

**CAPTIVITY AND CONVERSION: AN IN-DEPTH STUDY OF  
SOVIET POWS IN AFGHANISTAN**

Elliott Newton

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

in the Department of Central Eurasian Studies,

Indiana University

August 2015

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty, Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts.

Master's Thesis Committee

Kathryn Graber, Ph.D.

Roman Zlotin, Ph.D.

Hiroaki Kuromiya, Ph.D.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to give a special thanks to the members of my Thesis Committee, Kathryn Graber, Roman Zlotin, and Hiroaki Kuromiya, for their hard work and willingness to work with my difficult schedule. Their service is much appreciated.

Elliott Newton

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In this thesis, I examine both internal and external pressures Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) experienced prior to their defection and while in captivity. I discuss several driving factors, such as Soviet propaganda tactics, pre-deployment military training, quality of life in Afghanistan, human rights violations, ethnic conflicts and ritualistic hazing (*dedovshchina* or *starikovshchina*) that influenced Soviet soldiers to defect from the Red Army. In addition, I observe what issues most compelled some of these soldiers to convert to Islam and settle in Afghanistan rather than return to their homes in the Soviet Union or seek asylum in the West following their release. These factors include the historical treatment of Soviet POWs and psychological trauma. The historical Soviet treatment of POWs played an influential role in the defectors' decisions and why many were afraid to return to their homeland years after the conflict had ended. Psychological trauma resulting from violence against non-combatants seems to have fostered Soviet soldiers' sympathy and respect for the Afghan population before their capture or defection.

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*“It has so turned out that no one needs us. The Soviet Union rejected us because it makes believe that there are no POWs here, and it does nothing to help. The United States always wants specific proof beforehand that the Soviet soldiers will be good, while...other countries like Pakistan are too afraid...”* Vladislav Naumov, Soviet army deserter in Afghanistan, March 1986 (Thorne 1986, 1)

## **INTRODUCTION**

At the outset of the Soviet invasion in December 1979, 17 million people resided in Afghanistan. However, as a result of the war, 5.5 million Afghans fled abroad as refugees and another 2.2 million became “internal refugees” within the country (Grau 2004, 135). Over 1.3 million Afghans died, mostly civilians (Grau 2004, 150). High casualties among the Afghans were detrimental to Afghan society, as the casualties constituted a significant portion of the population. Casualties were also high on the Soviet side. “It has been determined that during the ten years of war, the war dead of the 40<sup>th</sup> Army exceeded 36,000, including 3,000 officers” (The Russian General Staff 2002, 43).

Despite this, the USSR lost the war when the political conflict morphed into a psychological one. As discontent grew, soldiers deserted more frequently. Some of these defectors objected to the lifestyle in the Red Army. Conditions were difficult, as disease and casualties were common. It was not until after an examination of official figures released in 1993 that the world discovered the Soviet Union “significantly undercounted” casualty figures in Afghanistan (The Russian General Staff 2002, 48 and Кривошеев 1993). Intense censorship and long deployments meant many soldiers were bored and unhappy with their situation. Numerous

Soviet troops turned to alcohol or drugs to remedy this despondency. Additionally, according to soldiers' personal accounts, they were horrified at the violence and degradation present within the army structure. New recruits were completely unprepared for their military mission. Upon their arrival, they were misused and beaten, and Central Asian soldiers were mortified and humiliated. This violence spread into the army's war tactics as Afghan civilians were maliciously targeted and human rights violated. Many Soviet troops could not handle the pressure and escaped from what they once considered their internationalist duty.

Some of these soldiers, several of whom we will meet in the coming pages, failed to ever return to the USSR or to seek refuge in the West. Instead, they built new homes and new lives for themselves in Afghanistan. Many of these troops were simply too afraid to return to the Soviet Union. They knew the mistreatment most POWs (prisoners of war) received at the hands of the Soviet government and remembered the horrors of the gulags following WWII. Some remained, like Vladislav Naumov, because they felt the Soviet government had abandoned them and they had no other option. These soldiers decided it would be best to simply assimilate with their old foes and begin anew. Other defectors felt a much deeper connection to the Afghan people. These troops embraced Islam, and many even took up arms alongside the Mujahedeen. These soldiers took the cause of Afghanistan as their own, vowing to defend it with their lives. One such soldier, Gennady Tseuma, eagerly married a local woman and rejected his old life in the Soviet Union. He would never see his parents alive again. Many of these ex-Soviets made a psychological connection with their captors. As I show in this thesis, these defectors welcomed Islam to fill what they felt to be the religious void in their communist lifestyle and sincerely believed the Afghan people could provide them with a better future than life in their own

country. Men like Gennady Tesuma and Bakhretdin Khakimov felt Afghanistan gave them what the USSR never could: an accepting home filled with religious peace and sincerity.

## **SOURCES AND METHODS**

Numerous sources on the fate of Soviet POWs in Afghanistan exist. I have collected primary language sources where possible and a large amount of information from news organizations such as TIME magazine and the BBC. Though I found substantial evidence of violence and abuse within the POW accounts, I wanted to ensure that the information was not due strictly to bias. In 2006-2008 I traveled to the Russian cities of Kemerovo, Omsk, Novokuznetsk, and Novosibirsk. Later, in 2013, I visited Dushanbe, Tajikistan where I interviewed former Soviet Central Asian soldiers about their experiences in Afghanistan and Red Army life in general. Many details about Soviet misconduct in Afghanistan were taken from Vladislav Tamarov's book, *Afghanistan: A Russian Soldier's Story*, which details his experiences in Afghanistan while serving in the Soviet Army. It is important to note that although Tamarov lives in St. Petersburg today, he has no qualms writing about the morally problematic actions he saw and did. Tamarov did not write a biased memoir as an ex-patriate; rather, what he wrote appears to have been open and honest information that he felt needed to be made public. Finally, I conducted extensive research on Stockholm syndrome and PTSD from psychological journals. Such research suggests that POW experiences in Afghanistan made these men susceptible to adopting Afghanistan following their release from captivity.

The majority of my research stems from published or broadcast interviews with these POWs. These interviews include those which Lyudmila Thorne conducted in Afghanistan from 1983 to 1986, writer Ivan Watson (from NPR)'s interviews with Gennady Tseuma in 2006, and a

2012 Russia Today documentary on the life of Tseuma in Afghanistan and his journey home to see his relatives. I sought to collect as many stories as possible from various POWs, over a period of time to see how their perspectives changed with time. Gennady Tseuma's story is the longest-document case study, as I was able to gather interviews with him from the 1980s until present. Rodric Braithwaite, in his book *Afghantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89*, describes conditions in which soldiers fought this war. He was thorough in his collection of primary sources on the war and provided valuable details regarding the lives of many of these POWs.

## **PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF THE WAR**

Unsurprisingly, Soviet media coverage of events in Afghanistan was highly skewed in favor of the U.S.S.R. Contrary to the American media's portrayal of Afghanistan, the Soviet Union attempted to paint a rose-colored picture of the war during the initial years (History Channel 2008). According to the Communist Party, "the Soviet invasion was forced, but a necessary measure. Due to US and Western expansion, the government decision [was based on choosing] between a pro-Soviet People's Democratic Republic and the chaos of Islamic fundamentalism" (Translated from Коммунисты Петербурга и Ленинградской Области 2014). The U.S.S.R. was thus depicted as the champion of every helpless Afghan peasant. The number of mounting fatalities was buried deep beneath the state socialist façade of patronizing collaboration, and the Soviet people had very little information about the war their government was fighting and the soldiers serving abroad. However, the Soviet news cover-up and the surmounting casualties at the war front became impossible for the regime to conceal from the Soviet populous.

## ***The People and the War***

For the first six years of the war, the Soviet media managed to keep a lid on internal reporting of the war in Afghanistan and hindered foreign news outlets from reporting on the events. During the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, veterans from the war were not allowed to attend the games for fear that they would give interviews to foreign media stations (Braithwaite 2011, 235). Most Western reports of the war were based on secondhand or eyewitness accounts from refugees living in Pakistan (Thorne 1986, 26). Even though foreign media access to Afghanistan was already limited, the Soviet Ambassador to Pakistan stated in 1984 that “so-called journalists” accompanying Afghan guerillas would be killed upon entering Afghanistan (Thorne 1986, 26).

Soviet media strategies worked until Gorbachev’s policy of *glasnost*. Only then did the Soviet citizenry understand that their leaders were not completely honest about the way events were turning out in Afghanistan. The population openly condemned the corruption that had become prevalent. The people struggled with one of the largest problems of a command economy: money was plentiful but goods were not. In a survey of experts on the prevalence of corruption of the USSR, Vladimir Belyaminov addressed the relationship between the goods deficit and corruption:

Today’s corruption is a silent system that lives parallel to us. There are whole segments of the economy (intermediaries, representatives, those who provide “information services”), which function and are not going to die out anytime soon. There are intermediaries between those who have access to the resource and those who want to obtain their [resources] “quicker” and “easier.” [Сергей Сибиряков 2010]

Young men in the USSR were obligated to serve two years in the Red Army, and very few wanted to spend their assignment serving in Afghanistan. Many parents donated large

amounts of money to government officials to ensure their sons would not fight in Afghanistan but would serve their country in a much less hostile area of the Soviet Union (Grau 2004, 148).

### ***The Casualties and the Home Front***

At the beginning of the Soviet-Afghan War, the Soviet Union grossly misrepresented the situation in Afghanistan, particularly the number of casualties among Soviet soldiers: “During the first two years of the conflict, the Soviet press covered the deaths of some two dozen servicemen—though thousands had already died” (Grau 2004, 148). Family members of those who perished in Afghanistan would receive the body for burial in the infamous zinc coffin on one condition—complete and utter secrecy. “Even the earlier tombstones did not list where the serviceman had died, only that he had died ‘fulfilling his internationalist duty’” (Grau 2004, 148). At other times, family members would not receive a body. Instead, “they were presented with a form: ‘Your son perished while fulfilling his international duty in Afghanistan’” (Tamarov 2001, 3). Compounding the difficult situation of Soviet families, soldiers were instructed to limit their communications with their parents for security purposes. Many servicemen reported being told “not to complain about things because it will only make your parents worry” (*Finger Lake Times* 1984). Yet, parents were not completely unaware of their sons’ circumstances. One soldier recalled:

I used to write my parents that I was serving somewhere abroad, that I was eating grapes, reading a lot, and watching TV. But in my parents’ first letter back to me, my father wrote that I shouldn’t think they were stupid, that they knew perfectly well where I was. When I came home two years later, I was shocked to see the change in my mother. She had gotten old. [Tamarov 2001, 138]

This constant state of ignorance and terror took its toll. The Soviet people began to resent the loss of their sons “fulfilling their international duty,” and the public’s attitude towards the war soured.

## **RELIGION**

Religion was one of the more glaring disparities between the Russian soldiers and the Afghan Mujahedeen. For the communist Russians, religion was a sign of weakness, a coping mechanism for an archaic culture. But to the Mujahedeen, Islam was everything. It was their culture, their way of life, and their motivation for fighting. Within the Soviet military, there were often disagreements between Russian combatants and the ethnically Central Asian soldiers. These Central Asian soldiers were faced with adverse messages about religion. The Soviet attitude directly challenged their culture and heritage of Islam. For some soldiers, this contradiction influenced their decision to desert the Soviet army.

### ***Religion in the Soviet Union***

The founding leader of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Illyich Lenin, thought that religion justified tyrannical rule while distracting and appeasing those who were searching for freedom from the oppressive employer. In 1905, Lenin was actively distributing the *Novaya Zhizn'*, the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party’s first newspaper. During this period, Lenin wrote what would become an influential expose on religion stating:

Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of the people, over burdened by their perpetual work for others, by want and isolation... Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward. But those who live by the labor of others are taught by religion to practice charity while on earth, thus offering them a very cheap way of justifying their

entire existence...Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man. [Ленин 1905]

To the Soviets who shared in Lenin's sentiment, the religious commitment and devotion of the Mujahedeen was backward and archaic. The USSR's dedication to Marxism prevented it from recognizing the validity of such religious obligation. This is not to say that the Soviet Union did not have experience with Islam. On the contrary, a large portion of its population was ethnically and religiously Muslim. Even though the regime's official stance on religion was the "opiate to the masses" philosophy, historically Soviet Central Asians were overwhelmingly Sunni Muslims. The Communist Party, however, tried to discourage the religious practices of these Central Asian regions. During the 1930s, the Soviet Union led an attack on Islam and other Central Asian practices—such as polygamy, veiling women, and bride price—that were perceived as oppressive to women. In his book, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia*, Douglas Northrop writes that women's emancipation in Uzbekistan came to "exemplify the entire Bolshevik revolution" (Northrop 2004, 9). This offensive, known in the local languages as *hujum*, led many Central Asians to immigrate to Afghanistan and forever set Soviets—at least in the eyes of the Afghans—in opposition to Islam. As late as the 1980s, the Soviet propaganda system struggled with the anti-religionist policy in Central Asia:

Although the percentage of young believers is not large, the positions of religion are still strong and the process whereby it is reproduced in the new generation has not been stopped. Rural school teachers themselves admit that their atheistic work is not very effective. There are pupils who arrive in school with definite religious views that have evolved within the family. [Дадабаева 1981, 27]

During the war in Afghanistan, Soviet attitudes towards Muslims continued to shift downward. Muslims were perceived as increasingly unstable, volatile populations that required caution and vigilance. The communist populace began to equate pious Muslims with Islamic extremism. For some Soviet Muslims, this bias and intolerance played a role in their decision to

desert the Red Army. These soldiers opted to fight with the Mujahedeen as religious brothers because their spiritual and cultural upbringing mirrored that of the freedom fighters.

### ***Religion in Afghanistan***

For the Afghan freedom fighters, Islam was deeply embedded in their lives and culture. The Soviets' disdain for all religions generally, and Islam especially, only served to increase the Afghans' suspicion and hesitancy to gratefully bask in the chilling glow of communism. While Islam is a complex and multifaceted religion, one aspect provided a particular motivation and justification for the Mujahedeen's acts of war: *jihad*. *Jihad* is an important part of Islam and is sometimes referred to as the "sixth pillar of Islam." The word *jihad* may be used to refer to any kind of conflict to preserve or bring to pass a good cause. Although it is often mistranslated into English as "holy war," *jihad* generally refers to a much more benign case: the effort a Muslim makes to live and structure his or her society on Islamic principles (Hewer 2006, 17). For the everyday Muslim, *jihad* represents the internal struggle against evil or temptation. To Muslims in the Soviet Union, it often meant resisting temptation by refraining from drinking alcohol or avoiding fornication. It could also have been as simple as finding the time to pray five times a day.

However, the word *jihad* also can be used to refer to holy war in a purely military sense. Most Muslims regard this definition as "lesser" *jihad*. In Islam, the use of violence and force is considered far too serious to be left to human initiative; it must be used according to the laws of God. From the Mujahedeen's perspective, the Soviet Union had occupied Afghanistan and sparked a defensive *jihad*. Therefore, God sanctioned their war against the Red Army. Their struggle was real. It was every Muslim's duty to wage war against the godless communists who

had come to Afghanistan to pervert the conservative, righteous lifestyles of Afghans with atheism and immorality. For the Mujahedeen, the concept of lesser *jihad* provided an impetus, a rallying cry to their fellow Muslims to resist the Soviet tyrants. It was an appeal to all Muslims to follow their example, to be stalwarts in the physical defense of an Islamic nation against atheist oppressors. In some ways, this rallying cry was a success. While the majority of the Afghan resistance movement were native Afghans fighting for their country's independence and an Islamic government, many of the freedom fighters were from Arabian Gulf countries.

The Mujahedeen's emphasis on militaristic *jihad* inevitably led to the development of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan. Although many Muslims did not participate in Islamic radicalism during the war, various Mujahedeen began to be driven by the conviction that, through endless sacrifice and implacable determination, their *jihad* would eventually triumph. For the extremists, the blood and sacrifice of their martyrdom through *jihad* would eventually restore the purity of the faith (Wheatcroft 2005, 301). The withdrawal of the Soviet Union in 1989 confirmed this belief. After nine years of war, the Mujahedeen were triumphant. They felt "their meeting with God's appointed time is bound to come" (Haleem 2005, 29).

