



ISSN: 2158-7051

INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
RUSSIAN STUDIES

ISSUE NO. 6 (2017/2)

CHECHNYA: LIFE IN A WAR-TORN SOCIETY, By Ayse Dietrich*, University of California Press, California. Written by Valery Tishkov, Year of Publishing: 2004. Subject Area: History of Chechnya and Russia. Book Type: History. Total Number of Pages: 284. ISBN: 0 520 23888 5, \$34.95, Paperback.

The book includes a foreword by Mikhail S. Gorbachev, a Preface, fourteen chapters, Notes, Main Characters, Informants and Interviewers, Select Bibliography and Index.

As Mikhail S. Gorbachev asserts in the Foreword, “The war in Chechnya was a difficult trial for the new Russian state and for all its citizens, especially the Chechen people; and the desire to enjoy democratization after the collapse of the Soviet Union, have been misused by the leaders to create nationalist hysteria and anti-Russian feeling; and the thirst for power of some Russian national leaders and the cruelty of Russia’s armed forces are the main guilty parties in this war.” In addition to his brief historical view of the Chechens and the war, he talks about the value of the book for offering a new perspective on the war in Chechnya and Chechen society. He indicates that the importance of this book comes from its firsthand accounts obtained by the author from many Chechens in different areas; from actual fighters and people who stayed out of the fighting, supporters of Dudayev and his opponents.

As mentioned in the Preface, the author Valery Tishkov’s main goal in writing this book was to present the real voices of various participants in this tragedy and allow them to give their personal views on the events they had witnessed.

In the first Chapter, “Ethnography and Theory” the author, who was a delegate in 1992 under Boris Yeltsin and participated in talks with the Chechens in December 1994, begins by claiming that previous writers who have dealt with the issue of the Chechen war remain outsiders since they are not the participants: “the war is not their war” and “they are on the front lines, but not in the war”. He correctly asserts that as outsiders they manipulate the conflict for their own purposes. The author uses the methods of the delegated interview for his book; and asks questions such as: “Where were

you during the war, what were you doing at the time, and how did you earn living?; what happened to your family?; what did you think of the rulers and their aims?; what has changed in Chechnya, and what can be expected in the future?”. The author’s analysis is based on the evidence of fifty-four people: fifty of them Chechens, one Ingush, one Buryat, and two ethnic Russians. Their professions varied, from statesman to housewife, and the geographical span was quite wide.

The author mentions that there were limiting factors for this research; among them were that there were few sociocultural anthropologists who had studied armed conflict, particularly in the former USSR; there was a serious lack of reliable ethnographic data; and that storytelling, or ethnography, is an important aspect of information-gathering which is often dismissed by analysts. In addition, he correctly points out that many studies primarily highlight cultural differences, specifically the differences in religion, and present the conflict as a struggle of Orthodox Christian Russians against Muslim. Finally, he claims that his analysis indicates that the Chechen people, or Chechen society as a collective body, no longer exist as an agent or locus of social action.

Regarding the issue of Chechens and modernization, the various theories of modernization are derived from the common epistemology of a society’s physical and intellectual progress. The author claims that the Chechen situation reflects de-modernization, since change in Chechnya rushes forward too swiftly for society to deal with violently imposed dynamics that resulted in social disintegration. The most prominent characteristic of de-modernization are a mental world dominated by simplified and limited versions of events, past and present, and individual decisions made under the pressure of limited information about available choices and acute time pressure. Another important characteristic of de-modernization is the flight of those (intellectuals, professionals etc.) capable of implementing the agenda of modern life through society’s key institutional structures.

Another feature of Chechen society in conflict is the tendency to turn to the abused past for arguments that can be applied to the present. The arguments of the Chechen militants were based on a dramatic representation of the past - the 19th century Caucasian war and the trauma of deportation under Stalin. The search for a lost ideal (which never existed) is still the driving force of intellectual debate in Chechnya. Chechen society also borrowed foreign models, before, during, and after the war, and the borrowing of ideas that are at odds with long-adopted norms and values may also be considered a symptom of de-modernization. Yet another characteristic of de-modernization is apathy, together with the disregard for human life and common decency that readily develops from it. Despair becomes the dominant mood in Chechnya.

