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PSEUDO DEMOCRACY, REAL WAR

RUSSIA'S AUTOCRATIC CONDUCT IN CHECHNYA AND THE  
IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. NATIONAL AND REGIONAL SECURITY  
STRATEGY

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

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Now that the Cold War is over the common assumption is that the threat to the United States and its Western allies from the former Soviet Union is gone. Russia, many Americans have na#ly assumed, has adopted a democracy modeled on that of the United States. The old enemy has therefore become a new friend. Accordingly, the substantial Cold War-era defense budgets designed to equip the United States Armed Forces for countering the Soviet threat are also gone, the money having been shifted to other priorities. New force structures, defense postures, and security strategies suggest that the United States assumes since Russia is now a fellow democracy, it will necessarily favor adjudication and bargaining over violence to resolve future conflicts. However, evidence of Russian behavior in the build-up to, and conduct of the wars in Chechnya suggests that the applicability of the 'democratic peace' argument favored by American idealists is questionable. The Chechen case study indicates that by Western standards Russia's democracy is at best immature, and at worst non-existent. Thus, if the means with which Russia resolves domestic disputes is any indication of how they will choose to resolve international disputes, there is cause for concern. Therefore, the Western world's excitement over Russia's supposed transformation from communism to democracy, and from centrally controlled to market-based economics is premature. Consequently, the shift in priorities of the United States' force structures, defense postures, and security strategies could prove dangerous. Working toward the ideal of solid, friendly relations with a Russia that retains significant nuclear weapons capability is wise. Doing so under the expectation that they will act like a Western-style democracy is not. More careful thought on the part of our national security planners would be prudent.

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## *Preface*

If Russia is no longer a threat to the United States because communism has given way to democracy as the preferred form of government there, why does the United States still have Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles on alert? The answer, of course, is because the Russians still have their ICBMs on alert. The next question is whether or not these weapons are an expensive anachronism, or if they are still an effective deterrent to war. If it is the latter, what exactly are we trying to deter? After all, democracies are not supposed to go to war with each other, preferring “adjudication and bargaining” as a means of resolving disputes.

This line of thought led me to wonder if, absent the Cold War, there remains a source of conflict between the United States and Russia which transcends the ideological differences given center stage for the last several decades. In other words, is there potential for a renewed Cold War, or something like it, the source of which is deeper than the ideological manifestation with which we are more familiar? It is an intriguing question, but too large for this project. For that realization, I thank my faculty research advisor, Lieutenant Colonel Jim Forsyth. As he suggested, I have narrowed the topic to a case study of the Chechen wars as an indication of Russia’s foreign policy tendencies, particularly with respect to resolving acute crises. From those indications, we might draw inferences first about the health and feasibility of Russian democracy, and then about the appropriateness of our current force structure and regional and national defense strategies. Those inferences might then provide a basis from which to later explore the possibility of a larger, persistent conflict.

*Abstract*

Now that the Cold War is over the common assumption is that the threat to the United States and its Western allies from the former Soviet Union is gone. Russia, many Americans have naïvely assumed, has adopted a democracy modeled on that of the United States. The old enemy has therefore become a new friend. Accordingly, the substantial Cold War-era defense budgets designed to equip the United States Armed Forces for countering the Soviet threat are also gone, the money having been shifted to other priorities. New force structures, defense postures, and security strategies suggest that the United States assumes since Russia is now a fellow democracy, it will necessarily favor adjudication and bargaining over violence to resolve future conflicts.

However, evidence of Russian behavior in the build-up to, and conduct of the wars in Chechnya suggests that the applicability of the “democratic peace” argument favored by American idealists is questionable. The Chechen case study indicates that by Western standards Russia’s democracy is at best immature, and at worst non-existent. Thus, if the means with which Russia resolves domestic disputes is any indication of how they will choose to resolve international disputes, there is cause for concern. Therefore, the Western world’s excitement over Russia’s supposed transformation from communism to democracy, and from centrally controlled to market-based economics is premature. Consequently, the shift in priorities of the United States’ force structures, defense postures, and security strategies could prove dangerous.

Working toward the ideal of solid, friendly relations with a Russia that retains significant nuclear weapons capability is wise. Doing so under the expectation that they will act like a Western-style democracy is not. More careful thought on the part of our national security planners would be prudent.

## Part 1

### Setting the Stage

*All the business of war, and indeed all the business of life, is to endeavour to find out what you don't know by what you do; that's what I called "guessing what was at the other side of the hill"*

— Duke of Wellington

Since the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of the new Russian state, Westerners, and Americans in particular, are palpably giddy because a significant threat in the European theater is now gone. The giddiness, or perhaps naïve relief, has led to excitement over an assumed “peace dividend.” The United States, some have assumed, will at last be able to divert money from defense toward other pressing needs. There is certainly nothing wrong with working toward that end; even the staunchest hawk must agree that the peace implied in the disappearance of the Soviet threat is far preferable to the Cold War with its nuclear weapons-fueled tension, or just as horrifying, another large scale shooting war. Moreover, after decades of Cold War tension and substantial blood spilling in its hot war offspring, the chance to draw back from brinkmanship is appealing. That we have plunged headlong into exploiting that chance is therefore not surprising.

Having taken that plunge so enthusiastically, however, leads to just the kind of shock evident on Dan Rather's face in a recent episode of the news program 60 Minutes in which he discovered that the United States still has nuclear ICBMs on alert. The realization was apparently even more shocking to him since, he learned, the missiles are there to counter similar



Russian weapons ready to be launched at the United States. Fellow democracies, after all, are not supposed to hold each other at risk of nuclear annihilation.

