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**The Cry of the Wolf:  
Islamism in Post-Soviet Chechnya**

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**The Cry of the Wolf:  
Islamism in Post-Soviet Chechnya**

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**Report**

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## **Dedication**

To my wonderful parents, Daniel and Margaret Jimenez. Thank you for your constant support and unconditional love. This report is possible because of you.

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## **Abstract**

### **The Cry of the Wolf: Islamism in Post-Soviet Chechnya**

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Chechnya today has been operationalized as a hub of Islamic radicalism that threatens a global jihad force. How did this region become a link in terrorist networks such as Al Qaeda? And how did a Chechen nationalist movement transform into a jihad against Russia and the West? Islamic radicalism in Post-Soviet Chechnya is the product of many factors, chief among them notions of historical determinism, a legacy of conflict and oppression, and political volatility. Consequently, this report utilizes a historical and political approach in order to present a clear and complete understanding of Islamism's rise and growth in Chechnya. Russo-Chechen relations have long preceded today's insurgency and counterinsurgency operations in Chechnya, and Islam has always played a crucial role in this history. The Russo-Chechen narrative is thus key to understanding the development of Islamism in Chechnya. Chapters 1 and 2 delineate this history and expound upon notions of historical determinism, helping to contextualize Islamism in contemporary Chechnya. There are also a host of politically contingent factors contributing to Islamic radicalism in Chechnya, particularly Putin's use of soft authoritarianism in the Caucasus.

These factors are examined in Chapter 3. Taken in sum, this historico-political approach aims to trace the development of political Islam in Chechnya and shed light on the consequences of this phenomenon, as they relate to today's growing network of global Islamism and the future of Chechen jihad.

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## Introduction

Prior to the afternoon of April 15, 2013, few people in the United States could locate Chechnya on a map, much less articulate the region's complex history of conflict and violence. But following the eruption of terror after two pressure cooker bombs exploded during the Boston Marathon, everyone's eyes were suddenly fixated on this tiny region, straddling Russia to the north, and the Caucasus Mountains to the south.<sup>1</sup> The bombs exploded about twelve seconds and 190 meters apart, near the marathon's finish line, located on Boylston Street. They killed three people and injured an estimated 264 others.<sup>2</sup> The guilty parties of the incident: two Chechen nationals who moved to the US approximately a decade before the tragedy. The FBI immediately took on the case, and by April 18th, released photographs, identifying brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev as the men behind the bombings. Fleeing from arrest, the Tsarnaev brothers eventually made it to Watertown, Massachusetts, 8.9 miles from Boston,<sup>3</sup> shooting and killing an MIT policeman in the process. Officials caught up to them in Watertown and a gunfight ensued, resulting in the death of elder brother, Tamerlan. Dzhokhar escaped in a stolen SUV.

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<sup>1</sup> "What we know about the Boston bombing and its aftermath," *CNN*, April 19, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Kotz, Deborah, "Injury toll from Marathon bombs reduced to 264," *The Boston Globe*, April 24, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Map data © Google 2015

In an unprecedented manhunt, the entire city of Watertown up to a 20-block radius from the center was shut down.<sup>4</sup> This situation was to be the first major field test for the national interagency security organizations established after the September 11th attacks. American, as well as international, media reported almost exclusively on this story, and the hashtag #PrayForBoston quickly began trending, rapidly attaining millions of tweets and retweets on social media. As the manhunt progressed, footage of utter chaos and fear in Boston was quickly replaced by eerie images of a desolate Watertown. America waited with bated breath for Dzhokhar's capture, able only to sit in fear and watch as major news headlines provided hour-by-hour updates. By nightfall, a Watertown resident had located Dzhokhar hiding in a boat in his backyard. Authorities rushed to the scene. Using thermal camera technology, they fired one shot, successfully wounding Tsarnaev. He was detained without further incident.<sup>5</sup> Claiming that elder brother Tamerlan was the criminal mastermind, Dzhokhar outlined during interrogation how the brothers were inspired by widely available literature on Islamic radicalism. Interrogation also revealed that they obtained the information to construct the two bombs online, using references supplied by the Islamic terrorist network, Al-Qaeda.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Tanfani, Joseph, Devin Kelly, and Michael Muskal, "Boston bombing [Update]: Door-to-door manhunt locks down city," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Seelye, Katharine Q., Michael Cooper, and William K. Rashbaum, "Boston bomb suspect is captured after standoff," *The New York Times*, April 19, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Cooper, Michael, Michael S. Schmidt, and Eric Schmidt, "Bombing Suspects are Seen as Self-taught and Fueled by Web," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2013.

The Tsarnaev brother's Patriots Day attack on Boylston Street placed Chechnya back in the international spotlight for the first time since the most recent ceasefire agreement in the gruesome Russo-Chechen Wars in 2010. Claiming that they were



Figure 1, Political Map of Chechnya, courtesy of *UT Austin PCL Map Collection*

acting as lone wolves, the Tsarnaev brothers admitted they were inspired by Islamist groups like Al-Qaeda, but did not act in conjunction with any known terrorist

organization.<sup>7</sup> While these types of lone-wolf terrorist attacks are difficult to detect and stop, they should come as no surprise to anyone who has studied Chechnya and its culture. It is telling that American authorities described the attack as a “lone-wolf operation,”<sup>8</sup> for it is none other than the wolf that is the enduring symbol of the Chechen people. The wolf embodies all that it means to be a Chechen; the wolf is simultaneously a symbol of fierce independence, and pack loyalty. The symbol of the wolf underscores an important facet of Chechen identity: the driving force that is cultural heritage and political culture. According to popular consensus, the origins of the symbol of the wolf comes from the mythological "Wolf Mother" of Turpalo-Noxchuo, who birthed the Chechen people. A central line of the Chechen national anthem alludes to this legend. But the wolf is more than a mythological symbol to Chechens; the wolf is exemplar of Chechen existence. As Katherine S. Layton states, “every Chechen, regardless of political inclination or social status, knows the symbol of the wolf. The wolf is a multilayered and holistic representation of what it means to be Chechen.”<sup>9</sup> The wolf embraces his primitive essentiality, and consequently, nature embraces the wolf. At the same time the wolf is noble, hunting not the weak, but those creatures stronger than he. The lone wolf is an embodiment of independence, but is never fully alone. He is an integral part of a larger community that endures nature’s tribulations collectively. The

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<sup>7</sup> Cooper, Michael, Michael S. Schmidt, and Eric Schmidt, “Bombing Suspects are Seen as Self-taught and Fueled by Web,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Sherman, Pat, "UCSD professor says Boston Marathon was 'lone wolf' terrorism," *La Jolla Light*, April 21, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Layton, Katherine S. *Chechens: Culture and Society*, pp. 62-63.

wolf thus encompasses what is essential to being Chechen: freedom, honor, and courage of conviction. Indeed, the flag of the Republic of Ichkeria boasts the wolf at its center. After the outset of the Russo-Chechen wars, the wolf as a symbol was adopted by separatist Chechen militants as a form of ethos and to allude to their Chechen identity.

The Chechens' cultural narrative<sup>10</sup> is replete with examples of banditry, revenge, and blood feuds. Simultaneously, the Chechen political culture is a precarious one, in which a delicate balance exists between clan hierarchy and the official Chechen government. Born into this complex culture, the separatists or “wolves” of Chechnya are raised in a climate of political volatility. The Russo-Chechen Wars have only exacerbated this political unpredictability. As Mark Galeotti notes in his publication on Chechen history, “A generation of Chechens is now reaching adulthood having known nothing but conflict and the messy, brutal counter-insurgency operations which followed the formal end of the war in 2009.”<sup>11</sup> In many ways, the words and actions of the Tsarnaev brothers, influenced by their Chechen identity,<sup>12</sup> reflect this recent experience of

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<sup>10</sup> As a point of clarification, the Chechens' cultural narrative is subject to differences in interpretation depending on who is writing, or reading, the narrative. Here, I mean Chechens' cultural narrative about themselves, though many elements endemic to their own cultural narrative is carried over into cultural narratives given by non-Chechens.

<sup>11</sup> Galeotti, Mark. *Essential Histories: Russia's Wars in Chechnya, 1994-2009*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> To what extent their Chechen heritage drove the interests of the Tsarnaev brothers remains suspect, however social media profiles such as VKontakte, and searches of their personal computers' internet history indicate that the brothers were following the affairs of Chechnya and were attuned to Chechen politics. For a discussion of the Tsarnaev brothers' link to Chechnya and how Chechen culture could have influenced Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, see Thomas Goltz, “Is There A Chechen Connection to the Boston Bombings?”, *The Nation*, April 24, 2013, as well as, Miriam Elder and Matt Williams, “Chechnya connections build picture of Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev,” *The Guardian*, April 19, 2013.

violence and upheaval. However, in employing strategic tactics of jihad<sup>13</sup>, the Tsarnaev brothers have added Islamic radicalism to the equation.

Born out of the first Russo-Chechen War (1994-1996) and then-president of Chechnya Dzhokhar Dudaev's political and military incompetence, the presence of Islamism has influenced the wolves of Chechen nationalism, and transformed them into cogs in the wheels of a global jihadist network. I would like to pause here to explain what is meant by Islamism. Islamism is an ideology, distinct from the religion that provides its namesake. As Daniel Pipes states, Islamism stresses "complete adherence to the sacred law of Islam and rejects as much as possible outside influence, with some exceptions (such as access to military and medical technology). It is imbued with a deep antagonism towards non-Muslims and has a particular hostility towards the West. It amounts to an effort to turn Islam, a religion and civilization, into an ideology."<sup>14</sup> Underlying current Islamic radicalism in Chechnya is a centuries-old struggle for independence from Russia. The Chechen separatist movement has historically been one of defiance against central authority, in which Islam was used as a mechanism for uniting

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<sup>13</sup> Most broadly, the term *jihad* is defined as a holy war against the non-Muslims of *dar al-harb*, or "house of war." As defined by Moshe Gammer, Muslim legal literature (*fiqh*) distinguishes between an offensive *jihad* (to conquer parts of *dar al-harb*), which is the obligation and responsibility of the ruler, and a defensive *jihad* when a part of *dar al-Islam* is attacked and conquered by unbelievers. In the case of a defensive *jihad*, participation in the *jihad* is an obligation of all able Muslims in the attacked area. I use Gammer's definition of a *jihad*, as a holy war or effort broadly; I will not distinguish explicitly between defensive or offensive *jihad*, though such a distinction may be gleaned from context.

<sup>14</sup>For more on the definition of Islamism, see Daniel Pipes, "Distinguishing between Islam and Islamism," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 30, 1998, also, Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam*. 2004.

the fragmented, hierarchical clan-based Chechen peoples in a common cause. But the establishment of ties between Chechnya and Islamic radical groups, such as Al Qaeda, has led to the addition of terrorism and tactics of *jihad* to the Chechen separatist movement. Consequently, Chechnya is now linked to a global jihad network. In this manner, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev represent a grim reality for residents of Grozny, Moscow, and Boston alike: Chechnya has been operationalized as a center of Islamism. And the Chechen militant revolutionary network has not only penetrated deeper into Russia, but has begun to extend its operations to the West, threatening a global jihad force.

This report provides a critical presentation of the rise of Islamism in Chechnya, and how it has come to replace Chechen nationalist efforts in the region. Chapter 1 provides a brief history of Chechen separatism and the rise of Islamic extremism in Russia eventuating in today's jihad movement in the region. Any analysis of Islamism in Chechnya requires an understanding of Chechnya's long-standing legacy of political precariousness and conflict with Russia. Chapters 2 and 3 offer a concise analysis of the social, cultural, and political environment in Chechnya that have made the country conducive to Islamism becoming a dominant force driving current politics and conflict. In order to approach the issue in a thorough and multi-causal manner, my examination of the causes of Islamic radicalism in Chechnya consists of two parts. First, Chapter 2, discusses historical precipitators of radicalism, as extant literature widely speaks to the role of history in the Chechen quagmire. Such a historical explanation for the increasingly radical ideology in Chechnya are not all-encompassing, but are compelling;

this explanation offers insight into the Russo-Chechen conflict, as well as Islamism's role in this conflict. Specifically, I examine how a determinist reading of history has contributed to the radicalization of Chechen separatism. Second, Chapter 3 draws inspiration from Chechnya specialist Gordon Hahn's system theory model for explaining Islamic radicalism in Chechnya. Hahn stresses the need for a multi-layered approach to understanding the rise of Islamism in Chechnya. Building upon this notion of complex causality, Chapter 3 provides a succinct analysis of various structural, and operational, or politically contingent, factors contributing to the presence and proliferation of Islamism in the Chechen state. I conclude with a discussion of the future implications of Chechen jihadism and Islamism's tenacity in Chechnya.

## Chapter 1 Chechnya: A Brief History

*По камням струится Терек,  
Плещет мутный вал;  
Злой чечен ползет на берег,  
Точит свой кинжал;  
Но отец твой старый воин,  
Закален в бою:  
Спи, малютка, будь спокоен,  
Баюшки-баю. —Казачья Колыбельная Песня, М. Лермонтов*

*“The Terek runs over its rocky bed.  
And splashes its dark wave,  
A sly brigand crawls along the bank;  
Sharpening his dagger’ while in the song the Cossack mother reassures her child that  
‘your father is an old warrior; hardened in battle.” —M. Lermontov, Cossack Lullaby*

### A. Early Russo-Chechen Relations

Largely due to geography, the region of the North Caucasus has a complicated and rich history. The Northern Caucasus lies at a critical junction between trade routes and consequently, has, at times, been the intersection at which civilizations of the West and East either mingled, or clashed. In many ways, current Russian-Chechen tensions are an extension of a historical legacy of conflict. The origins of this conflict lie in differences of cultural perception. In the nineteenth century, Russians conceptualized Chechens as a curious mixture of a primitive yet respected people, the archetypal “noble savages” of Western colonialism. Classical Russian literature is replete with examples of work depicting the contradictory and enigmatic Chechens. Mikhail Lermontov’s *Cossack*

*Lullaby* for example, speaks to this image of the Chechen *gortsy*, or mountain people,<sup>15</sup> as “wily,” and “primitive” but also “respectable.”<sup>16</sup> Pushkin’s “The Caucasus Prisoner” romanticizes and underscores the raw beauty and wild nature of the Caucasus Mountains and her people.<sup>17</sup> Lermontov famously wrote much about the Caucasus. In his poem “Mtsyri,” he tells the story of a young Caucasus highland boy who is left in a Georgian monastery. As he grows older, he comes to realize his *gortsy* identity: “And through the mist I saw at times / How unassailable in snows, / The Caucasus in glory rose... / And from my half-forgotten past / a misty veil was dropped at last.”<sup>18</sup> As Charles King states in his *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*, “the poem [Mtsyri] contains a harsh rebuke of Russian atrocities in its highland wars [in the Caucasus].”<sup>19</sup> But while Pushkin and his contemporary, Lermontov, wrote Romantically about the primitive freedom of the Caucasians, Russia was ultimately perceived by Russians as the purveyor of civilization to the region, and the great writers of the time considered the Chechen campaigns such as those of A.P. Ermolov to be a historical necessity.<sup>20</sup> As a British officer traveling through Chechnya in the 1850s notes,

“The Caucasian character has all the good and evil features common amongst semi-savage mountaineers. Possessed of the most daring courage ... frugal and

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<sup>15</sup> In Lermontov’s time, the term Cossack was used indiscriminately to distinguish inhabitants of the Caucasus mountain range, which included the Chechens.

