



The Angel of Grozny: Orphans of a Forgotten War

Åsne Seierstad, Nadia Christensen (Translator)

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In the early hours of New Year's 1994, Russian troops invaded the Republic of Chechnya, plunging the country into a prolonged and bloody conflict that continues to this day. A foreign correspondent in Moscow at the time, Åsne Seierstad traveled regularly to Chechnya to report on the war, describing its affects on those trying to live their daily lives amidst violence. In the following decade, Seierstad became an internationally renowned reporter and author, traveling to the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other war-torn regions. But she never lost sight of this conflict that had initially inspired her career. Over the course of a decade, she watched as Russia ruthlessly suppressed an Islamic rebellion in two bloody wars and as Chechnya evolved into one of the flashpoints in a world now focused on the threat of international terrorism.

In 2006, Seierstad finally returned to Chechnya, traveling in secret and under the constant threat of danger. In a broken and devastated society she lived with orphans, the wounded, the lost. And she lived with the children of Grozny, those who will shape the country's future. She asks the question: What happens to a child who grows up surrounded by war and accustomed to violence?

A compelling, intimate, and often heartbreaking portrait of Chechnya today, *The Angel of Grozny* is a vivid account of a land's violent history and its ongoing battle for freedom.

The Angel of Grozny: Orphans of a Forgotten War Details

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Jule says

Seierstad, a Norwegian reporter, was 24 when she first left Moscow to go into Chechnya - it was her first year of working as a journalist - to report about the life and ongoings during the first war. Her account is a tremendous work that blends political with historical facts, offers a great insight into Chechen and Russian culture and last but not least documents her personal experiences during the first and second Chechen wars. Especially for her documentation of human tragedy in a time of violent political conflict her work is so important. Seierstad witnessed the first conflict closely and then secretly, i.e. without official Russian authorisation, returned 10 years later in 2006 to observe and document the conflict once again with her own eyes - despite the existing Russian information blockade and in critical disbelief of the official Russian media propaganda. For anyone who wants to learn about the Russian-Chechen conflict in political, cultural and historical context I find this a great read.

Scott says

I knew nothing of Chechnya before reading this book and, although it's dangerous to take any one account of such a complex situation as gospel, I do feel more informed. And that is one of the triumphs of this book - that it makes clear the lack of clarity, and the complexity, of ancient regional warfare. Although there is great sympathy for the Chechens, Seierstad is careful to illuminate the stories of Russians too. Ultimately it's a bleak book, and there is no sign of resolution, but in the details of the stories of the individuals caught up in these conflicts run by the safe and the powerful, there is great humanity. Even in the devastated ruins of cities there are angels.

Michal Mironov says

WARNING: Probably the most depressing and powerful book I have ever read... This is not an ordinary collection of oral history gathered during one trip to Chechnya. The author kept coming back to the country again and again during the years – officially and secretly – thoroughly interviewing people from all sides: from orphans on the streets to the powerful dictator Kadyrov. She uncompromisingly confronted the families of black widows, religious fanatics as well as the Russian skinheads in Moscow. And she paid a price for that: „From being captivated by the poetry, the music, in search of ‘the Russian soul’, I became aware of the racism, the nationalism, the corruption of senior government officials, the ignorance, the bleak history. Little by little I became almost anti-Russian.“ And I must admit that it deeply affected me too as a reader. Adding some quotations so you better grasp why:

On Christmas in Chechnya: „The Christmas tree was decorated (by Chechen kids) with the skeleton of a dead Russian. A sniper - sharpshooter - who had been shot on a rooftop, had rotted there in the blazing sun and was later washed clean by rain and snow...“

Information leaflet for schoolkids in Chechnya: „Which road would you choose: the one that is overgrown with grass and flowers, or the one that is full of trash and tyre tracks? Correct answer: where people walk

(throw away trash) and cars drive (tyre tracks) there is the least danger of landmines.“

How the war devastated Chechen society: „Adults who abuse children. I know it happens everywhere, all over the world. But most societies have ways of limiting it - norms, rules. We - Chechens - have them too, of course. Very strict rules, in fact. But when a society comes unravelled, the rules unravel as well; nobody pays attention, people have their own concerns, so sadists can find ways to sneak off and do their wicked deeds.“

