A Strategic Analysis of The Chechen Wars: 
The Keystone of Good Leadership

THESIS

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Abstract

At the start of the First Chechen war, the Russian Federation had recently inherited a fractured polity. New leaders tried to piece together a new identity and grand strategy for a state that was still coming to terms with the fact that it was no longer the center of a union. Its new borders were unstable and unsecure, and secession of any one republic threatened a potential chain reaction throughout the region. What Russia needed was a strong, experienced leader, with a clear sense of direction and purpose for the Russian Federation. While many factors contributed to Russia’s domestic troubles, Boris Yeltsin proved unequal to the task of effectively consolidating and directing what remained of the Russian Republic. In the case of Chechnya, after the collapse of the Soviet Union the Russian military still retained a vast arsenal and reserves of manpower, which could have overwhelmed Chechnya from the outset – had they been well coordinated and directed.

Dzhokhar Dudaev was exactly what Chechnya needed. He had decades of experience in the ranks of the Russian military and thoroughly understood their tactics, and he also had experience in irregular warfare from his service in the Soviet war in Afghanistan. And, of course, he was very familiar with the irregular and unconventional style of warfare that traversed Chechen history. In 1994 and 1995 Dudaev proved his ability to out-strategize the dysfunctional Russian forces, both politically and militarily. In 1996, two factors brought him down: the sheer mass of the Russian forces sent to
Chechnya and their tactical adjustments, as well as undermining from competing Chechen factions. His death to a Russian air strike in that same year hamstrung the Chechen government with weak leadership that resulted in disaster for the nascent Chechen state.

Neither the 1994 war nor that of 1999 was won or lost solely by the actions of one side or one leader. A mosaic of complex factors, acting on both sides, contributed to the origins, developments, and outcomes of each war. Technological, training, and coordinative flaws in the Russian strategy during the first war were largely rectified in the second. Additionally, the image of potentially legitimate statehood and victimization that the Chechens enjoyed at the start of the first war vanished by the second, causing the republic to lose its badly needed public support in both Russia and abroad in the international community. While noting the complexity of factors involved in the outcome if each war, key individuals at the helm of each polity created successes and failures out of the assets and liabilities at hand. Similarities between the origins of each war, contrasted with the stark differences in how forces executed their operations and the results they achieved, exemplify the significance that leadership has on an army’s success or failure.
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Introduction

In mid-December 1994, Russian forces marched into Grozny, the capital city of the Chechen Republic, in the southern Caucasus Mountains. Neither President Boris Yeltsin nor Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, who were responsible for the decision to use armed forces in Chechnya, considered the move a declaration of war.\(^1\) Instead they considered the military deployment a domestic political operation, intended to reintegrate the wayward republic back into the Russian Federation and restore order and stability in what had degraded into a lawless and chaotic region.\(^2\) Through the invasion, Yeltsin intended to remove the de-facto president in Chechnya, Dzhokhar Dudaev, quell his secessionist support base, and facilitate the installation of a new local government.\(^3\)

Although the National Congress of Chechen People (OCChN, or ОКЧН-Общенационального конгресса Чеченского народа) declared Chechnya independent from Russia in 1991 as the Soviet Union was unraveling and each of the 15 federal republics declared and received independence, Moscow consistently maintained that Chechnya did not have the option of secession as it was not a federal republic, but rather an autonomous regional republic within the larger federal Russian Republic. Further, by

\(^1\) “The situation in Chechnya - an internal problem for Russia. And no one, except Russia, will settle it,” Krasnaya Zvezda, December 1, 1994; Boris N. Yeltsin, President’s Notes (Ogonyok, Moscow, 1994), pp. 310-315.
\(^3\) “President of the Russian Federation appeals to the citizens of Russia,” B. Yeltsin, speech in the Kremlin, Moscow; Pavel Milyukov and Konstantin Yauk, Storm of Grozny: January ’95 (Publisher OAO, Yaroslavl, 2010), pp. 250-251.
1994 Moscow considered Chechnya a serious security threat, as violent acts by Chechens in neighboring regions of Russia and Dagestan increased. As far as Moscow was concerned, the aim of the Chechen campaign was to “disarm illegally armed bands” and “restore constitutional order.” As stated by the Speaker of the Russian Duma when military intervention appeared imminent, “Chechnya is and will remain part and parcel of the Russian Federation…and [the Office of Russia’s Prosecutor General] has called for undelayed actions to restore law and order in Chechnya.”

While contextual events and actors triggered the eruption of conflict in 1994, Chechen-Russian conflict was not a new phenomenon arising purely as a result of structural weaknesses due to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Rather, the collapse of the union and the breakdown in administrative structure and control that resulted created an opportunity for renewed open conflict in an environment that had remained contentious, but suppressed, throughout not only the life of the Soviet Union, but the Russian Empire before it.

The objective of this analysis is to sidestep the issues of justice or morality that so frequently take center-stage in discussions of Chechen-Russian conflict, and to instead address the strategic strengths and weaknesses of each side. Such a comparison is particularly interesting given that an initial comparison of size and available resources and arsenals overwhelmingly favored the Russians. Nevertheless, Chechnya managed to hold out from 1991 to 1999, and many consider the region still unsubdued. Clearly other

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factors were at work besides material power. The most important element, which either held all other factors together or permitted them to unravel, was leadership.

Historians have drawn several parallels between the Russo–Chechnyan conflict in the 1990s and similar conflicts in the 19th century, but the one most frequently made revolves around the 19th century Caucasian imam Shamil and the impact he had as a leader of the Muslim Caucasians in their struggle against Russian efforts at conquest. While he is often compared to the religiously zealous Shamil Basaev (the Chechen fighter and terrorist who quickly gained notoriety in each war), his tactical choices and skills were more comparable to those of Dzhokhar Dudaev. Given their numerical and material inferiority, the Chechens required effective leaders when Russian-Chechen tensions erupted into armed conflict if they wanted to emerge victorious from the unequal struggle.

The 1990s provided an opportunity to analyze the effectiveness of specific leaders. Dzhokhar Dudaev, Aslan Maskhadov, and Shamil Basaev all claimed to carry the banner of Chechen independence, yet did so with very different ethos and methods and with manifestly different results. Where Dzhokhar Dudaev initially advocated political channels to legitimize a secular Chechen state that would have a relationship with Russia similar to that of the other independent Caucasian states (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), Shamil Basaev used violence to advocate a pan-Islamic Caucasian state that would have no such relationship to Russia. Aslan Maskhadov failed to advocate any clear political objectives, simultaneously supporting both Moscow and local warlords
declared by Moscow as criminals and terrorists. Of the three, Dudaev enjoyed the greatest support in both Russia and the international community. Basaev was consistently branded by all as a terrorist, and Maskhadov maintained a political image as fuzzy and unstable as his stated position and apparent allegiances.

Russian leadership played an equally important role, and the executive organization of the Russian Federation suffered a heavy blow in 1991 by losing the Soviet administrative infrastructure. Further, the loss of its outer republics redefined Russia’s “external” borders, forcing Moscow to readdress the issue of its territorial integrity while redefining its political hierarchies. Infighting amongst the ministries and weak executive leadership (President Yeltsin was in and out of the hospital, and the constitutional crisis of 1993 demonstrated the extent of conflict between the executive and legislative branches) contributed to a federal government that was poorly coordinated and unable to effectively project the power potentially at its disposal. The case of Chechnya exemplified this lack of coordination and poor projection of power, as a tiny territory with a far inferior base of military and economic resources that somehow managed to hold out against Russia’s attempt to subdue it. After being elected into office as President of the Chechen Republic in 1991, for several years General Dzhokhar Dudaev managed to maintain political independence, gain international support for Chechen independence, and even keep Russian forces from taking over Chechnya.

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6 Dzhokhar Dudaev, The Thorny Path to Freedom: Government documents of the Chechen Republic, Articles, Interviews (Vilnius, 1993). pp. 10-12; interview with Basaev, Combat Films and Research, www.combatfilms.com; interviews and accounts from Maskhadov portray him as everything from an intellectual and diplomat to a jihadist, and from strongly pro-Russian to a steadfast nationalist.
From Dudaev’s death in a targeted air strike in March 1996 to the next Russian assault on Grozny in September 1999, security and stability within Chechnya and in surrounding regions deteriorated significantly. In 1996 Aslan Maskhadov replaced Dudaev as the head of the Chechen Republic (he did not become president until 1997); however, Maskhadov was not as able a field commander as Dudaev and he maintained less control over the governing party, the OCChN, which began to fracture in 1996.\(^7\) Additionally, many of his “field commanders” were warlords who had uncontestable local power and who did not actually answer to the government in Grozny.\(^8\) Many of these warlords also received aid from foreign mercenaries and militant Islamic activists, interested in establishing a foothold in the weak, but strategically valuable, Chechen state.\(^9\)

The decline in the viability of the Chechen state between 1996 and 1999 gave Russia increasing justification for renewing its assault. Furthermore, by 1999 Moscow’s leadership had become more decisive. Throughout the 1990s, Yeltsin’s direct control over the government waned and in August 1999 he appointed Vladimir Putin as prime

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At this time, Putin took over as acting president, with Yeltsin’s support as his successor in the next elections. When Shamil Basaev invaded Dagestan in August 1999, Putin responded very differently than Yeltsin had several years before. As in the first war, Putin’s administration considered the second war a response to internal instability and violence. However, where Yeltsin considered the first conflict a primarily political operation to reintegrate Chechnya, with the armed forces there primarily as backup, Putin addressed the second conflict as a war from the outset – a “cleansing” of criminal and terrorist actors and supporters. Putin not only had a very different objective in the second war, but operationally he conducted it with greater coordination of better-prepared forces, a swifter and more forceful initial response, and greater manipulation of information and media coverage.

Still, good (or bad) leadership did not exist in a vacuum; several other factors played a role in each conflict, and they can be grouped into four categories: the administrative structure and organization of each force (heavily influenced by the political climate); the technology and military capacity of each force (which changed most markedly for the Russians); the strategic objectives of each force; and the use of the media and public opinion in garnering both Russian and international support. As will be seen, success in war significantly depends on two things: the existence of a focused objective with solid, unified support, and a leadership able to rally and retain this support, and able to efficiently project the assets at his disposal.

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Historiography

Many analyses and accounts have been written about these two wars, and about Russian-Chechen conflict in general. It is certainly a sensitive subject and, unsurprisingly, most accounts contain a bias toward one side or the other. Primary sources of information are often particularly passionate, since so many of these sources are personal accounts. However, just because the accounts are subjective does not mean they are not valuable. The journalist Anna Politkovskaya wrote excellent, unapologetically passionate coverage of the development of Chechnya’s situation, gathering first-hand interviews from perspectives that might otherwise have gone unheard. The fact that she (as well as many other journalists) was murdered indicates the influence such accounts had on the regimes in both Chechnya and Russia, not to mention the international attention and support garnered from the international community through their efforts.

Even academic authors inevitably have their own biases. For example, in his book *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, historian Anatol Lieven gives his own first-hand account of how events in Chechnya unfolded, as he personally lived there during the first war. While he attempts to give each actor equal treatment, what emerges is a story of villains, victims, and incompetency all around. By his account, there is little that is redeeming about either the Russians or Chechens – except, ironically, for two individuals, Aslan Maskhadov and Ruslan Khasbulatov. In the case of Maskhadov this is
ironic because it was under Maskhadov’s tenure as president that Chechnya sunk to its lowest point, between 1996 and 1999. While Khasbulatov was technically Chechen born, he never returned to Chechnya after his family was forced out under Stalin, but instead spent his life as an economist in Moscow, and gave no public indication of a particular interest in events in Chechnya.

Nevertheless, Lieven provides a wealth of interviews and accounts of broadcasts and events that are difficult, if not impossible, to acquire otherwise. However, in their attempts to paint vivid pictures of the horrors of post-Soviet Chechnya, neither Politkovskaya nor Lieven attempt to evaluate the events as successes or failures of the leaders and regimes in Chechnya and Russia, as actors with military and political goals. This paper does not wholly refrain from making judgments; however, the judgments presented are based on the extent to which the regimes achieved their objectives, rather than on the morality or “rightness” of the actions that took place. The morality of the events is certainly important to address, but it has been well hashed out by both sides. What has received little attention is not whether each side was right, but whether each side had a clear and focused idea of their objectives, and whether they effectively utilized the means at their disposal to create a viable strategy in pursuit of those objectives.

