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The Fangs Behind the Mask: Everyday Life in Wartime Chechnya

Introduction – Kevin McSorley

This chapter explores experiences of everyday life in wartime Chechnya¹, drawing particularly upon the reportage of the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya², collected in the volumes *A Dirty War* (2001) (DW) and *A Small Corner of Hell* (2003) (SCH), and the memoirs of the Russian soldier Arkady Babchenko³, published as *One Soldier's War in Chechnya* (2007) (OSW). The paper draws upon such a corpus in order to highlight some of the mundane details of how the war was experienced, felt and negotiated at an individual and interactional level by various participants that were affected by it. The goal here is not to try and shed further light upon what might be considered as the broad geopolitical, historical and structural causes of the conflict, or the strategic rationales of the various warring parties, except in so much as theories about what is happening and why, and an associated discourse of incomprehension and rumour, are fundamental features of the lifeworld and personal politics of all those caught up in the war.

The chapter argues that wartime Chechnya was an environment in which an over-riding sense of uncertainty dominated everyday life for both civilians and soldiers. I detail a widespread sense of confusion over the ever-changing 'rules of the game' of wartime living. The chapter aims to illuminate not just the central instability and ontological insecurity of life in Chechnya during wartime, but also how this chaotic situation was experienced and negotiated at the everyday level of the personal politics of survival and coping. I argue that a complex and shifting range of precarious interactions took place, necessitating ambiguous allegiances and indeterminate performances of identity. Furthermore, war experience included fluid negotiation of whatever agentic possibilities emerged fleetingly and unexpectedly from within the chaos. Attempts were made to hold onto a sense of humanity and civility in the midst of the war through fragile performances of love and precarious recitals of ethical codes of interaction. Finally, the chapter explores some of the emotional consequences of the tightly circumscribed yet fundamentally uncertain experiential trajectories that were rendered by and through the war. I argue that feelings of cynicism and loneliness were dominant emotional aftermaths for those who lived through the war.

As Christine Sylvester (2011: 110) notes, at the heart of war there is often a radical mismatch we are only beginning to understand, between people's actual embodied experiences of conflict and institutional myths of identity, masculinity and glory in war as well as the sophisticated arguments Western theorists have constructed about war's prosecution. She argues that a crucial task is to investigate in much more detail the myriad and often contradictory ways in which people in multiple positions experience and narrate the interruptions and changes to their lives before, during and after experiencing war. It is through analytic attention to such lives that we may better come "to know war as a comprehensive whole that has a teeming life alongside and sometimes in defiance of what statesmen, militaries, strategists and IR specialists say about it" (Sylvester 2012: 503). The analysis in this chapter is situated within that broad analytic agenda. It is also informed by the sociologist Erving Goffman's analysis of the 'interaction order' and the constitution of self-identity.

For Goffman (1959: 173), interaction is a domain of face-to-face social action characterized by its own forms of delicate yet fundamental “procedural order” or “working consensus.” Throughout his work, Goffman mobilizes various metaphors of ritual, game, and, most significantly, drama as analytic scaffolds to try and illuminate aspects of everyday social interaction. In perhaps his most renowned work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), he portrays the individual as a dramaturgically skilled interactant who is sensitive to the audience and to other local specificities, engages in accomplished ‘impression management,’ and uses the dramaturgical arts of projection, consistency and circumspection to deliver a successful performance. Performance is thus understood by Goffman (1959: 15) as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.”

Goffman’s use of terms such as impression management and influence in describing everyday interaction is not meant to imply that such conduct is somehow insincere. Indeed, interaction rarely follows any prepared script but rather derives from the skilled and shared command of an idiom that is exercised with minimal forethought. While consciousness of the performative quality of interaction may arise in the course of some social interaction, this is certainly not always the case (Smith 2006). Furthermore, self-presentation has a specifically moral character in that there is typically a shared expectation that one will be treated in a particular way if presenting in a certain manner. Indeed, the quotidian organization of the interaction order continually renews a sacred sense of belonging to the social, and the recognition of individual personhood through eye contact, turn taking, nodding and so on. Morality for Goffman is thus fundamentally a product of the local social situation, an interactional rather than personal construct that is renewed in every encounter.

Relatedly for Goffman, any sense of identity is fundamentally a collaborative and local achievement, a ‘dramatic effect’ attributed only in performative interaction with a particular audience, and thus always an ongoing and potentially precarious accomplishment. Self-identity is understood in terms of a multiplicity of situated roles, a “dance of identification .. to accommodate the changes in footing and multiple voices that make up the shifting alignments that occur as individuals respond to local circumstances [where] self is nothing more than the capacity to manage these alignments” (Smith 2006: 102). For Goffman there is no additional sense in which a ‘true self’ resides beyond or hides behind the repertoire of constantly shifting personae (a term that Goffman notes originally referred to the masks worn in Greek tragedies) that are necessarily played out in social interaction. Thus Goffman endorses Robert Park’s assertion that:

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role .. it is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves .. In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self. (Park 1950, cited in Goffman 1959: 30)

Goffman's work thus complicates any distinctions between semblance and substance (Lawler 2014), surface and depth, being and acting, and sensitizes us to the ways in which human recognition, morality and identity is continually constituted in social interaction. As Lawler notes, for Goffman there is ultimately no way to be other than to act, we exist only through "masquerading as ourselves" (2014: 116). Doniger (2005: 203) similarly argues that, "we assume that masquerades lie, and often they do, at least on the surface. But often masquerades tell a deeper truth, that masquerading as ourselves reaffirms an enduring self (or network of selves) inside us." For Goffman, this is not to be understood as a condition of manipulation, cynicism, or false consciousness. Rather, the smooth dance of everyday interactional masquerading is the very stuff of civility and sociality, through which we come to know others and ourselves.

The Rules of the Game

Derluguian (2003: 8) argues that the wars in Chechnya were overdetermined, with different scholars and commentators emphasizing various different combinations of sufficient causes ranging from "historical legacies, imperial geopolitics, political instability, oil, Islam, organized crime, and now, atop of all, al Qaeda."⁴ Whatever the complex genealogy of the causes of the conflicts, chaotic uncertainty and seemingly arbitrary predation dominated the experiential lifeworlds of many of those caught up in them. The wars were characterised by Russian Federation forces engaging in the massive artillery bombardment of cities, towns and villages followed by periods of counter-insurgency warfare "in which virtually the entire civilian population of Chechnya came to be seen as the enemy" (Lapidus 1999: 64). Once Federal forces had assumed control of an area, they commonly deployed 'special operations', colloquially known as *zachistka*, whose official aim was "to check people's residence permits and identify participants of illegal armed formations" (Memorial 2007), but which in practice involved widespread war crimes against civilians including massacres, rape, torture and looting (Bellamy 2012). Indeed, Evangelista argues that, "from the first days of the first invasion, the Russian armed forces .. violated the laws of war on a vast scale" (2002: 8).

Politkovskaya describes the unbridled lawlessness that dominated life under occupation for the residents of the villages in the Uras-Martan district of Chechnya. She writes: "There's nothing here for those who remained, except for the infamous Chechen 'package': Federal raids, night purges, marauding, morning discussions of who was taken away this time and what was stolen along with them, regular burials, stories about the ways those who survived were tortured, and whose corpses looked like what" (SCH: 116). The purges consisted of blockading villages with rings of armoured vehicles while masked men went from house to house, plundering anything of any value from within, wreaking wanton violence and cruel humiliations upon the occupants, and taking male inhabitants away for 'filtration' at 'temporary filtration points' set up at the edge of the village (SCH: 96-117).

The process of filtration was supposed to lead to the identification and isolation of militants through various bureaucratic checks. The reality was that it was a gateway practice to systematic terror and associated extortion, a "marauding and racketeering routine masked as searching for bandits [that] worked nonstop" (SCH: 51). Filtration was characterised by initial non-selectivity and almost universal suspicion for those

between the ages of ten and sixty, and the grounds for extended detention were similarly broad and essentially arbitrary – because individuals were found in locations that were not their permanent address, because their documents were incomplete, because they shared a surname with a Chechen militant commander, because they ‘looked’ like fighters, even because they were ‘tall’ (Memorial 2007; Human Rights Watch 2000; SCH: 113).⁵ In a report upon a purge in the village of Stargye Atagi, the twentieth that had taken place there since the war began, Politkovskaya details the nakedly commercial logic, rather than any military rationale, that actually underpinned the threat of filtration:

The soldiers mainly took those who could not pay the ransom to the poultry farm [the temporary filtration point]. They entered the houses and demanded money for the men right away. If you gave them the money, there was no filtration for you, no suspicion that you might be connected with the militant units. If you didn't, you got both filtration and suspicion. (SCH: 105)

The experiences of those taken away for filtration typically consisted of malicious debasement, merciless beatings, and world-destroying torture at the hands of anonymous tormenters. There was no semblance of due process and furthermore anonymity for soldiers during interactions with potential ‘terrorists’ was officially sanctioned to supposedly minimize the possibility of reprisals. Little indication was ever given to detainees as to the reasons why they were being held, how long their punishment might last, or what might lead to its cessation. Detainees would often be taken to, and moved between penitentiary camps, police stations, military bases and other ad hoc ‘reception centres’ that were all part of the wider reaches of the ‘filtration system’ in Chechnya (Memorial 2007). Deaths in detention were commonplace. Information about the reasons for detainment, or the status and whereabouts of detainees, was systematically withheld from relatives and again subject to a callous mercantile logic. Only shadowy, nameless intermediaries offered desperate families the hope of finding out about such matters, if sufficient further payments could be raised. Any possibilities for the eventual return of detainees, or indeed for the return of dead bodies for burial, were similarly underpinned by cruel and systematic extortion that was marked by constantly shifting demands with little guarantee of any successful outcome. Politkovskaya writes:

Slave trading of arrested people exists everywhere .. but not everyone is able to come up with the money, since Chechnya is impoverished. Not everyone makes the deadline set by the officer. And in such cases the arrested men disappear without a trace. Or the middleman announces that the ransom is now for a corpse. And the dead cost more than the living. That's how the military have arranged it, knowing that there is no greater torment for a Chechen than not to observe the funeral rites. (SCH: 68).