On atmosphere in Grozny: „Something about Chechen men gives the impression that they are always prepared. Ready to attack or to defend themselves. It's as if they are filled with a perpetual, unreleased tension. Temperament simmers in the city. There is adrenalin in the air. Judging by what you see on the streets, dreamers are few and far between in Chechnya; you don't get many people strolling about aimlessly philosophising.“

On atmosphere of fear in Chechnya: „It's like Moscow in the thirties. People inform on each other, they disappear in the night and never return. No one trusts anyone else any more, because Putin had a stroke of genius: he let Ramzan Kadyrov do the dirty work. Now it's Chechen against Chechen.“

A „small talk“ in Beslan: „One of the terrorists said to a mother who begged them to release the youngest children: 'My children have been shot too. Are your children better than mine?“

How even Kadyrov's generals despise the Russian allies: „(Drunken Russian general) bellows to all sides, while the distinguished and decorated Chechen leaders smile politely but with a trace of disgust. What is this barbarian doing here with us? the faces say. Even in the puppet regime, the connection with the Russians is more one of need than of pleasure.“

Still willing to learn more? Go ahead and read the book.

Maggie says

This is the third Seierstad book I've read, but this book makes her the most approachable. That probably lies in the fact that many of her experiences in the book are very personal to in that they occurred at the beginning of her journalistic career and were very frightening (often, frankly, quite foolhardy) and, perhaps, therefore hold greater weight in her memories.

Seierstad does an excellent job of explaining the complexities of the Chechen War and why independence is so important to the Chechens. She also does a wonderful job of showing the effect of that war (or wars, depending on how you look at it) on the land, politics, economy, families, individuals, and children. She also examines the view and effect from the other side--Russia's.

I learned a great deal about the areas, the war, the peoples of both sides, and I appreciate the dangers she put herself in to get the information. My education has been enlarged and I won't soon forget many of the people I met through her book. Recommended.

Khawlah Abdullah says

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Anushree Rastogi says

When I started reading this book, the Boston bombings hadn't yet happened and Chechnya was a country that had been conveniently forgotten like so many war-torn nations of the world. It was therefore with feelings of apprehension and excitement at getting to know a little more about the Soviet Union, my latest interest, that I picked this one up.

Then of course, there was a bomb blast. People died and, suddenly, the internet was flooded with information on this seemingly insignificant nation with an area a tenth of Wisconsin and a population of a little more than a million.

This review is special for reasons I cannot quite describe. The haunting descriptions that Seirstad comes up with through her impeccable accounts of this war-zone will stay with you for a lifetime.

The political reason behind the Chechen Wars is simple:

Dudayev wanted Chechnya to break away not just from the Soviet Union but from Russia as well. Boris Yeltsin, the driving force behind the fall of the Soviet Union, wanted to keep Russia's borders intact at any cost and refused to accept secession.

Dudayev began a war of words with Yeltsin. "Russianism is worse than Nazism", "Boris Yeltsin heads a

gang of murderers" and his regime is the "diabolic heir to a totalitarian monster." For its part, the Russian government introduced an amazingly ineffective trade embargo and cut important subsidies; the only thing the Russian state paid was pensions to help local Russians remain in Chechnya. The huge reduction in financial aid added to the chaos and corruption, and soon Dudayev's regime was even less able to pay salaries than Governments elsewhere in Russia. A Moscow bank robbery by Chechen criminals netted almost a billion dollars; most of the money was brought back to Chechnya. Grozny became a center of smuggling, fraud and money laundering, while the government's role in the republic was collapsing. Meanwhile, the hawks in Yeltsin's administration wanted a "small victorious war", something that would increase their popularity among nationalistic Russians after an ultra-nationalist candidate, Vladimir Zhirnovsky, had won about every fourth vote in the parliamentary election. However, the main reason for invading Chechnya was the political ambitions of Yeltsin and his inner circle. If Chechnya seceded, the spirit of rebellion could spread through rest of North Caucasus, and all of Russia could fall apart.

Chechnya: the wolf, however, would not relent. The separatists chose this beast as the emblem of their republic. The free, wild wolf was the Chechen, the tame, cowardly dog was the Russian. It was after all, the only animal that dared to take on something stronger than itself. What it lacked in strength and size, it made up for with limitless audacity and courage. It loved freedom, could not be tamed, and would rather die fighting than surrender.

