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Chechnya: the Causes of a Protracted Post-Soviet Conflict

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ABSTRACT

The conflict in Chechnya is one of the most protracted of all the post-Soviet conflicts and is the only violent secessionist conflict to have occurred within the Russia Federation. The article evaluates the main explanations for the conflict and challenges historicist and 'ethnic' war accounts. It presents an alternative analysis which focuses on the interrelationship and combined effect of history, contingency, the instrumentalization of conflict by political leaderships, intra-Chechen cleavages, political economy, sectional interests and international factors. The article views the 1994-6 and 1991-present wars as part of a continuum, and discusses how the dynamics of the conflict have changed over time, as new radicalising elements such as Islamic fundamentalism and Russian nationalism under Putin have become more salient.

The cascade of turbulence that followed the end of the Soviet empire in the late 1980s, included violent ethnic and regional conflicts and other significant potential conflicts that have not erupted into violence.¹ The costs, both human and economic, are incalculable. Many of the conflicts remain in a 'frozen' state of 'no peace no war', while many of the potential conflicts are in an uneasy equilibria, managed by institutional accommodations, such as in Crimea, elite cooption, as in Kazakhstan, or disenfranchisement and exclusivist policies, as in Estonia and Latvia. Russia is now home to one-fifth of all refugees in the world.²

The destructive level and sustained nature of the conflict in Chechnya make it the most protracted and violent of all the post-Soviet conflicts. The conflict in Chechnya, like some other post-Soviet conflicts, involves secession and territorialized ethnicity. The importance of the conflict, however, lies more in the fact that it is the only violent conflict to have occurred within the Russia Federation. Chechnya is the only case where Russia has persistently deployed its military power to resist decolonization, and it is the only case where secessionists challenged the sovereignty of the Russian Federation by the use of military force. Moreover, for much of the duration of the conflict Russia was politically unsuccessful in subduing Chechen secessionism and suffered a humiliating military defeat in 1996.

Consequently, the conflict has been immensely significant for the development of Russia's own post-Soviet state-building project.

How can we explain the destructive intensity and protracted nature of the conflict in Chechnya? The object of this article is not to provide a detailed narrative of the conflict itself, or of its damaging effects on Russian and devastation of Chechen society. The relentlessly brutalising aspects of the military conflict have been described and documented well by others.³ The article evaluates the main explanatory frameworks applied to Chechnya, and challenges the emphasis placed by most of the existing studies of the conflict on its historical roots and 'ethnic' nature.

My analysis is concerned with a broader perspective on the causes of the conflict, for only by understanding causation will it be possible to assess whether a solution is possible, and what form this might take. Consequently, my argument is critical of the overly historicist bent of much of the writing on Chechnya. In contrast, while giving due recognition to the historical elements of the conflict, I stress the combination of contingent factors, and the respective roles of political agency, political economy and sectional interests in the dynamics of Russo-Chechen relations in the early 1990s.

The discussion begins with an examination of how the conflict reflects the process of end of empire in the post-Soviet space generally, as Chechnya should be properly understood as one conflict among many that have followed the end of the Soviet empire. It then proceeds to an evaluation of the most widely favoured explanations of the causes of the Russo-Chechen conflict. The causes of both the 1994-6 conflict and the resumption of war in late 1999 are analysed here as being part of a continuum of interrelated factors.

The conclusion examines the elusive question of whether any single causative factor can explain the conflict, or even predominate in any explanation, and argues that the causes of the conflict in Chechnya cannot be found at any one level of politics (local, domestic, or international), or in any single issue, or in the actions of a particular leader, or in any single historical incident or time frame. The set of causative factors is made even more complex by the ongoing dynamics of the conflict over time, which sees new radicalising elements emerge and increase in salience, while others become less relevant.

END OF EMPIRE AND THE CHECHEN CONFLICT

Theories of the end of empire generally fall into two main categories: the 'metropolitan', and the 'peripheral'.⁴ Metropolitan theories search for the causes of imperial collapse by focussing on the domestic politics of the

imperial core, and the implications for its international role. A realist explanation emphasises how significant changes in the power and orientation of the imperial core, for example, by defeat in war, economic decline, loss of ideological motivation or redefinition of strategic interests, accelerate the disengagement from the 'burden' of empire.

A liberal perspective on this theory emphasises the role of decolonization as an extension of the *mission civilisatrice*, though transformed into a democracy promotion exercise by imperial elites. The peripheral theory, as its name suggests, attaches great weight to the subversive effect of political mobilization in the colonies themselves. Most usually, it is an anti-colonial nationalist struggle that undermines the political will and military capacity of the imperial power to retain its grip on empire. Both these theories recognise that the management of empire is a delicate balance between forms of control (from sustained military rule to milder forms of temporary repression) and methods of cooption, patronage and clientelism.

These theories provide a useful starting point for understanding Russia's end of empire and the background to the conflict in Chechnya. Among the key factors in Russia's imperial retreat up to 1991 were the liberalizing and erratic impulses of Gorbachev, which drove the disengagement from Eastern Europe, and the changed economic calculus of the Yeltsinites, which self-interestedly favoured a Russia-first reform programme over the economic interdependencies that had been built up within the Soviet Union. The Russian dismantling of empire stopped, however, at the boundaries of the Russian Federation. There was nothing intrinsically definitive about this boundary, since it was as much of an administrative artifice as the borders of the other Soviet union republics. Yet, in the decade after signing the formal end of the Soviet empire in the Belovezha Accord of December 1991, the Yeltsin presidency led Russia into two costly wars to prevent the secession of the small Caucasian Republic of Chechnya (known to Chechens as Ichkeria).

History demonstrates that there is often as much violence in the exit from empire as there is in empire-building. One of the great myths about the end of empire, fostered by the British in particular, is that it involved generally peaceful transfers of power. The reality is that the great European empires that disintegrated during the twentieth century ended with bloodshed wherever there was a significant strategic or economic interest.⁵ Moreover, several of these end of empire conflicts dramatically transformed the domestic politics of the imperial power, De Gaulle's coup d'état over Algeria and the Portuguese revolution of 1974 being among the most important cases. Others have steadily effected regime change, as in the

erosion of constitutional liberties in Britain in response to the conflict in Northern Ireland, with which the conflict in Chechnya is often compared by Russian politicians and media commentators.

The conflict in Chechnya could be understood as a shift from imperial disengagement to the rediscovery of imperial nerve in Russia, first under Yeltsin, and then Putin. It is important to note at the outset, however, that Russia's involvement in military conflict in Chechnya is not unique in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) since 1991. Russia became directly militarily involved in several of the post-Soviet conflicts, irrespective of their geographical proximity or distance. Those in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, for example, are adjacent to Russia's Caucasian borders, but those in Tajikistan, Transdnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh, lie well beyond Russia's post-Soviet borders, though within its own self-declared zone of strategic interest. There are several explanations for this continuing involvement.

First, the nature of the Soviet collapse differed from that of preceding empires by its speed, taking little more than two years in 1990-1. This rapid disintegration allowed virtually no time for an adjustment to post-imperial conditions on the part of Russia's elites or society, or indeed among the colonized peoples. Moreover, many Russians saw themselves as the greatest victim of the Soviet empire and an integral part of the process of deolonization. The suddenness of disengagement left little time for Russia's elites to plan for the management of conflict potential or become comfortable with a reorientation to a post-imperial role.

Strategic thinking on how to manage the end of empire was, in any event, far from the priorities of the economic liberals (or their foreign advisers) who Yeltsin gathered into his first government in late 1991. Much as they applied 'shock therapy' to the Soviet economic legacy in 1991-2, they operated a 'quit and run' strategy toward the governments of the former Soviet republics.⁶ A dominant section of the metropolitan elite, under Yeltsin's leadership, largely initiated and forced the process whereby the empire was dismantled. The speed of the Soviet collapse made it difficult to control, and led to chaos in many former colonies, including Russia itself.

Second, one of the distinctive features of Russia's contiguous land empire, as opposed to the European maritime empires, was that its imperial expansion across the Eurasian plain from the middle of the sixteenth century created a much greater fusion between metropolis and periphery, and a blurring of identities and territory.⁷ Territorial proximity and cultural familiarity made for a much more complex and destabilizing disengagement. Security and strategic interests created a logic for continued Russian *droit de regard*, interference and, when its national interests were perceived to be

stake, direct intervention in the affairs of successor states in the 'near abroad'. Russia may have renounced its Soviet global role, but it aspired to a hegemonic role over the successor states. Russian involvement in some areas was logistically straightforward because some structural elements of empire remained – critically the presence of Russian military bases in Transdnistria, Georgia and Abkhazia, Armenia, the Baltic states, Crimea, and Tajikistan. The gradual assertion of Russian hegemony over its 'near abroad', in its own form of 'Munrovsii' doctrine, was eventually embodied in the new Russian Foreign Policy Concept of April 1993.⁸

Third, the sheer scale of the disintegration, the Soviet Union being one of history's greatest land empires, contributed to the surge of demonstration and contagion effects among the new states, from which the colonial territories of the Russian Federation were not immune. Chechnya's location on Russia's new international frontier enhanced its capacity to effect secession, particularly given that its immediate neighbour to the south, Georgia, was friendly to its aspirations and hostile to Russian hegemony.

Fourth, the Soviet Union collapsed on to its own ethno-federal structure. The policy of 'institutionalized multinationality' created nation-states in embryo, for although most of them had no historical provenance as independent entities, they became the default political-administrative template for the post-Soviet space. Although the ethno-federal structure of the Russian Federation mirrored that of the Soviet Union, only the latter's largest administrative unit, the union republics, became the internationally recognised fracture point for the construction of new states.

Fifth, international norms of recognition for end of empire scenarios are determined by the principle of *uti possidetis jure*, which favours the existing administrative boundaries constructed by the colonizers. This norm has contributed to a problem of frozen conflicts, with many post-Soviet secessionist entities, such as Chechnya, existing temporarily or permanently as *de facto* independent territories, while *de jure* remaining unrecognized by the international system.

The conflict in Chechnya has been the most destructive by most measures, whether military and civilian casualties, physical destruction of Chechnya, and number of refugees.⁹ From late 1991 to the start of the second war in September 1999, the population of Chechnya declined from around one million to around 300,000. A large part of the Russian population left in 1991-2, and much of what remained was killed by the reckless Russian bombing and shelling of Grozny during the war. The modern infrastructure of Chechnya has been almost completely destroyed by the conflict. Several hundreds of thousands of Chechens are currently refugees in the relative safety of neighbouring Ingushetia. Some idea of the

human catastrophe may be gleaned from the following comment by one of Russia's leading Democratic politicians and outspoken critic of the war, Boris Nemtsov:

[M]ore than 3,100 soldiers have been killed in the second Chechen war alone. I don't know the exact figure because it changes every day. Nine thousand lads among the army men and the Interior Ministry representatives alone were crippled. There are 400,000 wretched refugees who are living in appalling conditions not only in Ingushetia, where their camps stretch as far as the eye can see, but I also saw all that in Stavropol Territory and Kuban region. Besides, tens of thousands of civilians were killed - no-one knows exactly how many...'¹⁰

STANDARD ACCOUNTS OF THE CONFLICT

Institutionalized Ethnicity and Secession


The Russian Federation exhibits many of the characteristics that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union: immense size, administrative and ethnic complexity, and a built-in territorialization of ethnicity in the federal structure. Communist type federations are generally seen as conducive to state collapse during political and economic transition because of the inherent incompatibility between democratization and the institutionalized territorialization of ethnicity, what Brubaker terms 'institutionalized multinationality'. The ethnofederal design of these states, it is argued, has a 'subversive' corroding effect on state power that is magnified by regime transition.¹¹

The refashioning of the Russian Federation from early 1992 was founded on an inherited administrative-territorial framework of 'institutionalized multinationality' that remained unchanged, with one exception, the partition of the Checheno-Ingush republic in July 1992 by mutual agreement.¹² Contrary to the theory, this ethnified institutional framework has not been destabilising. At the beginning of 1992 of the eighty-eight constituent units in the Russian Federation, twenty were nominally ethnic 'sovereign republics', and sixty-eight were overwhelmingly ethnic Russian populated regions. Chechnya was the only case where the assertion of separatism lead to violent conflict. How can we explain Chechnya's exceptionalism?

