

SEBASTIAN SMITH: *Allah's Mountains*. x, 288 pp., incl. 6 maps. London: I.B. Tauris, 1998. £19.95.

Working for Agence France-Presse, Sebastian Smith was a distinguished contributor to the Western media's impressive coverage of the Chechen war (1994-96), winning two prizes, including France's highest journalistic award (named after Albert Londres). Vividly reliving here the events of the conflict, he by no means restricts himself to an account of Russo-Chechen relations. In order to contextualise this latest in the catalogue of miseries to afflict the Chechen nation, Smith naturally incorporates a history of Russia's relentless drive to conquer the various North Caucasian mountaineers. He draws parallels between tactics employed by the 19th century Murid movement under Imam Shamil (an Avar) and latter-day Chechen military leaders -- the Russian leadership's total disregard for the lives of both the native Caucasians and its own cannon-fodder conscripts is a further constant in the equation. But also described are more current problems facing the remaining North Caucasian regions. This broader scope is the main factor differentiating the present book from the more concentrated 'Chechnya: a small victorious war' by Carlotta Gall and Tom de Waal (vid. my review in CAS 17.1, 185-188, 1998), which preceded it by almost a year.

Like his colleagues, Gall and de Waal, Smith has thoroughly researched the background to his topic, as confirmed by his selected bibliography (274-78), divided into the sections: Ancient History, Russian Conquest, Soviet Period and Deportations, Soviet and Post-Soviet History, Religion, Chechen Conflict, Travel Writing and Ethnography, General. I would suggest adding, along with Gall/de Waal, the pamphlet 'Chechnya. One Year of War' by R. Smeets and E. Wesselink (Pax Christi International, Dec 1995) in the section 'Chechen Conflict', and a similar pamphlet 'The Ingush-Ossetian Conflict in the Prigorodnyj Raion' (Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1996) in the section 'Soviet and Post-Soviet History', where readers should note that Bruno Coppieters is the editor of 'Contested Borders in the Caucasus', whilst Suzanne Goldenberg wrote 'Pride of Small Nations', not vice versa, as printed.

Plainly, Smith has in most instances managed to master his wide-ranging theme, so that this lively narrative, punctuated by italicised segments that seem to be contemporary diary-entries, can worthily serve the goal of publicising an area about which we tend to hear only when blood is being shed. North Caucasians deserve better, and the West not only failed them during the months of Yeltsin's carnage (as well as in Shevardnadze's earlier dirty campaign against the Abkhazians) but has done little to make amends since. In the face of highly detailed reporting from the scenes of battle, Western leaders simply chose to remain largely silent in the desperate hope that their new Kremlin chum would speedily sort out his little local difficulty. Smith notes the dawning of this realisation on the press-corps on p. 150: 'We hadn't yet understood how little real impact our reports made, and that the international community would

never take concrete steps to pressure [for] an end to the war'. On the presence of Western leaders at the Red Square celebrations of the 50th anniversary of Victory in Europe on 9th May 1995 during a mendaciously declared ceasefire in Chechnya Smith sarcastically observes: 'The Western leaders mark their indignation by insisting that no Chechnya veterans take part in the military parade on Red Square. This, the press secretaries explain, indicates the West's firm stand on Chechnya. Then, to emphasise their principles, the Western leaders -- John Major, Helmut Kohl, Bill Clinton -- turn down an invitation to a second, even bigger military parade' (p. 195). Such heads of state, their foreign ministers, and all who voted in favour of Russia's admittance to the Council of Europe even while it pursued the Chechen war should be forced to read and ponder such descriptions from this book as: 'After a week or so, all this began to seem normal. Death became commonplace. When a bomb hit the parliament building, opposite the presidential palace, it was as if the Chechens there didn't think mere bodies were sufficient proof -- they made us walk over the corpses sprawled on the steps and inspect the brains splattered on the walls and floor. We declined, but they insisted. We had to see the brains' (p.151). A further tug on their collective conscience should be occasioned by: 'An MSF [Médecins Sans Frontières] report in April, which was timed to coincide with the meeting of the Group of Seven states in Moscow, said what all the Western leaders couldn't bring themselves to mention for fear of undermining President Yeltsin's re-election bid. "Civilians are killed, hospitals, schools, mosques are targeted. It's a flagrant violation of the Geneva convention and the international accords signed by Russia"' (p.224). One can sense in Smith something of the justifiable rage experienced by a previous visitor from Gt. Britain to the Caucasus, J.S. Bell, one of Smith's sources, who in the preface to his 'Journal of a Residence in Circassia during the years 1837, 1838, and 1839' wrote the following on the despair he witnessed in Circassia: 'When we viewed the desolation of the whole districts -- the crops burned and the hamlets destroyed -- and continually heard the account of families, once happy and prosperous, reduced to indigence and misery by the destruction of their young men -- and when we reflected that all this disturbance of the peace of a country every way fitted for the enjoyment of its inhabitants, was occasioned solely by the ambition and insatiable thirst for domination of one individual, the Emperor of Russia, we could not restrain our indignation' (1840). *Plus ça change...*

