

Russian Preferred Self-Image and the Two Chechen Wars

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From Yeltsin's announcement in December 1994 that Russian troops would wage a "small victorious war" in Chechnya to "restore *constitutional order*" to Putin's promise in October of 1999 to "corner the bandits in the . . . house and rub them out,"¹ and throughout two wars, the self-image of the Russian Federation has been profoundly linked to its ability to deal with the situation in Chechnya. Michael Urban has argued that the re-creation of post-Soviet national communities has taken place largely through two moments: one, a positive moment, rehabilitates national "markers" of culture (for example, "bourgeois" Russian theater) that were suppressed during the communist era; the other, a negative moment, is effected by cleansing the nation of symbols, such as statues of Stalin, that were imposed by communist oppressors. In Russia, the re-creation of a post-Soviet national community has been complicated by the impossibility of blaming someone else for the imposition of communist rule and its continuing harmful consequences for economic and political development. The torturous nature of identity-formation in Russia has contributed to a situation in which everyday political conflict, bargaining, and compromise "easily becomes entangled with the intractable issue of identity."²

In this article, I will argue that divergent Russian responses to two remarkably similar wars were based on Russians' preferred images of the Russian state and were strongly influenced by anxieties about forming a positive national identity. The first Chechen war was unpopular with Russians because the way it was conducted contradicted Russians' preferred image of Russia as a benevolent and militarily proficient state, whereas the second war is widely supported because it projects an image of Russia as a strong country capable of protecting its citizens and territory.

Russians' preferred self-image has been influenced by Soviet experiences of a powerful central government providing for citizens' basic needs, as well as by

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more recent experiences of social upheaval. Russians would like their new state to have territorial integrity, economic and social stability, and domestic security.

Russian citizens, used to decades of state-provided services, would also like to feel that their society is caring and benevolent, rather than aggressive and imperialistic.³ The Soviet state guaranteed its citizens free or affordable housing, day care, medicine, education, and cradle-to-grave employment; propaganda reassured all “comrades” that they belonged to the most powerful, benevolent union in the history of the world. Thus Russian citizens, raised on decades of state-guaranteed prices and services, have had to contend with great economic and social instability and the struggle to define a “national idea” in an unstable social and economic environment. That search for a national idea both in Russia and in other post-Soviet societies exemplifies the void left by the departure of communist ideology as a guiding force in political life.

The loss of an ideological reference point complicated center-periphery relations that had heretofore been “disguised and justified by reference to a supranational ideology and a compelling version of history that sanctioned the rule of the Communist Party.”⁴ After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, nationalistic rhetoric by both central and regional political leaders flowered. Dzhokar Dudayev’s glorification of an independent Chechnya and a mythologized native “warrior tradition” drew on this rhetoric and on decades of Soviet nationalities policy, which encouraged nationalist ideas by promoting ethnicity in the state apparatus—every republic had its own institutes for the study of national language and culture—but denied regions the right to anything more than symbolic expressions of that nationalism.⁵

Reasons for the 1994 Invasion

Russia entered the first Chechen war in December 1994, a year characterized by relative calm, modest economic gains, and a cessation of imminent threats to territory. Yeltsin’s decision to invade a rebellious province at the end of a year of relative calm deserves explanation. Several factors influenced the decision:

- The powers of a Russian president under the 1993 constitution were unconstrained by Western democratic standards. He could issue his own decrees, which had the force of law throughout the Federation;⁶ he headed the armed forces;⁷ he could declare a state of war as well as a state of emergency; and the balance between various branches of the government heavily favored him.⁸ Yeltsin made several crucial decisions through decree instead of consulting the Duma, and when he did rely on the advice of others, it was often that of the “war party.”⁹ Western critics saw the war party’s rise to power in the Kremlin as confirming the dangers of the “super-presidentialism” encoded in Yeltsin’s 1993 constitution. The Russian press hardly dealt with the problems of “super-presidentialism,” although there were frequent articles about Yeltsin-the-man and the need to find a balance between having a strong president and a dictator.¹⁰ The prominence of anxieties about a “return to the past” and the difficulties of forming a positive national identity when the nation’s leader—Yeltsin—was so inconstant,

underlay many discussions about Yeltsin's capacities for conducting a full-scale military operation in Chechnya.

- Russians were becoming increasingly convinced that the anarchy and lawlessness in Chechnya required direct government intervention. The series of four bus hijackings by Chechen criminals in the Russian North Caucasus and the escalation of kidnappings in 1994 contributed to a sentiment that the government's hands-off policy was endangering citizens. On 29 July, the Russian government issued a statement that described the situation in Chechnya as "practically out of control" and warned that it would take measures to protect Russian citizens against violence.¹¹ In this case, the construction of national identity was strengthened by the *possibility* of the Russian government bringing order (something sorely lacking in Russian politics during this period) to a seditious republic and protecting citizens from "bandits" (despite a growing feeling in Russia that the Russian government was *sponsoring* oligarchic crime in Russia and was quite indifferent to the fate of ordinary Russians).

