

Samashki: Belief and Betrayal in a Chechen Town at War

THOMAS GOLTZ

I just got back from a curious triangular project involving the Russian-American Press and Information Center in Moscow, the Center for War, Peace and the News Media in New York, associated with the journalism school there, and the Institute for War and Peace Reporting in London. I do not know how they all managed to find each other, but they came up with what sounded to me like the most insane project I had ever heard of—finding two young journalists from Ingushetian and Ossetian television, and getting them to work together on a joint venture film about their mutual conflict, which would be then be simultaneously broadcast in both republics. But they had to find somebody foolish enough to come in and be the mediator, and my name came up.

Well, I nearly killed the project because I thought it was just so stupid. But I needed the money, so I took it on and flew off to Moscow to meet the organizers. There I was told that if we could get the two groups even working together, we could call it “training,” and it would be a success. Well, I did not like the sound of that at all, because I like “product.” But things were set, so I flew down to Nazran, met the two teams, and we started working—meaning I started knocking heads, I guess. Because the remarkable thing was that at the end of the day, when we got to St. Petersburg to edit the piece, we actually had come up with a small documentary that was not only acceptable to both parties involved, but acceptable to me, too, in the sense that I want to show it to you all. Sadly, I have not had the voicing done on it yet, so I will have to torture you and read the script as it goes along, but you will get a good idea about what happened.

I am actually quite proud of it. I showed it at the Association for the Study of Nationalities conference at Columbia University last Thursday night [April 24].

Thomas Goltz is one of the best known free-lance journalists now operating in the Caucasus. He worked as a journalist and editor in Turkey and the surrounding region in the 1980s for publications such as the *Washington Post*, *BusinessWeek*, and other newspapers in both the United States and Great Britain. In early 1997, the BBC sent him back to Samashki to do a documentary on the aftermath of the Chechen war. That program forms the basis of this article. He is currently working on a trilogy on the post-Soviet Caucasus, the first book of which is on Azerbaijan.

Everybody seemed to be very pleased with it. I showed it yesterday at New York University, and the response was the same. While I have done my fair share of reporting on war and ethnic conflicts, this is the first time I have worked on a project involving post-conflict resolution, actually getting people to work together. As I say, I went into it with great trepidation and doubt, but it actually ended up being very successful from my point of view.

The primary thing that I want to share with you today is my most recent video on Chechnya, which I put together for the BBC. It concerns my return to the town of Samashki. It might help to provide some background information.

In early 1995, I was subcontracted to ABC to produce a documentary for *Nightline* on the “Chechen spirit.” I traveled alone, as I prefer to do when I work as a TV reporter. It may be more dangerous, but you get a lot more things done. I went in illegally from Azerbaijan, through what I call “the pipeline,” up through Dagestan and then into Chechnya.

By purest chance, I ended up in a town called Samashki. At first, I wondered what the hell I was doing there, because the war was in Grozny and elsewhere, and Samashki seemed rather quiet. Then I took a look around and I said, “This place is Grover’s Corners *à la* Chechnya.” So I stayed and started to work, while things got more and more intense, and the security situation began to seriously deteriorate. After several weeks, I thought I had enough material; so I left and managed to get out of Chechnya, via Dagestan to Azerbaijan, once more via the smugglers’ pipeline, doing lots of fun things like walking through minefields in the middle of the night. Actually, I was caught on the border by the Russian guards. My bribe was not big enough the first time, and they refused to take the second, so I had to find other means across.

When I arrived back in Baku I sent the tapes, but the agency I was working for said they wanted more material. I flew to Moscow to get legal accreditation, and then went back to Samashki, which was by that time surrounded. I managed to get across the lines with my press pass, and then stayed for another week or ten days, during which time the Russian military mounted what the locals call the “first storming” of the town. Once again, I managed to escape, this time in the company of about one hundred Russian Mothers Against the War and Russian Buddhist monks, who had crossed the lines during a lull in the action. These incredibly brave people were altogether the weirdest component of the war in Chechnya for the two years. As result of my departure, I found myself on the Russian side of the lines when the Russians decided to make Samashki into the *My Lai* of the Chechen War.

