

Anarchists and the second Chechen war

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It is of little doubt that the total failure of any attempts to oppose the Second Chechen War was the most bitter defeat of the Russian anarchist movement during the past decade. A feeling of total powerlessness in front of the brutal realities of the Chechenyan meat-grinder was pressing so heavily on the imagination of anti-authoritarians during the first half of the decade, that the movement was only able to recover slightly when the intensity of the war gradually calmed down.

One may say, that the Second Chechen war started the 26th of August 1999, when the air force of the Russian Federation bombed Grozny and other parts of Ichkeria, and ended the 31st of October 2007, when pro-separatist websites published the announcement of Dokku Umarov, that the Ichkerian Republic had been dissolved and replaced by the Caucasus Emirate. Of course, the war still goes on and various armed attacks take place on an almost weekly basis, but the goal of the rebels is no longer the national independence of Ichkeria, but the formation of a theocratic state that would unite the whole North Caucasus. The Chechen nationalist resistance was marginalized, and in practice is no longer a significant force. This war may be seen as a continuation of the general «North-Caucasian War», which began with the attack by Islamist fighters on Dagestan the 7th of August 1999, although, even before there had been significant Islamist attacks, such as the attack by Emir Khattab against the 136th motorized battalion in Buynaksk the 22nd of December 1997. Islamists were never likely to be satisfied with the Khasyavyurt agreements of 1996. Islamism is fundamentally an anti-nationalist ideology, thus the formation of a nation state cannot be the goal of Islamists.

Thus, the coup of October 2007 means the end of one era and the beginning of a new one, therefore making now the time to make some summary of the anarchist success, or more exactly the lack of it, in the struggle against the imperialist war in the Northern Caucasus during last 8 years.

A libertarian take on Islamism

If for liberal opponents of the war an Islamist victory over nationalists within the Chechen resistance was a reason to mourn, anarchists look upon this infighting as rather neutral observers. Anarchists were never up for picking the «lesser evil» between nationalists and Islamists, or between separatism and federalism, or between Bolshevism, fascism and capitalism or any other authoritarian ideology whatsoever. Anarchist communism is not about waiting for the «right conditions», however even though it cannot be realized over night, neither can it be achieved through any type of state system. This of course does not mean that anarchists are for the Status Quo — there is always an alternative, decentralized, non-hierarchical scenario for the development of the social conflicts.

Obviously Islamist concepts in terms of sexual freedom and the position of women seem very backward, but one should also point out that in comparison with other authoritarian movements, Islamism also has its good sides. Islamism refuses any ideas on the superiority of one «nation» or «race» over another, and also proposes some limits on neoliberal capitalism, such as a ban on interest. It underlines the importance of social responsibility, although does not criticize capitalism in those terms. In Lebanon and Palestine Islamists won the trust of the oppressed through social initiatives and a principled stance against corruption. In Chechnya, the support of international Islamists played a role, but the real key reason for the victory of the Islamists within

the resistance were the common goals of Islamists throughout the entire Northern Caucasus, which provided a chance to set up a wider movement crossing national boundaries. Also in the context of a general collapse of the formerly developed society, Islam as a more archaic institution was providing some rudimentary social structure, just as it did in Afghanistan in the 1990's and in Somalia today.

Currently praise and even conversion to Islam is a trendy phenomena among Western (and not only) leftists, and there are even modern attempts of synthesis between Islam and anarchism, but one should take them with a grain of salt. Islam is obviously not the equivalent of Islamism, the former is an ancient religion which allows for a wide spectrum of interpretations, and the latter is a modern ideology, far more restrictive. But Islam is the only religion, amongst the major world religions, founded by a politician, and these origins of Islam have given it a certain modern flavour in comparison with the others. That is, it is more fit for state governance than other ancient religions. If one day there will be an anti-authoritarian Islam besides modern Islamism, there is little doubt that religious interpretations of the former will be vastly different from the interpretations of the latter.

