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The Soviet-Afghan War: Female Perspective and Participation

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By

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## DEDICATION

For my dad, Emilio Garcia, thank you for instilling in me the value of education and for all the sacrifices you made for the family to have the opportunities that you could never have.

*¡Gracias 'apá!*

And my husband, Dennis Madrigal, for your never-ending support in this recent endeavor towards my higher education. Thank you for always having faith in me.

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## ABSTRACT

### The Soviet-Afghan War: Female Perspective and Participation

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The women of the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1980s have long been overshadowed by a predominant male discourse found in war reporting and historical studies. Moreover, a historical analysis has yet to be written that combines the experiences of foreign female journalists, Afghan women, and Russian women who were active participants in the war. In this analysis, their perspectives and experiences will be examined through various primary sources, such as interviews and poetry, in order to demonstrate their activism and the greater need for further studies on women in times of war. Female experiences will demonstrate the failures of the socialist reforms to achieve equality and empowerment for women in Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. In addition, women of the Soviet-Afghan war responded to the socio/economic challenges that were created as a result of war and the socialist agenda with resourcefulness and activism, and it is vital that their voices be studied because they can help form a richer image of both societies of the conflict. Women have unique perspectives and experiences that are influenced by their responsibilities in the domestic and social spheres that are often quite different than men. Therefore, women can add to the narrative of the conflict if they are given the opportunity to do so. A comparative analysis of women from various global conflicts will demonstrate common challenges with the women of the Soviet-Afghan war, and will further emphasize the need for world leaders, the media, and academics to focus on the plight of women.

## Introduction

The 2001 takeover of Afghanistan by military force was an experience with which many Afghans were familiar. Led primarily by the U.S. and NATO troops as a reaction to the 9/11 attacks, the military forces that entered the country purged the government from Taliban influence and the country has since strived to rebuild. A similar experience occurred not long before. When Soviet forces crossed the border in 1979, Afghans were once again confronted with an invading military and political force. The Soviet-Afghan war divided the country into supporters and non-supporters for the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and the Soviet presence in the country. Mujahideen, local Afghans rebels, charged the Soviet military with guerrilla warfare and hoped to drive the Soviets out of the country. The international community followed closely as casualties mounted, battles were won and lost, and the refugee population grew. In what seemed like the reigniting of Cold War tensions, the Soviet-Afghan war was another example of foreign forces having a great impact on the course of Afghanistan and its people.

The reforms implemented under the pursuit of socialist ideology can be better studied and analyzed through women. Slavenka Drakulic's memoir, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, described her life experiences in Yugoslavia under the communist regime, and her memories revealed a bleak existence especially for women. Her experiences in Yugoslavia brought a different perspective on policies implemented and the effects they had on living conditions for people under communism. Drakulic's memoir, along with the voices of Afghan and Russian women, demonstrates how women had to be active in order to survive communism. Though reformers often boasted about the improvements in life for women under the banner of socialism, Drakulic, like Afghan

and Russian women, reveals a less simplified upward mobility and reform. The experiences of women of Afghanistan and Russia during the war demonstrate that improvements in life were not uniform among all women under the socialist regime, and often women bore the greatest burden of the failings of communism to provide a utopian society filled with equality, happiness, and harmony. Instead Afghan and Russian women had to be resourceful, active, and strong-willed to survive.

An analysis of the female perspective and participation in war is significant because it helps to form a richer image of both societies of the conflict since women confront and deal with challenges differently than men as a result of their experiences in both the domestic and social spheres. A woman's role as a mother and wife shapes her opinions and passions distinctly from men because of the responsibilities the roles entail. Duties such as caring for children and household chores are everyday jobs that are typically held by women, and although they may seem insignificant to the grander scheme of war, they are more telling of the conditions of life as will be demonstrated in the voices of Afghan and Russian women. Women therefore are crucial in providing information to expand our understanding of life under war and especially life under socialism. Women are also often faced with barriers that are altogether unique to their gender to which men cannot relate and therefore cannot articulate their effects. In the social sphere, women frequently encounter gender discrimination in the workforce, education, and in politics that shapes their viewpoints quite distinctly from men who do not face these challenges. By analyzing women of the Soviet-Afghan war, the societies of the newly formed socialist Afghan government and its ally the Soviet Union can be better understood.

Though women can provide a different perspective and add to the narrative of the conflict if they are given the opportunity to do so, they are often overlooked by the dominant male-centered discourse of war as demonstrated in different conflicts around the world. A comparative analysis of women in Yugoslavia, United States, Israel, and Kosovo will demonstrate the common challenges that women face in times of war and political reforms. Moreover this analysis will emphasize the great need for a female focus in government policies, media coverage, and historical studies.

Female foreign journalists participated indirectly by documenting the events that took place in rural and urban combat zones in Afghanistan. Foreign journalists tended to be sympathetic to the Mujahideen troops, as Jan Goodwin demonstrated in *Caught in the Crossfire*, and they also were challenged by gender barriers in reaching them and others in Afghanistan. The women who reported were privy to places and people to which the rest of the world had limited access. Therefore, their information was vital in influencing the international community's opposition to Soviet presence in Afghanistan.

Within the Afghan female community, support and loyalty was divided between the Mujahideen and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Some actively supported the Mujahideen because of family ties; they provided shelter and food to the Mujahideen who were often their husbands, sons, brothers, uncles or nephews. However, this support was not unanimous. Women who supported the Soviet government disavowed those among their countrymen who aided the rebels. These women actively worked for the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and enjoyed social privileges that were denied to



them within the conservative religious circles of the country. These women saw themselves as the agents of social change for Afghanistan because they spread propaganda and worked for the successful implementation of socialism in their country. Lastly, though the women of the refugee camps were limited in their participation, they were able to voice their perspective through *landays*, short verse poems, which revealed a concern not for the war, but for love. An examination of the *landays* will demonstrate that Afghan women were empowered despite gender challenges like the restrictive and foreign environment, conservative norms of behavior, and arranged marriages.

Many Russian women in the war assisted the wounded soldiers or had direct combat experience, while others enjoyed a safer environment performing clerical duties in the offices of Afghanistan. Other women were housewives and accompanied their high-ranking husbands abroad. A few women were already in Afghanistan prior to the war because their husbands were contracted to help rebuild infrastructure. Since the war was heavily censored, many women returned to find a hostile environment awaiting them.

Though the women involved in the Soviet-Afghan war participated in distinct ways, they had common challenges and they fought vehemently to overcome them. Women in the Soviet-Afghan war found ways to protest the gender, political, and economic barriers they faced. For example, Afghan women maintained clandestine groups like RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, to protest for women's rights. Despite their gender, female foreign journalists' continuously

sought interviews with individuals who were difficult to reach. Russian women fought economic challenges on their return from war, and formed support groups to comfort the scars that were left from war. Women confronted their gender, political, and economic challenges during the war with great resolve in order to achieve a better quality of life for themselves and their families.

There does not exist any scholarly analysis of the Soviet-Afghan war that combines a collection of all three female perspectives: foreign journalists, Afghan women, and Russian women. Besides Deborah Ellis' *Women of the Afghan War*, which is a collection of primary source interviews instead of a historical analysis, historical studies usually separate the Afghan and Soviet experiences. Little has been written on Soviet women who were involved, and even less attention has been given to female journalists who surprisingly had greater access in a male dominant society. Moreover, the current conflict in Afghanistan once again demands that female participation be recognized both in combat and noncombat roles. The unique perspectives of women in war can provide insight on the conditions of life during war and the effects of socialist reforms that are not readily available until politicians, the press, and historians place a greater emphasis on their value.

## **Foreign Journalists of the War**

A close analysis of the women of the Soviet-Afghan war was made possible by the interviews and stories collected by foreign journalists who overcame gender barriers to gain a unique perspective on the war. Afghan and Russian female activists no longer allowed themselves to be silenced by the male dominant storyline. Women from both sides of the conflict were able to reveal the conditions of life and the effects of socialist reforms during war.

Although reports on the Soviet-Afghan war were dominated by male policy makers, researchers, and media correspondents, the women who were able to break through the gender barriers provided valuable information to help create a thorough view of the people and events of the war. Jan Goodwin, who was rejected because of her gender, initially found it difficult to partner with a Mujahideen group that would be willing to allow her to work alongside and report on their actions. Goodwin persisted and eventually was given access to the Mujahideen, but only after several dangerous attempts. Her close encounter with the Mujahideen was remarkable because of the strict restrictions between men and women in Afghan culture. Goodwin was able to overcome the gender challenges and speak to and interact with the Afghan men to learn more about their motivations and actions. Anne Brodsky was also challenged by the gender restrictions. Unable to walk freely on her own, Brodsky used the network of the clandestine group, The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), to help her contact women to interview. During Brodsky's time in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, women were prohibited from being seen in public without a male companion. This challenge did not dissuade Brodsky from continuing with her work. RAWA members had

male friends and family members that aided Brodsky to move about in Afghanistan in order to learn and record the female perspective and experience. Even though Goodwin and Brodsky had to wear the uncomfortable garment of the chador, a type of scarf to cover their hair and face, it was often used to their advantage in order to disguise their identities.

Despite their challenges, female journalists were valuable documentarians because they were able to observe the interactions of Afghan women within the private sectors that men were banned from entering. According to *The Area Handbook of Afghanistan*, “Most research on Afghanistan has been conducted by males so that, given gender separation, there is a paucity of studies of Afghan women.”<sup>1</sup> The interviews conducted and documented by Deborah Ellis, Jan Goodwin, and Anne Brodsky can provide scholars with a foundation for further research and analysis.

Although their article on female coverage of war was published long after the Soviet-Afghan war, Margaret E. Thompson, Maria Suarez Toro, and Katerina Anfossi Gomez’s research on the importance of feminist media coverage has relevance to the experiences of female journalists in Afghanistan. Some challenges faced by women reporting on the war were the sources that were often considered as unreliable by members of the mainstream media. Thompson, Suarez Toro and Anfossi explained,

The emphasis on ‘objectivity’ as a norm means that alternative perspectives from ‘unofficial sources’ such as peace activists, including women, are viewed as not credible or irrelevant, particularly if they question the dominant patriarchal view that military solutions and violence resolves conflict and ensures ‘security’ and peace.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nyrop, Richard F., and Seekins, Donald M., *Afghanistan: A Country Study* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Press, 1986), 127.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret E. Thompson, Maria Suarez-Toro, and Katerina Anfossi Gomez, “Feminist Media Coverage of Women in War: ‘You are Our Eyes and Ears to the World’,” *Gender and Development* 15, no. 3 (2007): 438.

