

**Back from Afghanistan. Workshop on the experiences of veterans from the war in Afghanistan in Tajikistan, Ukraine, Belarus, Russia, Lithuania and Germany**

**Veranstalter:** Felix Ackermann, Center for German Studies, European Humanities University Vilnius; Michael Galbas, Lehrstuhl für Osteuropäische Geschichte, Universität Konstanz

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In the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, thousands of Soviet soldiers started to find their strategies for (re)integration into late Soviet society and are still dealing with post-Soviet realities under different national conditions. At the end of the 20th century, the Soviet Union fought its last war. This war turned out to be an endeavor with a disastrous outcome for the parties involved. Nearly 15,000 'soldiers-internationalists' died during their official service in Afghanistan while they fulfilled their 'international duty'. More than 25 years later, the veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War are still trying to find their place in post-war societies, media and the legal order. In a transnational context the organizers, Felix Ackermann (Vilnius) and Michael Galbas (Konstanz) arranged a workshop to argue gaps and contradictions between soldiers' self-perception, their post-war experience and the circumstances veterans have faced in a new social and national settings. In their approach, they avoided the normative concept of a successful (re)integration. In this context, the different social and political practices of the veterans, oscillating between disappearance and presence, were discussed by the participants who compared the veterans' own perspective, the veteran organizations' view and the strategies pursued by state officials. Starting from this basic approach, the presented papers discussed the effect the dissolution of the Soviet Union had on these experiences, the long term psychological impact of the war experience, the development of a specific veteran memory culture, and the development of networks in a transnational con-

text.

MARKUS GÖRANSSON (Aberystwyth) contributed a paper which illustrated the rise of the veterans' movement in Soviet Tajikistan during the 1980s and its decline in the early 1990s. Influenced by the important role the Tajik soldiers played during the first years of the conflict in Afghanistan, the soldiers were marked by a high level of 'sovietization' and did not turn against the Soviet state after the Afghan invasion, unlike Western observers predicted. It became apparent that the veterans from Tajikistan were effectively coopted into official bodies. During and shortly after the war, the efforts of the Soviet state institutions to organize and mobilize the veterans were apparently successful in reinforcing the symbolic and institutional links between the Afghan War veterans and the state. For the most part, the veterans' movement became so heavily reliant on state sponsorship that it showed signs of losing their bearings when the state to which the veterans had sworn their allegiance began to crack and then collapsed shortly after. The paper underlined three major reasons for the fall of the movement: (1) The Tajik veterans had begun to identify themselves closely with the Soviet army and their units which led to the majority supporting the communist elites during the Dushanbe riots in 1990. (2) The rapid loss of legitimacy in large parts of the population during the post-soviet transformation a result of that support. However, the paper demonstrated the resources, the veterans had to mobilize themselves – during the turmoil they patrolled for security and arranged a network to supply themselves and parts of the population with goods. (3) It had also been found to be near impossible to organize a strong homogeneously veterans' movement in Soviet Tajikistan afterward. Based largely upon the fact that the Tajik society is shaped by regional distinctions, that are not similar urban and rural areas and shaped by ethnical heterogeneity, the veterans failed to build up a strong movement.

The associations of veterans in the Russian Federation are supporting the current Russian government and their political and ideological course is important for the research of MICHAEL GALBAS (Konstanz). Questions

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about the relationship between veteran organizations and the state, the change of the nature of these links and the transformation of the veterans' self-conception were constructive parts of the paper presented. It highlighted (1) altering public opinion about the war and the deteriorating reputation of the 'soldiers-internationalists' during the last Soviet years and the first post-Soviet decade. (2) The significance of Soviet-Afghan war memory and (3) the strategy of the post-soviet political establishment to implement the veterans' experience, potency and to exploit their fight to win recognition. As the paper underlined, it is important to understand, that the circumstances, the veterans had to deal with changed from total refusal to a diffident (re)integration into society during the last Soviet years and the total lack of willingness to deal with the consequences of the war in detail under Boris Yeltsin. In answer to these poor political echoes the veterans organized themselves under the flag of fraternity. The organizational level developed from local networks in the beginning to a political power with significant support of Vladimir Putins' current policy. To perceive the veterans in Russia as a monolithic bloc seems to be wrong as well, as there are differing private motives to come to terms with their experiences – to live as a part of the new social and political networks – whether close to the state or independently.

