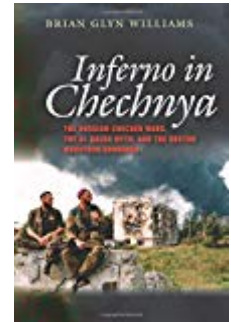


Brian Glyn Williams. *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings.* Lebanon: University Press of New England, 2015. 296 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-61168-737-8.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Brian Glen Williams's sweeping review of Chechen national identity and political history transports the reader from the April 2013 Boston Marathon finish line to the hamlets of the North Caucasus, the mountains of Afghanistan, and back to Boston. The book is deeply informative and largely accessible without prior knowledge of Russia, Central Asia, or the Caucasus. Readers move through the background of more than a thousand years of the inter-ethnic and cultural melding before being introduced to the modern Chechen culture and its traditions. The author then presents the history of brutal efforts by the Russian empire to claim and pacify the North Caucasus, contextualizing two centuries of conflict. The heart of this work focuses on the plight of Chechens in the last thirty years, from misplaced hope for a post-Soviet independent state to two bloody civil wars and the enduring mythology of the existence of disciplined, well-trained, radical jihadi Chechen fighters in every theater of the global war on terror. The book's greatest contribution is the author's fieldwork in Afghanistan and Central Asia to explore and dis-

prove the existence of Chechen fighters and units undertaking *jihad* for pay. The work concludes with an explanation of the Chechen diaspora in the United States. Williams delivers a deeply informative and highly descriptive history of the Chechen people.

The book opens with the author's personal experiences of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing and the surprising revelation that two brothers from Chechnya were responsible. The rest of the introduction presents the genesis story of the Chechen people and brief history of the Caucasus, including their culture of fierce independence, martial skills, and a religious belief system incorporating Sufi mysticism, Islam, and pagan rites. The following chapter vividly details the efforts by imperial Russia to conquer the northern Caucasus region and rule the Chechen, Ingush, and Dagestani people. Russian campaigns of the early nineteenth century form the basis of the unbridled contempt for Russia central to Chechen identity for the last nearly two hundred years. If the efforts by the tsar's army weren't disheartening enough,

Williams offers an extensive review of the Soviet policy toward the Chechens, including the post-World War II genocide of nation by sending them *en masse* to exile across Central Asia. Khrushchev's policy enabling exiled nations to return home in 1956 allowed the Chechens to reclaim their homeland, where they remained in a uneasy state, fully mindful of the forced deportation yet participating in the Soviet modernization practices of expanding education, technology, and petroleum-refining industry in Chechnya.

The next chapter explores the misplaced optimism of Chechnya in the post-Soviet era and the failed hopes for an independent Chechnya. The following chapter presents the first Chechen civil war and the detailed horrors of the Russian invasion. As Williams describes and explains the last thirty years of Chechen history and experience, he illuminates the tension that began between traditional Chechen culture and Sufi Islam, and incorporates traditional, even pagan practices of the region and a growing vein of conservative, Wahhabi Islam that came to the Caucasus region after the first Russian civil war. The next chapter details the brutal second Russian invasion of Chechnya and the drawn out "cleansing" operations. Williams then debunks one of the post-9/11 myths, the permeating idea that legions of bloodthirsty Chechens for hire made up Al Qaeda's elite strike force in Afghanistan and Syria. The final chapter returns to Boston and traces the journey of the Tsarnaev brothers and reflects on the Chechen diaspora inside the United States.

The book is well organized and accessible to a nonscholarly community. The work is subject to criticism in two areas. First, much of the book is a succinct retelling of the Russia versus Chechnya story, which is perfectly acceptable, but the author makes an impressive scholarly contribution by means of field work in Central Asia and Afghanistan to evaluate the legitimacy of claims that Chechens comprised significant elements of jihadi fighters. His fieldwork's contribution is im-

pressive, but gets lost in much of the book. It is significant that there is no evidence of more than a handful of Chechens ever making the battlefields in the war on terror. Williams discusses why in an effective way, and the reader should be directed to this significant fact earlier in the work. Second, ending with the story of the Tsarnaev brothers comes across as a contrived literary device instead of meaningfully adding to the work. It moves the book into a grey area between academic and general-interest literature.

For all readers this book delivers an in-depth survey of Chechnya, its inhabitants, and their stories of survival and suffering. For readers unfamiliar with this region and its history, this work is an effective and easily digestible survey. For scholars of the area, the book's vivid details and excellent research make it an excellent addition to the scholarship bridging post-Soviet politics and transnational terrorism.

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