

From Russia with hate

The way in which Chechnya has been mistreated over the years

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Brian Glyn Williams

INFERNO IN CHECHNYA

The Russian–Chechen wars, the Al Qaeda myth,
and the Boston Marathon bombings
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that the brutally enforced peace can endure in the long term.

Williams mostly ignores the present side-show that Chechnya represents, choosing instead to delve deep into the nation's past and bring us a text that functions more or less as a conventional history of the Chechen people. Wherever you drop a pin in that history, it seems, you may be sure of finding sadness and mistreatment. Though covered only briefly by Williams, the Chechens themselves are clearly capable of mistreating one another in ways both inventive and macabre. Yet the greatest villain during the past two centuries has been Russia. Chechnya remains part of that country, even though there can be little prospect of happy coexistence because of the litany of atrocities for which Moscow has been responsible.

Inferno really catches light when Williams recounts the fate of the Chechens from the early Soviet era onwards. During the rule of Stalin in the 1930s a situation close to outright war seems to have prevailed in Chechen lands, as people bravely resisted the Communists' attempts to control and transform their lives. Memories of this resistance may well have

played a part in Stalin's decision to deport, or "liquidate", the entire Chechen people in February 1944. Almost 400,000 Chechens were to be forced into cattle cars and transferred to Kazakhstan and other parts of Central Asia. The sources Williams selects to describe these horrors show well the mixture of barbaric cruelty and modern efficiency that was required:

The cattle cars set aside for Beria's ugly errand had already been used for his earlier deportations; they were caked in old faeces, and smeared in dried blood and urine. With practice the NKVD had perfected these sinister operations to a ruthless science.

The presence of so many children facilitated the process of squeezing a greater number of deportees into the cattle carriages. An official report from the period advised that, "The compression of the cargo of the special contingent from forty to forty five persons in a carriage, taking into account 40–50 per cent children, is completely expedient".

The book is just as unsparing, and often very moving, in its account of the Russo–Chechen wars that followed the collapse of the USSR. By this point, however, Williams is pursuing another agenda as well. He wants to document the realities of Chechnya's links to radical Islamism and thereby to debunk the myth that Chechen freedom fighters were allies of, or identical to, al-Qaeda. For the most part Williams argues this case persuasively, showing how self-styled jihadis were always a small minority among Chechen forces and how Chechens have travelled abroad to fight, for instance in Afghanistan or Syria, in much smaller numbers than has sometimes been imagined.

Eventually we arrive back in Boston with the Tsarnaevs. Contrary to what the book's subtitle might suggest, only around a tenth only around a tenth of Williams's text is given over to the events of the 2013 marathon. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt about the impact that the bombings had on the author. It turns out that he himself might easily have met the younger bomber, Dzhokhar, in the years before the attack. Dzhokhar's English teacher in Cambridge, Massachusetts, had advised his student to contact the professor in order to discover more about his ancestry, but Dzhokhar for whatever reason had decided not to.

As others have noted, the brothers' lack of a clear sense of history and lack of a clear cause are two of the most striking facts about them. Brian Glyn Williams provides the evidence to demonstrate that it would be wrong to connect their crimes with the Chechen people as a whole, people whom they hardly knew and among whom they had only lived briefly. Once again, we are reminded that guilty individuals do not make guilty nations – whatever Stalin, Vladimir Putin, Fox News and sundry other conspiracy theorists think. A good account of Chechnya's misery through the generations, this book leaves many questions about the Boston Marathon bombings unanswered. But in a way that is the point of *Inferno in Chechnya*.

In the lives of most scholars, it is almost unheard of for research subjects to become relevant to their everyday existence. When it does happen it is usually a cause for celebration. However, as Brian Glyn Williams's new book illustrates, the experience can be anything but pleasant. Williams is a professor at the University of Massachusetts–Dartmouth, specializing in Islamic history. He has published previously on the Crimean Tatars, Afghanistan and the war on terror, and for several years has taught a class on Chechnya. This last interest suddenly achieved a horrible and uncanny relevance on April 15, 2013, when two brothers, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, detonated pressure-cooker bombs near the finishing line of the Boston Marathon. Boston is Williams's home city and *Inferno in Chechnya* his attempt to uncover the true connections between this thriving modern metropolis and the far-off conflict zone where the Tsarnaevs once lived.

The global image of Chechnya has morphed considerably in the past decade, from a place of utter carnage and lawlessness into one of vice-like authoritarian rule and monstrous (though often also inadvertently comic) excess. This is largely thanks to the personal tastes of Ramzan Kadyrov, the local Kremlin-backed leader, who took office at the age of thirty and has exercised power ever since with all the restraint of a spoilt three-year-old child. Private menageries, fast cars and deadly vendettas along with hugely expensive public vanity projects and a pervasive air of threat now occupy almost all the space that was once filled by bloody war, even though many doubt



Boston, April 15, 2013