From the SelectedWorks of Rebecca Gould

2011

The Spoils of War

Rebecca Gould

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/r_gould/6/
The Spoils of War

Rebecca Gould
Columbia University, 420 122st, New York, 10027 United States

doi: 10.1080/14790726.2010.529916

Narrative Introduction

In After the Last Sky, Edward Said famously invoked a frequently cited, and frequently disputed, comparison between the Palestinian situation after 1967 and the Jewish situation after the Holocaust. Said both accepted with reservations the characterisation of Palestinians as the ‘Jews of the Arab world’. ‘There is a sense,’ he wrote, ‘in which the formula applied,’ but, he added, the Palestinian experience confounds ‘attempts to draw parallels.’

Writing at a different end of the spectrum and soon after Israel’s assault on Beirut in 1982 Primo Levi proposed a related comparison: ‘Everybody is somebody’s Jew. And today the Palestinians are the Jews of the Israelis.’

There is no need to adjudicate the accuracy of such comparisons, imperfect as they inevitably are; more important is to see what they teach us about the common condition of disenfranchised peoples.

If the Palestinians are the Jews of Israel, then the Chechens are the Palestinians of Russia. This comparison was proposed by a Russian customs official in the passport control section of Vladikavkaz in southern Russia. His task was, among other things, to keep Chechnya and surrounding separatist regions free of foreign visitors. The following narrative records the final hours of a journey to Chechnya and its environs, and documents the efforts of Russia’s security apparatus to keep Chechens safely locked within Russia’s sovereign territory.

There was no need to ask. He knew she was American. Just for the hell of it, he decided to use this information to start a conversation.

‘Where are you from?’

‘New York. You may have heard of that city?’

It was not hard to take it from there. They spoke of the city’s huge population, huge compared to Nalchik, capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, a small republic located on Russia’s Muslim southern periphery. Nalchik had one hundred and fifty thousand people. New York had eight million. There was no competition.

‘If only I could go to your country and start my life over again! Then everything would be right. Take me with you. Please!’

‘But how?’ she asked. ‘You’d never get past customs. Even if you managed to make it to the states, you’d have to work illegally, and then you’d be
hound and eventually deported back to your country. That’s no life for anyone.’

‘You don’t know how good it sounds compared to life here.’

He was right. She didn’t know. She had spent the past two years exploring the region, bribing police, concealing herself, breaking laws without intending to, losing her mind. In spite of all those hardships, or maybe even because of them, she was an outsider, occupying the margins of society. Her plan before arriving had been to go native, but she was leaving, flying back to her home country, still a foreigner.

‘Would you like to listen to some music?’

She nodded.

His left hand firmly clutching the steering wheel, he used his right to shuffle through a stack of cassettes in the glove compartment. Finally, he found the cassette he had been looking for and inserted it into the cassette player.

_We are the people of Noah;_
_We are God’s children._
_When we sacrifice ourselves in war,_
_we know that somewhere paradise calls._
_Allah does not ignore his children._

‘Where did you get this tape?’ she asked.

‘We all have tapes like this. Probably no one trusted you enough to play it for you.’

‘When I was here two years ago, a young man named Aslan played me the exact same tape. He asked me to keep it as a gift, and when I returned to America, I played it every day until listening to it hurt me so much that I had to return. He was Chechen, of course. Are you Chechen?’

‘I am Kabardin,’ the driver said with a frown. ‘Some Chechens think we’re their enemies, but my friends, they died in the war, fighting on both sides.’

It was a long drive. They sailed through forests of darkness, punctuated by the plaintive wails of Timur Mucuraev, the Chechen bard whose music transformed the silence of the night. A wide yellow line stretched before them, a ray severed from the sun. It reminded her of the golden bangles her mother wore when she kissed her good-bye at the airport. ‘When are you coming home?’ her mother had asked her. ‘I don’t know, mom,’ she had answered. ‘Probably never.’ And now she was on her way home.

They stared intently at the ribbon. There was so little to say. Always, all her life: so little to say. She had traveled there with the intent of researching the war, in the hope of stopping it, or at least of causing a pause in its merciless movement. But scholarship, journalism, weeping—all these things only get one so far, and then there is nothing else to do except sigh and accept defeat. War is the business of others.

‘My best friends are Chechens,’ he said after a pause.

‘It’s too bad I’m only meeting you today, my last day in the North Caucasus. We could have had some great conversations if I stayed longer.’

‘Then stay,’ he offered. ‘I’ll find you a home.’

