Afgantsy: The Social, Political, and Cultural Legacy of a Forgotten Generation

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Abstract

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

During this time the war filtered through a range of domestic avenues, from emerging grassroots organizations, to conferences aimed at reinforcing the state narrative, to references in popular cinema. When in the years of glasnost public debate on the war was authorized, the only uniform perception of the afgantsy that emerged was that they were wrongfully deployed by the Politburo. After the Soviet Union dissolved on 26 December 1991 this verdict became redundant for many, and the historicization of the
Soviet-Afghan War along redrawn borders became a challenge for 15 independent countries.

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