In the second chapter, “Indigenization, Deportation, and Return”, the author introduces the historical background of the Chechens and the 1944 deportation which changed the social and demographic structure of Chechnya. He talks about his methodological approach to the historical and ethnic factors to understanding the conflicts in the region, but claims that a historical explanation is not an objective of his study, and that history cannot serve as a basis of controversy for today’s political events, rather these conflicts have contemporary actors who grapple with contemporary problems. In order to understand why a historical explanation should not be used to explain the current crises, he provides examples from scholars such as Shternberg, Munchayev and Furman, who wrote academic articles about Chechen culture and the community. He criticizes their perspective which he claims often carries an underlying political message that “the terrible external threat of Russian conquest” (the author quotes Furman) should be condemned, that the course of

Chechen history was diverted, and that these “historical injustices” should be corrected.

The author considers the period of Stalin’s deportation of the Chechens as the beginning of the history of the modern generation of Chechens and the Chechen conflict. The author claims that after the 1917 Revolution, many Chechens had supported the Bolsheviks; it was only during the recent conflict that “new genealogies” were “discovered” that traced families back to Chechen *abreks* (Caucasian Robin Hoods) who had resisted tsarist and Soviet authorities in the region, raiding and plundering. If Chechens “assisted in the victory of the Bolsheviks,” they had been “trapped” into doing so[1]. The author thinks that this is a very good example to show the “climate of de-modernization in which abuse of history gives scope to irrational perceptions of contemporaneity and self-destructive political projects”.

The author points out that there are two Chechen attitudes toward Stalin’s deportation: before 1980s when people kept quiet, it was as if the tragedy was some sort of collective stigma for which they had to pay, an attitude common among many deported peoples. After the liberalization of the late 1980s the deportation of the Chechen and Ingush people became the subject of many dramatic, literary, and poetic narratives, and was considered a genocide. In this chapter, the author also relates the memories of many people’s painful journeys and daily experiences of the deportation and their search for answers to the deportation.

In chapter three, “Contradictory Modernization”, the author begins by discussing the difficulty of finding printed sources to write about the Chechens after their return from deportation in 1957 and after the Soviets passed a decree on repatriation of the Chechens. This new chapter in their history began with difficulties in terms of social relations, and the resettlement of Chechens in new areas, since their old territories were occupied by other people.

Also in this chapter the author also talks about political status in Chechnya being linked to belonging to the republican committee of the Communist Party and to Moscow in the 1970s and 80s. This same period saw the development of the nepotism and corruption which would become the norm for the central and periphery elites in Chechnya; conflicts and rivalry for power increased among the Chechen elite.

Next, the author goes on to describe the contradictions of modernization in Chechen society. In relation to economic development in Chechnya, he points out that companies preferred not to employ Chechens, resulting in unemployment. The author indicates that some of these unemployed young Chechens left Chechnya for other regions; others joined criminal gangs. Later these two groups became the main manpower pool for the armed struggle. In addition, the local justice system was biased against ethnic Chechens; taken together, these circumstances help explain the high level of crime among Chechens when compared to other ethnic groups in the Russian Federation.

The author asserts that after their return from exile, the Chechens, along with the Ingush, remained the object of special attention by local party organs, as well as by the KGB and the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) of the Soviet Union, which continued to consider them insufficiently “loyal” to the regime and prone to “nationalistic prejudices.”

The author claims that the actual social and psychological reasons for “Chechen criminality” or “disloyalty” were never investigated, and it would be misleading to judge the general situation in the

republic and the social behavior of the Chechens solely on the basis of KGB and MVD documents. He describes the actual situation for the returnees where much of the land they formerly held was inaccessible. For example, despite the fact that the government implemented a number of measures to help the returnees financially and provided supplies for agricultural needs, the Akkinty Chechens who returned to Dagestan could not return to their native villages because these lands had been settled by the Laks.

The author also asserts that the information he received from a peacekeeping mission working in the Interior Department in the North Caucasus does not support KGB reports on the high level of “Chechen criminality” and “Chechen clashes with Russians”.

Further on in the chapter the author provides information about education and the new generation based on the article published in *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (1978). He claims that the corruption of the late Brezhnev period; disgust with the bureaucratic system (*nomenklatura*); the lack of educational opportunities, and the low living standards created dissatisfaction among the Chechens, but they welcomed the changes introduced by Gorbachev during *glasnost* and democratization period.

