**The impact of the Afghan War on soviet soldiers.**

*Defense of the Socialist Motherland is the sacred duty of every citizen of the USSR.*

Article 62, Soviet 1977 Constitution

Soviet invasion in Afghanistan started in December 1979, when the first military troops crossed the Afghan border. Only at the time of ‘perestroyka’, in the year 1988, Gorbachov, the leader of Politburo - start the process of withdrawing military troops from the territory of Afghanistan. Between 1979 and 1988, about 15,000 soldiers were killed, and many others were wounded. Gorbachov wanted to stop that war. He stopped it as a historical fact. But did he stop that war inside the hearts of thousands of veterans who came back to their homes? Did he prevent the negative impact of that war on soldiers’ lives? The answer is simple - no. My essay will give evidence in support of this opinion.

The Afghan War changed many people’s lives in the USSR. Still, in present-day Russia, the consequences of that war are appeared. The greatest impact of the Afghan War can be seen on the people who were there - soldiers who had to serve in Afghanistan and fulfill their ‘international duty’. The war for which there was no need, had destroyed many soldiers’ lives. Fifteen thousand of them had been killed, and many others had been injured, some having become invalids, unneeded to the government who had sent them to that war, and to the people who were not in the war. Every single young man who went to Afghanistan continued his life differently from the people who had never been there. The effect was due not merely to a war, but to the whole system of the ex-USSR. In my essay I will try to describe both of these effects on soldiers’ lives.

The new life for the eighteen year old boys began when they graduated from high school. Some of them became recruits during the spring draft, others during the fall draft. Recruits bound for Afghanistan would receive 8-10 weeks’ training before being sent to their units.[[1]](#endnote-1) From that moment they became subject to the subordination of officers through the formal channels of authority, and the informal of *dedovshina* (discrimination by the older soldiers). Newcomers were kept in line, while being beaten. This continued until the new soldiers agreed to acquiesce.[[2]](#endnote-2) That was just the beginning of soldiers’ lives, being sent to the war they all experienced in very different ways. The impact of fighting and the experience of killing, *dedovshina*, an alien military institution, and an alien land changed the characters and lives of the soldiers before they returned home. ‘*We were in an alien land. And why were we there? To this day, for some, it doesn’t matter.*’[[3]](#endnote-3)

War in Afghanistan was not exclusively a male war. Many of the women who volunteered to served in Afghanistan were nurses, others filled a variety of support or nurture roles (as cooks, for example). The rest were involved in paperwork or communication. For these in Afghanistan women the main problem became men. They attracted soldiers in Afghanistan not only as sex objects but also as mother figures.[[4]](#endnote-4) Often women were raped by soldiers who had been sent to Afghanistan instead of going to prison. Thus in the Soviet patriarchal society the belief that women who served in Afghanistan were whores or prostitutes took root. Here, a woman who had served in Afghanistan describes her feelings:

‘*You fulfilled your international duty in a bed’... My mother proudly announced to her friends: ‘My daughter was in Afghanistan.’ My naive mother! I want to write to her: ‘Mother, be quiet or you’ll hear people say your daughter is a prostitute.*’[[5]](#endnote-5)

After coming home, soldiers organized the form of a community that they had been accustomed to in Afghanistan, with their own customs and jargon. Coming back to normal life was enormously difficult for them, because of the reasons that I will explain in next paragraph. Thus, from the beginning they separated themselves from the surrounding society. Many veterans became members of Mafia groups. The lives of the returning soldiers differed from each other, but on one point it was the same for every veteran: they could not live normal lives in society, as they would have without having experienced the war. In the words of a veteran who had served in Afghanistan: ‘*You never really come home.*’[[6]](#endnote-6)

One of the main reason for veterans holding back from society was that civilians met soldiers coming back to homes without honor. Forty-six percent of civilians said that the Afghan war was a Russian national shame, and only 6% of them said that they were proud of their soldiers who had fulfilled their international duty in Afghanistan.[[7]](#endnote-7) Veterans felt that their efforts and endurance had not been wholly in vain. Often veterans became the object of criticism by media and public opinion. People thought that the war had made warriors of the men, and, in fear, kept away from veterans. The media blamed them - not the government - for taking part in the war and partly for losing it. Thus, after coming back, soldiers started to look with new eyes upon the society that had sent them to their death. While they had been in Afghanistan, the public and media had expressed contempt for the soldiers; after they returned, this sentiment only increased.

