Russia's Chechen War

Tracey C. German

LONDON AND NEW YORK

Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details

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Widespread media interest in the Chechen conflict reflects an ongoing concern about the evolution of federal Russia. Why did the Russian leadership initiate military action against Chechnya in December 1994, but against no other constituent part of the Federation? This study demonstrates that the Russian invasion represented the culmination of a crisis that was perceived to have become an increasing threat not only to the stability of the North Caucasus region, but also to the very foundations of Russian security. It looks closely at the Russian Federation in transition, following the collapse of the communist Soviet Union, and the implications of the 1991 Chechen Declaration of Independence in the context of Russia's democratisation project.

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ROUTLEDGE
RoutledgeCurzon
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2003
by RoutledgeCurzon
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by RoutledgeCurzon
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003.

RoutledgeCurzon is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
German, Tracey, C., 1971–
Russia's Chechen war/Tracey C. German.
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Chechnëì (Russia)–History–Civil War, 1994– 2. Chechnëì
(Russia)–Relations–Russia (Federation) 3. Russia
(Federation)–Relations–Chechnëì (Russia) 4. Chechnëì
(Russia)–History–Autonomy and independence movements. 5.
Democracy–Russia (Federation) 6. Russia (Federation)–Politics and
government–1991– I. Title.
DK511.C37 G47 2003
947.5'2–dc21 2002032613

ISBN 0-203-41776-3 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-41920-0 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0–415–29720–6 (Print Edition)

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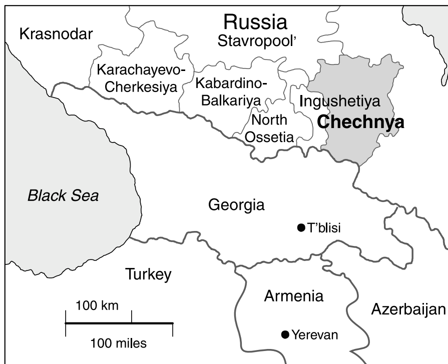
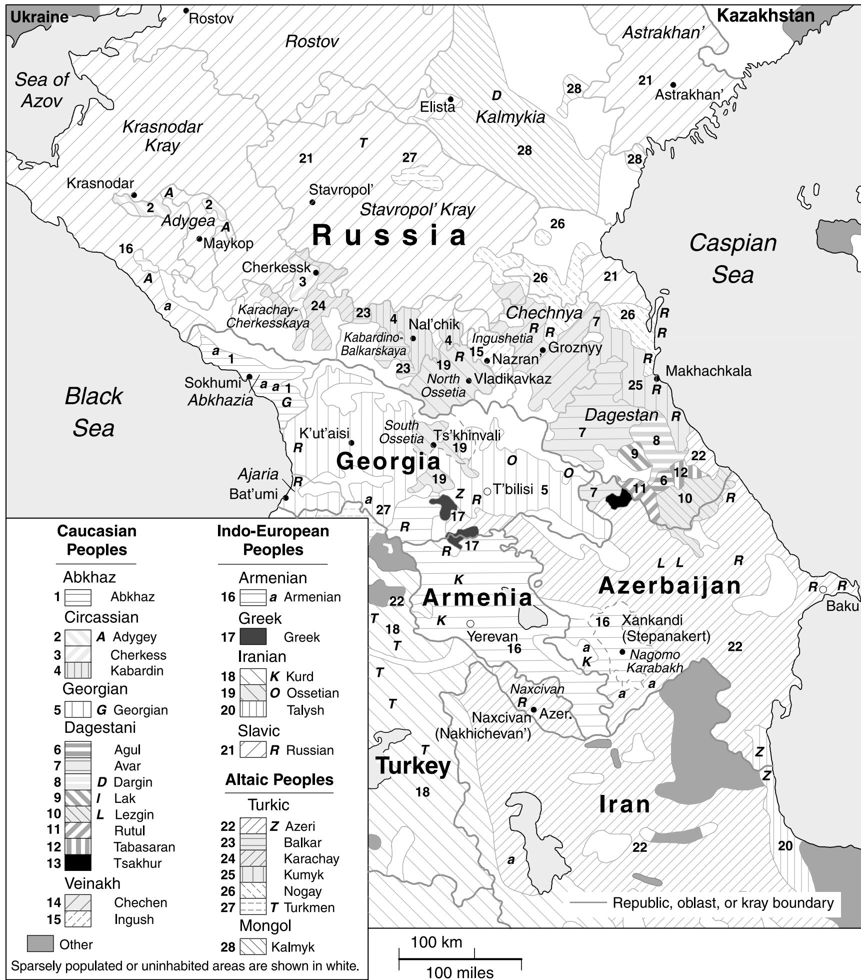
Abbreviations

