



VINTAGE

A DIRTY WAR
ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA

CONTENTS

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Map

Title Page

Preface

Introduction

PART ONE: THE BUILD-UP (July-October 1999)

1. Grave-Robbers
2. Land of the Unknown Soldiers
3. "A Dirty War"
4. Tainted Tins
5. Criminal Mothers
6. A Tale of Love and Fascism

PART TWO: WAR (November 1999-March 2000)

7. Ingushlag
8. Camp Guards
9. Bomb, Don't Save
10. The Basic Instinct of Empire
11. Kalashnikov and the Old People's Home
12. Welcome to Hell
13. Tell Them: This War is Senseless
14. Strange Battles
15. Reducing Mortality
16. The Chechnya Reservation

17. Concentration Camp Village
18. Sentence has been Passed
19. My Homeland
20. The Decisive Battle

PART THREE: RESTORING ORDER (May 2000-January 2001)

21. A Reduced City
22. The Name's Shamanov
23. The Ordinary Man Does Not Need Freedom
24. A Return to Normality?
25. Weight 300kg, Value 0.00 roubles
26. Netherworld
27. Oil Rules
28. I Want to Stay Alive
29. Still a Captive
30. We're Disposable
31. Elections in a Battle Zone
32. Bread and Bullets
33. Back to School
34. Guns in the Night
35. Where the Trail Leads . . .
36. Two Weeks
37. Treatment Deferred
38. Murder or Execution?

Picture Section

Postscript

Chronology

Index

Biographical Notes
Copyright

About the Book

"My notes are written for the future. They are the testimony of the innocent victims of the new Chechen war, which is why I record all the detail I can." ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA

The Chechen War was supposed to be over in 1996 after the first Yeltsin campaign, but in the summer of 1999 the new Putin government decided, in their own words, to "do the job properly". Before all the bodies of those who had died in the first campaign had been located or identified, many more thousands would be slaughtered in another round of fighting. The first account to be written by a Russian woman, *A Dirty War* is an edgy and intense study of a conflict that shows no signs of being resolved. Exasperated by the Russian government's attempt to manipulate media coverage of the war, journalist Anna Politkovskaya undertook to go to Chechnya, to make regular reports and keep events in the public eye.

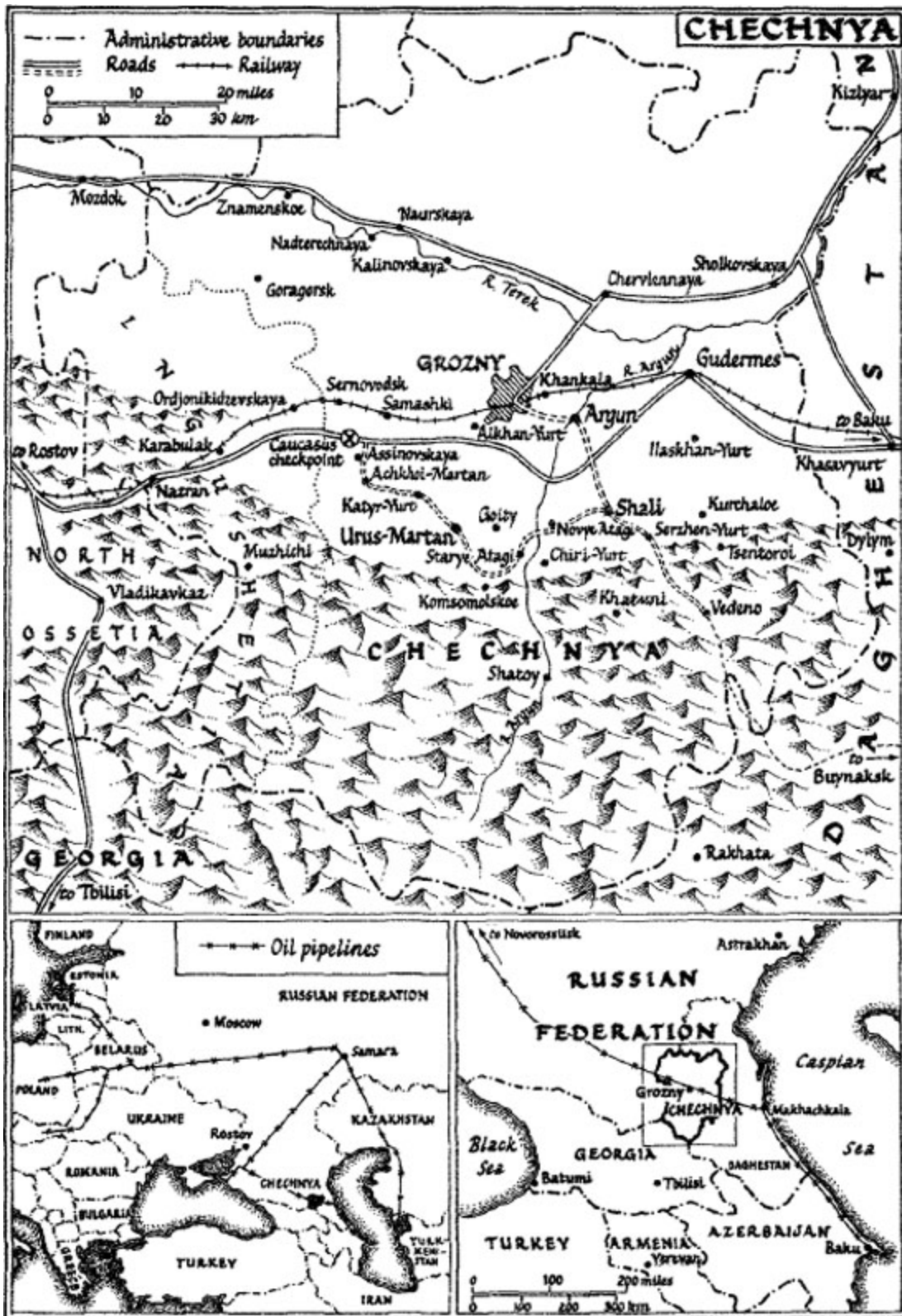
In a series of despatches from July 1999 to January 2001 she vividly describes the atrocities and abuses of the war, whether it be the corruption endemic in post-Communist Russia, in particular the government and the military, or the spurious arguments and abominable behaviour of the Chechen authorities. In these courageous reports, Politkovskaya excoriates male stupidity and brutality on both sides of the conflict and interviews the civilians whose homes and communities have been laid waste, leaving them nowhere to live and nothing and no one to believe in.

