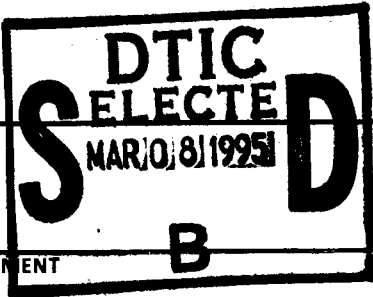



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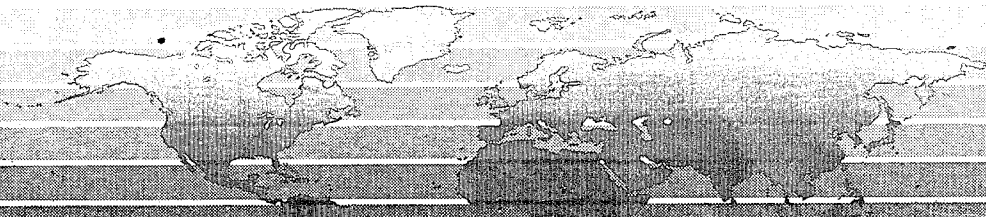
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Strategic Studies Institute  
Special Report



# RUSSIA'S INVASION OF CHECHNYA: A Preliminary Assessment

Stephen J. Blank  
Earl H. Tilford, Jr.

U.S. Army War College



**RUSSIA'S INVASION OF CHECHNYA:  
A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT**

**Stephen J. Blank  
and  
Earl H. Tilford, Jr.**

**January 13, 1995**

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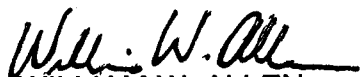
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## FOREWORD

On December 11, 1994, Russia invaded the secessionist republic of Chechnya in the North Caucasus. The aim was to suppress the republic's government, led by General Dzhokar Dudayev, compel it to accept Moscow's authority, and to force it to renounce its bid for independence and sovereignty. This invasion, which quickly turned into a military quagmire for Russia's troops, triggered a firestorm of domestic opposition, even within the higher levels of the Ministry of Defense. As a result, the invasion has the most profound and troubling possible consequences for the stability of the Russian government, Russian democracy, and the future political-military relationship.

This special report, based on what is already known, attempts to assess the discernible consequences of this invasion and provide a framework within which future developments can be assessed. It is offered as a contribution to the debate on this timely issue.

  
WILLIAM W. ALLEN  
Colonel, U.S. Army  
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## **SUMMARY**

In December 1994, Russian forces invaded the rebellious province of Chechnya. They aimed to unseat General Dzhokar Dudayev, who had proclaimed Chechnya's independence from Russia. The invasion culminated a series of failed coups against Dudayev that had been orchestrated by the office of Russian President Boris Yeltsin. However, this invasion has quickly degenerated into a military-political quagmire. Generals, soldiers, and even Deputy Defense Ministers have attacked the invasion, and tactical, operational, and military incompetence has been rife. Civilian control over the military has broken down, and the armed forces' poor cohesion and limited reliability have become clear to everyone. Furthermore, the government's reporting has been exposed as official lying by the media with the result of mounting public disaffection.

Worse yet, the integrity of the Yeltsin government and of Russia is at risk due to the invasion. Russian prestige has been dealt a blow abroad. As a result, in Moscow, scapegoating has already begun between the government and the military while the reputation and stability of the government and the armed forces have been severely impaired. All this is already clear from an initial, preliminary assessment of the invasion.



# **RUSSIA'S INVASION OF CHECHNYA: A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT**

## **Introduction.**

When Russia's armed forces invaded Chechnya on December 11, 1994, they thought that it would only be a brief, decisive operation to bring the rebellious republic to heel. Unfortunately, they grossly miscalculated and have thereby put the stability of the Russian government itself at risk while inadvertently exposing the many shortcomings of the Russian armed forces. The invasion also revealed the absence of viable institutional or civilian control over the armed forces, as well as the government's readiness to use them to quell domestic unrest. These factors make for an exceedingly dangerous situation in Russia. And the invasion has also raised deeply troubling questions for Russia's international relations. All this is clear even from the first few weeks of the invasion. The invasion's repercussions will, therefore, be profound, and probably long-lasting in their ultimate effects. This essay accordingly represents an effort to assess these consequences on the basis of what is already known.

