

Chechnya and National Liberation

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Contents

Some History	3
Independent Chechnya	4
State Capitalism + Imperialism = Bad News	5

As this is written in mid-February, Shali, Samashki, Argun and other towns around the Chechen capital, Grozny, where Chechen forces have regrouped, are taking the full brunt of Russian fighter-bomber attacks, tank barrages, and mortar bombardments. In Grozny itself, thousands of buildings have only a wall or two standing. For nearly 10 weeks after the Russians invaded on Dec. 11 to reverse a 1991 declaration of independence, fighters in Grozny resisted block by block. Now, fewer than a hundred thousand people pick for food in what was once a city of 400,000. Moving on, Russian forces level the countryside of a tiny country that Russia originally conquered by force only 135 years ago.

Russian announcements follow a well-thumbed script. A “Provisional Council” is named to run the country, headed by a former Soviet oil minister. There’s talk of negotiation, announcements of cease-fires, when Grozny still holds out—then the proclamation that the Chechen president is a “state criminal,” when the balance shifts. Western governments are supporting Yeltsin, with mild criticisms. President Clinton goes out of his way to mention that Chechnya is part of Russia, and adds that “if the forces of reform are embattled, we must renew—not retreat from—our support for them.” He is referring to Boris Yeltsin. German chancellor Helmut Kohl, visiting Clinton in February, agrees: we must not “push the forces of reform and the President into a corner.” (Yeltsin is happy to oblige them, once he has the upper hand; another cease-fire is announced Feb. 13.)

To the contrary of what Clinton and Kohl say, the real lessons are clear:

- The effort to peacefully reform communism into a democratic system has failed.
- The struggle for self-determination is one of the strongest real forces for change—a step toward democratization today, and toward the goal of a voluntary federation of free peoples, still far away.

Some History

Russia (then Muscovy) began expanding into Muslim lands to its south and east in the 1500s, reaching the Caucasus about a century later. Russian policy was both imperialist and anti-Muslim. As one history summarizes, “the liquidation of the governing bodies of these territories was followed by a systematic occupation of the former Muslim lands... Muslim inhabitants were treated as Russian subjects to whom the rights reserved to Christians were denied” (Muslims of the Soviet Empire, 8) Despite some periods of relative tolerance—under Catherine the Great in the 1700s, after the 1905 Revolution, during the Soviet “New Economic Policy” of the 1920s—suppression was the rule.

The Chechens and other tribal peoples, such as Daghestanis, resisted Russian control until the nineteenth century. A major revolt broke out under Imam Mansur in 1783, but the Chechen leader Sheikh Shamil led the longest, bitterest resistance, a harassing guerrilla war from the rugged Chechen hills that lasted from 1834 to 1859. With his capture the Chechen lands became part of Russia, but Chechens and Daghestanis revolted again, against Bolshevik rule, in 1920–22.

In the 1930s, the Chechens and the neighboring Ingush people were organized into the “Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic,” ruled from Moscow. Legally, this was part of Russia, unlike Ukraine, Kazakhstan, etc., which were supposedly independent republics of the USSR on a par with Russia. (This is why, when these republics declared the USSR dissolved in 1991, Chechnya remained inside Russia.)

From 1928 to 1941—the period of Soviet forced industrialization, collectivization, and purges—Stalin carried out “a frontal assault on Islam within Soviet borders. This assault resulted in the closing of thousands of mosques and the liquidation or imprisonment of most Muslim clerics... clerics and believers were accused of being saboteurs, counter-revolutionaries and parasites.” (Muslims of the Soviet Empire, 11) In a so-called “super-purge” on Aug. 1, 1937, Stalin’s police arrested, executed, or deported 14,000 people in the Chechen-Ingush republic—one out of every 30 inhabitants.

