The Chechens

A handbook

CAUCASUS WORLD

Peoples of the Caucasus

Amjad Jaimoukha

The Chechens

The ancient Chechen nation has been living in its idyllic homeland in the North Caucasus for thousands of years, building states, creating its own civilization, and forging relations and interacting with other Caucasian and Near Eastern civilizations.

The only comprehensive treatment of the subject available in English, this book provides a ready introduction and practical guide to the Chechen people, and to some little known and rarely considered aspects of Chechen culture, including customs and traditions, folklore, arts and architecture, music and literature. *The Chechens* also includes:

- Chechen history from ancient times, providing sketches of archaic religions and civilizations;
- the present political situation in Chechnya;
- the esoteric social structure and the brand of Sufism peculiar to the Chechens;
- analysis of Chechen media development since the early twentieth century, and of the short-lived Chechen film industry; images of the Chechens carried by Russian and Western medias;
- a section on proverbs and sayings;
- appendices detailing social structure, the native pantheon, bibliographies and periodicals pertaining to the Chechens and Chechnya, and a lexicographic listing;
- a comprehensive bibliography, with many entries in English, for further reading.

This handbook should prove a corrective to the negative stereotypes that have come to be associated with the Chechens and put a human face back on one of the noblest—yet least understood—of nations. This book is an indispensable and accessible resource for all those with an interest in Chechnya.

Amjad Jaimoukha is Assistant President of the Royal Scientific Society in Jordan. Educated in England, he has written a number of books and articles, including *The Circassians* (also published by RoutledgeCurzon), *Kabardian—English Dictionary, The Cycles of the Circassian Nart Epic* and *Circassian Proverbs and Sayings*. He is also a member of the Central Eurasian Studies Society at Harvard University.

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Foreword

Since 1722, the Chechens have struggled against successive Russian regimes in a bloody cycle of invasion, resistance, bloodshed and deportation. The bitter winter of 1944 saw the wholesale deportation of the Chechens to Central Asia and Siberia, many in cattle trucks, while those in the mountains who could or would not be moved were burnt alive in their villages. Their land was literally erased from the Soviet maps. The following decades saw the Chechens rebuild their land until, in 1991, they declared themselves a sovereign nation. But, with grim inevitability, wars with Russia followed in 1994 and 1999, resulting in the razing of Chechnya. As Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote, describing the conditions in the Soviet gulags: 'There was one nation that would not give in, would not acquire the mental habits of submission—and not just individual rebels among them, but the whole nation to a man. These were the Chechens.'

But this was a struggle for more than political survival. The Chechens have also been fighting to preserve their cultural identity and heritage. The 1994–1996 War, for example, saw the destruction of the national archives in Grozny, a unique, irreplaceable accumulation of Chechen culture that had only finally come together in the previous few years.

Caught as their homeland is between international power blocs and the deadly practicalities of energy politics, perhaps their greatest challenge still lies ahead. Indeed, the Chechens are at a major crossroads in their existence, where the choice is stark: exile or assimilation. Either way it amounts to the murder of a people, since the difference brought by the twentieth and now the twenty-first centuries is simple: the amputation of the people from their homeland.

Behind the romantic image of indomitable mountaineers lies a welcoming people whose migrant communities have helped build countries like Jordan, Turkey and even Russia. Significantly, the Chechens, for all their warlike reputation, have never sought to invade another country or enslave another people. And, while one cannot ignore the scale of Russian savagery against the Chechens, one cannot ignore the interdependence that has grown between the two peoples. Yet recent years have seen Russia and the West link the entire Chechen people to a wider, international pattern of 'Islamic terrorism'—once more branded a 'suspect people', as Stalin had previously labelled them. While no one can deny the existence of terrorist attacks carried out by Chechen guerrillas, these have little to do with international terror networks, but everything to do with three centuries of oppression of a people no more and no less Islamic than the British are Anglican. Indeed, the Chechen character is less Islamic and more Caucasian, related neither culturally nor linguistically to their northern neighbours.

For a people who are supposed to represent such a strategic threat, beyond the welter of expert reports on the ongoing crisis, very little has been written about them. As Amjad Jaimoukha says, there is a jigsaw here that needs to be pieced together before it is too late. This book itself is the first such work to present a complete picture of the people in any language. The Chechens have fought long and hard with their own resources and

those of neighbouring Caucasians to maintain their right to their way of life in their own land. Now it is time we lent a hand. Otherwise what is endangered may become extinct. The present destruction of the Chechen homeland is particularly a catastrophe for the diaspora, since this has meant the loss of the central place that links them, while the refugee communities face their own crisis of identity and assimilation.

This book, therefore, is meant not to be a catalogue of deportations and massacres, nor is it a glorification of a noble warrior people. Instead this is a celebration of a unique culture and so warns of what may be lost to us all. This, therefore, is a handbook for survival: one we may dare to hope may help others to stem this loss of a unique heritage.

Nicholas Awde
London, 2004

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Introduction

> Yet, what most Western coverage of Chechnya lacks is background. Because of inadequate background knowledge, Western reporting is full of speculation in which the unknown is fitted into pre-existing theories.
>
> (P.Armstrong 1999)

Writers on Chechen issues have to deal with the problem of a dearth of information, which becomes especially acute for non-Russian and non-Chechen speakers, given that most of the references are in these two languages. This lack of sources, compounded by the 'introverted' nature of the Chechens, leads in turn to the tendency by many of these writers, be they Chechen, Russian or Western, to make sweeping statements and backward projections based on particular and stereotypical features of Chechen society, in order to emphasize a particular point of view, or perhaps implement an agenda. On the one hand, the Chechens want their conception of the ideal model of their society to be regarded as the proto-democratic organization of human development—on a par with the ancient Greek democratic ethos. Westerners, on the other hand, in their effort to understand the esoteric Chechen society, seem to rely mainly on reference materials, predominantly in Russian, on the recent and relatively well-known past, for it is uncomfortable to go back beyond Russian intervention in the Caucasus in the eighteenth century AD for lack of readily available sources of information and because of the considerable effort required to delve more deeply into Chechen affairs.

For example, it is commonly stated that the Chechens had never developed a feudal society. However, egalitarianism had become a leading beacon in Chechen society only since the late Middle Ages, when the Chechen rank and file ousted their local and foreign feudal lords. R.Wixman's (1980) blanket generalizations and wholesale dismissals regarding the North Caucasians form a case in point. He had as informants the exiled North Caucasian nationalists who promoted the image of North Caucasian unity in all aspects, to the detriment of the historical and cultural particularities of each of the North Caucasian peoples. From mere statistical data he concluded that 'none of the languages of the North Caucasus is in fact a "literary language"' (p. 161), and, amazingly, 'Can one speak of a distinct Chechen history or Avar history? Certainly not' (p. 167). It is hoped that the chapters on history will show that most definitely the Chechens had a discrete history, which, however, does not negate the fact that at times it coincided with that of other peoples in the vicinity, the Avars included.

It is also claimed by some authorities that it was the encounter with the Russians that shaped and honed the warlike character of the Chechens and later engendered their national identity. Again this is short-sighted, for the ancestors of the Chechens had to deal with the most ferocious of medieval hordes—the Tatar-Mongols. Particularly, it is the age-old spirit of national preservation that had carried the Chechens through the trials and

tribulations of the last few centuries, including the ghastly 1944 deportation. Furthermore, it was not in the wilderness of Central Asia that the Chechens had developed their consolidation strategies, rather it was the application of their already sharpened 'survival skills' that allowed them to display the proverbial aloofness popularized by Solzhenitsyn, whilst the spirit of most of the other exile nations was broken.

