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Russia Refuses to Remember Its Own History

By Ivan Sukhov

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For Russia, 2014 was marked by several dates that nobody wants to remember. December saw 20 years since the first war in Chechnya. In August, 15 years had passed since the start of the Second Chechen War. And finally, September marked 10 years since the Beslan hostage crisis.

State-owned media outlets did not report on any of these stories. On the anniversary of the Beslan school siege in which insurgents held more than 1,200 hostages and that ended in the deaths of 385 people, including 186 children, only a crowd of mostly local residents turned out for the commemoration.

Despite the scale of the suffering, state-controlled television maintained complete silence on the subject. Can you imagine a media blackout on a major anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attack, with only close relatives of the victims gathering for memorial services?

The First Chechen War claimed the lives of thousands of soldiers and officers, not to mention countless civilians. No media outlets so much as mentioned the anniversary of the start

of that war, with the exception of archival columns in a few minor publications with tiny readerships.

An entire generation of children has grown up with no memory of the bloody campaign of 1994-96 for the simple reason that they were not born yet. For those who are older still and remember much of what happened, the details nonetheless tend to blur together from the passage of time. In another 10 years, the two military campaigns will finally blur into a single war.

Perhaps by then the Russian public will have forgotten both wars entirely, and only close relatives and friends of the dead will still remember what happened. No collective national memory will survive because countries only remember what which they understand.

The Vietnam War Memorial in Washington — a huge, V-shaped black wall like the wings of some terrible bird — suggests that the United States has reached some level of understanding of that war, however incomplete, imperfect or late it was in coming. It means that U.S. society has done the work of trying to come to terms with that part of its history.

The fact that Russia has no memorial to the Chechen wars indicates that just the opposite is true here. To this day, nobody really understands what happened there two decades ago, or why it happened at all.

The question of how it ended — and, indeed, if it ever really did end — is especially pertinent now. For the first time in several years, on Dec. 4 insurgents staged a daring attack in Grozny that took federal forces several hours to neutralize. However, nobody is asking this question — much less attempting to answer it.

This is first because everyone is focused on Ukraine, the plummeting exchange rate, rising prices and the resultant drop in the buying power of salaries. Second, nobody cares any more about the North Caucasus.

Today few people remember that the end of the First Chechen War sent Russian society into the same type of euphoria it is now experiencing over Crimea. In fact, the First Chechen War ended without any clear winner: The conflict concluded simply because both sides were tired of the endless torrent of deaths.

Everyone wanted revenge when the Second Chechen War began. Of course, it was not the newly appointed and as yet obscure prime minister, Vladimir Putin, who annexed Chechnya and Dagestan to Russia — General Alexei Yermolov did that in the early 19th century. However, Putin's tenure really did mark a turning point away from the trend toward dissolution and withdrawal from Russia, replacing it with Moscow's uncompromising determination to defend its territory and take back whatever it had lost.

But underlying that euphoria was another, very different feeling. Surveys in 1999 revealed that Russians placed a high value on the territorial integrity of the country, to the extent that they were prepared to personally take up arms in its defense.

What's more, they disliked Chechens and other ethnic groups of the North Caucasus more

than any others, and did not particularly want them as fellow citizens. Those two sentiments combined into a determination to control the territory without consideration for its unwanted inhabitants.

If anything, the Chechens understood what was happening better than others. They tried to break away from Russia, but when they failed, they essentially said: "If you force us to remain, at least make us full-fledged fellow citizens. Give us our own place in the sun in your world since you force us to remain a part of it."

However, Russia did not really want to discuss "a place in the sun" for Chechens. And that was not so much because Russians did not want them as fellow citizens after two painful wars, but because Russians had no clear understanding about "a place in the sun" for themselves.

They had too little time to understand for whom this new and hypothetically beautiful country was made after it emerged from the cocoon of the deceased Soviet Union. They did not yet know exactly which people comprised the population of this new state.

As it turned out, Russia was unprepared to deal with the Chechen question — and that is a dangerous condition for a country attempting to overcome the consequences of a bitter armed conflict on its own territory.

All Kremlin propaganda of the last year has focused on the ideas of empire and a renaissance of ethnic Russian influence. However, it was impulsive and thoughtless to say "yes" to both at once without considering the inherent contradiction between the two. Any claim of exclusivity for ethnic Russians naturally excludes any hope of empire because no neighboring country will ever agree to second-class citizen status.

Old neighbors such as the Chechens and Volga Tatars, along with the new ones such as the Crimean Tatars, cannot wait forever for Moscow to develop an equitable and viable paradigm for mutual cooperation. They have already waited for almost a quarter of a century. For now they retain a utilitarian interest in Russia as a source of money, jobs and interaction with the outside world.

But in their search for ideas, they increasingly look beyond Russia. Is it any surprise, therefore, if they also now look at the Islamic State?

The attack on Grozny on Dec. 4 could remind Russia that it has dangerous enemies who are also enemies of Europe and the United States. But Russia has painted itself into a corner such that Moscow can no longer take comfort in the idea that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

That is not a good idea even when your house is fully in order, much less when, as is the case with Russia, your institutions are weak, different parts of the country have only tenuous connections and citizens lack a common or unifying identity. In that situation, the attack on Grozny and the unexplained fire that broke out the next day at the FSB headquarters in Makhachkala could spark a nationwide chain reaction threatening the integrity of the state.

The fact that such events could erupt at any time is the result of Russia's failure to make sense of its own recent history. Of course, it is very convenient to remember the 100th anniversary

of the war in 1914 — although even those events at the start of the last century still require an accurate and intellectually honest analysis.

In the mean time, Russia's public memory is more like the fragmentary memory of an old man who remembers events long past better than something that happened yesterday. That is, he remembers distant events better, but not perfectly.

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