

# RUSSIA AND THE CAUCASUS

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## **The Historical Background**

It took the Russian Tsars more than two hundred years to conquer the Caucasus. They began the effort at the end of the 16th century. They did not complete it until the 1860s. Russia's expansion into the Caucasus was classic imperialism, like the British conquest of India and the French expansion into North and Sub-Saharan Africa. During the Soviet period ideologues developed an elaborate mythology maintaining that Russian conquest and rule of the Caucasus was somehow an entirely "anti-imperialist", "progressive" process. "Anti-imperialist" because Russia took control of the Caucasus from the Ottoman and Persian empires. "Progressive" because Russian conquest allegedly opened the way for the peoples of the region to develop their cultures and expand their economies according to their own desires and needs. The culmination of this process was claimed to be the Soviet system itself, which was said to have brought brotherhood, peace, and prosperity to the region. Today, four years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it would be hard to find Caucasians who would not find this mythology ludicrous. Scholars in Russia have begun reevaluating it.<sup>[1]</sup>

Of course, Russian conquest of the Caucasus did have a positive side, as colonialism did in most parts of the world. It brought more peaceful conditions and more orderly administration. It led to the development of infrastructure--roads, railroads, ports, and the expansion of cities. During the last decades of the Tsarist Empire, there was considerable industrial development mostly with private capital. The needs and desires of the people who lived in the region were always a lower priority, however, than the requirements of the distant central government.

Many Tsarist Russian officials originally hoped to Russianize all subject peoples and some would like to have converted them all to Orthodox Christianity. But the Tsarist Government was both inefficient and susceptible to pressures from its own society. At the very time it completed conquest of the Caucasus with the surrender of Imam Shamil in 1859 and the subjugation of the Circassians<sup>[2]</sup> in 1864, it had begun to launch a program of reform. During the final decades of its existence, the Tsarist Government moderated autocracy and began to create a more open political and economic system. Political and religious groups were able to organize and, though never complete, considerable freedom of expression was permitted. The Caucasus benefitted from the economic upsurge that came toward the end of the 19th century when oil began to be exploited in Azerbaijan and Chechnya and Georgian ports on the Black Sea were opened to international trade. The Revolution of 1905 brought groups seeking autonomy and even independence into the mainstream of politics in Azerbaijan and Georgia. Revolutionary organizations were active among Armenians. By 1914 there was reason to hope that the Russian Empire might evolve, like most other European states, into a liberal constitutional monarchy with an open society and effective parliamentary government.

World War I created strain that caused the Tsarist Empire to collapse early in 1917. After a few months of political confusion, Lenin came from Germany and carried out a coup<sup>[3]</sup> that

locked the country into the grip of Bolshevik Communism. Through a combination of intrigue and military force, the Bolsheviks over the next few years restored the empire in more rigidly authoritarian form than the Tsars had ever hoped for and called it the Soviet Union. The Soviet system was based on deception, intimidation, and force. Manipulation of various forms of terror and threat of terror became the dominant characteristic of the Soviet art of governing.<sup>[4]</sup>

## **The Soviet Legacy**

The three Transcaucasian nations that declared independence in 1918 had all been occupied by the Red Army by mid-1921 and were brought back into the empire as component "republics". Confusion continued in the North Caucasus for several years as the Bolsheviks played ethnic groups against each other and maneuvered to gain control of the Mountaineer Republic which the Chechens, Dagestanis, and several other North Caucasian nationalities proclaimed in 1918. In the end, the Bolsheviks consolidated control over the ethnically complex North Caucasus through classic divide-and-rule techniques. Peoples were allocated separate "autonomous" republics and regions, areas of mixed populations were shifted arbitrarily, and unrelated ethnic groups with few common interests were joined together so that each would serve to restrain tendencies toward self-assertion among the other.

Divide-and-rule tactics were applied in Georgia too where the Abkhaz, with a small minority population, were allocated a large "autonomous" republic, and the predominantly Muslim--though otherwise culturally Georgian--population of Ajaria was given the same status. The Ossetes in Georgia received a sizable "autonomous" region. Sorting out Armenian and Azeri territories was difficult. The Bolsheviks manipulated disputed territories and boundaries to create the Karabakh "autonomous" region and the "autonomous" republic of Nakhichevan in Azerbaijan. Sizable numbers of Armenians, of course, continued to live in cities in Georgia and Azerbaijan. The resentments and tensions which broke out in blood when Communist power began to collapse in the 1980s are the result of emphasis on ethnic structuralism which was a recipe for permanent tension in a region as ethnically diverse as the Caucasus.