The journalist Sebastian Smith had tried for a long time to find out the significance of the Sufi fraternities in the Chechen ethos:

> The Chechens…were able to survive by retreating into the inner world of the Sufi brotherhoods—the same secretive, sometimes fanatical organisations which led resistance to the tsarist armies and then the Bolsheviks. On the deportees' return to their homelands…what became known as 'parallel Islam' thrived in private houses across Chechnya.
>
> (S.Smith 1998:77)

The self-same author was struck by the reticence and reluctance of the Chechens to divulge information on all matters pertaining to them. The esoteric nature of Sufism was a perfect fit with, and a continuation of, the earlier peculiar North Caucasian system of Men's Houses and Unions.

Thus the amalgam of misconceptions associated with things Chechen could fairly be attributed to a joint failure by the Chechens and the rest of the world, the former for requiring the latter to just leave them in peace and the latter's either indifference, or reluctance to step on Russia's toes.

The history of Chechnya is not widely known beyond the familiar terrain of the last three centuries. The Russian—Caucasian War is well documented, with archives in London, Istanbul, St Petersburg, Tbilisi, Baku and Makhachkala, some of which go back to the sixteenth century. However, little research had been done on ancient and medieval Chechen history, and even the terra cognita was besmirched by communist drivel. Even Ya.Akhmadov's (2002) important work on Chechen history carried an obvious Russian bias in its latter parts. An attempt is made in this book to piece together a coherent history of the Chechens from ancient times. Still, Chechen historians have the daunting task of rewriting their history sans foreign coercion with the few archival materials that have escaped the destruction of the past decade. But first, the urgent matter of survival must be attended to.

It is most important to emphasize that Chechen history does not start with Chechnya being part of Russia. International perspective in general can cast back only to the establishment of Soviet power and the subsequent arbitrary designation of the North Caucasian entities as autonomous republics and regions of the Russian SSR. This myopic view of the Chechen issue does not encompass the genocidal nineteenth-century Russian—Caucasian War.

On the other hand, the North Caucasian perspective goes back to the most ancient of Caucasian cultures, dating back to more than five millennia ago. For thousands of years, the Vainakh lived in their North Caucasian domicile, which waxed and waned as invaders came and went, but was preserved more or less intact due to the nation's remarkable tenacity.[1] Linguistic evidence ties Vainakh culture to the ancient Hurrian and Urartian

civilizations that flourished in the Near East a few millennia ago. The Vainakh also constituted an important element in the eneolithic Kura-Arax culture in the Trans-Caucasus. However, it has not been absolutely established whether Vainakh culture is a continuation of these ancient civilizations, or just a close kin. A tentative connecting line is drawn from the earliest Hurrians to the present-day Vainakh, with the qualifying statement that much more research needs to be done in this area.

The conquest of the Caucasus was a bloody affair, with the Russians destroying villages, slaughtering civilian populations and deporting, to achieve victory. The Chechens defended their homeland for almost a century, but in the end sheer numbers vanquished valour and the Chechen population was literally decimated, and, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the strength of the nation was almost completely sapped, enabling Russia to incorporate Chechnya. Population census figures are included as indicators of the horrific loss of human life that the Chechens have been periodically sustaining in their continuous confrontation with the Russians. Whereas archaeological monuments and finds in the Northwest Caucasus are regularly designated as part of 'Russian' culture, with no serious challenge from the largely pacified indigenes, no such claim can be made on Chechen heritage, thanks to the aggressive assertion of Chechen identity.

A large Chechen diaspora was created in the Middle East and Turkey as a result of mass expulsions. The Chechens that remained in the Caucasus after the war were able to reorganize their shattered lives by falling back on their deeply ingrained traditions and stable social structures. Unlike the Circassians, who were almost exterminated and scattered over a wide geographic area, the Chechens managed to keep their traditional domicile, albeit with some population shifts dictated by Russian policy. One consequence of this was that whereas the Circassians were more or less subdued, the Chechen martial spirit never waned, even after Stalin's horrific deportation of the whole Chechen nation. The Chechens never reconciled themselves to Russian hegemony and had always been on the look-out for a chance to rid themselves of the bloody occupiers. In the interim, they have 'institutionalized' vigorous procreation as a defence against Russian genocide.

Although there is some coverage in this book of the most pressing issues of war and politics—in order not to underestimate the dangers facing the very existence of the Chechen nation—the bulk of the work is concerned with often neglected aspects of the Chechen issue, including culture, customs and traditions, folklore, arts and architecture, music and literature. A case is made that this culture has something to offer human civilization and ethos, provided the Chechens are vouchsafed a safe place under the sun.

The chapter on politics and current affairs presented a tough challenge at many levels. The ongoing conflict and the circumstances surrounding it are very different from the 1994–1996 War. The Chechen struggle against Russian occupation had transformed to religious and civilizational contexts by the detrimental input of the Wahhabis and the '11 September' affair. Part of Chechen diplomatic and media energy was diverted to trying to reassure the West that the old struggle was purely nationalistic, that Bin Laden's interest in the Chechens was not a reciprocal affair. The most recent war had caused the physical destruction of tens of thousands of Chechen civilians. At the dawn of the new millennium, all aspects of Chechen culture were interred in the soil of obscurity. Stemming from the fact that the book touches a very sore spot on the world body politic, and to preserve neutrality, competing views on the future of Chechnya are presented in

Chapter 5. The reconstruction of post-war Chechnya is dependent on revival of the economy, and the West and other countries must do their bit in this regard.

The Chechens have to deal with the (mis-)conception that their country is part of the Russian Federation. The double standards by which the international community views the conflict do not only stem from lack of understanding of the historical background to the conflict. Bias is a very undermining factor. Why could the Russians commit genocide in broad daylight and escape scot-free, whilst Chechen reaction is scrutinized to a fault, the Chechens having to go out of their way to 'assure' the world that they would not play dirty? 'Moderate' Chechens have come to realize that the idea of an independent Chechnya must get the approval and support of the West. However, in the West, Chechnya and Chechens are in general perceived as part of the Muslim world, non-European as it were, and as such alien to the Western ethos. Although this view is certainly one explanation of Western apathy towards the Chechens, it is not the only one. The West forcefully intervened on the side of the Muslim Bosnians and Albanians and saved them from ethnic cleansing by the Christian Serbs. Not only did they bring Serbia to heel, they also ousted Milosovic and eventually brought him to justice. This could have been motivated by the fact that conflicts were right in the middle of Europe, not on the murky periphery. The Russians were not very happy with this development, for it had set a disturbing precedent. It would seem that killing Muslims wantonly, which the Russians had been doing for hundreds of years, was no longer an acceptable thing. Although Serbia was a more manageable target than Russia, perhaps a time will come when the Russian war criminals will also be brought in handcuffs to The Hague. It would also seem that Chechen 'aloofness' and atypical reactions to calamity (the Chechen 'stiff upper lip' syndrome) are generally off-putting to a Western audience, when open expression of pain and misery is expected instead of highlander stoicism.

The al-Qaeda attacks on the USA of 11 September 2001 resulted in a major setback to the Chechen cause and robbed the Chechens of the modicum of sympathy they had had in the West. Russia played its cards right and quickly associated the Chechen legitimate struggle for independence with Muslim extremism. The West became even more indifferent to Chechnya and Chechens—but not for long. In early 2002, the Europeans and Americans became more vocal in condemning the inordinate use of force by the Russians and categorically stated that Maskhadov was a crucial element in the peace equation. Despite initial delay and voluble protest from the Russians, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty started to broadcast in Chechen, Circassian and Avar in early April 2002—a significant event for the three language communities.