Disrespect to the people and to the governmental system became common among soldiers who were experiencing discrimination after having fulfilled their duty. This situation galvanized potential men, unhappy with their political system into striking. During the putsch of 1991, many veterans supported Mayor Sobchak, who supported the putsch against the new democratic government in Leningrad.

The long-term impact, and one of the most terrible consequences of the Afghan War, was the addiction of soldiers to alcohol and drugs. Death, drinking, and drugs became part of the veterans’ lives forever. Drugs were essential to the survival of the soldiers. Drugs helped them to carry 40 kilos of ammunition up and down the mountains, to overcome depression after their friends’ deaths, to prevail over the fear of death. Drugs and alcohol became the usual procedure of self-medication when other options were denied. The abuse of drugs created a generation of drug and alcohol addicts. According to the official reports of the Russian Department of Health Services, 40 millions medically certified alcoholics in 1985 were registered. Consumption of alcohol had increased 20,4% from its consumption in 1950-79.[[8]](#endnote-8) If these were official reports then it is possible that they were only a part of truth, and another part is like the bottom part of an iceberg - it cannot be predicted.

*There wasn’t a single person among us who did not try drugs in Afghanistan. You needed relaxation there, or you went out of your mind.*

Veteran of Afghan War[[9]](#endnote-9)

Coming back home, veterans found employment in many different fields, from driving buses to banking. But most of them started to work on the field which was closest to what they had done in Afghanistan. Emergency services such as the firemen, militia and rescue departments had a shortage of workers at that time and many of the Afghan veterans continued to work there. Finding a job was one of the privileges which the government gave to the veterans. This was maybe the only privilege which was really fulfilled. But this was a strategic maneuver for the Soviet government: to prevent veterans from assuming employment in the Union of Afghan War Veterans Society. The government was afraid of this Union because it united the most dangerous and prepared warriors in Russia.

Another major impact of the Afghan war on soldiers lives’ was injuries and mental disorders. ‘*Most of us came home. Only we all came home differently. Some of us on crutches, some of us with gray hair, many in zinc coffins.*’[[10]](#endnote-10) Although a medical service was established on a modern and highly effective level ( 93% of the troops received initial medical aid within 30 minutes and the attention of a specialized doctor within six hours), many soldiers became invalids during the war. Fifty thousand soldiers were wounded in action, of whom 11,371 became invalids and were unable to return to work, while 1,479 veterans received the most serious category of disability.[[11]](#endnote-11) These veterans were unable to continue working and leading normal lives. These circumstances forced them to live on the earnings of their family members and on the governments’ invalid benefit. But even these benefits were paid inconstantly and were extremely low. One of the privileges which Afghanistan veterans received was a flat in a newly built house. In the Soviet Russian system, which recognized no private ownership of property, every single citizen had to wait in a line of thousands of people before getting a flat. Afghanistan veterans were put at the beginning of that line, but corruption in the Russian bureaucracy had widened the process of granting new flats to the invalids and veterans. Thus when the free market economy was established in Russia and all the lines for the flats were canceled, people had to buy them with their own money, and many veterans and invalids of the Afghan War remained without their flats. Thus the bureaucratic system in Russia had left most of the veterans without their privileges and benefits.