Even when the OSCE became engaged, it proved a rather ineffectual presence. 'But something is wrong. Something is wrong with the OSCE people, with their blazers and safari gear, the way they snap instamatic pictures of the wrecked streets, looking more like tourists than documentalists' (p. 195).

Smith's assessment of Yeltsin appears on p. 272: 'Yeltsin was not a tyrant *per se*, but when his thirst to remain in power led him to an act of tyranny, there was nothing in the system to stop him'. Whether this be valid or not, the observation of the

Karachays' ex-leader, Kazbek Choma(y)ev, certainly carries conviction: 'The people in power, Yeltsin and so on, still think in the old way...If rehabilitation of repressed peoples was solved, I don't think anything bad would happen in the North Caucasus. For this to be achieved, we need democracy, but our leaders are steeped in Soviet mentality. They wouldn't know democracy if they saw it. Russia is a prisoner of its own imperial past' (p.91). This will remain a danger until a generation not shaped by Soviet thinking takes over the reins of government not only in Russia but in the other former union-republics where post-Soviet constitutions have invested similar power in the presidency.

Smith's valedictory warning is redolent with sympathy for his subject: '...everyone backs David against Goliath. But this admiration masks the fragility and the ultimate tragedy of the North Caucasus. The mountain nations may be small and hardy, but they are also small enough to be persecuted *en masse*, small enough to disappear. In a warning to all highlanders, the last Ubykh speaker died in Turkey in 1992, a century after his people were pushed out of the North Caucasus by the Russians. The Ubykhs, who are related to the Adygei-Circassian tribes, made the mistake of over-assimilation to their place of exile and, finally, suffered this quiet linguistic extinction. In the same way that the most rugged countryside eventually erodes under the weight of tourists, the highlanders' strength is great, but finite' (p. 273). Thus, I find it all the more surprising and regrettable that, in my view, he misinterprets two aspects of the study -- the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and the role of the Confederation of the (Mountain) Peoples of the Caucasus under its first president, the Kabardian academic Yuri (Musa) Shanibov (vid., intermittently, pp. 100-34).

Had it not been too much of a diversion from the book's main topic, the actual policies towards Georgia of (a) the Abkhazian National Forum (Aydgylara) and (b) President Vladislav Ardzinba's government should have been presented within the context of a full discussion of Georgian-Abkhazian relations since, say, 1989. Instead, Ardzinba is condemned at the outset by the familiar journalistic technique of loaded adjective-selection. Describing him as 'dapper' (p. 100) seems to be designed to plant in the mind of the reader the suspicion that a Caucasian president with a dress-sense must have motives ulterior to the mere welfare of his people -- incidentally, Ardzinba should be mentioned on p. 142 as a further leader of an ethnically North Caucasian region categorically refusing to sign the letter circulated by the Kremlin asking Yeltsin to 'restore order' to Chechnia, which was the manufactured excuse to start the 1994 war. Although Georgian forces are described as storming into Abkhazia, it is the Abkhazians who are still tarred with the blame for 'launching a savage war' (p. 101), presumably because they had the effrontery to fight back. The trite charge of Russian backing, with the suggestion that Russians (sc. other than North Caucasian and/or Cossack volunteers) were heavily involved militarily, is made, for 'Shevardnadze said