ASSR	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
EC	Executive Council of the National Congress of Chechen People
FSK	Federal Counterintelligence Service
IC	Interim Council
KGB	Committee of State Security
KNK	Confederation of Peoples of the North Caucasus
KOUNKh	Chechen Committee for the Management of the Economy
LDPR	Liberal Democratic Party of Russia
MVD	Ministry of Internal Affairs
NF	Chechen National Front
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NCMD	North Caucasus Military District
ODChN	National Movement of the Chechen People
OKChN	National Congress of the Chechen People
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic
SNGS	Council of National and Civil Accord
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
SWB	BBC Summary of World Broadcasts
UNPO	Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VDP	Vainakh Democratic Party
VLKSM	All-Union Leninist Communist Youth League
WTO	Warsaw Treaty Organisation

R U S S I A
Dagestan
Stavropol’
Kamyshev
North Ossetia
Kargalinskaya
Kalinovskaya
Nadterechnaya
Chervlěnnaya
Ingushetiya
Gudermes
Groznyy
Argun
Bamut
Urus-Martan
Shali
North Ossetia
Vedeno
Shatoy
CAUCASUS MOUNTAINS
Dagestan
25 km
GEORGIA
25 miles



Map 1 Chechnya



Map 2 Ethnolinguistic groups in the Caucasus region

Source: The Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, The University of Texas at Austin

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Chechnya in December 1994 represented the culmination of a crisis that was perceived to have become an increasing threat not only to the stability of the North Caucasus region, but also to the very foundations of Russian security. The intervention, intended as a highly visible display of military strength and enduring might, merely emphasised the fundamental structural and behavioural weaknesses of many Russian institutions in the post-Soviet era, notably the presidency, government, parliament and armed forces. Renewed fighting in Chechnya, which began at the end of 1999, has re-focused attention on Russia's relationship with its constituent parts, particularly in the volatile North Caucasus. It also serves to emphasise the importance of the region to Russia, which is expending vast quantities of resources, both material and human, in a second attempt to subdue the rebellious republic. The protracted crisis has proved to be a significant juncture in the development of the fledgling Russian democracy and illustrates the highly personalised nature of decision-making in the post-communist era.

The aim of this study is to identify and explore the issues behind the evolution of post-Soviet Russia's conflict with Chechnya and investigate why a political crisis was permitted to deteriorate into a full-scale war. Many motives have been ascribed to the war of 1994–96, ranging from the neo-imperialist ambitions of the centre to ethno-nationalist tendencies on the periphery. This study will examine the causes of Russia's conflict with Chechnya within the context of the Federation's transition away from communist rule, towards its own distinctive interpretation of the democratic ideal.

A brief portrait of the Chechen nation

In order to understand the motivating forces on both sides of the conflict and the origins of the decision to invade, it is necessary to examine the historical relationship of Russia and the myriad peoples of the North Caucasus.[1] There is a long and acrimonious history of struggle between the two sides in the contemporary conflict, as the Russians have continually

struggled to dominate the volatile Caucasus region, which is vital both geopolitically and economically. The region plays a crucial economic role as it is a vital supply route for oil from the Caspian Sea, which provides a source of income for republics across the North Caucasus. However, the complex level of ethnic diversity and myriad peoples of the Caucasus represent a significant threat to the security of Russia's southern fringes. Even the Russian term 'Chechen' is inextricably linked with the incessant hostilities in a history where peace has been the exception – it is derived from the name of the village (*Chechen-aul*) on the Argun river in the North Caucasus where the first battle was fought between the Russians and Chechens in 1732.

