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Chechen Nationalism and the Tragedy of the Struggle for Independence

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Introduction

The conflict in Chechnya has attracted world attention. The Chechens are a nation in a region of many nations. Moscow views Chechen independence as a geopolitical “domino” threatening Russia’s disintegration. Chechens call for national self-determination and Islamic revival. The conflict pits the warriors of a small but proud and warlike nation against the regular troops and paramilitary formations of a great state struggling to redefine itself after seven decades of Communism. At the heart of the struggle remain Russia’s relations with those nations brought into the tsarist empire by force and subjected to totalitarian repression. Hostilities continue as the Chechens cannot expel the Russians and the Russians cannot prevent Chechen raids and terrorist actions.

Following a long tradition, the Russian government has defined the conflict as a struggle against banditry and terrorism—much as it did in Central Asia in the 1920s and early 1930s, and in Afghanistan in the late 1970s and 1980s. This legitimizes Russia’s course of actions, however ruthless the means, as a police function in the name of public order. The Chechens, meanwhile, refer to their war as a “struggle for national and political liberation” and an Islamic holy war, or *jihad*. Neither side sees the conflict as a civil war. Russia will not honor the Chechens with that political legitimacy, and Chechens refuse to accept the idea that they were ever voluntarily a part of the Russian Empire, Soviet state, or Russian Federation.

This struggle is a manifestation of what Samuel Huntington described as a “clash of civilizations.” Like other such conflicts it has its roots in the history of the interactions between

the protagonists. Chechens have embraced an Islamic revival to foster internal solidarity and to mobilize a broader struggle across the region. The region itself defines the clash.

Disputed Territory and a Clash of Civilizations

Steppe and mountain, Cossack and mountaineer, Christian and Muslim, soldier and warrior, oppressor and bandit—these dichotomies describe the conflict between Russians and Chechens. Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, a colonel who served in the Soviet Army, described the current war as the continuation of a four-century struggle. This is no exaggeration, since the struggle between Russians and Muslims of the Caucasus began in the seventeenth century. The unequal and bitter struggle has had a profound impact on the character of the Chechen nation, its social organization, and self-perceptions. Clan loyalty and personal freedom defined a Chechen warrior culture quite distinct from that of the Cossack settlers north of the Terek River.

Like most of the peoples of the Caucasus other than the Georgians and Armenians, the Chechens converted to Islam by the eighteenth century. Islamic faith linked Chechen culture to a greater identity, and provided the basis for alliances with other Islamic peoples of the region in their struggle with Orthodox Russia.

Clan life in a Chechen mountain village revolved around raising sheep and raiding. The clans practiced the blood-vendetta where no offense against clan honor could go unpunished, and feuds could go on for generations. To supplement their meager existence, Chechen warriors frequently raided north of the Terek, carrying off goods, animals, and slaves from Cossack settlements.

The Coming of Russian Rule and Chechen Resistance

The Russian advance south of the Terek began in earnest after the Wars of Napoleon. This coincided with a profound spiritual movement in Chechnya and other Islamic areas of the north Caucasus which sought to establish a Koran-based social order. Ultimately, the Russian military faced two wars in the North Caucasus: in the west against the Cherkess people and in the east against the peoples of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia.

Russian rule in the North Caucasus had been imposed by force and was thus maintained. Following the collapse of the Russian Empire, the North Caucasus peoples declared the formation of the Republic of the North Caucasus Federation in 1918, under the sponsorship of the Central Powers. Germany's defeat and the outbreak of civil war in southern Russia turned the North Caucasus into a battleground for Reds and Whites. However, after the civil war the Bolsheviks sent the Red Army into the region, overthrew the existing order, and annexed it in 1922.

Stalinism and Chechnya

Joseph Stalin, the Bolshevik Commissar of Nationalities and a Georgian, adapted the class struggle to the traditional policy of divide and rule. Soviet federalism provided a national veneer to a centralized state, controlled by the Communist Party, where Russians staffed the key party

posts within the various republics. The Chechens proved a difficult people to subdue. In 1929 they revolted against collectivization, leading to a decade-long struggle. Russians arrived to manage the oil industry with the development of Chechen oil fields.