Chechnya, which had declared its independence from Russia in 1991, had become an increasingly painful and troublesome issue in Russian politics. Russia's determination to overthrow the government of General Dzhokar Dudayev is only the most recent manifestation of the acute disorder that pervades the entire Caucasus and Transcaucasia as well. While the ultimate outcome and repercussions of this invasion remain to be seen, already it has illuminated obvious and often ominous trends.

Russia's decision to invade Chechnya underscores the end of the Caucasus' isolation from world politics. No longer is the area merely Moscow's gateway to influence in the Near and Middle East. Rather the fate of the entire regional state system in the Caucasus and the Commonwealth of

Independent States (CIS)—the bedrock issue of all the many contentions in which Russia is involved—is deeply entwined with further progress in European security, especially around the Black Sea and Balkans.<sup>1</sup> The crises in the Caucasus: ethnic wars in Nagorno-Karabakh and between Georgia and Abkhazia, the unrest throughout the North Caucasus most violently displayed by this invasion, and Russian efforts to regain a regional hegemony reflect and contribute to the pervasive regional chaos that now threatens to engulf all of Russia as well. Accordingly Caucasian events also materially affect Europe's security and this is reflected in Europe's expanded security agenda.<sup>2</sup>

A second conclusion relates to this one. By deciding to invade Chechnya, President Boris Yeltsin has made the stability of the Russian government and the integrity of the Russian state the center of gravity of the war. Whatever happens in Grozny is of *relatively* small consequence compared to the fact that Yeltsin has exposed his regime's failure to create either a "rule of law state," (not to mention democracy), a reliable policy process, and a way to control Russia's armed forces. Accordingly, the chaos pervading the entire Caucasus could easily spread to Russia.

The fundamental problem across the CIS remains, therefore, the creation of effective states which have a legitimate monopoly on the use of force. Neither the states in the Caucasus, the rebellious provinces there, nor Russia have produced a *Machtordnung* (an order based on power) uniting force with legitimacy. Hence there is no order; instead we find a Hobbesian war of all against all where Russia or free-booting forces operating in Russia's name are constantly tempted to intervene.<sup>3</sup> Though violence is regionally prevalent, it has failed to generate a principle of order anywhere from Russia south.

Accordingly a third conclusion suggests itself, namely that for the first time in its modern history, Russia has nothing to offer the Asian peoples with whom it is engaged. In the past Russia built an empire by combining force with ideas, ideologies, and institutions that attracted at least some Asian elites who were then coopted. Today Russia has nothing to offer these people other than force. No attractive legitimating

ideology accompanies Russia's direct force, therefore that force cannot suffice to create any viable regional order across Eurasia. For this reason, perhaps the most dangerous aspect of this cycle of constant strife is that it has now spread to Russian territory proper and has manifested itself as a major threat to Yeltsin's government. Russia's overall Chechen policy has had a corrosive impact on Russian constitutional and internal security.

Chechnya has also become a major embarrassment for Moscow on the international stage because, on the one hand, Russia now appears to be indecisive and weak, and on the other hand it appears as an overbearing, brutal bully. Incompetence mixed with brutality is a pitiful combination. Where that corrosion will stop nobody knows. Indeed this inability to visualize an outcome or resolution to the use of military power, a conflict termination strategy in other words, is a major aspect of the profound strategic failure represented in Chechnya.

### **The Threat to the Russian State.**

The greatest danger to Russia in its Chechen invasion lies in the fact that Yeltsin has put not only Defense Minister Pavel Grachev's authority on the line by this operation, but he also has put his own power and that of the Russian state at risk.<sup>4</sup> The issue in Chechnya is not merely preventing other regional formations from following its example, leading to a breakup of Russia itself; rather the Russian state's own cohesion is what is now at stake. The fact that an invasion occurred testifies to the absence of any existing state of law in Russia. Yeltsin can indeed call out troops without accounting to anyone or any agency. Furthermore that force will remain not the final argument of Russian authorities, but the first argument. Parliamentarians like Yegor Gaidar are right to worry that this operation heralds the government's reliance on "national patriots."<sup>5</sup> But the malaise goes deeper than that.