Under the auspices of anti-terrorist operations then, a highly predatory and profitable war economy emerged, such that it seemed as if “the commerce in living and dead bodies by soldiers [is] the principal military operation in Chechnya” (SCH: 113).⁶ The dread that routine interaction could indiscriminately morph into something far more dangerous saturated and paralyzed everyday life – travelling by road across a network of identity checkpoints became a source of excessive risk; just going outside for a walk became newly hazardous and suspicious. The ominous threat of corporeal

disappearance, the brutalizing of bodies, the buying and selling of hostages, and the trading of corpses and body parts became defining preoccupations of everyday existence in wartime Chechnya. These were not simply new realities of occupied life but rather the unruly symptoms of a continuous disordering of any sense of ontological security, bodily integrity, a stable interaction order and the rules of living. In such circumstances of lawlessness, indiscriminate predation and permanent flux, everyone was newly compelled to become a conscious strategist of survival, a lay theorist of the war, scrambling for footholds. One Chechen mother whose 22-year old son had disappeared thus asks of Politkovskaya:

Most of all now we want to know the rules of the game. We want to understand which of us you don't like. And why? What should we be tortured for? What are the reasons you've been commanded to kill? To kidnap? Right now we don't understand anything, and everyone is being destroyed in turn – those who were with the Wahhabis and those who were against them. And most of all, those in the middle, who weren't with anyone. (SCH: 117)

Such pervasive uncertainty was the breeding ground for countless rumours and contradictory myths – for example, that it was a positive sign if a corpse hadn't surfaced within the first week of disappearance, or alternatively that it was an indication that no body, living or dead, would ever be offered up (SCH: 114). In such a climate of radical doubt and ubiquitous threat, and the absence of any sure ideas of what to do and how to act, flimsy superstitions and lucky charms became surrogate guidelines for living and sources of belief. Lying face down in a field while helicopters hover overhead, a surveyor called Vakha tells Politkovskaya of his desperate strategy to try and escape without being thought a terrorist:

Every time the helicopters come, I take my folder, get out some paper, and pretend to write. I think it helps .. I've never been wounded with this folder. Not in the first war and not in this one. It's always helped me. (SCH: 33-4).

A day afterwards he is dead, ripped to shreds along with his folder whilst wandering exhausted into an unmapped minefield. There is no talisman that is capable of providing immunity from all the known and unknown threats that exist and that must at times be played off against each other. In an isolated mountain village, where everyone knows that you risk being shot if found in the surrounding forest, the inhabitants are forced to tempt fate anyway in order to collect the firewood that they so desperately need to keep warm. As Politkovskaya notes, “Readiness to die is the main requirement of their existence, which flits between life and death every minute” (SCH: 57).

For Russian soldier Arkady Babchenko, the experience of Chechnya was similarly characterised by existential duality, incomprehension of the ‘rules’, the utter absence of morale and morality in the Federal army, and by total state indifference to the fate of the ordinary private. Even the dog-tags supplied by the government were made of the sort of flimsy aluminium that would melt in a small fire, leaving new recruits to try and inscribe their own identities using nails onto makeshift dog-tags fabricated from the galvanized metal of broken spoons (OSW: 128). Most significantly though, Babchenko details a wartime experience dominated by a brutally dehumanizing institution where, rather than interaction based around order and discipline, it was the practice of

dedovshchina, the excessively violent and ruthless use and abuse of those in the lower ranks by the upper echelons, that had become the central principle around which everyday army life was organized. Indeed, bullying was a principle that had become intensified by a radically anomic lack of restraint in the senior ranks during the war and by the significant presence among the *kontraktniki*, contracted soldiers, of ex-criminals who were “creatures more of gangland than a modern European Army” (de Waal 2001: xxvi).

Under such brutal conditions, the key task of the federal conscript became simply to try not to attract any form of attention or opprobrium, not to offer any sort of presence which might offend, by avoiding eye contact, lying low and “switching on the fool” if interaction was inescapable (OSW: 57). Violence was impossible to completely avoid however and when your turn to be beaten inevitably came around, there was nothing that could be done: “You either take it in the face or hang yourself – that’s your entire choice” (OSW: 70). In one company, Babchenko chronicles how:

the bullying there is like a well-oiled machine .. this column of walking dead cares nothing about anything: the war, Chechnya, the heaps of bodies at the airstrip. They are only worried about tonight, when the officers leave the barracks .. and they will get beaten with spades. In the morning the officers will come back .. and beat them again for having spade-marks on their faces. (OSW: 85)

