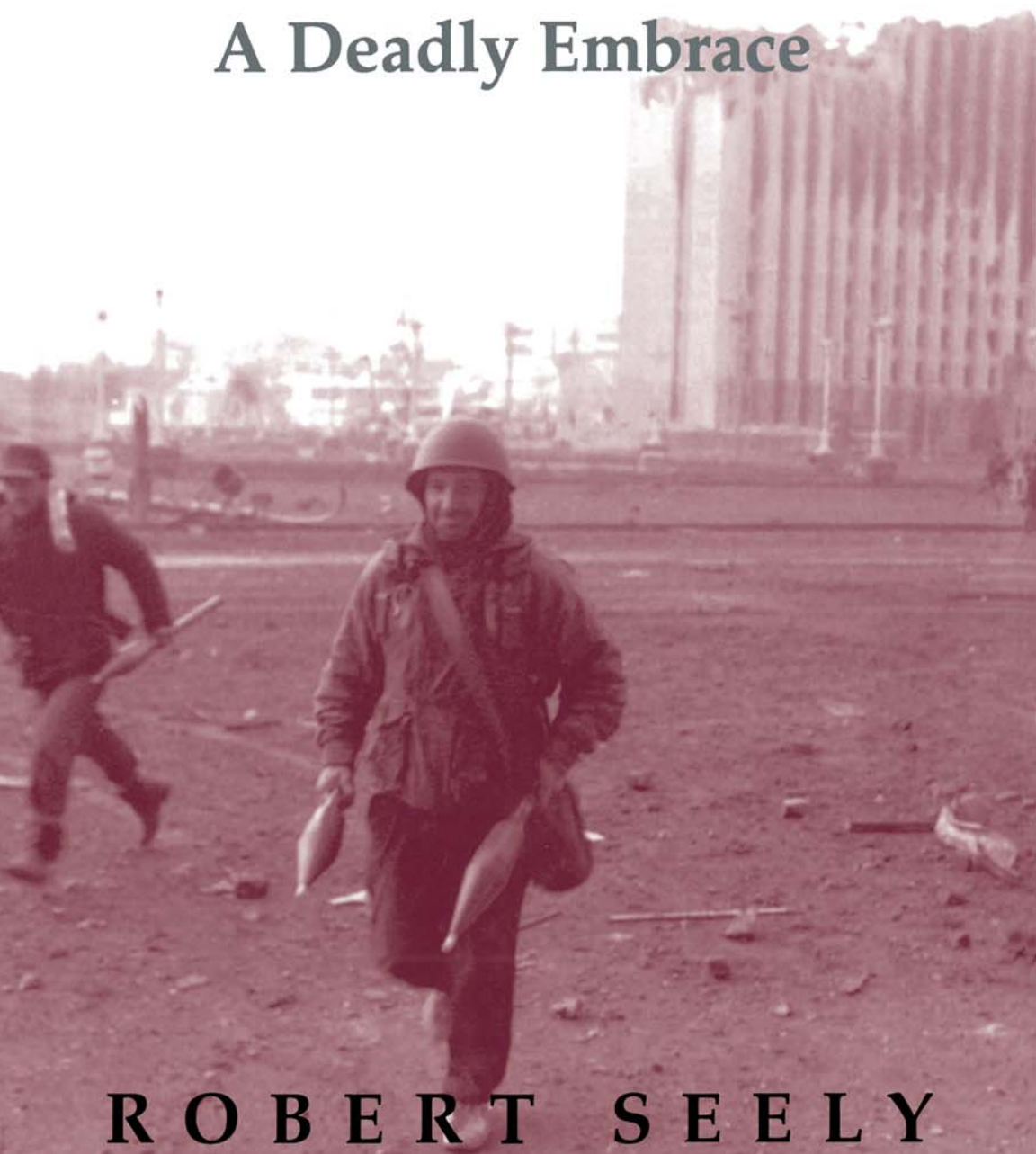


RUSSO-CHECHEN CONFLICT, 1800-2000

A Deadly Embrace



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**RUSSO-CHECHEN CONFLICT,
1800–2000**

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ROBERT SEELY



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All pictures courtesy of Associated Press.

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Warfare has played a critical role in the development and fate of the Russian state, whether tsarist, Soviet, or potentially democratic. Armed struggle, with its many component nationalities and a host of major and minor foreign powers, characterized the emergence of the Grand Duchy of Moscow as pre-eminent in Russia and the subsequent expansion of the tsarist state into a multinational Russian empire. Moscow grew to prominence largely as the result of combat against Tartar, Turk, and Pole. Dramatic military victory over the armies of such vaunted military 'Great Captains' as Charles XII of Sweden, Frederick the Great of Prussia, and France's Napoleon Bonaparte marked the rise of Russia to great-power status in the nineteenth century. In the same century, Russia's victory in the War of Liberation against Napoleonic France and its poor military performance in the Crimean War unleashed forces for change within the Russian empire. Throughout these centuries, Russia expanded inexorably across the vast span of the Eurasian continent, absorbing a multitude of peoples with different cultures and institutions, peacefully or by force. By the twentieth century, the empire counted within its borders literally hundreds of nationalities, not all of which accepted eternal Russian domination.

Russia's twentieth-century wars have had an even more profound impact on the state. Embarrassing defeat in the Russo-Japanese War after the turn of the century unleashed revolutionary forces, which, with the catastrophic effects of the First World War, brought about the demise of the empire and the rise of Lenin's Bolshevik state. Nor did the subsequent rise of the Soviet Union to global prominence as the world's first communist state alter this military record. The birth of the Soviet Union was accompanied by renewed conflict, as numerous ethnic groups availed themselves of the opportunity to reassert their independence. Ultimately, the Soviet government imposed its ideology and political control by force throughout the lands of the former Russian empire.

Foreign wars, in particular, the Second World War, had even more telling effects on the Soviet Union's fortunes and ultimate fate. Whatever its motivation, the Soviet Union's cooperation with Hitler's Germany from 1939 until mid-1941 left a legacy of cynicism among Western nations regarding the Soviet Union's future strategic intent. The ensuing perfidy of Hitler in launching his devastating war against the Soviet state seared the soul of Russians for generations to come. Despite its ultimate victory in the most terrible war that any European nation has ever experienced, the war's impact left a legacy of paranoia that had a telling effect on the policies of the Soviet political leadership in the postwar years. Specifically, an appreciation of the Soviet-German war's effect on the Soviet Union compelled Soviet leaders to adopt policies that would prevent such a disaster from ever occurring in the future. This meant maintaining a military establishment and capability whose costs ultimately proved beyond the economic means of the state to sustain. Within the Soviet state, it also meant maintaining a harsh totalitarian system necessary to ensure the state's survival against internal pressures and waging a Cold War to fend off potential foreign foes. Amidst the many challenges of the Cold War, the Soviet Union also waged a long and seemingly interminable war in Afghanistan. This war sapped the strength and will of the Soviet state and, within the context of the Cold War, in many ways facilitated its demise.

The record of warfare's consequences for its imperial and Soviet predecessor contains sobering messages for the fledgling pseudo-democratic Russian Federation: that warfare has had telling effects on the fate of the nation and its peoples, and, more often than not, these effects have been deleterious. This fact alone underscores the potential dangers the Russian Federation faces as it consolidates its authority and legitimacy as a potential democratic state. Specifically, it accents the potentially serious consequences of the Russian Federation's recent war in Chechnya against divisive forces that it perceives are a threat to the future existence of the Federation.

