THE Chechen Wars

Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?

Matthew Evangelista

BROOKINGS INSTITUTION PRESS
Washington, D.C.

1 Introduction

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

—Robert V. Daniels, 1997

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the Russian side, leadership- or personality-based explanations for the second war focus on the electoral ambitions of Vladimir Putin. Appointed prime minister when the war began, he saw his popularity soar the cruder his language became and the harsher his army's response to the Chechen situation. When Yeltsin resigned the presidency on the eve of the New Year 2000, he chose Putin as his designated successor. The popularity of the war made Putin unbeatable in the March 2000 presidential elections. Not surprisingly, he voiced no regrets about resuming the war, even though it meant breaking the peace agreements his predecessor had signed. "I do not have a second of doubt that we are doing the right thing," Putin maintained. "Maybe we should be even tougher."[9]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In fact, across the political spectrum in Russia observers have identified the same core regions as being "at risk" for secession in the wake of the Chechen conflict. Galina Starovoitova, who once advised Yeltsin on ethnic affairs, predicted at the outset of the first war that the "crude use" of "notorious tools of imperial policy," would "produce mistrust of the center's policy and centrifugal tendencies." She expressed particular concern about the republics with large Muslim populations, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Vladimir Putin, while himself making the crudest use of Russian military "tools," justified the resort to force as a means of maintaining control of regions at risk of separation. "I have never for a second believed," said Putin, "that Chechnya would limit itself to its own independence. It would become a beachhead for further attacks on Russia." If the Chechen rebels had remained in power, "they would have swallowed up Dagestan, and that would have been the beginning of the end. The entire Caucasus would have followed—Dagestan, Ingushetiia, and then up along the Volga river to Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, reaching deep into the country."[17]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Yeltsin's War

Armed intervention is impermissible and must not be done. Were we to apply pressure of force against Chechnya, the whole Caucasus would rise up and there would be such turmoil and blood that no one would ever forgive us. It is absolutely impossible.

—Boris Yeltsin, August 1994

This was Yeltsin's private war because the government did not declare war and the parliament did not declare war. The entire war was carried out according to the commands and decrees of one political figure.

—Ruslan Khasbulatov, April 1996

The origins of the Russian invasion of Chechnya in late 1994 are complicated and still somewhat mysterious, despite the availability of memoir accounts, interviews, and some documents. In one respect, however, there is no mystery. This was Boris Yeltsin's war—to win, to lose, or to avoid altogether, if he had so chosen. In one volume of his memoirs, Yeltsin claimed: "I never shirked responsibility in the course of the Chechen campaign, even when other people gave the orders. I took responsibility upon myself." That characterization takes considerable liberties with the truth. In the midst of some of the toughest situations, when key decisions had to be made, Yeltsin would be traveling abroad or convalescing in a hospital. Indeed, at the very outset of the war, when Russian troops invaded Chechnya in December 1994, Yeltsin disappeared from sight in order to have an operation on his nose. Yet, even if only in retrospect, Yeltsin is willing "to take responsibility—for the storming of Grozny, for the bomb attacks, and

for their cessation." That is as it should be.[1] The history of the conflict in Chechnya from 1994 to 1996, to the extent that one can piece it together, demonstrates that this was truly Yeltsin's war.

Background to War

Russia and Chechnya share a long history of conflict, from invasion and colonial rule during the Tsarist era through mass deportations and repression under Stalin. That shared history did not predetermine the outbreak of war in 1994, but it does go some way toward explaining the Chechens' desire for greater independence as the Soviet Union disintegrated. There is also, however, a long history of Russian-Chechen cooperation in the North Caucasus. During the Soviet era many Chechens received higher education, joined professions, and moved to urban centers outside their homeland. If not for the economic collapse of the USSR, many Chechens might have continued along this trajectory to a modern cosmopolitan life-style, leaving the ways of the guerrilla fighter in the distant past. Instead, the demise of Soviet order and the policies of Russian and Chechen leaders brought about the renewal of violent conflict. In this context, a brief history of Russian-Chechen relations provides a useful background to discussion of Yeltsin's war.

The Tsarist Legacy

Russia's first military encounter with Chechnya came in 1722, when Chechen fighters routed a cavalry force sent there by Peter the Great. Later in the century, Chechen resistance to Russian influence was led by Sheikh Mansur, a religious and military leader who launched a *gazavat*, or "holy war," against corrupt Muslims and Russian interlopers. Mansur's followers were dismissed by Russian military authorities as ignorant scoundrels and "ragamuffins," much as Russian leaders would use equally demeaning language two centuries later to characterize Chechens as bandits and terrorists.

The legacy of antagonistic relations between Chechnya and the Russian government contributes much to understanding the sources of the outbreak of violence in Chechnya in the 1990s. This is not to say that immutable ancient hatreds made conflict inevitable. Although Russia's strategic objective to control the North Caucasus region dates back two centuries, its methods have varied. Efforts at co-opting and integrating the peoples of the region alternated with heavy-handed repression that incited

hatred. A constant theme has been the counterproductive nature of Russia's military actions. The blunt military instrument most often served to alienate potential allies and turn an indifferent population against the Russian authorities.[2]

The first serious attempt to subdue Chechnya followed in the wake of Russia's annexation of Georgia in 1801 and the outbreak of war with Turkey in 1807. Russian authorities advanced strategic arguments to justify expansion, particularly the need to secure the route from Vladikavkaz to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, through the Darial Pass. The effort to incorporate the mountain peoples of the region into the Russian Empire was led by General Aleksei Ermolov. The policies he pursued represent the worst of Russian approaches to the Chechens, and they set the precedent for subsequent crimes of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. Under Soviet rule, the Communist Party tended to portray Ermolov as the symbol of an enlightened civilizing mission. The Chechens, some of whom sought to blow up a statue of the general in Grozny in 1969, knew better.

Ermolov advocated a strategy of economic warfare against the recalcitrant mountaineers, destroying their crops and burning their villages. His forces perpetrated massacres against unarmed villagers and carried out the first mass deportation of Chechens, including sending captured prisoners into exile in Siberia. Mountain peoples who had moved to the fertile land between the Terek and Sunzha Rivers were driven back up into the mountains, reversing a trend toward the more "progressive" economic and political practices that had followed the migration. As one historian puts it, "By forcing the Chechens back up into the inhospitable mountains, Ermolov returned them to an economically and socially primitive state, thereby ensuring the existence of a fierce and dedicated opponent for the Russian Empire over the next half century (and beyond)."[3]

Paradoxically, Ermolov's military and economic policies "led gradually to a consolidation of Chechen society." The destruction of Chechen villages and other "harsh punitive actions drove many Chechens into the arms" of Islamic leaders such as Kazi Mullah and the legendary Shamil'.[4] The Russian government during the tsarist era carried out three major deportations, setting the precedent for Stalin's genocidal actions against the Chechen people in the 1940s. The deportations failed to break Chechen resistance and instead contributed to an abiding attachment to the homeland and a smoldering sense of grievance. Chechens, whose primary loyalty was typically local, formed their sense of a "national" identity mainly in opposition to Russian offensives.

Deportations and Restoration

The Soviet era brought some measure of industrial and modern life to the Chechens along with the worst catastrophe of their history, the mass deportations to Central Asia and elsewhere ordered by Stalin in 1943–44. Indeed, the two issues are linked. As one account describes, the deportations "unwillingly dragged thousands of Chechens into the modern era, transforming them from a mountain farming people into a scattered diaspora."[5]

The proposal to abolish the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) and expel its population was discussed at a meeting of the Politburo on February 11, 1943. The only disagreement came over whether to expel the people immediately or wait until Hitler's armies had been completely driven from the North Caucasus. No one opposed the deportation in principle. Nikita Khrushchev, who later criticized and reversed Stalin's decision, favored waiting for defeat of the Germans in the region. Anastas Mikoian expressed concern about the USSR's reputation abroad.[6]

At the height of World War II, the Stalinist regime carried out a number of such deportations on the basis of ethnic identity. Accusations of "mass treason" for collaboration with Nazi forces were based on dubious evidence. Many people were deported from regions that the German armies never reached, including Chechnya itself.[7] More than a million Soviet citizens of German ancestry (whose families had lived in Russia for generations) were sent from their homes in the Volga region and Ukraine to Siberia and Central Asia. Next Stalin's attention turned to the "small peoples" of the North Caucasus: the Karachai, Kalmyk, Balkar, and others.

The deportation of the Chechens and Ingush was the most ambitious operation after the Volga Germans. About 500,000 people were rounded up, starting in the middle of the night of February 22–23, 1944, and packed into trains. Some 12,525 railway carriages were used, fewer than expected: because so many of the deportees turned out to be children, they could be packed in more tightly than adults. The lack of food, toilets, or washing facilities produced an epidemic of typhoid. The harsh winter at their destination in Kazakhstan further decimated the population of deportees. Between the deportation itself and the conditions of exile, about a quarter of the deported population had perished within five years of their arrival, according to official statistics.[8]

In the mid-1950s, following Stalin's death, Chechens and others began making their way back to their homelands in the North Caucasus. Finally in 1956, Stalin's successors, led by Nikita Khrushchev, officially permitted the deported groups to leave their places of exile, but discouraged them from claiming their former property and tried to prevent them from returning to the sites of their (destroyed) ancestral villages in the mountains.[9]

In 1957 the Soviet authorities reestablished a homeland for the Chechens and Ingush. The Checheno-Ingush ASSR was created by transferring back territory formerly assigned to the Dagestan ASSR and the North Ossetian ASSR, as well as the area around the former capital of Grozny, which after the deportation had become a mainly Russian region (*oblast'*). Some of the territory of the Grozny *oblast'* that had formerly belonged to Checheno-Ingushetiia was transferred to Dagestan and Stavropol' district (*krai*).[10] Intentionally or not, the new arrangement led to a dilution of the Chechen population within the autonomous republic—41 percent, compared with 58.4 percent in 1939.[11] It also created conditions for competing territorial claims among the various other ethnic groups, leading to violence in some cases as the Soviet Union disintegrated.

The Chechens were not unique in their experience of harsh, even genocidal treatment and deportation under the Soviet regime. Yet "they were the largest nation on a compact territory to be deported and then allowed to return." Although other small deported groups attempted to mobilize on national grounds as the USSR broke up in 1991, it was the Chechens who had "force of numbers as well as the fresh historical grievance that pushed them into open separatism."[12]

The End of the Soviet Era

"The Chechen Republic's transition from spontaneous anticommunism to the idea and policy of state sovereignty was not smooth." That understatement comes from Taimaz Abubakarov, minister of economics and finance in the Chechen government of President Dzhokhar Dudaev during the first half of the 1990s. It encompasses several points that have characterized the debate over the sources of the first Chechen War.[13] First, a key factor in the political mobilization within Chechnya, as in much of the rest of the Soviet Union, was not only or primarily nationalism, but *anticommunism.* It is not so much the values theoretically associated with communism—such as collective property and egalitarian economic and social structures—that Chechens, along with most other Soviet citizens, found objectionable. Nor was it necessarily an ideological objection to the Soviet Communist Party itself. Dudaev, who joined the party in 1968 as a military officer and was considered by his subordinates to have been an extremely loyal member, never formally resigned.[14] For Dudaev and his fellow Chechens, the aspects of "communism" that elicited the most resist-

ance were the hypercentralization and inefficiency of the political and economic system directed from Moscow, and the secrecy and hypocrisy of political life. Indeed, these were the main objections of Russians and non-Russians throughout the USSR.

With the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* reforms, residents of Chechnya mobilized to support the goals of decentralization, economic change, and political activity that Gorbachev's program came to represent. Some of them seized on nationalist symbols, but others chose other banners—such as the Green ecology movement—to oppose the structure of Moscow-dominated communist authority.[15] In 1989 that structure was represented by Doku Zavgaev, the first secretary of the Communist Party in the Chechen-Ingush Republic, in effect, the top leader and representative of Moscow. Zavgaev, though an ethnic Chechen, was cautious in asserting Chechnya's rights. He was, however, apparently instrumental in advocating that Moscow promote for the first time ever a Chechen military officer to the rank of general. Thus Dzhokhar Dudaev owed his status as a Soviet general to his soon-to-be nemesis.[16]

In other regions of Russia, including autonomous republics such as Tatarstan, former communist leaders managed to reinvent themselves in the face of nationalist pressures and remain in control. Zavgaev, however, was outmaneuvered by his opponents among what Timur Muzaev, the most authoritative chronicler of these events, has called the radical nationalists. First they formed the Vainakh Party, from the word Chechens use to refer to themselves and the Ingush, who speak a related language. Then they convoked a Chechen National Congress in November 1990 and invited the recently promoted General Dudaev—who had never lived in Chechnya—to head the nationalist movement.[17]

Responding to the radical nationalists three days after the close of the Chechen National Congress, the Supreme Soviet of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR issued a "Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Chechen-Ingush Republic." Despite the declaration, officials of the Supreme Soviet—the political institution still formally part of the USSR's system of government—intended that the republic maintain close relations with Russia. The radicals, now led by Dudaev, had other ideas. They favored secession and linking Chechnya to neighboring Muslim republics in a North Caucasus confederation. The first half of 1991 saw an increasing division between the radical nationalists determined to break with Russia and a more moderate wing of the Chechen nationalist movement. According to Muzaev, "The second session of the Chechen National Congress, summoned by Dudaev and his adherents in Grozny on 8–9 June 1991, marked the triumph of the radicals."[18] Renamed the National Congress of the Chechen People, its executive committee, with Dudaev as its head, emerged as the main rival to the Supreme Soviet.

Communist authorities in Moscow followed the developments in Grozny and accurately reported the goals of Dudaev's movement as the "self-dissolution of the current structure of the Supreme Soviet of the Checheno-Ingush Republic, carrying out new elections and the creation of a sovereign national state." But, at least judging by the Central Committee documents that have been declassified, the communist officials seemed more worried about the claims from Ingush political leaders for "restoration of the autonomous region [*avtonomii*] of the Ingush people and its original historical borders." They feared, presciently as it turned out, conflicts between Ingush and Ossets over the Prigorodnyi district—traditional Ingush lands that were then part of North Ossetiia—and the outmigration of Russian speakers (see map 2-1, p. 23).[19] Yet by and large Gorbachev's advisers in the Central Committee seemed more concerned about the heterodox nationalist proposals of the communist leader Doku Zavgaev—made, in part, in reaction to the more extreme positions espoused by his rival Dudaev—than about Dudaev himself.[20]

The big opportunity for the opponents of Moscow's rule came with the failed coup against Soviet president Gorbachev in August 1991. Zavgaev and the local communist authorities in Grozny had failed to condemn the coup plotters, who sought to reverse Gorbachev's reforms, especially his proposal for a new Union Treaty to create a less centralized, confederation of republics to replace the USSR. They thereby discredited themselves in the eyes of increasingly nationalist and anticommunist Chechens as well as among the supporters of Russian president Boris Yelstin, whose symbolic role in defeating the coup had made him a hero.

Demonstrations in Grozny apparently convinced Yeltsin's circle that Zavgaev and the Soviet-era authorities had to go. It is a matter of some dispute as to how widespread the opposition to Zavgaev actually was. Valerii Tishkov reports that the demonstrations in Sheikh Mansur Square (formerly Lenin Square) in Grozny did not have an obvious political objective: "These were not political actions, but rather a demonstration of solidarity, free spirit or libertarianism, and militancy, mobilized and directed by local leaders." Demonstrators were apparently paid "100 rubles per day (at that time a rather significant sum); livestock was specially slaughtered and meat was constantly being prepared in the Square. Men who were not otherwise employed (there were few women at the Chechen demonstrations)—basically the older generations—were the backbone of

the demonstration and guaranteed its spirit by performing the traditional *zikr*" dance. On Russian television the same faces kept appearing at the demonstrations, ostensibly directed at the remnants of Soviet power.[21]

In the meantime, Dudaev's supporters seized government buildings and the radio and television center. They disrupted a session of the Supreme Soviet and caused the death of Viktor Kutsenko, the elderly head of the Grozny City Council and an ethnic Russian, who was either thrown out of a window or fell trying to escape.[22] In response to the demonstrations and violence, Zavgaev demanded that Moscow authorize forces to disperse the demonstrators and restore order, but Yeltsin's government decided otherwise.

On September 14, 1991, Ruslan Khasbulatov arrived in Grozny from Moscow. Khasbulatov, an ethnic Chechen, was chair of the Russian Supreme Soviet, parliamentary deputy from Checheno-Ingushetiia, and at the time still an ally of Yeltsin. He persuaded Zavgaev and the members of the Chechen-Ingush Supreme Soviet to abolish that body, to resign their positions, and to establish a temporary council that would rule until new parliamentary elections could be held on November 17.[23]

No sooner had Khasbulatov returned to Moscow than Dudaev and his supporters attempted to usurp power from the temporary council. They stormed the republic's KGB headquarters and seized its cache of weapons, reportedly with the acquiescence of Moscow authorities. At this point, according to Tishkov, "some misgivings began to appear among the Muscovite initiators of 'decommunization' of Chechnya about the increasingly independent behavior shown by Dudaev. As Khasbulatov later admitted, he 'spoke with Yeltsin about adding one more star to Dudaev's shoulder-strap and returning him to the army'" to get him out of Chechnya. In fact, the Russian air force chief Petr Deinekin evidently offered Dudaev promotion to a high command position if he would stay in the service. "The highest position for me," Dudaev reportedly answered, "is as an ordinary Chechen."[24]

With its support of Dudaev, and its abandonment of Doku Zavgaev, "Moscow played a decisive role in the overthrow of the old regime and in the coming to power of national-radical elements."[25] Another Russian political observer similarly argues that if Yeltsin's assistants, "responsible for nationalities problems had understood the nature of processes going on in the North Caucasus, they in turn would not have facilitated the rise of Dudaev to power in Chechnya. It's possible that there would have been no crisis, and no first or second war."[26] A well-informed Russian military official even speculates that, like communist-era leaders in Tatarstan and

Bashkortostan, who remained in power by embracing the rhetoric of nationalism and autonomy, Zavgaev could have done the same if not for Moscow's precipitate support of Dudaev. "It's possible that he would have calmly held power for more than another decade if not for the Muscovite purveyors of misfortune having planted the thought with the Chechens of the necessity of an obligatory change of the *ancien régime.*"[27]

Dudaev took advantage of the "social anarchy" that prevailed in Chechnya, as one of his erstwhile supporters described it, but his actions were not widely popular.[28] In fact, they met opposition from a wide range of Chechen nationalist organizations. On September 25,1991, ten groups formed a round table to demand that Dudaev's executive committee halt its efforts to displace the temporary council and seize power.[29] They were too late. On October 8 Dudaev's National Congress of the Chechen People declared itself the sole authority in the republic. On October 19 Boris Yeltsin—the president of a Russia still formally part of the Soviet Union—wrote to the leaders of the National Congress demanding that they relinquish control of the government buildings they had seized, return weapons to the interior ministry, disarm the "illegally created armed formations," and hold elections as scheduled on November 17.[30]

Instead, Dudaev and his allies followed their own plan. They preemptively held elections on October 27 for parliament and the president. Accounts of the elections differ dramatically. Dudaev's executive committee claimed that 77 percent of the eligible electorate participated and that 85 percent voted for Dudaev.[31] According to Tishkov, voting took place in only 70 of the republic's 360 electoral districts, with a turnout of only 10–12 percent, but Dudaev did emerge as the winner among three candidates and declared himself president.[32] One of his first acts was to issue a declaration of sovereignty of the Chechen Republic, thereby splitting it off from the autonomous republic that had included Ingushetiia.

