

Conflict in Chechnya

G. P. Armstrong

Volume 19, Number 1, Spring 1999

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs19_01re04

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-5673 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Armstrong, G. P. (1999). Conflict in Chechnya. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 19(1), 139–143.

Conflict in Chechnya

Gall, Carlotta, and Thomas de Waal. *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus*. New York: New York University Press, 1998

Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.

The first recorded skirmish between Chechens and Russians took place nearly three centuries ago when a Russian cavalry patrol was driven out of a Chechen *aul*; the most recent was at the end of 1998 with the ambush of Russian special police in Dagestan. The recent war was only one of many Russian Chechen fights.

These two books are often reviewed as a pair but they are really quite different. Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal have written a straightforward piece of reportage on the war; Anatol Lieven, on the other hand, has written a meditation about modern Russia as revealed by the war. The terrible war between Russia and Chechnya, which all three covered as journalists is, however, at the centre of their books.

Gall and de Waal start with an account of the calamitous Russian attack on Grozny on New Years Eve 1994 as a scene setter; their notable achievement is in portraying the event from both sides. Subsequent chapters relate the story chronologically from the origins of the Chechen people, their history in the Great Caucasian War, the Civil War, the deportations and post-1991. Dudayevs rule is described, the opposition, the federal responses and then, step by step, the war up to the Khasavyurt Accords by which Aleksandr Lebed and Aslan Maskhadov, soldier to soldier, ended the fighting. The two authors spent weeks in Chechnya during the war, speaking to both sides and to everyone connected, living in the fighting zone. Their deep and detailed knowledge of people and events illuminates the book throughout.

Three things especially stand out in this well-written and well-organized book. First, it is balanced. Western journalists, who had never before heard of Chechnya or of anything even remotely connected with it, descended on the land when the war started and quickly fitted the Chechens into the good guy/bad guy framework that modern TV news requires. And it was easy to admire the Chechens - brave, hospitable, stylish, fighting for their independence and telling stories of a past much more grim than anyone in the West had ever imagined. However, this war, like so many wars, was the consequence of stupidity, avarice and missed opportunities. And some of the blame lies on Jokhar Dudayev, Chechnyas first president. The authors make it clear that, at almost any time, he could have had a generous autonomy agreement from Moscow. Second, it is clear that the authors have met many of the principals, indeed spoken with them over long periods. There is a depth of detailed acquaintance that will not likely be equalled in other Western accounts. Third, many mysteries are cleared up or, at least, the authors give considered opinions after careful research. They explain how Dudayev got all his weapons. (Although a mystery remains. Neither they nor Lieven say what became of Dudayevs tanks and other heavy weapons other than mentioning the only successful Russian operation, the destruction of Dudayevs air force). They have convincing accounts of the corrupt, confused and contradictory policy in Moscow. They show how each chance for a peaceful resolution was thrown away by one side or the other. They give a considered account of the massacre at

Samashki. When the reader is finished, rumours have been replaced by balanced, thoughtful assessments that ring true.

But, it is the casual stupidity of the Russian side that is illustrated on every page. This reviewer, a diplomat in Moscow during the war, reported that all Russians knew - had they not been raised on Lermontov and Tolstoy? - that Chechens always fight and Chechens never give up; no one in Moscow could possibly be stupid enough to think that anyone could ever overawe Chechens or that an invasion of Chechnya would not turn into a real fight. But they *were* stupid enough. Gall and de Waal are as baffled as anyone else as to why the decision to invade was taken - perhaps, they suggest, Yeltsin and company were dazzled by the American invasion of Haiti which had passed so quickly and so successfully. In any event, the authors believe, and they are convincing, that the operation was intended to be a show of force at which Dudayev would crumble. There wasn't supposed to be much fighting. Then when the fighting did start and the timetable fell apart, the centre pressed for a quick resolution. Time and time again the authors portray the Moscow leadership demanding a last, decisive effort - the operation was supposed to be over in 20 days; it wasn't, so the New Year's attack was to finish it with one last big push. Then the commanders were ordered to end it in time for the fiftieth anniversary of 1945, or the G7/8 meeting in Halifax, or the presidential election. The hurry up orders from Moscow were manifested at the front by random bombardment and uncoordinated attacks in which unprepared troops were thrown at the problem.

The war was very brutal. But such wars are always brutal. Whenever one side has lots of firepower and the other is elusive and swimming in the sea of the people, destruction will be indiscriminate. There were the same indiscriminate bombings in Chechnya as in Vietnam, Samashki was another My Lai, and Grozny was replicated (on a much larger scale, to be sure) in Mogadishu. The destruction will be incomparably worse when the side with the firepower has almost no training - anyone, after all, can pull a lanyard to fire a gun; aiming it takes skill. Pilots with an average of twenty hours flying time per year, dumb bombs, poor visibility, incompetent intelligence - it's no wonder that the precision bombing they boasted of in Moscow destroyed everything except the target. A disordered, untrained army of bewildered conscripts can only destroy. The wonder is that Russian soldiers did, so many times, hold out and push on.

Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal have written the best narrative account of the war that is likely to appear until we can get at the Russian archives. It is also extremely well-written.

