

Holding a Decaying Empire Together: The War in Chechnya

On 25 December 1991, the Soviet Union officially was dissolved, with the former superpower splitting into fifteen individual states. Each of these entities had been a constituent “republic” of the USSR built around one of the major ethnicities within the country—Russia itself was dominated by Russians, Ukraine by Ukrainians, and so forth. The fifteen republics, however, actually greatly simplified the diversity of the Soviet state, which contained hundreds of distinct ethnic groups, many of which dominated a small piece of territory within a republic. In many cases, these groups had certain limited rights to govern themselves locally and independently of the larger republic of which they were a part.

The Chechens were one such group. Chechnya is located in Russia, in the mountainous Caucasus and bordering the now-independent country of Georgia. The total number of Chechens is small, although exact numbers are disputed—there are perhaps somewhat over two million Chechens, over half of whom live outside Chechnya; the population of Chechnya itself is approximately 1.3 million, but this includes Ingush, Russians, and other non-Chechens. The great majority of Chechens are Muslims, and although Chechnya was incorporated into the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century (and Russia had influence in the region much earlier), their culture remains quite distinct from that of the Russians. During the Soviet period, Chechens were joined with another small Caucasian Muslim group, the Ingush, in a local governing entity.

In September 1991, even before the Soviet Union officially dissolved, rebels under the leadership of a former Soviet Air Force general, Dzhokar Dudayev, effectively seized control of Chechnya. The head of the Communist Party in Grozny, the Chechen capital, was killed. Shortly thereafter, Dudayev won a clearly corrupt “presidential election” and issued a declaration of independence. The Chechen-Ingush government effectively dissolved, as Ingushetia stayed with Russia.

At first, Moscow’s response to Chechnya’s supposed independence was weak. Russian troops sent to Grozny quickly were withdrawn, and the central government refused to take strong military action, treating the Chechen posture more as an annoyance

than a serious attempt to create a new country. Dudayev's government was unstable—the latter had taken advantage of the unique circumstances accompanying the decline of the USSR to establish himself as the supposedly legitimate president of Chechnya, but he would be more accurately described as a warlord. From Moscow's perspective, cautiously waiting for circumstances to change seemed to be a reasonable reaction to events in Chechnya.

In response to the Chechen situation and other demands for greater autonomy by ethnic entities and other local governments, the government of President Boris Yeltsin shaped the 1992 Federation Treaty, which was signed by virtually all local ethnic governments—but Chechnya refused to accede to the treaty, maintaining its claim to independence. In the meantime, Russians and others fled Chechnya in considerable numbers. Organized crime was endemic in Chechnya, and spilled over into neighboring areas, while low-level violence continued between Dudayev supporters and opponents, with the Russians assisting the latter. By mid-1994, the violence worsened, with Dudayev's foes making a serious military effort to overthrow his regime. Russian aircraft began to bomb Grozny, and in December Russian troops invaded the region.¹ The conflict that has become known as the First Chechen War had begun.

The First Chechen War

Russian military commanders expected little meaningful resistance from the greatly outgunned Chechens, and planned their campaign accordingly. The Chechens, however, proved to be surprisingly effective, using mobile guerrilla tactics to inflict considerable losses on Russian troops, many of whom were low-quality conscripts who had been stationed in nearby regions.

The Russians quickly resorted to a crude counterinsurgency tactic: the massive use of firepower. Air strikes and artillery were used indiscriminately, with little concern for infrastructural damage or civilian casualties. Russian forces soon were battering Grozny, by far the largest city in Chechnya, with munitions. As 1994 ended, the Russian Army's

¹ For a contemporary report on the ground invasion, see Michael Specter, "Russian Forces Move Into Rebel Region," *New York Times* online ed., 12 December 1994.

ground forces moved into Grozny,² and vicious street fighting ensued. The losses on both sides are debated, and the precise number of civilian and Chechen rebel deaths never will be known, but perhaps twenty-five thousand civilians, as well as thousands of Russian troops and rebels, were killed in the conquest of the city.³ The Russian Army succeeded in taking Grozny, but in the process virtually destroyed it.

