



## One Soldier's War In Chechnya

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*One Soldier's War* is a visceral and unflinching memoir of a young Russian soldier's experience in the Chechen wars that brilliantly captures the fear, drudgery, chaos, and brutality of modern combat. An excerpt of the book was hailed by Tibor Fisher in the *Guardian* as "right up there with *Catch-22* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches*," and the book won Russia's inaugural Debut Prize, which recognizes authors who write "despite, not because of, their life circumstances." In 1995, Arkady Babchenko was an eighteen-year-old law student in Moscow when he was drafted into the Russian army and sent to Chechnya. It was the beginning of a torturous journey from naïve conscript to hardened soldier that took Babchenko from the front lines of the first Chechen War in 1995 to the second in 1999. He fought in major cities and tiny hamlets, from the bombed-out streets of Grozny to anonymous mountain villages. Babchenko takes the raw and mundane realities of war—the constant cold, hunger, exhaustion, filth, and terror—and twists it into compelling, haunting, and eerily elegant prose. Acclaimed by reviewers around the world, this is a devastating first-person account of war by an extraordinary storyteller.

## One Soldier's War In Chechnya Details

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# From Reader Review One Soldier's War In Chechnya for online ebook

## Bill Purkayastha says

I wanted to read this book. I wanted to read it very badly. And, eventually, I got hold of a copy, and I did.

I was - quite frankly - acutely disappointed.

For starters, let me say that I've always had a keen nose for the smell of bullshit, and my nostrils began twitching almost at once.

As I said, I do know something about the Russian army, and the brutal treatment of conscripts by their seniors, called dedovschina, is nothing unknown to me. So, I have no problem with believing that some pretty brutal practices went on. But Babchenko's account of his own experiences, which seem to have included daily beatings that ought to have killed any normal human, allied with starvation (apparently nobody fed his unit) reminded me of a book I read a long time ago...Papillon.

I assume most people who're reading this are familiar with Henri Charriére's Papillon, the alleged autobiographical account of a French convict's prison years in the penal colonies of French Guyana. The book's impressive, a rattling good read, a great testament to the human spirit...and a total, complete and absolute fake.

Charriére was a prisoner, true, though far from the heroic figure he painted in his book. He was a trusty who pumped other prisoners for their accounts of their exploits, dramatised them, stitched them together, and, on his (entirely official) release, made a bestselling book (and a sequel named Banco) out of them. The fact is simply that the experiences he related were so dramatic it's impossible for a modern reader to believe one man could have lived through them all. And, of course, he didn't.

Such is the case here. Babchenko's account reminds me so overwhelmingly of Papillon because it's so obviously a compendium of many individual's experiences, put together and made his own (and of a few friends, not one of whom is identified fully and completely). It's impossible to believe that one man could withstand all that hurt without any long term effects – and that day after day, week after week, without medical help or even food. And, also, the soldiers themselves apparently spent all their spare time stealing things from their base to sell to the Chechens across the wire, in return for food and money and booze, all of which was to be handed over to their seniors. I have no problem believing this happened once in a while, but the way he describes it, nothing would have been left.

Babchenko then goes into a brief, very brief account of his service in Chechnya in the first war. It occupies scarcely one chapter, and segues into his service with a penal battalion in Moscow after he was arrested for overstaying his leave (granted on the death of his father) due to illness. And the next we hear of him, he's back in Chechnya, and it's 1999, and the Second Chechen War is in full swing.

And that's what the rest of the book's about: the Second Chechen War.

Right away, my bullshit detectors began howling. Babchenko's account, superficially highly plausible, just doesn't hold up when you think about it in detail. There are holes; chronological holes, logic holes, contradictions, and all without any particular reason why they should exist.

The chronological problem is great in itself. Babchenko writes in page xi of the Preface, “A few of the stories have been complied from several real episodes that have been compressed into a single period and shifted in time.” (Emphasis mine.) Why shifted? Who knows? Babchenko doesn’t say.

