

# Eyewitness Accounts from Chechnya

YEVGENIA ALBATS

For one who was in Grozny and all around the warring Chechnya, certain things are difficult to forget. It is difficult to forget the seven-year-old boy whose legs had been cut off by a shell splinter. Along with his mother and other civilians, he had been standing in line to get water from a water tank, since there was no running water in Grozny. The shell hit the queue directly; nine civilians were wounded, this boy among them, and five were killed.

It is difficult to forget the blind tenants who lived under constant bombardment in an apartment building across from the Blind People's Society on Eighth of March Street in Grozny; there was no water, no electricity, and almost no food or heat in the apartments. Most of the time the blind tenants were living under their beds. They kept asking me when I interviewed them: "Why did the authorities never tell us that they were going to bomb the city?" "Why did Yeltsin lie to us, saying that there would be no bombardment of the city?" "Why did nobody take us out of here?"

It is impossible to forget the story of Azamat Paragulgov, the one who managed to escape from the "filtration point" in Modzok, North Ossetia, near Russian military headquarters. Such filtration points were established in Chechnya and neighboring North Ossetia to check whether males captured in Grozny and other Chechen towns and villages were soldiers or civilians. According to Paragulgov, some of the prisoners of war were taken to Modzok on "Urals" military trucks. Russian soldiers forced the people to lay down on the floor of the truck bed and then forced others to lay on top of them, layer upon layer, so that by the time they reached the destination those at the bottom had suffocated. Paragulgov himself saw five dead people thrown out of the truck. According to people who went through other filtration points or camps, all of the prisoners were subjected to torture. The fingers of one from the village of Shali were cut off with a bayonet. Another person had his kidneys ruptured and fingers smashed.

Finally, it is impossible to forget the city of Grozny. There is no such city any more. There is not a single house that has not been destroyed in one way or another by the war. "It looks like Stalingrad," say veterans who remember World War II. All types of ammunition and ordnance were used in the city without any consideration for the thousands and thousands of civilians—mostly women, children, and the elderly—hiding in apartments and basements. According to non-government sources, 25,000 civilians were killed in Grozny, 5,000 of them children.

## The People Who Resisted

Now, who are the people who took up arms against Russian troops in Chechnya? Who are those called "Dudayev's bandits" by officials in

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Moscow? I met a lot of them on the roads in Chechnya. They are not bandits; they are ordinary citizens who have stood up for their land, their houses, their families. I will quote several of them, using only their first names to protect their identities in case they are still alive.

I met Magomed, age 44, in the village of Samashky that was turned into a bloodbath by Russian troops. Magomed was a construction worker in Russia before the war and returned to Chechnya with his family after the war had broken out. Magomed sold a cow and bought a submachine gun. He told me, "I do not care about Dudayev. What I stand up for is my family."

In Grozny I saw a woman sniper, a Chechen girl about twenty years old, dressed in a red and black polka dot skirt and military shirt. She had a Kalashnikov automatic rifle in her hands. She joined a guerrilla unit after a shell hit her house and killed her entire family: her mother, father, sisters, and little brother.

In a suburb of Grozny I met with Kazbek, age 38, who was president of a production firm before the war. Kazbek commanded his small detachment after the village where he had brought his family was bombed. "I myself carried a woman whose legs had been torn off, but she had a baby to take care of," he told me. "Can I afford not to fight after this?" He assured me, "There is not a single bandit in my detachment—I swear by my children."

Thus, Russian authorities—not Russia as a country, not Russians as a people, but Russian authorities—are conducting a war against the Chechen people, not against "bandits." They are implementing what they call "constitutional order" in the most brutal, bloody, and violent manner. They are trying to impose what they understand as "rule of law" by conducting a war of extermination, through pure punitive actions against the Chechen people.

### **What Motivated the Chechnya War?**

Publicly stated causes of the war in Chechnya are numerous. Some say that Yeltsin wanted to stir patriotic sentiments among Russians and so raise his ratings, a gambit that backfired. Others say that federal authorities wanted to send a message to other territories of the Russian Federation that pretensions to statehood as Chechnya had attempted would not be tolerated. Still others point to corruption in Russia's power structures, including the military, and the fight over Chechen oil between *mafia* clans both in Chechnya and in Moscow. The question of Chechnya's oil was given great attention in the Western media. However, a close look at the problem suggests that the case may be overblown.