The conquest of Grozny illustrated very well what was to become, at least among foreign observers, the most-noted aspect of the Russian war in Chechnya: a brutal indifference to civilian suffering. Not only was Russia unrestrained in its use of munitions, but it became ever-clearer that the Russian Army was committing war crimes on a massive scale. Murder, rape, torture, looting, kidnapping, and other crimes were common, and this mistreatment in turn reinforced the Chechen desire for independence.⁴

Although the rebels were able to inflict significant losses on the Russian military, the size and capabilities of the forces arrayed against them placed the Chechens at a serious military disadvantage. Seeking a “shortcut” to strategic victory, and, perhaps more importantly, embittered by Russian mistreatment of the Chechen population, rebels increasingly began to undertake terrorist attacks in Russia itself. The most spectacular of these attacks, led by Shamil Basayev, involved the seizure of a hospital in the Russian city of Budyonnovsk in June 1995 and the holding of its staff and patients as hostages. To the humiliation of the Russian government, efforts to storm the hospital failed, with a substantial number of hostages and Russian troops being killed in the process. Moscow soon agreed to Chechen demands for peace talks and Basayev and his men were allowed to escape back to Chechnya, accompanied by a number of “volunteer hostages”, who were released once the rebels reached their destination.⁵

² See Michael Specter, “Russians Enter Separatist Capital after Air and Ground Onslaught,” *New York Times* online ed., 1 January 1995.

³ Writing in mid-1995, Paul Goble argues that at that point “a minimum of 40,000 people in the region” had been killed by Russian forces. He also notes that, “Perhaps 12,000 of the dead were ethnic Russians who lost their lives during the Russian attacks on the city of Grozny.” “The Costs for Moscow of Its War in Chechnya are High and Continuing,” *Prism* vol. 1, issue 8, 23 June 1995, published online by the Jamestown Foundation at www.jamestown.org.

⁴ Various Russian war crimes are described in Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 228-55.

⁵ See Steven Erlanger, “Russia Allows Rebels to Leave with Hostages,” *New York Times* online ed., 20 June 1995 and Alessandra Stanley, “Chechen Gunmen who Raided Town Release hostages,” *idem*, 21 June 1995.

The Breathing Period: 1996-1999

As the First Chechen War dragged on, opposition to the conflict grew with Russia. Public support suffered over time as Russian forces suffered far more casualties than initially had been expected and reports of the brutality of the fighting troubled many consciences. In the 1990s the Russian press was far freer than it is today, and there was considerable criticism of Moscow's military mistakes and human rights abuses in the domestic press. (In recent years, Moscow has taken ever-more-stringent measures to limit press freedom, placing many formerly-independent broadcasting outlets under state control and using measures such as huge fines to discipline, and in many cases forcing the closure of, print media outlets.)

In April 1996, the Russian government scored a victory against the Chechen rebels when Dudayev was assassinated by Russian aircraft using "smart" munitions. Aslan Maskhadov ultimately emerged as Dudayev's successor. Maskhadov had been a senior military leader of the Chechen forces; like Dudayev, he had been a Soviet military officer earlier in his life. Shortly thereafter, in August, the Chechens retook Grozny. Yeltsin's newly-appointed national security advisor, General Alexander Lebed—himself a major political figure who shortly before had been a candidate in the first round of the 1996 Russian presidential campaign—negotiated a ceasefire agreement that ended the First Chechen War. This was followed by a formal peace treaty in May of the next year.

Although Russia did not acknowledge in the treaty that Chechnya was a wholly independent state, it also did not force the Chechens to back down from their claims of sovereignty—the document skirted this key issue.⁶ Internationally, it was seen as an admission of defeat by the Russia, as it provided that Russian troops would leave Chechnya and that Moscow would compensate the Chechens for economic damage resulting from the war. In short, and leaving the issue of legal sovereignty aside, the treaty effectively acknowledged that Chechnya's leaders *de facto* were independent of Moscow. Clearly, Russia had lost the First Chechen War.

