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Gabriela Korobkov April 3, 2018

The Polyphony found in Political Events: A Case Study on the Soviet-Afghan War and its Cultural and Political Narratives

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the Official Political Narrative (OPN) and the Cultural Narratives (CN) that emerged in relation to the Soviet-Afghan War. The Official Political Narrative encompasses the reasons behind the intervention in Afghanistan: using archival documentation of the Central Committee's meetings, memorandums, and letters between political elites, I find that the OPN intervened to prevent foreign involvement in Afghanistan, support the socialist party, and protect the border between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan. To determine the Cultural Narratives, I analyzed interviews with those who served in the war and were affected by it, and I also studied films, memorials, and songs. Two separate themes emerged: I call the first one the During-War Narrative and the second is called the After-War Narrative. The During-War Narrative was influenced by the OPN as veterans point to supporting socialism in Afghanistan and protecting the border as reasons for their involvement in the war. Overtime, the cultural narratives shift, and the war is called a "political mistake". Individuals begin to question the legitimacy of the Soviet Union, and this contributes to the destabilization and delegitimation of the Soviet Union. The narratives that formed around this war propelled the collapse of the Soviet Union. Through this case study, I show how the narratives affect each other and how the Cultural Narratives affected the Soviet Union after 1989. I borrow the term Polyphony from Mikhail Bakhtin, who showed the importance of each voice in literature. In political events, the term polyphony is used to show how the voices that emerge are important because they have an influence. We can see this as the OPN shaped part of the Cultural Narratives, and the Cultural Narratives had an effect in undermining the Soviet Union's Official Political Narrative.

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Introduction: Polyphonic Characteristic found in the Political and Cultural Narratives

War, being a multi-faceted endeavor, lends its analysis and study to many disciplines and perspectives. For example, war can be studied strictly in terms of political decision-making, military tactics, economic impact, or even the cultural response to the conflict. A problem arises, however, when one perspective is used in isolation. Certainly, these methods offer considerable insight by themselves, but, a synthesis of two or more analyses provides further dimensions in which one may approach the study of a war. This thesis aims to address the interaction between the cultural and political understandings of the Soviet-Afghan War. More specifically, I will focus on the official political narrative, as it shaped the decision to go to war, and the cultural narratives, which explore how the war was interpreted as it was being fought and a few years after the soldiers and civilian employees returned. I will use Mikhail Bakhtin's theory on polyphony[1] as a theoretical framework to synthesize these seemingly disparate narratives.

Bakhtin details his theory on polyphony in his work *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984). He borrowed the term from the music discipline and, while studying Dostoevsky's works, determined that the concept applied in literature. He found that "a chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels" was the presence of "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (Bakhtin, 6). Furthermore, Bakhtin finds that Dostoevsky's works are not dominated by a "single objective world," with one authoritative voice. Rather he finds a "plurality" of voices "with equal rights and each with its own world" (Bakhtin, 6). While studying political events, one finds a similar plurality. The

[1] Bakhtin uses the word "*raznorechie* or *raznogolositsa*" which is often translated as "heteroglossia" (Yekelchyk, 459). I have decided to use the word polyphony, another common translation, since it encompasses both verbal and nonverbal communication, and both are studied in this thesis.

event, itself, can be seen in a single dimension or unit of analysis, but to grasp the event in full means to understand the myriad of voices that emerge and the war's full impact on society. This includes voices that come from the political, cultural, and military realm, but is not limited to them. Just as Bakhtin finds the voices equally affecting the universe in which the characters live, so to do the voices that emerge in relation to a political event have a lasting effect. By analyzing the official political narrative that emerged in 1979 and 1989 along with the cultural narratives that developed from 1979 to 1991, I aim to detail the overarching themes of the narratives and identify the similarities and differences between them. *When do the cultural voices agree with the official political narrative that decided to invade Afghanistan? When is there disagreement, and does that affect any future, official political narratives? In other words, how do these seemingly disparate narratives affect each other and define the conflict, as a whole?*

Part I of this paper focuses on the official political narrative (OPN), which encompasses the reasons behind the invasion. This narrative is typically shaped by political elites, who make the decision to go to war. In the case of the Soviet-Afghan War, the OPN was developed by the Central Committee in 1979 and acted upon by Leonid Brezhnev. Like most high-level political decisions, the Committee's meetings were not publicized during the time they were made, and this points to one distinguishing quality of OPNs: the political narrative, although informed by outside information about developments in the conflict zone, can be isolated from the general public, even though it determines whether the country will intervene.

To understand the Central Committee's framework, I analyze archival documents that were published in George Washington University's National Security Archive and translated by Dr. Svetlana Savranskaya. This thesis examines documents recorded between March 17th, 1979 and December 28th, 1979; thus, I focus on the decision-making process which began a few

months before the invasion up until the invasion itself. While it is impossible to know with absolute certainty why any political party or organization would choose to take a specific action, such as invading a country, the Central Committee Politburo sessions and other supporting documents are the best tools available to understand the political narrative that formed amongst the political elites.

Through my research, I find that the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) was primarily motivated by international politics: first, committee members were wary of the United States' growing influence in the region and the potential for nuclear missiles to be placed on the Afghan-Pakistan border. Therefore, moving into Afghanistan provided an opportunity to protect the Soviet's supposed sphere of influence. Second, Afghanistan was undergoing dynamic political changes that would inexorably lead to the disintegration of its communist, Soviet-supported regime. Third, the committee determined that Afghanistan's collapse would have adverse effects in the region and create further instability, particularly in Central Asia. In a sense, the Soviet invasion illuminates the Central Committee's hope that troops on the ground would prevent such a catastrophic collapse. Archival documents point to this conclusion and show that CC members wanted to isolate Afghanistan's political turmoil from its neighbors. Part I(a) will detail the international considerations that influenced the Central Committee; Part I(b) explores how the Central Committee went from not wanting to invade to invading; Part I(c) examines other voices that emerged in 1979.

The Civic and Cultural Narratives, discussed in Part II, predominately emerged during the period of Glasnost. I define the cultural narrative as being a representation of how society experiences, remembers, and interprets an event. The cultural narrative manifests itself through conversations, documentaries, war films, art pieces, monuments, and other similar expressions.

The root of the cultural narrative is found in the experiences of those who were affected directly or indirectly by the war. For example, soldiers, veterans, family members, and friends of those affected set the initial tone of the narrative. Over time, their experiences are spread and shared, and society more broadly develops an understanding of the war. In the Soviet-Afghan War, not unlike other conflicts around the world, the cultural narrative becomes paramount when discussing the war. Thus, the official political narrative is more important during the decision-making process, but the cultural narratives becomes more important when trying to understand how society views the war. Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievich shows this in *Zinky Boys*, where she interviews those affected by the Soviet-Afghan War: they all discuss their internal struggles with the struggle and outcome of the war more than they discuss the politics behind the intervention.

To understand the cultural narrative that emerged, I analyze *Zinky Boys*-- a compilation of interviews including Majors, Lieutenants, Privates, nurses, mothers, military advisers, civilian employees, army doctors, and widows. I chose Svetlana Alexievich's work because she includes both people who served in the military and people who were close to those who served; since the cultural narrative is shared and shaped by those two groups in society, both must be studied. I find that there are two cultural narratives that emerged: the During-War Narrative and the After-War Narrative. The During-War Narrative is the narrative accepted by soldiers as they were actively serving in Afghanistan. This narrative explains why some soldiers wanted to serve in Afghanistan and what they believed their role to be. In general, the veterans in the interviews explain how they believed they were protecting the border and helping an ally build socialism. During the Soviet-Afghan War, the official Soviet news and press supported this view of the conflict and civilians also claimed that soldiers were protecting the border and building socialism

in Afghanistan. The narrative changed as the war progressed. The After-War Narrative is dominated by a sense of shame and confusion. The shame is not for losing or admitting defeat in Afghanistan; rather, the shame was for fighting a war not worth winning. Veterans and civilians both point to a "worthless" war. Even though the narrative during the war emphasized the need to protect the border, veterans and civilians changed their perception of the conflict. They explain how the war did not defend national sovereignty or protect the country's borders from attack, and, for this reason, the war in Afghanistan had very little meaning for Soviet Union citizens. Indeed, Afghanistan did not threaten the existence of the Soviet Union. Part II(a) explores the During-War Narratives; the After-War Narrative is detailed in Part II(b); Other cultural representations of the Soviet-Afghan War, as seen in memorials, films, and songs, are presented in Part II(c).

In Part III, I weave the narratives together based on the theoretical framework of polyphony. I find that the official political narrative influenced the During-War Narrative, and the After-War Narrative seems to have influenced politics in Russia after the end of the Soviet-Afghan War. In Part III(a) I discuss the decision to leave Afghanistan; in Part III(b) I argue that the Cultural Narratives that emerged in response to the war had a corrosive effect on the Soviet Union's legitimacy. Individuals began to question the Central Committee's decision to invade Afghanistan, and they believed they were being lied to about the war. The assumption underlying the idea of polyphony is that these voices are important because they have an *influence*. In the case of this war, the narratives contributed to the destabilization and delegitimation of the Official Political Narrative.

In the conclusion, I suggest that further research should be done to determine the connection between the cultural narratives and Russia's foreign policy post-1991. Dr. Artemy

Kalinovsky, along with other scholars, suggests that the Soviet-Afghan War had an effect on future foreign policy. Specifically, Russia's open interventions were closer to the Russian and former Soviet Union territory, involved CIS countries, were limited in scope, and lasted a shorter period of time. It is only in 2015 that we see Russia expand out of the post-Soviet-Afghan narrative and become openly involved in Syria. Thus, the narratives that emerged before, during, and after the Soviet-Afghan War could have influenced Russia's foreign policy. Using the idea of polyphony, it becomes clear how different voices, whether they are tied to politics or not, affect future-decision making.

Part I. Political Narratives

a. The International Threat, international considerations that influenced the Soviet decision-making process

On March 17th, 1979, the Central Committee (CC) of the Soviet Union's Communist Party held a meeting to discuss the "deterioration of conditions in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and Possible Responses from [the Soviet] Side" (Document 1). Fifteen members were present for the meeting, and General Secretary of the Communist Part of the Soviet Union Leonid Brezhnev was expected to be briefed at a later date. During that time, the 17th division in the Afghan army "collapsed," with part of the division defecting to the insurgency (Document 1). Andrei Gromyko, the Minister of Foreign Affairs during that time, relayed the information to fellow central committee members and expressed that, although unconfirmed, "thousands, literally thousands" of insurgents were in Afghanistan (Document 1). This marked a shift for the Soviets in that the number of insurgents reflected the political instability of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), the party which the Soviet Union supported. In other words, the Communist Party in Afghanistan received little, if not underwhelming, support from the people. The Central Committee understood the importance of receiving little support from Afghan people, as it pointed to a failing party and, potentially, the end of a communist party in the country. Nevertheless, if the Soviets were unwilling to support the PDPA by sending troops immediately following the coup in April 1978, there was less incentive to help now as it would mean fighting the local population for power.

While the Central Committee was not willing to militarily intervene in Afghanistan in March of 1979, they made strong accusations against outside insurgent groups, which infiltrated Afghanistan from beyond the country's borders. In his opening statement, Andrei Gromyko, the

Minister of Foreign Affairs, explained the international presence in Afghanistan and its effect on the conflict:

> Bands of saboteurs and terrorists, having infiltrated from the territory of Pakistan, trained and armed not only with the participation of Pakistani forces but also of China, the United States of America and Iran, are committing atrocities in Herat. The insurgents infiltrating into the territory of Herat Province from Pakistan and Iran have joined forces with a domestic counter-revolution. (Document 1, 1)

The atrocity to which he is referring is the Herat Uprising of 1979, where "counter-revolutionary" forces killed "hundreds of DRA officials and Soviet advisors who were in charge of introducing the women's literacy program" (Document 1). While it is difficult to substantiate the claim that the "saboteurs and terrorists" were from Pakistan and supported by China, the US and Iran, it is clear that Gromyko viewed the Herat Uprising as one encouraged from outside Afghanistan (Document 1). He shied away from blaming Afghan civilians at large, as if they had little to do with the event. Instead, outside influences, "religious fanatics," and reactionary masses were part of the "domestic counter-revolution" (Document 1, 1-2). It is interesting to note his terminology: "domestic counter-revolution" implies the Saur revolution, which brought the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) into power, was a revolution and not a coup d'etat. Yet, this "revolution" resembled a coup more than anything else since PDPA loyalists took over the palace in Kabul and Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan and his family were killed. Yet, Gromyko does not claim that local populations support the PDPA; he makes it clear and even emphasizes that a "domestic counter-revolution" does indeed exist (Document 1, 1-2). Thus, Afghanistan in March of 1979, from the Soviet's perspective, was in danger of a domestic uprising, led by local counter-revolution forces, and supported by international actors including: The United States, China, and Iran.

The language used by the Central Committee is reminiscent of the language used during the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the language used once the Bolshevik Party was in power. Terms like "saboteurs" and "counter-revolutionary" forces were used to label any opposition, whether it was a real political rival or peasants refusing to do away with their grain. For Lenin, labeling the supposed hostile elements in the Soviet Union as "counter-revolutionaries" gave him the ability to inflict mass terror against the population (Figes and Kolonitskii, 185). While the Central Committee could not and would not inflict the kind of terror used in 1917 against foreign elements present in Afghanistan, the similar use in language points not only the Soviet Union's communist foundation, but also to the CC's interpretation of these outside forces. Gromyko is not claiming that the United States, as an international superpower, is upholding forces competing with the Communist Party in Afghanistan. Rather, the foreign governments are supporting foreign "saboteurs," who then assist the "counter-revolution" (Document 1, 1). It is possible to see the ideological connection between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. While the Central Committee members rarely discuss the PDPA in terms of growing socialism internationally, here it is possible to see the Soviet Union's direct and overt connection the PDPA.