The Chechens must face the fundamental question as to why justice stops at their doorsteps. They are in the unenviable position of being spurned by co-religionists, demonized and brutalized by the Russians, treated with indifference, or even hostility by some of their fellow North Caucasians, and kept at arm's length by the West. Many in the world would be happy if the Chechen 'problem' would just go away. The Russians have killed, tortured, maimed, mass-expelled and raped Chechens for more than two centuries with absolute impunity, without stirring undue concern from the rest of the world. The Russian action in Chechnya could be likened to the British Army reducing Edinburgh to rubble and expelling a couple of million Scottish people in response to a unilateral declaration of independence by Scotland. Some Chechens see an orientation towards the West as the best stance by which to achieve and maintain independence. It would seem

that Maskhadov's government had been earnestly cultivating such an attitude, but was thwarted by many inside and outside factors. Nevertheless, the moderates still have leanings towards the West, despite fervid Russian attempts to lump them with the small radical minority, who had been thriving on the conflict and chaos. Pluralism and respect for the point of view of the other is of paramount importance in a Chechen context.

Most interested intellectuals and scholars have sympathies with the Chechen cause, but Western governments in general turn a blind eye to Russian conduct, sacrificing the 'insignificant' Chechens on the altar of national interests—realpolitik at its ugliest. The world community cannot act deaf, dumb and blind forever to the plight of the Chechens and their rightful demand to self-determination. The West need not feel threatened by the Chechens. On the contrary, Chechen culture, and in general North Caucasian culture, has a lot to contribute to world culture—a missing jigsaw piece on the universal cultural landscape. The Chechen issue is of concern to many people around the world, be it from a purely humanistic point of view or from political and other considerations. Even genuine friends of the Chechens are worried enough to want to know how things would develop in a post-war Chechnya. Will the old factious behaviour prevail, or will the Chechens come to the realization that unity is the Holy Grail, to be sought not only during conflicts, but also in the all-too-crucial process of nation building? Perhaps the optimistic streak could be extended to mend the chinks between the Chechens and Ingush introduced and fostered by the Machiavellian Russians.

The main realms of the esoteric universe of the Chechens are the traditional clan system, the eclectic ancient belief complex and the more recent Sufi orders, the amalgam of customs and traditions and the unique folklore.

At the start of this venture, the aim with regard to social structure was to elucidate the *tukhum-taip* system and present it as a model of Chechen society. However, it transpired that controversy surrounds even some fundamental points relating to this issue. What is more, complicating dynamic factors make any static model a rough approximation at the very best. Not least of these compounding elements is the imposition of Sufism and its maze of fraternities on the already complex system. A compromise would be to first present an ideal system and then qualify it by adding known disturbance factors to depict a more realistic picture, although the extent of the approximation of the final model to reality cannot be determined—Chechen society has been in chaotic flux for such a long time.[2]

There is a tendency to portray the Chechens as a primordial people that preserved its ancient highland culture in a pristine state, at least until Russian intrusion in the North Caucasus. This view lacks proper retrospection, as the Vainakh did not remain isolated in their mountain strongholds and their society did not stay static throughout the past. In the history sections, a conscious attempt is made to portray the historical development of Vainakh society, the transformations it had undergone and the dynamics that gave rise to the traditional social structure.

The hope of using the model to account for past behaviour and predict post-war Chechen society proved to be over-optimistic, as one had come to realize that a dimension of that society was beyond scrutiny—probably a 'survival' dynamic that incidentally confounds outsiders. Attempts are made to construct models to explain various phenomena and developments. Although the robust social system had undoubtedly been a major factor in the preservation of the nation, the Russians were able

at times to exploit cracks in the monolith in order to attempt to hack it to pieces. Differences between northern and southern tribes, the so-called 'plain—mountain opposition', mainly in some cultural aspects and with respect to attitude towards Russia, the Sufi—Wahhabi standoff, and even polarization of far-away communities, such as the Chechens in Jordan, had rent the Chechen social fabric.

Reconstruction of the ancient creed is of importance in trying to grasp the nature of the eclecticism of the Vainakh and to place the atavistic features of the belief system in a historic-religious context. It is also important in as much as it facilitates understanding of Chechen attitudes and modes of behaviour. The fact that the Nakh evolved a complex pantheon indicates that they had developed a full-fledged civilization, as such a system cannot be produced by a primitive society.[3] The breaking down of conceivable reality into manageable portions as an adjunct of social specialization led to the differentiation of godly provinces, with the collective of deities representing the sum total of this reality. The daunting task posed by this 'epiphany' was the identification of this civilizational stage in Nakh social development. Fortunately, relics of this ancient civilization have been preserved in ancient religion and literature, and were culled to make an attempt at a skeletal reconstruction.

There is an anecdote about a Chechen who was so disillusioned by the apathy of the Muslim world towards the Chechen cause that he half-jokingly suggested that all his people convert back to the Christian faith, preferably to Catholicism or Protestantism, in order to motivate the West to come to their rescue. The controversial writer Naipaul, 2001 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, lamented the demotion of native cultures and their superseding by Islam. There are perceptible contradictions between indigenous, Muslim and Western cultures, and this has polarized Chechen intellectuals. But to be fair, Naipaul's thesis could also be extended in some respects to Western cultures that have been supplanted by Christianity.

One aim of the book is to uncover the ancient native culture. This is not an easy task due to two historical circumstances. Up to the early years of the nineteenth century, the Chechens preserved their ancient customs and traditions almost intact. The influence of the Avar *imams,* who led the struggle of the Northeast Caucasians against Russian encroachment, was negative in as much as they sought to suppress the native culture in favour of spreading the Sufi ethos. Some cultural pursuits were frowned upon and a few were actively interdicted, especially music and poetry, the principal vehicles of orally transmitted lore. According to foreign visitors of the time, they were hard-pressed to find story-tellers and minstrels to give them a glimpse of ancient folklore.

The other factor in the diminution of cultural heritage is definitely Russian genocidal conduct towards the Chechens in the last three centuries, and the incessant drive to impose an adventitious set of morals and modes of conduct. Expulsion, transfer, mass deportations, massacres and full-scale invasions have taken a very heavy toll on Chechen society. The explanation of the fierce clinging of many Chechens to their culture and dreams of independence does not reside solely in the fact that the Chechen nation is the largest in the North Caucasus. Recourse must also be made to the fact that their culture has a robust mechanism for internalizing their history and propagating it through esoteric institutions. This system was tested time and time again throughout history. Contrary to other nations, say the Circassians, who were decimated and had the spiritual dimension of their culture seriously compromised, the home-grown close-knit *tukhum-taip* social

system of the Chechens was cemented by Sufism, an import system that had nevertheless played a principal role in preserving Chechenness. The Chechen brand of Sufism could not be accused of being docile, playing as it did a leading role in the struggle against Russian encroachment by providing an organizational framework and inculcating iron discipline into its adepts. The confraternities of Sufism were built upon the Men's Houses and Unions prevalent in the North Caucasus in the nineteenth century. Native culture was so intimately intertwined, one might say confused, with Muslim dogma, that when there was a call to revert to Islamic *shariat,* the Chechens discovered that their version of Islam was not in complete harmony with the 'pure' one. When the Sudanese version of *shariat* was imported wholesale and a hasty decision was made to implement it in the late 1990s, the Chechens were not impressed by the alien diktats and penal codes and they had come to realize that their brand of Islam was different.

