

The Polish daily “Gazeta Wyborcza”’s most prestigious and popular correspondent, who is often called Ryszard Kapuscinski’s finest student, tells the story of one of the most tragic events of recent

# *Towers of Stone:* Tales from Chechnya

REPORTAGE 1

by Jagielski Wojciech

years in a book titled *Towers of Stone*, published in Italy by Bruno Mondadori. He does so with the sharp, perceptive lightness of touch of a born writer

**T**hick, cold fog still hung low over the green hollow and a pallid sun rose slowly above the mountains to awaken the village of Shodroda, nestled among the slopes of the Caucasus. The women had finished milking the cows. Dishevelled children ran across the lanes, inventing pastimes for the new day. The customary morning lethargy was broken by the sudden appearance of shepherds running breathlessly down from the mountain pastures and shouting in turns that the guerrillas were marching across the pass towards the village.

Pushing their donkeys ahead, the guerrillas advanced with rifles in their hands and boxes full of ammunition. They did not hide, as if they had no fear at all of running into the soldiers patrolling the border. By midday they had already reached the village. No one stopped them; they came in without shooting. On hearing the news of the party’s approach the local police, who had spent all night celebrating a colleague’s birthday and drinking strong wine, threw their rifles into their luggage and left, the tyres of their cars squealing, in the direction of the nearest town.

There were practically no men in the village,

apart from the elderly. As always in this season, they had gone to Russia to work as masons on building sites or to harvest the fields so as to earn some money to survive in the mountains during the dry, cold autumn and icy winter to come.

The warriors were kind: they gathered the inhabitants in the square and announced that they had come from the mountains to free them. Their chief decried the wicked, corrupt officials; he also spoke of the Omnipotent One, who would recompense the peasants for the humiliations and wrongs they had suffered. “In the name of the Omnipotent One, I declare this village free and independent from the capital that God has forgotten!”

The bearded commanding officer also promised that the warriors would do no harm to the people; he even forbade his soldiers to pick apples in the peasants’ gardens. “Join us and you will live according to the commandments of the Very High One”, he told the inhabitants of Shodroda. “But if you are afraid of the helicopters, which will certainly appear as soon as news of our arrival spreads, or if you are not yet ready to live the way the Lord has decreed, you may leave”.



He looked disappointed when, an hour later, the villagers gloomily set off, abandoning the village over which a single green flag fluttered, the one the warriors had hung on the minaret of the mosque.

That day the bearded warriors also went into other villages scattered amidst the green ravines of the Caucasus, split at this point by the border that divides peaceful Daghestan from rebellious Chechnya. They appeared in Rachat, Tando, Ashino, Ansalta, Agwali, Galatle, Shauri, Andi and another dozen villages in the districts of Botlich and Cumadin in Daghestan's border zone in the Caucasus mountains.

The inhabitants of the various villages immediately recognised the bearded men as being Chechens. It was not only their language that set them apart but also their demeanour, which was unusual for these parts. The Chechens had always acted superior to other ethnic groups but their haughtiness had become truly unbearable from the summer of 1996, when, after a war that had lasted for two years, they had stopped and forced the bigger, stronger Russian Army to retreat. No Caucasian people had ever managed such an exploit; indeed it had been a long time since anyone had made the slightest attempt to stir up a war with Russia. The Chechens, on the other hand, not only felt more superior to the others than ever before since their victory against the Russians; they had also assumed the right to educate their neighbours and meddle in their affairs.