A great part of the book is devoted to the Battle of Alkhan Yurt, where Babchenko played an observer’s role, if one is to believe him, calling in strikes, helping carry out reconnaissance, and the like. All this begins most dramatically on New Year’s Eve, 2000, with our hero, in the ice and mud of Chechnya, thinking of home and so on (there’s also an unexplained misdating of the Russian Orthodox Christmas thrown in for good measure). Then he talks in detail about how they got into their vehicles and moved out and their travails over the next days as the battle of Alkhan Yurt developed around them.

Well, here’s what: the battle of Alkhan Yurt ended on the first of December 1999, a full month before Babchenko claims it even started, and involved claims of a massacre by Russian forces of Chechen civilians – a massacre Babchenko, an alleged witness of everything that happened, completely fails to mention, even to deny that it happened.

Then there are the logical inconsistencies.

Babchenko talks (Page 193) about a captain named Sitnikov, and says right away that he was one of those officers who get decorations but get all their men killed. Dangerous people, as Babchenko says. We follow Sitnikov and Babchenko around for several tens of pages, in and out of battle. In all this time, do we see the captain’s hunger for glory, which Babchenko has told us about at the outset, successfully poisoning our attitudes towards the man? No, we see a man who seems to be a careful, professional officer. Are there two different captains called Sitnikov, and Babchenko has forgotten which one he’s talking about?

Then there is the unnamed mortar battery commander, a man who (page 255) never doubted the correctness of his actions and was prepared to kill readily, and even happily. This man is described as a superb professional, who has total command over his troops, and obeys orders rigidly. So, when his unit is ready to fire on a certain sector of the battlefield, and orders come on the radio from headquarters to cancel the bombardment and withdraw, what does our by-the-book commander do? Does he withdraw? No, he waxes furious, orders his men to load their bombs, and to get ready to launch the bombardment anyway, as though he was some kind of warlord independent of the main command. And yet when another infantry officer informs him that the Russians are now in the target sector, he accepts that and cancels the bombardment – the exact orders he had just refused to obey when conveyed directly from headquarters. Is this professionalism? (Of course, since the bombardment was never launched, and the officer never named, there’s no way to check on whether Babchenko is telling the truth about this episode.)

The third part of the book continues about Chechnya, in the tense peace that followed the formal end of fighting. The same Babchenko who joined the second war of his own free will suddenly can’t wait to go home; but even though he claims that a kontraktnik can demand to be sent home in the middle of the fighting, he apparently makes no attempt to ask to be sent home; the circumstances of his discharge from the army in April 2000 are never explained.

During this period, Babchenko slips back into observer mode; lambasting the corrupt Russian officer corps, where according to him, generals beat colonels, colonels beat majors, majors beat captains, and so on, all the way down the line, and nobody cares about anything but themselves. In true Babchenko fashion, he then describes (page 365) a Captain Vladimir Shabalin, a compassionate, courageous officer, who brings flowers to the grave of a soldier who saved his life in an ambush. Babchenko doesn’t even seem to notice his own self-contradictions.

For instance, in the second part of the book (the section discussing the First Chechen War), the author claims to have been in Mozdok, which is not in Chechnya, unloading corpses and watching necropsies (performed with a bread knife, no less) after the Second Battle of Grozny. And after that, he claims to have been sent off to fight in Chechnya and witnessed at first hand the destruction of Grozny. This is absolutely not possible for a simple reason: the Second Battle of Grozny, as a peek at Wikipedia will inform you, led to the signing of the Khasav Yurt accord and the withdrawal of all Russian units from Chechnya. Babchenko could have been either in Chechnya or in Mozdok; he could not have been in both places at once. Translation: He is either making the whole thing up or passing off someone else's experiences as his own.

Then there's the episode in the part of the book set in Mozdok where a senior conscript called Timokha demands Babchenko find 600,000 rubles for him. Babchenko tries to find something to steal and sell to the Chechens for money, but can't - the only items he does find are cannon shells he fails to sell, though he was offered a million rubles for a rocket launcher. Yet, after a couple of pages, he reports that he was (on alternate days) in charge of the armoury, from which this same Timokha and others could freely steal weaponry and sell for cash, and it was simplicity itself to fudge the accounts. It passeth understanding why Babchenko didn't steal the weapons himself.

All in all, a book that probably has some basis in facts, but is so full of demonstrable holes that the entirety doesn't hold water.

