

## INTRODUCTION

### Russo-Chechen Conflict: Varying Perspectives

The Russo-Chechen conflict is a long running one and still poses a problem in the contemporary context. Most analyses of the conflict tend to pitch it as a regional issue situated in the Caucasus, or as a contemporary security issue. This tends to limit the cause for the conflict to an issue of resources (namely oil) and the conflict is seen in terms of its implications on the region (including neighbours and the European Union).

There are numerous journalistic accounts of the contemporary episodes in the conflict (i.e. the war of 1994 and 1999) like Sebastian Smith's book *Allah's Mountains* and Vanora Bennett's book *Crying Wolf: The Return of War to Chechnya*.<sup>1</sup> These accounts provide a lot of details of the conflict from a first hand perspective. As resources for furnishing the basic facts of an analysis of the conflict these accounts are invaluable – the purpose of journalistic accounts is to provide an insight and a view of things from the ground. Their limitation, however, is the fact that they are more descriptive than analytical. Furthermore, while these accounts (specifically Bennett's and Smith's) do make an attempt to dig up the history of the conflict but in a very cursory fashion, which does not really help to sufficiently explain the contemporary episodes of the conflict.

Many of the analyses of this conflict tend to look at it as a securitised ethnic and communal conflict or as a peace and conflict studies issue.<sup>2</sup> These approaches tend to look for the very immediate and concrete causes for the conflict. Also, since these approaches are solution-oriented they tend to build an analysis that will result in a workable peace solution. Consequently, these studies tend to be formulaic in applying a predefined model for analysis, by basing their analysis on experience gained in other conflict situations. The advantage of this analysis is that it is able to identify the potential causes of a conflict in very concrete terms – usually economic resources or political resources. However, the conflict is not given a more targeted analysis and the limitation of such accounts is that they are grounded in the most contemporary events, i.e. only the recent or more immediate causes of conflict are given prominence, and ignore its extended history. Other accounts tend to view the conflict from a human rights perspective.<sup>3</sup> Certainly there is considerable merit to look at the conflict in the light of human rights violations. It highlights the fact that the most serious issue in this conflict is by far the human suffering caused by it, especially to the civilians of both Chechnya and Russia.

The Danish Association for Research on the Caucasus (DARC) poses the Russo-Chechen conflict as both a regional issue entailing human rights violations as well as an issue of peace and conflict.<sup>4</sup> This perspective combines the regional perspective with the human rights approach and the peace and conflict studies approach. But like exclusively human rights-oriented and peace and conflict studies approaches, DARC's combined approach lacks historical depth.

One of the few works that does seem to put some kind of historical perspective on the problem is a set of essays in a collection titled, "*Russia and Chechnia [sic]: The Permanent Crisis – Essays on Russo-Chechen Relations*."<sup>5</sup> The work contains essays that deal with each phase of Russo-Chechen conflict. However, there is no link between the essays – the essays stand as individual pieces. Each essay analyses a particular event or phenomenon from a given phase in Russo-Chechen relations – for instance Bulent Gokay's essay traces the interpretation of Imam Shamil's resistance movement over time, while William Flemming's essay furnishes the various details of the deportation of the Chechens in 1944 and Pontus Siren's essay seeks to answer why the Russians and Chechens went to

war in 1994. But these essays look at specific events and phenomena and do not link up into a cohesive narrative of events (not that that is necessarily the object of the authors of the work).

## **Objectives of this Study**

Russia and Chechnya's relations are aptly described as "the permanent crisis."<sup>6</sup> The two have had a long history of conflict beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Imperial Russian Army invaded the region, and stretching to the present day, where the status of Chechen aspirations for an independent nation-state still remain ambiguous and contested by Russia. This study will attempt to analyse the Russo-Chechen conflict in light of its history, look at this relationship of conflict as a historical phenomenon, as well as attempt to determine the primary – in contrast to the contemporary – causes of the conflict based on this historical analysis. This analysis will be conducted using scholarly and other works available.<sup>7</sup> For instance, there is a need to understand the Russo-Chechen wars of 1994 and 1999, not as isolated events but ones that have specific historical roots and placing these wars in their specific historical context. Based on a historical analysis, this study contends that the nature of the conflict between the two sides is the result of two irreconcilable factors, namely, the divergent political positions both sides have taken in the conflict. One factor is that of adversarial Russian policy and attitude towards Chechen aspirations. As will be demonstrated during the course of this study, their policy and attitude is a very aggressive one, looking to thwart Chechen nationalism at all costs. What began as a colonial mission driven by a military-strategic vision soon turned into a deliberate policy to integrate the Chechens into Russia. The second factor is that of a fierce Chechen nationalism, which makes it unacceptable to the Chechens to integrate into the Russian polity. This fierce nationalism has its roots in the revival of Sufi Islam in the region and unified Chechen opposition to Russian invasion. Both these factors will be elaborated during the course of the study.

The study divides the history of Russo-Chechen conflict into three distinct phases – the imperial phase, the Soviet phase and the post-Soviet phase. The demarcation of each phase in terms of time is important but the exact dates involved in the transition from one phase to another are not so crucial. In broad terms, the beginning of the imperial phase of Russo-Chechen relations lies at the point of first contact between the two sides, close to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Russian soldiers fought directly with their Chechen opponents. The entry of the Russian army into this region signified the implementation of its drive to colonise the region. The imperial phase ended with the Russian Revolution and the seizure of power by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1917 – the phase of the Soviet Union (USSR). This phase led to the integration of a number of "autonomous regions," including that of the Chechens, into the USSR and lasted about seventy four years, till December 1991, when the USSR collapsed. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russo-Chechen relations entered their third and current phase – the post-Soviet phase.

It will be noted that the phases have been created from an entirely Russian perspective. This is a useful categorisation of the history, as it is the Russians who in a sense initiated the conflict by their drive to colonise, and as the more powerful entity in the conflict have tended to dictate its direction. Thus, the three phases outlined are the result of the internal political dynamics of Russia. The imperial phase sees the two sides first come into contact with each other. With the collapse of imperial rule due to revolutionary activity in Russia, there is the creation of a new, socialist political system in Russia – namely, the Soviet Union. Russia in the Soviet Union saw a new political order established, with a new government and leadership, resulting in considerable change in the way that the Chechens were dealt with. Finally, the collapse of the Soviet Union, saw the emergence of a

changed political system in all the countries of the Soviet Union, including Russia. This ushered in another, more violent, stage in Russo-Chechen relations – the post-Soviet phase.

The structure of the study that follows is based on the phases delineated above. Chapter 2 looks at the idea of ethnicity and nationalism in some detail and applies it to the Chechens. Having established the Chechens as a unique nation and a brief study of what constitutes nationhood, the study proceeds to look at the three phases of Russo-Chechen relations. Chapter 3 looks at the imperial phase, while chapter 4 looks at the Soviet phase of Russo-Chechen relations. The latest phase of conflict, i.e. the post-Soviet phase, has seen two wars between the two sides. Two chapters are dedicated to the post-Soviet phase: Chapter 5 looks at the war of 1994 while Chapter 6 looks at the war of 1999. Chapter 7 while retracing the conflict in each phase and elaborating the thesis of the study presents the conclusions, as well as the weaknesses of this analysis and the potential for further studies.

## **References**

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2. For example, see Tarja Vayrynen, “Securitized Ethnic and Communal Conflicts”, in *Peace and Conflict Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, December 1997, George Mason University, at <http://www.gmu.edu/academic/pcs/vayryn.html>
3. For example, see Oktay Tanrisever. “A Symposium on Chechnya – Russian Nationalism and Moscow’s Violations of Human Rights in the Second Chechen War,” in *Human Rights Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3, April – June, 2001.
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5. Ben Fowkes, (ed), *Russia and Chechnia: The Permanent Crisis Essays on Russo-Chechen Relations*, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 1998.
6. This is part of the title of a book – “Russia and Chechnia [*sic*]: The Permanent Crisis,” Fowkes, *ibid*.
7. The literature consulted for this analysis is all available in the English language; sources in other languages were not consulted for this study.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **CHECHEN ETHNO-NATIONALISM**

#### **What is Chechen Ethno-Nationalism?**

With reference to Chechen history and present aspirations, the terms “ethnicity” and “ethno-nationalism” and some of their implications need to be discussed.

“Ethnicity” is perhaps one of the more basic ways of identifying oneself. Humans tend to identify themselves as part of a larger group – it is in our nature as social beings. It has been described as “primordial” by many authors, i.e. something which has existed from before, something that is primary in terms of origin, creating an unbreakable bond with others of similar “ethnic” background. It is a powerful form of association – as Robin Cohen, a sociologist, puts it “It is the closest form of association that can be achieved by a collectivity of humans.”<sup>1</sup> The basis of “ethnicity” is the concept of group identity.

What constitutes ethnicity? Cohen feels that there are two dimensions to ethnicity – subjective and objective. Subjectively, ethnicity and ethnic identification are based on human perception—it is in essence the “meaning of ethnicity to the actors themselves.”<sup>12</sup> It is the members of an ethnic group who view themselves and those in their group as being of the same ethnicity. This perception of being from the same group can be based on any subjective or objective factor, (for example – language), as long as it is mutually accepted by members of the particular ethnic group. There is also an external perception by others viewing a set of people as an ethnic group, thus further reinforcing and strengthening their ethnic identity. Again this can be based on any subjective or objective factor that runs across the identified group, such as, language. Tarja Vayrynen, Research Director of the Tampere Peace Research Institute in Finland, expands this and states: “[ethnicity] is a part of the frame of reference of the social group in terms of which both the physical as well as socio-cultural world is interpreted... ethnicity is a way to typify the world, others and oneself.”<sup>3</sup>

By the objective dimension is meant that exogenous force that reinforces existent perception or creates a new sense of ethnicity. Cohen argues that often this is not treated as importantly as the subjective dimension but that it ought to be. Objective factors that give rise to notions of ethnicity include, first of all legal and political restrictions on “what occupations and activities are permitted to subordinated groups.”<sup>4</sup> A current-day example of this is the types of work that were, or were not allowed to the South African Blacks. A second objective criterion is coerced migration – like that of Indians of the South Asian subcontinent to the east coast of Africa as labour during the British Raj. Finally, there is the third objective factor – phenotype or appearance. This is by no means an exhaustive set of objective criteria, but demonstrative of the objective or exogenous dimension of ethnicity.

What is important to note from the above discussion is that there are two experiences (“dimensions”) of ethnicity – those that are subjectively experienced by members of an ethnic grouping and those that externally shape and influence an ethnic grouping.

Walker Connor, also a sociologist, concurs with the above, in that he believes that it is important to define the group that one belongs to in relation to others. Connor introduces an interesting distinction between the concept of “nation” and “ethnicity.” He states, “we can describe the nation as a self-differentiating ethnic group.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, a nation is a group that differentiates itself from other groups on the basis of any factor that may allow this differentiation. Crucially, he follows on to state: “[a] prerequisite of nationhood is a popularly-held awareness or belief that one’s own group is unique in a most vital sense. In the absence of such a popularly-held conviction, there is only an ethnic group... without a realisation of this fact... a nation does not exist.”<sup>16</sup> Connor distinguishes a nation from an ethnicity by claiming that a nation is a unique ethnic group that has realised that it is indeed different to and separate from other groupings. Furthermore, because of this more knowledge-oriented perception of ethnicity, overt cultural symbols do not matter as much as the attitude of the group itself. However, once a group begins to differentiate itself as different to others, it will naturally turn to more overt cultural symbols – anything from language to religion, cultures and traditions.

Essentially then, an ethnicity is the expression of the “us and them” syndrome.<sup>7</sup> Ethnicity is overtly expressed in the form of cultural symbols, but equally important are the perceptions that surround the ethnicity. While Cohen believes that this perception has a subjective and objective component, Connor tends to lean more toward the side of the self perception of a group in believing it is a distinct ethnicity.

What constitutes ethnicity will vary from context to context. For example Sean Byrne and Neal Carter, both political scientists, in a unique analysis of ethno-territorial conflict in Northern Ireland and Quebec, proposes six ethnic “variables,” which they label as “socio-cubism” and that constitute a potent basis of ethnicity:

- 1) History
- 2) Religion
- 3) Demographics
- 4) Political institutions and non-institutional behaviour
- 5) Economics
- 6) Psycho-cultural factors<sup>8</sup>

Terrence Ranger equates ethnicity in Africa with tribalism.<sup>9</sup> Soviet sociologists, however, base their ethnic analysis on language – to them, language provides the key distinction between groups.

Having briefly looked at the concept of ethnicity, the concept of nationalism needs some analysis. We already saw that Connor believes a nation to be a “self-differentiating” ethnic group. The concept of nation can be interpreted as going a little beyond this. Moynihan states that the difference between the two is one of “degree.”<sup>10</sup> He states that the nation is the “highest form of the ethnic group” which along with a subjective emotional component has an objective form in its territorial link.<sup>11</sup> So, a nation is defined as a grouping of people, replete with their characteristics (language, ethnicity, religion etc.), but linked to a demarcated territory. The political scientist, Anthony D. Smith confirms this. He defines nationalism as “an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity and identity of a human population, some of whose members conceive it to constitute an actual or potential ‘nation’.”<sup>13</sup> He further states that a nation is a “named human population sharing an historic territory (amongst a host of other qualities, but the link with territory is crucial).”<sup>14</sup> This is quite important in distinguishing a nation from an ethnicity, as is exemplified by the case of the Kurds who span the territories of a few nation-states consequently are not considered

a nation. Therefore, while an ethnicity builds up the basic group identity, when that group is linked to a particular territory it becomes a nation. Therefore, nationalism is an ideology that can employ the ethnic bond in calling to attain independence and/or maintain the autonomy, unity and identity of a “territorial community of shared history and culture.”<sup>15</sup> In other words “nation” is a bond that can be achieved through the vehicle of “ethnicity.”

However, this is only one interpretation of nation and nationalism, namely the ethnic form of nationalism. Nation and nationalism have other forms too, for instance there is the concept of civic nationalism. This is nationalism based on a different method of identity, a rather more idealistic identity based on the principles of the French Revolution, which “sees the nation as a territorial association of citizens living under the same laws and sharing a mass, public culture.”<sup>16</sup> However, for the purposes of this study, ethno-nationalism is the form of nationalism that is of concern and that shall be used. This study deals with Chechen ethno-nationalism.