They had derisively named Daghestan "Dar al-Kufr", country of no faith, although they themselves had received the faith of the Prophet over a thousand years after the peasants of Daghestan. They had previously lived for centuries bowing down to sacred mountains and forests and even the Christian god while the ulemas and sheikhs of Daghestan, who were superior in terms of religiousness and wisdom, debated successfully with the holy men of Cairo, Baghdad and Istanbul. A number of famous Caucasian imams, starting with Imam Shamil, who had fought for political freedom as well as the establishment of God's rule, also came from Daghestan, as did three-fourths of the Caucasian pilgrims who set out each year for the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Despite having received the faith

much later – and from a usurper of a prophet, Sheikh Mansur, at that – the Chechens had given themselves the name “Dar al-Islam”, country of the faith, with the zeal of neophytes. And ever since they had stood up to the Russians, they had set themselves up as the only model for the others. So they started inciting their neighbours, near and far, to a common revolt against Russia. No sooner did they hear that someone in Kabargi, Circassia, Balcaria or Karaiai had begun to talk of independence than they would send emissaries to establish contact, offer support and spread awareness of a project for a single state for the mountain dwellers of the Caucasus. As for the mountain people of Daghestan, the Chechens haughtily explained to them that Daghestan and Chechnya were actually a single country, so the Daghestanis as well as the Chechens would have to chase Russian soldiers, officials and State employees out of their country as soon as possible so as to finally start living in freedom and be able to really breathe.

The inhabitants of Shodroda, which had been occupied by the bearded warriors, actually considered the Chechens to be their own; it was only on the map that borders divided their villages, grazing lands and the springs to which they took their cattle to drink. Only a strip of land that had been left uncultivated separated their fields, with Boltich in Daghestan on one side and Vedenno in Chechnya on the other. When the hoarse voice of Shodroda’s muezzin sounded from the loudspeaker (a tin fixed with a wire to the tower of the mosque), calling the faithful to prayer, it could also be heard by the Chechens on the other side of the valley. They knew and visited each other, traded with each other at the markets, invited each other to weddings and funerals and even, albeit on rare occasions, married each other. And when the Chechens had fought the Russians in the mountains, the mountain people of Daghestan had offered their wives and children shelter and fed and taken care of them without counting the passing of the days or asking for any recompense. Many inhabitants of Daghestan, especially the Chechen ones, had also enlisted in the guerrilla army to help in the war against the Russians. The Daghestanis did not expect anything in return: offering hospitality is as

sacred a duty for the Caucasian peoples as the obligation to uphold their reputations or perpetuate bloody vendettas from one generation to the next – the only way to settle a wrong inflicted on someone or wipe out a reason for shame. And they certainly did not expect the Chechens to boss them around in their villages in Daghestan or burst into their homes armed with rifles. “What are you looking for here?” the elders of the Daghestani villages asked them, trying to stop the guerrillas who had come down from the mountains. “Go away!” “All of Earth belongs to the Highest One”, the commanding officer growled, brushing aside the elderly white-bearded men standing in his way. “We are servants of the Omnipotent One and we can go wherever we want to; we don’t need to ask anyone’s permission”.

There were several Daghestanis among the guerrillas. Perhaps it was the presence of these natives in their units that gave the Chechen commanding officers such self-assurance; they behaved as if they were doing the Daghestani peasants a favour with their armed attacks on them. They expected no hostility or demands of any kind; rather, they gave the impression of being sure of themselves, their cause and their victory. So they treated the Daghestanis who had joined them from behind the mountains the way superiors treat inferiors, not as visitors representing a people prepared to offer them unconditional help.

The people of Shodroda, Tando and Ansalta immediately realised that these bearded men, amongst whom they recognised their fellow countrymen and neighbours, were the very rebels who had been forced to flee Daghestan the previous year because of the wrath of the local authorities. Officials in the capital, Machachkala, had announced that they were dangerous criminals and said their religion was subversive and evil. The rebels, who also believed that the “unholy and corrupt” government had to be overturned, had found shelter in neighbouring Chechnya, where about a thousand of them had taken refuge. They had settled in the town of Urus-Martan, known throughout the Caucasus as the proud bastion of Muslim fanatics, dreamers, usurpers and bandits. They did not recognise any authority and dreamed of creating a new caliphate, which some viewed

