

## ZINKY BOYS

From 1979 to 1989, a million Soviet troops and thousands of civilian conscripts were engaged in a war the State denied was taking place. Of the estimated 50,000 casualties, the ones who came home in zinc boxes (the 'Zinky Boys') were often the luckiest, and thousands more were wounded in ways no statistics record. Yet since 1989, a radically altered Soviet society has continued to reject the memory of war and the many lives that were lost. Not for nothing is the Afghanistan war known as 'the Soviet Vietnam'.

A book, which created controversy and outrage when it was first published in the USSR, Zinky Boys is not about the politics of war, but about the people it affected. Officers and men, nurses and prostitutes, mothers whose children will never come home and children who no longer know what 'home' is, describe the beauty of Afghanistan and the brutal army bullying, the shops full of Western goods and the lack of basic equipment, the killing and the mutilation... Brash or baffled, defeated or defiant, each voice contains a note of anger -the anger of those whose innocence has been taken away.

Presenting to us the words of these women and men without judgment - their confusions and contradictions as revealing as their honest self-assessments - Svetlana Alexievich has produced a unique, sometimes harrowing, but unforgettably powerful insight into the realities of war, both in Afghanistan itself and in today's turbulent Soviet society.

### Autobiography:

Svetlana Alexievich is the daughter of a Byelorussian father and a Ukrainian mother. With a degree in journalism from Minsk University, she began her career with a local paper. It was there she discovered that (in her own words) 'the best way to learn about life was through the sound of human voices, through what the ear perceives.' Using the interview as a way of presenting her material, Svetlana Alexievich wrote two books about World War II, and a third, the present volume, about the USSR's war in Afghanistan. She is currently engaged in researching a book about the disaster at Chernobyl.

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Translators' preface

The voices in this book speak against two different backgrounds: the ten-year war in Afghanistan, and a great turbulence at the heart of Soviet society.

The roots of the war go back at least 150 years, to the struggle between Russia and Britain for influence in Central Asia. In the nineteenth century, after two wars with Britain, Afghanistan became a buffer state between British India and Russia. A third war led to independence in 1921. A monarchy, established in 1926, was overthrown in 1973 by Mohammed Daud, who was assassinated in 1978. The new government was headed by Nur Mohammed Taraki and his Marxist People's Democratic Party.

The following year, after two further coups, Babrak Karmal came to power with Soviet backing. This event effectively marked the outbreak of war between the rebels (mujahedin) on one side and the Soviet and Afghan government forces on the other. Mohammed Najibullah, who became President in 1989, has to date survived the complete evacuation of Soviet forces in 1989 and the continuing determination of the rebels to establish an Islamic state. Soviet economic and military aid continues to succor the Najibullah regime on a massive scale. It has been estimated that the conflict has cost approximately one million Afghan lives.

The men and women who express their thoughts and experiences in the following pages need no introduction - they must speak for themselves. The confusion and contradictions displayed by some are as revealing as the honesty and insight of others. As we listen to them, however, we need to bear in mind certain aspects of Soviet life with no immediate parallel in the West.

To begin with, we may find it difficult to envisage the almost complete ignorance in which the Soviet public was kept about the war, at least until the advent of some measure of media freedom (the celebrated glasnost) in the mid-1980s. The information available to ordinary people amounted to a few pat phrases about the 'limited contingent' of Soviet troops and the 'fulfilling of international obligations', together with much anti-American propaganda. True public debate and political opposition of the sort which, at the very least, provides some counterweight to the government version of events in more open societies, simply did not exist.

Another factor, related to this ignorance, was the ruthless secrecy with which news of casualties was treated. This applied not only to the press, but to society in general. To take just two examples: in the hope of obscuring the true impact of the war, some local authorities refused to allow special areas in cemeteries to be set apart for the graves of soldiers killed in Afghanistan; while others forbade the cause and place of death to be stated on gravestones or memorial shields.

