

The Enduring Shame of War in *Zinky Boys*

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Abstract

From 1979 to 1989, a million Soviet forces fought a horrific war in Afghanistan, killing 50,000 people and destroying tens of thousands more youth and humanity. When it was first published in the Soviet Union, it sparked controversy and outrage, with reviewers calling it a "slanderous piece of fantasy" and part of a "hysterical chorus of malign attacks." *Zinky Boys* presents the candid and affecting testimony of the officers and grunts, nurses and prostitutes, mothers, sons, and daughters who describe the war and its lasting effects. The tale that emerges is appalling in its cruelty and enlightening parallels to the American experience in Vietnam. The Soviet dead were returned in sealed zinc coffins (thus the nickname "*Zinky Boys*"), while the authorities denied the combat existed. Svetlana Alexievich reveals the reality of the Soviet-Afghan War: the beauty of the land and cruel Army bullying, the slaughter and mutilation, the abundance of Western products, and the guilt and destroyed lives of returned veterans. *Zinky Boys* is a one-of-a-kind, horrific, and unforgettable look at the terrible reality of war.

Keywords: shipped, devastating, War, testimony, profusion, mutilation.

Introduction

War is a living nightmare. Those troops who survived it will remember it as a nightmare for the rest of their lives. They will not survive it; they will relive it in some form or another for the rest of their lives. Moreover, what they relive is what all combat troops do: the whole insanity of what they have done.

So, while being written in 1990, this book is indistinguishable from the reported experiences of American young men in Vietnam twenty years before or of British and American soldiers who followed the Russians into Afghanistan thirty years later. A half-century of experience with brutal death. For the grunts who do the shooting and dive for cover and who suffer from the terror and discomfort of patrols, outposts, and missions that they know are not only hazardous but also ill-founded and worthless, this experience is always the same.

Moreover, the personal effects for these warriors are nearly identical: estrangement from family and friends, drug addiction, psychotic episodes, psycho-somatic impairments, and a slew of other ailments collectively known as PTSD. Every front-line soldier suffers terribly and permanently

from the experiences of killing, being a continual target of death, and watching friends being murdered and injured. The Russians stated things succinctly:

“... in order to experience the horror you have to remember it and get used to it. Within two or three weeks there’s nothing left of the old you except your name. You’ve become someone else... It’s a total transformation, it happens very quickly, and to practically everyone... everyone’s damaged in some way, no one escapes intact.”

However, there is something more that is becoming clear. The most lasting repercussions of battle may not be in the troops themselves but in the cultures to which they and their comrades' corpses return. A veteran who participated in the Russian interviewing procedure writes the book's preface to the American War in Vietnam. He is unequivocal on the essential shared experience of his colleagues and the young Russians:

“... of all the comparisons between the American GIs who fought in Vietnam and the young Soviets who fought in Afghanistan, perhaps the most remarkable and consistent is their bitterness towards their governments. Both groups of men feel profoundly betrayed, and it is having been lied to that most sticks in the craw.”

Warfare damages the social fabric of the society that engages in it. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of disillusioned young men who have returned from conflict, carry this sense of betrayal with them. They may be hesitant to discuss their experiences with death, deprivation, and misery. However, this treachery must be addressed to spouses, family, and friends. They are the carriers of an unstoppable social infection. Neither the silly Soviet limitations on discussing military experience nor the equally stupid US official rhetoric about the national responsibility to combat communism could stop the rise of suspicion that the actual enemy is the government.

The Russian war in Afghanistan, I believe, was a triggering element in the breakdown of the Soviet state. It is also possible that the American war in Vietnam triggered a substantial, if less radical, shift in American politics, beginning with the Reagan administration and gradually expanding at the state level. The American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan led to the dissolution of conventional political party stances in America and Trump's eventual ascent and division. Wars kill more people than people. War undermines faith in organisations and institutions located far from the fight. War necessitates deception among the nation that pursues it.

However, the deception involved in conflict extends beyond political and military falsehoods, distortions, and cover-ups. All of these recent conflicts were popular because the public widely supported them. Each case's claimed reasons and aims were noble: to free, protect, construct, and grow. Families were delighted to send their boys to serve their country—the words of political leaders reassuring everyone that military intervention was both necessary and fundamentally short-term. When the case details became out, it became evident that the public had been tricked. Alternatively, they deceived themselves more accurately by believing in mostly meaningless abstractions such as justifiable warfare, theories of strategic vulnerability, and the wickedness of socialism (or capitalism). They were the actual perpetrators, not their governments. They did not simply condone conflict; they actively encouraged it. Shame is a powerful feeling. Soldier testimony is truly embarrassing in a community that recognises it has made grave mistakes.

