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Nurture and Punish:
How Soviet Nationality Policy Shaped the Path
to the First Chechen War (1994)

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Abstract

This thesis examines the origins of the First Chechen War (1994). It argues that Soviet nationality policy simultaneously created the foundations of modern Chechen nationhood and undermined the region's integration into the Soviet state. Through repression, collectivization, political purges, and the 1944 deportation of the Chechen and Ingush peoples, these contradictions accumulated over decades and became fully visible only after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. Using the constructivist approach, this thesis examines how Soviet policies shaped both Chechen identity and the region's relationship with Moscow. Particular attention is paid to the long-term consequences of deportation, not only as a source of collective trauma but also as a process that disrupted social development, weakened local institutions, and destroyed intermediary elites capable of linking Chechen society to the Soviet state. The thesis concludes that the First Chechen War was not the product of a single historical grievance or political crisis. Rather, it emerged from contradictions embedded in the Soviet project itself, which became politically explosive following the collapse of Soviet institutions and contributed to the outbreak of war in 1994.

Abstrakt

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Ursachen des Ersten Tschetschenienkrieges (1994). Sie argumentiert, dass die sowjetische Nationalitätenpolitik zugleich die Grundlagen einer modernen tschetschenischen Nation schuf und die Integration der Region in den sowjetischen Staat untergrub. Durch Repressionen, Kollektivierung, politische Säuberungen sowie die Deportation der Tschetschenen und Inguschen im Jahr 1944 verstärkten sich diese Widersprüche über Jahrzehnte hinweg und traten erst mit dem Zusammenbruch der UdSSR in vollem Ausmaß zutage. Auf Grundlage konstruktivistischer Ansätze zum Nationalismus sowie Erkenntnissen des historischen Institutionalismus untersucht die Arbeit mithilfe von Process Tracing, wie sowjetische Politiken sowohl die tschetschenische Identität als auch das Verhältnis der Region zu Moskau prägten. Besonderes Augenmerk gilt den langfristigen Folgen der Deportation, die nicht nur als Quelle kollektiver Traumata verstanden wird, sondern auch als Prozess, der die gesellschaftliche Entwicklung störte, lokale Institutionen schwächte und jene Vermittlungseliten zerstörte, die als Bindeglied zwischen der tschetschenischen Gesellschaft und dem sowjetischen Staat fungieren konnten. Die Arbeit kommt zu dem Schluss, dass der Erste Tschetschenienkrieg weder das Ergebnis eines einzelnen historischen Konflikts noch einer kurzfristigen politischen Krise war. Vielmehr entstand er aus Widersprüchen, die im sowjetischen Projekt selbst angelegt waren und nach dem Zusammenbruch der sowjetischen Institutionen politisch eskalierten und zum Kriegeausbruch im Jahr 1994 beitrugen.

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Introduction

Welcome to Hell. According to various accounts and archival videos, it was this very phrase, scrawled across a wide variety of surfaces, that greeted Russian soldiers as they approached Grozny in 1994.¹² Only three years earlier, they had been ordinary Soviet citizens – just like the Chechens – but now they were representatives of the enemy people to the rebellious republic, which demanded absolute independence from Moscow. And while only recently they had traveled to Grozny merely on business or to visit relatives, now their journey there had a completely different purpose – they were supposed to take the city by force.

Charred corpses, lying alone in camouflage next to burned-out tanks. The ruins of high-rise buildings. Children hiding in basements from bombs. All of the above is a typical chronicle of these events, which could be seen not only in foreign media broadcasts but also in the pages of critical publications within Russia itself.³ And indeed, the caption did not lie: at first glance, these photographs and videos resemble depictions of hell. It is important, however, to understand that from a historical perspective – unlike a theological one – hell is not a permanent category. It can look completely different at different times and in different places, and the “sins” that lead societies to end up there are never exactly the same from one to the next.

The First Chechen War took place in a completely different context than, for example, Russia’s current war against Ukraine. Unlike today, at that time the Soviet Union had just collapsed, and people were only beginning to learn how to live outside the communist framework; the war itself was taking place within Russia’s internationally recognized borders; and, hard as it may be to imagine, key decisions in the Kremlin were being made not by Vladimir Putin. It was a different war. However, the narratives surrounding the reasons for its outbreak are sometimes

¹ Kanal Voennogo Naznachenia, “Grozny 31.12.1994 — Resist And Bite,” YouTube video, accessed June 5, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AczgF52Sv-w>

² Stanley Greene, “Welcome to Hell,” *Nieman Reports* 58, no. 2 (Summer 2004), June 15, 2004.

³ “Plemiannika my potom nashli. V iame u konservnogo zavoda. Tuda trupy svozili,” *Novaya Gazeta*, December 11, 2024. Accessed June 5, 2026, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2024/12/11/plemiannika-my-potom-nashli-v-iame-u-konservnogo-zavoda-tuda-trupy-svozili>

strikingly similar to the explanations given for Russia's current war against Ukraine.

In both cases, commentators of various stripes attribute a centuries-long history to these conflicts, portraying relations between the peoples as an endless series of preparations for the next war. Discussing Chechnya, for example, commentators often trace the origins of the conflict back centuries, emphasizing historical grievances dating to the Caucasian War and the 1944 deportation.⁴⁵ Such interpretations, however, risk obscuring the specific institutional legacies of Soviet nationality policy and the political dynamics of the post-Soviet period that made war possible in 1994. It is important to understand that the present author does not question the existence of imperialism or the centuries-long domination of some peoples over others throughout history. However, the explanations of major events cited above often risk reducing themselves to historical determinism, which stems from the assumption that the future is fixed and can be deduced by identifying certain decisive episodes, while the role of certain short-term factors may simply be ignored.

In other words, the events described above undoubtedly played a significant role in making the First Chechen War possible. However, this thesis does not intend to answer the question of what exactly caused this war by simply pointing to a single specific event around which the entire narrative would then be constructed. On the contrary, its aim is to explore how a multitude of factors led to the developments that this work examines. The present author argues that *the origins of the First Chechen War lie in the contradictions of Soviet nationality policy, which promoted the development of a distinct Chechen national identity while failing to establish lasting integration between Chechen society and the Soviet state. Due to a number of factors, the most significant of which was the 1944 deportation, many Chechens remained alienated from Soviet institutions and the broader Soviet political order, leading to widespread poverty in the region and inequality between the urban Slavic population and the Chechen countryside. As the Soviet Union collapsed, these*

⁴ Al Jazeera, "Chechnya's 200-Year Struggle," June 22, 2004, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2004/6/22/chechnyas-200-year-struggle>. Accessed June 5, 2026.

⁵ The Week, "Chechnya's Bloody Struggle," January 19, 2015, <https://theweek.com/articles/528698/chechnya146s-bloody-struggle> Accessed June 5, 2026.

contradictions came to the surface and led to a political crisis as a result of which secessionists took control of the republic. At the same time, the authorities of the rest of the Russian Federation, which had suffered from excessive decentralization – also caused by Soviet nationality policy – began to concentrate power in Moscow. Overlapping, these two trends led to significant friction over the interpretation of sovereignty and the rights of the regions that were to function within the new Russia, and, ultimately, led to war.

However, before delving into the main arguments, it is necessary to familiarize oneself with the historical background of Russian-Chechen relations; therefore, the first part of the main text will be devoted to the Russian Empire's arrival in the Caucasus. This thesis will then examine the Soviet period in Chechen history – from the policy of so-called “indigenization” to the dramatic changes of the Gorbachev era. This will help the reader understand why the author identifies Soviet nationality policy as the key factor that made the First Chechen War possible. We will then move on to the post-Soviet period to trace how the legacies of these earlier policies interacted with the collapse of Soviet institutions and ultimately contributed to the outbreak of war in December 1994.

Also, a brief review of the existing scholarship is necessary before turning to this analysis, so that the reader knows which works the author of this piece drew upon. In addition to that, the theoretical framework of this work will also be introduced.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

The First Chechen War has been covered quite extensively in academic works; however, a problem with books specifically on this topic is that many of them attempt to cover both the First and Second Chechen Wars simultaneously, which means that important details risk being lost in their treatment of each conflict. Nevertheless, the author managed to find the literature best suited to his objectives. Three researchers played a key role in this thesis: John B. Dunlop, James Hughes, and Francine Hirsch.

Dunlop's *Russia Confronts Chechnya* (1998) is still considered one of the most comprehensive studies of the origins of the First Chechen War. One of its main strengths is the breadth of its coverage. Dunlop examines the relationship between Chechnya and Russia from the time of the Romanov Empire through the end of the twentieth century.⁶ This long-term perspective is valuable because it manages to demonstrate how earlier experiences shaped political attitudes decades later. However, this approach has its limitations, the main one being the inability to give due attention to every nuance across all the periods under review. In the case of Dunlop's book, this concerns the legacy of nationality policy in the R.S.F.S.R., which subsequently led Yeltsin to pursue an aggressive centralization of power in Russia – a factor that also played a role in the escalation of the conflict with independent Chechnya.

In his turn, James Hughes approaches the conflict from an institutional perspective in his classic book *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (2007). This work is particularly useful for understanding the political crises that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of post-Soviet Russia, as well as the radicalization of key figures such as Dudaev and Yeltsin. Hughes pays close attention to questions of state-building, federalism, elite competition, and institutional weakness, thereby explaining why tensions between Moscow and Grozny escalated during the early 1990s. Also, his account of the power struggle between Yeltsin and Gorbachev is outstanding since he does not miss a single detail in this episode which

⁶ Dunlop, John B. *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. ix.

makes it possible to understand just how significant this political conflict was in the context of the First Chechen War.⁷ Therefore, Hughes' analysis is especially valuable for understanding the short-term causes of the conflict. However, because his primary focus lies on the immediate post-Soviet period, the deeper historical roots of these institutional problems sometimes receive less attention than in works focusing specifically on Soviet nationality policy.

In her influential work, *Empire of Nations* (2005), Francine Hirsch demonstrates that Soviet nationality policy did not simply manage pre-existing national identities but actively participated in their construction.⁸ And even though she does not devote much attention to the Caucasus, the theoretical importance of her work cannot be overstated. Her work demonstrates how the Soviet state created national institutions, promoted local elites and categorized populations according to national criteria simultaneously.⁹ This insight is particularly important for understanding the development of modern Chechen identity. However, Hirsch's work primarily focuses on the formative decades of Soviet rule, so it does not directly address the specific dynamics that led to the First Chechen War.

Building on the work of these researchers, this study aims to synthesize their findings and apply them to the case of Chechnya across different historical periods. It goes without saying that, in addition to these works, the footnotes will cite many others that helped the author gain a deeper understanding of the topic. However, listing them individually would be impractical given the length of this thesis. Nevertheless, the author is grateful to each of them and invites readers to familiarize themselves with these works in the bibliography.

Unlike many existing accounts, this one pays particular attention to Soviet nationality policy as both an ideological project and a practical system of social engineering. This includes managing population movements, creating and destroying local elites, deporting people and resettling them, and the broader attempts of the

⁷ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 16–17, 23

⁸ Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

Soviet state to reorganize society through administrative means. By examining how these policies shaped institutions and identities, the thesis argues that Soviet nationality policy created the structural conditions within which the political crises of the early 1990s unfolded.

In terms of its theoretical framework, this thesis takes a constructivist approach, drawing on insights from historical institutionalism. Rather than treating national identities as fixed or primordial categories, it considers them to be historically constructed phenomena shaped by political institutions and state policies. Particular attention is paid to the role of Soviet nationality policy in shaping Chechen identity and the institutional environment in which post-Soviet political actors operated.

Methodologically, the study employs process tracing. Rather than seeking a single cause of the First Chechen War, this thesis reconstructs the sequence of developments linking Soviet-era policies to the outbreak of war in 1994. By doing so, it aims to demonstrate how long-term structural factors and short-term political events interacted to make the conflict possible.

In addition to the secondary literature, this thesis draws upon a number of primary sources, most notably Soviet decrees issued as part of Soviet nationality policy. Among others, these include decrees on the deportation of Chechens and Ingush, decrees on their removal from the registry of special settlements in exile, as well as decrees on the abolition and restoration of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. By analyzing their content and language, the author of this work was able to gain insight about the nuances of Soviet nationality policy and how exactly it was implemented in the North Caucasus. These decrees are cited throughout the thesis, and their full texts, together with scans of the original documents, are reproduced in the appendix.

Having outlined the relevant literature, theoretical framework, methodology, and source base, the thesis now turns to the historical analysis.

Part I:
Empire Comes to Caucasus

Chapter 1: The Empire Looks Toward the Mountains

“...We were promised a brutal fight.
From the distant mountains of Ichkeria,
into Chechnya, answering a brotherly call,
crowds of bold men were already gathering...”

Mikhail Lermontov,
Valerik (1840)

Today, Chechnya is formally part of the Russian Federation. But this affiliation is only nominal, and it was often based solely on Russia’s ability to exercise direct physical control over this part of Caucasus. Chechnya’s connection to the Caucasus itself, however, is much stronger, at least for purely geographic reasons. Therefore, before discussing Chechnya as part of Russia, it is worth first examining how back then St. Petersburg (not Moscow) interacted with the Caucasus region as a whole before turning it into one of its parts. Once we are done with this, we will be able to trace how it transformed from completely uncharted territory into a strategic outpost of the empire, a development that subsequently had a profound impact on Chechen identity as well. It is this process, as well as the overall relationship between the Russian Empire and Caucasus region, that this chapter examines.

Southern Frontier

It is important to understand that prior to the Russian Empire’s expansion in the Caucasus in the 18th and 19th centuries, a huge part of the region did not consist of the same countries and administrative units that we associate with it today. While in the South Caucasus, Georgians and Armenians did exhibit strong traditions of organized religion, a written culture, statehood, and other traces of proto-national identities, the Northern Caucasus was controlled by a vast number of khanates, principalities, tribal confederations, and other types of administrative units that bore no resemblance to either the empires of that time or modern nation-states.¹⁰ The

¹⁰ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 10.

allegiances of political actors in this region were based on tribal and religious affiliations, and local societies, unlike those in the southern Caucasus, politically were far more decentralized – so power was dispersed among a vast number of autonomous groups.¹¹ This difference between the north and south of the region ultimately foreshadowed how the Russian Empire eventually brought the Caucasus under its control. But before we explore this, it's worth starting with the basics – namely, how relations between Russia and the Caucasus first began.

Chronologically, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific starting point from which to date the beginning of Russian-Chechen relations. This is especially true when one considers all the nuances involved in the formation of both identities over the past few centuries. However, since the details of all these processes are beyond the scope of this work, the very establishment of this starting point is an inevitable convention that will allow us to proceed with an analysis of the Russian presence in the Caucasus in the following chapters. For this reason, the author of this work will take the liberty of using as a starting point a period that is often regarded as foundational in Russian historiography. That is, the reign of Peter the Great.

The rationale for this choice lies in the fact that it was under his reign that the Russian Empire launched its first truly large-scale military campaign in the Caucasus. Having strengthened the Russian bureaucratic and military apparatus, which made his victory over Sweden in the Great Northern War (1700–1721) possible, Peter the Great launched an expedition to the Caucasus against a weakened Persia, and for the first time in history, cities such as Derbent and Baku came under Russian control.¹² It was at that time that the Russian army first seriously encountered the tribes whose descendants are known today as Chechens.

In 1722, imperial cavalry was dispatched to take control of the village of Enderi, located on the Aktash River in eastern Chechnya. At one point, a military mission that at first glance seemed straightforward took an unexpected turn, and Russian units suffered heavy losses after encountering fierce resistance from local

¹¹ Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 13–15.

¹² *Ibid.*, 16.

mountain tribesmen.¹³ British writer traveler John Baddeley wrote about this as follows: “This was the first time that Russian regular troops had come in contact with that tribe in their native forests, and the result was ominous of what was to take place on numberless occasions during the ensuing 130 years.”¹⁴ However, this was only a prelude to the events to come – even though at that time, it was unclear.

Peter the Great died in 1725, and as a consequence “his expansionist project was put on hold for nearly half a century. Empress Anna soon abandoned Peter’s conquests of Persian territory, and Russia withdrew to its old line on the Terek River”.¹⁵ And then, right up until Catherine the Great came to power, it seemed that this would be where the natural border of the Russian Empire in this region would lie. But Russia’s most famous empress in history had other plans, which happened to be linked to the distinction between the North and South Caucasus mentioned above.

The cornerstone of Catherine the Great’s foreign policy was the confrontation with Turkey – including in the Caucasus. Therefore, under her reign, a fortress was built in Mozdok, which today is located in North Ossetia. This fortification became a stronghold for the Russian Empire as it continued its advance southward toward Georgia, which at that time was the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti. This proximity between the two Orthodox countries in the Caucasus played a huge role, as Kartli-Kakheti, surrounded in harsh conditions by Muslim peoples, began to see Russia as a potential protector. Already under Catherine the Great, Russia’s protectorate over Kartli-Kakheti was established in 1783 at the latter’s request.¹⁶ However, it was short-lived – by 1787, Russian troops had been withdrawn from the region amid another Russo-Turkish War and the uprising by mountaineers which took place in the same time.¹⁷

¹³ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.

¹⁴ John F. Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1908), 25.

¹⁵ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.

¹⁶ Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27.

¹⁷ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.

This imperial expansion fundamentally collided with the complex social fabric of the North Caucasus. In the late 18th century, the Muslim mountain peoples of the North Caucasus were divided into roughly twenty distinct groups. And while they lacked a unified political identity, they nevertheless shared the same grievances regarding the spread of Russian influence in the Caucasus. The Russians not only sought to spread Orthodox Christianity in the region but also, and this was likely even worse, relied on the local feudal nobility in their dealings with the locals since through those noble men they planned to establish control over the region. However, economic development in the North Caucasus was extremely uneven, and this was particularly evident precisely in the areas inhabited by Chechen and Dagestani tribes. Lacking the basic feudal structures, they coexisted with one another, divided into “free societies,” and suffered greatly as a result of imperial policy.¹⁸

For centuries, the livelihood of the mountain peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan was based on the close connection between the mountains and the plains. In winter, livestock was driven from the mountains to the fertile plains, where the animals could find food; moreover, the main grain harvests were gathered precisely in the plains and foothills. However, with the arrival of Russian troops and Cossacks, who began building their own settlements there – restricting the movement of livestock and people – the locals were increasingly forced to make do with the meager conditions of the mountain peaks.¹⁹ Over time, too many people crowded into the narrow gorges for such a limited supply of resources, threatening famine. Naturally, this led to widespread discontent among the highlanders, and then a leader emerged among them who was ready to lead their uprising against the Russian presence.

¹⁸ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 11-13.

¹⁹ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9.

The Beginning of the Major Uprisings

Born into a humble peasant family, Mansur Ushurma, better known as Sheikh Mansur, is now a semi-legendary historical figure among Chechens. Although not a professional theologian, he nevertheless became famous among the people primarily as a preacher who fought for the purity of Islam and its liberation from the influence of tribal customs called *adats*. Thanks to his charisma and religious zeal, he managed to unite the scattered mountain tribes around him, and by 1785, the *ghazawat*, a holy war against the infidels from Russia, had spread so widely that virtually the entire North Caucasus was drawn into it.²⁰

Although the Russians later managed to suppress it and take Sheikh Mansur captive, the impact of this uprising cannot be overstated. First, thanks to Sheikh Mansur's influence, the North Caucasus became much more Islamized; second, a whole tradition of religious resistance to external influence emerged in the region.²¹ This would later be reflected both in the Caucasian War of the 19th century and in the First Chechen War, to the onset of which this work is dedicated.

The former war is inextricably linked to the annexation of Kartli-Kakheti by the Russian Empire in the early 19th century. Seeing the dire situation of his country, squeezed between two powerful Muslim neighbors – Persia and the Ottoman Empire – King George XII sent his envoys to St. Petersburg with a request to Emperor Paul I of Russia to take the Georgian kingdom under his protection, to which the emperor agreed. Soon, however, he was assassinated, but his successor, Alexander I, continued along the same line, and in 1801 a manifesto was officially issued regarding the annexation of Kartli-Kakheti to Russia. This had far-reaching consequences.²²

Georgia was separated from Russia by the wall of the Caucasus Mountains, which at that time was virtually impassable for regular armies, supplies, and trade.

²⁰ Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 66-67.

²¹ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9-13.

²² Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 28.

The only link connecting the empire to its new region was the so-called Military-Georgian Road, running from Vladikavkaz to Tbilisi. Goods and people using this road were never safe: the tribes of the North Caucasus periodically raided them. Naturally, the Russian elite were dissatisfied with this situation; moreover, the very logic of the empire dictated that it was unwise to have such undeveloped and uncontrolled regions within its own territory – regions over which Turkey and Persia, hostile to St. Petersburg, could exert political and religious influence. Therefore, after annexing Georgia, the Russian Empire inevitably faced a new task: the conquest of the rest of the Caucasus.²³ That is how eventually the Caucasian War began.

²³ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 11-12.

Chapter 2: Russia Takes the Mountains Under Its Control

“European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.”

Edward Said,
Orientalism (1978)

The Caucasian War lasted from 1817 to 1864, and it would not be an exaggeration to say that it marked a fundamental turning point in relations between Russia and the North Caucasus, radically altering not only the lives of the local tribes but also influencing the entire empire as a whole. For example, Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy were witnesses to it, and had it not been for this war, they would have become entirely different authors, influencing the course of world literature in a different way. However, while many examples of Russian literature about the Caucasus reflect the colonial image of the highlander in the Russian consciousness, a noble but “wild” warrior, this chapter of the present thesis sets itself a much more prosaic task. Namely, to understand exactly how the Caucasian War unfolded and how it influenced Chechen-Russian relations in the long term. To do this, we must first turn to another, less poetic figure in Russian history – General Alexei Yermolov.

Harsh Measures

Determined to resolve the problem in the North Caucasus, in 1816 the administration of the Russian Empire appointed him commander of the Separate Georgian Corps and commander-in-chief of the civil administration in Georgia, with jurisdiction over the entire Caucasus.²⁴ This is considered the starting point of the Caucasian War, since it did not begin with any specific event, but rather with the moment in 1817 when Yermolov, having taken up his new post, began systematically extending Russian control over the Caucasus. And even today, due to the extremely harsh

²⁴ Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 46.

measures he resorted to in order to suppress the resistance of the North Caucasus tribes, the name of this man evokes hatred among the residents of Chechnya and neighboring republics.²⁵ It could be said that, in a sense, these measures did bear fruit, and Russia managed to establish control over the region, though with a great many nuances, which will be discussed later, since we must first understand exactly what made the name Yermolov a synonym for “tyrant.”

