kultura

MARCH 3/2006

Discourses on War in Russia Today

Guest Editor: Mischa Gabowitsch (Moscow-Berlin)

editorial — Afghanistan and Chechnya under Contemporary Russian Eyes — 2

analysis — Whose War? The Chechen Conflicts on Russian Television — 3
Olessia Koltsova (St. Petersburg)

portrait — Chechnya: The Memory of a Non-Existent War — 8
Natalia Konradova (Moscow)

sketch — On the Public Perception of the Afghan War in Contemporary Russia — 10
Alexei Levinson (Moscow)

film review — 'The 9th Company': War in Russian Cinema in 2005 — 15
Yuliya Liderman (Moscow)

kultura. Russian cultural review is published under the supervision of
Professor Wolfgang Eichwede,
director of the Research Centre for East European Studies at Bremen University.
Editorial board: Dr. Isabelle de Keghel, Hartmute Trepper M.A.
Technical editor: Matthias Neumann
The views expressed in the review are merely the opinions of the authors.
The printing or other use of the articles is possible with the permission of the editorial board.
© 2005 Forschungsstelle Osteuropa, Bremen
Forschungsstelle Osteuropa | Publikationsreferat | Klagenfurter Str. 3 | 28359 Bremen
tel. +49 421 218-3302 or -3257 | fax +49 421 218-3269
mailto: *fsopr@uni-bremen.de* | Internet: *www.forschungsstelle-osteuropa.de*

Afghanistan and Chechnya under Contemporary Russian Eyes

editorial

Ever since Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Russia has been in an almost incessant state of war. Even during the short period of 'rest' between the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the start of the first Chechen war in late 1994, Soviet or Russian troops were in constant action on the periphery of the collapsing empire: in Vilnius, Baku and Nagorno-Karabakh in 1990–1, and later in Tajikistan and Transnistria.

Any war inevitably makes an imprint on the society that is fighting it, regardless of whether that society is willing to acknowledge this fact or not. And the way in which a society and its cultural elites deal with war says a lot about its values and its patterns of action and perception.

One specific feature of the wars that Russia has been waging for over a quarter of a century is that rather than taking place in the country's heartland, they have been conducted far away – abroad or on Russia's fringes. The role war plays in the lives of most Russian citizens is indirect and mediated: they watch it on television (see Olessia Koltsova's article in this issue), they fear terrorist attacks triggered by it; they bail their sons out of military service. The war makes itself felt in a general passivity and a diffuse propensity to violence, rather than provoking an active social response or original artistic treatments. This is fostered by a militarisation of Russian society that goes back to the Soviet era.

The numerous refugees from 'crisis regions' are hardly making themselves heard in contemporary Russian culture. Nor are the war veterans, who are often abandoned by state and society, as shown in Alexei Levinson's sociological sketch and in Natalia Konradova's analysis of the politics of war memorials. This is why the Great Patriotic War continues to be seen as the only 'real' and 'just' war, shaping the attitude of the population and the cultural elites towards Afghanistan and Chechnya, as Yuliya Liderman shows in her article about filmic representations of war (also see kultura No. 3/2005). Whether they are hewn in stone, broadcast on TV or shown on the silver screen, the latest wars are less present in the minds of Russians than the 'great' war of 1941–5 that many have still not come to terms with. For many war veterans, the 'Afghan syndrome' has become a Russian equivalent to the Vietnam trauma. So far, however, there is no Russian *Apocalypse Now* or *Platoon* that would turn the individual experience of war into an ethical inquiry aimed at society as a whole.

Still, the Afghan war and the two Chechen campaigns reflect many central problems of late Soviet and the new post-Soviet society: the unsteady relationship between the state and individuals, the insecurity of people in the street and the elites' internecine struggle for power, the corruption that pervades the army and state authorities, and the search for a new national pride. Thus, sooner or later, Russian culture will have to face up to these wars – perhaps when the wounds have healed, perhaps when they open up again. It remains to be seen whether it will continue to draw upon old traditions of dealing with this experience, or develop entirely new forms for that purpose.

Whose War? The Chechen Conflicts on Russian Television

Olessia Koltsova

analysis

This article analyses the dramatic change in TV coverage of Chechnya – from sharp criticism in 1994–5 to almost unanimous support in 1999. Addressing the causes of this change, the article also reviews the key actors in this game as well as the evolution of the TV images of the war.

It would be hard to overestimate the influence of the two Chechen campaigns (1994–6 and 1999–2001) on public life in contemporary Russia. Firstly, these were virtually the first wars that were covered on TV – not counting the Afghan campaign of 1979–1989, which had been covered in a limited and strictly controlled way. Secondly, TV images of the war were an important strategic resource which different groups in seething post-Soviet Russia used to conquer and defend their position in the struggle for power. These images decisively contributed to the success of the Chechen separatist government in gaining a considerable degree of autonomy in the inter-war period, to the impetuous ascent of the first private nationwide TV channel, *NTV*, and to the victory of Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin in the presidential elections of 1996 and 2000 respectively.

Enter the main actors

It is a commonly held view that the coverage of the first Chechen campaign was an illustration of the nascent Russian freedom of speech, whereas the second war symbolised a return to state control over the media. My long-term observations suggest that this is not quite true. In both cases, the media images were collectively 'orchestrated' by powerful groups. The difference is that during the first war there was no clear leader among these groups, and so the coverage of the war was relatively varied, whereas during the second war such a leader emerged, who soon became a monopolist. At those times when none of the power groups were seriously interested in visualising Chechen topics, these subjects either did not appear on television at all or quickly disappeared from the airwaves.