Communist leaders in the Kremlin claimed almost to the end of their time in power that they operated on the basis of "the friendship of peoples", the "flowering of cultures" and the development of peoples' economies for the benefit of the peoples themselves. Like almost everything else in the Soviet system of lies, the reality was entirely the opposite. Even the Armenians and the Georgians who escaped the "reform" of their alphabets into Russian Cyrillic after World War II (the Azerbaijanis and North Caucasians did not), had to riot in the 1970s to retain the official status of their languages. Religious institutions were tightly controlled and much religious activity was suppressed. All important economic decisions were made in Moscow, often to the serious disadvantage of local interests. All independent political activity was forbidden. So were most forms of freedom of expression. While the Communist Party became increasingly moribund, it still held a dead hand over all civic and cultural activities. The KGB penetrated into all phases of life.

## **Imperial Collapse and Aftermath**

As the Soviet Empire began to disintegrate in the late 1980s, the Caucasus was one of its first regions to experience serious disorder and degeneration. Since the disappearance of the Soviet system at the end of 1991, no part of the Caucasus has been free of armed conflict, economic deterioration, or political turmoil and confusion. As many as two million people have become refugees, tens of thousands have died. Food and medicines sent from abroad

have kept hundreds of thousands of Caucasians from starving and dying of disease. These disasters have not happened because the Caucasus is a poor region. It is well endowed by nature. It has agricultural and mineral wealth, sufficient sources of energy to be a major exporter of oil. It has industries and potential for more industrial development. The peoples of the Caucasus are the heirs of ancient civilizations and high culture. They are literate, they are talented, they are famous for their energy, ingenuity and skill as farmers, artisans, workers, and traders. Their professionals and intellectuals are the equal of any in the former Soviet Union. Why has freedom from Soviet colonialism resulted in so much disaster in such a promising region?

The basic answer is simple: the nature of the Russian/Soviet colonial system. It was a much more pernicious system than that of other European colonial empires. Britain, for example, over a period of several decades, systematically created institutions of self-government in India. When Britain granted India independence in 1947, authority was transferred to Indian leaders and officials who had already had long experience in responsible leadership and administration. Beneath the upper echelons of government, an experienced civil service kept state and local government in operation during the change from colonialism to independence. The same was true in many other European colonies, though performance varied and some, of course, did experience disruption and degeneration after independence. Over a shorter or longer period of time, however, almost all European colonial powers prepared their colonies for independence. Russia did not. The Communist Party developed no counterpart to European colonial administrators and cadres of indigenous civil servants.

The result of nearly 70 years of the Soviet system was that the most important human activities took place in the shadows, or underground. People depended on family, clan, or colleagues from their ethnic group for support that enabled them to live some degree of normal life. The sense of civic responsibility that is necessary for the operation of modern societies atrophied. Peoples gained little experience of governing themselves. "Socialist" government came to be seen as an enemy to be evaded, exploited, manipulated, or cheated. The early idealism, which some communists may even have believed in, came to be regarded as the sham it was. All officials were regarded as dishonest and self-serving. No one was well prepared for the independence that suddenly came in 1991. Nevertheless some characteristics of the peoples of the Caucasus equipped them for a more promising response to independence than some of the other parts of the ex-Soviet Union. Why, then, has the Caucasus been so troubled?<sup>[5]</sup>

There are several reasons, most of them interconnected. Each situation has its own characteristics. There is one important common denominator: Russian interference. Russia has found it impossible to let the independent Caucasian countries go their own way. Furthermore, Russia's leaders have continued to insist that the erstwhile "autonomous" republics and regions of the North Caucasus must remain integral parts of Russia. Old habits persist in the way Russia tries to deal with them: divide and rule tactics, playing ethnic groups against each other. Russia is a poorly consolidated state itself. The Russian Federation, a communist construct, is still more a truncated empire than a genuine federal structure. Since independence, however, Moscow no longer exercises effective control over many territories that are entirely Russian in population, let alone those with non-Russian populations. The tendency since independence has been toward de facto autonomy all over the Russian Federation. This is not necessarily an unhealthy tendency, for it could eventually lead to the transformation of Russia into a genuine federation. Various forms of federalism have proven to be the most effective form of government for large modern states.<sup>[6]</sup> Federalism was long ago proven to be a good solution for even small multi-ethnic states, as the example of Switzerland, now more than 900 years old, demonstrates.