First, seeing the tragic consequences for the mountain dwellers resulting from the construction of Cossack settlements on the plains, he not only failed to attempt to halt the isolation of the local tribes in the mountains, but instead made it his official policy. In essence, this process resembled how white settlers pushed the frontier during the colonization of North America. Initially, Yermolov built a network of fortifications and fortresses necessary to control the lowland territories. Initially, he was far from able to control all of them; however, over time, as the existing fortresses were surrounded by new roads and settlements of migrants, Russian forces advanced southward and built additional strongholds, thereby claiming even more fertile land for themselves. That, as a matter of fact, is how the fortress of Groznaya came to be, eventually growing into the Chechen capital, the city of Grozny. Eventually, this strategy effectively restricted many mountain communities’ access to the plains, since to the south, the local tribes were left with only barren mountains incapable of sustaining them. Undoubtedly, they had faced this problem before, but it was under Yermolov that such tactics were consciously adopted by the Russian administration and applied systematically.²⁶

At the same time, his strategy for conquering the Caucasus was by no means limited to cutting off the mountain tribes from the plains. Witnessing the spread of Russian control over their territory, they naturally put up resistance and carried out attacks on Russian patrols and supply convoys. They managed to do this with relatively few losses thanks to the abundance of forests in which they could hide. For the same reason, many Chechen villages – *auls* – were virtually impregnable to

²⁵ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 13.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13-16.

Russian troops: surrounded by trees, they could successfully hold their ground against artillery and cavalry units, which were not as familiar with the terrain. Consequently, Yermolov ordered the mass clearing of forests in regions where Russian expansion was proving difficult. This helped prevent sieges by local tribes, made the auls much more vulnerable, and reduced the number of places where those fighting against the Russians could hide.²⁷

This tactic was supplemented by punitive expeditions to the villages from which individual Chechens who had attacked Russian soldiers or Cossack settlements hailed. If local residents refused to hand over the suspects and their families, imperial troops would often burn their crops, cut down their orchards, and drive off their livestock. The aim of these actions was to bring the population to the brink of starvation so that they would stop sheltering the mountain tribesmen who were fighting against Yermolov.

Taken together, these measures, while helping the imperial administration expand its control over the region, created more problems in relations between the North Caucasus and Russia than they helped to resolve. A number of scholars agree that Yermolov's harsh policy, which isolated local tribes from the plains, disrupted the natural course of their economic development and prevented them from establishing a fully-fledged feudal system. In other words, by pushing the mountain peoples further south, to areas lacking fertile soil, the Russian Empire also set them back socially, preventing local military-tribal forms of social organization from weakening on their own over time – as they would have done through integration with the lowland territories. For this reason, in the form of the Chechens' ancestors, Russia found some of its fiercest enemies, and it took decades to defeat them.²⁸

Another reason for this was that, following Yermolov's departure from his post in 1827, his "method" for subjugating the Caucasus remained in use; it was simply his successors who began to apply it. Such cruelty and intransigence "had led gradually to the consolidation of Chechen society, which had previously been

²⁷ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 18.

²⁸ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16.

divided into tribes and clans.”²⁹ However, this consolidation was primarily of a religious and political nature and was most clearly evident during the era of “the three imams” – a series of attempts by various Muslim leaders to establish a centralized Islamic state in the territories of modern-day Chechnya and Dagestan in years 1828-1859. It is noteworthy that none of them were Chechens. Gazi-Muhammad, Gamzat-bek, and Imam Shamil were from Dagestan, but this makes sense when one considers how Islam spread throughout the North Caucasus.

For reasons that are beyond the scope of this study, by the 19th century Dagestan had become the main center of Islamic education and the spread of Muslim influence in the North Caucasus. It was through the Dagestan religious milieu that Sufism – a mystical-ascetic tradition within Sunni Islam – actively spread to Chechnya, subsequently playing an important role in the consolidation of anti-imperial resistance. Since the spread of Islam helped members of various Chechen tribes feel a sense of belonging not only to their own clan but also to the broader Islamic community, this played a huge role in the attempt to establish a separate state – the Caucasian Imamate.

The first two of these three imams did not remain in power for long. Ghazi-Magomed was proclaimed Imam of Chechnya and Dagestan in 1829 and, unlike his legendary predecessor Sheikh Mansur, set about attempting to establish fully-fledged state institutions. For instance, he appointed naibs – governors – to various regions in order to establish a more stable tax system. However, just three years later, he was killed in battle against Russian troops. His successor, Gamzat-bek, ruled for even less time, just two years, after which, in 1834, power passed to the most legendary political leader in the history of the North Caucasus.³⁰ This, of course, refers to Imam Shamil.

²⁹ Ibid., 20-22.

³⁰ Ibid., 23-24.

The Empire (With Great Difficulty) Defeats Shamil

After Gamzat-Bek's death, Shamil' was elected imam and remained in that position for 25 years – until 1859, when he was finally taken prisoner by Russian troops.³¹ During that time, he became renowned for successfully establishing the political traditions laid down by Sheikh Mansur. These included: the daily implementation of Sharia law in place of adat customs, the establishment of Muslim schools attached to mosques, the unification of various tribes and peoples to wage war against the Russian threat, and much more. The most important aspect of all this was that Shamil ceased to be a spontaneous leader of an uprising by various clans and became the head of a fully-fledged state, with its own domestic and foreign policies, as well as laws whose enforcement was carefully monitored.

Under his rule, a state council (*Diwan*) was established in Imamate, where respected men discussed laws and taxes and engaged in military planning, which became far more effective thanks to the military conscription and the production of gunpowder and cannons introduced by Shamil.³² As a result, he managed to hold back the advance of the Russian Empire for a surprisingly long time, but the forces were too unequal. After the end of the Crimean War in 1856, Russia was able to send more than 200,000 soldiers to the Caucasus, and the mountain tribes had no way of withstanding such a massive onslaught. By 1864, widespread resistance had ceased, and the highlanders were either forced to swear allegiance to Emperor Alexander II or to leave their homeland forever. The war was over, but for many, the hardest times were just beginning.

Between 1856 and 1864 approximately 600,000 Muslims migrated from the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire.³³ Russia itself did not hinder the migration of these people at all. Quite the contrary: the fact that so many mountain dwellers refused to live under the new rules led Alexander II's administration to see new opportunities for settling new territories with more "desirable" peoples – Georgians, Armenians,

³¹ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 18.

³² Gammer, Moshe. *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar: Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnia and Daghestan*. London: Frank Cass, 1994. 225–226

³³ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 29.

Russians, and Ukrainians. At the same time, the fate of those who left their homeland was far from enviable: there is data indicating that one-third of the highlanders who set out for Turkey perished along the way. And although many of them returned in the decades that followed, the trauma – similar to what would later occur during Stalin's deportations of 1944 – had already been inflicted.

This marked the beginning of a new historical period in the life of the North Caucasus, when it became a full-fledged part of the Russian Empire – a period fraught with numerous contradictions. The first of these was the land issue: per capita, the Cossacks in the region owned far more land than the mountain dwellers, and by 1912, this difference had more than doubled. The second conflict concerned the law. While standard civil courts tried Russians and Cossacks, military courts handled indigenous mountaineers. This unfair judicial system and the redistribution of land to Cossacks understandably angered the Chechens and other mountain tribes.³⁴

Naturally, when the next Russo-Turkish War broke out in 1877, the mountain tribes saw this as a window of opportunity and, hoping for Ottoman assistance, launched an uprising. However, in terms of effectiveness, it was a far cry from what had been seen under Shamil', and it was suppressed in just one year. All the leaders of the uprising were executed, and hopes for the imminent restoration of the Imamate vanished.³⁵ The problems described above came to the forefront once again, along with the day-to-day issues of the region's economic development.

In this regard, oil naturally played a very important role. The expansion of this sector in the 1880s and 1890s led to strong economic growth in the region and the expansion of its main city, Grozny.³⁶ And the general economic boom experienced by the Russian Empire in 1913, when industry, trade, and logistics, led to the formation in Chechnya of entire classes of the national bourgeoisie and intelligentsia – small in absolute terms, but which nonetheless played a major role in the subsequent tragic events in the region.

³⁴ Ibid., 33-34.

³⁵ Ibid., 32.

³⁶ Lieven, Anatol. Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 23–24.

Empire Comes to Caucasus – a Summary

The process of incorporating the North Caucasus into the Russian Empire was far from peaceful. Since the time of Peter the Great, it had been linked to the Russian leadership's sweeping geopolitical ambitions that extended beyond the region. First and foremost, through their expansion in the Caucasus, the Russian authorities sought to exert pressure on their long-standing enemies in Turkey and Persia. Furthermore, the presence in the southern Caucasus of Orthodox Kartli-Kakheti, which had requested assistance, also spurred Russia to extend its influence there.

This inevitably conflicted with the way of life of the tribes that were the predecessors of the modern Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus; over time, this conflict only intensified, ultimately erupting into the bloody war of 1817–1864, during which the local Muslim tribes were able to unite under the banner of the North Caucasus Imamate – a theocratic state whose most famous leader was Imam Shamil'. Following the war, the Russian Empire annexed the North Caucasus, subjecting local populations to economic and legal discrimination, and to suppress resistance, Russian leadership isolated Chechens from fertile lowlands. This policy blocked their economic development and transition to standard feudalism, forcing them to rely on clan-based, warlike structures just to survive.

As a result of this process and all the preceding conflicts with Russia, the scattered Caucasian tribes politically consolidated under a shared Muslim faith, even while maintaining the aforementioned traditional clan structures. At the same time, the growth of the Russian economy and the regional oil boom transformed Grozny into a vital economic hub, where the seeds of a distinct Chechen intelligentsia and national bourgeoisie were first sown.

Thus, following all the colonial patterns, the mountain peoples, through interaction with the larger "Other" that had conquered them, acquired their own distinct political-religious self which under other circumstances might have developed in a completely different way. This would play a very significant role in the ensuing civil war that engulfed Russia from 1917 to 1922.

Part II:

Chechnya and Soviets

Chapter 3: Bolsheviks Come to Chechnya

“The national program of workers’ democracy: no privileges whatsoever for any one nation or any one language; the solution of the question of the political self-determination of nations, i.e., their state separation, solely by a fully free and democratic method.”

Vladimir Lenin,
Critical Remarks on the National Question (1913)

While in the first part we noted that it is impossible to understand the relationship between the Russian Empire and Chechnya in isolation from the broader context of the Caucasus, the same can now be said about the region’s incorporation into Soviet Russia. The Bolshevization of Chechnya was just one episode in how Lenin and his team, through persuasion, concessions, and coercion, sought to secure the loyalty of various national minorities living within the territory of the former Romanov’s Empire. In the context of the civil war, it was critically important for them to secure any support they could, so the Bolsheviks were prepared to make serious compromises and try new approaches, just to ensure that minority groups would not side with their opponents.

However, as we shall soon see, these concessions often were purely strategic in nature, and once they had seized the initiative, backed by ample resources and military might, the Soviet authorities subsequently adopted a much firmer and less conciliatory stance. This chapter will examine how Bolsheviks took control of the North Caucasus and how Soviet nationality policy – which they began to implement throughout the region – subsequently influenced the formation and development of Chechen identity, as well as the specific historical events that occurred in connection with the implementation of that policy.

The Soviets' Consolidation of Power in the Caucasus

Before discussing the specific features of Bolshevik policy in the Caucasus, however, it is worth examining what was happening there in 1917. Following the February Revolution, a group of highlanders' intellectuals established the Central Committee of the North Caucasus and Dagestan. Its aim was to act as the region's provisional government until 11 May 1918, when, observing the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in Russia, the committee decided to establish an autonomous Mountain Republic, declaring independence from Soviet authority.³⁷

It is important to understand that the desire to break away from Soviet rule was one of the few things that united the political elite of this new state project, which, amidst the ongoing First World War received its diplomatic recognition by the Triple Alliance – the Ottoman Empire, Germany and Austria-Hungary. Within the republic itself, two opposing trends were evident: a democratic one and a religious one. The former was represented by the oil magnate Tapo Chermoev, who became the first Prime Minister of the Mountain Republic and believed that the country's system of government should follow European models. The religious wing, meanwhile, was identified with Sheikh Uzun Haji, who had access to significant military power in the North Caucasus. Uzun-Hajja believed that the new state should function on the basis of Sharia law and pan-Islamism, which, of course, was at odds with the democratic and progressive ideals.³⁸

Such was the state of affairs in spring 1919, when General of the White Army Anton Denikin, one of the principal commanders of the Russian Civil War, dispatched his forces to the Caucasus. The White Army's main slogan was: "A united, great and indivisible Russia.", and it was under this banner that Denikin began to bring the region under his control. By June 1919, the White Army had established control over the entire region, capturing Grozny and the Terek oblast, and effectively occupying Dagestan. Following this, the Mountainous Republic's liberal government announced its dissolution and evacuated once again to Tbilisi, as a result of which

³⁷ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 36.

³⁸ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 58-64.

this young state effectively ceased to exist.³⁹ Initially the Denikin authorities did not meet with too much resistance from the Caucasian population. However, by the end of the summer, the situation had changed.

The reason for this was his decree conscripting local men into the White Army – in this way, Denikin hoped to muster sufficient forces to capture Moscow. The mountain tribes, who prior to the revolution had enjoyed the privilege of not serving in the Russian army, were not particularly fond of the White commander's decision and did everything they could to evade service. To put a stop to this, Denikin sent punitive detachments to various villages "to teach them a lesson".⁴⁰ Moreover, the matter was by no means confined to Chechnya alone: Denikin was also forced to deal with resistance from local inhabitants in North Ossetia, Kabarda and other parts of the region. Ultimately, this led to an uprising that spread across a vast area.⁴¹

The aforementioned Uzun Haji led this movement and, in September 1919, announced the creation of the North Caucasian Emirate – an Islamic state that laid claim to the territories of Chechnya, Dagestan and part of Ingushetia.⁴² Ironically, the Bolsheviks, who were more concerned with defeating the Whites than with who exactly was opposing them in the Caucasus, lent their support to the new religious state. Thus, they supplied the sheikh's army with weapons and a limited military contingent. For example, in that same year of 1919, an international detachment of Red rebel fighters was formed, which operated in Chechnya and Dagestan as allies of the local resistance against the Whites who suffered serious casualties trying to maintain their control over the North Caucasus. Denikin, who had already sent troops towards Moscow, was forced to evacuate his men from there, as maintaining such a problematic and unstable rear area was too costly for him at that time.⁴³

³⁹ Ibid., 123.

⁴⁰ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 21.

⁴³ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 38.

By March 1920, organized White resistance there had ceased but this by no means signaled a bright future for the state-building project of the North Caucasus Emirate. This was partly due to the fact that, in the same month, its founder, Uzun Hadji, passed away at the age of 90. Shortly afterwards, the 11th Red Army advanced into the region and in about three months established control over the entire North Caucasus, dismantling the Emirate which existed for only about seven months. Following the consolidation of the North, the Bolsheviks then rapidly established control over Azerbaijan, Armenia, and finally Georgia.⁴⁴ However, the details of how this unfolded in those countries were beyond the scope of this study. Thus began the Soviet period in the history of Caucasus in general and North Caucasus in particular, which was characterized at various times by differing attitudes on the part of the Bolsheviks towards local autonomy, and by differing views among Soviet leaders on the matter.

In essence, the Soviet authorities' implementation of their nationality policy in the North Caucasus following their takeover of the region could, if desired, also be considered part of the broader theme of consolidating Bolshevik power there. However, to ensure a clearer structure for this work, this topic will nevertheless be dealt with in a separate section.

Soviet National Policy in the North Caucasus and Its Transformations

One of the reasons why the Red Army was able to seize the North Caucasus so quickly, while Denikin's forces were forced to fight to the death for every village, was not so much the locals' affection for the Communists as the terrible reputation Denikin had earned for himself during the brief time his army was in the region. As a result, when the Bolsheviks arrived in the Caucasus after him, already as victors in the civil war, many welcomed them with sympathy.⁴⁵

Soon, however, the initial positive impression was severely marred by the practices of war communism that the Bolsheviks attempted to impose on the region. This even led to an anti-Soviet uprising in Dagestan but the forces were so unequal

⁴⁴ Ibid., 39-40.

⁴⁵ Galeotti, Mark. *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014. 18.

that the Bolsheviks managed to suppress it in less than a year.⁴⁶ In the end, the mountain peoples had no choice but to negotiate with the new authorities – unlike the situation with the White Army, however, there was much more hope for some kind of compromise. At the very least, these aspirations were linked to the ideals conveyed by the Bolsheviks’ rhetoric at the time.

While Denikin’s forces operated under the slogan “a united and indivisible Russia” – which sounded particularly reactionary in the North Caucasus context – Lenin and his team approached their interactions with minorities in a far more deliberate manner. Aware of their precarious position following the October events, they sought to win over as many diverse political and military forces as possible. In the Caucasian context, this manifested in the Bolsheviks’ immediate efforts to present themselves as advocates of autonomy and freedom for the non-Russian population in general and for regions inhabited by minorities in particular. The irony of the suppression of the uprising described in the previous paragraph can be explained by the fact that autonomy and freedoms were granted only to the working class, but not to the bourgeois and religious elements, who, as it was explained, had previously led the uprisings in the North Caucasus.⁴⁷

That said, it would be a mistake to characterize this position as pure opportunism, since Lenin had been voicing similar views even before the revolution. For instance, in his article “On the National Pride of the Great Russians” (1914), he forcefully advocated for loosening Russian control over the empire’s other peoples. In that same publication, he also drew on Marx and Engels, saying: “No nation can be free if it oppresses other nations.”⁴⁸ Naturally, once they had met Denikin, the people of the North Caucasus could not help but welcome such ideas.

However, given that it was difficult back then to speak of a firm political identity among the peoples of the North Caucasus at that time, the Bolsheviks’ stance

⁴⁶ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 41.

⁴⁷ Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 27.

⁴⁸ Vladimir I. Lenin, “On the National Pride of the Great Russians,” *Sotsial-Demokrat*, no. 35 (December 12, 1914), in *Collected Works*, vol. 21 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 102–106.

on Islam played an even more important role. While the White movement had always viewed the Muslim faith with suspicion, the Bolsheviks, from the very outset of the revolution, immediately declared their willingness to allow minorities to practice their beliefs without state interference. Thus, in 1917, Joseph Stalin, then Commissar for Nationalities, and Vladimir Lenin jointly published an appeal “To All Working Muslims of Russia and the East,” which explicitly stated that:

From now on, your beliefs and customs, as well as your national and cultural institutions, are declared to be free and inviolable.

Organize your national life freely and without hindrance. You have the right to do so.⁴⁹

So we can see how in early Bolshevik rhetoric regarding the North Caucasus, pragmatic considerations were intertwined with genuine convictions held, at the very least, by the leader of the unfolding revolution himself. Even more importantly, for some time after the establishment of Soviet power in the North Caucasus, this position was indeed reflected in the policies of local Bolsheviks.

In 1921, Stalin met in Vladikavkaz with representatives of the elite of the former Mountain Republic to discuss exactly how the Bolshevik administration should function in their region. During the discussions, he announced that the Soviets recognized the internal sovereignty of the Caucasus’s inhabitants and were prepared to grant them broad autonomy in exchange for their acceptance of the new government. Furthermore, and this is no small matter, he promised that, should the negotiations be successful, he would grant amnesty to all those who had participated in the anti-Soviet uprising mentioned above.⁵⁰

Ultimately, he succeeded, and the assembled congress recognized Soviet authority in exchange for the Soviets agreeing not to oppose the official establishment of Sharia law in the region. In addition, the Soviets pledged to interfere as little as possible in the internal politics of the North Caucasus and agreed to work toward the return of lands to the mountain peoples, whose property had been illegally expropriated during the tsarist period. Thus emerged the Mountainous

⁴⁹ Vladimir I. Lenin and Joseph Stalin, “To All Working Muslims of Russia and the East,” November 1917.

⁵⁰ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 42-43.

Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, comprising Chechnya, Ingushetia, Ossetia, Kabarda, Balkaria, and Karachay, while Dagestan became a separate republic. To a certain extent, a new Republic seemed like the fulfillment of a dream that had once been shattered by the White Army.⁵¹ As subsequent events showed, however, this impression turned out to be false.

Once they took power, the Bolsheviks started to implement the policy of *Korenizatsiia* (indigenization) throughout the new socialist state. The aim of this policy was to increase the representation of non-Russian peoples in government affairs, thereby strengthening the position of various minorities and their cultures within the territory of the former Russian Empire. Naturally, this applied particularly to regions where non-Russians constituted the local majority, as was the case in many parts of the North Caucasus. In practice, this manifested itself in the appointment of an increasing number of representatives of non-Russian peoples to government posts, the promotion of local languages and the national identity of their speakers, as well as the cultivation of new national elites, who were subsequently expected to maintain ties between their ethnic groups and Moscow.⁵²

This development of national identity among minorities inevitably went hand in hand with the categorization of local residents and the inclusion of an ever-growing number of people in various registries, the most well-known and easily understood of which was the census. By conducting it, the new government gained new insights into who was currently living in the territory under its control, while simultaneously introducing its citizens to the very concept of nationality. This was necessary because, prior to the Bolsheviks' rise to power, many residents of the former Empire in its various parts defined themselves through clan, religious, and regional concepts, with the result that a political understanding of their own nationality was foreign to many residents of the newly formed U.S.S.R.⁵³

To remedy this, as it was mentioned earlier, the Bolsheviks granted various

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. 9-15.

⁵³ Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). 14-15.

groups specific autonomies with clearly defined borders, official languages, and selected elites. As Francine Hirsch puts it, those elites, in their turn, were “treating border delimitation as means to obtain territories and resources, spread the Soviet “national idea” among their populations – and helped to integrate those populations into the Soviet whole.”⁵⁴ In this way, the new regime simultaneously established new identities and facilitated its control over the population through counting and categorizing it.

Paradoxically, these progressive practices, previously unthinkable in the Russian Empire, could conflict with the hopes of some local groups that had previously demanded greater autonomy and independence for their regions. Although it might seem – if we set aside the question of full independence, which was indeed difficult to achieve because the Soviets needed the Caucasus for their subsequent industrialization – what exactly could have sparked protests among the local population? Especially if we are talking specifically about the ideological core of indigenization, rather than the problems encountered in its actual implementation?

The case of the North Caucasus is uniquely suited to explaining this, even though it might seem – if we set aside the question of full independence, which was indeed the crux of the matter – that the most notable state projects that had emerged earlier in this region were not national in the classical sense of the word. Neither Shamil’s Imamate nor the Mountain Republic sought to elevate specific ethnic groups and force all others to conform to them, following the model of European states during the Romantic era. Both projects were built on supranational ideas that sought to unite the peoples of the North Caucasus, either on the basis of religion or regional affiliation.⁵⁵ Moreover, these concepts gained the greatest power during times of war, when people needed to be united in the face of an external aggressor, as in the case of Denikin.

For this reason, in fact, the Soviets initially agreed to a compromise by consenting to the creation of the Mountain Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic – because no one wanted to face the mobilized population of this entity in battle again.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 163.

However, as soon as the military context receded even slightly into the background, the internal contradictions of this project surfaced: among the mountain peoples, who were not united by a single national identity, language, or understanding of where the lands of one subgroup ended and another began, internal conflicts frequently arose. Because of this, administering such a vast territory was extremely difficult, and Moscow decided to remedy the situation by breaking it down into smaller, much more manageable units. And it did so rather quickly – by 1924, the Mountain Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic had ceased to exist, having been divided over the course of a few years into a number of independent national-territorial entities (the Chechen, Kabardino-Balkar, Karachay-Cherkess, North Ossetian, and Ingush Autonomous Regions), which subsequently formed the basis of the modern republics of the North Caucasus.⁵⁶ Today, the existence of these administrative units seems a given, but in the 1920s they were intended to replace the pan-Caucasian project for a mountainous republic, and it is important to bear this in mind in order to gain a clearer understanding of what the U.S.S.R. actually was.