Thus, active military operations were taking place in Chechnya a year before the 'official' start of the first war in November 1994, and there had been disturbing portents of the coming tragedy even earlier, starting in 1991, when Chechnya declared its sovereignty. Nevertheless, Chechnya only made the headlines three years later. This was the time when a new player emerged on the Russian political scene, which soon developed into a powerful oligarchic group: Vladimir Gusinsky's *NTV*. This new media business managed to find a quick and effective way of conquering the media market and the political stage: *NTV* filled the vacant niche of supplier of oppositional news. The porous federal elite not only lacked the resources to cut *NTV*'s transmitter, its counterproductive actions even helped the channel. The failure of the assault on the Chechen capital in November 1994 was true bounty for the oppositional TV station: it provided the journalists with proof of federal involvement in the Chechen 'internecine' feud, an involvement that was as large-scale as it was unsuccessful. *NTV*'s broad coverage of this event made it impossible to keep the involvement of the 'federals' in the Chechen conflict secret, and the federal elite could no longer ignore *NTV* and *Media-MOST*, the media empire that grew up around the channel.

The blow dealt by *NTV* came as a surprise to Yeltsin's team: the country's leadership had obviously expected to repeat the silent Afghan scenario, and was not ready for a situation where it had no monopoly over the collection and dissemina-

tion of information. A press centre was only created a week into the military campaign; President Yeltsin's address to the nation came even later. The military's scanty declarations were mutually contradictory, and at first the very existence of the military operation was being denied. This behaviour was in no way unique: it is typical of wars that took place early in the TV era, such as Vietnam and the British operation on the Falklands.

The fruits of silence

The silence at the beginning of the campaign and the lack of a coordinated information policy had disastrous consequences for the federal elite. Firstly, it delegitimised the actions of the military, adding to other difficulties in garnering public support: the fact that that very same elite had exposed the 'incorrect' policies in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of troops from that country was still present in collective memory. Secondly, the silence, together with people's distrust of official statements, encouraged the media to use alternative sources of information: simple Chechens and members of the separatist movement. The latter chose the opposite tactic and actively communicated with journalists: they gave interviews, supplied reporters with footage etc. As a result, their view of the situation was much better represented on Russian TV than the position of the 'federals'. Even channels controlled by the Kremlin could not ignore alternative points of view: *NTV* quickly became popular by broadcasting information that differed from the official account which fell on the fertile ground of general social discontent. Opinion polls revealed that *NTV* was seen as more objective, informative and accurate in its judgments than other nationwide channels; its news broadcasts came second in viewer ratings, overtaking *RTR* (the Second Channel). And although the news ratings for all three federal channels soared after the war began, *NTV*, unlike *RTR* and *ORT*, was a newcomer, which could not fail to scare its competitors. As a result, the semi-state, semi-oligarchic *ORT* took a moderately pro-government stance, whereas the journalists at the state-owned *RTR*, which was obliged to broadcast all official statements, expressed their anti-war attitude in their reports and analyses.

As a result, coverage of the war in the federal media, albeit relatively diverse, shifted noticeably in a direction favourable for the separatists. Thus, although at the beginning most media gave space to both supporters and opponents of the military operation, the Russian side seemed to be the aggressor, which greatly delegitimised its position. The current sufferings of the local population and the horrors of war were actually shown, while the past crimes of the separatist regime were simply retold. Not only the Chechen population, but also Russian rank-and-file conscripts, were portrayed as victims, who were often depicted as unwilling participants in a war the goals of which they did not understand. In general, the Russian army was represented as ineffective, corrupt and miserable; *NTV* paid particular attention to Russian military mistakes and failures, and to disagreements among the federal elite. In contrast, the separatists looked like true believers, willing and capable of defending their land. Since, unlike the 'federals', they gave many informal interviews, they were presented as individual human beings, while the federal army looked like an anonymous grey mass. At the same time, partly because common Chechens were portrayed as supporting separatists, Chechen society looked less fractured than the Russian, and internal conflicts and cleavages were obscured.

Although the official position was present in media discourse, the general tone described above coloured the coverage of the war and most influenced the public attitude to the Chechen campaign. Throughout 1994–5, 60–70% of Russians

expressed a negative stance towards it. On the whole, the population was badly informed about Chechen issues, and at the beginning of the war almost one-half of Russians were ready to 'set Chechnya free' because they didn't understand why the federal troops needed to fight for it. This was despite the fact that the Russian media never questioned Russia's territorial integrity and were challenging the methods rather than the goals of the campaign.

The First Chechen War: international context

As a result, in 1996, on the eve of the presidential elections, this negative attitude towards the war forced the Yeltsin administration to cease active military operations and enter negotiations with the separatists. Some officials later acknowledged that they had lost the information war in Chechnya. What they meant was not only the fight for domestic (Russian) viewers and voters, but also the struggle for international support. The separatists were actively supplying Western media with information about the Russian military's infringements against the rights of the inhabitants of Chechnya, especially media in countries that were competing with Russia for control over the Caucasus and Caspian regions. When Russian official sources tried to supply the same media with data about similar behaviour by the separatists, that information ran up against Western societies' mechanisms for filtering out unfavourable news – mechanisms that are softer and less explicit than in Russia, but highly effective. All this shaped a negative attitude in the West towards Russian policies in Chechnya, an attitude that was difficult to ignore when the countries concerned were Russia's creditors.

Interestingly, the Russian federal elite employed this ineffective information policy at a time when examples of a much more skilled management of war news were available. I am not only referring to the Chechen separatists, who, incidentally, were managing the media in the territories they controlled at gun-point. What I have in mind is how 'advanced democratic' states managed the coverage of military operations, above all during the Gulf War in 1991, which eventually influenced the coverage of the second Chechen campaign. It was during the Desert Storm campaign that the system of a pool of journalists was fully deployed: a privileged group who obtained access to the conflict zone. Others simply weren't issued visas. The military also controlled almost all the movements of journalists from the pool, who were obliged to submit all their texts, in English, to the military for approval.