I've heard this book compared to *Catch-22* or to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. *Catch-22* it certainly isn't; it has none of the satire and dry humour of Joseph Heller's masterpiece. As for *All Quiet*, I didn't notice any similarities to Remarque's book (except a virtually copy-paste rendition of the description of Paul Bäumer's fellow-soldiers in the first chapter), and I should have, for it's a personal favourite of mine. I however did notice similarities to a much less well known account of a German soldier's wartime experiences: Hans Peter Richter's Second World War memoir, *The Time Of The Young Soldiers*. In its episodic style and its narrative structure, its recounting of similar experiences, and its refusal to give names and correct dates, it's so similar that I find it difficult to believe that Babchenko hadn't read Richter's book at some point.

Well, so far, I'll admit, my suspicions about Babchenko's account were all subjective. So I decided to do a little checking on Babchenko himself, and there it was; the proof.

In an interview, Babchenko (who wrote on that conflict as well) openly claims that Russia was responsible for the 2008 war between itself and Georgia, which led to the latter's defeat; even though the US, Georgia's military and propaganda backer, itself admitted (in the person of Condoleezza Rice, no less) that Georgia had started the war.

In other words, he's a professional anti-Russian propagandist, the kind who always gets a ready audience in the West, because those of us who keep our eyes open know that anti-Russian propaganda is alive and well among the neo-imperialists in Washington and NATO headquarters in Brussels.

To get back to the book, then. Its production values are fair, though the disjointed and episodic nature is intensely irritating, as is the disproportionate emphasis on the Second Chechen War (so disproportionate that I wonder if that is all the author experienced). The translation (by Nick Allen) is relatively good (but for consistently using lay for lie) and for once is into British English (and not American English, which always sets my teeth on edge). But it has its own pitfalls in that British idiom sits ill on Russian tongues, and Allen even fails to use the pejorative word Russians use for Chechens, and for Caucasians in general (churka). Can one imagine an American Vietnam War memoir without the word "gook"?

Yes, there are some good quotes. Sample:

“We were herded into this war and killed by the hundred. We didn’t even know how to shoot; we couldn’t kill anyone, we didn’t know how. All that we were capable of was crying and dying. And die we did. We called the rebels ‘uncle’, and when our boys’ throats were cut at the block posts, they’d beg the rebels, ‘Please, uncle, don’t kill me, what did I ever do to you?’ We so wanted to live. Get that into your heads, you fat, smug generals who sent us off to this slaughter. We hadn’t yet seen life or even tasted its scent, but we had already seen death. We knew the smell of congealed blood on the floor of a helicopter in a forty-degree heat, knew that the flesh of a torn-off leg turns black and that a person can burn up entirely in lit petrol, leaving just the bones.”

But good quotes don’t make a book. Do they?

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### **Istvan Zoltan says**

(EDIT on 31st May: It turns out that Babchenko hasn’t been killed. He cooperated with the Ukrainian secret services to expose some of the hitman who had been offered a bounty to take him out. His death was faked. Interesting turn of events! The Russians bamboozled, finally, after bamboozling others several times.)

Arkady Babchenko is dead. I read the news that he was shot from the back in Kiev today. I finished his book today. This is a testament to the rottenness of Putin’s regime and the fact that the great powers - currently China, Russia, and US - pose a grave threat to anyone who is their potent opponent.

I gave the book three stars because its literary quality isn’t outstanding. It is written in simple, plain prose. Much of its material has appeared before in newspapers. This is not a bad thing, it is just one of the important factors for me to award 4-5 stars for books that are also high quality writing measured by the standards of Hesse, Hemingway, Peter Nadas, Junichiro Tanizaki, Borges, etc.

The book is straight, honest and hard. It tells you about the day-to-day lives of Russian soldiers in Chechnya both during the first and the second Chechen wars.

What is revealed is what is revealed by most war books: that the soldiers don’t know why they are there, that no one cares about the average private, that civilian and soldier are seen by those organising the war as replaceable, as discardable.