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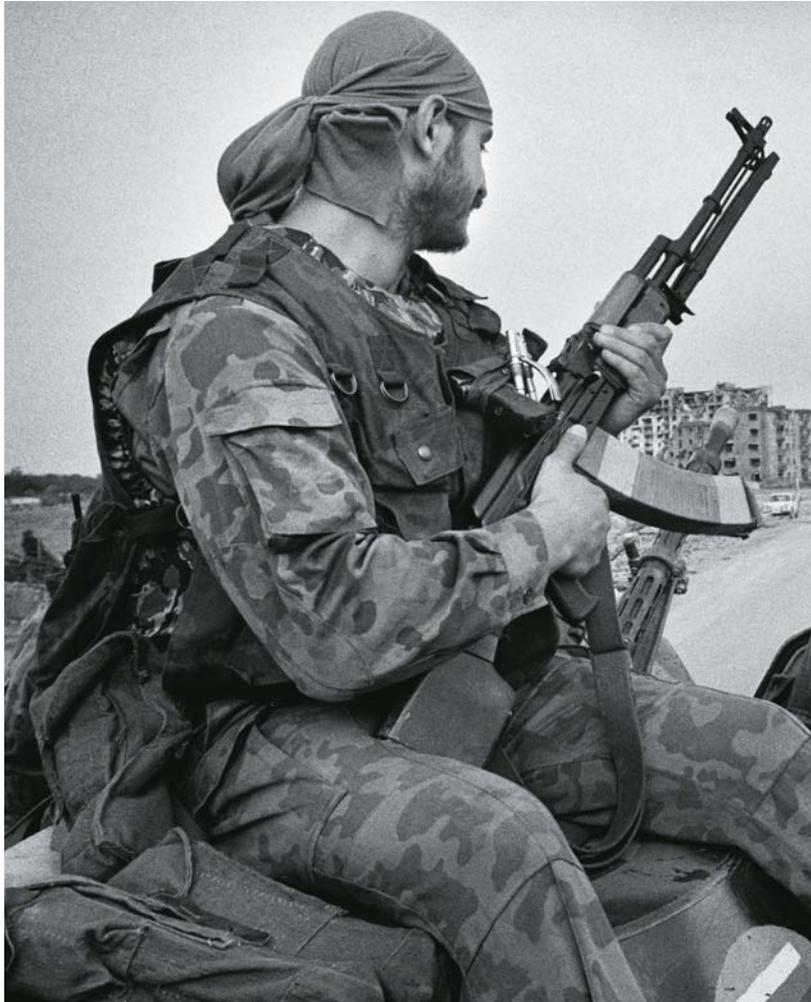
as the real kingdom of justice while others saw it as an oasis of anarchy. Urus-Martan was a gathering point for Caucasian rebels of every sort and Arab combatants who went around the world in search of martyrdom and holy wars, their passport to Paradise. Urus-Martan also had an unsavoury reputation throughout the Caucasus as the main market for prisoners taken hostage by armed gangs as well as the headquarters and military base of the gang leaders. Urus-Martan had escaped any form of control including that of Chechnya's president, whose authority it did not recognise, and no one really knew what was happening there. When the Dagestan authorities heard that the rebels had taken refuge in Urus-Martan, they called for surveillance of the Chechen border to be stepped up, for the bandits had compared the rebels' escape from Daghestan to Mohammed's flight from Mecca and promised a return as triumphal as the Prophet's.

Now they had returned, convinced that they would find a consensus and respect, at least from the poor inhabitants of the villages along the border, who had long been forgotten by the officials in faraway

Machachkala. The insurgents thought that they would be able to chase out the Russian soldiers who controlled the border with the help of the experienced Chechen fighters and proclaim the creation of an independent Islamic republic in the freed territories. In time, it would become part of Chechnya together with other oases of freedom governed according to the laws of God that had risen in Daghestan and form the embryo of a Caucasian caliphate.