The exceptionalism of the conflict in Chechnya must be explained in the first instance by reference to the structural and political constraints on ethnic nationalism elsewhere in the Russian Federation.¹³ The most important constraints were demographic and geographic. Russia is a state of great

ethnic diversity, with more than one hundred ethno-linguistic groups, but it also has a demography characterised by a high level and spread of ethnic Russian homogeneity and shaped by a long history of settler colonialism, ethnic assimilation and Russification. At the time of the 1989 Soviet census those identifying themselves as ethnic Russians were an overwhelming majority (81.5%) of the 147 million population of the RSFSR.¹⁴ Only four republics (North Ossetia, Tuva, Chechnya, Chuvashia) had an absolute majority of the titular ethnic group. In another three republics (Tatarstan, Kabardin-Balkar, Kalmykia) the titular ethnic group was a simple majority. In twelve republics ethnic Russians were an absolute majority or the majority group.¹⁵ It is not, therefore, simply numerical superiority but its dispersion and settlement over time that makes ethnic Russian homogeneity a powerful constraint on ethnic separatism.

In the early 1990s Chechnya exhibited characteristics that would make it the most extreme test case for ethnic conflict potential in the Russian Federation. Chechnya had one of the largest absolute majorities of the titular ethnic group.¹⁶ According to the 1989 census the population of areas now in Chechnya was composed of just over one million persons, around 715,000 of whom declared themselves as Chechens, 269,000 as Russians, and about 25,000 as Ingush. The secession potential inherent in this demographic profile was compounded by Chechnya's geography. Being situated on the new international frontier of the Russian Federation bordering Georgia, along a border that was demarcated by the remote and poorly accessible Caucasus mountains, was an immense advantage for the capacity to assert independence from Russia. This natural advantage is striking when one compares Chechnya with the only other ethnic republic to vigorously and consistently assert its independence, Tatarstan.

While all of the RSFSR's ethnic 'autonomous republics' followed Yeltsin's lead in declaring their independence from the USSR in the so-called 'parade of sovereignties'  during the summer of 1990, all but two declared themselves sovereign 'within the RSFSR'. The two exceptions were the republics of Checheno-Ingushetia and Tatarstan, which viewed their status as independent states. Both of these republics persisted with their claims to sovereignty after the break-up of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Neither republic rejoined the Russian Federation by signing the Federal Treaty of March 1992, nor did they recognise the authority of the Russian president or parliament. Neither republic participated in the Russian parliament or other governing bodies, nor did they hold elections to the new Duma or the constitutional referendum in December 1993.¹⁷

In effect, these republics acted as if they were independent states outside the jurisdiction of Russia, akin to the other newly independent states that

had been union republics. Geography made an enormous difference to the secession capacity of these two republics, for unlike Chechnya, Tatarstan was situated in the heart of European Russia, surrounded by ethnic Russian and other loyal regions, and far from an international frontier. Moreover, much of Tatarstan's economic wealth was derived from oil, and it was totally dependent on Russia for transshipment. Consequently, Tatarstan was driven to negotiate a political compromise with Yeltsin in a bilateral power-sharing treaty of February 1994, which qualified its status as one of 'association' with Russia, and gave it extensive exceptional powers compared with other units of the Russian Federation. The question is why a similar political instrument was not negotiated with Chechnya as the basis for an accommodation. An opportunistic pursuit of the advantage of geography by the Chechen leadership is part of the answer, but there were deeper barriers to negotiation.

Historicism and the 'Ethnic War' Account

Many recent accounts of the conflict have manipulated mythic elements of the relations between Russians and Chechens to emphasise a recurrent theme of historical 'ethnic enmity' as a kind of essentialist predetermined factor of causation.¹⁸ This argument has three strains.

First, the claim is made that the conflict is one of colonizer versus colonized, and is rooted in the particularly conflictual pattern of Russian colonization of the Caucasus in the nineteenth century. Russian imperial expansion into the Caucasus began in 1722, when Peter the Great annexed the regions of the Caspian Sea littoral in present day Dagestan. It was the start of a century and a half of military engagement and colonization as the Caucasus became a frontier of competition between the Russian and the Ottoman empires. The northern Caucasus area became a highly militarized frontier zone, with the Russians colonizing the plains behind a 'line' of military garrisons and cossack settlements and isolating the indigenous peoples, including the Chechens, in the upland and mountainous areas to the south of the Terek river. As with many colonial conflicts, these wars were long and bitterly fought and forged a historical mythology on both sides that, undoubtedly has contemporary resonance. The question is whether these referents had an ongoing significance or were revitalized by the nationalist mobilization for and during the conflict.

Second, the conflict is seen as social conflict where the pre-modern traditional clan (*teip*) based extended ethnic kin networks of the Chechens are counterposed to the modernising Russian state. As one widely cited Russian anthropologist, Sergei Artiunov, observed of Chechen society: 'In peacetime, they recognize no sovereign authority and may be fragmented

into a hundred rival clans. However, in time of danger, when faced with aggression, the rival clans unite and elect a military leader.¹⁹ This argument tends to freeze patterns of behaviour associated with Chechen communities by eighteenth and nineteenth Russian colonizers, and projects them forward to the late twentieth century. Thus, there is an emphasis on the mythical ethnogenesis of the Chechens as a group of highland clan communities, with a society based on a pastoral economy that was supplemented by brigandry on the precarious trade routes over the Caucasus mountains and against the plains peoples (who were increasingly Russian in the nineteenth century). It was a society where custom law (*adat*) prevailed over the *shariiat*, and where blood feuds and hostage taking was the norm. The brigandage is usually interpreted as an innate expression of the martial spirit of the Chechens, that found its full expression in the resistance to Russian colonial expansion in the nineteenth century.²⁰

Third, the conflict is viewed as a fundamental 'clash of civilisations' with the Caucasus being a crude fissure line between the Islamic and the Orthodox Christian world. Reference is frequently made to the mysticism of Sufi brotherhoods that became embedded in Chechen society during the social turmoil of colonization and resistance in the middle of the nineteenth century. The periodic uprisings against Russia were often led by Islamic imams, who declared 'holy war' against the Russian infidels, for example, the rebellion of Sheikh Mansur in 1785-91, the 'Caucasian War' from 1817, and most famously, the Avar Shamil's revolt in the 1840s.²¹ Russia's response was ruthless military suppression, usually involving the destruction of Chechen villages and a scorched earth policy to reduce Chechen resistance by starvation, and ethnic cleansing by expelling Muslim peoples from across the Caucasus into the Ottoman empire. By the late 19th century Chechens were essentially pacified. Modernisation in the late nineteenth century saw the building of towns, roads, railways, schools and industry, to complement the extensive plains farming of Russian peasant settlers whose inward migration to the Caucasus accelerated after pacification.

Consequently, as traditional Chechen social networks were broken down by modernisation and secularisation, the main social cleavages in the territory formed along north versus south, highland versus lowland, agricultural/industrial settled versus mountain-pastoral, secular versus religious, russified versus indigenous, cleavage structures. After the 1917 revolution there was a brief attempt to create a North Caucasus emirate on theocratic lines, but this was quickly suppressed by the Bolsheviks. From 1922 historically ethnic Chechen lands had territorial autonomy within the RSFSR, and were formed into the Checheno-Ingushetia Autonomous Republic in 1936.

While mutual antipathy between peoples can be fuelled by historical memory, as often, however, bloody pasts can make for strong alliances.²² A strong thread in the historicist thesis is that Chechen nationalism was mobilised around a much more profound experience of resistance to Russian colonialism, with the Chechens being the most resistant of all the peoples of the North Caucasus. Furthermore, this memory was made more intense by a recently ingrained and bitter historical event, notably the genocidal deportation of 1944.²³ The culminating logic of this legacy of colonial enmity, it is argued, was Stalin's genocidal deportation of Chechens to Central Asia in February 1944. Several peoples of the North Caucasus, some 600,000 people (400,000 of them Chechens), were deported to Kazakhstan and Kirghizia supposedly for collaborating with German forces against the Soviet Army. The episode resulted in an estimated 100,000 deaths and ingrained an 'historical memory' of genocide.

The deportation, which is within living memory for many Chechens, was a defining event for the reinforcement of Chechen identity constructed around resistance to Russia, for both Russians and Chechens. As the Russian nationalist dissident writer Alexandr Solzhenitsyn observed: 'No one could stop them from living as they did. The regime which ruled the land for thirty years could not force them to respect its laws.'²⁴ The political institutionalization of this identity was entrenched by the return of Chechen deportees and the reestablishment of the autonomous republic of Checheno-Ingushetia at the height of Khrushchev's destalinisation campaign in 1957. It was at this time that two districts (Shelkovskii and Naurskii raions) mainly populated by ethnic Russians were transferred to Checheno-Ingushetia from Stavropolskii Krai, in an attempt to dilute the ethnic Chechen majority.

The glamourising metaphor of the 'noble savage' is ubiquitous but often ambivalent in the romanticization of conquered and colonized peoples by colonizers, from Livy to Kipling, and in the case of the Caucasus, Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat*.²⁵ This romanticized metaphor of the chronicles of the late imperial era of nineteenth century Europe has been readily consumed and spread by Western journalistic accounts of the contemporary conflict in Chechnya.²⁶ Insights have also been moulded by the work of Soviet and Russian ethnologists and anthropologists, which also is strongly influenced by stereotypes dating from the nineteenth century. The Russian ethnographer Valery Tishkov is one of the few such specialists to criticize the distorting and malign influence of some of his colleagues on the romanticized writing of Western journalists on the nature of ethnicity in the Caucasus. He has described this genre as a 'reification of Chechenness' and a 'nationalistic narcissism' which is impelled by 'superficial historicity and cultural fundamentalism'.²⁷

Most of the accounts of the post-1991 Chechen resistance to Russia exaggerate and mythologise the enduring pre-modern nature and 'highlander' clan bonds of the organisation of contemporary Chechen society. The genre emphasises the 'noble military tradition' of the Chechens, their 'antiquity' as an ethnies, their 'epic' and 'warlike' spirit and 'highlander camaraderie'.²⁸ The Chechen soldiers of the 1994-6 war, according to one reporter, were like 'Homeric heroes', comparable to 'Aeneas with the RPG' or 'Achilles with a rocket propelled grenade', and characterised by 'archaic championship...dash and elan'.²⁹ In the search for understanding Chechen society, comparisons are drawn with highland clan cultures elsewhere, for example with the Berbers of North Africa and the Gurkhas of Nepal. Oddly, comparisons are not drawn with historic clan societies in Ireland or, in particular, in highland Scotland, from which culture, after all, the word clan itself originates.³⁰

Perhaps, this is because there is no anthropological foundation for understanding contemporary Scottish or Irish society through clan referents since, as a social phenomenon they were destroyed by the colonizing projects of metropolitan empires and locally coopted elites. In these societies clan may have a contemporary symbolic or lyrical resonance, but virtually no social connection and certainly no political significance. This is a much more convincing point of reference for understanding the symbolic resonance of clan in contemporary Chechnya.³¹ However deeply embedded clans and Sufi practices were in the past, the notion of contemporary Chechnya as a clan based Sufist society has little basis in sociological fact. The social significance, beyond the symbolic, of the notion of clan, was eroded by a century of Tsarist and Soviet modernisation, in particular industrialisation and secularisation policies, and the social cataclysm of the deportation eliminated many of the older generation where the residues of these traditions were strongest. This is not to dismiss evidence for a reinvention and mythologization of traditional values as part of the nation-building radicalisation of society induced by nationalist elites and strengthened by the experience of conflict with Russia after 1990 (see below).

