

Historical trauma and memory: the case of the Afghan war

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Abstract

Historical memory is a social phenomenon resulting from a merger of individual and social discourse. The state, civil society and mass media contribute to its formation. The case is exemplified in the historical memory trends related to the Afghan war that the Soviet Union waged from 1979 to 1989. The war suddenly came to public focus in response to the Russian blockbuster «The Ninth company». The examination of the movie and the public campaign to promote it revealed that it was specifically used to alleviate the traumas of post-Soviet wars. The state played a major role in promoting it, but the interference of the media and the veterans of the war provided for a mixed effect on public consciousness.

The theoretical approach: identity construction in a changing society

The phenomenon of historical memory is a product of two components — history that describes the life of nations or other large entities such as Europe or Asia and memory that is locally or even individually embedded and implies retention and a more or less consistent orderly placement of past events. The order and consistency of historical memory is generated through a merger of individual and social discourse. Historical memory concurs with other similar products or collective reflectivity — oral history or collective memory. Historical memory differs from the two by prioritizing events in line with their relevance and political importance. It is but natural that historical events have a varying degree of influence on individual lives, but big events are always transcendent in respect to an individual, their effect is pondered and evaluated regardless of a degree of individual involvement in them. The potential for historical memory to influence attitudes and values is inevitably placed at the center of political maneuvering with involvement of the state and its representatives, political parties, minorities and other groups with vested interests. The political aspect of historical memory manipulation is well described by the French sociologist A. Thiess in her article on the contemporary French historical controversies. (Thiess, 2010) With the coming to power of M. Sarkozy the French state made an about turn in its treatment of history and its efforts to explore the recent past. The State became a sponsor of policies aiming to unify the nation and imbue it with patriotic feeling of pride over its past. This led to pressure on historians to blur their vision of certain periods and events of history and press forwards other events. The idea of nationwide solidarity demanded that some parts of history be placed in the forefront and others pushed to the brim of public debate. The policy caused a wave of protests from the historians and predictably from ethnic minorities who suspected that new focus might undermine their claims to their own ethnic history. The uproar over the government's attempt to return to the «one nation — one history» approach was interwoven with a much subtler subject of national and ethnic identities. History

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and historical memory were urged to shed the guise of objectivity and become the obvious raw material for national identity construction. Common national identity has always been and remains now an important attribute of a modern nation — the only basis, cause of development and purpose of social and political development that guarantees satisfaction of needs of all citizens in production and distribution of resources. (Smith, 1998) National identity is a symbolic representation of the nation and a way of axiomatic justification of many existing norms and values. It is hard to explain to a soldier who lives in the northern part of a country why he should serve in the southern part unless he is aware that the population there is «his people» and the history of the region is part of the overall history of «his people» and «his country». It might be hard to convince the rich to pay a large part of their income in the form of taxes unless they accept that fact that they have to share their wealth with their brethren and contribute to their country's development. The representations are instrumental in unifying the nation, this is the rationale that guides the policies of the French government. The necessity to construct a unified national identity becomes even more of a necessity in the times crisis when the role of the national state rises and the role of international organizations tends to shrink. The more the European and other nations felt the impact of the crisis, the more they stressed the importance of national identity building and national history reconstruction.

The Russian Federation met with the same set of problems, but their urgency for the Russian state was even greater. Russia is a fairly new state that emerged as many other states in the Eastern part of Eurasia as a result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Soviet state had a large measure of control over the process of identity construction and tended to use only those events that bespoke of the glorious onward march of socialism. The socialist revolution, the civil war that followed it, industrialization and collectivization, the victory in the Second World war, launching of the first man into space — all these events were seen as underlying the identity of the Soviet man. The Russian Federation emerged as a result of the Soviet Union's inglorious collapse and there were few elements of the old identity that it could import directly into the new one. In the context of the defeat of the so-called real socialism it was not longer possible to use revolution or socialist achievement themes as a basis for national solidarity. Only a war or wars, to be precise, could be addressed to as a source of national inspiration in an age of diminished ideological resources. The second world war was recognized as one event that a) is an indisputable instance of national glory, b) a struggle in which Russia and countries of the West fought together against evil forces of oppression, c) a fight that liberated nations of Europe and Asia enabling them to sustain national existence. The preservation of the War memory became so important that the Russian authorities set up a special commission that was entrusted with the task of dealing with any possible falsifications of history, the history of the Second World War *prima face*. The commission's defined its objectives as «analysis and summarizing of information on the falsification of history of the Russian Federation purporting to diminish its international prestige» and «elaboration of policies to counteract falsification of the history of the Russian Federation detrimental to the interests of the Russian Federation»¹. The presidential commission was to sit in session twice a year, and that sheer fact meant that only falsifications that could be regarded as «gross» could become part of its agenda.

