



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

By Robert W. Schaefer

Praeger Security International, 2010

303 pp. \$59.95

ISBN: 978-0-313-38634-3

Reviewed by

JOHN W. SUTHERLIN

Winston Churchill famously remarked that Russia is “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.” That would make Chechnya, by virtue of being inside Russia, nearly impossible to figure out. Yet Robert Schaefer attempts to do exactly that in one of the most important works on Chechnya’s insurgency to date. His analysis is relevant to all such conflicts as Schaefer provides unambiguous recommendations on how to cope with all insurgencies. This is critical to the entire work since “insurgencies cannot be viewed like other conflicts because they are a fundamentally different type of warfare” (p. 2).

According to Schaefer, there are “four prerequisites” that must be present before a particular country sees an insurgency develop: lack of government control or illegitimate government (pp. 13–15), a common ideology (pp. 16–17), effective leadership for the insurgents (pp. 17–19), and a vulnerable population (p. 19). The last of these is most important to Schaefer. Insurgencies (and the counterinsurgencies) are fights over controlling populations and giving them something of value to fight for.

Next, Schaefer describes “common characteristics of insurgencies” (pp. 20–30). Many will read this section and others and wonder why the literature review is so light. Simply put, why is there so little provided to justify these claims? In many ways, this section is merely a foundation for the chapter on terrorism (pp. 31–48). Schaefer

puts terrorism in the context of being one of many tools of insurgents. He then brings in the specific case study of Russia and Chechnya as an example of how the larger power has misread the smaller one and is, in fact, fighting the wrong kind of war. He firmly asserts, “The Chechen insurgency is alive and well and in better shape than it has been for much of the last 400 years” (p. 48). That is a long way away from what Vladimir Putin claims.

The next couple of chapters on Chechen history and the centuries-old conflict with Russia seem a bit out of place when first reading the book. This was a concern because *The Insurgency in Chechnya* has no consistent methodology, but employs a hodgepodge of histories, personal experiences, and a modest literature review to buttress Schaefer’s contentions. Still, by the time chapter five is presented, Schaefer is back on solid ground. From 1980, the reader gets the sense that he could provide a minute-by-minute account of the Russian-Chechen conflict. He is able to tie the prerequisites and common characteristics sections with those on Chechen history and the Russian responses to provide a succinct summation: “To say that there had been a lack of government control in Chechnya prior to the declaration of independence would be a gross understatement . . . there was no Russian control” (p. 122). Thus, a political vacuum was fostered and external (that is, Turkey and Saudi Arabia) and Islamic extremists crammed the region with weapons and an ideology: “Wahhabism first entered the North Caucasus through Dagestan around 1986, although it would take another ten years before it would reach Chechnya” (p. 163).

When Schaefer reaches chapter eight on the Russian counterinsurgency (pp. 195–232), the reader will understand why earlier chapters were needed. Schaefer details Russia’s counterinsurgency strategies and even provides a diagram (p. 201) to offer more explanatory power to his argument. But as he describes the Russian response, he is quick to point out why this has been inadequate to end the hostilities. When Russia sought to convince the “uncommitted population to support the war . . . it was effective in mobilizing those pro-Russian groups that lived in the North Caucasus region” (p. 204) and thus use counterinsurgency tactics against what it publicly called terrorists. It is only when Russia began using counterterrorism tactics that Chechens turned the tables.

However, Chechnya turned the tables internally (with locals) and internationally (using terrorist organizations that were willing to lend support or tactics in exchange for an Islamic-based agenda being adopted). Schaefer calls this the rise of the “Caucasus Emirate” (p. 233). Here, the objectives (at least in the short term) were distorted. With a religious ideology and external funding, Chechnya could remain relevant to the Russians and the world by “conducting well-planned attacks on high value targets” (p. 249). Furthermore, it could be a place where those leaving the fight in Afghanistan or Iraq could go and fight similarly using remarkably similar rhetoric.

But for how long? True, this conflict has been on and off for centuries. How important is it to the West? For Russia, it is vital that the West remain hooked to Caucasus natural gas and allow Russia to frame Chechnya as an internal matter with outside terrorists. This allows them a free hand, but will it work? Schaefer notes that each side has different objectives and is fighting a different war (p. 273). The Chechen insurgents remain elusive and “merely continue to move from one area to the next to avoid capture and attack government targets at will” (p. 281).

This impossible situation seems destined to continue because as long as there is just one insurgent, he can claim the righteousness of his cause and inflict damage to innocents. For Russia, every lost bridge, road, school, factory, or, in the worst case, human fatality to the insurgents is a nagging reminder that its legitimacy is being diluted and damaged.

Schaefer’s work reflects the paradoxical world of insurgencies and counterinsurgencies using a real case study better than anything I have encountered lately. In terms of analyzing the North Caucasus region, there may be nothing as useful. Undoubtedly, there are lessons for U.S. policymakers here. Schaefer demonstrates that even mysterious riddle-laden enigmas can be understood. **JFQ**

John W. Sutherlin, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science and Co-Director of the Social Science Research Laboratory at the University of Louisiana at Monroe.