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The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad

by Robert W. Schaefer

Reviewed by Constance Philipot, Senior US Foreign Service Officer

Does the limited readership for Chechnya and the North Caucasus need another book? The uptick in violence and major terrorist acts in Moscow in recent months has sparked greater interest in the region, but arguably this need is more than filled by recent books and articles by such noted specialists as Thomas de Waal at Carnegie, Miriam Lansky (National Endowment for Democracy) together with the former Chechen Foreign Minister Akhadov, and Georgetown's Charles King. What does a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army have to offer to this intellectually rich literature?

A lot, it turns out. Robert Schaefer is sufficiently steeped in the complicated ethnic-religious-historical stew of the North Caucasus; he fully understands and successfully communicates the background against which the insurgency takes place. To this he adds his experientially based knowledge of counterinsurgency (COIN). He goes beyond a US-centric interpretation of COIN to look at the situation from the Russian government and military's point of view. His insight helps answer the paradox that most of those who have studied the region grapple with: Why have the Russians never succeeded in extinguishing this 300-year insurgency while, at the same time, the Chechens have never been able to win their independence? In part, it is because the Russians have successfully addressed aspects of the conflict in their own terms, but have failed to adequately address the essential "hearts and minds" aspect of COIN, preventing them from ultimate victory. The Chechens (and other peoples of the North Caucasus) have been highly skilled in the initial guerilla warfare stages of insurgency, but have failed to defeat the far more numerous Russian forces at the advanced stages of the conflict when there is a need to mass forces. The initial and outwardly successful "Chechenization" of the Chechen struggle in which resources poured into the area failed. Additionally, cessation of violence resulting from the former insurgent Kadyrov deftly playing Moscow and his local rivals is unraveling due to the failure to provide security and build trust among the local population.

A very useful introductory chapter, "Insurgency 101," sets the stage for Schaefer's thesis that the Chechen/North Caucasus rebellions should be analyzed as classic insurgencies. More than an "Insurgency for Dummies," the chapter underscores the key elements of an insurgency—lack of governmental control, available leadership, ideology, and vulnerable population—which Schaefer weaves throughout his account of the history of the North Caucasian struggles against Russian rule. Similarly, the clear distinction he draws between

insurgency and terrorism (the former a strategy, the latter a tactic) is important to understanding where the Russians have gone wrong in branding the insurgency as terrorism.

In his detailed history of the conflict-ridden region, Schaefer stresses that religion was a galvanizing force in the struggle since the 18th century—and not a new element resulting from the Chechen war of the mid-1990s. The Russian response to the Chechens was consistently violent and suppressive, including such tactics as forced resettlement—a pattern that continued in the Soviet Union and Russian Federation. The Russians consistently exploited the fissures in Chechen society, including those between followers of fundamentalist Islam and other local traditions.

The period of perestroika in the late 1980s gave hope to Chechen nationalists and other repressed people of the region for greater freedom and autonomy, but ultimately the turmoil and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union created the preconditions for the Chechen wars. Presidents Yeltsin and Gorbachev played Chechen leadership that were competing in their own power struggle with disastrous results for the Chechen peoples. The loss of central government control, available leadership (in the form of Dzhokhar Dudayev), an (always) vulnerable population and ideology (nationalism, Islam and criminality) were, as Schaeffer points out, a formula for an insurgency. Paradoxically, it was the Russians in 1994 that launched the insurgency against the newly declared independent Chechen Republic Ichkeria. The brutal war that followed was very unpopular among Russians—in part due to the free flow of information and the Chechen use of large-scale terrorism. The conflict ended with the Khasavyurt Accords negotiated by retired General (and presidential candidate) Alexander Lebed.

The interwar years (1996-99) were marked by conflict between the moderate Chechen President Maskhadov (elected after Dudayev's death) and radicals such as Basayev and the foreign Arab military leader Khattab. The Chechen government was poorly run and highly corrupt, and the nation was ripe for the Russian invasion in 1999. Schaeffer cites good evidence that the Russians had actually planned the invasion of Chechnya prior to a series of bombings in Moscow, but the author does not take a strong stand on whether the Russian government (security services) undertook the bombings, as the now-exiled oligarch Berezovskiy claims. That said, Schaefer cautions those who propose the idea that the Russians would commit such acts against their own people as unthinkable not to be trapped in their own ethnocentric world view. In any case, the Russian government clearly exploited the bombings to boost popular support for the war.

The Russians learned some lessons from the first Chechen War which they applied to the subsequent conflict. Beyond tactical improvements, they systemically controlled the flow of information to the Russian public, eliminating the domestic opposition that contributed to the earlier failure. Moreover, President Putin's high popularity gave the Kremlin free license to conduct the war as it saw fit, including the handling of the Beslan school terrorist attack

which resulted in the deaths of 200 children—and led to the defeat of the Chechen insurgency.

But that is not the end of the story, as is clear from the two recent terrorist

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acts in Moscow that were claimed by the North Caucasian insurgents and resulting in the almost daily list of casualties throughout the North Caucasus. Schaefer attempts to address why the insurgency persists and its ability to spread beyond Chechnya to much of the North

Caucasus. The Russians, he submits, framed the problem as the existence of criminal and undesirable elements that are responsible for creating the instability. A strong dose of heavy-handed law enforcement and military action to root out the undesirables is the outgrowth of such thinking. Schaefer acknowledges that the high-value-target technique that the Russians employed can be useful in quelling a limited rebellion or terrorist activity, but does not address the issues contained in a deeply rooted insurgency. Khadyrov's appeal to the local traditional Islamic elements to fight against the foreign "fundamentalists," together with substantial economic assistance for rebuilding Grozny, resulted in relative peace in Chechnya over the past several years.

This stability, however, like the rebuilding, is only surface deep. The Russian and "khadyrovtsy" heavy-handed law enforcement has not provided security nor built trust among the population. Instead, it has resulted in a reservoir of grievances and forced many young men to join the insurgency. In the meantime, the leadership of the insurgency has spread its reach beyond the issue of Chechen independence to a mantle of a broader, fundamentalist North Caucasus Emirate. The intensity of the insurgency outside Chechnya, particularly in Dagestan, shows that the insurgents have succeeded in broadening the conflict. At this point in the narrative, Schaefer could have addressed specific features within each republic which allowed insurgency to take root. He implies that the violence is principally an outgrowth of the Chechen revolt, rather than the result of economic and social conditions, or the Kremlin's highly centralized policies. This is a minor omission which does not detract from this otherwise thoughtful and comprehensive analysis.

In addition to providing a new perspective on the academic literature on the North Caucasus conflict, Schaefer's work is useful to the civilian and military policymaker charged with dealing with the Russian government on counterterrorism and security issues.