On November 2, 1991, the Russian parliament (Congress of People's Deputies) pronounced the Chechen elections illegal, and five days later Yeltsin declared a state of emergency in the republic and dispatched 2,500 interior ministry troops. Dudaev responded by declaring martial law and mobilizing forces for the defense of Chechen sovereignty. Under threat of Russian invasion, most of Dudaev's erstwhile opponents rallied to his side, a phenomenon that was repeated under his successor when Russia invaded again in 1999. At this point, most of the military means to enforce a state of emergency in Chechnya were still nominally under the control of the USSR, not Russia, and personally subject to the decision of the Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev's ambivalence about the use of vio-

lence and his rivalry with Yeltsin led him to hesitate. In the meantime the Russian parliament rescinded Yeltsin's order to use force, reflecting the emerging political competition between its chair, Khasbulatov, and the Russian president. As historian Fiona Hill described, "Soviet television subsequently showed several hundred Russian troops leaving Grozny in tourist buses, as Chechen national guardsmen fired automatic weapons in the air in celebration."[33]

Not for the last time, threatening but indecisive Russian actions gave Dudaev a welcome boost. As one opposition critic complained, "before 9 November Dudaev was zero. Afterwards he became a national hero."[34] One could easily imagine other circumstances that would have hindered his success in consolidating power and driving out the former legal authorities. The constitutional crisis in the USSR itself, as Yeltsin's Russia led the way to the breakup of the Soviet Union, had an evident impact. As one observer put it, "the Yeltsin-Gorbachev rivalry, which was about to come to a head, paralyzed the activity of the Center and indirectly contributed to promoting Chechen separatism."[35] In broader terms, however, the series of events that led the fifteen constituent republics of the USSR to become independent countries also had a psychological impact on the leaders and followers of the Chechen nationalist movement. Actions that were literally unthinkable a year earlier became plausible, if not fully realistic by the end of 1991.

Independent Chechnya

In December 1991 Boris Yeltsin consolidated his victory over Mikhail Gorbachev by collaborating with the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus to remove the Slavic core from the Soviet Union, triggering its disintegration into fifteen newly independent states. In Chechnya, General Dudaev took advantage of Yeltsin's distraction to consolidate his position and prepare for any future challenges to Chechen sovereignty. He gave priority to accumulating weapons and to ridding Chechen territory of Russian military forces, two interrelated goals, as it turned out.

Emerging out of the disintegrating Soviet Union, Chechnya suffered an unemployment rate of some 40 percent. Lack of work was a particularly serious problem for village dwellers.[36] Its main source of wealth—oil—saw a steady decline from peak production of 21 million tons in 1971 to a low of 4 million in 1991, with projections of further decline to 1.5–2.0 million tons by the year 2000.[37] Three-fourths of the goods produced in Chechnya, including oil products, were dependent on deliveries from Russia and

other countries of the former Soviet Union.[38] In focusing on what he knew best—war—Dudaev neglected everything else that Chechnya would need to become a viable political and economic entity, including good relations with Russia.

Arming the Chechen Revolution

Dudaev achieved the task of creating an arsenal of weapons with remarkable ease. Starting with at most a couple of thousand armed fighters—his "national guard"—he managed to intimidate the already demoralized remnants of the Soviet army stationed in Grozny. By February 1992 Dudaev's armed supporters had "moved into military settlements and began to control the activity of the Russian troops." In Grozny, General P. A. Sokolov, the last commander of the 173d Training Center of the North Caucasus Military District, had frequent encounters with Shamil' Basaev, the soon-to-be infamous guerrilla leader: He "was constantly sitting in my office, a real bandit who kept asking me to give him a machine gun."[39] The Chechens soon got a lot more than that.

On May 28, 1992, after months of intimidation by Chechen fighters, Russia's new defense minister, General Pavel Grachev, formally agreed to leave to Chechnya half of the weapons that had belonged to the Soviet armed forces.[40] According to some sources, "It was actually an attempt at a dignified cover-up of the fact that almost all the weapons had been lost," many of them apparently sold to Dudaev's representatives by retreating Russian soldiers and officers.[41] In fact, at least one press report implicated General Sokolov himself in the sale of weapons.[42] Others suggest that Dudaev paid bribes to key figures in the Yeltsin administration in return for access to arms.[43] In any case, Dudaev's forces inherited a sizable arsenal: 40,000 automatic weapons and machine guns, 153 cannons and mortars, 42 tanks, 18 Grad multiple rocket launchers, 55 armored personnel carriers, several training aircraft and helicopters, and 130,000 grenades.[44]

Because Chechnya did not possess a formal army, many of the weapons were dispersed throughout the population. They ended up in the hands of rival gangs, many of them oriented more toward crime than national defense. As the criminal activity spread beyond the borders of Chechnya into other parts of Russia, the Moscow authorities became increasingly determined to crush the Dudaev regime. In some respects, this very formulation—implying that Chechen-linked crimes originated in Chechnya—is misleading, since most Chechen gangs were originally part of networks based in Moscow and dominated by Russians. As journalist David Remnick put it, "there was no more criminal city in Russia than Moscow

itself (and presumably the air force would not be called out to level the Kremlin). Moscow was lousy with hit men and racketeers, millionaires who made their money out of protection scams, thugs who evicted old ladies from the apartments to 'hasten privatization.' There was a Chechen mob in Moscow, but it was one clan of many that had turned the capital into a kind of criminal bazaar."[45] Another writer, after tracing the origins of post-Soviet organized crime to Moscow and describing the mob wars there in the early 1990s, turned his attention to Chechnya: "The two conflicts were related," he argued. "The Chechen War was a gangster turf war writ large."[46] But after Dudaev came to power and Soviet Army weapons became widely dispersed, some Chechen groups sought deliberately to spread violence beyond Chechnya's borders. They helped discredit Dudaev's government and gave Russia a pretext to intervene on Chechen territory.

In fact there was no shortage of pretexts. Even though the Russian army withdrew from Chechnya in summer 1992, it soon resumed military pressure on the republic and nearly invaded in November. The division of Checheno-Ingushetiia had exacerbated conflicts between Ingush and Ossets over the Prigorodnyi district, as even Central Committee officials in Moscow had anticipated a year earlier. The conflict had already claimed hundreds of victims and had involved direct participation by the Ossetian National Guard. Ostensibly to prevent Chechen intervention in the conflict, the Russian army moved to the still undemarcated border between Chechnya and Ingushetiia. Viewing Russia's actions as a thinly disguised pretext for invasion, Chechnya mobilized its armed forces and received offers of up to 500,000 volunteers from elsewhere in the Caucasus. Moscow backed down and withdrew its troops.[47] Over the next two years, even as negotiations were conducted between the federal government and the breakaway republic, Moscow never abandoned its efforts to overthrow Dudaev's regime by force.

Negotiations, with and without Dudaev

In 1992 General Pavel Grachev, newly appointed minister of defense, put forward a proposal for resolving interethnic conflicts in the republics, one very different from the approach he adopted to deal with the Chechen crisis:

> It's necessary to meet more often. It's necessary to come, sit around the table and talk, discuss, to dig down to the root of the conflict and find a generally acceptable variant, a compromise. There's no other way. Bayonets and machine guns are not going to fix the economy or the political situation. I'm saying this—a person who has spent his whole life with weapons. It's surprising that people who consider themselves professional politicians don't understand this.[48]

Map 2-1. *Southern Russia and the Caucasus*

President Yeltsin failed to heed Grachev's advice. According to Colonel Viktor Baranets, a former adviser to the chief of the General Staff and later head of the Defense Ministry's press service, Yeltsin visited the Caucasus at least five times in the period 1992–94. "He went swimming in the sea, went hunting, went wine-tasting, played tennis. The only thing he didn't find the time for was to sit at a table with Dudaev and come to an agreement."[49]

The professional politicians in Moscow did undertake negotiations with representatives of Dudaev's government throughout the period from 1992 and even into the war.[50] Groups of "experts" from both sides met and

came close to agreement on a number of issues. It did not seem implausible that Chechnya could have worked out a modus vivendi with the federal government along the lines of what Tatarstan eventually achieved. Many idiosyncratic factors undoubtedly influenced the course of the negotiations and prevented such a hopeful outcome. The key factor, however, was General Dudaev and the Russian government's attitude toward him. Even while carrying out negotiations, the Yeltsin regime seemed to prefer a forceful solution. Whenever it could support an internal armed opposition to the Chechen president it would do so, no matter how near to resolution the ongoing negotiations appeared. Dudaev, in turn, would withdraw support from his negotiating team as he felt increasingly under threat by Moscow-supported oppositionists.

The main manifestation of Moscow's attitude toward Dudaev was a refusal to invite him to meet President Yeltsin personally. Historian John Dunlop attributes this policy primarily to Sergei Shakhrai, Yeltsin's minister of nationalities, whose own ethnic background as a Terek Cossack meant that he had "internalized that community's historic animus against the Chechens." Whatever the explanation, "the cornerstone of the Yeltsin-Shakhrai strategy for managing the Chechen crisis was to avoid all personal contact with Dudaev."[51]

Colonel Baranets placed more of the blame on Nikolai Egorov, Shakhrai's successor as minister of nationalities. "If one attentively follows the whole chain of Egorov's actions in the Chechen tragedy, one can find out without difficulty that he was one of the most powerful generators of the idea of a forceful solution to the conflict." The "change of power" that would be brought about with the violent overthrow of the Dudaev regime was "for him a vitally important principle."[52]

Ruslan Khasbulatov also deserves some responsibility for hindering efforts to arrange a face-to-face meeting between Yeltsin and Dudaev. After having helped bolster Dudaev's position during the autumn of 1991, Khasbulatov turned against him. But the former Yeltsin ally—and, as speaker of the parliament, a powerful political figure himself—had by 1992 turned against the Russian president as well. According to one analysis, Khasbulatov "regarded Chechnya as his own fiefdom and blocked attempts by others to negotiate with Dudaev." When Galina Starovoitova, the liberal Russian lawmaker, attempted to arrange for Dudaev to come to St. Petersburg to meet with Russian government officials, Khasbulatov objected. When Starovoitova next tried to phone Dudaev, who had reacted favorably to her initial proposals, she found the phone lines from

the parliament building to Grozny cut, presumably with Khasbulatov's blessing.[53]

Whether one prefers to blame Khasbulatov, Shakhrai, Egorov, Grachev, or any of the other hawks on Yeltsin's team, the ultimate responsibility for the invasion of Chechnya clearly rests with the Russian president himself. As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, Yeltsin acknowledged as much in one of his several autobiographies. He also justified his refusal to meet with Dudaev: the Chechen leader had "threatened Russia, blackmailing it with terrorist acts and explosions at military bases and nuclear plants. On principle, a person who proclaims such things should not and cannot be negotiated with."[54]

Dudaev said many provocative things, and even his supporters acknowledge that they contributed to turning Yeltsin against him.[55] Yet Dudaev also made conciliatory remarks, including ones that would suggest the basis for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. In autumn 1993, for example, he stated: "We consider at the current moment all the necessary conditions are at last in place for the renewal and successful conducting of negotiations with the government of Russia on a whole package of problems which concern our relations on the basis of principles of multilateral cooperation, friendship, and mutual help. Moreover we do not see strategically a place for the Chechen Republic outside the single economic, political and legal space which covers the current Commonwealth of Independent States."[56]

Unfortunately, Dudaev made these conciliatory remarks at an inauspicious time. In autumn 1993 Yeltsin was distracted by the conflict with his opposition, led by Khasbulatov, in the parliament (Supreme Soviet). He ultimately resolved it by deploying force, disbanding the legislature, and ordering tanks to fire upon the parliament building, known as the White House. Ironically, Dudaev's conflict with his legislative opposition followed similar lines, as each side became more intransigent and violent. One account describes "an uncanny parallel between events in Chechnya and Russia. Just as Yeltsin did, Dudaev fell out with a once-friendly Parliament and used violence to suppress his opposition."[57]

The parallel was not lost on Dudaev himself. In April 1993, when Yeltsin held a referendum to bolster his position vis-à-vis the Russian parliament, Dudaev made an extraordinary announcement on Russian radio. He promised that his government would "not obstruct citizens of Chechnya who have not lost their Russian citizenship who want to take part in the referendum on 25 April. I too am ready to cast one vote. I have not yet lost

my Russian citizenship." Two weeks before the referendum, Dudaev sent Yeltsin a personal telegram advising him to choose the "lesser of two evils—the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet and the calling of elections to Parliament with the simultaneous holding of a referendum on the adoption of a new Constitution." As it turned out, "Yeltsin, knowingly or not, followed Dudaev's advice almost to the letter."[58] Dudaev's expressions of solidarity earned him few points with Yeltsin. Indeed, if Yeltsin had acknowledged Dudaev's support, it would have rendered more difficult and even hypocritical the Russian president's efforts to criticize the illegitimate and undemocratic nature of the Chechen regime. In using force against political opponents, Yeltsin was acting much the same way as Dudaev.

Despite Yeltsin's personal animus toward Dudaev, it seemed obvious to most observers that a personal meeting between the two held the only real hope for peaceful resolution of the conflict. Yet, as Baranets writes, "it was as if a secret and evil force separated Yeltsin and Dudaev every time the idea of a meeting between them was floated."[59] Another source suggests that certain Yeltsin advisers were demanding hefty bribes from Dudaev in order to set up a meeting with Yeltsin but that the Chechen president refused to hand over any more money to them.[60] Dudaev later claimed that he needed only "half an hour with Yeltsin" to resolve the conflict between Chechnya and Russia. In December 1993, Ruslan Aushev, president of Ingushetiia, tried to arrange such a meeting and was confident that Dudaev would come to Moscow to attend it. But he was thwarted by hawkish members of Yeltsin's inner circle.[61] Evidently the opponents of peaceful resolution of the crisis shared the view that a personal meeting between the two presidents might resolve it.

The hawks increasingly gained the upper hand from the late summer of 1994. Evidently Yeltsin's more moderate advisers had lost his favor following an unrelated incident in Berlin, where Yeltsin had traveled to mark the withdrawal of Russian troops from Germany. The apparently drunk Russian president attempted to conduct the German orchestra, then "grabbed a microphone and began loudly and tunelessly to sing the Russian folk song 'Kalinka.'" When several of his liberal advisers later wrote to warn Yeltsin about such behavior, he responded by cutting them out of his inner circle and leaving them home on the next foreign trip—to the United States. On the return from that trip, Yeltsin was so drunk on the planned stopover at Shannon Airport in Ireland that he failed to get out of the plane to meet the waiting Irish prime minister.[62]

Yeltsin's advisers suggest that the contingent of hawks who favored a forceful solution to the Chechen crisis deserves the blame for pushing the president in that direction. Yet even before they managed to offend Yeltsin with their criticisms of his drunken performances, the more moderate members of the president's team were ineffectual and missed several key opportunities to forestall a violent outcome. Sergei Kovalev, a human rights activist who served for a time as an adviser to the Russian government, gives an interpretation of the role of the moderates that rings true: "If he is dealing with the Chechen issue, of course [an adviser] thinks about solving it, but the main thing for him is not that problem at all. The main thing is to coincide with the opinion of the boss."[63] If Kovalev is right, then one should not be surprised that the liberal economic advisers and the professional diplomats on Yeltsin's team did little to try to settle the conflict with Chechnya peacefully.

There were several apparent missed opportunities to avoid full-scale war in Chechnya. First of all, as even many Yeltsin partisans acknowledge, Dudaev was his own worst enemy and could well have been overthrown without Russian interference. Dudaev's regime faced serious opposition in the early 1990s, which, many of Yeltsin's advisers believed, might "itself be able to deal with the 'Dudaev problem.'"[64]

Dudaev made a number of proposals for renewing economic cooperation between Russia and Chechnya as a prelude to improvement in political relations. In a letter to Yeltsin in July 1992, for example, Dudaev proposed that Moscow grant Chechnya control of its oil exports in return for Chechen payment of transit fees to the Russian government for use of its pipelines. Yeltsin ordered his staff to study the offer, which his advisers dubbed the "Buy Chechnya" proposal, but nothing came of it.[65]

In June 1993 Dudaev traveled to Vienna with his economic advisers to discuss proposals with representatives of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) to lure foreign investment to Chechnya. As one participant describes, "The prospects, developed in the course of the discussions, noticeably encouraged Dudaev—to such a degree that at the dinner party organized in his honor in one of the ancient castles of the Austrian capital he astounded those present with the declaration that he was ready to consider himself a citizen of Russia." The Russian government's representative to UNIDO responded by proposing "a toast to the new eminent citizen of his country." Despite the apparent concession on Dudaev's part, nothing came of the UNIDO proposals, which apparently required endorsement from the central government in

Moscow. At that point, Dudaev seems to have abandoned any hope of economic cooperation with Yeltsin's Russia. "The dog's barking, the caravan's leaving," he explained to his economics minister Abubakarov, employing a favorite saying.[66]

Another effort at improving relations came in the autumn of 1993, when Yeltsin was facing considerable opposition from his parliament and could have used a successful breakthrough in center-regional relations. This time he was thwarted not by the hawks but by the officials of his foreign ministry, the specialists in diplomacy. On September 2 Yeltsin ordered the government to establish a program for conducting negotiations with Chechnya aimed at resolving their differences. The last line of the order read: "I propose that this should be done by the foreign ministry along with other ministries." In response, First Deputy Foreign Minister Anatolii Adamishin undermined the very basis of Yeltsin's initiative. He pointed out that "the designation of the foreign ministry of the Russian Federation as the basic coordinator of the negotiating process with Chechnya would signify that the Russian side acknowledges the republic's status as a foreign state, just what the Chechen leadership has been intensively striving for."[67] Adamishin was presumably reflecting the views of his boss, Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev. By his own admission, Kozyrev later supported the invasion, anticipating that it would be "quick, decisive, and limited." He promised, reliably, as it turned out, "that the international community would treat the use of force in Chechnya as a strictly domestic Russian affair."[68] In dealings with other ethnic republics, most notably Tatarstan, Yeltsin had been willing to take a flexible response—flattering the republican leadership's pretensions to independence in the interest of maintaining the integrity of the federation. With Chechnya, on the advice of his diplomatic advisers, he was unwilling to do so.