About the Author

ANNA POLITKOVSKAYA has been a special correspondent for the bi-weekly Russian newspaper *Novaya gazeta* (circulation 700,000) since 1999. After graduating from the Journalism Faculty of Moscow University in 1980, she worked first for the *Izvestiya* daily, and then, in the 1990s, for the *Megapolis Express* and *Obshchaya gazeta* weeklies. She has made social issues her subject: public mores, the defective judicial system, prison conditions, and the fate of orphans, the disabled and the country's many refugees and displaced persons. In January 2000 she was awarded the prestigious Golden Pen Award by the Russian Union of Journalists for her outspoken coverage of the new federal campaign in Chechnya.

JOHN CROWFOOT lived in Moscow from 1986 to 1999. In the early 1990s he worked with *Express Chronicle* human rights weekly and *Vozvrashchenie* publishers. Among his translations from the Russian are Vitaly Shentalinsky's *The KGB's Literary Archives*, Lev Razgon's *True Stories* and an anthology of women's memoirs of the Gulag, *Till My Tale is Told*. He is currently translating the memoirs of Emma Gerstein.

THOMAS DE WAAL reported on Russia and the Caucasus from 1993 to 1999 for the *Moscow Times*, *The Times*, the *Economist* and the BBC World Service. With Carlotta Gall, he won a James Cameron Prize for Outstanding Reporting for their book *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War* (1997). He is now based in London and working on a book about the Nagorny Karabakh conflict.



A Dirty War

A Russian Reporter in Chechnya

Anna Politkovskaya

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN AND EDITED BY

John Crowfoot

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Thomas de Waal



THE HARVILL PRESS
LONDON

PREFACE

On 11 December 1994 Russian forces were sent into Chechnya “to restore the constitutional order” after three years of tension and uncertainty. “Why can’t we carry out an operation in our country like the US did in Haiti?” demanded Kremlin hawk Oleg Lobov when warned of the possible consequences. Whether the attitudes of the war-party were shaped by contempt or historical ignorance, the use of force turned a minor distraction into a major conflict.

The Chechen fighters denied the federal authorities a rapid victory. The generals and politicians leading the campaign had to face the unaccustomed scrutiny of Russia’s new media and parliament. A small but articulate minority in Moscow opposed the operation from the outset and mounting casualties extended public disaffection: a year later Boris Nemtsov, young governor of the Nizhny Novgorod Region, gathered a million signatures on a petition against the war. Finally, after 18 months of armed conflict and uneasy ceasefires, the stalemate was officially acknowledged.

Following Yeltsin’s re-election as President of the Russian Federation (and a last outburst of fighting), an agreement was reached with Chechnya’s leaders in August 1996. Federal troops were withdrawn, and a five-year moratorium imposed on any discussion of the republic’s disputed status. The war had been a terrible and disturbing lesson for the reformers.

A mere ten years earlier the USSR was a nuclear superpower and serious rival to the West. The rapid dissolution of the Soviet bloc and the emergence of more

than a dozen new states from the USSR was “in retrospect a remarkably non-violent process”¹ - only in Chechnya (and distant Tajikistan) did the transition result in war. The end of the fighting offered a new start, both to Russia and Chechnya. For a time it seemed that the brutal military campaign had been a singular lapse, one last appalling aberration in a momentous period of change that saw the end of the Cold War, the defeat of communism, and the beginning of market reforms in the old Soviet Union.

In January 1997 Aslan Maskhadov was chosen President of Chechnya in elections that international monitors agreed were free and fair. In May that year he met President Yeltsin and they signed a treaty that further confirmed the end of hostilities. Both sides seemed determined henceforth to resolve their differences by non-violent means. This commitment to democracy and diplomacy justified Russia’s admission to the Council of Europe in 1996. In international eyes Chechnya remained within the Russian Federation, and was thus also regarded as part of a wider Europe.