Babchenko does not go into much detail about the business and political background of the war, but illustrates well that behind all the big slogans - freedom for Chechnya, Russia fighting against terror, etc. - there is a reality that is harrowing and destructive for family life, for dignity, for safety. That means that eight year olds will be blown to death because of mistakes, that soldiers in terror will be bled out by a knife, that young people who haven’t even started living will be beaten up by their officers for laughable reasons. And the state never says sorry, never explains itself. Those responsible for failed offensives in which 10, 20, 50, 100 people die needlessly never have to justify themselves and won’t be chased down by justice. Power protects its own.

Babchenko became a journalist after the war. He kept writing about the injustice that soldiers suffer in the army, about abuses of power, corruption and recklessness.

Last year he wrote about the plane which was flying one of the most prestigious military bands of Russia to

Syria but crashed. Everyone died. The plane wasn't properly maintained. This earned Babchenko many nationalist enemies. Parliamentary officials openly criticised him, the national tv instigated a manhunt against him.

He moved to Kiev, but Kiev is close to Russia and due to the chaos still reigning there a journalist is an easy target for a few well trained thugs. A big loss, a sad day. This is how freedom dies, how freedom of speech dies, how the tyrants win, how feudalism creeps back in. Overlords are cementing their power everywhere for a lifetime and we are just sitting and watching.

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### **Brett Chapman says**

Follow our narrator throughout boot camp, training, the abuse and social hierarchy centered around hazing in boot camp, more training, and deployment to Chechnya. There is terror, fear, the innocence of youth, and coming of age all in this narrative. Truly a remarkable (and at times heart wrenching) story of this young man in the Russian armed forces during the Chechen War. Also check out 9 Rota (The 9th Company) about the Soviet Army and its dilemma in the Afghanistan conflict. A lot of similarities are found in both this book and the film. Thank you.

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### **Laughing Man says**

#### **Sincere and Revealing**

Chechen war was always a mystery for most people, this book sheds light on it and the Russian army. Russian army is a paper tiger, behind it lies a miserable rag tag band of misfits abandoned by their country and their command. Sad... Thank you Arkady for sharing what was left of your sanity with us

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### **Seymour says**

This is a hell of book, a first hand account of an 18 year old conscript in the Chechen war of 1996, torn from his mother's apron strings and brutalised beyond belief by both the training and the fighting. The most telling effect of the horror is that Babchenko chooses to return to the battlefield as a contract soldier to fight in the second conflict, not because he believes in the war but because it has become part of him and he cannot stay away. Later, still, he goes back as a journalist and still fails to make any sense of it. "Maybe war is the strongest narcotic in the world."

I urge that this work should become a classic. Not only does it document one of the most horrific and under-reported conflicts of our time, but its unsentimental, visceral prose simultaneously spans the great Russian tradition of Solzhenitsyn's Ivan Denisovich and the burning reportage of Herr's Dispatches in a shrapnel burst of imagery that is also evocative of Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five. On the jacket, it is rightly ranked with Catch 22 and All Quiet on the Western Front.

Not originally intending to write a book but compelled to somehow purge and process his experiences on the page, Arkady Babchenko pieces together fragments of memory into three or four long chapters covering specific campaigns, interspersed with shorter vignettes. There is not strong sense of an unfolding chronology and there are wide gaps, alluded to, where there is a sense that whatever lies in them is too agonising to

express; the author's stint in a penal battalion and loss of a comrade called Igor may have been the most awful scenes of all if they were written with the same unflinching illumination. Some of the scenes, however, will haunt the reader like a nightmare.

The first section of the book contains accounts of the first conflict, and Babchenko's initiation into the senseless violence and hatred of the conflict by the fists and boots of other soldiers in the barracks, long before he comes under fire from the Chechens.

The second section documents some of his experiences in the second war, having completed a law degree and volunteering to go back into a place that the reader, by then, would rather not be reminded of in spite of being compelled to carry on turning the pages. Babchenko describes real people and real events with only minimal adaptations to accommodate to the style of literary fiction and keep things coherent for the reader.

In the final section, having returned to "normal" life and working as a journalist, the author returns to the same landing strip at Mozdok where he had arrived as a recruit some seven years earlier. He finds very little has changed in the atmosphere of the place and in the tormented eyes of the next generation of soldiers, even though the war is essentially "over". There is an attempt to explain the brutality of the daily beatings at the barracks that no soldier escapes, "a male collective in a confined space inevitably assumes a prison's model of existence." However, he cannot find an explanation for the insanity maintains ascendancy in the region, "still they send huge bundles of rifle rounds to Grozny, and the constant gnashing of teeth is eased with litres of vodka, and there is a non stop supply of torn human flesh to the hospitals. Fear and hatred still rule this land."