There were great problems with getting the documentary aired. The television agency [Video News International, now owned by the *New York Times*] that had brought me to ABC basically left me in the lurch. A nasty fight ensued that had nothing to do with the war, or even television journalism, that included their making posters of me that described me as one “Thomas Stalinsky Goltzkoi, the chief Russian agent of propaganda in the Chechen War.” Finally, Danny Schechter of the “Rights and Wrongs: Human Rights Television,” which is tied in with Charlene Hunter Gault and PBS, picked up the material, did a re-edit and broadcast

it. I do not think it was ever broadcast in the Boston area, because it was one of these programs that appeared in New York City at 11 o'clock on Thursday night and 7 o'clock in the morning in Chicago. I saw the thing in Spanish in Seattle at noon on Saturday. It remained pretty obscure.

Despite that, it was nominated for the Rory Peck Award in London—Rory Peck being an ace cameraman who worked the lands of the former Soviet Union, plus Afghanistan, for years before being killed in front of Ostankino in Moscow, during the great shoot-out in 1993. I was first put on the candidates list, then the long list, then the short list, and finally announced as a finalist for the 1996 award.

Although I did not win, the BBC thought I should have, and rather than just saying, “better luck next time,” they put their money where their mouth was and said, “here’s another camera, here’s a bunch of money, here’s institutional support—now go back to this place that you have deemed so important and find out who is alive, who is dead, and what the aftermath is all about.” I think that in terms of journalism as a whole, and specifically television journalism, this was a very important thing to do, because so often reporters go in and do what we in the trade call “wham, bam—thank you ma’am” reporting. You get there, you shoot, you get out and report, possibly distorting everything—and you never go back to take responsibility for your actions. This is a major component of the program I am about to show you. On that note, here is “Return to Samashki.”

[Editor’s note: The following text is the author’s narrative accompanying the showing of his two films, which made up the main part of the presentation before a live audience on 30 April 1997.]

First Video Presentation: “Return to Samashki”

Samashki. The word in Chechen means “the place of deer.” To me, it meant the horror of war. The place is indelibly carved on my memory. I was inside a killing zone—and have never been so frightened in my life. I was there as the farm town was turned into the symbol of Russian brutality, when Moscow tried to reassert what it called “constitutional order.” I often wondered if I’d get out alive. . . .

The waiting is over. . . . We are taking hits here and there, by the railway station and the road. Let us see if the defenders can hold this town and if I can get my ass out at the end of it. . . . I’d like to remind anyone watching this that Samashki is a surrounded town.

I managed to escape before the final assault, and found myself on the Russian side of the lines. There I was perfectly and horribly positioned to see people I had known stumble out of their burning town.

Bodies, bodies, everywhere! Nearly 200 people were killed. It was the worst massacre of the Chechen war. I was haunted by the experience and vowed to return to find who among my many friends were alive or dead. In going back, I

had to steel myself to face the physical and psychological scars carved by the knife of war. The aftermath is often more cruel than the moment.

It had been almost two years since I had been there. The Russian soldiers may have gone, but their signature of destruction is everywhere to be seen. Samashki was used as a test-firing range for artillery shells and vacuum bombs. It is a miracle that anyone survived. I went to the graveyard to look for fallen friends. I was shocked to see how many fighters had died, their graves marked by flagpoles, lest future generations forget their sacrifice. The graves were maintained with care.

That first night back, I attended a *Zikr*, or ritual dance of remembrance for the dead. This was the first time I had seen the village elders and youth perform it together. During the war, the elders tried to surrender Samashki—while the youth wanted to fight on.

Now the war is over—and with no outside aid or international assistance, unity is required to rebuild. Shattered homes have become quarries, and bricks salvaged from the rubble—the building blocks of the future.

Weirdly, many people were surprised to see me alive. Everyone was saying, “You had been shot and killed—that means you will live a long life! We thought we had lost you, that you were dead.”

Sometimes, it was almost as if I were a prodigal son returned. I found children back in school, using old Russian textbooks. Strangely, they were using Soviet textbooks. The children had all been through hell, judging by their art work.

There were other changes, too. This woman has broken the new law that prohibits trafficking alcohol. Theoretically, she could have been flogged—but instead only lost some 50 bottles.

Islam may have come to Samashki, but the town is not completely dry. At a wedding reception that same evening, vodka flowed freely. I could scarcely believe my eyes and ears. Old friends coming out of the woodwork to say hello. People dancing, people smiling and laughing! Samashki, the town synonymous with destruction and sorrow, seemed to have come back to life! The only thing to do was join in and celebrate.