### **Defence of the Ethnic Paradigm**

Often ethnicity is dismissed as a viable concept for analysing politics, especially in the modern world. There have been some major criticisms of the concept of ethnicity as a tool for political analysis. Ethnicity is a controversial topic and, therefore, a controversial paradigm. It has been criticised by three schools of thought – the Marxists; the nationalists; and those who support the globalisation perspective.<sup>17</sup>

Marxists criticise ethnicity on the basis of its criteria of identification. They believe that group identity in the modern world is differentiated along class lines. Ethnic groupings are, according to Marxists, an “epiphenomenon” or “false consciousness.”<sup>18</sup> It is something that has been created for the use of the dominant classes in a society, to allow them to subjugate other classes. Moreover, modern capitalist social ordering has meant that the interests of people are now based on the relations of production that define capitalism.

Certainly there is some truth in the Marxist perspective. But it should be realised that class alignment is only true where there is awareness of class-based interests. People’s awareness of their interests need not be class-based and often they are not – despite the beliefs of Marxists that “people live not just by interests alone but also by their emotions... anger, grief, anxiety, jealousy, affection, fear and devotion.”<sup>19</sup> The awareness of one’s interests need not exclusively be class-based and may more often be based on their emotions.

Nationalists argue that ethnicity only serves to divide and does not unite groups. For nationalists, the largest logical grouping of people is at the level of a nation. However, nations are not necessarily constituted of a single ethnic group and can be multi-ethnic in nature. It is in these multi-ethnic nations that nationalists feel ethnically-based identification will destroy national unity. So, the nationalists present the nation as a rival form of identification to ethnicity and advance it as “an object of affection, not merely a vehicle for advancing an interest.”<sup>20</sup> Again there is a fair degree of truth to this, but a nation-state is often too “large and amorphous an entity to be the object of intimate affection.”<sup>21</sup>

To those in favour of the globalisation perspective, ethnicity is an “irrelevant anachronism,” since globalisation has meant the demise of differences and the realisation of globally common set of problems and hopes.<sup>22</sup> The world has become increasingly interlinked and interdependent. But this

very process of “the dissolution of the known world” creates in people a reaction whereby they reach out to what is familiar and local to them – their ethnicity.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note that these critiques are more of the implications of ethnicity, not necessarily the paradigm itself. The Marxists can claim a valid criticism – perhaps class consciousness is a better way of analysing certain kinds of society, especially modern capitalist society. However, it needs to be noted that people do not live simply by their interests but rather by their emotions as well.<sup>24</sup> The nationalist and globalisation critiques are merely lamenting the problems caused by ethnic *identification*. Ethnicity as a method of analysis is by no means flawed, and there is ample evidence to suggest it is a valid one. The fact is that ethnicity remains the single most potent form of association amongst a group of people. It has been so in the past and it remains so in the present.

There is another thread that emerges in the critiques. For instance, in the three critiques outlined earlier, the idea of outdated-ness seeps in. Marxism and nationalism indicate the decline of an old kind of identity and claim the arrival of a new kind – class-based in the Marxian case and a higher multi-ethnic grouping in the case of the latter perspective. Globalisation proponents go even further and claim global linkages because of interdependency. Again, it is hard to deny the logic of these positions as the modern world does bear witness to the types of identification that the three perspectives talk of. But the role of ethnicity in associative group behaviour and attitudes cannot be denied – it has not been phased out. To the contrary, ethnicity seems to be a powerful force in today’s world. A host of modern conflicts are ethnically driven. The ethnic paradigm is very much a valid paradigm of conflict analysis.

### **Ethno-Nationalism and Conflict**

As in other forms of nationalism, conflict can also be defined in relation to ethno-nationalism. As Vayrynen puts it, “[an] ethnic group is about boundary maintenance; ethnicity is a way to structure interaction which allows the persistence of differences.”<sup>25</sup> So, in essence ethno-nationalism allows one group of people to distinguish themselves from another – to identify themselves as a distinct group in order to pool common interests and resources. What is important to note, however, is that this identification can become adversarial and eventually violent. The securitisation of an ethnic identity takes place when the survival of that identity is threatened and those who identify with that ethnicity may revert to violence in order to protect their identity.

At a broader level nationalism sees two perspectives – the integrative and the disintegrative. Ethnic conflict theory posits a few conditions that result in the outbreak of conflict by an ethnicity. One of these conditions is the desire of an ethnic group to access certain political and economic resources.<sup>26</sup> If an ethnicity is denied political and economic resources that it (or its leadership) requires or needs then it is likely to resort to violence to contest for the acquisition of those resources, without which their very survival is at stake.

### **Chechen Ethnic Identity**

Applying these theories and paradigms to the Chechens’ self-perceptions is not an easy task. First we need to decide whether it is valid to label the Chechens as an ethnic group. Are the Chechens a unique enough group in the Caucasus to enable them to be termed an ethnicity? If one looks through the insights of history, or even the Russian response, the answer is yes. As a North Caucasian group they are certainly quite unique. They have a separate and unique historical development and

consequently shaping a unique ethnic identity. There are two elements that make the Chechens a distinct ethnic group – the indigenous links of the Chechens to their territory for centuries, and the role of Islam since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

The Chechens are part of a very unique linguistic group. The Chechen language is a distinctive member of the Nakh branch of the East Caucasian family.<sup>27</sup> The only other people whose language is related to the Chechens are their cousin tribe, the Ingush, and the tiny grouping of Batsbii (a 1926 census put their population at just over 2,000 individuals but the author is unaware of current estimations).<sup>28</sup> Even the Ingush language shares only 40% of the vocabulary of the Chechen tongue. So, the Chechens are linguistically a very unique group.

The Chechens have been resident in this part of the Caucasus for thousands of years. They were not conquered by the Arabs, Persians, Turks and Mongols, which most of the rest of Europe and Asia were.<sup>29</sup> They have developed in near isolation. The other Caucasian peoples have frequently been conquered and have been under the influence of various empires. The Caucasus by virtue of being at a cross roads of empire has typically been subject to conquest. But the Chechens have been relatively safe from this conquest – until the Russians made a serious bid for the Caucasus in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, the Chechens have also evolved a less hierarchical social system than the rest of the Caucasus. The Chechens have a tribal set up that is still quite strong.<sup>30</sup> This system saw nine *tukhumi* (clans), each with its sub groups (called *taipy*), which are equals and thus free of the characteristics of feudalism. This again is fairly unique in the Caucasus. When the Russians invaded the Caucasus in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, one strategy they employed was making alliances with the nobilities of the lands being conquered. So, the societies with hierarchies were more easily conquered, like the Ossetians, Kabardians and the Kumyks.<sup>31</sup> The Chechens, like the Daghestanis, did not have feudal relations, thus offered more resistance to the Russians.

The Chechens converted to Islam sometime in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Naqshbandi Sufis first made converts amongst the North Caucasians.<sup>32</sup> The particular strand of Islam that took a hold in Chechnya was Sufi-guided. Thus, Sufi Imams led the establishment of Islam in the region.<sup>33</sup> The only other groups in the Caucasus that also adopted Islam are the Daghestanis and the Ingush. Islam has retained a very powerful role in Chechen history, beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact this was and is a key factor – Sufi Islam was used to unite the Chechens and much of the Caucasus to fight the “holy” war against the Russian invaders. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the North Caucasians came under attack from the Russians and, as Lesley Blanch, who wrote the authoritative work *Sabres of Paradise*, put it, “[Islam] thrived on Persecution [from the invading Russians]... around 1827, it sprang up, refreshed.”<sup>34</sup>

Earlier the framework established to study ethnicity established a subjective and an objective experience of ethnic identity. This same strand allowed the Russians to differentiate themselves from the Chechens – to view their language and culture as inferior. In fact, as imperial conquerors of the Caucasus, they found it hard to understand why the Chechens should resist the greatness of Russian civilisation. In a similar vein, Islam allowed the Chechens to set themselves apart from the Russians (the subjective, internal interpretation of ethnicity) and concurrently it also allowed the Russians to identify their enemies in the Caucasus (the objective, exogenous interpretation of ethnicity). In fact, Islam allowed the Chechens to identify themselves as taking part in a greater Caucasian struggle for freedom.

Thus, these two broad strands define what it means to be ethnically Chechen. We can go one step further and deduce that the Chechens possess a national character, as they are an ethnic group linked to a territory. It is these two strands that are also the basis of the ethno-nationalist struggle that the Chechens have waged against the Russians, since first coming into contact with them. With regard to the first strand, the Chechens were looking to protect their heritage as a distinct linguistic group, to protect their territorial link and their social structure. The Chechens were and are distinct from the Russians, as they are from most of the rest of the Caucasus.

Chechen tribal law called *adat* is overlaid with Islamic law or sharia.<sup>35</sup> Islam came into the region and added another layer atop Chechen ethnic identity. Islam gave the Chechen identity more strength in the face of opposition. As Vanorra Bennett, a journalist who worked in the region, states, "Islam reinforced and dignified the mountain tribes' already strong identity. It also gave them a *moral framework* in which they could interpret the Russian invasion as not only dangerous to their way of life but also wrong."<sup>36</sup> Islam provided the moral reason for resistance to the Russians, at all stages of this conflict. It was morally wrong to give into the Russians, who were and are infidels and conquerors, thus must be opposed.

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## **CHAPTER 2**

### **FIRST CONTACT: RUSSIAN IMPERIAL AMBITIONS IN THE CAUCASUS**

The Russian imperial ambitions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century set the tone for the future conflict with the Chechens. Specifically, the Russians sought to integrate the Chechens into the Russian empire. The rest of the Caucasus had integrated with relative ease and indeed, the Russians could see no reason why the North Caucasus would not want to be a part of their great empire. But there were a few trouble spots, including the Chechens, who held out and fought. As argued in the previous chapter, the Chechens were indigenous to the region and the nature of their religion meant that they would resist the Russian invasion. The Christian parts of the Caucasus integrated relatively easily, like Christian Ossetia. But the Chechens fought for their independence. They were a fiercely independent set of people, who realised their separateness from the Russians. Moreover, their religion provided a moral framework for resisting the Russians.

A note to the reader: in this chapter, the terms North Caucasus, Daghestan and Chechnya are used rather loosely. The North Caucasus includes the Chechens and Daghestanis as the major nationalities, but numerous small nationalities also exist within this region (like the Kalmyks or the Ingush). The resistance that the North Caucasians put up was unified and mobilised under the banner of Islam – so Islam carried regional level influence. In all the resistance efforts, the Chechens maintained a high degree of involvement, unified with the Daghestanis on a religious basis.

#### **Russian Motivation – Why Invade the Caucasus?**

The point of first contact between the Russians and the Chechens was the result of Russian imperial expansion. Specifically, the Russians first came into contact with the Chechens as a deliberate state policy in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with Russian armies and Chechen fighters coming into direct conflict with each other. Chechen raiders and bandits had attacked the frontier outposts of the Russian empire frequently since the time the Russians had first established a presence in the Caucasus in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But the Russians formally engaged the Chechens in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Most authors who look at the history of the conflict begin with Russian perceptions of the Chechens and the North Caucasians in general, as reflected in Russian literature at the time. Russian writers at the time – from Alexander Pushkin (see *The prisoner of the Caucasus*, *Evgeny Onegin*) to Leo Tolstoy (see *Hadji Murat*) – painted a very romantic picture of the region. The inhabitants of the North Caucasus were a barbaric and wildly free set of people. Their terrain is depicted as dramatic and so are the personalities of these wild mountain people. The North Caucasians were presented in a romanticised light, from an older more romantic period in human history. But this image was tempered by the fact that these people were still backward; they were the barbaric tribes from the mountains. They were famous as bandits and raiders. The Russians, with their more modern European ways of thinking, viewed the peoples of the North Caucasus as culturally inferior with their tribal laws, customs and loyalty. Perhaps this is where the idea of the civilising mission comes from – Russian literature. The North Caucasians were barbaric and needed to be civilised.

Related to this civilising mission is the idea of the conquest of Christianity over Islam. The North Caucasians were predominantly Muslim by faith. Many of the South Caucasians were, on the other hand, Christian, like the Georgians. As an illustrative example of the conquest of Christianity, George 7<sup>th</sup> of Georgia requested that Georgia be assimilated in the Russian empire because “he believed that Russian rule would prove more enlightened; were they not co-religionists, too?”<sup>1</sup> More significantly, the peoples of the regions neighbouring Georgia were perceived as “fanatic Moslems.” Russia, of course, came to the rescue of their Christian brethren and in 1800 Emperor Paul of Russia accepted the Georgian Crown.<sup>2</sup> The Georgians supported their “Russian co-religionists,” fighting beside them in the Russo-Persian war of 1826 and “throughout their Long struggle against Shamyl and the Moslem Caucasian tribes”<sup>3</sup> Georgia thus, became a protectorate of the Russians, being protected from the fanatic Muslims that surrounded her.

The more concrete motivation for invading the Caucasus lies in the idea of colonisation and strategic motives. Both motivations actually go hand in hand. By establishing Chechnya as a colonial protectorate the Russians hoped to achieve certain strategic benefits. The colonisation of the Caucasus had begun well before the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in fact it goes back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> Russia had already acquired much of the Caucasus by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Russia's first two campaigns against the Caucasus took place in 1594 and in 1604.<sup>5</sup> Ever since, the Russians had a tenuous hold on Daghestan and very close relations with Georgia, Daghestan, along with Chechnya, remained a trouble spot and continued to resist. Thus, the second Caucasian campaign began in 1801, as a quest to pacify the Caucasus once and for all and complete its transition into the Russian sphere of influence as a colony. The renowned Imam Shamyl became involved in a long and bitter struggle with the Russians. With regard to strategic motivation, the colonisation of the Caucasus was an important goal. The logic of Russian expansion was driven by the idea of buffer zones. These buffer zones would, in “the event of an attack... lie, like an outer bastion, a girdle of buffer states, between Russia proper and any enemy.”<sup>6</sup> The reason for the Caucasian buffer zone came from the other regional powers, namely the Ottomans and the Persians. With the colonisation of the Caucasus, the Russians would have the necessary territory in the south to facilitate the fulfilment of their strategic requirement for a buffer zone at their frontiers.

In summary, the particular mix of motives to invade the Caucasus included some degree of practical motivation in the form of acquiring colonies with strategic implications. The motivation was also partially a civilising mission – to introduce a higher, Russian culture and language to the area and more importantly to Christianise the region. What this translated to was a policy that required the total submission of those in the region. However, the North Caucasians resisted the Russians. The Chechens (along with the Daghestanis) put up a great deal of resistance.

