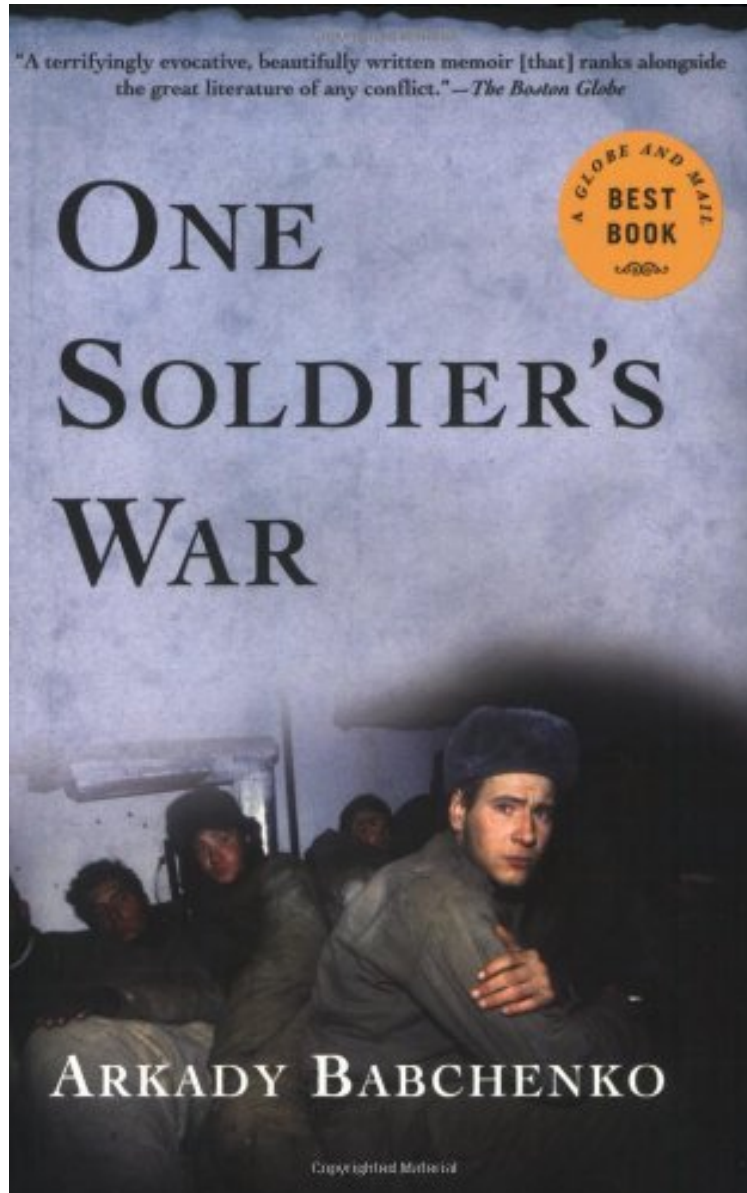


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One Soldier's War

Arkady Babchenko

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Arkady Babchenko : One Soldier's War before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised One Soldier's War:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. An exhausting readBy S.T.There's a single two star review by .fgd which is accurate, but I still have to give this four stars.This was an exhausting read, yet I couldn't stop. Every moment conveyed misery. Most notably, the non-stop accounts of dedovshchina and endemic alcoholism and bullying simply

wore me down. Reading war accounts from other conflicts, there's a sense that even when various soldiers dislike or even hate each other, there's a sense of camaraderie and mission. This account portrayed an insular dog-eat-dog world where the mission hardly even mattered - senior members bullied younger members, higher ranks bullied lower ranks, the soldiers stole and sold army property to cover their own needs - the sense of hopelessness and unending fear, grit, and grime never ended. Overall, that pervading sense of misery seems more accurate than some other rosier accounts of war I've read.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. This was a great book. I enjoyed it immensely.

By Polarbear This was a great book. I enjoyed it immensely. It's not a happy story or an easy read, but it's one Russian soldier's story about his experience in the Russian army and what it was like fighting in Chechnya. I like authentic, first-hand, honest accounts of history and this is one of them from a tiny little-known conflict in a forgotten backwater of post-Soviet Russia.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Brutal. A violent and bloody account of a grunts ...

By Mike Dubya Brutal. A violent and bloody account of a grunts experience in the Chechen conflict. it doesnt delve into the politics of the conflict, or the varying factors and reasons the wars were fought. It is a personal reflection and diary of Arkady's life and brutality of being in the Russian Army.

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.