In 1994–5, the situation in Chechnya was infinitely remote from such a set-up, above all because the federal elite was unprepared and fragmented, but also for other reasons, such as the impossibility of introducing a visa regime, and the opportunistic behaviour of ordinary recruits, who often assisted the journalists.

The Second Chechen War: a regrouping of actors and popular indulgence

By the beginning of the second war, many things had changed. During the 1996 elections, competing oligarchic groups, including *Media-MOST*, joined forces to support Yeltsin, resulting in a concerted and successful propaganda campaign that propelled the unpopular president to a new victory. Part of this campaign dealt with Chechnya: the armistice was presented as a successful end to the war, and television quickly refashioned yesterday's bandits into official leaders. Yeltsin's entourage learned a lesson from all this. Although all the 'helpers' were rewarded, *Media-MOST* soon found itself in the role of a subordinate partner, and in order to break free from that dependence, Gusinsky decided not to support Yeltsin's

designated successor, Vladimir Putin during the 1999–2000 elections, backing his weaker opponent instead. However, unlike in 1994, the pro-Yeltsin group managed to mobilise not only *ORT* but also *RTR*, whose joint informational impact now surpassed *NTV*'s. Moreover, by that time the decaying state finally realised that it had not lost its capacity for enforcement, and started actively using it to put pressure on *Media-MOST* and its creditors. All this greatly weakened the scope for a major television station to present an oppositional view of the second Chechen campaign that started in the summer of 1999.

The other crucial factor that changed the coverage of the Chechen conflict was a shift in public opinion. In the first half of the 1990s, the discontent with the difficulties of the period of transition went hand in hand with a dissatisfaction with Russia's government; in the late 1990s, this was supplemented by a suspicious and sometimes hostile attitude towards the 'West'. Since *perestroika*, the West had been a subject of much interest and admiration; it was perceived as a magical assistant who would quickly instruct Russia in democracy and an effective economy. By the end of the decade, admiration gave way to disappointment, and the West began to be seen at best as a more powerful competitor who wasn't interested in Russia's well-being. This view was fostered by the US operation in Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999, which, to most Russians, made American criticism of human rights abuse in Chechnya sound like hypocritical rhetoric. In May 1999, during the bombardment of Belgrade, negative sentiments towards the USA were at their peak, and for the first time in a decade there was an upsurge of nationalism and patriotism.

The prospect of consolidating the fragmented Russian nation around a struggle against a common enemy didn't go unnoticed by the political elite. Combined with the shock caused by a series of (purportedly Chechen) terrorist attacks in Russian cities, this became the fertile ground that fostered the decision to use force to solve the Chechen conflict. Even at the beginning of the campaign, before the propaganda machine was in full swing, around 60% of Russians supported the use of force, and by 2000 that support grew by roughly 10%. Even in mid-2002, when a majority of the population had already grown tired from the protracted conflict, support for government actions in Chechnya remained higher than in 1994–5. The popularity of Vladimir Putin, a previously unknown figure who became prime minister in 1999, was entirely based on his decisive actions in Chechnya, i.e. precisely what had caused Yeltsin a lot of damage in his time.

The inversion of TV images: how it was done

It is rather difficult to say whether the change in the TV coverage of the war was the reason for, or a consequence of, this positive attitude towards the war in Chechnya, but there is certainly a strong correlation. Moreover, all central TV channels covered the war in almost the same way. The methods used for solving the conflict, rather than just the goals, were no longer questioned; there were hardly any reports about the ineffectiveness of Russian troops, and its opponents were more and more often called bandits and 'illegal armed formations'. Footage shot by the separatists was no longer shown on TV, nor were interviews with their leaders; on the contrary, there were now numerous interviews with representatives of the Russian army. The Chechens and the 'federals' therefore switched roles: the former now looked faceless, while the latter were personified. Moreover, the media no longer distinguished between ordinary Russian soldiers and their leadership; at the same time, especially in official statements, the difference between the illegal armed formations and the peaceful Chechen nation was con-

stantly stressed. Scenes of violence and human suffering were shown much more rarely.

This unanimity was engineered using a number of methods that the Russian leadership had developed out of its own experience in the first Chechen war, as well as based on other military campaigns, above all the Gulf War. Firstly, instead of shunning journalists, military commanders now actively communicated with them, constantly producing a suitable interpretation of events. Secondly, as the government consolidated its position, it made ever greater use of its enforcement capacities. Being unable to introduce a visa regime, the government introduced the institution of accreditation, which had to be obtained in Moscow in order to be able to enter Chechnya. All accredited journalists were housed in special press centres. On their trips to the scenes of events, which they couldn't choose themselves, they were accompanied by military personnel. It was officially prohibited to move around unaccompanied, and any trespasser could be arrested – now that the government relied on professional soldiers much more than on conscripts, army members became significantly less opportunistic. Contacts with separatist sources were cut off especially thoroughly. But most importantly, since, as I have already mentioned, the government took control of the electronic media, even if the journalists managed to shoot alternative footage or obtain it from separatists, there was a hardly chance for it to be broadcast on the main channels. Oppositional reports could only appear in media that had little influence, but the most active oppositionists were persecuted by different means.

