

THE SECOND CAUCASIAN WAR

When the Russian Federal troops crossed the administrative boundaries of Chechnya, a Moscow based weekly entitled its leading article "The Second Caucasian War".¹ For many observers in late 1994, the Russian military intervention in Chechnya aiming to put down the rebellious Caucasian republic recalled fears of an earlier Caucasian War, which erupted in the early 19th century as the Russian armies were expanding the borders of the empire to the mountains of the Caucasus. This fear had two dimensions: one was that military confrontation in Chechnya could spread and ignite the entire North Caucasus; the other, that the conflict could last for decades, as in the 19th century.

More than a decade later, the alarmist calls of Russian liberals of the early 1990s seem to be largely justified. The December 1994 invasion led to a 20-month war, with catastrophic consequences, and eventual Russian defeat and withdrawal. Three years of chaos in Chechnya were followed by another invasion, now known as the "Second Chechnya War". Russia's policy of supporting the Kadyrov regime in Chechnya seems to have succeeded in pacifying the resistance there—but at what price! The situation remains precarious in Chechnya and volatile in neighbouring Daghestan, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria. Repression and guerrilla attacks continue. With the two wars in the Caucasus, the Russian political system itself evolved into a new authoritarian model where political descent and media freedom had no place. In a word, the global result of the war is catastrophic. This war is evidently the most horrific, violent, and long lasting of post-Soviet wars.

1 *Moscow News*. No 50, 16-22 December 1994.

Although the war in Chechnya does seem to be a long-term war, it differs from the earlier war there in various ways. No Caucasian alliances came to the support of the Chechens, no inter-ethnic or tribal alliance was set up, nor did other localized rebellions try to imitate the Chechen fight for liberation from Russian rule. In this sense, the "Second Caucasian War" is limited to a Russo-Chechen confrontation. The idea of pan-Caucasian solidarity, of an alliance or even a confederation of mountain peoples, which had much following in the early 1990s, failed to materialize in any political sense after the Russian military invasion in Chechnya. The anti-Russian resistance in the North Caucasus in the 19th century was possible largely because of the imposition of a state structure, especially the Imamate under Sheikh Shamil, giving the resistance the institutional support of a structure going beyond what had previously been a tribal alliance; this permitted long-term resistance. What Imam Shamil succeeded in doing in the early 19th century was not possible for Dudayev and Maskhadov to achieve in the 1990s: to move from resistance to statehood. The wars of the 19th century were a clash between an expanding Russian empire and a resistance that relied on a new ideology and organizational structure that was developed in response in the North Caucasus—the political Islam of the day and the state (Imamate) that it permitted to develop. The contemporary conflicts described in this book are the result of decline; the decline of the Russian power, and its retreat from the South Caucasus and elsewhere, but also the decline of Chechen society and its disintegration: both Russia and Chechnya were part of the USSR, and with its collapse both went through severe social, economic, political dislocation.

This conflict, which was largely caused by the instability due to the Soviet collapse, became in itself an additional source of instability and further disintegration. The war in Chechnya has caused severe problems for neighbouring Dagestan, cutting its communication lines from the rest of the North Caucasus and Russian provinces, and causing waves of security problems, acts of violence and terrorism. The Chechen conflict has also destabilized Ingushetia, pushing it away from Vaynakh² unity

2 Vaynakh is the common name regrouping the Chechens and the Ingush. The development of a separate Chechen and Ingush identities goes back to the Russian invasion of the North Caucasus in the early 19th century, when a group of elders representing a minority of the Vaynakh accepted Russian rule and later became known as Ingush, while the majority did not recognize Russian rule and

to look for a separate course, and eventually contributing to the Ingush-Osset clashes. The continuous conflict, now lasting over a decade, has led to large scale military operations, terrorist acts, and population displacement that have destabilized the entire North Caucasus and shifted Russian popular perception towards xenophobic attitudes to "blacks" or "peoples with Caucasian features", "Muslims", and other components of *rossiyani*.³

Before turning to Chechnya, we need to look at the situation in the North Caucasus in general in the last years of the USSR, and the effect developments in the Transcaucasus⁴ were having on the northern part of the region. The conflicts in the North Caucasus have three main sources: the struggle for sovereignty, to upgrade their status and political independence against the central authorities, which brought a radical-nationalist movement to power in Chechnya; the struggle for pan-Caucasian federalism uniting the peoples of the North Caucasus, and separating them from the Russian state; and finally territorial conflicts within the peoples of the North Caucasus that led to separation of the Ingushes from the Chechens in peaceful manner, but to bloodshed among the Ossets and Ingushes.

The parade of sovereignties

The regions of the South Caucasus were not the only area where ethnic groups associated with administrative entities (union republics, autonomous republics, autonomous regions) were mobilizing against the centre of Soviet power to achieve their sovereignty. In 1989-90 similar movements mobilized in Baltic countries, and later in Ukraine and Moldova. In reaction to the desire of the centres of the Union Republics to distance themselves from the Union centre, certain entities mobilized against this movement, fearing to lose their own status and autonomy as

became known as Chechen.

3 In Russian there is a distinction between *russky*, meaning ethnic Russian, and *rossiyani*, which includes non-Russian components of the Russian Federation, with multiple ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds.

4 In Soviet times the three republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were called *Zakavkaziya*, translated into English as "Transcaucasus". Since independence, the term "Transcaucasus" has gone out of favour because it contained a Moscow angle (Transcaucasus from Yerevan is what lies behind the Caucasus, and that is Russia!), and it has been replaced by the term "South Caucasus".

a result. For example, ethnic Russians in the Baltic republics, the region of Crimea in Ukraine, and Transnistria (a region of Moldova east of the Dnestr river) all witnessed reactive mobilizations.

The Russian mobilization for sovereignty, the Russian entity's change from supporting a project of a reformed Union to adopting a separatist project, was the decisive and the final blow to the existence of the Soviet Union. For the Russian liberal elite, Gorbachev's policies were leading towards anarchy and chaos, reforms had reached a dead-end, and Russia was facing growing resistance in the republics. Many Russians were weary of supporting and subsidizing the economies of poorer regions of the USSR, such as Central Asia, and argued that economic reforms and modernization in Russia had a better chance if Russian statehood was dissociated from its colonial past. Strong currents within Russia led to the Congress of People's Deputies of the RSFSR adopting a declaration in favour of "sovereignty" as early as in June 1990. The election of Boris Yeltsin as RSFSR President in June 1991 further strengthened Russian "separatist" trends; while in opposition to the head of the Soviet state and the ruling Communist Party, Yeltsin created a dual-state situation pitting Russia against the USSR. This struggle was in a few months to put an end to the tormented history of the Soviet Union.

Yeltsin used the struggle of minorities, non-Russian ethnic groups and the Union Republics against the Soviet centre to achieve his own political aims. In March 1991, before he had been elected President of Russia, he made a statement often quoted since, encouraging sovereignty structures within RSFSR to "take as much sovereignty as they can administer."⁵ This was a signal that every political entity within the Russian Federation understood differently, but it created an unmistakable dynamic towards political self-assertion, especially in the central Volga region,⁶ and even more so in the North Caucasus.

Not everyone agreed with this strategy. The fate of ethnic Russians left outside the frontiers of the Russian Federation was a major

5 John Dunlop, "Russia: Confronting a Loss of Empire", in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds), *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 53.

6 On the drive for sovereignty in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chuvashia and Khakassia, see Dmitry Gorenburg, "Regional Separatism in Russia: Ethnic Mobilization or Power Grab?", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 2, March 1999, pp. 245-74.

problem. One Party expert on international affairs, Alexander Tsipko, warned against Russian "sovereignty" which "would eventually lead to the split the historical core of the state", and added: "I understand and support the Balts, who have begun their own struggle for sovereignty. But what gain is there for millions of Russians in striving for independence from Moscow and destroying their own state?"⁷ Political developments put an end to this debate, and pronounced a final judgment on the Soviet-Russian competition. The attempted putsch in Moscow in August 1991, and its failure, put an end to the situation of dual power. Yeltsin and his supporters emerged as the core of opposition to the putschists, and once these had failed to receive enough support from the armed forces and failed in their Kafkaesque coup d'état, the choice for Russia's sovereignty ended up imposing itself.

For Moscow, in the months before the collapse of the Soviet system, Chechnya did not emerge as the major problem of secessionism on the Russian territories. A more serious challenge was posed at the time by Tatarstan, an Autonomous Republic with a strategic position on the middle Volga, largely industrialized, with important oil deposits, and sizeable population.⁸ In August 1990 the President of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev, declared the "sovereignty" of the autonomous republic, giving political space for the development of radical nationalist formations, under the umbrella of a "Tatar Public Centre" and other groups, which were calling for the proclamation of Tatarstan's independence.

The contrast between developments in Tatarstan and in Chechnya will help us understand why in one case calls for sovereignty led to redistribution of power between Moscow and a provincial capital, and in another they led to the most bloody of post-Soviet conflicts. Curiously, one can also find many parallels between developments in Grozny and Moscow, as we will see below.

7 Original article in *Izvestia*, 1 October 1991; English translation in *CDSF*, Volume XLIII, No. 39, 30 October 1991, p. 1.

8 Tatarstan has an area of 68,000 square kilometres, with a population of 3,658,000 in 1989, of which 47 per cent were ethnic Tatars and 43 per cent ethnic Russians. Although Tatarstan is situated in the heart of European Russia, to its east lies Bashkortostan, another Autonomous Republic with a titular Turkic speaking nation, and with its southern frontiers not far from the northern borders of Kazakhstan.

Before that, let us have a look at Chechen specificities, and see why Chechnya emerged as the most difficult political issue and the most complex security challenge after the Soviet collapse.

The Chechen trauma

Many authors have looked back to Chechen history to understand this conflict. Very often the Chechen resistance to the Tsarist armies in the 19th century is evoked, and current Russo-Chechen confrontation is pictured as part of a historic process going back three or four hundred years.⁹ The first important uprising against the Russian advances to the Caucasus was led by Imam Mansour (Ushurma), a Chechen from the *aul* (village) of Aldi, who led a rebellion from 1785 to 1792, until he was arrested when the Ottoman fortress at Anapa fell to Russian soldiers. He later died in a Russian prison. The three following major Caucasian rebellions were led by non-Chechens: Ghazi Muhammad (1829-32), Hamzat Bek (1832-34), and the legendary Imam Shamil (1834-59), all three Daghestani Avars. Under the banner of Islam, and the leadership of Imam Shamil, Chechen tribes joined the Great Caucasian Rebellion and fought fiercely against the Russian armies, until the defeat and surrender of Shamil in the village of Gunip (in central Daghestan) in 1859. Yet there are vast differences between the conflicts of the 19th century and the wars of the 1990s in the North Caucasus. Although the Chechens formed "the elite of Shamil's army",¹⁰ the "Caucasian Wars" of the 19th century were a rebellion of a tribal alliance, under the banner of Islam that cemented together the North Caucasian tribes against the expansion and colonial policies of the Russian army.¹¹ Although the Chechens played an important part in this resistance, they were not

9 See for example Marie Benningsen Broxup, *The North Caucasus Barrier*, especially the Introduction; Michael Fredholm, "The Prospect for Genocide in Chechnya and Extremist Retaliation against the West", *Central Asian Survey*, London, 2000, 19 (3/4), pp. 315-27.

10 Lesley Blanch, *The Sabres of Paradise, Conquest and Vengeance in the Caucasus*, London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2004, p. 94.

11 Some authors have given the Chechens the central place in the 19th century Caucasian Wars, going as far as substituting them for various other peoples of the north Caucasus in the war against Russia. See Matei Cazacu, *Au Caucase, Russes et Tchétchènes, Récits d'une guerre sans fin*, Geneva: George Editeur, 1998.

alone: Avars, Dargins, Lezgins, Laks, and other peoples of Daghestan played just as central a role, as did Kabardin, Cherkess, Adyghes and Abkhaz in the west who resisted Russian armies for five years longer following the collapse of the rebellion in the eastern part, and suffered harsher repression.

In contrast, the rebellion of the Chechens under Djokhar Dudayev was part of national mobilization at the moment of the collapse of the USSR. While the Chechen national movement had a lot in common with that of its neighbours in the south—the Armenian, Georgian, Abkhaz and Azeri national movements—it remained largely isolated within the context of the North Caucasus.

A more relevant historic experience for understanding of the Chechen rebellion in 1991 was the 1944 deportation of the entire Chechen population under the orders of Stalin. "To the Chechens, the so-called 'deportation' is the worst catastrophe in their collective memory. It is also the most recent (or was until the war of 1994-96 and the one which started in 1999)," writes Moshe Gammer, a specialist in North Caucasus history.¹² A similar view of the relevance of the 1944 deportations and not the "Great Caucasian War" of the 19th century for understanding of the 1991 Chechen revolution is expressed by Valery Tishkov.¹³ Those deportations played an essential role in the construction of new identities in the North Caucasus. The Soviet policy which started with the breaking up of the Gorskii Respublika (Mountain Republic) in 1921, only a year after its formation, by creating administrative structures that separated the mountain peoples on the basis of ethnic division, finally took the form of banishment. In some cases, such as that of the "Meskhet Turks" from south-west Georgia, their national identity was created in exile; the Meskhetians were the only group among the eight deported "peoples" who did not have their own autonomous structure prior to the deportations, "since there was no such nation at the time. Only after the deportations were the Meskhetians forged into a nationality from diverse ethnic groups such as the Muslim

12 Moshe Gammer, "Nationalism and History: Rewriting the Chechen National Past", in Bruno Coppieters and Michel Huysseune, *Secession, History and the Social Sciences*, Brussels: VUB Brussels University Press, 2002, p. 130.

13 Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004, p. 20-21.

Georgians and Armenians, the Azeri Karapapakhs, the Turkic Kurds, and other Muslim turkicized groups living in the south-western corner of Georgia, known as Meskhetia.¹⁴ Similarly, exile to the steppes of Central Asia and Siberia defined the clear limits between who was a Chechen and who was an Avar; instead of being united by the anti-Russian resistance of the past, they were divided not only by linguistic differences, but also by the fact of one being exiled to Central Asia and the other not. Moreover, after their return from exile in 1957, villages of Akins (or Chechens of Daghestan) occupied by various Daghestani groups since 1944 (mainly by Laks and Avars) were never returned to their previous owners. Since then the issue of return of the land of Akins remains a source of discord between Chechnya and Daghestan.

On Red Army Day, on 23 February 1944, the entire Chechen people, as well as the Ingushes, the Karachais and the Balkars, were forced into trains and trucks, and sent into exile for "treason". Even Chechens serving in the Red Army at the front were arrested and deported. In total, over four hundred thousand of them were deported to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁵ The punishment of an entire nation for the presumed crimes of some of its members made some observe that the Stalin regime was practicing "racial politics without the overt concept and ideology of race."¹⁶ Only two decades after the creation of ethno-territorial entities in the North Caucasus, as elsewhere in the USSR, came the forced deportation of entire nations. This led to what some scholars call the "paradox of the last two decades of Stalin's rule: the simultaneous pursuit of nation building and nation destroying."¹⁷ The consequences of the deportations were catastrophic; there are no precise statistics, but it is believed that a quarter of the deported Chechens perished on the road to exile. A Chechen historian, Yavus Akhmadov, writes, "Of the half-million Chechens and Ingush who were sent into

14 Isabelle Kreindler, "The Soviet Deported Nationalities: A Summary and an Update", *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3, July 1986, p. 389.

15 In the 1939 Soviet census, 407,690 Chechens were registered.

16 Eric D. Weitz, "Racial Politics Without the Concept: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges", *Slavic Review*, Volume 61, Number 1, Spring 2002, p. 3.

17 Terry Martin, "The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing", *The Journal of Modern History*, Volume 70, Number 4, December 1998, p. 816.

exile, not even 300,000 were still alive a few years later."¹⁸ Other sources put the number of the Chechens who perished under horrible conditions of transportation (in the back of trucks or in cargo trains), from the harsh conditions in Central Asia where there was no infrastructure ready to receive them, and from the cold and deprivations in the early years following the deportations at over a hundred thousand.¹⁹

The Chechen generation which led the revolt of the early 1990s was deeply influenced, if not completely conditioned by the experience of deportations and return. Dudayev himself was born in 1944 in Chechnya and grew up in exile in Kazakhstan. Similarly, his comrade-in-arms and successor as President of Chechnya, Yandarbiev, was born in 1952 in Kazakhstan; Aslan Maskhadov, the chief of staff of the Chechen armed forces during the 1994-96 war, later elected President of Chechnya, was born in Kazakhstan in 1951. The deportations, the suffering, and the humiliation made the Chechens feel they were vulnerable and distinguished from others, and had a cause to rebellion.

