

CONFLICT IN CHECHNYA: AN OVERVIEW

by Walter Bergen

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INTRODUCTION

On the night of December 31, 1995, Russian Federation forces launched a massive tank and infantry assault on the city of Grozny. The attack and subsequent defeat of Federal forces by lightly armed Chechen irregulars, propelled a little-known Caucasian people and city onto the TV screens and newspaper headlines of the Western world. The purpose of this article is to provide readers with the context for the present conflict in Chechnya, to describe some early efforts at peace making in the region, and to offer a preliminary analysis of the consequences of the conflict. This overview comes from the vantage point of field work in the former Soviet Union, with little access to what has been written about the Caucasus in the last few years. The overview summarizes conversations and meetings in which the author was an active participant.

GEOGRAPHY

Chechnya-Ingushetia under the Soviet Union was a small Caucasian Autonomous region encompassing nearly 20,000 sq. kilometers and approximately 1 1/4 million people. When Chechnya declared independence from the Soviet Union in September 1991, Ingushetia decided to remain within what became the Russian Federation. The land rises in from rolling plains in the north to an east-west cordillera in the south reaching in excess of 14,000 ft. Chechnya is bordered on the west by Ingushetia, an ethnic and linguistically related Caucasian ethnic group. To the north is the Russian Federation, to the east Daghestan, and the south Georgia. Georgia and Russia have traditionally been Christian (Orthodox), and the Ingush and Daghestani have traditionally been Muslim.

Chechens are one ethnic group in the midst of a plethora of ethnic groups populating the North Caucasus. Closely related to the Ingush, Chechens share the mountainous regions of the North Caucasus with Circassians, Daghestani (they being a conglomeration of many minor tribes), and Abkhazians.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF CONFLICT IN THE CAUCASUS

When a Mongol army was defeated at Kulikovo field in 1380, it signalled the turning point in Mongol fortunes upon Russian soil and the beginning of Russian expansionism. This victory with its strong historical links to Russian Orthodoxy in popular Russian

imagination served to bring together Russian colonial aspirations and the spread of Orthodoxy in what was to become Tsarist Russia.

Fighting a series of wars through the 15th and 16th century Russia defeated and annexed by turns Mongol/Muslim khanates on the Volga and in Central Asia. The first to fall was Tatarstan in 1552. With the capture of Astrakhan by Ivan the Terrible in 1556, the Caucasus became the focus of an international struggle that would pit the Ottoman Empire, the Crimean Khanate, Tsarist Russia, the Shaybanis of Turkestan and Iran in a 250-year-long chess game. The outcome of that struggle would end disastrously for the Caucasian inhabitants. "From 1552 until the eve of the Russian Revolution in 1917, Tsarist Russia extended its conquest of Muslim lands and incorporated them into the Russian empire."

According to Marie Bennigsen Broxup in her excellent introduction to the history of the North Caucasus in The North Caucasus Barrier, the history of Russia's engagement with the Caucasus can be separated into five periods.

1. Preliminary Moves, 1556-1604

In a series of strategic moves after the fall of Astrakhan in 1556, Russia attempted to annex first the western, then the central, and finally the eastern Caucasus. A variety of strategies were used: outright military conquest, co-option, colonial settlement, and forced Christianization. Kabarda, which was coopted by the Russians was attacked in 1587 by a joint Crimean and Ottoman force, which won a decisive military victory. In 1604 Tsar Boris Godunov began a military offensive which ended in disaster. Russian fortresses on the Sulak, Terek, and Sunja rivers were lost, and Russia retreated north to Astrakhan. Russia would not make major military moves in the area for over 175 years.

2. Peace and Social Change, 1604-1783

During this era Russia turned its attention to Europe, and the Ottoman empire maintained a protectorate after a military defeat at the hands of Iran. While there were no major military conflicts, three important changes would have significant repercussions for the future of the Caucasus. "First, religion became a major factor in the competition between the Ottoman Empire and Russia for the soul and alliance of the North Caucasus. Christianity retreated while Islam made steady progress in the western and central (regions of the) North Caucasus." Thus the foundation for future religious rivalries and wars was laid. Secondly, continued encroachment by Russian peasants (Cossacks) on the northern boundaries would play a significant role in future tensions and Russian strategies to gain military and political advantage. Thirdly, the decline of the Nogay horde north of the Caucasus meant that the military balance of power in the region became increasingly fragile. Russia would presently take advantage of this development.