By focusing on the leaders, their objectives, and their strategies, it becomes apparent that often leaders lacked coherent objectives, and their strategies suffered as a result, falling apart politically and militarily. Interestingly, a correlation existed between the coherency of a regime and its objectives, and broader perceptions of the “rightness” of their cause. For example, while General Dudaev and President Putin had entirely
opposite motivations and ideologies, they projected the clearest goals and directed the most focused strategies, and experienced the greatest direct support and short-term success. Under the far less coherent regimes and contradictory strategies and objectives of Yeltsin and Maskhadov, the situation in Chechnya deteriorated. Under Yeltsin, the Chechen campaign went from a police operation of restoring constitutional order to a war, and under Maskhadov Chechnya went from a fledgling republic with a struggling regime to a region of anarchy with a powerless government. Neither leader garnered much support for the campaign in Chechnya, domestically or internationally – in fact, under the tenure of President Maskhadov, Islamic militants and warlords (especially the more effective leaders such as Shamil Basaev) received more support and assistance from similar, stateless organizations abroad than the Chechen regime did.

Such observations are rarely made by more passionate accounts that are primarily interested in faulting one side or the other for the atrocities that occurred. However, these observations are essential to make in order to understand the dynamics of this conflict as it has developed and as it continues to develop. By looking at the conflict as one between a right side and a wrong side, two errors are made. The first is in assuming either is right or wrong, and the second is in assuming each “side” operated as a coherent entity. Given the highly subjective treatment this conflict has thus far received, a more objective attempt at pulling apart the threads of the picture is greatly needed.
Background

Relations between the Russians and Chechens have never been amicable, and the outbreaks of armed conflict in 1994 and 1999 were only the most recent episodes of a Russian-Chechen antagonism that existed for centuries. In the 19th century, even though far smaller in numbers and weaker in military strength than the Russians, the mountain Caucasians posed a more persistent and enduring disturbance to the Russian Empire than either the Ottoman or Persian Empires to their south. At the time, modern delineations between territories (e.g., Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Ossetia, and so forth) did not exist. From the perspective of most Russians (especially in Moscow), there was little distinction between different mountain Caucasians – and this attitude has not changed much. Journalist Sebastian Smith made the following observation as he conducted research and interviews in Chechnya in the 1990s:

To Russians, the Caucasus are the enfent terrible of an empire. The Region may be beautiful, but the people are suspect. Conveniently for xenophobes, and Moscow’s notorious police, most of the Caucasians are dark-haired and dark-eyed. Forget all the variety. To many Russians all Caucasians are simply cheorny – ‘blacks.’ A more clinical racist label is litso kavkazkovo natsionalnosty, or ‘Caucasian national features.’

A large part of the problem was how different the two peoples were from one another, in almost every respect. The mountain Caucasian peoples had no ethnic,

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religious, or linguistic relation to the Slavic Russians. They were semi-nomadic and Muslim, with a clan-based social and political structure in contrast to Russia’s highly sedentary, Orthodox Christian traditions. Chechen “cities” consisted of “auls”, which were essentially small, mountaintop residence-fortresses, generally built with at least one side flush with a cliff-side.

Also, from the perspective of the Caucasians, their society revolved around a martial culture, with military virtues valued above all else and an intense defiance of authority beyond that of their clan or tribe. The auls proved highly defensible, and throughout the 18th and 19th centuries the Chechens remained resilient against Russian offensives. Combined with other Caucasian traditions and social traits such as blood feuds with other clans and their tendency to be armed, the Chechens presented an image of an inherently violent people.

Fortunately for the Russians, most of the Caucasians were too scattered and uncoordinated to present an effective offensive force against them. They did, however, pose a formidable and virtually unconquerable defense against Russian consolidation and control. In particular, the efforts of the Imam Shamil in the middle of the 19th century exemplified both the strengths and weaknesses of the Chechens against the Russian military. Between 1830 and 1860, Shamil was both religious and political leader of the


Caucasian Muslims in Dagestan and Chechnya. He developed an impressive military force under a political regime that was uniquely well-structured and hierarchical by the standards of most Caucasian societies. Shamil and his followers proved remarkably successful against the Russian forces, given the vast inferiority of both their numbers and the technology available to them.

To begin with, the auls were almost impenetrable, and the approaches to them extremely narrow and restrictive against the passage of Russian siege equipment. Away from the auls, Chechen fighters dominated Russian forces through their tactical use of the forests. Russians travelled in large, slow convoys, and Chechen fighters would often ambush the Russians from all sides, preventing them from forming effective defensive postures. Shamil and his forces consistently employed a highly effective tactic of trapping Russian forces in the forest, encircling them, and then methodically attacking at the fringes and simultaneously dividing their columns, further weakening their posture. The Chechens used snipers who constantly changed location and fired at the Russian flanks from the ground and from trees, after which they disappeared into the forest.\(^{14}\)

The most effective technique the Russians devised to counter this tactic amounted to a very literal and extreme campaign of scorched earth. In the early 1850s the Russians cut down and burned thousands of acres of forest in order to deprive the

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Chechens of their strongest tactical advantage.\textsuperscript{15} This solution remarkably resembled that employed by Putin, who in 1999 chose to obliterate buildings and in some cases destroy entire towns in order to deny the Chechens the tactically valuable asset of defending in an urban area.\textsuperscript{16}

On the other hand, the greatest strategic weakness of virtually all Caucasian resistance efforts has been their inability to coordinate for very long under a single regime, especially after the immediate threat of invasion has passed. Only on rare occasions have they managed to overcome tribal and clan conflicts. In the case of Imam Shamil, he not only fought Russian regulars on one front, but had to deal with rivals and individuals under his authority who chose to act independently. In general the 19\textsuperscript{th} century native Caucasians, while formidable fighters individually and as clans, were equally handicapped by their independent warrior nature. For example, while the imam served as the “supreme commander” (or “Commander of Believers”), his territory was administratively divided amongst deputies, or naibs. These deputies each controlled approximately 5 sub-districts of 100 people, headed by a dibir, which were further divided into tribes headed by elders. Imam Shamil did not designate or regulate the levels of subdivision – they joined under his command already formed, based on family/tribe/clan affiliations, and the power of those at each level was likewise not dependent on the imam. Thus, when they disagreed with the imam there was neither a


\textsuperscript{16} Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power, pp. 113-117.
law nor custom preventing them from acting in their own interests, even against the interests of the imam.\textsuperscript{17}

Here a parallel exists between Imam Shamil and his lieutenants and Aslan Maskhadov and his subordinates during the second war. Maskhadov had little control over his “field commanders” from the outset; their power as local warlords existed before Maskhadov granted them a veneer of legitimacy by denoting them field commanders. Basaev was a prominent example. While Maskhadov initially appointed him as his prime minister in 1996, Basaev soon left Grozny (and the government) to continue his own efforts in Dagestan and Russia. Nevertheless, the perception that Basaev was to some extent still connected with Maskhadov’s regime and Chechnya as a whole remained. In contrast, Dudaev structured his political administration in a more European style, and his armed forces in a hierarchy similar to that of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{18} Where Maskhadov (and imam Shamil) left vague the relationship between political and military jurisdiction, Dudaev delineated the roles and powers of each hierarchy in the initial government formed by the OCChN, and their relationship to each other.

Following Shamil’s capture and the Crimean War, Russia conducted its first (of two) forced mass emigrations of Chechens and other Caucasians from the region. The most irreconcilable factors of Chechen hostility, prior to the 1990s, stem from this deportation along with another ordered by Stalin during World War II. Just as Putin

\textsuperscript{17} Moshe Gammer, \textit{Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnya and Dagestan} (Frank Kass, Portland, 1994), pp. 236-244.

believed that the best way to deal with the region in 1999 was to bomb it into submission, both Tsar Alexander II and Stalin seemed to believe that the best way to deal with it was to cleanse it of its native populations.
The Soviet Era to the First Chechen War

Even though the administrative structure of the Soviet Union changed several times, Chechnya was one of several smaller ethnic enclaves that always had a special status. After securing the Caucasus in 1921, the Soviet Union established the Mountain Autonomous Republic, which included the territories of Balkaria, Chechnya, Karachai, Kabardia, Ingushetia, and Ossetia. While Moscow designated each territory as an “Okrug,” Chechnya became an “Oblast” (which was technically more autonomous). The Mountain Republic did not last long; by 1924, Moscow dissolved it into its constituent nations, and Chechnya and Ingushetia merged into the Chechen-Ingush Republic.\(^19\)

While this new republic still did not receive union-level status, its ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) placed it within a very small group of ethnic territories that had a degree of autonomy only once-removed from that of the federal republics.

During World War II, Moscow again disrupted the social life and citizenry of Chechnya, influencing those who would eventually lead Chechnya against Russia in the 1990s. While Joseph Stalin’s purges affected Soviet citizens across the country, Chechnya suffered acutely. In the early 1940s, under accusations of German collaboration and assaults against Soviet troops in the 1930s, Stalin deported an estimated

\(^{19}\) Chechen and Ingush are both “Vainakh” in ethnicity, and historically very closely related.
408,000 Chechens to Kazakhstan.\textsuperscript{20} Dzhokhar Dudaev, for example, was born in Chechnya but grew up in Kazakhstan, and Maskhadov was born in Kazakhstan. The Soviet government permitted the Chechens to return to in the late 1950s, after Khrushchev rehabilitated the Chechen (and Ingush) populations and reestablished the Chechen-Ingush Republic.\textsuperscript{21}

At the time of its disintegration, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics consisted of fifteen “Union Republics,” (in the Caucasus, these included Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan). After the attempted-coup in Moscow in August, 1991 each of the Union Republics declared independence from the Soviet Union, and on December 24, 1991 (the day before the Soviet Union officially dissolved) the Russian Union Republic sent a letter to the United Nations taking over the international responsibilities for the former Soviet Union, as its successor state.\textsuperscript{22}

The Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was one of sixteen Autonomous Republics that had greater autonomy than the Oblasts and Okrugs, but less than the Union Republics. When the Soviet Union dissolved, most Autonomous Republics (along with many of the oblasts, as the next level of autonomy) converted into “Republics” under the administration of what became the Russian Federation.\textsuperscript{23} The fact that the Supreme Soviets in most of these territories retained control over their

\textsuperscript{23}The Russian constitution (Russian and English translations), with accompanying commentary, elaborations, and history, \url{http://constitution.garant.ru/} (last accessed May 22, 2012).
governments significantly facilitated this conversion, and the transition for most of them (from membership in the Russian Republic to membership in the Russian Federation) proceeded relatively smoothly.

Chechnya was different. The First Secretary of the Chechen Soviet, Doku Zavgaev, failed to retain power over the republic as Dudaev and the Chechen Congress (OCChN) stormed the presidential palace and administrative building and took control. On September 15, 1991, Zavgaev fled Chechnya for Moscow, and three weeks later the OCChN dissolved the Soviet. On October 27 a presidential election, surprisingly well received and broadly accepted within Chechnya, installed General Dzhokhar Dudaev as President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.24

While verbally chastising Grozny from Moscow, Yeltsin’s regime exercised very little direct involvement in Chechnya until 1994, militarily maintaining its distance.25 No doubt Moscow’s apparent ambivalence had much to do with the fact that the situation in Moscow was too chaotic to permit Yeltsin to give much attention to Chechnya. Additionally, Dudaev appeared to want to settle the issue peacefully; the resolution of independence issued by the OCChN on October 28, 1991, included clauses relating to the establishment of permanent representation in Moscow under Russia’s new political order, as a sovereign state on a par with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In an interview two days later, Dudaev made lengthy statement explaining his perception of the situation in the Soviet Union. He said that they (Chechens and all peoples of the Soviet Union)

24 Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power, p.63.
25 M.A. Smith, A Chronology of the Chechen Conflict, Vol. 1 (Conflict Studies Research Center, Sandhurst, 1996); Boris N. Yeltsin, President’s Notes, pp. 242-250.
needed to support the Russian parliament, and that he had full faith that Yeltsin would do what was best for them and for Russia. Dudaev thought that Russia itself was in a crisis of sovereignty, and had acted rightly toward the Baltic states, and that it was clearly in Russia’s best interests to recognize the independence of other territories wishing to secede.26

Nevertheless, he was also unwilling to settle for anything less than full independence. Given the fragile political climate in the Caucasus at the time (and elsewhere in the Russian Federation), Moscow’s hesitance to accept this condition was understandable.27 Near the end of the war, a journalist summarized the Russian dilemma well:

…Russia simply cannot afford to lose this war and grant the Chechen nation its independence, no matter what the final cost may be. The majority of Russian political and military leaders believe that a total withdrawal from Chechnya could facilitate a breakdown of law, order, and central government rule in the northern Caucasus. That would grossly undermine vital Russian national interests in this strategically vital, oil-rich region.28

26 Dzhokhar Dudaev, The Thorny Path to Freedom: Government documents of the Chechen Republic, Articles, Interviews (Vilnius, 1993), p. 10, 49-50: “Before all else we should see our own service through the prism of the democratization and the reconstruction of the sovereign Russian state. The most absurd fact: Russia, a great power, cannot obtain its own sovereignty. And if today such a great state with its history, with rich potential – of people, of geography, of natural characteristics – struggles to achieve even conditioned sovereignty, you can imagine, that such enormous forces stand higher than her means. And what is there for us to do? We now must strongly support the parliament in Russia. I say, that if it were not for the courageous civilian Yeltsin, who saw the dangers of developing events, not to speak of my own time in the Baltics, the balance of forces and situation today would be very different.”
27 Abkhazia and Ngorno-Karabakh, for example, were equally embroiled in ethnic conflicts at the time, threatening not only the integrity and stability of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan but also that of neighboring Russian Caucasian republics. Mercenaries such as Shamil Basaev moved back and forth between these zones of conflict; Stanislav Lunev, “Chechen Terrorists: Made in the USSR,” Jamestown Prism, The Jamestown Foundation, January, 1996.
In its April 3, 1992 issue, the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Report published a lengthy discussion of the political climate within the former Soviet Union. Within the Russian Federation alone, eighteen summaries discussed specific issues of secession and constitutional debate. These included referendums in Siberia, Tatarstan, and Karachai-Cherkessia for full independence; debates over the political future of all krais, oblasts, and republics; and a declaration by the (unrecognized) Confederation of Mountain Peoples in the Caucasus of their intent to create their own army.  