However anarchists should also not regress to the level of demonizing Islamism. Islamism is no more dangerous, or more cruel than any other authoritarian ideology. Declarations such as «Islamism is fascism», which one can hear from sources as diverse as government authorities to certain anarchists, are just ridiculous. Obviously, modern Islam did not develop in a vacuum – it has been influenced by fascism, socialism and other Western ideologies. However, it is not a subcategory of any of them, but an ideology in its own right, and it accepts a wide range of different social structures, from the absolute monarchy of Saudi Arabia to the theocratic republic of Iran.

Islamism is not the same thing as Wahhabism. The main inspiration of all Islamists is modern Iran, which is not Wahhabist but Shiite. That is, Islamism is a modern ideology (or more exactly – many ideologies), which does not have an exact correspondence with any of the ancient branches of the religion. The Wahhabist movement, originating in 18th century Saudi Arabia, is certainly one of the sources of modern Islamist thinking, but no less important is for example the tradition of the Moslem Brotherhood, founded in Egypt in 1928, and the teachings of its main ideologue Sayyid Qutb.

There is little doubt that we will often face Islamists in a common field of struggle as, in many regions of the former Soviet Union, they are the only force which can challenge the corrupt despotism of government officials. Under these circumstances it would be a grave mistake to present Islamists as a greater evil, since the reasons for their support are obvious. It would also be a grave mistake to propose any kind of tactical cooperation with Islamists. Notwithstanding their superficial criticism of capitalism, modern Islamism is not even feudalist, but an all-out bourgeois movement with some theocratical flavor. We will not be doing any better, if all-out corrupt heirs of the Soviet nomenclature in Middle-Asia or Northern Caucasus were to be replaced by Islamists. The history of the most recent 5000 years proves, that no religion can save a human being from moral degradation, which is the clear consequence of having any authority over another.

Who won the Second Chechen War?

I make a conscious decision to not label the Islamists of Northern Caucasus as Wahhabites, since that would be a simplification – for example Dokka Umarov considers himself a follower of Sufi Islam, traditional in Chechnya. However, the Wahhabist segment played a significant role in the conflict, as it was the factor which caused the split of Chechen society during the course of the Second War.

Akhmat Kadyrov was a significant factor in the success of the Federal forces. Kadyrov was the Chief Mufti of Ichkeria, defending the interests of the Sufi school, traditional in Chechnya, against expansion of Wahhabism. Starting with October 1998, several attempts were made on his life in Chechnya, after which there was no doubt left as to the fact that Wahhabite influence in Chechnya was incompatible with his life. Thus the federal forces got a very valuable ally, whereas Maskhadov and the rest of the «half-secular» authorities were trying to avoid any clear conflict with the Islamists. After the start of the Second War, Maskhadov and the national resistance could not refuse open cooperation with the Islamists, but this alliance was far more beneficial for the latter. The situation «between the lines of fire» was a big disadvantage for the national resistance, and thus its influence had already vanished long before Maskhadov was killed, on the 8th of March 2005. During his struggle underground, Maskhadov condemned the deeds of Basayev and other commanders of the Islamist resistance against peaceful people, however he did little to interfere – not that he really even could. It is unlikely that Maskhadov was in a position to sidetrack Basayev, and Basayev was also an useful scarecrow, which could be shown to the whole world: «If you are not going to negotiate with me, you will have to talk with him».

For Kadyrov the elder, it was far easier to persuade field commanders to surrender than it was for the federal troops, as he was himself a living example of the opportunities switching sides would permit turncoats. Alu Alkhanov, the Chechen president to follow Kadyrov the elder, was the last representative of the original anti-Dudayev opposition of 1994 who held any significant position in Chechnya. Since Kadyrov the younger sidetracked Alkhanov, any leading positions in the republic have been promptly put in hands of former resistance fighters. Thus, Kadyrov the younger could move on with his goal to gain total hegemony in the republic, and start eliminating the influence of all federal forces inside the Republic. The bold and unpunished execution of the former commander of the «Mountaineer» detachment, Movdavi Baysarov, in the center of Moscow in 2006, and the expulsion of Sulim Yamadaev from the post of commander of the special battalion of the Ministry of Defence «Vostok» (East) in April of 2008 show, that Kadyrov is in a position to reach for this goal (after the first version of this article was published, Yamadaev was assassinated in Dubai – the police of the Emirates has issued an international search warrant on a number of Kadyrov's associates involved in the assassination, but obviously they have nothing to be worried about in Russia). Since Kadyrov's allies are also involved in the hostile and violent takeovers of companies controlled by Chechen businessmen outside of Chechnya, one may not describe the relation of Kadyrov the younger to federal authorities in 21st century terms, but rather it is something like the relation between a King and a Duke. The «Duke», that is Kadyrov the younger, is allowed to do whatever he likes in Chechnya, such as setting up private torture prisons on his own estates. The influence of federal authorities in Chechnya is even weaker than during Dudayev's time, as back then an opposition still existed which was capable of acting, and at times Dudayev was only in control of the capital of the republic. Chechen nationalists were refused formal sovereignty and independent foreign policies, but in exchange they received