It explains in part why the commission was inactive when a new historical clash occurred, this time over a textbook for students of the historical department of Moscow state university. The textbook written by two MSU professors Barsenkov A.I. and Vdovin A.S. attempted to portray the history of the 20th century Russia in ethnic terms as a history of relations between ethnic Russians and other nationalities inhabiting the country. (Barsenkov, Vdovin, 2005) The ethnic angle led to a bias that was condemned by the Public chamber of the Russian Federation — an organ whose main task is to mediate between the state and society. The textbook was attacked by the authorities of the Chechen republic who claimed that the book disparaged the

¹ <http://archive.kremlin.ru/articles/216485.shtml>



Chechens by presenting them as a nation of traitors. They expressed an outrage that the data that portrayed the Chechens as deserters came from the unreliable sources — the archives of the NKVD (the Stalin's secret police). They also threatened to start legal proceedings against the two historians, arrest them and deport them to the Chechen republic where they might face criminal charges. The reaction of the Chechen authorities was predictable since for about a decade they had been trying to build up a new Russo-Chechen identity that met the aspirations of the federal authorities to create a new multicultural nation on the basis of existing panoply of ethnic cultures. The narrative of the MSU textbook dealt a heavy blow to these attempts and undermined the federal policies.

The criticism of the textbook caused a backlash from a group of public figures and social scientists who believed that pressure on historians was a return to the old times when only one viewpoint approved by the party could be voiced in public. Defending his colleagues, A. Nikonov, another professor of history of the MSU echoed the French historians: «You can write your own books on history if you do not like this one. Let them be conceptual, full of facts and other data. We shall evaluate them. We have the right to such an evaluation in the framework of scientific discussion»². Professor Nikonov questioned the very idea that there is only one possible treatment of history; he insisted that history ought to be a multicultural field of knowledge where each party had the right to voice its viewpoint and criticize its opponents. He suggests that the state and liberal mass media leave historians to do their job and iron their contradictions out in their inner circle. This call is likely to be left unheeded. In a country deeply divided into the prospering few and the impoverished many the authorities will continue to look to historians to create a unifying narrative. It is obvious that on the road to such a narrative the factual side of history will often be bent to fit the new line of thinking.

Wars, transition traumas and identity

It may seem the debate on the outcome of the Second World War, the clash between liberal and conservative historians is of little concern for ordinary Russian citizens. However there is ample proof that it is not so. The population of the country is still agonizing over the past and present traumatized by the passage towards the market and the loss of economic, social and cultural capital that occurred in the period of reforms. The concept of trauma was first introduced by J. Alexander and P. Stompka who used the metaphor to describe the painful process of adaptation that an ordinary citizen goes through in the period of transition from socialism to capitalism. (Alexander, 2004) Stompka claimed that a citizen of a socialist country was not only an individual repressed by the totalitarian system, he was also its product imbued with its norms and values. Transition to openness and market economy was likely for him or her to turn into a traumatic experience that relates practices to the transformation of the value system — from a set of values presupposing conformity and reticence to values of openness and individualism. There is however another side to the social trauma that has more to do with psycho-history and stereotyping than with flexibility and change. The trauma can also be regarded in Durkheimian terms — as a pattern of relations between an individual and society. E. Durkheim elaborated a theoretical foundation for an understanding of this subject in two of his works — «Suicide» and «Elementary forms of religious life». In «Suicide» he called for the recognition of suicide as a regular social phenomenon that could serve as an indicator of the state of social order. There is a possibility that under certain circumstances an individual finds him or herself in a state of anomie. Anomie is tantamount to alienation from society and its basic values. It can occur in situations when an individual has to relate to a social milieu that is different in terms of norms and values from the one to which he or she belonged in the past. Durkheim outlines two ways in which such an estrangement may take place migration and social change. Migration is an obvious case of intercultural mobility: an individual seeking to better his or