My thesis is laid out in three major sections. Part I: Soviet Defectors discusses the environment and circumstances in which these men fought prior to their capture or defection. I examine Soviet military training in preparation for service in Afghanistan, conditions Red Army soldiers experienced while in Afghanistan, and Central Asians' experience in the Soviet Army during this period. Part II: A New Life in a New Land addresses historical treatment of POWs at the hands of the Soviets and psychological factors that may have strongly influenced some of the POWs' decisions to remain in Afghanistan following release from captivity. In Part III: Case Studies, I address POWs' individual experiences prior to, during, and after their captivity.

## PART I: THE SOVIET DEFECTORS

In any war, there are men who desert their posts and abandon patriotic responsibilities. Naturally, the Soviet-Afghan War was not devoid of these defectors. There were, however, a number of factors unique to the Soviet Army that contributed to the desertion rate. To begin with, many soldiers became disillusioned with the war. They were told that they would be defending their country and serving the Afghan population, but instead, they found themselves fighting against Afghan natives for unclear reasons. Following his service in Afghanistan, former soldier Vladislav Tamarov wrote:

Now, our troops have returned from Afghanistan. Now, our government has announced that the war was a ‘mistake.’ Now, I think about the results of this *mistake*. Tens of thousands killed, hundreds of thousands of bodies crippled and fates twisted. That is the only result of this war. What can any war give, aside from such results? [Tamarov 2001, 3]

From the outset, the Soviet leadership had failed to define their mission in Afghanistan. During the Soviet occupation, the communist-backed Afghan Army had desertion problems of its own due to this reason. Reportedly, “every month, an average of 1,500 to 2,000 men desert... The main reasons for the desertions were the low level of political understanding of the soldiers and their complete lack of understanding of the goals and missions of armed conflict” (The Russian General Staff 2002, 51). In addition, much of the Red Army was ill-prepared and inadequately trained for a military offensive in Afghanistan. Many soldiers received insufficient military training before they were deployed, and Soviet cultural training about life in Afghanistan was inadequate.

Upon arrival in Afghanistan, many Soviet fighters were horrified by the USSR’s violation of human rights agreements and the treatment of Afghan civilians. Soviet soldiers lived

and fought in poor conditions, and many suffered from medical maladies and drug abuse. Furthermore, the Red Army was not always welcoming to new troops. The ranks of the Soviet Army were permeated with a sort of “pecking order” that many young servicemen resented. Green recruits often found themselves victims of hazing and mistreatment by more experienced soldiers. Central Asian recruits were also subject to racial discrimination and abuse. As such, these soldiers, who were ethnically linked to the would-be enemy, often struggled to find the motivation to assault individuals whose culture and belief system mirrored their own.

## **PREPARING FOR WAR**

### ***The Disparity: Propaganda and Soviet Troops***

Many of the Soviet soldiers who abandoned the Red Army did so because of the blatant discrepancy between Soviet propaganda and the actual situation in Afghanistan. The Soviet government grossly misrepresented the state of affairs at the warfront to both its citizens and its soldiers. As a result, many soldiers misunderstood the role they would be playing in the Soviet-Afghan War and, once in Afghanistan, grew discontent. The constitution of the Soviet Union states that “[m]ilitary service to the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army is an honorable duty of the citizens of the USSR. To defend the fatherland is the sacred duty of every citizen” (USSR Constitution, art. 132-133). Accordingly, the Soviet populace was expected to respect and honor the troops serving in Afghanistan. Young men drafted into the army were taught that they would be serving their country by providing necessary assistance to the Afghan people. However, upon their arrival in Afghanistan, many troops were disturbed by the shocking disparity between Soviet propaganda and reality.

As soldiers were deployed to Afghanistan by the thousands, they were sent out with various misconceptions regarding the Soviet-Afghan War.

Up until 1985, in the press and on television, they told us that Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan were planting trees and building schools and hospitals. Only a few knew that more and more cemeteries were being filled with the graves of eighteen- to twenty-year-old boys. Without the dates of their death, without inscriptions. Only their names on black stone... [Mothers whose sons died] were presented with a form: "Your son perished while fulfilling his internationalist duty in Afghanistan." [Tamarov 2001, 1-3]

In 1988, the US Army commissioned a RAND corporation study headed by Alexander Alexiev to examine the strength and weaknesses of the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. This study was based on extensive interviews with 35 former Soviet military personnel who had defected from the Soviet Army. One defecting soldier recounted, "I knew very little about Afghanistan. I just knew that Soviet soldiers there were assisting the Afghans to build kindergartens, schools, and houses. Once I got there I saw right away that this was a big lie, nothing but lies" (Alexiev 1988, 19). Another soldier remembered viewing a propaganda film that showed Soviet troops playing with Afghan children and milking cows (Alexiev 1988, 18). Soviet soldiers and citizens were often told that the military was invited by the Afghan people who needed the Soviet Union's help to defeat the invading Americans and Chinese. Some soldiers were unaware that they would be serving in Afghanistan until they were on the transport plane en route (Alexiev 1988, 6). Contrarily, others reported being told, "Whoever wants to go to Afghanistan will go to Afghanistan and whoever doesn't will go there anyway" (Thorne 1986, 14).

Upon realizing the extent of their government's deception, the reaction among some servicemen was dissatisfaction and pessimism. As a former Soviet soldier put it, troops were "humiliated by being used as tools" in the war (Prinz 1986). Soldiers were disappointed in their government's lack of honesty and disregard for its citizens. The RAND corporation study for the US Army observed:

The general reaction to such heavy-handed and implausible propaganda is said to be widespread cynicism among the rank and file...A number of our respondents told us that the process of questioning the system, which eventually led them to defect, first began upon realization of the extent of official demagoguery in Afghanistan. [Alexiev 1988, 20]

As more soldiers became dissatisfied with the misrepresentation of the Afghan War and conditions in which they lived, more defected to the Mujahedeen. Over the course of ten years, more than 100 Soviets defected to the Mujahedeen, with at least two dozen joining the resistance and actively fighting Soviet forces (Alexiev 1988, 61-2). Servicemen were not willing to die fighting for a cause they did not support and for which the circumstances of their death would be covered up.

### ***Military and Cultural Training***

Before deployment, Red Army soldiers underwent basic military and cultural training. This education was meant to provide military aptitude, rudimentary language skills (known as survival language skills), and general cultural knowledge (Бондарчук 2005). It was intended to equip trainees with the ability and expertise they would need to successfully function in a war environment. The cultural programs were intended to give the soldiers increased cultural sensitivity, which would hopefully allow them to conduct their missions with respect for the local traditions and enable them to handle culturally sensitive issues with tact. In reality, most Central Asian recruits did not even possess the language skills to effectively serve as combat troops in the Soviet Army. Before the war, one Russian study had observed, “Language preparation of students to serve in the Soviet Army is, at the present time, one of the gravest problems which confronts the national schools” (Абузиаров 1978. 4). However, the USSR was hard-pressed for fighters. As such, many servicemen did not receive sufficient military training, and the Soviet Army’s initial invading force was severely lacking in military preparation. The

little training these soldiers did receive was based on a more traditional form of ground warfare with the United States:

When the Soviet forces entered Afghanistan, they not only had no practical skills in the conduct of counter guerrilla warfare, they also did not have a single well-developed theoretical manual, regulation, or tactical guideline for fighting such a war... There were no directives on training the force for this type of war; however, the necessity of such training was already evident during the first months after the 40<sup>th</sup> Army's arrival in Afghanistan." [Russian General Staff 2002, 43]

Thus, soldiers were completely unprepared for the mountainous deserts of Afghanistan and the guerilla warfare tactics of the Mujahedeen. Later, the Soviet Union changed its training location to the more appropriate setting of Central Asia in areas such as Ashkhabad, Iolotan, Termez, Chardzou, and Tedzhen (Alexiev 1988, 14). These training camps gave soldiers a more accurate environment in which to train for combat. Nevertheless, these new surroundings did nothing to correct the shortened training time most soldiers received. One soldier recalled:

I was supposed to have six months' training in boot camp, but our officers were in a hurry – they knew we could be sent off earlier... For other kinds of troops, training was just a formality and lasted only a few weeks, except for the special troops, the landing storm troops. [Tamarov 2001, 14-19]

This incomplete military training left many soldiers physically and psychologically unprepared for the hardships of war. As they struggled with combat, injuries, and casualties, some were unable to handle the difficulties and deserted.

Although Soviet servicemen did undergo various forms of cultural training, oftentimes these classes took the form of political indoctrination. These classes for soldiers began even before the invasion of Afghanistan. They became a standard part of Army training after the Воениздат's 1972 issue of 'Recommendations for the Psychological Training of the Ground Forces (Дубовой 2004, 6). They were propaganda forums that impressed upon the soldiers their patriarchal relationship to Afghanistan and the helplessness of its people (Бондарчук 2005).

While various cultural aspects were discussed—like some very basic language skills—most of these lectures provided little useful knowledge. Some soldiers even reported using these classes as a time to catch up on sleep (Tamarov 2001, 12). The Russian General Staff’s own post-war reports on training in Afghanistan illustrated a general concern for the quality of training that had been received: “The training of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan was often an extension of the peacetime training regimen... The political training, the full-field inspections, and the repetitious drills often degraded, instead of improved, combat readiness” (Russian General Staff 2002, 48).

In his dissertation “Moral-Psychological Support of Soviet Soldiers in the Territory of Afghanistan,” Andrei Dubovoi provides a series of conditions in which this type of training can be effective. He states:

Moral and psychological support of the troops should be specific, be focused on a specific opponent, on real and specific conditions of the fight, taking into account features of modern warfare, the tasks to which [the troops] will be assigned, and the means to be used. High morale of units can only be achieved through a combination of deep conviction, military skills and psychological training of soldiers. [Дубовой 2004, 16]

In the end, it seems that the USSR’s cultural training programs failed to fulfill the requirements Dubovoi thought to be successful. The US Army report stated, “Given the emphasis on political indoctrination in the Soviet army, psychological preparation and motivation of the troops for service in Afghanistan is surprisingly poor and possibly even counterproductive” (Alexiev 1988, vi and Бодаренко 2005). Without sufficient cultural training, many soldiers began to develop a sense of prejudice against Afghans as well as Muslims in general. Soldiers began to view Islam as a violent and extreme religion.

## **LIFE IN AFGHANISTAN**

The Soviet Army's living situation in Afghanistan left much to be desired. The conditions of combat combined with the deserts of Afghanistan and extremely poor hygiene had a negative effect on the health and morale of the Soviet military. Soldiers were forced to live amid filth and squalor. One unnamed interviewee spoke of his experiences in Afghanistan, stating:

Living conditions were terrible. Underwear was not issued, the bed sheets were never changed, and the soldiers rarely took a bath. And even if there was a possibility to bathe, you had to wash with water that was barely warm or cold. [Alexiev 1988, 46]

In addition to poor living conditions, the soldiers' diet also suffered. Most meals came from canned food and were generally bland and unsatisfying. As a result of these circumstances, the morale among the Soviet military further deteriorated.

### ***Soviet Medical Care***

Not only was the Soviet Union unprepared to provide proper hygienic care for its military, it also failed to offer sufficient medical attention. During a standard two-year deployment, it was expected that 60 percent of the force would succumb to either malaria or a water-borne illness such as amoebiasis, cholera, hepatitis, Shigellosis, or typhus (Grau 2004, 140). The medical personnel were unequipped to treat the various diseases that soldiers developed, and some scholars have hypothesized that more soldiers succumbed to disease than died in combat (Alexiev 1988, 45). Many of the common ailments were hygiene-related like jaundice and dysentery from unclean water and unsanitized dinnerware. Other complaints stemmed from the strenuous nature of combat:

One former sergeant recalled that cases of acute heat prostration [exhaustion] in his regiment were so numerous during operations that the medical unit was overwhelmed and unable to deal with all of them. According to him, nine soldiers died of heat stroke during his four months in the regiment. [Alexiev 1988, 47]

Combat injuries also posed a challenge because of the difficulty of evacuation from the mountains of Afghanistan. Units stationed in remote outposts received supplies on an unreliable basis. If soldiers were injured in these remote areas, it could be weeks before the wounded were evacuated.

### *Drug Use*

Soviet soldiers also complained of intense boredom and the subsequent drug abuse that often accompanied it. An extreme sense of monotony and isolation permeated the ranks of the Soviet Army. This frustration multiplied as soldiers were not allowed any home leave during their two-year service in Afghanistan, and Soviet censors prevented the servicemen from communicating any real information with their family members at home. Additionally, soldiers undoubtedly suffered from the psychological effects of warfare, including mental and emotional stress and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Discontent and unsatisfied, some soldiers searched in vain for the familiar outlet of their homeland: vodka. Unfortunately for lower-enlisted soldiers, alcohol was a valuable commodity in the Soviet-Afghan War. It was generally not produced in Afghanistan, difficult to obtain for enlisted soldiers, and expensive to ship from Russia. Many soldiers became creative in their search for a substitute:

You cannot imagine what they drink. They will drink shaving lotions and cologne. That's good stuff. Then they will drink toothpaste... They will simply squeeze four or five tubes in a jar, dilute it with water and drink it. They also drank truck antifreeze, glue, and brake fluid... They will also take shoe polish and smear it on a piece of bread and leave it in the sun until the alcohol separates from the shoe polish. Then you eat the bread and get drunk. [Alexiev 1988, 52]

Other soldiers used yeast, raisins, and bread to concoct their moonshine. Recalling the ever-present search for alcohol, one ex-soldier remarked, "We needed it to raise our morale. Without

it we had no morale” (Tempest 1984). For these combatants, alcohol provided a much-needed release from the hostility and monotony of warfare. However, the shortage of alcohol led some soldiers to turn in desperation to another, much more available form of intoxication.

Without sufficient medical care or psychological training, many Soviet servicemen were unequipped to cope with the ennui and pressure associated with war. As this phenomenon grew, some soldiers turned to drug use as a means of coping with their dissatisfaction. The most common drugs were hashish, opium, and marijuana. Soldiers also experimented with heroin, a heroin-like substance called *koknar*, and *cheffir* (an extremely concentrated form of tea). Hashish was an especially popular choice, and the majority of soldiers admitted using it at least once. One former POW recalled, “I didn’t have a single friend who was not using hashish” (Prinz 1986). Much like the alcohol abuse, servicemen reported using drugs to deal with boredom and cope with stress. One defector-serviceman explained after his arrival in the United States, “Most soldiers smoke hashish and opium because they are bored. There is nothing to do over there, nothing to entertain yourself with... it’s just torture, nothing else” (Alexiev 1988, 50). Another soldier admitted, “With this kind of life you’ll not only turn into an addict, but you’ll be ready to do anything, cut your wrists, your legs, or your throat” (Thorne 1986, 13).

This drug abuse undoubtedly influenced the performance of the Soviet military. For some deserters, the rampant drug and alcohol use encouraged their disillusionment with the Soviet Union. Additionally, the use of drugs in the army sparked illegal trading between servicemen and Afghans, which increased village raids as soldiers searched for drugs. One ex-Soviet soldier remembered, “The Afghans would exchange it [hashish] for all kinds of stuff. Once two guys swapped hashish for bullets; one was sentenced to nine years in prison, the other to six years” (Rybakov 1983). As the search for drugs brought Soviet servicemen into contact with Afghan

civilians, some soldiers recognized the damage the war was causing among the civilian population and became disenchanted with the Afghan War.

## Personnel Relations

*Наша армия—особая армия и в том смысле, что она есть школа интернационализма, школа воспитания чувств братства, солидарности и взаимного уважения всех наций и народностей Советского Союза. Наши Вооруженные Силы—единая дружная семья, живое воплощение социалистического интернационализма. [Л.И. Брежнев 1978, 556]*

*Our army is a special army in the sense that it is a school of internationalism, a school that fosters feelings of brotherhood, solidarity, and mutual respect among all nations and nationalities of the Soviet Union. Our Armed Forces are a united, close-knit family, the living embodiment of socialist internationalism.<sup>1</sup>*

*[L.I. Brezhnev 1978, 556]*

The Soviet Army had a long history of abuse between first and second-year soldiers known as *dedovshchina* or *starikovshchina*<sup>2</sup>. Basically, this system involves a sort of structured hazing of more recent recruits by the experienced soldiers. The soldiers that have been in combat longer, called the *stariki*, are permitted to debase and harass the more green combatants, the

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<sup>1</sup> I included Brezhnev's quote for a sense of irony concerning brotherhood within the ranks of the Soviet military. From a purely-military perspective, Army service did encourage learning a common language but lacked socially to build mutual respect and cohesion among the Socialist peoples'.

