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The Chechen Conflict at 18: Historical and International Perspectives

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It has been eighteen years since the Supreme Soviet of the Chechen-Ingush Republic issued its "declaration of state sovereignty of the republic" in November 1990[1]. Eighteen years. The lifetime of a first-year student at a Chechen university – to the extent that such institutions still function. Eighteen years. The typical age of a conscript in the Russian army, sent to participate in the "counterterror operation". What we may prefer to call the second Chechen war is still not completely over – and many aspects of the conflict have spread to other regions of the North Caucasus. Nevertheless, eighteen years gives us enough distance to try to put the conflict initiated by this declaration of sovereignty into some historical perspective, and especially to consider its broader international context.

In the late autumn of 1990, the Soviet Union had barely a year left to exist – but nobody knew that. We think of that time as the period of conservative reaction to the reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev – historians might want to call it the Thermidor – and it culminated in the failed coup attempt of August 1991. That event, in turn, prompted Russian President Boris Yeltsin to join with his Ukrainian and Belarusian counterparts to withdraw their republics from the Soviet Union, triggering its disintegration by the end of the year.

That is the briefest summary of the domestic context in the period that coincided with the rise of the Chechen national movement, leading up to the Russian invasion of November-December 1994. What was the international context? It was no less dramatic. Gorbachev's reforms, in international policy as well as domestic, represented a sharp break from the past, even though the leaders of some countries – the United States in particular – took a long time to recognize that. Italy was in some respects better prepared to take seriously Gorbachev's reforms. Before becoming general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985, Gorbachev had traveled to Italy on several occasions (including for the funeral of Enrico Berlinguer) and met with prominent leaders of the Italian Communist Party. He and his wife Raisa even spent time in the country as tourists – something only the most privileged of Soviet citizens were allowed to do[2]. The policies of *glasnost'* and *perestroika*, when exported to the states of the "fraternal alliance" in Eastern Europe led to the overthrow of communist regimes there, mainly through peaceful means[3]. And the "new thinking" in foreign policy meant that Soviet mili-

[1] This article is an expanded version of a presentation given in Russian at a conference on *The End of the Cold War and Ethnic Conflict*, Piatigorsk, Russia, July 2008.

[2] A. RUBBI, *Incontri con Gorbaciov: i colloqui di Natta e Occhetto con il leader sovietico*, Roma 1990; A. BROWN, *The Gorbachev Factor*, Oxford 1996, pp. 43 ss.

[3] J. LÉVESQUE, *The Enigma of 1989: The USSR and the Liberation of Eastern Europe*, Berkeley 1997.

tary power would no longer prevent "freedom of (political) choice" in the former Soviet sphere[4]. The fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989 symbolized the end of the division of Europe and the possible end of communism, even in the Soviet Union.

But not all of the changes were peaceful. Within the Soviet Union, popular movements for independence or sovereignty led to violent episodes – in the Nagorno-Karabakh (the Armenian enclave of Azerbaijan) in 1988, in Tbilisi, Georgia in 1989, and in Latvia and Lithuania in 1991. Outside the Soviet Union, in the Balkans, the situation was much worse. In June 1991, the Yugoslav republics of Croatia, Slovenia, and Macedonia declared independence, setting off years of violent conflict in which tens of thousands of innocent civilians died.

What was the reaction of the "international community" to these events and how did it affect the international response to the conflict in Chechnya? It is important to recognize that the international reaction was not a unified one. Even the "West" – the countries of the NATO alliance, for example – disagreed among themselves. In the Yugoslav crisis, for example, Germany and Italy were quick to recognize the independence of Croatia and Slovenia. Other European countries and the United States thought such precipitate action unwise in the absence of commitments by the new states to protect groups that would now become ethnic minorities. The Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) took the initiative to absorb the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) at a time when France, for example, was strongly opposed, and the United States was ambivalent.

If the process of Soviet disintegration culminated in Russia's defection from the Union, it began in the Baltic region. Estonia had declared its sovereignty in November 1988, to be followed by Lithuania in May 1989 and Latvia in July. The Baltic republics, and in particular Estonia, are important to our story for two reasons. First, part of the inspiration for the Chechen independence movement came from their example. Dzhokhar Dudaev, the leader of the movement and Chechnya's first president, served in Estonia as a general in the Soviet air force and commander of the strategic air base at Tartu. Dudaev, who was killed in 1996, is still widely admired in Estonia for his refusal to use his troops to suppress protests in favor of Estonian independence. The protest movements in turn inspired Dudaev to support similar independence efforts in Chechnya[5].