generous federal subsidies and an amount of authority inside «their» republic, of which leaders of other subjects of Russian Federation can only dream about.

Today Chechnya is an extremely authoritarian republic, and it is impossible to estimate the real level of support that Kadyrov can claim. The fact that a number of influential field commanders are still hiding in the republic (or surrounding areas) shows, that the resistance has not completely lost its support. However there is no doubt that Kadyrov's politics, despite the many controversies, are supported by a substantial part of the population. First of all this is due to the improvement in living conditions, as well as a far better safety situation than during either of the periods of independence (1991–1994 and 1996–1999). But the support for Kadyrov the younger is also due to fact that he managed to prove that he is not a simple marionet, and that in a certain sense he is proceeding with his original nationalist project. Chechnya, is currently one of the most ethnically homogenous territories in Europe, and power (both civil and military) is completely in the hands of former national separatists. Everyone understands, that when the following cycle of weakening of the central state in Russia starts (which sooner or later will undoubtedly happen – in 50, 100 or 200 years), there is no force which can hold Chechnya in Moscow's authority.

Obviously, for anarchists, all this intrigue is secondary – hostage taking and de-facto competition between the federal troops and the resistance, as to which of them manages to kill more of its hostages, is just a detail of the general bloody tragedy. 100 victims of the hostage taking in Dubrovka and 300 in Beslan are just a minor part of the general picture of tens of thousands of victims murdered and maimed. War is always an unprincipled and bloody business, and if sometimes one manages to set the rules of the game, it is only when following the rules is beneficial for all sides of the conflict. In the case of the second Chechen war however, neither side made such attempts, thus everyone bears responsibility for what happened.

In the end, what happened in Buynaksk, Volgodosk, Moscow and Ryazan between the 31st of August and 22nd of September 1999 is also secondary. Yes, much is unclear with this history, especially in regards to Ryazan, and in case we win at one point (and most likely only in that case) all of this will be investigated. But thus far the «alternative version» of the story remains unfinished, and I am certain that things would have developed the same way even without the explosions. Public opinion was not even close to stopping the First Chechen war, which halted only after the military success of the resistance. Thus in 1999 the state could easily have gone on with the war even without the explosions.

And in the end, who won? Obviously, nationalist turncoats won – they did not receive formal independence, but their real power vastly exceeds the power of the average politician today, the latter's hands usually, being tied by a number of international agreements. There is also no doubt, that the federal authorities and Chekist (FSB operative) clique, which has consolidated all power in Russia to its hands in the past past 8 years, also won – they were forced to give all power within Chechnya to former nationalists, but now they no longer have to worry about the massive human toll of «maintaining the integrity of the country», and its consequence, a dissatisfied public. In a certain sense the Islamists also won – they have no chance to realise their political ambitions during the next decades, but they've gained a practical monopoly over the guerilla struggle in Russia. Amongst the various warring fractions, only one has undoubtedly lost – that is the nationalist resistance. And what about those who did not wage war? They are clearly on the losing side – hundreds of thousands of physically and mentally crippled people will pass the trauma of war onto second and third generations.