The deportations were followed by the liquidation of Checheno-Ingush ASSR, the distribution of its land over neighbouring republics, the resettlement of Slavs in the northern lowlands and urban areas and peoples of Caucasian origin in the mountain villages. All traces of the Chechens and the Ingushes were erased, references in publications censored. Most shocking for the Caucasian populations was the use of tombstones for construction purposes, an extreme humiliation for a people and a culture that venerate ancestors and identify *teip* (tribal) belonging as far back as 12 generations. For the Chechen consciousness, the deportations were the most horrific in a series of genocidal acts initiated by Russia to eradicate Chechens physically and culturally. In the contemporary Chechen memory, the massacres by Russian soldiers in Chechen villages during the Great Ghazavat, the deportations that followed the 1859 defeat, the deportations of 1944, and the more contemporary wars were parts of a chain of events in a war of "three hundred years" that continues, a war in which the Russian state has tried to crush

18 Quoted in Inga Prelovskaya, "New Data on 1944 Exile of Chechens", *Izvestia*, 12 March 1992; translated into English in *CDPSP*, Volume XLIV, No. 12, p. 17, 22 April 1992.

19 Comité Tchétchénie, *Tchéchénie, Dix clés pour comprendre*, Paris: La Découverte, 2003, p. 25.

the Chechens and resistance and rebellion are seen as the only way to guarantee a future without the danger of annihilation.

One anecdote reveals how deep an impact the deportations left on the Chechens: following the start of the war in Chechnya in 1994, and its catastrophic failure to yield the results expected by the Yeltsin administration, scarcely eight weeks before the presidential elections of 1996, the Russian leadership asked the Chechen resistance leadership to start direct talks to put an end to the war. The Chechens could have rejected this and chosen to support the Communist Party candidate Zyuganov, with the fair assumption that this could be an effective move because the war was a major source of public dissatisfaction with the Yeltsin regime and opinion polls gave Zyuganov real chances for victory. Yet, they decided to give a positive response to the talks, and here is one interpretation as to why:

Here is the most curious part of the scheme because effectively, by agreeing to talks, the Chechen rebels are endorsing Yeltsin for re-election. The Chechen commander [Aslan Maskhadov, the chief of Chechen General Staff] explained this by saying he could never trust the communists for what they had done to his people, especially the deportation of the entire Chechen nation to Central Asia in 1944.²⁰

The Chechen revolution

What distinguished Chechnya from Tatarstan and many other autonomous entities striving for "self-determination" was that in August-September 1991 a revolution took place in Chechnya, and a radical Chechen political formation overthrew the local Soviet authorities by force and took command in the republic. This revolution was unlike the power transfer in Armenia or Georgia, where the local Communist elite abandoned power as a result of growing popular mobilization in support of the national movements through parliamentary elections; it conditioned the Chechen-Russian relations that led to violent confrontation.²¹

20 Thomas de Waal, "Chechnya talks set to avoid sovereignty", *The Moscow Times*, 25 May 1996.

21 For detailed description of the Chechen Revolution, see Marie Benningsen Broxup, "After the Putsch, 1991", in Marie Benningsen Broxup (ed.), *The North Caucasus Barrier, The Russian Advance towards the Muslim World*, Lon-

As we have seen earlier, much of the struggle between the centre and the ethnic territories happened parallel to the weakening of the Soviet regime and the Gorbachev-Yeltsin struggle for power. In 1990, as it became evident that the Soviet Union could no longer be reformed even at the rapid pace of *perestroika*, various projects with different visions about what could replace the USSR clashed. While Gorbachev continued to insist on a reformed federation of republics replacing the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin put forward the idea of sovereign Russia and the dissolution of the USSR, thus undermining Gorbachev's authority and also undermining central rule. In this struggle Yeltsin encouraged political independence for the union republics. For Yeltsin and Russian democrats, this was not just a cynical way to get rid of Gorbachev and take power, but to a large degree reflected genuine belief that Russia had no other choice but to get rid of the heavy Soviet heritage if it wanted to become a "normal" nation and integrate into the Western world. Nevertheless, a bitter power struggle developed in which the Russian democrats encouraged sovereignty for the Union Republics while Gorbachev tried to stir trouble to Yeltsin by encouraging the autonomous republics within the RSFSR, such as Tatarstan and Chechnya, to achieve more self-rule. As the struggle reached a dramatic height with the attempted putsch of August 1991, internal political life in Chechnya was boiling and ready to explode.

In this period, the Chechens were living a new kind of national self-assertion. Since the return of the Chechens and the Ingushes from deportation in 1957-58, the Autonomous Republic had been under strict Russian rule. Yet Russian presence in the republic was weakening: between 1979 and 1989, while the ethnic Chechen population of the Autonomous Republic increased by 20.1 per cent, the ethnic Russian population decreased by 12.6 per cent.²² In 1989, the candidacy of Nikolai Semyonov, a party cadre from Groznyy, to succeed another ethnic Russian, the republic's party chief Vladimir Foteyev, met resistance from ethnic Chechen and Ingush members of the local party. As a

don: Hurst, Second Edition, 1996, pp. 219-40; see also Flemming Splidsboel-Hansen, "The 1991 Chechen Revolution: the Response of Moscow", in *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1994, pp. 395-407, and Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and After the Soviet Union*, pp. 198-206.

22 L.A. Belyaeva (ed.), *Chechenski Krisiz*, Moscow: Tsentr Kompleksnikh Sotsialnikh Issledovanyi i Marketinga, 1995, p. 9.

result Doku Zavgayev, an ethnic Chechen party cadre, and a descendent of two important Chechen *teips*, became the new party leader. This led to popular celebrations in Grozny and elsewhere in the republic, for in contemporary memory it was the first time an ethnic Chechen had acceded to such a high post. Yet Zavgayev, a career party cadre, was not well equipped to cope with the shifting political forces in the republic, and he was to make way for two other ethnic Chechens who were also rising to prominence. One was the Soviet air force pilot Djokhar Dudayev, who had received the rank of army General, the first ethnic Chechen who reached such a post in the Soviet armed forces. The second was Ruslan Khasbulatov,²³ an economy professor and close collaborator of Yeltsin, who was elected to the Russian parliament in 1990.

Rapid growth of political activity led to the formation of a number of new, unregistered political parties. The first among them was the Vaynakh Democratic Party, created by a poet and schoolteacher, Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, in 1990.²⁴ Another organization was called the Islamic Path and was led by a former officer of the Interior Ministry forces, Beslan Gantemirov; it was a paramilitary structure that later evolved into armed units self-proclaimed as the "National Guard". The new political formations came together in the first National Congress of the Chechen People, held on 25 November 1990 in the Chechen capital, where over a thousand delegates attended. Among the organizers were figures who later played key roles in the historic developments, including Yandarbiev and Gantemirov, Yusup Soslambekov, who later became the leader of the Caucasus Peoples' Confederation, and Yaragi Mamodayev, a rich businessman who financed much of the activities of the Congress in those early days. Djokhar Dudayev was among many guests invited from abroad, including the Chechen Diaspora in Turkey and Jordan, to attend and take part in the debates. A resolution was adopted focusing on ending discrimination against Chechens, on ter-

23 Khasbulatov also played a key role in Russian politics, as he became a close associate of Yeltsin in 1990-91 and served as Deputy Speaker and later Speaker of the Russian Parliament, before becoming one of his arch-rivals, by joining Vice-President Alexandr Rutskoi in the legislative struggle with Yeltsin that led to the October 1993 power struggle.

24 Zelimkhan Yandarbiev was later elected Vice-President of Chechnya, and became acting president after the assassination of Dudayev in 1996. He himself was killed in a car bomb in Doha, the capital of Qatar, on 13 February 2004.

ritorial disputes with neighbouring Daghestan, and on the need to restore the Ingush Republic, separate from Chechnya.²⁵ In line with other national formations which had already developed in the Transcaucasus (Armenian National Movement, Azerbaijani Popular Front, Georgian National Congress), and now developing among the peoples of the North Caucasus including the Cossacks, the first Chechen National Congress also adopted resolutions for the preservation of the national language and culture, as well as furthering of religious education. The conclusions of this congress were not especially radical in their context, but its significance was in the creation of a political movement with a large base in Chechnya autonomous from the official institutions. The Congress also took a leaf from Soviet practice in historiography, by publicly demanding that the local historian Vitaly Vinogradov, the author of a concept on "voluntary union" between Chechnya and Russia, should be stripped of his prizes and even his "citizenship" of the republic.²⁶

The second National Congress of the Chechen People (NCCP) was held in July 1991, and witnessed further radicalization. The Congress proclaimed its executive committee to be the only legitimate state institution in the republic, very much in the spirit of the Georgian National Congress two years earlier, and declared its intention to "separate" Chechnya from both the USSR and the RSFSR.²⁷ It also elected Dudayev as its president. Dudayev, a Chechen who had spent most of his life outside the republic, with a career in the Soviet military establishment that could only inspire respect from ordinary Chechens, was the best suited person to guide such a political movement. The "alternative" political structure was now mobilized and armed with resolve at a time when the Soviet leadership in Moscow seemed unable to handle similar revolts in the Transcaucasus and the Baltic states, and Gorbachev's project to create a new federation was failing to mobilize support. In a short few months the political situation in the republic had polarized

25 Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*, London: University of California Press, 2004, p. 58.

26 Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya, A Small Victorious War*, London: Pan Original, 1997, p. 82; Tishkov, op. cit., p. 59.

27 Emil Payin and Arkady Popov, "Chechnya", in Jeremy Azrael and Emil Payin (eds), *US and Russian Policymaking with Respect to the Use of Force*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996; Tishkov, op. cit., p. 60.

to extremes, and needed a single spark to ignite a revolution. The Soviet and Russian Federation leaders in Moscow, preoccupied with even more dramatic changes, hardly noticed the events developing in this far away Caucasian province.

The putsch attempt in Moscow, here too, was the spark that transformed the historical trajectory.²⁸ Zavgayev was in Moscow during the events, and made a public declaration in support of the coup. In Groznyy, Dudayev and the militants of the National Congress called for disobedience and strikes to oppose the coup. As it became clear that the coup was failing, thousands of people came to support the few who had earlier gathered in the main square of Groznyy. The failure of the coup did not put an end to mobilization in Groznyy; on the contrary, the taste of victory created a euphoric feeling and the movement took a new dynamism. The leadership of the National Congress wanted to put an end to the local leadership of Zavgayev, discredited for having supported the failed putsch. It saw itself as the legitimate leadership of Chechnya, representing the wishes and opinions dominant in Chechnya at this historic moment. On 22 August 1991, the newly formed armed volunteers loyal to the National Congress took over the local television building, and later the radio station, as well as the offices of the Council of Ministers. The local law enforcement forces, the KGB and the MVD, lacking orders from their superiors in Moscow,²⁹ did not interfere or show any signs of resistance. Both politically and militarily, the road was open for a change in power. On 1 September 1991, the leaders of the National Congress declared the local Supreme Soviet dissolved. As the local authorities refused to be disbanded, the armed wing of the National Congress, the National Guard, attacked the building of the Supreme Soviet, on 6 September.

Khasbulatov flew to Groznyy on 14 September, and took part the next day in the meeting of the local Supreme Soviet during which the

28 The August 1991 events precipitated the Karabakh conflict into an open war, and led to political crisis in Tbilisi where the authority of Gamsakhurdia was challenged by the armed Georgian opposition, leading to the civil war of December 1991-January 1992.

29 The Speaker of the Russian Supreme Soviet, preoccupied with bringing down pro-Gorbachev loyalists in Chechnya, had ordered local law enforcement forces not to intervene against the National Movement militants.

ruling body in the republic declared itself dissolved.³⁰ A Provisional Supreme Soviet was set up with 32 members to supervise new elections planned for November. A deal seems to have been agreed between Khasbulatov and Dudayev, to get rid of the old party bureaucracy in Chechnya. The role of the Russian leadership was key to the outcome of the struggle in the Groznyy streets: the Yeltsin leadership supported the Chechen National Congress to get rid of Doku Zavgayev, seen as a rival provincial leader allied with Gorbachev and the Yanaev-led putschists. A Provisional Supreme Soviet was set up to organize new legislative elections. One Russian analyst wrote later about the role played by Ruslan Khasbulatov that he "had done more than the others to bring Dudayev to power in the hopes to lean on him as his own deputy in Chechnya, also miscalculated and was later branded as a 'traitor to the Chechen nation'".³¹

But the militants of the National Congress did not intend to be dictated to by Moscow. Soon, the militancy of the Chechens in the streets of Groznyy, and the radical declarations of their leadership, alarmed Moscow. Their "democratic" ally did not behave according to the rules of the game fixed by Moscow. The NCCP activists continued their armed assaults on government buildings and took control of the local KGB headquarters, increasing their arsenal of light weapons. This last act alarmed the new head of the Russian KGB, Viktor Ivanenko, who flew to Groznyy in the company of the Russian Vice-President Alexandr Rutskoy. After the meeting, Rutskoy declared that he was afraid "that Chechen-Ingushetiya will become a second Karabakh".³² The meeting did not produce the results desired by Moscow, which were the return of the KGB building and the stolen weapons and the transfer of the leadership of the republic to the Provisional Supreme Soviet.

A cascade of events starting with the putsch in Moscow and a fight against the Communist party bureaucracy in Checheno-Ingushetia soon evolved into an anti-Russian struggle for the independence of Chechnya. Both for the Chechen nationalists of the NCCP and for the new

30 Flemming Splidsboel-Hansen, "The 1991 Chechen Revolution: the Response of Moscow", *Central Asian Survey*, 13 (3), 1994, p. 396.

31 Emil Payin, "Chechnya and Other Conflicts in Russia", *International Affairs*, Moscow, Vol. 44, No. 6, 1998, p. 154.

32 "'Revolutionary' Events in Chechen-Ingushetiya", *Tass*, 6 October 1991.

leadership in Moscow, Dudayev seemed a good alternative to the corrupt party bureaucracy in Groznyy. For Yandarbiev and Gantemirov, the general who had spent all his career outside the republic and belonged to a minor Chechen *teip*, seemed to be the ideal leader they needed to mobilize the Chechen people, traditionally divided around clan allegiances, around a charismatic leader, whom they thought they could control. For the Yeltsin leadership and Moscow Chechens such as Khasbulatov and Salambek Khajiev, Minister of Chemical Industries in the last Soviet cabinet and one of the two ministers who condemned the August putsch, Dudayev talked like a democrat; he seemed resolved to oppose the local bureaucracy, and his past career in the Soviet army and his ethnic-Russian wife seemed enough restraints from developing into a Chechen nationalist hero. The genie was now out of the bottle. Dudayev did not play the role others projected onto him, but went further in writing his own script.

Dudayev and the Executive Committee of the NCCP pushed to disband the Provisional Council and organize early elections. On 27 October 1991 elections were organized and Dudayev was declared the new President of Chechnya. According to Chechen figures 72 per cent of the electorate voted, with Dudayev receiving 90 per cent of the votes. The Kremlin contested both the legitimacy of the elections and the results, saying that there had been only a small turnout, 10-12 per cent of the voters.³³ Five days after the elections Dudayev declared Chechnya an independent republic, in line with the positions expressed within the Chechen National Congress, but an open act of defiance of Moscow.

In Moscow there was a fear that Russia might follow the fate of the USSR, that ethnic conflicts would cause the collapse of the Russian Federation. Rutskoy clearly expressed these fears in an interview after his return from Groznyy: "What has happened recently, so to speak, is particularly incomprehensible. Why? Because, when I met Dudayev, he told me very clearly that the independent Islamic Chechen state is not a part of the Russian Federation, nor of the USSR."³⁴ Rutskoi also

33 Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains, The Battle for Chechnya*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2001, p. 127.

34 In an interview given to Russian Television on 9 October 1991, reported by *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, "Vice-President Rutskoy interviewed on Chechen-Ingushetiya", 11 October 1991.

warned against the policy of Yeltsin, who had advocated finding compromise in Chechnya and in the 16 other autonomous republics of the Russian Federation; he criticized this policy as "giving out sovereignty" to ethnic regions.³⁵

On 8 November the Russian President declared a state of emergency in Chechnya, and dispatched up to 2,500 Interior Ministry and KGB troops to Groznyy. But those forces could not move out of the Groznyy airport, where they were besieged by demonstrations of several thousand people, some armed with automatic weapons, while downtown Groznyy witnessed further demonstrations of up to 50,000 people.³⁶ The Russian parliament overwhelmingly voted against a military solution to the Chechen crisis, and the troops were called back from the Caucasus.³⁷ The first military showdown between Moscow and Groznyy was avoided by a Russian retreat, at least for the moment. Chechnya was out of the control of the new Russian authorities, a *de facto* independent, albeit unrecognized state-project.

Territorial conflicts: Prigorodnyi Rayon and the Osset-Ingush War

Rebellion against the central authorities in Moscow was not the only source of conflicts in the North Caucasus. As in the Transcaucasus, numerous territorial conflicts pitted one nation against another; according to one count, in the early 1990s there were "at least 20 actual or potential disputes in the North Caucasus region."³⁸ But while in the Transcaucasus those territorial conflicts were the result of border fixing in the early Soviet era (in Karabakh for example), in the North Caucasus there was an additional acute problem arising from the 1944 mass deportations of "punished" peoples.³⁹ After the "pardon" of those peoples by

35 Deborah Seward, "Russia threatens blockade of defiant Muslim region", *Associated Press*, Groznyy, 14 November 1991.

36 *New York Times*, "Enclave resists Russian crackdown", 10 November 1991.

37 AFP, 11 November 1991.

38 Anna Matveeva, "Territorial Claims in the North Caucasus", in Martin Pratt and Janet Allison Brown, *Borderlands Under Stress*, The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 2000, p. 297.

