

1

Introduction

Chechnya, of course, is an extreme instance in the relations between Moscow and its regions. However, it serves as a warning that federalism may fail in the Russian republic just as it failed in the Soviet Union as a whole, ground up between the millstones of imperial centralism and ethnic particularism.

—Robert V. Daniels, 1997

In December 1994 the government of the Russian Federation launched a devastating war against the separatist republic of Chechnya. It lasted nearly two years, killed tens of thousands of people, and turned hundreds of thousands more into refugees. Despite a ground invasion and massive bombing of cities and villages (including vast destruction of the capital city of Grozny), the Russian armed forces failed to defeat the guerrillas. Chechen forces shocked and demoralized the Russian public by launching terrorist attacks on Russian territory. Finally they recaptured Grozny. Moscow withdrew its forces in humiliation, signing a peace agreement with the newly elected Chechen president, Aslan Maskhadov, that deferred resolution of Chechnya's status until the year 2001.

Chechnya had achieved *de facto* independence, but at tremendous cost. Would any of the other eighty-eight regions that make up the Russian Federation follow its example? Could Russia go the way of the Soviet Union and disintegrate into its constituent parts?

To many observers, Chechnya seemed a unique case. Only one other republic—Tatarstan—had joined it in

2 INTRODUCTION

refusing to sign the Federative Treaty that Russian president Boris Yeltsin proposed in 1992. But despite Tatarstan's own declaration of sovereignty, it managed to avoid violent conflict with Russia and to work out a *modus vivendi*. As a Tatar spokesperson told me in November 1998, the "lessons of Chechnya should be a warning to everybody": military conflict between the center and the regions "should not be repeated in any form."

Less than a year later, however, two such conflicts had broken out in the Russian North Caucasus. First, in August 1999 rebel forces, led by opponents of President Maskhadov, invaded neighboring Dagestan, ostensibly to liberate it from Russian rule and found an Islamic republic. Russian military forces and Dagestani villagers opposed the invasion. Then the Moscow government went a step further and began bombing Chechnya and sending in ground forces.

What had seemed unthinkable just months before was now a reality: renewal of the Chechen War and spillover of the conflict into Dagestan. How would this latest crisis in the North Caucasus affect the stability of the Russian Federation? Vladimir Putin, the former KGB agent appointed prime minister just as the new war began, had an answer: "I was convinced that if we didn't stop the extremists right away, we'd be facing a second Yugoslavia on the entire territory of the Russian Federation—the Yugoslavization of Russia." If Russia granted Chechnya independence, "immediately, dissatisfied leaders from different regions and territories would turn up: 'We don't want to live in a Russia like that. We want to be independent.' And off they'd go."¹

Although Russian troops readily halted the incursion into Dagestan, their effort to impose control over Chechen territory got bogged down. The toll of civilian casualties mounted as Russian forces launched artillery and air attacks against Grozny and other population centers, provoking a wide-scale refugee crisis. As rebel fighters fled to the mountains, Russian army and police units set up "filtration camps" in the areas under their control to identify suspected "bandits" and "terrorists" among the remaining population. Evidence of torture and summary executions led to local protests and international accusations of human-rights abuses, but little change in Russian policy.

How could Russia's leaders have steered their country into such destructive and seemingly self-defeating wars, at a cost of tens of thousands of dead and wounded, Russian citizens nearly all? The secondary literature on the war of 1994–96 is already quite extensive, supplemented by firsthand reports, memoirs, and other documentation.² It all points to a troubling

paradox: the outbreak of this war—as with many others—seems to have been simultaneously overdetermined (to use the social-science jargon) and avoidable. Among the main competing explanations for the war are the *strategic arguments*: Chechnya stands astride key transportation junctions, including the Rostov-Baku highway and Rostov-Baku railroad, the only links between northern Russia and Transcaucasia and the countries of eastern and southern Europe. It has also been an important center for oil refining and transit. Some Russian officials sought to justify the first invasion of Chechnya as being necessary to secure these facilities for the sake of the economic well-being of the rest of the country.³ More cynical observers suggested that personal interests in controlling Chechnya's oil trade played a big role in both wars.