- Dudayev's charismatic leadership aggravated the situation. During the constitutional crisis of 1993, Yeltsin and other central actors offered regional leaders concessions in return for support or the promise of future loyalty. By using subsidies and tax breaks to accommodate the regions most inclined to protests, the central government managed to defuse a crisis, albeit at the expense of central authority.¹² The spate of Chechen violence in 1994 and the "war party's" increasing insistence that Yeltsin order a full-scale operation in Chechnya notwithstanding, Yeltsin was initially reluctant to use force in Chechnya. As late as 11 August, the president appeared on national TV saying, "Were we to apply pressure by force to Chechnya . . . there would be such a commotion, there would be so much blood that nobody would ever forgive us. It is absolutely not possible."¹³

Dudayev's charismatic leadership and provocative rhetoric overcame Yeltsin's initial disinclination to use "pressure by force." Dudayev claimed that Chechnya would reclaim glorious traditions once free of Russia's yoke, promised economic miracles through independence, and exaggerated the amount of oil in Chechnya.

In one of his first presidential addresses on Chechen TV, in 1992, Dudayev accused the Russian secret services of masterminding an "artificial earthquake" attack on Chechnya. He publicly insulted Yeltsin, calling him "the leader of a gang of murderers" and his regime the "diabolical heir of the totalitarian monsters."¹⁴

Those personal insults, combined with verbal incitements such as his promise to execute Russian prisoners captured in an opposition assault on Grozny on 26 November 1994, made it politically impossible for Yeltsin to retreat from his plans of armed intervention. At a press conference held on the eve of the Russian invasion, Dudayev thrice cited Harry Truman's alleged statement that "there is no language in which you can talk with Russians," and repeatedly called Russia a "satanic power."¹⁵

Yeltsin, intent on overhauling a state crippled by seven decades of charismatic leadership, was especially sensitive to Dudayev's insults and ideology. If "communist" became a universal tag of opprobrium in Russian political debates¹⁶

because of the impossibility of blaming another nation for the imposition of an authoritarian regime, a similar irony operated in the Dudayev-Yeltsin conflict: Yeltsin's need for the Russian Federation to maintain a positive identity was threatened by Dudayev's insults, especially since they were founded on the negative images of Russia as a corrupt state that it was trying to overcome and the Soviet Union's shared past with Russia as an imperialist, aggressor nation—another major stumbling-block for efforts to reclaim glorious Russian traditions.

From 1991 to 1994, Russian claims about Chechen banditry and anarchy were remarkably similar to statements made at the end of the 1990s by Western detractors to the effect that Russia had a robber economy and had become a haven for criminals. It may be that Russia deflects negative self-images onto its own nemesis, Chechnya; whether or not that is true, this volley of insults demonstrates the extent to which Russia's search for a positive "national idea" or identity has been inextricably linked to the wars in Chechnya.

Oil revenues and the unique status of Chechen-Russian relations are often given as additional factors influencing the Russian invasion of December 1994, but I hesitate to ascribe too much significance to either of them. Under Dudayev, oil export revenues *were* threatened by the siphoning of oil by locals. However, the FSK (Russia's domestic intelligence agency) cautioned the Russian government that a war with Chechnya would *decrease* oil revenues, as Chechen attacks would render the pipeline inoperable.¹⁷

As for the historical animosity between Chechens and Russians,¹⁸ Stalin's deportation of Chechens en masse to Central Asia and Siberia in 1943–44 is indeed a brutal episode in Chechnya's history, but it fails to account for secessionist aspirations. Other regions that suffered deportations at the hands of Stalin were content to stay within the federation or did not make claims that Stalin's deportations justified assertions about the essentially genocidal nature of Russia.

The calm of 1994 (excluding the December invasion of Chechnya) belied the weakness of a state in the "throes of a liberal capitalist revolution."¹⁹ By 1995, wage arrears, asset stripping, rule by oligarchs, the corruption of the Yeltsin regime, and hostage taking by Chechen separatists were competing for the attention of Russians already beleaguered by an economy so bad that many had begun resorting to barter as a primary means of survival.

In June 1995, Moscow faced further political humiliation when the Chechen commander, Shamil Basayev, led an armed force through numerous Russian checkpoints by bribing or tricking Russian officers. After attacking a police station in Budenovsk and briefly taking the town hall, the Chechen fighters held several hundred people hostage in a hospital with threats to kill them if the Russian army did not withdraw from Chechnya. Ninety-one people died in the attack, including policemen, hospitalized Russian soldiers, and local civilians.