According to the researchers, media coverage of war that relied on untraditional sources, such as female activists, were susceptible to greater scrutiny in a predominately male industry. Bernadette Barker-Plummer and Cynthia Boaz also concluded in their research on the Iraq war coverage of 2003 that a masculine discourse dominated: “These patterns that we are calling masculine – of male dominance, strategy framing, a reverence for power based in, and reproduced by, insider sourcing, game language, and limited representation of women – are visions to some extent [found] in all news discourse.”<sup>3</sup> Their description of the male discourse during the Iraq war closely reflects the major issues in the reporting during the Soviet-Afghan war. According to Barker-Plummer and Boaz, women have a different discourse while covering war. They found that female journalists tend to focus on the personal experiences of individuals, and groups of people instead of statistics, battles, or political/military officials. The women that participated in reporting the events of the Soviet-Afghan war demonstrated that such masculine discourse could be shattered with the stories they documented.

Ultimately, the human story of the Soviet-Afghan war was the greatest contribution made by these women to the international community. The human story focuses on the personal experiences of everyday people like the challenges and triumphs of individuals, and moves away from the sterile information of statistics of the war. As Ellis declared “I am a social justice activist, and I believe that what we let our governments get away with today affects what happens to people tomorrow. That is why I present this book.”<sup>4</sup> Ellis’ interviews with Russian and Afghan women in Moscow,

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<sup>3</sup> Bernadette Barker-Plummer and Cynthia Boaz, “War News as Masculinist Discourse,” *Feminist Media Studies* 5, no. 3 (2005): 373.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), Introduction.

Afghanistan, and Pakistan are invaluable for academic research. Her book revealed the experiences of various Afghan women groups and Russian women that will be used and analyzed throughout this paper.

The efforts of female journalists such as Ellis, Goodwin, and Brodsky helped to redirect the attention on not just the policy makers and military, but the women who tried to survive on both sides of the war. Although there were various male reporters in Afghanistan who documented the war, they lacked the access to women because of the social norms of the culture which did not allow for a man to be left alone with a woman. Therefore, female reporters were privy to information and an intimacy that a male reporter could not obtain. Female reporters could also understand their subjects on a different level than their male counterparts because of the common bond of womanhood. For example, Slavenka Drakulic's, a female journalist in communist Yugoslavia, often focused her efforts to bring attention to the plight of women and what she called the "aesthetics of poverty."<sup>5</sup> In Drakulic's observations of the failures of communism, she focused on the ways in which women coped with the shortage and lack of variety in clothing, cosmetics, and hair product. For instance, women in Yugoslavia for a period of time had red-dyed hair which, Drakulic noted, was a decision made not because it was a fashion statement but because the state government provided no other colors in the store shelves. Drakulic explained, "They have no choice – they either appear untidy, with bleached ends and unbleached roots sticking out, or they dye their hair whatever color they can find. So they dye it hoping that other women won't come to this same

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<sup>5</sup> Slavenka Drakulic, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, (New York, NY: HaperCollins Publishers, 1993), 18.

conclusion. They don't exactly choose."<sup>6</sup> Drakulic called efforts like these and others by women to deal with communist reforms that affected their everyday appearance as "aesthetics of poverty." Drakulic's ability to notice the color variation of women's hair can be traced to her own femininity since she may have made the similar efforts to conceal graying hair. It may have been more difficult for male journalists to capture the nuances of the female experience because they could not relate to the shared practices of women.

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<sup>6</sup> Drakulic, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, 24.

## **Afghan Women and the Mujahideen**

Whether in domestic or public spheres, Afghan women were active participants in the Soviet-Afghan war, and their participation also reveals the divisions among the Afghan community from the rural and urban areas of the country. The Mujahideen overwhelmingly had greater support from rural Afghan women instead of the women from the cities. Furthermore, women in the urban areas were also divided in their activism for and against the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Whether they were supporting the rebels or the socialist regime, Afghan women provide a deeper look into the organization of the Mujahideen as well as the structure of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan in which they played an imperative role.

Within the female Afghan community, factors that inspired support for the Mujahideen included kinship and geographical location. Afghan rebels were often the fathers, sons, and husbands of Afghan women; and to procure their safe return home, many Afghan women supported the Mujahideen to fight the Soviet army. Validated for their efforts by communal and family recognition, many Afghan women expressed high self-esteem such as fondly reminiscing on their efforts to conceal Mujahideen paraphernalia. However, for the women who supported neither the Soviets nor the Mujahideen, they often endured heartache, torture, and secret prisons because their allegiance was cause for suspicion.

Kinship was one of the greatest factors for why women gave their allegiance to the Mujahideen. The majority of the women interviewed who supported the Mujahideen stated that they had a relative who was one of the rebels. The strong tie of kinship



appeared to have been enough to encourage women to support the fighters by cooking and washing for their men. For instance, Mallali explained her motivation to aid the Mujahideen. She said, “My brothers and some of my other relatives were at the front, and I wanted to be there to help them.”<sup>7</sup> Other interviewees expressed similar motivations. Husbands, brothers, or cousins who were fighting with the Mujahideen inspired loyalty to the rebel cause, and many women were willing to perform duties that could help them. The duties that the Afghan women repeatedly spoke about were cooking and washing for the men, as well as providing hideouts to shelter soldiers or their weapons. Few of the interviewees mentioned combat experience, though this duty was often required of them. Some women were trained to use rifles and were given lookout duties while soldiers rested, and other women experienced active combat duty. For instance, Seema described her firearm training: “I was taught to fire a gun by my cousin, in case I was ever left alone. We were allowed to clean and oil the guns, and to cook and clean the clothes for the Mujahideen.”<sup>8</sup> Seema and with other women who supported the Mujahideen were active participants in the Soviet-Afghan war in that they helped to ensure the survival of Mujahideen members.

Since kinship was a cause for allegiance, the Mujahideen extended the ties of family to include tribal identity as a family unit. According to the researchers in Afghanistan,

Because both tribe and ethnic group are extensions of family, in order to unite Afghans from divergent groups it might be useful to extend the concept of family as far as it will go in order to include all citizens in the group. This is precisely what the Mujahideen have done in appealing to the community of believers.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Nyrop and Seekins, *Afghanistan: A Country Study*, 116.

Moreover, Mujahideen recognized that the ties of family helped them fortify support for their cause. They communicated to Afghans the ideas of brotherhood by using the common religious background to gain and extend their support across many civilians. Many Afghan women therefore took up the call and became active supporters of the Mujahideen.

Afghan women felt validation while helping the Mujahideen. For example, Hoshey Afasobey concluded “That time was a very good time for us, when the Russians were inside Afghanistan, and we were fighting them. That time was a good time.”<sup>10</sup> For most of her interview, she recounted how she and her mother hid Mujahideen and their paraphernalia while almost getting caught by the police. An example of her resourcefulness and of many women like her, Afashobey’s mother cleverly hid Mujahideen magazines underneath her scarf while soldiers ransacked their home looking for evidence that they had housed or supported the rebel fighters. Afasobey’s last words were melancholic. She seemed to have relived her memories while she told her story and was saddened to recognize that her reality was no longer in Afghanistan. Wartime was good for her in comparison to how her life was at the moment in the refugee camp because during the war, she actively supported the Mujahideen since her husband and brothers were fighters too. Similarly, Mallali appeared grateful for the recognition she received when she worked with the rebels: “The other men treated me very well,” she wrote. “They respected me, and they respected the other two women who were working there with me.”<sup>11</sup> In instances where women were essential for the Mujahideen’s survival, as in hiding guns and providing food, Afghan women appreciated the way they were

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<sup>10</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 47.

treated. Moreover, their confidence grew with each responsibility. For instance, Seema said, “We were very angry because the Russians were in our country. I knew that if my brothers and uncles were not fighting the Russians, I would fight the Russians all by myself. Just talking about the Russians, even now, gives me a headache.”<sup>12</sup> Her self-assurance that she would be able to battle the Russians on her own was a result of her training and treatment among the rebels. She may not have had such strong feelings if her family was not part of the Mujahideen, or if she had never handled a rifle. Her unwavering support was due in large part because of her kinship and duties to the rebels. Through the experiences of women who supported the Mujahideen, the Soviet-Afghan war can be better understood as a war in which women played a vital role in the oppositional forces. The care that Afghan women provided for the Mujahideen helped to continue the struggle against Soviet forces because of the various instances when the Mujahideen relied on women for their survival. The factor of kinship was a major determinant of their activism, and their participation demonstrated their strength and courage to become involved despite the numerous dangerous consequences of capture, torture, or death.

In the rural areas of Afghanistan, women’s active participation was more prevalent than elsewhere in the region. For instance, Seema noted that village women “... would help hide other soldiers in their homes. They stayed in their own village, though, unless they went with a brother or a father. That was not really necessary, though. There were women in every village to cook and clean for the Mujahideen.”<sup>13</sup> Seema’s description of the village organization provides an insight into the amount of support the

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<sup>12</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 46

Mujahideen received. Villages were susceptible to the Mujahideen because these remote areas often could not get protection from any other group. Even if the women did not support the rebels or have family ties to them, the social pressure to aid them was overwhelming in these small villages. Also, Seema described a cultural norm that was not violated even in time of war. Few women left their villages, and those who did, like Seema noted, were accompanied by a relative. Women continued to be tied by the customs of the male hierarchical society and this tradition did not abate during war. But many women found ways to be active. Najla also explained the importance of geographical location and family ties in forming loyalty among RAWA members:

We [RAWA members] also had acquaintances with them [Mujahideen] because they belonged to the local area. Some of us women had relatives, brothers, or husbands there. The rest of us were unmarried but we could trust that they value women and our part of the resistance war ... the Mujahideen in our front were well established among the people. They saw no theft, no rape, no killing innocents, no robbery – nothing.<sup>14</sup>

Though the women of RAWA specifically strived to improve women's conditions through education, many allied themselves with the Mujahideen because of family ties and the close proximity of the village they lived in. Women in the rural areas were generally more supportive of the Mujahideen because unlike women in the cities that suffered from rockets by the Mujahideen that oftentimes caused damage to their properties, women in rural areas were well-respected and worked alongside the rebels.