Babchenko thus details not so much an institution straining under the test of a fierce campaign but the complete moral decomposition of the army, a disavowal of any expectation of ethical interaction and values whatsoever. Alongside the systematic filtration and extortion of Chechen civilians, and the vicious culture of bullying in the ranks, the army was characterised by widespread drunkenness, corruption, and the hawking of stolen goods. For Babchenko, it appeared that:

Thieving is both the foundation of the war and the reason for its continuing. The soldiers sell cartridges; the drivers sell diesel; the cooks sell tinned meat .. Regimental commanders truck away vehicle-loads of gear, while the generals steal the actual vehicles themselves .. And we’ve all been sold too, guts and all .. our lives were traded long ago to pay for luxurious houses for generals that are springing up in the elite suburbs of Moscow. (OSW: 306)

The officers seemed to have “turned into an organised gang that exists separately from the soldiers” (OSW: 307), viewing their soldiers simply as ‘vouchers’ to be spent, and loathed back in turn as ‘jackals’, shot in the back when any chance arose in battle. Babchenko’s judgment is damning: “Ours is an army of workers and peasants, reduced to desperation by constant under-funding, half-crazed with hunger ... flogged and beaten by all, regardless of the consequences .. stripped of all rights. This is not an army but a herd drawn from the dregs of the criminal masses, lawless apart from the dictates of the jackals that run it” (OSW: 308).

Within such a mercenary culture, with only a perverse sense of being in this together, prioritizing one’s own survival and individualized war aims came to dominate. While tasked with a particular brief of salvaging a damaged water tanker, Babchenko and a colleague run into a situation where other Russian soldiers have been pinned down by

a Chechen sniper and are at risk of their lives. However, although they could assist their fellow soldiers, Babchenko and his colleague choose to do nothing, reaching an unspoken understanding with the sniper not to define the situation to either of their detriments:

We weren't supposed to be fighting here; we'd only come to pick up our water tanker, which had been shot up from that very house where the sniper was holed up now. The Chechen could see us too, but he wasn't firing at us, concentrating on a more attractive target .. our guys saw only the sniper, who had become the most important and fearful thing on earth for them, and they desperately wanted someone to kill him. But no-one touched him, because to kill him or dig him out of the house would be difficult .. there would be a firefight when he started shooting back .. and no-one wanted that .. he wasn't shooting at us so there was no need to bother him unnecessarily. (OSW: 252-253)

With this brief tacit allegiance in place, Babchenko and his colleague complete their own isolated task, salvage the water tanker and disappear from the scene, allowing the other sequestered act of conflict to play out without disturbance: “For us, the war was over for the day, and we left” (OSW: 253). Beyond such temporary constructions of alliance for localized mutual benefits, more systematic ongoing collusion and networking between sometime adversaries for criminal exploitation and financial gain was a highly significant feature of the Chechen wars, as indeed was the fluid switching of sides by fighters, units, even entire militias for wider strategic and political reasons.⁷ Wartime Chechnya was thus an environment in which shifting allegiances and identities⁸, disjointed actions, and an over-riding sense of uncertainty dominated everyday life for both civilians and federal soldiers.

Fragile Humanity

Whilst deep unease and incertitude were dominant structures of feeling in Chechnya during wartime, the precarious accomplishment of civility and humanity did not completely disappear from the horizon of everyday life within the ruins. Babchenko describes one occasion when, upon finding the keys to an intact and homely apartment in an otherwise destroyed and abandoned block in Grozny, he resists the opportunity to loot it, and instead uses it to performatively re-enact a comforting routine from his pre-war life, when his girlfriend would greet his arrival back home from work:

I thought up a game. In the evening, when it got dark, I would come home from work and open my door with my keys. Boy, what a joy it is to unlock your door with your own keys, to enter your home and flop down exhausted in the armchair. To let your head loll back as you light up a cigarette and close your eyes ... She comes over to me, curls up on my lap and tenderly rests her head on my chest .. “Go and wash your hands, supper's ready. I've made borscht, the real thing, not the half-cooked slop they give you at work.” (OSW: 25)

The physical props and the embodied movements of putting the keys in the door, flopping down on the armchair, lighting a cigarette, and closing the eyes do not so much support a fantasy as make a habitual domestic reverie newly material in the midst of chaos. Babchenko envisions a tender exchange with his girlfriend over supper, but inevitably it is still one that is shot through with the materiality of the war - “take off

your webbing first, silly.. and don't dip your grenades in the soup, give them here. I'll put them on the windowsill." Eventually she sends him back to work and the spell is broken:

I open my eyes and sit motionless for a while. My soul is empty, barren. The ash from my cigarette has dropped onto the carpet. I am seized with melancholy but I also feel good, as if it had all really happened .. I came a few times to the apartment every day and played the 'peace game' .. Later, when we moved on, I dropped by one last time, stood on the threshold and carefully closed the door. I left the key in the lock. (OSW: 26)

In not looting the apartment and deliberately leaving the key carefully in the lock when he eventually leaves for the final time, Babchenko not only preserves his own embodied memories of peace but temporally extends this imaginative horizon of a civil interaction order and this material gesture of home to the next unknown guest.