<sup>16</sup> Galeotti, Mark. *Russia’s Wars in Chechnya 1994-2009*, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Fowkes, Ben. *Russia and Chechnya: The Permanent Crisis*, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> King, Charles. *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>19</sup> King, Charles. *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>20</sup> H. Troyat, *Pushkin*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1974), pp. 168-74, quoted in Ben Fowkes (ed.), *Russia and Chechnya: The Permanent Crisis*, p. 26.

temperate in their ordinary habits; honorable and affectionate in their domestic relations; they are, nevertheless, to an enemy, or, indeed, to an outsider of any kind, both ruthless and bloodthirsty, seeming to be actuated by but two motives — love of bloodshed and love of gain.”<sup>21</sup>

The Russians have historically conceived of the Chechens as “wily and primitive.” This perception, in tandem with centuries of Chechen oppression based on fear of Islamic dominance over Russian Eastern Orthodoxy, has largely contributed to a complex conflict. As stated by Simone Ipsa-Landa, “The conflicts in Chechnya have therefore become like a Rorschach test of Russians’ identity aspirations, with the very accusations of bribery and banditry that the West levels against Russia being displaced onto Chechens.”<sup>22</sup> Russo-Chechen conflict has always been about the Russian perception of the Chechens as ‘other.’ Chechnya’s long history with Islam has helped contribute to this difference in perception. There is a tendency to romanticize descriptions of Caucasian people as exotic, in an orientalist sense, but ultimately backwards and “lesser.” Chechnya has long been a region on the periphery of Moscow. The Caucasus, it would seem, breeds its own distinct culture, due to its liminal geographical location, nestled within the Caucasus mountains, and the traditions of the mountain people inhabiting it. This difference in perception stands as a backdrop to Russo-Chechen relations.

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<sup>21</sup> Fawn, Rick and Stephen White, *Russia After Communism*, pp. 86-89

<sup>22</sup> Ipsa-Landa, Simone. “Russian Preferred Self-Image and the Two Chechen Wars.” *Demokratizatsiya*, p. 315.

Though Russian Cossack<sup>23</sup> communities in search of independence from central Tsarist authority began settling the Caucasus mountains of Russia as early as the sixteenth century, most Russian encounters with the mountaineer peoples began in the eighteenth century.<sup>24</sup> It was the Russian campaign against Sheikh Mansur, beginning in 1784, that brought Chechnya to the forefront of Russia's domestic concerns. The struggle against Mansur threatened to become a trans-Caucasian issue, thereby opening the door to conflict with the neighboring Ottoman Empire, Russia's primary rival at the time. Followers of Sufi-educated<sup>25</sup> Sheikh Mansur supported the universal adoption of *sharia*, or Islamic law, over the Chechen *adat*, a set of traditional customs that acts as a legal code, and proposed a *ghazavat*, or Holy War, in the entire Northern Caucasus.<sup>26</sup> Mansur called for a return to an "ascetical and purified Islam," and criticized widespread practices such as theft, the cult of the dead, and the practice of vendetta.<sup>27</sup> Initially this holy war was to be waged against 'corrupt Muslims,' those Muslims who did not acknowledge the dominance of *sharia* law, and consequently, his own authority. Under the banner of Islamic unity, Mansur demanded "faith in God" and "order" throughout the

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<sup>23</sup> Not to be confused with the Cossacks of Lermontov's *Cossack Lullaby*.

<sup>24</sup> This is not to say there were not encounters prior to the 18th century; for example, skirmishes during the time of Peter the Great, during the Safavid Iran campaign, are among the first reported instances of the Chechens' demonstrating their tenacity and ferocity as mountainous guerillas.

<sup>25</sup> Sufism is a mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God. It consists of a variety of mystical paths that are designed to ascertain the nature of humanity and of God and to facilitate the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom in the world, *Encyclopedia Britannica*

<sup>26</sup> In this report, the words *jihad* and *ghazavat* are often used interchangeably

<sup>27</sup> Dunlop, John B. *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, pp. 11-12

villages of Chechnya.<sup>28</sup> But upon hearing that Mansur intended to invade the neighboring Caucasus republic of Kabardia, Imperial Russia deployed the Astrakhan Regiment to Chechnya to quell the *ghazavat* before it happened.<sup>29</sup> As Mark Galeotti outlines, the Russian government feared such a jihad could easily snowball into a holy war between Mansur and the Ottoman Empire, and all of Orthodox Russia.<sup>30</sup> The Northern Caucasians, especially the Chechens, stubbornly resisted such Russian imperialist campaigns however, and fought fiercely for their freedom against the armies of the tsar.<sup>31</sup> In this oppositionist struggle, the Chechens embraced a curious mixture of Islam-proper, and traditional beliefs, resulting in a quasi-religion that, while far from radical or even conservative in its adherence to the teachings of the Koran, nonetheless became an integral part of shared Chechen identity.

The Astrakhan Regiment, initially dispatched to Sheikh Mansur's home village of Aldy, set fire to the town after finding it empty. This action served only to enrage the Chechens and empowered Mansur with the rhetoric needed to extend the *ghazavat* against the Russians. While it would not be until the Soviet period that Chechen national identity, in the modern sense of statehood, was fully realized, a strong sense of ethno-nationalism was present during Mansur's time. Islam provided a uniting ideology under which Mansur could rally and operationalize the Chechens in fighting Russian forces.

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<sup>28</sup> Bliev, M. M., and V. V. Degoev. *Kavkazskaya voyna*, p. 134.

<sup>29</sup> Dunlop, John B. *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*. pp. 11-12.

<sup>30</sup> Galeotti, Mark. *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1994-2009*, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> Fowkes, Ben (ed.). *Russia and Chechnya: The Permanent Crisis*.

But the core cause of early Russo-Chechen conflict was hardly a question of religion. Many Chechens opposed the adoption of *sharia* law, which in many instances directly contradicted the Chechen *adat*. The *adat* is rooted in ancient tribal codes of behavior that precede and often take preponderance over Islamic mandates, and in many instances, clash with shariah law. One such example is the Chechen cultural legacy of blood feuds. The Koran specifically forbids the spilling of innocent blood, and therefore comes into conflict with Chechen notions of revenge and inter-*teip*, or clan, killing in the name of crimes committed in past generations.<sup>32</sup> Anatoly Lieven gives a good example of this in one of his personal memoirs in which he meets and interviews a German-turned-Muslim living in Chechnya. Wilhelm Weisserth, who returned to Chechnya in 1957 after visiting Mecca and becoming an Islamic scholar and leader, became an elder in his Chechen wife's village. Wilhelm describes the complex role of village leader and religious leader:

One problem for the elders is of course the question of revenge. In the Chechen tradition (Adat), if a member of your family is killed or wounded, you have the right of revenge. There was a case in the mountains, resolved this year, where members of a family got drunk and beat another man while stealing his car, and he died. The blood-feud went on for twenty-three years. The Soviet law gave the men ten years in gaol, but when they were released it began again. But the

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<sup>32</sup> A quick note about the Chechen *teip*-system: Society was divided along patrilineal lines, into extended families (*dözal* or *tsa'* in Chechen), clans (*gar* or *neq'i*), tribes (*teip*) and tribal confederations (*tuqum*). This system of societal classification served as a locus of identity, around which political, social, and economic structures were constructed, Gammer, Moshe. *The Lone Wolf and the Bear*, p. 4.

Shariat lays down quite different rules, it absolutely forbids revenge against innocent relations — though many Chechens don't know that, or don't want to...

We religious leaders appeal to the Koran, tell people that Allah does not allow murder, whatever the reason. But when trouble has occurred, then our task is to reconcile the parties so that it doesn't spread, and to bring forgiveness.<sup>33</sup>

The *teip* leader, or tribe elder, has the difficult the role of mediator, and must act as a source of authority in settling such disputes. But where to place authority: in the teachings of Islam or in Chechen traditions of blood-feud? In this manner, Islam and Chechen culture are often divided. Nonetheless, years of conflict with the Motherland and centuries of Russian oppression provided reason enough for the Chechen *gortsy*, or mountaineers, to stand behind Mansur and his Islamic ideology, all sharing a common enemy in Russia.

In 1785, at the Sunzha River crossing the Russians returning from Aldy were ambushed and massacred; as many as six hundreds Russians were killed, one hundred captured, and the entirety of the Astrakhan regiment dissolved.<sup>34</sup> Surviving soldiers, escaping into the surrounding forests, were hunted and killed. Emboldened by this initial success, Mansur rallied fighters from within Chechnya and across the Caucasus. A gifted rhetorician and charismatic leader, a hallmark of Chechen religious leaders, Mansur easily mobilized 12,000 fighters, most of whom were Chechen. However, Mansur's expertise as a leader stands in contrast to his military acumen; attempting to conquer the

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<sup>33</sup> Lieven, Anatol. 1998. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>34</sup> Baddely, John. *Russian Conquest*, p. 49

Kizlyar fortress, Mansur's forces made the mistake of crossing into Russian territory and were easily defeated. As John B. Dunlop discusses in his book *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, Mansur's decisive victory over the Russian forces at the Sunzha River crossing "led [him] into overconfidence, and prompted him to undertake certain ill-advised military actions."<sup>35</sup> In July of 1785, Mansur traveled down from the mountains and marched upon the Kizlyar fortress, located near the Terek River. Three days of intense fighting ensued, but Mansur failed to capture the garrison, whose superior artillery proved to be a decisive factor in repelling Mansur and his forces. Though Sheikh Mansur escaped and remained active until his capture in 1791, his campaign had failed. But in challenging the Russians, his early success at the Sunzha Pass and his ability to rally thousands of fighters sent a clear signal to the Russians that the Chechens were a formidable adversary when united. Under the banner of Islam, their ferocity of spirit was matched only by their skills as guerrilla militants.

The next century would see General Alexei Yermolov's campaign to secure a road running through Chechnya to Georgia, annexed in 1801. Georgia was foremost a buffer between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, and Imperial Russia was keen on having Georgia as an ally. Conversely, Christian Georgia, being surrounded by Muslim lands, sought protection from the Tsar from the neighboring Ottomans.<sup>36</sup> The proposed road to

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<sup>35</sup> Dunlop, John B. *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>36</sup> Dunlop, John B. *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, pp. 13.

Georgia would also aid in bolstering defenses against Iran and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>37</sup> The construction of this path meant again engaging with the fierce Chechen mountaineers. This time, Yermolov would ensure that Russian policy towards Chechnya's civil population was ruthless, adopting a "scorched earth" policy.<sup>38</sup> He himself stated, "I desire that the terror of my name shall guard our frontiers more potently than the chains of the fortresses."<sup>39</sup> Yermolov was especially wary of the Chechens, whom he regarded as a 'bold and dangerous people.'<sup>40</sup> The fortress of Grozny, loosely translated as "dread" in Russian, was founded in 1818 thanks to Yermolov. Yermolov aimed to contain the Chechens in the mountains, clearing the lowlands between the Terek and Sunzha Rivers for Cossack settlers. These Cossacks would in turn cut down the forests, in an attempt to dissolve the Chechen advantage. The Chechens responded by calling a meeting of the *teips*, or clans, to rally against the Russians. Yermolov countered the Chechen response quickly, driving the Chechens back into the highlands. But the Chechens, though suffering some losses, were far from defeated. This conflict continued until 1827, at which time Yermolov was recalled and removed as head of the Chechen campaign. But his hardline policy against the Chechens was continued by his successors, albeit "with less ruthless enthusiasm."<sup>41</sup> The Russians, with the help of Yermolov,

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<sup>37</sup> For a thorough discussion of Russo-Georgian relations, see Donald Rayfield, *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia* (Reaktion Books, 2012)

<sup>38</sup> Sakwa, Richard. "Chechnya in Russia and Russia in Chechnya." In *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, p. 27.

<sup>39</sup> Baddely, John. *Russian Conquest*, p. 97.

<sup>40</sup> Galeotti, Mark. *Russia's Wars in Chechnya 1996-2009*, p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Galeotti, 15

defined and dominated Russo-Chechen relations in the eighteenth century. But with the advent of the nineteenth century and the rise of Sheikh Mansur's successor, Imam Shamil, it would be the Chechen *gortsy* who would challenge Russia in the next phase of conflict.

Just as Mansur was but one in a long line of charismatic, religious leaders who would unite the mountaineer peoples in common antagonism to central authorities in Petersburg (and later in Moscow), Imam Shamil, too, was a cultural hero and religious figure who raised Chechnya and the North Caucasus in rebellion. Imam Shamil, a Dagestani Muslim, would become de facto leader of the Chechen *gortsy* and Chechen resistance movement in the nineteenth century. Shamil took up the resistance movement of the North Caucasus in 1834. Initially, he tried to reach a rapprochement with Russia.<sup>42</sup> In exchange for a greater degree of political autonomy, Shamil agreed on behalf of the Chechen to accept Imperial Russia's supreme sovereignty and to cease the bloody raids in the Caucasus lowlands. Russia rejected any thought of compromise, fearing the Chechens and their warfare expertise. As one Russian officer at the time phrased it, "amidst their forests and mountains, no troops in the world could afford to despise them" for they were "good shots, fiercely brave [and] intelligent in military affairs."<sup>43</sup>

Ultimately Shamil, though being gifted with greater political and military aptitude than Mansur and his predecessors, would also fail in his struggle against the tremendous force of the Russian Empire. But Shamil continued the practice of Chechen guerrilla

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<sup>42</sup> Galeotti, 15

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

warfare, as well as the use of Islam as a device for uniting *teip*-defined, egalitarian Chechen communities. Under Imperial Russian rule, the Chechens fought reprisal after reprisal. When Chechen hopes that the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, and the ensuing instability, would help facilitate Chechen independence proved unfounded, the Chechens further united and rose up against the nascent Soviet Regime, becoming a worthy foe in future decades.