The physical destruction of homes, forced pledges of allegiance, and the deaths of their family members were determining factors for some Afghan women's negative perspective on the Mujahideen. An increasing bitterness towards the rebels became widespread as the Mujahideen's attacks affected civilian homes. Rocket launches that

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<sup>14</sup> Anne E. Brodsky, *With All Our Strength: the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 61.

were intended to destroy the Soviet stronghold left some women homeless in urban centers like Kabul because their houses were in the area of the fight. For instance, Masuma recounted how she came to arrive at the refugee camps: “We lost everything in a rocket attack. The rocket attack was followed by thieves who stole everything that had not been destroyed. The thieves were Mujahideen.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Nasreen had negatively associated the Mujahideen with the demise of her life’s stability. She said, “When the Mujahideen came, they destroyed our house again. They stole everything from us. We are from the Old city of Kabul. The Old City no longer exists. It is now level with the ground.”<sup>16</sup> Both women characterized the Mujahideen as uncaring and ruthless thieves who destroyed their livelihoods. Their homes were reduced to rubble, leaving them homeless and in search for a means to survive. Their eventual escape to Pakistan was a result of having nothing left of their homes, and according to their perspective, this was primarily the fault of the Mujahideen. The group of women who had ill feelings towards the Mujahideen were not the same as those who washed and cooked for them, or who were their fellow combat soldiers as has been previously discussed. On the contrary, this group’s only contact with the Mujahideen was through traumatic experiences like the bombings that destroyed their homes. Having little to replace this negative image with, these Afghan women offered no support for the Mujahideen.

A required oath of loyalty to the Mujahideen dissuaded some women from supporting the Mujahideen. Many Afghan women who were part of the media, either through radio, newsprint, or television, were asked to operate the propaganda machine for the Mujahideen. They refused to do so because they thought it was ethically wrong.

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<sup>15</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 51.

These groups of Afghan women were persecuted by the Mujahideen because their allegiance was uncertain. For instance, Maryam recounted her experience being recruited, placed in jail for refusing to accept camaraderie with the rebels, and lastly how she managed to leave prison after a hunger strike and outside assistances. She said, “The different Mujahideen groups were asking people to join them ... Especially, they wanted us to develop a radio station, but we didn’t want to. That’s why we had to go from Peshawar to Islamabad. I ran away from the Russians and then I ran away from the fundamentalists!”<sup>17</sup> Many women like Maryam faced pressures to declare loyalty to the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and the Mujahideen. Literate and skilled Afghan women were seen as valuable assets for their ability to influence the civilian population in their native language. For some Mujahideen groups who were more liberal in terms of gender roles and women’s empowerment, these Afghan women were sought after to help their cause. Their educational background, however, helped them avoid being manipulated by Mujahideen and Soviet propaganda ploys. Danger, imprisonment, and persecution awaited many Afghan women who deviated from the common rhetoric of the Mujahideen or the Soviets. Despite these consequences, many remained steadfast on their beliefs and did not retreat.

#### *Urban Women and Their Opposition to the USSR*

Although a large portion of anti-Soviet opposition came from the rural areas where the Mujahideen had a stronghold, resistance to the Soviet presence and the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan also took shape in urban areas such as Kabul. The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) was a prominent

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<sup>17</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 187.

group that led the opposition in Kabul; its martyred leader Meena advocated for women's rights and an independent Afghanistan. Women in cities like Kabul tended to be more liberal, educated, and politically active. Overall, they did not experience the restrictive roles for women that Afghans in the rural areas of the region endured. However, RAWA's concern was to improve the quality of life for all women of Afghanistan because they shared a common struggle for more rights. Many women in the cities viewed the Soviet invasion as a distraction from the women's rights movement; they believed that the invasion diverted the national conversation and rendered women's rights a less important goal. As Zarlasht explained,

Everyone cared about the invasion and women's issues became secondary. Most of the people were saying as long as the country is under invasion and occupation, issues like the rights of women could not make sense as a main focus. ... [Meena] believed that if men and women were not liberated how could women [*sic*] be.<sup>18</sup>

Many of the efforts of RAWA were focused on organizing opposition for the Karmal regime and its Soviet ally in order for the women's rights movement to continue on its path. Various women in cities like Kabul viewed the new government as a barrier to their political liberation. In their perspective, major accomplishments towards women's rights in Afghanistan could not happen until the foreign presence was removed and a legitimate government established.

Women in urban areas also opposed the new government and its Soviet ally because family members had been taken by the regime or imprisoned for treason. As Nadia remembered,

There were protests in Kabul among the educated and intellectuals and university students ... At one of these early ones, to protest the forcing of families to send their boys to the war front to fight for the Soviets, I saw

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<sup>18</sup> Brodsky, *With All Our Strength*, 71.

RAWA leaflets ... My family was involved in the resistance movement and I had a brother who had already been arrested and disappeared.<sup>19</sup>

Nadia, and many women like her, were opposed to the regime because of personal tragedy. The Soviet-backed regime needed recruits to fight the Mujahideen and drafted Afghan men into their ranks. Numerous Afghan women were against their husbands or sons joining the Soviet army and found ways to oppose this action.

Leafleting and mass protests were the major strategies that women in the cities used to demonstrate their discontent with the new government and the USSR. RAWA gave its members this responsibility in order to spread information and educate the public on the regime's actions. As Hadia explained,

Whatever Meena wanted us to do in those years we did for her. For example, one of the activities was the distribution of leaflets. It was very difficult; there were police and detectives all over. So in addition to using children, we would put piles of leaflets in the bundles that women used for the bath houses, so we took out our clothes and put leaflets inside and put that under our burqa.<sup>20</sup>

Nadia demonstrated the courage that many women had in order to continue the fight for better political representation and treatment. Despite the dangers of police interference and imprisonment, women like Nadia carried on with RAWA tasks with the determination to see a country free of foreign rule and a better quality of life for all Afghan women. Nadia exemplified the resourcefulness of women through the use of the burqa as a tool for their organizing. The burqa was often used by Afghan women to manipulate and strategize without the authorities knowing. Like Nadia who used it to hide leaflets, the burqa also served as a disguise rather than a burden. While the reputation of RAWA spread and its members became more endangered, the burqa hid

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<sup>19</sup> Brodsky, *With All Our Strength*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> Brodsky, *With All Our Strength*, 73.



their identities and enabled them to move freely to continue with their organizing. The major goals of leafleting were to spread awareness of the Soviet policies like the draft of Afghan men, the status of members who were imprisoned, and the organization of public protests against the regime. On the anniversary of the Karmal succession, RAWA members organized a protest that garnered support from Kabul university students and high school students. They chanted, “No Communist Regime. USSR Out. Democracy Now!”<sup>21</sup> Along with the chanting, many women also threw their head scarves at authorities as a sign of defiance. Afghan women repeatedly demonstrated that they were active members in their community and resisted all threats to their feminist progress.

RAWA organized, rallied, and protested the new Afghan government because of fear and frustration over women’s issues not being a major part of the government’s agenda. As demonstrated by the various members of RAWA, some Afghan women were vocal about their discontent and wanted to have a government that was legitimate and ruled by the general will of the people, especially the will of the female population. They showed their strength through their unity and their relentless efforts to spread their message despite the threats to their own lives and those of their families. Similarly in Yugoslavia, Slavenka Drakulic explained in her memoirs that issues regarding women were also not the priority for the government. She said,

It is not that the state hated women and, therefore, didn’t produce machines that would make their lives easier, but rather that there were so many other problems to solve, things to produce. The ‘woman question’ (if any!) was going to be solved one day, that’s for certain. Women just had to be patient, had to understand the vision of the great revolutionary

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<sup>21</sup> Chavis, Melody Ermachild Chavis, *Meena, Heroine of Afghanistan: The Martyr Who Founded RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 88.

plan, a vision in which their needs – what with Ideology, Politics, and Economics – were nowhere near the top.<sup>22</sup>

Under the communist regime in Yugoslavia, Drakulic concluded that many of the discomforts and challenges faced by women were caused by the regime's continual efforts to reach its revolutionary goals of a utopian society. Similar to the women in RAWA, Drakulic recognized that issues such as gender equality and women's rights were not the priority because ideology, politics, and the economy were more important in for the predominantly male ruling regime. The perspective of women, such as the members of RAWA and Drakulic, help demonstrate the conditions of life for those on the periphery of society. Though women in Afghanistan, and in communist states such as Yugoslavia, had little political representation in government, their points of view were not silenced because they continued to strive for better conditions for all women. Furthermore, the discourse of what took place under the banner of communism is enriched by women's voices. The triumphs of economic and social equality that socialist rhetoric claimed to have achieved were challenged by the experiences of many women who did not benefit from the reforms. Though many women disagreed with the socialist reforms, there were others who agreed and supported the communist regime.

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<sup>22</sup> Slavenka Drakulic, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, (New York: Haper Collins Publishing, 1993), 46.

## **Afghan Women Supporting the USSR**

*"I remained in Kabul while the Russians were there. The Russians never threatened me or my family. The Mujahideen destroyed my house. All of them [Mujahideen] were very bad ..."*<sup>23</sup>

*– Bibijan, sister of the former monarch of Afghanistan*

For many women like Bibijan, the Soviet presence in Afghanistan was not threatening, but instead provided a stable enough environment to enable them to continue to live in their homes and carry on with their daily routines. As Bibijan explained during her interview, the Russians were less threatening in comparison to those who destroyed her home. Afghan women's perspective and loyalty was based on which party caused them the least amount of harm and provided greater opportunities. For some, support for the Soviet backed government was viewed as an opportunity to improve their own lives and those of all Afghans. Moreover, Afghan women supporters of the new regime played a key role in helping turn the country into a socialist state. These women, like Anahita Ratezabe, Mahboba Karmal, Sholaila Sherzai and Marzia Jahis, acted as agents of social change by implementing and supporting the various forms of propaganda and school reforms.

