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Editorial

THE CASE FOR CHECHNYA

What happened was what always happens when a state possessing great military strength enters into relations with primitive, small peoples living their independent lives. Either on the pretext of self-defence, even though any attacks are always provoked by the offences of the strong neighbour, or on the pretext of bringing civilization to a wild people, even though this wild people lives incomparably better and more peacefully than its civilizers . . . the servants of large military states commit all sorts of villainy against small nations, insisting that it is impossible to deal with them in any other way.

Leo Tolstoy, 1902 draft of *Hadji Murat*

IN THE DECADE and a half since the end of the Cold War, the map of Eastern Europe has been comprehensively redrawn. More than a dozen new countries have appeared as a result of the break-up of the Soviet Union and the Yugoslav wars of succession, an arc of newly sovereign states stretching from Estonia to Azerbaijan. The majority of them have, at the prompting of the us, been incorporated into Euro-Atlantic defence structures, and several were ushered into the eu earlier this year; Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania now form the outer perimeter of the Single Market, while Georgia and Ukraine have advanced their cases for NATO membership. The continent has been transformed.

Chechnya provides a stark contrast to these trajectories. Here, as in the Baltic states, a national independence movement emerged during *perestroika*, and a broad national consensus for secession was democratically ratified in late 1991. Earlier the same year the citizens of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania overwhelmingly voted for separation from the ussr; the results of the referenda were quickly approved by the ussr's Supreme Soviet and the three new nations, with populations of 1.6 million, 2.7 million and 3.7 million respectively, were admitted to the UN within a



matter of weeks. But Chechnya—at 15,000 square kilometres, slightly smaller than Wales, and with a population of around a million—has, since 1991, suffered two full-scale assaults by the world's fifth-largest military force, and is now entering the sixth year of a vicious occupation designed to reduce the populace to starvation and submission. While citizens of the Baltic states are now able to cross Europe's borders freely, Chechens must endure Russian checkpoints and *zachistki*—‘clean-up’ operations, ostensibly for checking identity papers—which routinely result in the torture, ransom, disappearance or summary execution of those arrested, as well as the pillaging and further impoverishment of those who remain. The devastation is unthinkable, the brutality endless and unchecked, while the casualties remain largely uncounted.

Discussions of the Russo-Chechen conflict have rarely focused on this staggering divergence of fortunes, often preferring the state-sponsored obfuscations of the ‘war on terror’, or else characterizing it as the all but inevitable product of a long-running historical antagonism. The legacy of Chechen resistance to Russian colonization—from the first confrontations with Cossack settlers in the sixteenth century to the southward expansion of the Tsarist Empire in the nineteenth century, and well into the Soviet period—has undoubtedly played a role in galvanizing the movement for secession. A strong impetus would also have come from the experience of deportation and exile suffered by several North Caucasian peoples in 1944. The immediate roots of the present war, meanwhile, can be found in the Kremlin's cynical plan to hoist Putin into power, and to reverse the defeats suffered in 1994–96.

But underpinning Chechen resistance, past and present, has been a consistent struggle for self-determination. The Chechens' demands are comparatively modest—full sovereignty, retaining economic and social ties with Russia—and have a sound constitutional basis. The response, however, has been staggeringly disproportionate, with Russian forces unleashing attacks of a ferocity unmatched in these lands since the Second World War. In the West, on the rare occasions that attention is devoted to Chechnya there has been almost total unanimity that Chechen independence is not to be countenanced, for the good of Russian democracy and its nascent capitalism. What follows is an attempt to demonstrate the weakness in fact, and shamefulness in principle, of the arguments used to deny the fundamental right of the Chechen people to govern themselves.

The Chechens are one of an intricate patchwork of peoples covering the North Caucasus.¹ ‘Chechen’ is in fact a Russian designation, after a village where a battle was fought between Cossack settlers and the local people in 1732; the Chechens—mythically descended, ‘like sparks from steel’, from the hero Turpalo-Nokhchuo—refer to themselves as ‘Nokhchii’, and are closely related to the neighbouring Ingush, with whom they share many customs. The two peoples, whose languages are mutually intelligible, are jointly known as the Vainakh. They have been present in the area for over 6,000 years, their livelihood predominantly provided by livestock, subsistence farming and the surrounding forests. As with mountain peoples elsewhere, Chechen society lacked feudal structures, being composed instead of groupings of clans living in formal equality—‘free and equal like wolves’, as the Chechen saying has it. This essentially democratic, acephalous form of social organization distinguished the Chechens from many other Caucasian peoples, such as the Kabardins or Avars, and was to have far-reaching implications: firstly because it meant that there was no native elite whom the Tsars could co-opt; and secondly because the Chechens were in a sense already ideally organized for guerrilla warfare.

Frontier revolts

The tradition of resistance to outside rule in Chechnya is striking in its depth and consistency. It has been stronger here than elsewhere due to a combination of factors: pre-existing social relations, cultural patterns, concrete historical experience and environmental conditions. Topography and demographics have been crucial: Chechnya’s thickly forested mountains provided better cover for resistance than was available in, say, Ingushetia; moreover, as the most numerous of the North Caucasian peoples, the Chechens provided the majority of footsoldiers for rebellions against Russian rule. Their record of struggle sets them apart from their neighbours, among whom both admiration and resentment of Chechens are common. It was above all the disparity between Chechen and Ingush experiences of and attitudes to Russian rule—the Ingush largely abstained

¹ For a detailed historical narrative see John Dunlop’s *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, Cambridge 1998, chapter 1. The classic account is John Baddeley’s *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus* [1908], London 1999; see also Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, New Haven 1998. Lieven’s book, a compendium of fascinating information and acute insights, stands in marked contrast to his current commentary on Chechen affairs, characterized by an extraordinary degree of sympathy for Putin’s needs.

from the rebellions of 1840–59 and 1920—that lay behind Ingushetia’s decision to separate from Chechnya in a 1991 referendum.

Resistance has been bolstered and perpetuated by Chechen culture in which, as elsewhere in the Caucasus, honour—both martial and familial—and hospitality are prominent. Memory plays a central role, not only in its oral traditions—notably the epic songs, *illi*—but also in the customary duty to remember seven generations of ancestors. History is no dispassionate record of events; it is the basis of Chechen identity itself.² Religion, too, has been an important element: Islam penetrated the East Caucasus in the 17th and 18th centuries, melding with local animist traditions. The Naqshbandi Sufi brotherhood, with its aversion to hierarchy and creed of resistance, held strong appeal for Chechens, and it was under Sufi leadership—uniting dozens of disparate Caucasian peoples behind the banner of Islamic solidarity—that the most effective resistance to Russian colonial domination was to be mobilized in the 19th century.³

Russia’s southward expansion began with the conquest of the khanate of Astrakhan by Ivan the Terrible in 1552, and the first contacts between Chechens and Russians date from this time. But shifts in geopolitical fortunes and priorities meant that Russian imperial interest in the Caucasus revived only in the late 18th century—provoking the 1785–91 uprising of Sheikh Mansur, whose armies inflicted a heavy defeat on Catherine the Great. After the Napoleonic Wars, the Tsars began to colonize the region in earnest, constructing lines of forts along the Terek and Sunzha rivers, which laterally bisect Chechnya. Russia’s colonial policy was similar to that adopted by other European powers in their dealings with tribal peoples; in the Caucasus it was personified by General Aleksei Yermolov, who from 1816 attempted to

² On Chechen culture’s orientation to the past and the nature of its epics, see Obkhad Dzhambekov, ‘O khudozhestvennom vremeni v ustno-poeticheskom nasledii chechents’ev’, in Kh. V. Turkaev, ed., *Kultura Chechni: Istoriia i sovremennye problemy*, Moscow 2002, p. 71; see also the essays in the same volume by Z. I. Khasbulatova on etiquette and traditions of mutual assistance, and on traditional architecture by V. I. Markovin. On songs and music, see Iu. A. Aidaev, ed., *Chechentsy: Istoriia i sovremennost’*, Moscow 1996, pp. 297–305. On myths and legends, see *Skazki i legendy ingushei i chechents’ev*, compiled by A. O. Malsagov, Moscow 1983; English version printed in 1996 by the Folklore Society. Khassan Baiev’s memoir *The Oath: A Surgeon Under Fire*, London 2003, also provides many insights into Chechen culture and everyday life under Soviet rule, as well as striking testimony of the two wars.