This resistance was unexpected for the Russians. A lot of the Caucasus had been relatively easy to conquer, like Georgia and Ossetia, in the previous bouts of Caucasian conquest. The fact that they were Christian nations meant that there was not the same strong moral opposition to invasion. So, the initial logic of colonisation and the civilising mission was soon lost in the logic of conquest, which is what overtook the initial drive to colonise. Soon the North Caucasus became more than simply an issue of colonisation and civilising – for the Russians it became a struggle to decimate the local nationalist fervour. This is discussed further in the section titled “Russian Methods – Bludgeoning Chechen Resistance” in this chapter.

## **Chechen Resistance**

The mobilisation of Chechen resistance was based on the moral framework provided by Islam. The most famous case of mobilisation based on Islam is that of Imam Shamil from Daghestan. However, the hold of religion and resistance based on religion was well under way by the time Imam Shamil led the resistance.

Islam had made inroads in the North Caucasus in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Chechen Islam was based on Sufism and has been represented by two Sufi trends: the Naqshbandi and the Qadiriya. The best known of the Naqshbandi are the brotherhoods of Yusup-Hadji and Tashu-Hadji. The most numerous qadiriya brotherhood is the Kunta-Hadji Kishiev order.<sup>7</sup> There was a strong emphasis on religious leaders and a strong tradition of religious leaders – Sufi Imams or Murids. So there was a strong element of leadership in the kind of Islam that the Chechens had converted to. This leadership was what became very prominent in the rebellions against the Russians. The first of these rebellions against the Russians came under the leadership of Sheikh Mansur, a Chechen shepherd, in 1785.<sup>8</sup> Islam was gaining much popularity under Russian persecution by this point. With the coming of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the Russians took up the banner of Caucasian conquest once again, three Imams raised the banner of Islamic Jihad against the Russians.

The first of these leaders was Khazi Mollah, who was declared Imam in 1830.<sup>9</sup> Khazi Mollah's Imamate resisted the Russian onslaught but had limited success. Khazi Mollah was followed by the treacherous Hamzad Beg.<sup>10</sup> Hamzad Beg's Imamate was characterised by vendettas and disunity.

The third Sufi Imam is Imam Shamil, by far the most inspiring leader and one who inspired the longest lasting rebellion against the Russian invaders. It is clear though, that by the time Imam Shamil became the third Imam the trend of religious leaders leading rebellions against the Russians was well established. Shamil was different because he led a rebellion that lasted the better part of 25 years – easily the longest running rebellion against the Russians. Thus, it may be useful to study Imam Shamil's movement in order to understand the kind of ferocious, religiously based resistance the Chechens put up against the Russians, and also as an indication of the role of the Sufi Brotherhood.

Imam Shamil was a shepherd from the Daghestani village of Ghimri in Daghestan, born in 1796.<sup>11</sup> Early on in his life he decided upon a path of religiously inclined study and soon after was well established in the Sufi brotherhood. He received most of his religious education and training within the Madrasas and schools located within Daghestan – one of the more famous ones being at Yaraghal under the auspices of Mullah Mohammad.<sup>12</sup> It is here that Shamil was first exposed to the rejection of Russian invasion on the basis of Islamic morality – a more militant Muridism was taught and exhorted at Yaraghal. Yaraghal was a centre for the revival of Islam in the North Caucasus, led by the Sufi Brotherhood – Shamil was just one of many who came to learn at Yaraghal. Sufi Islam, or Muridism as it was also known, made a comeback in the Caucasus after the Russian invasion. The invasion resulted in the persecution of the North Caucasians and provided the Sufi brotherhood the fuel with which to reignite Sufi Islam. As Lesley Blanch put it, Muridism “like most faiths, thrive on persecution.”<sup>13</sup> Shamil took on minor leadership roles, like a number of his companions and led small sorties against the Russians. With considerable experience behind him, Shamil became the third Imam of Daghestan by 1834 after the second Imam, Hamzad Beg, was murdered.<sup>14</sup>

Imam Shamil imposed Shariat on the entire Caucasus. Shamil's Imamate lasted for 25 years, indicating its resilience and Shamil's ability to mobilise the Muslim tribes of the North Caucasus.

Shamyl's movement centred around four tenets: unification of the Caucasus; the constant harassing of Russian troops; establishment of Shariat in Daghestan and finally his recognition of his divine mission.<sup>15</sup> His movement saw a great deal of success. However, eventually the brunt of Russian might was too much for Shamyl's movement to bear. Three factors have been proposed as resulting in the eventual defeat of Shamyl's movement: first, the "cumulative force of the Russian armies" which were concentrated in the Caucasus with the end of the Crimean war,<sup>16</sup> second, the appointment of Prince Bariatinsky as supreme commander of the forces in the Caucasus;<sup>17</sup> and third, internal dissensions that began to take their toll on Shamyl's movement.<sup>18</sup>

After Shamyl's surrender, the resistance to the Russians died down considerably. Many pockets continued resisting the Russian presence but not on the scale that Shamyl did. This dying down in the resistance is discussed in the section "After the Conquest" later in this chapter. Shamyl's case indicates the seriousness with which the Chechens took the defence of their homeland. In fact, Shamyl was just one of the more successful Chechen warriors and his narrative provides a good estimation of the vigour with which the North Caucasians generally fought for their freedom.

### **Russian Methods – Bludgeoning Chechen Resistance**

The way that the Russians perceived the Chechens showed in the way that the Russians dealt with them in their colonial expansion. Some have argued that the permanence of this conflict may have been avoidable had the Russians been more sensitive to local conditions. The Russians had a fairly blunt and brutal approach that crushed the locals completely – culturally, politically and economically: Russian colonisation sought complete integration. The Caucasian campaign was a long and protracted one, lasting near two centuries. Moreover, the Chechens showed a tremendous degree of resilience to the Russian advance. The Russian drive to colonise acquired a more brutal edge, looking to destroy the peoples of the North Caucasus as a nation (which is not to deny that colonisation cannot be a brutalisation of the concept of nationhood in the first place). The protracted nature of the conflict, both in terms of time and the resistance to the Russians, meant that the Russian campaign acquired a more desperate, anti-nation quality.

It is in General Yermelov that we find an example of this anti-nation campaign. Yermelov was one of the most successful Russian Generals in the Caucasus, becoming Commander in Chief of the Army of the South in 1816.<sup>19</sup> His was a name that inspired fear and with good reason. Yermelov was perhaps that one Russian General who realised that the campaign in the Caucasus required escalation. The war that Yermelov waged was of unprecedented viciousness. Yermelov's strategy was twofold. At one level he was playing out a more subtle and long term plan – a more gradual Russification of the conquered Caucasus. This essentially involved creating settlements of Russian soldiers and their families all over the Caucasus. It was system of cantonments where the "army of occupation was expected to live off the land and be entirely self supporting" and was "calculated to hold down the restless natives without necessarily resorting to arms."<sup>20</sup>

At another level, Yermelov used a more direct strategy – uncompromising violence in war. Yermelov himself admitted to the extreme nature of his methods, stating, "I desire that the terror of my name shall guard our frontiers more potently than chains or fortresses."<sup>21</sup> Yermelov was looking to terrorise the local population into submission. Another telling statement indicating Yermelov's methods, states, "I am inflexibly severe out of motives of humanity. One execution saves hundreds of Russian lives."<sup>22</sup>

More indicative of Russian intentions is the mass deportation of various North Caucasian nations. With Imam Shamyl's capture in 1859, the Russian government "expelled" 81,000 of his followers

from the Russian Empire, followed by another 22,500 in 1865.<sup>23</sup> This mass deportation was repeated by Stalin, in 1944. However, Tsarist Russia's execution of this deportation was not as "systematic" as Stalin's. A lot of Chechens managed to stay on in the Empire – close to 80% of them according to some estimates.<sup>24</sup> Other Muslim Caucasian nationalities were not so fortunate, for instance the Ubykh – "most of whom were expelled between 1864 and 1866 because of their obstinate effort to continue Shamil's fight after he himself had been defeated."<sup>25</sup> What is important to note from this is the notion that the Russians viewed the more aggressively independent nationalities of the Caucasus as problematic and looked to solve the problem through a policy of deportation. This deportation has been labelled by some as an early example of successful ethnic-cleansing.<sup>26</sup>

The extreme violence of the campaign against the Chechens coupled with the deportation is indicative of the lack of respect for the national independence of the North Caucasians, including the Chechens.

### **After the Conquest**

After the pacification of the Chechens, a policy of divide and rule was applied to them. The various Chechen groups were physically separated – like the Terek Chechens were separated from other Chechen groups by inserting a "band of Cossack territory stretching from Vladikavkaz to Grozny."<sup>27</sup> The loyal Cossack nationality was inserted into Chechen territory in order to disunite the Chechens as a national grouping.

Despite these tactics, Chechen resistance to the Russian occupation still continued, albeit in a less violent form. Sufi Islam was clamped down upon to some degree. The Naqshbandi order was suppressed by the Russians, who recognised the power of the Sufi Brotherhood.<sup>28</sup> With the suppression of the Naqshbandi order, the Qadiriya order made its presence felt in the North Caucasus. The Russian authorities tried to clamp down on the Qadiriya order as well but ended up provoking a revolt lasting from 1877–1878.<sup>29</sup> Despite the suppression, the two orders gained adherents and by 1917, almost all Chechens belonged to one of the two orders.<sup>30</sup> Thus, Sufi Islam retained a strong basis and a strong hold in Chechnya.

Putting the analysis together we note the following: we see that the Russians invaded the Caucasus in a drive to acquire colonies. (Colonisation does not necessarily imply a termination of the nationhood of the group being colonised.) The level of resistance the Russians meet within the North Caucasus, however, meant that they escalated their campaign and made it their mission to destroy the Chechens as a nation. The Chechens, along with other North Caucasian nationalities, primarily the Daghestanis, put up stiff resistance to Russian invasion, mobilised by the Sufi Brotherhood under the banner of Islam. However, this resistance was crushed and the Russians completed their conquest of the Caucasus. After the conquest, Sufi Islam retained a strong presence in Chechnya, possibly even gaining in strength. However, the key point to note is that the Russian campaign became decidedly more directed against the Chechens as a national grouping.

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## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CHECHNYA IN THE USSR**

The break-up of the USSR allowed a number of the republics within it to break away. The Caucasus republics were no exception and Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan took the opportunity that the failure of the Soviet state provided them. Russian dominance in the region, in terms of its oil and strategic interests, weakened after the abortive coup of 1991. The chaos that ensued in post-Soviet Russia meant that the Russians were not able to significantly assert their interests in the region. This was particularly apparent in the case of Chechnya, which declared its independence from the Russian Federation yet did not receive any immediate retributive action.

The USSR set out as a model for uniting a multitude of different nations under the banner of communism – a composite nation. According to one source it was composed of some one hundred and four distinct nationalities and had up to two hundred different spoken languages – certainly a diverse entity.<sup>1</sup> But the unity of this entity can certainly be questioned. In fact it can be argued that this unity was imposed through the threat of violence and that the various nationalisms were purposely suppressed, including Chechen nationalism.

This chapter argues that the diversity of the USSR was maintained through force and that once the threat of force was removed certain elements within the union chose to break away. More specifically it is argued that Chechnya too was forcibly kept within the USSR and that once the USSR started to collapse, the Chechens saw an opportunity to reassert their national identity. First, the notion of the USSR as a composite nation is brought into question. Then, the analysis developed is applied to the Russo-Chechen relations. Finally, the events of the late 1980s and the early 1990s are looked at as an opportunity for the Chechens to assert their independent national identity.

#### **The Soviet State – A Composite Nation?**

Bennett reports a very telling statement by the academic Marie Bennigsen Broxup: “From Kalinin’s dream to give everyone in the USSR ‘the psychology and ideals of an industrial worker in Petrograd’ to the later hybrid the *Homo Sovieticus*, the Soviet nationalities have been expected to fit within a mould acceptable to Russia.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the diversity of the USSR was acceptable as long as that diversity fit in with Russian needs and requirements – the term *Homo Sovieticus* being a reference to this standardisation in political thought. The internationalist communist doctrine of the friendship of peoples was a useful cover for what was really a highly centralised state imposing control over the entire USSR. Furthermore, according to Pearson, “nationalism represented the single biggest challenge and the most persistent rival authority to the Soviet establishment.”<sup>3</sup> In order to maintain the “unity” of the USSR, the Soviet state had to combat the nationalism of the states that composed it.

The Russian dominance of the USSR has two levels of possible analysis – at the level of the Union Republics (i.e. the Soviet Socialist Republics or SSR) and at the level of the Russian Federation republics (i.e. the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics or ASSR). Union republics formed the

USSR and were represented as such. The USSR included the Russian Federation with a total of fifteen union republics. (To illustrate, the Ukrainian SSR and the Bulgarian SSR also form part of the USSR.) Russian Federation republics include regions like Chechnya – regions that were relatively autonomous but were represented at the level of the Russian Federation.

At both levels, the Russian state (or rather the Russian dominated Soviet state) was imposing its will through certain tools of intervention. These tools of intervention can be seen in the policies and actions of the Russian state, which were aimed at forcing unity and suppressing nationalism.

First we consider the substantial deployment of the military and the development of extensive state security apparatuses within all federation republics. To recount and highlight all events of military and state security suppression of nationalist tendencies would be a laborious undertaking. However, narrating a couple of such incidents would be enough to highlight the case. In the late 1980s when the peoples of the USSR had been given more of a chance to express themselves, nationalist sentiment came out strong in the form of demonstrations and protests. For instance Georgians were pushing for their independence by the late 1980s, articulated via mass demonstrations.<sup>4</sup> But these demonstrations weren't tolerated. Soviet troops used "poison gas and pick shovels to crush a peaceful demonstration in Tbilisi" in April of 1989, resulting in the death of sixteen demonstrators.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Gorbachev sent troops to "occupy" the city of Baku, Azerbaijan, in April 1990 – a repressive act that resulted in the death of a hundred civilians.<sup>6</sup> And these are just cases in the "inner" empire (the USSR) – the "outer" empire (Warsaw Pact countries) saw many episodes of military based repression e.g. the Prague Spring 1968 or the Hungarian Uprising of 1956.<sup>7</sup> The Soviet military was prepared to deploy at an instant to protect the sanctity of the Soviet state and to curb any expressions of nationalist sentiment.

