

## WAR

## Russia's Chechen Crisis

by *Wayne Allensworth*

Russia's ill-fated decision to intervene in the Chechen civil war has precipitated a political crisis at least as heated, and far more bloody, than the 1993 presidential-parliamentary showdown. Consider the following: all the major "democratic" parties, including former prime minister and Yeltsin backer Yegor Gaidar's "Russia's Choice," have denounced the intervention and called for a halt to military operations, leaving only Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and a few other ultranationalists backing the action; Grigory Yavlinsky, a leading pro-radical reform parliament deputy, has called for President Boris Yeltsin's resignation; Yeltsin's own human rights commissioner, Sergei Kovalyov, who spent three weeks in the besieged Chechen capital of Grozny, has bitterly denounced the intervention, citing the "huge number of civilian casualties—helpless invalids, elderly people, women—most of them ethnic Russians who had no place to go," thus undermining official claims of concern over civilian deaths as well as concern about the region's Russian population; a number of Russian general staff officers have denounced the intervention, and Russian news media accounts indicate growing dissension in the ranks of the ragged and infrequently paid army (a group of enlisted men bitterly told a Russian reporter of having had their first decent meal in some time while being held prisoner by the Chechens); the State Duma's communist faction is agitating for early presidential elections (previously scheduled for 1996), as deputies prepare for an extended emergency session; as of early January, 40,000 Russian troops have been committed to the assault on Grozny, and the high-spirited Chechen irregulars are fighting on, prompting

comparisons with the disastrous Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The Russian government felt it had sufficient grounds for intervention, and reason to expect popular support. After all, Chechen strongman Dzhokhar Dudayev, a former Soviet air force general, had seized power in Grozny by coup in 1991, taking advantage of the chaos following the failure of the August anti-Gorbachev putsch. He then had himself elected President in a disputed election; his popular support has steadily declined ever since. He was in dire straits last November, with insurgent anti-Dudayev forces already closing the ring around the capital. Dudayev is widely believed to be connected to (if not the godfather of) the notorious Chechen mafia, gangsters who are feared throughout the former Soviet Union, and has threatened Moscow on many occasions with a wave of terrorist attacks if the Russian authorities attempted to interfere. The Chechen coup set a dangerous example in the eyes of the Russians, with the specter of warlordism threatening the stability of the Russian federation. Chechnya is still, at least technically, Russian territory, and the civil war there threatens to spill over into volatile adjacent territories. The possibility of a wider war in the Russian Caucasus is real enough.

The story of what went wrong is twofold. First, the Russian public might have supported a quick application of massive force followed by an early withdrawal, but the ill-conceived and tentative intervention (which Russian officials initially denied) quickly bogged down as casualties, both military and civilian, mounted. The specter of another futile, drawn-out conflict, à la Afghanistan, has weighed heavily on the minds of the Russian public. Second, the presence of Russian troops in Chechnya, as well as the clumsy and brutal application of Russian air power, has rallied Chechens to the defense of their homeland.

The Chechens are one of the many mountain peoples of the Caucasus who were conquered by the czar's armies in a series of bloody 19th-century campaigns. Muslims whose native language is Turkic in origin, they earned a reputation for tenacity, ferocity, and stubborn

courage in their hard-fought war against Russian domination. The Chechens' traditional way of life is clan-based, and the bold feud was long a feature of their hard-scrabble lives. The threat of the outlander was the cement that bound the Chechen clans into a nation, and Stalin's deportation of that tiny nation of less than a million souls in the 1940's (about a third of their number died) burned distrust of Moscow into the national consciousness. In spite of (or maybe because of) the old imperial policy of Russification (many Chechens speak Russian as their first language today) and Stalin's deportation of the entire nation (the survivors were allowed to return following the tyrant's death), as well as the Soviet policy of religious repression, the Chechen identity asserted itself with a vengeance once the fight with the foreign invaders began. Chechens who may have had no sympathy for Dudayev are now rushing to the defense of Grozny and national autonomy. People who may have never openly practiced their religion are now shouting "*Allah akbar!*" ("God is great!") in the rubble of the Chechen capital. Even the leaders of the anti-Dudayev coalition that had led the fight against him earlier (and had accepted Moscow's aid, hoping, apparently, for autonomy within the Russian federation following Dudayev's ouster), warned the Russians not to intervene directly in the conflict. Theirs was a fight between kinsmen and fellow Muslims, and the Chechen people, anti-Dudayev or not, so the Russians were told, would not welcome the direct interference of outsiders in their clan feuds. The warnings went unheeded.