It is clear that Russian democracy has failed since Russia's current government exists in a vacuum of social-political forces and answers to nobody. Though one may call Russia a

democracy, Yeltsin and his government are not operating under any rule of law nor is institutional stability in sight. Indeed, the CIA has suggested that coherent, legitimate political leadership in Moscow is in danger.<sup>6</sup> In 1993, in a remark worthy of his Tsarist predecessors, Yeltsin observed that he only answers to his conscience. Today the Tsarist model still pervades defense decision making. Indeed, Yeltsin's power and authority reside neither in law nor other structures, but in his own person.<sup>7</sup> Much as in Tsarist times, key figures in the government despise each other and are constantly intriguing one against the other. Not surprisingly this fact suits Yeltsin since he can play one off against the other. This condition is a pervasive, recurrent feature of the Tsarist bureaucratic structure which has resurfaced in the post-Soviet period. As Otto Latsis, a member of the consultative presidential committee remarked, "The problem is not so much that decision-making procedures have been breached, but that there are no procedures at all."<sup>8</sup>

However, the absence of viable, regular, and coherent political institutions makes it almost certain that failure in Chechnya will threaten the power of the president, just as failed wars challenged the power of every Tsar who waged them. Yeltsin and Grachev alone are on the firing line especially now, when television viewers can see the truth on a daily basis and Russian society is no longer easily manipulated by propaganda or amenable to Tsarist-like rule.

### **The Chechen War and Its Immediate Consequences.**

It is hard to believe that the Russian army has found it so difficult to overwhelm and defeat the Chechen rebels. Whether or not Russian forces occupy Grozny and install a puppet government, the consequences of the invasion will eclipse local events in Chechnya in importance. Those consequences have already undermined Russia's domestic constitution and government and they will weaken its international position as well.

The first consequence of this war is a demonstrable absence of any viable system of civilian control over the

military. In defiance of the 1992 Law on Defense, the army was used on the Russian population without any recourse to Parliament. Indeed the government denied it was going to invade Chechnya and, in September 1994, Yeltsin said that "under no circumstances" would there be an invasion.<sup>9</sup> This 1992 law is obviously most inconvenient for the government which has submitted draft laws on defense and peacemaking that reserve to Yeltsin *alone* the power to call out the army for any contingency without recourse to Parliament for permission, funding, or authorization. As the Duma's overall evaluation of the new draft Law on Defense observes, the provisions on the armed forces' structure and objectives are never really confirmed by legislation "and they are left hostage in their entirety to executive structures of government."<sup>10</sup>

As for the legal justification of the invasion, it too is cloudy at best. Chechnya refused to sign the Federation Treaty of 1992 that regulates relationships among Russia's republics and the central government. But that treaty stipulates that a state of emergency may be declared in a republic only with the local government's agreement. Yet even if the emergency is contained within only one republic, e.g. Chechnya, the local government must inform the President of Russia and the Supreme Soviet (presumably today that would mean the Federation Council and the Duma) of the Russian Federation and act according to federal laws during the state of emergency.<sup>11</sup> The 1993 Russian constitution also states that the President may impose a state of emergency on his own if he immediately notifies the Federation Council and State Duma. While the presidential decision enters into force immediately, it only remains in force for three days until and unless the Federation council extends the state of emergency.<sup>12</sup> But Yeltsin did not declare any state of emergency before the invasion or communicate with the Parliament's two houses. So the invasion is illegal even by Russia's legal standards. Chechnya's refusal to sign the treaty put it outside the law, but what can we say of the Russian government that broke the treaty without accounting for its actions to any institution?

Essentially this invasion manifests a return to a quasi-Tsarist way of governing. As was the case under the Tsarist and Soviet systems, the Kremlin is not accountable to anyone. Furthermore, its defense decision-making process is characterized by a small group of unaccountable men making secret and calamitous decisions. Their decisions are justified by either resorting to the old Soviet "big lie" technique or by outright repression and phony accusations against the independent media.<sup>13</sup> Such practices are too easily invoked in Russia to reassure advocates of democracy there.

As part of this formula of nonaccountability and resort to mendacious propaganda we also find the disturbing possibility that officials deliberately may be misleading or misinforming Yeltsin. In his speech to the nation on December 27, 1994, Yeltsin claimed the opposition press was motivated by political ambition and Chechen bribes. Furthermore, he maintained that Russia was ready to move over to the administrative reconstitution of a new Chechen government in Grozny. None of this was true. Worse yet, after he announced that Russia would stop the terror bombing of Grozny, it continued for several days without letup. Deliberate screening of information and deception of the autocrat were other hallmarks of Tsarist rule. And the deliberate use of misinformation on the population was, of course, another such hallmark. In this war there have been numerous instances of such official lying that have been exposed by the independent media, much to the government's discomfiture. The danger is that in the present context of institutional incoherence and fragility, such misinformation (if not disinformation of and by one's own government) can only lead to further loss of control by Yeltsin and the top military command. This could lead to even greater strategic catastrophes.