While Gromyko labeled foreign powers as supports of "saboteurs and terrorists," the United States worried about the Soviet Union's influence in Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. More specifically, United States National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and his close colleagues in the White House were wary of the USSR's potential influence in the Middle East. Thus, both nations feared the others influence in the region. With hundreds of Soviet advisors in Afghanistan and with Pakistan's and Iran's "pro-American" leaning, the worry was understandable (Galster). In fact, a few weeks after the Herat Uprising, Brzezinski pursued a

policy that was "more sympathetic to those Afghans who were determined to preserve their country's independence" (Galster). There is evidence Brzezinski's sympathy turned into "moderate covert support for Afghan dissident groups which had set up headquarters in Pakistan" (Galster). It seems Andrei Gromyko was not wrong to point out the international community's supposed involvement since this conflict was not politically limited to the borders of Afghanistan. The Central Committee was convinced other nations would influence Afghanistan through proxy groups, and the Committee tried to thwart any attempts by "[appropriating] an additional 10 million rubles to Afghanistan in hard currency for the protection of the border" (Document 1, 2). Their calculated decision was not foolhardy. For one, Afghanistan shares a border with both Iran and Pakistan. Both nations could send insurgents through the border. This was particularly likely in 1979 when the country was vulnerable to outside threats. Domestic affairs pulled police and military forces away from the border to areas of conflict and the country was exposed to outside threats. The USSR's appropriation of 10 million rubles for protection of the border shows just how vulnerable Afghanistan was during that time. After all, the Soviet Union would only appropriate 10 million rubles if they found it necessary and essential to their cause. One main reason for their willingness to secure the border is that the Central Committee did not want the conflict in Afghanistan to spread beyond Afghanistan's borders. As explained by Dr. Lester Grau, "The Soviets were interested in protecting their borders and keeping the unrest contained in Afghanistan and not spreading into Soviet Central Asia" (Grau, 418). Since "Afghanistan's borders [were] porous and in many places, poorly marked," there was a risk that insurgents or civilians would go to one of the three Soviet republics that border Afghanistan: Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan (Grau, 414).

Furthermore, there is more evidence supporting the view that Gromyko and other central committee members considered international politics when determining the appropriate and necessary Soviet response. As with most important political meetings, the March 17th meeting turned into the March 18th meeting; this time, Brezhnev was present. He began by outlining the documents he signed in connection to events in Afghanistan. Brezhnev approved:

> The delivery of additional supplies of special materials, including military property and armaments...and authorizing Comrade A. N. Kosygin to communicate with Comrade Taraki, and to brief our press and other media outlets in connection with the events in Afghanistan (Document 1, 16).

In other words, Brezhnev claims he approved everything the Central Committee submitted the day before, and he found the recommended measures to be "entirely correct" (Document 1, 16). Following Brezhnev's introduction, Andrei Gromyko was given the floor to report on Afghanistan, once again. He discussed the events in Herat, the "uprisings of insurgents," and the countries involved in counter-revolutionary action. He claims the following:

> We may assume with full justification that all these events, not only in Afghanistan but in the neighboring governments, including those in China, are being directed by the hand of the U.S.A. China, Pakistan, and Iran are playing a role here that is not all but far behind. (Document 1, 17).

Here it is possible to see the covert rivalry between the Soviet Union and other international actors. The rivalry with the United States is clear since the two powers were enmeshed in the Cold War. The Soviet Union's competition with China, on the other hand, is more indirect in 1979. By the start of the Soviet-Afghan War, the Sino-Soviet split had already ended; however, the effect of the confrontation was still present since the "rivalry for the leadership in the communist movement" was not resolved[2] (Zubok, 122). Gromyko reiterates the international

[2] By the end of the Soviet-Afghan War, the Soviet Union wanted to resolve the tension that was still present between the Soviet Union and China. Soviet political elites, "feeling the pressure of

response to the conflict and these countries' involvement in Afghanistan. No central committee members present in this meeting object to this statement and neither does Brezhnev. In fact, Kosygin discusses the need to close the border with Pakistan and Iran, and Brezhnev agreed, adding that "letters to Pakistan and Iran must be sent today" (Document 3, 19). Furthermore, Dmitry Ustinov, the Minister of Defence, claims that Amin was worried about "saboteurs" being sent from Pakistan and Iran and trained and equipped by Chinese advisors before being sent into Afghanistan (19).

Despite this, Gromyko made an interesting and important point: sending forces to Afghanistan would "create...an incredibly difficult complication in [Soviet] foreign policy" (Document 3, 18). The detente with America, which they "achieved with such difficulty," would be in danger and SALT-II negotiations would be in jeopardy (Document 5, 18). In general, "relations with Western countries...would be spoiled" (Document 5, 18). For all of the reasons listed above, Gromyko decides that the Soviet Union "cannot embark on such an act as the deployment of troops" (Document 5, 18). The benefits of helping Afghanistan are too politically costly in international relations and many political relationships are at stake. Although Brezhnev and other Central Committee members do not respond directly to his comments, there is general agreement that Soviet troops would not be deployed. Aid in the form of equipment, money, and food is acceptable for the CC; perhaps aid is justifiable since the mentioned Western countries would not retaliate for such low levels of Soviet involvement in Afghanistan.

The Central Committee met again on March 20th, 1979, and Nur Muhammed Taraki, the General Secretary of the PDPA, attended the meeting. Alexei Kosygin (the Premier of the Soviet

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the US militarization and global militancy, needed de-escalation of tensions with China to ease the burden of military preparations in the Far East" (Zubok, 124).

Union), Gromyko, Ustinov, and Boris Ponmarev (Head of the International Department of the CC) were present, and Kosygin's opening remarks to Taraki illustrate the Central Committee's general view on the Soviet Union's involvement in Afghanistan (Document 3). While the CC aims to support and assist the PDPA, the Soviet Union will do so in a manner which:

> Would preserve the authority of [the Afghanistan] government in the eyes of the people, not spoil relations between Afghanistan and neighboring countries, and not injure the international prestige of [Afghanistan]. (Document 3, 1)

Thus, Kosygin admits to the leader of the Communist Party in Afghanistan that the Soviet Union will provide practical assistance, while keeping in mind the international and domestic backlash to military and political support (Document 3). They also point to the importance of maintaining "international prestige" (Document 3). While Central Committee members do not explain in the meetings the role of international prestige and its significance in the conflict, there is an underlying tone that addresses the need for Afghanistan to appear strong and unified[3]. Furthermore, deploying troops "would immediately awake [the] international community and would invite sharply unfavorable multipronged consequences," of which there are two (Document 3). First, Soviet deployment would encourage nations supporting anti-PDPA elements to deploy their own troops (Document 1, 18). Second, Alexei Kosygin argues sending troops to Afghanistan would "worsen" the situation, not improve it. Soviet troops would be forced to fight "foreign aggressors" and the local Afghanistan population; fighting the latter would destroy the PDPA's reputation among Afghanis, and resistance to the PDPA would increase. After all, the group targeting locals and civilians under the guise of "revolution" would fool no one.

[3] While prestige is not mentioned in the official Central Committee meetings, there is evidence that Brezhnev stated the need to uphold appearance after the Herat Uprising (Westad, 58).

This is not the first time Afghanistan's "prestige" is mentioned. After the Herat rebellion Taraki was told about the importance of maintaining a particular image:

> The Soviets also told Taraki frankly that the rebellion at Herat had tarnished the regime's image at home and abroad: nothing similar must happen. At a meeting with Brezhnev that evening, Taraki was again lectured in a patronizing manner on how to govern Afghanistan; on the need for a 'patriotic front' and a loyal army. (Westad, 58)

How was Afghanistan being perceived by the international community? Did they appear to be united and strong, or fractured and weak? Here, the importance of their appearance is stressed, and it reiterates the claim that prestige, especially for a country undergoing civil conflict, is important.

There is also the question about maintaining the Soviet's prestige in the international arena. The Central Committee members do not discuss their prestige directly, but there seems to be a covert understanding that the Soviet Union's international standing is also affected by the events in Afghanistan. As discussed in this paper in Part II(a), the veterans who served in Afghanistan were pressured to maintain the appearance of a "great, powerful, and *morally healthy*" army (Alexievich, 51). At the very least, the military had to maintain its prestige throughout the war, and it is likely that the Central Committee was concerned about its political reputation in 1979. *Were the Central Committee members hesitant to invade because it could weaken its international prestige?* There is no direct evidence in the archives that substantiates this claim since members did not discuss it. That being said, foreign governments believed the Soviet Union became weaker after it invaded Afghanistan. Vladislav Zubok discusses China's perspective on the Soviet Union's position in the international scene after 1979:

> First, the Chinese leadership could see that Afghanistan altered the balance of power in international relations: the Soviet Union was bogged down, like the United States had been earlier in Vietnam: Soviet isolation sharply reduced the Soviet

> threat to China's security. Kenneth Waltz, a theorist of structural realism in international relations, was in China in 1982 and argued to his Chinese hosts that the occupation of Afghanistan weakened, not strengthened, the Soviets. (Zubok, 124)

Maintaining prestige, from an international politics perspective, is a "more subtle type of power…but it is highly effective" (Harvey, 1). A country's prestige is linked to its status in the international community, and this status defines whether or not the country is a threat. For this reason, it seems highly likely that Central Committee members assessed their international standing when considering the various kinds of responses to events in Afghanistan. After they decided to invade, it seems China judged them as weaker than before since it was "bogged down" in Afghanistan by sending troops, equipment, and military advisors.

Taken together, the Central Committee meetings encompass the international lens through which the Committee viewed the deployment of Soviet troops in March 1979. They were wary of Soviet involvement since the United States, Pakistan, China, and Iran were allegedly encouraging and supporting anti-PDPA elements. Soviet involvement would mean instigating a kind of proxy war against the nations. There was also a focus on the relations between these nations in terms of diplomacy and the immediate consequences of deploying troops. It seems that for a short time, approximately ten months, the Soviet Union was unwilling to provide troops, and their decision to withhold direct support is linked to international relations.

b. From no to yes: Why the Soviets decided to invade

Given the central committee's strong stance against invading Afghanistan in March, it seems odd that Brezhnev sent troops just nine months later. *What changed for the Soviets? How did the supposed benefits of invading outweigh the costs detailed in March of 1979? What events*

triggered this response?[4] In regard to the latter question, there seems to be three events to consider when understanding the Soviet response: Hafizullah Amin taking over the PDPA, Nur Muhammad Taraki's assassination, and the international communities' encroaching influence in Afghanistan.

Amin's takeover in September 1979 and Taraki's assassination in October left the Soviet Union with fewer allies in the PDPA. Taraki overall had a positive relationship with the Central Committee and even traveled to Moscow to meet with high officials regarding political and social developments in Afghanistan. While the Central Committee meetings show that Taraki and the members had disagreements, there was an understanding between Taraki and CC members. When Taraki visited Moscow, he began his opening statement to the Central Committee in the following manner:

> I am very grateful to you for the detailed account of the position of the Soviet government on the question that I wanted to discuss. I also speak forthrightly and openly, as your friend. We in Afghanistan also believe that emerging problems should first be dealt with through political means, and that military actions must be auxiliary in nature. (Document 3, 3)

While his friendly tone could be seen as pandering for the sake of gaining supplies, the committee meetings point to a genuine relationship between Taraki and the CC. In this particular meeting, he continues to "speak forthrightly" about the supplies, equipment, and help he needs to aid the PDPA cause. At times, the Central Committee denies his requests for support; for example, Kosygin denies sending troops to Afghanistan and states that "we must not allow the situation to seem as if you were not able to deal with your own problems and invited foreign

[4] Just as the archives point to the Central Committee's intentions through verbal speech, so too does the decision to invade expose one aspect of the official political narrative. In other words, action can be seen as a type of speech, even if it is not as direct, and the Central Committee's actions can aid the process of answering the aforementioned questions. Moreover, the timing of this action also sheds light on which events resulted in the Soviet's decision to invade.

troops to assist you" (Document 3, 1-2). Yet, the Committee allocates six MI-24 helicopters, maintenance specialists, military vehicles, and 100 thousand tons of wheat in this same meeting (Document 3, 6-8). Additionally, Kosygin, was authorized to communicate with Taraki, and there were frank discussions between CC members and Taraki regarding the Soviet Union's role in supporting the PDPA (Document 3 and 4). Yet, Taraki's relationship with the Central Committee did become strained as the political situation in Afghanistan deteriorated. Towards the end of 1979, and a few weeks before the Soviet invasion into Afghanistan, "Puzanov, Pavlovskii, and the Soviet military and KGB mission in Kabul" requested a meeting with Taraki and Amin (Westad, 61). Here, Taraki was confronted by Soviet elites in regards to the political breakdown and his role in the deteriorating political situation:

> They demanded an immediate meeting with [Taraki] and Amin, who was already in the palace, and who came to Taraki's rooms to listen while Puzanov read out a long list of charges of military inefficiency, political incompetence, and personal ambition. (Westad, 61)

Nevertheless, the Central Committee was accustomed to working with Taraki, not Amin. Their cultivated relationship was generally productive, as the CC had experience with Taraki and knew what to expect from him.

