

# Chechnya, the Russian Sicily

*Roman Bessonov reports on the first example of Russia's Great Criminal Revolution, where fighting has already left over 40,000 dead. Part I.*

Future historians of Russia's Great Criminal Revolution—as the period since January 1992 has come to be known—will speak about Chechnya either with horror or with great respect; it will be the latter, if this revolution ultimately prevails. In any event, they will have to mention that Chechnya was the first and the most outstanding example of bringing the economy and everyday life under criminal rules of conduct.

Chechen historical traditions—the customs that underlie the dominant ideologies and conflicts in that region, and the way they were encountered and sometimes manipulated by outside forces (Russians and others)—were scarcely discussed in the Russian press before 1993. Popular authors treated the matter from the standpoint, first, of communist ideas, and later pseudo-democratic ideology.

With the flare-up of the war in Chechnya in late 1994, publications on Chechnya multiplied, but most of them are still ideologized. Those who attack Chechnya try to describe it as a wild place, full of bloodthirsty villains terrorizing each other with vendettas; they echo Russian authors such as the melodramatic writer Yelena Charskaya, who referred to the Chechens as armed, militant, and cruel people, and the great poet Aleksandr Pushkin, who had “a wicked Chechen climbing the river bank, sharpening his dagger” in one of his verses. The defenders of Chechnya paint a bucolic picture of peaceful mountain people with a developed national memory, who realized their will to self-management through an inter-tribal treaty.

It is certainly worthwhile to look more deeply at how things work in Chechnya, where as many as 40,000 civilians perished in two months of brutal, winter fighting and where Russia, still a nuclear-armed superpower, remains embroiled in a violent conflict.

## Hierarchy of tribes

The writers do all agree that the Nakh people inhabiting the Terek River valley in the North Caucasus, where Chechnya is geographically defined today, have preserved a strong tradition of tribal relations through many centuries. Today, they are organized in tribal formations called *taips*. The predecessors of these tribes lived in the mountains and often warred against each other. To this day, the valley tribes, or *taips*, consider themselves superior to the mountain-dwellers.

There are not 12 *taips*, as is sometimes thought, but over

170. Not all are equal as to rights and opportunities, but there is a hierarchy in which the more rich and respected groups contend for influence. Authors in the Moscow daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, who tend to idealize Chechen traditions, ignore this detail.

The criminal tradition in Chechnya owes its strength partly to geography. Chechnya has few natural resources of its own, but is situated right on the route of goods traffic from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea coast. Without skirting all along the Caspian coast and then traversing the lifeless salt marshes of Kalmykia, the traveler must go through Grozny, the Chechen capital, on the way to the northwest. And the hollows and canyons of the Terek, as well as the mountain slopes above it, provide good opportunities for attacking passing caravans. (Thus the criminal bands in this region came to be Chechen because the Chechens lived there, just as the famous Odessa Jewish mafia came into existence just because Odessa was a port town in a region largely inhabited by Jews. The Chechen and the Jewish gangsters, active at two ends of the Black Sea, have a lot in common in their demeanor: They look like intelligent businessmen, they never talk loudly, and they smile at their potential victims.) Because of such factors, Chechnya had a predilection for becoming a Russian Sicily.

At the same time, czarist Russia wanted to bring this region under control primarily for economic reasons. The armed Chechen groups raiding caravans were a drain on state income. Merchants needed this colonization even more than the czars themselves, which may be why it took until the mid-19th century for Chechnya to be conquered.

## Sufi orders in Chechen nationalism

Chechen nationalism developed as a means to preserve the mechanisms of territorial control. Those *taips* that spring from mixed *ghars* (a *ghar* is an extended family group, compounded of families of general surnames), meaning they had an admixture of non-Nakh blood, were less respected. Former Speaker of the Russian Parliament Ruslan Khasbulatov, for instance, comes from a mixed *taip* called Kharachoy (earlier known as Circassian), which is why there were more opportunities for him to struggle for power in Russia than in little Chechnya. Likewise, President of Kalmykia Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, despite being a millionaire, would find it im-

possible to rule his republic if he hadn't signed an alliance with the leaders of the biggest tribe controlling Elista, because Ilyumzhinov himself comes from a mixed Don tribe.

