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Patriot Games: *The Ninth Company* and Russian Convergent Cultures after Communism

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Abstract: This article examines the memory battles that took place across new media outlets after Fedor Bondarchuk's 2005 Afghan War blockbuster *Ninth Company* hit Russian screens. Bondarchuk's film attempted to memorialize the Afghan War as a national-spiritual 'victory', one that overall reaffirmed the war as Russia's Vietnam. *Ninth Company* triggered responses across cyberspace as Russian veterans, audiences, critics and others argued about Bondarchuk's vision, discussions that led to the creation of a video game response entitled 'The Truth about the Ninth Company'. Developed by Dmitrii 'Goblin' Puchkov, the game attempted to counter Bondarchuk's film by having players take part in simulations of the battle covered on the big screen, this time to posit that Soviet soldiers did their duty and that the war was not a Soviet Vietnam. Puchkov's position on the Afghan War led the producers of Bondarchuk's film to issue their own video game response. These battles over the meaning of the Afghan War, as the article argues, should be understood within two frameworks: first, the emergence of new forms of media in the new Russia that allowed these 'cinegames' to flourish; and second, the evolution of remembrance practices in the new Russia that have attempted to find meaning in the Soviet past.

Keywords: *Ninth Company*; Soviet-Afghan War; Fedor Bondarchuk; Dmitrii Puchkov; post-Soviet memory; Russian patriotic culture; Russian video game culture.

Emblazoned with the title 'Ninth Company: A Military-Patriotic Strategy Game', Lesta Games' 2008 product included a video game, informative guide, a feature film, a documentary film and a collection of music videos from the group 'The Blue Berets / Golubye berety', made up of Afghan veterans. It also came with a military patch, maps and, for the lucky few who bought one of the 2000 copies of the deluxe edition, a leather pack and compass. As an initial foray into the convergence between cinema and video games in the new Russia, Lesta's product is nearly perfect. The combination of films, videos, commercial tie-

ins and video games clearly indicate that these media forms have converged in important ways.

The name of the cross-media brand 'Ninth Company' refers to a Soviet detachment that fought in the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-88). The feature film included in the package was, when it came out in 2005, the highest-grossing film in Russian history (at least for a few months, until Timur Bekmambetov's *Day Watch* / *Dnevnoi dozor* bested its returns). And the 'patriotic' strategy game Lesta put out came after another video game challenged the film's interpretation of the Afghan War and called on Russian patriots to play it in order to learn the 'truth about the ninth company'. The new game, documentary film, and musical film all attempted to prove that the feature film had its history right.

This article examines one specific instance of media convergence, which Henry Jenkins has described as process, one where 'the flow of content across multiple media platforms' that in turn creates a participatory culture (Jenkins 2006a: 2). While Western scholars have primarily interpreted video games and their reliance on cinematic tropes as proof of a form of American cultural imperialism, this examination places Russian cinegames within a historical framework, one that stresses the important roles the ongoing process of remembrance and nationhood play. This article analyses the phenomenon in Russia for what it tells us about the attempts to provide meanings to the past and how Russian cinegames emerged out of specific historical circumstances. The rise of Russian patriotic cinegames, viewed as important sites of memory in the ways scholars such as Pierre Nora and Jay Winter have outlined,[1] add another layer to the scholarly understanding of the connections between movies and games, one that situates them in terms of ongoing discussions over the meanings of the Soviet past. At the very least, taking a historically-minded approach will help explain the phenomenon of the 'historical-patriotic' product that Lesta put out as a means to remember the Soviet War in Afghanistan. In the end, both the feature film and the game, to invoke Nora, are places where memory crystallized (Nora 1996: 1). The Lesta package also points to another convergence, one where memories, movies, games, online participatory cultures and beliefs about nationhood all collide.

To understand this specific example of convergence, this article will employ a structure similar to a game. In the information guide below, the Lesta package will be contextualized in terms of how it fits within the broader scholarship on wars and gaming as well as within the literature on cultures of remembrance. After the guide, the importance of the Ninth Company in Afghanistan will be explored by analyzing three players and their significance: player one, the soldiers who fought in the Afghan War and who largely came to believe that their

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[1] Pierre Nora famously studied 'lieux de memoire' [sites of memory] in his landmark introduction to the collection he edited by that name. The English-language translation is 'Introduction: Between Memory and History' in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, Vol. I, edited by Pierre Nora. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 1-20. Building on Nora's analysis, Jay Winter explored the places where the Great War had come to be remembered in his 1995 *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

experiences had been forgotten; player two, a movie director named Fedor Bondarchuk, who was the age of many of the last group of Afghan war vets and who wanted to remember them as Russian patriots; and player three, a video game impresario named Dmitrii Puchkov who disagreed with the second player's memory games and who wanted to narrate the Afghan War as a Soviet victory. This historical order of play, as the discussion below will reveal, is central to understanding the way the stories about the Soviet-Afghan in general and the Ninth Company in particular played out.

The Cinegames Informative Guide

Certainly the Lesta packaging can be evaluated for what it tells us about nostalgia for the Soviet era. Yet it is equally illustrative for what it tells us about the relationships between films, games and war. Roger Stahl has argued that popular representations of war have begun to change the way people understand conflicts, turning the dirty, nasty business of war into a more sanitized space for entertainment (which he dubs 'militainment, inc.'). Military-themed computer games and other forms of popular media have transformed the ways Americans interact with war, making simulation and play more central to its understanding (Stahl 2010). Taking a broader view, Patrick Crogan traced the simulation of war that computer games employ by noting how contemporary games evolved from American military technoscience that first appeared in World War II and the Cold War. What Crogan calls 'gameplay mode'—that is, the connection between war, simulation and previous military technologies—has a long history of its own. As he argues, though, computer games can 'open up spaces for insightful reflection' on connections between technoculture, history and games (Crogan 2011: xxvii). Games—like films—can mobilize historical events and construct an 'experience of historical time' or 'a matrix of experiences of time and the way that history functions as part of this matrix' (Crogan 2011: 61). In doing so, games and films can help to mediate memories about the event itself.

'Patriot Games' attempts to expand on these studies by focusing on the historical; that is, the ways Russian cinegames reflect and even shape the ongoing processes of remembrance and nationhood in Russia. This focus fits within *Digital Icons* issue 4 on war and cyberspace, in which Adi Kuntsman argues that digital media and computer technologies affect war but also its perceptions and the ways conflicts are remembered and commemorated (Kuntsman 2010: 2). The special issue also challenged the Anglo-American focus of internet studies. In it, Elena Trubina posits that the discussions about the Great Patriotic War on Russian blogs suggests that a 'cosmopolitan memory' has developed in recent years, one that simultaneously shapes nationhood but also is more attuned to the global narratives about the war and its meanings elsewhere. There is, she writes, 'a growing heterogeneity of people's opinions of the war and its importance' (Trubina 2010: 64) in Russia today, in part because the internet 'fosters a sense of connection with the world as a whole' (65). The phenomenon of cinegames suggests something similar even if its underlying approach is more attuned to the national rather than the cosmopolitan. In the end, the fact that new game and cinema cultures emerged after communism's collapse matters very much.

Player One: The Ninth Company in Afghanistan

The first context to understand Lesta's patriotic strategy game is the ongoing process of remembering—or forgetting—the Soviet war in Afghanistan. It is in that conflict that the Ninth Company became the source for later media convergence and remembrance. It is a story of empire, but not the kind discussed in the editorial in regards to video games; instead, the Ninth Company is a story of the last days of the Soviet empire.

The real Ninth Company—Player One in the memory game that got fought over in the years to come--symbolizes the entire Afghan War as perceived from the Soviet perspective. One of the first detachments to enter Afghanistan in 1979 when the Red Army invaded, the Ninth Company of the 345th Guards Airborne Regiment stayed in the country until the war's end. In this role, members of the Ninth Company participated in a conflict that Gregory Feifer explains thusly: 'the Red Army found itself pushed by circumstances and events it had failed to foresee into a brutal struggle against a population that refused to tolerate invaders no matter how friendly they declared themselves to be' (Feifer 2009: 4). Although often understood in the west as an act of aggression, the 1979 Soviet invasion came after repeated pleas for assistance from the Afghan Communist leaders that had come to power in an April 1978 coup had fallen on deaf ears. When Leonid Brezhnev and his advisors decided to depose Hafizullah Amin (who had himself engineered a coup against the first leader of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, Nur Muhammed Taraki, in September 1979), they replaced him with Babrak Karmal. In making this move, the Soviet leadership and their military forces became involved in a conflict they did not understand, a civil war that had erupted after the Afghan monarchy had been toppled in 1973 (Feifer 20009: 55-84; Braithwaite 2011: 37-57). Over the course of the next decade, Soviet troops would battle with the Afghan mujahedeen guerilla movement and its foreign supporters. By the time of the final Soviet withdrawal in February 1989, the USSR had lost between 15,000-75,000 soldiers (depending on whether or not you accept official statistics or other estimates). The Afghans lost over 1 million people in the war (for a discussion of the losses, see Feifer 2010: 4; and *The Soviet-Afghan War* 2002: xix, 43-44).

The Ninth Company played a major part at the beginning and end of the war, though its final offensive was one not widely reported and therefore one easily forgotten. In 1987 the company was asked to defend the highest point within Soviet-controlled territory during the last major front of the conflict. The brainchild of the new Soviet commander, Lieutenant General Boris Gromov, the attack involved 10,000 Soviet troops and 8,000 Afghan troops against the mujahedeen rebels. Operation Magistral (Magistral'), as it was called, attempted to open up the road between Gardez and the town of Khost, which the mujahedeen had cut off. The operation initially proved to be a success. Launched on 19 November 1987, Operation Magistral succeeded in capturing the treacherous Satukandav Pass, the main passage between the two cities. Soviet forces entered Khost on 30 December and brought relief to its 40,000 residents and Afghan army units. The Operation, as Gregory Feifer has characterized it, was mostly one that the Red Army leadership intended to be a show of force to the mujahedeen (Feifer 2009: 231). In his study, Rodric Braithwaite refers to Magistral as 'one of the

most substantial operations of the whole war' (Braithwaite 2011: 214). Among the Red Army units deployed in the operation was the Ninth Company of the 345th Regiment.

