Chechens Through the Russian Prism

Rebecca Gould
Russia’s leading Chechnya expert has produced a landmark work--but it is a landmark that also shows that Chechens and Russians still cannot hear each other.

by Rebecca Gould

Posted on 16 February 2005


It is now 10 years since Russian troops entered Chechnya. Since then tens of thousands of Russians and hundreds of thousands of Chechens have been killed. But throughout those years and despite the scale of the bloodletting, the Russian intelligentsia has maintained a striking silence on this war. There are exceptions. In journalism, there is Anna Politkovskaya, a tireless critic of President Vladimir Putin’s policies. And in academe, there is Valery Tishkov, the most eminent Russian intellectual to make the Chechen war the focus of his scholarship.

The prestige of his name makes it inevitable that Tishkov’s views will enter the canon of Russian historiography and political analysis of the Chechen conflict. Tishkov speaks from a position of authority. Currently the director of the Institute of Ethnography and Anthropology at the Russian Academy of Sciences, Tishkov served as the Russian Federal Minister of Nationalities in 1992 and was subsequently involved in drafting a peace plan for the Russian government under Boris Yeltsin.

Unfortunately, no one in the West is likely to appear who is capable of challenging (or perhaps willing to challenge) Tishkov with the same insight and erudition he displays. For that reason, Tishkov’s book ought to be read with a special focus on its limitations. And there is another reason to do so: regardless of his good intentions and regardless of the complexity of his views, Tishkov will be cited to support views far more simplistic than those contained in the book itself.

Tishkov’s book, then, is an event to be welcomed with a touch of wariness. It was perhaps a similar fear of Tishkov’s authority and how his views might be (mis)used that prompted the unanimously negative reaction by scholars at a roundtable devoted to his book during the Association of Nationalities conference in New York City last year.

And there are certainly some significant caveats about Tishkov’s work. Ironically, Tishkov shares many of the limitations of the Chechen nationalist historians and propagandists he writes against, such as the recently assassinated Zelimkhan Yandarbiev. All these commentators, regardless of their political stance, have a common heritage: true to their Soviet upbringing, they are unable to see beyond ethnicity. Every criminal in Tishkov’s book is strictly classified according to race. In discussing the wartime deportation of the Chechens and other minorities of the Soviet Union, Tishkov stresses
that Stalin and Beria were ethnic Georgians, as though their being foreigners absolves
the Russian state of any responsibility for the deportations. In a Columbia University
symposium devoted to his book, Tishkov reproached a questioner for assuming that only
Russians were implicated in the attack on Grozny. After all, he pointed out, Lev Rohklin,
the Russian general who ordered the assault on Grozny during the first Chechen war, was
a Jew. Such racially bound imagery does not of course intend to discriminate, but that is
its effect. For the Soviet mind, ethnic difference, no matter how subtle, is the most
fundamental distinguishing mark among human beings.

Tishkov is sympathetic to the Chechens, but many of the stories he tells, based on the
interviews conducted by his research assistants, are filtered through his own biases, while
other perspectives are left untold. He assembles in his text only the most inflammatory
statements by the likes of Yandarbiev, a fundamentalist, or Movladi Udugov, a raving
anti-Semite, as if he wishes us to believe such radical and short-sighted statements
comprise the core of the Chechen claim to independence.

A NATIONAL IDENTITY ONLY RECENTLY DISCOVERED?

Having gone into battle and conquered these straw men, Tishkov then propounds his
theory that Chechen national identity is a recent invention, a child of the past decade of
war and of the 1944 deportation.

That puts him at odds with some in the West. As an ethnic Russian sympathetic to the
Chechens, Tishkov is perfectly positioned to tell the story of the West’s cultural
essentialism regarding the Chechen people--and does so in the book’s most brilliant and
original material, at the same time unraveling the Russian academic scholarship that
spawned Western romanticism.

Western journalists, Tishkov argues, have based their romantic renditions of the Chechen
fighting spirit on ethnographic accounts that have little relevance to the contemporary
Chechen people. The British journalist Anatol Lieven, for example, in a passage quoted
by Tishkov, characterizes the Chechens as opaque to outside investigation; internally
cohesive, and remarkably efficient and ruthless in pursuit of their aims if the modern
Western bourgeoisie could dream, it would dream Chechens. Tishkov’s responds to
Lieven’s fantasy by writing: I have a dream, a dream that the Chechens will be able to
escape the Western bourgeoisie’s dreams of Chechens.

Many other factions have taken up the issue of Chechnya, from Polish and Ukrainian
nationalists to reactionary Russia-bashers, but, as Tishkov points out, their motives have
less to do with helping Chechnya than with the political advantages of glorifying a people
with a history of resisting the Russian empire.

Whatever their motivations, Western academics and journalists who are inclined to wax
romantic on the subject of the Chechen mentality do more harm than good. The
oppression of Chechnya, therefore, does not only come from the powerful neighbor to the
North.

As long as Chechens are constructed according to Western dreams, Tishkov implies, they will never have their own internal sovereignty. Unfortunately, Tishkov does not offer concrete suggestions about how Chechens can achieve such cultural (much less political) sovereignty. His critique is searing and effective, but he offers nothing in exchange for the delusions he exposes.