A broader strategic argument was based on the precedent that Chechen secession could set: that “the ‘brushfire’ of drives for independence may pick up elsewhere across Russia, leading to the eventual destruction of Russian territorial integrity.”⁴ This argument became the centerpiece of justifications by both Russian presidents for their pursuit of war in Chechnya.

Many analysts attribute the wars in Chechnya to the *historical and structural legacy of the Soviet system*. The more simplistic versions imply that the very existence of some 100 ethnic groups in the Russian Federation, whose aspirations were suppressed under the Soviet order, provides sufficient reason to understand the sources of such conflicts as the one between Russia and Chechnya. Indeed, the Chechen case provides an extreme example of the phenomenon. Having suffered mass deportation from their homeland on Stalin's orders during World War II, the Chechens retained a strong sense of ethnic identity and an abiding mistrust of Russia. Such explanations make the Chechen drive for independence appear natural and inevitable.

A more sophisticated explanation related to the Soviet legacy emphasizes the political structure, dating back to the Stalinist era, imposed on various ethnic groups. Here the stress is not on Soviet suppression of ethnic identity, but on the creation or fostering of that identity through the development of local institutions, formalization and teaching of indigenous languages, and encouragement of native culture—all within strict control of the Communist Party. In this interpretation, the Soviet Union was not so much the “prison house of nations” as the “hothouse” of nationalism. The point is that the Soviet authorities created the formal institutions of self-rule, which, although meaningless in the highly centralized and authoritarian Soviet context, provided the basis for assertions of autonomy during the post-Soviet transition.⁵ The Soviet legacy also sowed

4 INTRODUCTION

the seeds of violent conflict in that many of the Soviet administrative boundaries separated ethnic groups in a fashion that fostered irredentism as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics disintegrated.

In contrast to structural and historical explanations, those based on analysis of *leadership politics* and *personalities* highlight the idiosyncratic and contingent nature of the decisions to invade Chechnya. One view attributes the first war to a pathological decisionmaking process in Moscow. According to this view, Boris Yeltsin—ill, weak, and unpopular—sought to boost his “ratings” with a quick, victorious war against a people associated in the Russian popular consciousness with the worst excesses of the transition to capitalism: organized crime and violence. Surrounded by corrupt, self-serving advisers, he persuaded himself to undertake what soon turned into a hopeless quagmire.⁶ The other side of the leadership perspective focuses on the erratic nature of the Chechen leader, General Dzhokhar Dudaev. He was extremely sensitive to perceived personal slights, and he tended to exaggerate the economic benefits that would accrue to an independent Chechnya, making him willing to take greater risks than the situation warranted. Lacking the political skills necessary to govern an impoverished, isolated ministate, the Chechen general felt more comfortable leading a war of national defense against Russian aggression.⁷

To the extent that observers favor a leadership- or personality-based explanation for the second war, they point out that the initial Chechen intervention into Dagestan was led by two highly unusual and charismatic figures: Shamil’ Basaev and Khattab (nom de guerre of Habib Abd al-Rahman).⁸ Their roles as self-promoting opponents of the elected Chechen president Aslan Maskhadov were probably more important to understanding the conflict than any commitment to Islamic revolution. Also relevant was the weakness of Maskhadov himself as a leader, a weakness that allowed Moscow to make the case that an invasion was necessary to restore order to a lawless territory.

