

# The Structures of Chechnya's Quagmire

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The current situation in Iraq in the aftermath of the invasion by British and U.S. forces made many analysts pay closer attention to the problems facing the Russian forces in Chechnya. Rather than engaging the convoluted and politically controversial arguments regarding how comparable the two situations are, we must be clear on what is actually going on. This task is especially difficult because conducting field research is nearly impossible in Chechnya, one of the most dangerous places on Earth, with around a hundred civilians disappearing on average every month.

My data derives from interviews conducted last spring and summer in various locations across the North Caucasus and in Moscow. For reasons of personal security, the names of my interview subjects cannot be revealed; I can only generically state that these people are native North Caucasians (some Chechens and other local nationalities) who possess direct knowledge of some facets of the situation. Their observations are the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that I put together using general sociological knowledge of how things tend to be in such conflicts. In addition, I find useful the account of Russian investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya recently published in English (*A Small Corner of Hell*) and Thomas Goltz's *Chechnya Diary*. Especially revealing is the last part of Politkovskaya's book, "Who Wants This War?" in which Politkovskaya provides a graphic description of the various forces engaged in violent repression and retribution, as well as many micro-operations conducted from all sides by "violent entrepreneurs."

## **The Long Decay of the Chechen Revolution**

Chechnya continues to be such a bloody mess because the Chechen revolution of 1991 has not ended. The social theorist Arthur Stinchcombe says that revolutions come to an end "when political uncertainty is reduced by building enough bargains into a political structure that can maintain these bargains." By this measure, the revolution in Chechnya has had a very long aftermath, passing through its violent ebb and flow, and might still be going on.

Stinchcombe summarizes the structures that can produce such decreases in uncertainty as conservative authoritarianism (or "Thermidor"), independence, occupation government, totalitarianism, democracy, and *caudillismo* (a decentralized system of governance based on weak and shifting loyalties to regional warlords, venality, and often

a great deal of violence). In the last decade Chechnya has seen movement in all these directions but stopped short of following any.

Chechnya is an obvious exception to the general tendency of conservative authoritarianism that swept across other post-Soviet countries, including the rest of the North Caucasus republics, where we find elements of old Communist *nomenklatura* still in control. Until August and even November 1991 (Yeltsin's botched state of emergency in Checheno-Ingushetia) this pattern, in retrospect, could have seemed Chechnya's likeliest future. But in the revolution's aftermath, the prospective forces of such a *nomenklatura*-oligarchic restoration physically fled the country.

The unilateral proclamation of Chechnya's independence by the revolutionary regime of Djohar Dudayev, however, failed to install a credible government possessing the necessary political, coercive, and economic resources, because the Russian blockade, most consequentially, prevented international recognition of Chechnya. Thus Dudayev's regime was denied foreign aid, loans, and investment that could help to finance its institutionalization. For the same reason neither totalitarianism nor democracy could emerge in the unruly and collapsing Chechnya. Dictatorship and democracy, in their own distinct ways, are difficult to build and maintain because they both require functioning bureaucratic institutions. Thus four possibilities have been eliminated: a "Thermidorean" restoration of old Soviet *nomenklatura*; a functioning government resulting from national independence; totalitarianism; and democracy.

## The Wars

The Russian military invasions have already twice failed to impose an effective occupation government. In 1995–1996, Moscow brought back to Grozny the remnants of the old *nomenklatura* overthrown four years earlier. But these men proved incapable of winning political support locally because in popular opinion they were associated with the brutality of Russian soldiery, yet they did not control the military and thus could not offer any protection. The government of Doku Zavgayev (former communist leader of Checheno-Ingushetia who was overthrown by Dudayev in 1991 and then practically adopted by Yeltsin's presidential administration) could not offer much economic or social benefit either because the money that Yeltsin's central government had earlier allocated for the civilian restoration of the war-ravaged country vanished somewhere between the various offices in Moscow and in Russian-occupied Grozny.

The second Russian occupation that started in the early months of 2000 took a different approach by amnestying and inviting as junior partners various defectors from the Chechen armed resistance. The biggest such name was Akhmad Kadyrov, formerly the chief Islamic authority (*mufti*) under the separatist president Dudayev and, incidentally, the same man who in 1995 had declared jihad on Russia. Kadyrov, who belonged to the traditional Sufi Islam, subsequently has found himself in a deadly conflict with the emergent Islamic militancy that drew its puritanical inspiration and material support mainly from Saudi Arabia and recruited among the disillusioned Chechen fighters in the first war, such as Shamil Basayev's private army. (In general, to the orthodox Wahhabis Sufi mysticism looks only slightly better than idolatry.)