Lessons from the Chechen revolution

What happened in Chechnya between 1991 and 1994 is yet another example of the moral failure of national liberation ideology. The Dudayev regime was not able to stop the robbery and ethnic cleansing of and violence done to Terek Cossacks, who've lived at least since the 16th century in territories which were, probably, prior to the 1950's never settled by the Vainakh (Chechen and Ingushetian people) and other inhabitants of the republic, who found themselves in a vulnerable position after the collapse of the Soviet system of administration. I do not want to describe these events as a «genocide» as I am an opponent of the semantical inflation this word has suffered during the last 20 years, but it is a well-established fact that in that period, anyone not supported by more archaic social structures (families, clans, religion), could suffer in Chechnya.

It would be a crude simplification to describe the regime change in Chechnya in 1991 as a «coup d'état». As a matter of fact, a real revolution took place in Chechnya, perhaps the most fundamental among all of those which took place in the former Eastern Bloc 1989–1991. If in Central Europe, and especially in the USSR changes were pretty much controlled and manipulated by representatives of the nomenclatura itself, or the intelligentsia creating the opposition, in Chechnya the lower stratum of society was much more involved than in any other place. If Dudayev and his closest circle came from the nomenclature, the main protagonist of the revolution was not the discontent in this stratum, but within the most marginal elements of the society: elderly victims of the 1944 deportation, rural and unemployed youth. This was due to the character of the Soviet system in Chechnya. Whereas national quotas were carefully preserved in the highest posts of the republic, technical professions requiring a high level of specialisation were closed for Chechens. Thus, besides a few representatives of the nomenclature and intelligentsia, the vast majority of Chechens were working either in agriculture, or at the lowest level of the city economics. This was due to the high fertility rate (which in part was a consequence of the collective trauma of deportation) and limited possibilities, as well as the fact that since the mid 1980's more and more of the population had gotten involved in the marginal and criminal segments of the economy. These people never received anything from the Soviet authority, and they had every reason to hate everyone who successfully integrated into the system.

In 1991 it was payback time, and the opportunity was eagerly seized. Not only did the non-ethnic population escape from Chechnya, but a majority of the former intelligentsia escaped as well. It would, however, be a simplification to say that the conflict was purely national — besides the conflict between the ethnic and non-ethnic population, there were also conflicts between the proletariat on one side and the intelligentsia and former nomenclature on the other, and apart from the latter two a conflict between the rural population and the city dwellers. As the Soviet system did not provide the protagonists of the revolution with the necessary skills of governing a modern state, what took place in Chechnya was a process of «demodernization» with more archaic social forms (such as religion and the clan) replacing the modern ones. In the process of intermixing with modern capitalism, this took on a corrupted, deformed form. For example, in the ancient mountaineer society, the institution of slavery (which is actually hardly real slavery, thus it is even misleading to call it so) was first and foremost a form of social protection for vulnerable people, a way to feed those who had no family or clan to take care of them. Now economic interests came to play, and the traditionally humane institution of «slavery» was transformed into a highly profitable trade of humans, which in between 1996 and 1999 reached such a scale, that it became the main source of foreign currency in the republic.

According to the «Novaya Gazeta», most of the leadership of the Ichkerian republic including Dokka Umarov (but not Aslan Maskhadov) was involved in the business.

Obviously, the reason for the war of 1999 was not to «free the slaves», but first of all to «preserve integrity of the country». The reason for the war of 1999 was certainly not the natural resources of the republic, as the amount of oil and gas in Chechnya will never compensate the massive bill the war has created thus far. But one should also not ignore the fact that the slave trade was one of the key factors in gaining the Russian public sympathy for the war. Separatists traditionally blame the Russian special services for provoking the conflicts between Chechnyan fractions and for their involvement in slave trade, and there is some evidence to that. However, it is hard to take seriously claims that Basayev was an FSB agent — similar to conspiracy theories around 9/11, these theories totally deny the possibility that Muslims themselves could form significant movements against imperialistic ambitions.

The theories of Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov, who was the most important Chechen political scientist and writer, living abroad during Soviet times, regarding the relatively anti-authoritarian historical «warrior democracy» of Chechens did not hold enough influence to direct the revolution in an anti-authoritarian direction. No archaic anti-authoritarian social system can survive, when surrounded by modern capitalism. There are no paths back to the past. In the end, such attempts were hardly even made — in reality Dudayev just wanted to be a small Yeltsin, just as Yeltsin wanted to be a big Dudayev. The attack against the Chechen parliament in 1992 was repeated by Yeltsin in Moscow a year later. In June of 1993, Dudayev was already shooting the city hall in Grozny and meeting the opposition with tanks.