On the Chechen side as well, the officials of Dudaev's Foreign Ministry did little to promote the cause of a diplomatic solution to the conflict with Moscow. According to Taimaz Abubakarov, on both sides "negotiations were carried out not in search of compromise but as the latest demonstration of the uncompromising nature of the sides' positions. Thus, the pauses between negotiations were filled with destructive political activities that led ultimately to war." Part of the blame, Abubakarov argues, lies with the Chechen Foreign Ministry, which failed to achieve either of its two main tasks: "recognition by the international community of the republic's sovereignty or the overall guarantee of its security." He points out that none of the Chechen negotiating teams was led by foreign ministry officials. Dudaev's first foreign minister, Shamil' Beno, was disqualified,

according to Abubakarov, because of his "liberal views" and resigned after five months in office. Beno's successor, Shamsudin Iusef, was more straightforwardly unqualified: "He knew little of Russia, and, most importantly, didn't want to know." In Abubakarov's view, Iusef deliberately tried to poison relations with the Russian government. At one point in February 1993 while a Chechen delegation was negotiating in Moscow, Iusef sent a telegram to the Russian leaders disavowing its positions.[69]

Dudaev himself would have been far from an ideal negotiating partner, even if things had gotten that far. When he suspended the Chechen parliament's activities in April 1993 and imposed direct presidential rule, he conveyed the image of standard-variety military dictator. To be sure, he would not have been the first dictator—within the former Soviet territories or outside—with whom Boris Yeltsin had dealt. But the undemocratic nature of Dudaev's regime gave Yeltsin an easy excuse not to deal with it, even if Yeltsin was soon mimicking much of Dudaev's behavior vis-à-vis his own parliament. To make matters worse, Dudaev apparently lacked an important attribute of genuine dictators—the ability to impose his preferred policies. As Abubakarov described, "It wasn't hard to notice that however authoritarian [Dudaev's] power seemed, it appeared so only in its formal features. One got the impression that presidential rule had force only within the boundaries of the famous Presidential Palace in the center of Grozny. Beyond the garish external attributes hid an unauthoritarian, not to say purely nominal, power." As a negotiator, Dudaev had poor democratic credentials, which made it difficult for him to function as a genuine representative of the views of his republic's citizens. Nor, as an ineffective dictator, could he credibly commit to enforcing agreements that might be unpopular. Indeed, according to Abubakarov, ordinary people "blamed him not for his dictatorship at all but for his inability to construct an iron order."[70] His account accords with sociologist Georgi Derluguian's description of Chechnya under Dudaev as "a working anarchy ruled by an unsuccessful dictatorship."[71]

In May 1994, after two years of fruitless negotiations with the Chechen government, Yeltsin's regime made a surprising about-face. It indicated to the press that it had erred in trying to isolate Dudaev. Yeltsin's press secretary Viacheslav Kostikov suggested that Moscow was now "inclined to recognize Dudaev as the legal president of Chechnya and to conduct negotiations precisely with him."[72] Two days later, Sergei Filatov, Yeltsin's chief of administration, reported that Shakhrai would be removed from his position as minister of nationalities "in part because of the need to improve relations with Chechnya."[73]

On May 27, 1994, five days after the remarkable announcements by Kostikov and Filatov, Dudaev was nearly assassinated. A sophisticated remote-control car bomb had exploded, killing Dudaev's interior minister and deputy, both of whom were traveling in the same cortege with the Chechen president. Following the failed assassination attempt, the Yeltsin administration lost interest in a face-to-face meeting with Dudaev. Dunlop suspects, reasonably, that the press campaign associated with Shakhrai's removal was part of a ploy to lull Dudaev into letting down his guard. In fact, "Shakhrai reemerged from the shadows and, once again, de facto took over supervision of Russian nationality and regional affairs (although Nikolai Egorov, a militant Cossack from a Cossack village in Krasnodar krai, southern Russia, remained as titular minister of nationality affairs)."[74]

Was there any real interest on Yeltsin's part in negotiating seriously with Dudaev, or were Kostikov and Filatov just contributing to a ruse intended to make Dudaev let down his guard? Kostikov, unfortunately, missed an opportunity to set the record straight. In the year 2001 he and eight other former advisers to Yeltsin published a large tome on the "Yeltsin epoch." Yet in more than 800 pages, including seven chapters devoted to the war and its aftermath, they found no opportunity to address this event or even the general question of whether the Yeltsin administration's search for a negotiated solution was ever sincere.[75]

As Yeltsin stressed in his memoirs, Dudaev certainly said many provocative things. Moreover, in making weapons widely available in what was already a traditionally martial culture, the Chechen leader also bears some responsibility for the criminal violence that accompanied mobilization for national defense. Most threatening to the Russian government and citizenry were acts committed outside Chechnya. Hijackings and kidnappings in the regions bordering the country caused particular alarm, especially an incident in late July 1994, when four hijackers seized a bus near the resort town of Mineral'nye Vody (see map 2-1).[76] For Anatol Lieven, author of a major book on the Chechen War, these hijackings "were of critical importance in acting as the catalyst for new Russian moves against Dudaev." He offers two possible explanations for the hijackings: "They may have been a symptom of Dudaev's inability to control Chechen criminality, or they may have been deliberately planned by Russian agents to provide an excuse for intervention." "No verdict on this question is possible," he avers, "but still, these events absolutely have to be mentioned and discussed in any book about the origins of the war."[77] In Lieven's own book, he writes that "the timing of the Russian administration's decision to turn against Dudaev was a direct result of the last [July 1994] hijacking."[78]

To what extent should the hijackings be considered a catalyst? Or does it make more sense to consider them a pretext? The Russian authorities were clearly ready to take advantage of the hijacking to demonize Dudaev's government. As one account describes, "The official media began a propaganda blitz on the evils of the Chechen regime. A police official showed a photograph of the three severed heads of [Chechen gangster Ruslan] Labazonov's gang exhibited in the Grozny square in June—except that he said they were the heads of Russian police officers." Lieven points out that Dudaev's government cooperated in helping arrest the perpetrators of the first three hijackings. In the July 1994 incident, however, the Chechen president "refused to let either the hijackers or the Russian special forces into Chechnya, fearing with some reason that Russia would use this as an excuse to occupy part at least of Chechnya."[79]

Yelstin sought to allay such fears in August 1994, when he stated that "armed intervention is impermissible and must not be done." But he suggested that the internal opposition to Dudaev was growing and that it reflected Moscow's influence.[80]

Moscow had indeed decided to intervene actively on the side of Dudaev's opponents—and, at first, with considerable success. On November 26, 1994, the opposition forces seized control of Grozny, but they were soon routed by troops loyal to Dudaev. Among those taken prisoner were some seventy Russians, including army officers and soldiers. On November 28 Dudaev threatened to execute them if Moscow refused to acknowledge its participation on the side of the opposition. The next day Yeltsin issued an ultimatum for all the Chechen forces to cease fire, lay down their weapons, disband their units, and release all prisoners. According to his advisers, Yeltsin did not expect his terms to be met: "Inside he had already decided on a forceful, military solution."[81]

Yeltsin convened his Security Council on November 29 to discuss the Chechen crisis. The council, an advisory body to the president, was made up of the leading officials of the Russian government, including the prime minister, foreign, defense, interior, and justice ministers, parliamentary leaders, heads of intelligence agencies, and others.[82] The secret meeting was convened not to debate possible options but rather to endorse a decision Yeltsin had already made. As Iurii Kalmykov, then justice minister, reported, "When the official Security Council session was held, all the documents had already been prepared, and the Security Council members only had to vote—either to adopt or reject the 'force option.' This very much surprised me. I said let's discuss things first, I want to speak. But I was told that we would vote first. I again tried to put forward my view. The

president said again, let's vote on it. I had to agree. . . . And I voted in favor. So did everyone. And then we started discussing it."[83] Besides Kalmykov only two other officials voiced objections to the invasion: intelligence chief Evgenii Primakov and Vladimir Shumeiko, chair of the Federation Council that represented Russia's regions. The rest, including Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, supported military action—assured by the "power ministers" that the invasion would be quick and effective. Kalmykov resigned in protest, one of the few civilian officials to do so. Formally, Yeltsin took the decision for war on November 30, 1994, when he issued secret decree no. 2137s, sanctioning the use of direct military force.[84]

During the next two weeks, as Russian forces from the Interior and Defense Ministries deployed along the border with Chechnya, Yeltsin authorized a series of negotiations with Dudaev's government but continued to refuse to meet directly with Dudaev himself. He designated Pavel Grachev, the hard-line Russian defense minister, as his main representative—an inauspicious choice for a peaceful compromise. Grachev announced in advance that "negotiations with the Chechen leader will take place only on condition that Dudaev appears at them in his capacity as representative of a subject of the Russian Federation." Although Dudaev made no such concession, the two did meet, as Grachev later reported on Russian television. The defense minister addressed the Chechen leader insultingly and threatened, "Dzhokhar, this is your last chance. . . . Do you really think you're going to fight against us? In any case, I'll crush you [*ia tebia razob'iu*]." Dudaev refused to back down. "Then it's war," vowed Grachev. "Yes, war!" agreed Dudaev.[85] Grachev, who had initially argued against an invasion at a Security Council meeting on December 7, now reversed position, caught up in the logic of his own ultimatum.[86]

One more Russian general met with Dudaev two days before the Russian army launched its invasion: General Aleksei Mitiukhin, commander of the North Caucasus military district, which formally included Chechnya. Mitiukhin's mission was to secure the release of six Russian soldiers captured by the Chechens in the failed "storm" of Grozny on November 26. Dudaev readily agreed, without any expectation that his gesture would forestall the war. "It's already late," he explained. If the Chechen leader made the concessions necessary to conciliate Russia, "the people won't understand."

Mitiukhin reported Dudaev's frustration in being unable to meet Yeltsin to work out their differences, echoing what many other participants had described. Dudaev complained that "he waited a long time to be

invited to the Kremlin like a normal person [*po-liudski*]." "As late as the 29th or 30th [of November 1994], if they had only spoken with me as a human being [*po-chelovecheski*], everything could have been completely different. But all I heard was 'bandit, criminal, dictator, thief, leader of a criminal regime!' That didn't offend just me, but my entire people."[87]

In the next few days, the Chechen side made a number of initiatives intended to forestall an attack. Talks between Russian officials and Aslan Maskhadov, then chief of the Chechen general staff, led to the release of the Russian prisoners of war. At the last moment, on December 10, Chechen propaganda minister Movladi Udugov communicated that Dudaev would accept an official invitation, if it were made, to come to Moscow for negotiations. That same day, Yeltsin celebrated a national holiday, Constitution Day, at the Kremlin. On the official list of well-wishers was the name Dzhokhar Dudaev, president of the Chechen Republic. According to protocol, Dudaev, in turn, would have received a pro forma thank-you message from Yeltsin, were it not for the air and land blockade Russia had imposed in anticipation of the invasion. As his aides put it in their memoir, on the eve of the Russian attack, "Yeltsin's compliments would have gone out to the mutinous general, if a bewildered communications officer hadn't come in to a group of speechwriters and asked how to get a letter to Grozny."[88]

The War

The path to war was cleared by Yeltsin's hawkish advisers, who presented one-sided views of the Chechen conflict, and by the diffidence and ambivalence of the more moderate members of his team, who refused to take a stand in favor of a peaceful resolution. Once the invasion began, however, a number of the skeptics began to voice their reservations, at least among themselves.

Hawks Ascendant

On December 27, 1994, the Expert-Analytical Council of the President of the Russian Federation ("Analytical Center") met to discuss the political consequences of the Chechen invasion. Their discussion was tape-recorded by the presidential security services, headed by Yeltsin's personal bodyguard Aleksandr Korzhakov. Korzhakov sent Yeltsin a summary of the discussion, which the president's advisers later published.

Korzhakov was keen to present the Analytical Center's members as disloyal to the president, but their criticisms seem well founded, especially in

retrospect. General Dmitrii Volkogonov expressed concern that the conflict would spread into other regions and advocated an immediate meeting between Yeltsin and Dudaev. Emil' Pain claimed that the Russian invasion of Chechnya had "saved Dudaev politically" when his power was "hanging by a thread." Mark Urnov worried that the situation in Chechnya was deepening the political crisis in Russia and damaging the president politically. Leonid Smirniagin argued that the entry of troops into Chechnya would only be justified if they could carry out a successful blitzkrieg. But he thought that the violent overthrow of Dudaev by Russian forces would be "a disgrace for Russia," and he favored new attempts at negotiation.[89]

Thus, by Korzhakov's report—which Yeltsin's liberal advisers reproduce in their memoir without questioning its authenticity—members of the Analytical Center expressed many doubts about the invasion and about the administration's overall policy toward Chechnya. Korzhakov summarizes their views, suggesting that the president's advisers "by no means share his political views in relationship to the Chechen problem and are not inclined to show solidarity with him in resolving this question by the methods that are now being used [armed invasion]. On the contrary, their point of view is closer to that of the parliamentary, and even non-parliamentary opposition." Korzhakov points out that except for Oleg Lobov (secretary of the Security Council) and Sergei Filatov (chief of the president's administration), "all the rest of the speakers had practically nothing to say about the violation of human rights by Dudaev's armed detachments, about the criminalization of the republic, the arms trade and the narcotics business, both flourishing in Chechnya, or even about how Chechnya is an integral part of the Russian Federation to which all federal laws and presidential decrees extend." Korzhakov concludes his memo with the veiled recommendation that all the doubters be fired ("It is necessary to resolve the question of strengthening the leadership cadres of the President's Analytical Center and its reorganization").[90]

The incident of the advisers' meeting is one of the best-documented cases of the hawks attempting to discredit the more moderate elements of Yeltsin's retinue. But Yeltsin himself was well aware at the time, and has acknowledged since, that the president's bodyguard (and drinking buddy) routinely prevented Yeltsin from receiving advice and information from the more liberal members of his team. As he (or, rather, his ghostwriter) put it, Korzhakov "was jealous of these 'rotten intellectuals' [and] tried to vigilantly block their 'access to the body,'" that is, to prevent them from meeting personally with Yeltsin.[91] Instead, those advisers had to put their views in writing, as Georgii Satarov did in late December 1994, with a

lengthy letter expressing his doubts about Yeltsin's Chechen policy and the pernicious effect of hawks such as Egorov. But Satarov never sent his letter, so his heartfelt criticisms are only of historical interest—as evidence of the ineffectiveness and indecisiveness of the opponents of the "party of war." If, as his memoirs attest, Yeltsin was aware that he was not receiving the full range of possible views, because of Korzhakov's own prejudices, he bears ultimate responsibility for the poor decisions that resulted.

There is some evidence that Yeltsin's liberal advisers presented their behavior as more principled in retrospect than it actually was at the time. Nikolai Petrov, a geographer and political analyst who worked on the staff of the Analytic Center, remembers a more opportunistic approach: "There are no doubts that Baturin-Satarov-Pain-Urnov-Smirniagin et al. didn't participate in the real decision-making. Nevertheless they played a very negative role." He accuses them of supporting Yeltsin's confrontational approach by "doing the work of the propaganda department of the CPSU Central Committee and not doing any real analytical work."[92]

One gets a sense of the propagandistic nature of the moderates' work even from the memoir that, presumably, puts their contribution to the Yeltsin administration in its best light (why else would Satarov reproduce verbatim a 1,200-word letter that he never sent?). The authors of the memoir constantly refer to the most sensational of the charges against Dudaev. They quote, for example, his remarks reportedly made to a Turkish journalist during the war that Russia was attacking Chechnya with atomic bombs, and that he personally would fly a bomber to Moscow to retaliate; they quote his threats to kill Russian prisoners of war captured as they sought unsuccessfully to support the violent uprising of Dudaev's opponents in November 1994 (he released them instead); they present as incriminating evidence that Dudaev's defense plans, prepared in March 1992, identified the Russian armed forces as the "potential opponent" and insinuated that Chechnya intended to attack strategic targets in Russia. Finally, they charge that "Islamic fundamentalists, criminal groups, and terrorist centers" were all in the service of Dudaev's government.[93]

No one claims that in Dudaev Chechnya was blessed with the most sober and reasonable leader possible. Even his closest collaborators have attested to the Chechen president's suspicious nature, bordering at times on paranoia.[94] Yet Dudaev was the proverbial paranoid with real enemies. Nor does anyone doubt that Chechnya received support from foreign governments and Islamic groups sympathetic to its plight. Yet, in their memoir, Yeltsin's moderates fail to make an important distinction that comes through clearly, for example, even in the reporting of the Russian defense

ministry's former press chief. Writing of support from Islamic countries, Baranets points out that it was not a cause but a consequence of Russia's attack: "Having begun the war in December 1994 against a single Chechnya, already by winter 1995 Russia was fighting against a coalition of Muslim countries." Baranets compares militant Islam to "a tiger in a Moscow zoo, obediently dozing in the iron cage of Soviet power." It was "released into Chechnya, set free and enraged by Moscow" when Yeltsin unleashed the war.[95]

The point is not that Yeltsin's liberal advisers presented outright falsehoods about Dudaev's regime. Instead, they appeared to be trying to justify their inaction and ineffectiveness in preventing Yeltsin from pursuing a course that they genuinely seem to believe was mistaken. But they tended to highlight irrelevant factors. Dudaev might have been as much the dangerous nut case they portray, yet the best solution—and they knew it at least in retrospect—was not an ill-conceived and unprepared use of armed force. Their focus on Dudaev's faults obscures the basic fact that Yeltsin's advisers did not choose to pay enough attention to the situation in Chechnya so as to be able to give the president good advice. As Petrov recalls, "I can remember Mark Urnov, at that time head of the Analytical Center, looking for a map of Chechnya several days after the war had been started, or Emil' Pain asking me about the ethnic composition of Chechnya by *raions* [districts] at the same time. For a short while I was making analyses of the reaction to the war in regions of Russia for the Center's daily reports for Yeltsin, all the time this section [of the report] was severely edited by the Center leadership in order to make the picture more positive."[96]

Not only did Yeltsin's "experts" allow themselves to remain ignorant of the situation in Chechnya. In some cases they deliberately hindered the dissemination of accurate information and analysis. In December 1994, for example, Leonid Smirniagin, Petrov's boss in the branch of the Analytic Center that focused on the regions, refused to allow publication of a critical analysis of Moscow's approach to Chechnya, drafted under Petrov's editorship. It was soon leaked to the Russian press, which published extensive excerpts.[97] This example is only one of many that reinforce Kovalev's judgment about Yeltsin's advisers: "Intelligent from one side and cynical from the other, they were used by the regime, and they themselves were eager to be used."[98] Petrov, an evident exception to this rule, resigned his position on the first working day of the new year, January 5, 1995, and was thereafter treated by many of his former colleagues as a traitor—even barred by guards from retrieving his personal effects from his office.