<sup>2</sup> This tradition has carried over into the contemporary Russian army. In 2006, the New York Times reported that at least 16 Russian soldiers were murdered whilst undergoing *dedovshchina* and an additional 272 committed suicide as a result of the hazing. There had been 3500 reports of abuse up until August that year (Myers 2006 and Prodan 2013)

*molodiye*. In Afghanistan, newer recruits were routinely stripped of their possessions, including cigarettes, lighters, coats, boots, pants, gloves, etc. They were also subjected to other forms of victimization, such as scrubbing out latrines with toothbrushes, being forced beneath beds, and running with gas masks on until they fainted (Alexiev 1988, 36). The young *molodiye* were also responsible for many of the *stariki*'s chores and guard duties. Any refusal to comply with these demands was met with severe and violent beatings. There were many reports of soldiers being hospitalized as a result of abuse from the *stariki* during the Soviet-Afghan War. One former soldier recalled:

In Afghanistan everyone gets demoralized almost at once. [The *stariki*] just kept saying, "We were given a hard time, now it's our turn to make you suffer." They would always try to hit us where it hurt the most. Mostly it was the career sergeants, who had already served some years. [Rybakov 1983]

As can be imagined, these antagonistic relations between soldiers had a detrimental effect upon morale in the Soviet Army. While these acts of persecution were not officially endorsed, they were not discouraged either. The same soldier reported that "the officers try to keep out of it [because] they depend on the elders [*stariki*] and the sergeants" (Rybakov 1983). Senior officers turned a blind eye, and the act of reporting cruelty only brought more severe retribution.

This systematic abuse served to undermine the military administration. Often, the *stariki* held seniority over new arrivals regardless of rank. Thus, a commanding officer recently stationed to a new area could be subject to maltreatment. Additionally, this systematic exploitation sometimes led new recruits to take drastic action. Some soldiers committed suicide, while others turned upon their oppressors, beating them<sup>3</sup> and, in more severe cases, actively aided the enemy<sup>4</sup>. The more crafty recruits would make these attacks look like accidents or acts

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<sup>3</sup> See the accounts of Beg (43) and Plotnikov (66).

<sup>4</sup> See accounts of Levenets (57), Naumov (61) and (Alexiev 1988, 62).

of war. As one deserter observed, “You can’t tell from the bullets how they were killed because the Mujahedeen use the same weapons as the Soviets<sup>5</sup>” (Thorne 1986, 23). In one instance of abuse, an entire unit of paratroopers turned against their tormenter: “As they were scrambling along a narrow ridge, one of the paratroopers hit the *politruk* [political instructor] in the face, so that he fell over the edge and was killed” (Thorne 1986, 23). Less cunning soldiers were convicted of attempted murder and sent to Soviet prisons (Rybakov 1983). Still other soldiers deserted the Red Army to escape the abuse.

## CENTRAL ASIANS IN THE SOVIET ARMY

*An important circumstance which helps to deepen a feeling of friendship among peoples is the fact that the Soviet military, as a rule, serve outside their republic, krai or oblast'. Daily contact with the fraternal peoples and familiarity with their culture, everyday life, rites, and traditions help to strengthen ties of friendship between them. The struggle against negative phenomena, obsolete traditions and rites also helps international indoctrination. It would be an oversimplification to reduce these merely to vestiges of the past. Even under conditions when there are no objective prerequisites for national antagonism, among certain people, if they are not constantly indoctrinated, nationalistic distortions are still not excluded. [Скрыльник 1981, 11]*

Within the Soviet Army, there was an ironic illogic that tested the loyalties of many of the Soviet servicemen of Central Asian descent. The Soviet Central Asian republics are geographically and historically tied to the people of Afghanistan. At the time of the Soviet invasion, three major Afghan ethnic groups (Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen) had about 18 million co-nationals living in the USSR. Soviet Central Asians stationed in Afghanistan were inevitably drawn to the ethnic and cultural ties they found among the Afghan people. One Soviet KGB

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<sup>5</sup> By the end of the war, there were 2,840 cases in which Soviet soldiers were incarcerated for selling weapons to the Afghans (Braithwaite 2011, 227).

Major remembered that Central Asians “showed little interest in fighting their neighbors...in no time at all they were black-marketeering (including selling army equipment), buying Korans and robbing the local population” (Zhou 2012, 321). Many of these soldiers chose to remain in Afghanistan because of the connection they felt with the local population and the mistreatment they had received at the hands of the Soviets. Although many Central Asians were committed to communism and the cause of the Soviet Union, they deserted in higher numbers than their Russian counterparts (Alexiev 1988, 44).

The Soviet system claimed to be a political structure in which all were equally respected and rewarded. Slogans such as “brotherly peoples,” *bratskiye narodi*, peppered Soviet propaganda and the national anthem. Nevertheless, this ideal was rarely a reality. The misguided belief that Central Asians were incapable soldiers, their lack of Russian language skills, their prevalence in the enlisted ranks and general exclusion from the officer corps, and the rampant racism found in the Red Army contributed to the mistreatment of Central Asians in the armed forces. Racial hierarchy was always present in the army, as was the military rank, structure, and veteran hierarchy. “During the mid- and late 1970’s, some 70-75% of the Soviet officers were Russians-Byelorussians. Practically all the non-Slavic officers were captains and below” (Bodansky 1982, 188). Officially, discrimination of this sort did not exist. In 1981, Colonel Bel’kov (Бельков) wrote in the Communist military magazine, *Коммунист Вооруженных Сил*:

One of the important manifestations of such equality is the multinational composition of the Soviet officer corps. In a socialist society, a man of any nationality can dedicate himself to professional military service. Moreover, during the period of creating the bases of socialism, when actual inequality of peoples still survived, the CPSU carried out special measures to train national military cadres and set aside the necessary number of places in military schools for all republics. Under the leadership of the Communist Party the multinational officer cadres have grown up and became stronger. At present, multinationality remains a qualitative feature of the Soviet officer corps. It is manned by the best representatives of all the Soviet nations and nationalities. [Бельков 1981]

## *The Numbers*

At the onset of the Soviet-Afghan War, there was a surplus of Central Asians serving in the invading forces. One individual noted that “three-fourths of the soldiers who served with him in a motorized rifle regiment at Kushka, Turkmenia, on the border with Afghanistan, were Central Asians” (Alexiev 1988, 5). There are several reasons for this over-representation. The most obvious explanation was the propinquity of units based in the Central Asian republics to the war front. They were simply closer to the area of conflict and were conveniently located for an early Soviet advancement:

In mid-September of 1979, months before the actual invasion, Soviet reserves in the Turkestan and Central Asian military districts (headquartered in Chirchik, Uzbekistan and Kapchugay, Kazakhstan, respectively) were mobilized... Westerners reported that the initial deployment included anywhere from as few as 30 and as high as 90 percent Central Asian soldiers. [Zhou 2012, 316]

These early units were able to reach Afghanistan much faster than other more centralized Soviet troops. Unfortunately, the majority of these early troops were very poorly trained, and casualties were high.

An alternative theory suggests that the deployment of Central Asians may have been a strategic maneuver on the part of the Soviet Union. Linguistically and culturally, these Central Asians were certainly better equipped to communicate with and relate to the Afghan population. According to this theory, the Soviet Union hoped that this rapport would enable the army to affect a smooth transition into Soviet rule. In addition, Soviet strategists may have hoped that these troops would set an example to the Afghan people, proving that communism and Islam were not mutually exclusive. They intended the Soviet Central Asians to serve “as representatives of socialism, to showcase the benefits and the success of socialist development to their fellow Muslims, and to disprove the idea that Islam and communism were incompatible”

(Zhou 2012, 315). These ideas, however, proved ineffective as the presence of Central Asians did not seem to appease the Afghan population.

As the war progressed, the number of Central Asians deployed to Afghanistan decreased. This is partly because they were simply rotated out: the Central Asian units were the first to enter Afghanistan, so they were also the first to leave. However, some have suggested that the removal of Central Asian troops was a deliberate move by the USSR (Zhou 2012, 322). Soviet strategists realized that the presence of these soldiers had little or no effect on the local population. Additionally, there were a number of demonstrations in the Soviet Union as Central Asian family members protested the higher death rate among their loved ones. “The peoples of Central Asia suffered proportionately the most—65 killed for every one million of the population—the story that Central Asians were unwilling to fight their co-religionists in Afghanistan is a myth.” (Braithwaite 2011, 329). Moreover, of the case studies found, only 2 of 21 soldiers who defected were of Central Asian descent. These Soviet Muslims found themselves surrounded by a people and culture remarkably similar to those of their homeland. This, juxtaposed with the rampant prejudice in the Soviet Army, created an environment that many Central Asians found distasteful.

### ***A Caution***

It is important to note a distinction between Soviet Central Asians and Caucasians, or people from the Caucasus Mountain region. Russians and other light-skinned ethnic groups, such as Ukrainians and Belarusians, reclined on top of the Soviet’s industrial totem pole, while

Central Asians labored at the bottom (Newton 2006 and Newton 2013)<sup>6</sup>. Caucasians, on the other hand, were largely exempt from this class structure. There are numerous accounts of Chechens and Dagestanis refusing to take orders from *stariki* and getting away with it, according to my interactions with both Russians and Central Asians who formerly served in the Red Army. One Tajik went even further to tell me the following anecdote: from childhood, Caucasians are trained in wrestling and fighting techniques and are taught to use them to protect their honor. Although these individuals were also Muslim, the Russians were apprehensive to order them about. Within Caucasian culture, pride, and honor are highly revered. If a Caucasian feels they have been disrespected, they are likely to respond violently and effectively (Newton 2013). For this reason, Russians generally steered away from abusing these Muslims and opted to batter their more passive Central Asian coreligionists.

### ***Military Performance and Language Skills***

Many Soviet officers had the mistaken idea that Muslims were inferior soldiers. This idea stems largely from the performance of the first Central Asian units deployed to Afghanistan. These early units were Central Asian reserve units that were severely lacking in competent military training:

Whether for reasons of expediency or surprise, or because it underestimated the potential resistance, the Soviet military leadership fleshed out understrength units with local reservists in areas of the Turkestan Military District adjacent to Afghanistan, rather than deploying combat-ready units for the initial thrust. As a result, the majority of the [invading] Soviet forces were made up of Muslim Central Asian reservists. [Alexiev 1988, 5]

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<sup>6</sup> In order to protect the identity of these individuals, I refer to the interviewees in aggregate as “Russians” or “Tajiks”

Their poor performance and high mortality rate led many to believe that Central Asians were incapable of competent military action. This supposed inability was apparently recognized by the Soviet government, as the number of Central Asians serving in the Red Army in Afghanistan sharply decreased after the initial invasion of Afghanistan.

Even though the Soviet educational system claimed to have virtually eradicated illiteracy in Central Asia, literacy did not entail attaining Russian language skills as might be assumed. Many Central Asians had poor Russian language skills and were unable to communicate effectively. While a Russian language education system may have been more successful in urbanized areas, it lacked substantial roots in rural ones because of a shortage of trained teachers. Often local languages were the primary language of education in rural areas. Publicly, Soviet military leadership embraced these linguistic differences:

In any family, however, not all brothers and sisters speak the same language. And we regarded it as something natural, because it could not be otherwise! We no longer even wonder why the differences among nationalities, which in any bourgeois army invariably result in mutual strife, alienation, and even open hostility, are relegated to a second plane in our Soviet Armed Forces, where precedence is given to the feeling of military duty and the awareness of personal and collective responsibility for the security of the great Soviet Homeland. Awareness is the same for all: Russians, Uzbeks, Ukrainians, Kazakhs, Belarusians, Georgians, Latvians, and Tadzhiks—all sons of one mother, the socialist homeland. [Долгов 1982]

The majority of Central Asian recruits were not the educated elite of the few urban centers, but rather were from the outlying villages and countryside. “As practice has shown, young soldiers who have mastered Russian more quickly learn modern weapons and complex equipment and become class specialists. In the units’ service, comrades help those who have a poor knowledge of Russian” (Скрыльник 1981, 11). Unfortunately, many of these soldiers were relegated to manual labor and received no linguistic assistance.

According to one of our respondents, one-third of the Central Asians in his regiment who participated in the invasion either did not understand or pretended not to understand even basic Russian. Many spoke no Russian at all...[an] article in *Izvestiya*, for example,

revealed that in Uzbekistan, “many recruits don’t speak Russian well enough to serve anywhere but in manual-labor battalions that dig ditches or pave roads.” [Alexiev 1988, 11]

Although some Central Asians were fluent in Russian and served in valuable military roles, the subordinate majority of these soldiers felt the compounded racism already present in the Soviet Army. Despite the apparent need for additional language instruction, the Soviet Union never did provide adequate linguistic training for these soldiers. In fact, several studies show that Russian proficiency among Central Asian soldiers actually decreased during the duration of the war (Alexiev 1988, 41). This is likely due to the fact that Central Asian soldiers who were less proficient in Russian were more likely to serve in undesirable assignments.

### ***Racism Becomes Abuse***

The preexisting racial tensions in the Soviet Army multiplied during the strenuous conflict against the Muslim adversary. Central Asian soldiers were commonly referred to as *chernozhopy* (black asses) or *churkas* (a derogative term denoting stupidity) and assigned the more tedious and disagreeable tasks. One Ukrainian soldier reported:

From the beginning we, the white people, considered ourselves somewhat higher and with more privilege than the *churkas*...that is why, when it is necessary to do some unpleasant work, say clean a toilet, a Kazakh would be sent and the Russians would make him do it...It has always been this way in the army. If I worked with a screwdriver, the Central Asian works with a shovel. [Zhou 2012, 318]

Central Asian soldiers were often considered inferior and were not given the same considerations other soldiers were. Slavic troops were instructed to disregard their Central Asian comrades because they were untrustworthy and incompetent. One soldier was told not to trust Central Asians because they had “such an affinity for the local people” (Lapychak 1984). His officers explained that these Central Asians would no longer be assigned to serve in Afghanistan because

they too often interfered with Soviet campaigns or deserted to the Mujahedeen. “Graduates of the national schools are unable for a long time to be given responsible tasks in the army, and when possible they are assigned to the service divisions.” (Абдузиаров 1978, 4) These Central Asians were condemned to labor units and were refused the privileges many ethnically Russian soldiers received. Central Asians were also at a higher risk of abuse by *stariki*. This extreme maltreatment contributed to instances of desertion and even suicide. One soldier recalled:

I knew a young Uzbek who killed himself. He came to Afghanistan and soon ran away. The whole regiment looked for him for two days but couldn't find him. Finally they found him in his native town. He was sent to the *disbat* for 20 days, and then they brought him back to the unit. After that, he was beaten severely every night by the *stariki*. His money was taken from him and they beat him even with a metal bar. He wrote a letter to his father telling him that he would rather die than serve any longer and begging him to come and take him home. Then one night at 2 a.m. he took a knife, went to the toilet, locked the door, and committed suicide. [Alexiev 1988, 37]

This environment undoubtedly impacted the Central Asian soldiers, causing some to question the validity of the Soviet principles. In some cases, it appears the ethnic ties Central Asians found in Northern Afghanistan affected their military performance:

An Afghan soldier of Uzbek ethnic origin, who defected to Pakistan in 1981...said that while serving in Kandahar airport he had become friendly with a Soviet Uzbek soldier with whom he could converse in the Uzbek tongue. The Soviet soldier...confided that when he and other Central Asians engaged in fire fights with [M]ujahidin<sup>7</sup>, they deliberately aimed their rifles inaccurately. [Zhou 2012, 320]

The familiarity Soviet Central Asians experienced undoubtedly encouraged some soldiers to leave the Soviet Army for a more recognizable life. Although a few reported no racial mistreatment, most experienced at least some form of abuse.

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<sup>7</sup> Alternate spelling of Mujahedeen, as cited in Zhou's quote.

## HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

*History teaches that the outcome of battles and war is often decided by the morale of the people, their psychological stability and willingness to bear hardships and sacrifices to achieve the objectives of the war. That is why the problem of strengthening the morale of the troops was always very relevant. [Дубовой 2004, 3]*

The Soviet Union's mistreatment of the Afghan population fostered a sense of bitterness among its soldiers, some of whom objected to the military's complete disregard for civilians. During its campaign in Afghanistan, the USSR was reprimanded by several different Western commissions for its blatant disregard for human rights. Accusers cited the violation of multiple international treaties and coalitions, including the United Nations Charter; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and the Final Act (US House 1985, 8). Specifically, Western officials referenced acts of genocide, mass and summary executions, torture of prisoners, destruction of whole villages, destruction of agriculture and animals, and the use of chemical weapons. The Soviet military used these tactics to squash the Afghan rebellion and to attempt to curtail the influence of the Mujahedeen by beating the civilian population into submission. Many of the troops involved in these maneuvers found the exploitation and brutality distasteful. As one soldier observed, "We were struck by our own cruelty in Afghanistan. We executed innocent peasants. If one of ours was killed or wounded, we would kill women, children, and old people as a revenge. We killed everything, even the animals" (Alexiev 1988, 58). Many Soviet deserters reflected on these events with horror and stated that this cruelty was a large part of their reasons for escaping the Soviet Union.

### *Acts of Torture and Acts of War*

Prisoners of the Soviet military were often subjected to severe mistreatment and even torture at the hands of their adversaries. Soviet torture methods included beatings, pulling out hair or beards, pulling out nails, dried shaving of hair or beards, pouring boiling water on detainees, grinding pepper into eyes, electric shocks, sleep deprivation, forcing detainees to stand on ice or in the hot sun, toxic injection, and the torture of relatives or children (US National Committee for Human Rights in Afghanistan 1985, 4). While this mistreatment was indeed horrible, many Afghan prisoners did not even make it to the military prisons. Often, Soviet military officials would simply execute captured Afghans on the spot. A former member of the Afghan military remembered a time when “the [Soviet] troops caught 15 civilians and tightened [tied] them together and shot them at once on the spot” (US National Committee for Human Rights in Afghanistan 1985, 1). In another instance, “the troops caught 10 villagers, tightened [tied] them up, poured some oil on them, shot them and burned them at once” (US National Committee for Human Rights in Afghanistan 1985, 2). Oftentimes, these individuals were civilians with no relationship to the Mujahedeen.

The Soviet military also targeted entire villages. Sometimes these attacks were carried out by swift and impersonal bombing raids by the Soviet Air Force. One ex-Soviet soldier remembered a time when troops had some difficulty taking a village, so they called in air support “and they just bombed that village clean down to the ground” (Sciolino 1984). But more often, these attacks were the acts of isolated ground troops. While the official Soviet stance was that its military was liberating the Afghan people, troops were ordered by their superiors to annihilate entire villages. Often, these orders came as a form of revenge for Soviet casualties and hardships. For instance, one soldier recalled:

I was on a military mission for eighteen days. I had to go hungry and to carry corpses. You know, so many soldiers in our company died that it was horrible. They shot my best friend, so afterwards we went through the houses and shot all the residents one after the other: women, children, everybody. [Alexiev 1988, 58]

Certainly, there were instances when Mujahedeen or insurgents were hiding in these villages, but frequently troops closed in on areas that clearly had no combatants hiding there. Often, these villages were bereft of all except women, children, and the elderly:

Once they entered a village where only old men and women with children were left, because whenever we went on a search-and-destroy mission all the able-bodied men had left the villages. The lieutenant ordered his platoon to herd all these women, children, and old men together into one room and throw in hand grenades. [Alexiev 1988, 58]

The Soviet military also abused local villages by destroying crops, irrigation systems, and livestock. These tactics were used as a form of retribution in an attempt to uproot the local population and force them to emigrate. There were also reports of military personnel using chemical weapons on the civilian population. One soldier recalled:

The soldiers talked about the smell of poison gas at the airports. One Paratrooper told me about an engagement where they used gas. He said that the gas masks were poorly made, a lot of guys had their eyes hurt by the gas. When I was in a hospital for a few days I saw soldiers who had gone blind from the gas and whose skin had turned black from chemical weapons. [Rybakov 1983]

Through these methods, the Soviet Army left a path of destruction in its wake as it annihilated entire communities. There were reports of villages leveled, their occupants killed or taken prisoner; devastated agriculture; and cultural tributes dishonored. An Afghan whose village was destroyed recollected:

They entered the village with 60 tanks. They poured gasoline on the houses and burned them; they shot down the cattle with machine-guns; they killed the chickens; they even slaughtered the dogs. The Russians burned our mosque and trampled upon the Koran. I myself buried the dead with the help of people from the other two villages. Sometimes only halves of bodies were left. And sometimes only heads, cut off. We buried twenty women with bullets in their heads. [Alexiev 1988, 58]

As more reports of inhumane war tactics reached the West through Soviet defectors, media organizations began campaigning for some form of intervention on behalf of Afghanistan. These acts of terror provoked an outcry in the West, and many nations officially objected over these human rights violations. As one official put it, “The Soviets are not seeking simply the capitulation of the resistance forces or an end to the opposition. They are engaged in the wholesale slaughter of a people and the total destruction of a culture” (US House 1985, 17).

### *Abandoning the Bloodshed*

Siding with the West, many Soviet soldiers also opposed the army’s harsh tactics and defected to avoid further participation. As a result of the disjuncture between the USSR’s misleading propaganda and the situation they found on the ground, the majority of Soviet troops already questioned the validity of their presence in a foreign country. When they witnessed the horrific treatment of civilians, they doubted their regime even further. Almost every POW I researched referenced the mistreatment of the civilian population as a factor in his desertion<sup>8</sup>. These were generally very young men, unaccustomed to so much graphic bloodshed and violence. Some soldiers felt that the Soviet Union’s positive propaganda was a cowardly attempt to hide what it was really doing in Afghanistan from the world. As one soldier said, “We would like the world to know more about Afghanistan and about the bayonets and silencers that were attached to our automatic rifles” (Thorne 1986, 11). To most defectors, the Soviet Union’s use of extreme military tactics was unacceptable and went against their deepest convictions. While some embraced these violent scenarios, others, such as Sergei Krasnoperov and Igor Kovalchuk,

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<sup>8</sup> A common misconception among Soviet leadership was that Central Asians were inferior soldiers. It is evident that inhumane acts played a more important role in defection rather than race. Of the POWs whose stories I document, 19 were of Slavic origin and 2 were of Central Asian descent.

turned from them in horror and, unable to cope, abandoned the motherland they never dreamed could act so maliciously. There were soldiers who sought solace in joining the society their leaders encouraged them to destroy.

## **PART II: A NEW LIFE IN A NEW LAND**

*“It should always be borne in mind that in the formula ‘man-machine’, man always was, is, and always will be the more important element. Marxism-Leninism tells us that the more the means of armed combat are perfected, the more important the role of man becomes.” [Мерумский 1976, 3]*

Following their desertion, there were some Soviet defectors who opted to remain in Afghanistan even when faced with opportunities to return to the Soviet Union or seek asylum in the West. The majority of these soldiers converted to Islam and did their best to assimilate into their new culture. They usually married Afghan women, found jobs supporting their local community and often converted to Islam. Some of these ex-Soviets even performed the ultimate act of betrayal and took up arms against the Soviet Union. Their reasons for doing so are closely tied to their motivations for deserting the Soviet Army, yet there are also a number of unique factors that may have prevented some soldiers from leaving the land of their confinement. To begin with, ex-prisoners of war had historically been treated with contempt in the Soviet Union. They were usually tried, convicted of treason, and sent to the infamous gulags. Many Soviet deserters were simply too afraid to return home, worried of what awaited them there. Instead, they made efforts to make a new life for themselves in Afghanistan. Other ex-combatants expressed a deeper commitment to their newfound faith and culture. While there are likely many factors involved in their decision to convert to Islam and remain in Afghanistan it is probable these victims of psychological trauma were attempting to assuage their trauma and correct the

atrocities they participated in by pledging themselves to the Mujahedeen cause.

## **HISTORICAL TREATMENT OF POWS**

As Soviet soldiers were captured in the Soviet-Afghan War, many were convinced that they could never return home because they feared retribution from the Soviet government. POWs held in Afghanistan would have been faced with the prospect of returning to their nation in shame or trying to find a new home. They likely knew they would be portrayed as traitors and cowards to their friends and family members at home. One Soviet POW who was exchanged for a Mujahedin<sup>9</sup> prisoner was “sentenced to six years’ hard labor” (Braithwaite 2011, 259). Deserters would have remembered the countless World War II POWs that were deemed traitors and sentenced to years in the prison camps. This dread of humiliation—and possibly even prosecution—undoubtedly influenced Soviet fighters who opted to remain in Afghanistan after the close of the war.

### ***World War II***

World War II was the deadliest war the world had ever experienced. Within the USSR alone, estimates range between 20 and 50 million people dead<sup>10</sup>. Following the war, many individuals perceived as sympathetic to the German invaders were poorly treated, deported, and

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<sup>9</sup> Alternate spelling of Mujahedeen, as cited in Braithwaite’s quote.

<sup>10</sup> During the conflict, the Soviet Army’s front lines were “supported” by the infamous barrier troops. Soviet barrier troops should not be confused with conventional support or reinforcement units. Rather, the primary responsibility of barrier units was to prevent unauthorized retreat. They were to thwart chaos and panic in frontline conscript units by “blocking” their retreat, with deadly force if necessary. Red Army soldiers were not given the authorization to retreat under any circumstances. As such, soldiers who opted to retreat during battles were met by machine gun fire from the barrier troops. Thus the Soviet Army was actually responsible for a large portion of its own casualties.

in some instances killed. Prisoners of war of all ethnicities were targeted for government reprisals.

On August 8, 1941, Stalin issued what became known as Order No. 270. In this order, those who surrendered to German forces were deemed traitors to the Soviet Union. Later on, this order was expanded to classify all of the Soviet citizens behind enemy lines as enemies of the state. Stalin's paranoia was not entirely baseless, as many Soviet POWs did in fact fight for the Nazi Party:

This notion [That POWs are traitors] had spread through the Red Army, in part because one million captive Soviet soldiers fought against their own country, some out of conviction, many out of desperation to survive the horrors of German captivity. By 1945, one out of eight soldiers in German uniform was a Soviet citizen. [Overy 1997, 361]

### *Soviet Attitude towards POWs*

Given the chance to surrender to Soviet or Allied forces, German soldiers in WWII would flock to the Allied front lines because they knew they would receive better treatment (Ferguson 2004, 189). There were several reasons for this. First, Soviet forces tended to mistreat these prisoners because they did not respect POWs. They regarded prisoners of war as men without honor who had betrayed their country by surrendering. Second, the Germans betrayed the Non-aggression Pact between Germany and the Soviet Union, and Nazi forces knew that they could expect retribution at the hands of the Soviets. Contrarily, the American government was a signatory to the Geneva Convention. German forces knew the Americans respected and cared for the POWs under their care, and they feared Soviet vengeance for Nazi mistreatment of Slavic populations. Afraid of Soviet reprisals and the historical treatment of Soviet POWs, Germans sought to surrender to American military forces.

Following the Second World War, the Soviet Union extended its distaste for prisoners of

war to include allied American and British POWs. These soldiers were held by Soviet forces for a short period of time following WWII. An American Lt. Colonel named James Wilmeth, who ensured the repatriation of Allied POWs, said the following regarding the Soviet military:

The Soviet attitude toward liberated American prisoners is the same as the Soviet attitude toward the countries they have liberated. Prisoners are spoils of war won by Soviet arms. They may be robbed, starved, and abused—and no one has the right to question such treatment. [Wilmeth 1945, box 22, entry 319]

The Soviet attitude towards POWs continued after WWII through the Afghan-Soviet War. Soviet POWs were perceived as traitors or spies.<sup>11</sup> According to this mindset, those captured had willingly given up fighting for their motherland in exchange for the preservation of their lives.

### *POWs in Afghanistan*

Soviet soldiers deployed to Afghanistan were well aware of the fate that befell retreating soldiers and POWs during World War II. They knew that, if they were captured, they would be victims of humiliation and degradation upon their return. At worst, they would be prosecuted and convicted of crimes against the motherland. Such a fate could not have appeared promising. As one ex-soldier observed, “If I am returned home they’ll put me in prison for a couple of years, maybe longer...What’s the point of going back to the Soviet Union?” (Rybakov 1983).

Prisoners of war also knew that their family members and friends were likely informed of their disloyalty and encouraged to forget and reject their sons. As soldiers were captured or declared missing in action, their families were forced to face the difficulties of their loss. Some of these POWs were married not long before their deployment to Afghanistan. Often, word of

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<sup>11</sup> This attitude is difficult for Western minds to understand. Prisoners of war are honored in the West; the black POW/MIA banner promises, “You are not forgotten” and the Warrior Ethos states, “I will never leave a fallen comrade.” The US government makes every effort, both diplomatically and militarily, to recover its missing and captured personnel. America rejoices when its POWs return home.

their fate reached their loved ones, accompanied by accounts of the POW's treasonous acts. Granted, there are some documented instances in which Red Army deserters joined forces with the Mujahedeen to fight their compatriots, but these instances were rare. In most cases, the POW was innocent of such rash accusations of treason. Prisoners of war suffered in solitude while their loved ones were tortured with the thought of their disloyalty.

In later years, the Soviet Union attempted to make amends for the mistreatment of its own captured soldiers. It dropped treason convictions of several ex-prisoners of war and promised a safe and welcome return for any who wished it. One official stated, "All of them [POWs] will be accepted, employed, allowed to study if they wish... We are taking care of everything. Our people, including those being held captive, are showing heroic behavior" (Keller 1988). While this assurance influenced some, many captured soldiers remained suspicious of their former government's true intentions and refused to return<sup>12</sup>.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA**

The Soviet Union failed to recognize the potency of psychological trauma in the military. Disorders such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), acute stress disorder, and various other anxiety disorders were not even recognized, let alone treated. One ex-Soviet soldier observed, "In the United States there are 186 psychological rehabilitation centers open to help Vietnam veterans. But where are we in the Soviet Union to go for help? We don't even have one such center" (Tamarov 2001, 7). As in all wars, many servicemen in Afghanistan suffered mental

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<sup>12</sup> Some of the skepticism stemmed from stories such as that of a former GRU agent who defected to the Mujahideen and eventually to the West. His former comrades killed him more than a decade after the war had ended (Braithwaite 2011, 265).

trauma because of the horrors they witnessed, including the atrocities they themselves committed. This same soldier recalled:

I saw houses burned by the Mujahedeen, as well as disfigured bodies of prisoners they'd taken. But I saw other things too: villages destroyed by our shelling and bodies of women, killed by mistake. [Tamarov 2001, 116]

Without any sort of psychological training or therapy, Soviet soldiers were at the mercy of the constant emotional and mental strain of combat. The majority of these soldiers were young men who were more susceptible to mental trauma than those who had years to train before going to war because they lacked the necessary skills to help them overcome the emotional and mental strains of combat (Jameson 2010, 350). Those imprisoned by the Mujahedeen were also vulnerable to the psychological effects of Stockholm syndrome, which may have influenced their unexpected dedication to a foreign faith and people.

Soldiers suffering from Stockholm syndrome or even PTSD may have rejected their former lives in favor of the lifestyle and beliefs of their captors. It is possible that Islam provided these prisoners with an outlet for their frustrations. As they searched for any source of release or liberation, Islam may have suggested a spiritual freedom, one that provided them with structure and a reprieve from the difficulties of imprisonment. This is especially relevant to Soviet conscripts who had an Islamic heritage, who were from the Caucasus and Central Asia.