First of all, the example of the Chechen revolution is a good argument against those Marxists (especially left communists), who believe that only the material conditions and class composition of the movement defines its destiny, that communism appears somewhat on its own if these factors fit. It doesn't work like that — emancipation is impossible without anti-authoritarian ideas spreading to the minds of the wider population. Besides the material conditions, ideas are also necessary. It is not an issue of the «backwardness» of Chechnya — as a matter of fact in Soviet Chechnya industrial production was more developed than in plenty of other republics. However in Soviet Chechnya, the mostly Russian industrial proletariat was in a privileged position compared to the mostly rural and lumpen Chechen proletariat.

Obviously, there was nothing exceptionally horrible taking place in Chechnya 1991–1994, nothing that could justify the massacre that followed. Post-colonial processes against former representatives of the privileged stratum were much more brutal in the Algeria and Zanzibar of the 1960's. What happened in Chechnya 1991–1994 is a good remainder for anarchists, that not every revolution is an anarchist one, and it is not enough for the revolution to be violent, not exclusively ethnic and that the lowest stratum of society be involved. Besides the second and third characteristics, it is also necessary that anti-authoritarian ideas be shared by a substantial part of the people — otherwise it is likely that the story of the Chechen revolution will be repeated. Bloody conflicts between the various fractions of the new elite, and the unpunished banditry and slave trading whose victims are often from ethnic minorities (in the Chechen case Terek Cossacks and other Russians, Nogais and others), and at times even members of the Chechnyan majority.

Anarchist resistance against the Second Chechen War

Most likely, even without the explosions of 1999, the anti-war movement would have been miserable, but afterwards it did barely exist. It took 3 months after the beginning of the war for the anti-war movement to gather enough courage to get out in the streets. The first people to demonstrate in Moscow in December of 1999 were Anarchists. Apparently some sorry pickets had already taken place in other cities. Soon after other groups appeared as well (liberals and Trotskists), and the question of cooperation became an issue. In this respect, the movements in Moscow and St. Petersburg developed in different directions.

In St. Petersburg, all anti-war groups (anarchists, liberals and Trotskists) agreed upon a common anti-war picket, in which everyone was to participate with their own political symbols. In Moscow liberals did not want political symbols present in the pickets, but due to nature of the slogans (instead of «No war but the class war», there was «For negotiations between Putin and Maskhadov»), their weekly picket had a liberal flavour.

The question of bringing political symbols is many-sided, and as a matter of fact in recent years there have been plenty of cases in which anarchists have seen their role amongst the social movements in Moscow as defenders of the autonomy of protest against the intrusion of political parties. In such a situation, it makes sense to demand that nobody bring political symbols, anarchists included. But when the proposed solutions themselves are fundamentally diverging according to ideological paradigms, as is the case with the conflict in the Caucasus, anarchist symbols in actions help underline the differences between the solutions proposed by anarchists and those proposed by other political groups.

Separate anarchist anti-war pickets in Moscow had already died out by the spring of 2000, and a small number of anarchists began to join the weekly liberal picket. Autonomous Action in Moscow concluded that participation in a weekly picket is merely a symbolic act, as the small numbers in a picket do not correspond with the widespread anti-war sentiment in the rest of society – during the first half of the decade, independent opinion polls showed that, 30–50% of those asked were against Putin's political practices in the Northern Caucasus. That is, such a picket is more a show-off of one's own «moral superiority» towards surrounding society, than a real attempt to change the political situation in the Northern Caucasus.

This is why the Moscow group of Autonomous Action decided to look for other means of resistance. At first, we gathered humanitarian aid and spread stickers with the address of the website of the Kazan anarchists, which had advice and legal aid for those wanting to avoid military service. Then, since 2005, we began the «Deserter Day»-festival.