What may come as a result of the Kremlin's miscalculation is anybody's guess. What does seem clear, though, is that the Chechen crisis should instruct our own denationalized American elites, who preach the gospel of the New World Order, open borders, and multiculturalism, on the power and resilience of particularist identities. We may call it nationalism, tribalism, clannishness, or what have you, but it is an essential and natural ingredient of human community. Moreover, if the Russians and Soviets were unable forcibly to assimilate the

Chechens, who at their peak could barely populate an American city, while using the sternest possible measures over a period of roughly a century and a half, perhaps we should rethink the notion that a few Big Macs, a pair of Nike sneakers, and some Madonna CDs, together with enough English to make one's way through K-Mart, are enough to convert untold millions of Mexicans, Chinese, and Nigerians, among others, into Americans. The Los Angeles riots and the behavior of certain Latino organizations during the Proposition 187 campaign should serve as a reminder to us of what any village idiot knows: when the crunch comes, blood calls to blood and people line up with their own kind against outsiders.

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## Crooning Over Chechnya

by Eugene Narrett

Leonard Bernstein was a fine mid-century American composer and conductor. He also achieved notoriety as one of the postwar period's first and most visible celebrants of extreme left-wing attitudes. Bernstein's garden parties for the Black Panthers in their baddest days evoked the phrase *radical chic*, which entered our language as an early marker of what since has become known as lifestyle liberalism.

Rebellion in the Russian province of Chechnya recently has elbowed aside Bosnia as the foreign segment of our media diet, and it is this rebellion that has provided the latest occasion for radical chic. In fairness, it is not only lifestyle liberals who are engrossed with the Chechen. Republican internationalists nostalgic for the Cold War have taken an interest in Russia's stumbling response. Bob Dole, who has been lurching into one hollow "statesmanlike" posture after another as preamble to his doomed presidential bid, has muttered darkly about resurgent Russian imperialism. This grumbling is familiar and thoroughly bogus. Those who danced with Brezhnev cannot plausibly claim

distress about the suppression of a tiny province of Muslim fundamentalists.

But it is precisely the Chechens' exotic ethnicity that liberals find so thrilling. Brezhnev's crushing of the Czech spring in 1968 may have discomfited them a bit, but in the midst of the Vietnam War they did not want to criticize the Russians overmuch. Besides, the Czechs were so boringly *Western*, part of our culture for 2,000 years. How could liberals with hearts aflame for the Vietcong glamorize white people who love Mozart and the Catholic Church?

The Chechens are a different matter, just the kind of dashing hoodlums that liberals find attractive, at a distance. Consider some of the breathless commentary from a newly minted "expert" in the Northeast's most liberal paper. Our freelancer recalls the glamorous Imam Shamil, "a holy Muslim warrior" who proclaimed a *jihad* against the troops of the czar. "His horsemen were unequalled!" enthuses the cub reporter quoting from her *Worldbook*. "Navigating the high terrain like mountain goats"—what an inventive simile—"they swooped down with reins between their teeth and hacked the Russian soldiers to pieces as they struggled up the narrow mountain passes." How exciting to envision the slaughter of a bunch of incompetent Christian white boys, scions of men who for 500 years fought to protect themselves, and people further west, from the onslaught of Tartars and Mongols.

But politically correct attitudes are nothing new to bored middle-class attitudinizers. "Shamil was a heroic figure in European capitals. Victorian ladies embroidered his black banner in needlepoint." So radical chic was alive and festering in 19th-century England. It was just that mixture of aesthetic and imperial attitudes that led some English to glorify and assist the Confederate states during our own Civil War.

There is more in this matter that reflects the liberal habit of loving abroad what they hate at home. Listen to the pack: "Violence and carrying weapons is a Chechen way of life. In the Caucasus, warriors wrote poems to their daggers." Even better, "blood feuds and vendettas still exist." Those infatuated with this portrait of violent, gun-toting natives are the same liberals who demonize the National Rifle Association and any American who seeks to retain his right to a rifle. Such double standards are a sig-

nature of radical chic and the reason normal folks resent it.

Last but not least are careerist reasons for idealizing the Chechens. If there is a protracted battle with many deaths, there will be a lot to write about, many picturesque and horrid scenes to be described with piquant sympathy for the Third World rebels. "Already volunteers are signing up for a holy war," our cub writes with an almost lubricious fervor. Chechen brutality and fanaticism will dissolve into visions of turbaned horsemen writing poems to their daggers and jiggling in the village square.

Our own national interests will become obscured as well. While the Russian army flounders as it did during World War I, and Yeltsin's control of his country fractures as did the czar's, a coup becomes dangerously possible. Our goal must be stability in Russian governance, with or without Boris Yeltsin. If we will not go to the mat for the Czech Republic or Poland with their integral links to Western culture, we must not pick fights for Chechnya, a province the size of Massachusetts and a republic only in name.

With our limited political influence and energy and our need to reform our own government and cultural values, one can only hope that the odd alliance of Cold War reflexes and radical chic will not obscure our main interests concerning Chechnya. There as elsewhere, we need statesmen who can distinguish travelogs from history and who decline to satisfy the transient fascinations of our jaded elite.

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## ECONOMICS

### The Flat Tax by R. Cort Kirkwood

When the new guru of the Grand Old Party waddled up to the Speaker's chair and took his oath, the clock began ticking. The GOP had 100 days to fulfill a good measure of its "Contract with America." Since House