



Shali Graves

by Jonas Bernstein

Bouncing down a road on the outskirts of Nazran in a Russian jeep filled with four drunken Ingush teenagers (one of them at the wheel), and a reggae singer shouting "Hello, Afree-ka!" on the tape player—this was not how I imagined I'd spend Eid al-Fitr, the holiday marking the end of Ramadan. Nazran had donned its Sunday best to celebrate the end of a month of self-abnegation. Neatly dressed men, young and old, promenaded—or staggered—through the city center; others whipped by in Ladas with green, pink, or white flags streaming out of windows. Freshly scrubbed young kids carried bags of candy they had collected door-to-door in a Moslem version of trick-or-treat.

For all the festivities, though, Ingushetia doesn't have much to celebrate. In 1991 it began giving refuge to tens of thousands of its ethnic brethren fleeing neighboring North Ossetia to escape the Russian-armed Ossetian militias. Now this poor republic is housing and feeding tens of thousands of its displaced Chechen cousins. Both Ingush and Chechens say the distinction between them is an artificial one, imposed by their Russian conquerors in the nineteenth century. They are, everyone insists, one people.

Whether one or two, however, they are all well-versed in the agonies of displacement. The mother of my Ingush host described how her family was herded onto a train bound for Kazakhstan in 1944, when Stalin deported every Chechen and Ingush man, woman, and child from their homeland. In 1992 she and her family were forced out of their new home in North Ossetia. Her eyes now failing, she cried as she recalled

how the Ingush were shot, burned alive, and decapitated.

Besides the stream of Chechen refugees, there are other daily reminders of the latest Caucasian war: each morning, Chechnya-bound Russian army helicopter gunships fly low over the Ingush capital, while trucks and armored personnel carriers ferry fresh troops into what the Russians call "the conflict zone."

Early in the morning on the day before Eid al-Fitr, I hitched a ride into the zone on a bus chartered by the Ingush government's Ministry for Emergency Situations. It was a regular run, organized by Pyotr Kosov, adviser to Ingush president Ruslan Aushev and deputy ataman of the All-Great Cossack forces of the Don. Kosov goes back and forth all the time, getting information on Russian and Chechen POWs and bringing in food and medicine for the civilians. He has good relations with field commanders on both sides, and always takes along a bundle of the day's edition of *Izvestia* to give away: it is a prized possession in Chechnya, which is under a Russian information blockade. On this day the destination was the town of Shali, located some 25 km southeast of the Chechen capital of Grozny.

Some Cossacks, their anger fueled by territorial disputes with Chechnya, have volunteered to fight the Chechens: not Kosov. He is unreservedly critical of the war. The night before our trip, Kosov compared the war in Chechnya to what happened to the Cossacks at the hands of the Bolsheviks in 1921-1922. Once a strong supporter of Boris Yeltsin, he does not mince words about the current Russian leaders.

"When the Chechen events began, it was already clear that there wasn't democracy in our country," he said. "A

dictatorship was already in place, and this dictatorship is returning our country to the Stalinist period." Kosov compared the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs—whose *spetsnaz* have carried out illegal detentions, beatings, and torture in Chechnya—to the Stalin-era NKVD, and said that "no fewer than 30,000 civilians" were killed in the siege of Grozny. (Sergei Kovalyov, Yeltsin's human rights commissioner, has estimated the death toll at 24,000.)

Kosov noted that Slovakia and the Czech Republic managed their break-up in a civilized manner. He allowed that Chechnya would always be economically dependent on Russia, but that some kind of special status for the republic could be negotiated. "Even in the Czarist empire, different regions were handled differently," he remarked. "Finland had a parliament, in Poland there was a Sejm, in the Don region there was an ataman."

Kosov insisted there must be negotiations between Yeltsin and Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev, something the Russian president has adamantly refused to consider, despite Yeltsin's insistence that he is seeking a political solution to the war—and that these talks must have "international participation." Kosov called Clinton's support of Yeltsin "bankrupt."

Kosov got us through the two Russian posts just east of the Ingush-Chechen border without problems. A series of Chechen checkpoints began at the town of Samashki, just 3 km past the second Russian post, and extended all the way to Shali. It was evident that the Russians did not control this part of Chechnya. But the many roofless houses made it equally clear that the Russian strategy was to bomb and shell indiscriminately.

Yet even in a "conflict zone," life goes on. In Achkoy-Martan, which had been bombed the previous night and was with-

Jonas Bernstein is a program officer with Freedom House in Moscow.

out electricity, shoppers were out in droves in the central bazaar. Armed fighters mixed with women and children. In a village just beyond Achkoy-Martan, women sold liter-bottles of Pepsi and cartons of Marlboro at roadside stands, while men hawked auto parts and gasoline, or washed their cars in a nearby stream. One woman was pulling a cow. We passed four cemeteries, each with rows of fresh graves.