Religion is not much of a source of nationalism in Chechnya, unlike the case of the Pamir separatists in Tajikistan, but is rather a reason for tense relations with Orthodox Christianity.

The majority of religious Chechens are members of Sufi brotherhoods, a network of sects within Islam. The first of them to become widespread in Chechnya was the Nakshbandei *tariqat* (way) of Sufism. It was used by Imam Shamil (1798-1871) in his attempt to build up a militarized theocracy. Shamil saw that it was impossible to found a nation based on tribe alone, so he was trying to find a more reliable basis. After the defeat and imprisonment of Shamil, the influence of this *tariqat* decreased, and most of Shamil's former elite converted to the Kadirei *tariqat*.

The remaining Nakshbandeian sheikhs became pro-Russian after the Caucasus War (ended in 1864 after 142 years of intermittent fighting), and they also supported the Bolsheviks after 1917. The Kadireis made attempts to take power in 1925, 1929, and 1930, but they were quickly suppressed, although the armed rebels lost not more than 100 people in conflicts with the Red Army. But later, during the short period of World War II when the North Caucasus was occupied by German forces, the Nakshbandei leaders made contact with the Nazis. This fact was denied in 1989-91, but now, even those who speak in support of Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev, agree that that was true. As a result, the entire Chechen people was exiled to Kazakhstan and Siberia by Stalin. (The same happened to the Crimean Tartars, Adygeys, Circassians, Balkars, and Volga Germans.)

Under Nikita Khrushchov, the Chechens could return to their native land. At this time, the Kadirean *tariqat* became more popular. In Tselinograd (Akmola), Kazakhstan, the most radical brotherhood of Kadireans was later formed, led by Vis-Hadji Zagiyeu. Dzhokhar Dudayev's brother, Bekmuraz, is a teacher in this brotherhood. Dudayev's main rival in September 1991, Ahmet Arsanov, and his strongest opponents today, Beslan Gantemirov and Umar Avturkhanov, belong to the opposite Nakshbandeian *tariqat*.

The Kadireian *tariqat* was more widespread in the mountainous part of Chechnya. Oppositionist activity on the part of the mountain-dwellers has been increasing since July 1989, when Doku Zavgayev, a valley-dweller from the Nijaloy *taip*, was appointed First Secretary of the Chechen-Ingush Regional Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU).

The Communist Kremlin was very cautious on appointment questions. In virtually every Soviet or Autonomous Republic, the top-ranking official in each leadership body represented the local ethnic population, while the second-ranking, his deputy, would be Russian. Chechnya was the only exception. The Kremlin analysts realized that introducing inequality into the *taip* might destabilize the region. One

FIGURE 1  
Chechnya and the Transcaucasus region



of Mikhail Gorbachov's first "experiments" when he came to power in 1985, was a rather careless reconstruction of regional elites. The first bloody result was in 1986 in Kazakhstan; Gorbachov had appointed Kolbin, a Russian from Moscow not known in Kazakhstan, as First Secretary of the Republic Committee of the CPSU. The next day, several thousand young men were running along the steets of Alma-Ata, crushing cars and breaking shop windows. Gorbachov had to retreat and replaced Kolbin with Nursultan Nazarbayev, who today is the President of Kazakhstan. In Chechnya, he did the opposite, promoting a "national cadre"—Zavgayev—but here, too, he neglected the experience of his aged and more cautious predecessors in the party and state leadership, who would not rely upon any of the Chechen elite figures.