At some deep layer, most North Caucasian nations, whether indigenous or imported, share many cultural features, and one is tempted to describe the situation as a common North Caucasian culture with regional variations. Comparative studies and extrapolations would shed light on obscure aspects of Chechen culture. *Adat,* the pan-North Caucasian corpus of customs and traditions, is referred to as *'nokhchalla'* by the Chechens, *'xabze'* by the Circassians, and so on. All indications are that all share a common cultural origin and throughout history they were subjected to similar outside influences: Scythian, Greek, Roman, Persian, Byzantine, Gothic, Georgian, Mongol, Tatar, Turkic, Muslim and Russian. In addition, the similarity of the physical nature of their countries had played a part in inducing a common 'mountaineer' culture and identity, for example the cult of hospitality. Delving into the accounts, first of the Circassians then the Chechens, one comes face to face with the similarities in the culture. Those who read *The Circassians* would be struck by a sense of *déjà vu* when reading the sections on Chechen culture and folklore. In addition, these similarities furnish the opportunity to develop some themes broached in the earlier book and even add a few new ones without undue intrusion, for example Caucasian connections to the Christmas Tree, Kabardian domination in Western Chechnya, traditional medicine, common beliefs and superstitions, and so on.

One can roughly discern two native perspectives on culture, as one would expect in Chechen society, polarized as it is. One outlook, espoused by pro-independent elements, views Chechen culture as totally separate from that of Russia, which it accuses of being the source of corrupting influences. It finds a balance between native and Muslim cultures to produce a hybrid culture. The other perspective is an amalgamation of native, Russian and consequently Western cultures, with only lip service to Muslim heritage. In general, diaspora Chechens in Russia espouse the second point of view, being well-educated and in well-off positions in general. Ironically, these very same 'Russified' Chechens are being harassed by the increasingly racialist and xenophobic Russians. The nationalists and the diaspora in the Middle East adopt the first point of view. There is also a dichotomy between the plains and mountain populations, with the southerners being more attached to their ancient roots.

As one delves deeper into Caucasian issues, an uncanny similarity emerges between Georgian and North Caucasian civilizations. Some authorities assert that comparative studies indicate that in ancient times there had been cultural uniformity across the Caucasus. In addition, there had always been cultural exchanges and influences across the

Caucasus, and many customs and traditions are still held in common. Georgians exported Christianity to the North Caucasians in the Middle Ages, and, most probably, North Caucasian polyphonic music was an import from Georgia. As this work progressed, it had become clear that Georgian materials were of importance in shedding light on some aspects of North Caucasian cultures.

It may be useful to construct a virtual model of proto-North Caucasian culture that does not necessarily imply or deny a common root, but pre-supposes at least some active cultural interaction at some points in the histories of the North Caucasian peoples, say at the age of the great cultures: Maikop, Meot, Sindika, Kura-Arax, and others. It is not unlikely that there were cultural connections between the North Caucasians and the ancient Western cultures, such as that of the Celts. The similarities suggest that perhaps at one time a common culture may have encompassed Eastern and Western Europe. One could mention tree worship and rites associated with it, veneration of fire, festive celebrations, including Chechen festal rites very similar to Hallowe'en and Beltane.

Folkloric themes and traditions broached include ancient and traditional costumes, standards of beauty, cuisine, folk medicine, festivals and holidays, sports, and so on. Beauty was a highly prized quality, honed by resplendent costumes, vigorous training and austere diets. The martial traditions of the Chechens have made a smooth transition to modern sports, especially wrestling. Chechens share their flair for wrestling with other North Caucasian nations, whose athletes were well represented in recent Russian national teams. A succession of European, World and Olympic champions, incommensurate in number with the tiny size of the Chechen nation, have impinged impressively on the world sporting stage in the last three decades, representing mainly the Soviet Union, then Russia and other CIS countries, and Turkey, but rarely Chechnya itself. Despite the vicious war, Chechen athletes are keeping up the tradition and a new generation of sportsmen is also vying to uphold Chechnya's excellence.

It is very tempting to stereotype the Chechens. When looking at a different culture it is most important to beware of and compensate for preconceived ideas and established paradigms. This is particularly important in a Chechen context because of cultural peculiarities that cannot be readily pigeon-holed. To borrow a metaphor from science, no observation is accepted as orderly unless it falls within the familiar paradigm. You need a framework to pin your observations on; otherwise they would make no sense.

There is a blind spot in the Russian ethos concerning the North Caucasus that renders Russians unable to understand the peoples of the area—to the detriment of the cultures of all concerned parties. Historically, Russia's relation with the North Caucasians was based on confrontation. The Russians destroyed and conquered, then by their myopic heavy-handed policies caused the build-up of feelings of resentment—a squeezing of the coil that would inevitably rebound in great violence. If the Russians had just realized one sacred tenet of the Chechen code of chivalry, that a guest is treated with reverence, then Russia could have conducted her affairs with the Chechens in a civilized fashion. A feature of the turbulent Chechen-Russian relationship is that the Chechens as a whole never harboured ill will towards the Russians as a people, although they had every reason to do so.

For a long time, the Russians have been working diligently and in a deliberate fashion at projecting negative images of the Chechen in the average Russian mind—empathy not being one of the fortes of the Russian ethos. The process was initiated by Russian

romantic writers of the nineteenth century. The dominant theme put forth was the noble North Caucasian savage that was in dire need of the 'civilizing' mission of Russia. The Russians view foreigners with morbid suspicion, considering them as potential enemies ready to pounce on Mother Russia and reduce it to bondage at the slightest chance. The Tatar-Mongol legacy is still a heavy load on the Russian psyche. It is quite telling that whereas the Westerners who came in contact with the North Caucasians were so impressed by the people that some of them speculated that the area was the cradle of the white race, the xenophobic and bleak Russians could only discern 'savages' and 'blacks'.[4]

The Russians have more recently been exporting this contrary perception to the West. With dramatic images tending to stick most in mind, stage-managed events and choice pictures can do wonders towards sullying a nation. It is most important that counter-measures be taken to offset such propaganda. In the madness and chaos that surrounds the Chechen issue, there is a dire need to present a sober view of Chechen culture. To continue the scientific metaphor, it is hoped that this work would make a contribution towards effecting a paradigmatic revolution so that when the terms 'Chechen' and 'Chechnya' are mentioned positive notions come to mind. It is hoped that the Russians may remove the blinkers of nationalism and discover the beauty in the peoples that they have been oppressing for so long. The Russians are sowing the seeds of their own self-destruction as a people. It is a sobering thought that Russian culture can only be traced back a thousand years, whereas those of the North Caucasians go back for millennia. The purported oldest written record in Russian Cyrillic is associated with contacts between the Russians of the Tmutarakan principality and the Circassians in the Caucasus in the tenth century AD.[5]

The Vainakh took their poetry and music very seriously. The stock and ware of the story-tellers *(tueiranchash)* can be fashioned as the annals of pre-eighteenth-century Chechen history. The major encounters with invaders and foes were witnessed by detached bards, whose only function it was to record the account in an elevated language and immortalize the feats of heroes. Romance was expressed in verse and melody, but only by the fair sex. The balladeers were respected by all and they achieved a good standard of living and enjoyed a high social status. Fortunately, many of the songs of yore were recorded starting in the nineteenth century, in the hope of preserving them for posterity. However, with the cultural destruction brought about by deportation and the two post-independence wars, the musical heritage suffered severe losses. The Chechens, as did all North Caucasians, immediately took to classical music in the Soviet era. Music schools were opened and many talented musicians emerged after the exile, some of whom achieved international renown.

The Caucasus has been famed since antiquity for the large number of its languages and for the exotic grammatical structures of its indigenous language families. This diversity testifies to millennia of peaceful co-existence of the different nationalities in the region. In Chapter 13, the Chechen language is discussed in terms of its position among world languages and with some theories on its origin. The topics of orthography and education in Chechen are also broached.