To many in the West, the 1994-96 Russo-Chechen War has neither antecedents nor consequences of major import to either Russia or the West. The brutal reality, however, is that it has both. What occurs in Chechnya will likely affect the ultimate political form and fate of Russia, and, as the past century has vividly demonstrated, for better or for worse, what happens in Russia will have an equally momentous impact on the West and the remainder of the world. Set against the backdrop of Russo-Chechen relations over the past two centuries, Robert Seely's study of the First Russo-Chechen War makes this fact abundantly clear.

Aptly sub-titled 'A Deadly Embrace', Seely's work details the tortuous path of Russian subjugation of the Chechen nation within the context of the

Series Editor's Preface

expansion of the Russian empire into the Caucasus region. As he points out clearly in his Introduction, the Chechens have represented that collective spirit of pride and independence manifested for centuries by the many and varied inhabitants of the Caucasus region. In the face of Russian imperialism and Soviet communism, the Chechens have repeatedly rebelled or aligned themselves with Russia's enemies in their search for independent identity. This record of Chechen resistance culminated in the 1990s, when the Soviet state collapsed. Seizing the opportunity, Chechen political leaders declared Chechnya to be a free and independent state and fought a brief but desperate war for their independence. In so doing, they fended off, albeit briefly, what was arguably the world's second strongest superpower.

Subsequently, the embarrassed Russian state refused to accept the reality of Chechen independence and recaptured the Chechen capital of Grozny and much of the fledgling Chechen state during a short but violent struggle in 1998 and 1999. Regardless of whether Russia's renewed conquest of Chechnya will endure, the First Chechen War left unhealed scars on both the Russian and Chechen people. Nor did the Second Chechen War, from which Russia has apparently emerged victorious, settle the longstanding issues that have both divided Russians from Chechens and posed insoluble dilemmas to tsars, commissars, and presidents alike. Seely's perceptive study provides Westerners and Russians with the necessary context for a better understanding of the potential implications of this bitter ongoing struggle for both the Russian Federation and the world.

David M. Glantz
Carlisle, PA
Series Editor

PREFACE

I would first like to say what this book is not. It is not a straight forward account of the Russo-Chechen war. Although I visited Chechnya during the war, I did not cover the war as a journalist. Whilst being in Chechnya was unpleasant and uncomfortable, it was not for me life-threatening. Many brave reporters did risk their lives to cover the war. Some were killed, either deliberately or accidentally, at the hands of Chechens or Russians. Reporters who covered the war and subsequently wrote about it include Carlotta Gall and Anatol Lieven.

What this book tries to achieve, however, is, first, to put the current war in a historical perspective, and, second, to show that some of the most important reasons for the outbreak of war lay in Moscow rather than Grozny. The book aims to give an indication of the type of relations that the Chechens and Russians have had, and also the style of politics that the Russians have used in dealing with the Northern Caucasus.

There are a few people I should thank. First is my wife, Nata, for giving me the encouragement to finish the book. Second, I would also like to thank Brown University, Rhode Island, USA. I spent the best part of a year as a Fellow in 1995 at Brown's Thomas J. Watson Institute for International Affairs. Third, I would like to thank Thomas J. Biersteker and Thomas G. Weiss from the Watson Institute for helping to fund a three-week trip to Chechnya and Ingushetia in April 1996. As well as helping with this book, that trip helped produce a paper for their Humanitarianism and War Project. Fourth, I would also like to thank the several dozen people who I interviewed for this book, some of whom have since died, and two of whom have been assassinated.

To Nata

INTRODUCTION

In 1991, the small mountain territory of Chechnya was an almost unknown part of the Soviet Union, one of a myriad of hidden regions on its political and geographic fringes. Three years later, the territory was the target of the largest military campaign staged on Russian territory since the Second World War. The Chechen capital Grozny, established in the late eighteenth century as a frontier town for the expanding Russian empire, experienced a level of destruction not seen on the European landmass since the fall of Berlin in 1945. Tens of thousands of refugees fled south from Grozny and other cities into the mountains. Thousands more civilians, many of them elderly Russians, were killed by the Russian armed forces that had ostensibly come to save them from ethnic bloodshed. By the summer of 1996, and in circumstances of military humiliation unrivalled since the First World War, the Kremlin pulled out its 40,000-strong army. It had been defeated and demoralized by bands of armed guerrillas who numbered a fraction of the size of Russia's forces.

Three years later, Russian forces were ordered back into Chechnya, and again, in an attempt to subdue relatively small numbers of Chechen guerrillas, they bombarded from land and air dozens of Chechen settlements, killing hundreds, if not thousands, of civilians in the process. As this book goes to print, that battle, in which the protection of civilians has been all but ignored, is still raging.

This book charts the often bitter and bloodthirsty history between Russia and the Chechens, and seeks to explain why the latest outbreak of warfare between the two peoples took place and what its importance was to Russia. While I hope that both students and academics will find this work useful, the book is equally aimed at the lay reader interested in events either in Chechnya, the Caucasus or the Russian Federation.

Like most conflicts, the Chechen war was caused by the failure of politicians and soldiers to achieve their aims by peaceful means. Russian leaders failed to provide stability in Chechnya, while proving unable to deny

Chechens practical independence. Chechen leaders offered their people neither a stable and defensible political framework outside the Russian Federation, nor some kind of workable *modus vivendi* within it.

The book is divided in two. The first part (Chapters 2–4) provides an overview of the major events which have taken place since the two peoples came into contact with each other two centuries ago, and explains the deep vein of hostility and incomprehension that a significant number of Chechens have, if not for Russians personally, then for the Russian state. It examines how Russia chose to colonize the north Caucasus mountain range, and how ethnic groups there chose to resist.

Dudayev's limited appeal to his own people was largely dependent on his role as the first ruler of an independent Chechen territory since the 1850s. Full-scale Russian colonization of the Caucasus began roughly 200 years ago and since then Chechens have rarely lived happily under Russian rule. When given the opportunity they have voted with their weapons – and lives – to state their claim to independence. Groups of Chechens raised rebellion against Moscow continually between 1815 and 1860; 17 times between 1860 and 1917; between 1917 and 1925; and during the late 1930s and 1940s. In 1944, Chechen relations with the Russian authorities reached a nadir when the Soviet Politburo decided to deport the entire Chechen population to central Asia. This traumatic event left roughly half of all Chechens dead and imposed a stigma which the Chechens waited for five decades to avenge. Most of the current generation of Chechen leaders were raised in conditions of impoverished captivity in central Asia.

The second part, roughly two-thirds of the book (Chapters 5–10), investigates the more immediate causes of the Russo-Chechen war of 1994–96. It charts the influence of Chechnya on the course of Russian politics, and shows that events in Moscow were at least as great an influence on the decision to go to war as events in Chechnya. For Western observers, the author makes a series of points, both in this chapter and from Chapter 5 onwards, about the nature of Soviet politics and the successes and failures of the transition from Soviet-era values to the politics of Boris Yeltsin and the new Russian state which emerged after 1991.

Chapter 4 examines the events in 1991, both in Moscow and in the northern Caucasus. Chechnya – or at least some of the political factions within it – declared independence from the Russian Federation in the autumn of 1991, weeks after the August putsch in Moscow which saw Boris Yeltsin famously jump on top of a tank and pledge to fight for the future of a democratic Russia against Soviet loyalists plotting the overthrow of President Mikhail Gorbachev. Three days after Yeltsin's declaration the Moscow coup collapsed through its

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own weakness, sounding the end of the Soviet Union. Although Gorbachev emerged safely from forced captivity in his Crimean *dacha*, his authority had been fatally weakened. During the coup Russia and the other 14 union republics – the major constituent parts of the USSR – all declared or re-affirmed their independence from the Soviet state.¹

Boris Yeltsin's new Russian leadership promised a break from the failures and oppression of the Soviet era. Russia quickly accepted the independence of the three Baltic states – Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia – which had been seized illegally by the USSR on the eve of the Second World War. From 1992 onwards, the Kremlin also appeared to accept the independence of the 11 other Union republics which ringed Russia.

