Forgetting Chechnya[1]

Review of

Irena Brežná. 2016. ***Vlčice zo Sernovodska: Zápisky z rusko-čečenskej vojny*** [She-Wolves from Sernovodsk: Notes from the Russo-Chechen War] [translated from the German into Slovak by Jan Mattuš] (Ser: Prekliati reportéri). Krásno nad Kysucou: Absynt. 168pp, ISBN: 9788089845675, €10.99.

and

Polina Zherebtsova. 2014. ***Муравей в стеклянной банке. Чеченские дневники 1994—2004 гг*** Muravei v steklannoi banke. Chechenskie dnevniki 1994-2004 gg. [Ant in a Glass Jar: Chechen Diaries, 1994–2004] (Ser: Corpus, Vol 271). Moscow: Izdatel'stvo AST. 604pp, ISBN: 9785170836536, RUB680.

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Who remembers Chechnya now? Who cares? When the first post-Soviet Russo-Chechen War raged between 1994 and 1996, the world's public opinion usually saw Chechen guerillas as freedom fighters. Less than three years before the outbreak of this conflict the Soviet Union had broken up and its union republics were transformed into or recreated as ethnolinguistically defined independent nation-states. Meanwhile, within the Russian Federation most of its autonomous republics and regions declared and demanded recognition of their sovereignty at the turn of the 1990s. This heady period became known as a 'festival of independence.' Tatarstan is still hailed (though without much substance to this end) as the most independent out of all Russia's autonomous republics, but none dared to declare independence. That is, none but Chechnya. In 1991 an independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (Nóxçiyn Paçẋalq Içkeri in Chechen) was founded, leading to the split of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In the Chechen Republic, Cyrillic was replaced by Latin letters for writing the Chechen language in emulation of the Turkish example. The Ingushes cautiously decided that their autonomous Republic of Ingushetia should remain in Russia. They were right. In the wake of what the incumbent Russian President Vladimir Putin sees as 'the greatest geopolitical tragedy' of the 20th century (that is, the breakup of the SU), the Kremlin de facto steeled itself not to let a single piece of territory leave the boundaries of what had been the SU's largest union republic, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, which in turn yielded the post-Soviet polity of the Russian Federation. This approach became the proverbial 'red thin line' one would not be allowed to cross; the post-Soviet Russian government would not tolerate the independence of Chechnya. The fatigue of the disastrous Soviet-Afghanistan War (1979-1989) not yet over, as vividly chronicled by the 2015 Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich in her *Boys in Zinc* (1991), a new catastrophe struck both Chechnya's civilian population and families across Russia as their sons were conscripted to the army for compulsory military service and then sent to kill and die in another neocolonial war.

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[1] I warmly thank Catherine Gibson for her invaluable suggestions for improvement. Obviously I am alone responsible for any remaining infelicities.

Urban warfare conducted with tanks, helicopters and bombers (akin to what is now observed in Syria) engendered a wave of over half a million of refugees from the republic’s population of just a million. The deaths of numerous civilians and conscripts, ‘cleansing operations’ (*zachistka*), ‘filtration camps’ (*fil'tratsionnyi lager'*), and wanton destruction appalled public opinion in Russia and internationally. The Russian government was criticized en masse by the western world and - now a rare sight - by Russian citizens. Apart from turning into a military stalemate, this conflict was an awful public image disaster for the faltering Boris Yeltsin administration. The successful 1996 assassination of Ichekria’s first President and the only Red Army general of Chechen extraction, Dzhokhar Dudayev (Dƶoxar Dudin), did not help. In his honor the defiant Chechens renamed their capital of Grozny as Dƶovxar-Ġala, or the City of Dzhokhar. It was high time to try something else. The Kremlin called upon services of the charismatic anti-establishment Soviet-Afghan war veteran, General Alexander Lebed, who had already proved his credentials by achieving a much needed truce in the Transnistrian War (instigated by Russia against Moldova) that limited the final toll to a thousand casualties. Chechen fighters placed great trust in a former fellow Red Army soldier than apparatchiks-turned-democrats in distant Moscow. In the summer of 1996 Lebed negotiated an agreement with Ichkeria’s new President Aslan Maskhadov effectively ending the war. The following year Yeltsin and Maskhadov formally signed this agreement at Moscow. To a degree, the Russian government recognized the independence of Ichkeria and promised to end the use of violence associated with the on-and-off Russo-Chechen conflict fought for over three centuries. A new opening for better, equitable and – most importantly – peaceful relations between the Chechens and Russia was a clear possibility.