³ See Lieven, *Tombstone*, pp. 359–63.

subdue Chechnya, where resistance was stiffest, by means of punitive raids on mountain villages, collective punishment, razing of houses and crops, deforestation, forced mass deportation, and settlement of Cossacks on lands vacated by Chechens. Not only did this approach dispossess and enrage an entire population, it also had longer-term sociological consequences. In his eagerness to drive the Chechens out of the agricultural lowlands and into the mountains where they would eventually starve, Yermolov blocked the formation of feudal and landowning structures in Chechen society, thus cementing the very clan-based order that had made resistance so effective.⁴

The Chechens initially responded to Yermolov's brutality with armed raids on Russian positions. But by the late 1830s resistance had coalesced around Imam Shamil, an Avar from Dagestan who advocated Islamic discipline in order to defend local ways—including the *adat* or customary laws—against the invader. Between 1840–59 Tsarist repression escalated into full-scale war against Shamil's proto-state.⁵ The armies of Alexander II eventually won through sheer military might, but the persistent trouble on his empire's southern flank evidently persuaded the Tsar, in the aftermath of the Crimean War, to press on with the task his father had entrusted to Paskievich, Yermolov's successor, in 1829—the 'extermination of the recalcitrant'. Forced deportations of the Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus began in 1856 and continued until 1864; a total of 600,000, including 100,000 Chechens, were sent to the Ottoman Empire, where tens of thousands perished from starvation and disease. The Cherkess have never recovered demographically; most of the Chechens who survived, however, eventually returned, though many remained to form significant diaspora communities in present-day Turkey and Jordan.

Rebellion flared up in Chechnya and Dagestan in 1877–78, this time mobilized primarily by Qadiri Sufi brotherhoods, and was once again

⁴ M. M. Blied and V. V. Degoev, *Kavkazskaia voina*, Moscow 1994, cited in Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, p. 16. Yermolov's portrait currently hangs in the Russian Army's North Caucasus headquarters in Rostov-on-Don: see Dmitri Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia*, Washington, DC 2004, p. 139.

⁵ For a scholarly account, see Moshe Gammer, *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnya and Daghestan*, London 1994; a striking literary vision of both the rebellion and its imperial adversaries can be found in Leo Tolstoy's last work, *Hadji Murat*, published only in 1912. Tolstoy served in Chechnya from May 1851 to January 1854, at the height of the war.

brutally suppressed. A relatively quiescent period followed, in which the Chechens remained on the socio-economic margins, and subject to still more severe land hunger than Russian peasants—by 1912, Chechens and Ingush owned less than half as much land per person as Terek Cossacks.⁶ The discovery of oil near Grozny in the 1880s brought with it rapid industrial and urban growth, but what meagre benefits this provided went above all to Russian migrant workers; indeed, Grozny remained a strongly Russian city well into the 1970s. As the Empire sought dependable local cadres, however, a small minority of Chechens began to receive a Russian education. It was from among these men, influenced by the ideas of the *narodniki* and later the Social-Democrats, that a local intelligentsia began to emerge in the late 19th century; initially focused on recording the folklore and traditions of their people in scholarly works, by the first decade of the 20th century they had moved to writing critical articles on the current conjuncture.⁷ Several such figures were involved in the creation of an independent North Caucasian Mountain Republic in 1918, while others fought alongside the Reds during the Civil War as the best means of securing local autonomy. (Among them was Aslanbek Sheripov, whose brother Mairbek was to lead an uprising against Stalin in 1940.) Nevertheless, by the end of the Tsarist era, there was as yet no distinct Chechen nationalism; aspirations to sovereignty were instead couched in pan-Caucasian terms.

Revolution to deportation

The leading role played by Cossacks in the White Army, which moved into the North Caucasus in 1919, galvanized opposition in Chechnya. Mobilized by Sufi brotherhoods in the countryside and by radicals such as Sheripov in Grozny—which survived a 100-day White onslaught in 1918—the resistance engaged fully a third of Denikin's forces at a crucial moment in the Civil War.⁸ After the White withdrawal in 1920, however, the Red Army initially replicated the pattern of punitive raids, and resistance continued. By 1921 Stalin was forced to pledge full autonomy for the rechristened Soviet Mountain Republic, accept local Islamic laws

⁶ 5.8 and 3 desiatinas respectively, to the Cossacks' 13.6 (1 desiatina = 1.09 hectares). See Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, p. 33.

⁷ Kh. V. Turkaev, 'Rossiia i Chechnia: aspekty istoriko-kul'turnykh vzaimosviazei do 1917g.', in Turkaev, *Kul'tura Chechni*, pp. 164–87.

⁸ Abdurahman Avtorkhanov, 'The Chechens and the Ingush During the Soviet Period and Its Antecedents', in Marie Bennigsen Broxup, ed., *The North Caucasus Barrier*, New York 1992, pp. 147–94.

and return lands granted to the Cossacks. Within a year the Soviets had reneged on these promises, sending in army detachments to forcibly disarm the Chechens in the highlands; further pacification measures were required into the summer of 1925, including artillery and aerial bombardment of mountain villages.

Yet although many Chechens saw Soviet rule as Russian domination refurbished, others were better disposed to the Communist order, seeing it as Chechnya's path to modernity. Much of this ambiguity persists to this day, since the Soviet system provided professional opportunities and social infrastructure that the patriarchal order had never offered. In the field of culture, Chechen writers turned away from the Arabic poetic traditions of preceding centuries towards realist fiction in the manner of Gorky; it was the playwright and novelist Khalid Oshaev who devised the Latin transcription for Chechen in 1925—anticipating Atatürk by three years.⁹ By the late 30s, however, modernization had become unambiguously synonymous with Russification. This was expressed on a symbolic level with an enforced shift to Cyrillic script, and in a literal sense with adjustments to administrative boundaries designed to dilute the weights of the titular nationalities of the newly formed Caucasian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics, merging distinct groups and adding to them areas with predominantly Russian populations.¹⁰

As elsewhere in the USSR, the onset of collectivization in Chechnya in the autumn of 1929 marked the beginning of a qualitatively different phase of Soviet history. In response to arbitrary arrests and confiscations of livestock, armed resistance began once more: archives were burnt and dozens of GPU agents assassinated, prompting the despatch of the Red Army to Checheno-Ingushetia that December. It suffered heavy losses, and the Kremlin line was softened until 1931, when the GPU arrested 35,000 Chechens and Ingush for 'anti-Soviet' activity. The following year saw the beginning of a crackdown on the local intelligentsia, though the 3,000 arrests of 1932 were outdone by the 14,000—3 per cent of

⁹ Aidaev, *Chechentsy*, pp. 287–90.

¹⁰ Perhaps the most lasting effect of Russification has come from Chechen not being taught in Soviet schools: though 98 per cent of Chechens claim it as their mother-tongue, Chechen remains largely a spoken language; to this day, the overwhelming majority of publications in Chechnya are in Russian. For a survey of Chechen media, see Valerii Tishkov, *Obshchestvo v vooruzhennom konflikte: Etnografiia chechenskoi voiny*, Moscow 2001, pp. 453–55; an abridged English version has been published as *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*, Berkeley, CA 2004.

the population—that took place during the *ezhovshchina* of 1937; guerrilla activity continued in Chechnya's mountainous south, however, until 1938. An indirect indication of the toll taken by arrests and repression can be seen in the fact that, between the Soviet censuses of 1937 and 1939, Checheno-Ingushetia suffered a population loss of 35,000.¹¹

But the depredations of the GPU pale into insignificance beside the genocidal deportations of 1944. If the former were tragically generalized across the USSR, the latter were chillingly focused. The pretext given by the Soviet authorities was that several North Caucasian peoples and the Crimean Tatars had collaborated en masse with the Nazi occupying forces. Chechen émigré circles—including the grandson of Shamil—had briefly made contact with the German authorities. But in Chechnya itself, opportunities for working with the enemy were limited: having taken Rostov, Stavropol, Krasnodar and Mozdok by late August 1942, the Wehrmacht ground to a halt before reaching Grozny; the only town in Checheno-Ingushetia over which they managed to establish control before their retreat began in late 1942 was Malgobek, which had a predominantly Russian population.¹² In Chechnya as elsewhere, the handfuls of collaborators were overwhelmingly outweighed by the number of Caucasians and Tatars volunteering for service in the Red Army—17,413 Chechens alone—or fighting with partisan bands behind German lines.

The real motivation undoubtedly lies instead in the obstinate refusal of the majority of Chechens, above all, to bow to Soviet authority. It was this that underpinned the nationalist insurrection led by Hassan Israilov and Mairbek Sheripov, which began in 1940—when Hitler and Stalin were officially allies—and which had, by 1942, gained control of several mountain regions and formed a provisional government.¹³ Rather than being

¹¹ Avtorkhanov, 'Chechens and Ingush'; Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, pp. 49–56.