On the Russian side, leadership- or personality-based explanations for the second war focus on the electoral ambitions of Vladimir Putin. Appointed prime minister when the war began, he saw his popularity soar the cruder his language became and the harsher his army’s response to the Chechen situation. When Yeltsin resigned the presidency on the eve of the New Year 2000, he chose Putin as his designated successor. The popularity of the war made Putin unbeatable in the March 2000 presidential elections. Not surprisingly, he voiced no regrets about resuming the war, even though it meant breaking the peace agreements his predecessor had

signed. "I do not have a second of doubt that we are doing the right thing," Putin maintained. "Maybe we should be even tougher."⁹

Toughness may not be the answer, but weakness was certainly part of the problem. As a number of analysts have pointed out, the Russian state was considerably weaker than its Soviet predecessor. The lack of "state-ness" in contemporary Russia is part of the historical and structural legacy of the breakup of the USSR, and, in effect, provides a link between that explanation for the Chechen Wars and the one that focuses on leadership politics and personality.¹⁰ If post-Soviet Russia had built the infrastructure of a "normal," law-governed state, the role of personal idiosyncrasies and Kremlin intrigues would not have been so significant and the influence of the "power ministries," dominated by military and secret-service personnel, would not have been so great. Moreover, the lack of functioning state institutions lay at the heart of Chechnya's inability to govern itself under the Dudaev regime, and after, and undoubtedly contributed to the escalation of violence and the outbreak of war.

In considering the first war, many analysts have drawn the paradoxical conclusion that Galina Starovoitova, the liberal Russian politician and human rights activist, expressed to me in an interview in November 1998, shortly before she was murdered: Chechnya was a unique case, containing an overdetermined number of strategic and historical-institutional factors pointing toward secession, but also one that did not need to result in war. She and others have pointed particularly to the fact that a face-to-face meeting between Yeltsin and Dudaev might have been enough for the latter to temper his demands and settle for something less than full independence for Chechnya.¹¹

If the Chechen case was so unusual and the violent outcome avoidable, then it is not surprising that with the end of the first Chechen War, few observers anticipated another bout of violent secessionism in Russia. The consensus seemed, instead, to predict a gradual loosening of bonds between center and periphery in Russia and the uneasy relationship that has come to be known as "asymmetric federalism."¹² In the wake of the renewal of war in 1999, the pendulum swung back in the other direction. Alarmist predictions about a domino effect of separatism began to reappear, both in the West and in Russia.¹³

By far the most alarmist interpretations of the Chechen conflict have come from Vladimir Putin himself. "What's the situation in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya today?" he asked himself in an interview in early 2000. "It's a continuation of the collapse of the USSR."¹⁴ Thus he justified a renewal of all-out warfare. "This is what I thought of the situation

6 INTRODUCTION

in August [1999], when the bandits attacked Dagestan: If we don't put an immediate end to this, Russia will cease to exist. It was a question of preventing the collapse of the country."¹⁵

I examine the various explanations for the outbreak of the two wars in the first part of this book. My analysis leads me to question the argument that beyond the case of Chechnya itself the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation was at stake. Chapter 2 presents a brief review of the history of Chechen-Russian relations and a narrative account of the origins of the first war based on the most recent sources, including a collective memoir of nine former Yeltsin advisers. Chapter 3 covers the period between the peace agreement of August 1996 that ended the first war and the outbreak of the second war three years later. If the first war could have been avoided by such measures as direct negotiations between Yeltsin and Dudaev, the road to the second war is likewise littered with missed opportunities of many kinds. Chapter 4 focuses on the outbreak of the second war, especially the machinations of Boris Yeltsin and his "family" of political cronies and relatives, as they sought to secure the position of the president's designated successor, Vladimir Putin. I seek to make sense of the various rumors concerning the origins of the invasion of Dagestan and the mysterious series of apartment bombings that terrorized Russian citizens and turned many of them into strong supporters of a renewed war effort. Although I analyze the origins of the two wars, I do not provide a military history of the wars themselves or a study of strategy and tactics, tasks that have been undertaken by several other authors.¹⁶

The second part of the book takes up the issue that seemingly drove both Yeltsin and Putin to unleash war on their own country: the apparent fragility of the Russian Federation. I examine the hard cases—the regions most often cited as likely to seek further autonomy or outright secession from Moscow—and find far less cause for concern than one would expect from the hyperbolic language of a Yeltsin or Putin.

