

Chechnya: a secret war full of genocide and press restriction

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Reporter

"Everywhere is war until the basic human rights are equally guaranteed to all without regard to race," said Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I, in his Feb. 28, 1968, speech to the United Nations.

Little has changed since 1968. War is everywhere today.

March 10, Israeli aircraft attacked the headquarters of Yassir Arafat in retaliation for recent suicide bombings along the West Bank amidst worsening violence in the Middle East.

Six months after the terrorist assaults on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Bush's Operation Anaconda pounds eastern Afghanistan, hoping to flush remaining Al Qaeda cells and Taliban forces from cave hideouts.

In the Hague, Netherlands, former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic stands trial for participating in the butchery of the Balkans and for disregard for human rights during the Bosnian war.

And between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea, along the mountainous region of the North Caucasus, the Russian military maintains its campaign against fundamentalist guerillas operating in Chechen cities such as Grozny, Argun and Khankala.

Following the Sept. 11 attacks, Russia pledged its allegiance to counter-terrorism by heightening military operations in the federation's second war against Chechen rebels.

However, the rebels are rarely the only ones attacked or harassed by the campaign, as Russian forces raid houses and shell city blocks with tanks and warplanes, causing the daily death toll to rise.

But the world rarely sees or hears the cries of gunned-down Chechen students, as Moscow strictly censors the ability of journalists to document the war and alienates civilian suffering to the periphery of international media coverage.

While the collateral loss of civilian lives accompanies every war, Russian forces are undergoing scrutiny for committing war crimes by

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detaining, torturing, and murdering civilians “in a climate of lawlessness,” according to the Human Rights Watch Web site.

“For a year now, Russian authorities have been claiming the situation in Chechnya is returning to normal,” said Elizabeth Anderson, executive director of Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asian division. “But in fact, civilians face the daily threat of being arbitrarily detained, tortured, or just ‘disappearing’ in custody. That’s a far cry from normal.”

SU-24 and SU-25 fighter jets and tanks have cratered the once-cosmopolitan capital city, Grozny, with rocket-fire against alleged rebel hideouts, forcing thousands to abandon what little possessions smoldered in the rubble of their crumbled homes and apartments.

The second war in Chechnya, under the guise of combating terrorism, has already displaced 200,000, causing a refugee crisis as the Chechen exodus floods neighboring Ingushetia.

Apparently, no one is safe from the Russian army.

On Oct. 30, 1999, a SU-24 warplane destroyed a Red Cross convoy, using the crimson emblem as a crosshairs and killing 25 people and injuring 70, according to the Washington Post.

The Russian Defense Ministry dismissed their blunder near Shami-Yurt by claiming the convoy was transporting Chechen fighters and arms for the guerillas.

The bombed-out cities and refugee camps are equally desperate situations where aid from the West trickles slowly and atrocities, such as murders, rapes and kidnappings occur with routine precision.

The Chechens remaining in broken cities such as Gudermes and Grozny must constantly contend with the ravages of war, as bodies and sewage stagnate in streets that are devoid of electricity, running water and any apparent conclusion to the ongoing horror.

A body count from the current

campaign remains incomplete, and Russia's tight control over journalists wishing to witness the war prevents the international community from knowing if the number of casualties will exceed the 700,000 lives lost during Yelstin's 1994-1996 war.

Chechnya is no stranger to conflict or war with Russia.

Imperialist and Soviet Russia both attempted to conquer Chechnya.

“In 1944, the Soviet dictator Josef Stalin deported the people of Chechnya to Central Asia (Siberia). Some 200,000 died on the way,” a “Christian Science Monitor” journalist reports in Conflict on Chechnya. They were allowed to return in 1957.