However, others drew a different lesson from the first military campaign. If such an operation were repeated, the government was advised, the forces sent into Chechnya should be properly led and co-ordinated; and this time public opinion, the media and parliament would have to be effectively prepared and managed. When Anna Politkovskaya began reporting for the popular bi-weekly *Novaya gazeta* in summer 1999, Yeltsin was selecting a new prime minister. The little-known Vladimir Putin’s candidacy benefited from a widespread feeling that the country needed firmer government, that the new business magnates, the so-called oligarchs, should be reined in and that the Federation’s 89 restive regions and republics ought to be brought back under control. With parliamentary elections soon to be held, a rapidly escalating sequence of events provided an opportunity for Yeltsin’s protégé to give a dramatic demonstration of such firmness - fighting in

Daghestan, terrorist explosions in Moscow and the second deployment of federal forces in Chechnya on 1 October 1999.

JOHN CROWFOOT

¹ John Keep, *Last of Empires: A History of the Soviet Union 1945-91*, (Oxford 1996).

INTRODUCTION

In 1818 the tsarist general Alexei Yermolov founded a new fortress in the North Caucasus. He was stepping up his efforts to subdue the rebellious native peoples in the mountains to the south and he called the fortress Groznaya, meaning "Terrible" or "Formidable", as a token of his intent to intimidate them. How grimly appropriate then that the city of Grozny, the successor to that fortress, should now symbolise the terror that the Russian military can inflict in the modern age. Grozny, which once had a population of 400,000, is now barely a city at all. All its major buildings stand in ruins. It is modern Europe's most powerful symbol of what happens when politics fails and violence takes over.

The destruction wrought on Grozny makes even the damage to a battle-scarred town like Sarajevo seem light. Wandering through the streets after its ruination during the first Chechen war in 1994-6, it was hard to conceive how conventional weaponry had done so much harm. The centre of the city was reduced to rubble, with many of the inhabitants of these streets lying in mass graves. Ruins had been swept into tottering piles. Streets had become empty thoroughfares that ran between large areas of sky. If an occasional building had escaped the bombing, it was only a large windowless facade facing nowhere. It would have seemed more plausible to be told that the place had suffered a nuclear attack or some giant natural catastrophe.

The destruction of Grozny was both terrible and strange. Terrible, because of the wantonness and scale of the damage. Strange, because this destruction was ordered from Moscow with the stated aim of preserving Chechnya

within the Russian Federation. Chechnya was Russia's equivalent of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom or the Basque country in Spain - an unstable dissident region, some of whose citizens wanted to secede, some of whom wanted to stay in the larger country. Like both those places, it had a mixed population. The majority of the inhabitants of the centre of Grozny were Russians.

This turned out to be only the first round. In 1999-2000 even more devastation was inflicted on the city by artillery and bombers. Chechnya has now lost almost everything we associate with a modern state: government, economy, housing, power, healthcare. Chillingly, recent visitors also note a lack of men. Wandering through the devastated streets of what he called the "Hiroshima of the Caucasus" in September 2000, a British journalist found only women working on tiny efforts at rebuilding from the ruins: "The men are not simply demoralised: they have vanished - for some good reasons."¹ One reason was an order by the Russian military command to treat all Chechen males between the ages of 10 and 60 as potential fighters. Many were arrested and "filtered" into places like Chernokozovo, a former prison, turned into a "filtration camp". Chernokozovo was officially set up in order to unmask Chechen fighters, but was turned into a factory of torture and extortion against the Chechen male population. According to human rights researchers who interviewed survivors the Russian soldiers greeted new inmates with the words "Welcome to Hell".²

How did this hell come to pass? How did Chechnya end up obliterated by war? In answering these questions, it is important to remember that, although the conflict has deep historical roots, Chechnya's implosion was quite rapid. Ten years ago it was an unusual but by no means exotic southern region.

Three snapshots from my visits to Chechnya as a reporter over four and a half years, show its descent into the Inferno:

I first visited Grozny in January 1994, eleven months before war broke out and a little more than two years after General Jokhar Dudayev proclaimed the republic independent of Moscow. Its freedom was only symbolic: direct flights operated from Moscow, Chechnya's borders with the rest of Russia were open and the currency was the rouble. Yet Grozny was already a bizarre place, where guns were traded in the bazaar and the silence of the night was punctuated by baying dogs and random shots. The project of Chechen independence had gone sour, and yet Grozny was still an imposing Russian city with broad boulevards, a university, shops and cafés.

Three years later in January 1997 this city had vanished. The university, the neo-classical Hotel Kavkaz, the presidential building had all been levelled by bombs. The human cost had been appalling, but a residual society had survived the war. Most of the Chechen population had retained their one-storey houses on the edge of the city. And the occasion was an optimistic one: after the Chechen victory and the Russian military withdrawal, the Chechens were holding elections, monitored by international observers. All the candidates advocated Chechen independence, but the long lines of voters were solidly behind the most pragmatic and apparently honest of them, the chief military commander Aslan Maskhadov.