### Officials grab for wealth

The first crack in the stability of the North Caucasus dates back to this early Gorbachov period. As we understand it now, the real aim of Gorbachov's *perestroika* was the conversion of state property into the private property of officials. This was best illustrated by the so-called cooperative movement, beginning in autumn 1987, when enterprise directors were ordered to found "cooperative" (collectively privatized) commercial companies, headed by people from their staffs. The same thing happened later with whole ministries, their ruling bodies transformed into concerns and corporations.

At this time, the Chechen elite was already represented in Moscow not only by ballet dancers and political econo-

mists, but by some high-ranking officials. Salambek Khadshiyev, of late a supposed replacement for Dudayev after he is defeated, was U.S.S.R. minister of the petroleum-refining industry. A more important person, Yaragi Mamodayev, who now heads "the Chechen government in exile" (not in Siberia, mind you, but in London!), ran a department in the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Oil and Gas Extraction. The minute they had the chance to parlay their positions into capital, they did so, and came to Grozny as influential politicians.

At first glance, Grozny differed little from Moscow and

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Leningrad in 1990. It had the same public rallies with oppositionists exposing the local officials, charging them with corruption, and speaking of democracy. Some of the oppositionists look moderate, others are radical.

But there were important differences. In Grozny, the people calling themselves democrats, even the most radical anti-communist ones, held their rallies under a green Islamic banner. Second, their leaders, unlike their Leningrad counterparts, possessed large sums of money.

The third peculiarity differentiating Chechnya from all other regions, and probably the most important, is that the political debate at the All-People Congress of the Chechen people (November 1990) was preceded by a series of *taip* meetings where thousands of people were forced, by the law of the Forefathers, to identify their civic and political choice with the common will of the *taip*. And this common will dictates that the representatives of each *taip*, who are appointed (not elected, another difference) by authorities at each *taip* meeting, will later represent the common will of the *taip* in everything they do. Thus every person is responsible for his actions before his *taip*, and if the rival *taip* is going to take revenge, its people may go and kill their neighbors if they belong to the opposite tribal group.

This detail explains well the violently anti-Russian posture of Dzhokhar Dudayev. Constant use of Russia as an enemy image was vitally necessary to enable him to retain

power, for in a little bit changed situation, tribal rivalry might have destroyed him.

### **The oil factor**

Inevitably, the problem of oil and of arms shipments figured in the outbreak of the current war.

In 1990, British Petroleum (BP) and other oil multinationals trained their sights on the offshore Caspian Sea oil fields near Baku, Azerbaijan. Therefore, the outcome of political struggle in Azerbaijan, but also in Chechnya, was of special interest to them. It was in their interests to have a weak Azerbaijan, enervated by war with Armenia over Karabakh, an Azerbaijan that would depend on them. They also had a use for such a situation in the area between Azerbaijan and Russia that would make the transportation of oil to Russian ports impossible.

The pipeline to carry this oil had three possible routes from the Caspian to the Black Sea coast: 1) through Grozny, Chechnya to the Russian port of Novorossiysk, where a pipeline already runs, 2) across Armenia and Georgia to Poti, or 3) across Armenia or Iran into Turkey. There was also consideration of shipment of the oil across Ukraine, Belarus, and Latvia; from the Caucasus to Scandinavia.

A geopolitical subtheme here was the separation of these eastern European countries from Russia and isolation of Russian oil deposits from the European market. For this reason, the prospect of this project affected the political situation in the former Soviet republics and in Russia. It polarized political forces in the eastern and western parts of Ukraine and Belarus. Nationalists argued that the pipeline would free them from dependence on Russian fuels and save their economies, while Communists affirmed that Ukraine would get nothing from the project exploiting its territory for the transshipment of oil to western Europe. Ukrainian journalist Sergei Tikhy has observed, "That may be, but there is no doubt that some Ukrainian citizens will become very rich if the deal comes off." Indeed, long before any pipeline is laid, this story has become a matter of sharp clashes between the personal ambitions of old *apparatchiks* and new "democratic" functionaries, in all the countries involved.