Yeltsin, who was shown on national TV at the G7 summit in Halifax "smiling and toasting world leaders" during the crisis,²⁰ was accused of incompetence and indifference in the press, with statements such as the one in *Izvestiya* that "Budenovsk proved that Russians live in a weak state today" appearing daily.²¹ The conflation of an individual president with the image of the nation proved disastrous

for Russians who wanted to identify their country with strength, capability, and vigor. Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin added insult to injury when he put an end to the crisis by opening negotiations with Basayev.²² Although most Russians would have preferred a decisive Russian victory to negotiations with “terrorists,” many seemed relieved that the ordeal was over, and in August, a meeting between General Alexander Lebed and General Aslan Maskhadov, chief of staff of the Chechnya forces, established the possibility for a Russian withdrawal from Chechnya.

In January 1997, Maskhadov won the Chechen presidential election with pledges to restore internal peace and stability and cooperate with Russia to renovate the economy. A slew of agreements and peace accords followed his election, although the future status of Chechnya was left uncertain.²³

Public opinion polls taken before and after the Lebed-Maskhadov agreements indicate that the only month in which a majority of Russians supported the invasion of Chechnya was June 1995, immediately after the hostage-taking debacle in Budenovsk, when Russians felt that it was imperative that they take a firm stand against terrorism. Opinion changed as the war dragged on and it became clear that Russian forces were unable to score a decisive victory: By November 1996, slightly more respondents (26 percent) agreed that Chechens should have independence than believed that Chechnya should be kept in the Russian Federation (22 percent).²⁴ Anatol Lieven believes that those figures “hardly show a population obsessed with Russian prestige or even territorial integrity, let alone imperial glory, when faced with real costs.”²⁵ I would argue that support for the war in Chechnya was low for precisely the opposite reason: it was unbearable for Russians obsessed with forging a positive national identity (or, in Lieven’s interpretation, “with prestige and territorial integrity”) to see the calamitous condition of their military.²⁶ Ex-finance minister and Duma deputy Boris Fyodorov expressed that sense of humiliation when in September of 1996 he said, “The actual result of our [Chechnya] policy is quite obvious . . . Russia’s territorial integrity is in greater danger now than before. Russia has, in effect, capitulated, suffering humiliating military and political defeat.”²⁷

The first Chechen war was unpopular because it failed to meet Yeltsin’s stated goals of bringing order to Chechnya, exposed the disastrous state of Russia’s military, and left Russian citizens feeling more vulnerable to terrorism. Critics also objected to spending money on the war that could have gone to badly needed social services at home. The “humiliating military and political defeat” that Fyodorov ascribed to the war had made the formation of a positive national iden-

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tity almost impossible; most Russians were willing to “let the Chechens win” if it meant restoring Russia’s image as a strong state.

In contrast to Yeltsin’s general appeasement strategy with regional leaders, Putin has embarked on a strategy of aggressive centralization. His use of force to “strengthen the state” demonstrates a marked departure from Yeltsin’s use of the language of democracy to justify direct intervention in Chechnya.²⁸ And while the first Chechen war gave rise to bitter criticism of Yeltsin, Putin’s tough stance on Chechnya when he was prime minister propelled him to the presidency.

Differences in Public Reception of the Two Wars

Several factors explain the disparity between the Russian public’s reception of the two wars.

- The Russian public was ready for revenge after being victimized by Chechen violence outside of Chechnya. Chechen warlords Shamil Basayev and Saudi-born Emir Khattab led a convoy of vehicles and armed men to Dagestan in August 1999. They said they had come in support of local Wahhabites and planned to export an Islamic revolution to Dagestan.²⁹ The government dispatched Russian forces to suppress the attempt to create an Islamic revolution.

In September 1999, apartment blocks in Dagestan, Moscow, and Volgograd were bombed, killing more than three hundred Russian citizens and plunging the nation into a mood of fear and desperation.³⁰ The Kremlin blamed Chechen separatists for the bombings, at which point Putin made his infamous remark about “rubbing out the bandits.”³¹ Although some Western observers and members of the Russian intelligentsia expressed dismay that Yeltsin’s new prime minister (who had also been announced as Yeltsin’s “successor”) felt free to “speak the language of thugs and gangsters from our TV screens,”³² Putin’s inflammatory words suited the mood of a nation weary of “perpetual crisis,”³³ fearful for their personal security, and intent on forging a national identity as a strong country, rather than as a nation of victims.

- Putin’s strong leadership inspired confidence in the Russian government’s ability to win the second war. Yeltsin ordered the December 1994 invasion of Chechnya as he was undergoing surgery for the repair of a deviated septum, leading to renewed speculations about his health and competency.³⁴ By the end of the war, many Russians felt that the war could not be won under the Yeltsin administration’s fickle leadership and that contrary to its objectives, the war had unleashed an epidemic of Chechen terrorism.