There is much more that could be said, but a comprehensive discussion of recent Russian interference in the Caucasus would require a book.<sup>[7]</sup> Let us review a few of the most striking examples:

### **Karabakh and Relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan**

Tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan were kept in check as long as the communist held a firm grip on both countries. When Gorbachev introduced glasnost and perestroika, Moscow's control weakened rapidly. Some communists wavered in their loyalty to Moscow and began to seek greater identification with their own people. The KGB tried to bolster Moscow's influence over both republics by fanning tensions between them that only Moscow could mediate. Moscow, however, never developed much skill in true mediating. As tension turned into violence, Moscow sent in troops. Military commanders out of habit and long Soviet practice, resorted quickly to force. Discipline in the Soviet army declined rapidly during the Gorbachev period. As far as we know, the KGB remained relatively effective and Gorbachev found it very useful. Nevertheless the three major institutions that held the Soviet Union together: the Communist Party, the KGB, and the Soviet Army often operated at cross purposes.

Soviet military intervention in Sumgait, an industrial town north of Baku, in January 1990 was bloody and resulted in massive flight by the Armenians who lived there. The Karabakh situation was continually exacerbated and soon Armenian activists, encouraged by exiles returning from abroad, launched a major offensive to gain control of the territory. Soviet Army equipment was transferred or allowed to fall into the hands of Armenian forces. By the time the Soviet Union collapsed, a full-scale war was under way. Russia was unable--or unwilling--to stop it. Moscow's early efforts to effect a truce and set a mediation process in motion were inept. Until recently, neither the Armenians nor the Azerbaijanis have had confidence in Moscow's motives or feel assured that Moscow is capable of exercising effective control over military commanders in the region. Moscow has been hesitant, however, to let international mediators have a free hand in attempts to find a solution to the conflict.

Comparatively free elections in Azerbaijan in June 1992 brought a strong defender of Azerbaijani independence to power--Ebulfez Elchibey. But Elchibey lacked political experience. His aspirations for closer relations with southern Azerbaijan alarmed Iran. His strong interest in close relations with Turkey alarmed Moscow. After less than a year he was ousted in a coup mounted by a minor warlord supported by the Russian military. The long-time Communist chief in Azerbaijan who had been removed by Gorbachev--Heidar Aliev--came back to power from retirement. If Moscow was fully behind the coup and engineered Aliev's return, as many observers maintained at the time, it achieved less than the desired result, for Aliev soon became a strong and skillful defender of the Azerbaijan's independence. He improved relations with Iran while maintaining valuable links to Turkey. He has taken a strong stand against Moscow on the all-important issue of development and transport of Azerbaijan's enormous oil-exporting potential. He has also been the target of plots and coups every few months; these have been attributed by many Azerbaijanis to Russians--whether operating with Yeltsin's knowledge or not. Azerbaijanis also see Moscow's hand in the agitation of the sizable Lezgin population of Dagestan, its neighbor to the north on the Caspian coast, for border changes.

### **Georgia's Minorities**

All Georgia's minority problems have been exacerbated by Russian interference. The Russian hand is clearly visible in the case of Abkhazia, a bit less blatant in South Ossetia

because Russians have operated there partly through North Ossetia. The Ossetes have had a reputation of friendliness toward Russia since the early 19th century. It was easy for Russian nationalists and communists, helped by the military, to urge both the Abkhaz and the Ossetes to attempt to separate from Georgia and join Russia. The Soviet Army generated intense Georgian resentment with its brutal military intervention in Tbilisi in April 1989. Russian soldiers slaughtered women demonstrators with sharpened shovels while Gorbachev looked the other way. Georgia's population was so aroused that they elected the intensely anti-Russian Zviad Gamsakhurdia president a year and a half later with 87% of their vote.<sup>[8]</sup> Gamsakhurdia was convinced that Gorbachev and Shevardnadze aimed to destroy him, though the two were hardly allies by that time. Gamsakhurdia, a fervent and uncompromising Georgian nationalist, was utterly uncompromising toward the Abkhaz and Ossetes. He thus pushed moderates among them into the arms of communist extremists and their conservative Russian friends.

