

Critically analyse the sources of the First Chechen War (1994-6)

The instability and fighting in Chechnya that has been a recurrent problem for the Russian federation since 1991 is the most recent phase in a conflict that has very deep historical roots. Russia first began to expand southward into the Caucasus region in the 1720s under Peter the Great (Seely 2001: 23). The friction that this caused between the Russian state and the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus has never been resolved and has led to sporadic, violent clashes throughout the past two and half centuries. This has particularly been the case for Chechnya which, out of all the regions in the Caucasus, has exhibited the most hostility toward Russian interference and control. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union the Russian Federation has embarked on two military campaigns, 1994-6 and 1999-2009, in an attempt to determine the seemingly perennial Chechen issue. This essay will attempt to elucidate on the historic sources of this long-standing conflict and explore the more contemporary origins of the First Chechen War.

Any discussion of the recent conflict in Chechnya must firstly acknowledge the most fundamental of causes – the long-standing antipathy between Chechen culture and the Russian state. Within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union Chechens experienced two centuries of ostracism and persecution, manifest in such policies as Russification under the Tsars. However, the event with the most recent importance and arguably the most devastating effects was Stalin's decision to deport the whole of the Chechen population during WW2 to central Asia and redistribute their lands to new settlers (Mersky 1997: 81). It is estimated that 'over a quarter of the deported Chechens' died as a result (Cornell 2000: 187). Despite the turmoil caused by such events and attempts to dilute Chechen culture, the people of the region have maintained a very distinct identity. One of the characteristics of this is a society that is largely tribal and anarchical; Chechens 'had never experienced any government' (Seely 2001: 29). It could be contended therefore that not only were Russians seen as foreign occupiers, but the concept of state and government was to a degree a foreign concept that Chechens were not accustomed to. Even when Dudayev came to power in 1991 as the head of a Chechen government, factionalism and tribalism were still very evident in Chechen society and political culture. Such disunity became increasingly evident during 1993 as Dudayev's popular support diminished, yet when Russia launched its military offensive in 1994 Chechens largely set aside their differences to confront the foreign aggressor. A widespread and enduring Chechen enmity to Russian exploitation therefore lies at the heart of the recent conflict and is the reason that so many Chechens have been willing to take up arms to defend against Russian intervention.

The rise of Gorbachev to Soviet leadership in 1985 and the establishment of his reformist agenda catalysed the disintegration of the USSR, and this event in Russian politics held massive repercussions for Chechnya. Gorbachev's 'glasnost', or policy of 'openness', allowed the USSR's ethnic minorities to expose the various atrocities committed against them over the past seven decades and effectively gave voice to those wishing to break away from the Soviet Union. Demands for autonomy were most audible within the Union Republics, particularly the Baltic nations, but claims to independence were also prevalent in certain regions within Russia. 'Once the constituent republics of the Soviet Union raised the banner of revolt during Gorbachev's period in office, the future of the Russian Republic, with its patchwork of ethnic minorities, became a major preoccupation' (Waller 2005: 77). In fact, when Gorbachev was attempting to accommodate these claims, Boris Yeltsin, President of the Russian Republic, encouraged the autonomous republics to 'take as much power as you can swallow' (cited in Waller 2005: 65). Of course, Yeltsin had unwittingly made the situation more difficult for himself as he would have to confront the issue of regional separatism after the collapse of the USSR and the fall of Gorbachev. Chechnya, although not initially of greatest concern (the resource-rich region of Tatarstan was considered most important), soon became the epitome of Moscow's problems with ethnic independence movements. The region experienced a cultural reawakening with the rebuilding of mosques and the re-emergence of Islamic schools (Smith 2001: 74). 'The shallowness of Soviet homogeneity was exposed almost overnight' (Smith 2001: 83). Islam was essential to the character of the new Chechen identity and 'has been central to their resistance to Russian expansion' (Baum 2006: 221). One independence slogan read 'Chechnya is not a subject of Russia, it is a subject of Allah' (Smith 2001: 125). Wahhabism, an extremist sect within Islam, began to take root across Chechnya although its effect was limited during the build up to the First Chechen War; Islamic fundamentalism played a more significant role in the development of the Second Chechen War particularly in the form of an abundance of terrorist attacks.