In Shali, the atmosphere was much more like that of a war zone; constant bombing rumbled in the distance as, 20 km to the north, the Russians were pounding Argun. The middle-aged Chechen who was our host guided the bus to his home on the edge of town. A large, unexploded artillery shell that had come through the wall days before lay in his courtyard. Inside the house were three Russian POW mothers who were staying with him; they had been searching for their sons for more than a month. When Chechen forces were driven out of Grozny southward to towns like Shali, these mothers had followed (some forty captured Russian soldiers were being held in Shali).

The women, their faces etched with stress and fatigue, decried the previous day's bombing of Shali in which five people died; hospital officials later told me that among the dead were a woman and two children. The women cursed Boris Yeltsin and defense minister Pavel Grachev, and praised the locals for having looked in on them during the shelling to make sure they were safe.

In the evening, we made our way through darkened streets to Shali's TV studio. Located in a small basement, it looked like an under-equipped college station, although it had its own generator. There we met Aslambek Abdukhadzhev, the huge, bearded 34-year-old commander of the Shali region. Wearing a lambskin hat, Abdukhadzhev was preparing to record a message to the people of Shali.

He was in no mood to discuss the prospects for a negotiated settlement of the conflict. "The people have seen what's going on in the occupied regions of the Chechen republic," he said. "They now realize that whether they're armed or not, they'll be destroyed in any case. We have reached the conclusion that the only way to save the Chechen people is through resistance. The war can be stopped only through war. There will be peace only when the last Russian soldier leaves this territory."

Despite their overwhelming advances, he said, the Russian soldiers "have only one thought: not to die. We, on the other hand, know that death is in the hands of Allah; that only the Almighty—he is known by different names, according to different religions—will decide when you will die. But the Communists wiped this concept out of the heads of the Russians."

I had heard these words before: seven years ago, from Afghani *mujahedeen* in Peshawar.

The shelling of Argun stopped around midnight, allowing us a few hours of relatively peaceful sleep. The next day, however, had a tense start. There was no gas, a clear sign, a neighbor said somberly, that an attack was imminent. For breakfast we made do with Spam and bread without tea. Suddenly, a spry, elderly Chechen woman entered the house looking for our host. She was a refugee from Grozny; all her possessions were in a bundle tied together by a shawl. When she broke into tears, so did the three Russian POW mothers.

Andrei Mironov came by. He was in Shali to gather "scrap metal," as he called it—fragments of shrapnel and bomblets from cluster bombs—for Kovalyov's commission and Memorial, the human rights group. If there was no attack on Shali, Mironov said, he would make his way to Argun. (He did, in fact, and found six cluster bomblets which he defused for transport back to Moscow. Three of them were confiscated by a KGB officer at a Russian checkpoint; the others escaped detection.)

A mild-mannered intellectual who looks like a Berkeley professor, Mironov—like Kovalyov—was in Grozny during the height of the bombardment there. He had spent the better part of two months in Chechnya. When I expressed surprise, he said: "There are 100,000 people still in Grozny; it is possible to live there." Yes, but you had a choice, I countered. "They had a choice, too, at least at first," he replied. "I talked to many of them, mostly ethnic Russians. They had everything they owned there. Now it is destroyed, of course. But many told me, 'It is better to die here.' And these Russians were treated equally like insects by the Russian troops. I saw Chechens give them their bread." Denouncing the conflict as a "purely colonial war," a continuation of the effort by

czars and commissars to subjugate the ethnically and culturally distinct people of the Caucasus, this Russian asked: "Where is the document by which the Chechens agreed to become part of Russia?"

We visited the security headquarters of the Chechen forces, in the center of town across the road from the prison where Russian POWs were being held. In the square in front of the buildings, fighters were pulling up in cars and donning their Islamic-green headbands: one of them was no more than twelve years old. Five were women. After a few minutes, two young European-looking men stepped out of a car—Russian soldiers who had joined the other side.

With us was Renat Aminov, a businessman from Bashkortostan who had embarked on a personal crusade to free Russian POWs and bring the two sides together at the negotiating table. After several hours of discussions with Chechen military officials, including Abu Asayev, head of security in Shali, he won a small victory; a weak, dazed, and injured Russian soldier, young enough to be my son, was taken to our bus. As we escorted the boy, Asayev was softly singing, "*Svoboda ili Smert*"—Freedom or Death.

Meanwhile, Aminov's friend Marat, a young Bashkiri journalist who has made many trips to Chechnya, went to the hospital and picked up Natassia, a twelve-year-old Chechen girl who had been shot in the head by a sniper in Grozny at the end of January. After an operation, she had been taken to Shali. The town's hospital, however, was almost without supplies and under constant threat of bombardment, so Marat had decided to take her back to Bashkortostan.