Contrast these scenes to a year and a half later, the hot summer of June 1998 and my last visit to Grozny. Maskhadov had failed and peace had only brought new nightmares. The city had never been so forbidding and for the first time a foreigner had to fear for his safety in broad daylight. I had four guards with me all the time, to deter the kidnappers, who were Chechnya's most - its only - successful entrepreneurs. Hundreds of people, the majority of them Chechens, but also Russians and foreigners, were being held hostage. At the children's hospital, where staff had not been paid for months, the chief doctor told me

about a growing tuberculosis epidemic. Almost the entire adult population was unemployed and insurgents opposed to President Maskhadov were growing more powerful.

This was the background to Moscow's second military intervention in the autumn of 1999, bringing yet more destruction, marauding and hatred. The second Chechen conflict is Anna Politkovskaya's subject in *A Dirty War*. Normal civilian lives are often overlooked by war correspondents in the heat of battle, but this is Politkovskaya's essential subject. By her careful reporting, the author becomes our Virgil, Dante's guide through the Inferno, a guide both to this apocalypse and to the attempts at ordinary life lived in its shadow.

This book is a work of immense courage. Politkovskaya risked the dangers of a partisan war, of army checkpoints and Chechen kidnap gangs. Finally, and most frighteningly, she was arrested, abused and threatened with death by some of the same soldiers she was investigating for atrocities. This is investigative reporting in the truest sense. She also has the capacity to remain human in the most inhuman of situations. She feels sympathy - and elicits *our* sympathy - for the victims of this conflict, however little their story. There is real pathos in the story of the Russian conscripts, misled into going to a war zone by being fuddled with alcohol and packed off in the middle of the night; or the poor villager whose only cow has been shot by a rabid Russian general using it for target practice. Of such little calamities is a great tragedy made.

Much has been misunderstood about the origins and nature of the Chechen conflict. Many of the categories commentators use to describe it are simply misleading. The war was not, as Moscow determined it in 1999, an "anti-terrorist operation": you do not flatten cities in anti-terrorist operations. It has never been an Islamic jihad - the Chechnya that initially fought for its independence in 1994 was, formally at least, a secular republic. Islam won more

recruits during the war and afterwards, but it was more a new badge of identity than fuel for conflict. Equally, the politics of oil, despite many Western analyses, was always a secondary consideration. Chechnya was producing very little oil by the 1990s and the separatist regime in Grozny never interfered with the oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea that ran through Chechnya. In dozens of conversations with Russian officials about the origins of the 1994 war I do not remember the subject coming up once.

It is better to see the Chechen war within the particular history of the North Caucasus Region and the clumsy efforts made to integrate it into the Russian state. The region is both Russia and not Russia. The mountains, foothills and plains on the north side of the Caucasus contain a patchwork of small nationalities, which were incorporated into the Russian Empire only in the mid-nineteenth century. In the Soviet era they were divided into six – now seven – “autonomous republics”, regions where some of the more populous nationalities were honoured with a higher symbolic status and a few token institutions. The common language and urban culture is Russian. Yet they were and remain a world away from the flat Slavic heartlands of Russia because of their mountainous geography, distinct ethnic traditions and the predominance of Islam over Christianity.

In the summer of 1999, when Anna Politkovskaya travelled to the region, the focus of anxiety was the easternmost republic, Daghestan. Daghestan forms a long sliver of mountains that falls down to a strip of coastline and then the Caspian Sea. Almost every valley is home to a new nationality and language; by one estimate there are 34 main ethnic groups in the republic. This has helped to make Islam a greater force than in Chechnya, indeed the republic's *lingua franca* used to be Arabic, as taught in the mosques (it is now Russian). Deeply divided within itself and heavily reliant on Moscow for economic subsidy, the region

has remained, as it were, Russian by default and the idea of Daghestani independence has never carried weight.

Yet after the war in Chechnya ended in 1996, Daghestan began to fall apart. Radical Islam made headway among young men and many of them flocked to two villages, Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi, which declared themselves autonomous from the regional government. The republic's notoriously venal politicians resorted to violence to sort out their feuds and there were prominent victims in gangland-style bombings and shootings every week. Chechnya, de facto independent and next door, provided a haven and safe refuge for armed gangsters and militants on the run.

On 7 August 1999 two Chechnya-based warlords moved across the mountains from Chechnya into Daghestan in a convoy of vehicles and armed men. They acted suddenly and their motives were unclear. One was Shamil Basayev, the most famous of the Chechen warriors of the first conflict. Basayev had become Russia's enemy number one after he led a raid deep into southern Russia in 1995 and took hundreds hostage in the town of Budyonnovsk. He had been allowed to escape back to Chechnya in return for the promise of peace negotiations. A year later he led the Chechen recapture of Grozny. Basayev is more radical than President Maskhadov and was seeking a new role for himself in post-war Chechnya. Equally, he was not a radical Islamist, merely a devout adherent of the *Naqshbandiya*, the local Chechen brand of Sufi Islam.

His comrade-in-arms was Emir Khattab, a frightening individual with long black Medusa-like locks. Khattab, the only non-Chechen to have fought with prominence in the first war, is a Bedu from Saudi Arabia. He fought with the mujahedin against the Soviets in Afghanistan and moved to Chechnya in 1995. A year later he led an operation that destroyed an entire Russian tank column high in the southern mountains. A video cassette of the attack - released no doubt to elicit more money from his Saudi

sponsors and on sale in Grozny market - shows Khattab walking along a line of charred Russian corpses, yelling in triumph. After the war was over, Khattab stayed on in Chechnya and started a training camp for fighters.