By 1991, Dzhokhar Dudayev had risen to prominence as the leader of the independence movement and was elected president, quickly proclaiming Chechen independence and a new constitution (Waller 2005: 79). In the early 1990s the collapse of the Soviet Union beset the central administration in Moscow with a multitude of political difficulties and therefore the problem in Chechnya was overshadowed by more pressing concerns. Not until the political situation had stabilised somewhat after the contest between parliament and the government in 1993 did Moscow fully commit to resolving the issue. The government at first employed more indirect methods to resolve the problem mainly in the form of funding and arming anti-Dudayev forces in Chechnya, such as the one led by Umar Avturkhanov. The subsequent failure of this course of action in the summer and

autumn of 1994 was the immediate reason for direct military intervention. There exists a variety of theories, assessing the environment in both Chechnya and Moscow, which attempt to explain why conflict eventually broke out. The most obvious and unchallengeable reason for military action was to stop Chechnya seceding from the Russian Federation. It is arguable that Yeltsin and his government was in fact more fearful of the repercussions of such an event rather than Chechen independence in itself – to grant sovereignty to Chechnya would be a dangerous precedent at a time when many ethnic minorities within Russia were flirting with the same ideas. Moscow feared that a chain reaction could occur so that, like the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation would disintegrate down into its constituent republics (Seely 2001: 3). Even if the Russian Federation did not collapse as a result, any loss of land in the north Caucasus would be detrimental to Russia's influence in and links to the trans-Caucasian states (Smith 2001: 73). Furthermore, there was the spectre of a united North Caucasian independent state, embodied in the newly created organisation, the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus (Dunlop 1998: 140-1). The idea to create an autonomous state in the North Caucasus region has a long history stretching back to the conception of the Caucasus Mountain Republic in 1918.

It would appear also that Yeltsin, along with some of his close associates, had some sort of personal investment in the crisis in Chechnya. It is widely accepted among commentators that Ruslan Khasbulatov and his return to Chechnya in August 1994 was a catalyst and a source of the conflict that began later that year (Lieven 1999: 90-1) (Seely 2001: 164-5). As Speaker of the Russian Parliament he had staged a coup against Yeltsin in October 1993 which ultimately failed but made him Yeltsin's greatest political foe. Khasbulatov's return to Chechnya and his attempt to become an alternative option to Dudayev and the other political factions signalled his return to politics. This development encouraged Yeltsin to increase support to the anti-Dudayev opposition under Avturkhanov, and later in the year to intervene even further to impede the growth of Khasbulatov's influence and stop power falling into his hands.

Seely has investigated Khasbulatov's effects on the Chechen War even further by considering the repercussions of his attempted coup in October 1993 on Yeltsin's administration (2001: 150). Seely argues that it was a contributing factor to the growing conservatism of Yeltsin's government that occurred in 1992 and 1993 - despite the failure of the coup Yeltsin became aware of the strength of the traditional hardliners or 'hawks' and was forced to accommodate them (2001: 150-1). The result was, in 1993, the 'pro-western democratic reformers gave way to a revamped old regime made of neo-imperialists and realpolitik proponents' (Smith 2001: 70). Dunlop goes as far as to suggest that this 'virulent form of Russian neo-imperialism' was the fundamental

cause of the war (1998: 222). The removal of more liberal democratic politicians was mirrored in the Kremlin's policy making process which became increasingly undemocratic. The Constitution of 1993 gave the President overwhelming individual power making the 'presidency almost unimpeachable' (Smith 2001: 139). Furthermore, Yeltsin began to rely on a small clique of officials to formulate policy, a sort of court politics. These politicians were largely situated within the new Security Council (established 1992) which increasingly influenced Yeltsin (Seely 2001: 151) and by August 1994 had 'took over all the power to make Chechen policy' (Lieven 1999: 89). J.B. Dunlop has singled out Minister Sergei Shakhrai in particular as being central to Moscow's reluctance to cut a deal with Dudayev; by mid-1993, 'Shakhrai seems to have decided that there was no further point in dealing with Dudaev even through proxies' (1998: 214). Thus, the government was directed by a small group of oligarchs with little inclination to compromise with Chechnya. Serious democratic and objective discussion of the Chechen problem, a barrier to drastic and ill-advised action, was therefore unlikely to occur. Maybe the most ominous sign of political change for Chechnya though was the new military doctrine, adopted in November 1993, which stressed the importance of the 'near abroad' and the potential problems caused by 'internal, rather than external enemies' (Smith 2001: 114); it was obvious Chechnya was not going to go unnoticed for much longer.