### *"The Great Uncle"- Pro-Soviet Propaganda*

To garner support for its new policies and to legitimize the Soviet presence in the country, the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan portrayed the Soviet Union as a benevolent neighbor and partner. When asked about the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, Ratezabe responded: "We have never had trouble; we have only had help from the Soviet Union from the first day of our independence during the time of Lenin

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<sup>23</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 166.

until now. I remember my mother telling me when I was a small child, the Soviet Union is our great uncle.”<sup>24</sup> There are several elements of propaganda in this statement. First was the attempt to portray the relationship between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan as a long term relationship. Ratezabe was aware that the Afghan rebels, the international community, and the media had depicted the Soviet Union as an invading force whose presence in Afghanistan was part of a ploy for territorial dominance during the Cold War. To counter this argument, Ratezabe attested to a longer held relationship, one based on a common struggle for independence. According to Ratezabe, Vladimir Lenin’s 1917 revolution and the Afghan independence from the British Empire in 1919 brought the two nations closer together. Secondly, Ratezabe referred to the Soviet Union as a “great uncle.” If it was true that she grew up learning about the benevolence of the Soviet Union, then this type of learning demonstrates evidence of indoctrination. Suppose she was not entirely truthful, which might be suggested by the luxuries granted to her by the government, then her words aimed to reinforce the Soviet propaganda. The image of a “great uncle,” as Ratezabe described the USSR, invokes the image of friendliness, love, and good intentions that are often found among family. One cannot help but recall a similar label established by the US which referred to its relationship with Latin America as one between “Good Neighbors” though this was hardly the case. The purpose of such benevolent associations was to distract from imperial intentions. Ratezabe, like other women in her position of power, promoted the deception that the relationship with the Soviet Union and Afghanistan was altruistic when in reality it was not.

When Goodwin interviewed Ratezabe she noted that Ratezabe led an upper class lifestyle which reveals Ratezabe’s limitations on what other middle and lower class

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<sup>24</sup> Jan Goodwin, *Caught in the Crossfire*, (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1987), 148.

Afghans experienced since the Soviet invasion. Remaining in Afghanistan was not a difficult choice for Ratezabe since she lived comfortably in a mansion of former President Daoud and owned luxury automobiles in exchange for her contributions to the new Soviet-backed regime. Historian Nancy Dupree explained that Ratezabe was held in high regard by the Afghan government as shown by the important political positions she maintained that few Afghan women held:

Although a hard core remains active in Kabul, women as a group are still largely excluded from positions of real power – with the exception, of course, of Dr. Anahita [Ratezabe], member of the PDPA Central Committee Politburo, only female member of the Presidium of the Revolutionary Council, Minister of Education, President of the DRA Peace, Solidarity, and Friendship Organization, and President of DOAW. She greets all foreign dignitaries, addresses major meetings, and makes frequent trips abroad.<sup>25</sup>

Part of Ratezabe's endearment with the Soviet Union and its involvement in her country stems from the agreement that each, Ratezabe and the Soviet-backed regime, would reciprocate the support for the other. Her perspective and testimony demonstrated her failure to recognize the reality of the conflict and her active role in spreading pro-Soviet propaganda. Ratezabe's role in the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan also reveals the inequalities of upward mobility for women under the socialist regime. Though Ratezabe was fortunate and lived a wealthy life-style, the same cannot be said for all Afghan women.

Mahboba Karmal, wife of Babrak Karmal, also expressed this view of the Soviet Union as a benevolent neighbor and ally. When asked about the study abroad program through which Afghan students were sent to the USSR to study and live for long periods

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<sup>25</sup> Nancy Dupree, "Revolutionary Rhetoric and Afghan Women," in *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. M. Nazif Shahrani and Robert L. Canfield, (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1984), 336.

of time she responded positively. She said, “The Soviet Union is a peace-loving country; all our student have a nice life there.”<sup>26</sup> Karmal’s response exemplifies the recurring image and defense of the Soviet Union that was found among Afghan women supporters. They likely believed that the Soviet Union had good intentions for their country as seen in the offer to educate the youth. Karmal was an example of how Afghan women supporters endorsed a single perspective of the Soviet Union, and used emotional language for propaganda. Karmal’s choice to say to an international journalist like Goodwin that the USSR was a “peace-loving country” was no mistake. Her decision was precise and intentional in order to promote the USSR as an ally and to counter the image that the Soviet Union was an imperialist country dominating Afghan politics.

Upper class women like Ratezabe and Karmal were not the only ones to support and maintain Pro-Soviet propaganda; young and working class women also played the role of upholding the socialist agenda and defending it. Women like the Sholaila Sherzai were granted employment within the government and defended the regime’s new changes. Sherzai was Goodwin’s guide in Kabul, and much of her conversation closely aligned with the party’s rhetoric that placed the Soviet Union as a benevolent ally. The 24 year-old had long been involved in politics; she entered the Women’s Democratic Organization at thirteen years of age and the Communist party at sixteen. When Goodwin interviewed and interacted with Sherzai, the influence of politics clearly appeared in her conversations and she demonstrated an overwhelmingly positive view of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and the USSR. For example, Sherzai explained, “One of the benefits of the revolution is equality for women ... Before, women were exploited. Only a few were working. Now thousands of our young girls have gone to the Soviet Union

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<sup>26</sup> Goodwin, *Caught in the Crossfire*, 127.

and other socialist countries for higher education. They have many more opportunities.”<sup>27</sup> Although Sherzai’s response was an accurate description of the educational opportunities for women, she did not acknowledge the problems with the school program where Afghan children were sent to the USSR. According to Goodwin, this was part of a ninety-minute conversation on the achievements of the revolution. Though the rest of the conversation was not documented, it is not difficult to imagine that Sherzai would vehemently defend and explain her stance because of her long-standing affiliation with the party. Goodwin also explained that Sherzai took part in the student exchange program with the Soviet Union which leaves little room to suspect that Sherzai would do anything but defend the Soviet ally.

The Democratic Republic of Afghanistan created propaganda targeting women similar to Sherzai in order to garner support for the new direction that the government wanted to take the country. Some messages that targeted Afghan women to gain their support were: “Women of Afghanistan! Defend the dignity and honor of your homelands!” and “Men and women are like ‘the two wings of a bird,’ in order to fly both wings must move, and no great movement can achieve victory without the participation of women ...”<sup>28</sup> Sherzai was an example of how the Soviet propaganda affected many Afghan women.

### *School Reform*

To reinforce the image of the Soviet Union as a compassionate and kind ally, Afghan children of different ages were sent to the USSR to become educated at no cost to

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<sup>27</sup> Goodwin, *Caught in the Crossfire*, 115.

<sup>28</sup> Dupree, “Revolutionary Rhetoric and Afghan Women,” 319 and 327.

the Afghan government or the families of the students. Sherzai's participation in the exchange program was a common practice that required students to live and learn in the Soviet Union for long periods of time with the promise to return to Afghanistan with the experience and knowledge needed to lead the country. However, there are reasons to suspect that the program was not entirely voluntary. According to *Afghanistan: A Country Study*, "Some sources asserted that children were kidnapped while attending school or walking to or from school and shipped to the Soviet Union to be educated."<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, the program was promoted as a greater benefit for Afghanistan because of the educational resources the USSR could give students that could not be afforded in their native country. Afghan women who supported the program dismissed the claims of coercion and instead boasted about the vital role the program played in transitioning the country to a socialist regime.

Marzia Jahis was an Afghan woman who benefitted from the study abroad program because she received employment as a coordinator, and she tried to convince others that it was a promising path for Afghanistan. She explained to Goodwin that although the top excelling students were chosen to participate, the majority were the children that were left impoverished or orphaned as a result of the war. According to Jahis, sending children to the USSR was: "... a wonderful opportunity for our young ... They are being given educations [*sic*] their parents could not afford. When they return, they give radio and television interviews; they all have a very favorable impressions [*sic*]."<sup>30</sup> She further explained how the program also gave incentives to college students who received free tuition and stipends to help with the costs of living in the Soviet Union.

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<sup>29</sup> Nyrop and Seekins, *Afghanistan: A Country Study*, 130.

<sup>30</sup> Goodwin, *Caught in the Crossfire*, 126.



Jahis believed in the school reform because in her perspective the alternative was far worse. In her view, she believed she was helping her country out of the financial and social dilemma brought by the war. Though Jahis appeared whole-heartedly to favor the Soviet exchange as a means to improve Afghanistan, she later confessed that she had kept her own children out of the system. She claimed that she did so to allow children whose parents were killed in the war the opportunity for a higher education. Though Jahis described the experience as being beneficial for Afghans, not all women agreed, and many chose to keep their children out of school in order to avoid the transfer abroad. Many also joined the ranks of RAWA to protest.

As demonstrated through the women who supported the Soviet alliance, many Afghan women were active participants because they believed the Soviet-backed socialist regime was the right path for the country. They helped to spread various forms of propaganda, including school reforms. However, not all Afghan supporters of the regime held blind allegiance. On the contrary, supporters of the Soviet Union continued to be active in the pursuit of independence and rights that were unique to the experiences of Afghan women. Some Afghan women demonstrated their strength through their persistence in creating their own identity despite the wishes of their socialist counterparts in Russia.

In a seminar titled, “Paths and Methods for Work Among Women in the First Years Following A Revolution,” Afghan women challenged Soviet preconceptions of their oppression when they suggested that veils were not a constraint for their everyday living. Veils are garments commonly used by Muslim women to cover themselves. Though the transcript does not specify the type of veil they discussed, whether it was a

chador that covers just the hair or a burqa that covers the entire body and face, the general use of the word “veil” suggests that it was used indiscriminately to mean both types of veils. The seminar was held in the USSR, and its purpose was to unite Russian and Afghan women together for a discussion on the next steps in the revolution. Timonthy Nunan said Afghan women “... tended to have more in mind a revolution that would free them from the poverty imposed by big landowners and (to a certain extent) male patriarchy, but they were less enthusiastic about the Soviet prophecy of deveiling, industrialization, and secularism than their counterparts north of the border.”<sup>31</sup> The Afghan women who attended the seminar, and many like them who supported the Soviet alliance, hoped that the quality of life could improve for all Afghan women from the impoverished living conditions and high illiteracy rates that Afghan women endured. They expressed a priority to improve the economic and educational life for Afghans and not the removal of the veil that their Soviet counterparts saw as their major barrier. The seminar discourse demonstrated that Soviets presumed the Afghan war campaign as an opportunity to uplift Afghans. According to Nunan, Afghan women were viewed as less progressive. “... many of the Muslim women of Central Eurasia (Afghanistan included) and the Caucasus were, in the plan of history, [viewed] objectively backwards...”<sup>32</sup> In the transcript recovered from the seminar, Afghan women placed less of an emphasis on the removal of the veil but instead focused on personal bravery, resistance to unjust regimes, and traditional norms of womanhood like maternity and hospitality towards guests, for the path of liberation and a better life for all Afghan women.<sup>33</sup> The discussion

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<sup>31</sup> Timonthy Nunan, “Under a Red Veil: Staging Afghan Emancipation in Moscow,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 1, vol. 38 (2011): 33.