Modernisation brought large scale Russian migration into Chechnya. Grozny, the capital, had been transformed from a delapidated military garrison into an oil boomtown in the 1890s, and Russian workers poured in during the Soviet industrialisation of the 1920s and 1930s. By the time of the 1937 census Russians accounted for 28.6% (190,000) of the population of Checheno-Ingushetia. During the Soviet oil industry expansion of the 1950s and 1960s there was a further influx of Russians (and to a lesser extent Ukrainians and Belorussians), primarily technical specialists, who concentrated in the capital Grozny, which was a major oil

pipeline terminal, petrochemicals centre, and transshipment point on the Baku-Novorossisk pipeline. According to the 1959 census Slavs, mainly ethnic Russians, made up half the population of Checheno-Ingushetia. By the 1979 census they had fallen to around 30%. This dramatic demographic shift was partly caused by a steady flow of returnees from Central Asia, but mostly it was caused by an explosion in the birthrate of Chechens, benefitting from the Soviet welfare state.³² Chechens began to reverse a century of population shifts by migrating from the overpopulated highland areas to lowland steppe areas displacing Russians in areas that had been Slavic populated for one hundred and fifty years or more. Consequently, by the time of the 1989 census Chechen society was dominated by younger generations, who were thoroughly Sovietised, urbanised (about half the population lived in towns, and one third of the population lived in Grozny, where about 55% identified themselves as Slav), and secularised. By the late Soviet period Chechnya was among the least religious and most stable parts of the country, and few young Chechens would have preferred the drums of the *zikr* over the Beatles.³³

Resurgent Peripheral Nationalism

A convincing argument has been made that the conflict in Chechnya was driven by an inter-elite competition for power.³⁴ As a consequence of Soviet modernisation policies, an urbanised and secularised stratum emerged to dominate the Chechen elite by the late Soviet era. This upwardly mobile stratum felt constrained by the ethnic privileging of Russians and other Slavs in the republic. The mobilisation of an ethnic Chechen nationalism fell within a pattern of nationalist mobilisation across the Soviet Union in response to Gorbachev's weakening of the Soviet control regime and bungling of reform in the late 1980s. The demand for national self-determination occurred in Chechnya as part of a drive by the ethnic Chechen section of the Soviet nomenklatura in the republic to redistribute power in their favour and assert their ethnic hegemony. Inter-elite competition in Chechnya was also reflected in a regional cleavage.

The ethnic Chechen nomenklatura elite tended to be recruited from the lowlands steppe towns of Nadterechny (Above-the-Terek) to the northwest of Grozny. While this area was the last traditional stronghold of the politically oriented and pragmatic Naqshbandi Sufism in the latter nineteenth century, it was also the most urbanised, modernised, secular and Russified part of Chechnya in the late twentieth century. Doku Zavgaev, for example, who was appointed the first ethnic Chechen communist party secretary for the republic in 1990 came from the town of Znamenskoye in this area.³⁵ This trend should not be overly stressed, however, since Aslan

Maskhadov, one of the military leaders of Chechen resistance in 1994-6, and elected president from January 1997, also comes from Nadterechny – though Maskhadov fits the pattern as an essentially secular leader.

The ‘parade of sovereignties’ of union republics extended into the RSFSR itself at Yeltsin’s instigation, as he led the RSFSR into a declaration of sovereignty from the USSR in June 1990, and then proceeded on a tour of key ethnic republics inciting them to ‘take as much sovereignty as you can swallow’. The old guard of Russians and Chechens in the nomenklatura, headed by Zavgaev, responded with a cautious approach that was evident in several respects. The Checheno-Ingushetia Supreme Soviet declared its sovereignty only in November 1990, one of the last of the autonomous republics to do so.

Furthermore, although Chechnya did not participate in the all-union referendum on the USSR of March 1991, Zavgaev was prepared to sign the new union treaty agreed at Novo-Ogarevo in May 1991 by Gorbachev and the leaders of the constituent units of the USSR (the leaders of the union republics and autonomous republics). Chechnya also participated in the RSFSR presidential election of June 1991, and ensured a massive vote for Yeltsin. Zavgaev’s caution on the assertion of independence increasingly brought him into confrontation with the more radical nationalists in the course of 1991. Metropolitan weakness often encourages peripheral secessionists. In Chechnya, Zavgaev came to be regarded as a Russian stooge by the radical nationalists, who wanted an unequivocal break with Russia, and saw Russia’s internal convulsions as a historic opportunity to strike for outright independence. Passions were also inflamed by the counter claims of Russian nationalists on Checheno-Ingushetia for the return of the Shelkovskii and Naurskii districts.

In many parts of the USSR moderate gradualist nomenklatura leaders were pressured by nationalist radicals to accelerate the drive for independence. In the case of Zavgaev, the pressure came from the National Congress of the Chechen People (NCCP) established in November 1990 by Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, a Chechen poet and intellectual. Yandarbiev’s cooption of Dzhokar Dudaev, Chechnya’s most famous Soviet military officer, who, although essentially an outsider to both the local Soviet elite and nationalist opposition networks in the republic, brought charisma and organisational skills to the nationalist movement.³⁶

By the June 1991 congress of the NCCP Dudaev was a radicalised de facto leader of the nationalist opposition. He rejected ‘colonial freedom’ or any ‘hybrid’ version of sovereignty, and demanded a treaty with Russia that would recognise Chechnya’s independence. The opportunity to strike at Zavgaev’s regime came during the failed coup in Moscow in August 1991.

Zavgaev, in Moscow at the time, wavered in choosing sides and lost irretrievably the confidence of Yeltsin. The NCCP orchestrated demonstrations and launched a nationalist uprising against Zavgaev. The seizure of power by Dudaev and the NCCP occurred with the connivance of Yeltsin and his main ally, the parliamentary speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov (also an ethnic Chechen), who ordered local Russian military garrisons to arm and assist the rebels.³⁷

The Political Economy of Conflict: Economic and Sectional Interests

Chechnya is of major strategic and economic importance to Russia. Its territory straddles Russia's eastern gateway to the Caucasus, and the main oil pipeline from Baku to Novorossiisk traverses through Grozny, itself one of the Soviet Union's major centres of petrochemical industry. Some works suggest that that the conflict in Chechnya has an economic subtext as a struggle over oil. It is not that Chechnya has significant extractable oil reserves, as these are a meagre 50 million tonnes. In 1993 its production was some 1.25 million tonnes (less than one per cent of Russia's total output), but together with the 120,000 tonnes annually pumped through the Russian pipeline from Azerbaijan, it was sufficient for a lucrative and largely illicit oil trade with Russia from which Dudaev and other sections of the governing groups in Chechnya undoubtedly benefited.³⁸

The most important political economy factor, undoubtedly, is its strategic location on Russia's main transshipment pipeline for the billions of tonnes of extractable reserves in the Caspian Basin. If Russia is to be a key player in the Caspian oil business it must control Chechnya or at least peacefully coexist with it, or risk losing its position as the key strategic actor in the Caucasus. An independent Chechnya could pose a threat to Russian economic interests in the Caspian, particularly if ruled by an uncooperative leader and not a client of Moscow.

The drift to a coercive strategy against Chechnya during 1994 came in the midst of the so-called 'deal of the century' when a Western-led oil consortium headed by BP and Chevron signed a contract with Heidar Aliev's government in Azerbaijan for the development of Caspian sea oil reserves. This was a challenge to the Russian-led Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), established with Kazakhstan and Oman in 1992 to construct a 1,600-kilometer link between the Tengiz oil field in Kazakhstan and a terminal near Novorossiisk. The CPC, in which Lukoil was a major investor, was Russia's key lever to become the main transshipment region for Caspian oil.

The Russian pipeline monopoly, Transneft, also wanted to use its Baku-Novorossiisk route for 'early' oil exports from three Azeri oil fields in the

Caspian as the precursor to even larger shipments later. Since the pipeline traverses over 153 kilometers of Chechnya, a cooperative regime there was essential to smooth commercial operations. Sectional interests in the Russian 'fuel-energy complex' (TEK) exerted a strong influence (notably via Boris Berezovsky) on the Yeltsin 'Family', and formed one pillar of the 'Party of War' in the Kremlin to push for the ousting of Dudaev by military means and the reinstalling of a puppet regime under the compliant Zavgayev. Another key sectional interest formed the second pillar of the 'Party of War', the military-security elites. According to the Russian Defense Minister at the time of the December 1994 invasion of Chechnya, General Pavel Grachev, the General Staff had been reluctant to undertake the military operation, and were pushed into it by the government of prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, himself an energy industry oligarch.³⁹ There are two convincing arguments, nevertheless, that elements in the military hierarchy favoured intervention. Grachev had presided over, if not organised, systematic corruption in the General Staff, largely based on the illicit sale of armaments, not only to Chechnya, but using Chechnya as a transshipment point to other post-Soviet conflict zones in the Caucasus (Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh).

Furthermore, the fiscal austerity of the economic liberals threatened the military with reforms and significant budget cuts during the spring of 1994. Consequently, the military commanders around Grachev shifted in support of intervention in Chechnya, to both cover the traces of their corrupt activities, avert reform and pursue budget maximisation through a 'short successful war'.⁴⁰ This convergence of opinion and interests among business and military-security elites on the need for intervention in Chechnya created a powerful dynamic in favour of conflict within Russian high politics.

Presidentialism and the Instrumentalization of Conflict

The dynamics of metropolitan politics has had a profound impact on the course of Russian-Chechen relations since 1991. The reason is that the question of Chechnya's secession became a useful political expedient that was instrumentalized in the political infighting within the Russian elite over the post-Soviet transition.⁴¹ There are four main episodes which underpin this argument.

First, the politics of dual power in 1991-3; secondly, Yeltsin's reactive nationalism to the nationalist-communist Duma in 1994; thirdly, Yeltsin's presidential re-election campaign in 1996; and fourthly, Putin's presidential ambitions from late 1999 (discussed later).

Beginning in late 1991 the issue of Chechnya was quickly instrumentalized in the emerging power struggle in Moscow, as an uneasy

situation of dual power developed between Yeltsin's presidential administration and the Russian Parliament led by Khasbulatov. To reinforce his authority Yeltsin increasingly used policy toward the republic as a tool with which to strengthen his nationalist credentials and berate Khasbulatov. That Khasbulatov was an ethnic Chechen was doubly effective for Yeltsin, given the widespread racism against Caucasian people, and especially the Chechens, among Russians.⁴²

Within the Russian political and military elites a major debate arose over how to manage Chechen secessionism. One convincing analysis usefully categorises the different elite positions on the 1994-6 invasion of Chechnya into liberal, pragmatist, and nationalist camps, though it is important to note that positions on intervention cross-cut the democratic-authoritarian spectrum in Russian politics.⁴³ One of the complications in evaluating the views of the Russian elites on Chechnya is that opinions were dynamic, changing over time as the conflict developed, both during the 1994-6 war and that beginning in September 1999. It is perhaps more useful to analyse Russian elite positions as a dichotomy, between those who favoured intervention and those who opposed it. These basic interventionist and non-interventionist positions were determined by the following arguments.

