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Alexander Nemeshaev, left, and Igor Moruzov served in the Soviet military in Afghanistan.

Soviet vets talk about pain of war

By Woody Behrens
News-Press Staff Writer

Echoes from the war in Vietnam reverberated through Campbell Hall at UCSB Thursday — by way of the Soviet Union.

In a class called "Voices of the Stranger," two young men from the Soviet Union talked about the pain, the suffering and the trauma that lingers from their country's involvement in a most misunderstood war in Afghanistan.

The parallels to America's Vietnam experience were striking, and an overflow crowd that included many veterans of that war listened intently as Alexander "Sasha" Nemeshaev and Igor Moruzov shared their thoughts through an interpreter.

Nemeshaev, who lives in Moscow, served in the Soviet military in Afghanistan from 1984 to 1986. He said the intensity of emotions for those in the war cannot easily be explained, and the process of adjusting to a peaceful life back home is amazingly complex.

"One day you are fighting, and the next day you are leading a civil life, where everyone has a peaceful life," Nemeshaev said. "Little was written about the war, and what was written was colored, so very few people understood what had been going on when we

returned

"There was no one to talk to for the veterans — to take off the heaviness brought on by combat," he said. "The strong sought out other veterans, and the weak let their spirits fall, became introverted and started drinking."

Nemeshaev said veterans' organizations in and around Moscow are addressing the problems, but they have little experience or expertise to draw on.

"Because of this, we turn to our American friends for their experience in moral and spiritual rehabilitation," he said.

The superpower link was established last year, when UCSB Professor Walter Capps, who has gained international acclaim for his course on the Vietnam war, went to the Soviet Union with a group of veterans, including King Harris, news director for KEYT-TV, Santa Barbara's ABC affiliate.

This trip by the Soviets, Capps explained, was an effort to strengthen the bonds established then and demonstrate to Americans the common problems — and common solutions — "all people share."

Nemeshaev mentioned some specific problems Soviet veterans face, including a shortage of rehabilitation facilities and artificial limbs.

"We are trying to launch an industry for artificial limbs, and we are trying to speed the construction of rehabilitation centers, but there are long delays," he said.

In the meantime, the need for psychological expertise is great.

Igor Moruzov, who served in Afghanistan from 1985 to December 1986, said the most difficult thing Soviet veterans have encountered is "to go from words to action and really help the veterans."

He said his countrymen from the war believe it is very important that no one forget the war and the effects it has had on the people who were called to fight.

"We want to help in such a way that 20 years from now, teen-agers won't relate to the war as an adventure — or worse, not at all," Moruzov said.

He told the audience he was particularly moved by the memorial to Vietnam veterans in Washington, D.C.

"People go there as if to meet (the veterans who died in Vietnam). They are really feeling," Moruzov said.

Capps, harking back to a question he posed to an audience of Soviet students, asked the soldiers if they regard Americans as their enemies.

"It is an interesting question," Moruzov said, eliciting laughter and applause from the audience. "Our delegation — I wouldn't say there is a revolution — but this is perhaps the first time we get to meet and get to know each other."

"Relations have changed a great deal, in a positive direction," Moruzov continued.

At the close of the 90-minute class, Capps shared an anecdote with the audience that underscored the comments by the guests.

"When I was there," Capps said, "I was told, 'We're already friends — we just don't know each other yet.'"

"I think we've gone a long way today toward getting to know each other."

The audience then gave the Soviets — and the American veterans present — a prolonged standing ovation.

Capps said the trip by the Soviets, along with a journalist they credited with being the first to tell the true story of the Afghanistan war, was made possible by the Vietnam Veterans Aid Foundation.