

# HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE WAR IN CHECHNYA

ANTERO LEITZINGER

The Middle East, and lately Eastern Europe, are astonishing examples of history repeating itself. The same applies to Caucasia. As soon as the Soviet Union disintegrated, new Russia launched its foreign policy toward the newly independent Caucasian states based on the old traditions of pre-1917 imperial policy. Instead of developing completely new, modern strategies, Russia copied old ones, disregarding the fact that the world had changed.

Historically, Russia's penetration towards Turkey, Iran and India, was explained as a response to the British challenge in India. Thus, the Russian occupation of Caucasia in the nineteenth century was described as a move in the Great Game of colonial powers. However, regardless of the absence of any serious western rival power on today's scene of action, modern Russia is still playing the same game. It toppled democratically elected leaders in Georgia and Azerbaijan in order to make these countries join the Commonwealth of Independent States. The war in Chechnya, was a logical next step in securing Russian dominance in the area; in fact it is but a repetition of a war which had raged there in the mid-19th century.

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*Antero Leitzinger is a political historian at the University of Helsinki, Finland.*

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Therefore, a proper evaluation of the war in Chechnya must include studies of nineteenth century Chechen history. Although monographs of Chechnya in a western language are rare (the writer of this article having published one in Finnish), a fairly good picture can be obtained from biographies of the famous Shamil, the resistance leader of Northern Daghestan and Chechnya until 1859. One of the latest contributions is Moshe Gammer's 'Muslim Resistance to the Tsar—Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnya and Daghestan' (London, 1994); Lesley Blanch's 'The Sabres of Paradise' (London, 1960), W. E. D. Allen and Paul Muratoff's 'Caucasian Battlefields' (Cambridge, 1953), and John F. Baddeley's 'The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus' (London, 1908) are of great value too. Interestingly, all of these excellent books have been published in England, none in the USA or Germany, although there had been some German studies on Caucasia published in the mid-19th century. (A bibliography was published in Central Asian Survey, volume X, No. 1-2).

### **HOW DID IT ALL BEGIN?**

There are only a few mentions of the Chechens before their first encounters with Russians in the sixteenth century. No foreign power had ever taken control of the remotest Caucasian valleys, not Alexander the Great, nor Tamerlane, nor the armies of ancient Roman, Arab nor Mongol empires. Although Chechen tribes were relatively coherent, their administrative structure was that of a primitive democracy, resembling mediaeval Switzerland. This became one of the main obstacles to Russian attempts to establish their imperial rule over the whole of Caucasia. Unlike in neighbouring Daghestan, there never was a single ruler or dynasty to be corrupted or eliminated in Chechnya in order to achieve the subordination of all of his subjects, as a Russian general was later to lament. A relatively democratic society, called anarchic by the

Russians, could also produce capable political and military leaders.<sup>1</sup> During armed resistance against foreign intruders, all Chechen tribes could accept the authority of a mutual leader like Shamil.

As free and proud men, Chechens carried arms and were accustomed to warfare. They owned horses and were able to move fast. According to General Tornau, a 19th century Russian noble, they “merited the fullest respect, and amidst their forests and mountains, no troops in the world could afford to despise them. Good shots, fiercely brave, intelligent in military affairs, they, like other inhabitants of the Caucasus, were quick to take advantage of local conditions, seize upon every mistake we made, and with incredible swiftness use it for our own destruction.”<sup>2</sup>

A typical Chechen military operation would be a sudden raid and an equally fast retreat during the night. Time after time, Russian officers were confused because of the great distances covered by Chechen raiders.

Another typical feature of Caucasian warfare was the taking of hostages for ransom. This was described vividly by Lady von Freygang in her travel stories written in 1811.<sup>3</sup> Generally, Chechens lived at peace behind the Russian border. It was a hard frontier life, but an actual state of war and the following occupation of Chechen lands was achieved only by General Yermolov, whose obsession was to ‘pacify’ all of Caucasia, after his appointment in 1816. As Yermolov himself declared in 1818: “I shall offer the villains ... rules of life and a few duties, which will make clear to them that they are

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1 Buddeus, Aurelio in an appendix to Friedrich Bodenstedt (1849), *Die Voelker des Kaukasus und ihre Freiheitskaempfe gegen die Russen*, Frankfurt, pp. 518-519; John F. Baddeley (1908), *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, London, p. 116.

