



**UNDERSTANDING THE AFGHAN WAR IN MODERN
RUSSIAN LITERATURE**

Mirotin Oleg Dmitrievich

Teacher, Termez State Pedagogical Institute, Uzbekistan

Nurmamatov Bobur Batirovich

Teacher, Termez State Pedagogical Institute, Uzbekistan

INTRODUCTION

These works are described and analyzed with a two-fold purpose: to explore creative trends found in the literature of this subject, and to evaluate the extent to which the genre of Afghan War literature in Russian has changed over the past decade. In order to provide a context for this literature, the introduction describes the method of socialist realism as it applies to military themes, and the legacy of World War Two novels in Russian.

The article provides a brief history of Russian-Afghan relations, and an account of the ten-year intervention. The second chapter documents the dissolution of official censorship during the 1980s, revealing dissent over the Soviet military role in Afghanistan. Chapter Three discusses the evolution of the genre of publicistic writing, and documents its unprecedented frankness through revelations made in Soviet journalistic investigations. Chapter Four provides an overview of song and poetry about the conflict, beginning with *magnitizdat* produced by amateur songwriters, and later including works by professional poets. Chapter Five discusses novels and short stories about the war. A range of fictional works is traced, from propagandistic portrayals, both pro- and anti-Soviet, to non-ideological, personal interpretations which incorporate lyricism, satire, and fantasy. Chapter Six focuses on the works of Aleksandr Prokhanov, a writer who initially used his fiction to support the war effort, and whose oeuvre charts the disintegration of Party consensus on interpretation and depiction of the events in Afghanistan.

The final three chapters treat the works of Oleg Ermakov, whose lyricism and stylistic experimentation mark a new direction for recent Russian war fiction. The analysis shows Afghan War literature to signal a radical break with recent official Soviet military writing as shaped by socialist realism. This break is evident in the frankness and subjectivity of publicistic writing, and the anti-war sentiment found in a significant minority of published songs and poems. In particular, Oleg Ermakov's prose continues the past legacy of unofficial, dissident war fiction.

My subject matter, however, will also include publicistic writing, based on its inclusion by earlier Russian critics of the post-World War Two era as a traditional element of Soviet military literature. In addition, I have included in this study emigre authors, as well as citizens of the former Soviet Union, who have chosen to treat the Afghan War. This





inclusion is due to the recent breakup of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Communist Party, events which have hastened the dissolution of previous divisions of Russian literature which were based on the author's citizenship. The introduction concludes with a discussion of the tenets of socialist realism, the official method of aesthetic representation throughout most of the Soviet period, as it applies to military themes in literature; and a brief overview of the legacy of World War Two literature in Russian. These tenets, and the works produced under their influence, are found to remain relatively consistent throughout the post-World War Two period. Except for a small yet significant dissident trend in war literature, socialist realism extends through the era of Soviet military involvement in Afghanistan. In order to provide a political and historical context for the literature of this relatively unpublicized war, the first chapter briefly documents Russian-Afghan relations from the earliest imperial contacts in 1464 to the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. This background provides a history of Russian expansion toward the south, marked by rivalry with Great Britain in the nineteenth century, and more recently with the United States.

The gradual sweep southward is also noteworthy, however, for Russia's traditional wariness of entanglements in Afghanistan. Brezhnev's decision to invade on ideological grounds ignored military realities, and signalled a break with the cautious policies of the past. The Soviet army now found itself engaged with an enemy who in certain instances emulated successful Russian *guerrilla* tactics against the Germans during the Great Patriotic War forty years ago. Soldiers composed songs which the authorities felt conveyed a mood of pessimism, and consequently were suppressed. The second stage began around 1984, when the official press began to publicize widely the exploits of soldiers fighting in Afghanistan.

This publicistic campaign predominated until 1987, when Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* ushered in the third stage of war coverage. Journalists and authors of fiction now began to portray the individual, subjective side of the war. Poetry and song, although composed from the beginning of the war, finally appeared in officially sanctioned publications. At the conclusion to Chapter Two is a review of general Soviet critical reaction to the genre of Afghan War literature. Criticism is practically absent through the mid-1980s, since authors were not allowed to portray Soviet soldiers in combat. Moreover, since that time, the description and evaluation of this nascent literature, with few exceptions, has remained in the background; attention instead has been focused on related social issues, such as assigning culpability for the war, or securing proper treatment for disabled veterans.

The third chapter focuses on publicistic writing about the war. This category of journalistic literature, although nominally grounded in documented fact, underwent a transformation in political orientation and aesthetic form during the 1980s. Beginning with hagiographic accounts of Afghan War heroes which draw upon the tradition of Great Patriotic War *publitsistika*, this genre moves toward impressionistic first-person accounts, investigative reporting, and the compilation of soldiers' letters containing sentiments which





formerly would have been considered unpatriotic. Some writers, such as Artem Borovik and Svetlana Aleksievich, incorporated their own subjective impressions into their depictions of the war, in the process uncovering an extremely.

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