Another important consideration is that the Baku-Novorossiisk oil pipeline ran directly through Chechnya. Chechnya had potential friendships and connections with Georgia and Turkey (a large Chechen diaspora lived in Turkey, and Dudaev had briefly provided shelter to the exiled Georgian president, Zviad Gamsakhuria, when he fled Georgia in January, 1992; not to mention the Vainakh Kists – ethnic Chechens – who occupied the Georgian side of the border), and Moscow feared a treaty between Chechnya and one (or both) that might disrupt business associated with the pipeline. Along this line of analysis, events of the 1990s and 2000s demonstrated that Chechen warlords and terrorists will not hesitate to sabotage the pipeline if it suits their interests and they are given the opportunity to do so.

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30 Ibragimova Zarema Khasanova, Nokhchi Emigrants of Turkey (MAKS-Press, Moscow, 2000); Movla Osmaev and Ibragim Aliroev, History and Culture of the Vainakh, pp. 130-132.
A sharp rise in violence by Chechens in Russia in 1994 brought the issue of Chechnya into focus in Moscow. Unidentified Chechens (by some accounts, criminals, by other accounts, opponents of Dudaev) conducted four hijackings that summer, all out of the same Russian city of Mineralnye Vody (Минеральные Воды). In the first three cases, Dudaev arrested the Chechens when they arrived back in Chechnya and handed them over to Russian authorities. In the fourth hijacking, Dudaev did not even let the Chechens back into the country and a botched attempt by Russian forces to intervene left the hostages and one Russian militiaman dead, after which the Russian government executed the Chechen hijackers. On television Yeltsin stated that “the situation in Chechnya is now changing…So I would say that [political pressure] is not having any influence at all.”

Statements from the Kremlin and newspaper articles at the time indicate that neither Moscow nor the Russian public wanted military conflict in Chechnya. The incremental and initially-covert way in which Russia began its military intervention indicated its hesitance to engage its forces there. Even Dudaev demonstrated an interest in a diplomatic settlement, first by including articles related to the establishment of permanent diplomatic relations between the two territories in the OCChN’s initial declaration of independence, and next by communicating frequently with Moscow until 1994. He also arrested Chechens responsible for terrorism and kept the oil flowing through the pipelines running under the republic.

33 M.A. Smith, A Chronology of the Chechen Conflict, Vol. 1 (Conflict Studies Research Center, Sandhurst, 1996.)
Dudaev did not budge on the issue of ultimate sovereignty, although his precise position on this issue is often misunderstood. Dudaev had backed Yeltsin in 1991 and saw the liberation of the Baltics and the union republics as evidence that a similar declaration by Chechnya would be seriously addressed and, apparently, accepted. Unfortunately, Yeltsin did not accept his declaration. While Yeltsin showed a lack of conviction on how to address Dudaev by neglecting the issue for three years, he gave no indication that he might accept it, and in 1994 he took the first steps toward armed conflict.

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The First Chechen War: 1994-1996

Military conflict between Moscow and the de facto government in Chechnya began on December 11, 1994, when Russian forces mobilized toward Grozny. It officially ended on August 31, 1996, when Chief of General Staff of the Chechen Forces Aslan Maskhadov and the Russian Security Council Secretary Alexander Lebed signed the Khasav-Yurt Accord. While there is little disagreement about the end of this war, its precise start is highly controversial. President Yeltsin ultimately decided to use armed force in response to a failed attempt by Russian MVD and counterintelligence forces to overthrow Dudaev’s government by covertly supporting a coup on November 26, 1994.35

While Defense Minister Grachev publically denied Russian participation in the attempted coup, the arrival of Russian forces, accompanied by the Russian Army’s chief of general staff, General-Colonel Mikhail Kolesnikov, at the staging base in Mozdok, North Ossetia, confirmed Moscow’s intentions.36 An estimated 43 Russian tanks, 100 additional armored vehicles, 20 howitzers, 40 combat helicopters, and 2,500 infantry entered Grozny accompanied by the weak Chechen-opposition.37 This force easily

captured the presidential palace, television complex, and the National Security and Internal Affairs Ministry buildings in the center of the city; however, Dudaev had been aware of the assembled force well in advance and the buildings were deserted. As the Russian forces converged on the dense center of the city, Dudaev and his forces waited in ambush. The tanks and trucks proved useless in the ensuing battle, as Dudaev’s forces attacked from both the upper levels and basements of surrounding buildings. In the end, Dudaev’s forces destroyed 32 tanks and captured the rest intact, with 300 Moscow-backed opposition troops killed and another 200 taken prisoner, 68 of whom were not Chechen irregulars, but Russian enlisted men and officers.

This failed coup should have alerted Moscow to the inaccuracies in their intelligence. This intelligence, from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), indicated that the Chechens in general were politically fractured and that many did not side with President Dudaev. It also indicated that Dudaev’s forces lacked formal military training.38 Yeltsin and Grachev interpreted this to mean that those who opposed Russian control in Chechnya constituted a minimal percentage of the population and were disorganized and poorly armed and trained. Inexplicably, even after the defeat in November, they assumed that if the Russian army occupied the city with an impressive show of force, the Chechens would back down or, at the most, put up a weak and disorganized fight.

38 “In Chechnya many different forces are established,” Krasnaya Zvezda, ITAR-TASS, August 9, 1994; Georgii Z. Anchabadze, Vainakh: Chechen and Ingush (Caucasus House, Tbilisi, 2002), pp. 116-120; Pavel Milyukov and Konstantin Yauk, Storm of Grozny: January ’95 (Publisher OAO, Yaroslavl, 2010), pp. 17-27.
Clearly, this assumption was erroneous. The drive into Grozny in the second half of December 1994 failed horribly; the Chechen irregulars successfully repulsed the Russian invasion force, and Russian casualties in the initial siege of Grozny were significant. However, in the middle of January the Russian government modified its strategy, and those in the field learned from their experiences and adapted their tactics to conditions on the ground. \(^{39}\) Significantly improved Russian performance reduced their losses and helped the Russians achieve a temporary victory. Nevertheless, while Russian forces took central Grozny in February it was far from a decisive win, and the war itself lasted for another 18 months, ending in something of a stalemate that granted Chechnya limited political autonomy and put off a final decision on its independence for five years.

In short, Moscow did not achieve its objectives in August 1996 – Russian forces had killed Dudaev and reached a temporary arrangement with the new government, but Chechnya was not fully restored to Russian sovereignty, an anti-Moscow resistance persisted (albeit disorganized and scattered), and the Chechen criminal and terrorist elements had clearly not been subdued. Predictably, a few years later armed conflict erupted again.

The December 1994 invasion plan initially contained three phases. In phase I, the Russian Air Force would neutralize Chechen air capacity while ground forces encircled and blockaded Grozny out of three Caucasian bases in the North Caucasus Military District (Mozdok and Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia, and Kizlyar in Dagestan). In phase II, ground forces would move into Grozny, suppress any armed resistance, and remove

Dudaev. In phase III, internal security forces would replace the Russian military in Grozny and stabilize the administrative infrastructure after removing the de facto governing regime.

The air component of Phase I, ironically, was both the most successful and the most useless, as the air force played a minimal role overall in the first war. The Chechen forces had no air force to speak of and the initial Russian air assault met no resistance whatsoever (Dudaev actually publically congratulated Grachev for his “success” in achieving air supremacy over the region). Later in the conflict, the Russian Air Force was kept mostly out of the war due to the combined challenges of the mountainous terrain of the approach, the urban setting of the actual combat, and the effective Chechen use of antiaircraft weaponry.40

The ground forces intended by Moscow to blockade and then invade Grozny were of the same general composition as the November force – primarily tanks and armor, but with a relatively small infantry component and minimally trained snipers or other special military teams.41 Predictably, they were bogged down by local resistance as they moved through Chechnya toward Grozny, and were unsuccessful at blockading the city. Furthermore, the Russian forces made the mistake of pushing toward Grozny as quickly as possible without securing the villages and countryside en route (a mistake remedied by

Putin in the second war), leaving their rear entirely unsecured against traditional Chechen tactics of sniping and ambush. As a result, Moscow’s timetable was pushed back by almost two weeks, and the main assault on Grozny did not begin until December 28.

When the Russians finally reached Grozny, the results were bloody. Exact numbers are widely contested, but various sources estimate Russian losses during the initial siege (December 28- January 1) at around 1,500 men, and losses between November and February at 3,500 men. In comparison, Chechen losses between November and February (militant and civilian) are estimated at around 4,500 people.

The Russian force began with approximately 6,000 soldiers, while post-war estimates of the Chechen forces ranged from as low as 5,000 to as high as 15,000. A large part of the difficulty in counting Chechen soldiers and casualties was that almost their entire force consisted of irregulars, and civilians (both individually and in clans) participated frequently in the fighting.⁴²

After a brief regrouping at the outskirts of Grozny, Russian forces renewed their siege on January 5. This time, however, both strategy and tactics changed. First, control of the operation was returned to the military (since November, control had been in the hands of the MVD and FCS). Second, forces were broken into smaller, more mobile groups, which methodically secured buildings from top to bottom before moving on toward the center of the city. Finally, throughout the month of January an additional 30,000 Russian reinforcements arrived, providing a decisive numerical advantage to the Russian forces. The reinforcements also included snipers and sappers.

Although the city of Grozny as a whole remained uncontained, Russian forces captured the city center, including the presidential palace, by the end of February, forcing Dudaev and his supporters out of the city. This outcome severely damaged Dudaev’s control over the coherency of Chechen operations. His position in central Grozny provided several strategic advantages: not only was it centralized and well fortified, but it provided the concentrated civilian element necessary for the public image element of his campaign. When Russian actions forced Dudaev to flee, he lost his military advantage to the Russians and his public media image to competing Chechen warlords.

A stalemate ensued from February 1995 into the spring of 1996. In April 1996 a Russian air strike killed Dudaev, and the leadership began to fracture between Vice President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev and Beslan Gantemirov, Chief of Staff Aslan Maskhadov, and Shamil Basaev – each with competing strategies. In May Yeltsin declared “victory” and signed a peace treaty with Yandarbiyev, while Maskhadov continued to conduct military operations within and outside of Grozny. The peace collapsed, and on August 6, 1996 Shamil Basaev, who had already conducted several attacks in Chechnya and Russia on his own initiative (including the massive Budennovsk hostage crisis in June, 1995), captured a train and moved into the center of Grozny with an estimated 600 men (but swelled with Grozny residents to between 3,000-4,000

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44 G. Sanin, “Shamil Basaev’s death march,” Sevodnya, June 16, 1995; Dudaev stated that he had not ordered the operation, but that the Chechen struggle had clearly “assumed new form.” Nikolai Zagnoyko, ITAR-TASS Report, June 14, 1995, as reported in FBIS-SOV-95-114.
He successfully sealed off the three primary avenues into the city and the ensuing battle lasted two weeks.