The Caucasus have consistently represented frontier territory for Russia, encompassing the vital southern border with the Islamic empires of modern-day Turkey and Iran. Both Turkey and Iran are historic opponents for influence in the area, which shares ethnic, religious and cultural affinities with these two Muslim nations. The end of the Cold War and subsequent changes in the global political order have led to a re-drawing of international borders and strategic re-alignments. This has increased the significance of the North Caucasus, which now represents an international border between the Russian Federation and the three independent states of the Transcaucasus, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Russia's strategic position is threatened by shifting alliances in the region: the former Soviet republic of Georgia has stated its desire to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), and Turkey has also increased its role in the region, declaring the North Caucasus to be a foreign policy priority. Oil-rich Azerbaijan has become the focus of substantial interest from the West, which is anxious to maintain secure access to lucrative Caspian hydrocarbons. Thus, Russia is understandably keen to preserve its current borders and maintain its territorial integrity.[2]

The territory of Chechnya (15,000 square km) lies on the northern side of the Caucasus mountain range. According to the last population census conducted by the Russian authorities in October 2002, there were just over one million people living in Chechnya, a constituent part of the Russian Federation. The *Nokhchi* people, as the Chechens call themselves, have inhabited their present territory for approximately 6000 years, although that estimate is disputed.[3] They are closely related to the neighbouring Ingush (the *Nokhchi* and Ingush are collectively called *Vainakh*, meaning 'Our People'), but both are distinct ethnic groups with separate languages.[4] The majority of the Chechen people are nominally Muslim, adhering to a form of Islamic mysticism known as Sufism.[5] Islam in Chechnya is represented by two Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqats*): the Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya. The Naqshbandiya *tariqat* is relatively orthodox and intellectual, whilst the Qadiriya is more informal, preaching non-violence and practising the *zikr* with music and dancing, which are prohibited by the purist Naqshbandiya order.[6] These two orders remain crucial to Chechen society, uniting

disparate clans that lack any hierarchical social structure. Sheikh Mansur, the son of a shepherd from the Chechen *aul* of Aldi, was the first Chechen to utilise the religious orders as a mobilising force against the Russians. In 1784 he proclaimed himself *imam* (chief of a Sufi Muslim order) and declared a *Ghazawat* (holy war) against the invading Russian Empire.

Notwithstanding initial expansion into the North Caucasus during the 16th century, when Cossack settlers arrived in the Terek Delta and foothills of Chechnya, the Russian incursion did not commence in earnest until the 18th century. Mindful of the strategic importance of this region, Peter the Great renewed Russian activity southwards as part of his ambitious scheme to establish a trading route to India.[7] The Tsar encouraged Cossacks in the area to persist with provocations along the North Caucasus borders in the hope of opening the region for Russian colonisation. The Cossack Line defended Russia's southern borders and exemplified the inexorable advance of Russian imperialism. Cossacks were the vanguard of the expansion southwards during the 17th and 18th centuries, loyal servants of the Tsar who relied on them to colonise the Caucasus.[8] Following Peter the Great's death in 1725, Russia's imperial expansion was suspended for almost 50 years until Catherine the Great renewed the drive to the south, as rivalry with the Persian and Ottoman empires for influence in the region intensified. The imperial forces met fierce resistance in Chechnya, which became the centre of one of the longest guerrilla campaigns of the 19th century, the Caucasian War (1817–64). The Chechens fought against Russian domination during the War under Imam Shamil after the resistance leaders proclaimed a *Ghazawat* against the Russians to the north, following the example set by Sheikh Mansur in the 18th century.[9] The republic was eventually assimilated into Tsarist Russia in 1859 and many residents were exiled to the Ottoman Empire. Russians began to settle in the lowlands, particularly after oil was discovered near Groznyy in 1893 and thousands of oil workers were sent to the city from European parts of the empire.

The Chechen Autonomous *oblast* was established on November 30th 1922, upon the dissolution of the Mountain People's Republic, which had included all of the North-east Caucasus apart from Dagestan. It was merged with the Ingush Autonomous *oblast* in 1934 in an attempt to dilute the indigenous majorities and two years later was raised in status to an ASSR. The Soviet policy of 'divide-and-rule' enhanced the tensions between the manifold peoples of the region, as artificial borders divided natural alliances and strengthened individual ethnic identities. The policy of *korenizatsiya* (indigenisation), first advocated by Lenin, encouraged the development of local languages and culture in an effort to attract the nationalities to the idea of revolution. However, this brand of officially sanctioned nationalism directly contributed to the simmering discontent of the region by instilling a separate ethnic awareness previously not present amongst the numerous tribal groups. In 1944 the Chechens became the largest group on a compact territory to be deported *en masse* by Stalin for alleged collaboration with the

Nazis. On February 23rd 1944 over 500,000 Chechens and Ingush were transported to northern Kazakhstan for an exile that lasted 13 years – they were not permitted to return until 1957 following rehabilitation under Khrushchev's leadership.[10] During this 13-year period nothing was published in Chechen, which became a prohibited language, and the term 'Chechen', along with the names of other deported nations, disappeared from Soviet textbooks and encyclopedias.