However, neither Yeltsin nor any Russian leader could countenance Chechen independence. The titular ethnic groups in the Union republics that declared independence may have harboured nationalist resentment towards Russia, but legally they were opting out of the Soviet Union, *not* the Russian Federation. By accepting the independence of the Union republics when he became the undisputed leader of Russia at the end of 1991, Yeltsin was accepting – albeit in a reluctant way – their legal right to secede from the Soviet Union. If he had acquiesced to Chechnya's independence from the Russian Federation, Yeltsin would have taken the process of territorial unravelling a step further by introducing it within his newly independent state. There were 19 other autonomous republics within the Russian Federation, along with other territories which might also have been tempted to demand independence for ethnic or political reasons. Yeltsin feared that accepting the independence of Chechnya would have been a *de facto* recognition that the process of state disintegration which had destroyed the Soviet Union would continue within the Russian Federation.

Yet if Russia had no intention of granting independence to Chechnya, it was too feeble to run out of Grozny the Chechen rebels loyal to a bizarre Soviet air force general, Dzhokhar Musayevich Dudayev, who had seized power. An attempt in December 1991 to oust Dudayev before his regime had had time to settle failed in humiliating circumstances. The general emerged as vanquisher of the Russian army.

Although Russia's initial failure to oust him boosted the general's popularity among his fellow Chechens, Dudayev failed miserably as a politician. Chapter 5 examines how he managed to cling to power, and the possible reasons why he was able to agree to a retreat of the Russian army from Chechnya in one of the more extraordinary and murky episodes in the immediate aftermath of the USSR's collapse.

One of the most powerful factors which created the conditions for conflict

in Chechnya in 1994 was the vicious rivalry for power between Boris Yeltsin and the Speaker of the Russian Parliament, Ruslan Khasbulatov, an ethnic Chechen. Chapter 6 examines the battle for power between the two. Linked to the fight between Yeltsin and Khasbulatov is one of the general points argued in this book – that political battles between individuals and groups in the Soviet Union were played out not in the semi-transparent field of party politics, but in part through the manipulation of rival ethnic groups on the political fringes of the Soviet Union. The manipulation of ethnic rivalries was a key tool by which authoritarian opponents of reform in the Soviet Union undermined Gorbachev's quasi-democratic initiatives in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This tactic was continued in Chechnya and other territories within the Russian Federation, and union republic territories which had been part of the Soviet Union.

In Chapter 7, allegations that Dudayev profited from Chechen links to powerful criminal/political/business 'pyramids' in Russia, which gave Moscow's leaders an incentive to ignore the Chechen chaos, are investigated. For some of the most powerful groups in Russia, a piece of Russian Federation territory, without Russia's already lax law or indolent police, was a useful thing to have. One of the most important, and depressing, trends in Russian politics examined here is the intertwining of criminal, business and political power, and accusations that the Chechen war was not so much a Clausewitzian case by other means, as gangsterism by other methods. One person who kindly gave an extended interview for this book, Galina Starovoytova, has since been assassinated.

The book investigates the role of the Russian armed forces in the crisis, examining also the incremental increase of the military's power since 1991, its failed attempt to retain some form of unified military structure within the former Soviet Union, and its role in both attempting to ferment, and later to control, armed conflict in the Caucasus.

In Chapters 8, 9 and 10, Russia's military performance is recounted and examined. Although the Soviet Union's military power was always likely to be stronger on paper than in reality, the war, graphically covered by television and in the press, reinforced how far standards in Russia's armed forces had collapsed. The invasion of Grozny is likely to serve as a model for how *not* to attack an occupied city. The Soviet Union did not lack experience in this field. In the Second World War, its armed forces liberated hundreds of towns and cities from Nazi Germany. More recently, the Soviets had staged a highly successful commando operation at the beginning of the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 yet, when columns of slow-moving Russian armour rolled into Chechnya in December 1994, Russian military commanders clearly believed

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the republic would be subdued by nothing more than an overwhelming show of force by conscript troops – the tactics that had been used to crush the anti-Soviet uprising in Czechoslovakia in 1968 known as the ‘Prague Spring’. Instead of a few Molotov-cocktail-throwing students, Russian forces faced marauding gangs of skilled Chechens who picked off infantry carriers and tanks alike with sophisticated equipment, often purchased directly from Russian soldiers. Russian conscript troops who were not burned to death or shot down as they escaped their armoured death traps huddled together in panic and near-starvation in pockets throughout the city. The national humiliation discredited Yeltsin for months, and was accompanied by fears in Russia that the invasion of Chechnya was part of a wider campaign by powerful political, military and political figures around Yeltsin to undermine Russia’s fragile constitution and install the president as dictator.

CHECHEN BACKGROUND: LAND AND PEOPLE

Chechnya is in the northern Caucasus region, now a southern Russian border territory. The southern half of Chechnya lies in the Caucasian mountain range. The region to which the mountains give their name runs roughly 500 miles, east to west, from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea, and, north to south, from the Russian steppe to the Iranian and Turkish borders. In prehistoric days, population shifts brought tribes through the Caucasus on their way to eastern and central Europe. Most moved on, some settled. The mountain valleys that gave protection to the migrating tribes also cut them off from the world outside. As a result, the region is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse in the world, comprising over 40 ethnic groups, 30 languages and both Christian and Muslim (and, until the nineteenth century, Mazdeanist and animist) religions.

In the words of one Caucasus scholar:

The Caucasus was the key to the defense of the Islamic world, a land bridge between two seas, a link between two continents, open to the vast Eurasian steppe on the north, highroad to the Fertile Crescent to the south; it is a region where cultures have crossed and clashed for millennia. But it has also developed its own cohesiveness and regional unity: it is more than a mere geographical concept.²

By examining Greek and Roman myths about the origin of man, some scholars have speculated on whether the Caucasus was the seat of civilization, predating Babylon and Egypt, and that the first Atlantic Ocean was actually

an enlarged version of what is now the Caspian Sea, while the Garden of Eden was situated just south of the northern Caucasian range.³ The Greeks believed that fire and metallurgy were discovered in the Caucasus. Early Arab geographers called the region *jebel al-alsan*, the mountain of languages.⁴

Landlocked Chechnya, which constituted the bulk of Checheno-Ingushetia, was one of an obscure pack of republics within the southern rim of the Russian Federation. In political terms, these autonomous republics were of little importance. They were small, poor and generally ignored. If one compares the Soviet Union to a *matrushka* doll, where each doll contains a smaller doll within, the Russian Federation was within the Soviet Union, and Checheno-Ingushetia was within the Russian Federation. Ingushetia, which spun off from the Checheno-Ingushetian republic to form its own autonomous republic in 1992, lies to the west of Chechnya's current borders.

The northern Caucasian region is the last remaining part of the Russian empire's nineteenth-century imperial acquisitions still within the boundaries of the European landmass of the Russian Federation. The 1989 Soviet census put the population of areas now in Chechnya at 1,084,000 people; this comprised 715,000 Chechens, 269,000 ethnic Russians and 25,000 Ingush. Further reference to the purpose of these ethnic republics will be made in the next section of the book; suffice it to say for now that the existence of these 'republics' was not based on their high ethnic populations. Ethnic Russians made up 67.6 per cent of the population of the non-Russian republics in the region, and remained culturally aloof from indigenous north Caucasians. Rarely, for example, did Russians speak the language of the ethnic group in whose republic they lived.