Gamsakhurdia refused to negotiate with Abkhaz separatists while freebooting Georgian warlords moved into Abkhazia and unleashed open warfare. With its long frontage on the Black Sea, Abkhazia contained important Soviet military installations and was the holiday playground of the communist elite. Without the equipment and manpower Russian officers made available from former Soviet military bases, the small Abkhaz army could not have withstood even the makeshift forces of the Georgian warlords.<sup>[9]</sup> To complicate matters further, Russia encouraged North Caucasians to send mercenaries to aid their allegedly Muslim Abkhaz brethren.<sup>[10]</sup> At least two or three thousand came and contributed substantially to Abkhaz success.<sup>[11]</sup>

The Russian Defense Ministry in Moscow feigned lack of knowledge or responsibility for what was happening in Abkhazia while Yeltsin, particularly after the return of Shevardnadze to Georgia, periodically called for a halt to the fighting and mediation. Whether this was mere ritual or sincere remains unclear. Extreme conservative groups in Russia and ex-communists were more open and in their way more honest. They championed the Abkhaz cause in meetings, declarations, and in their press, and advocated joining the territory to Russia, as did Abkhaz separatist leaders (as most of them still do). Some Russian communist/nationalists were motivated by a desire to punish Shevardnadze for his defection from Gorbachev and consequent contribution to the demise of the Soviet Union.

Things went from bad to worse in Abkhazia during the final weeks of 1993. Gamsakhurdia returned to western Georgia from exile in Chechnya while Russian support enabled the Abkhaz separatists to eject the demoralized Georgian forces from all Abkhaz republican territory. Shevardnadze joined the battle at the end of the year and barely escaped with his life. When Sukhumi fell he fled southward to the airport and boarded a plane with Russian and Abkhaz troops in hot pursuit. They attempted to shoot his plane down as it flew away. Back in Mingrelia, he had to fight Gamsakhurdia's irregulars who were prevented from capturing the port of Poti by the landing of Russian marines. Gamsakhurdia was either killed or committed suicide while a shaken Shevardnadze returned to Tbilisi and soon had to agree to Russian pressure for Georgian membership in the Confederation of Independent States (CIS).

Abkhazia, one of the most attractive and productive parts of the entire ex-Soviet Union, was left in ruins. More than 250,000 of its Georgian inhabitants fled to Georgian-controlled territory and still crowd hotels, barracks, and camps all over the country. Meanwhile at least 150,000 Russians, Greeks, and Armenians fled northward to Russian territory, as did some Abkhaz. As of mid-1995 the remaining population of Abkhazia was estimated at 130,000, down from almost 600,000, and Russia, having meanwhile established a stronger position in Georgia, shifted to favoring a settlement which would reaffirm Abkhazia as a part of a federal Georgia, the same position Shevardnadze and most moderate Georgian political leaders had

taken. Russian officials (notably Federation Council Chairman Shumeiko) publicly denounced self-declared Abkhaz President Ardzinba and equated him with Chechen President Dudaev. Subsequently Russian negotiators have shifted position on Abkhazia several times while the situation there remains basically stalemated. There is little reason to believe that Moscow possesses the strength or the determination to force the Abkhaz separatists to accept even a nominal reconciliation with Georgia.

Back to 1992: during the first year after Shevardnadze's return to Tbilisi, Georgia and Russia reached agreement on a truce in South Ossetia enforced by both Russian and Georgian troops. Georgia exercises no administrative authority in the region. Gamsakhurdia cancelled its autonomous status and it has since been termed the Tskhinvali Region by Georgia. While the truce is tenuous, South Ossetia has lost population and is economically stagnant. Russia seems to be realizing, as it has in respect to Abkhazia, that a viable relationship with Georgia is more valuable than trying to lop off minority territories that are economically and demographically ruined in the process. Though Shevardnadze signed an agreement granting Russia military bases on Georgian territory, but he also endorsed the conditions the Georgian parliament placed on it: if Russia cannot settle the Abkhaz problem, Georgia will not ratify the base agreement.<sup>[12]</sup>

Georgia's relations with Russia continue uneasy. Georgians suspect Russians, not necessarily all directed by Moscow, of continuing support of opponents of Shevardnadze. Georgian Interior Minister Georgadze fled to Moscow when he and warlord Joseliani were implicated in an assassination attempt against Shevardnadze at the end of August 1995. Security officials in Moscow denied involvement, but Georgia's new interior minister officially accused "reactionary forces in Russia" of sheltering Georgadze. Russia has refused to return him to Tbilisi. Credible reports out of Moscow indicate that senior Russian generals have been protecting him.

