

## **Explain the chief causes of the conflict in Chechnya**

The two Chechen wars have been one of the most notorious conflicts of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The largely bloodless collapse of the USSR and Russia's subsequent transition to democracy is marred by the conflict in the Northern Caucasus which since 1991 is said to have cost as many as a hundred thousand victims. But what are the roots of this conflict? Why are the Chechens so desperate to break out of the Russian rule and what are Russia's reasons for refusing them to do so?

In an attempt to answer these questions this essay will first look at the history of the Russo-Chechen conflict – its roots can be traced as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and in order to fully comprehend the reasons for the current state of affairs, it is necessary to place it in a historical context. The period from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards will be looked into, with a particular focus on the forced deportation of 1944; the essay will argue what the Chechens perceive as continuous mistreatment and victimisation at the hands of their Russian neighbours is the main reason for their desperate determination in resisting the Russian rule and thus a major cause of the current conflict. The focus of the essay will then shift to the years immediately after the collapse of the USSR, as the developments which took place at this time were of paramount importance in shaping today's outlook not just of Chechnya, but the region of Northern Caucasus as a whole. It will be argued that whilst Moscow was never likely to put up with an antagonist regime in Grozny, the catastrophic mismanagement of the country by Dzhokhar Dudayev forced its hand in cracking down on the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and ending the Chechen dreams of sovereignty. Finally, the essay will conclude by attempting to shed some light on what the future may hold for the people of Chechnya.

The presence in the region of Northern Caucasus of the Turkic tribes from which today's Chechens are descended can be traced as far back as five thousand years; the ancestors of today's Russians, on the other hand, have been trying to infiltrate the region since the late 1500's, however, it was only in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when they managed to establish a lasting foothold in the Caucasus. The Russian expansion to the south turned the Caucasus into a region where the Orthodox Christianity clashed with Islam – thus the ethnic and national conflicts in

the region have additional religious factor, which often in the past contributed to their severity. Under Catherine the Great, Russian efforts to subdue the region were intensified and eventually resulted in the failed Mansour Rebellion. After Russia successfully conquered Georgia in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, to make its southern border secure from Turkish and Persian troops it became necessary for the Russians to pacify the region of today's Chechnya and Dagestan.

The methods used by Russians under the leadership of Aleksei Yermolov and then Ivan Paskevitch to keep the local population in check were often extremely brutal: one of the most notorious examples is the Dadi-Yurt massacre when a village selected at random in retribution for the Chechens stealing Russian horses was razed to the ground and the population nearly completely exterminated (Dunlop 1998). Even though relatively successful in the short term, such exploits had in the long run strengthened the animosity towards the Russian rule in the region; they also pushed the locals firmly towards militant Islam. The subsequent waves of deportation further reinforced these trends. After the Caucasian War, the tsar Alexander II decided that the best way to pacify the region once and for all was to ethnically cleanse it of the Islamic population. As a result, by 1866 more than half a million Caucasian Muslims were forcibly resettled in the Ottoman Empire, approximately fifth of them Chechens (*ibid*). A decade later, following the Russo-Turkish war, the Chechens returned to the area, only to find their land redistributed amongst Russian Cossacks, a martial tribe which, it was hoped, would seal the Russian southern border. This, and the unequal treatment at the hands of the Russians of Chechens and Cossacks made unrest and ethnic tensions in the area inevitable.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 briefly gave the people of North Caucasus hope for peace; in January 1921 a "Soviet Mountain Republic" was created, freedom of religion was granted to its citizens, and lands given by the tsars to the Cossacks returned. The Chechen's hope was, however, short-lived: within a few years the religious freedoms were revoked, a policy of forcible russification was introduced, and the borders readjusted to "dilute" the Chechen population with other ethnicities; the brutal farm collectivisation and the terror of the great purge of the 1930's caused mayhem in the Caucasus and further alienated its population.