Putin’s consistent statements as Yeltsin’s prime minister that once president he would protect Russia’s citizens from Chechen terrorists, strengthen the state, and crack down on corruption boosted his once-dismal popularity ratings.³⁵ As president, Putin remained focused and preoccupied with the war in Chechnya, reiterating his belief that Chechnya belonged to the Russian Federation and would be brought under control by federal forces. Far from being drunk or under anesthesia, Putin went so far as to make a New Year’s visit to his troops stationed on the battlefield in 2000.³⁶ Putin’s image as a powerful leader continues to reward him

with high approval ratings from a public eager to identify their nation with a strong and capable president.

- Russians had time to assess Lebed's settlement of the first war, and they were dissatisfied with the results. Chechnya had become increasingly lawless since the end of the first Chechen war in August 1996. Abductions and raids into other parts of the Northern Caucasus by various Chechen warlords were becoming commonplace. In addition to incursions into Dagestan, there had been multiple attacks on farmers in Stavropol Kray. The increasingly desperate plight of the ethnic Russians remaining in Chechnya also galvanized political support for the war.³⁷ The preferred self-image of Russia as being an organized, law-and-order federal country was compromised by Chechen violence. The feeling of vulnerability in the face of Chechen terrorism, as well as disgust with Maskhadov for not delivering on campaign promises to control crime and rebuild his war-torn republic,³⁸ contributed to a feeling that Lebed had given too much away.

Russians who were disgruntled with the Lebed settlement because it emphasized the Yeltsin administration's incompetence felt that it was vital for Russia to present a strong face in subsequent crises with Chechnya. There were practical as well as psychological reasons for that, since the humiliations in Chechnya had presented formidable challenges to the formation of a positive self-image for Russia. Now Russia had the chance to revise a humiliating version of its part in the conflict.

- Western criticism of the war in Chechnya was not convincing to Russians who had come to distrust Western advice. By October 1999, Russian disappointment with the results of economic reforms initiated or recommended by Western experts, the March 1999 NATO bombing of Kosovo, and Western impatience with the rate of "progress" in Russia had led to mounting anti-western sentiment. Russia now wanted to find its own way, rather than imagine itself as a Slavic version of a Western European country.³⁹

Western optimism about Russia's transition to democracy in the 1990s led to disenchantment for both sides when policy reform failed to ameliorate entrenched social and economic problems. At the end of four years of Yeltsin-Gaidar capitalist reforms enthusiastically promoted by Western consultants, "the fall in national income . . . was unprecedented, greater than the Great Depression in the course of the First World War, the civil war, or even the Second World War."⁴⁰ A mere 18 percent of Russians were being paid regularly⁴¹ and "crony capitalism" was concentrating capital in the hands of a small business elite.⁴² In the course of one month (September 1998) food prices rose by 40 percent, while incomes fell by about a third. Members of the emerging middle class discovered that their savings had become worthless.⁴³ In the words of one Russian scholar,

In Russia, the reforms are widely seen as a plot to undermine the country, and/or a criminal act of massive proportions. . . . The political class and the population in general are distrustful of the West, which did not fulfill [ill-founded] expectations of massive help, and is believed to use the Russian weakness to advance its own geostrategic interests.⁴⁴

Leaders on all sides of the political spectrum had concluded that "Russia should be able to choose its own mix of policies."⁴⁵ Meanwhile, NATO expansion was seen as a step toward the creation of a European security system either directed against or excluding Moscow. Russian indignation with NATO rose to new heights during the March 1999 NATO bombing of Kosovo, when NATO's decision to intervene in Yugoslavia without gaining the specific approval of the UN, that "legal cornerstone of the international order," seemed to many Russians shocking proof of Western arrogance.⁴⁶ The extension of NATO's responsibilities, which had previously been confined to the territories of its member states, raised the possibility that the West might seek to impose its will in various parts of the former USSR. Many Russians saw an explicit parallel between the Yugoslav conflict and their own Chechen problem: Gorbachev warned that the West was really seeking to strengthen its influence in the Muslim world, and rhetoric about the necessity of a Slavic-Orthodox brotherhood became commonplace.⁴⁷ In a gesture full of symbolic uneasiness with NATO, Primakov ordered an airplane en route to Washington to fly him back to Moscow after learning that the Clinton-Albright team had made the irreversible decision to use NATO to strike Serb military targets.