<sup>32</sup> Nunan “Under a Red Veil,” 39.

<sup>33</sup> Nunan “Under a Red Veil,” 60.

during the seminar demonstrates that Afghan women wanted to take ownership of their identity and not allow an outside force to direct what would be the next best step in the revolution for Afghan women. Though the Afghan participants did agree on some aspects of the revolution with their Soviet compatriots, the particular stance against the deveiling and emphasis on traditional duties for women reveal the independence and determination of Afghan women to shape the revolution to their own liking.

## Afghan Women of the Refugee Camps

In order to find safety from their war-torn homes, millions of Afghans fled to neighboring countries where they lived in large and overcrowded refugee camps. Pakistan became the second home for many Afghans and the influx of refugees attracted journalists and scholars who wanted to learn more about the conflict. Debra Denker's article in the June 1985 *National Geographic* quickly became popular because of the captivating photo of a young Afghan girl with piercing green eyes who was chosen for the cover. Denker's article, "Along Afghanistan's War-Torn Frontier," described a painful and dreary existence for Afghan refugees and especially for women.<sup>34</sup> Much has been written about the refugees in Pakistan, including interviews conducted by Ellis and Goodwin, however this section will include poetry from the refugee camps that will demonstrate Afghan women's desire for love and stability in their war-torn environment that also further illustrates their strength and courage to survive.

Sayd Bahodine Majrouh, an Afghan scholar and refugee, documented short verse poetry called *landays* that were created by Afghan women who lived in the Pakistani camps. Before the Soviet invasion, Majrouh was a professor in the University of Kabul, where he was chairman of the Department of Philosophy and Social Studies, the president of the Historical Society, and the governor of the province of Kapica.<sup>35</sup> The academic and worldly experience earned Majrouh a well-respected position among Afghan academic and elite circles but did not save him from the repression of the new communist government in Afghanistan. Majrouh fled and joined the thousands of

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<sup>34</sup> Debra Denker, "Along Afghanistan's War-Torn Frontier," *National Geographic*, (167, No 6, June 1985).

<sup>35</sup> Sayd Bahodine Majrouh, *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager (New York: Other Press, 2003), 78.

Afghans in Pakistan. During his time in exile, Majrouh documented and planned the publication of the *landays* and other works.

*Landays* are short verse poems, two-line verses consisting of 9-13 syllables. The brevity allowed for easy memorization and popularity. According to Majrouh, "... the best ones then immediately become anchored in the collective memory."<sup>36</sup> In some ways, *landays* share a common characteristic with oral history since *landays* were passed down and shared verbally.

Although some might expect these *landays* to be morbid because of the harsh conditions of the camps, the collection shows quite the opposite. In the last section of Majrouh's book, "Ninety-three *Landays* of Exile," he documented an array of poetry that captured the various sentiments of women specifically from the Pakistani refugee camps. The recurring theme within the collection of poetry was promiscuity and feminine dominance, which demonstrates ways in which Afghan women escaped their reality of dysfunctional marriages, conservative social norms, and displacement in order to construct a world where they controlled their environment, mind, and body. As the *landays* demonstrate, many Afghan women coped with the war and their social constraints by finding the outlet to voice their desires and frustrations while continuing to carry out their daily routines.

For the average woman promiscuity and dominance in a relationship experience was nearly impossible to fulfill because of the restrictive nature of the environment. Danish scholar Inger W. Boesen asserted that instances of extramarital affairs often did happen within the Pashtun community as a form of rebellion against the patriarchal

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<sup>36</sup> Majrouh, *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, xi.

dominance.<sup>37</sup> The theme of rebellion can be found in the *landays* since promiscuity in a conservative community was a violation of the social norm and extramarital affairs may have continued in the refugee camps. However, the dangerous environment as a result of war, such as the constant rocket fire and uncertainties of death, may have also severely hampered the rebellious act from continuing which may account for the popularity of promiscuous *landays*. The imagination to create and continue to recite these types of *landays* suggests that Afghan women yearned for greater liberties and control over their lives.

The theme of promiscuity that prevails among the *landays* reveals that many Afghan women during the Soviet-Afghan war had great desires to control their personal sex lives as well as their marriages, and the poetry enabled them to construct fantasies in which they could express their desires and frustrations. Many of the authors of the *landays* boast about the number of lovers and their control over their relationship, which may be a response to the common practice of arranged marriages in Afghan culture. As a way to remove themselves from their current arranged marriages, or if they were left widowed with children, these *landays* may be viewed as a coping mechanism to escape their reality. For example,

*Go away then, my friend, and travel well!  
You were but one of many lovers and I'll find a  
hundred more.*<sup>38</sup>

The author of the *landay*, and the women who recited it, found reassurance that many other men could replace the void left from a lover's absence. Not just one, but a hundred.

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<sup>37</sup> Nyrop and Seekinis, *Afghanistan: A Country Study*, 127.

<sup>38</sup> Majrouh, *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, 60.

The friendly terms of the breakup reveal that the author has been through this before and would survive with other men. The promiscuity and feminine control found in the *landay* is indicative of what many Afghan women may have desired: greater control of their lives. In the following *landay*, the theme of promiscuity was also present which indicates that many Afghan women were attracted to the notion of having multiple lovers and command of a relationship:

*All my hotheaded lovers will be pleased with me,  
I am not one of those who bully men in love!*<sup>39</sup>

In this *landay*, the number of lovers was kept ambiguous but it can be inferred that it was numerous. Unlike the first *landay*, this author boasted about her skills to keep her men content. When she commented on her men's "hotheaded" characteristic, she referred to the irritability or temper issues that characterize a strong personality. In this scenario, she was in control and could tame tempers no matter the difficulty. Similarly in power, the author in this next *landay* takes charge over her sex life:

*If I stare at you with such great insistence,  
it is because in you I see the hint of my next lover.*<sup>40</sup>

The theme of promiscuity was reinforced in this *landay* with the idea that the woman was on the move for her next lover, and her vast experience with multiple lovers was implied. Also, she was assured that her wants would be met with her skills of seduction.

*Landays* reveal the unhappy marital arrangements for many Afghan women and the ways they protested their husbands in order to take control of their lives. In many of the *landays*, husbands were often referred as "little horrors" suggesting a miserable coexistence. Marriages were commonly arranged by fathers who sometimes promised

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<sup>39</sup> Majrouh, *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, 69.

<sup>40</sup> Majrouh, *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, 65.

their daughters to older men. A woman's future rested on the wishes of her father, and the results of the arrangements can be seen through the *landays*. For example, the following *landay* centered on a woman's feelings about her father:

*Young men, defend me, defend your very honor!  
My father is a tyrant who throws me in an old man's bed.*<sup>41</sup>

Evidently unhappy with her marriage, the author blamed her father for her troubles since he was the culprit who selected her suitor. Calling her father a tyrant implied insensitivity on the behalf of the father who arranged the marriage and his inability to understand his daughter's grievances. She may have argued with her father's selection, as she is obviously unhappy with her husband's age, but the father was not deterred. This *landay* depicts a common experience among Afghan women that may have led to its popularity among the women who recited it. The poem enabled the author to express her frustration and helped other women vent their unhappiness instead of keeping their sentiments quiet.

Infidelity was another common theme found among *landays*. Many Afghan women may have made *landays* about extramarital affairs popular as a result of their own unhappy marriages and their poetry was a way to escape to a fantasy where they could be with someone else.

*"Little horror," take your rifle and kill me now.  
As long as I live I shall not forsake my lover.*<sup>42</sup>

In this *landay* the woman would rather end her life than end her love affair. The love of another man was more important than her marriage for various reasons. For instance, it may be the physical attraction, the reciprocated love, or simply the desire to continue to

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<sup>41</sup> Majrouh, *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, 59.

<sup>42</sup> Majrouh, *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, 65.



maintain control over an aspect of her life that was enticing. In addition, the following *landay* was explicit about why death was preferable to her marriage:

*Let this rock crush me with its weight,  
But let no aged husband's hand ever brush against me.*<sup>43</sup>

The author was repulsed by her husband's touch and would rather die instead of living alongside him as his wife. The husband's age was the likely factor in the woman's unhappiness which may have been the case for many women's grief. By wishing for death instead of an elderly husband's touch, the author wanted to take control over her own life and not have her life dictated by her father's choice of a suitor. The option of death presented in the poem may have been enticing for many Afghan women who found themselves miserable with their husbands.

References to nature often helped some Afghan women communicate their sexual drive and desire for dominance. The wish to control aspects of their own lives may have been a result of the dramatic changes caused by displacement during the war. The metaphor of untamed nature often described a woman's longing for sexual affairs and her ability to overpower men. One woman wrote:

*My lover prefers well mannered garden flowers,  
But I, wild tulip that I am, I shed my petal on the  
Endless plain.*<sup>44</sup>

The author described herself as a "wild tulip" juxtaposed against her lover's wishes of an organized garden. Unable to control this particular flower, the woman insisted that her lover must accept her free spirit. The author's ability to move freely and possibly to numerous lovers was referred to with the shedding of petals throughout the plain. The *landay* reiterated the author's, as well as those who recited the poem, desire for control

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<sup>43</sup> Majrouh, *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> Majrouh, *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, 61.

and independence to make choices during the turbulent times of war. The confident and aggressive voice can also be seen in the following:

*My lover was dozing on armsfuls [sic] of flowers,  
And I, like morning dew, came down over him.*<sup>45</sup>

The man in the poem enjoyed many flowers, or lovers, but was overpowered by the morning dew as symbolized by the female author of the *landay*. The author was confident that although her lover was occupied with other flowers, her presence would take over him mentally and physically because she had the command of the relationship.