Turning now to look at the extensive security apparatus setup across the union republics, we see that all union republics possessed a repressive state security agency. The principal example is of the KGB – the state security organ for the entire USSR. This organ was responsible for "protecting the establishment from attack and liquidating its enemies," which it did ruthlessly.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the KGB was directly involved in the suppression of the Latvian bid for independence. According to the renowned journalist Hedrick Smith the Latvian KGB, the "black berets," had "turned to terrorising Latvians, arresting some nationalists, shooting others."<sup>9</sup> The NKVD, predecessor to the KGB, was responsible for the mass deportation of numerous minority nationalities (Volga Germans, Karachai, Kalmyks, Balkars, Crimean Tartars, Ingush and the Chechens) in 1944 from their home territories for resettlement elsewhere in the USSR.<sup>10</sup> The brutality and efficiency with which these deportations were carried out is telling of the lengths that the Soviet state would go to in order to solve its ethnic questions, especially the fragmentation of the North Caucasus.<sup>11</sup> The case of the Chechen deportations shall be discussed further on in this chapter.

Another important factor to bear in mind is the single party nature of the USSR – only the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was legally allowed to run for elections. This ensured at a legal level the political monopoly of the CPSU and consequently the Soviet state. More than that, the autonomy of the republics in the USSR and the Russian Federation was limited – that of Federation republics being more limited. What is also important to note is the assimilation of local elites into the party ranks or their replacement by those appointed to powerful positions in the Communist Party. The local elites of the various regions within Russia and the Soviet Union were incorporated into the communist party cadre or were replaced by it. This allowed the centre a great deal of power over its various peripheral regions.

Religion is not necessarily a nationalist factor, but it can contribute to the national identity of certain groups (like the Chechens, as was discussed in Chapter 3). The USSR had no place for religion in its ideology or political make up. In fact, throughout most of the seventy years of the USSR's existence, religion was suppressed. Although Gorbachev relaxed the restrictions on religion somewhat and allowed a revival of religion—for instance in 1988, Gorbachev held an important and symbolic public meeting with the Patriarch Pimen and other leaders of the Church – “Gorbachev gave his blessing to the reopening of hundreds of Orthodox churches... which had been seized by the state under Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev.”<sup>12</sup> Regardless it is important to note that prior to Gorbachev, the state did restrict religion.

Economic binding played a big role in the interdependence of union republics on each other. The union republics were bound to each other economically, making it difficult to contemplate independence. As such, Soviet economic policy did not aim to suppress nationalism, but this was a consequence of the economic policy. For instance, the Ukrainian SSR produced close to half of the USSR's food. Therefore, the Ukrainian SSR would want to stay in the Union in order to take advantage of the guaranteed market of its agricultural produce, while the other union republics would encourage the Ukrainian SSR to stay within the Union. This extended to all kinds of other economic activity – from military and armaments (e.g. fighter aircraft production facility in Georgia) to industrial equipment (e.g. oil drilling equipment factories in Chechnya). The Soviet economic policy tied various parts of the Union to each other, spreading industry and agriculture, at the expense of efficiency and regional independence. Thus, the incentive to break away from the union had limited appeal, which would certainly check any bids for independence to a substantial extent.

### **Chechnya and the USSR – Russian Suppression and the Rebuilding of Chechen National Identity**

Having studied the general case of Russian dominance in the USSR through their hegemonic policy and stance, we can now turn our attention to the case of Chechnya. In 1921, the Chechens rebelled against the imposition of a centralised authority on them. Within the framework of Soviet Russia, the Chechens again saw themselves being targeted by Russian policy.

As was highlighted in Chapter 2, the Chechens have been historically viewed as a problem for the Russians – the “irritatingly independent hinterland.”<sup>13</sup> There were two counts of suppression of the Chechen national identity by the Soviet state. One was territorial deprivation vis-à-vis the deportation of the Chechen nation for resettlement in Central Asia and the concurrent dissolution of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR. Stalin ordered the deportation of the almost five hundred thousand Chechen and Ingush, commencing on February 23, 1944, and ending a mere eight days later on March 1, 1944. The deportation was meticulously planned and treated with the highest priority – Laurentii Beria, head of the NKVD at the time, was himself present to oversee the operation.<sup>14</sup> The dissolved Chechen-Ingush ASSR was incorporated into Russia, Dagestan, North Ossetia and Georgia and the deportees were loaded into cattle trains heading for Central Asia.<sup>15</sup> The Chechens were transported in the most appalling conditions, many of them dying en route and at their destinations; the old and sick were massacred on their home territory in order to speed up the process.<sup>16</sup> What is important to note here though is the reason for conducting the deportation. The official reason stated was that “many Chechens... under the instigation of the Germans, entered into volunteer detachments organised by the Germans, and together with the German military forces conducted an armed struggle against detachments of the Red Army.”<sup>17</sup> The essence of this justification is that the Chechens collaborated

with the Germans and fought against the Red Army during the period of WWII when the Germans had occupied the Caucasus, consequently the deportation was a retributive action. But this justification does not hold because “the German army hardly set foot in Checheno-Ingushetia” – it was impossible for the Chechens to have collaborated with the Germans.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, the Chechens revolted in 1929–30 and then again in 1940 and 1942. The deportation was really Stalin’s solution to the Chechen problem, a twentieth century echo of what Tsar Alexander II attempted in the 1860s. It is plain to see that the deportation was essentially meant to destroy the territorial roots of the Chechen nation.

The second count of suppression was along religious lines. As argued in Chapter 3, Islam formed a very important component of the Chechen identity. Initially, the Soviet government had a fairly tolerant policy toward Chechen religious institutions. Chechen religious (Muslim) leadership in the form of Sufis was cooperative with the Bolsheviks. This meant that the Bolsheviks then applied a policy of “respect for Caucasian religious institutions.”<sup>19</sup> However, soon afterwards a policy to repress religious practice was adopted, even if it was not that effective. Mosques were closed down and Shari’a courts were abolished.<sup>20</sup> The Sufi brotherhoods survived, despite the policy. The role of the Sufi brotherhoods cannot be emphasised more, as they were an important bastion of religious leadership and one of the important ways in which the Chechen leadership mobilised the Chechen populace (the establishment of the Sufi brotherhoods has been discussed in some depth in Chapter 3). But, the official state line insisted on trying to rid the Chechens of the religious component of their identity.

In terms of the factors of forceful unification of the USSR brought up in the previous section, Chechnya too was subject to them. The Chechens were subjected (as was the rest of the Caucasus) to the cultural programmes of the era – known as “Yezhovshchina – after the name of Nikolai Yezhov.”<sup>21</sup> The programme “shook the North Caucasus deeply” and included such moves as the liquidation of the national intelligentsia and the “translation” of the national script.<sup>22</sup> The translation of the script is a fairly significant issue. In 1928 and 1929, the Muslim regions of the North Caucasus were “forced to undergo the Latinisation” of their script.<sup>23</sup> This was followed some years later with yet another conversion from Latin to Cyrillic script (the Russian script). This changing of the script had a dual role: firstly to facilitate the economic and political integration of the Chechens within the Russian Federation and secondly to distance the North Caucasians from Turkey.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, in 1929, Stalin’s government undertook the drive to collectivise all farming in the Soviet Union. The North Caucasus was chosen as the first region within the Soviet Union where the rural economy would be completely collectivised.<sup>25</sup> This drive was opposed by the Chechens, as “forcible collectivisation met with stubborn resistance.”<sup>26</sup> Significantly, this opposition assumed a religious character whereby collectivisation was viewed as “the work of the devil”, something against “which it was the duty of every Muslim to fight.”<sup>27</sup>

As a region in the Russian Federation the CPSU was the only political party that was allowed to run for elections. Furthermore, as Chechnya was a region in the Russian Federation, rather than a union level republic, it did not enjoy the autonomy of a union republic. As an indication, the Chechen leadership under Dzhokar Dudayev (first president of the later breakaway republic of Chechnya) was, as early as November 1990, looking to change the status of the Chechen-Ingush Republic to that of a union republic.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps with the autonomy of a union republic Chechnya may not have been so quick to declare independence in 1991.

Economically, too, Chechnya was tied intimately to the rest of the USSR. Two important industrial products were manufactured in Chechnya – oil and oil drilling equipment. And the only market that Chechnya could export its two vital industrial products to was the rest of the USSR. Rail links and an established oil pipeline meant easy access to important markets. If, somehow, Chechnya had managed to secede, its economy would have crumbled – the USSR could have easily excluded it from any global economic interaction.

### **The Chechen Recovery**

Regardless, after Stalin's repression, the Chechens were able to rebuild themselves as a nation. In an interesting reversal, the deportations actually strengthened the hold of the Sufi brotherhood and the reassertion of Islam in the Chechen national character.<sup>29</sup> In 1974 there were as many as 62,000 Sufi religious leaders (*murids*).<sup>30</sup> As a further indication of the recovery of Islam, the Chechens reopened thousands of mosques and also began going for pilgrimage to Mecca in large numbers.<sup>31</sup>

More than that, the Chechens were “rehabilitated” by Khrushchev, and the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was restored on February 11, 1957. Maybe Khrushchev's move to rehabilitate the deported Chechens can be called a mistake on the part of the Russians in the grand scheme of Russo-Chechen relations, because it allowed the Chechens to re-establish their territorial roots. What this meant effectively was the recuperation of the Chechen population in their own territory – by 1979 they accounted for 70.7 % of their republic's population, an impressive comeback.<sup>32</sup> The space left empty by the Chechens after their deportations were filled with ethnic Russians. Upon, returning to their homeland, the Chechens slowly but surely recovered the status of majority in their own territory.

The essential point to note is that, after the deportation the Chechen's rebuilt themselves and their national identity. Now, they just needed an opportunity to assert this rebuilt national identity.

### **1991: A Chance to Reassert National Identity**

On March 11, 1985, Mikhail Sergeivich Gorbachev was elected General Secretary of the CPSU, thus coming to power in the USSR. With him he brought an ambitious programme of political and economic reform, with its two prongs of “perestroika” (restructuring) and “glasnost” (freedom). There was much enthusiasm for his programme of reform in its initial stages. But his programme was improperly balanced. Glasnost provided society with a vital tool for expression of their grievances, problems and opinions and thus unleashed some powerful social forces. But this freedom required an equal balancing with concrete restructuring – it was not good enough to simply let people complain openly about matters, they needed to be empowered in order to help them solve their problems (economically and politically). Perestroika was not pursued to an extent that satisfied the ordinary citizenry. As Raymond Pearson puts it “a doomed atmosphere of ‘too little too late’ hung over the commitment to perestroika.”<sup>33</sup>

Glasnost not only allowed people to express their opinions at an individual level but also allowed more collective expressions in the form of political movements and parties. With Glasnost came parties like Sajudis in Lithuania and movements like Solidarity in Poland.<sup>34</sup> These parties and movements sought to wrest control from the established communist party and get more autonomy for their respective nation-states, and were what resulted in the disintegration of the Soviet Empire in the late 1980s. In the chaos of the disintegrating Union, the Chechens seized their chance.

By 1990, Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian Federation, was pushing to break-up “that great corrupt Communist monolith [i.e. the USSR].”<sup>35</sup> He urged the union republics to “grab as much sovereignty as [they] can swallow.”<sup>36</sup> The Chechens took Yeltsin’s word at face value and their leader, Dzhokhar Dudayev, was prepared to “grab as much sovereignty” as he could. The Chechens “adored” Yeltsin and gave him their full support.<sup>37</sup> Earlier, when Dudayev had taken over via a military coup, he pushed to make the Chechen-Ingush republic a union level republic. But it was apparent that that would not be possible. Chechen demands for more autonomy were being ignored – Yeltsin was not going to let Chechnya get too much autonomy. In fact as then Vice President, Alexander Rutskoi, put it “the Chechens were getting out of hand” and that they ought to “behave like orderly Russian citizens.”<sup>38</sup> Consequently Dudayev’s government unilaterally declared Chechnya’s independence from the Russian Federation. It is important to note here that the neighbouring Ingush, who formed the other half of the Chechen-Ingush Republic, chose to stay within the Russian Federation – in June 1992 they rejoined Russia.<sup>39</sup> The Chechen leadership at the time was able to realise that an opportunity had presented itself where the Chechens could break from the Federation, regardless of how representative that decision was of the Chechen population.

The Chechen decision to breakaway is a strange one, if viewed in its more immediate context. The Chechens were sure to invite Russian reaction, which they did and which is discussed in some detail in the next chapter. Furthermore, the fact that they were economically bound to the Russian Federation meant that they would invite economic troubles. Politically, it was a unilateral decision which meant no recognition of their state globally or from the Russians. But this decision needs to be viewed with a more long term historical lens. The generation that was leading the Chechens at the time had direct memories of Soviet repression (territorial deprivation through the deportations and religious suppression). Like previous generations of Chechens, this generation too had “personal memories of ethnic cleansing and other sufferings under alien rule.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, by this time the Chechens had rebuilt and strengthened their territorial and religious identity – it only made sense to secure their national identity. In any case however, the Russians were unable to react immediately, their military situation in the region being very weak, so the Chechens were able to “see” themselves as a free nation.

To sum up, the Chechens were forcibly bound to the Russian Federation and almost annihilated by the brutality of some of its leaders (Stalin). Yet, the Chechens withstood the brutalisation of their nationhood and went on to rebuild it. With the coup of 1991 and the subsequent disintegration of the USSR, the Chechens saw an opportunity to assert their independence and, more importantly, their national identity.

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## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE WAR OF 1994: RUSSIAN REACTION TO CHECHEN NATIONALISM**

The break-up of the USSR allowed the Chechens to reassert their national identity in the form of an independent state – with its own laws, constitution, army and other trappings of a free state. As was argued in the previous chapter, the USSR was not a composite nation as it itself touted; rather it was a case of forced unity, which meant the suppression of all expressions of nationalism as a matter of state policy. Chechen nationalism was not exempt from this suppression – in fact as was argued in the previous chapter Soviet state policy aggressively sought to undermine Chechen nationalism, with Stalin's deportation and general religious suppression being key actions. However, the Chechens rebuilt themselves as a nation, so much so that by the late 1980s and early 1990s they were poised for claiming nationhood or independence – they just required an opportunity.

This chapter picks up from the last where it was argued that the Chechens saw the Coup of 1991 as an opportunity to reassert their national identity by declaring their independence from Russia. It is argued here that the Russians contested Chechen independence. Chechnya was part of Russia as far as the Russians were concerned and they would reincorporate it back into their polity as was clear ever since the Chechen declaration of independence in 1991 and the Russian attempt to thwart that independence. Moreover, Russia was heavily involved in the Caucasus after the break-up of the USSR and it was bound to solve the Chechen problem. By 1994 the situation had become such that the Russians were forced to enter a full scale war with the Chechens in order to try and maintain their bid to recapture Chechnya. Thus, it was the Chechen declaration of independence and the consequent Russian contestation of that nationalist assertion that ultimately led to the Russo-Chechen war of 1994.