Finally, after anti-Russian, anti-communist movements as German armies approached the Caucasus in 1942, Stalin ordered the deportation of the entire Chechen and Ingush population in 1944. “Security Police units entered the Chechen-Ingush ASSR disguised as ordinary troops. On 23 February, when people were assembled in villages to mark Red Army Day, they were suddenly surrounded by security forces and informed of the decree.” (Soviet Disunion, 96) These deportations took an enormous toll in lives. Up to 46 percent of the neighboring Crimean Tatars, also deported en masse, were killed or died in transit or in exile. The number of Chechen and Ingush casualties is not known.

When the Chechens and Ingush were finally allowed to return in the 1950s, they endured rioting and massacres by local Russians (1958) and renewed anti-Muslim campaigns—in the 1960s, when two-thirds of the mosques in the whole Soviet Union were closed, and again in the 1980s. Sporadic resistance to Russia continued too—bombings, secret resistance meetings, and an effort to found a “United Party for the Liberation of the Caucasus” in 1969 (the leader was sent to a mental hospital); mass demonstrations in 1973, and so on.

Despite the brutal suppression, Russia never succeeded in fully controlling the Chechens. Both social and religious reasons help explain why. The clan-tribal social structure, still strong as late as the 1980s, means that the average Chechen, even in the cities, belongs to a social network that has nothing to do with the official government, and that has always been highly resistant to Russian suppression. Religious devotion, too, is a major reason for fighting a government that has repeatedly tried to stamp Islam out. More specifically, a traditional semi-secret network of Sufi brotherhoods, parallel to the official Sunni Muslim religious structure, has provided organization and leadership for resistance. Imam Mansur, Sheikh Shamil, Uzun Haji (leader of the 1920–22 rebellion), and leaders of other Muslim insurgencies elsewhere in Russia were all members of various Sufi societies. The Sufi orders were still strong in the 1980s, and may well be involved in the present resistance.

Independent Chechnya

This background makes it clear why Chechnya declared independence in 1991, when the USSR cracked up after the attempted coup in August of that year. Simply put, Chechen resistance has broken out every time Russian power has been weakened—in 1920–22, 1942, 1991.

Nevertheless, independence was not the result of a popular movement. There was no substantial dissident movement in Chechnya in the 1980s, as there was in Ukraine, for example. Rather, the current president, Dzhokhar M. Dudayev—a former Soviet air force general in Afghanistan—ran a pro-independence campaign as an opportunist maneuver to gain power, much as local Communist Party heads did in some other republics.

There is some truth in Russian charges that the Chechen government is both a dictatorship and a front for organized crime. Dudayev's allies, later his police, were the Chechen crime syndicates who had traditionally been active as smugglers and as gangs in Moscow. When Peter Jennings of the *New Statesman* and *Nation* visited Grozny in 1993, he noted "lines of new Mercedes, BMWs and Cadillacs" were parked outside the presidential palace. Dudayev explained that the cars "show the wealth of our nation... that our lads, our Chechen people, have learned how to function creatively under the new conditions." Meanwhile, up to \$300 million in oil revenues disappeared.

To some extent Chechen crime is a typical economic operation of an empire's "outsiders"—after all, why should Chechens respect Russian legality? But Chechens too are among the regime's victims. Jennings reported that workers "complain they have received no wages for months" and "live in constant fear" of armed gangs, the police force was quintupled (part of the problem), and journalists who tried to investigate the corruption were killed.

But to state what should be obvious, the Russian invasion transformed this situation of growing dictatorship, with lingering nationalist support for Dudayev, into a mass struggle. "The fighters now don't fight for Dudayev, but for themselves," one guerrilla told the *New York Times*, a comment echoed over and over. Though we shouldn't have any simplistic optimism about prospects for democracy if it should win, the anti-Russian movement is a mass national resistance.

State Capitalism + Imperialism = Bad News

Two major lessons can be learned from the Chechen situation. First, communism, or state capitalism, can't be peacefully reformed into a democratic system, any more than other forms of capitalism can be peacefully reformed into a free, equal system. The point here isn't one of definitions, but one of dynamics.

Communism in the old USSR had two historic problems, and neither one has been solved. The first was that its economic system, one of state capitalism, was in permanent stagnation. The US and US-dominated financial institutions, like the International Monetary Fund, want Yeltsin to "solve" this situation through a wholesale attack on mass living standards. Despite some "successes" in this plan, it has been too politically dangerous to carry through, so the Russian economy is in a downward spiral it can't seem to break out of.

