Catastrophic Playground

Stephen Kotkin

*A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya* by Anna Politkovskaya, translated by John Crowfoot
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*Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus* by Svante Cornell

Afghanistan emerged as an independent kingdom in the 18th century, though its frontiers would change many times and it would always be more a confederation of tribes and lesser khanates than a centralised state. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, determined to halt Russia’s Inner Asian advance and ‘secure’ its own North Indian frontier, Britain fought three wars with the Afghans. It failed to subdue them but acquired substantial influence over Afghan foreign relations. Britain also sought to counter Russia by colonising oil-rich Iran, a far greater prize, but achieved only limited success; and after the Second World War, the United States replaced it as the ‘barrier’ to Moscow’s penetration of Iran. Following Britain’s departure from the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the Soviets became Afghanistan’s principal source of military hardware and economic aid, building hospitals and hydroelectric dams as well as military airfields and a strategic tunnel. In the mid-1960s, an Afghan Leninist party appeared – surely one of the last to be founded anywhere – and in 1978 it stunned Moscow by seizing power in Kabul. The senescent Soviet establishment recognised the frail revolutionary regime it had not created and did not control, but after unsanctioned assassinations and uprisings, the Kremlin faced increasing instability in a country on its border and became paranoid about the possibility of American penetration. Late in 1979 – the year the Islamic Revolution in Iran toppled the Shah, whom the CIA had returned to power in a nearly bungled coup in 1953 – the KGB engineered a putsch among Afghanistan’s Leninist gangsters. It was backed by an expeditionary force that was intended to stay a few
months or perhaps a year, two at the most. Nearly a decade went by before the remnants of this force withdrew ignominiously across the Friendship Bridge to Soviet Tajikistan. Just over two years later, the Soviet state itself dissolved.

Tajikistan descended into civil war after 1991, a blowback from the conflict across the Hindu Kush, compounded by a struggle to preserve local Soviet-era structures; and the war in Afghanistan began to loom large in explanations for the Soviet collapse. But as Mark Galeotti points out in *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War* (1995), the Soviet Union did not lose the war; in some ways, it did not even fight it. While the US sent some 550,000 troops to Vietnam, the USSR never had more than about 120,000 in a country five times Vietnam’s size. Soviet deployment in Afghanistan involved a mere fiftieth of the Kremlin’s total Armed Forces of 5.3 million. Only 40 per cent of the Soviet troops took part in combat and fewer than 15,000 soldiers died during the ten years of war – compared with between 35,000 and 65,000 servicemen who died at home in circumstances ranging from suicide to hazing. Indeed, more than five times as many people in Brezhnev’s Soviet Union died in car accidents each year than in battle during the entire Afghan campaign. The war accounted for less than 2 per cent of the annual defence budget, and its total cost over the whole decade amounted to a single year’s subsidy for Soviet agriculture (a war of another kind). With statistics such as these Galeotti makes the point that for the Soviet Union, Afghanistan was a ‘small war’, a political vehicle for some, a misfortune for most, and ultimately ‘just another symbol of the system’s failure, to rank alongside Chernobyl, empty shops and mafia millionaires’. He explodes the myth about the total narcoticisation of the rank and file (only a small minority succumbed to drug addiction). Emphasising the political corruption that allowed the privileged and the well-connected to escape war duty – ‘Life is a book,’ the Russian proverb goes, ‘and the Army is two pages torn out of it’ – Galeotti directs his anger at the Soviet regime for concealing the basic facts of the conflict even from those press-ganged into battle.

