



CHECHNYA PEACE FORUM

Chechnya in context: A history of a land in conflict

Chechnya is located on Russia's south western border sandwiched between Ukraine, Georgia and Kazakhstan. The country and its people have been defined by war and the struggle for recognition; equal rights; and a decent standard of life. Chechens make up the largest ethnic group in the Caucasus but have faced numerous threats to their existence from pre-Tsarist times right up to the present day.

The Soviet Era

Subsequent to the Revolution Soviet forces re-captured Chechnya and its neighbouring republics and created the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. This was the first time in Chechnya's history that the country had received any form of official recognition of autonomy. But Chechnya's relationship with the Soviet Union was fractious. The inter-war years under Soviet control did bring several significant developments to Chechen society. The emerging capitalist system which had been pushed by Tsarist Russia had begun to create a small Chechen bourgeoisie and intelligencia which threatened Chechnya's traditional unity based on a common perception of equality and freedom. Conversely the Soviet era with its social bases re-ignited Chechen unity and their sense of nationhood. Unfortunately after collectivisation in 1929 Chechnya's relationship with Soviet Russia worsened and the collective trauma of being subjected to Soviet rule began to play a lasting part in fostering Chechen solidarity and union. The onset of collectivisation in 1929 also led to a change in Soviet policy towards Chechnya which began to have the Russification of Chechen culture at its core.

After World War Two, a depressing precedent was set with Soviet Russia betraying the Chechen people. Stalin expelled the Chechens to Siberia and Kazakhstan on suspicion of collaboration with Nazi Germany even though huge numbers of Chechens fought side-by-side with their Russian counterparts during the war – 50 of which received Russia's highest military honour: The Hero of the Revolution. Four years after Stalin's death the Chechen-Ingush Republic was re-established in 1957 and Chechens were allowed to return to their homeland but the damage done to the Chechen people was massive and laid the seed for Chechnya's modern strive for independence. In 1991 as the Soviet Union entered its last days up to one in every three Chechens was a survivor of the 1944 deportation and their collective experience helped to build modern Chechnya's opposition to Russian rule. An independent state, Chechens have come to believe, is the only guarantee they can have of protection against genocide and of self-preservation. The suffering they have endured in the post-Soviet era under Russian rule only strengthens their case.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Chechnya in the Modern Era

In 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union numerous Soviet regions claimed independence. The Chechen-Ingush Republic fell into flux resulting in Chechnya pulling away and declaring independence under the Presidency of Dzhokhar Dudayev. He came to power in a flawed election by campaigning on an ethno-nationalist platform which appealed to rural Chechens but alienated many of the middle class in Grozny. However, one belief continued to run through all Chechens regardless of their status, and that was the belief in independence.

Chechnya under Dudayev was politically unstable and on the verge of economic ruin. He fought to retain power and support partly by reiterating his Chechen sovereignty message. The idea of sovereignty, which was still hugely popular with Chechens, was becoming increasingly provocative to Boris Yeltsin's post-Soviet Russian government who saw Chechnya as a bellwether for the unity of Russia's post-Soviet semi-autonomous regions. In 1994 under the guise of 'restoring constitutional order' Yeltsin ordered a huge military invasion of Chechnya. The following 20 month conflict cost upwards of 45,000 lives and virtually destroyed Chechnya's capital, Grozny. The fighting finally ended after Yeltsin pulled his troops out of Chechnya heralding a huge military disaster for Russia.

The intervening three years before the second tragic Russian invasion of Chechnya were equally unkind to the country and its people. Few journalists or aid workers ventured into Chechnya to document the suffering left by the attempted Russian occupation. The country was left broken and wracked by crises. In the Khasavyurt Accords of 31 August 1996, Yeltsin did finally acknowledge the existence of Chechnya as an independent state. He reaffirmed this in 1997 by signing the 'Treaty on Peace and the Principles of Interrelations Between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria' with the new Chechen President, Aslan Maskhadov who had been elected in early 1997. But this official recognition was paralleled with continued obstructions by the Russian state towards Chechnya and its progression to viable statehood. Most notably Russia continued to strangle Chechnya economically through sanctions and diplomacy, threatening to cut ties with any state establishing relations with Chechnya.

Putin and Chechnya

For the Chechen people however, the three years of lawlessness and economic meltdown were just the start of a greater nightmare - one that would begin with the decline of Yeltsin and the rise of Vladimir Putin in Russia.

Putin's accession from head of the FSB to Prime Minister and then finally President was an impressive piece of politicking and opportunism in a time of great instability in Russia. His rise to power was based on the twin themes of law and order and the quelling of perceived terrorist activity in Chechnya. After winning the presidential election, Putin was still under pressure from political opponents. His cynical use of Chechnya as a tool to increase his own standing against opposition figures had and continues to have devastating affects for the people of Chechnya. The second Russo-Chechen War, initiated in 1999 during Putin's time as Prime Minister and continued after the start of his Presidency mirrored his predecessor's campaign in its bloodiness and devastation. While overwhelming Russian military power managed to overrun the Chechen resistance and retake control of the region, a prolonged

guerrilla war followed sparking numerous human rights abuses in the form of Russian Army reprisals.

Putin's long-term strategy of Chechenisation has been equally devastating for the Chechen people. By installing a puppet government under the rule of former rebel fighter and gangster Akhmad Kadyrov, who was succeeded by his son Ramzan in 2005, Putin has affectively outsourced the terror and intimidation once propagated by Russian forces to pro-Russian Chechens. The result has been the creation of a corrupt and criminal regime under the control of the Kremlin. Chechnya's people live in poverty and in fear while also being completely cut out of the political process. Limited stability; a drop in the death rate and some regeneration of Grozny and other urban conurbations is scant conciliation for a people who remain in constant threat of arbitrary violence, torture or imprisonment. The message is clear: Chechnya's history is laced with tragedy and despair, unless pressure is put on Russia, its future may be equally as bleak.