Yet Mr. Rather need not have glimpsed at the insular world of U.S. and Russian nuclear war planning to have understood the larger issue which reveals why ICBMs remain on alert. The larger issue centers on the assumption that since the United States no longer has a communist enemy in the Soviet Union, then it necessarily has a democratic ally in Russia. But that assumption may be wrong and the situation in Chechnya helps explain why. If renewed war in Chechnya is any indication of what to expect from the new Russian democracy, then the Western world, and the United States in particular, is likely due for a significant shock at least as sharp as Mr. Rather's. The United States' fundamental perception of Russian intent in the new world order may well be flawed, largely because its assumption that the new Russian democracy with its renunciation of communism is a mirror image of its own, or at least fraternal to its own. That assumption causes Americans to expect certain democratically inspired patterns of behavior on the part of the Russians as they deal with acute crises, whether those crises are centered abroad in sovereign foreign powers, in what they call the "near abroad," or in independence-minded republics within their own territory.

The issue is all the more intriguing given that the architect of the current war in Chechnya is now the acting President of Russia, and appears poised to win the office outright in the coming elections. Whatever the outcome of the current war in Chechnya, there will be consequences for Mr. Putin's presidency should he win, and for Russian democracy in general. Should he find success in the current Chechen campaign, would democracy give way to imperialism, renewing Russian territorial ambitions in Europe? Should Russia suffer a second, humiliating defeat, what are the prospects for internal stability? Would it lead other, disparate regions to test democratic

federalism, seeking the same goals as the Chechens? Should significant Russian war crimes come to light, what are the implications for U.S. policy? Will the United States be obliged to react the same way it has in Kosovo? Even worse, will the United States be forced by an outraged European Union to act imprudently?

Underlying these and other similar questions is the issue of democracy in Russia. The West assumes first that democracy – even in its sophomore state – will prevail in Russia, and second, that the tradition of authoritarianism and autocracy in Russian politics is moribund and too weak now to overcome democracy’s foothold there. In short, does the current crisis in Chechnya portend a new Russian threat to European regional, and U.S. National Security? Further, does it indicate that Russia’s attempt at democracy is doomed to failure? Answers to these and other similar questions will require a significant adjustment to U.S. foreign and defense policies.

### **The Fall of Communism and Rise of Democracy**

Few can forget the dramatic events surrounding the August 1991 coup attempt against then Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. When Boris Yeltsin, as President of the Soviet Union’s Russian Republic, climbed atop a tank outside the Russian parliament building in defiance of the coup plotters, he carried with him more than his own aspirations for power. He also carried the hopes of the Russian people for the freedom and prosperity democracy promised. He was hailed by them – and by those in the West – as a champion of democracy. Yeltsin’s bold gesture was for the Soviet Union the point of no return.

Gorbachev never fully recovered from what many believed was his inept handling of those events. Having divorced the Communist Party from the government of the Soviet state, Gorbachev watched Yeltsin strip the vestiges of power from the Party. Admittedly, Gorbachev neither disbanded the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, nor resigned his personal

membership, though he stepped down as the Party's General Secretary. Yet, "in sweeping out its leadership, handing its vast properties to the mercies of democratically elected parliaments and thrusting it out of all federal government and security organs, he in effect decapitated the 15 million-member organization and left it to find its own place in the new order."<sup>1</sup> He also left himself with no support outside what he might muster in the parliament, and by then, he was highly unlikely to get any there either.

Yeltsin exerted unilateral control over the remaining organizational and functional assets of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and in November he dissolved the Communist Party within the borders of Russia. In the meantime, ten Republics of the Soviet Union – Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, Belorussia, Moldavia, Kirgizia, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Lithuania, and Georgia – had all declared independence, leaving only Russia and Kazakhstan in the Soviet Union. In early December, Russia, Ukraine, and Belorussia signed an agreement creating the Commonwealth of Independent States, and declared the Soviet Union defunct. Eight more former Soviet republics quickly followed suit. Having essentially been lame ducks for years, the Communist Party and the USSR were by then dead ducks. Somewhat ironically, Gorbachev resigned as President on Christmas Day, and by 31 December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.

It is important to note that once the demise of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party began, the speed with which it continued was as much due to the excitement of adopting democracy, as it was with the urgency of burying communism. Boris Yeltsin's stand atop the turret of a tank was more symbolic of Russia's longing for democracy than of a repudiation of Russia's old political order. He was, after all, effectively rallying pro-democracy forces. Indeed, many equate his stand with that of the young Chinese man in Tiananmen Square. Never mind

that at that point, Gorbachev – still a devout communist -- had in mind not to adopt democracy, but to reform the Communist Party and return it to what he believed was its “original purity.”<sup>2</sup> At least publicly, Yeltsin had other ideas. Thus, the demise of the USSR and the Communist Party was as significant as their replacement not with another autocracy, as had been Russia’s experience for centuries, but with what was supposed to be a democratic form of government. Boris Yeltsin’s legitimacy was thus as much as the lodestar of democracy as it was in simply having assumed the Russian presidency. He was a symbol of the Russian people’s hope for the promise of democracy. It was, as he would discover later, a tremendous burden to carry. It is questionable, however, that he ever intended to carry that burden faithfully.

### **Kindling the Chechen Fire**

The point here is to demonstrate that in spite of Yeltsin’s audacious defense of democratic principles on the turret of that tank, his dedication to those principles often fell short of matching his presidential actions. This was to become increasingly important in the way he met the challenges presented by the crises in Chechnya. Indications of this shortfall came early in his tenure.

