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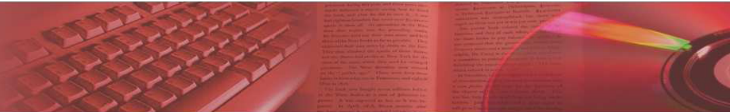

**Verii Tishkov**. *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 302 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-520-23888-6.

**Reviewed by** Anatoly Isaenko (Department of History, Appalachian State University)
**Published on** H-Genocide (February, 2007)

**"It Is Very Hard to Be a Chechen"–Chechen Folk Proverb**

The tragedy at Beslan's North Ossetia High School #1 is symbolic of the unresolved "Chechen problem" and illustrates the lack of a responsible and comprehensive ethnic policy in the North Caucasus, whatever the official Russian rhetoric. The book by Valerii Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*, illuminates many of the reasons and causes for this development. As a leading Russian ethnographer who served in several important political posts, Tishkov examines the evolution of the war in Chechnya that erupted in 1994, untangling the myths, long-held resentment, and ideological manipulations that fueled the crisis. In fact, this is the first real attempt by a Russian scholar to present a balanced assessment of both Russian and Chechen perspectives, putting ethnic and national violence under scrutiny and paying attention to the region's most radical partisans' transformation of secessionist ethnic conflict. He does not always accomplish this goal; but he does begin an important process of historical analysis for Russian historians, writing a more balanced history instead of a history of the victor. Combining research, interviews, data, and authoritative work on the Chechen problem by historian Anatol Lieven and ethnologist Jan Chesnov, Tishkov offers possible political positions.[1] He provides numerous citations and refers to predominantly Chechen interviews. However, sometimes the author's position may be exaggerated. In particular, this relates to his exploration of the roots and intervening results of terrorist attacks.

The author's choice of the awkward term "demodern phenomenon" is also open to criticism, likely chosen to avoid using the term "ethnic conflict" and its accompanying genocidal elements. Demodern phenomenon rests on the assertion that "Chechen people, or Chechen society as a collective body, no longer exists as an agent or locus of social action" (p. 13). Tishkov argues, that "since 1991, Chechnya has been torn apart by various violent contradictions, notwithstanding that the most widespread external image of Chechnya is that of a rare ethnic group in solidarity" (p. 13). Not arguing with this overall conclusion, I still cling to the opinion–based on personal experience–that in the beginning of the 1990s, social activity in Chechen society was spinning around two juxtaposing forces, Russian and Chechen. From these roots and the failure of the democratic state-building experiments in Russia and Chechnya evolved today's catastrophic situation in Chechnya. Just as in Chechnya, where democratic opposition had been completely crushed by the ethnocentric regime of General Djohar Dudaev, Boris Yeltsin's October 3, 1993, attack on the Russian Parliament was a turning point. One flaw in the book is that the crucial events and developments of this dramatic period are mentioned only in passing (pp. 72-74).[2] They deserved more attention to provide a fuller picture of the situation.

The author concluded that at some stage during "the handling of the rebellion," in 1991 and later, "Moscow lost sight of the important distinction between seeking to impose legality and undermining it" (p. 74). Although this conclusion has merit, his explanation for Moscow's stand–i.e., due to "miscalculations and blunders"–does not. They hardly occurred because of the "complexity of the situation in Russia," and because of a "lack of experience on the part of the new generation of Russian politicians" (p. 74). Facts show that Yeltsin's administration intentionally helped ethnocentric elements come to power as a counterbalance against pro-communist forces. I can point to evidence to support this aside from the fact that the entire Soviet arsenal in Chechnya was left for the new leader, Dudaev, and his political party. For one, I have the testimony of Nicholai M. (living in the region), who in the beginning of the 1990s was in charge of minute-books and other important documents of the monthly meetings of the Administration of Terek Cossacks. According to M., they had detailed evidence of the amount, routes of supplies, and locations of stores of weapons and munitions bought with stolen oil money of

the Chechnyan and Ingushetian mafia. He claims to have shared this evidence with Russian law enforcement agencies, which took no action to intercept the arms smuggled into Chechnya. At the same time, "the Charitable Islamic Fund" of Osama Bin Laden and other similar radical Islamist groups, through bribes to the Kremlin, bought exclusive rights to supervise the "religious education of the Caucasus peoples."[3]

The regional Chechen policy ("the enemy of my enemy is my friend") helped radical ethnocentric forces crush democratic opposition in the republic. They practiced ethnic cleansing and helped establish Dudaev in Chechnya as the leader of a dictatorial anti-Russian regime. When Yeltsin finally understood how dangerous Dudaev and his cohorts could be to the interests of the Russian government, the administration turned to violent tactics, leading to the disaster of the first Chechen campaign of 1994-96. But, by then it was too late.