Anatol Lieven has used the Chechen war as a jumping off place for discussion of a larger topic. In his introduction he declares that the book is directed against three common schools of thought. The first, which he associates with Richard Pipes, is a historicist or even determinist school that maintains that Russia is so constrained by its history that hardly anything can ever change. The second school, which is really the same as the first but emphasizes the external manifestation of Eternal Russia, holds that Russia is inherently expansionist. His third school, ostensibly opposed to the other two, believes that absolutely anything can be made out of the Russian raw material with a little Western (dare we suggest Harvard?) know-how. Lieven makes the profound observation that, while the third school appears to be the opposite of the first two historicist views, in practice it leads to the others. If there is only one road forward to democracy and only one kind of democracy at the end of the road, as this naïve view seems to take for

granted, then failure will send one right back toward the old, bad past. Its as if the Road of Progress had no turnoffs: its either forward or backward.

The central tenet of the historicist (Lieven even suggests russophobe might be a more descriptive word) school is the assertion that the Russians want the empire back and are doing what they can to retrieve it. As Lieven points out, not only does every public opinion poll in Russia for years contradict this assertion, but the Chechen war shows its falsity. If Russia cannot fight to hold itself together, how can it fight to capture Kiev and Tallinn? Neither the level of competence or capability nor public support are there, and, after the Chechen defeat Muscovy would have to be preternaturally otiose to think it could take on Ukraine. Opinion polls now show a majority of Russians are resolved to let Chechnya go and each of the two leading presidential candidates has intimated that he agrees.

What does all this tell us about Russias future? Lieven sees neither a return to the past ` la historical determinism nor effortless progress along the one-way highway to the glorious future ` la ahistorical progressivism. Rather he thinks that something rather more *comprador* is in store. A Russia run by a small clique who fixes elections, sells off raw materials and generally lines its own pockets, unopposed by an indifferent, sullen and ultimately helpless population whose elections only alternate one group of robbers with another. This state of affairs, as he correctly points out, is truly the norm in the world today. Most of the worlds states are kleptocracies, not liberal democracies. In fact, he argues, post-communist Russia is a pretty typical kleptocracy already. The Chechen War, he argues, shows there is nothing there but a vacuum that greedy oligarchs manipulate. His argument deserves serious consideration - it is far more thoughtful and better rooted in reality than either historicism or naïve progressivism. And he may prove right. This reviewer, however, still believes that Russia has two things that most of these *comprador* states do not: a well-educated population and universal suffrage. Russian electorates are not as easily manipulated as is generally assumed: for example, over half of the regional leaders, who are little local gods, have been defeated in elections. (And, more significantly, they have given up their power). The essence of the future that Lieven sees is one in which those who are in power, stay in power. That doesnt work so smoothly in Russia. The Russian future is still open.

But no short review can do justice to this rich book. There is much understanding and thought about the nature of Chechen society. There is a thoughtful section on the military lessons of the war. There is a long, powerful and important discussion of just what is this famous Russian nationalism against which we are so often warned. Lieven concludes (and this reviewer agrees) that Russian nationalism, never strong in fact, has probably been killed off by communism. As he memorably observed on another occasion, Russians are cheap nationalists. They can be roused to talk about it, but its clear that they dont really get excited about Russophones in the CIS states or brother Slavs in Bosnia; the Cossacks are a farce; nationalist parties are marginal. Opinion polls show that all these matters are below the horizon for most Russians who would rather have a quiet life than a glorious one. Indeed, that could be the major theme of Lievens book - the Chechen war and the background of contemporary Russian society, shows that glory is not much valued by Russians today.

If these two books have defects, they are shown by the fact that the authors expect that a Chechnya, whose unity was forged in this ordeal, will not fall apart. They cannot believe that Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basayev, the two men who, working together, created the victory, could come to blows with each other. But they have. Chechnya is very close to civil war (at the time of writing - December 1998) and, by the time this review is published, one may have killed the other. What is missing from both books, this reviewer believes, is due consideration of two factors: the dream of the Mountaineer Republic and Wahhabism. Gall and de Waal mention that the core Chechen fighters all learned how to fight in Georgia but they don't say what they were fighting for there. Lieven knows why but doesn't dwell on it. One of the splits in Chechnya today is whether Chechnya is to be, as Dudayev once said it should be, the seed crystal for the re-creation of the independent republic of all the Mountaineers of the Caucasus that existed for a short time eighty years ago. Basayev, who led the Chechen fighters in Abkhazia's victory against Georgia, seems to think that it should be; Maskhadov, on the other hand, evidently feels that Chechnya has enough problems without starting another war. Likewise, Gall and de Waal mention in passing the Jordanian Chechen fighter Khattab but they don't mention his agenda. He is a Wahhabi and, to the Wahhabi sect of Islam, the traditional Sufism of the Chechens borders on idolatry. To Wahhabis, the victory against Moscow is only the first step in creating the Wahhabi Imamate. Lieven knows who the Wahhabis are, but doesn't extrapolate. These fissures among the victors - whether to re-build Chechnya, whether to fight for the Mountaineer Republic, a secular Chechnya or a Muslim republic, Naqshbandi Sufism or Wahhabism - split post-war Chechen society and are tearing it apart. The world has not heard the last of Chechnya.

Altogether, these are two fine books. Gall and de Waal give as good a considered narrative of the war as we can expect to read for a long time but Lieven is much more than that. Lieven's book is the best that this reviewer has read on contemporary Russia - it is the most thoughtful, the most original and it completely avoids stereotyped thinking. He forces the reader to think and, in most of the books and papers written about contemporary Russia, that is rare.

G.P. Armstrong

Department of National Defense, Ottawa

[The opinions expressed are exclusively the reviewer's own.]