

# Sounds of War: Condemned to Hope

Written by Susanna Hast

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Sounds of War: Condemned to Hope

<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/03/15/sounds-of-war-condemned-to-hope/>

SUSANNA HAST, MAR 15 2018

**This is an excerpt from *Sounds of War: Aesthetics, Emotions and Chechnya* – an E-IR open access book by Susanna Hast.**

**Download your free copy here.**

**You can listen to all the songs featured in this book on the companion website.**

In late 2014, I met Chechens living outside their homeland for the first time. Some were refugees, but not everyone. I first went to see a family in their home. The family's father was absent, and the mother greeted me warmly with an embrace. She did her prayers, and I exchanged some words with her daughter. Afterwards, we suddenly had to leave. I did not realise that we were about to witness a group of young Chechen women and girls performing in their traditional costumes. This performance was just for me, and I found myself seated in a chair alone in front of the young dancers. Later, because of my allergies, I had to decline a table full of cakes the women had prepared. I remembered reading about Chechen hospitality and felt ashamed. We talked about life, about dance, a disappeared brother, a search for a job, Chechen-only marriages, traditions and the fabric their dresses were made of. We did not discuss war.

I hastily filmed some clips with my mobile phone. Among those clips was one of a young woman singing a song called *Daimohk*, meaning ancestral land. The song is about the beauty of nature and the Chechen landscape. It is also about honour and dignity, and love for the homeland. I did not get permission to publish the song because I had no contact with the singer. The missing song is a silence, a rupture, an empty soundscape. If I do find the singer and get permission, I will publish the song on my website. Research is a process.

### Why Chechnya?

Chechnya is a republic of the Russian Federation in the North Caucasus with slightly over one million inhabitants, of which a majority are of Chechen descent. Massive war crimes took place in Chechnya during the two wars – after the collapse of the Soviet Union, including rape, mutilation, torture, kidnapping and murder. The sweep operations conducted by Russian Special Forces and contract soldiers of the second war have been called a collective punishment aimed to destroy the cohesion of local communities (Gilligan 2010; Médecins Sans Frontières 1999).

When I began this research project in 2013, I wanted to find out how people could experience compassion in the context of war, and what forms compassion could take. I could have chosen any war as the context, but I was already working with Russian area studies for a decade and wanted to learn more about Chechnya. I do not have any personal connection to Chechnya or any exciting story to tell about how this research came about. I simply thought of Chechnya when I thought of war. Perhaps the fact that I do not speak or understand Russian well enough is one reason I began looking beyond words towards the body and aesthetics. My lack of language skills never prevented communication, and human-to-human bonding with the Chechens I had the privilege of meeting. In fact, with difficulties in language-based communication, the body stands out as the means with which to speak.

In this chapter I provide context for understanding the two wars in Chechnya, and I present an overview of some

# Sounds of War: Condemned to Hope

Written by Susanna Hast

cultural aspects. The following chapters often refer to 'tradition,' not because time has stopped, but because the idea of tradition is the idea of community – the Chechen community tied to its war history, cultural history, land, customs and identity.

## Aesthetics of Tradition

It is not an easy task to conduct research on Chechnya, especially for non-Russian and non-Chechen speakers (Jaimoukha 2005). Societies are constantly changing and the purpose of this book is not to generalise and categorise Chechens. As I will later explain, this means trying to avoid *stilling*. At the same time, I make visible these stills, which often relate to traditions like the clan system, honour, hospitality, Sufism, folklore and social structures. The emphasis on tradition, and the construction of Chechen people/identity as a singularity stills the Chechen community into a static and homogenous one. The purpose for this may be to build a sense of community for people living in the aftermath of war and genocide. The act of stilling the community is a survival strategy.

The narrative of Chechen tradition, including descriptions of that which is inherent, historical and shared in the community, is part of the aesthetics of Chechen war experience. There is no authentic Chechnya to be discovered, but there is an idea of the authentic which keeps surfacing in the material analysed here. The tension between the idea of maintaining Chechen tradition and the abandoning of tradition in war time is at the core of the politics of emotions in Chechnya. This is why the stories and images that are most interesting in terms of emotions are often related to traditions, and the patriarchal system which sustains them. I will explain some of the social structures to which the idea of Chechen identity and way of life are attached.

