

# Russia: The Deployment of a “Limited Contingent” to Afghanistan Had Practically No Impact on Everyday Life

Monday 12 September 2022, by [BAKHMIN Vyacheslav](#), [Posle/Pосле](#) (Date first published: 6 July 2022).

**An interview with human rights activist Vyacheslav Bakhmin about the atmosphere of that critical moment and the relevance of parallels with today’s war**

*The comparisons of the current war in Ukraine with the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan forty years ago are currently very popular. And while Ukrainian politicians [predict](#) a repeat of the shameful defeat for the Russian army, the secretary of the Security Council [Nikolai Patrushev argues](#), to the contrary, that “America will not succeed in damaging Russia” by turning “Ukraine into a European Afghanistan”. Obviously, historical analogies have no predictive power, but they sometimes help in understanding the specifics of the current moment. The Politburo decision of December 1979 and the decision of the Russian president in February 2022 have a huge number of differences: the deployment of troops into Afghanistan, despite its weak preparation, was preceded by a collective discussion within the narrow circles of the party leadership (during which there were some voices against it, for example, that of Alexei Kosygin), and the entry itself occurred, at least formally, at the request of the legitimate government of Afghanistan, which had the support of part of the population. Finally, the very scale of the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan was much smaller than the Russian presence during the current Russian invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, the Afghan war also resulted in huge casualties, its real course was also concealed by official Soviet propaganda, and it was also accompanied by an increased likelihood of global military conflict. And just like during the current war, the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan led to a sharp “tightening of the screws” inside the Soviet Union. Vyacheslav Bakhmin, a well-known human rights activist and co-chairman of the Moscow Helsinki Group, was arrested in February 1980, two months after the start of the Afghan war. Bakhmin was then accused of “spreading deliberately false fabrications that defamed the Soviet state and public order” and imprisoned for the next four years in a camp. Vyacheslav spoke to Posle about his perception of the war in Afghanistan and of how relevant historical parallels are with today’s war.*

**How did people around you and you personally react to the news of Soviet troops entering Afghanistan back in 1979? How did the war affect most people’s everyday lives?**

It was, though a limited contingent, still the entry of troops into another country. And of course, we understood that there would be casualties, that it was a serious violation of international law, even though the troops were sent in at the request of the Afghan leadership. Nonetheless, we were afraid of serious consequences for both the country and for human rights in the country, and that is why all my colleagues spoke out against the deployment. But still, emotionally we were not as much against this war as we were against the deployment of troops to Czechoslovakia. In the latter case, it was an attack on something that was very dear to us, something that we regarded as our last chance, or a small chance to change the situation in our own country.

**The difference between the troop entry into Afghanistan from the troop entry into Czechoslovakia was, as we know today, that the former escalated into a full-scale war with heavy casualties, including those of the Soviet troops. Did you or your friends have a feeling at the time that this might escalate into a long and bloody war?**

**VB:** I think most didn't have the feeling at the beginning that it could be a long one. Our thinking was influenced by the very definitions: a "limited contingent;" and an "entry at the request of the authorities." I did understand that it was probably happening in order to overthrow Hafizullah Amin and in order to place their own people in, and to gradually hand over the struggle for democracy to them. But then it turned into something else entirely - a battleground between the United States and the Soviet Union with the help of mujahideen who were supplied with weapons from the United States and other countries. The entry of troops became a massive war in which more than 14,000 Soviet troops and about a million, as I understand it, Afghans perished. These were huge losses, but most of us didn't realize this. Perhaps there were specialists who could predict this, understanding that, in general, any war in Afghanistan was doomed to fail, based on their knowledge of history. But most did not believe that this was the trap that could eventually result in the destruction of, and change in, the Soviet Union. And, to some extent, this was what happened.