On the third day the Chechens and Daghestanis leading the rebels gathered in the village of Ansalta, which had been taken without a fight. After a short meeting they chose the group to lead the insurrection: it would be formed of about fifty villages buried in the mountain ravines, which governed themselves according to the laws of the Koran without an armed revolution. Policemen and officials sent from the capital were chased out of some villages; in others, they had fled on their own from the misery and despair the way teachers, doctors and agronomists must have previously fled. Many of the people leading the insurrection – mullahs, journalists and poets – had experienced long years of imprisonment in the prisons and penal colonies of faraway Siberia, the punishment inflicted on them for their fight – which had seemed a vain one at the time – for the freedom of the Caucasus and in defence of Islam, which Russia had outlawed. Mullah Bagaudtin Mohammedov of Kizljär was appointed the head of the insurrectional council and immediately proclaimed himself Sheikh. Sirajuddin Ramazanov, an Avar from Gunib, became his vizier. The rebels proclaimed the revolt of the independent Islamic mountain republic and declared a holy war on Russia. They also proclaimed the nomination of an emir who would lead them to victory. The Chechen commanding officer who had captained the incursion into the border territories of Daghestan was chosen with no hesitation or dissent; during the previous war with Russia, he had become so renowned as to be considered a hero not only in Chechnya but also throughout the Caucasus. His name was Shamil Basaev.

Russian aircraft arrived the next day and bombed Ansalta. A new war had broken out in the Caucasus; it was to be followed by another, even bigger one, more terrible





Grazia Neri\_Panos (2)

than any of the wars that had taken place until then.

The helicopters lifted themselves heavily off the ground, groaning. Painted green, with the red stars on their armour, they struggled against the chilly, transparent morning air like swimmers trying desperately not to drown. From the town of Botlich on top of a high hill, they could be seen from afar flying over the ravine crossed by a small river, noses lowered towards the earth as if scanning the stream or trying to spot something among the rocks. Only at the foot of the mountain, where the ravine curved, did the helicopters suddenly veer upward to avoid the rise, the village clinging to its side; they did so violently, as if they had only become aware at the last minute of the rock they could have crashed into. As if groaning with the effort, they rose even higher and slowly pulled out of the ravine to place themselves in line with the Botlich market and finally hover, immobile, above the village. There they positioned themselves as if to consult each other; an instant later they launched a ferocious attack on the mountain forming the opposite wall of the ravine. The peasants in the area called the mountain "donkey's ear". The guerrillas who had come from Chechnya to incite tranquil Botlich to armed insurrection were hiding on its slopes as well as on the nearby mountain Calvo and in the village of Tando, situated between the two mountains.

On the first day they pushed forward as far as the town limits: with well-aimed launches, the grenadiers had destroyed a few Russian helicopters on the landing base dug out from among the rocks beneath the village. They did not, however, manage to instigate the Avars to fight. The mountain people not only did not listen to the foreigners; they rebelled against them. Armed with old-fashioned shotguns to hunt wolves and bears, the peasants of Godoberda first stopped them entering their village and then attacked them, showering the assailants with an

—The Chechen commanding officer and imam Shamil Basayev, who was killed in July 2006, was considered a hero of the insurrection against Russia, not only in Chechnya but throughout the Caucasus

avalanche of stones. Faced with this unexpected resistance, the guerrillas withdrew to their hiding places in the mountains, caves and woods. Divided into small groups, they defended only the mountains, passes and houses they had occupied, waiting for reinforcements and orders from Chechnya.

During the day, while the Russian aircraft and helicopters threw missiles and bombs at them, the guerrillas stayed hidden in the caves. They came out after the air strikes were over, when the Russians sent their infantrymen to the mountain in the gloomy silence that had fallen. From the rocky mountaintops, the guerrillas shot at the soldiers clambering their way up with difficulty, as if in a rural shooting match. Having withstood a few bloody attacks, the Russians gave up. From then on, the odd gunshot with which the guerrillas greeted the helicopters flying overhead was the only sound to be heard. The war against the resistance fighters was essentially conducted by heavy armoured helicopters that assailed their hiding places and blew up the occupied villages: systematically, day after day, house after house, from the cool of dawn to the hot, late sunset. The mountains around Botlich resounded with thudding, faraway explosions; white columns of smoke rose from the greyish rocks and green woods, marking the points the bombs and missiles had reached. When the air strikes intensified, fog-like grey smoke covered the slopes and peaks of the mountains. The bombing only stopped at lunchtime, when the air became too muggy.

