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Chechnya – Russia's restless frontier

Part Three: Crime and propaganda

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 addressed the U K Defence Forum on 2nd June 2009 on the Afghanistan-Pakistan situation.

Lieven is no apologist for Russian excess in Chechnya. The suffering of civilians has 'severely damaged Russian international standing as well as the goals of the Russian operation'.

He makes an essential distinction between actual war crime, and what is perceived or actively portrayed as such.

On the siege and bombardment of Grozny:

'Unfortunately, despite advanced technology-development programmes by the US military, to this day there is no effective way of storming a bitterly defended city without destroying much of it in the process – not, at least, if massive casualties among one's own troops are to be avoided....Realistically, and even ethically, the first duty of commanders is to pursue victory, and the second is to protect the lives of their troops...Of course, the attacking side might try to allow the civilian population to leave the city before it is attacked. The Russians did, indeed, warn the population of Grozny to do so, but they certainly should have done more to create safe corridors of escape for them. Western criticism should have focused on this failure and on the Russian military's refusal to allow the International Committee of the Red Cross to play a stronger role. Instead, however, too much Western criticism treated even the Russian warning to the population as a crime, which is ridiculous.'

In May 2009, the BBC's Rupert Wingfield-Hayes began his contribution to Radio Four's 'From our own correspondent':

In Europe, we tend to think of the siege of Sarajevo as being the worst war crime in the post Cold War era. But the destruction there pales in comparison to what the Russians did to Grozny in the freezing winter of 1999-2000.

Wingfield-Hayes does not quite categorise Grozny as a 'war crime', but the inference, even now, is unmistakable.

As to individual criminal acts committed by soldiers, Lieven reminds us of the context:

As in Vietnam and Chechnya, when a majority of soldiers are extremely unwilling to fight hard and are unhappy with their commanders and economic position, strong disciplinary actions are likely to result in soldiers ceasing to fight altogether, with the result that the war is lost...It may also be that the individual soldiers (or police) committing crimes may have previously distinguished themselves for courage and ferocity in combat. Unfortunately, because of their training and the personality type that joins such forces, elite troops like the British paratroops are often distinguished by ruthlessness towards civilians and violence in their personal lives. In these circumstances, a fighting officer – not a staff officer at headquarters, let alone a civilian lawyer – will face acute moral and emotional dilemmas, not readily understandable by those who have not experienced combat and comradeship in combat.

One thinks, although Lieven does not mention it, of the case of Budannov, a Russian war hero tried and convicted of the kidnap, rape and murder of a Chechen teenager, who he claimed to have suspected of sniping. It is the case perhaps most associated with the murdered journalist Anna Politkovskaya, much of whose work was on the Chechen campaigns. The trial polarised Russian public opinion, and it has been noted that the guilty verdict coincided with Chechen presidential elections, which were won by Moscow's favoured candidate, Akhmad Kadyrov, former guerrilla fighter, imam, and father of the present incumbent, President Ramzan Kadyrov.

Only two states fully supported Russia's actions against Chechnya: Tajikistan and Belarus. Conversely, only one regime recognised the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria; the Afghan Taliban. In both cases, motivations are quite transparent.

In the end, Chechnya may be unique, and unrepeatable. It has not triggered a domino response throughout the Caucasus, Central Asia, or the greater Middle East, all of which continue to smoulder or ignite according to their own peculiar tectonic contacts. Support for the rebel republic was marginal and sub-state level. It was a 'war' quickly forgotten, which, despite periodic bloody sieges and incursions on Russian territory, has slipped at least from the waking consciousness of Russia. Its greatest legacy may be the displacement of ethnic Russian and Caucasian populations from the region to the cities of the interior, and the pressures this creates; an exodus which might have occurred anyway as post-Soviet economic relationships unfold.

If the second Chechen campaign is in some way a response to NATO actions in Kosovo, the Russians certainly learned lessons from observing NATO strategy there, particularly in the use of air power. Above all, Chechnya has had its effect – partial, delayed, reluctant, irresistible – on the Russian Army, and on the national security concept:

'Russia is not the US, Canada, or Western Europe. It is not protected by seas. It is a land empire, with land borders, some of them bordering on areas of extreme instability. Afghanistan and Iraq are separated from the US by thousands of miles of ocean and the territory of US allies. They are at Russia's backdoor. Russia therefore does not possess the American ability to send small expeditionary forces to fight overseas wars in far off countries, and then pull them out again when the short-term objective seems to have been achieved...

...Nor does Russia possess the West European option of restricting its truly effective armed forces to tiny groups of special forces backed up by airpower, while the armies as a whole (it is presumed) will never have to fight at all, but at most are intended for largely non-violent peacekeeping missions. Danes and Swedes can afford armies most of whose troops are in effect no more than state-subsidised backpackers; Russia cannot.

...It will have to be prepared to fight and die – as Russian soldiers have fought and died in Chechnya, to an extent inconceivable to most Western armed forces, and in the face of courageous, skilled, ferocious, and implacable enemies. While criticism of Russian soldiers must therefore be searching, it must also be tempered by respect – above all from their fellow countryman.'

On 16 April 2009 Chechnya was declassified as a 'zone of counterterrorist operations'. The numbers and specifics of Russian troop withdrawals are not yet known.

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