39 Other "punished peoples" included Koreans, who were deported from their historic regions in the Far East as early as 1937, and the Volga Germans, the Crimean Tatars, the Meskhets, and the Kalmyks.

Khrushchev in 1957 they could return from exile, to homelands where either new Russian migrants or peoples from neighbouring regions had taken over villages and fields, which had to be emptied and returned back to their original owners. Yet certain territories were not returned; for example the Novolakski Rayon in Daghestan, initially inhabited by ethnic Chechens, was occupied by Laks and Avars of Daghestan; certain originally Balkar villages were kept by Kabardin, and the Prigorodnyi Rayon of North Ossetia was not returned to the Ingushes. The resulting land conflicts continue to poison the relations between various ethnic groups in the North Caucasus. Moreover, the Balkars complained of the domination of the Kabardin over the republican leadership posts, concentrating most of the resources in their hands. "In 1991 the Balkars decided to create their own autonomous republic within the Russian Federation, but the central authorities refused to study the case" according to Sofyan Bipayev, the leader of the National Council of the Balkar People.⁴⁰

Another source of territorial conflict was the division of ethnic groups as a result of the emergence of international borders dividing the Caucasus into two: Russia in the north and Georgia and Azerbaijan in the south. As we have already seen, the Ossets found themselves divided; in the north there was the North Osset Autonomous Republic which made part of the Russian Federation, and in the south the former South Osset Autonomous Region, which was one of the major sources of the Georgian-Osset conflict. Another people divided into two as a result of the new international frontiers were the Lezgins. A Caucasian people speaking an east Caucasian language, they were living in southern Daghestan and in north-eastern Azerbaijan. A Lezgin national movement formed in 1990 called Sadval (Unity), especially active in Daghestan, called for the creation of a Lezgin autonomous structure bringing together Lezgin-inhabited lands in southern Daghestan and northern Azerbaijan, as an entity within the Russian Federation.⁴¹ The movement did not mobilize enough support and its importance declined from the mid-1990s.

40 Author interview with Sofyan Bipanyev, Nalchik, 15 May 1995.

41 "The Lezgins: A Situation Assessment", *International Alert*, London 1997, pp. 14-15.

The North Caucasus was divided into ethnically based entities after the dissolution of the Mountain Republic in the early 1920s. Daghestan was an exception, with its over 30 ethnic groups. North Ossetia had its one titular nation giving its name to the republic, while there was a strange mixture in the Karachayevo-Cherkess and Kabardino-Balkar ASSRs, which were combinations of Turkic peoples living in the mountainous regions (the Karachays and the Balkars), and Adyghe peoples living in the plains (the Cherkess and the Kabardin). Checheno-Ingushetia was composed of two related peoples belonging to the Vaynakh nation, differing in tribe and dialect.

The conflict between Ossets and Ingushes is a contemporary one resulting from the 1944 deportations and their consequences. The territorial units of North Ossetia and Ingushetia were first defined in the early 1920s when the Gorskaya Respublika was finally dissolved in 1924. The Prigorodnyi Rayon was in Ingushetia, while Vladikavkaz⁴² was the capital of both republics: one bank of the Terek River was the Ingush part, while the North Ossetians had the other for their capital. In 1934 Ingushetia was merged with Chechnya, the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous SSR being created in 1936. In both cases the contested territory remained with the Ingushes until their mass deportation in 1944. Several thousand Ossets from South Ossetia and elsewhere in Georgia were forced to move to villages emptied after the deportation of the Ingushes. After their return in 1957, the Checheno-Ingush ASSR was restored, but the Prigorodnyi Rayon—with an area of 978 square kilometres—was left out and stayed within North Ossetia. Instead, three regions of Stavropol Krai were added to the Checheno-Ingush ASSR. Yet the Ingush tried desperately to return to Vladikavkaz or to their villages of origin in Prigorodnyi Rayon. The North Osset authorities did all they could to limit the Ingush return by using administrative restrictions, such as freezing the issuing of *propiska* (residency permit), and applying a policy of discrimination against the Ingushes in jobs and education.

42 Vladikavkaz, which literally means "rule the Caucasus" in Russian, was one of the first Russian fortresses in the North Caucasus, built in 1784. It had a significant strategic importance, being the starting point of the Caucasian Military Highway, which crossed the mountains and ended up at Tbilisi. In 1931 the city was named Ordzhonikidze, after Georgian Bolshevik leader Sergo Ordzhonikidze, and regained its first name shortly before the collapse of USSR.

Discrimination led to tensions and explosions. In 1973 a demonstration erupted in Grozny, then still the "capital" of the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Republic, and lasted four days, demanding the return of the Prigorodnyi Rayon to the Ingushes.⁴³ For the Ossets, a region situated on the eastern suburbs of their capital Ordzhonikidze (now Vladikavkaz) was impossible to relinquish, and for the Ingushes, a region where old and important cemeteries were found was impossible to forget. Tension rose again in 1981, leading to clashes between the two communities in Prigorodnyi Rayon, and calmed down only after the intervention of Interior Ministry troops.

In the age of independent political movements, the Ingushes naturally mobilized around the cause that troubled them most, the situation in Prigorodnyi Rayon. Niiskho (Justice) was the first among several political organizations that were formed, which made the return of the territories central to their platform. But what gave boost to Ingush mobilization was a law "On the Rehabilitation of Repressed People" that the Russian Supreme Soviet passed in April 1991. The law intended to render justice to the various ethnic groups that had suffered deportations under Stalin, but also to Cossacks repressed by the Bolsheviks in the early 1920s, including territorial compensations. But the law failed to establish precise procedures for the promised compensation, and what to do with people living on contested territories. This law created hope among the Ingushes who were left to think that Moscow finally supported their demands; both Yeltsin and Rutsikoy, on separate occasions, promised to Ingush public meetings to implement the law as soon as possible.⁴⁴ On the other hand it caused alarm among the Ossets, and had the effect of sharpening the already tense relations to a dangerous degree. As one report puts it, "[t]he Ingush contend that the law itself is good, but that North Ossetia's militant behavior made it a dead letter..."⁴⁵ Ossets, while agreeing to discuss the return of Ingushes to their villages of origin, refused territorial change; Yuri Biragov, Deputy Chairman of the Osset Supreme Soviet, was on the record declar-

43 Alexandre Grigorianz, *La montagne du sang, histoire, rites et coutumes des peuples montagnards du Caucase*, Geneva: Editions George, 1998, p. 256.

44 Irina Dementyeva, "A people lost", *Moscow News*, 26 February 1992.

45 "The Ingush-Ossetian Conflict in the Prigorodnyi Region", New York: Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 1996, p. 20.

ing: "Ossetia will put up with any law that does not presuppose border changes."⁴⁶

The conflict in South Ossetia aggravated even further the situation in Prigorodnyi Rayon. Up to 100,000 ethnic Ossets fled Georgia, most finding refuge in North Ossetia, and particularly in villages in Prigorodnyi Rayon where most had relatives because of the 1944 forced resettlement. Those refugees had gone through traumatic experiences and were in a desperate situation. Many of them played key roles in the violent events that followed.

Another catalyst of the clashes was the Chechen Revolution. In the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Republic the Ingushes were a minority,⁴⁷ and as the Chechens' nationalism awoke they took over key posts from ethnic Russians, and in the process marginalized even further the Ingush minority.⁴⁸ The Chechen national movement, embodied by the National Congress of the Chechen People, did not seek to accommodate the interests of the Ingushes, and created a dynamism of ethnic separation. When the Chechen revolution broke out the Ingushes did not share its aims, did not want a confrontation with Moscow, and were forced still more to look for their separate way. Promises from the Russian leadership to compensate for the territorial losses of the repressed peoples played an important role in Ingush aloofness towards Chechen anti-Russian militancy; on the other hand Chechen radicalism posed the question of separation between the Chechens and the Ingushes and the creation of an Ingush republic, and thus the territorial issue was put strongly on the agenda. The three Ingush-inhabited regions to the west of the Checheno-Ingush ASSR, Nazran, Malgobek, and Sunzha, declined to join the Chechen drive for independence, and in June 1992 the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation founded the Republic of Ingushetia as part of the Russian Federation, but without defined borders. At this stage both the Ingushes and the Ossets started to arm

46 Lyudmila Leontyeva, "Another Autonomous Republic inside Russia", *Moscow News*, 21 June 1992.

47 According to the last Soviet census (1989), the Checheno-Ingush Republic had 1,290,000 inhabitants, of whom 52.9 per cent were ethnic Chechens, 29.1 per cent Russians, and 11.7 per cent Ingushes.

48 Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and After the Soviet Union*, SAGE, 1997, p. 163.

themselves, and skirmishes between the two groups and sporadic killings increased.

The situation exploded on 31 October 1992, when armed Ingush groups from Ingushetia attacked the village of Chermen, with a mixed Osset-Ingush population, in the northern part of Prigorodnyi Rayon.⁴⁹ Violent clashes erupted in the next days among Osset and Ingush villages, and in less than a week over 500 people were killed and the Ingush inhabitants of North Ossetia were expelled, with the exception of one village.⁵⁰ South Ossetian armed formations showed particular brutality during the clashes, deliberately destroying Ingush houses and villages. The Russian authorities played a negative role; at the outbreak of the hostilities, the Russian Interior Ministry transferred arms to the North Ossetian authorities, which were later distributed to the North Ossetian police and illegal paramilitaries. When the clashes started Russian forces intervened to repress Ingush armed resistance, but did not oppose military action from the Osset side, leading to the expulsion of between 34,000 and 64,000 Ingushes from North Ossetian territory.⁵¹ This was the first, massive bloodshed on the territory of the Russian Federation after the break-up of the USSR.

The Osset-Ingush confrontation and the Russian military intervention there once again brought the North Caucasus to the precipice of war. Russian Interior Ministry (MVD) troops deployed to stop the clashes entered Ingushetia, reaching territories claimed by the Chechen authorities in Groznyy. Dudayev warned Moscow not to expand its deployment over Chechen territory: "Russia must not forget where the Chechen borders are", he threatened, otherwise "both Nazran and Vladikavkaz will blow up."⁵² Chechen military forces were put on alert.

49 Serge Schmemmann, "Russian troops arrive as Caucasus flares up", *New York Times*, 11 November 1992.

50 According to the Human Rights Watch quoted above, the clashes led to 583 confirmed deaths, Ingush and 192 Osset, and by 1994 over 200 people were still missing.

51 Vicken Cheterian, "North Ossetia: Under the Volcano", *Swiss Review of World Affairs*, Zurich, May 1994. Different estimates of the number of the displaced depend on the different sources: Osset sources have put the number of the Ingush displaced at 34,000, while Ingush sources have mentioned the higher number.

52 "Osset-Ingush Conflict - Details", Itar-Tass, Moscow, 10 November 1992.

The Caucasus People's Confederation (KNK) made a similar threat of sending detachments of Caucasian volunteers in case Russian forces invaded Chechnya. War seemed inevitable. But once again Moscow backed down, when Yeltsin ordered Russian troops back to Ingush territories.⁵³

To conclude, one can make a number of remarks on the Osset-Ingush conflict. First, the Ingush desire to return to their lands of origin was mass driven, and opposed by the North Ossetia administration which tried to fight this by administrative and sometimes repressive policies. Second, the Osset-Ingush clashes might not have happened—at least not in the violent explosion that occurred in October 1992—without two other conflicts: a hundred thousand Ossets fled from Georgia, and the Chechen conflict with Russia led to the exclusion of Ingushes from the administrative framework in which had been included since 1957. And third, there was the shifting nature of Russian statehood, and the impact of its policies in the Caucasus region. Between April 1991 and October 1992 the Russian leadership changed profoundly. The law "On the Rehabilitation of Repressed People" reflected an attempt to correct past prejudices, albeit in a clumsy, disorganized manner that led to more tragedies rather than correcting past ills. In late 1992 the Russian leadership was no more preoccupied with moral questions, but rather with how to restore its rule over a potentially explosive borderland of new Russia, and manipulation of inter-ethnic conflicts, "divide and rule" policies, and even outright military intervention were among the possible means. For the second time the Yeltsin leadership renounced using force thinking that it was not yet the right moment to do so.

The Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus

A third force that was taking form in this time, aiming at political and territorial change, was the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus, known as KNK. This movement was a contemporary reflection of the former Gorski Respublika, and aimed at the creation of a large confederal structure for the mountain peoples of the northern Caucasus, stretching from the Black to the Caspian Sea. The KNK simultaneously

53 Fiona Hill, "Russia's Tinderbox", *Conflict in the North Caucasus and its Implementation for the Future of the Russian Federation*, Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, Harvard University, September 1995, p. 84.

looked back to the past and projected a certain vision of a future: its aim was to revive a unity of Caucasian nations, similar to the Gorski Respublika of the early 1920s, incorporating Daghestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia, Adyghe and Abkhazia, with Sukhumi its capital.⁵⁴ The KNK expected further decrease of Russian power in the North Caucasus, permitting the emergence of a federal structure and eventually a sovereign state independent from Moscow.⁵⁵

The founding conference of this movement was held in Sukhumi in August 1989, bringing together political movements representing thirteen ethnic groups in the North Caucasus. Here the Assembly of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was established. At its second conference in Nalchik in October 1990, the organization changed its name to the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus (Russian initials KNK). Musa Shanibov, a former history professor from Nalchik, and a Kabardin national movement activist, was elected its president. At the Nalchik conference the KNK declared itself the legal successor of the 1918 Mountain Republic, and called for its restoration.⁵⁶ Thus the KNK aimed to establish a "state" from territories of what still was the Soviet Union, territories that were soon to be divided among two separate states, most being in the Russian Federation, while Abkhazia was in Georgia. Both Moscow and Tbilisi took the threat of the Confederation seriously, and Moscow tried to limit its influence by creating parallel inter-ethnic organizations, directed by figures loyal to the Kremlin.

At its second conference the KNK developed two institutions; the first was the "Caucasian Parliament" in which 16 of the North Caucasus ethnic groups were represented, each group having three seats, and it was headed by Yusup Soslanbekov, a Chechen militant who would later play a key role in the Chechen revolution. The second was a "defence committee", organized from volunteers from various regions of the Caucasus, the armed branch of the movement. The vision of the KNK leadership was to establish a multi-ethnic Caucasian state: accord-

54 Arkady Popov, "Wild geese' in the Caucasus", *Moscow News*, 8 November 1992.

55 Vakhtang Dzhnanashiya, "No problems with weapons over here", *Russian Press Digest*, 2 September 1992.

56 Fiona Hill, "Russia's Tinderbox", op. cit., p. 26.

ing to Musa Shanibov, the aim was to transform the KNK: "from the confederation of peoples we want to advance towards confederation of states."⁵⁷

But after the collapse of the USSR and the spread of inter-ethnic conflicts, the KNK proclaimed a different role by creating a new structure, the Committee of National Accord, to keep inter-ethnic peace and regional stability. According to Shanibov:

The Confederation has internal contradictions on the ground of nationalism. Nationalism has brought the struggle for the definition of national borders, and the return of lost territories. The Osset-Ingush conflict created a passage to introduce the Transcaucasus syndrome to the North Caucasus. From Derbent to Sukhumi, the creation of the house of the Caucasian peoples will make borders irrelevant.⁵⁸

The KNK was however full of romantic idealists with little political experience and contradictory ambitions. It did not play any visible role until the Georgian National Guard invaded Abkhazia. Many North Caucasian ethnic groups, such as the Adyghe, Kabardin and Cherkess, are related to the Abkhaz. As a result, mass mobilization took place from the early days of the Abkhazia war, and several thousand KNK volunteers travelled through mountain passes to join the struggle. According to media reports, 3-5,000 Caucasian volunteers joined the Abkhaz forces in the autumn of 1992. The Caucasian volunteers played a highly important role in the military developments in the Georgian-Abkhaz war. For Shanibov and many in the KNK, the war in Abkhazia was a Russian imperial war against indigenous Caucasian peoples, carried out by Georgians. "Today, young folks of the Caucasus peoples, including Russians and Cossacks are valiantly trying to prevent genocide by the two empires - Russia and Georgia - against a 100,000-strong nation,"⁵⁹ said Shanibov in an interview.