Peace in Chechnya would prove to be far from complete, however. Power struggles within the Chechen leadership continued—Maskhadov survived several

⁶ Alessandra Stanley, "Yeltsin Signs Peace Treaty with Chechnya," *New York Times* online ed., 13 May 1997.

assassination attempts which often are blamed on his rival Basayev, the “hero” of the Budyonnovsk hospital incident. Chechen terrorism within Russia continued, including attacks on apartment complexes and railway stations; additionally, Russian envoys and officials were killed in Chechnya. Perhaps most importantly, conflict boiled in neighbouring Dagestan, another majority-Muslim region of the Russian Federation—and the conflicts in the Caucasus increasingly were taking on strong religious overtones.

Traditionally, Islam in the Caucasus had not been associated with harsh and radical theological beliefs, such as those associated with the Wahhabi tradition that emerged in the Saudi Peninsula. Rather, the Caucasian practice of Islam generally has been seen as relatively tolerant, with strong strains of Sufi mysticism and cultural traditions that are strongly condemned by Islamist extremists. In the early period of the Chechen conflict, religion played a relatively modest role—while religious differences between the Chechens and Orthodox Russians were a component in the Chechen desire for independence, it is clear that nationalism was a far more important factor than was sectarianism. As the bitter struggle continued, however, religion became increasingly important to the conflict. This no doubt partly simply was the result of the pressures of war, with Chechens turning to religion as a justification for sacrifice and a source of divine sanction for their costly struggle. Another important factor, however, was the substantial assistance that was pouring into Chechnya from outside Muslims—financial and other assistance was funnelled in and foreign jihadis came to fight the “infidel” Russians. Saudis, Egyptians, Pakistanis, and others joined the war, but these outsiders had no interest in secular Chechen nationalism—they were Islamists who were interested in religious struggle. Moreover, for a number of years Wahhabi missionaries (largely funded by Saudi Arabia) had been active throughout the Caucasus, as well as in many other parts of the world, seeking to convert local Muslims to the very severe Wahhabi vision of Islam.

Over time, Islamism became an increasingly-powerful force in Chechnya, and Basayev took advantage of this to emerge as a key leader among more religiously-radical Chechens, with many local warlords and others being loyal to him. Maskhadov, who no doubt was concerned about being outflanked by rivals on issues of faith, in early 1999 announced that Chechnya would transition from secular law to *sharia* (Islamic law). This strained the Chechen government relationship with the Russians, who had no desire to

see neighbours—much less a region that it still considered a part of Russia—adopt characteristics associated with Islamist states.

In August 1999, Basayev led a large force of Islamist fighters in an invasion of Dagestan. His goal was to assist local Islamists in establishing an independent Dagestan that would then be linked to Chechnya in a larger entity. The effort failed, with heavy losses to Basayev's force. However, the invasion was taken very seriously indeed by Moscow—while the Chechen conflict had previously spilled into other regions, the sheer scale of Basayev's invasion seemed to confirm that a *de facto* independent Chechnya presented a major security threat to Russia.

In early September, a series of bombings of apartment buildings occurred in Dagestan and Moscow, killing approximately 300 Russians. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin publicly blamed the Chechens, but a curious incident occurred on 22 September, when individuals associated with the FSB, the Russian internal security service, a successor of the Soviet KGB, were arrested while apparently planting a bomb in an apartment building in the city of Ryazan. While the FSB soon claimed that the arrested men had been participating in a training exercise and that the explosives and detonator were not real, local police in Ryazan are known to have disagreed with these claims, and there is considerable speculation that the FSB actually had committed the earlier bombings. The motive for such an action, apparently, would be to provide the Russian government—in particular, Putin, a former head of the FSB—with a pretext for an invasion of Chechnya. To this day, blame for the bombings is still debated, although the official investigation fingered Arab terrorists fighting with the Chechens as the organizers of attacks and a number of individuals associated with the Chechen cause have been tried and jailed in Russia.