By mid-afternoon, we were heading back toward Ingushetia with our two young victims. Pyotr Kosov, the Cossack adviser who arranged the trip, said the conflict was already entering phase two: a protracted guerrilla war. Indeed, at the first Russian post, an Interior Ministry officer—surprisingly friendly this time—told us that four of his comrades at the checkpoint had been severely wounded several days earlier in a hit-and-run attack. He expressed his disgust for the whole bloody business.

Several hours later, the four drunken Ingush teenagers were depositing me at the front door of my host's house in Nazran. As I stepped out of the jeep, one of them shouted: "Tell America we want Stingers!" □



Message Parlor

by James Bowman

Of for the days when Sam Goldwyn could tell his precious "creative" folk that if they wanted to send a message, they should call Western Union! Message movies started to make their appearance with the breakdown of the studio system that had created benevolent dictators like Goldwyn. They became an annoyance in the sixties, a pain in the seventies, a disease in the eighties, and look like becoming a plague in the nineties. It is the baleful effects of The Message which, along with the demands of the money men for lowest-common-denominator entertainment, have turned Hollywood into an artistic disaster area.

In a way the least noxious of the message movies are those simple, sharply drawn morality tales with a hint of paranoia that are typical of the work of black filmmakers like Preston Whitmore II. His *Walking Dead* tells of a detachment of black Marines in Vietnam who have been betrayed by their superiors. Their fight to accomplish their mission and then get out of enemy territory becomes a metaphor for their struggles against racism (told in flashback) in civilian life. Interestingly, all four of Whitmore's main characters have become Marines not out of patriotism but because of entanglements with treacherous or demanding women. The misogyny of so many young black males has become as much a part of the message for them as their fantasy of sticking it to The Man.

But films like Whitmore's also draw on a more general Hollywood paranoia about government that is the most common element in films with a political message. You or I might think, for example,

that the escape of a deadly virus that liquefies human tissue and kills its victims, horribly, in a matter of about eight hours is a pretty promisingly scary subject for a movie. Not Wolfgang Petersen and the gang that brings us *Outbreak*. Finding a cure for the horrible disease turns out to be a piece of cake. The real drama lies—see if you can guess—in a deadly military plot to cover up the fact that the virus was the subject of its experimentation with biological warfare.

This is another in the long line of cinematic intrigues based on the assumption that mad generals fully prepared to wipe out whole towns full of American citizens in order to cover up their wrongdoings are as plentiful as corridors at the Pentagon. This one is played by Donald Sutherland, and we know he's the bad guy because he speaks well of people who do their duty and ill of sentimentalism. Thank God for noble characters like Col. Sam Daniels (Dustin Hoffman) of the Army Medical Corps and his trusty sidekick, Major Salt (Cuba Gooding, Jr.), who are soon on to him.

Will the brave and ingenious Dr. Daniels avoid arrest by the general's goons long enough to track down the host monkey—on the loose in a California forest—bring it in, find the cure, manufacture a serum so as to save the life of his ex-wife (whom he still loves), and still have time left over singlehandedly to abort Operation Clean Sweep just as it is about to annihilate the town? What do you think?

Hoffman is the Peter Pan of the American cinema. At 50 he is still the boy scout Graduate, sickened by the corruption of his elders, and the idealistic cub reporter who saves the world from wicked, Watergate-style national leaders. It is deeply depressing to me that the movie-houses are packed with people

apparently unoffended by a Message so simple-minded that it would make Oliver Stone blush.

It was Stone's *JFK*, after all, that set the standard for both American cinema's paranoid style and its treatment of history. His precedent has unfortunately been followed in *Jefferson in Paris*, a product of the Merchant-Ivory-Jhabvala team, the Laura Ashley of designer movies. Designer movies need a Message too, but it has to be utterly anodyne and non-controversial—such as that, for example, racism and class-snobbery are bad, and personal authenticity good. Merchant-Ivory specialize in such messages, but in *Jefferson* they actually get close to saying something interesting about the connection between love and power. The idealistic theorist of political equality may find it quite easy to behave in his private life like the arbitrary tyrant he has made his career out of opposing.

The only trouble is that none of it is true. I would not want to be accused of condemning all dramatizations of history that are less than scrupulously accurate. But there is a world of difference between Shakespeare's overlooking the human flaws of Henry V in order to portray him as a great national hero and Mrs. Jhabvala's overlooking Jefferson's greatness in order to portray him as a child molester. No reputable historian believes the hoary legend of a romantic relationship between Jefferson (Nick Nolte in the film) and the 13-year-old slave girl Sally Hemmings (Thandie Newton). At first Mrs. Jhabvala claimed in interviews that the story was "completely" true (though she quietly raised Sally's age to 15); then she took to issuing the formulaic statement that "the whole Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemmings liaison, if there was one, is, after nearly 200 years, a romantic legend."

James Bowman, our movie critic, is American editor of the Times Literary Supplement.