The trauma of war did not disappear: many women continued to live out a repressive life in the refugee camps but because of Majrouh's research their voices will not be silenced. When Majrouh fled Afghanistan and worked to document the *landays* of the Afghan women in Pakistan, he did not live to see them published. His clandestine organization that reported on the events of the war, the Afghan Information Center, came into conflict with the conservative Muslim groups of the country and Majrouh was assassinated in 1988. The voices of the Afghan women in the refugee camps almost would have gone dead too, but Majrouh's contacts in Europe helped to get the poetry published years later to keep their Afghan women's experiences alive. The *landays* are a treasure for the academia because it gives a glimpse into the pastime, the frustrations and desires of a population that was often silenced in the public sphere. The documentation of the *landays* enabled the voices and perspective of women to survive the war. It also has helped to create a better understanding of the war along with Afghan female response to the changes brought by the conflict.

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<sup>45</sup> Majrouh, *Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry*, 70.

## Russian Women of the War

*We feel we have been used.*<sup>46</sup>

– Lyubov Yakoveleva, founder of *Anika*, a support group for Russian female veterans.

Yakoveleva's feeling that she and her female counterparts were not appreciated during the war was a feeling that echoed through various groups of Russian women. Though they participated in the war and endured similar harsh living conditions as their male comrades in the field, Russian women were not officially recognized by the Soviet army. As a result, they could not partake in veteran benefits granted to Russian men, which left many Russian women feeling unappreciated for the sacrifices they made.

The experiences of Russian women in Afghanistan are a necessary component to include in the mainstream discussion of the Soviet-Afghan war. In order to construct a better understanding of the war, the female experience is vital since it provides a viewpoint uniquely influenced by their gender, given that they were challenged by socio/economic barriers as a result of their gender. Russian women's participation helped to unravel the regime's official stance for their intervention in Afghanistan, which it claimed was nonthreatening, and revealed that Soviet involvement was aggressive, dangerous, and unwelcomed by many Afghans.

Russian women's contributions and courage would have gone unrecognized and silenced as a result of the Soviet government's censorship campaign if they had not been active and expressed the grievances they experienced. Furthermore, the Russian female experience in Afghanistan demonstrates the shortcomings of the socialist agenda of the Soviet Union. The regime's disregard for women's needs, such as protection against sexual harassment, living conditions, access to feminine hygiene products for their

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<sup>46</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 14.

menstrual cycles, and the lack of financial assistance for female veterans demonstrates a failing of a major socialist ideal: the improvement of the quality of life for women.

### *The Soviet Intent Challenged*

In the campaign in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union hoped to support and enforce a communist regime to help with the advancement of the socialist world-wide revolution, to extend its military frontier further south, and to demonstrate that it would not tolerate satellite states being overthrown by agents who wanted to divert the socialist agenda.<sup>47</sup> The Soviet regime perpetuated a propaganda campaign of a limited contingent of Russian soldiers sent to Afghanistan, and the government also censored casualty information from the general public. According to scholar T.H. Rigby,

The Soviet leaders wanted to play down the role of the USSR's so-called 'limited contingent' for political reason, both domestic and international ... It was only with the flowering of *glasnost* in 1986 that the virtual news black-out was breached and there were more and more frequent reports of their [Russian soldiers] steadfastness and heroism and their generosity and humanity towards the Afghan population. All the same, there was still no realistic press account of the course of hostilities and the conditions under which the Soviet troops lived and fought, and no official casualty figures were revealed till after the decision to withdraw was announced.<sup>48</sup>

In the hopes of allaying any opposition domestically, the Soviet government kept information about the war limited to the Russian general public and continued its rhetoric on the necessity for Soviet presence in Afghanistan; this policy would bring dire consequences to Russian women deployed in Afghanistan and female veterans. The Soviet government often referred to the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighborliness, and

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<sup>47</sup> T.H. Rigby, "The Afghan Conflict and Soviet Domestic Politics," in *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, ed. Amin Saikal and William Maley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1989), 67.

<sup>48</sup> Rigby, "The Afghan Conflict and Soviet Domestic Politics," 77.

Cooperation of 1978 and the UN Charter Article 51 on self defense as an explanation for their presence in Afghanistan. The treaty stated that Afghanistan had the right to defend itself from forces that endangered its state's primary interest, which by the late 1970s and into the next decade was social reform. Furthermore, the Soviet military could provide military assistance to aid its neighbor. The Soviet government claimed that it had done nothing that would cause suspicion of imperialist intent, but instead had done the logical step of protecting and defending its ally and neighbor. In an early 1980 press release, the regime explained, "There goes without saying that there has been no Soviet 'intervention' or 'aggression' at all. And another thing: We are helping the new Afghanistan, at the request of its government, to defend the national independence, freedom, and honor of its country..."<sup>49</sup> The explanation was meant to appear noble in order to dissuade war opposition from fomenting.

Though the secretive nature of the Soviet Union in regards to the war is not unique since many countries follow similar practices in times of war, the effects on women can be viewed distinctly because of the political ideology of the Soviet Union. As a communist regime touting greater equality and better treatment for women, the war propaganda of the USSR had the reverse effect for women's rights. Instead, women in combat were not recognized by the army and basic female needs were ignored, as will be discussed in the next sections. Moreover, male veterans had a difficult time transitioning into civilian life, but women were especially vulnerable as a result of the decision by the Soviet government to keep the Afghanistan war concealed as much as possible from the public. Women's health problems were not recognized as combat wounds and financial

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<sup>49</sup> Basil Dmytryshyn and Frederick Cox, *The Soviet Union and the Middle East: A Documentary Record of Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey, 1917-1985*, (New Jersey: Kingston Press, 1987), 201.

assistance was denied. Despite these challenges, Russian women challenged their constraints that were first established by the Soviet policy of secrecy; they were strong-willed and actively fought against repressive policies.

### *The Situation in Afghanistan Exposed and the Implications*

The participation of Russian women varied based on factors such as their capabilities and expertise, and as result of this diversity, their experiences provide a rich collection of information about the events that took place that counter the official Soviet stance for their involvement in Afghanistan. Some Russian women performed engineering, medical, or clerical duties, while many others were given combat duties in the Soviet army. Another group of Russian women were in Afghanistan before the start of the war and stayed to help their husbands or to aid the Soviet army, while still others simply accompanied their military husbands abroad. With their various responsibilities in Afghanistan, Russian women had the ability to view and experience the changes that accompanied the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Many Russian women often suffered exploitation, and though the Soviet army moved slowly to address these issues, the continual efforts by Russian women to expose their maltreatments demonstrates their activism and the weaknesses of the Soviet socialist goals. Many Russian women who served in Afghanistan kept their deployment a secret from their families, friends, and neighbors in order to avoid misconceptions of promiscuity and sexual companionship as part of their responsibilities abroad. This may have resulted from the lack of information provided to the general public on the war. According to Ellis, "Although women served in a wide range of capacities ... most

people assumed that the women were there to serve the sexual needs of the Russian troops. Many of the Russian troops had the same idea, and women who were harassed and attacked had no recourse for justice ...”<sup>50</sup> The demeaning impressions came from a lack of publication of the responsibilities maintained by women, such as combat, medical, and clerical duties. If Russian women were perceived solely as sexual companions for the male soldiers, the Soviet government did little to remedy the false impression. Since the war was overshadowed by propaganda and censorship, the Russian community may have had difficulties conceptualizing the necessity for Russian women because the Soviet government touted military involvement as insignificant.

Many Russian women dealt with sexual harassment or worse from Russian soldiers and they could not find help despite the dominant socialist rhetoric that often championed women’s empowerment. Since the Soviet army did not officially recognize their military involvement, many Russian women were unprotected. As Ellis explained, women were not official part of the military, and therefore, the military was not responsible for them.<sup>51</sup> According to Ellis, sexual harassment within the Soviet army was not taken seriously and few male soldiers ever faced severe punishment from the act. Further, the Soviet army gave little consideration and care to the needs of women. Tatiana, a Russian soldier, described the poorly mismanaged living arrangements and the diet while in she was in combat. She was aggravated because she felt that her female needs were not taken into account within the basic organization of the camp. She said, “And we women had a difficult time with our monthly period – no one had even

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<sup>50</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 11.

<sup>51</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 13.

considered that.”<sup>52</sup> Because she said this while complaining about the long and dangerous walk to the water tanks, and the horrid tents that they lived in, one can assume that access to the restrooms for women was also a treacherous endeavor. Access to sanitary towels or other forms of sanitation for women during their menstrual cycle appeared to be minimal. The difficulties that Tatiana and other women experienced demonstrate the lack of consideration by Soviet army and regime for the needs of Russian women which directly contradicted the validity of its socialist stance of empowerment and the improvement of the quality of life for women.

The lack of feminine hygiene available to Russian soldiers is indicative of a larger failing of socialist regimes to support their female population. In Yugoslavia for instance, Slavenka Drakulic recounted in her memoirs the issues that came with having sanitary products during her menstrual cycle and the harsh reality that women continued to wash and reuse sanitary cloths years later since there were no disposable sanitary products for them to use. She also shared in her memoirs her travel experiences in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union and her encounters with female friends. Drakulic repeatedly heard frustration among women about the lack of feminine products:

We don't have sanitary napkins and sometimes not even cotton batting. I have to hoard it when I find it, or borrow it ...,” and “Look at us – we don't even look like women. There are no deodorants, perfumes, sometimes even no soap or toothpaste. There is no fine underwear, no pantyhose, and no nice lingerie. Worst of all, there are no sanitary napkins. What can one say except that it is humiliating?”<sup>53</sup>

While asked to speak in a seminar in New York on Eastern European women, Drakulic held up a tampon and menstrual pad and announced that the absence of the products was a reason why communism failed. She explained,

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<sup>52</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 17.

<sup>53</sup> Drakulic, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, 30,31.