Military Misgivings

The failure of the liberals is especially striking given that their views on the Chechen situation were not particularly radical. If Yeltsin's administration was dominated by hawks, within the uniformed military there were a number of, if not doves, then critics who were highly skeptical about the idea of using military force in Chechnya. In fact, a cautious and sensible approach seems to have been fairly widespread at the Defense Ministry and in the General Staff. Yet the decisionmaking process there resembled that of the Kremlin, as proponents of war systematically excluded skeptics. Colonel Viktor Baranets reports that several of Grachev's deputy ministers of defense—Generals Boris Gromov, Valerii Mironov, and Georgii Kondrat'ev—were not invited to key meetings to plan the military operations because they were expected to object. "In the General Staff it was hardly a secret for anyone that Gromov, for example, from the beginning was categorically against any forceful solution to the Chechen problem."[99]

Serious doubts emerged within the General Staff about the wisdom of the invasion, first, and, more specifically, about the adequacy of planning if an invasion were nevertheless decided. Gromov in retrospect criticized Grachev for agreeing to have the army participate at all in military action in Chechnya. Moreover, he faulted Grachev for his unrealistic predictions of a successful completion of operations in a couple of weeks. If forced to accept the mission of invading Chechnya, Gromov suggested that Grachev should have responded by demanding more time. "He should have said: deeply respected supreme commander-in-chief, a minimum of six months is required for preparation."[100] Delaying the invasion to provide more time to prepare would also have avoided launching the attack in December—"the worst time for the beginning of an operation: practically constant cloud cover leaves no possibility for effective use of aviation."[101] But the invasion was not delayed in order to provide more time for preparation. It was already late November when the main operations division of the General Staff first began to study maps of invasion routes into Chechnya. General Mitiukhin, commander of the North Caucasus military district, was given only two weeks' notice that a major operation would be staged from his bases.[102]

What kind of evidence did Yeltsin receive about the likely duration of a war against Chechnya? Oleg Lobov, secretary of Yeltsin's Security Council, anticipated a brief one. Indeed, in November 1994 he reportedly advocated a "short, victorious war to raise the President's ratings" in the face of Yeltsin's flagging popularity. He had in mind the U.S. operation against

Haiti in September to overthrow the military regime there and its apparent effect in boosting President Bill Clinton's approval rate.[103] Defense minister Grachev's best-known claim was that a single Russian airborne regiment could have resolved the Chechen crisis in two hours. In private discussions with Yeltsin and his advisers, Grachev exhibited less bravado, but his estimate was still unrealistic: he promised that the operation would succeed within twelve days.[104]

Military opposition to the invasion from Grachev's subordinates was not long in coming. Colonel General Eduard Vorob'ev refused Grachev's order to lead what he considered an ill-prepared invasion. As he told David Remnick, "I am no pacifist. Had the preparations for war been adequate, I would have executed those plans without thinking twice." But he did think twice. "I began to think through the errors: our underestimation of the Chechen passion; the lack of military surprise; the dependency on air power in bad weather; the dependency on a phony opposition movement; the utter lack of preparation. My God, our tank troops went into battle without maps of the city!" Some tanks and armored personnel carriers entered Grozny without functioning guns. Attacked by snipers, they became instant burning coffins. On December 22, Vorob'ev refused the defense minister's order to lead such an ill-prepared invasion and submitted his resignation.[105]

He was not the only one. As Lieven reports, "In all, some 557 officers of all ranks are believed to have been disciplined, sacked or to have left the army voluntarily in protest against the intervention."[106] Initially the protests focused on the poor preparation. A week into the invasion, for example, the General Staff for the first time requested that the Defense Ministry's Institute of Military History provide information on earlier Russian campaigns in the Caucasus.[107]

Within days of the invasion another source of protest appeared. Russian troops sent into Chechnya met widespread resistance from ordinary, unarmed civilians. Many officers responded by questioning their orders. One captain, a medical doctor, complained to journalists: "We are not doing anything good by being here." Since "we are fighting civilians, it would be better if we left." He added that "almost all the officers think the way I do."[108] Indeed, Major General Ivan Babichev reacted much the same way when the tank column he was commanding came face to face with a crowd of angry civilians. "We are not going to shoot. We're not going to use tanks against the people. . . . If they give us such an order I would treat it as a criminal order. The military must execute only legitimate orders and the order to crush villages with tanks is not a legitimate order."[109]

Finally, officers and soldiers resented the fact that they were sent into a war that probably could have been avoided. At least they saw no evidence that Yeltsin had tried to avoid it. Colonel Baranets reports several conversations on this theme. He quotes one captain he met in Grozny: "You know, he says, what I thought most about when our tanks and armored personnel carriers were moving into Chechnya? About why our president couldn't, or for some reasons didn't want to, negotiate with Dudaev so that there wouldn't be a war." A paratrooper told him "if I had seen Yeltsin getting blisters on his tongue from trying to talk peace with Dudaev, I wouldn't be fighting with one eye looking over my shoulder."[110]

The War of Deceit

The soldiers' distrust of Yeltsin was widely shared by most citizens of Russia. Rather than boost Yeltsin's popularity as Lobov promised, the invasion saw confidence in the president plummet—and for good reason. Yeltsin lied about the war from start to finish, and his lies were often quite transparent. On the evening of December 27, 1994, he gave a televised address in which he claimed that "the Gordian knot of the Chechen crisis can be cut. But at too high a price—the price of the life of Russian citizens. For the sake of preserving people's lives I have given an order to exclude any bombing strikes that could lead to victims among the peaceful population of Grozny."[111]

Yeltsin was lying. The day before he had received a report from Sergei Kovalev, his human-rights adviser who had led a delegation of parliamentarians to Grozny. The bombs were already raining down on the Chechen capital when Kovalev wrote to Yeltsin, addressing him in the third person: "Why was the President quiet for three years" about the situation in Chechnya "and then sent bombers?" He urged that Yeltsin find out and reveal who took the decision to bomb population centers and "take measures so that the peaceful population is not destroyed." After all, Kovalev reminded Yeltsin, it was the president himself who had said "the right to life is a basic right."[112] As Yeltsin spoke to the television cameras, Kovalev and his team had already counted forty-two bodies—victims of air attack—in the city center. Moreover the bombs had destroyed the electricity and water systems, leading indirectly to further civilian deaths.[113]

After promising not to bomb the peaceful population of Grozny, Yeltsin concluded his speech by claiming that "the path to political resolution of the conflict, as previously, is open." And, as previously, he named three of his most obstinate, hawkish officials—Egorov, Stepashin, and Kvashnin—as his representatives.[114]

Bloody Endgame

In some respects Russia could have won the war in Chechnya. Its armed forces destroyed Grozny and gained nominal control of all the other major population centers. The Chechen troops were forced to retreat to the mountains and conduct a guerrilla campaign. If Moscow had used economic aid to win over the civilian population, it might have employed police methods to deal with the remaining rebel forces. Instead the Russian forces treated the residents of Chechnya, including thousands of ethnic Russians who lived in Grozny, indiscriminately as enemies. The occupying Russian army—with drunken and drugged soldiers robbing, harassing, and otherwise maltreating Chechen civilians—did little to try to win over hearts and minds.

The Chechen resistance forces turned the tide of the war and ultimately put an end to the Russian occupation by becoming what Moscow had always branded them: terrorists. Two events stand out as major turning points. In June 1995, Shamil' Basaev led a raid on the Russian town of Budennovsk (see map 2-1, p. 23). He justified the action as a response to the Russian army's massacre at the village of Samashki two months earlier.[115] Basaev's forces apparently intended originally to attack a military target of some sort, but when that mission failed they seized a hospital and took more than a thousand hostages. After several days of fruitless negotiations, during which Basaev demanded safe passage for his troops, the Russian forces unsuccessfully tried to storm the hospital as medical workers begged them to hold their fire. More than a hundred Russian civilians died.

With Boris Yeltsin at a summit meeting in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin handled the situation from Moscow. He asked Sergei Kovalev to meet with Basaev and work out an agreement. Basaev demanded an immediate cease-fire in Chechnya and the opening of peace talks. Meanwhile Yeltsin in Halifax criticized the "barbaric" Chechen action and claimed that "the world community has finally understood whom the federal forces are fighting." The "criminals in black headbands" had to be "annihilated," he vowed. Instead Chernomyrdin, filmed on television negotiating by phone with Basaev, worked out a deal for the Chechens to escape across the border to Chechnya and release the hostages there. The Budennovsk events have been called "a pivotal episode of the war. Facing defeat, the Chechens had launched a ruthless raid that appeared suicidal both for themselves and their cause. Yet they emerged not only relatively unscathed but in a stronger position than before. They had won a much-needed ceasefire and forced Russia to be serious about peace talks."[116]

In January 1996 another prominent Chechen field commander led a raid on Kizliar, an old Russian fortress town on the Terek River in Dagestar.. Salman Raduev's original target was apparently the Russian helicopter base outside town, but when his forces met unexpectedly strong resistance from the Russian side, they retreated into town. There they carried out a repeat of the Budennovsk action by capturing the town hospital. Raduev's troops went around town seizing additional hostages until they held some 2,000 or 3,000 of them. Russian forces quickly attacked the hospital but stopped when the Chechens began to execute the hostages. Local Dagestani officials then negotiated safe passage for the terrorists, on the Budennovsk model, but Russian forces reneged on the deal and attacked the Chechen convoy at the village of Pervomaiskoe, just as it was about to cross a bridge into Chechnya. The Chechens attacked a local police post and then retreated into the village with their hostages.

President Yeltsin responded to the new hostage crisis by flying to Paris to attend the funeral of French president François Mitterrand. He vowed to punish the "bandits," without harming the hostages and claimed that "we have thirty-eight snipers posted around the village to catch the terrorists." Meanwhile another armed group—Turkish citizens of Abkhaz and Chechen origin—hijacked a passenger ferry in Turkey's Black Sea port of Trabzon, demanding that the Russian army free their "Chechen brethren" in Pervomaiskoe (see map 2-1). Instead the Russian troops bombed the village with Grad rockets. Many of Raduev's troops managed to escape, taking eighty hostages with them. They were later released to Dagestani authorities at a press conference that highlighted the humiliating failure of the Russian special forces. The Russian attack had left, by official count, sixty-nine dead, including twenty-eight civilians.[117] With its army in shambles and its citizens thoroughly demoralized, the Russian government finally began to take seriously the need to end the war.

Several additional factors contributed to the Russian decision to pursue peace. In April 1996 the Russian army assassinated Dzhokhar Dudaev. The Chechen president was talking by satellite phone to Konstantin Borovoi, a Russian member of parliament who was trying to arrange negotiations between Dudaev and Tatarstan's president Mintimir Shaimiev, as a first step toward direct negotiations with Yeltsin or Chernomyrdin. Nearby Russian forces used the satellite signal to target Dudaev with a guided missile that killed the Chechen president and two of his aides.[118]

The assassination of Dudaev removed an unpredictable and unreliable negotiating partner. He was succeeded by his "acting" vice president Zelimkhan Iandarbiev and by Aslan Maskhadov as commander of the

armed forces. With competent Chechen leaders in place, there still remained an unpredictable and unreliable negotiating partner on the Russian side, namely, Boris Yeltsin. But the Russian president was motivated to change—at least in appearances. Popular opposition to the war was widespread. The Committee of Soldiers' Mothers was especially active, supporting efforts of parents to travel to Chechnya and rescue their sons from the army or at least find out how they died and recover their bodies. Founded originally during the years of *perestroika,* to promote military reform and an end to the brutal practice of hazing (*dedovshchina*) conscripts, the committee, with branches throughout the country, kept the war's human costs in the public eye.[119]

The presidential election campaign also played an important role, as Yeltsin openly acknowledged that he could not be reelected if he did not make a convincing effort to end the war. Particularly important was the influence of retired General Aleksandr Lebed'. First as a presidential candidate who openly criticized the war, Lebed' threatened to draw enough votes from Yeltsin to throw the election to his communist rival, Gennadii Ziuganov. Then, after having been co-opted by the Yeltsin team, Lebed' served as the broker who negotiated the final peace agreement and withdrawal of Russian forces.[120]

The endgame of the first Chechen War was as complicated and violent as the beginning. First of all, the Yeltsin government remained reluctant to negotiate with representatives of the Chechen government, even after Dudaev's death. In October 1995 Moscow had installed, of all people, Doku Zavgaev—the former first party secretary from Soviet times—as puppet head of the Chechen Republic, staging his bogus election to the presidency in Russian-controlled zones of Chechnya in December of that year.[121] Following Dudaev's death, V. A. Kovalev, the Russian minister of justice who took over after Iurii Kalmykov's resignation, insisted that there was no longer any doubt as to the legitimacy of Zavgaev as Chechnya's leader. Few in Chechnya took that claim seriously. Moscow eventually recognized the futility of its position; in May 1997 Zavgaev was appointed Russian ambassador to Tanzania.[122]

Once Russian officials acknowledged the necessity of negotiating with Dudaev's successors, they carried out the negotiations with the same cynicism and bad faith as they had exhibited throughout the crisis. Yeltsin's handlers sought to portray the president as genuinely interested in restoring peace and withdrawing Russian troops, even as the army sought to impose its violent solution to the Chechen problem up to the last minute. They were particularly worried that the war would undermine Yeltsin's

reelection campaign. On May 23, 1996, with less than a month to go before the election, Yeltsin expressed a willingness to meet with Iandarbiev. The announcement came from Tim Guldimann, the Swiss diplomat who headed the Grozny mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The Chechen delegation arrived in Moscow a few days later and met with Yeltsin on May 27. The next morning, as his negotiators continued meeting with the visiting Chechen officials, Yeltsin took a surprise trip to Chechnya. He met at an airport with Russian troops and congratulated them on their "victory" in the Chechen War.[123]

This publicity stunt was followed by a resumption of Russian ground and air attacks, despite the cease-fire signed with Iandarbiev. Nevertheless, further negotiations yielded a tightly sequenced and promising proposal for Russian withdrawal and Chechen disarmament: Russia would reliquish its military posts along Chechen roads (*blok-posty*) by July 7, at which point the Chechen side would begin disarming its fighters, completing the process by August 7. The Russian army would then begin its withdrawal from Chechnya and be out of the country by the end of the month.[124]

With the promise of peace in the air, and the threat of a communist presidential victory as a further incentive, Russian voters gave Yeltsin a first-place finish in the June 16 elections, but far from the majority necessary to avoid a runoff. At that point, Yeltsin invited the third-place challenger, retired General Aleksandr Lebed', to join his administration as the president's national security adviser and secretary of the Security Council, an offer made and accepted with such alacrity that few doubted it had been negotiated in advance. On June 25 Yeltsin announced that troops from the Leningrad, Moscow, Volga, and Urals military districts—key electoral constituencies—would be brought home from Chechnya by September 1. The following week he was reelected in the second round.

His reelection secured, Yeltsin immediately reneged on the agreements he had made to stop the war. On July 7, the deadline for dismantling the Russian *blok-posty,* Moscow announced that it would not carry out its commitment. On July 9 and 10 Russian forces blockaded and attacked the mountain villages of Gekhi and Makhkety. They were hoping to destroy the headquarters of Iandarbiev and catch the Chechen officials who were meeting in Makhkety. Many civilians were killed, including some children hiding in a cellar, but every Chechen leader escaped unharmed. The next day a bomb exploded in a Moscow subway station, killing four people and hospitalizing another dozen. A month later two more bombs went off on Moscow trolleys, wounding over thirty people between them. Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov blamed Chechens and ordered his police officials to

take "retaliatory actions" against the city's Chechen diaspora.[125] Some observers have argued that Russian secret service operatives, acting on behalf of the "party of war," deliberately set off the explosions to thwart the peace process.[126] On July 29, after a full resumption of Russian military activity, an unsuccessful attempt was made to kill Aslan Maskhadov. Moscow and its puppet Zavgaev blamed Maskhadov's domestic enemies, but the pattern since Yeltsin's reelection seemed unmistakable: renewal of full-scale war, accompanied by efforts to liquidate the top Chechen leaders.

Throughout these events General Lebed' found himself in an unusual position. On the one hand, his efforts at negotiating an end to the war seemed rather futile in the face of renewed Russian military operations. Indeed, one of the general's envoys was nearly killed while meeting with Maskhadov when the Russians attacked Makhkety. On the other hand, the army's apparent successes might have helped Lebed' in his talks with the Chechens by strengthening his bargaining position. Some observers have argued that Lebed' himself initially supported the attacks on Makhkety and Gekhi, with hopes of achieving a "blitzkrieg victory." Only when they failed did he opt for a "blitzkrieg defeat," accepting a humiliating peace agreement and total withdrawal of the Russian forces.[127]

In any case, the Russian army's position was not as strong as it appeared. On August 6, 1996, some 1,500 Chechen fighters, led by Maskhadov, stormed Grozny and pinned down the nearly 12,000 Russian troops supposedly defending it. The Russian command reacted with typical brutality and deceit. On August 20 General Konstantin Pulikovskii, commander of the Russian forces, issued an ultimatum: all Chechen fighters must leave Grozny or he would order an air and missile attack on their positions. The general gave the civilian population forty-eight hours to leave the city but waited barely a day before launching a devastating attack. As for negotiations, Pulikovskii announced that "there was no longer anything to talk about" with Maskhadov. Pulikovskii's optimism was misplaced. The August assault cost the Russian army some 494 dead, 1,407 wounded, and 182 missing in action. Estimates of civilian deaths were around 2,000, and more than 220,000 refugees fled the carnage.[128]

Yeltsin finally faced reality and gave Lebed' authority to negotiate the Russian withdrawal. On August 31 Lebed', Maskhadov, and their associates, in the presence of the OSCE's Guldimann, signed an agreement on "principles for the determination of the basis of relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic." It became known as the Khasaviurt Accord, after the town where it was negotiated. The document

formally left the status of Chechnya's relationship to Russia undecided until December 31, 2001, and, therefore, subject to further negotiations.[129]

The origins of Russia's 1994–96 war in Chechnya defy easy summary. Undoubtedly most of the factors that previous studies have identified played some role: the legacy of Soviet ethnically defined political institutions; Chechnya's historical grievances amplified by power-hungry politicians; the strategic location of Chechnya, astride major oil and transportation routes; and Moscow's concern that Chechnya's successful bid for independence would lead to the breakup of the Russian Federation. This last factor I find relatively less persuasive. The Yeltsin administration had dealt with similar bids for autonomy from strategically more important regions, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, and had worked out a modus vivendi by negotiation and conciliation, as I describe in chapter 5. Yeltsin would not have found in Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudaev as reasonable a negotiating partner as he found in other regions. But Yeltsin deliberately chose not to deal with Dudaev as someone deserving of any respect. He seemed determined to settle the Chechen situation by force rather than by making concessions. Yeltsin's advisers pushed for a "short, victorious war" to boost the president's sagging popularity, and those who had doubts kept silent or were forced out. The first Chechen War had many contributing causes, but a more responsible and competent leadership in Moscow could have prevented it.

3

No War, No Peace

Undoubtedly, we [that is, Russian leaders] are guilty for the fact that the war began, we destroyed Chechen homes. We need to rebuild them, we need to feed people. Let's at least set right what we're responsible for. We need to get rid of the illusion that hungry young people, having gone through a war, will just sit quietly.

—Magomedsalikh Gusaev, Dagestan's minister of nationality affairs and external relations, May 1998

Between the withdrawal of Russian forces in late 1996 and the outbreak of renewed warfare in August 1999, the situation in the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (as it now chose to be called) continued to deteriorate. The end of the war allowed Chechen citizens to go about their daily lives without fear of Russian air attack or arrest and internment in "filtration camps," but people were far from secure. Kidnappings reached epidemic proportions. Some of them seemed crude money-making operations, pursued with no political purposes whatsoever. Yet they had an evident political impact in demonstrating the weakness of the Chechen government. And some of the kidnappings, judging by their timing, had direct political motives as well.[1]

The influence of radical Islamic movements, such as Wahhabism, increased in the wake of the war and the physical and economic devastation that it wrought. Indeed, the precipitating cause of the second war was an August 1999 invasion of Dagestan by Chechen and Dagestani fighters, marching under the banner of Islam and unconstrained by the central government in Grozny. The

invasion was led by the Chechen field commander Shamil' Basaev and Habib Abd al-Rahman, better known as Khattab, a guerrilla fighter from Saudi Arabia or Jordan. The incursion was readily halted thanks, in part, to opposition from local Dagestani villagers who welcomed Russian military support.