At the end of this chapter the author briefly discusses historiography and language. During the democratization period, in order to raise the status of the Chechen language, intellectuals brought up the question of introducing the Chechen language in the city schools’ curriculum. In addition to language, Chechen intellectuals rejected the existing depictions of their past and began to openly debate the Soviet historiography which claimed that the Chechen people and their territories had voluntarily joined Russia.

In the chapter four, “Chechen Images”, the author discusses the effects of the war in the emergence of Chechen identity, and states that the conflict produced contemporary perceptions of the Chechens. He states that there are two rival trends concerning Chechen identity. In order to widen its geographic span and deepen its cultural legacy one trend includes as many historic communities as possible in the Chechen entity. The other focuses on narrower group boundaries based on locality and “clan” ties. The author claims that religion was a minor factor in the formation of a new Chechen identity; the word “Chechen” became a political identification, a metaphoric category linked to the tragic past of the “revolution”. The Chechen war created a new group identity based on both historic and invented precedents. In this chapter, the author also talks about historical discrimination in regard to the internal distinctions and contradictions among the Chechens on the issue of who is more genuinely Chechen - the highlanders who supported Dudayev, or the lowlanders who are considered by some to be less cultured, illiterate people. He states that this issue is a general phenomenon for those post-Soviet regions where ethnic Russians or other “non-natives” have left local societies and this absence of “outsiders” has helped to precipitate tensions within an indigenous group that is itself based on perceived small cultural differences.

The Chapter five, “The Road to War”, is devoted to the Chechen national revolution, secession attempt and Moscow’s reaction to it. The author describes Dudayev’s election as a leader during the second National Congress of the Chechen People in 1991, and his declaration of Chechen independence from both the USSR and the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR). The events following this declaration, and particularly Moscow’s inconsistent responses, many the product of political infighting between Gorbachev and Yeltsin and the dissolution of the Soviet

Union are discussed. The author points out that this Yeltsin-Gorbachev rivalry made Moscow unable to send troops into Chechnya, indirectly contributing to Chechen separatism. Dudayev's actions – his violation of the constitution, domination of the political arena, dissolution of the parliament and declaration of his direct presidential rule – also contributed to the crisis. Several political opponents were killed opposition parties and newspapers were closed. This violence and social disruption was responsible for an economic crisis, the mass exodus of qualified Russian professionals in Chechnya, unemployment, the collapse of the health and educational system, corruption and plundering.

Regarding the solution to the Chechen crisis, the author claims that there were various means available to solve the Chechen crisis without using armed force right up to December 1994. He points out that in the time leading up to and throughout the crisis, not a single top government official contacted President Dudayev directly to hear his views and propose ways of resolving the crisis. In addition, a political double standard was evident in how the problems were dealt with. The author, based on David Laitin's observations, points out that in the handling of the rebellion, Moscow lost sight of the critical distinction between seeking to impose legality and undermining it. He claims that the Russian authorities seriously subverted their own claim to legality when they started to utilize the rebels' tactics, not only against Chechen fighters, but also against sympathizers and neutral civilians in Chechnya. In part and these mistakes can be explained by the complexity of Russia's internal situation, and by the lack of experience on the part of Russia's new politicians.

The sixth chapter, "Dzhokhar, Hero and Devil", examines the self-proclaimed leader of a Chechnya in conflict, his media image; his perceptions, his war experience, his charisma. It answers the questions of how a new breed of national leaders emerged from liberalization, how the post-Soviet populace perceived them, and why the masses followed such leaders. He claims that in the Russian academic circle it is rarely admitted that a leader creates a so-called "revolutionary movement" on his own. The author asserts that Dudayev's charisma came from his anti-Russian stance, his knowledge of the military trade, his perception of war as his primary occupation and his treatment of politics and government as a sort of semi-military game. After his death on April 21, 1996 Russian authors took an uncritical attitude toward Dudayev, while Chechen writers and propagandists canonized him, and poets praised his virtues. The author also provides some excerpts from the interviews about Dudayev to support his arguments.