The two warlords, together with a couple of thousand warriors, moved into three villages in the mountains. They said later they were responding to a call for help from Islamist allies in three mountain villages, but their broader goals are disputed. It seems unlikely that at this point Basayev and Khattab were anticipating a new war in Chechnya. A year before they had publicly proclaimed their desire to yoke Chechnya and Daghestan together into one Islamic republic. A union with Daghestan was probably their long-term ambition and any rebel movement in the North Caucasus needed Daghestani support to flourish; but in 1999 a union like this had no widespread public support and was little more than a slogan. (Indeed Basayev seemed to be aware of this. When I interviewed him in June 1998 the subject of Daghestan did not come up once, he talked only about Chechnya and Russia.) Another writer has called the fighters "Che Guevaras in turbans", men more interested in the overthrow of the pro-Russian corrupt order in Daghestan than in creating an Islamic state.³ Just as important a spur for Basayev was his obsessive desire to continue the fight against the Russians in any manner possible; since 1996 he had lost status and purpose in Chechnya and had had an unsuccessful spell as the republic's prime minister. He remained a man in quest of martial glory as an end in itself.

Inevitably, this being the Caucasus, there are also suggestions of conspiracy. Some suspect that the Chechen incursion was deliberately provoked by someone in Moscow to justify a strong military response. The two men were invited into Daghestan by two criminalised politician brothers, the Khachilayevs, who had shadowy connections in Moscow (one of them has since been murdered). It was also an open secret in Chechnya that the telephones and

the radical Islamic website used by the invaders had been paid for by the prominent Kremlin insider and business tycoon Boris Berezovsky - a man with long-standing business links in Chechnya and a murky political agenda in Moscow.

What needs no proof is that Basayev and Khattab's incursion into Daghestan was the cue for a momentous shift of power in Moscow: the entry on to the Russian political stage of a new strong man, the then head of the counterintelligence service or FSB, Vladimir Putin. Putin was named Russia's new Prime Minister on 9 August, two days after the first raid. He promptly flew down to Daghestan to take charge and ordered an escalation of the Russian response. Three weeks later he ordered an attack on the two separatist Islamic villages in the plains. Then a bomb, almost certainly planted by the rebels, tore apart a Russian army compound in the Daghestani town of Buinaksk; it killed 62 people. Further terrorist bomb attacks, their motive unexplained, killed more than 200 people in Moscow and southern Russia. They provided the background to a new intervention in Chechnya.

By marching into Daghestan, Basayev and Khattab had detonated a different kind of explosion in Russia's most fragile region. They also made a big miscalculation. They clearly believed that they could count on local support, but instead a flood of Daghestanis poured away from the mountains and there were demonstrations and rallies against the Chechen invaders. Thousands of Daghestanis appealed to the Russian authorities to give them weapons to fight the Chechens. The region was threatening to turn into a mini-Lebanon, a place with no central control, fought over by private armies.

It is crucial here to emphasise how different Daghestan and Chechnya are. There is no "domino effect" waiting to happen in the North Caucasus - or indeed elsewhere in Russia. Few Daghestanis have ever advocated secession

from Russia. Chechnya was and remains very different, its attempt at independence a special case. This is because, in contrast to their other North Caucasian neighbours, the Chechens had two engines that propelled their movement for independence: both a political and economic base and a common memory of mass persecution. Of all the pieces in the mosaic of the North Caucasus, Chechnya alone had a productive economy, centred on its factories and oil refineries, and a large and homogeneous population (with around 800,000 Chechens in 1991). They also had a living recollection of mass trauma: they were the largest ethnic group in the Caucasus to be deported en masse by Stalin to Kazakhstan in 1944. Tens of thousands died on the way and Chechnya was abolished and erased from the map. The Chechens were allowed to return home only in 1957 after Nikita Khrushchev's Secret Speech denouncing Stalin, but even then were still second-class citizens in their own republic, subordinate to ethnic Russians.

In 1991 Chechnya gained a radical leader, General Dudayev, who was able to mobilise these grievances into a bid for independence. Dudayev made his dash for freedom in September 1991, when the whole architecture of the Soviet Union was breaking up. It was not a classical act of de-colonisation. Dudayev had been a patriotic Soviet general, who spoke Russian better than Chechen and was married to a Russian. He was an impulsive and difficult leader, who found it difficult to negotiate with Moscow – but sometimes offered very favourable terms for re-joining Russia.

The tragedy of Chechnya is that the 1994 war was completely avoidable. Dudayev was a poor negotiator. But, far more importantly, the administration in Moscow lacked any maturity and historical insight in their bargaining process with the Chechens. To achieve a peaceful settlement with Dudayev required a gesture of historic respect for what would have been the Chechens' first ever

voluntary submission to a Russian state. The failure to meet this challenge was the biggest failure of Yeltsin's new Russia.

The men in the Kremlin also lacked the courage to do something else: to cut off the roots of the outlaw economy that had allowed Chechnya to flourish for three years - and they were in Moscow not Grozny.

