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# Five Best: Amy Knight

on Russia, Chechnya and terrorism



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## A Russian Diary

By Anna Politkovskaya (2007)

**1. Award-winning** Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was brutally gunned down in the stairwell of her Moscow apartment house in October 2006, made more than 50 trips to the Russian republic of Chechnya after the

outbreak of the Kremlin's second war there in 1999. Her gripping diary of the period from December 2003 to August 2005 spares no detail in describing the atrocities—extra-judicial killings, torture, kidnappings and rape—committed by Russian troops against Chechen civilians. The Chechens retaliated with terrorist acts in Russia, aimed, futilely, at forcing Moscow to concede to their separatist demands. One of the most chilling episodes in Politkovskaya's diary is her description of a 2004 face-to-face meeting with Ramzan Kadyrov, the man who implemented the Kremlin's reign of terror against the Chechen people and who, to this day, remains the unchallenged leader of the Chechen Republic. At the end of the meeting, she was, she relates, in "tears of despair that someone like this can exist." The Kremlin, she writes, "fosters a baby dragon, which it then has to keep feeding to stop him from setting everything on fire."

## The Moscow Bombings of September 1999

By John Dunlop (2014)

**2. John Dunlop's study** of the 1999 bombings of four apartment buildings in Russia that killed nearly 300 people remains the definitive work on this horrifying episode of terrorism. Drawing on a vast number of sources—including reports by independent Russian journalists and eyewitness accounts—Mr. Dunlop makes a convincing case that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) not only had advance knowledge of the bombings but in fact orchestrated them. The purpose was to generate support for the relatively unknown prime minister at the time, Vladimir Putin, by blaming the attacks on Chechens and thereby justifying a second war with Chechnya that made Mr. Putin a national hero and paved the way for his capturing the presidency in 2000. Although many Russians have long suspected that the FSB, and possibly Mr. Putin himself, was behind these acts of terrorism, they are surprisingly indifferent about the implications.

## Chechnya's Terrorist Network

By Elena Pokalova (2015)

**3. A specialist** in security studies at the National Defense University, Elena Pokalova provides an impressive analysis of the Chechen and North Caucasian terrorist movements as they evolved after the Soviet collapse. She explains, cogently, how the Kremlin's repressive policies radicalized Islamic groups in the North Caucasus and led them from separatist insurgencies to terrorism. The book's compelling account of two of the most devastating terrorist episodes in Russia since Mr. Putin came to power—the October 2002 Moscow theater siege and the September 2004 hostage-taking at a school in Beslan, North Ossetia—makes the point. In both cases, the gross incompetence of the FSB and the Kremlin's refusal to negotiate with the terrorists resulted in many needless deaths. The Kremlin, the author points out, would go on to use these terrorist crises as justifications for its increasingly authoritarian powers. The Russian approach to the terrorist threat, Ms. Pokalova notes, illustrates the need to go beyond military action—namely, by appealing to the hearts and minds of the population. The Putin regime, it would appear, has yet to grasp this crucial idea.

## The Brothers

By Masha Gessen (2015)

**4. The story of** Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the two brothers who carried out the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, is as complex as it is riveting. It is a story that Masha Gessen relates with the benefit of her insights as a Russian émigré herself. The Tsarnaev family, she argues, was on the wrong side of history—they had arrived in the U.S. from Dagestan in Russia's North Caucasus just after 9/11, “when the United States stopped

viewing Chechen rebels as freedom fighters and started seeing them through Russian optics, as likely Islamic terrorists.” The book is a fascinating history of the dysfunctional, alienated Tsarnaev family. After the bombings, Ms. Gessen looks for answers in Dagestan, where Tamerlan spent several months in 2012. One may disagree with some of her theories, but she has provided a remarkably detailed portrait of the brothers whose fateful path led to the Boston bombings.

## Inferno in Chechnya

By Brian Glyn Williams (2015)

**5. A respected scholar** of Islam, Brian Glyn Williams takes us through the history of Russian efforts to incorporate Chechnya into the Russian Empire in the 18th century, its brutal 19th-century military conquest of the region, Stalin’s forced deportation of hundreds of thousands of Chechens to Central Asia in 1944, and the two savage Chechen wars that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. In his illuminating study, Mr. Williams explores the shift, after 9/11, that led Americans to begin viewing Chechens as co-conspirators with terrorists—and he argues convincingly against the claim that Chechens were allied with al Qaeda. Writing of the Boston bombers, he stresses that Tamerlan Tsarnaev was not inspired by Chechen separatists—their cause was focused on Russia. He concludes that Tamerlan was influenced by global jihadists when he visited Dagestan in 2012 and that he came back home on a mission to kill Americans.

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