² <http://www.apn.ru/publications/article23159.htm>

her life chances or escape a repressive regime finds him or herself in a strange cultural environment infused with meanings difficult to comprehend. He or she has an apparent problem linking him or herself to others, suffers from loneliness and tends to regard his or her conditions as critical.

The other case if exemplified by a society in a state of flux. In this case Durkheim holds an individual constant. It is society represented by an institutional structure that drifts away from an individual leaving him or her in an axiological quandary. In this case as in others suicide is extreme, though typical response. More often an individual resorts to what N.Smelser defines as psychological defense strategies. The first of them is denial. An individual facing a threat of exposure chooses to deny what he or she has done, refuses to admit that a crime or some other shameful deed has been committed. Cultural defense mechanisms work in a way that is similar to individual reactions. The authorities, mass media or public opinion decline to accept responsibility for acts committed against other countries or inside the country against certain «culprits». It is not infrequent that the mass media join the authorities to deny acts committed against other countries or, for that matter, against certain «targets» inside the country. The second strategy presupposes that process of rationalization. Some actors make a deliberate effort to argue certain moments of the current situation presenting them as natural, unavoidable and even desirable. In this way an act of aggression is camouflaged as an act of defense or trespassing caused by the sheer logic of the situation. The third strategy is often characterized as projection: feelings of guilt or remorse make the perpetrator of a crime and other ungainly act seek justification for it in a larger context. In a societal discourse projection reveals itself in the desire to portray a certain situation as «common», «repeating itself in other countries» or «culturally and historically determined». The fourth vector of coping with a trauma can be defined as sublimation. In a cultural context sublimation is also quite common, though rarely identified as such. It is in most cases a replacement of the feeling of guilt by portrayal of the situation as a case of martyrdom. There is long standing religious tradition of using martyrs to justify whatever acts that were committed by them in the past.

Post-Soviet war traumas: the inevitable present

The post-Soviet history abounds in traumatic experiences, but the experience that keeps having both long and short term effects was the first Chechen war (1994–1996). The Russian army was in disarray in the wake of dramatic reforms when the president Eltsin ordered it to restore the constitutional order in the secessionist republic. At first the government tried to achieve its goals by a covert operation. The Russia army officers and soldiers were sent into Chechnya in the guise of local forces ostensibly fighting to help the local parliament disbanded by the nationalists. The operation ended in disorganized defeat of the Russian Federation forces, many soldiers and officers were captured and made public confessions in the presence of Russian and foreign TV cameras. They revealed that they had been sent across the border as part of a covert action to overthrow the secessionist general Dudaev and restore Chechnya's ties with Russia. The second stage of the drama came when the Russian army entered the republic in full force. The Russian military leaders claimed that the strength of the Russian forces was such that it could «defeat the rebels by one regiment of paratroopers». However, the reality of the Chechen resistance belied such brash claims. The Chechens secessionists led by former Soviet officers well trained in guerilla warfare put up stiff resistance to federal troops. The army suffered terrible losses and, in its turn, inflicted heavy casualties both on the guerillas and civil population. The memoirs published after the war reveal a feeling of utmost disappointment of the part of officers or soldiers who participated in the march on Grozny in 1994. V. Mironov, author of a novel describing the storming of Grozny, sums up the feelings of the soldiers and officers.

«Their Power lets them push the youth to die for their old ideals and, after having satisfied their thirst for blood, they'd be stealing again left, right and forward whatever's left there. We,



officers, the witnesses of their madness, are pretty much done too. They'll do to us what they did to the veterans of the Afghan campaign. They'll portray us as idols, and then would demote us to the status of drunks and drug junkies. Those vets are now officially murderers that had gashed off peaceful Afghan population unable to take on a decent force. Now they're shut out, blamed for everything. Their official diagnosis the "Afghan syndrome". Jesus, how many more of those "syndromes" they've forgotten to mention. Every hotspot is another "syndrome". Too many, if ask me, even for such large state like Russia»³.

