s story—Lieutenant Borisov—cannot accept the fact that soon he will have to leave Afghanistan. Such concepts as honour of uniform, the

prestige of the state, soldier's duty are key factors for him. He still naively believes that the Soviet army in Afghanistan fulfils an internationalist duty. In contrast, the soldiers surrounding him want as quickly as possible to return home, which results in his inner protest. This work also abolishes the myth of a righteous Soviet soldier: after each battle the soldiers searched the killed dushmen and the money found was spent on bribes for senior officers, purchasing of vodka, and aiding families of soldiers fallen in Afghanistan. These books not only denounce and expose the cruelty of war, but call to draw political conclusions from the Afghan events (Malov-Boichevskii; Малов-Бойчевский). Another important work dedicated to the war in Afghanistan is a novel *В двух шагах от рая* (Two Steps To Paradise, 2006) by Mikhail Evstaf'ev, who went to Afghanistan as a volunteer. The work shows a panoramic view of the war conflict, presents numerous figures of soldiers at different levels of the military hierarchy, the fate of which served as a canvas to create a saga about the fate of Russia. The novel is an expression of the author's pain, highlighting the dramatic spiritual and physical experiences of soldiers involved in the war (Stebelev; Стебелев). These three works suggest that literature plays a central role mainly in the memories of the individual life experiences.

The songs of Soviet soldiers fighting in Afghanistan are an important memory carrier about the Afghan war. They create original soldiers' folklore containing such motifs as fatigue by fighting, memories of severe battles, the desire to survive and return home as soon as possible, uncertainty about the future, but also courage and heroism of the soldiers. They reflect the moods, feelings and reality of the war, for example,

Под небом чужим:  
(...) Ах, как хочется мне,  
Заглянув в амбразуру,  
Пулеметом глушить  
По России печаль  
(Under foreign skies:  
(...) Oh, how I want,  
Glancing to the porthole,  
Suppress with a machine gun  
The sadness over Russia) (*Afganistan v ognе; Афганистан в огне* 1985, 59)

As emphasized by Alla Sergeeva, in the Russian culture, love of one's country is inseparable from love for the native land, the landscape, and even the state. This is connected with the fact that for centuries the Russian soldier fought "for faith, tsar and fatherland," therefore these elements are closely related (Sergeeva; Сереева 2004, 17).

One of the first Afghan war-related songs by Victor Verstakov, a war correspondent of "Правда", was *9 рота* (The 9th Company). The song was banned, and customs officials confiscated copies of the text and removed the recordings from cassette tapes

(Ivanov; Иванов 1993). Such songs were the first to reveal the truth about events in distant Afghanistan:

Войну мы тогда называли работа,  
а все же она оставалась войной.  
Идет по Кабулу девятая рота,  
и нет никого у нее за спиной  
(We called then the war our work,  
and yet it remained the war.  
The 9th company walks around Kabul,  
and there's no one behind) (Verstakov; Верстаков)

The Afghan motifs are a dominant of the pieces of the group “Голубые береты”, the cult band of the Russian Airborne Troops. The band began its activities in Afghanistan in 1985 by performing the songs of various artists. Its founder was a senior sergeant, Oleg Goncov. The most popular songs that have become standards of the “Afghan songs” are, for example, *У опасной черты* (At a Dangerous Line) and *Десант уходит в прорыв* (Airborne Troops Interrupt the Front). The band has also become an important instrument of patriotic education of youth. The band's music focuses on the themes of war, male friendship, fidelity, honour, and home country. It is worth noting that the money from the concerts was passed to local veterans' organizations for the purpose of construction of monuments, to help invalids and families of the fallen. The band's songs provided moral support for the troops, especially in the face of widespread criticism of the army. After 1990, observations of negative situations (that were noticed during performing in different parts of the country) were included in the group's repertoire while performing in different parts of the country: the disintegration of the country and the army, opposition to negative public perceptions of veterans from Afghanistan, armed conflicts (*Вы нас туда послали!* [You've sent us there!], *Погоны России* [Russia's Shoulder Boards] (“Голубые береты”). In 1996, Goncov founded the group “РОСТОВ” (Российское творческое объединение ветеранов [Russian Creative Union of Veterans]) that also focused on patriotic and military education of youth (Kukharenko; Кухаренко 2008). Iurii Slatov songs were popular, e.g. *Ордена не продаются* (Medals Are Not for Sale), *У трапа самолета* (At the Steps of the Plane), *Пароль – Афган* (Password – Afghan). Slatov's song *Память* (Memory) became the anthem of the airborne soldiers from Afghanistan. Slatov has also performed with the band “Голубые береты”.