The last revival of the anti-war movement took place in the autumn of 2002, when special forces attacked hostage-takers in Dubrovka with gas which killed more than 100 of the hostages. Back then, Autonomous Action once again joined the Moscow Anti-War Committee, dominated by pro-Western liberals. However, this resurgence was to be short-lived, and the last strike against «anti-war unity» was when the Moscow Anti-War Committee gave a platform to 2004 presidential election candidates such as Irina Khakamada. Anti-war sentiment in Russian society was always spread beyond the liberal intelligentsia, which sympathizes with US politics and neoliberalism, but liberal participants in the committee never figured this out, and eventually Autonomous Action left the committee again, this time for good.

We were never willing to cooperate with liberal parties, no matter if they attempted to participate in or boycott the elections, but we are ready to cooperate with those Non-Governmental

Organisations which are not mere a front-organisation of some political party, even if the members of these organisations themselves are mostly liberals. Unfortunately people from the Anti-War Committee of Moscow, as many other political figures in Russia, did not value the political independence of their own organisations.

Deserter day festival

Already back in 2001 the Moscow group of Autonomous Action picked the struggle against the draft as a tactical part of the anti-war campaign. Obviously we do not support a professional army but rather a «Black guard», a volunteer anti-bourgeois militia, however the draft was the easiest way of finding a common ground between the Russian and Chechnyan working class. The name of the festival, which has been organised annually since 2005 (and outside Moscow since 2008), «Deserter day», was a conscious provocation, as desertion generally makes the Russian news only when desperate conscripts escape garrisons with assault rifles and run amok, killing random people. We can understand their despair, although we do prefer more rational ways to desert as the only rightful reaction against an imperialistic war. We picked up the label «Deserter day» in order to declare our main position, and to underline the dead-end of reforms such as «a professional army» or «negotiations with Maskhadov». Only by declaring such a principled position, could we develop an autonomous anarchist political subject in Russia, whereas otherwise we would have been lost in the amorphous general mass of liberals and «leftists» (whose «leftism» is often suspect).

The Deserter day was a success. The original goal was not starting a tradition but in 2009 the 5th edition was organised in Nizhni-Novgorod (the first time the festival was organised outside Moscow was in 2008 in Kirov). Deserter day has also become a model for other large anarchist convergences which soon followed; Black Petrograd first organised in 2004, the Libertarian forum of 2006, the Gender Festival of 2008. Eventually, these kind of convergences replaced the conferences of formal anarchist organisations as the main form of inter-city meetings in the movement. This was a fundamental transformation in the Russian anarchist movement. Obviously, having visited the Deserter day festival, people were way more hopeful than after yet another weekly anti-war picket, thus at least in this respect new tactic was a success.

Although the first action day in 2004, which a year later was declared to be «Deserter day» , was organised on the day of the 60th anniversary of the deportation of Chechens and Ingushetians, gradually the anti-war theme moved to background, and the festival in Kirov in 2008 was practically an anti-military event. The intensity of the conflict has been decreasing for years and the less news there is of new attacks, the less the problem is in the minds of anarchists and society at large. Paradoxically, the defeat of the anarchist anti-war struggle opened new directions for activity. As the North-Caucasian conflict is no longer daily news, anarchists can get involved in more fruitful activity than the anti-war campaign, which was judged to be a defeat since the very beginning. This only because the «significant minority» of population with anti-war sentiment does not have real significance, if there is a lack of structures which can organise resistance.

The Defeat of the campaign against the Second Chechen War

Neither anarchists, nor other anti-war groups have such structures. During the times of the Perestroika, the destiny of the anarchist movement became tied with the destiny of the general democratic movement, and nobody was prepared for the pace and insolence of Yeltsin's treachery. For the sake of liberals, one must say that the best of them understood what was going on already well before the beginning of the First Chechen War. However, after many years during which the liberals were building the support base for the falsely democratic segment of the nomenclature, masses either stayed behind the segment, or became totally politically apathic while attempting to survive during the economic shock therapy of the beginning of the 90's. It was too late to change course, and anarchists, «democratic leftists» and «liberals with a conscience» were left without a mass support. This state of affairs had already become clear during the First Chechen War. Back then, despite the anti-war propaganda in the mass media owned by oligarchs, who hoped to gain personal dividends from Yeltsin by blackmailing him with the threat of popular opinion, the scale of anti-war protests was a modest one. In general, there are hardly any successes in history in terms of stopping imperialist wars through the effort of the population of the imperialist countries alone. When anti-imperialist movements gained an upper hand (for example in Vietnam), most of the sacrifices were always suffered by guerilla movements.

