

IN ALEPPO, RUSSIA CONTINUES A LONG HISTORY

Amir Taheri 11 decembre 2016

In the past few days Russian media have been full of reports and speculations regarding “the imminent end “of the campaign that President Vladimir Putin has led against insurgents in Aleppo, Syria’s second largest city.

The Kremlin controlled Sputnik agency claims that Russia and the remnants of Syrian head of regime Bashar Al-Assad’s army plus Lebanese, Iraqi, Afghan and Iranian “volunteers” controlled by Tehran are about to “finish it off.”

If that happens, Aleppo, one of Islam’s greatest historic centers, won’t be the first city of its stature to be “finished off” by Russians. What is happening in Aleppo contains echoes of what Russia, always helped by local “allies” did in a dozen other Islamic cities.

The first in the line of Islamic cities to be” finished off” was, of course, Kazan, capital of the Muslim Khanate that had ruled Russia itself for almost two centuries. Kazan had been found at the start of the 11th century AD as a trading post linking the steppes to the Siberian vastness.

Several Caliphs sent missionaries to the region to convert the locals to Islam. In time, Kazan and its environs became one of the few territories to adopt Islam without being conquered by an Islamic army. From early 15th century Kazan became the main city of the main city of Tatars, the remnants of Chengiz Khan’s Golden Horde, who had converted to Islam. It was officially declared the capital of the Khanate in 1438, a status it retained until 1552 when it was conquered by the Russian Tsar Ivan the Awe-Inspiring (or Terrible).

Ivan was able to seize Kazan thanks to the collaboration of Bashkir beys (chiefs) who, like Bashar Al-Assad today, claimed to be Muslims but were prepared to help an “Infidel” army seize a city of Islam. Ivan and his local allies razed the city to the ground and beheaded over 100 Tatar chiefs. The onion-shaped cupolas of the Saint Basil Cathedral in Moscow, built in 1561 to mark Ivan’s victory over Muslims, represent the chopped heads of the Tatar chiefs with their turbans and headgears.

Over the centuries, the people of Kazan rebuilt their cities, including many of the mosques and madrassahs razed to the ground by the Russians.

A second wave of Russian destruction came between 1920 and 1930 when Lenin and his successor Stalin ordered that all traces of Islam be effaced in Kazan. Again, Russia’s local allies, including followers of the Muslim Communist the Tatar Sultan Aliev (Galiev in Russian) helped the Russians as Assad is doing in Aleppo today.

The Bashkir Muslims who had helped Ivan destroy Kazan, didn’t escape a terrible fate at the hands of the Terrible Tsar. Their capital Oufa was razed to the ground in 1557 and the city’s biggest mosque replaced with the Saint Trinity Basilica. This time a band of Tatar marauders led by one Sheybak Bey played Assad’s role by collaborating with the Russian invader.

Another great Muslim city the Russian destroyed was Merv, a Central Asian metropolis that had dazzled people during the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BC). The Russians captured the city in 1881. This time the Muslim traitor was the adventurer Ali Khanov, who had joined the Tsarist army and obtained the rank of colonel. Unlike Kazan and Oufa which were to recover from their ordeal centuries later, Merv never recovered.

Even today it is little more than a heap of ruins.

In the 18th century it was the turn of Baku, capital of the Iranian province of Shirvan, now re-named Azerbaijan, to suffer an assault by Russia.

For the following half a century, Baku changed hands between a rising Russia and a declining Iran three times. Its final annexation by Russia came under the Treaty of Turkmanchai (1828) after local traitors, this time led by Turkic tribal chiefs and Christian minorities, sided with Russians. The population of the city, estimated at fewer than 20,000 at the time, most of them ethnic Tats and Taleshis were deported to Iran where they settled as “immigrants” (mujahers).

In more recent times, Russia has orchestrated the turning of at least two other Muslim cities into rabble: Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, and Grozny the capital of the autonomous Chechen republic. Kabul was destroyed during the Soviet invasion and occupation of 1980-89 when the local collaborators were Afghan Communist factions Khalq (People) and Parcham (Banner). The Uzbek militia, known as Glim-Jam (Carpet Stealers) recruited by the Red Army played the role that Assad’s loyal forces have assumed in Aleppo today.

Grozny had been a battlefield between Russia and Chechens since the 18th century. But its final destruction came in January 2000 when Vladimir Putin ordered carpet-bombing operations of the kind witnessed in Aleppo. Like now in Aleppo, Russia ordered a ceasefire to allow civilians to leave. Once this had been done, Russian forces launched the final assault. By 6 February the Russian flag was hoisted at the center of a city which was now a heap of rabble. Sixteen years later, Grozny’s population is only two-thirds of what it was in 2000. Of the city’s 6700 houses and apartments in 2000, only 900 have been rebuilt.

In Grozny, Assad’s role was played by Ramzan Qadyrov and his Sufi group of followers. In the case of Russia and its Muslim neighbors, history repeats itself, always as a deeper tragedy. END

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