In essence, upon coming to power, the Bolsheviks began building what can be called as the “Empire of nations” – a unique historical project that was neither a classical empire, such as the British Empire, with its super-dominant centre and exploited peripheries, nor a modern nation-state. It was a kind of “deferred” post-national *and* supranational project, within which the authorities hoped to accelerate the political development of individual regions by promoting national identities familiar to us today, but with the paradoxical aim: to ultimately be able to overcome them and build a society in which the very concept of a nation would play no significant role.⁵⁷ Put simply, the Bolsheviks not only wanted to establish control over the peoples of the former Empire, but also to incorporate them into the revolutionary process, thereby reconciling Marxist anti-imperialist stance with a firm position on retaining a wide variety of territories under their rule.

This, in turn, came into conflict with other supranational projects, such as the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 188.

⁵⁷ Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. Pages 8–9.

former Mountain Republic. The early Soviet Union was prepared not only to tolerate but also to promote the nationalisms of the peoples inhabiting its territory, yet it was willing to do so only within the framework of its own state. However, as soon as other supranational concepts were involved, the Soviet authorities became far more intransigent. Moreover, this applied not only to the mountain peoples: a vast number of people in Central Asia also saw themselves first and foremost as representatives of something greater than any specific ethnic group. For example, they identified themselves as the peoples of Turkestan or as local Muslims. However, the Bolsheviks fought hard against the promotion of such broad political projects, labelling them collectively as “Basmachi”, and eventually dividing Central Asia too into specific republics with their own “titular nations” – the Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and others.⁵⁸ The main point was that these new nations should not claim alternative political agency and stay within the Bolshevik framework.

Over time, however, the balance between promoting local peoples and their cultures within the administration and establishing Bolshevik control at the local level shifted increasingly towards the latter. This could be seen, for example, in the Soviets’ attitude towards Islam. Whilst immediately after the end of the civil war they demonstrated tolerance towards religion and were even prepared to tolerate the presence of Islamic structures in regional administration, this soon began to change as the Soviets consolidated their hold on power. The young socialist state perceived the Islamic factor as a threat to its own legitimacy, since recently religion had been used by local elites to mobilise the entire Caucasus against external enemies. Thus, by 1927, all Islamic schools (*medressehs*) throughout the North Caucasus had been closed down, and pilgrimages to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina were banned.⁵⁹

The same logic can be seen here: Muslim educational institutions and the practice of pilgrimage fostered the spread of a broad, supranational association of people with one another, which ran counter to the long-term and equally supranational plans of the Soviet elites. So, it can be concluded that the promotion of not only

⁵⁸ Ibid., 130, 180.

⁵⁹ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48-49.

nationalism but also secularism served not only ideological goals rooted in the Leninist understanding of Marxism, but also the aim of preventing the spread of pan-Caucasian and pan-Islamic ideas in territories recently incorporated into the Soviet Union.

Ironically, in their efforts to combat all this, the Soviet authorities not only fostered the emergence of a national consciousness among people who had previously lacked it, but also ensured that this consciousness was hostile to the Soviet state. A number of experts agree that as early as the 1920s and 1930s, the national identities of the inhabitants of the North Caucasus were rather weak, and it was only after twenty years of Bolshevik rule that they began to emerge.⁶⁰⁶¹ However, a significant question remains as to what caused this to happen – was it, in fact, national policy, or, as has often been the case in history, due to pressure from an external “Other”?

This question becomes particularly relevant when considering what the inhabitants of the North Caucasus as a whole, and the Chechens in particular, had to endure under the rule of perhaps the greatest enemy these peoples have ever faced in history – Joseph Stalin.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 1.

Chapter 4: Stalin Period

“On February 23, 1944, the Chechen people were crammed into cattle cars and deported to Siberia and the endless steppes of Central Asia. Thousands upon thousands of Chechens defended the Caucasus, Stalingrad, and Moscow; broke through the siege of Leningrad; captured Königsberg and Berlin; and liberated Warsaw, Kyiv, Prague, and Vienna. In gratitude for this, Stalin cracked down on the Chechen people.

Those who still seek to glorify Stalin today and attribute the victory in the Great Patriotic War solely to him should remember that tens of millions of people died on the front lines and at home. It was they who defeated fascism, not Stalin!”

Ramzan Kadyrov (2017)⁶²

Although, strictly speaking, the Stalin era could be said to have begun as early as 1922, when he assumed the post of General Secretary of the RCP(b), in reality the process of his emergence as the sole head of state was a gradual one. However, the details of this lie beyond the scope of this study. To make this work more accessible to the reader, the author proposes using the years 1928–1929, when Joseph Stalin had finally crushed the intra-party opposition and, de facto, no longer had any real rivals in the struggle for power.

Moreover, this period, right up to the end of the Second World War, is characterised by other crucial stages in Chechnya’s history: collectivization, the protest movement against Soviet rule, the unification of Chechnya and Ingushetia, purges, and, ultimately, the infamous deportation of Chechens and Ingush in 1944. Without an understanding of these events, it is impossible to comprehend the political consciousness of modern Chechens, nor the events that unfolded in the region during the collapse of the U.S.S.R. The present chapter will focus on these events, recounting them in chronological order.

⁶² “Kadyrov osudil popytki geroizatsii Stalina,” *TASS*, February 23, 2017, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/4047790>. Accessed 5 June 2026.

Collectivization & Great Terror

One of the main objectives set by the U.S.S.R. was the industrialization of the country – the Soviet Union lagged far behind Western nations in this respect, and its leadership was determined to rectify this. The initial stages of this process required the purchase of a great deal of machinery and equipment for industrial production, and the most reliable way to obtain the funds for such imports was through grain exports. However, many peasants, firstly, did not want to sell grain to the state at low prices for profitable export, and, secondly, against the backdrop of deteriorating relations between the U.S.S.R. and Western countries and fears of a possible war, preferred to keep the grain for their own consumption and future sales.⁶³ Ultimately, this led to a crisis: the state was not receiving sufficient quantities of grain for the exports it needed for industrialization, which is why a decision was taken to establish so-called *kolkhozes* – collective farms that abolished private ones, thereby allowing the Soviet leadership to have direct access to the grain produced in the country and to seize it for further sale.⁶⁴

Naturally, such plans were not met with much enthusiasm among the peasantry, including in the North Caucasus, which, interestingly, was one of the first regions where this practice was introduced. Moreover, as in many other situations, there was a noticeable difference between lowland and mountainous areas. The former were home to a mixed population and had more established administrative structures, which meant that the authorities had greater scope for direct control, and local residents had fewer options to oppose the processes taking place, whereas the mountainous regions, where the state's presence had historically been much weaker, offered far greater resistance to collectivization. At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that the very concept of "private land ownership" in Chechnya, where clan ties were strong, made little sense. As a result, the process of consolidating various parcels of land into state-controlled units was perceived not only as a threat to people's private property, but as an encroachment on the local population's way of

⁶³ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 195-197.

⁶⁴ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 49.

life as a whole. This is what led to the uprising in Chechnya in the period 1929–1930.⁶⁵

An uprising broke out simultaneously in several towns, including Goiti, Shali, Benoy, and Nozhay-Yurtovskoye. Successfully seizing various government buildings and institutions under the leadership of the military commander Shita Istamulov, the rebels demanded that the Soviet Union honor the original promises made by Stalin in Vladikavkaz in 1921. According to these promises, the Bolsheviks had pledged to respect the autonomy of the mountain peoples: first and foremost, this meant an end to attacks on mountain farms – that is, collectivization – the reintroduction of elements of Sharia law into the administration, and a further increase in the number of local, mountain-dwelling personnel in local government. Wavering between offers of concessions and threats, the Bolsheviks ultimately managed to suppress the uprising, albeit at great cost. Afterwards, however, they introduced concessions not only in this troubled region but throughout the country.⁶⁶

This was explained by the fact that discontent with collectivization and riots were occurring not only in Chechnya, but also, for example, in Ukraine, Siberia, and Central Asia. This had to be stopped somehow, and in 1930 Stalin published one of his most famous articles – “Dizzy with Success.” In it, responsibility for all the problems encountered during collectivization was shifted onto local officials, who, by resorting to violence, had distorted the entire original concept of collectivization, which was supposed to be carried out on a supposedly voluntary basis.⁶⁷ As a result, forced enrollment in collective farms was temporarily suspended, including in Chechnya and people could feel the pressure ease. But this did not last long.

Soon, the second phase of the Soviets’ intensified pressure on the region began: this time, however, the goal was not only to collect the required amount of grain and strengthen the authorities’ control over agriculture, but also to carry out the “Stalinization” of Chechnya as a whole. In response to the continued presence of

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 205-206.

⁶⁷ Joseph V. Stalin, “Dizzy with Success,” *Pravda*, no. 60 (March 2, 1930), in *Works*, vol. 12 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955), 197–205.

armed groups in the region opposing the Bolsheviks, the latter not only resumed collectivization, albeit in a more cautious form, but also launched campaigns to eliminate the remnants of Muslim self-organization. As part of an aggressive anti-religious campaign, the Soviet authorities portrayed Islam as a remnant of feudalism and a symbol of backwardness, while its preachers were branded as “counterrevolutionary elements” and “mullah-nationalist ideologues.”⁶⁸

It is important to note that the rest of the 1930s were marked not only by the arrests of mullahs and other religious authorities, but also by the persecution of the local secular intelligentsia. Dunlop writes that in 1932, the NKVD carried out mass arrests in the Gudermes and Nozhay-Yurt regions, during which more than 3,000 people were charged with plotting a mass uprising. Many of them belonged in one way or another to the educated classes, some of whose members may even have supported the Bolsheviks’ rise to power following the civil war, but later became disillusioned with the Soviets because of their attitudes toward Islam and other aspects of local life.⁶⁹

Thus began a process of ever-increasing alienation between the Bolsheviks and the Chechen people: by oppressing the “intermediary classes” – that is, those groups of people who could facilitate communication between local residents and the Soviets – the new government created a problem for itself in which the population of an entire region was unable to begin identifying itself with it, since there were no suitable local figures capable of promoting the very idea of such an association. This process reached a point of no return with further purges in the late 1930s and the subsequent deportation in 1944.^{70 71}

It is also important not to forget that significant administrative changes took place in Chechnya prior to the Great Terror and the deportations. In 1934, by decree of Stalin, the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Region was established, which two years

⁶⁸ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 52-55.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings* (Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, 2015), 44.

later became the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, existing as part of the Russian Federation. This decision was dictated by the very logic of Soviet national policy, as the U.S.S.R. was then undergoing a process of consolidation of related ethnic groups, in which similar tribes and clans were united into single administrative units.

According to the principles of Marxism-Leninism, the creation of such large units was intended to help small nations more quickly pass through all the necessary stages of development for the subsequent transition to socialism.⁷² In this case, the goal was to create a unified “Vainakh” identity, which, according to the authorities’ plan, was intended to facilitate the administration of the region since Chechen and Ingush peoples have a lot of cultural and linguistic similarities.⁷³

Later, however, this led to great tragedies, as the subsequent Soviet repressive campaigns against the mountain peoples ultimately affected not only the Chechens but also the Ingush in the same way. Of course, even before the merger of the two autonomous regions, the Ingush were also viewed by the Bolsheviks as part of the problematic mountainous region, but after they became the same administrative unit, the fates of these two peoples became even more closely intertwined.

This could be seen in the Great Terror of 1937–1938, during which hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people were arrested and executed, swept across the entire territory of the U.S.S.R. Historians have various explanations of why it happened. One of the popular arguments is that the terror was triggered by the looming threat of war with foreign powers, in response to which Stalin’s leadership sought to eliminate potential traitors,^{74 75 76}. Another perspective points to internal Soviet problems. According to it, during collectivization, the Soviet leadership was unpleasantly surprised by how often regional elites sabotaged the implementation of

⁷² Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. 8-9.

⁷³ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

⁷⁴ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 230-232.

⁷⁵ Peter Kenez, *A History of the Soviet Union from the Beginning to Its Legacy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 105-110.

⁷⁶ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 96.

its orders, and therefore, through purges, intended to resolve this problem once and for all by replacing unreliable officials with more loyal ones.^{77 78} After all, everyone is familiar with Stalin's quote: "Personnel decides everything."⁷⁹ In any case, whatever the reasons for this were, the Checheno-Ingush Republic was not spared the wave of terror, which had a profound impact on its development.

Between July 31 and August 1, 1937, according to various estimates, between 7,000 and 14,000 people were arrested there.⁸⁰ Those who fell into disfavor included administrative officials, employees of regional and rural institutions, as well as prominent Chechen and Ingush intellectuals living outside the republic. In addition, at least 200 prominent local administrative officials and 30 of the 76 members of local regional committees were among those arrested. In October and November, all secretaries of party committees were arrested as well, as were all chairmen of the twenty-eight executive committees of Chechnya-Ingushetia. Many of them were executed or sent to labor camps, while others were permanently forced to leave their posts and disappear from public life.⁸¹

This led to the armed resistance, still active in the mountainous regions, gaining new strength as the local population became increasingly disillusioned with Stalin's regime. Thousands of Chechens and Ingush fled to the mountains, organizing armed groups to attack NKVD officers and members of the Soviet administration. In essence, a full-fledged partisan resistance began in the region, which by 1940 had found its leader in the person of Hasan Israilov – a former communist who had lost all hope of meaningful cooperation with the regime.⁸²

⁷⁷ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. 340.

⁷⁸ J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 128.

⁷⁹ Stalin, Joseph. "The Tasks of Business Executives," in *Works*, vol. 14 (London: Red Star Press, 1978), 39.

⁸⁰ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 236-237.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 56-58.

John Dunlop notes that his experience as a member of the Communist Party was an unusual background for a future leader of a Chechen insurrection.⁸³ The author of this work believes, however, that in this case, it is more than logical. By the time of Israilov's uprising, Chechnya had already been under Soviet rule for about twenty years, and this could not help but affect the people living there. Israilov was not only a member of the CPSU but also a journalist familiar with the official rhetoric of the authorities, and therefore able to see the discrepancy between it and what was actually happening in the republic.⁸⁴ Moreover, since he had studied at a university in Moscow and was himself, to a certain extent, a product of the Soviet system, he not only fully grasped the principle of nationality but also adopted it as his own.

Armed resistance under his leadership had begun even before Nazi Germany's invasion of the U.S.S.R. However, supposedly it was the Chechen underground's collaboration with the invaders from the west that led to the subsequent horrific chapters in the history of the mountain people. In June 1942, Israilov and his comrade-in-arms, Mairbek Sheripov, who led the Chechen uprisings in Shatoi and Itum-Kale, issued a joint appeal from the Chechens and Ingush to Germany, in which they stated that "Germans would be welcomed in the Caucasus as guests only on condition that they officially recognised Caucasian independence".⁸⁵ It is difficult to speak with certainty on this matter, but on the whole it can be assumed that this openness to possible cooperation with the Third Reich definitively placed the Chechens, in the eyes of the Soviet leadership, in the category of "non-Soviet nationalities", as Francis Hirsch describes them.⁸⁶

As early as the 1930s, the Soviet Union began the unofficial process of dividing peoples into "Soviet" and "foreign" nationalities. Although this division was not formal, its consequences were very much felt. The "foreign" category included

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 260-262.

⁸⁵ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 58.

⁸⁶ Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. 13.

members of ethnic groups that had ‘their own’ countries outside the Soviet Union, such as Germans or Poles. Due to the military threat, the Bolshevik authorities harboured deep suspicions towards them and, as a result, subjected these groups to various forms of repression, including deportation. Perhaps the best-known example of this is the Soviet deportation of Volga Germans to Central Asia, carried out due to fears that they might begin to support Nazi Germany during the war.⁸⁷ In a sense, a similar pattern in relations between the Soviet authorities and a specific ethnic group can also be observed in the case of Chechnya, albeit with a number of caveats.

Due to the unceasing armed resistance and attacks on representatives of the Soviet administration and the NKVD, the limited penetration of Bolshevik authority into the mountainous regions, and the presence of Islam – which, although it had partly gone underground, was far from having lost its influence – the Soviet authorities increasingly ceased to view Chechnya as one of the Soviet republics, albeit one with its own problems, and with each passing year came to regard the region more as a risk to internal security. Chechnya was becoming a problem that demanded a “solution”. Israilov’s actions, finally, provided the Soviet authorities with the final pretext to begin viewing Chechnya-Ingushetia as a “non-Soviet” and hostile people.⁸⁸

Consequently, despite the fact that more than 17,000 Chechens and Ingush had fought in the ranks of the Red Army against the forces of the Third Reich, a decision about the solution of the problem of these peoples was taken.⁸⁹ This, of course, refers to one of the gravest crimes of Stalinism – the deportation of Chechens and Ingush in 1944.

⁸⁷ Hirsch, Francine. *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*. 16, 319.

⁸⁸ Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings* (Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, 2015), 48.

⁸⁹ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 60.

Deportation of the Chechen and Ingush

In 1944, the State Defense Committee approved a secret decree which, in dry, bureaucratic language, ordered the deportation of Chechens and Ingush to the Kazakh and Kyrgyz Soviet Republics. On reading the original source, what immediately strikes one is the impartiality and almost matter-of-fact nature of the description of the planned operations. Indeed, the document never once mentions the names of the peoples being deported – instead of “Chechens” and “Ingush”, it refers only to depersonalized “special settlers”. Here, for example, is the opening of the decree:

The State Defence Committee RESOLVES:

1. To instruct the NKVD of the U.S.S.R. to send, in February–March of this year, up to 400,000 special settlers for resettlement in the Kazakh S.S.R. and up to 90,000 special settlers for resettlement in the Kyrgyz S.S.R.

To oblige the Council of People’s Commissars of the Kazakh S.S.R. and the Kyrgyz S.S.R. to ensure the reception, accommodation and employment of the arriving special settlers.

2. The resettlement of arriving special settlers shall be carried out with a view to their employment, primarily in agriculture and livestock farming (state farms, subsidiary farms, collective farms), and as workers and employees in enterprises in the resettlement areas, utilising their professional qualifications.

The resettlement of special settlers shall be carried out primarily in vacant buildings of collective farms, state farms and enterprises, as well as through densification.⁹⁰

By going through this document, one is also struck by its managerial, industrial tone. The resettlement of hundreds of thousands is described as yet another administrative decision within the framework of a gigantic machine, which, for more efficient operation, requires their presence in some other place rather than their native home. At the same time, this can be described as a perversion – or a logical continuation, depending on one’s point of view – of the Soviet leadership’s original concept of dealing with nationalities. After all, if they can be “invented” and “optimised” to

⁹⁰ State Defense Committee (GKO), Decree No. 5073ss, “On Measures for the Resettlement of Special Settlers within the Kazakh and Kirghiz SSRs,” Moscow, Kremlin, January 31, 1944, Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), f. 644, op. 1, d. 200, ll. 8–12. Electronic Library of Historical Documents.

achieve various economic and political objectives, what should prevent them from being “removed” if the situation demands it? “I gave you life, I will also kill you!” said the Cossack Taras Bulba to his son in the novel of the same name by the Russian novelist Nikolai Gogol.⁹¹ A similarly terrifying idea could be traced in the case of Checheno-Ingushetia.

Yet it all began as a holiday. On February 23, 1944, the republic celebrated Red Army Day, and people were summoned to various events, concerts, and rallies. However, as soon as local residents gathered anywhere, they were surrounded by soldiers who read out the deportation order. To organize the operation “logistically,” more than 100,000 military personnel and NKVD officers were deployed in the republic, and a significant number of soldiers and military equipment were also stationed in neighboring regions in case of an uprising.⁹²

As a result, in just one week, approximately 478,000 people were loaded into freight cars and sent into exile in Central Asia. Of these, about 91,000 were Ingush, and the rest were Chechens.⁹³ The conditions they were forced to endure on their journey, which lasted two to three weeks, were horrific. There were virtually no facilities for personal hygiene in the cars, which led to infections; the deportees did not receive enough food and water, and since the transport of people took place in February, this was compounded by severe frosts, for which the transport was completely ill-equipped. Ultimately, between 78,000 and 200,000 people died during the journey and in the first years of exile, accounting for approximately one-third of the entire population of Chechnya and Ingushetia.⁹⁴ According to archival data from the NKVD, as of early October 1945, only 405,900 of those deported were registered in the special settlement, which confirms the information about these enormous losses.⁹⁵

⁹¹ Nikolai V. Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, trans. Isabel F. Hapgood (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1886), 234.

⁹² John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 64-67.

⁹³ Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings* (Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, 2015), 58.

⁹⁴ Galeotti, Mark. *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014. 20.

⁹⁵ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 269.

But that was not the end of the Stalin administration's campaign against Chechnya and Ingushetia. In addition to the physical removal of the local population from the territory of Chechnya-Ingushetia and their relocation to another region, there was also a legal aspect to the matter. On March 7, 1944, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. issued a “Decree on the Abolition of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and on the Administrative Organization of Its Territory”. The reasons for this were explicitly stated in the document – and it also makes more explicit statements about deportation itself:

Because during the Great Patriotic War, especially during the German Nazi forces' operations in the Caucasus, many Chechens and Ingush betrayed their homeland, sided with the fascist occupiers, joined sabotage and reconnaissance units sent by the Germans into the rear of the Red Army, and formed armed gangs at the Germans' behest to fight against Soviet authority, and also taking into account that many Chechens and Ingush have for a number of years participated in armed uprisings against Soviet authority and, for a long time, having been unengaged in honest labor, have carried out bandit raids on collective farms in neighboring regions, robbing and killing Soviet citizens, –
the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. resolves:

All Chechens and Ingush living in the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, as well as in the adjacent regions, are to be resettled to other regions of the U.S.S.R., and the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic is to be abolished.⁹⁶

The decree goes on to describe the details of the administrative reorganization of the former Chechen-Ingush Region. Most of it was replaced by the supranational Grozny (Groznskaya) Oblast, “a completely new social-economic and political-territorial entity, one aimed almost purely at maximizing the extractive capacity of the Grozny oil industry.” However, it is also worth mentioning the territories acquired by the former Chechen-Ingush Region's neighbors following the 1944 deportation. The Georgian SSR, for example, received the Itum-Kali District within its existing borders, the western part of the Sharoevsky District, the southern parts of the Galanchozhsky, Galashkinsky, and Prigorodny Districts, while Dagestan, for example, grew from 35,000 to 38,200 square kilometers through the incorporation of

⁹⁶ Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R., “Decree on the Abolition of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR and the Administrative Reorganization of Its Territory,” Moscow, Kremlin, March 7, 1944, in *Repressed Peoples of Russia: Chechens and Ingush* (Moscow, 1994), 76–77, Electronic Library of Historical Documents.

the Veden, Nozhay-Yurt, Sayasanovo, and several other districts of the former Chechen-Ingushetia.⁹⁷

Moreover, the transfer of these territories to new authorities was often accompanied by the renaming of Chechen and Ingush geographical names. This way, Achkoi-Martan district became Novoselskii, Urus-Martan's new name became Krasnoarmeiskii, Shalinskii was turned into Mezhdurechenskii, etc.⁹⁸ In other words, if the problem of the "inconvenient" Chechens and Ingush was solved by physically relocating them to another part of the country, then the very inconvenience caused by this decision was eliminated by erasing any mention of these peoples from the Map of the U.S.S.R. The Chechens and Ingush ceased to be part of the Soviet people even in a purely geographical sense, and this continued until 1957, four years after Stalin's death. Then the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was reestablished and Nikita Khrushchev officially condemned Stalin's cult of personality and the mass repressions he had carried out. Until that time, however, Chechens and Ingush were forced to live in exile.

