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Behind the Breaking News

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BEHIND THE BREAKING NEWS
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Today marks the 56th anniversary of the day Stalin began the deportations of the Chechens and several other North Caucasian nations to Central Asia. Among the worst crimes of the Stalin era, the deportations were accompanied by massacres and repression. Hundreds of thousands died of suffocation, disease, exposure, and starvation. Those deemed "untransportable" -- children, the elderly, pregnant women -- were massacred on the spot. As a result, the Chechen nation declined by 25 percent. The survivors were branded a "punished people."

To this day, not one person has stood trial for those crimes. As we remember the victims of Stalinist terror, we sympathize deeply with the victims of Mr. Putin's current massacre and doubt whether the international community has any intention of bringing him and the others responsible to justice. With that in mind, we bring you this article from our colleague, Prof. Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

No Indictment for Moscow War Criminals?

By Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

Instead of endorsing him prematurely as President Boris Yel'tsin's legitimate successor, the international community might ask whether Russia's acting president, Vladimir V. Putin, should be indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Putin may be a hero in Russia for his no-holds-barred campaign against Chechnya. But on the world stage he should be identified for what he is -- a man responsible for offenses against international human rights conventions. Perhaps former President Yel'tsin might also be in the dock, but he might be excused, for signs of faltering faculty and ill health. Putin, on the other hand, enjoys all his faculties and has used them to manage a war against Chechnya that deliberately targets civilians for destruction. In fact, in January Putin adopted a policy that treats all Chechen males aged 10 to 60 as combatants and orders

their arrest.

The United States must use its clout to push for an immediate end to the fighting and an investigation into allegations of atrocities against civilians. Those responsible for the crimes must be brought to justice. The most serious outrages to come to light so far include the following:

- Russian soldiers round up civilians from captured villages and detain them with complete disregard for due process in "filtration centers," or concentration camps.
- According to former inmates, the civilians held in such camps are routinely beaten, tortured, and raped.
- There have been many allegations of executions of Chechen civilians at the hands of Russian soldiers. Human Rights Watch verified 41 such cases in just one area of Grozny.
- There have been repeated allegations of the use of chemical weapons, as well as confirmed indiscriminate shelling against populated areas, the extensive use of mines which will plague civilians for years to come, and the employment of devastating weaponry such as fuel-air bombs against Grozny.
- Based on their nationality, Chechen civilians are routinely denied the right of free passage across what are ostensibly internal borders between Chechnya and other Russian regions.
- In contravention of international norms, Russian forces have bombed humanitarian aid convoys and humanitarian corridors, the only escape routes from the Grozny slaughterhouse.

Aside from those crimes perpetrated by specific individuals, there is the general public tolerance of this bloodbath. Perhaps most Russian political and military leaders, along with most directors of Russian television stations and newspapers, should be held responsible, since most have supported Putin's war. But it was Putin and a few others at the top who gave the orders for months of indiscriminate attacks on Chechen civilians.

Most Russian voters seem to have endorsed Putin and his war. They, like most Serbians and Javanese in 1999, have shown how hollow are the claims that human rights have now gained universal acceptance. To be sure, most Russians, like Serbs and Javanese, have limited access to objective reports on the atrocities committed in their behalf. But the racist attitudes of many Russians toward dark-skinned persons provide fertile ground for regime propaganda. Like Serbs and Javanese, ordinary Russians have been manipulated by media efforts to distract them from domestic problems, mobilized instead against external scapegoats.

Russia's dissidents have called for immediate cease-fires and negotiations but have been ignored by the increasingly timid media in Russia and the morally obtuse media of the West. As in the Soviet past, a few brave persons have taken a principled stance. Sergei Kovalev, Grigory Yavlinsky, Andrei Piontkovsky, Pavel Felgenhauer, and the Soldiers' Mothers Committee have been vocal advocates of peace, but their voices fall on deaf ears, not just in Russia but in the West.

NATO leaders have eased the job of Russian propagandists. Chorus-like, Western politicians have defended Russians' right to fight "terrorism" and maintain Russia's "territorial integrity." Contrary to President Bill Clinton's assertion, however, Chechnya is not like South Carolina in 1861. Chechens have never voluntarily accepted union with Russia -- not in Tsarist, Communist, or

post-Communist times. For more than two centuries the rulers of Russia have denied Chechens national self-determination. When the last war ended in 1996, the ambiguity of Chechnya's status was recognized in the Khasavyurt Treaty, which specifies that "The agreement on the fundamentals of relations between Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic being determined in accordance with generally recognized norms of international law shall be reached prior to December 31, 2001."

Why did Russia break this truce? The Kremlin says it invaded again to root out terrorism. But this is a handy pretext. As the former prime minister, Sergei Stepashin, indicated, the intervention was planned in March, five months prior to the bombings in Russian cities. Russia's invasion of Chechnya has been used to boost Putin's popularity and ensure an "orderly transfer of power"; to cow Russia's southern neighbors, the pro-western Azerbaijan and Georgia; to regain Russian control over a key route for Caspian oil; to reaffirm the unbreakable unity of an empire now known as the "Russian Federation"; and to settle scores for generals humbled by the Chechens back in 1996.

Granted that some dialogue is needed with a nuclear superpower, must the West bow and scrape before another Russian leader responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity (not to mention the deaths of ill-trained teenaged Russian conscripts)? Is this the time to praise Russia's "democracy" or its rebounding stock market? Should the West be providing Russia more credit so it can continue to wage this war? If we call a spade a spade, it is not clear why the Kremlin's acting president does not belong with the Iraqi, Rwandan, Indonesian, and other warlords held responsible for crimes against humanity in recent years. The West had to ignore the crimes of Stalin to support him against Hitler. It has no such reason to appease the former KGB agent who now speaks of rebuilding Russia's greatness. The international community, with the US at the lead, must use all the diplomatic and economic pressure at its disposal to make sure that the authors of another ghastly massacre, the second in the history of the

Chechen nation, do not get away with mass murder.

The author is Professor of Political Science at Boston University and Associate, Harvard University Davis Center for Russian Studies. His most recent work, *The Baltic Miracle: Complexity Theory and European Security*, is due to be published this year by Rowman and Littlefield. His other works include *Dynamics of International Relations* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) and *Can Russia Change* (Routledge, 1990). Readers with comments may contact Prof. Clemens directly, at wclemens@bu.edu

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