One mother wrote in the letter to Politburo ‘*Why did you ruin my son, why did you spoil his mind and his soul?*’.[[12]](#endnote-12) While physical disability was relatively easy to prove and to cure, the psychological damage was far more complicated to diagnosis and to treat. Modern counter-insurgency wars involve a particularly high incidence of psychological damage; generally Post-Traumatic stress disorders, symptoms which include flashbacks, emotional numbness, withdrawal, jumpy hyperalertness or over-compensatory extroversion. This was caused partly because of the critical stresses of combat and injury. In most cases mental disorders were caused by unclear front-line zones. Soldiers had experienced mostly ‘road war’ without clear front-line meant that no place was safe. Soldiers were always ready for the battle alarm; there was no time to rest. ‘*Knowing their terrain well, the resistance fighters can move with ease at night and night vision equipment would enable them to train accurately their weapons on enemy targets...*’[[13]](#endnote-13) And how could soldiers relax, knowing that an unguided rocket could penetrate almost all security perimeters, that even a ten year old boy could carry and use a pistol or a grenade? One veteran recalled:

*...the leading vehicle broke down. The driver got out and lifted the bonnet - and the boy, about ten years old, rushed out and stabbed him in the back... We turned the boy into a sieve.*

Veteran of Afghan War[[14]](#endnote-14)

Another historical testament to that violence was found in a different source:

‘*...in early May 1981 they killed a number of children in the village of Kalakan, the stronghold of SAMA. The Russian soldiers were stated to have said, ‘When the children grow up they take up arms against us*’...’[[15]](#endnote-15)

How can people who killed a ten year old boy live normally after coming back to the motherland? Without safe place, restless - these circumstances may cause a healthy adult to become mentally imbalanced. What can it do to nineteen year old boys, who had been drafted just after finishing their school and who had not seen life yet? They can easily lose their minds. But psychological disorders became classified adequately to the status of invalid only later. Yet, no category of invalidity was given to that disability. Thus, mentally sick veterans had to live almost entirely on support from friends and family. In this way the government ignored the impact of the war, which was started by its decree, on soldiers’ lives.

In a normal society the killing of another man is not permitted; killers receive the death penalty. During the war this situation had been changed and in Afghanistan soldiers had received a license to kill their enemies, who were also human beings. With a machine-gun soldiers received the power of life and death and the feeling of authority to do what they wished became common among Russian soldiers in Afghanistan. Problems ensued when soldiers were unable to overcome that feeling once they has left their guns behind. Some soldiers, unable to square the demands of war with the demands of their conscience, were stamped with amorality. Others became compulsively violent. ‘*...they killed thirty-one villages, slaying them inside mosques, in lanes, or inside their homes.*’[[16]](#endnote-16) These circumstances created another impact of the Afghan War. By the end of 1989, about 3,000 veterans were in prisons for criminal offenses, while another 2,540 soldiers were imprisoned for crimes committed while serving in Afghanistan.[[17]](#endnote-17) Thus the Afghan War created criminals who were trained to kill. Among the crimes committed by soldiers in Afghanistan, the most common were hooliganism 12,6%, rape 11,8%, theft of personal property 12,4%, robbery 11,9% and murder 8,4% (these percentages were taken from the total number of 2,540 soldiers convicted of crime).[[18]](#endnote-18)

Thus the war had affected all of the soldiers who experienced it. Some became criminals, others became invalids without any actual support from the government. The rest had to face the psychological impact of the war, which was called as ‘afghan syndrome’ by the media. Most of these people decided to dedicate their lives to helping the victims of the Afghan War. In Leningrad, several organizations were created with the aim to aid physical and psychological victims of the war. LAVVA (Leningrad Association of Veterans of the War in Afghanistan), ‘*K* *sovesti*’ Leningrad Information-Publication Organization, ‘*Modul*’ Cultural-Leisure Center for Veterans of the Foreign War Association - these are just a few of many organizations created throughout the USSR.[[19]](#endnote-19) Left and unsupported by the government, these organizations aimed to provide extra facilities for the treatment of injured veterans, to compensate veterans fully or partly for the expenses of necessary treatment, to develop sports for invalid and to force the government to support the invalids’ rights.