Amin did not cultivate the same kind of relationship with the Soviet Union, and Taraki's assassination did little to show Amin was a reliable and trustworthy leader of the PDPA. Even though Taraki's assassination came after Taraki's attempted assassination of Amin, Amin's political maneuvers after Taraki's death put him in even more unfavorable light. Dr. Arne Westad details his actions, following Taraki's death:

> When the assassins missed their target and Amin escaped, he summoned troops loyal to him to surround the palace and called a meeting of the Politburo, which duly expelled Taraki and proclaimed Amin the new head of the PDPA. Then he began a purge of Taraki's supporters and other likely rivals. A number of prisoners

> from Daoud's regime and the *Parchami* wing of the PDPA were executed, followed by Taraki himself on 9 October. (Westad, 62)

Following Taraki's assassination, Gromyko, Andropov, Ustinov, and Ponomarev wrote a memorandum directed to the CC CPSU on October 29th, 1979 discussing the shift in power and how the Soviets should approach Amin. They advise the following:

> Continue to work actively with Amin and overall with the current leadership of the the [sic] PDPA and the DRA, not giving Amin grounds to believe that we don't trust him and don't wish to deal with him. Use the contacts with Amin to assert appropriate[5] influence and simultaneously to further expose his true intentions… (Document 6)

The advice reflects the old Russian adage "trust, but verify" (Доверяй, но проверяй). The Central Committee's concerns were well placed, considering Amin's actions. According to the memorandum, the "scale of repressions in the Party, army, state apparat and civic organizations has widened" since Amin became the PDPA's General Secretary (Document 6). Zerai, Misak, and Pandzhshiri, members of the PDPA Politburo, were "subject to fictitious accusations" (Document 6). Thus, party members in Afghanistan experienced a quasi-political purge. Additionally, there were concerns about how Taraki was "removed from power and then physically destroyed" (Document 6). Amin's rise to power was based on Taraki's assassination. The Soviet Union had a productive relationship with Taraki, and Amin's relationship with the

[5] While the Central Committee does not discuss the importance of maintaining the Soviet Union's prestige directly, the use of the word "appropriate" in this quote indicates their attention to how they were perceived. *What kind of influence was deemed appropriate, and by what metric was the term measured?* The memorandum does not elaborate on the term, but there are a few possibilities as to what they might have meant. First, "appropriate influence" might mean what is appropriate within the Soviet Union's capabilities; second, it might refer to the level of influence acceptable to foreign governments. Since the memorandum was released about two months before their invasion, they could have been sensitive to the US, China, Iran, and Pakistan's interpretation of their influence in Afghanistan. Third, it could mean an appropriate level of influence in light of the fact that Amin was the new leader of the PDPA, and they did not want to support him as much as they supported Taraki.

CC members could not easily replace their relationship with Taraki. Nevertheless, they tried to work with Amin since he was the new leader of the PDPA. Ustinov, Andropov, Gromyko, and Ponomarev "recommended patience with Amin and an increase in the number of Soviet military advisers in Afghanistan" (Westad, 62). Nevertheless, these Soviet political elites understood that Taraki's assassination reflected instability within the PDPA. His death exposed the fragility of the party, and this was a source of concern for the Soviet Union. Hence, the CC needed to "expose his true intentions" and uncover the state of the PDPA to determine their future actions (Document 6). Amin's takeover revealed the inner political turmoil found in the party. A weakened party is bound to collapse and cause further instability in the country and undermine any political gains made by the PDPA. This seems to be one event that was factored into the decision to invade and prevent the collapse of the PDPA.

Another concern was the possibility that "the new leadership of Afghanistan intends to conduct a more 'balanced policy' in relation to the Western powers." In other words, CC members were speculating that Afghan leaders were considering a pivot towards the West, and they were not wrong to believe this was a possibility. Amin tried to work with the United States:

> He knew that the Soviets were losing patience...he tried to strengthen his hand by opening relations with the United States while appealing to the Kremlin to work with the new PDPA leaders. (Westad, 63)

Gromyko, Andropov, Ustinov, and Ponomarev claimed any pivot would "allow the victory of counter-revolution in Afghanistan or the political reorientation of H. Amin" (Document 6). By "political reorientation," they mean the possibility of Amin supporting the "counter-revolution" in Afghanistan instead of the PDPA. It is interesting that Amin's possible betrayal is phrased in terms of political terminology. Gromyko, Andropov, Ustinov, and Ponomarev seem to imply that Amin is motivated by political concerns, not that he is aligning himself with the possible victor

in the conflict in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Central Committee members continued to work with Amin in the hopes of establishing a positive relationship with the new leadership. Even though Amin could not replace Taraki, Taraki's assassination meant the CC had to navigate the new political reality. Unfortunately for Amin, reconciliation efforts fell flat since Amin's politics; the possibility of a Western pivot, and the weakened state of the PDPA opened the door for a Soviet intervention.

One of the Soviet military's first tasks, as described by Mark Urban, was to replace Amin as the head of the PDPA:

> The Soviet army was ready to begin the first phase of its operation to seize Afghanistan. Their object was simple enough – to replace the regime of Hafizullah Amin with one headed by Babrak Karmal – a regime designed to secure broader support from the people and party. (Urban, 42)

Interestingly enough, CIA analysts also assumed that Amin's politics encouraged the Soviet invasion into Afghanistan. According to an "Interagency Intelligence Memorandum" by the CIA, titled "Soviet Options in Afghanistan," Amin's politics contributed to the Soviet's intervention. The document claims:

> Amin's seizure of sole power within the Khalqist regime in mid-September has further complicated these Soviet problems in dealing with both the regime and the insurgency. We believe that the Soviets probably did not instigate or forsee [sic] this move by Amin. Moreover, they probably also evaluated it as rending the counterinsurgency task more difficult...because it further narrowed the regime's base of support, and...threatened to divide the ruling party itself. (Document 7, 2)

The CIA's memorandum supports the view that Soviets were responsive to a weakened PDPA and believed a divided party would escalate an already dangerous civil war. Based on this memorandum, the Americans, at least represented by a division of the CIA, pinpointed the Soviet's interpretation of events in Afghanistan. The document also details a possible Soviet response:

> If Moscow, within the next few weeks, concludes that Amin has consolidated his position and that no effective challenge from within the regime and the Army is

> likely, we believe the Soviets will probably increase their counterinsurgency role over the next few months, albeit incrementally rather than dramatically...In the event that Amin does not consolidate his position...the Soviets are likely to shift their political and military support accordingly. (Document 7, 2-3)

While the CIA downplayed international politics that also encouraged a Soviet intervention (i.e. the possibility of a pivot towards the West), their prediction of an increased Soviet response was correct. The Soviets did send troops to Afghanistan, in addition to increasing military equipment and aid, just a few weeks after Taraki's assassination.

In addition to Taraki's assassination and Amin's politics, the last important consideration that factored into the decision to invade was the international component. The PDPA was weak and unable to protect the border sufficiently. The "saboteurs," "terrorists," and "counter-revolutionary forces" mentioned in the Committee meetings could influence the outcome in Afghanistan even more than they did in March of 1979 (Document 1). Grau shows just how poorly equipped and untrained the Afghan officers were before the Soviet intervention:

> When the KGB Border Guards colonels arrived, they discovered that they were faced with major challenges in improving Afghanistan's border security...There were nine Afghan officers in the border-guard experience. The headquarters had no map of Afghanistan showing the location of the border-guard posts, nor were there any regulations or standard operating procedures (SOPs). (Grau, 416)

The border, and more importantly the *porous* border that invited outside influence, is a key part of the Soviet decision to invade. *What was going to prevent more insurgents from entering Afghanistan from Pakistan or Iran? Additionally, what would prevent the Afghan conflict from spilling into Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, or Tajikistan (Grau, 418)?* The border issue went both ways for the Soviets and also illustrates the importance of Afghan's geography for this conflict. As explained by Gregory Feifer in *The Great Gamble*, "Afghanistan's fate has been determined,

more than anything, by its position on the globe," and this point certainly applies to the Soviet-Afghan War (Feifer, 1).

It is interesting to track the Soviet leadership's response to events in Afghanistan because the same international considerations were present in the March and October political meetings, even though one led to an intervention and the other did not. The Soviets were unwilling to intervene in March of 1979 because they believed their intervention would draw foreign governments to Afghanistan, which shared a border with the Soviet Union; when the PDPA started to deteriorate a few months later, the Soviets calculated that an intervention was key to stopping outside actors from entering the country since the PDPA was in a much weaker position and could not protect itself. The international component detailed in this section and the previous one is crucial to understanding the political narrative adopted by Central Committee members. In the twenty-one documents published in the National Security Archive, almost all of them mention, emphasize, and detail other countries and how they affect the Soviet's decision-making process. Thus, meetings covered high-level politics seldom broached domestic Soviet and Afghanistan considerations. Yet, the intervention backfired, as it brought more conflict with foreign governments, particularly the United States:

> The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which began on Christmas Eve 1979, dramatically intensified the cold war and, in the early 1980s, became a symbol of international tension. The war that followed destroyed many Afghan provinces, and caused 50,000 Soviet and over 1.2 million Afghan casualties. (Westad, 49)

Thus, the international conflict the Central Committee was hoping to avoid increased after their invasion.

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union's emphasis on foreign government's involvement in Afghanistan was not an incorrect assumption. The Geneva Accords, which followed the Soviet-

Afghan War, was signed by Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the Soviet Union and the United States serving as guarantors (Geneva Accord, 1988). The agreement focused on "non-interference" and "non-intervention" between Afghanistan and Pakistan, in addition to a timeline for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan (Article II, Geneva Accord, 1988).

In terms of domestic Soviet Union considerations, the committee failed to address the effect of militaristic mobilization of the Soviet population. Over the course of the nine-year Soviet-Afghan war, more than half a million Soviet soldiers were sent to Afghanistan. Certainly, the war had an effect on a portion the Soviet Union's population. Of course, the Central Committee could not predict how the intervention would grow, and they did not anticipate a long and difficult time in the country. That being said, wars are always complicated and typically require more resources, not less, and the Central Committee failed to mention the war's cost on Soviet society. Not only did the war cost the Soviet government money, supplies, and equipment, but any war is taxing on those who serve, their families, friends, and general inner circle.

While CC members do not explain the reason for their omission, there are a few possibilities. First, the cost of the war was not part of their stated calculus: international affairs instead dominated the conversation. That is not to say they were careless; rather, the breakdown of Afghanistan and the involvement of the United States, Iran, Pakistan, and China were paramount in the decision-making process. Second, it is also likely that committee members assumed the cost of war would be insignificant, rendering the discussion futile. Another possibility is that the social and domestic cost of war is inappropriate to discuss during a high political meeting when the war has not yet begun. At that point, the cost is theoretical and nonexistent. Lastly, is it also possible these topics are discussed only when society forces its political leaders to discuss them.

In October and November of 1979, Soviet society did not feel the impact of the events in Afghanistan, and there was no reason to object to the invasion.

c. Competing Voice

The official Political Narrative is the most relevant political narrative because it highlights why Soviet political leaders decided to invade Afghanistan. However, it was not the only narrative present in 1979; in fact, there were voices who opposed the invasion. Valentin Ivanovich Varennikov, for example, served as the deputy chief of the Soviet General Staff in 1979 and "returned to Moscow on the eve of one of the most momentous decision of the Soviet leadership in the postwar period" (Kipp, 9). This "momentous decision" concerned the decision to invade Afghanistan. In an interview with Artem Borovik for Ogonek Magazine, Varrenikov claims that several members of the Soviet General Staff opposed the intervention. Dr. Jacob Kipp details his account in a biography on Varrenikov:

> Varennikov emphasized the General Staff's reluctance to intervene and stated that both Marshal Ogarkov, then-Chief of the General Staff, and General of the Army Sergei Akhromeev, then-First Deputy Chief of the General Staff, "and certain other comrades had a negative attitude toward this step." (Kipp, 9).

Thus, there were voices in the military that raised their concern with the invasion in Afghanistan. These voices stand in contrast to the overarching official Political Narrative. While there is little archival documentation the shows the contrast between the Soviet Military's stance on the war and the Central Committee's position, these interviews account for a possible rift between the two sources of power in the Soviet Union. Moreover, Varennikov even claims that Orarkov reflected the general attitude of the General Staff:

> In another interview for New Times Varennikov singled out Marshal Ogarkov as an opponent of military intervention, but made him the institutional voice of the General Staff. "Even at that time some military leaders -- then Chief of the General Staff Marshal Nikolai Vasil'evich Ogarkov and the General Staff as a whole -- spokeout against the introduction of our troops into Afghanistan." (Kipp, 9-10)

Varennikov's account "[suggests] that a long-simmering debate over responsibility for the debacle in Afghanistan may finally be emerging" (Dobbs). Yet, his voice was one of the few that came out publically. There are very few records on the opinions of other General Staff members in regards to the actual decision to invade. With the lack of substantial evidence from the archives and little commentary coming from other members of the General Staff, it is difficult to accept Varennikov's account entirely. It is possible that that portions of the Soviet military did not want to claim responsibility for the Soviet-Afghan War and the outcome of the conflict. Nevertheless, his account, if accurate, points to a contrasting voice that emerged in 1979. To this day, the question remains: *what effect did the General Staff's dissent on the intervention have on the decision to invade in December of 1979?*

Part II. Civic and Cultural Narratives

The cultural narrative that developed during the start of the war, and even a few years into the war, encompasses the reasons for intervening in Afghanistan, and how Soviet society interpreted the need for this war. The cultural narrative, in this particular case, changed throughout the war and post-war period because very little was publicized about the war in its beginning. As a Private in the Grenadier Battalion said, "The war had been going on for two years, but the general public didn't know much about it and kept quiet about what they did know" (Alexievich, 15). A Private in the Signals Corps pointed out this same secrecy; the war was "a State Secret, with 100,000 soldiers in a foreign country! Even the temperature in Kabul was classified information" (Alexievich, 56).

The Private's statement raises the question, *how did the Soviet Union manage to hide a war with so many citizens serving in Afghanistan?* Part of this is due to the political discourse of the time. Glasnost, the period of openness, began in 1985 under Mikhail Gorbachev. Thus, the first years of the war were not adequately studied and written about by journalists. Certainly, the Soviet Union's strong hold on the dissemination of news explains part of the secrecy. A Major in the Propaganda Section of an Artillery Regiment explains the media's position on Soviet-Afghan War Veterans: "To being with the media kept quiet about us, then we were heroes for a time, and now we're being knocked off our pedestals again so we can be forgotten about" (Alexievich, 92-93). Thus, the public's perception on those who served in the Soviet-Afghan war changed drastically within a few year period since the secrecy which surrounded the first six years ended with the start of Glasnost. From 1985 onward, information about the war reached Soviet society, and that is when published works were studied.