Pursuing the subject with an unbiased view, Seirstad presents all faces of the Chechen story: the systematic destruction of the art, history and culture of this little mountain country, the rampant spread of Wahabism and the consequential rise of terrorist activities, societies changing attitudes on women, family and honor and the plight of the people involved in the war: both Chechen and Russian, which has led to considerable hatred on both sides and the incessant rise of racially provoked crimes in Russia, particularly, Moscow.

She writes:

"A census would have revealed many things. Soviet figures from 1989 show that the number of Chechens had just reached one million. Since the wars started, five years after that, around one hundred thousand Chechens have been killed. Among the dead are thousands of children. They could hardly be called bandits or terrorists, as the authorities label those who resist....

You can try to count the dead. You can argue about the numbers. You can count the maimed. You can argue about those numbers, too. What does it matter to lose a leg. An arm. To become crippled. To become blind. To have your hearing blasted away.

Where in the statistics do you find a violated childhood?"

The Beslan school tragedy where 330 primary school kids were ruthlessly killed is proof enough of her assertions.

As a result of the war, this country is losing that which it values the most: its cultural treasures.

"The National Museum in Grozny was bombed after the Russian troops looted what they thought worth preserving: European paintings, anything made of gold and silver, precious stones and metals. Chechen and Caucasian art was blown to pieces. Small, unique clusters of buildings, dating as far back as the twelfth century have been leveled to the ground."

A country rattled by war and political uncertainty is bound to give in to religious fundamentalism. As per Jokhar Dudayev's interview in 1996:

"Lack of western help in building a democratic Russian state after the Soviet Union's collapse was what made the Chechen's look towards Sharia- Muslim laws and regulations."

In view of this, the situation is growing from bad to worse. Two ideologies: Wahabism and Sufism are now pitted against each other. In Chechnya the mania for mythologizing has free rein. One theory or story is just

as believable as the next. The most important thing for people is that the story fits in with their belief system. It is therefore no surprise that the society is governed strictly by religious rules that are decreed arbitrarily. Women are repressed and are delegated to a secondary status.

“Woman, subject yourself to your husband. It is wrong for a wife to try to rise to a man's level. Then she degrades her husband; she is a woman, after all. She can't do everything...”

In a society where women are thought of as carriers of a family's virtue, honor killings and gender repression is on the rise.

Women and children, as always, are the worst sufferers. It being deemed “improper” for women to work, they have no means to earn a livelihood once they have lost their men in the war.

As for the children, one of Ramzan Kadyrov's first acts as president was to close down all public orphanages, as, according to him, they went against Chechen tradition. Leaving thousands of children on the street, with no means of fending for themselves or protecting themselves against physical and mental abuse.

Oppression on the basis of gender is, however, not the only issue plaguing the Chechen society. When Putin came to power, a lot changed.

“Putin has understood something that never concerned Yeltsin: the power of the free word. Whereas you could travel freely to Chechnya at the beginning of the war, it is now illegal and impossible for a foreigner.... I don't have permission to be in North Ossetia, where we are now, or in any of the other Caucasian Republics. For that, I would need a KTO card, that is to say, permission to be in an area of kontra-terroristicheskaya operatsiya-counter terrorist operations-and in order to get a KTO card you have to be on a Government organized visit.”

The atmosphere is stifling and tense. People disappear overnight- often, forever. Families are watched and harrassed by the FSB and the Kadyrovtsi and it is not uncommon for a family to lose all male members within a span of few months-followed by an agonizing search for their bodies, which are often found dumped in ditches with parts missing and torture marks all over them; if they are found at all.

“People are more afraid now than during the war. It's like Moscow in the thirties. People inform on each other, they disappear in the night and never return. No one trusts anyone anymore, because Putin had a stroke of genius: he let Ramzan Kadyrov do the dirty work. Now its Chechen against Chechen.”

It's called “Chechnising” the conflict. Whereas before the Russian forces committed the worst abuses, now the Chechen militia maintains control in a society maimed by fear.

Asne Seirstad travels through this forgotten hell and interacts with those who have lost their all, bringing back harrowing tales of terror and unimaginable violence: fear that keeps the society quiet.

It is the society where the assassination of those who speak against the regime: journalists like Anna Politkovskaya is inevitable.

The situation in Chechnya being what it is, the Chechens don't have it easy elsewhere in Russia either. An estimated fifty thousand racial attacks occur in Russia every year. The number is increasing. Few people dare to report the assaults. The police often sympathise more with the attacker than with the victim. Only a few hundred incidents are reported every year; along with a fifty racially motivated murders. The perpetrators are seldom prosecuted; a conviction is even rarer.