But something nagged at me. I still had not learned of the fate of the Samashki commander, Hussein. He had sheltered me during the darkest days of the siege, and even made my escape possible. You might say I owe him my life.

I went to his house and found his father and brother hard at work, loading potatoes. To my delight and relief, they told me Hussein had survived the assault, but was at present out of town. Last time I was here I helped them push a rocket warhead up a truck, so I may as well help load the potatoes now!

But my mood changed abruptly when they told me Hussein would not, could not return. The village elders had branded him a traitor, and said he had been working for the Russians all along. The elders came and said that Hussein had brought war to Samashki. They told him he had to leave.

“He did not want to. God, he did not want to go. But they made him. How can my older brother be a traitor? How could he sell out his own people?”

I was staggered—the man I had seen mount devastating raid on Russian armor accused of collaboration? I had to learn the truth.

When Hussein left Chechnya, he traveled 3,000 miles east to the village of Nadezhdovka in Kazakhstan. I went there to find him. Ironically, this area is where Stalin had banished the Chechens in 1944, unjustly accusing them of collaboration with the Nazi enemy.

I found Hussein on a broken-down collective farm. “This used to be a fine place, Thomas, a really nice place . . . [disembodied voice] . . . fantastic place.” Hussein knew about the charge of collaboration. He dismissed it as disinformation spread by the elders. He said they were cowards, who forced him to abandon the people he had vowed to defend. But he saved his real rage for the Russians. Under failing lights, he told me how drunken soldiers had attacked Samashki to the music of Shostakovich. “Over the screaming there was that music—and with that music, they killed a village. It was the first time I saw a village killed. Not individual people, Thomas, but a village. . . .”

“When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the West said the cold war was over. But for many people in the USSR, the ‘hot war’ had just begun.”

Hussein is now plotting his revenge—against the Russians who murdered his people to music, and the Chechens who tarnished his name. He showed me his arsenal, including a heavy machine gun customized for mobile use. His son Ruslan has become an expert marksman with the weapon—and ready to avenge his father’s honor.

“We have made our preparations for our return there . . . it is not over. It is merely a little pause in the action.” Hussein is going back to Samashki—and he is not alone. During our last evening, I was reacquainted with a number of men I had met before—hard-core veterans of the Samashki front. All of whom had been branded with the same charge of collaboration with the enemy.

It was all too depressing. Who was the betrayed and who the betrayer? Hussein’s rejection by his own people had turned into a bitter rage. The invisible scars on his soul were still bleeding.

As I left him, I had to wonder and worry about the process of reconciliation and reconstruction in Samashki, and indeed in Chechnya as a whole. The war in Chechnya is not over. Perhaps it has just begun.

Second Video Presentation: “Check Points of the Mind”

Borders and check points. . . .

With burned and shattered buildings, they have become the icons of ethnic strife in the post-Soviet Caucasus. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the West said the cold war was over. But for many people in the USSR, the “hot war” had just begun. The smoldering embers of ethnic hatred, often stoked by Moscow, soon erupted into flame. The world knows about the wars over Karabakh in Azerbaijan, Abkhazia in Georgia, and of course the carnage in Chechnya. But few know about the short, brutal war that erupted between the Ingushetians and Osse-

tians in 1992. The facts about who started shooting first remain a question of bitter dispute. When the smoke cleared, hundreds had been killed and thousands driven from their homes. Many on both sides say the mainly Muslim Ingush and nominally Christian Ossetians are eternal enemies. Today, two small peoples are divided along ethnic lines.

To try and break through the cycle of mutual distrust, the Russian-American Press and Information Center and the Institute of War and Peace Reporting joined together to attempt what many said was impossible: to make a joint television program on the conflict, using Ingushetians and Ossetian reporters and cameramen. The project editor was American journalist Thomas Goltz, who had final veto power over content. Our Ingush reporter was Yaqub Mankiev, a young reporter from Nazran. He was joined by his Ossetian colleague, Elbrus Dzabeyev, to explore cultural and political subjects in the republics that were normally taboo. Of fundamental importance was the agreement of the two television teams to broadcast the resulting documentary simultaneously. Border crossings might remain on the ground, but the idea was to start lifting the check points of the mind.