It seemed for a while that Putin's government astutely pulled a coup by enlisting Kadyrov as Chechnya's new proconsul and turning his own private army into the new state police. But Kadyrov proved worse than a puppet. On the one hand, he possessed the typical liabilities of foreign-imposed puppets: he came to be widely despised as a corrupt and self-serving politico. On the other hand, Moscow was apparently trapped in its own bet on Kadyrov and thus had to turn a blind eye to his misdeeds and unilateralism. Kadyrov quarreled viciously with the political partners and civil administrators whom Moscow had been trying to impose on him. Instead, the former mufti relies on his clientele of relatives, venal officials, and armed retainers. Many people blame the majority of nightly disappearances on the political and commercial operations conducted by Kadyrov's private army-turned-police and commanded by his infamous son, Ramzan Kadyrov. Officials in the Kremlin apparently still hope that the death squad tactics will eventually eliminate the Chechen resistance. But the most recent proliferation of terrorist attacks in Chechnya and in Russia might be evidence to the contrary. Anna Politkovskaya describes the new generation of fighters as a non-political "third force," whose attacks are fundamentally acts of family revenge for the close relatives who have been murdered by the Russian military or Kadyrov's military or by Chechen separatist warlords such as Shamil Basayev and Ruslan Gelayev (who are themselves enemies). The fragmentation of forces on both sides remains a durable condition, and it is conducive to the perpetuation of violence because no stable government has emerged.

## Warlordism

The example of post-revolutionary Chechnya comes closest to Latin American *caudillismo*, that Stinchcombe himself recognizes as looking "too much like a continuation of the uncertainty of revolution to seem like an ending." Other scholars, mostly referring to Africa, call *caudillismo* simply warlord politics.

In this volatile and violent pattern political leaders and followers are tied not by any formal rules regarding the social and moral obligations between the governments and the governed, but by the unstable personalized pyramidal networks through which *caudillos* have to truck and barter, including violently, with their clients for the resources to run a government. The situation in Chechnya since the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991 has been one resembling a particularly disjointed and anarchic *caudillismo*. By the analogy to the mafia's violent entrepreneurs (see the work of Vadim Volkov), we might call this pattern "violent neo-patrimonialism."

The pattern actually predates the Russian invasions. After the 1991 anti-Communist revolution, the state in Chechnya could not be restored. In the murky but relatively peaceful period of 1992–1993, Dudayev's separatist government survived by granting various smuggling monopolies to its strongmen and allied warlords. Attempts to reclaim these monopolies for the state budget and the embryonic Chechen army provoked ferocious resistance. In 1994, elements in Yeltsin's administration decided to covertly lend military and financial support to the warlords who had broken away from the separatist Dudayev. By default, Dudayev chose to increase his calls for national unity in the face of what he was describing as imminent war with Russia. This eventually became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Furthermore, the neoliberal shift in the global environment took away the key state-building resources previously available to the Third World developmentalists. With the end of Cold War, the insurgent progressive generals seeking to bolster their state-building efforts lost the structural opportunity to play on the superpower rivalry. In addition, the deep political recession of the western Left diminished the resources of international solidarity and aid to the national liberation movements. Moreover, in the new world situation, regimes such as Dudayev's could not find a workable state-building ideology. The twentieth-century activist program of peripheral state building (i.e., "national liberation") centrally prescribed the nationalization of key economic assets, especially oil industries. With the disappearance of a national developmental model, Dudayev had to pay lip service to market liberalism in the hope (though a rapidly vanishing one) that this might help the international recognition of Chechnya as it did for Estonia, which was Dudayev's model.

Meanwhile the warlords were taking over by force Chechnya's oil wells and refineries, which gave the prospective state builders of Chechnya the choice of either making zero revenue or joining the game and behaving like the warlords. While Dudayev and his shrinking circle of loyalists were still hoping to create a national army and issue national passports and currency, their numerous and well-armed opponents gained access to the global smuggling operations that grew explosively during the early 1990s, and thus obtained another major source of cash. The up-and-coming warlords no longer needed the government because they had their own means of violence and, with their newly acquired capabilities, could create their own economic opportunities.