People from the Caucasus in general, and Chechnya in particular top the list of hate figures and have the lowest reputation among ordinary Russians. Chechens have problems registering in Russian cities, enrolling children at school, getting jobs, finding places to live.

They have reason too, they have lost their boys there. In a war against those people who are almost as hated as the Afghans. The roots of their repugnance go a long way back.

Seierstad does develop an anti-Russian sentiment, it is true, as she meets and interacts with the long suffering people of this nation. She has, however, tried to view all angles of this story. A path-breaking book from a woman who was asked to write about spring fashions instead of Chechnya, it is great for starting out and getting to know more about a part of the world that has such rich history and has shaped so much of our modern day beliefs: politically and socially.

Karen says

I admit I am biased about loving this book because I basically want to be Asne Seierstad. That said, this was an excellent book about those who are affected by war. And recently. And not in Iraq or Afghanistan. It's the story of people, especially children, caught in the war in Chechnya.

It's funny that I can't stand to watch violent tv shows or movies, but I'm compelled to read books like this. Further, I'm grateful to people like Seierstad for traveling to dangerous places and talking to dangerous people to bring me this story. I think the world needs more of this truth. If nothing else, it makes you really appreciate all that you have.

Jonfaith says

It may be effective for Errol Morris to allow his interviewees to gush unchecked and create a culpable subtext. This is a fine strategy - for him. It works well on film. Pages of raving do not make for persuasive or evocative prose. If the person in question is a young man leaning towards jihad or a Russian reactionary whose son has been imprisoned for a hate crime, it doesn't lead anywhere to have pages of stuttering conspiracy theories and gnashing hate speech.

I couldn't tell if *Angel of Grozny* wanted to be journalism or a memoir. It was closer to the latter, though hobbled by overly creative writing and a sore lack of editing. Åsne Seierstad is likely a fine journalist, her perseverance at seeing first hand both wars in Chechnya is intrepid without question. As a Russian speaker, she was able to access personal elements well beyond a World Service broadcast. That may be the problem right there. These are stories, grounded in a nightmare but as interchangeable as those on any newscast. The

trauma at the heart of this is extremely graphic and uncomfortable. There are simply better ways of approaching it.

Chris says

I wish more American reporting was like this book. Yes, I know Seirstad is from Norway but I can wish.

This is a good look at how war effects and affects society on a micro and macro level. The focus is a married couple who have taken in orphans, but Seierstad focuses on other families as well. This is actual more gripping than Bookseller of Kabul and quite is rather more brutal.

E.P. says

Asne Seierstad was a freelance journalist in Moscow when the first Chechen war broke out. Acting under a poorly-understood compulsion to find out what was really going on there, she sweet-talked her way onto a military transport plane and ended up in Grozny. She spent several months during the first war, and again during the second war, slipping around Chechnya, often disguised as a Chechen woman in order to avoid attention and get into places foreigners were forbidden to enter, so she could interview people touched by the conflict. Hosted by Hadijat, a woman running an unofficial orphanage in Grozny, she focuses heavily on the stories of women and children, but also speaks with others, including a couple of encounters with Ramzan Kadyrov, Chechnya's infamous president. The result is a fascinating book in which interviews and Seierstad's personal experiences are woven into a more or less coherent narrative.

Seierstad's own story is riveting: she makes no claims to heroism, but she is obviously a tough and determined reporter, who doesn't hesitate to visit taboo families, such as the relatives of resistance fighters and even participants in the Dubrovka siege, or to ask Kadyrov probing questions, which he sidesteps with stunning barrages of word salad. The picture she paints of Chechnya's current leader is grim: while she is slightly more sympathetic than, say, Politkovskaya, mentioning how he sits there doodling flowers with faces and looking sheepish when she asks tough questions, the ultimate impression is of someone utterly unsuited to uphold the dignity of office he represents, and who can't even sit still and speak in complete, coherent sentences, let alone tell the truth. The allegations of misconduct against Kadyrov are graver than those aimed at the US's own Donald Trump, but in character, they seem worrisomely similar. But enough about that.