Another factor that contributed to the secrecy of the war was the environment that surrounded veterans upon their return. The Private who served in the Signals Corps tried to connect with other Soviet-Afghan veterans upon his return to the Soviet Union. Given the experiences of war, and the psychological transformation that accompanies it, his need to communicate with those who shared the experience is understandable. As he phrased it, "We spoke the same language, and it was a language only we could share" (Alexievich, 56). He was prevented from developing these connections:

> I started looking other vets up...The powers-that-be stopped us meeting…'Now, lads,' they tried to persuade us, 'don't talk too much about what you did and saw over there. (Alexievich, 56).

Veterans were prevented from forming groups and discussing their experiences. While this changed as time passed, the veterans' immediate experiences were sometimes lost. Without their discussions, and without proper reporting on the conflict, Soviet society knew little about the progress of the war for six years and its effect on those serving. The secrecy even went beyond basic facts about the conditions on the ground. A nurse, who served in Afghanistan, stated the following:

> There was a conspiracy of silence about our casualties; it was somehow implied that there were an awful lot of infectious diseases over there- malaria, typhus, hepatitis, etc. (Alexievich, 22).

At this nurse points out, even how soldiers died in Afghanistan was hidden and contorted. That is not to say that soldiers were not affected by diseases and infections; the nurses and medics in these interviews point to a lack of supplies and medication. Yet, there was an overall "conspiracy of silence" that hid the casualty rate and deaths caused directly by the war. The nurse describes this in detail:

> A boy might be blown up by a mine and there'd be nothing left except half a bucket of flesh, but we wrote that he'd died of food poisoning, or in a car accident, or he'd

> fallen into a ravine. It wasn't until the fatalities were in their thousands that they began to tell families the truth. (Alexievich, 23-24)

Thus, those who served in Afghanistan and were recording the cause of death had to hide the true nature of this war. The secrecy eventually affected the society that had to internalize the deaths of fathers, sons, brothers, and friends. A mother, who lost her son, was prevented from knowing the cause of death. She describes her experience as she discovered the cause of death:

> Time passed, and I wanted to find out how my son was killed...The officer in charge got angry and even started shouting at me. 'This is classified information! You can't go around telling everyone your son has been killed! Don't you know that's not allowed? (Alexievich, 83).

Not only was the mother prevented from knowing the cause of her son's death, but she was also prevented from telling those around her. This tactic seems counterintuitive as grieving mothers, and grieving individuals in general, find support in the family members and friends that surround them. From the Soviet Union's perspective, however, refusing to release the number of deaths and the causes of death can be seen as saving morale. If Soviet society knew little about the war, then perhaps the deaths and the purpose of the war would not be thoroughly questioned. More importantly, the military and the political decision-making process would not be challenged. For this reason, returning service members were advised to not speak about the war. A Sergeant-Major who served as a Medical Instructor in a Reconnaissance Unit described the "list" of appropriate and inappropriate conversation:

> The farewell address from the political education officer to the departing *dembels* was a list of what we could and could not talk about back home. No mention to be made of fatalities, nor of any 'unofficial activities', because we are a 'great, powerful and *morally healthy'* army. All photographs and films were to be destroyed. We did not shoot, bombard, use poisons or lay mines here. We are a great, powerful and morally healthy army. (Alexievich, 51).

From the perspective of political and military elites, the prestige of the Soviet military had to remain high. Indeed, any country that wishes to protect its borders, maintain a strong

international reputation, and preserve its support from the population should take care to sustain a "great" and "powerful" army. This applies to all countries and nations around the world, not just the Soviet Union. However, it was particularly important for the Soviet Union to maintain prestige during the Soviet-Afghan War because the country was in the middle of the Cold War. Indeed, they did not want to appear weak, and this gives on reason for why they hid the casualty rate from the Soviet population. As explained by Lester Grau and Michael Cress:

> The real Soviet casualties from the war are still a secret, but almost double the official figures released by the Gorbachev regime in a great show of glasnost (openness). The official figures are 13,833 40th Army dead, but the actual figures are in the vicinity of 26,000. (Grau and Cress, xix).

Even during the period of Glasnost, when the Soviet Union transition to more "open" and transparent power, they were still unwilling to release the number.

In addition to being "great" and "powerful," the Sergeant-Major points to the notion of a "morally healthy army" (Alexievich, 51). Juxtaposed with his comment on "not [shooting], [bombarding], [using] poisons, or [laying] mines," it is clear the Sergeant-Major means that a "morally healthy army" is one that acts on the principles of right and wrong (Alexievich, 51). The political and military leaders wanted Soviet society to believe the citizens serving in the armed forces were doing so for good reason. Their sacrifices were justified in moral terms. For this reason, political and military elites had an inclination towards minimizing the information exposed to Soviet society and preventing the veterans from broadcasting photographs and films.

For all the reasons listed above, it was not until Glasnost that Soviet society developed a strong cultural narrative about the Soviet-Afghan War. Yet the roots of the cultural narrative are found in the veterans' experiences; their memories are the foundation upon which future films, novels, and songs are based. While analyzing the veteran's interviews, it becomes clear that there was a narrative pushed onto those who served. The During-War Narratives (DWN), analyzed in

Part a, motivated citizens to serve in Afghanistan. Veterans point to an "international duty," a need to protect the border, and the like when describing what they felt before they were in Afghanistan. The After-War Narratives (AWN), analyzed in Part b, developed for most of society during Glasnost, but it was formed by the veterans during the war. The AWN centers around the disillusionment felt by the soldiers as they realized that the DWN did not reflect reality.

a. During-War Narratives

"We were going to create a revolution, weren't we? That's what we were told and we believed it. It was kind of romantic" (Alexievich, 16). A private in the Grenadier Battalion shared his understanding of the political goal in Afghanistan. Indeed, the Saur Revolution brought the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan into power and erupted into a civil war between the new communist regime and the Mujahedeen. Depicting the Soviet intervention as the attempt to uphold socialism in Afghanistan is not difficult, and many soldiers believed this was their central aim. Over time, soldiers, nurses, medics, and civilian employees became suspicious of their role. A Private in the Signals Corps sarcastically alludes to the separation between the military's role and the socialist revolution:

> We went to Afghanistan to build socialism but found ourselves penned in by barbed wire. 'Don't leave the compound, lads! No need to spread the message, we've got specialists for this.' Pity they didn't trust us. (Alexievich, 54)

The Private's statement is quite fascinating since he points out the irony of being locked in a military compound even though his presumed role was to develop a socialist government in the country. As explained by Grau and Cress, "despite all the press photos showing Soviet soldiers

with Afghan adults and children, genuine fraternization between Soviets and Afghans was discouraged" (Grau and Cress, 313). Thus, there was a genuine separation between the soldiers serving in Afghanistan and the civilian population in the country. A natural question follows: *How does killing more Mujahedeen, and not interacting with the local population, encourage Afghan society to accept an ideology*? In short, it does not. Every government that has invaded Afghanistan, including the Soviet Union, sooner or later realizes that fighting local populations does little to transform the culture underpinning the Afghan societal structure.

The second part of this quote raises a different question; what specialists did the Soviet Union send to spread socialist ideals in the country? Certainly, there were military advisors and military specialists, but they supported the PDPA. From the various documents published about the Soviet-Afghan war, very little is said about the specialists. Perhaps they found it difficult to spread socialist ideals in the middle of the war, especially amongst those who interpreted their actions as destabilizing and dangerous to Afghan growth. It seems the distrust to which the Private alludes is a result of the fragmentation between the soldier's actions and the supposed goal of intervening in Afghanistan. The Private discovers this unique fragmentation for himself while speaking with an Afghan civilian:

> I talked to a shopkeeper once. 'You've been living your lives the wrong way. Now we'll teach you how to build socialism.' He smiled. 'I did business before the revolution and I do business now. Go home. These mountains belong to us. Let us sort out our problems in our own way.' (Alexievich, 55)

Reverting back to his socialist ideals and his understanding of the war, the Private wastes no time in telling the shopkeeper how their presence will benefit the Afghan people and the Afghanistan government. The shopkeeper has probably seen and survived multiple political transitions, led by different political organizations, throughout his life and discovered one crucial hindrance to a stable Afghanistan: the constant influx of foreign influence, whether it be through foreign

fighters or military interventions, prevents the Afghan people from setting their own political foundation. He has seen leaders take power and leave shortly thereafter, and the Soviet army is no different.

For the Private, this is a crucial moment. He realizes that "[building] socialism" in Afghanistan is a dream far removed from reality. More than likely, he was taught from a young age that socialism is the best form of government and it is his duty to uphold those values: now, he finds himself face to face with a shopkeeper who tells him to leave the country. More so, he learns that he is not needed and those who lost their lives did it in mountains that do not belong to the Soviet Union.

A nurse was confronted by the same problem. When discussing the war, she states, "we were told this was a just war, that we were helping the Afghan people to put an end to feudalism and build a wonderful socialist society" (Alexievich, 22). In the most ideological terms, she was told by her superiors, and perhaps by those who encouraged her to enlist, that Afghanistan was dealing with an ideological transformation. This language reflects utopian ideals. In her mind, Afghanistan was shaking off the "shackles" of feudalism, and the Soviet Union's role was to support the Afghan people as they develop a socialist system of governance. The nurse does not mention the civil war, which was exacerbated by the Soviet intervention. She makes no mention of the mujahedeen or the local populations and how they reacted to the PDPA's socialist reforms.

It is not until she lands in Afghanistan and serves for a few days that she realizes her original understanding of the war was incorrect. "Gradually," she states, "we began to ask ourselves what we were all here for. Such questions were unpopular with the authorities, of course" (Alexievich, 22). After seeing boys being "blown up by a mine," and the "conspiracy of silence" that surrounded these kinds of death, it is only natural that one will begin to question the

war. *Why are these men dying? What political or social goal justifies these sacrifices?* These questions are central to all wars. Every citizen serving in times of war, and every citizen related to someone who serves, will naturally ask these questions. In terms of the Soviet-Afghan war, it is difficult to point to a definitive answer, although the Soviet authorities certainly tried. As one Private explained:

> Not a single political instruction period went by without them telling us that 'our forces were bravely protecting the frontiers of the Fatherland and providing assistance to a friend and ally' That was when we started worrying that we might be sent over there; which is exactly why the authorities decided to lie to us. (Alexievich, 27)

Soviet authorities claimed the intervention was necessary to protect the frontier. This is a difficult argument to make since protecting one's borders does not mean intervening in an ongoing civil war. Local units could simply be stationed inside the Soviet Union's borders and prevent any "spill-over" from the political conflict in Afghanistan. The authorities also pointed to helping an ally; yet, sending over 100,000 troops to a new "friend and ally" seems to be something more than "providing assistance" (Alexievich, 27). In terms of international assistance, aid and military advisors typically fall under this category, but fighting the local population is seen as an intervention.

The Private understood the stated reasons for intervening were "[lies]" (Alexievich, 27). This quote also shows that he was not alone in his worry for being sent to Afghanistan. "We might be sent over there". His political class saw through the political instruction, given by a superior. Based on the interviews in *Zinky Boys*, it seems that one of the aims of the political instruction was to boost morale and provide definitive answers for the soldier and civilians' unspoken questions. The other interviewees describe the same kind of justifications for war

given in the political instruction periods. The Nurse described her own experience during the instruction:

> Twice a week we attended a political 'seminar', where we were continually told that we were doing our sacred duty to help make the border totally secure." (Alexievich, 22).

Indeed, there were two justifications that encompass the During-War Narrative: the first is the goal of protecting the border and the second involves helping an ally in a time of need. The Nurse points to the former in this comment, and the Private exposes both of them. Of course, the individuals serving in the military interpreted "helping an ally" in different ways. Some believed they were spreading socialist values abroad and bringing the best system of governance to Afghanistan. Others did not outline their interpretation directly. A Major in the Propaganda Section of the Artillery Regiment expressed his aim: "I went to Afghanistan full of enthusiasm. I thought I could do something useful out there" (Alexievich, 88). Mirroring what the Private from the Signals Corps believed, before he spoke to the shopkeeper, the major said he "expected to be needed by the people" (Alexievich, 88). He believed that to be his role; it was not until he served in Afghanistan that he saw that his understanding of the war was misplaced.

b. After-War Narratives

Once the war ended, the narrative changed. No longer did veterans, civilian employees, and family members believe they were protecting the border and helping an ally with a socialist revolution; Instead, they called the war a "political mistake." Soviet-Afghan veterans were not respected and even criticized for their role in the war, and the "morale," that political and

military elites hoped to encourage, fell. A Private in the Grenadier Battalion explained one interaction he had when he returned:

> The young people ignore us. There's absolutely no mutual understanding. Officially, we have the same status as the World War II vets. The only difference is, they were defenders of the Fatherland, whereas we're seen as the Germans -- one young lad actually said to me! (Alexievich, 19)

The "young lad" believed the Private was part of an invading force, one that did more harm than good. From the Private's perspective, the younger generation, which saw the return of the Soviet-Afghan veterans, did not respect the political decision to fight in Afghanistan and the younger generation's perspective was apparent through their interactions with those who served in the armed forces. As well, the comparison with WWII veterans is not atypical in these interviews. There seems to be a clear distinction between these two groups of veterans in terms of how they were treated by society and how the general public viewed their actions. The WWII veterans were seen as the "defenders" of the Soviet Union; they had to protect the union from an invading force. WWII veterans served in the Great Patriotic War, a name that indicates just how the war and its veterans were perceived. In contrast, the different factions in Afghanistan were not focused on invading the Soviet Union. Thus, the narrative that developed after the war, unlike the During-War Narrative, downplayed the need to protect the border. From Soviet society's perspective, there was not an international threat that sought to invade the Soviet Union.