She smiled and turned her face to the forest. So many trees. Maybe they could hide there together. Maybe she would never have to go home.
‘Some things I saw in Chechnya I’ll share with anyone,’ he said. ‘But most things no one will ever know.’

‘But you played Mucuraev for me. So certain kinds of suffering can be known, even to outsiders.’

Ten minutes later, they arrived at the airport of Vladikavkaz, Russia’s military outpost and the place where soldiers trained in preparation for Chechnya. The grounds were heavily manned by Russian guards armed with machine guns. The last time she had gone through a customs post the soldiers had extracted a bribe of three hundred dollars. She could have bargained them down to less if only she had not been terrified of deportation. Ever since, she had cursed her cowardice.

‘Why are you scared?’ he whispered. The car slowed. ‘They’ll see your fear in your eyes. They’ll think they can do whatever they want with you. You must not show your fear. You can control your eyes through muscles of your forehead. Press hard on your muscles, and your eyes won’t move. That’s a trick I learned from fighting in the war.’

She closed her eyes, and tried to imagine being home, tried to see herself thousands of miles away from Chechnya, in a place where the very word meant nothing to her, where people knew as little as she knew five years before.

He pressed the breaks gently when they reached the checkpoint. The guards’ eyebrows were arched. Their thick lips, bloated by alcohol, were folded inwards. They looked like caricatures of themselves. They examined her passport, their fingernails caked with dirt, scratching the place where her picture was pasted, as if they wished to remove it. She avoided looking into the eyes of the guard who shoved the passport at her through the car window.

The car stopped at a small, pitiful building, a slab of concrete in the middle of a desolate half mile of tar. Nalchik International Airport, only one hundred miles from hell. How tragic to suddenly find hell in the midst of a mountainous paradise. She got out of the car, and fumbled through her pockets. A few oily bills. She could not compensate him. She needed those bills, she suddenly realised, to brave the rats in the airport, who were armed and hungry for cash. He was just a poor cab driver, fresh from the war, probably supporting his family, on the salary he received in exchange for starving in Chechnya. What should she do? Give him everything she had, even though it was more than she could afford to give, even though it might cost her life? O God, will the misery I cause never end? she wondered. I hate being an outsider.

There was nothing to be done. She explained herself, apologised, offered him an orange. He looked away, probably angry (she imagined). She knew his cultural training prevented him from showing his fury or fear. Here, the guest was god. She presided over his sacrifice.

‘I am sorry,’ she repeated, and offered her coins.

‘Don’t worry,’ he smiled, his lips clenched. ‘You have bribes to pay ahead. You’ll need all the money you can get.’

Timur Mucuraev hummed in the background:
We are Chechens from the people of Noah.
From the ashes we will return.

The tension wore away from his lips as the song filled the air. He ejected the cassette and handed it to her.
‘May this be something for you to remember us by. The Chechens and your driver.’

The idea of accepting his generosity was repulsive to her. Why was she always taking and never giving? What did people like her – all those tourists with typewriters – do? They were all of them parasites, sucking up the life of the world.
‘I’m so sorry,’ she said. ‘I can’t pay you now, but I’ll send you all the money I owe you and more when I get back home. Just give me your address.’

He gazed at the stars. It was a cloudy night. Orion with his broken knees was still waiting to be born on earth. ‘Tell me, does the sky look like this in New York City? That’s where you’re from, right? Can you see the stars through the smog?’ He didn’t expect or desire an answer.

Then after a pause he continued, ‘You Americans. You’re so full of trust and ignorance. You talk so much and believe everything you’re told. You won’t send me money. You can’t send me money. There are no wires to reach me here. Go home. Write about us. Suffer for us when you are safe, far away from war. Your work here is done. Your job, my dear, is over.’

He rolled up the window, backed the car away from the pavement, cast his wide eyes upon her, and saluted her, as though they were marching off together to war.

As she entered the airport, she was accosted by two Russian soldiers with Kalashnikovs and boots reaching to their knees. One was bearded and the other was mustachioed. They demanded to see her passport.
‘What were you doing in Nalchik?’ the mustachioed one asked as his fingers traced the edges of her passport. Like the guard at the checkpoint, his dust-caked fingernails seemed magnetically drawn to her picture. ‘Do you know that your government issued a warning to all American citizens, instructing them never to cross into southern Russia? This is not the place for the likes of you.’

‘My government can say whatever it likes,’ she said. ‘I don’t ask for their advice.’