2 Baddeley, *ibid.*, p. 266.

3 von Freygang, Fredrika (1818), *Bref om Caucasus och Georgien*, Stockholm.

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subjects to Your Imperial Majesty, and not allies, as they have hitherto hoped.”<sup>4</sup>

It was an expensive promise. A generation of Russians in the mid-19th century must have lost up to 100,000 men in the Caucasian war. The loss of Chechen lives in the defence of their homesteads, was of course a lot heavier and nearly annihilated the nation.

Yermolov's methods consisted of brutally terrorising the civilian population, hostage taking, forced resettling and destroying villages by heavy bombardments. But, as Baddeley noted, “they took a bloody revenge during the next thirty years, and it is strange that Russian writers, so far, fail to see any connection between the vaunted ‘Yermolov system’ and the Murid war.”<sup>5</sup>

By 1832, Yermolov's methods proved insufficient, and were criticised by Russian intellectuals for their cruelty. As General Rosen, another member of the Russian nobility, admitted: “In order to contain the Chechens our troops used to ... capture a number of men and women as prisoners, to bring into submission the frightened savages, to take hostages from them ...”<sup>6</sup>

The impatient Tzar Nicholas I was pacified by Rosen, who advocated the use of more systematic military operations, gradually tightening an economic blockade and the destruction of all livestock in order to cause starvation. An end to all resistance was promised within five years. It was, however, not the last time that final victory was declared within reach by the Russian military, yet still in vain.

The resistance of the Muslim mountaineers in Chechnya and Northern Daghestan had been led with increasing determination and

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4 Gammer, Moshe (1994), *Muslim Resistance to the Tsar—Shamil and the Conquest of Chechnya and Daghestan*, London, p. 30.

5 Baddeley, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

6 Gammer, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

skills by the Murids since 1829, that is by Muhammed Gazimulla and his successors, Hamzad Bey and the legendary Imam Shamil. Both Gazimulla's and Shamil's fame was increased by spectacular escapes from enemy sieges and attempted assassinations. Again, one of the typical features of the Caucasian war was the amazing impotence of Russian intelligence and the military to capture the resistance leaders or to predict their next targets. This inability was underlined by continuous miscalculations, false reports and a failure of correct analysis.<sup>7</sup>

### WESTERN OBSERVERS

A German observer, Friedrich Bodenstedt, noted in his book on the Caucasian people's freedom struggles, first published in 1848: "Who then thinks, that the result of this fight would depend on the ruining of stone fortifications or destruction of individual forests, has not yet comprehended the nature of the Caucasian war. The Russians may cross with their armies all Caucasian lands, all fortifications may they demolish and all forests burn, and with the fire of their armaments even melt the snow of glaciers raising above the clouds; and no end to the disastrous fight will be made thereby."<sup>8</sup>

Other than Bodenstedt and another German writer, Friedrich Wagner in 1854, no western writers were interested enough to publish books on the Caucasian war. The famous French author Alexandre Dumas wrote a travel description, but was mainly interested in the romantic story of a Georgian princess and her company, including a French governess, who were kidnapped by Shamil's men in 1854. This occasion was used by Russia for propaganda purposes as an example of 'eastern barbarism', but the governess Anna Dracy herself described later her experiences as a romantic adventure among the poor but basically chivalrous mountaineers. The hostages were exchanged for Shamil's son, whom the Russians had kept as their hostage for almost 17 years!

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>8</sup> Bodenstedt, *op. cit.*, preface p. ix.

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The Caucasian people had always hoped for foreign intervention, for help from the Ottoman Empire or England, whom they regarded as their natural allies. Their last hopes were, however, dashed during the war of 1853-1856, when allied war efforts were restricted mainly on Crimea. The Ottoman Empire was not strong enough to invade Caucasia. The weakness and unfairness of western powers was a bitter disappointment for Shamil. After all, as Baddeley has noted: "They fought, it is true, for themselves alone—for Faith, freedom, and country. But they stood too, though all unknowingly, for the security of British rule in India."<sup>9</sup>

The strategic importance of Caucasian resistance was not fully appreciated by all western observers until much later. One reason for official French and English indifference was the anxiety of facing similar opposition to their own colonial rule, experienced already in both North and South Africa. As Wagner wrote in 1854: "The fight in the Caucasus is in the eyes of everyone ... at least equally justified as the fight of the French against Arabs and the fight of the Englishmen against Kaffirs ..."<sup>10</sup>