It is at this point the battle in Chechnya starts invoking memories of the war fought by the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The Afghan war lasted for ten years and ended in an inglorious withdrawal, the veterans of that conflict shown up by the Russian media as occupiers waging a war against civilians. The character of the novel, a young Russian officer, feels deeply injustice done to him and other Russian soldiers. He realizes that they are being used, their lives are being wasted, and after the war they would face a life in which they would hardly find peace. In the context of the Chechen war the soldier and the state came to be at odds with each other:

«Because your government sent you into this butchery and then, chucked you out, the still living ones as well as all the dead. It has bedamned and forgotten you. There was nothing there. All this was your paranoid hallucination caused by the posttraumatic syndrome and multiple concussions. But don't you worry. We'll fix you up in the mental home in about five years, come on in. Whatever remains of the army, we'll disperse and downsize, so that they don't tell anybody anything and debate our actions. Same as witnesses after a crime, they'll remove the military after each of their "salvaging operations". Like they did after Afghanistan, Germany, and so on. Because they knew for sure, the Army can turn around and see that the real enemy is right here in Moscow»⁴.

As captain Mironov predicted the war resulted for many in a post-traumatic stress syndrome, the soldiers of the war came back not only with painful memories but with traumatic experience of post-war adaptation:

«"Fire! Smoke cutting my eyes. The APC is burning. I am burning! Cartridge boxes bursting. Must get out, jump now! I can't! My legs! My legs are caught! I am burning!!! The pain!!! No!!! Harley! Harley, you fucker!!! Pull me out!!! Can't stand any more!!!"

"Den! Den!"

I sit bolt upright on the bed. At home. The sheet is wet, I am wet too. I'm drenched in sweat, damn it.

"You're keeping me awake again. You're shouting in your sleep"

It's my brother. We share a room. He hasn't had a quiet night since my discharge. Unless you count the nights when I don't come home. But that isn't often.

"Sorry, Serge"

"It's OK.."

I go to the bathroom, put my head under the tap. I don't want to sleep any more. I wouldn't sleep at all if I had the choice. Mum asks why I drink so much. 'Cause I don't dream when I collapse drunk, that's why»⁵.

Case of projecting

P. Stompka views trauma as inevitable concomitants of transition to what is a «natural order» — democracy and a market proven to be the most effective way of running a complex economy. In most East European states there was little choice but to streamline economies in accordance with the demands of the European Union and make a painful but short leap towards a capitalist future. The change relied on the «sacral» that incorporated perceptions of Europe as their true identity that would one day replace the false identity of state socialism and

³ http://artofwar.ru/m/mironow_w_n/text_0180.shtml

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ http://artofwar.ru/b/butow_d/dreams_eng.shtml

alliance with the Soviet Union. The European identity was bolstered by activity of the prosperous private sector of local economies, local intellectuals, the Church, and memories, still recent, of the past when these countries had been the still waters of «large Europe».

In the Russian Federation the perception of the past and its relations to the present was more controversial. The «sacred» of the Russian mind incorporated achievements and breakthroughs of the socialist period — industrialization, eradication of illiteracy, development of world class science and ultimately creation of a superpower. The liberal criticism of the past presenting it as a period of repression and loss was itself inconsistent and controversial: rejection of the repressive policies was conducive to a more lenient evaluation of the pre-revolutionary period full of repressive practices, corruption and loss. The arguments against the Soviet past began to look even more dubious in the light of losses sustained by the Russian Federation in the period of transition. The period had none of the advantages of the transition in other former socialist states that resulted in their reunification with Europe or, as in China, in high rate of economic growth. Comparing the Russian reforms with the way reforms were pursued in other countries M.Burawoy rightly qualified them as a failure. (Burawoy, 2000) It was obvious that coping with a failure became a task of utmost importance for the Russian ruling elite: its response was a cultural policy that conducted a critical reevaluation of the past with reliance on proven defense mechanisms — denial, projection and rationalization. This policy dictated the necessity to deal with the trauma and humiliation of the Chechen wars and at the same time discredit the Soviet past as a period no less traumatic than the present. It is with these goals in mind that the movie «The Ninth Company» was manufactured and presented to mass viewers.

