

Chechnya: Ten Years of Violence

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Chechens reflect on the anniversary of a war that has shattered homes and lives.

Ten years ago, on December 11, 1994, Russian troops entered Chechnya in what was officially called a campaign for the "restoration of constitutional order".

For Chechens, the Russian military intervention a decade ago was the moment their society was plunged into a cycle of violence that continues – although in reduced form –today.

Until the last minute, few believed that Russian president Boris Yeltsin would resort to a military assault to remove the regime of Jokhar Dudayev, who proclaimed independence from Russia in 1991.

"If Yeltsin hadn't sent troops to Chechnya in 1994, things could have evolved according to a very different scenario," said a professor at Grozny State University, who did not want to be quoted by name. "In fact, Dudayev had never said openly that Chechnya wanted to secede from Russia. He wanted more independence for Chechnya as part of the Russian state. No more, no less."

Talking about the Russian attack of December 1994, the professor said, "I recall the words of [French diplomat Charles] Talleyrand: 'It was worse than a crime; it was a mistake'."

An initial attempt to overthrow Dudayev failed on November 26, 1994, when Chechen opposition fighters with Russian support entered Grozny but were defeated by Dudayev's troops. More than a hundred prisoners were captured, including a dozen Russian army officers.

Negotiations followed, but already Moscow was gearing up for a full-scale invasion.

On December 11, despite an agreement between Dudayev and Moscow to enter into peace talks scheduled to take place the following day in Mozdok, North Ossetia, Russian federal army divisions poured into Chechnya from three different directions.

Hussein Iskhanov, a former aide to rebel president Aslan Maskhadov and member of the Chechen parliament, says the intervention was "highly unnecessary and provocative".

"Dudayev was prepared to offer significant concessions to Moscow to avoid bloodshed," said Iskhanov. "Peace talks had been scheduled for December 12 in Mozdok, but Russia instead launched its massive invasion on December 11. Now peace talks were out of the question."

A decade on, the nature of the Chechen conflict has changed substantially.

One shift is that radical Islamic sentiments are growing amongst Chechen youth. While "Freedom or Death" was a popular slogan among Chechen fighters during the first campaign of 1994-96, you are more likely to hear "Victory or Paradise" now.

“Over the past 10 years, Russia has shown that its real aim is the physical elimination of the Chechen people,” said Grozny resident Aslanbek, aged 25, who has spent his entire adult life surrounded by conflict. “In 1994, when the Russian army came to Chechnya to ‘restore constitutional order’, it destroyed half of Grozny, dozens of smaller towns and thousands of civilians.

“In 1999, the same army came back to ‘fight terrorism’ with even more disastrous consequences. Grozny has been annihilated. Tens of thousands of people have been killed and maimed, or have gone missing, and it’s not over yet. The Chechens have no choice but to defend themselves.”

Aslanbek is a member of a Grozny-based “jamaat”, a group of radical Islamic militant fighters commonly known here as “Wahhabis”.

“Russia is fighting us on every level: militarily, in ideology and religion,” he said. “All you have to do is turn your TV on to see that this is true. They often show Russian priests blessing the soldiers going to Chechnya, calling them ‘Christ’s warriors’, What else can you call this if not a religious war?”

Another change is that the conflict has turned into a civil war within Chechen society.

“Security forces are hunting militants and sympathisers, destroying civilians indiscriminately in the process,” said the professor in Grozny. “For their part, the militants target law enforcers and government officials.

“But behind each dead Chechen, be it a militant or a government employee, stand his family and friends. Our supreme [traditional] law says ‘blood for blood’. That means the carnage will go on for years or even decades to come.”

As well as the immediate violence, warfare has had a massive impact on society and the economy in Chechnya. As the professor said, “No good ever comes out of any war. A war brings devastation, bloodshed and disaster; it degrades morality and destroys the soul. We in Chechnya have suffered all of this.

“The republic is decades behind in economic terms. The official unemployment rate is over 70 per cent. More and more young people are addicted to drugs or alcohol. Not to mention the thousands of people dead or missing, disabled and orphaned. That’s what this war has cost our people.”

The conflict has affected the lives of every person in Chechnya -- mainly ordinary civilians like Aminat Aduyeva, a 53-year-old woman from the Kurchaloi region.

“During the first war I lost a brother,” she said. “In the second war my son died and my nephew disappeared without trace. They weren’t fighters or terrorists or Wahhabis.... There are lots of people in Chechnya like me.”

“As a mother and a woman, I cannot understand why Russian soldiers and Chechen lads should kill one another. Who needs it? If Putin and Russia are so bothered by [rebel leaders Aslan] Maskhadov or [Shamil] Basayev, why do our children have to die?”

“When will it all finally end, I want to know. When will they stop destroying us, let us live, give us a chance to live like normal people, bring up and educate our children, and build houses? I no longer have any hope that I will live to see that day.”

Umalt Dudayev is the pseudonym of a Chechen journalist who is a regular IWPR contributor.

Location: Stavropol
Russia
North Ossetia
Ingushetia

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/chechnya-ten-years-violence>