The interpretation of the NATO strikes on Yugoslavia as a Western assault on Slavic civilization may have aggravated the Russian response toward Chechen nationalists. Chechen "bandits," like NATO "militants," were perceived as threatening an already beleaguered Slavic world. Serbia may have been defenseless in comparison with NATO, but Russian nationalists were sure that Chechnya could be brought under Russian control. In addition, NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia made criticism of the brutality in Chechnya seem like hypocritical Western propaganda:⁴⁸

Most Russians . . . were unable to be persuaded by the humanitarian rationalization of the operation. [NATO intervention] was seen as directly running against the age-long European legal tradition of respect towards national sovereignty and territorial integrity.⁴⁹

Now Russians were determined to formulate an identity for the Russian Federation independent of Western guidance; indeed, many felt that self-reliance was a critical component in any positive national identity. Putin has resisted all attempts to bring in international mediators to end the fighting in Chechnya—a role the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe played during the first war.⁵⁰ Putin is determined to emphasize that Russia must make its own policy decisions. His constant affirmations that Chechnya belongs to Russia and is therefore an internal matter likewise shows his inclination to strengthen the image of Russia as a powerful central state capable of solving its own federalist problems. The irony of Putin's affirmation that Chechnya belongs to Russia, even as he wages a bloody war there and contrasts Chechnya's anarchy with Russia's civilization, was not lost on at least one journalist in Grozny in 1999:

And yet the war in Chechnya is above all Russia's agony. Leaving aside any moral considerations, it is simply not practical to wish the Russians success in "winning"

this war. Moscow cannot succeed in making Chechnya a normal part of Russia again because the weapon it is using—the Russian armed forces—treats Chechnya as a foreign country, open for marauding and random violence.⁵¹

In sum, a majority of Russians were enthusiastic about Russia's role in the second war because it created and strengthened positive images of Russia as a state capable of ensuring domestic security for citizens and making consistent policy decisions. The first Chechen war failed to galvanize popular support because it exposed Russian military weaknesses and brutality, and because rather than protecting their state, it made them into an aggressor nation subject to retaliatory acts of terrorism.

In addition, Putin's crackdown on the press has made reports about human rights abuses in the second Chechen war less available to the Russian public.⁵² For citizens who want to feel that they belong to a benevolent state, the suppression of reports about brutality in Chechnya is critical to maintaining the war fever caused by the 1999 apartment bombings. During the first Chechen war, journalists drove into Chechnya with hired drivers and traveled freely; authorities generally did not censor media reports about the war.⁵³ Uncensored media coverage portrayed the brutalizing of conscripts and civilians alike, contributing to disgust with the already unpopular the war.

By contrast, the risk of kidnapping has prevented all but a handful of Russian journalists from covering the second war, and Putin's administration has put tight controls on the media:

Russian journalists were routinely summoned for interviews in which they were reminded of their patriotic duty in reporting the "anti-terrorist operation." Strenuous efforts were made to keep foreign correspondents out of the combat zone altogether.⁵⁴

The construction of an image of Russia as benevolent and strong demands active "tinkering" with the presentation of the war to the Russian public. Under Yeltsin and Putin, deflecting anxieties about the Russian Federation onto Chechnya became part of the process of identity formation. For example, apprehensions about crime in Russia are diverted when politicians call Chechnya "lawless" and promise to "restore order" there. In the second war, journalists and intellectuals who called attention to aspects of the war that contradicted Russians' preferred image of well-organized Russian troops fighting a defensive and morally justified war were shamed as "unpatriotic traitors." "Unpatriotic" was applied so often and in so many cases—to publicizing "ugly" facts about the war, calling for an end to the fighting rather than victory, and approving of international mediation rather than relying on Russian governmental bodies—that one could clearly trace a trend to conflate patriotism with an optimistic outlook for the second war in Chechnya.⁵⁵ Optimism and "pragmatic patriotism" have therefore become an integral part of Russian identity-formation in the Putin era.⁵⁶

If "unpatriotic" has replaced "communist" as a universal tag of opprobrium in Russian politics, then the major arena for identity formation in Russia has shifted from the post-Soviet crisis over whom to blame for the Soviet legacy to the Russian Federation's crisis over not having territorial integrity, strong state insti-

tutions, or charitable institutions empowered to take care of Russia's mounting social problems. Putin's "spin" on the war in Chechnya as a successful effort to restore territorial integrity and protect Russian citizens from terrorism may therefore console Russian citizens who would otherwise consider their state vulnerable and weak.