Apart from Chechnya, the region contained several other mountainous or semi-mountainous 'ethnic' territories. These were Dagestan to the east of Chechnya, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, and Adygeia to the west. In their poverty and instability, a number of these non-Russian republics share a similar history to the Chechens. Most of these territories have seen violent disputes since 1991. North of the 'ethnic' northern Caucasus are three ethnically Russian regions which have historically been included in the northern Caucasus map and which had sizeable Cossack populations – Krasnodar, Stavropol and Rostov. Georgia, which was a full Union republic and therefore on a par with the Russian Federation, lay to the south of Chechnya below the southern Caucasus range. Georgia has been independent (to a degree) since 1991.

Throughout the Russian Federation, the indigenous ethnic groups were in most cases a minority within their ethnic territory. In Tatarstan, for example, by 1989 Russians constituted 43.5 per cent of the population and

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Tatars 48.5 per cent, while the majority of ethnic Tatars lived outside 'their' republic. Only 1.7 per cent of Jews lived in the Jewish Autonomous Region. Out of all 30 autonomous territories within Russia, the homeland's titular ethnic group was in a majority in only eight – the northern Caucasus territories of Dagestan, Checheno-Ingushetia, North Ossetia and Kabardino-Balkaria included.⁵ In most smaller territories, ethnic Russians were in a majority. In only one territory, Dagestan, where ethnic Russians made up 9.2 per cent of inhabitants, did they constitute less than 25 per cent of the population. The average population size of the titular ethnic group in all 30 territories was 37.6 per cent, while the average figure for ethnic Russians in those territories was 45.7 per cent.⁶

The non-Russian republics were united by low levels of industrialization. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, over half the budgets of the north Caucasus republics were dependent on direct subsidy. They also had high rural populations: 43 per cent of the region's population was rural as compared to 26 per cent for the Russian Federation as a whole. The region also endured high birthrates, which meant that, in comparison with other parts of the Soviet Union, it had a relatively dense population, ranging from 27.7 people per square kilometre in Karachaevo-Cherkessia to 76.5 people per square kilometre in North Ossetia, compared with a Russia-wide average of 8.7 people per square kilometre.⁷

Chechnya was one of the most economically backward areas of the Soviet Union. Although the Soviet state did invest in oil and gas production in the republic, almost all jobs in the sector went to ethnic Russians or other Slavs brought into Chechnya. Most ethnic Chechens survived by farming, either in collective farms or subsistence farming on the mountain foothills. Others depended on migratory work. Tens of thousands of Chechens left the republic every summer to work on construction sites in Siberia, Kazakhstan and European Russia. Within the Soviet Union, Chechnya had some of the highest child mortality rates and some of the lowest average wages and investment per head.

Chechnya consists of two distinct geographical parts. To the north, a low and largely unattractive plain extends into Russia's fertile Stavropol region. Up to the 1850s, most of northern Chechnya was heavily forested. It is now largely bare, deforested by Russian imperial armies and collective farming. To the south, a range of foothills rises to the northern range of the Caucasian mountains which stretch into the physically stunning but politically troubled republic of Georgia. The foothills to the mountains begin about 15 miles south of Grozny.

The mountains slowed the spread of modernity. In their aspirations,

Chechens are remarkably conservative – in some senses quasi-medieval. The further into the mountains one goes, the more this is true. Chechen society is patriarchal and clan dominated. At the beginning of the latest war, Chechen society had about 160 clans, known as *teips*, which are today divided into nine major groupings.⁸ Historically, these groupings were known as a *tukhum*. Below the *teips*, groupings of 10–15 households were called either *nek'e* or *gar*.⁹ Chechen society was also lateral – unlike many of their neighbours, such as the Circassians, Chechens did not experience the feudal tradition of master and serf. They also have practically no experience of modern, democratic politics and, like many Russians, have confused ideas of the fundamentals of non-totalitarian politics.

The geographic difference between north and south Chechnya is mirrored in the people. Northerners have tended to be more accommodating to Russia over the years, in part due to a greater physical vulnerability. Southern Chechens have raised rebellions more often and fought longer and more bitterly, aided by the mountains which have made armoured and artillery operations against them extremely difficult. Southern Chechens see themselves as the guardians of Chechen identity and honour. Northern Chechens, exposed to Russian armies from the north and vengeful fellow Chechens from the south, have often faced bloody reprisals from both during periods of warfare.

Chechens and neighbouring Ingushi, who together make up the Vainakh ethnic group, share similar languages.¹⁰ According to nineteenth-century chroniclers of the northern Caucasus, some Ingush believed themselves to be descendants of English crusaders who took local wives and converted to Islam.¹¹ A third Vainakh language is spoken by a few thousand members of the Batsi ethnic group who live in northern Georgia, and practise Eastern Orthodoxy. Vainakh is one of the six arms of the north-east Caucasian language family.

Chechens practise a form of Sunni Islam with Sufi influence. Although years of Soviet repression undermined Islamic spirituality in all but the elderly, Islam is making a strong comeback and is an important cultural factor in Chechnya's new identity. The northern Caucasus was, in pre-Soviet times, an important centre of militant, ascetic Islam. The more nationalistic of Russian strategists have in the past few years emphasized the role of Russians in the region to provide a bulwark against a resurgent Islam.

Historically, the Chechen ideal of manhood is the *dzhigit*, a courageous armed horseman/warrior skilled in weaponry and fighting who places a premium on pride and valour. Although the *dzhigit* per se may have been consigned to history, his influence is a pervasive one. Most women, who have

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had no direct power in Chechen politics but exercise their influence through husbands and family, generally encourage this conservatism. Soviet militarism and armour training at kindergarten were not the only reasons Chechen society idolized weaponry.

Chechen history is melancholic, and built around tales of bravery during various colonial rebellions against Russian rule. Colonization of Chechen lands began in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The battle to control the mountains was fought on and off for more than 30 years. Like many of the bloodiest colonial conflicts of the era, warfare was conducted in a brutal fashion against the Chechen people as a whole. It produced perhaps the greatest guerrilla leader of the nineteenth century, the cleric *Imam* Shamil. Shamil shaped the disparate communities into a partly centralized fighting force which came close to bringing Russia's colonizing effort to a halt before the Chechen leader's capture in the late 1850s. Although the greater part of organized resistance collapsed with Shamil, more than a dozen other rebellions throughout the nineteenth century threatened Russian control of the northern Caucasus and drew Russian military effort and manpower to the region.

This century, Chechen factions fought each other as well as White Russian and Red Russian armies from 1917 to the mid-1920s. Several more rebellions were raised against Bolshevik rule before the outbreak of the Second World War.

In 1944, the Chechens were deported, en masse, to central Asia, a fate which befell several other ethnic groups in the Soviet Union during the Second World War. They were accused, largely falsely, of aiding the Nazi armies which, by 1942, had pushed deep into the Volga basin and the northern Caucasus. In scenes of extreme brutality and suffering, around half of all Chechens died either en route to Asia or in the squalid dust-bowl reservations allotted to them by the Soviet state. This is the defining factor in their history and, to Chechens, carries the same significance as the Holocaust does to Jews. It is also evidence that being part of a Russian state means disaster for them. The high mortality rates and indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas during the last war confirmed this belief.

Chechen hostility to Russia is aimed almost entirely at its political and military institutions. On a local level, Russians – at least Cossack Russians – and Chechens have intermixed for centuries. However for Chechens, the Russian state, and especially its armed forces, is seen as an instrument of evil, the purpose of which, some believe, is the destruction of the Chechens as a people. The result of Chechen history and culture is a highly volatile mix of eagerness to fight and an ability to do so. The remarkably successful guerrilla

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tactics used during the recent Russo-Chechen war bear a striking resemblance to those used during the original colonial invasion.