Even before this invasion it had become clear that Boris Yeltsin would not allow any other civilian to control the military, seemingly out of fear that a rival might develop his own power base. But it was also clear that the armed forces, like the government, were factionalized. The Minister of Defense depends completely on Yeltsin for his job, and must support his decisions and carry them out even more zealously than

would otherwise be the case. At the same time the President and the Minister of Defense have become a law unto themselves in that no other institution is allowed to oversee defense policy.<sup>14</sup> In other words, in defense policy, Yeltsin's personal decree or whim has become law. But since law has no legitimacy where force and caprice rule, parliamentary opponents quickly labelled this war as illegitimate. Furthermore, the media's reporting demolished the flimsy lies behind which Chechen policy had been conducted. This is one key reason for the attacks on the media even before the war. These physical and rhetorical attacks suggest the Kremlin's inner circle is unwilling to be held accountable for its actions, an unwillingness that can only strengthen antidemocratic tendencies within the government. In part, this explains why the Ministry of Interior (MVD) forces took up preventive positions in Moscow and arrested Chechens there now. (If they were criminals before the invasion, why not arrest them then?)

That refusal to answer for the presidency's actions might also be a motive for invading at this time according to Pavel Felgengauer, the defense correspondent of *Segodnya*, and Russia's most prominent defense reporter. According to Felgengauer the invasion came at this time to forestall any parliamentary investigation of the previous five failed coups undertaken by the government in Chechnya. These coups (discussed below) were directly traceable to Yeltsin's office and the Intelligence Service (FSK), and employed regular troops from the armed forces. Any investigation would undoubtedly have produced a major scandal.<sup>15</sup>

The invasion's second consequence flows from the first. Absent civilian control over the military and laws binding on everyone, key members of the armed forces can then plausibly argue against this or any other operation, especially a domestic one, on the grounds of conscience as well as on professional ones. Thus two deputy ministers of defense, General Boris Gromov and General Georgii Kondrat'ev; the Deputy CINC of the Army, Col. General Edvard Vorob'ev; and one of the commanding officers in the field, General Viktor Babichev, all attacked the operation or refused to participate.

This phenomenon not only underscores the pervasive lack of respect for Grachev and Yeltsin among the military, it also highlights the essential unreliability of the army when it comes to quelling domestic unrest.<sup>16</sup> Efforts to impose such repression elsewhere could conceivably break the state apart. Those who argued that the army supported Yeltsin in 1993 overlooked the fact that when called on to defend the state against rebels the army either temporized or refused. Instead it only attacked the rebels after the latter rashly and forcefully attacked the army and the people. Arguably the army was not defending only Yeltsin, but rather itself, a fact not lost on Yeltsin.<sup>17</sup> The Chechen operation, or other similar and especially concurrent ones, could, if protracted, lead to massive military disobedience on the scale of February 1917, especially since commanders and troops are visibly unhappy with this war.

These trends therefore demonstrate an absence of unity of command at the top, a fact that casts doubt on the merit of using the army for any strategic operation. This is not only a question of domestic but also of foreign missions, and it makes the use of the army anywhere a most problematic affair. Given Yeltsin's and Grachev's widespread loss of status, it is hardly clear that they can compel full compliance to orders for any particular military operation. The fact that the terror bombing of Grozny continued for two days after Yeltsin said that it would stop suggests that local commanders conceivably disregarded that order. If so, that would be another indication of the dangers of lack of control over the armed forces. Consequently, the army's performance in Chechnya has exposed its shortcomings in command and control to the world.

Yet, at the same time, Yeltsin and Grachev (and the others involved in the plan) have demonstrated their fidelity to the tenets of the 1993 defense doctrine stating the army can and will be used to quell domestic unrest.<sup>18</sup> Since Grachev wants the doctrine accepted as a legally binding document upon state institutions (as was the case in Soviet times), the government is playing for the highest stakes with dubious cards. A fundamentally illegitimate and lawless regime (only 46 percent of voters approved the existing constitution which, in any case,



has been superseded by this action) effectively has announced that although it lacks control over commanders and soldiers, it will call out troops at home and, in so doing, perhaps violate its own Federation Treaty and Constitution. Although the Chechen government had defied Moscow for three years and thus the threat to Russia dates from 1991, Moscow only called out the troops now after the five failed coup attempts. This suggests that little or no long-range planning went into the operation. Rather, it was ordered in a state of some panic or urgency for reasons going beyond any Chechen threat.

