

Chechnya: 'War on terror' legends debunked

A war of unintended consequences

By Thomas de Waal

On the afternoon of 3 September, when the worst of the shooting had stopped, and the terrible aftermath of the Beslan school siege was only just beginning, I was sitting in a BBC World television studio talking live with a Russian analyst. A news flash came up on the wire agencies: the Russian security services said that among the dead hostage-takers they had found nine Arabs and one “black” (the Russian word, still used without embarrassment, is *negr*). My fellow analyst and I both agreed that, if this was true, this had a significant bearing on the nature of this horrible event: it meant Beslan had been attacked by a group with a clear link to the Middle East and the wider front of “international terror.”

The next day, President Vladimir Putin delivered his address to the Russian people about Beslan. In a pained speech Putin told his nation that it was at war. He put his words in a strongly historical and international framework, appealing to nostalgia for the strong Soviet state and warning that Russia's enemies wanted to break up the country. The language was often obscure but the message was unmistakable: the threat emanated from outside Russia's borders. “This is an attack on our country,” Putin said. The word “Chechnya” was not mentioned once.

Slowly however, a more inevitable truth began to emerge from Beslan: almost all the hostage-takers were from the North Caucasus. First, Russian officials admitted that the so-called “*negr*” was mistaken for such because his face had been coated in ash from the fire in the school. Then they started to draw back from their claims about the so-called dead Arabs. Later the notorious Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev, who claimed to have planned the raid, said there were 31 hostage-takers, of whom only two had been Arabs.

The obvious truth was also, in its way, more terrible. It meant that the group of men and women who rigged up explosives in the gym of School No 1 in Beslan and then presided over up to 400 deaths, half of them children, were almost all locals, who had a common language and culture with their hostages. Despite what Putin might say, despite some links with international jihadists, this conflict remains very much Russia's home-grown problem: its horrors have been bred locally.

How has it come about that a generation of village boys and girls, born in the atheist Soviet Union, have turned into Islamist suicide bombers and child-killers? What has gone so badly wrong? The answer of course, or most of it, lies in what has happened in Chechnya over the past ten years, since the Russian military first went into Chechnya in December 1994.

The Chechen conflict is a classic case of the law of unintended consequences. Most obviously and disgracefully, a purported campaign by Boris Yeltsin in 1994 to reintegrate Chechnya into the Russian Federation and to “restore constitutional order” ended up with the alienation of the entire Chechen population and a wanton outbreak of lawlessness by the Russian army.

On the Chechen side, perhaps the strangest unintended consequence was the way a whole segment of Chechen society discovered militant religion. Nowadays the Islamist Chechens call Grozny, Chechnya's main city, Jokhar after the first president of their would-be independent state, Jokhar Dudayev. But Dudayev himself was a former Soviet strategic forces general, a product of the communist system with a Russian wife and a known fondness for cognac. His first Chechen constitution was modeled on that of Estonia and in a 1992 interview with *Literaturnaya gazeta* he glossed it as follows:

“I would like the Chechen Republic to be a constitutional secular state. This is what we are striving for, this is the ideal we are pursuing. If religion takes precedence over the secular constitutional order, the Spanish Inquisition and Islamic fundamentalism in a strongly expressed form will appear.”

Dudayev, like many other Chechens, tried to re-discover his Muslim heritage as a way of forging a new Chechen identity. But I heard people joke that he was so ignorant of Islam that he had apparently exhorted Chechens on television to pray three times a day!

The mountain villages of Chechnya give a better clue to the actual nature of Chechen traditional identity. They are dotted with tall stone defensive towers, built with amazing engineering skill. Exactly the same towers can be found on the Georgian side of the mountains, testament to a time in the later middle ages when the Chechens were mostly pagan. Islam only began to arrive in the eighteenth century, and it was of a very specific kind in the form of the two Sufi tariqats (brotherhoods), the Naqshbandia and the Qadiria. Dozens of shrines to Sufi saints and ancestors, traditional places of veneration as much for mountain forefathers as for religious figures, are dotted around Chechnya. These mountain villagers communities hold together with fierce traditions of collective decision-making, self-sufficiency and respect for tradition and the ancestors.

Then there is--or was--the other Chechnya, the more recent russified one. It was centered on the city of Grozny and its oil institute, university, museum, archive, schools. Slowly a new generation of Chechens was benefiting from Soviet education and a new professional class was forming. In the long run, it made little difference to this group of russified Chechens what kind of state they lived in so long as their basic rights and freedoms were growing.

Boris Yeltsin changed all that. By launching his brutal war in 1994 on Dudayev's strange, quasi-autonomous fiefdom, he basically destroyed Chechen society and left behind a gaping hole that is still unfilled.