Thus the experience of the Afghan War had a twofold impact on soldiers’ lives: first, the impact of the war itself and second, the impact of returning to a peaceful life after the war. In the words of one veteran:

*What did the war give to us? Thousands of mothers who lost sons, thousands of cripples, thousands of torn-up lives.[[20]](#endnote-20)*

While in Afghanistan, soldiers experienced discrimination by the older soldiers and by the officers. The foreign land, the experience of fighting, the death of friends, the highly difficult conditions of living, and the absence of a stimulus to fighting made most of the soldiers addicted to drugs and alcohol. Drugs became an easy source of relaxation because Afghanistan is one of the biggest suppliers of marijuana on the black market.

The term ‘lost generation’ can be applied towards the veterans of the Afghan War. This war had created a generation of alcoholics and drug addicts. It also made many young people invalids unable to work and to earn money on their own. The other ‘creation’ of the war in Afghanistan was the increased rate of violence and immoral behavior among soldiers and veterans of the war. These circumstances had made criminals out of 19 year old boys. Discrimination by the public opinion and media, and the unwillingness of the government to help victims of the war even increased the number of criminals, alcoholics and drug addicts among the veterans of the Afghan war.

**Footnotes:**

1. Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992), p.156. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* (London: Bookcraft (Bath) Ltd., Midsomer Norton, 1995), p.35. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam* , p.64. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* , p.41. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* , p.41. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* , p.45. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* , p.47. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* , p.51. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* , p.52. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam* , p.164. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* , p.68. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Diego Cordovez, Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1995), p.247. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Nasir Shansab, *Soviet Expansion in the Third World* (Maryland: Silver Spring, 1986), p.171. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* , p.69. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), p.241. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan* , p.241. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* , p.71. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* , p.72. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* , p.81. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam* , p.164.

    **Evaluation of the historical sources:**

    The book **Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War** by Mark Galeotti were used a number of materials written both in English and in Russian. Mostly the references I have used were taken by the author from articles from newspapers with the interviewees of veterans. I count this source of information as reliable because the author showed the point of view on the Afghan War of both veterans of Soviet military forces and from the United States, which supported Afghanistan during that war.

    **Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam** was written by a Soviet veteran who served in Afghanistan for two years. Of course he supported the Soviet’s military forces, so I used this source only to show the general mood of soldiers during the Afghan War. The author’s personal opinion was taken for this.

    **Afghanistan,** by Hassan Hakar, showed the Afghan War from the Afghan side. This source was predisposed against the Soviets, so I used it to show the other side of soldiers’ characters - the violence and murders of the civilian population of Afghanistan. This source would be not reliable if the facts were not proven by the other sources I used.

    **Out of Afghanistan**, by Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, was interesting because it supported both sides of the Afghan War with historical facts and documents. The book’s facts were based on official documents of both the Soviet and the Afghan governments. This source gave me a whole, truthful picture of what happened in Afghanistan. According to this information I built my opinion of what was the real impact of the Afghan War on the personal lives of soldiers while they were serving in Afghanistan.

    **Soviet Expansion in the Third World** by Nasir Shansab, whose nationality is afghan, was useful because showed the tragedy of afghan people without insulting the Soviet military forces. It also showed the Afghan army’s dangerous force of resistance.

    All these books after critical analysis gave me the information needed for my essay.

    **Bibliography:**

    1. Vladislav Tamarov, *Afghanistan: Soviet Vietnam* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992)
    2. Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* (London: Bookcraft (Bath) Ltd., Midsomer Norton, 1995)
    3. M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995)
    4. Nasir Shansab, *Soviet Expansion in the Third World* (Maryland: Silver Spring, 1986)
    5. Diego Cordovez, Selig S. Harrison, *Out of Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1995)

    [↑](#endnote-ref-20)