The tradition of bearing arms, allied to poverty, has been a powerful incentive to banditry and violent criminality. Perhaps the closest parallel to the Chechens in western Europe are the Sicilians. Chechen links with organized crime syndicates are often cited by Russians living in Moscow and St Petersburg as prime reasons for their mistrust.

THE SOVIET LEGACY

While the depths of mutual animosity between the Russian state and the Chechens are rare, if not unique, the Soviet Union's political legacy cast a shadow over the histories of all the peoples of that country and aided the fomentation of ethnic unrest and violence in many of its regions in the late 1980s.

There are several basic points which the reader who is unfamiliar with Soviet politics should grasp to understand the thinking of the Soviet and Chechen leaderships immediately prior to the collapse of the Soviet state. In its wider context, the Chechen war illuminated the intense pressures under which Soviet leaders found themselves during the collapse of the USSR.

Until very recently basic notions about political ideas and the role of the state and law, which Westerners take for granted, were barely understood by the Soviets. Moreover, the notions themselves were also alien to Russian and Soviet political culture. Law, for example, was not understood as independent of the Communist Party, but as part and parcel of the same authoritarian apparatus.

In spite of the Soviet Union's attempts to portray itself as a modern, secular power, it resembled in many respects a theocratic state from the medieval era. Doctrine, however absurd, was paraded as truth, while truth became whatever doctrine decreed. Ideological opposition to socialism was condemned as heresy and eliminated. Apart from a tiny and pampered communist elite in Moscow and St Petersburg, the level of political awareness and understanding throughout the Soviet Union was akin to that of a third-world state.

Although the country's propagandists – internal and foreign – portrayed socialism in the USSR as a great leap forward which had vanquished ethnic rivalries, from the state's inception its leaders remained obsessed with the threat of resurgent nationalism. That fear was a guiding factor in Soviet policy throughout the Soviet state's existence. This had two nuances: it was seen as

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an ideological threat to communism and as a colonial threat to *de facto* Russian domination in a *de facto* Muscovite empire. These fears were ignored by Western commentators, who for decades continued to swallow the Soviet line that national and linguistic identities had been superseded by the new identity of *Homo Sovieticus* (Soviet man).

From its early days, Soviet authority painted all notions of ethnic nationalism, certainly in the Union republics, whether moderate, democratic or authoritarian, as reactionary and even proto-Nazi. Russian identity was largely co-opted into the new Soviet state. The only form of nationalism allowed was Sovietized Russian which, with its coarseness and chauvinism, had more than a passing resemblance to the fascism it battled against.

The central principle of the USSR's nationalities policy was to give the empire's ethnic groups the appearance of autonomy while denying it in practice. Internally, the USSR was divided into a series of ever-decreasing layers of territorial entities. The country's basic building blocks were the 15 union republics. These consisted of the Russian Federation, which was by far the largest republic within the USSR, and 14 smaller republics around it.

Union republics were granted to the major ethnic groups in the Soviet Union: Slavs such as Ukrainians and Belorussians; the Baltic peoples (Lithuanians, Estonians and Latvians); the major Caucasian groups (Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis); and five central Asian peoples (Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Turkmenis, Tajiks and Kirgiz). Below and within the 15 union republics were several dozen autonomous republics – homelands of ethnic groups not deemed large or important enough to warrant the status of union republic. Beneath them were smaller territories – in decreasing order of importance, *krais*, autonomous *oblasts*, *oblasts* and autonomous *okrugs*.

Which ethnic groups got what in the Soviet Union's racial pecking order was heavily dependent on scientific Marxist notions of 'progress'. Ethnic groups were graded in one of four categories of historical development – tribalism, feudalism, capitalism and socialism. For those ethnic groups lucky enough to reach the final two categories of this determinist beauty contest lay a further distinction between 'historic' and 'non-historic' peoples.

Officially, at least, the divisions between ethnic groups should have had little importance as socialism replaced ethnic loyalties with an all-encompassing Russian-speaking, Soviet identity forged in the Bolshevik Revolution. In reality, Soviet socialism repressed communal ethnic identity but did not destroy it. The outbreak of ethnic unrest and an aggressive xenophobia in Chechnya and elsewhere after 1991 took place in part because the state had so long suppressed all forms of non-Russian political nationalism.

Running parallel with this quasi-eugenic notion of development were a

number of unwritten policies to aid Soviet control of the peoples of the USSR. The most significant was the creative drawing of boundaries between administrative areas to overlap territories of rival ethnic groups. Administrative territorial divisions established after 1917 were meant to reflect areas historically inhabited by the Russian empire's ethnic groups before and during their incorporation into that body. In fact, they were one of the most powerful tools for the Soviet Union to practise the most traditional of imperial policies – divide and rule. By deliberately overlapping traditional territories and administrative boundaries, the Soviet government automatically created sources of friction between ethnic groups, some of whom had lived in peace with their neighbours, while others had had a history of bloodthirsty rivalry with each other. The policy was designed to ensure a string of potential 'fifth columns' within internal territories to ferment ethnic disputes and divisions should the need arise. In between times of crisis these make-believe borders were of little relevance, as real power was held by central ministries and agencies such as the KGB. When the state fell apart, they quickly became sources of tension and conflict, especially if ethnic friction was encouraged by the Soviet government. For readers familiar with late Soviet history, the best examples of overlapping ethnic borders leading to conflict are the splintering of the Caucasian republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia and the fracturing of Moldova, the Soviet Union's fringe union republic on the border with north-east Romania.

All 15 union republics had such fifth columns. In Ukraine, for example, the republic's boundaries were drawn so as to bring in a large ethnic Russian population in eastern Ukraine. In the 1950s, the Crimean peninsula, an overwhelmingly ethnic Russian region, was 'given' to Ukraine. In Estonia, the fifth column was a large Russian minority shipped into the republic after the Second World War. Although Chechnya was not a union republic, it was deemed a sensitive territory. Its borders were moved after the Second World War to encompass large numbers of ethnic Russians who had formerly lived in Russian *oblasts* north of the original Checheno-Ingush republic.

Throughout its history, the Communist Party used a number of other mechanisms to ensure the loyalty of the Soviet Union's ethnic groups. Some were comical, others genocidal. Among these were:

- the inclusion in the history of each major ethnic group of a Soviet revolutionary 'hero' to prove that socialist liberation had been a correctly multi-ethnic affair;
- the forced use of the Russian language and the Cyrillic script;

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- artificially engineered famines aimed at depopulating areas of land inhabited by ‘national’ peasantries, such as Ukrainians, or other groups whose loyalties were suspect, such as the Cossacks;¹²
- torture and murder;
- mass deportations, in the 1930s and 1940s, used both to exile suspect ethnic groups and to create ‘vacancies’ for ethnic Russians to be shipped in.

Different ethnic groups were consigned, *de facto* if not *de jure*, positions within the Soviet Union. Within that hierarchy, Russians were the elder brothers. Of the other ethnic Slavs, Ukrainians were loyal sidekicks.¹³ Belorussians, a people almost devoid of any specifically Belorussian, as opposed to Slavic, identity, were also in the favoured ethnic fold. After them came people with whom the Russians had an ambiguous relationship – Christian Caucasian peoples such as Georgians and Armenians. Jews also fitted into this category. These three groups were well represented in the St Petersburg and Moscow intelligentsias, playing an active part in many, if not all, parts of Soviet life (there were few Jews in the foreign service, for example). They were also in part mistrusted. Not only did all three possess cultures older than Russia’s, they also enjoyed a tradition of trade, and therefore freedom, lacking in the culture of both the Russian empire and the Soviet Union.