A fluent Russian speaker and originally well-disposed towards Russia and Russians, Seierstad finds herself becoming increasingly appalled by the excesses inflicted by her adopted country on this tiny nation. At the same time, Chechnya and the Chechens are hardly angels themselves: Seierstad recounts horrifying stories of abuse, in which husbands attack their wives, men rape their children, brothers kill their sisters, and Chechens commit dreadful crimes against other Chechens. Giving Chechens more control, in the form of the Kadyrovtsy, has had nasty side effects: under the guise of returning to their Chechen roots, the government has instigated widespread oppression of women, and people suspected of Wahhabism are grabbed off the street, tortured, and sometimes disappeared. All it takes is for a man to wear his hair slightly too long at the back for him to be whisked away, perhaps never to return; women have it even harder in some ways, since they are now forced to wear headscarves and dress modestly, but dressing TOO modestly and covering up TOO much of their hair can be taken as a sign of Wahhabism. The book came out ten years ago, but if

anything it seems that the situation in Chechnya has only gotten more dire, something the book foreshadows: it ends, not with a happy story of rehabilitated orphans, but on a warning note: Hadijat's orphanage is in danger of being shut down, and some of her children are totally out of control, enraging and endangering the others as they act out as a result of the trauma they have suffered.

One thing all of the disparate writers I've read on this and other wars agree about is that war reveals whatever a person's true character is, showing both their strengths and their weaknesses. Reading this book, I was struck by how true this seems not just for individuals, but for nations. Seierstad's book uncovers some of the pathologies at the heart of both Russia and Chechnya (are they one nation or two? Both, it seems). Caught up in a sick, co-dependent relationship, both nations have retreated into nationalism and attempts to preserve their heritage in the face of external attack. Unfortunately, the parts of their heritage they are trying to preserve are often the very things they should be most eager to throw away. Seierstad chronicles the rising xenophobia of Russian young men, who horrify their grandparents, survivors of WWII, by tattooing swastikas on their bodies, and records how young Chechen men retreat from their problems by attacking women--sometimes verbally, sometimes physically--and torturing dogs. Sometimes nations respond to a terrible self-inflicted trauma by learning from it as they attempt to rise from the ashes: think Germany after WWII, or Rwanda after the massacres of the 1990s. The Chechen wars could have had the same effect on Russia and Chechnya, but they have not. Perhaps they were not traumatic enough (easy to believe for Russia; harder for Chechnya), or perhaps both nations have enough grievances against the other to avoid looking their own flaws square in the face, preferring instead to point fingers and lay blame everywhere but where it lies. What will happen in the future is anyone's guess, but "The Angel of Grozny" does not give much hope for improvement any time soon, and neither do events since the book was published.

"The Angel of Grozny" is not a light read, but it is informative and compelling. Highly recommended for anyone interested in Chechnya, the Chechen wars, or post-Soviet Russia, or if you're just looking for a book by and about women affected by war.

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Lee says

War is bad. Here's why: Åsne Seierstad's first assignment as a journalist was as Moscow correspondent for a Norwegian newspaper. What she lacked in writing experience, she made up for in her fluent Russian and fearlessness. By stealth, as well as official invitation, she spent over a decade reporting from Chechnya. Her meetings with the Chechen president, whose image in tandem with his father, (the murdered ex-president) is ubiquitous, would be hilarious were the leaders not so thuggish and brutal. The government co-opts fundamentalist Islam with its own conservative form of the religion as interpreted on a television program by the President's uncle. It is with the average Chechen, though, that Seierstad brings clarity to a situation almost nobody outside Chechnya knows about. Kidnappings, disappearances, informers are part of daily life. Seierstad could use a few lessons about metaphor and pathos, but as investigative journalism, this is a good one. By the way, support your local independent bookstore. If you buy this through amazon.com you're a fool and I won't be your friend.

Hans Brienesse says

This was a grand book to read albeit quite depressing at times. It is written with the author's usual eye for the minutest details of the misery of the human condition in morally-, religiously-, and politically-repressed countries.

From the abandoned children to the ignored soldiers to the honour killings to the simmering substrate of emotion that is identity, this is a tale of woe indeed. A religious system that will not bend meets a political system that will not yield. and the nut that is cracked between them are the innocents.

How telling was it that the Chechen rebels did not admit to the brutalities administered to the Russian soldiers, and the average Russian citizen sees the Chechens as filthy rabble yet both were at great pains to portray their version as correct.

All I can say is I am thankful we live in a more enlightened country with complete freedom of the press! The author as usual has been meticulous about making sure all the details are correct and also her characters get the chance to read what she has written before it is published thus ensuring there is no confusion. If you have any interest at all in conflicts of politics and religion read this book.

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