From Publishers Weekly If you haven't yet learned that war is hell, this memoir by a young Russian recruit in his country's battle with the breakaway republic of Chechnya, should easily convince you. And yet Babchenko, who was drafted in 1995 as a second-year law student for the first Chechnya campaign, actually volunteered for the second one in 1999 for reasons even he is hard put to explain. Written shortly after his discharge from the army, the book burns with the need to tell of his personal ordeal and that of his fellows as young, innocent and woefully inexperienced grunts condemned to a miserable life ruled by shell-shocked superiors and perpetual threats. Here there are no good guys or moral high purpose—No one, from the regimental commander to the rank and file soldier, Babchenko assures us, understands why he is here; one fights only for the fellow soldier next to him. Babchenko, now a journalist, demonstrates genuine literary ability, especially in the earlier vignette-like chapters, but readers will glean little about the conflict's political and historical context. Redundancy weakens a narrative that otherwise would have benefited from brevity. (Feb.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

"Bears comparison with the great literary accounts of any war." "Harrowingly good ... This literary account from the front is a modern equivalent of *All Quiet on the Western Front*." "Babchenko writes courageously about what he has seen--that is why his book is so graphic. That is why it is not only important as literature, but also politically." "Breathlessly visual ... Easily bears comparison with the great literary accounts of other wars, such as Michael Herr's *Dispatches* . . . One has rarely read about a military culture in which the line between war and peace is so blurred." From *The Washington Post* ed by Thomas de Waal

All wars pervert language and our sense of reality, but Russia's war in Chechnya was especially grotesque. In 1994, in the most opportunistic fashion, President Boris Yeltsin sent the Russian army to crush a secessionist government in the southern province of Chechnya. Ostensibly, the army's task was to "restore constitutional order" and "disarm bandits." But to correspondents covering the conflict, it was obvious that Yeltsin's decision would be a catastrophe, for one reason above all others: The Russian armed forces were a frightening rabble of unruly men. Far from restoring constitutional order, the soldiers abused every article of Russia's young constitution, looting, raping and killing in what was supposed to be part of their own country. One day in 1995, I met a young Chechen businessman who explained how the armed forces were fulfilling the second part of Yeltsin's orders, the "disarming" of the populace. He rummaged through a wardrobe in his house and pulled out a wad of \$100 bills -- \$5,000 in all -- that he said he had agreed to pay two soldiers for a consignment of Russian army snipers' rifles, grenade-launchers and ammunition (which would, of course, pass quickly into the hands of Chechen insurgents). In *One Soldier's War*, his memoir of Russian army life, Arkady Babchenko confirms that this kind of sale was rife. He describes how two new recruits were beaten, tortured and expelled from his unit for selling ammunition through the fence of their base to buy vodka. But their real mistake was not that they traded with the enemy. It was that they were new: "We don't watch the beating. We have been beaten ourselves and it has long ceased to be of any interest. Nor do we feel particularly sorry for the gunners. They shouldn't have gotten caught. . . . They have seen too little of the war

to sell bullets -- only we are entitled to do that. We know death, we've heard it whistling over our heads and seen how it mangles bodies, and we have the right to bring it upon others. And these two haven't. What's more, the new recruits are strangers in our battalion, not yet soldiers, not one of us. But most of all we are upset that we can no longer use the gap in the fence." At moments like this, *One Soldier's War* evokes *Catch-22* or, closer to the source, the savage ironies of Isaac Babel's tales of the 1919-21 Russian-Polish war, *Red Cavalry*. Babchenko went to war having learned Morse code but not how to use a gun. He and his fellow conscripts were systematically hazed and humiliated by senior soldiers; they sold their boots for cabbage pies and treated a stray dog as a lucky feast; they were filled with hatred and nihilism: "We stopped caring for ourselves, no longer washed, shaved or brushed our teeth. After a week without soap and water our hands cracked and bled continually, blighted by eczema in the cold. We hadn't warmed ourselves by a fire for a whole week because the damp reeds wouldn't burn and there was nowhere to gather firewood in the steppe. We began to turn wild as the cold and wet and filth drove from us all feelings apart from hatred, and we hated everything on earth, including ourselves." The memoir, by turns horrific, sad and funny, fills a big gap by providing us with the first-person experiences of an articulate Russian soldier. As one tale of savagery follows another, however, the story becomes increasingly frustrating to the reader who knows the Russian political context. The end of one war, a two-year interlude and the start of a second war are barely registered as the narrative becomes war-without-end, totally enclosed within a soldier's helmet and a company of men. We never learn why Babchenko, a conscript in the first Chechen war, from 1994 to 1996, volunteered to fight again in 1999. And there are even more troubling omissions. One is President Vladimir Putin, who -- in contrast to his predecessor, the bumbling Boris Yeltsin -- never is mentioned by name. The other is the civilian population of Chechnya. The soldiers routinely used the word "Chechens" to mean rebel fighters, the enemy. Babchenko suffered mental torment when it became clear he ordered artillery fire that killed an 8-year-old girl and her grandfather, but usually he sounds strangely uninterested in the suffering of the Chechen civilians, the main victims of Yeltsin's and Putin's wars. War is not just an existential experience for young men. It is the ultimate test for a society, forcing its citizens to ask if they can trust their government to dispense death in their name. That is a question Babchenko never addresses in this harrowing but rather self-absorbed memoir. Copyright 2008, The Washington Post. All Rights Reserved.