Nobody can convincingly argue that the transition from decades of authoritarian government to democracy is easy. One would think, however, that by two years into Russia’s transition, there would have been a relatively stable working relationship among the elements of the putative democracy. By 1993, the animus between the Russian parliament and Yeltsin’s Kremlin indicated that this was far from the case. At best, these two elements of Russian government seemed to be stumbling along, fighting for influence and power, accomplishing virtually nothing but delaying the progress of effective governance and disappointing the Russian people by frustrating their hopes for a free and prosperous democracy. With an inept, far from

independent judiciary, and without clear constitutional provisions to delineate powers, there was little hope of resolving the conflict between the legislature and the executive.

Yeltsin's undemocratic response was to dissolve parliament, disband regional councils, suspend the Constitutional Court, and ban eight political parties and their newspapers. Opposition leaders and conservative deputies were shocked and outraged, expressing that discontent by occupying the parliament building – Russia's "White House." The short, extremely tense standoff ended when army troops loyal to Yeltsin stormed the building, killing 100 people. The very tanks Yeltsin had so symbolically stood upon in support of democracy were used again, though this time at its expense.

According to Peter Rutland, the crisis revealed a rivalry "not driven by alternate conceptions of Russia's future or even by the interests of different social groups," as one would expect in a democracy. "It was not a dispute over policy, but simply a struggle for power."<sup>3</sup> Yeltsin used that struggle to force passage of a new constitution affording disproportionate power to the President. In December he by-passed the parliament and presented the proposed new constitution directly to the electorate for approval. On the same day that voters elected a new Parliament they approved Yeltsin's new constitution by referendum with reportedly 51% of the vote. Such an endorsement is questionable, however, since as Rutland suggests, "it was later revealed that the actual figure was 46 percent. Technically, this meant that the constitution was invalid, but in Russia people had long since stopped paying attention to technicalities."<sup>4</sup>

That is unfortunate, because had they paid attention to those technicalities, Yeltsin might not have had the freedom to implement a constitution that gives him the right to rule by decree. He could not have ignored the authority of the Constitutional Court, dismissed Prime Ministers, or dissolved parliaments on a whim, among the many powers granted him. More importantly, had

they paid attention to those technicalities, Yeltsin might not have enjoyed the power to mount his first invasion of Chechnya over the objection of significant opposition in the new parliament, and against the will of the Russian people in general.

Indeed, the first war in Chechnya was wildly unpopular with the Russian people. According to Michael McFaul, “By January 1995, only 16 percent of the Russian population supported the use of force in Chechnya, while 71 percent opposed it. Opposition to the war translated into opposition to Yeltsin himself....by January 1995, 81 percent gave him negative marks. The logic driving the decision to invade, however flawed, anticipated exactly the opposite popular reaction.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, contrary to what is supposed to occur in a democratic republic, Yeltsin spurned the will of the people in his decision to go to war.

In an extreme example proving the veracity of “groupthink,” Yeltsin also surrounded himself with an entourage sympathetic to his own aims in Chechnya. Absent any legislative or judicial input, his “party of war....isolated the president from those who sought alternative methods for dealing with the breakaway republic....those against the war were pushed to the margins of the decision-making process.”<sup>6</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Gorbachev Quits as Party Head, Ending Communism’s 74-Year Reign,” *The New York Times on the Web*, On-line, Internet, 25 August 1991: 1, Available from <http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/europe/082591communism-gorbachev.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Rutland, “Has Democracy Failed Russia?” *The National Interest*, (Winter 1994/95): 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Michael McFaul, “Eurasia Letter: “Russian Politics after Chechnya,” *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1995: 151.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

## **Part 2**

### **At War in Chechnya**

*What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?*

— Mahatma Ghandi

The current crisis in Chechnya can be seen as a continuation of the unresolved conflict of 1994-1996. The truce signed in August, 1996 between Yeltsin's national security advisor Alexander Lebed and the Chechen rebels after the rebels had seized Grozny was really nothing more than a cease-fire. It simply deferred the issue of Chechen sovereignty for five years. Clearly, neither party to the conflict could wait that long to influence the outcome.

### **Animosity Revisited**

This is not surprising, as the animosity between ethnic Chechens and Russia dates back centuries, at least to Peter the Great's annexation of the Caspian Sea regions of Dagestan in 1722. During the following 150 years, the Russians prosecuted an enormous empire-expanding campaign, during which they annexed the Moslem North Caucasus. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Dagestan and Chechnya allied themselves under Shamil to create a theocratic, Islamic state, but were soundly defeated by the Russians.

During and immediately after the Bolshevik revolution the North Caucasus populations again rebelled but were put down decisively by the Soviets. In World War II, the Chechens further

bloodied the nose of the Soviets at the behest of Nazi troops in control of territory near Grozny, but as the tide turned against the Germans, so it did against the Chechens. Stalin exacted revenge in a deplorable and shameful example of his propensity for ethnic cleansing. He deported the entire Chechen population, along with their ethnic cousins the Ingushi, to Siberia.

In the late 1950s, Nikita Khrushchev allowed the Chechens to return to the Caucasus, at which point, along with the Ingushi, they established a new republic within the framework of the Soviet Union. All was quiet, though not entirely acceptable to the Chechens until the events of 1991 loosened Moscow's grip on the Soviet empire.

