Chapter - II
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CONFLICT IN CHECHNYA

The ethno-secessionist upheavals since 1991 posed a serious threat to the state of Russia. These uprisings questioned the ideological basis of Russian nationality which the central leadership assumed settled with the break up of the Soviet Union in 1991. Chechnya declared independence in 1991 and became the first republic to do so in post-Soviet Russia. This was followed by Tatarstan which proclaimed its sovereign status and established diplomatic links with other countries.

The dissent voice of separatism, though not as prominent as Chechnya and Tatarstan, was also heard in the Ural Republic in the East, oil rich Tyumen in Western Siberia and Sakha-Yakutia in the Far East. In the Sverdlovsk region of the Ural Republic, the idea of a local currency, the “Urals franc” was floated. These developments demonstrated the fissiparous tendencies within the state of Russia, and at times, it appeared that Russia would split into various quasi-independent entities. Paul Globe, of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, made a remark in 1995, “you are
watching the death of a state”. The nationalities minister, during Yeltsin period, Sergey Shakray documents his fear an article that Chechnya was likely to be followed by the Urals, Siberia, and the Far East. He warned, “Russia will be reduced to the dimensions of the Moscow region and will disappear from history”. The spectre of the disintegration of Russia haunted Russian politics till the end of the 20th century. On September 11, 1998, the newly nominated Prime Minister, Yevgeniy Primakov, confirmed this fear among the political leadership in his speech in parliament by saying, “The new government must first and foremost pay special attention to preserving Russia as a single state. Today this is lot more than a theoretical or a hypothetic issue. We are facing a serious threat of disintegration of our country”. Similar opinion was expressed by prominent western media. The Economist reported this economic and currency crisis signaled “the beginning of Russia’s dissolution” as Russia’s regional bosses were declaring their own “state of emergency” issuing surrogate currencies, and closing their borders to trade with other regions. The article put the question “could Russia

2 Ibid. p. 2.
3 Ibid., p.2.
break up as the Soviet Union did seven years ago?" While the ethno-separatist crisis in Chechnya continues to haunt the Russian politics, the integrity of Russia has been maintained.

**Why Soviet Union Disintegrated and Russia Not**

Here, it would be pertinent to examine: Why the secessionist crisis in 1991 rendered the Soviet Union asunder, but the Russian Federation, despite similar crisis, has maintained its integrity? This question has been explored in detail, though not very convincingly, by Stephen Hanson in his "Ideology, Interests, and Identity: Comparing the Soviet and Russian Secessionist Crises". He examines the existing theories on secessionist and separatist strategies, which has been classified as "instrumentalist" and "essentialist". The former based on the competing of economic and political interests among the elites, and the other stressing on culture or ethnic group identity, are according to him, insufficient to explain the break up of the Soviet Union and the non-break-up of the Russian Federation. He argues, the Soviet Union should probably never have collapsed from the instrumentalist perspective; and from a purely essentialist

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5 See Alexeev, *Center Periphery Conflict in Post Soviet Russia*, Ch. 2.
perspective, the crisis in the Russian Federation should have been much more severe than it in fact was.

Stephen Hanson first considers the systematic theoretical comparison of the secessionist crises in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia suitable for following reasons:

1. In both cases secessionist encountered the Stalinist federal structure that had tended paradoxically to promote regional cultural distinctiveness while reinforcing Moscow's political control.

2. The strategy of the centre toward secessionist crisis vacillated between accommodationist and coercive methods, and by this, increasing the general uncertainty about the limits of Moscow's tolerance of republican or regional autonomy.

3. In both the cases, the separation from the centre appeared to be economically and militarily advantageous for some reasons, while at the same time inherited interdependencies of the Stalinist economic system made full autonomy wholly unrealistic for others.

Hanson argues that given the above similarities, it is possible to extract the factors leading to the collapse or non-collapse of Leninist federal states through a comparison of the
two cases than would be possible through an examination of either case taken in isolation. Hanson seeks to explain the collapse of the Soviet Union and the non-collapse of the Russian Federation through the differences of ideological environment prevailing during the two periods: The peaceful demise of the Soviet Union can be seen as the distinctive product of Marxism-Leninism's delegitimation within a liberal world order, whereas the absence of a coherent ideological basis for Yeltsin's regime has ironically made full secession from the Russian Federation much more difficult to legitimate and mobilize, both domestically and internationally.

This appears to be an interesting hypothesis but proving it would be difficult as it fails to answer the following doubts:

1. Why did the USSR collapse in 1991 and not before? If ideology (Marxist-Leninist) was the factor for propelling the secessionists, the separatist movement should have come much earlier during the pinnacle of ideology rather than at a time when ideology was feeble.\(^6\)

2. The undue role of ideology undermines the role of military powers and a strong state. The fact that a weak state, political fluidity and weak institutions create a conducive

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\(^6\) Gorbachev was a liberal and reformist and Marxist-Leninist ideology got adulterated in many ways during his period.
ground for secessionist uprising and popular movements remain unstressed in such an explanation.

3. And the delegitimization of Marxist-Leninist ideology and the Soviet State by the liberal world order was not a phenomenon to emerge out of the blue in 1991.

4. The argument that “the absence of a coherent ideological basis for Yeltsin’s regime has ironically made full secession from the Russian Federation much more difficult to legitimate and mobilize, both domestically and internationally” explains nothing except the author’s anathema for a particular ideology. It is a generally accepted that a state without a coherent ideology and policies whether Marxist or non-Marxist, runs a risk of encouraging multiple conflicting identities and interests. Such states have incoherent policies, weak institutions and confusion dominates the politics at large. This political fluidity promotes secessionist rather than what author seems to argue. In fact, the worsening of the crisis in Chechnya in the 1990s has been explained by various scholars as an upshot of incoherent ideology and policies of Yeltsin.

