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Another Look at Russia's Path to War with Chechnya

Tracey German's *Russia's Chechen War* examines the political causes of Russia's war in Chechnya, which has continued sporadically since December 1994. German, a British scholar who wrote her dissertation on the Russian-Chechen conflict, is a specialist at the World Markets Research Center. Her concise, in-depth analysis provides the most complete and persuasive explanation of the causes of the conflict. Her analysis surpasses that of the two main books on the war, Anatol Lieven's *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, and *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* by Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, in her broader source base, more detailed examination, and objectivity, in contrast to the anti-Russian bias of those previous works. While German's discussion of the war itself and of the interwar period between 1996 and 1999 offers little new, her analysis of the background to the first war adds much to our understanding of the politics at work in Moscow and Grozny.

German uses a wide variety of primary and secondary sources. As with previous studies, she relies on reports in the Russian and Chechen media to help provide a basic narrative, but she supplements these with interviews, government documents, and publications from both Russia and Chechnya that previous studies neglected. In addition, she makes great use of memoirs written by major figures in the conflict such as Boris Yeltsin, Dzhokhar Dudaev, Ruslan Khasbulatov, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev and others. These sources allow German to provide a more complete explanation of the events that led to the Chechen War.

German argues that the Chechen War resulted from the combination of five major factors: the political instability in Russia due to the transformation from Soviet Communism to democracy; "the institutional and ideological vacuum, caused by the collapse of communism," which allowed for the rise of hard-line elements in both Russia and Chechnya; Russia's desire to maintain its territorial integrity; mismanagement by both Russian and Chechen elites; and the lack of a proper institutional and legal framework in Russia to deal effectively with center-periphery issues (pp. 155-6). Of course, the sudden transformation from communism to democracy was the most important contributor to the cause of the war.

German begins with a brief history of relations between Russia and Chechnya, emphasizing the long record of acrimony and conflict brought by Russia's efforts to dominate the Caucasus region. While this point is made by previous works on the Chechen War, German adds that Russia also feels threatened by Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, especially as Georgia wants to join NATO and Turkey has declared the North Caucasus "to be a foreign policy priority" (p. 2). Other works on the Chechen War tend to ignore the overall geopolitical importance of the Caucasus region as a whole and how it helps explain Russia's actions there.

The roots of the contemporary Chechen conflict go back to Stalin's deportation of the Chechens, Ingush, and other Caucasian peoples to Kazakhstan in 1944. Lieven, Gall and de Waal, and other writers on the Chechen conflict assert that the 1944 deportations solidified Chechen

nationalism. But German argues that “Notwithstanding the deportations of 1944, the notion of a Chechen nation and statehood remained underdeveloped” (p. 19) until the late 1980s and early 1990s, when nationalism began to fill the ideological vacuum caused by the collapse of Communist ideology. During this period, ethnic groups in the former ASSRs of the Russian Republic “exploited nationalism in an attempt to achieve self-determination” as opposed to most Soviet republican leaders who did not want to dissolve the Soviet Union (p. 17). This phenomenon, German asserts, was particularly prominent in the North Caucasus in which none of the numerous ethnic groups had power in their own republics.

Along with the rise of nationalism, German argues that the incomplete transition to democracy in the early 1990s did not allow Moscow to deal with the Chechen separatist movement effectively. She states that after the failed coup attempt in 1991, the new Russia retained many Soviet institutions, such as the KGB, and the nation continued to function under the 1977 Soviet Constitution for two years. Ultimately, “[t]his failure to institutionalize the new political order, combined with structural weaknesses inherited from the Soviet system of power, led to the executive and legislature becoming embroiled in a struggle for supremacy” (p. 10). Surprisingly, however, she minimizes the power struggle between Yeltsin and the Russian parliament as a factor in Moscow’s decision to invade Chechnya in 1994.

As German describes, movements against Soviet/Russian rule began in Chechnya in 1988 when demonstrations in Grozny against a proposed biochemical plant in Gudermes turned into political protests against communist domination. These movements formed the National Front, the first popular front established in Chechnya, with the objectives of establishing democracy, reviving Chechen and Ingush history and culture, and protecting the environment. The following year, ethnic Chechens won seats in the Congress of Peoples’ Deputies, which politicized the Chechen nation and created embryonic statehood ambitions. These ambitions heightened in July 1989 when Doku Zavgayev became the first ethnic Chechen to serve as First Secretary of the Checheno-Ingush ASSR Communist Party. Zavgayev’s installation symbolized “the ascendancy of regional political ambitions over the imposition of ‘placemen’ from Moscow” (p. 24). The role of Chechens in Soviet politics expanded again in 1990 when Salambek Khadzhiiev became the Soviet Minister of the Chemical Industry and Ruslan Khasbulatov became Chairman of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet. It was during this period, 1989-90, Ger-

man argues, that the idea of Chechen statehood gained ground.

The Chechen separatist movement really began with the founding of the Vainakh Democratic Party (VDP) in May 1990 (“Vainakh” is the term used by the Chechens and the Ingush to refer to the greater Checheno-Ingush nationality, while “Nokhchi” is used by the Chechens to refer only to the Chechen nationality). One of its founders, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, stated that the VDP symbolized the “beginning of the end of Soviet power in Chechnya, the North Caucasus and the entire Soviet empire” (p. 27). The VDP leadership then organized a National Congress of Chechen People (OKChN) in November 1990, which declared Chechen state sovereignty.

