

“Some call us heroes, others call us killers.”¹ Experiencing violent spaces: Soviet soldiers in the Afghan War

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Using memories of and interviews with Soviet soldiers, the article discusses their experience of combat and physical violence during the Soviet War in Afghanistan (1979–1989). With Afghan statehood rapidly dissolving and little interest on the side of the Soviet military to enforce international law, Afghanistan quickly turned into a space where violence became the most important social resource. The soldiers and other Soviet personnel had to adapt to these conditions, which differed immensely from the late socialist society in the USSR. The article traces their immersion into the violent space and discusses their behavior while in Afghanistan. It points to the brutality of counterinsurgency combat and to the atrocities committed by both sides. In addition, it sheds light on the experience of serving in the Soviet Army during the last decade of the USSR. Many of the dysfunctions of the late socialist society were also prevalent – even amplified – while serving in the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. These problems were often exacerbated during the war and impeded the abilities of the Soviet Army. Upon their return from Afghanistan, many veterans found it difficult to return to civilian life in the USSR. Their immersion into the violent space was more rapid and formative than their return to socialist “normality.”

Keywords: USSR; Afghanistan; late socialism; Soviet Army; war; violence

Introduction

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan began in December 1979 and ended with the withdrawal of the last troops into Soviet Central Asia in February of 1989 (Kalinovsky 2011). Lasting for almost 10 years, it was the longest military conflict that involved a Communist state. Its significance for the last decade of the Soviet Union is undisputable (Galeotti 1995, 103–233). Still, while the diplomatic, military, and social implications of the Afghan War have been noted and discussed, the nature of violence experienced there, and its dynamics and consequences for the Soviet soldiers have received less attention. This is surprising because sources are available that provide graphic accounts of warfare, of the physical violence perpetrated against and by Soviet soldiers in combat with the enemy, within its own ranks, and against civilians. These descriptions allow for the conclusion that most of Afghanistan outside Kabul may be interpreted as a *Gewaltraum*, a violent space in which social behavior differed not only from civilian life in the USSR, but also from the routine of the Soviet military.² The *Gewaltraum* is not geographically defined; rather, it is a space where

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the modern state is absent and where violence becomes the main resource.³ When arriving in Afghanistan, Soviet soldiers were initially shocked by the extreme violence experienced on a regular basis. Rather than focusing on military tactics or the nature of the counterinsurgency, this essay discusses the perception of physical violence as expressed by the actors themselves.

Within the *Gewaltraum* Afghanistan, physical violence was the most important resource. It was used to communicate, to establish social hierarchies, and simply to survive. The dynamics unleashed by violence shaped the experiences of Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan. From combat to counterinsurgency, from life in the barracks to interaction with the civilian population and the Afghan allies, the struggle to survive in violent conditions altered each individual's frame of reference (*Referenzrahmen*). The soldiers' values were transformed and became distinctly different from the norms in Soviet civilian life, or even military life outside Afghanistan. This war's frame of reference enabled Soviet soldiers to act within the confines of the "wild war" (Wolfgang Sofsky) while alienating them from the late socialist society they were serving.⁴ They understood the logic of violence in this armed conflict (Kalyvas 2006, 52–86; 146–172).

The war in Afghanistan had many faces: it was the USSR's first major military operation since World War II, it was entangled with the Cold War, and, at the end, with the dissolution of the Soviet empire, it turned Afghanistan into a global battlefield.⁵ Moreover, it serves as an example for a conflict fought on the territory of a failing state. Existing research has taken all of these aspects of the conflict into consideration.⁶ But the experience of violence in an area where the state ceased to exist, although documented by many observers, has thus far received less attention than the politics, the military aspects, or the memorial culture that evolved in the aftermath of the conflict (Danilova 2005; Oushakine 2009).⁷ Authors who discuss patterns of violence and their consequences for Soviet society often do so in a brief or abstract manner (e.g. Galeotti 1995, 67–83; Sidky 2007).

This article analyzes the experiences of violence as recounted by Soviet soldiers and civilians who served in Afghanistan. Many sources are available in both Russian and English, and most were published either during perestroika or shortly after the Soviet collapse. But accounts of the Afghan experience continue to be published in the countries of the former USSR, first and foremost in Russia. Today they constitute a specific genre of military literature. Increasingly, accounts of the Afghan and the Chechen conflict are mingled together (Oushakine 2009, 130–201). The wars in the post-Soviet realm are increasingly seen as a common phenomenon often referred to as *goriachie tochki* (hot spots). They offer a narrative of war that differs distinctly from the heroic tales of the "Great Patriotic War" that have long dominated Russian public discourse (Tumarkin 1994; Längenohl 2002; Scherrer 2004). The view of the southern periphery is strikingly different from the picture of the European battlefields.