A phenomenal and impassable gulf will separate most readers from the author, "You can't explain what war is to someone who has never been there, just as you can't explain green to a blind person..." but I found the prose insidious enough to give me at least one sleepless night with broken dreams of lying in frozen trenches and there will ever more be a great deal more flesh and blood behind those sanitised newsreel clips on television.

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### **Philipp says**

Great account of both wars in Chechnya, from a Russian journalist who, for reasons unknown to him, volunteered for the second, and then came back as a journalist to report on Chechnya after the war (spoiler: people still die in droves, but Russia just fakes a layer of fake peace on top of reality).

As it's more therapy than novel the structure is 'patchy', the author wrote what he had to write, with little regard for 'setting up scene', or whether the stories are connected. Since this is reality, there is no 'red thread' going through the book - people appear, they disappear, they reappear, most of the time they die.

The major theme of the novel is brutality, so if you can't stomach that, stay away. In this book the Russian army has a pecking order based on sheer brutality, the new ones get beaten up by the old ones, the higher rungs beat up the lower ones, etc. - and not just a slap, but kicks in the face until teeth fall out, every night. Chechen warriors disembowel captured Russians, or publicly slit their throats. People get blown up, so that only a foot is sent home in a zinc coffin, welded shut. Mothers of missing soldiers are accidentally shot - they've come to Chechnya to find their sons, since the chaotic Russian army can't really keep track of anything. Deserters run away? Eh, so what, they'll die anyway. Newcomers steal some ammunition? The officers get drunk, beat up the newcomers brutally over days, mock-execute them, until they kick them out

naked into Chechnya; left to die.

I can't really understand the comparison to Catch-22 in Goodreads' description - Catch-22 was an over-the-top satire which took many freedoms to get the point across, One Soldier's War is just nihilist brutality from start to end.

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### **Aditya Pareek says**

This is a whining fest, yes the Russian Conscript Army was bullying central yes it was a fucked up situation but nothing forgives Arkady Arkaidovich Babchenko being a shit prose writer.

No matter how many times you were smacked on the jaw it doesn't forgive your prose being whiny and devoid of literary worth.

Trash Russophobe rambling sensationalism by a sellout pfft if he didn't have any shame faking his own death with Ukrainian despotic government's support what do i even have to slander such a person with.

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### **Scott says**

After reading *One Soldier's War* it seems to me that the only thing scarier than taking on the Russian army is... being a soldier in the Russian army.

The Russian army has long had a reputation for being an awful workplace.

The Red Army of WW2 is renowned for its inhumanly brutal treatment of its own soldiers. Summary executions, punishment battalions where the punishment was near certain death, merciless attitudes towards psychological issues such as PTSD and shell shock- the average Russian soldier seemed to have as much chance of being killed by his own countrymen as he did by his fascist adversaries. Add to this the Spartan food, equipment, shelter etc. that they were provided and the life of the average 'Ivan' was one of near-unmitigated misery.

In the decades since, the Russian army appears to have improved its treatment of its soldiers, in the sense that they aren't murdered on the spot by their superiors, or at least they aren't murdered as often. Otherwise, their army seems still to be a place of endless bullying, brutal punishments, meagre rations and morale lower than the low, low prices at your local carpet emporium.

Arkady Babchenko has written a shocking and eye-opening book about what life in this army is like. Babchenko was a conscript. A young student forced to join the Russian Army in 1995 to fight in the brutal Russia-Chechnya war.

The horror begins well before he is sent to fight. In the barracks, older, higher ranking soldiers beat their juniors bloody, with no consequences whatsoever. Theft was constant. Dereliction of duty rampant. Punishment for those unable to turn the system in their favor was horrifying. Babchenko saw a man beaten almost to death for several days for selling a few bullets to local Chechens.

At war, things are no better. The soldiers are continually half-starved, their rations almost always inadequate. They get dysentery and lice, and are understandably listless, at best, about winning the war they are fighting.

