

What underlies the bestial carnage of the Caucasus?

“Don’t these people have children, too”, Beslan residents asked each other last week when Chechen rebels took a thousand of them hostage, mostly Ossetians, and half of them children, resulting in the death of several hundreds, and injury to many more.

What is it all about?

Towards the end of the 1914-1918 World War, when Lenin’s Bolsheviks seized control from the Tsars of the Russian Empire that covered most of Central and Eastern Europe and North Asia, it became the Soviet Union based on semi-autonomous Republics that the colonies were turned into.

Historically, the Caucasus, which separates the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, was a battleground of Chechens, Armenians, Georgians, Azeris, Ingushis and Ossetians, in which the Tsars waged brutal wars.

Religious differences, Christian versus Muslim, often masked material reasons for conflicts like access to land and other natural resources. Sometimes, the ethnic differences were a more direct spark of conflict.

The Russians, it seems, were especially contemptuous of the “swarthy” Chechens, particularly those to the south of Chechnya, who were Muslim. The Third Imam of Chechnya and Dagesta on the Caspian Sea, Imam Shamil, had introduced Sharia

Law and strengthened the hold of Islam over his people in the mid 1800s.

Even after Imperial Russia conquered Chechnya, its brutality continued, with burning of villages, hounding of Muslim clerics and forced emigration to the Ottoman Empire, to the south, of many defeated opponents.

A journalist of Southern African origins, Vanora Bennett, in her book, *The Return of War to Chechnya*, written in the early 1990s, claims that "what the Russians remembered with great bitterness" over the years of their imperial occupation of Chechnya, were "dramatic mountain kidnappings" by Chechen guerillas "of highly placed Russian officers and their relentless bargaining over the price of the release of their hostages".

Even under Soviet rule, especially under Stalin, the Georgian, the Chechens reportedly had bitter experiences. In her book, Vanora Bennett records that Stalin had ordered that on 23 February 1944, Chechens and Ingushis should collect on their village squares to celebrate Red Army Day. Throughout their territories, she writes, 600 000 were rounded up by soldiers and packed off in cattle trucks into exile in the Soviet interior in Central Asia.

The reason, reportedly, was that Stalin accused them of having collaborated with Nazi Germany. Apparently, a decade after Stalin's death, many deported Ingushis and Chechnyans "crept home".

In 1991, the Soviet Union began to collapse. As a semi-autonomous Soviet Republic, Chechnya declared its independence.

It was a country divided between its north and south, between Christians and Muslims. In 1993, its leader, Dudayev, is reported to have dissolved the Chechen Parliament, and to have ordered the execution of many opponents. By the end of 1993, opposition to Dudayev had developed into a small-scale civil war, as a result of which Northern Chechens called for Russian support.

Russian military intervention was questionable in international law, critics argue, even if Chechnya was part of the CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States. It would have been wiser for Russia to have internationalised intervention and set aside historical prejudice and national self-interest.

Chechens claim that 300 000 Russian soldiers presently “inflict a regime of terror” in Chechnya, whose population has been reduced from 2 million, ten years ago, to 800 000 now. Thirty five thousand children have been killed, they claim, and another 42 000 injured.

For all that, hostage taking, suicide bombings, planting bombs in passenger aircraft and calculated, direct harm to children are criminal acts, that must become punishable by life imprisonment, anywhere, under international law.

The Russians are attracting some criticism for seeking to identify Chechen nationalism with international terrorism. Separatist Chechens see this, and Russian refusal to promote negotiations, as attempts to undermine the legitimacy of their claims to national independence. They accuse President Putin of personal antagonism towards legitimate Chechen independence aspirations.

Are Chechnyan rebels who now specialise in the evils of hostage-taking knowingly following ancestors who kidnapped Tsarist Generals in the Caucasian mountains 150 years ago, or is it but a curious coincidence?

The truth is that today's enemies are numb to the horrors of the most extreme brutalities against each other, or between their respective allies. The Beslan hostage-taking shows that Chechen rebels no longer kill only purebred Russians.

What they seek is the widest publicity, hoping that it will draw attention to the oppression they suffer. The media are not without blame for turning their reading and viewing public into spectators of massive televised death. Maybe, through repetition viewers are being made immune to its horrors.

I write this week's column in Galway, less than 100 km from Northern Ireland which has also been the scene of great violence over a far longer time, but that for some time now has experienced calm. The violence here wasn't between people of different faiths, but between Catholicism and Protestantism, which - as in the former Soviet Union - has masked material differences of a political and economic nature between the leaderships, here, of two conflicting Christian factions.

President Putin has inherited the outcomes of mistakes of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, in respect of Chechnya. Russia has little materially to gain from the war-torn Region.

Putin would gain immensely in international stature if he were to invite the UN to involve itself in making and keeping peace in the Caucasus.