By this time General Lebed, the most vocal critic of the war in Moscow, had become Chairman of the Security Council, and on August 22 he traveled to Grozny to settle a treaty. In Grozny there had been a power change as well, and Maskhadov had taken over the government. Lebed was less interested in declaring victory than ending the war, and with Basaev’s invasion Maskhadov had a better bargaining position. The resulting Khasav-Yurt Accord removed all Russian troops from Chechnya, temporarily granting sovereignty for 5 years, at which time the subject would be readdressed.\footnote{The last paragraph of the Khasav-Yurt Accord states: “We have worked out Principles for the determination of basis of relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic, on the basis of which further negotiation will take place.” (Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Government of Chechen Republic, Khasav-Yurt, August 31, 1996).}

Factor I: Structure and Administration

To say that the political and military arms of the Russian government lacked coordination throughout the Chechnya operation would be an understatement. However, their lack of coordination stemmed from a more fundamental problem, rather than a fluke of miscommunication. Russia was in the midst of an identity crisis. Almost overnight, Russia transformed from the center of a multi-republic federation to a single republic,\footnote{N.N. Novichkov, V.Ya. Snegovskii, A.G. Sokolov, and V.Yu. Shvarev, Russian Armed Forces in the Chechen Conflict: Analysis. Results. Conclusions. (Infoglob, Trivola, 1995); Lester Grau, “Vulnerability of Russian armored vehicles in urban combat: the experience of Chechnya,” Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1995; P.P. Potapov, Irregular Warfare in the Caucasus (Contemporary School, Minsk, 2010); Andrei Raevsky, “Russian Military Performance in Chechnya: An initial evaluation,” Journal of Slavic Military Studies, Vol. 8, No. 4, December 1995, pp.681-690.}
with substantial loss of territory and human and material resources, and a political infrastructure that no longer accurately reflected the physical makeup of the country. In regards to its armed forces, this translated into significant confusion over “external” vs. “internal” security threats, and over which ministry or agency had jurisdiction in which scenarios. The armed forces that marched into Grozny in December certainly were inexperienced, untrained, and uncoordinated, but the hierarchical structure between policy makers on the one hand, and those who carried out operations on the other, were in a state of transition from that of the Soviet Union to a yet-to-be-determined “Russian” structure.

In May 1992, the newly-appointed Minister of Defense, General Pavel Grachev, issued a draft (made formal in 1993) of the new “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation.” The document stated that, owing to improving stability in the international community and to decreasing stability along the new borders of the Russian Federation, the greatest threat to national security came from within Russia and along its borders. Grachev, along with President Yeltsin, asserted that restless populations at the fringes of the Russian Federation not only presented a domestic security threat, but also provided a haven for criminal activity and terrorists.

Nor were they wrong in this assessment. While the territory of the north Caucasus had been, under the Soviet Union, entirely internal, it now formed an external

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border with Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, each of which suffered its own ethnic conflicts and territorial instability in the early 1990s. Reports (made then and retrospectively) by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, United Nations Economic and Social Council, and Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe all acknowledged the substantial growth in transnational crime due to the insecure and porous nature of borders in the Caucasus following the collapse of the Soviet Union and its infrastructure.⁴⁹

Also in response to post-Soviet instability in the Caucasus, in 1990 a collection of militants (mostly mercenaries) established the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus. This was a stateless organization with few political goals other than to disrupt Russian control over the Caucasus and to establish an Islamic Caucasian caliphate. This organization never attained much regional power as a polity; it accepted training and funding from a variety of contradictory sources, including Middle Eastern patrons seeking influence in the region (including al Qaida, through Ibn al Khattab), and the Russian FSB and SVR, attempting to influence events in Abkhazia.⁵⁰ With sixteen highland ethnic nations vying for influence in pursuit of different interests, and individuals such as Basaev and Ruslan Gelaev shifting back and forth between the

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Confederation and Chechnya, the Confederation served as a microcosmic representation of the secessionist turmoil occurring throughout the former Soviet Union. Mussa Shanibov, its leader, disbanded the organization in 1994.

The environment in which Moscow had to develop new security policies and political structure was deplorable, and the nature of new security threats inevitably blurred the lines between domestic and foreign issues. By Presidential Decree No. 547, Yeltsin established the National Security Council “for the provision of the Russian Federation President’s functions on the state administration, on formation of internal, external and military policy in the sphere of security, on reservation of State Russian sovereignty, on maintenance of social and political stability in the society, on protection of citizens rights and liberties.” Nevertheless, neither the creation of the Security Council nor Grachev’s accompanying military doctrine succeeded in providing clarity or direction to the objective of establishing post-Soviet Russian security. The Security Council was ad hoc, and fluctuated in size and composition relative to the influence of the power ministries. Moreover, the participants had little real impact on the creation of state policy; since membership in the council shifted frequently, decisions tended to be made by Yeltsin and Grachev (who were also the only two consistent members of the Council), even though the two had little impact over the direction of mandates within the ministries.  

This doctrine was criticized both in Russia and abroad. It called for coordination between internal and external forces which would necessarily translate, in certain (yet undefined) circumstances, into the subjugation of one to the jurisdiction of the other. The external forces concerned consisted of the Russian Ground and Air Forces (but absent the nuclear branch of the armed forces and the navy), and the internal forces consisted of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Internal Security Service, and the Border Guard. This meant that if the government perceived the use of armed forces to be a justified response to either an external or internal threat, then both branches of forces could be used and that both composition and control would be dictated by the Security Council based on the circumstances.

These forces had no experience working with one another, let alone under each other’s jurisdiction. Military training was significantly different from that given to the special armed teams of the interior forces, which focused on riot control and small-scale terrorist response. The different forces did not operate along the same hierarchical lines, and MVD superiors had little understanding of the structure of the forces now under their command. The merging of external and internal armed forces was disastrous, and most of the men who went into Chechnya did not even know the names of the men with whom they went into battle, let alone have experience working with each other as cohesive units.

When it became clear that Russia would engage in a full scale military intervention in Chechnya, several hundred officers, many of them senior and experienced, either were sacked or resigned because they refused to participate.\(^\text{54}\) This purge included some civilians (one significant civilian casualty of this administrative action was former Russian Minister of Justice, Yuri Kalmykov).\(^\text{55}\) A particularly notable figure in this purge was General Alexander Lebed. He commanded the airborne forces in the Dniester region from 1992 to 1996, and while not directly involved in Chechnya until 1996, he was a well-respected higher officer who vociferously protested the Chechen invasion. In several interviews and statements, Lebed expressed his frustration with the Security Council and the Russian government. He argued that the former did not function as a council, but as a rubber stamp of legitimacy for Yeltsin and Grachev to make decisions regarding the use of armed forces.\(^\text{56}\) Specifically regarding Chechnya, he stated:

I do not approve of this ill-conceived and even reckless invasion, although part of the Russian territory is involved, and the fate of Russia is at stake. It is impossible to win a quick victory with the help of tanks, shells and aircraft only. And victory will not be easy… I still cannot understand who is actually giving orders to armor columns and personnel in Chechnya. I cannot understand who will be held responsible for what is happening there. Neither can I understand the timing of the operation, with newly

\(^{54}\) The number quoted by Alexander Gerasimov, from the Ministry of Defense Personnel Directorate, on Moscow, NTV, April 7, 1995 was 557 (Benjamin S. Lambeth, *Russia’s Air Power at the Crossroads*).


called-up, inexperienced young soldiers participating in combat action... Militarily, the 'Chechen strategic operation' arouses many questions.⁵⁷

Lebed actually contributed to Yeltsin’s election headaches in 1996, as he challenged Yeltsin in the presidential election in June.⁵⁸ After coming in third place, Lebed gave his support to Yeltsin in exchange for Grachev’s removal and his own appointment as Secretary of the Security Council. Lebed’s attitude toward Chechnya was the opposite of Grachev’s, and two months later Lebed and Maskhadov signed the Khasav-Yurt Accord ending the first phase of the Russo-Chechen conflict.

These developments proved three things about the structure and coherency of the Russian government and the military in the first few post-Soviet years. First, the new Russian Federation was insecure about the most critical aspects of its identity as a state, namely the real extent of its territorial sovereignty and the structure and roles of its administrative and enforcement agencies. Second, refusals by officers to participate portrayed the lack of faith they had in the new combined hierarchy of the combined armed forces, and the low level to which discipline in the armed forces had fallen. Many soldiers and officers had not been paid in months, and desertions were high.⁵⁹ Many of the battalions sent into Chechnya were understrength due to desertions, and there were reports of Russian soldiers looting from their own convoys and vehicles.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Ingush President Ruslan Aushev reported, in a speech to Russia’s Federation Council in Moscow on December 15, 1994, that Russian passivity and fraternization with civilians contributed to the disabling of
Third, Yeltsin had only minimal control over not only the development of the Chechen situation, but most political issues in the Russian Federation. Chechnya was but one issue over which ministers and commanders fought in order to influence Russian policies. The most prominent structural crisis for Yeltsin was the Constitutional crisis in the fall of 1993. This “crisis” had been building for over a year, as members of parliament disagreed with Yeltsin’s policies and direction, and in 1993 Alexander Rutskoi and Ruslan Khasbulatov led the parliament in a standoff against Yeltsin. Events such as this kept Russia’s administration and forces divided throughout Yeltsin’s presidency.

On the Chechen side, the organizational structure of the government, military, and civilian population was a different situation altogether. General Dudaev’s regime and forces were tight and unified in their support of their political and military leader, although they were mostly irregulars and lacked the formalized structure of the Russian forces. When Dudaev returned to Chechnya in 1991, he quickly gained a position of power within the newly-formed OCChN. The Congress’ leaders, Zelimchan Jandarbijev and Jaragi Mamodajev, recognized the value of Dudaev’s extensive experience in the Russian military. Unfortunately for the Congress, their base of control was small, and the majority of militant Chechen groups were fractured along lines of teip (or clan)
While Dudaev’s regime was well coordinated and organized, the regime itself did not control much of Chechnya, and several warlords constantly vied with each other (and with Dudaev) for localized control and short-term gains.\(^{64}\)

Intelligence gathered by the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the spring and summer of 1994 accurately portrayed a fractured Chechen public, many of which did not support Dudaev. However, this did not mean that Dudaev’s regime was as fractured and unstable as the rest of the republic. Accounts from those who served under him and a biography later written by his wife Alla claim that, although most of the men under his command were not good soldiers, they were good fighters, and loyal to Dudaev and to the cause of Chechen independence.\(^{65}\)

Nor did the MVD’s intelligence mean that those who did not initially support Dudaev inevitably supported Moscow. For example, the editor of Kavkaz newspaper, Musa Temishev, stated in an interview:

> I am against Dudaev, but if the Russians came here, I, Musa Temishev, would be the first to carry out such acts [of blowing up Russian nuclear power stations], and so would every Chechen. A Russian intervention would be the third Russian Genocide against the Chechen nation…the only reason the Russian parliament vetoed Yeltsin’s state of emergency last autumn was that we had blockaded the airport and shown that we were ready to die. That is the only language the Russians understand.\(^{66}\)

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\(^{63}\) Interview with Ahmad Zakev, former Commander in the South-West, Small Wars Journal, June, 1999; Stasys Knezys and Romanas Sedlickas, The War in Chechnya (Texas A&M University Press, 1999).

\(^{64}\) Stasys Knezys and Romanas Sedlickas, The War in Chechnya (Texas A&M University Press, 1999), pp.127-147; One Soldier’s War; Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power.

\(^{65}\) Alla Dudaeva, The First Million; Taimaz Abubakarov, Regime of Dzhokhar Dudaev: fact and fiction, pp.44-54.

\(^{66}\) Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power, p.63.
When Russian forces invaded in December 1994, two miscalculations by Russian intelligence emerged. First, Moscow had seriously underestimated the strength and professionalism of Dudaev’s regime and forces; and second, that many of those who had previously opposed Dudaev, opposed the Russian military invasion even more.\(^{67}\) Russian intelligence initially estimated Dudaev’s forces at between 1,000-5,000 fighters. By January 1995, these numbers grew to almost 15,000, and consisted of civilians who decided to join the cause and former Russian “loyalists” who changed sides.\(^ {68}\) While many Chechens did not like Dudaev, they respected him – and reasons for disliking him varied substantially, depending on the orientation of the individual. Some disliked him because he seemed too religious, or because he seemed too much a part of the former Soviet regime (having served as a commander in the Soviet Air Force and having spent so little time in Chechnya), and still others disliked the forgiveness and lenience he showed to criminals and radicals.\(^ {69}\) No one seemed to dislike him because he did not seem committed to Chechnya, or because they distrusted him as a person, or because they considered him an ineffective or weak leader. Lieven acknowledged that, although crime and corruption were rampant in Chechnya, no one applied these characteristics to Dudaev.\(^ {70}\)

Regardless, Dudaev was still unquestioningly committed to secession from Russia, and this did not sit well with the remaining Russians in Chechnya and those

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\(^{68}\) Ahmad Zakaev was a civilian who had been neutral until Russia invaded: Interview with Ahmad Zakev, former Commander in the South-West, *Small Wars Journal*, June, 1999;

\(^{69}\) Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power, pp.52-101, p.118.

\(^{70}\) Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, p. 75.
Chechens with more professional occupations. These individuals ironically preferred either Maskhadov or Ruslan Khasbulatov, a member of parliament in Moscow. That Khasbulatov was perceived so favorably by anyone in Chechnya, including Russians and those with professional ties to Moscow, was surprising. Born in Chechnya but raised in Kazakhstan (like most Chechens of his era), he never returned to Chechnya after the rehabilitation of the Chechen ASSR, but earned a degree in economics at Moscow State University and remained in Moscow the rest of his life. He also gave no indication that the issue of Chechnya personally concerned him more than the other issues confronting the Russian Federation. Lieven recorded the following statement in a personal interview with Khasbulatov: “…what we have under Dudaev is a peasants’ revolt; and you as a historian will know that a peasants’ revolt is the ugliest, the most stupid and the most dangerous phenomenon.” He interpreted this to mean that Khasbulatov had little faith in Dudaev or his regime to help the Chechen cause. However, in 1992 and 1993 Khasbulatov attempted to rally the parliament behind him and rout Yeltsin (who he previously supported), and repeatedly referred to Yeltsin and his cabinet as “inexperienced boys and “worms.” He eventually failed, and the government dismissed and sued him for defamation and lying to parliament over the country’s debt situation.