### **Back to the Future**

Another in the long line of local communist apartchiks to fall, Doku Zavgayev was overthrown, opening the way for a Soviet Air Force general Dzhokhar Dudayev to win office in a dubious election. He immediately declared Chechnya independent from Russia. Not so willing to accept the recalcitrance of indigenous Russian republics as it was for fellow Soviet republics, Moscow squawked. However, though soundly rejecting any legitimacy of Chechen independence with biting rhetoric, the Russians failed to do anything more, allowing Dudayev to run Chechnya essentially independently.

In the Russians' eyes, however, this created a constitutional crisis. Between the fall of communism in 1991, and the implementation of Yeltsin's new constitution in 1993, several Russian republics joined the Soviet republics' bandwagon and declared independence. The integrity of the Russian federation was thus in question; Yeltsin's outlined his answer to the dilemma in his new constitution. McFaul describes it well. "The new constitution offered a solution. By declaring all republics, oblasts, and krais (small states) equal subjects of the Russian Federation, the new Russian constitution spells out a de jure resolution to the center-



regional conflicts in Russia that occurred throughout 1992 and 1993.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, McFaul explains what is most interesting about Chechnya with respect to the new constitution. “While bilateral negotiations between Moscow and the other republics continued through 1994, only one republic – Chechnya – held out against recognizing the new constitutional basis of Russia’s federal framework. In 1994, therefore, Chechnya’s independence became the exception rather than the rule – and was a major eyesore for a Russian president seeking to consolidate and strengthen state power.”<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, in December 1994, arguing to restore the constitutional and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation, Yeltsin sent the army to Chechnya to crush the independence movement. The fighting was fierce as the rebels first abandoned, then, over the course of the next couple of years, worked to retake the capital of Grozny. At one point in February 1996, Yeltsin admitted that the Chechnya campaign was “maybe one of our mistakes,”<sup>3</sup> but the fighting raged for another ten months. Ultimately, about 40,000 people died as a result of the war, including an “estimated 4000 Russian soldiers, several thousand Chechen fighters, and 15,000 to 25,000 residents of Grozny – Russian and Chechen alike.”<sup>4</sup> Some estimates put the figure closer to 100,000 total deaths in an “unnecessary and arbitrary war.”<sup>5</sup>

In April 1996, Dudayev was killed in a rocket mortar attack. His vice-president, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev took over. He and Yeltsin agreed to a truce that held until Yeltsin was reelected six weeks later. But fighting resumed shortly thereafter, with the rebels regaining control of Grozny in August. At that point, Yeltsin empowered Lebed to negotiate a resolution to the crisis, and the warring factions signed yet another truce on August 31<sup>st</sup>, which, except for minor, sporadic fighting over the next few months, seemed to have held. Significantly, it was with this truce that

the Russians and Chechens shelved full resolution of the crisis for five years. What seemed appropriate at the time would prove inadequate in preventing more bloodshed.

## **Round Two**

One wonders if the first round of the war ever really ended. In January, 1997 the last Russian troops left Chechnya and the Chechens elected a new president, Aslan Maskhadov, with 65% of the vote. But the same month two Russian journalists were kidnapped and a long series of similar abductions and ransom demands followed. Obviously, Moscow was not pleased and tensions increased. Nevertheless, in May Yeltsin and Maskhadov signed a peace accord, but amazingly, nothing in it resolved the issue of Chechnya's status. Moscow was intransigent – Chechnya would remain part of Russia, though with significant autonomy. In turn, for the next year, the Chechens continued to seethe under Moscow's recalcitrant oversight.

The Spring and Summer of 1998 saw a number of bomb attacks as political tensions *within* Chechnya disturbed the wider North Caucasus. In September, rebel leaders called for Maskhadov's resignation, unhappy with what they perceived to be his cozy relationship with Moscow and his unwillingness to put an end to organized crime, including the syndicates largely responsible for the kidnappings in the region. Those calls became incessant and ultimately led to an assassination attempt in March 1999. Maskhadov only narrowly escaped.

The inevitable occurred in July when a firefight broke out between Russian troops and Chechen rebels on the Chechen border with Dagestan. In August, Russian troops began helicopter assaults on Chechen positions in Dagestan. The Kremlin insisted, however, that it had no intention of resuming the wider war. Of course, that changed in September when, after a series of bomb attacks on Moscow and Rostov apartment buildings killed 300 people, the Kremlin found new justification for escalating the war in Chechnya. Vladimir Putin, then the

Prime Minister, ordered troops to move on Grozny, thus expanding what was originally developed merely as a plan to seal the borders of Chechnya in order to stem the number of kidnappings. The difference with this round, however, is that it was a wildly popular decision with the Russian people and at least so far remains so.

It is interesting that the Kremlin implemented the original, smaller scale plan to simply seal the borders of Chechnya while Sergei Stepashin was Prime Minister. As the New York Times suggests, “the war might have unfolded according to this script if Mr. Stepashin had held onto his job as prime minister. But Boris N. Yeltsin, who was then the president, replaced Mr. Stepashin with Mr. Putin in August after concluding that he needed a hard-nosed minister to do battle with his political rivals....”<sup>6</sup> Mr. Putin, currently the acting President of Russia, but then in place as the Prime Minister, clearly preferred a more hard-line approach to the Chechen problem. Emboldened first by the early successes of the Russian army in the initial Phase II skirmishes, and then by the public outcry over the apartment building attacks, Mr. Putin saw fit to attempt to subjugate all of Chechnya. Since then we have heard the Kremlin’s optimistic proclamations that the Chechens will succumb by “Spring.” But at the same time, the Kremlin has been distinctly reluctant to reveal an accurate accounting of battle casualties for both sides, and has been particularly reticent about civilian deaths.