Emboldened by their success in thwarting the attacks, Russian leaders chose to escalate the conflict with aerial bombardment of Chechen territory and ultimately a full-scale invasion. Unlike the previous war, this one received widespread support from the public, owing to a spate of terrorist bombings in Moscow and other Russian cities that were attributed to Chechens. There is considerable suspicion, however, that those bombings were not the work of Chechen terrorists but of the Russian secret services. Moreover, some observers have linked the events surrounding the invasion of Dagestan to power politics in Moscow, particularly Boris Yeltsin's attempt to protect himself and his family by choosing a successor—Vladimir Putin—who could defeat his political rivals.

In the face of such contending explanations, the immediate origins of the second Chechen War remain in dispute. One prominent chronicler of the Chechen conflicts has even suggested it might be necessary "for a contemporary historian to write an 800-page book devoted to the tangled and sanguinary events of the autumn of 1999" before they could be fully understood.[2] Other specialists have predicted that "the complex interplay of financial, political, military, loyalty-related, nationalist, religious, and other motivations" involved in the war's origins "will occupy political analysts and historians for decades to come."[3] Chapter 4 represents my attempt to make sense of the outbreak of the second war (although in considerably fewer than 800 pages), but before doing so I review here the events of the "interwar" period. Whatever political machinations in Moscow contributed to the renewed warfare, circumstances in Chechnya itself played an important role, particularly the devastated economy, the breakdown of political authority, and the rash of violent crimes, including widespread kidnapping. This chapter sets the scene for the second Chechen War by exploring the complicated landscape of Chechen politics following the signing of the Khasaviurt Accord.

The Maskhadov Administration and Its Opponents

Even as Moscow conducted the withdrawal of the Russian army from Chechnya, some groups sought to undermine the situation. On December 14, 1996, forces under the command of Salman Raduev kidnapped

twenty-two Russian Interior Ministry troops and initially refused to release them, despite receiving a "tough warning" from interim Chechen prime minister Aslan Maskhadov. Raduev was the notorious commander responsible for the hostage raid on Kizliar and Pervomaiskoe the previous January.[4] Two days after the kidnapping of the Interior Ministry troops, a government delegation from North Ossetiia was abducted on the way to Grozny for talks with Chechen officials. On the night of December 16–17, six medical personnel working for the International Committee of the Red Cross in a town south of Grozny were shot dead, and the next night six Russian civilians were murdered in Grozny itself. Yeltsin's press secretary described the killings as a provocation directed against the peace process. Boris Berezovskii, the financial "oligarch" then serving as deputy secretary of the Russian Security Council, flew to Grozny to consult with First Deputy Prime Minister Movladi Udugov and field commander Shamil' Basaev to seek the release of Raduev's hostages. They were freed on December 18 in just one of many instances in which Berezovskii played a key role in a Chechen hostage crisis.[5]

In an attempt to reestablish political normality, Chechnya conducted elections in January 1997. General Aslan Maskhadov, the hero of the war and the peace, handily won against his opponents. Maskhadov took 59.3 percent of the vote, followed by Shamil' Basaev with 23.5 percent, and acting president Zelimkhan Iandarbiev with 10.1 percent.[6] International observers declared the elections "legitimate and democratic." Tim Guldimann, head of the OSCE mission to Chechnya, characterized them as "exemplary and free."[7] Boris Yeltsin's spokesperson reported the Russian president "satisfied" with the vote. He added that Yeltsin believed Maskhadov's election "provides a serious chance" for successful talks resulting in "mutually acceptable decisions on Chechnya's status within the Russian Federation."[8]

Signs of trouble persisted despite Maskhadov's election. The rogue commander Raduev refused to recognize the results. He insisted that Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudaev was still alive and that only Dudaev could order him to cease fighting against Russia. Raduev threatened to "burn to cinders" at least three Russian cities if Moscow did not acknowledge Chechnya's independence. Basaev and Iandarbiev meanwhile declined suggestions that they join Maskhadov's new administration. Basaev vowed to return to his pre-war career selling computers, while Iandarbiev, a well-known writer, announced that he would resume his literary pursuits.[9] Chechnya's fate might have been very different, had they kept their promises.

One of Iandarbiev's final acts before handing over the presidency to Maskhadov was to have his Foreign Ministry declare OSCE mission head Guldimann persona non grata. Maskhadov later reversed the decision when he invited the Swiss diplomat who had played such an important role in ending the war in Chechnya to his inauguration. In mid-February 1997 Iandarbiev had his 300-member presidential guard stage a demonstration against Maskhadov's plans to combine his office of the presidency with that of prime minister.[10] In early March Iandarbiev spoke at a rally organized by Raduev to proclaim the anniversary of the Kizliar-Pervomaiskoe hostage raids as a "day of historic Chechen combat glory." Two hundred of Raduev's armed supporters paraded through central Grozny and attracted a crowd of some 3,000 people.[11]

Despite such provocations, Maskhadov attempted to fashion a broadly representative government. It included two members of the Dudaev-Iandarbiev cabinet and even two officials who had served under the pro-Moscow regime of Doku Zavgaev. He appointed Movladi Udugov as his chief negotiator with Russia, and in April 1997 nominated Shamil' Basaev to the post of first deputy prime minister.[12] Basaev was put in charge of industrial affairs, where he would share responsibility for oil production with First Deputy Premier Khozh-Ahmed Iarikhanov, director of the Southern Oil Company (Iunko). Basaev's new post gave him opportunities for personal enrichment in a highly corrupt sector of the economy, but perhaps more important, it provided potential jobs for his armed followers. A priority of the Maskhadov government was to secure the flow of Caspian Sea oil from Baku in Azerbaijan through a pipeline connecting Grozny to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiisk, something Basaev promised he could do (see map 3-1, p. 54).[13]

Basaev's appointment followed a late March visit to Grozny by Boris Berezovskii, in his capacity as deputy secretary of Yeltsin's Security Council. Given Berezovskii's long-standing involvement in Chechnya and investments in the oil industry, the appointment might have seemed to Maskhadov a way to get on good terms with the Yeltsin government. Some Russian politicians disagreed with Maskhadov's choice. Given that Basaev was still under investigation by the federal prosecutor's office for his role in the Budennovsk hostage-taking, his appointment was considered by some "a slap in the face for Moscow."[14]

Maskhadov lived to regret his overtures to Basaev and Udugov, as well as his association with Berezovskii.[15] He came to blame Berezovskii for contributing to the strength of his opponents. "For Chechnya," he told a journalist from *Der Spiegel*, just after the start of the second war, Bere-

zovskii "is very bad. He is hatching plots and linking up with opposition officials such as Basaev and Udugov. He pays for their television, Internet access, and their satellite telephones. His negotiators have been involved in all major extortion jobs." But Maskhadov, like everyone else, seemed at a loss to explain Berezovskii's motives: "Maybe he has orders to weaken Russia's position in the Caucasus. Maybe he has his own oil interests here. The fact is that his intriguing is highly dangerous for the entire region."[16]

Competing Visions of Chechnya's Future

Much of the kidnapping carried out by Chechen gangs—with victims in the hundreds—seemed driven mainly by the prospect of ransom money. Yet some of the kidnappings appeared to have a political purpose, as an instrument in the struggle against Maskhadov by his many opponents. One particularly plausible analysis relates the kidnappings during the first two years of Maskhadov's presidency to the conflict over the nature and future of Chechnya. On the one side was Maskhadov, portrayed as a moderate figure interested in asserting Chechnya's nominal independence and sovereignty, but within the framework of economic and political cooperation with Russia. The foundation for such cooperation—and the key to the revival of the Chechen economy—was integration into the regional system of oil production and transport. Such integration required coordination not only with Moscow, but also with regional neighbors such as Azerbaijan.

The competing vision of Chechnya's future was based on the dream of an Islamic state encompassing Chechnya and Dagestan and perhaps other Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus. The proponents of such a future did not seek peace with Russia—even on the favorable terms, entailing unilateral withdrawal of the Russian army, negotiated by Maskhadov with Aleksandr Lebed'. Only a continuation of the war beyond Chechen territory would make the union with Dagestan possible, providing an outlet for landlocked Chechnya to the Caspian Sea in the east. If such military action provoked a Russian reaction, all the better. The other Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus would rise up in response to Russian repression, and the whole region would become independent. At that point, the "Islamic Nation" (as one of the Chechen nationalist groups was named) would gain access to the Black Sea to the west, as well as the Caspian to the east, and Chechnya's viability and survival would be assured.[17]

Oil also played a role in this scheme, because control of the Dagestan coast would provide access to two-thirds of the Caspian shelf.[18] This was a

utopian vision for sure, and one that depended on many faulty assumptions, including at a minimum the desire of the peoples of Dagestan to join with Chechnya in an Islamic state. The analysis also neglected the cruder motives of personal greed and power that undoubtedly drove many of the leading Chechen oppositionists. But the basic political goals espoused by the various Chechen opposition groups amounted to an outright rejection of a Russian presence in the North Caucasus in favor of some kind of Islamic confederation. Such goals would not have been served by the policy of rapprochement pursued by Maskhadov.

Indeed, Maskhadov's leading opponents all held top positions in the main Islamic organizations. For example, the "Caucasus Confederation" promoted nationalist movements in Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkariia, and Karachaevo-Cherkesiia against the "Russian occupation." Iandarbiev and Raduev were its main leaders. In January 1998 they issued a statement condemning the policies of the Maskhadov government as "insufficiently tough." They were particularly critical of the unproductive and "humiliating" meetings between Maskhadov's representatives and the Russian "leaders of the former empire." Maskhadov's opponents also criticized his commitment to Islam and to Chechen independence, as when Raduev ridiculed the Chechen president because he had used his Russian passport to travel to Mecca for the *hadj* (Saudi Arabia, like every other country, did not recognize the Chechen passport as legitimate).[19]

Another major opposition group, the Congress of Peoples of Ichkeria and Dagestan, was convened under the leadership of Basaev and Udugov. Both had served in Maskhadov's government, with Basaev justifying his participation as being useful to monitor the Chechen president and "correct him in the case of attempts to deviate from the course of independence." Although not formally affiliated with the Wahhabi movement, the congress supported efforts of the Wahhabis in Dagestan in their struggles against the traditional Muslim institutions there and in their attempt to "liberate" Dagestan from Russian control.[20]

Strategic Industries: Oil and Kidnapping

Maskhadov's vision of a nominally independent Chechnya working in close economic and political cooperation with Russia appeared within reach in the first months of his administration. A number of agreements between the Russian and Chechen governments, signed in May 1997, seemed a promising start. In the early days of May, Maskhadov had made numerous

efforts to improve the atmosphere for cooperation by seeking to crack down on criminal activities. He gave senior interior ministry officials a deadline of one month to improve their performance or be fired. He had his vice president issue a warrant to detain Salman Raduev after the maverick commander claimed credit for recent bomb attacks in Russia.[21] Maskhadov sought the release of Russian journalists from NTV whose capture had received wide attention and reflected poorly on his new government.

Boris Berezovskii sought to bolster the prospects for the Russo-Chechen agreements by promoting them to Russian television audiences a week before they were actually signed on May 12, 1997. As an incentive to further economic cooperation, Ivan Rybkin, the Security Council secretary, suggested "offering Grozny a share of tariffs from oil exports via Chechnya"—essentially the "Buy Chechnya" proposal that Dzhokhar Dudaev had floated to an unresponsive Yeltsin administration in 1992.[22] The May agreements seemed to bear fruit, at least as far as the oil factor was concerned, on July 3, 1997, when Geidar Aliev, the president of Azerbaijan, signed an agreement in Moscow endorsing the shipment of Caspian oil through Chechnya. Western support for the proposal came in the form of partnership with British Petroleum (BP).

The day after the oil agreement was signed, Jon James and Camilla Carr, two British volunteers at a home for troubled children, were kidnapped at gunpoint in Grozny.[23] A number of observers have suggested that the kidnapping of British citizens was intended to wreck the BP-Azerbaijan deal and thwart Chechnya's integration into the international oil market. In response to the kidnapping, President Maskhadov ordered an antiterrorist brigade to storm the headquarters of warlord Arbi Baraev in Urus-Martan, where he suspected the captives were being held. The operation failed, owing to unanticipated resistance from forces loyal to Raduev.[24] On August 18, 1997, however, the three NTV journalists abducted in Chechnya in mid-May were freed through the efforts of Berezovskii. He and NTV director Igor' Malashenko acknowledged that the captives were ransomed for "a seven-figure dollar sum."[25]

In May 1997, when the oil deal seemed close, Raduev was interviewed by a Russian newspaper and made a prescient threat: "Now they think they've won the oil contract. They're mistaken. They've lost. Only for that reason, knowing my influence, they're now looking for the possibility to begin separate negotiations with me."[26] He also gave a strong indication of the role Berezovskii would play: "He has a personal interest in this oil. I often meet with him personally. We don't have close relations, but I respect him. He is a very courageous and businesslike person. Whenever the need arises for me to have an intermediary in negotiations with Russia, I call Berezovskii. He's an honorable person."[27]

During the summer of 1997, kidnapping and general insecurity were not the only barriers to Russian-Chechen economic cooperation. Plans for transshipment of oil across Chechnya foundered over disagreements about the transit fees that Moscow would pay and whether material support for maintaining the pipelines would be forthcoming. Apparently as a bargaining ploy, Russian officials began hinting that Moscow would seek alternative routes for oil transshipment and bypass Chechnya altogether. On August 6, 1997, for example, Sergei Kirienko, then first deputy minister of fuel and energy, told journalists in Moscow that talks on the transit of Azerbaijan's Caspian oil via Chechnya to Novorossiisk were "deadlocked" because of Chechnya's "impossible" tariff demands.[28] On August 21, *Nezavisimaia gazeta,* a newspaper with financial ties to Berezovskii, quoted his charge that the Russian finance ministry was sabotaging the oil pipeline deal by not transferring the necessary funds to Chechnya. The charge was repeated a few days later when Chechen vice president Vakha Arsanov met in Baku with Azerbaijani president Aliev. The Chechens also objected to the wording of the agreement with Moscow, which appeared to smuggle in "politically charged" references to "Chechnya as a member of the Russian Federation."[29]

As the time approached for the first shipment of "early" oil from Baku, Moscow again threatened to bypass Chechnya and transport the oil by barge to Astrakhan and Volgograd for refining. Grozny in turn vowed to build a pipeline to Georgia and leave Russia out of its Azerbaijani oil deal altogether.[30] On September 5, 1997, however, Boris Nemtsov, Russia's fuel and energy minister, made a conciliatory gesture by suggesting that Russia sign an agreement with Chechnya on repairing the Chechen sector of the pipeline, even while disagreements on tariffs were still being negotiated. Despite threats from Raduev to disrupt the flow of oil if Russia did not officially recognize Chechnya's independence, the agreement was signed on September 9. It immediately came into question, though, as Chechen terrorists bombed a truck carrying Russian workers to a repair site and as Russian prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin was accused of refusing to transfer the funds required by the agreement. Finally, on September 15, Nemtsov announced Moscow's decision to construct a 283-kilometer pipeline across Dagestan to North Ossetiia, thereby cutting Chechnya completely out of Russia's Caspian oil affairs.[31]

Map 3-1. *Caspian Oil Routes*

In order to salvage his plan to integrate Chechnya into the international oil market, Maskhadov sought further support from Western backers. He relied on a fellow Chechen with broad international contacts, Khozh-Akhmet Nukhaev. Nukhaev, the reputed "father of the Chechen mafia," had served as chief of counterintelligence in the Dudaev government before moving to Azerbaijan to represent that country's oil interests in negotiations with Chechnya and Western companies.[32] He founded an organization called Caucasian Common Market, which boasted an impressive list of advisers, including Jacques Attali, former head of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. In October 1997 Maskhadov and Nukhaev signed a protocol of intent with Lord McAlpine to set up an investment trust to restore the Chechen oil complex. In March 1998 Maskhadov traveled to London where he met former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, an adviser to both British Petroleum and the Caucasian Common Market. By April 1998, with British endorsement,

Maskhadov had secured the support of leaders of the North Caucasus republics and the representatives of Georgia and Azerbaijan for the common market project, in which the transport of oil across Chechnya would play a key role.[33]

Again the opponents of Chechen economic integration disrupted Maskhadov's plans with violence. On May 1, 1998, they kidnapped Valentin Vlasov, Yeltsin's envoy to Grozny. Vlasov met and was held in the same location as the two British captives, Carr and James—evidence that the kidnappings were part of a coordinated plan.[34] The British couple was released on September 20, 1998, after fourteen months in captivity, thanks to a deal worked out between Berezovskii and Raduev. Berezovksii reported that he had secured their release by donating computers and medical aid to Raduev, but most observers consider these a euphemism for a substantial ransom. Leaders of republics neighboring Chechnya criticized Berezovskii, suggesting that Raduev now had "more computers than some Russian intelligence services possess." Taped telephone intercepts of conversations between Berezovskii and Movladi Udugov suggest that Berezovskii was indeed involved in sending money to ransom some victims of Chechen kidnappings.[35]

In this case, Berezovskii flew Jon James and Camilla Carr back to London on his private jet. But his efforts were not an act of individual altruism. In addition to conducting his business affairs, Berezovskii was at that time also serving as a government official in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the organization that brought together most of the countries that had made up the Soviet Union. In fact, in an interview with Russian media, Raduev made clear that "Berezovskii was dealing with us not as a politician-businessman, but as the executive secretary of the CIS." As such, one of Berezovskii's goals was to further economic cooperation in the Caucasus region, including collaboration in the shipment of Azerbaijani oil across Chechnya to Novorosiisk.[36]

Neither Moscow nor Western governments were, however, satisfied that the situation in Chechnya was adequately secure to proceed. Two weeks after the release of James and Carr, four engineers (three British citizens and one New Zealander), employed by a British telecommunications company, were kidnapped in Grozny. President Yeltsin's personal envoy Vlasov was still held captive. He was released on November 13, 1998, presumably with Berezovskii's intervention. On the same day kidnappers captured Herbert Gregg, an American teacher at an orphanage in Dagestan's capital of Makhachkala.[37] He was eventually released, but the four engineers were not so lucky. They fell victim to a botched rescue operation by

Maskhadov's government.[38] Their captors executed them and left their severed heads by the roadside; the bodies were found a week later. In early December a senior official of the Grozneft oil company was kidnapped in Grozny and the chief of the Chechen antikidnapping unit was assassinated.[39] With such grisly determination, Maskhadov's opponents made it clear that they were not giving up their attempts to thwart his plans to use the oil pipeline as a means of improving relations with Russia.