It seems more likely that Khasbulatov directed his statement toward the situation as a whole, rather than specifically against Dudaev as a Chechen leader.

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71 Anatol Lieven, Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power, p.79.
73 In another interview, Khasbulatof merely referred to Chechnya as a “place [like Estonia, Latvia, and others] where the non-indigenous population have been disenfranchised, and even ousted from their
In other words, trying to organize the Chechen population into a unified bloc in support of a single administration and a single was a monumental task. While Yeltsin could not redefine and effectively direct the preexisting Soviet institutions into a new Russian form, Dudaev could not rally the diversity of interests in Chechnya into a unified institutional structure in the first place. Russia’s fractured system made it less effective, but Chechnya’s fractured population made the republic incoherent as a polity and, eventually, anarchic.

Factor II: Technology and Capacity

Poor training and lack of experience caused Russia’s forces to be militarily less effective than their size and technological strength indicated they should have been. This training and experience deficiency applied to both tactical skills in the field and equipment proficiency. The Russian Army conducted virtually no training exercises between 1992 and 1994, and the only training in urban combat provided to soldiers was a brief introduction to the “basics.” The last experience the Russian ground forces had with urban combat had been gained during World War II, and while its commanders documented their experiences, such education had long since been left out of standard


74 Vyacheslav Mironov, “Assault on Grozny Downtown,” translation from the book by V.N. Mironova “I was in this war” (Grozny, 1995), http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/CHECHNYA/chechen_war.txt.

training. Even the Russian army’s experiences in Afghanistan left them ill prepared for what they would be faced with in Chechnya. In both the Chechen wars and in Afghanistan most of the soldiers were drafted, and did not remain in the army. Only a few officers still commanded when war in Chechnya broke out. Edwin Bacon, of the Centre for Russian and East European Studies in Birmingham, makes the following observation:

Of interest then is the extent to which lessons have been learnt by the Russian military from the experience of Afghanistan…An interesting paradox is that although in numerical terms Soviet Afghan veterans (afgantsy) apparently showed little interest in high office, being not just politically apathetic on a par with the population at large but ‘abnormally passive,’ the minority who did rise to post-war prominence have loomed large on the political and military stage in Russia. Generals Lebed and Gromov and Yeltsin’s loyal Defense Minister Grachev stand out amongst them…However, the fact that Grachev bears primary responsibility for the clumsy and ineffective tactics used in Chechnya since 1994 raises questions about how far Afghanistan’s lessons have been learnt on the ground, as opposed to on paper.  

Further, many of the more senior and experienced officers with this experience and/or knowledge left the military on account of the decision to invade Chechnya, creating a significant drain of practical combat experience. The drain of experienced military personnel left the attack in the hands of very young officers, and made it necessary to send many fresh conscripts with very little training to the front. Nonsensically, soldiers frequently carried with them advanced equipment that they had not been trained to use.  

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78 Mukhin, “Every other youth had no training,” *Nezabîsimaya Gazeta*, No. 61, April 5, 2000.
Also due to a lack of experience, Russian military leaders did not comprehend the difficulties of the logistics of fighting in an urban setting and of transporting men and equipment across the Caucasus Mountains. The planners assumed that that the initial and most substantial fighting would take place at the outskirts of the city, on relatively open (and dry) land, against a conventional force, and that the inner city fighting would amount to cleaning up against stragglers. When the bulk of the fighting ended up occurring deep within the city and it became necessary to transport supplies well within “enemy” territory, unarmored trucks proved entirely insufficient to the task. In order to get food and ammunition where it needed to go it was necessary to use armored vehicles, which had to make several trips for each one that a truck could make, and kept those armored vehicles out of combat where they were equally needed and intended to be used. Russian forces also had difficulties getting men and supplies to Grozny. Heavy ground vehicles became bogged down outside the city when the ground thawed. Due to the Chechen forces’ possession of anti-aircraft guns, aircraft had to drop their resupply loads outside of the city.

While the Chechen arsenal paled in comparison to what was materially available to the Russian forces, it was still greater than Moscow had expected. The most significant weakness in Dudaev’s arsenal was his lack of air support. Initially, Dudaev had approximately 266 aircraft at his disposal, although 40 percent were inoperable and the rest were grounded due to the fact that the Chechens lacked skilled pilots to fly
them.\textsuperscript{79} Even these quickly became irrelevant, as Russia’s initial air raids destroyed virtually all of them. However, while the aircraft left behind by the Soviet army and air force (at least 80 L-29 Delin combat trainers, 39 L-39 Albatros, 3 MiG-17 fighters, 2 Mig-15 UTIs, 6 An-2 helicopters, and 2 Mi-8 helicopters\textsuperscript{80}) had little potential value to Dudaev in the context of urban combat, it was politically significant in Russia, and damaged Grachev’s image in the war overall by appearing as if the Russian military inadvertently armed the enemy as they fled the region.\textsuperscript{81}

Chechnya’s air defense was a different matter. General Dudaev (a former Soviet air defense commander) knew exactly what he was doing when he trained his forces in this regard, and was cognizant of the requirements and limitations of both his environment and his enemy.\textsuperscript{82} Chechnya’s air defense arsenal consisted of ZU-23 mobile antiaircraft launchers and DShK machine guns mounted on Cherokee Jeeps and Toyota off-road vehicles. Russian reports also stated they used ZSU-23/4 Shilka antiaircraft systems, Strela-3, Igla-1, and Stinger SAM systems, and RPG-7 portable antitank grenade launchers against low-flying aircraft.\textsuperscript{83} Also, in addition to the arsenal left behind by Grachev, several reports indicated that Dudaev received weapons from

contacts in Georgia and possibly Turkey. While Chechnya did not have an air force, the urban and mountainous nature of the theater severely hampered Russian airpower, and Dudaev’s substantial air defense arsenal effectively rendered the Russian Air Force almost entirely ineffective after the initial air strike.

In the organization of his troops, Dudaev utilized well the advantage of defending an urban area. While Dudaev did not state if either his experience in Afghanistan or his knowledge of Chechen history had any significant impact on his military structure, veterans of the war noticed correlations, and two things can be reasonably concluded, if not proven: his organization closely resembled the historical organization of mountain Caucasians (when social and military hierarchies overlapped), and it successfully exploited the weaknesses of the Russian forces in the Caucasian theater. The foundational combat unit under Dudaev was a very small cell of 3-4 fighters, with specific duties assigned to each (anti-tank gunner, machine gunner, and a sniper). Similar to the forces recruited by the imam Shamil, these cells organized themselves based on preexisting associations. Unlike Shamil, Dudaev’s commanders organized these cells into squads of 5-6 cells, giving the squads under Dudaev a more centralized hierarchy than those under Shamil.

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85 P.P. Potapov, Irregular Warfare in the Caucasus, стр. 72-75; Benjamin S. Lambeth, Russia’s Air Power at the Crossroads (RAND, 1996).
Most coordination occurred within a squad, but in November and December 1994, multiple squads coordinated with each other. When a squad engaged an armored Russian combat group, it dispersed itself around the convoy and communicated via simple Motorola handheld radios. The snipers, positioned both high in the buildings and in the basements, pinned down the infantry while the anti-tank gunners attacked the armored units. The machine gunners provided assistance wherever needed. Although the teams were very small, their diversity and suitability to urban combat proved exceptionally effective against the Russians’ reliance on awkward and slow armored groups.

The greatest difference between the two forces in technology and materiel was less the weaponry itself and more that the Chechen forces received better training in the use of their equipment, specifically oriented toward that which better suited the theater of combat. Dudaev personally oversaw this training and carried credit for its success. Yeltsin, on the other hand, had no personal military experience and disregarded the advice of those who did. General Lebed and Colonel General Shustko, the commander of the North Caucasian Military District from 1987 to 1993, each warned Yeltsin that invading Chechnya would not be a simple “restoration of constitutional order,” and that military intervention would be a long, complicated, and expensive endeavor. Grachev, for unknown reasons, contributed little of benefit; as Grachev was deploying forces to Mozdok, Generals Beslan and Vladikavkaz publically berated his move as reckless.

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88 It is interesting to note that, while each side had the capability to eavesdrop on the communications of the other, the Chechens spoke Russian and could make use of what they heard, but the Russians could not understand Chechen, making their own eavesdropping useless.

claiming he turned a deaf ear to military advice for political reasons.⁹⁰ When Russian forces invaded Chechnya in December 1994, with the same tactics and force composition as in the failed November coup, Dudaev’s tactics again proved sufficient to repel the stronger, yet inappropriate, Russian tactics and arsenal.

Factor III: Strategic Objectives

Each side suffered unique problems in the previous two factors, and these problems contributed to deficiencies in the overall strategy of each force. Moscow’s deceptively-simple objective was to regain control over the Chechen Republic. Its focus on stabilizing Chechnya by overwhelming Grozny with a single large, armored force was sound from the perspective of a state that relies on centralized power. However, decision-makers in Moscow clearly failed to understand the challenges to such an undertaking posed by the irregular nature of the Chechen forces. When Russian forces succeeded in penetrating Grozny in January 1995, Dudaev and his commanders dissipated into the countryside and continued fighting. Additionally, Yeltsin and Grachev failed to take into account the geographic challenges of instigating an invasion in the mountains in December. Had Yeltsin listened to his military advisors (especially those who had served in the Caucasus) he would have been aware of the significant

challenges in conquering and controlling the Chechens when they chose to hold up in the
mountains in a defensive posture against Moscow.

A variety of administrative issues plagued Russian strategy in Chechnya, and not
just issues that directly related to Chechnya. Different factions in Moscow fought
amongst each other for influence over the future grand strategy of the Russian Federation,
and the greatest debate revolved around whether political or military interests should
ultimately determine Russian policy. For example, while Grachev saw the military as the
enforcer of political ends, Lebed felt the military should *determine* political ends in the
first place. The consequences of this infighting manifested themselves in Chechnya
through botched attempts at “political” operations (such as those of August and
December, 1994) accompanied by military backup – but a military backup under the
direct control of political commanders who lacked experience commanding military
forces.

Dudaev’s strategy seemed to suffer from misperceptions of Chechen unity. He
wanted to establish a Chechen state, with its factions unified in support of self-
sovereignty. Clearly, Dudaev did not understand that many Chechens did not support
him as the leader to accomplish this goal, but only supported him in his stand against
Russia. Ironically, factions that posed a military threat to Russia posed an equally
powerful political threat to Dudaev. The Chechen forces resembled something between
an insurgency and a national military. Unlike many insurgencies, Dudaev’s regime had a

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documents of the Chechen Republic, Articles, interviews*; Nicholas Daniloff, “Demokratizatsiya Interview
plan for a post-insurgency government, and didn’t even consider itself an insurgent force, but rather a legitimate government. 92 Unfortunately, the regime did not have the support of enough of the population, and never attained legitimacy beyond Grozny.

In the end, both Russian and Chechen strategies suffered from a lack of coordination of their greatest potential asset. Moscow’s most powerful asset was the massive armed forces inherited from the Soviet Union; however, Russian leaders could not effectively employ this asset without a clear and plausible strategy. Chechnya’s best asset was the resilient and ethnically homogenous masses who, while they could agree that they did not want the Russians in their territory, could not come together effectively to support an alternative.

Factor IV: The Media

In the first war, Chechnya unquestionably won the war of public opinion. Even the Russian public did not support the initial invasion. 93 While Moscow officially remained silent on activities in Chechnya, Dudaev and the journalists invited by him into Chechnya conveyed stories of destruction, of civilian resistance against trained armies, and of Russian soldiers dying for a cause that meant little to most Russians. As early as 1991, Dudaev worked hard to keep Chechnya in the media spotlight, because he rightly considered international support essential for Chechnya to achieve sovereignty. He gave

frequent interviews, both in print and televised, and in 1993 he published a compilation of many of them, titled *Thorny Path to Freedom* (with journalists from publications such as *London’s Financial Times, Time Magazine*, and *New York Times*, in addition to standard Russian media). In one interview, conducted shortly before the war broke out, Dudaev stated he wanted public censure to convince Moscow to back down, and further stated that he had “a surprise for Russia, after which she would not be able to recover for a long time,” and that this was “an ideological bomb, and it will be far worse than a nuclear one.”