The Chechens had always had an outlaw reputation. Even in the twentieth century, administration by Moscow was at best provisional. The American engineer George Burrell saw this in 1929, when the Soviet authorities were attempting forced collectivisation of Chechnya: When we first went to Grozny we locked the doors and windows at night and were a little apprehensive about the fighting going on around us. We would see the soldiers going out fully equipped for a foray into the hills or the steppe, and see them coming back, tired after a seemingly hard campaign, bringing their dead and injured with them, for they by no means escaped unscathed. But the Army is too powerful for scattered bands of tribesmen or groups of villagers to contend with, hence as time passed less fighting occurred in the surrounding district.

The trouble would sometimes start when a Government agent went to a village to collect taxes, grain or cattle. He was occasionally roughly handled, or killed. Then retaliatory measures commenced and mayhap what was left of that village was little enough. Some motor cars in Grozny were punctured with bullet holes. Anybody in a motor car out on the steppe might be mistaken for the tribesmen's persecutors and a shot would come winging through the air. Several chauffeurs were killed while we were in Grozny, hence there were some localities not far from Grozny where foreign experts were forbidden to go.

The tribesmen, say the Chechens, are a proud race, not easy to coerce. Many of them dislike the Government on various counts. The men never did much work, allowing the

women that privilege. Now an effort is being made to make them work. Furthermore, many are Mohammedans, difficult to persuade on religious matters, and do not take kindly to the Communistic form of religion, or to any change in their mode of living. The Government, they find, wants to change everything. They resent changes in their age-old customs – the blood-feud, harems and the sale of brides. The Mohammedans hopelessly see the passing of Islam as a force in Soviet Russia.”[4](#)

There was an old Chechen tradition of the *abrek*, the noble bandit who resists authority. In the modern period he had a less glamorous descendant, the Chechen Mafioso. The generation of Chechens that grew up in exile in Kazakhstan was excluded from positions of authority in the Soviet system and men from this group formed one of the most feared criminal networks in Moscow. Even today, Chechen criminals have powerful influence in the Russian second-hand car business, oil pipelines and even the Moscow city administration. Naturally the existence between 1991 and 1994 of a “free economic zone” in the south outside the Kremlin’s jurisdiction made their lives – and the lives of a lot of corrupt Russian politicians – a great deal easier.

Reading Politkovskaya’s book, we are reminded that war did not close down the shadow economy in Russia and Chechnya. It merely changed the list of products for sale and raised the prices.

The fact that men make money out of war is a truism. In Chechnya this process has gone much further than usual and the pursuit of financial gain has distorted all other goals. Put simply, everything is up for sale. Politkovskaya records that Russian officers had allegedly taken over control of the backyard oil wells that were Chechnya’s most lucrative asset. At the same time they were also alleged to be shipping metal out of the republic.[5](#)

This is only the tip of the iceberg. “I could buy a tank if I wanted to,” a Chechen trader once told me with typical

braggadocio, but he was exaggerating only a little. He had already bought automatic weapons, grenades and ammunition from Russian conscripts - weapons that were bound to be later turned on them or their comrades. Politkovskaya discovered evidence of the same practice in the latest conflict. The first chapter in this book is yet more grotesque, as she relates in effect how unidentified corpses became articles of commerce. Samuel Beckett - or nearer to home Nikolai Gogol - could not have dreamed up anything blacker.

The largest amounts of money to be earned in Chechnya came with the kidnapping business. The taking of hostages is an old practice in the North Caucasus, where many mountain tribesmen were in the habit of raiding Cossack settlements and traders in the plains. War, economic collapse and a plentiful supply of guns caused it to surge up again in Chechnya in 1997.

This time however it took on a very contemporary spin. Gangs armed themselves with four-wheel-drive vehicles and satellite phones. The kidnapers were exceptionally brutal, given to torturing their victims and despatching gruesome videotapes of their acts to the families involved. They used "intermediaries", often top-ranking Russian and local officials, who reputedly won large slices of any financial deal negotiated. And they extracted ransoms that were staggering by regional standards. In a region where salaries were at best a few dollars a month, kidnapers demanded - and received - millions of dollars in ransom fees. After several Russian magnates paid out this kind of money, shares in the kidnapping business rocketed.

At least some of the kidnapers have found favour with the Russian authorities. In an extraordinary twist to this tale, it was reported in the autumn of 2000 that the Russian domestic intelligence service, the FSB, was protecting Arbi Barayev, a ruthless Islamist, implicated in numerous kidnappings and the beheading of four Western telecom

engineers in Chechnya in 1998. *Moscow News* reported that Barayev and two other prominent kidnapers, the Akhmadov brothers, had apparently switched sides and were helping the Russians. The three were living in their own houses and travelling freely across Chechnya in their own vehicles. None of them had been put on Russia's wanted list and the Akhmadovs were said to be in possession of FSB documents. If true, the implications of this are devastating: the Russian security services have been working with the very "bandits" in Chechnya they claimed to have come to disarm.⁶

The complexity and danger of Chechnya make it a difficult place for reporters. In the first war there were compensations. Russia and Chechnya were so anarchic that it was possible to drive into Chechnya with a hired driver and travel freely. The two sides were often extraordinarily close; I once took tea with the rebel Chechen vice-president – a man with an arrest warrant on his head in Moscow – less than a mile from a Russian checkpoint. And ordinary Chechen villagers were unfailingly warm and helpful to Western reporters. Most had no political affiliation, although almost all were full of hatred against the Russian invader. They took us in without a moment's thought, mindless of the risks and the expense of having guests during a war.