In Chapter 14, Chechen literature will be exposed in as much detail as is appropriate in such a work to drive home the idea that the Chechens have produced both outstanding writers and literary outputs. Works from the period of Chechen Islamic literature, which

began in the seventeenth century and flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through Soviet literature, up to the full development of national literature, are noted. Also, the post-Soviet and diaspora literatures are considered.

Discussion of the media in a Chechen context is of importance, since it could be a crucial determinant of the fate of the nation. It would seem that the world needs to be prodded every now and then to rouse it from its lethargy towards the whole affair. There is a cyber war going on between the Chechens, who are trying desperately to draw world attention to their plight, and the Russians, who are sparing no effort to screen the republic from international attention. The Russians had become a bit sensitive to Western accusations of flouting human rights in Chechnya and so they launched dedicated web sites trumpeting the return of normality to Chechnya and portraying Chechen culture from a Russian perspective.

The Ingush will be discussed in as much as they affect the story of the Chechens. It is generally accepted that the separation of the two nations, collectively called 'Vainakh', only took place in the latter Middle Ages. Thus, besides having the same ethnicity and similar languages, the two peoples share a long history. In fact, the study of the Ingush, who converted much later than the Chechens to Islam, and thus had been less exposed to Muslim influence, would shed light on the ancient culture and beliefs of the Chechens. Tsarist Russia drove a wedge between the Chechens and Ingush, exploiting the latter's less hostile attitude towards its hegemony and policies. The Soviets, on the other hand, lumped both peoples together and (mal-)treated them equally. Thus a joint entity was created in 1934 and both peoples were deported *en masse* to Central Asia and Siberia in 1944 on trumped-up charges. By the end of Soviet rule, the Ingush were almost as anti-Communist as were the Chechens. So much for the Soviet nationality policy!

It is the hope that this book may go some way to providing 'adequate background knowledge' on Chechnya and do justice to the tyrannized and maligned freedom-loving Chechens who have been paying dearly for upholding their national ethos and cherished ideals.

Note on the written Chechen language

Given the multitude of sources and different cultural and dialectical backgrounds of informants, A.G.Matsiev's *Chechen-Russian Dictionary* (1961), which is based on official and literary Chechen, was adopted, whenever possible, as the standard for Chechen words and expressions, for consistency. The one-to-one (hence reversible) Cyrillic-Latin conversion system used in this work is as follows:

а=a

б=b

в=v

г=g

гI=gh (Parisian [r])

д=d

е=e

Ж=zh

з=z

и=i

к=k

кх=kkh (combination of ‘[k]’ and ‘[x]’)

къ=q (soft velar occlusive-guttural voiceless affricate; Arabicق)

кI=k’

л=l

м=m

н=n

о=o

п=p

пI=p’

р=r

с=s

т=t

тI=t’

у=u

ф=f

х=kh (soft velar fricative voiceless phoneme)

хъ=h (guttural-fricative voiceless phoneme; Arabic ح)

хI=kh’

ц=ts

цI=ts’

ч=ch

чI=ch’

ш=sh

ъ=” (glottal stop)

ь(as umlaut indicator)=e

э=è

ю=yu

я=ya

I=’ (occlusive-guttural voiced phoneme; Arabic ع)

In Arabic words, the glottal stop *(hamza)* is indicated by ’. The diacritic that marks long vocalic morphemes is rendered as doubling of the vowel, e.g. пIēpacKa= p’eeraska (Friday). In cases where confusion may arise, a hyphen is inserted to separate two distinct letters, e.g. s-h=схь, whereas sh=ш.

1
People and land

People

Appellations

The Chechens refer to themselves as 'Nokhchii' (sing. 'Nokhchi' or 'Nokhcho'), or 'Nokhchiin qam' ('The Chechen People'), and call their country 'Nokhchichoe' (literally: 'The Chechen Home'), 'Nokhchiin mokhk' ('The Chechen Country'), or 'Daimokhk' ('Fatherland'). A number of these names derive from the ethnonym and toponym of a large Chechen tribe, the Nokhchmekhkakhoi, and its domicile in southeast Chechnya, which is also called 'Ichkeria'. First mention of this 'proto' community, as 'Nakhchmateans', is found in the medieval Georgian and Armenian Chronicles.

Arabic sources in Georgia referred to 'Chechens' as far back as the eighth century AD using a term thought to be an adoption from the Iranian name for the Nokhchii. Russian sources started to use the terms 'Chechen' and 'Chechnya' in the seventeenth century AD, presumably from Kabardian 'Shashan' (stress on second syllable).[1] Tradition has it that it was after a historic skirmish in 1732 in which the Nokhchii defeated a Russian army contingent at Chechen-Aul on the Argun that the term came into use. However, the term 'Chechen' was used as early as 1692 in Russian sources and 'Chechnya' was shown on a map of the North Caucasus that goes back to 1719, which puts paid to the traditional spin (N.G.Volkova 1973). According to A. P.Bergé (1991 [1859; 140]), the term 'Chechen' first appeared in a 1708 treaty between the Russians and the Kalmyks. Modern Russian appellations for the Chechens are 'Checheni' or 'Chechentsi', and for their country 'Chechnya', which has become the prevalent term in the English language, albeit Chechen intellectuals and nationalists prefer (the more regular and 'neutral') 'Chechenia', or even 'Chechenya'. The Georgians refer to Chechens as 'Chechnebi' (sing. 'Checheni') (and to both Chechens and Ingush as 'Kistebi'—sing. 'Kisti'), the Circassians—'Shashan', the Ossetians—'Tsatsan', the Avars—'Burtichi' or 'Burtiyaw', the Lezgins—'Chachan', the Kumyks—'Michikish' or 'Michigish', which name ('Mischxish') is also used by the Circassians, but only to refer to the Ingush.

Nakh, Vainakh and Chechens

The term 'Nakh' ('People') refers to the Chechens, Ingush, Kist and Tsova-Tush (Bats), all of whom speak languages of the Nakh branch of Northeast (NE) Caucasian and share common descent and culture.[2] In this work, the Malkhi, considered in some sources as a separate Nakh ethnos, is considered one of the (divergent) Chechen tribes. 'Nakh' also denotes the ancient ancestors of the Chechens from the purported separation of the Nakh from the other Northeast Caucasians, but more concretely from the middle of the first

millennium BC, when they were first mentioned as 'Nachos' in historical annals, to the early Middle Ages, when the North Caucasian Vainakh emerge as a distinct nation. 'Vainakh' refers to present-day Chechens and the related Ingush and Kist, considered as a collective, and to the Chechens in the Middle Ages down to the time of their differentiation into a nation distinct from the Ingush.

One proposal was that the separation of the Ingush from the rest of the Chechen nation began in the seventeenth century AD and was completed in the first part of the nineteenth. Chechen historian Ya. Akhmadov (2002) suggested the first part of the eighteenth century as the time when the Ingush swarmed off the Vainakh collective. A third proposition has a separate Ingush nationality taking shape in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries. The first two hypotheses seem to be more in tune with the fact that the Ingush made a collective decision to remain neutral during the Russian-Caucasian War, which accentuated their distinctiveness. Also, two of the earliest references on the Ingush in Russian sources were in the works of I.Shtelina and I.Georgi in 1770 and 1776, respectively.

Nevertheless, ethnic designations had remained fuzzy right through the early years of the twentieth century. In most Russian eighteenth-century documents, the ethnonym 'Chechens' was used for both Chechens and Ingush. In 1870, the Ingush writer Chakh Akhriev entitled a work on Ingush epic tales *From Chechen Legends*. The 1897 Russian census listed the Ingush as one of the Chechen tribes. Many attempts were made by Chechen and Ingush intellectuals to restore national unity, the last being at the beginning of the 1920s—but to no avail. Although the generic 'Vainakh' was used in the 1930s, paradoxically a time of emphasis of Ingush separate identity, the nominal separation was institutionalized, resulting in further differentiation between the two 'nations'. At present, it may be legitimate to talk about two nationalities in the modern sense, with the proviso that the final chapter on their relationship has not been written yet.

