

## Chechens

### Profile

According to the 2002 national census, there are 1,360,491 Chechens in the Russian Federation. Chechens are indigenous to the North Caucasus and are ethnically close to the Ingush. The majority of Chechens live in Chechnya (where according to the 2002 census 1,031,647 Chechens resided, accounting for 93.5 per cent of the republic's population; Russians accounted for 3.7 per cent; Kumyks for 0.8 per cent and others for less than 0.5 per cent) and some in adjacent Dagestan. Chechens are Sunni Muslims. The dominant form of social organization among the Chechens is the clan. Chechen is one of the Caucasian family of languages.

### Historical context

Prior to deportation, Chechens lived primarily in the mountain areas of Chechnya; they resettled on the plains. Chechnya was incorporated into the tsarist empire after a prolonged war in the nineteenth century. Following the Bolshevik Revolution, Soviet rule met considerable opposition in the region. Some areas were not subordinated until the 1920s. In 1922, the Chechens were granted their own AO. In December 1934 this was merged with the Ingush autonomous area to form the Chechen-Ingush AO, which became the Chechen-Ingush ASSR in December 1936. In the 1920s and 1930s Russians began to flood into the area. Immigration produced a strengthening of clan and religious brotherhoods in the region.

### Mass deportation

On 23 February 1944 Chechens and Ingush suffered mass deportation overnight on Stalin's orders, as punishment for alleged collaboration with Nazi Germany, even though many Chechens fought heroically in the Red Army. Some 459,486 were sent to Central Asia, and many, at least 20%, died during the terrible train journey. The territory of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was partitioned. In the 1950s, Chechens and Ingush were gradually rehabilitated and allowed to return to their former lands, which had by then been populated by Russian settlers. From the 1970s, the area experienced a growth in ethnic sentiment and a rise in demands for autonomy. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, tension between Ingush and Chechens mounted. Chechens demanded complete independence from Russia, while Ingush wished to stay within the Federation in order to regain land that had been placed under the jurisdiction of North Ossetia.

### President Dudayev and the declaration of independence

From late 1990 the Chechen self-determination movement was led by Dzhokhar Dudayev, a former Soviet Air Force General. In November 1991 Dudayev became President of Chechnya. Chechnya declared independence and Russian troops were sent to restore control. The Russian Parliament refused to support the move and the troops were withdrawn. Moscow introduced an economic blockade of the republic. The Chechen authorities sought to consolidate their new-won statehood. On 17 March 1992, a

new Chechen constitution was adopted. Chechen and Russian became the state languages and the Latin script was introduced instead of Cyrillic. Russians began to leave the area. Relations deteriorated between Ingush and Chechens and on 4 June 1992 the Russian Parliament passed legislation to create a separate Ingush republic.

In Chechnya a struggle developed between the president and parliament. Moscow sought to influence events by offering covert support for opposition forces. Internal opposition to President Dudayev was steadily eradicated in 1992-3. In the autumn of 1994 a civil war broke out in Chechnya when opposition factions challenged Dudayev. The failure of this action led to growing tension between Russian and Chechnya. At the end of 1994, Russia mounted a full-scale invasion of the republic in what became subsequently known as the First Chechen War. Despite vastly superior manpower, Russian military forces suffered a humiliating defeat forcing President Yeltsin to agree to a ceasefire in 1996 and to sign a peace treaty one year later. Conservative estimates of casualties suggest that 7,500 Russian combatants, 4,000 Chechen combatants and no less than 35,000 civilians died in the war. Despite the high casualties on both sides, Moscow continued to pursue a military solution to the Chechen issue while Chechens remained committed to the idea of independence. The war spilled over into neighbouring areas and frequently threatened the stability of the whole Caucasus region.

### **The Second Chechen war**

An unstable period followed in which Chechnya enjoyed a *de facto* but internationally unrecognized independence from Moscow. In 1999, in response to Chechen raids into Dagestan, and the alleged blowing up of apartment blocks in Russia by Chechen terrorists, Moscow once again invaded Chechnya, the start of the Second Chechen War. The war pitted the Russian military and pro-Moscow Chechen forces against Chechen fighters in a conflict characterized by appalling levels of destruction, disregard for civilian casualties especially on the part of the Russian military command and human rights violations on both sides. Although Russian military units succeeded in capturing the Chechen capital Grozny - flattening the city in the process - in 2000, the Chechen resistance continued to operate both within Chechnya and in neighbouring areas of the North Caucasus and successfully inflicted a number of attacks on Russian civilians and pro-Russian Chechen leaders. These included the hostage takings in the Nord-Ost theatre in Moscow in 2002 and the No.1 school in Beslan in September 2004, operations that ended with appalling numbers of fatalities and global opprobrium for the perpetrators, and the assassination of pro-Russian Chechen President Akhmad-Haji Kadyrov in May 2004. The Chechen independence movement became associated with Wahhabi radicalism, and Russian politicians explicitly appended the struggle against it to the global 'war on terror'. Capitalizing on the loss of sympathy for the Chechen cause caused by the Moscow and Beslan hostage takings, Moscow succeeded in installing a pro-Russian regime in Grozny and eliminating key figures in the Chechen resistance, including former President Aslan Maskhadov and warlord Shamil Basayev.