¹² See Aleksandr Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples*, New York 1978, pp. 36–8.

¹³ Born in 1910, a Party member from 1929, Israilov was twice arrested for criticizing in print the 'plundering of Chechnya by the local Soviet and party leadership'. In January 1940, he wrote to the Chechen-Ingush ASSR Party secretary that 'For twenty years now, the Soviet authorities have been fighting my people, aiming to destroy them group by group; first the *kulaks*, then the mullahs and the 'bandits', then the bourgeois nationalists. I am sure now that the real object of this war is the annihilation of our nation as a whole. That is why I have decided to assume the leadership of my people in their struggle for liberation.' See Avtorkhanov, 'Chechens and Ingush', pp. 181–2. Dunlop highlights Israilov's unprecedentedly secular background for a Chechen resistance leader: *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, pp. 56–8.

deployed against Hitler's armies, the Soviet air force pounded the mountain *auls* in a bid to crush the North Caucasian National Committee.

The plan for the deportation was drawn up in October 1943, codenamed 'Operation Lentil'—the first two syllables of the Russian word *chechevitsa* pointing a phonetic finger at the principal targets. On 23 February 1944, in a process personally supervised by Beria, 478,000 Chechens and Ingush were crammed into Studebaker trucks and then sent, along with 50,000 Balkars, to Central Asia in airless freight trains; Kalmyks and Karachais suffered a similar fate. Food was scarce, disease rife, and many simply died of exposure. NKVD files give an official death rate of 23.7 per cent in the trains, a total of 144,704 people. Estimates for indirect population loss among Chechens alone range from 170,000 to 200,000.¹⁴

Return from exile

Although the Israilov rebellion had provided a brief glimpse of a modern Chechen nationalism, the latter was largely forged by the experience of deportation and exile. The brutal specificity of Soviet nationalities policy and the sense of a shared, bitter destiny aided the formation of a Chechen national consciousness. The Sufi brotherhoods played a key role in exile, too, since their underground activities perpetuated a specifically Chechen religious tradition. Though Islam was to re-emerge during *perestroika*, there is little doubt that in Chechnya, religion served as 'spiritual clothing for [a] national struggle'.¹⁵

In exile, the surviving Chechens and Ingush faced strict restrictions on residence and were mostly able to work only as manual labour. With de-Stalinization in the late 1950s they began to stream back to the re-established Chechen-Ingush ASSR. But even after their return, they were heavily discriminated against, and largely excluded from skilled employment—a marginalization that only consolidated the national identification that had begun to develop in exile. In the late Soviet period, Checheno-Ingushetia's economy was divided into two spheres. The largely urban Russians—24 per cent of the republic's total 1989 population of 1.2 million—dominated the oil and machine sectors, health, education and social services. The predominantly rural Chechens and Ingush—the former far more numerous than the latter, composing 64

¹⁴ Nekrich, *Punished Peoples*, p. 138; Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, pp. 62–70.

¹⁵ Lieven, *Tombstone*, p. 357.

per cent of the ASSR's population—worked in agriculture, construction and also crime. Given the higher population growth rate of Chechens and Ingush relative to Russians, by 1989 these imbalances had resulted in an estimated surplus labour force of over 100,000, while a quarter of ethnic Chechens were now living outside Checheno-Ingushetia, having left in search of employment. Like the rest of the North Caucasus, moreover, Checheno-Ingushetia had markedly lower wages and poorer social provision than the rest of Soviet Russia: the average wage in 1985 was 83 per cent of the RSFSR average, dropping to 75 in 1991; infant mortality was 23 per 1000 in 1987, compared to an RSFSR mean of 14 per 1000. In 1989, only 5 per cent of the population of Checheno-Ingushetia had higher education, while 16 per cent had no education at all.¹⁶

The brunt of this economic apartheid was, of course, borne by the rural population—according to the 1989 census, 59 per cent in Checheno-Ingushetia, compared to 27 per cent in the RSFSR as a whole—and it was above all from the poor south of the republic that the independence movement drew its numerical support. By the end of the Soviet era, Chechnya's small intelligentsia—largely the product of the Communist system—was also pressing for, at the very least, a revision of the terms of Chechnya's USSR membership. Indeed, as elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the leaders of the nationalist movement came not from the political elite, but from local artistic and intellectual circles—the poet Zelimkhan Yandarbiev and the actor Akhmed Zakaev, for instance—although some, such as Dzhokhar Dudaev and Aslan Maskhadov, were drawn from the Red Army, one of relatively few Soviet institutions open to Chechen talents. Financial support, meanwhile, came from local bosses such as Yaragi Mamadaev or the Moscow-based diaspora—much more numerous and prosperous than overseas Chechen communities, which have had little influence on present conditions in their ancestral land.

A crucial factor in 1990–91 was the fact that, unlike the vast majority of Russia's titular ethnic republics, Chechnya possessed no native *nomenklatura* which could seamlessly retain power. The reasons for this are the same as those underpinning the emergence of Chechen nationalism itself. The GPU had picked off pre-Revolutionary leaders and intellectuals; but it was above all the deportation and subsequent discrimination that had 'prevented the Chechens from forming a consolidated, self-confident

¹⁶ Demographic information: Tishkov, *Obshchestvo*, p. 115; socio-economic data: Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, pp. 85–8.

Soviet elite that could have peacefully resolved the situation when the Soviet Union started to fall apart'.¹⁷

Declaration of independence

As in the Baltic States, the origins of the Chechen national movement lie in informal associations established during *perestroika*, such as the scholarly society Kavkaz, Bart ('Unity')—which in 1990 became the Vainakh Democratic Party—and the Popular Front of Checheno-Ingushetia. The latter was closely connected to the local Party and КГБ, and initially limited itself to organizing protests on environmental issues, such as a planned chemical plant in Gudermes, or on the defence of Chechen culture (the Ingush were largely sidelined). But the notion of full sovereignty became increasingly central to discussions during 1990, and more radical forces gained the upper hand. On 26 April, Gorbachev promulgated a law giving all Russian ASSRS 'the full plenitude of state power on their territory', and making them full subjects of the USSR, with the constitutional right to secede from the Union. On a visit to Kazan in August 1990 while campaigning for the RSFSR presidency, meanwhile, Yeltsin famously told Russia's ethnic republics to 'take as much sovereignty as you can stomach'. The First Chechen National Congress, held in November 1990 with the full approval of the local CP, took up these invitations by declaring the sovereignty of the Chechen Republic of Nokhchi-cho, but also resolved that the new state would remain part of the USSR.

At this stage, the chief differences among Checheno-Ingushetia's political forces concerned the composition of a new national leadership, the form of relations with Moscow and the role of Islam. All the main factions of the Chechen National Congress—the Communists; a secular group drawn from the Soviet intelligentsia and the Popular Front; radical Chechen nationalists, such as the Vainakh Democratic Party, many of whose members favoured some form of Islamic state—advocated full sovereignty 'at a minimum'.¹⁸ It was only in 1991, as the Soviet Union neared collapse, that this consensus was broken, as the local Party clung to power while the nationalist opposition gathered force. The key actors here were the Vainakh Democratic Party, led by Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, and the Executive Committee of the Chechen National Congress, which was from March 1991 headed by Dzhokhar Dudaev.

¹⁷ Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, p. 16.

¹⁸ Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, p. 93; Lieven, *Tombstone*, pp. 56–64.

For the previous five years, Dudaev had commanded a long-range bomber division in Tartu, and was strongly influenced by the rising fortunes of the Estonian independence movement. He had left Estonia just as a referendum there returned a strong majority in favour of secession—an event which doubtless encouraged him to embolden his stance: Estonia's population of 1.6 million was, after all, little larger than Checheno-Ingushetia's, and the latter had a smaller Russian minority than either Estonia or Latvia. Dudaev's arrival in Chechnya brought a radicalization of the Executive Committee, which soon created an armed National Guard and by the summer of 1991 was openly calling for the dissolution of the Chechen-Ingush Supreme Soviet, claiming legitimate authority now rested with the National Congress.