For me, the sight of a sanitary napkin and a Tampax was a necessary precondition for understanding what we are talking about: not the generally known fact that women wait in long lines for food or that they don't have washing machines – one could read about this in *Time* or *Newsweek* – but that besides all the hardship of living in Eastern Europe, if they can't find gauze or absorbent cotton, they have to wash bloody cloth pads every month, again and again, as their mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers did hundreds of years ago. For them, communism has changed nothing in that respect.<sup>54</sup>

The common challenge amongst women living in communist regimes was a problematic symptom of government priority and policy. The lack of resources adversely affected women, and yet the government did little to alleviate the problem. Without the voices of women who expressed these grievances, the various plights of women would have gone unrecognized. Drakulic said in her introduction to the seminar that there are some challenges that the popular media will report on, but it is not the comprehensive experience of women. Therefore, the voices of women in Eastern Europe are vital in our understanding of the conditions in which communist governments tried to reform society. The Soviet-Afghan war represented an opportunity for the Soviet Union to reform and maintain a socialist society but women like Drakulic and her friends, as well as Russian women in service, showcase the pitfalls of socialism that adversely affect women's lives.

### *Russian Women among Afghans*

Some Russian women who were contracted under the Soviet army had minimal interaction with the Afghan community, but others who did have access to the Afghan community demonstrated the growing tensions between the two populations which contradicted the Soviet and Afghan government's stance that all was well between the two nations. The coexistence of Soviets and Afghans was not as simple as the Soviet and

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<sup>54</sup> Drakulic, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, 124.

Afghan governments tried to make the world believe. The frustration amongst many Afghans stemmed from the Soviet's long-term presence in their country, as well as the major cultural differences between the two nations.

Although the Soviet regime promoted the advancements made between the Russian and Afghan communities, Russian women reveal a different narrative in which tensions grew between Afghan citizens and the Soviet presence in the country. Russian women were often mistreated and attacked because of their ties with the Soviet Union. Reflecting on her experiences in Afghanistan, Galina said: "Before the war started, a Russian lady was very well respected, in the shops, everywhere. After the war started, some people would throw things at Russian ladies, tomatoes, things like that."<sup>55</sup> Russian women who had little restrictions, usually those who were in Afghanistan independent from the Soviet army, endured such harassment from Afghans. Galina was in Afghanistan before the break out of war as an independent contractor with her husband, and she could attest to the difference from how she was once treated. Russian women were assaulted because Afghans who were against Soviet presence in the country could easily vent their frustration on unarmed and unaware women. The stories of assaults are corroborated by British journalist Helen Womack who said,

There was a case before we arrived where a couple of Russian women had gotten very frustrated sitting in their flats, leading these sterile lives. They actually dressed up as Afghans and went to the market, and they were lynched because they'd outraged local tradition. They were killed. The crowd tore them apart.<sup>56</sup>

The brutal mistreatment and attacks on Russian women reported by Galina and Womack demonstrates the heightened tensions between the Afghan and Soviet

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<sup>55</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 23.

communities. Though the Soviet Union wanted the Russian general public to think otherwise, the evidence of greater problems was apparent.

The friction between many members of the Afghan community and Soviet presence became apparent even among the scandalizing gossip stories. Sameema Bibi, an Afghan woman from Kabul, expressed antagonistic sentiments towards Russian women and implied that they were all dangerous agents of the Soviet regime. Bibi recounted,

I met lots of Russian women, too, in Jalalabad and in Kabul. A doctor in Afghanistan had a Russian wife. He was killed by his wife. She strangled him with his own necktie. Could be she was a Russian agent. We heard lots of stories of Russian women who killed their Afghan husbands if the husbands were against Russia.<sup>57</sup>

Bibi's interpretation provides insight into the coexistence of Russian women among Afghans, especially in regard to personal relationships and marriages. In Bibi's account, it was the death of an Afghan doctor by a Russian woman that was scandalizing. If it had been a Russian doctor who died maybe the event would not have been as important or memorable to repeat. The hostility over the intermarriage between an Afghan and Russian could have also played a factor in Bibi's unfavorable description of the Russian woman as a murderer and secret agent. Bibi's account also reveals that Russian women were viewed as strong and dangerous figures because they appeared to have the support of the Soviet government instead of being marginalized. Bibi, along with other female Afghans, could have been frustrated with their own low social status and threatened by Russian women who appeared to have more protections from their government. However, this was a misconception since many Russian women were vulnerable to mistreatment while they were in service in Afghanistan.

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<sup>57</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 26.

The hostile encounters that Russian women experienced are important to recognize as uniquely feminine since it was women who were attacked and gossiped about and who had the least amount of support from the army and government, leaving them almost entirely defenseless. Without the reporting of these incidents, our understanding of the hostilities in Afghanistan would have been skewed to the male-dominant discourse of the war. However, women did share their experiences which challenged the Soviet stance of so-called friendly intervention in Afghanistan and demonstrated that many Afghans were growing tired of the Soviet presence in their country.

### *Homecoming*

By the late 1980s, the war's censorship began to unravel as the Soviet Union withdrew from the territory, and the Soviet public was not keen on celebrating the acts of Russian soldiers in Afghanistan. Referred to as the "Afghan Syndrome," many Russians perceived the war as unjust and morally wrong, and they turned on those who were active participants in the war. Since men were most associated with the Afghan war, they bore the brunt of the clash. They were often called "... baby-killers, murderers, sadists and torturers, or simpletons who had been too stupid to understand the crimes they were committing ..." <sup>58</sup> Veteran organizations such as the Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (1989), the Russian Union of Veterans of Afghanistan (1990), the Russian Fund of Invalids of the War in Afghanistan (1991), The Brotherhood of Arms (1997), and the Committee for Soldier-Internationalists' Affairs were the organizations that developed to

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<sup>58</sup> Rodric Braithwaite, *Afghantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan, 1979-1989*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 320.

help veterans cope psychologically and financially after the war.<sup>59</sup> Through the struggle of such veteran organizations, soldiers of the Afghan war were officially recognized by a revised law in 1995. Along with recognition came privileges such as tax breaks, medical services, and commercial business that had recently become privatized.<sup>60</sup> Female veterans, however, continued to struggle for recognition and benefits long after their male comrades began to receive aid. The inequitable treatment of male and female participants of the war demonstrates a failure of the Soviet regime to uphold their socialist goals of equality and female empowerment.

The Soviet government's refusal to connect Russian women's injuries with the war in Afghanistan because of the claim that they were not active members of the Soviet army was a major weakness of the part of the regime to uphold a key component of socialism: equality. The Soviet government strategized a coercive deployment of Russian women and cleverly designed it so that the official military documents would not have Soviet government approval even though these women were in Afghanistan with the Soviet army. Tatiana explained this strategy as an indirect order: "I did not apply to go there. I don't know of any women who applied to go to Afghanistan. They were chosen. It wasn't an order, exactly, but it was pretty close."<sup>61</sup> Though most women were given implicit directions from party officials to deploy to Afghanistan, in a few instances some women volunteered to stay together with siblings.<sup>62</sup> However, the Soviet's denial of most Russian women's service demonstrates a lack of compassion the female population that participated in the war. The USSR's denial of Russian women may have resulted from

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<sup>59</sup> Braithwaite, *Afghantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan*, 316.

<sup>60</sup> Braithwaite, *Afghantsy: the Russians in Afghanistan*, 317.

<sup>61</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 16.

<sup>62</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 20-22.

the regime's unwillingness to come to terms with the consequences of their decisions and their responsibilities to their soldiers. Also, they may have tried to maintain some remnants of censorship they upheld throughout the war in order to reduce their campaign in Afghanistan as a smaller-scale war. Though men also suffered in the post-war homecoming since their service and sacrifices were dismissed, women were especially vulnerable because they were not recognized by the Soviet army and could not obtain the same benefits that male veterans eventually received.

Despite the challenges of an unreceptive community, untreatable physical injuries, and emotional ailments faced by female veterans of the war, the Soviet Union provided no aid for Russian women which adversely affected the lives of many of them instead of improving the quality of life. Koromyoslova explained the difficult circumstances of returning home and the inability to discuss her experiences: "We didn't talk very much about where we had been," she said, "not even to relatives. People were just not interested."<sup>63</sup> Even within the family, Russian women found it difficult to express their anxieties and trauma in the aftermath of war. The transition to civilian life was made even more difficult with the refusal of veteran organizations to share the benefits that aided male veterans. Veteran groups for soldiers of the Afghan war barred entrance to Russian women because of the government's refusal to recognize their participation within the Soviet army. The Soviet government took little responsibility for sending women into the combat zones or for giving the care needed to treat the injuries from such endeavors. Tatiana's experience when she sought help mirrored those of many:

My illness was never associated with Afghanistan ... When I went to the local military committee for assistance, they told me that they wouldn't help me because I had never been part of the military. They hadn't sent me

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<sup>63</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 21.

to Afghanistan - I had chosen to go. Their explanation was 'You went there yourself – you volunteered. We have no responsibility for you.'<sup>64</sup>

Tatiana explained that when she returned from Afghanistan, her extreme weight loss made her unrecognizable, and she had trouble financially supporting herself as well. The veteran organization denied her any assistance and insulted her by refusing to acknowledge the sacrifices she made alongside her male comrades. Tatiana's homecoming was not an isolated experience. Koromyoslvoa also had physical ailments that she suffered from and received no assistance from the government. She said, "Now I am officially handicapped. Although I came home in 1985, I had to work, with the pain, until 1988, when they finally declared me handicapped. I get a small pension, the regular pension for handicapped people. I get nothing special for having been in Afghanistan."<sup>65</sup> Koromyoslvoa demonstrated strength and tenacity because she worked three years with the pain from her combat wounds. The voices of Tatiana and Koromyoslvoa are examples of how the Soviet Union failed to respond to the needs of female veterans, and there are many more women that experienced the same challenges. The inability to recognize and provide services for Russian women who served in Afghanistan showed a lack of consideration and understanding on the part of the regime for the sacrifices they made. Moreover, the experiences of female veterans in the Soviet Union demonstrates the negative effects of socialist reforms to reveal how women were not taken into account and cared for by the government regardless of the political philosophy they publicized.

Without the avenue to express their grievances, Russian women became frustrated and angry; but instead of accepting defeat, they organized in order to gain the recognition they believed the Soviet government owed them. ANIKA, registered as the Moscow

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<sup>64</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Ellis, *Women of the Afghan War*, 21.