References to the motifs of the Afghan conflict are also present in popular music, especially the kind referring to patriotic feelings.<sup>8</sup> The themes of war are mentioned in the works by Aleksandr Rozenbaum, a representative of stage songs, a Distinguished Artist of Russian Federation (1996) and National Artist of Russian Federation (2001). Most of the songs of this trend are related to the Great Patriotic War (*Я часто просыпаюсь в тишине* [I often wake up in silence], *Проводи-ка меня, батя, да на войну...* [Walk me to the war, Dad...]). Some works have been devoted to the war

in Afghanistan: *Караван* (A Caravan), *Дорога длиною в жизнь* (Way of Life), *Монолог пилота "Чёрного тюльпана"* (A Monologue of a "Black Tulip" Pilot). The last song is a poignant story about the feelings of pilots carrying the coffins of killed Soviet soldiers in their twenties back to the Soviet Union. Rozenbaum frequently performed in the Soviet military units located in Afghanistan. Iurii Shevchuk, the founder and leader of the "ДДТ" group, appeals to civic and patriotic motifs in his works and the need for moral self-improvement, rejection of violence, and overcoming hatred. In 1982, the band won the contest "Золотой камертон", announced by "Комсомольская правда", with the song *Не стреляй* (Do Not Shoot), calling for pacifism and showing mental trauma of the veterans.

Songs dedicated to the war in Afghanistan receive very different comments (some are offensive). Here are some examples of such statements that emphasize admiration for the courage and bravery of Soviet soldiers, the pride of their dedication, as well as unjust attitudes towards them from the authorities:

(as sas) Слушаю песню слезы не сдержать ВЕЧНАЯ ПАМЯТЬ ВСЕМ КТО БЫЛ ТАМ И НЕВЕРНУЛИСЬ!!!! это незабыть некому никогда! (I listen to the song, it's difficult not to cry, ETERNAL MEMORY TO ALL WHO WERE THERE AND DID NOT COME BACK!!!! no one can ever forget it!)

(Farkas013) воевали за страну которой нет!!! жаль что правительсива многих бывших союзных республик чуть ли не преступниками ветеранов афгана считают... (They fought for a country that no longer exists! It's a pity that the governments of many of the former allied republics think of Afghan veterans almost as criminals.)

(OlshDeflagration) Старшие братья с честью прошли свой путь, верю и мы не оскраимся, если время придет вновь, а оно придет... (Older brothers with honour went their way, I believe that we will not disgrace ourselves, if the time comes again, and it will come.)

(Ivan Z) Настоящие сыновья своей потерянной РОДИНЫ ... (The true sons of their lost HOMELAND)

(Maxim 499) Слава Всем Солдатам воевавшим в Афганистане! (Glory to All Soldiers fighting in Afghanistan!)<sup>9</sup>

One memory carrier that processes and transmits the memory of the war in Afghanistan, especially to the younger generation, is the cinema. Films focused on the Afghan war began to emerge in the '80s – on both sides of the Iron Curtain (e.g. *Rambo III*, dir. by Peter MacDonald, 1988) depicts fictional events during the Afghan war). One of the best films of the presented conflict *Афганский излом* (Afghan Breakdown) of 1991 directed by Vladimir Bortko is considered. This war drama film reveals new and unexpected trials that war situation put before soldiers; another scene of this hell on earth during the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Many veterans regard this movie as the best account of the Afghan war. Also worthy of mention is Vladimir Khotinenko' film *Мусульманин* (A Moslem, 1995). This philosophical movie shows the drama of a man who spent seven years in Afghan captive, converted to Islam,

and returned to his homeland did not find understanding. Thus, the film presents the formation of the personality, faith, different perceptions of good and evil, difficulties in accepting what is new and different.

