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Writing In a Country at War

Formally, there is not war in Russia. Formally.

Informally, war continues to be waged in the southern part of the country, in the North Caucasus region in the endless fighting of the “forest brothers”--Caucasian Salafits, many of whom are terrorists, who live in the forests--and representatives of the Russian state . Daily, the news counts up the dead--the policemen, the officials, the churchmen killed, the forest brothers annihilated.

This thick abscess, ready to burst, is my native Dagestan.

Dagestan is a small but diverse republic, home to more than one hundred ethnic groups, and dozens of political coalitions. The well-educated progressive co-exists with the low-brow fundamentalist, adherents of the local brand of Islam known as Tarikat (which translates as “The Way”) mix with former communists, urban outcasts and country bumpkins. The Salafits, who believe an independent Islamic state will solve every societal problem from unemployment to political corruption, have a strong following. Against the background of the rest of Russia’s politics, Dagestan is vibrant, with sharp distinctions between its dark and light sides.

Each conflicting group has their own fervent activists who are convinced of the rightness of their causes, and deny completely that any other truth may exist. Still, it is difficult to draw firm lines between enemies, individuals frequently and unpredictably changing camps. Brothers, close friends, parents and children can suddenly be on the opposite sides of the barricades. Constant injustice and unremitting violence turn the young and foolish, or even the educated, into terrorists.

For whatever reason, it seems to me that writers in Dagestan refuse to address this reality, and those writers from other parts of Russia are only able to provide an outsider’s or a soldier’s perspective. Our poets and prose writers choose instead to focus on our beautiful snowy summits, our soaring eagles and courageous highlanders. They avoid anything controversial, leaving that to the journalists.

Though rare, there are exceptions, such as the poet Adallo who suffered under the Soviet regime, then joined, for a time, the Islamic gunmen, but through it all, continued to write.

This retreat from the controversial is what I think is behind resistance to my story “Salam, Dalgat,” where I tried to paint a real, vivid picture of Dagestan today. There was a great deal of strong criticism, and somewhat less--but equally strong--praise when excerpts were published in the local paper. Some people claimed I was damaging my county’s image. Others accused me of godlessness and slander. But the characters in my story are only normal people, living normal lives. They have weddings and bathe in the sea. They go to work. But over everything there is an air of anxiety, or apprehension. It is important for the writer to stay true to their vision--if they tilt in one ideological direction or the other, they turn into political essayist and lose their artistic power.

Ten years ago, believing the Dagastani people would be amenable to the plan, a group of fundamentalist fighters crossed the border from Chechnya into Dagestan, with the intention of forming an independent Islamic state. This belief was a mistake, and the insurgency was suppressed by local citizen soldiers and the Russian Army. These days, though, I am afraid it would be a different story. People who once fought against the chains of religion, now consider it to be the only thing that can save them from political and social chaos.

This is the subject of my recent novel, *Holiday Mountain*, which centers around an imaginary, but not out of the realm of the possible, isolation of Dagestan when the North Caucasus region is cut off, by a physical wall, from the rest of Russia. Some people in Russia may think this scenario is a good one, but I believe it would be ruinous for all concerned. If the Salafit’s dream comes true and sharia law is established in Russian Caucasus territory, there will be no paradise, no matter what they may say. These leaders are not so pure as that--of course they accept bribes and crave money and power. Still, their demagoguery enchants the young and unsatisfied, who would be willing to kill their unrighteous parents to gain the favor of the brothers of the faith.

At the same time I am sure that strict sharia law could not hold for long over the people of Dagestan, because of the heterogeneity of its population, and a long-standing tendency toward independence. In the past, Dagestan was home to “free societies,” resembling the city states of Ancient Greece with elections, and democratic rights and obligations, but much of their culture is fading. This is a great pity, because Dagestan is a beautiful, unique country, where mountain villages resemble castles, or beehives, and where craftsmen--goldsmiths, silversmiths, potters, carpet-makers, wood-carvers--are revered. Now young Dagstanis are moving away from their native languages, costumes and moral codes, simultaneously turning to the East and the West, not to gain the best, but to imitate the worst of both.

I, myself, was raised in an atmosphere of cultural and religious tolerance. In Makhachkala, where I grew up, it was the custom to send greetings to everybody on all the holidays--Christian, Jewish, Muslim--without distinction. But during the last ten years Islamic fundamentalist pressure has gotten heavier. Wearing hijabs is a new and exotic fashion and carrying guns a practical necessity. A few years ago I attended a concert with a group of male friends--and they were all carrying guns. There was an arms check at the door, so they piled their guns in my bag, since women are never searched. I spent all evening with a heap of guns in my purse.

Granted, all this is rich material for the artistic imagination, and I hope more writers from Caucasus will abandon the literary canons of pastoral praise and put their fingers on the true pulse of the present. This kind of literature can inspire public discussion, presenting new ideas--healing the brains--of readers.