There is also a perceivable differentiation, mainly in some cultural aspects and with respect to attitude towards Russia, between the plains and mountain Chechens, but it is not pronounced, and is mostly the result of a certain Machiavellian maxim.

Nationhood[3]

The Chechens are accustomed to democratic ways, their social structure being firmly based on pluralism and deference to individuality. Until the Russian conquest, they had formed an independent nation with its own language and definite territory, and peculiar, albeit stable, social and political structures based on autonomous clans with mutual support relations that linked them into larger tribal confederations (which generally coincided with dialects). Each clan was headed by a respected elder and decisions were taken by elected councils or plebiscites. By the beginning of the Russian encroachment, feudal classes had disappeared and social distinction had to be earned the hard way—by performance of extraordinary feats of valour.

Nationalism as conceived by the Chechens and other North Caucasian peoples, at least at the outbreak of the war with Russia, does not completely coincide with the Western concept thereof, as both developed in different circumstances. Therefore, Western researchers should take this into consideration when applying the tools for gauging North

Caucasian nationalism. The Vainakh had developed a unique brand of national consolidation a very long time ago, the most conspicuous evidence being the complex warning system of watchtowers extending from the foothills to the remotest Vainakh mountainous settlements. The social structure was such that at the perception of an external danger all the super-tribes *(tukhums)* would unite in a seamless manner in face of the threat. The relationship among these *tukhums* was finely balanced between detachment in times of peace (to minimize the number of spanners that could be thrown in the works) and perfect synchronicity and meshing when the need arose. Thus, there was an awareness of an over-arching ethnic identity encompassing all tribal formations. An outsider would most probably miss this dimension when looking at the micro-level and overlook mechanisms that would be set in motion by emotive stimuli.

A Chechen is caught in a web of supra-national, ethnic, national and a plethora of sub-national identities: Caucasian, Mountaineer, North Caucasian, Northeast Caucasian, Nakh, Vainakh, Nokhcho (Chechen), member *of tukhum, taip, aul, vaer, gar, neqe* and *dooezal*. Religion adds another identity complex: Muslim, Sunni, Shafii, Sufi, *tariqat* adept, *virdfollower*.

Demography

The Chechens are the largest North Caucasian nationality and the fourth largest in the Caucasus after the Azeris, Georgians and Armenians. According to the historian A. Rogov, there were about 1.5 million Chechens in the Caucasus in 1847. However, as a result of the Russian-Caucasian War and subsequent mass expulsion, the Chechens were decimated, only 140,000 remaining in the Caucasus in 1861. Subsequent massacres and expulsions had further reduced the number to 116,000 by 1867.

According to the 1897 Russian census, there were 226,496 Chechens, almost double the number of 30 years before. The population of the Chechen Oblast (Region) of the Mountain Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924 was 525,800. The 1926 census gave 318,522 as the number of ethnic Chechens in the Soviet Union, with 291,400 in the Chechen Autonomous Oblast (AO), which also had 7,500 Russian citizens (2.4 per cent). For both Vainakh groups the census gave 393,713 language speakers. The 1937 census gave 436,000 as the number of Chechens in the USSR, whereas that of 1939 gave 407,690, the diminution in number being a direct result of Stalin's brutal 1937–1938 purges. The 1959 census gave 418,756 Chechens. The minuscule increase over the previous census figure, given the traditionally high birth rate of the Chechens, was a reflection of the horrific humanitarian disaster that befell them during the 1944 deportation and exile. The figure for the 1970 census was 612,674, whereas that of the 1979 census was 756,000, an incredible increase of 80 per cent in 20 years, despite a high mortality rate—a collective response to attempted genocide.

The 1989 census figures gave 956,879 Chechens, of whom 77 per cent resided in their republic, and 237, 438 Ingush. The same census gave 1,270,000 as the population of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). Of the areas currently part of Chechnya, there was a total population of 1,084,000, of whom about 715,000 were Chechens, 25,000 Ingush and 269,000 Russians and Cossacks. Of the 242,000 Chechens living outside their republic, 58,000 resided in Daghestan, 19,000 in what is now called 'Ingushetia', and about 75,000 in Kazakhstan. The population of Chechnya

was estimated at 1.2 millions in 1994. A census carried out in 1998 gave an approximate population of 800,000.

According to the 2002 Russian census, there were 1,088,816 people living in Chechnya, not counting the tens of thousands of refugees in the neighbouring regions of Ingushetia, Daghestan, Stavropol, North Ossetia, Georgia and other places. However, there was a consensus that the figure was highly exaggerated, by as much as 200,000 in some estimates.[4] It would seem that the local authorities were keen to inflate figures to increase Federal funds allocated to the republic. Despite the upheavals of the current war, the rate of population growth is still very high, easily exceeding 3 per cent.

There are Chechen diaspora communities in Russia, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kirghizistan, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, USA and scattered speakers in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Germany and other countries.

Land

Boundaries

The Caucasians practised age-old customs of hospitality, allowing peaceable peoples to live in their midst, and respected other people's historical rights to their lands. On the other hand, aggressors were always fought with vehemence. The custom requiring people to remember many ancestors was useful in delimiting boundaries and resolving land disputes, as an errant claim could face a chorus of independent, but roughly matching, counter-evidence.

Historically, Chechen and Ingush lands lay to the east of the Georgian Military Highway, with the headwaters of the Terek forming the western limit. The northern frontier was defined by the middle course of the Terek River and the Kachkalikov Mountains, which formed the barrier with the Kumyk Steppes. The traditional easternmost water boundary was demarcated by the basins of the Sulak and Andi Koisu, which are now in Daghestan. The main ridge of the Caucasus formed the southern boundary.

The Chechens lived in the fertile plains between the Terek and Sunzha Rivers, the Black Mountains along the foothills of the Caucasus, and the mountainous regions to the south and east. Little Kabarda had a mixed Kabardian and Chechen population. To the east of the Chechens lived the various peoples of Daghestan; in the plains to the north, the Russians and Kumyks; to the west, the Ingush and, to their west, the Ossetians; and to the south, South Ossetians and Georgians.

After occupying Chechnya in the nineteenth century, the Russians systematically removed Chechens from economically important areas and replaced them with Slavs and Cossacks, which fact accounts for the mixed population of the cities and the northern lowlands. In addition, some place names were replaced by Russian appellations, which process became systematic following the 1944 deportation. Fortunately, the Chechen scholar Akhmad Suleimanov mounted a number of expeditions in the 1970s and 1980s in Vainakh territories and recorded ancient toponyms in his monumental onomastical works *Toponymy of Chechen-Ingushetia* and *Toponymy of Chechnya,* which also included a number of folkloric tales and legends.

Until the twentieth century, the land of the Nokhchii included parts of modern-day Ingushetia, some of the high mountains of Georgia, and portions of Daghestan out to the Caspian Sea. During the Soviet period, the size of Chechnya waxed and waned in tune with central diktats. After the 1944 deportation, Stalin apportioned chunks of Chechen land to the surrounding regions and ordered the blotting-out of Chechnya from all maps. This has left a legacy of boundary disputes that could escalate into destabilizing conflicts, as the Chechen people try to recover their traditional territories. The temporary demarcation line between Chechnya and Ingushetia was hastily drawn in 1992.