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The second reason the Baltic republics are important to our story is that they represent the limit of U.S. tolerance for the nationalist movements that threatened to break up the Soviet

[4] M. EVANGELISTA, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War*, Ithaca 1999.
[5] M. EVANGELISTA, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?*, Washington D.C. 2002.

Union. This may seem surprising, given popular notions, especially in today's Russia, to the effect that the disintegration of the Soviet Union was a long-standing CIA plot. In fact, the U.S. government was led during the late 1980s and early 1990s by George Herbert Walker Bush (the first President Bush) – himself a former director of Central Intelligence. Yet Bush and his advisers did not anticipate or welcome the Soviet collapse. They were primarily concerned about stability in the region and resisted movements that could lead to a violent disintegration of the federal system that Gorbachev was trying to reform. In an important respect, the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia were exceptional. The United States had never recognized their incorporation into the Soviet Union during World War II and therefore could hardly oppose their bids for independence. Even here, however, the U.S. administration encouraged the Baltic leaders to proceed cautiously so as not to provoke a violent response.

President Bush articulated this view on independence most clearly in a speech he gave in Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, in August 1991, just weeks before the coup attempt in Moscow. The speech was widely understood as a gesture of support for Gorbachev's central government in the face of nationalist challenges from the constituent Soviet republics such as Ukraine. Bush had this to say: «Freedom is not the same as independence. Americans will not support those who seek independence in order to replace a far-off tyranny with a local despotism. They will not aid those who promote a suicidal nationalism based upon ethnic hatred»[6].

Critics in the United States dubbed this the "Chicken Kiev" speech. In English to be called a "chicken" is an accusation of excessive timidity or fear. And, indeed, Bush and his advisers (Condoleezza Rice – an adviser to both Presidents Bush – is credited with writing the speech) were genuinely afraid of instability in the Soviet Union that independence movements might provoke.

That provides some context for understanding the U.S. reaction to the Russian invasion of Chechnya in late 1994. In analyzing that reaction, I limit most of my attention to the first year of the war and I will not say much about the Putin era. My point is that we do not need the events of 11 September 2001 and the "global war on terror" to explain the restrained reaction of the United States to the humanitarian catastrophe in Chechnya that resulted from the Russian invasion[7]. To summarize my argument in its simplest form, one can understand the U.S. reaction to the war in Chechnya by considering the values that the U.S. government favored at the time, and which ones it preferred when those values came into competition with each other. President Bush already told us in August 1991, for example, that the United States valued stability over freedom and independence.

[6] President G.H.W. BUSH's speech to a session of the Supreme Soviet of Ukraine, August 1, 1991, is available at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Chicken_Kiev_speech (accessed July 14, 2008).

[7] For consideration of these factors, see M. EVANGELISTA, *Il caso Cecenia, Putin e la guerra al terrorismo*, in «Vita e Pensiero», 4, 2004.

Even though a new administration had come into office under President William ("Bill") Clinton in January 1993, U.S. policy's emphasis on *stability* remained consistent. The break-up of the Soviet Union only reinforced the system of values that Clinton inherited from Bush. In the wake of the Soviet collapse, each of its fifteen constituent republics had become an independent state. Several of them, such as Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova, faced their own secessionist crises. So did the Russian Federation – the formal name of the largest and most populous of the Soviet successor states. Stretching across eleven time-zones, from Kaliningrad (the former Koenigsberg) in the West to Vladivostok in the East, Russia contained some hundred different ethic groups or "nationalities", as they were known in Soviet parlance, speaking as many languages. Administratively Russia was divided into 89 *sub"ekty* ("subjects"). These ranged in size from the two cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg to the enormous territory of the resource-rich Republic of Sakha (Iakutia) – at 3,103,200 square kilometers, about the size of the entire continent of Europe west of Russia. Twenty-one of these political units, including Chechnya, are designated "national republics" because they are considered the homeland of a major nationality. During the late 1980s several of these republics, such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, as well as Chechnya, sought greater independence from Moscow. Both Chechnya and Tatarstan refused to sign the Federative Treaty that formed the basis for relations between the central government of post-Soviet Russia and the regions, and Bashkortostan only did so after appending a separate bilateral agreement.