Afghanistan bordered Soviet Central Asia and was of strategic interest to the Soviet leadership. Contrary to contemporary perceptions, pre-war Afghanistan was far from a society marred by violence: during the 1970s, Western hippie tourists flocked to the bazars of Kabul to visit "the Orient" and to be inspired by its people and their tranquil way of life. The Afghan state, however weak and inefficient it may have been, provided a sense of stability in cooperation with local strongmen. Afghanistan's stability was threatened, however, when a politically radicalized group took power in 1978 and set the country on authoritarian modernization at breakneck speed. The Afghan Communists had often been politicized abroad; they saw the USSR as a model for the development of their country and, following the Bolshevik tradition, were confident they could impose a modern future on their homeland. They believed that ruthlessness would help to accelerate the aspired transition and

decided to embark on a Sovietization course similar to that of Russia and, indeed, Soviet Central Asia of the 1930s (e.g. Kindler 2014; Northrop 2004). The regime combined the struggle against religion with the harassment of local elites and an attack on property structures. There was hardly any attempt to create support for these measures. Kabul chose to rely on force, not on persuasion. The initial results were similar to those in Soviet Central Asia under Stalin: violent unrest in the countryside, raids on local government institutions, and defections of soldiers and officials. The situation bordered on civil war. A substantial part of the population was willing to fight the government's intrusions. The Soviet state had faced similar resistance in vast parts of the country during the Civil War (1918–1922) and the First Five-Year Plan (1928–1932) (Mawdsley 1987; Narskii 2001; Baberowski 2003; Schnell 2012, 145–532). It had twice managed to overcome popular resistance through the overwhelming use of force. Both under Lenin and Stalin, the ruthlessness of the regime helped to subdue the peasantry. The Bolsheviks did not shy away from harsh reprisals, starvation, and mass killings. They compensated the weakness of their rule in the countryside and in Central Asia through violent means. Fifty years later, the regime in Kabul was willing to follow a similar course.

During the course of 1979, attempts at Sovietization led to frequent outbursts of violence in Afghanistan. To illustrate the tensions that evolved, the Soviet journalist Bocharov (1990, 58) pointed to the regime's import of the Soviet institution of *subbotnik*, the day of unpaid labor in the name of Communist nation building:

The revolutionary authorities in Kabul decided to hold a Leninist communist "subbotnik." On a Friday, at that: the Muslims' most important day in the week of prayer. Four hundred forty-six mosques in Kabul awaited the advent of the faithful in vain – the faithful were attending a communist "subbotnik." The result? Pogroms, streets littered with broken glass, hatred of the revolution, the Soviets, the *shuravi*.⁸

As a consequence of these policies, state authority in Afghanistan withered away and the army began to disintegrate (Braithwaite 2011, 37–57). When the situation became critical, the regime sought help from Moscow. Though the Soviet leadership was hesitant to get engaged, it finally decided to intervene (Galeotti 1995, 1–24; Feifer 2009, 9–54; Braithwaite 2011, 58–81). While the precise circumstances of the final decision remain in the shadows – Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev was ill and the power struggle between Andropov, Ustinov, Gromyko, and Suslov in the Politburo proves hard to reconstruct – it is clear that the process of state failure and the escalation of violence were already well underway when the Soviet Army began to arrive in December (Liakhovsky 1979; Kalinovsky 2011, 16–53). In their initial engagement, the storming of the presidential palace in Kabul, the Soviet Army professed that it was willing to fight outside military conventions: the troops did not take prisoners. KGB forces killed Afghan party leader Hafizullah Amin, who had asked for their help in the first place, on the day of their arrival in his own palace. The incumbent was shot in front of his family.⁹ In his place, the Kremlin installed Babrak Karmal as the new ruler. The battle for the presidential palace marked the beginning of the Soviet intervention. The initial fighting in Kabul was a story of mutual betrayal, misunderstanding, and unrestrained violence, and the war that ensued continued to be characterized by these features.

Soviet soldiers who came to Afghanistan in the following weeks were ill prepared. Most were conscripts and had been drafted only recently. But even the Soviet officers were not well trained, and their troops were not equipped for the task that lay before them. The Soviet Army had not fought in decades. The veterans of the "Great Patriotic War" had long retreated into higher offices. Soviet propaganda continued to praise their heroism, and the victory against Hitler was one of the main pillars of the party-state's legitimacy.

Officially, the army was seen as one of the main institutions of the state; its historic achievements as well as its modern weapons served to instill in the Soviet populace a sense of pride and achievement (Colton 1990). The cult of World War II was also a cult of the Soviet hero, the male soldier and victorious combatant who defended the motherland. In the Soviet moral universe, the military carried positive connotations. The ideal male citizen was closely linked to heroism and bravery. At the same time, there were few things heroic in Soviet society under Brezhnev. Life in late socialism had become predictable. This tranquility made the gap between everyday experiences in the USSR and Afghanistan all the more conspicuous. For Soviet youngsters, the war in Afghanistan was a shocking experience.