Just as Russian self-images are influenced by the Soviet state experience, so is Chechen separatism the outcome of decades of Soviet nationalities policy. During the early Soviet period, nativization (*korenizatsia*) helped some ethnicities to "consolidate nationality" by encouraging the use of native language, forming a national cultural and political elite, and officially establishing ethnicity in the state apparatus.⁵⁷ Despite the

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subsequent repudiation of the nativization policies of the 1920s and Stalin's promotion of Russian language and culture, the majority of the ethnic republics were politically and culturally more nationalistic as a result of such efforts and of limited affirmative action during the Soviet period. Titular nationalities were promoted,

often at the expense of better-educated Russians.⁵⁸ National languages were taught, and every republic had its own writers' union, theatre, and a host of national academies that specialized in national history, literature, and language.⁵⁹ The nationalities of the USSR were "made" according to the needs of the present and the constraints of the past:⁶⁰

Their pasts were constructed and reconstructed; traditions were selected, invented, and enshrined; and even those with the greatest antiquity of pedigree became something quite different from past incarnations.⁶¹

The beneficiaries of Soviet manipulation of the nationalities problem, endowed with a nationalist doctrine and all the apparatus of an independent state, "from the national opera house to a national flag and seal,"⁶² were nevertheless denied political independence, that "culmination of all nationalist doctrines,"⁶³ by the very state that had set them on the nationalist path.

National self-determination to the point of secession had been canonized by the Soviet constitution, which guaranteed the right of separation from the union. That was a "time bomb that lay dormant through the years of Stalinism, only to explode with the Gorbachev reforms."⁶⁴ Indeed, the slow dismantling of communist ideology was accompanied by a surge of national self-determination in the ethnic republics. On the Moscow political scene, that was clearly illustrated by the fate of the referendum on keeping the USSR together, organized by Gorbachev and held in March 1991, after rebellions in the Baltic republics and amidst the confusion wrought by perestroika's contradictory messages.⁶⁵ The three

Baltic republics, plus Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova boycotted the referendum, and the wording of the referendum was widely perceived as misleading by Western and Russian observers (it nevertheless officially produced a substantial majority in favor of the retention of the USSR as a “renewed federation”).

In August 1991, Gorbachev announced that a new treaty to transform the multinational state into a democratic federation of equal soviet sovereign republics would be signed later in the month. The treaty was discredited by the attempted coup of 19 August 1991, apparently intended to avert the weakening of central power that the union treaty augured. A procession of declarations of republican independence led to the disintegration of the USSR itself by the end of the year.⁶⁶ Since the Soviet Union’s dissolution into fifteen national independent states, including three in the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), it seemed a cruel irony to many Chechens that they, too, had not been granted independence.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Although many postcommunist societies disassociated communism from national identity through the understanding that “communism had never been ‘our’ doing in the first place,”⁶⁸ Russia did not have this option. There, a discourse of identity a priori waives the potentiality of re-creating a national community by blaming someone else for the introduction and maintenance of communist rule.

The possibility of re-creating national community through more “positive” moments such as recovering identity markers—“symbols, rituals, anthems, history, literature and so forth—that had been suspended and suppressed during the Communist epoch”⁶⁹ is still a viable one for Russia, and one that has had some popular success (for example, the surge in Russian Orthodox practices in the post-Soviet era as expressions of “national feeling”). But the impossibility of establishing a national idea or a coherent identity in the Russian Federation by purging the nation of markers associated with an alien/imposed period of communist rule has complicated ordinary political processes. Urban claims that the discursive practices which have emerged tend to:

- 1) polarize the political community over the question of national identity; 2) to preclude a mutual recognition of the particular identities advanced by political subjects, thus destabilizing politics at the root level of communication; and 3) to spin off ancillary conflicts, particularly in the field of federal (ethnic) relations, that are not only explosive in their own right but which also further aggravate the conflict over national identity.⁷⁰

The conflicts in Chechnya have therefore become like a Rorschach test of Russians’ identity aspirations, with the very accusations of bribery and banditry that the West levels against Russia being displaced onto Chechens. Support for the war depends on Russian citizens’ perceptions of the war: defensive or aggressive; protective of Russian citizens or brutalizing of conscripts; exposing Russian weaknesses or promoting Russian strength.

The search for a “national idea” to bind the Russian state and society together is a critical undertaking for Russia’s future. In the past, many Russians sup-

ported expansionist policies, but exhaustion with the "imperial mode of statecraft"⁷¹ has led many to seek to improve their lives inside Russia.⁷² A corresponding determination to create a positive national identity that focuses on Russian self-reliance, domestic stability, and social services has made Putin's pragmatic patriotism and his version of the second war in Chechnya appealing to many Russians.

Putin's swift response to the apartment bombings in September 1999 showed Russians accustomed to sluggish and inefficient leadership that their prime minister would be capable of protecting them from terrorism as president. His overwhelming victory in the March 2000 presidential elections and widespread support for his professed goals of building central state power show that Russians want to feel that their state is effective, sheltering of its citizens (although not imperialistic or aggressive), and non-revolutionary in its ideology and program. Russian disenchantment with the first Chechen war coincided with a sentiment that the war was spreading domestic instability and uncertainty and that Russian aggression toward a rebellious region was making Russia more vulnerable to terrorism. Russia, in the first Chechen war, seemed to its citizens a state with a decaying military apparatus, corrupt draft practices, and a capricious leader who was not committed to winning the war. The unpopularity of that war was therefore strongly influenced by the ways in which it contradicted Russian preferred images of Russia as a state strong enough to care for its citizens. The second Chechen war's popularity was due to the way in which it showed Russian citizens a state strong enough to clamp down on "banditry" in a rebellious province, protect its own citizens from terrorism, and see a conflict through to the end.