Untranslated KGB memoirs show that the authorities were victims of their own falsehoods. In *Ruka moskvy* (1992), Leonid Shebarshin, one of the KGB’s top experts on Inner Asia, reports that after the 1978 Communist coup no one in Moscow could obtain accurate information about Afghanistan, and Yuri Andropov, head of the KGB, found himself compelled to make secret visits to Kabul to gather intelligence. Nikolai Leonov, the chief KGB analyst, was able to observe for himself, in Afghanistan, the lies that were being told in official telegrams and reports to the Politburo, and in *Likholetye* (1995) he shows how the myriad Soviet agencies clashed with each other, producing a vacuum of responsibility which was exploited by their Afghan clients, who also lied continuously. Many Soviets, he adds, referred to Afghanistan as ‘(Af)gavnistan’ (Af-shit-stan).
For the people of Afghanistan the Soviet intervention turned out to be something more than a showcase for imperial degradation. An estimated 1.3 million Afghans were killed – a hundred deaths for every Soviet death. A similar number were maimed. About five million Afghans – a third of the pre-1979 population – were driven into refugee camps in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. Several million more were displaced within Afghanistan, often many times. How could a war waged with such a limited force in so vast a country have caused so much destruction? The answer can be found in *The Bear Went over the Mountain*, a translation of a Russian technical military assessment intended for internal consumption, with commentary by Lester Grau, a retired US Army officer. Grau highlights the technique of indiscriminate ‘sweeps’ conducted by the Soviets over areas suspected of harbouring Mujahidin. Most sweeps began with massive artillery barrages – which, by raining down on civilians, became unwitting recruiting agents for the rebels. When Mujahidin resistance materialised, Soviet troops did not grind on, losing large numbers of troops, as they had in the Second World War, but instead called in helicopter gunships to launch further indiscriminate attacks. In other words, massive firepower was substituted for close combat. This was done not because the officers cared for their men – far from it – but because they often had little choice, since untrained, underfed, disease-ridden conscripts were reluctant to ‘close’ with well-armed fighters on their native terrain (though the prowess of the Mujahidin was wildly exaggerated). Less clear both from the manual and from Grau’s spartan commentary is that Afghanistan underwent its own civil war, and that the fractious Mujahidin received billions of dollars of lethal weaponry and other support from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan and the US. Everyone was involved in ravaging the country and its population, and in that they all enjoyed spectacular success. Afghanistan was not – as the mythology has it – a graveyard of empires, but rather a catastrophic playground for foreign meddlers (and a graveyard all the same).

Along Eurasia’s rocky spine, then, the Cold War was the Great Game squared, equally unscrupulous but prosecuted with deadlier armaments and graver consequences. Briefly outliving the Soviet regime, the Afghan ‘Communist’ dictatorship, which had plenty of collaborators in profitable sinecures (not unlike today’s top-heavy Pakistan military regime), gave way in 1992 to the Mujahidin, lifetime warriors with a broad base of support, who promptly turned their vicious turf battles into reciprocal massacres. The Soviet war seemed to unite Afghanistan in opposition but from the start it in fact promoted an even deeper sense of ethnic consciousness, a greater divide between Afghan ‘Turkestan’ in the North and the Pashtun Pakistani-leaning South. It encouraged an extremist Islamism, and an equally extreme warlordism in lieu of government. Washington made its own generous contribution. Rather than endorse Gorbachev’s efforts to forge a coalition government and deny all sides
Stephen Kotkin reviews ‘A Dirty War’ by Anna Politkovskaya, translated by John Crowfoot and ‘Small …

an illusory ‘victory’, Reagan and then Bush, with Pakistani connivance, ratcheted up support for the most murderous of the self-styled radical Islamists, to ensure that Moscow bled profusely and its Kabul ‘puppet’ suffered total defeat. In doing so, the US flouted not only its own self-interest (regional stability) but also the Geneva Accords which it had signed in 1988. Why, once a Soviet withdrawal was on offer and had even begun, Washington energetically promoted Islamist violence in Afghanistan, at the same time as spending a second fortune on combating Islamism in Iran – by arming Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, for example – remains just one of the many mysterious actions of a superpower bereft of a comprehensive, long-term Middle East policy. Now, the US appears to be cosying up to the Central Asian tyrannies – variants of the Soviet-style regime it worked to overthrow in Afghanistan – and to Moscow. As for the disintegrating Taliban, they are the offspring of lethal Soviet blundering, American malice, two-faced Saudi finance, Pakistani so-called Intelligence, and popular Arab frustration and finger-pointing, as well as a surfeit of Kalashnikovs, land-mines, heroin cultivation, illiteracy, anarchy and Muslim piety.

The Russian/British/American Great Game has been played less energetically to the west of the Caspian but this may change, just as the calculations east of the Caspian are shifting again today. Parallels between Chechnya and Afghanistan are much drawn these days, both in Kremlin security circles and in the mountain redoubts of the south Caucasus – converging views, coming from diametrically opposed positions. Commanded by men who cut their teeth in Afghanistan, Russia’s Chechen war began in December 1994. It ended inconclusively some twenty months later, but was resumed in August 1999 and continues. Of course, some people, notably Chechens, will tell you that the war really began with Peter the Great’s 1722 southward advance into the Caucasus, or even with Ivan the Terrible’s 1559 building of the Tarki fort on the nearby Sunzha River, and that the conflict has continued ever since through inter-generational rebellions, deportations and guerrilla campaigns. Other people, notably Russians, will tell you that the ‘war’ essentially began with the weapon-smuggling, drug-running, oil-siphoning and gangsterisation of Chechen politics and territory in the early 1990s. Both views are partly right, yet mostly wrong. The tortured history of Chechen-Russian relations did not make inevitable a violent separatist ‘movement’, forced into being by criminally irresponsible ‘leaders’, any more than Chechen organised crime (tied to Moscow) made inevitable a military ‘operation’, launched by criminally irresponsible ‘leaders’. Even so, we must proceed from the fact that Chechnya, unlike Afghanistan, lies within Russia’s borders as recognised under international law. Visitors to the tragic ruins of Grozny rarely travel on to Kazan, which Ivan the Terrible conquered and annexed in the 1550s, and which today is the intact capital of Russia’s Tatarstan republic. Like Chechnya, Tatarstan declared independence but, as a result of negotiations with Moscow, opted instead for far-reaching
autonomy. The upshot is that Tatarstan’s elite may happily loot the public purse and practise the nationalist demagogy which has been made into a high political art throughout the former Soviet realm, but at least its inhabitants have peace. In Chechnya, war has intensified the elite’s profiteering, and ruined both the land and people’s lives. The three-year respite at the end of the 1990s, during which Chechnya began to resemble a miniature post-Soviet Afghanistan, showed how armed separatism, even in ‘victory’, is really a form of defeat.