The decisive blow to the local Party's authority came with the August putsch against Gorbachev. While Chechnya's CP officials avoided taking a decisive stance, Dudaev's Executive Committee staged rallies and called a general strike in defence of Yeltsin. A classic revolutionary situation of dual power ensued, until the seizure of the Supreme Soviet on 6 September by the National Guard and the paramilitaries of Bislan Gantemirov's Islamic Path Party.¹⁹ With hundreds of people streaming into Grozny from the Chechen countryside in support of Dudaev, the nationalists took control of more government buildings during September. The Executive Committee's response to Yeltsin's proposal of a Provisional Council to replace the Supreme Soviet, a compromise more palatable to the local CP, was to form an interim government and schedule elections for 27 October. Dudaev won a landslide victory, and declared independence on his inauguration on 1 November.²⁰ At the end of the same month, the Ingush voted formally to separate from Chechnya, and remain part of Russia as an ASSR.

¹⁹ The former used car dealer Gantemirov became mayor of Grozny under Dudaev, then went over to the opposition and served in the same post for Russia's puppet administration during the 1994–96 war; he was jailed for fraud in 1996, but amnestied by Putin in 1999 and put at the head of an armed group.

²⁰ Despite the many irregularities, and although experts have given different final figures—Dudaev winning 90 per cent of the vote on a 72 per cent turnout, or 85 per cent on a 77 per cent turnout—the verdict is clear. The Russian Caucasus expert Sergei Arutiunov has noted that Dudaev had 60–70 per cent support. See 'Chronology' in Diane Curran, Fiona Hill and Elena Kostitsyna, eds, *The Search for Peace in Chechnya: A Sourcebook 1994–1996*, Kennedy School of Government, Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, March 1997; and Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, p. 114.

Dudaev's declaration of independence was the latest in a series that had begun in Lithuania in March 1990. Armenia followed in August, Georgia in April 1991, and 20–31 August 1991 saw similar declarations from Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan; Tajikistan followed suit in September, Turkmenistan in October and Kazakhstan in December. The contrast between the fate of these states and Chechnya is striking. On 6 September, for example, the Kremlin recognized the independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and on 17 September the three nations were given seats in the UN; Ukraine and Belarus were already members, but the rest of the former Soviet republics were admitted on 2 March 1992 (except Georgia, which had to wait until July for lack of a government). On 2 November 1991, meanwhile, the RSFSR Supreme Soviet declared the elections Dudaev had just won to have been unlawful. Then, on the night of 8–9 November, Russian special forces flew in to Khankala airbase near Grozny in a bid to remove Dudaev from power. But the coup attempt was foiled by a combination of armed Chechen opposition and obstruction from Gorbachev, still nominally commander of the Soviet military, and unwilling to repeat the bloodshed that had taken place in Lithuania that January. Russian troops left Chechnya in humiliation, and for the next three years, the country gained *de facto* independence.

Chechnya's secession was in line with USSR law, and the margin of Dudaev's electoral victory indicated the depth of popular support for full sovereignty. Moreover, for all the doubts they subsequently raised as to its legitimacy, the Russian authorities on several occasions accepted Chechen independence *de jure*. On 14 March 1992, after negotiations on a range of legal, economic and security issues, Chechen and Russian representatives signed protocols explicitly referring to the 'political independence and state sovereignty of the Chechen Republic', a formula that was endorsed in further documents signed on 28 May and 25 September of that year.²¹

Dudaev in power

Dudaev's Chechnya has been portrayed as a lawless land, blighted by crime, corruption and political and economic instability, with the blame placed squarely on its uniformed leader. Comparison with other former Soviet republics yields a more balanced assessment. In the years

²¹ Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, p. 169.

immediately following 1991, economic disaster overtook all post-Soviet states. Perhaps the most comparable to Chechnya are the republics of Transcaucasia, which saw abrupt shrinkages of GDP—35 per cent in Azerbaijan in 1991–92 and 23 per cent in 1992–93; 40 and 32 per cent respectively in Georgia, 52 and 15 in Armenia—as well as a marked decrease in industrial production: the 1992 figures for Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are 44, 48 and 24 per cent respectively. In Chechnya, industrial production dropped by 30 per cent in 1992 and by 61 per cent in 1993—principally due to the emigration in the early 1990s of the predominantly Russian specialists in the oil industry, the republic's main source of revenue.²² Though the Dudaev government was undoubtedly inexperienced in economic affairs, Chechnya's woes were clearly part of a wider catastrophic trend.

If Chechnya's contested political scene stands in marked contrast to the *nomenklatura* dictatorships of Central Asia or Azerbaijan, it more closely resembles the turbulent landscape of post-Soviet Georgia, where president Zviad Gamsakhurdia was toppled by military coup in 1992 and assassinated in 1993. Political opposition to Dudaev came initially from former Party officials and pro-Moscow Chechens in the lowlands, but was soon augmented by business elites dissatisfied with the slump in economic fortunes after 1991 (and by the Dudaev government's unwillingness to privatize with the same gusto as the federal centre). As it did in Georgia, Yeltsin's government proceeded to finance and arm opposition groups, which made several attempts to assassinate Dudaev.

Dudaev responded to these pressures with populist gestures to the poorer, more traditional south—such as the 1994 renaming of Chechnya as the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, after a highland region—and, increasingly as of 1993, by a strengthening of presidential rule. Dudaev's dissolution of parliament in April 1993 tarnishes his democratic credentials—though he did not go so far as to shell his elected opponents into submission, as Yeltsin did in October of the same year. It should also be recalled that, unlike Aleksandr Rutskoi and Ruslan Khasbulatov, the leaders of the rebellion against Yeltsin, the Chechen opposition was actively being funded by an aggressive foreign power, with the aim of revoking Chechen sovereignty altogether. Moreover, several of the pro-Moscow districts claiming to be victims of Dudaev's dictatorship unilaterally declared

²² Transcaucasia: World Bank, *Statistical Handbook 1995: States of the Former USSR*, Washington, DC 1995; Chechnya: Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, pp. 126.

their secession from Chechnya in June 1993, with no democratic mandate whatsoever. It was this constitutional disorder, which Russia had itself created, that served as the pretext for invasion in 1994.

Much has been written about the prevalence of crime under Dudaev.²³ Chechens had become prominent in the shadow economy in the late Soviet period, largely due to their exclusion from legitimate sectors. But in Chechnya as elsewhere, the surge in criminal activities after 1991 is intimately bound up with the post-Soviet economic collapse. Against a background of catastrophic de-industrialization and skyrocketing inflation, crime became 'a matter of simple survival'. Highly profitable rackets sprang up around the Baku–Novorossiisk pipeline, which then ran across the heart of Chechnya, and Grozny airport became a kind of special free trade zone for drugs and contraband. Two remarks are in order here: firstly, these activities would not have been possible without the complicity of the Russian authorities controlling Chechen airspace and manning the border; and secondly, these larcenous de facto privatizations were simply small-scale versions of the orgy of theft then taking place in Russia itself. The Chechens were very much the 'junior partners in a wave of corruption and criminality emanating from the Russian capital'.²⁴

Yeltsin's Vietnam

The Russian authorities had clearly been contemplating military intervention in Chechnya long before 1994: Rutskoï had advocated it in October 1991, and military stand-offs had taken place on Chechnya's borders twice in 1992. The immediate trigger for war, however, was the failure of yet another special forces coup attempt in Chechnya on 26 November 1994, which has been described as 'Yeltsin's equivalent of the Bay of Pigs'.²⁵ Russian forces entered Chechnya on 11 December, and throughout that month Grozny came under a bombardment described as more intense than that in Sarajevo or Beirut. With the New Year came

²³ Several of Dudaev's key supporters in 1990–91 did have underworld connections— notably Gantemirov and the 'businessman' Yusup Soslambekov, who had served a sentence for rape in the Soviet period. Mamadaev is also alleged to have had mafia links. See Lieven, *Tombstone*, p. 59.

²⁴ See Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, pp. 127–33, on the involvement in oil rackets of figures such as Aleksandr Korzhakov, chief of Yeltsin's bodyguard, and Oleg Soskovets, first deputy prime minister—later key members of the 'party of war'.

²⁵ Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, p. 21; on Rutskoï and stand-offs, see Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, p. 110, 172–4.

a full-scale ground assault, with the Russians taking Grozny in March amid heavy casualties, almost totally destroying the city's centre. The pattern of massively disproportionate force was repeated elsewhere—most brutally with the massacre of at least two hundred villagers in Samashki on 6–8 April 1995—but the Russian advance slowed in the spring of 1995, as the occupying army increasingly sought local truces rather than engaging Chechen formations. Shamil Basaev's May 1995 raid on Budennovsk, and the ensuing negotiations, provided a vital breathing space for the Chechen resistance, which was now able to filter back behind Russian lines in sufficient numbers to seize key towns—holding Gudermes for several days in December 1995.