Chechnya and Chechens After WWII

Following the deportation, Chechnya as a region and the Chechen people lived two different histories, since the majority of the Chechen population was deported to Central Asia along with the Ingush, with other people moving into the region to replace them. To account for that, this section will be divided into three parts. For the reader's convenience, we will first briefly examine the life of Chechens in exile following the deportation. Then the focus of this work will shift to life in the territory of the former Chechen-Ingushetia following the deportation of 1944, including its various economic, political, and demographic changes. Having discussed these two important topics, we will finally turn to the history of the region after 1957, when most of the deportees returned to their homeland and the Republic of Chechens and Ingush was officially restored on the map of the U.S.S.R., and the history of Chechnya and the Chechens became a unified whole once again.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 73.

In 1944, however, that was still a long way off. Life for Chechens and Ingush in Central Asia was fraught with challenges and restrictions, the most significant of which was the ban on the free movement of those who had been displaced. According to one of the decrees of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R., “for unauthorized departure (escape) from the places of compulsory settlement of these deportees,” those found guilty were subject to criminal prosecution – carrying a sentence of up to twenty years of hard labor.⁹⁹ Ingush writer Issa Kodzoev, who spent his childhood in exile, described this monitoring of the deportees’ whereabouts as follows:

Every month, on a specific date, people were required to report in and sign in. The police kept a close eye on some individuals. And the locals were very good at informing on who was capable of what. Informing was widespread.¹⁰⁰

Added to this were harsh working conditions: as newcomers to the region, Chechen and Ingush people were often used as cheap labor in sectors that locals shunned. For example, historian Brian Glyn Williams reports that Chechens, “for example, were forced to engage in hard physical labor building roads and rail lines across the frozen wastes of Kazakhstan. Others were forced to work in dangerous mines and perform menial tasks in factories.”¹⁰¹ When we also consider the local population’s distrust of them – since they were viewed as collaborators with the Germans – and the harsh climate, with which the deportees were completely unfamiliar, it becomes abundantly clear why most of them left Central Asia at the first opportunity.

However, the people who later went from there to the Caucasus would have a different sense of self, as this shared experience of overcoming such horror played a crucial role in shaping modern Chechen national identity. This is explained by the

⁹⁹ Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, “Decree on Criminal Liability for Escapes from Places of Mandatory and Permanent Settlement of Persons Deported to Remote Regions of the Soviet Union during the Great Patriotic War,” November 26, 1948, *State Archive of the Russian Federation* (GARF), f. R-7523, op. 36, d. 450, l. 87, reproduced in *Collection of Legislative and Normative Acts on Repressions and the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repressions*, pt. 1 (Kursk: GUIPP “Kursk,” 1999), 396–97.

¹⁰⁰ Shabelnikov, Dmitriy. “Deportatsiya chechentsev i ingushey glazami svideteley” [The deportation of Chechens and Ingush through the eyes of witnesses]. *Arzamas*. Accessed June 5, 2026. <https://arzamas.academy/mag/934-deportation>.

¹⁰¹ Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings* (Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, 2015), 66–67.

fact that, under the conditions of exile, clan differences between people were erased, and all the teips, finding themselves in identical circumstances, began to share the same interests, chief among which – survival. As one of the Chechen participants in the study made by Ali Askerov, said in his interview:

We formed as a nation during the exile years in the 1940s and 1950s. Today, nobody talks about it, but over there we all were on the same boat. [...] There were no mountains to defend the highlanders from the enemy. In exile, the Chechens learned how they needed each other even from different teips.¹⁰²

At the same time, while Chechens in Central Asia felt a sense of national unity, the region from which they had been expelled was, on the contrary, in a state of multiethnic chaos.

As early as February, immediately following the deportation, the U.S.S.R. needed someone to replace the deported Chechens and Ingush in order to sustain the local agricultural sector. By order of the authorities, tens of thousands of Russians, Ukrainians, Avars, Dargins, and Ossetians were resettled there to save the region from ruin. The process of their migration is a separate topic with a vast number of nuances.¹⁰³ The main difficulty thereof lies in the fact that the settlement of the Grozny region following the deportation of Chechens and Ingush cannot be described either as a classic colonial arrival of new masters on conquered land or as yet another forced relocation of Soviet citizens ordered by Stalin.

To understand this issue, we must first describe how Stalin's agricultural system functioned at its core and then place it within the postwar context. The key is to see the position of Soviet peasants: they were effectively bound to their collective farms and relied heavily on them for their livelihood. Collective farmers depended on the *kolkhoz* for grain allocations and remuneration, which was distributed through the labour-day (*trudoden'*) system.¹⁰⁴ For failing to meet certain quotas or for not adhering to specific standards, the collective farm chairman could refuse to record

¹⁰² Ali Askerov, *The Russo-Chechen Conflict: Analysis, Impact, Transformation* (PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 2011), 314.

¹⁰³ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 74.

¹⁰⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 111-112.

their workdays or otherwise deprive them of access to the distribution of goods, thereby cutting them off from an important source of subsistence.

Having clarified this, let us now turn to the context. Right after the war, there was a shortage of food in the Soviet Union, and then in 1946–1947, a terrible famine struck the country. It was a consequence of the recent war, during which a huge number of men had died, livestock had been destroyed, and, to make matters worse, a drought had followed. In many regions of the country, people were looking for ways to survive and were willing to do anything to save themselves and their relatives. And it was precisely under these conditions that the Soviet authorities began organizing the “voluntary-compulsory” relocation of people from various regions to the former Chechen-Ingushetia.¹⁰⁵

There is still a lack of scholarly literature on the resettlement of depopulated regions in the North Caucasus; however, the sources the author of this study was able to locate nevertheless allowed him to form a clear picture of what transpired. Quotas for a specific number of people to resettle in new areas were issued from above to various regional collective farms, and these farms, in turn, were required to provide those people.¹⁰⁶ Given how collective farms operated at the time, it becomes clear that their chairmen had enough authority to find the necessary people and send them to the Grozny region, even if some were not particularly eager to relocate.

However, it is important to note that certain incentives were also at play, such as housing and livestock that had become “state-owned” – that is, abandoned by the Ingush and Chechens – and this makes the picture clearer. Caught between the demands of the collective farms and their own needs, people from various regions of the U.S.S.R. eventually gathered to settle the North Caucasus territories that had been left without owners. Although even here, the dynamics varied significantly from region to region: if the Ossetians were actively settling in the region, then “migration from the Ukraine and R.S.F.S.R. to the newly established Grozny oblast’ by contrast remained slow and unenthusiastic, heightening that particular region’s own broader

¹⁰⁵ V. A. Kononirenko, “The Process of Migration to the Post-Deportation Territories of Crimea and the Northern Caucasus in 1944–1953: Main Trends and Outcomes,” *Izvestiya of Saratov University. New Series. Series: History. International Relations* 15, no. 4 (2015): 102.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

economic stagnation”.¹⁰⁷

As a result, the resettlement of the region did not yield immediate good results, and the Grozny Oblast’ faced serious economic difficulties. By May 1945, the number of functioning farms had dropped from 28,000 to 10,000, and, for example, as early as 1948, the harvest plan was fulfilled by only 61%.¹⁰⁸ There were several reasons for this inefficiency. First, there were simply fewer resettlers than those who had been deported before their arrival, and so many villages remained abandoned and stood deserted. Second, the new arrivals lacked the skills to farm in mountainous conditions and preferred to stay on the plains or in the cities. Finally, one must not overlook the sociological problems of such an “engineering” approach to manipulating demographics across entire regions. For instance, Anatol Lieven interviewed a Russian woman who had lived in Chechnya since the 1944 deportation, and she recounted the following:

It was boring, empty, frightening, without people – like a desert. And we had been used to a lively life. Then after that, masses of new people arrived, from Russia, Ukraine – they were simply thrown together from everywhere. No one knew anyone else. Grozny was a depressing place.¹⁰⁹

It is logical to assume that, having nothing in common other than the fact that they found themselves in the same region, the new residents of the Grozny oblast’ found it more difficult to form stable work collectives and other social ties. Such a crowding of disoriented people in an unfamiliar region following a devastating war hardly fostered productive working relationships, without which it is impossible to achieve strong economic performance. There is a Russian proverb that says, “It’s easier to destroy than to build” – and this is precisely what the Soviet authorities observed as they monitored the economic situation of Chechnya after WWII, from which nearly all of its indigenous inhabitants had been deported.

In the years that followed, the economic situation in the Grozny region did not improve significantly, but one extremely important event paved the way for new changes in the North Caucasus. This, of course, refers to the death of Stalin in 1953.

¹⁰⁷ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 286.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). 321.

Chapter 5: Restoration of Chechen-Ingushetia

“Oil rigs, people of fire,
Faithful to the ideals of October,
The homeland of brave horsemen and famous heroes –
My Chechnya and Ingushetia!

Glory in battle, valor in labor,
The close-knit Soviet family,
Forever young, my beloved republic –
My Chechen-Ingushetia!”

Excerpt from the anthem of the
Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic

Nikita Khrushchev has a complex political legacy. However, if there is one place in the world where he is viewed largely favorably, it is Chechnya. And this is no coincidence: back in the day, he played a pivotal role in Chechnya’s history by allowing the Chechens and Ingush to return to their homeland after the deportation. This process, however, was far from smooth and was accompanied by numerous conflicts between former deportees and new residents of the region. The present chapter of this thesis will be devoted to Khrushchev’s decision to restore the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, and to how this region’s political and economic systems were developing until the onset of time of big changes – Perestroika – in the second half of the 1980s.

Khrushchev Surprises Everyone

No power vacuum remained unfilled, and after the initial shock caused by Stalin’s death, another internal party struggle for power began. If we set aside information irrelevant to this thesis, it suffices to say that following Lavrentiy Beria’s execution in 1953, the main contenders for power in the U.S.S.R. were Georgy Malenkov and Nikita Khrushchev. In the course of those internal struggles, Khrushchev delivered his legendary secret speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the

Soviet Union in 1956, in which he denounced Stalin's cult of personality.¹¹⁰

Given that Malenkov had once been much closer to Stalin than Khrushchev, this helped the latter consolidate his position, as there was a palpable sense of discontent within the country and the party regarding the repressions of the past decades. In addition, while condemning the crimes of Stalinism in this report, Khrushchev mentioned, among other things, the deportation of the Chechens and Ingush:

This makes the atrocities initiated by Stalin all the more monstrous, as they constitute a gross violation of the fundamental Leninist principles of the Soviet state's national policy. We are referring to the mass deportation of entire peoples from their homelands, along with communists and Komsomol members, without any exceptions: this deportation was not dictated by any military considerations. [...]

In March 1944, the Chechen and Ingush peoples were completely deported, and the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic was abolished. [...]

Not only a Marxist-Leninist, but simply no sane person can understand how it is possible to accuse entire peoples – including women, children, the elderly, communists, and Komsomol members – of treasonous activities; how it is possible to subject them to mass repression, condemning them to hardship and suffering for the hostile acts of individuals or groups.¹¹¹

Following that speech, ultimately, by 1957–58, Khrushchev had definitively become the sole ruler of the U.S.S.R. The other details of how he managed to achieve this are extremely interesting but are not relevant to this study. The main point is that by this time, Nikita Khrushchev possessed sufficient authority and resources to bring about changes in the life of the Soviet Union. And he indeed made use of them – the mention of the 1944 deportation turned out not to be merely lip service in Khrushchev's report.

Already on July 16, 1956, a decree was issued by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R.; according to its first clause, all deportees were released from the requirement to live in the areas strictly designated for them. And

¹¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 131.

¹¹¹ Nikita S. Khrushchev, "On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences," *Izvestiya TsK KPSS*, no. 3 (1989): 151–53.

although the second clause stated that the decree did not grant them the right to reclaim confiscated property or return home, tens of thousands of people nevertheless interpreted it as an invitation to leave. It is important to understand, however, that they had begun doing so long before it became legally possible.¹¹²

First, Stalin's death in 1953 sparked a wave of enthusiasm among the "special settlers," who, sensing that there is now more freedom on an informal level, began slowly returning home – in defiance of all laws and prohibitions. And while the number of illegal returnees was relatively small at first, by 1955 "Chechens began to disappear from Central Asia in large numbers and then to reappear in Groznenskaya oblast".¹¹³ Therefore, the fact that in 1956, following a decree by the Presidium, another 25,000 to 30,000 people returned from their places of exile to the North Caucasus should be viewed as a continuation of a trend that had already begun, rather than as something sudden.

At first, the Soviet authorities tried to prevent this mass migration by attempting to establish an autonomous republic for Chechens and Ingush in Central Asia, but the idea failed to gain any traction among the mountain peoples themselves.¹¹⁴ Therefore, realizing that they could not influence this influx of people in any way, on January 9, 1957, the Presidium issued another, even more important decree "On the Restoration of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the R.S.F.S.R."¹¹⁵ It is important to mention that the restored republic had different borders.

It had lost some of its territory – for example, the Prigorodny District, which remained part of North Ossetia – a situation that later led to a serious conflict between the Ingush and the Ossetians. At the same time, some territories inhabited predominantly by Cossack people, such as the Naursky and Shelkovsky districts,

¹¹² Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, "Decree on the Removal of Special Settlement Restrictions from Chechens, Ingush, Karachays, and Their Family Members Deported during the Great Patriotic War," July 16, 1956, *State Archive of the Russian Federation* (GARF), Collection, f. 207, vol. 4, folder 15.

¹¹³ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 75-76

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, "Decree on the Restoration of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR within the R.S.F.S.R.," January 9, 1957, Current Archive of the Ministry for Regional and National Policy of Russia, reproduced in *By Decision of the Government of the USSR* (Nalchik: El-Fa Publishing Center, 2003).

became new parts of Chechnya-Ingushetia.¹¹⁶ Due to this realignment, the proportion of the “new” population in the republic increased, which, according to the plan, was supposed to facilitate control over the region. Nevertheless, the main thing was that the Chechens were no longer required to bear the stigma of being “traitors” and were officially allowed to return home which was still important even though they were doing that already for the past four years.

Initially, the Soviet authorities again hoped for a smooth, controlled return of the former residents of Chechnya-Ingushetia and their descendants, but once again, this proved impossible. In 1957 alone, approximately 200,000 people returned to their homeland. By the following year, 1958, almost all of the deportees had already returned to the restored Chechen-Ingushetia. It would seem to be a happy ending but as Ali Askerov puts it, coming back home, they had “to face new problems [...] because the land they left had not remained empty”.¹¹⁷

However, this problem was nothing new. As early as 1955–1956, before the restoration of Chechnya-Ingushetia, deportees who had entered the Grozny region illegally and found new residents on their former land demanded the return of their property. In some instances, people who “would not be permitted to take possession of the homes in which they had formerly lived, [...] would make dugouts next to them and then settle in”.¹¹⁸ Or, for example, Alex Marshall describes extreme cases where “returning Chechens and Ingush created additional problems by demanding their houses back, threatening, beating and occasionally murdering members of the local population in the process.”¹¹⁹ Realizing that they could do nothing to stop these developments, the authorities facilitated yet another population shift.

As John Dunlop writes, the Soviets resettled at least 2,500 predominantly Russian families to the other side of the Terek River, and a full 36,000 Russians left the newly established Chechen-Ingushetia of their own accord. Moreover, many of

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ali Askerov, *The Russo-Chechen Conflict: Analysis, Impact, Transformation* (PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 2011), 67.

¹¹⁸ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 76.

¹¹⁹ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 287.

those who left were party members – about 300 communists departed the Shalinskii District alone.¹²⁰ At the same time, conflicts were often avoided, as Chechens and Ingush frequently returned to their mountain settlements, which had been left empty because the region's new residents preferred to stay on the plains or in the mountains. However, in 1958, the steadily mounting tensions finally came to a head, and mass clashes broke out in Grozny between Chechens and the city's Slavic population.

The incident was triggered by the murder of a Russian worker by a group of Chechens on August 23. His funeral drew thousands of people, and the procession soon turned into a political demonstration, with participants demanding the abolition of Chechen-Ingush autonomy, while some individuals even called for a repeat of the deportation. It is also important to mention that the course of the rallies was far from peaceful: protesters beat Chechens they encountered, one of whom died. This time, however, the authorities sided with the mountaineers: regular army units were brought into the city to restore order, and the protest was suppressed. The situation in the republic had returned to normal, and a period of relative calm had set in.^{121 122}

And it was precisely during this time – unlike the era of open conflict – that the conditions took root in Chechnya that would eventually lead to the major war of the 1990s.

Between Restoration and Perestroika

The most “unexciting” period in recent Chechen history – in terms of the intensity of events – is perhaps the most significant. Often, in articles, books, and films about this region, attention is focused on dramatic, shocking events, such as the 1944 deportation or the war that broke out 50 years later. Moreover, when discussing these events, the authors of such works frequently draw a direct connection between them. Why this is done is perfectly understandable. However, this logic remains a

¹²⁰ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 79-80.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 80-81.

¹²² Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 288.

simplification.

This statement should not not be misunderstood. The connection between the historical events mentioned is, of course, significant but, as is often the case in history, it is circumstantial and conditional. In turn, authors of popular works on the subject, as was shown in the introduction, often tend to explain the causes of the 1994 Chechen War as stemming from historically rooted hatred that has persisted for centuries, which, having been “reactivated” once again during the deportation, ultimately led to bloodshed several decades later.

In reality, however, a look at the period preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union reveals the contours of a far more nuanced and, likely, accurate explanation for this tragedy. It lies in the fact that the deportation did not merely generate a great deal of hatred – though no one is trying to deny this – but, more importantly, had a profound impact on the social and economic development of Chechnya and Ingushetia in the decades that followed. And this, combined with Soviet policy in the region during the period covered in this chapter, ultimately made the 1994 conflict possible.

But before discussing this topic, it is important to first familiarize ourselves with life in Chechnya during that era. And since this period of relative calm began shortly after the 1958 Grozny riots, we should first examine the nature of interethnic relations in the republic at that time. Thus, we will examine whether any changes occurred in relations between Chechens and other peoples of the republic after the former returned to their homeland, and how the former deportees generally felt after arriving home in the long term. We will then turn to the economic aspect of the issue and assess the standard of living of the population of Chechnya-Ingushetia during this period. Finally, we will present the demographic indicators of that time so that in the next chapter, devoted to Perestroika, we can better understand who actually inhabited the region during this era of change.

So, let us return to the first point. How did the various peoples of Chechnya-Ingushetia get along with one another during this period? The answer is that, from the early 1960s right up until perestroika, there were not many open conflicts between them, but beneath the surface of apparent stability lay a vast number of

contradictions. To summarize, one could say that, compared to many other regions of the U.S.S.R., the Chechens were much less integrated into the local administrative system and largely played a secondary role within their own republic.¹²³

The standard system of Soviet governance in other autonomous regions implied a balance between centralized control and the involvement of the local population in administrative work. James Hughes refers to this as a “diarchy,” in which the first secretary of the autonomous region, who came from the indigenous population, shared power with the Russian second secretary. In Chechnen-Ingush Republic, however, which the authorities continued to view with suspicion, the situation was different.¹²⁴

There, Chechens were something like “political trainees” who first had to prove their loyalty before being granted access to real power. Consequently, the local party structure was characterized by a clear bias toward the dominance of Slavs, and Russians in particular. The positions of first secretary of the regional committee (in effect, head of the republic), head of the local KGB and police, – all of these were, as a rule, held by Slavs.^{125 126} Here, for example, is a list of the first secretaries of the regional committee following the restoration of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Region until perestroika. The years in parentheses indicate when they were in office:

Alexander Yakovlev (1957–1959)
Alexander Trofimov (1959–1963)
Fyodor Titov (1963–1966)
Semyon Apryatin (1966–1975)
Alexander Vlasov (1975–1984)
Vladimir Foteev (1984–1989)¹²⁷

¹²³ Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings* (Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, 2015), 78.

¹²⁴ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 12.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-14.

¹²⁶ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 82-88.

¹²⁷ “Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic: Administrative Divisions — Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics,” *World Statesmen*, accessed June 5, 2026, <http://www.worldstatesmen.org>.

The list is indeed more applicable to the Grozny region than to Chechnya-Ingushetia. There were, however, objective reasons for this. The level of education among Chechens and Ingush was extremely low throughout the period from the 1960s through the late 1980s. As of 1989, three-quarters of Chechens lived in villages, and among them, “15.56 percent lacked any education whatsoever; 13.32 percent had only an elementary education; 23.25 percent had an incomplete secondary education; and only 34.14 percent had a complete secondary education.”¹²⁸ Finally, just over 4.5% of all Chechens living in the republic had a higher education. Given that these figures are for 1989 alone, it becomes clear that when Chechen-Ingushetia was reestablished in 1957, the Soviet leadership had nowhere to turn for personnel capable of contributing meaningfully to the administration. The Soviets, however, had no one to blame for this but themselves.

Nevertheless, although Chechens and Ingush were clearly underrepresented in positions of power, in the region, as in other parts of the U.S.S.R., efforts were underway to educate and nurture a local intelligentsia, which, in theory, was supposed to serve as a loyal buffer between the Party and the republic’s population. Some of them were professionals and academics who had survived deportation and then returned to the restored republic. Others were graduates of local schools and universities that had emerged in the region throughout the 20th century. Finally, there was a small group of people who had received their education outside Chechnya and Ingushetia. For example, at universities in the capital or other republics, or at military academies. It is noteworthy that this group included the future leader of the Chechen resistance during the 1994 war, Dzhokhar Dudaev, who received military training in Tambov and Moscow.¹²⁹

It is crucial to mention one sociological characteristic of the Chechen intelligentsia that distinguished it from the educated classes of other Soviet republics. Originating primarily from rural areas, Chechen intellectuals were often the first members of their families to live in urban areas. Consequently, they were much more

¹²⁸ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 87-88.