The implications of this are enormous. The regime is liable to call out troops at home with little or no consideration as to consequences and for reasons having to do as much with covering up its own failures as with the potential "threat" posed by the insurgents. The determination to employ military force at home also reflects a broader process at work. Already by late 1993, the MVD had mounted tens of costly operations in the North Caucasus and Moscow, and was becoming the preferred instrument for quelling and pacifying internal unrest once the army had initially suppressed the local fighting.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time, the armed forces' tactical and operational deficiencies have been exposed for little reason. Naturally this greatly embarrasses the Russian Army and the government. Observers of the military had long known that draftees were increasingly deficient in health, physical training, education, character (probably about one-third being criminals), and morale. Significant numbers of Russian troops surrendering, the widespread evidence of a breakdown of logistics, poor training, troops being transported in sealed cars with no briefing concerning conditions at the front, or not being given sufficient food, and the widespread desire not to fight in this war all point to severe limitations on the army's reliability and competence. Indeed, Ingushetia's President, Ruslan Aushev, told the Russian Federation Council and a news conference on December 15, 1994, that soldiers in the columns crossing Ingushetia had often urged protesters to disable military vehicles and shown them how to do it.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand the demoralization of the armed forces also showed up in incidents of brutality towards Muslim servicemen (a Bashkir) and Ingush

civilians, all of whom were murdered in killings that were reported by a number of Duma members.<sup>21</sup>

Russia may still consider itself a superpower, but its army was not up to this effort. Given the extent of Russian interests abroad, it is unlikely that these forces could adequately defend them all. Just as the army is an instrument of questionable utility at home, under some circumstances it might not be much better abroad. Therefore this invasion, like the crisis of the military economy at home, highlights the fact that the instruments of power at Russia's disposal are not commensurate with Russia's strategic claims and interests. Inasmuch as the government shows too easily a willingness to deploy these unreliable armed forces, this insolvency (to use Walter Lippmann's term) can only raise the greatest fears for Russia and its neighbors.

This incommensurability also pertains to the war's economic aspect. By December 23, 1994, the government had already spent 400 billion rubles on the war and was forced to propose a still larger outlay for Chechnya's peacetime reconstruction if and when that occurs.<sup>22</sup> By the end of 1994, officials were estimating that the costs of rebuilding Chechnya would reach 3.5 trillion rubles and there is no source for the money. And the costs associated with sending and maintaining 40,000 troops there is included in that figure, making the total cost at the start of 1995 at least \$1 billion (U.S.).<sup>23</sup> These expenditures will break the budget and explode the fiction that Russia could somehow conform to the International Monetary Fund's dictates and continue receiving subsidies. Instead, inflation and defense spending will grow together. Indeed, one cynical view is that Grachev urged the invasion precisely to increase defense spending. He and the military were certainly bitter about the government's and Duma's failure to heed their exorbitant budget demands. That their budget requirements would destroy the economy seemed largely inconsequential to the military.<sup>24</sup> Thus, not only does the war call into question the vitality of the army and the health of Russian democracy, but it also further strains Russia's economy.

However, perhaps the most dismaying military and domestic aspect of the war is that it shows the regime's utter

strategic incompetence, not only in facing the Chechen challenge but also in assessing Russia's true options and capabilities. This failure particularly relates to four issues: the reasons for resorting to a large military operation, failure to assess the Chechen and Russian forces realistically, failure to understand the media's role, and, most importantly, the failure to see that there could be no victory here. No one in the Kremlin apparently had an end state in mind or conceived of a conflict resolution or termination strategy. The planners were misled by the old Russian belief that a mere show of force would quickly intimidate the Muslims into submission.

Russian efforts to suppress Chechnya date to 1991 and even then showed a dangerous proclivity to impose undemocratic and unrealistic solutions in the North Caucasus.<sup>25</sup> The general reasons for intervening: to preserve Russian integrity, enhance Yeltsin's and/or Grachev's stature, bolster the defense budget, overcome internal political disaffection by a 'splendid little war,' and to suppress a rebellion that threatened internal security and criminality, are all well known.