The following analysis relies on the recollections of Soviet personnel – both civilians and soldiers, both men and women – that were published during the last years or immediately after the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan both in Russian and, often, in English translation.¹⁰ While the quality of these publications certainly varies and it is impossible to prove the validity of every event, the overall evidence these accounts provide for the patterns described here is overwhelming. It is a conscious decision to use secondary material because it contains explicit descriptions of violence; most interviews were taken shortly after the veterans returned from combat.¹¹ Today the *afgantsy's* memories are overshadowed by the collapse of the empire and the troubled 1990s. Additionally, an entire memorial culture – both state sponsored and commercial – has developed in the former USSR which strongly influences contemporary views on Afghanistan.¹² During the last decade *afgantsy* organizations, as well as the Putin regime, have tried to heroize the memory of the Afghan War and revive the concept of internationalism. By carefully using material from the 1990s, these pitfalls are avoided.

“We never bothered ourselves with the questions about whether we were doing the right thing or not:”¹³ The immersion into the sphere of violence

During the initial years, most of the details about the war in Afghanistan were withheld from the Soviet public. Combat and the use of military force were hardly mentioned (Galeotti 1995, 89–93). Until 1987, the Soviet press and publications remained in a state of denial: they insisted on the internationalist mission to build socialism (see e.g. Bocharov 1987; Kluban' 1988; Ponomarev 1988). The cost of the war and especially the violence were hidden from the public. Soldiers returning from the battlefield were told to keep quiet and those fallen returned in the infamous zinc caskets, and were delivered and buried late at night. These politics of misinformation were initially successful, but eventually contributed to discrediting the war effort. In the long run, however, neither the losses nor the experiences of the Soviet personnel could be blanked out. On the contrary, the continued propaganda served to undermine the legitimacy of the party-state. When Mikhail Gorbachev decreed more openness from 1987 onwards, the news and the ensuing debate about the war in Afghanistan triggered public outrage (Sapper 1994, 193–241; Galeotti 1995, 91–93; Kalinovsky 2011, 195–198). The war in Afghanistan stood in marked contrast to Gorbachev's efforts to impose civil values in the USSR.¹⁴ It also contradicted Gorbachev's image. To him, it was an embarrassing legacy of the Brezhnev era.

During perestroika, harsh criticism of the Afghan War became commonplace. Earlier sources, however, tell a different story. They confirm Yurchak's (2006, 36–124) argument that Soviet citizens shared many of the regime's values – if only for the lack of an alternative and sometimes quite sincerely. Many veterans remember that they initially believed in their mission and in the value of internationalism. Thus, young Soviet citizens shared some of the core values of the regime and were idealistic. The 1980s were not necessarily

governed by cynicism and distance to the regime. As late as 1986, Timur Zaripov volunteered to go to Afghanistan: "I myself wrote an application to be able to go there. At that time I thought I was doing the right thing ..." (Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 97). Similar enthusiasm could be found among specialists – nurses and medics who volunteered for "internationalist duty." A Soviet woman remembered:

How did I end up here? I simply believed what I read in the papers. "There was a time when young people were really capable of achieving something and sacrificing themselves for the great cause," I thought, "but now we're good for nothing and I'm no better than the rest. There's a war on, and I sit here sewing dresses and thinking up new hair-dos." (Alexievich, 39)

Another civilian volunteer from Moscow compared the mission to the great projects of earlier Soviet generations:

I thought I missed out on the *BAM* and *tselina* projects, but I'm in luck – I've got Afghanistan! ... I was an ordinary, rather bookish, Moscow girl. I thought I'd find real life only somewhere far away, where the men were strong and the women beautiful. I wanted adventure and escape from everyday life ... (73)

Certainly, the vast majority of Soviet soldiers were conscripts. They did not choose to serve in Afghanistan. But the interviews with veterans convey that for some, idealism, belief in Soviet values, or a longing for adventure lured them to Afghanistan (Bocharov 1990, 25). When they finally arrived, both the volunteers and the conscripts quickly realized that the reality on the ground differed from what they expected. Enthusiasm or the sense of duty which had motivated them gave way to skills of survival.

Most positive expectations were shattered immediately. Many Soviet soldiers professed their amazement when they arrived in Afghanistan. Even those who had been stationed in Central Asia experienced the country as foreign. On the one hand, there was the landscape, a southern yet harsh land with distinctly oriental features. On the other hand, there were the Afghans and their culture. The Soviets perceived them often as backward and hostile. Still, in the beginning there prevailed a sense that the internationalist mission was a civilizing one.¹⁵

Yuri T., who served with the first wave of Soviet troops in 1980, remembers how unprepared he was: "We didn't know what was waiting for us when we went to Afghanistan. Everything happened to us unexpectedly ..." (Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 12).¹⁶ Recruits had to adapt to the Soviet Army with its hierarchies and rituals, and to the war itself. For a private like Yuri Pakhomov, Afghanistan in 1980 was full of surprises. He noted: "Everything is foreign in this country" (Buser and Broadhead 1992, 118).¹⁷ Soviet conscripts as well as officers were hardly prepared for Afghan culture (Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 47, 49). When crossing the border, even a Soviet officer with a Central Asian background judged: "It was as if we'd found ourselves in the Middle Ages, in an entirely different world" (Buser and Broadhead 1992, 166). While private Pakhomov realized in time that a new phase of his life had begun ("My youth has ended ... never to return"), he could no longer imagine returning home: "I can't imagine what it would be like to lie on a bed with white sheets ..." (119). Still, he was horrified by the situation he encountered in early 1980, at the beginning of the war:

The stuff happening now scares me to death ... The attacks on the convoys continue and the mujaheddins got grenade launchers from somewhere. The situation is not the best, but the newspapers write that Afghanistan is already building socialism. (Buser and Broadhead 1992)

The gap between the official explanations and combat reality haunted him. Becoming immersed into the Afghan sphere of violence, into a space where different rules structured life, was a rather quick process. Still, not everyone felt able to chronicle this process. One

Soviet lieutenant, who had arrived in Kabul in August 1983 and kept a diary, wrote on 14 September: "I don't feel it's necessary to continue my diary. It would turn out to be too horrifying" (Buser and Broadhead 1992, 171). Others testified to the emotional changes they experienced upon serving in Afghanistan. Yuri Y. remembered how initial fear gave way to indifference:

In general, fear came at the stage of adaptation, or right at the beginning. At that stage emotions were very much on the surface ... After the phase of acclimatization there followed an almost complete atrophy of emotions. You just lived like a machine. (Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 27)

The interviews convey that the immersion into the Afghan sphere of violence took less time than the painstaking return to civilian life (Alexandrov and Grigoriev 2001, 95). There are numerous accounts of the problems Afghanistan veterans encountered upon their return to the Soviet Union (Sapper 1994, 143–192; Galeotti 1995, 67–119). This difference – the relative speed of accepting the rules in Afghanistan and the problems that accompanied the readjustment to civilian life – was summarized by a commander of the Soviet special forces. He stated in an interview in which he had previously boasted about his killing skills:

It took me much longer to get used to a peaceful way of life than to get used to war. I had a feeling of being lonely and defenseless when I walked around in my hometown without a gun. I'd gotten used to carrying a gun. (Alexandrov and Grigoriev 2001, 95)

The accounts of the Afghan experience suggest that in Brezhnev's USSR, even training as an officer hardly prepared soldiers for the fighting at the Hindukush. Combat in Afghanistan defied the Soviet image of war, which was shaped by an idealized picture of World War II. In Afghanistan the enemy could be anywhere – including among the fraternal Afghan forces, civilians, or even within one's own ranks. For someone coming from a statist and static society like the USSR, survival in a sphere of violence like Afghanistan could only be learned on the spot. However, it is striking to see that many of those who left an account of their experiences confess to having quickly adapted to the new rules. Following those rules, they understood, was a precondition for survival.

"That time the guerillas weren't able to kill all our wounded:"¹⁸ Combat and Atrocities in Afghanistan

The first combat experiences are vividly remembered by Soviet veterans.¹⁹ The bulk of Soviet forces were involved in the occupation of the country. Combat was often conducted by counterinsurgency units.²⁰ It was often seen as a distraction from the boredom of life in the barracks and camps. Still, the nature and ferocity of the fighting surprised recruits as well as officers. The indiscriminate use of force against combatants as well as the wounded, the mutilation of bodies, and the refusal to take prisoners were characteristic of the war in Afghanistan (Bocharov 1990, 68, 79; Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 75, 78, 94).²¹ Yet, it was the experience of violence itself that left an impression on the soldiers. The bulk of the fighting took place in the mountains, hunting an enemy that was seldom visible but could lurk behind the next rock. Such missions often included experiences of raw physical violence:

We went on a twelve-day patrol. We spent most of our time running away from a guerilla gang and only survived on dope. On the fifth day one soldier shot himself ... We had to drag his body along, including his backpack, flak-jacket and helmet ...

Dum-dum wounds from exploding bullets were the worst. My first casualty had one leg blown off at the knee (with the bone left sticking out), his other ankle ripped away, his penis gone, his eyes blown out and one ear torn off. I started shaking and retching uncontrollably ... Next was

a soldier with a dum-dum in the stomach. His guts were hanging out. I bandaged him, staunched the blood, and gave him a pain-killer, something to make him sleep. I held him for four hours, then he died. (Alexievich 47–48)

The fierce combat put Soviet soldiers under stress. Yet, in contrast to other armies where combat created strong bonds within the platoons and battalions, the Soviet forces did not entirely share this experience.²² Rather, many soldiers reported that bonding with comrades in Afghanistan was often prevented by ethnic tension, corruption, and internal hierarchies (Tamarov 1992, 12; Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 16, 32, 60). These hierarchies, especially the differences between the rank and file and the officers, as well as between those who had served longer and the freshmen, precluded positive experiences of solidarity (Alexiev 1988, 9–10; Sapper 1994, 124–142; for individual testimonies Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 34–35, 43, 88, 105; Galeotti 1995, 34–35; Odom 1998, 247–249). While a basic solidarity – especially during battle – may be inferred from the sources, the soldiers themselves often pointed to the strained social relations within the army. The medic who reported on aiding the wounded cited above observed the limits of solidarity within the Soviet military:

There was this slogan: “Afghanistan makes brothers of us all.” Crap! There are three classes of soldier (*sic!*) in the Soviet Army: new recruits, “granddads” or veterans, and dembels, conscripts nearing the end of their two-year service. (Alexievich 1992, 49)

These problems, which also divided late Soviet society in general, were amplified in the war. Thus, corruption, theft, and internal violence impaired the functioning of the Soviet military machine (Tamarov 1992, 96–97).²³ For the ordinary soldier these problems made the situation even less bearable: “The pressures of army life were usually vented in senseless cruelty – not only towards Afghans but also towards our own men – especially when the soldiers were high from smoking drugs” (Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 111).