Moscow Lets Maskhadov Lose

Maskhadov's domestic opponents availed themselves of other means besides kidnapping to undermine the Chechen president. Maskhadov had been under increasing pressure, for example, to adopt Islamic Shariah law and thereby reduce his own power. At first Maskhadov's concession to Islam seemed to serve him well as Chechnya's Supreme Shariah court on November 4, 1998, sentenced Salman Raduev in absentia to four years in prison for attempting to overthrow the president. But on December 24 the court ruled against Maskhadov himself and called on the president to dissolve the Chechen parliament, arguing that its legislative activities contravened Islamic law.[40]

Maskhadov was not getting much help from Moscow either, despite claims by Sergei Stepashin, the interior minister, that "Maskhadov is supported by Russia and other countries" and should be able "to consolidate his authority." According to Stepashin, Prime Minister Evgenii Primakov had assured him at a meeting in early November 1998 that funds had been allocated from the federal budget to improve social conditions in Chechnya. Primakov had made a similar pledge the previous month, but there was little to show for it. Charges of widespread embezzlement of funds intended for Chechen reconstruction and social welfare seem well founded. Stepashin nevertheless expressed confidence that the receipt of the money—payments of pensions, in particular—"would enhance Maskhadov's prestige."[41]

But other initiatives emanating from Moscow seemed designed to undermine the Chechen leader's prestige. In early December 1998, for example, the Russian press reported that President Yeltsin had annulled his directive of September 1997 to negotiate a treaty with Chechnya on the mutual delegation of powers, along the lines of the one that had led to a modus vivendi with Tatarstan. Yeltsin's policy reversal seemed an ill-timed slap in the face to Maskhadov, who in an interview on December 2 had expressed his readiness for "any dialogue" with the Russian government

that would lead to the signing of "a full-fledged treaty" between Moscow and Grozny. Alluding apparently to the oil issue, Maskhadov had also declared himself ready to assume "a certain responsibility for defending the strategic interests of the Russian Federation in the Caucasus."[42]

Despite Moscow's rebuff, Maskhadov continued the struggle against his terrorist opponents. Faced with a rash of kidnappings, he had nevertheless managed to score a few successes against terrorism—and not always with Berezovskii's dubious intervention. In early November 1998 a spokesperson for Anatolii Chubais acknowledged that Chechen intelligence had helped prevent a planned assassination of the then first deputy prime minister a year earlier.[43] On December 11 the Chechen interior ministry arrested a suspect in the beheading of the four Western hostages. Moreover, Deputy Premier Iusup Soslambekov made a commitment, unfortunately never fulfilled, to expel "an Arab terrorist group led by Khattab." Soslambekov said that his government did not want Chechnya converted into a "terrorist morass."[44] Ironically, what was left of the democratic aspects of Chechnya's political system in some respects hindered the government's attempt to deal with terrorism. In mid-December, for example, when President Maskhadov called up army reservists to help police the country's territory, his opponents declared the move unconstitutional.[45]

In early 1999 a number of Russian observers became alarmed at the deteriorating situation in Chechnya and the Yeltsin administration's apparent complacency. In mid-January Aleksandr Lebed', the retired general and former Security Council secretary who brokered the agreement that ended the war, issued a warning to the press. He predicted another war if Moscow failed to take action to bolster Maskhadov. Forces opposed to the Chechen president, argued Lebed', are "ready to start an armed insurgency at any moment." As one report described, "Lebed also blamed Moscow for not having taken advantage of the opportunity offered by the peace agreement that he and Maskhadov signed in late August 1996 to stabilize the political and economic situation in Chechnya and the neighboring North Caucasus republics."[46] A few days later, Valentin Vlasov, the presidential envoy to Chechnya who had survived more than six months in captivity there, issued a similar judgment. He faulted the Yeltsin government for not having provided more economic and political support to Maskhadov in accordance with the May 1997 agreements. He specifically criticized the Russian president for inadequately monitoring his government's implementation of the agreements.[47]

By February 1999 Maskhadov seemed to have conceded defeat. Under pressure from field commanders led by Shamil' Basaev, he suspended the

Chechen parliament and ordered the immediate transition to Shariah law throughout Chechnya. Russian observers, such as former Security Council secretary Ivan Rybkin, recognized Maskhadov's move as a desperate attempt to prevent an open split with the opposition. But Rybkin also noted—accurately, if unhelpfully—that Maskhadov's decree violated the Chechen Constitution. That constitution, adopted under Dudaev, established Chechnya as a secular republic with freedom of religion for all. It did not grant the president power to dissolve the parliament or impose universal Islamic law.[48] Within days of Maskhadov's decree, the rebel field commanders formed an alternative governing body—a council called the Shura—and elected Basaev as its head. The Shura demanded the immediate implementation of Shariah, the resignation of the president and the parliament, and the drafting of a new constitution.

Maskhadov's concessions only seemed to embolden his enemies. On February 22 the Supreme Shariah Court demanded that Maskhadov dismiss the prosecutor general because of his service in the Russian police force during the first Chechen War, and the president complied.[49] The next day Maskhadov's adviser on matters related to Chechnya's Russian-speaking population was kidnapped on his way to work in Grozny. Meanwhile Basaev publicly criticized Maskhadov for his allegedly pro-Russian orientation and suggested, with some reason, that the president had adopted Shariah reluctantly, under pressure from the opposition.[50]

A turning point came on March 5, 1999, when Major-General Gennadii Shpigun of the Russian Interior Ministry was abducted in Grozny. Interior Minister Stepashin vowed that if Shpigun were not released soon Moscow would pursue "extremely rigorous measures to ensure law, order, and security in the North Caucasus region." He criticized the Maskhadov government's unsuccessful efforts to crack down on terrorism. "In effect," Stepashin said, "several thousand armed scoundrels dictate their will to Chechen society, driving it into medievalism and obscurantism." He threatened that further "terrorist acts" would prompt Russia to intervene and destroy the "criminal formations' bases," albeit "in conformity with international practice."[51] Maskhadov's press secretary responded to Stepashin's criticisms by blaming Russian authorities for circumventing the Chechen president and dealing directly with his rivals—the practice established by Boris Berezovskii right at the outset of the Maskhadov administration. He suggested that Russian intelligence services had conspired with Basaev to abduct Shpigun.[52]

Basaev, for his part, denied responsibility for the kidnapping but urged whoever had abducted the general to turn him over to the Shura as a "war

criminal." On March 9 Basaev's ally Movladi Udugov threatened reprisals against individual Russian politicians if Moscow should attack Chechnya.[53] Trying to calm the situation, Maskhadov went on Chechen television and vowed, "I am doing my best to prevent war." He offered a $200,000 reward for information on Shpigun's whereabouts and claimed that some twenty separate groups were investigating his disappearance, despite a lack of cooperation from Russian authorities.[54]

Stepashin responded the next day by insisting that Moscow "has been supporting and will support the legitimate Chechen president." Valentin Vlasov, Yeltsin's special envoy to Chechnya, and Oleg Sysuev, first deputy chief of the presidential administration, both ruled out Moscow's use of force in Chechnya.[55] In fact, as Stepashin later acknowledged, this was precisely the time when planning for a new, limited invasion of Chechnya was begun.[56]

By the end of March Russian helicopter gunships had encroached on Chechen airspace and President Maskhadov responded with orders to shoot down all unauthorized aircraft flying over the country. This was not the first time that the Chechen government had warned Moscow about such aerial intrusions. On August 13, 1997, Russian fighter aircraft staged simulated attacks on Grozny's airport and central market, according to Chechen officials, in an apparent attempt to disrupt a forthcoming meeting between Maskhadov and Yeltsin. The Chechen government made similar claims as recently as January 1999, at a particularly tense time in Chechen domestic politics, but Russian air force officials denied the charge.[57] Given the warlike atmosphere in March, the claims seemed quite plausible this time.

On March 29 Maskhadov's government attempted to use its last bit of leverage. Blaming Moscow's failure to pay for adequate security—payments of 100 million rubles ($4.13 million) were in arrears for the past six months—it halted the shipment of Azerbaijani oil through the Chechen sector of the Baku-Grozny-Novorossiisk pipeline.[58]

Along the Path to War

The next few months witnessed a series of border skirmishes between Chechen and Russian troops. Most of the reports came from Stepashin's Interior Ministry, which was already planning a new invasion of Chechnya, so their reliability cannot be assumed. But there was obviously an escalation of conflict in the border areas. In April 1999 several kidnappings and killings in the Stavropol' region bordering Chechnya prompted

Stepashin to close the frontier. It "will be closed for gangsters, not for civilians," he said. But, he added, "this will effectively be a war zone," patrolled by helicopter gunships.[59] On July 19 the Interior Ministry reported an attack by Chechens on the Stavropol' border posts, killing two Russian soldiers and wounding five. Russian helicopters retaliated by launching some forty missiles.[60]

On May 27, 1999, the Interior Ministry reported an attack on a Russian border post between Chechnya and Dagestan. The next day Stepashin's ministry sent helicopters to attack what it claimed was a terrorist base on a small island in the Terek River. Chechen security minister Turpal Atgeriev denied that Chechens were responsible for the border attack, which he blamed on residents of Dagestan. He said the Russian air attacks were intended to provoke a new conflict with Chechnya.[61] Stepashin meanwhile met with two Russian priests who had just been released from captivity in Chechnya. He promised that criminals who "kidnap and kill people" must be "eliminated." The next day officials from Chechnya and North Ossetiia met to draft measures to cooperate in eradicating kidnappings for ransom.[62] The gesture was, unfortunately, too little and too late.

In July Russian troops arrested Atgeriev but were obliged to release him after prosecutors announced that they had inadequate evidence against him. Nevertheless, the Chechen government responded by closing, first, the offices of all of its regional representatives in the Russian Federation, and then even its "embassy" in Moscow.[63] During the night of July 25–26 fighting broke out along the Dagestan-Chechen border, but no casualties were reported.[64]

Amid all the bad news, it was hardly noticed that U.S teacher and missionary Herbert Gregg, who had been kidnapped in Dagestan the previous November, was finally released on June 29, 1999. General Shpigun, much dearer to his boss Sergei Stepashin, remained a captive.[65]

On July 27 President Maskhadov, conforming to a now familiar pattern, made conciliatory gestures simultaneously to his domestic opposition and to Moscow. He named Ruslan Gelaev—a comrade-in-arms of Basaev and Khattab—first deputy premier with responsibility for law enforcement. Maskhadov told his cabinet that he expected Gelaev's appointment to lead to a reduction in kidnapping, theft of oil, and other crimes. To placate Moscow, and Western oil interests, Maskhadov dispatched his national guard and presidential guard to protect the section of the Baku-Novorossiisk pipeline between Grozny and the Dagestani border. His presidential spokesperson explained that Chechnya wanted to demonstrate an

ability to adhere to the 1997 export agreement it had made with the oil industries of Russia and Azerbaijan.[66]

Again, in a familiar pattern, Maskhadov failed to satisfy either his domestic opponents or the Russian government. Basaev and Khattab were on the verge of plunging Chechnya into war—a war that Moscow had also been planning for nearly five months.

It is now known that the Russian authorities had been planning to resume the war against Chechnya long before the attack on Dagestan and the apartment bombings. This information was revealed already in early 2000 by Sergei Stepashin, an active proponent of the first war who had been Yeltsin's prime minister from late April 1999 until August 1999. Yeltsin fired him on August 9, two days after the first Chechen incursion into Dagestan. In a newspaper interview, Stepashin stated:

> In relation to Chechnya I can say the following. The plan for active operations in this republic was worked out starting in March [1999]. And we planned to move to the Terek in August-September. So this would have happened even if there had not been explosions in Moscow. I actively conducted work on strengthening the borders with Chechnya, preparing for an active offensive. Thus Vladimir Putin did not discover anything new here. You can ask him himself about this. He was at that time the director of the FSB [Federal Security Service, the descendant of the KGB] and had all of the information.

Stepashin implies that the original planning for the war did not necessarily include a full invasion and attempt to recapture Grozny and control all of Chechnen territory: "I was always a supporter of a strong and tough policy in Chechnya. But I would have thought well about whether it was worth crossing the Terek and going further to the south."[67]

As this chapter has shown, the situation in Chechnya following the withdrawal of Russian troops was dangerous and unstable. Moscow's unwillingness or inability to fulfill the terms of the agreement that ended the first war—particularly in the provision of economic aid and reconstruction—certainly contributed to making independent Chechnya an unviable proposition. Yet the sources of Chechnya's failure are also found in its internal politics, the rivalry among political factions with competing visions of Chechnya's future, and the greed for oil and ransom money.

But did Chechnya's instability require another military invasion and occupation? Would, as Stepashin suggested, a more limited effort to secure the border area have been less costly and more effective? Chapter 4 explores the origins of the second Chechen War and seeks to explain why Vladimir Putin chose the course of all-out war to resolve the Chechen situation.

4 Putin's War

I had already decided that my career might be over, but that my mission, my historical mission—and this will sound lofty, but it's true—consisted of resolving the situation in the North Caucasus. . . . I have a little time—two, three, maybe four months—to bang the hell out of those bandits. Then they can get rid of me.

—Vladimir Putin, March 2000

The second round of Moscow's war with Chechnya began with an attack from across the Chechen border into Dagestan during the first few days of August 1999. Reports ranged from some 300 troops to over 2,000. The force consisted of Dagestani Wahhabis, Chechens, and various other Muslim soldiers, including some from Central Asia and the Middle East. They were led by field commanders Shamil' Basaev and Khattab, an Arab fighter married to a Dagestani woman. Responding to a request for assistance from the leadership of Dagestan, Moscow sent Interior Ministry troops to the Tsumadin and Botlikh districts on August 4.[1] Local Dagestani forces resisted the invasion as well—apparently to Moscow's surprise—and they were soon supported by regular Russian army troops.

This was not the first military action involving Wahhabis in Dagestan. In May 1997 a force of Dagestani fighters associated with the sect took control of several villages, including the one where Khattab's wife was born. In December 1997 a group of Chechen guerrillas joined the Wahhabi force to attack a Russian armored brigade near Buinaksk. The residents of the villages "liberated" by the

Wahhabis and Chechens declared their independence from Dagestan and established another "little Chechnya" within the Russian Federation.[2] The August incursion looked like another step on the path to creating a united Chechen-Dagestani Muslim state, the explicit goal of Basaev and his allies.

But the Dagestanis by and large resisted the Chechen incursion and spurned the Wahhabi fundamentalism that threatened to undermine their own Islamic traditions of governance.[3] Yet the Russians continued their military operations against Chechnya with massive aerial attacks in early September, followed by a ground invasion. At first it seemed that the Russian forces might stop at the Terek River and try to create a positive example in Chechnya's traditionally pro-Russian Nadterechnyi district. But they kept going all the way to Grozny. Unlike the first Chechen War—which very nearly led to Boris Yeltsin's impeachment—this one was popular.[4] Support for the war effort stemmed first from its apparent defensive origins and second from the fact that the defeat of the Chechen invaders coincided with a series of terrorist bombings on Russian territory. During the first two weeks of September, four apartment buildings were blown up in Dagestan, in Moscow, and in Volgodonsk. Suspicions naturally fell on Chechens.

Putin Chooses War

Vladimir Putin, appointed prime minister and heir apparent by Boris Yeltsin just days after the attack on Dagestan, seized on the opportunity to prosecute the war while it still enjoyed public support. If one can believe his "astonishingly frank self-portrait"—as a collection of Putin's interviews with Russian journalists was called—Putin did not expect the popular support to last. But after just four months of war Yeltsin decided to resign the presidency early, putting Putin in an excellent position to move from acting president to the real thing with elections in March 2000. Renewal of the war against Chechnya, supported by an increasingly docile and servile Russian press, secured Putin's victory.

The war itself dragged on for years. Even after most of Chechnya was bombed into rubble and thousands of its citizens killed, driven away, or "disappeared" into internment camps and mass graves, the country remained a dangerously insecure place, with frequent guerrilla attacks, assassinations, and abductions. Even the assassination of Khattab in March 2002—apparently killed by a poisoned letter prepared by the Russian secret services and delivered by a traitor within his circle—failed to stem the tide of terrorist acts.[5] Putin undoubtedly managed "to bang the hell out of those bandits," but he fell far short of fulfilling his "historical mission" of "resolving the situation in the North Caucasus."[6] If he managed to preserve the Russian Federation from further disintegration, it was despite rather than because of his policy in Chechnya. The causes of the second Chechen War are rooted in the unique characteristics of the Chechen situation and the political instincts of Vladimir Putin, both relevant for understanding the future of the Russian Federation.

Defending Dagestan

On August 10, 1999, newly appointed prime minister Putin reported that President Yeltsin had instructed him to "impose order and discipline" in Dagestan and that the Russian authorities would resolve the situation there in "one-and-a-half to two weeks."[7] On August 13 the Russian forces initiated two days of intense air and artillery bombardment of villages in the Botlikh district, creating a refugee crisis, but failing to dislodge the invaders.[8] Eventually the Russians drove the attacking forces back over the border. On August 25 Russian military aircraft attacked the Chechen villages of Vedeno and Urus Martan, where rebel forces retreating from Dagestan had fled. A Russian military official in Makhachkala confirmed the attacks, but the defense minister himself denied them.[9]

On August 27, Putin flew to the Botlikh district of Dagestan to present medals to Russian soldiers and Dagestani volunteers who had repulsed the invaders. At the same time he warned of further possible attacks. Indeed, two days later an attack was launched against the Dagestani village of Karamakhi. It came not from Chechnya, but from a combination of local Dagestani police forces and federal Russian troops. Karamakhi had been a hotbed of Wahhabism. Along with the neighboring village of Chabanmakhi, it had been run for the past year by the local Islamic *djamaat*, or council of elders, with little influence of the Dagestani or Russian governments. For reasons still hard to understand, this arrangement had the blessing of then Russian interior minister Sergei Stepashin, who visited the area on September 2, 1998, and subsequently arranged for substantial "humanitarian aid" to be delivered to the already relatively prosperous villages.[10] A prominent Chechen religious leader later described how "Stepashin—who is a non-Muslim and does not know what Islam is—visited these two villages and said about their residents: 'They are good Muslims. They are not hardliners and should be helped.'" He accused Stepashin of having sent two truckloads of weapons to the villages, under the guise of medical supplies.[11] A year later, the Russian authorities had a new perspective on Wahhabism, following the invasion of Basaev and Khattab, and decided to snuff it out.

Map 4-1. *Chechnya and Dagestan*

Although the government suppression of the Wahhabis received passive support from the local population, it triggered a further escalation of violence elsewhere. On August 31 a bomb exploded in a popular shopping complex off Red Square in Moscow, killing one person and wounding forty. Basaev later attributed the terrorist attack to his Wahhabi allies from Dagestan.[12] On the night of September 4, 1999, a bomb exploded in an apartment building in Buinaksk, Dagestan. Sixty-four people died and hundreds more were injured. On September 5 some 2,000 Chechen militants crossed the Dagestani border and attacked several villages in the Kazbek and Novolaksk districts.[13] Basaev's press service described the attacks as intended to divert federal forces from their punitive operations against the Wahhabis of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi.[14]

In Moscow bombs destroyed two apartment complexes, one on September 9 and another on September 13. Three days later a truck bomb exploded near an apartment in Volgodonsk in Rostov *oblast'*. Between these three explosions and the earlier one in Buinaksk, some 300 people were killed. Although widely attributed to "Chechens," the crimes remain unsolved. Demolition experts quickly destroyed the remains of the first Moscow building that had been bombed, making observers wonder how, without physical evidence, an investigation could be conducted to find the perpetrators. In the case of the Buinaksk bombing, six suspects were arrested in September 2000 and put on trial in Dagestan two months later. All were Dagestani followers of Wahhabism. The Dagestani prosecutor charged that Basaev and Khattab had arranged the explosion.[15]

The apartment bombings had a traumatic and galvanizing effect on Russian public opinion, comparable to what happened in the United States after the attacks of September 11, 2001. They provoked widespread and uncritical support for expanding the war against Chechnya.

