

Wedding album

A New Zealander mourns for the land where she married, Chechnya, and asks why the world has been so silent about Russian aggression. **BY PETA CAREY**

No one had warned me. As I walked out the door of the house, white dress and flowers and prenuptial nerves, the guns exploded. Here in Ingushetia, the neighbouring state from Chechnya, I had come to expect gunfire, bombing, or worse. But in that split second of terror, an arm reached out to comfort me, and the tall, gold-toothed bodyguard, Alhazur, reassured me: it is Chechen custom to announce the departure of the bride with gunfire.

The guns were lowered. And as he took me to the waiting car, he assured me in careful, slow Russian that he would be right behind me, for my protection. Not only Alhazur, but half the village was there, too – the cars lining up to follow the bride to her wedding, headlights flashing, horns blaring.

Such was Chechen hospitality. Such was their generosity, their joie de vivre, their laughter, and their honour and pride in their custom. This was certainly not what I had expected when I left New Zealand at the beginning of 1997. My Russian language teacher in Auckland had expressed her disgust that I would be going there at all. I explained that my partner had been working in the region for two years, mopping up the aftermath of the 1994-96 Russian war. "How can he work with them?" she exclaimed. She implied that the war was what the Chechens had deserved, that they were simply animals. They eat with their fingers, she told me.

This is the long and continuing prejudice towards this small race of mountain people deep in the south of the Russian Federation. In the rest of Russia, mothers put their children to bed at night, warning them that, if they don't go to sleep, the Chechens, like witches, will find them in their beds. Images of cruel, sabre-wielding Chechens have persisted in Russian folklore. So, when a Russian leader, most recently the steely-eyed Putin, finds reason to punish the Chechens yet again, the Muscovites clamour and cheer.

But still I am incredulous. As Chechnya endures yet again the brutal and bullying tactics of its so-called motherland, the media are largely silent. Nato, the UN and the international community barely murmur. In New Zealand I am aghast to read the latest reports on the Internet – of a massacre of an entire village, complete with bloody, agonising details – only to see one whole week later, a report sanctioned by the Russian media on the same incident, reprinted in the *NZ Herald*, citing yet again the Russian pretext of erasing the threat of terrorism from the region.



The history of Russian hatred of Chechens is as grotesque as Hitler's persecution of the Jews, and the events of today far outweigh the human rights atrocities witnessed in Kosovo. Why then this silence? And for most of us, barely able to find Chechnya on the world map, why this war?

I arrived in Ingushetia, the neighbouring state from Chechnya, in the spring of '97. The first most vivid memory, and my first encounter with hostility, was the Russian checkpoint – young Russian faces, lips curling, eyes blank, chain-smoking, guns slung or cleaned or rubbed longingly. Mud caked their sand-bagged bunker. It was spring. Beyond the barrier, the trees lining the road to Chechnya were white with blossom. The surrounding fields bright yellow with daisies. But for a hundred metres around the bunker there was only mud, curls of barbed wire, and nowhere to go for the dozen or so pale-faced, hungry young men. They were nervous and angry – the memory of the last war still fresh.

In August 1996, the mighty Russian forces – heavy artillery, air and ground assaults, and an army numbering well over 100,000 – were defeated by Chechen independence fighters. Russia had to capitulate and granted Chechnya autonomy and the right to democratic elections.



Top, a couple outside their stone dwelling in the Caucasus Mountains. Above, the writer in Dagestan. Right, remote village close to the Chechen border.

Chechnya's infrastructure, however, was bombed out of existence, disease and hunger were rife. Ingushetia is a part of Chechnya that escaped the horrors of the war thanks to a thin line on the administrative map of the Russian Federation. In those days, as it does now, its relative neutrality served a number of aid agencies operating in Chechnya.

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My husband ran a medical aid organisation, its base the Ingushetian town of Nazran, only an hour's drive from the Chechen capital of Grozny.

I was green to it all, knew little of the history, naive enough to think that I could make a documentary about the place. Needless to say, the camera rarely came out of its case, even in Ingushetia. I was not allowed out on the street unless I was in a vehicle, accompanied by two locals and in constant radio contact. Kidnappings were commonplace. Westerners, in particular, could fetch a high ransom. Since the war, a Russian economic blockade had encouraged a black market. Chechnya and the neighbouring states of Ingushetia and Dagestan were very corrupt.

Despite the security problems, I was instantly beguiled by these tall men and women, olive-skinned, fine-boned with deep black eyes – eyes that laughed, and defied, and smiled, and, above all, eyes that challenged. The Caucasians are a mountain people, born on horseback, their defiant and fiery spirit indefatigable. Their family or clan is paramount, a law and loyalty unto itself. They say you can trace the nature of the people back to their homeland – the buttress and rampart-like topography of the wild and beautiful Caucasus Mountains.

During my three months there, I lived side by side with Chechens and their families, toured the mountains and neighbouring states of Ossetia and Dagestan, and my husband and I were married – at the suggestion of and with warm encouragement from the locals.

It was easy to romanticise: those mountain men on horseback, tales of daring, resistance fighters turned folk heroes. I relished it – even more so, when I began to appreciate the history of just how Russia struck out to destroy it.