## **The Effects of War Destruction**

The Russian invasion in 1994 provided, for a while, the cause for national unity. But the war gave rise to many new guerrilla bands and autonomous field commanders. The covert Russian sponsorship of various Chechen auxiliaries, renegades, and rogues was another major source of new warlords. Some were purely entrepreneurial and no more than gangsters; others, like Shamil Basayev, pretended to possess some kind of political agenda. Among those in the latter category, some were later known as Islamic terrorists. Under pressure from the Russian invasions and for reasons of internal legitimation, some of the most radical (and violent) among the Chechen guerrillas developed ideological, military, and financial links to Middle Eastern opposition networks. This possibly included Al Qaeda, although the role of Osama bin Laden seems to be overplayed by Russian propaganda, which after September 2001, has thus sought to justify the brutal and endless "antiterrorist campaign" in Chechnya.

In the 1990s, Chechnya experienced catastrophic de-urbanization and de-industrialization, which began with the effects of economic isolation, violent lawlessness, and the flight of educated specialists, and was later compounded by the destructive war. The remaining population of Chechnya is estimated at only a half or even a third of the pre-1991 figure. (The 2002 census figure of one million people is certainly a result of a gross mistake or, possibly, fraud related to either electoral manipulation or the embezzlement of reconstruction subsidies.) Apart from the men with guns, the group caught in the endless and multi-sided war now overwhelmingly consists of ruined

farmers, former workers, and low-level specialists, plus the sub-proletarians—destitute people with nowhere else to go. They sustain themselves with the faith provided by the idea of national resistance to the Russian occupation and, since the mid-1990s, the project of gaining social order and spiritual confidence through activist, puritanical Islam.

## **The Role of Islam**

The religious distinction marks the chasm between the Chechen resistance and the Russian occupiers, but the project of Islamic salvation has also served to dramatically divide Chechen society itself. The rise of the new militant ideology turned on its head the relationship between the previously low-status rural Chechens, who stayed and continued fighting, and the no less numerous but now invisible secular urban Chechens, who have been undone as a social group with the destruction of the towns and today are scattered outside their homeland.

In the run-up to the second Chechen war, warlords such as Shamil Basayev abandoned the nationalist civilian government of Chechnya in utter frustration and reverted to a guerrilla lifestyle at their village bases, justifying their actions with reference to the new Islamic radicalism, calling for the liberation of fellow Muslims in other republics of Russia and in the whole world, and thus prophesying and indeed helping to bring another war.

Desperate for resources and isolated internationally, the second Chechen president, Aslan Maskhadov, elected in 1997, could offer neither jobs to civilians nor a credible military force against the warlords and bandits. Ironically, Maskhadov proved insufficiently corrupt and ruthless to effectively consolidate a regime of personal sultanism, which would have been a more realistic option given the situation. (Maskhadov's dilemmas were similar but, due to external isolation, more grave than those that are now facing Afghanistan's president Hamid Karzai.) Previously, Maskhadov had been an excellent Soviet army officer. He earnestly tried to recreate in Chechnya the professional military discipline and civil legal order that to him formed the basis of normal life. But the odds were against President Maskhadov who, as one could see in his interviews, felt increasingly defensive, aggrieved, and disoriented. He also grasped, in desperation, the rhetoric of Islamic revival but in doing this the second Chechen president had neither the recognition nor the resources of his domestic opponents. In his ranting, Maskhadov blamed the machinations of Moscow if not an international conspiracy of the American CIA and the Zionists. Thus, a potentially constructive political force was lost.

## **The Current Situation**

The war in Chechnya is still dragging on. Despite a very cruel campaign aimed at eliminating the Chechen fighters and their supporters, the Russian forces have failed to end the resistance and to capture or kill either Basayev or Maskhadov (who, staying true to his army instincts, had hailed the resumption of war as a return to political clarity). Likewise Moscow has failed to rebuild the state structures and industrial economy in Chechnya, relying instead on a combination of military occupation and the auxiliary force of various Chechen defectors who, despite being granted Russian military rank and

state titles, essentially remain the same warlords whose small private armies facilitate their nefarious businesses.

Tragically, there is no indication that the conflict could be ended by the recent presidential elections held by the Russian occupiers. There is even less hope that their Chechen opponents can win and, least of all, build a government. The situation looks exceedingly bleak, and it is indeed worse than it looks. The individual warlords of various stripes might get killed (Khattab, the Barayevs (uncle and nephew)) or, on the other side, the numerous leaders of the pro-Russian Chechen police) or they could mysteriously die in captivity (Turpał-Ali Atgeriyev, Salman Raduyev). Still, the pattern of warlord segmentation endures.

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