### B. Bolsheviks meet Chechnya

The Bolsheviks created the Chechen autonomous oblast in November 1920, after several years of conflict with the anti-Bolshevik, or White, forces during the Russian Civil War, from 1918-1922. Though a Union of the Peoples of the North Caucasus was established in 1917, and Chechnya's independence was formally declared in 1918, General Anton Denikin of the White Guard and his forces clashed with the Chechens. Ultimately Denikin and his forces were defeated and forced to retreat from the "seething volcano" of Chechnya.<sup>44</sup> However, the arriving Bolshevik Army, initially greeted as liberators, soon proved to be interested only in continuing the oppressive policies of their Tsarist predecessors in Chechnya. In 1934, Chechnya was merged with the Ingush autonomous oblast to form a joint Chechen-Ingush autonomous region, which was designated a republic two years later. During World War II, Stalin accused the Chechens and Ingush of collaboration with the Germans. As a result, both groups were subjected to mass

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<sup>44</sup> These were the words used by General Anton Denikin to describe the fierce Chechen territory after his defeat in 1920.

deportations to Central Asia, and the republic of Checheno-Ingushetia proper was dissolved. Historian Robert Conquest described these deportations as “one of the most significant, and most neglected episodes in modern history.”<sup>45</sup> The first public reference to the deportations came in June 1946. The paper *Izvestia* published a decree titled “On the Abolition of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR and the Conversion of the Crimean ASSR into the Crimean Region (*oblast*). This decree formally accused the Chechens and Ingush of aiding the German forces:

“During the period of the Great Patriotic War, when the peoples of the USSR were heroically defending the honor and independence of their motherland in the struggle against the German Fascist occupiers, many Chechens and Crimean Tatars, under the instigation of agents of the Germans, entered into volunteer detachments organized by the Germans, and together with the German military forces conducted an armed struggle against detachments of the Red Army.”<sup>46</sup>

As Conquest points out, despite these accusations, the German army barely set foot in Checheno-Ingushetia.<sup>47</sup> It is generally accepted that Stalin’s claims against the Chechens are unsubstantiated. The exiles were later allowed to return to their homeland, and the republic was reestablished under Nikita Khrushchev in 1957. However, there were inexplicable psychological and social consequences. Returning Chechens often brought with them a loathing towards Russia. As Ben Fowkes writes, “psychologically, the

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<sup>45</sup> Conquest, Robert. *The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities*, p. ix.

<sup>46</sup> William Flemming, in Fowkes, Ben (ed.). *Russia and Chechenia: The Permanent Crisis*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

experience of deportation led to a complete rejection of the Soviet system by the deportees.”<sup>48</sup> Chechen exile Abdourahman Avtorkhanov expressed the anti-Russian sentiment felt by returning Chechen deportees in an interview in 1991 regarding the Chechen drive from independence: “It is a revolt of the children in revenge for the deaths of their fathers and mothers in deportation and exile.”<sup>49</sup> This sentiment, in addition to a strong cultural heritage of revenge and feuding, fomented decades of fighting in years to come.

Just as this legacy of Russo-Chechen conflict forms a historical continuum between Chechnya and Russia, Russian perception of Islam and its role in society also demarcated a recurring theme of Russo-Chechen history. During Tsarist Russia, Islam was viewed as a potential threat to Orthodox Russia’s distinct role within Christendom and European civilization. Russia, indubitably a product of her unique and variable geography, has traditionally maintained a kind of hegemonic strength in lieu of its strategic position straddling Europe to the West and Asia to the East. Islam however, presented a viable challenge to this hegemony. Moreover, the spread of Islam, much like Christianity, has been historically aggressive. In order to maintain its tenacity within the Eurasian landmass, and to keep the Islamist Persian and Ottoman Empires at bay, Holy Russia had to subordinate Islam and tame its growth. The various territories conquered and annexed by the Holy Russian Empire, particularly the Muslim *khanates* found along the Volga, in Siberia and, later, in Central Asia, had to be safeguarded against Islamist

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<sup>48</sup> Fowkes, pp. 10-11.

<sup>49</sup> *Literaturnia Gazeta*, no. 43 (1991), p. 2.

empires that could undermine the territorial and cultural integrity of the Romanov Empire.

Islam was thus enfeebled and oppressed throughout the Russian Empire, and by the Second World War, despite intermittent gestures of rapprochement by the early Bolsheviks, Islam was eliminated as a dominant force. The only enduring pockets of Islamic practice were in the inaccessible mountains of the Northern Caucasus and Central Asia. It was not until the threat of fascism and Nazi Germany that the Soviets were forced to address religious communities and minorities in Russia, lest they lose the loyalty of a host of direly-needed communities in the war effort. As a result, the Soviet leadership not only made amends with the Orthodox Church, they also recreated the Muslim Spiritual Directorates.<sup>50</sup> In Imperialist Russia, Catherine the Great established the Orenburg Mohammedan Spiritual Assembly in 1788.<sup>51</sup> Such assemblies were intended to allow the central Russian government to monitor and control Muslim religious activity. By the time of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, only one directorate remained active, the original Orenburg Assembly, which was later renamed as the Central Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of Inner Russia and Siberia (TsDUM<sup>52</sup>).<sup>53</sup> A handful of directorates were established in the 1920s during the nascent Soviet Union, but suffice it to say that only TsDUM and two other directorates, one of which was for the Muslim's of the North Caucasus, continued to operate by 1943.

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<sup>50</sup> Ro'i, Yaakov. *Islam in the CIS*, p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Central Muslim Spiritual Board, <http://cdum.ru/en/cdum/>

<sup>52</sup> TsDUM was again renamed in 1948 to DUMES

<sup>53</sup> Ro'i, Yaakov, p. 7

These directorates were, on the one hand, a sign of political cooperation between the surviving Islamist communities of Russia and the Soviet Union. On the other hand, many Muslims in these communities viewed the establishment of such directorates as subjugation by the central authorities. Furthermore, the Muslim leaders of these directorates were considered collaborators with a regime that for years had repressed and actively waged war against Islamist communities. In this manner, an unforgivable grudge developed against so-called establishment Islam and non-establishment 'parallel' Islam.<sup>54</sup> This schism highlights an underlying truth to Islam in Russia - the solution to Islamic radicalism today lies *within* Islam. The inter-Islam factionalization that began under the Soviet Union in many ways continues to contribute to the strength of Islamic radicalism and *Salafism*<sup>55</sup> in the Caucasus.

Despite the best efforts of Soviet authorities and the establishment of such directorates, traditional, or "folk," Islam remained the dominant form of religious culture within Chechnya and the greater Caucasus. As Yaakov Ro'i points out, "...the weight of popular or folk Islam was in many regions clearly preponderant. Its leaders, Sufi *ishans* in Central Asia and the mentors of Sufi *wirds* in the Caucasus, continued to enjoy much prestige among their followers. This applied especially to rural regions... The repositories of Islam there... retained a semi-religious character and that no communist propaganda or government repression was able to eliminate."<sup>56</sup> A blend of local Muslim

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<sup>54</sup> Ro'i, Yaakov, p. 2

<sup>55</sup> A movement for return to the golden age of Islam's first four khalifs

<sup>56</sup> Ro'i, Yaakov, p. 2

shrines and pagan social celebrations, which no communist propaganda or Soviet repression was able to eliminate, dominated. The few surviving directorates, supplemented by periodic monitoring of trends among Russia's various Muslim communities, the Soviet regime largely turned a blind eye to Islamist communities in the Caucasus. It would not be until Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's regimes, during the 1960s and early 1970s, that Soviet authorities again began to treat Muslim communities as a threat to the stability of the Soviet Union. During the 1960s and early 1970s some "extremist" Muslims began adopting "anti-Soviet" or "anti-social" positions, demanding the abolition of equality of rights for women and calling upon believers to refuse to serve in the Soviet armed forces or to let their children join the Young Pioneers or the Komsomol.<sup>57</sup> For clarification, the Young Pioneers and the Komsomol were Party organizations for the Soviet youth. These organizations were fundamental in teaching Soviet children Party doctrine, and were a source of legitimacy that demarcated "true" Party children and those who were "class enemies."<sup>58</sup>

In tandem with liberalization and the continued "thaw" in the Soviet Union, the 1970s also saw a series of events in Iran and Afghanistan that drastically affected Soviet policy towards Islam. The rise of the Khomeini regime in Iran, committed to the dissemination of Islamic propaganda in the USSR, and the adoption of a new, anti-Marxist-Leninist position by the mujahideen in Afghanistan, foreshadowed a revival of

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<sup>57</sup> Ro'i, Yaakov, p. 2

<sup>58</sup> For a brief discussion of the Soviet "cult of childhood" see: "Soviet Cult of Childhood," <http://blogs.bu.edu/guidedhistory/russia-and-its-empires/elise-alexander/>

Islamism in Russia's Muslim regions. Particularly susceptible was Russia's Northern Caucasus, where Chechnya, long-considered the most polarized, religiously-oriented of all of the Soviet Union's Muslim ethnic regions, was located. This perception is curious, as it was not until 1978 that plans for the first mosque in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR were officially drafted, and it would not be until 1979 that this mosque was officially registered.<sup>59</sup>

The threat of intransigent centers of Soviet Islam, specifically in Dagestan, Central Asia, and the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, between 1981 and 1987, motivated the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) Central Committee to set a historic precedent. The CPSU began issuing a series of resolutions addressing Islam in the Soviet Union. These resolutions included several countermeasures to combat Islam's power and curb its expansion. Islam was considered a dangerous challenge to stability.<sup>60</sup> As Yaakov Ro'i describes, the threat of Islam to the stability of the Soviet Union was not the official CPSU apologia, but the perception of such a threat indubitably had an effect on the leadership's decision making.<sup>61</sup> Gorbachev's speech to the Uzbekistan CP Central Committee in November 1986 is testament to this fact. In the speech, Gorbachev stated that Islam was no longer in the category of a mere religion, but had "taken on a political

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<sup>59</sup> Broxup, Marie. *Islam and Atheism in the North Caucasus*, pp. 40-48.

<sup>60</sup> Ro'i, Yaakov, pp. 2-3

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

substance in a country where the sole permitted political institution was the CPSU. A condition of war existed thereafter between Islam and the Soviet government.”<sup>62</sup>

Islamist developments under Khrushchev reached their apogee during Mikhail Gorbachev’s reign in the late 1980s. Gorbachev maintained the hardline CPSU stance against Islam on the grounds that it threatened to undermine the USSR. The extent of his views on the issue are evident by a speech he made in November 1986, just one year after taking office. The speech, delivered to the Uzbekistan CP Central Committee, argued that Islam was “no longer in the category of a mere religion, which entailed in itself a danger to the ruling ideology, but had taken on political substance in a country where the sole permitted political institution was the CPSU.”<sup>63</sup> For all intents and purposes, this statement marked the start of a new war between the Soviet authorities and Islam.

### C. Gorbachev and Islam

When Mikhail S. Gorbachev became general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985, he endeavored to lead his country in a radically new direction, launching dramatic new programs, *perestroika*, or economic, social, and political restructuring, and *glasnost*, or the creation of an atmosphere of open expression and self-criticism. These programs introduced profound changes in economic practice, internal affairs, and international relations. Within five years, Gorbachev’s programs

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<sup>62</sup> Speech entitled *Islam and Politics*, Igor Believe, “Islam i politika”, *Literaturnaia gazette*, 13 and 20 May 1987

<sup>63</sup> Ro’i, p. 3

proved revolutionary. While his program of reform was not the only factor, nor the intention, it removed communist governments throughout Eastern Europe and the Balkans from power and brought an end to the Cold War. However, Gorbachev also unwittingly set the stage for the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

*Perestroika* and *glasnost* set in motion a wave of calls for sovereignty and a number of applications for official registration on behalf of groups and organizations, including some which were religious in nature. The profound cultural transformation taking place towards the end of the Soviet period also affected the country's Muslim communities. Though ultimately, Islamic radicalism in the Caucasus was at the forefront of Soviet domestic concerns, the liberalization under Gorbachev did allow for a greater degree of autonomy for Russia's Muslim populations. Religious education was now possible, some journals such as *Ogonek*, a popular culture publication, began publishing articles underscoring Muslim viewpoints and apologia, and it was now possible to build new mosques in larger numbers, as restrictions on their registration diminished (or were altogether ignored). Whereas Soviet practice prior to this cultural transformation was to disregard and quiet Muslim movements, these movements had now achieved a level of legitimacy. As Yaakov Ro'i describes it,

Demonstrations and disturbances became more commonplace — a few had occurred before, such as the anti-Russian demonstrations that had followed a soccer match at Pakhtakor stadium in Tashkent in 1969 and rocked the Uzbek

elite. But now they were larger, more frequent and, above all, documented, for it was no longer possible to sweep them under the carpet.<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps the most salient example of Islamic assertion of authority under Gorbachev is the creation of an entirely new group, the Islamic Revival Party (IRP), which called for the defense of Muslim rights. Their agenda outlined the need to regulate the economy on the basis of *Shari'a* law, Muslim law as defined by the Qu'ran, and condemned 'ideas of national specificity,'<sup>65</sup> and declared that all Muslims of the Soviet Union were united as one *umma*, or one Islamic consociation. An excerpt from their platform expresses these ideas:

We, Muslims of different nationalities and regions, and of different *madhhabs*, have resolved to unite in a single Islamic Revival Party with the purpose of disseminating Islam, consolidating the ties between all the Muslim peoples [of the Soviet Union], protecting the rights of Muslims at all levels, raising the political awareness of the Muslim masses, and defending their economic and other interests.<sup>66</sup>

The IRP also condemned the practice of 'extremism, terrorism and all forms of discrimination, kindling interethnic dissension and introducing martial law in the Muslim regions.'<sup>67</sup> The condemnation of extremism and terrorism were directed at the Soviet authorities, though they established statutorily a code of conduct that applied within

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<sup>64</sup> Ro'i, Yaakov, p. 4

<sup>65</sup> 'Programma i ustav Islamskoi Partii Vozrozhdeniia', n.d. in Ro'i

<sup>66</sup> Ro'i, Yaakov, 5

<sup>67</sup> 'Programma i ustav Islamskoi Partii Vozrozhdeniia', n.d., Ro'i.

Islam as well. All problems were to be resolved via legal recourse, though independent commissions of the IRP. The IRP was never officially registered, though the Soviet authorities' tolerance of its activities is testament to the impact of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* on Russia's Muslim community.<sup>68</sup>

The IRP and Gorbachev serve as a backdrop to the treatment of Chechnya during the last years of the Soviet Union. While some Muslim groups and organizations made tremendous headway in seeking religious and political autonomy in contrast to previous decades, this privilege was not equally extended to Muslim communities residing in the Caucasus. Established in 1965, the Council for Religious Affairs, or CRA (*Sovet po delam religii*), the government apparatus responsible for collecting intelligence and supervising developments among the Soviet Union's numerous religious communities, had long been reporting on the Chechen-Ingush ASSR. Their reports focused on how the Sufi tariqats, or brotherhoods, of Chechen-Ingush ASSR could undermine the Soviet regime. These Sufi brotherhoods held as their cornerstone the tenets of Sufism,<sup>69</sup> which were a danger to the authority of Soviet institutions and communist ideology in Chechen-Ingushetia. Of these reports, one in particular, the "Analytical report on Muridism and

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<sup>68</sup> For a thorough and authentic account of the IRP's formation and failure to influence politics outside of Tajikistan, see IRP founding member Valiakhmet Sadur's "Islamskii faktor: zametki i razmyshleniia russkogo musul'manina," *Dia-Logos*, (Moscow) 1997, pp. 224-36. For further information on the IRPT post-independence, see Chapter 4 of *Islam in the CIS: A Threat to Stability?* by Yaakov Ro'i.