But we must ask why invade now with such sizable forces? Indeed, some observers believed that before the summer and the coups described below, progress towards a solution was taking place.<sup>26</sup> Sadly, the answer apparently is that Moscow invaded out of pique. The current masters of the Kremlin would have done well to read Lenin's Political Testament wherein he wrote, "in general, spite plays the very worst role in politics." Before November 1994, Russia mounted at least four covert operations against Chechnya, all of which failed. These operations began in mid-1992 and were intensified in the summer of 1994 when Yeltsin signed an "instruction" releasing 150 billion rubles of state funds for action against Chechnya. Reports from captured Russian officers indicate that the "mechanism of intervention" included organizing mass flights of criminals from prison, and recruiting Chechen criminals from Russia. All these sources indicate that overall authorship and supervision of the plot against Chechnya came from Russia's Ministry of Nationalities, under Sergei Shakhrai, the Foreign Intelligence Service (*Federativnyi Sluzhba Kontrrazvedki-*

FSK), and Vladimir Lozovoy, head of the North Ossetian and Ingushetian Interim Administration. This latter organization reputedly operates under the direction of Sergei Filatov, chief of Yeltsin's administration.<sup>27</sup> This evidence apparently confirms the claim that the FSK and MVD blindsided the Ministry of Defense which was led to claim falsely that no Russian troops were involved in these operations. This denial took place despite the fact that the FSK had gained operational control over the forces sent into Chechnya in the fall of 1994, in the fifth and last covert operation before the current attack.<sup>28</sup>

This evidence itself signifies a dangerous lack of governmental control over regular and covert military forces and operations. It also implicates Russia in the coup against the Aliyev government in Azerbaijan in the fall of 1994, an operation that started in the same way with a mass prison break followed by an uprising. Inasmuch as previous coups in Baku also indicate the heavy involvement of covert Russian forces, it appears that the FSK has taken over the KGB's mission of coup-making abroad.<sup>29</sup> The resort to black operations—and their public failure—can only undermine the authority of the FSK, Yeltsin, and the armed forces. Moreover, to the degree that coups in both rebellious provinces and sovereign states become identified as habitual Russian *modus operandi* to secure Moscow's interests, Russia's international position will also suffer as foreign suspicion of its policies and goals increases.

Frustrated by the failure of their first four operations, the MVD, FSK, and the government mounted a fifth one involving supposed anti-Dudayev volunteers in November 1994. This, too, ignominiously failed and Dudayev exposed to the world the involvement of Russian troops. This public embarrassment undoubtedly enraged Yeltsin, Grachev, and other leaders who were shown to have been blindsided by the FSK, and not fully in control of their own armed forces. Grachev, who had gone on television to deny the involvement of Russian troops, must have been particularly embarrassed. Even though Yeltsin and Grachev subsequently made a pretense of negotiations while they were massing troops, that was clearly a ruse. The Kremlin had decided on war to avenge its failure.

And the inner circle all thought this splendid little war would be a walkover. Grachev said that one paratroop regiment would suffice to conquer Chechnya in two hours, a sign not only of arrogance but of utter strategic incomprehension.<sup>30</sup> They believed that a single crushing blow was all that was needed. No resistance was expected, nor did the planners count on the fact that massing troops in the neighboring North Caucasian Muslim republics would stimulate their active opposition as well. Therefore, when significant opposition did come, it disoriented the troops who had been screened from the media and were told there would be no opposition; that they were only fighting a band of criminals.

Nor did the planners count on the reluctance of commanders to fire on unarmed civilians or on the corrosive effects on the military of official lying during Russia's first "television war." Free broadcasting from the war zone belied the hollow claims made about a lack of Russian or civilian casualties and brought into question the reasons for the war. Nor did Russian audiences enjoy seeing their forces engage in the terror bombing that ensued when the ground forces failed to advance over land.<sup>31</sup> This media exposure, local resistance, and generals' refusal to violate the constitution (in Babichev's case) by firing on civilians, or support what they believed was a fiasco, along with the incompetence of the troops, betrayed the hollowness of the invasion plans.

Nor can one discern what objective could be gained by so massive an operation. There is already talk of some sort of Chechen referendum, which Russia will veto in the end or, perhaps, some sort of negotiation about autonomy—a meaningless concept in an utterly lawless state, especially when Yeltsin has already named a new government of Russian puppets to take over once the Russian army occupies Grozny.<sup>32</sup> In other words, Yeltsin is now making up political objectives as he goes along. Strategic failure has resulted in less than inspired improvisation. Consequently, more troops have had to be sent to Chechnya.