### ***Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder***

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a condition that results from prolonged exposure to psychological trauma. Psychological trauma refers to harmful or potentially deadly situations that produce feelings of helplessness or intense fear or horror (Ozer 2004, 169). While one traumatic event is sufficient to produce symptoms of PTSD,

The greater the number of various types of traumatic events experienced by an individual (e.g., torture, fighting, shelling, abduction, abuse/rape...), the more likely the individual [is] to have PTSD, with more pronounced symptoms. [Kolassa 2007]

Significantly, it is irrelevant whether the victim of PTSD experiences these traumatic events himself or herself or simply sees them happening to others. What matters most is the individual's proximity to the disaster, the shocking nature of the event, and the frequency with which these events occur (Horowitz 1990, 25). Symptoms of PTSD include sleep disturbances, hallucinations, paranoia, increased startle reaction, and confusion. Victims also report feelings of survivor's guilt, rage at attackers, and fear (Horowitz 1990, 33).

Soldiers serving in Afghanistan were exposed to an ample number of traumatic events. The war was a bloody one, and many reported seeing their friends killed or horrifically maimed. Soviet soldiers also witnessed gruesome scenes in Afghan villages and towns. As noted above, many women and children were killed, and the bodies were sometimes terribly disfigured. Additionally, many soldiers experienced traumatic events directly. Injuries were common and adequate medical treatment scarce. Hazing and abuse was a prominent part of army life. Some soldiers were captured by the Mujahedeen and faced with the horrifying prospects of possible torture and death. Others were arrested by the Soviet military and subjected to torture for their misconduct.

Undoubtedly, a substantial quantity of Soviet servicemen suffered from the effects of PTSD. Many family members noted significant changes in soldiers returning from Afghanistan. These alterations ranged from minor sleep disturbances to excessive paranoia and personality changes. Without medical assistance, many Afghan War veterans suffered with PTSD for the rest of their lives. Soviet POWs were also affected. Several prisoners reported reoccurring nightmares and periods of chronic distress (Thorne 1986, 4). Others exhibited significant

personality changes made apparent through their changes in mood, ethos, and belief system. Soldiers who rejected their former lives to settle in Afghanistan are particularly suspect for PTSD or another psychological disorder as these substantial alterations were likely influenced by psychological trauma.

### ***Stockholm Syndrome***

Stockholm syndrome refers to the psychological phenomenon in which victims of traumatic physical and emotional stress bond with their captors in such a way that they do not condemn those who have offended them, but rather defend them and have intense feelings for them. While it is impossible to quantify the extent to which Stockholm syndrome played a role in the actions of Soviet POWs, it is likely that the conditions required to produce the disorder were present during the Soviet-Afghan War.

There are several factors that contribute to the development of Stockholm syndrome (Cantor 2007, 379). First of all, a hostage's life must be threatened or he or she must believe that his or her life is in danger. Physical and emotional abuse and, particularly, the execution of a fellow hostage tend to escalate this fear. Following their capture, prisoners generally must observe some act of mercy in their oppressor, and "under such circumstances, any act of kindness on the part of the captors or even the absence of beatings, abuse, or rape lead victims to see their captors as 'good guys'" (Adorjan 2012, 458). The victim must also be kept in seclusion and completely separated from the outside world without any possibility of escape. This internment could be corporal or psychological, meaning the hostage might be physically restrained or simply believe that there is nowhere else to go.

In their weakened psychological state, Soviet POWs were susceptible to Stockholm syndrome. They undoubtedly feared for their lives. The sheer fact that they were imprisoned by enemy forces would have impressed upon them the inevitability of their death. As for small kindnesses, several POWs reported that they received fairly humane treatment from their captors (Thorne 1986, 4). Often, this kindness at the hands of their enemies juxtaposed harshly with the abuse Soviet soldiers experienced from their own comrades. Kept in isolation deep in Afghanistan, it is unlikely that these prisoners received any news from home or heard anything about the Soviet's campaign. The First Secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party warned of cultural relations with foreigners because, through such relationships, Western powers "make use of individual renegades, who have betrayed the Motherland, or of religious extremists and fanatics" (Ганьпов 1981). Most POWs undoubtedly felt escape was improbable<sup>13</sup>. They were physically restrained in enemy territory and unable to return home. Even if escape were possible, many prisoners, as explained above, felt they could never return for fear of prosecution and imprisonment<sup>14</sup>. Under these circumstances, it is likely that some POWs developed symptoms of Stockholm syndrome, which may have contributed to a rejection of former lifestyles in favor of a new reality.

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<sup>13</sup> There is one instance of a secret Pakistani prison uprising in which Soviet POWs attempted to escape but were killed by Mujahedeen and Pakistani regular army soldiers. The event was covered up by both the Pakistani and Soviet governments (Braithwaite 2011, 266-7).

<sup>14</sup> "There is no record of any [POWs] being shot" upon their return to the Soviet Union, although the Western media routinely predicted this punishment (Braithwaite 2011, 259).

### **PART III: CASE STUDIES**

*“The main motive for the soldiers to honestly and faithfully perform their duty, may be only a deep awareness of the righteousness of the cause they serve” (Дубовой 2004, 17).*

The following case studies are a collection of both official and personal accounts of Soviet POWs in Afghanistan. These accounts reflect signs of psychological trauma, disillusionment, and the defector relating to his captors, before conversion to Islam. I chose the most compelling documented accounts but did not limit these to those who remained in Afghanistan indefinitely. In order to limit biases of the time and changes in personal perspectives, I tried to use cases such as that of Genady Tseuma that were documented over a long period of time (1986 and 2009).

#### ***Mohammad Beg***

Mohammad Beg was a young private from Tashkent, Uzbekistan. In 1987, he was serving in a remote outpost near Kabul and became involved in a dispute with an officer. After beating the officer unconscious, Beg deserted his post and found refuge in a village for a short time before being handed over to the Mujahedeen (*Time Magazine* 1988). Following his capture, Beg enjoyed relative freedom. Already a Muslim, Beg was respected and treated with dignity by his fellow followers of Islam. Despite captivity, Beg expressed absolutely no desire to return to his native Uzbekistan. Instead, he said, “I’d like to stay in Afghanistan and find a job...I’m free here...As a Muslim, I’m not oppressed” (*Time Magazine* 1988).

Beg’s decision to remain in Afghanistan stems from his fear of punishment or execution for his actions against his superior. Because of his violence and insubordination, Beg would likely face a prison sentence and possibly execution if returned to Uzbekistan. His desertion only compounds his criminal action. Additionally, Beg is socially accepted and free to conduct his life

in the manner he chooses. While in captivity, he is free to travel with an accompanying guard and is not compelled to take up arms. Because of his ethnicity and religion, he is able to associate freely with the Afghan-Uzbek population. These ethnic ties give him the feeling that he is surrounded by friends and family who share his beliefs and traditions. As Beg notes himself, his shared Muslim identity influenced his decision to remain in Afghanistan rather than return to his native Uzbekistan in the Soviet Union.

### *Sergei Busov*

Sergei Busov was a member of the ever-prominent poor working class in the Soviet Union. He and his parents shared a communal apartment in Perm. He recalled, “We were allocated a room which was 14 square meters. Living in such cramped quarters, we couldn’t even dream of a three-room apartment, not to speak of a happy life” (Thorne 1986, 35). Before the war, Busov worked as a welder in a factory but dreamed of becoming a truck driver. He was learning to drive a truck when he was drafted into the army:

On April 2, 1983, I was taken into the army. I was literally taken, because no one asked me whether I wanted to go or not. Two months later I was already in Afghanistan, where I came face to face with real communism: lying, genocide, lawlessness, humiliation, betrayal, servility, etc. [Thorne 1986, 35]

Upon his arrival in Afghanistan, Busov was initially pleased with his assignment to drive a food delivery truck in Baghram. However, he quickly grew dissatisfied with life in the Soviet Army. He deserted and “voluntarily laid down [his] arms and joined the resistance, in hope of finding freedom” (Thorne 1986, 35). After participating in a number of skirmishes against the Soviets, Busov was granted asylum in Canada in 1986 (Prosser 1986b).

Busov named several reasons for his desertion. He was particularly shocked when he discovered the blatant differences between Soviet propaganda and the actual state of warfare in

Afghanistan. He recalled, “When I was still in basic training I was told that in Afghanistan I would find American and Chinese mercenaries...after I arrived in Baghram I asked an older soldier about this and he told me to throw this idea out of my head” (Thorne 1986, 18). Busov disliked being forced to take action against the Afghan people because he arrived there with the intention of protecting them. He was also shocked by the scale of violence and high casualties, none of which were reported in the Soviet Union. In addition, Busov was disturbed by the system of *dedovshchina* in the ranks of the Soviet soldiers. He disliked his role as a green recruit because “the new recruits are treated like servants” (Thorne 1986, 23). He, along with all other new recruits, was forced to do much of the work for the more experienced soldiers. He resented this unfairness, and it deepened his antipathy towards the USSR. Finally, Busov was angered by the inhumane acts of war taking place on behalf of the Soviet Union. He witnessed the Soviet Army abuse and humiliate Afghan civilians and even endanger its own troops. On one occasion, he remembered:

An Afghan village was being bombed by the USSR...Why would they want to bomb this village, which was just six kilometers from a major military unit? I asked myself. All of this influenced me in my decision to defect. [Thorne 1986, 24]

This blatant disregard for human life—both Afghan and Soviet—seems to have been one of the primary driving forces behind Busov’s desertion.

It is not clear from his story whether he deserted the Soviet Army with the intention of joining the Mujahedeen or if he was simply captured by them and then took up their cause. He certainly seemed to have developed a significant emotional bond with his Afghan companions.

In a letter to President Reagan, he wrote:

I completely support the Afghan partisans and their just struggle for their country’s freedom. We have spent many sleepless, anxious nights together under one sky, and we have shared the last crumbs of bread and the last drops of water. [Thorne 1986, 35]

Although there is no way to be certain, this kind of connection certainly denotes a deep, lasting relationship like the one formed in a Stockholm syndrome scenario.

But in the end, it seems that Busov's defection was ultimately driven by the hardship and struggles he endured throughout his young life and during the war. His difficult childhood and limited prospects, combined with the humiliation he endured as a soldier, sealed his resentment against the Soviet Union. He wrote:

A human being is so created that he is constantly dreaming of a good, happy life and all of his life he strives toward that dream. But what can you do with this dream in a country where a person is considered merely as a cheap working unit? [Thorne 1986, 35]

Busov mentions the need for a happy life several times during his narrative. It appears that he struggled with a desire for happiness and fulfillment throughout his young life and deserted the Red Army in an effort to find it.

### ***Nikolai Bystrov***

Captured by the Mujahedeen in 1983, Nikolai Bystrov underwent harsh treatment for his first six months as a POW (Braithwaite 2011, 262). Given the chance to emigrate to the West, he chose instead to remain with the famous Tajik warlord Ahmad Shah Masood<sup>15</sup>. Bystrov's decision to live in Afghanistan with Masood made him a legend in his own right. Ironically, this former Soviet soldier would become the protector of Masood, a leading opposition figure to the Soviets and later the Taliban. Bystrov married a Tajik woman from Masood's tribe in 1986, affirming his allegiance to Masood, to whom he would serve as a bodyguard for the next decade (Braithwaite 2011, 262). Bystrov returned to Russia with his wife in 1995 to evade the Taliban,

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<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, I was unable to find any information as to why he made this decision, other than the fact Bystrov deeply respected Masood.

but would later visit his in-laws in Afghanistan and arrange for the remains of Soviet KIA (killed in action) to be returned to Russia (Braithwaite 2011, 262).

### *Taras Derevliany*

Taras Derevliany was a young Ukrainian soldier from the Yaroviv, Lviv region. He was drafted into the army in November 1986 and trained as an operator and gunner on an armored personnel carrier. He was sent to guard the Kabul-Jalalabad highway in Afghanistan. Just a few short months after his deployment began, Derevliany deserted the army on July 2, 1987 (Kolomayets 1988). Three days later, he found a group of Mujahedeen hiding in the mountains and joined them.

Derevliany is unique because, after deserting, he began actively campaigning for the end of the Soviet-Afghan War. He published leaflets and distributed pamphlets persuading other soldiers to desert the army and join his crusade against the war. He encouraged them to actively protest and “refuse to serve in this country, start collecting petitions in your platoons, in your companies and battalions, under the heading ‘Stop the War and Withdraw Soviet Forces from Afghanistan’” (Kolomayets 1988). Derevliany knew from experience that the army was already having trouble with dissatisfaction and controversy among its ranks. He played upon this discord by reminding soldiers of their morality and duty. He wrote, “Refuse to take part in this senseless and shameful war, stop fighting and annihilating the Afghan people. Remember that if you will not do this, this shame will stain you like a black blemish” (Kolomayets 1988).

Derevliany reminded soldiers of their sense of humanity and berated them for their violence against the Afghan people. He repeatedly insisted that the Soviet soldiers belonged at home, fixing the growing problems in the USSR. He felt that the real war was being carried out

at the home front, and the Soviet-Afghan War was merely a distraction and a diversion. He entreated:

Remember that you are needed to defend your own country, your own people and your own families, and not to suppress other nations...Just think, aren't the peoples of the USSR exploited, aren't Soviet people subjected to violence and repressions? Haven't all of the peoples of the USSR, without exception, lost their cultures, their religions, their customs and national independence? [Kolomayets 1988]

Derevliany claimed that the Soviet Union was suffering from the very same maladies it was supposedly addressing in Afghanistan, only the Soviet government was the source of the infirmity. He insisted that ending the Soviet-Afghan War would help correct the situation. He believed that once these disgruntled soldiers returned home, their eyes would be opened to the duplicity of their government, and they would insist upon a better system.

It is difficult to ascertain exactly why Derevliany deserted the army, although he does mention the plight of the Afghan people several times in his propaganda materials. It is possible that he witnessed some war atrocities that influenced his campaign on their behalf. However, it also seems that Derevliany came to Afghanistan already overwhelmed with feelings of discontent and frustration with the Soviet government. The situation in Afghanistan only reinforced these concerns. Certainly, his displeasure with the Soviet Union motivated his decision to join the Mujahedeen and promote an end to the war. Nevertheless, Derevliany does not seem to take issue with the Soviet *people*. Instead, his condemnation seems to have been focused squarely on the communistic government he believed was undermining his homeland.

### ***Bakhretdin Khakimov***

Private Bakhretdin Khakimov volunteered for service to fight in Afghanistan in 1980 (Kelly 2013). Not long after arriving in Afghanistan, Khakimov was wounded and left for dead.

Fortunately, the Mujahedeen provided him with two French doctors who nursed him back to health. During his months of recovery, Khakimov was uncertain about his future. He had heard rumors that the Mujahedeen tortured and killed captured soldiers. “I didn’t know whether they were going to put me in prison, torture me or kill me,” he recalled (Kelly 2013). However, his fears were never realized, and his encounter with the Mujahedeen proved to be quite the opposite. Eventually, his personal experience with Muslim compassion led him to religious conversion.

Like many Soviet soldiers, the 20-year-old private smoked cigarettes. Seeing him struggling with withdrawal, the Mujahedeen would purchase cigarettes for him from the nearest store, a two-day donkey ride away. Khakimov reflected that, while the efforts of the French doctors saved his life, the Afghans saved his soul (Kelly 2013). Soon thereafter he converted to Islam and adopted the name Sheikh Abdullah, which he continues to use today. Khakimov embraced Islam and the Mujahedeen cause. He played an essential role in fighting Soviet forces near Herat and believed that he was fighting *al-jihad al-asghar*, the *jihad* against the infidels. He said, “I knew [Soviet] tactics so I was a teacher for the Mujahidin<sup>16</sup>” (Kelly 2013). During the conflict, he killed many Soviet soldiers. Following the war, an Afghan village adopted him as their son and he was able to successfully assimilate into the Afghan culture after converting to Islam and learning Dari.

He was finally reunited with his family back home in Ukraine, albeit by telephone (Kelly 2013). No matter how difficult the emotional situation was, the former Red Army soldier would not return to his native land. “It’s not possible for [Ukraine] to forgive me. It is not like Afghanistan, where you can pay money to avoid the law. I will be punished back there” (Kelly

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<sup>16</sup> Alternate spelling of Mujahedeen, as cited in Kelly’s quote.

2013). The words exchanged attest to some of the feelings Khakimov felt during the trying decades of his past.

