

1998

Book Review: *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*

Rory J. Conces

University of Nebraska at Omaha, rconces@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/philfacpub>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Conces, Rory J., "Book Review: *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*" (1998). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 7.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/philfacpub/7>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



International Third World Studies
Journal and Review, Volume X, 1998/99

Book Review: Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power

By Rory J. Conces

Department of Philosophy and Religion

University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE 68182-0265

Anatol Lieven. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998. 436pp. 12 illus. \$37.50 (cloth).

[1] From December 1994 to August 1996, Russia was engaged in the Chechen War, a Vietnam-style quagmire that exemplified, on the one hand, the end of Russia as a great military and imperial power, and, on the other hand, "one of the greatest epics of colonial resistance in the past century." No analysis can hope to understand the totality of forces that lend to the stability (or instability) of nations with large minority populations unless it first examines the conditions that led to the Russian defeat in Chechnya. At the center of that problem lies an interesting issue. What aspects of the Russian state, Russian society, and the Russian psyche in the 1990s played a part in the Russian defeat, and what aspects of Chechen history, society, and culture played a part in the Chechen victory? Lieven uses the Chechen War as a keyhole into the wider debate concerning the nature and course of Russian nationalism.

[2] This new book by Anatol Lieven, former correspondent for the London *Times* and expert on post-Soviet affairs at the Institute for Strategic Studies London, provides a readable account of this issue. "Part I: The War" consists of three chapters, including a chapter that is more or less a personal memoir of his war experiences in the capital city of Grozny. The reader enjoys an insider's view of the trials and tribulations faced by combatants and civilians alike. This is perhaps the most interesting part of the book, though it would have been much improved with maps of the North Caucasus, Chechnya, and Grozny. (This is ironic, given that Lieven himself notes that one of the operational problems faced by the Russians when they launched their attack on Grozny was the lack of maps of the capital city.) The city of Grozny, founded in 1818, was at one time a large industrial city, the second largest oil-refining center in the former Soviet Union, before it was turned into something akin to the futuristic war-torn landscape from the film *Terminator*. The people of Grozny, including a sizeable population of ethnic Russians, were subjected to massive barrages of rocket, artillery, and mortar fire that few Westerners have witnessed. It is no exaggeration on the part of Lieven to say that the bombardment was more intense than those launched against the cities of Beirut, Kabul, and Sarajevo in recent history. As Lieven recalls, "Every morning when we got up, we would find that a malign giant had taken another bite out of the familiar streets, leaving a blackened hole in an otherwise untouched row of houses, and in it limbless, obscenely mangled corpses dressed in the remnants of nightclothes and slippers." Another of Lieven's short descriptions of Grozny captures what life was like after the attack: "In January 1995 its appearance became dramatic enough, especially at night, with gas flaring from fractured pipes casting a lurid light over the scene, and fighters, civilians, stray dogs and cats, journalists and the odd homeless tramp or drug addict all huddling as close as they dared to the flames

to keep out the damp and icy chill." Lieven's immersion into the Battle for Grozny produced what few academics can imagine.

[3] Lieven's discussion of the origin of the war is a very important theme of his *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. He traces the more proximate chain of events back to the nationalist movement of the Inguish and Chechens between the 1970s and 1990s. They were the first North Caucasus peoples to begin to make public national claims within the Soviet Federation. Whereas the main motive for the Inguish protests was the return of Progorodny District from North Ossetia, the Chechens focused initially on environmental issues, the preservation of the Chechen language and culture, and religious freedom. By 1991, the Chechen protests developed into a demand for Chechnya to break away from the Russian Federation and become a fully autonomous republic of the Soviet Union. The Chechen National Congress, with Dzhokhar Dudayev as its chairman, was the mouthpiece for the most extreme national demands. The slide toward disaster quickened with the Chechen National Congress calling for the dissolution of the Chechen-Inguish Supreme Soviet, the declaration of Ingushetia as separated from Chechnya and as a republic within the Russian Federation, the consolidation of power by Dudayev, the October 1991 presidential and parliamentary elections in Chechnya, and the declaration by the Chechen parliament of full independence from Russia on 2 November 1991.

