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Moscow Gave Four Times More Hero Medals in Chechen War than in Afghanistan

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

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Vienna, June 15 &mdash The Russian defense ministry has named 322 of its soldiers Heroes of the Russian Federation for their actions in the two Chechen campaigns, nearly four times as many Heroes of the Soviet Union (85) that its Soviet predecessor handed out in Afghanistan, a product of the intensity of the Chechen war and of awards inflation in post-Soviet times.
According to an article in the current issue of "Sovershenno Sekretno," the Russian defense ministry presented 559 soldiers and officers with the title Hero of the Russian Federation between 1992 and the end of 2008. Of these, 322 were awarded to participants in the army's role in Chechnya (http://www.sovsekretno.ru/magazines/article/2214).
In addition to those in the military receiving this distinction, personnel from the FSB, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Emergency Situations also were named Heroes of the Russian Federation. Like the military until December 2008, few of these organizations have provided exact numbers.
The FSB has never given them out, but the number of awards there must exceed 40,

the magazine said, given that the names of 34 of them are known. And for the MVD internal troops, the number is at least 81 for the fighting in the North Caucasus, of whom 54 received the award posthumously.

Thus, for the Chechen campaigns, more than 500 Russian personnel received this award, nearly six times as many that received the distinction of Hero of the Soviet Union for Moscow's effort in Afghanistan in the 1980s but, of course, far fewer than the 11,739 who received that award during World War II.

In addition to the dramatic increase in the number of awards, "Sovershenno Sekretno" suggested, two other aspects are troubling. On the one hand, the percentage of senior people who did not directly participate in combat seems to have gone up as well, a situation that recalls the medal mania of Brezhnev's time.

And on the other, some of the awards went to officials like FSB deputy director Vladimir Pronichev who was named a Hero of the Russian Federation for his role during the Nord-Ost terrorist incident, a case in which, as "Sovershenno Sekretno" recalls, 129 of the 130 who died were victims of the use of lethal gas by people under Pronichev's command.

The general inflation in the number of medals that the Russian authorities have handed out is obvious, according to the article, but the exact numbers are impossible to check given that information about awards given even during the first Chechen campaign, from 1995 to 96, remain inaccessible to investigators, with officials refusing all requests for their release.

The reason for this, the article continues, is that such statistics would be embarrassing either because they would allow people to see just how serious that conflict was, something the Kremlin did everything it could to conceal, or how commanders had used the conflict to hand out medals and thus advance its members.

Despite official efforts to keep the lid on such information, some of it has leaked out. There is a reference in one order that in February-March of 1995 alone, "almost 1600" Russian officers and men were given the Order of Courage, a statistic that suggests that the fighting was extremely intense.

That would mean some 21,500 such orders were given out during the first campaign.

And given that the numbers on the medals for March 2000 ranged from 42,000 to 46,000, there must have been more than 20,000 such awards given between the two Chechen wars, yet another indication of either the seriousness of the conflict or medal inflation.

The situation with regard to the awarding of medals appears to have become worse during the Russian campaign in Georgia, even though overall statistics remain classified. During that effort, which Moscow has called "the five-day war," the magazine reported, at least 19 officers and soldiers were named Heroes of Russia and 263 were awarded the Georgian Cross.

But it is not only in the military were the "golden rain" of orders appears to be intensifying. Last Friday, on Russia Day holiday, Interfax reported, Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, was awarded the star of the Order of St. Aleksandr Nevsky "For Labor and the Fatherland" (http://www.blagovest-info.ru/index.php?ss=2&s=3&id=27981).

While giving awards to church leaders has become increasingly frequent in post-Soviet Russia, this presentation is in some ways anomalous. While he has been declared a saint by the Orthodox Church, Aleksandr Nevsky in fact formed an alliance with the Muslim Mongols to oppose the expansion of Catholic influence into Russia.

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