"What was happening over there was presented in the news as if it was no more than an easy walk"

**As we know, the Afghan War had such a huge effect because it affected a huge number of ordinary families whose sons had died or were fighting. Was Soviet society sensitive to this issue when the war began, or was it all still more of a background noise for people, which, at the time, seemed not to be concerned?**

It seems to have been the latter. Because in the first months of the war, it didn't affect anybody, except, I guess, those families who had children in Afghanistan. What was happening over there was presented in the news as if it was no more than an easy walk. No serious casualties nor any problems ever made it into the news, this was out of the question — there was strict censorship. It seems to me that the situation was similar to what was happening in our time with the entry of Russian troops into Syria. Not until the coffins started coming in, not until Afghan veterans started coming back from the war and bringing military thinking with them into the country; it seemed until then, that nothing serious was happening. Since I was not in Moscow at the time and was imprisoned, I didn't see much, at least not for the first four years. It seemed to me that the population was fairly relaxed about it, because they were consuming what was being fed to them by the main official TV and radio channels, where everything was framed as the Soviet Union's international assistance to our brothers in Afghanistan. The country had encountered such international help quite often — in Cuba and in Africa. We were always ready to come to the rescue of young Communist regimes, which we partly created ourselves. So, it was a typical situation. I think it was only during the *Glasnost*' era that Afghanistan started to be taken seriously as a tragedy for the country.

**The outbreak of war in Afghanistan marked the end of détente, a sharp deterioration in relations with the West, and the imposition of international sanctions (incomparable, of course, to the current scale, but nonetheless sensitive) against the Soviet Union. How did this affect the change in the domestic political atmosphere in the country?**

Again, it's hard for me to say, because the domestic political atmosphere had to be observed in its dynamics over time. As far as I know, even if there were economic sanctions, hardly anyone felt them, because the Soviet Union was quite a powerful economy with its non-market economic processes operating in their own, very particular way. But as for other sanctions (such as the boycott

of the 1980 Olympics), it was impossible to silence, it was talked about as a completely unacceptable involvement of sports in politics, as this is always being discussed in such a vein. And that played a role. Those festivities, for which Moscow and the rest of the country were preparing in 1980, and the first Olympics that took place in our country, were held not in the atmosphere that had been planned beforehand. As for the rest of the sanctions, it's hard for me to judge, but I don't think they had much of an impact.

**The troop entry into Afghanistan was quickly followed by a huge campaign of repression against dissidents and human rights activists. Andrei Sakharov was deported from Moscow in January 1980, and in February you were arrested. Was this unexpected for you and how obvious was the connection between the Soviet army's actions in Afghanistan and the KGB's actions against dissidents inside the country?**

Of course, it was not unexpected. The wave of repressions came even before the official deployment of troops on December 25. In fact, the decision had been made before that, and the discussion of the measures themselves had taken place even earlier. And against this background, there were growing repressions. At first, there were mass warnings about the inadmissibility of actions that violate the law, which concerned a large number of prominent dissidents of the time, and after the warnings came the arrests. The arrests themselves began before the deployment of troops to Afghanistan. This means that a final decision had already been made at the top to do away with the human rights movement, which was an irritant to the authorities, because it was not that powerful, but nevertheless an organized and visible one in the world, including the Moscow Helsinki Group, which regularly provided information about the situation in the country. And, of course, the deployment of troops in Afghanistan was a good reason to end the human rights movement, since there was no longer any talk about détente or the country's reputation in the world; everyone was busy with the problems of the war in Afghanistan. Against this backdrop it was easy enough to shut down some people and expel the rest. Of course, the reaction to the expulsion of Sakharov was quite serious in the world and in the country, but there were not many people of his caliber (or rather, there were none at all), and therefore it was possible to deal with all the others quite painlessly. Which is what happened next.