While Khakimov did not willingly desert the Soviet Army, he developed a deep affinity for Afghanistan and Islam. Although he does express some fear of prosecution in Ukraine, Khakimov may also have experienced some psychological trauma. He felt completely—and was quite literally—abandoned by his Soviet comrades and was frightened by the Mujahedeen, whom he had been warned would torture and kill him. He was shocked to discover that they not only treated him with kindness, but went out of their way to look out for his well-being. Experiencing such significant mental strain while in isolation could very well have led to symptoms of Stockholm syndrome. Khakimov felt that his eyes were opened to the true nature of the Afghan War. He believed that the oppressive communists were assaulting his kind, well-meaning protectors, and he took up arms in their defense.

### ***Igor Kovalchuk and Nikolai Golovin***

These two POWs deserted the Soviet Army together and were then captured and held by the Mujahedeen. Igor Kovalchuk was a factory worker from Kharkov. Although he had aspirations of becoming an aviation officer like his father, he was unable to enter the program because of his academic performance. Instead, he took employment at an aviation factory (Prosser 1986a). When he was twenty years old, Kovalchuk received a summons to the recruitment center. He had already deferred the army's call twice and thus had no choice but to accept the call. He enlisted into the army (Prosser 1986a). Upon reaching Afghanistan, he was assigned to a reconnaissance unit and participated in a number of skirmishes.

Nikolai Golovin was born in Ulanovsk on January 30, 1962. He was trained as an electrician and also did some work as a chauffeur (Thorne 1986, 40). Upon the completion of his electrician training, he was assigned to work at a hotel under construction for the 1980 Olympics. Several months later, he received his summons from the Soviet Army. Making no attempt to avoid the draft, Golovin promptly went to the local recruitment center and enlisted. He remembered:

I was a kid. What did I know about what kind of a war was going on? I just went to the draft board and went through all the formalities. I was told to come back in two weeks with all my baggage packed. [Prosser 1986a]

Golovin was deployed to Afghanistan, but unlike Kovalchuk, he saw very little combat.

Shortly after arriving in Afghanistan, Golovin developed typhoid fever and was sent to the army hospital. There, he met an ailing Kovalchuk who was suffering from dysentery. The two men quickly became friends, and Kovalchuk began to share his combat experiences with Golovin. Kovalchuk was part of a reconnaissance company in Afghanistan. His responsibility was to fire a machine gun attached to the back of an armored vehicle. He did not enjoy this duty, and the violence he witnessed had a serious impact on him. He recalled, "After I pulled the trigger and looked through the viewfinder I could see people's heads rolling off like watermelons and their bodies ripped apart, like pieces of raw meat" (Thorne 1986, 7). As Kovalchuk continued to participate in several extremely violent maneuvers, he became disenchanted with the Soviet Union.

One event in particular reshaped Kovalchuk's opinion of the Red Army. Roughly six months after his arrival in Afghanistan, he was riding in an armored personnel carrier (APC) with several other soldiers and some young Russian women from a travelling entertainment troop. The driver of the APC wanted to impress the girls and started driving faster. Two young

Afghan children—a boy and a girl—were crossing the street in front of the vehicle. The driver made no attempt to avoid the children. The girl managed to escape the APC, but the boy was run down and killed. Kovalchuk reflected:

It was done in such a callous way. I was shaken. An innocent child had been killed; the driver and I saw that we had killed a child. And yet it didn't arouse any feelings on the part of the driver. That was the first incident that made me antagonistic to what we were doing in Afghanistan. I asked to be transferred to another company, and I was; but it didn't get any better. What I saw after that in Afghanistan was worse and worse and worse. [Prosser 1986a]

Kovalchuk's experience worsened as he witnessed other war atrocities. Once, while riding in a convoy of APCs, he noticed the driver of the second vehicle was heavily intoxicated and driving erratically. The driver crashed into the back of the first vehicle and killed two soldiers and severed the legs of a third. One of the deceased soldiers was from Kovalchuk's hometown (Thorne 1986, 7). Another time, Kovalchuk participated in an attack on an Afghani village. He was ordered by his commander to fire upon a small village hut. Then his commander threw a grenade into the dwelling. After the explosion, Kovalchuk "peeked inside and saw about fifteen people, men, women and children, all slouched together in a pile of blood. It was like a butcher shop, reeking with a horrible smell" (Thorne 1986, 8). On yet another occasion, after Kovalchuk's company captured twelve Mujahedeen, the same commander ordered that the prisoners be tied up and placed in the path of three APCs. The prisoners' bodies were torn to shreds by the armored vehicles, and Kovalchuk was one of the soldiers ordered to bury the remains in a shallow grave. Later, after the commander had been drinking, he dug up one of the heads of the prisoners, lit it with benzene, and threw it into a pot (Thorne 1986, 9).

These and other brutal undertakings left Kovalchuk feeling disillusioned with the war. In a letter he wrote to President Reagan, he explained:

I, Igor Kovalchuk, did not want to kill children and women; I did not want God to judge me for having spilled blood. In Afghanistan, I learned to understand the entire Soviet government system, and learned to hate the violence that man can exert over man.  
[Thorne 1986, 40]

Kovalchuk's dissatisfaction with life in Afghanistan had an impact on Golovin as well. He remarked, "I started also becoming disenchanted. That's when we started giving help and arms to the Mujahedeen" (Prosser 1986a).

While still serving in the Soviet Army, Kovalchuk and Golovin made contact with a Mujahedeen fighter who agreed to transport them to Pakistan in exchange for weapons. When they met with the Mujahedeen to deliver the weapons, they were spotted by a passing Afghan who turned them over to the Soviets. The two men were imprisoned in a Soviet military prison for three months. During that time, they both experienced severe forms of abuse. Golovin was beaten over the head with a wooden mallet, and Kovalchuk's left arm was repeatedly cut with razor blades and then two wires connected to a 24 volt battery were inserted into the wounds (Thorne 1986, 11). Eventually, they managed to escape and took refuge with the Mujahedeen. At first they were treated quite well, but eventually, they were sold to another group of fighters. This second group was not as kind to the POWs and kept them under guard at all times (Prosser 1986b).

After their capture, Kovalchuk and Golovin struggled with the monotony of imprisonment. To deal with the extreme boredom, both men smoked hashish, and eventually became addicted. In an effort to gain asylum in the West, both men later conquered their addiction. Kovalchuk explained, "Please try to put yourself into my place, and think what it was like, to sit all this time within the walled confines of a mud hut" (Thorne 1986, 40). Several times, both men made attempts to gain asylum in Western countries. Initially, Canada offered a promising opportunity, but both POWs were denied entrance, apparently because of their drug

addiction (Prosser 1986a). After the two men managed to stop using drugs, they were granted asylum in Ottawa, Canada.

Both of these POWs, and especially Kovalchuk, expressed a deep dissatisfaction with the Soviet Army. Poor living conditions, inaccurate Soviet propaganda, and the horrors Kovalchuk witnessed in the war all likely contributed to this discontent. From the beginning, both men apparently received inadequate health care. Golovin developed typhoid fever almost as soon as he arrived in Afghanistan, while Kovalchuk suffered from a common Afghan malady: dysentery. It was while both men were ailing from these diseases that they began to plan their desertion. Additionally, a number of Kovalchuk's war experiences involved soldiers who were intoxicated. Both men found the common alcohol and drug abuse in the Soviet Army disgusting and pathetic. They were also shocked to discover the reality of war in Afghanistan. Kovalchuk, especially, seems to have questioned the validity of the Soviet Union's presence and expressed a sense of horror at the mistreatment of Afghan civilians. He could not find a purpose for the violence he saw around him. In a poem he wrote during his imprisonment, he questioned:

Why are we here,  
Killing simple people,  
Conquering their land?  
After all, they are  
Defending their homes. [Thorne 1986, 9]

Thus, the primary reason these young soldiers left their Soviet comrades appears to have been the horrific scenes Kovalchuk witnessed in battle. In particular, he seems to have been struck with the inhumane actions and ideals of his fellow soldiers. He was both dismayed and repulsed by the contemptuous attitudes many of his comrades had toward the Afghan people. He feared that too many Soviet soldiers were violent and bloodthirsty, and the treatment he received in a Soviet military prison undoubtedly confirmed these suspicions. After Kovalchuk communicated

his revulsion with Golovin, the two decided to risk facing the condemnation of the Soviet Union and deserted the army.

### *Sergei Krasnoperov*

Sergei Krasnoperov was a young Russian from Korgan who was assigned to work with Army supplies and ammunition. Soon after he arrived in Afghanistan, he grew disillusioned with the Soviet-Afghan War. He recalled, “I came to Afghanistan to fight, to serve my country as a soldier...I didn’t know my government was killing people here and that’s what my task would be. Either you kill or you are killed. That’s what being a soldier means” (Starkey 2011). Krasnoperov decided to take advantage of his access to Soviet weaponry and began to sell it to the Mujahedeen. In 1984, he was caught for the second time. Rather than face prosecution, Krasnoperov deserted the Soviet Army. He explained, “If I hadn’t escaped, they would have put me in prison...I had to escape and join the Mujaheddin<sup>17</sup>. I climbed into the hills and found some fighters. They welcomed me and I joined them” (Starkey 2011).

Not long after joining the Mujahedeen, Krasnoperov converted to Islam and began to assist the holy warriors. Although he did not actively participate in battles, he supported the Mujahedeen by repairing equipment, recovering ammunition, preparing supplies, and teaching the Afghans about Soviet weaponry. At one time, he remembered assisting Afghan fighters to take on Soviet helicopters: “Tanks and helicopters were harassing us a lot, so I fixed their machine guns when they jammed and I repaired the artillery as well. We hit many helicopters and scared the pilots, so after a while they stopped coming” (Starkey 2011). Krasnoperov also spent some time serving as a body guard for Abdul Rashid Dostum (Wendle 2012).

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<sup>17</sup> Alternate spelling of Mujahedeen, as cited in Starkey’s quote.

Following the war, Krasnoperov chose to stay in Afghanistan. He changed his name to Noor Muhammad and learned the local language of Dari. He married an Afghan woman and settled in Chaghcharan. He has six children and works as a repairman. In 2012, he reported that he had absolutely no desire to return to Russia:

Russia is no longer the big world power that it was...People don't have jobs and they're going hungry. I've gotten used to the people here and the country...My family would have problems in my old homeland but here even the Taliban accept and respect me the way I am. I have an Afghan passport and I'm a proud Afghan. [Hasrat-Nazimi 2012]

Krasnoperov quickly adopted the Afghan people as his own, rejecting the life and culture of his youth. He is entirely and completely loyal to this new culture and way of life. Recalling his defection to the Mujahedeen, Krasnoperov stated, "They took me in and I became part of their movement—*jihad* against the unbelievers" (Hasrat-Nazimi 2012). Despite Krasnoperov's ethnic and familial ties to Russia, he believes that Afghanistan is the best place for him and his family. He still speaks regularly over the telephone with his mother and only brother living in Russia.

Krasnoperov deserted the Soviet Army due to his lack of commitment to the communist cause. He balked at the horror and violence of warfare, and he resented the Red Army that forced him to participate. He noted the army's gruesome acts against Afghan civilians and left to defend them. Following his desertion, Krasnoperov spent a great deal of time working with the Mujahedeen. During this time period, he displayed a complete reversal in his belief system as he went from an atheist lifestyle to pious one. By his own admission, Krasnoperov was not at all religious before he was taken in by the Mujahedeen. He remembered, "I wasn't religious before. We didn't respect anything except for vodka and girls. My parents were Christian, but I was interested in other things. I was young" (Hasrat-Nazimi 2012). However, after living among the Afghan resistance, Krasnoperov converted to Islam and became very devout. Though he does not provide a reason for his conversion, this sudden change in his religious zeal may have been due

to some serious mental and psychological stress brought on by the war and his isolation with the freedom fighters. He completely rejected his former life in favor of one among the Afghan people and proved himself fully committed to his new home.

### *Alexander Levenets*

Alexander Levenets was a young Ukrainian teenager from Melovadka when he was drafted into the Soviet Army. He was initially pleased to escape the difficulties of providing for his blind mother and diabetic older brother. However, he was soon faced with the reality of the Soviet-Afghan War. After he was deployed to an airbase in Kunduz, Levenets became a victim of *dedovshchina* and suffered from the systematic abuse that many new Soviet recruits experienced (Narziev 2005). Eventually, the stress became too much, and he betrayed the army. After he was caught providing weapons to the enemy, Levenets escaped from the Soviet Army and found the Mujahedeen. He had been warned that they would abuse and torture all Soviet prisoners, but instead, Levenets found that the freedom fighters were welcoming and accommodating. In a complete rejection of his homeland, he took up weapons alongside the Mujahedeen and fought against the Soviets. When explaining to a reporter why he had turned against his old comrades, he stated, “I had hatred toward them and treated them as they had treated me” (Doucet 2009).

After converting to Islam, Levenets changed his name to Ahmed. He married a Tajik-Afghan woman and has six daughters. After the war, he remained in Afghanistan and still actively practices Islam. He currently works as a taxi driver in Kunduz (Wendle 2012). Years after his desertion, Levenets is still completely committed to his new religion and his new family. He speaks to reporters in Dari, and explains that there is absolutely no reason for him to

return to Ukraine. His mother and only brother have since passed away. He told a reporter, “Here I have relatives, my clan...my wife’s brothers are helping me. They respect me; they need me. Who needs me back home? Mother passed away waiting for me” (Narziev 2005). Levenets continues to observe all of the facets of Islam, wears a beard, dresses in the traditional Afghan garb, and keeps his wife out of the eye of strangers.

Levenets left the Soviet Army because he disliked the cruelty he experienced at its hand. Although he does not elaborate on the specific abuses he was subjected to, he insists that the Soviet military mistreated and misused him repeatedly. However, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what prompted Levenets to convert to Islam and fight alongside the Mujahedeen. It appears that he was at least given the option of not fighting and simply living with his rescuers in peace, but instead opted to participate in the warfare and converted to Islam after only one month (Narziev 2005). It is likely that some form of traumatic bonding contributed to his conversion during his weeks of isolation with the Mujahedeen. It certainly seems that these Afghans treated Levenets with a kindness he had not found among the Soviets. His hatred and resentment towards the Soviet Army undoubtedly played a large role in his desire to fight the communists.

### ***Nikolai Movchan***

Nikolai Movchan was a young Ukrainian trained in furniture making and woodworking. Drafted into the army, he served as a sergeant in Ghazni where his platoon was part of an antitank unit assigned to guard the headquarters of their regiment. Because of this assignment, Movchan saw very little action in Afghanistan as the Mujahedeen did not have access to tanks and other sophisticated equipment. After arriving in Afghanistan, he became disillusioned with Soviet propaganda. He would eventually appear before the US House of Representatives in

1985, which was instrumental in formulating American opinion on the Soviet-Afghan War. He recalled to American officials, “When I arrived in Afghanistan as a sergeant in the Soviet Army in October 1982, it was not long before all the slogans and appeals of the Soviet leadership lost all meaning for me” (US House 1985, 21). “I realized that the war was not the way it was described to us back home. I realized it was an unjust war” (Shipler 1986). Movchan rapidly became more disillusioned with the military’s attitude toward the Afghan population. Once, his superior officer pointed out a nearby village and said that fifty enemy combatants lived there. Movchan remembered disagreeing “When I looked, I saw only plain, common folk. I thought, ‘our big country has invaded this small country, and the people have risen up against us’” (Tempest 1984). Movchan also disapproved of the Soviet Union’s military action against Afghan villages. Often, in an effort to deter civilians from assisting or joining the Mujahedeen, the Soviet Army would retaliate swiftly and ruthlessly:

On one occasion, a village near our base was destroyed and most of the inhabitants were killed by Soviet tanks. Very few escaped. The reason for this attack was because a group of “Mujahedeen” had ambushed some Soviet soldiers from this position. This type of retaliatory action against the civilian population is the typical response to such “Mujahedeen” activities. [US House 1985, 22]

Movchan felt that these acts of revenge were too harsh and endangered the civilian population. He was concerned for the welfare of the Afghan people and did not question their right to rebel against the foreign nation oppressing them.