One of the most popular films on the war in Afghanistan still is *9 poma (The 9th Company)* directed in 2005 by Fedor Bondarchuk. The film presents the fate of a group of recruits who began their military service in the late 1980-ties and after a few months of training were sent to Afghanistan. The film shows the events that occurred during the Operation “Magistral” in the beginning of 1988, when the 9th Company fought at a height of 3234 meters. At that time the Soviet authorities decided to withdraw the troops, but due to confusion, the authorities forget the 9th Company. After heavy fighting against the prevalent forces of the enemy, almost the entire contingent was killed. Liutyj, the only soldier who survived, however, is sure that his company has won its war. In many details the film is different from the real events (a different season of the year, a different place and time of the battle, a different number of the killed). However, for the film director, the message of the film was the most important:

Это фильм о моем поколении, о войне, о товариществе. Про мужскую любовь, про подвиг, предательство и верность. Та правда, которую я стремился показать в кадре, возможно, не понравится генералам. Но наши консультанты—солдаты, которые были в Афганистане,—после просмотра выходили в состоянии эмоционального подъема. Для меня это имеет огромное значение. Я готов к тому, что эту картину будут ругать высокие чины, которым не понравится мой взгляд (It is a movie about my generation, about the war, about the camaraderie. About men’s love, heroic deeds, betrayal and loyalty. Perhaps the generals will not like the truth, which I have tried to show in the picture. But our consultants—the soldiers who were in Afghanistan—came out in a state of emotional agitation after watching the film. For me it is very important. I realize that this picture will be criticized by those with high rank who will not like my point of view) (*Interv’iu i statti*, part 3, 1; *Интервью и статьи*, ч. 3, 1.).

In one of his interviews, Bondarchuk said that today many people do not know about that war to which young boys right after graduating from school had been sent. When 18-year-olds were sent to the Chechen front the public was outraged, but no one thought about the fact that a similar situation took place in Afghanistan within the same 10-year period. The director stressed that the Vietnam War haunts the U.S. to this day. In contrast, the Soviet Union participated in the war in Afghanistan for ten years, but after perestroika the war was forgotten. In the film, Bondarchuk was looking for the “hero of our time” and—as he says—it seems that he has found his. While shooting this picture, he thought of youthful idealism and illusions that are then lost. These illusions have been used by the authorities by sending young men to war, who were eager to see if they would be able to do a heroic deed (*Interv’iu i statti*, part 3, 1; *Интервью и статьи*, ч. 3, 1.). According to the director, the film is about how boys were becoming men. But not everyone is convinced whether Afghanistan could actually transform young people in the real patriots. The film is compared to the film

production *Они сражались за родину* (They Fought for Their Country, 1975) by Sergei Bondarchuk, Fyodor's father, which is one of the most poignant films about the Second World War. It is easy to notice the similarity of the subject, situations, characters—their tragic death as a result of irresponsible commanders (Выков; БЫКОВ).

The film was a box office success that also had a deep effect on viewers. Sergei Minaev, a journalist, admitted that after watching the film he was in a state of trance. He saw many men who smoked cigarettes in silence and wept after the screening. He emphasized that the film presents the characters who—most importantly—want to believe. It was also important that for the first time since the early 1990s the characters of a domestic film were not criminals or drug dealers. It turned out that national heroes can be ordinary boys from different parts of the Soviet Union, who then joined the army and died for their country. Thus, the film illustrates the national idea and the tragedy of the young generation (Minaev; МИНАЕВ). The film can be considered a tribute, a monument in honour of those who sacrificed their health, youth, and life to fight in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup>

The tragic fate of the Soviet soldiers who were captured was told by a war drama *Пешаварский вальс* (the Peshavar Waltz, dir. Timur Bekmambetov and Gennadii Kaiumov, 1994). The film was based on real events and shows an uprising of the Soviet and Afghan soldiers held captive in a Pakistani camp. These 'unofficial' soldiers, unrecognized by the Soviet Union, heroically sacrifice their lives so that the dushman camp could be abolished. Despite the numerous awards won at foreign film festivals, the film was not very popular in Russia. Much information about the rebellion shown in the film, during which all the soldiers (over twenty) were killed, is still shrouded in mystery. The governing bodies of the Soviet Union did not want to admit that Soviet soldiers were being held in camps, because according to the official version, the contingent of Soviet troops did not take part in combat operations (Shkurlatov; ШКУРЛАТОВ). Another film was made based on the motifs of the novel by Aleksandr Zviagintsev *Русский Рэмбо* (Russian Rambo, 1996). Called *Дезертир/Русский Рэмбо* (The Deserter/Russian Rambo, dir. Iurii Muzyka, 1997), this film shows the conflict between a soldier's duty and love for wife kidnapped by the dushmen. Lastly, the war film *Черная акула* (Black Shark, dir. Vitalii Lukin, 1993) presented the operation of the new Soviet military helicopter Ka-50 in the combat conditions in Afghanistan. It was the ideological predecessor of *9 рота* and the first movie filmed in the genre of Russian military-patriotic propaganda.