Once those serving in the war doubted the stated goal of "protecting the border," the narrative changed. Instead of protecting their country, they were seen as the invaders. As an Army Doctor explained, "I understood what I was really doing -- I was part of an invading army, let's face it…" (Alexievich, 61). While this came as a surprise to those serving in the war, it must be noted that members of the Central Committee foresaw this narrative. During the Central

Committee meetings before the intervention, Comrade Gromyko, for example, explained how any intervening force would be viewed as an invading army. Not only would the local population interpret their actions in such a way, but the international community would, as well. Yet the Central Committee never made this prediction with their own population. They never discussed Soviet society's reaction to the war, and how a failed intervention would be interpreted. Needless to say, those who served in the war felt lied to and betrayed. A Private expressed his feelings of betrayal:

> If I'd been asked to give me life for something worthwhile I'd have volunteered, but I was deceived in two ways; first, they lied to us; second, it took me eight years to find out the truth about the war itself. Many of my friends are dead and sometimes I envy them because they'll never know they were lied to about this disgusting war-- and because no one can ever lie to them again. (Alexievich, 28)

In this interview, the Private also details the "political instruction" he received from his superiors. These were the instruction periods that explained the need to assist an ally and protect the border. After serving in Afghanistan, losing his friends to the war, and managing the mental and physical effects of the war, he has to find a way to cope with the realization that he was "lied to" (Alexievich, 28). The Private, along with other veterans interviewed in *Zinky Boys*, expressed his frustration with the decision to go to war. He takes issue not with war itself, but with this war in particular, contending that it was not "worthwhile". He did not believe he was protecting the border and serving a worthy cause. His experience and discovery, whether accurate or not, separated him from the authorities that convinced him the war was just and moral. He felt deceived, and other veterans did, as well. Furthermore, the Private's statement raises the question, *how do veterans deal with the dilemma of living and finding meaning after their fellow servicemen were killed in this war?* He claims to "envy" his friends, but perhaps he feels guilty over the losses. While he does not delve into the topic, many of the Soviet-Afghan veterans

struggled with PTSD and there might be a connection between fighting a war that was a "political mistake" and finding meaning once they return (Severo, 1989).

While the veterans in these interviews felt deceived, non-serving members of society viewed the war as a "mistake" and conveyed their understanding of the war to veterans and those immediately affected by the war. For example, a mother, who lost her son, "gave a talk at the Polytechnic" university. A student approached her after the lecture and told the grieving mother, "If you'd stuffed less patriotism into him he'd be alive today" (Alexievich, 66). Not only did the student indicate her opinion on the war, she went so far as to blame the mother for her own son's death. While this is an extreme response, other veterans had similar conversations with Soviet civilians. The Private in the Grenadier Regiment enrolled in classes when he returned from the war. He had a conversation with "an old lecturer at college" (Alexievich, 77). The old lecturer told him that he was "a victim of a political mistake"; more so, he added that he was "forced to become accomplices to a crime" (Alexievich, 77). Thus, the lecturer blames the governing body that made the decision to fight in Afghanistan, and he blames the veterans for their role. The Private's conversation with the lecturer, and the mother's conversation with the student, show how the non-serving Soviet citizens merged their understanding of the war with the veterans' roles in sustaining the war. Hence, the lecturer sees the Private as both a victim and an accomplice.

In his interview, the Private also explains how the public viewed the war as pointless:

> People back home had their own view of war. 'So you think you were heroes, were you? You lost a war, and anyhow, who needed it, apart from Brezhnev and a few warmongering generals?' (Alexievich, 77).

This quote exemplifies one key part of the After-War Narrative: Soviet citizens did not believe the war was worth fighting because there was very little to gain in winning. Theoretically, the

Central Committee could always point to supporting a communist ally, trying to encourage the socialist cause. This aim failed in the face of reality, and the veterans' interactions with local Afghans show the complexity of the conflict in Afghanistan. The war went beyond a strict dichotomy of communists fighting Mujahedeen, and the veterans interviewed in *Zinky Boys* express their doubts with spreading communism in Afghanistan. From the Private's perspective, Soviet society adopted this stance as well. Nothing was to be gained from the Soviet-Afghan War, and this belief turned into the understanding that this was not "needed" (Alexievich, 77).

When society suspects a war is useless and not "needed," one natural response is to identify those who made the decision to go to war and condemn them. The mother who lost her son shows this in the interview:

> Now they say it was all a dreadful mistake -- for us and for the Afghan people. I used to hate Sasha's killers...now I hate the State which sent him there. Don't mention my son's name. He belongs to us now. I won't give him, even his name, to anyone. (Alexievich, 66).

The mother reiterates the narrative she learned from those around her: "they" labeled the war a "mistake" for Soviet and Afghan society. Whether or not this statement can be empirically studied or factually true, it was true enough for her to mistrust the political process or the elites that took part in the decision. After all, the "political mistake" of intervening in Afghanistan resulted in her son's death. Other mothers interviewed in *Zinky Boys* express the same kind of hatred against the State. Perhaps knowing the deaths were caused by the politicians' oversight changes how the mothers perceive the State's actions. Thus, the cultural narrative that developed around politicians making a mistake fueled distrust. Eventually, this distrust damaged their relationship with political elites. As the grieving mother explains, she will hold onto whatever she can, whether it be her son's name or her memories of him. She will not allow the State to use his name.

Certainly, mothers were not the only participants in the interviews who expressed distrust. A Private in a Motorised Infantry Unit explains the "illusion" he found in the Soviet Union:

> We'd done our 'international' duty, hadn't we?...Afghan cured me of the illusion that everything's OK here, and that the press and television tell the truth. 'What should I do?' I wondered. I wanted to do something specific-- go somewhere, speak out, tell the truth, but my mother stopped me. 'We've lived like this all our lives,' she said. (Alexievich, 21)

The Private mocks the notion that the purpose of the Soviet-Afghan War was to promote an international cause. Serving in Afghanistan certainly gave him a different perspective. Furthermore, the reality on the ground in Afghanistan did not align with the news as it was broadcasted to the public. The news held onto the During-War narrative: The soldiers in Afghanistan were protecting the border and aiding a communist ally. The Private wished to "tell the truth" (Alexievich, 21). While he did not get the chance to share his perspective immediately, this interview gave him the opportunity he missed.

The Private's mother acknowledges the false nature of the news. She also comments on Soviet news in general: the press and television did not typically tell the truth. She had grown used to the lack of information since she has experienced it for most of her life. Her comment also shows how Soviet citizens would not readily accept the information they heard. After all, the press reported a specific narrative on the Soviet-Afghan War; yet, the civilians described in these interviews did not accept the narrative given to them by State-sponsored news sources. Instead, they saw the war as a political mistake and a worthless pursuit. These participants express their frustration with the decision and how it separated them from the governing body. They did not have faith in the political structure.

c. *Other Media and Voices*

The previous two sections examined interviews with veterans, civilian employees, and non-serving Soviet citizens. These interviews are a key piece to understanding a part of the Soviet-Afghan narrative since the participants were affected by the conflict personally, either by serving in the war or waiting for a loved one to return home. They are able to share their experiences and provide a powerful representation of the war. Yet, the Soviet-Afghan War narrative is not confined to the interviews found in *Zinky Boys*. Song, war films, documentaries, art pieces, and monuments also reflect a part of the narrative that emerged over time. Because these representations rely on the real experiences of those who served, some might argue they fall short in portraying the war. Furthermore, films, songs, and art pieces are usually created by artists, not veterans, and it is possible for the artist to exaggerate the war. However, eliminating these sources from research limits one's understanding of the Soviet-Afghan narrative since the narrative around the war encompasses how citizens understand the war. *In general, do people believe it was a worthwhile cause or a political mistake? How do they view the political elites that made the decision to invade?* These questions focus on perception, and the various sources illustrate how part of Soviet society perceived the war. Films, for example, have the ability to capture an element of the war, and its reception in society indicates whether or not Soviet citizens accept the film's interpretation of the war. Additionally, artistic pieces can reveal information not given in the interviews. The difficult Afghan terrain and its impact on conditions on the ground is heavily emphasized in Soviet-Afghan war songs and films but not discussed in these interviews. One reason for the omission is simply the interviewer's choice to discuss other aspects of the war over the physical conditions on the ground. Svetlana Alexievich provides a strong account of how veterans, mothers, and civilians mentally and emotionally processed the

war. Because of practical considerations, however, not all topics were covered. Other sources are necessary to provide additional information. This section will supplement the narrative presented through the interviews by analyzing Soviet-Afghan War songs, films, and memorials.

Perhaps one of the most famous Soviet-Afghan War songs is “Caravan”. In the first stanza, “Caravan” covers general themes on war:

You never get used to the silence In war, in war, in war. Silence-- it is only a lie, just a lie On the steep path, In a stranger’s land We step out of the caravan	Не привыкнуть никак к тишине На войне, на войне, на войне. Тишина - это только обман, лишь обман. По тропе крутой, По земле чужой Мы выходим на караван

(Rosenbaum, “Caravan”)

The silence that the song alludes to is a deceptive silence felt by soldiers in all wars. The “lie” soldiers’ experience is that silence is peaceful; in times of war, it is quite the opposite. Silence creates the anticipation of attack. Like most war songs written by the intervening force, “Caravan” highlights the difficulty of being in a foreign land; yet, the terrain in Afghanistan was particularly problematic for Soviet soldiers. One of the main problems encountered by Soviet forces was the inability to conquer and travel through Afghanistan’s grueling terrain. Interviews with Soviet military leadership and Mujahedeen show how local Mujahadeen used the terrain to maximize guerilla warfare tactics. In practice, this meant a few Mujahadeen could enclose and destroy large Russian units protecting supplies. Thus, they were in “a stranger’s land” (“По земле чужой”),traveling around “steep” and twisted paths (“По тропе крутой”).

Caravan-- this is a flask of water Without it, you are dead	Caravan-- it means it is possible. Караван -- это фляга воды,

без которой - смерть. Караван -- это значит суметь.

(Rosenbaum, “Caravan”)

The necessity of the Caravan is apparent through the metaphorical representation of the flask of water. It is quite true that without water, and hence without the caravan, there is certain death or “смерть”.With the Caravan, a feeling of hope arises that something is possible; perhaps victory is possible. It is easy to see the importance of the caravan from a practical perspective. Various units carried with it much needed supplies, one of which being radio communication technology. One challenge Soviet military leaders faced in Afghanistan was communicating and coordinating between units (“The Bear went over the Mountain). The lack of proper communication led to several ambushes against traveling, vulnerable Soviet units, and the Mujahedeen would seize food and equipment from Soviet vehicles (“The Bear went over the Mountain”). Additionally, Soviet equipment could not withstand Afghan terrain and climate, as explained by Dr. Geoff Shaw and Dr. David Spencer:

> Modern machinery is rendered next to useless in a sandstorm and, indeed, without proper protection to turbines, gun barrels of all sizes, firing tubes of all sorts, exposed lubricated parts in any kind of machinery, permanent damage can be done in a matter of moments (Shaw and Spencer, 181).

Thus, the caravan can be seen as a necessity and also something which invites attack. The last few lines of the song illustrate the complicated reality of the caravan:

Caravan-- this is salt on your face.	Караван -- это соль на лице.
Caravan.	Караван.
We will be silent in the third toast.	Третий тост. Помолчим.
For those who are gone, …?	Кто пропал, кто пан...
Caravan, caravan, caravan.	Караван, караван, караван.

(Rosenbaum, “Caravan”)

The caravan is needed by the soldiers but the song alludes to those who die around it. Unlike the political discussions, "Caravan" focuses on the technical aspect of war and the deaths caused by it. It magnifies the individual experience of Soviet soldiers and tries to bring the audience to a place they have never experienced. Given the musical form of the piece and the fact that soldiers would sing it, or at the very least hear it, it makes sense that "Caravan" reflects what soldiers felt and saw. Their experience is dominated by the harsh realities of war because they live through it and were transformed by it. The narrative presented in this song emphasizes the harsh reality on the ground and the means by which soldiers survived.