The interventionists argued that Dudaev's aggressive advocacy of Chechen independence threatened the integrity of the Russian Federation and had to be quashed, for if it was left unmanaged it may have a domino effect on other recalcitrant Russian ethnic republics, not only in the North Caucasus, but also Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. The liberal stream of thought in favour of intervention believed it was crucial if Russia was to develop as a 'normal' democratic constitutional polity and 'civic' federation.⁴⁴

For the nationalist stream, it was critical for the reassertion of Russian national prestige and to bolster Russia's role as the hegemonic power in the Caucasus and Caspian region. The non-interventionists argued that not only was it morally wrong to use coercion against Chechnya's exercise of its right to self-determination, but also that the high-powered coalition of sectional institutional and economic interests, the so-called 'War Party', had the support of Yeltsin and, consequently, war was inevitable.

The conflict in Chechnya is an affirmation of the dangers inherent in presidentialism during a democratic transition.⁴⁵ Yeltsin used the presidency in classic fashion to personalise power, as did Dudaev. The Russian decision to intervene in late 1994 came at a high point in Yeltsin's presidential power.⁴⁶ After his dissolution by force of the Russian parliament in the 'October events' of 1993, Yeltsin had used his extensive decree powers under his tailor-made constitution of December 1993 to successfully rebuild a network of patron-client ties not unlike that of the Soviet nomenklatura

system. One important dimension of Yeltsin's patrimonial system of rule was the cooption of the leaders of Russia's regions and ethnic republics – all except Dudaev, who in any event showed no interest in this network. This informal system greatly eased the process by which bilateral power-sharing treaties were concluded and helped to stabilise Russia's partial asymmetric federation.⁴⁷ The question is why the secession crisis with Chechnya could not have been managed by a similar treaty conceding extensive autonomy as that which provided for an institutionalised accommodation with Tatarstan in February 1994. A treaty offered a peaceful political resolution to the conflict and would have been an institutional barrier to the descent to war in late 1994. How, then, can we explain the failure of Russia's new presidential federalism to reach an accommodation with Dudaev to match that with Tatarstan president Mintimer Shaimiev?

Historicist accounts, inevitably, emphasise primordial ethnic hatreds among the senior policy makers. Yeltsin's key policy advisers at the critical juncture of 1993-4, it is argued, were predisposed by their ethnic origins to block an accommodation with Chechnya.⁴⁸ We should not minimise the extent of personal animus between Yeltsin and his key advisers on the one hand, and Dudaev and his staff on the other. The question is whether it is plausible to attribute political mistrust and the failure of negotiations to 'ethnic' hatred, or whether the process of negotiation itself generated, or at least consolidated levels of mistrust, leading to breakdown.

For example, Yeltsin's key adviser on the issue, Minister for Nationality and Regional Affairs Sergei Shakhrai, was a shrewd constitutional lawyer and an extremely tough negotiator. His handling of the negotiations with Tatarstan demonstrated that he could be party to carefully crafted political compromises that satisfied the demands of Tatarstan for 'sovereignty', and conceding wide autonomy, while preserving the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation. Harsh uncompromising political rhetoric is the sensible and natural position for politicians to take in negotiating mode, and it is a mistake to over-emphasise the former at the expense of appreciating the contents of the actual compromise.

Serious negotiations for a power-sharing treaty with Chechnya began in 1993, while the negotiations with Tatarstan were in progress.⁴⁹ The negotiations were consistently undermined, however, by two key elements. Firstly, the Russian and Chechen sides wavered between compromising and uncompromising positions, and the pattern of events was such that a propitious conjuncture when both sides were ready for compromise did not arise. Secondly, the constantly shifting negotiation positions were driven by changing political conditions in Russia and Chechnya, which steadily eroded the possibility for compromise.

In Russia, the surge in support for communists and nationalists in the December 1993 Duma elections forced Yeltsin to take a much more hardline nationalist stance from early 1994. In Chechnya, Dudaev's popularity plummeted in 1993 and 1994 as the country fell into disorder and he was increasingly challenged by opposition groups in parliament and abandoned by many of the key Chechen leaders who had brought him to power. His authority was increasingly restricted to Grozny and the southern highlands.⁵⁰ Consequently, the Yeltsin administration increasingly stalled an accommodation with Dudaev, in the expectation that he would be ousted by his domestic opponents, with or without some assistance from Russia.

Moreover, it was not only a matter of inconsistent negotiating positions, but, more importantly, that the principal negotiators never actually met. Dudaev, for example, refused to meet Yeltsin's key negotiators Shakhrai and Abdulatipov and in December 1993 he unilaterally rejected a draft treaty on autonomy that they had negotiated for months with the leaders of the Chechen parliament (which in formal constitutional terms was the supreme authority).⁵¹

Russia still hoped for an accommodation, however, as when the power-sharing treaty with Tatarstan was signed in February 1994 Shakhrai stated that a similar treaty would be the basis for a solution to the Chechnya crisis, though Yeltsin warned that it would not be a 'model' for federal relations in general.⁵²

It does not appear that the historic enmity between Russia and Chechnya was an obstacle to Dudaev's room for compromise. Dudaev was more concerned with how the negotiations were conducted than the outcome per se, so long as Chechnya had a wide degree of autonomy. He wanted face-to-face negotiations with Yeltsin, and harried Yeltsin with letters and intermediaries to this effect. A critical obstacle was the growth of personal animosity between Yeltsin and Dudaev, and the consequent 'personalization' of Russian-Chechen relations.⁵³ Diverse accounts of first hand encounters with both men reveal that both were strongly authoritarian leaders, who had easily bruised egos, and a didactic command style (Yeltsin's was shaped by the command-administrative methods of the communist party secretariat, Dudaev's by the Soviet officer corps).⁵⁴

Yeltsin's personalization of power in the presidency was of crucial importance to achieving stable patrimonial relations with the leaderships of Russia's regions and, in particular with the ethnic republics, whose leaderships were among the most authoritarian and neo-traditional. Dudaev, unlike Shaimiev and executives in the other republics, was an outsider to the party nomenklatura and as a Soviet military officer was acculturated into a very different set of values and behaviour. Consequently, he lacked the

personal skills for adjusting to an executive federalism constructed around Yeltsin's new patrimonialism and inter-elite bargaining.⁵⁵ By training and temperament Dudaev was not a skilled politician, in fact he appears to have been repelled by the politicking and insider congeniality of the tightly closed patrimonial networks of the old communist party nomenklatura. The notion that the conflict was a product of egos, with Yeltsin being too arrogant to engage with Dudaev at an appropriate level of respect and considering him an upstart, is much too simplistic and overlooks Yeltsin's belief in the economic and security logics of Russian military intervention.⁵⁶

That Yeltsin personally was central to the conflict is indicated by the fact that the war was pursued even after the removal from office of the key ministers who formed the so-called 'Party of War' (Grachev, Shakhrai, Yerin, Soskovets, Yegorov *et al*) by summer 1996.⁵⁷ Furthermore, it was the presidential electoral cycle in Russia that eventually turned the policy on Chechnya from one of coercion to one of political accommodation. The approach of the presidential election of June 1996 concentrated the minds of the Yeltsin administration on finding an alternative solution to the bankrupt coercion strategy, since Russia's military forces were bogged down in a seemingly unwinnable guerrilla war of attrition. During the first months of 1996 in the run up to the presidential election Yeltsin returned to a negotiation strategy to find a face-saving exit from the conflict (see below).

RUSSIAN STRATEGIES IN CHECHNYA UNDER YELTSIN

Blockade

Dudaev's attempt to legitimise his regime by holding elections in October 1991, when he was elected president of Chechnya with 90% of the vote, was declared illegal by the Russian parliament and caused Yeltsin to formally impose a 'state of emergency' in Chechnya in November 1991. Even allowing for vote-rigging, most observers accepted that Dudaev won the election. Irrespective of the conduct or outcome, Russia did not recognise Dudaev for fear of legitimising his regime and, *ipso facto*, the independence of Chechnya. There was a botched attempt at military intervention at this stage, but when Russia's small force was compelled to withdraw without a fight, Yeltsin turned to a policy of blockade. The intention was to impose a *cordon sanitaire* with the aim of economically strangling the Dudaev regime. The policy was not unsuccessful, as it induced a catastrophic general breakdown of state services and capacity in Chechnya, despite Dudaev's attempt at autarky by withholding federal taxes, and the systematic plundering of oil fields and illicit sale of oil from the Baku-Novorossiisk pipeline.

From November 1991, when Yeltsin decreed emergency rule in Chechnya (though the decree could not be enforced), Russia instigated a sustained campaign of political, economic, and military subterfuge to undermine Dudaev. The effectiveness of this strategy was probably greatly weakened by the systematic reorganisation of the Russian state in this period, including the core 'power ministries' responsible for such a strategy.

One consequence of this policy of isolation and non-intervention was that during 1991-2 some 90,000 Russians and Slavs, about one-third of the total number living in Chechnya, were physically expelled or otherwise forced to leave. The ethnic cleansing by direct and indirect methods of intimidation accelerated after Dudaev became president in October 1991, as ethnic tensions and anti-Russian sentiment was allowed to spill out into uncontrolled public disorder, with routine humiliations and robbery by armed gangs.

The Use of Chechen Proxies

The shift in Russian policy to a more interventionist approach came when Dudaev attempted to further consolidate the legitimacy of Chechnya's claim to national-self-determination by holding a referendum on independence in November 1992. The expression of overwhelming popular support for independence strengthened the legitimacy of Chechnya's claim to self-determination under international norms. Consequently, Russian policy to depose Dudaev became militarised, though initially the policy focussed on divide-and-rule tactics by securing the allegiance of remnants of the Chechen nomenklatura in Nadterechny. Groups from this region of Chechnya were mobilized as proxies, armed by Russia and given support from the Russian military. Russia refused to recognise Dudaev as the only legitimate Chechen partner for negotiations, and attempted to build up the authority of the proxies. The bankruptcy of this approach was demonstrated early on by the absence of popular support in Chechnya for Russian proxy regimes, beginning with Khasbulatov's 'peace mission' of August 1992, and culminating with the so-called Provisional Council set up under Umar Avturkhanov in the Nadterechnyi village of Znamenskoe in August 1994. Repeated attempts at the military overthrow of Dudaev by Russian proxies in March 1992, August 1994, and November 1994, failed ignominiously.

Demonization

Russia exploited the breakdown of order under Dudaev to foster the perception at home and abroad that Dudaev's regime rested on a fusion of traditional Chechen clan politics with the new post-Soviet mobilisation of ethnic nationalism, business, organised crime, and terrorists. Chechnya, it

was argued, was a major haven for the so-called 'Chechen mafia', to which was attributed many of the evils afflicting Russia in the trough of its transition, from massive currency fraud, arms and drugs smuggling, and other criminal activities throughout the FSU. This 'mafia', it was claimed, also threatened Russia itself by establishing centres of power in Moscow and other cities. Comparisons especially favoured by Yeltsin and other Russian politicians were with Panama's former ruler General Noriega, Pablo Escobar and the Medellin drugs cartel in Colombia, against whom the United States deployed military forces, and the IRA in Northern Ireland against whom the British waged a long war. The breakdown of civil order under Dudaev and the fact that his entourage included numerous criminal figures, gave some credence to the official Russian view, not only in Russia but also internationally.⁵⁸

Military Intervention

The decision for a large scale military intervention against Chechnya appears to have been taken in late November 1994, following the disastrous failure of another proxy attack on Dudaev. When the invasion came in late December 1994 the war quickly became a catalogue of disasters which lay bare the poor state of Russian military readiness. The initial attack on Grozny, in particular, was one of Russia's worst military defeats since the Second World War.⁵⁹ Russian troops were badly led and early setbacks in Grozny led to a collapse in morale. For many Russian observers the demoralisation of the army was a reflection of the profound depth of national humiliation after the collapse of the USSR and the tearing apart of Soviet society.