Russia was "at war" with Georgia' (p. 103) -- the natural reaction of anyone familiar with Shevardnadze's habit of tailoring his statements to meet the demands of (a) the moment and (b) his audience will be: 'So what?!' No counterbalancing mention is made of (i) the strong indications that Yeltsin knew in advance of Shevardnadze's plan to invade on 14th August 1992 and did not demur, and (ii) the fact that, as the war was reaching a dénouement, Russian planes bombed Abkhazian positions near Sukhum. In the light of Smith's observations on p. 102 about the lack of guidance (one might also add control) coming from Moscow to local military commanders and the level of corruption in the Russian army, it is a pity he did not realise that herein lies the answer to the charge of Russian complicity, so convenient to the Georgians both to excuse their defeat (cf. Shevardnadze's cited remark) and to lay, as usual, the blame for Georgia's misfortunes anywhere other than Tbilisi. Russians know full well the level of contempt felt towards them by Georgian society in general, and many serving in Abkhazia will naturally have sympathised on a purely human level with the threat facing the Abkhazian minority from Georgian nationalism. This will have led some actively to support the Abkhazian defensive alliance. Russian weaponry most certainly was employed by both sides, but, whereas Georgia received its share as part of the distribution of Soviet arms amongst the union-republics (not to mention the spoils of raids on weapons' stores), the Abkhazians had to pay high prices for theirs. For a description of one of the most crucial battles of the war (Gagra) and some comments on the charge of Russian complicity in the general fighting see Billingsley (Forthcoming). The Abkhazian victory is described as pyrrhic (p. 104)! Despite the human and material losses of the war, followed by the hardships of the CIS-imposed economic blockade, I doubt those Abkhazians who escaped with their lives and live in relative peace on their ravaged ancestral territory, albeit unrecognised, would readily concur with this assessment.

Smith met Shanibov only in 1996, by which time he was no longer Confederation chairman, and judged him 'a rather deluded figure' (p. 104), whilst he concludes that 'the Confederation was a failure, and now Shanibov plays the role of the prophet ignored' (p. 105). He infers that the Georgian-Abkhazian 'war was what the ambitious Mussa Shanibov had been waiting for' (p. 101), Shanibov himself being prey to 'fanaticism' (p. 115). Of Duda(y)ev's relations with the Confederation we read: 'Unable to manage his own tiny country, he turned his attention to baiting Russia. He made the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus a vehicle for his futile and dangerous dream of uniting the nationalist forces in all the North Caucasus against Russia' (p. 134). I had the advantage of meeting Shanibov in Adyghea just prior to the Georgian-Abkhazian war and have not seen him since; though invited as main guest to a conference on the North Caucasus at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies in April 1993, he was unable to attend after a shooting-accident in