Amjad Jaimoukha (2005), who I refer to often in this chapter, explains the difficulties in describing social structures, such as the *tukhum-taip* system, because there is no stable model to present. Traditions are always changing. According to Jaimoukha (2005), clan exclusivity has become less pronounced, even though it still manifests in people seeking marriage outside the clan (*taip/teip*) but inside the tribe (*tukhum*). Kvedaravicius (2012) discusses the relationship of *teip* affinity to actual public governance in Chechnya, and writes that the discourse on *teip* affiliation is strong but the affiliation does not necessarily manifest in governance practices. How the *teip* system manifests in social relations is a question of social ties "forged and severed, politics enabled and forsaken, deaths occasioned or forestalled" (Kvedaravicius 2012: 181). In other words, "discourses perpetually linger on the verge of enactment within temporalities" (Kvedaravicius 2012: 181). There is no one story to tell about Chechnya, there are stories which are real as they become enacted, lived experiences. For example, the dichotomy between the local tradition of Sufi Islam and Wahhabism is enacted in the practise of the fight against terrorism. The local enforcers of anti-terror campaigns are amnestied rebels, former *Wahhabity* now fighting against *Wahhabism*, who can be accused of being *Wahhabity* themselves. Religious difference is sometimes entangled with blood feud sentiments, in which case revenge can be targeted against *Wahhabi* even if it originates in blood revenge.

For me the interest is in how traditions and 'anti-traditions' are aestheticised – how they are drawn as central to the everyday experience. Khassan Baiev (et al. 2003) refers to tradition – hospitality, respect for elders, honour, blood revenge, modesty, bravery – continuously as a way of explaining Chechnya to the foreign reader. But traditions are multifaceted too. For example, blood feud does not always lead to violence. The community deciding on the punishment can exercise forgiveness, requesting compensation for the victim's family. Baiev offers an example: a family that lost its son took in the perpetrator to their family as their surrogate son.

Tradition is an important discourse which constructs the collective identity of a people under attack. Traditions are under threat in war, and to practice and remember them is to hold on to the collectively defined self. To not refer to tradition, in this context, is interesting too. Milana Terloeva (2006), who I introduce in Chapter six, writes very little about marriage tradition or honour, for example, when she describes the loves and losses of her friends. Although with regards to other themes, Terloeva too brings forth visions of Chechen mentality, spirit and tradition. I will argue that her writing, stripped of references to patriarchal traditions, is then a politics of love.

Like the autobiographies of Baiev (et al. 2003) and Terloeva (2006), the documentaries I analyse in this study bring forth ideas of tradition, or rather, they visualise and make them audible. It is no wonder that the Sufi ritual *zikr* has

# Sounds of War: Condemned to Hope

Written by Susanna Hast

ended up in documentaries on Chechnya, because it is impressive and strange. *Zikr*, in which the participants are seeking a trance-like state, is made of synchronous movement and religious chanting. The soundscape of *zikr* is powerful even for the distant observer through the screen. Chechen dance, *lezginka*, discussed in Chapter four similarly exemplifies the importance of corporeal-aesthetic moves and rhythms of war/(post-)war experiences. In addition to the dance present in films, both Baiev (et al. 2003) and Terloeva (2006) write about wedding dance in their wartime memoirs.

Jaimoukha (2005: 6–7) calls the Chechen struggle against Russian invasions and exportations a mechanism for “internalising history and propagating it through esoteric institutions.” Thus, the *taip* (clan) system and Sufism act as a means to preserve Chechen-ness. To cover all the elements of Chechen society, history and institutions in this book would be impossible, but I make references in order to provide context for the analysis while trying to avoid distancing, exoticising and using a Western colonial gaze to describe a foreign culture. It is not the otherness I want to bring forth in this book, but rather the sameness. This sameness relates to a culture of violence and the stories that resonate across cultures and countries, but also to a culture of healing and resistance to violence – the important stories of survival. The experience of violence, be it war, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, psychological violence, abuse or other forms, induces similar expressions of trauma (Lewis Herman 2011). Individual trauma is connected to collective trauma. I believe that the investigation of emotions in war is related to experiences of violence and healing. A sensing and constant negotiation of difference is my solution to the ethics of researching the foreign and unfamiliar, or sometimes not so unfamiliar. I do not claim that bringing the research close to the skin is always better than other ways of researching, but I hope to give it a chance.