Soldiers returning from Vietnam had the same public reaction as Russians returning from Afghanistan: humiliation. The troops were the scapegoats for that disgrace, but it was the fault of those who insulted, criticised, accused and neglected them.

Moreover, this humiliation has a cultural half-life that outlasts the generation that lived through the battle. Because it is so unpleasant, shame is handed around covertly. Moreover, it manifests itself in the form of self-hatred currently seen in America and Russia. They are unable to recognise their own monstrously awful behaviour. To avoid embarrassment, they turn on one other and invent diversionary concerns such as abortion rights, immigration atrocities, and fiscal shortfalls. As a result, the humiliation stays and festers. Giving a chance induces the desire to show confidence and bravado and conceal its presence.

Moreover, the cycle of conflict begins all over again. As one Russian artillery officer said, "*Our children will grow up and deny their fathers ever fought in Afghanistan.*" However, those youngsters will most likely be transferred to battle somewhere else.

They had to sit through lengthy speeches about the Soviet Union and its military strength in the 1970s. American military officers conducted the briefings, and the basic premise was that the Soviet Union was an evil well-armed empire. They seemed to have an infinite supply of weaponry and armies, all of whom desired our products. We were taught that the Soviet Union had little and that they would crave our possessions, which we had in abundance. Some of this propaganda was true: the Soviets were famished with consumer goods and had many men under arms, but the equipment was antiquated and malfunctioning, and the soldiery was unwilling and often pushed into duty. Even when consumer goods were scarce, even the most fashion-conscious person was unlikely to risk death for a pair of jeans. The ones are conducting the briefings somehow forgot to disclose that portion. In sum, while the Soviet Union had enough punch to destabilise the globe, military bombast aside significantly, they were exceedingly unlikely to initiate anything.

I recall significantly more anti-Soviet propaganda after the "invasion" of Afghanistan. One military publication in the United States solicited donations to purchase ammunition for the mujahidin. If I recall well, the tagline was "Kill a Communist for Mommy" or something along those lines. I have long wondered if anyone ever contributed, and if so, how much of it ever got to Afghanistan. I guess I am getting at with all of this preface that we were indoctrinated into hating everything Soviet.

This book is the product of several personal interviews done by the author with repatriated troops and civilians, as well as the next of kin of those who were returned in zinc coffins, or zinky lads as they were called. Alexievich has managed to humanise the Soviet soldier for me, and I have realised that soldiers are soldiers everywhere. Our governments instigate wars, forcing soldiers to fight whether they want it or not.

Many Russians were persuaded that their presence in Afghanistan prevented the United States from taking over the country, which was on the verge of invading. Many soldiers were informed they were being flown to another location, only to arrive in Afghanistan when the jet landed. Some people volunteered for the work because Afghan bazaars featured more consumer items

than Soviet stores. Consider this moment: a backwater like Afghanistan produces more than your native nation!

Life was difficult for these warriors. The Soviet army ignored the regular hazing and torture of recruits. Older troops, called "grandfathers," often looted and assaulted recruits. An extract from a soldier's home letter:

"Mum, buy me a puppy and call it Sergeant so I can kill it when I get home." (p.46)

Even female civilian employees were subjected to abuse. They volunteered for duty for various reasons, including patriotism, increased income, and shopping possibilities. It was widely understood that they had come looking for males, whatever their purpose. Unfortunately, many of them felt compelled to take on a guy as protection from the predations of others. It is better to know one demon than many.

Alexeivich has captured the sorrow and heartbreak of those who returned to a society so careless that Afghanistan casualties, Zinky Boys, were not permitted to be buried in the same portion of a cemetery, as if they were a collective dirty secret. I will not even get into the sorrow and betrayal of bereaved moms who were never given enough information about their children's deaths. Despite this, the author's work garnered mixed reviews, and I will leave you with this final quotation from a phone call she received:

"Who needs your dreadful truth? I don't want to know it!!! You want to buy your own glory at the expense of our sons' blood. They were heroes, heroes, heroes! They should have beautiful books written about them, and you're turning them into mincemeat" (p.187)

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CONCLUSION

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