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SPECIAL ISSUE ON CHECHNYA

Chechnya: The Russian Policymakers Tragedy

Tanya Basok

When the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, many analysts applauded the peaceful way in which it happened. And in fact, it was peaceful. In contrast to Yugoslavia, there were no popular leaders committed to holding the Soviet Union together. Gorbachev's popularity at the time was very low and the populist leader Yeltsin, similar to other republican leaders, was only too anxious to dissolve the Soviet Union and assume presidency over the new political entity. Thus, in contrast to Milosevic of Yugoslavia, who was prepared to wage a genocidal war to prevent secession of Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and to a much lesser degree, Slovenia (for an update on the Yugoslavian crisis see Barutciski in this issue), Russian leaders who enjoyed popular support at the time were willing to let the republics become formally independent states. They did so always keeping in mind that it would be possible to establish economic, political, and military control over them at a later stage. So the partition was indeed smooth, although consequent

struggles for autonomy in Abkhazia and Transdnier, and the Armenian claim to Nagorno-Karabakh did provoke wars.

While most nationalist aspirations in the former Soviet republics were thus peacefully satisfied, this was not the case of nationalist movements *within* the Russian Federation. Once formed, the integrity of the Russian

sovereign state was not to be undermined by separatism in some of its semi-autonomous regions. Even mild claims for decentralization of federal power are perceived by Moscow as a threat.

Thus the multi-ethnic Russian state was to become a federation with a strong central government that would grant no right to any of its semi-

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autonomous regions to self-determination. And those who dare challenge this arrangement should be prepared to have their territories invaded, their population killed and their leadership deposed. The tragedy that has engulfed Chechnya is the focus of study of this issue of *Refuge*.

As Benifand analysed, this was, in fact, the fate of the Chechen republic. As Basok argues, this current conflict in Chechnya has long roots and can be explained by a chain of events that intensified the already problematic ethnic relations between the Russians and the Chechens. But analysis of the violent reaction to Chechen claims to independence should also be placed, as Plekhanov rationalizes, within the current context of developing authoritarian rule in Russia. This factor has become even stronger as a result of the military operations in Chechnya (see Benifand). And, the ambivalence of the international response (see Benifand and Plekhanov) has allowed Yeltsin to pursue this policy with impunity. Even the tremendous human cost of this war (see the discussion of the violations of human rights and the refugee movement in Basok, Benifand, and Kritski in this issue) did not seem to alert the Western political leaders sufficiently for them to impose sanctions against Russia.

The question that needs to be addressed is: how durable is a federation ruled hegemonically from the centre? This would depend on a number of factors, including: the nature and extent of political control, economic disadvantages and/or social neglect experienced by the population in the regions; presence of leaders who can translate grievances related to disadvantages into nationalist aspirations and formulate the ideological platform for their struggle; and the degree to which those with nationalist claims believe that the centre is likely to accept them as legitimate and negotiate a solution acceptable to all parties.

With respect to the last point, Yeltsin's military action in Chechnya was a clear message to other nationalists within Russia that Moscow does not accept any challenges to the state's integrity. Thus, even in the presence of the first two factors, fear of retribution may dissuade some leaders of the Russian republics. If however, nationalist leaders in the republics perceive that the central power weakens (and this perception does not have to be realistic), we are likely to witness an explosion of pent-up nationalist aspirations. How much military power will Moscow use then? How many civilians will be killed? And how many people will become homeless? ■

Tanya Basok, *Guest Editor*

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