Despite these threats, or perhaps because of them, the Chechens have managed to preserve a unique culture and identity. One reason for this resilience is their tight clan structure, the custom of extended families. A clan, or *teip*, is based on two or three villages claiming descent from a common ancestor with each family headed by an elder, who still commands great respect in contemporary society. Each village can contain anything from 10 to 50 families. A *teip* is self-sufficient and self-contained with its own Council of Elders, Court of Justice, cemetery, customs, traditions and laws (*adats*). However, all *teips* are categorised by a specific *tukum*, a form of tribe, of which there are nine and according to legend, all *tukums* share a common family ancestry. *Tukums* provide the basis for self-administration independent of state institutions.[11] Traditional kinship ties, together with the Sufi religious brotherhoods, continue to play a significant role in contemporary Chechnya, providing an organised social structure capable of mobilising individual groups.[12]

Chapter outline

This book focuses on Russo–Chechen relations in the post-Soviet era and attempts to explain reasons for the enduring crisis. Chapter One establishes the impact of Russia's transitional status on the decision-making process in the wake of the collapse of communism as a viable political system, with particular regard to its influence on the Chechen crisis and its potential for stimulating the escalation of a political argument into violent conflict.

The ensuing chapters concentrate on a chronological analysis of the crisis, utilising the case-study approach in an attempt to locate the rationale for the war. Chapter two elucidates the motives behind the 1991 unilateral Chechen declaration of independence in order to gain further insight into the background of the secessionist struggle. Chapter three continues with this chronological theme, investigating the impact of the chaos and institutional vacuum prevalent across the Federation in the immediate post-coup era. Was the apparent inaction of the Russian leadership during the closing months of 1991 typical of systems in transition? To what extent did this facilitate the rapid loss of central control in Chechnya? Chapters four and five examine the circumstances of Chechen 'independence' and the republic's unsuccessful attempts to establish both internal and external aspects of sovereignty, together with Moscow's evolving policy towards the rebellious republic. Chapter six analyses the reasons behind the dramatic shift in the

Russian attitude to the Chechen problem during 1994, determining a strengthening in the authoritarian tendencies of the executive as the power of the legislature was undermined. Chapter seven investigates the background to the December decision to invade.

Chapter eight examines Russo–Chechen relations during the first Chechen war (1994–96) and investigates the events that led to the Khasavyurt peace accords of 1996. What caused the Russian leadership to renege on this peace deal and launch a new offensive in 1999? Why did they squander the chance for peace and reject political overtures by the Chechens? The final chapter, 'Conclusions', examines possibilities for the future of Chechnya and offers conclusions on the state of Russian 'democracy' as illustrated by the ongoing conflict.

1 The Russian Federation in transition

Introduction

In the wake of the rapid demise of communism as a global ideology, considerable scholarly attention has been focused on the extant democratisation of the former Soviet empire. The progress of the Russian Federation's democratisation project has not been trouble-free, a fact that is manifest in its evolving relationship with its 89 constituent parts, particularly the Chechen Republic. The nature of Moscow's relationship with its peripheral regions serves as a key indicator of the health of democracy across the Federation: the level of real autonomy granted to local elites, as well as the accountability and transparency of the relationship is a reliable demonstration of the extent of democratisation. Increasingly, regional trends and relationships have become the crucial factor in any assessment of political stability in Russia, as opposed to interest group and factional clashes within the Kremlin itself. This chapter will examine the process of democratic transition which the Soviet Union, then Russia, underwent as it strove to move from a non-democratic regime towards its aspirations of democracy.

