

Post-Soviet Legacies of Afghanistan: A Comparative Perspective¹

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Anybody who lived in Russia during the 1990s was familiar with the plight of veterans of the Soviet–Afghan War, the so-called *afgantsy*. Although controversies about the war had begun to disappear from the Russian media and—with a few prominent exceptions—many veterans kept a low profile, they remained highly visible in cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg. Crippled vets—often wearing the beret and the trademark *maika*-shirt—begging in metro stations or in public squares became an iconic image of the transition. Their mutilated bodies were not merely reminders of the vicious fighting on the Hindu Kush. They also symbolized the inability of the post-Soviet welfare state to address the needs of disabled soldiers who had served the USSR in its last war. In a way, the veterans’ misery represented at once the legacy of late socialism and the hardship of the post-Soviet transformation. Their fate reminded the public of the cruelty with which the Soviet regime treated its own people. They were mainly seen as victims of a bygone empire, of the draft, the failed medical system and, more generally, of the lost cause of “internationalism.” Yet, other perspectives on the veteran’s experience have faded away or were never seriously discussed. The Soviet soldier as perpetrator of war crimes was hardly mentioned in the post-Soviet public sphere. The expertise of the *afgantsy* in using military force was often used after 1991 but hardly problematized. Until the state-sponsored rebirth of nationalism and hero culture under Vladimir Putin, the narrative regarding the Soviet–Afghan War was one

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