Only one part of Georgia remained free of obvious Russian manipulation until recently: Ajaria, the republic on the Turkish border which has enjoyed the distinction of being the most peaceful part of the country. Hundreds of thousands of Georgians cross here yearly to shop in Turkey and large quantities of Turkish consumer goods flow into Georgia and other parts of the Caucasus through Batumi.<sup>[13]</sup> The region's communist chief before independence, Aslan Abashidze, has maintained a firm hold on power there, initially supporting Gamsakhurdia but shifting in good time to support Shevardnadze. He has maintained a close relationship to Russian military leaders in the region, but has kept both Georgian warlords and Russian nationalists from attempting to stirring up trouble among his predominantly Muslim-ancestry population. Ajaria also has sizable Greek and Armenian minorities to whom churches and cultural institutions have been returned. His Georgian Renaissance Party moved onto the national scene in the November 1995 elections, attracting over 400,000 votes and becoming one of the three dominant parties in the new Georgian parliament.

## **Chechnya**

While Russian maneuvers in the independent Caucasian countries are poorly understood and often ignored by the Western press, the whole world became tragically aware of the brutal Russian military assault on Chechnya launched in December 1994 and the defeat the Chechens administered to the Russian army in the summer of 1996. The war became a domestic Afghanistan.

The Chechens, among the last of the North Caucasian Muslim peoples to be subdued in the 19th century, have never reconciled themselves to Russian domination.<sup>[14]</sup> They were deported en mass to Central Asia in early 1944, along with three other North Caucasian

nationalities (the Ingush, Karachay, and Balkars), the Kalmyks, the Crimean Tatars, the Meskhetian Turks, and the Volga Germans. A third of them died. They were permitted by Nikita Khrushchev to return in the late 1950s, reestablished themselves rapidly on their home ground and made up their population losses with one of the world's highest birthrates. Jokhar Dudaev, who emerged as their leader in 1991, had gone to Kazakhstan as a babe in arms and returned to Chechnya at the age of 14. By exhibiting exemplary Soviet behavior he was able to attend the Soviet Air Force academy and rose to rank of general, serving as Soviet Air Force Commander in Estonia when the Soviet Union collapsed. He never forgot he was a Chechen. The Moscow-appointed Communist Party chief in Grozny, Doku Zavgaev, supported the coup against Gorbachev in August 1991. Dudaev saw his chance and led a movement which expelled Zavgaev and proclaimed Chechnya's independence, then held elections as a result of which he became president. Yeltsin's initial attempt to suppress the Chechens by sending in troops a few weeks later failed miserably. Moscow reverted to old divide-and-rule tactics by helping the closely related Ingush separate from what had long been the joint Chechen-Ingush Republic. That exacerbated violence between the Ingush and the neighboring Ossetes, a situation which Moscow has never been able to settle. Then for a couple of years Moscow marked time.

In mid-1994 KGB officials and military commanders in Chechnya developed a scheme to make it appear that disaffected Chechens had abandoned Dudaev and were ready to rejoin Russia.<sup>[15]</sup> Everything went wrong. Violence and tension rose. Chechens rallied around Dudaev. Ingush supported their Chechen cousins. After Russian bombing of the Grozny airport in early December 1994 failed to intimidate the Chechens, Yeltsin gave orders to the Russian Army to mount an all-out offensive. Minister of Defense Grachev declared it would all be over in a few hours.

The military debacle that ensued is too well known to need detailed repetition. Grozny was bombed and shelled into the condition of Dresden in World War II. Russians living there were more often victims as Chechens, and thousands of both suffered miserable deaths.<sup>[16]</sup> Thousands of Russian soldiers were also killed. Prominent Russian generals, Boris Gromov and Aleksandr Lebed, repeatedly condemned the war. It seriously affected Yeltsin's popularity. Chechen terrorist sorties into Russian territory exposed confusion among all elements of the Russian government. Old Soviet habits of brutality and lies became routine in all matters relating to Chechnya.

Under attack from his former Chechen enemy, Ruslan Khasbulatov<sup>[17]</sup>, a desperate Yeltsin in the fall of 1995 dispatched discredited old Communist Doku Zavgaev back to Grozny to create a quisling government. Zavgaev manipulated elections in Chechnya in early December 1995 to attempt to legitimize his government. There was no evidence that Zavgaev actually gained significant support. These maneuvers reinforced Dudaev's popularity and Chechen determination to resist. The fraudulent elections Zavgaev engineered may indeed have been a factor in sparking the new wave of Chechen terrorism against Russians that was unleashed in early January 1996. Some Russian security and military commanders openly favored presidential candidate Zhirinovskiy's call for napalming the Chechens into oblivion, but they lacked the capability to do so. Violence bred further violence. During May 1996, Chechen fighters launched a new wave of attacks on Russian forces, penetrating into Grozny itself, and killed large numbers of Russian soldiers. The Russian military responded with indiscriminate artillery and bombing assaults and efforts to annihilate whole villages. The lucky--for the Russians--killing of Dudaev at the end of April did not weaken the Chechen will to resist. Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, Dudaev's successor, and other Chechen commanders such as Aslan Maskhadov and Shamil Basaev, vowed to continue the struggle.