Moreover, the Russian government changed its international information policy. Above all, it virtually cut off Chechen sources from Western media. Besides, Vladimir Putin reacted very coolly to Western discontent, and he grew cooler as the oil prices soared.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that despite the obvious differences in the coverage of these two wars, they also have some points in common, the most important of which is linked to oil, or, to be more precise, its absence in the discourse about the war. The Caspian oilfields, to which the Caucasian republics are the key, have been the main reason why various actors on the international scene are interested in control over that region. However, both sides in the Chechen conflict adopted an entirely different rhetoric: the separatist leaders explained their actions with reference to the struggle for national independence, while the 'federals' spoke of the struggle to restore constitutional order and preserve Russia's territorial integrity. Neither of the two sides found it advantageous to reveal the 'oil motive' at the basis of the conflict, which could have discredited both. This is why this topic, which could have provided Russians with answers to many of their questions, was hardly discussed either on Russian TV or in the separatists' media.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Olessia (Elena) Koltsova teaches at the sociology department of the Saint Petersburg branch of the Higher School of Economics. Over the past nine years, she has been studying Russian media production and the post-Soviet transformation of mass media.

READING SUGGESTION:
Olessia Koltsova, News Media and Power in Russia. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2006, pp. 205–225.

portrait

Chechnya: The Memory of a Non-Existent War

Natalia Konradova

Unlike all previous wars, the Chechen war has not engendered a form of remembrance of its own. In Russians' minds, despite its officially declared status as 'an operation to restore constitutional order' and corresponding public political declarations, it has become a continuation of the unjust and unjustified war in Afghanistan.

From the beginning of the first war in Chechnya, the main commemorative functions (fundraising, erecting memorials, press publications) have been carried out by associations of veterans of the Afghan war. At first, the names of the victims of the new war were added to existing memorials, and from the late 1990s general memorials to all those who died in the 'trouble spots' began to be built. Thus one can speak of a 'Chechen period' in the erection of memorials, rather than monuments to those who died in Chechnya. This period spans the past 4–5 years, planning phase included.

Since the 'Chechen' monuments have never been a phenomenon in their own right, let us start with a brief overview of the 'Afghan' tradition which still serves as the basis for memorials to 'Chechen' soldiers. Starting in the second half of the 1980s, when the memory of the 'internationalist warriors' was legalised, a peculiar, vivid and recognisable idiom of commemoration developed. On the one hand, it made reference to the Great Patriotic War memorials, expressing the continuity of the warrior's exploits: the new memorials were put up next to the old ones, imitating their composition and even copying certain motifs – for example, flying cranes. On the other hand, the memorials to soldiers of the recent wars expressed very different meanings: the new heroes were presented as the victims of political intrigues, and their death as the outcome of the tragic choice of soldierly duty over justice.

The feeling of injustice may express itself in the inscriptions: for example, on a memorial in Rostov ('We are pure before thee, Motherland! Be thou pure before us, too!'). But as a rule, visual images, rather than words, were more significant and less conformist. The soldier is depicted as being entombed in a wall (see illustration) or chained to metal constructions; a particularly frequent motif is that of a split rock, or crack or breach in the wall. The veterans responsible for the choice of these images explain the crack as a symbol of a broken human life. I would like to stress, however, that these non-figurative motifs are something entirely new to the Russian artistic and commemorative tradition. Abstract sculptural objects have never been so important as now. This is not so much due to the persuasive force

'Monument to the citizens of Mytishchi who were killed doing their duty as soldiers or officials', 2002. Photo from the website 'Boevoe bratstvo', (www.bbratstvo.ru).

of the visual as to the habit of concealing the true meaning of war, of rendering one's statements about it indirect and ambiguous. Verbal expression is often, albeit unjustly, considered more straightforward than visual images. This has been a strong habit ever since the ban on public discussions of the Afghan war, and is now applied to the Chechen war.

Thus the 'Chechen' period in the erection of war memorials continues an established tradition, although the expressive image of the soldier who died in agony in a foreign land is gradually giving way to that of a calm soldier who is tired of fighting: more and more often soldiers are depicted sitting down, his weapon drooped, in an obviously non-bellicose posture. It is interesting to look at the debate surrounding the erection of a memorial in the Moscow district of Maryino: local inhabitants complained that the 'tired soldier' resembled a deserter (see the link at the bottom of the text). In this case the memorial was not dedicated to specific victims but was an attempt to summarise the tragic war experience of the recent past. As it turned out, the public wasn't prepared to accept a non-heroic image of the Russian soldier.

The building of universal memorials dedicated to 'the warrior in general', and thus to no-one in particular, estranges our memory from concrete events. This tendency is obviously encouraged by the state: there have been cases where, for example, local authorities clashed with veterans of the war in Afghanistan who demanded a memorial 'of their own' rather than a general one.

However, it is rare for those who died in Afghanistan or Chechnya, or even for victims of other armed conflicts in which the Russian army participated, from Tajikistan to Angola, to get 'their own' memorial. These conflicts have only very recently come to be discussed in the media, and then usually euphemistically, using expressions such as 'local wars', 'fulfilment of international duty', 'operations on another country's territory' etc. For both the veterans and ordinary Russians, these wars are essentially one war, in which our collective memory doesn't distinguish specific events. The 'Afghans' are probably the only ones to enjoy an official status today, because the war in Afghanistan is presented as a mistake of the old regime (which legalises the memory of it), while the Chechen War isn't really over yet.

And although, on some counts, the death toll in Chechnya has long surpassed the number of victims of the war in Afghanistan, and although the Chechen war is formally an internal conflict, Russians perceive Chechnya as a foreign territory. Chechnya, for them, is another 'Afghanistan'. This is precisely why the new tendencies in monument-building have hardly altered the previous 'Afghan' tradition of war memorials.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

SEE ALSO:

PHOTO:

Monument 'Soldier of the Fatherland – 20th century' by V.A. Surovtsev (2002), photo on the sculptor's web site *www.surovtsev.ru/works14.html*

READING SUGGESTIONS:

Nataliya Danilova, Memorial'naya versiya Afganskoi voiny, in: Pamyat' o voine 60 let spustya. Rossiya, Germaniya, Evropa. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2005, pp. 262–281.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Natalia Konradova (b. 1974) holds a candidate of sciences degree in cultural studies and works at the Languages of Culture department of the Russian Institute for Cultural Studies. She has written a number of articles about naïve art and about the Russian tradition of war memorials.