One of the key areas that protected the mountainous pass between the Afghan cities was a mountain held by Soviet soldiers. Known as 'Height 3234 [10,500 feet],' the remote location meant that its Soviet defenders lacked reliable communication with headquarters. Thirty-nine members of the Ninth Company arrived at Height 3234 during Operation Magistral in order to hold a small garrison that overlooked several miles of the road between Gardez and Khost. The mujahedeen attacked the position eleven times on 7-8 January 1988 (the hundreds who attacked may have been Pakistani commandos, as Feifer notes [235]). Radio communication often failed and reserve forces were initially unable to relieve the company. Once the attacks had been repelled, reserves arrived, although the Ninth Company suffered serious casualties: 6 dead and 10 wounded out of 39 soldiers (Feifer 2009: 235-36). This defense became 'one of the most famous incidents of the whole war,' but its fame came mostly from Fedor Bondarchuk's film version (Braithwaite 2011: 215).

Fig. 1. View from Height 3234. Photograph by S. V. Rozhkov, 1988.

Source: Screenshot from *The Truth About Ninth Company* website: http://www.pravdao9rote.ru/afgan/afgan/. Accessed 26 November 2012.

When Franz Klintsevich, a reconnaissance chief attached to the Soviet forces, arrived to relieve the Ninth Company at Height 3234, he first saw a soldier bleeding heavily from shrapnel wounds to his chest and trachea (Feifer 2009: 236). With little medical supplies available,

Klintsevich stuffed some wax paper into the wounds and attempted to get the soldier to breathe through his mouth. Klintsevich then got through to the company's commander, Colonel Valerii Vostrotin, and begged for relief. Initially Vostrotin refused, but some pilots managed to bring ammunition and carry away the dead and wounded. The wounded private, Anatolii Kuznetsov, died before relief arrived. Klintsevich stayed on at Height 3234 for two weeks after 8 January, only to learn that the Soviet command had decided not to hold Khost because it stretched Soviet forces too thin (Feifer 2009: 236-37). By the end of January 1988, the city had returned to mujahedeen hands and the Soviet government had decided to withdraw. Many Soviet soldiers therefore viewed Operation Magistral 'as no more than a completely unnecessary demonstration of toughness to the rebels,' one that 'came to be a symbol of the futility of the entire war, not merely its last years' (Feifer 2009: 238). Even the Soviet General Staff, in its assessment of the war, notes that Magistral was 'the one exception' to the last phase of the war and that the Soviet leadership launched it even after 'it was clear to reasonable people that there was no military solution to the Afghan problem' (*The Soviet-Afghan War* 2002: 28). Just a few weeks after the events on Height 3234, Mikhail Gorbachev announced that the 100,000 Soviet soldiers left in Afghanistan would begin pulling out in May. Operation Magistral, therefore, was an event best forgotten. So too were the events on Height 3234. In the end, the General Staff placed the blame on Soviet politicians, declaring that the history of the war 'is written in the blood of thousands of people on the soil of Afghanistan,' all because they were involved in a conflict caused by 'the whims of a few Kremlin politicians' (*The Soviet-Afghan War* 2002: 29).

When Soviet troops arrived home, they were feted as heroes. As the system began to collapse, however, Afghan veterans became 'just another group of victims' (Feifer 2009 258). In the chaotic, euphoric days of 1990-1992, few Soviet citizens concerned themselves with the aftermath of the Afghan War. Increasingly, veterans began to take care of their own needs, forming societies such as the Committee of Internationalist Soldiers to assist with the difficulties brought by the return to civilian life. As Gregory Feifer has concluded, many veterans who formed these groups 'came to believe that the war's worst damage to the Soviet Union wasn't the dead in Afghanistan, but the severe psychological damage suffered by those who returned (Feifer 2009: 259).' The *Afgantsy* / *Afghans*, as veterans referred to each other, found the breakup of the Soviet Union particularly hard to deal with. In the end the state forgot them and their experiences.

The largest support group to emerge as the system fell apart was the Russian Union of Afghanistan Veterans (Rossiiskii soiuz veteranov Afganistana, or RSVA). Founded in 1991, the RSVA initially dealt with the difficult transition veterans experienced in the 1990s and the trauma many still suffered from their wartime experiences. For the next decade, the society attempted to raise awareness about the war through educational programs, lobbying efforts and memorials dedicated to Soviet soldiers. Both Klintsevich and Vostrotin joined the group, serving as important officers: Klintsevich even became the head of the organization in 1994.

Fig. 2. Members of the Ninth Company in Afghanistan, 1988. Photograph by A. A. Borisenko.

Source: Screenshot from *The Truth About Ninth Company* website: http://pravdao9rote.ru/afgan /afgan/24/. Accessed 26 November 2012.

Their efforts rarely succeeded, for the war has tended to be forgotten entirely or remembered solely as a disaster fought by a bankrupt Soviet regime. Two contract killings of important Afghan vets led to lurid press reports about afgantsy as mafia men. By the end of the 1990s, Serguei Oushakine has argued, 'the figure of the afganets was turned into a cliché standing for an uncontrolled, violent, mafia-connected man, tortured by his military past (Oushakine 2009: 168).' The reports of journalists such as Aleksandr Oleinik and Artem Borovik, who both exposed the incompetence and corruption within the Soviet leadership, remained more influential in how Russians remembered the Afghan war than the RSVA's activities.[2] In Borovik's words, the war 'inspired people to faith, [but] it was a faith far different from the one promoted by our propaganda,' one instead that 'gave ample reason to be either a cynic or a mystic (Borovik 1990: 1-2).'

[2] Borovik became one of the faces of glasnost-era journalism in Russia and in the United States, where he frequently appeared on '60 Minutes.' His account of the trauma of the war both for its soldiers and for Soviet society represents the dominant memory of the conflict. See also Svetlana Aleksievich (1992), *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*. New York: W. W. Norton, for more on how the war had already been forgotten in Russia by 1992.

The few films that were made about the Afghan War only seemed to confirm Oleinik's and Borovik's accounts. Vladimir Bortko's 1990 *The Afghan Breakaway / Afganskii izlom* recounts the last days of the war and focuses on the son of a high-ranking official who visits the front in order to win a medal for himself. As Birgit Beumers has noted about the film, 'Bortko exposes the hollowness and emptiness of military awards, with which not pride but only bribery and corruption are associated' (Beumers 2000: 177). *Peshawar Waltz / Peshavarskii val's* (1994), the first feature film by Timur Bekmambetov (co-directed with Gennadii Kaiumov) is told through the eyes of foreign journalists and Soviet POWs: in the end, after seizing control of their camp, the Soviet soldiers are killed by a Soviet attack made to free them. The film condemns the war in general and the Soviet military and political leaderships in particular. Finally, Vladimir Khotinenko's 1995 film *The Muslim / Musul'manin*, tells the story of an Afghan vet named Kolia who returns to his village and reveals that he has converted to Islam. The film, as Beumers has commented, is one where the war has become 'part of individual memory and it is a war that changes the lives of those who have fought in it' (Beumers 2000: 181). In all three films, notions such as patriotism for the socialist motherland are revealed to be hollow promises; instead, the directors focus on how individuals experienced and understood the conflict. Although remembered in these feature films, the Afghan War is presented as one of meaningless ideals and the bankruptcy of the state that asked its soldiers to fight.

This fragmented memory only deepened once Boris Yeltsin and then Vladimir Putin launched their wars in Chechnya. Memories of the previous war now competed with the situation in the Caucasus. The Union of the Committees of Soldiers' Mothers (Soiuz komitetov soldatskikh materei Rossii, or SKSMR), founded in 1988 by mothers of Afghan soldiers who wanted information about their missing sons, switched its focus to the victims of the new war. For the most part Russian society did the same. Even those who actively tried to increase awareness about the Afghan war had mixed views about its meanings. Aleksandr Liakhovskii, a Russian historian who has compiled the most extensive history of the war, published his work under the title *The Tragedy and Valor of the Afghan War / Tragediia i doblest' Afgana*. As he notes, most veterans and Russians have had a difficult time balancing the widely-accepted view that the war was a tragedy with their personal pride in having served their country (Liakhovskii 1995: 6-7). Members and leaders of the RSVA openly admitted in the 1990s that they seemed to be fighting a losing memory battle—forgetting was the order of the decade.

Thus, the 2008 Lesta package spoke to the larger processes of remembrance and forgetting. It included one component that captured it well: Sergei Iarovyi's 20-minute documentary *War is Not a Stroll* / *Voina – ne progulka*. Iarovyi fought as a paratrooper in Afghanistan. While there, he founded the singing group 'The Blue Berets / Golubye berety', which held its first concert in 1985. They performed several other times in that country and also made appearances at official state concerts in the late 1980s. As the war ended and the USSR collapsed, the group found itself adrift. They put out a couple of albums in the 1990s, but only found themselves relevant again in the late 2000s. Iarovyi's documentary discusses his time in Afghanistan and uses footage he shot while in the country. He also discusses his music and the comradeship he enjoyed as a Soviet soldier. His short film ultimately serves as

way to recapture a timeless Soviet-era patriotism, one where young men from across the former empire got together and bonded over a failed imperial overstretch. *War is Not a Stroll*, in short, lamented the lack of attention given to Afghan vets while also repositing some of the major ideas offered in Fedor Bondarchuk's 2005 blockbuster and legitimizing them as historically accurate.