Our first stop was Chermen, in the Prigorodny district in Ossetia, scene of the worst fighting in 1992. Chermen still appears to be a ghost town. It was here that the events of the Ossetian-Ingush conflict erupted in 1992. But time heals all wounds and today the village is rising from the ashes. People are returning to their lives before the conflict. To our surprise, we discovered that not all the Ingushetians had left Chermen—or that many had chosen to come back. Down a side street, we found a school where young Ingushetian children were on recess break. In stark contrast to the bleak, burnt-out scene observed from the main street, here there was activity and life.

We asked the Ossetian authorities to allow us to interview an Ingushetian family and were directed to the house of Leila Mirjoieva. We worried that due to the need for clearance by the authorities, Mrs. Mirjoieva would be less than frank about her views on the current situation. But it became evident that Mrs. Mirjoieva had plenty to say.

JOURNALIST: Were you afraid to return?

LEILA: Of course we were afraid . . . to tell you the truth we would lie awake at night, and think . . .

JOURNALIST: Can you remember the day you returned?

LEILA: Of course I can.

JOURNALIST: Did you meet with your Ossetian neighbors?

LEILA: Of course I spoke with them—they were my neighbors.

JOURNALIST: How did they accept you?

LEILA: We were well received, and our fears about returning diminished. We feel safe, or pretty safe.

JOURNALIST: Have your relations with your neighbors changed?

LEILA: Things are pretty much as they were when we left. Maybe that's because everyone wants to forget about the bad times and focus on the future. We need to make peace.

Our joint Inguish/Ossetian team then paid a visit to Leila's Ossetian neighbor, Bella Kundukhova. She described the fear that had gripped the Ossetian community then and the fear that continues to haunt it today.

BELLA: To be honest, no one here is confident enough to say that all of this madness has come to an end.

JOURNALIST: Are there fears that all of this might start all over again?

BELLA: Where is the guarantee that it is not going to happen again? Neither side can say so. Still, what is done is done. . . . But I don't want to pass this conflict down to our children. I hope that the next generation can live together normally.

Inguish and Ossetian housewives, living side by side in Chermen? It was not what we expected. But it was far too early to say that peace and mutual understanding had arrived. Though you cannot find the border on any map, Cherman is divided into two sections: Ossetian and Ingushetian. Only time can guide the villagers across it. Someday, it may fade away. . . .

The next venue was Nazran, capital of the tiny Republic of Ingushetia, the smallest of the twenty-one republics that make up the Russian Federation. Almost a fifth of its three thousand citizens are refugees from Ossetia. Some blame the previous government for the conflict, others blame Moscow. All want peace. An anonymous man we encountered on the main square explained why the Ingushetians want peace: "We Ingushetians know perfectly well that we must live in peace with our neighbors. As small nation that lost half its population in the deportations in 1944, we are well aware of the perils of ethnic conflict."

Meet Akhmad Pliev. Indeed, it is impossible to understand the Ingushetians without regard for so-called *vysyl* (or deportations of 1944). Accusing both Inguishetians and their Chechen cousins of collaboration with the Nazi army, Stalin sent them all to the wastelands of Central Asia. Half died on route. Akhmad Pliev, who is 80 years old, remembers the years of exile and the return in 1957. He invited us into his house to explain: "I lived in Kyrghyzia . . . I came there from Northern Kazakhstan. . . ."

Interestingly, his family name—Pliev—is also shared by many Ossetians. But he has lost all contact with his Ossetian relatives due to the present conflict. He agreed to an interview:

"This conflict has so torn us apart; we are now completely disconnected. I am eighty years old and I want to visit my relatives before I die. But that seems impossible. Why? Divisions, divisions . . . In fact, we could have formed one republic—yes—one Ossetian-Ingushetian republic. But no. The governments inspired hatred in the Ossetians against the Ingushetians and vice versa. So we started hating each other, while in essence we are related to each other. Perhaps this is the naive opinion of an old man, but it is what I think. . . ."

We told him that we would try and convey his message to the Ossetian Plievs, if we could find any.

Ingushetia may be beset by an influx of refugees from Ossetia as well as Chechnya, but it is clear from the red brick houses going up that the people have faith in the future. The government has set out an ambitious agenda, including the construction of a new capital city, called Magaz. The unusual sight of road

repair is a direct result of Moscow's determination to keep Ingushetia happily within the federation—to prevent the Ingushetians from following their Chechen kin into secession.