By mid-September 1999 Russian forces had defeated the Wahhabi militants of Karamakhi and Chabanmakhi and driven the Chechen invaders out of Dagestan. Unfortunately, their main method of air and artillery bombardment had destroyed several Dagestani villages in the course of liberating them. Russian defense minister Igor' Sergeev charged that several thousand rebels remained concentrated at three locations on the Chechen border. He vowed that the Russian army was "fully ready" to repel any new incursion.[16] Instead of waiting, the Russians launched their own air assault. Ostensibly intended to interdict invasion routes, the initial attacks across the border expanded by September 23 to include "ammunition depots, the [Grozny] airport, oil refineries, industries, and television and telephone facilities."[17]

Basaev: "Some Women Curse Me"

As Russian military activities intensified, newly installed prime minister Putin issued Chechen president Maskhadov an ultimatum: to arrest those responsible for the invasion of Dagestan or face further Russian attacks. Putin was undoubtedly buoyed by the widespread—and unexpected—support for his hard line from a Russian population unnerved by the terrorist bombings. Yet in retrospect it would have been more sensible to try to work with Maskhadov rather than threaten him. The Chechen president had attempted to discredit the supporters of the incursion into Dagestan. On August 29 Maskhadov issued a decree removing his extremist rival Movladi Udugov from Chechnya's National Security Council. He accused Udugov, an ally of Basaev and a longtime supporter of a combined Chechen-Dagestani Islamic state, of fomenting "a large-scale ideological sabotage operation against the Chechen state" and of having "pushed the traditional friendship between the Dagestani and Chechen peoples to [the] breaking point."

Moscow missed an opportunity to bolster Maskhadov at the expense of Basaev, Udugov, and Khattab. In an interview with a BBC reporter, Basaev acknowledged that in Chechnya "some women curse me" because his military activities in Dagestan had provoked a renewal of Russian bombing.[18] Indeed, few Chechens supported Basaev's continued military provocations, especially when they jeopardized Chechnya's hard-won independence and peace. Few were willing to support the holy war that he, his friend Khattab, and their "band of madmen" had promoted. Such a characterization was typical of the ordinary Chechens interviewed by reporter Anne Nivat. One woman referred to Basaev as "that criminal" who "should have been arrested a long time ago." A group of Chechen men who did not join the fight against the new Russian invasion insisted that "all of us here would willingly fight the Russians for our independence, but not as long as Shamil' is leading the troops."[19]

Maskhadov acknowledged Basaev's unpopular position, even if those in Moscow did not. He told an interviewer in late September 1999, "Basaev has forfeited much of his reputation here through these guerrilla actions. Our people are tired of war and condemn such acts of provocation." But when the interviewer asked why Maskhadov would not arrest Basaev, Raduev, and Khattab, "or at least strip them of their operational bases in the Chechen mountains," Maskhadov responded: "I cannot simply have Basaev arrested as a gangster; people here would not understand that. After all, we fought together for our country's independence."[20] Maskhadov often used the formula "people would not understand" as a way of avoiding admitting that he would be powerless to do something because his enemies still commanded considerable influence.

Yet much of Basaev's influence appeared to stem from his support from certain quarters in Moscow—especially from Berezovskii, who reportedly supplied him with telecommunications equipment, computers, and probably ransom money.[21] As Sergei Kovalev, a leading human-rights activist, described, "Berezovskii publicly said he gave Shamil' Basaev $2 million to build a cement factory and provide work for unemployed Chechens. I don't know how Basaev builds factories, but I do know how he buys weapons and wages wars. So why did Berezovskii choose Basaev? Everyone knows Basaev is a terrorist. His disputes with Maskhadov, his intrigues and adventurism are well known."[22]

Despite Berezovskii's support, by autumn 1999 the tide of Chechen public opinion seemed to be turning against Basaev. He was rescued by Vladimir Putin himself. As in 1994, when the unpopular leader Dzhokhar Dudaev was able to silence his critics and rally support in the face of a Russian invasion, this time too the rival Chechen leaders came together to meet the Russian challenge. As Basaev told the BBC, "In the current situation we are united and our unity is strengthened by Russia—and for that we are very grateful."[23]

Replaying War

On September 29, 1999, Putin expressed willingness to begin negotiations with the Chechen leadership, but only on condition that (1) Maskhadov condemn terrorism "clearly and firmly;" (2) he rid Chechen territory of armed bands; and (3) he be willing to extradite "criminals" to Moscow. Putin said that the Russian leadership "will never allow a replay" of the 1994–96 Chechen War, because it could lead to "unnecessary casualties among troops" (he did not mention Chechen or Russian civilians). But he added that he still did not exclude a ground attack to "solve the main task—destroy the bandits, their camps and infrastructure." The next day Russian tanks spearheaded a ground invasion into Chechen territory, while an air campaign targeted dams, oil wells, and bridges.[24]

With such actions, Putin left Maskhadov little alternative than to rely on Basaev and the other field commanders to help defend the country. On October 1, 1999, just two days after issuing the conditions of his ultimatum, the Russian premier declared that Russia no longer recognized the legitimacy of Maskhadov's rule in Chechnya. For him the "only legitimate organ of power in Chechnya" was the parliament elected under dubious conditions of Russian military occupation in 1996 and exiled to Moscow

after the Chechen victory. Putin claimed that a flood of Chechen refugees, then estimated at more than 90,000 by Russian officials, proved the illegitimacy of Maskhadov's rule. "They are voting against the current regime with their feet by going to Russia," Putin said, as if acknowledging the Chechen position that Chechnya and Russia were two different countries. Putin neglected to add that most refugees were fleeing a Russian bombing campaign and sometimes even seemed themselves to be a target of the attacks. On October 21, for example, a Russian missile strike on a market in Grozny killed over 100 civilians. The pace of bombing accelerated to a rate of 150 air strikes a day by the end of the month, as the number of refugees in neighboring Ingushetiia alone exceeded 124,000.[25]

The Russian government's method of convincing Chechnya to remain part of the federation seemed somewhat counterintuitive, to say the least. Russian planes bombed Chechen cities and villages, sending tens of thousands of refugees fleeing to the "border." As they reached the border (which was not an international one, because Moscow did not recognize an independent Chechnya), the refugees were turned back by the Russian army and refused entry into what was, according to the Kremlin, another part of their own country, Russia. In the meantime, the army tried to create a cordon sanitaire to keep Chechens out of the rest of Russia—especially Dagestan.

With the new invasion of Chechnya in September 1999, a parallel process of refugee creation got under way in Moscow and other cities in Russia. While the Kremlin was insisting that Chechnya remain part of Russia, the proponents of "Operation Foreigner" were sending another message. The government of Moscow, for example, during the week of September 14–20, expelled at least 11,000 of its own Russian citizens, with their Russian passports, calling them "foreigners" because they happened to be of Chechen descent. A Chechen diaspora group in Moscow appealed to Muscovites and the mass media not "to put an equals sign between banditry and the Chechen people"—a lost cause, given the harsh rhetoric emanating from the Kremlin and the harsher reality of indiscriminate bombing of Chechnya itself.[26]

Why War?

As noted in chapter 2, the origins of the first Chechen War—or at least an important reason why the conflict was not resolved peacefully—lay in the idiosyncratic personalities and leadership styles of Boris Yeltsin and Dzhokhar Dudaev. Some analysts argue that the course of the second war also owes something to such personality factors. Its origins, as suggested in chapter 3, are tied to internal political conflicts over the nature of the Chechen state and competition, both internal and external, over the control of oil. Individuals are not irrelevant. Berezovskii's peculiar role, for example, should certainly not be disregarded, nor should the political motivations of Yeltsin and Putin. Before turning to the question of leadership and personalities, however, two other possible explanations merit consideration.

Religious Motivations?

If what seemed to motivate the fighters of Basaev and Khattab to invade Dagestan was the desire to create an Islamic state and spread the doctrine of Wahhabism, one needs to ask what role religion played in the second Chechen War.[27] However, the impact of religion should not be exaggerated. Wahhabism in Dagestan was a minority belief, representing just a small percentage of the population before the Chechen Wars broke out. It was not a major force in Chechnya either. Khattab evidently practiced Wahhabism, the dominant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia. But Basaev himself has called into question the religious motivations for Khattab's actions. When a reporter asked Basaev if his radical friend Khattab was a "Wahhabite," he said, "No, he is a Khattabite."[28] It was a revealing, if somewhat coy, answer. Khattab and Basaev seemed less interested in religion or in fashioning an independent and viable Chechen state than in fighting for its own sake.

Raduev was the same. In one interview with a Russian magazine in May 1997, he waxed poetic about all of the wars he looked forward to fighting after driving the Russians out of Chechnya:

> I will create a powerful army of five thousand. It will liberate the Caucasus. First, I'll help the Balkars. Then with a powerful strike of three battalions, I'll wipe out Erevan. I can do it even now. I spoke about this to the courageous and patient president of Azerbaijan. Then I'll help Georgia. I'll destroy like trash the Shevardnadze regime. . . . I'm ready to help the Belarusian opposition, even though they're not Muslims. . . . Lukashenko's antidemocratic regime must be destroyed. . . . And then I'll bring Yeltsin to his knees. . . . I'll use chemical weapons against Russia. I'm not playing games here.

Confronted with such lunatic ravings, the interviewer could not resist mentioning to Raduev that some people thought he was "not quite right in

the head." Raduev readily acknowledged that other Chechen political leaders were questioning his sanity. "Udugov said that I'm a medical case, Maskhadov announced that I'm a schizophrenic. . . . But I consider myself a student of the great Dzhokhar [Dudaev]," hardly a reassuring response, but a revealing one, nonetheless.[29]

Dudaev had come into power expecting to promote a secular republic, independent of Russia, which would respect Chechen traditions that had been stifled by the Soviet regime. His model was the independence movement of Estonia, where he had been stationed as a Soviet air force commander before being drawn into Chechen politics. Yet the more Moscow resisted making concessions to Chechnya's claims of sovereignty the more Dudaev fell back on Islamic forces—including some outside the country—for support. In the early months of the war, Dudaev could respond to an interviewer's question about the role of religious leaders in Chechen politics that they "do not play an essential role here. Religious and public figures, representatives of peoples and confessions place their trust in the legally elected president and the government."[30]

If such a claim about the lack of Islamic influence on Chechen politics had some plausibility at the beginning of the first war, it lacked any by the end. As Georgi Derluguian described, "Eventually, every powerful man in Chechnya, starting with President Aslan Maskhadov, scrambled to acquire a degree of Islamic discourse and representation—beards grew longer, prayers became conspicuous, women were expelled from the remaining offices."[31] Timur Muzaev, in his encyclopedic review of the evolution of Chechen political organizations, has highlighted a steady radicalization and Islamicization that he attributes mainly to Yeltsin's war against the Dudaev regime. Before the war there were several political parties and organizations of a pro-Russian orientation that favored Chechnya's membership in the Russian Federation. By the end of the war all political organizations promoted Chechen independence. They differed only over whether a sovereign Chechnya should cooperate with Moscow or seek to undermine Russia by interference in its internal affairs and by military intervention in the Muslim republics of the North Caucasus.[32] Clearly, one of the great missed opportunities of the Yeltsin administration was its failure to work out a modus vivendi with Chechnya before the republic fell victim to forces espousing radical Islam.

The base for radical Islam in Chechnya was the country's third-largest city, Urus-Martan, with a population of about 100,000 people. Starting in 1997, Arab fighters began arriving one by one, until they numbered about 500. According to Shervanik Iasuev, an administrator appointed by

Moscow to run the city, the new arrivals "were bearded, wore green or black shirts and long robes over their pants, and were armed with expensive pistols." They called themselves Wahhabis, although they came not only from Saudi Arabia but from throughout the Middle East. "They went to the market and they paid with dollars," said Iasuev. "There was no power here; there was disorder everywhere, and their influence was very strong." With unpromising economic prospects and an astronomical rate of unemployment, Chechnya seemed fertile ground for recruiting fighters to march under the banner of Islam. Young recruits were sent to a camp for three months of religious and military training at Serzhen-Iurt, about 40 kilometers from Urus-Martan. "The poor Chechen people were already suffering so much and our young guys simply couldn't think," Iasuev explained. "They were ready to accept any ideas." At Serzhen-Iurt the young Chechens met Khattab and joined his force of Wahhabis, the troops that would later link up with Basaev to invade Dagestan and set off the second Chechen War.[33]

Military Pressures?

As mentioned earlier, many Russian officers reacted skeptically to the prospect of a military resolution to the Chechen conflict already in 1994, before the first war began. As the war dragged on, opposition to it increased, even within the Defense Ministry. Colonel Viktor Baranets's conversation with "one wise and far-sighted General Staff general" was typical: "What are we going to do with Chechnya?" asked Baranets. "The general blurted out the answer instantly: 'Leave.' And I understood that this answer had been ready for a long time."[34] Despite widespread opposition to the first war, and the humiliating withdrawal in 1996, the Russian military high command tried its hand again at a military solution just three years later. One possible explanation for this surprising turn of events is that most or all of the officers who were opposed on principle to a renewed war in Chechnya had already resigned in protest against the first war. The remaining military leaders had learned different lessons from the first war.[35] They seemed eager for revenge.

Perhaps more significant is the fact that the initiative for renewal of the war seems to have come not from the Defense Ministry but from the Interior Ministry, as the revelations of Sergei Stepashin, reported in chapter 3, suggest. And it was the kidnapping of the Interior Ministry official General Shpigun that prompted Stepashin to get the plans under way. Ironically, Stepashin began his plans for a new war to regain Russian control over Chechnya just when the Russian public was least interested in such a cam-

paign. Public opinion polls in March 1999 reported, for example, that barely a third of Russians considered Chechnya part of the Russian Federation, and few seemed to miss it.[36]

Putin's Personality

Why did the war escalate from the fairly limited operation that Stepashin had in mind? How did the second war become so popular, given that its prospects for long-term success seemed hardly better than in the previous one? Here it worth considering what role the personality and ambitions of Vladimir Putin played. Russian journalist Andrei Piontkovskii has tried to relate Putin's approach to the war to his background in the KGB and even to his difficult childhood. Piontkovskii focuses especially on Putin's easy use of *fenia*, the slang of the criminal world, which became increasingly popular among Russian politicians as they abandoned the artificiality of Soviet-era political speech. "But none of the politicians resort to this underworld jargon as abundantly and naturally as Putin," argued Piontkovskii.

> "Wipe out in the shit house," "a control shot in the head," "whoever offends us won't live 3 days,"—this is clearly not the work of image-makers, but something very personal and rooted in experience. This kind of language isn't typical for the KGB, and even less for its foreign intelligence officers who always stood out for their polished education and well-schooled manners.[37]

Echoing similar analyses of Yeltsin and his intensely personal reactions to Dudaev's inflammatory language, Piontkovskii sought sources in Putin's childhood to understand his policy toward Chechnya.

> When British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who came to Petersburg to express his respect for the future ruler of Russia ahead of time, timidly reproached Putin for annihilating Grozny, Putin replied sincerely and with conviction. His lips even trembled in indignation. It turns out that one of the Chechen rebels called him a "kozyol"—something close to "bastard." In the St. Petersburg courtyard of his childhood, such insults were never forgiven. Turning Grozny into Dresden or Hiroshima is, in Putin's understanding, a perfectly suitable response to being called a bastard.[38]

Lest the reference to Dresden and Hiroshima be dismissed as journalistic hyperbole, Piontkovskii had earlier described to his readers the widespread

sentiment in Russia that weapons of mass destruction should be used against Chechnya in response to the invasion of Dagestan and the apartment bombings. Among those who advocated such means were professional politicians who, in a seminar held in the Duma building, "were discussing in all seriousness the question of using thermonuclear weapons in Chechnya." They also included fellow journalists:

> Returning home, I opened up the latest edition of the most popular Russian paper. On the first page, the writer argued: "It is necessary to put the question before Chechnya—either they cease all military activity on Russian territory or face the physical destruction of the whole republic with air raids, bacterial weapons, psychotropic nerve gas, Napalm, everything that our once-strong army has at its disposal."[39]

Finally, some members of the Russian public as well advocated wholesale destruction of Chechen society. In the early days of the war, when it seemed that the Russian forces might stop at the Terek River, the online edition of the Russian newspaper *Vesti* asked its readers whether they favored crossing the Terek and carrying out a large-scale invasion. By a ratio of 5 to 2, respondents favored the invasion. Particularly striking was the rationale of some of those who opposed an invasion—they were not necessarily doves: "We don't need to cross the Terek. Let them die from hunger and bombing," one of the opponents of invasion wrote. "I don't understand why they don't use chemical or nuclear tactical weapons!"[40] This was by no means a representative sample of the Russian population, because computer and Internet users were still relatively rare. If anything, it oversampled the middle classes and intelligentsiia and perhaps called into question one politician's claim that "Internet users are the most progressive class of the Russian society."[41]

These reactions from Russian politicians, journalists, and the public suggest that Putin's emotional response to the Chechen crisis is one widely shared—or at least widely propagated. In any case, one needs more than Putin's boyhood humiliations in a Leningrad courtyard to understand the origins and course of the second Russian war against Chechnya.

Some Russian journalists have made further inferences about the origins of the war by building on the information that the Defense Ministry was already planning a second invasion, even of limited scope, and that Stepashin himself visited the North Caucasus militay district to oversee preparations for the attack. Pavel Fel'gengauer, for example, suggests that

the invasion of Dagestan by the forces of Basaev and Khattab may not have been simple "unprovoked aggression." It might be seen "as a clever preventive strike which thwarted Russian military plans and postponed the inevitable invasion for two critical months." Alternatively, he suggests the possibility "that Russian secret services actually lured Basaev into Dagestan to create a pretext for the coming Russian invasion."

> Troops that had been set to invade Chechnya from the north were tied up for several weeks in Dagestan and the rebels decimated several units. Stepashin says that the initial plan was to reach the Terek River in August or early September, but it took the Russians until October to achieve this goal. Russian troops encountered heavy resistance from rebels in Dagestan, so when the delayed invasion of Chechnya began, they advanced step by step, in constant fear of ambushes. The end result: Grozny was surrounded only by December and the Russian command managed to organize a serious assault on the city only this week—in the middle of January (2000)—the worst possible time of year to fight in Chechnya.[42]

Neither of Fel'gengauer's inferences is without problems. As to the likelihood of a "clever preventive strike" on the part of Basaev and Khattab, it assumes that they were acting on behalf of Chechnya or the Chechen government to defend their country's territory. But at the time of the incursion into Dagestan, Basaev and Khattab considered Maskhadov their opponent and would not have been in a position to coordinate with him a plan for preventive defense. The inference that Basaev and Khattab were somehow drawn into Dagestan—perhaps by some expectation that it would be an easy victory—is more plausible. As he flew to Dagestan to try to quell the fighting there, Sergei Stepashin, in his last act as prime minister, vowed that "Russia will not repeat its mistakes in the north Caucasus. No more Russian soldiers will die there."[43] It is also clear, as undoubtedly Basaev and Khattab knew as well, that Stepashin had supported the Wahhabi *djamaat* in Dagestan a year earlier. Might the Chechens have concluded that the prime minister would accept further Wahhabi inroads into Dagestan with equanimity? If Stepashin was indeed planning an invasion of Chechnya since the previous March, then his promise not to send any more Russian troops there to die was a blatant lie. But perhaps he did intend to encourage the Chechens to get entangled in Dagestan, as a pretext for subsequent Russian military actions.