One rung below the Christians of the Caucasus were the Azerbaijanis, seen as the most ‘civilized’ of the Muslims. Below the Azerbaijanis were the Muslims of central Asia and the northern Caucasus. The derogatory term *chorni* (black) was largely used to describe Muslims.¹⁴ At the bottom of the Islamic pile were the Chechens, who had a reputation as troublemakers unequalled by any other people in the USSR. In the unspoken terms of ethnic division, Chechens were the lowest of the low. They were *sobaki* (dogs) and spoke *sobachni yazik* (dog language). It is probably true to say that for the Russian state, Chechnya is a hated obsession, a focus of the deepest wells of ethnic and religious contempt and fear. A strain in Russian thought, voiced by people ranging from tsars to soldiers, has called for the destruction of the entire Chechen nation.

Soviet – and ethnic Russian – sensitivity to ethnic identity would depend on where one was in the Soviet Union, and with whom. For example, a Ukrainian would be seen by the state as being ‘reliable’ in Grozny or central Asia because he would identify with his fellow white-skinned Slavs against darker-skinned Muslims. In western Ukraine, a nationalistic, Catholic area of the Soviet Union near the border with Poland and Hungary, the same

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Ukrainian could be seen as a potentially hostile 'ethnic' himself. A Chechen was thought to be unreliable everywhere.

In spite of multiple daily diets of aggressive and intrusive propaganda, the Soviets failed to destroy ethnic-based nationalism as a means of identity and expression. After the Second World War, with its shattering effect on both the Soviet state and the many ethnic groups which had been crushed by the weight of Soviet repression in the 1930s and the Nazi invasion in the 1940s, national revival was a dead letter until the 1980s. It had not gone away but had gone underground, and no sooner did Gorbachev announce his policies of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) than claims and counter-claims of injustice surfaced.

SOVIET/RUSSIAN FEDERATION POLITICS

The 1994–96 Chechen war owed as much to the interplay of political forces and personalities in Moscow as it did to events within Chechnya; indeed, the situation inside Chechnya at key points between 1989 and 1997 was dictated by events in the Russian capital. Politically, the war was in part the outcome of a series of clashes between Soviet and Russian Federation leaders. In particular, it was made possible by key rivalries between 1985 and 1994 which resulted in a decade-long bout of musical chairs between centripetal (contracting) and centrifugal (expanding) – forces in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation.

Conflicts on the periphery of Moscow's territories have historically been under-reported by journalists and writers. They have occurred in far-away places about which little was known, and where communications were weak, and they involved troublesome planning with Soviet authorities. Yet, these conflicts were often influential in deciding the outcome of political battles within Moscow. Owing to the lack of democratic politics, political rivalries in the Soviet Union were not played out, as they would have been in Western states, through competing political policies, but instead through the manipulation of ethnic rivalries. When Lenin seized power in 1917, for example, he tried to consolidate support for the Bolsheviks by holding out the promise of wide political and cultural autonomy to Ukrainians and other national groups which lived within the former Russian empire, but outside the empire's ethnic Russian heartland.

When Lavrenti Beria,¹⁵ Stalin's secret police chief, challenged for power after his master's death in 1953, he tried to strengthen his position against the Communist Party by offering the leaders of the Soviet republics greater freedom. Likewise, when Gorbachev encountered opposition, he turned to

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the non-Russian ethnic groups in the USSR's union republics to bolster his reform process.

Beria was executed shortly after Stalin's death, and so never had the chance to put his centrifugal policies into action but, in the cases of Lenin and Gorbachev, the centrifugal policies were speedily followed by centralizing policies designed to undermine the very powers promised to the peripheries. Pre-Gorbachev, Soviet leaders following liberalizing policies generally used them not as a basis for long-term government, but as short-term policies designed to outmanoeuvre centrist rivals within Moscow. They often failed. Khrushchev, a modernizer in the Gorbachev mould, was forced out after a period of liberalization, and was replaced by a centrist and conservative leadership.

From *perestroika* onwards, the chronology of centrist-versus-periphery forces is roughly as follows. In the mid-1980s, Gorbachev wanted economic and political reform to keep the Soviet Union as a viable superpower. His actions provoked reaction. The Soviet leader was opposed by powerful elements within the central government, the Communist Party and the military, who feared that, broadly speaking, Gorbachev's reforms would progress too far and too fast, and challenge the integrity of the state. Their combined power threatened to halt his reforms.

As other Soviet leaders had done before him, Gorbachev turned to the peripheral 'ethnic' republics of the USSR for support. He championed limited democratic elections in the union republics. He hoped that moderate nationalists and moderate communists would support his democratizing reforms and mollify the extreme fringes of non-Russian nationalism. Conservatives within the Communist Party, KGB and military answered by fanning ethnic unrest in a number of republics: Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as in Central Asia.

By 1990, Gorbachev's policies were clearly failing. Centrist opposition remained strong while ethnic unrest, inflation and a sense of economic failure had discredited Gorbachev internally – although he remained as popular as ever abroad. The democrats who, Gorbachev believed, would support him increasingly demanded concessions from central government. Fearful of losing credibility in Moscow, while gaining nothing from his peripheral allies, Gorbachev traded support from the ethnic middle classes who controlled the nationalist and moderate political forces outside Russia to buy support from more conservative, centrist forces within Moscow. His actions were proof that in the Soviet Union, politics was a zero-sum game between the centre and the peripheries: when one lost, the other won.

Boris Yeltsin, newly resurrected on the national political scene as chairman

of the Russian Federation Supreme Soviet, championed the cause of the republican supreme soviets – both his own and others – against both union traditionalists and Gorbachev's failed, moderate centre. This was Yeltsin in his liberalizing mode. However, even then one should note that support for the non-Russian republican soviets was not a sign that either Yeltsin or the Russian 'democrats' necessarily affirmed the union republics' right to independence. To limit Yeltsin's growing power, Gorbachev raised the spectre of Russian nationalism trampling over the rights of autonomous regions within Russia. Ironically, the leaderships of these regions were among the most authoritarian and corrupt in the country.

After the 1991 coup, Yeltsin ousted Gorbachev and found himself the inheritor of his position as a moderate centrist. After the initial shock of the USSR's collapse, disgruntled conservatives, including members of the Russian parliament as well as KGB and military representatives and fringe Soviet activists from the now independent union republics, united to fight Yeltsin, under the banner of saving the Russian state. They became known as *derzhavniki* (strong staters). They were led by Ruslan Khasbulatov, an initial ally turned enemy of Yeltsin who became the speaker of the Russian parliament after Yeltsin became president.

Further ethnic conflicts on Russia's periphery followed, notably in the small north Caucasus region of North Ossetia, Moldova on the edge of the Balkans, and in the southern Caucasus republic of Georgia. The battle between Yeltsin's moderate centre and Soviet loyalists, which simmered for two years, came to a head with a stand-off around the Russian parliament building in October 1993. Yeltsin saw himself threatened by a conservative rebellion as Gorbachev had been. He called in the army and, in scenes broadcast around the world, crushed Khasbulatov and his supporters.

Yeltsin understood that to be a weak centrist, *à la* Khrushchev and Gorbachev, was to be caught, as Gorbachev had been, between peripheral political forces spinning away from the centre and centrist forces seeking to bind territories together. Yeltsin succeeded where Gorbachev and Khrushchev had failed because he realized that holding a weak centrist position was fatal, and, unlike his predecessors, he was willing and able to use force against his rivals before he lost the ability to do so. Second, the violence in the former union republics, while it damaged Yeltsin, did not discredit him in the same way it did Gorbachev because the territories were now legally independent of Russia. Unlike his two predecessors, Yeltsin also inhabited a post-1991 world in which he did not have to operate with a single-party structure and was able to make and break alliances as needs be. He was not bound, as Khrushchev and Gorbachev had been, to the Communist Party.