¹²⁹ Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings* (Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, 2015), 79.

strongly attached to the village and the narratives prevalent there, which gave rise to a kind of “dual loyalty” in their consciousness. On the one hand, they felt a sense of belonging to the Soviet educated class, realizing that, by holding positions in universities, writers’ unions, and so on, they clearly benefited from their status. On the other hand, they remained bearers of the memory of the deportation and hardships to which the U.S.S.R. had subjected their people.¹³⁰

At the same time, they often did not shy away from religion, which allowed them to feel a sense of unity with their people in rural areas. There is evidence that even Chechens who were members of the Communist Party participated in secret religious ceremonies and observed Muslim rituals at the funerals of their relatives. Such religious practices helped them not only feel a connection to their people but also to specific clans, which continued to play an important role in Chechen life. As a result, the Chechen intelligentsia lived simultaneously in two worlds: the secular-Soviet and the religious-national. Which of these was more important at different points in time is a big question; however, one can say for sure that during the major conflict with Russia that followed, the latter clearly came to the fore.^{131 132}

Between the restoration of Chechen-Ingushetia and Perestroika, the republic saw a phenomenal growth in its Muslim population. In the 1970s and 1980s, the birth rate among Chechens was around 40 per thousand, while among the Russian population, this figure had fallen to 12. According to the official census, the total number of Chechens rose from 318,000 in 1926 to 957,000 in 1989, and their presence in cities increased from 9% in 1959 to 42.1% in 1989. Russians, on the other hand, were reducing their presence in the republic: from 1979 to 1989, their number fell from 336,000 to 293,000. Moreover, this decline was largely due to voluntary migration. Thus, Dunlop notes, “the much-discussed outmigration of

¹³⁰ Ibid., 79.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 378.

ethnic Russians from Chechnya-Ingushetia, thus, began more than a decade before General Dudaev came to power.”¹³³

These demographic changes, however, had little impact not only on the political inequality between Chechens and Slavs, but also on the economic situation in the republic. As Russian ethnographer Valery Tishkov notes, during this period the economy of Chechnya-Ingushetia was divided into “Russian” and “national” sectors. The former was responsible for the machine-building, social welfare systems, infrastructure, and oil industry. Despite the oil industry’s importance to the region, Chechens were hardly involved in it at all: all leadership positions in the oil sector were invariably held by ethnic Russians, and for skilled jobs, authorities preferred to bring in specialists from central Russia rather than hire local residents. In its turn, when it comes to the “national” sector, Chechens were engaged in “small-scale village production, seasonal work, and the criminal sphere”.¹³⁴ As a result, by the late 1980s, Chechnya-Ingushetia consistently ranked at the bottom among the autonomous republics of the U.S.S.R. in terms of most socioeconomic indicators – at a time when the number of young men reaching working age was on the rise.

In general, it is crucial to address the issue of Chechnya’s young and unemployed population at that time. Due to the rising birth rate described above, a “surplus” population emerged in the republic, which, because of structural constraints, could not find a place for itself in Soviet society. These people were not hired in heavy industry, which preferred specialists from other regions, while the already overcrowded agricultural sector could not provide them with even a minimally acceptable standard of living. This is when the phenomenon of so-called *otkhodnichestvo* – construction brigades traveling throughout the Soviet Union to fulfill short-term contracts – began to flourish.¹³⁵ Tens of thousands of Chechen men regularly left to work in other regions, thereby forming a distinct, “non-Soviet” social class of people accustomed to relying solely on themselves and their clan for

¹³³ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 86.

¹³⁴ Tishkov, Valery et al, *Chechenskiy Krizis*. (Moscow: Tsentr Kompleksnykh socialnykh issledovaniy i marketinga, 1995). 16.

¹³⁵ Marshall, Alex. *The Caucasus Under Soviet Rule*. London: Routledge, 2010. 299.

their own sustenance, rather than on state institutions. The latter often seemed to them more of an obstacle to prosperity than a factor contributing to it.¹³⁶

As a result, by the time of Perestroika, the Chechen-Ingush Republic was grappling with a host of systemic contradictions stemming from the social upheaval caused by the deportation. The traumatized people returning from Central Asia, having missed more than a decade of normal development, were largely unfit for important government posts, to which the Soviet leadership was already reluctant to admit them due to its deep-seated suspicion of the mountain peoples. This, in turn, isolated them in the unprofitable and impoverished agricultural sector, which could not provide sufficient resources for the ever-growing population, and by the early 1990s, a whole social stratum had emerged in the republic, consisting of people ready to take on any venture that promised them even the slightest profit. The stage for upheaval had been set by none other than the Communist Party, all that remained was to add fuel to the fire. And this was done by a communist as well – none other than Mikhail Gorbachev.

¹³⁶ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 85-86.

Chapter 6: New Opportunities

“Having grown older, I loved the Soviet Union not for what it was, but for what it could have become had circumstances turned out differently.”

Mikhail Elizarov,
The Librarian (2007)

Following Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev served as General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1964 to 1982. After dying at age 75 from a heart condition, he made way for 68-year-old Yuri Andropov, who passed away in 1984, allowing 72-year-old Konstantin Chernenko to become the head of state. As if competing with his predecessors, he died just one year after taking office. The leaders of the U.S.S.R. succeeded one another more frequently than people today upgrade their smartphones, and this rotation of elderly men could not fail to catch the eye. Therefore, even before doing anything known to the general public, Soviet functionary Mikhail Gorbachev aroused interest on his way up the career ladder, since he was only fifty-four when he took office as General Secretary. It soon became clear that he differed from his predecessors not only in age.

Already shortly before becoming a head of the state, Gorbachev began speaking about the importance of “accelerating” the Soviet economy and reviving it. That same year is considered the beginning of Perestroika – the Soviet authorities’ attempt to restructure the economy of the U.S.S.R. in order to overcome its stagnation. Shortly thereafter, in 1986, following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, a policy of *Glasnost* was also adopted. Gorbachev believed that the system could not survive without more transparency and openness. The politics of Glasnost entailed the lifting of numerous taboos and open discussion not only of the pressing problems Soviet people faced in their daily lives, but also, for example, of historical events and the facts that had been kept silent. This chapter of the thesis will examine this period of Soviet history and explain how it ultimately led to the rise to power in Chechnya of people who demanded the region’s complete independence from Russia.

Chechnya During Perestroika & Glasnost

Typically, when people hear the term *Glasnost*, they first think either of the events in central Russia, where it finally became possible to have a full-fledged discussion about the Gulag and other human rights abuses committed over the past decades, or of the Warsaw Pact countries, which were given the opportunity to reshape their relations with Moscow. However, for Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic the arrival of Perestroika in the second half of the 1980s was just as significant and people were excited to see changes.

There were many reasons for this, both economic and political, although in this context, as in many others, it is hardly possible to separate the two spheres. The local economy was heavily focused on oil production and processing. This was not a bad thing in itself: thanks to this specialization, the region had undergone active industrialization in the past, Grozny had become a modern oil hub, and, as a result, professionals were actively moving to the city, bringing new knowledge and skills to Chechnya. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, these professionals were generally not recruited from among the mountaineers, which is why, in terms of fairness, the modernization of Chechnya and Ingushetia did not feel inherently socialist. In addition to that, a disproportionate amount of power and resources in the republic was concentrated in the hands of officials in Grozny, many of whom were ethnic Russians.¹³⁷ As the central government's authority waned, this situation became increasingly prominent, and with the onset of Perestroika, the fairness of this state of affairs became a topic of active debate in Chechnya.

Furthermore, Glasnost brought to light the traumas that had previously tormented Chechen society, hidden from open Soviet discourse. Especially when it comes to the deportation of Chechens and Ingush, carried out by order of Stalin in 1944. Superimposed on the then-pressing problem of Chechen underrepresentation among the Grozny elite, the memory of these events, deeply rooted in collective memory, became a powerful tool for social mobilization. The main point here that the author of this work wishes to convey is that, taken together, Glasnost and

¹³⁷ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 85.

Perestroika laid the groundwork for the subsequent attempt to separate Chechnya from Russia. Specifically, they weakened the ability to exercise centralized control over the region and enabled other activist groups to openly challenge the established order and, more broadly, to question the legitimacy of the Soviet administration at the local level.¹³⁸

It all began with the emergence of the *neformaly* (informals) – as members of independent civic and youth groups in the late 1980s were called, operating outside the control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Having emerged in various parts of the country, such as the Baltic Republics, they also made their presence felt in the North Caucasus. Perhaps the most significant informal organizations in the region covered by this work were the academic association called “Caucasus” and the People’s Front of Chechnya and Ingushetia. Organized and led by the intelligentsia, they were secretly supported by Chechen members of the Soviet nomenklatura and the KGB.¹³⁹ This was done in order to force the central authorities to hand over more resources to the local leadership by organizing mass protests and demonstrations of discontent among the republic’s residents. In this case, the main goal was to oust the Russian first secretary of the regional committee, Vladimir Fateev, and replace him with a Chechen official.¹⁴⁰

To achieve this, they employed what is known as “eco-nationalism” – a specific form of political mobilization in which Soviet citizens, by invoking rhetoric about protecting the environment in their region, criticized the authorities and demanded greater independence from the Communist Party without risking being branded as traitors to their country.¹⁴¹ The Popular Front resorted to this strategy in 1987–1988, when it organized rallies and protests against the construction of a biochemical plant in Gudermes. This tactic proved successful, and in 1989 Vladimir Foteev was removed from his post, handing over his position to a Chechen official

¹³⁸ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 1.

¹³⁹ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 88-90.

¹⁴⁰ Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 56.

¹⁴¹ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 18.

Doku Zavgaev. For the first time in the history of the U.S.S.R., a Chechen became the head of Chechnya-Ingushetia.¹⁴²

And that was only the beginning. Calls for the protection of nature soon evolved into demands for greater political independence and “sovereignty.” A key role in this was played by the creation of Chechnya-Ingushetia’s first openly political organization, Bart (Unity), founded by a group of political activists that included Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, a key figure in the future independent Chechnya. In 1989, members of this organization attended the first Congress of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, held in Abkhazia, where they advocated for the idea of establishing “federal statehood for the peoples of the Caucasus.” Then, in 1990, Bart was reorganized into the Vainakh Democratic Party, and its demands became even more radical. Party leaders spoke of establishing a “sovereign Vainakh republic” in which all real power would belong to the mountain people, and of restoring traditional institutions, such as the Council of Elders. Ideas about complete independence from the U.S.S.R. in general and Russian Federation in particular began to circulate openly, and this would lead to irreversible consequences.¹⁴³

In 1990, in an effort to keep the nationalist movement under control, Zavgaev agreed to hold the first Chechen National Congress (CNC) in Grozny. The congress’s executive committee was headed by Major General Dzhokhar Dudaev – at that time a serving Soviet general who commanded a heavy bomber division in Tartu, Estonia. The congress organizers, drawn from the national intelligentsia, specifically invited him as the only Chechen at that time holding the rank of major general in the Air Force, in order to lend the event prestige. By exerting pressure on the Supreme Council of the Republic, by November 27, 1990, Dudaev, Yandarbiyev, and the other members of the CNC had secured the official adoption of the Declaration on the State Sovereignty of Chechnya-Ingushetia.¹⁴⁴ According to its first clause:

¹⁴² John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 89.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁴⁴ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 20.

The Chechen-Ingush Republic is a sovereign state established as a result of the self-determination of the Chechen and Ingush peoples. The sovereignty of the Chechen-Ingush Republic is a natural and essential prerequisite for the existence of Chechen-Ingushetia as a state.¹⁴⁵

Unlike the declarations of nearly all other autonomous republics of the R.S.F.S.R. at that time, except for Tatarstan, the Chechen declaration deliberately omitted any provision stating that the republic would remain part of the Russian Federation.¹⁴⁶ At the same time, it is absolutely essential to understand the context in which this declaration was adopted.

The Soviet Union was dying, and with it went any sense among its constituent parts of what the future held for them. The behavior of the country's two main leaders certainly did not help matters. In 1990, a political struggle was underway between Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and the leader of Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin, during which they did everything in their power to make life difficult for one another.

For example, the former wanted to weaken the latter's influence, and to achieve this, he supported initiatives by the autonomous republics within the R.S.F.S.R. to declare their sovereignty. Then, on April 26, 1990, a law was passed in the Soviet Union that effectively erased the constitutional distinction between union republics, such as Ukraine and Russia, and autonomous republics, such as Chechnya and Ingushetia. All of them were declared "constituent entities of the federation", and this planted a time bomb within Russia in the case it tried to quit the U.S.S.R. – in theory, then, anyone could have invoked this law in an attempt to secede, in their turn, from Russia.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, the Declaration on the State Sovereignty of Chechnya-Ingushetia was not based solely on empty dreams. It had a legal basis, and this basis would later be invoked during the events that would go down in history as the Chechen Revolution.

¹⁴⁵ "Deklaratsiia o gosudarstvennom suverenitete Checheno-Ingushskoi respubliki (27 noiabria 1990 g.)," in "Vozniknovenie i eskalatsiia chechenskogo konflikta," *Politicheskie otnosheniia i politicheskii protsess v sovremennoi Rossii*, no. 1 (2007), accessed June 5, 2026.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁴⁷ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 91.

The Chechen Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union

Just as quickly as the Chechens' demands shifted from environmental issues directly to politics as their opportunities grew, so too did they shift from signing declarations to direct political action as the Soviet Union collapsed. The Chechen Revolution is precisely such a story of how former Soviet and anti-Soviet Chechen activists and intellectuals came together to wrest power from the weakened and dying Soviets and establish an independent rule. To make sense of these developments and avoid getting lost in the details, the author of this paper will identify three key stages necessary for understanding the Chechen revolution following the signing of the 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty of Chechnya and Ingushetia.

The first of these was the establishment of the All-Chechen People's Congress (OKChN), chaired by Dzhokhar Dudaev, who by that time had permanently left the Soviet Army and returned to Grozny to pursue a career in politics. The OKChN was declared the republic's alternative governing body, without which, of course, the revolution itself would not have been possible. The second major stage was the August coup by the State Committee for the State of Emergency, GKChP, in Moscow and the failure of its supporters throughout the U.S.S.R., including Chechnya. Thanks to this, the OKChN was able to seize power in Chechnya and Ingushetia and eliminate the influence of the Communist Party. And finally, the presidential elections held in Chechnya, already separated from Ingushetia, in October 1991. Conducted amid countless violations and intimidation of the population, they nonetheless established Dudaev as the republic's official leader and enabled him to officially proclaim the Chechen Republic a fully independent state on November 1, 1991 – just under two months before the Soviet Union officially ceased to exist.

What exactly was the OKChN, which emerged to eventually become the highest authority in the rebellious Chechen Republic? In essence, it was an alternative governing body established by Dudaev and his associates during the second phase of the First Chechen National Congress, held on June 8–9, 1991.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 95.

Dudaev was appointed its chairman, and Yusup Soslambekov, one of the leaders of the Vainakh Democratic Party, was named his first deputy. This took place against the backdrop of General Dudaev's earlier announcement in May 1991 – following the declaration of Chechen-Ingush sovereignty adopted in November – that the Supreme Council of the Republic had lost its legitimacy. In essence, he announced the creation of a new authority in Chechnya, which was to take over the administration of the republic “during the transitional period leading up to new elections.”¹⁴⁹ A structure of dual power (*dvoevlastie*) was developing in the republic, with both the OKChN and the Communist Party, still active in Chechnya and led by Zavgaev, claiming power. Soon it was to be resolved due to the events that unfolded in Moscow in 1991.

On August 20, 1991, Gorbachev and the leaders of various Soviet republics were scheduled to sign a new Union Treaty, under which the republics would be granted extensive autonomy while Moscow agreed to relinquish some of its decision-making powers. Representing the R.S.F.S.R. in this process was its then president Boris Yeltsin, who had received this mandate earlier in the first direct elections in the history of the Russian Federation.¹⁵⁰ An interesting detail: to secure support from regional and national elites, Yeltsin actively appealed to the autonomous regions within the R.S.F.S.R., promising them ever greater freedoms, even as they openly questioned whether they should be part of Russia at all. It was then that he uttered his famous phrase about them taking “as much sovereignty as they can swallow.”¹⁵¹ In the short term, this did indeed help him win votes – and even in Chechnya, he received the support of the majority of voters. In the long run, this may have led to the 1994 war but that will be discussed in later sections.

The key point to understand now is that not all members of the Soviet elite were satisfied with what was happening. Moreover, for many of them, the idea of granting such a high degree of autonomy – essentially, turning the republics into

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Galeotti, Mark. *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014. 29-30.

¹⁵¹ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 17.

separate states that would cede to the center only control over defense and foreign policy – already amounted to the death of the Soviet Union. Wishing to stop this, a number of military officers and KGB agents decided to use force to prevent the signing of the New Union Treaty and restore the center’s control over the country. That is, to stage a coup. The specific details of what happened next are not important for this work and will therefore not be described. The main thing to understand is that this coup failed due to a split within the army and the poor organization of the coup plotters themselves, and as a result, its supporters throughout the U.S.S.R. also suffered a political defeat. Chechnya was no exception.^{152 153}

Neither the republic’s leader, Doku Zavgayev, nor other key Soviet officials in the region dared to immediately condemn the coup plotters, while the OKChN, led by Dudaev and Yandarbiyev, reacted immediately, demanding Zavgayev’s resignation and calling on the people to take to the streets in the capital to protest against the rebellious military and KGB officers. According to some sources, Yeltsin’s team viewed them as allies at the time, which is why it sent “the highest-ranking Chechen within the Russian administration, Police Major General Aslanbek Aslakhanov,”¹⁵⁴ to visit Grozny so that he could issue a stern warning to Zavgayev not to use force against the protestors. Meanwhile, the latter had transformed into fully-fledged combat units, and soon armed men were occupying key buildings in Grozny – such as district administrative offices and television stations – beating, and sometimes even opening fire on, anyone who tried to stop them. In the end, OKChN fighters stormed the building of the republic’s Supreme Council, dispersing the deputies and, most likely, throwing the secretary of the city committee, Vitaly Kutsenko, out the window.¹⁵⁵

In an effort to control developments in the republic and maintain its grip on Dudaev, Moscow made concessions to him and forced Zavgayev to officially resign,

¹⁵² John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 102.

¹⁵³ Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 60.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 101.

formally transferring power to the Provisional Supreme Council, which the OKChN soon dissolved as well. It was becoming clear that Dudaev planned to be the sole source of power in Chechnya. To achieve this, after dealing with his Communist opponents, he soon scheduled presidential elections despite the fact that this time Moscow was against it.¹⁵⁶

The elections took place on October 27, 1991, under what amounted to martial law, with the electoral process itself organized by the man who had nominated himself for the presidency. Dunlop also quotes researchers who studied this issue:

In some districts, the number of ballots cast exceeded the number of registered voters, and in the ballot boxes placed in town squares, packets of ballots allegedly filled out by representatives of the Chechen diaspora were placed into the voting urns.¹⁵⁷

Dzhokhar Dudaev, of course, ended up winning the election without any issues. Boris Yeltsin and the Russian parliament declared the results invalid, but no one cared, since the new Chechen leadership was on track to cut ties with Russia anyway.

On November 1, 1991, Dudaev issued his first decree on the state sovereignty and full independence of the Chechen Republic, which was ratified the following day by the Chechen parliament.¹⁵⁸ The Ingush Part of the former Chechen-Ingushetia, around that time, in its turn, seceded, deciding to remain a part of Russia, so Chechnya was now on its own. The nationalization of federal property began, including branches of the Central Bank, and tax payments to the Russian budget were halted.¹⁵⁹ Also, Soviet symbols in everyday life were replaced by Chechnya's own coat of arms featuring a wolf. Only when Chechnya truly began to become a separate state did Boris Yeltsin realize the scale of what was happening and start considering the use of force.

This time, however, the story began as a farce, only to turn into a tragedy in 1994 with the outbreak of full-scale war. In November 1991, following the

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 112.

¹⁵⁷ "Rossiiskaya politika v Chechne," *Izvestiya*, 7 February 1995, pp. 1, 4

¹⁵⁸ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 25.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 29.

“elections” held in Chechnya, Boris Yeltsin signed a decree imposing a state of emergency in the republic with the aim of ousting Dzhokhar Dudaev and restoring a government loyal to Moscow. To achieve this, a landing force of about 600–1,000 troops was sent to Chechnya, but they faced a complete failure: after landing at an airport near Grozny, they were instantly surrounded by Dudaev’s forces and captured. This failure was largely due to yet another round of conflict between Yeltsin and Gorbachev: the latter continued to control the Soviet security forces and, at a critical moment, declared Yeltsin’s decree illegal, thereby prohibiting Soviet military personnel in the region from assisting the arriving paratroopers, thus leaving them isolated. Thanks to the OKChN’s swift negotiations with Moscow, the captured soldiers were soon allowed to leave the republic, and Dudaev’s authority in the region grew significantly. Moscow appeared weak, and this was in line with reality – the Soviet Union had less than two months left to live.¹⁶⁰

On December 26, 1991, it was finally officially dissolved. Russia and the fourteen other republics became separate countries, inheriting the territorial structure and names they had acquired during the Soviet era.¹⁶¹ This development ultimately turned Chechnya into a problem solely for Yeltsin, who, having finally succeeded in forcing Gorbachev from the political stage, was left to deal with a region of his own country that did not want to be part of it. An independent, non-Soviet Russia was born already burdened with the problem of Chechen secessionism, and this had a profound impact on the early years of its new-found existence. However, no one had yet considered the possibility that a major war was inevitable.

¹⁶⁰ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 115-120.

¹⁶¹ Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings* (Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, 2015), 83-84.

Chechnya and Soviets – a Summary

The Bolsheviks' advance into the North Caucasus was made possible not so much by popular support as by the mistakes of the White Army. Denikin's forced conscription provoked the anger of the mountain peoples, and amid the war with the Bolsheviks, he left the region to avoid conflicts on his home front. In turn, the Bolsheviks, having subsequently won the war, took control of the entire North Caucasus and abolished the nascent independent statehood that had been taking root there in the form of the North Caucasus Emirate. This marked the beginning of the Soviet period in Chechnya's history.

At first, to consolidate their own positions, the Bolsheviks made significant concessions to local elites, allowing Islam to play a prominent role in the region's administration. At the same time, they pursued a policy of "indigenization" in the region, promoting Chechen national identity in an area where tribal structures still prevailed, as well as advancing Chechen personnel and granting them more positions in local government. This was done in order to thereby establish a connection between the central authorities and the population of Chechnya.

Over time, however, the Bolsheviks began to promote secular ideas in the region, as they viewed Islam as a political threat capable of uniting the local population against Soviet authority in the event of a conflict. The situation began to escalate and reached its peak during Stalin's rule, when, in his attempts to implement collectivization, he turned the entire peasantry of this already underdeveloped and unstable region against him. Subsequent purges only exacerbated this conflict by removing the "mediators" from the educated class that stood between the Chechen people and Soviet authority. Dissatisfaction grew, and a significant number of people in Chechen-Ingushetia – a region created by Stalin himself – joined the armed resistance, which continued to trouble the Soviet leadership even during World War II.

Ultimately, Stalin and his inner circle decided to resolve this problem in a radical manner, and in 1944, under the pretext of fighting Nazi collaborators, they organized a genocidal deportation of the entire population of Chechnya-Ingushetia,

sending its inhabitants primarily to Central Asia. At the same time, at the administrative level, the Republic of Chechens and Ingush was abolished, and in its place, the “ethnically neutral” Grozny Region was established. As a result, while the Russian Empire had prevented the Chechens from fully undergoing feudal development, Stalin’s intervention also severely hindered the region’s ability to build a stable society within the context of Soviet modernization. Once again, the Chechens found themselves left out of the broader intra-Russian context.

