The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad
by Robert W. Schaefer

Reviewed by Constance Phlipot, Senior US Foreign Service Officer

Does the limited readership for Chechnya and the North Caucasus need another book? The uptick in violence and major terrorist acts in Moscow in recent months has sparked greater interest in the region, but arguably this need is more than filled by recent books and articles by such noted specialists as Thomas de Waal at Carnegie, Miriam Lanskoy (National Endowment for Democracy) together with the former Chechen Foreign Minister Akhadov, and Georgetown’s Charles King. What does a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Army have to offer to this intellectually rich literature?

A lot, it turns out. Robert Schaefer is sufficiently steeped in the complicated ethnic-religious-historical stew of the North Caucasus; he fully understands and successfully communicates the background against which the insurgency takes place. To this he adds his experientially based knowledge of counterinsurgency (COIN). He goes beyond a US-centric interpretation of COIN to look at the situation from the Russian government and military’s point of view. His insight helps answer the paradox that most of those who have studied the region grapple with: Why have the Russians never succeeded in extinguishing this 300-year insurgency while, at the same time, the Chechens have never been able to win their independence? In part, it is because the Russians have successfully addressed aspects of the conflict in their own terms, but have failed to adequately address the essential “hearts and minds” aspect of COIN, preventing them from ultimate victory. The Chechens (and other peoples of the North Caucasus) have been highly skilled in the initial guerilla warfare stages of insurgency, but have failed to defeat the far more numerous Russian forces at the advanced stages of the conflict when there is a need to mass forces. The initial and outwardly successful “Chechenization” of the Chechen struggle in which resources poured into the area failed. Additionally, cessation of violence resulting from the former insurgent Kadyrov deftly playing Moscow and his local rivals is unraveling due to the failure to provide security and build trust among the local population.

A very useful introductory chapter, “Insurgency 101,” sets the stage for Schaefer’s thesis that the Chechen/North Caucasus rebellions should be analyzed as classic insurgencies. More than an “Insurgency for Dummies,” the chapter underscores the key elements of an insurgency—lack of governmental control, available leadership, ideology, and vulnerable population—which Schaefer weaves throughout his account of the history of the North Caucasian struggles against Russian rule. Similarly, the clear distinction he draws between
insurgency and terrorism (the former a strategy, the latter a tactic) is important
to understanding where the Russians have gone wrong in branding the insur-
gency as terrorism.

In his detailed history of the conflict-ridden region, Schaefer stresses
that religion was a galvanizing force in the struggle since the 18th century—
and not a new element resulting from the Chechen war of the mid-1990s. The
Russian response to the Chechens was consistently violent and suppressive,
including such tactics as forced resettlement—a pattern that continued in the
Soviet Union and Russian Federation. The Russians consistently exploited the
fissures in Chechen society, including those between followers of fundamental-
ist Islam and other local traditions.

The period of perestroika in the late 1980s gave hope to Chechen nation-
alists and other repressed people of the region for greater freedom and autonomy,
but ultimately the turmoil and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union created
the preconditions for the Chechen wars. Presidents Yeltsin and Gorbachev played
Chechen leadership that were competing in their own power struggle with disas-
trous results for the Chechen peoples. The loss of central government control,
available leadership (in the form of Dzokhar Dudayev), an (always) vulnerable
population and ideology (nationalism, Islam and criminality) were, as Schaeffer
points out, a formula for an insurgency. Paradoxically, it was the Russians in
1994 that launched the insurgency against the newly declared independent
Chechen Republic Ichkeria. The brutal war that followed was very unpopular
among Russians—in part due to the free flow of information and the Chechen
use of large-scale terrorism. The conflict ended with the Khasavyurt Accords
negotiated by retired General (and presidential candidate) Alexander Lebed.

The interwar years (1996-99) were marked by conflict between the
moderate Chechen President Maskhadov (elected after Dudayev’s death) and
radicals such as Basayev and the foreign Arab military leader Khattab. The
Chechen government was poorly run and highly corrupt, and the nation was
ripe for the Russian invasion in 1999. Schaeffer cites good evidence that the
Russians had actually planned the invasion of Chechnya prior to a series of
bombings in Moscow, but the author does not take a strong stand on whether
the Russian government (security services) undertook the bombings, as the
now-exiled oligarch Berezovskiy claims. That said, Schaefer cautions those
who propose the idea that the Russians would commit such acts against their
own people as unthinkable not to be trapped in their own ethnocentric world
view. In any case, the Russian government clearly exploited the bombings to
boost popular support for the war.