Another Soviet-Afghan War song explains the real conditions of the war and how Soviet soldiers would often lie to their family members about serving in Afghanistan. The second stanza of the song "Hello Little Sister" (Привет сестренка) depicts both of these themes:

Сейчас суббота, белье почищу и черт с войной	It's Saturday, I'll clean my laundry, and the devil with this war.
И пахнет потом, здесь спят парнишки, был трудный бой	And it smells like sweat, the boys are sleeping here, it has been a difficult battle
С дружком Олегом, что он вернется держу пари	I'm holding a bet with my friend Oleg about him returning
Ты только маме, что я в Афгане, не говори	Just don't tell mom that I am in Afghanistan

(Rosenbaum, "Caravan")

One can see glimpses of the war's conditions and the state of mind in which these soldiers lived. The soldier in this hold is betting on Oleg's return from the battle; of course, the bet is theoretical since Oleg cannot claim any prize if he does not return. All three of the stanzas in this song end with the line "Just don't tell mom that I am in Afghanistan" (Ты только маме, что я в Афгане, не говори). A few of the veterans interviewed in *Zinky Boys* explain how they lied to their

mothers about serving in the Soviet-Afghan War. The most heartbreaking accounts, however, were of the mothers, themselves, who lost their sons and did not know they served in Afghanistan. One mother explains how her son pretended to serve in Mongolia, but he mixed up his geography and was discovered by her. The soldiers point to the dangerous conditions as the main reason for lying, and they did not want their mothers to worry. The last stanza of the song shows the soldier directly hiding his deployment in Afghanistan:

Своей сестренке я шлю горячий, большой привет. Скажи: пусть пишут, давно из дома уж писем нет, А если спросят, о чем пишу я, ну что ж, соври Ты только маме, что я в Афгане, не говори.	To my sister I send a warm and big hello. Tell them: they should write me, it's been a long time that I have received letters from home And if they ask you what I'm writing about, well, lie Just don't tell mom that I am in Afghanistan

(Rosenbaum, "Caravan")

Alexander Rosenbaum, a famous musician, wrote many songs about the Soviet-Afghan War. Along with his song "Caravan", one of his most gripping and remembered songs on the war is called "A Pilot's Monologue 'Black Tulip'" (Чёрный тюльпан). Black Tulip, in regards to the Soviet-Afghan War, is another term for a cargo plane carrying dead soldiers back to the Soviet Union, and Rosenbaum's song is about this plane. The first stanza centers around its flight and the men who were taken away by the war:

В Афганистане, в чёрном тюльпане, С водкой в стакане мы молча плывём над землей. Скорбная птица через границу К русским зарницам несёт ребятишек домой. В чёрном тюльпане те, кто с заданий, Едут на родину милую в землю залечь. В отпуск бессрочный, рваные в клочья, Им никогда, никогда не обнять тёплых плеч.	In Afghanistan, in the Black Tulip With a cup of vodka, we quietly float above the ground. A mourning bird, going over the border To the Russian (x), it carries the boys home. In the black tulip, those who had their task

Go to their dear Motherland to lie in the ground They can never, never hug a warm shoulder
Into a never-ending vacation, ripped to pieces
(Rosenbaum, "A Pilot's Monologue 'Black Tulip'")

In the first stanza, Rosenbaum evokes a powerful image of a cargo plane, represented by a bird gliding in the air, carrying the "boys home" (Rosenbaum, "A Pilot's Monologue 'Black Tulip'"). The song is typically performed with a single guitar, which emphasizes the lyrics and intensifies one's emotional reaction to the song. Rosenbaum writes about the soldiers in Afghanistan completing their task and returning home; of course, their return is accompanied by a sense of grief and tragic loss. Yet, Rosenbaum attaches a sense of meaning to their loss. He claims the soldiers had a "task" (заданий) in Afghanistan (Rosenbaum, "A Pilot's Monologue 'Black Tulip'"). While the veterans in the interviews questioned the purpose in the Soviet-Afghan War and whether their assumed role was beneficial to the Afghan or Soviet people, this song takes a definitive stance. Furthermore, he evokes a sense of national unity by discussing the soldiers' return to their motherland, (Едут на родину) or home country (Rosenbaum, "A Pilot's Monologue 'Black Tulip'"). Thus, these soldiers did their duty and are coming home.

While Rosenbaum adds meaning to the casualty rate, the song is about the death of these soldiers. He does not focus on the politics behind their deaths but on the grief that accompanies it. It seems his purpose is to remember and commemorate the men. Regardless of the politics behind the war, the soldiers in the Black Tulip are on a "never-ending vacation" and will not experience the pleasures associated with life (Rosenbaum, "A Pilot's Monologue 'Black Tulip'"). Similar to most wars, the men who served in Afghanistan and lost their lives were young. He addresses their age in the second stanza:

Опять на душу класть тяжёлый камень,

Опять нести на родину героев,
Которым в двадцать лет могилы роют,

Again, they send heroes back to the Motherland,
Who are twenty years old, for whom graves are being dug

Again, we place heavy stones on our soul
(Rosenbaum, "A Pilot's Monologue 'Black Tulip'")

A few interviewees also discussed the age of men who went to Afghanistan and lost their lives. A Sergeant serving as an Infantry Platoon Leader claimed, "They say it was a man's war but the truth is, it was a boy's war. It was kids not too long out of school who did the fighting" (Alexievich, 70). Perhaps that is why he describes the feeling of putting "heavy stones on our souls" (Rosenbaum, "A Pilot's Monologue 'Black Tulip'"). Accordingly, Soviet society had to contend with the death of thousands of young men, and the losses were pressed onto them. While official figures on the war are questioned, estimates point to a minimum of 13,000 casualties and 35,000 wounded in Afghanistan (Taubman). Thus, the Soviet military lost more than ten percent of the force that served in the conflict. Here, again, in this stanza Rosenbaum applies meaning to the loss. He celebrates the men as "heroes" (героев), even though the Soviet-Afghan veterans were not always seen as heroes. It is possible to see conflict between Rosenbaum's song and other opinions about the war. As mentioned in the previous section, one veteran was confronted by civilians when he returned. They claimed that he and his fellow servicemen "lost the war" and called their hero status into question. Perhaps civilians asked themselves, *should the veterans be called heroes if they were not victorious in Afghanistan?* This is quite a subjective question, and even the media had to grapple with the classification of the term "hero". A Major in the Artillery Regiment explained how at one point, they were labeled heroes in the news, and then were "knocked off [their] pedestals" (Alexievich, 92-93). Thus, there was also a question about how Soviet-Afghan veterans should be viewed in society.

In this song Rosenbaum also discusses the surviving veteran's transition back to civilian life:

И мы идём совсем не так, как дома,	And we fly not at all how we fly at home
Где нет войны и всё давно знакомо,	Where there is no war and everything is familiar
Где трупы видят раз в году пилоты,	Where pilots see dead bodies once a year
Где с облаков не валят вертолёты.	Where helicopters don't fall from the sky
И мы идём от гнева стиснув зубы,	And we fly with our teeth clenched from anger
Сухие водкой смачивая губы,	And our dry lips wet with Vodka

(Rosenbaum, "A Pilot's Monologue 'Black Tulip'")

The transition back to civilian life is an extreme and difficult transition in most cases. Soldiers and pilots become accustomed to seeing "dead bodies," or helicopters being shot down. Certainly, their experiences in war stay with them, and some veterans will always remain aware of their surroundings, as if an attack is eminent. Furthermore, Rosenbaum ties the anger felt by the veterans to their need to numb themselves with alcohol. Many of the veterans, civilian employees, and medics discuss their difficult transition back to Soviet society and how their experiences haunt them. A nurse described her experience:

> In the summer, when I breathe in the hot dusty air, or see a pool of stagnant water, or smell the dry flowers in the field, it's like a punch in the head. I'll be haunted by Afghanistan for the rest of my life…(Alexievich, 27).

The nurse is cursed by her memories from Afghanistan. Her statement is a reminder that the effects of the war, and any war in general, last longer than the conflict, itself. Even when all of the soldiers leave Afghanistan and the Geneva Accords are signed by the parties involved, parts of society hold onto the experience of going to war. They will remember their time in Afghanistan, and it will change them for the rest of their lives. Perhaps one can argue that society never forgets a war and never moves on from it. Rather, they find ways to internalize it and process their grief, in whatever way is possible.

One of the modes by which society internalizes pain from war is to commemorate those who lost their lives. Monuments become important symbols erected after a war. They are typically used to honor the soldiers who served in the war and show a glimpse of the meaning behind the conflict and the soldiers' sacrifices. Because of the important role monuments play in commemorating veterans, it comes as no surprise that Soviet-Afghan veterans organized to call for the building of monuments. Other groups, like the Komsomol, support the veterans' aims. On November 22nd, 1987, Novosti group organized a press conference to announce that they were given official approval to build a national memorial (Keller). Over time, various monuments were erected in Russia and former Soviet Republics.

The monument pictured below is located in Kiev, Ukraine.

(Picture taken from "Veterans of Afghanistan", Afghanistan War, Kiev, Ukraine)

This monument depicts three Soviet soldiers. The figure in the middle is in a seated and collapsed position, while two other soldiers are standing around him. The inscription written on the stone states the following:

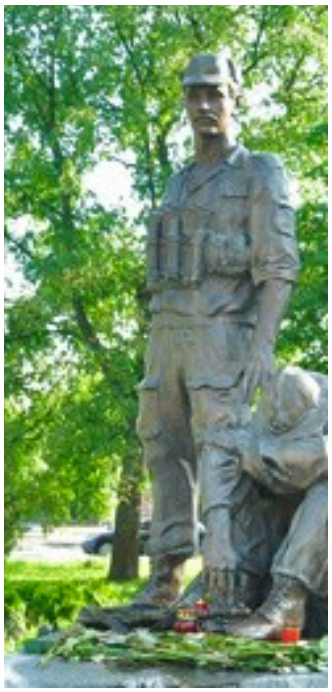
Oh, what friends war has gifted me	
Yes, those who were then taken back	Каких друзей война мне подарила
The war wanted to kill me, and it did	Да тех, кого потом назад взяла
But what's the use of that which life did	Меня убить хотела и убила
not take from me	Но что с того, что жизнь не забрала

The statues and the inscription are a powerful representation of death in war. The eye is immediately drawn to the man featured in the middle of the monument. With this arms on his legs and his head pressed into his body, his demeanor expresses his grief and pain. It reflects the first two lines of the inscription about the friends one loses through conflict. Certainly, war unites those serving and creates bonds unknown to civilians. Veterans often point to a strong brotherhood that is formed through war. As mentioned previously, veterans find ways to reconnect with their fellow soldiers when they return home. The veterans share a similar language and can discuss war in a way that is difficult for civilians to understand. Losing those friends can be a traumatic loss as it also means losing those bonds. The statue represented in the middle is grieving. Perhaps he lost his friends; perhaps he is living in the trauma of war. Regardless, this is the figure citizens have as a representation of veterans in the war. The heart-wrenching demeanor illuminates the hardship that comes with war. His pain, grief, struggle, and hopelessness is vividly displayed in the memorial.

The two figures around him show two different expressions. The soldier on the right holds a strong pose. His fist is clenched, and he is looking directly ahead. Compared to the figure featured in the middle, his posture is formal and structured as he stands upright:

(Picture taken from "Veterans of Afghanistan", Afghanistan War, Kiev, Ukraine)

He carries a rifle over his shoulder that is pointed directly towards anyone who stands in front of him, and he has equipment on his chest. His stance indicates that he is determined and ready for the battle that lies ahead. The direction of the barrel certainly points to his seriousness and strength. He seems ready to defend himself and the two men around him from anyone that attacks. Yet, there is a touch of pain expressed in his face, as if this pain has become his source of strength and determination. Based on the inscription placed in front of these three figures, this seems to be a scene of three men that just experienced the death of a friend, and the younger figure on the right is responding to the loss.



(Picture taken from “Veterans of Afghanistan”, Afghanistan War, Kiev, Ukraine)

The figure on the left portrays another reaction. In a form similar to the man on the right, he is standing, with his arms on his side. Yet, he does not carry a rifle with him and his left hand is not clenched. Based on facial features, he appears to be older than the man to his left. While his physique is strong and reflects the build of a soldier in action, his muscles are not tense. His facial expression, unlike the other figure, is relaxed. He portrays a sense of sorrow and loss.

Looking back at the memorial in full, it is dominated by pain and grief, and the last line of the inscription emphasizes the loss felt by those soldiers. “But what’s the use of that which life did not take from me" (Но что с того, что жизнь не забрала). The veterans in the interviews all pointed to the same kind of question. *What is the next step in their life? How do they live after this war?* These kinds of questions are not limited to veterans, alone. Mothers who lost their sons also dealt with the pain associated with the death of a loved one. One might ask if the process of accepting their death with complicated by the idea that the loss was “worthless” or caused by a “political mistake”.

(Picture taken from: “Trans-Siberian Travel”)

The monument shown above is located in Yekaterinburg, which is a city in Russia located about 1000 miles east of Moscow. This Soviet-Afghan War monument is sometimes referred to as the Black Tulip War Memorial. The name of the monument reflects the meaning behind the work. Certainly, the strong but demoralized soldier placed in the center of the work depicts the pain associated with this war. Similar to the first monument pictured above, he is also sitting on the floor, with his head bowed. As seen in his exposed forearm, hands, and build, he is a young and strong soldier. Yet, both of his hands show no sign of tension. Even his right hand is softly gripping the rifle he is holding. His back is caved over as he leans his weight on his legs. All of the tension in this monument is concentrated in his face, which is shown below:

(Picture taken from: "Trans-Siberian Travel")

His furrowed brows, pursed lips, and clenched jaw shows a man grieving, and the names of those who were killed surround him. The columns on his left and right side mark the casualties by year. This is the Soviet-Afghan War veteran the public is left to remember. Rifle in hand, he was defeated in this war. His posture, demeanor, and expressions all point to the questions posed by the veterans in their interviews, and expressed in the memorial in Kiev: *what was the purpose of the Soviet-Afghan War? What was to be gained in the intervention? Lastly, for what cause did the soldiers die?* The memorial does not offer answers to these questions. Rather, it shows the complete helplessness of a veteran left to ask these questions for himself. Void of any sense of victory and achievement, the Black Tulip War Memorial is a strong reflection of Soviet society's perception on the war in Afghanistan.

While the memorials in the former Soviet Union are not exactly the same, many of them feature a veteran with his head bowed down. There is a consistent theme of pain, grief, hopelessness, and despair. Civilians who see these statues, and were never exposed to the war, are left with a feeling of defeat. Certainly, there is no trace of victory in these memorials. Moreover, the political elites that decided to invade Afghanistan have a lasting image of the war and its cost on society. Their successors in the political arena are left with the image of what can happen when the decision to invade is viewed as a "mistake". The veterans suffer, and the close relatives and relations that surrounds them do, as well. The following Soviet-Afghan War

(Picture taken from: "A memorial in Skyktyvkar to the Soviet-Afghan War.)

memorial, located in Syktyvkar, follows this same pattern. One question remains with these memorials: *is there an element of shame portrayed through the soldier's body language? Does he grieve the loss of his friend and feel guilty about the war, overall?* These questions are difficult to answer since only the sculptor can state his goal definitively. If these memorials reflect what the veterans and family member's claimed in the interviews, then it is possible to see

the soldier's grief and suffering, along with the notion that this war was a political mistake that claimed the lives of many soldiers.

