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The University of War Propaganda

A soldier with the Russian army in Afghanistan recounts what they believed about their mission

BY GLENN GREENWALD

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I'm traveling still today, but I wanted to note an amazing Op-Ed that was referenced in a book I'm reading: the Op-Ed is by Nikolai Lanine, published in *The Toronto Globe and Mail* in November, 2006. Lanine was drafted into the Russian Army at the age of 18 and spent several years as part of the Russian occupying force in Afghanistan. Thereafter, he moved to Canada, and in 2006, his wife's first cousin, a medic in the Canadian Army, was killed in Afghanistan. Lanine wrote this column after attending his funeral, and recounted what he and his comrades in the Russian Army believed they were doing in Afghanistan:

I identified with the Canadian soldiers at the funeral mourning the loss of their friend. Like them, I went to Afghanistan believing in "fighting terrorism" and "liberating Afghans." During my first mission, we were protecting refugees escaping an area that was under attack by the mujahedeen. I was deeply affected by their misery, and by the poverty and suffering of the Afghan people in general. In my mind, our presence was "helping Afghans," particularly with educating women and children. My combat unit participated in "humanitarian aid" - accompanying doctors and delivering food, fuel, clothing, school and other supplies to Afghan villages.

It was only later that I began to wonder: Did that aid justify our aggression ?

Exactly the same quandaries arose which the U.S. confronts today, and the same justifications were concocted to dismiss them:

*It is hard to kill people without demonizing them. In 1988, my unit accidentally hit an Afghan wedding party. My friend, whose mortar shells had killed innocent people, was shocked when he learned of it. Some soldiers, however, were indifferent. "That village supports the resistance, anyway," they said. Like NATO now, we didn't count "their" casualties. As another friend, Alexander, would later write : "We thought that all of them - old and young - were insurgents." Alexander, to save his unit, had called in artillery that destroyed a village from which the mujahedeen were attacking. **People of the villages hit by our air strikes became hostile and turned to the resistance. More attacks by insurgents led to more Soviet strikes.***

*After 10 years of such a tragic cycle, more than a million Afghans were dead and millions more had fled their devastated country. Also, ignored by many, **a powerful religious force of militant Islamic movements grew under the pressure of foreign aggression.** In 1989, during negotiations between my regiment and the most radical militants from the area, a mujahed told my friend : "We'll take our revenge to your country." And they did. The backlash spilled out and hit not only the former Soviet Union and Afghans themselves in the 1990s, but also America on 9/11. The vicious cycle I witnessed in the 1980s - violence causing violence - is still continuing.*

At Andrew's funeral, the shock and disbelief on the faces of his military friends were all too familiar. So were the official speeches. And the Canadian media coverage seemed like an echo of the Soviet press. "Positive changes are evident. However, it would be premature to say that Kandahar is not a 'hot spot' any more," the Soviets said in the 1980s. "Things have improved," one Canadian newspaper said now, yet "significant problems" remain. "Development is occurring" in Kandahar, the paper added, just like a Soviet journalist had observed in 1988.

Of course, back then it was Russia who was fighting -- and the U.S. which was funding and arming -- the very religious extremists who, today, we insist are such an existential threat that we must fight endless wars to extinguish them. That's what is most striking about war propaganda: no matter how many times it's re-cycled, regardless of by whom and for which wildly divergent ends, it never loses its efficacy.