In addition to the cinema, television has been an essential medium shaping life attitudes about the Afghan war, especially of young audiences. The war was shown in a series *Охотники за караванами* (The Caravans Hunters, dir. S. Chekalov, 2010). That war drama was based on the works of Alexander Prochanov *Охотник за караванами* (The Caravans Hunters, 2003) and *Мусульманская свадьба* (Muslim Wedding, 1989). It presents the events of 1987, focusing on the Soviet Army's attempt to take over the new types of weapons ("stinger"). A war documentary series with the elements of historical reconstruction *Афганская война* should be mentioned (The Afghan War, dir. Aleksei and Tatian Krol, 2009). At the core of the screen-play is the book *Трагедия и*

*доблесть Афгана* (The Tragedy And Heroism of the Afghan, 1995) by a retired Major-General Aleksandr Liakhovskii. The film focuses on the struggle of Soviet troops with international terrorism and presents the points of view of all parties to the conflict. The production shows how a relatively small regional conflict can lead to a global problem of drug trafficking (*V Rossii snimut...; В России снимут...*).

The subject of the war in Afghanistan also reached the Internet, which provides a lot of possibilities for the development and popularization of the cultural memory. On the one hand, it can be said again, after Marian Golka, that the Internet is a boundless ocean of oblivion, which reduces individual memories to little remains. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that it is also a gigantic archive, collecting various data about the past and present and a very effective tool for their categorization (Golka 2009, 115-118). The motifs of the Afghan war appear on websites such as those featuring “demotivators” that are especially popular among and created mostly by the younger generation. According to Golka, young people “do not celebrate the collective memory anymore, and it happens that they distance themselves from it—they often distance themselves from tradition, seeing it as a burden and an obstacle” (Golka 2009, 66).

One of the demotivators shows a young veteran of the Afghan war with medals on his chest. Under his photo, there was a description: “Афганистан. ‘Афганистан, грохочет где-то пулемет’. Они сражались достойно и про них забыла родина” (“Afghanistan. ‘Afghanistan, a machine gun roars somewhere’. They fought with dignity and their homeland has forgotten them”) (*Afganistan; Афганистан...*). The commentary provides a clear criticism of the attitude of Russian society towards soldiers-veterans. Another picture shows the pain and tragedy of veterans who, despite the passage of decades, still experience what they experienced during the war. The demotivational poster shows a kneeling well-built veteran who is holding a blue beret in his hand. He looks at the burning fire, while holding the other hand on his heart. The description is very significant: “Афганистан болит в душе моей” (“Afghanistan hurts in my soul”) (*Afganistan bolit...; Афганистан болит...*). The next composition shows the sands of the desert reaching to the horizon: “Красиво и страшно... Афганистан...” (“Beautifully and terribly... Afghanistan...”) (*Krasivo i strashno...; Красиво и страшно...*). This clearly shows the threat which from the beginning was the war in Afghanistan, a country that has never been captured by anyone. Another demotivator presents two pictures: on the top picture one can see a column of Soviet troops withdrawing from Afghanistan; on the bottom a drug addict injects heroin. The commentary explains that the war was not pointless, and the withdrawal of troops contributed to making Afghanistan a powerful exporter of drugs: “Мы ушли из Афганистана, но что лучше—15 000 погибших за десять лет войны или миллионы погибших от афганского героина” (“We walked away from Afghanistan, but what is better—15,000 who died within ten years of war than millions killed by Afghan heroin”) (*My ushli...; Мы ушли ...*).

Demotivators can be considered as specific depreciation acts, communication events carrying axiological meaning. Małgorzata Majewska recognized depreciation as a linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour, deliberate or involuntary, the aim of which is to threaten the positive aspect of the interlocutor’s view, and is an attack on

his positively integrated self-image. In the context of the above-mentioned images, we can talk about the deliberate pursuit of the addresser to cast doubt and insecurity in the mind of the addressee, to force him to consider the difficult aspects of the late-Soviet history and the fate of those whose lives were ruined by war (Majewska 2005, 7).