Babchenko witnessed things a young man shouldn't have to see. He saw his comrades horribly executed by Chechens. He saw Russian soldiers accidentally shoot Russian mothers who had come to the corpse-strewn battlefields to try and find their dead sons.

Obviously, do not read this book if you have a weak stomach.

If you're wondering how on earth the Russians maintained an effective fighting force when half their soldiers were demoralised, hungry and recovering from constant hazing, the answer is: they didn't. Faced with the fanatically committed people of Chechnya the Russian army went from disaster to disaster, pitting miserable tired conscripts who would rather have been anywhere else against motivated, committed men fighting for their homeland.

Babchenko reports all of this in fascinating detail. Taking you right into the hell that is combat, and the special hell that is combat in the Russian army. He writes well, and perceptively, and I rate this as a modern soldiering classic, an insight into what war and military service can be like at its worst.

The craziest thing in this whole book though? After going through all this hell, Babchenko *voluntarily*(!) signed up for a second tour of Chechnya in 1999.

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### **Ann Bridges says**

Recommended to me by a fellow author, I happened to start reading this book the same day Babchenko "disappeared" to escape an assassination attempt, bringing home the concept that his view of life in Russia may be more politically incorrect than I ever imagined.

If you're looking for a no-holds-barred account of what it was like to be a soldier for another country, one with limited funds and juggling insurrections, terrorism, and fluctuating boundaries, this delivers. Babchenko details gruesome scenes and horrific encounters, including from his fellow soldiers and commanders, in sparse, emotionally-charged language. While Americans were flying high on the internet boom and fixated by the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, Russia was embroiled in a civil war which barely made it to our television news. Ground yourself a little more in the politics and disputes of what was once the "great" USSR breaking up during the '90's, and perhaps you'll understand more of the context of today's news, too.

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### **Edward Lengel says**

Superb, and one of the best war memoirs I've read. Babchenko's account realistically reveals the modern Russian army and its wars in Chechnya--but fundamentally his perspective rings true for soldiers' experiences of every nation and every generation.

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### **Sarah says**

Maybe it's the Russian translation, but the book just doesn't flow very well. It's an autobiography about the Chechen wars. The narrator is around 18 at the beginning of the book. Right off the bat, he sees some gruesome things (dead bodies in the drinking water, eating a dog because they are hungry, a man strangled

by his own intestines) and discusses how they are starved and beaten during training by their own officers. The military sucked there, but civilian life wasn't all that great either. I really liked the story, but I didn't like how it was told--does that make sense? I didn't want to continue reading, even though the chapters were short.

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### **Petitpois says**

Hace poco leí una expresión que me caló, decía que la tristeza de la depresión no se puede entender por quienes no la padecen, porque es una tristeza de otra dimensión. La vida en una guerra pertenece asimismo a otra dimensión. Se me hace incomprensible tanta crueldad y sinsentido, y sin embargo, ellos, esos pobres jóvenes al servicio estúpido de una nación, son capaces de verle un esquema, de crear unos valores dentro del infierno. La lectura de este terapéutico diario de un soldado ruso en las dos guerras de Chechenia es, cuanto menos, desconcertante, pero sobre todo es infinitamente triste, y definitivamente concluyente para mí, de que no hay razón alguna, ni una, que justifique una guerra. Son vidas perdidas, y sin embargo no son capaces de desertar, y siguen cual zombies cumpliendo con su puto deber y perpetuando la barbarie, con el agravante de que muy pocos tienen la suerte de salir de esa dimensión desconocida cuando acaba el conflicto, y nadie vuelve indemne. Una narrativa fluida, directa, íntima, descriptiva y sin tapujos, que revuelve tripas y mente.

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### **Andrew Chapter says**

Regardless of whether this is a true or fictionalised account, this book is a confronting description of war and of the horrors that humans perpetrate upon one another.

Depressing. Disgusting. Upsetting.

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### **Kevin Tole says**

Babchenko fought two tours in Chechnya, the first as an 18 y.o. conscript and the second as a 'contract soldier', that is he volunteered to serve again and was paid as a veteran. He writes post-events as a journalist in an act of catharsis to attempt to get this stuff out of his head and at the same time to let people know what was happening and had happened in Chechnya.