During World War II, when the German Army advanced into the Caucasus, there were more signs of Chechen unrest and collaboration with the enemy. In late February 1944, Lavrenti Beria's NKVD carried out Stalin's "solution" to the Chechen Question—the mass deportation of Chechens to Central Asia. Over 70,000 Chechens of the 450,000 expelled died during transit or on arrival. Chechnya ceased to exist. The exile became the defining event for succeeding generations of Chechens. In 1957 Nikita Khrushchev decreed that the Chechens could return to their ancestral homelands. Chechnya and Ingushetia were joined administratively into the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic. This arrangement joined the rebellious Chechens with the traditionally loyal Ingush in a clear continuation of Moscow's policy of divide and rule. Inside Chechnya, Soviet officials made their own arrangements with local clans while keeping an uneasy eye open for signs of resistance to Communist rule.

Chechnya and the Struggle for National Self-Determination

When Mikhail Gorbachev embarked on his ill-fated attempt to save the Soviet system via *glasnost* and *perestroika*, Chechen nationalists saw an opportunity for national self-determination. In the chaos and collapse of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin led a resurgent Russian Federation and championed greater self-rule within the Union Republics. In his political struggle for control of Russia, Yeltsin encouraged the national republics within Russia to seek greater autonomy. The Chechens exploited this opportunity. On November 27, 1990, the Soviet of the Chechen-Ingush Republic unanimously dissolved the union of Chechnya and Ingushetia and declared their independence and sovereignty.

In the aftermath of the August Coup of 1991 and the collapse of efforts to reform the Union, Chechens voted for independence and overwhelmingly elected General Dudayev as their president. The Yeltsin government's ham-handed tactics to thwart independence convinced most Chechens that whoever was in power in Moscow was an enemy of self-determination.

Between Peace and War

At this juncture in the struggle for Chechen independence, Moscow was weak, and Grozny drifted into chaos. Crime and corruption grew at a staggering pace. Although Yeltsin viewed Chechen independence as a threat to Russia's territorial integrity and sovereignty and a magnet for other disgruntled Caucasian peoples chafing under Russian rule, his administration focused its efforts elsewhere. Russia was preoccupied with dissolving the Soviet system, trying to create a viable Russian government, and transforming the economy through privatization and marketization. The Chechens seized arms from corrupt and incompetent Russian officials, but did not create an effective regular military.

In 1994, fearing that a Yeltsin rival would emerge, Russia abandoned efforts to ally with Chechens opposed to their own increasingly arbitrary and corrupt government. Russia then attempted to overthrow the Chechen regime by covert action with disguised Russian military

personnel. The attack failed dismally. The Yeltsin government compounded the mistake by then mounting an overt and ill-prepared military intervention. Their failure to take Grozny by *coup de main* and the resultant protracted struggle reinforced the anti-Russian core of Chechen nationalism and led to an Islamic revival.

Chechnya: From War to War

Following the initial battle for Grozny and other cities, the war in Chechnya became a classic insurgency. The Chechens fell back to the hills south of the Terek to conduct partisan operations against Russian columns and garrisons. Russian forces occupying the villages of the south were undisciplined and quickly fostered a spirit of resistance among the civilian population. Russia found itself in a protracted and unpopular war. The Yeltsin government failed to develop a convincing case for the war and was embarrassed by the ability of the Chechens to mount raids into Russian territory.

With his popularity at rock bottom in a presidential election year, Boris Yeltsin needed to defuse the war in Chechnya. He negotiated a cease fire in the spring of 1996. When assured of re-election, Yeltsin renewed the fighting and promptly lost Grozny. This led to an internal debate in Russia, weighing the continuing damage to the army in continuing the conflict against the possibility of national dismemberment if the Chechens were allowed to secede. The peacemakers won, and the Russian Army withdrew, signing the Khasavyurt Accords on August 31, 1996.

Chechen military and political success strengthened the political hand of Colonel Aslan Maskhadov, who engineered the victory in Grozny. Maskhadov was elected President of Chechnya in early 1997, but his power base was quite limited. Personal and ideological/religious conflicts projected an image of a bandit republic with no one in charge. Law and order collapsed, and kidnapping and extortion became widespread. Varying Islamic factions produced further splits among the Chechen leadership.

