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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 One: A fish rots from the head

In easily the most brilliant short play in any language about the 1994-96 Russo-Chechen conflict:

Exchange at a queue for water in Russian-occupied Grozny, May 1995,

overheard by the author:

Russian woman (pushing to the front): 'Let me past, we don't have to be

afraid of you any more.'

Chechen woman, pushing back: 'Stay in line. We weren't afraid of you then, and we're still not afraid of you.'

'Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power'

Anatol Lieven

1998

'In retrospect, the lack of preparation is curious...Withdrawal from Afghanistan coincided with deployments to destinations along the Soviet Union's southern periphery; Tbilisi, Baku, Sumgait, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Northern and Southern Ossetia, Ingushetia, and Tajikstan.

Although the deployments provided a wealth of experience in managing imperial decline and disintegration, that experience was never analysed for the benefit of military officers and political leaders. Thus, the same mistakes were repeated. As Russian officers bitterly remarked, Moscow was stepping on the same old rake, only to be hit in the forehead again'.

'Russia's Restless Frontier; the Chechnya factor in post-Soviet Russia'

Dmitri Trenin & Aleksei Malashenko, with Anatol Lieven

2004

'Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power' was published in 1998 two years after the raggedy end of the first conflict, (officially a 'peacekeeping operation' to preserve constitutional order overturned by ethnic separatists), and two years before the high-velocity onset of the second (recast as a counterterrorist operation against Islamist extremism).

'Tombstone' offers a scrupulously researched analysis of the historical origins and course of the conflict, and the political, military and cultural causes of both the Chechen victory and the Russian defeat. The demoralisation of the Russian Army - frequently unpaid, poorly resourced, arena of institutionalised brutalisation, witnessed on many occasions effectively to have abandoned the attack, bought off by the enemy, or simply to have taken so long in preparing and launching an attack that its object was defeated before it began - reflects directly the dismal directionless churn of Russia under Yeltsin;

'The new social values of capitalism and materialism, and the general atmosphere of corruption in Russia have two main effects on the armed forces.

The first is the armed forces themselves are infected with corruption. Russia has now reached a state which also struck me very forcibly in Pakistan, where orruption is so all-pervasive that social and official (as opposed to personal) honesty becomes simply irrational, irrelevant, unpraised and unrespected, like chastity at the Court of Naples

...The other effect of course is on the soldier's willingness to risk his life and health for his country. It is remarkable how many military analyses of the Russian and other armies regard ordinary soldiers like pawns who can be moved around at will without reference to the state of their feelings. The question of individual morale is even more crucial today, because the nature of modern infantry fighting gives great autonomy to the individual soldier or small group.....A Russian opinion poll of 1994 - two months before the outbreak of the Chechen War - showed 95% of respondents believing that real power lay in the hands of the 'mafia'. My private talks with ordinary Russian soldiers showed the vast majority of them believing the same - and what sane man is going to risk having his legs torn off and his guts ripped out for the mafia without even being paid for it ?'

Lieven, a cool, dry-humoured, hard-headed, even-handed debunker and rigorous academic, is compelling with the anecdotal and empirical. Appreciative of the sophistication of the leadership of charismatic Chechen guerrilla Shamil Basayev (whose incursion into neighbouring Dagestan in 1999 was the trigger for resumption of hostilities); scathing about the instant mythology of the so-called Cossack Revival (the Cossacks were a substantial presence in the complex ethnic makeup of the Caucasus, and 'Cossack identity today is entirely optional - it can be put and taken off again like a Cossack hat'); and wry on his experiences of being kidnapped by Spetsnaz:

...On the evening of 20 February the SOBR unit in Grozny came looking for the White Tights [a legendary unit of Latvian women sharpshooters who turn up in every post-Soviet war fighting on the anti-Russian side. No scrap of evidence for their existence has ever been found]. They showed their professionalism by coming over the garden wall in dead silence - and in the garden, they found our host, washing the dishes. Thankfully, because they put a gun to his head and asked him who was in the house, and he replied, 'Western journalists'. Without that, as one of them told us later, 'we'd have chucked a grenade into the room first and checked your documents afterwards.

...In common with most soldiers far from home, they had adopted a temporary pet or mascot - a cat rescued from a burnt-out flat, and christened by immemorial Russian tradition 'Mashka'. It was a strange sight - but one I had seen in every war - to see these hard-faced men with the cat on their knees, gently stroking its fur.

.All the same, I was never in danger of sentimentalising this unit. A large lump on the head and several aching ribs reminded me of the mildest aspect of their behaviour to prisoners; and if they did regard us as mascots, then I have no doubt that in a crisis they would have killed and eaten Mashka.'

Lieven draws parallels with the Spetsnaz, who emphasise their superior modus and motivation, and the Chechen warriors. On the Chechen fighting discipline;

Compared to what I have seen of the Afghan Mujahidin, the Georgians, and various other forces, the care and professionalism with which the Chechens handled their weapons was indeed highly impressive (partly no doubt because of Soviet military training)...In the words of David Brauchli, a distinguished war photographer now with AP, just arrived in Grozny from Bosnia in January 1995, 'I'm really impressed by the Chechen fighters. they've got so many guns, but you don't see them fooling around with them, showing off and shooting each other by accident. They're really serious soldiers'.

Hostilities were concluded in August 1996 with thee signing of the Khasavyurt Accords. Official constitutional reform was deferred until 2001. Chechnya had achieved de facto independence. The Russian people perceived their Army's failure to secure a decisive victory as a humiliation and a disgrace, which they had no stomach to continue. The Russian military felt that the politicians had betrayed them.

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