The Chechen war had little support among the Russian population. Preparing for presidential elections, Yeltsin promised to bring the war to an end and forged an alliance with

one of its most outspoken critics, General Lebed, whose support enabled Yeltsin to win. Subsequently he appointed Lebed head of security with responsibility for negotiating an end to the fighting. If it had not been for the stunning Chechen offensive in August which succeeded in completely ejecting Russian forces from Grozny, negotiations might have dragged on for another long period of intermittent fighting. The Chechens' ability to take and hold the capital made it clear to Russians that there was no alternative to a cease fire and serious negotiations for a settlement. The agreement Lebed achieved provided for withdrawal of all Russian combat forces and postponement of a final decision on Chechnya's status for five years. Meanwhile the Chechens would be responsible for administering themselves and enjoy de facto independence. Reluctance on the part of many elements in Russia, including a majority of the communist-dominated Duma, caused apprehension, but in the course of the fall of 1996, Lebed's solution was implemented and in early 1997 all Russian forces had been withdrawn. Lebed's reward was to be summarily dismissed by Yeltsin in November--but his popularity with the Russian electorate remains high and he will undoubtedly reemerge as an important figure in Russian politics. Meanwhile, Chechens appear to have little faith in Russia's promises of financial support for rebuilding the country. Lebed's replacement as security chief, \_\_\_\_\_ Berezovsky, has visited Chechnya and advanced schemes for drawing the entire region into an economic program, based on customs-free trade and oil, which could enable the Chechens to rebuild their economy. No Russian group has the will or the resources to attempt to resume the war against the Chechens. In spite of their unclear legal situation, they have achieved self-determination. What they make of it remains to be seen.

There are many unanswered questions about Chechnya, other regions of the North Caucasus, and relationships with the three independent Caucasian countries on the southern side of the mountains. Will the prolonged Chechen struggle to gain conditional freedom inspire other North Caucasian peoples to do the same? There is some evidence that other Caucasian peoples have become more assertive as a result of the Russian military defeat in Chechnya, though there is little reason to believe that most of them feel it is necessary to undertake guerrilla operations to gain greater freedom. One of the most interesting developments is the increasingly closer ties that have developed between Georgia and Azerbaijan and Chechnya. This has led in turn to a reorientation, and incipient revitalization of the Federation of North Caucasian Peoples. This loosely constituted group originally supported Abkhaz separatists in league with Russian nationalists in their successful attempt to wrest Abkhazia from control of Tbilisi. Now the Caucasians see Georgia as a potential ally and Georgia sees the North Caucasian republics to its north as a buffer against Russia. Azerbaijan sees a closer relationship with Chechnya as useful for developing oil transport capabilities.

What lessons have the Russians drawn from the Chechen fiasco? The impasse into which Moscow plunged itself in Chechnya as well as its maneuvers in the independent Caucasian countries underscore Russia's lack of a coherent Caucasus policy. Russia's inability to formulate a Caucasus policy is part of a larger problem: Russia has not reconciled itself to loss of empire. It has no consistent approach to coping with the aspirations of non-Russian peoples to manage their own affairs or, for that matter, to dealing with purely Russian regions where assertive governors have taken matters into their own hands, opposing Moscow's draft calls and sending minimal tax receipts to the center.

Not only Yeltsin, but a majority of the Russian governmental, military, and professional classes have not yet come to the realization that a modern democratic country--which many of them still maintain they want Russia to be--will inevitably find the costs of empire too great to bear. Imperialism became a self-defeating system during the 20th century as a result of the accelerating technological revolution. Over any length of time it cannot be sustained by a democratic society. And, as the experience of the Soviet Union demonstrates, for an

authoritarian society it leads to ruin. Russian communists have no formula for dealing with these problems. Their efforts to restore the Soviet Union--approved by a vote of the Duma in February 1996--can only prolong the agony of imperial collapse.