From the outset, there had been a striking degree of opposition to the war not only among the Russian public, where a small but persistent anti-war movement took root, but within the army itself. As early as 13 December 1994, a tank column had refused to fire on a group of women blocking the road into Chechnya. The high number of Russian casualties contributed to low morale, and the notion of withdrawal from Chechnya became increasingly popular. In the spring of 1996, with electoral disaster looming and the Chechen resistance making bold, large-scale attacks, Yeltsin put forward a tokenistic peace initiative, but then ordered the assassination of Dudaev, carried out by Russian rocket attack on 22 April 1996. Yandarbiev took over as acting president. Thereafter, the Russians alternately proposed ceasefires and renewed their offensive, most notably after Yeltsin had scraped home in the June elections—a victory due in no small part to the massive political and monetary support of the West, orchestrated primarily by the Clinton administration.²⁶

The decisive spur for negotiations came after a Chechen offensive on Grozny, Gudermes and Argun—launched to coincide with Yeltsin's inauguration on 9 August—had driven the Russians back to their positions of December 1994. On 31 August General Aleksandr Lebed and Chechen Chief of Staff Aslan Maskhadov signed the Khasavyurt accords, which recognized Chechnya as a subject of international law but postponed a final decision on its status until the end of 2001. The first Russo-Chechen

²⁶ In February 1996 Helmut Kohl extended \$2.7bn credit to the Russian government, most of it unconditional; Alain Juppé stumped up a \$392m loan; in March, the IMF approved a \$10.3bn credit—making it clear that funds would be withdrawn if Yeltsin lost—and the World Bank agreed a loan of \$200m. See Fred Weir, 'Betting on Boris: The West Ups the Ante for the Russian Elections', *Covert Action Quarterly*, Summer 1996.

war was a humiliating defeat for the Russians and, despite their victory, a cataclysm for the Chechens. Conservative estimates give 7,500 Russian military casualties, 4,000 Chechen combatants and no less than 35,000 civilians—a minimum total of 46,500; others have cited figures in the range 80,000 to 100,000.²⁷

Imaginary dominos

The principal argument advanced in defence of Yeltsin's assault on Chechnya was that Chechen independence would unleash a chain of separatist wars in the rest of Russia—an internal version of the Cold War trope of a 'domino effect'. It rests on precarious foundations. As Robert Wade has recently written in the *Financial Times*, the likelihood of secession increases 'the more that three conditions are met: location on a non-Russia border; population with non-Russian majority; a plausible export revenue base'. To take the second of these, demography: of the RSFSR's 31 titular ethnic republics, in 1991 only 4 had an absolute majority of the titular groups—North Ossetia, Tuva, Checheno-Ingushetia and Chuvashia—while 3 had a simple majority: Tatarstan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Kalmykia. Russians formed the majority of the population in the rest. Economically, all but two of the seven republics listed above were heavily dependent on the federal budget; only Tatarstan, a major manufacturing centre which produced 25 per cent of the country's oil, and Checheno-Ingushetia, which produced 90 per cent of Russia's kerosene, were net contributors.²⁸ Only these two republics refused to sign federal treaties with Russia in 1992; but in Tatarstan the main issue was the distribution of revenues between a central *nomenklatura* and a peripheral one, and a deal was eventually reached early in 1994. Only in Chechnya did a democratic movement for secession emerge, and only there did the cause of independence gather significant mass support.

What of Russia's strategic objections? Chechnya sits near the centre of the isthmus separating the Black Sea and the Caspian, and the Russian authorities frequently raised the spectre of an independent Chechnya galvanizing the other Caucasian peoples to form a single state that

²⁷ John Dunlop, 'How Many Soldiers and Civilians Died During the Russo-Chechen War of 1994–96?', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 19, nos 3–4, (September 2000), pp. 329–39. Lieven, *Tombstone*, pp. 102–46 gives a fine analysis of the course of the war.

²⁸ *Financial Times*, 8 September 2004; James Hughes, 'Managing Secession Potential in the Russian Federation', *Regional and Federal Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3 Autumn 2001, pp. 41–3.

would choke Russian supply lines and threaten vital geopolitical interests. But after an initial surge in solidarity in the early 1990s, interest in a pan-Caucasian state rapidly waned—especially so in the wake of the Ingush–North Ossetian war of 1992—and by 1994 the Chechens were entirely isolated. Still more damaging to such arguments is the Russians’ strategic hypocrisy: furious at the prospect of Chechen secession, they to this day arm and encourage irredentism in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Indeed, many of the Chechen field commanders who would fight the Russians in 1994–96—among them Shamil Basaev—were trained by the GRU, Russian military intelligence, for deployment in Abkhazia in 1992–93.

Once the motives of restoring order, preventing Russia’s disintegration and protecting its strategic interests are removed, how then are we to explain the decision to invade in late 1994? A key individual role was played by the nationalities minister Sergei Shakhrai, fresh from wrapping up the treaty with Tatarstan, and long personally ill-disposed towards Dudaev. In broader terms, John Dunlop has pointed to the ‘outbreak of a virulent form of Russian neo-imperialism’, which sought to re-establish Russia’s dominance over its periphery. After its defeat in Afghanistan and the US victory in the Gulf, the Russian military was also eager to re-assert itself. But the principal impetus was supplied by the Yeltsin regime’s urgent need for a ‘small victorious war’ to consolidate its endlessly corrupt and increasingly unpopular rule.²⁹ The same desperate need to hold on to the levers of power, and the associated profit-streams, undoubtedly persuaded Yeltsin’s clique of the wisdom of concluding a truce at Khasavyurt two years later, after Chechen forces had brought the Russian army to a standstill.

Out of the rubble

The Chechen state that emerged from the rubble in 1996 was confronted with tasks that would have been daunting even with a unified domestic political scene and vast quantities of international aid. A prime factor in its subsequent misfortunes lay in the very document that had secured peace: the postponement of a decision on Chechnya’s status

²⁹ The infamous phrase was originally uttered by Nicholas II’s interior minister Viacheslav Plehve with reference to the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05; it was repeated in 1994 by Oleg Lobov, secretary of the Security Council—who is also reported to have added, ‘like the US had in Haiti’. See Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, p. 211, and Lieven, *Tombstone*, p. 87.

until 2001 by the Khasavyurt accords. The Russians worked assiduously to ensure that the Chechen government remained trapped in a juridical limbo, unable to secure international recognition or seek redress against the former occupiers. Only Afghanistan and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus were willing to accord Chechen envoys full diplomatic status. To this day, official Islamic solidarity has been non-existent: 'not a single Arab country ever recognized Chechen independence, and their rulers consistently voiced support of Russia's territorial integrity'. Little better was to be expected from the West, where in 1995 Clinton compared Yeltsin's anti-separatist stance to that of Abraham Lincoln, and was to hail the liberation of Grozny in 2000.³⁰

Economic life in Chechnya was at a low ebb. Much of the country's infrastructure and industry had been pulverized by Russian bombardment, while the reconstruction funds allocated by Moscow were routinely embezzled before reaching their destination—in 1997 Yeltsin professed amazement that of \$130m sent to the Chechen National Bank, only \$20m ever arrived. Out of 44 industrial concerns operating in 1994, only 17 were running in 1999; production in the latter year stood at 5–8 per cent of the pre-war level. In 1998, unemployment stood at 80 per cent, while it was estimated that legitimate sources of income could only reach a third of the way to the poverty threshold. In these circumstances, barter, woodcutting and metal salvaging became important means of subsistence. But it was above all crime that flourished, most notably kidnapping and small-scale pirate oil-processing operations—in 1999 there were an estimated 800 mini-refineries run by armed factions siphoning off oil from pipelines. Grozny's arms market, too, did a roaring trade—as, more surprisingly, did markets in general, which were full of cheap goods and agricultural products. Social provision, however, had collapsed: education was almost non-existent, and access to health services minimal; infant mortality was estimated to stand at an incredible 100 per 1000.³¹

External silence and profound social and economic dislocations combined with internal turbulence to choke off any prospect of a viable political project. The presidential elections held in Chechnya in January 1997—described by the OSCE as 'exemplary and free'—were won by

³⁰ Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, pp. 191, 198.

³¹ Embezzled funds: Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, p. 37; industry, markets, infant mortality: Tishkov, *Obshchestvo*, pp. 436–41; unemployment, income, mini-refineries: I. G. Kosikov and L. S. Kosikova, *Severnyi Kavkaz: sotsialno-ekonomicheskii spravochnik*, Moscow 1999, pp. 188–90.