The 'Afghan syndrome' recurred, as the poorly officered and largely conscript army lacked motivation, alcoholism and drug-taking impaired military performance, and indiscipline led to routine atrocities against Chechen civilians. The selling of weaponry to Chechens was an endemic problem. The demoralisation was completed by institutional incompetence, as the command of Russian forces was divided between the army and ministry of interior, who competed against each other, refused to coordinate their operational activities, and on occasion even shot at each other. The military command was corrupt, incompetent and overconfident, as epitomised by Grachev's remark that Grozny would be taken within 'a couple of hours'. The guerilla war suited the Chechens, who were highly motivated, well organised and well armed for this type of conflict, and were fighting in their own terrain with local support. Russian training and equipment was badly matched against the hit-and-run guerrilla tactics of the Chechens, whether in the urban warfare in Grozny and other towns, or in

the poorly accessible mountain terrain. Incapable of countering the Chechens militarily Russian troops, in echoes of US military conduct in Vietnam, turned to the reckless use of airpower and artillery, and massacres of civilians.⁶⁰ Moreover, Russia's military humiliation was covered widely by the Russian and foreign media.

Political Accommodation

The policy shift from a strategy of coercion to a strategy of political accommodation was driven by the need to find an exit from a war that Russia was losing, and which was negatively affecting Yeltsin's chances of re-election in the June 1996 presidential election. Initially, prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin was assigned to lead the negotiations for Russia. The killing of Dudaev by the Russian military in April 1996 appeared to remove a major obstacle to negotiations on the Chechen side, as he was replaced as Chechen military leader by Aslan Maskhadov, a former Soviet commander and a well-known moderate.

After Yeltsin's re-election in July 1996, the lead in the negotiations was taken by the head of the Security Council, and former Soviet army general, Aleksandr Lebed. The negotiations were accelerated by the prospect of a major Russian military defeat by a surprise Chechen assault on and encirclement of Russian forces in Grozny in mid-August 1996. The talks held in Dagestan in the settlement of Khasavyurt were eased by the respect and rapport between Lebed and his Chechen adversaries, Maskhadov and Basaev, and by what the parties termed the 'presence' of the Head of the OSCE Assistance Group in Chechnya, Tim Guldemann. The Khasavyurt Agreement of 31 August 1996 'internationalized' the conflict, in the sense that the joint statement on the truce, accepted the right of nations to self-determination, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1949 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966 as the basis for a final treaty. A masterstroke to secure the agreement was a core ambiguity whereby the final decision on the status of Chechnya was postponed for 'up to' five years.⁶¹

Chechnya would remain part of a 'common economic space' with the Russian Federation, and Russia would provide funds for the reconstruction of the war ravaged infrastructure of the republic. The truce was policed by joint military patrols. A Joint Commission to implement the agreements quickly ran into difficulties, however, when Yeltsin sacked Lebed from the government. Lebed's replacement, Ivan Rybkin, insisted on a coalition government in Chechnya which included the 'legal' government of Russian proxies under Zavgayev elected in Russian supervised elections in June 1996. Following the completion of the Russian military withdrawal,

presidential elections were held in Chechnya in January 1997 supervised by international monitors who declared them 'democratic and free'. Maskhadov achieved a decisive victory, polling 65% of the vote.

De facto, Russia had relinquished its sovereignty over Chechnya, though some of its government officials portrayed Chechen independence as no different from the 'independence' of Tatarstan, Bashkortostan or other republics with high levels of autonomy.⁶² Widely recognised as a moderate, Maskhadov presided over the ratification of the Khasavyurt truce in a formal peace treaty between Russia and the 'Chechen Republic of Ichkeria' at a Kremlin ceremony on 12th May 1997. A special status between the Russian Federation and Chechnya was established, where their mutual relations were to be regulated by 'standards of international law', and where both sides renounced 'forever' the 'use or the threat of force in the resolution of any disputes between them'.⁶³ Two further agreements on the integration of Chechnya into Russia's economic space and a common currency were signed at the same time.

The Manipulation of International Support

While there are comparisons to be drawn between Chechnya and Kosovo as cases of ethnic secessionism, the key differentiating factor in both cases is the severe limitations to international leverage on Russia or intervention in Chechnya due to Russia's nuclear and Great Power status.⁶⁴ After the agreements of 1996 and 1997, Russia and the international system consigned Chechnya to a limbo status, effectively blockaded by Russia. In addition, Russia made strenuous efforts to secure that Maskhadov's government did not receive international recognition, despite the legitimacy of his democratic election in January 1997.

Western governments, anxious to bolster the more 'pro-West' Yeltsin presidency at all costs, and constrained by international norms generally unfavourable to secession, refused to antagonise Russia by supporting an independent Chechnya. With the exception of Estonia, no foreign state normalised relations with Chechnya, Chechen officials were not formally received by foreign governments, and although Ichkerian passports were issued in January 1998 they were not internationally recognised.⁶⁵ Unlike in the Balkan wars, there were no calls from Western governments for Russian military or political leaders to be brought to an International War Crimes Tribunal in Le Hague for war crimes perpetrated in Chechnya, and criticism of Russia's violation in Chechnya of the 1990 CFE1 Treaty that established regional ceilings of conventional weapons, was muted. Western governments adhered to the position promoted by the Clinton administration from 1992 that the issue of Chechnya was an 'internal'

matter for Russia. Clinton even went so far as to favourably compare Yeltsin with Lincoln in his struggle against secessionists.⁶⁶

After the Russian withdrawal in 1996 armed gangs in Chechnya stepped up a lucrative trade in hostage taking and assassination. What had been a minor embarrassment to Dudaev, now became a serious problem for his successor Maskhadov, with some 506 cases, including a few high profile cases involving Westerners. The situation was described in the 1998 and 1999 annual reports of the Assistance Group of the OSCE in Chechnya as one where: 'crime, unrest and acts of terrorism have acquired endemic proportions, adding to a volatile political situation and a general break-down of law and order', and where the deprivation of rights had become 'a norm of life', with routine abductions, murders, robberies and provocative attacks on neighboring North Caucasian Republics. According to the OSCE officials, Chechnya was a 'hotbed of crime and terror'.⁶⁷ In the absence of significant external support, Maskhadov's attempt to consolidate his authority and establish an effective system of governance was severely weakened. One of the consequences of this policy was that his government was destabilised by the growth of the power of armed radical Islamic groups opposed to the peace process.

DUAL RADICALISATION AND THE RENEWAL OF CONFLICT

One of the common effects of any conflict is that it induces a radicalisation and polarization of opinion. The renewal of conflict between Russia and Chechnya in late 1999 was partly a product of political differences over the status of Chechnya, left unresolved by the agreements of 1996-7, and partly a response to the breakdown of order under Maskhadov. More importantly, by summer of 1999 a dual radicalisation was peaking in Russia and Chechnya that was driving the momentum on both sides for a return to conflict.

Radicalization in Chechnya

As noted earlier, prior to the conflict with Russia Chechnya was a largely secular society. The war of 1994-6, and more precisely the Russian atrocities committed during it, radicalised large sections of Chechen society, in particular in the highland regions where traditional Islamic communities were more embedded, had a deeper sense of historical enmity with Russia, and had been most mobilized to engage in the conflict. The transformation of soldiers from highland areas into 'Islamic warriors' took several years. The process of radicalization was not simply a reaction to the bitterness of the confrontation with the 'old enemy', however, but also a result of

proselytising influences from Wahhabist volunteers recruited and funded from abroad, such as those led by the Gulf Arab Khattab, a follower of Saudi millionaire and Islamic extremist Osama bin Laden. There can be little doubt that the apparent conversion of Shamil Basaev, a highlander from Vedeno and one of the most capable Chechen field commanders, to the concept of 'jihad' (Holy War) against Russia was a profound turning point. Many Chechen field commanders, including Basaev and Salman Raduev, were opposed to the peace process, and had refused to participate in its implementation, while not directly sabotaging it on the ground. Indirectly, however, they may have been organisers of bombings and kidnappings in Chechnya and in neighbouring parts of Russia and Dagestan, which led to a deterioration in the relations between the Russian and Chechen governments. Whereas Dudaev had popularised the idea of the unity of the peoples of the North Caucasus, but not acted upon it, the radicals made no secret of their intent to foment destabilisation in neighbouring Caucasian republics to create an Islamic state.⁶⁹ By September 1998 the radicals were demanding the resignation of President Maskhadov on the grounds that he was too conciliatory towards Moscow. Maskhadov's government, consequently, was squeezed from two sides, internally from the radical opposition, whose ranks were swelling from recruits of young unemployed Chechens, and externally from Russia, whose blockade stunted economic growth and exacerbated social collapse in Chechnya. Both internal and external enemies of Maskhadov despised his government for being too soft in dealing with the other.

By the beginning of 1999, Maskhadov's authority had been so weakened among the field commanders that he was politically compelled to reach a compromise with the radicals by decreeing the introduction of *Shariiat* law in Chechnya and the suspension of its parliament as a prelude to the adoption of an Islamic constitution. This was not only in complete contradiction to the Russian Constitution, and a further demonstration of Chechnya's *de facto* independence, but also revoked Dudaev's secular constitution of 1992.⁷⁰ The move may have been less radical than at first sight, as Maskhadov's government were entrenching traditional Islam as a way of countering the growing power of Islamicist extremists of the Wahhabi sect. Nevertheless, the sight on Russian television of public executions in Chechnya under Islamic law renewed popular fears in Russia of an 'Islamic threat' in the Caucasus.

A turning point came in August 1999 when a large force of several thousand Wahhabi influenced Chechen Islamic guerrillas led by Basaev and Khattab invaded neighbouring Dagestan as the start of a 'Holy War' to 'liberate' the North Caucasus from the Russian 'infidels' and to establish a

'Caliphate'.⁷¹ A sympathetic account of the invasion termed the guerrillas 'Che Guevaras in Turbans' and claimed that Islam was attractive to Chechens and other peoples of the Caucasus because it appeared to be 'the only force capable of replacing the old certainties and clear social order which was previously provided by the Soviet system' (sic).⁷²

Radicalization in Russia

The political cycle of metropolitan politics in Russia was as crucial to the resumption of war in late 1999, as it had been to the initiation and settlement of the 1994-6 conflict. By the summer of 1999 Yeltsin was preparing for a presidential succession. His key concern was the protection of his family security and interests by a hand-picked successor, who would have to win the presidential election that would follow his resignation if Yeltsin's future was to be ensured. This new element of political expediency was combined with traditional Russian sectional interests and strategic fears about Chechnya, such as the threat to a newly constructed Transneft pipeline linking the Caspian and Novorossiisk through Dagestan and bypassing Chechnya.

In response to the attack on Dagestan, Yeltsin sacked prime minister Sergei Stepashin and replaced him with Vladimir Putin, the head of the FSB, and his chosen successor. A resumption of war with Chechnya was now instrumentalized as the means to boost Putin's popularity in advance of a presidential campaign. The Chechen radicals had provided a *causas belli* by attacking Dagestan, but the mass of the Russian public despite, or because of, their overt racism against Chechens and other Caucasian peoples were not likely to be mobilised by Chechen acts of 'terrorism', as government propaganda portrayed it, against Dagestanis. Popular support for a new war came only after bombings of apartment buildings in Moscow and other Russian cities in September 1999, which killed and maimed over three hundred civilians.⁷³ The bombings allowed Putin, and Russia's political elites generally, to demonize the disorderly regime of Maskhadov as a front for 'international terrorism'. Consequently, the Russian government launched a second war against Chechnya under the cover of an 'anti-terrorist operation'. Putin declared his aim was to destroy Chechnya as a 'terrorist state', 'an outpost of international terrorism', and a 'bandit enclave' for foreign-funded 'Islamic fundamentalists'.⁷⁴

Public opinion polls showed a zero-rating for Yeltsin and 2% for Putin in August 1999. A new military adventure in Chechnya was a high risk strategy, given the abysmal performance of the Russian military in 1994-6. Putin, however, was an adherent of his own brand of radical nationalism, and he appears to have shared the view widespread in the higher echelons of the Russian military and security apparatus that the defeat in 1996 had been due

to a 'stab in the back' by Russia's weak political leaders and, in particular, its Western-influenced critical news media.