By coincidence, our visit coincided with the last days of the Muslim month of *Haji*. Judging by the number of sheep along the roads, a record number of Ingushetians intended to comply with the ritual sacrifice. We encountered a man who said that the Ossetians in our team could not understand Islam because there were “no Muslims” in Ossetia—a statement hotly contested by our Ossetia reporter. We left the slightly unsavory incident behind and continued our journey of exploring contradictions.

A far better reception was afforded our group by Mr. Ali Tangiev. Describing himself as a small businessman, Ali said he wanted to make money and do good works at the same time. He said he was seeking an Ossetian business partner with the aim of exporting to Georgia and beyond—even to America. His factory was a wild labyrinth of interests and activities. In one room he manufactures stools and chairs. In another, men were making windows and doors. In still other rooms, he was making bread and even *kolbasa* sausage. Said Ali, “I am ready to do anything, no matter how small, that will contribute to the friendship of our two peoples. There is nothing to be gained by conflict; let there be peace; let there be mutual understanding; we do not need this conflict.”

Our next stop was the Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz. The name means “power in the Caucasus,” and it has been the major center of Russian power projection for over 200 years. It is also one of the last places where statues of Lenin still stand. The contrast with Nazran, in Ingushetia, was dramatic, both in terms of architecture and the sort of people one meets on the street. In addition to the Ossetians, the new Republic of Ossetia/Alanya is home to Armenians, Greeks, Russians and Balkarians. As a people, the Ossetians have traditionally allied themselves with Moscow. But nearly everyone we met said that the time had come for peace between Ossetia and Ingushetia, and for the two republics to engage in discussion about the future, not the past. As Professor Anzour Khachirov says, “Peace must come from the Ossetians and Ingushetians themselves, it cannot be imposed from Moscow. . . . The two people must solve this problem themselves. . . .”

We managed to track down a household where two people have established peace of a different kind. Ruslan and Tamara Tolparobi describe themselves as a sort of Romeo and Juliet. He is Ossetian and she is Ingushetian.

“I saw her at the street car stop, and asked to walk her home. . . . It was fate, love at first sight. I told my father that I wanted to marry her, and he told me that it was my decision. But my mother . . . she said I had to chose a wife from among my own ethnic group.”

Tamara puts in, “They said an Ingush bride, really! . . .”

But love conquered all. . . .

We had not forgotten our pledge to Akhmad Pliev in Ingushetia to find one of his distant Ossetian kin in Vladikavkaz. Finally, we discovered the poet and intellectual Grigori Pliev, who agreed to talk about the past, the future—and the larger family Pliev:

“Whoever came up with the idea of promoting peace between our two nations through exploring the connections between the family Pliev in Ossetia and Ingushetia is a true man, a humanist. Such an effort is long over due. Let the family Pliev, with roots in both Ingushetia and Ossetia, be a mirror to us all. I am for such practices as a means of promoting peace and understanding between our two nations. We are Ossetians and Ingushetians by nationality, but we are both Plievs. . . .”

On the last day of our project, we discovered another missing link between the two peoples—Muslim Ossetians. Today is the Muslim feast of the sacrifice, or *Kurban Bayram*. The location of the celebration is the main mosque in Vladikavkaz. Built in 1908, it was closed until last year, but it is now again open for prayers. Today North Ossetian Muslims greet each other with the words *Salaam Aleykum*, which means “peace upon you.” We asked some of the Ossetian Muslims what they thought of the conflict that had torn them apart from their coreligionists in Ingushetia:

WOMAN: Dividing humankind into nationalities only leads to confrontations, which is anathema to Islam.

A YOUNG MAN: God helps us achieve things outside of our own power. Solving the national conflict between the Ossetian and Ingush is an example of this. If we have faith in him, we can achieve a peaceful solution. And, God willing, the children of both the Ingush nation and the Ossetian nation will never experience such a conflict again.

War is easy to make; peace is far more difficult to sustain. As we left the fertile lands of the North Caucasus, we hoped that our small, joint project had met its main objective—breaking down at least a few check points of the mind.

. . . And maybe even sowing a few seeds of peace.