Abkhazia. I cannot, therefore, comment on his views or state of mind in 1996, though I feel obliged to note that in private conversation I personally found him neither ambitious, nor fanatical nor a war-monger. On the contrary, he was extremely worried about Russian attempts to infiltrate and undermine his organisation. As maintained in his 71-page booklet 'Victory of Unity' (Sukhum-Nal'chik, 1994, in Russian), it was his desire to build a unified North Caucasus by peaceful means, which is why he had to leave Maikop at short notice for Nazran in order to try to prevent escalation in the Ingush-Ossetian conflict. He revealed to me something that was confidential at the time, though in due course he made it public, namely that the ultimate goal of the Confederation was to create a state independent of Russia. This was, however, to be achieved over the long term and only by negotiation, which implied that Dudaev's tactic of deliberate provocation of Moscow was to be eschewed. To assert that the 'war in Abkhazia was a chimera of success' on the grounds that the highlanders 'helped Russia divide and rule Georgia' is bizarre when one considers that the Confederation grew out of an earlier Assembly, established in 1989 in Abkhazia's capital (as indeed Smith notes) precisely to try to protect fellow North Caucasian Abkhazians from the threats issuing from chauvinist leaders in Tbilisi. When Shevardnadze's 1992 invasion turned those threats into reality, the Confederation was fortunately ready to organise volunteers, principally from Circassia and Chechenia (including the famous Abkhazian battalion under Shamil Basaev). Does Smith seriously imagine that the Confederation's purpose would have been better served by standing back and letting Georgia gobble up Abkhazia (with whatever consequences for the very physical survival of the Abkhazian nation, whose preservation had been the Assembly/Confederation's principal *raison d'être*)?! Far from 'neither the Russians nor the pro-Moscow North Caucasus political establishment' being able to 'risk standing in Shanibov's way' (pp. 101-2), the pro-Moscow Kabardian leader of Kabardino-Balkaria, V. Kokov, had Shanibov arrested and detained in Nal'chik for a period during the Abkhazian war, which perhaps indicates the degree of apprehension towards the Confederation in Russian circles. That the Confederation should be condemned by Smith (p. 105) for failing to prevent the killings in North Ossetia's disputed territory of the Prigorodnyj Raion in late 1992 when it was preoccupied with the full-scale war in Abkhazia is unfair, especially when Smith himself goes on to state (p. 115) that 'Russian forces had armed and possibly helped the North Ossetians', for 'Moscow wouldn't hesitate to use force to strengthen its grip over the region'. In the face of such determination on the part of Moscow to try to bludgeon the North Caucasus to bend to its will, as evidenced by the destructive might eventually but vainly brought to bear in Chechenia, it is hardly surprising that the wholly unofficial, non-governmental Confederation, which had achieved progress on a number of fronts (e.g. the dispute between Chechens who returned to Daghestan from Central Asian exile to find their homes occupied by Daghestanis, as well as the victory

of Abkhazia in 1993), should have suffered a decline in prominence precisely from this time. Even two years after the uneasy peace brought to Chechnia by Gen. A. Lebed many North Caucasians are still reluctant to voice too loudly aspirations of independence, though at the same time the Chechen victory does seem to be re-inspiring some, so that it may be rather premature completely to write off the Confederation, which continues to exist under the chairmanship of the Chechen Yusup Soslanbekov. After all, some sort of regional co-operation (within or outside Russia) is surely the only way for North Caucasians to overcome the mass of difficulties presently besetting them and thus to achieve their universal goal of survival with preservation of their distinctive linguistic diversity within a pan-North Caucasian cultural unity.

Apart from the reservations just delineated, and despite the fact that it sadly lacks any pictures (sc. other than on the dust-jacket), the volume can still be recommended for its important insights into many of the difficulties plaguing the North Caucasus.

Technically, the book is littered with some very peculiar errors in spelling, several repeated throughout: 'bezerk' (berserk), 'tires' (tyres), 'publically' (publicly), and the less extraordinary 'millenia' (millennia), though 'defense' (defence) and some others perhaps betray an American influence! A full list follows.

