



Essential Histories

# Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009

Mark Galeotti

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# Introduction

*A bullet, a bomb, or a missile cannot, will not, destroy us. This will not end. We will sooner or later revenge ourselves upon you for the deeds you have done to us.*

– Open letter from the ‘Wolves of Islam’ movement to the people of Russia, 1995

Post-Soviet Russia fought its first war – the First Chechen War – in 1994–96. In effect, it lost: a nation with a population of 147 million was forced to recognize the effective autonomy of Chechnya, a country one-hundredth its size and with less than one-hundredth of its people. A mix of brilliant guerrilla warfare and ruthless terrorism was able to humble Russia’s decaying remnants of the Soviet war machine.

But this was a struggle that had already run for centuries. Russia licked its wounds and built up its forces for a rematch, invading again in 1999 and by 2009 declaring the Second Chechen War won. However, this did not mean peace in Chechnya, where a guerrilla movement still survives at the time of writing, much less in the wider North Caucasus region, which seems to have been infected by insurrection. It is also worth questioning just how much of a victory this really was for Moscow, given that its price has been installing Ramzan Kadyrov, an erratic warlord-turned-president who in many ways runs Chechnya as his own private kingdom, as well as having to provide massive amounts of federal funding to rebuild the country and buy off Kadyrov and his allies.

If only Boris Yeltsin, first president of post-Soviet Russia, had been more aware of his history. After all, it is hardly surprising that the first and most serious direct challenge to Moscow’s rule after the collapse of the USSR came from the Chechens. An ethnic group from the North Caucasus mountain region on Russia’s southern flank,

the Chechens – who call themselves *Nokhchy* or *Vainakh* – have lived in the region for thousands of years, their land defined by the Sunja and Terek rivers to the north and the west, the Andi mountains to the east and the mighty Caucasus range to the south. Their reputation has been as a proud, fractious, raiding people. This is, after all, a land of mountains and valleys. Diagonal ranges cut the country from north-west to south-east, with the lowland valleys and hillsides in between often thickly forested. This is perfect bandit and guerrilla country, but also a geography that worked against the rise of any strong central power.

Grozny, 17 March 1995: a Chechen fighter pictured shortly after the Chechen capital had finally fallen. His AKM-47 is a dated but still effective weapon for the close-quarters fighting that had scarred the city. (© GRIGORY TAMBOULOV/Reuters/Corbis)





This 19th-century postcard of the Georgian Military Highway – Russia’s main route through the Caucasus – shows the contrast between fertile lowlands and rough, demanding highland relief which was such a problem for successive generations of foreign invaders and occupiers. (Library of Congress)

Instead, what emerged was a people divided but united, politically divided between clan (*teip*) and family, but with a shared culture characterized by a close-knit sense of community, based on tradition, kinship and a fierce sense of honour, which valued independence to an immense degree. The Russians came to realize this when their own imperial expansion brought them to the North Caucasus in the 18th century, their eyes fixed on other prizes: Georgia to the south, and beyond that, Safavid Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Of all the North Caucasian mountain peoples, the Chechens put up the fiercest resistance to the Tsarist Russian invaders of the 18th and 19th century and Soviet occupiers of the 20th. They would suffer the most for it, too, including massacres and forced deportations.

Leaders such as Sheikh Mansur and, especially, Imam Shamil (ironically, an Avar from present-day Dagestan, not a Chechen) have become symbols of national pride and independence alongside modern-day figures such as former elected Chechen president and tactical genius Aslan Maskhadov, the man who masterminded the counter-attack that saw Russian forces pushed out of the Chechen capital, Grozny. A bandit tradition, of the so-called *abreg* or *abrek* – a wronged man who strikes back against abusive lords, like a Robin Hood of the North Caucasus – has metamorphosed into the cult of the guerrilla. A generation of Chechens is now reaching adulthood having known nothing but conflict and the messy, brutal counter-insurgency operations which followed the formal end of the war in 2009.

Meanwhile, the conflict proved pivotal in shaping post-Soviet Russia, too. The First Chechen War demonstrated the limits of the new democracy. Although Yeltsin had originally told the constituent republics and regions of the Russian Federation to ‘take

as much sovereignty as you can stomach', when the Chechens took him at his word, he proved too much of a nationalist to be willing to see his country break apart. It also undermined his credibility with the military and the country alike, forcing him to fall back on questionable political alliances and outright vote-rigging to hold on to power. On the other hand, the second war was the making of the hitherto-unknown prime minister and then president Vladimir Putin, allowing him to present himself as the saviour of Russian territorial integrity, the scourge of terrorists and kidnapers and the strong man able to succeed where Yeltsin had failed.

The Chechen wars of 1994–96 and 1999–2009 were dramatic, vicious and complex affairs, full of extremes of heroism, atrocity and unexpected reversals. An irregular

guerrilla force proved able to drive a modern army out of Grozny, for example, when well motivated and brilliantly led. Conversely, the Russians demonstrated an impressive ability to learn from their mistakes when they subsequently created a Chechen force of their own, able to take the war to the rebels on their own terms. As such, the Chechen wars covered the whole spectrum of modern conflict, from a handful of relatively conventional clashes between regular units, through hard-fought urban battles to the bitter military and political campaigns of terrorism and counter-insurgency. In many ways they epitomize the new paradigm of war, as armies come to terms with warfare that is more often asymmetric and political, as much about winning hearts and minds – or at least shattering the enemy's will to fight – as carrying the day on the battlefield.