Subsequently, through a combination of coercion and promises of access to substantial resources, the Soviet leadership succeeded in resettling large numbers of residents from other autonomous regions and republics to replace those who had been deported, in order to improve the local economy. This, however, did not yield significant results, and the region’s economy remained stagnant, while the Chechens themselves, living in conditions akin to imprisonment in Central Asia, awaited change. They had to wait until Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953.

After that, a period of political thaw began in the Soviet Union, and the country’s new leader, Nikita Khrushchev, openly criticized his predecessor in his report at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956. Condemning Stalin’s cult of personality, he also mentioned the tyrant’s inhumane treatment of the Chechen people, who had been unjustly exiled from their homeland. Taking the change in leadership as a signal to act, the Chechens slowly, in defiance of the restrictions, began returning to their native region, and seeing that this human tide could not be stopped by any means, in 1957 the Soviet leadership restored Chechnya-Ingushetia and put the republic back on the map of the U.S.S.R.

Initially, when the Chechens returned to the region, there was unrest stemming from the fact that the returnees were attempting to reclaim their property, which had fallen into the hands of settlers who had arrived in the region following the deportation. However, over time, relative calm returned to the North Caucasus. Only the last General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, who launched the process of renewing the U.S.S.R., *Perestroika*, was able to disrupt this calm.

This period is characterized by the fact that Chechens were finally able to

openly discuss their problems – ranging from the trauma of deportation to economic and political inequality with the Slavic population of their own republic. Beginning as a moderate environmental protest, the local population's discontent eventually grew into political demands for independence, which were shaped by the Chechen intelligentsia. Over time, this led to the formation of a nationwide congress of the Chechen people under the leadership of Dzhokhar Dudaev, who, amid the intra-Soviet crisis caused by the power struggle between Yeltsin and Gorbachev, took power in his hands and declared the independence of the Chechen Republic in 1991. Only three years remained before the war.

Part III:
Post-Soviet Chechnya on the Eve of War

Chapter 7: Chaos in Post-Soviet Russia

“One thing is certain: on October 3 and 4, 1993, Russian democracy was killed by tanks shooting at it. Let the liberals not bull***t about it – this is an indisputable fact.

It lasted only a short while: from 1989 to 1993, and died at a young age. That is the most important thing everyone needs to know about this date.”¹⁶²

Eduard Limonov

For the second time in less than a century, Russia faced the challenge of integrating the North Caucasus amid the collapse of a vast empire. Legally, Moscow’s position after 1991 was stronger, as Chechnya was internationally recognized as part of the Russian Federation. In practice, however, this meant little to the Chechens.

Revolutionary republic embarked on the path to independence, and nowhere else in the country of 148 million were there enough people or resources to prevent it.

This can be attributed to a variety of factors stemming from the political and economic crises Russia faced following the collapse of the Soviet Union. These factors played a dual role: they not only defined the scope of possibilities for the Russian leadership – for whom, it can be argued, Chechnya was merely one of a vast array of problems – but also influenced the behavior of the Chechen secessionists themselves, whose republic remained, to a large extent, tied to the realities of the Russian state as a whole.

Ultimately, the interplay of these factors meant that the parties were unable to reach any compromise during the negotiations, and in 1994, Russia sent troops into Chechnya. Therefore, this part will be divided into two chapters. The present one will focus on the broader Russian situation in the early years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, while the second will focus specifically on Chechen context in the same time period. After reviewing those structural characteristics of both sides, we will finally be ready to discuss a brief period when Boris Yeltsin made his final decision and why he managed to reach an agreement with the other ethnic republics but not with Chechnya.

¹⁶² Aleksei Sochnev, “Po televizoru obiavili, chto ia ubit okolo Ostankino” [“They Announced on Television That I Had Been Killed Near Ostankino”], *Russkaia Planeta*, October 2, 2013, archived October 4, 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20131004221223/https://rusplt.ru/society/limonov_interview.html.

Yeltsin Wants More Power

To understand how this became possible, one must grasp the difference between Russia in 1991 and 1994. Although not much time had passed between those dates – a mere blink of an eye in historical terms – they nevertheless represented two distinct political systems. In the first case, although Yeltsin was able to send a small contingent to Chechnya, he still had to take Gorbachev and other members of administration into account. In the second case, however, the Russian president was able to isolate himself from the rest of the administrative apparatus and, together with his small team, make a decision that soon led to catastrophic consequences for both Chechnya and the rest of Russia.

The point is that during the events of November 1991, when Yeltsin first attempted to quell the Chechen uprising by force, it was not only Gorbachev who exerted a significant influence on him, but also the parliament, which, realizing that continuing the actions initiated by the President of the R.S.F.S.R. could lead to a bloodbath, also decided to go against his decision. And at that time, it had the necessary tools to do so: under the constitution in force at the time, parliament was required to ratify a decree declaring a state of emergency, and on November 11, 1991, it voted to repeal Yeltsin's decree, which forced the latter – who did not then have a sufficiently strong base of support in the Supreme Council – to enter into negotiations with the Chechen leadership.¹⁶³ This was likely one of those moments that convinced the Russian president that he needed to consolidate more power in his own hands so that he could act with less regard for others. In the years that followed, he succeeded in doing so. The chaos that reigned in the Russian administrative system following the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed him to do it.

But first, we need to go over the background of the institutional structure first of the R.S.F.S.R. and then Russia to see that the conflicts that happened between the president and parliament can also be partially understood as a consequence of Soviet national policy. Historically, the Soviet leadership deliberately denied the Russians the right to establish a fully-fledged national republic and to have their own

¹⁶³ Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 64.

Communist Party within the R.S.F.S.R., as it feared that the emergence of an independent Russian political center could create problems for the all-Union leadership, which was also based in Moscow.¹⁶⁴ ¹⁶⁵ The Russian people were viewed by the Soviet authorities as the key nation of Soviet statehood, upon which the leadership of the rest of the country could be built; yet, paradoxically, for this very reason, a separate Russian statehood remained underdeveloped, which later led to problems in the 1990s.

When the Soviet system began to weaken, the national republics already had a comprehensive state apparatus that could be restructured to become independent, whereas in Russia such institutions were comparatively underdeveloped and politically subordinate to all-Union structures.¹⁶⁶ They had to be built in a hurry, and this took its toll. In May 1990, Boris Yeltsin was elected Chairman of the Supreme Council of the R.S.F.S.R., transforming what had previously been a largely subordinate republican institution into an independent political centre, and in June, a declaration on the state sovereignty of the R.S.F.S.R. was adopted.¹⁶⁷ As strange as it may sound to the uninitiated reader, it was only then that Russia achieved a certain degree of independence from the U.S.S.R. as a whole and was able to act independently of the union leadership. However, the downside was that later, this new system, which had been hastily put in place, lacked a clear division of powers between parliament and the subsequently established office of the president – a position to which, ironically, Yeltsin moved from the very same parliament.¹⁶⁸

The reason for that was the fact that even after the U.S.S.R. was no longer there, the new Russian state continued to operate under the R.S.F.S.R. constitution, adopted back in 1978, which was originally designed for the Russian Federation's

¹⁶⁴ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. 396.

¹⁶⁵ Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *The Shortest History of the Soviet Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 200.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 91.

¹⁶⁸ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 56-57.

existence within the Soviet system, not as an independent entity. And although amendments were made to it regarding the recognition of private property, the post of president, etc., it still carried within it a “Soviet core,” which was preserved and expressed in its Article 104:

The highest organ of state power in the Russian Federation is the Congress of People’s Deputies of the Russian Federation. The Congress of People’s Deputies of the Russian Federation has the authority to consider and decide on any matter falling within the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation.¹⁶⁹

To put it simply: The Congress of People's Deputies was the country's “supreme assembly,” while the Supreme Council – the parliament – served as its standing committee. And the 1978 Constitution granted it vast powers, effectively placing this body above the president who considered himself a leader chosen by the entire nation, deserving of greater authority.¹⁷⁰

Naturally, the latter was not happy about this, which led to constant conflicts between him and Parliament. For example, in 1992, Yeltsin wanted to appoint Yegor Gaidar – an economist who had played a key role in restructuring the Russian economy along capitalist lines – to the position of prime minister. However, among parliamentarians, Gaidar was an unpopular figure, blamed for the impoverishment of the population and the collapse of many industries, which is why they twice rejected his nomination in a vote. In the end, Yeltsin had to concede and appoint another official, Viktor Chernomyrdin, as prime minister, who, on the day of his confirmation to the post, uttered the famous phrase: “We need a market, not a bazaar!”^{171 172}

This was by no means the only instance in which either the president or parliament attempted to block the other’s decisions; indeed, this applied not only to

¹⁶⁹ Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, *Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the RSFSR*, April 12, 1978, Russian State Archive, accessed June 5, 2026, <https://statearchive.ru/730>.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Dmitri Travin, “Yegor Gaidar: The Reformer Who Died of Neglect,” *openDemocracy*, December 23, 2009, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/yegor-gaidar-reformer-who-died-of-neglect/>.

¹⁷² John R. Lott Jr., “Exploding the Myth About Economic Reform in Russia,” *The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* no. 930 (March 9, 1993), <https://www.heritage.org/europe/report/exploding-the-myth-about-economic-reform-russia>.

individuals but also to various decrees in the economic and political spheres. This thesis does not set out to focus on this, however, the author considers it important to convey the idea that these constant clashes had a cumulative effect, which ultimately led Russia to the crisis of 1993, thanks to which Yeltsin gained much greater powers.

Yeltsin Gets More Power

This year, the country has, one might say, been paralyzed in terms of governance. Constant conflicts between the president and parliament have led to a situation where even Russia's regions are no longer able to act in a consistent manner. Each region had its own local head of administration, appointed by Yeltsin, and its regional councils of people's deputies, which often aligned themselves with the Supreme Council. As a result, they began to replicate the situation unfolding in Moscow: regional councils and local heads of the government constantly blocked or ignored each other's decisions.¹⁷³ At the same time, a number of regions were already experiencing not only administrative chaos but also separatist tendencies.

The most striking example of this was the Republic of Tatarstan, where a referendum was held in 1992 in which a majority of voters supported the idea of establishing the republic as a "sovereign state and a subject of international law."¹⁷⁴ Taking advantage of the deadlock in Moscow, the Tatarstan leadership exploited the situation to expand its powers and strengthen its independence from the capital by gaining greater control over the region's natural resources and reducing its own tax payments. With all this in mind, the Kremlin became increasingly convinced that central authority needed to be strengthened, because otherwise the country could simply collapse under the weight of internal contradictions.

Ultimately, following yet another series of conflicts, on September 21, 1993, Boris Yeltsin issued Decree No. 1400, which dissolved the Congress of People's Deputies and called for elections to a new legislative body – the State Duma. The

¹⁷³ Cameron Ross, *Federalism and Democratisation in Russia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 123.

¹⁷⁴ Kathleen Knox and Rim Gilfanov, "Tatarstan: Status Under Scrutiny As Lawmakers Change Constitution," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 4, 2002, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1099027.html>.

Supreme Council declared this decree illegal, and an armed confrontation ensued in the capital, from which Boris Yeltsin emerged victorious. It was during that period that the famous videos emerged showing tanks firing on the Russian parliament building. Soon after, a new constitution of the Russian Federation was adopted, significantly expanding the president's powers, and this had major consequences for relations between Moscow and the regions.¹⁷⁵

Abolishing the remnants of what had resulted from late-Soviet national policy and the struggle between Yeltsin and Gorbachev, the new constitution officially declared the republics and regions to be equal in rights, and any references to their "sovereignty" were completely removed.¹⁷⁶ Ironically, the central government still made concessions to the most "ambitious" regions. For example, in 1994, Yeltsin and the head of Tatarstan, Mintimer Shaimiev, signed an agreement under which Tatarstan received enormous privileges compared to other regions of the Russian Federation in the areas of taxation and natural resource management. Similar agreements granting privileges were signed with resource-rich Bashkortostan and Yakutia. Although contradicting the new constitution, many researchers agree that Yeltsin stabilized the country and prevented further secession by "bribing" republics that theoretically could secede.¹⁷⁷

As a result, between 1991 and 1994, the Russian Federation underwent a transformation from a state with an ambiguous political system based on an outdated Soviet constitution into a federation with a very powerful central government in the capital, whose president, possessing broad powers, could conduct bilateral negotiations bypassing parliament and thereby establish personal agreements with leaders in individual, unstable republics. He managed to secure this position by using force against parliament, casting doubt on Russia's democratic trajectory. In the short term, however, the strategy proved effective: most regions, including Tatarstan, were eventually brought into Moscow's orbit. Only one major exception remained in the North Caucasus.

¹⁷⁵ Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 243.

¹⁷⁶ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 43-44.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 45-47.

Chapter 8: Chaos in Post-Soviet Chechnya

“They were marching because, for the Russian people, there was no question as to whether life under French rule in Moscow would be good or bad. Life under French rule was simply unthinkable: it was the worst possible outcome.”

Leo Tolstoy,
War and Peace (1869)

While for Russia the period from 1991 to 1994 was marked by the centralization of power and Yeltsin's success in negotiating with various “breakaway” republics to keep them within the country, Chechnya saw the opposite trend during this time, with chaos spreading across virtually every aspect of life in the newly established republic. Politically, there was an ongoing shift toward autocracy under the rule of Dzhokhar Dudaev, who had no intention of tolerating his overly active rivals; economically, there was a gradual criminalization of virtually all key sectors that generated revenue for the republic. Those two factors led to armed clashes between various political factions within the secessionist republic, and the Kremlin began to hope that it might not even need to negotiate with Dudaev, but could simply remove him through a minor armed proxy intervention – later exactly this kind of thinking made the big war possible since the very idea of armed intervention stopped being a taboo.

This thesis' chapter will be devoted to the situation in the republic on the eve of the war. By examining it, the author of this work hopes that the reader will thereby gain a clearer understanding of the background of the processes leading to Yeltsin's fateful decision to send troops into Chechnya, which will be discussed further on. In this case, it makes more sense to start with the economic situation in Chechnya after the fall of the U.S.S.R., because it was precisely this factor that made many people in Chechnya become dissatisfied with the state of the affairs in their republic, which led to the emergence of political groups there that actively opposed Dudaev.

The Economy of Extremes

As we have seen in previous chapters, the economic situation in Chechnya was far from perfect even before Dudaev came to power. However, during his tenure as head of the republic, this problem worsened, and Chechnya had to endure a severe decline in industrial production, a drop in exports due to the Russian blockade, and the resulting additional surge in unemployment and a massive increase in criminal activity. Together, these circumstances led to political division within the newly formed republic and to growing instability and conflicts that at one point reached the level of a civil war. Without understanding this economic context, the reasons why Dudaev behaved in a certain way at specific moments will not be clear, and therefore it is very important to familiarize oneself with them first. This section will start with the most important part of the Chechen economy at that time – the oil refining industry.

As we know from previous chapters, it was this sector that provided the republic with a stable income, and although Chechnya was one of the poorest republics of the U.S.S.R., it was able to stay afloat thanks to it. With the declaration of independence, however, this came to an end. The reason was the exodus from the republic of technical specialists – primarily Russians – who were capable of ensuring the operation of processing plants. By 1992, industrial output in the republic had already fallen by 30%, and by 61.4% in 1993, while in the rest of Russia this figure fell by “only” 16.2%.¹⁷⁸ On top of that, there was also plain old theft. As Anatol Lieven writes, “Under Dudaev, the pipeline was riddled with holes by local people siphoning off the oil, and in 1994 the Russian government estimated that it would take 55 million dollars to repair. The war, of course, wrecked it still further.”¹⁷⁹

There was still some time left before the war, however, and during this period, not only the oil industry but also all other sectors capable of generating revenue for the republic were suffering. This was due to the dual blockade – trade and financial – imposed by the Russian government. The former involved the creation of a “sanitary cordon” around the republic, blocking the export and import of goods but it

¹⁷⁸ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 126.

¹⁷⁹ Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 85.

operated extremely inefficiently. The reason for this was the corruption of the Russian military personnel who organized this cordon since for a small bribe, it was still possible to get anything through.¹⁸⁰ In addition, the neighboring regions of Ingushetia and Dagestan effectively did not join the blockade, which gave the Chechens considerable leeway in terms of trade. Nevertheless, it is logical to assume that this still led to price increases for the end consumer, who, in the case of Chechnya, generally did not have significant financial resources to begin with.

In turn, the second blockade, the financial one, posed far greater challenges for the Dudaev regime. After Chechnya stopped paying taxes to the federal budget in 1991 and nationalized all federal property on its territory, payments in the opposite direction continued – following the dissolution of the U.S.S.R., financial transfers from the center to cover pensions and various social needs continued to flow into the republic from Moscow.¹⁸¹ However, following another round of political confrontation in 1993, the federal government halted these transfers as well. Consequently, the already troubled budgetary sectors – comprising salaries for teachers, doctors, and so on – suffered enormous losses, and many professionals ceased to receive their due pay.¹⁸² Because of that, more and more people were falling into poverty and turning to a life of crime which touched upon almost all spheres of life in the new Chechnya.

Oil, finance, trade – all of these became a means of enrichment for criminal bosses, who, against the backdrop of the blockade and separatist chaos, faced virtually no restrictions. Although there were officials involved as well. For example, Mark Galeotti writes:

Chechnya was becoming a virtual bandit kingdom. Organized crime flourished, not least within the new Chechen state apparatus. The Chechen State Bank, for example, was used to defraud its Russian counterpart of up to \$700 million using fake proof of fund documents. Russian oil pipelines which ran through Chechnya were not only at risk of destruction but also being tapped illegally and even though Grozny was still a hub for oil refining.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 62.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁸² Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 74

¹⁸³ Galeotti, Mark. *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014. 31.

Added to this were widespread incidents of outright banditry. The most notorious of these were the mass robberies of trains passing through the republic's territory. For example, in 1993 alone, more than 500 trains were attacked, and between 1992 and 1994, according to statistics provided by Russia itself, 26 railway employees were killed during these raids. This became a popular trade because arms trafficking flourished as weapons were freely sold within Chechnya, with much of the supply coming from corrupt elements of the Russian military. At the same time, the absence of customs controls at Grozny airport turned the republic into a hub for drug smuggling across Russia and abroad.¹⁸⁴

In this context, as is often the case in criminalized societies, the level of everyday street violence began to rise, affecting first and foremost the most vulnerable members of the population. In this case, it was the Russians, because unlike the highlanders, they had no clan ties or relatives in the villages willing to help them hide from criminals.¹⁸⁵ Consequently, violence against them was "logical" even from a purely class-based perspective, since they, as a rule, lived in cities and were better off than the average highlander from rural areas who had left due to unemployment to try their luck in more urbanized regions.

But there was undoubtedly a racist dimension to the violence against them as well, as Russians were associated with Moscow and with past discrimination against the Chechens. Beatings, property seizures, and other abuses were common. Although Dudaev did not directly order such actions, the situation increasingly resembled ethnic cleansing. By 1994, between 180,000 and 250,000 Slavs had fled Chechnya; those who remained had every reason to never feel safe.¹⁸⁶

Taken together, all these circumstances led to public disillusionment with Dudaev, who clearly turned a blind eye to the chaos which took over Chechnya. Even more difficult times for him began to lie ahead – in his own republic, there appeared people who really wanted to remove him from power.

¹⁸⁴ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 124.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

A Republic Without Democracy

At times, when studying the First Chechen War and its causes – examining its various phases across different regions – a researcher may experience a sense of déjà vu. Of course, history never repeats itself in the details, and what happened at point A is never exactly the same as what is happening at point B. However, this is hardly important to the human mind, which, perhaps for purely biological reasons, is always tempted by even the most superficial similarities in order to more easily process them and thereby comprehend what at first glance seems incomprehensible.

The First Chechen War was an incredibly complex event that can hardly be fully explained within the scope of a modest student paper. Nevertheless, it is impossible not to notice that, in the run-up to the war, a process of centralization was underway in both Russia and Chechnya that clearly undermined the democratic hopes of the post-Soviet era. Although in Chechnya, this was probably even more severe.

Between 1992 and 1994, a significant group of relatively influential individuals who were dissatisfied with Dudaev emerged in Chechnya. This group consisted mainly of the national intelligentsia and businesspeople who, seeing what was happening to the economy, believed that the first president of the Chechen Republic was leading it to ruin. By March 1992, they had managed to form armed units that seized the television center in Grozny by force and began demanding Dudaev's resignation, but he was able to suppress the uprising thanks to the presence of armed units loyal to him. The rebels fled the city but the pressure on the president did not cease.¹⁸⁷

On a purely political level, Dudaev found himself under pressure from the Chechen Republic's parliament. His former ally, Yarogi Mamodaev, who in 1993 served as first deputy prime minister of the Chechen Republic, began to strongly criticize Chechnya's first president – again, over the economy and the fact that ministers under his authority were openly engaged in corruption schemes involving petroleum products. As a result, a conflict arose, leading the parliament in May 1993

¹⁸⁷ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 149.

resolving to remove Dudaev – who at the time held both the positions of president and prime minister – from the latter post and to grant Mamodaev the authority to form a “government of popular trust.” Dudaev was very unhappy with this, and after waiting a short while, in June 1993 he announced the dissolution of parliament, the Grozny City Assembly, and the Constitutional Court. Later, the parliament was turned into an empty body with no powers, and a presidential dictatorship was established in Chechnya. Yeltsin got a worthy counterpart.^{188 189}

Then, in December 1993, various groups opposed to Dudaev united to form the “Provisional Council of the Chechen Republic” (PCCR). It included both Chechens who had opposed Dudaev even before his full turn toward autocracy – such as former Interior Ministry officer Umar Avturkhanov – and, for example, former Grozny mayor Beslan Gantamirov, who had joined the opposition only in 1993. On June 3-4, 1994, the PCCR organized a congress in the village of Znamenskoye, where they announced a loss of confidence in Dudaev and, consequently, demanded his resignation from the presidency. There, the PCCR was proclaimed the sole legitimate authority of the Chechen Republic. Soon, the Russian state backed it by beginning to pay pensions in the Upper Terek region, which was under the control of Dudaev’s opponents. Furthermore, the Kremlin began sending weapons there – and, as early as September 1, 1994, armed clashes between the forces of the PCCR and Dudaev’s forces had already been reported. Moscow now had an official proxy, and Yeltsin was clearly counting on it.¹⁹⁰

Russia had embarked on a path toward the armed overthrow of the first president of the Chechen Republic, and a major war, though not yet the preferred option, no longer seemed at all implausible. Disaster was drawing ever closer, and the next and final chapter of this work will be precisely about that.

¹⁸⁸ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 73.

¹⁸⁹ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 150-151.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

Chapter 9: How the War Began and Why Exactly There

“War belongs to the young,
A cure for wrinkles and age.”

Viktor Tsoi,
A star called the Sun (1989)

The uncomfortable truth about war is that it requires at least two opposing sides. This is a simple idea, yet it contains implications that may make a biased reader feel uneasy. Russia’s war against Chechnya in 1994 was undoubtedly launched by Boris Yeltsin’s decision, but upon examining the factors that influenced him during his deliberations, it becomes clear that this choice was largely determined not only by the domestic conditions in which he found himself, but also by the actions and rhetoric of another powerful president of his country – Dzhokhar Dudaev.