Corrigenda et addenda: p.2 1.8up: lies; p.8 1.3: western dialects/languages; 1.24 *et passim*: Cherkesska; p.9 1.12up: 'Caucasian national features' is a rather free translation of what should read 'a face of Caucasian nationality'; p.10 1.17up: the Daghestani-Chechens' struggle; p.11 1.19up: prophesied; p.18 1.2up: grandfather gave it; p.20 1.2: villages; p.21 1.9: in front; p.26 1.4up: offence; p.27 1.21up: occurrences; 1.5up: jewellery/jewelry; p.34 1.7: Thracians; p.41 1.12: ecstasy; 1.21: men's; p.42 1.15up: annihilated; p.48 1.16up & p.274 1.14up: Journal of a Residence; p.52 1.16: An(n)a Ch(°)avch(°)avadze; 1.21: enemy; p.53 1.3: Aibga; 1.16up: and the Ubykhs' old coastal settlement of Sochi; p.56 1.1: Denikin; p.59 1.12: the Volga Germans and the Meskh(et)ians from Georgia have never been allowed to return after their wartime-deportations; p.61 1.18up: yoghurt; p.62 1.18: grievous; p.64 1.13: the precise ethnicity of the Meskh(et)ians (viz. turkified Georgians vs Turks) is a matter of dispute; p.70 1.2: Führer; p.72 1.15: the Georgian oil-terminal at the port of Supsa is not particularly near the Georgian-Turkish border; 1.19: since the proposed Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey pipeline does not approach Abkhazia, perhaps some explanation is needed as to how the conflict in Abkhazia helps Moscow vis-à-vis this proposed routing for the oil; p.78 1.15: idiosyncratic; p.79 1.19, p.100 1.4 & p.182 1.6up: fulfil; p.80 1.18: medressehs; p.82 1.4up & p.155 1.19: bureaucratese; p.83 1.1: Wasterzhi; 1.19: homogeneity; p.84 1.9 & p.87 1.11 & p.93 1.20: practice; p.89 1.5: Adygei [Adyghe] family and speakers of a divergent dialect of Abkhaz; p.90 1.22: I do not understand how reference to historical facts can be called reinventing the past; p.92 1.17: Abaza; 1.20 & p.124 1.5: siege; p.94 ll.13, 16, 6up & p.279 1.20: Khase; 1.5up: many of the diaspora; p.95 1.3:

Khase; l.5up: billion; p.106 l.6: using an Iranian dialect; p.107 l.3: foreignness; p.108 l.7: indestructible; l.3up: harassed; p.109 l.6: force; p.114 l.13up: fuelled; p.125 l.16 & p.140 l.10: phenomenon; p.128 l.8: jubilant; p.131 l.7: telegram; l.13: by whom; l.22up: trans-Caucasus; p.133 l.5up: harassment; p.135 l.3: megalomaniac; p.136 l.20 *et passim*: phoney; ll.14ff: the information 'FSK (the revamped KGB...later the FSB' repeats what is stated on p.137; p.148 l.16: virtual; p.152 l.19up: irresistible; p.158 l.1up: colossal; p.160 l.16 & p.192 l.3: New Year's ?Eve/?Holiday; p.163 l.10: polka-dotted; p.173 l.9up: besieging; p.176 l.7: transferred; p.184 l.2up: in an; p.188 l.10up: harangued; p.191 l.19up: sneaked; p.192 l.3up & p.222 l.16up: *humma a dats* (= Russian *nichego*); p.193 l.4up: perimeter; p.197 l.16up: people's; l.12up: altogether; p.198 l.9, p.224 l.10up & p.260 l.4up: Médecins Sans Frontières; p.203 l.11: Budennovsk; p.204 l.11: negotiators; l.7up: other's; p.205 l.1up: manoeuvred; p.206 l.13up: infuriated; l.10up: être; p.211 l.22up: of the cruellest; p.224 l.7: Chechens'; p.224 l.18up: cruellest; p.232 l.13up: end-of-millennium; p.235 l.6: sacrilegious; p.239 l.10: disastrous; p.241 l.17: besieged; p.243 l.9up: confetti; p.245 l.12up & p.284 l.23up: Madzhayev; p.252 l.21up: hypocrisy; p.259 l.13up: accommodate; p.260 l.22up: perpetrators; p.265 l.17: pilgrimage; l.22: stubbornness; l.11up: hopelessness; p.266 l.3: *Realpolitik*; p.270 l.18up: interrupts; p.272 l.16: imaginable; p.273 l.16: brethren; P.275 L.4: Jonathan; ll.8, 12, & 18: comparée; l.17: *Grèce*; p.276 l.21: *nationalities*; p.278 l.12: *v.*

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