

Gammer, Moshe. *The Lone Wolf and the Bear. Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule*. London; Hurst and Company. 2006. pp. xviii. + 252 pages. Paperback. ISBN 85065 748 3.

On July 7, 2006 the world media reported the death of 'Islamic extremist' terrorist, Shamil Basayev in the breakaway province of Chechnya. Most accounts of the killing of Basayev, a Chechen field commander who had increasingly resorted to terrorism against Russia, described his death as a blow against global extremism similar to the recent assassination of the Al Qaeda leader Zarqawi in Iraq.

But as Moshe Gammer makes abundantly clear in his history of Chechnya, there is a historical *context* to Shamil Basayev and Chechen resistance to Russia that is much older and more narrowly focused on Russia than Al Qaeda's more recent, broad war against the 'Western Zionist Crusaders.'

To explain this context, Gammer's epic work takes the reader from the primeval forests of Chechnya on the eve of the 19th century Russian conquests to the on-going Second Russo-Chechen War of 1999-present. What emerges is an indictment of colonial excesses that can at times be overwhelming and a brutal track record that far surpasses Russia's harsh treatment of *inorodtsy* (internal non-Russian 'aliens') in other part of the empire. The litany of Russian excesses, from denuding Chechnya of its ancient forests to deny the highland 'bandits' sanctuary, to systematic use of rape and policies of collective punishment, seems to fall somewhere between burning the rain-forest of the Brazilian Indians and Balkan style ethnic cleansing.

Lest one be tempted to treat Gammer's damning account as a case of Russophobia, Gammer time and again makes use of the Russian colonial administration's own words to indict it. The following letter (page 93) from one Russian officer to another in 1877 is fairly typical of the Russian administration's contempt for the Chechen *cheorny* (blacks): "In general we should pluck out as many as possible and in the most oppressive manner. The entire population of Benoy and Zandak (southern Chechnya) should be exiled to Siberia and if these rascals refuse, they should be exterminated in the winter like cockroaches and starved to death."

Gammer shows that the Chechens' response to the Russian slaughter of their people and burning of their villages was to fall back upon their faith as a rallying point. In many ways the Russian invasion of Chechnya led to

the Islamification of this highlander race and to the emergence of defensive jihad under the leadership of one of the 19th century's greatest guerilla leaders, Imam Shamil.

In the Communist period Gammer again lets the Soviets' own chilling words bring the horrific nature of the Chechens' experience with genocidal deportation to life. When a Soviet NKVD officer charged with ethnically cleansing the Chechens in 1944 reported to his superiors that he had found it "necessary to liquidate" Khaybek (a Chechen village of 700) to meet his deportation deadline, he received a letter recommending him for "decoration and promotion for his uncompromising activities during the evacuation of the Chechens in the area of Khaybek" (page 170).

In the post-Soviet context Russia's 'war against international terrorism' in Chechnya has once again led to the emergence of jihad in the burnt-out mountain hamlets of Chechnya. And as one reads Gammer's work describing Chechnya's slide into war with Russia one is reminded that the more things change in this mountainous war zone the more they remain the same. Replace the rumble of horse-drawn field artillery with T-72 main battle tanks and the clatter of muskets with the staccato burst of AK-47s and the Tsarist wars to subdue 'the highland bandits' could just as easily be Putin's 'war against international terrorism' in Chechnya. As the post-Soviet Russian Federation responds to Chechen resistance by taking a page out of the Tsarist administration's book on how to subdue 'intransigent natives', the Chechen insurgents are increasingly defining their struggle in jihad terms that the great 19th century highland guerilla Imam Shamil would have recognized.

But there is one major difference between the Chechens' lonely war against the might of Tsarist Russia and the on-going war, and that is the fact that with the publication of books like Gammer's, the outside world has insights into the Chechens' reason for resisting Russia that their 19th century counterparts lacked. For this reason *The Lone Wolf and the Bear* is a book the Russian government does not want outsiders to read for it provides the historical background that is deliberately missing in Putin's cynical efforts to conflate Chechen terrorism with Al Qaeda. One hopes that works like Gammer's will help humanize the Chechen people that has all too often been defined in Russian *agitprop* (agitation propaganda) as 'mountain savages', 'bandits', 'anti-progressive elements', 'Nazi collaborators', and most recently, 'Al Qaeda international terrorists.'

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