Moscow was alarmed by the increasing capacity of the KNK to mobilize and the radicalization of its discourse. The arrest of Shanibov was arranged in Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, in late September 1992. As Shanibov was being transferred to a police facility in Rostov-

57 Author interview with Musa Shanibov, Sukhumi, 21 April 1994.

58 Ibid.

59 *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 14 July 1993.

on-Don, demonstrations organized by the Congress of Kabardin People gathered over 30,000 demonstrators in central Nalchik. Valery Kokov, the President of Kabardino-Balkaria, introduced emergency rule in the republic on 26 September, and federal troops surrounded the crowd in Nalchik. This did not calm the situation, as some militants tried to storm the local television building and attacked the airport. The clashes led to 40 victims. Another revolution on the Chechen model seemed in the making in Kabardino-Balkaria.⁶⁰ During negotiations between local opposition leaders and Kokov, Kabardin militants demanded the lifting of the state of emergency, the withdrawal of troops and the release of Shanibov. On 28 September the Russian authorities declared that Shanibov had "escaped" from detention, and he arrived in Nalchik the same evening to address to the crowd, after which the situation calmed down in the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria.⁶¹

At the end of the next month, when clashes started between Ossets and Ingushes (31 October 1992), the KNK took a neutral position in this conflict. When Russian troops approached Chechen territory, it made threatening declarations of mobilizing volunteers in case of a Russian invasion of Chechnya. But when the real Russian invasion took place in December 1994, the KNK was already in a period of decline and failed to come to the assistance of the Chechen resistance, as we will see later. There can be different explanations for this: the first is that there is a huge difference between mobilizing volunteers living in the territories of the Russian Federation against Georgian irregular forces and doing the same against the Russian armies. Many political movements such as national movements of the Adyghes or Avars in Daghestan have easily mobilized for the first cause, and refrained from doing so in the Chechnya war. Second, many North Caucasian ethnic groups were ready to come to the assistance of the Abkhaz, hoping that the liberation of Sukhumi would give them access to the sea and direct contacts with Turkey with its large Caucasian Diaspora, while for many Chechnya did not have a similar geographical importance. Third, many

60 Lyudmila Leonteva, "The Chechen scenario in Kabarda?" *Moscow News*, 1 October 1992.

61 Natalya Pachegina, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 30 September 1992; English translation in *Current Digest of Post-Soviet Press* (CDPSP), Vol. XLIV, No. 39, p. 6, 28 October 1992.

peoples of the North Caucasus feared the Chechens, and did not like the idea of replacing Russian rule with the domination of the Chechens over the region. Most important, the Confederation was formed in a special period of euphoric discovery of independent political mobilization, in the last years of Soviet collapse, when utopian ideas were needed. This mobilized force was instrumentalised in the war in Abkhazia, against the Georgian forces. In December 1994 political realities had changed, the popular support for national movements was in free fall, and the Confederation itself was a used force. The war in Chechnya declared the end of the romantic idealism of Caucasian unity. After a rapid increase in strength the KNK weakened following the victory in Abkhazia, and with the start of the Chechnya war, it became "impotent as a military and political power in the North Caucasus."⁶²

Chechnya under Dudayev, 1992-94

Euphoria was high after the success of the Chechen Revolution, and seeing Soviet/Russian troops depart for the first time in living memory was surely an extraordinary event. The revolutionaries took the leading posts: Dudayev became President, Yandarbiev Vice-President, Yaragi Mamodayev Deputy Prime Minister in charge of the economy, Yusup Soslanbekov headed the parliamentary commission on foreign relations and later became its Speaker, and Beslan Gantemirov headed the City Soviet of the Chechen capital.

Yet this euphoria had a shorter life-span than happened in other revolutions. In a few months Chechnya was already transformed into a failed state, where the old institutions were disintegrating faster than elsewhere in Russia and the former Soviet Union, while the new did not appear on the mental horizons. The result was a total institutional collapse: budget allocations from Moscow were interrupted, links between industries in Chechnya and their former partners elsewhere in the ex-USSR were broken, and production came to standstill. State employees received no wages, resulting in mass impoverishment. Electricity supply, gas and heating were irregular at best. Criminality increased, while the court system was marginalized, reviving old traditions of vendetta.

62 Amjad Jaimoukha, *The Circassians, A Handbook*, London: Curzon, 2001, p. 86.

As popular discontent over the misfortune caused by the new regime increased, so did the internal competition within the ruling elite: while the economy was kept under "state" control a struggle for large chunks of cash illegally appropriated, especially from the oil industry, led to schisms within the new leadership.

Chechnya became not only a danger in itself, but also a danger for itself. Trains travelling in the region and crossing Chechen territories were regularly victims of looting. Even having trains escorted by armed Interior Ministry troops did not solve the problem. One railway security officer in Mineralniye Vody in the Russian North Caucasus reported: "Over 50 carriages have been completely looted in the past two months. This is considering only the trains which have reached us. No fewer carriages were plundered before reaching the Makhachkala station. During the first nine months of this year [1993] about 200 cases of robbery were registered..."⁶³

More preoccupying was the growing criminal economy that developed in Chechnya, often in close collaboration with official circles and economic interests in Russia. There was an important oil refinery near Groznyy, and a pipeline carrying Caspian oil from Baku to the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. According to Yusup Soslanbekov, Chechnya exported in 1992 only the equivalent of \$130 million worth of oil products to Russia.⁶⁴ Since Russia imposed a total blockade on rebellious Chechnya, neither crude oil pumped to Chechnya nor refined products exported were officially accounted for. The benefits were pocketed at the highest levels in Groznyy and Moscow. Similarly, the legal limbo in which Chechnya found itself made banks in Groznyy ideal places for money laundering. As former Soviet republics introduced their national currencies, large quantities of old Soviet roubles were flown to Chechnya and reinjected into the Russian market, where the Soviet rouble was used until mid-1993. According to one report, two Tupolev-134 flights from Tallinn transported over ten tons of old Soviet roubles, out of circulation in Estonia but still in use in Russia.⁶⁵ Such transactions enriched a select few but caused much harm to the Russian economy.

63 Lyudmila Leontyeva, "Dangerous roads", *Moscow News*, 26 November 1993.

64 Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountain*, p. 131.

65 *Chechenskiy Krizis*, op. cit., p. 22.

Another controversy which later became a subject of heated debate in Moscow was the weapons and ammunition left behind by the departing Russian armies. The Russian forces stationed in the former Soviet military bases came under increasing pressure after the Chechen Revolution, when Chechen youths started raiding arms depots to steal arms and ammunition. In mid-1992 Grachev negotiated with the Chechen leadership and reached an agreement to divide the military equipment and weaponry fifty-fifty, half to be taken by the departing Russian troops while the other half was handed over to Chechen authorities. Most probably the Russian side left most of its part back in Chechen hands as well. While Grachev was later heavily criticized for having "sold" Soviet weaponry to the Chechen "enemy", probably he and the Russian military had no other choice except for a bloody confrontation with Chechen militants to withdraw the Soviet weaponry from the Chechen territories. As a result, forces loyal to Dudayev were now in possession of heavy armament and large quantities of rifles and ammunition.⁶⁶

Dudayev also made foreign policy moves that did not bring Chechnya any profit other than media coverage, often negative. First he offered asylum to the former dictator of East Germany, Erich Honecker. After Honecker turned down the offer, Dudayev offered to receive another high-profile asylum seeker, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. "By giving a home to Gamsakhurdia, Dudayev only succeeded in angering the new regime in the only other country with which he shared a frontier: Georgia."⁶⁷ In those years the Chechen leader made numerous visits to Arab and Islamic countries seeking recognition. Although he was received at high levels in many capitals, and managed to open a semi-official representation in Ankara in early 1994, those trips did not bring much to Chechen foreign policy: no state recognized Chechnya's independence. After each foreign visit and after each interview with a foreign journalist Dudayev aroused more scandal, revealing his growing psychological imbalance; after a visit to Iraq and a meeting with Saddam Hussein, he announced his support for "the fight of Islam against Russia, the United States and the West in

66 According to V. Tishkov, the volume of arms left behind in Chechnya by the Russian troops amounted to 42 tanks, 153 cannon and mortars, 18 Grad multiple rocket systems (40 tube, 122 mm), 55 armoured personal carriers, 5 fighter planes and 2 helicopters, 130,000 hand grenades, and over 40,000 semi-automatic rifles. See *Chechnya*, op. cit., p. 64.

67 Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya*, op. cit., p. 109.

general.⁶⁸ Groznyy's problem was with Moscow, and Dudayev's gestures abroad were not helping to establish a dialogue with the Russian leadership, let alone develop a sympathetic audience in the West.

The internal political situation showed initial signs of tension as early as in April 1992, when an unknown group tried to storm the television building in central Groznyy. Things got even worse in early 1993 when the political situation became completely polarized between the opposition dominated parliament, which demanded the resignation of the President, and the head of the state.⁶⁹ In April 1993 visitors to the Chechen capital could see two rallies, one organized by the opposition demanding the immediate resignation of Dudayev, and the other ten minutes' walk away in support of Dudayev. Each gathered between 5-10,000 people. By now Dudayev had succeeded in turning his closest collaborators into his fiercest enemies. The opposition counted among its leaders former collaborators of Dudayev such as Soslanbekov, Gantemirov and Mamodayev. Ruslan Labazanov, a former convict who for a time headed the personal guards of Dudayev, was also with the opposition, with his private armed formation. Dudayev dissolved the parliament and dismissed his cabinet in April 1993, and introduced presidential rule. The opposition-dominated parliament declared that the Dudayev decree was illegal and amounted to a coup. On 19 April the Chechen Constitutional Court similarly ruled the President's decrees unconstitutional.⁷⁰

The parliament continued to meet and started a process to impeach Dudayev. The opposition planned to organize a referendum in early June, and asked people whether they preferred a presidential or parliamentary system. But a day before the referendum, armed formations loyal to Dudayev attacked opposition offices and disrupted the work of the electoral commission. There were up to fifty casualties as a result of the clashes, including Shamil Dudayev, a nephew of the Chechen president, and the brother of Labazanov. Now not only there was personal animosity and political antagonism between the hero of the Chechen

68 AFP, Groznyy, 25 November 1993.

69 Nikolai Troitsky, "The Chechen crisis as the mirror of Russian Revolution", *Megapolis Express*; English translation in *Russian Press Digest*, 24 February 1993.

70 Timur Muzayev and Georgy Melikyants, "Political Crisis in Chechnya", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*; English translation in *Russian Press Digest*, 20 April 1993.

revolution and his closest comrades, but also a blood feud and vendetta. Only months before the showdown between the Russian President Yeltsin and his parliament led by Khasbulatov, Chechnya went through a similar political crisis that was resolved by the President dissolving the parliament and using force to crush its resistance. But after this "mini civil-war" Dudayev lost control over certain regions of Chechnya, and especially of three northern districts: the Nadterechny, Gudermess and Urus-Martan regions announced their dissidence, and were controlled by armed formations of various opposition groupings. In fact, from mid-1993 the authority of Dudayev did not go beyond the limits of Groznyy.⁷¹

The situation continued to degrade further in 1994. Chechnya under Dudayev was a *de facto* independent entity lacking state institutions, with the central authorities highly unpopular and even illegitimate in the eyes of part of the political elite and local population, where state institutions such as parliament or the cabinet of ministers did not function, where the authorities did not control much of the territory of the country, and finally where the collapse of social services and economic activities led to widespread discontent. Chechnya in 1992-94 resembled very much neighbouring Georgia under Gamsakhurdia and in the early years of Shevardnadze rule. Yet there was one fundamental difference: Chechnya was not recognized by the club of nations, and the Kremlin did not agree to let it go. While Georgia had a historic chance to reorganize its political set-up, Chechnya did not have time for that. In this sense, Djokhar Dudayev bears a double responsibility: first for leading the Chechen masses into open rebellion against Moscow, with all the risks such a rebellion involved in view of the past record of Russo-Chechen relations; and second for failing to find an arrangement with the Russian leadership to save his land from the backlash.

The "Tatarstan model" and the negotiations that did not take place

Several developments in Russia by early 1994 increased pressure on the Yeltsin administration to find an adequate response to the challenge

71 Yakov Nikolayev, "The Chechen opposition is getting armed", *Megapolis Express*, reproduced in *Russian Press Digest*, 16 June 1993.

of the Dudayev leadership and the security problems of the growing chaos in Chechnya. Unfortunately, the change of political context in Russia and the shift of public opinion towards the nationalist right, the hard-line positions of a number of key decision-makers in Moscow, the disintegration of the Chechen leadership and its infighting, and the personality clashes between Dudayev and Yeltsin created an atmosphere of uncertainty, doubt, and lack of trust towards a process of political negotiations—in itself difficult to realize. As a result, military escalation was seen in Moscow as a possible and even desirable option, before a process of negotiations even started.

While Chechnya was undergoing a breakdown of the political forces that came to power as a result of the 1991 revolution, similar political developments were taking place in Moscow. Against the background of the devastating social cost of the “shock-therapy” reforms applied by the Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, two camps were formed within the Russian leadership, with conflicting visions of Russia’s future, clashing over the path to take for economic reforms and monetary policies, as well as the new constitution. The schism was between Yeltsin, supported by the executive and especially the loyal Minister of Defence Grachev, and on the other Yeltsin’s closest allies of not long ago who had fought with him against the hardliners trying to reinstall the old Soviet power in August 1991. The leaders of the anti-Yeltsin dissent were Vice-President Rutskoy and Speaker of the Parliament, Ruslan Khasbulatov. They criticized the economic policies of Yeltsin, saying they had “enriched a narrow band of people, criminalised the economy, and debauched hungry officials”.⁷²

After much tension and political paralysis, Yeltsin went on the offensive in September 1993 by sacking his Vice-President.⁷³ The situation deteriorated further when on 21 September a televised speech of Yeltsin declared “Step-by-Step Constitutional Reform”, which basically dissolved the existing Supreme Soviet and called for new elections and voting on the constitution in December. Although the actions of Yeltsin were unconstitutional, and can be described as a coup d’état, the

72 David Hearst, “Yeltsin’s coup: the economy: parliament’s leaders favour third way”, *The Guardian*, 23 September 1993.

73 John Lloyd, “Yeltsin tells rival he is sacked: Dismissal of vice-president Rutskoi raises constitutional doubts”, *Financial Times*, 2 September 1993.

Russian President had the support of the power ministries and the mass media—notably the central television, which gave him the possibility to manipulate the public opinion throughout the country.⁷⁴ Yeltsin also enjoyed widespread support in the West, which still considered him as a democrat fighting against conservative forces. In retaliation the parliament called an emergency session and named Rutskoy as President.⁷⁵ But the balance of power was on Yeltsin’s side; as the Supreme Soviet did not receive any support from military divisions—in spite of Rutskoy’s efforts—and no mass demonstrations came to support the anti-Yeltsin forces, they had little chance to win the fight. After being besieged in the White House for 12 days, supporters of the Supreme Soviet moved out of the building to attack the city mayor’s office and the building of Ostankino (the main offices of Russian Channel One). This badly calculated move gave the Supreme Soviet the image of an “aggressor”, providing the necessary pretext for Yeltsin to send army tanks to shell the White House to dislodge rebel deputies and their armed supporters. Rutskoy and Khasbulatov, isolated in the White House, lacking popular support and opposed by the military, had no other choice but walk out of the buildings, their hands up.⁷⁶ The elimination of Khasbulatov from the political scene in Moscow created a new opportunity for negotiations between Yeltsin and Dudayev.

In the same period another event came to focus attention on Chechnya. In February 1994 the Russian and Volga Tatar leaders reached an agreement to put an end to the ambiguity in the relationship between Kazan and Moscow.⁷⁷ Tatarstan was the autonomous republic within the Russian Federation which was the first to come with a declaration of sovereignty, and passed a referendum in March 1992 in which 61

74 Roy Medvedev, *Post-Soviet Russia, A Journey Through the Yeltsin Era*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, pp. 107-108.

75 Helen Womack, “Yeltsin ignites power struggle”, *The Independent*, 22 September 1993.

76 Serge Schmemmann, “Showdown in Moscow” *New York Times*, 4 October 1993.

77 The treaty was called “Treaty on Delimiting the Jurisdictions and Mutual Transmission of Authorities Between the Organs of State Power of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Tatarstan”, and was signed in Moscow between Yeltsin and the Tatar President Mintimir Shaymiev on 15 February 1994.

per cent of the voters answered positively about its "state sovereignty".⁷⁸ After three years a treaty was signed between Moscow and Kazan in which Tatarstan dropped the expression "sovereign state" and "subject of international law", but obtained the right to have foreign diplomatic representation, and to have direct foreign economic agreements abroad without passing through Moscow.⁷⁹

Bashkortistan and Yakutia had already signed the new Federal Treaty, with appendices added to regulate certain specificities. As a result, after the agreement between Moscow and Kazan, Chechnya was the last oddity sticking out of the "parade of sovereignties", and therefore the focus of attention of the Kremlin. Most important in this issue was that while other republics such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Tajikistan went through bloody conflict to reshape the new political hierarchies, Moscow revealed a high level of political maturity by reaching agreements with various republics and autonomies without the use of force. The Russian Minister of Nationalities, Sergei Shakhrai, said that the Treaty would "serve as an example" towards normalizing relations with Chechnya.⁸⁰

In the spring of 1994 Yeltsin seemed ready to negotiate with Dudayev to find a political solution to the Chechen case. Many republican leaders, like Shaimiev of Tatarstan, offered their mediation. In March, a Kremlin spokesperson announced preparations for a Russian-Chechen "summit". Later in May, the Kremlin still insisted that preparation for a summit was underway, and that Yeltsin was ready to meet with Dudayev. Another mediator was Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, the President of Kalmikya: "On April 28, 1994, I met Yeltsin who asked me to contact Dudayev, he wanted to avoid bloodshed (...) But all the papers were eventually thrown to the basket. I felt Yeltsin's circles had made

78 The question of the referendum was formulated in the following way: "Do you agree that the Republic of Tatarstan is a sovereign state and a subject of international law which develops its relations with the Russian Federation and the other republics on the basis of bilateral treaties?" quoted in Raphael S. Khakimov, "Prospects of Federalism in Russia: A View from Tatarstan", *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 27 (1), 1996, p. 74.