Moreover, Putin was an ideologue for the re-establishment of a strong state in Russia. The reconquest of Chechnya would not only undo the national humiliation of the defeat in 1996, but also serve as the vehicle for a recentralization and strengthening of state power in Russia.⁷⁵ For the Russian military, a new 'short victorious war' would not only help restore morale, but also replenish military power, which had been significantly depleted by the 1994-6 war and further run down by budget cuts in its aftermath.⁷⁶

On the one hand, Putin took the conflict with Chechnya to a new low level of dehumanisation, using gangster language to publicly remark how Chechens would be 'wasted in the shithouse. The question is closed once and for all. And we have to do this today, quickly, decisively, with clenched teeth, strangle the vermin at the root'. He also personally awarded hunting knives to Russian troops serving in Chechnya at the New Year holiday in early 2000.⁷⁷ At the same time, he adeptly applied a combination of the Russian strategies of the early 1990s – blockade, use of proxies, demonization, coercion, and manipulation of international opinion.

Lessons were drawn from successful Western military conflicts. From the Falklands and the Gulf Wars, the propaganda lesson was to control media access and manage 'information war'. From NATO's war against Serbia, the military lesson was to apply massive airpower, distance bombing, and accept extensive 'collateral damage'. Russia's military performance was transformed also by the use of larger forces and greater numbers of better trained, led, well-coordinated and well-equipped elite units.⁷⁸ The new tactics brought early success, Grozny being retaken by Russian forces in December 1999, having first been laid waste by aerial bombardment, and Chechen forces were pushed back into the less accessible highland areas, and over the border with Georgia into the remote Pankisi Gorge. Maskhadov's election was rejected as 'illegitimate', and Russia looked for a puppet government in the rump of the Zavgayev-led Chechen parliament elected under Russian rule in 1996, declaring it as the 'only legitimate' Chechen authority.⁷⁹


Military success produced a sharp surge in Putin's popularity, and damaged his political rivals for the presidency, Primakov and Luzhkov. The war was a key factor in the strong showing in the Duma elections of December 1999 for the pro-Kremlin Unity party and the poor showing of Yabloko, whose leader Yavlinsky was one of the few Russian politicians to consistently criticise the return to a strategy of coercion.⁸⁰ Putin's success in the presidential election of March 2000 was largely due to his image as the victor in the war against Chechnya. As Chechen guerrillas regrouped and

intensified the guerrilla war in the course of 2000, Russian casualties have mounted and the war has returned to being as unpopular and as unwinnable as that of 1994-6.

Moreover, the increasing reports of human rights abuses, atrocities, 'purging' of villages, and widespread torture in concentration camps by Russian forces, despite the media controls, brought increasing criticism from Western governments and international organisations.⁸¹ Criticism from Western governments briefly intensified in late 1999 and early 2000, and subsequently the Chechens were removed from the US 'global terrorism' list for 2000.

On 8 December 1999 there was a rare joint declaration by the United Nations, the OSCE and the Council of Europe urging Russia to respect human rights in Chechnya. The criticism intensified in the first six months of the Bush presidency, but was sidelined after the Slovenia summit in June 2001 as the US prioritized securing concessions from Russia over the ABM Treaty.⁸² The attacks on New York and the Pentagon of 11 September 2001 led to a reversal of US policy on Chechnya. This was partly moral revulsion against the associations between some Chechen radicals and the bin Laden group suspected of the bombings, and partly a realist concession by the US to secure Russian support for its campaign against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Consequently, the US has returned to the pragmatic Clinton policy of viewing Chechnya as an 'internal' matter of 'terrorism'.⁸³

Putin appears to recognise that war against Chechnya is unwinnable, yet so far he has recoiled from a political solution that would involve negotiations with Maskhadov.⁸⁴ If Putin was driven by political expediency in launching the war in late 1999, his capacity for compromise was also constrained by a patriotic radical zeal, not only his own, but also from the Russian military.⁸⁵ After a period of military rule in Chechnya, Russia has recently moved toward a policy of Chechenization, exploiting war weariness among Chechens, and inter-denominational fear of the Wahhabis, by installing a new puppet regime of proxies led, in practice, by a triumvirate of the Chechen administration head and Mufti Akhmad Kadyrov, Chechen Premier Stanislav Ilyasov, and Duma deputy for Chechnya, Aslanbek Aslakhanov.

Putin has also publicly moved the Russian government's position from military occupation to a search  a political exit. The problem is that he will not negotiate with the only Chechen leader who can deliver a political agreement, Maskhadov.⁸⁶ When Putin ordered the military attack on Chechnya in late 1999, it was as much motivated by a policy to reassert

Russian sovereignty over the territory, as it was to counter a security threat from Chechnya. After the attacks on New York Putin appeared to refine this policy, declaring that: 'it is not an issue of Chechnya's membership, or non-membership, of the Russian Federation', rather it is the fact that Chechnya was an 'irresponsible quasi-state' that became 'a gangster enclave while the ideological vacuum was quickly filled by fundamentalist organizations'.⁸⁷ The implication appears to be that if Chechen leaders could guarantee a stable regime that did not threaten Russia then some kind of independence might be tolerated. While muted criticism and a more understanding approach from Western governments will make Chechnya less of an inconvenience in foreign affairs for Russia, it is likely to harden Russian policy, tilting it to an uncompromising strategy of coercion and making agreement on a political solution even more difficult to reach.

CONCLUSION

Since 1991 Russia has employed a wide range of strategies in attempts to manage secessionist Chechnya, from economic blockade, the use of proxies, demonization, control and coercion, negotiation and compromise. None of these strategies achieved the goal of subduing the aspiration of the Chechen people to self-determination, and making it a full part of the Russian Federation, though they have resulted in massive loss of life, immense damage to Chechen society, and the wholesale destruction of the infrastructure of Chechnya. Conflict with Chechnya has also been immensely damaging to democratisation in Russia, helping to undermine constitutional politics and the rule of law, entrenching nationalist sentiment, eroding freedom of speech, and intensifying racism against Chechens in particular, and all Caucasian peoples in general. The issue has also been used, though sporadically as a foreign policy instrument by Western governments to berate Russia. The only strategy that Russia has not so far attempted is the granting of outright independence, and the normalisation of relations with Chechnya on a neighbourly basis.

Moreover, it is evident that the dynamics of this protracted conflict have radicalized positions on both sides. Chechen society is riven apart by sectarian conflict and a growth in the power of militarised Islamic extremists, which would be enormously destabilising were an independent government to be restored without significant economic support from Russia and the international community. In Russia, the multiethnic bargaining, institutionalised in an asymmetric federal system under Yeltsin, which appeared to have successfully contained nationalist separatism in

Russia's other most recalcitrant secessionist republic, Tatarstan, is now under challenge from a resurgent state nationalism under Putin. The negotiations that resulted in autonomisation and political accommodation appear to be increasingly regarded as appeasement, and a betrayal of the Russian 'nation'. If the current asymmetric federalism was not easily reconcilable with the demand for secession made by Chechnya, a more symmetrical federation will be even less palatable. Putin's plans for a strongly recentralizing refederalisation of Russia are, consequently, a recipe for prolonging the conflict in Chechnya.

The argument presented here suggests that no single factor, in particular, not the historicist 'ethnic hatred' factor, can be usefully employed to explain the conflict between Russia and Chechnya. The causes of the conflict lie in a combination of historical and contingent factors, where political leaders (Yeltsin, Khasbulatov, Dudaev, Putin, Basaev), sectional interests within Russia (the oil and gas elites, the military elite), and regional (the Nadterechny 'clan') and ideocratic (Wahhabist) groups within Chechnya, have acted as 'conflict entrepreneurs', instrumentalizing conflict for political and economic ends.

One of the key dilemmas that gave rise to this conflict was how Russia adjusted to a post-imperial reality. The Russian elite under Yeltsin, across the political spectrum, tended to perceive Russian identity as being congruent with the Russian Federation's inherited Soviet era territorial boundaries. The Chechen leadership under Dudaev was equally committed to the assertion of independence. Reaching a compromise on secession is one of the most difficult of all political problems. The difficulty is made even more complex by the international norms for managing state recognition after the break-up of empires, which are weighted against secession and self-determination. The fact that Chechen secessionism is within the borders of the Russian Federation must in part account for the ferocity of the Russian response, though we should also not underestimate the acquiescence of Western governments in tolerating Russia's treatment of Chechnya as an 'internal' matter.

I have attempted to identify the key phases in the dynamics of the conflict and offer an account of the factors that were critical in each phase. The initiation of conflict was largely driven by metropolitan intra-elite struggles in Russia between the Yeltsin presidency and the parliament in the context of a rapid imperial implosion, which threatened powerful sectional economic and military interest groups.

Once conflict was underway, the internal dynamics of this type of war, which has been characterized by successful Chechen guerrilla tactics and Russian military demoralization and endemic human rights violations,


propagated new elements to feed the conflict in the form of a radicalization and polarization of positions on both sides.

The temporary cessation of conflict in 1996-9 was also driven by metropolitan political expediency, as Yeltsin pushed for a negotiated political compromise to enhance his reelection bid. Though, it is important to note that Russia was, in any event, on the verge of military defeat on the ground. A more vigorous policy of support for the democratically elected Maskhadov government from Russia and Western governments in 1997-8 might have helped avert the breakdown into disorder and contained the growth of radicalized Islamic elements in Chechnya.

By summer of 1999, however, radicalization affected Russia and Chechnya equally and provided a context for a resumption of conflict. Putin and Basaev followed the trend set by Yeltsin and Dudaev as ‘conflict entrepreneurs’ and instrumentalized conflict for political ends: to boost his presidential electoral chances in the case of Putin, and to demonstrate his leadership of an Islamic ‘Jihad’ in the case of Basaev. In this sense, rather than a dramatic shift in causality between the first and second wars, there is an inherent consistency in the protracted conflict in Chechnya.

APPENDIX – TABLE 1

KEY FACTORS IN THE RUSSIAN-CHECHEN CONFLICT

Conflict Initiation (1991-4)	Russian metropolitan politics: intra-elite power struggle Chechen peripheral nationalism Russian energy and military sectional interests Chechen regional interests
Conflict Cessation (1996-7)	Russian metropolitan politics: presidential election Chechen military success War weariness OSCE ‘presence’
Conflict Resumption (1999-)	Russian metropolitan politics: presidential alternance Chechnya as a failed regime Chechen ideocratic interests Dual Radicalization 

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¹ The main conflicts are: Chechnya, Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, North Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Tajikistan, and Ferghana valley (Uzbekistan/Kirghizstan). The main potential conflicts are: Crimea, Gagauzia, Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Northern Kazakhstan, Ajaria, and Estonia and Latvia. For analyses of these conflicts and potential conflicts see James Hughes and Gwendolyn Sasse, *Ethnicity and Territory in the Former Soviet Union: Regions in Conflict*, Frank Cass, London: 2002.

² According to data provided by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in June 2001.