Meanwhile, Chechen refugees were accepted and given asylum across Europe, including in numerous post-communist and post-Soviet states. Streets and squares were named across these countries in honor of Dudayev, and numerous plaques and monuments were erected to his memory and to the bravery of Chechen independence fighters. It appeared that a stable peace had been achieved in Ichkeria and this newly independent postcolonial state would gradually gain internationally recognized independence. But two years later, in 1999, rogue Chechen forces invaded the neighboring autonomous Republic of Dagestan. Russia replied with full military might, facilitated by the rapid growth of the oil price, which began in this year and continued unabated for the entire decade. In her diary, Polina Zherebtsova saw the retributive shelling of Dzhokhar (Grozny) as another, that is, ‘second’ Russo-Chechen War. However, these events hardly registered on the radar of world public opinion. On the other hand, the further forays of rogue Chechen forces outside Chechnya, bent on bringing the war to Russia, convinced many international commentators that Chechen fighters were none other than feared ‘Islamist terrorists.’ This change in the outside perception of the Chechen military from ‘freedom fighters’ to ‘terrorists’ was sealed by Al-Qaeda’s 2001 attack on the US and the 2004 school siege conducted by rogue Chechen fighters in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, which cost over 300 children their lives. The former event triggered

Washington’s ‘war on terror’ in Afghanistan and Iraq, while the latter turned even Russia’s few remaining liberals against the Chechens and their cause.

Paradoxically, the 1999 Dagestan raid played into the Kremlin’s hands. First, it allowed the Russian government to nullify the 1997 Russo-Chechen peace treaty, which some considered a ‘humiliation’ for resurgent Russia. Second, this raid facilitated the transition of power from ailing Yeltsin to the largely unknown and uncharismatic former KGB officer, Vladimir Putin. In August 1999 President Yeltsin nominated Putin as his Prime Minister. In addition, the latter’s legitimacy as a potential contender for Russian presidency was given a boost when Putin oversaw the inconclusive investigation of the bombings of apartment blocks that killed almost 300 people later that year in Buynaksk, Moscow and Volgodonsk. Conveniently, Chechen ‘terrorists’ were accused of planting the explosives, so Prime Minister Putin could have a ‘reason’ to order yet more aerial bombing raids on Dzhokhar (Grozny). However, some allege that it was the Russian security forces, the FSB (the KGB’s successor), who actually staged these attacks. The perpetrators remain unknown to this day. A rapid swell in popularity allowed Putin to win the presidential election in 2000. General Lebed who had quite successfully participated in the earlier presidential election of 1996 must have been strongly warned to step aside. He contented himself with the then still elected position of the Governor of Krasnoiarsk Krai.

Meanwhile, Russian aerial bombing attacks on Chechnya led to the outbreak of another conflict that officially became known as the Second Russo-Chechen War (though to Zherebtsova’s keen observing eye it was already the third war she had experienced in her home city). It was destined to be even more violent, intensive and protracted than the first one. In Ichkeria a kind of dual administration set in. Moscow controlled the urbanized parts of Chechnya, while the Chechen government and fighters ruled supreme in the mountains and hard-to-reach mountain villages. Enthusiasm for this war waned quickly in Russia when more zinc coffins came back to Moscow with corpses of eighteen-year-old conscripts. Accordingly, Putin’s popularity began to dip in the polls. The charismatic Lebed again offered his services, but died in 2002 in a helicopter crash (or was it assassination?). Ichkeria’s governmental institutions de facto ceased operating in 2000. The country’s government went into exile and was discontinued in 2007 when the last Ichkerian president proclaimed a Caucasus Emirate, with Ichkeria as its province. Meanwhile, the west had fully embraced Putin as a ‘fellow democrat and trusted ally’ in the Washington-led ‘war on terror.’ The radicalization of some segments of the Chechen forces who turned to Al-Qaeda and its form of militant Islam seemed to prove that the west was right in striking such a ‘working coalition’ with Putin’s Russia.