79 Radik Batyrshin, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 16 February 1994; in *CDPSP*, Vol. XLVI, No. 7, p. 11.

80 Jean Raffaelli, "Tatarstan signs treaty normalizing relations with Moscow", AFP, Moscow, 15 February 1994.

the military choice."⁸¹ But a car bomb in Grozny on 27 May 1994, which hit a convoy escorting Dudayev, disrupted the attempts at direct talks between the two leaders. The Chechen leader himself was unhurt, but three people were killed—the Interior Minister Magomed Eldiyev, his deputy and their driver. Chechen authorities blamed Russian secret services for the attack.⁸² Even worse, in an interview given to a major Russian television station, Dudayev personally attacked Yeltsin, even insulting his dignity by describing the Russian President as a "drunkard". In the words of Shakhrai, this was the last straw and put an end to Yeltsin's timid attempts to meet with Dudayev: "Dudayev simply insulted the president, called him a sick man, an alcoholic. After that a personal meeting again failed to happen."⁸³ The breakdown of negotiations that did not even start increased the pressure on Yeltsin to listen to the hardliners in his cabinet who were calling for an immediate military intervention to "solve" the problems in Chechnya.

Failure of the Chechen opposition

In the summer of 1994 Yeltsin had an opportunity to consider a military solution for the crisis in Chechnya. After removing his arch-rivals Rutskoi and Khasbulatov, now Yeltsin could claim to have unified the Russian state structures under his leadership and stopped its disintegration. The same events convinced him that he had the support of the Russian military, especially through the loyal support of Pavel Grachev.⁸⁴ With the "sovereignty" issue clarified with Bashkortistan, Yakutia, Tatarstan and others, Chechnya was now an isolated case in the Russian Federation. Yeltsin also felt that Dudayev was isolated and weak, and Chechen opposition against him growing.

But there was also cause for urgency. In the Duma elections of December 1993, the party of the eccentric nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR) got a surprising 22.9 per

81 Author interview with Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, Elista, 19 May 1995.

82 "Chechnya Blames Russia for Assassination Attempt", *AP*, Moscow, 30 May 1994.

83 Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya*, op. cit., p. 147.

84 The Russian armed forces had once again failed to come to the support of "putschists" accused of trying to restore a Soviet Union. But in the days of October 1993, their support for Yeltsin was equally slight, since the Defence Minister had difficulties in bringing four tanks to shell the White House.

cent of the votes, ahead of the pro-establishment Russia's Choice which got only 15 per cent.⁸⁵ As a result of combined proportional and direct votes, Russia's Choice became the largest group in the Duma, followed by the LDPR, leaving the Russian Communists in the third position.⁸⁶ Following the crushing of the patriotic-leftist opposition to Yeltsin's policies in the October 1993 events, the success of the LDPR was simultaneously a result of it and a warning. Western analysts did not hide their fears of "unappeasable popular anger, the collapse of public order and eventually dictatorship."⁸⁷ The Russian administration felt it had to do something before the 1996 elections to bolster the image of Yeltsin. Changes in key government positions in the summer of 1994 brought hard-liners into decision-making posts around Yeltsin.⁸⁸

There were also geopolitical shifts on the regional level, in which the situation in Chechnya looked like hurting Russia's position. The growing interest of Western oil industries in the Caspian hydrocarbon resources increased the geopolitical profile of the Caucasus region. In September 1994 a consortium of Western oil companies and the Azerbaijani government signed the "deal of the century", a project worth an estimated \$8 billion for oil production in offshore regions off the Azerbaijani Caspian coast.⁸⁹ The Russian Foreign Ministry opposed the deal—even though Russia's Lukoil had a minority share of 10 per cent in the project—arguing that an agreement for the delimitation of the

85 The LDPR was the second party registered in the Soviet Union, in March 1990, the first being the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—this was one cause of rumours about Zhirinovskiy's association with the KGB. Even if he was a political agent of the KGB, the growth of the nationalist vote and the weakness of the party in power were enough signs of regime instability.

86 Russia's Choice got a total of 70 seats, the LDPR 64, and the Communists 48, out of a total of 450 seats. For a detailed description of the 1993 elections see Richard Sakwa, "The Russian Elections of December 1993"; *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 1995, pp. 195-227.

87 Stephen Sestanovich, "Russia Turns the Corner", *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 1994, p. 83. In the article the author makes analogies between Russia under Yeltsin and Weimar Germany, with the shadow of fascism hanging over Russia as a possible threat.

88 Gail W. Lapidus, "Contested Sovereignty, The Tragedy of Chechnya", *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Summer 1998, p. 17.

89 Daniel Southernland, "Azerbaijan, Western firms agree on Caspian Sea oil drilling plan", *The Washington Post*, 20 September 1994; Agis Salpukas, "Huge-scale Caspian oil deal signed", *New York Times*, 21 September 1994.

Caspian had not yet reached. In the next years the interest of Western oil interests, but also of Western diplomats, academics and the media in the Caspian Sea and its (often exaggerated) energy resources reached a dramatic height, and exerted influence on the conflict zones of the Caucasus. The chronology of events suggests that the competition between the West and Russia over the division of the Caspian region might have influenced the Russian leadership's decision to accelerate events in Chechnya.

Yet, Moscow did not initiate an outright invasion of Chechnya, but tried to overthrow Dudayev's rule by arming and supporting the Chechen opposition. Dudayev seemed weak and isolated, losing control over Chechnya. By this time, seven out of fourteen regions (*rayons*) of Chechnya were under opposition control:⁹⁰ all the lowlands to the north of Grozny were under the control of the various opposition formations, while support for Dudayev came mainly from the mountainous regions, reflecting historic divisions between the steppe, which was easily conquered in the past by Russian forces, and mountainous regions with traditions of resistance and anti-Russian sentiments.

The Chechen opposition to Dudayev gathered in the "Provisional Council of Chechnya" created in December 1993 was an impressive but very heterogeneous group. The opposition headquarters was at Znamenskoye in the northern Nadterechnaya region, and was headed by Umar Avturkhanov, a former head of the regional administration. Avturkhanov called for Russian help to overthrow Dudayev, demanding arms and cash, but opposed direct Russian military intervention. Avturkhanov also promised to drop separatist calls if the opposition took power in Grozny.⁹¹

While the political demands of the opposition were understandable (to overthrow Dudayev and reach a deal with Moscow), its military approach was more confused and confusing. With their forces alone they knew they could not conquer Grozny. Their position regarding the kind of support they expected from Moscow reveals a deep dilemma:

90 C. W. Blandy, *Chechnya: Two Federal Interventions, An Interim Comparison and Assessment*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, January 2000, p. 11.

91 John Lloyd, "Moscow backs rebel power bid in Chechnya", *Financial Times*, 3 August 1994.

while they asked for Russian material support, they opposed an outright Russian military intervention. They knew that any Russian invasion of Chechnya would rally the Chechens not so much around Dudayev, but around the idea of anti-Russian resistance. In the words of Gantemirov, the head of the "Joint Forces", the military wing of the opposition: "I was, am and shall remain opposed to bringing Russian troops into Chechnya. We will be able to settle accounts with Dudayev's supporters on our own, although recently it seems to me that I would not mind taking command of several battalions of Russian troops. Then we would teach Dudayev a lesson."⁹²

The Chechen opposition was a strange mixture of personalities, "united" by their antagonism against Dudayev. Next to Avturkhanov and Gantemirov were characters like Doku Zavgayev, the former Soviet Party boss of Checheno-Ingushetia, Salambek Khadzhiyev, a former Soviet Oil Minister and leader of the Daimokhk opposition party, and Yaraghi Mamodayev, a former businessman and former ally of Dudayev.⁹³ At Russian insistence the former arch-enemy of Yeltsin, Ruslan Khasbulatov, who had moved to Tolstoy Yurt, his village of origin in Chechnya, since his release from prison in early 1994, meddled in the murky waters of Chechen politics. Khasbulatov tried to stay above the political divides of Chechnya by seeking to play the role of mediator between the Dudayev government, the opposition, and Moscow—but without much success.

The opposition was deeply divided, and did not project any image of an autonomous political force. Labazanov hated Gantemirov, and there was no coordination on military level between the two largest military formations under the umbrella of the Provincial Council. Mamodayev in his turn openly criticized Avturkhanov, the head of the Council, calling the Provisional Council "an impostor structure", and stated that "no more than 1,000 people stand behind the Provisional Council".⁹⁴

In the summer of 1994 the security situation deteriorated dramatically. An opposition demonstration in Grozny, organized by Ruslan Labazanov, degenerated into armed clashes causing scores of casual-

92 Dmitry Balbuurov interview with Beslan Gantemirov, *Moscow News*, 30 September 1994.

93 Dmitry Balbuurov, "Chechen opposition leaders make strange bedfellows", *Moscow News*, 15 September 1994.

94 TASS, Moscow, 26 June 1994.

ties.⁹⁵ Dudayev also increased his criticism of Khasbulatov, calling him a traitor and stripping him of "Chechen citizenship",⁹⁶ thus breaking the last possible contact between the Kremlin and Grozny.

Government troops attacked armed formations led by Labazanov and drove them out of Argun, the third main urban centre in Chechnya. The weakness of the opposition against the pro-Dudayev forces was shown once again. Labazanov found refuge in Tolstoy Yurt, near Ruslan Khasbulatov, but pro-Dudayev troops attacked the village and put the opposition militias on the run. This attack meant that Dudayev did not want Khasbulatov to interfere in Chechen politics, as mediator or not. In spite of the failures of the Dudayev regime, many Chechens rightly considered the Provincial Council as an instrument of Moscow, representing the interests of the remnants of the old Soviet bureaucracy in the republic. Any outside (that is Moscow) initiated pressure on Dudayev led to most Chechens closing ranks, and thus increased support for the Dudayev government. To increase the tension in an already complicated situation, Chechen military sources spread information saying that there were 24 nuclear warheads left behind in the republic after the departure of the Russian forces.⁹⁷

Moscow, instead of waiting for a further degradation of the situation in Chechnya, making its intervention necessary to pacify a region falling into civil war and anarchy—which would have eventually led to louder calls for intervention to put an end to an inter-Chechen war—opted for increasing direct Russian military involvement. In fact, the Russian leadership in 1994 was not aiming to find a solution to the growing violence in Chechnya and the North Caucasus, but to impose its will over the region. Under the cover of the "opposition", specially recruited Russian Defence Ministry personnel equipped with heavy armour and with air support were sent to take Grozny and throw Dudayev's government out of power. On 26 November 1994, the "opposition" troops advanced into Grozny. After a day-long battle with forces loyal to the

95 The Chechen opposition put the number of the dead up to 300, while Chechen authorities put the number "between 10 and 60 at the most". See "Up to 300 dead in fighting in Chechnya opposition", *AFP*, Moscow, 15 June 1994.

96 Leonid Sergeyev, "Situation in Chechnya deteriorates sharply", in *Rossiskiy Vestnik*, published in *Russian Press Digest*, 16 June 1994.

97 *Caucas Bulletin*, Geneva, Vol. 4, No. 17, September 7, 1994, p. 1.

Dudayev government, the opposition was beaten back leaving behind several tanks, and of a total of 200 prisoners from among the invaders, 70 were identified as regular servicemen of the Russian Armed Forces.⁹⁸ This humiliation was one too many for the Yeltsin administration. After nourishing illusions of a hasty change of power in Grozny through the armed groups of the opposition, it abandoned the weak and inefficient opposition; but the idea of a rapid change was not dropped. Following the failure of the initial efforts, the logical continuation in military escalation was outright invasion.

On 29 November Yeltsin broke his silence and demanded that the Chechen side should free the prisoners and disarm within 48 hours. He added: "All forces and resources which are at the disposal of the state will be used to put an end to the bloodshed, to defend the life, rights and freedoms of the citizens of Russia and to restore constitutional legality, law and order, and peace in the Chechen republic."⁹⁹ On 6 December Generals Grachev and Dudayev met in Ingushetia. Although the meeting led to the release of the Russian prisoners, it did not solve any other pending issue. Meanwhile the Russian air force was bombing targets at Grozny airport, destroying planes, radars, and communication facilities. The war machine was activated. A tragedy started unfolding, leading to one of the cruellest wars in the post-Cold War era. It was also a war that was entered precipitately, a war which lacked any serious planning, resulting in gross military mistakes, dissidence within the Russian armed forces, and catastrophic results for the troops—and unimaginable suffering for the civilian population, trapped between the fire of the Russian army and the wrath of the Chechen fighters.

The Russian military intervention: an army close to collapse

The invasion of Chechnya was hardly prepared. The Russian Security Council ordered Grachev on 29 November to prepare the invasion in merely a week. Although Grachev could put together an impressive

98 "Chechnya threatens to execute captured Russians", AP, Grozny, 28 November 1994.

99 Larry Ryckman, "Yeltsin issues ultimatum to Chechnya; jets bomb Grozny", AP, Moscow, 29 November 1994.

force¹⁰⁰ compared with the Chechen forces loyal to Dudayev,¹⁰¹ and superior to the Soviet troops sent to crush demonstrations in Tbilisi (1989), Baku (1990) and Vilnius (1991), the military leadership were unprepared for the kind of operation they were to face in Chechnya, and no one among the planners of the operation expected fierce resistance from the Chechens. During one interview Grachev, denying the participation of regular Russian troops in the 25 November assault on Grozny, said: "One airborne regiment would be enough to solve all the questions in two hours."¹⁰²

In the early hours of 11 December 1994, Russian troops from three directions started their advance towards Grozny. Their objective was to move rapidly on the city and to capture Dudayev's Presidential Palace on 13 December.¹⁰³ The troops from the west, crossing Ingush territories, advanced slowly as villagers in Ingushetia organized demonstrations and blocked roads in front of their movement. The same happened

100 The initial invading Russian forces had a strength of 23-25,000, armed with 80 tanks and 200 fighting vehicles, and supported by air cover with Sukhoi-25 bombers and Mil-Mi 24 helicopter gunships. They were opposed by a Chechen regular force of 3,000 including 800 in the battle hardened "Abkhaz battalion", with an estimated 40 tanks and 60 fighting vehicles. See Pavel Baev, *The Russian Army in a Time of Troubles*, PRIO, Oslo, 1996, p. 143; and "Grozny Forces no Match for Moscow", *AFP*, Moscow, 28 December 1994.

101 According to an official Kremlin International News Broadcast on 27 January 1995, the Chechen forces had the following strength: "T-62 and T-72 tanks - from 40 to 50; - BMP-1 (infantry assault vehicles) and BMP-2 - from 40 to 45; - BTR-70 (armoured personnel carriers) and BRDM-2 (armoured scout vehicles) - from 30 to 35; - anti-tank weapons - from 90 to 100; - grenade launchers of various types - from 620 to 630; - artillery pieces and mortars - from 150 to 160; - Grad multiple rocket launchers - more than 20-25; - D-30 122 mm howitzers - 30; - small arms - about 42,000 units; - tank machine guns - 678; - heavy machine guns - 319; - anti-aircraft weapon complexes of various types - about 40; - ammunition: cartridges, artillery shells, bombs, mortars, grenades - in quantities sufficient for 6-7 months of intensive combat by an army of 40,000 men." These data were based on Russian military information about the quantity of weapons left behind in Chechnya as Russian troops departed in mid-1992. They do not necessarily mean that all this weaponry was under the control of the Chechen forces opposing the Russian invasion, nor that it was all in functional state by late 1994.

102 See Peter Ford, "Russia threatens a splinter state", *Christian Science Monitor*, 30 November 1994.

103 See the notes of the former Minister of Interior of Russia Anatoly Kulikov, "The First Battle of Grozny", in *Capital Preservation, Preparing for Urban Operations in the 21st Century*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, Appendix B, p. 14.

to troops moving from the east, from Daghestan. Only those forces that started from Mozdok in North Ossetia, and crossed Chechen provinces under the control of the opposition, advanced rapidly and deep into Chechen territory. If this was meant to be a *Blitzkrieg*, as the Russian Defence Minister had earlier boasted, it was a bad copy of the German original.

The Russian army, having wasted the element of surprise, gave the Chechen defenders precious time to set up hasty defence positions. The Chechen defences of Grozny had three rings: the first, central ring was put around the Presidential Palace; the middle ring consisted of defences across Sunzhe River bridges, and Minutka square; the outer ring was positioned on the highway network of Grozny, the southern, industrial suburb of Neftyanika, around Khankala airport, and Staraya Sunzhe.

The order given by the Russian President to the invading troops was to "restore constitutional order", which is to say the least a vague phrase for the launching of a military operation on a massive scale. The opposition from within the military establishment reveals better the gap between the political leadership—the presidency and Defence ministry—on the one hand, and the army General Staff. Opposition to the operation spread widely within the army, and among its senior officers: General Boris Gromov, Deputy Defence Minister, openly voiced his criticism, saying that after a decade of budgetary cuts and the collapse of the Soviet Union with all its consequences for the military, the Russian army was unprepared for a large-scale military operation in the Caucasus;¹⁰⁴ General Eduard Vorobyev, deputy head of the ground forces, refused to lead the invasion.¹⁰⁵ More than anything else, the Russian military loathed to be sent once again into action and then see the politicians who ordered them in the first place not assuming responsibility. This had already happened with a series of military adven-

104 In a televised interview, the Deputy Minister of Defence, General Gromov, said that he himself learned about the invasion of Chechnya "from the press", and that the "whole military campaign had been prepared spontaneously", while the planning was done not by military people, since "major decisions are not being taken by military people"; interview with General Gromov on Ostankino TV Channel 1 in Moscow, *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 6 February 1995.

