October 18, 2008

Urban Renewal and Partial Amnesia in Chechnya

By C. J. CHIVERS

GROZNY, Russia — This is the year, according to an order from a president whom few dare to disappoint, that the architectural scars of war in Grozny, Chechnya’s capital, will be removed. That the order has nearly been fulfilled is a feat.

Not long ago, Grozny (the name means “terrible” in Russian) offered a panorama of sagging husks of buildings and unmarked graves, scenes that eerily resembled the ruins left by the most destructive urban battles of World War II.

Grozny today is less a battlefield than the renovated seat of a new police state within Russia’s borders, led by Ramzan A. Kadyrov, the republic’s young and exceptionally violent president. And Mr. Kadyrov, a Chechen who has professed loyalty to the same Kremlin that many of his fellow Chechens fought for more than a decade, has decreed that by Dec. 31 his capital will bear no more of the marks of war that made Grozny worthy of its name.

As the makeover nears completion, and at a pace recalling the fear-driven public works of Stalin’s time, Grozny’s new look summons questions. The ruins are vanishing. How will the city remember the forces that destroyed it?

The answer, in short, is very carefully. And partially. If the task of writing a war’s history falls to the victors, then Mr. Kadyrov is busy with a selective first draft.

Throughout the city, memorials have sprouted, but they are as censored and as celebratory of the republic’s latest rulers as are the contents of Chechnya’s state-run news media.

Russia elsewhere is a nation with a well-developed sense of its enemies. It is also densely populated with memorials, many of them statues of thick-limbed Soviet soldiers standing against invading Germans more than half a century ago. To this day, on significant war anniversaries the Kremlin broadcasts messages of Soviet victory over Germany to its population and the world, just as it still celebrates the Nazi surrender in military parades at Red Square.

But here in Grozny, public discussion about the forces that flattened this city is complicated by the fact that those forces were not foreign. They were Russian. And so in the urge to memorialize the war, Grozny has become an outdoor shrine to the president’s father, Akhmad H. Kadyrov, who was killed by a bomb in 2004 at a ceremony, as fate would write it, commemorating the defeat of Nazi Germany.

In the government’s version, Akhmad Kadyrov, a Sufi religious leader and former rebel, had grown so disgusted with separatists and the Arab jihadis who joined them that he led an armed countermovement, steering Chechnya back to the fold of a beneficent Moscow.

These days the weary face of the deceased Mr. Kadyrov looks down from ubiquitous posters. His name adorns everything, including weight-lifting centers and the city’s huge new mosque, the largest in Russia. Official remembrances of the wars are used to recall his civic-mindedness, judgment and courage.

The only images that compete with him are, in order, pictures of one of his sons, Ramzan, and portraits of the Kremlin’s most recent occupants, Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin and President Dmitri A. Medvedev.

But the problem with the Kadyrov cult of personality that the younger Mr. Kadyrov has sponsored is that it requires both selective forgetting and an awkward balancing act for former rebels now courting Kremlin favor.

A visitor will not find official acknowledgment that by the time the elder Mr. Kadyrov rose to prominence, Chechnya and Russia had been at war, off and on, for nearly 10 years. Or that an accumulated mass of evidence has documented Russian human rights violations against Chechens on a grand scale.

Nor does anything indicate that it was not separatists who destroyed Grozny, but Russian artillery, aircraft and armor.

Such subjects are officially taboo. The current government has decided to let time try to heal what words and memorials cannot yet salve.

“We understand perfectly well people who have no history of their own, who do not respect the memories of their ancestors — this nation is doomed,” said Salavdi Jamiyev, Grozny’s deputy mayor, who is coordinating much of the reconstruction. “But we are in a difficult time.

“It is now maybe a time to bypass some controversial issues,” he continued. “Maybe it is better not to discuss the political mistakes of Russia’s leaders. Later, maybe, the task can go to future generations. But not now.”

And so all across Grozny, there are signs of the airbrush.

A memorial to dead journalists does not list their names. On the day the monument was unveiled, a list of killed journalists was read aloud.

But it did not include some of the most prominent killings, including that of Cynthia Elbaum, a young American photographer and the first journalist to die in the war. Ms. Elbaum was killed by a Russian airstrike.

“It was a ceremony for those who died in the name of freedom of speech,” said one person who attended, but asked not to be identified out of fear of retaliation. “But those who suppress freedom of speech held it, and they left out names that did not fit the message. It was farce.”

As the noncontroversial monuments rise, monuments that more fully explore the darkly intertwined histories of Russia and Chechnya lie fallow. At one intersection, a small, rebel-made monument is overgrown and in neglect.

The memorial is an assemblage of grave markers. The stones had been dug up by Soviet laborers after Stalin ordered in 1944 that the Chechen population be deported to Central Asia. The Soviet Union later used the gravestones for building foundations and curbstones.

After Stalin’s death, Khrushchev allowed the surviving Chechens to return.

And after the Soviet Union dissolved, Chechens collected the tombstones and arranged them in an outdoor park. From one pile of stones, a muscular arm rises. It is holding a dagger.

It was a sure mark of rebellion, and over the years, as Russian patrols have passed it, they have fired into the monument repeatedly, leaving it pocked with bullet marks.

Mr. Jamiyev, the deputy mayor, said a contest was being held to design a new memorial to deportation. The gravestones are sacred and will be moved to a better location, he said.

The winning entrant for the replacement monument, he said, will probably not include that defiant knife.

Sitting at his desk in a new city hall, where the lobby bears a stone mural of Akhmad Kadyrov, across the street from a mosque named after Akhmad Kadyrov, Mr. Jamiyev allowed himself a warm, silent smile.

Most everyone here knows that Russia made rubble of this city. Most everyone knows the history of cycles of war between Chechens and Slavs. But today, officially at least, Russia is an ally. Mr. Jamiyev recited a Russian proverb. “The one who recalls the past,” he said, “will banish his eyes.”  
 *Copyright 2009 New York Times Company*