Climate

Despite its small size, Chechnya enjoys a variety of climatic conditions, ranging from the seasonal extremes of the semi-desert Terek-Kuma Lowlands in the north to the alpine weather of the mountainous south. There are local and large-scale factors that affect the Chechen climate, including the terrain and the proximity of the Caspian Sea. The lofty Caucasus insulates the Northern Caucasus from the southern Mediterranean weather systems, but the area is subject to continental systems from the north and east. Chechnya has long warm summers and short cold winters. Temperature is roughly dependent on elevation. The average temperatures in January and July in the north are –3° C and +25° C, respectively, –4° C and +23° C in central parts, and –5° to –12° C and +21° to +25° C in the south. Average rainfall is 300–400 mm in the Terek-Kuma Lowlands, 400–600 mm in central regions, and 600–1,200 mm in the south. Snow covers most areas of the mountainous south for a considerable part of the year, with permanent cover starting at 3,800 m. The foehns (dry and warm winds) that blow down mountain slopes in winter and spring have baneful effects on the flora.

Flora and fauna[5]

Forests of beech, birch, hornbeam and oak cover about a fifth of the area of Chechnya and are located mainly on mountain slopes. Besides their other benefits, these forests are the only defence against relentless attack on the precious soil by mountain torrents. Desert vegetation, represented by sagebrush and saltwort, and semi-desert vegetation, such as feather-grass, are found in the north. On the left bank of the Terek there are acorns, wild fruits, berry-bushes, medicinal herbs and mushrooms. Deciduous forests dominate in the mountains at heights of 1,800–2,000 m. Sub-alpine and alpine meadows can be found higher up in the mountains.

The fauna of Chechnya comprises bears, wild boars, roe-deer, wild goats, bezoar-goats, chamois, wolves, foxes, jackals, badgers, otters, racoons, martens, hares, molerats, ermines, grass-snakes, steppe constrictors, adders, lizards and Greek tortoises. Birds include bustards, cranes, doves, ducks, grouse, pheasants, pygmy cormorants and steppe eagles. There are some 50 species of mammals and 150 kinds of birds in the semi-desert Terek-Kuma Lowlands.

There are a number of reserves, ranging in size from 12,000 to 100,000 hectares. The beech forests of the largest reserve, the Shatoi, located between the Chanti-Argun and Sharo-Argun Rivers, furnish valuable wood and abound in berry-bushes, nuttrees, medicinal plants, melliferous herbs and mushrooms. The pine and birch forests are home

to bears, wild boars, roe-deer, badgers, martens, grey hares, squirrels and lynxes. The sub-alpine meadows boast birch groves with thickets of rhododendron and azalea. The Vedeno reserve, which encompasses Lake Kazenoi (Qoezan-'Am), has ash, beech, cherry, hornbeam, lime, maple and oak, and boasts of a wide variety of herbal plants. The fauna is represented by bears, wild boars, wild cats, goats, bezoar-goats, badgers, squirrels and Caucasian black grouse. The flora of the Urus-Martan reserve includes ash, beech, horn-beam, lime, maple, oak, pine, apple, cherry, pear, blackberry, wild strawberry and ramsons. The forests of the Shali reserve abound in berry-bushes, fruit-trees, yew-trees and herbal plants. The fauna comprises wild boars, roe-deer, bears, badgers, minks and martens. The Argun reserve is rich in fruit-trees, berries, herbs and mushrooms. Resident fauna include red deer, roe-deer, martens and pheasants.

Relief and terrain[6]

About half of the area of Chechnya is covered by plains, almost a third by hilly regions (300–1,200 m), 11 per cent by mountains of medium height (1,200–2,400 m), and 8 per cent by high mountains. The surface of the republic is composed mainly of sedimentary rock of the Mesozoic and Tertiary Periods. There are chestnut and light chestnut soils in the north, meadow and black soils in central parts, and mountain soils in the south.

The relief of Chechnya is divided into four regions: the Northern Plains, the Terek-Sunzha Ridges, to the south of the Terek, the Chechen Plains in the centre and the mountainous south. These regions differ not only in the structure of their surfaces, but also in climate, soil, and flora and fauna, which elements determine to a large extent the conditions of life and economic activities of their human populations.

Northern Plains

The northern part of the republic is dominated by the sandy ridges and hills of the southern Terek-Kuma Lowlands, which are located between the Terek in the south and Kuma in the north, and between the Stavropol Range in the west and the Caspian Sea in the east. During the Quaternary Period, most of the area, which lies below sea level at the lower reaches of the Terek, was repeatedly inundated by the waters of the Caspian. Dry steppe vegetation characterizes this zone, which turns to desert in the extreme north.

Terek-Sunzha Ridges

In the triangular section between the Terek in the north and Sunzha River in the south stretch the Cainozoic Terek-Sunzha Ridges, which are made up of two parallel low mountain chains, the Terek to the north and Sunzha-Lesser-Kabardian to the south, each of which, in turn, is divided into a number of sub-ridges. The surface of the ridges is formed of a combination of gypseous clay, ferruginous sandstone, shingles and loam sediments. The northern slopes have more abrupt and deeper gorges than the southern ones. The fertile Terek and Sunzha valleys of western Chechnya, which enjoy ample rainfall, are Chechnya's main agricultural centres.

Map 1.1 Principal towns and cities in Chechnya. The relief of the republic consists of the Northern Plains, Terek-Sunzha Ridges to the south of the Terek, Chechen Plains in the middle, and the lofty Caucasus Mountains in the south.

The Terek Ridge, which stretches for almost 120 km, has its highest points at Tokareva (707 m) and Malgobek (652 m), whilst the highest summit of the central and eastern parts

is 515 m in height. To the north of the Ridge lies the Nadterechny Plain, which has a slight downward inclination to the north. The western part of the Ridge, from the valley of the Kura up to Mineralnoe, has a latitudinal direction. At Mineralnoe, the Ridge branches off in a northwesterly direction to the lower Èldar Ridge, with the longitudinal Kalausskaya Valley acting as a boundary between the Terek and Èldar ridges, while the main Ridge turns in a southeasterly direction, keeping this orientation up to Khayan-Korta Mountain, and then turns latitudinally. From the eastern end of the Ridge extends the Bragun Ridge, and from the northern chain stretches the 30-km Gudermes Ridge, which has its highest point at Geran-Korta (428 m), and which is incorporated into the spurs of the Black Mountains at the Aksai River. There is a narrow passage called 'Gudermes Gate' between the Bragun and Gudermes ridges through which the river Sunzha breaks on to the Terek-Kuma Lowlands. Whilst the northern slopes of the Terek Ridge are distinguished by many indentations, those of the Èldar, Bragun and Gudermes ridges are less broken-up.

The southern chain consists of three ridges: Sunzha, Lesser-Kabardian and Zmeiski (Snaky). The Sunzha Ridge extends for about 70 km and has its highest point at Mount Albaskina (778 m). It is separated from the Lesser-Kabardian Ridge by the Achaluk Gorge and from the Grozny Ridge in the east by the Andreev Gorge. To the southeast of the Sunzha Ridge, between the rivers Sunzha and Dzhalka, extends the Aldinski Ridge, which is divided by the Khankala Gorge and a valley of the Argun into three separate parts. The Terek-Sunzha Ridges divide the Alkhanchurt Valley, which extends for some 60 km.

Chechen Plains

The Assa spur sections the Terek-Sunzha Plains into the Chechen and Ossetian Plains in the east and west respectively. The Chechen Plains lie to the south of the Sunzha Ridge, extend to Grozny and Gudermes in the east, and are bordered by the Black Mountains in the south. The Plains slope gently in a northeasterly direction, going down in height from 350 m to 100 m, and their surface is crossed by a number of river valleys. This is a very fertile area of Chechnya and has the highest population density.