Aslan Maskhadov, a former Soviet artillery general and Dudaev's minister of defence, who received 59.3 per cent of the votes; his nearest rivals were Basaev, with 23.5 per cent, and Yandarbiev, with 10.1 per cent.³² The results—far more evenly distributed than those in Georgia's 1995 elections, or the farcically one-sided contests in Kazakhstan in 1994 or Azerbaijan in 1998—register the country's principal political faultlines, which divided Maskhadov's project for an independent secular Chechnya from the uncompromising stance of some of his field commanders, who in several cases advocated a pan-Caucasian Islamic state as the sole guarantee of Chechen independence.

The confrontation between secularists and Islamists was to prove fatal to Maskhadov, who as of 1998 was increasingly defied by powerful players such as Basaev, Yandarbiev and Salman Raduev. Maskhadov made misguided attempts to undercut his adversaries' support—such as the 1999 introduction of elements of *sharia* law, in contravention of Chechnya's 1992 constitution—and on several occasions entered into armed conflict with forces loyal to former field commanders such as Raduev and Arbi Baraev, in a bid to free hostages taken as part of the kidnapping business that flourished in Chechnya from 1996–99.³³ Maskhadov's opponents, meanwhile, repeatedly stepped up criminal activities at moments designed to undermine negotiations with the Russians—most notably with the kidnap and killing of the Russian Interior Ministry envoy Gennadii Shpigun in March 1999.

Many Western commentators have seen the failures of Maskhadov's regime as grounds for including Chechnya in the ever-expanding category of 'failed states' undeserving of sovereignty, and which it would be better to place under the custodianship of more civilized great powers.³⁴ This argument should be rejected as decisively in Chechnya as elsewhere. Few states would have been able to establish a peaceful, prosperous society in three years given the physical ruin, economic collapse and countless political and social fractures wrought by two years of war with a vastly more powerful neighbour. Isolation and the war's

³² See 'Chronology', in Curran et al., *Search for Peace*. For engaging snapshots of Chechnya during the election, as well as a much richer portrait of the North Caucasus in Soviet and post-Soviet times, see Georgi Derluguian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus*, forthcoming.

³³ See Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, pp. 27–34.

³⁴ See Anatol Lieven, 'A Western Strategy for Chechnya', *International Herald Tribune*, 9 September 2004.

shattering after-effects to a great extent shaped the character and fortunes of independent Chechnya, as to a lesser extent did its essentially anarchic social traditions. But it should be stressed that the prime cause of Chechnya's woes from 1996–99 was the utter devastation wreaked upon it by the Russian military in the preceding years.

Uses of Islamism

Much has been written about the role of Islam in Chechnya—the Russian military claiming the country is awash with Arab mercenaries, and that it forms part of an incipient ‘Wahhabite crescent’ threatening to engulf Russia's entire southern flank. Since 9.11, the West has largely colluded with such fantasies by identifying Russia as its ally against an ‘Islamic threat’ emanating from Central Asia. But the character and composition of Islamic radicalism in the North Caucasus have largely been misunderstood. What is commonly referred to as ‘Wahhabism’ is, more accurately, Salafism, and has indigenous roots in the struggle between orthodox forms of Islam and local syncretistic traditions. The Sufism that took root in Chechnya in the late 18th century accommodated veneration of Chechen holy figures and shrines, and played a vital underground role in cementing Chechen national identity during exile. The 1980s saw a religious revival and, for the first time in Chechnya since 1944, the construction of mosques; but it was only during the war of 1994–96 that Islam emerged here as a political phenomenon, a tool for mobilizing and providing discipline in the resistance to Russian occupation. More austere Salafite interpretations gained ground simply due to the prestige and armed strength of field commanders such as Basaev and Raduev—who may have embraced Sunni orthodoxy in a bid to secure financial support from the Gulf—and after the war because of economic hardship and the impasse reached by the secular independence project.³⁵

The escalating Islamization of Chechnya, meanwhile—Yandarbiev signed into law a new criminal code based on Sudan's, and later he and Basaev called for the abolition of the presidency in favour of an imamate—should be seen as part of an internal political battle over the nature of the Chechen state. Elsewhere in the North Caucasus, the targets and social bases of radical Islam are different, born of economic misery and

³⁵ Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, p. 101. See Lieven, *Tombstone*, pp. 24–5, for a discussion of Islam during *perestroika*, and the curious neo-Gothic architecture of the new mosques.

frustration with the political closure effected by immovable elites. Levels of funding from abroad for Islamists have been greatly exaggerated—as have the numbers of volunteers, which experts even now put at no more than 1–2 per cent of pro-independence forces. For all the claims of international Islamic involvement in Chechnya, the cause in which resistance has been mobilized there remains that of national independence. In a less guarded moment, Putin himself implicitly admitted as much, revealingly comparing the campaign launched in Chechnya ‘to the security service operation in the Baltics and Western Ukraine . . . aimed at eradicating anti-Soviet resistance lasting from 1944 to the mid-1950s’.³⁶ His continual insistence on the Islamic dimension serves only to underline the base opportunism of his ‘anti-terrorist operation’—a colonial war repackaged for domestic and international consumption.

Putin’s war

According to the Russian analysts Dmitri Trenin and Aleksei Malashenko, preparations for war in Chechnya were ‘well under way’ as early as 1998.³⁷ The pretext this time was provided by Basaev’s August 1999 incursion into Dagestan, which marked an attempt to expand the influence of Islamists who had already established micro-imamates there, and ultimately to unite Chechnya with Dagestan and form an independent Islamic state.³⁸ Although Basaev was quickly expelled from Dagestan, a series of explosions in apartment buildings in Buinaksk, Volgodonsk and Moscow in late August and September—FSB collusion has repeatedly, and plausibly, been alleged—prepared domestic opinion for the ‘counter-terrorist operation’ that began at the end of September.

Vladimir Putin’s rule has unarguably marked a transition from the oligarchic capitalism of Yeltsin to a more authoritarian mode—he has, notably, installed dozens of former KGB personnel in key positions throughout government, and brought the powerful plutocrats of the 90s to heel or else driven them into exile. But it is the war in Chechnya—launched within a month of his appointment as prime minister—that has been his principal means of consolidating power, paving the way for his smooth ascent to the presidency in March 2000, and ensuring a staggering degree of compliance from political elites and intelligentsia alike.

³⁶ Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, pp. 93–4, 97, 119.

³⁷ Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, p. 111.

³⁸ For a more detailed account, see Georgi Derluguian, ‘Che Guevaras in Turbans’, *NLR* 1/237, September–October 1999.

Putin's war on Chechnya has been characterized from the outset by a far more relentless use of force than that of his predecessor, not only in terms of troops and ordnance but also cruelty to civilians from an army bent on revenge, and increasingly composed of *kontraktniki*, professional soldiers often recruited from Russia's prisons. On 1 October, Russian forces—100,000-strong this time, compared to the 24,000 Yeltsin had initially deployed—entered Chechnya after several weeks of massive aerial bombardment had virtually levelled the remnants of Grozny. After securing the lowlands north of the Terek in the autumn of 1999, they rolled southward and, in February 2000, took Grozny, suffering heavy casualties in the process. Chechen government troops retreated to the mountains, where they were pounded by Russian artillery and air-strikes.

Putin strolled to victory in the March election—Blair rushed to Moscow to be the first world leader to congratulate him—and in June appointed Akhmad Kadyrov as puppet ruler. But for all the talk of 'normalization', as Putin passed responsibility for Chechnya from the army to the FSB and then to the Interior Ministry (MVD), Chechen resistance forces remained able to infiltrate Russian lines. The massed troops of the Russian Defence Ministry, MVD, FSB and special forces (OMON) controlled the plains by day, but Chechen forces began to conduct guerrilla operations by night, picking off convoys or patrols before melting into the forest. Since then, the conflict has remained one between 'an elephant and a whale, each invincible in its own medium'.³⁹

With Russian casualties rising—the official figure for 2002–03 was 4,749, the highest in one year since 1999, and the monthly average for 2004 is currently higher than American losses in Iraq—Putin has since 2001 adopted a strategy of 'Chechenization'.⁴⁰ This has meant troop reductions—around 60,000 Russian soldiers now face an active resistance estimated at a maximum of 5,000—and the delegation of many combat operations to militias under the control of Kadyrov's puppet government.⁴¹ Kadyrov was shoehorned into the presidency of Chechnya in a rigged election in October 2003—in which 20,000 of the occupying troops were eligible to vote—but his assassination on 9 May 2004

³⁹ Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, p. 42.