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# Chronology

- 1585** Ottoman Empire claims control over Chechnya.
- 1722–23** Russo-Persian War pits Safavid Iran against Peter the Great's Russia.
- 1783** Treaty of Georgievsk implicitly cedes North Caucasus to Russian Empire.
- 1784** Sheikh Mansur leads first rebellion against Russians.
- 1785** Russian defeat at the battle of the Sunja River.
- 1817–64** Caucasus War.
- 1818** Russians found fort of Groznaya; later becomes city of Grozny.
- 1834–59** Imam Shamil's revolt against the Russians.
- 1859** Chechnya formally annexed to Russian Empire.
- 1862** Chechnya formally subjugated.
- 1877–78** Chechen revolt crushed.
- 1917** Chechnya joins Union of the Peoples of the North Caucasus.
- 1918** Following collapse of Tsarist Russia, Union of the Peoples of the North Caucasus declares independence.
- 1918–22** Russian Civil War.
- 1920** Bolsheviks occupy North Caucasus.
- 1921** Mountaineer Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic formed.
- 1924** Mountaineer Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic divided into constituent regions and republics.
- 1934** Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Region formed.
- 1936** Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic formed.
- 1944** Stalin orders deportation of Chechen population.
- 1956** Chechens begin to be allowed home.
- 1991** **October** Presidential elections held in Chechnya, won by Dzhokhar Dudayev; he declares independence.
- November** Russian President Yeltsin refuses to acknowledge Chechen independence.
- 1992** **March** Constituent elements of Russian Federation sign a new federation treaty bar Chechnya and Tatarstan.
- June** Split of republics of Ingushetia and Chechnya recognized by Moscow. Chechnya declares itself an independent state. Moscow refuses to accept this.
- December** Ingushetia breaks away to become a separate republic within the Russian Federation.
- 1994** **November** The Russian-backed Provisional Chechen Council launches abortive coup.
- December** Russian forces invade Chechnya 'to restore constitutional order'.
- 1995** **May** Chechen fighters seize hundreds of hostages at Budyennovsk hospital, forcing Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin into negotiations.
- July** Ceasefire agreed.
- December** Ceasefire falls apart.
- 1996** **April** Dudayev is killed by Russian missile; he is succeeded by Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev.
- August** Chechen rebels retake Grozny. Khasav-Yurt Accord signed.
- November** Peace settlement agreed; end of the First Chechen War.
- 1997** **January** Aslan Maskhadov wins Chechen presidential elections; recognized by Moscow.
- May** Yeltsin and Maskhadov sign peace accords.
- 1998** **December** Four engineers from Britain and New Zealand are kidnapped and beheaded.



- 1999**     **August** Chechen extremists launch cross-border attack into Dagestan. Vladimir Putin appointed Russian prime minister.  
**September** Moscow blames Chechen rebels for a series of apartment bombings.  
**October** Russian forces move into Chechnya.  
**December** Putin replaces Yeltsin as acting Russian president.
- 2000**     **February** Russian forces take Grozny.  
**March** Putin wins Russian presidential election.  
**May** Russia announces direct rule of Chechnya.  
**June** Akhmad Kadyrov appointed head of Russian-backed government in Grozny.
- 2002**     **October** Chechen terrorists seize the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow, holding 800 people hostage; some 130 hostages die when Russian forces use gas when storming the building.
- 2003**     **March** New Chechen constitution is ratified.
- 2004**     **May** A suicide bomber kills Akhmad Kadyrov.  
**September** Terrorists seize school in Beslan, southern Russia; more than 300 are killed when it is stormed.
- 2005**     **March** Rebel president Maskhadov is killed.
- 2006**     **March** Ramzan Kadyrov becomes Chechen prime minister.
- 2007**     **March** Ramzan Kadyrov appointed Chechen president.
- 2009**     **April** Kremlin declares 'counter-terrorism operation' in Chechnya over. End of the Second Chechen War.

Botlikh, 24 July 2000: Border Troops played a secondary role in the conflict, trying to prevent incursions into other regions of Russia and interdict efforts to resupply the rebels from Georgia. Here a quick-response force in their distinctive green berets scramble in response to reports of a potential cross-border rebel raid into Dagestan. (Stringer/EPA)



# Home of the wolf

*We are free and equal, like wolves.*  
– Chechen saying

## Homeland of the wolf

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The national symbol of the Chechens, visible everywhere from badges and knife pommels to the flag of the independent 'Chechen Republic of Ichkeria' – Ichkeria is the traditional Turkic name for the region – is the wolf, *borz* in Nokhchy. Chechen folklore stresses the wolf's role as both loner and pack-member and this duality is visible in Chechen society, too. It is traditionally dominated by the tribe and the clan (*teip*), each being made up of lines (*gars*) and families (*nekye*), governed by the male elders who interpret the *adat*, traditional law. While the *adat* and the collective wisdom of the elders are important, though, these are forever in tension with an egalitarian, competitive and aggressive spirit of adventure and independence.

To the Chechens, after all, the wolf symbolizes courage and a love of freedom, but also implicitly a predator's spirit. Traditionally, Chechen culture was a raiding one, in which young men would prove themselves by raiding other tribes and *teips* – even ones with whom they were on good terms – for horses or cattle or even brides. These raids, which were meant to be essentially bloodless (although a raider caught by his intended victims might face a good beating before being released or ransomed), were also ways of maintaining the skills that would make the Chechens formidable guerrillas. Killing another Chechen would simply bring blood feud from his kin; the feud is a powerful force in such a society, and in some cases ran from generation to generation.

The flag of the independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria has a green background to symbolize the state's Islamic roots and also as a representation of life. The red stripe stands for the blood shed in the name of freedom and the wolf on the state coat of arms is a traditional Chechen symbol. (Public domain)