Politkovskaya also details a defiant attempt to preserve humanity in the tiny ruined kitchen of another Grozny apartment. Sasha and Vika Jura are a severely disabled couple who have been pinned down for months in their flat, surrounded by burned and bombed out blocks, but who nonetheless engage in the joint cultivation of hope using whatever imaginative acts, material detritus, recitals of civilized customs, and idioms of love that they can muster. They endeavour to look decent, Sasha assiduously combing his hair, and pretend that the liquid they consume is actually 'morning tea'. Vika spends her days writing poetry about the war in old school notebooks, reciting it coquettishly to Sasha who laughs and teases whilst radiating pride in her performances. All the while bullets strafe outside their windows, bodies lie unburied in the street, and the city burns. Politkovskaya writes:

Here, in the smouldering ruins of Grozny, there's nothing to see except suffering, your own and others'. Yet it is precisely here that life is the most real, even though it's almost like a cave, and the three-by-three patch in the kitchen resembles a stage. And for some reason you keep your comb in a refrigerator. There hasn't been any electricity for a few years now .. The refrigerator has turned into a closet, suitable only for keeping combs. A stove? The family has one of those. There's no gas though. And for that reason the pots arranged on it are just symbols of a struggle for a better future, in which there will be gas, and you won't have to make fires in the street to cook. A sink? Of course! But unfortunately there is no water in the pipes. And there's a lampshade hanging overhead, but no light. (SCH: 77)

Not only does Politkovskaya divine real joy in their impish and improvised refusal to accept the imposed conditions of bare life, she reads in their vibrant performance of defiant civilized living a wider repudiation of the emotional mendacity of Moscow life, a metropolitan lifestyle that tries to carry on regardless of the war on its citizens at the periphery, preferring not to think about it, not to feel it. Politkovskaya thus writes of the Grozny couple's wartime performance that:

Everything in their kitchen is like a stage prop – the stove, the refrigerator, and the faucets - except for the feelings. And in Moscow kitchens everything is real – the stove, the gas, the hot and cold water from the faucets – except for the

feelings. There, it's the feelings that are just props. We're too satiated for a country that's been at war for so long. (SCH: 77)

It is in these fragile yet determined performances of civility, these “sublime moments of human effort to just stay humane” (Derluguian 2003: 25), that the complexity and contradictions of wartime life are revealed, where vicious constraint and cruelty may co-exist with life-affirming creativity and emotional clarity.

With the radical uncertainty of the mundane interaction order and the associated atrophy of wider public morality, Politkovskaya locates such small oases of hope and the practice of humanity primarily in the resilient citation of discrete codes of interaction that determinedly refuse to acknowledge the primacy of adversarial identification. She encounters doctors whose professional identity and dedication to the Hippocratic Oath overrides both any partisanship in who they will treat, as well as the desperation of their material circumstances, as they are forced to power operating equipment and X-ray machines with their own car batteries whenever the generators go down (DW: 218). She describes teachers who will not break their promise to any of their pupils and continue to hold classes and nurture civility in the ashes of former schools, cultivating rare pride in every child by bestowing full marks upon every essay that manages to be submitted in such times (DW: 157). Whilst wider public interaction during the war was often characterised by paranoid uncertainty and ambiguity, it was often through these fragile performances of tender familial love⁹ and precarious recitals of alternative ethical codes that attempts were made to cultivate and hold onto another sense of humanity in the midst of the war.

Emotional Aftermaths

Despite these life-affirming but transitory interludes of alternate values and citations of resilient and pacific humanity, Babchenko's and Politkovskaya's narratives of the war are ultimately accounts where an increasingly jaded cynicism becomes the dominant structure of feeling for those who experience, and even those who manage to live through, the war. The emotional consequences of holding, over a sustained period of time, such close proximity to brutality and destruction, of constantly negotiating uncertainty and ambivalence, of maintaining a vigilance that brooks no trust in everyday interactions, the material world, or even one's own senses, ultimately leaves an embodied and affective aftermath that is deeply alienating and not easily shed.

At the end of *One Soldier's War In Chechnya*, Babchenko describes his halting attempts to reintegrate into everyday Moscow life upon his return from the war:

You learn to walk without checking the ground beneath your feet for mines and tripwires, and step on manholes in the road without fear, and stand at your full height in open ground .. You start to get drawn into life. You get interested in this game, which isn't for real. You pass yourself off as a fully fledged member of society, and the mask of a normal person grows onto you, no longer rejected by your body. And those around you think you are just the same as everyone else ..

