

Russia Praises Veterans of War in Afghanistan

By [The Moscow Times](#)

February 16, 2014



President Vladimir Putin met with Afghan War veterans in Sochi on Saturday to mark the 25th anniversary of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan.

Opening the meeting, Putin told the veterans that he was well aware of the impact the war had "not only in your personal lives, but also in the life of our people as a whole," according to a transcript on the Kremlin's website.

The topic of the Winter Olympics came up at the meeting, and the veterans expressed gratitude for all the changes in the city.

"Mr. President, just look what the city is like now. It has changed right before our eyes. It is a pleasure to walk around it. And this is not only our opinion — everyone says so. Thank you very much for Sochi, from all our hearts," one of the veterans said.

Russia's defense minister also praised veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan on Saturday,

calling them "true patriots."

Sergei Shoigu said in a statement marking the anniversary that Soviet soldiers' heroism in the war was part "of the best combat traditions of the Motherland." He added that the experience has proven useful for counter-terrorism and peacekeeping duties.

The Soviet invasion began on Dec. 25, 1979 and ended when the last units withdrew on Feb. 15, 1989. On Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's initiative, the Soviet parliament in 1989 declared the Afghan war a mistake. According to Shoigu, more than 14,000 Soviet soldiers died and about 50,000 were wounded.

The government of Soviet-backed Najibullah fell in April 1992 after Moscow withdrew support following the 1991 Soviet collapse.

Franz Klintsevich, the chairman of the Afghan Veterans Union, has urged the government to revise the Soviet parliament's condemnation of the war.

But retired Colonel General Boris Gromov, who served as the commander of the Soviet troops in Afghanistan and led their withdrawal in 1989 and currently serves as a lawmaker, dismissed the request as "stupid," Interfax reported.

Deputy Defense Minister Nikolai Pankov also said that revising the assessment of the war would be "inappropriate" now.

Material from The Moscow Times is included in this report.

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