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Thus, the basic pattern in the late 1980s – early 1990s in Russia was a swing between Soviet centrists, who were generally authoritarian, and peripheral nationalists, who were generally reformist. When a moderate centre did exist, it did not last.

The change of state from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation and the final breakdown of the single-party system meant that political policy and fundamental political belief became an object of competition and debate between rival political forces. However, it did not *immediately* alter the way in which Moscow politicians dealt with ethnic nationalism and rivalries for three reasons.

First, the forces fighting Yeltsin were very much products of the Soviet-era mentality and followed patterns of behaviour which they knew and understood. Second, former Soviet republics and current Russian Federation territories could still be used to ferment unrest. In spite of their independence, union republics contained Russian troops and ethnic Russian inhabitants. In internal republics within the Russian Federation, ethnic tension could be used in exactly the same way as the union republics were used against Gorbachev. The best example of this was the 1992 violence in north Ossetia. Third, in Chechnya in 1991, Yeltsin also played by the old Soviet rules of ethnic destabilization, supporting ethnic allies against the centre on the basis of ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’. This was the mentality which explained Yeltsin’s and Khasbulatov’s attack on Chechnya’s 1991 pro-Soviet regime, and their support of Dudayev and his Chechen nationalist allies.

In the spring and summer of 1991 the Chechens had been useful tools to unseat incumbent communist leaderships and weaken Gorbachev. Chechens had overwhelmingly supported Yeltsin, believing that he would become a ‘good tsar’ and give autonomous regions wide-ranging freedom over their own affairs. Chechens wanting independence, as well as those who wanted to live within a Russian state without the historical baggage of the deportations and horrors of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, could all support Yeltsin.

Yeltsin realized his mistake in the winter of 1991 when it became clear that Dudayev and his supporters were politically unstable and violent, were refusing to play a role within the Russian Federation, and had the same aspirations for independence as nationalists in Union republics.

NOTES

- 1 Not all declared then and there. The Soviet republic of Georgia, for example, had declared independence earlier, in 1991.
- 2 Paul. B. Henze, ‘Fire and Sword in the Caucasus: The 19th Century Resistance of the North Caucasus Mountaineers’, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (July 1983), p. 6.

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- 3 Reginald Aubrey Fessenden, *The Deluged Civilisation of the Caucasus Isthmus*, T. J. Russell, Boston, 1923, p. 31.
- 4 Henze, 'Fire and Sword in the Caucasus', p. 6.
- 5 Leonid Smirnyagin, member of the Presidential Council with responsibilities for nationalities issues, *Sevodnaya*, 22 June 1993, 'On the Right of Nations to Privileged Statehood', *SPD*, Vol. xlv, No. 25, 1993, p. 5.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Fiona Hill, *Facts from Russia's Tinderbox: Conflict in the North Caucasus and its Implications for the Future of the Russian Federation*, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 1995.
- 8 Jabriel Gakayev, Chechen professor, interview with author, May 1996.
- 9 Valeri Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union*, Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, New Dehli, 1997.
- 10 There is a third language of the Vainakh, Bats, which is spoken by some 3,000 people of the Batsbi (Batsaw) ethnic group, who live in Georgia and are Eastern Orthodox by religion. Bats is a spoken language only, and the Batsbi use Georgian as their written language. See Bernard Geiger, Tibor Halasi-Kun, Aert H. Kuipers, Karl Menges, *The Peoples and Languages of the Caucasus: A Synopsis*, Columbia University, New York, 1959, p. 20.
- 11 Stephen Graham, *A Vagabond in the Caucasus*, Bodley Head, 1911.
- 12 Politicians, historians and Cossacks themselves are divided as to whether Cossacks are a separate ethnic group. In recent years, Cossacks have generally blown both ways, being thoroughly Russian when faced by the threat of ethnic unrest in the Caucasus, and not very Russian when negotiating tax revenues to Moscow and central government powers in Cossack regions.
- 13 That is why Ukraine's vote of independence so shocked Gorbachev and made the break-up of the Soviet Union inevitable.
- 14 The expression was also used to describe some swarthier Caucasian Christian groups.
- 15 Lavrenti Pavlovich Beria, 1899-1953.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

Arguably, the colonization of the Caucasus was the defining event for the Russian empire in the nineteenth century. Although military rivalry with Britain lasted the best part of 70 years, interrupted by one, brief 'hot' war in the Crimean peninsula mid-century, Russia's military advance towards Asia and the battle to suppress northern Caucasian resistance to its rule was the longest military operation which either the Russian empire or the Soviet Union has yet experienced. From the 1780s to 1865, it absorbed a continual stream of Russian recruits. Even after the defeat of the Chechens and other mountain peoples, a considerable proportion of Russia's late nineteenth-century defence budget was allocated to provide a large reserve force in the northern Caucasus to cope with continual revolts against tsarist rule. In contrast, for the past two centuries, Chechnya's history – and the history of large tracts of the Caucasus – has been defined largely by the battle against Russian and Soviet attempts to subdue it.

For generations of writers and thinkers whose work constitutes the central canon of Russian literature, the Caucasus provided a unique source of experience. Pushkin, Lermontov, Tolstoy and others were moved by the physical beauty of the mountains, while its anarchic or feudal peoples were the inspiration for characters and allegories in both novels and polemics. When the glory of romantic warfare and adventure had given way to the tawdry reality of a failed colonial conquest which depended on unending brutality, some of the same writers used the Caucasus to lament the loss of innocence, both for the mountain people and Russia. For pan-Slavists – writers and philosophers who idolized, rather than despaired of, Russia's backwardness – the battle for the Caucasus became a symbol of Russia's mystical will. The mountain people were 'filth'¹ to be exterminated; the continual blood sacrifice against them was proof of the unyielding determination of Russia to crush its foes, real or imaginary. The Russian saying '*Bei svoikh shtob chuzhie boyalis*' ('Beat your own people so others will fear you') appeared to be the moral.

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Russia's imperial destiny in the Caucasus never matched either the potential or the achievements of Britain's Indian empire, although in some senses it was the model. The Caucasus in the end proved to be a southern boundary for the Russian – and later Soviet – empires, rather than a springboard for the invasion of Persia and India as some nineteenth-century Russian strategists hoped, and some Britons feared. Oil reserves tapped towards the end of the last century, and gas reserves exploited this century, provided some profit for Russia.

However, the overwhelming impression of Russia's colonial adventure in the northern Caucasus is one of failure. The state failed to conquer quickly, failed to subdue rebellion and failed to inculcate respect for its colonial elite. Indeed, the brutality of the tactics used by Russia rendered rebellion inevitable.

The influence of the Caucasian wars is not only historical. Many of the most repellent strategies pursued by the Soviet state had their echoes in the original Russian imperial policies in the Caucasus mountains. What is now called ethnic cleansing became in the middle of the last century an instrument of state policy, an act of desperation on the part of Russia at its failure to dominate the relatively small number of rebellious clans. After the final military defeat of both eastern and western Caucasian mountain people by the 1860s, upwards of 600,000 Muslims emigrated from their homelands rather than submit to Russian rule. The majority were Circassians from the western Caucasus, although thousands of Chechens, Ingush and Muslim Georgians also left. They emigrated to Turkey, where their offspring account for some 3.5 million of the current population, and help explain the strong pro-Chechen and anti-Russian support voiced by ordinary Turks during 1994 and 1995. The exile of Caucasian ethnic groups was repeated on a wider scale in 1944 when the USSR's communist leadership ordered a second, forced deportation of the entire Chechen and Ingush populations to Central Asia.