But no-one knows your real face, and no-one knows that you are no longer a person .. You don't tell anyone the truth anymore. You can't explain

what war really is to someone who has never been there .. They simply don't have the necessary sensory organs. (OSW: 398-399)

Babchenko's description is of a war experience that is ultimately liminal, an experience that casts him on his return into yet another world of enduring uncertainty and ambivalence, where he is forever waiting for the why of the war to be revealed, where he feels as if he should not have, or indeed has not really, returned. It is this suspended and haunted existence that is the force that animates his writing.¹⁰ He closes his memoirs by recounting an exchange with another unnamed and forgotten veteran, one of the approximately one million military personnel who passed through Chechnya, one of the many who now spends his days sitting and smoking in a Moscow subway station.¹¹ However, despite an initial sense of empathy in the encounter, it too ends with no real closure:

His eyes recede again behind a film of indifference.

"Half-truths everywhere, half-sincerity, half-friendship. I can't accept that. Here in civilian life they have only half-truths. And the small measure of truth we had in war was a big lie. So many lads died and I survived. The whole time I used to wonder what for? .. Maybe I lived so that others remember us? I am a reminder."

I get up silently and leave him cigarettes, matches and vodka .. I walk away without saying anything and he doesn't even look at me. For him I am also 'one of them'. Which means whatever I say is a half-truth. (OSW: 405)

Politkovskaya relatedly describes the emotional confusions, intensities and sometimes even paradoxes that accompany the chaotic disorder of war. In a poignant personal conversation with a Russian colonel she has only just met, both on a high from having temporarily evaded danger, Politkovskaya describes the new perspective that the war has given her on her own life, how worries about money and the fact that her husband has left her now feel like trivial nonsense:

"I'm thankful for the war. I got here by chance and got stuck here by chance as well. But now I know how to rise above all this nonsense. It has purified me of everything that was superfluous, unnecessary. How can I not be thankful?"

Mironov silently agreed. He told me nothing about himself, but I still understood, without any words. We shared the same blood that had been poured into our veins by the war. It rushed inside our bodies like hormones, all too often taking us nowhere, into a dark room without doors. When it let us go at the very last moment, we realized how lonely we were. Our fate was to look for people who were similar to us in this world, who knew something about life that most people would never experience. Perhaps we would like to share this secret with them, but they didn't want to know and didn't care. (SCH: 199-200)

For Politkovskaya, a powerful appreciation and revaluation of life thus supplements the constant closeness to death in war, but she simultaneously describes the cruel recognition that such vital feelings are often fleeting, unshareable and isolating. Alongside her undoubted tenacity and bravery¹², it is her desire to try and describe the myriad everyday lives and ordinary confusions of war in as much detail as possible, and to try and create a language that can render some of these seemingly incommunicable experiences and contradictions more understandable and more

shareable that makes her reportage so distinctive and important.¹³ For Politkovskaya attentiveness to detail is in itself a necessary ethical response to the intense confusions, deceptions and disavowals of wartime. Describing the precise look of a gang of men in Grozny - possibly mercenaries, possibly soldiers - who are mocking a group of demonstrators whose relatives have disappeared, she writes:

They are cheerful and vigorous, with strong, healthy teeth. They're wearing masks and bandannas, with automatic weapons and grenade launchers pointed at the crowd. They're convulsed with laughter, leaning against the armour in ecstasy, and that's why their rows of powerful fangs can be seen through the holes in their masks ..

Of course all of this is details .. But it is from just these details that we find out what life is about. As if it weren't bad enough that your mother or child has been taken away and their bodies haven't been returned – they also have to mock your pain! Who can stop this? Putin? The minister of defence? The attorney general? No. These gentlemen aren't trained to think about details. (SCH: 131-132)

Concluding Thoughts

At one level, Babchenko and Politkovskaya's writing is an impassioned ethical attempt to try and reveal the metaphorical fangs behind the mask, to expose the wider hidden rationalities and mendacities of the war in Chechnya. Babchenko recounts bewildered conversations that regularly take place in the federal army where his comrades sarcastically discuss the latest performative political utterances and official strategic definitions of the situation, concluding that "the 'restoration of constitutional order' and the 'counter-terrorist operation' are nothing but meaningless words that are cited to justify the murder of thousands of people" (OSW: 94). Politkovskaya is similarly scathing of such political and linguistic mendacity, and particularly of the fact that the official pronouncements are subject to minimal examination by a largely compliant Moscow media that prefers to deal in talking-heads generals, blithe assurances that everything is in hand, and the production of "stirring reports about the war in the North Caucasus, in which the most terrible and disturbing facts are sanitized so that the voters don't choke on their food" (DW: 64). By describing the everyday experiences of those caught up in the conflict, both writers endeavor to document the texture of a radically different reality from this remote and sanitized version of the war, detailing its brutal and senseless conduct and its brazen criminal and commercial logics. As such, both suggest that the greatest masquerade of all may be the very idea of the war itself, in that events on the ground do not resemble any recognizable conflict between opposing sides that is being won or lost, but rather constitute some endlessly protean and regenerating enterprise that is perpetually breeding off bodies and blood. Politkovskaya thus writes that:

We don't even know if it's a real war or not. We already know that there will never be a victory. It's like some crazy, broken merry-go-round dangling little zinc coffins instead of horses (DW: 207)