5. Also how do we explain the secessionist movements in states, such as, Indonesia, India, Canada, Ireland etc.,
where author's ideology is absent? No doubt the ideological factor in the case of Soviet Union makes this case distinct but gives no clue either for the Soviet case or for other secessionist movements outside the Soviet Union. The ongoing crisis in Chechnya also defies the logic put forward by Hanson.

While comparing the two cases of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, the differences between the two should be examined. While the Soviet Union was characterized as a "prison home of nations", Russia has ethnic Russians in a majority which can overwhelm minority ethnic groups. Till the late soviet period, Slavic-Russians made up slightly more than half of the population of the Soviet Union, but Russians today constitute 80 per cent of the total population of the Russian Federation. The non-Russian ethnic groups have a majority of the population only in 5 of total 21 republics. The various "titular nationalities" today are still at the stage of ethnic groups and have not transformed themselves into a community aspiring to form nations. In other words, except Chechnya and Tatarstan, these ethnic minorities have not expressed any clear demand to establish

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sovereign nation independent of the Russian Federation. This predominance of Slavic-Russian changes the equation and the chances of ethnic conflicts in Russia are lesser than the Soviet Union.

Thus, it has been hypothesized here (in this chapter) that when a high perception of ethnic distinction blends with the interests of the political leadership, ethnic conflict emerges. Alternatively, the absence of either of these factors explains the non-existence of ethnic conflict. It can further be hypothesized that a weak state facilitates ethnic conflict.

The approach I adopt to explain the secessionist crisis in Chechnya includes both essentialist and instrumentalist argument without ignoring the regional specificities which gives the Chechen crisis a distinct character. Independently, the high perception of ethnic distinction in secessionist crisis is regarded as the conclusive evidence of the essentialist argument, while the calculative and strategic behaviour of political leadership is quoted as the final proof of instrumentalist perspective. But as we proceed to delineate the case of Chechnya we discern that both the factors are at work simultaneously. Historical animosity and ethnic differences of Chechens and Russian are starkly integrated with the vested interests of political elites. Here, which
variable is more important is impossible to explain and leads only to a futile debate. But ethnic conflict does not emerge very powerful if the state is strong militarily and economically. Although, the prowess of state does not explain the emergence of ethnic conflict, it can be empirically proved that in a weak state with inchoate institution and waverling policies secessionist crisis thrives, while the developed states have managed the conflict well, albeit militarily or institutionally. The instances of Timor in Indonesia, Chechnya in Russia, Kashmir in India, Tamils in Sri Lanka support the first assumption while the example of Quebec in Canada endorses the latter.

Ethnic perception extracts its energy from its historical and cultural resources within. History and culture are the wellspring of these inner resources for they can indicate much about the likelihood of ethnic consciousness developing into ethnic nationalism and hence, into a secessionist movement.\(^8\)

A.D. Smith refers to the following factors that create the condition for ethnic nationalism:

(i) **Identity**: Human beings have a variety of identifications, such as, family, village, religion, age, class, ethnic and

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national identities. These identities are aggregates of individual identity. *Ethnie* is also a type of particular collective cultural identity. A.D. Smith defines *ethnie* as "named human population with a myth of common ancestry, shared memories and cultural elements; a link with a historic territory or homeland, and a measure of solidarity. A distinctive name is important. This gives a collective personality to the ethnic group and distinguishes it from the other.

**(ii) Myth of common ancestry:** In the formation of an ethnic community, the notion of common ancestry is propagated. Here what plays the significant role is the belief of common ancestry. This belief can be mythical and common ancestry may not imply genetic heritage. The "belief" not the "reality" of physical descent is important. Ethnicity is not about blood or genes as such, but about myths and beliefs in common origins. According to W. Horowitz, for the mobilizers the *ethnie* becomes a "super-family" extended in space and time to distant relatives over many generations, including the yet unborn⁹

(iii) **Historical memories**: Selective inferences are drawn to present the ethno-historical memories of the collective. “This history becomes a potent and malleable resource for ethnic communities embellishing kernels of historical ‘fact’ with a *exampla virtutis* to create a sense of common history and destiny”.¹⁰ These memories may be constructed by emphasizing the greatness of the past based on myths so as to see the future through the past.

(iv) **Shared culture**: The most important elements of shared culture are language and religion. In Europe and parts of Asia, language has been the most frequent differentiator of *ethnies*. But as suggested by Max Muller a century ago, it is dangerous and misleading to equate language with ethnic origins. Neither religion is any longer the key criterion of ethnicity.¹¹

(v) **Attachment to specific territory**: What is crucial for ethnicity is not the possession of the homeland but the sense of mutual belonging even from afar.¹²

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(vi) Solidarity: Finally, there is an element of solidarity. Not all the members of a given ethnic feel an equal sense of belonging to the community but a majority of them does.

Ethnic categories are distinct from ethnic communities. The former, according to A.D. Smith are characterized as a distinct cultural (usually linguistic) group by outsiders (often scholars, missionaries, travelers, etc.) but possess little or no sense of their common ethnicity. Ethnic categories get transformed into ethnic communities when the perception of solidarity is created by the leadership and accepted by the people of large. A.D. Smith does not agree with the "invention" of ethnie. He argues that "inventing" ethnies like creating nations requires certain pre-existing elements and appropriate conditions.