Defining the transition process

Democratisation has been defined as 'the advance of liberal-democratic reform, implying, in particular, the granting of basic freedoms and the widening of popular participation and electoral choice'.[1] Over the past century there has been a tendency for an increasing number of countries to pursue supposedly democratic forms of government, Huntington's so-called 'Third Wave', and by 1992 the number of 'democracies' was in a majority for the first time, totalling 91 of 183 states.[2] The collapse of the outer Soviet empire in 1989 provoked a sense of triumphalism amongst the liberal democracies of the industrialised West, who claimed victory over the communist ideology. This was exemplified by Francis Fukuyama's manifesto that the fall of the communist empire amounted to the 'end of history', on the basis that non-democratic regimes had recognised liberal democracy and the capitalist economic order as 'the final form of human government'.[3] The

spread of democratic forms of governance was acclaimed as a significant tool in the promotion of global peace and security. Noting that no two democracies have ever fought a war against each other, former US President Bill Clinton argued that support for democratisation would be an antidote to both international war and civil conflict.[4]

Yet whilst liberal democracy[5] is certainly the proclaimed ideal of a large proportion of states in the contemporary world, each country's notion of democracy varies, depending greatly upon the legacy of the previous regime type, together with the mentality of the current leadership and its ambitions. Democratisation is not a solitary consequential event; it comprises several different stages that occur over an indefinite period of time: the breakdown of undemocratic rule, transition, consolidation and, if successful, the perpetuation of a stable democratic political order. Thus, transition (or 'transformation', a term preferred by some observers[6]) is merely an intrinsic stage in the complex development of a democratic state. A state is deemed to be undergoing transition from the moment critical flaws initially become discernible in the undemocratic regime, until it successfully attains democratic stability, an accomplishment often taking many years. It is imperative to distinguish between the initiation of democratisation as a process and the final objective of consolidating democracy as an institution. There are innumerable potential impediments to the completion of a successful transition: the complex process of democratic transformation encompasses both positive and negative phases, with violent conflict representing an extreme potential outcome.

Successful transition requires a certain degree of national unity[7], a concord of conflicting interests for the sake of peace. Whilst a certain degree of nationalism or national pride is necessary for the cohesion of a modern state, extreme forms accompanied by violence are destabilising and dangerous. Unfortunately, the fundamental liberalism inherent in democratic ideology promotes the free expression of a wide spectrum of grievances, thereby fostering nationalistic tendencies. Existing underlying ethnic tensions are particularly prone to exacerbation during a transitional period. Previously repressed national groups push for increased autonomy, whilst political leaders exploit these rifts and utilise populist, ethnic slogans in order to win support for their faction. Instead of the moderation and co-operation essential to avoid conflict, extremist rhetoric is employed.

Gorbachev and liberalisation

The transformation of the Soviet system was unintentionally inaugurated by the appointment of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in 1985. He inherited the mantle of power from a series of infirm, elderly leaders and his comparative youth brought a new vigour to Soviet political life. Nevertheless, in 1985 there was no indication of the prodigious impact Gorbachev's rule was to

have on the legitimacy of the communist ideal, eventually culminating in the abrupt dismantling of the vast Soviet empire.

Initially *perestroika* (re-structuring) was intended to be a programme of economic reform. By the end of the 1980s it had become apparent that the Soviet Union was experiencing severe economic difficulties. The centre could no longer afford the enormous financial burden of maintaining its Eastern European satellites and simultaneously attempting to compete with the extensive military build-up being conducted by the United States. Living standards across the USSR had fallen dramatically as financial resources were diverted away from public spending into the defence budget. The socialist concept of central planning had generated a weak economy dependent on heavy industry and collective agriculture and unable to compete on world markets. In an attempt to revive the economy Gorbachev chose to concentrate resources on a structural regeneration of the entire socialist system.[8]

The Soviet leader unveiled his liberalisation project at the XXVIIth CPSU Congress held in February 1986, announcing that 'now the situation is such that it is impossible to simply limit out measures to partial improvements – what is needed is a radical reform'.[9] As the first step in the reform programme he initiated the policy of *glasnost* (meaning transparency or openness) which was intended to mobilise support from the intelligentsia and public at large for the wider programme of *perestroika*. *Glasnost* entailed lifting the controls on public debate and individual expression of opinion. Political prisoners were released, new freedoms were granted to the mass media and a widespread re-evaluation of the Soviet past took place. The Central Committee Plenum of January 1987 was a crucial turning point in the transformation process, as uninhibited discussion and analysis of the Soviet regime were openly encouraged. Gorbachev has described the plenum as 'the first step on our road towards democracy', when every speaker 'criticised the bureaucracy' and 'had his hand raised in support of democratisation'.[10] By the middle of 1987 serious economic reform was underway, as Gorbachev called for an economy that would retain economic planning, but with decentralisation and a significant role for market forces within the framework.