3. Military Advance and Consolidation, 1783-1824

With the destruction of the Crimean Khanate and the fall of Azaq in 1783, "The road was open for a face-to-face confrontation between Russia and the North Caucasus." Uniting the linguistically and socially diverse tribes, Sheikh Mansur Ushurma, a Chechen, managed to lead a coordinated military campaign against Russian incursions from 1785-91. Sheikh Mansur was captured in the Ottoman fortress of Anapa in 1791 and died in exile in 1793. Russian advances continued under the leadership of General Ermolov. Using genocidal tactics for the first time in the Caucasus, Ermolov was able to subdue uncoordinated resistance by local princes and feudal lords.

4. 'Ghazawat' Holy Wars, 1824-1922

"During this period the North Caucasus underwent a total (social and religious) change: the feudal system was replaced by clans and free peasant societies (*uzden*), and the tariqat (the Sufi Orders) provided a new ideology and became deeply implanted among the population. Unity was formed around the Shariat law as opposed to the customary law of the *adat*. Arabic language and culture spread from Daghestan to the Western Adyghe territories, and the last heathen Ingush *auls* were converted to Islam in the 1860's." Muridism, military *jihad* inspired by Sufi orders would provide the ideological and organizational principles for resistance to Russian military conquests in 1824-59 under the legendary Imam Shamil and again in 1877-78 and 1920-21. In the last uprising of this period the Caucasus was conquered but not pacified. As Broxup states, "In fact all the problems remained."

5. The Soviet Period to Present Day, 1922-1995

The area witnessed several sporadic and ill fated rebellions. The Caucasus had its share of tragedy during the Stalinist purges. This period also witnessed the brutal genocide of mass deportation of North Caucasian nations in 1944-45. On December 12, 1994, Russian federal military units crossed the border with Chechnya threatening to consume the entire region in conflict. The first Russian Federal military casualties were soldiers ambushed in an Ingush village on the Chechen border. On December 31, 1994 Grozny was stormed. After almost a month of intense conflict the city fell. Organized armed resistance continues.

MODERN CHECHEN DIASPORA

Beginning on February 23, 1944, on Stalin's orders, Chechen and Ingush people were exiled *en masse* to Central Asia. Transported in winter with few supplies, probably half of the people died in transit or in the closing months of the winter. Stalin accused the Chechens and Ingush of treason after an armed uprising by Chechens and Ingushetians in 1943-1944. In fact, Germany never managed to enter Chechen territory nor is there any evidence that any material assistance was given. The uprising represented an attempt to assert indigenous Ingush-Chechen autonomy. The response was swift and vicious.

Chechens and Ingush were returned to their ancestral lands beginning in 1957 shortly after Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin. Small numbers of Chechen-Ingush people

returned to quietly rebuild their lives. Ethnic Russians, having settled in expropriated lands, were resented. Simmering tensions over the Prigordny region, an area formerly part of Ingushetia and annexed by Ossetia flared between nominally Christian Ossetians and nominally Ingush people resulting in a massacre of between 3,000 and 10,000 Ingush shortly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the fall of 1992.

Today some 100,000 Chechens live in Kazakhstan, and an unknown number of Chechens live and trade in Moscow. Ruslan Khasbulatov, an ethnic Chechen and former speaker of the Duma until October 1993, was born in Kazakhstan. Modern Chechens, educated with Soviet edited text books were largely ignorant of their history. The public knowledge and discussion of the mass exile began earnestly in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Previously, only community elders had spoken about the events. With the break-up of the Soviet Union and some Caucasian intellectuals beginning to exercise their freedom, Chechens began to appreciate the extent of the historical injustices inflicted upon them.

AN ATTEMPT AT INDEPENDENCE

The attempted putsch on August 19, 1991, signalled the end of the Soviet Communist era and the beginning of Yeltsin's rise and rule of the Russian Federation. Those events in Moscow triggered a series of events in Grozny that were to have a profound effect upon the Ingush-Chechen Autonomous Region. Shortly after news of the attempted coup reached Grozny, the National Chechen Congress chaired by Dzhokar Dudaev appealed for civil disobedience against the local government and also spoke out in defence of Z. Yandarbiev, leader of the Vainakh party, who had been arrested.

