

When The Chechen Miracle Kick-Started The Russian 'Path of Redemption'

By Scott Ritter

In my recent visit, I met with people who once fought a bitter war against Moscow, but are now the country's fiercest defenders

Over the course of 24 days – from December 28 to January 20 – I was able to take in the sights and sounds of Moscow and Saint Petersburg, as these two cities celebrated both the New Year and Russian Orthodox Christmas (I also got to experience the freezing cold of the Russian winter, which was very much part of the experience!)

I viewed my winter sojourn in Russia as an extension of the journey I began in May 2023, when I embarked on a mission of trying to discover the country's essence in a manner that could be made discernible to my fellow Americans as sort of an antidote to the poison of Russophobia. The combined experiences of observing the Christmas Eve service hosted by Kirill, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in the center of Moscow and watching Pyotr Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker performed live in St. Petersburg's renowned Mikhailosky Theatre on Christmas Day, January 7, helped ground me in the importance of family and culture in the lives of the Russian people.

Russia's mettle, however, can't be measured by its social and cultural accomplishments alone. The true test of a people comes only when the foundation of their society is threatened, and the nation is called upon to rally together in its collective defense. Amidst all the holiday celebration and fanfare that I witnessed there lurked an underlying reality that Russia was very much a nation at war. This war was defined in the mindset of those people I met not so much in terms of a Russian-Ukrainian conflict as it was an existential struggle between Russia and the collective West – led by the US – in which Ukraine is being used as a proxy.

Let there be no doubt, everyone I spoke with about this conflict was weary. They wanted the fighting to end, and to be able to get on with their lives. But they were all likewise united in their conviction that the war could only end in a Russian victory that resolved once and for all the issues that underpinned the current conflict – blocking NATO expansion into Ukraine, eliminating a Ukrainian armed force that has become a de facto extension of NATO military power, and the extermination of the odious ideology of Ukrainian ultra-nationalism as defined by the legacy of Stepan Bandera and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists.

To a person, the Russians I spoke with were insistent that the time for compromise had long passed and that, given the investment in blood and treasure that Moscow had made to date, there is no alternative to a decisive victory. Yes, the Russian people are tired, but they also understand that the war is a necessary evil which has to be endured all the way to a final comprehensive victory if there is ever to be a chance of a lasting peace. I was able to glimpse the character of the Russian people during the portions of my sojourn to Russia that took me out of its two largest

metropolitan centers, and to the south of the country – into what I have come to call the “*Russian Path of Redemption*” – Chechnya, Crimea, Kherson, Zaporozhye, Donetsk, and Lugansk.

Redemption is the action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil. In the case of Russia’s conflict with Kiev, the six named territories all play a role that precisely matches this definition. Of them, Chechnya stands out as having no geographic, historic, ethnic, religious, or political connection with Ukraine. And yet it is with Chechnya that the Russian Path of Redemption begins.

It was the scene of two bloody wars between Moscow and separatists fought between 1994 and the early 2000s (with the final counter-guerilla operations concluding in 2009) that killed tens of thousands of people. The fighting that transpired was bloody and ruthless; little mercy was shown by either side. By 2002, Chechnya’s capital city, Grozny, had been completely leveled.

The rancor and bitterness produced by a conflict that witnessed so much violence between people with different religions, cultures, and languages made the notion of reconciliation all but impossible to imagine. Add to this was the fact that the Chechens possessed a history that lent itself to prejudice and resentment against the Russians, even without the horrors of the two wars. The exile of the Chechen people by Joseph Stalin’s Soviet government during the Second World War saw nearly 610,000 Chechen and Ingush forcibly evicted from their homes and relocated to Central Asia, where nearly a quarter of them died due to poor conditions. The survivors were allowed to return to their homeland in 1957, following Nikita Khrushchev’s reforms. But the resentment generated by the years of suffering was passed down through the generations that followed.

