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Walter Sperling. Vor den Ruinen von Grosny: Leben und Überleben im multiethnischen Kaukasus. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2023. 675 pp. ISBN 9783957572356.

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Walter Sperling's *Vor den Ruinen von Grosny* (Before the ruins of Grozny) provides a nuanced exploration of how broader historical forces were experienced at the local level in one of the most contested regions of Russia and the Soviet Union. Focusing on Grozny—the capital of Chechnya, a republic in the Russian North Caucasus—a city at the intersection of imperial expansion, Soviet modernization, and ethnic conflict, Sperling highlights how major political and social transformations, from colonization and industrialization to revolution and war, were reflected in everyday urban life. By placing the daily interactions, decisions, and adaptations of ordinary residents at the center of his analysis, Sperling sheds new light on how global processes shaped local identities, conflicts, and solidarities, revealing the complexities often obscured by larger historical narratives.

Sperling structures his analysis of Grozny's history chronologically, beginning with the city's founding as a military outpost of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century and continuing through the post-Soviet conflicts of the 1990s. Relying on a broad range of sources, including archival documents, newspaper publications, personal interviews, and residents' memoirs, the author carefully conveys the polyphonic nature of historical experience, avoiding simplified binary oppositions such as "empire" and "colony." Special attention is given to the everyday practices of coexistence and interaction among various ethnic and social groups, which allows him to reveal both the complexity and multidimensionality of the Soviet "friendship of peoples" project and the fragility of its ideological foundations.

The first chapter of the book is devoted to the emergence and early development of Grozny, from a military outpost of the Russian Empire to a rapidly growing oil center. Sperling traces how the city's original function as a tool of imperial power gradually gave way to economic development, attracting a diverse population and shaping a distinctive urban community. The author pays particular attention to the interaction between the Russian population and local Chechen communities, showing that even under conditions of colonial conflict, there was space for interethnic contact and mutual influence.

In the second chapter, Sperling examines the revolutionary transformation of Grozny in the early twentieth century, focusing on the 1917 revolutions, the civil war, and the first years of Soviet power. He reconstructs how the city became a contested space where Bolsheviks, Cossacks, Muslim leaders, and other actors vied for control amid violence and institutional collapse. The chapter highlights shifting alliances and the breakdown of traditional hierarchies, showing how residents navigated uncertainty by adapting their loyalties and political identities. Grozny emerged as a place where

new social dynamics took shape under the pressures of war and revolution, laying the groundwork for Soviet consolidation.

The third chapter of the book focuses on the Stalinist period, when Grozny became a model Soviet city, a symbol of industrialization and modernization. Sperling shows how the development of the oil industry became a central element of the Soviet project to construct a new national identity and an industrial society. The author convincingly illustrates how ideological directives and harsh repressive measures became intertwined with the everyday life of the city's residents, shaping a unique Soviet culture that, despite fear and repression, retained elements of ethnic and cultural diversity.

The fourth chapter offers a detailed examination of the events of World War II and the tragedy of the 1944 deportation of the Chechen and Ingush peoples. Sperling reconstructs the complex circumstances of life under German occupation and the varied responses of the local population to the war. He shows how the Soviet state's imperial logic, which treated entire ethnic groups as potentially disloyal and punished them collectively, culminated in the mass deportation of the Chechens and Ingush. Branded as collaborators with the Nazis, these peoples were forcibly removed from their homeland and sent to Central Asia under brutal conditions, leading to widespread suffering, high mortality, and enduring trauma that reshaped Chechen and Ingush identity and memory. This chapter stands out for its emotional intensity and analytical depth, shedding light on one of the most painful episodes in the region's history and the long-lasting consequences it had for Grozny's multiethnic community.

The fifth chapter addresses the postwar period and describes the reconstruction of Grozny as a model Soviet city. Sperling analyzes how, following brutal repressions and the 1944 deportation, the city gradually came to symbolize stability and prosperity during the late Stalin era and into the postwar decades. Yet beneath the surface of orderly urban life lay deep social and psychological wounds: not only from the forced removal of entire ethnic groups, but also from the compromises and adaptations made by those who remained. These included conforming to official norms of loyalty, participating in state-sponsored rituals of celebration and remembrance, suppressing personal trauma, and embracing a new vision of "normality" centered on family, work, education, and modest material aspirations. Residents strove to rebuild their lives and identities within the constraints of a tightly controlled political and moral order—an order that demanded outward stability in exchange for security, mobility, and belonging.