³ As with other conflicts, there is by now an extensive literature of narrative accounts and personal testimonies of the conflict in Chechnya written by Russian and Western journalists. For the 1994-6 war see Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya. A Small Victorious War*, New York: New York University Press, 1998; Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya. Tombstone of Russian Power*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998; Vanora Bennett, *Crying Wolf: The Return of War to Chechnya*, London: Macmillan, 1998; Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains: Politics and War in the Russian Caucasus*, London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998; Yo'av Kamy, *Highlanders: A Journey to the Caucasus in Quest of Memory*, New York: Farrar Strauss & Giroux, 2000. For the war beginning in August-September 1999 see: Anne Nivat, *Chienne De Guerre, A Woman Reporter Behind the Lines of the War in Chechnya*, translated from the French by Susan Danton, Public Affairs, 2001; Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War: A Russian Reporter in Chechnya*, London: Harvill, 2001. What is striking about this Russian and Western journalism is its poverty in reporting the mentalité of the Russian combatants, despite an emphasis on the 'Chechnya syndrome' of murder, looting and other abuses by Russian troops. None of these works compare favorably to such journalistic classics of US military involvement in Vietnam such as Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, New York: Vintage Books, 1977, and Mark Baker's *Nam: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Woman Who Fought There*, New York: William Morrow, 1981.

⁴ For a discussion of these theories in relation to the British empire see John Darwin, *The End of the British Empire: The Historical Debate*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

⁵ The serious decolonization conflicts of the British empire were in Ireland, Palestine, India, Kenya, Cyprus, Malaya, Aden, and Northern Ireland; in the French empire, they were in Vietnam and Algeria; in the Portuguese, they were in Angola and Mozambique.

⁶ For a discussion of the measures taken by Yeltsin and his team to rapidly disengage from the former Soviet republics in late 1991 see Jerry Hough, *Democratization and Revolution in the USSR 1985-1991*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997, pp. 466-9.

⁷ Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and its Rivals*, London: John Murray, 2000.

⁸ See Neil Malcom, Alex Pravda, Margot Light and Roy Allison, *Internal Factors in Russian Foreign Policy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 53-5, 63-4, 68.

⁹ Estimates of casualties in 1994-6 vary from a low of 4,379 military dead and in excess of 20,000 civilian dead, with no accounting of wounded (Lieven, 1998: p. 108), to a high of 80,000 dead and 240,000 wounded, announced by General Alexandr Lebed in *Izvestiya*, 4 September 1996. In the current war, officially Russia admits to just over 3,000 military killed, but unofficial estimates are at least double this, and no-one knows the scale of recent Chechen military and civilian casualties. According to the UNHCR there are now around 250,000 refugees from the conflict in camps in Chechnya and Ingushetia.

¹⁰ *BBC Monitoring of World Broadcasts*, 30 September 2001, from an interview on TV6.

¹¹ Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 26; Valerie Bunce, *Subversive Institutions. The Design and the Destruction of Socialism and the State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

¹² The partition of Checheno-Ingushetia into two separate republics was motivated by the Ingush elite's interests in remaining within the Russian Federation. The respective leaders of the two parts, Dzhokar Dudaev (Chechnya) and Ruslan Aushev (Ingushetia), both former Soviet military officers, agreed to retain the existing Soviet administrative boundary for five years. The deal came in the wake of the constitutional upgrading of the 'autonomous republics' of the RSFSR to 'sovereign republics' in the renamed Russian Federation by a new Federal Treaty of February 1992.

¹³ I have explored these issues in depth elsewhere, see James Hughes, 'Managing Secession

Potential in the Russian Federation' in Hughes and Sasse eds (note 1), pp. 36-68.

¹⁴ *SSSR v tsifrah v 1989g.*, Moscow, Finansy i statistika, 1990, pp. 23-5; *Argumenty i fakty*, No. 13, March 1991, p. 1. The 1989 census identified 101 ethnic groups in Russia, and although many numbered less than 5,000, there were 39 major ethnic groups numbering more than 100,000.

¹⁵ See *Narody Rossii, Entsiklopediia*, Moscow, *Bol'shaia Rossiiskaia Entsiklopediia*, 1994, pp. 433-5.

¹⁶ After its partition from Ingushetia in July 1992 Chechnya was one of the smallest republics, approximately 160 kilometers long and 100 kilometers wide.

¹⁷ Tatarstan did briefly send a delegation to the Constitutional Assembly in July 1993, but it soon walked out.

¹⁸ For academic accounts see: Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union. The Mind Aflame*, London: Sage, 1997, and John B. Dunlop, *Russia confronts Chechnya. Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998. For journalistic accounts see Lieven (note 3), Gall and de Waal (note 3), Bennett (note 3).

¹⁹ There are between 130-150 *teips*, organised into loose groups called *tuqums*. For a description of traditional Chechen social organization see Yan Chesnov, 'Civilization and the Chechen', *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia*, Vol. 34, No. 3, Winter 1995-6, pp. 28-40; Sergei Artiunov, 'Ethnicity and Conflict in the Caucasus' in Fred Wehling ed., *Ethnic Conflict and Russian Intervention in the Caucasus*. Policy Paper No. 16, Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation, University of California, San Diego, August 1995, p. 17.

²⁰ For an example of this see Anatol Lieven, 'Nightmare in the Caucasus', *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 2000, pp. 145-59.

²¹ Historically, two orders of Sufism took hold in Chechnya. Mansur and Shamil were adherents of the Naqshbandiya movement (or *tariquat*), which fused religion and politics in 'holy war' (*ghazavat*). In the 1860s, following the defeat of Shamil and the exhaustion of resistance, the more spiritual 'other worldly' Qadiriya order became popular, particularly in the highland regions of Chechnya. Sufi orders also have numerous sects (*virds*). Since these orders were suppressed in the Soviet era, their activities were secret, and consequently, it is extremely difficult to assess the extent and significance of Sufism. For a studies of Sufism in the North Caucasus see Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars. Sufism in the Soviet Union*, London: Charles Hurst, 1985; Austin Lee Jersild, 'Who was Shamil?: Russian Colonial Rule and Sufi Islam in the North Caucasus, 1859-1917', *Central Asian Survey*, Vol.14, No. 2, 1995, pp. 205-223; and Anna Zelkina, *In Quest for God and Freedom, The Sufi Naqshbandi Brotherhood of the North Caucasus*, London: Hurst, 1999.

²² One thinks, for example, of the Franco-German axis in the European Union.

²³ For a detailed account see Dunlop (note 18).

²⁴ Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Volume 3, Boulder, Westview, 1998, p. 402.

²⁵ Tolstoy's moral tale is set in the early 1850s and depicts ignorance, cruelty, naivety, and honour among Russians and Caucasians during the so-called 'Murid War'. Hadji Murat is an Avar, though much of the story is set in the territory of present day Chechnya.

²⁶ The work of the Edwardian journalist John Baddeley, correspondent for The Observer, who wrote a narrative Romantic history *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, London, Longman, 1908, has strongly influenced contemporary journalistic accounts, as has the cinematic contemporary mythologising of highlanders through the 'Braveheart' phenomenon of the mid-1990s. Karny (note 3), p xvi acknowledges the influence of the latter.

²⁷ A tainted yet widely used source, for example, is the chapter by the ethnic Chechen émigré writer Abdurahman Avtorkhanov, 'The Chechens and the Ingush during the Soviet Period and its Antecedents' in Marie Bennigsen Broxup (ed.), *The North Caucasus Barrier, The Russian Advance towards the Muslim World*, London: Hurst, 1992, pp. 146-194. See also, in particular, the work of Chesnov (note 19) and Artiunov (note 19). For Tishkov's critique

of this genre see Valery Tishkov, *Understanding Violence for Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Chechnya*, Geneva, Centre for Applied Studies in International Negotiations (CASIN), January 2001, especially the section headed 'Forging the Chechens from Ethnographic Trash', pp. 56-60.

²⁸ See Lieven (1998), Gall and de Waal (1998), Bennett (1998). Interviewees in Chechnya, on the other hand, tended to emphasise that 'Today, there is not such respect for tradition', see Lieven (1998) pp. 26-9. His interviews with the ex-computer salesman and leading Chechen guerrilla commander Shamil Basaev in 1995 revealed a largely secular man living in a secular family milieu, who was uninterested in the idea of an Islamic state. Lieven surmised that his later support for this project appeared 'to have come out of the war' *ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁹ Lieven (1998), pp. 327, 329-30. A rather unfortunate analogy, given that Achilles and Aeneas were on opposite sides in the Trojan war, both were military aggressors, and indeed, Aeneas was a military colonizer and the claimed mythological antecedent of Roman empire-builders.

³⁰ The word *clann* in Gaelic means extended kin.

³¹ I witnessed a classic example of the absurdity of ethnic chic at the RIIA Chatham House on 10 March 1998 when, after delivering a speech on "Chechnya: our future as a free nation", a bemused Chechen President Maskhadov was presented with a *kinzhal* (a large curved dagger), dating from the nineteenth century and with decorative motifs supposedly of Chechen craftsmanship, by an Oxford don. It occurred to me as I watched that this was the equivalent of presenting Gerry Adams, the leader of Sinn Fein, with a *cliath mhor*.

³² Suzanne Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations: The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder*, London: Zed Books, 1994

³³ A *zikh* is a ritualistic entrancing dance to drums of the Qadiriya order of Sufism.

³⁴ Gail Lapidus, 'Contested Sovereignty. The Tragedy of Chechnya', *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Summer 1998, pp. 5-49, at pp. 10 and 15.

³⁵ Lieven cites a Russian Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK) report of 1994 that identified Zavgaev's network as the 'Tyerekhsloi' clan. Lieven (1998), p. 336.

³⁶ Dudaev had become famous throughout the USSR when, as a Soviet air force commander in Estonia, he had shown sympathy with the Popular Front.

³⁷ For an account of Dudaev's seizure of power see Flemming Splidsboel-Hansen, 'The 1991 Chechen Revolution: The Response of Moscow', *Central Asia Survey*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1994, pp. 395-407. For a detailed discussion of the impact of the Chechnya issue in Russian politics in the early 1990s see: William Hayden, 'The Political Genesis of Conflict in Chechnya, 1990-1994', *Civil Wars*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1999, pp. 23-56.

³⁸ See E. Schneider, 'Moscow's Decision for War in Chechnya', *Aussenpolitik*, Vol. 46, No.2, 1995, pp. 157-167. Lieven, citing Russian sources, states that Dudaev's government took from between 300 million to one billion dollars from oil revenues, and most of it was extra-budgetary: Lieven (1998), p. 75.

³⁹ An interview in *Trud*, 15 March 2001.

⁴⁰ Schneider (1995); Vladimir Mau, *Yeltsin's choice: Background to the Chechnya Crisis*, London: Social Market Foundation, 1994.

⁴¹ Schneider (1995); Michael McFaul, 'Eurasian letter: Russian politics after Chechnya', *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1995, No. 99, pp. 149-168; Liliia Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999; Lapidus (note 34).

⁴² For Yeltsin's own racist views on Khasbulatov's 'oriental nature' see Boris Yeltsin, *The View from the Kremlin*, HarperCollins, London: 1994, p. 186.

⁴³ For the categorisation of positions and their main adherents see Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition?: The Rise, Fall, and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996*, BCSIA Studies in International Security, Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press, 1999, pp. 306-10, 328-33.

On the 1994-6 conflict leading Liberals such as Sergei Stankevich, Andrei Kozyrev, Boris Nemtsov and Anatoly Chubais supported intervention, while Galina Starovoitova, Yegor Gaidar, Gavril Popov, Yeltsin's own special adviser on Human Rights issues, Sergei Kovalev, and Yabloko leader Grigory Yavlinsky, opposed. Even the non-interventionist camp tended to support Russian 'sovereignty' over Chechnya. The liberal non-state media, especially the newspaper *Izvestiia* and television company NTV took critical editorial positions. Since the renewal of war in late 1999 only Kovalev and Yavlinsky of the leading figures in the liberal/democratic forces remained opposed to the war, while Nemtsov has become one of the most vocal critics.