In 2005 the FSB assassinated the moderate Ichkerian President Maskhadov, pushing control over the Chechen fighters into the hands of increasingly more radical commanders, often epitomized by the iconic Shamil Basayev. FSB officers assassinated him a year later. Symptomatically, also in 2006, the investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya was assassinated when entering the elevator in the apartment block where she lived in Moscow. To this days the murderers have not been identified. Politkovskaya was an increasingly lone voice of liberal Russia, criticizing the sheer violence and brutality of Russia’s home-made ‘war on terror’ in Chechnya, in which every Chechen man, woman and child were treated as ‘terrorists.’ Her two books on this subject – *A Dirty War* (2001) and *A Small Corner of Hell* (2003) – were a timely reminder about what democracy and human rights should be about, and what demons their absence may spawn. But the wave of ‘the accepted narrative’ turned. The west preferred not to see or hear what was going on in Chechnya, while Russia’s population enjoyed the golden decade of high oil prices that boosted standards of living and the government’s popularity ratings. Yeltsin died in 2007, leaving Putin in charge of Russia as the country’s undisputed leader. After the 2009 winding down of the wide-scale military operations in Chechnya, the war was declared over. The first President of the pro-Russian Chechen Republic, Akhmad Kadyrov, installed by Moscow in 2003, was assassinated a year later. Putin could not automatically make Kadyrov’s son, Ramzan, into another Chechen president because he was not yet 30, the legal age threshold for assuming this office. But Kadyrov junior was eased into the republic’s positions of power in quick succession as Deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister of Chechnya, before assuming the post of the republic’s President in 2007. In this way, thanks to the well-established loyal Kadyrov dynasty, the Kremlin could at long last be rid of having to be directly involved in exercising the Weberian monopoly of power for the sake of keeping uneasy stability in the restive republic. In turn, Kadyrov’s battle-hardened Chechen bodyguards and the republic’s security forces (known collectively as *kadyrovtsy*) could be deployed elsewhere in Russia when it was necessary to teach ‘unruly inhabitants’ a lesson, or when a ‘disloyal individual’ had to be liquidated. Simultaneously, non-transparent transfers of huge financial outlays for the reconstruction of Chechnya spawned a secretive kleptocratic system of kick-backs that enriched Kadyrov and his loyalists, alongside his Kremlin superiors. Grozny, formerly reduced to rubble, was quickly rebuilt as a pro-Russian city, its character strangely defined through a blend of state-approved Islam and postmodern buildings. The old Soviet homely multicultural and somewhat shoddy Grozny and the ruins of Dzhokhar were gone.

The Chechen War now over, who is there – apart from families – to shed a tear or remember the 200,000 to 300,000 casualties out of the republic’s total population of 1 million? The west continued to turn a blind eye to the unpalatable genocidal-like reality of the Chechen conflict and its aftermath until the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and even till 2014, when Putin’s Russia attacked annexed Ukraine’s Crimea. This time the resurgent Russian Federation crossed a thin red line, breaching one of the foundational principles of peace and stability in postwar Europe as enshrined in the 1975 Helsinki Accords, namely, the inviolability of the existing European borders. To add insult to injury, the Kremlin also seized Ukraine’s eastern provinces and from this base keeps waging war on this country. For a while, the west was appalled, but the occupation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine were quickly forgotten, when in another rapid move on the geopolitical chessboard, Russia intervened in 2016 in the stalemated Syrian Civil War, decisively tipping the balance in favor of the Assad regime. In Britain television news bulletins have not failed to mention the Syrian War and Russia’s involvement almost every day for the last two years. To the contrary, the continuing Russo-Ukrainian War and the Russian occupation of Crimea are *rarely* mentioned, while the Chechen Wars and their aftermath *never* make it to the news. Ukraine and Chechnya seem to lie farther away from Britain than Syria. But in reality the distance, as the crow flies, from London to Damascus is 3,500 kilometers, while only 2,500 kilometers between the

British capital and Crimea, 2,700 kilometers between it and the Russian-occupied eastern Ukraine, or 3,000 kilometers between London and Chechnya.