**Was Sakharov's expulsion directly linked to his anti-war rhetoric?**

VB: I think this was a pretext, but not the main reason. Something had to be done with Sakharov, as with Solzhenitsyn in his time. This question was discussed because Sakharov could not be sent abroad as a bearer of serious secrets. The idea of sending him to some (Soviet) closed city was also discussed before, but only against the background of the Afghan war was this decision made – to isolate Sakharov from information, and others – from Sakharov's speeches. This decision was the most serious of all, because its consequences were more serious than those of arresting any other dissident. So, they went for it, and we understood and were ready. The people of the first echelon – those who were actively engaged in gathering information, interacting with the West, Western journalists and diplomats – were on the verge of going to jail by the mere fact of their activity, and everyone was ready for an arrest. The only question was, when? And when the troops came in and a wave of warnings started, then everybody understood that the bell rang, they could be arrested any day. So, there was readiness.

**We know that Yuri Andropov, who was at the time Chairman of the KGB, was one of the chief lobbyists for the decision to send Soviet troops into Afghanistan. What do you think, was this decision a trigger for the security services to launch a repressive offensive inside the country? To what extent did they need the war to solve some domestic political problems?**

It is hard to say, but there is some logic here: against the backdrop of a war, the security services have their hands free. This was what they have always sought and what they wanted. They get tired of playing games set by the constraints of the Politburo, the law and the court, because [it] does not allow them to effectively use the repressive apparatus; and, against the backdrop of the war, a lot becomes allowed. Therefore, such a hypothesis looks quite logical, although I cannot say for sure, because I do not know what motives the chairman of the KGB had for supporting the entry of troops. It is possible that he sincerely thought that it could be dealt with and done with quickly enough.

**Tell us about the circumstances of your arrest. When did it happen, and what did it have to do with?**

Since 1977, I was one of the founding members of the Working Commission to Investigate the Use of Psychiatry for Political Purposes. We collected information about people who had been placed in psychiatric hospitals for judicial or administrative reasons. And often it was because of their behavior, not because of their illness. We never claimed that a person was not ill, but we always suspected that the measures taken against that person were dictated not so much by his mental condition as by his activities, which the authorities considered harmful. There were many such cases. We kept a file cabinet; we had our own psychiatrist who did independent expertise. He then had to emigrate when his name (which we did not disclose) had become known. We didn't have very many people on our committee, but we put out a monthly newsletter about what we were doing, with our addresses and phone numbers on the cover. These Information Bulletins were read by the Voice of America, and that is why we were approached by people who were facing this kind of psychiatric repression. We acted quite openly. In the three years from 1977 to 1980, no one was arrested for the activities of the Working Commission, which was, of course, surprising. They (the authorities) never made a pause like that. For example, the Helsinki Group had key representatives arrested in just one year. After a conversation with [*the chief of the KGB subunit responsible for suppressing dissent*] Filipp Bobkov in October 1979, in which he warned me that they would not tolerate this, our arrests began to take place precisely for our work in the commission. By 1981, there was no one left, everyone was arrested. They were either imprisoned or sent into exile. That's when the organization ceased to exist.

“Against the backdrop of a war, the security services have their hands free. This was what they have always sought and what they wanted”

I was arrested in February. At first, I got three years under Article 190.1 of the RSFSR Criminal Code; I was charged with deliberately circulating false fabrications and slandering the Soviet state and social system, in other words, I got the maximum term. People were shouting in court that it was not a long enough term to serve for what I had done. Then, when the charge was read out in court, it turned out that it exactly amounted to Article 70 [Article 70 of the RSFSR Criminal Code on Anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda], but they decided to charge me not under Article 70, but under Article 190. Nevertheless, I was kept in Lefortovo throughout the trial, which showed that it was the KGB, not the prosecutor's office, that was involved in the case. Then they gave me three years, and I served them in the Tomsk region, in Asino. At the end of my term, they brought another case against me. That was the fashion back then, because they didn't give more than three years under Article 190, but under Article 70 they gave up to seven years. But Article 70 meant that you were in a special camp for political prisoners, which was full of like-minded individuals; and Article 190 meant that you were in a penal camp where there were no like-minded people. Of course, the second option was preferable, but it gave a shorter sentence. And this is why there was such a practice of giving the second sentence. Those who behaved inadequately in the zone were given a second term. Before me, Valery Abramkin received such a second term, and after the three-year sentence, he received a second three-year sentence. Although I was also facing a three-year sentence, for some reason, they gave me only a year, which was a surprise to me. Even the appeal to the Supreme Court by the

