

Black-white-black. Travelling through the Caucasus Mountains and through Caucasus history

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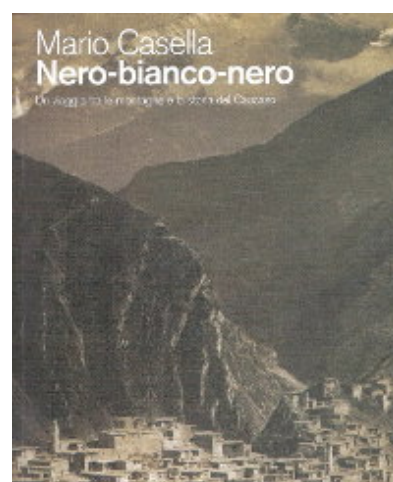


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[Casella, Mario](#)

Nero – bianco - nero. Un viaggio tra le montagne e la storia del Caucaso

ABOUT: Mario Casella's book was released in 2011 by Gabriele Capelli Editore, an Italian-Swiss publishing house. It is a product of the project conceived and carried out by Mario Casella and his Russian partner and mountain guide Alexei Shustov, who traveled on skis across the Caucasus Mountains from Derbent on the Caspian Sea to Sochi on the Black Sea. The dangerous slopes of the Caucasus Mountains proved to be the least challenging part of the undertaking. Most of the trouble, according to Casella, came from the bureaucratic red tape. The book contains the author's diary, which traces his exciting journey into the region's history, combined with political commentary from Casella. It is written for the general public and has been praised by numerous critics.



The book starts with a dedication: “In the memory of Natalya Estemirova. I dedicate this book to **all those who continue their brave struggle for human rights and freedoms in the Caucasus.**” While Casella’s book is not exactly political, he tries to highlight the existing social and political issues in the region, and he describes the daily travails of a “traveler with a pen” in the Caucasus.



One can’t fail to notice the author’s sarcasm as he writes about the requirement to constantly renew his registration and obtain permits for traveling in the region’s restricted areas. The author uses particularly caustic language to present the travelers’ interactions with the Federal Security Service (FSB). Casella describes the “festival of absurdity” that was an hours-long interrogation by an FSB officer in Derbent, who, according to the author, faintly resembled Vladimir Putin. The farce lasted until midnight, writes Casella, proving that **simply mentioning the initials FSB is sufficient to explain any bizarre turn of events.**

While Casella and his companion did not travel through Chechnya, the Chechen theme is invariably present in the book. The history of the Caucasus is full of kidnappings, incarcerations, exiles, and deportation, writes Casella in the chapter on Imam Shamil. Drawing a risky parallel between the 19-th century leader Dagestani guerilla leader and Chechen terrorist Shamil Basaev, the author concludes that these men embody two different eras and two different concepts of resistance.

The wise and elderly **Imam Shamil called for retreat and dialogue, and today, this appeal is widely supported in the Caucasus.** For others, however, **this is tantamount to surrender that will clear the path for long-term Russian domination over the entire Caucasus region.**

A separate chapter is devoted to the author’s previous visit to Chechnya (in November 2007), which he calls “the grey zone of humanity.” As an epigraph, Casella chose an excerpt from Anna Politkovskaya’s book *Putin’s Russia*, which describes the killing by the federal troops of peaceful villagers, traveling to Grozny by bus. Most of the chapter tells the story of Zeynep Gashayeva, who takes care of infant children and gathers evidence on the crimes committed during the war in Chechnya.

These materials, according to Casella, could serve as reliable evidence for an international criminal tribunal for Chechnya. If this tribunal is created, the entire former military and political leadership of Russia would end up on the dock, claims Casella.

The Kremlin tries to convince the world that the Chechen issue has been resolved, but in reality there is no respect for private property and human dignity in Chechnya, writes the author. However, he believes that the struggle for human rights in Chechnya continues. Casella recalls his meeting with Natalya Estemirova, who told him a great deal about the **widespread corruption and miserable existence of ordinary Chechens.**

The conclusions Casella makes are far from optimistic. Estemirova was killed in July 2009, and the orphanage established by Gashayeva was recently closed on personal orders of Ramzan Kadyrov. Casella’s final impressions were shaped by his experience in Grozny, where just a few blocks away from neon-lit Kadyrov Avenue he struggled to find a toilet in the dark yard of a private house. In Chechnya, only a few steps separate ephemeral prosperity from the dark truth of everyday life, concludes Casella.

The August 2008 war in South Ossetia is also a frequent theme in the book. Casella tells the story of the “Red Army’s intervention to help the South Ossetian brethren.” His interlocutors claim that never before has Moscow’s support for the region been so tangible.

Casella is convinced that Russia is planning its return to the Caucasus as a colonizer. To prove

this, he points to the new army base near the resort of Bezingi in Kabardino-Balkaria, with its modern facilities and military equipment. Casella believes this is proof that **Moscow is poised to reinforce its presence in the region.**

Wrapping up his story on the war in South Ossetia, Casella depicts **Abkhazia and South Ossetia as separatist regions, which are increasingly colonized by Russia.** He also writes that Moscow's harsh reaction to President Mikhail Saakashvili's incursions was caused among other things by the need to ensure the safety of the South Stream project.

Still, the main reason, according to Casella, was the desire to safeguard the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi. **Vladimir Putin spent too much time and effort securing the Olympics to allow for any stray Georgian rockets to reach Sochi,** located just 40 km away from the **Abkhazian border. Therefore, it was decided to make Abkhazia a buffer state,** claims Casella.



Casella ends his book by mulling Russia's Olympic challenge. **There are quite a few people who believe that Sochi should not have been awarded the Olympics in the first place,** writes the author. Among the objections he lists is Sochi's proximity to a nature reserve, which has been declared a world heritage site by UNESCO, the region's military instability, as well as the fact that Sochi is the site of the decisive historical battle in which Russia defeated the Caucasian rebels in 1864.

Mario Casella (born 1959) is a journalist with a passion for mountain climbing. At the age of 26, he was certified as a professional alpine guide, which means that he can lead mountain climbing groups.
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Vladimir Putin hopes that the Sochi Olympics will provide a unique opportunity to forget the tragic events of the past and pave the way to a new era of peace and prosperity in the Caucasus, writes Casella. This is the real Olympic bet of Kremlin. But, as it often happens in modern Russia, in similar cases **ambitions of those who have money and power truly know no measure.**

To bolster his claim, Casella mentions the project to build an artificial Federation Island off the coast of Sochi. The island could be completed as soon as 2014, unless the Federation (the island, of course, jokes the author sarcastically) sinks due to unforeseen circumstances.

Prepared by the Valdai Club Staff

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