#### **Post-Soviet Russian Involvement in the Caucasus Region**

A lot of analyses of conflict in the Caucasus treat it in regional terms and for obvious reasons (as an example please refer to *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*).<sup>1</sup> There have traditionally been three powers that have tended to influence the region, and Russia has for the past couple of centuries been the dominant power in the region. In that sense it is useful to look at Russia's role in the Caucasus as a region.

The Caucasus is Russia's own backyard, a region that they are intricately linked to. The Caucasus has historically been a region where Russia has asserted a considerable degree of influence and control. This is due to a number of reasons, especially strategic military considerations given the presence of two other major powers – Turkey and Iran. Furthermore, the Caucasus was the theatre of some of Russia's southward colonial expansion – thus politically it is a region which is historically important to the Russians. Finally, Russia may also have concrete economic reasons for maintaining a link with the Caucasus, especially in more contemporary times given the value and importance of oil.

It shall now be demonstrated that even after the break-up of the USSR, Russia still continued to maintain and in fact was expected to maintain its considerable influence in the region. This is most aptly demonstrated by the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – a conflict in the Caucasus that continued well after the collapse of the USSR. In this conflict, Russia played a very active role. Thus, it is argued that Russia continued to view the Caucasus as its own sphere of influence and that it

wanted to maintain its influence in the region. And furthermore, that they involved themselves in a specifically military capacity and did so relatively successfully.

Let us briefly consider the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azeris and Armenians claim absolute historic right to Nagorno-Karabakh and have battled over it periodically for generations. During Stalin's rule, the dispute was exacerbated when the majority Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh included "wholly within the boundaries of the new Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan" as part of a "divide-and-rule policy behind many border decisions in that region in the 1920s."<sup>2</sup> After the collapse of the USSR, from August 1991 onwards, Russia's policies vis-à-vis the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh were directed at maintaining a high degree of influence in the region. These included: mediation efforts such as the one made in September 1991 by Boris Yeltsin and Kazakhstan's leader, Nursultan Nazarbaev, and, later, participation in the work of the Minsk Group of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE); the Tripartite Initiative (Russia, the US and Turkey) and single-handed missions like those undertaken by Vladimir Kazimirov in 1993 and 1994.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Russia has been involved in disengaging its military units from the conflict zone and dividing the spoils of weaponry between the newly independent republics and trying to preserve the military balance in the region and keeping outside players (Turkey and Iran) away from its Caucasian zone of influence.<sup>4</sup>

Whatever it's overall aims, Russia clearly has shown itself determined to retain the influence over the former republics of the southern Caucasus that it enjoyed while the Soviet Union was a single entity. This relationship has been easiest to maintain with Armenia, traditionally Russia's strongest ally in the region and clearly interested in maintaining that connection. Russia operates two military bases in Armenia, and the military alliance continues to expand.<sup>5</sup> This influence is not limited to Armenia and Azerbaijan, but a multitude of other conflicts that broke out in the region e.g. Georgia-Abkhazia and Ossetia-Ingushetia conflicts.

Thus, the Caucasus is a region where post-Soviet Russia exercised considerable influence. It had established and consolidated its presence in the region before and during the existence of the USSR. Consequent to the break-up of the USSR, it still exercised considerable influence in the region and it enjoyed some degree of success. But it is important not to limit the analysis of conflict (specifically that with Chechnya) to that of Russia's struggle to maintain regional power. Certainly, Chechnya falls into the Caucasus region but given its deeper historical link to Russia, the Conflict needs to be looked at with respect to specific Russian actions in the region.

### **Russian Actions after Chechen Declaration of Independence**

To the Russians, Chechnya was a part of their polity and an integral part of their federation. Consequently, the Russians viewed their actions in Chechnya as an "internal law and order" issue.<sup>6</sup> They had rules by which they would allow limited autonomy to the various nationalities within their federation but these rules did not include secession. Furthermore, there were genuine Russian concerns about the integrity of the Russian Federation. After all, if one component in the federation decided to breakaway others with such ambitions would likely follow. For instance, there were concerns about two mineral rich republics in the Federation looking to breakaway, namely Tartarstan and Bashkortostan.<sup>7</sup>

According to the former Minister for Nationalities Questions, V. Tishkov, the Chechens were being incited by their leadership to enter conflict and secede from Russia. Specifically Tishkov states that "in post-Soviet states, citizens are easy followers of the leaders whose appeals seem to offer the only

option. The power of prescription and belief in collectivist projects remain enormous among the poorly modernised and indoctrinated populations of former socialist societies.”<sup>8</sup> To the Russian leadership, Chechnya’s bid to breakaway was being forced upon its people, who actually did not want to breakaway. As Marta-Lisa Magnusson elaborates:

“Russian leaders adhering to this instrumentalist approach refused to ask the question of why people follow such leaders. Ethnic myths and other devices of "ethnic entrepreneurship" can be constructed or even fabricated. But personal memories of ethnic cleansing and other sufferings under alien rule, the kind most Chechen adults have experienced in their lives, are not social constructions. They are lived experiences.”<sup>9</sup>

The Russians did not view the Chechen demand for separation as genuine. As far as they were concerned Chechnya should accept its position in the federation. This position was so strong as to prohibit any negotiation with the Chechen leadership. Yeltsin refused to even meet Dudayev and threw out of the window any chance for a negotiated and peaceful settlement.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of the legitimacy of Dudayev’s government, it was obvious that he was the man in charge in Chechnya at the time and any negotiation should have been conducted with him. The possibility of talks with Dudayev was a very real one – a negotiated settlement to the dispute could have been achieved. In fact, the Chechens were willing to negotiate their status as part of the Russian Federation, with some guarantees of autonomy.<sup>11</sup> The Chechen parliament even proposed a draft treaty in the summer of 1992 that provided for “confederate relations including economic cooperation in defence and security matters, etc.”<sup>12</sup> Instead the Russians chose to initiate covert operations against Dudayev’s government and also aided forces that backed the idea of reintegration with the Russian Federation.

After the Chechen declaration of independence in late 1991, Russia’s military position there was massively undermined, as they had to withdraw their forces from the republic under “humiliating circumstances.”<sup>13</sup> The Russians deployed the 12<sup>th</sup> Motorised Infantry Training Division by February 1992, which by June of the same year had to withdraw, leaving its equipment behind. The deployment was obviously begun before the declaration of independence but after their declaration of independence the Chechens “expelled” the Russian army from their territory. After this point Yeltsin did not advocate or approve any direct involvement of the Russian army in Chechnya. But this does not mean that Russian troops or “mercenaries” were not involved in covert operations in Chechnya. The Russians backed local opposition forces, primarily in the form of the Provisional Council. This backing up opposition forces meant the provision of troops and the supply of heavy equipment.<sup>14</sup> Also, Dudayev was the direct target of the Federal Counter Intelligence Service’s (FSK) assassination attempts. Thus, the Russians were involved in all activities short of using their own army. They were attempting to destabilise the Dudayev government, in order to replace it with a more pro-Russian government in the form of the Provisional Council.

Another action the Russian government took was the imposition of an economic embargo. The embargo severely curtailed public services, but it did not stop the export of oil and also trade in arms.<sup>15</sup> The success of this embargo is certainly questionable. During this economic embargo Chechnya was able to export oil till as late as December 1994 (i.e. by the time the Russians had begun operations in Chechnya). This is in all likelihood due to the corruption of the Russian bureaucracy – an economic embargo would be impossible to implement given the levels of corruption in the Russian government. Had the Russians been able to successfully implement their embargo than perhaps the Chechens would have been more pliable.

Thus, two points need to be noted. First of all, the Russian perception of the breakaway was one of seeing an integral part of their polity breakaway. Secondly, the Russians took all manner of actions short of actual invasion in order to cut short Chechnya’s national ambitions.

## The War of 1994

The FSK orchestrated five covert operations from late 1991 to September 1994, aimed at destabilising the Dudayev government. The last such operation was begun in late 1994 and rather embarrassingly for the Russians twenty-one of their servicemen were captured by Chechen forces in November 1994.

The Russians began a full scale invasion of Chechnya on December 11, 1994. Pontus Siren argues that this invasion was the “unintended” consequence of one of the covert operations of the FSK.<sup>16</sup> When the twenty-one Russian service men were captured by Chechen forces, the Russians had to commit to a full scale invasion in order to save face publicly and appear consistent.

Very briefly, the war lasted about two years, the ceasefire being called on August 31, 1996.<sup>17</sup> The war cost an estimated 28.5–30 million dollars a day, with a total cost estimate of about 2–2.5 trillion dollars.<sup>18</sup> The war was also heavy in casualties, with General Lebed estimating as many as 90,000 casualties, both Russians and Chechens included.<sup>19</sup>

If anything, the war brought out some of the strengths of the Chechen national character. Specifically, the religious angle of their character and their intense attachment to territorial freedom.

As noted in Chapter 4, after the rehabilitation of the Chechens by Khrushchev, the Chechens saw a general religious revival. Specifically the hold of the Sufi brotherhoods was strengthened. Having read Sebastian Smith’s account of the war, it is interesting to note the salience of the Sufi Muslim tradition. Before going into battle, Chechen “warriors” would prepare themselves with Sufi zikr and prayer.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Sebastian Smith goes so far as to say that “the tradition of the Sufi brotherhoods was one of the most important elements in maintaining morale and a sense of ethnic identity”.<sup>21</sup> The Chechen Diaspora has also poured its help into the conflict. For instance, the return of Chechen Jordanians, such as Shamil Bassayev, has helped to radicalise many young Chechens who became active combatants in the Chechen wars.<sup>22</sup> Youths as young as fifteen and sixteen years old involved themselves in the fighting, knowing that they would be martyrs if they were killed in the fighting. The Chechen Diaspora also contributed money, armaments, and soldiers (mujahideen: provided by more radical Islamic groups) and these have certainly played a major role in strengthening the Chechen resistance movement.<sup>23</sup>

A second appreciable point in the conflict is the ferocity of the Chechen resistance. This is a combination of factors, not least of which has to do with the Chechen attachment to their land and the preservation of its freedom. The Chechen fighters took the war to considerable extremes. One apt example of this is the hostage taking at Budenovsk.<sup>24</sup> Shamil Basayev, a rebel leader, had managed to lead a hundred and fifty of his men into the southern Russian town of Budenovsk, where they captured a hospital and blockaded themselves in. The demands were simple – bring an end to the war. Budenovsk is significant in that it recalls an old Chechen tactic of hostage taking – the kind that was prevalent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century engagement that the Russians and Chechens had. More importantly it demonstrates the desperate extremes the Chechen fighters were willing to go to in order to combat the Russian threat to their freedom.

In many ways the Chechen fighters were no better than their Russian opponents. As will be discussed below, the Russians had a very indiscriminate method to their war, which translated to a lack of

respect for civilian life. In this sense, the Chechens fighters too exposed civilians to the fighting but in a more indirect way. By moving into populated areas to continue fight or for other tactical reasons the Chechen fighters “shielded” themselves with civilians. For instance, the Chechen fighters moved to Grozny for the final offensive in 1996, which left close to 250,000 civilians trapped in the city.<sup>25</sup> Admittedly the kinds of tactics available to the Chechen fighters were limited, given that they were a smaller and poorly equipped force in comparison to their Russian opponents, consequently “employing” civilians in this manner was one of the few real alternatives the Chechens had.

Bearing this in mind, it must be realised that the Chechen effort did enjoy considerable popular support. The Chechen fighters were from amongst the local population. Thus the Chechen populace had a very direct stake in the fighting and aiding their combatants was in their own best interests. There was considerable indignation among ordinary Chechens at the Russian assault and this they expressed through joining the Chechen militias and lending support to Chechen fighting units.

The nature of the conflict also indicates Russian intent. The war was conducted in a manner that looked to crush the Chechen nation. The Russians conducted an all out war that decimated Chechnya’s infrastructure. More importantly, the population of Chechnya was targeted directly by the Russian military and tens of thousands of Chechens were displaced, killed and forced to become refugees. There was complete disrespect for civilian life and massive human rights abuses. Russian forces swept into Chechnya and attacked all manner of targets; not just the Chechen soldiery but rather civilians and civilian infrastructure was also targeted. This indicates that the war with Chechnya was more than the preservation of Russian territorial and political integrity. The war with Chechnya was meant to decimate any and all opposition to integration with Russia. Had Chechnya been an internal law and order issue as was claimed by the Russian government, the nature of the violence would not have been so indiscriminate – only secessionist elements would have been targeted. But the kind of war Russia was waging was designed to cripple the Chechens and destroy them as an independent nation state – it was designed to force them back into the Russian fold. The nature of Russian fighting indicated that the Russians were not simply after the immobilisation of a secessionist forces. The Russians recognised that a free Chechnya was popular with the Chechen people and that the only way to bring Chechnya back into the Russian Federation would be to so badly cripple Chechnya that it had no other reasonable alternative.

It must be said at this point that the Chechens perpetrated massive human rights abuses as well. In terms of their war “ethics,” the Chechens were no better than their Russian opponents. There are appalling examples of Chechen cruelty visible on the internet, in the form of videos and pictures. Part of the reason that these images and videos are available on the internet so easily is strategic – horrifying images of Russian officers and soldiers being executed are designed to instil fear into the Russian soldiery. But that does not absolve the Chechens of their share of human rights abuses.

It is also important to note here that Russian troops were often fighting without much determination and had terribly low morale. Most of the Russian troops were conscripts – young, poorly trained and unused to fighting, often in Chechnya without their prior knowledge or consent. As one Chechen put it, “The conscripts are blameless, they are barely human – they have no documents, nothing, just metal dog tags. They’re not even told where they’re going when they get sent to Chechnya.”<sup>26</sup> The drunkenness and poor morale of Russian units in Chechnya is famous – or infamous rather. This suggests a general lack of support for the campaign amongst the Russian soldiery. Unlike the Chechen fighters who had ample reason to fight, the Russian soldiery were comparatively less motivated. The Chechen fighter had considerable grounds to fight from the basic recognition of

Russian brutalisation of the Chechen nation historically to the immorality of the Russian invasion on Islamic grounds. This low morale is just indicative of the lack of a genuine cause on the Russian side.