The 9th Company is one of the most famous Soviet-Afghan War films released in Russia in 2005. This film shows how soviet's perception of fighting in Afghanistan did not change too dramatically from the end of the war to 2005. *The 9th Company* focuses on a group of young recruits, who join the 9th Company. The film shows the bonds created through serving in Afghanistan since the recruits suffer through the hazing rituals together and overcome the brutality of their drill instructor, Senior Praporschik Dygalo. The first hour of the film focuses on their training and bonding. The second hour of the film depicts their battle atop a hill, where they have to prevent any Mujahedeen from taking it. The 9th Company prevents multiple attacks from bands of over a hundred Mujahideen. The company uses almost all of their supplies and weapons and loses communication with main headquarters. The film shows how the company is stranded and even forgotten about by the regimental commander. By the end of the film, only one soldier by the name of Lyutaev survives the Mujahideen's attacks. When the Soviets arrive to rescue the 9th Company, Lyutaev tells the Colonel that the "9th Company reports mission accomplished," and "the convoy can pass safely". (The 9th Company, 2:12:00). The Colonel responds: "There is no convoy; we're pulling out" (The 9th Company, 2:12:00). This last scene uncovers a part of the narrative on the Soviet-Afghan War: the soldiers sacrificed their lives and obeyed their commands, but, in the end, they achieved no victory. There was no meaning behind the deaths of the 9th Company soldiers. This narrative is present in the interviews mentioned above: veterans, mothers, and other individuals affected by the war questioned the meaning behind it. For some, this questioning became a religious endeavor. In *The Afghans*, Vladimir Rybakov shows the religious connection as a Lieutenant dies and asks to speak to Father Anatoly. In this final

moments, he asks Father Anatoly to "tall [his] parents the whole truth" (Rybakov, 112). The truth is that he was not dying for Russia, for the empire, or for "access to warm seas, as they say in the West" (Rybakov, 110). He is dying "because of the cowardice and stupidity of [the] leadership, and not for anything more" (Rybakov, 110).

Another voice that emerged during the Soviet-Afghan War was the voice of Central Asian troops that served in the Soviet Army. Previously, it was believed that "the use of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Turkmen in Soviet forces" was "a failure," but that is not entirely correct. As explained by Dr. Jiayi Zhou, the record is not as clear when it comes to Central Asian troops' perspective on the Soviet-Afghan War:

> While there are accounts of Central Asian and Soviet Muslim soldiers sympathizing with the Afghan cause and even defecting to the *mujahedin*, other evidence indicates that many Soviet Central Asian soldiers, if not the majority, served the Soviet Union's cause without viewing it from a separate nationalist or ethnic lens. This perhaps speaks to the strength of the 'Soviet identity' and the successes of Soviet nationality policy. (Zhou, 303)

Moreover, Zhou claims that non-Central Asian Soviet troops did not interact with Afghan civilians as much as Central Asian troops did. For this reason, "Afghan civilians had better relations with Soviet Central Asians" than they did with "soldiers of other backgrounds" (Zhou, 320). Perhaps this also explains why more Central Asian Soviet troops defected (Zhou, 321). While Zhou calls into question the assumption that most Central Asian troops defected, there was a number of troops who did, although exact numbers were not reported. Some Central Asian troops did not want to fight their "neighbors" (Zhou, 321). Vladimir Kuzichkin, a Soviet KGB officer, explained that "a small, but undetermined, number of Soviet deserters, many of Central Asian origin, [were] known to be actively operating with the resistance" (Zhou, 321).

While some of the desertion is tied to a Muslim identity and the Central Asian soldiers' sympathy for their Muslim brothers in Afghanistan, this was not as wide-spread as was originally believed:

> Concerning desertion, bullying and hazing were the main considerations for deserters…The claims that Central Asians enthusiastically joined the *mujahideen* are even less supportable…. "True, some did go over to the other side, usually after being held in POW camps – but so did a number of Russians." (Bleuer, 495-496).

Thus, the record on Central Asian Troops deserting is mixed. There is more evidence that points to Central Asian Troops responding to the war in a way similar to the non-Central Asian Soviet Troops.

Yet, there were cases of Central Asian soldiers "[choosing] to remain in Afghanistan because of the connection they felt with the local population" (Newton, 22). This claim, along with the Central-Asian troops and their reaction to serving in Afghanistan raises another question about the role of religion and identity in the war. In particular, *what developments did Islam have in relation to this war in Afghanistan and the surrounding countries?* Islam in Afghanistan was strengthened as the Mujahedeen based their willingness to fight the invading Soviet force on the foundation of religion. The term Mujahedeen, itself, is a name for a kind of martyr, one who defends and propagates the Islamic faith. The Muslim identity was strengthened during the war, and "gained further momentum in the five Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan (Akcali, 267). The spread of the Muslim identify is reminiscent of the CC meetings, where the issue of outside influence inside the Soviet Union was raised. While CC members did not discuss the spread of Islam, it points to a broader of a "spill-over" effect. Regardless of the Soviet intervention, the identities that were developed during this war, and the narratives they created, moved outside of Afghanistan's borders.

Part III: Interweaving the Narratives

By analyzing the official Political Narrative and the various Cultural Narratives as they emerged from 1979 onwards, it is possible to see the polyphonic characteristic of political events and how different kinds of voices, whether they be political or cultural in nature, affect each other. For example, the During-War Narrative was shaped, in part, by the Official Political Narrative. In the Central Committee meetings, the members emphasize the international component to the conflict. There was a looming threat that foreign governments would intervene in the country and the surrounding region and act on their own interests. As mentioned in Part I, Central Committee members were worried that American missiles would be placed in Pakistan and threaten the Soviet Union's existence. They were also concerned with the influence of Iran, China, and Pakistan in Afghanistan's civil war. Westad explains one part of the Central Committee's calculation in regards to international events:

> The Soviets calculated that the recent developments in South-Central Asia were threatening. The Iranian-American hostage crisis did nothing to dispel their fears that Iran would become increasingly hostile. The KGB reported in mid-October that the Iranian leaders were convinced that 'the Soviet Union will not give up the ideological struggle and its attempts to set up a leftist government in Iran.' In response, the Iranian government aimed to weaken the PDPA regime in Afghanistan, and to prevent the spread of Communism partly by exerting its own influence in the Muslim republics of the Soviet Union. (Westad, 63)

Afghanistan's porous border became one motivation for Soviet intervention in the interest of mitigating foreign influence in Central Asia (Grau, 418). In particular, "the border with Pakistan remained the most worrisome border for the Soviets and Afghan government" (Grau, 423). The Soviet political elites' acute awareness of the PDPA's inability to secure it was factored into the decision-making process. Their line of reasoning was broadcasted in the news and media, and the soldiers were taught about the Soviet-Afghan conflict in terms of protecting the border. The justification was also stated in their political instruction classes. Hence, the During-War

Narratives included the need to protect the border, and this is one reason why Soviet-Afghan veterans pointed to "securing the motherland" and "securing the border" as reasons for serving in the Soviet-Afghan War. The political instruction classes and the news and media provide two examples of how the Political Narrative spilled into the Cultural, During-War Narrative. Here, the Official Political Narrative spills into one cultural understanding of the war.

The second emphasis in the During-War Narrative was about the Soviet Union's willingness to help an ally. This justification was not directly stated in the Central Committee meetings: members did not actively express the need to support a communist ally. However, Nur Muhammad Taraki, the president of Afghanistan for part of 1979, appealed to the ideological connection between the PDPA and the Soviet Union. In the March 20th meeting in 1979, he stated:

> I also want to emphasize that the relations between our countries are more than just routine diplomatic exchange. They are based on a class foundation and on mutual ideology and politics. In our country, as in yours, the government belongs to the working class and to the peasants, who wrested it from the hands of the aristocracy and the feudalists (Document 1, 3-4)

However, this is just one example of ideology being mentioned in the meetings. The socialist connection between Afghanistan's ruling party and the Soviet Union was not the focal point of their discussions. Rather, the meetings covered practical concerns about how many resources should be sent to Afghanistan and whether it would affect international politics. Perhaps the underlying assumption in all of the meetings is that the Soviet Union is helping the international, communist cause, and Afghanistan fell into that category. This is an assumption since there is little evidence in the archives that points to the justification. Nevertheless, the veterans and civilian employees express their desire to support the development of a communist government in Afghanistan. Before their perception of the war changed, they believed their main task was to

support this development: certainly, the enlisted soldiers were told by their superiors that this was their "international duty". It seems the second part of the During War Narrative did not flow directly from the Political Narrative established by the Central Committee. Yet, there was an accepted belief that the Soviet Union was helping a socialist ally, trying to establish a government in Afghanistan.

The After-War Narrative developed over time. This is due, in part, to the Soviet Union's reluctance to release information about the war to the public. Yet, the Narrative also changed as the war was fought, and it became clear the Soviet Union would need to leave. Even though the Soviet Union dealt with significantly fewer casualties, they could not manage a quick and decisive victory for a few reasons. First, the Soviet military's tactics in Afghanistan were not effective. As shown by Lester Grau in *The Bear Went Over the Mountain* and *The Other Side of the Mountain*, the army was not prepared for the terrain and climate in Afghanistan. Second, the Mujahedeen used guerrilla warfare tactics that crippled Soviet operations. A Major of an Artillery Regiment explained the military's shortcomings in Afghanistan:

> [The Soviet people] were told we were fighting 'bandits'. But why couldn't a regular army, 100,000 strong, with all the latest equipment defeat a few disorganized bandits after nine long years? (Alexievich, 90)

From the Soviet military's perspective, it does not matter as much if the opposition is composed of bandits, Afghan civilians, or Mujahedeen. The tactics are more important, as are the opposition's use of weapons to destroy Soviet units. Overall, the opposition in Afghanistan was effective at defending itself, even though a unified opposition did not exist. Rather, the Mujahedeen and the tactics they used, changed depending on the group, valley, or tribe (Other Side of the Mountain, iv). The Soviets, on the other hand, would bomb the locals' granaries and villages, ruin the crops, irrigation system, fields, and pastures, effectively wiping out the food

supply (Other Side of the Mountain, vii). The local population tended to support the Mujahedeen because they viewed them as the brave protectors of their home (other side, viii). With the local population on the Mujahedeen's side, it became difficult for the Soviet army to eliminate the opposition's new recruits. The difficulty of overcoming the Mujahedeen and the severe conditions became part of the After-War Narrative. This part of the narrative flowed from the soldier's lived experiences, not from the Political Narrative.

The core of the After-War Narrative went beyond the loss of Afghanistan. Rather, it centers around losing a war not worth winning. It is difficult to trace how this notion developed. Perhaps the veterans, and the family members affected by the war, started to question the purpose of the conflict. Veterans might have asked themselves, *why am I serving in Afghanistan? What are we doing here?* The mothers who lost their sons might wonder, *for what cause did he die?* It seems the Political Narrative did not provide a sufficient answer. The veterans doubted the Soviet Union's stated goals behind intervening in Afghanistan. Whether or not the conflict in Afghanistan would spill into the Soviet Union's territory is irrelevant to understanding how Soviet society interpreted the need for the war. Central Committee members could have been correct in their assessment on the conflict. Regardless, veterans began to doubt these stated reasons and questioned the political elites who were behind the decision to invade.

a. From yes to no: Leaving Afghanistan

The Geneva Accord on Afghanistan was signed April 14th, 1988. The goals of the Soviet intervention were not realized, and the Soviet defeat had broad consequences for Soviet society and politics. As explained by Grau and Cress:

> The inability of the Soviet military to win the war decisively condemned it to suffer a slow bloodletting, in a process that exposed the very weaknesses of the military, as well as the Soviet political structure and society. The employment of a draft army with full periodic rotation of troops back to the Soviet Union permitted the travails and frustrations of war and the self doubts of the common soldier to be shared by the entire Soviet population. The problems so apparent in the wartime army soon became a microcosm for the latent problems afflicting Soviet society in general. The messages of doubt were military, political ethnic, and social. In the end, they were corrosive and destructive. (Cress and Grau, xx)

Here, one can also see the polyphonic characteristic of political events. The soldiers that returned to the Soviet Union shared their experiences from the war and shared their beliefs about the war's goals. Grau and Cress also show how "messages of doubt" seeped into a multitude of realms, not just politics. Thus, Soviet society's interpretation on the Soviet-Afghan War and the narratives that were shaped from 1979 onwards had a lasting effect.

Grau and Cress's comments stand in contrast to Gorbachev's statement on withdrawing from Afghanistan. He gave this statement on February 8th, 1988 and discussed the men who served in the conflict:

> And now about our boys, our soldiers in Afghanistan. They have been doing their duty honestly, performing acts of self-denial and heroism. Our people profoundly respect those who were called to serve in Afghanistan. The state provides for them, as a matter of priority, good educational opportunities and a chance to get interesting, worthy work. The memory of those who have died a hero's death in Afghanistan is sacred to us. It is the duty of party and Soviet authorities to make sure that their families and relatives are taken care of with concern, attention, and kindness. ("Gorbachev Statement on Afghanistan")

As the highest representative of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev uses this part of the speech to give meaning to those who lost their lives. He addresses the memories left behind, but fails to mention how those memories will affect Soviet society and politics in the future. Furthermore, the veterans' statements stand in direct contrast to Gorbachev's claim that "people profoundly respect those who were called to serve in Afghanistan". On the contrary, those who served did

not believe they were respected by society. It seems more likely that the perception of the war being a political mistake affected how society treated the veterans: they extended the source of the mistake from the politicians to the veterans.