It served Yeltsin, of course, to keep the press tightly controlled and it is very likely that Putin will continue to be even more strict, more draconian with the media – Russia’s in particular. The prospects for improvement are dim. According to the New York Times, a former Defense Ministry press and information chief, General Vladimir Kosarev, “realized that his hopes of bringing the military’s information policy in line with modern, international standards was a losing battle.”<sup>7</sup> A young, former press secretary to the Defense Minister

suggested why: “When big losses are reported, then heads fly, and our generals want to be able to eat well.”<sup>8</sup> Truth is surely the first casualty of war, as the old adage suggests, but such a casualty is particularly troubling when the one to strike the blow is supposed to be a democracy. When those in the positions of power within that democracy favor self-interest over the good of the nation, the democracy is in trouble.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael McFaul, “Eurasia Letter: “Russian Politics after Chechnya,” *Foreign Policy*, Summer 1995: 153.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>3</sup> “Chronology of Russian Involvement in North Caucasus,” *The New York Times on the Web*, On-line, Internet, 9 August 1999: 1-4, Available from <http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/europe/080999rusia-timeline-rtrs.html>.

<sup>4</sup> McFaul, 149.

<sup>5</sup> Grigory Yavlinsky’s “Russia’s Phony Capitalism,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 77, No. 3, May/June 1998, pp. 67-79. Yavlinsky is a Russian economist and leader of Yabloko, a democratic, reformist party.

<sup>6</sup> “A Look at How the Kremlin Slid Into the Chechen War,” *The New York Times on the Web*, On-line, Internet, 1 February 2000: 1-5, Available from <http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/europe/020100russia-chechnya.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Celestine Bohlen, “Many Russians Questioning Official Toll in Chechnya,” *The New York Times*, On-line, Internet, 21 January 2000: 1, Available from <http://ebird.dtic.mil/Jan2000/e2000121many.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

## Part 3

### Chechnya and the Fate of Russian Democracy

*No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.*

— Winston Churchill

Westerners may be perplexed, even in their disdain for war, over why they ought to concern themselves with what is essentially an internal matter of the sovereign Russian Federation. Not surprisingly, the Russians have repeatedly and sternly argued the same point. However, a more careful consideration should provide cause for alarm in West, and the United States in particular. The current basis for our relationship with Russia is the belief that we're dealing with a fellow democracy, albeit a young one. Moreover, we have based our security strategies and the associated force structures and defense budgets on the idea that democracies are less likely to pose a threat to one another. Yet as the example of the war in Chechnya suggests, there is significant cause to suspect how genuine is Russia's democracy, and equally significant cause to question its potential fate.

To suggest what that might mean precisely to the United States is, of course, speculative. Nevertheless, we can draw valuable inferences from the exercise, particularly considering that the architect of the current war, the sitting President Vladimir Putin, is likely to be the next popularly elected President of Russia. Furthermore, one is left wondering what, as a result of, or perhaps even in spite of the war in Chechnya, are the prospects for Russian democracy. Are

there indications, among them the war in Chechnya, that democratic principles in Russia are bankrupt? Should democracy fail outright, as some observers of Russian behavior in Chechnya suggest it already has, would there be a return to Cold War hostility between the United States and Russia? Should it survive, even flourish, will it be of a form conducive to good relations with fellow democracies, as much of the international relations literature suggests is likely?

Analyzing these and other similar questions with respect to the means with which a putatively democratic Russia has chosen to deal with the crisis in Chechnya suggests a couple of possible outcomes. The first centers on the concept of the “democratic peace” alluded to earlier, which suggests that democracies shun the use of violence to resolve conflicts between them, and presumably, within them. The second avenue, drawing heavily from the first, probes somewhat deeper by asking if Russia’s system of government, as indicated by its methods of resolving conflict in Chechnya, actually qualifies as a democracy, at least based on the Western model.

### **Renouncing the Democratic Peace?**

Explanations for the democratic peace suggest two reasons for the tendencies of democracies to disdain the use of violence in resolving disputes. The first, or structural account, maintains that decision-makers operate within a structure that constrains the decision making process. Operating within those constraints, the decision-makers are more likely to favor of peaceful rather than violent resolutions to crises. The second, or cultural account, suggests that democratic values inform the decision making process, and that again, decision makers normally shun the use of violence for conflict resolution in favor of “adjudication and bargaining.”

The case of the Russian decision to go to war in Chechnya in 1994 and again in 1999 suggests either that there is a flaw in the theory of the democratic peace, or that it simply isn’t applicable to the Russian case. A general interpretation of the facts suggests the latter. Robert

Kaplan argues as much in his compelling book, “The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War.” He appeals for a more realistic, proportional-based approach to United States foreign policy. “The Washington establishment chants that democracies don’t go to war, but what are emerging in many places are pseudo-democracies, societies teetering on ungovernability which hold elections out of desperation rather than as the final step in a process of economic and political development.”<sup>1</sup> Kaplan’s argument implies that these pseudo-democracies are neither structurally, or culturally democratic, failing a litmus test on both accounts. Russia certainly qualifies as one of them.

In an interesting twist, John Harper supports the idea that the United States was too quick to assume Russia’s democracy was sound to begin with, let alone capable of meeting structural and cultural criteria. He suggests that “one of the more convincing “defenders” of the democratic peace acknowledges that it operates, if at all, only when an American liberal elite *believes* that a particular country meets its democratic standards, although emotions and misperceptions may affect the elite’s judgment.”<sup>2</sup> Either way, the evidence surrounding both decisions to go to war in Chechnya strains any argument suggesting Russia’s government is solid enough to justify treating it as a democratic peer.

