

Review - Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus

Written by Elizabeth Austin

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ELIZABETH AUSTIN, AUG 2 2013

The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad

By: Robert W. Schaefer

Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010

Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Schaefer, U.S. Army Special Forces (Green Beret) and Eurasian Foreign Area Officer, offers a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the situation in the North Caucasus in his book *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad*. Though this book was published three years ago, the recent Boston Marathon Bombing in the U.S. by Chechen extremists makes a review of the book, and its subject matter, timely. In reviewing the book, I gained useful insight into the politics, and sources of instability, in the North Caucasus region, and was able to clarify the role of Islam in Chechnya. Schaefer tackles the definition of insurgency, differentiating it from terrorism, gives a comprehensive history of the region, focusing on the past 300 years, and brings the reader up to date by covering the Chechen-Russian wars in the 1990s, and the aftermath, in detail. In so

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doing, the reader receives a rare glimpse into the region's political tensions, as well as a forecast for the future.

In the introduction, Schaefer defines the war in Chechnya as an insurgency, equates that insurgency with a revolutionary war, and states that the goal of the book is to "...get past the politics, the rhetoric, the tactics, the value-judgments, the disinformation, and the condemnations to discover the elements and laws of Chechnya's revolutionary – and Russia's counter-revolutionary – wars." (pg. 7) He succeeds in this objective.

Schaefer differentiates insurgency (Chapter 1) and terrorism (Chapter 2). He outlines their differences with comparative analysis and using civilian, not military, language, which is helpful to the reader (pg. 34):

- Terrorism is an operational level tactic, while insurgency is a strategic level campaign.
- Terrorist cells are small, while insurgencies are big or aspire to be big.
- Terrorism is about fear and coercing of short-term behavior, while insurgencies are about power and resources.

He concludes that: "Insurgencies may use acts of terrorism as a method, but terrorism and insurgency are fundamentally different things." (pg. 34) and offers an analogy: just as the military usually works for the elected political officials, so do the terrorists usually work for larger insurgent organizations. (pg. 39)

Those definitions firmly in place, Schaefer launches into an extensive history of the North Caucasus (Chapters 3, 4 and 5), highlighting the Great Gazavat (1829-1859), Soviet and post-Soviet eras, and the ceasefire that ended the First Chechen War.[1] With differing reports coming out of the region at the time, it is unclear who violated the ceasefire and ignited the Second Chechen War (1999). However, Russia claims the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Chechnya turned the conflict into another front of Al-Qaeda's campaign directed at the West. Ironically, Russia's failure to complete its promised reparations after the First Chechen War[2] left the region more vulnerable to outside influence, and Russian countermeasures. In my opinion, it is this point which is pivotal to understanding the status-quo in the North Caucasus today. Russian counterinsurgency tactics, after decades of Soviet-era repression, have only fueled Chechen resentment, Islamic fundamentalism, and secessionist sentiment.

For those readers unfamiliar with the different sects of Islam, the next section (Chapter 6) is essential to understanding not only the role of Islamic fundamentalism in the Chechen insurgency, but Islam in general and the nature of extremism and *jihad*. Separating Sunni, Shi'a, Sufi, Salafism and Wahhabism, Schaefer explains that in Chechnya Sufi Islam, the "mystical branch of Islam", (pg. 145) is, and always has been, practiced. The Salafists and Wahhabists are extremist minorities in Chechnya, and any connection with Al-Qaeda comes through those fringe extremists. This was substantiated by Brian Glyn Williams, Professor of Islamic History at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth:

The account of the migration of these foreign *jihadi* fighters to post-Soviet Chechnya is one of the murkiest chapters in modern Chechen history and one full of implications. For the foreign fighters have not only added an extremist edge to the Chechen nationalist insurgency, they have provided the Kremlin with a propaganda tool for painting its Chechen nationalist adversaries in broad brush strokes as 'al-Qa'ida'[3]

This led me to conclude that it was not Islamic extremism and ties with Al-Qaeda that pushed the Chechens to engage in the Second Chechen War, as Russia claims. The Second Chechen War arose from Russian failures and incursions, including disinformation campaigns. Other readers may or may not agree. The brilliance of Schaefer's book is the openness with which every fact is presented, allowing readers to reach their own conclusions.