Western observers noted that fragging was prevalent both in the garrisons and during combat: “Respondents claimed to know of several instances in which young soldiers shot *stariki* [more senior soldiers] in the back during operations” (Alexiev 1988, 37). They concluded: “Over the past eight years, the Soviet Army in Afghanistan has proved neither a well-disciplined nor a highly motivated force” (61). The characteristics of the late socialist society impaired the performance of Soviet troops (Yousaf and Adkin 1992).

The specifics of guerrilla war added to the uncertainty. The soldiers endured permanent insecurity:

If it was just their army fighting against us, then we’d know who our enemy was. But nothing was clear there. Even a small child who gave you a friendly smile in the morning could hand you a ball point pen in the evening which would blow off half your hand ... Now I understand a child like that very well. In his place I would have done just the same ... It’s only now that I think like that – I didn’t think anything at all then. Or if I did, I only thought how I could take revenge on the Afghans on behalf of my fallen comrades. (Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 108–109)

The recollections of veterans convey the limited role of ideology and military discipline during the war. Combat was rather structured by emotional dynamics of revenge and counterattack (Kalyvas 2006, 58–61; Marlantes 2011, 98–104). This observation troubled Western monitors:

The demonstrated Soviet willingness to pursue a military *modus operandi* in open contravention to a number of internationally accepted norms of military conduct and agreements, such as the Geneva Conventions, is perhaps the most disturbing finding. (Alexiev 1988, 64)

The last war fought during the Cold War was fought as brutally as the previous ones.

Our knowledge about and the assessment of atrocities in Afghanistan will remain incomplete. But the numerous detailed descriptions of unrestrained violence warrant attention and explanation. They formed an essential part of the Afghan experience.

Yuri T., one of the Soviet soldiers who first entered Afghanistan in 1979, indicated that atrocities were part of the war from the outset.²⁴ As noted above, the Soviet forces that stormed the presidential palace in Kabul were ordered not to take prisoners. In this case, their adversaries were regular troops. Outside of Kabul the Soviet Army refused to treat the insurgents as regular combatants. It was also willing to collectively punish the civilian population. Thus, early in the conflict the Soviet Army established the use of violence as an important resource. Yuri T. remembers an operation in February 1980, only weeks into the invasion, in the course of which an Afghan village was stormed:

Soon after we'd landed, an aerial attack began, just as we were told. Although it was obvious that there was also a civilian population in the center, we were given the order to destroy everything that moved. Absolutely everything – even livestock. (Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 5)

Such raids on villages with high numbers of civilian casualties became a fairly standard practice during the war (Alexiev 1988, 56–60; Bocharov 1990, 72, 141; Alexandrov and Grigoriev 2001, 11–12).

The same Soviet soldier recounted that the enemy was equally relentless. When a Soviet battalion was encircled, the men were killed and their bodies mutilated:

They had been sliced and slashed in a way that I'd never seen, not even in the movies ... They'd been damaged so badly that many of them had to be sent back home in windowless coffins. (Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 8)

On another day, when Yuri T.'s company managed to capture partisans, an officer criticized them. "When we came to the company commander, he began to reprimand us for taking prisoners" (10).

Many Soviet soldiers describe the execution of prisoners and of civilians. Alexander Alexiev noted in 1988: "There is overwhelming evidence ... that resistance combatants captured by the Soviets are almost always summarily executed" (Alexiev 1988, 60). Yuri Y., who was also among the first to enter Afghanistan in 1980, recounts the following incident:

Lieutenant Colonel Koshelyov personally checked to see that everything was in order. Finally, he said, "Remember, boys, that I don't need prisoners of war!" In spite of the lieutenant colonel's order, four captured guerillas were brought to our company commander; they'd been found killing wounded soldiers. The commander wondered why we had taken prisoners. He ordered us to take them aside and shoot them immediately, which is what happened. (Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 25)

Clearly, these atrocities followed a pattern of reprisal and revenge (Alexandrov and Grigoriev 2001, 113). Within the sphere of violence, no party showed restraint; neither prisoners nor civilians were spared in this process (Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 64; Alexandrov and Grigoriev 2001, 87–96). Both the Soviet Army and the partisans created a space where regular military conduct could be perceived as weakness. In retrospect, Soviet soldiers like Vadim K. found it difficult to comprehend their own actions. He recounts an episode clearly using his civilian frame of reference and distancing himself from his time in the war zone:

Once we were in ambush near a road. There was no reason to shoot, but the people were already prepared to shoot. They'd come to kill. So they began to fire at a nearby village. Of course they returned fire from the village. The intelligence troops were called to the place. They went to the

village and made a clean sweep of it. Without any real reason. (Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko 1994, 84)