## So Tired After the Wars

War history seems to be the most important history of Chechnya to tell. If you search for articles and books on Chechnya, you find war sooner rather than later. Constantly on guard, Chechens have fought invasions and tried to preserve their community. Even before encounters with Russia, in medieval times, Chechens fought hordes of Tatar-Mongols. When I interviewed two Chechen men living outside of Chechnya, they impressed me with their historical knowledge. At the same time, they told me how much of that history has been lost because “it is difficult to write and fight at the same time” (Ali and Said 2017). In fact, the wars destroyed much of the written history stored in Grozny (Tishkov 2004). But Ali and Said want to tell me about the fights against the Mongols. They tell me that Chechen warriors shaved their heads so that the Mongols could not hang the decapitated enemy heads by the hair while riding their horses. The story makes us three laugh. Even if I do not ask, we return to war all the time, sometimes joking, sometimes serious. It is present, waiting to be remembered, a historical memory not to be erased. But the women I met in Ali’s house, and at the cultural centre where the young women danced for me, do not talk about the war with me.

The early nineteenth century Russian-Caucasian War, before Chechnya was part of Russia, was the bloody precedent of the post-Soviet era wars (Jaimoukha 2005). It involved deportations to Siberia, civilian killings, burnt villages and destroyed livelihoods. In 1861, Russia finally annexed Chechnya. This was also the period of Islamisation of the Chechen society when Imam Shamil came to the region and began converting the semi-pagan mountain Chechens. The end of the nineteenth century also saw the industrial exploitation of oil resources in Chechnya. 1917 presented the opportunity for independence, but in 1921 the Red Army occupied the North Caucasus. During the Soviet collectivisation policy, previous economic and social structures were ruptured. In 1934, Chechen and Ingush autonomic oblasts were combined as one, and, in 1936, made into an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, more than 30,000 Chechen and Ingush men enlisted in the Soviet Army, but volunteers also fought against the Red Army in the hope that Germany would liberate the North Caucasus.

In the winter of 1944, ethnic cleansing of Chechens and Ingush was implemented by Soviet troops. Masses were deported on Stalin’s orders, in order to abolish Chechnya from the Soviet map. Jaimoukha (2005) describes how hundreds of thousands were herded to collection points and forced into trains for a trip that lasted days, and even weeks. At least one quarter perished during the trip or during the first months of exile. Russians, Ukrainians and Daghestani resettled the Grozny Oblast. The deported were sent to Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, and elsewhere in the

# Sounds of War: Condemned to Hope

Written by Susanna Hast

Soviet Union.

Milana Terloeva (2006) recounts her grandmother's experiences of deportation to Kazakhstan. They were chased out of their houses on the night of February 23, 1944. Her grandmother was with her siblings, cousins, mother and grandfather who refused to leave. Those who stayed were killed, even burnt alive. In 1957, when they were allowed to return after 13 years of exile, they had no homes to return to. Russians had taken over, and they could not return to the mountains but were forced to live in the capital Grozny. They would rebuild and take back their lands, Terloeva's grandmother explains to her, only for everything to be destroyed again. And when the second war was ongoing, when everything had been destroyed again, her grandmother comforted her, saying "we will rebuild, like always." She continued, "You have no right to despair. We are condemned to hope, Milana." To be condemned means to be punished by an external force. To be condemned *to hope* is a choice, it is the determination to survive the punishment. *Condemned to hope* is an expression which captures the lived experience of Terloeva's grandmother. It is a reminder to future generations that they could live without hope, but they would not rebuild or heal without it.

After the exile, the population more than doubled over a 30 year period, and Chechen nationalism became more assertive in the 1980s, in particular with *perestroika* and *glasnost* which allowed more freedom of expression (Jaimoukha 2005). The wars which followed, in 1994 and 1999 were not only fought for political survival, but also for cultural identity and heritage, material and non-material. In October 1991, Dzhokhar Dudayev won the presidency, and soon after issued a degree proclaiming state sovereignty seceding Chechnya from Russia which caused Boris Yeltsin to declare a state of emergency in Chechnya. In 1992, Ingush districts separated from Chechnya. After Russian attempts to support Chechen opposition to bring Dudayev down failed in December 1994, Yeltsin sent in troops.