On the Public Perception of the Afghan War in Contemporary Russia

sketch

Alexei Levinson

Rather than analysing historical facts and events, this article explores the place of the war in Afghanistan in the public mind in contemporary Russia. It is based on interviews and essays by 4th year sociology students in Moscow who were born after the beginning of the war. The topic of the interview was 'The war in Afghanistan. What we knew about it, what we thought about it (before the release of The 9th Company).'[1] While these data are insufficient for a quantitative analysis, they do permit qualitative interpretations. They are supplemented by the author's own impressions and recollections.

The war is forgotten, Sakharov is forgotten, but he turns out to have been right

I would define my position as that of the liberal intelligentsia, which is in favour of including Russia in the circle of European countries and spreading the main principles and values of that community among Russians. From the very start of this war and until its very end, exponents of this position were opposed to it. But there was practically only one person – Academician Andrei Sakharov – who voiced this stance publicly. Standing on the rostrum of the Congress of People's Deputies in the Kremlin, he called the war a crime. The opinion that Sakharov expressed was at first rejected by society. Today, most Russians consider that war to have been unjust. According to an opinion poll carried out by the Levada Centre (February 2005, poll taken among a sample of 1,600 persons representative of the Russian population, aged 18 or older), the war in Afghanistan is seen as more 'unjust' than any other (75%). But as our students' interviews showed, young people have forgotten Sakharov's act.

Likewise, the war itself, conducted by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s, was for a long time a 'forgotten' war in Russia. Although the war against Nazi Germany, called the Great Patriotic War in Russia, ended almost half a century earlier, memories of it are present in the media and in people's minds, whereas the memory of the Afghan war has largely been suppressed. This is confirmed by my students when they talk about the pompous celebrations of the 60th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War. 'That was a great, a real war; you can see that one ought to remember it (but not necessarily Afghanistan)'.

Nevertheless, the students also mention other reasons why they hardly know anything about that war and hardly any of their elders have told them anything about it. According to them, the point is that there are now other, 'maybe more important military operations (Chechnya, Iraq) and the events in Georgia', and against that background 'people don't remember Afghanistan'. Moreover, 'a country that has lost a war strives to forget the fact that the war took place'.

As for me, I would add that military circles continue to value the Afghan experience, and veterans of the Afghan war continue to cultivate the folklore and songs that were created at the time. Society as a whole, however, having 'paid its tribute' to the memory of that war by erecting a few monuments, has chosen to 'repress' this traumatic experience.

Why do we need Afghanistan?!

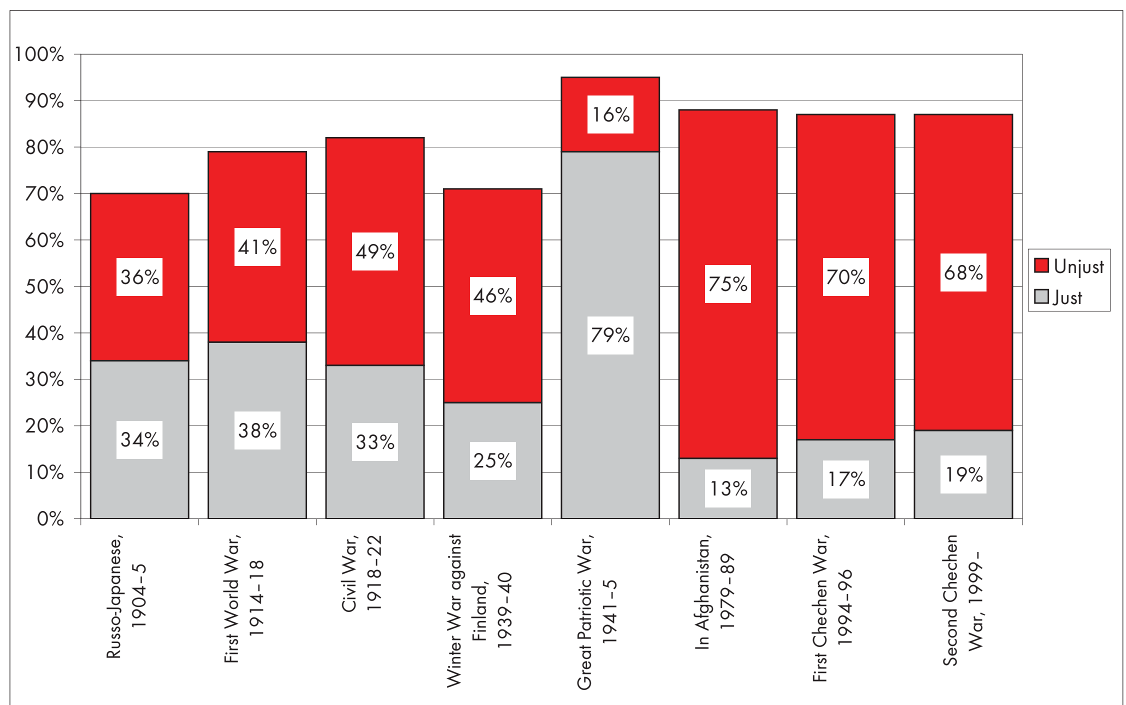
At the start of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, I did not hear very harsh criticisms of that action among the public. Instead, people were attempting to find a proper explanation for it. One of them revolved around 'conquering an outlet to the Indian Ocean in order to reinforce the USSR's status as a predominant global power'. In another, more pragmatic explanation, the invasion was seen as an attempt to secure control over the world's main source of oil. Few people

[1] The questionnaire for the students' interviews with each other consisted of eight questions. The students conducted 25 interviews with each other and wrote 25 interpretive essays on them. These data were analysed by Levada Centre staff, to whom the author wishes to express his sincere gratitude.

believed that the invasion was in response to a request by the little-known and obviously dependent leaders of the Afghan revolution, who for some reason had overthrown Mohammad Zahir Shah, a friend of the Soviet Union. Either – people thought – 'our' politicians had made a mistake in supporting this revolution out of ideological considerations, and now the army had to rectify that mistake, or else the circumstances had evolved in a way that made it possible to take the next step towards an extension of 'our' sphere of influence after Stalin's acquisitions in the 1940s.