Soviet army sources recently stated that the war claimed the lives of some 15,000 military personnel, with more than double that number seriously wounded. In a country of 280 million, and over a ten-year period, this might seem 'acceptable' in the dreadful calculus of modern conflict. Three factors in particular, however, give the lie to any such complacency. First, this was, in the main, a war fought not by professional soldiers but by conscripts aged between 18 and 20, and it was they who suffered the brunt of the casualties (and the dreadful institutionalized bullying inseparable from Soviet army life). Second, the total lack of government accountability meant that there was hardly any informed public discussion of, let alone support for, the war. Third, for obvious reasons of political and military reliability, Soviet forces in Afghanistan were disproportionately - some would say almost entirely - drawn from the non-Islamic republics of the USSR, i.e. Russia, Belorussia, Moldavia, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and the Baltic states. (Many of those who speak to us in the

following pages are. Belorussian, as is Svetlana Alexievich herself.) An additional cause of resentment was the rumored ability of certain privileged members and sections of society to buy their sons out of danger.

Finally, readers without first-hand experience of the Soviet Union may be struck by the almost obsessive interest in imported goods and clothes revealed by a few of the speakers. This simply reflects the fact that in an economy where almost any item used in daily life may be impossible to find, or appallingly shoddy, or just plain drab, such scarce articles can command enormously high prices and confer prestige on their owners.

The men and women who make up this book are very diverse; perhaps all they have in common is that they were affected by the war in Afghanistan. It is no exaggeration to say that they offer us a unique insight into the Soviet condition at a turning-point in the country's history; but they also have something to tell us about our common humanity - and inhumanity.

Post-coup postscript, September 1991:

The infamous attempt to overthrow Gorbachev occurred while this book was in preparation. The whole world saw the TV pictures of the popular resistance to the KGB and Interior Ministry troops who had been ordered to surround and storm Boris Yeltsin and his supporters in the Russian Parliament (the 'White House'). It is fitting to record here that this resistance was immeasurably stiffened by the presence of several hundred Afghan veterans (Afgantsi) who gathered at the scene. Indeed, two of the three young men killed on the night of 20 August were decorated veterans of the Afghanistan war; after the coup was defeated they were honored by Gorbachev and Yeltsin as heroes and martyrs of the new democracy.

Those earthshaking days and their aftermath lend a wholly new and unexpectedly relevant perspective to this book and go some way to temper the almost fascist image with which the Afgantsi have been saddled (to some extent with their own connivance).

JULIA R ROBIN WHITBY.

#### SHORT GLOSSARY

Afgani (slang: afoshki): units of local currency Afgantsi (singular Afganets): Soviet veterans of the war.

APC: armored personnel carrier.

cheki: foreign currency vouchers paid to Soviet personnel abroad as part of, or in addition to, their salaries.

dembel (from Russian dembel, demobilisatsiya): conscript nearing the end of his two years' service.

dukh (abb. of dukhman): member of the mujahedin.

'grandad' (Russian ded): conscript with some considerable part of his two years' service behind him.

'vets'. war veterans.

Asterisked footnotes, and explanatory notes between square brackets, have been added by the translators. The verse renderings of Russian songs and poems are also our own.

JW & RW

Notes from my Diary

14 June 1986

I never want to write another word about the war, I told myself. Long after I'd finished "War is not a Woman", a book about World War II, I could still be upset by the sight of a child with a nosebleed. Out in the country I couldn't bear to watch the fishermen cheerfully throwing their catch on to the sandy riverbank. Those fish, dragged up from the depths of God knows where, with their glassy, bulging eyes, made me want to vomit. I dare say we all have our pain threshold - physical as well as psychological. Well, I'd reached mine. The screech of a cat run over by a car, even the sight of a squashed worm, could make me feel I was going mad. I felt that animals, birds, fish, every living thing had a right to a life of its own.

And then all of a sudden, if you can call it sudden for the war had been going on for seven years...

One day we gave a lift to a young girl. She'd been to Minsk to do some food shopping for her mother. She had a big bag with chicken heads sticking out, I remember, and a shopping-net full of bread, which we put in the boot.

Her mother was waiting for her in the village. Or rather, standing at her garden gate, wailing.

'Mama!' The little girl ran up to her.

'Oh, my baby. We've had a letter. Our Andrey in Afghanistan.

Ohhh... They're sending him home, like they did Ivan Fedorinov. A little child needs a little grave, isn't that what they say? But my Andrey was as big as an oak and over six foot. "Be proud of me Mum, I'm in the Paras now," he wrote to us. Oh, why? .

Why? Can anyone tell me? Why? 'Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows.' (Richard II) Then, last year, something else happened.

I was in the half-empty waitingroom of a bus station. An officer was sitting there with a suitcase, and next to him there was a skinny boy who you could tell from his shaved head was a soldier.

