

By Melynda Jarratt

## Soviet soldiers speak out

- veterans of Afghan War interviewed

When Sergei Morozov returned from his short stint in Afghanistan as a member of the Soviet Military Reserve, he discovered to his dismay that the Soviet press did not give fair and accurate coverage of the war which he had just left behind.

"I don't think our media provides complete and absolutely objective coverage of the developments in Afghanistan," he said in a recent interview conducted vis-a-vis the Soviet Embassy in Ottawa for the *Brunswickan*. "Those who returned from Afghanistan in the first years our limited contingent was there, were especially vexed by the lack of trustworthy information."

Nevertheless, Morozov and Skumatenko, who both agree on the one-sided picture of events in Afghanistan, volunteered that "positive changes" in Soviet media coverage of that war have taken place due to Gorbachev's new policies of Glasnost (openness) and Perestroika (restructuring). Indeed, such candidness on the part of Soviet citizens to Western journalists could never have taken place without Glasnost, and critical evaluations of the Soviet media such as that represented by Morozov and Skumatenko was unthinkable only two years ago.

So what do the ordinary Soviet soldiers who have returned from the fighting in Afghanistan think about that war and a possible political solution to it?

Sometime ago within the framework of an exchange of information between Canadian and Soviet students, the *Brunswickan* established an ongoing rapport with students in the USSR.

In the past few months this paper has published two related articles including an interview with Maxim Sotnikov, head of Moscow University's Young Communist League.

In this piece, Melynda Jarratt writes about the war in Afghanistan from the perspective of two members of the Soviet Military Reserve who formerly served in Afghanistan.

Sergei Skumatenko, 26, is presently a subway construction worker. Awarded the Red Star medal for wounds sustained in actions, Skumatenko, who is partially

impaired as a result of those wounds, is a leader of a Soviet Youth club whose main task is to research the history of Soviet soldiers during WWII.

Sergeo Morozov, 30, is presently a worker at Southern Pipe Works in the city of Nikopol. Besides being an elected delegate to the USSR Supreme Soviet, Morozov is a leader and sponsor of the Soviet Military Reserve.



Afghan Rebels perch atop a captured Soviet Armoured Personnel Carrier

Morozov feels that a political solution is "possible under the national reconciliation policy of the Afghan government. As regards the Soviet troop contingent, I think it must be withdrawn from Afghanistan upon political settlement of the issue."

On the other hand, Skumatenko disagrees with

his comrade's analysis. "I do not see such an opportunity," he commented, "at least for the near future. There is nothing you can agree on with a person who hates peoples' rule fanatically." He believes that the rebel Mujhadin leaders who are presently spearheading the fight against the Soviet backed Afghan

government hold the ordinary Afghans in "fear and make them fight."

Despite this conflict of opinion on a political solution to the Afghan war, both men believe that morale among the lower and upper echelons of the Soviet military contingent in Afghanistan is "O.K." Skumatenko says dryly: "Only volunteers go to (that country). They are aware of what they undertake." And

Morozov elaborates: "I recall how they lined us up and read the appeal by the Afghan government to our government to send in troops. Volunteers were asked to step forward. All of us did ... I'm sure of that, if need be, about 90 percent of my fellow Afghanistan veterans would go back there. Some of them have even applied to the Defense Ministry to be sent back."

But that was not the case last winter when 5 of their fellow soldiers who had been held by Afghan rebels were spirited away by Canadian authorities and brought to Canada to live. When asked about these former Soviet soldiers, Morozov quickly made reference to patriotism and their apparent lack of it. "I don't know their reasons. But I don't think a patriot would have done so." "Further," he adds, "if you don't like things in your own country, try and change them."

What is life like for veterans of the Afghanistan war? Are they respected by their fellow citizens in much the same way that veterans of The Great Patriotic War (WWII) are, and in what way are they remunerated for their services in the Soviet contingent to Afghanistan?

Skumatenko, for example, was awarded the Red Star medal for wounds sustained in action. Although he is partially impaired he is able to work at a subway construction site, and because of his impairment receives many privileges. "I for one," he remarks, "get a money pension, am exempt from all taxes, can travel on all kinds of public transport free, pay lower rent, and so on. The benefits for us are the same as

continued on page 27

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