The soldiers looked at her curiously. Then finally, the mustachioed one turned to the bearded one and said, ‘It looks like we’ll have to detain her.’
‘For what?’ she demanded. ‘I’ve never heard of such nonsense. I don’t understand how you keep your country together if this is how you treat your guests.’ She was thinking of the Chechen and Kabardin hospitality that she had come to take for granted during her sojourn in the Caucasus. As soon as she crossed into Russian domains, as soon as she entered the Vladikavkaz airport, the delight in visitors from far-away cultures that seemed intrinsic to this region evaporated. In Russia, everyone was a stranger to each other, and every stranger was an enemy.

‘Don’t you know you’re supposed to register your visa at every city you visit?’ the mustachioed guard shot back. ‘Your visa is empty. There are no
registration stamps since you flew into Moscow, two weeks ago. My dear girl, you have been violating Russian law. And if you’ve ever heard of Chechnya, you know what we do to pretty young girls from America who break the law.’

The bearded one put his hands on the mustachioed one’s shoulder, as if to restrain him. ‘Don’t you worry, sweetie. We’re sure you’re a good girl, and mean no harm. Just give us a little gift, and we’ll let you go home.’

She obediently dug her hand into her pocket and pulled out the crumpled bills she had intended to give the cab driver. Two twenties and a five. She extended her hand with the bills inside.

‘Will this be enough?’

The mustachioed guard frowned. He had expected more. Forty-five dollars would hardly pay for dinner with his mistress. His wife was expecting a baby. He needed more. He raised his eyebrows and opened his mouth as if to ask for more. Before he could figure out what to say, the bearded one took the money from her outstretched hand, nodded, and said, ‘You’re free to go. We normally don’t make exceptions. But we can see you’re a good for nothing slut, not worth our time.’

She knew she was lucky. When she had to give a bribe at the Nazran airport, it was for three hundred dollars. The guards had blood-shot eyes, probably from a hangover, and they might have killed her, she reflected, if she had not come up with the funds on time.

The flight was already boarding. She rushed to the gate and handed over her passport and ticket. Another staring session. How can anyone endure being stared at in so many ways, by so many greedy, ruthless male eyes? ‘Thank god I’m coming home,’ she whispered, imagining her mother. ‘Thank god there is a home for me to return to. Unlike me, the Chechens only have white tents stretching endlessly away from their homeland.’

‘What was your mission here?’ the customs official inquired from the other side of the glass panel as his gaze roamed over her body. She was less than a few feet from the ramp linked to the plane that would take her home, after a detour through Moscow. She was tempted to jump across the ramp, and risk the consequences. Let me him shoot at me if he wants to, she thought. At least that way I’ll be closer to home. ‘I wanted to learn about the culture and the people of the North Caucasus. I study Dagestani languages and Kabardinian. I’m a linguist by profession. I want to discover the relationship between the many tongues spoken in the Caucasus mountains.’

The words sounded so much more reasonable than the truth.

‘Why didn’t you go to Palestine if you like to study languages?’ the customs official asked with a sarcastic smile. ‘You could learn lots of Arabic there. Every linguist has to learn the languages of radical Islam. They have lots of suicide bombers, enough to keep you occupied. You could have met a nice young suicide bomber, married him, and lived happily ever after. You could have ten children, and start an Islamic revolution. Why bother with Chechnya? We don’t have enough terrorists here to keep girls like you busy.’

‘Chechnya?’ she repeated ponderously. ‘I don’t understand what you’re talking about. I told you: I’m a linguist. I research the relationship between indigenous Caucasian languages. I don’t know anything about Chechnya. But thanks for the tip. I’ll consider that next time I get leave from my job.’
He pressed a red button that released a metallic shiver of energy. A gate flashed open, directing her to move on. As she loaded her luggage onto the conveyor belt, she observed a poster pasted onto a steel panel plastered with pictures of the severed heads of Chechen rebels. She knew most of their names. She had not met any of them, but many Chechen men she had lived with in Pankisi and Nalchik had served in their armies and looked to them as their leaders. Big black Xs were branded across the faces of those who had been killed by Russian forces.

Most of the pictures were still intact, their simulacrums awaiting the cancellation of their existences through crossfire. They were dressed in heavy khaki military fatigues, and had machine guns flung around their arms, just like the Russians. The only difference in their profiles was that the Chechens were all bearded, tall, and thin, whereas Russian soldiers at checkpoints and in airports ranged from thick to fat, and had been either mustachioed or clean-shaven. Only once had she seen a Russian guard with a beard. Their weapons were identical.

