Letters from Afghanistan:
A Creative Analysis of the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979-1989

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Grishka,

Finally in Afghanistan after two months of training ground! School did not prepare me for this - in Basic Military Training we fired maybe nine rounds and in the army the officers kept yelling at us for total, and in the army the officers kept yelling at us for not doing it fast enough. Anyhow, two days ago they flew us on a plane and we flew for five hours straight before landing in Kabul. We live in barracks, where there is no running water. There are a lot of Russians, Turkmen, and fellow Ukrainians here, much less Balts and Caucasians. One kid from Tallinn claimed Estonians were hoarded to war for slaughter because Comrade Chernenko hated them, but Stariky beat him up and he doesn't speak up anymore.

Grishka, if only you knew how much I miss Dnipropetrovsk. Almost every day I remember our beautiful city: the river adorned with rows of chestnut trees, and the giant poplar in the yard we used to climb. I promise to return soon - everybody hopes we will withdraw from Afghanistan within a year. Take good care of mother; you are the man in the family now. Once I come back, I want to find a decent job so that you can attend university.

Kostya
Grisha,

Do not let mother blame herself for my conscription. To evade it costs two-three thousand rubles. I have never seen so much money in my life! This makes me so angry. Of course all the poor working people go to war, while sons of politicians and bureaucrats sit at home due to blat.

We are stationed in Kabul, and there's very little to do. We take turns patrolling the streets. It's quiet most of the time, except last week, while our unit was on duty, I heard movement and immediately one of our guys got shot in the shoulder. We never saw the attacker, but the captain said they must have been mujahedeen. Afghans hate us: we came across a mujahedeen giving out leaflets calling for the expulsion of Pashtun. He ran and was dead in a second, shot by one of us in the back of his head. I don't even know who killed him - it could have been me.

Among other news, food is shitty, and the stink of latrines is horrible in this heat - it's hit thirty-five the other day. The sun is always blazing; it hasn't rained once since we arrived. During the day the soldiers do nothing but play cards and drink. We tried swimming in Kabul river once, but in summertime it's just a shallow, muddy stream. Thankfully, it cools down quite a bit at night.

Kostya
Grisha,

I feel more and more like we don't even know the country we are protecting. I mostly interact with other soldiers. There is an interpreter living with us; he goes by Misha, but his real name is Mahmud. He lived in the Union and studied in MSU. Misha is my main source of contact with the local population.

People here don't adhere to hygiene and live in brick and stone dwellings. Afghans wear traditional Asian robes and turbans and grow long beards. Once they spot a foreigner at a bazaar, they refuse to sell anything at a reasonable price. They also have a habit of carrying their daggers wherever they go. Most notably, they are deeply superstitious, and believe in spirits and djinns. Even Misha wears amulets from Bala (a Pashtu word for any Bad thing or happening).

Poppy is everywhere in Afghanistan. Law does not prohibit it, and Afghans smoke marijuana every day. Soldiers who have money entertain themselves by smoking hashish. I've seen people I know get addicted to it really fast.

I get irritated sitting around in Kabul. Muslims pray five times a day, and mullahs wait to call them to prayer before dawn, making sleep impossible. The stink of mules and donkeys is unbearable. The only good thing about this place is fruit: Finest grapes, melons, apricots, and pears are sold right in the streets.

Kostya
Grisha,

This morning I woke up to loud cries and dozens of people running simultaneously. Apparently, a gang of Georgians and Russians raped a nurse. Such crimes are hardly rare here. What is rare is someone getting punished. No one in the camp cares enough to stop fellow soldiers from committing crimes. Alcohol, drugs, and mindless work turn us into animals: female personnel are scared of walking alone, and fresh recruits, salage, get harassed all the time. Hazing is a part of soldiers’ lives in Afghanistan; one eighteen-year-old died of alcohol poisoning after someone made him drink a bottle of vodka by himself.

Another common crime is selling weapons to the locals. A friend of mine sold his pistol for 18,000 afghans, but Kalashnikovs go for 100,000 a piece... This friend invited me to a brothel. Prostitutes are cheap and can be hired for a hundred afghans. Usually women aren’t even seen because they work at home and cover themselves with veils and burkas. When we do see them, they look like proper wildlings: many wear jewelry on their faces, fixed with some sort of gum.