### **Applying the Structural Test**

Making the case that we can apply the democratic peace argument to Russia simply because it has adopted a nominal democratic form of government is difficult. It would be a dangerous course for the United States to take. Looking first at the structural explanation for the democratic peace phenomenon, we see from the Chechen experience that Russia did not, on each occasion of war there, even come close to fitting the structuralists’ parameters. If the idea is that “in democracies, the constraints of checks and balances, division of power, and need for public

debate to enlist widespread support will slow decisions to use large-scale violence and reduce the likelihood that such decisions will be made,”<sup>3</sup> then it simply doesn’t work.

Russia’s first incursion into Chechnya was simply a unilateral decision on the part of the executive, and Boris Yeltsin in particular. He made the decision absent the normal deliberations expected in a democratic government with a legislature; indeed, he had dismissed parliament and was ruling by decree at that point. Furthermore, he ordered the war without the onus of a judiciary ruling on the constitutionality of his decision, though even that would have been moot as well. Recall that he had rammed a new constitution through the electorate that gave him near dictatorial power, and the judiciary simply and uncritically approved his policies.

### **Applying the Cultural Test**

It is no easier to argue that in the relatively short time since the renunciation of communism, the Russian government maintains the democratic institutions and values favoring adjudication and bargaining over the use of violence for conflict resolution. The circumstances surrounding each decision to go to war in Chechnya simply do not bear that out.

Concerning the first Chechen war, Michael McFaul makes a startling assertion. Even absent consultations with the legislature and larger elements of the executive, Yeltsin did not decide to invade for the sake of military utility in preserving the Federation. Rather, he suggests Yeltsin “moved against Chechnya to save his presidency.”<sup>4</sup> Acknowledging that preserving the territorial integrity of the Federations was certainly an objective of the offensive, McFaul questions the timing – Chechnya declared independence in 1991, but Yeltsin did not move on them until 1994, when he and his presidency were in the throes of a political crisis in Moscow.

Furthermore, McFaul asserts that “as for method, the Russian federal government had managed to resolve several other secessionist crises through negotiation and compromise,” yet



“Yeltsin decide[d] to use massive military force against Chechnya.”<sup>5</sup> One assumes that a culturally tempered democrat would have chose negotiation and compromise, using force only when necessary in the best interest of the nation.

The second and current Chechen war reveals a similar phenomenon. In a perfunctory though democratic attempt to solicit advice from his predecessors as Prime Minister, Mr. Putin called several of them to a meeting on Chechnya shortly after assuming the post. There they decided on the limited strategy of sealing the Chechen borders and creating a buffer zone in an attempt to stop the kidnappings and curb the power of the Mafia. But succumbing to the pressures of generals bent on revenge for the humiliating defeat of the first Chechen war, and interested in elevating his popularity and appeal in the wake of the apartment bombings, Putin ordered another large scale offensive. His order “reflects his resolve to assert traditional Russian interests and his closeness with the Russian security establishment that is prosecuting the war. But it also shows his vulnerability to over optimistic assumptions about Russia’s military prowess and Russian generals determined to settle old scores.”<sup>6</sup> This also tends to refute the idea that the decision might have come from an executive culturally disposed towards negotiation over violence.

### **Another Perspective**

Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder suggest that emerging democracies are prone to favor peace over violence in dispute resolution. Though not directly refuting the idea of the democratic peace, their theory provides interesting background from which to analyze Russia’s experience in the two Chechen wars, perhaps more so in the first war than the second. They argue that in the “transitional phase of democratization, countries become more aggressive and war prone, not less.”<sup>7</sup> They further suggest:

Threatened elites from the collapsing autocratic regime, many of whom have parochial interests in war and empire, use nationalistic appeals to compete for mass allies with each other and with new elites. In these circumstances, the likelihood of war increases due to the interests of some of the elite groups, the effectiveness of their propaganda, and the incentive for weak leaders to resort to prestige strategies in foreign affairs in an attempt to enhance their authority over diverse constituencies. At least in some cases, the link between autocratization and war reflects the success of a ruling elite in using nationalist formulas developed during the period of democratization to cloak itself in populist legitimacy, *while dismantling the substance of democracy*. (Emphasis added).<sup>8</sup>

Mansfield and Snyder's argument fits well with the example set by Russia's prosecution of the war in Chechnya. We saw it with Boris Yeltsin's decision to go to war in 1994 for the purpose of saving his presidency, as McFaul argued convincingly, and others have echoed – notably Yavlinsky. We saw it again in Putin's decision, and Yeltsin's approval to continue the war with the subsequent move on Grozny in September 1999. It was a phase of the war Yavlinsky called "arbitrary and unnecessary," owing more to the power and influence of the Russian military leadership and oligarchs interested in securing access to oil resources, than to any military or geopolitical necessity.

Perhaps the Chechen crisis indicates that the Russian ruling elite really is "dismantling the substance of democracy." If that is the case, the United States and its Western allies had better adjust their thinking on how to deal with this new "ally." But the evidence surrounding Russia's handling of the Chechen problem questions whether there is a democracy to dismantle in the first place. Mansfield and Snyder offer a basis from which to judge *transitions* to democracy; the insight they give us helps explain the current transition in Russia. But it leads also to the larger question of what Russia is really transitioning to, if indeed it is changing at all.