prosecutor's office, which was indignant at the fact that the court did not give me three years, could not change things. So, they gave me a year, and, in 1984, I was released. When perestroika started, I got a letter from the judge, apologizing that he couldn't do anything and couldn't release me, so he gave me a year. This letter included a certificate of rehabilitation for the whole case. This is a unique case; I don't know of any other cases where this happened.

In 1984 I was released and went to Tver (then Kalinin) because I could not live in Moscow while I had a criminal record. There I was under supervision for a year, which was extended after I was provoked and charged with hooliganism. It was a separate article, and I was almost put in jail for another three years. But then perestroika started, and they changed the article and I got off with a minor scare. In 1989 I came back to Moscow when perestroika was in full swing. Then my conviction was over, and I could already live in Moscow formally. I've been living in Moscow ever since. All these things have had quite a serious effect on my life.

### **How was your life in Tver immediately after your release?**

I was lucky enough to get a job as a programmer, doing something I knew and could do. They sent me straight to the employment bureau, because there was no record of my arrest in my workbook, and I had a pass there for four years. I was released from my previous job for not going to work. And when they asked me at the employment office where I had been for those four years, I referred to family circumstances. In the end they gave me a referral to work as a programmer at *Spetsavtomatika*, and they gladly hired me there. But I told them that I had been convicted, because I didn't want to cause them any problems. They told me that if I was referred to them for work, it meant that everything was okay. That's where I worked until I was arrested for hooliganism in 1985. It was a provocation in order to prolong my supervision, which was to last for a year at the most. After the prolongation of my probation, they wanted to put me in jail again, and the court gave me three years in a maximum-security prison, but on appeal they changed the charge to article 112 (Article 112 of the RSFSR Criminal Code of RSFSR intentional infliction of bodily injury of average gravity). I was released after three weeks spent in jail. It so happened that during this time I took a leave from work, three weeks of which I spent in prison in Tver. After that I continued to work. But the workplace wanted to discuss my "misbehavior" because my case was reported on by Voice of America and Radio Liberty. But they didn't know how to convict me. So, I was told that if something like this happens — to not go straight to some "Voice of America." To which I replied that I didn't go to them, that Voice of America already knew everything themselves. So, there were good relations at work, and I worked there until I left Tver. Moreover, they recommended me to the head organization of *Spetsavtomatika* Research and Production Association in Moscow, where I worked until 1991. Then I worked at the Institute of Mathematics and at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, upon recommendation by S. A. Kovalev.

### **The mid-1980s was a time when the war in Afghanistan continued. The dissident movement had been defeated, there was a growing social crisis in the country which led to perestroika. What was your sense of your interactions with your colleagues, the people around you, and of the state of the society in general?**

We didn't communicate much about these things, although, naturally, we followed what was going on in the country. I used to correspond with my Moscow colleagues, people came to visit me, etc. We saw that things were gradually changing, because already in 1985 there were the first signs of a thaw, and two years later, when Sakharov was released, a lot of things became possible. I even started making illegal trips to Moscow. Even though technically I was still not allowed to live there, I could still visit. In Moscow, I took part in a human rights conference in 1988. It was the first time that we gathered at an apartment, and the KGB didn't know what to do in such a case. On the one hand, they should have shut it down right away, but, on the other hand, times were already different.

Therefore, the situation could be characterized as uncertain. Although we did closely follow what was happening in the country, the news about the war in Afghanistan was the background noise, and interested only a part of the population, those who were somehow involved in it.

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