The OKChN facilitated the rise to prominence of Dzhokhar Dudaev, a little-known ethnic Chechen officer in the Soviet air force. German explains that the emergence of Dudaev marked the beginning of tensions between the Chechen separatists and the Soviet/Russian authorities. Dudaev led a radical faction of the OKChN that advocated the creation of an independent Islamic Chechen state, while moderate factions favored gradual reforms (p. 31). Dudaev’s election as Chairman of the OKChN Executive Committee in 1991 radicalized and split the organization as moderate intelligentsia members left the congress to oppose the OKChN openly. During the anti-Gorbachev coup attempt in August 1991, pro-Dudaev forces seized the television station in Grozny and Dudaev delivered a televised speech demanding the dissolution of the Checheno-Ingush Supreme Soviet and the resignation of Zavgayev. German argues that “the obstinacy of the incumbent ruling elite” in Chechnya during the coup attempt helped enhance “the influence of the radical nationalists” (pp. 37). In September 1991, the OKChN declared the ASSR Supreme Soviet to be illegitimate and powerless and called for parliamentary and presidential elections for October 27. By this time, German explains, the split between the Chechen separatists and the Soviet/Russian authorities had been completed.

One of the most valuable aspects of German’s book is her accurate narrative and evaluation of prewar anti-Dudaev opposition movements, which Lieven and Gall and de Waal discuss only superficially. German emphasizes that Dudaev never had the unanimous support of the Chechen nation, despite his manipulative references to the threat of Russian invasion and his disingenuous advocacy of an Islamic state. Opposition groups were divided, with some favoring independence without Dudaev as leader and others favoring a more conciliatory

relationship with Moscow. On March 31, 1992, armed opposition supporters, frustrated by Dudaev's inability to solve Chechnya's severe economic and political problems, seized the radio and television stations in Grozny and demanded Dudaev's resignation. Dudaev's National Guard crushed this uprising, exposing his authoritarian style of rule. In September 1992, opposition political factions formed a coalition named Round Table and called for multiparty elections in Chechnya. In April 1993, Dudaev came close to being overthrown as the Chechen Parliament voted no confidence in his government and Dudaev closed the parliamentary newspaper *Golos Chechenskoi Respubliki*. By 1994, the opposition consisted of four main groups that received varying degrees of support from Moscow and were mainly centered in northern Chechnya. Dudaev enjoyed his greatest support in the southern mountain regions. The Russian invasion in 1994, however, as German points out, effectively united this opposition in defense against the invaders.

German also provides a thorough treatment of Russia's actions in the prewar period. Throughout 1991 and 1992, Moscow's control of Chechnya gradually eroded. After the OKChN declared the Checheno-Ingush Supreme Soviet to be illegitimate, the Russian government withdrew the KGB from Chechnya, and sent the RSFSR Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi to Chechnya for negotiations. These actions failed to quell the separatist movement, which German attributes to "liberal tendencies" in the Russian leadership (p. 48) and to Moscow's administrative weakness caused by the competition between the existing parallel Soviet and Russian structures. German argues that Russia's failure to establish adequate political and legal structures after the Soviet Union's collapse combined with disputes between Yeltsin and the Russian parliament over Chechnya contributed to Dudaev's attempt to gain independence.

During 1992-1994, Russia used negotiations with Chechen officials and large monetary subsidies in an attempt to resolve the situation. But in March 1993, the Russian Parliament stopped sending subsidies for pensions and other benefits to Chechnya to force the republic to acquiesce. As with previous studies, German argues that Yeltsin's eventual shift in support for what she terms a "party of war" in the Kremlin by 1994 ultimately led to the decision to go to war. German argues that three factors motivated the party of war: frustration as a result of Russia's loss of international standing

in the 1990s; the fear that NATO expansion presented a direct threat to national security; and the threat of civil war. She argues further that the party of war's influence on Yeltsin persuaded him to reverse his previous antiwar stance by the autumn of 1994. In a manner reminiscent of the Soviet era, the Security Council was only used to formalize Yeltsin's decision to go to war; as Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev noted, "few of those present [at the November 29 Security Council meeting] endorsed military intervention, but...it was impossible to voice their reservations as Yeltsin had already made his decision" (p. 124). German argues, however, that if Yeltsin had simply met Dudaev for talks, as Dudaev had requested, the war would likely have been averted. While previous authors have outlined the events leading to the Chechen war, German's description is the most detailed and contains the most convincing arguments to explain why Moscow failed, particularly her emphasis on Yeltsin's administration during the transition.

German's discussion of the war itself contributes little to the understanding of the conflict as her narrative is relatively short (only one chapter) and contains much the same information that is found in numerous other books. In the final chapter, German briefly examines the interwar period and the resumption of hostilities in 1999. She points out that the second war contained more foreign fundamentalist Islamic elements as Islamic extremists, including the Saudi warrior Khattab and others. She explains that Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, who was elected in 1997, effectively lost control of Chechnya to various warlords and, in 1999, he reluctantly agreed to turn Chechnya into an Islamic state governed by Sharia law.

German concludes that behind all the reasons for the Chechen wars "lies the fundamental reality that the country lacked substantive, effective democratic institutions and the constitutional framework necessary to achieve a successfully negotiated settlement" (p. 155). The survival of a Soviet mentality in Russian politics as well as "institutional self-survival" also contributed to the outbreak of war. It is possible to extrapolate from German's argument that the Chechen wars are just one of the many problems that resulted from the rapid collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Perhaps if the Soviet Union had been able to sustain itself and the transition away from communism had been more gradual, the Chechen conflict could have been averted.

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