To conclude, the author states that the Chechen war was a highly personalized conflict, and it was Gorbachev's liberalization movement that opened the door to "many new would-be architects of social space". He states that Dudayev constructed a closed subculture that developed its own language, code, and practices, with minimal connection to the outside world in order to establish stability. The author claims that it is precisely this irrational, closed subculture of a charismatic leader in constant conflict with the dominant milieu, that so effectively provokes the phenomenon of de-modernization.

In the Chapter seven, "The Sons of War", the author, to write about those who were actively involved in the war, he had to rely on informants from the ranks of Chechen fighters (*boyeviki*) and discusses their exhibitionist behavior such as videotaping their performative violence. The author met personally with the fighters and participants in anti-Dudayev meetings who witnessed the Dudayev regime's brutal assaults and killings, and learned that the Chechens had committed violence against one another as well as against non-Chechens. The author comments on the Chechen

participants' ability to overcome their fear and master the techniques of guerrilla warfare, noting the tenacity and effectiveness of the Chechen armed resistance. He asks how a small, badly organized part of the Chechen male population emerged victorious in what logically appeared to be a hopeless fight. Faith, fanaticism, tradition, and romantic clichés are insufficient to explain the mass mobilization.

The author continues by examining the apathy and internal division that emerged after the war, in place of the expected enthusiasm and solidarity. He also points out that the goals of the Chechen resistance leaders were significantly different from the interests of the ordinary fighters. War meant more than “motherland and freedom,” it meant protecting home and family, taking revenge for their loss; for some it produced a certain satisfaction in wreaking violence on others, and/or a consuming pleasure in plundering. For many fighters it proved impossible to escape the cycle of violence they found themselves in, and what followed was chaos and de-modernization.

Chapter eight, “The Culture of Hostage-Taking”, deals with the lucrative business of holding hostages for ransom that developed among Chechens during the First War. When the author was collecting information on hostage-taking in Chechnya it was still an ongoing issue and “centuries-old” tradition in Chechnya. His initial sources were reluctant to talk about the practice because while the federals initiated the practice, the hostage-taking industry is perpetuated by criminals, who also abduct Chechens. Reliable information on this topic is difficult to obtain, since it is carefully guarded secret. To illuminate the character of the inaccessibility of information and the fear the informants have, he provides excerpts from his interviews. The author claims that abductions in Chechnya increased after 1991 (in fall 1999, there were 851 people missing and the total income gained from abduction activity was \$200 million) and none of his informants could recall any such cases before 1991. The motive behind abducting Chechen citizens was usually ransom money. Besides monetary gain, the abduction of high-ranking officials and foreigners is also linked to political maneuvering. In addition, the author provides information about the type of civilians who are kidnapped and their abductors.

Chapter nine, “Violence in Secessionist Warfare”, discusses the violence conducted in the Chechen war. The author emphasizes that the Chechen war was never a conflict between two ethnic groups and between two states, rather “it was a group-*versus*-state conflict”. He accuses President Yeltsin in launching a military invasion into the breakaway region without sufficient technical and logistical preparation, a factor which immediately complicated matters substantially. He also wonders how the Russian government set the moral and political tone for the Russian forces' brutal conduct within their own country. He quotes Oleg Lobov's (secretary of the Security Council) comments about the war: “We need a small victorious war, as in Haiti, to raise the president's ratings” and states that this “small victorious war” turned into an uncontrolled, large-scale war. He characterizes the war as “de-modern phenomena” since accepted limitations on violence is abandoned and society was driven into anarchy and chaos. He talks about the image of the enemy, and states that his data show that atrocities blamed on “historically rooted,” “ethnically coded” group animosities, frequently cited and said to be “in their blood,” are often post-factual rationalizations based on superficial observations. The chapter also discusses the disbelief felt by Chechens who considered themselves Russian citizens and were unwilling to reject federal authority when the Russian army marched into Chechnya. In addition, the author examines the cruelty that characterized both sides' actions; the federal troops' treatment of the civilian population; and the Chechens' view of the conflict as an

obligation to protect their homes and families, as *ghazavat* (holy war), preserving their women's honor, or defense of the homeland. He looks at how political leaders deceived the public with slogans and promises, intentionally turning the populace into killers against their will in this civil war; and clarifies the phenomenon of collective violence and its search for moral justifications to gain legitimacy. The author states that to understand the violence and conflict it is necessary to recognize the primary role of the specific social situation in interpreting human behavior and institutions. The key point is an examination of human responses to common existential problems under different social conditions. Words can be a very important component of violence and can, eventually, be transformed into bullets. Armed conflict in Chechnya started with its legitimization through verbal expressions and the introduction of such slogans as "national revolution" and "national self-determination," as well as charges of "nation-killing" and Russian "imperial domination."