<sup>69</sup> Particularly, the Sufis' organizational and ideological seclusion, their subordination to Muslim authorities and their peculiar religious ritual, especially the *zikr*, the integral part of ritual of Sufi and dervish orders.

measures for neutralizing its negative influence”<sup>70</sup> sent by RSFSR CRA Chairman L.F. Kolesnikov in May of 1989, concluded that the North Caucasus, specifically the Chechen-Ingush ASSR continued to prove a cause of destabilizing concern.<sup>71</sup> The report asserted that religious extremists had initiated destabilizing activities that affirmed traditional Islamic institutions as mandatory, obligatory norms for Muslim daily life. This report led to the adoption of “Muslim fundamentalism” by such religious activists in the Caucasus, which essentially prescribed the Islamization of society, sanctioning the use of force in this end goal. As Ro’i puts it, “Misinterpreting the extension of democracy and glasnost as permissiveness, they [religious activists] proceeded to organize all kinds of unsanctioned activity... The activity of the North Caucasians linked up with that of religious fundamentalists in Central Asia, from whom some of them had received instruction.”<sup>72</sup> Taking Gorbachev’s glasnost initiative as an opportunity to advance their activity, these religious fundamentalists in the Northern Caucasus organized illicit public activity, meetings, ultimatums and the like. Moreover, they began to attract new members to their ranks, and forged common relations with other Muslim groups in the Fergana Valley and Central Asia broadly. Under this threat of pan-Islamic fundamentalism, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was allowed to organize its own religious

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<sup>70</sup> Analytic report on Muridism and measures for neutralizing its negative influence’, sent by RSFSR CRA Chairman L.F. Kolesnikov to the Yaroslavl’ Oblispolkom, 5 May 1989 - Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF) — the State Archive of the Russian Federation, f.R - 1033, o. 1, d. 101, 11.12-21; document in possession of the Kenton Institute, Oxford, from Ro’i.

<sup>71</sup> Ro’i, p. 5

<sup>72</sup> Ro’i, p. 7-8

center and institutions. This was deemed by the CRA to be less threatening than handing over leadership of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR to the religious leadership of Dagestan, where a group of intransigent Wahhabist radicals formed the dominant leadership. However, in Dagestan and other parts of the Northern Caucasus, clashing factions between Islamists identifying with either Sufism, Wahhabism, or non-radical schools of Islam created the perfect conditions for conflict.

In Dagestan, different schools of thought within the Muslim community led to various Islamic factions. This divisiveness within Islam became a driving force in Chechnya in the 1990s. Under the Soviet Union, Islam had been a unifying and consolidating force in Chechen society, rallying Chechen nationalists and separatists under a common banner in open antagonism to Moscow. However, a rift developed in the 1990s between Chechnya's traditional Sufi brotherhoods and the Salafis or Wahhabis, prominent in Dagestan, further contributing to political instability in Chechnya. Already subject to antagonism and backlash from Moscow, Chechnya was now being torn apart from within by rivaling sects of Islam. This rift marked the beginning of a conflict that continues to rage at the time of writing this report.

#### D. General Dudaev and the Islamicization of Chechnya

By the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union and General Dzhokhar Dudaev's rise to power in the early 1990s, internal instability in Chechnya was rampant. Testament to the level of instability at the time, Dudaev tried to suppress growing political opposition to his administration by simply dissolving parliament in 1993, resulting in the death of some

seventeen people, thereby exacerbating existing tensions.<sup>73</sup> A condition just short of complete anarchy rendered the Chechens incapable of achieving their aims using nationalist and separatist rhetoric alone. As Gordon Hahn states, “winning on the ideational battlefield is equally important to winning on the military battlefield. An ideology capable of effectively articulating grievances and providing a course of action that promises success is oft times decisive in mobilizing a movement.” Islamism did just that. Moreover, the unexpected success of Muslim radicals in Afghanistan against Soviet forces at Khost seemed to validate the cause of Islamism, and demonstrated that through Islamism, a victory over monolithic Russia was possible. Between December 1990 and February 1991, the Vainakh<sup>74</sup> Democratic Party began espousing Muslim rhetoric and highlighted the long-standing oppression of Chechen Muslims by Moscow, organizing a series of demonstrations under the slogan of Muslim solidarity. These events stand as a preface to Dudaev’s regime and the Islamization of the Chechen cause.

Trained as a Soviet air force general, Dzhokhar Dudaev took control of Chechnya in late 1991. The state of the collapsing Soviet Union provided an opportunity for Dudaev to exploit the chaos and mobilize separatists under the banner of religion. Dudaev’s nationalist program centered on Islam; it called for Muslim solidarity and stressing the Islamic nature of all Chechen separatist efforts. Historically, this falls in line with a tradition of Chechnya using Islam as a unifying force. Religious figures have

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<sup>73</sup> Walker, Edward W. “Ethnic War Holy War, War O’ War: Does the Adjective Matter in Explaining Collective Political Violence?”, pp. 28-35.

<sup>74</sup> Vainakh was the common name for the Chechen and the Ingush

stood at the forefront of Chechen opposition to Moscow for decades, dating back to Tsarist times. In fact, Chechnya's campaign for political sovereignty has been historically waged under the banner of Islam and the establishment of an independent Islamic state. Following the Soviet Union's dissolution in 1991, a scramble for power ensued, as many of the former Soviet republics began to assert their independence. In his famous speech, Gorbachev's successor, Boris Yeltsin, dared the former republics to "take as much sovereignty as you can stomach!"<sup>75</sup> Though he did not explicitly give any specifics to this manifesto, in principle, Yeltsin was speaking to those republics that did not directly threaten the hegemony of the newly created Russian Federation, such as Ukraine and Belarus. However, the Chechens, fomenting a separatist agenda for centuries, took Yeltsin at his word. In 1992, Chechnya declared independence from Russia and attempted to forge their own state. It was following General Dudaev's declaration of Chechen independence that Islam entered into the Chechen separatist struggle as a device for the unification and mobilization of Chechen fighters. As the Chechen republic drifted into banditry, warlordism, and anarchy, receiving scant help from the West, Dudaev was compelled to extend communications to the Islamic world.<sup>76</sup> Concomitantly with the establishment of ties to the global Islamist network, General Dudaev began to re-fashion himself as a loyal Muslim and Islamic adherent. Indicative of the foreign nature of Islam to the Chechen struggle, Dudaev himself was a thoroughly Sovietized former Soviet air force general who had a Russian wife, drank alcohol, and

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<sup>75</sup> *IZVESTIYA*, Aug. 13, 1990

<sup>76</sup> Sakwa, Richard. *Chechnia: From Past to Future*, Ch. 1.

never claimed to be a believer, let alone an Islamist, until he decided he needed support from Muslims abroad. Nonetheless, Islamism as a political ideology was quick to take root in Chechnya, and in the ensuing decades, grew in strength and intensity. The reasons for its rapid growth and tenacity in the region are expounded upon in the following two chapters.

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<sup>77</sup> Walker, Edward W. "Ethnic War Holy War, War O' War: Does the Adjective Matter in Explaining Collective Political Violence?", pp. 28-35.

<sup>78</sup> Gall, Carlotta and Thomas de Waal. *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus*, p. 34.

## Chapter 2 A Unidirectional History

*We, wolves and dogs, share one mother,  
But we refused to surrender.  
Your lot is bowls with food,  
Ours is hunger on the frozen ground*

*Tremble in your cages  
When we are out hunting!  
Because more than any bear,  
We wolves hate  
Dogs.*

—Excerpt from anonymous Chechen poem widely known and memorized by Chechen youth during the Soviet period.

Islam has always been an essential aspect of Chechen identity. It has historically been used as a mechanism to recruit, mobilize, and operationalize the goals of Chechen separatism. But Islam did not start out as the precipitator of war, nor were jihadist tactics, displayed by generations of Islamic radicals, endemic to the Chechen's natural repertoire of fighting. It was not until a growing foreign and domestic jihadist presence became dominant in the early 1990s, when Dzhokar Dudaev entered<sup>79</sup> Islamic radicalism into the political equation of Chechen separatist leaders, that Islamism began to displace secular, Chechen separatist aspirations.

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<sup>79</sup> Islam has long been present in Chechnya, as is discussed in the first chapter of this report. The sect of Islam indigenous to Chechnya is Sufism, a mystical form of Islam that emphasizes personal union with God and reverence for Sufi scholars and saints. However, here I mean to say that it was not until Dudaev and the underpinnings of the first Russo-Chechen War that Wahhabists and Salafists became prominent and began mixing with Chechen nationalists.

## A. TRACING THE PATH TO RADICALISM

Beginning with Dzhokhar Dudaev's proclamation of the independence of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in 1991, the subsequent three decades have seen the Chechen radical separatist movement evolve into a Salafi-jihadist-influenced struggle to establish and Islamic caliphate throughout the predominantly Muslim territories within the Russian Federation. Chechnya's nationalist struggle has undergone a profound ideological transformation. Islamic radicalism has changed the nature of what began as a separatist movement for Chechen independence.

This transformation reached its apex in 2007 with the creation of the Caucasus Emirates, Imirat Kavkaz or Severokavkazskiy Emirat, which proclaimed the establishment of an Islamic caliphate that continues to threaten to overrun the Russian Federation. The Caucasus Emirate, declared by its leader Doku Umarov (Abu Usman) in October 2007, sought to establish a Taliban-style Sharia-based Islamist state within the Russian Federation.<sup>80</sup> In waging a jihad against the Russian Federation, "The Caucasus Emirate and Al Qaeda cooperate with each other and often support each other with regard to personnel, training, financing, and propaganda."<sup>81</sup> The Caucasus Emirate undermines the political authority of the Russian Federation, and its ties to Al Qaeda and global terrorist networks is destabilizing to Chechnya. How did Islamism, both global and

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<sup>80</sup> Rainsford, Sarah. "Islamic State May Threaten Russia's Caucasus," 2015.

<sup>81</sup> "Islamic State of the Caucasus,"  
<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/ik.htm>

domestic Salafism,<sup>82</sup> come to become the dominant force in Chechnya? How has a radical ideology like Islamic extremism proven capable of underpinning the Chechen nationalist movement? What inspires young Chechen men and women, just coming of age, to strap a bomb to their chest and hold a crowded Moscow theatre hostage? Is it to act in the name of Allah and become one of his chosen favorites, or awliyas? Such singular religious conviction would hardly seem to be the case; the historical narrative and cultural history of Chechnya demonstrates a long-standing conflict with Russia, beginning in the eighteenth century and centers foremost on Chechen independence and autonomy from central authority. The core Chechen system of values strongly enumerates freedom and equality as primary.<sup>83</sup>

Chechnya's assertion to autonomy is based on a distinct 'historicist' reading of its relationship with Tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and the current Russian Federation."<sup>84</sup> This narrative is read by the Chechens as a black-and-white interpretation of oppression, subjugation, and exploitation of the Chechen people, punctuated by stories of heroic resistance and defiant leaders. Such a single narrative, unwavering in its polarization of Russia versus Chechnya, creates a belief that history warrants Chechen independence.

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<sup>82</sup> Salafism is a radicalized strain of Islam. Generally speaking, Salafis are fundamentalists who believe in a return to the original ways of Islam. The word 'Salafi' comes from the Arabic phrase, 'as-salaf as-saliheen', which refers to the first three generations of Muslims (starting with the Companions of the Prophet), otherwise known as the Pious Predecessors.

<sup>83</sup> Bersanova, Zalpa. "Sistema tsennostei sovremennykh chechentsev (po materialam oprosov)", in Dmitrii Furman (ed.), *Chechnya i Rossiya: obshchestva i gosudarstva*, Vol. 3 of *Mir, progress, prava cheloveka*, pp. 223-49.

<sup>84</sup> Sakwa, Richard. *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, Ch. 1.

While there is an abundance of evidence to suggest that a teleological (distinctly black and white), historical reading of Islam in Chechnya is prevalent<sup>85</sup>, such a singular approach to Islamism's role in Chechen history is incomplete. In accordance with a multi-variable approach that seeks to understand the Chechen conflicts and the role played by Islam through various lenses, a monochronic<sup>86</sup> understanding is limited in its disregard for the complex and multi-layered factors surrounding the issue. Nonetheless, such readings of history contribute to a holistic understanding of Islamic radicalism in Chechnya. Moreover, determinist interpretations of Russo-Chechen history have had a strong effect on Chechen sentiment towards Russia, and vice versa.

For example, Western-educated Chechen Umalat Umalatov's *Chechnya through The Eyes of a Chechen*,<sup>87</sup> a poignant and personal account of the hardships faced by Chechen families, discusses at length the egregious human rights violations and moral misconduct of the Russians against the Vainakh peoples. Umalov's work discusses the exile of Chechens to Turkey at the end of the Great Caucasian war in the 1860s, along with other tribulations faced by Umalov's family throughout the nineteenth century. In the post-Soviet era, such a reading of Chechen history seemingly necessitates Chechen independence by demonstrating a historical continuum of oppression and violence. Such

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<sup>85</sup> For a thorough discussion of historical monochronism with regard to Chechnya, see Richard Sakwa, "Introduction: Why Chechnya?" in *Chechnya: From Past to Future*. In addition to Sakwa, the following book is useful in understanding a black-and-white reading of Russo-Chechen history: A Blinskii (ed.), *Rossiia i Chechnya: 200-letnaya voina* (St. Petersburg, Satis, 2000). See also Ben Fowkes (ed.), *Russia and Chechnia: The Permanent Crisis* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1998).

<sup>86</sup> Monochronic is taken to mean determinist, in a historiographical sense

<sup>87</sup> Umalat, Umalov, *Chechnya glazami chechentsa*, 2001.

a teleological approach to the historical process not only elucidates meaning and gives purpose to the interpretation of history, but also offers a clear and ineluctable plan of action; all means thus become legitimate in the pursuit of this goal, ordained by such a determinist reading of history.<sup>88</sup>

The issue of Chechen independence presents a curious case in terms of political science. In one of the most comprehensive and intensive analyses of secessionism in the Soviet Union, scholars Emizet and Hesli (1995) trace the path to secession by various ethnic republics and regions in the USSR after its collapse. Their hypothesis predicts that the earlier a region declared sovereignty, the stronger the sense of separatism. Their hypothesis does not hold, however, in the case of Chechnya. Chechnya declared sovereignty and secession concomitantly, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Dudaev's supplanting Doku Zavgayev by means of an armed coup.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, in Chechnya, the explanation for separatism is historical in origin. Rather than there being a correlation between sovereignty and secession in Chechnya, "historical symbolical resources" provide the answer to the question of why Chechnya declared itself sovereign and pursued a separatist movement, to the point of radicalism.<sup>90</sup> Chechnya's separatist rhetoric centered largely on a collective narrative of armed resistance, oppression, and deportation. This rhetoric was supplemented by what Ralph Premdas in his study of

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<sup>88</sup> Fowkes, p. 5

<sup>89</sup> Emizet, Kisangi N. and Vicki L. Hesli, "The Disposition to Secede: An Analysis of the Soviet Case," pp. 492-536.

<sup>90</sup> Sakwa, p. 4

Asian secessionism calls “primordial factors,” that is, heroic narratives of resistance.<sup>91</sup>

Chief among such legends of heroicism is none other than that of Imam Shamil.

Shamil’s unprecedented success in uniting the Chechen people in resistance against the Russian forces has earned him a place in many textbooks, even Soviet ones, as a hero and legendary personage. As stated by Bülent Gökay, “The Shamil legend was actively promoted through popular biographies and children’s books, as well as more scholarly works. According to a textbook published in 1937 he was ‘a talented and energetic leader... of the mountain people who fought against the tsarist colonialists.’ Shamil was presented in Soviet history textbooks as a brave and capable military leader, and an opponent of local feudalism. The religious element of his struggle was ignored or rationalized.”<sup>92</sup> Such figures and collective memories worked in tandem with a shared history of repression to inspire in Chechnya an inexplicable sense of warranted independence.

