

# 'White Ravens': speaking through the silence

German documentary looks at the impact of the Chechen conflict on Russian society

Jim Quilty  
Daily Star staff

**B**EIRUT: Chechnya has a strong whiff of déjà vu about it. Simmering since 1994, Russia's war against Chechen independence fighters is redolent of the Soviet Army's operations in Afghanistan – if only because the campaign against Chechnya's more-or-less Muslim population, or what we know about it, has been so dirty.

The déjà vu isn't just a Russian one. Intractable and demoralizing to Russia's army and society, Afghanistan has often been depicted as "Russia's Vietnam." The Chechen insurgency has also left its marks on Russian society – imprints that strangely anticipate those Iraq is leaving upon the U.S. today.

These comparisons spring to mind while watching "White Ravens," a documentary about Russian veterans of the Chechen conflict. The documentary screened during Umam D&R's symposium "Civil Violence and War Memories," which ended Sunday.

The film's modus operandi is to sit its informants in front of a camera and ask them to recount experiences. There are four principals in this cast of characters.

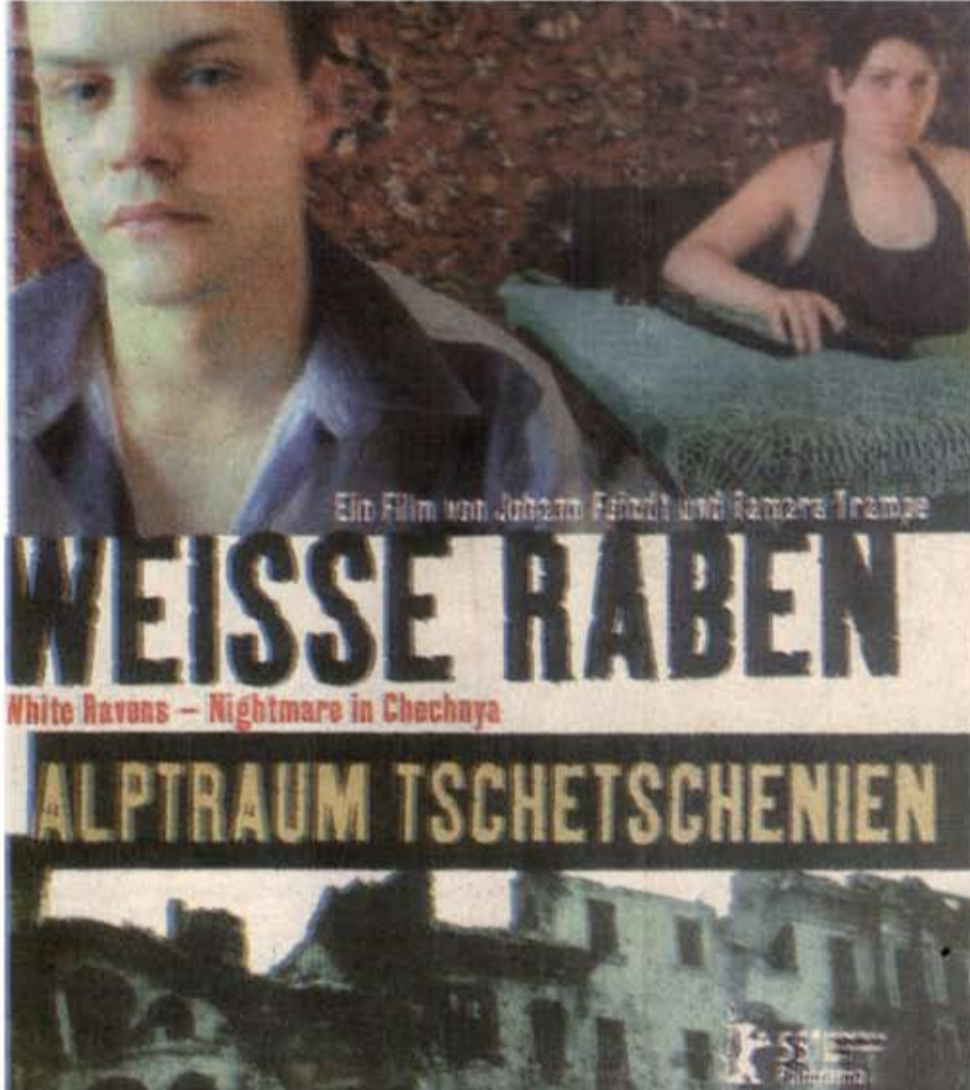
Katja is a 32-year-old nurse now working in a St Petersburg hospital. She signed up to serve in Chechnya for financial reasons, she says, and was delighted to leave after a year. Shortly after she got home, though, she felt compelled to return for another tour of duty.