Yeltsin not only severely underutilized the media, but permitted its exploitation against him. While trying to support a modern, western view of freedom of press, he failed to advocate the Russian perspective regarding insecurity and instability in the Caucasus. The Russian government gave journalists free rein to travel into Grozny (at their own peril) and to speak with whomever they wished, but while Dudaev made every effort to utilize the resources of the press, Yeltsin did not. As a result, events frequently came either through a Chechen filter or through limited interviews with frontline conscripts. Even then, commanders discouraged soldiers from interacting directly with journalists, further silencing the Russian perspective. After the second war, Russian memoirs began to emerge about both wars. They portrayed soldiers out of touch with the

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war’s purpose, and what little information they received came from foreign news sources.97

From the images broadcast out of Grozny, Russian forces seemed to indiscriminately fire on military and civilian targets alike. This was slightly misleading, since very few regular troops existed in Dudaev’s ranks. Russian troops fired on civilian buildings because that was the ground chosen by the Chechens. Regardless, perceptions matter a great deal, and it seemed to matter little that many of the Russian soldiers had little military training, while many of the Chechen civilians had substantially more combat training.98 While neither side was the clear victim or aggressor, the scene that emerged in the media heavily favored the Chechens as the victims. This image, combined with the financial and political drain of the war (which also received significant media attention), damaged Russian morale and especially Yeltsin’s image as a leader capable of settling the Chechen situation.99

97 Arkady Babchenko, One Soldier’s War (Grove Press, New York, 2006); Vadim Rechkalov, No such thing as surviving suicide bombers (Vremya, Moscow, 2005); Yuri Arkhipov, Captivity (Informburo, Moscow, 2010).
The Interwar Years

The Khasav Yurt Accord of August 1996 officially marked the end to the first war, but it clearly did not end the larger conflict. In fact, the years from 1996-1999 transformed the situation in Chechnya and the relationship between Chechnya and Russia as much as the war years of 1994-1996. After Dudaev’s death, vice president Zelimkhan Yanderbiev (an academic and writer before the war) immediately resumed talks with Russia. However, his efforts were hindered from two directions. Official Chechen forces, then under the command of Chief of Staff Aslan Maskhadov, continued fighting Russian forces in Grozny and the surrounding region. For months many in Chechnya even refused to believe Dudaev had been killed. A press conference with his wife neither confirmed nor denied his death, as she apparently was virtually incoherent, and abruptly left midway through the conference.

Additionally, continued acts of terrorism by warlords in Chechnya, Dagestan and Russia further stalled attempts at resolution. These actors did not act directly on behalf of the regime in Grozny (Dudaev had renounced their actions), but they considered their acts in support of an independent Chechnya, which equally damaged relations. Most within the regime did not consider Yanderbiev as strong a leader as Dudaev, although his

moderate nature made him appealing to those seeking a quick end to the war.\textsuperscript{102} He also, however, was willing to concede “victory” to Moscow to end the war, and a split grew between his supporters and those who supported Maskhadov.

On May 26 Yanderbiev flew to Moscow, accompanied by former Chechen (Soviet) leader Doku Zavgaev, Bislan Gantemirov (who had been in and out of the Chechen government since before the collapse of the Soviet Union), representatives of the CSCE and several Chechen field commanders, and signed a treaty with Russian Prime Minister Chernomyrdin, conceding victory.\textsuperscript{103} Yeltsin further antagonized the situation in Chechnya by secretly flying to Grozny (while Yanderbiev was still in Moscow), proclaiming victory and stating that remaining resistance would be quickly routed, and then immediately returning to Russia.\textsuperscript{104} Upon the return of Yanderbiev and his delegation a political war began amongst factions within the Chechen government. While Moscow chose to recognize Zavgaev as a would-be president, most of the government recognized Yanderbiev as acting president, and the more militant factions (including Maskhadov and the warlords) recognizing neither Zavgaev as leader nor the peace treaty signed by Yanderbiev.

Developments in August set the stage for the deterioration of Chechnya’s fragile situation in the following three years.\textsuperscript{105} On August 6 a new Chechen assault began, supposedly planned and coordinated by Maskhadov but conducted by Shamil Basaev,
Ruslan Gelaev, and Doku Umarov. They invaded Grozny by train (the central train station sits in the political center of Grozny), and in three days routed Russian forces out of the city center. While Yanderbiev remained president, Maskhadov (who became the head of the government) replaced him in negotiations with Russia. By the end of the month Maskhadov had signed the Khasav-Yurt Accord with Russian Security Council Secretary Lebed and arranged for the removal of the remaining Russian forces from Chechnya.

After taking over the government, Maskhadov appointed those who carried out the August 6 assault (Basayev, Gelaev, and Umarov) as ministers, and granted the remaining warlords who supported him the status of field commanders. In new elections at the end of the year Maskhadov was elected president, and in May Yeltsin met with Maskhadov (even though he never met with Yanderbiev) and renewed the Khasav Yurt Accord.

Dudaev and Maskhadov were very different leaders. Like Dudaev, Maskhadov had served in the Soviet armed forces, but as an artillery colonel. Also like Dudaev, he initially supported Yeltsin in the Moscow events of 1991; however, Maskhadov remained in the Soviet Army in Moscow until 1992, and returned to Chechnya later that year. In the opinion of some in Grozny, Dudaev surrounded himself with the “rabble” of the Chechen masses (a mix of military and civilian, educated and uneducated, even former criminals). Maskhadov’s entourage, on the other hand, changed significantly from 1994 to 1997. Initially he associated closely with former-Soviet intelligentsia, including

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106 Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power, pp.139-141; The War in Chechnya, pp. 275-280.
107 Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power, pp.80-84.

By the time Dudaev was killed, Maskhadov had built relations with several Chechen warlords outside of Grozny. He sided with them against Yanderbiev’s concessions to Moscow, and he used them to invade Grozny in August 1996. However, by early 1997 these warlords had become more of a problem for Maskhadov than a solution, as they continued their assaults into Russia, regardless of the peace accord.

Maskhadov’s greatest weakness was, ironically, his political flexibility. His record showed a man eager to side with whoever seemed to offer the best prospects, rather than to define his interests and loyalties and stick to them. In 1990-1991 this was the anti-Gorbachev hardliners, but then in 1991-1992 he supported Yeltsin. It is unclear whether he more firmly supported Dudaev or the opposition from 1992-1994 (as he had associates in each camp), but by 1995 he clearly sided with Dudaev. Throughout the interwar period his loyalties seemed equally split between Moscow and the growing jihadist-backed warlord elements in Chechnya.\(^\text{108}\)

Maskhadov’s inconsistency did not single-handedly undermine Chechen stability and independence; even Dudaev fought an uphill battle against warlords and criminals from the start. However, Maskhadov’s methods after coming into power exacerbated the situation. The secular, hierarchical, republican approach to statehood favored by Dudaev gave way to less centralized control and compromises with extremists under Maskhadov,\(^\text{108}\)

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and foreign militant Islamic organizations found a much more facilitative environment under Maskhadov than under Dudaev.\textsuperscript{109} In the spring of 1999, Maskhadov made Sharia law the legal code in Chechnya.\textsuperscript{110} This placed the Chechen government in a problematic situation by having a secular government with a religious legal code, and military enforcement that lacked institutionalization or any clearly defined source of control. The warlords voiced their support for Chechen independence but acted independently and, since many received aid from foreign militant Islamic organizations, contributed to the perception in Russia and abroad that Chechnya was a lawless state that nurtured international terrorists.\textsuperscript{111} In the summer Maskhadov dissolved the parliament on the grounds that, by adhering to Russian law rather than Sharia law, it did not represent Chechen interests.\textsuperscript{112} At the same time he declared “jihad” against all instigators of kidnappings and killings.\textsuperscript{113} As well intentioned as this latter declaration may have been

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  \item \textsuperscript{109} Matthew Evangelista, \textit{The Chechen Wars: Will Russia go the way of the Soviet Union?} (Brookings Institution, 2002), pp. 48-60.
  \item \textsuperscript{111} Anna Politkovskaya included an entry in her book \textit{A Dirty War} that describes the power and economic structure in the oil-rich region of Tsatsan Yurt: “The owner [of a steadily working oil well] is a respected wealthy man who can afford his own security forces and no one disputes his right to the property. The rest are daily a focus of an uncompromising struggle, in which firearms come into play...The burning oil wells are the fiefdoms of those bands that are not fully in control of their acquisition. After the job has been done, the clients drill a new well a mere 100 metres away and set up their own ‘field of miracles’ there...there is not a road in Chechnya where you cannot buy home-refined petrol, but in this district the oil tankers and stalls stand at every road junction and before each home.” Anna Politkovskaya, translated by John Crowfoot, \textit{A Dirty War}, (Harvill Press, London, 2001) pp. 224-225.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} Sanobar Shermatova, “Maskhadov calls to declare jihad,” \textit{Moskovskie Novosti}, June 8, 1999
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(and perhaps his intentions in general), analysts and politicians in Russia interpreted the overall developments as the growth of a “jihad front” in the Caucasus.\textsuperscript{114}

Just as the imam Shamil’s control over his lieutenants in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century suffered because their power neither originated with him nor was regulated through an existing institutional infrastructure, Maskhadov lacked control over his field commanders, whose power existed before Maskhadov granted it a veneer of legitimacy. However, unlike the era of the imam Shamil, the actions of Maskhadov’s field commanders reflected on his competency as president. As the security and stability of Chechnya deteriorated, Russia increasingly gained justification for renewing military intervention. When Shamil Basaev launched his invasion of Dagestan in August 1999, Putin had all the domestic support he needed to renew the war with Chechnya; according to VTsIOM, in October 1999, 75 percent of Russians supported military intervention.\textsuperscript{115}


The Second Chechen War: 1999-2000 (and beyond)

Brief, intense campaigns carried out by Shamil Basaev both helped bring the first war to an end (in August 1996) and triggered the Russian reactions that instigated the second. On August 7, 1999, Basaev launched an invasion into neighboring Dagestan.\(^{116}\) From Moscow’s point of view, this act officially elevated the Chechen conflict to the international level, as Basaev conducted it under the banner of the Riyadus-Salikhin Reconnaissance and Sabotage Battalion of Chechen Martyrs (RSRSBCM) (which later became the Islamic International Brigade) in support of Islamic “brothers” fighting the regime in Dagestan.\(^{117}\) He led between 1,500 and 2,000 soldiers, and was accompanied by the (presumed) Saudi guerrilla fighter Ibn al-Khattab.\(^{118}\) The Russian Army quickly responded, repulsing Basaev and his forces back into Chechnya and beginning a new siege of Grozny.

The Khasav-Yurt Accords prohibited Moscow from sending troops into Chechnya. However, acting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin justified renewed military intervention on the following claims: first, Basaev’s acts themselves breached the Khasav-Yurt Accords; second, Basaev’s acts proved the presence of lawless,


\(^{118}\) This presumption is based on intelligence presented in United Nations Security Council resolutions 1267 and 1989.
transnational Islamic militants in Chechnya; and third, that because President Maskhadov no longer controlled Chechnya, the region again posed a threat to internal Russian security. In an interview included in his biography, Putin stated: “My evaluation of the situation in August [1999] when the bandits attacked Dagestan was that if we don’t stop it immediately, Russia as a state in its current form would no longer exist…but the issue is not secession. Chechnya will not stop with its own independence. It will be used as a staging ground for future attacks on Russia.”

As in the first war, Russian operations began with an air strike, conducted in August and September 1999. Unlike the first war, the air force not only made a preemptive strike against any potential air capabilities of Chechnya, but against several known locations of ground units as well. Indeed, Prime Minister Putin (after January 2000, President Putin) relied on the Russian air force far more in the second war than Yeltsin did during the first war. The Russian forces’ primary tactic between October 1999 and February 2000 followed a simple, yet effective, pattern. In cities or towns where Russian forces suspected insurgents were hiding, Russian commanders gave the population a warning to leave. After this warning, bombing raids essentially obliterated much of the town. Ground forces then moved in, secured what remained, and left a small contingency force in place to cover their backs as they progressed.