## Is it Really a Democracy?

Given Russia's apparent preference for violence in resolving the Chechen crisis, it is appropriate to address the issue from a much larger perspective. We are left to wonder less about the difficulties in applying the concept of the democratic peace to Russia's policy decisions, than we are about whether or not Russia, despite its best efforts to cast off the cloak of communism, really qualifies as a democracy at all.

By American, Western, or perhaps nearly any standard the answer would be no. But surely the Russians appears to be trying. However, as Rutland argues, it is a formidable, perhaps insurmountable task. "Building democracy and a market economy were assumed to be compatible and complementary processes which could be introduced to any country on the planet. This left Yeltsin playing the double role of George Washington and Adam Smith – either of which on its own would have strained even his considerable thespian skills to the limit."<sup>9</sup>

Rutland proposes a checklist for what constitutes a democratic political system. Weighing these elements against what we have seen to be the government's planning and decision-making processes in Chechnya suggests Russia is a democracy in name only. Rutland's checklist includes:

1. Free and fair elections;
2. Separation of powers;
3. A fair and independent judicial system;
4. A free and inquisitive press;
5. The widespread sharing of democratic values in society at large;
6. Respect for human rights: at least individual rights, and possibly collective rights (e.g., for ethnic minorities); and
7. The presence of civil society, i.e., a plurality of social organizations.<sup>10</sup>

Russia fails to meet most of these criteria. Our mistake has been is assuming they have met them, and that with these institutions in place, Russia would naturally follow the Western pattern

of democracy. Rutland argues that this assumption is inappropriate. “What is absent is any consideration of *politics*: the struggle for resources and clash of ideas between different social groups. The assumption is that once democratic values and institutions are in place, parties will emerge to compete for the popular vote, and sound policies and good government will follow. Democracy is seen as a source of political legitimation rather than a forum for policy resolution.”<sup>11</sup>

Rutland posits the cart before the horse argument here, insisting that we have assumed too much about Russia’s ability to adapt to a Western standard of democracy – especially in its acute crisis management – simply because it has de jure, if not de facto democratic institutions in place. It is a familiar situation to those of us in the United States Air Force. We assumed for several years that simply because we declared ourselves to be a “Total Quality Management” force, that our actual operations reflected the best applications of TQM, and that the concept was appropriate for our military institution to begin with. Regardless of that assumption’s validity, we pursued TQM with great enthusiasm, only to find later that it simply didn’t work in the context of the structure we attempted to impose. Perhaps the giddiness with which we greeted the rise of democracy in Russia is equally immature, and our assumptions about its applicability to Russia based on our concepts of how it should work are jejune.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War*. (New York: Random House, 2000), 122.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Harper, “The Dream of Democratic Peace: Americans Are Not Asleep,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol 76, No. 3 (May/June 1997): 120.

<sup>3</sup> James L Forsyth, “Examining the Democratic Peace,” Chapter 3, Page 71 PhD Diss., University of Denver, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> McFaul, 150.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 151.

## Notes

<sup>6</sup> “A Look at How the Kremlin Slid Into the Chechen War,” *The New York Times on the Web*, On-line, Internet, 1 February 2000: 1-5, Available from <http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/europe/020100russia-chechnya.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995): 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> Rutland, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

## Part 4

### A Portend of What Is to Come?

*Treat your friend as if he will one day be your enemy, and your enemy as if he will one day be your friend.*

— Decimus Laberius, First Century B.C.

Perhaps the most telling indictment of Russia's efforts thus far to establish a new form of government in the wake of communism's demise comes again from economist and democratic reformer Grigory Yavlinsky. Ostensibly democratic, the Russian government, Yavlinsky laments, has retained the same "semi-criminal" oligarchy evident under Soviet communism. "After communism's collapse, it merely changed its appearance, just as a snake sheds its skin. The new ruling elite is neither democratic nor communist, neither conservative nor liberal – merely rapaciously greedy."<sup>1</sup> Some have even suggested with only tepid irony, that Russia's government be called a "kleptocracy."

### Asking the Right Questions

Obviously, if that indictment is even half true, it offends Western democratic sensibilities. Of course, there are some in Western governments, including the United States government, who are rapaciously greedy. Nevertheless, our system of checks and balances generally protects us from those who fit that description and in so being may bring harm to our system of government and our way of life. Saying the same for Russia is questionable, if not downright absurd. The

“rapacious greed” Yavlinsky speaks of is evident in the decision making processes that led to Russia’s involvement in two bloody Chechen wars, one of which continues today, and who’s outcome is far from certain. And if such decisions of dubious validity are evident in one aspect of Russia’s “foreign” policy (essentially, in the Chechen case, in its “near abroad”), why not in others with even more of an effect on U.S. interests than the flow of oil from the Caucasus to the Black Sea?

### **The Implications**

The implications for United States security policy – in the European theater in particular – are thus enormous. If we see evidence of clearly undemocratic habits in the way in which Russia handles its crisis in Chechnya, would it not be logical then to expect the same in, say, their method of dealing with the “crisis” of NATO expansion to their borders? The issue of NATO is clearly perplexing to the Russians. Why, they ask, does NATO still exist if its sole purpose was to counter the Soviet threat in Europe? Furthermore, since it still does exist, why is it *expanding* into the former Warsaw Pact countries in the Russian “near abroad”?