Military mistakes made in previous centuries were also repeated by Russian rulers for large parts of the twentieth century. For the best part of 200 years, the Russian state has tried to use battlefield tactics relying on the use of overwhelming force to provide quick, decisive strategic victories to dissipate the Islamic guerrilla forces. The tactic failed for several decades in the nineteenth century and failed again between 1918 and 1924. Russian control was gained only by the willingness of the Russian authorities to take the mountains at whatever cost in lives either to their own armed forces, or to the mountain people and their families. In some instances, the ambush and slaughter of poorly commanded Russian troops took place in the same

mountain valleys in every period of conflict.² In every case, quick victory proved an illusion and the legacy of bitterness was passed on from one generation of mountain people to the next.

The same military tactic was tried in 1994–96. It failed because by the mid-1990s Russia's leaders no longer had the political determination to sustain unlimited casualties in a war in which the country had been publicly humiliated abroad and discredited at home. Most Western observers describe this as a major setback. A military defeat for Russia it may have been, but it was also a victory for those in Russia who believe the country's destiny lies in developing viable political traditions rather than relying on military might. The Chechen war, and the Afghan war in the previous decade, were proof to those politicians and generals who wanted to listen that Russia could no longer inhabit the same world as it had during the nineteenth or twentieth centuries.

Sadly, as events in 1999 have shown, some of Russia's military and political leaders have been reluctant to learn that lesson. There are reasons for Russia to use force against a smallish number of Chechen militants who have attacked Russian targets from inside Chechnya. But to use that as an excuse for the wholesale re-invasion of Chechnya has been to invite the same bloody and failed outcome as that of the original war.

In haphazard fashion, Russia, in its nineteenth-century wars of conquest, did attempt to find local allies among mountain groups. The resulting policy of divide and rule embittered relations between ethnic groups within the Caucasus. Some alliances, such as that between Russia and the Ossetes in the northern Caucasus or between Russia and the Armenians in the southern Caucasus, continue to discolour relations within the Caucasus to this day. On a taxi ride into the outskirts of Grozny in 1991, an Ossete driver refused to take the author through a night-time Chechen checkpoint: he made it clear his ethnic background would put him in danger.

Russia's Caucasian expansion produced two of the world's earliest Islamic fundamentalists. The mountain people's great nineteenth-century guerrilla leader, *Imam* Shamil, and his eighteenth-century earliest predecessor, Sheik Mansur, who led a revolt against Russian armies, were proponents of using the Koran both as an ideological weapon to underpin opposition to expansionist Christian empires, and as a means of purifying, unifying and strengthening Islamic societies. If Soviet military planners had made more of an attempt to understand Afghan society before the 1979 invasion, they would perhaps have paused to consider that two of the Sufi Islamic brotherhoods, which provided the spiritual/ideological core of the mountain people's opposition to Russia's nineteenth- and twentieth-century empires, were both active and influential within twentieth-century Afghanistan.³

Russo-Chechen Conflict

The Caucasus has also, in part, proved a barometer of Russian society, whether through Tolstoy's damning of tsarism in the short story *Hadji Murat*, or through, for example, the treatment of Shamil by Soviet propaganda. From the Bolshevik Revolution to 1940, when the Soviet Union was a utopian revolutionary state which murdered in the name of dialectic materialism, Shamil was portrayed as a radical anti-imperialist hero. After the war, when the Soviet Union metamorphosed into a crude national socialist state – indeed, in some sense, a crudely fascistic, Russianized, empire, glorifying militarism and displaying a virulent hatred of opponents of either itself or its imperial predecessor – Shamil was officially portrayed as an atavistic Muslim whose treachery was an affront to the great Russian people. Soviet scholars have talked about the ideological change from Marxism to nationalism after 1990, yet in practice the Soviet Union had already ceased to be a utopian socialist state by 1945 – although admittedly it kept for export purposes its traditional Marxist liberational creed.

RUSSIAN EXPANSION INTO THE CAUCASUS

Russia pushed into the Caucasus like a diaphragm, contracting and expanding from its Slavic heartland from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Victories achieved under one tsar would be abandoned by successors for fear of over-extension, only to be reclaimed by later generations. But from the seventeenth century onwards, and in particular in the century from 1720 to 1820, the Russian empire pushed itself and its people into the Caucasus, and rolled back its two southern Islamic neighbours, the Ottoman and Persian empires.

Russia used three methods of colonization: settlement, acquisition and seizure. Russian Cossack migrants had been emigrating to the northern plains of the Caucasus from the sixteenth century onwards. Their intention was not to bring the Russian empire into the northern Caucasus, but the very opposite – to escape tsarist rule. Among them were runaway serfs, criminals, officers or soldiers from abortive rebellions, and Ukrainian Cossacks (the Zaparozhian host) driven from their homelands.⁴ These Cossacks established settlements (*stanitsas*) outside Russian control along the Muscovite state's southern frontier. Their *stanitsas* ranged over several thousand miles – in the west from the borders of the Danube in Moldova to Siberia and the Far East. As the Russian state expanded, the Cossacks were induced to change their role and, from being tsarist renegades, they became empire frontiersmen.

The Russian state's expansion into the Caucasus has generally been dated from the 1720s, although the expansion of Muscovy into the region was part of a wider rolling back of the Muslim world. In the thirteenth century Muscovy itself had been incorporated into the Islamic world as a part of a khanate called the Golden Horde, established by a grandson of Genghis Khan. Russians know the period as the 'Tatar yoke', and, in spite of its antiquity, it continues, as does the more recent Ottoman control of the Balkans, to provide an excuse for anti-Muslim prejudice among Russians. The Golden Horde split into three khanates – Kazan, Astrakhan and the Crimea. The last of these, the Crimea, fell in 1783, as Russia was pushing into the Caucasus.

Peter the Great's 1722 campaign pushed Russian armies into Dagestan along the western seaboard of the Caspian. Peter seized the Caspian littoral towns of Baku and Derbent, and settled Cossacks along the Terek River, which ran inland across the Caucasus from the Caspian. After Peter's death, Empress Anne largely abandoned dreams of territorial conquest. Catherine the Great renewed them and established a forward military position at Mozdok, which grew into a key military base for later Russian conquests, and the headquarters for the 1994 military intervention in Chechnya. Throughout the 1770s, Russia established a series of forts, the Caucasian Line, across the plains north of the mountains.

However, the Caucasus mountain range remained a barrier rather than a forward post to expansion into Asia until the 1801 acquisition of Georgia, when Russian power finally breached the northern Caucasian range and flowed south.

Georgia was a semi-tropical Orthodox Christian state which straddled the greater width of the Caucasus between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. Muscovy had been doing business with Georgia since the sixteenth century and by 1800 the two countries had exchanged 17 diplomatic missions.⁵ Georgia's great days as a nation, remembered by its inhabitants to this day, were in the twelfth century, although the country was to struggle on for several centuries of genteel poverty before the rump Georgian state, consisting of its heartland territory, Kartlo-Kakheti, finally collapsed at the end of the eighteenth century, unable to defend itself from the incursions of both Ottomans and Persians.

But again, Russia's absorption of Georgia took time. Georgia first requested troops to defend itself against Muslim neighbours in the late sixteenth century. Troops were sent to Georgia during the 1768–74 war against the Ottomans, and again in 1783, when Pavel Potemkin marched a force of two battalions and four guns to Tiflis,⁶ Georgia's capital.⁷ On the way, Potemkin established Vladikavkaz,⁸ a town that became a key Russian fort, as well as