In all of the cases except Chechnya, the poorest of Russia's 89 regions, the Moscow authorities pursued a compromise solution that kept the republics from seceding. In the Chechen case, Boris Yeltsin chose war, supposedly for fear that Chechen independence would provoke a rash of other secessions. As he put it in one of several volumes of ghost-written memoirs, «We cannot stand idly by while a piece of Russia breaks off, because that would be the beginning of the collapse of the country»[8]. In 1999, Vladimir Putin renewed the war in response to an incursion of rebels across the Chechen border into Dagestan, led by opponents of the elected president of Chechnya, Aslan Maskhadov. In one of his own quasi-autobiographies, Putin justified the new invasion and bombardment of Chechnya with the same argument that Yeltsin had used: «What's the situation in the Northern Caucasus and in Chechnya today? It's a continuation of the collapse of the U.S.S.R.». He spoke of the "Yugoslavization" of Russia[9].

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[8] B. YELTSIN, *Midnight Diaries*, New York 2000, pp. 58-59.
[9] V. PUTIN, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President*, New York 2000, p. 139.

In fact, there was little danger that Russia would go the way of the Soviet Union and break up into its constituent units. Yeltsin's administration was willing to negotiate with the leaders of republics that were demanding greater autonomy and made numerous concessions. Many of those leaders were the former Communist officials who had headed their republics in the Soviet period. Their nationalism was of a moderate, if somewhat opportunistic, variety, and they managed to keep their more extreme nationalists at bay. The "treaties" they signed with Moscow helped undermine the extremists by creating a system of "asymmetric federalism" that gave the regions numerous advantages, including some control over their natural resources. Again Chechnya was the exception. In that case, the Kremlin initially backed the former Soviet air force general Dudaev, an idiosyncratic, radical nationalist, at the expense of the ex-Communist leader, whom Moscow abandoned. Dudaev's mercurial personality and provocative rhetoric would have made it more difficult for Yeltsin to strike a deal with him than with the leaders of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, for example. But Yeltsin did not even try and refused even to meet with Dudaev. He thought he could easily overthrow the upstart Chechen's regime in short order. Two years and tens of thousands of deaths later, he withdrew the Russian army in 1996, leaving the status of Chechnya unresolved. Putin's renewal of the war in autumn 1999 produced destruction of a near-genocidal character, prompted retaliatory acts of brutal terrorism, and helped spread the conflict well beyond Chechnya's borders.

The Clinton administration appears to have shared the fears of Yeltsin and Putin that the Chechen crisis would create a "domino effect" and lead to the violent break-up of the Russian Federation. Indeed several secessionist conflicts in other post-Soviet states did lead to violence – in the Transdniestrian region of Moldova, in the Abkhazian and South Ossetian regions of Georgia, and in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, Tajikistan suffered a devastating civil war.

In dealing with Russia, Bill Clinton sought, much like his predecessor's approach to the Soviet Union, to support the federal center against the separatist regions. And like Bush, that support was signified by endorsement of the individual leader – in this case, Russian President Yeltsin, rather than Soviet President Gorbachev, now a pensioner. Moreover, for Clinton and his advisers, support for Yeltsin meant not only acceptance of his ends – preservation of Russian territorial integrity – but also his violent means. In this respect stability was valued more highly than non-violence or peace. U.S. officials shared the myopic view of their Russian counterparts that war would lead to stability rather than to further instability. Such an approach reminds us of George Orwell's remarks in his 1946 essay, *Politics and the English Language*:

«Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*»[10]. Orwell's point comes across equally well in Russian.

Not all of the international response to Russia's attempt at violent suppression of the Chechen independence movement resembled the U.S. position. Thanks to a joint memoir written by nine of Yeltsin's advisers, we have some specific details about the early response to the invasion of Chechnya. On 27 December 1994, for example, a group of Finnish parliamentarians expressed their concern to the governments and presidents of Russia and the United States, to the United Nations, and to the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe[11]. The next day, an assistant to President Yeltsin met with officials from the International Committee of the Red Cross who conveyed their view to the Russian president that the situation in Chechnya now attained «the legal status of an armed conflict of non-international character». That status, according to the Red Cross «above all signifies that the government authorities involved in the conflict must adhere to specific humanitarian obligations»[12]. From this point, as Yeltsin's advisers have documented, Russia's president was made aware of his international legal obligations with language taken directly from the 1977 protocols to the Geneva Conventions. Expressions of international concern intensified in the next few days, as German foreign minister Klaus Kinkel made an "emotional call" to his Russian counterpart Andrei Kozyrev on behalf of Prime Minister Helmut Kohl and the European Union[13].