The young soldier was digging in a plant pot (a dry old ficus, I remember it was) with an ordinary kitchen fork. A couple of simple country women went and sat next to them and, out of sheer curiosity, asked where they were going, and why, who were they? It turned out the officer was escorting the soldier home.

He'd gone mad: 'He's been digging ever since we left Kabul.

Whatever he can get hold of he starts digging with. Spade, fork, stick, pen... you name it he'll dig with it.' The boy looked up, muttering: 'Got to hide... I'll dig a trench... won't take me long... brotherly graves we called them... I'll dig a nice big trench for you all... 'It was the first time I'd seen pupils as big as the eyes themselves.

What are people talking about at this moment, seven years in to the war? What are they writing about in the press? About our trade deficit and such geopolitical issues as our imperial interests and our southern borders. We do hear whispered rumours about those letters being sent to jerry-built flats in towns and to picturesque peasant cottages in the villages... followed, a little later, by the zinc coffins themselves, too big to fit into those rabbit-hutches they built in the 1960s. (Khrushchevki, they call them.) Mothers, prostrate with grief over the cold metal coffins, are expected to pull themselves together and give speeches in their collectives, even in schools, exhorting other boys to 'do their patriotic duty'. Newspaper reports with any mention of our casualties are ruthlessly censored. They want us to believe that 'a limited contingent of Soviet forces is helping a fraternal people build the way forward', that they are doing good work in the kishlaks (the local word for villages), that our army doctors are helping the Afghan women to have their babies. Many people believe it. Soldiers on leave take their guitars to the schools and sing of things they should be weeping about.

I had a long talk with one of them. I was trying to get him to admit the awfulness of the choice: to shoot or not to shoot. But we didn't get anywhere: the problem didn't really seem to exist for him. What's good? What's bad? Is it good to 'kill in the name of socialism'? For such young men the limits of morality are defined by the military commands they receive.

Yur Karyakin once wrote: 'We should not judge a man's life by his perception of himself. Such a perception may be tragically inadequate.' And I read something in Kafka to the effect that man was irretrievably lost within himself.

But I don't want to write about war again...

5 - 25 September 1986

Tashkent Airport. An overpowering smell of melons. More like a melon-field than an airport. Two o'clock in the morning. The thermometer says 30 degrees Celsius. Fat, half-wild cats, Afghans they're called, dive fearlessly under the wheels of taxis. Young soldiers, no more than boys, hop about on crutches amidst the sun tanned holiday crowds, the piles of suitcases and crates of fruit. Nobody seems to notice them - they're a familiar sight here, apparently, sleeping and eating on old newspapers and magazines, trying for weeks on end to get a ticket for Saratov, Kazan, Novosibirsk, Voroshilovograd, Kiev, Minsk... How were they crippled? What were they supposed to be defending? Nobody cares. Except one little boy, who can't take his huge eyes off them, and a drunken beggar-woman who goes up to a soldier. 'Come here, love... I'll look after you...' He waves her away with his crutch, but she doesn't seem to mind, just murmurs something sad and womanly.

Some officers are sitting by me, talking about the poor quality of our Soviet-made artificial limbs. And about typhus, cholera and malaria. About how, early on in the war, there were no wells, no field-kitchens, no baths, nothing to wash up with. And about who's taking what home: who's got a video-recorder, and whether it's a Sharp or a Sony. There's a saying, 'War is a stepmother to some and a real mother to others.' I can't forget the way those officers eyed the pretty girls in their low-cut blouses, relaxed and happy after their holidays... Dostoevsky described military men as 'the most unthinking people in the world'.

The stench of a broken lavatory in the little waiting-area for the Kabul flight. It was a long wait. And I'm amazed to see so many women. Snatches of conversation: 'I'm going deaf. First thing I noticed, I couldn't hear bird song.'

For example, I can't hear the yellow hammer properly. I taped it, you know, and I turn it on full blast, but... It's the result of my shellshock. 'You shoot first, and then you find out if it was a woman or a kid... We all have our nightmares...' 'The donkeys over there, they lie down during the shelling, and when it's over, they get up again.' 'What would I be back home! A prostitute? That's what it amounts to. I just want to get enough dough together to buy a flat of my own. Men? What about them? All they do is get drunk.' 'This general was talking about the external deficit and the need to defend our southern borders. He was almost in tears.' 'Bring them sweets. They're just children. That's what they like best - sweets...' 'There was this young officer. When he found out that his leg had been amputated he began to cry. He had a face like a little girl, all rosy and white. I was scared of bodies at first, especially the ones with arms or legs missing, but in the end I got used to them.' That was a woman talking. 'They do take prisoners. They cut off their limbs and apply tourniquets so they won't bleed to death. They leave them like that for our people to pick up the stumps. The stumps want to die, but

they're kept alive.' 'The customs people noticed my bag: "What are you taking home?" - "Nothing." - "Nothing!?" They didn't believe me. Made me strip down to my underwear. Most people bring home two or three suitcases full of stuff.'