The Russo-Chechen relations up until the World War II can thus hardly be described as cordial or peaceful. It was, however, the WWII that provided Chechens with the most important reason to detest the Russians. In the course of the War, J. Stalin's regime accused Chechens "as an entire people" of supporting the Nazi Germany in the war against their Soviet motherland; an accusation largely, though not completely, baseless. As a punishment, Chechens, together with several other nations of the Soviet Union, were to be completely deported to Siberia. According to moderate estimates as a result of this forcible resettlement as much as a quarter of the total Chechen population lost their lives, though some scholars claim that the actual figure is closer to forty percent of the population (Dunlop 1998, Conquest 1970); in 2004 European Parliament adopted a resolution by which "*the deportation of the entire Chechen people to Central Asia on 23 February 1944 on the orders of Stalin constitutes an act of genocide*" (European Parliament 2004). Even though after Stalin's death the Chechens were eventually permitted to leave Siberia and return to their native lands, under the leadership of Khrushchev and then Brezhnev they continued to perceive themselves as a victimised people: Moscow did everything in its power to dilute the Chechen population with Cossacks and native Russians, and the dreaded inclusion of Chechen lands into the Russian Empire was celebrated as a "voluntary union"; to humiliate the Chechens even more a monument to the despised Yermolov was erected in Grozny, the capital city of the republic.

Ever since the Russian Empire expanded into the Northern Caucasus, the local population's experience with the new masters was invariably negative. The tsars saw it as necessary to bring the region firmly under their own control in order to secure the southern border of the Empire – the local languages, customs, and religion were suppressed out of fear that in case of a conflict with the Ottoman Empire, the locals would side with their distinct Turkic – and Islamic – relatives from the south, rather than their Russian masters, thus offering the Ottomans an easy passage through the mountains and into the Russia proper. The Caucasian peoples did everything in their power to resist these efforts and were repeatedly punished, often with excessive cruelty. These tactics, even if successful in the short run, in the long term had an effect of strengthening not just the Chechen's attachment to Islam, but also of awakening their own national identity, which had strong anti-Russian overtones. After two hundred years of almost continuous mistreatment at the hands of their

Russian masters, the people of Chechnya were understandably desperate to break out of the influence of their powerful neighbours.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the words of the new Russian president Boris Yeltsin who explicitly encouraged the former Soviet republics to “take as much sovereignty as you can swallow” reignited Chechen hopes for freedom and in November 1991 Dzhokhar Dudayev unilaterally proclaimed the independence of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Even though the state was not formally recognised, the internal power struggles prevented Moscow from reacting decisively and allowed Dudayev’s regime to strengthen its grip on power. Moreover, his experience as a former major general in the Soviet army allowed Dudayev to quickly build up an effective and well equipped army: former Eastern Bloc states were full of well-trained combatants whose military careers were cut short by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and who easily enough could be recruited as mercenaries; furthermore, the Caucasus, as an area of key strategic importance to the USSR, was full of modern weaponry often guarded by demoralised troops who could be bribed – or, if necessary, bullied – into giving up their arms to well-organised Chechen forces. In addition, as Muslims, Chechens were able to attract both mercenaries and financial support from Islamist communities around the world, who in their struggle saw an opportunity to establish an Islamist state in the strategically important region. Thus, taking advantage of Moscow’s preoccupation with managing the collapse of the USSR as a world superpower, in a very short time a small group of people succeed in creating a quasi-independent entity with a fully functioning army. Yeltsin, who eventually managed to wrestle the power from Mikhail Gorbachev, seeing as deposing Dudayev would not be possible without a large-scale bloodshed, chose not to intervene directly and so despite not achieving formal international recognition as an independent state, from late 1991 onwards Chechnya functioned as a *de facto* sovereign state.

The aforementioned developments of the early 1990’s, as well as the fact that many of the former Soviet republics were allowed to reinvent themselves as sovereign states at least formally independent from Russian influence led many to believe that Moscow would simply accept the status quo in the republic and eventually allow Chechnya to develop into an independent country. This, however, was not to be. There are a number of significant differences between, say, the Baltic States and

Chechnya, which mean that whereas losing the former would not hurt Russia in any significant way, keeping the latter is of critical importance to modern Russia's national interests.

First and foremost, just like in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, its geographic position makes the Northern Caucasus a region of vital strategic importance to Russia, though for completely different reasons. Whilst in the past it was seen as a southern gate of the empire through which an enemy could pass into the country and which the Empire wanted to guard at all cost, today the area is more of a bridge which has to remain open in order for Russian interests to be served. Whilst Chechnya's territory itself is not particularly resourceful – though it does have some oil reserves – it provides a gateway to the gas and oil-rich regions around the Caspian Sea through the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline; a number of oil-processing plants are also located in the country. Since both gas and oil are cornerstones of Russian economy, securing the supply routes is of paramount importance and with the ever-increasing prices and oil reserves running dry Moscow is sure to do everything in its power to ensure the secure and steady flow of resources. For this reason alone, it was only a matter of time before Russians would oust the unsympathetic government in Grozny and put an end to the Chechens' dreams of independence. Within just couple of years after taking power, however, Dudayev and his faction provided Yeltsin with a number of other, even more pressing reasons.