[4] Between November 1991 and July 1994 Russia used a show of its troops on the Inguish-Chechen border, as well as trade and financial sanctions, in an attempt to bring Chechnya back into the fold. During this time state services in Chechnya continued to collapse, and mass protests against Dudayev were held, in part as a result of his rejection of a draft treaty for a confederation with Russia in December 1993. Lieven takes this refusal to sign the treaty as the most important cause of the war. While Lieven's rendering of the causes of the war is certainly well informed and plausible, his presentation is somewhat confusing because the book gives rise to a sense that the causal efficacy of various events is definitive when, in reality, it is not. The distinction between remote and proximate causes of certain events is an interesting and important one that seems to be blurred by Lieven whenever he intimates a causal link to the Russian intervention in Chechnya. This is exemplified when Lieven presents several more links in the causal chain. He notes that the anarchy that beset Chechnya pushed it down the road to war with Russia by encouraging Dudayev to use nationalist rhetoric, by allowing the growth of banditry in Chechnya as well as in Russia, and by promoting the growth of a domestic, violent opposition to Russia. In addition, Lieven provides the reader with a host of what he calls "subsidiary reasons" for the Russian intervention, including the protection of Russian unity, the safeguarding of an oil pipeline from Baku to the Black Sea, and the fear of Turkish influence in the region. And yet the "catalysts" that eventually triggered the intervention were a series of bus hijackings and a failed attempt by forces opposed to Dudayev to capture Grozny, with the resulting declaration by Dudayev that opposition prisoners would be executed. Apparently, it is this chain of events that brought about the Russian military intervention on 11 December 1994, beginning with an air strike on Grozny and followed by a full-scale ground assault almost three weeks later.

[5] The war went badly for the Russians from the first days of the conflict, even though the Chechens lacked support from other North Caucasus autonomous republics, in part because of the Chechens' strong contempt for their Caucasus neighbors. As Lieven sees them, Chechens are not well liked in Russia and in the North Caucasus. Lieven makes it clear that bad planning and low morale were threatening the operation from the very beginning, exemplified by the general unwillingness of

Russian troops to suppress domestic unrest.

[6] A number of important lessons emerge from Lieven's analysis. One lesson concerns the difficulty for modern, organized armies operating in urban areas. The ruins of a large city such as Grozny provided the defending Chechens with ample opportunity to engage in activities like sniping, planting mines and booby traps, as well as conducting ambushes of Russian columns, all of which helped negate the Russian superiority in armor, air power, and artillery. This is reminiscent of the American experiences in Hue (Vietnam) and Mogadishu (Somalia). Urban fighting wreaks havoc on armies that rely on major units that are coordinated in a rigid hierarchy of command because the terrain and an enemy that resorts to the use of guerrilla tactics tend to break units down to smaller groups that rely more heavily on junior officers and NCOs, of which the Russian military was in sort supply. ,

[7] A second concerns the Russian underestimation of the ability of the Chechen separatists to do battle. Even though the Russian troops outnumbered their foe 10-to- 1 and could rely on the use of air power and armor, the Russian strategy of pinning down the Chechen fighters and forcing them into pitched battles played into the hands of the Chechens, who only had to destroy the enemies' will to fight, which they did. As Lieven notes, instead of adopting the military strategy of Carl von Clausewitz, the Chechens relied initially on a strategy that was "often evasive and indirect, concerned to avoid major direct clashes and the heavy casualties they entail." As the war progressed, both sides changed strategies. The Russians took to the more evasive, "Asiatic" strategy, following the battle of Grozny, in order to avoid heavy casualties and to boost the morale of their troops, as well as to give their "pacification" program a chance to turn the tide, whereas the Chechens "sought out occasions for direct and if possible decisive 'Clausewitzian' battle[s]."

[8] A third lesson is that the reliance on long-range bombardment to win battles in heavily populated areas does not guarantee winning. The resources used to indiscriminately kill friend and foe alike, as well as to destroy the infrastructure of the city, are not resources well spent. If anything, bombardment is counterproductive because it infuriates the defenders and makes them more entrenched to weather the storm and to rise up at a later date to kill the invader, exactly what the Chechens did. Modern weaponry can be extremely effective in knocking down buildings but is less able to move defenders into submission. (Perhaps a recent counterexample to this would be the use of air power against President Milosevic and the Serb military presence in Kosovo.)