Committee of Women Disabled in the Afghanistan War, was a prominent organization in Russia that strived to gain financial and medical benefits for female veterans. Founded in 1991, the organization established support groups in order to help Russian women connect with fellow female comrades. Also, ANIKA sought equal rights for female veterans of the war. As a sign of ANIKA's progress and the changing attitudes in Russia, the Moscow museum endorsed a permanent exhibition on Russian women in the Afghan war, and the female curators discussed the importance for the Russian community to come to terms with the Afghan war and the enormous costs paid by women for their service.<sup>66</sup> The Moscow exhibit helped with the discussion of women in Afghanistan and exposed a new generation of Russians to all the participants of the war.

During the Soviet-Afghan war, Russian women were called to be companions to their husbands and combatants of war but they encountered little appreciation for their involvement from the Russian community. Through the various positions and responsibilities in Afghanistan, Russian women provided information to better understand the situation of war and to challenge the government's stance that Soviet involvement was not threatening when in fact it was. Female veterans' unofficial involvement led to the denial of women's contributions and sacrifices even though Russian women had life-changing accidents and psychological trauma as a result of the war. The short-coming of the socialist agenda is also revealed through the participation of Russian women in Afghanistan. The lack of understanding for women's needs while

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<sup>66</sup> Kathryn Pinnick, "When the fighting is over: the soldiers' mothers and the Afghan Madonna's," in *Post Soviet Women: from the Baltic to Central Asia*, ed. Mary Buckley. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 154.



deployed and the unequal treatment between female and male veterans undermined the goals of socialism.

Although the struggle to receive acknowledgement from their government was strenuous, Russian women found ways to overcome their hardships. Veterans returning home did not sit idly by as the Soviet government denied them recognition and benefits for the injuries sustained during the war. On the contrary, Russian women were active in organizing and fighting for proper compensation. They created support groups like ANIKA to help fight and advocate for their rights. On the warfront, Russian women demonstrated strength and courage as many were placed under direct combat duty where their lives were at risk. Through the various facets of the Afghan war, Russian women have demonstrated courage and strength to face their challenges even in the face of the Soviet regime. Furthermore, it is imperative to recognize that their hardships have been shared by many other women in different countries and different times. In order to improve the treatment of for all women, it is important to listen, learn, and include the female experience into the policy-making process of countries and mainstream narrative of historical studies.

## **Conclusion**

Though the places and time periods may vary, women have historically shared common experiences in times of war. In the Soviet-Afghan war, women were faced with challenges on various fronts. Female journalists went to great lengths to cover the stories of women. With perseverance, journalists like Ellis, Goodwin, and Brodsky found interpreters and went into dangerous battle zones alongside men and women to share their stories with the world. Afghan women had to decide which side of the conflict would best support their needs, or chose to flee completely from their home. Though often confronted with the gender barriers of the strict conservative traditions, many Afghans defied cultural norms and were active participants outside of the domestic sphere. Russian women also resisted gender barriers when they were sent to Afghanistan. Some challenges included fighting stereotypes of being sex companions to soldiers, sexual harassment, and the army's lack of recognition for women's needs. Russian women also endured economic challenges when they returned home and received little financial assistance from the government for their services. By simply being women, the Soviet regime did not recognize the contributions of female veterans. In many instances in history, a common struggle prevails among women.

There is a common gender barrier among women in times of war. During the Kosovo crisis of the late 1990s, the population underwent great turmoil in the hands of Albanians. In her study, Augusta del Zotto found that women had active roles in trying to find and facilitate peace, but their stories were ignored and instead others stories of the war prevailed in the media. Del Zotto encountered what she called a "black-out" of

women since the stories of female activists in Kosovo only made up 1 percent of globally generated stories.<sup>67</sup> Many women in the Kosovo conflict were active participants in the refugee camps, and they were outspoken through organized demonstrations on issues like women's health as a result of the violent rape accounts reported. For example, a women's group pressured the UN to distribute RU486, also known as the "morning after pill," to women who were victims of rape. Though women in Kosovo had various active roles, they were instead overwhelmingly reported as helpless victims.<sup>68</sup> Russian and Afghan women had similar gender barriers to overcome. Like the women in Kosovo, Russian and Afghan women had more active and complex roles during the war yet much of their participation has gone unnoticed within their own countries, and among the historical and mainstream discussions.

Like the vocal opposition in Afghanistan, women in Israel also protested the government for their lack of attention on women's needs throughout the long-held Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In 1988, the Women in Black organization was created as the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation intensified. The movement was dedicated to achieving peace in the Middle East, and soon their network of members spread throughout the region. In Israel, Women in Black focused on women's issues. According to Swanee Hunt and Cristina Posa,

They [Women in Black] have been demonstrating against the closures of various Palestinian cities, arguing that the blockades prevent pregnant women from accessing healthcare services and keep students from attending school. The group also has called for the full participation of women in peace negotiations.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Augusta C. del Zotto, "Weeping Women, Wringing Hands: How the Mainstream Media Stereotyped Women's Experiences in Kosovo," *Journal of Gender Studies* 11, no. 2 (2002): 149.

<sup>68</sup> Del Zotto, "Weeping Women, Wringing Hands," 149.

<sup>69</sup> Swanee Hunt and Cristina Posa, "Women and Peace," *Foreign Policy*, no. 124 (2001): 43.

Similar to the women of RAWA, Israeli and Palestinian women were concerned about stopping the conflict because of the enormous burden it placed on women and families. Unlike the predominantly male leadership, whose main focus was on the political, ideological, and territorial disagreements between the countries, Women in Black and RAWA demonstrate a specific focus on helping women.

The experience of Russian women returning home and finding minimal support from their government and society is another experience that many female veterans have encountered. In an article in *Time* magazine, “How We Fail Our Female Vets,” Laura Fitzpatrick reported on the treatment of American veterans returning home from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. When she described the history of the Veterans Affairs it was apparent that American women have also struggled to gain recognition for their needs. Fitzpatrick wrote,

With the exception of nurses, women weren't allowed to serve in the regular or reserve forces during peacetime until 1948. World War I produced some 25,000 female veterans; an additional 319,000 women served in World War II. By the time the Vietnam War ended, nearly 1 million living American women had served their country in the military, making up 3.5% of veterans overall. But the VA didn't start providing medical and mental-health services to women until 1988.<sup>70</sup>

The article also documented the low number of well-equipped veteran hospitals for specific women's needs, such as routine checkups, birth control, gynecologists, and feminine sanitary products. The dry desert climate also caused different reactions among male and female veterans. From 2002-2008, women were more likely to be diagnosed with urinary-tract infections and reproductive-system problems, and yet the government did not connect these ailments with the war. According to Fitzpatrick, there were only a

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<sup>70</sup> Laura Fitzpatrick, “How We Fail Our Female Vets,” *Time*, July 12, 2009. Accessed April 20, 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2001011,00.html>

few VA hospitals nationally that provided quality care for female patients. The continual efforts of female veterans to demand more from their government is evident in the numerous advocacy groups and current legislation that would improve conditions for female veterans. Like the Russian women in the Soviet-Afghan war, American women also needed to fight to receive their earned benefits.

Although the experiences of women in the Soviet-Afghan were not unique, as demonstrated through the examples of other women in times of war, the focus on the perspective and participation of women in Afghanistan and the Soviet Union is a narrative that needed to be told for the same reason that the stories of women in Kosovo, Israel, and the US needed to be told. Through the women of the Soviet-Afghan war, the division within the Afghan community becomes apparent since many women were active in both Soviet and Mujahideen camps. Even in the most dire environments like the refugee camps, Afghan women were ambitious and creative. The Soviet-Afghan war can be seen as a conflict that was heavily censored among the Russian general public as seen through the voices of Russian women, their participation helped to bring forth the reality of the hostile tensions with the local Afghans, the danger of the Soviet involvement, and the short-comings of the Soviet socialist agenda. Activist journalists like Ellis, Goodwin, and Brodsky helped to prevent another ‘black-out’ of women whose role in the war was vital.

Analyzing women adds to our historical perspective of the Soviet-Afghan war because the treatment and opportunities for women demonstrate the priorities of the nation and the conditions of life that may not be readily obvious to the opposite sex. The focus on women during times of war helps to inform our understanding of the conditions

in which they lived as well as others in their society. Through their unique viewpoint, women provide a distinct perspective that can further our understanding of the war and the aftermath of rebuilding.

Both Afghan and Russian women were strong-willed and active participants, and they strived to create stability for themselves by challenging gender, social, and economic barriers. By studying women of the war, one gets a better understanding of the energy of women living under the siege of war on the home front, the army, and the refugee camps. Their stories help to establish the image of women with strength and activism.

With current global conflicts in places like Afghanistan, Syria, and Tunisia for example, it is of the utmost importance for the well-being of society that the media, historians, and public servants uphold their responsibilities to inform on all major participants of the conflict, and not solely on the dominant few. If the war discourse continues to silence women, governments are not held accountable for their actions in war and inevitably countries will repeat the same mistakes from the past. For example, the current US treatment of female veterans reflects the mismanagement of government officials. Moreover, women who continue to organize, lobby politicians for better legislation, and protest for improved treatment demonstrate the necessity of keeping the government accountable in order to stop further mistreatment. Drakulic stated in her memoirs,

Growing up in Eastern Europe you learn very young that politics is not an abstract concept, but a powerful force influencing people's everyday lives. It was this relationship between political authority and the trivia of daily living, this view from below that interested me the most. And who should I find down there, most removed from the seats of political power, but women. The biggest burden of everyday life was carried by them. Even if

they fully participated in revolutionary events, they were less active and less visible in the aftermath of those events.<sup>71</sup>

Drakulic's words resonate in many of the global conflicts that have greatly affected the daily routines of civilians, especially those with the least amount of political power: women. The view from below, as Drakulic described it, is one that should be recognized and elevated. As NATO troops begin to withdraw from Afghanistan, NATO countries like the US, England, and Russia would be wise to take into consideration the knowledge and experience of women since they can provide insight into the conflict and help in the post-war resolutions that can lead to long-term peace for all people involved.

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<sup>71</sup> Drakulic, *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, xv."

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