120 Vladimir V. Putin, translated by Catherine Fitzpatrick, First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia’s President Vladimir Putin (Hutchinson, London, 2000); Pp.133-142.
conducted constant reconnaissance of the route ahead and of what had already been cleared, suspecting ambushes in rear areas like those that occurred in the first war.\textsuperscript{122}

Having learned from the first war, the Russian forces initially advanced much more slowly and methodically, securing the territory outside the city before moving into it. Moscow also changed its tactics by deploying a 100,000-soldier force, rather than proceeding with a piecemeal buildup. This force consisted of a mix of MVD brigades; army tank, artillery, and air components; Spetsnaz (special forces) units; and sniper, sapper, and NBC attachments.\textsuperscript{123} Moscow sent this force against a Chechen force estimated at no greater than 2,500 fighters, although supplied with armored vehicles, Grad rocket launchers, 152mm howitzers, 120mm mortars, and SAMs.\textsuperscript{124}

The Russian force reached Grozny in mid-October. The siege lasted through the winter in the same methodical fashion, with no particularly significant battles such as those that began the first conflict. The siege was not so much of a war as a bombardment and cleanup operation, with Russian forces tightening a noose around Grozny through the use of air raids and of building and street sweeps that had little consideration for collateral damage. An emergency hearing on the subject called by the CSCE addressed the degree to which Putin was actually fighting a war against a militant enemy, or

indiscriminately obliterating human habitation in a region he considered a harbor for enemies of the Russian state.\textsuperscript{125}

The end of the second war was much less clear than its start – and many consider the larger Russian-Chechen conflict ongoing to this day. In October 1999, Aslan Maskhadov’s brief presidency effectively ended; he remained in his position through most of the war, but was seen by most as impotent.\textsuperscript{126} Putin installed Akhmad Kadyrov as the acting-head of the Chechen government in June 2000 and declared the siege of Grozny over.\textsuperscript{127} Indeed, the Russian siege did end at that time; however, for the next several years a guerrilla insurgency against the Russian occupation operated across Chechnya and frequently spilled into neighboring territories, and many of the Chechen warlords (including Shamil Basaev) remained alive and active outside of Grozny.\textsuperscript{128} After Putin unilaterally deposed Maskhadov, he fled Grozny and joined the ranks of guerrillas and warlords outside the capital.\textsuperscript{129}

Unfortunately, Akhmad Kadyrov proved a problematic choice for leadership in Chechnya. Most in Moscow saw him as largely ineffective at suppressing the acts of terrorism that emanated from the region. Indeed, the most devastating terrorist acts

occurred after the end of the second war, including the Moscow theatre hostage crisis in 2002, the Beslan school crisis in 2004, and the various “Black Widow” bombings.

On the other hand, many nationalist, secessionist Chechens saw Kadyrov as a pro-Moscow traitor (he previously served in Maskhadov’s administration, and had been a commander under Dudaev). This was unfortunate, as Kadyrov’s history suggested a markedly moderate and conciliatory individual. His life before the first war had been one of an Islamic cleric, of the Qadiri Tariq. He initially supported Dudaev and served as a mufti during his tenure. When Maskhadov became president he sacked Kadyrov, and Kadyrov’s interwar activities are unclear. While a Muslim cleric seems a logical choice for a leader to unite and control Chechnya, the problem with this seemed to be that Moscow appointed him. While Maskhadov did not maintain as much respect in Chechnya as Dudaev, he commanded more respect with the warlords than Kadyrov. While Maskhadov was killed in 2005 by Russian forces who still considered him a terrorist, Kadyrov was assassinated by Chechens at the Victory Day celebration in Grozny in May 2004.130

Factor I: Structure and Administration

In the years between the wars many changes took place within the command structures of both Chechnya and Russia. In Russia, Yeltsin was technically still president when the second war broke out, but he had been in and out of hospitals for years and his ministers increasingly made state decisions. Yeltsin had become increasingly unpopular, and by mid-1999 publications openly called for his resignation. In August 1999, Vladimir Putin became Prime Minister, and that same month announced his bid for the presidency, with Yeltsin’s sponsorship. While he did not become president until 2000, Putin essentially served as President of Russia for the entire second Chechen war.

The change in power from Yeltsin to Putin drastically changed the orientation and direction of the Russian government. Militarily, it served as a catalyst for the formalization of structural changes that had been building over the previous few years. For example, the formerly-flexible Russian Security Council became more formal and institutionalized, composed of six individuals: the president, the prime minister, the defense minister, the minister of foreign affairs, the head of the Federal Security Service, and a council secretary, appointed by the president. This streamlining occurred gradually, but in January 2000, days after his inauguration, President Putin issued a

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134 Vera Guverich, Memoirs of the Future President (International Relations, Moscow, 2001); A. Mukhin, Who is Mister Putin, and Who is with him? Dossier on the Russian President and his security forces (Moscow Center for Political Information, 2002); Padma Desai, Conversations on Russia: Reform from Yeltsin to Putin (Oxford University Press, 2006).
presidential decree that defined the organization and responsibilities of the Security
Council to be in line with his new military doctrine, which he released at the same
time.\textsuperscript{135}

The military doctrine released by Pavel Grachev in 1993 included a clause which
stated its intent to serve as a temporary doctrine to be in effect until 1997, but it actually
lasted until 1999. A new Russian military doctrine, drafted in October 1999 and
approved in May 2000, paved the way for Putin’s response to renewed war in Chechnya.
Where the 1993 doctrine blurred the lines between external and internal threats to
security and left fuzzy how the government would respond to such threats, the new
document made very clear distinctions between the two threats. It obfuscated how threats
would be addressed, but it created a far stronger legal basis for the government in
Moscow to respond as it saw fit to internal problems. The territorial insecurity of
Yeltsin’s administration in 1993 as expressed in Grachev’s military doctrine actually
facilitated Chechen claims to legitimate sovereignty by acknowledging that the Russian
Federation was in a state of flux. In contrast, combined with the fact that the Khasav-
Yurt Accord failed to grant Chechnya independence, the new military doctrine drafted by
Putin’s administration effectively closed the door on this possibility.\textsuperscript{136}

During the second war Chechnya itself was essentially leaderless, as in the
interwar years Maskhadov had facilitated the undermining of his own presidential power.

\textsuperscript{135} Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of December 17, 1997 № 1300, new edition, Decree
of the President of the Russian Federation of January 10, 2000 № 24,
\textsuperscript{136} S.J. Main, “Russia’s Military Doctrine,” \textit{Conflict Studies Research Center}, Occasional Brief 77, April,
2000; “Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation: April 21, 2000 decree of the President of the Russian
Real power was in the hands of warlords and foreign militant Islamic supporters, and Maskhadov projected an image of support for their objectives. Russia based its invasion on claims that Chechnya had become anarchic and infested with criminals and terrorists, and these claims seemed justified when Maskhadov fled Grozny in September to join Basaev.\footnote{“Maskhadov’s family held hostage by the FSB,” \textit{Kommersant}, December 9, 1999.} While Chechen organization and structure had been fragile (but present) in the first war, in the second war, with no parliament and no president, it did not exist.

The installation of Akhmad Kadyrov at the end of the second war actually represented a return to much of what Dudaev had called for – centralized, secular government, but with the cooperation of religious and political parties – except, of course, for Chechen independence. But then again, the situation in 2000 was very different from what it had been in 1991. In 1991, based on the secession of all union level republics, Dudaev could make a valid claim for independence based on precedence. The territory of the former Soviet Union was still in flux, and a Chechen government existed through a coalition of parties under the leadership of the OCChN. Initially a moderate Islamic cleric, Kadyrov sided with Dudaev during the first war and helped bring the Islamic parties into his coalition in 1991. Kadyrov provided invaluable assistance in this, as Dudaev did not come across as the most appealing leader to many Muslims.

In 2000 Chechnya had become lawless and polarized, thanks in large part to the influx of militant Islamists, and in Russia the idea of a politically moderate Muslim leader almost seemed paradoxical. On the other hand, while Kadyrov was not an
extremist, Maskhadov and Basaev accused him of being a traitor because he supported Russian sovereignty. Even after the war, a unifying, legitimate leader seemed impossible to find.

Factor II: Technology and Capacity

While technology advanced little between the two wars for the Russian forces, training and force coordination improved, although in limited, specific areas. Russian command made deliberate choices about what to train, apparently under the belief that insurgency forces would remain the primary threat. They focused on technological and equipment training for long-range assaults, but, interestingly, did not improve training in urban combat. Russian commanders interpreted the first war as evidence of the futility of taking the offensive in an urban setting, and chose to train in means and methods that could remove the need to directly engage in urban combat. Therefore, they focused on tactics and techniques that precluded close combat in an urban setting.¹³⁸

While training and command coordination improved by 1999, the Russian forces still suffered similar personnel problems as they did in the first war. High turnover throughout the 1990s significantly hindered learning and training, and Moscow again relied significantly on fresh conscripts. Moreover, turnover affected all levels of the armed forces. Aside from the 500 officers removed from their positions at the start of the first war, the interwar years saw a new director of the GRU (Military Intelligence), new

commanders of the Ground Forces, Border Forces, North Caucasian Military District, and the armed forces of the Interior Ministry, and new Secretaries of the Security Council and the Defense and Interior Ministries – and these are only the most prominent and applicable personnel changes. Most of these positions changed twice over between the start of the first war and the second war.

Frequent changes in hierarchies and strategic direction at the executive level inevitably created confusion and inefficiency in training and logistics. For example, near the end of the first war Yeltsin established a Unified Grouping Force to coordinate all power forces involved in Chechnya. By 1999 the leaders of each force with representation in this grouping had been routinely replaced and their own mandates and strategies altered, so that bases in Mozdok and Khankala became clogged with surplus special purpose vehicles and equipment.\footnote{Mark Kramer, “The Perils of Counterinsurgency: Russia’s War in Chechnya,” \textit{International Security}, 29, no. 3, Winter, 2004, p. 15.}

Despite these obstacles, the Russian forces did improve their tactics in the second war. While most of the weaponry available in 1999 was the same as in 1994, the selections made by commanders of what to use and the degree of training provided to soldiers on the selections changed significantly.\footnote{Alexander Krasnikov, “Sappers tested in 'hot spot,'” \textit{Armeiskii Sbornik}, January 28, 2000.} Tanks accompanied infantry and artillery, but in 1999 the Russian Army used them primarily as cover for forward troops rather than as the primary instruments of offensive operations. The Russian forces in 1999 also relied much more heavily on artillery, in particular 122mm and 152mm self-propelled howitzers, Uragan and Grad rocket systems, 82mm and 120mm mortars, and,
in the mountains outside of Grozny, the Nona system. The Russian forces also seemed to take a lesson from the Chechens in 1994, as they used weapons in less traditional ways. For example, Krasnopol precision-guided munitions and anti-tank guided missiles proved effective not only against armed vehicles and fortified strongpoints, but also against bands of guerrillas. Russian forces also avoided direct clashes on open terrain or establishing fixed operations; worked in small detachments and groups; and became much more skilled at constructing strategic ambushes, engaging in mobile warfare, and using explosives.

The use of surface-to-surface missiles against human targets was especially lambasted by individuals and groups who were appalled at the Russian military’s apparent disregard for human rights or collateral damage. However, the fact that the Russians did use them, despite such public accusations, exemplified one stark difference between the 1994 conflict and that of 1999 – the degree to which the commanders and President Putin saw this conflict not as a “war,” with conventional laws, but as the eradication of a domestic infestation. The commanders of the interwar period had trained their men in the means to kill the largest numbers of enemy forces as possible from a distance, lessening Russian losses as much as possible. Putin did not hesitate to sanction these tactics.

Russian forces made the greatest technological advancements in electronic warfare and communications. In the first war Russian communications technology had

141 A.I. Suprunov, Beginning of a New Caucasian War (Registered Publisher “RED,” 2008).
been extremely poor, limited to narrow bandwidths and weak signal strength and range. In the second war virtually every facet of electronic and telecommunication technology had improved, and the Russian Army was much more effective at both jamming Chechen networks and tracking transmissions back to physical locations. However, while Russian forces had learned effectively to use this technology offensively, their defensive use of communications equipment did not improve apace. Chechen forces easily eavesdropped on Russian communications and evaded specific ambushes and assaults with the information gained thereby.\footnote{Vasili Gumenniy, “War in the airwaves,” Krasnaya Zvezda, April 5, 2000.}

Factor III: Strategic Objectives

While Yeltsin’s administration addressed the first war as the suppression of a secessionist movement, Putin’s administration viewed the second war as a purely anti-crime and anti-terror campaign. The war zone encompassed all of Chechnya, and the potential for insurgent terrorists existed in every city and village. In other words, Putin did not consider civilians “innocent” solely because they were civilians.\footnote{In the opening statement at the CSCE hearing on the Chechen Crisis, Chairman Christopher H. Smith acknowledged that the reason for the crisis was that Moscow considered “Chechnya,” as a whole, to be the alleged culprit behind Russia’s problems with terrorism; “The Chechen crisis and its implications for Russian democracy: Hearing before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe,” 106th Congress, 1st session, November 3, 1999 (Washington, D.C., 2000).} Based on experiences from the first war and the interwar period, Putin held the view that civilians could, at any time, become a significant force of their own.
In the first war Yeltsin’s goal had been somewhat contradictory; while he stated that the purpose of the operation was restoration of constitution order, and that Chechnya was inseparable from Russia, he treated the Chechen leaders as leaders, and not as rebels or criminals. He built his strategy around an assumption that putting down Chechen resistance would be a matter of intimidating the Chechens into capitulating, but nevertheless addressed Dudaev and his government as a regime.  

