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Chechnya – Russia's restless frontier

On 16 April 2009 Russia declared that Chechnya was no longer a 'zone of counterterrorist operations'. In this three part series Elayne Jude (writing as Paula Jaegar) reflects on the writings of Professor Anatol Lieven, who also addresses the U K Defence Forum on 2nd June 2009 on the Afghanistan-Pakistan situation.

Part Two: Kalashnikov Culture

"Russia's Restless Frontier" looks at the two Chechen wars in a panorama of developing Russian relations with the world, and with its citizens and diasporas. It was published four years after the start of the second Chechen campaign in 2000, which re-established Russian control, rehabilitated the Russian Army's reputation, restored national pride - and brilliantly launched the Presidency of Vladimir Putin (whose first action on appointment as acting head of state was to send the troops into Grozny, and who flew a fighter jet over Chechen territory during his formal presidential election campaign); four years before the Russo-Georgian conflict in 2008, coinciding with the succession of Putin's protege, Dmitri Medvedev.

It's a lean, dense piece of work, 230-odd pages of material of a detail and orientation quite unfamiliar to most Western non-specialists. A British reader might be most intrigued by what it has to say about links between Chechens and international Islamist organisations, particularly the Afghan Taliban; and, in light of recent events, on Russian relations with other Caucasian states.

'Why should non-Russians care about any of these issues? First and foremost is the potential for the conflict to spill over to other states. Chechnya borders on Georgia, a country undergoing a difficult state-building process. In the past, Russia has threatened to extend its anti-terrorist operation to Georgian territory. Should that happen, the United States, with its military instructors on the ground in Georgia, would face a difficult choice; whether to withdraw the instructors and acquiesce to Russia's viewpoint that Georgia is a terrorist state, or risk its relationship with the Russian federation by opposing such an intervention.'

Russia and Georgia have a long and acrimonious post-Soviet history little understood or discussed in the West. Chechnya's rugged border with Georgia was the source of bitter wrangling. The Pankisi Gorge was, Russian military intelligence claimed, a shelter and base for Chechen rebels, including field commander Ruslan Gelayev (the Georgians counterclaimed he was a Russian provocateur). During the second campaign, Tbilisi refused the Russian request to close the border from the south (Georgian) side. There were claims in the Russian media that 'Taliban fighters' had crossed the border from Georgia into Chechnya.

Behind the sniping lay Moscow's ultimate strategic aim of retaining oversight of its perceived security perimeter, and the Georgian political elite's tendency

'...to overestimate the opportunities [for military-enforced political interference] available to Russia, and thus they demonised Russian policies. this attitude was partly sincere and partly tactical; having Russia as an enemy served to consolidate the new states, if (initially) chiefly at an elite level.'

The introduction, in 2000, of a visa regime on the Russian-Georgian border, intended to lever the Georgian government into participating in a joint counterterrorist operation in the Pankisi, in fact produced widespread alienation; Russian gas company Itera demanded repayment of Georgian debt for natural gas supplies; and relations between the states deteriorated. Georgia demanded the withdrawal of Russian military bases, while making overtures to NATO and to Turkey. Russian bases in Abkhazia were attacked by Gelayev, from Pankisi via Western Georgia. When, finally, Georgia bowed to Moscow's ultimatum to deal with the Chechens allegedly operating out of the Pankisi, the Georgians found no terrorists. Tipped off, said Moscow. And so it went on.

"For Putin the Commander in Chief, Chechnya is a symptom of a far larger and more serious problem. Russia's southern border coincides with much of the arc of instability, stretching from North Africa and the Balkans to the Greater Middle East and all the way to South East Asia, and including the newly independent states of Central Asia...should those former Russian borderlands give way, Russia's Muslim republics will be dangerously exposed. Thus, like Chechnya, Central Asia is Russia's first line of defence.'

We are familiar with the wild theory that America itself was behind the attacks of 9/11, a provocation to deliver the takeover of the Muslim world. This ominous fantasy is widespread in Muslim states; it also had, and has, its evangelists in Russia, with the twist that they see the ultimate threat in this dark strategy to themselves. Russia is experiencing a fairly massive influx (between 1-2 million since the breakup of the Union) of immigrants to Russian cities as the ethnic Russian population declines, with all the tensions that this might be expected to produce in an impoverished indigenous population.

'For the public in the West, the story of the Balkans was essentially about Serbian expansionism, but for the Russian government and much of the public, the most serious threat came from Islamists, who Russia believed the United Nations short-sightedly supported.'

The complexion of the first and second wars altered, in part as secular Chechen President Mashkadov, a former Soviet general, failed to reconcile the (probably irreconcilable) tribes, and Basayev, a radical Islamist, mounted his brilliant, bloody and highly successful jihad raids.

The Islamic tradition of Salafiya, or Wahhabism, espoused by Islamist political radicals, is one of rigid pedantry and purity which refuses to incorporate ethnic variance. Chechnya, remote, mountainous, wedded to fierce individualism and clannish self-determination, practises Muridism, a form of Sufism highly coloured by elements of local tradition. In Afghanistan, many fighters from all over the Muslim world joined the mujahideen (including Chechens); but

Chechens do not necessarily take kindly to armed strangers, and don't want their glory stolen:

'Chechen rebels are particularly annoyed when their military successes are ascribed to the Arabs, Afghanis and others. In the summer of 1998, President Maskhadov as well as several influential field commanders, called on the local youth to leave rebel groups commanded by foreigners, saying that "Arabs, Tajiks and other scum have no business here"...During the antiterrorist operation in Afghanistan, foreigners put up the stiffest resistance to Northern Alliance troops.'

For obvious reasons, both the Russian authorities and the Chechens have claimed at times considerable numbers of foreign troops fighting in support of the rebels; similarly, reports of funding and the provision of foreign-run training camps (of probably dubious rigour) have been, most probably, exaggerated for propaganda purposes. While some money has undoubtedly come, specifics are difficult to verify.

Religious solidarity was preached from many mosques, often by young imams recently returned from study abroad, but at a governmental level, support for the Chechen cause was, at best, muted.

'Russia's Restless Frontier; the Chechnya factor in post-Soviet Russia' - Dmitri Trenin & Aleksei Malashenko, with Anatol Lieven 2004