Historical precipitators are not all-determining, but they provide a necessary context to understanding how Islamism, first Sufism and later Wahhabism, came to dominate the political climate of Chechnya. By the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, when viewed through a lens of Russian repression and Chechen subjugation, a clear and inexplicable trajectory had developed for Chechnya: Chechen secession and the formal recognition of an independent Chechen state. Those who opposed this discourse

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<sup>91</sup> Premdas, Ralph. “Secessionist Movements in Comparative Perspective,” pp. 12-31.

<sup>92</sup> Gökay, Bülent, “The Russian Debate over Shamil,” in Ben Fowkes (ed.) *Russia and Chechnia: The Permanent Crisis*, pp. 34-35.

were seen as traitors to the demands of history by those who bought into a teleological reading of Chechen history. In fulfilling this obligatory aim, Islam was treated as a means to an end; religion used as a political device for unifying and mobilizing a population. The Chechen populace saw their Muslim identity as inseparable from their Chechen identity. To the extent that they were devout, practicing Muslims is arguable; however, Islam was seen as an inexplicable element of Chechen identity. For example, Moshe Gammer argues that Islam has historically comprised an integral part of Chechen identity.<sup>93</sup> As a result, in the eyes of Chechens, centuries-long repression at the hands of the Russians, and the subsequent wars, which were fought along not just political but religious lines, helped cement the notion that Chechen oppression was tied to Muslim oppression, and vice versa.

While there is sufficient evidence to further the polemic that the history of Russo-Chechen relations is a singular story of ruthless repression, this position would ignore the full and complex context necessary to understand the situation. The Russian empire was a multifaceted kingdom that made use of a variety of strategies in governing its constituency.<sup>94</sup> Although Chechnya's experience under Soviet control was one of subjugation, the apogee of which was the deportation of its entire population in February 1944. However, the period between 1957 -- the date of Chechnya's reconstitution as a

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<sup>93</sup> Gammer, M. "Nationalism and History: Rewriting the Chechen National Past," In: Coppieters, B. and Huysseune, M. (2002) *Secession, history and the social sciences*. 1st ed. Brussels, Belgium: VUB Brussels University Press. Ch. 4.

<sup>94</sup> For more information on the governance of the Russian Empire, see Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire 1552 - 1917*, London, Harper Collins, 1997

republic together with Ingushetia -- and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 is widely considered to be a period of relative peace and stability.<sup>95</sup> During this time Chechnya developed considerably culturally, though it remained economically underdeveloped in comparison to other Soviet regions, a point I elaborate below in the section on Chechen structural problems. Indeed, Chechnya's troubled history is punctuated by periods of relative calm. For example, following the end of Imam Shamil's struggle in the 1860s, Chechnya entered into a time of prosperity and development.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, even during this span of "stability," Chechens were regarded with apprehension by the Russian authorities and were not allowed to govern themselves.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a unidirectional reading of history was appropriated by insurgent groups as a means for seizing and maintaining power.<sup>97</sup> When read in an international context, the Chechen argument raises a host of questions, chief among them: "When does a state have the right to secede?" Chechen nationalism indubitably carries with it vast global implications and should not be treated as if in a vacuum. Still, Chechen leadership remained steadfast in their teleological reading of its own history. Moshe Gammer states that following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chechen independence efforts were still conducted largely in the context of the Soviet Union: "Thus, while striving to de-Sovietize, the new Chechen historical narrative is still

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<sup>95</sup> Sakwa, Richard. *Introduction: Why Chechnia?* p. 6

<sup>96</sup> Sakwa, pp. 6-7

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*

strongly linked to Soviet narratives, ways of arguing and moulds of thinking.”<sup>98</sup> Such a parochial interpretation of history consequently led to a determinist understanding of Chechnya’s future trajectory by Chechen elites. To be sure, voices of dissent arose in the early stages of Chechnya’s independence movement, but they were quickly marginalized.<sup>99</sup> This situation resulted in Chechen leadership becoming unable to view their own case outside of such limited circumstances. A determinist reading of a nation’s history may be counted as pre-political, that is to say, it is independent of political processes. There is no discourse to the contrary of Chechen independence, and consequently autonomy is non-negotiable; political methods of understanding it are not applicable. As stated by Richard Sakwa, “Perhaps the most important political consequence is the displacement of sovereignty from the actual, existing people living in the present to a mythical historicized people represented by the political struggle, whose views become ascriptive and authoritative rather than representative and contentious.”<sup>100</sup> As is the case with many regions spawning separatist movements, this singular recollection of history and the subsequent discourse towards Chechen autonomy formed the background to Chechnya’s political culture.

Moreover, Chechnya’s ideological politics is corroborated by specific social conditions, concretely, a system of values that prioritizes independence. The repression

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<sup>98</sup> Gammer, Moshe. “Nationalism and History: Rewriting the Chechen National Past,” in Bruno Coppieters and Michel Huysseune (eds), *Secession, History and the Social Sciences* (Brussels, VUB University Press, 2002), pp. 117-40.

<sup>99</sup> Sakwa, p. 7.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

of the Chechen nation under Stalin, culminating in the deportation of the entire populace in 1944, not only fomented a grudge against the Russian state, it also destroyed many “modernized” Chechen groups, such as the intelligentsia and Party bureaucracy. Consequently, the Soviet Union paradoxically accentuated the traditional social order and values.<sup>101</sup> Though many Chechens willingly participated in the Second World War, the decision to deport the Chechens and Ingush was made immediately after the Caucasus region had been rid of German troops.<sup>102</sup> During this time, correspondence between Stalin and Beria makes for a grim, though thorough, understanding of the reasons for the deportation *en masse*. Enumerated among them were the Chechens “low level of labour discipline,” the “prevalence of banditry and terrorism,” “failure of the Chechens to join the Communist Party,” and the purported “confession of a German agent that he found a lot of support among local Ingush.”<sup>103</sup> Beria’s instructions were to deport the entirety of the Chechen-Ingush republic; Stalin’s order gave a targeted number of 459,486. Beria was more than successful in this aim; the total deported amounted to 387,229 Chechens and 91,250 Ingush for a total of 478,479.<sup>104</sup> The deportation of the Chechen and Ingush population was a remarkable demographic blow to these populations, but there were severe social and psychological repercussions, as well. The deportations paradoxically

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Fowkes, Ben, p. 10.

<sup>103</sup> Bugai, N.F., *L. Beria - I. Stalinu: 'Soglasno Vashemu Ukazaniiu'* (Moscow: AIRO-XX, 1995). pp 90-1

<sup>104</sup> Beria’s telegram of 22 February 1944 to Stalin, quoted in M.A. Vyltsan, ‘Deportatsiia Narodov v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny’, *Etnograficheskoe Obizrenie* (1995), no. 3, pp. 36-8.

strengthened the tenacity of the Sufi brotherhoods, especially the *Qadiriya tariqa*.<sup>105</sup> The *Qadiriya* are members of the *Qadiri* Sufi order, or *tariqa*, which preaches adherence to the fundamentals of Islam.<sup>106</sup> Even after the Chechen-Ingush republic was reconstituted in 1957, the construction of mosques was forbidden. As a result, no loyal Islamic hierarchy arose to undermine the independent Sufi brotherhoods.<sup>107</sup> According to Soviet sources, there were some 62,000 *mürids*, or disciple of Sufism, among the Chechens and Ingush in 1974.<sup>108</sup> This number comprised over half the total number of practicing Muslims in the republic. Additionally, it helped to strengthen the *teip* clan system in place. The Chechen clan system was closely linked to the religious practices of the Chechens, as the clan court, the *kkhel*, presided over by clan elders, made its rulings in accordance with the *sharia*, or Islamic law.<sup>109</sup> Psychologically and socially, the Chechen experience with deportation led to the complete rejection of the Soviet system, and the reinforcement of traditional values intimately tied to Islam.<sup>110</sup> Naturally, this rejection cultured problems for the Soviet Union, and later the Russian Federation, for decades to come.

The social structures contributing to a unidirectional history of Chechnya were preponderant at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the ensuing Chechen putsch, or coup d'état. The Chechen revolution of 1991 resulted in the replacement of a

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<sup>105</sup> Fowkes, p. 11.

<sup>106</sup> "The Qadiriya Sufi Way," <http://sunnirazvi.net/qadiri/main.htm>

<sup>107</sup> Sakwa, p. 7

<sup>108</sup> Beningsen, op. cit., in Fowkes, p. 74.

<sup>109</sup> Fowkes, p. 11.

<sup>110</sup> Fowkes, p. 11.

Sovietized elite with insurgents external to the Soviet system, as well as the usurping of Sovietized “lowlander” Chechens by more traditional “highlanders.” This revolution was strengthened by actions of the Russian leadership during the months following the failed August coup attempt. For instance, at the time, Russian leadership included ethnic Chechen Ruslan Khasbulatov at the head of the Russian parliament, the Congress of People’s Deputies, and its smaller operative, the Supreme Soviet. There was little cooperation between Khasbulatov and the Chechen insurgents, and ultimately, these interactions did not help lead to a peaceful outcome.<sup>111</sup> It should be noted that while social basis for liberalism among Chechens was weak, it was not non-existent. There was a handful of voices for a more nuanced approach to Chechen independence. Scholars such as Dzhabrail Gakaev have written much on such alternative approaches.<sup>112</sup> General Dudaev’s approach for example, was not wholly radical. Officially, Dudaev called for Chechnya to become a full republic outside of Russia but within the Soviet Union. Indeed, up to his death in April 1996, he can be considered a loyalist to the Soviet system, even though the USSR proper had long since collapsed.<sup>113</sup> Even the contemporary interpretations of the greatest of Chechnya’s heroes in the struggle against the Russian monolith, Imam Shamil, was subjective. As Umar Avturkhanov, the leader of one of the groups opposed to Dudaev’s “crazed tyranny” in 1994, phrased it to Chechenist, Anatol’ Lieven:

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<sup>111</sup> Sakwa, p. 7.

<sup>112</sup> See Dzhabrail Gakaev, “Put’ k chechenskoi revolyutsii,” in Furman (ed.), *Chechnya i Rossiya*, pp. 150-76

<sup>113</sup> Lieven, Anatol’. *Chechnya*, p 58.

They talk about the tradition of Shamil, but what did Shamil do for Chechnya in fact? He brought us only decades of unnecessary war, the ruin of the country and the death of half its people. And he wasn't even a Chechen. He came here from Daghestan, preaching his crazy religious fanaticism, hatred of the Russians and holy war, and we Chechens behaved like fools as usual, and followed him, to our destruction.<sup>114</sup>

Chechnya's historical understanding, therefore, was not without nuances, and even today, despite a ruthless history of oppression, there are those in Chechnya who still support the notion of accommodation and cooperation with Russia.<sup>115</sup> Scholar Igor Rotar notes that even battle-hardened Chechen insurgents regretted the break up of the Soviet Union and looked upon the former Soviet Union fondly and with nostalgia, remarking that they were the "best days of my life."<sup>116</sup> However, most Chechens have a predominantly mythopoeic view of history, moderated by the presence of variable historical interpretations, as well as several ahistorical factors. A unidirectional history does well to explain a great deal of the Checheno-centric motives behind Chechen independence. The Chechen historical framework serves to clarify the use of Islam as a political device for mobilizing a populace who see their struggle as distinct and historically validated. The following sections explain the political factors in this struggle.

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<sup>114</sup> Lieven, Chechnya, p. 304

<sup>115</sup> Rotar, Igor. *Pod zelënym znamenem islama: islamskie radikaly v Rossii i SNG* (Moscow, AIRO-XX, 2001), p. 21

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

### Chapter 3 Towards a Complex Understanding

*When will blood cease to flow in the mountains?*

*When sugar-canes grow in the snows*

—A Caucasian Proverb

A systems theory, or multi-causal, approach to the study of any political phenomenon pursues equally all levels of analysis, and aims to prioritize independent, or causal, variables in accordance with their causal necessity and sufficiency. Gordon Hahn, scholar on Chechnya, states:

To understand why alienated, anti-social, sociopathic or other personalities succumb to political extremisms, in this instance revolutionary jihadism, one needs to examine the entire complex of potential contributing factors. These include structural independent variables (social, historical, cultural, and religious factors, including state and regime weakness or breakdown), and intervening or operationalizing independent variables such as ideology, agency (authority, leadership, organization and individual psychologies), and politics (the structure of political action between contending actors).<sup>117</sup>

Thus any complete discussion of the rise of Islamic radicalism in Chechnya needs to supplement an analysis of the various structural conditions<sup>118</sup> with operational variables.

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<sup>117</sup> Hahn, Gordon M. *The Caucasus Emirate Mujahedin: Global Jihadism in Russia's North Caucasus and Beyond*, Kindle Location 192.

<sup>118</sup> By structural, I mean those explanatory variables that are not politically contingent, and are often endemic to Chechnya or carry a historical legacy, such as culture, religion, our social conditions. This is in contrast to politically contingent, or operational variables, which are those that are subject to a condition of being in flux. These operational

Such an approach gives not only a backdrop for understanding the Chechen quagmire, but also helps explain how pivotal factors intersect to produce the current status of Chechnya as a hub of the global *jihad* movement. This is not to avoid the common comparative political “problem of parsimony,” but rather to provide a necessary multi-causal explanation. The variables involved in the Chechen question are many. This report chooses to focus on problems with state formation, cultural, and religious factors, problems with ideology, and political maneuvers, in particular the power plays of current Russian President Vladimir Putin.

#### A. Structural Explanations

##### PROBLEMS WITH STATE BUILDING

In addition to a history of resistance, Chechnya suffered from an inability to create a cogent state. The local communist leadership of Chechnya only became Chechenized<sup>119</sup> in the last days of the Soviet Union. By this time, the ethnic Chechen elite<sup>120</sup> were vexed by the problem of whom to trust: Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev, the hardliners<sup>121</sup>

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variables include ideology, agency, organization, or political maneuvers, often intervene at critical junctures. They can be seen as pivotal in turning the Chechen situation from a nationalist struggle to a *ghazavat*.

<sup>119</sup> In this context, “Chechenization” refers to the development of a substantial ethnic Chechen communist elite in the Chechen republic.