It is hard to overstate the awfulness of the bombing of Grozny by the Russian air force in December 1994 to January 1995. The estimated casualty figure of 27,000 civilians killed is probably too high, but many thousands did die and mostly the weakest, oldest and most helpless, many of them ethnic Russians--all in the name of affirming that this city was part of the Russian state. Anyone who saw this apocalypse was moved to say, "If this is the solution, then I would prefer the problem." For me, the tragic absurdity of it was summed up by the household I visited in February 1995, whose grandfather, a lame veteran of the Second World War, had just been knocked down and killed by a drunken group of Russian soldiers in an armoured car. The dead man was far more a patriot of Russian statehood than his killers were.

The Russian bombers not only killed thousands, they also destroyed urban and professional Chechnya. The oil institute, university and archive were all destroyed. By the spring of 1995, Chechnya was being run from the hills. This new Chechnya then began to experience another smaller incursion from the other direction. The first Islamic volunteers began to arrive, mostly from the east, via Azerbaijan and Dagestan.

The memoirs of the US Islamic volunteer Aukai Collins, entitled *My Jihad* suggest how divorced these incoming Islamists were from the realities of Chechnya. Collins said he felt at home at the camp of the Saudi-born warrior Khattab because "the Arabs were more religious." The savage behaviour he meted out--the shooting of Russian prisoners for example--point to how the conflict was beginning to mutate into something even more dangerous.

The Chechen fighters slowly diverged into two streams. The main group of fighters in 1994-6 held arms out of a mixture of nationalism, anger, revenge and sheer desire for survival. The leader of this pragmatic nationalist cause, Aslan Maskhadov, another Soviet-educated army officer, became Chechnya's only ever legitimately elected president in 1997.

By the time the rebels had driven out the Russians and Maskhadov was the nominal leader, however, the Islamists who were beginning to run the show and getting a big influx of funds from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Hundreds of

jihadis mistakenly identified Chechnya as a new bridgehead in their world struggle. One of them was Osama Bin-Laden's right-hand-man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was detained in Dagestan and spent six months there on a false passport before being deported. Chechnya's second constitution, the political analyst Alexander Iskandarian likes to point out, was based not on that of Estonia, but on that of Sudan.

Maskhadov's inability to stand up to the Islamists caused further splits and led eventually to the breakaway of Akhmad Kadyrov, a Sufi Mufti and fighter, who switched sides to the Russians in 1999. He then became Chechnya's version of Najibullah, ruling by corruption and intimidation, fighting his former comrade-in-arms Maskhadov and being made Russia's own president in Chechnya in 2003--before he was assassinated in May this year.

In 2004, the Maskhadov fighters have been squeezed into almost non-existence and the chief conflict now going on in Chechnya is a civil war between Moscow's proxy army, led by the heirs of Kadyrov, and the Islamists chiefly led by Shamil Basayev.

Does this mean that Chechnya has indeed become a front in the war in terror, as Putin likes to say?

Only up to a point. Certainly there was a jihadi element in Chechnya by the autumn of 1999, when Moscow invaded again. Yet there is no evidence that it has significantly increased since then: the high mountains of the Caucasus keep almost everyone out. War has depleted their numbers and Chechnya is far from being Afghanistan: it is a small place where most of the fighters actually live in villages most of the time and cannot afford to maintain large groups of foreigners.

What has happened is scarier than that. A radical fringe of the Chechens has become Islamicised without much foreign help at all. They have grafted what they have learned from Hamas and the Middle East--the paraphernalia of the suicide bomber, the videos, the belts strapped with explosives, the headbands and hoods--onto an older revenge culture and made themselves into very frightening creatures indeed.

Most disturbing are the so-called "Black Widows," the women who have now caused around a dozen suicide bombings associated with Chechnya. Information about them is very murky. It seems they have lost family members to Russian atrocities. Possibly some of them have been raped--one of them captured in Chechnya last year was certainly pregnant. And almost certainly they have been actively brainwashed by the militants.

To anyone who saw, as I did, Chechnya a mere ten years ago, when it was still recognizably part of the post-Soviet space, all this is very depressing beyond words. No society on earth perhaps has suffered such a precipitate decline. And

in the wider Russia, a parallel corruption of views and attitudes has proceeded apace. The sense of “otherness” between Chechens and Russians, who once shared so much, is now so great that bigotry that would have been shocking ten years ago has now become mainstream.

Left in the middle between the two extremes are a silent majority of ordinary Chechens. It is hard to think of a more unlucky group of people. They have suffered ten years of bombing, torture, looting and extortion from the Russian army and the depredations of the Islamist fringe. They have also--though they may be only dimly aware of it--been demonised-by-association by an outside world that all too often uses the epithet “the Chechens” as a synonym for savagery and terrorism.

Most Chechens I speak to now say independence has disappeared from the agenda. The issues are survival, rights, security and reconstruction. It is clear to me that, given how Russia's security forces have caused Chechnya's problems, not solved them, the only way to break the cycle of violence is to internationalise it with monitors from abroad. But Moscow and the outside world are still a long way from acknowledging this. How much more pain will it take--how many more Beslans, dare I say, though I dearly hope I am wrong--before Russia and the rest of the world own up to their responsibilities to this unhappy place?

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