Where to begin on that subject? We in the west know very little of Chechnya and how the conflict impacted on Russia and it would appear that at the time very few Russians seemed to understand it either beyond the increasing number of invalids that began to appear on the streets and metro stations. I in no way claim to understand the conflict in Chechnya but the little I know (and this is helped by the book) the first Chechen war broke out when Russia attempted to regain control after a declaration of independence in 1991 with war breaking out on invasion in 1994. This lasted till around 1996 and the Russian involvement was under the aegis of Boris Yeltsin. The Second War broke out in 1999 as a war against Chechen warlords and Islamic dissidents intent on controlling the state as an Islamic and warlord state. This was forwarded mostly by Putin and to an extent needs to be seen as part of a greater conflict in the Caucasus states.

Babchenko describes in episodes unmitigating hell. As a recruit he was constantly beaten up along with the

other recruits and subject to a regime of bullying, regular beatings and casual violence inflicted on all recruits within the Russian Army as a matter of course. The relief from that was to go into combat where chances of survival for an untrained recruit were slim and capture by the Chechens would undoubtedly lead to torture and death by having one's head pinned down under a booted leg and having one's throat cut to bleed to death. The first Chechen War appears to have been one of relentless violence by both sides, of killing and maiming interspersed with looting, hunger, cold and idiotic leadership.

This book does not let up and is only relieved by the brief comradeship that the soldiers make in their violent passage. All the people seem touched by post-traumatic stress both during and for the survivors, after the campaigns. Babchenko tries to make sense of the mindlessness of it all without seemingly questioning the motive, though at a significant part of the book he does rail against the political forces that have thrown him into this ceaseless warfare. There ARE passages that make you think 'surely he's making this up or at least gilding the lily somewhat. But he does say in the intro that he built some of the stories through multiple experiences and testaments - so maybe we are looking at more of a work of fiction from a journalist after the fact (who was indeed there). Along the way we get to hear of trading with the enemy of armaments and spare parts for food and vodka, the interminable battle to remain human in the face of utter ignorance from the higher ranks who were as corrupt (and on a significantly bigger scale) than the grunts.

This is a good starter to try and understand the Russian military and the conflicts in the North Caucasus.

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### **Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says**

If I were to direct the film version of this war memoir I'll start with a Tarantino-like scene, really strong, the kind that would make moviegoers regret coming in late from the long line at the popcorn counter. Act 1, Scene 1 would be from pages 138 to 139 of the book. Close up shots of the haggard, dirty faces of the young, mostly teenage Russian soldiers. Not too far are the enemy Chechens--

"Then the Chechens start killing our guys they took prisoner. They shout from the end of the street to get our attention and show a few soldiers, badly beaten and with their hands tied behind their backs. The Chechens laugh and shout something at us in their language and then quickly put one of the prisoners on his side on the asphalt, pin his head with a foot and stab him twice in the throat with a knife. The boy jerks his tied hands and whimpers, and a black trickle spreads from his slashed throat onto the road.

"The Chechens go back around the corner, leaving him to die on the asphalt.

"He lies a long time on his side without moving, and then he starts to twitch. He jerks his bound hands and tries to turn over as if he is uncomfortable, then he falls quiet again. It is painful for him to move and he obediently lies on his side, with a gaping throat that keeps pumping a black trickle. When we think he is already dead he starts to twitch again and tries to crawl, then goes still again. This goes on a long time. Blood pours from his throat and smears across his face. His jacket has slipped down to his elbows, and when he jerks his arms blood spurts from an artery onto his bare shoulder.

"Bastards!" says Murky, unable to bear it any longer. He jumps up and shouts over the buildings, 'Just kill him you fuckers! Shoot him you bastards. Bastards!'

"He unslings his rifle but Osipov and Loop manage to grab the barrel. They grip his arms and press him to

the ground.

"Murky squats, holding his head in his hands and moaning.

"Bastards, bastards, bastards,' he whispers.

"The boy soon starts to choke: he can't breathe and blood sprays from his mouth as he coughs. Sometimes he loses consciousness for a while and lies motionless, then he comes to and once again tries to crawl.