Consolidation of Chechen Identity

The evolution of Chechen identity has been a long-drawn historical process. Historically, Chechen identity has been intertwined with the Caucasus identity. A cultural homogeneity of the North Caucasus mountain people has been acknowledged by most of the scholars on this subject.

\[13\] Ibid, p. 30
Chechen language has also emerged from the Nakh branch of the East Caucasian family, roughly 5000 years ago.\textsuperscript{14}

According to the 1989 census, the Chechens, numbering 957000, are the largest of the North Caucasian ethnic community. The religion of Islam entered Chechnya during the 17\textsuperscript{th} century. "They were not converted to Islam until relatively late in their history (during the 17\textsuperscript{th} century); oddly, the presence of many Christian churches on their territory indicates a prior period of Christianity, or, more accurately, pagan-Christian syncretism."\textsuperscript{15} Chechens were described by Russian observes of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century as "as free as wolvers". The Wolf also appears on the Post-Soviet Chechen flag. \textsuperscript{16}

The Chechen revolt against Russia dates back to 1707 and later Sheikh Mansur, a sufi mystic of the Naqshbandi tariqa (order) led the revolt against Russian.\textsuperscript{17} Russian imperialism in Transcaucasia grew apace n the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. After the treaty of Gulistan in 1813 Russia consolidated its hold further south. This was the period when Cossack and


\textsuperscript{16} Quoted by B. Fowkes from A. Benningssen, "\textit{Un Mouvement Populaire encaucase an XVIII e, Siecle, La Guerre Sainte du Sheikh Mansur (1785-1791).}"

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 3.
other Russian settlers occupied and settled in this region. But this was resisted fiercely by the mountains people of Caucasian. The most important rebel leader in the 19th century Chechnya was Sheikh Shamil. But the Tsarist Empire crushed the rebellion by the mid 19th century. Shamil was executed in 1859 and his 81000 followers were forced to leave the Empire.\textsuperscript{18} The Russian Empire followed a policy of divide and rule and sought to change the ethnic composition of Caucasus by social engineering. The Chechens were separated from the Inguish and a Cossack territory (Cossacks were loyal to Russia) between Vladikavkaz to Grozny was created.

In the Chechen territory, two sufi orders, viz., Naqshbandi and Qadiriya emerged powerful. These two sets, though originally peaceful, revolted at times against the Russian empire. Qadiriya Sufism rose to revolt in 1877-8 and the Naqshbandis revolted in Dagestan in 1920-1.\textsuperscript{19}

In 1917, a "Union of Mountain Peoples" was formed to create an autonomous state within the constitutional framework of Russia. Most of the North Caucasian nations

\textsuperscript{18} A.W. fisher, "Emigration of Muslims from Russia in the Years after the Crimean War", \textit{Jahrabucher fur die Geschichte Osteuropas. Neue Folge}, vol. 35 (1987), p. 363.

were included in this framework. In January 1921, the North Caucasus was split into Dagestan and the Mountain Autonomous Socialist government in Moscow. The Chechens and Ingush were included in the Mountain ASSRs.

The communist government tried to suppress the religious and ethnic identity among the Caucasians. But the deeply religious Chechens revolted whenever their religions and clan identity was under threat from outside. Sufism, mainly Qadiriya order, provided an alternative ideology for the people in their fight against the Russian government. When the collectivization of forms was introduced, they revolted in 1920-30. The influence of Bolshevisim was also low in Chechnya. In 1927, only 0.13 per cent of the Chechens were member of the communist party, which was the lowest in proportion in the RSFSR (Russian Socialist Federation of Soviet Russia).20

The administrative arrangement of the Caucasus people continued. The Mountain ASSR was converted into separate nationality in the 1920s. The Chechens were given separate autonomous region in the 1920s. Ingushetia was separated from the Mountain ASSR in 1924. In 1934, it was attached to the Chechen region. In 1936, the region of Chechno-

Ingushetia was elevated to the rank of an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of the RSFSR. Thus, the social engineering of the North Caucasus, started by Tsars in 1860s, on the pretext of administrative convenience continued during Stalin. But the Second World War proved to be a watershed in the history of Russo-Chechen relations. The wholesale deportation of Chechens on the pretext of the Chechens collaborating with the German army created animosity that would determine the future of Chechnya for the 20th century. According to Ben Fowkes, “what one can call a Chechen nation began to emerge, as a paradoxical result of Stalinist nationality policy”.21 Thus, Stalin in a way contributed to the emergence of ethnic conflicts in various parts of the Soviet Union.

The Mass Deportation of the Chechen and Ingush in 1944

The most tragic event in the history of Chechnya was the en masse deportation of Chechens by Stalin in 1944. The justification given by Stalin regime for this deportation was that Chechen had supported the Nazis against the Soviet government. The officials reasons for this deportation was first published on the 26 June 1946, two years after the

21 Fowkes, Russia and Chechnya, p. 9.
incident, in Izvestiia in the form of the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic) with the title: On the Abolition of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR and the Conversion of the Crimean ASSR into the Crimean Region (Oblast).

During the period of the Great Patriotic War, when the people of the USSR were heroically defending the honour and independence of their motherland in the struggle against the German Fascist occupiers, many Chechens and Crimean Tatars, under the instigation of agents of the Germans, entered into volunteer detachments, organized by the Germans, and together with the German military forces conducted an armed struggle against detachments of the Red Army. On the instructions of the Germans they created diversionary bands to fight against Soviet power behind the front. The mass of the population of Checheno-Ingushetia and the Crimean ASSR did not engage in any counter-action against these traitors to the motherland. In connection with this fact, the Chechens and the Crimean Tartars were deported to other regions of the Soviet Union... In accordance with the representation of the Presidiums of the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, the presidium of the Supreme Soviet of
the USSR has decreed the abolition of the Chechen-Ingush Republic.\footnote{Izvestiia, 26 June 1946.}