[9] In "Part II: The Russian Defeat," Lieven moves beyond a discussion of strategies to sketch the Russian defeat as a result of changes in the Russian state, society, and culture as well as a systemic crisis. In Lieven's view, this translates into the defeat being a product of a weak Russian state and an inability on the part of Russian society to mobilize forces to compensate for that weakness, a mobilization that could have taken place were it not for the absence of strong popular nationalism. The Russian people had no identity apart from the strong state, a state defined in terms of imperialism and ideology. With no fully developed Russian national identity, the collapse of the Soviet state meant that there would only be a confused Russian nationalism. Russian Cossacks, who have traditionally been an ally and a force for Russian nationalism and anti-minority sentiments, have failed to have much of an impact in recent years. What he calls the "Serbian" or "neo-Cossack" option, manifested in its virulent form in the former Yugoslavia and in its embryonic form in some Russian areas of the former Soviet Union, is seen as a growth stemming from some sectors of the Communist elite turning to a radical nationalism in an attempt to retain power, the mobilization of local ethnic populations, and the

exploitation of the ensuing conflict by criminal gangs and warlords. In spite of the publicity that this option has acquired in the Western press, it has not taken hold in Russia.

[10] Important aspects of how the Russian state has been undermined are seen in Russia's current metamorphosis. The Russia that entered the Chechen War in December 1994 was in the midst of a liberal capitalist (and democratic) revolution. The new elite acquired vast wealth through the privatization of state property (primarily raw materials like natural gas, nickel, and oil) and the acquisition of control of the state itself. According to Lieven, corruption was an interesting inevitability of the Soviet system: "Given the nature of communist ideology, the massive entry of organized crime into business may well have been unavoidable; for it would seem to stand to reason that if the state criminalises all forms of business activity, then when it eventually changes its mind and legalises business, it will find that the businessmen are by origin and nature criminals." Moreover, Lieven intimates that the privatization of state property and the lure of corruption are not limited to raw materials, but are equally associated with weapons and fissionable materials.

[11] 'Citing a string of experts', Lieven suggests that some officials in the Yeltsin government, like Anatoly Chubais, the Privatization Minister, believe that the way in which state property is distributed is not important, but that what is important is the creation of property owners, which will solidify a market economy and the introduction to democracy. The presence of property owners will stimulate all the rest! However, Lieven is not so optimistic and largely discounts such claims as a smokescreen for an economic oligarchy that will restrict the market and control a weakened state as it sees fit. Moreover, the Stalinist "shattering" of Russian society has only helped the elites because the society is incapable of generating "mass democratic politics," which would temper the power of the new elites. Unfortunately, the check and balance system does not exist in Russia.

[12] The turn to liberal capitalism and the creation of a class of new elites did not make it easier for the Yeltsin government to wage war against the Chechens. On the contrary, the interest in wealth and power, Lieven notes, reduced the tendencies to military adventurism. Lieven acknowledges that a change in demographics has also had an impact in this area. Although immigration back to Russia has increased over the years, there has been a significant decrease in the birth rate (due to factors such as urbanization and economic development) and increase in the death rate (due to factors such as malnutrition and a decline in health services), which Lieven suggests has resulted in an older population less inclined to engage in revolutions or militarism. Though Lieven believes demographic changes in a neighboring country like Kazakhstan (which has an increasing birth rate) could lead to serious ethnic conflicts involving Russians, one must question the likelihood of Russian intervention in such an area given Russia's aging population and his further claim that the defense of one's home and homeland play an important role in whether there is serious military intervention.