The Russian side was always more difficult. The generals never spoke to us, making exceptions only for a handful of faithful Russian correspondents. The information supplied by the Defence Ministry in Moscow was worse than useless. Only the lower ranks, miserable and badly informed, were accessible. They divided into two categories, the conscripts and the contract soldiers, known as *kontraktniki*. In the spring of 1996 I spent an hour with three conscripts in a guardpost in Grozny. They had one bed, a scrappy wood fire, and a cast-iron pan. One of them had scrawled on the wall in wavy chalk: *I want to go home!* I do not know if they ever got home before the Chechen fighters came back to Grozny

three months later; I do know that if they were there they would have either surrendered or been slaughtered. We were more likely to meet the *kontraktniki* at checkpoints, where they were more ruthless at extracting bribes. They were often ex-criminals with tattoos along their arms and bandannas on their heads, creatures more of gangland than a modern European army - and no friends to journalists.

The latest war has posed a far bigger challenge to journalists. The Chechen side has been simply shrouded in darkness, the risk of kidnap having made it too dangerous to report on. The brave reporters that have managed to gain access to the Chechen leadership have done so undercover and have had little contact with the local population.

By contrast, the Russian authorities have waged their information war with much greater professionalism. In Moscow Valery Manilov, deputy head of the General Staff, became the army's omnipresent spokesman, spouting a stream of often contradictory statistics.⁷ On the ground generals, like the much-feared Vladimir Shamanov, turned into media figures. On the strength of his public image, Shamanov was elected governor of Ulyanovsk Region, the birthplace of Lenin, after he was removed from his post.

The government has put tight controls on the media. Russian journalists were routinely summoned for interviews in which they were reminded of their patriotic duty in reporting the "anti-terrorist operation". Strenuous efforts were made to keep foreign correspondents out of the combat zone altogether. Those who went there without the proper accreditation risked being denied visas, while Moscow-based correspondents were called to the Foreign Ministry and reprimanded for their anti-Russian coverage.

The most important difference, however, came from within. This time the military intervention in Chechnya had broad popular support. The main reason for this was a wave of anger and revulsion that followed a string of bomb explosions in Russian cities in September 1999.

The first tremor, on 4 September, came with the slaughter of Russian soldiers and their families in Buinaksk in Daghestan. Shocking as it was, this made little impact outside the North Caucasus. But then the whole country was traumatised. Two apartment blocks, seemingly chosen at random, were blown up in Moscow within a week. More than 200 people were killed in their beds. A fourth and final blast in the southern city of Volgodonsk killed 17 more people.

The explosions were terrifying acts of murder, all the more so because no warnings had been given and no responsibility claimed. The Russian authorities laid the blame on "Chechen terrorists" - only to get a stout denial from Shamil Basayev that he was involved.

The conspiracy theorists have again posed some challenging questions. How come Basayev was accused of randomly killing civilians in Moscow, when he had never targeted civilians before? And wasn't it true that the main beneficiary of the bombings was the new administration of Vladimir Putin? It is indeed strange, to say the least, that the explosions happened out of the blue when Chechnya was at peace - and then stopped again so suddenly. Fighting only broke out in Chechnya after the chain of explosions had ended.

Yet several extremist Islamic militants in the North Caucasus did also have both the means and the motive to stage revenge attacks on Russian cities. The trail here leads to Daghestan, more than to Chechnya. There is a clear circumstantial link between the slaughter at Buinaksk in Daghestan and the two militant Islamic villages in the same region, which were captured with great bloodshed by Russian forces only a few days before. In an interview at the time (in the Czech newspaper *Lidove Noviny*) Basayev acknowledged the connection: "I denounce terrorism, including state terrorism used by the Russian empire," he said. "The latest blast in Moscow is not our work, but the work of the Daghestanis. Russia has been openly terrorising

Daghestan . . . What is the difference between someone letting a bomb go off in the centre of Moscow and injuring 10 to 20 children and the Russians dropping bombs from their aircraft over Karamakhi and killing 10 to 20 children? Where is the difference?" Although denying personal involvement with the bombings, Basayev seemed to suggest he knew something about them.

To the Russian authorities, however, this was not simply a matter of unsubstantiated suspicions. Officials said they had evidence that linked the bombings to "international terrorism" in Chechnya and made the sensational accusation that the bombers are linked to the Afghanistan-based Saudi dissident, Osama Bin Laden, who is wanted by the United States for explosions in American embassies in East Africa.