As stated by Gregory Feifer, the war in Afghanistan affected not only those who have personally experienced it: "For many Soviets, it represented a last senile folly of the Brezhnev era. Gorbachev's 'bloody wound' highlighted the system's bankruptcy and undoubtedly to some degree helped speed the collapse of the Soviet Union" (Feifer 2009, 257). According to Braithwaite, most difficult for veterans was awareness of the difference between how they were treated and how their fathers and grandfathers, returning as heroes after a victory over Hitler, were greeted. However, the reception of the Afghan war changed over time: President Vladimir Putin restored a sense of pride in the history of Russia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially the history of the Soviet Union. Patriotism and glory of Russia's military history began to be emphasized. Consequently, the war in Afghanistan was looked at as a heroic episode, during which the soldiers fulfilled their military duty and defended the interests of the Soviet homeland (Braithwaite 2011, 324). In this context, celebrated anniversaries should be considered another important memory carrier.

The 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the withdrawal of troops was very solemnly celebrated in February 2009 at the Olympic Stadium in Moscow. About five thousand veterans and their family members came to the stadium. On Sunday, February 15—the anniversary day—there was a momentous ceremony in the Kremlin. Veterans could feel then, that after two decades of service and suffering in Afghanistan, that they had finally gained some recognition, even if the state for which they had fought, no longer existed (Braithwaite 2011, 326-327). This way the review process of memory took place, although one can also see elements of its instrumentalization. Memory can in fact very easily become the subject of political battle, an instrument of manipulation by politicians. Referring to the issue of official memory, Aleida Assmann emphasized its weak point, which consists in reliance on censorship and artificial animation. This contributes to the fact that the persistence of this type of memory is exactly like the durability of power that supports it (Assmann 2009a, 134). Also, it should be remembered that the collective memory is the memory of politics. Moreover, as long as communication memory is distributed and forms by itself, as well as falls apart by itself, the collective memory is directed from the outside and is characterized by a high degree of uniformity (Assmann 2009b, 164). At the same time, according to Golka: "Polityka pamięci jest niezbędną do uzyskania (czy odzyskania) spójności danej zbiorowości i skonstruowania jej tożsamości oraz w celu nakreślenia jakiejś perspektywy przyszłości – słowem, do stworzenia określonej formy ładu zbiorowego" ("The politics of memory is needed to obtain (or recover) the consistency of a given community and construct its identity and to outline some prospects for the future—in a word, to create a particular form of collective order") (Golka 2009, 125).

Gregory Feifer noted that the attitude of the Russians themselves towards to the war in Afghanistan changes. This is connected with the fact that Russia, rich in raw materials, wanted a new confrontation with the West in the twenty-first century, seeking to regain the lost position in the world:

And in Moscow, outward displays of patriotism and political loyalty again have become the going currency for getting ahead in business and politics. Veterans and students of the war are increasingly looking back at the conflict through a Cold War prism, speaking less about Moscow's mistakes in Afghanistan and more about the war's lessons for dealing with the United States. [...] Many veterans are proud of their service, fiercely loyal to their comrades, and highly critical of how the conflict was fought (Feifer 2009, 278-279).

Undoubtedly, the state and Russian society needs a fair settlement with the past, which is demonstrated by the number of contradictions in the evaluations disclosed in the Russians' opinions about these events. Considering the difficult process of dealing with this aspect of the Soviet past, Golka's words are worth recalling, which remind us that the past as the content of social memory is one of the components of the present which is most difficult to measure and determine. The evaluation of its impact on the future seems even more complicated (Golka 2009, 20). As Vladimir Kutiavin noted, the approach of the Russian state to the Soviet heritage is characterized by eclecticism, because on the one hand the Soviet anthem, rooted in the consciousness, is restored (with a small text change), while on the other hand, the very 'own' revolutionary holiday of November 7<sup>th</sup> is abolished (Kutiawin 2008, 39).