That the Russian formulation of a positive national identity has appropriated the war in Chechnya and Putin's leadership does not justify the continuation of a war in which electroshock torture, forced disappearances, and the beating of men between the ages of six and sixty at detention centers are explained as "necessary measures."⁷³ And while Russians are understandably unresponsive to Western criticism of the war in Chechnya, Putin's current cozy relationship with President Bush suggests that international pressure to end the disastrous military occupation of Chechnya could bear fruit. Although even the most cynical Westerner would be inclined to laugh at Dr. Karaganov's suggestion that shock therapy was the work of Western consultants, who eagerly plotted Russia's downfall to "advance their own geostrategic interests," it is almost certain that Western leaders' silence about the nightmarish brutality of the Chechen wars has more than a little to do with America's interests.

NOTES

1. As reported in an editorial by Andrei Chernov in *Novaya Gazeta*, 7 October 1999.
2. Michael Urban, "The Politics of Identity in Russia's Postcommunist Transitions: The Nation Against Itself," *Slavic Review* 53 (1994): 734.
3. For a discussion of the preference of many Russians for a "benevolent" state and popular concern about the advent of "predatory capitalism," see V. T. Lisovsky, "Young People Talk about Themselves and the Times," *Russian Education & Society* 41 (1999): 48-61.

4. Ronald Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*. (California: Stanford University Press, 1993), 112.
5. Ibid.
6. Russian Constitution, Art. 90, 1993.
7. Russian Constitution, Art. 87, 1993.
8. Stephen White, *Russia's New Politics: The Management of a Postcommunist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 80–82.
9. The “war party” was a small circle of advisors or a “security clique” that Yeltsin came increasingly to rely on, and who consistently pushed for an elimination of the Chechen problem through direct military intervention. It consisted of General Alexander Korzhakov, General Pavel Grachev, Sergei Stepashin, and Oleg Lobov, secretary of the Security Council.
10. Based on my personal observations and media consumption during a trip to Moscow in 1995.
11. Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 88.
12. Astrid Tuminez, “Russia in Search of Itself: Nationalism and the Future of the Russian State,” October 1997, PONARS Policy Memo 20, 4.
13. Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, 88.
14. Ibid. 67–69.
15. Ibid., 69.
16. Urban, “The Politics of Identity,” 736.
17. Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, 85–86.
18. The historical animosity is popularly portrayed as commencing with the Orientalization of the Caucasus by imperialist Russia.
19. Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, 269.
20. Ibid., 124.
21. Otto Lacin, “Cruelty Breeds Only Cruelty,” *Izvestiya*, 20 June 1995.
22. Chernomyrdin agreed to arrange for the “guarantee of safe passage” from Budenovsk to separatist-held areas of Chechnya for Basayev and his men, an immediate cease-fire by Russian troops, and the reopening of negotiations.
23. Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, 144–46.
24. Figures from polls conducted by Yuri Levada’s All Russian Center for Research on Public Opinion
25. Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, 146.
26. The prevalence of media reports about *dyedovschina* during the period of the first Chechen war demonstrates this trend. Literally translated as “granddadism,” *dyedovschina* is the ritualized abuse of new conscripts by older conscripts and volunteer soldiers. *Dyedovschina* has been responsible for astoundingly high rates of murders, suicides, and nervous and physical breakdowns. *Dyedovschina* long predates the Yeltsin administration and had been a particularly brutal aspect of Soviet military service for at least three decades.
27. Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, 269.
28. Stephen Hanson, “Putin and the Dilemmas of Russia’s Anti-Revolutionary Revolution,” *Current History* (October 1993): 27.
29. Basayev and Khattab clearly miscalculated Daghestani enthusiasm for a Greater Chechnya; Daghestanis fled the mountains and organized massive demonstrations against the Chechen invaders. Thousands of Daghestanis implored the Russian authorities to supply them with weapons so they could fight the Chechen invaders. See Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War* (London: The Harvill Press, 2001), xx.
30. Hanson, “Putin and the Dilemmas of Russia’s Anti-Revolutionary Revolution,” 24.
31. Conspiracy theories about the apartment bombings abound. In September 1999, residents of Ryazan saw men moving suspicious objects into the basement of their apartment block. Local police evacuated the building and found and defused a “powerful explosive device” [Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War* (London: The Harvill Press, 2001)], 33. To read

editorials by those who believe that the FSB had been ordered by the Kremlin to create “war fever” for political reasons, consult *Novaya Gazeta* periodicals.