In fact, across the political spectrum in Russia observers have identified the same core regions as being "at risk" for secession in the wake of the Chechen conflict. Galina Starovoitova, who once advised Yeltsin on ethnic affairs, predicted at the outset of the first war that the "crude use" of "notorious tools of imperial policy," would "produce mistrust of the center's policy and centrifugal tendencies." She expressed particular concern about the republics with large Muslim populations, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Vladimir Putin, while himself making the crudest use of Russian military "tools," justified the resort to force as a means of main-

taining control of regions at risk of separation. "I have never for a second believed," said Putin, "that Chechnya would limit itself to its own independence. It would become a beachhead for further attacks on Russia." If the Chechen rebels had remained in power, "they would have swallowed up Dagestan, and that would have been the beginning of the end. The entire Caucasus would have followed—Dagestan, Ingushetiia, and then up along the Volga river to Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, reaching deep into the country."¹⁷

In chapter 5, I look at four cases of "regions at risk" of secession. First, I consider Dagestan, the republic, along with Ingushetiia, most immediately affected by the catastrophic events associated with the wars in Chechnya. Some 100,000 refugees fled to Dagestan in the wake of the first war, threatening to destabilize the delicate political balance between the thirty-odd ethnic groups living there. Why is it that Dagestan, the poorest region in Russia next to Chechnya itself, has not pursued secession and instead actively opposed efforts by Chechen militants to separate it from Russia in 1999?

The next case is Tatarstan. The "Tatarstan model" is often invoked as a peaceful alternative to what happened in Chechnya and as a harbinger of the asymmetrical federalism that came to characterize Russian center-regional relations. What were the keys to Tatarstan's relative success? Could they be more broadly applied? More than one observer has argued that Tatarstan, in its drive for autonomy from Moscow, came close to a violent conflict of the Chechen sort. What factors kept it from the brink?

A related and important case is Bashkortostan. Like its neighbor Tatarstan, Bashkortostan is rich in natural resources, relatively well developed in industry (including military production), and one of the few "donor" regions whose tax revenues are redistributed to the poorer areas of the federation. A number of observers have pointed to the danger that Bashkortostan and Tatarstan might join together to form the nucleus of a "Volga-Urals Republic" and assert independence from Russia. Such an entity would be a military-industrial powerhouse and could pose a real threat to the survival of the Russian Federation.¹⁸ What has kept the two regions from pursuing such a course?

Next I turn to the Russian Far East, to the Maritime Territory—Primor'e—and to Sakhalin *oblast*. Including these regions allows one to "control" for the effect of Islam and non-Russian ethnic identities on the prospects for separatism. Sakhalin and Primor'e are predominantly Russian, but they have had many reasons to assert their autonomy from Moscow. Their natural trade partners are in the Far East, and the exploita-

tion of their resources (gas, oil, fish) has been hindered by Moscow's interference or recalcitrance. The government of Sakhalin has objected to Moscow's efforts to negotiate the status of the disputed Southern Kuril Islands with Japan, without taking Sakhalin's interests into account. Primor'e, in addition to the material factors involved in Sakhalin's case, raises issues of cultural influences and identity. Many observers have noted the distinctive, independent character of the Russians of the Far East and Siberia—as well as a historical precedent of the short-lived Far Eastern Republic of the early 1920s. If identity and material incentives play an important role in separatist movements, they should be evident in Sakhalin and Primor'e. If, on the other hand, there exist countervailing factors that contribute to the preservation of the Russian Federation despite strong fissiparous tendencies, the cases from the Russian Far East should reveal them.