Gorbachev also raises the concern of providing for veterans and their family members. Veterans in these interviews, however, tell a different story. As one Artillery Captain describes:

> We were incredibly badly paid for fighting that war: we got twice basic pay (basic pay being worth 270 foreign currency vouchers), less all kinds of stoppages, compulsory membership-fees, subscriptions and tax. (Alexievich, 81)

He was not the only veteran to emphasize the lack of support following the conclusion of the war. Veterans believed they were treated unfairly and not compensated for their services. Alexander Kovalyov, the head of the Moscow regional association of Afghan veterans, claims that he received 800 rubles for a monthly pension, which amounts to $40 (x). With society treating the veterans in a manner which reflects the "mistake" of the war, and with little compensation, it is clear why veterans feel "forgotten" and "worry about [their] reputation" ("Russian Veterans"). Here one can find how part of the After-War Narrative influenced parts of society well after the war ended.

On May 10th, 1988, the CC CPSU sent a letter to all communist members of society about the withdraw of troops in Afghanistan. The CC CPSU admits the difficult of entering Afghanistan and being victorious in the face of many complications:

> We do not want to say it, but we should: at that time, we did not even have a correct assessment of the unique geographical features of that hard-to-enter country. That found its reflection in the operations of our troops against small highly mobile units, where very little could be accomplished with the help of modern military technology. (Document 21, 1)

The geography, along with the tactics used by the Mujahedeen, made it difficult for Soviet forces to accomplish their goals in Afghanistan. The letter describes their shortcomings in the conflict.

In a fashion similar to Gorbachev's speech, the CC CPSU discusses the bravery and heroism of the Soviet-Afghan troops and the sacrifice they made. In contrast to Gorbachev's speech, however, this letter addresses how many soldiers and killed, wounded, and missing in action. They also touch on the difficulty of the war for the soldiers and the meaning behind their loss:

> Meanwhile the war in Afghanistan continued, and our troops were getting engaged in extensive combat actions. The situation developed, which made any way out more and more difficult as the time passed. Combat action is combat action… There is a reason that people say that each person is a unique world, and when a person dies, that world disappears forever. The loss of every person is very hard and irreparable, it is hard and sacred if one died carrying out one's duty. (Document 21, 2)

In the first part of this quote, they acknowledge the soldiers' conditions on the ground. In the previous part of the letter, they also acknowledge that decisive victories were hard to achieve. Taken together, the Central Committee is admitting part of the narrative shared by the veterans. Here one can see how the official political response and parts of the cultural narratives merge. The soldiers describe the terrible conditions on the ground and how their experiences shaped their perspective of the war. In the second part of the quote, the CC points to the importance of the "lost worlds" as represented by the soldiers' deaths. They share no significant meaning behind the purpose of those loses, which indicates that finding meaning for their deaths is complicated by the goals behind the war. The veterans indicate the lack of meaning in the war and a lack of meaning in their friends' deaths, and the CC offers no support for discovering this meaning. Here, again, there is a shared thread between official political statements and the cultural narratives as addressed in this paper.

While the CC does not explore the international reasons that motivated them to invade, they do discuss their desire to change Afghanistan and their failure in this goal:

> One has to admit that essentially we put our bets on the military solution, on suppressing the counterrevolution with force. We did not even fully use the existing opportunities for neutralization of the hostile attitudes of the local population towards us. We have to assess critically some aspects of functioning of our adviser apparatus in Afghanistan as well. It did many things to provide assistance in strengthening the PDPA and the people's regime. However, often our people, acting out of their best intentions, tried to transplant the approached we are accustomed to onto the Afghan soil, encouraged the Afghans to copy our ways. (Document 21, 1-2)

The CC lists their main reason for withdrawing from Afghanistan: the military invasion did not help the country to stabilize and the PDPA to gain full political power. Additionally, the socialist values that the Soviet Union attempted to spread did not survive in the conflict. At first, some of the veterans believed their mission was to support socialism in Afghanistan. Over time, they found that this goal would not be achieved and could not be achieved. Here lies another connection between the cultural narratives and the official political narrative. There are interwoven, and they can reflect the themes mentioned in the other narrative.

b. How the Cultural Narratives Influenced the Next Official Political Narratives

The assumption underlying the idea of polyphony is that each voice, whether it is stated in an official political capacity or not, is important. As Bakhtin describes in his work, each voice has "equal rights" and comes with "its own world" (Bakhtin, 6). My aim here is not to speak philosophically or to attach a sense of importance. Rather, my claim is that these voices are important because they have an *influence*. They shape the societal landscape and effect the rising political narratives. The voices that emerged in this war had a part in propelling one of the most important events in the past century: the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The voices had this effect because the cultural narratives that emerged in response to the Soviet-Afghan War had a

corrosive effect on the Soviet Union's legitimacy. As mentioned in the previous sections, people began to question the Central Committee's decision to invade Afghanistan, and they believed they were being lied to about the war. Over time, these narratives contributed to the destabilization and delegitimation of the Official Political Narrative in the Soviet Union. As Douglas Borer explains, "[The Soviet Union's] own implosion was also in part a result of the Afghan War" (Borer, 139).

By 1989, *Glasnost*, or the period of openness in the Soviet Union, was well under way. The word itself incorporates the idea of multiple voices and points to the polyphonic characteristic of this time. The cultural narratives on the Soviet-Afghan War spread rapidly, even as the Official Political Narrative, as directed by Soviet political elites, hoped to slow down the accusation that the war was a "political mistake". The statement released by the Soviet Military Command acknowledged their failure in Afghanistan, but explained that their reasons behind the intervention were correct. They wanted to "[provide] international assistance in the defense of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan" (Document 23, 1). The CC CPSU released their own statement and claimed that, while their intentions were not misplaced, they "put [their] bets on a military solution" (Document 21, 1). They claim that the solution was incorrect, not the goal. The individuals quoted in this paper did not accept the political elites and military's reasoning. They continued to question the war, and the Official Political Narrative could not monopolize the information published since they were living in the period of *glasnost.* The individuals affected by the war turned away from the OPN that offered inadequate answers to their questions. Dr. Serguei Oushakine explains how this occurred at the lowest level:

> The absence of an authoritative interpretation of the consequences of state military politics produced an uncommon cultural and political situation. The task of cultural "enframing" and "emplotment," [*sic*] which could render soldiers' deaths socially and personally

> meaningful, was actively taken up by the mothers themselves. Their striving for public recognition of their losses and their own identities often resulted in a complicated ethical situation: attempts at assigning a wider social meaning to their traumas became fundamentally entangled with a public rationalization of the state's military politics. (Oushakine, 207)

Grieving mothers played a crucial role in future political narratives as they tried to find meaning behind the deaths of their sons. Part of this process involved meeting other families, organizing memorial services, and, in some cases, forming committees. They built bonds and connections through these activities, and this is not surprising, given the nature of the meetings. These were parents who lost their sons, and wanted to find the truth. One of the slogans of a "Moscow-based legal organization" called Mothers' Right was "Information about dead sons units their parents" (Oushakine, 209). These mothers "redefined public space," and used it as a place to come together and discuss what the official political narrative hoped they would not: the tragedy behind the war and those who caused it. As Oushakine interviewed these mothers, another narrative emerged:

> The mothers' descriptions of their social invisibility also pointed toward the withdrawing state, dysfunctional institutions, and a general feeling of social collapse typical of the first post-Soviet decade. Soldiers' deaths did not create this experience of disintegration, but they did exacerbate it. (Oushakine, 219-220)

These associations were also formed by Soviet-Afghan veterans, and Oushakine shows cases of veterans and mothers working together on memorial services and events. Of course, a common bond united them. The veterans were also affected by the deaths of their friends. Furthermore, they had another motivating factor: society treated them differently, as explained in this paper. The narrative of shame extended to the veterans. Hilali shows this dynamic:

> Soviet veterans of the war in Afghanistan, much like their counterparts in the United States after Vietnam, returned to a society that neither understood nor appreciated the war they had fought. Unlike veterans of the Great Patriotic War (World War II), the Afghanistan

> veterans, or *Afghantsi* as they were called in the Soviet Union, were not recognized for their sacrifices. After the war, many *Afghantsi* were jobless and suffered from post combat stress disorders and other psychological problems, referred to in the Soviet press by such names as Afghan syndrome and Afghan complex. (Hilali, 117)

Thus, these kinds of civil links began to form and the "general feeling of social collapse" explained by Oushakine is seen as the veterans were forced to create their own links with one another. While the groups that formed did not turn into a revolutionary moment that overthrew the Soviet Union, it did have another strong effect. It encouraged those individuals to question the legitimacy of the state. Every time they gathered, or participated in a memorial, they were actively trying to put meaning behind the losses. When one questions the meaning behind the war, one inevitably questions the political system that pushed the intervention.

Additionally, the military's failure in Afghanistan also effected how the military was seen, not just the veterans from this war. There developed a "lack of interest in military service" (Hilali, 117). Men in the Soviet Union were not inclined to serve, and military leaders "criticized the attitude of youth and called them antipatriotic" (Hilali, 117). Their labeling of young men as antipatriotic is correct, since these men were not motivated to protect the Soviet Union with their lives. Perhaps the young men did not mean to make a political statement with their "antipatriotic" assertions and actions. Yet, their intentions do not matter as much as the meaning behind it. Criticizing the military was absolutely political, whether it was meant to be or not, since it dealt directly with the sovereignty and existence of the Soviet Union. The young men renounced Soviet patriotism and, like the veterans and mothers, questioned the legitimacy of the state.

Other scholars point to this effect of the war: The Soviet-Afghan War did not cause the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it propelled it. The organizations that formed in response to the war, such as the Soldiers' Mothers Organizations, "contributed to the loosening of state and party

control over society" (Kalinovsky, 199). These groups were not political in nature since they focused on remembering those who died. However, questioning the war, trying to find meaning behind the deaths, and organizing those affected by a war seen as a "political mistake" became political. The cultural narratives began to seep into the political narratives of that time. As Rafael Reuveny and Aseem Prakash claim:

> *Glasnost* effects refer to the impact of the war on accelerating *glasnost* by emboldening the media to report non-official war stories, thereby widening cleavages among various organs of the Soviet state. (Reuveny, Rafael, and Aseem Prakash, 698)

These "widening cleavages" gave the "opportunity for redefining the relationship between the citizens and the Soviet state" (Reuveny, Rafael, and Aseem Prakash, 706). Here the cultural voices seep into politics because the cultural voices or, as Reuveny and Prakash name them, the "less powerful groups [became] more assertive" (Reuveny, Rafael, and Aseem Prakash, 707). In general, as groups become more vocal, the "socio-political equilibrium gets disturbed" and even "[leads] to the collapse of empires" (Reuveny, Rafael, and Aseem Prakash, 707). Reuveny and Prakash argue that this drastic shift typically occurs after a major war, and the Soviet-Afghan War is one example of this shift. The Cultural Narratives described in this paper had the effect described by Reuveny and Prakash. They contributed to the overall atmosphere in 1989 onward that questioned the Soviet Union. In the end, the Soviet Union, which typically represented one Official Political Narrative, did not account for the importance of other voices (polyphony), and their failure contributed to the collapse in 1991.

Part IV: Conclusion

The political and cultural narratives that developed around the Soviet-Afghan War shed light on the ways society interprets conflict and how it processes it over a period of time. The Political Narrative emphasized the political nature of the conflict since it was developed by political elites. The Central Committee focused on international threats they believed to be important and highlighted the need to protect the border from any "spillover". One part of the cultural narrative that emerged captured this part of the political narrative, as veterans and civilians explained their wish to protect the border. Over time, veterans explain how they felt the narrative presented to them about the war was incorrect. They did not believe they were protecting the border or supporting the socialist cause in Afghanistan.

The political and cultural narratives affect each other. The Political Narrative that formed in the Central Committee meetings was influenced by the cultural narratives from previous wars. Furthermore, the After-War Narrative, which deals with the shame of fighting and the mistrust between the political elites and the people, was developed out of a particular Political Narrative. It is likely that the Soviet people mistrusted their politicians for reasons other than the Soviet-Afghan War. Nevertheless, my presentation of the narratives as separate spheres allows one to examine the roots of the narratives and how they came about from the conflict.

Through the idea of polyphony, one can see how the importance of these cultural voices affected the dissolution of the Soviet Union. While the Cultural Narratives from the Soviet-Afghan War did not cause the collapse on its own, the narratives focused on the legitimacy of the Soviet Union and caused a part of its destabilization.

For further research, the connection between the Cultural Narratives and Russia's foreign policy after 1991 should be studied. Dr. Artemy Kalinovsky has suggested that foreign policy changed after the Soviet-Afghan War. His work, published in 2011, explains the change:

> The Russian Federation, so far, has not intervened militarily in support of any foreign government or movement, aside from minor engagements in the CIS. Only in the past five years has Moscow, buoyed by high energy prices, been able to play a serious role abroad. During the 1990s, its military efforts were limited to trying to arrest the process of disintegration that had led to the breakup of the Soviet Union. (Kalinovsky, 212)

It is only until 2015 that we see Russia acting outside of CIS countries when it sent forces to Syria. Nevertheless, there was a strong pattern the emerged after the end of the Soviet-Afghan War. The interventions were shorter, geographically closer, and smaller in scale. The Georgian Civil War, for example, lasted two years between 1991 and 1993; the War in Abkhazia began in August of 1992 and ended in September of 1993. The Transnistria War was another conflict in which the Russia was involved. It lasted approximately four months. The civil war in Tajikistan lasted approximately five years, which is much longer than the conflicts listed above. However, Russia sent a much smaller force to Tajikistan; the numbers range somewhere between a few thousand to ten or fifteen thousand. The First Chechen War was over in less than two years, and the conflict in Dagestan finished in less than two months. As Kalinovsky suggests, this foreign policy was in response to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the collapse was influenced by the Cultural Narratives that emerged after the Soviet-Afghan War.

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