The final part of his liberalisation of the Soviet regime involved the democratisation of political institutions. In March 1989 the first competitive elections took place for the newly established representative legislature, the Congress of People's Deputies, and the following year the Communist Party agreed to give up its monopoly on power, endorsing the removal of Article Six from the Soviet Constitution. This amendment meant that multi-party elections could be held, seriously undermining the hegemony of the central authorities, but also unintentionally opening the way for further democratisation.

Gorbachev is often mistakenly portrayed as a champion of democracy by Western observers, who fail to point out that, although he abandoned much

of the communist ideology, he retained a firm belief in the socialist ideal and refused to abandon communist institutions.[11] He stressed that 'perestroika is not some kind of illumination or revelation … The essence of perestroika lies in the fact that *it unites socialism with democracy* and revives the Leninist concept of socialist construction both in theory and in practice'.[12] Gorbachev and his reform-minded allies were convinced that socialism could only achieve its full potential through controlled democratisation, maintaining that 'only through the consistent development of the democratic forms inherent in socialism and through the expansion of self-government can we make progress in production, science and technology, culture and art, and in all social spheres.'[13] In his memoirs, Gorbachev himself has described the modest objectives of his reforms: 'What we had in mind was not a revolution but a specific improvement of the system, which we then believed was possible. We longed for freedom so much that we thought that if we just gave society a breath of fresh air it would revive. We understood freedom in a broad sense, to include actual, not just rhetorical, control of the land by farmers, and of factories by workers, freedom of enterprise, changes in our investment and structural policies and an emphasis on social development.'[14]

Gorbachev's programme of liberalisation constituted the beginning of a transition process, which would eventually lead to a rejection of the socialist system that the reforms were merely intended to strengthen. *Glasnost* in particular triggered the expression of grievances and opinions, which the authorities were unable to control and which fatally weakened the legitimacy of Soviet rule. Having failed to preserve coherence between the pillars of the communist political system, Gorbachev unwittingly initiated a dramatic systemic transformation.

Rising from the ashes: Yeltsin and 'democracy'

The abrupt collapse of the Soviet Union, following the coup attempt of August 1991, caught the majority of politicians, analysts and the population unawares. There was little time for any preparation and certainly no gradual introduction to the principles of democratic reform. Russia's transformation from a post-totalitarian state literally occurred overnight. It is doubtful that the liberal opponents of communist rule had been plotting to overthrow the incumbent government, and consequently they had given scant consideration to the enormity of the task suddenly confronting them. Sergei Stankevich, one of Yeltsin's political advisers, concluded that the collapse of the Soviet regime was a 'mixed blessing'. In his opinion the democratic opposition 'had reached a distant shore long before we thought we ever would … We democrats who had been in opposition were suddenly in power, and in many ways we were not prepared. The main weakness was that the idea of what a 'new Russia' should be had not been considered at all.'[15]

His remarks allude to the institutional vacuum that frequently accompanies democratic transition. Russia's tentative transition away from the repressive communist system towards the norms of democracy, must be perceived as a new beginning rather than a return to past experiences. The new leadership of the Federation failed to promptly dismantle Soviet institutions such as the KGB, remaining seemingly inert in the months following the attempted coup. It continued to function within the framework of the 1977 Soviet Constitution together with the Soviet era legislature, the Congress of Peoples' Deputies, for two years, whilst simultaneously attempting to adopt the principles of liberal democracy. Consequently, even though the leadership verbally embraced democratic ideals, it lacked the institutional foundations upon which to construct its aspirations. Yeltsin himself has acknowledged this fact, writing in his memoirs: 'I cannot say that we had to start from scratch, but almost. Meanwhile, we had to figure out everything from the start. What was a vice president? How should a Russian constitutional court look? There was nothing but blank space because no such institutions had previously existed in Russia … As a result, there emerged beautiful structures and pretty names with nothing behind them.'[16] This failure to institutionalise the new political order, combined with structural weaknesses inherited from the Soviet system of power, led to the executive and legislature becoming embroiled in a struggle for supremacy. Each side in this conflict exploited democratic procedures in order to preserve their monopoly on power, resulting in the creation of a 'democracy' that perpetuates political irresponsibility and the predominance of personal advantage over accountability to the electorate.