Finally, the possibility exists that other North Caucasian Muslim forces will join with Chechnya against Russia and convert the area into a true cauldron. This last consideration,

directly traceable to the strategic failure in Moscow, leads us to consider the possibility that the Kremlin's actions could now generate a real, not propaganda, Islamic threat. In effect, Moscow could summon its own worst nightmare into being. While earlier the area was seen as a source of many nasty conflicts, it was not regarded as being in imminent danger of "Lebanonization."<sup>33</sup> Now Russia has given the many nationalities of this area a reason to unite. Moreover, the Russians have revealed themselves as brutal and incompetent; a lethal combination. For these reasons, the invasion of Chechnya will make it much harder to achieve a regional peace in the North Caucasus that is based on compromise, mutual accommodation, and negotiations rather than one based on force and Muscovite centralization.<sup>34</sup> Thus the resort to force *majeure* may trigger a series of long wars that will further debilitate an already sick Russia.

While these are the immediately evident domestic consequences of this invasion and suffice to explain its tragic folly, they are not the only ones. Indeed, this action has serious international repercussions. First, this war and the brutality of Russia's terror bombing of innocent civilians risk the good will which democratic Russia had been building in the West. Even in the United States, which originally said this was purely a Russian internal affair, protests by human rights groups have begun to register. The same holds true in Europe and the protests could lead to sanctions or raise other obstacles to Russia's major foreign policy goals.<sup>35</sup> The European Union's refusal to let Turkey in, allegedly on human rights grounds resulting from its Kurdish war, and U.S. aid reductions to Turkey illustrate what might happen as a result of this tragic war.

Second, Russia's heavy-handed actions indicate its supposedly neo-imperialist aims, undemocratic nature, and reliance on covert operations to destabilize governments, as well as its willingness to send in troops when all else fails. In other words, Russia has gratuitously provided ammunition to all those who regard Moscow as a threat and wish to wall it off from influence in their region. More pointedly, since the use of troops was a violation of the Vienna Document on Confidence

and Stability Building Measures of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) that said any concentration of over 40,000 troops must be communicated to the other signatories, and the Budapest decisions of the CSCE that were signed five days before the invasion, those violations could—and possibly will—be held against Russia as an indication of its unreliability, and as reasons for not revising the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty.

Revision of the treaty is a key Russian policy goal that has now been endangered.<sup>36</sup> Russia wants to gain permission to station more troops, armored vehicles, and tanks in the North Caucasian and northern flanks of Russia and this would necessitate revision of the quotas that the treaty stipulates for Russia in those flanks. If Russian claims to revise the CFE's flank quotas and allow it to station more troops, tanks, and military vehicles are rejected, Russia may renounce the CFE treaty and isolate itself in Europe, thus provoking NATO's expansion. Or if Moscow accepts the treaty it will have to accept conditions that limit its plans for rebuilding the North Caucasian Military District into a major front-line and versatile power base for military action in Russia, the North Caucasus, Transcaucasia, and potentially the Ukraine, which borders the district's western frontier. Assuming that unrest continues throughout the area, acceptance of such limitations puts a heavy burden on Russia's armed forces. That burden's weight will be due to the fact that having started a protracted war, Moscow will be unable to find other resources for essential military construction. But if the Kremlin renounces the treaty, Russian ambitions for a larger role in European security will be blocked.

Third, although this invasion may seem to show that the Russian armed forces are strategically and tactically incompetent, Western analysts need to be cautious in assessing the performance of Russian forces in Chechnya. It is not advisable to extrapolate too much from the seemingly poor performance of Russian troops fighting in an unpopular war against their own citizens. The tendency might be for the West to assume that a seemingly substandard performance in Chechnya might mean Russian forces could not adequately

defend the nation's interest under different circumstances elsewhere.

On the other hand, the way Moscow has handled the Chechen situation could indicate that Russia is having an increasingly difficult time creating and enforcing order in its Muslim peripheries. If Russia has to rely on brute force to maintain order it will alienate itself from the West and dig itself into a geopolitical hole across Eurasia. Furthermore, Moscow's actions in Chechnya will further destabilize the state system in this already fragmented "arc of crisis."<sup>37</sup>

In time, democracy could have become the principle that provided legitimacy to the force of state power throughout the North Caucasus. But Moscow's actions may lead many to believe that Russia has nothing to offer Asia but force. Unfortunately for Moscow, many Asians may now feel that they do not have to be intimidated by a Russia which has employed force both illegitimately and with such seeming incompetence. Instead, those in Asia and Europe who are so inclined may now be less reticent to resist Russia, with unpredictable and potentially dangerous results.