Although western governments remained sceptical, individuals showed sympathy to the Caucasians. A few western travellers, like Viscount Pollington in 1865 and John Abercromby in 1888, reminded their readers of the utter destruction of Chechen lands and not to forget the spirit of resistance still prevailing, years after Shamil's surrender, among the remaining inhabitants of largely depopulated areas.<sup>11</sup>

### **DOES IT EVER END?**

Even when the Russians at last succeeded in vanquishing some of the resistance leaders, they were almost immediately replaced by new ones, with no worse qualities nor in fewer numbers. Obviously,

9 Baddeley, *op. cit.*, preface p. xxxviii.

10 Wagner, Friedrich (1854), *Schamyl als Feldherr, Sultan und Prophet und der Kaukasus*, Leipzig, preface p.v

11 Pollington, Viscount (1867), *Half Round the Old World*, London; John Abercromby (1889), *A Trip through the Eastern Caucasus*, London.

the cause of the war was irrelevant to the leading personalities and could not be solved simply by removing them. Some of the experienced Russian officers were questioning the sensibility of the Caucasian war, like General Tornau in 1832 who lamented: "and perhaps more than a few individuals, from the depths of their souls questioned why such things must occur. Why is there no room on this entire world without distinction or faith?"<sup>12</sup>

However, the rule of Tzar Nicholas I was very oppressive and intolerant of any opposition. Only from exile, could a Russian like Ivan Golovin in 1845, express: "The war in the Caucasus is under prevalent circumstances a truly fruitless war, and the stubbornness, with which the Russian government insists on its continuation, will have nothing but useless bloodshed and increased hate as its consequence, and make every lasting rapprochement impossible. Russia should, first of all declare war on its own officials who are its greatest enemies, and who, after calling forth the quarrel themselves, make it in its continuance pernicious, by robbing and stealing without mercy. They sacrifice the interest of the country to their own interests and sell enemies even weapons and gunpowder. They conceal the number of the killed ones ..."<sup>13</sup>

Russian casualties in the military operations of 1838-1845 were very heavy, although the army never published the number of soldiers who perished in hospitals; only direct battle casualties were released. The unsuccessful accomplishments of several 'last' expeditions were extremely humiliating for imperial prestige. Desertion increased, specially among Poles and other non-Russian nationalities, who were forced to fight a colonial war far away from home. Nearly half of the Russian ammunition ended in Shamil's hands.

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<sup>12</sup> Baddeley, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

<sup>13</sup> Golovin, Ivan, 'La Russie sous Nicolas I', pp. 487-488 or in a German translation in Bodenstedt, *op. cit.*, p. 303-304.

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In the end, Shamil's resistance was exhausted by the length of the war, and not through any decisive military actions. Russia engaged in environmental warfare, cutting forests and resettling the populace, thus creating large unpopulated wastelands. By the summer of 1859, Shamil's movements were restricted to the highest mountains, and finally he surrendered. Tzar Alexander II was enlightened enough to understand that the errors of his predecessor should not be repeated, and treated his former enemy with unexpected courtesy and clemency instead of having him executed.

But, although this was the end of the resistance for Shamil, an already old man, and for some of his close warriors, it created just a brief pause in the Caucasian wars. Chechen insurrections were recorded again in 1862-1863 (resulting in the forced emigration of 5000 Chechen families to the Ottoman Empire), in 1877 (when a son of Shamil served in the Ottoman army), in 1905, 1917-1925 (with the participation of Shamil's grandson Said Bey), in 1929-1936 and again in 1940-1951 (when only the freedom fighters escaped a resettlement in Central Asia).

Today's Chechens are well aware of their historic traditions. Both Sheykh Mansur (of the late eighteenth century) and Imam Shamil have been portrayed on the stamps of the Chechen Republic Ichkeria. Contemporary Russians may remember the Chechens from Lermontov's poems or Tolstoy's novel "*Hadzhi Murat*", a tribute to the courage of one of Shamil's warriors, which was published posthumously because of his sympathetic view towards the Caucasians. Still, it is difficult for most Russians to realise the commitment of the Chechens to their historic cause. As a German TV reporter of "*Deutsche Welle*" broadcasting company noted in January 1995: "Russians have difficulties in understanding people, for whom concepts like liberty and honour are more important than your own life!"