To sum up, the Russian war against Chechnya was a reaction to the Chechen declaration of freedom. We clearly see that Russia was looking to destabilise Chechnya in the interval since its declaration of freedom to the 1994 war. Furthermore, rather than being an effort at regional power play in the Caucasus or an anti-secessionist campaign, the Russian operation was designed to destroy any semblance of Chechen nationhood. Along with this, we also see a very determined and resilient Chechnya. It was apparent from the kind of desperate fighting that the Chechens were engaged in that the freedom of the Chechen polity was of great importance to them. Moreover, we also see that the Islamic component of the Chechen national character plays a heavy role in their fight against the Russian invaders.

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## **CHAPTER 5**

## **THE WAR OF 1999: ROUND TWO OF RUSSIAN REACTION TO POST-SOVIET CHECHEN NATIONALISM**

Vladimir Putin's government launched an offensive against the Chechens in late 1999, cutting short the 5 year phase of peace outlined in the 1997 Peace Treaty. The Treaty was a kind of moratorium on the relations between Chechnya and Russia, providing a 5 year interval that would allow both sides to stand back from the conflict and decide a more long term solution in 2001. The Russians, however, reneged on this agreement, interpreting events in Chechnya's neighbour, Daghestan, to allow them the right to invade the North Caucasus (Chechnya, Ingushetia and Daghestan). The Chechens were not asserting themselves as aggressively as in the run up to the previous war (1994 – 1996) and were abiding by the agreement of 1997. On the other hand, the Russians had a different view of the situation, most significantly that this was an opportunity for resolving the conflict in their favour (especially after September 11, 2001). The Russians took advantage of this opportunity, and a more prepared and more experienced Russian army went into Chechnya to sweep away Maskhadov and assert Russian control over Chechnya once again.

### **After the 1997 Peace Treaty: Rebuilding Chechnya**

After concluding the war in 1996 and signing a formal peace agreement i.e. the 1997 Peace Treaty, the Chechens were not in the slightest looking for opportunities to provoke the wrath of the Russians. The war of 1994 was enough of a lesson to the Chechens about the enormous human, infrastructural, political and economic costs of war (as it was to the Russians). They would not look to fight. They had achieved what they wanted – they had managed to preserve their defacto independence for the short run and were looking to build their country up again.

Soon after the conflict in Chechnya ended, a presidential election was organised. The election took place on January 27, 1997. Aslan Maskhadov won with a substantial 64.8 percent of the vote, while one of the separatist leaders, Shamil Basayev, received 22.7% of the vote.<sup>1</sup> Basayev was one of the more daring Chechen commanders during the 1994 war and in fact was made famous by the hostage taking incident at the hospital in Budennovsk. Regardless, as a result of an election that even Moscow accepted as fair and free, Maskhadov thenceforth became president of the Republic of Chechnya and Basayev its prime minister. The radical Basayev was an official member of the new government and represented some sections of the population of Chechnya. But Maskhadov was by far the more representative of Chechen people and their opinion and aspirations and he was the man in charge. There are some who would argue that Maskhadov's election as president would necessarily mean the dominance of his clan – perhaps this might lead one to question the fairness of Chechen politics thereafter.<sup>2</sup> Regardless, what is important to note, of course, is the fact that elections were held, and those elections were free and fair at that. The fairness of these elections was even recognised by the Russians, as indicated above. Furthermore, that a moderate, Maskhadov, was elected and his elected status was not contested locally suggests that the Chechens were now looking to rebuild their government and to re-establish themselves as a nation with a state in the world system. In other words, the Chechen leadership and people were looking forward to rebuilding the status of Chechnya as a state, independent and separate from Russia.

Moreover, the Chechen leadership realised that for all practical intents and purposes, the new Chechen entity was still very much dependent on and a part of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) framework. They had no intention to stray too far from the CIS. The CIS would be

Chechnya's chief economic partner. Access to global resources and markets would be extremely difficult for the Chechen polity, locked away as it was. Thus, they would have to build their relation with the CIS and build in the CIS a viable economic partner. Maskhadov had always been willing to settle for a situation whereby Chechnya would be integrated with Russia "even if nominally autonomous."<sup>3</sup> This echoes the earlier sentiments, expressed by Dudayev, in the late 1980s and early 1990s (before secession) – namely to gain for Chechnya a high degree of political autonomy from the Russian Federation but still retain the economic relations of the Russian Federation. The Chechens were looking to retain their political independence (something that irritated Moscow) but were looking to rebuild their relations, especially economic, with the CIS and Russia.

### **Chechen Terrorism and Shamil Basayev: The Causes of War in 1999**

The events that took place prior to the Second Chechen War were used as justification by the Russians to invade Chechnya (along with Dagestan). The events included a set of terror bombings (notably in a southern Moscow apartment complex) and the insurgent activities of Shamil Basayev in Dagestan. The Russian interpretation of the bombings and of Basayev's actions was a necessarily forced and skewed one, allowing them to justify their second invasion. The Chechens were not linked to the 1999 terror bombing spree and moreover, the activities of Basayev were well removed from the collective will of the Chechen people, as shall be demonstrated below.

In September of 1999, there was a spate of apartment bombings, the most prominent of which were in the southern districts of the Russian capital Moscow.<sup>4</sup> The bombings left close to 300 dead. The Russian government immediately lashed out and pinned the blame on Chechen terrorists. The investigations had not revealed anything conclusive but the Putin's government was quick to blame Chechen militants as the cause of the bombings. What is significant in this pinning of blame is that the Russians did not wait for the results of a conclusive investigation. Rather, they were building a case against the Chechens – "criminals, kidnappers and bandits."<sup>5</sup> In fact, the results of the investigation effectively de-linked the Chechens from the bombings – federal prosecutors announced on April 30, 2003, that none of the alleged bombers was Chechen.<sup>6</sup> But, at that point in time, it was unimportant to the Russians whether or not the Chechens had done it or not – their propaganda machine would pin the blame on the Chechens and label them a bunch of terrorists that needed to be controlled thus, allowing them the necessary justification to invade Chechnya. On September 22, 1999, Russian fighter jets struck targets within Chechnya.<sup>7</sup> By October the same year Russia cut off all diplomatic ties with Chechnya and consequently did not recognise Maskhadov's government as the legitimate government of Chechnya, while initiating the ground assault.<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of the Russian reasoning, it did not make sense for the Chechens to unleash a campaign of violence and terror against the Russians – it would only hurt their cause. Terrorists cannot represent the will of a nation and more importantly, the Chechen government was looking to rebuild itself and its ties with its neighbours. For it to sponsor acts of terror against the Russians just did not (and does not) make sense. As stated previously, the Chechens even realised that their fate was closely linked to the CIS and for them to reject that and perpetrate acts of violence against it was out rightly unconstructive to their cause. If anything, the Russian government should have offered help in rooting out terrorist elements that were not only hurting the Russians directly, but that were damaging the Chechen bid to rebuild their nation-state.

Now let us discuss the most immediate reason for the Second Chechen War – the "invasion" of Dagestan by Basayev. Basayev moved into Dagestan on August 8, 1999.<sup>9</sup> He promoted a very

radical Islamist philosophy geared to hurt the Russian hegemony in the region. Having contributed to the establishment of the de facto independence of Chechnya, he was now intent on spreading his radical philosophy to other parts of the Caucasus. His leadership and actions resulted in direct Russian military losses.

His goals went well beyond those of the ordinary Chechen, who saw the independence and establishment of their state (however tentative) as the right path to follow, as expressed in their election of the moderate Maskhadov and their rebuilding of the Chechen nation-state. Basayev had pan-Caucasian goals for the establishment of an Islamic state, spread across the length of the North Caucasus.<sup>10</sup> The declared intention of his movement, the Riyad-us-Saliheyn (RS; a paramilitary group) was to create “a united Islamic republic of Chechnya and Daghestan.”<sup>11</sup> The RS is a very active militant group, acting under Basayev’s direction. To date, the group has claimed responsibility for numerous acts of violence perpetuated against Russia and its citizenry – for instance hostage taking, like at Budennovsk. Clearly, his was an extremely radicalised stance on Islam and politics in the region. But he was not representative of Chechen political will and aspirations – he had lost the presidential elections to the more moderate Maskhadov. His moving into Daghestan and fomenting an insurgency cannot be taken as the collective will of the Chechen people. Rather, Basayev expressed in his actions the stance of the few radical Chechens. And more importantly he identified with the ambitions of a more pan-Caucasian Islamist philosophy. So for Basayev, the establishment of a free (however tentative) Chechnya was only one of the objectives he and his creed were to fulfil.

Certainly, Basayev is a Chechen but does that mean his actions represent the will and aspirations of the Chechen people? It has been amply demonstrated that the Chechens were in fact looking to rebuild themselves as a nation and state and that it was highly irrational for them to aggravate their powerful northern neighbour.

The Russians were planning to invade Chechnya well before the spate of apartment bombings and Basayev’s invasion of Daghestan. In fact, the plan to invade Chechnya had been tabled as early as March 1999.<sup>12</sup> It is clear that the Russians did not respond to the events of late 1999. Rather the Russian motivation for going to war was twofold. The first has to do with the Russian Army. The kind of war that the Russians were looking to wage was designed to re-assimilate the Chechens back into the Russian polity. This campaign also allowed the Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Defence to take “revenge,” reasserting their importance. Since the collapse of the USSR, the Russian Army has increasingly become a low priority division of the government. After their defeat in 1996 at the hands of the Chechen guerrilla army, they were left discredited and needed to show themselves as a useful and important division of government. The campaign in Chechnya would allow the discredited military to prove its worth again. The contention was not illogical – with considerable experience behind them in the previous Chechnya campaign, the Russians would possibly know better how to deal with their adversary. Moreover, their adversary (Chechnya) was in poor shape given its debilitated economy and similarly decimated military. Add to this the second reason: Putin’s bid for election. By creating a national enemy in the Chechens and appealing to the Russian people’s sense of nationalism, Putin was elected as President of the Russian Federation. Putin was looking to become president of Russia but for his re-election he had to defeat his opposition – the opposition taking power would potentially result in trouble for the “Yeltsinintees.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, a very convenient coupling was created in a more aggressive army and interior ministry looking to assert their usefulness and Putin’s bid to be president elect of the Russian Federation, allowing the Russians to once again bid for assertion of control over what they felt was their own territory. In no way was the Russian campaign justified or linked to the so-called terrorism that was incorrectly pinned on the

Chechens. It was part of the long-standing association of Chechnya with Russia, in the Russians' perception. A convenient set of factors emerged allowing the Russians to once again bid for the re-integration of a territory that was to them rightfully their own.

### **The Second Chechen War: Russian Tactics**

In this second bout of war, the Russians used the same excessively violent and indiscriminate fighting tactics that they had employed in the previous bout. Massive human rights violations took place as the Russian forces ploughed their way to Grozny. It was clear from the start that the Russians were not out to eliminate the perceived terrorist threat. The force with which they went in made it apparent that they were looking to destroy Chechnya. The carpet bombings, the strafing and maiming of refugees and displaced persons and the generally indiscriminate fighting indicated the contempt with which the Russians viewed their opponents. As one Russian soldier put it, "We have to be cruel to them [the Chechens]. Otherwise, we'll achieve nothing."<sup>14</sup> The tactics of the Russian campaign i.e. massive and indiscriminate aerial bombing of civilian and military targets, suggests that they were not out to eliminate the terrorist threat, but rather to decimate any semblance of statehood that the Chechens had achieved. The war was total, not targeted and was designed to eliminate the Chechen state. In the *Human Rights Review* Oktay Tanisever reports that "[it was the] carpet bombing campaign which [was] responsible for the vast majority of civilian deaths in the conflict in Chechnya."<sup>15</sup> On October 21, 1999, 140 civilians were killed, while 260 were wounded in the surface-to-surface rocket attack of a busy market centre in Grozny.<sup>16</sup> This indicates the severity and indiscriminate nature of the Russian campaign.

Again, like the last chapter, it must be said that the Chechens are no less guilty of human rights abuses, and images floated by various media bear testimony to this (one has only to search on the internet to come across thousands of videos and images of these abuses). Like the Russians, though, these abuses fall into a tactical plan. Like the capturing of the hospital in Budennovsk or other dramatic and hard hitting incidents, the popularisation of these abuses through various media is aimed at discouraging and demoralising the common Russian soldier.

### **After the Invasion: Beyond the Second Chechen War**

The Russians were able to capture Grozny and for the most part controlled the majority of Chechnya by December of 1999 – a very short and violent conquest (though far from over).<sup>17</sup>

The immediate political actions were of significance. The most significant action was the referendum held in March of 2003. The referendum approved a new constitution of Chechnya that stated, "that the republic [was] an "inalienable" part of Russia."<sup>18</sup> However, this referendum was much criticised. For instance, the council of Europe's envoy Frank Judd stated, "There is a lot of hard work to be done before a referendum can convincingly take place."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, in a republic where separatist rebels and federal forces clashed (and still do clash) almost daily, the referendum lacked credibility. The referendum was phoney, designed simply to give an outward appearance of "normalcy" i.e. that the new status quo was acceptable to the Chechens. This is not to deny that most Chechens, having become more than a little war weary, would accept a state of peace, no matter what the form. But a false referendum, apparently affirming the Chechen acceptance of Russian occupation does not imply that they actually accepted the Russian occupation.

With the Russian takeover, the capital Grozny was reinstated. This was an important symbolic action. After the first war with the Russians and subsequent Russian withdrawal, the Chechens renamed their capital from Grozny to Dzhokar-Gala. This was an act of de-Russification; an action signifying the Chechen independence from Russian control. However, after the second round of war, the Russians purposefully renamed the capital Grozny again. Stephen Blank, professor at the Institute of Strategic Studies of the Army War College, goes so far as to say, “[the] establishment of a new capital and possibly alteration of the area’s boundaries, may prevent the revival of a distinct Chechen political identity and submerge it within a basically Russian administrative district.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, the motive behind this action was to re-instate Chechnya as a part of the Russian Federation. It is a symbolic act, demonstrating that the Russian’s are once again in charge of Chechnya. Just as the Chechens sought to de-Russify their country and in that way reassert control over their nationhood, the Russians sought to claim their control over the Chechen nation.

The fact of the matter is that the very reason for going to war against Chechnya is still around – the terrorists that the Russians claimed to have gone after in their campaign are still around. Russian military units and civilians are frequently targeted by Chechen “terrorists.” This was most blatantly demonstrated by the Dubrovka Theatre hostage crisis of October 2002. A large Moscow theatre was seized by a handful (fifty) of Chechens and eight-hundred people were held hostage.<sup>21</sup> The hostage takers demanded an end to Russian hostilities in Chechnya and a withdrawal of Russian forces from the territory. Pockets of Chechen resistance still abound in Chechnya, shooting down helicopters and ambushing land based units. Furthermore, Chechens have become directly involved in terror tactics against the Russians, targeting Russian civilians in a suicide bombing campaign (for example the bombing of a rock concert in a Moscow suburb that killed 16 people in July 2003).