Polina Zherebtsova's childhood-cum-adolescence diary and Irena Brežná's collection of reportages offer a stark insight from the all too rarely evoked female perspective into the grassroots realities of both Chechen wars and their aftermath. They reflect on the sheer human cost of geopolitical decisions and power calculations conducted in distant capitals, with little or no respect for the lives of civilians, or for that matter of soldiers and fighters, either. The successful transfer of power in Russia took precedence over such trifle considerations. The west conceded as long as Russia was needed as a trusted partner in the 'war on terror,' and only started crying wolf , rather quietly,after 2014. Cheap Russian oil and gas stifle it well. In the west's eyes, the war in Syria seems to be of more import on account of the country's proximity to the Middle Eastern seams of oil and to Israel. Somehow, the ongoing Brexit negotiations make the British elite forgetful of the fact that the European Union borders both on Ukraine and Russia, *not* on Syria or Israel. Symptomatically, both books under review were published in German, French, or Czech, but *not* in English. (Furthermore, *She-Wolves from Sernovodsk* also appeared in Italian and Slovak editions, while *Ant in a Glass Jar* was published in Bulgarian, Finnish, Latvian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian too.) Thus far, neither of these two titles has had a chance to make a dent in the absent memory of the two Chechen wars and their victims, a forgetfulness that is especially pronounced in the Anglophone world. Somehow, readers and publishers prefer the male fighter's point of view as evidenced by the 2013 bestselling volume, Mikail Eldin's *The Sky Wept Fire: My Life as a Chechen Freedom Fighter*, that ironically was translated from the Russian, though never published in Russia. In 2017 Chechnya briefly returned to the news when Kadyrov ordered a crackdown on gays in, literally, *his* republic, because in the Islamic nation of Chechens 'homosexuality did not, does not and cannot exist.'

Unsurprisingly, postwar Chechnya is characterized by heightened patriarchalism. These are the real-life *gendered* effects of both wars, as Brežná acutely observes in her book's closing reportage from 2012 (she added more recent material to the Slovak-language version of the 1997 German edition of this volume.) Present-day Chechen society is male-centered, ritualized displays of physical prowess need to be accompanied by arms and, ideally, one should be a member of the Chechen police, army or security forces. Other forms of gainful employment are scarce in the republic. What remains for others is to move to Moscow or anther Russian city for work, despite the fact that they are often face there much racist discrimination and exploitation, and are offensively dubbed bu ethnic Russian racists as 'black-assed Caucasians' (*kavkazskiie chornozhoptsy*). In a deftly legitimizing bow to traditional Islam, many women in Chechnya wear the Islamic headscarf or even the veil, and tend to keep to designed female-only spaces, as required by this religion. It is a far cry from the equality of genders as promoted and actually implemented during the Soviet times. This equality was even exacerbated in the course of the war when women could and did enter many places that became no-go areas to Chechen males, by default suspected of being enemy fighters. It was Chechen women who pleaded with Russian officers for the lives of their menfolk. Women travelled unaccompanied across the length and breadth of Ichkeria and Russia in search of their sons and husbands incarcerated in black prisons or concentration ('filtration') camps.

Alternatively, when the latter turned out to be already dead, some Chechen women, in despair, took revenge on Russians, by turning themselves into suicide bombers. They became known in the western press as 'black widows,' carrying out attacks mainly between 2000 and 2013.