Fortunately, the war for the right to ship the "black gold" has not yet torn Ukraine apart. The inhabitants of the North Caucasus were not so lucky.

In Azerbaijan, British interests evidently preferred the elected President Abulfaz Elcibey to the pro-Moscow Ayaz Mutalibov, but soon after Elcibey signed a contract that mostly satisfied American companies, he yielded power in Azerbaijan to former CPSU Politburo member Heidar Aliyev, who guaranteed a 20% share of the new oilfield development to BP, not forgetting about his relatives, who found good employment in London. An American firm, Amoco, retains a 20% share.

In Chechnya, it appeared that the British would be most suited by a radical, fiercely anti-Russian politician who

would control the shipment of oil across Chechnya in British interests.

How did the power struggle play out in Grozny? On Nov. 20, 1990, two clans of "national democrats" attacked each other—the moderates headed by Lecha Umkhayev and Salambek Khadjiyev (representing two allied influential *taips*), and the radicals, whose leaders were Beslan Gantemirov and Yaragi Mamodayev. The radicals managed to gain control over the opposition movement. Their man Dudayev was elected a member of the executive committee of the All-People Congress of the Chechen People. Later, when Dudayev is President, former Mayor of Grozny Gantemirov will take up arms against him, and Prime Minister Mamodayev will escape to Moscow, away from charges of corruption and of organizing the murder of the Utsiyev brothers in London.

(The Utsiyevs were Dudayev's special representatives, sent to England to hold commercial talks in early 1993. Their mission was kept secret from Mamodayev, whom Dudayev already did not trust. After signing some documents with American and German companies, Ruslan Utsiyev and Nazarbek Utsiyev were murdered in February 1993. The person accused of the murder is one Garik Ter-Oganesian, whose wife, Alison Ponting, works for the Russian service of the British Broadcasting Corp.)

Mamodayev has already done plenty for British geopolitical operations. In 1992, when he was prime minister of Chechnya, nearly 10 million tons of petroleum products disappeared from the republic without proper documentation. Most of this illegal cargo was transported via Odessa and Ilyichevsk without any documents. After that the oil travelled up the Danube and reached Serbia.

Russian political figures who love Serbia so much would go to pieces trying to explain why a Muslim country that hates Russia would support an Orthodox Christian country against another Muslim country—Bosnia. What can Chechnya and Serbia have in common? Nothing, except for the fact that both became British tools.

In February 1994, Heidar Aliyev finally (just after an attempt on his life) announced that BP was the chosen partner for the new oil development. He met with British Prime Minister John Major. Subsequently, Aliyev's people dropped hints to Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev that the Chechnya question should be solved.

### A deal . . . and war

The full-scale military conflict in Chechnya began in September 1994. On Sept. 20, the final agreement on sharing the Baku oil fields is signed. BP got 17.1%; the Azerbaijani oil company got 20%. Other partners, including Americans and Turks, are sure that the oil will be transported across Chechnya and Russia to Novorossiysk. Russian officials boast that their armed professionals could defeat Dudayev in several hours. But the clashes do not end. After two months, it is clear that oil cannot be transported across a partisan war zone.

In late November, amid severe fighting, Azerbaijan sells one-quarter of its share to an Iranian oil company. It is said there is only one way left to transport the Baku oil—across Nakhichevan (a district of Azerbaijan, separated from the rest of the country by southern Armenia), Iran, and central Turkey to Iskenderun. The British did not object to this version, but after a vociferous anti-Iranian press campaign in the United States in early 1995, Iran dropped out. The only route left is through Armenia and Turkey to the Black Sea; from there, oil could be shipped to Odessa, Ukraine, and piped through western Ukraine, western Belarus, and Latvia, to the port at Ventspiels.

To date, *no* oil pipeline project has been built, but several peoples in the Caucasus have lost thousands of lives and suffered terrible setbacks to their economies.

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