105 Pavel BAEV, *The Russian Army in a Time of Troubles*, Oslo: Prio, 1996, pp. 64-6.

tures in the last years of the Soviet Union, almost creating a tradition: the military repression of demonstrations in Tbilisi in April 1989, the Red Army's entry to Baku in January 1990, and the repression in Vilnius, where Gorbachev had distanced himself from the events, diverting the blame for the repression onto the army generals. Similarly Yeltsin, after giving the order to the military to restore "constitutional order" disappeared for a whole week for a "nose operation".

In the early months of the intervention, up to early February 1995, it was the generals of the FSB—the intelligence services—who were obliged to lead the military operations, with catastrophic consequences. Certain elite troops "refused" to take part in the operation, and according to one Western military expert over 20,000 troops participating in the operation were Interior Ministry troops, specialized in domestic security operations, but unsuitable for major warfare.¹⁰⁶

There was equally important political opposition to the war. Yegor Gaidar, former Prime Minister and the leader of Russia's Choice, the biggest parliamentary faction, called the invasion of Chechnya "a crime".¹⁰⁷ The public in its turn was highly divided about the military invasion of Chechnya. In an opinion poll conducted by the All-Russia Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (ARCSP) on 16-19 December, 31 per cent "blamed" Dudayev for the crisis, and 25 per cent Yeltsin and his associates. To the question "what is to be done", 36 per cent chose "search for a peaceful solution to the Chechen problem", and 30 per cent supported "decisive measures to re-establish order" in Chechnya.¹⁰⁸ To conclude, neither the Russian political elite, nor the public, nor even the media were ready for, or convinced of the necessity of, a war in the Caucasus.

106 Mark Galeotti quoted in Bruce Clark and Chrystia Freeland, "Elite troops 'refusing to fight in Chechnya'", *Financial Times*, 6 January 1995. Galeotti is quoted as saying that "the commanders of the airborne divisions refused categorically to put their full weight behind the Chechen operation." Similarly, military intelligence seems to have refused the operation, and withdrawn from the North Caucasus before the invasion.

107 John Thornhill, "Gaidar calls Chechnya war 'a crime'", *Financial Times*, 4 January 1995.

108 Yury Levada, *Izvestia*, 23 December 1994, English translation in *CDPSP*, Volume XLVI, No. 51; p. 11.

New Year's Eve: the battle for Grozny

There were several Russian parliamentarians in Grozny on the New Year's Eve, trying desperate last minute mediation between the Chechen leadership and the Kremlin. Among them was Sergei Kovalev, the famous human rights defender, as well as Viktor Kurochkin, Gleb Yakunin, with several journalists, a Russian clergyman, and others. In the early morning of the New Year, as the sky was glowing from the blazing fire of the Grozny oil facilities, they walked past abandoned streets of central Grozny and gathered in the basement of the colossal Presidential Palace. Wounded soldiers and civilians, as well as prisoners, were brought into the basement of the building. Kovalev recalled, "Of course, no one had expected an assault on the palace or set up a field hospital in basement. We lent a hand in clearing the premises to make room for wounded Chechens and Russians alike..."¹⁰⁹

In spite of the political conflict, in spite of Chechen nationalism, the debate about Russia's colonial past, and the call for independence, it was still possible until then to imagine a common project, to initiate a peace mission, to clean a basement to tend wounded soldiers and civilians, Russians and Chechens alike. But once violence exploded, those intermingled, cosmopolitan communities shattered, polarized. Political conflicts like those that have occurred and are still going on in the Caucasus differ qualitatively from conflicts where one side, at a certain moment of the political crisis, decides to use violence. Once blood starts flowing, the same conflict takes on a totally different dimension, as fear takes the place of enthusiasm and commitment is mixed with anxiety.

On New Year's Eve the Russian army moved in three columns into Grozny. By now, the army's strength in the theatre of operations had increased to 38,000 soldiers;¹¹⁰ the number of forces sent into the city was put at 6,000. Again, the idea was to surprise the forces defending the

109 Sergei Kovalev, "Offensive on New Year's Eve", *Moscow News*, 29 January-4 February 1998. Kovalev describes the lack of preparation of the Russian units, most of the Russian captured servicemen he interviewed in the Presidential Palace basement were conscripts, who had joined the army only two months prior to the invasion and had no experience of handling arms. The few experienced officers lacked basics: for example, they had no military maps of Grozny. Instead, they were supplied with tourist maps...

110 Pavel Felgenhauer, "The Russian Army in Chechnya", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2002, p. 158.

city on this New Year's Eve. Again, the Russian Army failed to achieve surprise. It started advancing in Grozny before even bringing the city under siege, with the southern suburbs of Grozny under Chechen control and able to move fresh reinforcements from mountainous areas to the south. According to Kulikov, "If the failure to move at 0500 on December 11 was the first mistake made by the Russian forces, the failure to initially wait until the blockade was complete was the second mistake."¹¹¹ Another basic failure was that the Russian military planners did not expect fierce resistance to the three forces moving towards the centre of Grozny; in fact, most of the advancing units were engaged in fierce fighting in the suburbs of the city, and failed to carry out their plan. The few units which succeeded in penetrating the town were even less lucky; those advancing from the north reached the vicinity of the Presidential Palace but met fierce resistance there. The 131st Motorized Rifle Brigade, which surprisingly advanced to the south of the city and reached and captured the main train station, was soon surrounded by Chechen fighters and decimated under a hail of anti-tank rockets and sub-machine gun fire.

Once a modern army enters an urban region, it loses most of its advantage against a lightly armed enemy: its use of armour and domination of the skies, which play such a crucial role in open fields. The Chechen forces were divided into small group of 10-20 fighters, with good knowledge of the city, often composed of members of the same family, clan, or village of origin. Either they were mobile, on foot or in small cars, or they had taken positions in large buildings with good field vision.¹¹² Mobile groups armed with light weapons including RPG-7 anti-tank rockets, or youngsters with petrol-bombs positioned in buildings, set deadly traps for the advancing Russian tanks and armoured vehicles.

The attack on Grozny on New Year's Eve led to a disaster when tank columns which lacked the protection of infantry forces were cut off from behind after reaching the Presidential Palace and around the railway station. "The Russians hoped to scare the Chechens into surrender but that has clearly failed," said one commentator.¹¹³ As if the Russian mili-

111 Kulikov, op. cit., p. 29.

112 Sean Edwards, *Swarming and the Future of Warfare*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005, pp. 269-70.

113 Christopher Bellamy, "Top Brass Ripe for Fall after Fiasco", *The Independent*, 5

tary planners thought that taking the Chechen capital would progress according to their previous experience in Prague! Aslan Maskhadov, who was commander of the Chechen military units at the time, recalls that two Russian motorized units penetrated Grozny and practically surrounded him in the Presidential Palace without much resistance. It was only then that mobile Chechen fighters armed with RPG-7 rocket propelled grenades started attacking Russian armour, which were like "sitting ducks".¹¹⁴ The Russian forces' losses in men and material were colossal: up to two thousand Russian servicemen died that night, while their supreme leader was sipping champagne on the first channel of Russian television, without uttering a word about the developing events in the Caucasus.

The military mistakes were so huge, the preparation so chaotic, and the results so depressing that politicians or analysts alike looked for exotic explanations other than "human stupidity". According to General Alexander Lebed, illicit arms trafficking was the reason of the Chechnya war, and explained why the Russian military leadership sent tank columns to Grozny without the protection of infantry:

...at the time of the liquidation of the Western Group of Forces, [Grachev] and Burlakov [Grachev's deputy] had stolen 1,600 tanks and sold them in Riga... The procurator was investigating it. The late journalist Kholodov got close to the truth. (...) Therefore, a military conflict was necessary. In Russia there is a saying – war writes off everything.¹¹⁵

Following this initial failure, the Russian army intensified its attacks, increasing its rate of shelling and carpet-bombing the entire city. The railway station was taken, after successive tank attacks, only on 9 January, the Presidential Palace was taken on 19 January, and Grozny was

January 1995.

- 114 Maskhadov claims that in the three days following the New Year misadventure, his forces destroyed up to 400 Russian armoured vehicles. See Maskhadov interview on: <http://urbanoperations.8media.org/chechnya1.htm>
- 115 Harold Elletson, *The General Against the Kremlin, Alexander Lebed*, London: Warner Books, 1998, p. 222. The journalist Dmitry Kholodov was killed when a booby trapped briefcase exploded in his hands in October 1994; the briefcase was believed to contain top secret military documents sent by an unidentified military contact, since at the time Kholodov was investigating corruption among top military officials, including the Defence Minister Pavel Grachev. *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, for which the journalist worked, accused the military of being behind the contract killing.

finally surrounded only on 23 February.¹¹⁶ Resistance in Grozny practically ended by the end of that month, turning the city that was once the home of 400,000 people into post-World War II-like debris.¹¹⁷

The catastrophic military results of the Chechnya campaign reflected the dire situation in which the Russian army had found itself, a shadow of its Soviet past. A decade of reforms—which in Gorbachev's period aimed at modernizing the economy by basically shifting investment from the defence budget to other, productive sectors of the economy—and three years of complete neglect under the Yeltsin administration had brought the Russian armed forces to near collapse. Investment, repairs and procurement were so low that in 1994 only a fifth of the Russian army's tanks were serviceable. Russian pilots were test flying a mere 25 hours a year—compared with 180 hours in the US forces—because of lack of fuel and funding.¹¹⁸ In those conditions, many of the more skilled military cadres had left the army for better paid jobs in the booming private sector, to a point where one journalist compared the situation in 1994 to that of 1941, when the Soviet Army was not ready to face Hitler's forces, after being decapitated in the Stalinist purges.¹¹⁹ Was this the heir of the mighty Soviet armed forces which had threatened all Western Europe with invasion? How could it fail to pacify one of its own provinces, which was not even that big in surface and population size? One observer of the Russian armed forces could not hide his surprise:

NATO's military posture was configured on the reasonable assumption that if war came, Western forces would have to fight badly outnumbered and from a defensive and a reactive posture against a massive, combined-arms military machine that retained full control over nuclear weapons option and was pre-

- 116 Maj. Gregory J. Celestan, "Wounded Bear: The Ongoing Russian Military Operation in Chechnya", *Foreign Military Studies Office*, August 1996. Available online: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1996/wounded.htm>
- 117 "(T)he highest level of firing recorded in Sarajevo was 3,500 heavy detonations per day. In Grozny in early February, a colleague of mine counted 4,000 detonations per hour", writes Frederick C. Cuny, "Killing Chechnya", *The New York Review of Books*, 6 April 1995, p. 15.
- 118 Dave Carpenter, "Chechnya operation plagued by mistakes, morale, disarray", AP, Moscow, 5 January 1995.
- 119 Pavel Anokhin. *Rossiiskiy Vesti*, 30 December 1994, English translation in *CDPSP*, Volume XLVI, No. 52, p. 4.

pared, as a matter of doctrinal principle, to trade high casualty rates for victory. The clash in Chechnya revealed a military of a sadly different sort: a ragtag band of hastily assembled conscripts who were not resourceful enough to evade the draft, led by underequipped, undertrained, and demoralized officers, who freely admitted that they did not understand why they were there.¹²⁰

The Chechens' choice to stand and fight in Grozny came with a price tag. The Russian army destroyed the city before taking it, causing a high rate of casualties. Most of the civilian victims of the war (that is the 1994-96 war) are believed to have fallen during the battle of Grozny. Some put the number of the dead between 25,000 and 29,000.¹²¹ One explanation is that Grozny was largely a Russian city, and until the late 1980s two-thirds of its population were Slavs and only one-third Chechens. Although many Russians, Ukrainians and other Slavs left it in the early 1990s, nevertheless Grozny stayed largely a Russian town. Moreover, many Chechens left the city for villages as military activities intensified from November, finding refuge with relatives or moving to their villages of origin, leaving behind Russians who did not have similar opportunities. It is believed that most of the civilian casualties of the battle of Grozny were from this ethnic Russian population, old Russian pensioners who were left with no choice and neither protection.¹²²

Terrorism and guerrilla warfare

Following the Grozny debacle, the Russian forces upgraded their tactics, especially the use of infantry, added reactive armour¹²³ to protect

120 Benjamin S. Lambeth, "Russia's Wounded Military", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1995, p. 91.

121 John Dunlop, "How many soldiers and civilians died during the Russo-Chechen war of 1994-1996?" *Central Asian Survey*, 2000, Vol. 19, No. 3/4, pp. 334-5.

122 One estimate is that 60 per cent of the civilian casualties of the 1994-96 war were ethnic Russians of Grozny. Valery Tishkov, "Political Anthropology of the Chechen War", *Security Dialogue*, 1997, Vol. 28, No. 4, p. 426.

123 Reactive armour is added to tanks and armoured vehicles to protect them from anti-tank weapons, such as rockets and missiles. It was first used by the Israeli Army in 1982. When the reactive armour is hit by a rocket it explodes and therefore decreases the impact of the projectile. The Soviet army started using itself reactive armour from mid-1980s, in Afghanistan. The Russian tanks sent to Grozny were heavily armoured in their fronts, but completely vulnerable from their sides and their rear to rockets, and from their tops to petrol bombs,

the rear and the sides of their tanks, and used smaller groups for house-to-house fighting. Yet the reliance of the Russian Federal troops on heavy (and often indiscriminate) firepower continued. They showed a better performance in the spring of 1995. Following their success in Grozny, the other major population centres fell to the advancing Russian troops by mid-March: Gudermes, Argun, Shali. By mid-April all the plains were under the control of the Russian forces. The Chechen fighters put up fierce resistance in each of those towns, and then evacuated the lowlands and moved their bases to mountainous regions. In the spring of 1995 the Russian troops, better organized and, with fresh reinforcements, went on the offensive towards the mountainous strongholds of the Chechen rebels: Vedeno in the east, and Bamut in the west, where Chechen fighters were positioned in a former Soviet Strategic Missile Forces facility.

Although it took the Russian forces two months to take Bamut, the Russian military campaign seemed to have destroyed the organized Chechen resistance. The Chechen military structure was completely disorganized as a result, arms and ammunition were low, and morale was on the downturn. Russia seemed to be winning the war, in spite of the heavy losses it had suffered in the initial phase of the campaign. The Russian military analyst Pavel Felgengauer noted the failure of the Chechen resistance to organize efficient guerrilla warfare, because the Chechen fighters "are still unable to put up a lengthy resistance to regular troops that has dug in at a strategically important point. The Chechens have many grenade launchers, but neither the long-promised Stingers nor any artillery have been seen in their possession." Here, clearly, the comparison is with the guerrilla warfare the Soviet army faced in Afghanistan, and fears of a second Afghanistan still haunted Russian analysts and the military alike.¹²⁴ However, it should be noted that Afghanistan had an area of 647,000 sq. km. and a population of 15.5 million when the Soviets invaded, while Chechnya had a mere 19,300 sq. km. and a pre-war population of slightly over one million.

often dropped from second or third floors of residential buildings.

124 Pavel Felgengauer, *Sevodnya*, 26 December 1995; English translation in *CDP-SP*, Vol. XLVII, No. 52, p. 13.

It was in this desperate moment for the Chechen fighters that a group of them, probably 200 armed men,¹²⁵ led by the already notorious Shamil Basayev organized a raid outside the administrative boundaries of Chechnya, reached the town of Budyonnovsk in Stavropol Krai, attacked the city hospital and took around 1,500 people inside the hospital building as hostages. The Chechen leaders' threats to take the war into Russian territory itself had materialized. Basayev demanded an end to the military operations in Chechnya, the withdrawal of all federal forces from there, and the immediate beginning of talks between the Russian leadership and Dudayev, as a precondition for release of the hostages.

After two failed attempts by the Russian security forces to storm the hospital, which caused the death of thirty hostages, the Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin entered into direct negotiations with the Chechen hostage takers. Four days after the hostage taking started, an agreement was reached in which the Russian Prime Minister agreed on the cessation of hostilities in Chechnya and safe passage for the hostage takers back to Chechen territory.¹²⁶ Basayev and his men returned to Chechnya in buses, shielded by several hundred hostages and other volunteers such as Russian journalists and parliamentarians. At the end of the crisis of Budyonnovsk, Chernomyrdin declared, "A great thing has been done. The war is in fact over". Afterwards, Russian political leaders made a habit of declaring the end of the war at each cease-fire agreement. But Chernomyrdin refused to continue political negotiations with Dudayev ("Russia does not need Dudayev's signature, our opinion on him is known")¹²⁷ and insisted that Chechnya stayed within the Russian Federation, and proceeded with organizing new presidential elections.

The halt in Russian military operations after Budyonnovsk gave the Chechen fighters valuable time to reform their ranks and organize logistics, and, probably most important, it gave a strong boost to their morale. Resistance operations resumed, and the Chechen fighters carried out not only guerrilla attacks in mountain areas but also daring and vast

125 Grigory Sanin, *Sevodnya*, 16 June 1995, in *CDPSP*, Volume XLVII, No. 24; p. 3.

126 Sergei Shargorodski, "Rebels release hostages after deal to halt fighting in Chechnya", *AP*, Budyonnovsk, 18 June 1995.