In Chechnya, odds were too uneven from the very beginning. The victory of the resistance in the first war was a miracle, which has no analogy in modern history, thus it is of no surprise that it was not repeated in the second war. The reasons for the defeat of the resistance were already laid out in 1996, when during the Khasavyurt negotiations the Ichkerian government failed to gain a recognition of sovereignty from Russia. That is, despite the miracle of the victory in the fight over Grozny, in the diplomatic battle the resistance only managed to reach a draw. It is pretty likely that both Maskhadov and Basayev figured this out, but only the latter decided to keep on waging war, while the former understood that the resistance had already completely exhausted its reserves. Perhaps Maskhadov hoped that some miracle would result in such a deep crisis in Russia, that the country would collapse altogether and establishment of Ichkerian independence de jure with the recognition of other countries would become possible.. But such a miracle did not took place.

Right now, due to the succesful «localization» of the conflict, meaning that it is waged mostly by the army and military structures manned by local population, the main losses are among the local population, followed by recruits(contract soldiers) and rarely amongst amongst inhabitants of other regions or conscripts. and even more seldom are recruits from other regions being killed. Also due to the strenghtening of the control over mass media, the war has practically disappeared from the TV screens, and for a vast majority of the population, it simply does not exist. The only chance for the resistance right now is to count with some global crisis, which will disintegrate Russia completely and stop the influx of money from the federal budget to the local elite. However the current global energy crisis is only strenghtening the federal authority in Russia, due to the vast reserves of oil and gas in Russia.

The stubbornness of the St. Petersburg anarchists, who, almost without a pause co-organised anti-war pickets for 8 years in a row deserves a praise. There were times, when there were less than 10 people in the picket and it seemed to be a show of pointless masochism, but at one point the numbers of picketeers started growing, and in the period between 2004 and 2007 it was regularly attended by dozens of people, of whom at times 90% were anarchists. St. Petersburg

anarchists managed to reclaim a space in the city, where every week any local citizen could come to and have a talk with anarchists, and acquire some anarchist press as well. This was possible only due to stubbornness and to some level a self-sacrifice as well. More than once the picket had to be violently defended, first with sticks and later on with knives as well. At the end one of the very early participants of the picket had to leave Russia altogether, when the state apparatus started to use one of the cases of self-defence as a pretext for repressing the movement as a whole.

In the end, the fatal problems of the St. Petersburg anti-war movement were not due to its tactics, but due to its positions, which eventually split and soon after totally annihilated the oldest anarchist group in the former Soviet Union at that point, the St. Petersburg Anarchist League (PLA), which for years was the most active section of Association of Anarchist Movements (ADA), which in turn was for a while a member of the International of Anarchist Federations IFA (or do you mean International Anarchist Federation).

Originally, the St. Petersburg anti-war pickets were not initiated by the PLA but by «unaffiliated anarchists». However, PLA members and positions were prominent in the picket, especially as time went on. The position of PLA was always that of support for the resistance (with a critique on attacks against civilians), as the PLA was looking for the unification of all possible anti-Putin forces, with the approach «first we get rid of them, and then settle issues between each other». The Moscow Autonomous Action never wanted to accept such «ecumenism», our basic position was always that nobody would support us, unless we can present a valid alternative to the current regime. If, at times, we collaborated with other anti-war initiatives, it was always only on the condition, that we would present a strictly anarchist alternative to imperialist wars — that is the fraternization of the proletariat from both of the sides, against their own bosses.

The position of the PLA is partially justified as, after all, in 1994 it was the federal forces, who started the wide-scale massacre. The internal conflict in Chechnya had started a long time before, but Yeltsin raised the scale of warfare to a completely new level. In order to convince people that an alternative exists, one has to present it — but when one looks at an «united front» from the sidelines, the usual impression is that the people involved do not know what they want in the first place. Today the whole Russian opposition is collapsing, and only anarchists are on the upswing — this is a sign that we were right, when we insisted on keeping our own positions in regards to the war in Chechnya. If we had merged with some «united front» back in 2000, we simply would no longer exist.

