

The Dogs of War

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Fears are growing that ethnic disputes in Karachaevo-Cherkessia could drag three North Caucasus republics into a bitter tribal conflict.

War is so close that I can feel its breath. Sometimes, I imagine that I can hear children sobbing and women screaming. The air is thick with the harbingers of violence and sudden death.

Fear twists inside me, ready to well up to the surface at any moment. The fear of war.

When the "second conflict" began in Chechnya, a wave of horror swept through the neighbouring republics - will they shoot and bomb us too? People were afraid for their families, for the future. But the fighting was contained inside Chechnya's borders. The horror faded. There was a sense the danger had passed.

Then our neighbouring republic, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, was racked by upheaval. There was talk of a war between the Karachai and the Cherkess. Cherkessk, the capital, is only a two-hour drive from Nalchik; the Kabardinians and the Cherkess share ethnic roots.

Soon, the Moscow TV stations were calling Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and nearby Adygea "hostile territories". They said that, in the event of a war, the Kabardinians and the Adygeans would support the Cherkess while the Balkars would ally with the Karachai. All three republics would be drawn into the conflict.

At first, I tried to ignore these hysterical outbursts - wild conclusions drawn by analysts who have little understanding of our peoples. But then a Karachai friend phoned me from Cherkessk. We had studied together at university. We had never discussed our ethnic differences back then.

Now I ask him, "What's going on over there? Why are you at loggerheads with the Cherkess?" And, to my astonishment, he answers, "They started it all. And we're just letting them know that they'll never get their hands on any part of our republic."

In the schools of Cherkessk, Karachai and Cherkess children refuse to sit together in class. Hatred and division have become part of their upbringing. No, I don't want to believe that. Even if it is true. To believe in that is to believe in the inevitability of war.

Meanwhile, the independent station NTV is describing sleepy Adygea as "a second Chechnya on the brink of war". It said Adygean nationalists had come into conflict with the ethnic Russian population and violence was imminent.

But how can I believe these prophecies of doom? I know the roots of these tensions. The Russians are angry that the authorities offered asylum to 100 refugees from Kosovo. The asylum-seekers were ethnic Adygeans whose ancestors had left the Caucasus during the wars with Imperial Russia. Local Russians are concerned that this is the beginning of a massive influx of Cherkess and Adygeans from abroad.

But at the same time these rumours sow the seeds of fear. And that fear is fuelled by the fighting in Chechnya, by the daily reports of terror and repression.

It's a dead-end. And I don't know any way out. I'm afraid for my relatives and my friends. I love my people and my language. We were taught to love our homeland, the country in which we were born. But now I'm afraid to live here. Something is happening to us, to the little peoples who populate the North Caucasus. We are changing. And perhaps not for the better.

In some ways, my fear has changed too. It's no longer the fear of death that haunts me - I have a special relationship with death. I'm afraid that, if a war starts here, then the rest of the world will be indifferent to our suffering. I'm afraid of that indifference. Yet, at the same time, I understand that we ourselves are indifferent to what is happening around us. "What can we do?" People ask me. "Anything, apart from violence," is my reply.

I love to fill my house with flowers but, recently, I stopped watering them and they almost died. I realised then that I was losing my faith in life and in the future. I gave up writing articles. I understood that journalists who are opposed to war are forbidden from expressing their opinions. If you criticise the Chechen terrorists, you can write what you like. But to condemn the Russian authorities, to pity Chechen children, the elderly, the women, to say that an entire people is being systematically annihilated - all that is taboo.

If those are your views, it means that you oppose the authorities. And they do not forgive their enemies easily.

Recently, a journalist friend from Vladikavkaz, in North Ossetia, said to me: "If you feel that the end is coming, then you should surround yourself with beauty rather than destroy it. Live for today..."

Those words have helped me. From then on, I really began to value what I have: the serene, beautiful landscapes, the coming of spring. And I even fell in love. True love (does anybody ever think that their love isn't true?). I don't want to die! I want to live! I want to live decently, in a civilised country where I know that I have the right to life. Don't I have that right?

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