A series of demonstrations followed (August 22, 27, 30) in support of the National Chechen Congress, which at that time represented democratic and nationalist sentiments. Support for Doku Zagaev, Chairman of the Chechen-Ingush Supreme Soviet and the whole Communist apparatus dwindled quickly. "On 6 September, 1991, after two weeks of round-the-clock demonstrations, the mainly pro-Communist Supreme Soviet was stormed while in session and disbanded by National Guard units of General Dudaev." Ruslan Khasbulatov, soon to be speaker of the Russian Supreme Soviet, welcomed the fall of Doku Zagaev, a long term adversary. September 7, 1991, is celebrated as the first day of independence from the USSR.

Support by Russian Federation 'democratic' leaders was short-lived. Within six weeks a complete *volte face* had taken place, and Dudaev, the National Chechen Congress and his allies were being termed bandits and vilified by Russian Federation politicians (Khasbulatov and Rutskoi). On October 19 President Yeltsin signed a decree ordering the Chechen opposition forces to submit to the Russian Federation. The Chechen National Congress refused to bow to Russian Federation pressure to accept the legitimacy of the Provisional Council. Instead, elections were held on October 27, and Dzhokar Dudaev was elected president. Russian politicians have consistently argued the elections were unfair, while independent international monitors reported no irregularities.

Further information is sketchy between Fall 1991 and August 1993. A few facts seem clear. Dzhokar Dudaev, as duly elected president, was able to consolidate political power. Secondly, as Russian military forces relinquished military bases in the fall of 1991, large amounts of heavy weapons, small arms, and ammunition were turned over to Chechen militias. Chechen Provisional Council opposition forces in the fall of 1994 and Russian military forces in January 1995 would pay dearly for this. Thirdly, the Russian Federation engaged in a program of aiding and abetting Chechen figures who would serve as pro-Russian proxies and in turn tried to de-stabilize Chechnya through covert military aid. Some time in June 1994, Ruslan Labazanov and Dudaev had a falling out. No information surrounding these events are available. Labazanov took with him a cadre of armed men who would soon play a part in the political manoeuvring leading to the violent clashes in the Fall of 1994.

On August 2, 1994, Umar Avturkhanov, leader of the Temporary Council, announced in Moscow that a coup had taken place ousting Dudaev from power. Eyewitnesses in Grozny said that the city was calm and no evidence of any actions was evident. Another Chechen rebel leader not aligned with Avturkhanov, Yaragi Mamodayev, called Avturkhanov's decree "unconstitutional."

On August 8 1994, Ruslan Khasbulatov, former Speaker of the Supreme Soviet went to Chechnya, ostensibly to play the role of mediator. After the violent political crisis of October 1993, where Khasbulatov's opposition to Yeltsin was effectively ended, it seemed odd that Khasbulatov wanted to broker peace between Dudaev and Yeltsin. Sergei Shakhrai, Minister of Nationalities and an ally of Yeltsin was quoted as saying, "If Khasbulatov receives the support of the Chechen people I think the Federal centre will be obliged to work with him resolving the situation."

Khasbulatov's peaceful intervention in Chechnya was probably an attempt by Yeltsin's camp to co-opt Khasbulatov and to give him a role in the political arena bringing him into the Yeltsin circle, thus denying a potential ally to opposition forces working against Yeltsin in Moscow.

With tension mounting the Chechen Congress of Peoples Deputies representing various regions of Chechnya authorized Dudaev to mobilize Chechen armed forces on August 10, 1994. Positions were hardening and armed conflict began to seem inevitable. The Provisional Council, equipped with funds from Moscow was trying to arm its own militia units and construct an alternative government structure. At no time does it appear that Avartkhanov, Khasbulatov, or Labanazov, all major players in the Provisional Council backed by Moscow, had anything more than localized support from their family clans. August 15, 1994, several mines exploded in Grozny, signalling an escalation of hostilities. By this time Khasbulatov had abandoned his role as mediator and was trying to establish his own militia and place himself in a position to gain political power after Dudaev's planned demise. In a rally on the outskirts of Grozny on August 25 in opposition to Dudaev, Labanazov was seen standing with Khasbulatov. The Chair of the Provisional Council Umar Avturkhanov did not attend.