The sixth chapter explores the return of the Chechen and Ingush peoples following their rehabilitation during the Khrushchev-era "thaw." The author convincingly demonstrates how tense and conflict-ridden this process was, despite the official Soviet ideology of the "friendship of peoples." Sperling offers a detailed analysis of how the returnees were perceived by the local population and the mechanisms of their reintegration, highlighting the frequent gap between official rhetoric and the lived reality of everyday discrimination and conflict.

The seventh chapter focuses on everyday life in Grozny during the late Soviet period, specifically the 1960s and 1970s. Sperling draws attention to the paradoxes of

Soviet multiculturalism, which combined an ideology of unity with a diversity of everyday practices. The author examines the cultural symbols of the era, such as clothing, public spaces, and holidays, showing how Soviet modernity intertwined with local traditions to create a distinct and unique urban identity.

The eighth chapter covers the perestroika years, when Grozny's multiethnic community faced the crisis of the Soviet project and a surge in nationalist sentiment. Sperling shows how criticism of the existing order, fueled by economic and ideological collapse, awakened a drive to rethink national identities and intensified regional tensions. Particular attention is given to the events leading up to the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the role of regional elites in amplifying nationalist rhetoric.

In the ninth chapter, the author closely examines the dramatic events of the early 1990s that led to the collapse of interethnic peace in Grozny and the outbreak of armed conflict in 1994. Analyzing the shift from peaceful expressions of national demands to the chaos of civil war, Sperling describes how decades-old bonds were rapidly and irreversibly destroyed. This chapter serves as the culmination of the book, vividly illustrating the tragedy of a disintegrating multiethnic society and the devastating consequences of nationalist politics and violence.

The author provides a vivid, engaging, and richly detailed account of everyday life in the city of Grozny, tracing its development from the oil boom of the late nineteenth century to the onset of the First Chechen War in 1994. However, chapter 1 (pp. 20–77) devotes surprisingly little attention to one of the most crucial aspects of the city's early history: the initial cultural encounters and interactions between Russians and Chechens. The narrative of this relatively brief opening chapter focuses primarily on the military campaigns of the Russian imperial administration and the strategies used to subjugate the Chechen mountain clans. Yet, given that this period marks the establishment of the first permanent Russian settlements in Chechnya, it would have been especially valuable to explore the dynamics of cultural contact and exchange between the two groups. These early interactions, tense, asymmetrical, and deeply complex, were formative for the future of Grozny and deserve more sustained analytical attention as part of the city's foundational history.

The author's depiction of General Denikin's occupation of Grozny during the Russian Civil War focuses heavily on violence, repression, and continuity with earlier imperial practices, emphasizing mass executions, looting of Chechen villages, and the brutality of the White Army's counterintelligence (p. 100). While these aspects are well documented and should not be minimized, this account risks overlooking the more complex political dynamics of the period. As recent studies of Denikin's administration in the North Caucasus have shown, the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution also opened new, albeit short-lived, avenues for political experimentation and dialogue between the White authorities and local elites (Oreshin 2020). Denikin's regime, though ideologically centralist, made attempts, however limited and ultimately unsuccessful, to establish cooperative relationships with Muslim leaders and explore forms of local self-administration. These efforts were shaped by the rapidly shifting postimperial context and reflected a broader uncertainty about how to govern the multiethnic periphery. A more nuanced account of this period would acknowledge not only the violence of De-

nikin's forces, but also the contested and transitional nature of power relations in the region following the collapse of the Russian Empire.

The author notes that Stalinist repression in the 1930s, particularly NKVD terror, may have prompted some of Chechen and Ingush people to shift sides during World War II (p. 177). This is an important observation, but it remains underdeveloped. Notably, the book almost entirely overlooks the role of collectivization and its devastating consequences for Chechen and Ingush communities. While the author focuses on urban repression during the Great Terror, he does not address the fact that collectivization in the North Caucasus triggered widespread armed resistance, the formation of anti-Soviet bands, and long-term hostility toward Soviet authority (Ibragimov 2012). These experiences significantly shaped anti-Soviet sentiment and should be recognized as an important factor in understanding why some individuals might have seen cooperation with the Germans as an act of resistance or a survival strategy.