It isn’t difficult, judging by the overwhelming majority of reporters’ accounts, to depict the Chechen war as a struggle for ‘national liberation’ against an empire, even though the Chechen ‘struggle’ is one chiefly between rival warlords for visibility and control over the small, jerry-rigged oil refineries known locally as ‘Samovars’ (the old refineries have all been destroyed). On the other hand, it is equally easy, judging by Moscow’s rationalisations, to depict the war as a stand against both ‘Islamic’ terrorism and the unravelling of the Russian Federation, even though Moscow’s butchery has helped spread radical Islam in the Caucasus and done more harm to the country’s integrity than Chechen secession could ever have done. ‘Both sides support the same ideology,’ Anna Politkovskaya writes, in her disjointed but moving collection of articles translated and reprinted from Novaya Gazeta, a small-circulation newspaper in Moscow. ‘Neither one nor the other has any pity for the civilian population.’ This forgotten ‘third side’, she explains, longs for elementary security, employment, family life and ethnic harmony. Most Chechens, she adds, despise the warlords, and despise the Russians, too. They are unable to understand why women, children and the elderly have become the main targets of the brutally inept Russian military. Remarkably – as if the Kremlin had not read The Bear Went over the Mountain – an ‘anti-terrorist operation’ has again become a war not against militants, who are notoriously hard to reach, but against the population at hand, using indiscriminately applied firepower. One Russian lieutenant-colonel tells Politkovskaya to ‘pass this message on to Moscow: this war is quite senseless’. Which is what she has done in her reportage, and though she didn’t get behind Chechen lines, she makes plain that there, too, they badly need to hear the message. Her civic-minded dispatches (dated July 1999 to January 2001) stand out not only because she is a Russian documenting Russian atrocities – she has been imprisoned (briefly) for her pains – but also because she treats the victimisers as well as the victims with compassion.

Rather than excoriate undisciplined rank-and-file Russian soldiers, Politkovskaya humanises them: they live, she says, like stray dogs – hungry, dirty, diseased and abandoned. They survive by trafficking in vodka, medicines and their own weapons, or by taking bribes at ‘checkpoints’ from the people they are supposed to screen. Cannon fodder, these conscripts are fed tainted canned meat in a foul-smelling cellar canteen, while their mothers try to steal them back from the base. (Some mothers manage – illegally – to hide their sons to prevent
them from being called up in the first place.) Elsewhere she takes aim at Kremlin propaganda. Moscow says it is rebuilding Grozny: it isn’t. Moscow says it has pacified and secured territories: it hasn’t. Invoking comparisons with Nazism, which have great shock value for much of her Russian readership, Politkovskaya brands a wretched Chechen refugee settlement in Ingushetia ‘a concentration camp’: ‘all they need now,’ she adds, ‘is to start designing gas chambers.’ Outrage provokes this kind of hyperbole: outrage at colleagues obsessed with finding new and dramatic angles on ‘the story’ but unwilling to help alleviate the suffering; at Western human rights agencies endlessly issuing reams of anti-Russian press releases, but unresponsive to her efforts to assist people held hostage by Chechens; and, above all, at corrupt and vengeful Russian officials. ‘The moral of this story,’ she writes, ‘is that the state does not exist in Russia . . . The Russian Federation is a case study in total and irreversible impotence.’ In answer to Putin’s tough-guy boasts about wiping out ‘bandits’ and building a ‘strong state’, she calls for a President ‘who will defend the weak – according to the Constitution our state exists, first and foremost, for the good of the people’. Naive, to be sure, but right.