A particularly wide X of red tape and was pasted over the head of one very famous rebel: Shamil Basaev. She recognized his boyish grin, and remembered the story an old woman told her in a refugee shelter in Nazran, just a week prior:

‘Shamil Basaev was my neighbor. I knew him ever since he was a boy in grammar school. His mother and I were best friends. He was one of the best students in his class. He used to dream of becoming Russia’s next president. He could have done anything he wanted with his life. The war destroyed it all. The Russians bombed his home and kidnapped his sister. His mother died of a heart attack. He never forgave the Russians. So he vowed to fight.’

Later Shamil Basaev reentered her life on a video she had been given as a gift by another refugee, living in Nalchik. He was wearing a black T-shirt blazoned proudly with the word ‘ANTITERRORISM’ in large white Cyrillic letters. The video had been made soon after the bombing of the World Trade Center. He was trying, she supposed, to express his commiseration for America’s suffering and his opposition to needless violence.

Shamil Basaev believed that Chechnya should fight until it was burned to ashes, until no Chechen was left alive to mourn. Like Timur Mucuraev, he did not want his country or his people to give in.

Chechen women didn’t long for war with the same passion as their male counterparts. Although the men wanted to stop fighting too, they were afraid of admitting it, for fear of losing their manhood.

Everyone needs a hero. No one likes sacrificing one’s sons, but when you get caught in a cycle of suffering, any attempt to escape death looks like cowardice. Most Chechens she knew loved Shamil for his courage and despised him for his foolishness, and his willingness to sacrifice everything for the fantasy of freedom. And now he was dead.

So many stories. So many lives. So many deaths observed. The fear of dying recedes as the possibility of life dims.

‘What do you do with the stories you carry with you?’ she asked her mother four months earlier as they drove to JFK. They had been talking about the baby
that lived for a brief month inside her belly, just before her departure for Chechnya. She had never wanted to be a mother, but she had no desire to be a murderer either.

‘Don’t be so hard on yourself,’ her mother had said, and reached out her hand. ‘It’s your body. You have a right to do as you chose.’

She thought about these things, and she thought about the spoils of war, about how much gets distorted when violence is the only acknowledged truth, and power the only path to legitimacy.

She was glad she was leaving. She had become a parasite on the carnage of war. She sat on the plane, waiting for takeoff, thinking to her mother: you’re right but you’re also wrong. It was my body. A baby lived inside. It was a beautiful blue quarter-size starfish, already kicking and breathing, in my imagination. It sucked my life out of me. I wanted to live more than I wanted to save its life. I don’t know why. I don’t know whether it was worth it. She suddenly felt close to the soldier who threatened to hurt her, who grabbed and shot randomly, as though he had more right to live than anyone in the world. She felt closer to the soldier whom she hated viscerally than to the taxi driver she hadn’t been able to pay, who accepted whatever came his way, who lacked the power to resist.

The cab driver thought about her, as he drove home that night. A sweet woman, really. Beautiful, and graceful in all her modesty. She spoke Russian with embarrassment, as if the words stained her tongue with blood, but he liked the way they sounded on her lips. He regretted how he pushed her away. But there was nothing else he could have done. It was hard dealing with girls so full of innocence, particularly when they came from foreign countries he could never see with his eyes. He loved innocence, but he also wanted to grind it into the earth like a flagellating insect, to kill it beneath the heels of his steel boots. Innocence was a commodity he could never have. His country had not allowed him to smile the way she did, her teeth so white, her eyes so wide. He would have married her if she had stayed behind. He would have taught her to be a Kabardin woman, and helped her to be tough and strong like a soldier headed for battle. They would have had children together. He would have given her all the love he had to give.

He parked his car on a curb overgrown with weeds, radishes, and marigolds in downtown Nalchik, not far from the bus depot. It was pitch black outside, with only a candle glowing on the other side of the window. His mother was sitting on the balcony, waiting for him. Her hair was in tangles. When she saw him, she stood up and cried.

‘I thought you’d never come home, son,’ she whispered to him in their native Kabardinian. ‘I thought you were gone forever. It reminded me of a year ago, when you went to war. Please don’t ever stay out late like that. Even if you’re working to help us survive, come home when it gets dark. We can make do without the money. We have enough grains to last us a lifetime. In my old age, all I want is you by my side. Please let me forget that year when you were gone, fighting a war. Please, I don’t want to remember. Come inside. Your tea is growing cold.’
Correspondence

Any correspondence should be directed to ... Rebecca Gould, (rrs40@columbia.edu).

Notes