Player Two: Fedor Bondarchuk

Bondarchuk, son of the film director Sergei Bondarchuk, got his start directing music videos and commercials. After graduating from VGIK (the All-Russian State Institute for Cinema / Vserossiisskii gosudarstvennyi institut kinematografii in 1991, Bondarchuk founded 'Art Pictures' with Stepan Mikhalkov, the son of the famous film director Nikita Mikhalkov. The two made 'clips' of rock and pop stars such as Boris Grebenshchikov and Alla Pugacheva throughout the 1990s. Bondarchuk, however, was born in 1967 and is therefore part of the last generation of Soviet men who saw action in Afghanistan. Although he served in the army at the age of 18, his famous father kept his son away from the front. Bondarchuk is fully aware that he escaped what many in his generation did not and this guilt serves as one of the motivating factors for his war movie. Bondarchuk also believed that his film could act as a means of memory recovery: 'For a long time Russia didn't want such a film because Russia didn't want to remember these ten years of shame' (quoted in Finn 2005). He wanted to make a film that captured the patriotic bonds forged in war, one that aimed to recapture a romantic, patriotic and even national sense of brotherhood the Soviet Union fostered. He would succeed and would also initiate a battle over the memory of the Afghan War, a conflict waged by multiple players in different media outlets.

Bondarchuk also wanted to follow in his father's footsteps. Originally he hoped to make an updated version of *Fate of a Man* / *Sud'ba cheloveka*, Sergei Bondarchuk's 1959 masterpiece about a World War II veteran who tries to come to terms with his wartime losses (Korotkov 2005). Iurii Korotkov, Bondarchuk's scriptwriter, stated that the two initially planned to make a film about the Chechen War and its effects on one soldier, but when they decided that they could not compare the Chechen War to the Great Patriotic War, they switched to Afghanistan (Korotkov 2005). For Korotkov and Bondarchuk, the two wars are comparable because many Soviet soldiers volunteered for the Afghan War, young Soviet citizens had their adult consciences formed within it, and many still see it as the happiest time in their lives (Korotkov 2005).[3]

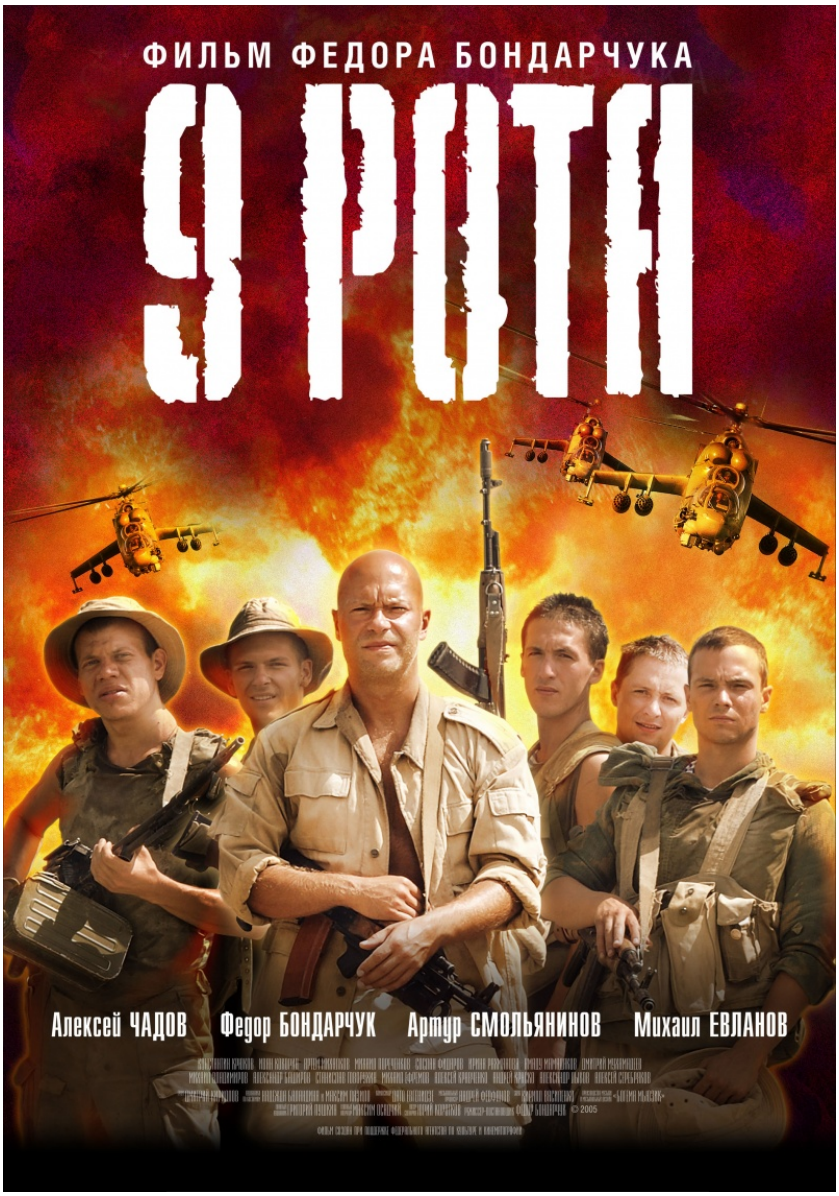
Bondarchuk's onscreen Afghan War, based on Korotkov's script and co-produced by Stepan Mikhalkov, appeared when the director was 38, the same age at which his father made *Fate of a Man*. Released on 29 September 2005, *Ninth Company* smashed box office records, becoming the highest-grossing Russian film of all time, eventually earning $25.6m.[4] STS, the television channel that co-produced the film, also produced a massive marketing

[3] Dawn Seckler has written, 'the validity of these claims is debatable. However, the following is undeniable: *Company 9* was conceived from these ideas'. Review in *KinoKultura* 12 (April 2006): http://www.kinokultura.com/2006/12r-company9.shtml.

[4] See the statistics at: http://www.kinopoisk.ru/level/1/film/84674/.

campaign that saturated billboards, airwaves and commercials with information about the Afghan War blockbuster.[5] It would go on to be the official Russian Oscar submission and won Best Picture of 2005 at both the Nika and Golden Eagle awards.

Fig. 3. Official Poster for Fedor Bondarchuk's 2005 film *Ninth Company*.



Source: Screenshot from Kinopoisk.ru: http://www.kinopoisk.ru/film/84674/. Accessed 26 November 2012.

[5] The most memorable acknowledgement of this marketing campaign appeared in Timur Bekmambetov's 2006 blockbuster *Day Watch* / *Dnevnoi dozor*. Anton Gorodetsky, the hero of the film and its prequel, *Night Watch* / *Nochnoi dozor*, re-enters Moscow from the Gloom by smashing through a metro poster for *9 rota*. *Day Watch* would go on to smash Bondarchuk's box office record, topping out at $32m.

Bondarchuk's cinematic war narrates the final days of the conflict and the events surrounding Hill 3234. His Afghan War follows a bunch of young recruits—Bondarchuk's peers—as they train in Central Asia before heading to Afghanistan. The director claims that 'I didn't make a film about the Afghan War. I was making a film about the friendship, comradeship, and love of boys whose state I remember from being 18 in the army in 1985' (quoted in Kishkovsky 2005). His war is about how young boys form a band of brothers because of the brutal treatment they receive first from their officers at boot camp and then because they witness the war's horrors.

Fig. 4. The Band of Brothers: The Ninth Company Bonds.

Source: Screenshot from *Kinomania.ru*: http://www.kinomania.ru. Accessed 26 November 2012.

The first half of the film follows a group of volunteers and draftees from Krasnoiarsk through their boot camp experience in Uzbekistan. They are slowly dehumanized, starting with having their heads shaved. They are given nicknames: Liutyi [fierce one, played by Artur Smolianinov], Chugun [iron, Ivan Korokin], Vorobei [sparrow, Aleksei Chadov], Pinochet (Soslan Fidarov, given to a Chechen soldier because he looks foreign) and Gioconda (Konstantin Kriukov, given to one soldier who was an art student). When they arrive in the Ferghana Valley, their drill sergeant, Dygalo (Mikhail Porechenkov), physically and mentally beats them

down, telling them that 'here you're not smart, not stupid, not good, not bad, not artists, you're nobody! You're not even people—you're shit!' They are relentlessly drilled, moving from being unfit for combat to a unit that easily conquers their grueling tasks. They also form a bond that has at its core the 'friendship, comradeship and love of boys' Bondarchuk desired. While these soldiers mouth the words that they are 'Soviet paratroopers, [who are] the force, the beauty and the pride of the armed forces', their real love is for each other, not for the Soviet Union. They openly fear for their lives and mock their officers. They bond by sneaking around with Snow White, the daughter of their commanding officer, who sleeps with everyone and whom they dub a 'glorious, pure fallen woman' after they all engage in group sex with her.[6]

Russian and American reviewers immediately noted the similarity of the first half of *Ninth Company* to Vietnam films, particularly Stanley Kubrick's 1987 *Full Metal Jacket*.[7] It too opens with a shaving scene and it witnesses its grunts receiving nicknames (Joker, Pyle, Cowboy, and Snowball). It too has a veteran drill sergeant who dehumanizes the soldiers (R. Lee Ermey's Sgt. Hartman), telling them 'You're pubes! You're the lowest form of life on earth! You're not even human fucking beings! You're nothing but unorganized pieces of amphibian shit!' It too has its soldiers bond around love for each other, not love for America. Yet Kubrick's Vietnam War is irredeemable, its combatants cynical. The only two believers are Private Pyle and Sergeant Hartmann, the latter because he believes in all of America's wars, the former because he becomes a killing machine. Of course, at the end of Kubrick's boot camp sequence, Pyle kills Hartmann and then himself.

None of these moral uncertainties cloud Bondarchuk's version of war. Instead, the film suggests that the soldiers all make a sacrifice for the Russian nation in a patriotic act that produces a 'victory.' This triumph, as the final scenes elucidate, clearly is not won on the battlefield, but in the mind. The Afghan War therefore should be understood as a recent example of the supposedly timeless 'Russian spirit' exhibited by all the historic defenders of the motherland, a concept promoted in popular prints and posters from 1812 through 1945 (Norris 2006). The war, its costs and the reasons why Soviet soldiers were in Afghanistan do not really matter. What does matter is that they acted heroically and served their homeland by making a stand against great odds.