Soviet soldiers understood that atrocities could lead to retaliation and further escalation: “We were equally callous to the Afghans’ suffering. We started the atrocities, they responded. Then it began to seem to us that they had started, and we had to respond in the same way” (102). The use of violence created a vicious circle. It was often motivated by mere revenge rather than strategic goals.²⁵ Within the soldiers’ frame of reference, revenge and even reprisals against civilians were legitimate.²⁶

How can the atrocities in Afghanistan be explained? It is clear that the Soviet military command did not suppress the use of violence, but often encouraged harsh reactions. The Soviet officers were not willing to show weakness in the struggle against the insurgency. Thus, crimes against the population as well as harsh reprisals even against those enemy combatants who had surrendered were permitted. One aim was certainly to “deter people from collaborating” with the insurgents and to “shape civilian behavior indirectly” (Kalyvas 2006, 150). But communication through violent acts was only one aspect of the complex picture.

By their own accounts, soldiers used the opportunity to kill indiscriminately when they felt emboldened or when they perceived the emotional need to respond to loss, danger, or attacks. They spread fear and terror and avenged friends and comrades killed in action instantly. Often, they killed to reaffirm their power in a country they did not understand. The lack of punishment by the Soviet Army – only rarely were soldiers court-martialed for war crimes – created opportunities to act violently.²⁷ Still, it was often the decision of the individual soldier to commit these violent acts, although there are instances when rank-and-file soldiers were ordered to engage in atrocities. Even if we assume that these killings made some tactical sense, they came at a high political and moral cost. The violent behavior of the Soviet troops fueled the insurgency. It undermined Moscow’s attempts at socialist nation building. As is known from other wars, reprisals and indiscriminate violence can often be a counterproductive measure (Kalyvas 2006, 152–153). “Despite the absence of systematic empirical evidence, it is plausible to claim that the deterrent aim of indiscriminate violence often fails ... many people prefer to join the rival actor than die a defenseless death” (160).

In the USSR reports about atrocities were largely suppressed. This created a distance between those who had experienced the Afghan killing fields and the rest of Soviet society. Tensions arose between society and the returning veterans (Galeotti 1995, 67–119). Even at the end of perestroika, the USSR was reluctant to discuss war crimes or to prosecute those responsible.²⁸ To the contrary, many Afghanistan veterans made a career in the Army. Officially, the blame was put on Brezhnev’s decision to invade (Kalinovsky 2011, 195).

“When I returned home, I burned my Certificate of Honor:”²⁹ Some conclusions

In January 1989, only weeks before the last Soviet brigade left Afghanistan, Mikhail Gorbachev ordered the last major offensive, operation “Typhoon.” The Afghan regime had long pressed the Soviet leadership to stay engaged, and this last assault was a compromise. General Sotskov, one of the Soviet commanders on the ground, drew the following conclusion about this final mission:

Almost ten years of the war were reflected, as if in a mirror, in three days and three nights: political cynicism and military cruelty, the absolute defenselessness of some, and the pathological

need to kill and destroy on the part of others. Ten years of bloodletting were absorbed into three awful days. (Kalinovsky 2011, 168)³⁰

The end of the war resembled its beginning.

The main consequence of the war in Afghanistan was, of course, the destruction of the country, the massive loss of lives and future perspective, and the ongoing absence of civil structures even after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. In sum, two centuries of nation building were wiped out (Goodson 2001, 91–132). This destruction of Afghan statehood was an international affair that involved the Afghans, their neighbors, as well as the main adversaries in the Cold War. The Soviet Union itself survived the withdrawal from the Hindu-kush only for three short years. The war, however, left its imprint on individual experience and on post-Soviet society. What characterized the conflict in Afghanistan? What are its consequences?

The concept of the *Gewaltraum* enabled us to better understand the Soviet experience of Afghanistan. The unwritten rules of the sphere of violence forced the conscripts to adopt their behavior and adapt an alternative frame of reference. Their idealism and the concept of the “Soviet man” as a morally superior being were shattered upon arrival (Ovchinnikova and Simonov 1989, 14–15). The denial of Afghan realities in official propaganda only contributed to this process. The official narrative could neither legitimize nor explain the war.

As we have shown, violence was ubiquitous in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan. From the beginning of the operation to its last days, the excessive use of force characterized the conflict. Combat was often brutal because surrender was not an option. Both sides fought fiercely as only few prisoners were taken. The practice of shooting prisoners of war and mutilating the bodies of the dead and wounded certainly led to further escalation. Norms of military engagement were – as the actors themselves recount – substituted by the logic of the *Gewaltraum*. As an institution, the Soviet Army largely failed to regulate violence – within its ranks as well as against civilians. Rather than channeling and controlling the use of force, the Soviet Army created opportunities to act violently. Within this sphere of violence, not merely the “violent few” (Collins 2008, 370–398) who were attracted to violence per se acted violently. Rather, using violence became a means of survival. Soldiers were expected to use violence in order to protect themselves and their platoon. The use of violence could also raise their status. In most situations, the soldiers reacted to the local circumstances. They were regularly driven by emotions such as fear, anger, or revenge. The urge to avenge the loss of a comrade was crucial. Violence was also used as a means to communicate: burned villages or mutilated bodies conveyed a message. The situation in Afghanistan left little options for those who served there. Looking back, they acknowledged that they had lived in a different order and tried to make sense of it: “Simply, *there* we had our own life, another life, and we lived it as best as we could. That life was lived by other values, other criteria” (Tamarov, 4). The only escape was desertion, self-inflicted wounds, or suicide. All of these reactions were common among Soviet conscripts.