'Wake up. You don't want to miss the show, do you? We're over Kabul. We're landing.

... The sound of gun fire. Patrols with automatics and flakjackets inspect our papers.

I didn't want to write about war again, let alone one actually in progress.

There's something immoral, voyeuristic, about peering too closely at a person's courage in the face of danger. Yesterday we had breakfast in the canteen and said hello to the young man on guard-duty. Half an hour later he was killed by a stray fragment of mortar-shell that exploded in the barracks. All day long I tried to recall the face of that boy.

'Fairytale merchants.' That's what they call the journalists and writers here. I'm the only woman in our group. The men can't wait to get to the front. 'Why are you so keen?' I ask one of them.

'It's interesting. I'll be able to say I've been to Salanga. Do a bit of shooting. 'I can't rid myself of the feeling that war is a product of the male nature. I find it hard to fathom.

Stories: 'I fired point-blank and saw how a human skull explodes. I thought to myself: that's my first. After action there are always dead and wounded lying about. No one says anything. I dream of trams here. I dream I'm going home by tram... My favourite memory is of my mother baking pies, and the whole house smelling of sweet pastry... 'I had a good friend, one I got to know here. One day I see his guts trailing over the rocks... I want revenge. 'We were waiting for this caravan. We waited for two or three days, lying in hot sand, had to shit wherever we could. After three days you go crazy. That first burst of firing, you give it to them with such hate... After the cease-fire, we discovered the caravan was carrying bananas and jam. We ate ourselves stupid... 'To write (or tell) the whole truth about oneself is a physical impossibility, according to Pushkin.

'Revenge for Malkin!' scrawled in red paint on a tank.

In the middle of the road a young Afghan woman kneels by her dead child, howling. I thought only wounded animals howled like that.

We drive past devastated villages. They remind me of ploughed fields. The shapeless mounds of mud, family homes not long ago, frighten me more than the darkness which may be concealing enemy snipers.

At the hospital I watched a Russian girl put a teddy bear on an Afghan boy's bed. He picked up the toy with his teeth and played with it, smiling. He had no arms. 'Your Russians shot him,' his mother told me through the interpreter. 'Do you have kids? A boy or a girl?' I couldn't make out whether her words expressed more horror or forgiveness.

There are many stories of the cruelty with which the mujahedin treat our POWs. It is, literally, a different era here - the fourteenth century, according to their calendars.

In Lermontov's A Hero of Our Time, Maximych says of the mountain-tribesman who has killed Valla's father: 'Of course, according to their lights he was completely in the right' - although from the Russian's point of view the deed was quite bestial.

Lermontov here pinpointed the amazing ability of Russians to put themselves into other people's shoes - to think according to 'their' lights, in fact.

Stories: 'We captured some terrorists and interrogated them: "Where are your arms dumps?" No answer. Then we took a couple of them up in helicopters: "Where are they? Show us!" No answer.

We threw one of them on to the rocks... 'They killed my friend. Later I saw some of them laughing and having a good time. Whenever I see a lot of them together, now, I start shooting. I shot up an Afghan wedding, I got the happy couple, the bride and groom. I'm not sorry for them - I've lost my friend'.

In Dostoevsky's novel Ivan Karamazov observes: 'No animal can be as cruel, so exquisitely and artistically cruel, as man. 'Yes, and I suspect we prefer to shut our eyes and ears to such truth. In every war, whether it's fought in the name of Julius Caesar or Joseph Stalin, people kill each other. It's killing, sure enough, but we don't like to think of it as such: even in our schools, for some reason, the education is officially described not as patriotic but as military patriotic education. I say 'for some reason', but there's no secret about it: the aim is military socialism and a militarised country. And do we really want it any other way? People shouldn't be subjected to such extremes of experience.

They just can't take it. In medicine it's called 'sharp end experience' - in other words, experimenting on the living.