Shevtsova has conjectured that Russia's transition was 'uniquely difficult', differentiated from most other post-communist transitions by the total collapse of the state that accompanied the collapse of communism, as well as the lack of elite consensus about methods of reform. She is highly critical of Yeltsin for failing to establish either a coherent institutional order or widespread social support for his programme of reform, concentrating instead on the construction of an undemocratic vertical system of presidential power that granted him vast powers.[17] A crucial difference between Russia and the states of post-communist Eastern Europe is that the latter possessed a systemic framework within which to conduct reform, thus safeguarding progress towards democratic consolidation and blocking any regressive movement. The communist system was far more entrenched within Russia and there was a lack of modern democratic traditions, ensuring that no consensus was reached during the initial stages of transition. Consequently, the Russian transition has been determined by the 'logic of the political battle being fought at the time and not by any long-range plans for state-building.'[18]

The majority of Russia's politicians, civil servants and officials were moulded according to the realities of a communist state, thus could not be

expected suddenly to transform themselves from model Soviet citizens into epitomes of a diametrically opposing set of beliefs. Shevtsova believes this to be the reason behind the atmosphere of continual crisis prevalent during the first three years of the post-Soviet era. In her opinion the extent of 'elite continuity' in Russia distinguishes its political transformation from those of other post-communist countries, where opposition leaders emerged from outside the established political order. The anti-Soviet opposition arose from within the existing elite, even from within the Central Committee, and consequently its members were reluctant 'to carry out a broad-based purge of the elite to which they belonged.'[19] This has led some observers to claim that Russia has not been transformed at all. Yuri Burtin, a correspondent for *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, maintains that, despite operating within a new political-ideological framework, the Russian apparat has been able to preserve traditional positions and relationships: 'This system is like a werewolf – it changes its external hide whenever it pleases, but its essence remains the same.'[20]

This characterisation can also be applied to the Russian population as a whole. Under Soviet rule they were prevented from taking any active role in the political management of the country, and were discouraged from expressing any beliefs that contradicted the official position, notwithstanding the fact that public opinion was disregarded anyway. The passivity manifest in post-communist societies can be construed as a fusion of the previous regime's legacy, such as repression, and disillusionment with the current situation. Consequently, the mentality and attitudes of ordinary citizens need to undergo a democratic transformation, to enable them to adapt to the countless political, social and economic changes and assume the individual responsibility that is an intrinsic element of democracy.

Growing pains

The swing to ultra-liberalism, evident in Russian policy-making following the 'triumph of democracy', can be perceived as a consequential backlash against the repression and intolerance of the Soviet era. However, as reforms failed to bring about the promised changes and the high expectations of the immediate post-coup days remained unfulfilled, a selective nostalgia for the 'glorious socialist past' became manifest in Russian society. This disillusionment, so typical of transitional periods, was captured by various surveys of public opinion, as well as articles that appeared in the newly unshackled press.[21] An article published in *Moscow News* was highly critical of the Russian leadership, declaring that it had 'neither succeeded in consolidating society, nor in forming a stable state organisation, nor in finding the right place for Russia in what is called the post-Soviet space. Its successes in the development of market mechanisms are also dubious.' In the writer's opinion 'political forces in Russia have not managed to overcome their obsession with monopolising political power … When the power structure

monopolises the role of the espouser of the ideas of democracy, a denigration of reformist values is inevitable'.[22]

The disparaging tone of this article was similar to that adopted by a growing number of commentators, as disillusionment with the slow pace of democratic and economic reform became widespread. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that the mere publication of such overt criticism reveals the extent of the democratisation of Russian society. Although the authoritarian tendencies manifest by Yeltsin appear inconsistent with democratic reform, the uncertainty of a transitional period necessitates a strong leader. Otherwise a country risks drifting aimlessly in a political and institutional vacuum. Gennady Burbulis, former presidential aide, summed up Yeltsin's dichotomous character, equating it with Russian society at large:

> The tree of power in Russia has two roots: the roots of authoritarianism and of democracy, and this is very much in tune with Yeltsin himself. Yeltsin's entire life, his entire human experience, was that of being an outstanding representative of the administrative side of a totalitarian system … But at the same time, he is a creative, untamed personality, and in the late eighties he came in contact with the democratic moods of society … So he began to combine these two traditions … These roots are present in Russian society and they are at war within Yeltsin … It's that war of urges, of roots, that describes us in transition, and Yeltsin personifies it all.[23]

According to this diagnosis, Russia is suffering from the legacy of decades of Soviet rule. As the Russian nation attempted to ease its way from the centralised command of communist rule to the liberal principles of democracy following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new leadership desperately sought to establish legitimacy. The idealistic aspirations of the immediate post-coup days were destroyed by the communist inheritance of corruption, mistrust and subterfuge. It is probable that the easiest part of the Russian transition was the liberation of the economy, with the introduction of capitalism and market reforms. The political reforms that are an intrinsic part of democratic transition have proven to be far more complicated than anticipated.