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Reports from nongovernmental organizations, such as Helsinki Watch (now known as Human Rights Watch), as well as intergovernmental bodies, such as the Council of Europe, provided great detail on the damage to civilians inflicted by Russian attacks. Representatives of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe who conducted a fact-finding mission to Chechnya «were appalled by the magnitude of destruction and compared the condition of Grozny with that of Stalingrad during World War II»[14]. Others compared the situation in Chechnya to that of Bosnia when its capital city was under siege by Serbian militia forces and the Serbian army – actions that eventually provoked NATO intervention. In the winter of 1995

[10] G. ORWELL, *Politics and the English Language*, London 1946, available at http://orwell.ru/library/essays/politics /english/e_polit (accessed July 14, 2008).
[11] Yu.M. BATURIN - A.L. IL'IN - F.V. KADATSKII - V.V. KOSTIKOV - M.A. KRASNOV - A.Ya. LIVSHITS - K.F. NIKIFOROV - L.G. PIKHOIA - G.A. SATAROV, *Epokha El'tsina: Ocherki politicheskoi istorii*, Moscow 2001, pp. 622-623.
[12] Ibidem, p. 625.
[13] Ibidem, p. 631.
[14] S.E. CORNELL, *International Reactions to Massive Human Rights Violations: The Case of Chechnya*, in «Europe-Asia Studies», 51, 1, 1999, pp. 85-100.

«at the height of the shelling of Sarajevo there were thirty-five hundred detonations a day, while in Grozny the winter bombing reached a rate of four thousand detonations an *hour*»[15].

The most important and reliable information about the consequences of the Russian invasion came from the brave Russian human rights activists who were on the scene and upon whose testimony the international organizations depended[16].

In contrast to the Germans, the Finns, and the various international organizations, the U.S. government responded quite late to the Russian invasion. President Clinton did not contact Yeltsin to discuss the situation until 13 February 1995, two months into the conflict. His remarks, according to the summary by his press secretary, were not particularly hard-hitting: «President Clinton reiterated the importance of an end to the bloodshed and the start of a process leading to a peaceful settlement of the dispute». Making even that statement more palatable, «he stated once again that Chechnya is part of Russia, but noted the legitimate international concern over the humanitarian toll the fighting has taken»[17].

Most of the U.S. response to the first war in Chechnya was premised on the assumption that everything must be done to support President Yeltsin as the only hope for Russian democracy. Electoral gains by communists and supporters of the fascist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskii were particularly worrying to U.S. officials who sought to avoid weakening Yeltsin any further with their criticism. U.S. policymakers, from President Clinton on down, referred to the war in Chechnya as an "internal matter" and compared it to the U.S. civil war of the mid-19th century, implying that all-out war, with massive civilian casualties, was fully justified to preserve the country. Warren Christopher, the U.S. secretary of state at the time, explained that Yeltsin was in «full control» of his military forces (something that contemporary observers doubted), that «Russia is operating in a democratic context», and therefore the United States should «not rush to judgment»[18].

The U.S. response even to atrocities such as the well-documented massacre at the village of Samashki in April 1995 was weak. The Clinton administration did acknowledge that Russia had «not fulfilled all of its commitments under the OSCE and the Helsinki Final Act», but it made no mention of war crimes[19]. The timing of the Samashki massacre was especially inconvenient for Western leaders. Boris Yeltsin had invited them to Moscow to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany on 9 May 1995. It would have been difficult to decline the invitation to honor the millions of Russians killed in the fight against fascism without creating a serious rift in relations with Moscow and risking a

[15] D. REMNICK, *Resurrection: The Struggle for a New Russia*, New York 1997, pp. 263-264, original emphasis.

[16] A. CHERKASOV - O. ORLOV, *Rossiia-Chechnia: Tsep' oshibok i prestuplenii*, Moscow 1998; GLASNOST' FOUNDATION, *Voina v Chechne: Mezhdunarodnyi Tribunal*, Moscow 1997.

[17] Quoted in C. GALL - T. DE WAAL, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus*, New York 1998, p. 186.

[18] E. SCIOLINO, *Administration Sees No Choice but to Support Yeltsin*, in «New York Times», January 7, 1995.

[19] Quoted in S.E. CORNELL, *International Reactions to Massive Human Rights Violations: The Case of Chechnya*, cit.

popular anti-Western backlash. Paradoxically, however, the approach of the anniversary might itself have contributed to the Russian decision to terrorize Samashki in order to speed the end of the war before the Western visitors arrived[20]. This is a question that historians might try to explore. In any event, Western leaders attended the victory celebration, including a major parade of military equipment and soldiers on Red Square, as the war continued to rage in Chechnya. President Clinton made some mildly critical remarks about the Russian conduct of the war, but they had no effect.