Putin's Putative Political Ploys

Much debate has focused on the relationship between the second war against Chechnya and Putin's political ambitions. The Chechen attacks against Dagestan coincided with Yeltsin's replacement of Sergei Stepashin as prime minister with Putin. Putin at the time was a political nonentity, known for his loyalty to the president, but not for much else. He received broad approval for his conduct of the war, essentially escalating it. And his crude determination, expressed in crude language, to eliminate "terrorists" and "bandits" further boosted his popularity.

The links between the war and Putin's rising political fortunes are mainly circumstantial. The account in Yeltsin's memoir alludes to the relationship between Putin's appointment and the situation in Chechnya, but only obliquely. Yeltsin claims that he had wanted Putin to serve as prime minister as early as 1998 when he became dissatisfied with the incumbent, Evgenii Primakov. Yeltsin did not, however, think the time was right to appoint Putin, "so Stepashin was inserted temporarily." Indeed, he lasted barely three months in the job.

On August 5, 1999, Yeltsin summoned Putin to explain to him "the state of affairs" and tell him that he wanted him to take over the government, even as "a fierce battle loomed ahead." Elections were coming up. "It would not be easy to keep the entire country under control. The northern Caucasus was very troubled. Some political provocations were possible in Moscow." To some extent those last two factors, with their seeming allusion both to the Chechen invasion of Dagestan and the apartment bombings in Moscow, probably loom larger in retrospect than in the actual discussion Yeltsin conducted with Putin. Only the former president and his ghostwriter know for sure.

Was Basaev's Invasion a Setup?

In any case, Chechen forces led by Basaev and Khattab invaded Dagestan two days after Yeltsin appointed Putin. Unlike Yeltsin, who at the outbreak of the first Chechen War had disappeared for days to have an operation on his nose, Putin visibly and publicly took control. As Yeltsin rhapsodized, "within a matter of weeks, he had transformed the situation within our power ministries. Each day he would bring together the heads of each ministry or agency into his office. He forced them to gather all their resources into one united fist."[44] What is most surprising is that Yeltsin, whose career had nearly collapsed in the wake of the disastrous first war in Chechnya, would decide that the best instrument for dealing

with the North Caucasus three years later was a "united fist." But equally surprising is the fact that the Russian public seemed to agree. Three months into the war, pollsters found that 77 percent of respondents in St. Petersburg and Moscow approved of the invasion. Even in the provinces the approval rate averaged 64 percent, despite the fact that the regional media often portrayed the local impact of the war—deaths of hometown police and soldiers, for example—more truthfully than those in the capitals. Along with support for the war itself, Putin's personal approval rating soared, from 35 percent when Yeltsin appointed him in August to 65 percent in October, as he escalated the war. As one Russian journalist explained, "The secret of this popularity is in the single forceful expression which Putin used about Chechnya—'We will wipe them out.'"[45]

Russian observers raised suspicions about Putin's motives in escalating the war and about the origins of the first attacks by Basaev's forces into Dagestan in August 1999. They pointed out that Basaev met little resistance from Russian forces, which were evidently withdrawn from the border area just before the Wahhabi incursion, and suggested that Basaev might have been drawn in to create a pretext for a full-scale Russian invasion. Suspicions fell particularly on Boris Berezovskii because of his close ties to Basaev. Vitalii Tretiakov, editor of *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, claimed unequivocally that "the Chechens were lured into Dagestan and allowed to get involved there so as to have a legal pretext to restore federal authority in the republic and begin the active phase of the fight against terrorists gathered in Chechnya." He insisted that "this was clearly an operation planned by the Russian secret services" and that it "was approved at the very top."[46] Another Russian commentator suggested that Tretiakov's revelations were mainly an attempt to defend Berezovskii, the primary financial backer of his newspaper, or, in his more colorful language, "The whole thrust of the article is to prove that oligarch B., who is spiritually close to Tretiakov, has less shit on his snow-white suit than his competitors."[47] Regardless of motives, there remains for many a lingering suspicion—apparently shared by Basaev himself—that the Chechen commander was lured into attacking Dagestan in early August 1999.

Robert Bruce Ware, a leading specialist on Dagestan, has stressed that key developments in the region go back a bit earlier than August. Already at the end of June 1999 Wahhabi militants began infiltrating villages of Dagestan's Tsumadin and Botlikh districts from Chechen bases. "They entered the villages in small numbers and made their presence felt as their numbers gradually grew. Generally, they were courteous to the locals, paid for everything they required, and harassed no one, except in so far as they forbade alcohol. They did not confront local law enforcers, who would have drawn upon their families for support and revenge." According to Ware, military conflict did not begin with an invasion by Basaev and Khattab, but with a local skirmish on August 2, "when Dagestani police forces were dispatched from Buinaksk and Makhachkala to reestablish administrative authority in the region." Basaev and Khattab used the police action as a pretext to carry out an invasion in support of the goal they had explicitly advocated since the April 1999 Congress of the Peoples of Ichkeria and Dagestan: "the creation of an independent Islamic state." Dagestani and then Russian federal forces, apparently surprised at the success of Basaev's incursion, responded by seeking to dislodge the invaders.[48]

Rather than validating the notion of a scheme "approved at the very top," Ware offers two explanations for why the border was so poorly defended. One is that Basaev bribed "Russian officers near the Dagestani border to permit him access by retracting their troops just prior to his advance and later permitting his escape," a tried and true method from the previous war. A second is that Russian officers in the area, confident in the local Dagestanis' commitment to resist the Wahhabi invaders, pulled back their troops in order to set a trap for Basaev.[49] Ware suggests that Russia was not seeking a pretext to invade Chechnya, and that on the surface Stepashin's revelation of an invasion plan dating to April 1999 appears to be "trivial," indicating only normal contingency planning to cope with a dangerous situation. Against the various conspiracy theories, Ware offers another plausible explanation: "Basaev became over-confident as a consequence of surrounding himself with representatives of that small minority of Dagestanis who supported him, and who appear to have misled him concerning the support he was likely to receive from the broader Dagestani population."[50]

The most intriguing evidence that Basaev was lured into invading Dagestan comes apparently from French intelligence sources, via the Russian press.[51] They revealed that in the summer of 1999 Basaev met, at the estate in southern France of the arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi, with Aleksandr Voloshin, chief of staff for then-president Yelstin (and later Putin), and Anton Surikov, a former Soviet military intelligence officer. Surikov had worked with Basaev some years earlier when the Chechen commander was leading military forces of the Abkhaz separatist movement in Georgia, with Moscow's blessing. Voloshin is claimed to have provided $10 million to Basaev in order to fund the invasion of Dagestan. Furthermore, Russian military intelligence officers who later observed the forces of Basaev and Khattab crossing the Chechen-Dagestani border were reportedly ordered not to respond.

In this account, the main objective of the invasion, instigated by Yelstin's administration, was to undermine the political prospects of an emerging coalition between Moscow mayor Iurii Luzhkov and former prime minister Primakov.[52] If Basaev and Khattab had succeeded in seizing the Dagestani capital of Makhachkala and delaring an Islamic republic, Yeltsin would have gained a pretext for imposing emergency rule and postponing the parliamentary elections scheduled for December 1999. The Luzhkov-Primakov movement would have lost momentum, and Yeltsin's political fortunes would have had a chance to revive. In the event, the fierce resistance of local Dagestani villagers thwarted the plans of Basaev and Khattab, as well as those of Yeltsin and Voloshin—if indeed they harbored any.

The fact that Yeltsin did not find adequate justification to declare emergency rule in autumn 1999 does not, however, mean that he did not put the invasion of Dagestan to some other political use. Here most speculation focuses on Yeltsin's promotion of Vladimir Putin. One need not accept that Putin deliberately engineered the second war, counting on his newfound popularity to propel him into the presidency as Yeltsin's successor. Yeltsin's own pronouncement on this matter is unequivocal: "Putin's sudden popularity in the face of the Chechen War was not remotely predictable."[53] That may be so, but once it was clear that fighting Chechen kidnappers and terrorists played well at home, Putin abandoned the limited objectives that Stepashin claimed lay behind the original plan to renew the war. As one Russian analyst put it, "Basaev's raid on Dagestan and the bombings in Moscow both served to reinforce in the public opinion a single, simple chain of conditioned reflexes—Chechens—terrorists—liquidate, wipe out in the toilet."[54]

Did Putin also seize the opportunity to promote his political prospects by escalating the conflict? Some observers believe so. According to Aleksandr Iskandarian, director of Moscow's Caucasus Studies Center, for example, "This was a war fought on TV screens to boost the popularity of the president" and ensure his election.[55] The renewal of warfare in Chechnya served as well to undermine the political standing of retired General Aleksandr Lebed', the only potential challenger who could have campaigned on the platform of law and order that Putin used so successfully. Having brokered the failed peace accord with the Chechens, Lebed' was now made to look naïve and impotent—hardly presidential material.

The Riazan' Connection

One issue surrounding the renewal of war in Chechnya has caused more suspicion than perhaps any other: who bears responsibility for the bombings of apartment buildings in Russian cities in September 1999? The leading suspects, including Basaev and Raduev, have denied responsibility, even though the latter was occasionally prone to take credit for other terrorist acts regardless of his actual participation. The apartment bombings appear to account for most of the support for this second war from ordinary Russians, who had opposed the first war in large numbers. In Russia, a country particularly susceptible to both consiracy theories and genuine conspiracies, many observers began to wonder if the federal security forces had arranged the explosions. At least two candidate theories have been proposed.

The first is linked to Yeltsin's purported campaign to undermine his political rival, Moscow mayor Luzhkov. What better way to discredit the popular Lukhkov than to demonstrate that he could not keep his own residents safe from terrorist attacks? The second theory suggests a deliberate effort to provoke a "rally 'round the flag" effect on the Russian populace to solidify the rule of Yeltsin and his designated successor. Russian journalists once asked Putin himself about such theories. He reacted with characteristic bluster: "What? We blew up our own houses? Nonsense! Total rubbish! There are no people in the Russian secret services who would commit such a crime against their own people. The very suggestion is amoral and fundamentally nothing more than part of an information war against Russia."[56]

Putin's denials failed to allay suspicions about the apartment bombings. In fact, the most suspicious apartment bomb was one that did not go off at all. On September 22, 1999, in the provincial city of Riazan', residents prevented a possible explosion of their apartment complex on Novoselov Street after seeing three people—two men and a woman—carrying several big sacks from their car into the basement of the building.[57] The car's license plate indicated that it was registered in Moscow, but a piece of paper had been taped over it to suggest, by replacing the last two digits, that it was local. The residents phoned the city police, whose experts found that the sacks contained the explosive hexogen and were set with a timer to detonate early the next morning, the pattern that had characterized explosions earlier that month in working-class flats of Moscow and Volgodonsk. An alert went out, and road blocks were set up to capture the terrorists, whom Moscow would soon describe as Chechens, although witnesses said the woman was blonde and the men looked Slavic.

As the search for the terrorists got under way, Nadezhda Iukhanova, an operator at a local telephone bureau, overheard a suspicious call to Moscow. The voice instructed the caller in Riazan' to "get away separately,

there are road blocks [*perekhvaty*] everywhere." Iukhanova reported the conversation to authorities at the Riazan' branch of the Federal Security Service (FSB). They were convinced that they had found the terrorists and they managed to trace the call—to "one of the official premises of the metropolitan FSB," their parent organization in Moscow.[58]

The next day, September 23, the press service of the Russian Ministry of the Interior confirmed the presence of hexogen in the sacks found in the Riazan' basement. They were sent to Moscow to the central FSB headquarters for further tests. Major General Aleksandr Sergeev, head of the local branch of the FSB, congratulated Riazan' residents on surviving such a close call.[59] That same day Russian airplanes began bombing Grozny. Prime Minister Putin made a terse announcement of the attack and added that "the bandits will be pursued wherever they are found"—implying perhaps that Chechens were responsible for the attempted terrorist act in Riazan'.[60]

Also on September 23, FSB general Aleksandr Zhdanovich appeared, as scheduled well before the Riazan' incident, on the NTV television program *Hero of the Day.* He presented the government line of the moment that citizens of Riazan' had thwarted an attempted terrorist bombing.[61] The next day, however, the FSB in Moscow offered a different story. It reported that the sacks found in the basement of the Riazan' apartment building were not explosives after all, but ordinary sugar. Still attempting to conform to the previous line, a police spokesperson told the *Moscow Times* that terrorists frequently plant a few dummies before laying real bombs—but this story was now at odds with the one coming out of the FSB headquarters. FSB director Nikolai Patrushev announced that the placement of sacks with timers and detonators was part of a *training exercise.*[62] The local Riazan' authorities resisted this conclusion. "It was a live bomb," insisted Lieutenant Iurii Tkachenko, an officer of the bomb squad who had done the original inspection. He and his colleague, Petr Zhitnikov, later received official recognition and monetary awards for their bravery in dismantling the bombs, as did telephone operator Iukhanova for her contribution to apprehending the terrorists. Nevertheless, Patrushev ordered his subordinates at the Riazan' bureau to release the Moscow-based FSB agents, who had so successfully posed as terrorists.[63] The Russian minister of the interior, Vladimir Rushailo, having congratulated his officers for thwarting the terrorists, was put in a bit of an awkward position.[64]

Because Patrushev took two days to announce that the Riazan' bomb scare was a training exercise, the local media had plenty of time to record the contrary impressions of Riazan' officials. V. N. Liubimov, the governor

of the Riazan' *oblast'*, indicated that he was unaware of any exercise. Neither was the head of the local FSB, General Sergeev, informed about it. Following Patrushev's announcement, he sent his agents back to the apartment block to apologize to the residents for unnecessarily creating such a panic. He later visited there himself, urged the residents not to file a lawsuit, and managed to arrange some improvements for the complex—such as a more secure entryway.[65]

Moscow later tried to justify the exercise and the delay in revealing it after the bombs had been discovered. Even the local Riazan' FSB spokesperson, Lieutenant Colonel Iurii Bludov, insisted that the episode was a useful test of the citizens' responses. But, as one journalist wondered, "if it was a training exercise, who was being trained? Why, after the residents had practised evacuation procedures, were they not reassured and allowed to go home?"[66] Instead many of them felt lucky to be able to spend the night in a bus, as one of the residents who had first discovered the bombs was a local busdriver. As another account summarized the official position, it looked a bit feeble: "Residents may have had to spend the night in the cold, and they may have lived for two days thinking they had been the target of a terrorist attack that almost succeeded, but the lessons learned were valuable."[67]

Aleksandr Litvinenko and Iurii Fel'shtinkskii, authors of the most thoroughly investigated account of the Riazan' incident, raise serious doubts about the official story belatedly offered by Patrushev and endorsed by Bludov. They wonder, in particular, how to account for the delay in announcing that the bomb scare was in fact a training exercise. "Let's propose just for a minute that in Riazan' exercises were actually being carried out," they write. "Is it possible to suppose that for the entire 23rd of September, while the world was shouting about the prevention of a terrorist act, the FSB kept silent? No, it's impossible to imagine that. Can we assume that information about the 'exercises' was not made known to the prime minister of Russia, a former director of the FSB, who, moreover, had close personal ties to Patrushev?"[68]

In summarizing the Riazan' affair, one U.S. journalist suggests that there were two competing versions of reality at issue: "Either the authorities tried to kill a couple of hundred Russian residents, or they simply tried to scare the daylights out of them and spread panic through a city for two days to see what would happen."[69] A third version of reality is the political reality that Vladimir Putin fashioned from the incident. One need not accept the darkest interpretation of the Riazan'incident—that the security forces planned to blow up an apartment building and deliberately kill

hundreds of Russian citizens—in order to draw some conclusions about Putin's political machinations. It certainly would have been easier for him to justify the bombing of Grozny on September 23, if "terrorists" had destroyed yet another Russian apartment complex the day before. If, however, there was no deliberate intention to blow up the apartment complex on Novoselov Street, Russian authorities nevertheless took advantage of twenty-four hours of panic and confusion to pin the attempted terrorism on Chechens and escalate the war.

Some of the survivors of the Riazan' exercise remained skeptical of the government's position. Aleksei Kartofelnikov, the first to spot the FSB agents on the night of September 22, was well aware of the link to the Chechen War. "The government started bombing Chechnya the next day," he remembered. But he was reluctant to accept Chechen responsibility for the apartment bombings. "I know Chechens. I served with them in the army. They are good people. How can one suspect them of such a thing? How can one suspect it of anybody?" Another resident, Ivan Kirilin, "a scrappy 67-year-old who talks through a cigarette," was more cynical. "Whom should I believe—what the government says or what was in the basement?" he asked. "I don't think the Chechens would blow up a residential house. You have to ask—who is responsible for the war? Who needed the war? The government, of course." As Maura Reynolds, who interviewed many of the residents, concludes: In Riazan' "the government's assertions have made little headway against residents' suspicions. There are too many details that don't fit. And there's the undeniable fact that the bombings led to the war, and the war fed the rise of Vladimir V. Putin." [70]

Putin's war against Chechnya was not a matter of the "two, three, maybe four months" that he anticipated. In late January 2000, after five months of fighting in Dagestan and Chechnya, the Russian Defense and Interior Ministries reported nearly 1,200 deaths among the Russian forces.[71] By March 2000, the figures had reached 1,991 dead and 5,925 wounded on the Russian side—very close to the figures for the first seven months of the previous war.[72] In June 2000 a respected military journal suggested that the army was still sustaining up to 50 deaths a week, or 200 a month.[73] By the end of the year 2001, nearly 4,000 Russian soldiers had been killed and as many as 13,000 wounded.[74] The toll of military casualties is remarkably close to what the Soviet Union sustained during its ten-year war in Afghanistan.[75] The difference is that this time the civilian victims—some tens of thousands of whom perished during the two Chechen Wars—were nearly all Russian citizens.[76]

Russia had gained control of most Chechen territory, except for the impenetrable mountain strongholds that would indefinitely shelter the tenacious guerrilla fighters. As in any classic guerrilla war, the central authorities controlled the peripheral territory at best by day. The guerrillas were in charge at night. As one observer put it, "Before 5 p.m. Grozny is in the hands of the federal troops; after that the checkpoints close down and start defending themselves."[77]

With any national liberation movement as advanced as the Chechen one—and, after all, the country's independence was tacitly recognized with the August 1996 agreement to withdraw Russia's army—it was hard for Moscow to find reliable local representatives. In June 2000 Putin signed an order establishing an interim civilian administration in Chechnya that would report directly to the Kremlin. He appointed the Chechen mufti, Akhmad-Hadji Kadyrov. Unfortunately for Moscow, Kadyrov's appointment led to the immediate resignation of several local Chechen administrators who had been working with the Russian government.[78]

Many observers, especially among the Chechens themselves, blamed the resumption of war in 1999 on the Russian government's failure to fulfill the more than fifty agreements it signed with Chechnya in the wake of the 1996 peace accord. The agreements were supposed to provide for reconstruction of the devastated country. Perhaps it never intended to do so. In May 1997 Presidents Yeltsin and Maskhadov signed the Treaty on Peace and the Principles of Relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. The first principle on which the two sides agreed was "forever to repudiate the use and the threat to use military force to resolve whatever disputes may arise." The status of Chechnya was supposed to be decided peacefully through diplomacy by the year 2001. Evidently someone in Moscow wanted to give war another chance—and many of Maskhadov's enemies in Chechnya were more than willing to oblige.