⁴⁰ 2002–03 casualty figures: *The Military Balance* 2003, p. 86; 2004: *Nezavisimaja gazeta*, 25 October 2004.

⁴¹ Estimates for the number of active Chechen resistance fighters have ranged from 2,000 to 5,000. See Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, pp. 121, 238 n. 29; *Military Balance* 2003, Table 41; *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 10 September 2004.

required yet more fraudulent elections this autumn, won by Kadyrov clan loyalist Alu Alkhanov. The change of personnel will do little to alter the character of the quisling regime. Under the command of Kadyrov's son Ramzan, the *kadyrovtsy* have become infamous for their brutality, and have tortured and killed their countrymen no less assiduously than the occupiers themselves. Kadyrov's administration, while professing to be about the reconstruction of Chechnya, remained a corrupt clique—Putin's human rights envoy to Chechnya admitted that no more than 10 per cent of the \$500m allocated to Chechnya in 2001 had been spent, and in 2002, FSB director Nikolai Patrushev admitted that \$22m had been 'misused' that year.⁴²

There can be no greater indictment of Putin's rule than the present condition of Chechnya. Grozny's population has been reduced to around 200,000—half its size in 1989—who now eke out an existence amid the moonscape of bomb craters and ruins their city has become. According to UNHCR figures, some 160,000 displaced Chechens remained within the warzone by 2002, while another 160,000 were living in refugee camps in Ingushetia. The latter figure has declined somewhat since—a Médecins Sans Frontières report of August 2004 estimated that around 50,000 Chechen refugees remained in Ingushetia—thanks to the Kremlin's policy of closing down camps and prohibiting the construction of housing for refugees there. Those forced back to Chechnya live on the brink of starvation, moving from one bombed-out cellar to another, avoiding the routine terror of *zachistki* and the checkpoints manned by hooded soldiers, where women have to pay bribes of \$10 to avoid their daughters being raped, and men aged 15–65 are taken away to 'filtration camps' or simply made to disappear. The Russian human rights organization Memorial, which covers only a third of Chechnya, reported that between January 2002 and August 2004, some 1,254 people were abducted by federal forces, of whom 757 are still missing.⁴³

The military stalemate has produced a chilling degeneration among the occupying forces. Sheltered by an official policy of impunity—many officers, for instance, have been permitted to have several different identities, ostensibly to protect them from 'revenge attacks' by Chechens—Russian troops have engaged in an orgy of theft and arbitrary cruelty. Each of the ministries operating in Chechnya runs its

⁴² Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, p. 38.

⁴³ *Guardian*, 30 September 2004.

own fiefdom, with corresponding rackets and sales of arms, often to the Chechen resistance fighters themselves. There are dozens of reported instances of soldiers returning the bodies of civilian casualties only for a fee—which is higher for a corpse than a living person, because of the importance in Chechen traditions of burial on clan lands. The violence has not been limited to Chechen civilians: an estimated half of Russian casualties have come in non-combat situations, mostly due to systematic bullying of demoralized teenage recruits—largely those without parents rich enough to buy exemption from service. Those returning to Russia from service in Chechnya often bring with them the vicious habits learned there.⁴⁴ In that sense, the ugly symptoms of Russia's aggression towards Chechnya have metastasized into a cancer that threatens to consume Russian public and private life.

The Russian media had played a key role in conveying something of the horrors of the 1994–96 war; this time, the authorities have not made the mistake of allowing them freedom to operate, and have closed down or replaced the editorial teams of the two most critical sources of news, NTV and TV6.⁴⁵ A striking contrast between the current war and the previous one has been the manner in which Russian official discourse has permeated journalistic commentary, to the point where 'terrorist' and 'Chechen' have become virtually synonymous. This has had poisonous social repercussions: generalized antipathy to 'persons of Caucasian extraction' has often flared up into outright xenophobia, resulting in both official and spontaneous public persecution not only of Chechens but also of several other peoples from the region.⁴⁶ It is this widespread public hostility to

⁴⁴ For a powerful account both of daily life in Chechnya under the occupation and its repercussions in Russia, see Anna Politkovskaya, *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya*, Chicago 2003. Bullying: Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, p. 141.

⁴⁵ Many crucial and courageous reports have been filed from Chechnya by Anna Politkovskaya for *Novaia gazeta* and Andrei Babitsky for Radio Svoboda; but in Russia, the influence of radio and especially print are negligible compared to that of television.

⁴⁶ In September 1999, for instance, 15,000 Caucasians were expelled from Moscow by the city authorities and another 69,000 compelled to re-register; in September 2003, 54 Chechen students were beaten by a skinhead mob in Nalchik; in April 2004, a 10-year-old Armenian boy was set on fire in a market in Kostroma; in September 2004, a gang of 20 youths ransacked cafés belonging to Caucasians in Yekaterinburg. See Amnesty International report, 'For the Motherland', December 1999; *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 15 October 2003; *Moscow Times*, 23 April 2004; *Moscow News*, 9 September 2004.

the Chechen cause, together with the more general political atomization and apathy of contemporary Russia, that largely explain the absence of a cogent movement against the war. There have recently been some stirrings on this front: on 23 October, human-rights organizations staged a demonstration on Moscow's Pushkin Square that drew up to 2,000 participants, and on 6–7 November the Soldiers' Mothers' Committees held the founding congress for a new political party. But dissent has thus far focused largely on the war's brutality rather than its political roots. Even on the left, the question of Chechen independence has at times all but vanished.⁴⁷

Regional repercussions

The horrors of Beslan, where on 3 September this year at least 350 people died after Russian troops stormed a school in which hostages were being held by an Islamist group loyal to Shamil Basaev, form part of a logic of escalating violence engendered by the Russian occupation. While resistance has predominantly taken the form of guerrilla actions inside Chechnya against Russian troops and pro-Moscow Chechens, the current war has seen the increasing resort to violence outside Chechnya's borders—including the previously unused tactic of suicide bombings. Such methods are, of course, above all an expression of utter desperation, perpetrated by people with nothing to lose but their lives; it has been suggested that the high incidence of female suicide bombers may be connected with widespread rape by Russian troops, though this aspect of the war is still less reported than the rest.⁴⁸

Since the suicide bombings of government and military targets in Mozdok, Gudermes, Znamenskoe and elsewhere, as well as attacks in public

⁴⁷ Boris Kagarlitsky writes that 'the central issue . . . is not Chechen independence or Russia's territorial integrity, but democracy in Russia and Chechnya': see 'Where is Chechnya Going?', *Moscow Times*, 3 June 2004.

⁴⁸ The case of Colonel Yuri Budanov has acted as a barometer for what Chechens can expect from Russian troops and officials: convicted of kidnapping, raping and killing an 18-year-old Chechen girl, Budanov was eventually sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment, after official support for his insanity plea provoked outrage. His recent request for a pardon was approved by Vladimir Shamanov, a veteran of the Chechen campaign and now governor of Ulyanovsk, but withdrawn after further protests and a 10,000-strong public demonstration in Grozny. See Politkovskaya, *Small Corner of Hell*, pp. 153–60, and Institute of War and Peace Reporting, *Caucasus News Update*, 23 September 2004, available at www.iwpr.net.

spaces in Moscow, Russian officialdom has spoken of a ‘Palestinization’ of the Chechen resistance. The largely unmentioned obverse, or rather, precursor of this has been an ‘Israelization’ of Russian strategy. The mass of checkpoints designed to prevent the population from moving freely; the killing of unarmed civilians; the impunity enjoyed by the occupying forces; the deliberate economic immiseration and overall humiliation visited on the inhabitants of the occupied territory—all these features are common to the West Bank and Chechnya today. In February of this year, Russia resorted once again to targeted assassination, killing former president Yandarbiev in Qatar with a car-bomb—an operation to which it was rumoured that Israeli secret services had lent their expertise.

As Israel has done in the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon, the Russians have conducted raids on the refugee camps in Ingushetia, seeing them as breeding grounds and hiding places for resistance fighters. These repeated incursions have served only to enrage both the refugees and the local population, between whom Russian soldiers have proved unable or unwilling to distinguish. It is worth noting that the raids on government offices in Nazran in June this year were conducted primarily by Ingush, and that there were almost as many Ingush among the Beslan hostage takers as Chechens. Though the Russian authorities now speak with alarm of a possible ‘regionalization’ of the conflict, it is an expansion and escalation entirely of their own making.