Putin, on the other hand, never acknowledged the political legitimacy of any Chechen regime between August 1999 and May 2000. His goal was the restoration of domestic order in a territory that had become infested with criminals and terrorists, and he built his strategy around the position that only a massive cleansing operation could clear it out. These were clearly very different perceptions of the situation and very different objectives. Where Yeltsin was concerned with the political image of both the war and himself, Putin was primarily concerned with subduing the violence by any means he deemed necessary.

Any coherent Chechen strategy in the 1990s ended with the death of Dzhokhar Dudaev. In fact, after his death the government in Grozny sharply split on what objectives Chechnya should be pursuing. Yanderbiev and Zavgaev advocated submission to Russian sovereignty, and quickly lost their authority and influence (although they continued to advocate their views). Maskhadov led a split strategy between one that supported cooperation with Moscow and one that supported the

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warlords who blatantly fought against Moscow – and did so by conducting violent operations inside Russian territory. Since Maskhadov dissolved the parliament and fled Grozny before the second war started, there was no “Chechen” strategy during the second war, but only sporadically coordinated militant efforts at resistance. As in the first war, the Chechen population proved remarkably strong and defiant in their resistance, but they lacked a central force around which to rally, a unifying objective, and any leader recognized as legitimate, either abroad or even within Chechnya. Where Moscow’s troubles in the first war stemmed from inconsistencies in Russian objectives and strategy, Chechnya experienced the same difficulties in the second, only to a greater extreme.

Factor IV: The Media

The shift of leadership in Chechnya from Dzhokhar Dudaev to Aslan Maskhadov in 1996 produced significant changes to the public image of Chechnya. Dudaev projected himself as a leader with a sense of purpose, trying to establish a Chechen state. While he was Muslim, and included Muslim parties in his coalition, his public image presented a secular ruler. He almost always appeared in public in either his military uniform or a suit, and he chose to reach out to non-religious international institutions rather than pan-Islamic organizations.

Maskhadov portrayed a very different image from the beginning of his tenure. He allied himself with the militant religious factions, and gave them positions of authority in
the government. Between his support of the militant Islamists and the increase in violence, Maskhadov helped create a damning image of the situation in Chechnya.

His rise to power in 1996 and election into the presidency in January 1997 also remained controversial throughout his time in power, questioning his legitimacy in a way not addressed in the case of Dudaev.

President Putin’s media approach to Chechnya also could not have been more different from that of Yeltsin. Putin thoroughly manipulated and exploited the media to frame the conflict and the Russian position as he wished, especially to his domestic audience. The general image of Chechnya in 1999 had become one of terrorism, kidnappings, and criminals. This image was well founded, as the situation deteriorated significantly between the two wars; nevertheless, Putin fully exploited this, and support at home and abroad for Russian intervention was much greater than it had been in the first war.

While Yeltsin passively permitted the press to move freely in Chechnya, Putin much more tightly regulated not only the reports that came out of Chechnya but the journalists who went in, who were thoroughly vetted and escorted. Several journalists nicknamed their trips into Chechnya as “holiday tours,” as they were meticulously guided

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148 “Shamil Basaev returned: Why Aslan Maskhadov cannot work without him (interview),” Kommersant, October 29, 1997; “Chechen Lion: Aslan Maskhadov”, from John Arquilla, Insurgents, raiders, and bandits: how masters of irregular warfare have shaped our world (Chicago, 2011); Vitalii Tretekov, “Maskhodov the Chimera,” Nezavisimaya Gazeta, May 5, 2000..
and cared for the entire time.\textsuperscript{151} The Kremlin did everything it could to leave little question that the situation in Chechnya was so severe that military intervention was unavoidable, and that it needed to be conducted as swiftly and thoroughly as possible.\textsuperscript{152}

In general, Putin succeeded at manipulating the press much more consistently at home than abroad. In the fall of 1999, 75 percent of Russians supported military intervention, and this figure remained above 60 percent until the war ended, despite high casualties and the degree of destruction the war incurred.\textsuperscript{153} Abroad, contrasting reports and competing interests created a more confused picture. On the one hand, Basaev and even Maskhadov represented a spread in militant Islamism, which needed to be curtailed. On the other hand, many considered Putin’s methods unethical and against humanitarian law. However, due in part to Putin’s efforts at hindering the international press and in part to the swiftness with which he conducted the operation, most external efforts at humanitarian intervention did not begin until after Putin declared the war over.

What remained of the Chechen government did not help, either.\textsuperscript{154} In a meeting of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe addressed by Chechen parliamentarians in February 2000, the Chechens presented an image that not only contradicted some of what was emerging at the time about the conflict, but contradicted facts from the previous war and the longstanding conflict with Russia. For example, they stated that the kidnappings had not been a part of Chechnya until the Russian forces

“imported” them during the first war.\textsuperscript{155} They also listed casualty numbers for both wars that well exceeded any other calculations (tens of thousands in each war).\textsuperscript{156} In general, from September 1999 until June 2000 the Russian forces projected an image of greater justification and legitimacy in their actions than the leaderless Chechen forces. The only individuals with real authority, such as Basaev and Umarov (and eventually Maskhadov) were viewed internationally as violent, extra-judicial actors, and not as legitimate representatives of the republic.

\textsuperscript{155} \textit{Briefing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe}, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{156} \textit{Briefing of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe}, p. 3.
Conclusion

When the first Chechen war broke out, the Russian Federation had recently inherited a fractured polity. New leaders tried to piece together a new identity and grand strategy for a state that was still coming to terms with the fact that it was no longer the center of a union. Legally and geopolitically the Russian Federation took over the role and responsibilities of the Soviet Union, but at 75 percent the size and minus regions that previously provided security and economic strength, such as the Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan. Its new borders were unstable and insecure, and secession of additional territories threatened a chain reaction that could dissolve Russia. Yeltsin came across as a leader who could not decide how to act toward Chechnya, and as a result instigated policies and operations that contradicted each other and were poorly coordinated. On the one hand he publically addressed the Chechen situation as an internal policing operation, while on the other hand he treated the regime as if it had some legitimacy. He tried to utilize troops without declaring war, and used diplomacy without formally acknowledging the status of his opponent.

Dudaev was exactly what Chechnya needed. He had decades of experience in the ranks of the Soviet military and thoroughly understood Soviet tactics, and he also had knowledge of and experience in irregular warfare. He also understood the political aspects of the conflict. From 1991 to 1994 he maintained a political regime independent from Russia and showed he understood the value of legitimacy, in both Moscow and in
the eyes of the international community. In 1994 and 1995, Dudaev proved his ability to out-strategize the dysfunctional Russian forces. In 1996, two factors brought down Dudaev and the Chechen state. The sheer mass of the Russian forces sent to Chechnya and their tactical adjustments overwhelmed Chechnya militarily (and killed Dudaev), and competing Chechen factions undermined the Chechen state politically.

After Dudaev’s death, no leader emerged in Chechnya with the same understanding of both the military and political dimensions of the conflict. Shamil Basaev had no interest in reaching a negotiated peace with Russia, or in serving as an administrator for the Chechen Republic. Yanderbiev appeared too weak to stand against Moscow, and lost the respect of Aslan Maskhadov and the warlords, who militarily controlled Chechnya. Maskhadov quickly demonstrated that he had no control over the warlords either, and increasingly isolated himself from the Chechen government. He came across as both pro-Moscow and a facilitator of the lawlessness and violence that grew throughout the interwar period, and had no real power in Chechnya.

When Putin emerged as the leader of the Russian Federation, he was determined to pacify Chechnya at any cost. While Russian forces suffered substantial casualties in the second war, Chechnya’s state of anarchy and lawlessness made it relatively easy for Putin to garner initial public support. The Chechen government did not have the same internal cohesion that it had under Dudaev, and Putin neither addressed the regime as legitimate nor attempted a diplomatic resolution. His methods were harsh and did not discriminate between criminals, mercenaries, and those who supported them on the one hand, and innocent civilians on the other. Unlike Yeltsin, he received substantial censure
from human rights advocates abroad and in Russia; nevertheless, Chechnya remained under Russian sovereignty and the warlords retreated away from Grozny, into the forests and mountains of Chechnya, Ingushetia, and Dagestan.

While some analysts credit Basaev with forcing Moscow to capitulate in 1996 and consider him the most successful advocate of Chechen independence, this view is flawed for several reasons. While Basaev and those with him certainly drove Russian forces out of Grozny in 1996, Moscow’s uncoordinated and ineffective leadership placed Russian forces in their weak position there in the first place. In 1996, the prolonged and unwanted Chechen conflict was as politically debilitating in Moscow as it was militarily draining, and Lebed’s appointment to the Security Council helped secure a quick settlement. Additionally, Russian capitulation to Maskhadov (and not Basaev) was never really a “success,” as it did not lead to Chechen independence. Finally, it was Basaev’s acts of terrorism (and those of other Chechen warlords) in the following years that instigated Moscow’s massive retaliation in 1999, contributing to the swift suppression of any possibility of an independent Chechen state.

Neither the first nor the second war was won or lost solely by the actions of one side. A mosaic of complex factors, acting on both sides, contributed to the origins, developments, and outcomes of each conflict. The Russian military largely rectified technological, training, and coordination flaws in their strategy in the second war. The image of potentially legitimate statehood and victimization that the Chechens had cultivated at the start of the first war had vanished by the second, causing the republic to

lose badly needed international public support in both Russia and abroad in the international community. Regardless of the complexity of factors involved, leadership mattered a great deal. Russo-Chechen conflict neither began in 1994 nor ended in 2000; however, each of the two wars fought during this period transformed the broader conflict, and it was individual leaders who directed the factors that determined their outcome.
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Appendix A: Timeline

1817-1864 – Caucasian Wars.

1858 – Imam Shamil is captured by Russian forces.

1865 – Mass deportation of Caucasians, mostly to the Ottoman Empire.

1921 – Mountain People’s Autonomous Republic is formed within the Soviet Union.

1922 – Chechen Autonomous Region established, joined with Ingush in an Autonomous Republic in 1936.

1944 – Moscow dissolves the Chechen-Ingush Republic, and deports most inhabitants to Kazakhstan.

Jan. 9, 1957 – Supreme Soviet in Moscow reverses its position of 1944, reestablished the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, and permits its former residents to return.

Aug. 21, 1991 – Communist hardliners attempt a coup in Moscow against Gorbachev.

Sep. 6, 1991 – Dzokhar Dudaev and supporters overthrow the Soviet government of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR.


Mar. 31, 1992 – Redefinition of territories within the Russian Federation. Of the 20 newly-defined republics, only Chechnya and Tatarstan do not sign the new federal treaty (Ingush signs as a republic separate from Chechnya).


Aug. 1994 – Attempted coup against Dudaev by opposition in Chechnya with Russian MVD support.

Nov. 28, 1994 – Russian air raid eliminates all of Dudaev’s aircraft and two airfields near Grozny.
Dec. 11, 1994 – Russian armed forces enter Chechnya, but are delayed by the populace from reaching Grozny until the end of December.

Dec. 31, 1994 – Initial Russian artillery assault on Grozny. They are repulsed, and regroup outside of Grozny.


Feb. 13, 1995 – Ceasefire concluded between Russians and Dudaev on the use of aviation, artillery and mortars.


Feb. 22, 1995 – Grozny is finally encircled and sealed (although the city is still not fully in Russian control).

May 1995 – Most cities and large towns controlled by Russian forces.


Jul. 6, 1995 – Anatoly Kulikov is appointed Minister of Interior (MVD).

Jan. 9, 1996 – Hospital hostage crisis in Kizlar.

Apr. 21, 1996 – Dudaev killed in targeted aerial attack.

May 28 1996 – Peace treaty signed between Chechen Vice President Yanderbiev and Russian Prime Minister Chernomyrdin.


Jun. 1996 – Pavel Grachev is sacked by Yeltsin.


Jan. 1997 – Aslan Maskhadov officially becomes president.

Aug. 9, 1999 - Putin is appointed prime minister.
Aug.-Sep. 1999 – Shamil Basayev leads international armed forces from Chechnya into Dagestan.

Sep. 1999 – A series of Bombings in Dagestan and Moscow, attributed to international terrorists associated with Basaev.


Oct. 1, 1999 – Russian forces begin ground campaign into Chechnya.

Oct. 12, 1999 – Russian forces cross the Terek River and begin their approach to Grozny.

Oct.-Dec. 1999 – Russian forces capture cities and territory leading to Grozny.

Feb. 29, 2000 – Russian commander Gennady Troshev declared counter-terrorism campaign completed.

May 2000 – Yeltsin established direct political control over Grozny.


Jun. 11, 2000 – President Putin installs Akhmad Kadyrov as the acting Head of Chechen Government.


May 9, 2004 – Kadyrov is killed at a Victory Day celebration in Grozny.


Mar. 8, 2005 – Russian FSB forces kill Aslan Maskhadov at Tolstoy-Yurt, Chechnya.

Jul. 10, 2006 – Shamil Basaev is killed in Ingushetia.