The second problem, symbolized by Chechnya, is that Russia is a state built on the suppression of non-Russian nationalities. A glance at the map tells the story. Over half of Russia's area consists of non-Russian lands that, like Chechnya, are "autonomous" areas or republics in law. If Chechen secession is recognized, the whole pile takes a lurch toward collapse. In other words, Russia remains an empire of suppressed nations. Any progress toward real democracy risks breaking it up.

Since neither problem has been solved, and both can only be solved within the present system through undemocratic means, Russia's fragile parliamentary system and its recently granted political freedoms are in danger of unraveling. Since January, critics of the government like Yeltsin's own human rights commissioner, Sergei A. Kovalyev, have been denounced as "enemies of the people"—a death sentence in Russia's recent past—and it has become clear that the decisions about Chechnya are being made by a mainly military body called the National Security Council. Yeltsin himself seems to be under the thumb of the NSC. One parliamentary leader calls this body

“a military-civilian junta disguised as the National Security Council,” and warns, “If it continues Russia will be ripe for an authoritarian dictatorship.”

It may seem that Russia’s “nationality problem” is not a result of capitalism, but of a “Kremlin mentality,” a particularly barbaric survival of pre-capitalist tsarist conquests. Without going into all the reasons for considering Russian communism a form of state capitalism, it can be said that other capitalist systems have been built on pre-capitalist, or only partly capitalist, forms of oppression. Black oppression in the United States is an example. As in Russia, these appear to be special, inherited problems, when they are really built into the system. And like the US, Russia and other ex-communist states, with a couple of possible exceptions, are failing to solve their “minority” problems through reforms.

Second lesson: The struggles for self-determination around the ex-communist world are limited, but important struggles that help the general struggle for democracy. On the surface, it may look as if “nationalism” is a destructive force that contributes to the emergence of authoritarian rule. Actually, in the six years since the old USSR began to crack up in 1989, the struggle of the oppressed nationalities has pushed Russia toward democracy not once but many times. The struggles of the Baltic countries to secede, in 1989–91, contributed to the weakening of Gorbachev’s rule, led Gorbachev to turn toward the generals, and therefore helped bring about the coup attempt whose defeat greatly, if momentarily, expanded Russian democracy.

Isn’t it plain that if Lithuania and the others had not struggled for independence, it would have been harder to destroy communist rule, if possible at all? And the secession of the other non-Russian states from the USSR in 1991 at least means that Russia is now sliding toward dictatorship in a smaller, weaker state. Finally, opposition to the Chechen invasion itself has weakened the Russian army, increased the demoralization of troops and officers, and led to open protests in Moscow. The Russian government would be moving to the right without any of this; what the national movements have created is resistance to this move.

Nevertheless, if the authority of the state continues to fray and crack without a full-scale popular struggle for freedom, the generals and police will grow bold enough to counterattack. The next months or a year can be crucial for the survival of any degree of freedom in Russia, and after that, the other ex-communist states.

Right now it seems as if people in Russia and other ex-communist countries are too economically exhausted and too demoralized by the failure of reform to start mass struggles. If this is the case, semi-democratic capitalism will give way to authoritarianism and, internationally, Russian imperialism will re-emerge as a rival to US imperialism.

The last word lies with the people, however, and they haven’t spoken it. It’s possible that new struggles for liberty will emerge. It should be clear, too, that battles are possible in the future to defend the relatively limited democratic rights these countries have gained since 1985. In that case anarchists and anti-authoritarians, even though we stand for the destruction of all oppression and oppose all states, would side with people trying to defend limited forms of democracy against destruction.

[Two Gorbachev-era books that are still useful for background are: Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire, a Guide* (Indiana University Press, 1986); Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion, A History of the Nationalities Problem in the USSR* (Free Press, 1990). The second deals with all non-Russian nationalities, not just Muslims.]

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