### **Pro-Moscow regime**

Despite imposing a pro-Moscow regime on the Chechen republic, there are vested interests in continued hostilities. These include the interests of figures within the Russian military and security forces who stand to gain profit or promotion through continued conflict and the interests of pro-Russian Chechens whose position is made secure by the continued existence of a Chechen resistance. The Chechen conflict may to some extent be characterized as a situation of dual power, split between a pro-Russian regime closely associated with the clan of assassinated President Kadyrov and his son Ramzan, and the pro-independence resistance, made up of a number of field commanders, their armed forces, sympathizers in the wider population and envoys representing the resistance abroad.

### **Current issues**

Continuing low-intensity conflict was shaped in 2005 by the killing of former Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov on 8 March. Maskhadov was killed just weeks after he had unilaterally proposed a ceasefire and unconditional talks with Moscow to end the war. Maskhadov was replaced by Abdul-Khalim Sadullaev, chairman of the Sharia Supreme Court, as president and military commander of the resistance. According to some analysts Sadullaev's appointment represented a shift towards a younger generation in the Chechen resistance (Sadullaev was in his 30s) that is more militant, less willing or able to negotiate a peace agreement with Russia and more inclined towards religiosity. Reports have further suggested splits within the rebels between those who support the establishment of a sovereign Chechen republic as a nation-state and independent subject of international law, and those who reject this idea in favour of the establishment of an Islamic state encompassing the whole of the North Caucasus, of which Chechnya would form only part.

In June 2005 Sadullaev pledged that the rebels would undertake no further hostage takings and would restrict its attacks to military targets. After Maskhadov's death the rebels undertook only one major operation outside of Chechnya, an attack in Nalchik, the capital of the Kabardino-Balkaria republic, in October 2005 in which over 130 people, including civilians, were killed.

In January 2005 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe approved a resolution condemning human rights violations in Chechnya, one of the highest-level rebukes of Russia's human rights record in Chechnya to date, following the PACE resolution in April 2000 recommending Russia's suspension from membership of the Council of Europe. The resolution also rebuked Council of Europe member states for failing to address the situation.

In March 2006 Ramzan Kadyrov, son of assassinated former pro-Russian President Akhmed-Haji Kadyrov, was elected Prime Minister of the Chechen republic by parliament. Bestowed with one of the highest state awards in Russia by President Putin, Ramzan Kadyrov is now the most powerful man in Chechnya. Russian human rights groups have criticized Kadyrov for his continued employment of former Chechen fighters against Russia who are personally loyal to him (known informally as the '*kadyrovtsy*'), and who are allegedly responsible for numerous serious human rights violations, including the abduction and 'disappearance' of civilians. In June 2006 the Russian NGO Memorial reported that at least 100 people had been abducted in Chechnya so far that year; of those, 38 were still missing, while the remainder had either been killed or released. The statistics applied only to a small portion of the territory of Chechnya.

On 17 June 2006 Sadullaev was killed by Russian Special Forces in the town of Argun; field commander and former vice-president of the unrecognized Chechen resistance government Doku Umarov was declared his successor. The Chechen separatists were further shaken when only days after Umarov had appointed veteran warlord Basayev (responsible for the mass hostage-taking at Budennovsk in 1995 and who also claimed responsibility for the 2002 Moscow theatre hostage taking) as his vice-president, Basayev was killed by Russian special forces on 10 July.

In a landmark case on 27 July 2006, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled that the Russian government was responsible for the 'disappearance' and death of a young Chechen man, Khadzhi-Murat Yandiev, in 2000. Many other cases related to 'disappearances' in Chechnya have been lodged with the ECHR.

In October 2006, the campaigning journalist Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead at her apartment block in central Moscow. Politkovskaya had reported extensively on human rights violations by Russian and Chechen security forces in Chechnya. Her death caused an international outcry. In August 2007, the Russian authorities made a number of arrests in connection with her death, claiming that the murder was organized by a Chechen criminal gang.