The village it was so quiet you could hear the grass growing; it was as if the inhabitants were watchfully holding their breath, waiting to hear the next set of explosions and foretell the future through them.

On the stone square, whiskered old men wearing bearskin hats huddled on a small bench, silent and still, watching the show of war in the mountains like veterans who are given invitations to a play for the services they have rendered. Led to the stalls and left to their own devices, they silently watched the same show over and over without understanding its content or meaning. The impression was heightened by the fact that the entire village looked like an amphitheatre excavated from the craggy rock. The sides of

the mountains around Botlich formed the cavea: rows of stone houses were pressed into in their clefts and faults, seeking support and balance; they touched and elbowed each other, massed together, with the roofs of the lower-placed houses serving as courtyards for the ones higher up and the nearby houses held up by stone walls shared by all of them. In this zealous elbowing, this fight for the conquest of space, there was no longer any room for the extremely narrow, winding lanes leading from the higher level houses to the market and the little mosque, the most important and central place, the sacred place reserved for the elderly, who spent the whole day watching the planes and helicopters cut through the serene, intensely blue sky, chasing off the eagles and hawks.

The children spent their days on the roofs or treetops. The houses and trees most frequently attacked were the ones on the outskirts of the villages, on the very cliff from which the helicopters appeared. From above the cliff one could look the pilots in the face and up close as they lifted their machines to the level of the village's rocky shelf. Each helicopter that lifted up the chasm was greeted with an enthusiastic clamour from the group of children.

The women, for their part, watched the war from their courtyards or sent fleeing, worried looks at it from near the wells or their kitchens as they went about their work: they straightened up laboriously from above their washing-up bowls and steaming pots and looked skywards, shading their eyes from the sun.

From the morning until sunset, announced by the muezzin plaintively calling the faithful to evening prayers, the entire little town (including us foreign journalists) stayed motionlessly watching the helicopters and listening to the muffled, faraway explosions.

There was nothing else to do. Nothing was happening.

From our amphitheatre we were unable to see the stage on which the performance was being given, veiled as it was by a huge green mountain. We listened to the echoes of the battle and watched the columns of smoke climb from the mountainous peak behind which the helicopters and aircraft would disappear: three went in and three out; there was a crash and smoke followed by a pause.



Grazia Neri\_Panos (4)



Then, once again, two went in, and then another two; there was a crash, smoke and the roaring of the engines of the machines turning back.

We were seated like spectators in front of a curtain someone had forgotten to raise, although the show had already begun. The actors went on and offstage and we could not see what was happening. We could only hear the sounds of the drama being staged behind the curtain; we could only imagine the plot and its unfolding.

There was no way to move either: the army had already managed to block the roads leading to Chechnya and the soldiers at the roadblocks around Botlich would not let anyone past, not even to go to Godoberda, around which some clashes were apparently taking place. The three Avars with whom we had travelled from Moscow to Machachkala on an empty plane were supposed to come and get us there. They lived in Godoberda and had gone to Russia to work for the summer, but as soon as they heard on the radio that the Chechen guerrillas had pressed beyond their own territory, they had left their work and were now returning home to fight the intruders. They squabbled along the way: one thought that they should buy guns at the market in Machachkala while the other two argued that there was no need to waste money because the local authorities in the village would surely distribute weapons. We had left the Avars in Botlich, for the soldiers were only allowing people who lived in the village and could prove it with some form of documentation to go there; the others were made to go back to the town and some were even sent all the way back to Machachkala.

Secret service agents appeared; they stood guard on the streets and sat in the inns alongside the locals and us foreigners; they wandered, apparently aimlessly, amidst the tortuous lanes of the town and spent their time in the shade of the trees in the square facing the mosque. They kept their ears cocked, checked things and walked around; they forbade everything and demanded everywhere that people show them documents, passes and permits, on which the number of stamps – round, triangular or square – was never sufficient.

As usual, we had come to the wrong place at the wrong time.