The people's commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) started this operation on 23 February 1944 and by the 1st March, 500000 Chechens and Ingush had been deported to Central Asia for "resettlement". It is true that the Nazis did try to exploit the hostility of the Chechens against the Soviet regime, by promising for instance, full religion freedom and the opening of the schools conducted in the native languages of the mountain people etc. But there is no evidence to suggest that Chechens participated in Nazi's invasion against the Soviet regime. Alexander Nekrich delineates the situations: "It is undoubtedly true that a section of the native population (of Checheno-Ingushetiya), especially in the upland area, was hostile toward Soviet rule. This, however, is not the same as saying that they took a friendly attitude towards the Nazi army. The radical ideas of the Nazis generally proved "alien and unattractive to the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus".\footnote{Nekrich, Punished Peoples (New York: WW Norton, 1978) p. 52. Quoted by J.B. Dunlop, Russia Confronts Chechens: Roots of Separatist Conflicts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 59.}

It has been stressed by researchers that the German army did not enter Chechnya-Ingushetia and never
established any political control over this region; except the western border town of Malgobeck ‘where the population was Russian”. As Robert Conquest pointed out, despite the accusations made in the decree, the German army barely set foot in Chechnya”.24 The invasion of German army in Caucasus was balked by the Red Army in late 1942 and in 1943 the occupied town of Malgobeck was liberated. There were thousands of Chechens who had joined the Red Army. There has been no obligatory military service for Chechens and in March 1942, the drafting of Chechens and Ingush into the military was discontinued. But voluntary mobilization continued and according to archival documents of the USSR NKVD, 17413 men joined the Red Army as a result of voluntary mobilization. They served till February 1944 after which they were ordered withdrawn and sent off as special deportees to Central Asia.25 By 5 October 1942, Chechens had won 42 decorations in the Red Army – more than several larger nations”.26 Hence, while less a hundred Chechens might have supported Nazis but thousands fought against them as the members of the Red Army.

25 Ibid., p. 46.
26 Ibid., p.47
Similar deportations did take place in other countries during the Second World War but the Soviet deportations were distinct and "acts of retribution".\(^{27}\) When Chechens were deported, the German army was already in retreat from Caucasus. The deportation of Chechen-Ingushetians was not an isolated incident as between August 1941 and May 1944, the Soviet regime deported 5 other minority nationalities and abolished their national territories.\(^{28}\) The Volga Germans were deported on 2 November 1941, the Kalmyks on the 28 December 1943, the Balkars on the 8 March 1944 and the Crimean Tatars on 18 May 1944.

Anatoly Pristavkin in his novel, *A Golden Cloud Passed the Night*, Starkly portrayed the repressive acts of deportations. The head of NKVD, Laurentii Beriia reported to Stalin:

"In the period up to 27 February 478479 people including 91250 Ingush, were evicted from their dwelling and loaded into the special trains. Altogether 180 trains were loaded, 159 of which have already been sent off... today trains have been sent off loaded with former leading party workers and religions authorities of Chechnya-Ingushetia, whom we made use of to conduct operation".\(^{29}\)


\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 65.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., p. 72. Beriia to Stalin 'On the course of the operation to deport the Chechen and the Ingush on 24 February'. The State Archive of Russian Federation (GARF), F. 9401, op 2, d. 64, l.164. Quoted by William Fleming, "The Deportation of Chechens and Ingush Peoples: A Critical Examination" in Ben Fowkes, ed. *Russia and Chechya; The Permanent Crisis*, p.72.
A further vivid description has been given by General-Major Bockov (head of the convoy army of the NKVD) in his report to Beriaia dated 21 March 1944:

"Altogether 180 trains each of 65 wagons were taken over for convoying the deportees and dispatched. The total number of people to be resettled was 443269, which makes an average of 2740 people per train. The dispatch of the trains to the prescribed points began on 23 February 1944 and was completed on 20 March of the same year. The period during which the trains were on route was between 9 and 23 days, but the average period was 16 days. 180 trains, with 491768 people were delivered to the prescribed unloading points." 30

According to official figures 1501 people died during the transportation. It has also been mentioned by researchers, based on eye-witness accounts, that old and sick people were killed by KNVD soldiers. Beriaia reported that 2016 “anti-Soviet elements were arrested and over 20,000 weapons seized. On this basis it has been argued by W. Flemming that “figures do not appear to lend much force to official Soviet claims that the Chechen and Ingush were collaborating en masse with the German occupiers”. The issue of actual death in deportation is debatable with some accounts putting the figure to as high as one third to one half of the total Chechen-Ingush population.

30 William Fleming, "The Deportation of Chechens and Ingush Peoples: A Critical Examination" in Ben Fowkes, ed. Russia and Chechya; The Permanent Crisis, p. 73
The deported Chechen-Ingush were placed in what were called ‘special settlements’ which were originally started in 1929 to settle Kulaks deported during the mass collectivization drive by Stalin. These settlements have been compared to GULAG (Main Administration of Corrective Labour Camps). Until the end of 1944, these camps were actually run by GULAG administration. Later it came under department of Special Settlements (OSP). According to official figures, the deportees were settled in the following areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Settlers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kazakh SSR</td>
<td>380397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(out of total 930,000 Special Settler)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirgiz SSR</td>
<td>83617</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(out of 83617 Special Settler)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vologda oblast</td>
<td>1207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivasovsk oblast</td>
<td>787</td>
</tr>
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The conditions in these special settlements were very harsh with inadequate supply of food, cloths and shoes. Those who tried to escape were penalized for 20 years in a GULAG camp. The actual figures of how many perished in remains unclear.