In addition, the author touches only briefly on a crucial point that further undermines the legitimacy of Soviet claims of mass collaboration of the Chechen and the Ingush people with the Nazis: The territory of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was never meaningfully occupied by German forces, aside from a small area near the town of Mozdok (Perović 2018). A fuller account that incorporated both the legacy of collectivization and the limited German presence would have provided a more accurate and compelling explanation of local wartime behavior and the injustice of collective punishment.

The author's framing of the 1944 deportation of Chechens and Ingush (p. 199) as a reaction to wartime pressures and Nazi actions—citing Timothy Snyder's argument that Germans and Soviets provoked each other into ever greater crimes—also seems problematic in light of evidence presented earlier in the book. On page 183, the author himself acknowledges that the Soviet regime had already carried out mass deportations of entire ethnic groups during the 1930s—well before the outbreak of full-scale war. The removal of Poles, Germans, and Finns from western borderlands, followed by the wholesale deportation of the Korean diaspora in 1937, reflects a consistent logic of preemptive state violence based on the perceived threat of "enemy nations" (Martin 2001). These operations occurred in the absence of direct military confrontation and followed patterns rooted in Stalinist security thinking.

Another point that warrants further clarification concerns the author's depiction of postwar Soviet everyday life and the treatment of the propaganda film *Kuban Cossacks* (1950; dir. Ivan Pyr'ev). The text notes (p. 222) that "they [Soviet people] no longer starved, but their tables were richly set only on major holidays" and offers an understanding of the film as an expression of optimistic future projection. However, this interpretation risks downplaying the severe material hardship that persisted in the immediate postwar years. Notably, the famine of 1946/47 (Ganson 2009), which claimed between 1 and 2 million lives, is not mentioned in this context. Without acknowledgment of this catastrophe, the reader is left without crucial historical grounding to fully grasp the profound dissonance between cinematic representations of abundance and the grim realities of hunger and ruin that defined everyday life for many Soviet citizens. As a result, the optimism portrayed in the film risks appearing merely

benign or naively utopian, rather than cynically detached from the population's actual suffering.

The book's treatment of the Soviet Union's dissolution (p. 438), though understandably secondary to its focus on Grozny, risks oversimplifying a complex process. The author refers to the March 1991 referendum and notes that its outcome was ultimately disregarded by the leadership of the republics (p. 438). Indeed, in March 1991 a referendum was held across the Soviet Union on the question of preserving the USSR as a renewed federation, and 76 percent of participating voters supported the proposal. However, only nine out of the fifteen Soviet republics took part. Six republics—Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia—boycotted the vote, and several others, including Ukraine and Turkmenistan, later reversed course through independence referendums. By December, only seven republics still recognized the March results. The USSR formally dissolved on December 21, 1991, with the signing of the Alma-Ata Protocol (Kremnev 2012). A fuller contextualization would have helped capture the contested and fragmented nature of the Soviet collapse.

Despite minor limitations, Walter Sperling's book offers an insightful and nuanced study that enriches our understanding of the complexities inherent in multiethnic societies under authoritarian regimes. It significantly contributes to the fields of historical anthropology, nationalism, and Soviet studies, opening numerous avenues for comparative research. What makes this work particularly compelling is the author's deeply humanistic perspective. Sperling approaches a profoundly difficult and traumatic history—ranging from the tragedies of the nineteenth-century Caucasian Wars and Stalin-era deportations to the bloodshed of the Chechen wars under Presidents Boris Yeltsin in late 1990s and Vladimir Putin in 2000s—with empathy, sensitivity, and critical distance. Far from romanticizing or glorifying the Soviet Union, the book devotes substantial attention to the crimes of the totalitarian communist regime. At the same time, Sperling is equally cautious in addressing any form of nationalist historiography, resisting the elevation of national myths or one-sided narratives. His account provides a powerful reflection on the dangers of nationalism and populism in their political manifestations, a warning that resonates far beyond the specific regional and historical context.

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