Irena Brežná is a renowned Swiss journalist of Slovak origin who covered the Chechen Wars for the German-speaking press, including the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. She is finely attuned to the fate of refugees and emigrants, as her family fled Czechoslovakia in the wake of the Prague Spring in 1968 when the Warsaw Pact's intervention was already under way. Thanks to her fluency in Slovak and Czech, Brežná faced no problems with acquiring Russian, which was a compulsory school subject in communist Czechoslovakia. In Switzerland she graduated from the University of Basel in Slavic studies, psychology and philosophy. This personal and educational background equipped her for the career of a translator and psychologist working mainly with refugees. Brežná has also been active in Amnesty International and, as a convinced feminist, led women-empowering projects in Guinea, Chechnya and some postcommunist countries. Not surprisingly, her perfectly crafted sparse prose borders on poetic and allows Brežná to effectively convey the tragedy of war as observed through a woman's eyes. As much as her skills allowed her to cross the previously iron-clad boundaries between a variety of professional careers, academic jobs, or languages, these also let her see more than met the typically male war correspondent's gaze. Brežná moved further and deeper than Politkovskaya in probing the realities of the Chechen wars. Rather than to stun security personnel with her audacity, as the latter did, Brežná chose to blend in, strove to fall under the FSB's radar. For the purpose of participatory observation she joined a group of Chechen women and saw for herself what Russian troops did. In the opening reportage, after the spa village of Sernovodsk (on the Ingush border) was 'cleansed' of fighters following a week-long siege, the locality's women, with Brežná disguised as one of them, were permitted to re-enter their houses in order to salvage some movable property. What they (and Brežná) saw was wanton destruction: crockery and furniture broken, living rooms defiled, food spoiled, livestock killed or wounded and left to putrefy, clothes slit and trodden into the slush, a copy of the Quran thrown into a muddy yard.

Contrary to official declarations on the radio, television or in the leaflets scattered from airplanes, the federal soldiers did not protect or respect peaceful civilian populations. As vividly evidenced by Zherebtsova's diary, irrespective of their actual intentions or ethnic background, *all* Grozny inhabitants were treated as potential enemy combatants, from children to the elderly. Girls and women often suffered sexual violence. Likewise, everyone's property was loot to which Russian soldiers readily helped themselves, often because they lacked essentials; superiors commonly misappropriated conscripts' pay and sold their food and armaments on the black market. Chechen fighters bought such supplies at highly reduced prices, so the war could continue unabated. Arguably, fate dealt the worst hand to city dwellers, where bombings, mortar fire and tanks killed them indiscriminately on an industrial scale. Neither civilian status nor a non-Chechen ethnicity was of import. Soldiers did not check any IDs, but shot first, fearful lest Chechen fighters might get them. The Russian army learned and perfected methods of modern urban warfare in densely populated areas during these two Chechen wars. Now the Kremlin shares this expertise with Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

Nevertheless in Grozny, under Russian siege for months during the first war and for years during the second, life continued. Those without money or relatives elsewhere in Russia had no other choice but to stay. Bus convoys with refugees leaving the city were frequently attacked both by federal troops and Chechen fighters. To civilians it was another proof that paradoxically, it might be safer to remain in this city under fire than try to leave as refugees. Incredibly, Polina Zherebtsova lived under these near-lethal conditions through both the Chechen wars. When the first war broke out in 1994 she was just nine and decided to write a diary, perhaps, in order to deal with this everyday trauma. She continued her diary for a decade through 2004 when the second war was largely over and Ramzan Kadyrov commenced the process of taking over the republic after the assassination of his father. At over 600 densely printed pages, Zherebtsova left a haunting document. She is the Anna Frank of Russia's genocidal-like war on Chechnya. All who want to know can now see through her child's and teenager's eyes how unprecedentedly brutal this warfare was, sparing no one, not even children. First power and water went. Electric lighting was replaced with candles and makeshift kerosene lamps, a frequent cause of devastating fires. Water had to be hoisted from the remaining few public pumps and later into the war cistern trucks brought it from the nearby lakes and rivers. One had to pay for this hardly potable muddy liquid mixed with weeds and sand. Gastric ailments and epidemics plagued the city's population. Then hunger struck. Those without money or family connections in the countryside, like Polina and her mother, never had enough to eat. Malnutrition lasting for years on end became a new norm, in extreme cases leading to death by starvation.