There is a monument that stands outside Nazran, the principle town of Ingushetia. We visited it one night at sunset, when the sinking red sun cast a ghastly red light on the tall stone tower. It stands on an empty field, the tower encircled from top to bottom in barbed wire. It is a memorial to February 23, 1944 – when on Stalin's orders every man, woman and child in Ingushetia and Chechnya was rounded up and shoved onto waiting railway wagons and sent to the barren wastelands of Kazakhstan. For some in faraway villages, who were unable to walk the distance to the train, they were enclosed in straw-filled barns, the doors fastened and the buildings set alight. Thousands were executed. For the 500,000 lucky

enough to be deported, it was a three-week rail journey crammed into cattle wagons. Typhoid was epidemic. Within a year 100,000 had died.

Stalin had his excuses. He had cited collaboration with the Germans, though, in fact, many more Chechens had fought and died alongside Russians, and as many discontented Russians had aided the Germans as had Chechens.

Nor was this Stalin's first attack on the Chechens. Only 20 years earlier, they had welcomed Stalin as the Bolshevik saviour from the white Tsarist oppression. Stalin had promised them "an honest and democratic peace". Years on, the collectivisation of farms had left the Chechens poor and hungry. In 1936 they rose up in protest, demanding autonomy. In 1937 Stalin had 14,000 of them rounded up and shot.

Why this hatred? There was oil, but the reserves appear much later in the history of the bloodshed. No, it was simpler than greed. It was because the Russians could not win. From the very first time they had tried to colonise the Caucasus, whose Moslem population and culture were so different from their own, they had never fully succeeded.

What the Russians hadn't bargained for, even as far back as the 1700s, when, with the Cossacks in tow, they first sought to take control, were the fierce mountain clansmen of the Caucasus. With obvious parallels to our own history, these mountain people believed that their land was much more to them than a means of sustenance. It was the tie to their family, their ancestors and their beliefs. Even today, the Russians appear to underestimate the complexity of Chechen society. This latest military adventure began with then acting president Vladimir Putin blaming Chechen terrorists for the bombing of apartments in Moscow. No Chechen group has claimed the bombing. The Chechen Government countered with the accusation that the Russian Government itself placed the bombs in order for Putin to win the support of the Muscovites.

Putin is right to claim that Chechnya is a cesspit of Mafia-style corruption and terrorism. Numerous Russian and Western journalists and aid workers have been the targets of kidnappings and murders. It has been suggested that Chechnya is now supported by Moslem terrorists. But what Putin cannot admit is that Russian oppression and an economic blockade are as much the cause as the response.

Putin's vow to rid the Caucasus of terrorism is admirable – but at what cost? Forty thousand civilian deaths? An entire city and hundreds of towns and villages bombed out of existence? A region crippled? The cycle of hatred maintained?



Top, Chechen mountain man on horseback: easy to romanticise. Above, rugged Caucasus Mountains: the "Tibet of Russia".

browse the Internet for reports from journalists who were courageous (or suicidal) enough to find their way into Chechnya. Now, it's the Russians who they fear. I read of the Russians' scorched earth policy, of the arms trade going on (unbelievably between Russian soldiers on the ground and their Chechen targets), of how villages pay off the Russians (\$US5000 plus a television set) so their village will be spared a bombing. I read reports that the Russians are rounding up every Chechen man aged between 10 and 60 and taking them – somewhere.

And then I turn to old files and photograph albums. And I wonder where each of those people is now. Nazran, the small town where we lived, is now home to more than 200,000 refugees. Lisa, my neighbour then, will have more than her three children in the home she came to as a refugee after the last war. The house – only two rooms – will be full with her husband's three older sisters, their husbands and children, his mother and her husband's friends. They will have run, in the first wave, from Grozny to Ingushetia. The vegetable garden she struggled to cultivate will be covered in snow and ice, there will be insufficient bread or potatoes. Her eldest daughter Fareeza will be skipping in the icy courtyard to keep her skinny legs warm. If there is any money at all, Lisa's husband Ibraghim will be downing the rubles in vodka, praying to Allah for some respite.

The refugees will be watching the same television images of the destroyed cities and villages in Chechnya that reach us. Except, they are recognising the destroyed shells of their own and their neighbours' homes.

Meanwhile, the pale-faced young Russian conscripts of the checkpoint – undertrained, underpaid, and more than likely underage – will be chain-smoking cigarettes and drinking vodka to mask their terror as they are transferred to the frontline, lucky if they escape the sniper's bullets, trigger-happy when confronted with grieving women, and more likely to return home to their Russian mothers in a canvas bag.

And even more than in the last war, everyone will have lost someone.

Alhazur – he will be fighting. Now he will either be in retreat somewhere in the mountains, or dead. If he was in Grozny, and he escaped, I wonder if he was lucky enough not to be one of the first who stepped on the Russian-laid mines as they fled. When I first met this tall, broad Chechen, with swarthy good looks, black-lashed black eyes, gold teeth and deep and frequent laughter, I could not hold his gaze. He seemed to challenge you simply by looking at you. And when he suggested there would be a wedding – it was he who first suggested it – he assured me his men would be there, for protection.

Sadly, I cannot return the favour.