

A Russian expert's view of N. Caucasus conflict

by Mark Burdman

During August, as the conflict in the Northern Caucasus escalated, *EIR* has had a number of discussions with Pavel Felgenhauer, the military correspondent for the *Segodnya* daily and one of Russia's leading military/strategic commentators.

From the outset of the fighting, Felgenhauer expressed strong disagreement with those Russian government circles, typified by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who declared soon after being appointed on Aug. 9, that the rebellion in Dagestan would be crushed "in a couple of days." Felgenhauer has foreseen a long and bitter conflict, with Russian forces bogged down. On Aug. 23, he told *EIR* that "the conflict in Dagestan will last months, maybe years. There is a military stalemate, a kind of 'Verdun,' the bloody World War I battleground in France.

He has been extremely critical of the way the war has been carried out by the Russian side, first under Interior Ministry direction, and after mid-August, by the Defense Ministry and Army. The Russian forces have shown a lack of discipline, training, and coherence. The rebels' typical strategy is to take a position, and let the Russians attack and suffer heavy losses. By the third week of August, estimates were that 50 Russians had died and 200 had been wounded.

This problem is to some extent caused by the nature of the current leadership in Moscow. Felgenhauer sees President Boris Yeltsin and his immediate entourage as a "kleptocracy," which has committed "massive theft and the stealing of Russia." It fears that it will be prosecuted should it lose power, and is therefore "desperate" to hold onto power, possibly by imposing rule by emergency decree, or annulling parliamentary and Presidential elections.

Such a leadership has neither the competence nor commitment to wage a war effectively. The only thing that would change matters positively from a Russian standpoint, would be "a change in the government and a change in the military leadership." This change is forthcoming, insists Felgenhauer, because the regime's unpopularity is creating a "revolutionary" dynamic in Russia.

But under present conditions, Chechen "Islamic" rebel leader Shamil Bassayev and his backers see a crucial moment of opportunity, for expanding the conflict into "a big war against Russia," Felgenhauer warns. "Their intention is not only to direct the war eastward, toward the Caspian Sea, to obtain more control over oil pipelines, but also westward, to create a 'North Caucasus and Islamic Republic' from the

Black Sea to the Caspian Sea. They take their model from the 19th century, from the Islamic guerrilla leader Shamil. Then, the British backed the North Caucasian rebels. Lord Palmerston advocated the idea, in the period of the Crimean War, that there should be a major landing operation, to oust Russian from the Caucasus. But, for his own reasons, the French Emperor Napoleon was against it, and the plan never was activated. But the British always backed Shamil."

Today, too, there is a large potential for "internationalizing" the conflict. According to Felgenhauer, the danger does not come from NATO as a whole, because NATO, for the moment, is so bogged down in the Balkans ("Kosovo is like Somalia"). "The main destabilizing factor in the Caucasus and Central Asia, is Turkey. . . . The Turkish Armed Forces could certainly be used in these regions. . . . The Turkish authorities are certainly turning a blind eye to anti-Russian groups inside Turkey who are providing money and help to Bassayev's forces. This is what introduces the possibility of internationalization of the conflict." The earthquake in Turkey, and the political-economic fall-out from it, introduces an incalculable element into this picture.

British play a central role

"Here in Moscow, it is presumed that there is a foreign factor in the conflict," Felgenhauer said on Aug. 16. "One of our leading strategists, retired Army Gen. Mahmoud Gareyev, who now heads a non-governmental military academy, said over the weekend, that the way to fight this war, is to go after the foreign sources of support." Gareyev is a disciple of the late Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, the individual most responsible for architecting military strategy in the Soviet Union during the 1980s.

Felgenhauer attributes great importance to the charge by Chechen President Aslan Mashkadov, in August, that Bassayev's offensive was the result of a plan concocted by "the Western secret services," aimed against both Russia and himself, with the goal of driving Russia out of the Caucasus.

Felgenhauer perceives a central role being played by the British against Russia. On Aug. 23, he told *EIR*: "I know that there are certain Western circles who have an 'active' position, they want to break Russia apart. There are certain places in charge of this policy. The main problem comes from Britain. British policies are rather destructive. . . . I have noticed a pattern of surprisingly bad reporting about Russia from certain Western quarters, such as the extreme hostility one finds against [former Prime Minister Yevgeni] Primakov. The worst reporting comes from the British press. A recent example was *Jane's Defence Weekly*, making the claim that Russia was smuggling S-300s into Yugoslavia. That's obvious bullshit, but it makes Russia look like a real bad villain. The British press has had many such 'leaks.' The origin of them is obviously the British government. It comes from the government and intelligence community. British intelligence is constantly staging stories, to discredit Russia."