The above mentioned memory carriers proved that the history of the war in Afghanistan is a component of the social memory and an important element in the process of constructing cultural memory of the Russians. The multitude and variety of memory carriers, storing and transmitting to subsequent generations of Russians the memory of participants and observers shows that for a considerable part of the Russian society the Afghan conflict is an element of the constitution of identity. Moreover, the events of several decades ago became the subjects of interest to a younger generation of Russians, which is another link in the chain of transmission of an appropriately modified cultural memory clothed in symbols.

In summary, we can identify the following mechanisms and procedures currently used by Russians to position information about events surrounding the Afghanistan war:

- emphasizing the heroism and courage of the Soviet soldiers (since taking office by President Vladimir Putin)
- noting the lack of stability in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the inability to control the situation in the country by U.S. and European forces
- commemorating fallen soldiers (monuments, obelisks)
- celebrating anniversaries associated with the Afghan events (withdrawal of Soviet troops)

- dispelling the assertion that in Afghanistan the Soviet Union was defeated
- on the part of some veterans, convincing the public of the false, distorted image of the Afghan war; denial of reports of poor Soviet military preparation; and the cases of violence from their side against the civilian population
- a firm belief among most of Russian society about the lack of justification for the conduct of that war
- reprocessing of the Afghan war experiences in memoirs, literary works, songs, films and series
- attempting to present the conflict in Afghanistan as a platform enabling young “boys” to become “men” (the film *9 poma*)
- creating demotivators as a way to present the Afghan events to the younger generation of Russians.

Thus, one can consider that the aim of constructing memory about the Afghan war is to shape a collective identity for Russian people, focusing closely around the pride and mighty power of the Soviet state. Its political functions revolve around the intention to continue the imperial tradition of the Soviet state in contemporary reality while rejecting the negative connotations for the former regime. However, the social functions of the formed identity consist of a quest to unite the diverse Russian society around the idea of a strong state, providing its citizens with stability and a sense of security (especially external one), which sharply contrasts with the politically and economically staggering Russian state after the fall of the USSR.

### Notes

- 1 This article was supported by funding from the Jagiellonian University within the SET project. The project is co-financed by the European Union.
- 2 Both the military actions in Afghanistan and in the North Caucasus have not received the official name “war”.
- 3 R. Braithwaite reports 15,051 people were killed in Afghanistan, or 2.4% of all in military service. Over 50,000 soldiers were wounded, and more than 10,000 became invalids (Braithwaite 2011, 329-330). For comparison, the total number of casualties as a result of the Vietnam War on the American side was more than 57,500 people. The war has cost the Americans \$165 billion (*Общие людские...*).
- 4 To read about the massacre of civilians in a village in northern Afghanistan, see *Czardara. Zapamietaj*, Vanves 1985. About the demoralization of the Soviet contingent, manufacture and use of alcohol (even making moonshine), and drugs (marijuana), see Feifer, 182-184. One of the former Soviet Afghan prisoners mentioned the murder of an Afghan captive, who was lashed to a cannon when a bullet was fired. He also admitted that the violation of military discipline was tolerated. *Афганистан в огне*, 37-39.
- 5 “Black Tulips” were four-engined transport planes carrying from Afghanistan to the Soviet Union coffins of fallen soldiers. Containers in which the coffins were transported were labelled with the cryptonym “Cargo 200.” Braithwaite, 253-257.
- 6 A landing uniform became a symbol identifying a participant of the war. Gradually,

August 2 (Ranger's Day) has become a holiday and a specific Victory Day for Afghan veterans. This date was chosen because the official date for the introduction of troops was not announced for a long time; moreover, the official dates had ideological significance, and the airborne troops in Afghanistan were the most numerous (Данилова).

- 7 A rich collection of novels and short stories written by the participants of the war in Afghanistan can be found on the website: *Афганская война*, <http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/AFGAN/> [accessed 7 April 2014].
- 8 About the music at the front, soldiers bards (e.g. Igor Morozov), see Braithwaite, 192-195.
- 9 See the comments under the video clip on the website: *Афган*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mTvPwAv2oI> [accessed 20 March 2014].
- 10 Eventually, the popularity of the film was used by the creators of computer games. A strategy game was created, called *9 рота* (The 9th Company), and a documentary game *Правда о девятой роте* (The Truth About the 9th Company), which is an interactive reconstruction of the historical battle of 7th and 8th January 1988. For the creators, such games were intended to form young people's patriotism and provide them with knowledge about the military issues, history and geography (*V ramkakh XII VRNS...; B ramkakh XII ВРНС...*).