Thus, at the beginning of what was to become the Afghan War, there were two interpretations of its causes: it was seen either as a fatal political mistake or as a powerful military-political move. Imagine my surprise when in early 2006, in response to a question I put to young people who were born after the beginning of hostilities in Afghanistan, I heard exactly the same explanations. Indeed, their most frequent supposition about the causes of the war was that the country's leadership had wanted to 'extend the power of the USSR', followed by references to 'ignorant Soviet policies'. A third group of students, who were obviously impressed by current affairs, said a 'war against terrorism' had been waged in Afghanistan – the young people likened the Soviet campaign, which they did not know anything about, to the US operation in Afghanistan and the actions of the Russian authorities in Chechnya, which had taken place before their eyes.

Back then, in the 1980s, Soviet citizens took several years to get used to the fact that the Soviet 'liberation army' had started to wage war on the civilian population of Afghanistan. This delay was made possible by the fact that the military implanted their discourse in the minds of the inhabitants of the 'peaceful country' (as they described the Soviet Union). The main factor was



'Just' combines the answers 'clearly just' and 'relatively just', and 'unjust' combines 'clearly unjust' and 'relatively unjust'. The percentage of respondents giving no reply varies from 29% in the case of the 'Finnish' war (which many know nothing about) to 5% in the case of the Great Patriotic War.
Levada Centre, February 2005. Poll among a sample of 1,600 persons representative of the Russian population aged 18 or older.

the appearance of an identifiable enemy, the '*dushmany*', on the TV screens and in the press. This put many things right: our army was not fighting the population, it was fighting an armed adversary, i.e. almost an army. It also helped that the Soviet Union's main geopolitical opponent, the USA, openly sided with those whom the USSR was fighting. The conflict acquired a global dimension that was comprehensible to the country's leadership and ordinary citizens as a continuation of the habitual lines of the Cold War. At the same time, the actions of the United States, which provided the Afghans with guns, but not soldiers, were interpreted to the effect that the USA would not go as far as to wage war against the Soviet Union unless the latter engaged in further expansion. This was understood as American 'permission' to carry on with Soviet policies in Afghanistan, while abandoning attempts to change the global geopolitical balance.

A 'strange war'

The war was becoming protracted. The army could not pride itself on any significant military achievements, and it became clear to ordinary citizens such as myself, in so far as it was possible to form a judgment about what was happening in those distant mountains, that there would not be any substantial success given the forces and means employed by the Soviet side. However, we thought that a great military power, which the Soviet Union considered itself to be, could have easily increased the number of troops deployed and achieved a 'full and decisive victory', if only thanks to numerical superiority. But instead, the contingent of troops in Afghanistan was labelled 'limited', and it became clear that it would remain so. The press (but not official statements!) increasingly started referring to the operation in Afghanistan as a 'war', although what was happening there was more and more at variance with the widespread understanding of war as a means of achieving victory.

Society gradually became used to this 'strange war', and it gradually became clear who needed it to continue, and for what purpose. The military command, it was said, used it to train a 'battle-hardened' officer corps. They were referring to the USA and 'their Vietnam', saying that they had run in their whole army there, and so must we. The arms producers were explaining they needed a 'proving ground' to test new types of weapons in real battle.

Moreover, in conversations with those who returned from Afghanistan – such people now appeared – it became clear that for many, this war was the only way to achieve quick promotion or, even more prosaically, to earn enough money for a flat. Then there were rumours about corruption, about traffic in fuel and even arms. Then people started talking about drug trafficking involving members of the army.

The war as a process became useful and necessary for many people. The war was necessary, and no victory was needed. The limited contingent may have been a gesture towards America and NATO, but it acquired a new meaning in internal Soviet affairs. The duration of the war – which lasted longer than the Second World War – became its peculiar psychological and economic feature. But among today's young people, only few have heard that the war was a protracted one and was very difficult to end. According to these respondents, the difficulty was that 'a country that is used to waging war and living with war can't do otherwise.'

The 'Afghan syndrome'

Society was getting used to the fact that it was waging war somewhere far away. But there were two aspects one could not get used to.

The first were the losses, the coffins, the 'cargo

200', as they came to be called in civilian life. People still remember that. But in young people's minds, the memory of these victims is now linked to the idea that their sacrifice was pointless. 'They perished in vain.' That statement then leads to two different views. Some express special sympathy for the dead because these people did not understand what they were supposed to fight for, being 'mere pawns in a political game'. Others think that sacrifices are wasted if the goal is not attained. In this case this means: 'They were dying in vain because the war didn't benefit the country they were fighting for'. It must be added that the young people have no idea how many people of their age were killed in that war, but they are convinced, firstly, that the exact figure is being kept secret, and, secondly, that there were certainly 'many'. (According to the official statistics, the Soviet side lost around 15,000 people in Afghanistan overall.)