The Russians learned some lessons from the first Chechen War which
they applied to the subsequent conflict. Beyond tactical improvements, they
systemically controlled the flow of information to the Russian public, eliminat-
ing the domestic opposition that contributed to the earlier failure. Moreover,
President Putin’s high popularity gave the Kremlin free license to conduct the
war as it saw fit, including the handling of the Beslan school terrorist attack
which resulted in the deaths of 200 children—and led to the defeat of the Chechen insurgency.

But that is not the end of the story, as is clear from the two recent terrorist acts in Moscow that were claimed by the North Caucasian insurgents and resulting in the almost daily list of casualties throughout the North Caucasus. Schaefer attempts to address why the insurgency persists and its ability to spread beyond Chechnya to much of the North Caucasus. The Russians, he submits, framed the problem as the existence of criminal and undesirable elements that are responsible for creating the instability. A strong dose of heavy-handed law enforcement and military action to root out the undesirables is the outgrowth of such thinking. Schaefer acknowledges that the high-value-target technique that the Russians employed can be useful in quelling a limited rebellion or terrorist activity, but does not address the issues contained in a deeply rooted insurgency. Khadyrov’s appeal to the local traditional Islamic elements to fight against the foreign “fundamentalists,” together with substantial economic assistance for rebuilding Grozny, resulted in relative peace in Chechnya over the past several years.

This stability, however, like the rebuilding, is only surface deep. The Russian and “khadyrovtsy” heavy-handed law enforcement has not provided security nor built trust among the population. Instead, it has resulted in a reservoir of grievances and forced many young men to join the insurgency. In the meantime, the leadership of the insurgency has spread its reach beyond the issue of Chechen independence to a mantel of a broader, fundamentalist North Caucasus Emirate. The intensity of the insurgency outside Chechnya, particularly in Dagestan, shows that the insurgents have succeeded in broadening the conflict. At this point in the narrative, Schaefer could have addressed specific features within each republic which allowed insurgency to take root. He implies that the violence is principally an outgrowth of the Chechen revolt, rather than the result of economic and social conditions, or the Kremlin’s highly centralized policies. This is a minor omission which does not detract from this otherwise thoughtful and comprehensive analysis.

In addition to providing a new perspective on the academic literature on the North Caucasus conflict, Schaefer’s work is useful to the civilian and military policymaker charged with dealing with the Russian government on counterterrorism and security issues.
Russia’s North Caucasus insurgency has gone relatively quiet, as Moscow crushed militants and many left to fight in Syria and Iraq. But longstanding grievances remain and the war may only have widened, as evidenced by the bombing of a Russian airliner in Egypt and the emergence of new groups swearing allegiance to the Islamic State in Russia itself. The export of the North Caucasus jihad to the Middle East has made Russia new enemies and transformed the problem from national to global. In Chechnya, policies toward Salafis have traditionally been even harsher. The Chechen interior ministry routinely carries out campaigns against them; reportedly, many were detained in 2015 and some disappeared late in the year. Winner of a Kirkus Star, multiple awards, and named to numerous best of lists, The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad is the most acclaimed book to have ever been written on the subject and helps both the average reader and the seasoned analyst make sense of the situation in the Caucasus. With the Crimean crisis in full swing and increasing violence throughout the region. “enormously helpful in understanding the ongoing conflict in the North Caucasus, and the gnawing feeling of dread as Russia prepares to host the 2014 Winter Olympics free of cynicism and romance. It makes one wish military analysts had taken on the Afghan puzzle with similar energy, say, a decade or so back.” - - The New York Times. Does the limited readership for Chechnya and the North Caucasus need another book? The uptick in violence and major terrorist acts in Moscow in recent months has sparked greater interest in the region, but arguably this need is more than filled by recent books and articles by such noted specialists as Thomas de Waal at Carnegie, Miriam Lanskoy (National Endowment for Democracy) together with the former Chechen Foreign Minister Akhadov, and Georgetown's Charles King. A lot, it mms out. Robert Schaefer is sufficiently steeped in the complicated ethnic-religious-historical stew of the North Caucasus; he fully understands and successfully communicates the background against which the insurgency takes place.