On August 26, 1994, between 150-300,000 attended a mass rally in support of Dudaev. Increasingly, Russia was seen by Chechens as trying to manipulate the political situation using covert military operations, just as had been done between Georgia and Abkhazia a year earlier. After heightened rhetoric but only sporadic military engagements, Dudaev's supporters clashed with Beslan Gantermirov in Ursus-Martan with ten casualties reported. Beslan Gantermirov, a former mayor of Grozny, was an independent opponent of Dudaev. After a series of clashes in September where neither Dudaev's supporters nor the Provisional Council are able to make decisive gains, a semblance of quiet descended upon Chechnya. In the midst of the lull, elders from various districts of Chechnya came to Moscow to receive assurances from representatives of the Ministry of Nationalities that Federation military forces would not become involved in what been till then had been, arguably, an internal Chechen conflict. The promises of 'non-intervention' they received were to be another bitter reminder of Russia's history of duplicity in the Caucasus.

SYNOPSIS OF ASSAULT

The months of October and November saw a series of indecisive scimmages with one side then the other gaining temporary advantage. Dudaev's political support and personal popularity seemed thin, but as it became clear that Provisional Council forces were nothing more than proxies of the Russian Federation, and in fact threatened Chechen autonomy, support for Dudaev stiffened. A frequent comment on the news from Chechnya during this time was, "we don't like Dudaev much, but if its between Dudaev and the Russians, we're with Dudaev."

The critical juncture in what had been a farcical seesaw was the decision by the FSK to commit Russian mercenaries recruited from Interior Ministry units to fight for the Provisional Council and Russian Federation aircraft to attack the Grozny airport. The decision to escalate the conflict would have dire consequences. In a series of badly coordinated attacks on November 26-27, 1994, Provisional Council armored units manned by mercenaries, financed by the FSK, attacked Grozny and were repulsed with heavy casualties. Simultaneous attacks on the airport by Sukkoi fighters without markings left little doubt at to where these planes were from, who manned them, and who was behind these attacks: Russia. The defeat was a stinging blow to the FSK, spelled the end of Umar Avartkunov's political and military career, and presaged what was to come a month later. The FSK had upped the ante in trying to get rid of Dudaev. Risking Interior Ministry troops as mercenaries in the covert operation, they had not considered the consequences of the operation going awry. It went terribly wrong. Dudaev, in a precipitous political move, called their bluff. Dudaev threatened to execute the prisoners captured during the abortive attacks as mercenaries if the Russia Federation refused to acknowledge them as prisoners of war. The FSK was caught. If they denied their soldiers, they would be shot. If they admitted the soldiers were there on behalf of the FSK, the last pretext for impartially was gone.

The Moscow News showed two pictures of Captain Andrei Rusakov. In the first picture he is shown giving an interview after the assault on the White House as a member of an

elite Interior Ministry unit, and in the second he is shown as a prisoner in Grozny. The Interior Ministry first claimed the soldiers had been discharged, then that they were on leave, and then finally admitted that they were employed by the FSK. The evidence was incontrovertible. The last vestige of Russian neutrality was torn away by an independent and increasingly feisty press.

On December 8, 1994, the last mercenary-POW captured during the abortive assaults ten days previous was returned to Ivan Chizh, spokesman for the Ministry of Defence. The efforts of *Duma* representatives, such as Yushenkov and Kovalyov were largely responsible. On the streets of Moscow, people anticipated serious negotiations to begin. On December 9, in a repudiation of Chechen good will, Boris Yeltsin authorized the use of "all available means" to settle the Chechnya question. The die was cast, and Yeltsin had sided with what was to be called in the coming days, the "party of power." On December 12th three armored columns invaded Chechnya from Daghestan, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia.

One of the first casualties was the Ingushetian Minister of Health, who had tried to intervene between angry Ingush villagers and Russian soldiers. He was badly beaten by Russian soldiers and died the next day in hospital. Russian forces were ambushed in border villages between Ingushetia and Chechnya. Ramazan Abdulatipov, vice chairman of the Federation Council, explained resistance to Russian troops on Daghestani and Ingush soil this way. "To let an armed person across your territory to a neighbor means to be at one with him."