Today someone quoted Tolstoy's phrase that 'man is fluid'.

This evening we switched on the cassette-recorder and heard Afgantsi songs - written and sung by veterans of this war. Childish, unformed voices, trying to sound like Vissotsky\*, croaked out: 'The sunset on the kishlak like a great big bomb'; 'Who needs glory? I want to live - that's all the medal I need'; 'Why are we killing - and getting killed?'; 'Why've you betrayed me so, sweet Russia?'; 'I'm already forgetting their faces', 'Afghanistan, our duty and our universe too'; 'Amputees like big birds hopping one-legged by the sea'; 'He doesn't belong to anyone now he's dead.

There's no hatred in his face now he's dead'.

Last night I had a dream: some of our soldiers are leaving Afghanistan and I'm among those seeing them off. I go up to one boy, but he's got no tongue, he's dumb. I can see hospital pyjamas under his army jacket. I ask him something but he just writes his name: 'Vanechka, Vanechka... ' I remember that name, Vanechka, so clearly. His face reminds me of a young lad I'd talked to that afternoon, who kept saying over and over again: 'Mum's waiting for me at home. 'For the last time we drive through Kabul's dead little streets, past the familiar posters adorning the city centre: 'Communism - Our Bright Future'. 'Kabul - City of Peace'; 'People and Party United'. Our posters, printed on our presses, and our Lenin standing here with his hand raised...

At the airport we came across a film-crew we knew. They'd been filming the loading of the 'black tulips', as they're known here. They wouldn't look into our eyes as they described how the dead 'sometimes have to be dressed in ancient uniforms, even jodhpurs and so on from the last century; sometimes, when there aren't even enough old uniforms available, they're put in their coffins completely naked. The coffins are made of shabby old wood, held together with rusty nails. Casualties waiting to be shipped are put in cold storage, where they give off a stench of rotting wild boar. 'Who'll believe me if I write of such things.

15 May 1988

My calling as a writer involves me in talking to many people and examining many documents. Nothing is more fantastic than reality. I want to evoke a world not bound by the laws of ordinary verisimilitude but fashioned in my own image. My aim is to describe feelings about the war, rather than the war itself. What are people thinking? What do they want, or fear? What makes them happy? What do they remember? All we

know about this war, which has already lasted twice as long as World War II, is what 'they' consider safe for us to know. We have been protected from seeing ourselves as we really are and from the fear that such understanding would bring. 'Russian writers have always been more interested in truth than beauty,' wrote Nikolai Berdyaev. Our whole life is spent in the search for truth, especially nowadays, whether at our desks, or on the streets, at demos, even at dinner parties. And what is it we literary people cogitate upon so interminably? It all comes down to the question, Who we are, and where are we going? And it dawns on us that nothing, not even human life, is more precious to us than our myths about ourselves. We've come to believe the message, drummed into us for so long, that we are superlative in every way, the finest, the most just, the most honest. And who ever dares express the slightest doubt is guilty of treachery, the one unforgivable sin! From a history book I've been reading: 'On 20 January 1801 a Cossack expeditionary force, under the command of Vassily Orlov, was ordered to spearhead the conquest of India. They were given one month to reach Orenburg [in the Urals], and a further three to gain the Indus River via Bukhara and Khiva.'

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\* Vladimir Vissotsky, a dissident singer and song-writer who dared to express what millions thought. He died in 1980, but is still vividly remembered.

These 30,000 Cossacks crossed the Volga and penetrated deep into the Kazakh steppes.'\*

From Pravda, 7 February 1989:

'The almond trees were in blossom in Termez [a Soviet town on the Afghan border]; but even without so generous a gift from Nature the inhabitants of this ancient town could never forget these February days as the most joyful and splendid of their lives.

'An orchestra played as the Nation welcomed the return of her sons. Our boys were coming home after fulfilling their international obligations. For ten years Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan repaired, rebuilt and constructed hundreds of schools, technical colleges, over thirty hospitals and a similar number of nursery schools, some 400 blocks of flats and 35 mosques. They sank dozens of wells and dug nearly 150 kilometres of irrigation ditches and canals. They were also engaged in guarding military and civilian installations in Kabul.

'Berdyaev again: 'I have always been my own man, answerable to no one.' Something which can't be said of us Soviet writers. In our day truth is always at the service of someone or something - either the interests of the Revolution, or the dictatorship of the proletariat, or some brutal dictator himself, or the Party, or the first or second five-year plan, or the latest Congress... Dostoevsky insisted: 'The truth is more important than Russia'.

'Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ' (St Matthew, 24:4,5). Russia has had to suffer so many false Messiahs - too many to mention.

I ask myself and others too, this single question: how has the courage in each of us been extinguished? How have 'they' managed to turn our ordinary boys into killers, and do whatever they want with the rest of us?

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\* The unspoken message here is that this force never reached its destination, and that the Emperor Paul I was assassinated in a coup partly provoked by such adventurism.

But I'm not here to judge what I've seen and heard. My aim is simply to reflect the world as it really is.

Getting to grips with this war today means facing much wider issues, issues of the life and death of humanity. Man has finally achieved the evil ambition of being able to kill us all at a stroke.

Nowadays it is no secret that 100,000 Soviet troops were deployed in Afghanistan every year. Over ten years, that adds upto 1,000,000. The war can be described in neat statistical terms: so many bullets and shells spent, so many armoured cars and helicopters destroyed, so many uniforms torn to shreds. How much has all this cost us? Fifty thousand dead and wounded. A figure you may believe or disbelieve, because we all know how well officials can count. The dead of World War II are still being counted and buried...

Fragments of conversations: 'Even at night I'm afraid of blood, in my dreams... I can't even bear to step on a beetle... 'Who can I tell all this to? Who'd want to listen? As the poet Boris Slutsky put it: 'When we returned from the war I saw we were needed no more.' I have the whole Table of Elements in my body. I'm still wracked by malaria. Not long ago I had a few teeth pulled, one after the other, and in my pain and shock I began to talk. The dentist, a woman, looked at me almost in disgust: "A mouth full of blood, and he wants to talk..." At that moment I realised I would never be able to talk honestly about anything again. Everyone thinks of us like that: mouths full of blood, and we want to talk. 'That's why I haven't used people's real names in this book.

Some asked for confidentiality; and there are others whom I can't expose to the reproach of 'a mouth full of blood, and he wants to talk'. Are we going to react to this moral crisis as we always have done in the past, by attaching blame to a few individuals in order to exonerate the rest of us? No! We are all accessories to this crime.

But I did record their names, if only in my diary, in case my cast of characters wish to be recognised one day: Sergei Amirkhanian, Captain; Vladimir Agapov, 1st Lt., guncrew leader; Tatiana Belozerskikh, civilian employee; Victoria V.

Bartashevich, mother of Private Yuri Bartashevich, killed in action; private Dmitri Babkin, gunlayer; Maya Ye. Babuk, mother of Nurse

Svetlana Babuk, killed in action; Maria T. Bobkova, mother of Private Leonid Bobkov, killed in action; Olimpiada R. Bogush, mother of Private Victor Bogush, killed in action; Victoria S. Valovich, mother of ist Lt. Valery Valovich, killed in action; Tatiana Gaisenko, nurse; Vadim Glushkov, ist Lt., interpreter; Captain Gennadi Gubanov, pilot; Ina S. Golovneva, mother of ist Lt. Yuri Golovnev, killed in action; Major Anatoli Devyatyarov, political officer of an artillery regiment; Private Denis L., grenadier; Tamara Dovnar, widow of ist Lt. Petr Dovnar; Yekaterina N.P., mother of Major Alexander P., killed in action; Private Vladimir Yerokhovets; Sofia G. Zhuravleva, mother of Private Alexandr Zhuravlev, killed in action; Natalya Zhestovskaya, nurse; Maria O. Zilfigarova, mother of Private Oleg Zilfigarov, killed in action; ist Lt. Vadim Ivanov, platoon leader, engineer; Galina F. Ilchenko, mother of Private Alexandr Ilchenko, killed in action; Private Yevgeny Krasnik, armoured car gunner; Konstantin M., military adviser; Sergeant-Major Yevgeny Kotelnikov, medical instructor in an intelligence unit; Private Alexandr Kostakov, sig-naller; x st Lt. Alexandr Kuvshinnikov, mortar-platoon commander; Nadezhda S. Kozlova, mother of Private Andrei Kozlov, killed in action; Marina Kiseleva, civilian employee; Vera F. K., mother of Private Nikolai K., killed in action; Private Taras Kets-mur; Major Petr Kurbanov (mountain infantry battalion); CSMVassily Kubik; Private Oleg Lelyushenko, grenadier; Private Alex-andr Leletko; Sergei Loskutov, army surgeon; Sergeant ValeryLissichenko, signaller; Vera Lysenko, civilian employee; MajorYevgeny S. Mukhortov, battalion commander, and his son Andrei, 2nd Lt.; Lydia Ye. Mankevich, mother of Sergeant Dmitri Manke-vich, killed in action; Galina Mlyavaya, widow of Captain StepanMlyavy; Private Vladimir Mikholap, gunner; Captain AlexandrNikolayenko, helicopter flight-commander; Oleg L., helicopter pilot; Natalya Orlova, civilian employee; Galina Pavlova, nurse; Private Vladimir Pankratov, reconnaissance company; PrivateVitaly Ruzhentsev, driver; Private Sergei Russak, tank crew; estLt. Mikhail Serotin, pilot; est Lt. Alexandr Sukhorukov (mountaininfantry battalion); Lt. Igor Savinsky, armoured car platoon-leader; Sergeant Timofei Smirnov, gunner; Valentina K. Sanko, mother of Private Valentin Sanko, killed in action; Lt-Col. Vladimir Simanin; Sergeant Tomas M., infantry platoon commander; Leonid I. Tatarchenko, father of Private Igor Tatarchenko, killed in action; Captain Vladimir Ulanov; Tamara Fadeyev, doctor and bacteriologist; Ludmilla Kharitonchik, widow of st Lt. Yuri Kharitonchik, killed in action; Galina Khaliulina, civilian employee; Major Valery Khudyakov; Sergeant Valentina Yakov-lova, commander of secret unit.12.