<sup>120</sup> By elite here, I mean local communist leadership in Chechnya in the last years of the Soviet Union

<sup>121</sup> Here, I mean those members of the Soviet leadership who sought to preserve the Soviet Union at all costs, specifically, the “Gang of 8.” Most famous of the Soviet hardliners, this group called themselves the “State Committee for State Emergencies.” These were the eight Soviet leaders who attempted a coup against Gorbachev in 1991, Oleg Baklanov, Vladimir Kryuchkov, Valentin Pavlov, Boris Pugo, Vasily Starudtsev,

who sought to preserve the Soviet empire at all costs, or Gorbachev's successor, Boris Yeltsin. Doku Zavgaev, senior Soviet Communist Party official and former First Secretary to Chechnya, sought to circumvent this problem by placing himself at the head of a national movement aligned with Yeltsin, designed to put pressure on Gorbachev and Soviet leadership. However, Major-General Dzhokhar Dudayev, elected leader of the Chechen National Congress in March 1991, moved in opposition to Zavgaev. The charismatic Dudaev, a Chechen born in deportation, is attributed a great success in uniting the nation due to the fact that he was not attached to any of the major Chechen clans.<sup>122</sup> In this sense, he is reminiscent of religious leaders of earlier centuries, who were also able to play a mediating role within the factitious Chechen *teip* system because of their religious supra-clan authority. Dudaev's Pan-National Congress began immediately advocating for a democratic and nationalist program. Their efforts became increasingly radical as the collapse of the USSR proceeded, and by June of 1991, they demanded a treaty with the nascent Russian Federation, pressing for the "unconditional recognition of the right of the Chechen nation to independence."<sup>123</sup> The Chechen separatist leadership

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Aleksandr Tiziakov, Dmitri Yazov, and Gennady Yanaev. See Rodney P. Carlisle, and J. Geoffrey Golson, *The Reagan Era from the Iran Crisis to Kosovo*, pp. 108-109

<sup>122</sup> The substantiation of this claim is subject, but it is a fact widely stressed in the writings of Russian journalists. For an interpretation of Chechen politics in terms of clan membership, see D. Makarov and V. Batuyev, 'Chechentsy i Teipy', *argument i Fakty*, no. 3 (796) (January 1996) p.2. However, in the absence of any serious anthropological studies, the question of Dudaev's lineage must be left open.

<sup>123</sup> Broxup, M. B. "After the Putsch, 1991", in M.B. Broxup, *The North Caucasus Barrier*, p. 233

sought to exploit a revolutionary situation<sup>124</sup> in 1991. From the outset, Dudaev's aim was Chechen independence. Dudaev's program, however, was built upon a platform that was more than nationalist in its approach. When Dudaev declared Chechen independence in response to Yeltsin's proclamation that former Soviet states should feel at liberty to claim their newfound freedom, he did not hesitate to capitalize upon the mobilizing power of Islam in order to achieve Chechen independence. Indeed, religious figures had been the vanguard of Chechen independence movements for centuries. Consequently came as no surprise that the Chechen separatist opposition evoked battle using Islamic slogans, often worn on headbands or tied to guns,<sup>125</sup> and "Allah-u-Akhbar!" became a frequent battle cry.<sup>126</sup>

The relative role of nationalism versus that of Islam in Chechnya's independence movement and ensuing wars is subject to debate. But it may be generally stated that the early Chechen independence movement was largely religious in origin, predicated upon Russian oppression of the mountain-dwelling Chechens, whose claim to Muslim identity threatened the Eastern Orthodox empire of the tsar. This resistance, spanning the late eighteenth century to the years immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution, made use of Chechnya's complicated, albeit irrefutable, relationship to Islam. From 1921

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<sup>124</sup> Defined here as a credible, competing alternative authority to the current regime's ruling group or group's, arising out of the need to seize and consolidate power, thereby constituting a sociopolitical revolution.

<sup>125</sup> Seely, Robert, *The Russian-Chechen Conflict 1800-2000: A Deadly Embrace*, p. 306. See also, M.S. Ashimbaev and A. Zh. Shomanov, "Politizatsiia islama na postsovetском prostranstve: uroki i vyzovy dila Kazakhstana," *Analytic - Analiticheskoe obozrenie*, 1 October 2000, p. 11.

<sup>126</sup> Walker, p.30.

forward, the Chechen struggle became more secular in nature, advancing a strong agenda of nationalism and the right to self-determination, a concept in sharp contrast to Russia's imperialist legacy.<sup>127</sup> This initial transformation from a religious, Islam-based rhetoric to a nationalist platform became religious again following Chechnya's brief rendezvous with freedom following the conclusion of the first Chechen War in 1996. Dudaev introduced universalistic models, not of nationalism, but, in particular, of Islam and regionalism among the Caucasian peoples.<sup>128</sup> This inconsistency in part contributed to the inability of Chechnya to develop an independent state. Moreover, Dudaev was unable to draft a clear trajectory for Chechnya. Dudaev wrestled with the choice of leading Chechnya down the path toward becoming a democratic, market-oriented country, or toward an Asiatic-statist (bureaucratic) state. His rhetoric and initial maneuvers indicated that he leaned towards democracy, but his Sovietist proclivities eventually drove him towards a more bureaucratic form of governance.<sup>129</sup> Dudaev, however, cannot fully be blamed for Chechnya's inability to form a coherent regime. Dudaev exacerbated long-existing tensions due to the existing social and cultural contracts in Vainakh society.

The underdevelopment of the Chechen state raises a host of questions about the relationship between state and society, and the development of a sound political culture. Chechen society, admittedly, does not lend itself to the construction of a cogent state.

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<sup>127</sup> Sakwa, Richard. Chechnya: From Past to Future. p 8

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Sakwa, p 9

Chechen society is differentiated into a clan system, composed of various teips. And while in some respects Chechnya has undergone some level of modernization, it remains largely traditional. A teip, or clan, is an extended community system. Each *teip*, about 130 in total, consists of groups of families who trace their lineage to a single shared ancestor. The average Chechen is said to know the constituency of his own teip well, up to seven generations back.<sup>130</sup> Each clan is presided over by a teip elder. While the role of the clan elder has diminished in recent years, they still retain a vital role. As Lieven outlines, "...the *teip* has a varying significance for Chechens, depending on the degree of their 'modernisation,' their urbanisation, their education, their place of habitation, and indeed, their degree of ideological nationalism or religious commitment — I have heard a few Chechen nationalists, especially ones of a religious cast, declare that the *teip* tradition should really be done away with, because all that matters is the nation and God. However, as with so many such traditions in the period of their ong decomposition, the *teip* continues to play a role in 'rites of passage,' and most especially in burials."<sup>131</sup> Decades of conflict and war have divided power between the traditional social system of teips in Chechnya and military commanders and militant hierarchy. At their core, however, Chechens retain high regard for their teip elders and still identify strongly with their clans.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Sakwa, p.9

<sup>131</sup> Lieven, p. 342, see also Richard Sakwa, "Introduction: Why Chechnya?" in *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, pp. 9-11.

<sup>132</sup> Lieven, *Tombstone of Russian Power*, p. 342.

This situation has created a political culture founded on highly egalitarian, anarchic principles. Robert Jackson examines what he calls “quasi-states,” ex-colonial states that have straddle the line between established statehood and possessing juridical capacities. For these post-colonial entities, the process of state building is far from complete. Chechnya, for the purpose of this report, is a such a quasi-state; it has achieved a degree of autonomy from Russia, and is capable of self-governance, though it suffers from an inability to realize fully those international standards by which we determine a state. Chechnya has succeeded in establishing what Anatol Lieven refers to as<sup>133</sup> “ordered anarchy.”<sup>134</sup> But Chechnya is also an ethnic nation. Chechens’ conception of nationalism is not the product of years of state-building, socio-economic development or higher education (perhaps it is – under Soviets); rather, their espousal of nationalist rhetoric is predicated on a factional traditional social order, with a respective system of law: the adat; unity predicated on disunity in essence. As discussed in the previous section, Chechen identity is, in large part, derived from a centuries-old historical legacy. Thus, in many ways, Chechen society faces an uphill battle in forming a modern state. The egalitarian spirit of the Vainakh peoples does not coalesce with international state enfranchisement, which requires a system of governance capable of subordinating an inherent Chechen tendency towards anarchism. Only in times of war and conflict have the Chechens been able to exchange their traditional social structure in favor of

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<sup>133</sup> Jackson, Robert. *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990) pp. 21-22.

<sup>134</sup> Lieven, Chechnya, p. ix

unification.<sup>135</sup> For instance, during the reign of Nicholas I, following a series of harsh tax increases against the Chechens in the 1820s, the Chechens began rallying around Naqshbandi preachers who progressed from urging religious piety to promoting liberation from the Russian yoke.<sup>136</sup>

This trade-off is key to understanding the role of Islam in Chechnya: Islam was key to Chechen, and pan-Caucasian for that matter, unification during such times. As Anatol Lieven states:

[Chechen] victory was part of an intermittent historical pattern whereby apparently 'primitive' forces, through superior morale, tactical skill and the right circumstances, have defeated modern imperial armies in the course of this century, and as such it is a warning against not just Russian racism but Western technological arrogance too. However, while Chechen society has previously been able to generate a rather effective form of 'ordered anarchy,' it seems unable to bear the weight of any modern state - even a Chechen one.<sup>137</sup>

The Chechen quasi-state, capable of victory over the Russian bear, was incapable of consolidating Chechen proclamations of independence into an effective state. What ensued was not a modern law-governed political order, but a highly criminalized clan-type social order.<sup>138</sup> The tradition-based egalitarianism inherent in Chechen social order

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<sup>135</sup> Wood, Tony. *Chechnya: The case for independence*. Verso: 2007, pp. 18-23.

<sup>136</sup> Wood, Tony. *Chechnya: The case for independence*. Verso: 2007, pp. 22-23.

<sup>137</sup> Lieven, Chechnya, p ix.

<sup>138</sup> Sakwa, Richard. pp. 10-11.

was simply not conducive to the establishment and consolidation of an inclusive democratic state. Chechen instability manifested in full-effect following Dudaev. No effective postwar state-building and reconstruction emerged in Chechnya due to lack of funds and weak governmental capacity in a highly militarized, impoverished, and traumatized society following the events of 1999.<sup>139</sup>

The power vacuum in Chechen leadership following their initial victory in the first Chechen War was quickly filled by Aslan Maskhadov, one of Dudaev's most distinguished generals. After the Khasavyurt agreement, Maskhadov sought to advance himself from able insurgent to successful statesman. In what is widely considered to be a relatively free and fair election,<sup>140</sup> Maskhadov won the Chechen presidency in January 1997. About half a million people voted after a highly public campaign. These were the first and last elections that approximated to OSCE norms of democratic criteria held in Chechnya. Tim Guldemann, coordinator of the OSCE mission in Chechnya, said that the vote "reflected the freely expressed will of the voters" and "established a legitimate foundation for the new system of authority."<sup>141</sup> Russia acknowledged Maskhadov's victory formally, and Chechnya it seemed, was on the path towards legitimate independence. Officially the Khasavyurt Accord postponed final decision of Chechnya's formal status for five years, but *de facto* Chechnya was already regarded as a newly independent state. Enter into the equation the previously discussed problem of historical

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<sup>139</sup> Hughes, James, *Chechnya: from Nationalism to Jihad*, Ch 4, p. 94.

<sup>140</sup> Lieven, Anatol, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, p. 145.

<sup>141</sup> Moscow News, 30 January 1997. Run-off elections for the parliament were held until March 1997, in James Hughes, *From Nationalism to Jihad*, p. 228.

monochronocism<sup>142</sup> and the perpetual victimization of Chechnya, and the new republic quickly ran into problems with state-formation. Following the second failed Russo-Chechen war, a Russian blockade and international isolation left Maskhadov with an impossible task.<sup>143</sup> State building required a political process that was civically inclusive and demanded compromise. Chechnya proved unable to construct effectively a state proper, and declined into lawlessness and crime, which threatened conflict both locally and regionally and, eventually, again provoked Russia.<sup>144</sup> During this period of ineffective governance, radical forms of Islam began to flourish in the Chechen Republic.

In this climate of crime and corruption, banner-carriers for radical Islam, such as fighters and warlords steeled by the experience of the first war -- most notably Shamil Basaev, began espousing increasingly extremist Islam and jihadist rhetoric.<sup>145</sup> Maskhadov was unable, and ultimately unwilling, to counter such rhetoric. He failed to produce what Weber calls a “legitimate statehood.”<sup>146</sup> Maskhadov was unable to establish the principle Weberian requirement of state building - monopoly over the legitimate use of force. Chechen insurgents, and Islamist fighters, with Basaev as their vanguard, continued to wreak havoc and engage in activities such as hostage-taking. The restlessness of the Chechen people, aspiring to independence, but finding no solace in

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<sup>142</sup> While problems associated with monochronicism and determinist historical narratives are not unique to Chechnya, they are nonetheless pertinent to a complex understanding of Islamism in Chechnya.

<sup>143</sup> Hughes, James, *Chechnya: from Nationalism to Jihad*, Ch 4, p. 94.

<sup>144</sup> Sakwa, Richard. *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, pp.10-11

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century)*, p. 96.

years of ineffective state-building and bitter war with Russia, saw in jihadist ideology a structured, integrative political discourse. This discourse offered the possibility of relief from the weight of the Russian Federation and came with the positive externality of religious salvation and enduring freedom. In the maelstrom of the late 1990s, where kidnapping, banditry, slavery, ransoming, and general aggression, not just confined to Chechnya<sup>147</sup>, relief from this volatility was highly appealing. Islamic radicalism and jihadism provided to be not just an ideology around which to rally, but a highly organized and proven-effective methodology. It was, as Anna Matveeva states, “a struggle for political order, where historical and demographic factors are pertinent, but, notwithstanding, the problems facing the region are basically modern, i.e., building a cogent state.”<sup>148</sup> Indeed, the collapse of the Soviet Union opened up a power vacuum throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia, while Russia struggled to find an effective way of asserting its interests. The militant warlords, such as Basaev, sought to exploit the situation in order to take more territory from Russia and to create “an Islamic republic from the Black to the Caspian Sea.”<sup>149</sup> In response, Russia argued that it was obliged to act within the terms of the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security that was signed at the OSCE summit in Budapest in December 1994. Thus, the events

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<sup>147</sup> I refer here to the two notorious Chechen invasions of neighboring Dagestan in August and September 1999

<sup>148</sup> From Matveeva, Anna, *The North Caucasus: Russia's Fragile Borderland*, (London, Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1999). Summary, quoted in Richard Sakwa, *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, p. 11

<sup>149</sup> S Shermatova, “Tak nazyvaemye vakhkhability”, in *Chechnya i Rossiya: obshchestva i gosudarstva* (Moscow, 1999), p. 419, quoted in Richard Sakwa, *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, p. 16

leading up the Russian invasion of Chechnya in 1996, violating the Khasavyurt Agreement, were not of Chechen separatist origin, but rather that of political radicals who sought to capitalize upon Chechen instability and Russian weakness, rallying under the banner of Islam in order to achieve this goal. The chaos resulting from Chechnya's brief stint with de facto independence provided Basaev and other such espousers of jihad with the window of opportunity needed to consolidate Islamic radicalism and sow the seeds for its propagation.

#### A. CRITICAL JUNCTURES

*“The situation in the North Caucasus remains strained. Extremists are stepping up their subversive terrorist activities and at the same time are trying to conduct a campaign to discredit the government bodies of the North Caucasus republics.”*<sup>151</sup> — President Medvedev, February 2009

#### THE RESONANCE OF POLITICAL ISLAM

Islamism<sup>152</sup> as a unified ideology proffers one of the most potent ideologies in the world in terms of mobilizing and operationalizing a community towards radicalism and extremist action. Where nationalism, socialism, and other ideologies have failed to mobilize a populace towards action, Islamism has succeeded in providing a resonant

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<sup>150</sup> Paragraph 6 states that ‘participating states will take appropriate measures to prevent and combat terrorism in all its forms,’....

