

Emil Souleimanov, *An Endless War: The Russian–Chechen Conflict in Perspective*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006, 266 pp., £26.00 p/b.

The Chechen conflict has grabbed many headlines in recent years, and a series of works have already been published trying to analyse, critically assess, predict and even resolve it. This latest study by Souleimanov positions itself alongside other more recent publications by Moshe Gammer and John Russell. It provides an overview of Russo–Chechen relations in the last few hundred years, coupled with a close analysis of the most recent events, especially the resumption of hostilities in 1999 and the subsequent official Russian policy of ‘normalisation’.

The focus of the work provides insights on a wide-range of issues, including the cultural tradition of revenge in Chechen society, the political events leading to the two recent conflicts in 1994 and 1999, and the role played by Chechnya in President Putin’s regime-building strategy since 1999. This breadth of analysis makes this a welcome addition to other studies on this subject. The study begins by laying out the political and socio-cultural background of the region and its people, while simultaneously trying to position Chechnya first within the Russian empire, and later the Soviet Union. Souleimanov suggests that even in the eighteenth century, at the time of the Great Caucasian war, the Chechens’ resistance to the imposition of the Russian state in their region was primarily a response to the brutalising tactics of the Russian army, rather than a result of their religious or ethnic identity.

While some of these issues have already been covered by other works, Souleimanov’s succinct and comprehensive account offers a valuable overview of the key events in the complex and often bloody relationship between Russia and Chechnya. For a specialist reader, the early part of the book provides interesting and well-researched insights into often overlooked parts of Chechen culture, such as the tradition of honour, the position of women in Chechen society, the Chechen sense of humour, the effect of the Sovietisation programmes on Chechen society, and the factors behind the emergence of the Chechen mafia in the 1980s. The middle section of this work examines the sequence of events following the Chechen declaration of independence in 1991, leading to the deployment of Russian federal troops to restore constitutional order, and the de facto independence of Chechnya during the ceasefire period 1996–1999. Its analysis broadens beyond the usual focus on the military operations during 1994–1996, and provides a colourful and intricate analysis of the shifting psychological, socio-economic and cultural dynamics of Chechen identity, resulting in the ‘ideologisation of Chechnya’ at this time (p. 129).

It is, however, the last few chapters which provide the most interesting section of this study. The often under-explored and most recent parts of the Russo–Chechen relationship are analysed, such as the re-launch of the Russo–Chechen conflict in 1999, the subsequent policy of normalisation and its effects on the socio-economic and, most importantly, cultural situation in Chechnya. The nature of the ongoing resistance, as well as the impact of the Chechen war on Russian society, is also touched on. For example, Souleimanov suggests that *sachistiki* (raids by 872 REVEWS military operatives) were an integral part of Russian tactics in Chechnya because the second conflict was ‘planned and waged as retaliation’ (p. 173). To highlight the severity of the problems with regards to societal security in Chechnya during the initial stages of the second conflict, extensive use is made of reports from human rights organisations who are working on the ground. There are also detailed accounts of the different militia and military groups, their structures and affiliations, providing a lot of hard to find information for anyone who wants to better understand the different forces currently at play in Chechnya. It seems that Russia’s successful trick to pacify Chechnya has in fact led to the dwindling of its control over the region and has failed to establish a functioning state. In a twist of irony, if the aim of this policy was,

as Souleimanov notes in a streak of dark humour, to 'sow the seeds of hatred between Chechens then the task has been accomplished' (p. 214), and past feelings of revenge may re-emerge in the future.

Although, credit is given to the recent efforts of the Chechen authorities to revive the socio-economic situation, he suggests that this has been achieved through fear rather than reconciliation. Despite the significant successes of the new Chechen regime of President Ramzan Kadyrov in suppressing the remnants of Chechen resistance, more secretive pockets of resistance remain. This new form of resistance is now individual and apolitical, reflecting the cultural shifts within Chechnya. Individual modes of revenge, centred on various Islamic teachings and small groupings have spread throughout the North Caucasus, and have replaced the previous largescale, separatist and organised campaigns against the federal and regional authorities. In his conclusion Souleimanov characterises the aim of such groups to be 'the hope that terrorist propaganda through action committed by these military groups, leading to (none too discriminate) reprisals by the regime will attract more and more recruits to the resistance' (p. 301). The final chapter considers the effects of the Chechen war on Russian society, which will be fascinating for anyone interested in contemporary Russia in general. It explores the rise in xenophobia, the development of a Chechen syndrome following the return of Russian military personnel from the region and increasing spy mania within Russia, all of which highlights the detrimental effect this conflict has had, not only inside, but also outside Chechnya. To conclude,

Souleimanov's book is a very succinct and up to date account of Chechnya's turbulent relationship with Russia. Despite covering a lot of the same ground as previous works, it offers an incisive, interesting and broad account for anyone not familiar with this subject. For an expert, this book provides very detailed and original insights into some of the neglected cultural aspects of Chechen society, such as the themes of revenge and the link between Islam and resistance to occupation. It brings this subject right up to date—and more importantly shows ways in which the Chechen problem has more recently spread to certain parts of the North Caucasus and has also had a very detrimental effect on Russia in general. In the end one cannot but agree with Souleimanov's succinct, yet devastating conclusion that Chechnya has become the Putin regime's 'military and political laboratory' (p. 303).