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14 June 1986

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'Mama!' The little girl ran up to her.

'Oh, my baby. We've had a letter. Our Andrey in Afghanistan.

Ohhh... They're sending him home, like they did Ivan Fedorinov. A little child needs a little grave, isn't that what they say? But my Andrey was as big as an oak and over six foot. "Be proud of me Mum, I'm in the Par as now," he wrote to us. Oh, why? .

Why? Can anyone tell me? Why? 'Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows.' (Richard II) Then, last year, something else happened.

I was in the half-empty waiting room of a bus station. An officer was sitting there with a suitcase, and next to him there was a skinny boy who you could tell from his shaved head was a soldier.

The young soldier was digging in a plant pot (a dry old ficus, I remember it was) with an ordinary kitchen fork. A couple of simple country women went and sat next to them and, out of sheer curiosity, asked where they were going, and why, who were they? It turned out the officer was escorting the soldier home.

He'd gone mad: 'He's been digging ever since we left Kabul.

Whatever he can get hold of he starts digging with. Spade, fork, stick, pen... you name it he'll dig with it.' The boy looked up, muttering: 'Got to hide... I'll dig a trench... won't take me long... brotherly graves we called them... I'll dig a nice big trench for you all... 'It was the first time I'd seen pupils as big as the eyes themselves.

What are people talking about at this moment, seven years in to the war? What are they writing about in the press? About our trade deficit and such geopolitical issues as our imperial interests and our southern borders. We do hear whispered rumors about those letters being sent to jerry-built flats in towns and to picturesque peasant cottages in the villages... followed, a little later, by the zinc coffins themselves, too big to fit into those rabbit-hutches they built in the 1960s. (Khrushchevki, they call them.) Mothers, prostrate with grief over the cold metal coffins, are expected to pull themselves together and give speeches in their collectives, even in schools, exhorting other boys to 'do their patriotic duty'. Newspaper reports with any mention of our casualties are ruthlessly censored. They want us to believe that 'a limited contingent of Soviet forces is helping a fraternal people build the way forward', that they are doing good work in the kishlaks (the local word for villages), that our army doctors are helping the Afghan women to have their babies. Many people believe it. Soldiers on leave take their guitars to the schools and sing of things they should be weeping about.

I had a long talk with one of them. I was trying to get him to admit the awfulness of the choice: to shoot or not to shoot. But we didn't get anywhere: the problem didn't really seem to exist for him. What's good? What's bad? Is it good to 'kill in the name of socialism'? For such young men the limits of morality are defined by the military commands they receive.

Yuri Karyakin once wrote: 'We should not judge a man's life by his perception of himself. Such a perception may be tragically inadequate.' And I read something in Kafka to the effect that man was irretrievably lost within himself.

But I don't want to write about war again...