In regards to the political situation within Moscow, Pain and Popov, officials within the government at the time, have emphasised a separate issue they believe to be of decisive importance - the 'short, victorious war' theory posits that Yeltsin's prime motivation for military intervention in Chechnya was the prospect of a triumphant war which 'would improve his prospects for reelection' (cited in Seely 2001: 202-3). Elections would take place in 1996 and Yeltsin's approval rating at the beginning of the Chechen conflict was dismal, standing at approximately 8% (Smith 2001: 138). Yeltsin, according to Smith, was hoping to tap into the growing 'nostalgia for Soviet empire and Russian grandeur' by bringing Chechnya to heel and safeguarding Russian unity (2001: 138). It is rather difficult to quantify the importance of the elections for Yeltsin, but it would seem that this was not his main priority for intervening in Chechnya; the gradual swing to the right of Russian politics and resolution of other political problems arguably played a greater role in placing Chechnya at the top of Moscow's agenda.

The role of the Dudayev regime in bringing about war with Russia is an extremely significant one, and thus the environment within Chechnya must be analysed. Relations between Russia and Dudayev's Chechnya appeared irrevocably hostile, but this was in large part due to Dudayev's intentionally antagonistic actions. Russian soldiers were unceremoniously kicked out of Chechnya and large quantities of Russian armaments

were appropriated by Dudayev's government. High profile Russians within Chechnya were murdered, such as Judge Samsonova and Dean Udodov (Dunlop 1998: 137), although Dudayev's involvement in such actions is questionable. Dudayev's general belligerence toward Russia accordingly led to little effort on his part to reach a compromise with Yeltsin. For example, in November and December 1993 the two sides appeared close to reconciling a draft treaty created by a Russian delegation along with the cooperation of several of Dudayev's allies (Lieven 1999: 75/6). However, when the Russian diplomats travelled to Chechnya to sign the treaty Dudayev dismissed them without any explanation whatsoever; Lieven prompts that 'Dudayev's remarkable ability to insult people' was 'not the least among the causes of the Chechen War' (Lieven 1999: 76). The bellicose nature of Dudayev's regime was further represented by the Chechen leader's periodic and public attacks on Yeltsin which led to a battle of egos of sorts between Yeltsin and Dudayev; 'the war was a highly personal struggle' (Tishkov 2004: 75). Dudayev is recorded as calling Yeltsin a drunkard on Russian television in 1994 (Cornell 2000: 209). This only served to increase tension and make the possibility of an agreed settlement ever more unlikely. The reason for Dudayev's raving nationalistic rhetoric is debateable but it was likely a combination of psychological instability and, probably more importantly, the need to maintain a constant state of fear and xenophobia within Chechnya upon which the regime could claim legitimacy.

The situation that transpired within Chechnya under Dudayev's rule was also a major cause of concern for Russia. The region had rapidly become a criminalised and unlawful state and the government immeasurably corrupt; many commentators have suggested that this provided impetus for Russia to intervene. Any sort of welfare system and government organisation had collapsed and those in the employ of the public sector often were not even paid; 'Dudayev's managing of Chechnya's economy was dismal' (Cornell 2000: 200). It is clear that throughout 1993 Dudayev's modest popularity among Chechens began to diminish and those who had previously been his allies, such as Gantemirov and Labazanov, began to turn against him. According to Labazanov, documents that came into his possession suggested that Dudayev had kept two billion roubles of oil revenues for himself (Sedlickas and Knezys 1999: 22). The situation within Chechnya became even more unstable during the summer of 1994 as Dudayev's power weakened and the various opposition forces began to control ever wider territories within Chechnya. In September the opposition began to coalesce as contacts were established between the factions under Gantemirov, Khasbulatov and Avturkhanov (Cornell 2000: 206). Subsequently Chechnya effectively degenerated into civil war; a 'pretext for Moscow to openly use force in Chechnya was now becoming sufficient' (Sedlickas and Knezys 1999: 32). Simultaneously, incidents of hijackings and kidnappings perpetrated by Chechens in their neighbouring regions increased significantly, adding greater friction

