

A Tale Of Two Chechen Wars

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Public reaction to last August's outbreak of war in Chechnya proved very different to the way the last conflict was received in 1995. The difference, reports Densi Bevz from the Siberian city of Tomsk, is down to cynicism, an uncaring community and the me

News that war had broken out in Chechnya in 1995 hit the south Siberian city of Tomsk fast, and in the hardest possible way. Twenty of Tomsk's sons in uniform were killed in the first 13 days of that offensive - as many as were killed in the entire ten years of the Afghan War.

Back then the response to this carnage was almost as fast. 'Committees of Soldiers' Mothers' - set up to defend the rights of young draftees in the often brutal Russian Army - had built unprecedented top level links with local, regional and national army and defence ministry officials.

They were already ensuring that their boys did not simply disappear into the military machine, and put their contacts to good use when the 1995 conflict broke out.

The committees would take over the Tomsk Drama Theatre for regular jam-packed 'information days', from where letter writing campaigns, petitions and public protests were planned and prepared. The state parliament in Tomsk was pressed to send its own message to Russian president Boris Yeltsin, urging him to halt the offensive.

A forty tonne load of food and aid was collected for the troops on the front line in just three days - a remarkable feat for a community deprived by post-Soviet era economic chaos. Two convoys were eventually sent to Chechnya in January/February 1995.

In both cases local Tomsk TV-2 journalists accompanied the caravans to the front line, where they began the habit of recording 'video letters' from the soldiers for broadcast back home. Sketches by soldiers were shown on screen. These reports added a poignantly personal touch to the news from the war.

The collective result of all this activity was to decisively turn public opinion and most of the media against the war. It seemed so distant, unreal and against the common sense. They came to believe that Russia's soldiers and their officers were being betrayed by the generals.

The official line fell on deaf ears. Nobody really cared about then Russian defence minister Pavel Grachev's strategy, still less about oil or Islamic fundamentalism, when measured against the life of one of their own, a teenage draftee from Tomsk.

Yet when these young soldiers began to return to Tomsk in the spring of 1995, they came home not to a hero's welcome, but to indifference. The experience of Private Andrei S. was typical. He was left without a job for several months, unable to get a state or private sector job due to his lack of education - he had only four years of elementary school, which had been enough for a fighting unit, but not for the new Russian economy.

It was exactly as the veterans' groups serving the men of the earlier Afghan conflict warned. Not only that, as these 'Afghans' had found, if Tomsk society wouldn't take them in, they would find a ready welcome awaiting them in the criminal underworld. Within a year many the heroes of Chechnya, had become the guilty defendants in a string of high-profile murder and racketeering trials.

The situation was even worse for the veterans of the 1996-97 Chechen campaign, who were demobilised without pensions, and often without having been paid for half a year.

Moscow federal paymasters failed to deliver on pledges of social funds for the war disabled and the dependents of the killed and wounded. The political leadership's public expressions of grief were not matched by food or cash help. A sense of cynicism replaced earlier goodwill.

The city's connection with the army faltered as its elite military establishments closed down - the anti aircraft defence centre in 1997, a rapid reaction unit in 1998 and a military college this year.

Despite international recognition and a Nobel peace prize nomination in 1997, it became increasingly difficult for the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers to raise food and funds - and much more slowly than in 1995. Political parties demanded endorsements and pledges of votes in exchange for their support and private industry gave less and demanded more in the form of free publicity for their 'gifts'.

By the start of the second Chechen war of recent years, in August 1999, the situation had almost reversed from the way it was in 1995. Local TV-2's daily surveys of more than 700 people in Tomsk showed broad support for the conflict, despite the early loss of four young Tomsk soldiers in the first month of the war.

Little seems to have changed. The generals seem just as determined to wipe out the 'boeviks' (Islamic fighters) as they were last time, before the slaughter of Russian soldiers in the streets of Grozny proved them wrong.

Even the legendary incompetence and insensitivity of the Russian rear echelons lived on: somehow the defence ministry managed to lose a coffin bearing the corpse of Tomsk private Alexei Skurikhin on its way back from the front. Apparently they mixed up their railway carriages.

Yet unlike 1995 and 1997 public opinion remains in support of the current offensive and indifferent to the plight of the young soldiers fighting it. The view seems to be that the war is a winning one and that this time the army will not abandon their men - before and after the fighting ends.

Since August the local Mothers' Committee has struggled to put an aid convoy together. With great difficulty they managed to collect 20 tonnes of cargo that recently left by plane for the giant Russian base at Mozdok, 100 kilometres north-west of Grozny, and driven from there to a local Siberian army unit.

This unit, which is not named for security reasons, had won high praise for its dramatic capture of the Terski mountain ridge and by taking just a week instead of the expected month to advance to its lines around Grozny. Yet these soldiers were found to be living in miserable conditions without water, proper hygiene or food supplies.

The unit includes many men who fought in Chechnya in 1995, and the conditions are much worse this time round. Many were promised big cash payments to return to the front line, an irresistible temptation for men who have in many cases fallen into unemployment since serving in the last conflict.

Sergei S. from the Siberian town of Jurga is on his second tour in Chechnya. Drafted in 1997 he served with 101 Combat Brigade during its bloody fight for the city of Gudermes that year. Left without a job after the end of that campaign, he rejoined the army and ended up back in Chechnya, in the recent fighting for the Terbsk mountain ridge.

Back home in Siberia, fewer and fewer people seem to care. The national TV media continues to show a carefully propagandised view of the war - state TV crews in the warzone carefully film around the scruffiest, sickest soldiers to focus on the young and well-presented.

The soldiers of 1999 have yet to join the battle for the streets of Grozny - the scene of the draft of 1995's bitterest and bloodiest rebuff. That carnage may yet come, but in the meantime, in Tomsk, confidence is high among those who care. Among the rest the view seems to be 'let the army get on with it'.

If the body count rises again, then that may change and the Soldiers' Mothers may come into their own once more. The letters and angry protests may begin again and the politicians and the media may feel the squeeze of public opinion. But right now, judging by the declining number of callers to our newsrooms, the average Tomsker's interest in the matter has been severely blunted.

Densi Bevz is a journalist based in Tomsk, recently returned from Chechnya.

Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
Ingushetia

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