At this everyday level of analysis, and here I am reading their work in terms of Goffman's understanding of the centrality of routine interactional masquerade to the

mutual reproduction of normal patterns of mundane social life, their writing also outlines the contours of a radically threatening new condition of permanent disruption, uncertainty and anxiety in the everyday interaction order, a condition which is itself perversely and explicitly pointed to by the literal appearance of the mask in public life. As McDonald (2013) notes, the wearer of a mask stands beyond the everyday social world's norms and obligations, and masking is an idiom that is widely associated in many societies with transition and metamorphosis from one social state to another. The highly salient advent and domination of masked men of uncertain identity in the prosecution of the Chechnya war enterprise does not simply and prosaically hide the wearers' faces to prevent identification. It also signifies the irruption of this widespread new condition of permanent disorder and terror, the mocking of pain and the collapse into short-termism and incertitude of a previously stable public interaction order through which civil identities could be negotiated and moral recognition achieved. Masking is here the symbolic and literal harbinger of filtration and other debasements of civil interaction. It instantiates the condition of perpetual confusion as to the arbitrary and ever-changing rules of the game that Babchenko and Politkovskaya document.

This chapter thus argues for a wider reading of the work of Babchenko and Politkovskaya, on the grounds that their writing is an enduring source of crucial insights into the brutally violated texture of everyday life in wartime Chechnya. It has also attempted to illustrate how the lens and language of everyday performance, interaction and masquerade may enable us to re-engage with such topics¹⁴ and sources afresh. In doing so, I have not sought to strictly operationalize specific analytic concepts onto a particular field of inquiry. Rather this chapter has adopted an approach that treats such analytic language as sensitizing heuristics, orienting attention towards the ways in which human recognition, morality and identity are continually negotiated, constituted and interrupted through specific social interactions in wartime. As such, this chapter has endeavoured to explore how a methodology of dialogically weaving together experiential testimonies with such conceptual vocabularies of the everyday might extend our imaginative horizons and abilities to write of war anew. To conclude, Babchenko sums up his experience of Chechnya as follows:

We don't know what we are fighting for. We have no goals, no morals or internal justification for what we do. We are sent off to kill and to meet our deaths but we don't know why. We just drew the short straw, happened to be born eighteen years ago and grew up just in time for this war. (OSW: 161).

For Politkovskaya, these patterns of brutality and brutalization, of arbitrariness and the atrophy of morality, are ultimately not containable to this one 'small corner of hell'. Rather "Chechnya" marks a new structure of feeling and interaction that contaminates the entire country as a million troops carry it home:

After this unrestrained lawlessness, they leave for their homes, all over the country. Chechnya as a mode of thinking, feeling and acting, spreads everywhere like gangrenous cells and turns into a nationwide tragedy, affecting all strata of society. (SCH: 134)

Notes

¹ Following its declaration of independence in November 1991, the Russian Federation waged two wars against the de facto republic of Chechnya. The First Chechen War lasted from December 1994 to August 1996 and ended in a cease-fire and a five-year moratorium on the final status of the republic. Following the invasion of neighbouring Dagestan by paramilitary forces led from Chechnya by Shamil Basayev and Ibn Al-Khattab, Russia launched the Second Chechen War in August 1999 to restore federal control over the territory. It re-established rule by a pro-Russian administration in May 2000 but counter-insurgency warfare continued to be waged by Federal forces against the rebels for the next decade, with the operation finally being declared over in April 2009.

² Politkovskaya reported on the wars for the Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. Although she is most well known in the West for her work in Chechnya, Politkovskaya is explicit that she is not a war correspondent. In the prologue to *A Small Corner of Hell*, she states that: “I am a journalist – and this is the only reason I’ve seen the war; I was sent there to cover it. Not, however, because I am a war correspondent and know this subject well. On the contrary, because I am just a civilian. The editor in chief’s idea was very simple: the very fact that I’m just a civilian gives me a much deeper understanding of the experiences of other civilians, living in Chechen towns and villages, who are caught in the war” (SCH: 26).

³ Babchenko fought in the First Chechen War as an eighteen year-old conscript to the Russian Federal Army and then returned to fight in the Second War as a contracted soldier for a further six months.

⁴ Rigi (2007), for example, theorizes the war in terms of what he calls ‘the chaotic mode of domination’, the post-Soviet expression of a non-hegemonic and extra-legal form of predatory rule whereby various gangs and elite networks of influence provoked, competed, and colluded for control of territory at the periphery and the exploitation of resources therein, opportunistically and often mutually benefitting from the war economy created. He ultimately argues that the war only really became chauvinistic and nationalized, overcoming a widely held belief among ordinary Chechens and Russians in shared Soviet identity, “not because people supported their own leaders’ war efforts but because the combatants indiscriminately violated the civilian population of the other side” (2007: 46).

