

CARLOTTA GALL & THOMAS DE WAAL: *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*. xiv, 416 pp. London: Pan Original. 1997.

The 1994-96 war in Chechnia was Russia's Vietnam, insofar as the intense coverage devoted to it by the world's media ensured instant reporting especially via vivid images flashed across TV-screens (even in Russia itself), which immediately gave the lie time and again to the disinformation emanating from those responsible for the bloodshed in the Kremlin. Unlike in some other Caucasian conflicts, Western journalists had no difficulty distinguishing aggressor from victim. Consequently, their readers and viewers received largely accurate information. But once a conflict ends, attention rapidly switches elsewhere, and the international community easily forgets both the problems which initially led to hostilities and the miseries (death, maiming, loss of domicile and employment, destruction of infrastructure and economy, breakdown of civic order) that typically result. Thus, roughly one year after the agreement negotiated by Aslan Maskhadov, now President of Chechnia, and Gen. Aleksandr Lebed, soon to be sacked by the opportunist Yeltsin, is an appropriate time for the appearance of a book chronicling the war and placing it in its historical context. The authors have done an excellent job in achieving their goals.

The first chapter plunges the reader into the thick of the ferocious assault on Grozny, Chechnia's capital, unleashed as 1994 drew to its close. No-one read the omens in the number of dead (between 1,500 and 2,000) suffered by the Red Army attackers that New Year's Eve. The next three chapters recount pertinent aspects of Chechen history, in particular the brutality of (a) the 19th century Caucasian War, as Tsarist Russia crushed North Caucasia's struggle to preserve ancestral liberties, and (b) the deportation of the entire Chechen (and closely related Ingush) people to Central Asia by Stalin in 1944, undoubtedly in punishment for constantly rebelling against Moscow-rule. Suitable references are made to academic works in establishing these ultimate causes of the war. Proximate causation is then related in chapters five through eight, covering the revolution of the late(?) President J. Dudaev, his provocative declaration of Chechen independence (see Cornell's recent article for a discussion of the legitimacy of this move), the less wholesome characteristics of his pre-war presidency, and the Kremlin's sordid manœuvrings and incompetent attempts to manage the crisis. The remainder of the book conveys the reader through the war's grisly events and incorporates an epilogue on the huge post-war challenges facing the Chechens, with the question of Chechnia's status on hold until 2001.

There is very little that calls for comment. I prefer the anglicised 'Chechnia', since use of the very Russian 'Chechnya' implies tame endorsement of Russia's highly dubious title to the land ('Nuokhchijchü' in Chechen). Mention might have been made of the statement by the liberal Grigori Javlinski, leader of the Jabloko [Apple] grouping, on BBC 2's Newsnight as the first bombs were falling on Grozny when he

declared that, if Chechenia wanted independence, this should be granted -- the small, land-locked territory in the centre of the N. Caucasus would then have had to reach a speedy accommodation with Russia to the mutual advantage of both (without a single loss of life). I think space might also have been found to stress that the only significant world-leader to give full backing to Yeltsin was that other former apparatchik Eduard Shevardnadze, particularly in view of the rapprochement presently sought by Shevardnadze. US Defence Secretary William Perry's public endorsement of Yeltsin's blitz on Pervomaiskoe also passes unnoticed, though Clinton is rightly taken to task on p. 316 for one incredibly foolish (and uncleared) remark -- see Clogg (1997) for a more trenchant response. The N. Caucasian river is Sundzha (not Sunzha). The 'i' is missing from the surname of Prince A. Bariatinsky, who accepted the surrender in 1859 of the man who had led the N. E. Caucasian guerrilla-movement against Russia since 1834 and who has remained an inspiration to local resistance ever since, Imam Shamil. The sentence 'Avturkhanov was conspicuous among the politicians on the Dudayev side' (p. 140) reads oddly when Avturkhanov was acting against Dudaev at the time. Historically, an 'abrek' was a type of (N.) Caucasian (not specifically Chechen) Robin Hood (p. 310). But even to hint that any of this detracts from the value and power of this work would be churlish.

Despite the large-scale taking of hostages to which the Chechens in desperation first turned, rather successfully, under Shamil Basaev (now Prime Minister) in the sleepy S. Russian town of Budyonnovsk and then under Salman Raduev in Kizlyar with the subsequent flattening by bombardment of the village Pervomaiskoe, where raiders and hostages finally dug in -- the peaceful resolution by the Turkish authorities at this time to the seizure by Caucasian sympathisers in Turkey of a Russian cruise-ship at Trebizond well underlines the senselessness of Yeltsin's macho tactics --, this book stands in summation as a ringing indictment of the government which displayed no compunction about committing appalling slaughter on the absurd excuse of restoring order on what it claimed to be its own 'Russian' soil. The very lowest estimates put the number of civilian dead at 50,000, most of whom in Grozny will ironically have been ethnic Russians. But an almost equally depressing picture emerges of the spineless attitude of Western leaders (and organisations), whose initial silence in the hope of a swift Russian victory or later half-hearted justification of Russian actions in defence of its 'territorial integrity' earn them a share of the guilt. In particular chapter 11 (War Against The People, which includes a description of the horrors inflicted on the village of Samashki in a drug-inspired massacre) should be closely studied by all who not merely failed to condemn Yeltsin but actually gave him their (albeit qualified) support (e.g. by attending the Russian government's celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the ending of World War II). Whether still in office or preening themselves in board-rooms and suchlike havens of prestige and profit, their consciences should be pricked

as the price (for others!) of their blind-eye policy is laid bare. One day realisation will perhaps dawn of the potential dangers in showering unconditional support on superficially appraised foreign potentates -- pertinent response to concrete actions perpetrated by governments, however favoured the individual leader, is the only acceptable course.

One of the most shaming moments for the West came when during this war Europe's one-time bastion of human rights, the Council of Europe, admitted Russia to full membership. How this could have come about and how ready Western institutions now are to compromise their principles are illustrated on pp. 316-7. The Swiss chairman of The Council's committee on Chechenia, Ernst Mühlemann, had an argument with Russian human rights' campaigner, Sergei Kovalyov, at the time of the 1996 Russian elections. In response to Kovalyov's criticism of The Council's supine attitude on Chechenia the reply was proffered: 'What do you want? That Zyuganov and not Yeltsin is chosen at the elections?'...

References

Clogg, Richard. 1997. Disinformation in Chechnya: an anatomy of a deception. *Central Asian Survey*, 16.3, 425-430.

Cornell, Svante E. 1997. A Chechen state? *Central Asian Survey*, 16.2, 201-213.

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