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## Response

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### The Experience of Afghanistan and its Relevance for Post-Soviet Russia

#### Some Remarks From a Historical Perspective

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It has long been argued that the war in Afghanistan played a crucial role in the downfall of the USSR. It undermined the credibility of the old regime under Brezhnev and his successors and, perhaps more crucially, it also delegitimized Mikhail Gorbachev's reform policies (Sapper 1994; Galeotti 1995). Roughly three years after the last Soviet soldier left the Hindu Kush, the Soviet Union disintegrated. As Mark Galeotti quipped, the Sovietization of Afghanistan had failed—but what about the Afghanization of the USSR (1995, 1)? Today, in the light of frozen conflicts on Georgia's northern borders, in Karabakh and Transnistria as well as the ongoing war in the Donbas, this question remains relevant. The legacy of the war in Afghanistan is manifold but its lasting impact on the post-Soviet space is the spread of irregular violence and wild wars. The essay by Anna Kadykała shows, convincingly, how war and violence have left its imprint on the public imagination in Russia. Yet, crucially, I would argue that in the case of the Afghanistan War, the representation of the war in popular culture can hardly be separated from violent practices and the crisis of statehood that have shaped post-Soviet societies in the past decades. When it comes to violence, the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan may be interpreted as a crucial caesura, because

it formed a milieu of veterans and experts that gained influence on politics as well as culture. The war marked the beginning of the end of the more peaceful era of late socialism.

Any modern war is first fought and then remembered in the media. World War II or Vietnam may serve as examples in the Western world. They both left a deep imprint on popular culture. Much of the same holds true for Russia. The Stalinist invention of the "Great Fatherland War" has come to dominate official memory of war and conflict in the USSR and in Russia. Its narrative about love of the homeland, struggle against the fascist invaders and, most importantly, victory, came to legitimize Leonid Brezhnev's rule and was revived under Vladimir Putin. Today, the carefully administered myth of the "Great Fatherland War" is used to legitimize Russian statehood and authoritarian rule (Behrends 2015b). Simultaneously the narrative of Afghanistan—once in opposition to the official military culture of the USSR—is gradually finding a place in the official discourse. The controlled and scripted public sphere of Russia also shapes the way the Soviet past and its wars are remembered (Satter 2012; Pomerantsev 2014; Dubin 2011, 47–164). Yet, the representation of war and violence changed over time.

In the beginning, under Brezhnev and Andropov, the war in Afghanistan was kept secret. Officially, Soviet troops were simply fulfilling their "internationalist duty." Even under Mikhail Gorbachev it took a couple of years before *glasnost* would change the way the Soviet public could discuss the war in the Hindu Kush. In 1985, there was even an official document which laid out what could be

said about Afghanistan—and what had to remain secret. His policies opened the debate about the war and, more broadly, Soviet military culture. During the final years of the USSR and immediately after the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the war was often scandalized. The defeat weighed heavily on the reputation of the Soviet Army, but on top of that came stories about dysfunctionality, corruption, misconduct, abuse and war crimes committed in Afghanistan. The war was portrayed as a senseless endeavor: Young Soviet men had been sacrificed for a lost cause. Generally, the war in Afghanistan had contradicted Gorbachev's civilizing mission in the USSR. Under Stalin and during much of the Cold War the Soviet population was kept in a state of constant struggle and mobilization. Indeed, under communist rule the distinction between war and peace was often blurred (Lewada 1993, 116–138). Gorbachev and his team promoted civil values and tried to put an end to the glorification of war and military in the USSR. Yet, his reforms from above were not necessarily supported by large segments of society. Many *afgantsy* were frustrated because they did not gain the status of those veterans who had fought against Hitler (Fedor et al. 2015; Edele 2008). Rather, they often found themselves at the margins of society and had to struggle for recognition and material compensation. They frequently refuted the criticism of Soviet military culture. At the end of 1991 the empire they had served disintegrated and the Soviet Army was succeeded by more than a dozen national Armies—the Russian one being, of course, the largest and most important one. Still, from then on there would be not just one narrative about the Afghan War.

