

Chechnya talks revisit forgotten conflict

□ **With world-wide attention on Afghanistan, war is put on back burner.**

JONI SMITH
Managing Editor

A series of lectures sponsored by the History and Politics club began last night with a talk by a Meredith professor focusing on the turbulence in Chechnya.

Dr. Greg Vitarbo, a newcomer to the Meredith faculty, gave a lecture titled "Chechnya and Russia: At the Crossroads," a topic exploring the conflicts in the semi-autonomous republic of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Vitarbo explained that this title seemed appropriate because at the present time, the conflict is at a crossroads and while there is speculation about what will happen.

Vitarbo opened by giving a brief overview of the Chechen War. In 1991, with the fall of the Soviet Union and communism, many republics asserted independence. Chechnya was one republic that claimed that it was no longer subject to Russian rule.

The Chechens were allowed a facade of independence until 1994 when Boris Yeltsin

assumed power in Russia.

"He was not a very popular leader, so he needed a distraction," Vitarbo said. "Attacking the Chechens seemed, at the time, to be a distraction that would end favorably and give him more support."

When the Chechens mounted a surprisingly strong resistance to the Russian military, the already demoralized and ill-prepared Russian soldiers were dealt another blow.

In 1995 the Russians relented in their attacks with the condition that the Chechens had five years to decide their fate.

In 1999 Vladimir Putin rose to power in Russia and began the second stage of the Chechen War due to the

Chechen's unwillingness to submit to Russian authority.

This stage lasted until earlier this year when Putin realized his army was once again get-

ting nowhere and called for peace negotiations instead. "turned a blind eye to the situation in Chechnya since Sept. 11 because where once the Chechen War was looked upon as a human rights case. Many

countries are now excusing Russia's actions due to the link between the Chechen rebels and Osama Bin Laden."

Many believe Bin Laden encouraged, supported, trained and possibly even funded the Chechens.

Vitarbo, along with the Steering

Committee of the History and Politics Club, was concerned with the increasingly forgotten Chechen conflict. This concern led to the series now in progress to better educate and entertain questions concerning Chechnya.

Outside of Russia, the Chechen conflict is a relatively forgotten skirmish. This is partly due to the ban on foreign journalists into Chechnya.

Putin has also closed NTV, one of the only independent television stations in Russia that adequately gives the entire picture of the Chechen War including the human rights infringements of the Russians and the poor condition of the Russian military.

These are both aspects of the conflict Russian officials strive to keep out of public attention.

The series on Chechnya will continue in the spring with another lecture and discussion by Erin McClain, a Meredith Alum who has done extensive work in the Chechen War including travel, research and serving as a guest lecturer at various institutions around the country.

"This topic involved so many countries and so many aspects of world affairs that it cannot be ignored," Vitarbo said.



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