There is yet no evidence to support the claim that Yeltsin's, and then Vladimir Putin's, administration changed their basic strategies after that. Tishkov is reluctant to fully illuminate the Russian government's ongoing role in Chechnya's deterioration. After Russia's humiliating retreat in 1996, Chechnya won a temporary and unstable *de facto* "independence." Instead of helping the newly elected and relatively moderate President Aslan Maskhadov to establish a viable government and do something about the country's economic ruin, Russian bureaucrats chose to exert pressure on Maskhadov through unofficial support and the encouragement of his enemies–radical Islamists, the Wahabists. In the mid-1990s, an anecdote was widely repeated in the Caucasus about Russian Premier Stepashin who had visited Wahabist enclaves in Dagestan. Stepashin said on television: "Well, I have been there; they are normal guys planting potatoes."[4] Without any interference from Yeltsin's security forces (or maybe with the their help), these "normal guys" hosted Islamist mercenaries from Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Gradually, they turned Chechnya into a "womb" that forged cadres of Islamists who led cells throughout the region and beyond.[5] The results of this Russian policy of former Soviet bureaucrats and party functionaries were disastrous, not only for Chechnya but the entire North Caucasus. According to Magomet Tolboyev–then the chair of the Dagestan Security Council:

"Islamic fundamentalists strengthened themselves.... The government is not able to control the situation–each leader controls his own territory.... I warned them many times, the Interior Ministry and the Foreign Ministry of Russia ... they are like slaves sitting in the dungeons, thousands of people, plus foreigners–Englishmen, Swedish, Hungarians, etc., and representatives of the President (Yeltsin).... If you want to be kidnapped, go to Chechnya, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Ossetia.... In Moscow they [officials] do not understand what the Caucasus in reality looks like. Yes, they are literate people, but they do not understand."[6]

In the meantime, the envoy of Osama Bin Laden in the North Caucasus, Amir Khattab, testified that the "lion's share" of ammunition for their operations were received from "corrupted Russian generals."[7] In my opinion, during the second Chechen campaign, one can find a definite sequence between these tactics and the reluctance of Putin's government to use other diplomatic methods like negotiations–except coercion–with moderate Chechen separatists. If "demodernization" of Chechen society was the result of life in the war-torn region, then Russia's policy of the last sixteen years is to blame first and foremost.

One may also argue with Tishkov's interpretation of the very nature of Chechen "demodernization." Historians familiar with the Chechens' long resistance to outside invaders, know about *gorskaya democratia* (mountaineer democracy). Chechens always saw mountaineer democracy as a form of self-preservation in crisis; it is deeply ingrained in Chechen tradition.[8] Detailed descriptions of the phenomenon can be found in an article by Emil Souleimanov.[9] According to Souleimanov, after the invasion of Tamerlane, Chechens gradually migrated from the plains to the mountains where they shifted from agriculture to cattle breeding. Consequently, their previous feudal relationships deteriorated along with the necessity of having an aristocracy and hierarchy. They gradually forced their aristocracy out to Kabarda, Ossetia, and Dagestan. They reorganized into clan-based, democratic communities with elected eldermen and judges of the courts of Khels. The victims of crimes were called to execute their sentences based on the common laws of the mountains–the Adats.

I would not denigrate as "primitive" this recursive metaphor of Chechen history, as Tishkov does. Many Chechens told me that they still respect this legacy as well as their *teip* (extended clan) organization. They are certain that these kinds of relationships have helped them survive as a distinct people under Soviet totalitarianism, especially during Stalin's deportations. I do not so hastily denounce and underestimate this as "primitivism," but instead look to multiple mountainous so-

cieties such as Tibet and the Cossacks who are functioning according to similar principles. The brightest example is the Cantonal Confederation of Switzerland. Directly from this "primitive" decentralized amalgamation of democratic communities, the mountaineers of the Alps successfully formalized one of the most developed and respected modern democracies. I do not agree that Chechens cannot perform the same transformation. After all, their most recent response to enforced authoritarian statehood under the leadership of Ramzan Kadyrov is failing. Backed by Russian bayonets, the Chechens assess this move as something either to resist actively (radical minorities–the Islamists) or to resist quietly (passive majority) as a way to preserve their identity while waiting for change. But today only 5-10 percent of the desperate Chechens who lost their loved ones still sympathize with radical Islamists.[10] That is why the radicals seek support in other depressed regions, like Dagestan or Kabarda.

