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by ROBERT FISK

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To Putin, Assad's Enemies in Syria are the Same as Russia's in Chechnya

Now what does this remind you of? “After an attempt to seize Grozny by land ended in defeat, Yeltsin resorted to ... pounding the city from the air. Thousands of civilians died in the attacks on the capital. Two years of gruesome fighting [in Chechnya] killed tens of thousands of civilians and probably 15,000 Russian soldiers. Putin ... cemented his rise to power by launching a new campaign that would be equally bloody, but would eventually bring the territory back under Moscow's control. He filled the airwaves with tough talk, promising to hunt down the Chechen bandits ... The Chechen battle was portrayed as a terrorist struggle against the legitimate Russian state. This was partly true – the Chechens did begin to use terror as a weapon.”

Sound familiar? I owe the above quotation to Shaun Walker's new take on the Putin years in his book, *The Long Hangover: Putin's New Russia and the Ghosts of the Past* – and it doesn't stop there.

In early 2000, in one of his first interviews, Putin told the Chechens they were not under attack from Russia – they were being brought under its “protection”. The Chechens were not a defeated people, Putin announced. “They are a liberated people.” And all this, according to Walker, while Putin's fighter jets “were bombing Grozny, raining more misery down on a city that already seemed as though it had reached total devastation”.

Walker himself is an old-school reporter, padding the broken pavements and shattered buildings rather than pontificating from Moscow – he wrote for *The Independent* before moving to what we used to call “Another Newspaper” – and he assiduously follows

through on the Chechen story, observing the rise to power of the faithful Akhmad Kadyrov and then, after the latter's assassination, of his equally faithful (and brutal) son Ramzan. Their enemies were liquidated. By the time Walker arrived in Grozny in 2009, "the city was unrecognisable from the eerie photographs of Stalingard-level destruction ... Neat tree-lined avenues, of new apartment blocks and pleasant cafes ... a whole street in which the tree-lined husks of apartment blocks had been replaced with brand-new versions; empty squares filled with white marble-effect ministerial buildings; and to top it all off, Grozny City, a 32-storey skyscraper housing a five-star hotel with a rooftop restaurant, a gym and plush bedrooms with luxury toiletries."

The parallels should not be drawn too closely. Putin was trying to restore Chechnya to Russian sovereignty. In Ghouta – or in Aleppo – he was and is trying to restore sovereignty to Syria. The Chechen "bandits" and "terrorists" were real enough. And so, slowly and ponderously, we ourselves are beginning to admit, amid the bloodbath of civilians, that al-Qaeda and fellow Islamists are real enough in Ghouta.

And of course, by "restoring" eastern Ghouta (or Aleppo) to the Damascus government, Putin is furthering Russian power. Besieged autocrats can count on Moscow. Could Mubarak count on Washington? Or could Ben Ali count on France?

There are, however, other small Chechen ghosts floating over Syria. A large number of Chechen Islamists, fleeing the forests of Chechnya after Russia's victory, arrived in Syria to attack the regime.

One of the Syrian army's most devastating setbacks occurred on a mountain top south of the Turkish border, when a Chechen jihadi suicide-bombed a military base by driving a captured armoured car into the compound. He killed every one of the Syrian defenders. The explosion was so vast that an eyewitness on a neighbouring hilltop told me he saw fire reaching into the clouds – and then continuing above the clouds into the empty sky.

The Russians know exactly who they are fighting in Syria, which is why Russian pilot Roman Filipov blew himself up with his own grenade rather than be captured by Islamists. For Putin, those Chechens who resisted his firepower inside Russia are merely continuing their struggle inside a Russian ally further to the south.

Eliminate them, Putin believes, and then make peace with your erstwhile enemies later. It's been a policy maintained, up to a point, by Damascus. The earlier siege of Deraya on the edge of Damascus was ended in a series of "reconciliation" committees and mutual ceasefire promises.

The distance between Grozny and Damascus is less than 900 miles. From the Kremlin walls, the minarets of Damascus are not in the “Middle East”; they are due south. Russian power doesn’t end at its own frontiers – nor did it in Stalin’s day. His Red Army did not halt at the Soviet frontier in 1945. It pursued the “fascist beast” to its lair in Berlin. And Chechnya remains very much in Putin’s mind today.

When he chose to call a major Islamic conference inside Russia, he welcomed clerical delegates from Egypt, Syria and other largely Sunni Muslim nations where they excoriated Salafism and its entire works. Saudi Arabia was virtually excommunicated.

The fact that the conference was officially held under the auspices of the awful Ramzan Kadyrov made no difference to the delegates. In any case, most of them live under Kadyrov-like masters. Putin had made his point.

Equally, he has arranged that Chechens should help rebuild – and fund – the 11th century minaret of the great Omayad mosque in Aleppo, brought down in the fighting of 2013 (for which both sides, needless to say, blame each other). Chechen prelates were freighted into Syria to pray at the mosque.

Even in Palmyra, captured by Isis, recovered by the Syrian government, recaptured by Isis – to Putin’s anger – and then recovered once again, there is a Chechen component to Russia’s presence. Moscow’s foot patrols in the city are often made up of Russian soldiers – from Chechnya.

This does not mean that Putin is somehow recreating Russia’s past struggles inside Syria. What it does mean is that Putin has learned from the Chechen war and has not forgotten its lessons – which include both ruthlessness and cunning.

For him, Assad’s enemies today were Russia’s enemies in Chechnya – in a few cases, the very same individuals – and, however much horror we express at the outrageous killing of civilians, we should not be surprised. Once superpowers become involved in Middle East wars, “terms and conditions” do not apply. Until it’s over. Did anyone mention Iraq?