Despite the arguably underappreciated durability of Russia's system of asymmetrical federalism, most Russian leaders have sought to reform it, primarily in a recentralizing fashion.¹⁹ Vladimir Putin has gone the furthest, seeking to reinforce what he calls the "power vertical" and to institute a "dictatorship of law." He has appointed former military, police, and intelligence officials to govern a new system of super-regions and has undertaken a high-profile attempt to bring wayward subjects such as Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and Primor'e back into line—all in the interest of preserving the state. Chapter 6 reviews Yeltsin's approach to federalism and summarizes Putin's "cure," which could be worse than the disease. By insisting on putting his police officials in charge of the regions, Putin could undermine important bastions of stability, such as Ingushetiia. Indeed, Putin's regional reforms may be counterproductive: unnecessary for maintaining the integrity of the Russian Federation and likely to bring back some of the worst features of the Soviet era. Thus Russia could go at least some of the way of the Soviet Union, not by breaking up but by reverting to an overly centralized authoritarian regime.

The discussion of "regions at risk" and the danger of recentralization suggests that Russian leaders have overreacted to the threat of secessionism triggered by the wars in Chechnya. The domestic implications of Chechen secessionism were hardly as threatening as Yeltsin and Putin portrayed them. What of the international implications? From the first days of the first invasion, the Russian armed forces have violated the laws of war on a vast scale—with indiscriminate bombing of civilian population centers, torture, and execution of scores of Chechens caught up in sweep operations and detained in concentration camps; massacres of villagers and

townspeople, and numerous other depredations against refugees and innocent civilians. Has the international reaction to Russian war crimes reduced the country's international prestige to an extent that might hinder Russia's integration into international and European institutions, an explicit goal of both the Yeltsin and Putin regimes?

The question of Russia's international standing in light of extensive evidence of war crimes committed during the two campaigns against Chechnya is the subject of chapter 7. I review the body of international law applicable to internal conflicts such as the Chechen Wars, the understanding of those laws by Russian political and military officials, the interpretation of Russian behavior offered by Russian and Western journalists and specialists, and the Russian government's response to domestic and international criticism. I argue that a number of prominent Western observers of Russian politics have let Russia off the hook by misunderstanding the extent and gravity of Russian war crimes, whereas numerous Russian journalists and human-rights activists have been more critical. The Western tendency to play down Russian war crimes has provided a kind of protection for Russia's international standing.

In the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, Russia seemed likely to avoid any further criticism of its behavior in Chechnya. Western governments had already shown themselves willing to forgive Moscow's brutal means because they believed its ends—preservation of territorial integrity—were just. Now they appeared inclined to accept Putin's framing of the Chechen conflict as one of combating internationally sponsored terrorism. After September 11, Russia became a member in good standing of the international antiterrorist coalition, thanks to its support of the U.S.-led war against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

As chapter 8 describes, however, cooperation with the West in the struggle against international terrorism did not mean that Russia would automatically be welcomed into Western institutions, such as the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or the World Trade Organization. Nor in fact did it mean that Moscow would get a free pass on Chechnya. Even if Western governments contemplated a *Realpolitik* deal of silence on Chechnya in return for cooperation against al-Qaida (and some of them evidently did so), they could not prevent their own citizens or members of international organizations from speaking out about Russian abuses. Russia's integration into international institutions already faces many barriers. Doubts about the country's suitability, based on the government's conduct of the Chechen Wars and reluctance to prosecute war criminals in compliance with domestic and international law, are not

10 INTRODUCTION

at the top of the list of reasons to go slow—even though, arguably, they should be.

Chapter 9 summarizes my argument that Russia is unlikely to go the way of the Soviet Union and break up into its constituent units. More likely is at least a partial reversion to an authoritarian centralism reminiscent of the Soviet era, with restrictions on the media and on political activism. Such restrictions will make it all the more difficult for Russian society to recognize the costs of using excessive force to subdue Chechnya's aspirations for autonomy and to do something to reverse the unwise course that its leaders have pursued.