The second aspect was the return of the living. The return home of those who had been fighting abroad for something other than the liberty of their homeland has created problems for many countries, starting with Ancient Rome. The 'Afghans' who returned to their cities and villages were often unexpected and unwelcome. Some were afraid of them because these were people who had been through a terrible experience – some of them confessed they had had to kill peaceful civilians. Others were afraid of them because the 'Afghans' had notions of honour, justice and personal rights they had paid for with blood, that were considered 'exaggerated' and unfit for our ordinary life. Everyone shunned the veterans, seeing them as people with a defective psyche, who were prone to hysterics and violence, and would often go mad or commit suicide.

The 'Afghans' were frightening. But I was also frightened by the way in which nearly all of society rejected them. Officials to whom the 'Afghans' applied for the aid, benefits etc. that were their due would use the phrase: 'I didn't send you there!' Perhaps society behaved so ungratefully to cleanse itself of the dirt of a war whose baseness it secretly felt. Be that as it may, even today students express a mix of sympathy for the dead and disrespect for those veterans who stayed alive. The students believe that they do not get proper help and support, but that is because 'the Afghan warriors have not earned society's respect'. Some mean this as a reproach to an ungrateful society ('everyone finds it easier not to remember those who suffered'), while others say that one may feel sorry for those who 'fought for nothing' or 'didn't understand what they were fighting for', but one cannot respect them. Most young people know nothing about the end of the war. Very typically, however, many of them connect the end of the war in Afghanistan, an event they do not remember and hardly know anything about, with another event, whose traces, on the contrary, have remained in their memory, although it happened at around the same time. That event is what they themselves and their parents call the 'collapse of the Soviet Union'. Surveys clearly show that, in the public mind, these events are linked, but people are confused about what was the cause and what was the effect: did the war end because the state that was waging it ceased to exist, or did the end of that war lead to the disintegration of that state? I personally now think the war in Afghanistan was one of the factors that deepened people's distrust of the regime, thereby speeding up its demise.

'Useless' wars

Those who, like me, remember the end of the Afghan campaign, also remember the rejoicing that has been repressed from contemporary mass consciousness: 'The war is over!' They also remember the 'Afghan syndrome' that was prevalent in

society: never send 'our boys' anywhere again. In order to overcome that syndrome and start a new colonial war in the mountains of the North Caucasus, its initiators had to surmount a great deal of public resistance. According to our surveys, the first Chechen war was conducted unsupported by the Russian population from beginning to end.

The interviews my students conducted with their peers ended with the question: what other war they know about did the Afghan war resemble most? They tended to compare the war in Afghanistan to that in Chechnya:

'It's also some other people's war of liberation.'

'The boys who are sent there don't know what they are fighting for either.'

The Levada Centre's above-mentioned survey showed that Russian society withholds its support from wars that do not usher in territorial gains. Our students often expressed similar opinions when discussing the Afghan campaign:

'It ended without results, except that our people died.'

This view is summarised by one female student:

'Oh, that was a useless war!'

The war was of no 'use'. But what aspects of the damage it caused are still remembered and felt today?

Among the consequences of the Afghan war that reverberate to this day, the students mention the *'undermining of the prestige and authority of military service'*. Draft dodging has become more wide-spread, and *'mothers are now thinking twice before sending their sons to this army to die'*.

There is a whole range of similarities between the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya. I believe it is very important to stress their similar duration – about 10 years – and the fact that neither ended in victory. As this terrible story shows, the state and society need this unhealed wound. However, the experience of the Afghan war also shows there comes a time when public resistance to war grows stronger than these factors. Then the war ends. It ends in a military defeat that ultimately turns out to be a victory for society.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

READING SUGGESTIONS:

Alexei Levinson, Who Needs It, *http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2002-08-05-levinson-en.html*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Alexei Levinson (b. 1944) holds a candidate of sciences degree in art history. Since 1988 he has headed the department of socio-cultural research at the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion, which is now called Yury Levada's Analytical Centre (or Levada Centre). In 2004 he published a book entitled *An Essay in Sociography*, which, among other things, examines Soviet/Russian attitudes towards war and the army.

'The 9th Company': War in Russian Cinema in 2005

Yuliya Liderman

film review

The 9th Company by Fyodor Bondarchuk (born in 1967, son of the eminent Soviet director Sergey Bondarchuk), a film about the war in Afghanistan, has earned 20 million US dollars at the box office (from 5,227,404 viewers) and another 3 million dollars from the sale of DVDs. It received the national Golden Eagle film prize as the best fiction film and the Russian Cinema Academy's first prize, the Golden Ram.

This success with the public, critics, and cinema professionals prompts one to ask what this agreement between Russian viewers and the artistic elite is based on. The much-celebrated rebirth of Russian cinema (expressed in record box office sales and budgets) goes hand in hand with a revival of the Soviet narrative canon and of the former role of the artist as a creator of mass spectacles.

The film is set in 1989 – the war in Afghanistan is in its ninth year. The main characters of the film – the aspiring teacher 'Vorobushek' (Little Sparrow), the aspiring painter 'Gioconda' (Mona Lisa), the ragamuffin 'Lyuty' (the Fierce One) and the fatherless Stas – meet at the muster. In the camp where they are trained before being sent off to the front, they acquire not only military skills but also a conception of real male friendship and generally about the way life works.

The multi-ethnic 9th company, to which they are assigned, is going to be annihilated. The only survivor (Lyuty) later finds out that his comrades died by an oversight of the command, defending a hill even though Moscow had decided to withdraw its troops. The film's ending highlights the fundamentally irreconcilable levels of the narrative: the responsibility of the command – in the general sense of the word – for the pointless war and the disintegration of the country, and the greatness of the common soldier – the warrior who gives his life in the line of duty.