This chapter of the thesis aims to examine exactly how their interaction led to Yeltsin’s decision to send troops into Chechnya in December 1994. Interestingly, when examining these events, many similarities can be observed in the processes within both the Russian and Chechen leaderships. These processes can be summed up by the simple term “radicalization”, and this applies not only to the leaders of the two countries discussed in this paper, but also to their inner circles. Over time, both Yeltsin and Dudaev, became less willing to make any compromises with each other and also found themselves surrounded by “hawks” appropriate to their respective contexts, and this bore fruit.

Also, from a certain perspective, despite certain similarities between them, one can also discern an ideological element in the fundamental nature of their confrontation. The shelling of the parliament building in 1993 and the military intervention in Chechnya in 1994 can be viewed as two stages of the same state-building project. Both crises stemmed from contradictions embedded in Soviet nationality policy: the deliberate underdevelopment of Russian republican institutions on the one hand, and the empowerment of national-territorial entities on

the other. By confronting the parliament and later Chechnya, Yeltsin sought to remove competing claims to authority and consolidate the sovereignty of the post-Soviet Russian state. Dudaev, for his part, wanted to bring Soviet national policy to its logical conclusion and secede his country from Russia, – a move which he considered entirely legitimate. It can be argued that these two ideas were fundamentally incompatible, and it was from this clash of principles that the 1994 war arose. Yeltsin decided to start a major war, but Dudaev was also fully willing to give him one.

To support the arguments presented, this chapter will be divided into three subsections. The first will focus on Dudaev's radicalization, and the second on Yeltsin's. This will clarify the state of mind of both leaders on the eve of the war. Also, Yeltsin's subsection will conclude with a brief historical overview: the author will discuss the failed attempt by the PCCR, mentioned numerous times above, to overthrow Dudaev, and how this ultimately forced Yeltsin to make the decision that is, in essence, the subject of this thesis. This will be followed by a discussion of why, in the case of Tatarstan, it was possible to negotiate a peaceful transition into Russia, whereas in the case of Chechnya, it was not. The order chosen by the author is explained by the very logic of the outbreak of war: since Yeltsin bears primary responsibility for the deployment of troops to Chechnya, one must first understand exactly who he was dealing with before taking on that responsibility. Fortunately for the author of the present work, there is much to say about Dudaev during this period.

Dudaev: From the President to the Chief Warrior

In his early TV interviews, Dzhokhar Dudaev looks and sounds like the quintessential Soviet citizen. A neat appearance, polished speech, a military uniform.¹⁹¹ In fact, it was this exemplary Sovietness that initially helped him rise to such heights when Chechnya embarked on the path to independence since compared to many other political activists, Soviet Army General Dudaev looked extremely credible. Nevertheless, behind this facade lay a secular Chechen nationalist who still

¹⁹¹ Dzhokhar Dudaev, interview by Vladislav Listyev, *Vzgliad* (1995), video recording uploaded by Ani Centre, YouTube, December 8, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1f-A1prA2Q>. Accessed 5 June 2026.

remembered the deportation of 1944 – he had spent his childhood in exile in Central Asia.¹⁹² He initially upheld those secular ideals in the 1992 constitution, which proclaimed Chechnya a secular state. Over time, however, everything began to change.

The pivotal year for him, as it was for Yeltsin, was likely 1993, when, like his Russian counterpart, he took up arms against his political opponents in parliament and other institutions. As discussed in previous chapters, the reason for this was their criticism of him, which, as he saw it, prevented him from pursuing normal policies in his own republic. In the end, having carried out a coup d'état, he, though he had rid himself of his pesky political opponents, found himself at an impasse: if the secular structure of the state, with its rational separation of powers, was hindering him, then what should he establish in its place? And here the old Chechen traditions, as well as Islam came to his aid – both things from which General Dudaev had previously been relatively distant his entire life.

To demonstrate popular support and preserve democracy, he turned to the traditional Chechen Council of Elders, whose activities had long been based on a religious interpretation of various issues.¹⁹³ Furthermore, after the dissolution of the parliament in June 1993, the center of Dudaev's opposition shifted from Grozny to other regions of the republic that did not approve of his policies. The main centers of opposition became the lowland regions of Chechnya, and Dudaev then increasingly turned to the so-called mountain clans, characterized by more conservative views, for support. And finally, to firmly hold onto power in the absence of normal institutions, Dudaev began to rely on the radical wing of young military leaders, such as Shamil Basaev.¹⁹⁴ They were willing to help him suppress the opposition, but not for free. In return, Dudaev granted them a great deal of autonomy, which then undermined the very autocratic rule he sought.

¹⁹² ¹⁹² Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya: The Russian-Chechen Wars, the Al Qaeda Myth, and the Boston Marathon Bombings* (Lebanon, NH: ForeEdge, 2015), 79.

¹⁹³ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 147-149.

¹⁹⁴ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 154.

This could not help but influence his negotiating position. Although many Chechens were clearly not opposed to the Tatarstan model, such an agreement, writes Anatol Lieven, “would have been very unpopular among some of the young hotheads in Dudaev’s guard, and this might well have spelled his personal doom.” Given how hard he had fought to stay in power up to that point, it stands to reason that he intended to avoid such a situation at all costs. And so, one might say, Dudaev found himself in a kind of “radicalism trap”¹⁹⁵ – to retain power, he had to rely on field commanders, and as they increased their presence in his inner circle, they reduced the number of concessions the president of independent Chechnya could make in his negotiations with Yeltsin. Askerov provides a clear example of this dynamic involving Akhmat Kadyrov, the father of Chechnya’s current leader Ramzan Kadyrov, who was opposed to Russia during the war that began in 1994:

He publicly provoked Dudaev for it. In a rally in Grozny, Kadyrov threatened Dudaev to be announced as a traitor, when the latter was advocating the path of Tatarstan. Dudaev then sharply changed his position leading Chechnya into war.¹⁹⁶

It is interesting to note that as the invasion drew nearer, Dudaev’s position began to undergo at least some superficial changes. While in the summer of 1993 Dudaev declared, “Independence – and that’s the end of it,” by April 1994 he was speaking of the possibility of “rational compromises,” though he still rejected any option that did not grant Chechnya full independence.¹⁹⁷ By early December 1994, however, he told Russian journalists that, in theory, he would be willing to leave Chechnya within Russia under certain conditions and with international guarantees that those who chose to use force would be punished. And although this appears to be a significant shift in rhetoric, in practice, the implementation of these ideas was difficult to imagine. James Hughes analyzes this shift in rhetoric as follows:

¹⁹⁵ Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 68.

¹⁹⁶ Ali Askerov, *The Russo-Chechen Conflict: Analysis, Impact, Transformation* (PhD diss., University of Manitoba, 2011). 278.

¹⁹⁷ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 76.

It may be that Dudaev may have finally sought a compromise in late 1994, given the precariousness of his situation, but by then it was too late. It is equally plausible, however, that he already recognized that conflict was inevitable and sought to manipulate his legacy to ensure that the blame for the conflict lay at Yeltsin's door.¹⁹⁸

In any case, it would not be wrong to say that in 1991 and 1994, Dudaev found himself in two different situations and was forced to act in completely different ways. His tragedy was that the same could be said of the Russian president at the time. Yeltsin's own political landscape had mutated following his 1993 assault on parliament; from that point forward, the existential imperative of preserving his own power became the driving force that ultimately dictated the rush to war.

Yeltsin: From a Liberal Presidency to the Invasion

The author does not wish to repeat himself, but in this case it is unavoidable. In the case of Yeltsin and his personal radicalization before the war, similar processes took place as with Dudaev. First, after the attack on the parliament, another institution began to play a much more important role. However, in this case, it was the Security Council – a body not legally accountable to the public – to which the real center of decision-making on a wide range of issues, including Chechnya, had shifted.¹⁹⁹

Second, by 1994, Yeltsin found himself politically isolated from those with differing views. And while Dudaev was surrounded by field commanders, in Yeltsin's case it was the so-called “war party” – a group of people consisting of security agency heads and his confidants, for whom the war promised various benefits.²⁰⁰ After 1993, he harbored doubts about the loyalty of many military officers, who wavered at a crucial moment in his struggle with parliament, and so he decided to discuss the most important issues only with select individuals whom he believed would not let him down. The most prominent among them was Defense Minister Pavel Grachev – one of the four ministers who, in 1993, approved Yeltsin's

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 89.

²⁰⁰ John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 203-204.

plan to dissolve parliament. For him, for example, starting a war was of the utmost importance because the Duma was constantly cutting defense spending, and only imminent military action could help him recoup those funds.²⁰¹

Third, Boris Yeltsin's new political rivalry played a major role; ironically, it was with another Chechen. His name was Ruslan Khasbulatov, and initially he was Yeltsin's chief ally and effectively shaped his policy toward Chechnya; however, over time they grew far apart and became political enemies. Thus, Khasbulatov was one of Yeltsin's main opponents during the 1993 crisis and was arrested following an armed clash. However, in 1994, the State Duma declared an amnesty, and he was released, after which he decided to focus on his home region.²⁰² Returning to Chechnya in 1994, he began actively traveling throughout the republic, seeking to act as a mediator between Dudaev, the opposition, and Moscow. Over time, he managed to gain popularity in the region, and Moscow began to seriously fear that Khasbulatov, whom Yeltsin detested, might overthrow Dudaev and seize power for himself.²⁰³ The Kremlin could not allow this to happen and therefore decided to act preemptively.

On November 26, 1994, forces of the PCCR, reinforced by a small number of Russian career military personnel and supported by Russian intelligence agencies, were sent to Grozny to overthrow the regime of Dzhokhar Dudaev and establish a Moscow-controlled administration in the republic. The idea was to present the assault as an internal Chechen conflict, but things did not go according to plan. Due to poor coordination, the assault ended in disaster, and many Russian soldiers were taken prisoner. This failure left the Kremlin facing a difficult choice: either accept a humiliating setback or commit federal forces to a full-scale military intervention.²⁰⁴

Ultimately, Yeltsin opted for the latter. On November 29, a Security Council meeting was held, following which Yeltsin issued an ultimatum to the Chechens

²⁰¹ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 81.

²⁰² John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 158.

²⁰³ Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 90.

²⁰⁴ Galeotti, Mark. *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994–2009*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2014. 32.

demanding a ceasefire and the surrender of their weapons, even though a plan for an invasion was already being drawn up behind closed doors. The very next day, November 30, the Russian president signed a decree “On Measures to Restore Constitutional Legality and Law and Order in the Territory of the Chechen Republic.”²⁰⁵ Behind this jumble of words lay a simple idea: federal troops were to advance into Chechnya, and they were authorized to use artillery and air power. On December 11, columns of Russian troops were already crossing the Chechen border. The war had begun.

But why did it start there, rather than in Tatarstan, which was a similar case, compared to Chechnya?

Two Secessions, One war

Secessionist tendencies existed in both republics at the time of the Soviet Union’s demise and dissolution. However, the mere fact of their existence does not make the republics themselves comparable cases. And this, in fact, is the reason for the different fates of Chechnya and Tatarstan: even before the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, these republics led completely different lives and had different experiences within socialist Russia, which is why, by the time of the collapse, they were already in completely different circumstances.

First, in Tatarstan, the Soviet authorities successfully established a broad base of local elites. When the U.S.S.R. collapsed, the first secretary of the regional committee, Mintimer Shaimiev, was able to transform the regional Communist Party into a moderate national ruling party, retaining control over institutions, which is why there was no radical shift in terms of the people in power in Tatarstan.²⁰⁶ In Chechnya, however, a national revolution took place, largely due to dissatisfaction with local administrators who had been appointed from outside the region, and who, in addition, were not locals. As a result, the Chechen revolution completely swept away the old Soviet structures, making it much more difficult for Yeltsin to negotiate

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Deniz Dinç, “The Rise and Fall of Ethnic Mobilization and Sovereignty in Tatarstan: Patterns of Elite Continuity and Dominance,” *bilig* 98 (2021): 124-130.

with the new authorities.²⁰⁷ Not only because he was not unfamiliar with these new local figures, but also because they often lacked any administrative experience whatsoever – Dudaev, for example, came to the administration from the military.

Second, although Tatarstan, like all regions of the U.S.S.R., did not escape the repressions of the 1930s, it nevertheless did not undergo an experience comparable to the deportation of the Chechens and Ingush in 1944. This allowed Tatar society to develop more gradually, without the sudden demographic and psychological upheavals characteristic of the Chechens, thanks to which a more stable economic and political situation has taken shape in the republic, which in itself reduces the likelihood of a turn toward violence in society and prevents the formation of what is theoretically an “explosive surplus population,” as happened in Chechnya, where unemployed youth became the backbone of the armed resistance. By the end of the Soviet era, Tatarstan had become a highly developed industrial region with a robust military-industrial complex and oil sector, where local residents were involved in all key processes. As a result, the Tatar population was highly urbanized and culturally integrated into the Soviet (and then Russian) system, which made the prospect of an armed conflict seem far less likely.^{208 209}

Ultimately, by the time of the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the difference between those two republics lay in how far local elites were willing to push the logic of Soviet nationality policy. For Tatarstan, sovereignty – in its Soviet sense – was viewed more as a bargaining chip; by playing this card with Russia, which was still regarded, to a certain extent, as the republic’s default partner, it was able to secure certain privileges for itself.²¹⁰ In turn, Chechnya, being one of the least Soviet of the Soviet regions and failing to understand the “rules of the Soviet game” – in which formal rules were often merely a pretext for private agreements – interpreted Soviet constitutional provisions and Gorbachev-era legislation in a far more literal manner

²⁰⁷ Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998. 77.

²⁰⁸ Deniz Dinç, “The Rise and Fall of Ethnic Mobilization and Sovereignty in Tatarstan: Patterns of Elite Continuity and Dominance,” *bilig* 98 (2021): 128-129.

²⁰⁹ Marat R. Minkin and Irina Y. Danilova, “Urbanization Processes in the Oil Region of Tatarstan in 1950–1960-s,” *Society: Philosophy, History, Culture*, no. 9 (2020): 1, 5.

²¹⁰ Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007. 61.

than Moscow had intended, seeing them as genuine legal and political opportunities.

In this sense, the Chechen leadership attempted to follow the logic of Soviet nationality policy to its ultimate conclusion: if nations possessed a right to self-determination, then they also possessed a legitimate right to leave the state that had created them. So, for Yeltsin, starting a war and defeating Chechnya was intended to demonstrate that sovereignty within the Russian Federation would no longer be interpreted according to the logic of Soviet federalism, but according to the principles of a unified Russian state. Therefore, in a way, the First Chechen War could be described as a war waged by the Russian Federation against the lingering notion of sovereignty as potentially including a right to secession, a notion rooted in a theory of Soviet national policy.

Post-Soviet Chechnya on the Eve of War – a Summary

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and Chechnya found themselves, in a sense, in similar situations. Due to the historical peculiarities of Soviet national policy in both the R.S.F.S.R. and Chechnya-Ingushetia prior to that time, unlike many other Soviet republics, neither possessed institutions fully adapted to the realities of post-Soviet statehood. Consequently, these institutions had to be established in a hurry, which led to confusion in the governance of each of these states, as the powers of each branch of government were not sufficiently clear.

As a result, both Yeltsin in the Russian Federation and Dudaev in Chechnya felt extremely insecure in their presidential positions, being forced to work alongside parliaments that frequently clashed with them over a wide range of issues – but, as a rule, economic ones. Because of this, conflicts constantly arose between the different branches of government, and the newly elected leaders of these two states felt the need to centralize power in their own hands and thereby make governance more consistent. Ultimately, each of them resolved their issues with their respective parliaments through force, and both Chechnya and Russia became systems where an enormous amount of power was concentrated solely in the hands of the president, allowing the head of state to pursue his policies with less regard for other institutions.

In both cases, this resulted in the president being surrounded by a very specific type of people who influenced his decisions. In Dudaev's case, these were nationalist radicals, former military officers and activists of the Chechen national movement, who were skeptical of any possible compromises with Russia, while in Yeltsin's case, it was the so-called "war party," within the Russian security establishment, whose influence increased after the constitutional crisis of 1993.

In Chechnya, however, not everyone was satisfied with the way things were going in the region, and in December 1993, the "Provisional Council of the Chechen Republic" (PCCR) was formed there. It brought together a wide variety of people who opposed Dudaev's rule, many of whom were in contact with Russia. After reaching agreements with other republics, such as Tatarstan, regarding the terms of

their continued membership in Russia, the Kremlin decided to turn its attention to Chechnya. At first, Yeltsin tried to use the PCCR as his proxy to oust Dudaev, but ultimately the modest military campaign launched by the PCCR failed, after which the Russian president saw no other option but to launch a full-scale invasion of Chechnya.

The reasons why the Russian president felt it necessary to take this action in the case of the North Caucasus republics but not Tatarstan lie in the history of Soviet national policy in these regions. Unlike Chechens, the people of Tatarstan did not experience such a massive deportation, which meant that the local elite was much more deeply integrated into the broader Russian context at the time of the Soviet Union's collapse. As a result, it was much easier for the new Russian leadership to find common ground with Tatarstan and make compromises regarding the granting of privileges to the region. In the case of Chechnya, however, Yeltsin's government felt compelled to take the unprecedented step of starting a war to suppress the late-Soviet mindset regarding regional sovereignty, which included the right to secession. It could therefore be argued that the First Chechen War marked the moment when post-Soviet Russia ceased to operate according to the logic of Soviet federalism and began to define itself as a unified Russian state.

Conclusion

The 1994 Russian-Chechen War is a complex historical event that cannot be explained by referring solely to any single event or period, no matter how profoundly tragic they may be – such as, for example, Stalin's deportation of Chechens and Ingush in 1944. Nevertheless, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that most of the causes of this conflict can be traced, in one way or another, to how Soviet nationality policy was implemented and the consequences it produced.

The crux of the matter is that Soviet nationality policy generated contradictions both in Chechnya and in Russia itself: in the former, it simultaneously fostered a modern Chechen political community and undermined its integration into the Soviet state through repression and deportation, while in the latter it left the R.S.F.S.R. without many of the institutions normally associated with republican statehood. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the interaction of these two legacies produced an explosive mixture.

In the Chechen case, having laid the foundations for a Chechen political community, the U.S.S.R. deported almost its entire population to Central Asia, and then, upon returning them in 1956, completely failed to establish even a relatively acceptable economic situation in the region. Because of this, the majority of the population – who lived outside the cities, where the privileged representatives of the Slavic peoples mainly worked – were left to fend for themselves. As a result, a situation arose in which the Soviet Union first ensured the existence of an entire political group living compactly in a small region, and then alienated it from itself and general context of the rest of the country. Naturally, this led to simmering resentment among a significant number of people and a small segment of the local intelligentsia.

Then, in the case of the R.S.F.S.R., the problem lay in Russia's unique position within the administrative structure of the Soviet Union. Under Soviet national policy, the Russian Federation was deprived of a normal republican system that could have been applied to an existence separate from the U.S.S.R. For this reason, Russia was forced to build its own institutions extremely quickly, which led to a great deal of chaos in governance and a lack of understanding of how powers should be distributed among the different branches of government. Ultimately, this

led to a major conflict between the parliament and the country's first president, Yeltsin, which the latter resolved by force, leaving no one in the Russian system who could veto his decisions.

Overlapping with similar processes of centralizing power in the hands of Dudaev in Chechnya shortly before, this event paved the way for war, as both leaders, to achieve their goals, were forced to rely on the more intransigent and bellicose elements of their own establishment. Radical supporters of both presidents promoted the same agenda, narrowing their leaders' room for maneuver with each passing month, while the stakes rose due to the actions of the Chechen opposition, which was supported by the Russian authorities and was acting with increasing aggression.

In addition, a purely ideological factor played an important role. The first president of independent Chechnya insisted until the very end on the application of the norms of late-Soviet national policy, which were based on the fact that Gorbachev, through one of his decrees, had granted equal rights to the national republics and a number of autonomous districts within the Russian Federation. Boris Yeltsin, meanwhile, having concluded agreements with other potentially separatist republics, was not prepared to tolerate within his nascent post-Soviet state a region that interpreted sovereignty as a right to secession. As a result, after yet another failed proxy operation, Yeltsin decided he would tolerate no more and issued a decree ordering the deployment of troops to Chechnya.

Thus, the First Chechen War became a clash between two concepts of sovereignty: one inherited from Soviet federalism, and the other rooted in the project of building a unified post-Soviet Russian state.

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Appendices

a. General Chronology

1722–1723 – Persian Campaign of Peter the Great strengthens Russian influence in the North Caucasus.

1763 – Construction of the fortress of Mozdok, marking the beginning of a permanent Russian military presence in the region.

1783 – Treaty of Georgievsk expands Russian involvement in Caucasian affairs.

1785–1791 – Sheikh Mansur leads the first major anti-Russian uprising in Chechnya and the North Caucasus.

1801 – Annexation of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti by the Russian Empire.

1817 – Beginning of the Caucasian War.

1834 – Imam Shamil becomes leader of the North Caucasian resistance.

1859 – Capture of Imam Shamil by Russian forces.

1864 – Official end of the Caucasian War.

1917 – Collapse of the Russian Empire following the February and October Revolutions.

1918 – Establishment of the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus.

1919 – Formation of the North Caucasus Emirate under Uzun-Hadji.

1920 – The Red Army occupies the North Caucasus and dismantles the Emirate.

1922 – Formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.).

1920s – Implementation of korenizatsiya (indigenization) policies in Chechnya and throughout the Soviet Union.

1929–1933 – Collectivization campaign reaches Chechnya.

1934 – Creation of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Oblast.

1936 – Transformation of the region into the Chechen-Ingush ASSR.

1937–1938 – Great Terror and mass political purges in Chechnya-Ingushetia.

1940–1944 – Insurgency led by Hasan Israilov against Soviet rule.

1944 – Deportation of the Chechen and Ingush populations and abolition of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR and creation of Grozny Oblast.

1953 – Death of Joseph Stalin.

1957 – Restoration of the Chechen-Ingush A.S.S.R. and beginning of the mass return of deported populations.

1958 – Ethnic unrest and riots in Grozny following the return of the Chechens and Ingush.

1960s–1980s – Reconstruction of the republic and emergence of a new Soviet-educated Chechen intelligentsia.

1985 – Mikhail Gorbachev launches perestroika and glasnost.

1990 – Formation of the All-National Congress of the Chechen People (OKChN).

September–November 1991 – Dzhokhar Dudayev and his supporters seize power in Grozny.

December 1991 – Dissolution of the Soviet Union and creation of the Russian Federation.

1993 – Constitutional crises in both Russia and Chechnya lead to the concentration of power in presidential institutions.

November 1994 – Failed anti-Dudayev assault on Grozny supported by Moscow.

11 December 1994 – Russian forces enter Chechnya, marking the beginning of the First Chechen War.

b. Dramatis Personae

Peter the Great (1672–1725)

Tsar of Russia. Initiated the Persian Campaign of 1722–1723, marking one of the first major Russian military interventions in the Caucasus.