<sup>151</sup> Open Source Center. Central Eurasia: Daily Report (hereafter CEDR), February 6, 2009, Doc. No. CEP-950260.

<sup>152</sup> Islamism is here defined as a normative political ideology that holds at its core the establishment of an alternative form of government, namely, the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate.

ideological foundation, suffice to precipitate a complete sociopolitical revolution.<sup>153</sup> Islamism offers a complete program for social and political transformation, against both Western cultural penetration and oppressive governments like that of the Soviet Union/Russian Federation. Moreover, it offers a guarantee of millenarian salvation and security in the afterlife with Allah.<sup>154</sup> Though Islamism did not start out as a primary cause of the Russo-Chechen Wars, it has become a significant factor. The protracted fighting and disorder associated with the wars has ensured that Islamism and jihadist efforts have not only subsisted through the centuries, but have in fact proliferated. As Märta-Lisa Magnusson states, “The proliferation of radical Islam, [however], is not a cause but an effect of the previous and the current wars.”<sup>155</sup> For the most part, the wars in Chechnya began as a secessionist struggle against the Russian Federation. The divisive line of cleavage pitting the two parties against each other was not religious in origin, but rather ethno-cultural. On one side of the fence were a proud people who identified as Chechen, sharing in a common history, language, culture, and legal recourse, i.e., the *adat*; on the other were the Russians, here loosely defined as those fighting for the preservation of Russian territorial integrity, and those who shared a common language, Russian. In truth, many of those classified as “Russian” were Ukrainian, Tatar or

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<sup>153</sup> Here I base my definition of revolution on Theda Skocpol’s definition of what constitutes a “complete” revolution, i.e, a successful transformation of both the extant social and political order. For more information on the criteria for a revolution proper, see Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, 1979.

<sup>154</sup> Walker, pp.30-31

<sup>155</sup> Märta-Lisa Magnusson, “Prospects for Peace in Chechnya.” *Searching for Peace in Chechnya — Swiss Initiatives and Experiences*.

Bashkir.<sup>156</sup> But in principle they identified with Russia as a state and therefore, Russia provided them with a source of national identity. In defining the shared Chechen identity, and struggle for Chechen independence, Islam hardly comprised the most prominent feature. As Edward Walker points out, the underpinnings of the Chechen Wars were not religious in nature. The Chechens fought for independence and autonomy, motivated by what may be called ethno-nationalism.<sup>157</sup> The Russians, however, were galvanized by a sense of statism; the need to preserve the territorial integrity of mother Russia and defend her from bandits, separatists and terrorists.<sup>158</sup> In this sense, the wars originated as an ethnic conflict of sorts. And while it is true that a religious line of division separated the Chechen fighters from the Russians, as most Russians were eastern Orthodox and most Chechens Sunni or Sufi Muslims, many observers and scholars of the first Chechen War conclude that religion had very little, if anything, to do with the outset of conflict.<sup>159</sup> In fact, despite the long-standing perception of Chechnya as one of the most religious of the ethnic republics in the Northern Caucasus, it was Chechnya's neighbor to the east, Dagestan, that was the hub and center of Islamic thought and teaching. Islam factored very little into the original Chechen equation, and played a limited role in mobilizing early Chechen separatism.

However, as Gordon Hahn states, "Winning on the ideational battlefield by effectively disseminating and convincingly propagandizing a revolutionary group's

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<sup>156</sup> Walker, p.28

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

ideological orientation is a key element in mobilizing supporters from among the aggrieved.”<sup>160</sup> An ideology capable of effectively articulating grievances and providing a course of action that promises success is oft times decisive in mobilizing a movement. Islamism did just that. Moreover, the unexpected success of Muslim radicals in Afghanistan against Soviet forces at Khost seemed to validate the cause of Islamism, and demonstrated that through Islamism, a victory over monolithic Russia was possible. It was following General Dudaev’s declaration of Chechen independence following the failed August coup and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 that Islam entered into the Chechen separatist struggle as a device for the unification and mobilization of Chechen fighters.

Any political ideology, if it is to substantively influence and mobilize a populace, must resonate with the movement in question. That is to say, it must carry some relevance to the population; its followers must be able to identify with the ideology and see in it the potential for the successful articulation of their grievances into concrete action. During times of socioeconomic deprivation and political instability, an ideology that possesses transformative power carries even greater influence. It is important to clarify that an ideology does not need to possess a completely rational, logical infrastructure to resonate with a population. Rather, resonant ideologies offer a sufficient explanation for the current sociopolitical situation, and propose a course of action, or solution, to achieve a desired outcome. In this regard, Islamism proffers a highly

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<sup>160</sup> Hahn, Gordon M. *The Caucasus Emirate Mujahedin: Global Jihadism in Russia's North Caucasus and Beyond*, Kindle Locations 216-218.

effective ideology of resistance. Much as Marxism offered a solution to problems of economic and class disparities, and a lack of social mobility, Islamism offers an explanation of the course of Chechen separatism and its failure to achieve success against Russian dominance. Islamism provides an explanatory ideology for what has transpired in Chechnya that has led to the failure of a movement with strictly ethno-nationalistic origins, namely, the penetration of alien cultural norms, defeat and humiliation at the hands of infidels, corruption and immorality, and straying from the true path of Islam.<sup>161</sup> It identifies who and what is to blame, secular governments, corrupt elites, the purveyors of Western culture, Jews and Christians, globalization and modernization, and the hegemony of kafirs, and then specifies what must be done to set these wrongs right, be pious, make contributions to Islamic charities, join an Islamist party, and become an activist in this party, mujahid or shahid, the establishment of an Islamic republic, the enforcement of sharia law, and a consequent return to the true path of Islam. Islam offered a ready-made solution to previously unsuccessful attempts at Chechen independence vis-a-vis ethno-nationalist rhetoric

A failed attempt at state building after the first Russo-Chechen War, and a failed regime under Maskhadov, created a political vacuum in Chechnya. This vacuum was rapidly filled by fundamentalist organizations, such as Al Qaeda, who, not unlike Putin, saw extremism as the only effective strategy of pursuit. Under the banner of Islam and with Allah's blessing, they sought Chechen independence at all costs. The politicization

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<sup>161</sup> Walker, pp.30-31.

of Islam occurred both internally, and as a result of external influences. This multi-layered complexity is in fact part of why the ideology proffered by fundamentalist Islam was so resonant in Chechnya, and why it remains tenacious to this day.

The radicalization of Islamic doctrine in Chechnya was, in part, the result of years of military conflict. The militancy that became a constant feature of Chechen life after the outbreak of the first Russo-Chechen War in 1994, led to the operationalization of Islam as a resource for uniting an endogenously divided people, and as a source of identifiable inspiration for Chechen separatist fighters. Chechen leaders contextualized the conflict with Russia by using historical, iconic symbols and allusions to anti-Imperialist, anti colonial wars of the past. This connection evoked a historical memory of oppression and conflict with Russia, fought along religious lines. But the politicization of Islam in Chechnya was also a consequence of external influence. It is no coincidence that the growing radicalization of Chechnya's independence movement occurred in tandem with the growth and influence of Al-Qaeda, beginning in the early 1990s. Al-Qaeda viewed Chechnya as a platform, much like Bosnia, Kashmir and other such Islamic nations, from which it could propagate its mission of global jihad against the "West."<sup>162</sup> Arab fighters and financial support were sent to Chechnya to support the

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<sup>162</sup> The global *jihad* movement was intent on entering into conflict with the West, but also those states that threatened to inhibit the return to fundamentalist Islam in Islamic states. In this regard, Russia too became a target of the global jihadist movement, for its crackdown on Islamism in the Northern Caucasus, reaching an apex under the first Putin administration.

Chechen resistance movement from Khost. Thus both internal and external pressures led to the radicalization of Islamic identity in Chechnya.

The emergence of Islamic radicalism in Chechnya can be viewed as the result of a paradox: the Chechen leadership employed Islamic slogans in order to radicalize the population and inspire them to military victory against Russia, but this victory then empowered the radicals and created a situation in which they attempted to impose a form of Islam (Wahhabism) that was alien to the vast majority of the population. This dual reinforcement meant that, while resonant among a majority of Chechens, Islamism as a political ideology, beyond the parameters of its utilitarian capacities to mobilize Chechen fighters, did not grow organically from within Chechnya. Rather, it was the imposed consequence of Wahhabist leaders, whose rhetoric was validated by military victories over monolithic Russia. Adding to the complexity of the situation, Islamic radicalism was appropriated to differing degrees within Chechnya. For example, Wahhabism took hold in the highland region, the base of Shamil Basaev's forces.<sup>163</sup> This is perhaps due to the fact that traditional Sufist communities were more embedded in the highland regions, and thus their memory of marginalization, disenfranchisement and historical animosity with Russia resounded more strongly among them. It is probable, then, that the traumatic experiences of harsh military conflict and increasing religiosity coalesced to produce a radicalization of the Chechen Islamic identity in the struggle against Russia.

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<sup>163</sup> Hughes, James. "Chechnya: the Causes of a Protracted Post-Soviet Conflict." *Civil Wars*, Vol. 4, No. 4, (Winter 2001), LSE Research Online, pp. 34-39

The radicalization of Islam in Chechnya was a multi-causal phenomenon. While it proved highly effective as a political ideology in uniting and mobilizing Chechen fighters, the tenets of fundamentalist, Wahhabist Islam were not endemic to the Chechen identity. However, in the face of a relentless Russian adversary and failed attempts at victory through nationalism alone, Islamism offered a solution that was perceived as viable. Whether the core of Islamic fundamentalist ideology truly resonated among Chechens is debatable, but political Islam offered a means to an end and capitalized upon a centuries-old Chechen religious identity. The politicization of Islam, beginning in the early 1990s, reached an apogee concomitantly with Putin's rise to power in the late 1990s. Consequently, Putin's actions and policy toward Chechnya are highly pertinent to understanding the evolution of Islamic radicalism in Chechnya, and to understanding its status today.

#### PUTIN'S POWER PLAYS IN THE CAUCASUS

*"What happened was what always happens when a state possessing great military strength enters into relations with primitive, small peoples living their own independent lives... Either on the pretext of self-defense, even though any attacks are always provoked by the offenses of the strong neighbor, or on the pretext of bringing civilization to a wild people, even though this wild people lives incomparably better and more peacefully than its civilizers, or else on a whole range of other pretexts, the servants of large military states commit all sorts of villainy against small nations, insisting that it is impossible to deal with them in any other way." [Russian?]*

—Leo Tolstoy, 1902 draft of Hadji Murat

September 1, 2004 was the beginning of three-day incident that would dramatically alter the course of Russo-Chechen relations. A group of armed Chechen and Ingush Islamic radicals seized School Number One (SNO) in the town of Beslan, North Ossetia, an autonomous republic of Russia's Northern Caucasus adjacent to Chechnya. The siege lasted three days, and claimed the lives of 385 people, of them, 186 children. During the seizure, over 1,100 individuals were taken as hostages, including 777 children. The militants occupying SNO were under the command of Chechen warlord and *de facto* leader of Chechnya's Wahhabist Muslims, Shamil Basaev. Basaev demanded formal recognition of Chechnya's independence and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Chechnya. Russia, not conceding, stormed the school on the third day of the siege. In retaliation, hundreds were killed, and many more were wounded, or went missing. The event led to an unprecedented consolidation of power in Kremlin. As stated by Simon Sarazhdyan for The Moscow Times, "Putin used Beslan to toughen laws on terrorism and expand the powers of law enforcement agencies. But he did not stop there. Putin also used the attack as a pretext for introducing measures that had little to do with fighting terrorism and a lot with consolidating power in the Kremlin, such as scrapping the election of regional governors."<sup>164</sup> At present, debates still continue regarding many details of the seizure, including allegations that journalists were not allowed to report freely, allegations regarding the nature of negotiations with the

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<sup>164</sup> Sarazhdyan, Simon. "Chechnya Vow Cast a Long Shadow." *The Moscow Times*. February 2008. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article/chechnya-vow-cast-a-long-shadow/356028.html>, accessed August 6 2015

militants, and questions as to attribution of responsibility. The Beslan incident involved both Chechens and Ingush participants. SNO was not a random target; during Soviet times, the school was used as a site to gather Ingush during the ethnic cleansing of Ingush peoples by the Ossetes.<sup>165</sup> Chechnya, too, had a stake in the matter. Indeed, SNO was the site from which several Russian federal attacks against Chechnya were launched.<sup>166</sup> For the Chechens, the siege was a maneuver in retaliation for the countless deaths and widespread destruction of Chechnya during the Chechen wars.

Initially, responsibility and motivation for the incident was unclear. After the incident, claims began to arise that the attack was influenced by al-Qaeda and the global jihad effort. In the years preceding the incident, Putin showed restraint in attributing Russian terrorist attacks to Chechens. However, in this instance, Putin declared the crisis to be a result of the “direct intervention of international terrorism.”<sup>167</sup> Putin’s statements ignored the nationalist origins of the Chechen demands, instead placing the incident in the context of the global jihadism, and pressing for international cooperation against Islamic radicalism. By presenting the Beslan incident, and the ensuing conflict as connected to the global narrative of Islamic radicalism, Putin made it possible to take unilateral direction in combatting the Chechens.

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<sup>165</sup> "Getting Back Home? Towards Sustainable Return of Ingush Forced Migrants and Lasting Peace in Prigorodny District of North Ossetia."

<sup>166</sup> Novichkov, N. "Frontal and Army Aviation in the Chechen Conflict."

<sup>167</sup> "Russia: On Beslan, Putin Looks Beyond Chechnya, Sees International Terror," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 7 September 2004,

Shortly after the attack, Shamil Basaev publicly claimed responsibility for the incident. Basaev enumerated that his Riyadus-Salikhin battalion carried out the SNO seizure. The Beslan incident, quite similar to previous Chechen radicalist attacks, such as the taking of the Dubrovka Theatre in 2002 and Chechen raid on Budyonnovsk in 1995, was an effort to end Russian oppression of Chechnya and finally to achieve Chechen independence. However, Basaev remarked that he underestimated the cruelty of the Russian government in responding to the situation.<sup>168</sup> Indeed, reports of Russian use of *shmel'* vacuum bombs, bombs that draw the oxygen out of a room and use the pressure to form an explosion capable of tremendous destruction, led to widespread accusations from the international landscape, including the European Union, of rights violations and the use of unnecessary force.<sup>169</sup> The incident tarnished the political reputation of Chechnya as well. Then President Aslan Maskhadov claimed no responsibility for the incident, attributing it to wholly Basaev, who was operating autonomously from the official Chechen government at the time.<sup>170</sup> Maskhadov spoke out against the claiming of the lives of hundreds of children, and issued a statement saying that there was “no justification” for the seizing of SNO.<sup>171</sup> Nevertheless, the attack became but one step in the full demonization of Chechen insurgents, a task carried to completion by Vladimir Putin.

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<sup>168</sup> Simon Sarazhdyan, “Chechnya Vow Cast a Long Shadow.” *The Moscow Times*

<sup>169</sup> Smith, David (5 September 2004). “EU doubts shatter unity”. *The Guardian*.

<sup>170</sup> Obituary: Aslan Maskhadov, *BBC News*, 8 March 2005.

<sup>171</sup> “Maskhadov: Chechnya’s Defiant Ex-Leader.”