The trouble with these very serious charges is the meagre scraps of evidence produced in support of them: a small group of foreign captives, a few brazen quotations from the Chechen war-lords and an Islamic website preaching holy war, www.kavkaz.org. Set against this are some good reasons to be sceptical in the absence of more concrete facts. The Islamic website was set up by the hard Islamic wing of the Chechen rebels with the explicit aim of attracting foreign support; their claims about an Islamic holy war can easily be interpreted as an opportunistic recruiting drive. The Russians have a vested interest in naming Osama Bin Laden, as that helps to blunt Washington's criticism of its conduct in Chechnya. Despite its talk of battalions of Islamic volunteers, the Russians have only been able to produce half a dozen foreigners taken captive out of the hundreds of Chechen fighters that have fallen into their hands. Most of these probably belong to the unit that Khattab brought to Chechnya in 1995. Even if more volunteers want to join the rebels - which seems a reasonable proposition - there are big logistical problems

preventing them crossing two other countries, Georgia and Azerbaijan, and the Caucasus mountain range.

The enigma of the bombings has not yet been solved. In September 2000 the Russian authorities said they had arrested 63 people in connection with the attacks. Interestingly they said that most were of North Caucasian origin, but there were very few Chechens among them.

Literature rather than politics provides one possible key for unlocking these horrific events. In *The Devils* Dostoevsky portrays a group of terrorists so infiltrated by the secret police that it does not know which way it is looking. The tradition of the militant-turned-provocateur is a long one in Russia and takes in Father Gapon, the man who led the revolutionary workers on the Bloody Sunday march in St Petersburg in 1905 - and then turned out to have been working for the tsarist secret police. The same kind of suspicion has fallen on the Khachilayev brothers in Daghestan. So it should not be ruled out, bizarre as it sounds, that *both* Islamic militants *and* Russian provocateurs had a role to play in the bomb explosions.

None of this is to deny that Moscow faces a real dilemma in Chechnya - albeit one largely of its own making - and that it faces some very desperate and dangerous enemies, such as Basayev and Khattab. The devil is all in the detail. The campaign that Putin waged - and which helped to sweep him into the Russian presidency - made no fine distinctions between separatists and terrorists, political rebels and bandits. The Russian public was encouraged to identify all Chechens as enemies and an intense wave of xenophobia, cultivated from the top down, swept through the country.

The first victim of this was Chechnya's president, Aslan Maskhadov. Maskhadov had failed to bring order to Chechnya. He had tried to please everybody and lost a lot of credibility in the process. But he remained the legitimate leader of Chechnya, acknowledged as such by the Russian

authorities after an election that was judged free and fair by international observers. In May 1997 President Yeltsin even received him in the Kremlin. To simply ignore him looked wilful and arrogant. But he too was now demonised, his repeated requests for meetings with Russian officials turned down. His envoy in Moscow, who had been attempting to negotiate, was arrested and jailed for allegedly carrying a pistol.

The official media fuelled the hysteria, portraying the conflict in deterministic good-and-evil terms. As Russian troops went into Chechnya, the three main television channels went to reports by young fair-haired boys in their twenties, always in among the Russian armed forces; they talked about the successes of “our boys” against the “terrorists”, while the Chechen rebels on the other side were never killed, always “destroyed”.

On 21 October a volley of missiles butchered dozens of Chechen civilians in Grozny’s Central Market. Russian television broadcast no pictures of the massacre, initially denied that it had happened at all, and then gave several contradictory accounts of how it had been the work of the Chechens themselves.

Few Russian media outlets had the courage to report the story objectively. The palm goes to a handful of Moscow newspapers, in particular the weeklies *Moscow News* and *Obshchaya gazeta* and Politkovskaya’s newspaper, the bi-weekly *Novaya gazeta*. How dangerous it now is to be a free-thinking Russian journalist was illustrated by the death in July 2000 of *Novaya gazeta*’s Igor Domnikov. Two months before, he had been attacked by an unknown assailant with a hammer in the entrance to his apartment block. He never recovered consciousness.

All this puts Politkovskaya’s achievement into context. She is in a very select band. It is an interesting phenomenon that many of the best journalists in Chechnya have been women. One could also mention Anne Nivat, as well as

Carlotta Gall, Petra Prochazkova, Yelena Masyuk, Maria Eismont - as well as the late Nadezhda Chaikova of *Obshchaya gazeta*, who was murdered in eastern Chechnya in the spring of 1996. This may be because to report well on Chechnya has required not only physical bravery but also the kind of long-term commitment that women reporters are often better at: the ability to work for the long term and negotiate with difficult and delicate situations over many months.

As I write, the war is still going on. Russian public support has begun to ebb, but is still broadly behind President Putin. Although the operation has been declared over, the Russian army continues to lose around 30 men a week. On 22 January 2001, President Putin handed overall control of the campaign over to the counter-intelligence service, the FSB. The official spin put on this in Moscow was that the army was no longer needed. It could also be seen as a recognition that the army had failed. With more than 3,000 soldiers and a far greater number of Chechens killed, the main culprits Shamil Basayev and Khattab are still at large. It seems unlikely that the FSB, who lack experience for this kind of operation, will succeed where the army has failed.

Russia has resisted all attempts to bring in international mediators to end the fighting - a role the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe played during the first war. Pointing to NATO's bombing of Serbia six months earlier, Moscow called Western criticism of its own operation "double standards". For its part, the international community has chosen mainly to ignore Chechnya - with the honourable exception of a few human rights groups. Many of the outsiders who have condemned Russia most vocally have often done so with dubious motives; some Islamic countries have perceived the war, mistakenly, as a war against Islam, while several Cold Warriors, mainly in Washington, sympathise with the Chechens in so far as they