Defeat is not end of the struggle

Thus, although the main culprits of the escalation of the conflict were the federal authorities, the Moscow Autonomous Action never supported the nationalist, nor the Islamist elements of the Chechen resistance. We were always proposing a third alternative — the unification of the proletariat from both sides of the conflict, against their leaders. But in practice, since beginning of the first war this «third alternative » was practically nonexistent in the region. People in Chechnya were too busy fighting for their individual survival to also fight against their government. In some sense, the movement against the disappearance of people, where unarmed women dominate is now such a «third force» (apparently according to the North-Caucasian norms, it is not worthy of a man to plea for something from authorities without an assault rifle). Also such a movement is that of the inhabitants of Makachkala (the capital of Dagestan), who after collapse

of the city infrastructure due to the corruption of local authorities were building barricades in the winter of 2007–2008, apparently independent of any politicians. Unfortunately, although one has been seeing such initiatives in the Northern Caucasus already for some years, the anarchist movement in Russia is not strong enough to form any kind of alliance with them. The third example is the movement of the «mothers of Beslan», organised by relatives of the victims of the 2005 hostage crisis and resulting massacre. Due to the general political situation which makes punishing the people who ordered the start of the attack and the shooting of a school full of hostages, with bazookas and tanks, rather impossible this movement has gradually degenerated into a semi-racist anti-Ingushetian movement not harmful to the authorities.

Due to the lack of such a «third force», the position of supporting the resistance is of course very attractive to radicals, as bearded guys with assault rifles obviously look more cool than elderly ladies with placates of their disappeared sons. Eventually, some elements of the PLA found a common language with anti-Arab and anti-Russian racist Boris Stomakhin, who is currently doing a 5 year prison stint for his ideas, sentenced among others things for «humiliation of human dignity of a group of persons due to their nationality». A crime he has definitely committed, but which does not necessarily mean that he had to be sent to prison (in my opinion having his ass kicked would have been enough). The Anti-Russian (or «Russofobic» as it is called in Russia) stance is, if not unavoidable then, at least a logical end for anyone who began to support the nationalist or Islamist resistance. Thus in the end, the anarchists in St. Petersburg went in different directions, and the anti-war picket was inherited mainly by those, who at first refused internationalism, and later anarchism altogether. Some comrades from St. Petersburg criticized us, claiming that in Moscow we «do not give proper attention to the anti-war theme», but instead of ritualistic protests we attempted to find some new, creative approaches, some new ways to make an impact. We never denied the importance of the Chechen issue, but the existence of the question alone is not enough to redefine priorities. In the end, in terms of results one can not consider either the St. Petersburg, or the Moscow approach as succesful, but at least in Moscow we were able to establish certain ways of action, which eventually helped local anarchist movements/groups? to reach a new level in terms of organisation and action.

Besides the approaches of the Moscow Autonomous Action and the St. Petersburg League of Anarchists, there was also a third anti-war approach. The Anarcho-Syndicalist KRAS-AIT made anti-war stickers and joined a number of anti-war actions, but they never focused on anti-war actions completely. They preferred to find conflicts in the work place and not only, which could open roads for such a social movement, which could challenge capitalism, and thus also such consequences of capitalism as imperialist wars. This makes sense to a certain extent — it is clear, that anti-war actions, in the form they took place, were more symbolic deeds for cleansing one's conscience than real means of stopping the war. But on the other hand, it is no doubt that in the beginning of the millenium, the Chechen war was the most current problem in the Russian society, and Moscow Autonomous Action decided that it would be a crime to be silent, even though there was little chance of influencing what was going on. By means of organising a protest, we could at least break the situation of total silence in general public, and to find those few people, who were ready to act against all odds. It is easy to be an anarchist during revolutionary times, but those heroic deeds of past anarchists which we now envy, are easy when you have a feeling that the society surrounding you is supporting and approving them. The most genuine revolutionaries are those, who do not lose their spirit even in conditions of a total isolation. We almost lost our spirit, but eventually we passed the trial.

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Pyotr Afos
Anarchists and the second Chechen war
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