Russian troops met fierce resistance on New Year's Eve in the city of Grozny. The civilian population was trapped in Grozny where apartment buildings were targeted (Gilligan 2010). According to Jaimoukha (2005), the Russian strategy was to terrorise the population by massacring civilians. Anna Politkovskaya (2003) describes the famous fight over Grozny as the spectacular slaughter of the Russian forces. According to Politkovskaya, the first generation of Chechen fighters were volunteers who were not motivated only by the present but by the past as well – they fought for their ancestors who perished in 1944 as well as those who died fighting Russia even before that. The second war made many of these young men professionals. Warlord Shamil Basayev attracted many of the former fighters, and they turned to Islamic revolution in order to fight foreign domination. But, as Politkovskaya explains, it was not Islamic tradition but rather the violent chaos of various private armies seeking sources of income in the ruined country that encouraged the religious aspect in the second war.

President Dudayev was killed by a Russian rocket in April 1996. Presidential elections were approaching in Russia and Yeltsin needed good news. Russian troops were unprepared and the invasion ended in a standstill forcing Moscow to negotiate a cease-fire in the Spring of 1996. After Chechen forces stormed Grozny, causing heavy losses to Russian troops, a peace treaty was finally signed on August 31st. Aslan Maskhadov was elected president in January 1997 and in May he signed an agreement with Yeltsin for the future of Chechnya.

Moscow's hardliners considered Chechnya a bandit state and wanted to reverse the peace agreement. Military humiliation, the Caspian oil pipeline passing through Chechnya, and the dangerous example of national ambitions were motivations for the next invasion. Chechnya was in internal chaos and the economy was crushed with high unemployment. There were problems such as lawlessness, an industry of kidnappings, an illegal oil trade, and rivaling warlords with their militias consolidating their power through violence (Jaimoukha 2005; see also Russell 2007).

The second war was preceded by the Chechen rebel Shamil Basayev sending his army to Dagestan in support of separatist rebels. As another incentive to use force, the apartment building bombing of September 1999 was blamed on a Chechen terrorist. Afterwards, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin ordered air bombings of Grozny, followed by a land invasion. Putin's rise to popularity and finally presidency in March 2000 has been linked to the politics around the war in Chechnya, and the apartment bombings in Moscow and other cities in Autumn 1999 (Russell 2007).

## Sounds of War: Condemned to Hope

Written by Susanna Hast

The Putin administration framed the war as a fight against Islamic extremism. The second war brought a more explicitly religious connotation, and along with it the accusation that Chechens were involved in international terrorism through *Wahhabite* militarism. Wahhabism (a radical religious-political doctrine) was introduced in Chechnya in the early 1990s (Kvedaravicius 2012). According to Johnston (2008), foreign Islamists meant resources, skills, recruits, and money for the Chechen resistance. It was in Russia's interest to frame the war as an operation to eliminate international terrorism rather than an armed conflict between Russia and Chechnya. Such framing excluded other knowledge, history and experiences from the narrative.

The war left one third of the Chechen population displaced, as some forty towns and villages were bombed (Gilligan 2010). Chechen fighters committed crimes as well. According to Human Rights Watch (2000), the fighters put civilians at risk and beat and killed village elders who tried to stop the fighters entering their village. They also committed kidnappings during the interwar years, and were responsible for hostage-takings and suicide bombings against Russian civilians (see Gilligan 2010). And Russian soldiers cannot be lumped into one category as perpetrators, either. As Gilligan (2010) explains, conscripted soldiers had lower moral due to their own mistreatment and the brutality of the war, which sometimes led to their reluctance to participate. Maya Eichler (2011), who interviewed Russian veterans of the Chechen wars, discovered men who were morally opposed to and unprepared for the war. One of her interviewees, who led troops to Grozny in 1994, considered the war politically motivated and unjust. He considered Chechens his fellow citizens. Soldiers used excessive force and sexual violence against civilians but war crimes charges were never brought forward and only a few cases were prosecuted in Russia.