Of the assault commanders, General Ivan Babichev leading an armored column from the west seemed least anxious to use armor against civilians, at one point refusing to move on Grozny and declaring to the thousand inhabitants of Novo-Shurvoi he would not go further. "It is not our fault that we are here. We did not want this, . . . This operation contradicted the constitution. It is forbidden to use the army against peaceful civilians. It is forbidden to shoot at the people." Babichev reflected widespread discontent within the army. Major General Voroboyov was offered the command of the ground forces in Chechnya by Pavel Grachev, Minister of Defence, and promptly threatened to resign. On December 31, 1994 Russian Federal armored columns under the cover of darkness attacked Grozny. What seemed like the last brutal strike against the Chechen people, turned with the coming of the New Year into a humiliating defeat. Russian armored columns were destroyed and raw recruits surrendered as combat commanders abandoned them. The whole assault became an embarrassing debacle. Russia's once mighty army was defeated by a lightly armed, highly motivated force of irregulars. It was shocking. For the first time the Russian public was treated to uncensored war reports on the nightly news. NTV, a new independent television station financed by the MOST group, had television crews on both sides of the conflict. Their reports would directly contradict time and again official announcements. Concerns over who was in charge in the Kremlin grew.

In a series of four major assaults which were either frustrated or repulsed, Russian armored columns attempted to storm Grozny. The city was devastated by rocket and

heavy artillery fire. Mothers of Soldiers, an organization which had been organized during the Afghanistan war came to life, and women came from all over the Russian Federation to claim their captured or dead sons in and around Grozny from Chechen commanders. Sergei Kovalyov, the professorial member of the Duma, and Yeltsin's appointee as head of Human Rights in the Russian Federation spent days with Chechen fighters in the bunker beneath the Chechen Presidential palace. General Gromov, a critic and opponent of Grachev, after much public opposition to the armed intervention was relieved of his duties in the Ministry of Defence.

On January 19, 1995, after continuous bombardment for days, the Presidential palace in Grozny was relinquished by Chechen armed forces and Russian assault troops claimed their pyrrhic victory. Many thought that resistance would end. In fact the last road leading to Grozny was not firmly taken under control until the end of February, and even then snipers continued to operate in and around Grozny. While some villages around Grozny negotiated local truces and some clans opposed to Dudaev attempted to remain neutral, the majority of the population seemed embittered. They were preparing for a long, Afghanistan-style guerrilla war.

REFUGEE AND RELIEF EFFORTS

The assault on Chechnya has created a humanitarian crisis. Medecins Sans Frontieres, UNHCR, and the International Red Cross/Red Crescent attempted to bring aid to the zone of conflict with varying success as the conflict developed. Bureaucratic delays frustrated prompt responses. The Russian Federation Emergency Situations Administration was offering Western relief and humanitarian agencies the opportunity to buy stocks of food and blankets from their Moscow warehouse and then airlift the supplies free of charge to Mozdok in the zone of conflict. That route proved to be less than satisfactory.

On January 22 the MCC FSU Co-Country Representative and a student Intern from the University of Waterloo accompanied representatives from Memorial and a truck of material aid from Compassion Ministries to a refugee camp near Tver. The group of about a hundred from Grozny included refugees who had fled Baku two years ago, an ethnic German, and ethnic Russians. Another convoy of Material Aid from Compassion Ministries went to Tambov on February 10th accompanied by MCC representatives. At the time of writing [early April 1995] another convoy is scheduled to leave for Saratov the last week of March.

On February 15, Lisa Amarkhadisaeva representing the Ingush Red Cross/Red Crescent, Jos Vanhee representing World Vision Russia/Belarus/Ukraine, Chris Hunter and Patricia Cockrell representing Quaker Peace and Service, Walter Bergen, Steve and Cheryl Hochstetler Shirk representing Mennonite Central Committee FSU met to discuss coordinated action to assist victims of the conflict. Through QPS contacts with the Ingush Red Crescent (InRC), and MCC's positive experience working with InRC in 1993, World Vision and MCC agreed to work with the InRC to provide relief supplies for refugees. World Vision and MCC provided immediate cash aid and then began a program of importing strategic Material Aid. World Vision committed itself to provide substantial

funding for several development projects in Ingushetia. MCC is funding construction of a bakery, importing two 40 foot containers of assistance, one for Compassion Ministries and another for the InRC. Concurrently MCC imported three World Health Organization Health kits from Holland for the InRC. QPS Moscow provided crucial liaison and coordinating services.

RELIGIOUS CONSEQUENCES OF THE CHECHEN CONFLICT: ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

At this time it is difficult to foresee the religious repercussions of the Chechen conflict. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on religious consequences and refer to economic, political, and social aspects as they affect the religious situation. Placed in a historical trajectory, the present Chechen conflict must be seen against the backdrop of Russia's posturing and military involvement in other Islamic contexts: Afghanistan some years ago, the present civil war in Tadjikistan, the Karabakh conflict, and Abkhazia's secession from Georgia.