After the death of Stalin, Khrushchev denounced the deportations in his secret speech of February 1956 to the XXth party congress of the CPSU as “rude violations of the basic Leninist principles of the nationality policies of the Soviet State.” During his period the rehabilitation of the five
nations except the Volga Germans and the Crimean Tatars started.31

On 14 November 1989, the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union passed a declaration recognizing that the deportation and other repressive acts committed against the non-Russian nations had been illegal and criminal and ordered reinstating them in their rights”. This opened a public debate on deportation which had been lost in history.32

These deportations by Stalin have profound impact on the shaping up of the ongoing inter-ethnic problems in Russia and the former Soviet Union. S.Kh Abumuslimov, a Chechen political scientist and later Vice-President at the 50th anniversary commemoration of the 1944 deportation wrote:

“Real Chechens cannot identity themselves as rossiyane (citizen of Russia), even if they wanted to... their Chechen memory would rise from the deep recess of their souls where it had been thrust by 200 years of spiritual colonization... their genetic memory would be set aflame by the history of humiliation of the martyrs and victims of the two century long genocide”.33

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33 Gail W. Lapidus “The Dynamics of Secession in the Russian Federation” in Mikhail A. Alexeev, ed., *Center-Periphery Conflict in Post-Soviet Russia*, p. 50
These historical memories became the political resources for mobilization and critical in the solidification of Chechnya’s distinctive ethnological identity.

**Grozny Invasion**

The declaration of sovereignty by the Baltic Republics in 1990, opened the Pandora box with similar claims being made by other republics. The Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic declared itself sovereign on November 27, 1999. At this juncture this appeared to be just another addition to the “parade of sovereignty” having been supported and given legitimacy by the Russian Federation itself. In order to mobilize the support of republican leaders in this struggle against Gorbachev and the Soviet system, Yeltsin exhorted the republican leaders to “take all the sovereignty you can swallow”. Gorbachev also tried to neutralize the power of Union republics in his new Union Treaty of 1991, by allowing the autonomous republics to sign the treaty as equal subjects of the new Union.

The issue at stake in the case of Chechnya was whether after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Chechnya was to be granted independence like other Republics as the

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34 Ibid., p. 54.
35 Ibid., p. 54.
Chechens insisted or it was to remain within the Russian Federation as the later contested. “The disagreement was linked to broader ambiguities surrounding the concept of sovereignty itself, the political and juridical basis of the Russian Federation, which was up for negotiation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the scope and limits of power sharing between the centre and the republics”.36

On October 27, 1991, Dudayev assumed power despite opposition from Moscow as well as Grozny. The law on state sovereignty of Chechen Republic declared secession of Chechnya from the Russian Federation on November 1, 1991.37

During 1989 census, compared to the republic of the Russian Federation, the Chechen-Ingush republic had the second highest concentrations of members of the titular nationality in the total population (70.7%) (Dagestan was first with 80%) Tatars had only 48.5%. This composition of Chechen increased further after 1991 when Russian left en-masse.

According to the 1989 all-Union census, there were 899,000 Chechens of whom 58,000 lived in neighbouring

36 Ibid., p. 48.
Dagestan; 15,000 lives in Stavropol’ Krai, 11,100 in Volgograd oblast, 8,300 in Kalmykiya, 7,900 in Astakhan oblast, 600 in Saratov oblast. A total of 59,310 Chechens lived outside the Russian Federation, with 49,000 of that number residing in Kazakhstan.38

The Chechens in 1989 were largely rural with 73.13 per cent living in villages. The attachment of the Chechens to their native languages was very strong. In 1989 census, 98.79 per cent of the Chechens recorded Chechen as their native language and only 1.06 per cent reported Russian as their native language. The birth rate among Chechens was very high. By 1979, the percentage of the Chechens leaving Chechno-Ingushetia had fallen to 80.9 per cent, which declined further to 76.6 per cent in 1989.39 The widespread unemployment and over-dependence on agriculture have been cited as reasons for the exodus of Chechens from Chechno-Ingushetia before 1991. It should be noted that ethnic Russians were also migrating from this region. Over the period 1979-89, their number reduced by 42,273, from 336,044 to 293,771, a drop of 12.6 per cent.40 Hence, the out migration of the Chechens during this period should not be

39 Ibid., p.86.
40 Ibid., p.86.
linked to “ethnic cleansing” as this process began even before 1991. According to Gail W. Lapidus, “in contrast to the brutal conflicts in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the dispute (Chechnya Vs. Moscow) initially engaged relatively small circle of elite actors in Moscow and Grozny; although it took the form of ethno political conflict, it did not initially involve the eruption of highly mobilized masses acting on the basis of ethnicized identities or animosities, nor did it unleash “ethnic cleansing” of the Russian civilian population within Chechnya”.

**Reforms of Gorbachev and Chechen Conflict**

Years of piled up historical animosity of the Chechens towards the Russian got manifested during the late years of Gorbachev regime. By 1989 the impact of Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms viz., Glasnost, perestroika, sweeping the rest of the USSR, soon convulsed the far-fetched regions such as Siberia and Chechno-Ingushetia. In 1987, a society called “Caucasus” was formed by intellectuals. The voice of dissent was expressed fearlessly. In 1989, the communist party committee itself in a plenum openly criticized the deportation of 1944 “as shared tragedy, which was based on political rather than national motives”. The deportation, it was declared, had been

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41 Gail W. Lapidus, “The Dynamics of Secession in the Russian Federation: Why Chechnya” in Mikhail A. Alexseev, ed., Centre-Periphery Conflict in Post-Soviet Russia, p.48
conducted by “those who had usurped sacred Leninist covenants concerning in internationalist socialist legality”.42

In 1989, Vladimir Foteev, an ethnic Russian was removed from the post of first party secretary. Following this Doku Zavgaev a Chechen, and Nikolai Semenov, a Russian contested the post for the secretary but finally Zavgaev was selected, showing the wind of change in the political environment.

In 1989, the first overtly political organization Bart (Unity) formed by the young Chechens emerged. The members included the future Vice President of General Dudayev, Zelimkhan Yandrabiev. The Bart was transformed into a full-fledged political party called the Vainakh Democratic Party.