The last paragraph highlighted an incident that took place after the September 11 attacks on the United States. The September 11 attacks allowed a new global rhetoric to emerge – that of terrorism. Terrorism provided the necessary rhetoric and justification for opposing and attacking any entity from nation-states to armed insurgents. This new rhetoric was also adopted by the Russians. The Russian government framed the issue of Chechen separatism as one of terrorism. True enough, the tactics employed by Chechen separatist would certainly qualify as terror tactics. But this set of tactics was in no way different to tactics used before – the Chechens have always fought a guerrilla style war, using hostage taking and bombing quite regularly. However, the increasing importance of the global rhetoric of terrorism was a very convenient framework for the Russians to place the Chechen problem in. Now, more than ever, the Chechen war would be viewed as a definitively internal Russian matter. The international community did raise a hue and cry about human rights violations as it did in the 1994 conflict. However, the Second Chechen War was definitely viewed as an internal Russian matter, as “all international actors proclaimed the crisis an internal Russian affair.”<sup>22</sup> The Russians had always framed Chechnya as an internal matter – now they had an internationally accepted framework that allowed them to further internalise the Chechen issue. As an important indicator of this shift, when the Second Chechen War began in 1999, Yeltsin still had to argue the case that this was an internal Russian security matter dealing with an internal terrorist threat – “President Yeltsin [asserted] that the West should not intervene in Russian affairs and that he will not negotiate with ‘bandits’ and ‘terrorists’.”<sup>23</sup> Yeltsin had to justify the invasion, to the West, as an internal security issue. Putin, after September 11, was able to declare the conflict and violence in Chechnya as part of an ongoing anti-terrorism campaign – something that the West (and world community) is more easily willing to accept given the mood post-September 11.

The war of 1999 and its justifications were another opportunity to crush Chechen national ambitions, to dismantle the Chechen state and to reintegrate Chechnya into the Russian Federation.

### **Latest Stirrings**

The latest happenings in Chechnya suggest the extent to which Russia has assumed control of its colony and the contestation of that assumption by more proactive (“terrorist”) elements in Chechnya. On May 9, 2004, the Russian emplaced President of Chechnya, Akhmad Kadyrov was killed in a bombing during a ceremony marking victory in World War II.<sup>24</sup> Doubtless, the bombing was very symbolic of the resentment of many Chechens toward the forced emplacement of Kadyrov as President of Chechnya. In an interesting move after the bombing, Ramzan Kadyrov, Akhmad Kadyrov’s son, was immediately named first deputy prime minister.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Putin “posthumously decorated Mr Kadyrov as a hero of the Russian Federation” and local authorities concurrently said that a statue would be erected and a square in the centre of Grozny renamed in his honour.<sup>26</sup> Soon after Akhmad Kadyrov’s death, the pro-Russia Sergei Abramov was named prime minister.<sup>27</sup> In an interesting development, Abramov was badly injured in a car crash in November 2005 and the position of prime minister was naturally handed over to Ramzan Kadyrov till such a time as Abramov would be fit to return to government. However, in March 2006, Abramov handed in his resignation to the president, Alu Alkhanov, and Ramzan Kadyrov has now been instated as prime minister. The Moscow-backed pro-Russian ruling “mafia” has ensured that the highest tier of government is very much inline with Moscow’s wishes and has demonstrated that it is capable of continuity.

These very blunt manoeuvrings by Moscow echo the earlier symbolic action of reinstating the name Grozny for the Chechen capital. The current set of actions again attempts to symbolically affirm to the Chechen people that Chechnya is once again very much a part of the Russian Federation. Moscow dictates who will “rule” Chechnya and it is increasingly apparent that those who support Russian rule will be “honoured.” The actions of the Chechen government are directed by Moscow. In a rather ominous sounding statement Putin stated, "There can be no doubt that retribution is inevitable for those whom we are fighting today. It will be unavoidable for terrorists."<sup>28</sup> It is apparent that Moscow will not take lightly to being threatened and intends to crush any Chechen resistance that may arise. In this regard the Russians have had some successes, namely the killing of two prominent rebel leaders, Maskhadov and Basayev, and also the short-term hold of their government. But this does not mean that the Chechen rebels have stood down their efforts and have continued to inflict heavy blows to the Russian military and people with, for instance, the Beslan school siege in the summer of 2004 or the more recent raid on Nalchik, capital of the Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, in October 2005. The situation can be deemed a stalemate, as neither side has made authentic efforts to resolve the dispute and neither is willing to back down.

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## **CHAPTER 6**

## **CONCLUSION: PERMANENT CONFLICT AND FUTURE SCENARIOS**

Now we will look at the question that this study set out to answer: “Why has this conflict persisted for so long and why does it continue till the present day?” The answer lies in the notion of the Chechen national identity and the Russian imperial legacy.

### **Two Factor Analysis: Chechen National Identity and Russian Integrative Policy**

In order to understand the cause for this conflict we need to break down the history of Russo-Chechen relations into three phases, as in fact this study has done. The first is the Russian imperial phase, followed by the Soviet Empire and finally the post-Soviet scenario. In each phase there is a distinct bid by Russia to integrate Chechnya within its own territorial, political/administrative and economic ambit. Concurrently in each phase the Chechens have resisted this integrative pull.

Since first contact, Russia has been trying to integrate Chechnya within it and the nature of Chechen identity has meant that it has resisted and continues to resist this integration. The three phases of Russian empire (the last one arguably not so much as an empire) see different contemporary situations dictating essentially the same scenario – the Chechens see themselves as an entity entirely distinct and separate from the Russians, with their own identity, and Russian integrative policy as subversive to the existence of this distinct and separate identity.

The conflict between Russia and Chechnya is based on two factors (or themes) that when thrown together have resulted in this conflict. The two factors are in essence the political positions both sides in the conflict take. These political positions are inherently at odds and result in a state of conflict when the two sides interact. One factor is that of Russian policy and attitude towards their Chechen adversary. This policy and attitude is a very aggressive one, looking to thwart Chechen nationalism at any cost. This is apparent from the point of first contact (Chapter 3) through to the latest episode in the conflict (Chapter 6). The second factor is that of a fierce Chechen nationalism, which results in unacceptability of the Russian pursuit of Chechen integration. Let us now retrace each phase in the conflict and look to build the case for this two factor analysis of the conflict.

### **Retracing the Phases in the Russo-Chechen Conflict**

The imperial phase of Russian history set up the conflict. It was, as argued in Chapter 3, Russian imperial policy starting in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and continuing till the 19<sup>th</sup> century that brought it into contact with the Caucasus. Specifically, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian Empire set out to expand its territory and seek a buffer zone in the south. Other reasons included (a) the intrigues and politics in the Royal court (b) the “civilising” mission that the Russians took upon themselves to introduce Russian civilisation upon the “barbarians” of the south and finally (c) the conquest of Christianity over Islam. Regardless of the immediate motivation for going into the Caucasus, once they were in there the Russians had to contend with a great deal of resistance. The Caucasus was a fiercely independent region that did not give into the Russians so easily. This resistance was most prominent amongst the Muslim territories of Daghestan and Chechnya. The resistance to Russian invasion was led by Sufi Imams, the most prominent of whom was Imam Shamil of Daghestan. Islam provided a moral framework to resist the Russians and was coupled with the strong sense of independent

identity that the Chechens had developed historically as tribal inhabitants of the North Caucasus mountains.

This phase set up the conflict between the Russians and the Chechens. It brought them into contact with each other in a military confrontation. Once the Russians realised the difficulty with which this territory would be integrated, excessive and cruel tactics were employed – General Yermelov being a case in point. Equally, the Chechens saw the Russian invasion as morally unacceptable based on the moral framework provided by Islam. It was under this banner, the banner of Sufi Islam, that the Chechen resistance's leadership successfully mobilised their populations to resist the Russian armies.

The first contact between the two sides had three outcomes. First, the Sufi religious tradition was not thoroughly rooted out. An attempt was made but it stayed largely intact and by the time the USSR came into being, was too strong for the Soviet administration to dismantle. Second, an attempt was made by imperial authorities to deny the Chechens their territorial link – up to 80,000 Chechens were deported after the end of hostilities in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (refer to Chapter 3). But not all Chechens were deported and many returned. Third, the Russians were unable to establish a comprehensive administrative machinery in the region due to its general inaccessibility. These three outcomes indicate the incomplete nature of the Russian conquest, at least from a Chechen perspective. The potential for future conflict slipped through. What had started out as a campaign with some real gains to be made, ended up being a war to subdue a rebellious colony.

A lull in the conflict followed from this imperial phase lasting till the inception of the USSR. With the coming of the Russian Revolution, also came a new leadership. The new leadership sought to implement its control over the former Russian empire, which included the Caucasus. As Chapter 4 details, the Soviet Union was a failed experiment in bringing together the varied nationalities under its space. The Soviet phase of Russo-Chechen relations was also, at least initially, a phase where the Russians had almost solved the Chechen problem. Again in this phase, we see continued Chechen resistance to integration within the Russian Federation while at the same time we see the Russians cracking down on the Chechens in order to “solve” the Chechen problem once and for all.

Various tools were employed to ensure that the USSR remained an integrated whole – from the deployment of military units and massive state security apparatuses in the various parts of the Russian Federation and the USSR, to economic and political policies that created a dependency which bound the Soviet periphery to the centre. This was true in the case of Chechnya too. Initially the Chechens, along with other North Caucasian nationalities, were allowed a fair degree of autonomy and the Chechen religious connection with Sufi Islam was tolerated. Concretely, Chechnya held little economic, political or military value. If anything, the Chechens had an economic and political value enforced upon them through the integrative policies of the Soviet Union. However, by the late 1920s and early 1930s the autonomy of the Chechens was severely curtailed and there was a significant crackdown on the Sufi-religious network. The Chechen people mounted a few minor rebellions up to and during the Second World War. After the German withdrawal from the Caucasus in 1944, Stalin ordered the deportation of the Chechens from the Caucasus justifying it by blaming the Chechens of collaboration with the Germans. No concrete evidence exists for this collaboration. The deportation was perceived as a necessary method of solving the problematic case of the Chechens, who were not able to accept Soviet domination and integrate themselves in the Soviet polity.

In 1957, Khrushchev rehabilitated the Chechens (along with the other nationalities that Stalin had deported) allowing them to re-establish their territorial link and rebuild their nationhood once again.

There was a distinct religious revival and significant increase in the population. The Chechens witnessed a revival of their nationhood, particularly their Muslim character. By the 1980s the Chechens had most definitely recovered as a nation and like other nationalities in the Soviet Union began to demand more autonomy by the late 1980s, during Gorbachev's campaign of political freedom and reform.

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Till the early 1990s there was no open hostility on either side and the Chechens steadily rebuilt their nation. By the time Gorbachev's reforms rolled around, the Chechens were looking to assert their nationhood in a more positive and aggressive way. The break-up of the Soviet Union signalled the next and final phase of Russo-Chechen relations.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 saw a chance for a number of nationalities to break free from the Soviet yoke. Boris Yeltsin, President of the Russian Federation, actively sought the dissolution of the Soviet Union and encouraged the various republics to grab as much autonomy as they could. Chechnya too was encouraged by Yeltsin and the Chechens fully supported Yeltsin. The Chechen leadership, under Dzhokar Dudayev, at the time had been fairly moderated in their demands, looking to gain Union Republic status in the Soviet Union. Yeltsin and his government ignored Chechen demands – Yeltsin's rhetoric was only meant for immediate political gain in the tumultuous times of 1991 and was not intended to be taken so literally. Realising that their demands were being ignored by Moscow, Dudayev took matters into his own hands and unilaterally declared Chechnya's independence. The Chechen leadership at the time was able to realise that an opportunity had presented itself where the Chechens could make a break from the Federation and create an independent Chechnya. The Chechen decision to breakaway was a strange one, if viewed in its more immediate context. The Chechens were sure to invite Russian reaction, which they did (in 1994 and then in 1999). Economically and politically, the decision was a bad one, as Chechnya's immediate trading partner was the Russian Federation and it did not give Chechnya legal recognition of its independent status. The decision to breakaway made sense only if previous Russian hostility toward the Chechens is considered – the leadership of Chechnya at the time had direct memories of Russian suppression of their nationhood. Breaking away from Moscow meant forging an independent path as a nation, without being subjugated and threatened by Moscow. The Chechens realised that they would have to build a new set of relations politically and economically with their neighbours, most importantly the Russians. Declaring their freedom was an attempt to secure their nationhood.

Russian policy towards the breakaway republic remained hostile, until finally in 1994 a full scale war was precipitated by a mismanaged Russian secret operation in Chechnya. As was seen in Chapter 5, till late 1994, Russian security forces had been infiltrating and trying to destabilise the Dudayev government. Pro-Moscow opposition forces were also backed by the Russians. In December of the same year, Russia and Chechnya entered an armed, direct and open conflict for the first time in over a century. The Caucasus was traditionally a Russian sphere of influence and so was Chechnya as a part of that region. But more than that, Chechnya was historically a trouble spot for the Russians.

The reasons for the 1994 conflict are often pinned as economic (the oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea and the drilling equipment industries present in Chechnya) and political (the integrity of the Russian polity). But the kinds of tactics that were employed in the run up to and during the war of 1994

indicated a very different motivation for the Russians. The tactics used prior to the armed conflict were meant to destabilise the Dudayev government, i.e. demonstrate the lack of viability of an independent Chechen nation-state. During the conflict itself, the Russians used massive amounts of force, indiscriminately, implying that they wanted to crush Chechen resistance completely. Civilians, refugees and civilian infrastructure were targeted. If the Russians simply wanted to preserve the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, then what reason would they have to utterly decimate the population, economy and state of Chechnya which would eventually rejoin them? Neither did it make sense to pound to a pulp an area that was of economic importance to them.

Chechen resistance was fierce. This reflected a couple of things – two characteristics of the Chechen national character. First, the Chechens were deeply linked to their territory and were willing to fight for its independence. Second, and more importantly, the Chechens were relied heavily on their Muslim identity. Sufi Islam was very strong amongst the fighters. Fighters would view themselves as fighting against an infidel and moreover would be martyrs if killed in action.