The Early Period of the Second Chechen War

In September 1999, Russia began to bomb targets in Chechnya, and this soon was followed by a ground invasion of Chechnya. At first, Russia indicated that it only sought to occupy the portion of Chechnya north of the Terek River, but Russian forces continued southward, and by November were bombarding Grozny. Russia also organized a pro-Moscow Chechen military force which played a significant role in the siege. The heavy air and artillery bombardment continued throughout December and into January, with most of

the city being levelled. There was a very heavy flow of refugees out of Chechnya, and the Russian government made little effort to provide them with humanitarian assistance.⁷ Reports of Russian excesses, and general disapproval for the Russian invasion, resulted in considerable criticism from the West, including threats to curtail foreign aid and take other measures to punish Russia. Russia publicly expressed resentment at Western interference in the Chechen issue,⁸ and outside efforts ultimately did little to improve conditions for most Chechens.

Russia suffered major casualties during the battle for Grozny, and firefights in which isolated Russian units were ambushed by Chechen fighters proved to be particularly deadly.⁹ Street-to-street urban warfare continued through December and into the new year, but by mid-January, circumstances clearly favoured the Russians, who, by completely surrounding the city, had cut the Chechen logistics lines. With their forces suffering from dwindling food, ammunition, and other necessities, it was becoming clear to Chechens that they must attempt to withdraw from the city so as to prevent their complete destruction.

An attempt by an encircled force to “break out” from its trap is one of the riskiest of military manoeuvres. The Russians—who saw the Grozny battle as a chance to inflict catastrophic losses on the Chechens and thus perhaps end the Chechen rebellion—had mined the areas surrounding the city and taken other measures to trap the Chechen fighters. The Chechens paid a high price when, as January ended, they finally attempted to escape: fatalities included a number of Chechen leaders, but most fighters escaped. However, soon thereafter the Chechens suffered another major defeat. Chechen fighters seized the village of Komsomolskoe and attempted hold it against Russian attack, but over the course of two weeks suffered at least several hundred, and perhaps as many as one thousand, fatalities, before withdrawing.

⁷ See Michael R. Gordon, “Trickle of Chechen Refugees Brave a Risky Escape Route,” *New York Times* online ed., 11 December 1999.

⁸ See Celestine Bohlen, “Russia Reacts Angrily Over Western Criticism in Chechnya,” *New York Times* online ed., 8 December 1999, and Erik Eckholm, “A Bristling Yeltsin Reminds Clinton of Russia’s A-Arms,” *idem*, 10 December 1999.

⁹ See, for example, Michael Wines, “Rebels Hit Russian Troops Hard in Battle in the Chechen Capital,” *New York Times* online ed., 16 December 1999.

The Chechens retreated into the mountains of southern Chechnya so as to fight a guerrilla war against the Russians which has continued to the present.

The Second Chechen War to the Present

In May 2000, Moscow announced that it would rule Chechnya directly and named Mufti Akhmed Kadyrov, a Chechen Muslim cleric, to oversee the region.¹⁰ In March 2003, a new constitution was approved by Chechens in a referendum, but very serious questions were raised about the legitimacy of the balloting and it is probable that there was manipulation of the election returns.¹¹ In October of that year, Kadyrov was elected president of Chechnya, but, again, there were serious questions about the integrity of the balloting, and the same has been true of subsequent elections.

War crimes against the Chechen population—committed by all sides in the conflict—have continued, and mass graves have been discovered throughout the region. The Russian government has made some half-hearted efforts to eliminate war crimes, including a number of legal prosecutions. However, while it is very concerned that news of Russian depredations not leak out Chechnya, it apparently remains rather unenergetic in actually preventing such abuses. Moscow continues to restrict media access, making it difficult for the international media to ascertain how Russian forces are conducting the counterinsurgency war. Perhaps part of the answer as to why this has been the case is that, from the First Chechen War onward, Russia appears to have utilized a common counter-insurgency strategy in Chechnya: using brutality to batter the insurgent population so as to convince it that compliance with Moscow's wishes is preferable to suffering the punishment for disobedience. Of course, this is not an openly declared policy, but one certainly could argue that it nonetheless is a real one.