The Political Economy and Geo-strategy of Conflict

Ever since the Russian army launched its disastrous intervention in Chechnya on 11 December 1994, the reasons of conflict in Chechnya have been the subject of academic debate. The Kremlin’s officials explanation for the conflict in Chechnya is that a very small faction of extremists led by the Chechen war-lords with their vested economic and political

interests, and backed and financed by a few Islamic countries have created the crisis in Chechnya. Russia considers Chechnya to be a vital part of its territory and it sent troops in 1994 to preserve the integrity of the Russian Federation. It has been emphasized by Kremlins that no region would be allowed to secede and endanger the security and unity of Russia. Yeltsin announced on 13 December 1994 that government’s action to attack Chechnya was prompted by the threat to the integrity of Russia and the safety of its citizens both in Chechnya and elsewhere and by the possibility of the de-stabilization of the political and economic situation.\textsuperscript{43} If Chechnya were allowed to secede it would be difficult to control other regions with similar aspirations.

Another group of scholars has pointed out that Russia’s interest in Chechnya is primarily due to the Russian economic interests in this region. They have stressed the Caspian oil fields, the pipelines that run through Chechnya and the rush of western companies in this region to exploit the hydro-carbon resources.\textsuperscript{44}

Still some other scholars argue that Russia invaded Chechnya because the former underestimated the strength of

\textsuperscript{43} Rossiiskie vesti 14 December 1994, p.4.
\textsuperscript{44} Ian Bremmer, Association for the Study of Nationalities, April 1995, pp. 1-4.
the latter and Yeltsin was made to believe that a fleeting blitzkrieg would engender high support for Yeltsin in the next election. Thus, he got convinced by the military officials who wanted to play active role and show their usefulness in the post-cold war period.

Pontus Siren on the other hand believes that “December 1994 attacks (by Russia in Chechnya) have ultimately more to do with the prolonged political struggle between Chechnya and Russia than any single strategic or economic factor. Moreover, chance rather than strategic calculation played a greater role in the ultimate unfolding of events which have come, to be known as the Battle for Grozny’.

Again personality factor and political culture in Kremlin have also been blamed for this attack. It has been suggested that the decision to intervene in Chechnya was made by presidential decree, without the approval of the parliament. In this decision, some of the leading personalities surrounding Yeltsin played more important role than political institutions.

From 1991 till 1994, a general confusion prevailed over the status of Chechnya. The Russian Supreme Soviet refused to sanction the military operation. “Three years of uneasy truce followed during which Chechnya, while economically
dependent on Russia, was *de facto* politically independent.\(^4\) The military of Russia, from 1991 to till 1994 was involved in covert operations and many attempts were made to assassinate Dudayev and destabilize his regime.

Although, it is difficult to credit any one factor for the conflict between Russia and Chechnya, economic and strategic factor did play a crucial role in determining Russia’s policy towards Chechnya. Ian Bremmer in the *Association for the Study of Nationalities*\(^4\) attributes the prime reasons of conflict to the issue of controlling the oil pipelines that run through Chechens. An independent research, conducted by the Moscow State University Independent Institute of Social and Historical Problems, stressed that on account of the loss of oil producing regions with the break-up of the USSR and in the context of increased activity of western companies in the region, it has become essential to control the pipelines through which the oil is transported. The survey pointed out that an alternative route to gas and oil pipelines, outside Russian borders could fundamentally alter the situation in this region.\(^4\) Russia could control the Caspian oil field only if it controlled the pipeline. Afanas’ev, a correspondent of the

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Moscow News, wrote that one of the reasons "behind the toughening of Moscow's position in relations to Chechnya is Azerbaijan's agreement with the American and the British on the development of the Caspian oil fields. If the oil pipelines do not pass across Chechnya as the Russian leadership would like it, but for example across Turkey and Iran, Russia will lose the economic levers for influencing Azerbaijan.\textsuperscript{48}

The control of Caspian oil resources and their pipelines are of strategic and economic interests for Russia and it definitely determines Russia and its policy towards Chechnya. The oil resources in Central Asia which can be transported through these pipelines are crucial. The oilfield of Tengiz Basin in Kazakhstan, with known reserves of 16 billion barrels (one sixth of Kuwait's known reserves) and an estimated 30-100 billion barrels of undiscovered reserves, now lies outside the territory of Russia and it has no control over the production of oil here. Therefore, it has become important for Russia to control the pipeline that will transport oil to the European market. Any alternative pipeline can greatly reduce Russia's economic revenue and political influence in this region. Russia has equity share in the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) by nominating as its

contribution the 200 km pipelines linking Atyrau and Komsomolsk and forming part of the proposed Tangiz-Novorossisk line. The CPC is a Russian-Oman-Kazakhstan partnership established for the purpose of connecting Tengiz Oil field in Kazakhstan to Novorossisk port.

But given the chaotic situation in Chechnya, and to avoid Russian influence, many proposals for creating an alternative route are being discussed. The route through Russia is transporting the oil along the prevailing route from Astrakhan and Baker through Grozny to the Russians port of Novorossiisk on the Black Sea. The 1st alternative route could be transporting oil from Baku on the Caspian Sea through Armenia or Georgia to the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean coast. A second route could be from Kazakhstan through Iran to the Persian Gulf to the world market. Russia for obvious reasons prefers the route that passes through its territory. 49 This route has been used for transporting oil from Tengiz Basin.