"When he stops moving altogether the Chechens shoot him in the back with tracer rounds. The bullets pass through his body and ricochet into the sky.

"They also kill the rest of the prisoners. This time they don't appear from around the corner; all we hear are screams. Before they cut each boy's throat, they shout 'Allahu akbar.' We hear this several times, and an hour later they throw the bodies out onto the street."

The screenplay would, of course, have several digressions from the book. And even if it isn't there (as the author pointed out they were all atheists like most young Russians), I will make this one soldier pray. He's at home, and after saying tearful goodbyes to his worried papa and mama, he utters a prayer for God to spare him the horror of dying with injuries. Like some friends who had gone ahead of him and returned dead with half of their bodies gone. Fast-forward then, we get to the actual scene in the book. The Chechens have captured him. They open him up alive with a sharp knife, as he screams, and his entrails are taken out and the Chechens use them to strangle him. His answered prayer: he doesn't die of injuries. He dies of asphyxiation with his intestines used as a rope around his neck.

How about some tender moments? For the parents inside the theater accompanying their children above thirteen years old? Lights out! A nighttime scene. Again in a modern city turned battlefield. A lull in the fighting. Close up shots, the author Babchenko and his comrades in their position. For this scene I'll use real Russian old women:

"When it gets dark, strange silhouettes in skirts appear on the streets, lots of them, wandering from curb to curb, stopping at the corpses. They turn them over onto their backs and study their faces for a long time.

"We can't figure out who they are, and meanwhile the silhouettes steadily approach us.

""Maybe it's some kind of mountain tribe. Maybe the highlanders here wear skirts like the Scots,' ventures Osipov.

"No one replies.

""The moon shines over the dead on the street and ghosts in skirts wander between the bloated corpses.

"Someone's nerves don't hold out and he opens fire, joined by two or three others. They fire a few bursts and even drop one of the silhouettes before cries are heard from over there.

"Women's voices shout in Russian and we finally realize that these are the mothers of soldiers; they have come here to find their missing sons and are searching for them among these mangled bodies.

"Hold your fire!" shouts Loop. 'They're mothers, our mothers!'

"Some of the women run over to the one who fell. She is wounded and they pick her up and carry her into one of the courtyards.

"The mothers have it worst of all in this war. They don't belong to either side, they get the brushoff from the Russian generals in Khankala or Severny, our soldiers shoot them. And as one priest we freed from captivity told me, the Chechens take them off into the mountains and rape them, kill them and feed their innards to their dogs. They have been betrayed by everyone, these Russian women, they die by the dozen, yet still they wander around Chechnya with their photos, searching for their sons.

"At dawn there are even more of them. They move from one body to another, study the mangled faces for a long time, holding a handkerchief over their mouths. They don't cry--in the heat it's hard to breathe near the bodies.

"One woman manages to find her son. The commanders give her a vehicle and she takes the body to Khankala.

"No one collects the other bodies."

Comic relief? Let's shoot this scene past halfway the memoir. Weakened by physical abuse by their own officers, wracked by constant hunger, thirst, heat during the day and extreme cold during the night, dead bodies everywhere, sleepless nights where death could come any minute, the author and his comrades developed dysentery. Let's show some ass shots for some laughs--

"My bleeding starts again and my long johns are permanently encrusted with blood. We all have it. Your rectum swells up and protrudes several centimeters. Half your backside hangs out and you sit resplendent like a scarlet flower. Where are we supposed to find wiping material? We strip the remaining scraps of wallpaper from the storerooms and rasp at our poor backsides, inflicting further harm on ourselves and sending blood gushing from our pants.

"War is not just attacks, trenches, firefights and grenades. It's also blood and feces running down your rotting legs. It's starvation, lice and drunken madness. It's swearing and human debasement. It's an inhuman stench and clouds of flies circling over our battalion. Some of the guys try to heal themselves with herbal folk remedies that end up making many of them even sicker.

"'This is our reward from the Almighty,' Arkasha says. 'The whole battalion has flowers spring from their asses--that's our springtime!'

(laughter from the audience)

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Arkady Babchenko--probably the most brutal Russian writer I've ever read. But then again maybe he was just mirroring the brutality of his own experience.