With the end of the conflict in 1996, a five year moratorium was placed on the conflict. In 1997, the president elect of Chechnya, Aslan Maskhadov, signed a peace treaty with Moscow and for some time it seemed that the conflict may actually have come to a halt.

This brings us to the final episode in this long conflict – the Second Chechen War, which was discussed in some depth in Chapter 6. Events that could not be concretely linked to the Chechens were used as a justification to invade this region a second time. This time the rhetoric used was that of terror and terrorism – the Chechens were held responsible for series of terror bombings in Russia. Moreover, the activities in Dagestan of one Chechen rebel, Shamil Basayev, were taken as representative of the entire Chechen population – Basayev was accused of terrorist activities in Dagestan, a territory that was a part of the Russian Federation. These two factors enabled the Russians to go in for a second bout in Chechnya. However, the actions of the Russians indicated that terrorism was more a cover than a real reason. The factors used as justification had no link to the Chechens – the terror bombings in 1999 were effectively decoupled from the Chechens by investigators later on and Basayev could not possibly have represented the Chechen population's collective will. The paltry excuses used by Russia fall apart when looked at carefully. More importantly the force with which the Russians went in indicated that they were not looking to eliminate terrorist elements in Chechnya but were going in to destroy any semblance of statehood that the Chechens had achieved. The Chechens had conducted a fair and free election and elected Maskhadov. Maskhadov was a moderate and under his leadership the Chechens were looking to rebuild their state. The Russians ignored this and proceeded to decimate the country once again, indiscriminately targeting people and infrastructure like the last time round. The object was to dismantle the Chechen state and subvert any sense of nationhood the Chechens had. The Russian campaign was a lot more successful and the actions that followed the successful capture of Chechnya are indicative of the true intent of the Russian government. The capital Grozny was reinstated, symbolic of the control that the Russians had of Chechnya once again (the name of the Chechen capital had been changed to Dzhokar-Gala, a symbolic break from the old Russian name of Grozny). Chechen resistance has been more subdued in this latest episode. There is a great deal of international support in the shape of funding and *mujahideen* volunteers from across the globe for those Chechens involved in resisting the Russian occupation. The Chechen population may be war weary by this point – they were looking to build their state after all but were interrupted in that process.

## **A Final Summing Up**

To sum up, all through the history of this conflict it becomes apparent that the Russian policy and tactics have tended to view Chechnya as a problem – something that needs to be “solved.” In the Imperial era of Russian history, there may have been concrete or perceived immediate reasons for going to war in the Caucasus. Soon after, the nature of the conflict took a turn, Chechnya became a trouble spot, a sore that needed treatment. It was a barbaric back land that refused to integrate into the Great Russian Empire. Through the Soviet period and after, the kind of policy and tactics the Russians have employed only indicate that Chechnya is a bad memory, a sore from the imperial legacy. As part of Russia, Chechnya had only marginal value in concrete terms. The long term motivation of the Russians seems to lie in the idea of destroying the Chechens as a nation and completing their integration into Russian civilisation. With equal vigour, the Chechens have a set about trying to release themselves of the Russian Yoke. For them, the motivation is simple enough – to eliminate Russian control over their national destiny and allow them to develop as a separate and distinct national entity. The Russians invaded their lands and have since been adamant about imposing their control over the Chechen people. This is wrong on two counts – as a free people who were originally inhabitants of the Caucasus, and as Muslims who find it morally incorrect to accept the Russian invasion.

The conflict between the Chechens and the Russians is a long running one, having lasted for well over a century and a half. The conflict must be viewed in its entirety – all of the individual events in it lie within a historical context. A lot of studies of the latest episodes in the conflict (i.e. the war in of 1994 and that of 1999) tend to view these events as problems of a recent regional nature or as security problems for the post-Soviet world. But the conflict has deeper roots and the reasons for its existence are far more terrifying in their consequence. It is the struggle of a nation to remain independent in the face of an adversary that is looking to destroy its very national identity.

### **Future Scenarios**

Having studied the history of this conflict in some depth, it may be worthwhile analysing the present situation and trying to predict which direction Russo-Chechen relations may head. In the short run, two issues will possibly dominate events.

First of all, one of the more significant recent developments has been the total internalisation of the conflict. Russia has always claimed the Chechnya issue to be an internal law and order one, and of late their version of the situation is the one that is taking hold. During the imperial conquest of the Caucasus, the war between the North Caucasians and the Russians was given significance by the international community – namely Great Britain. Imam Shamyl wrote directly to the Queen requesting aid and support and for a while British newspapers and journals carried articles condemning the brutalisation of the North Caucasians. However, this attention was temporary and did not result in any concrete help from the British: the issue was soon forgotten and Chechnya became a matter internal to Russia.

This internalisation was confirmed during the Soviet period when Russia’s relations with Chechnya were decidedly an internal matter of the Russian Federation – the international community had no access to information about and no interest in this relation. The Soviet Union was a closed society and for outsiders to gain access to sensitive political and military information was next to impossible. Moreover, had that information been available to the international community, it is unlikely that the Soviet Union could have been pressured into any corrective action. It was for all intents and purposes

an internal affair of the Russian Federation, couched further within the framework of the Soviet Union.

With the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russo-Chechen relations saw a distinct turn in terms of international attention – with the information blanket of the Soviet Union removed, Russo-Chechen relations could be scrutinised by the international community. This was amply demonstrated by the war of 1994, where the international community, namely human rights groups, journalists and the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), played a part in exposing the various issues in the conflict and to an extent brokering the post-conflict scenario. Russo-Chechen relations were very much in the scrutiny of the international community. However, we see that Russo-Chechen relations have phased back into being an internal Russian security issue with the current rhetoric of terrorism. This is not to say that Russia was not criticised for its actions in Chechnya in the Second Chechen War – human rights groups did voice their concern about the atrocities of the war. But the international community sided with the Russians when they viewed Chechnya as a matter internal to Russia. As long as the threat of terrorism exists it seems, Russia's positing the conflict as an internal law and order issue will meet with a great deal of success.

With this phenomenon of internalisation in mind, it may be an idea to bring back the conflict into the scope of international debate and discussion. The efforts of the few journalists and human rights groups still publicising the events of the ongoing conflict is a start but the issue needs to be looked at in the international arena.

The second event that will dominate the short run scenario is the imposition of Moscow's political control over the Chechen nation-state. After the imperial conquest of the region and the defeat of the Chechens in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Chechens still continued to passively resist Imperial Russian rule. It was the Soviet phase that saw an absolute and powerful political administration of the region. The complete domination of the political machinery in Chechnya by the center ensured obedience to Moscow's rule. Moscow also demonstrated its power with such acts as the deportation of the entire Chechen population in 1944. Politically and administratively, Chechnya was very much under Moscow's control. With Gorbachev's reforms and a general Chechen national revival in the latter stages of the existence of the Soviet state, more independent minded Chechens began to gain political influence in Chechnya. This Chechen political revival allowed the Chechens to breakaway from the Russian fold when the Soviet Union collapsed. The Chechens enjoyed de facto independence from 1991 to 1999. However, in that period, they experienced a war (1994) and their state was subjected to activities aimed at destabilising it. So politically, Chechnya did not have an unconstrained period ever since Russian occupation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The latest Russian political movements in Chechnya can be seen in the form of the controversial referendum and implantation of a puppet government. Numerous Chechen groups have already expressed their dissatisfaction with the arrangement through violence aimed against the implanted government and its Russian masters. With groups contesting the validity and authenticity of the referendum and the implanted government, the conflict is bound to continue.

That was a discussion of the short run scenario, where we see that the conflict is bound to continue as long as there is no external intervention to break the deadlock and the view of Chechnya as a terrorist state is not changed. Moreover, the forceful imposition of Russian rule does not eliminate the possibility of a conflict – there are already signs that the referendum held in early 2003 is not

acceptable to groups in Chechnya, as violence against the puppet government, and Russian targets, continues.

Let us now turn our attention to a long term projection. The trend that emerges over the course of the conflict, as this study has argued, is one of seeming Russian arrogance towards a fiercely free people. The national ambitions of the Chechens have been pointedly stalled and the overall goal of Russian manoeuvrings over the past century and a half is one of forcible integration into Russian political, economic and territorial space. At the same time, there is among Chechen elites the ability to mobilise the Chechens to the cause of a free Chechnya – with good reason, given that the Chechens have been forcefully occupied and that their moral codes and historical identity demand that they refuse this forceful occupation. If these two opposing forces are kept in contact, as they have been for the past century and a half of the conflict and as they are now, then there is a very high likelihood of this conflict continuing.

Another, possibly more important, factor is the way that Russia has tended to dominate the discourse between the two sides. The Russians have created and deployed policy instruments that the Chechens at best react to – this is true for the long term projection. This is also not very surprising given that the Russians are by far the bigger partner in terms of all kinds of resources. As the imperial power, Russia set up the conflict by first invading the Caucasus and then engaging the Chechens. The Chechens reacted to this invasion and Imam ShamyI started a rebellion. With the Chechen reaction, there was a period of coexistence till the creation of the Soviet Union.

Soviet Russia's policies toward Chechnya were initially quite tolerant of their religion and provided them with a fair degree of autonomy. Soon after this, their autonomy was severely curtailed under Stalin. A few minor rebellions were launched as a result until the Chechens were deported in their entirety to Central Asia. The Chechens were not involved in any significant actions after this apart from trying to adjust to their new home. However, another Russian policy returned them to their homeland and allowed them to recover as a nation.

The post-Soviet period saw the Russians create and implement destabilising policies towards the Chechens, attempting to topple Dudayev's government and forcing Chechnya back into the Russian fold. By 1994, this translated to an all out war. An uneasy peace followed, until Russia was once again able to wage an all out war against the Chechens (1999) and successfully take over.

With the latest conflict, the Russians have been able to completely internalise the conflict, avoiding international criticism and having a free reign in Chechnya. The Russians have now installed a puppet government and are intent on defending it (Akhmad Kadyrov's replacement came in the form of his son, approved of course by the Russians).

So, the effort in this region is primarily a Russian one. The Russians have set up the conflict to which the Chechens have been reacting since it was set up. This does not preclude the possibility that the Chechens are unable to match Russian policy at any given time: they have time and again showed their propensity to resist Russia's policy. But the direction that this historic conflict takes at any given time is usually the outcome of Russian policy at those points in time.

With this in mind, there are four possible long term outcomes. First, there is the very distinct possibility that the Russian policy may succeed – that is, the Chechens are bludgeoned into submission and/or accept their role as a part of the Russian Federation. Second, there is the

possibility that the Chechen refusal to accept Russian rule is powerful enough for them to create a permanent break with the Russian Federation in the form of an independent Chechen polity. A third possibility lies in neither sides' policy succeeding and the current deadlock extending till such a time as one of the two sides' policy succeeds. Finally, there is the possibility that as two forces that are highly reactive to each other, there is some kind of wedge driven between the two, thus, distancing them to end the conflict.

The Russo-Chechen conflict is bound into the third possibility outlined above – deadlock. It is unlikely that either of the two sides will attenuate their stances to compromise, given the history of their relations. The conflict will continue unless and until there is a separation of the two sides with direct third party intervention.

### **Problems and Potential for Further Study**

This study, like any other has its shortcomings and has highlighted a number of areas for further research. Conducting a study of this nature in Pakistan is a little problematic due primarily to resource constraints. The literature available is primarily of a journalistic nature – there being very little scholarly material available in Pakistan that studies the Russo-Chechen conflict. Most of the books acquired were of a journalistic nature. However, the dearth of scholarly books was made up for in terms of the articles that were acquired – there are a lot of articles of a scholarly nature that deal with the Russo-Chechen conflict. This is not to imply that journalistic writing is limited – in fact journalistic writing allows a great deal of flexibility in interpretation of events. An associated weakness of conducting a study like this from Pakistan is accessibility to scholarly material in languages other than English. Numerous Russian, Chechen and other European scholars and analysts have no doubt written extensively on the matter.

Specific weaknesses in this study include the research for Chapter 3, which looked at the imperial phase of Russo-Chechen relations. There really is very little material available on this phase of relations, at least in Pakistan. Certainly there would be archival material available in Russia on Russian Imperial policy at the time. However, to gain access to those resources would be next to impossible for this author.

Another major shortcoming of this work is that the views of scholars were not sought in through interviews. This is due to a distinct lack or inaccessibility of scholars who have an expertise in the North Caucasus as a region, in Pakistan.

Finally, there is, due to space constraints, a lack of regional contextualisation of the conflict. Many studies posit the Russo-Chechen conflict as regionally based power play in the Caucasus, involving Russia, Iran (and by implication the Arab World) and Turkey (and by implication the USA). This regionally based power struggle is posited on numerous factors including oil and oil pipelines and vested military-security interests.

Having said this, there is a great deal of scope for further study, especially in the form of comparative studies within the region. A number of the Caucasian republics broke away from the Soviet Union during the early 1990s. Often the South Caucasian republics are compared and studied comparatively. It would be enlightening and useful to try and look at the Chechen case in a comparative light with other North Caucasian countries. One potential area of comparison is with the neighbouring territories of Ingushetia and Daghestan. For instance, Daghestan and Chechnya were so

intimately linked during their resistance to imperial Russia. Yet Daghestan's Islamic identity seems to have worn thin by the time of the Soviet Union and furthermore, their integration into Russia seems to have been more thorough – at least this appears to be the case. Why?

Moreover, in 1991 the Chechen and Ingush declared their independence from Russia together but the Ingush rejoined the Russian Federation soon after. The Ingush and the Chechens share a very similar history and ancestry – they have been termed “cousin” nations. Why did the Ingush choose to stay within the fold of the Russian Federation?

Furthermore, in order to increase the knowledge base on Russo-Chechen relations in Pakistan, it is important to compile material and produce work on Russo-Chechen relations during the Imperial, Soviet and post-Soviet phases. Perhaps comparative studies could be conducted, looking at the subtleties and complexities of Russo-Chechen relations during each phase.

The regional context of the conflict could be carried back historically, as Iran (historically Persia and the Arab World), Turkey (historically the Ottoman Empire) and Russia have been the three principal powers interacting in the region. The waxing and waning of the influence of the three and the extent of their influence has changed over the course of time and it would be highly interesting and very useful to study this.

Finally, other paradigms of conflict may be used to analyse the Russo-Chechen conflict over time. In this study, the ethnic paradigm was utilised. However, there could be very valid and interesting studies made using economics, civilisation, military or other paradigms as a basis.

There is certainly potential for further research on this topic and this study has merely scratched the surface of a deep and historically complex issue.