But the importance of this route has been marred by two reasons: the fear that Chechen insurgents can blow up the pipeline that passes through Grozny; and secondly, this pipeline has a limited capacity. If the Tengiz Basin and Baku

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49 For detailed discussions on pipelines see Oil and Gas Journal, July 4, 1994, pp. 64-65.
field oil start extracting full capacity, the existing pipes would be inadequate to transport the increased volume. The current line from Baku to Grozny to Novorossiisk can not transport 60 million tons of oil per year required. In Russia itself, it has been proposed to build a pipeline from Baku to Novorossiisk, which would bypass the republic of Chechnya to avoid its vulnerability to the terrorist attacks. The Caspian Pipeline Consortium (Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Oman) proposed to transport Tengiz oil through new pipelines to Novorossiisk, thus, bypassing Chechnya.\textsuperscript{50}

But often the oil field reserves in Chechnya and the importance of pipeline passing through Chechnya have been overestimated. Tatarstan has oil reserves ten times greater than those of Chechnya.\textsuperscript{51} The oil production was 18 million tons in 1991 which fell to 1.5 million tons in 1994. But Chechnya is the most important centre for the production of aviation lubricants. This used to be the most important source of revenue for Chechnya. The oil reserves in Chechen-Ingush can be estimated at 60 million tons divided roughly between Chechnya and Ingushetia.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{50} Oil and Gas Journal, 22 May, 1995, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{52} See Robert E. Ebel, "The History and Politics of Chechen Oil," Caspian Crossroad Magazine.
Finally, it is difficult to conclude that Moscow’s venture into Chechnya was solely motivated by a desire to control Chechen oil. However, Russia’s policy towards Chechnya is definitely determined by the hydrocarbon resources in Chechnya and the oil pipelines that passes through it.

Coming to another set of assumption for the invasion of Grozny in 1994, it has been proposed that the intervention was propelled by dire economic situation and Yeltsin’s desire to rebuild his public standing with a successful military operation. This would ensure Yeltsin’s victory in the upcoming presidential election in 1996. Dorida Elliott of *Newsweek* argued that Yeltsin was keen to boost his sagging popularity and saw the invasion of Chechnya as an ideal way of achieving this objective. Stephen Kiselyov of Moscow News described, “if electors begin to dream of a firm hand capable of establishing order in the country, if electors lean more and more towards the national patriotic ideal, then Yeltsin, as always happens, begins to anticipate the events.” Yeltsin was in a situation where improving his image was more important than the risk of intervention.

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53 *Moscow News* 23, December 1994, p. 2
But Pontus Siren argues that while the parliamentary and presidential elections in 1995 and 1996 were at the backdrop of politics in Russia, it would be incorrect to link the Chechen crisis and the above elections for the following reasons: first, while conspiracy theories of the origin of war are abundant there is little concrete evidence to associate the two events. Secondly, it would be unrealistic to imagine even for Yeltsin that even a swift and victorious campaign in Chechnya could have restored his political standing which has been diminished above all by Russia's deteriorating economic situation and mounting crime and corruption. Thirdly, the Chechen operation was disproved by a majority of Russians from the outset. The result of an opinion poll in 1994 suggested that only 20 per cent of those questioned would approve the use of force in Chechnya. According to the Russian Centre of Public Opinion and Market Research on 5-6 December, the Chechen intervention was condemned by 57.7 per cent of those who responded. This figure went up to 69.9 per cent in 11-12 December. In another survey by All Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion only 30 per cent of 1600 people questioned, supported Chechen

operation, 36 per cent supported a peaceful resolution while 23 per cent wanted the withdrawal of troops from Chechnya. Therefore, it has been suggested by P. Siren that the presidential elections should not be linked to the Chechens operations. "The Chechen operation was influenced by concerns over public opinions only to the extent that if Yeltsin had not ordered the invasion he would have strengthened the extreme nationalist movement which would have claimed that he was not protecting Russian interests vigorously enough".57

Even if we believe that the operations in Chechnya were planned by Yeltsin against the backdrop of upcoming presidential elections, it was a serious miscalculation and it backfired diminishing his public standing further.

How far military establishment did precipitate the operation is difficult to ascertain in the absence of creditable evidence. While some supported military solution, others were opposed to it. Colonel General Boris Gromov, a Deputy Defence Minister and a hero of the Afghan War warned against another Afghanistan on Russian soil. General Labed condemned the operations as "foolish and stupid".58

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According to Pontus Siren, the real motive of war in Chechnya was “Yeltsin’s desire to confirm the authority of the Central government over the Chechen Republic... Chechen separatism has been unacceptable to the Russian government from the very moment the republic declared independence in November 1991.” The catalyst of military action was the capture of 21 Russian soldiers by Chechen extremists and their parading in front of camera. This was taken as national limitations and invited extreme step of military operations in Chechnya. According to Gail W. Lapidus, the shift in policy of Russia in 1994 towards Chechnya was the outcome of two factors: the conclusion of treaty with Tatarstan in February 1994, which refocused attention on Chechnya as the major challenge to Moscow; and the growing strategic importance of entire region as western contracts to export the massive oil and gas reserves of the Caspian basic were perceived a threat to Russian influence.

The resistance of Chechen was completely miscalculated. It was believed initially that Grozny could be occupied within 24 hours. Defence Minister Grachev declared that “all the questions in Chechnya could be resolved in two
hours with one parachute regiment". He further argued that "the military action in Chechnya would take two minutes to plan, ten hours to carry out, but ten years to withdraw". This was due to lack of insight and proved to be a fatal error of judgment as war lingered for a year and a half. Between 25 November and till the end of war, 90,000 people were killed, according to General Lebel. Russia spent 2.5% of GNP. This also sealed the prospect of peaceful solution through negotiations. Valer Trishkov, Chairman of the Committee on Nationalities, argued that military action in Chechnya had been unnecessary because Dudayev had been willing to negotiate with the status of republic. Dudayev has been quoted by Newsweek (23 January 1995) "full or partial independence, it is a relative matter. All these issues can be settled with one stroke of the pen."