Concluding remarks

The Chechen crisis developed against this backdrop of transition, as the Federation attempted to ease itself away from its communist past towards democratic ideals. Given that Russia has been undergoing democratisation throughout the duration of its contemporary struggle with Chechnya, it is pertinent to investigate the link between the process and the potential for internal conflict. The persistent crisis is investigated within the context of the Federation's transition away from communist rule, focusing on the extent

of any potential correlation between the Russian democratisation project and its violent struggle with a constituent part. In order to gain a deeper insight into the nature of post-communist transition, the ensuing chapters will investigate the nature of the Chechen independence movement and its relationship with the fledgling Russian 'democracy'. Can the outbreak of violent conflict be attributed to the democratisation itself or is the explanation located within the wider concept of systemic transformation?

2 Background to the Chechen declaration of independence in 1991

Introduction

The introduction of Gorbachev's reformist policies, following his ascent to power in 1985, dramatically transformed the face of Soviet politics, and within six years the Soviet empire was unravelled by the very policies originally intended to reassert the legitimacy of its central authorities.[1] His programme of liberalisation was merely intended to rectify several problematic areas in the existing political system, such as a failing economy and corrupt administration, not destroy communist rule. Nevertheless, democratisation, which Gorbachev stated was the aim and also the means of *perestroika*, irreparably weakened the hegemony of the Communist Party.

The advent of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, and consequent relaxation of previous restrictions, heralded the appearance of popular fronts demanding greater autonomy for the manifold ethnic groups throughout the Russian Republic (RSFSR) and other constituent republics of the Soviet Union (USSR). Soviet policy towards its myriad nationalities provided the embryonic political structures that were utilised by regional elites promoting 'republican assertiveness'.[2] The burgeoning self-determination movement was permitted free expression throughout Soviet territory, recognised as a useful tool in the fight for supremacy taking place in the Kremlin. However, the participants of this power struggle crucially failed to comprehend the pitfalls inherent in the exploitation of nationalist grievances. By adopting the guise of a democratic state, both the RSFSR and Soviet leaderships merely hastened secessionist tendencies, as regional leaders sought to increase their own personal power by distancing themselves from central control.

This chapter will provide an insight into the reasons why the Russian leadership initiated military action against Chechnya in 1994 and no other constituent part of the Federation, by analysing the recent history of the North Caucasian republic. In order to understand the motivating forces on both sides of the conflict and the origins of the decision to invade, it is imperative to explore the evolution of the contemporary relationship between the federal centre and the Chechen nation. This chapter locates an

underlying element of the rationale behind the 1994 Russian military invasion in the distinct nature of centre-periphery relations during the Soviet crisis of survival (1985–1991). As the Soviet leadership struggled to maintain its hold on power, regional elites exploited the atmosphere of uncertainty in order to expand their personal positions.

Restructuring the empire

The USSR was a multinational federation, comprising of myriad national groups, many of which lacked political recognition as nations. The Union was composed of fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), national administrative groupings conferred the highest status by the Soviet state (see Table 2.1 below). Within these SSRs there were twenty Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs), eight Autonomous Regions (*oblasti*) and ten Autonomous Areas (*okruga*), together with hundreds of smaller administrative units, namely provinces (*krai*) and regions (*rayony*). Although the Soviet Constitution guaranteed the right of the SSRs to secede from the Union,

Table 2.1 Administrative structure of the USSR[3]

Administrative unit	*Degree of autonomy*
Union Republic (SSR)	• 'Sovereign socialist state' of most populous national groups • Right of secession • Border with foreign country • Own constitution, citizenship, legislature, executive and judiciary • Permitted to establish universities and pursue cultural and education policies in national language[4]
Autonomous Republic (ASSR)	• Sub-division of SSR • 'National state' – territory of national minority not large enough to be ascribed SSR • Executive, legislative and budgetary powers • Permitted to establish universities
Autonomous Region (oblast)	• Designated territory of national minority within SSR or krai • Control over local affairs and administration
Province (krai)	• Large territory of geographic or military significance, in strategically important borderland
Region (oblast)	• Non-national administrative units
Autonomous Area (okrug)	• Designated territory of national minority within oblast