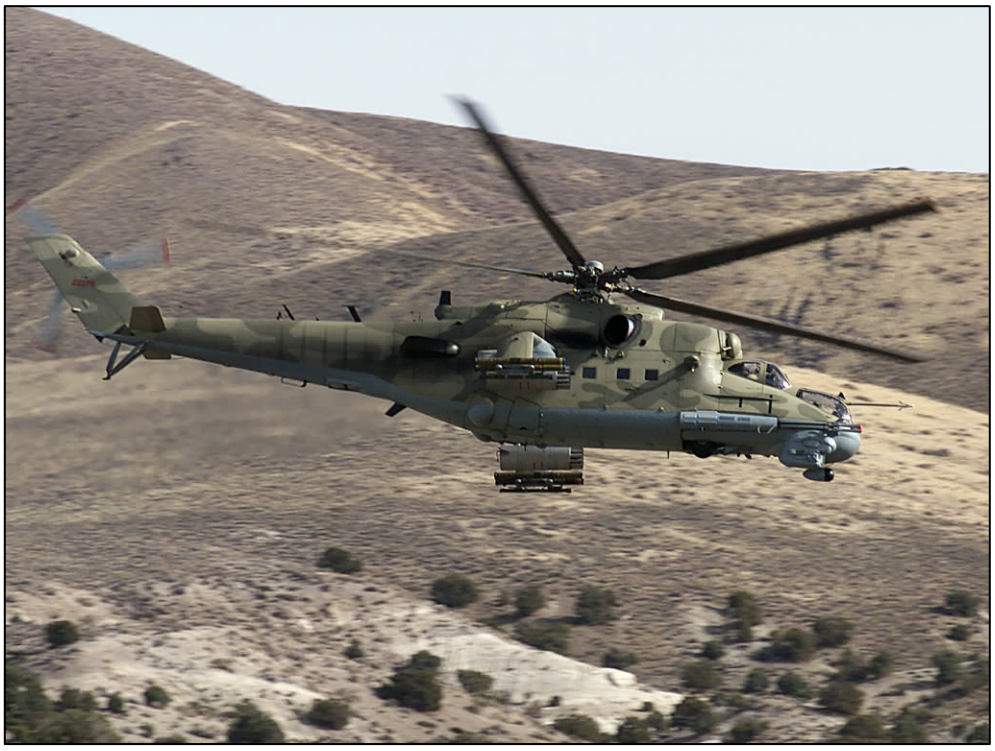
The second half of the film stakes out this heroic position quite clearly by following the fates of the young heroes and loosely follows the exploits of the real Ninth Company. In doing so, Bondarchuk also reverses the forgetting process, transforming the Ninth Company's actions on Height 3234 into a central story of remembrance and nationhood, two interrelated historical processes that Alon Confino has argued 'appear as modern sensibilities that give meaning to values and beliefs such as collectivity, selfhood, territoriality and the past' (Con-

[6] Dawn Seckler describes the scene where all the boys have intercourse with Snow White as 'truly a new low point for contemporary Russian cinema'. 'She is the Dostoevskiian whore with a heart of gold, who makes herself sexually available to all of the soldiers (first in rapid succession, then simultaneously) before they depart for battle. That is her sacrifice. Poetic as Bondarchuk's intentions may have been, the result is an offensive gang-bang scene presented as intimate, loving, respectful, and even transcendent' (Seckler 2006).

[7] See the reviews by Seckler and Finn cited above as well as the reviews by Tatiana Moskvina in *Iskusstvo kino*: http://www.kinoart.ru/magazine/11-2005/repertoire/9detachment0611/ and Diliara Tasbulatova, 'Zabytaia rota,' in *Itogi*: http://www.itogi.ru/archive/2005/39/59635.html.

fino 2006: 18). *Ninth Company* acts above all as an important site where memory and national identity crystallize. The new recruits are transported to Afghanistan with little understanding of why the war is raging around them. Their commanding officer merely repeats official Soviet propaganda that they are there 'to fulfill our international duty to help the people of Afghanistan and defeat the imperial aggressor'. Yet Bondarchuk takes the action surrounding the attack on Height 3234 and plays with it to ratchet up the drama. The soldiers heroically defend the heights against overwhelming numbers, not in January 1988 but in January 1989. Thus, the battle for the Heights becomes the last action in the war, while the lack of communication from the center serves as a metaphor for how ordinary soldiers were cast aside by their leaders. In the end, only one of the heroes we have followed throughout—Liutyi—survives. When relief comes, he tells his commanding officer 'mission accomplished'. His officer replies that the entire army is leaving. The next scene is set in February 1989 when the last Soviet troops leave Afghanistan. Liutyi comments 'we won our war, but we had no way of knowing that the country we fought for would vanish two years later'. As Liutyi concludes, 'we didn't know that in the chaos of the army's retreat, they'd simply forgotten us on those far-away heights. We left Afghanistan, the Ninth Company, and we were victorious'. The final intertitles play with this sequence, stating that 'the film is based on real events that took place on 8 January 1988 on the far-flung Heights 3234.'[8]

Fig. 5. Bondarchuk's Recreation of the Afghan War. A Mi-24 helicopter flies over Crimean Mountains.



Source: Screenshot from *Ninth Company* (2005).

[8] Curiously, the subtitles for the film change '1988' to '1989', though the original date remains in the intertitles.

Bondarchuk's blockbuster may not have adhered entirely to the 'true story' of the Ninth Company, but it spared no expense to capture other historical truths. *Ninth Company* was shot over 150 days in 18 locations spread between Moscow, Uzbekistan and the Crimea, which stood in for Afghanistan. The war sequences used 1500 Ukrainian troops employing 30 T-64-B tanks, 10 MI-24 and MI-8 helicopters and 22 AN and MiG fighter planes.[9] After he finished the edits, Bondarchuk held two preview screenings for two very select audiences. The first was with President Vladimir Putin and other luminaries at the President's private residence. Putin concluded that it was 'a very good film,' for it showed 'everything as it is in life [*vse kak v zhizni*].' Putin particularly praised the actors for work that 'grabs you by the soul [*beret za dushy*]' (quoted in Tropkina 2005). He expanded that 'it is about time to stop all this political noise around the events that took place in Afghanistan. Clearly, these events should be … studied by politicians, historians, experts, militaries and so on. But it is just as clear that those who fought in Afghanistan have nothing to be ashamed of' (quoted in Oushakine 156). The second, held at the Pushkin Cinema in Moscow a week before its wide release, was for the Russian Union of Afghanistan Veterans (RSVA). Among those present at the screening were the President of the Association, Franz Klintsevich, the former Ninth Company recon chief who served as an official consultant to the film. The other stars of the screening were three survivors of the events, including Vostrotin, who also acted as official consultants for the film. As the RSVA website concluded, many veterans disagreed over the accuracy of Bondarchuk's war, but they did agree that it at least made audiences think about the conflict. For his contributions to this memory recovery, the RSVA gave Bondarchuk a special commendation.[10]

The veterans association later organized 500 free screenings of the film. At the Novosibirsk screening 3000 people showed up. Afterwards, one RSVA council member, stated: 'The events are real. The film shows everything as it was'. The film's producers also created a website as part of their marketing campaign. Billed as a 'military-patriotic forum', the internet site allowed audience members to follow up on the memory recovery first experienced by the Veterans Association. Over 41,000 posts debated every angle of the film and every possible meaning one could take from Bondarchuk's history lesson.[11] Internet users could talk about the film's soundtrack, post photographs from the war or argue about the accuracy of the history on screen. *Ninth Company* the movie—with Bondarchuk acting as player two in the memory game—therefore did not just reflect the larger culture around it. The film acted as an important shaper of the culture around it, prompting an engaged debate about the meanings of the real Ninth Company and of the entire Afghan War: the President, members of the RSVA, veterans and their families all voiced their opinions about Bondarchuk's memory game and therefore helped to generate further interpretations of the film's meanings and the history screened in it.

[9] The stats are available on the film's press booklet: http://www.9thcompany.com/media/pdf/9rota_booklet_english.pdf.

[10] See the account on the RGVA's website (all quotations are taken from it): http://www.rsva.ru/rus_guard/2005-11/rota.shtml.

[11] See the site: http://9rota.lacory.ru/.

These sorts of discussions also appeared in a 2007 First Channel television documentary entitled *Ninth Company: The Last Call-Up / 9 rota. Poslednii prizyv*.[12] The hour-long film aimed to connect the film to the 'real' story of the Ninth Company and featured interviews with the actors and survivors of the war. Both Klintsevich and Vostrotin appear, but the bulk of the interviews consisted of reminiscences with Iskander Galiev, Ruslan Bezborodov, Dmitrii Baranovskii and Andrei Kuznetsov, all soldiers who served in the Ninth Company during the last days of the war. All the veterans confirm the general 'truthfulness' of Bondarchuk's film and note that Soviet-era censorship prevented the real history of the Afghan war from being told. Bezborodov, for example, notes that he brought art supplies to Afghanistan and that the character of Gioconda was loosely based on his experiences (in the film, Gioconda, played by Konstantin Kriukov, dies). The documentary blends interviews with the actors and soldiers with personal photographs, home movies and other sources that attest to the veracity of the 2005 blockbuster film. Letters from Ninth Company soldiers who died in the assault on Height 3234, including those from Viacheslav Aleksandrov, are also read on-screen. The documentary thus had the effect of verifying Bondarchuk's account while also affirming that the story of the Ninth Company is one that the film allowed to be heard for the first time (Ivan Babchenko, a veteran who fought in the last months of the war, provided this diagnosis). Throughout the documentary, the actors confirm that they were too young to know about the Afghan War and that they learned through their participation while the veterans affirm that they essentially got it right. In the end, the veterans attest that the war created a spirit of 'brotherhood [*bratstvo*]' that the film recovered.