It is evident that dynamic and complicated relations between the organized movement of veterans and the state are similarities of the first two papers. The Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic's situation during the last years of the Soviet Union was a completely different scenario embossed by questions and vague meanings of the Soviet's mission in Afghanistan after the breakdown of the USSR. The paper by IRYNA SKLOKINA (Kharkiv) accentuated that the question „What did we fight for?“ was important for the process of development of a specific image and self-image. This applies to the Ukrainian veterans just as much as to all veterans in the former Soviet sphere. Yet unlike the groups focused upon, the Ukrainians had to deal with different discourses. Incipient by a still Soviet discourse, one important part of the lively de-

bate around the Soviet-Afghan War was a perception of an Asian world versus a Slavonic world impact, in that direction to highlight to constructive labor of the Soviet military contingents from for example the Soviet Ukraine. However, the paper carved out how the veterans' movement in the Ukraine was subject to changing political circumstances. It underlined the argument, that the heterogenic state power was responsible for bringing the veterans more in line with local authorities, than in close relations to the state. What is clear is that the situation changed – the veterans in Ukraine began to be increasingly more involved in official military positions after Euromaidan, and during the war in the Donbas area. Furthermore, the conflict in Donbas annihilated the former 'Slavic unity' between the Ukrainian and Russian veterans.

Just like it was important for the Ukrainian veterans to pass experience and a moral concept to further generations during Euromaidan and to protect the younger fighters, the Belarusian Soviet-war veterans took over some of the legitimacy created by the Soviet victory in World War II and projected it into their own war in Afghanistan, as FELIX ACKERMANN (Vilnius) illustrated. The Belarusian veterans benefit from the strong pro-Soviet discourse and the discovery of the heroic Soviet past by the Belarusian state officials. The paper showed how a small group of veterans know how to create a virtual continuity between the 'Great Victory' of 1945 and the Soviet experience in Afghanistan, by the help of networks and close links to the political elite. These close links are to be found in the complex 'Stalin line' as a reinterpretation of the Soviet past and contain different aims – (1) the political education of the Belarusian masses by key attributes like heroism, patriotism and comradeship. (2) A connection between two different war experiences, strategies of memory and (3) how it is possible to compass respect and social acceptability and also to gain a certain discursive power by resources, which are provided by the Belarusian state itself.

The final discussion, led by JAN BEHRENS (Potsdam) pointed out that on the one hand it would be beneficial to survey the position of the veteran organizations within the par-

ticular national power vertical in the post-Soviet states, especially in Russia. On the other hand, the discussion clarified the intrastate mechanics linked to the veterans and how they are dealing with the rules of the political game. On this note, one of the important questions posed was how closely associated the veteran organizations are with this power vertical. Furthermore, the final discussion underlined two major comparative dimensions – (1) ‘afgancy’ and its impact on the actual setting of the particular post-Soviet societies and the impact of their war experience on the state building-process after the collapse of the Soviet Union, e.g. the specific characteristics in respective countries like Tajikistan, Russia and Belarus. There is however a second dimension – (2) the comparability between the experience of veterans of World War II and what their counterparts suffered after the Afghan war. To compare their struggle of recognition could gain insight into analog or different developments and their circumstances as well as a view into their respective civil societies. The discussion led to important topics of Afghan war research, like the inwards dimension in Afghanistan itself. It seems to be relevant to analyze more deeply the factors the war in Afghanistan has on the country’s contemporary civil society, just as the experience of displacement – Afghan war invalids, war crime or destruction of Afghan property. On the other hand the situation in Russia changed – the Russian war invalids stashed away from the Russian normal course of life. At the end of the workshop in Vilnius the participants discussed different possible narratives – (1) the national, respectively the transnational narratives to carry out historical research about the war in Afghanistan. The two other discussed narratives are closely related in a specific way: (2) the imperial Soviet narrative and (3) the ideological one. The ideology as a narrative includes keywords like ‘internationalism’, ‘international duty’ and ‘druzhiba’ and was used to legitimate the imperial dimension. Against the background of actual contemporary Russian policy, former Soviet conflicts and interventions are coming to the fore. It seems that the transnational perspective offers the possibility to research different national strate-

gies of (re)integration, without denegation of a common past. The workshop discussed the consequences of the Soviet-Afghan War under these perspectives, started a new theoretical debate about the interdependency between the ‘in war-community’ and the ‘out of war-society’. Furthermore, it opened up new vistas and analyzed new topics in the area of the Soviet-Afghan conflict. Time will tell if the debate will get new factors by veterans of combat operations from Chechnya, South Ossetia, Abkhazia or future conflicts.

#### Conference Overview:

##### *Welcome Address and Opening Remarks*

Felix Ackermann (Vilnius) / Michael Galbas (Konstanz)

Markus Göransson (Aberystwyth), A Fragile Movement: The Rise and Fall of the Afghan War Veterans Movement in Tajikistan between 1980 and 1992

Michael Galbas (Konstanz), The State and the Veterans’ unions. Social Strategies of Legitimization of the Soviet-Afghan war in 21st-Century Russia

Iryna Sklokina (Kharkiv), Afgancy on Euro-Maidan and in the War over Eastern Ukraine

Felix Ackerman (Vilnius), Taking over the Great Victory. Belarusian Afghan veterans and the memory of the Great Patriotic War

##### *Final Comment:*

Jan Behrens (Potsdam)

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