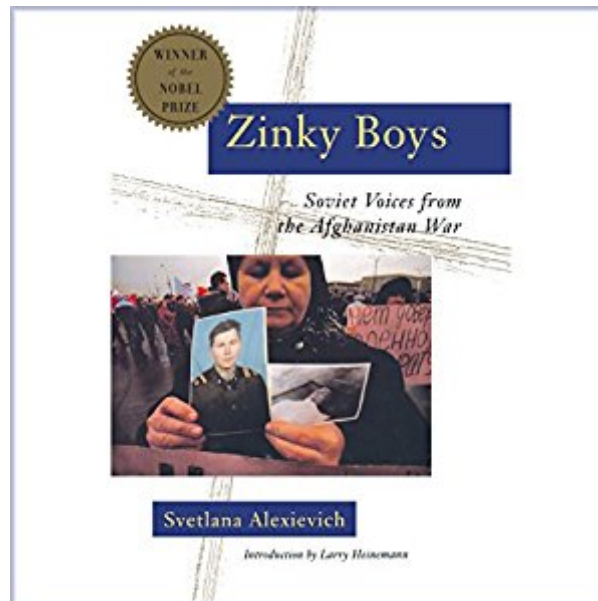




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# Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices From The Afghanistan War



## Synopsis

Winner of the Nobel Prize: "For her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time." (Swedish Academy, Nobel Prize citation) From 1979 to 1989 a million Soviet troops engaged in a devastating war in Afghanistan that claimed 50,000 casualties - and the youth and humanity of many tens of thousands more. Creating controversy and outrage when it was first published in the USSR - it was called by reviewers there a "slandorous piece of fantasy" and part of a "hysterical chorus of malign attacks" - *Zinky Boys* presents the candid and affecting testimony of the officers and grunts, nurses and prostitutes, mothers, sons, and daughters who describe the war and its lasting effects. What emerges is a story that is shocking in its brutality and revelatory in its similarities to the American experience in Vietnam. The Soviet dead were shipped back in sealed zinc coffins (hence the term "*Zinky Boys*"), while the state denied the very existence of the conflict. Svetlana Alexievich brings us the truth of the Soviet-Afghan War: the beauty of the country and the savage Army bullying, the killing and the mutilation, the profusion of Western goods, the shame and shattered lives of returned veterans. *Zinky Boys* offers a unique, harrowing, and unforgettably powerful insight into the realities of war. The introduction has been omitted due to rights issues.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 7 hours 1 minute

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: April 25, 2016

Language: English

ASIN: B01CT7CNS8

Best Sellers Rank: #56 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Asia #291 in Books > History > Asia > Russia #348 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Military

## Customer Reviews

The UN Women/USNC Gulf Coast Book Club met on Monday, March 14, 2016 to discuss *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War* by Svetlana Alexievich. The author, from Belarus, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015 "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time." We referred to Masha Gessen's interview with Alexievich, published in *The New Yorker*, in which she writes, "The voices in this

book speak against two different backgrounds: the ten-year war in Afghanistan, and a great turbulence at the heart of Soviet society. Alexievich's book is an collage of hundreds of oral histories of mothers, soldiers and civilians, whom she interviewed up to twenty times each, then transcribed and distilled over a period of many years. "Wars are fought on the backs of women," she writes. "My aim is to describe feelings about the war, rather than the war itself. What are people thinking? What do they want, or fear? What makes them happy? What do they remember?" While the stories are often brutal and heart-breaking -- especially those of mothers of sons who came home in zinc coffins -- the more we read the more deeply impressed we became by the author's monumental success in exposing not only the inhumanity of war, but its profound effect on human beings who suffer through them. She focuses on women. "Women tell things in more interesting ways. They live with more feeling. They observe themselves and their lives. Men are more impressed with action." Our discussion grew quite passionate, reflecting the visceral responses that we felt upon reading the women's stories, and learning about soldiers eighteen to twenty years old who were ground up in the machine of the Afghanistan war, while the general population knew nothing about what was happening there. The secrecy of the Soviet Union's operations and the shameful rejection of veterans upon their return was totally akin to our American experience in Vietnam, as brilliantly compared by Larry Heineman in his foreword. Our Un Women Book Club is known for delving into deep, often painful subjects. For over eight years, we have aspired to share the challenges of women around the world, to eschew what Alexievich calls "...an environment of banality." Once again, our understanding was heightened, thanks to this phenomenal author. Leita Kaldi Davis

"Zinky Boys" was published in 1989, about twelve years before the United States made the decision to follow in the path of the British and the Soviets. Author Svetlana Alexievich states that the oriental mind never changes. If you liked this book, you may want to read the series of books by John Masters (1914-1983) who served in the British Indian Army. The experiences of the English, Soviets and Americans in Afghanistan appear to be the same.

This is not a book to love, but to appreciate. Alexievich removes the scales from our perspective to reveal the trauma and uselessness of war in general, but specifically the wrecking of the lives of generally young Russian men and women. It also vividly lays bare the trauma and plight of the Afghan people caught up in the politics of the west. The impact comes not from a raving dialogue

but from simple stories of people for whom there seems no escape, even to this day. If you wish to hide yourself in a cocoon of unknowing, do not read this book.

Although this is a great read, it pales in comparison to Alexievich's other book available in English, *Voices from Chernobyl*. It's written in much the same way, with Alexievich interviewing a number of people and then crafting each person's answers into monologues. As always, Alexievich does not judge her subjects and their actions, but here the monologues are shorter, less detailed than in her other book, and by the end many of the stories blend together. This book is certainly worthwhile, but unless you already have a bit of knowledge or interest in the Soviet-Afghanistan war, I would recommend starting with a different book of hers.

excruciating interviews with young veterans of the Russo-Afghanistan war. Most of the people interviewed, soldiers, women in medical services, mothers of the fallen are eloquent in their loss and pain. This is quite a service since after a war who wants to say that this suffering was useless. It is a mega change that would shock even Americans who do not want to face the wasted lives in our version of this horror.

*Zinky Boys* is a powerful telling of "the Russian Vietnam Nam." In other words, an unrelenting quagmire of death and disaster for young Russian boys and men who were untrained and poorly equipped to fight a war that wasn't theirs to fight. The author tells the stories of these soldiers through a series of interviews which she has pieced together in unvarnished and heartbreaking vignettes.

Hard to read too much of it if you want to sleep at night. Confirms that Russian soldiers are just as human as those from the US. We need more books like this to stop the cruelty of war.

VERY WELL WRITTEN AND WORTH THE PRICE. Sometimes a hard read because of its realism and, well, its close relation to our own Vietnam War efforts, which makes this exciting book all the more significant. Thank you, Svetlana Alexievich, for the courage to publish this and the courage to get to the sources.

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