Schaefer covers the Second Chechen War (Chapter 7) with a detailed analysis of military strategy and a searing depiction of the brutality of the conflict (warning to readers: this chapter is not for the faint of heart). However, the turning point of the Chechen insurgency campaign came after the Second Chechen War during the Russian Counterinsurgency Campaign (Chapter 8). The Beslan School Tragedy in September 2004, in which Chechen insurgents held a Russian elementary school hostage, which resulted in the death of many elementary school children, silenced Western critics of Russia, and Chechnya lost any hope of Western humanitarian intervention.

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(pg.232)

Despite this set back, Schaefer believes that the insurgency is not dead, it's just taken a different form (Chapter 9). Russia's secular, nationalist campaign to promote Chechnya as a part of Russia, not a separate entity, has given the insurgency: "...a greater unifying structure: reactionary traditionalism in the form of conservative Islam." (pg. 239) And though Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov are pursuing the Russian agenda, suppressing insurgents and increasing support in Russia, their brutal, Soviet-style tactics are creating more Chechen insurgents (Chapter 10). This point was made by former Chechen President, and father of Ramzan Kadyrov, Akhmad Kadyrov at a meeting of the Russian Security Council in 2002: "When people disappear from their families and no one will say where they are located, and then their relatives find their bodies, this gives birth to a minimum of ten new rebels". (pg. 252) Assuming this is true, and Russian counterinsurgency tactics continue, an end to the Chechen insurgency is nowhere in sight.

Readers of *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad*, are taken on a detailed journey into the North Caucasus. Schaefer delves into the breadth and depth of the Chechen-Russian conflict without pushing a Western-biased agenda. He uses his military expertise and in depth knowledge of North Caucasus' history to offer a comprehensive and detailed examination of the conflict. This is particularly valuable because of the varying accounts of Islamic extremism in Chechnya presently being portrayed in the media. This book presents the facts and gives the reader a basis for interpreting how much is hype, often Russian-proliferated hype, and how it differs from reality on the ground. It is a fascinating, engaging read about a region that receives too little coverage and I highly recommend it for anyone interested in learning more about the geopolitical realities of the North Caucasus.

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Elizabeth Austin has a Master's in International Affairs from the American University of Paris (AUP), where she was awarded an AUP Travel Grant and completed her thesis field work in the South Caucasus. She then studied Russian Language and Literature in a year-long, multi-level course. Elizabeth also has a Master's in International Relations from the University of St. Andrews, where she completed her dissertation field work in Cambodia, and she is a graduate of New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies. Both her thesis and dissertation were published in the respective universities' libraries and she has contributed articles to *Global Politics Magazine*.

[1] The Khasav'yurt Accord is the ceasefire agreement, signed August 31, 1996 in Khasav'yurt, Dagestan, which marked the end of the First Chechen War and stipulated Russia remove all its forces from Chechnya and that: "An Agreement on the basis for mutual relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic, to be determined in accordance with universally recognized principles and norms of international law, should be achieved by 31 December 2001." Available online: http://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/RU_960831_Khasav'yurt%20Joint%20Declaration%20and%20Principles%20for%20Mutual%20Relations.pdf

[2] "As a direct result of Russia's actions during the first war, all factories and processing plants had been bombed and remained inoperable, mines laid by the Russians covered 15% of the republic's cultivatable soil, and 60-70% of the housing had been damaged or destroyed – all of which Moscow had agreed to take care of and did nothing about." Schaefer, pg. 178

[3] Williams, Brian Glyn, "Allah's foot soldiers: An assessment of the role of foreign fighters and Al-Qa'ida in the Chechen insurgency", pg. 157. Available online: http://www.brianglynwilliams.com/10_Ethno%20Ch10_962.pdf

About the author:

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