## **The End of Imperialism**

Three great empires that had been rivals for centuries collapsed at the end of World War I: the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman, and the Russian. Lenin restored the Russian Empire and it lasted for 70 more years. As successor states to empires that had cost their people heavily, the Austrian and Turkish republics abandoned all interest in reasserting their authority in the Balkans (in the case of both) and in the Middle East (in the case of Turkey) and concentrated on their own development, to the steadily increasing benefit of their people. Over the past 70 years the leaders of Austria and Turkey have shown no interest in intervening in the politics of the territories they formerly possessed. Mussolini's New Roman Empire looks like a comic episode today, except for the descendants of hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians who were bombed and gassed as he attempted to create it. But any Italian who advocated restoring Mussolini's short-lived empire would be dismissed as insane.<sup>[18]</sup> Several more empires were dismantled in the aftermath of World War II, notably those of Britain and France. Who in Britain today would seriously advocate the reconquest of India, or even want to try to manipulate Indian politics? Who in France would now want to restore rule over Algeria? Imperial devolution and dissolution has not always been orderly. Belgium, Spain, and Portugal, who let go of their colonial territories more reluctantly, could find no support among their populations for trying to regain them. Nor do former colonies which fall into disarray have the option of having their colonial status reinstated!

Independent Russia is different. In comparison with the evolution of politics in the developed world in the 20th century, Russia is politically backward. The demise of communism left Russia psychologically wounded and a hundred years behind in political skill and sophistication. Millions of Russians, tens of millions to judge by recent electoral returns, may still dream of restoring the Russian/Soviet Empire. Few politicians try to educate the population on the cost of such a course. Even Russia's democratic leaders argue that Moscow has the right to intervene in the "Near Abroad". Leaders of the independent ex-Soviet countries have to defend themselves against implied, and often real, Russian threats and intimidation. Their peoples fear Russian subversion, and several, especially Georgians and Azerbaijanis, have experienced it. While the Moscow government has to date usually maintained legally and diplomatically correct positions, it is often unwilling or incapable of controlling the declarations and actions of its military and security officials. It does not always set a good example for its politicians and businessmen. The experience of the Caucasus during the past half decade provides examples of all these unfortunate shortcomings and repeated instances of deliberate misbehavior.

What is to be done? Independent Caucasian countries need not only to be congratulated for defending their interests, but to be helped defend them. Their leaders should be frank about Russian efforts to intimidate them and compromise their freedom. Russia itself has enjoyed a high degree of international political and economic support since it became independent. The world hopes for the best in Russia. The claims of its elected leaders that they are determined to lead the country to democracy and create a society that respects human rights for all are still taken seriously in Washington and the capitals of Europe. Lapses from good behavior have been tolerated in the expectation that they are exceptional. But how long can Russia be excused from measuring up to acceptable standards? Russia's brutality in Chechnya has been much too mildly condemned. Indulgence of Russia has not improved its performance. The time is overdue to begin judging Russia not by the soothing words of its leaders and some of

its private citizens but by its performance in the Caucasus and elsewhere, including all parts of its own territory.

Russia passed a precarious watershed in the two rounds of presidential elections in June and July 1996. These contests were close, but the Russian people in the end rejected a neo-communist presidential candidate bent upon restoring the Soviet Union. The settlement which General Lebed subsequently succeeded in negotiating in Chechnya gained the grudging approval of Yeltsin. It can pave the way for a more rational Russian approach to its non-Russian citizens and to countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, especially those of the Caucasus. If Russia can find a way to abandon the neo-colonialist mentality that has prevailed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it can be judged at last to be on its way to becoming an honorable member of the democratic world. If not--if Russia goes on trying to maintain, shore up, and restore its empire--its future is dark. Imperialism and democracy are not a viable mixture.<sup>[19]</sup>

[1] See, e.g., M.M. Blied & V.V. Degoev, Kavkazskaya Voina, "Roset", Moscow, 1994.

[2] During the 1860s and 1870s hundreds of thousands of Circassians as well as many Chechens, Karachay, Abkhaz, Dagestanis, and other North Caucasian peoples--over a million in all--fled to the Ottoman Empire. Russia encouraged many, especially the Circassians, to leave to open their lands to Slavic settlers. The descendants of these Caucasian refugees can be found today not only in Turkey, but in Syria, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Probably as many as 20% of the present inhabitants of Turkey have some Caucasian ancestry. Almost no historians have dealt with these population movements. A recently published study breaks new ground in this respect: Justin McCarthy, Death and Exile, the Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821-1922, Darwin Press, Princeton, NJ, 1995. I chronicled the long struggle of the Circassians in "Circassian Resistance to Russia" in Marie Bennigsen Broxup (ed.), The North Caucasus Barrier, Hurst & Co., London, 1992, pp. 62-111.