These are valid questions, and the answers would truly reveal the intent of U.S. security policy in the region. For our purposes, however, the real issue at stake lies in how the *Russians* might answer these questions given the problems clearly evident in the policy and decision making apparatus they have in place for resolving crises. It is likely, especially given our use of NATO in an offensive role in the Balkans, that the Russians might assume our willingness to use it again as the mechanism for intervening in Chechnya. The circumstances, after all, are similar to those that led to our involvement in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Again, Yavlinsky hones in on the point, somewhat amusingly if the underlying issue were not so deadly serious. Speaking of the form the Russian government might take, he argues:

Another scenario has such a government becoming contentious and suspicious of Western actions and goals. Cooperation on important global issues would be less forthcoming, and rules and laws would change to fit personalities, hindering economic development. Unfortunately, up to this point, the West has not always promoted the correct path. Nowhere is this more evident than in the debate over NATO expansion. If a military alliance moves closer to a country's borders without incorporating that country, it means that the country's foreign policy has dismally failed. Talk that this is a different NATO, a NATO that is no longer a military alliance, is ridiculous. It is like saying that the hulking thing advancing toward your garden is not a tank because it is painted pink, carries flowers, and plays cheerful music. It does not matter how you dress it up; a pink tank is still a tank.<sup>2</sup>

A contentious and suspicious government, looking at the problem of NATO expansion to its borders, and hobbled by undemocratic, rapacious tendencies, might well present the United States and its allies a problem in Europe, if not elsewhere. Simply because our old enemy is ostensibly democratic does that mean they are necessarily our ally? Or is it that the threat our old enemy imposed has given way to a threat of somewhat smaller magnitude, though a threat nonetheless? The wars in Chechnya are just one indication among many that this may be the case.

To disagree with the contention that Russia is a democracy in name only, thus favoring the idea that this form of government has gained a sufficient foothold in the country still requires keeping one thing in mind. The cultural account of the democratic peace assumes decision-makers normally, though not always, act based on a standard of values that lead them to favor adjudication and bargaining over violence in resolving crises. It also assumes "in relations with other states, decision-makers (whether they be few or many) will try to follow the same norms of conflict resolution as have been developed within and characterize their domestic resolution processes."<sup>3</sup> Understanding that, if Chechnya is any indication of Russia's domestic conflict resolution style, the risk in assuming it is truly democratic is highly disconcerting.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Yavlinsky, 69.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid., 77.
- <sup>3</sup> Forsyth, 72.

## Part 5

### Conclusions

*Have no truck with first impulses for they are always generous ones.*

— Casimir, Comte de Montrond

The intent here is not to suggest a return to a hawkish, Cold War-style relationship with Russia. The author recognizes the danger such a tract presents in being dismissed as a mere reactionary, bent on reconstituting our long forgotten ICBM bases, the impracticality of the thought itself notwithstanding. Rather, the idea is to suggest that the excitement over the transformation of Russian government from communism to ostensible democracy, and the Russian economy from central control to market-based, be tempered with caution and more careful thought. There is a long way to go before U.S. policy makers can realistically assume Russia is indeed a free-market, democratic ally that cherishes the same Jeffersonian principles we hold dear. The case study of the wars in Chechnya gives sufficient cause to suspect the wisdom of letting down our guard.

Recognizing that the atrocities coming to light in Chechnya are abhorrent to Western sensibilities, it is still important to acknowledge that the matter is essentially a domestic one. However, what we need not, and indeed should not do is dismiss it as of no concern to us. It is a concern because Russian behavior in the Chechen crises – that is, from the decision making process, to their action in theater – suggests the potential for them to remain a threat to U.S. and Western interests. It seems their nature if not their wont. Russian “democrats” remain

structurally and culturally suspect. The former mayor of Saint Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, suggests “to this day, the power structures of our country remain, according to the method of work and the personnel that they have, in conflict with the new regime. These aren’t democratic structures that live in a democratic state and are merely in opposition to the democratic state.”<sup>1</sup>

What we have witnessed in Chechnya does not bode well for our belief that in the future the Russians will resort to more democratically inspired methods for resolving crises. How they will react further to NATO expansion is but one area of such concern. Richard Pipes suggests why: “...self-interest has to contend with a political culture based in traditions of empire building and reliance on military power for stature rather than security. For, unfortunately, Russia has not made a clean break with its Soviet past.”<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, our assumption that Russia, simply by virtue of its adoption of democracy in name, will necessarily succeed in that transition is questionable. First, it is clear from the example of Chechnya that democratic principles do not rush to the forefront of decision-makers minds when faced with perilous choices in solving crises. Again, Pipes suggests that in Russia, “fledgling democracy contends with ancient authoritarian traditions; private enterprise struggles against a collectivist culture; frustrated nationalist and imperialist ambitions impede the enormous task of internal reconstruction.”<sup>3</sup>

Examining Russia’s experiment with democracy, and particularly its unwillingness to apply democratic principles to crisis resolution in Chechnya, can lead to no other conclusion than that there is cause for concern; we may indeed still face a threat from our old nemesis. Surely, we will not see the Russian army pouring through the Fulda Gap, bent on capturing and occupying all of Europe. However, if Chechnya is any indication, democracy is in trouble in Russia, and our assumption that a democratic Russia is necessarily a friendly Russia is myopic at best,

irresponsible at worst. What we need is to temper our excitement over Russia's renunciation of communism. We must recognize that our old enemy can not immediately become our friend. Only then should we recognize and encourage Russia's attempt at democracy. Only then can we justify the U.S. defense budget, force structure, and security strategy adopted since assuming what clearly is not true about the Russian government.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Michael Wines, "What Putin's Rule Portends for Russia," *The New York Times on the Web*. On-line, Internet, 11 February 2000: 2, Available from <http://www.nytimes.com/library/world/europe/010200russia-asses.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Pipes, "Is Russia Still an Enemy?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 76, No. 5, (September/October 1997): 67.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

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