In spite of the fact that those people living in Chechnya suffered genocide they did not accept demodernization as its inevitable outcome. Tishkov's principal thought is that they are lost; it is a war-torn society without any perspective. This is not true. Chechens still preserve energy, hopes for modernization, and the will to build a civil society. The overall result is not "demodernization" but subtle and growing antipathy to both variants of authoritarian control: Russian and radical Islamist. I daresay that Chechen society will consolidate around the rich and ancient Chechen democratic traditions. After all, Caucasus mountaineers as well as Cossacks were never serfs of the Russian tsars or their own lords. Given the opportunity, Chechen society might even consolidate around a new type of democratic leader.

Notes

[1]. Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Jan V. Chesnov, "Chechentsem byt trudno: Teipy, ikh proshloe I rol v nastoiyaschem" ("Hard to Be a Chechen: Teips, Their Past, and Contemporary Role"), *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, September 22; "Etnokulturnyi potentsial Chechenskoi natsii" ("Ethnocultural Potential of the Chechen Nation"), in *Severnyi Kavkas: Ethnoplitical and Ethnocultural Protsessy u XX veke* (*The North Caucasus: Ethnopolitical and Ethnocultural Processes in the Twentieth Century*), eds. V.A. Tishkov and S.V. Cheshko (Moscow: IEARAS, 1996), pp. 33-51; "Byt chechentsem: Lichnost I etnicheskie identifikatsii naroda" ("To Be a Chechen: Personality and Ethnic Identification of the People"), in *Rossia I Chechnia: Obschestva I gosudarstva* (*Russia and Chechnya: Societies and States*), ed. Dmitri Furman (Moscow: Andrei Sakharov Foundation: Polit-info, 1999), pp. 63-101; [2]. Compare to Lieven, pp. 56-65, 74-84.

[3]. Vladimir Levin, "Kremlyovskie pokrovitely Bin Ladena" ("The Kremlin Patrons of Bin Laden"), *Information Agency*, "*Press-Center Ru*," http://www.presscenter.ru/index/php?subj=odoid+1756484, p. 5-6.

[4]. Ilyas Tahirov, "Normal'nye rebyata: kartsoshku sajayut . . . (Otkuda u Vahabisma nogy rastut?") ("Normal Guys: Planting Potatoes… ['Where the Legs of Wahabism Grow from?']"), *Pravda.* Ru, http://politics.pravda.ru/politics/2003/1/1/5/12302vahabizm.html. p. 2 (July 16, 2003).

[5]. Vadim Ilyin and Ismail Radjabov, "Sovetskoye nasledie trevozit zapad, Servenii Kavkaz stanovitsya glavnym poligonom extremistskoi aktinosti" ("Soviet Legacy Bothers the West, North Caucasus Became the Main Polygon of Extremist Activity"), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta The Independent Newspaper* (April 9, 2002).

[6]. Magomet Tolboyev, "Do Not Come to Us in the Caucasus," *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* (*The New Russian Word*) (New York, July 6, 1998), p. 7.

[7]. *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* (*The New Russian Word*) (New York, April 28, 1998), p. 6.

[8]. Anatoly V. Isaenko and Peter W. Petschauer, "Traditional Civilization in the North Caucasus: Insiders and Outsiders," in *Cultural Issues and Treatment of Trauma and Loss: Honoring Differences*, Nancy Dubrow and B. Hudnall Stamm, eds. (Washington, DC: Taylor Francis, 1999), pp. 150-177.

[9]. Emil Souleimanov, "Is Beslan the Result of Russian Policies in the Caucasus?" *Prague Watchdog-Crisis*, in Chechnya www.watchdog.cz, Prague, October 20, 2004.

[10]. Ibid.

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**Citation:** Anatoly Isaenko. Review of Tishkov, Verii, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society.* H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. February, 2007.

**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12839

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