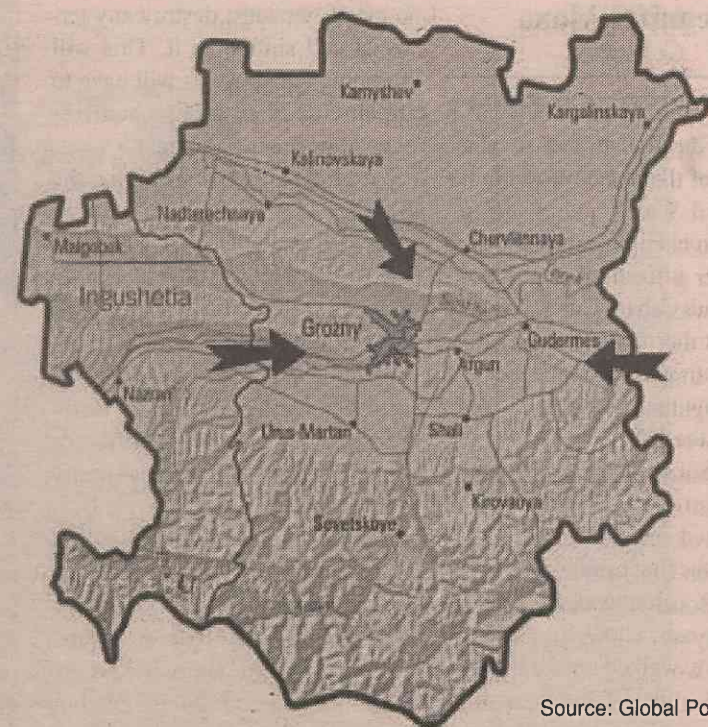
Before the rise and fall of the Iron Curtain, the czars waged war on Chechnya in pursuit of imperialist territories. “Both sides are playing out a violent drama more than 200 years old. In the 18th century, the czars moving south against the Ottoman Turks met their first real and humiliating resistance at the hands of Muslim Chechens and Dagestanis,” according to the “Christian Science Monitor.”

Chechnyans are passionate and ferocious adversaries and their persistence kept the mountain republic outside Russian control, and free from pacification.

But peace and independence has never lasted in Chechnya.

In the three years since the war began, the fighting is far from over and the situation is doubted to improve soon.

Russian operations now consist of routine neighborhood raids called zachistki and identification checkpoints, in addition to air strikes and ground offenses which have cost a rumored 3,000 Russian soldiers' lives, according to the Moscow branch of the Soldier's Mothers group on Jan. 24, 2000. This estimate is “about four times the official figure. The Russian government said the estimate was based on lies.”



Source: Global Policy

The arrows show where most fighting in Chechnya occurs.

That same month, The Guardian reported, “in the wake of a series of devastating Chechen rebel counter-attacks, the Russian military promised to adopt “tougher tactics” toward the local population. The military said Chechen males aged between 10 and 60 would now be automatically treated as rebels and detained for thorough checks.”

The shoot-on-sight mentality of troops patrolling the dawn to dusk curfews that combat guerillas with ambush teams confines citizens to their homes and punctuates the night with screams and explosions.

As Human Rights Watch's Peter Bouckaert said in his plea to the Senate, “one of the main reasons why many young men have not left areas of combat is that they are afraid to go through checkpoints. This will only reinforce fear” and reaffirm the illegitimacy of Russia's bloody operations in Chechnya.

Why would anyone leave knowing what harassment awaited them at a checkpoint? Assault, detention and executions are all likely possibilities.

“Many detainees are ‘doomed’ if the army or the security forces hold them for more than 10 days. After arrest they are taken to the massive Russian military headquarters at Khankala, just outside the city, or to smaller bases. There they are often kept in pits—literally holes

dug in the ground—or zindan (underground cells), said another Chechen, a senior official of the current Russian-appointed government,” according to “Time” magazine's January 2000 photo essay about the city of Grozny.

But Moscow is slow to acknowledge accounts of inhumanity and eager to discredit allegations of war crimes committed by the Russian military, claiming the means are necessary anti-terrorist operations aimed at restoring normalcy to Chechnya.

Military officials strictly regulate international journalists wishing to report on the climate of war, leading those with access on a propaganda pageant that limits interaction with civilians and places them on bases far from the fighting, according to the May 9, 2000, edition of the Washington Post.

“So most Russian journalists here covering the current campaign in Chechnya seem content to be little more than megaphones for the official line,” said Fred Weir of the “Christian Science Monitor.”

Either the international community will engage and prevent the human rights offenses happening under Moscow's campaign, or Chechnya will join the other conflicts the world yowed to never forget.