⁴⁴ This view predominated among Yeltsin's liberal ministers and advisers on nationality and federal questions, such as Sergei Shakhrai, Ramazan Abdulatipov, Valery Tishkov, Emil Pain, and Leonid Smirnyagin.

⁴⁵ For the standard formulation of the thesis that presidentialism hinders democratic transition see Juan Linz, 'The Perils of Presidentialism', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1990), pp. 51-69.

⁴⁶ There was much debate as to the constitutionality of Yeltsin's decree to launch the invasion. He did not declare a state of emergency (arguably a constitutional requirement) since this needed the approval of the Federation Council (the upper chamber of the parliament) - approval that the government knew would be difficult to obtain. Parliament appealed the decision to the Russian Constitutional Court, which after seven months of undeclared war, decided in July 1995 that the integrity of Russia was a matter of state security within the powers allocated to the president by the constitution. For an analysis of the case decision see Paola Gaeta, 'The Armed Conflict in Chechnya before the Russian Constitutional Court', *European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 1996, pp. 563-70.

⁴⁷ See Hughes, 'Managing Secession Potential' (note 13).

⁴⁸ The argument is that Sergei Shakhrai (a Terek cossack), Ramazan Abdulatipov (a Dagestani Avar), and their successor, Nikolai Yegorov (a Russian apparatchik from Krasnodar), were motivated by ethnic hatred of Chechens. Dunlop (note 18), pp. 215-16; Lieven (note 3), p. 76; Gall and de Waal (note 3), pp. 145-6; Bennett (note 3), pp. 313-14. Dunlop, for example, argues that Shakhrai 'as a Terek Cossack, appeared to share that group's corporate historical animosity toward the Chechens'.

⁴⁹ One obstacle to negotiations occurring earlier was the power of Russian parliament speaker Ruslan Khasbulatov, who obstructed attempts by government officials and parliamentarians to deal with Dudaev. See Gall and de Waal (note 3), p. 114-15.

⁵⁰ Key supporters such as Gantemirov, Soslambekov, and Labazanov deserted Dudaev, and ultimately ended up backing Russia.

⁵¹ Lieven (note 3), p. 76 citing Itar Tass.

⁵² *Segodnya* 17 February 1994.

⁵³ Tishkov (note 18).

⁵⁴ For vignettes of Yeltsin see Aleksandr Vasil'evich Korzhakov, *Boris El'tsin : ot rassveta do zakata*, Moskva: Interbuk, 1997; Vyacheslav Kostikov, *Roman s prezidentom: zapiski press-sekretaria*, Moskva: Vagrius, 1997. For encounters with Dudaev see Lieven (note 3), Gall and de Waal (note 3). In many respects, Dudaev was a typical 'Soviet man', had been born in Kazakhstan, never lived in Chechnya, married a Russian and was Russified, and made a successful career in the Soviet air force, including service against Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan. Although a loyal servant of the Soviet Union, he appears to have experienced a genuine conversion to the idea of an independent Chechnya as a result of his observations of the nationalist Popular Front in Estonia in 1989-90, while serving as commander of the Tartu airbase.

⁵⁵ Dudaev may well also have been a poor negotiator. Journalists report how he indulged himself with long contradictory monologues that went on for hours. Lieven has described

Dudaev as a 'histrionic deeply unstable' leader: Anatol Lieven (note 20), p. 148.

⁵⁶ The personal animus became irreparable when both men traded insults (indirectly) in summer 1994.

⁵⁷ McFaul (note 41). In a later defence of his actions, Yeltsin observed: 'The mistake I made was to share faith in the common might of our army', but made no other apologies for his 'war against terrorists', see Boris Yeltsin, *Midnight Diaries*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000, pp. 335-44.

⁵⁸ The most infamous was Ruslan Labazanov, a Chechen criminal boss (*abrek*) from Krasnodar who was appointed head of Dudaev's presidential guard in 1991-4. For a description see Lieven (note 3), pp. 29-32.

⁵⁹ The advance units were ambushed, surrounded and annihilated, with the loss of hundreds of troops and several hundred tanks and armoured vehicles.

⁶⁰ The capital Grozny was devastated by indiscriminate Russian bombing and shelling. One of the most widely reported massacres of civilians by Russian soldiers occurred in the village of Samashki, for which see A. Blinushov et al, *By all available means: the Russian Federation Ministry of Internal Affairs operation in the village of Samashki: April 7-8, 1995*, Moscow: 'Memorial' Human Rights Center, 1996. It was an echo of the My Lai massacre by US forces in Vietnam.

⁶¹ The 'vagueness' on the status of Chechnya may have been the inspiration of Guldumann. See Ivan Rybkin, Consent in Russia Consent in Chechnya, Lytten Trading and Investment Ltd, Abacus Trust and management services Ltd, [no place of publication], 1998, pp. 229-30. The moratorium on the status issue also reflected a similar arrangement in the Chechen-Ingush agreement of June 1991.

⁶² Rybkin (note 61), p. 229.

⁶³ *Izvestiia*, 13th May 1997, p. 1. The treaty was very brief and vague, having just five clauses. The signing ceremony was televised and for the first time Yeltsin publicly referred to Maskhadov as 'President of Ichkeria'.

⁶⁴ For a discussion of the limitations to international involvement in the Chechnya case see Emil Pain, 'Armed Conflict in Kosovo and Chechnya: A Comparison', *The Forced Migration Monitor*, Open Society Institute, No. 25 (September 1998), pp. 1-6; Ekaterina Stepanova, 'Kosovo and Chechnya: Illogical Parallels', *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 31, No.1, pp. 135-41.

⁶⁵ When Maskhadov travelled abroad he used, as Dudaev had done, his old Soviet passport.

⁶⁶ In April 1996 Clinton, referring to Russia's war in Chechnya at a summit with Yeltsin in the Kremlin stated: 'I would remind you that we once had a civil war in our country... over the proposition that Abraham Lincoln gave his life for, that no state had a right to withdrawal from our union': *The Washington Post*, April 23, 1996.

⁶⁷ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Annual Reports 1998 and 1999: <http://www.osce.org/docs>

⁶⁸ Khattab is a veteran of the war to expel the Soviets from Afghanistan. He has been fighting in Chechnya since 1995 and has built up strong ties with Basaev's forces.

⁶⁹ In April 1998, Basaev, then acting Chechen Prime Minister, created the Congress of Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan, the aim of which was to unite the two republics in an independent North Caucasus state.

⁷⁰ While Dudaev had sworn his constitutional oath on the Koran, we should read no more in to this act than we would in to Bill Clinton taking his constitutional oath on the Bible.

⁷¹ The part of Dagestan attacked, the Akkin district, had a large ethnic Chechen population and had been part of the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Republic until 1944.

⁷² Georgi Derlugian, 'Che Guevaras in Turbans: Chechens versus Globalization', *New Left Review*, Vol. 237, 1999, pp. 3 - 27.

⁷³ For Russians, the bombings seemed to fit a pattern of Chechen 'terrorism' set by the hostage taking and deaths in the episodes in Budennovsk in June 1995 and Pervomaisk-Kizlar in January 1996. There are suspicions, and some evidence, that the bombings were actually conducted as a provocation by the FSB. In the Russian city of Ryazan security forces were caught while planting explosives in an apartment building as an

‘exercise’: see *The Economist*, 9 October, 1999.

⁷⁴ The stance was strongly supported by the parties in the Duma, for example, see the statements by Vladimir Lukin, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee of the State Duma, and one of the leaders of the the main pro-democracy party Yabloko in late October 1999 in *International Affairs* (Moscow), Vol. 45, No. 6, 1999, pp. 107-110.

⁷⁵ Putin’s political beliefs are sketched out in a long policy statement issued on the eve of his appointment as Acting President: ‘Russia at the Turn of the Millenium’, 30 December 1999: http://www.government.gov.ru/english/statVP_engl_1.html. For an analysis of the recentralizing trends under Putin see James Hughes ‘From Refederalization to Recentralization’ in S. White et al eds, *Developments in Russian Politics 5*, London: Macmillan, 2001, pp. 128-146.

⁷⁶ See Roy Allison, ‘The Chechnia Conflict: Military and Security Policy Implications’ in Roy Allison and Christoph Bluth eds, *Security Dilemmas in Russia and Eurasia*, London: RIIA, 1998, pp. 241-80.

⁷⁷ Putin’s remarks came during a visit to Kazakhstan in September 1999. The crude rhetoric was mirrored by none other than Russia’s leading judge, Constitutional Court Chair, Marat Baglai, who declared that: ‘The problem of terrorism has created an extraordinary situation. We cannot use the same methods as in the fight against common crime when all complicated procedures should be observed... the liquidation of bandits is acceptable in this situation’. *Izvestia*, 1 October 1999.

⁷⁸ For a military account see Charles Blandy, *Chechnya: Two Federal Interventions: An Interim Comparison and Assessment*, Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Conflict Studies Research Centre, Camberley: 2000/01.

⁷⁹ Russia had repeatedly attempted and failed to employ this tactic before, even during its military occupation in 1994-6. In February 1995, after Russian forces occupied Grozny, a pro-Moscow government was set up under Salambek Khajiev, a leading member of the Chechen communist party nomenklatura. In July 1996 Zavgayev was brought back from Moscow and installed as Chechnya’s new president. He acquired the epithet Doku Aeroportovich, since he rarely travelled outside the heavily fortified Grozny airport. In late 1999 Russia released from prison Beslan Gantemirov, former Grozny mayor and Dudaev loyalist, with the aim of rallying a pro-Moscow Chechen leadership.

⁸⁰ In a televised election debate in late November 1999, the economic liberal, Anatoly Chubais, revealed himself to be aligned with hard line Russian nationalists when he called Yavlinsky a ‘traitor’ for his opposition to the war in Chechnya. See *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 27 November 1999 for extracts.

⁸¹ For the abuses see Politkovskaya (note 3); Nivat (note 3). Criticism from Western governments peaked in November 1999, when the US State Department criticised Russia for ‘excessive’ and ‘indiscriminate’ use of force against civilians: see ‘The Conflict in Chechnya and its Implications for U.S. Relations with Russia’ U.S. Ambassador-at-Large Stephen Sestanovich, Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for the New Independent States, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., November 4, 1999: <http://www.usembassy.it/policy/topics/russia/archive-2.htm>.

⁸² A sign of the increased pressure on Russia was its agreement to allow the OSCE to re-establish its mission to Chechnya in June 2001. It had been withdrawn at the height of the hostage taking in 1998.

⁸³ This policy is not without critics in the USA, for which see the editorial in the *Washington Post*, 4 October, 2001, ‘Why Chechnya Is Different’. German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder spoke of the need for ‘world opinion’ to take ‘a more differentiated approach’ (ie more understanding) to Russia’s conflict in Chechnya, reported in *The Guardian* 26 September 2001.

⁸⁴ Tolstoy's ascription of Nicholas I's approach to the Poles, that he 'hated them in proportion to the harm he had done them', seems appropriate for Putin's attitude to Chechens. The quote is from *Hadji Murat*.

⁸⁵ In November 1999 several leading Russian generals threatened to resign if there was a negotiated solution and political interference with their campaign. See *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, 5 November, 1999.

⁸⁶ The 'talks' between the Russian presidential envoy to the South Russia Federal District, General Viktor Kazantsev, and Mazkhadov's envoy, Akhmed Zakaev were held at Moscow airport on 18 November 2001. They demonstrated that Russia has set impractical preconditions for further negotiations of unilateral disarmament by Chechen forces. Thus, Putin's strategy for the present appears to be to seek an unconditional surrender of Chechen forces, or their annihilation.

⁸⁷ From an interview in *Focus*, 21 September 2001.