Moreover, his own stance carries its own ideological limitations; while he critiques Western scholarship, he ignores Russian prejudices. One chapter called “The Culture of Hostage Taking” invokes the very ethnic determinism Tishkov disdains. Here, Tishkov treats kidnapping as a tradition deeply embedded within Chechen society and a feature of the Chechen mentality, without pausing to consider the social-historical factors that shaped this mountain people’s way of life.

All these debates about the nature and roots of Chechen identity ignore a more important point: regardless of when Chechens began to consider themselves a single people, they now suffer together. Such suffering makes them into a nation, no matter how recent the roots of their trauma.

Tishkov’s greatest weakness is that he fails to perceive how deep a rift such suffering has opened up between the Chechen people and the Russian government. No matter how many buildings are rebuilt, no matter how many bombed sidewalks are paved over again, in the long-term sense, the conditions for peace in Chechnya have been destroyed.

**PRISONERS WITH EAR PLUGS**

Peace implies mutual understanding. But in Chechnya, both sides are committed to a deterministic view of the opposing culture. As long as Chechens and Russians find themselves trapped inside the ideological prison cell which they have built around themselves (though Russians certainly bear more of the blame for its construction than do the Chechens), the war will not end.

Which makes the fact that no Chechen writer has addressed Tishkov’s work in print even more troubling than Tishkov’s own biases. Anatol Lieven once remarked that, though Tishkov is a servant of the state, he is the best that the Russian intellectual elite has to offer the Chechens, and they ignore him at their peril. As this is one of the most authoritative books on the Chechen war (the Russian version of this book, entitled Society in Armed Conflict, was published back in 2001), the silence surrounding it in the Chechen press does not bode well.

Perhaps Chechens consider it beneath them to read the work of a “political anthropologist” (as Lyoma Usmanov, one eminent Chechen in the diaspora, has rightly called Tishkov). Those Chechens trapped inside Chechnya as well as many of those who live in Russia may not have access to a broad range of views on the Chechen conflict, and their freedom to write what they please is restricted. Those who live in the diaspora, however, do have access to books and the means to share their opinions with the world.
Perhaps they prefer to dispute more simple-minded opponents whose views are easier to defeat, and to preach to the converted.

That may well be the case, for one of the greatest weaknesses of the ideologues of the Chechen resistance is their tendency to respond to the sweeping, dismissive statements of many Russians with lies that are equally entrenched and prophecies that are equally self-fulfilling. Jokar Dudayev once said--in a phrase that Chechens love to quote--that the Chechen people “never cry and never forget.” The commitment to absolutist formulas is a hallmark of ideologies that led to no good. That does not mean Chechens should forget or even forgive, but they should not respond to Russian prejudice with their own form of insanity.

Regardless of its sources, this silence is symptomatic of the central problem in Chechen-Russian relations: the two sides cannot hear each other. Tishkov is not the first scholar to deny Chechen identity, and he will not be the last. At the opposite extreme are those diaspora Chechens who respond to the myth of Chechen-Russian friendship with an argument equally laden with ideology. All Russians, so this argument goes, are biologically destined to be imperialists. Thus two ideologies are at war with each other, and neither side can understand the position of the other. Centuries of lies have led to a war that shows no sign of slowing down. With the war in Chechnya, the effect has become the cause; this cycle of destruction now runs on its own negative energy.

Tishkov’s book set out to bridge that gap. It is a rare text that allows Chechens to speak for themselves, rather than through their leaders, their political advocates in the West, or their Russian foes. Life in a War-Torn Society does not achieve its ostensible goal of giving the Chechens a voice, though it is a valuable attempt in that direction.

A book published in 1994 called Chechens: History and Modernity, and another, ironically edited by Tishkov himself, entitled The Culture of Chechnya, published in 2002, were some of the more significant steps towards giving a voice to the Chechen people. These books are not merely of academic interest. They are required reading for anyone who has been touched by the tragedy of the Chechen people. Unfortunately, however, they have been ignored by most readers and expert commentators in favor of more “objective” analysis which ignores the human face behind the war.

But, if one wishes to understand Chechens on their own terms, one must read the words in which they have articulated their dreams and sorrows. Many “experts” who ought to know better--including Tishkov himself--contend that the Chechens have no literature. I beg to differ. The poems and novels of writers such as Abuzar Aidamirov, Idris Bazorkin, Magomed Mamakaev, and Magomed Gadaev (all of them unfortunately available only in Chechen and in Russian translation) belong not just to the Chechen people but to the world. Sometimes, one must listen to the more subtle, less self-assured voices of poets, writers, and artists, to words like these, written by the Chechen poet Ismail Kerimov in his poem on the 1944 deportation, which render the suffering of the Chechen people with a clarity that reaches beyond political analysis.
I am the sky
The bloody dictator’s throne
I am glasnost
born of song
the poet’s heart
swollen with woe
stuck in the throat
the one
who says
remember.

The Chechens can be understood in their own words. We need not rely on the Russian prism.

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