Caucasus Mountains

To the south of the Chechen Plains, four parallel latitudinal ridges gradually rise, crossed by deep gorges. The relief of the mountains is a result of long geological processes, with the torrents and rivers taking some credit for the artwork. The most ancient rocks belong to the Jurassic and Cretaceous systems, with three divisions of the Jurassic present. The sediments of the Lower Jurassic make up the greatest thickness, up to 4,500 m, and consist of black clay slates with layers of sandstone and aleurolite. The Middle Jurassic is composed of dark grey clay slates and sandstone. The Upper Jurassic, which has a massive thickness of up to 1,500 m, is composed of homogeneous limestone.

The most northern and lowest of the ridges is the Black Mountains, which received their name from the dark green, almost black, hue of the rich forests when viewed from a distance. The Black Mountains, whose tops have soft and rounded outlines, are cut by

gorges and gullies, and as such do not form a continuous chain. The highest point of the ridge stands at 1,200 m.

To the south of the Black Mountains extends the Pastbischni Ridge (which name signifying abundance of lush mountain pasture), some of whose peaks exceed 2,000 m in height. In the western part, the Ridge branches into two and sometimes three parallel ridges interspersed with ravines. It forms the Peshkhoiski Mountains in the central part and in the east it abuts the Andi Ridge, from which many spurs issue forth.

To the south of the Pastbischni Ridge lies the Skalisti (Rocky) Ridge, which is crossed by a number of river valleys, such as the Targim Gorge of the Assa. The slopes of the Skalisti, though abrupt, are smooth and do not form rocky ledges. The western part of the Ridge, called 'Ts'e-Lam', stretches between the rivers Terek and Assa, while the eastern section, 'Tsore-Lam', extends to the Guloi-Khi and ends at Khakhalgi (3,036 m), the highest point of the Skalisti. The 40-km latitudinal stretch from the Terek to Guloi-Khi reorientates itself in a northeasterly direction. Between the Skalisti and Bokovoi ridges extends a narrow strip of clay and sandstone mountains sectioned by rather wide valleys.

Along the southern border of the republic stretch the snow-capped mountains of the giant Bokovoi (Lateral) Ridge. It is here that Tebulos-Mta, the highest mountain in Chechnya and the Eastern Caucasus, is located. Also called 'Borz-Lam' ('Wolf-Mountain'), it stands at 4,493 m (14,741 ft). The relief of the Bokovoi, mainly alpine in character, was to a large extent shaped by glacial erosion, and is dominated by the valleys of the Assa and Chanti-Argun. Caucasian glaciers have been shrinking and receding since the last years of the nineteenth century AD. The Bokovoi is not clearly defined in the western part of Chechnya, whereas in the east it is bounded in the north by the Guloi-Khi Valley and in the south by the valleys of the Assa and Chanti-Argun tributaries. Further to the east lies the Pirikitelski Ridge, where Tebulos-Mta and Komito-Dattakh-Korta (4,271 m) are located, and the Snegovoi (Snowy) Ridge, the highest point of which is Diklos-Mta (4,274 m). All these ridges form the Vodorazdelni (Watershed) Ridge, which stretches uninterruptedly for 75 km between the upper reaches of the Chanti-Argun and Sharo-Argun and the Pirikitelski Alzan and Andi Koisu.

River systems, canals and lakes

The main rivers of Chechnya include the Terek, Sunzha, Argun, Aksai and Assa. The Terek originates in the environs of Mount Kazbek (Bash-Lam: 5,047 m) in the Georgian part of the central Caucasus, and flows first in a northerly direction across North Ossetia, and then moves northwestwards to Kabardino-Balkaria. It snakes back in an easterly direction to North Ossetia, flows through Chechnya and Daghestan, and eventually pours into the Caspian. The Terek is the major source of irrigation in the Northern Plains, but it is not navigable. Its width ranges between 100 m and 250 m, with a depth of 2–3 m. There are many fords and a large number of small islands. The Terek is one of the natural wonders of the Caucasus, and was a source of inspiration for the Russian 'Caucasian' romantics.

The Sunzha also has its sources in the Central Caucasus and has a path that mimics that of the Terek, but on a smaller scale. It connects with the Terek to the northeast of Gudermes. Its tributaries include the Argun, Assa, Fortanga, Gekhi and Martan. The Argun is formed by the confluence of the Sharo-Argun and Chanti-Argun, both of which

have their sources in the Central Caucasus. It moves in a northeasterly direction until it joins the Sunzha. The Argun is traditionally considered the boundary between lowland and highland Chechnya. Other rivers include Dzhalka, Goiti, Guloi-Khi, Khul-Khulau, Osu-Khi and Pirikitelski Alzan. All rivers, except for the Terek, Sunzha and Argun, are fordable in autumn and winter, but not so in spring and summer.

The river valleys occupied by the Chechens, from east to west, are: Yaraksu, Yamansu, Benoi-Asi, Aksai, Michik, Gansol, Gums, Okholitlau, Kharachoi, Elistani, Bass, Sharo-Argun, Chanti-Argun, Martan, Gekhi, Valerik, Shali and Netkhoi. Fortanga is considered the traditional frontier between the Chechens and Ingush.

Irrigation canals, which are mostly located in the and Northern Plains, include the Alkhanchurt, which irrigates the Alkhanchurt Valley, the Nadterechny, which waters the plains of the same name, and the Lenin. The Naur-Shelkovsky branch of the Terek-Kuma Canal passes through northern Chechnya for some 168 km. Other canals include the Assa-Sunzha, Samashki, Khankala, Bragun and Burunnaya, an offshoot of the Naur-Shelkovsky Canal. The canal system in Chechnya has fallen into disrepair as a result of war and neglect.

There are a few lakes on the plains and a number of glacial mountain lakes, including Kazenoi, the largest in the North Caucasus at 2 sq km in area and 72 m in depth. At an altitude of 1,869 m, the picturesque lake on the Chechen-Daghestani border used to be a tourist site in more peaceable times.

The Chechen Republic

The Chechen and Ingush regions had been part of the Soviet Mountain Republic until 1924, when separate Chechen and Ingush autonomous oblasts were set up. In 1934, the two oblasts were joined to form the Chechen-Ingush AO, with an area of 15,700 sq km and a population of about 700,000. In 1936, the status of the Oblast was upgraded to a full Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. In 1944, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was abolished after the Chechens and Ingush were deported to Central Asia and Siberia on charges of collaboration with the invading Germans. The Republic was reinstated in 1957 with an (increased) area of 19,300 sq km. The Chechen-Ingush ASSR had 12 administrative rayons (districts) and 17 cities and towns. In 1991, Chechnya declared its independence unilaterally, while Ingushetia opted to separate from the composite republic in the following year and rejoin the Russian Federation as a constituent republic. In January 1994, Chechnya changed its name to ‘Chechen Republic-Ichkeria’, the suffix being the name of a large region in the southeast traditionally associated with the birth of the Chechen nation.[7]

Present-day Chechnya has an area of some 17,000 sq km, making up only 0.1 per cent of the total area of the Russian Federation (to put this into perspective, you need one thousand Chechnyas to cover one Russia). It is bounded by the Stavropol Krai and Daghestan to the north, Daghestan to the east, Ingushetia and North Ossetia to the west, Georgia to the southwest and Daghestan to the southeast. There are 15 administrative districts: Achkhoi-Martan, Grozny, Gudermes, Itum-Kala, Kurchaloi, Nadterechny, Naur, Nozhai-Yurt, Shali, Sharoi, Shatoi, Shelkovsky, Sunzha, Urus-Martan and Vedeno.[8]

In 1929, the Autonomous City of Grozny was joined to the Chechen AO and became the administrative capital. Grozny, which lies in the valleys and lowlands of the central