[3] Russia experienced a true revolution in 1917, but Lenin's coup robbed it of its potential. Lenin's seizure of power was glorified as the "Great October Socialist Revolution" during the Soviet era and accepted by most of the world as such. It was, actually, one of the most effective political deceptions of modern history. See Richard Pipes, The Russian Revolution, Vantage Books, New York, 1991.

[4] Richard Pipes, Russia under the Bolshevik Regime, Knopf, New York, 1993.

[5] I dealt with this problem at greater length in Conflict in the Caucasus, RAND P-7830, Santa Monica, CA, 1993.

[6] Among them: the United States, Germany, Canada, Brazil, Mexico, Australia, and India. Tendencies towards devolution of authority to regions have been apparent in Britain, Italy, and Spain, among others. Ethiopia has recently instituted a comprehensive federal system.

[7] No such book has yet appeared. Compared to the flood of writing on Central Asia, relatively few books on the contemporary Caucasus have been published. Two of the more informative ones are Peter Nasmyth, Georgia, a Rebel in the Caucasus, Cassell, London, 1992, and Suzanne Goldenberg, Pride of Small Nations: the Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder, ZED Books, Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1994,.

[8] Edward Shevardnadze, still Soviet Foreign Minister at that time, was deeply affected by the bloody events in Tbilisi. They contributed to his decision to resign a few months later.

[9] Abkhaz accounted for only 17% of the population of Abkhazia in the last Soviet census in 1989, while Georgians made up almost half.

[10] During 1991 and 1992 Abkhaz Communists and Moscow encouraged the myth that the Abkhaz were predominantly Muslim. This myth was routinely repeated in most Western press reporting. In addition journalists often characterized the Abkhaz as Turkic, which they are not. They are Paleo-Caucasians and closely related to the Circassians. Almost all Muslim Abkhaz emigrated to the Ottoman Empire when Russia finally took control of the region in the 1860s. Since that time the remaining Abkhaz are almost entirely nominally

Christian, though religion has lain lightly upon them. Nevertheless, this part of the Black Sea coast was Christianized in Byzantine times and contains several impressive early churches which were restored by Russia after the 19th century conquest. Russia was then eager to emphasize the ancient Christian character of the region as justification for occupying it. As of 1993 there was not a single mosque in all of Abkhazia, no Muslim institutions, and none came into being at the collapse of the Soviet Union.

[11] They included the now famous Chechen commander Shamil Basaev who headed the assault on Budennovsk in the summer of 1995 and became a prominent figure among leaders of the Chechen struggle against Moscow. He gained combat experience as a Russian-hired mercenary in Abkhazia in 1992-93.

[12] Russian bases in Georgia, however, have continued in operation since before independence, though the number of troops has fallen sharply. Georgians maintain that most Russian military personnel on the bases are primarily interested in smuggling while KGB officers shelter among them and engage in intelligence gathering and political subversion.

[13] Two additional border crossing points further east along the Turkish-Georgian border were opened in 1995. Plans are being developed for opening a free port in Batumi, and for improving highway and rail systems from Batumi and other border crossing points to enable Georgia to serve as a major avenue for transit trade to and from Azerbaijan and Central Asia.

[14] For historical background see my [Islam in the North Caucasus: the Example of Chechnya](#), RAND P-7935, Santa Monica, CA, 1995.

[15] Dudaev never commanded universal loyalty among Chechens and, as time passed, became increasingly involved with criminal elements. From 1990 onward Chechnya produced a lively spectrum of political movements and parties. Nevertheless, no significant Chechen group actually favored reconciliation with Russia.

[16] Grozny's Russian inhabitants lived primarily in apartment houses in the center of the city while more Chechens lived in houses in the suburbs. The center of the city took the brunt of Russian artillery and bomb attacks.

[17] Khasbulatov was speaker of the Russian Duma until he joined the unsuccessful October 1993 coup against Yeltsin. Originally opposed to Chechen independence, Khasbulatov became a champion of it after he was excluded from the political game in Moscow.

[18] In a decisive demonstration of the extent to which Italy has rejected its imperialist past, the Rome government gave financial support to Ethiopia's observance of the hundredth anniversary of Battle of Adwa in March 1996 and Italian diplomats and academics attended the celebrations on the battlefield.

[19] I expanded on this position in "What to do about Russia" in the [Wall Street Journal](#), 1 February 1996.

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Circassian World is an independent non-profit web site dedicated to create an informational resource for Circassians and non-Circassians who wish to learn more about the heritage, culture, and history of the Adyghe-Abkhaz people. For more information regarding Circassian World, please contact [info@circassianworld.com](mailto:info@circassianworld.com)

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