Western states did not intervene, and could do nothing to prevent the human suffering in Chechnya. Many saw the war as Russia's internal matter. Putin was elected president of the Russian Federation and Akhmad Kadyrov, who fought against Russia but changed sides, was appointed head of the Chechen administration in June 2000. In 2002, when Chechen fighters took hostages in the Dubrovka Theatre in Moscow and the Russian military pumped poisonous gas into the ventilation system killing over 200 hostages and 41 Chechen fighters, Putin's line hardened against Chechnya and he refused negotiations with Maskhadov. According to Russell (2007), since Dubrovka, or even since 2000, Putin's solution was the 'Chechenisation' of the conflict; that is, he chose to transfer the fight against secessionism and terrorism to pro-Moscow Chechens under Kadyrov's leadership. In October 2003, Kadyrov was elected president but he was assassinated in May 2004. Again, the war destroyed economic enterprises and infrastructures such as transport systems, and electricity supply utilities were severely damaged. Moreover, the two wars have been environmental catastrophes due to oil spillages, illegal oil refineries and water pollution, while landmines and disease have caused further suffering. According to Jaimoukha (2005) the economy reverted back to agriculture and cattle-breeding when restoration funds did not reach the population.

Russia took over Grozny in early 2000, but the war did not end when the full-scale offensive did. Chechnya was established as a Counter-Terrorist Zone which actually produced terrorism by allowing violence, torture and kidnapping (see Kvedaravicius 2012). There is no data available on the number of deaths in the two wars, but according to Gilligan, the most reliable figures are between 65,000–75,000 (2010: 3). Moreover, several thousand went missing after the 'cleansings' (Laurén 2009). Abductions by federal forces were a business in which the abducted were sold back alive or dead to their families. Russian prison camps were sites of systematic and large-scale torture. The war did not destroy the lives of Chechens only. According to Russell (2007), a large proportion of the million and a half Russian troops suffered from posttraumatic stress, which is commonly called the 'Chechen syndrome.'

In 2007, Ramzan Kadyrov became president after the death of his father. Kadyrov has Putin's support even as I write this, and Chechnya has received significant financial support from Moscow. The majority religion in Chechnya is Islam with two branches, canonical Sunni, represented by the Shafii legal school, and Sufism. President Kadyrov has been promoting a peculiar mixture of the two as part of a new Chechen identity. Kadyrov has his own private militia called *Kadyrovtsy* inherited from his father's security force.

After the war, Chechnya remained a Counter-Terrorist Zone until 2009. Violence was "lingering heavily on the spectacle of reconstructed cities and the subsidized economy" (Kvedaravicius 2012: 7). It meant the same methods as in war time: aerial bombardments, the wiping out of villages, the killing of civilians, concentration camps and

## Sounds of War: Condemned to Hope

Written by Susanna Hast

torture chambers. Violence also created financial opportunities such as kidnappings for ransom, bribes at checkpoints, illegal oil and weapons trades and so forth. By 2006, as Kvedaravicius (2012) notes, the operation involved over 45,000 federal troops, thousands of law enforcement and security service agents under federal control, and thousands of Chechen soldiers and law enforcement agents. Forced disappearances became widespread and systematic constituting crimes against humanity as thousands have disappeared, most of them young men, since 1999 (Human Rights Watch 2005; Gilligan 2010).

Pro-Moscow Chechen forces gradually took over the task of abductions from the federal troops. The operation relied on local Chechen factions and groups around the families of former field commanders who had changed to the federal side. The Russian human rights organisation *Memorial* kept a database of the disappeared and had an office in Chechnya until July 2009 when Natalia Estemirova was abducted and killed. Some people have chosen not to report the disappearances, fearing further persecution. Disappearances and killings, reportedly targeting sexual minorities, continue to date (Hille 2015; Mirovalev 2015; Walker 2017). Yulia Gorbunova (2017) from Human Rights Watch writes how asylum seekers from the North Caucasus, especially Chechnya, have arrived at the Belarus-Polish border hoping to cross to safety. In the summer of 2016, some 400–800 people, most of whom were from Chechnya, tried to cross the border from Brest to Terespol. They were escaping the violence of the Kadyrov regime in fear for their lives.

Kvedaravicius explains that, as a result of the abductions, terrorists were simultaneously produced and destroyed: people changed sides when security and financial interests were at stake. Different agents, groups and institutions were in abundance in the counter-terrorist zone. “Thus, military battalions, combat units and institutions with strange acronyms, and special groups, police stations, prosecutors’ offices, and courthouses [...] were now vying and collaborating in the production of terrorists while other, complex, post-war entanglements were weighing upon them” (Kvedaravicius 2012: 14). Kvedaravicius argues that there is no post-war situation in Chechnya because violence continues to permeate the everyday.