The movie set out to highlight a tragic event of the Afghan war — the heroic resistance and destruction of an entire company guarding a pass in the mountains that the Soviet army was supposed to use to withdraw from Afghanistan. To a great extent the movie copycats classical American movies — «Apocalypse Now», «Platoon», «Rambo». Its narrative goes through stages from an early part that describes the training of Russian soldiers prior to their overseas mission and ultimately to a final battle against the overwhelming enemy in which all of them lose their lives. The narrative intermittently stops to put up flashbacks of the soldiers' life before their conscription into the ranks of the Soviet army. That life is described realistically as a train of events with loves and hatreds, hopes and disappointments. In each soldier's life there is hardship, conflict and promise as should be in the life of any young man in a country that is officially at peace with other countries. The draft tears them apart from the context of their previous lives and claims from them qualities that they have not been able to develop. Their individualist self-centeredness has to be replaced with collective solidarity; their joint survival now depends on their ability to quickly learn to act in a concerted way. There is a kulturtreger on the scene who ruthlessly leads the conscripts to a desired outcome — sergeant who in a matter of weeks prepares them to fulfill the mission and save their brethren. The enemy is portrayed with a wide brush — as an anonymous, cunning and ruthless force that declines to accept the Soviet soldiers as human beings and therefore does not deserve to be treated as ones (Picture 1).



Picture 1. A snapshot from the film «The Ninth company»: the attacking enemy. In the first row the commanding officer with «western attributes» (black-spectacled), obviously trained by western instructors.



Towards the end the movie runs to its climax. Early in the morning on a bright sunny day when the Soviet army prepares to evacuate from Afghanistan, the ninth company to which the soldiers belong is attacked by a well-trained kamikaze unit of the mojaheddin or «spirits» as were called by the Soviets (the same word came to be used in the Chechen war to describe separatist guerrillas). Enemy fighters swarm to the height occupied by the company, the soldiers have to fight back, but their ability to put up resistance is undermined by a breakdown of communication link with the headquarters and lack of support from other units. The battle ends with a total destruction of the company, only one of its soldiers goes through the carnage alive. Assistance comes too late; the survivor learns that during hasty preparations of withdrawal the commanding officers forgot about the company condemning them to die at the hands of the rapacious enemy (Picture 2).



Picture 2. A snapshot from the film: the only survivor of the Ninth company: assistance came too late.

The film provoked a lively and sympathetic reaction from many quarters. The President of the Russian Federation V. Putin invited its director F. Bondarchuk to visit him, praised the movie and watched in a rather public demonstrative manner.⁶ Other politicians came up with favorable comments calling it a «the right kind of film stressing patriotism». Ordinary Russian movie-goers, particularly of the young generation assessed the movie as one of the best products of the Russian film industry that «showed the way it happened». The chorus of positive evaluations came up against harsh criticism from those who knew quite well what exactly happened to the Ninth company and how in reality the battle was fought. The influential blogger and movie interpreter Goblin claimed that the film script ran counter to the facts that described the last battle of the Ninth company.⁷ In fact, he claimed, the company not only survived, but also inflicted heavy casualties on the attacking units. The TV channel «Zvezda» (The Star) capitalized the wave of interest to the film by making a four-part documentary on the battle and the war in Afghanistan called «The Ninth Company: the Truth». A large company of the documentary consisted of interviews with soldiers and officers of the Ninth company of the 345th Paratrooper regiment on a mission in Afghanistan. It appeared that the indisputable truth consisted in the fact that the company had fought a fierce battle on the height 3234 it was com-

⁶ Rossiiskaya Gazeta, Federal Issue, № 3919, November 9, 2005.