The cinema industry and the narrative canon

The figures and facts about the production and distribution of the film are used as an important, if not the central, argument in support of its artistic quality. The film's self-presentation (on its web site, *www.9rota.ru/flashindex.html*) and critics' reviews systematically mention the film's budget (9 million US dollars), the all-star cast (including Fyodor Bondarchuk, Mikhail Porechenkov and Alexander Lykov), as well as the actors' training for the shots (with accounts of what they did and how much time they spent on it), the high sound and image quality and the special effects.

The heroic mode of remembering war in the post-Soviet area (present in the film through the hero's death) is directly linked to the role of victory in the Great Patriotic War and the positive significance accorded to the Soviet period.

Of course, *The 9th Company* is not 'the first real war film in Russia' as its official web site contends. From the early 2000s, there have been many films and series about the Great Patriotic War and the wars in the Caucasus. The first new award-winning war film was Nikolai Lebedev's *Star* (2002), a remake of a film of the same name released in 1949. *The 9th Company* includes references to the new Russian war films, uses actors in roles similar to those other directors had cast them in, includes well-tried plot elements and, most importantly, draws on the theme of the greatness of a person who sacrifices himself to fulfil a mission, a stock plotline from Soviet times that was not revised in the 1990s.

The Russian mass viewing public

Knowledge of the contents of the TV schedule is universal in contemporary Russian society. The majority of Russians spend most of their free time

film review

watching television. And in many ways, the success of *The 9th Company* is linked to the fact that the film was designed as a product geared to TV viewers. Although it is a big-screen film, TV adverts played a major role in generating the hype that surrounded it. Moreover, the cinema text makes ample use of TV formats.

The first part – about two thirds of the film – shows the recruits training for combat. The plot elements and shot angles hark back most clearly to Stanley Kubrick's anti-war film *Full Metal Jacket*. But many techniques used in this part of the film are determined by TV genres, another factor that has contributed to the film's sensational success.

The director twice uses slow motion in scenes of rejoicing (as in replays of crucial moments in sports broadcasts), the first time in a scene where punishment is averted, the second time when the trainees seize a hill in a drill. In a duel scene between 'Vorobushek' and Stas, the camera movements and the montage of the scene are reminiscent of boxing broadcasts.

A music-video aesthetic (in a broad sense meaning any series of brief shots put to music) is used at the very beginning of the film, in the seeing-off scene (where the viewers become acquainted with the characters) and in the first third of the film's last part, in a scene without words, set to music, where a file of armoured vehicles sets out on the road (close-up shots of the equipment and soldiers, exotic landscapes and long shots of the armoured units in the mountains), to be interrupted by an attack. A successful device used in this scene is that the repeatedly shouted-out orders blend in with the episode's musical score.

The presence of comedy scenes in the heroic

PUTIN ON 'THE 9TH COMPANY'

On 7 November 2005, President Putin received the crew of *The 9th Company* in his residence in Novo-Ogarevo. In addition to an intensive commercial publicity campaign, this unusual step may have contributed to the film's great success. Here are some extracts from Putin's speech to Fyodor Bondarchuk:

'Fyodor Sergeevich, first of all I would like to thank you.

I think this is a very good film. [...] Like any work of art, it does of course betray the fact that it is not a piece of life, but a piece of creative work. But in my view it is very close to life. At least judging from what I know, from what I've heard.

Of course, this is a tragic story in the life of our country and our people. But the people who were fighting there, upholding the ideals that took them there – I shall not judge this now, that is a different matter – did it with dignity. And – to say it in a lofty style – they did it in the best traditions of the Russian host: displaying their strong will, in a spirit of self-sacrifice, and very efficiently; we must give them their due for that. And indeed, what you show at the end is very true: the soldiers who fought there won their battle, that's a fact.

And I would like to thank you and all the boys who made that film. I think it is a work of great talent, because it touches one's heart [...] One remembers, of course, the events of the Great Patriotic War, but then one finds that the generation of the 70s–80s could act in an equally heroic manner, as you have now shown in your film.

[...] This is a deep work about war and about people who find themselves in extreme conditions. And in my opinion you have shown this very fittingly.'

Source: *www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2005/11/96802.shtml*

film review

drama that is *The 9th Company* can only be understood if we relate them to TV reality. The plastique phallus that is the central object in an episode about sabotage training resonates with an idea of humour that has been shaped by numerous TV comedy shows.

The 9th Company differs from *Star* (the previous box-office record holder among war films) by the size of its budget, and thus by the number of crowd scenes and special effects (the film's central and most expensive stunt is the explosion of a 450,000 dollar airplane).

The film's topic – the war in Afghanistan – is tackled in fewer Russian films than the Chechen wars and the Great Patriotic War. But the particularity of that war is levelled out by the main theme of this film – the sacrifice of characters that viewers have become fond of in the first part of the film. This familiar plotline effaces the differences between the wars, putting them on a par with each other. It no longer matters whether the soldiers died for an existing or an ephemeral empire. And, although many character types are known to Russian viewers from previous films, in *The 9th Company* they look somewhat different. The tone is set by Fyodor Bondarchuk himself in the role of lieutenant 'Khokhol' (the Ukrainian). The glamorous attractiveness of the characters, shaped by a TV and glossy magazine aesthetic, undoubtedly distinguishes them from the positive cinema characters of 2002. Thus *The 9th Company* may be called a large-scale patriotic cinema project that is in line with aesthetic preferences developed by television. This recipe meets the tastes of the majority of Russian viewers.

Translated from the Russian
by Mischa Gabowitsch

READING SUGGESTIONS:

Lev Gudkov: The fetters of victory. How the war provides Russia with its identity, *www.eurozine.com/articles/2005-05-03-gudkov-en.html*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Yuliya Liderman holds a candidate of sciences degree in cultural studies and teaches at the Institute of European Cultures at the State University for the Humanities in Moscow. Her research interests include the sociology of contemporary Russian culture, methods of studying Soviet culture, media theory and Soviet cinema.