As Kvedaravicius shows through his study and the film *Barzakh*, which I analyse in Chapter four, war continues to be lived and experienced long after the bombs stop falling. Crawford (2015) explains that if war is seen through the logic of rational thinking, and not emotions, it leads to war being defined by the number of casualties – war calculable and quantifiable. But if we look at emotions in war, we see war creeping in, affecting people in diverse ways, and staying for way too long. We have a much longer timeline and many more variables. We see that emotions are constitutive of war and politics. It is for this reason that we need to remain interested in Chechnya even if nothing dramatic seems to be happening there (see Nivat 2001).

A Chechen man I met in 2017 told me about the climate in Chechnya at that time. It was a difficult decision to include our conversation in this book, because talking about politics in Chechnya is a risk for Chechens in the diaspora as much as for those living in Chechnya. For many, the political climate in Chechnya has gotten worse than it was during the war with Russia because now Chechens have been betrayed from the inside. The documentarist Monan Loizeau, in an interview she gave about her film on (post-)war Chechnya, says that the enemy used to be only Russia; now, in the face of Kadyrov’s terror, people are afraid of being betrayed by their own family because solidarity no longer exists (Tchernookova 2015). For those who dare to voice their criticism against Kadyrov’s regime, the result can be death. The man’s daughter came into the room and said: “It’s a crazy country. You know, here on the street you can say anything you like. But not there.” The Chechenisation of the second war made Chechens turn against each other, and silenced the people. “Kadyrov betrayed us,” the man said. He does not even believe Kadyrov is a real Chechen. For him, Kadyrov is a showman, Russia’s puppet, and the rebuilt Grozny is a facade which does not concern the majority of people who live in poverty. “This is a big test for us. I trust God,” he sighed.

The Chechen man talked about the lack of freedom that is embodied in the danger that comes with growing a beard. As a legacy of the Chechenisation and the anti-terrorist campaign of the second war, beards provoke suspicion. “The bearded men are considered Wahhabi,” he said. This is how war continues as a lived, bodily experience. I ask if two Chechen men would like to return home. “No,” they answered, because there is no normal life anymore. “You are either with him or against him [Kadyrov]. There is no return for those who oppose his policies,” the other man said. “We are attached to our land, our hearts are always there,” he continued. It is not an easy decision for them to live

## Sounds of War: Condemned to Hope

Written by Susanna Hast

abroad, but it would be worse in Chechnya. The punishment for criticising the regime would fall upon the family, the relatives, and the entire tribe. It is because of an anti-terror law, the men told me. "Everyone is so tired after the wars."

### To Stay Humane

War can be statistics. It can be the count of dead civilians and soldiers. It can be the number of injured or disappeared, the number of babies born with disabilities, or how many people suffer from trauma or mental illness. It can be a report on human rights violations. It can be a description of military strategy, or events unfolding on the battlefield. A description of war can include numbers of arms and tanks or how many cities were destroyed. A description of war can include information on the resulting natural disasters or the destruction of infrastructure. A description of war could include details about how people suffered from hunger, lack of health care, education, or housing. Causes and effects of war could be explained by religion, corruption, historical legacy, oil, economy, greed, hate, identity, and the mountains of Chechnya.

Chechen war history often places genocide and Russian cruelty or the heroic warrior tradition at the centre (see Akhmadov and Lansky 2010; Jaimoukha 2005). Such war histories tell of conquering Russians and fighting Chechens, but they tell little about the strategies, hopes, and experiences of civilians in wartime. It has been the work of human rights activists to collect testimonials validating the suffering of ordinary people or the destruction of livelihoods and nature. Médecins Sans Frontières has also done important work collecting testimonials in Chechnya (for example, Médecins Sans Frontières 2014) as has Memorial. The French journalist Anne Nivat (2001) travelled illegally across the war zone, covering the second war and people's experiences, reporting with great risk through a satellite phone she had to strap to her belly. The human rights activist and journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was murdered in 2006, became a witness to the second war, and her description of war in *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya* (2003) also focuses on testimonials. As Derluigan (2003) writes, reading this book, which portrays the complexity of the human condition, requires moral labour.

The moral labour comes from the connections the reader forms to the stories of individuals touched by war. The reader becomes a witness of war, even if a distant one.