⁵ The Russian human rights organization Memorial estimates that from a population of less than one million, a conservative estimate was that 200,000 Chechens passed through the ‘filtration system’ between 1999 and 2006 (Memorial 2007).

⁶ The shadow war economy also involved the widespread collaboration of Federal forces with criminal Chechen gangs in numerous other lucrative activities, notably the large-scale theft of the region’s oil resources, and arms trading.

⁷ Most notoriously, Akhmad Kadyrov, commander of a powerful clan-based paramilitary force that fought for Chechen independence in the First War, switched sides and fought for the Federal forces against his former allies from 1999 onwards, for which he was rewarded by being appointed acting head of the Chechen administration when Russia regained control of Grozny in July 2000.

⁸ In Mikail Eldin’s (2013) memoirs of the war *The Sky Wept Fire: My Life as a Chechen Freedom Fighter*, he details how this trickster environment was both a source of constant concern to the unit of partisan fighters that he was associated with, as well as something that could be explicitly exploited by them. Apart from a small core of full-time combatants, all the other fighters in the unit only came together to undertake specific operations, would only be partially known to each other, and would address each other only by their ‘war names’. Once

the operations were completed, the survivors would splinter apart and attempt to ‘go legal’ – return to work in normal occupations - until a new combination of fighters was called together by the leadership for the next operation. The likelihood of infiltration in such a structure was high and thus operations would often be undertaken by rebel commanders in the full knowledge that their plans and routes would likely be betrayed to the enemy from within. However, this expectation of betrayal would itself be offset by last minute changes of tactics. It was even deliberately exploited as a way of lulling enemies into a false sense of advantage and trapping them in unexpected ambushes of their own making. Multiple layers of deception and double bluff were thus key elements of insurgent warcraft. Of course deception is central to multiple forms and aspects of warcraft – from code-making to camouflage. The central place of ‘cunning’ and ‘deceit’ in military strategy is acknowledged throughout Clausewitz’ *On War*. As Scarry notes, war involves the derealization of all normal structures of substantiation, of meaning-making, and hence the elevation to structural centrality of “the principle of lying” (1981: 133).

⁹ Politkovskaya also argues that, “in such circumstances it should come as no surprise that the most effective antidote to war as in any primitive society is the maternal instinct” (DW: 50). For example, she describes how hundreds of the mothers of Russian soldiers, terrified by the brutality and moral decay of the Federal army, travel to army compounds in Chechnya in order to ‘kidnap’ their sons and bring them home, “transforming them into deserters and themselves into accessories to the crime” (DW: 45)

¹⁰ As McLoughlin (2009) notes, a motif of much war writing is that it regularly foregrounds its own inadequacy, the impossibility of adequate sense-making in the disorientating fog of war, the futility of representation faced with war’s overwhelming reality. As well as being a personal attempt to impose some verbal order on that which may otherwise seem incomprehensible, Babchenko describes numerous other motivations underpinning his war writing – coping and catharsis, ‘truth-telling’, writing out of a sense of guilt for surviving and a related sense of duty to tell the story of those who did not survive.

¹¹ Eichler (2011) details the widespread social marginalization of the *Chechentsy*, the Russian veterans of the Chechen wars, and attributes this to a number of factors: the traumatic effects of combat experience which hindered their social and economic reintegration into society; the state’s lack of recognition of the Chechen conflicts as wars until 2002, meaning that those who had fought were not officially recognized as war veterans and hence not entitled to the welfare benefits associated with such status; and wider societal uncertainty as to the rationale for, and rectitude of, the conflict which translated into ambivalence towards the soldiers, particularly in comparison with the almost universally lauded veterans of the Great Patriotic War (World War II). Eichler thus points to a crisis in the models of militarized masculinity associated with the Chechen wars.

¹² Politkovskaya documents her own firsthand experience of harassment and torture by the Federal Security Services in *A Small Corner of Hell*. She writes: “The soldiers, rulers of local life, have created a barbaric order in which anyone who knows about the actual conditions of the civilian population can be equated to an enemy spy and has to be dealt with according to wartime laws” (SCH: 87). She also notes how, in order to reach places where access has been denied, journalists have to employ “all the guiles of the partisan: wearing different clothes, lying their heads off, and, in some cases, giving various forms of bribe to those at the federal checkpoints” (DW: 151).

¹³ Rodgers (2014) argues that the significance of Politkovskaya’s writing can be understood in terms of an important and long-standing tradition of links between literature and public debate in Russia. He endorses Vartanova’s historical analysis of such connections whereby “the

Russian vision of literature presupposed a much broader social and cultural role for it than in other countries, thus often merging it with journalistic activity” (2012: 136).

¹⁴ There is an emerging literature (see Bharucha 2014, Hughes 2011, Rowe 2013, Spencer (ed.) 2012) which creatively explores the relationships between performance, protest and terror, and the war on terror in particular, but as yet limited analogous work examining everyday wartime life. Maltby (2012) draws explicitly on Goffman in her analysis of Military Media Operations in terms of strategic interaction, impression management and influencing activities.

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