There are plenty of socio-economic grounds for discontent at Russian rule in the North Caucasus. The region remains one of the country’s poorest, with the lowest wages and official unemployment rates several times higher than the national average—29 per cent in Dagestan and 35 in Ingushetia, compared to 9 per cent nationwide.⁴⁹ Characteristically, Putin has opted to deal with the possibility of political challenges from the disenfranchised by coercive means, first by ensuring the election of loyal FSB cadres such as Murat Ziazikov—lowered into place in Ingushetia after Putin engineered the exit of the popular Ruslan Aushev—and now by ending the election of regional governors altogether in favour of handpicked appointees. This is, of course, part of a much wider recentralization of authority under Putin; but once again, Chechnya has had a formative influence on the new Russian political elite’s strategy and composition. Of the seven presidential plenipotentiaries appointed

⁴⁹ *The Territories of the Russian Federation 2004*, London 2004, pp. 30–5.

in 2000, two were former commanders in the Chechen war, and several more veterans have become regional governors or taken up other official roles.⁵⁰ More than an expedient assault on a weakened enemy, the war in Chechnya has been an important source of cadres for Putin's neo-authoritarian project.

Under Western eyes

What has been the international response to the ongoing assault on Chechen statehood? As the Chechen foreign ministry official Roman Khalilov dryly notes, 'the international community's record of timely, painless recognition of secession is extremely poor'.⁵¹ Here Chechnya has been a casualty of the basest *Realpolitik*. Western governments gave the nod to Yeltsin's war as a regrettable side-effect of a presidency that had at all costs to be prolonged, if capitalism was to be successful in Russia. Putin has benefited from a similarly craven consensus. Yet for all the column inches expended on the harm done to Russia's fragile democracy by the imprisonment of Yukos chairman Mikhail Khodorkovsky, it is in Chechnya that the face of Putin's regime is truly revealed, and it is above all by its sponsorship of wanton brutality there that it should be judged.

The few early criticisms of Putin's campaign from such bodies as the OSCE and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe were soon toned down, and dismissed by European governments as counter-productive amid attempts to welcome Putin to the European fold. In September 2001, while state-sanctioned murders were being committed with impunity in Chechnya, Putin received a standing ovation in the Bundestag; in the summer of 2002, Chirac endorsed the Russian view of the 'anti-terrorist operation', and he and Schroeder reiterated their support at Sochi in August 2004. Collective EU efforts have been limited to humanitarian aid for the refugee camps in Ingushetia.⁵²

⁵⁰ Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, pp. 152–4.

⁵¹ Roman Khalilov, 'Moral Justifications of Secession: the Case of Chechnya', *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 22, no. 4 (December 2003), p. 414.

⁵² The French journalist Anne Nivat provides an illustrative vignette. The future Finnish president Tarja Halonen visited a camp in 1999, repeatedly insisting 'I represent the European Union, I'm here to help you' and asking what the refugees' problems were; but when confronted by replies such as 'We want a political resolution, not war' and 'Tell them to stop bombing us, to stop killing our children', Halonen seemed at a loss, and could only offer around tangerines. Nivat, *Chienne de Guerre*, New York 2001, p. 54.

Despite repeated approaches from Maskhadov's envoys, the UN has, for its part, refused to meet with Chechnya's legitimately elected leaders—though Kofi Annan was quick to express his grief at the assassination of the puppet Kadyrov earlier this year. On a visit to Moscow in 2002, Annan even praised Putin's efforts at conflict resolution—doubtless appreciative of the latter's prior backing for his bid to secure a second term as Secretary General. Questions about Russia's actions in Chechnya have routinely been sidestepped at meetings of the UN's Human Rights Committee. Nor has support been forthcoming from elsewhere. Arab governments have emphasized their support for Russia's territorial integrity, while in 1999 the Iranian foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi insisted the Russo-Chechen war was strictly an internal affair. China has seen in Yeltsin's and now Putin's suppression of Chechen aspirations for independence a useful precedent for its own dealings with Tibet and Xinjiang.⁵³

Official reaction in the us, of course, has been conditioned by the needs of the 'war on terror'. After the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon, Putin wasted no time in linking Chechnya to the wider battle against Islamic extremism, and gave the us permission to plant forward bases across Central Asia, its former sphere of influence, as a quid pro quo for Washington's approval for war in Chechnya. The Bush administration has responded with the requisite silence—though this is a marked change of tack for many of the neo-cons, whose hostility to Russia has meant support for Chechen independence from unlikely quarters. Members of the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya include Richard Perle, Kenneth Adelman, Elliott Abrams, Midge Decter and James Woolsey. Outside official circles, right-wingers such as Richard Pipes have also argued the Chechens' case, pointing out that authoritarianism is in Russians' DNA and that Putin would do well to learn the lessons de Gaulle drew from Algeria.⁵⁴

Liberals, by contrast, have been divided between those who accept the devastation visited on Chechnya as a regrettable bump in Russia's difficult road to a stable democracy, and those who actively endorse Putin's war. Despite the constitutional propriety of the Chechens' demands, there is almost universal agreement on the unacceptability of Chechen

⁵³ Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, pp. 191, 205.

⁵⁴ John Laughland, 'The Chechens' American Friends', *Guardian*, 8 September 2004; Richard Pipes, 'Give the Chechens a Land of Their Own', *New York Times*, 9 September 2004.

independence. ‘The first requirement is the exclusion of formal independence as a subject for negotiation’, concludes Jonathan Steele, on the grounds that Putin will simply not accept secession.⁵⁵ Anatol Lieven describes Russia’s right to wage war on Chechnya as ‘incontestable’, at the same time urging ‘more nuanced’ assessments of Russian war crimes. More recently, he has insisted that the West take a tougher line with Maskhadov, pressing him not only to break with the ‘terrorists’ but to fight them ‘alongside Russian forces’.⁵⁶ Blair’s fulsome support for Putin, meanwhile, only underscores the hypocritical selectivity of his ‘humanitarian interventionism’.

An anti-colonial struggle

Putin’s decision in September 2004 to place a bounty on the heads of both Basaev and Maskhadov signals his intent: no political settlement with pro-independence forces will be contemplated, no future for Chechnya envisaged other than a series of Kremlin-installed puppets disbursing favours to those whose loyalty can be bought or whose needs have overruled their principles. The Russians, echoing the Israeli tactic of claiming ‘there is no partner for peace’, have worked hard to close off potential dialogue; Maskhadov’s repeated offers of negotiations and proposals for peace—the latest involving UN protectorate status for Chechnya as an interim stage on the road to independence—have fallen on deaf ears.

The military solution Russia has sought over the last decade is, however, unlikely to materialize. In 1994–96 Chechnya won a remarkable victory against an adversary that massively outmanned and outgunned it, and though the sheer weight of the force currently deployed against it makes large-scale successes such as the 1996 re-taking of Grozny seem unlikely, the very brutality of the Russian occupation will succeed only in generating resistance. This in turn means that perhaps the most striking feature of the post-Soviet political landscape will remain in place: the determining role played by this tiny nation in the fortunes of its incomparably larger neighbour. The Chechens have defeated the Russian army, crippled the Yeltsin presidency, provided the springboard for Putin’s ascent to power, and now present the principal threat to Russia’s stability. The frictionless extension of his term to 2008 notwithstanding, a constant

⁵⁵ ‘Doing Well out of War’, *London Review of Books*, 21 October 2004.

⁵⁶ Anatol Lieven, ‘Chechnya and the Laws of War’, in Trenin and Malashenko, *Restless Frontier*, pp. 209–24; and Lieven, ‘A Western Strategy for Chechnya’.

stream of casualties from Chechnya may in the end prove as costly to Putin as it was to Yeltsin.

The scale of destruction wrought in Chechnya in the course of the last decade, the scores of thousands of deaths, the continuing savagery of the occupation, all form a standing rebuke to the complacency of Western governments and citizens alike. But the most shameful aspect of both Russian and Western reactions to Chechnya—a mixture of eager complicity and mute acquiescence—is the consistent refusal to countenance the Chechens' legitimate aspirations to independence. We should have no truck with such evasions. The Chechens are engaged in an anti-colonial struggle comparable to those waged by Europe's other colonies in Africa or Asia in the last century. They have never accepted foreign dominion—'no legitimate Chechen authority has ever signed any formal treaty accepting Russian or Soviet authority'—and have repeatedly given democratic approval to the idea of sovereign statehood.⁵⁷ The starting point for any discussion should be the fact that they are as entitled to their independence as any other nation.

⁵⁷ Khalilov, 'Moral Justifications', p. 410.