127 *Ibid.*

operations into the urban centres in the northern part of the republic, taking control of cities for a day or two, and causing many casualties among the Russian military forces. In August 1995 Chechen fighters attacked Argun, the third major urban centre of the republic, taking control of its centre. In December 1995 they attacked Gudermes, the second major city of Chechnya and a strategic town dominating the railway lines linking Russia with the Azerbaijani capital. It took the Russian forces a week to expel the rebels from Gudermes, with heavy losses.¹²⁸

A third major operation was carried out in January 1996, when a large Chechen armed group led by Salman Raduyev attacked the Daghestani town of Kizliar. Raduyev was a close relative of Djokhar Dudayev, and declared that the attack was carried out under the orders of the Chechen President.¹²⁹ Their objective was to take the airport of Kizliar, where, according to information the rebels had, eight helicopters armed with guided missiles were supposed to be based. Yet their operation failed as police forces in Kizliar put up an unexpectedly stubborn resistance.¹³⁰ Instead, the fighters attacked a hospital and took several hundred people hostage. After negotiations the Chechen group agreed to release most of the hostages, keep a hundred as human shields, and retreat to Chechnya. On the way they were attacked by Russian troops, and took up positions in the village of Pervomayskoye, near the border with Chechnya. The Russian troops encircled the village and threatened to storm it.

It seemed that the Budyonnovsk tragedy was being repeated. There was a serious danger of the Chechen conflict spilling over into neighbouring Daghestan. The Daghestani Minister of Nationalities, Magomed Gusayev, threatened: "If they want blood to spill here it will spill forever."¹³¹ Chechen fighters launched a large offensive inside Grozny on 15 January, to divert the attention of the Russian troops from Per-

128 Pavel Felgengauer, *Sevodnya*, 26 December 1995, English translation in *CDPSP*, Vol. XLVII, No. 52, p.13.

129 See interview of Dudayev in *Obshechaya Gazeta*, Moscow, in Russian, No 1, 11-17 January 1996.

130 Valery Yakov, *Izvestia*, 13 January 1996, English translation in *CDPSP*, Volume XLVIII, No. 2 p. 7.

131 Michael Specter, "Strife in Chechnya embroils a neighboring people", *New York Times*, 14 January 1996.

vomayskoye.¹³² The Russian troops surrounding the village pounded Raduyev's fighters with heavy artillery for three days. The fighters nevertheless succeeded in breaking through the encirclement by the Russian elite Alfa group, and most of the Chechen fighters survived the action and reached their positions inside Chechnya.¹³³

On 21 April 1996, a missile launched by a military plane exploded near Gekhi-Chu, a village in south-west Chechnya, and killed the Chechen rebel President Djokhar Dudayev. The missile homed into the satellite telephone of Dudayev, who was connected to a Duma member Konstantin Borovoi.¹³⁴ What an irony: the former Soviet air force general was killed by a Russian air force missile. The death of Dudayev removed a major obstacle to negotiations between the Kremlin and the Chechen resistance, since his bellicose declarations had made direct negotiations with him unacceptable to Yeltsin. In his long interviews, sometimes spending as long as four hours with foreign journalists, he made extreme declarations, going as far making veiled threats of using nuclear weapons.¹³⁵ If the Russian leadership had been ready to change the course of the already catastrophic war, the death of Dudayev could have offered a pretext.

From the start of the Russian military campaign, Dudayev was no more than a symbolic figure, and increasingly the chief of staff of the Chechen forces, Aslan Maskhadov, a former Soviet Army artillery officer, had emerged as the military leader of the largely decentralized armed groups led by charismatic field-commanders. Dudayev was succeeded by Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, a former literature professor, who

132 Natalya Gorodetskaya and Maria Eismont. *Sevodnya*, 16 January 1996; in *CDPSP*, Volume XLVIII, No. 3; p. 2.

133 Over 200 people, including 78 Russian servicemen, were killed as a result of the operation. See Andrei Magomedov, "Russia jails Chechen warlord Raduyev for life", *AFP*, Makhachkala, 25 December 2001.

134 Sharip Asyuev, "Dudayev died in missile attack on the outskirts of Gekhi-Chu", *Tass*, Moscow, 23 April 1996; Tony Barber, "Obituary: Dzhokhar Dudayev", *The Independent*, London, 25 April 1996; see also Yulia Kalinina, "Dudayev's Last Words", *Kommersant-Daily*, Moscow, 26 April 1996.

135 In one interview he boasted of having a "secret weapon [which was] capable of bringing a continent to its knees within a few hours". Then the general added: "No one has any protection against these weapons. There are no missile fields, no land defences, nothing." See David Hurst, "Dudayev Accuses 'Third Force'", *The Guardian*, 9 April 1996.

was Vice-President before the Russian military intervention, and one of the founders of the Chechen national movement.

Chechen fighters retake Grozny

As the start of the Chechnya conflict in 1991 was closely linked with the disintegration of the USSR, the launching of the Chechnya campaign was dictated by the urge to end demands for sovereignty among the subjects of the Russian Federation. But developments within the Russian political system increased pressure on Yeltsin to put an end to the "open wound" in Chechnya. In the December 1995 parliamentary elections the Communist Party won over 22 per cent of the votes, while the pro-establishment Our Home is Russia formation led by Prime Minister Chernomyrdin got a mere 12 per cent in spite of all the resources invested. Yeltsin, candidate for the 1996 presidential elections, had ratings even below that: opinion polls in December 1995 gave him 5 per cent of vote intentions, while his most serious rival, the Communist Party candidate Gennadi Zyuganov, had 20-22 per cent of vote intentions.¹³⁶ The ongoing war in Chechnya was seen as a major factor favouring a potential Communist victory in 1996. In this context Yeltsin took the initiative to launch a new "peace plan". Even negotiations with Dudayev, or after his death with his successor, although through mediators, were no more taboo.

In a public speech on 31 March 1996, the Russian President announced a three-stage peace plan: an end to military operations, followed by organization of parliamentary elections, and finally defining of the status of Chechnya "within the Russian Federation".¹³⁷ He also said that he had started indirect negotiations with Djokhar Dudayev. Following this initiative, in a letter sent to Dudayev, Yeltsin assured the rebel Chechen leader a few days before the latter's assassination that "regular checks have shown that military activities by the federal forces have stopped. You will no longer find that our forces have initiated military adventurism anywhere."¹³⁸ Yet the Russian military leadership

136 Roy Medvedev, *Post-Soviet Russia*, op. cit., p. 216.

137 Yeltsin's speech was published by *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, on 2 April 1996; reprinted in English in: *CDPSP*, Volume XLVIII, No. 13, p. 1, 24 April 1996.

138 David Hearst, "Chechen ceasefire hands Yeltsin election coup", *The Guardian*, 28 May 1996.

did not want a repetition of the 1995 events, when following the Budyonovsk hostage taking operation the Russian Prime Minister ordered the cessation of military operations in return of the release of hostages. The contradictory strategies of the political leadership and the military, already seen at the start of the military campaign in December 1994, were to continue. This time, it was the politicians in Moscow who were in haste to put an end to military operations, while the generals leading a difficult war in Chechnya saw this as unnecessary manoeuvring which caused them loss of time and energy, and hindered them from accomplishing their mission.

Yandarbiev's radical rhetoric after his inauguration did not prevent him from accepting a Kremlin invitation in May 1996, through the mediation of the OSCE head of mission in Chechnya, the Swiss diplomat Tim Guldemann. On 27 May just before the Russian presidential election, Yeltsin received Yandarbiev for cease-fire talks. An agreement was signed that day between Chernomyrdin and Yandarbiyev, in the presence of the Russian-appointed head of the Chechen administration, Doku Zavgayev. Yeltsin hailed this agreement as a "historic moment in the restoration of peace in Chechnya and the end of war".¹³⁹ Yeltsin skilfully made the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Chechnya by early September 1996 (after the presidential elections!) one of his major electoral promises. How far the Russian leadership was committed to end the hostilities is not clear, but the announcement of the Russian Defence Minister commenting on the signing of the agreement was expressive: "There is nobody who can formulate the position better than our own president who said bandits, murderers and professional mercenaries must be incapacitated."¹⁴⁰ But even without such a negative attitude from the Russian military leadership, it was simply impossible to implement a cease-fire agreement, after eighteen months of heavy conflict, with intermingled positions and without a clear troop separation and withdrawal.

Another stunt that the Russian President used to boost his popularity days before the second round of elections was to strike a deal with

139 Maria Eismont, Tatyana Malkina, "Boris Yeltsin and Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev have agreed to stop war on June 1", *Segodnya*, 28 May 1996, reported in *Russian Press Digest* of the same day.

140 David Hearst, *The Guardian*, 28 May 1996.

another presidential candidate who was a harsh critic of the Chechen war, General Alexander Lebed. Lebed, a career officer who had served in Afghanistan, was discharged from the military a year earlier, because of increasing disagreement with the Defence Ministry. On 16 June 1996, the Kremlin announced the appointment of Lebed, who had come in the third position in the first round of presidential elections, to the post of National Security Adviser.¹⁴¹ The appointment gave Lebed the power of supervision of the entire armed forces. Yeltsin also hinted that he saw in the General a successor of his in the year 2000.¹⁴² The Defence Minister Pavel Grachev, an old friend of Lebed who had turned into his bitter enemy, was now replaced. Among Lebed's top priorities in his new post was to put an end to the Chechnya crisis. Once again, it was internal politics at the top of the Russian leadership which had to define change of course in a Caucasus War.

A day after the signing of the agreement, Yeltsin flew to Grozny, accompanied by his generals. In a speech he delivered in front of a military unit, the Russian President mixed his promises of peace with false claims of victory: "Victory is already behind us. We have defeated the mutinous Dudayev regime (...). Their resistance has been practically broken. The road to restoring peace and constitutional order in Chechnya is open..."¹⁴³ On the first day of the cease-fire, fighting was raging in Chechnya with vast military operations simultaneously taking place on several fronts. The Russian military commander of Chechnya, General Tikhomirov, made the following declaration on Russian TV: "I will order troops to destroy, resolutely and with hatred, all those bandit groups that do not want peace..."¹⁴⁴

On 6 August 1996 several hundred Chechen fighters infiltrated Grozny, Gudermes, and Argun, the three main urban centres of Chechnya, and started fierce battles for their control. They attacked Russian army posts and fortifications, strategic points, and administrative build-

141 In the first round of the 1996 presidential elections, Yeltsin received 34.8 per cent of the votes, Zyuganov 32.1 per cent, and Lebed 14.7 per cent.

142 Harold Elletson, *The General Against the Kremlin, Alexander Lebed*, London: Warner Books, 1998, p. 256.

143 Robin Lodge, "Yeltsin in Chechnya: the war is won", *The Moscow Times*, 29 May 1996.

144 Lee Hockstader, "Sides violate Chechen truce on first day", *The Washington Post*, 2 June 1996.

ings. By the end of the day Russian forces were surrounded, cut off from each other, and in a desperate situation. In the next days more Chechen men armed with rifles and grenade-launchers came down to the cities to increase the thrust of the attack on the Russian forces.¹⁴⁵ Boris Yeltsin, just recently re-elected on the promises of an end to the war in Chechnya, and suddenly allied with General Lebed, had yet again to deal with a major problem in the Caucasus: losing Chechnya.

The Russian political and military leadership seemed completely surprised by the Chechen successes. While Lebed flew to Grozny and tried to meet Maskhadov, calling for separation of forces, local Russian military leaders such as the commander in Chechnya, General Vyacheslav Tikhomirov, as well as the Interior Minister Kulikov, were giving ultimatums to the Chechen fighters. Yet the Russian army was completely exhausted, suffering great losses in two weeks of fighting (according to one estimate given by a Russian military spokesperson by late August, 406 soldiers had been killed and 1,264 injured and 130 were missing, huge losses in a few days).¹⁴⁶ Retaking Grozny and the other towns would have cost the Russian military thousands of additional casualties, not counting the losses that the 120,000 civilians trapped in Grozny would have suffered. Eventually, Lebed and Maskhadov concluded a cease-fire, saving Grozny from yet another Russian assault, and promised a Russian military withdrawal from Chechnya. By end of the month, on 31 August, in the Daghestani town of Khasavyurt, Lebed and Maskhadov signed a cease-fire agreement, putting an end to what later became to be known as the "First Chechen War". The two main points of the Khasavyurt agreement were Russian military withdrawal from Chechnya by the end of the year, and deferment of the issue of Chechnya's status until 31 December 2001.¹⁴⁷

145 James Meek, "Chechens jubilant as the great bear staggers", *The Guardian*, 17 August 1996.

146 James Meek, "Yeltsin's gripe erodes Grozny peace deal", *The Guardian*, 23 August 1996.

147 *Khasavyurt Truce Agreement Between the Russian Federation and the Government of the Chechen Republic*, signed by A. Lebed, A. Maskhadov, S. Kharlamov, S-Kh. Abumuslirnov, in the presence of the Head of the Special Task Group of the OSCE for Chechnya Ambassador T. Guldemann, 25 August 1996, in Moshe Ganner, *The Lone Wolf and the Bear*, London: Hurst, 2005, pp. 221-3.

The last of the Russian troops withdrew from Chechnya by end of 1996. This was a humiliating defeat for Russia, to its newly elected but ailing president, to its huge but crumbling military. Very soon Chechnya was consigned to oblivion: no one was asked to present an explanation for the thousands of dead, for the havoc and destruction. Lebed lost his usefulness and was sacked after his first political mistake; Chechnya was left to survive in ruins; and the generals plotted their vengeance. The lack of comprehension of the calamity of the First Chechnya War was to lead inescapably to a new round of violence, a new war that continues until now.

But before going further, there are a number of interesting questions that I would like to discuss on the 1994-96 conflict: first, how can we explain that the rag-tag army of Dudayev could resist, harass and force out the Russian military machine? Second, how relevant is history, and which page of history should be considered, when looking at the causes of the Russo-Chechen confrontation? And third, was Chechnya a threat to the Russian Federation—could it cause its collapse?

"Military democracy": explaining Russian defeat and Chechen victory

In Chechnya, as in the Karabakh and Abkhazia wars, a small nation mobilized enough force to put up a strong resistance against the armed forces of a larger nation, and eventually score military victory and impose a cease-fire. Yet, while the Karabakh Armenians or the Abkhaz were facing the newly created, badly structured and undisciplined National Guards of Georgia, or the volunteers of the Azerbaijani Popular Front, the Chechen fighters themselves were facing a qualitatively different military institution, the heir of the once superpower Soviet Army.

There can be different explanations for the Russian failure—or the Chechen victory. From the military perspective, we have seen how the Russian army was in a serious condition; while it had a large number of soldiers, officers, and equipment, the servicemen had not received the necessary training and equipment, funding, logistical support and were not in combat-ready conditions. Moreover, the planning of the military operation of 11 December 1994 was done in a rush, and failed to achieve its objectives, on the way suffering huge losses.

The Russian forces, which had inherited their former Soviet formations, suffered from basic structural weaknesses as well. The Soviet Army was based on the Second World War experience ("armies are always preparing for the last war" is often repeated, yet was very true in this case) and structured to fight similar conventional armies, relying on large motorized formations, heavy artillery and air support, to overrun NATO positions in Western Europe. In Chechnya, as well as in Afghanistan, the Russian army and its Soviet predecessor lacked the necessary units trained for mountain warfare or large scale urban operations. Nor did the Soviet and later Russian army have adequate equipment to cope with long-term guerrilla resistance, and the Soviet Army in Afghanistan had to adapt its tactics and improvise its material for the new challenge.¹⁴⁸ Those shortcomings that were so obvious in the 1994-96 war¹⁴⁹ continue to haunt the Russian military in the "second" Chechnya war that started in 1999.

Other interpretations looked beyond the military sphere to the larger political context in which the war took place. Some observers found fault in the basic objectives of the Russian military campaign that started in December 1994. The announced objective was "to restore the constitutional order" in Chechnya. The political agenda was to boost the failing popularity of the Yeltsin administration. A Chechen researcher remarks that the war in Chechnya coincided with the large-scale redistribution of Soviet property among a handful of oligarchs in Russia.¹⁵⁰ This echoes the accusations of General Alexander Lebed, referring to the vast corruption within the Russian military as the main reason for the war, and reflecting doubt, mistrust, and incomprehension towards the immensity of the collapse, and the misappropriation caused by privatizing a state-dominated economy in such a short time as happened in Russia in 1993-96.

148 Among the most typical tactics in Afghanistan as well as Chechnya was an attempt to stay at least 300 metres away from the enemy, to reduce the efficiency of guerrillas relying on light arms, and increase the efficacy of Russian long-range fire-power.

149 Robert M. Cassidy, *Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict*, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle, PA, February 2003. See especially pp. 14-17.

