

Antisemitic Mob Rampages in Makhachkala Airport: A Tale of Changing Times



by Theodore Dalrymple

The sight of an antisemitic mob rampaging through Makhachkala Airport in Dagestan in search of Jews to kill or maim was, to me, a powerful reminder that material and moral improvement are by no means the same.

I visited Makhachkala with a Russian-speaking friend in 1995, when Dagestan seemed a haven of peace by comparison with neighboring Chechnya, where a vicious war was being conducted between Russia and Chechen separatists that left thousands

dead, hundreds of thousands displaced, and the capital city, Grozny, destroyed. At the time, Dagestan was at peace, and there were many thousands of Chechens who were taking refuge in it.

Makhachkala was then a typical Soviet-era provincial city, a wilderness of grey concrete devoid of local color. There was nothing particularly Muslim about it, though the majority of the population was Muslim. Its airport was of a piece with the city, cheerless and with a pall of gloom and pointlessness over it. Aeroflot, the former Soviet airline, still had a monopoly, and still flew Soviet-era aircraft. Our flight out was delayed, and when finally it came, one of the passengers said, as we climbed the steps into the plane, "The crew should be shot—as a minimum!" It was a joke, but in the recently Soviet context, not altogether a comfortable one.

When I saw a video of the mob raging through the airport, some of them shouting *Allahu akbar!*, I was very much struck, apart from by the horror of their atavistic emotion, by the airport in which it was taking place. It looked like a thousand other modern airports in the world, all chrome and glass, but very different from how it had been 30 years before. Thanks to its position as an oil terminal and center of refining, Makhachkala had obviously come up economically in the world.

The hotel at which we stayed in 1995 was still stuck in the Soviet era, which meant that we walked up nine floors and had no lavatory paper, even when asked for. The Soviet school of hospitality training was still in evidence (I remember the days in Soviet hotels when, if you saw food anywhere, you ate and argued over whose it was afterward). But now the hotel in Makhachkala seemed to be a standard four-star hotel that would not have been out of place in the mid-west of America.

Back in 1995, someone arranged for us to meet one of the most important local Muslim leaders, reputed to be something of a fanatic. We had breakfast together, which he brought, in a park. He arrived in a Russian navy uniform. It was nine in the morning, and breakfast consisted of a slab of milk chocolate and a bottle of Armenian brandy.

Obviously, he was highly Russified, for he was clearly of the opinion that a bottle once opened had to be finished. It was a matter of honor. It couldn't be left a third or a half drunk: That would have been regarded almost as an insult. I don't drink brandy at the best of times, let alone at nine in the morning, but from politeness, I did so. It didn't go very well with the milk chocolate, but I didn't want him to think that I was an effete and finicky foreigner.

As far as I remember, we talked of the end of the Soviet Union and the need for Dagestan, a Muslim republic, to become independent. What I remember more distinctly was that, by ten o'clock, the bottle was finished, at which I felt most relieved. I had proved myself, and now I could return to the hotel to sleep it off.

To my horror, however, our host went off for a while and returned with a second bottle. I managed surreptitiously to pour my third of that bottle into the ground: Our host was less vigilant after having drunk a third of a bottle of brandy in an hour.

Well, I thought as we parted, somewhat unsteadily, if this man in the Russian naval uniform who drinks two-thirds of a bottle of brandy at breakfast is the local Muslim militant, goodness knows what the rest of the population is like as far as drink is concerned. Many years of Russian and Soviet rule had obviously had a profound effect on local customs. Islam must be on the retreat.

At the time, I thought that secularization was irreversible: that once a society had undergone it, religious belief couldn't again become influential in public affairs. This was a very superficial view, but I wasn't alone in holding it: It was almost an intellectual orthodoxy. Religious eggs couldn't be re-made from the secular omelet.

Oddly enough, I didn't reflect on my own personal experience.

I had thought much the same thing in the Shah's Iran, back in 1970, at the height of his so-called White Revolution. Again, my reasoning was based upon very slight experience, in this case of the prosperous and highly Westernized northern part of Tehran, where life seemed almost indistinguishable from that of the West, and where Islam was worn very lightly, if at all. Such Westernization was irresistible, I thought, and must spread. How wrong I proved to be! But I made the same mistake a quarter of a century later with regard to what was once Soviet Central Asia.

When I looked at the videos of the mob, young men, running through Makhachkala airport looking for Jews to torture, maim, and possibly kill, I was horrified by their primitive delight in what they were doing. Their sense of high purpose was unmistakable. This was much better fun than anything else they could possibly have been doing: for to be vicious in the name of righteousness is a luxury that no money can buy.

Curiously enough, apart from those who wore Muslim beards, the young men were very Western in appearance. They wore jeans, T-shirts, and baseball caps. Apart from shouting *Allahu akbar!* they would have fitted in perfectly with a Black Lives Matter mob. It seems, then, that Westernization can happen without secularization. It's easier to combine the worst of different trends than the best of them.

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