Boredom is killing me. I would do anything to get out of this wretched city. My commander said we may be transferred somewhere south.

Yours,
Kostya
Grisha,

Yesterday our unit entered Ghayni - a major city hosting around 100,000 people, located on the Kabul-Kandahar highway. I suspect we are headed to Kandahar; the fighting in the south has recently escalated.

Conditions changed completely after we left Kabul. At first, there were many villages, miles of corn and poppy fields. But as we headed southwest and further into the Hindu Kush chain, we saw less and less people. Afghanistan is dominated by plateaus and mountains, and we had to find our way through a labyrinth of treacherous passes and ravines. It's freezing up there; some mountain peaks are permanently covered in snow and ice. Cold winds crawl under our uniform no matter how warmly you dress.

The countryside is largely a harsh, rugged terrain. Scarcely villages that we stumbled upon - a bunch of pitiful mud huts surrounding a single unpaved street, with flimsy sheds for sheep and oxen - are home to destitute peasants and farmers. Once we discovered a tiny mountain village where everyone - from old men to mothers with babies in their arms - had been massacred, their throats slit and their guts opened. The officer said that were the tribes fighting - Sunni Pashtuns attacking Shia Farsiwan, who are an Iranian minority. However, later I overheard someone boast that "our boys" had done that.

Yours,
Kostya
Grisha,

We are currently in Kandahar province, on the Pak-Afghan border. The march from Ghazni was an ordeal: we lost men protecting our convoy from mujahideen. Oftentimes their cruelty and ruthlessness brings death even upon Afghans. In front of my eyes, a stray rebel rocket blew up a civilian bus full of women and children. The others and I rushed to the bus. One infant girl wouldn’t stop howling and clinging to her mother’s corpse. I tried to detach her from it, and a little arm came off.

Afghan rebels kidnap and torture Soviet soldiers. One scout, who had been with us since Kabul, disappeared a week ago. Yesterday we found him – mujahideen left his body for the vultures. Strips of skin on his chest were peeled off and tied in a knot behind the head. The entire body was black with bruises when mujahideen are done torturing their victims, they use their bodies to play buzkashi – a game akin to soccer, where a rotting animal carcass usually substitutes the ball.

I hate Afghanistan more and more with every breath. I have thought about shooting myself, but I don’t want to go like this.

Kostya
Grisha,

Today is the anniversary of the Soviet intervention. No one knows when the war will end, if it ever will. I was remembering just now how I left home full of hopes to return soon, and now I'm not sure if I will return at all.

The conditions have gotten worse. We cover under canvas tents and eat once a day because of food shortages. The older and more knowledgeable take new draftees' food and clothes. There is dysentery, lice, and diarrhea around the camp. Cold and lack of clean water don't mix well.

To obtain food and better clothing, I sold a rifle to an Afghan that lives nearby. He is rumored to supply the mujahideen, but no one cares about winning the war anymore. There was an officer who told on somebody who had traded with a local warlord. The officer did not come back from his next battle; his own soldiers failed to push him out of bullet's way.

I fight and smoke hashish. Then I sit and wait for death. Days have blended into one infinite battle. Nights are filled with visions of the dead, calling to me, cursing me.

Kostya
Grishka,

Sorry you had to learn what happened via a telephone call from my commander. I hardly remember the first half of January, and afterwards medical tests and physical therapy have been taking up all my time.

Three days after the New Year, we engaged in a combat mission whose aim was to wipe out the mujahedens’ hiding place. Three of us, including me, were scouting ahead of the main column. My comrade spotted the land mine; he was only late by half a second. I remember the surge of adrenaline and how quickly my heart was beating, but afterwards—nothing.

I came around in the hospital in Kandahar after the amputation. They cut my legs off up to my knees and injected tons of morphine for pain relief, though it still hurt like hell. They then transported me to Mayor-i-Sharif, because it’s so close to the Soviet border and this is where all severely injured get discharged from.

My service, of course, is over. The doctors make me do exercises every day to keep muscles in my legs in shape. They say I will be able to stand on prosthetics—ugly painful things they are. They also say I will be sent home soon.

Tell mother I’m still alive.

Kostya
Bibliography


Box AF-1 and AF-2, South Asian Pamphlet Collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University


R. B. Holmes photographs, 1910-1919 and undated, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University