In summing up the Western countries' response to the first Chechen war, a group of Yeltsin's liberal advisers wrote that is seemed to follow a formula: «You there, straighten things out quickly please, while we close our eyes a little»[21]. This seems to me an accurate assessment.

As I suggested, one of the reasons for the weak character of the U.S. response is that the U.S. government when facing conflicting values had to choose certain ones over others. It chose former Communist Party official Yeltsin's newfound anti-communism (which it named "democracy") over peace. And it chose economic liberalization over democracy. Americans, and not only they, like to think that all good things go together – for example, free markets, strong economies, peace, democracy. But consider how George H.W. Bush put it in his lesson to his Ukrainian audience in 1991: «In modern societies, freedom and democracy rely on economic liberty»[22]. That means, economic liberty first, freedom and democracy next. That is a very typical American formulation.

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How is this relevant to the Chechen war? The United States gave the impression that its top priority in its relations with post-Soviet Russia was the opening of the Russian economy to foreign investment. Preventing the return of communists or the rise of nationalists to power in Moscow was a means to that end. The Clinton administration was unwilling to link economic aid to Russian compliance with its international treaty obligations and observance of humanitarian law in Chechnya. On the contrary, it supported continued assistance from international financial institutions. Six months into the war, for example, Moscow received a $6.8 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund. As Rachel Denber, the Moscow representative of Helsinki Watch, pointed out, «despite the Chechen conflict, 1995 must be considered a jackpot year for the Russians as far as funds from the international community are concerned». The 1995 loan was followed by a further $10.2 billion

[20] K. FIREMAN, *Russian Tactics Wrack Chechnya*, in «Newsday», April 17, 1995.
[21] Yu.M. BATURIN *et al.*, *Epokha El'tsina: Ocherki politicheskoi istorii*, cit., p. 786.
[22] BUSH's speech, cit.

from the IMF in early 1996. The two loans combined exceed most estimates of the total cost of the first war, leading some observers to argue that the West actually «paid for the Russian invasion»[23].

The West's priority emphasis on economic freedom over human rights or democracy seems to me a constant in its relations with Russia (and most other countries). During the second Chechen war, for example, there was far more concern expressed by Western governments about the fate of Mikhail Khodorkovskii, one of the richest people in Russia, than about the thousands of civilian victims of the Chechen conflict. For the U.S. administration, the arrest of Khodorkovskii, former head of the YUKOS oil conglomerate and a potential challenger to President Putin's political and economic objectives, posed the specter of insecure property rights in Russia. What is the message that vocal U.S. protests over Khodorkovskii conveyed, in the face of prolonged silence over Russia's abuses in Chechnya? Whether intentional or not, the message seemed to be: the rule of law is sacrosanct when it comes to the economy and individual rights to property, but optional when it comes to human rights.

I have suggested that one important element of the international context of the first Chechen war, at least as far as U.S. behavior was concerned, was the priority of stability over peace and the priority of economic openness over human rights and democracy. There is another priority that political leaders typically put above all others: their own political survival. This value is clearly evident in passages from the memoir of President Clinton's main adviser on Russia, Strobe Talbott. Talbott was Clinton's housemate when they were both Rhodes Scholars at Oxford University in the late 1960s. As a student in Moscow, Talbott had smuggled out tapes and transcripts of what became, under his editorship, the published memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev. He went on to a distinguished career as a journalist at *Time* magazine and a chronicler of U.S.-Soviet relations, especially in the realm of arms control, before joining the Clinton administration as Deputy Secretary of State for the post-Soviet region. Talbott accompanied Clinton in some twenty meetings with Boris Yeltsin (and a further half dozen with Vladimir Putin) and offered his advice for how to deal with Moscow. Yet Clinton always made his own judgments, often contrary to Talbott's advice. With some irony, Talbott titles his memoir *The Russia Hand* – an apt description of himself as a life-long Russia expert, but one he intends to apply to Clinton instead.

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[23] Quotations are from S.E. CORNELL, *International Reactions to Massive Human Rights Violations: The Case of Chechnya*, cit.