In other instances, Movchan heard of Soviet soldiers deliberately misusing civilians simply because they could. He recalled hearing stories of Afghan women and children being killed indiscriminately. There were also tales of women being raped and villages looted (Sciolino 1984). “All of this was hidden away under the official justification that ‘there are no peace-loving people here; they are all dushmans,’ the enemy” (US House 1985, 22). In the end,

Movchan became completely disheartened with the Soviet Union, and one morning in June 1983, he escaped while the rest of his unit slept. He was pursued by helicopters and tanks but found refuge with an Afghan civilian (Shipler 1986). Movchan was held for one year by the Mujahedeen, after which he was granted asylum in the United States. Upon his arrival, he spent some time actively campaigning for Soviet POWs still held in Afghanistan (Thorne 1986, 31).

Movchan's account is an important one because his story was heavily cited in the 1980s and was influential in framing the American perspective on the Afghan-Soviet War. His claims are obviously biased, since he was granted asylum in the United States just before he spoke in the committee hearing, but his accounts correlate with those of his compatriot defectors and should be treated as such. Movchan deserted the Red Army because he was disappointed with the Soviet Union's propaganda and aggressive military tactics against Afghan civilians.

However, it also seems that his desertion was not a well-planned affair, more of a spontaneous decision. When questioned about his desertion, he explained that "I left the Soviet Army because there was a possibility to do so. At the exact moment of defection, I really don't know what happened. It just kind of did" (US House 1985, 27). At the heart of this split-second decision was Movchan's discontent with the Soviet Army. He was dissatisfied with the actions and attitudes of his fellow soldiers towards the civilian population. He questioned the legitimacy of the Soviet cause in Afghanistan and felt his nation was destroying a helpless people's way of life. In the end, Movchan could not bear to live with the bigotry and violence of the Red Army and elected to leave it behind.

### *Vladislav Naumov*

Vladislav Naumov was born and raised in Volgograd. Before he enlisted in the army, he was a chief mate on a merchant vessel on the Volga River. After receiving a summons from the Soviet Army, Naumov enlisted and was sent to boot camp in Turkmenistan. While there, he was trained as a sharpshooter and to operate a tank. He was also one of the select few chosen to work in the “Lenin Room” where he helped to create Soviet propaganda posters and slogans. He was also subjected to special political training and indoctrination regarding Lenin’s teachings, writings, and political motivations. He was advised to watch his fellow soldiers carefully and note any possible signs of dissension or anti-communistic attitudes (Thorne 1986, 14). As a result of his role in the Lenin Room, many of the other soldiers disliked Naumov because they felt he held a “cushy” position and was willing to report on his fellow soldiers.

After his military training, Naumov spent some time in combat as a sniper, but he served mainly as a guard and tank mechanic at a Soviet outpost near Jalalabad. While there, he began to become disenchanted with the Soviet-Afghan War. Naumov disliked the violence and gore associated with the Soviets’ campaign. He recalled that he would sometimes find bits of human flesh and tissue trapped in the treads of the tanks he repaired (Thorne 1986, 15). As he became more disheartened, Naumov started to give weapons to the Mujahedeen. In October 1983, he was caught by the Soviet Army and transported to a military prison. There, he reported that he was severely beaten and tortured, but managed to escape his guards and join the Mujahedeen (Thorne 1986, 15).

As Naumov spent time with the Mujahedeen, his anti-Soviet feelings quickly turned into pro-Islamic sentiments. He wrote, “I came to the firm decision that I must live and not simply exist. [I] do not want to consider [myself] as [an] animal or [a] mere shadow” (Thorne 1986, 39).

He began to write articles describing Soviet military tactics and ideology to distribute among the Mujahedeen and the West<sup>18</sup>. Naumov was also an active participant in approximately twenty assaults against the Soviet military. While living with the Mujahedeen, he enjoyed relative freedom and was able to move about without any restrictions from his fellow combatants. Nevertheless, Naumov still felt confined because he was forced to remain in hiding to avoid capture by the Soviets. He wrote several letters to Western officials seeking asylum and was eventually granted asylum in Canada. He travelled to Ottawa along with four other POWs in 1986 (Prosser 1986b).

It appears that the factors that led to Naumov's desertion and complete betrayal of the Soviet Union derive from the violence he witnessed in Afghanistan. He was also undoubtedly influenced by the part he played in Soviet propaganda. As a participant in the Lenin Room, Naumov had a unique perspective on the propaganda materials produced by the USSR. He knew exactly what the Soviet Union was telling its people and its soldiers about the Afghan War. He developed a sense of disgust for the deception he was forced to participate in and turned against his homeland. He wrote:

The first reason which prompted my escape is that I detested the Soviet way of life and the Soviet policy in Afghanistan. The second reason why I took this suicidal step is that I wanted to become free... In the USSR I was relatively free to move about, but I did not have the opportunity to think, write or live freely. With the Afghan partisans I have gained relative freedom of thought, but I have lost the relative freedom of movement. [Thorne 1986, 38]

While these issues contributed to Naumov's decision to desert the Red Army, and seek asylum in the West, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what made him decide to join the ranks of the Mujahedeen and fight against his former comrades following his capture. Naumov expressed his desire for both freedom of thought and freedom of movement. It is possible that he joined the

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<sup>18</sup> Naumov, trained as a Soviet propagandist, ironically began to use his skills for the opposing side.

Mujahedeen in an effort to obtain more freedom and escape the tediousness of being a prisoner of war. At one point he remarked, “Our lives have become interesting, they have assumed meaning” (Thorne 1986, 17), suggesting that his life before aiding the Mujahedeen was meaningless. This penchant for meaning may also point to psychological factors that could have influenced his decisions. Whatever his reasons, Naumov represents a bright, young Soviet soldier who experienced a full turn-around in his belief system. His experience in the Lenin Room and his familiarity with combat led him to desert his Soviet comrades and take up arms with the Mujahedeen.

### *Alexei Olenin*

The Mujahedeen captured Alexei Olenin in the Salang Pass while relieving himself (Braithwaite 2011, 259). His reasoning for converting to Islam was simple: “No one made me do it. I simply realized that since I was still alive I must have been preserved by some power...I would have adopted any faith that was available: after all, up to then I had been a Young Pioneer, a Komsomol, and was preparing to join the Party” (Braithwaite 2011, 259). When he converted to Islam, he became known as Rakhmatula. After some time in captivity, Olenin’s slave master decided that he should take an Afghan wife, despite local misgivings: “Afghan fathers were reluctant to surrender their daughters, because the Russians could not afford the bride price, and because they feared that the girls would be dishonored when the Russians eventually abandoned them and went home” (Braithwaite 2011, 260). Olenin was engaged to an Afghan when his mother arranged for his release in 1994. He returned to Russia for a short time, but then his conscience weighed on him. Olenin returned to Afghanistan to marry his betrothed, Nargez, and remained there until 2004 (Braithwaite 2011, 260).

### *Aleksei Peresleni*

Aleksei Peresleni was a young milling operator in Moscow prior to being drafted on May 11, 1983. He was assigned to command a six-man howitzer crew in Kabul but was shocked at the situation in Afghanistan. He was particularly upset by the low morale among the Soviet troops and the rampant drug abuse. He remembered, “Practically everybody uses hashish all the time, and some use opium, but you just make sure officers don’t see you when you’re on military operations” (Sciolino 1984). Peresleni believed the low morale inspiring drug abuse was triggered by the men’s lack of real purpose. He believed that the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan during a time of peace was unjustified and tyrannical, and he felt that his government had misrepresented the role of its military in this struggling nation. He complained, “We were told we were being sent to offer friendship and help to the Afghan people...But when you’re sent to fight in a time of peace, you can’t feel very good about it” (Sciolino 1984). Peresleni also struggled with the humiliation he was subjected to under the tradition of *dedovshchina*. He bitterly recalled, “On my second day, they made me sing and dance...Anything to humiliate me. Then they took a huge log and started beating me—for nothing. It’s inhuman, animalistic” (Sciolino 1984). One day, all of the strain and misery took its toll, and on December 14, 1983, Peresleni simply walked away from guard duty where he had been assigned for twenty-four hours straight. He found refuge with the Mujahedeen, and in 1984, he received asylum in the United States.

Peresleni deserted because he was deeply dissatisfied with life in the Soviet Army. This abiding unhappiness stemmed from the degradation he experienced as a new recruit and the government’s untruthfulness with its own people. He felt that the Soviets had overstayed their

welcome in Afghanistan—if they had ever been welcome in the first place—and were now abusing the native people by their presence. Peresleni also expressed disgust for the way soldiers treated civilians and how this mistreatment affected the oppressors. “Some Soviet soldiers,” he said, “are so filled with rage that they kill everyone they see... The fighting is very indiscriminate” (Sciolino 1984). Peresleni was horrified at the way so many Afghan civilians were ruthlessly killed, and was equally disturbed by the changes he saw in his own comrades. Too many of his fellow soldiers were developing racist and sadistic tendencies, not to mention drug addictions. To escape this fate, Peresleni left the Red Army in search of a new life.

### ***Vadim Plotnikov***

Vadim Plotnikov was a young factory worker from Moscow who enlisted in the Red Army in his early twenties. He was trained as a demolitions expert in a special unit in Turkmenistan where he learned to quickly and effectively defuse bombs and to safely evacuate people from dangerous situations. Plotnikov claimed that he could defuse any Soviet bomb built from 1943 to the Afghan War. However, he found his assignment in Afghanistan to be ironic and unnecessary. In 1986 he stated:

During the past six years of war in Afghanistan I was probably the only demolitions expert who was sent there...In Afghanistan it's the Soviet Union that's bombing villages and, naturally, I wouldn't be asked to defuse the very same bombs that we were dropping. [Thorne 1986, 17]

Instead, Plotnikov believed that he was sent to Afghanistan because he had angered his commanding officer. During training in Turkmenistan, Plotnikov had an encounter with his platoon leader, which ended with Plotnikov threatening to kill his superior once he was out of the army. His platoon leader replied, “No you won't...because I will send you to a place from which

you will never return” (Thorne 1986, 18). Shortly thereafter, Plotnikov received his assignment to serve in Afghanistan.

Plotnikov’s case is unique because, unlike most deserters, he embarked on his tour in Afghanistan with the intention of deserting and joining the Mujahedeen. He remarked that he was aware of what was really going on in Afghanistan and did not wish to participate. He began planning his escape during his basic training. After he completed training, Plotnikov was assigned to be a guard at the Jalalabad airport. One day, when he was on guard duty, he just walked away. He took with him four automatic weapons and canned food. Plotnikov headed towards Pakistan in hopes of discovering a rumored militia group of free Russians fighting against the communists. Instead, he found the Mujahedeen. After joining with them, Plotnikov participated in several battles against Soviet forces and enlisted his skills as a demolitions expert. He applied several times for asylum in various western countries and in 1986 was granted asylum in Canada.

For Plotnikov, the motivation for desertion seems to stem from ideological differences and bitterness towards the Soviet Army. He stated, “Never forget that in Afghanistan real genocide is taking place...and it has turned out that we [Soviet POWs] too have become victims of this war” (Thorne 1986, 25). Plotnikov disagreed with Soviet ideology to begin with. He did not believe that the USSR had any right to be in Afghanistan, and, in particular, he felt his assignment in Afghanistan was an unworthy one. He also apparently harbored some resentment against the platoon leader that originally had him stationed there. Most uniquely, Plotnikov deserted the Red Army with the intention of fighting against it and left actively seeking a militia group that would enable him to fight what he had come to consider the great communist oppressor.

### *Nikolai Ryzhkov*

When he joined the Soviet Army, Nikolai Ryzhkov was still a very young man. He deserted his post shortly after his arrival in Afghanistan, but it is difficult to ascertain exactly how and why he deserted because he reported two different scenarios to US and Soviet officials. Ryzhkov described the first version of his escape to American representatives when seeking asylum in the United States but told another account to Soviet officials after he later returned to the Soviet Union.

When he was still a prisoner of war, Ryzhkov told US officials that, shortly after his arrival in Afghanistan, he became disenchanted with the Soviet-Afghan War. He disliked the bloodshed and violence of warfare and particularly objected to the inhumane treatment of Afghan civilians. In a press conference, he stated, “We were told we would be defending the southern border of the Soviet Union and would be facing American and Chinese mercenaries...when I arrived, my opinion changed<sup>19</sup>” (Knutson 1984). He contacted the Mujahedeen, and on June 16, 1983, he deserted the Red Army to live with the Afghan resistance (*National Review* 1983). Conversely, when Ryzhkov returned to the USSR, he reportedly told Soviet officials that he did not willingly desert the army. Instead, he was ambushed by the enemy and held captive against his will. He claimed that American spokesmen told him that he must make up stories of Soviet atrocities in order to gain asylum in the United States (Associated Press 1988).

Whatever his reasons, Ryzhkov obtained asylum in the United States in 1983. He stayed in the US just eighteen months before returning to his homeland, apparently because he had

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<sup>19</sup> See Busov page 43.

trouble adjusting to the American language, culture, and lifestyle—although a Russian news agency implied that Ryzhkov had become involved in a homosexual relationship with a CIA operative that went sour (*Los Angeles Times* 1985). Ludmilla Thorne, a Freedom House employee who was instrumental in bringing Ryzhkov to the United States, believed that he returned to Russia because “he didn’t know how to deal with his freedom...He couldn’t hold a job. He had three jobs in 1984. They all lasted three weeks, not more. He was drifting. He was a free person. He had difficulty dealing with his freedom” (Shipler 1986). Despite assurances of safety from the Soviet Ambassador in Washington DC, Ryzhkov was arrested and prosecuted for treason shortly after his arrival in the USSR (Keller 1988). He was found guilty of deserting, assisting the enemy, and participating in anti-Soviet propaganda (Parks 1988). He was condemned to twelve years in a Soviet labor camp, but was released after serving only two.

It is impossible to ascertain which of Ryzhkov’s stories is true. It is feasible that Ryzhkov lied to American representatives in order to gain asylum in the United States. However, it is just as likely—if not more so—that he misled Soviet officials in an effort to avoid a prison sentence for desertion and treason. Because of the discrepancies in Ryzhkov’s story, it is difficult to pinpoint whether he willfully neglected his socialist duty to protect his government’s interests or had a change of heart. If his first account is true, Ryzhkov was deeply troubled by the treatment of Afghan civilians by the Soviet military. While he did not participate in many conflicts, he supposedly listened to Soviet paratroopers complain about the number of Afghan villages they were assigned to destroy (*National Review* 1983). Allegedly, this violence and disregard for civilian lives filled him with disgust towards the Soviet Army, leading him to desert. However, if the account he gave in the Soviet Union is correct, Ryzhkov was not dissatisfied with army life,

at least not enough to defect. Rather, he was forced into captivity and lied to US officials to gain asylum.

### ***Yuri Shapovalenko***

Yuri Shapovalenko was a nineteen-year-old private from Sumy drafted into the Soviet Army and assigned to operate a rocket launcher. From the beginning, he felt that life in the army was a “very difficult experience” with a lot of “injustice” (Lapychak 1984). He struggled with his fellow soldiers’ drug addictions and the illness and disease that permeated the camps because of unhygienic conditions. Shapovalenko also reported maltreatment from more tenured soldiers and remembered receiving beatings and abuse for no apparent reason. But what affected him the most was his certainty that the Afghan people did not want the army there. Shapovalenko had the opportunity to work side by side with a unit from the Afghan military. These soldiers, while technically on the same side as the Soviets, disliked their Russian supervisors and often did their best to undermine them. He remembered, “We would go out on patrol with them and they would pretend to be friendly with us during the day...But at night they’d open fire on us” (Sciolino 1984). Shapovalenko was repeatedly reminded that these Afghan soldiers could not be trusted. He explained that many Soviet officers would take the weapons away from these fighters at night, especially rocket launchers and anti-tank weapons. While some of these Afghan soldiers continued to work with the Soviet Army, “many of course defected to the Mujahedeen” (Lapychak 1984). After deserting the army, Shapovalenko was captured by the Mujahedeen, but was eventually granted refugee status in the United States.

Shapovalenko was overwhelmed with the conditions and hardships of army life in Afghanistan. The poor health conditions, beatings, and drug abuse all bothered him. However,

what he found most disturbing was the irony that the people the Soviet Union was supposedly helping clearly did not want them there. Shapovalenko had first-hand knowledge of the Afghan population because he worked closely beside them every day. He saw that these soldiers often only pretended to support the Soviet initiative, but their first loyalties were to the civilians with whom they shared a common heritage and kinship. This falsity troubled Shapovalenko. He disliked not knowing whom he could trust and always having to be on his guard. He knew that the USSR claimed that the Afghan people wanted its forces there to protect and help them, but he also knew that these claims were a complete farce. Overcome with bitterness and discontent, Shapovalenko deserted the Soviet Army hoping to find a life that he could finally understand.