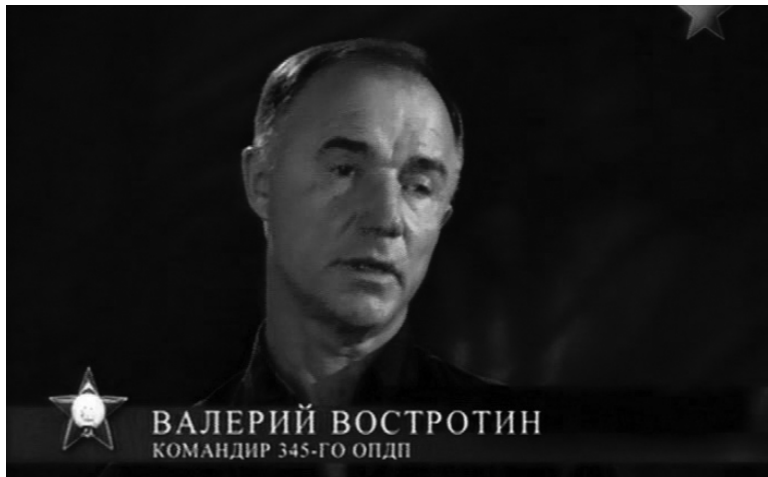
⁷ <http://kino.oper.ru/torture/read.php?t=1045689085>

manded to protect. However the course and the outcome of the battle sharply differed from the script of Bondarchuk's movie (Picture 3).



Picture 3. A snapshot from the documentary: captain Ivan Babenko, the real commander of the Ninth company 20 years later.

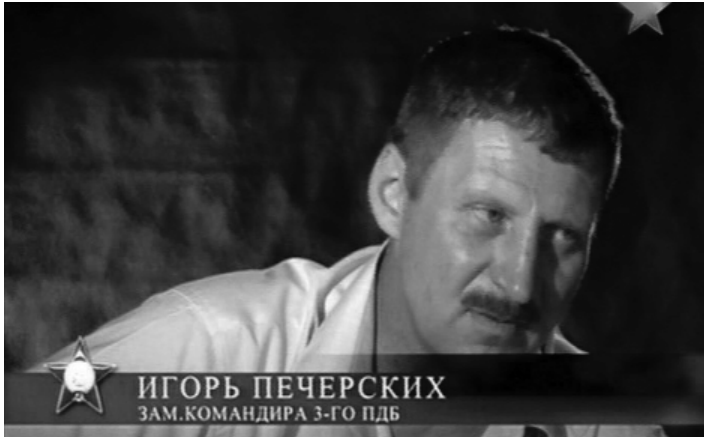
It appears that the headquarters of the special paratrooper regiment closely monitored all activities in the area of the Ninth company deployment. The communication with the Ninth company worked reliably and the news of the attack was immediately passed on to the commanding officers. Though the regiment could not rely on helicopter gunships to provide adequate assistance (mountainous area proved to be an obstacle), they called on artillery units to render support to the fighting unit. The commanding officer showed exceptional skill in guiding heavy artillery barrage: the enemy units were too close; any error on his side could be fatal to his own personnel. The machine-guns were well trained and throughout the battle kept enemy units under deadly fire (Picture 4).



Picture 4. A snapshot from the documentary: colonel Valery Vostrotin, then the commanding officer of the special 345th paratrooper regiment in Afghanistan: we knew what was happening and immediately commanded assistance to the unit under attack.



Dispatching a well-trained reconnaissance company of the regiment laden with munitions and food across mountainous terrain finally tipped the balance in favor of the Ninth company. The enemy stood no chance of surviving the pressure that came from two weathered, well-equipped units (Picture 5).



Picture 5. A snapshot from the documentary: Igor Pechersky, deputy commander of the Third paratrooper battalion: lethal fire came from 120 mm mortars that fired from the territory of Pakistan.

The battle lasted for 12 hours, the Ninth company assisted by the reconnaissance company repelled continuous attacks each time causing heavy losses in the ranks of the attacking units. The company suffered losses: 6 of its soldiers died in action (mostly at the initial phase) 28 were wounded, 9 of them received wound that were qualified as severe. According to Franz Klintsevich, propaganda instructor of the 345th regiment, the losses qualified as heavy by the standards of that particular war. In the ten years of their «international mission» in Afghanistan the Soviet army lost about 15 thousand soldiers and officers, a rather «sparing» number given the scale of the operation (the Russian troops extended their control to most of the Afghan territory) (Picture 6).