Rather, each of the successor states of the USSR made sense of the Afghan experience in its own way. Depending on where they lived the veterans of the war had to adapt to different circumstances and found themselves in different positions. Furthermore, each former Soviet republic attempted to regulate official memory of the Afghan War according to its own priorities. The imagined community of the Soviet *afgantsy* fell apart before it could establish itself as a political factor. Still, the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s were a short period where the disturbing and violent memories of the war in Afghanistan were discussed—in Russia and beyond. Svetlana Alexievich's iconic "Zinky Boys"—first published in 1991—represents this period (Alexievich 1991, 719–734; see also Behrends 2015a).

In the Russian Federation the prestige and the performance of the military remained low under Boris El'cin. While the first Russian president kept paying lip service to Gorbachev's project of civil reforms, he began to use the military widely against internal foes. In October 1993, El'cin moved tanks against the rebellious Supreme Soviet and its building was bombarded. Only months later, El'cin ordered the invasion of the break-away republic of Chechnya in the northern Caucasus. His attempt at retaking Chechnya was the first full-scale military operation of post-Soviet Russia. It was fought on its own soil and against its own citizens. The military violence in the Caucasus killed thousands of combatants as well as civilians (Tishkov 2004; Gilligan 2010). It failed to re-establish a more positive image of the armed forces. To the contrary, the tendency to harshly criticize the Army's conduct continued in the rela-

tively free press of the 1990s. The prestige of the Russian Army sank to a new low. The de-legitimization of the military tradition could have opened the way for a more civil Russia, where the Army would no longer be one of the main pillars of the state. But the process of civil reform from above—begun in 1985—ended during El'cin's presidency and his successor, Vladimir Putin, used the Russian state and controlled mass media to promote the image of the Armed Forces and to and to re-militarize society.

As part of this process, the Russian leadership also tried to change the way the Afghan War was remembered. A strong and heroic Russia, it was claimed, had only fought just and heroic wars. This claim had to be extended to the Afghan War. Over time post-Soviet Russia chose to remember the fallen conscripts as victims of a failed policy (Oushakine 2009, 130–201). The disturbing memory of violence of the war and the atrocities committed were increasingly filtered out of the picture. Beginning at the end of the 1990s the *afganets* was gradually turned into a nihilistic hero who did his duty in difficult times. The popular movie *deviataia rota* from 2005, mentioned by Kadykało, may be interpreted as one manifestation of this broader trend. Today we find an extensive literature in Russia on those who fought in “hot spots” (“*goriachie tochki*”) and their heroism. And, as Anna Kadykało correctly points out, the very fact that the USSR withdrew from Afghanistan and lost the war is nowadays often disputed. She shows how the memory of the war was and continues to be determined by political circumstance. The state and its institutions continue to be a powerful actor in the field of history

politics. Similar to Soviet times, conformity with the official narrative is once again expected in Russia. Those who resist the re-writing of history and state-induced myth making are being pushed to the margins of society.

The Russia of Vladimir Putin has seen a renaissance of the culture of violence and heroism that had characterized the USSR. The Russian leadership is the main sponsor of this trend. This may be observed in pop culture as well as the mass media in general. Many in the elite have a background from the military or the secret police—often including service in Afghanistan or Chechnya (Taylor 2011, 26–70; Kryschtanowskaja 2005). The official ideology of the state and Russia's ruling class once again glorify the military and war (Eltchaninoff 2015). The “normalization” of the Afghan experience is part and parcel of this larger process. Military culture has once again entered the realm of education and sports. The process of re-militarization of the public sphere became especially pronounced after Vladimir Putin returned to the president's office in 2012. It reached new heights during the conflict with Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014, the hybrid invasion of the Donbas and most recently the Russian air campaign in Syria were supported by emotional mobilization in state controlled TV. Russian citizens are expected to support government policy; dissenters are openly threatened and sometimes severely punished. Boris Nemcov, the opposition politician who attacked the Kremlin for the aggression against neighboring Ukraine, was murdered on the streets of central Moscow in February 2015. Resisting national mobilization and spreading the facts about Russia's military is once again dangerous.

Like during the Cold War, Russia is once again portrayed as a besieged fortress; in this cultural context a permanent state of war legitimizes aggression against neighboring states as well as internal repression. In many ways, Russia has gone full circle: the critical discourse triggered by the Afghan War has been replaced by state controlled militarization of politics and societies similar to the Soviet past.

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