32. Andrei Chernov, *Novaya Gazeta*, 7 October 1999

33. Stephen Hanson, “Putin and the Dilemmas of Russia’s Anti-Revolutionary Revolution,” 24.

34. As reported by James Carney, “Who’s in Charge?” *Time*, 9 January 1995

35. Putin’s popularity ratings were low because he was an unknown in the Kremlin, not because the public was against any of his policies.

36. Nataliya Gevorkyan, Natalya Timakova, and Andrei Kolesnikov, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia’s President Vladimir Putin*, trans. by Catherine Fitzpatrick (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), 144.

37. C. W. Blandy, “Moscow’s Failure to Comprehend,” *Strategic and Combat Studies Institute Occasional Paper No. 4—the Second Chechen War* (September 2000), 15.

38. In 1997, nearly all the buildings of the republic’s three universities were destroyed and had not been rebuilt, precluding educational opportunities for young people; only 10 percent of the population was engaged in some form of legitimate business; international aid for rebuilding and developing the economy were not forthcoming. *Ibid.*, 15.

39. Economist Leonid Albankin, quoted in White, *Russia’s New Politics*, 142.

40. White, *Russia’s New Politics*, 80–82.

41. *Ibid.*, 135.

42. “Crony capitalism” is meant in this context to denote a system whereby an “interlocking clique of business elites use their political connections to shield themselves from domestic and international competition,” Stephen White, *Russia’s New Politics*, 141.

43. *Ibid.*, 139.

44. Sergei Karagonov, “Russia’s Uneasy Dance with the West,” *BBC World Service World Lectures*. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/people/features/world_lectures/karag_lect.shtm> (accessed 12/22/01), 2.

45. *Ibid.*, 10.

46. *Ibid.*, 5.

47. White, *Russia’s New Politics*, 232–34.

48. In 2001, Russia rejected a UN resolution that “condemned serious human rights violations by Russia’s forces” in Chechnya and called for UN investigations of these abuses. Russia also vowed to reject future UN resolutions regarding its “domestic problems.” Human Rights Watch World Report, 2001: “Russia Buries Evidence of Atrocities,” available at <<http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/05/chechnya0515.htm>>.

49. Karagonov, “Russia’s Uneasy Dance with the West,” 5.

50. Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War* (London: Harvill Press, 2001), xxxi.

51. *Ibid.*, xxxii.

52. Putin’s clampdown on reportage of the war in Chechnya was nowhere more manifest than in the ordeals of *Novaya Gazeta* journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was captured by the Russian army after going behind rebel lines in Chechnya. Before torturing her and subjecting her to “a series of harrowing intimidations,” her captors told her it was “time to pay” for her reports on Chechnya. After her release, Politkovskaya returned to Moscow to see a newscaster on television denouncing her as an “enemy of the country.” “Russian writer warns of attacks on press freedom,” *Guardian Unlimited*, 3 May 2001.

53. Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War*, xxv.

54. *Ibid.*, xxvi.

55. Here I am using the term in its conventional sense of “love of and devotion to one’s country.” “Patriotism.” *The American Heritage Dictionary*. 3rd ed. 1992.

56. “Pragmatic patriotism” is an ideology created by default that is opposed to all other ideologies, including communism, fascist nationalism, and radical liberalism. It seeks to avoid liberal experimentation, because pragmatic patriotism should avoid extremes, create economic growth, and support domestic security.

57. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 101–02.

58. *Ibid.*, 109.

59. Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 447.

60. I do not mean to suggest that revising or creating traditions or versions of history is limited to the ethnic republics of the USSR. For a discussion of why and how nations imagine themselves as old, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991).

61. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 160.

62. *Ibid.*, 111.

63. Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment," 451.

64. Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, 144.

65. The explosion of popular nationalism in the Baltic republics, Armenia, Georgia, Moldavia, and western Ukraine after Gorbachev's loosening of central control likewise illustrates this point.

66. White, *Russia's New Politics* 240.

67. As early as 1989, General Dudayev had demonstrated genuine sympathy for national liberation movements, allowing an Estonian flag to be hoisted above his base in Tatr. Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, 58.

68. Urban, "The Politics of Identity," 733.

69. *Ibid.*, 733.

70. *Ibid.*, 734.

71. Tuminez, "Russia in Search of Itself," 4.

72. Here, it is critical to remember that Chechnya is a part of the Russian Federation and that problems there are therefore considered *domestic*.

73. For detailed discussions of human rights abuses in Chechnya, consult Human Rights Watch reports, available at <<http://www.hrw.org>>.