Ilyas Akhmadov & Miriam Lanskoy, *The Chechen Struggle, Independence Won and Lost*
Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 288 pages

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REFERENCES


1 Ilyas Akhmadov and Miriam Lanskoy’s, *The Chechen Struggle, Independence Won and Lost* (Palgraver Macmillan 2010) is a unique insider's look at how Chechen politics have developed since the fall of the Soviet Union.

2 The book provides a truly stirring portrayal of Chechnya's evolution and internal machinations from the early 1990s to 2007, on the basis of the memoires of Ilyas Akhmadov, who was involved in the resistance movement, then in politics as Maskhadov's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Given this, Akhmadov is able to provide unique information and insights into the complexity of the beginnings of the Chechen independence movement.

3 In describing his own experiences against the backdrop of the civilian tragedies that Chechnya suffered in both post-Soviet wars, Akhmadov shares his dreams, hopes, doubts, disappointment and despair. He begins with his first contact with the military leader Shamil Basayev in the pre-war period, and ends with an analysis of the aftermath of the assassination of Aslan Maskhadov, the pro-independence President with whom he worked closely, sharing his analysis about the Caucasus Emirate.

4 His decision to use himself as a prism through which to analyze and understand the competing elements that make up Chechnya, and what the Republic has become and why,
proves felicitous. Ilyas Akhmadov clearly delineates the obstacles that the Chechens’ eagerness for independence has faced. Many of the situations he describes involving the new elites show to what extent the Soviet experience and the so-called “transition” made it nearly impossible for those elites to prepare themselves to rebuild any kind of political institution, against the backdrop of the very brutal policy led by Russia towards Chechnya. He also highlights the mistakes that some of them made, both in domestic politics and in international relations, to the extent that these existed for Chechnya.

The genuine novelty and added value of this work is undoubtedly the amount of information culled directly from within the world of Chechen politics. While the extent of the violence perpetrated by the Russian Federal Army and security forces against civilians has been well documented by several NGOs, an area that has thus far remained under-scrutinized concerns the internal conflicts and difficulties that Maskhadov faced in the interwar period from 1996 to 1999.

By bringing attention to problems and conflicts within the pro-independence Chechen elite, especially during the interwar period, Akhmadov provides insight into how the first war was launched. He explains how the war transformed Chechen society as a whole, and the consequences these transformations had on society itself and on internal politics specifically. He furnishes a wealth of details concerning the Budennovsk raid, as well as hostage-taking in the interwar period. His accounts help to understand the complexity of the situation and the manifold challenges with which the independent elites were confronted.

By and large, the most interesting narratives involve his own accounts and thoughts. The many facts he gives about the war make it clearer how certain circumstances that developed in the interwar period are very likely linked to the experience of the war, to the inability to deal with its consequences, and to the difficulty of building real, long-standing peace.

In particular, Akhmadov underscores the divisions between the former warlords who immediately challenged President Maskhadov after the first war, thereby undermining the process of state building, and Maskhadov himself, who was working toward independence amidst so many obstacles. Akhmadov also shows how many former combatants used their new-found charisma and authority as veterans to tighten the screws and enhance their own power. In one instance, as he enumerates the mistakes the independence government made, he recalls how some ministers used Islam to increase their control on society by introducing new practices and customs that were absolutely contrary to the everyday practices of most Chechens. The chapter dedicated to the crisis within Chechen society is, from this point of view, very insightful. Here he describes how trials are conducted according to Islamic law, how “any man with a beard and a uniform could consider himself a guardian of moral virtue” (page 125). Akhmadov shows that the attempt to rebuild a society which was destroyed by war has failed. As he puts it, “One of the obstacles Maskhadov faced in creating state institutions was a lack of consensus about basic values”.

Akhmadov is most moving when he discusses his experiences as a Minister of Foreign Affairs in exile, working for an unrecognized government, and the difficulties he faced in bringing first-hand accounts and information to the international community.

Ilyas Akhmadov is a man of politics. At the same time, against the backdrop of a large-scale and bloody war that claimed the lives of many thousands of innocent people, he
shares with us his deep, personal feelings, his sense of discouragement, his hopes, his thoughts on the difficulty he had in moving the international community. Now living in exile in the United States, he continues to analyze the situation he left behind and how it has developed: following Maskhadov’s assassination, the national resistance has gradually been replaced by the Caucasus Emirate, whereas the real power in Chechnya is held by Ramzan Kadyrov, the son of Akhmad Khadzhi Kadyrov, who had been hand-picked by Moscow in 2000 to lead the Republic, becoming President in 2003 and killed in 2004.

Akhmadov reflects upon Moscow’s dealings with Chechnya and comes back to a question that brings the evolution of the Russian regime to the fore: “Why couldn’t Putin do the same in Nord Ost in 2002 or Beslan in 2004 as Chernomyrdin had done in Budennovsk in 1995?” By asking the question, he makes it clear that the period during which Russian authorities took the Chechen pro-independence elites seriously, was a very small time slot. Akhmadov’s description of the emergency government meeting following Basayev and Khattab’s invasion of Dagestan is especially riveting, for it is here that the mufti Ahmad Kadyrov announces that he has gone over to the other side, making clear that Moscow’s political dealings with Chechnya remain, in essence, colonial.

These important details and insights into the political machinations of Russian-Chechen relations, and especially inside the Chechen independence movement make this book an invaluable resource for students of contemporary Russia, the North Caucasus, and war and peace studies, providing a springboard for further analysis of the Chechen wars and Chechen society at large.

Throughout the book, Akhmadov demonstrates his clear-sightedness regarding both his own experiences and the evolution of post-Soviet Chechnya. He provides a nuanced analysis of the different reasons that have prevented Chechnya from building independence and from establishing a lasting peace, reasons which range from the international community’s reactions and to Russian policies on the one hand, to the competing forces among Chechens on the other. Akhmadov’s brilliant collaborative work with Myriam Lanskyo deserves utmost consideration, and indeed, would greatly profit from one day being published in Russian, so as to spur reflection in Russia and Chechnya on those questions.

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