Chechen separatists continue to commit acts of guerrilla war and terrorism, both in Chechnya itself and outside the region. An active campaign of bombings, ambushes, and assassinations has continued, with several important pro-Russian figures being killed, including Akhmed Kadyrov, who was killed by a bomb at a parade in May 2004. Russian troops frequently are killed in ambushes, but ever since they suffered crippling losses in

¹⁰ Michael R. Gordon, "Putin Names Chechen Cleric to Rule Separatist Republic," *New York Times* online ed., 13 June 2000.

¹¹ See Lawrence A. Uzzell, "Referendum Results," *Chechnya Weekly*, Vol. 4, Issue 10, 27 March 2003, published online at www.jamestown.org.

the early portion of the war Chechen fighters generally have avoided large-scale combat operations against the Russians. However, the Chechens still suffer losses, and in July 2006, Basayev himself was killed, but the circumstances surrounding his death are murky—different sources claim that he was assassinated by the Russians, Chechen rivals, or in an accident.

It is notable that in recent years, a number of Chechen suicide attacks against various targets have occurred. Although suicide bombings have become an increasingly-used terrorist tactic throughout the world, Chechen suicide bombings are somewhat unusual in that many of the attacks have been committed by women;¹² globally, the majority of suicide bombers are young men.

Female terrorists also played roles in the two most infamous terrorist attacks of the war, the seizing of hostages at a Moscow theatre in October 2002 and at a school in the Russian town of Beslan in September 2004. Both sieges ended violently, with Russian troops making botched attempts to rescue the hostages. In the case of the Moscow theatre, over 100 hostages were killed, while the events in Beslan resulted in the deaths of over 300 civilians, nearly 200 of them children. Both events have continued to be very controversial, with many Russians—as well as outside observers—blaming authorities for bungling their rescue efforts, with tragic results.¹³

Conclusion

As the Chechen War has dragged on, it has grown ever more complex and ugly. What began as a separatist conflict increasingly has taken on the characteristics of an Islamist struggle, and there is no end in sight to the violence—foreign jihadis continue to filter into the region and young Chechens continue to take up arms against the Russians. However, the fact that Russia was able to regain effective control of Chechnya (or, at least, of its major population centres) also illustrates one of the unattractive truths of counterinsurgency: a “winning ugly” strategy sometimes can work.

¹² See Steven Lee Myers, “Female Suicide Bombers Unnerve Russians,” *New York Times* online ed., 7 August 2003.

¹³ See C.J. Chivers, “Report on Russia Massacre Faults Officials,” *New York Times* online ed., 29 December 2005.

It is not necessarily always the case that failing to win “hearts and minds” ensures the defeat of the counterinsurgent—it sometimes may be possible to achieve and maintain control of an area through overwhelming military force and sheer brutality. However, this also ensures that the occupier is hated and it should be expected that at least a minority of the occupied population will strike back with similar ruthlessness. Given the proven ability of the Chechens to undertake terrorist attacks on Russian soil, it is likely that Russia will continue to pay in blood to maintain control of Chechnya. Like many counterinsurgency/terrorist campaigns before it, the Chechen conflict could continue for many decades.

Questions

- 1) How did the breakup of the Soviet Union create conditions that made the Chechen succession from Russia possible?
- 2) Should the Russian Federation allow Chechnya to become fully independent? If so, why? If not, why not?
- 3) What have been the strengths and weaknesses of Russian counterinsurgency strategy in Chechnya?
- 4) What have been the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy of Chechen insurgents and terrorists?
- 5) What, if any, role could the international community play in bringing the violence in Chechnya to an end?

Websites

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