Russian film critics also engaged in the lengthy debate about Bondarchuk's artistic vision. Valerii Kichin saw the film's present-day meanings in a positive light. 'For a Russian audience, the experience of the Afghan war is completely mixed up with our experience in the Chechen war, and that's why this is so timely and urgent. This film is about any war where people don't understand what they are dying for. The audience remembers Afghanistan, but they also see Chechnya' (quoted in Finn 2005). Others saw things differently: Katia Barabash opined that 'U.S. cinema makes these kinds of films so much better. We should leave it to them to give us *Saving Private Ryan*' (quoted in Finn 2005). Diliara Tasbulatova of *Itogi* wrote that Bondarchuk filmed a 'forgotten company' but also 'completely forgot about the sufferings of the other side—the Afghan people'. Ultimately, the film paled in comparison to anti-war 'masterpieces' like *Paths of Glory* and *Full Metal Jacket* because it 'is not entirely free from the clichés of ideological thinking' (Tasbulatova 2005).

Nikolai Peshkov, a colonel in the Russian army who served in Afghanistan and is now involved with the Society of Afghan Veterans, commented that 'Bondarchuk has created something in the best tradition of American films about Vietnam' (quoted in Finn 2005). Peshkov saw the film on opening weekend and believed that the use of American cinematic tropes was a good decision: 'We have a lot in common with our American friends. We were in a similar situation. I don't like to talk about defeat, but the execution of both wars was wrong. The soldiers were confused and at a loss, but they were pure in their souls. They died for their brothers like soldiers everywhere' (quoted in Finn 2005). Initial reaction among Af-

[12] Galina Ogurnaia, dir. (2006), *Ninth Company: The Last Call-Up / 9 rota. Poslednii prizyv*. Telekompaniia Ostankino. The film can be watched at: http://video.yandex.ru/users/voenvideo-ru/view/61/#.

ghan vets like Peshkov was by and large positive. Most thought the film played with the facts, but ultimately concluded that Bondarchuk had brought a larger truth about the war to the screen. Bondarchuk's *Ninth Company* may be a Russian Full Metal Jacket, but it also turns the Afghan War into history, providing an answer to the search for meaning about that conflict. No wonder Lesta included in with their patriotic-strategy game. Of course, the Lesta game appeared in the wake of another video game that tried to challenge Bondarchuk's interpretations of the war.

Player Three: Dmitrii Puchkov

Bondarchuk's cinematic narrative and the responses it engendered ensured that other players would get involved in the battle over remembering the Soviet-Afghan War. No one proved more important in the backlash against Bondarchuk's film than Dmitrii Puchkov, our third player in the game. Puchkov saw Bondarchuk's blockbuster and left angry. For the person better known in the Russian gaming world as 'Goblin', *Ninth Company* was not history at all because it did not adhere to factual truths about the war. Worse, in his view were the incorrect, anti-patriotic and ultimately anti-Soviet messages the film conveyed. Some Afghan vets echoed Goblin's gripes. 'There are too many special effects that make the film look like Rambo',[13] complained General Aleksandr Liakhovskii, the author of 1995's *The Tragedy and Valor of Afghanistan*. 'The 9th Company shows the bravery of both soldiers and officers. But it is too simple. And it is historically distorted. There are too many populist tricks' (quoted in Harding 2007).

Puchkov agreed. He is famous as the dubbed voice on a host of illegally transferred Hollywood films. Puchkov is a believer in translations that attempt to convey the meaning of the original into the second language, not the literal translations that tend to be the standard approach in Russian cinema. He has publicly condemned some editions for being too literal and even produced parodic versions of films for his company God's Spark [Bozh'ia iskra]: *Shmatrix* [Shmatritsa] and *The Fellas and the Ring* [Bratva i kol'tso] are two of his most popular film parodies. Puchkov's film parodies insert Soviet history into American cinematic narratives and in these adaptations Goblin plays games with the past. In *The Fellas and the Ring*, for example, Frodo Baggins become Fedor Sumkin, a Russian peasant everyman. He and Pendolf the wizard fight against a sorcerer, Sarumian—Tolkien's villain Saruman thus becomes Armenian. The sorcerer is aided by an army of pedophiles, convicts and Nazis. The result of this sort of translation (keeping in mind Jackson's film is left as is, Goblin changes the names and plot) is a 'cynical adaptation' that turns communist culture and Hollywood culture into kitsch. As Natalia Rulyova has described them, Puchkov's parodies are popular because they reflect 'nostalgia for the past, the change of values from Soviet to post-Soviet, the new Russians and post-Soviet mafia, nationalist and ethnic issues (often treated in a xenophobic way), globalization and patriotism, westernization and domestication' (Rulyova 2005: 628). Puchkov's nostalgia is one rooted in 'a need for the past in order to subvert it',

[13] Here Liakhovskii may have been referring to 1988's *Rambo III*, frequently shown on Russian television. In it, Rambo supplies the mujahideen with weapons. My thanks to Ben Sutcliffe for pointing out this link.

for his adaptations routinely mock Soviet rhetoric and Soviet values (Rulyova 2005: 628). He ultimately, to use Rulyova's argument, is a postmodern plagiarist, an artist who gets his viewers to laugh at crude jokes about the Soviet past.

While he was becoming known for his work on film, Puchkov was also garnering attention among the computer gaming community that blossomed in Russia in the 1990s. He began to publish well-received articles on *Quake*, a first-person shooter game that was particularly popular in Russia because of its multi-player format. Buoyed by the response to his writings on the game, Goblin started a personal website, 'Goblin's Dead End' / *Tupichok Goblina* that initially served as a forum for discussing *Quake* (He still maintains the site: http://oper.ru/). Later, the success of his fantasy-prisoner book, *Dungeon Cleaners* / *Sanitary podzemelii*, which he made available on the site, led the video game company 1C to make a first-person shooter game based on it. The game introduced Russians to a Gulag planet where the worst criminals are sent and where players can fight for their freedom (the company would release a second game in 2008).

Over the course of the late 1990s and early 2000s, therefore, Goblin became famous if not recognizable. The influx of cheap, pirated copies defined Russian cinema market in the 1990s, and Dmitrii Puchkov became one of their champions. As video game culture developed in Russia, Goblin was also at its forefront. In both arenas he became known as an insightful commentator on military, action, fantasy and gangster films and games.

When Bondarchuk released his film, Goblin immediately posted his views on his site. He liked the first half of the film, which he said was 'high quality' and 'recreated the atmosphere of those years' (Puchkov 2005). Puchkov noted that the film bears a strong resemblance to *Full Metal Jacket* and *Platoon* but thought this adaptation worked quite well. When the film shifted to the Afghan war proper, Puchkov praised the technical look of the film but thought the sounds of war were inferior to those heard in American war films. In sum, as he posted on his original website, 'from the technical point of view, the film *Ninth Company* came out not bad. It is no worse than an average Hollywood war film and this by itself is a serious breakthrough. It is not *Saving Private Ryan* or *Black Hawk Down*. But for domestic cinema, however you look at it, it is an unusual achievement' (Puchkov 2005).

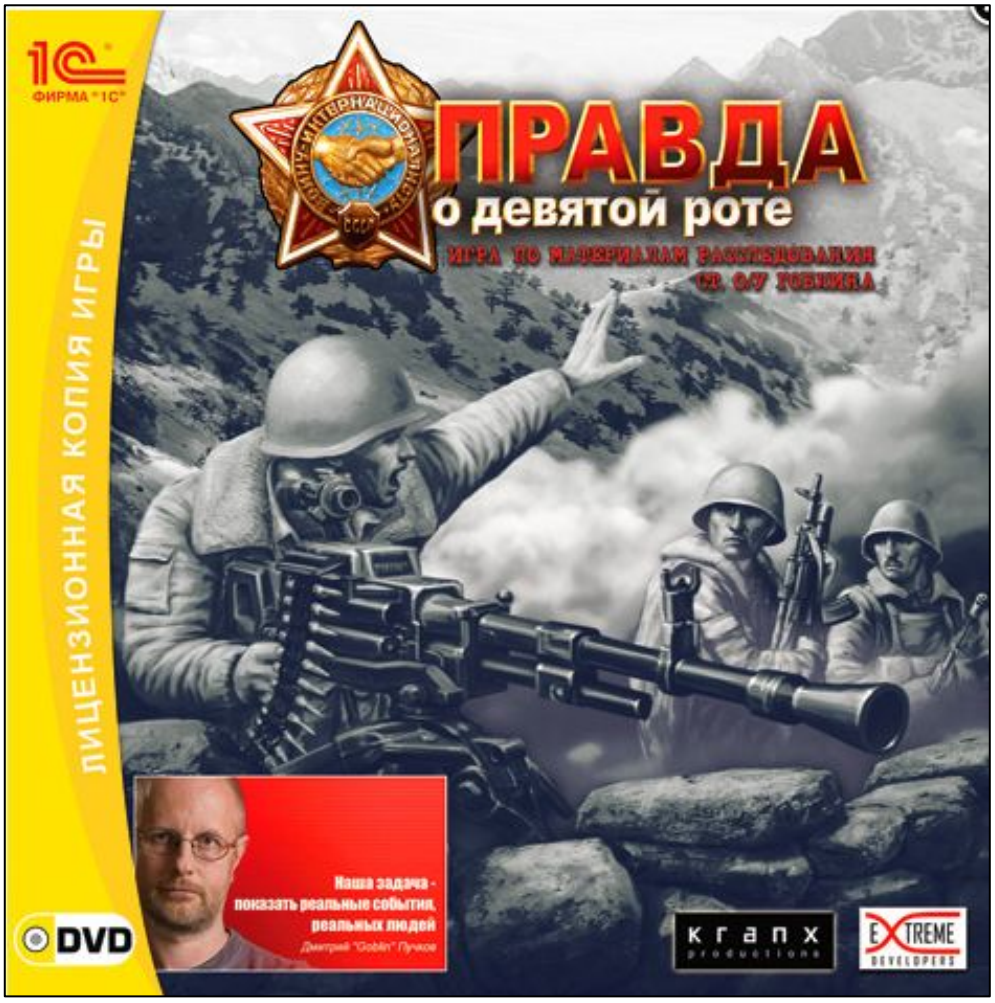
This achievement did not extend to the film's message, which Goblin labels 'rubbish [*chush'*]'. According to Puchkov, the Soviets won a military victory in Afghanistan and 'Soviet servicemen showed themselves to be exceptionally competent professionals'. Bondarchuk, Puchkov wrote, fell into the usual trap of seeing the war as 'immoral', 'wild' and 'senseless'. Puchkov particularly hated the film's end, concluding that it was 'completely magical' and not 'what really happened'. To combat this message, Goblin calls on young people to watch the film but to see the 'truth' about the Ninth Company as one where soldiers defended their Soviet motherland, where Soviet military leaders accomplished their aims and where the war produced a real victory.