Chapter ten, "The Impact on Family Life", is dedicated to the issue of the impact of terror on family life. The author at the beginning discusses the characteristics of traditional Chechen families. Then, he states that his ethnographic materials show that there has been more involvement and active participation of women in collective violence since the time of the "national revolution", and were used as human shields in seizing the Russian army arsenal in Chechnya. Women united and preserved families in the prewar period, and brought Chechens into the violence after the introduction of federal troops. The conflict in Chechnya also created "child soldiers" out of teenagers who were given arms and trained in their use. Parents were the most important factor, but were unable or unwilling to prevent their children from becoming involved in the violence. The war was the outcome of collective behavior, mob psychology, at a time when young people were escaping routine life, stimulated by exciting appeals and unclear expectations. The author states that the war in Chechnya also brought about a revival of the Islamic way of life; and after gaining control of Chechnya in August 1996, separatist leaders introduced Shari`a law; before the war, family life in Chechnya had never been dominated by Shari`a law. To conclude, the author states that the war destroyed many families, but they are struggling to reestablish meaning and purpose in their lives.

In chapter eleven, "Religion and the Chechen Conflict", the author discusses the spread of Islam in the North Caucasus. He states that at the beginning of the 20th century, Islam played a mobilizing and ideological role during local armed uprisings against tsarist Russia and Bolshevik rule in the early Soviet period. The establishment of Soviet power in Chechnya was accompanied by a bitter civil war, which took on a quasi-religious character; the new communist rulers saw Islam as a harmful "rudiment of the past," and it was driven to the periphery of Chechen life. The mosques and Muslim clergy were placed under state control, and their religious and political activities were much reduced. During Stalin's time, Islam as a doctrine and institution was subject to brutal suppression. The young and middle-aged elements of the population became atheists. Shari`a law and the unwritten code of conduct of the *adat* were portrayed as reactionary. Although religious worship declined under Soviet rule, many families maintained their adherence to certain ritual aspects of Islam. However, the modern generation of Chechens, those who were brought up under the Soviet system, tend toward atheism or at least become nonbelievers. These "new Muslims" had little to do with the spiritual practice of Islam, and joined as a political movement, becoming a force that encouraged its corruption. The use of Islam served pragmatic purposes for both the civil authorities and the clergy. In this chapter, the author also discusses Wahhabism as a force competing with traditional Sufi Islam, and its loss of influence after the first Chechen war, and the fragmentation of Chechen society by the war and by foreign influences.

Chapter twelve, “The Myth and Reality of the ‘Great Victory’”, addresses issues of postwar Chechen society such as the devastated infrastructure, economic collapse, the mass exodus from the republic, the disintegration of civil institutions and increased criminal activities. He examines why a new cycle of violence erupted, claiming that the war in Chechnya did not truly end. Rather, it was revived daily in the propaganda about the “great victory” that asserted Chechen superiority over the rest of the world. Chechens had cultivated the image of an enemy (Russia and the Russians), the resumption of fighting was encouraged by outsiders who supported complete secession from the Russian Federation, and the Chechens’ struggle had garnered sympathy from the Western world. The channeling of humanitarian and other aid to Chechen militants perpetuated the violence, and the illusion of a “great victory” limited efforts at restoring public order after the war. In addition, the violation of the Khasavyurt agreements to start a period of restoration in Chechnya and further militarization also contributed to the cycle of violence. Finally, the author claims that the world closed their eyes to images of a functioning Chechnya; journalists and press photographers did not produce pictures of schools in operation or of farmers working in the fields; most Chechens were preoccupied with the hard work of restoring their disrupted lives.