While the concept of the *Gewaltraum* enables us to better understand the behavior of troops in a concrete situation, it is of little help when discussing the impact of the war on Soviet society and the post-Communist transformation. We only begin to understand the significance of the war for Russia’s recent past. On the whole, the Soviet Army took many dysfunctions of late socialism – from stringent hierarchies to bullying and corruption – to Afghanistan (Alexiev 1988, 35–55).³¹ Not only the economy, but also the military suffered from structural problems in late socialism that undercut its performance.³² The

principle of merit did not count for much in the army. Personal relations were more important than individual achievement. Therefore, the Soviet Army and its soldiers lacked the understanding of war as efficient work, which is characteristic of modern armies (Lüdtke 2006, 127–152). While excessive violence may also be observed in other partisan wars and counterinsurgencies, these problems of an army in late socialism make the Afghan case peculiar. The Soviet Army was bound to the weak Soviet state – a state weakened further by Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies. In many ways the army’s performance in Afghanistan foreshadowed the collapse of the Soviet Union. In many ways, the USSR nurtured a weak army – in the sense that it was not able to impose control over its personnel.

The experience of violence in Afghanistan engendered a new understanding of violence and devalued the classic heroism of World War II (Sapper 1994, 289–371). It undermined perestroika’s civilizing mission from above. During the 1990s the war was still widely remembered as a mistake.³³ In addition to the moral disaster and the political problems, the Soviet intervention changed the military culture of Russia. The Afghanistan veterans understood that they would never be showered with recognition like the victors of the “Great Patriotic War.” Still, they fought for recognition. The *afgantsy* in Russia developed their own nihilistic heroism, a sort of defunct nationalism: taking pride in their participation in a war that was ultimately lost. This tradition has recently been continued by those who fought the Russian war in the Caucasus (Gordin and Grigor’ev 2003). Both the *afgantsy* and the veterans of the Chechen wars identify themselves as fighters in *goriachie tochki* – in irregular wars. After 2000 the Putin regime slowly adopted a more positive stance towards the war in Afghanistan. Still, it cannot match the comparison with World War II. Generally, the revival of traditional heroism and a more positive attitude toward the army and the use of force are part of Putin’s agenda. These policies began with the second Chechen War and continue to be of importance during the war in Ukraine and in Russia’s standoff with the West.

In 1995 Mark Galeotti noted that the “war seems not so much to have ‘Sovietised’ Afghanistan as ‘Afghanised’ the whole USSR” (Galeotti 1995, 1). His assessment has been confirmed by events in the past decades. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, irregular wars have shaped the post-Soviet experience, especially but not exclusively on the Southern edge of the former USSR. The two Russian incursions in Chechnya, the war in Karabakh, and the war in Georgia stand out. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, war and violence have reached the heartland of the former USSR. In retrospect, therefore, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan is a decisive caesura: it marks the beginning of an era of “wild wars” in Eurasia. In the decades after Afghanistan, the collapse of legitimate statehood and the disintegration of regular armed forces could be observed at the peripheries of the former USSR, and even within Russia itself (Marten 2012, 64–138; Sussex 2012).³⁴ Warlordism spread. Irregular forces and indiscriminate violence have become standard tools of Russian warfare from Chechnya to the Donbass. One may argue that this development started with the invasion of Afghanistan.