Chechnya's proven oil reserves of 372 million to 438 million barrels is comparable to reserves owned by a single Russian oil company, and in recent years the region's production of crude oil fell drastically; it was expected to be less than 1 percent of the total forecast production for Russia in 1995. A pipeline passing through Chechnya to connect Russian oil-producing areas with a refining center in Baku, Azerbaijan, was also not the cause of the war. Well-informed sources in two of Russia's largest integrated oil companies say that already there has been a proposal to build a pipeline that would bypass Chechnya and cross the Russian Stavropol region to the north. In the words of one of the sources, "The construction of the new pipeline would cost Russia much less than the war in Chechnya."

In sum, the real cause of the war in Chechnya is neither in Grozny nor in the entire Caucasian region; it is in Moscow. The war pushed aside a corner of the curtain that obscured the real power struggle for control of Russia. Unfortunately, it is not liberal, but the most hard-line forces—those from the military-industrial complex and the former KGB—who celebrate the victory in that power struggle now. One of Yeltsin's top advisers, interviewed on conditions of anonymity, was asked, Who is more powerful in Russia now, the civilian or military authorities? "It goes without saying: military," he answered. Thus, the true goal of the war in Chechnya was to send a clear-cut message to the entire Russian population: "The time is up for talking about democracy in Russia; now it is time to introduce order to the country and we will do it whatever the cost."

The blood bath in Chechnya, violations of human rights, and mass casualties among the civilian population do not seem to bother too much the leaders of Western democracies. After all, why become bothered if Yeltsin says—while Russian troops keep killing people in Chechnya—that he is not going to stop the reforms? Why care, if Russian missiles are not targeted at the United States right now? Why not give Russia some \$6 billion in International Monetary Fund loans? The Russian leaders will build new tanks, new rockets, and new shells to replace those lost in Chechnya, and will keep establishing "constitutional order" and "democracy" as they understand it, with the help of those tanks.

Sometimes, it seems that all Western leaders care about is the state of Yeltsin's health. Amazingly enough, the West keeps making the same mistakes year after year. It keeps looking at the events in Russia through the prism of personalities: "Good Gorbachev, bad Gorbachev," "Courageous Yeltsin (even if not as charismatic as Gorbachev), less admirable Yeltsin, but still good." While the West has focused on personalities, viewing Yeltsin as a champion of democracy and free markets who must be supported at all costs, the power structures and political institutions of the former Soviet Union have regrouped and are exercising their influence over the sick president. Who is running Russia now? Hannah Arendt, the famous American political philosopher, used to say that nothing is more dangerous for a country than when it starts to be run by "nobody," by unseen faces, unidentified persons who represent nobody and are under nobody's control. At present, Russia is run by such a "nobody" from the old Soviet political institutions who is ready to put the country over the edge, even though not necessarily under the red banner. As a group of Russian scientists claims in an open letter, "The Chechen crisis is not accidental. It reveals the criminal essence of the political regime that is being born in Russia. The most dangerous aspect of the present situation is the absence of the clear appreciation of this fact by the West."

The roots of the Chechen crisis go all the way back to September and October 1993 when Yeltsin, dismissed by the Russian parliament, violated the law and the Constitution and ended up with a mini-civil war in Moscow. It was a turning point at which Russian authorities first chose to resolve a political crisis with tanks and bloodshed, when they reestablished the Soviet Union's ill idea of the priority of force over law, and ruined any hopes that Russia could be run by the rule of law. They crossed the line. The West sent them this message: they will be excused for such conduct as long as they keep economic reforms going. But that view seems to be both ill-conceived

and shortsighted. History teaches us that a free market economy is by no means a guarantee for democracy. It may just as easily lead to the establishment of the harshest of regimes.

### **Human Rights Are Not an Internal Affair**

I am afraid that President Clinton's visit to Moscow to participate in the Victory Day fiftieth anniversary celebration on 9 May will be seen by many in Russia as another message of the kind mentioned above. Yes, the decision to go to Moscow has an excuse. Victory Day in Russia is a day of mourning for 29 million Soviet people killed during World War II. Being the daughter of those who fought the very war with fascism, I appreciate Mr. Clinton's willingness to show his respect to those who never got to see Victory Day. However, I do think that the leaders of Western democracies in general, and Washington in particular, should make it clear that their respect to those killed fifty years ago and to Russia as a country, which carried out the heaviest burden of the war with fascism, in no way means that Western democracies are ready to justify the current regime that is so quick to go ahead with mass human rights violations and killings in Chechnya. I do understand that Washington is trying to bargain with Moscow over the nuclear deal between Russia and Iran. Unfortunately, that bargaining is short sighted also. Those in Moscow ready to sign the agreement with Iran are the same people, the same political forces, that have involved Russia in the bloody war on its own territory. The West should understand that the only way to stop those political forces in Russia that are ready to push the country over the edge, is to exert international pressure on Russian authorities, to make it clear that human rights violations are not an internal Russian affair.