Emil Pains, a specialist on nationality policy and presidential adviser in Russia during this period noted, "In democratic societies, there are a number of conditions under which the use of force is the only permissible way for a state to resolve the regional conflicts. This is true, above all, when peaceful means of resolving conflicts have been exhausted and society has agreed to incur causalities and materials

losses, as well as when society is confident of the army's ability to act not only effectively but also in a civilized manner. These conditions had not been met before the Chechen war began.\textsuperscript{60} Sergey Kovalev, President Yeltsin's adviser on human rights expressed similar view in testimony before the U.S. Congressional Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe," before and after the outbreak of fighting it would have been possible to solve the problem of Chechen separatism by political means. All attempts to do so were systematically and deliberately torpedoed by the military high command and by others in the government in Moscow".\textsuperscript{61}

Hence, an opportunity to contain the conflict was wasted away. The protracted military conflict culminated in the Nazran agreements on a ceasefire which provided for Russian troop's withdrawal and prisoner exchanges, and later the Khasavyurt Agreement of August 10, 1996 and the agreement "On Peace and the Principles of Mutual Relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria". These developments were outcome of following factors: First, the routing of Russian forces in Grozny by the Chechens. It was realized by the Russian forces that complete

\textsuperscript{60} Emil Pain and Arkady Popov, "Russian Policy in Chechnya" Izvestiya, February 10, 1995, p.4.

\textsuperscript{61} Quoted by Gail W. Lapidus "The Dynamics of Secession in the Russian Federation", p. 69.
recapture of Grozny was possible only if Grozny was destroyed completely by bombing. Hence, Russian leadership realized the futility of such military campaign. Second, the deadlocked military situation created an opportunity for the more liberal groups in Moscow to come to the forefront in policy-making. Third, General Lebed was more interested in the peaceful resolution of the conflict. His commitment to negotiated settlement was unequivocal. Fourth, the agreement with Tatarstan in 1994 also threw a new option for similar agreement with Chechnya. Fifth, the hardliner president Dudayev was killed in a military action in April 1996. Many scholars and politicians believed that the time was opportune for an agreement.

The Khasavyurt agreement resulted in the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Chechnya and the status of Chechnya remained ambiguous. Any further negotiation on the status of Chechnya was postponed for 5 years until 2001. This allowed both sides to claim victory. In the election for President in the Chechen Republic, Aslan Mashkhadov emerged victorious. This election was recognized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). For the next four years Chechens de facto ruled the republic. But the situation took a new turn inviting second military
action in 1999 when some Chechen terrorist led by Khattab tried to capture Dagestan. This war continues. The Chechens have adopted guerilla techniques. The bombing of cities in Russia by Chechens is another facet of the same war.

**The Response of International Community**

The west and other countries made no special effort to utilize available instruments to prevent the escalation of conflict in 1994. Various factors were responsible for such an attitude. First, Chechnya was considered by most of the countries to be an integral part of Russia. The norm of sovereignty and territorial integrity takes on particular importance where the behaviour of a major power is at stake. Western governments and international organizations play an extremely intrusive role of in the internal affairs of smaller sovereign status in recent year while the powerful countries remain scot free. The silence of the United Nations was explained by the then Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "We are bound by the UN Charter." Article 2(7) prohibits United Nations to intervene in “matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction”. However, it should be noted that the UN does have the right to

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intervention when a domestic conflict has the potential to jeopardize the regional security or international order, or it leads to a serious humanitarian crisis. The reticence of the UN reflected the real politic at the global level where Russia was not only a permanent member of the Security Council but also a major power. The UN lacks political and other resources to contain such conflicts.

The perception of negligence by the West was also guided by the apprehension that separation of Chechnya might lead to fragmentation and even disintegration of Russia. The attitude of the USA was reflected in a State Department briefing “we have no interest and the world has no interest in seeing a splintering or dismembering of the Russian Federation. That would be enormously destabilizing.”63 The USA also feared that disintegration of Russia might destabilize the nuclear forces of Russia, thus, creating a real danger. European countries on the other hand practically feared the impact of Chechen secession on unleashing similar forces in Europe or legitimizing insurgencies within various countries of Europe. Therefore, they emphasized stability and integrity of Russia and respected sovereignty of a country and adopted

the policy of non-interference within the domestic affairs of a country.

West also feared that supporting Chechnya against Russia could weaken Yeltsin and strengthen communist or nationalists and this could have balked democratization and economist marketisation of Russia. A reversal of foreign policy of Russia towards the west was a major factor why west hesitated to put pressure on Russia. Andrey Kortunov sums up the attitude of west."... if one does not count the symbolic gesture by Denmark, which has frozen military cooperation with Moscow, our leading western partners have, on the whole, reacted to the pacification in Chechnya with Olympian clam..."

For west, the issues of nuclear disarmament, START II ratification, joint efforts in Bosnia, NATO expansion in East, democratization and liberalization were more important than the slaughtering of tribal Caucasian. The European Union reaffirmed to condemn Russian military action in Chechnya on the ground that democratization deserved more attention than human rights. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Chechnya compounded the fear of West further.
Conclusion

To conclude, the Chechen conflict has turned out to be watershed in the development of politics in Russia. The war in Chechnya demonstrated the weakness of Russian state, its decorated army and its failure to evolve a well developed federal structures. The escalation of conflict in 1994 was the upshot of the state in failure in Russia, feeble policy-making institutions in Russia and Chechnya, selfish intra-elite and competition and glaring differences between the executive and the legislative branches. Finally, a nascent civil society network proved incapable of mobilizing the public opinion and creating an alterative policy framework. The Chechen conflict has resulted in some unforeseen results. It imparted a justification to the very powerful executive (President) and the adoption of an authoritarian style of governance by him. Press is another victim of the war. Press censorship and the state control of press are pervasive in Russia. Army has also emerged powerful and an ultimate arbitrator of political conflicts in the country. All these developments are detrimental to the evolution of Russia as a democratic society. The multifarious dimensions of Chechen conflict, therefore, needs to be scrutinized to understand the emergence of politics in new Russia.