In April 1996, almost a year and a half into the Chechen war, Talbott attended a press conference during a summit meeting between Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin in Moscow. To Talbott's chagrin, Clinton repeated his analogy of Yeltsin to U.S. President Abraham Lincoln: «I would remind you that we once had a civil war in our country … [fought] over the proposition that Abraham Lincoln gave his life for: that no state had a right to withdraw from our Union». Talbott told him afterwards that Clinton's remark would make him subject to criticism at home for appearing to justify Russia's violence in Chechnya, but the President had already realized it. In his characteristically earthy language, Clinton admitted, «I guess I really painted a bull's-eye on my butt with that Lincoln line»[24]. But he was unrepentant: «If Yeltsin wins, then nobody will remember that the Republicans kept telling me to back off from supporting him. But if he loses, you just watch: they'll blame me». Clinton might be an extreme example, but for most politicians, much of politics, including foreign policy, is all about "me". That is the first priority, the highest value. Looking on the bright side, however, this fact suggests that human rights groups have the right idea in one of their main strategies: seeking to "shame" politicians into doing the right thing by threatening to undermine their political popularity[25].

This article has sought to put the origins of Chechnya's conflict with the Russian Federation into historical and international perspective, some eighteen years after the region's declaration of sovereignty. The conflict is still far from over, even though most of the major military action has ended[26]. Under Vladmir Putin's reign, Moscow established a pro-Russian Chechen warlord, the thirty-year old Ramzan Kadyrov, as president of the republic. He has imposed his own authority by institutionalizing his militia forces into units of the Interior Ministry and has used them to carry out vendettas against his enemies and protect himself and his corrupt allies. Superficially, Putin's policy of "Chechenization" has been a success, in that the large-scale armed conflict has ended. But the vast loss of life, and the degradation, demoralization, and impoverishment of the majority of the Chechen population, traumatized by more than twelve years of nearly continuous warfare, have undoubted sown the seeds of future conflict. It would not be an understatement to suggest that Russia's shortsighted and unnecessary attempt to prevent a chain-reaction of secessions has resulted in the worst humanitarian disaster Europe has seen since World War II.

Given the historical emphasis of this article, it seems appropriate to conclude with some reflections of what might have been. Historians and political scientists often use the technique of counterfactual reasoning or thought experiments to pose "what if" questions. The origins of the Chechen

[24] S. TALBOTT, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy*, New York 2002, pp. 150-151.

[25] The classic works on this topic include M. KECK - K. SIKKINK, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca 1998; T. RISSE - S. ROPP - K. SIKKINK (eds.), *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*, Cambridge 1999.

[26] For an analysis of the military dimensions, see M. KRAMER, *The Perils of Counterinsurgency: Russia's War in Chechnya*, in «International Security», 29, 3, 2004/05.

conflict lend themselves well to this kind of questioning, and the answers could have implications for other such situations.

In lieu of conclusion, let me pose what I see as a few of the key counterfactual questions:

Could greater Western criticism of the Russian invasion of Chechnya in late 1994 have made Yeltsin reconsider his decision? Egor Gaidar, a former minister in Yeltsin's cabinet, has claimed, for example, to be «convinced that in December, right up to 31 December, the beginning of the assault on Grozny … it was possible, by coordinated force of pressure, to change the course of events to one of negotiations on the basis of a demonstrated threat. It was the moment when we had to, and we could have used all channels and levers of influence to convince Yeltsin that he had made a mistake … and at that moment the West was silent»[27]. There is indeed evidence that Gaidar himself sought to put the brakes on Yeltsin's decision, and other liberal advisers expressed their opposition[28]. Yet Yeltsin at that point was apparently only listening to his more "hawkish" advisers. A future task of historians – given adequate availability of documents and participants to interview – is to answer the question whether a "louder" West could have made a difference.

A second set of questions concerns whether the efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the OSCE, or the Council of Europe had any effect on the course of the war. Did the political authorities in the Kremlin convey to the military leaders their obligations under international law, the Geneva Conventions, the European Convention on Human Rights, or the other instruments that Russia was obliged by its own constitution to follow? That Russian forces violated the laws of war and engaged in atrocities with impunity seems quite clear. Did they do so with official acquiescence or ignorance?

The final questions are more speculative than even these. We saw how much a priority the Clinton administration put on Yeltsin's victory in the 1996 elections. How important for Russia's future was that victory? Would the situation in Chechnya and the broader North Caucasus be worse today if Yeltsin had lost the election? Would the situation in Russia be worse?

[27] C. GALL - T. DE WAAL, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus,* cit., p. 187.
[28] Yu.M. BATURIN *et al.*, p. 625.