During the first war, Polina's sick grandfather Anatolii, a bibliophile and cinema projectionist, died in a hospital destroyed by shelling. The second war literally razed the apartment block where she used to live with her mother, and almost killed Polina herself when a shell landed in the open-air market where she sold books at a stall for a living. Killing became casual and abandoned corpses were left to putrefy in most unlikely places. Zherebtsova's family is multiethnic, but her surname is Russian-sounding, so when she was attending elementary school during and after the first war, Chechen children gave her hard time. Prejudice against ethnic Russians was at its highest then and 'kill Russians' became a new oft-uttered curse and threat. The war polarized Grozny's inhabitants into Chechens who bravely defended their land and lives and Russian 'infidel attackers.' Whenever non-Chechens could they left the city or were hounded by Chechen neighbors to leave. Vacated apartments were readily stolen or bought for a pittance from scared Russians and other non-Muslims. Those who stayed put were often killed. Russians and other non-Chechens who left Grozny were promptly replaced with Chechens fleeing rural poverty or indiscriminate 'cleansing' operations carried out by federal troops. The city's population plummeted by 60 percent from 400,000 in 1991 to 186,000 in 1996, and after the postwar decade lamely bounced back to a mere 290,000 in 2017. Nowadays, ethnic Chechens account for almost 94 per cent of the inhabitants, though in 1989 they amounted to 30 percent, while ethnic Russians constituted 53 percent of Grozny's prewar population.

Non-Chechens or children from ethnically mixed families, like Polina, who remained in the city had to polish their command of the Chechen language to blend in. For this purpose they also needed to start practising some Chechen customs, especially those dictated by Islam in relation to headscarves and long frocks for girls and women. The prewar tradition of forming friendships and cohesive neighborhoods with no regard for one's ethnic background came handy. Most of Grozny's inhabitants were polyglot and multicultural, skilled at switching between an array of languages and customs when a need or circumstance dictated. Unfortunately, one's name or surname could be an immediate give-away, even when it masked one's true ethnic loyalty. War is black and white. Combatants do not need any complications when a bomb must be dropped or the trigger pulled. In the midst of this madness of warfare and ongoing ethnic cleansing, Polina persevered in attending school, buoyed by her diary, love of literature and books, both in Russian and Chechen. When her girlfriends as young as 13 or 14 were married off, in line with the rural Chechen tradition, she stuck to education, despite other teenagers' scorn for her 'stupidity.' And much to her mother's chagrin, because a young Chechen husband could better provide for her in this horrific situation. Zherebtsova evaded numerous attempts at forced elopement and marriage, continued to attend her elementary and secondary schools, worked on the market and as a nanny, and finally graduated with flying colors from the Chechen State Pedagogical Institute in 2004. During her university years Zherebtsova began publishing stories and poems, and worked as a journalist in local newspapers. Finally, in 2005, after having secured a pittance of a compensation for their destroyed apartment, she could leave with her mum for the relative safety of Stavropol, just north of Chechnya. In this Russian city Zherebtsova enrolled at the North Caucasus Federal University and graduated with a degree in psychology. Quite tellingly, in this respect her educational background overlaps with Irena Brežná's.

The publication of Polina Zherebtsova's diary is a unique must-read first-hand witness account of the Russo-Chechen wars. It is also a proof of a certain respect for the freedom of speech in Russia's managed illiberal democracy, though it does not extend to protecting controversial books' authors, as amply evidenced by the assassination of Politkovskaya. Facing repeated death threats from 'Russian patriots' because of the war crimes she described in her diary and for being an outspoken of current Russian politics, in 2012 Zherebtsova had to flee to Finland, where she was granted asylum a year later. In 2017, Zherebtsova obtained Finnish citizenship and continues writing stories inspired by her tragic childhood and coming of age in war-torn Grozny. The fact that her safety could not be ensured in Russia is a clear proof of the final disappearance of the country's liberals as a political force, however slim. For whatever one may want to criticize President Putin, the wide consensus in today's Russia is that he was right to annex 'Russian' Crimea. In 2015 Zherebtsova crossed this new thin red line when in an interview given to Radio Liberty she criticized the seizure of Crimea that breached international law and Russia's present-day war on Ukraine. There is no return for her to Russia. This child victim of the two Russo-Chechen wars (so utterly forgotten in the west) became just another enemy of the Kremlin in its continuing 'war on terror,' and now additionally against 'Ukrainian fascism.' What counts is not facts, human rights, the rule of law, or decency, but solely the narrative that successfully boosts and maintains the legitimacy of the powers that be.

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