Sheikh Mansur (1760–1794)

Chechen religious and political leader who led the first major anti-Russian uprising in the North Caucasus between 1785 and 1791.

Imam Shamil (1797–1871)

Leader of the North Caucasian resistance during the Caucasian War and the third Imam of the Caucasian Imamate.

Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924)

Founder of the Soviet state. Developed the Bolshevik approach to the national question and the principle of national self-determination.

Joseph Stalin (1878–1953)

Soviet leader from the late 1920s until his death. Oversaw collectivization, the Great Terror, and the 1944 deportation of the Chechen and Ingush peoples.

Hasan Israilov (?–1944)

Chechen nationalist and leader of the anti-Soviet insurgency that operated in Chechnya during the Second World War.

Nikita Khrushchev (1894–1971)

Soviet leader who denounced Stalin's crimes and restored the Chechen-Ingush ASSR in 1957, enabling the return of the deported population.

Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–2022)

Last leader of the Soviet Union. His policies of perestroika and glasnost facilitated political liberalization and the rise of nationalist movements across the U.S.S.R.

Mintimer Shaimiev (1937–Present)

Leader of Tatarstan during the collapse of the Soviet Union and the 1990s. Successfully negotiated a power-sharing arrangement with Moscow, avoiding armed conflict.

Dzhokhar Dudayev (1944–1996)

Former Soviet Air Force General and first President of the self-proclaimed Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Central figure in Chechnya's secessionist movement and principal opponent of Moscow before the First Chechen War.

Ruslan Khasbulatov (1942–2023)

Ethnic Chechen politician and Chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet. One of Boris Yeltsin's principal opponents during the constitutional crisis of 1993.

Boris Yeltsin (1931–2007)

First President of the Russian Federation. Led Russia through the collapse of the Soviet Union, the constitutional crisis of 1993, and the decision to intervene militarily in Chechnya in 1994.

Pavel Grachev (1948–2012)

Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation. One of the key architects of the military operation against Chechnya in 1994.

Shamil Basayev (1965–2006)

Chechen field commander who emerged as one of the most influential military leaders during the First Chechen War.

Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev (1952–2004)

Chechen nationalist politician and close associate of Dudayev. Played an important role in the ideological development of the Chechen independence movement.

Umar Avturkhanov (1946–Present)

Leader of the Provisional Council of the Chechen Republic (PCCR), the principal anti-Dudayev opposition group supported by Moscow in 1993–1994.

c. Glossary

Aul – A traditional mountain village in the Caucasus, often characterized by strong kinship ties and communal organization.

A.S.S.R. (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) – An autonomous republic within a Soviet republic. The Chechen-Ingush ASSR existed within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (R.S.F.S.R.).

Chechen-Ingush ASSR – The autonomous republic established for the Chechen and Ingush peoples within the R.S.F.S.R. It existed from 1936 to 1944 and again from 1957 to 1991.

Collectivization – Soviet policy introduced under Joseph Stalin that consolidated private farms into collective agricultural enterprises under state control.

Gazavat – A term used in the North Caucasus to describe a religious struggle or holy war, particularly in the context of resistance against Russian expansion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Glasnost – A policy introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s promoting greater openness, freedom of expression, and public discussion within the Soviet Union.

Indigenization (Korenizatsiya) – A Soviet nationality policy of the 1920s that promoted local languages, cultures, and national elites within the non-Russian republics and autonomous regions.

Ingush – A North Caucasian people closely related to the Chechens. Together they formed the titular nationalities of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR.

Kulak – A term used by Soviet authorities to describe relatively prosperous peasants, many of whom were dispossessed during collectivization.

OKChN (All-National Congress of the Chechen People) – Political movement established during the late Soviet period that became the principal vehicle for Chechen nationalism and brought Dzhokhar Dudaev to power in 1991.

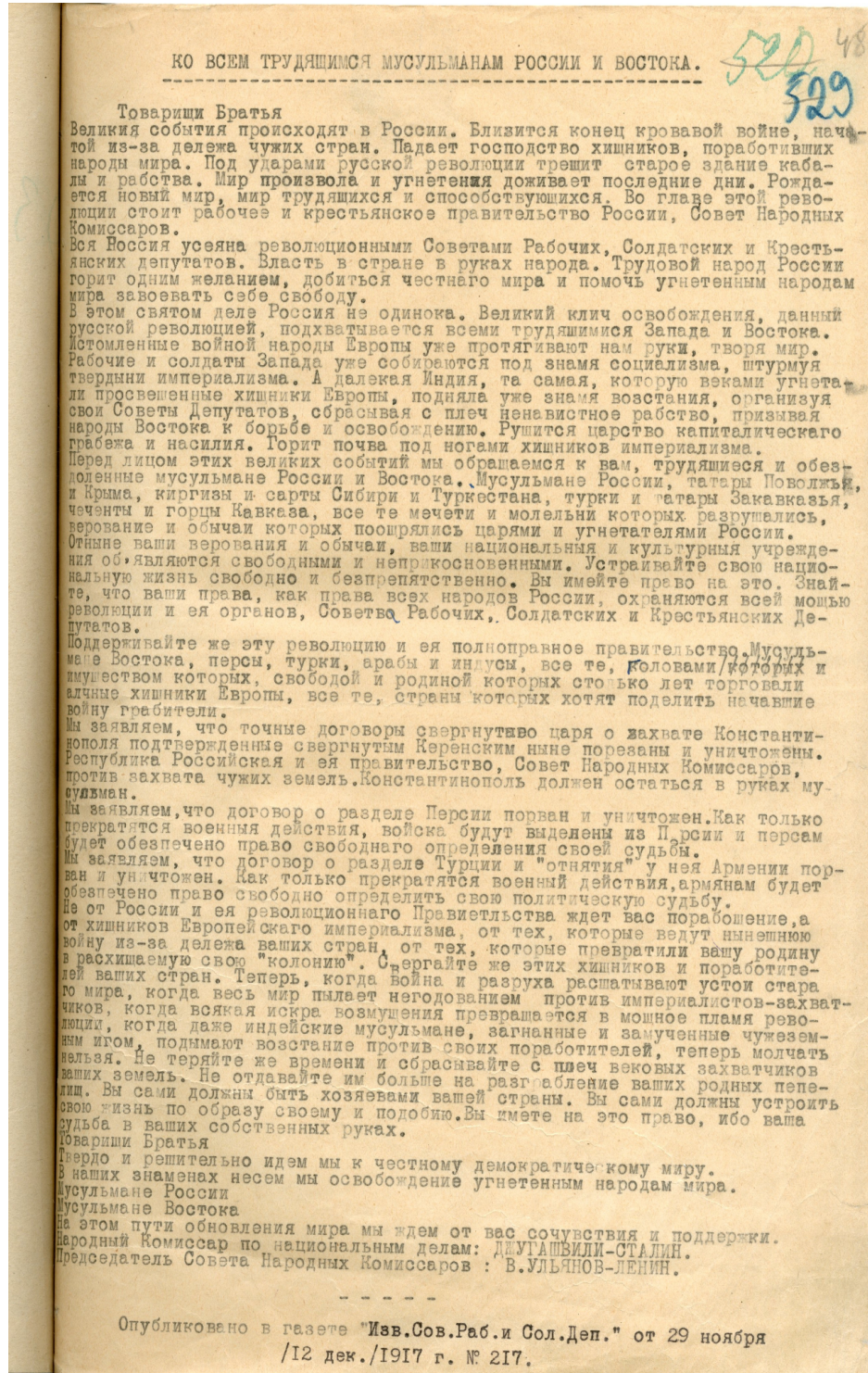
Perestroika – A programme of political and economic reforms initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s.

R.S.F.S.R. (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) – The largest constituent republic of the Soviet Union and the predecessor state of the Russian Federation.

Vainakh – Collective term referring to the Chechen and Ingush peoples, who share closely related languages, culture, and historical origins.

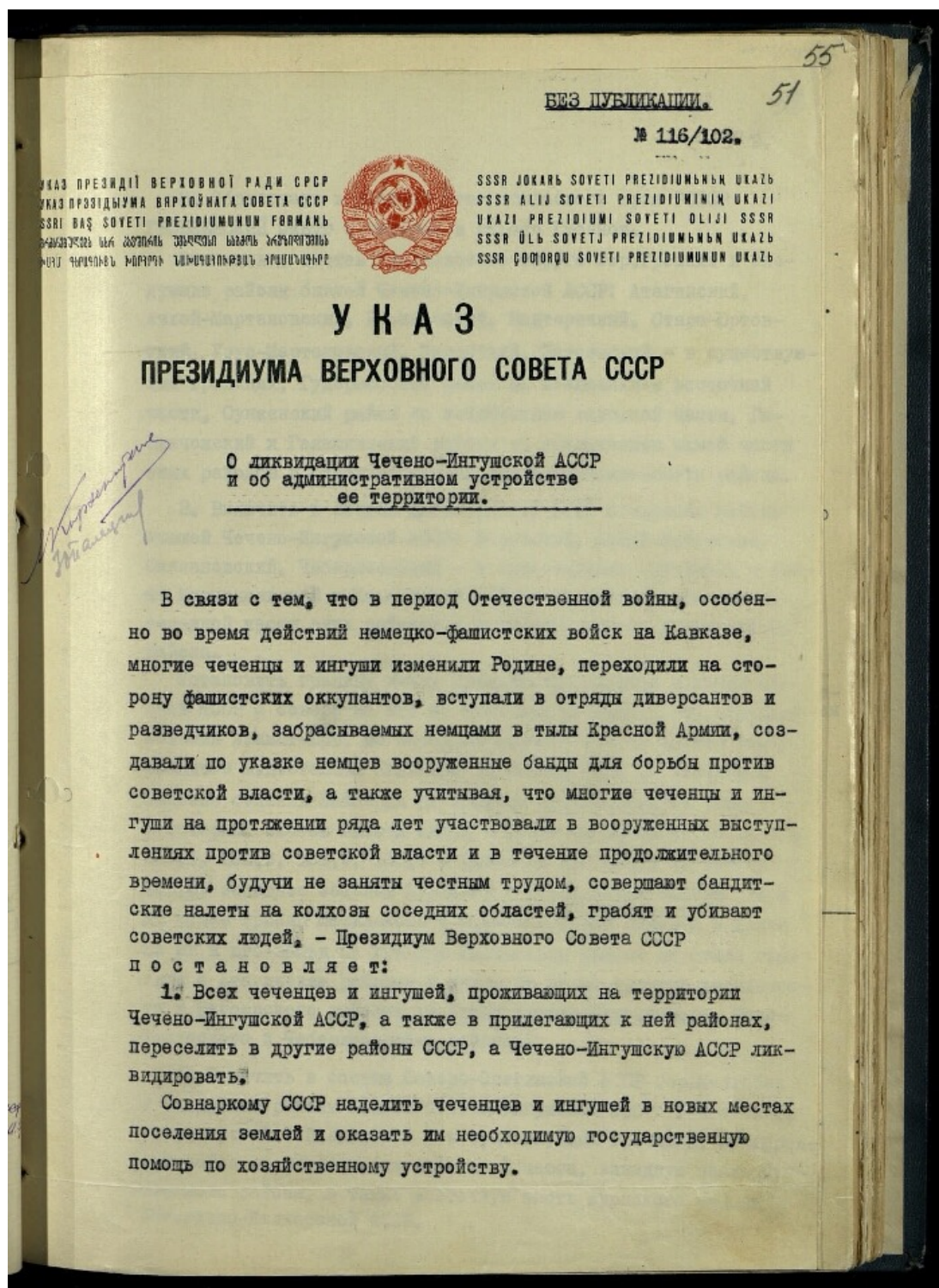
d. Documents

1. The Appeal of the Soviet Government "To All Working Muslims of Russia and the East" (24 November 1917)²¹¹



²¹¹ <https://islamperspectives.org/rpi/items/show/11587> (Last Access: 5 June 2026)

2. Decree on the Abolition of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic and on the Administrative Organization of Its Territory (7 March 1944)²¹²



²¹² <https://www.prlib.ru/item/1954997> (Last Access 5 June 2026)

3. Decree on the Removal of Special Settlement Restrictions from Chechens, Ingush, Karachays, and Their Family Members Deported during the Great Patriotic War (16 July 1956)²¹³

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Без опубликования в печати

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УКАЗ
ПРЕЗИДИУМА ВЕРХОВНОГО СОВЕТА СССР

ЮРИДИЧЕСКИЙ ОТДЕЛ

Дата: ____ год

**РАБОЧНОЕ БЮРО
ПО ЗАКОНОДАТЕЛЬСТВУ**

О снятии ограничений по спецпоселению
с чеченцев, ингушей, карачаевцев и
членов их семей, выселенных в период
Великой Отечественной войны

Учитывая, что существующие ограничения в правовом положении находящихся на спецпоселении чеченцев, ингушей, карачаевцев и членов их семей, выселенных в период Великой Отечественной войны с Северного Кавказа, в дальнейшем не вызываются необходимостью, Президиум Верховного Совета СССР **п о с т а н о в л я е т**:

1. Снять с учета спецпоселений и освободить из-под административного надзора органов Министерства внутренних дел СССР чеченцев, ингушей, карачаевцев и членов их семей, выселенных на спецпоселение в период Великой Отечественной войны.
2. Установить, что снятие ограничений по спецпоселению с лиц, перечисленных в статье первой настоящего Указа, не влечет за собой возвращение им имущества, конфискованного при выселении, и что они не имеют права возвращаться в места, откуда были выселены.

Председатель Президиума
Верховного Совета СССР – К.ВОРОШИЛОВ.

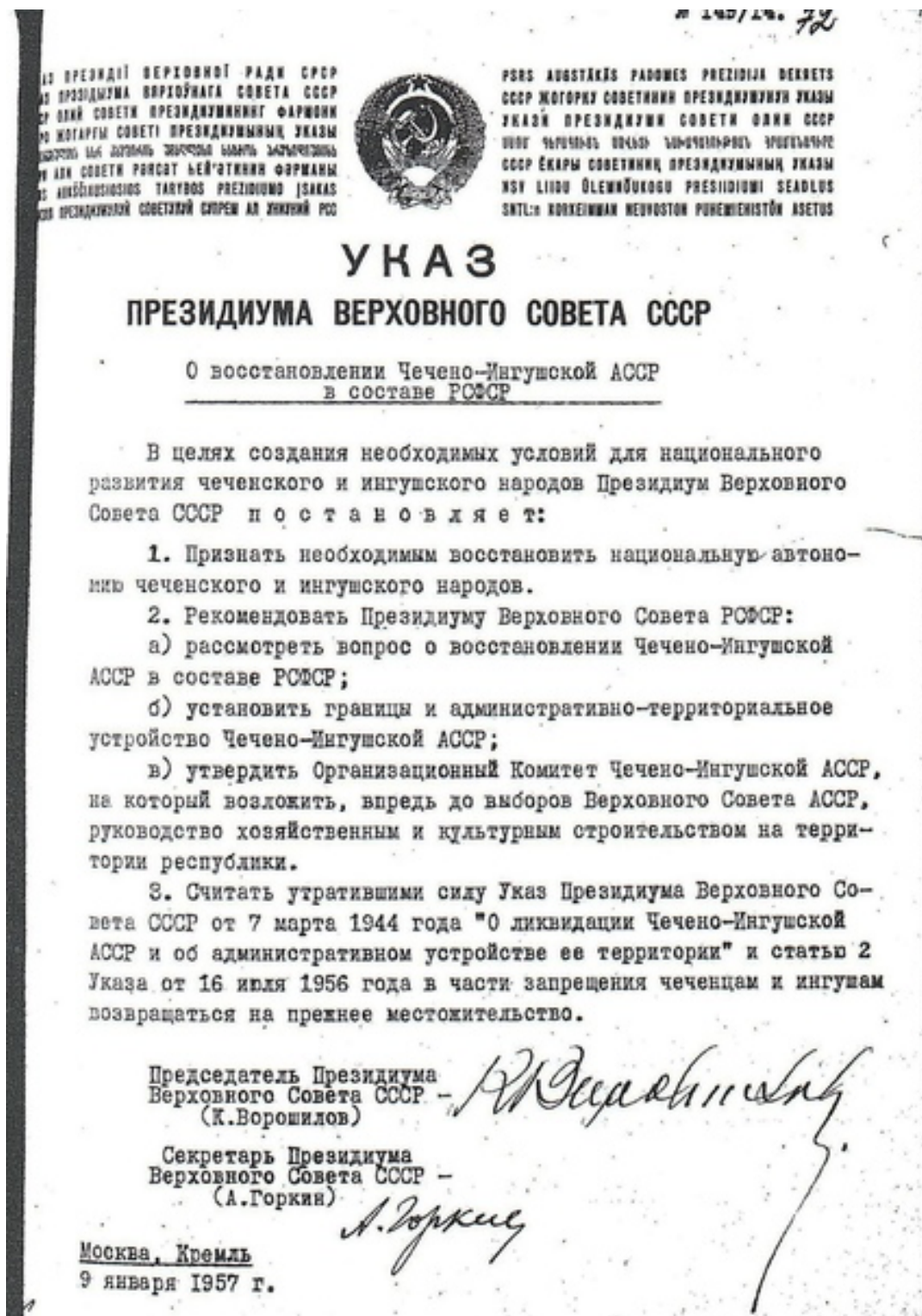
Секретарь Президиума
Верховного Совета СССР – Н.ПЕГОВ.

Москва, Кремль
16 июля 1956 г.

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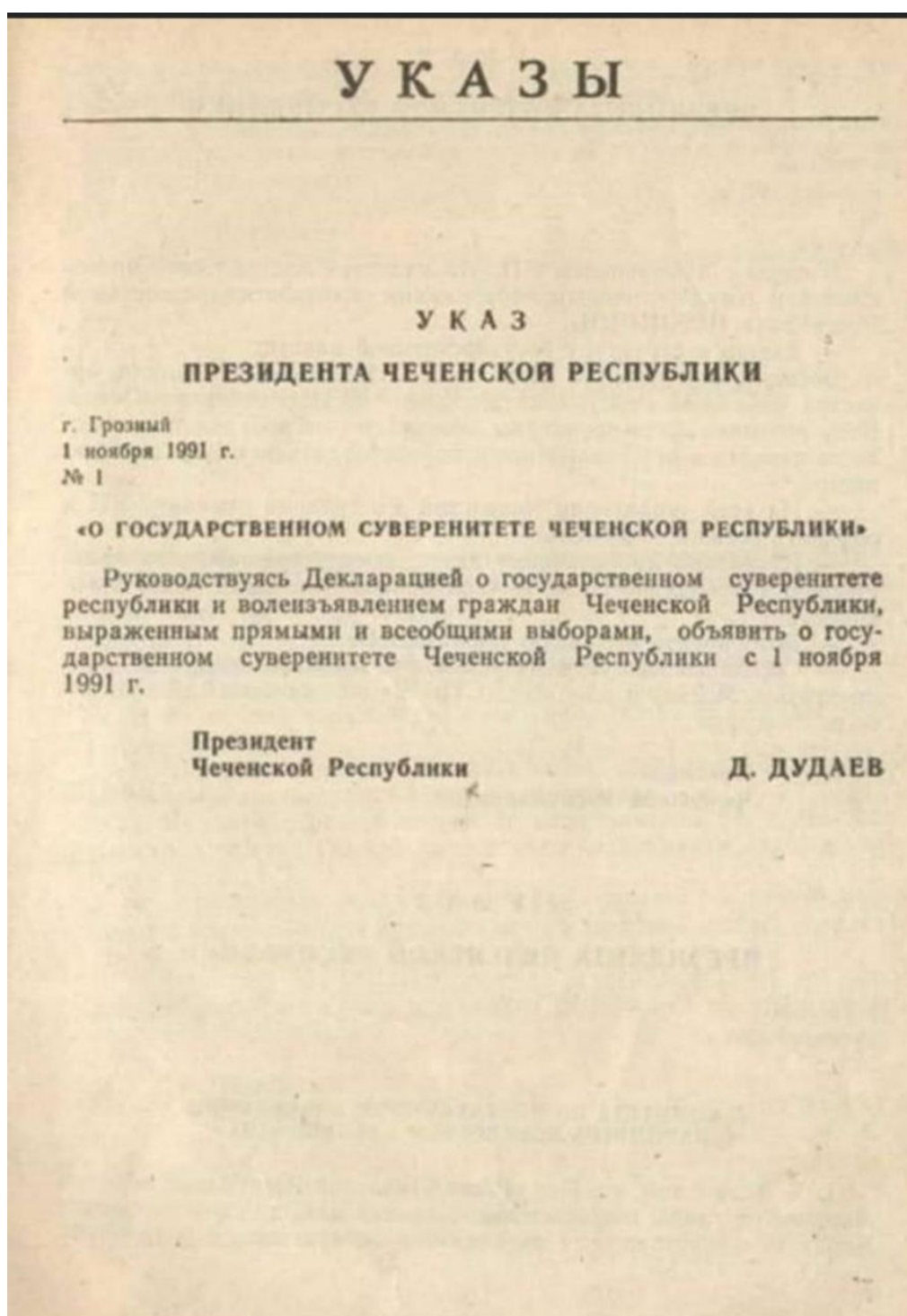
²¹³ https://portal.rusarchives.ru/evants/exhibitions/xx_f/79.shtml (Last Accessed: 5 June 2026).

4. Decree on the Restoration of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the R.S.F.S.R. (9 January 1957) ²¹⁴



²¹⁴ <https://vesti095.ru/2022/01/65-let-istoricheskomu-resheniyu-o-vosstanovlenii-checheno-ingushskoj-assr/> (Accessed 5 June, 2026).

5. Decree on the State Sovereignty of the Chechen Republic (1 November 1991)²¹⁵



²¹⁵ https://static15.tgcnt.ru/posts/_0/3e/3e40d48e7149924c8fc3f688ea50cea0.jpg (Last Access 5 Jun 2026)

e. Pledge of Honesty

Master's Thesis

*On my honor as a student of the Diplomatische Akademie Wien,
I submit this work in good faith and pledge that I have neither
given nor received unauthorized assistance on it.*

Author: Fedor Agapov
June 5, 2026

f. Vita

Fedor Agapov is a German-Russian Master's candidate at the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna, pursuing the Master of Advanced International Studies (M.A.I.S.) program. Born in Orenburg, Russia, and raised in Neuss, Germany, he received his Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the University of Amsterdam in 2022.

Prior to his graduate studies, he worked as a freelance journalist and as a producer for the independent Russian television channel *TV Rain* in Amsterdam. His articles and reports have been published in Russian-language media outlets, including *Novaya Gazeta Europe* and *DOXA*, as well as in German-language publications such as *Republik*, *nd.aktuell*, and *Jacobin*. His journalistic work focuses primarily on Russian foreign and domestic policy.

His master's thesis, titled "*Nurture and Punish: How Soviet Nationality Policy Shaped the Path to the First Chechen War of 1994*," reflects his broader research interests in the relationship between national identity, state institutions, and political conflicts.

He speaks English, German, and Russian.

g. Acknowledgements

I dedicate this thesis to my sister, who is about to welcome a child into the world – an event against which the history of any tyrant fades into insignificance.

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