I am interested in war as lived experience, "and that means looking at social aspects of war, people and/in/as war, rather than subsuming them in causes and effects" (Sylvester 2013a: 671). For me, this means embarking on a path which takes from and develops further research on *emotions* and *lived experience* (for example, Brennan 2004; Butler 2009; Penttinen 2013; Sylvester 2013b). Thus, I am preoccupied with war in the sense that it touches people's lives (Sylvester 2011; Butler 2009). As the ethnomusicologist Martin Daughtry (2015: 26) puts it, "armed violence, through its sensory and affective intensity, brings injury to a far larger population than those whose bodies are penetrated by flying metal." I believe embodied emotions are stories that make us deconstruct and rethink our knowledge about people in wartime. Thus I chose to look at something less obvious: the emotion of compassion, the role of children, and finally, love in war.

In this study, I take the everyday to be a site of resistance, resistance which manifests in compassion. By resistance, I mean material bodies that refuse to become firmly and unambiguously located in systems of power (Väyrynen et al. 2016). Encounters are sites of resistance, and can be mundane. Furthermore, they note that the corporeal and gestural body politic may sometimes appear as being without clear purpose and direction yet different struggles and everyday relations of bodies evoke various capacities and potentialities which pave the way for political agency. The stories I share here, and the readings of the body I make are founded upon this same idea of mundane choreographies which are unstable, almost invisible or unfitting, and seem to refuse to be stilled.

People are never fully governed. They are not just passive victims to be rescued, or else it would be a hopeless life (Banes 2015). In the course of this research I have become curious about the dichotomy of victim/perpetrator. This is problematic when the two are made categories which exclude each other, and these categories are seen to define human nature. The reason why it is important to discuss, not so much abandon, the victim/perpetrator divide is that in a culture of violence, we need to think about how to prevent violence, which means getting at the root of violence in

## Sounds of War: Condemned to Hope

Written by Susanna Hast

human experience. A man who is a *victim* of war can also be a *perpetrator* of violence by participating in a bride kidnap, blood revenge or honour killing. That same person can carry the trauma of Stalin's deportation, and is also a *victim* of the patriarchal culture which encourages and normalises violence against women and sexual minorities. Thus, there might be no single narrative to tell.

A compassionate encounter between perpetrator and victim can be an act of everyday resistance to cruelty in war (Hast 2014). Politkovskaya (2003) shares a story of Rosita, who was held in a tiny pit for twelve days, and tortured with electric shocks. There was a soldier who one night threw her a piece of carpet. Her release was promised in exchange for a ransom so big the villagers could not afford it. Eventually the soldiers (Federal Security Servicemen) settled for a tenth of the sum and Rosita was released. The practise Politkovskaya (2003: 49) describes here is "a concentration camp with a commercial streak." But this concentration camp had a soldier who offered a piece of carpet which led Rosita to realise the soldier is a human being too.

Politkovskaya, travelling in Chechnya, witnessed the destruction of the human spirit. For example, many Russian elderly were abandoned in Grozny during the wars. Politkovskaya was at the backyard of a former food factory in Shali, Chechnya, where she witnessed hundreds of homeless refugees cursing and fighting with each other while in queue for a food ration from the Russian government. She (2003: 43) writes, "This is an utter loss of human feeling, total alienation. It's impossible not to notice the extent to which traditional Chechen mentality has been destroyed here."

For all she witnessed in Chechnya, Politkovskaya (2003: 111) concluded that, "Wherever cruelty is a norm of life, no one can expect compassion and mercy, not even the weakest." Compassion in war is not to be taken for granted. Yet, compassion is not absent in a war zone, or when post-war begins to emerge. Compassion in war is human revolution, perhaps the most profound revolution possible. The presence of compassion in a wartorn society, among people deprived of everything, is what we need to learn about because it enriches our understanding of how war is experienced in relation to the most profound human (and non-human) connections and bonds. As Penttinen (2013) writes, research does not always have to analyse the disease, it can also look into the cure which is found in the human being herself. Compassion can be a cure, and I will argue later in this chapter that love can be a cure too. But first I need to explain what compassion is about, and why I am interested in its embodiment.

---

### About the author:

**Susanna Hast** is Academy of Finland postdoctoral researcher with a project "Bodies in War, Bodies in Dance" (2017–2020) at the Theatre Academy Helsinki, University of the Arts. She does artistic research on emotions, embodiment and war; and teaches dance for immigrant and asylum-seeking women in Finland.