Kiril was 18 when (for financial reasons) he joined the army and volunteered to fight in Chechnya for a Special Operations unit. He was captured by Chechen fighters and held "in a hole" for six months before escaping. He's now serving a 15-year sentence in a work camp for sexually assaulting a 10-year-old girl.

Petja was also an unemployed 18 year old when he joined a Special Operations unit and was posted to Chechnya. A few months after being deployed there, a mine blew off his right arm and leg.

Sergej is a 45-year-old veteran of Afghanistan who subsequently spent 10 years in and out of hospitals for various reasons.

Another player in the film is the Union of Committees of Mothers of Russian Soldiers. Founded in 1989 and dedicated to securing soldiers' rights, by the time of the first Chechen War Mothers had become a soldiers' advocacy group that successfully lobbied for an amnesty for 40,000 army deserters and pressured the Russian state to abolish conscription. The filmmakers



"White Ravens" is a documentary about Russian veterans of the Chechen conflict.

depict the Mothers as the only effective voice of dissent against the Chechen War.

The role of economic marginality in compelling people to enlist, and the role of mothers as a dissident voice the state cannot ignore, is strikingly reminiscent of the dynamic that sees young people join the U.S. Army and sends their mothers to picket President George W. Bush's Texas ranch when they start coming home from Iraq in pieces. It isn't the filmmakers' intention of to draw such parallels – the film was started long

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before the Iraq war – they simply lie there, latent.

"White Ravens" departs somewhat from the therapeutic-testimonial model – found in most of the documentaries screening during the symposium – on a number of levels. It's immediately apparent, for instance, that the film is imaginatively edited and assembled.

It also makes use of archival

footage from Chechnya. One clip shows the detention of a group of Chechens during a "mopping-up operation." The camera takes special note of the fact that there are two women in the group – one of them Russian – neither of whom were heard from again.

"White Ravens" isn't primarily interested in the conflict itself and it doesn't seek to provide a voice for the Chechen side – who are visible here but mute.

The images – whether the film itself or the still photos made from it – do provide some context for the testimonials. The stills of the two women fighters in particular, are used as tools.

Some informants are more forthcoming than others, but all of them seem hesitant to disclose too much about what goes on in Chechnya – or went on in Afghanistan. The images act as a sort of counterpoise to the veterans' oft-heard question, "Why do people keep wanting to bring up the past?"

The images don't show any atrocities, so in no sense are the veterans being confronted with their crimes. Sergej remarks that the Soviet Army would never have held prisoners with their fingers locked behind

their heads. Then he goes on to detail exactly what the practice does to your hands, suggesting he knows it quite well.

All are asked to comment on the images. Some remark that the women were probably snipers, others that it is a common myth in Chechnya that women are snipers. All are asked to speculate about whether the women were still alive. All are uncomfortable answering.

With some difficulty, Katja

recounts how the men in her unit captured a Chechen sniper. It was a woman, a former Olympic marksman from the Baltic. "They raped her," she says somberly. "Humiliated her. Many men."

"We don't really know how representative these cases are," says film co-director Johann Feindt. "But if you trust the Mothers' statistics, 40-50 percent of damaged Chechen veterans turn to violent crime – murder, rape, armed robbery – when they return home."

"When Kiril was arrested, for instance, he shared his cell with 19 other men. Five of them were Chechen veterans, one of Afghanistan."

Feindt says the Chechen War remains largely unreported both within Russia and outside. "The domestic press only addresses Chechnya in the context of terrorism."

"Afghanistan was a turning point for Russian soldiers," he continues. "When they returned after the Second World War they were heroes. Soldiers returned from Afghanistan as occupiers, losers."

"Chechnya is different again because it isn't a foreign country but considered a part of Russia. When these veterans return, they are shunned, regarded as 'sick.' They're unable to discuss what they went through or did in action."

"At first they were eager to speak with us. They're surprised that some outsider wants to listen to them ... It's more difficult to make them speak a second time. It's because they think about what they've said, I think. It would've been impossible to make the progress we did without the boys' mothers to get us access."

"I think they're telling the truth as much as they're able. Special Operations soldiers sign a contract with the army promising that they wouldn't disclose what they did in action. Then there's the shame."



Director Johann Feindt and film editor Stefan Krumbiegel.