In chapter thirteen, “An Ideology of Extremes”, the author examines a number of topics, among them the outbreak of cultural and political theorizing after August 1996, and the abundance of materials published on Chechen history, origins and achievements that were used in political mobilization. He also looks at the ideologies based on territorial expansionism and cultural mythmaking that dominated Chechen intellectual life, the Chechens’ sense of superiority over other peoples in the Caucasus; the status of the Russian language and the failure to revive the Chechen language; the expansionist idea of liberating the Caucasus from Russian, and creating a single “Caucasian Home,” or “Caucasian Confederation”. Finally, he discusses the creation of Chechnya’s public discourse that focused on Islam for political and cultural resistance, and the subsequent appearance of a new brand of post-Soviet anti-Semitism under the influence of radical Islamism and a pro-Arab orientation.

In the Chapter fourteen, “Chechnya as a Stage and a Role”, the author begins with his traumatic experience in Moscow that made him to think that “the war is not confined to remote fringes of the country” and the October 2002 incident at a Moscow performance of the musical *Nord-Ost* that proved that not only Chechnya but also Russia can be seen as a war-torn society today. He continues with his concluding observations about the conflict, and states that he deliberately avoided excessive theorizing and introduced a live version of the facts to explain the naked truth behind the Chechens’ social life, events and conditions they live in. He states that it is difficult to hope that in the future, the people of Chechnya and Russia will agree on any kind of common history of the conflict which would allow them to move beyond that tragedy. He uses the words of Michael Ignatieff (1999) to support his research and claims that “The truth that matters to people is not factual or narrative truth but moral or interpretive truth”, and that it is important to hear the versions of the common people who deeply involved in the conflict as either fighters or victims. He also states that it cannot be expected that an outsider can put forward an impartial, objective version of the conflict in Chechnya, and states that the truth must be authored by those who have suffered its consequences. He states that it is a serious mistake to ignore the Chechen authors who described Russia as their own country, voicing strong disapproval of the war and the people who were involved in the conflict, and, instead, emphasize texts by foreign and Russian authors pushing their own versions of the Chechen war. The author states that his collected work indicates that for the

prewar (1990s) generation of Chechens ethnic identity and their deportation issues were not a central element of their identity. It was under Gorbachev-Yeltsin that the reification of Chechenness arose under conditions of conflict and social transformation, and the Chechen past came to be used to forge an image for living Chechens and prescribe their present-day roles. The author censures those who through superficial historical analyses and cultural essentialism reduce an entire people to the level of a “pre-modern nation” with a unique martial spirit and a society in crisis.

In the Conclusion, the author states that “the postwar reconstruction can only be achieved through the renewal of empowering self-analysis, which is the primary condition for reconstruction in the postwar era”. For the researchers, the conflict is not yet over and, apparently, should not be over unless scripted by some international news service, or when they say so, which amounts to the same thing. For them, the “Chechen nation” is somewhere in the mountains and the ravines, continuing the armed resistance, which includes terrorizing the Chechens themselves. The fact that Russian courts have established that terrorists from Chechnya participated in blowing up residential buildings in Moscow and other cities is already old news that “experts on Chechnya” do not consider worthy of analysis, because it does not correspond to the widely shared consensus, constructed and imposed by academics and the media, as to what constitutes a Chechen nation. It seems that the war will only come to an end when the doves overpower the hawks, as difficult as that is to imagine, and not when either the “Russian side” or the “Chechen side” overpowers the other.

The author of the book is a very knowledgeable scholar in his field; and has experience as a former chairman of the state committee of RSFSR on nationalities and the multinational state. His research is based on firsthand accounts obtained by him from different layers of Chechen society who witnessed the bloody war and its consequences. As an outsider he never had the intent to manipulate the informants with his questions. He avoided excessive theorizing, and provided excerpts from his interviews (direct voices) to cover the events, describe Chechen society and support his arguments. The author, in his book, makes a skillful, convincing presentation of his arguments on the destructive methods used by both sides, and shows how a violent conflict could have been avoided by using preventative measures that acknowledged the primary role of the specific social situation in the interpretation of human behavior and institutions, without orchestrating an armed intervention to create more violence. Finally, the author’s approach to examining and understanding the Chechen conflict could be very productive in understanding other areas in the world that have suffered, or continue to suffer from, continued conflict.

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