All the war zones in the post-Soviet land area (they are, in roughly ascending order of carnage, North Ossetia, South-Ossetia-Ingushetia, Moldova, Abkhazia, Karabakh, Tajikistan and Chechnya) together have produced 200,000 deaths and between two and three million refugees. This is horrific but not on the scale of Afghanistan (let alone the Congo). Five of these post-Soviet conflicts have been in the Caucasus, and of that cluster, none has been resolved; the only one that produced a peace treaty – Chechnya in 1996 – is the one that has been renewed on the largest scale. Additional clashes threaten, on the borders between Armenia and Georgia as well as between Azerbaijan and Iran. Up and down the Caucasus, I have seen plenty of evidence of organised and disorganised crime, corrupt local and national rule, use of law as a weapon of persecution and the sale of everything involved with public office. Elections are rigged, when they take place, and politics is often conducted by means of assassination. Pockets of relative peace – under corrupt regimes – can be found, but most ordinary people suffer severe deprivation and enjoy only nominal statehood. More than other former Soviet territories, including those in Central Asia, the Caucasus offers a tableau of gangsters in power, refugee camps, unrecognised statelets and crippled or non-existent economies.

Rarely, if at all, has this calamity been analysed in the round, but that is what Svante Cornell has now done. He properly dismisses all the nonsense about a ‘civilisational divide’. Primarily Eastern Orthodox Russia supports the Muslim Ajars inside Eastern Orthodox Georgia; relations between Christian Armenia and Georgia are tense (over irredentism), and relations between Muslim Azerbaijan and Georgia are warm. Not ‘civilisations’ but politics – local and international – are the key to the Chechen war. We are seeing something new, much more destructive than the Cold War ever was.
international – is the key, which is why Cornell’s survey includes separate chapters on Turkey, Iran, Russia and the US.

Cornell is at his best elucidating the ethnic conflicts deriving from the actions of the Soviet Union. For example, instead of merging the Kabardins with the Cherkess (both are Circassians) and the Karachai with the Balkars (who share a common language), the Soviet authorities formed Karachai-Cherkess and Kabardin-Balkar ‘autonomous’ republics inside the RSFSR. They also made sure they drew up the borders of the two entities so as to include many ethnic Russians of the lowlands. Further south, the predominantly Azeri enclave of Nakhchivan, which was separated from the Azerbaijan SSR by a band of Armenian speakers, was placed under Azerbaijani jurisdiction; the predominantly Armenian enclave of Karabakh, separated from the Armenian SSR by Azeri-populated lands, was also placed under Azerbaijan. In yet another case, Abkhazia was first a Union republic, then had its status reduced to that of an ‘autonomous’ republic inside Georgia. It was precisely those groups with ‘autonomy’ who pressed for independence – a fact which, as Cornell points out, contradicts the reigning social science shibboleth that granting ‘autonomy’ offers a solution to separatist movements. But he also undercuts this thesis and his prosecution of Russian imperialism with an uncharacteristic reflection on ‘the Soviet identity’, which, he notes,

was instrumental in attenuating and mitigating conflicts between the peoples of the Soviet Union. The official rhetoric of brotherhood and unity, while often receiving only paid lip service, seems to have actually had an impact on the thinking of Soviet citizens . . . Tensions were alleviated not just by suppression, but also by a genuine feeling of common Soviet identity and belonging at the grassroots level.

It’s true that Abkhazians grudgingly accepted being an ‘autonomous’ entity inside Georgia when Georgia was inside the Soviet Union, but not once the Union disappeared. An outside observer may also be struck by how deeply ‘Soviet’ the various Caucasus nationalities are. They were, after all, given definition within and by the USSR.

Edging out on a limb, Cornell proposes a reasonable but perhaps politically impossible territorial swap between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a necessary but highly unpalatable asymmetrical federalism in Georgia (as the only way to restore its territorial integrity) and, less forcefully, independence for Chechnya. He acknowledges that ‘the legality of the Chechen republic that emerged in 1991 is indeed contested on good grounds’ and that ‘the beheading of four British women in late 1998 was indeed a severe setback in Chechnya’s attempts to...
boost its image.’ He suggests that Islam ‘might become the unifying force’ across the North Caucasus (presumably no longer to be Russian territory), adding that ‘whether this is a positive or a negative development naturally depends on one’s perception of political Islam.’ Or, more plausibly, on the realities of political Islam? In any case, Cornell’s final thought is less equivocal. ‘The truth,’ he writes, ‘is that the involvement of Great Powers in the Caucasus is likely to continue and to grow as the strategic importance of the region grows.’ Geopolitical dynamics cannot be wished away. In the post-Cold War era, the Great Game has grown only more complicated.

[*] Frank Cass, 218 pp., £17.50, 26 September 1998, 0 7146 4857 4.

From Robert Chandler

Stephen Kotkin (LRB, 18 October) shows the insanity of both Russian and American policies in Afghanistan over the last few decades. I am surprised, however, that he appears to accept uncritically the official Soviet/Russian line that only 15,000 Soviet soldiers died in Afghanistan, since this is widely believed to be a huge underestimate.

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