Picture 6. A snapshot from the documentary: Andrei Kuznetsov, senior sergeant of the Ninth company: during the battle he shouted anti-Islamic slogans that enraged the enemy and made «the spirits» concentrate fire on his part of the defense line.

The testimony of soldiers and officers of the Ninth Company make it obvious that the movie and the documentary spoke of wars that were in many respects different. The operation in Afghanistan was first unleashed as a standard military procedure of support for a proxy regime in the context of ongoing cold war. The septuagenarian Soviet leadership had few qualms about its possible outcomes could not possibly conjecture what the consequences would be for the army, the nation and the world. Quite soon it became clear that the operation of a limited scale was gradually turning into a major military conflict in which both the superpowers and their regional proxies would be deeply involved. However, when it became obvious that the war was to be a lasting undertaking, the Soviet leadership wary of possible internal discontent insisted that military kept personnel losses at a minimum. The Soviet army could rely on well-trained officers and advanced products of the national defense industries to put this policy into being.

The Russian wars were a different story. The two Chechen wars testified to the Russian leadership's brazen disregard for the lives of Russia citizens, steep decline of the Russian army followed by a drain of skilled officers from its ranks and mass draft evasion on the part of young men eligible for service. The shabby state of the Russian armed forces came to the notice of observers during Russia' conflict with Georgia in August 2008. The political leadership complained that it had to see the through the entire register of top rank army officers to find a single able commander who could lead the 8th army's march into South Ossetia.

Conclusion

The case of the Ninth company sheds light on the major factors that shape historical memory. There are four agents that have an influence on the outcome of the process. Firstly, it is the state that has a vested interest in constructing up a coherent positive narrative out of facts and episodes of national history. As Thies showed, the state has the multiple means to put pressure on professional historians to comply with its like. One of the key resources that the state has at its disposal is funds that it provides for research projects including historical and archeological research, museums, erection and maintenance of monuments etc. The list of resources includes symbolic domination enhanced by the state or state-led propaganda and direct punishment for what could be qualified as «deviation from the positive line of history». A powerful instrument in the hands of the state is political correctness that is often used to discredit those who seek to widen the scope of the discussion by introducing «undesirable» subjects at variance with the official line. Secondly, it is the media that orient itself towards the consumer. Modern media seek out ways to provoke or shock their readers or viewers. New ways of looking at historical events is a common trick to pique the interest of the consumers and lure them into the audience. In authoritarian states or states where historical discourse is heavily influenced by political correctness, the media have to take heed of possible consequences of statements that run counter to the line endorsed by the state and/or vocal political minorities. Thirdly, the formation of historical memory comes under pressure from participants of relevant events, particularly in the case when they organize themselves into vocal political groups and set out to impress upon other agents their line of history. Fourthly, historical memory is influenced by civil society and intellectuals involved in running non-government organizations. It is these groups that often change public evaluation of history by introducing new dimensions of judgment.

The case of the Ninth company shows how the state and its bureaucracies attempt to veil their inefficiencies behind the curtain of pseudo-historical events. However the plan backfires because there are still many survivors of the Afghan war disgruntled not only by the way the state treats them now, but also by contemporary liberal trend to portray the entire Russian history as a sequence of failures and crimes perpetrated by the state. They have a vested inte-



rest in revising the liberal line and rebuilding the view of history as the «glorious past». As often happens in democratic or quasi-democratic states, the media play on both sides, the heat of historical debate lets them keep their audiences in a state of suspense. In the case the independent intellectuals took a critical stance manifest in their rejection of state-sponsored attempts to create «false historical consciousness». It is now increasingly evident that the policy of projecting the fundamental flaws of the contemporary Russian social and economic order into the past meets with stiff public resistance. The Ninth company is likely to remain a film that has been able to impress some of the younger viewers, but it is certainly will not be able to become a centerpiece of discourse on Soviet and post-Soviet Russian wars.

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