Goblin did not just stop with his online posts and message board about *Ninth Company*. He also acted. His answer to Bondarchuk's war, the video game *The Truth about Ninth Company* / *Pravda o deviatoi rote*, appeared on 18 February 2008.[14] Andrei Kuzmin of KranX Productions led the game design, while Puchkov acted as 'ideological spokesman' for what

[14] *Pravda o deviatoi rote* / *The Truth About Ninth Company* (2008). 1C Company.

he saw as the ongoing memory damage caused by *Ninth Company*. Posted on the game's website (http://www.pravdao9rote.ru/), Puchkov declared: 'The historical memory of our people is being intentionally destroyed and replaced by completely idiotic stereotypes. Our game is our exact answer to the frantic lie about our recent history. Our task is to show real events, real people. To show that our servicemen are first of all citizens of our country and professionals who competently carried out their stated tasks'.

Fig. 6. Dmitrii (Goblin) Puchkov's game: *The Truth About Ninth Company*.



Source: Screenshot from 1C website: http://www.1csc.ru/games/pc/21147-pravda-o-devyatoj-rote. Accessed 26 November 2012.

Thus, the third Ninth Company is also a tale of empire's traces and how they got repacked in the new Russian nation.[15] Goblin's game bears some similarities to Bondarchuk's film in the sense that both wanted to revisit the Afghan War and use the patriotism supposedly displayed

[15] I borrow the 'traces of empire' reference from Nancy Condee's recent work (2009), *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

by soldiers in it to build a new nation. To accomplish this task, Puchkov demanded strict incorporation of facts in his videogame. The locales are not Crimean mountains meant to suggest Chechnya as much as Afghanistan; they are computer-based visuals of Afghanistan taken from satellite maps. It includes survivors' memories from the Ninth Company defense of Height 3234 to enhance your gameplaying experience and make it conform to the 'truth' about what happened in 1988. All of these details, along with historical documents, memories written by veterans, maps and photographs are part of *The Truth About Ninth Company*. The official website defines the product as a 'documentary game [dokumental'naia igra]': http://www.pravdao9rote.ru/. The deluxe version sold in stores even came with a Soviet soldier's canteen.

Fig. 7. Real History? Menu for *The Truth About Ninth Company* featuring photograph of Height 3234 and Ninth Company member with game reproductions of both.

Source: Screenshot from The Truth About Ninth Company.

The Truth About Ninth Company allows players to become participants, taking part in seven specific episodes from the battle itself. In a sense, *The Truth About Ninth Company* assumes you have seen Bondarchuk's movie and read the responses to it. The game allows you to stake out your own understanding of the events on Height 3234, what they meant for the participants and how to remember them best. On one level, Bondarchuk's memory project

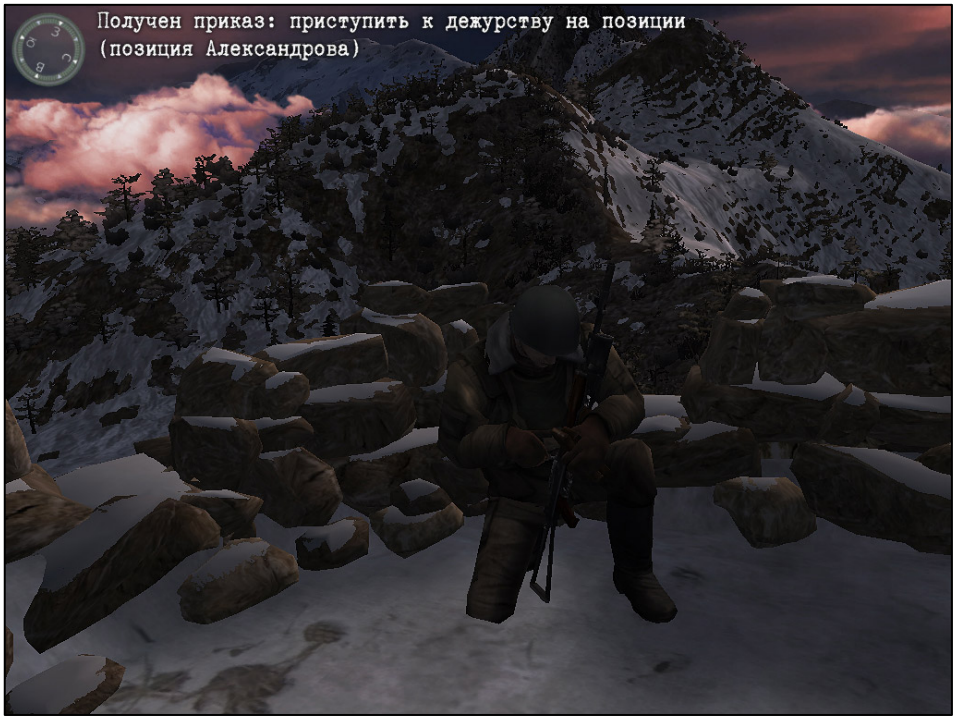
scores well: before 2005, few Russian gamers would have known anything about the real Ninth Company. Now, in Goblin's game, you inhabit their persons and play with their histories. You are asked to complete the same combat missions that veterans of the skirmish successfully did. The action begins on 7 January 1988 at 16:00. You become Junior Sergeant Viacheslav Aleksandrov and are given his 12.7 caliber heavy machine gun. After the first grenade and rocket attack, which has killed your radioman (Corporal Andrei Fedotov), you are asked to repulse the first mujahideen attack on the position. Your 'success' in the mission may bring an unexpected result—Aleksandrov covered the surprise attack and allowed his comrades to seek shelter, but died doing so. Your virtual reward is Aleksandrov's posthumous one—a Hero of the Soviet Union medal. The remaining six episodes unfold over the course of that night, ending on 8 January at 03:00. Players try to prevent the mujahideen from concentrating in one position, call in artillery strikes, participate in sneak attacks on the enemy, destroy RPG operators, carry ammunition to Height 3234 comrades and finally command the Ninth Company during the final mujahideen assault. As you inhabit each character, you literally take on their physical appearances and traits—the game's illustrators used 1988 photographs of the soldiers to render their likenesses. The creators also simulated the war game with the actual sounds of RPGs and mines, the foreign voices of their enemy and the cries for help from their comrades. Finally, the game comes packed with facts: historical details and commentary by historians accompany you on your missions.

Goblin and his fellow gamers declared in an official press release that *The Truth about Ninth Company* was a 'cooperative first-person gameplay'. Players inhabit the bodies of real Soviet soldiers, but they also move from soldier to soldier performing missions that demonstrate how each relied on his comrades. As the press release claimed, 'the sequential reincarnation of player first into one, then into another participant in the battle, will make it possible not only to feel and to be present at what is happening objectively, it will also clarify the pitiless logic of war, which does not pardon even minor errors'.[16] *The Truth about Ninth Company* stresses the wartime comradeship that guided Soviet soldiers in their actions.

Goblin's product can be viewed as one of many 'intense first-person shooter' videogames that proliferate around the globe. Popular American World War II games such as the *Call of Duty*, the *Medal of Honor*, or the *Wolfenstein* series, as well as Vietnam games such as EA's *Battlefield Vietnam*, sell millions of copies every year and send millions of players back to the past. As Zach Whalen and Laurie Taylor argue, these types of games 'operate with a clear—and a clearly *mediated*—relationship to the past', one they view as nostalgic (Whalen and Taylor 2008: 2). Video games reconstruct memory in similar ways to film, yet they go beyond an attempt to relive the past and instead offer players a chance to literally play with the past. In the case of *The Truth About Ninth Company*, game players could place themselves in the events surrounding Height 3234, inhabit the bodies of Soviet soldiers, and simulate their experiences. Game players—who, along with Puchkov, served as player three in the memory battles over the meanings of the war—could also use their game-playing trip to the past as a way to evaluate their views on Bondarchuk's film and Puchkov's response to it.