### *Genady Tseuma*

Genady Tseuma was a young Ukrainian soldier serving near Kunduz. During the ten-month term of his service, Tseuma struggled with the monotony and boredom that permeated Soviet Army life. One day he became curious about the civilian life in Kunduz and decided to go exploring. He explained:

Our checkpoint was close to the village. Every morning the mullah did the call to prayer. It was totally new to me. I didn't understand what was going on. I thought maybe they were killing people or something...So, one day, early in the morning, I got off my base to take a look. When I got close to the mosque there was an old man sitting there. Then suddenly men with guns surrounded me and captured me. After that, the mujahedin<sup>20</sup> told me to convert to Islam or they would kill me. I decided it was better to live than to die, so I became a Muslim. [Wendle 2012]

After converting to Islam, Tseuma adopted the Islamic name Nek Mohammud. Although he was pressured to join the Mujahedeen in the fight against the Soviets, Tseuma absolutely refused to fire upon his people. He lived as a prisoner in the compound of the local Mujahedeen leader until

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<sup>20</sup> Alternate spelling of Mujahedeen, as cited in Wendle's quote.

he was finally able to earn his release at the end of the Soviet War. However, instead of returning home, Tseuma elected to stay in Afghanistan. He spent several years working as a long-haul trucker operating out of Kunduz city. He married a native Afghan-Tajik woman, and the two of them had three children.

In 2009, Tseuma was reunited with his younger brother Sergei. Sergei was only eleven years old when his older brother was conscripted into the army. Sergei travelled to Afghanistan to beg his brother to return to Russia and his family. Tseuma recalled, “I wanted to go but my wife’s family did not let her. My children are sweet. I could not leave them” (Doucet 2009). Although Tseuma still harbors some longing for his homeland, his failing health and the ties he fashioned in Afghanistan hold him there.

Clearly, Tseuma did not leave his base with the intention of finding the Mujahedeen and converting to Islam. However, it appears that, upon his release, he felt he could not return to the Soviet Union because of his POW status. “The Soviet government was looking for us, but I didn’t let them find me because I didn’t know what they would do to me” (Wendle 2012). He feared that he would be legally prosecuted and imprisoned for his capture. Instead, Tseuma decided to embrace his ex-captors, continue to live among them, and practice their religion. For the most part, it seems he continues to practice Islam in an effort to blend with the local population rather than any actual religious commitment. He appears to regret his life in Afghanistan but cannot return home without his family. Still, Tseuma misses his homeland. He speaks to reporters in Russian and recalls his younger brother Sergei (Doucet 2009). “My parents died waiting for me to return,” he explained. “I feel guilty that they suffered because of me—because I was unable to escape from here” (Narziev 2005).

### ***Leonid Vilko***

The Mujahedeen captured Leonid Vilko, a 24-year-old Moldovan private, in 1984 as he was attempting to defect to the West. Shortly after his capture, Vilko became a Muslim “once [he] learned the language<sup>21</sup>” (*Time Magazine* 1988). This helped him gain relative freedom among his captors and allowed him to live peaceably among the Afghans. After he converted to Islam, Vilko adopted the Islamic name of Azizullah. As a convert and a POW, he was able to frequent local bazaars and engage in recreation with the Mujahedeen.

Unfortunately, not much information is available explaining why Vilko deserted the Soviet Army. However, it is clear that he intentionally left his post with the purpose of sharing Soviet information with the enemy. Whether this was due to mistreatment from his superiors or disillusionment with the Soviet cause is unknown. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that he originally intended to convert to Islam. In fact, it appears that he was looking for Western officials, not the Mujahedeen. Although Vilko does not say exactly what prompted him to convert to Islam, he most likely did so in an effort to assimilate with his captors, although psychological trauma may also have been a factor. Additionally, Vilko likely feared returning to the Soviet Union because of the humiliation and persecution associated with Soviet POWs.

### ***Alexander Voronov***

Alexander Voronov was a young enlisted soldier in the Red Army. He was assigned to work in a propaganda unit that tried to win the support of the Afghan people. This unit designed propaganda material and slogans in an effort to raise support for the Soviet cause in Afghanistan. In July of 1983, Voronov deserted the army along with another soldier. Both men were captured

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<sup>21</sup> The language he learned, whether Dari, Pashto or Uzbek, was not specified in the article.

and held by the Mujahedeen for five months outside of Kabul (*Ledger* 1984). During this time, both men experienced mistreatment (*Los Angeles Times* 1985). After five months, they were granted asylum in the United States thanks to the effort of the Freedom House organization (Thorne 1986, 30).

Although there is very little information about Voronov, it appears that he deserted the Soviet Union because he became disillusioned with the communist regime. In his propaganda unit, Voronov would have had unique access to the psychological manipulation the communists directed towards the Afghan people as well as their own citizens. In a US press conference, a nineteen-year-old Voronov observed that “nobody [in the Soviet Army] wants to kill innocent civilians, and the morale of the soldiers in Afghanistan is extremely low” (*Ledger* 1984). Voronov apparently disliked the violence of the Soviet-Afghan War and seemed to particularly object to the treatment of Afghan civilians. His discontent led him to defect in search of asylum in the West.

### ***Anatoly Zakharov***

Anatoly Zakharov was a young student in Leningrad when he was drafted into the Soviet Army. Much like other new recruits, he initially did not believe that he would be sent to Afghanistan. In fact, he looked forward to the exciting lifestyle he expected to find in the service. He remembered, “I thought that I would find friendship there and a good life. Some people argued with me, said that army life was bad, but I didn’t believe them” (Rybakov 1983). Immediately upon entering the military, Zakharov’s idealistic vision of army life was shattered. Almost from the very beginning of his military experience, he encountered the abusive system of

*dedovshchina*. Zakharov's first experience occurred as he and some other new recruits were being transported to their training center. The transport stopped off at a school gymnasium and:

There the sergeants and the elders [*stariki*] took away our watches, our money, all our valuables, and then they beat us up. I thought that this was some kind of initiation—that they beat us and robbed us because we were still civilians. [Rybakov 1983]

Unfortunately, Zakharov was mistaken. Following one month of military training in Tashkent, he was transferred to Kabul and assigned to a unit that guarded warehouses. There, the abuse continued:

The elders and the sergeants told us right away, “We were beaten, now we’re going to beat you.” They beat us, even while we stood in assembly, mostly with their feet and elbows... They did this every day, a few times each day. The sergeants in Kabul were worse than any we had run across yet—they were real animals. [Rybakov 1983]

In addition to this physical abuse, Zakharov also struggled with the long hours of guard duty. He and his fellow soldiers were supposed to be on duty for a maximum of twenty-four hours, but often, Zakharov would be on duty for several days at a time.

Eventually, Zakharov's tribulation became too much for him, and, one day, he simply left his post. Instead of court-martialing him, his superiors reassigned him to a construction unit in Kunduz. There, his hardships continued. Zakharov was assigned to work on a construction crew building helicopter hangers. As they worked, the *stariki* would beat the laborers. Zakharov recalled, “They kept hitting us with belt buckles when we worked; you couldn't even walk to the latrine, you had to run” (Rybakov 1983). Zakharov also reported that the more seasoned soldiers would take his rations, leaving him with very little food. Another time, an intoxicated sergeant told Zakharov that he did not do a good enough job cleaning the showers and then stabbed him with a bayonet. But the final straw for Zakharov came when one of his sergeants tried to force him to sleep with him. The sergeant told Zakharov, “I'll give you money and cookies, and if you say one word to anyone, the elders [*stariki*] will cut your throat at night” (Rybakov 1983).

That same day, Zakharov escaped from his unit. He removed all of his clothing except his underwear and boots so he would not be recognizable as a Soviet soldier. He wandered for some time, not knowing where he was or where he wanted to go. Finally, he was taken in by some local Afghans who fed and clothed him, hid him from the Soviet authorities, and found him a Russian translator. His new Afghan family also gave him a Russian copy of the Koran, and Zakharov ultimately converted to Islam. After living in Afghanistan for several years, Zakharov reported that he had absolutely no intention of returning to the Soviet Union or finding his way to the West. Instead, he stated, “I am already a Moslem. I will live here, I’ll have a family, an Afghan wife, kids” (Rybakov 1983).

Zakharov deserted his post for fairly obvious reasons; what is not so clear is why he decided to convert to Islam and live among the Afghan people. Zakharov left the Soviet Army because of the never-ending abuse he underwent from the beginning of his military service. This constant torment eventually became too much for the young soldier, and he escaped in search of some form of reprieve. In addition, Zakharov became highly disillusioned with the Red Army. He entered the military with the understanding that it would be an enjoyable and enlightening experience. Instead, he was faced with the stark reality of *dedovshchina*, and his opinion of the Soviet Union deteriorated. Nevertheless, despite his difficulties, it is impossible to know exactly what sparked Zakharov’s decision to become a Muslim. When he escaped the army, it was not with the intention of finding religion or a new way of life. He was not even looking for the Mujahedeen or another Afghan group. He was simply searching for some sort of relief. In this highly delicate psychological state, it is very likely that Zakharov would have been more susceptible to Stockholm syndrome or another form of traumatic bonding. He was undoubtedly suffering from psychological trauma. After experiencing so much abuse, the shock of humane

treatment from the Afghan locals may have sparked an emotional connection to his saviors, leading to his conclusion remain with the locals indefinitely.

### *Sergei Zhigalin*

Sergei Zhigalin was a former tractor driver from the Volgograd region of the USSR. After being drafted and sent to Afghanistan, he served as the driver of an armored personnel carrier. During his term in the Soviet Army, Zhigalin began to question the Soviet Union's justification for invading Afghanistan. He resented being forced to fight in a time of peace, all the while being told that he was sent to "offer friendship and help to the Afghan people" and complete his "international duty" (Lapychak 1984). Zhigalin also complained of receiving brutal treatment from his officers, including unnecessary beatings and chastisement. He disliked being punished simply because he was a newer recruit, and he harbored feelings of resentment towards his superiors. He also disliked the rampant drug abuse throughout the ranks of the Soviet military. Finally, Zhigalin objected to the Soviet Union's military tactics against Afghan civilians. He disagreed with these harsh military tactics and deserted the Red Army. He was captured by the Mujahedeen, but eventually gained asylum in the United States.

Zhigalin's dissatisfaction with the Soviet Army was built upon a number of factors. To begin with, he did not feel that the USSR had a right to be in Afghanistan in the first place. He objected to the invasion of another country in a time of peace, and this protestation was only increased when he witnessed the mistreatment of Afghan civilians. Zhigalin was also dissatisfied with life within the army. The racism, drug abuse, and brutality of senior troops intensified his growing doubts and fears about the nature of the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan. Eventually, Zhigalin decided that he could not support such violence and oppression and deserted the army.

These case studies show that exposure to violence against non-combatants and the psychological trauma that ensued led these soldiers to defect from their country. Whether that was their initial intent or they came to the conclusion while in captivity, they all eventually defected in one form or another from their military service in the Soviet Army.

## CONCLUSION

*“There is not a single Soviet soldier or officer left behind me. Our nine-year stay ends with this.” - Lieut. Gen. Boris V. Gromov, the commander of the Soviet forces in Afghanistan (Keller 1989)*

Afghanistan proved to be a tough battleground for the Soviet superpower. One third (7/21) of the documented captured or deserting soldiers defected to the Mujahedeen and actively took a role against the Soviet troops. The high level of defection was caused by the low morale that was commonplace among Soviet troops. This lack of drive was brought on by poor living conditions, inadequate military training, drug and alcohol abuse, and violent relationships between soldiers. Additionally, the level of animosity between Afghans and Soviets grew to insurmountable proportions. Widespread human rights violations offended some communist soldiers and further angered the Afghan population. In this dangerous, dynamic environment, paranoia was rampant, and capture became one of the greatest fears among the Red Army ranks. Many Soviet troops were in fact captured and held by the enemy. Others deliberately deserted their motherland's army and sought refuge among the Mujahedeen. Their actions often arose from their dissatisfaction with army life, the mistreatment of Afghan civilians, and, in the case of Central Asian soldiers, their own cultural and ethnic ties to Afghan locals. Following Soviet withdrawal and the subsequent release of POWs, there were some ex-Soviets that chose to

remain among the local population instead of returning to the USSR. While the personal background of some POW/MIA soldiers played a role in their decision to remain, many were influenced by the historical treatment of Soviet POWs and the effects of psychological trauma.

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# CURRICULUM VITAE

*Elliott Andrew Newton*  
*Elliott.a.newton@gmail.com*

## **ACADEMIC DEGREES:**

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### **Indiana University**

*Bloomington, IN*

- Candidate for M.A. Degree, Central Eurasian Studies-Central Asia/Dari
- Graduation August 2015
- Cumulative GPA: 3.97/4.0
- Thesis Title: CAPTIVITY AND CONVERSION: AN IN-DEPTH STUDY OF SOVIET POWS IN AFGHANISTAN

### **Brigham Young University**

*Provo, UT*

- B.A. Degree, Russian, Minor in Middle Eastern Studies/Arabic/Persian/Turkish
- Graduation April 2011
- Cumulative GPA: 3.74/4.0      Major GPA: 3.85/4.0

## **ACADEMIC AWARDS/PRESENTATIONS:**

---

### **Department of State**

*Dushanbe, Tajikistan*

- Critical Language Scholarship (CLS)
- Persian Language Summer 2013
- Intensive Language Study at the American Councils for International Education Language Institute

### **Department of Education**

*United States*

- Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS)
- Title VI Fellowship, Uzbek 2012-2013 Academic Year
- Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center at Indiana University

### **Department of Education**

*United States*

- Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS)
- Title VI Fellowship, Uzbek 2012 Summer
- Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center at Indiana University

### **Department of State**

*United States*

- Title VIII Fellowship, Dari (Afghan dialect of Persian) 2011
- Program for Research and Training in Eastern Europe and Eurasia
- Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center at Indiana University

### **Association of Central Eurasian Students Conference**

- Ethnography in Central Asia Panel
- Presenter-Uzbeks of Afghanistan: Language, Culture and Traditions
- Indiana University

***WORK EXPERIENCE:***

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**United States Army**  
*Armor Officer*

08/13-Present

***SERVICE:***

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**Boy Scouts of America**

Terre Haute, IN

2008; 01/12-08/13

*Assistant Scoutmaster*

- Assist the Scoutmaster in duties and help plan activities for the scouts
- Supervise scouts and plan for weekly meetings and frequent camp outing

**Novosibirsk, Russia Mission**

Siberia, Russia

06/06-05/08

*Missionary, Zone Leader- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

- Consistently worked 10-12 hour days for two years
- Led a group of 10-12 missionaries, conducted weekly training meetings, followed up on goals, sent weekly progress reports to the mission president

**Eagle Scout Project**

Terre Haute, IN

04/04-05/04

*Project Coordinator*

- Coordinated the scanning of history books into a software program, which converted the written text into an audio format for individuals with reading disabilities
- 50+ hours

***RECOGNITION:***

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- Listening comprehension and speaking at varying degrees of fluency: Arabic (Egyptian and MSA), English, Pashto, Persian (Dari, Iranian and Tajik dialects), Russian, Turkish, and Uzbek (Afghan, Tashkent and Standard dialects)
- ACTFL Russian Oral Proficiency Rating- Advanced High
- ACTFL Persian/Farsi Oral Proficiency Rating- Advanced Mid
- ACTFL Tajiki Oral Proficiency Rating- Advanced High/Superior
- Persian/Dari DLPT (3/3), Persian/Farsi DLPT (2/2+) and Russian DLPT (2+/2+)
- Indiana University host for His Excellency Ilhom Nematov, Ambassador of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United States and presenter at the reception held in his honor 2012
- Brigham Young University host for Daniel Seidemann, prominent lawyer from Israel and Consul General Elin Suleymanov from Azerbaijan to United States 2010
- Indiana University Uzbek Scholar and Student Association 2011-Present