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Notes

1. Tamarov (1992, 4).

2. For the concept of physical violence used, see the introduction to this special section. See also Sofsky (2003) and Baberowski (2008). For a reflection of violence in irregular wars which also applies to the Afghan case, cf. Kalyvas (2006). For analyses of century partisan warfare, see Laqueur (1998) and Gerlach (2010, 177–234). A similar approach focusing on actors and violence in the Vietnam War is used by Greiner (2010) and Tishkov (2004) to explain the first Chechen War.
3. On the concept of *Gewaltraum*, see Baberowski (2012), see also Sofsky (2003) and Schnell (2012).
4. This interpretation is not intended to criminalize or decriminalize the Soviet soldiers, although there can be no doubt that war crimes were common. Rather, it seeks to understand how their behavior made sense in the given circumstances, to explain the specificity of the Afghan experience and its place in the history of violence under Communist rule, and the reaction of Soviet society to the war. For the concept *Referenzrahmenanalyse*, cf. Neitzel and Welzer (2012, 16–46). The authors developed this concept to understand the narratives of Wehrmacht soldiers.
5. For a statistical overview of the Soviet engagement, see Krivosheev (1993).
6. Hyman (1992). For histories of the Soviet War in Afghanistan, see Marchuk (1993); Reuveny and Prakash (1996); Giustozzi (2000); Feifer (2009); Braithwaite (2011); and Kalinovsky (2011). For early accounts of its impact on Soviet society, see Sapper (1994) and Galeotti (1995). For an analysis of the Soviet legacy, cf. Rais (2008).
7. For a website dedicated to the veterans and the memory of the war, cf., for example, www.afgan.ru.
8. *Shuravi* was the Afghan term for “Soviet.” It also became a Russian slang term.
9. For an account of the fighting at the palace, see Feifer (2009, 55–84). For the account of an individual Soviet soldier, see Yuri T. in Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko (1994, 2–3).
10. Where available, I quote from the English translation. All translations from Russian are mine. The Romanization of Russian terms follows the LoC system. Russian names and terms from English translations that follow a different system are left unaltered. My main sources are Alexiev (1988); Buser and Broadhead (1992); Alexandrov and Grigoriev (2001); Alexievich (1992); Pashkevich (1991); Bocharov (1990); Dynin (1990); Ezhova (1989); Verstakov (1991); Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko (1994); Tamarov (1992); and Boiarkin (1999). For a journalistic perspective, see Ovchinnikova and Simonov (1989). For less critical accounts by former Soviet officers, see, for example, Pikov (1991); Gareev (1996, 1999); Tsygannik (1999); Rudenko (2004); and Orlov (2014). Many of the findings about the nature of the Afghan War were also shared by contemporary American think tanks and intelligence, cf., for example, Alexiev (1988), prepared for the US Army and based on NGO reports about human rights violations and on the testimony of Soviet defectors.
11. The article follows the larger trend toward the secondary use of interview material.
12. The distortion of memory through movies and pop-culture has been noted by other researchers as well. See, for example, Welzer’s et al. on the influence of movies on the memory of World War II veterans and their families. The problems discussed here also apply to the case of the Afghanistan War. See Welzer, Moller, and Tschuggnall (2002).
13. Artillery captain in Alexievich (1992, 79).
14. Cf. my interpretation of perestroika as an attempt to impose civil values on Soviet society and the party-state: Behrends (2012, 401–423).
15. Cf. also the contribution by Philipp Casula in this special section.
16. The unpreparedness of soldiers was also noted by Soviet officers: cf. Pashkevich (1991, 60–61).
17. For the combat diary of a platoon of Soviet soldiers from 1980 to 1985, cf. Ovchinnikova and Simonov (1989, 8–14).
18. Nikolai K., in: Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko (1994, 51).
19. For the Afghan experience of guerilla warfare, see Jalali and Grau (2001). The somewhat technical accounts given by mujaheddin commanders confirm the Soviet sources about the nature of conflict and combat. They frequently refer to killing the enemy and capturing material. For an overview of typical combat missions carried out in Afghanistan, see Tamarov (1992, 20–21).
20. For a military assessment of Soviet operations, see Grau (1998).
21. For similar breaches of international law and mass violence during counterinsurgency in the Vietnam War, see Greiner (2010). For experiences of violence in German counterinsurgency warfare, see, for example, Hartmann (2009) and Shephard (2012).
22. On strong personal ties within the Wehrmacht, see Neitzel and Welzer (2012, 299–355); for the US Army in Afghanistan, see Junger (2010), who as a journalist followed an American platoon to

- its remote outpost in the Afghan mountains and points to the strong ties among soldiers, which helped them to prevail and make sense of their mission under difficult circumstances. For a personal account of battlefield loyalty in Vietnam, see Marlantes (2011, 134–175).
23. Reese (2000, 145–157). On *dedovshchina*, see also the contribution by Alena Maklak in this special section.
 24. For a concept of atrocities in modern warfare, see Horne and Kramer (2001).
 25. See also the account of “operation revenge” in Alexandrov and Grigoriev (2001, 11–15). Revenge is also cited as a main motivation to kill in Vietnam by Marlantes (2011, 98–104).
 26. Neitzel and Welzer (2012) come to similar conclusions in their study of Wehrmacht soldiers.
 27. For a statistical overview of court-martialed Soviet soldiers, see Galeotti (1995, 72).
 28. In November 1989, the Soviet Congress of People’s Deputies declared an amnesty for all crimes committed by Soviet troops in Afghanistan (Odom 1998, 250).
 29. Vadim G. in Heinämaa, Leppänen, and Yurchenko (1994, 96).
 30. For his account of the war, see Sotskov (2007).
 31. For an official Russian assessment, see Russian General Staff (2002, 312–313), which not only concentrates on military tactics, but also briefly acknowledges atrocities and terror by the Soviet armed forces.
 32. Cf. also the contributions by Alena Maklak and Robert Lučić in this special section.
 33. For negative assessments of the Afghanistan War by ordinary Russians of the Baby Boomer generation, see Raleigh (2006).
 34. For Chechnya, see also Shchekochikhin (2003) and Panfilov and Simonov (1995).

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