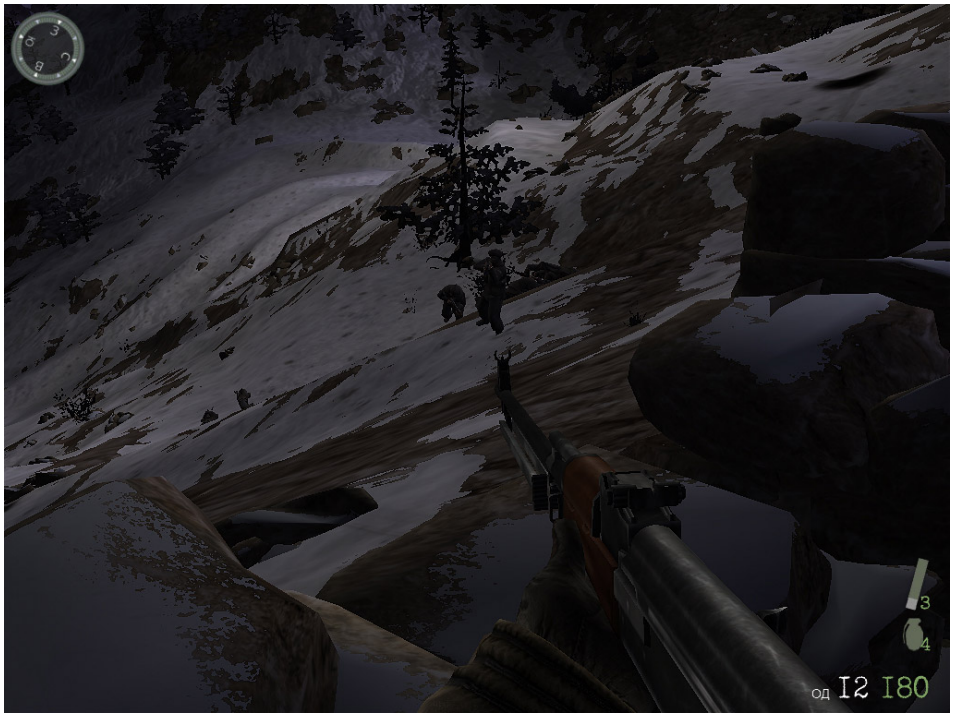
[16] From the press release: http://www.1c.ru/news/info.jsp?id=7884

Fig. 8. Viacheslav Aleksandrov's mission on The Truth About Ninth Company.



Source: Screenshot from The Truth About Ninth Company.

Fig. 9. Fighting the mujahedeen in *The Truth About Ninth Company*.



Source: Screenshot from The Truth About Ninth Company.

While creating a mediated space between past and present, *The Truth About Ninth Company* differs in important respects from its American counterparts. None of the major war game series mentioned above has players inhabit the personae of real veterans. Instead, Goblin's game comes packaged as a 'docu-game' like *John Kerry's Silver Star Mission*, issued as the Swift Boat campaign heated up in the 2004 U.S. Presidential campaign, or *JFK: Reloaded*, which allows gamers to be Lee Harvey Oswald and see just how hard it is to kill Kennedy. *The Truth About Ninth Company* represents something of a hybrid format, one where guns do not jam and war is not chaotic, yet also one where players are invited to play real characters from the past. It is, as Puchkov makes clear, a patriotic play aimed at teenagers who have heard 'nothing but slander about the Soviet Union'. For him, the game's patriotism 'is about the people, who honestly served their motherland and carried out their duty'. Puchkov's patriotism, stressed in the game, is also a timeless one: 'Respect for your country, for history, and for the readiness to serve one's country'.[17] Its difference from Bondarchuk's vision, however, is that the country in question is the Soviet Union, not Russia.

This patriotic appeal got Goblin's game special promotion at the XII Worldwide Union of the Russian People's Congress in Moscow [Vsemirnyi Russkii Narodnyi Sobor, VRNS]. Held on 22 February 2008, just as the game appeared, the Congress held a special session on 'computer games as a new factor in education'. Puchkov presented his game as the first docu-game in Russian history, explaining that it was created on the basis of meticulous research and a belief that the 'truth' about the war should be widely known (Interfax 2008). The director of the forum praised it for 'not only reviving patriotism among young people, but also for providing objective knowledge in military science, history, and geography'. 'It can be', he argued, 'that this game will begin the process--first in a "literary-play sphere"--of overcoming the myth about the fact that the war in Afghanistan was a crime. It not only was not a crime, in my view it was not a loss, but was a successfully realized operation, won with minimum losses' (Interfax 2008).[18]

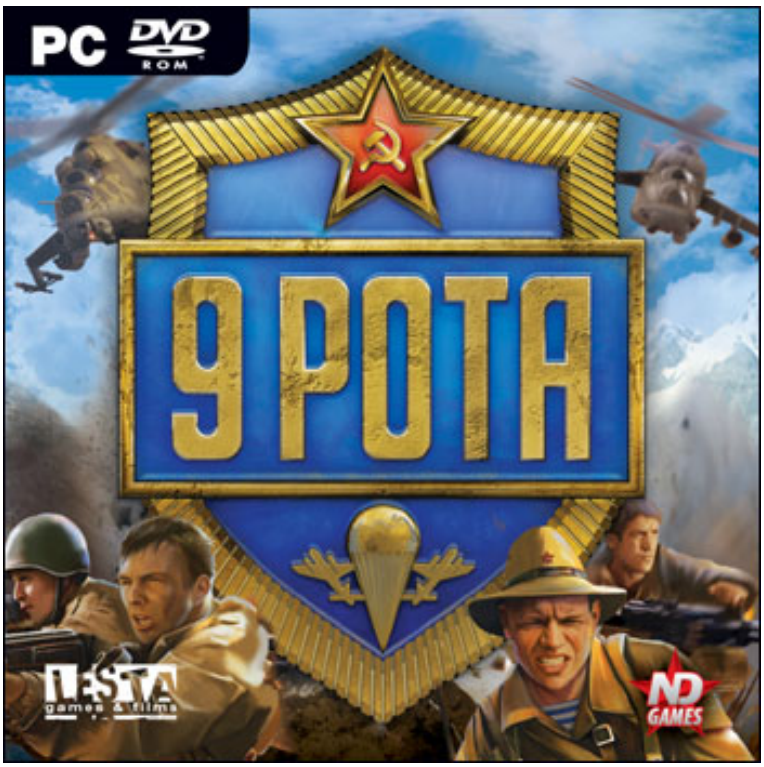
Anatoly Subbotin, the head of the PR Department for 1C, believed that the game 'was interesting first of all because it gave gamers an alternative view on the events described in the game. These events were mostly known from the movie by Bondarchuk. On the other hand the game offers quite a lot of information based on the memoirs of the participants. And the events in the game sometimes differ from the ones shown in the movie'.[19] What is evident from the numerous players who posted on sites—including Goblin's—is that the video game acted not just as a nostalgic agent like Whalen and Taylor argue, but as a patriotic exercise. Playing with the past, in other words, is more about asserting patriotism for the Soviet Union in the present than feeling nostalgic about the past. In the memory war over the meanings about Afghanistan, Puchkov—Player Three--posted the first high score.

[17] Personal correspondence with Dmitrii Puchkov, 29 July 2008.
[18] See the Interfax release: http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=23011
[19] Personal correspondence with Anatoly Subbotin, 20 March 2009.

Player Four: Lesta Games and Films

The film's producers fought back. Backed by the same companies that produced Bondarchuk's film--including Lesta--the video game *Ninth Company: A War-Patriotic Strategy* / *9 rota:voenno-patrioticheskaia strategiia* appeared on 30 May 2008.[20] It was billed on their game's website (http://www.9rota-game.ru/) as 'the first tactical strategy game based on the Afghan War'.

Fig. 10. Lesta Games, *9 rota* cover featuring digital reproductions of actors from Bondarchuk's film.



Source: Screenshot from Lesta's website: http://www.9rota-game.ru/. Accessed 26 November 2012.

This game dissolves the separation between video games and cinema (much like the *Ninth Company: The Last Call-Up* had done between movies and veterans' memories), for players essentially experience the Afghan War depicted by Bondarchuk. Its creators billed the game on their site as: 'not an historical reconstruction. It is not 'a game based on the film' in the classical sense. … It is the first tactical strategy dedicated to the Afghan war. The keyword here is "tactical". … Like the soldiers of the Ninth Company, a player who fulfills combat missions assigned to him will do so with historically accurate combat technology. … This technology served as faith and as truth'. The game follows this idea through the entire history of the Ninth Company's Afghanistan involvement, allowing gamers to play at the entire war.

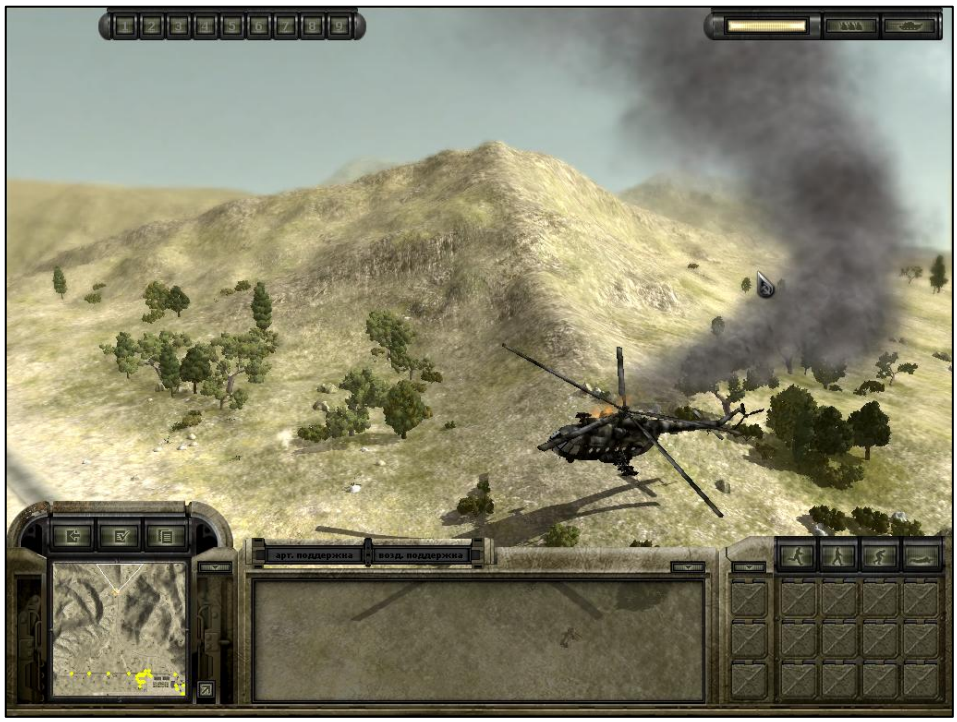
[20] *9 rota: voenno-patrioticheskaia strategiia* / *Ninth Company: A War-Patriotic Strategy* (2008). Lesta Games and Films.