And yet, despite all the negative energy generated by the tragic history of Russian-Chechen relations, the two peoples have found a pathway to peace and prosperity. A visitor to Grozny today is greeted by a city that has been completely rebuilt from the ruins, a place where Russians and Chechens live side-by-side in peace, respectful of their respective linguistic, cultural, and religious differences. I call this transformation “*the Chechen miracle*”, and yet divine intervention had nothing to do with it. Instead, the Chechen and Russian people were blessed by the leadership of two remarkable men – Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the Chief Mufti (religious leader) of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Akhmad Kadyrov – who realized that continued violence would only hurt the people they were tasked with serving, and that the best chance for peace was for the two to sit down a talk in an effort to find a pathway to peace.

They succeeded.

Today, throughout the Chechen Republic, the visages of Vladimir Putin and Akhmad Kadyrov can be seen on display, side-by-side, in recognition of the role both men played in overcoming the history of violence, mistrust, and resentment that had defined the relationship, and instead forging a new path forward governed by the notion of mutual respect and shared prosperity. The success of their joint work is manifest in the fact that while the Chechen people today maintain their distinct identity, defined in large part by the Muslim faith, they very much identify themselves

as being part of the Russian Federation, something that was unthinkable back in the 1990's when they fought for independence from Russia.

While in Chechnya, I had the opportunity to meet with several prominent Chechen figures, including former deputy interior minister Apti Alaudinov, State Duma member Adam Delimkhanov, chairman of the Chechen republican parliament Magomed Daudov, and the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov. What these four individuals all had in common was that, at some point in their lives, they had taken up arms against Russia. But they were also united in the fact that, at some point during their resistance against Russia during the Second Chechen War, they realized that the cause of an independent Chechen Republic had been hijacked by foreign jihadists whose passion for violence had superseded any logical notion of Chechen nationalism, and instead created the conditions where continued conflict threatened to consume the Chechen people.

“We have witnessed for ourselves how outside parties sought to infect us with their foreign ideology in order to further their larger struggle against Russia,” I was told. *“We ended up realizing that the best way to protect ourselves from being destroyed by these foreign agents was to align ourselves with Russia. In doing so, we discovered that the Russians shared our same desire to live in peace, free from outside manipulation. This is why we have made fighting alongside Russia in the Special Military Operation such a high priority. We see in the Banderist forces in Ukraine the same evil that we saw in the foreign jihadists who came to fight in Chechnya. We worked with Russia to destroy this evil back in the early 2000's, and today we are working with our Russian brothers to destroy the same evil as it has been manifested in Ukraine.”*

Actions speak louder than words. Daudov was responsible for organizing, training, and dispatching formations of Chechen fighters to the Donbass, where they played a central role in the liberation of Lugansk, the siege of Mariupol, and in the heavy fighting that took place in Zaporozhye and Donetsk. Delemkhanov commanded Chechen forces in Mariupol, and Alaudinov was given command of joint Russian-Chechen forces in Lugansk, where the courage and commitment of the Chechen soldiers played a major role in Russia's battlefield victories. In conversations over lunch, Ramzan Kadyrov underscored the narrative described by each of these Chechen leaders – that the Chechens considered themselves to be part of the Russian nation and would willingly sacrifice themselves in defense of Russia. And, as if to drive this point home, Ramzan Kadyrov invited me to join him on stage after lunch as he addressed the 25,000-strong Grozny garrison about the conflict in Ukraine.

If someone had suggested in 2002 that there would come a time in the not-to-distant future where 25,000 Chechen warriors could be assembled in Grozny not for the purpose of fighting against the Russians, but instead fighting side-by-side with the Russians against a common enemy, they would have been dismissed as delusional. And yet I bore personal witness to this very phenomenon, watching in amazement as Ramzan Kadyrov exhorted these heavily armed men to fight for the memory of his father, for their faith, and for the cause of greater Russia.

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