to the problem (Evangelista 2002: 30). While the apparent criminalisation of Chechen society was clearly an important factor as a source of the war, this must be placed in context. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, duplicity and corruption flourished within all of Russia's social, economic and political institutions, even with the government itself. Anatol Lieven notes Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin's involvement in aiding Gazprom, an energy company of which he was chairman, avoid government taxation (1999: 95). In this light, occupying Chechnya on the grounds of the corruption of the Dudayev regime is to a degree hypocritical, although the fact that Chechnya represented the most extreme example of instability is incontestable. In addition, any concern in Moscow for the plight of the Chechen population must be contrasted with Russia's conduct of the war, in which abuses to human rights were common and thousands of citizens, both Chechen and Russian, became collateral damage. However, it is indisputable that Dudayev's lack of concern to build a legitimate state system and the fact his government was overtly corrupt, encouraged Yeltsin, justifiably so, to intervene.

Potentially the most blatant example of the unscrupulous nature of the Dudayev regime was its exploitation of Chechnya's oil industries for individual profit. Sceptics in fact have suggested that powerful Russian individuals, within and outside of the government, cooperated with Dudayev in his illicit exportation of oil so as to profit also (Seely 2001: 189). While this accusation is difficult to prove, it is certainly true that the presence of oil, and more specifically the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline, in Chechnya was of great concern to Moscow and was a major contributor to the central government's desire for stability in the region. Chechnya is of immense geo-political importance because it is central to the transportation of oil from the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to Europe, but also simply as a trade route to Asia (Baum 2006: 225). Russian territorial integrity in the North Caucasus is therefore essential to its influence over the world's much-coveted oil resources and more generally its political weight on the international scene. In the 1990s various plans were proposed to build new pipelines to transport Kazakh and Azerbaijani oil resources which would circumvent Russia and thus render her largely redundant in the oil debate (Smith 2001: 72). The importance of the oil issue to the conflict is to some degree confirmed by the arrangement in Chechnya at present. Under Putin's direction, the region's oil trade has been placed firmly and uncompromisingly under the control of Moscow, much to the displeasure of the current and very dubious Chechen PM Ramzan Kadyrov.

In conclusion, Sedlickas and Knezys correctly assert that only 'the most primary purposes of the war are readily discernable: for Russia, this was an effort to preserve its "territorial integrity"; for the Chechens it was the fight for national independence' (1999: 3). The breakup of the Soviet Union was the immediate catalyst as this facilitated the

development of separatist thinking among Chechens and also created political anarchy within the former Soviet Union. Consequently, this offered greater political manoeuvrability to factions within Chechnya, namely Dudayev's regime. Following this there are a variety of subsidiary factors that contributed to hostility between Chechnya and Russia, most notably the growing conservatism and neo-imperialism within Moscow. The reality, however, is that the ultimate responsibility must lie with President Yeltsin and also to a large extent General Dudayev. 'This was Boris Yeltsin's war – to win, to lose, or to avoid altogether' (Evangelista 2002: 11). The responsibility certainly rested with them to find an accord, like Russia had done with Tatarstan in 1994. Dudayev was extremely uncompromising and yet Moscow was too quick in deciding to resolve the issue through covert operations and military action. Ultimately, the conflict represented a failure by both sides to resolve a political power struggle through peaceful means. Russia was not prepared to lose Chechnya because, not only would it represent a direct weakening of her power through loss of land and resources (oil in particular), but such an action could have had a general destabilising effect on the whole North Caucasus region. Equally, Dudayev was not prepared to countenance any deal with Russia unless Chechen independence was recognised. In this respect, Dudayev appears to have had a degree of legitimacy as he represented the interests of a significant proportion of Chechens, at least for a time, although of course his personal conduct and that of his regime was unnecessarily antagonistic and unproductive. Relations were further polarised by a degree of personal dislike at the top levels of both governments. For example, Yeltsin was not prepared to enter direct negotiations with Dudayev. Underlying all these issues, although less tangible and difficult to measure in impact, was an enduring enmity between Russian and Chechen people, rooted in over two hundred years of conflict.

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