150 Musa Yusupov, "Une opération de politique intérieure russe", *Le Monde diplomatique*, June 2003.

In searching for explanations for the Russian defeat in Chechnya, Anatol Lieven looks at the larger picture, at the state of Russia and its society in the early 1990s: "The Russia that went to war in Chechnya (...) was both a weak state and one in the throes of a liberal capitalist revolution..."¹⁵¹ The Russian elite in those years was caught in a deadly struggle to privatize large chunks of former Soviet property—which included everything from oil fields to airports to banks—while the population was struggling to adapt to rapid changes in society and an equally rapid decline in their living conditions. As a result of the new hardships—and structural changes of modernization and urbanization under the Soviets—Russia's population had suffered decline in a physical sense as well: the Russian health care system had nearly collapsed, causing a decline in life expectancy and a rapid demographic decline; in the period of one year, from 1992 to 1993, life expectancy of the Russian male population dropped from 62 to 59 years, or 13 years less than American men.¹⁵² Not only was Russian society demoralized as a result of those profound changes, it was largely indifferent towards the political status of Chechnya, and whether Russian "constitutional order" was imposed on the Caucasus Mountains or not. For a Russian citizen from Volgograd or Khabarovsk, the Chechens did not threaten their livelihood, their security, and their way of life. For the young Russian recruit, often from an underprivileged family, armed with an AK-74 rifle and a tourist map and sent to conquer Grozny, the war failed to inspire patriotic feelings.¹⁵³ Moreover, the organization and logistics of the Russian forces in the Chechen war zone, and the Russian Defense Ministry's finances, were in such a bad shape that often recruits were forced to trade their weapons for food or vodka.

151 Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya, Tombstone of Russian Power*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, p. 150.

152 Life expectancy in Russia began declining in 1988-89, when it was on average 67 years for men and 74 for women. Russia's birth rate fell to 9.2 per 1,000 people in 1993, from 10.7 in 1992. In real numbers, Russian women bore 1.4 million babies in 1993, compared with 1.6 million in 1992. See Alan Cooperman, "Amid Economic Woes, Life Expectancy Is Falling in Russia", AP, Moscow, 3 February 1994.

153 In spite of the overall Russian superiority in arms and men, at the unit level the Chechen fighters were better armed compared to the heavy but inadequate armament of the Russian forces.

In spite of those Russian shortcomings, neither the Russian political leadership nor foreign observers expected much resistance from the Chechen side. This was mainly due to the (correct) appreciation of the decline of Dudayev's popularity starting from early 1993, the defection of some of his former close collaborators, and the growing civil war of 1994; all this convinced many experts and observers (wrongly) that the Chechen pro-independence forces had no resources for much resistance against a Russian onslaught. Military observers compared the Chechen fighters with the Georgian National Guard, although a more correct comparison would have been with the Karabakh Armenians or the Abkhaz fighters. Another mistake was to evaluate the military capabilities of the pro-Dudayev Chechen fighters during their clashes with Chechen opponents. A set of social norms and traditions, personal and clan links, and the fear of vendetta, prohibited a total war during the Chechen civil war. But Chechen resistance against the Russian armies could not be anything but a total war, until the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya. Although Chechnya looked and was largely chaotic in 1993-94, any traveller would have not failed to see that there at least one consensus among the Chechens, and that was to exclude Russian intervention, and especially Russian military intervention, to sort out the problems of the republic.¹⁵⁴

The Chechen war of 1994-96 has become a classical example of asymmetric wars, in which a great military power fights—and loses—against a pre-industrial enemy. In such a confrontation, the strategic aims, tactics, technologic means, and will to fight and bear sacrifices differ between the two warring parties. In modern times, most colonial wars such as those of the French in Algeria, the US in Vietnam, and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan can be described as asymmetric wars. More recent examples are the Israeli army's actions in South Lebanon and the occupied Palestinian territories, and the US Army's in Somalia and more recently in Iraq. Strategically, the big power tries to limit the effectiveness of the resistance by imposing its political agenda and dominating the given country even partially, while the resistance sees its survival dependent on the outcome of the confrontation. The strategy of the big power is control of the territory, and that of the resistance is

154 Authors notes from several discussions in Groznyy, February 1994.

to make the occupation costly, through a long-term guerrilla campaign, to erode public support for the war and make the foreign military occupation politically unbearable. The great power tries to respond by punitive raids, often causing larger casualties among the civilian population, paradoxically increasing the chances of guerrilla recruitment. While most territory is impossible to "control" when the local population is hostile to a force of occupation, the military "successes" of punitive operations increasingly cause a loss of popular support. In a remark on the reasons why the US lost the war in Vietnam, Henry Kissinger writes, "We lost sight of one of the most cardinal maxims of guerrilla war: the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if he does not win."¹⁵⁵ The will to resist and the readiness for unlimited suffering provide the strategic strength of native forces facing a colonial force superior in number, armament, finances, and technology.

The Chechen resistance against the Russian forces displayed a skilful capacity to blend guerrilla and conventional tactics, and to choose the best situations to use limited human resources and armament to confront a bigger force. From the start of the war, Chechen fighters challenged the Russian army in pitched battles as during the battle for Groznyy in January-February 1995, or in Bamut later that summer. After they were driven out of the urban centres and mountain towns, the Chechen fighters stubbornly returned to challenge Russian control for a week over Gudermes in December 1995, and attacked Groznyy in January 1996 and again in March 1996. The most remarkable operation was the attack of August 1996, when Chechen fighters took control of Groznyy, Gudermes, and Argun. In Groznyy alone, 12,000 Russian soldiers were cut off from each other, and encircled in their strongholds and behind their reinforced positions, by Chechen forces numbering initially a few hundred, which after the third day of the operation increased to a couple of thousand fighters. The Russian forces had already lost the will to fight and now lost the control over the city.

The Chechen men went to the battlefield in a spontaneous manner that is unseen elsewhere. In the past, Chechens had distinguished themselves from their neighbours by the largely classless nature of their society, and the equality that conditioned the relations between them.

155 Henry A. Kissinger, "The Vietnam Negotiations", *Foreign Affairs*, January 1969, Vol. 47, No. 2, p. 214.

According to Professor Sergei Arutyunov, an anthropologist who has large field experience in the North Caucasus:

Chechnya was and is a society of military democracy. (...) Quite unlike most other Caucasian nations, there had never been any feudal system in Chechnya. Traditionally, if it was ever governed at all as a distinct entity, it was done by a council of elders on the basis of consensus. But like any other military democracy, such as the Iroquois in America or the Zulu in southern Africa, Chechens retained an institution of a supreme military chief. In peacetime, that chief had no power at all. No sovereign authority was recognized, and the nation might be fragmented in a hundred of rival clans.¹⁵⁶

As a result, the Chechens fought their war without needing a strictly hierarchical military command; the general staff that Aslan Maskhadov led did carry out planning, coordination, and logistics, but did not coerce young Chechens to join his armed forces to go to the battlefield. This was done spontaneously out of the social tissue of the Chechen towns and villages, in the form of small groups loyal to their field commanders. Although this "military democracy" proved impressively effective against a larger and heavy war machine, enabling the Chechen fighters in the field to adapt to changing circumstances and take the initiative, compared with a hierarchical Russian army slow to react to changing realities, it became the main obstacle for the Chechens building their institutions in the inter-war period of 1996-99: without a centralized military command Aslan Maskhadov failed to build state institutions in the war-torn land, while the numerous armed groups controlling various parts of Chechnya made sure that the country would not see either stability nor security. Chechens have a long tradition of resistance, but too short an experience in state-building.

Disintegration of Russia?

On 27 December 1994, President Yeltsin addressed the Russian and international public, to explain the ongoing military operations in the

156 Sergei Arutyunov, "Possible Consequences of the Chechnya War for the General Situation in the Caucasus", in Mikhail Tsyppin (ed.), *War in Chechnya: Implications for Russian Security Policy*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, 1995, available on the internet: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1995/con-nps.htm>

North Caucasus. He put forward his arguments, starting with: "What is happening in the republic, why are Russian troops in Chechnya? First, I will answer the main question: Russian soldiers and officers are defending the unity of Russia. This is an indispensable condition of the existence of the Russian state. The Chechen Republic is part of the Russian Federation whose composition has been sealed in the Constitution. No territory has the right to secede from Russia."¹⁵⁷

Following the collapse of the USSR, there was a fear that Russia, a multi-ethnic federal structure composed of ethno-territorial entities very similar to the Soviet Union, could follow the fate of its predecessor and end up collapsing along ethno-territorial lines. There were two reasons for this fear. The first was the acute struggle to control the political leadership within the Kremlin, between Yeltsin on the one hand and Vice-President Rutskoy and the Speaker of the Supreme Soviet, Khasbulatov, on the other. This struggle peaked in October 1993, and was eventually resolved by the use of tanks, which shelled the White House into surrender. The second reason for fearing collapse of the Russian Federation was the demands for sovereignty and self-determination from the ethno-territorial entities such as Tatarstan—the most important from the perspective of population, economic weight, and position as a communications hub—and Chechnya, which lacked a similar weight to Tatarstan but was relevant with its radical leadership and its geographical position in the volatile Caucasus.

This fear of the collapse of the Russian Federation played a key role in igniting the war in Chechnya. While many analysts have insisted on the desire of the Russian leadership to score a "little victorious war", this aspect of a fear of collapse has often been marginalized in the debate about the causes of the Chechnya war.¹⁵⁸ As one expert put it, "Moscow feared Chechnya would become Russia's Nagorno Karabakh."¹⁵⁹ That

157 "Address by Boris Yeltsin" reported by *Official Kremlin International News Broadcast*, Moscow, 27 December 1994.

158 Modern analysts who have studied history of warfare, and the emergence of war, have switched focus from "man the hunter" and the projection of power to "man the hunted", a creature living most of its existence in fear, making fear and irrational reaction due to it the root cause of wars. See Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites, Origin and History of the Passion of War*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997.

159 Alexei Malashenko, in a conference organized by the Swiss Peace Foundation

risk of the additional weakening of the Russian Federation was largely diminished in 1994. Following the confrontation with the parliament, Yeltsin emerged weakened and largely unpopular, yet succeeded in ending the duality of power in Moscow. Moreover, the agreement between Moscow and Kazan in February 1994 broke the trend of autonomous republics' efforts for increasing sovereignty. Therefore, the fear of collapse was not the direct cause of the Russian leadership to launch the Chechnya invasion, but it was very much present in the back of the minds of Russian decision-makers.

While Russian fears of state collapse are understandable, the events in Chechnya and the North Caucasus went beyond this preoccupation. Both during the first war and later in 1999 during the "second" war in Chechnya, this threat of Russia's disintegration was used for larger political purposes. "...Russian leaders have overreacted to the threat of secessionism triggered by the wars in Chechnya. The domestic implications of Chechen secessionism were hardly as threatening as Yeltsin and Putin portrayed them."¹⁶⁰ The war in Chechnya in 1994 (and the same can be said for the 1999 war) was launched to reinforce the hand of the Kremlin leader before elections, and to boost Russia's geopolitical positioning in the competition to access Caspian Sea resources. Moreover, the conflict in Chechnya served to reinforce "vertical powers", that is presidential authority over the subjects of the Russian Federation, and therefore limiting possible debate on the nature of the federation and its essence. While it is hard to deny the Kremlin's concerns about Russia's unity, or its attempts to find remedies to the security problems that were posed by the anarchy in Chechnya after the revolution in 1991, yet it seems that the Russian strategy in 1994 (the same can be said about 1999) was an attempt to address political problems back in Moscow (Yeltsin's re-election in 1996, and the transition from Yeltsin to Putin in 1999) rather than to address the strategic problems in the North Caucasus. The political objectives of the Chechen wars should be looked for in Moscow, not in the Caucasus.

A final problem in the discussion on preservation of Russia's territorial integrity is the lack of proportionality between the perceived threat

on the theme "Searching for Peace in Chechnya", Berne, 8 November, 2005.

160 Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars, Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* Brookings Institution Press, 2002, p. 8.

and the means to counter it. The destruction of Grozny and other urban centres in Chechnya, the massacres committed against civilians during military operations, as in Samashki,¹⁶¹ the large number of civilian victims, all this amounts to a conflict looking less like a police operation to deal with internal problems of a state than the colonial wars of the past, such as the Russian experience in the same North Caucasus in the 19th century, or the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. It is precisely the means used by the Russian leadership under two administrations that might eventually undermine the initial publicly declared aim of the military intervention: the conflict is increasing the schism between a Russian population among which xenophobia towards Caucasians and Muslims in general is on the rise, and those populations which feel that their essential rights are violated by large segments of the Russian society, and the Russian state.

One of the most interesting and thought-provoking works on Chechnya and the Caucasus conflicts comes from Valery Tishkov, an anthropologist who served as Minister of Nationalities in Yeltsin's cabinet. It is highly important to consider his arguments because they question issues taken for granted by Western scholars when they discuss Chechnya. Tishkov has since long criticized certain "Western" authors who take a biased position in analyzing the Chechen conflict. He is equally critical towards those outsiders who take up the separatist cause while having little knowledge of the complexity of the Chechen society, and frequently express a certain political agenda, often reflecting older Cold-War reflexes: "Emotional and political involvement in evaluating the events in Chechnya has been demonstrated by many foreign experts, among whom a pro-Chechen position has become linked up with an unexpectedly strong recidivist ant-Russian position."¹⁶² Tishkov also refuses to see the conflict on Chechnya as a part of a "four hundred

161 On 7 to 12 April 1995, Russian Federal troops attacked the village of Samashki, after the village elders negotiated the departure of the fighters. According to Russian press reports "hundreds" of villagers were killed. See Dmitry Balburow, "Samashki Massacre Shows Grim Reality of War", *Moscow News*, No. 15, 21-27 April 1995. According to a report by Human Rights Watch, 120 people were killed in Samashki. "Russia, Partisan War in Chechnya on the Eve of the WWII Commemoration", *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 7, No. 8, May 1995; see the report on-line: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Russiaa.htm>

162 Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and After the Soviet Union*, p. 185.

years war", and the Chechens as the "eternal rebels", and rightly points out that the most vivid historic experience for Chechens and the closest historic reference remains the mass deportations under Stalin, and the trauma linked to this memory.¹⁶³

Tishkov goes further to criticize the instrumentalization of past grievances by Chechen militants for political purposes. He rejects the use of such terms as "Chechen people" as an entity: "Our analysis shows that the Chechen people, or Chechen society as a collective body, no longer exists as an agent or locus of social action."¹⁶⁴ Tishkov insists that wide differences between Chechens and Russians, so much emphasised to justify the conflict, are not real, since Chechens have largely adopted modern, urban culture, especially in late Soviet times, and says that the majority of the Chechens are atheists, to underline their similarity with the rest of the Russian population. Every revolution mobilizes the masses and captures their imagination, and is eventually followed by a period of inevitable disillusionment. Tishkov relies on interviews showing this post-revolution disappointment to criticize the revolution itself, and question the real motives of its leadership.¹⁶⁵

Tishkov is especially critical towards the notion of self-determination. "The rhetoric of self-determination has been the chief legal and emotional argument underlying disintegration and violent conflict."¹⁶⁶ Self-determination, therefore, is not the expression of the will of the majority of the Chechens, but the political project of a small group of nationalist militants. For Tishkov, self-determination can be only negative, aggressive and destructive. This argument (that self-determination can only lead to violence) excludes the possibility of a Chechen majority finding a political arrangement with the Russian leadership by its own free will. Moreover, it also excludes the possibility of Moscow agreeing to Chechen independence: after all, Belarus and Kazakhstan arguably have closer links with Russia than Chechnya does, and still they acceded to independence not long ago, in 1991. To conclude Tishkov's thought provoking arguments, he proposes four reasons for the outbreak of the

163 Valery Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*, pp. 17 and 20-21.

164 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

165 Valery Tishkov, "Political Anthropology of the Chechen War", *Security Dialogue*, 1997, Vol. 28, No. 4, p. 428.

166 Tishkov, *Chechnya: Life in a War-Torn Society*, p. 12.

conflict in Chechnya: first, "the profound trauma of deportation", second, social problems in Chechnya including a high rate of unemployment, third, rapid modernization in the two decades preceding the conflict (including the emergence of a social urban group with higher education), and last, the availability of large stocks of weapons as a result of the withdrawal of the Russian army.¹⁶⁷ And: "The idea of Chechen self-determination as a form of nonnegotiable secession first arose under Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of perestroika, when nationalism on the periphery overpowered the process of democratization..."¹⁶⁸

Yet self-determination does not necessary intend to be polarized, extreme, "non-negotiable", and lead to violence. Looking at the Chechen past—the trauma of the deportation is the key period here, and not the anti-colonial struggle of the 19th century—one can understand the radical nature of Chechen nationalism, itself a child of the failure of *perestroika* to reform the USSR. Yet the Russian political leadership did not exhaust all the ways of negotiation and mediation before deciding that the Chechen drive for self-determination was "non-negotiable". It was the 11 December 1994 Russian military invasion that put an end to all possible negotiations, and introduced a new level into this conflict, the military dimension. By putting the blame on "self-determination" and a "small faction of people", Tishkov is blaming the Chechen side as responsible for the conflict, as if the only option following the tectonic changes of 1991 was for Chechnya, as well as other regions of the Russian federation, to wait for Moscow to decide their fate, and not to be actors of politics—and why not also history—on their own terms. The Chechen demand for independence in 1991 created a political crisis. The Russian invasion of 1994 turned a political crisis into a war.

167 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

168 *Ibid.*, p. 57.