For its part, the Russian government proved utterly incapable of developing a coherent political strategy regarding Chechnya. Some Russians wanted revenge or had personal reasons to stoke the fires of ethnic hatred with a well-financed media campaign. Even Russian moderates came to view Chechnya as a criminal land and a source of chaos. By 1998, both sides were preparing for a confrontation.

War Renewed without Decision

Events in the spring and summer of 1999 encouraged the resumption of hostilities. The NATO intervention in Kosovo, which bolstered the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army, disheartened the Russians and emboldened the Chechens. In August 1999, the Chechen military, with or without the support of President Maskhadov, led formations into Dagestan to ignite an Islamic insurgency. The Russian government moved to counter the insurgency. Yeltsin fired his latest prime minister, Sergei Stepashin, and replaced him with the new head of the Security Council, Vladimir Putin.

A series of bomb blasts in Russian apartment buildings brought the war home to the Russian people. Putin took the war deep into Chechnya, seeking to overthrow the Maskhadov government, vowing to eliminate the bandits/terrorists wherever they were found. Later, in London in March 2000, Putin cast the conflict as a fight against radical Islamic terrorism. He claimed that the West should support Russia.

After a deliberate advance to the Terek a well-prepared Russian assault took Grozny once again, but only after flattening much of the city with air, artillery, and rocket strikes. The Chechen resistance was forced from the city. The war reverted to insurgency.

The longer the war in Chechnya, the greater the risk of the territorial expansion of the conflict, and of external intervention. The war is a profound tragedy for Russian democracy and for Chechen nationalism. Violence drives out any chance for dialogue and compromise. General Alexander Lebed, a veteran of Afghanistan and one-time head of the Security Council, once remarked: "I have had occasion to see a lot of combat, and I affirm this fact: There are enough scoundrels in war on both sides—rape and sadism—all of this is present on both sides."

Future Prospects for Chechnya

Prudence suggests leaving predictions to tarot card readers, but one can forecast four alternative futures for the Russian-Chechen imbroglio: Chechnya and Russia separate; Russia continues to prosecute a protracted guerrilla war; Russia goes for the knock-out punch expanding the war beyond the borders of Chechnya; or Russian and Chechen leaders seek grounds for a compromise solution that leaves Chechnya autonomous but inside a federated Russia.

Should Russia and Chechnya agree to go their separate ways and Chechnya attains her full independence, Chechnya is likely to revert to the same situation that plagued the land between the 1996 cease fire and the current fighting. Russian intervention is the single unifying factor among most Chechens, and in the absence of a Russian threat, the various Chechen clans will re-establish control over their traditional territory and clash violently over disputed areas. Criminalization of the state and the great game developing over Caspian oil and gas will make foreign intervention more likely.

Russia, on the other hand, will discover if there is truth to the domino principle: that other peoples will take Russia's defeat as a sign to secede as well. The potential dismemberment of Russia would precipitate a major Eurasian crisis that would inevitably draw in neighboring nations and provoke other realignments of peoples and clans.

Should Russia continue to stay and fight it out, she may eke out a costly win. Despite the massive efforts required to win the war and rebuild the area, the Russians may have to re-fight the independence-minded Chechens in fifty years or so. Fighting a civil war over decades will recast the Russian state, society, and armed forces, giving greater power to organs of internal security.

Faced with these two gloomy futures, the Russian leadership might consider expanding the war to inflict a decisive defeat on the Chechen resistance. Chechens now cross into Russian Dagestan

and Ingushetia and independent Georgia for medical treatment and supplies. The Chechens currently receive foreign aid (money, weapons, supplies, and warriors) from outside (predominately Islamic) countries. Russia might interfere significantly in the internal affairs of its own republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia by imposing martial law. Russia has conducted air strikes and hot-pursuit ground penetrations on Georgian territory, and could consider mounting a major incursion into Georgia in an attempt to wipe out the Chechen resistance. Such a move might blow the top off the entire region. Outside assistance could mount. Neighboring nations could react militarily and economically to an attack on a sovereign state.

Russians and Chechens deserve a better future. The best possible answer is a political settlement based on the limited ability of each side to impose its will upon the other. However, having mobilized their public opinion against the “enemy,” neither leadership now is in a position to engage in serious negotiations. Unfortunately, at this juncture, it doesn’t seem to be in the cards.