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Angels thin on the Grozny ground

Maria Tumarkin


IS CHECHNYA RUSSIA’S IRAQ? After all, here is another war with no end that had radically destabilised its region, another "final solution" for the Islam terrorists that had led to the irreversible explosion in their numbers coupled with the triumphant rise of Wahhabism.

Lawlessness, urban guerilla warfare, the complete dissolution of civic society - sound familiar? And let's not forget the frequent surges of testosterone to the presidential brains. Bush's "we will smoke them out of their holes" echoed by Putin's "if we catch them in the toilet, we will rub them out in the outhouse".

From the end of 1994, when Russian troops first entered the breakaway region on then President Yeltsin's orders, through the second Chechen War started by Putin in 1999, to the present Russian-sponsored "chechenisation" of the conflict, in which Chechens have been turned against each other, this has been the dirtiest yet imaginable.

Putin, of course, had repeatedly and successfully traded on the US-led "war on terror" to legitimate his actions in the region. And for Bush's farcical weapons of mass destruction and the embarrassingly thin links between Saddam and September 11, the former Russian president had more heavy-hitting facts at his disposal - the Nord-Ost hostage crisis, the Beslan school and, for a while, Moscow being considered the most dangerous European capital, with the multiple and frequent terrorist explosions and suicide bombings in high-rise apartment blocks, on subway trains and in the middle of rock concerts.

And while Russian secret services have been subsequently implicated in much of what had been so readily attributed to the Chechen terrorists, there is no doubt that the terror is real.

Norwegian journalist Asne Seierstad, who is best known for The Bookseller of Kabul, first saw images of Chechnya on Russian television in January of 1995. She was in her early 20s and in Moscow on her first assignment as a freelance journalist. Her Russian was good, but not good enough to be able to spell Chechnya. Her editor wanted stories about the conflict, so against everyone's advice, Seierstad flew into Chechnya on a military plane, which was carrying, as lambs to slaughter, the fresh-faced 18-year-old Russian conscripts.

Seierstad's first time in Grozny was a total bluff. She did not know a soul in the whole of Chechnya and had no idea where the battle lines were, how to
get around or what lay outside Grozny. Later she would go to Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq. But Chechnya came first.

Another war correspondent, Janine di Giovanni, once evoked Martha Gellhorn’s words that it was only possible to love one war. Gellhorn was speaking about the Spanish Civil War. Di Giovanni - about Bosnia. For Seierstad, that war was Chechnya.

She returned there a decade later in 2006 under very different circumstances.

This time there was no military airplane to take Seierstad to Grozny. The perpetually escalating violence in the region coupled with the virtual media embargo meant that she had to cross the border with Ingushetia in a long skirt with a scarf on her head, her eyebrows dyed black, glistening lipstick on her lips - just another woman from the north Caucasus trying to go home.

Both her experiences in Chechnya are chronicled in The Angel of Grozny. The angel is a Chechen woman called Hadijat who takes in homeless, abused, hungry and damaged kids of Grozny, gives them a home and a solid, loving, forgiving person to call "Mama". Seierstad stays with Hadijat and befriends her kids. She tells their stories with great care and affection, yet there is much more to these stories than her book reveals.

Missing from it is the kind of forensic analysis and a sense of weary, but never cynical, depth that had characterised much of the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya’s writing on the subject until she was gunned down in her Moscow apartment building in October, 2006.

Politkovskaya, too, wrote a lot about the children of Chechnya. Yet she knew better than to simply romanticise them. Chechen kids and teenagers, she observed, whose entire lives were spent in the atmosphere of escalating lawlessness and violence, were far more intolerant and bloodthirsty than many of their parents. "The youngest Chechen generation," she wrote, "is the most difficult there ever was." Angels had all but fled Grozny. The question was how not to destroy all that that has remained human there.

In the end, Chechnya is different from Iraq because of the long and pained history of its relationship first with tsarist Russia, then the Soviet Union and finally the Russian Federation.

While Seierstad does provide both the recent and the long-term historical context for the conflict, including the potent trauma created by the deportation of the entire Chechen people by Stalin in 1944, her handling of history is at times crude and riddled with cliche. Seierstad is at pains to capture the present and she is to be admired for her sheer guts and the size of her heart, yet The Angel of Grozny does not do full justice either to the Chechen past or to its future.

Maria Tumarkin’s most recent book, Courage, is published by Melbourne University Press.