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Anne Le Huérou, Aude Merlin, Amandine Regamey and Silvia Serrano, Tchétchénie: une affaire intérieure? Russes et Tchétchènes dans l'étau de la guerre, Paris: Editions Autrement, 2005

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- 1 This book on Chechnya has been co-authored by Anne Le Huérou, Aude Merlin, Amandine Regamey and Silvia Serrano. These scholars are associated with either the *Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales - CNRS* or with the *Institut d'études politiques de Paris*. Their book offers an excellent introduction to the two most recent wars with Russia. Its aim is to explain to a wider public their historical and social background, the claims put forward by the various actors, the different currents in the Chechen independence movement, Russian security interests, and present prospects for war and peace. Particular emphasis is put on the role of the Islamic movement and on the failure of Western governments to have a significant impact on the events of the war.
- 2 The authors defend the thesis that, although many would frame it exclusively as part of the world-wide war on Muslim extremism, the present conflict continues to be primarily about sovereignty. In their view, this thesis requires both a historical exploration of the Soviet past and an in-depth description of the constitutive elements of Chechen nationalism and militancy.
- 3 The book is divided into four parts which are, however, not sharply delineated from each other. The first chapter focuses on the question of independence from Russia. It deals with the most dramatic moments in Chechnya's Russian and Soviet history, such as the 1944-57 deportation and the subsequent failure to create a sustainable form of economic development. It further analyses the role of the *teips* and other traditional institutions, relations between the Chechen and Russian populations in the republic, and the reinterpretation of Chechen history and traditions by the independence movement in the final years of the Soviet Union. It also gives a brief overview of the history of the two wars with Russia (1994-96 and 1999-), including the failure of all Russian attempts at normalization. Islamism is a central theme of the second chapter, while the third explains the extent to which the Chechen question is an international one. The fourth chapter examines the importance of a resolution of the Chechen question and the impact of the two wars with Chechnya on Russian politics and society.
- 4 Particularly interesting are the investigations into the extent to which the concept of a *Homo sovieticus* ("*Homo chechenus sovieticus*") can be applied to the Chechen independence movement at the beginning of the 1990s, and how popular mobilization in the two wars against Russia failed to create political unity, instead destructuring Chechen society. In their critical assessment of the interpretation that, unlike the first, the second war should no longer be seen as being about sovereignty but rather as a war on Islamic terrorism, they demonstrate how the two aspects are intermingled. Long historical experience of oppression and a lack of social and political integration serve both secessionist and radical Islamist discourses. The authors further explain how the emergence of radical Islamism in the second half of the 1990s has created new dividing lines within Chechen society, on a religious basis.
- 5 The book is very readable. Thanks to the generous space devoted to the history of the conflict, it is recommended not only for well-informed readers but also for "beginners", for instance university students without prior in-depth knowledge of this conflict.

- 6 The book is intended to be accessible to a wider public, but accessibility sometimes comes at the expense of conceptual precision. This is particularly the case with the term ‘colonialism’, which is used in a very loose sense, making it unclear how the descriptive dimension (colonialism as the historical phenomenon of the creation of colonies of settlers) relates to the normative dimension (colonialism as a form of exploitation legitimizing a unilateral right to secession). The authors appear to move from one dimension to the other without any critical reflection on this relationship. Nor is a sufficient distinction made between scholarly and political perceptions of history. The lack of a clear definition of the term ‘colonialism’ facilitates this confusion.
- 7 In a footnote (on page 16), the authors refer to Valery Tishkov, who contests the thesis that Chechnya has been permanently exploited to the advantage of the Soviet center and who claims that it has, to a certain degree and at certain periods, been a beneficiary of Soviet distributory policies. But the authors fail to engage in a real debate about this issue by confronting the various arguments and interpretations. The reason given is far from convincing: they argue that their primary intention is to analyse how Soviet history is perceived by Chechen independence-seekers (who do indeed feel that throughout all of Russian and Soviet history Chechnya has been the object of colonial exploitation), and not to rewrite the history of Chechnya.
- 8 The lack of sufficient differentiation between a history of the Chechen nation and a history of Chechen perceptions is characteristic only of the first chapter. The remaining chapters are far more differentiated, in particular where the Soviet legacy to the independence movement and the rise of Islamism is concerned. A final remark concerns not only this particular book but literature on Chechnya in general. In the title of their book the authors reject the notion that Chechnya should be considered a purely internal matter for the Russian federation (*Chechnya: an Internal Affair?*). The meaning of this rhetorical question is that the principles of territorial integrity and non-intervention in internal affairs should not blind us to the international dimension of a conflict. But this rhetorical question may be also understood otherwise, even if that is not the intention of the authors: to what extent is the war in Chechnya not an internal affair of Chechen society itself? Scholarly literature on Chechnya has provided us with interesting elements with which to answer this question, but what is generally lacking in literature on Chechnya is an analysis of the ideological and material motives of those who sided with the Russian forces before – and particularly since – 1999. This contrasts with the amount of attention paid to the complex motives of the independence-seekers. Refocusing scholarly research on this question would be not only relevant for scholarly purposes, but politically important as well. At present, there is a lack of perspective on both sides of the conflict line. Neither the Chechen independence movement nor the Chechen state institutions seem to have the potential to act as legitimate authorities. The pro-Russian forces are seen by the independence movement as traitors and opportunists, with whom dialogue is impossible or superfluous and who are not worthy of further analysis. But a scholarly interpretation would have to go beyond this perspective. A more balanced interest in the identities and interests of the two warring parties in Chechnya’s civil war could perhaps give us a more realistic idea of how external forces could and should intervene.

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