"Afghanistan has repeatedly been invoked in connection with the Chechen events. Afghanis who were quite peaceable and friendly prior to the introduction of a "limited contingent of Soviet Troops" have now turned into the indomitable warriors of Islam. And in contrast to Russia, they do not consider the war to be over." Islam proved to be the rallying point for disparate ethnic tribes (Uzbek and Tadjik) and clans in Afghanistan. If Islam will prove to be that rallying point in the North Caucuses to coalesce, resistance is an open question. Fighting under the banner of Islam, *mujahedin* became a formidable and feared military force which defeated Russia. The defeat in Afghanistan presaged a major turning point in the fortunes of the gerontocracy then in power. One wonders if the attack on Chechnya is a foretaste of another change, this time away from human rights and democracy towards greater authoritarianism.

The present Chechen conflict, against traditionally Islamic people, "was kindled against the backdrop of President Yeltsin's speech in Budapest and Russia's stand on the Bosnian question. In this way Russia has ever more distinctly been acquiring an image as the enemy of Muslims. This was confirmed by MCC representatives in the Middle East who monitored the unfolding conflict. The perception that Russia is an enemy of Muslims has dangerous consequences. Sheikh Ravil Gainatutdin, Chairman of the Board of Muslims in the Central European part of Russia in an interview in Moscow News said, "The image of an enemy Muslim is being shaped up in the minds of the Russians. This is very dangerous if we consider that 18 million Muslims live in Russia."

The leadership of the Russian military apparatus, in an attempt to explain away military set-backs, has claimed that up to 6,000 Muslim mercenaries are fighting for Chechnya. The tactics of Russian officers trying to motivate young recruits to fight in Chechnya are instructive. "We had terrible fears about their religion," said Sergei Bozhko, a conscript who deserted in Chechnya. "The officers tried to bring it home to us . . . that Chechens were like Arab terrorists portrayed in Hollywood movies, only worse--uneducated

Moslem fanatics blinded by Islam . . . who would gouge our eyes out and rip our bowels open." Reports of forced conversions have also surfaced.

The perceptions and statements of Islamic leaders in Russia sheds light on their frustrations and also the potential for dialogue. Sheikh Gabdulla Hadji Galiulla, head *mufti* of the Russian Federation speaking at a meeting of 17 leading clerics in Moscow Thursday, February 17, 1995, said that if the Chechen conflict was not already "a religious war pitting Moslems against Christians, the threat of this was imminent." Sheikh Galiulla went on to say that if the Russian leadership did not resolve the conflict soon, Islamic leadership in the Russian Federation would actively try to influence presidential elections.

Sheikh Nafigulla Hadji Ashirov, chairman of the executive committee of the Spiritual Leadership of Moslems in Russia, frustrated by the lack of even a simple acknowledgement of their request to meet with Boris Yeltsin said, "When Moslems--as well as Christians--are played like Marionettes, the government is not showing serious respect for these confessions. It would be entirely unwise not to reckon with the potential [of Islam]."

Comments by Sheikh Muhammad-Husein Hadji Alsabekov, the mufti representing Islam in the break away republic were less magnanimous. Alsabekov asserted that for every church destroyed, a hundred mosques were destroyed, and that Russia was pursuing the "extermination of the Moslems." Sheikh Ashirov's closing comments were ominous. "This is not yet a Moslem-Christian conflict, but if it should evolve into a war between Islam and Christianity, this will not be a war within the bounds of Russia, and that would be something terrible."

The prospects of Central Russian autonomous areas such as Tatarstan or Chuvash wanting greater independence from Moscow and by implication more solidarity with Turkic-Islamic people in the North Caucasus may cause the Russian Federation to resort to armed measures. Similarly, the prospects of the North Caucasus peoples, frustrated in their quest for autonomy, turning to Islam as a rallying point for an armed struggle of independence means that religion will play an increasingly prominent and radicalizing role in the North Caucasus. If historical strategies are any indication, a nationalist form of Orthodoxy will become an important instrument of opposition against Muslim communities in Central Russia and the Caucasus.

Another important player will be ethnic Russian minorities living within the territories of the North Caucasian republics around Chechnya. On the whole they see their future not with Islamic Caucasian republics, but with 'Mother Russia.' While some express concern over the brutality of the Chechen invasion, many are in basic agreement with the Russian Federation's actions. Support for "upholding the constitution" is strong in North Ossetia. Ethnic Russians within the North Caucasus perceive themselves as a persecuted minority in a majority, Muslim (however nominal) context. The prospects for dialogue and mediation are not very inspiring, at the moment, though efforts in the region continue.