[13] Lieven also assesses the Russian defeat in terms of what he calls a "systemic crisis" in the military establishment. Although some Western military experts downplay the Russian defeat in Chechnya, saying that it simply shows that the use of reserve units to put down a civil disturbance had not gone well for Russia, Lieven dismisses such claims as nonsense and contends that some of Russia's best units (which were of less than "elite" stature, including the Marine Infantry and Interior Ministry's SOBR units) were tested and had failed. Part of this failure was due to the operational approach that was used to fight the Chechen separatists, an approach that was part of the legacy of the 1979-89 Afghan War. Lieven is too quick to downgrade the elite units of the Russian military and Interior

Ministry, even though he discusses in some detail the factors that can explain the poor performance of the Russians on the battlefield, namely, shortages of men (including officers and NCOs), training, equipment, unity, and funding, as well as an excess of corruption. This legacy surfaces insofar as the deep-seated problems in the military establishment that were present during the Afghan War were also present during the Chechen conflict due to the absence of any sort of military reform. The lack of funds and the rivalry between the military and the Interior Ministry are cited as contributing factors for this persistent problem. By adding the systemic crisis to the more encompassing changes in the Russian state, society, and culture, Lieven makes it clear that a Russian victory in Chechnya was extremely doubtful.

[14] One last factor that contributed enormously to the Russian demise: the Chechens themselves. In "Part Three: The Chechen Victory," Lieven's discussion of the Chechens is reminiscent of John Le Carré's portrayal of the people in the North Caucasus in *Our Game*. They took on a much more powerful adversary and, without having the support of a state and its political and military institutions, defeated it. Their society and their traditions made the difference for the Chechens. As Lieven's overview of the Chechen people makes clear, the Chechens have been struggling against the Russians since 1785, with more recent revolts being tainted more with Chechen nationalism than with Sufi Islam and its "loud *zhr*," a dance and chant that were banned because of their inspiration to resist the authorities (like the Sioux "Ghost Dance" in the U.S.). The Chechens are a clan-based and egalitarian society, which has for centuries shown a tenacity to resist those who wish to dominate them. This has been true of the Chechens from the nineteenth-century wars under the leadership of Imam Shamil to the latest war against Russia under the leadership of Dudayev. Perhaps what made the Chechens such a difficult group for Yeltsin to conquer was the effect that Stalin's deportation had on the Chechen people. In Lieven's view, "the years of exile from 1944 to 1957 tempered in them that steely national discipline which became apparent in the war of 1994-96. More even than the wars of Shamil in the nineteenth century, the memory of the deportation became the central defining event in modern Chechen history. One reason for its continuing impact is that ...it involved not just intense suffering but intense *humiliation* of a people who must surely count among the proudest in the world."

[15] An indication of the sort of people the Russians were fighting is shown in the Chechen devotion to family and tradition, particularly in the importance of being buried in the ancestral village. Chechen fighters would routinely risk their lives to recover the body of a fallen comrade. The following Chechen proverb captures the spirit of these people: "It is hard to be a Chechen."

[16] In the remainder of the book, the author sketches the fate of Russia and Russian nationalism in the aftermath of the defeat in Chechnya. Lieven demonstrates a strong appreciation for the captivating lure of liberal capitalism (and democracy). A clear message conveyed by *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* is that this inherited ideology has forged the new elite and that there is no ideological alternative to it that would lead to another revolution. Given his belief that liberal capitalism assumptions will eventually falter, Lieven is realistic enough not to rule out future revolutions or other changes that could have grave consequences for Russia and its neighbors. The sort of ethnic nationalism that he fears is one that is not imperialist and does not build up the state. The nationalism that is found in present-day Serbia is a case in point. There is no imperial claim over Croatia or Bosnia, but simply a desire for a greater Serbia. Lieven finds the means to be as unambiguous as the end: "In order to do that they think they must kill or drive out people who don't fit into that vision." What would make this more likely to occur in Russia? Russia might move down such a path if it were excluded from Western

institutions, surrounded by states that have strong anti-Russian official national identities, and faced with the prospect of ethnic Russians outside Russia coming under physical attack on a large scale. Lieven admits that it is to the advantage of all parties that this has not taken place to any great extent.

[17] Lieven's book contains some controversial statements, such as his discussion of the capability of the Russian military. The book also provides refreshing insights into the Chechen War and Russia as it moves forward into the next millennium. The strength of *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* is its attempt to understand the multitude of changes that are occurring in Russia. The weakness of the book is not laying out in detail the causal links concerning the origin of the Chechen War and the eventual Russian defeat. While there are elements of the book that might have been done better, it remains a useful source on the Russian intervention in Chechnya and its subsequent loss of imperial status. Readers who deal with Russian affairs should seriously consider reading this book to broaden their vision of the former super power.