Before 1991 the Chechen people have never in history experienced independent statehood. As such, the country desperately lacked educated elites skilled in running a state on a political and economical level – the few people with any administrative experience perished in Stalinist purges of the late 1930's. Dudayev himself, as a former military man, had no political qualifications whatsoever, and was only able to take power due to personal charisma and decisiveness in the chaos of the late 1991 – and not without resorting to undemocratic methods. His circle's economic credentials were even worse, as the ridiculous plan of building a "gigantic pipeline to the Middle East...to sell Chechen drinking water to the Arab countries" clearly shows (Dunlop 1998). As a result, within months the country descended into chaos and the economy entered the state of near-collapse. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the oil industry developed into the area's leading sector – since Chechnya was a part of the centrally planned Soviet economic system there was no need for economic

diversification and so apart from the traditional farming Chechnya had no other significant industry. The oil processing plants were, however, for the most part manned by native Russians; after the collapse of the USSR violence towards ethnic Russians in the area was widespread and great many of them chose to migrate to Moscow and other Russian areas, which immediately resulted in sharp decline of oil production – a 60% decrease between 1992 and 1993 (Dunlop 1998). Other sectors of Chechen economy also suffered from gross mismanagement – food production declined by 46% in 1993 alone, as opposed to an 18% increase in Russia at the same time; unemployment began to rise uncontrollably (*ibid*). The social services and healthcare system, which already in Soviet times lagged far behind the Soviet average in terms of effectivity, quickly became overburdened and soon collapsed completely. This already difficult situation was made even worse by the fact that Chechens as a society were generally very poorly educated: in 1989 less than 5 percent held university degrees and just 34% had secondary education [Dunlop 1998].

The poor education and disastrous economic and social conditions in the republic had pushed many Chechens towards various criminal activities. Even before the “Chechen revolution” of 1991 took place, many of them had links with criminal underworld – this situation stemmed from the fact that the extremely harsh conditions during their exile in the 1940’s and 1950’s meant that engaging in criminal activity was often the only way to survive – but before the 1991 the Soviet authorities had largely kept the crime levels in check. After Dudayev took power, however, his catastrophic mismanagement of all aspects of life in the country quickly turned Chechnya into a “gangsterocracy”. Crime became a main source of income not just for gangs, but for the state as a whole. The Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline running through Chechen territory became a prime target for the thieves: according to some sources as much as 15 million tonnes of oil could have been stolen in the period between Dudayev’s coming to power and the First Chechen War, that is 37 months (Holoboff 1995). Even if he wanted to stop the plundering of oil Dudayev simply had no means of exercising effective control over the whole of the republic’s territory. Train robberies became another major source of income – according to official Russian statistics between 1992 and 1994 1354 such events took place, more than one per day on average (Dunlop 1998). In the light of Chechnya’s geographical

position as a bridge between Russia and central Asia, it was obvious that Moscow would not tolerate this situation for long.

Stealing oil and the cargo from Russian trains were not the only illegal ways in which the Dudayev's regime made money. Chechnya became one of the biggest sources of counterfeit money in the world – in 1993 it was estimated that at least 40% of all counterfeit currency in Russia originated from Chechnya, an area with just 0.7% of Russia's population (Mau 1994). Even more importantly, the country became something of a "world crime centre": vast amounts of drugs and weapons were transported through Chechen territory without any control whatsoever. Grozny became one of the world's largest smuggling hubs – according to Russian estimates as many as five international flights a day – that is over 1500 a year – were served by the city's airport outside of any governmental or fiscal control, carrying drugs, weapons, criminals, and other illegal cargo, which were then pushed throughout the former Soviet Union and beyond by Chechen criminal networks. Russia's economic losses caused by Chechnya in just the three years between 1991 and 1994 are estimated to be as high as \$15 billion (Chubarov 2001).