In all likelihood, Russia will proceed on a multi-lateral strategy of co-option. On the religious front, if Russian military and political leaders can shake the present lethargy and incompetence, a strategy of encouraging and playing off Orthodox and Islamic groups one against the other will probably take shape. Religion continues to be viewed as an instrument to be manipulated by those who are presently in power in Moscow. Within Islam, the most vulnerable to manipulation are those groups with historic ties to the Council of Religious Affairs. The least vulnerable are the Sufi Brotherhoods in the North Caucasus who have resisted co-option since their inception.

If Christian sponsored relief agencies are to have a helpful role to play in this zone of conflict, the experience of the Mennonite Central Committee in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East may prove crucial. Seeking common ground, building relationships of integrity, seeking justice, sharing a critique of imperial Christianity may be areas of common interest, understanding and dialogue between Mennonites and Caucasian Moslems. At a meeting on February 15, a MCC FSU representative spoke about the anguish of observing the conflict and hoped that somehow the small efforts made by Christian sponsored relief organizations might dispel some of the suffering and provide the opportunity for dialogue and friendship. Lisa Amarkhadisaeva of the Ingush Red Cross/Red Crescent responded to the effect that, "many believe that the many misfortunes we've experienced have come because we are Ingush, that we are Moslem. But the assistance that comes from Christian organizations, or from Christian countries tells us this is not so. In Ingushetia, people know who the Mennonites are. They know where the help has come from."

POSTSCRIPT

The consequences of the invasion in Chechnya continue to reverberate across the Former Soviet Union and beyond. The refugee crisis continues as Russian government officials pick through the ruins of Grozny and realize that Grozny is beyond repair. On March 6, the European Union postponed indefinitely a proposed trade accord as a direct consequence of Russia's actions in Chechnya. In a much less courageous move, on March 10, the IMF signed an agreement with the Yeltsin government for a 6.3 billion dollar loan, in an attempt to assist the government in maintaining a tight fiscal policy. No one acknowledged the obvious: the loan would pay for the cost of the Chechen conflict.

Chechnya's neighbors have viewed the events of the past year with alarm and the prospects for violence increases. "Although officially Daghestan, Karbadino-Balkharia and Ingushetia are neutral, their internal national movements have been growing more and more radical. Not only do they call for an end to the war, they are increasingly more active in urging territorial redivision in the North Caucasus, demanding the secession of their republics from Russia. As the conflict drags on, the threat of terrorism in Russia which appeared to be mythical is becoming real. The Chechen Diaspora in Moscow and St. Petersburg has not resorted to terrorism because investments in the Russian economy was considered more important than Dudayev's ambition.

But the guerrillas have become more fragmented. Dudaev, and more importantly the Chechen Council of Elders and the Diaspora representatives are now having a difficult time controlling them." The humanitarian crisis, the prospects of terrorism, a partisan war, and restive Caucasian republics all point toward complex and difficult political times ahead. Perhaps the most ominous repercussion of the war is the politicization of the military. Possibly the best known political organization active in the military has been the Union of Officers. It has been on the fringes of the political mainstream since the October crisis when former Deputy Defense Minister Vladislav Achalov and Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Terekhov were part of the short-lived cabinet of Alexander Rutskoi. This former fringe group held a conference where dissatisfied military leaders sent delegates or observers. Yeltsin's support in the military is weak. The prospects of the military taking an activist role in the chaotic political arena that is Russia and asserting its own interests means that the balance of power may shift dramatically.

On March 14, 1995, a peace plan to end the Chechen conflict was being forged by Human Rights Commissioner Sergei Kovalyov, Deputy Speaker of the Federal Council Ramazan Adulatipov, and others. I have high regard for both of these men but have little confidence that they will be able to meaningfully mediate in the conflict so long as the power ministries (FSK, Interior Ministry, Army) are not involved or have a direct stake in the implementation of the plan.

In a recent speech, Senator Bob Dole outlined the Republican version of 'Strategic Interests' in the Middle East and in that speech enlarged the sphere of America's Middle Eastern strategic interests to include the Caspian Basin. The prospects for North Caucasian nationalities having their rightful aspirations, including religious freedom, frustrated for the 'strategic interests' of neighbors seems unpleasantly, assured.

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