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The Chechen (book) Problem Solved

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The primary problem faced by instructors such as myself who attempt to teach the subject of the post-Soviet Caucasus is the selection of books on Chechnya. The problem is not a dearth of material. Rather, the on-going brutal war in Chechnya has attracted so much interest that I often fear that I might slight particular colleagues should I fail to assign their work to my students for the brief period devoted to the subject, which is subsumed under the more generic “North Caucasus” theme, in any case. Among the journalistic/outsider treatments, one is forced to select between Lieven, de Waal/Gall, Smith, Seely, Nivat, possibly Karny and maybe even (blush) my own meager contribution to war-reporting, to name just a few of the items on the carnage and chaos menu. “Insider” insight and analysis (in English), meanwhile, is provided by such notables as the late, great Anna Politkovskaya, the extraordinary Dr. Baev, the deliciously dense Derluguian, and of course, Tishkov, whom my students hate because he insists on serving a meat-grinding mixture of decisive theory and hard fact. The students generally prefer a BangBang-lite when forced to study national conflict in the post-Soviet space.
A surfeit of riches about a brutal and nasty subject indeed; choose your poison. Were the subject itself not so incredibly gloomy, I would now suggest that “happily” a solution to this vexing problem of enticing students into the subject of Chechnya, the North Caucasus and indeed, contemporary Russia, is now available. It comes in the shape of Emil Souleimanov’s *An Endless War: The Russian-Chechen Conflict in Perspective* (Peter Lang Verlag, Frankfurt/Main, 2007). The book, which runs at 355 pps, plus a very useful glossary (but no index, although it also has a preface by Anatol Lieven), is extraordinary for a number of different reasons.

What first strikes the eye, as it were, is the simple fact that there are no ghastly photographs. The reason I mention this is because in addition to reams of prose, the Chechen war (particularly the “first” of 1994-1996), also generated a vast archive (Bradner, Green, et al.) of the some of the most harrowing visual images ever recorded in a conflict area. These have been reproduced, almost *ad nauseam*, in virtually every book on the subject of Chechnya-at-war, possibly as evidence that things were indeed as harrowing and nauseating as the author claimed. I even added a selection to the Turkish translation of my book on Chechnya for exactly that reason.

In Souleimanov’s work, on the other hand, the iconic images are nowhere to be seen. Rather, the author, currently an assistant professor at Prague’s Charles University, paints his own images in dry, ironic and intelligent prose, leaving the reader with no doubt as to what aspect of barbarity is being addressed. And there is barbarity aplenty in the pages of his book.

The second aspect to strike the interested reader (whether knowledgeable or not), concerns the fact that this is very clearly a book about war, but unlike most work on contemporary Chechnya, the author is not a “war correspondent,” nor does he need to be. I have very specifically refrained from inquiring too much into Souleimanov’s ethnicity or even background (I suspect he is at least part Chechen, but it is almost beside the point). From his writing, it emerges that he is deeply engaged in his subject matter. Consequently, I often wondered how he could restrain himself from expressing
the sort of verbal outrage that many outside reporters (myself included) and certainly partisan insiders allow themselves when dealing with the subject of Chechnya in general, (and when dealing specifically with such sub-themes as the murder of Aslan Maskhadov, the Nord-Ost hostage-taking fiasco in Moscow or the blood-bath at Beslan).

Souleimanov treats all of these horrible but familiar events with the same dry, sober and almost ironic style of prose, which is nonetheless permeated with the sort of latent passion that can be mustered only by a true, non-partisan insider. The concept of the exactitude of the Chechen revenge, for example, threads its way through the book as a disturbing distant echo. One can only wonder what experience the author has had with this aspect of adat, or the Law of the Mountains, or conversely, how he has dared to reveal so much when it is perfectly clear that many powerful forces on all sides of the Chechen issue will not be particularly pleased with his opus.

The third factor recommending this very, very good book: The author is a true analyst, and a brave one at that. His command of Chechen social structure (teyps, etc.) is first rate. His familiarity with the rise and demise of the post-Soviet Russian media almost constitutes a concise dictionary on the subject. His ability to pin-point players ranging from lesser Chechen lowland thugs to members of Vladimir Putin’s diverse range of advisors (a rogues’ gallery second to none) is outstanding. His extrapolations from the current state-of-affairs in Chechnya to constitute a mirror of the New Russia is thoroughly depressing. His predictions about the future of the “Chechenization” of the North Caucasus (essentially, a continual, growing cycle of blood feud-based violence masked as “Muslim” fundamentalist terror) are truly frightening.

The author mourns the fate of Chechnya; he also mourns the fate of Russia. The problem of which book on Chechnya (or on the Moscow Media, Insurgent Islam or Power Politics in Putin’s Russia) to assign my students next semester is now solved.

Thanks, Emil.