Whilst Dudayev's inept government was a major factor in Chechnya's rapid descent into chaos, it would be a mistake to solely blame the Chechens for it – the functioning of the "criminal paradise" would not have been possible without the support of corrupt high-ranking Russian officials. There is, for example, evidence that the train robbers did not select their targets at random, but knew in advance what each of the trains contained; this information could only have been obtained from Moscow (Payin and Popov 1995, quoted in Dunlop 1998). Similarly, Chechen oil-processing plants could not function without Russian consent – according to E. Holoboff (1995) the corrupt system of oil exporting had been protected amongst others by the head of Security Service and deputy prime minister of Russia. As for the unsanctioned flights from the Grozny airport – it is inconceivable that a former world superpower that is Russia lacked the resources to enforce an effective air blockade of a country the size of Chechnya had it wanted to; since the republic formally remained a part of Russia, any plane landing at the airport was effectively infringing Russian air space and without a permission from Moscow to do so would have been shot down in a matter of minutes.

Another reason why it became necessary for Moscow to rid itself of Dudayev and his regime was the fact that their ideas were beginning to constitute a serious threat to Russian territorial integrity. The Chechen president had a messianic idea of creating an Islamic emirate in the North Caucasus stretching from the Caspian Sea in the east all the way to the Black Sea in the west. Apart from Chechnya, which he hoped would play the leading role in the new state, it would cover the territories of Dagestan, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia, where Russians account for as much as a quarter of total population; if created, it would cut Russia's oil and gas supply lines from the Middle East. Although the likelihood of Dudayev succeeding in creating the Caucasian emirate was moderate at best, by allowing Chechnya to break out of the Russian Federation Moscow would run a much more realistic risk of sparking a chain reaction of independence claims from other federal republics; Ingushetia, Dagestan, Tuva, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Chuvashia, Kalmykia, and Karachay-Cherkessia are all republics with Russian population of under a third of total, and in four more, including the gigantic Yakutia, Russian population is outnumbered by other nationalities. To nip the problem in the bud, Yeltsin decided to crack down on the mutinous republic.

Finally, in 1994 Moscow came to the conclusion that it could no longer tolerate the situation in the Chechen republic, which, in the words of general Alexander Lebed became "an open bleeding wound", and decided to remove Dudayev and his regime and restore constitutional order in the republic. At first, an indirect – "half-force" – solution was preferred, that is arming and financing opposition, however, when that failed, in December 1994 Yeltsin sent troops into the republic expecting a victory "before the end of the year" (Hughes 2008). The ensuing bloody 21-month war had devastating consequences for both Chechnya, whose population was once again decimated, and for Russia, whose inability to inflict a decisive defeat on a country half the size of Albania greatly weakened its international position. Eventually, after Dudayev was killed, a peace agreement was signed, which envisaged deferring a decision on Chechen independence for five years. Still, as a result of the war and Dudayev's chaotic rule beforehand, the republic was divided among warlords; the new president's, Aslan Maskhadov's, efforts to build a coherent government failed miserably and apart from the capital city, the country was effectively out of his control. When in 1999 the Chechen forces invaded the neighbouring Dagestan in an effort to use its Chechen minority to destabilise the republic and drag it into an

armed conflict on their own side, Moscow was left with no choice but to intervene again, thus sparking the Second Chechen War.

Although after the First Chechen War of 1994-1996, the Chechens could have retained some hope for a favourable solution to their situation, this hope now seems to have been lost. Whilst in the early stages their struggle was seen as a fight for freedom and viewed with empathy in many circles – even in Russia in 1995 almost two thirds of the society opposed a military solution to the Chechen problem (Chubarov 2001) – this support has now largely declined. That is mainly due to the methods the Chechens used in the more recent stages of the conflict: in 1999 four apartment buildings were blown up killing nearly 300 people – although the perpetrators were never caught, the authorities were quick to blame the Chechen terrorists; in 2002, in the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow Chechen terrorists took almost 900 hostages of which almost 200 lost their lives when the Russian forces stormed the building using chemical weapons. Finally, any international support for the Chechen cause must have died out when in September 2004 a group of Chechen and Ingush terrorists entered a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, and took over a thousand people hostage, vast majority of them children – over 300 people died in the ensuing shootout between the militants and the Russian forces. In the early 1990's it seemed that Chechnya had a chance if not for sovereignty, then at least for a degree of independence from Moscow; it is now clear that this chance has been lost and ultimately it is their own inability to govern their country effectively that cost the Chechens their hopes for freedom.

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