Precisely because the European security agenda is now increasingly bound up with developments in the Caucasus, it will be impossible, or at least highly unlikely that, in the event of protracted war there or other such interventions, Europe can remain aloof. As Lawrence Freedman recently wrote,

The tolerance of the European system to major upheavals in Russia and/or the Ukraine should not be judged high. Even smaller-scale ructions can become dangerous if they start to threaten the equilibrium of a number of countries. If there is an underlying tendency towards instability, then the issue of intervention starts to be seen in a different light. The interest in the prevention of disorder takes on a higher value, because there can be no less confidence that, left alone, most conflicts will peter out as the belligerents become exhausted.<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusion.**

Our analysis of the Chechnya invasion is that it is indicative of the larger issue of Russia's seeming failure to create a viable



state. If that is the case, the implications may go beyond the individual issues of Chechnya's attempted secession and the general complexities of the ethnic conflict problem in the CIS. The Chechnya invasion, and the way it is resolving, have cast doubt on the ability of Boris Yeltsin and his colleagues to create stable, lawful, and legitimate governing institutions in Russia. The extent to which the civilian leadership can control the army may also be in question. At the same time, the government has shown too great a willingness to use military force at home. Indeed, since 1989, Soviet and now Russian armed forces have been used in Georgia, Azerbaijan (twice), the Baltic, in Moscow (twice), throughout the Caucasus, and now again in Chechnya to compel submission to Moscow. All these interventions have failed, along with the covert operations that preceded them. Accordingly, these failures have undermined not only Russia's prestige and power abroad, but also threaten the foundations of the post-Communist Russian state itself.

Even before the Chechen coups and the invasion, two Russian analysts had already proclaimed that settling the minorities issue in Russian society and managing the Soviet legacy are tasks that must also include international institutions, not just the ethnic minorities on the spot and the Moscow government.<sup>39</sup> Aleksandr' Konovalov and Dimitri Evstatiev's argument for including international institutions is based on the fact that those institutions alone can provide an objectivity and criteria for settlement that eludes Russia because of the common perception that Russia is "the main heir of the imperial past and the main source of totalitarian practice in inter-ethnic relations."<sup>40</sup> This invasion has, if anything, enhanced the validity of this argument and heightened the urgency of international diplomatic and political intervention.

By invading Chechnya despite the aforementioned strategic vulnerabilities, the actions of Yeltsin and his colleagues suggest that they may not be able to manage that Soviet legacy and preserve peace in Eurasia. Similarly, by trampling on Russian democracy's fragile efforts to establish legal controls on government actions and on the armed forces, Yeltsin has seemingly repudiated his own statements of

December 6, 1994 in Budapest that "it was too early to bury Russian democracy."

If that is, indeed, the case then Yeltsin may have, in the words of the poet Mayakovsky, "stepped on the throat of his own song" to become the gravedigger of the third Russian Revolution (1905 and 1917 being the first two). If European intervention in Russia due to proliferating violence, and/or the death of Russian democracy come to pass, history will not soon forgive those who have ignited the fire of war on their own territory without having the means to put it out.

## ENDNOTES

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26. Petro, pp. 194-199.

27. James Sherr, "The Conflict in Chechnia," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, December 1994, pp. 557-558.

28. *Ibid.*; S. Frederick Starr, "Chechnya: The U.S. Interest," *Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 1994, p. A14.

29. Amur Mursaliyev, "Drugs Fuel Azeri Coups," *Moscow News*, No. 49, December 9-15, 1994, p. 6; Thomas Goltz, "The Hidden Russian Hand," *Foreign Policy*, No. 92, Fall 1993, pp. 92-116.

30. On November 28, 1994, Grachev told a news conference that not only were there no Russian troops there but that a commander who sent in tanks (and the same applies to armored vehicles, Infantry Fighting Vehicles, and Armored Personnel Carriers-BMPs and BTRs in Russian,) was inept. Moscow, *Krasnaya Zvezda*, in Russian, November 29, 1994, *FBIS-SOV*, 94-229, November 29, 1994, p. 1. Amazingly enough, that is exactly what the Russians did when they tried to take Grozny by storm over the end of 1994 and the start of 1995.

31. It should also be pointed out that terror bombing reflected the unavailability of other troops who could be used in the operation. As it was, the sending of two battalions of Marines (*Morskaya Pekhota* [Naval Infantry] who are elite troops) indicated the shortage of qualified troops in the theater. But on a large scale this resort to terror bombing and the sending of Marines reflects the fact that Moscow, despite having 3-4 million men under uniform

in the army, MVD, FSK, railroad troops, and border troops, cannot put together sufficient packages of usable military forces. This highlights the gap between resources and interests alluded to above.

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