At the same time, the game's narrative essentially follows that of Bondarchuk's film: as the English-language press release for the game claims, it 'follows the story of a ragged band of young recruits undergoing brutal training in Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley and culminates with a bloody stand against the Mujahedeen warriors on a nameless mountain top in Afghanistan'. You can learn the same sorts of lessons present in the film—that the war produced a band of brother-like spirit—whether you take part in 1980 or 1988 simulations. Your points are earned through merit reward and an 'in-combat morale system' that allows characters to learn how to fight alongside comrades. If you play this past well, and become more experienced in combat, you have the opportunity to form an elite unit.

In accomplishing the patriotic lessons of the film, the game—and so too *The Truth About Ninth Company*—also accomplishes an important history lesson. Red Army weapons may not jam and a certain order is imposed on a virtual historical landscape that actual combatants did not experience, yet gamers also dislodge themselves from historical determinism. Your tasks in *Ninth Company* and in Goblin's game may be to mimic Player One, Player Two, or even Player Three experiences on Height 3234, but gamers are not always successful in repelling the mujahedeen or in accomplishing any of the missions. The gaming experience therefore highlights the role of contingency in history (Fogu 2009: 119); playing at the past does not always mean you replicate it. Players therefore 'write themselves into the past' through this Afghan War simulation, one that takes participants through a creative process that in turn demonstrates how history can be a 'multivalent process subject to many different processes, interpretations, and outcomes' (Uricchio 2005: 327-29).

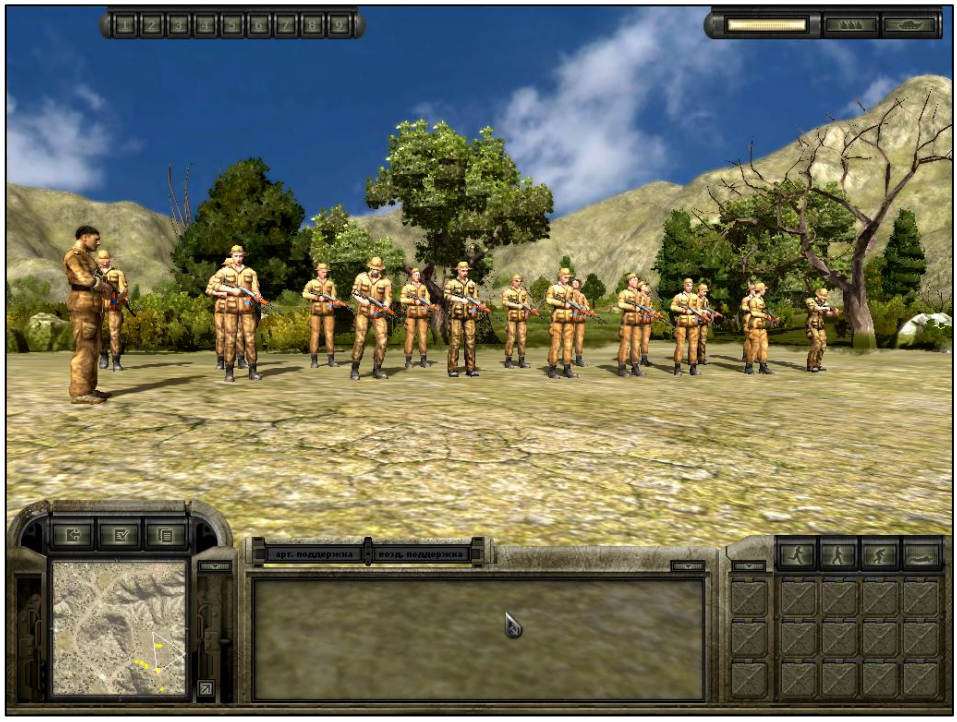
Beyond the gameplay mode of simulation present in both Lesta's and 1C's products lurked a battle over the ultimate meaning of the Afghan War and how best to remember the conflict. In his game and his blog, Goblin argued that the dominant memory of Afghanistan as 'Russia's Vietnam' was a false one. For him, the Soviet leadership and Soviet military successfully waged the campaign. Soviet soldiers also fought because they were *Soviet* patriots. Goblin's arguments—and those of his supporters who subscribe to them—emerged out of the fractured memory that developed about the war in the 1990s. In a sense, his vision of Afghanistan takes direct aim at the interpretations offered by Borovik, by Bortko (in his film *The Afghan Breakaway*) and by Khotinenko (in his film *The Muslim*). Bondarchuk's film and Lesta's game, by contrast, built more directly on the memory work laid after 1990. This *Ninth Company* turned the brotherhood of Soviet soldiers into a more timeless patriotic spirit, one that tapped into notions of Russian nationhood as defined by a defense of the motherland. The Soviet leadership is not an important actor in this memory game; rather, it is the individual soldier's patriotism and the recognition of it that matter most. Both players—Bondarchuk and Puchkov—use the same evidence to offer their interpretations; they vehemently disagree over the interpretation.

Fig. 11. Cinegames. MiG helicopter attacking Afghan positions in the *9 rota* game.



Source: Screenshot from Ninth Company: A War-Patriotic Strategy.

Fig. 12. The Ninth Company reimagined (again**).**



Source: Screenshot from Ninth Company: A War-Patriotic Strategy.

In the game world, the film version of the war initially emerged triumphant. Aleksandr Skakovskii, Lesta Production's PR manager, estimates that 70,000 copies of the Bondarchuk-based game sold in the first three months alone.[21] This success led foreign game companies to snap up the rights—Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Serbian, Croatian, Chinese, French, and English versions appeared by the end of 2009. Skakovskii credits the film's popularity, the general interest in war games, and the fact that the game garnered a relatively low rating on the Russian parental advisory labels for its appeal.

The patriotic games played over the meanings of the Ninth Company--and, more broadly, the meanings of the Soviet war in Afghanistan--highlight the significance of new media forms in the shaping of historical memories. In 2010, the Russian Duma, led by United Russian deputy Pavel Zyrianov took up the question of patriotic video games on his LiveJournal page (http://pavelzyryanov.livejournal.com/26165.html). Disturbed by what they saw as an 'insufficient level of patriotism in young people's lives', the Duma commission led by Zyrianov recommended a series of tax breaks for computer game manufacturers if they created patriotic titles and a 500 million ruble budget for developing a series of six patriotic game series (most on the Great Patriotic War. The commission cited 'The Truth About Ninth Company' as an example of a good patriotic game (see Semenova 2010). Zyrianov is clear on what needs to be done and why: 'computer games today are part of a vital ideological platform that affects the consciousness of our young people. They learn history, they adopt values from games and it is important that this process is given a pro-Russian stamp' (quoted in Shuster 2010). Lesta's game did not figure at all in these discussions: it was Puchkov's 'truthful docu-game' *The Truth About Ninth Company* that Duma deputies and gaming conferences looked to for their own versions of historical truth. Perhaps in the end Goblin posted the best score in the memory game after all.

Game Over?

In his work on popular history and how new media forms interpret the past, Jerome De Groot compares the EA Games Medal of Honor series to war films and their simulacra. At the same time, as he posits, the games contain 'something very sophisticated,' namely, 'the creation of a virtual landscape that becomes increasingly complicated' in updated versions (De Groot 2008: 136). On the one hand, the war gamers play is 'consciously turned into film' or at least a 'recognizable pattern or language of cinematic tropes' (136). On the other hand, De Groot muses, 'games can also provide a space for contested historical narratives to flourish' (138). In the end, '[H]istory in gaming presents at once a complexity of historical experience and a tightly organized, inflexible model of history' (139).

The cinegame examined above attests to this complexity and yet adds even more layers to De Groot's view of how games can enhance historical understanding. The Ninth Company players all took part in making history and in manufacturing memories out of the experiences on Height 3234. In doing so, the movie and the games that followed illustrate how new media can radically alter the processes of nationhood and remembrance, constructing, decon-

[21] Personal correspondence with Aleksandr Skakovskii, 23 March 2009.

structing and reconstructing pasts, invented traditions and collected memories with surprising speed (Kansteiner 2007: 141-42). The Ninth Company memory battles also emerged out of specific historical circumstances; namely, a desire in present-day Russia to understand the past and contentious pasts such as the Afghan War in particular. After 2005, gamers and cinema goers alike have played at the past and often done so to score patriotic points in a landscape meant to evoke Russian or Soviet patriotism. They have also engaged in meaningful debates about the meanings of the Afghan War. The battles over the film and its meanings fought in video games and online suggest that cinegame players are offering multiple interpretations to the past, helping to turn a forgotten event into History and Memory through play, interactivity, performances, commercial interests and multiple interpretations of the significance of the events on Height 3234. These conflicts—now fought on screens big and small—demonstrate that immersive, interactive spaces allow individuals to shape history and memory without the state playing the major role (Kansteiner 2007: 143).

And not just with the Afghan War. Arriving on shelves just in time for Victory Day 2010, 'For the Motherland,' a collection of 3 CD roms and DVDs, came billed as 'a special series' that represented a 'historical-patriotic release'.[22] The package, which was branded with the St. George's ribbon and Victory medal, contained the newest 1C video game 'Kursk Salient' from their series 'The Art of War,' an audio book of V. P. Astafev's *Somewhere the War Thunders* and the interactive CD/DVD-ROM *From the Kremlin to the Reichstag*.

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[22] *Za rodunu! 65 Let pobedy* / *For the Motherland! 65 Years of* Victory (2010). 1C Company. Spetsial'naia seriia: istoriko-patrioticheskii vypusk / Special Series: Historical-Patriotic Products. Includes: *Iskusstvo voiny: Kurskaia duga* / *The Art of War: The Kursk Arch* (2009). 1C Company; Viktor Astaf'ev, *Gde-to Gremit voina* / *Somewhere the War Thunders* (2010), read by Dmitrii Nazarov; and *Ot Kremlia do Reikhstaga* / *From the Kremlin to the Reichstag* (2000/2002).

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