The Beslan crisis was a loss when evaluated from all sides. Criticisms abound of Putin's use of the incident to tighten the grip of the Russian government, from groups such as the Mothers of Beslan and the Voice of Beslan.<sup>172</sup> A series of federal reforms following the incident led to decreased democracy in the RF and gave the President tremendous unilateral powers. Putin's framing of the incident as a terrorist attack directly connected to Al-Qaeda, and subsequently, to the U.S. led "war on terrorism,"<sup>173</sup> are not wholly inaccurate, but they also allotted him a great deal of seemingly justified control. This kind of "soft authoritarianism" is a hallmark of the Putin administration's response to Chechen-led terrorism and is essential to understanding of the contemporary state of Islamism in Chechnya.

#### A CHECHEN BY ANY OTHER NAME

By the end of the second Chechen War in 2010, Chechnya had long since been labeled a rogue state, and the term dead end, in Russian *tupik*, was widely used by both Chechens and Russians.<sup>174</sup> Russia was still very much humiliated from its defeat in 1996, and room for negotiations with Maskhadov were limited, due to nationalist constraints on both sides. Putin, a hardline "KGBshnik"<sup>175</sup> and head of the FSB (Federal Security Service, in

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<sup>172</sup> Beslan Mothers Stay In Court All Night, The Moscow Times, 4 May 2007  
See also Smith, David (5 September 2004). "EU doubts shatter unity". The Guardian (London).

<sup>173</sup> "The Whole World Is Crying", TIME, 12 September 2004.

<sup>174</sup> Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century)*, p. 97.

<sup>175</sup> Sometimes used interchangeably with the term "Chekist," meaning a member of the Russian secret police.

Russian, *Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii*) 1998-99, adopted a policy toward Chechnya typical of leaders of the security establishment, the siloviki, the leaders of the security establishment in Russia. As Hughes phrases it:

Putin would have been party to the argument of the 'power ministries,' best exemplified publicly by former minister of defense Kulikov, which repeated the mantra-like formula that Chechnya was ungovernable, a 'bandit' and 'terrorist' state, increasingly dominated by fanatical Wahhabis and intent on wider destabilization in the North Caucasus. The only solution was force to reconquer Chechnya by military means and 'reimpose order.' According to this script, Russia's de facto recognition of independence for Chechnya only served to promote further chaos and the growth of 'terrorism.'<sup>176</sup>

With Vladimir Putin contextualizing the Beslan incident as a terrorist attack, Russia began to embark on a path towards a war on terror, subsequently classifying all operations regarding Chechnya as "counterterrorist operations."<sup>177</sup> The military success over the Chechens, achieved only through an excessive use of force, was key in Putin's victory in the "khaki" presidential election in March 2000, and later in 2004.<sup>178</sup>

It is worth noting the apparent paradox in Putin's "democratic" rise to power. Putin, Yeltsin's chosen successor, had difficulty in garnering public approval; an August

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<sup>176</sup> Hughes, James P. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* p. 107.

<sup>177</sup> Hughes, James P. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* p. 110.

<sup>178</sup> Hughes, James P. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* p. 108.

poll prior to the March 2000 elections only showed a 2% approval rating for Putin.<sup>179</sup> In seeking this approval, Putin and his administration [the *siloviki*] decided to engage in a new war with Chechnya that would later justify the use of highly undemocratic means of operation. As James Hughes states, “The resumption of war with Chechnya was now instrumentalized as the means to boost Putin’s popularity in advance of a presidential campaign.”<sup>180</sup> And while the first war was brought to a conclusion via democratic channels, the second was begun in order to win a democratic election. For better or for worse, Putin and his *siloviki* succeeded in their aims, and Putin won the March 2000 election. The backdrop to his presidency was the re-conquest of Chechnya.<sup>181</sup> This posture would bring validation for the Russian defeat in 1996, and put an end to domestic fears of Muslim terrorism. Putin advanced rhetoric promoting Russian pride, thereby equating Russian strength with state strength. A series of Chechen-attributed organized attacks -- bombing apartment buildings in Moscow, Volgograd, and Buinaksk in September 1999 -- only fueled Putin’s claim to legitimacy. Furthermore, these attacks were instrumental in mobilizing popular opinion and in gaining support from the Duma and the cooperation of Russian media. Putin’s ideological war against Chechnya carried him to unprecedented popularity.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Opinion poll data on Putin’s popularity, August 1999-January 2000. Data accessed February 2000 at the Levada Center, [http:// www.levada.ru](http://www.levada.ru), quoted in Hughes, James (2013-03-01). *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century) (pp. 109-110). University of Pennsylvania Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>180</sup> Hughes, James P. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* p. 110.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> Mansur Mirovalev, “Chechnya, Russia, and Twenty Years of Conflict.” *Al Jazeera*.

Thus, a cornerstone of Putin's policy regarding Chechnya was to frame the issue as a question of terrorism, with potential global implications. Moreover, Putin's justification to such an extreme anti-Chechen war policy was reinforced by the necessity of combatting not just domestic terrorism, but the need to keep in check a failed state that threatened destabilization of the entire Northern Caucasus region.<sup>183</sup> As he explained in an interview with *Focus* magazine in 2001, "it is not an issue of Chechnya's membership, or non-membership, of the Russian Federation." In Putin's eyes, Chechnya had become "a gangster enclave."<sup>184</sup> Discussion regarding Chechnya's place within the Russian Federation would be to recognize the nationalist underpinnings of the conflict. Instead, Putin spoke about the destabilizing dangers of Islamic radicalism in Chechnya.<sup>185</sup> The heart of the Chechen issue was superseded by the perception that Chechnya had moved beyond the parameters of peaceful negotiations. Military force became the only viable solution.

Putin's characteristic approach in dealing with Chechnya was two-fold: first, the politicization of the Chechen quagmire and the espousal of rhetoric designed to dehumanize the Chechens, regardless of their status as civilian or insurgent; second, the use of counterinsurgency tactics that focused on extreme violence and the coopting of Chechen defectors and pro-Moscow elite. In dehumanizing the Chechen populace,

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<sup>183</sup> Hughes, James P. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* p. 111.

<sup>184</sup> Vladimir Putin interview in *Focus* (Munich), 24 September 2001.

<sup>185</sup> Hughes, James (2013-03-01). *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century) (p. 111). University of Pennsylvania Press. Kindle Edition.

characterizing them as Wahhabists and terrorists, Putin's use of ruthless military tactics became justifiable. Indeed, the use of such lexicon as "bandit country," "terrorist state" and "gangster enclave" came to be a distinctive feature of Putin's statements regarding Chechnya, often crude and vulgar. He once remarked on television during a trip to Kazakhstan that he wanted to "waste them [Islamic fundamentalists] in the shithouse."<sup>186</sup> For example, in November 2002 shortly after the Dubrovka theater attack, when questioned at an EU-Russia summit in Brussels by a journalist from *Le Monde* about Russian abuses in Chechnya, Putin angrily retorted:

"If you want to become a real radical Islamist and are prepared to be circumcised, then I invite you to Moscow. We have many religions. We have many specialists in this area. I will recommend that they do the operation in such a way that you will have nothing left to grow back."<sup>187</sup>

The Kremlin protocol chief termed it an "emotional outburst," but as one Russian journalist put it, the language was more like that used by Putin "in the bania with FSB chief Patrushev"<sup>188</sup> When speaking more rationally, Putin stressed that Chechnya was part of the "global war on terrorism." He declared that Chechnya was "a platform for the expansion of terrorism into Russia," "hotbeds of terrorism," "an outpost of international

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<sup>186</sup> Putin's quoted words in Russian were "*mochit' v sortire*," cited in Hughes, James (2013-03-01). *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century) (p. 111). University of Pennsylvania Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>187</sup> Hughes, James P. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* p. 112.

<sup>188</sup> Iuliia Latynina in *Novaia gazeta*, 15 November 2002; *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 13 November 2002: 3, cited in James Hughes

terrorism,” a “bandit enclave” for foreign-funded “Islamic fundamentalists,” a “medieval world.”<sup>189</sup> This kind of language was a crucial part of his method.

Putin succeeded in capitalizing upon Chechen radicalism and continues to enjoy widespread support for his actions. Even after the Beslan incident, his approval ratings only dipped slightly, and he was able to recover by 2005.<sup>190</sup> As James Hughes argues, Russian policy in Chechnya has been manipulated to justify authoritarian aspects of “Putinization” in Russia, employing what Pavel Baev terms a “counterterrorist mobilization”<sup>191</sup> to recentralize and consolidate his hold on power in Russia.<sup>192</sup> Indeed, following his election to Presidency in 2000, Putin institutionalized what he termed a “dictatorship of law,” *diktaturna zakona*. This policy was intended to correct the asymmetric federalism left by Yeltsin. Putin divided the entirety of the Russian Federation into seven federal districts, each presided over by a governor-general, not unlike what was used during Imperialist Russia.<sup>193</sup> Putin’s federal district plan, intended

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<sup>189</sup> See Vladimir Putin, Annual Address to the Federal Assembly, 16 May 2003, and Annual Address to the Federal Assembly, 26 May 2004

<sup>190</sup> Levada Center (formerly VCIOM) surveys, 1999– 2006, cited in Hughes, James (2013-03-01). *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century)* (p. 122). University of Pennsylvania Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>191</sup> Baev, Pavel. “Instrumentalizing Counter-Terrorism for Regime Consolidation in Putin’s Russia,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27 (2004): 339– 40.

<sup>192</sup> Hughes, James. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century)*, p. 232.

<sup>193</sup> For the recentralizing trends under Putin see James Hughes, “From Refederalization to Recentralization,” in Stephen White et al., eds., *Developments in Russian Politics* 5 (London: Macmillan, 2001), 128– 46; David Cashback, “Risky Strategies? Putin’s Federal Reforms and the Accommodation of Difference in Russia,” *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 3 (2003): 1– 32, [http:// www.ecmi.de/ jemie/ special\\_3\\_2003. html](http://www.ecmi.de/jemie/special_3_2003.html)

to solve the problem of asymmetry and regional relations in Russia, was essentially a simplified military bureaucracy. This outcome was evident by the fact that two of the new presidential representatives were former commanders in the first Russo-Chechen war, while two others were former senior officials in the internal security apparatus. Putin further dismantled Yeltsin's political legacy by forcing Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, and other autonomous republics to become fully integrated within the Russian federal constitutional and economic space, undoing the privileged status they had won from Yeltsin in 1994. Moreover, Putin radically restructured the Federation Council, the upper house of parliament in August 2000, further consolidating power in the hands of the Kremlin.<sup>194</sup>

Putin's use of soft authoritarianism was not just limited to restricting the government. He undertook several actions that demonstrated the extents of his willingness to exercise unilateral control. For example, he limited the political capacities of several prominent oligarchs, demonstrated by the exile of billionaire businessman Boris Berezovskii in early 2000, and the "Yukos affair," which resulted in the imprisonment of oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovskii in May 2005. Perhaps most significantly, he imposed centralization of the mass media. Putin exerted compliance through key figures in the Kremlin, pressured self-censorship upon the oligarchic owners of media and journalists, closed down more objective media channels, and rigorously cracked down on print media that was critical of his administration.<sup>195</sup> Such actions led to

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<sup>194</sup> Hughes, James P. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* p. 122.

<sup>195</sup> Hughes, James P. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* p. 124.

a gross manipulation of the reporting of facts regarding Chechnya. Famously, oligarch Vladimir Gusinskii's NTV, National Television, media company, known for its critical coverage of the war in Chechnya, was transferred to state control via Gazprom, NTV's main shareholder.

Perhaps the most well-known case of media manipulation was that of the assassination of journalist Anna Politkovskaya. Politkovskaya was a vocal critic of the Putin administration, particularly his policy regarding Chechnya. While on a flight to Beslan to report on the SNO incident in 2004, she fell unconscious shortly after consuming tea on the plane. Though the incident was not lethal, it was later discovered she had been poisoned.<sup>196</sup> Politkovskaya was subject to numerous death threats prior to her assassination. Politkovskaya herself, while attending a conference on freedom of the press in December of 2006 in Vienna, Austria, said: "People sometimes pay with their lives for saying aloud what they think. In fact, one can even get killed for giving me information. I am not the only one in danger. I have examples that prove it."<sup>197</sup> Politkovskaya, having given an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, just a week before her assassination spoke out against Kadyrov's actions in Chechnya, calling him a "Stalin of our days."<sup>198</sup> She was found dead in the elevator of her apartment

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<sup>196</sup> "Russian journalist reportedly poisoned en route to hostage negotiations". IFEX. 3 September 2004. Retrieved 11 October 2006.

<sup>197</sup> "Trois journalistes tués le jour de l'inauguration à Bayeux du Mémorial des reporters" (in French). Reporters Without Borders. 7 October 2006. Archived from the original on 29 October 2006. Retrieved 9 October 2006.

<sup>198</sup> Elena Riykovtseva, "Vetxiy and noviy Ramzan," *Radio Svoboda*. October 2006, New and Old Ramzan (Russian).

October 7, 2006. Alexander Litvienko, Russian state security officer at the time, publicly named Putin as the culprit. He was poisoned in November in that year with radioactive polonium.<sup>199</sup>

Putin was nothing short of thorough in the elimination of his opposition and the consolidation of his power. In waging war on Chechnya, Putin employed an unapologetic policy of dehumanizing and demonizing the Chechen insurgents. Ignoring entirely the nationalist origins of the centuries-old conflict, Putin painted a picture of Chechnya as a “bandit enclave,” brimming with Wahhabist fundamentalists, who threatened not just lives, but the destabilization of the entire Northern Caucasus.<sup>200</sup> Basaev and his Islamic followers acted independently of the Maskhadov administration, and such radical insurgents comprised only a portion of the Chechen populace. But although it existed only in “pockets of radicalism” scattered throughout Chechnya and the Caucasus, Islamism was nevertheless highly prevalent. However, Putin’s propaganda machine succeeded, and the re-concentration of power in the hands of Moscow was impressive during his regime. In 2000, Sergei Kovalev, a prominent human rights activist in Russia, argued that the relationship between the second Chechen War and the increasingly authoritarian government under Putin marked the “twilight of Russian freedom.”<sup>201</sup> By 2006, Kovalev’s claim was cemented by the establishment of Putin’s presidential party United Russia. Under United Russia, siloviki’s control over

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<sup>199</sup> Alex Goldfarb and Marina Litvinenko. *Death of a Dissident: The Poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and the Return of the KGB*. Free Press, New York, 2007, p. 328.

<sup>200</sup> Hughes, James P. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* p. 111.

<sup>201</sup> Kovalev (2000), 8.

parliament, regional administrations, the elections, judicial apparatus, and media was realized.<sup>202</sup>

Within the context of such an autocratic government and hardline President, Chechen Islamist attacks dance a fine line between “freedom fighting” and “Islamic terrorists.” By all accounts, and as the historical record has made clear, as Putin’s regime has become emboldened, Chechen acts of terror became increasingly reactionary, and vice versa. Indeed, the relationship between Chechen insurgency and Putin’s counterinsurgency can be aptly described as having a mutually reinforcing effect on each other. What is clear is that Putin’s power plays in the Northern Caucasus have done little to quiet Chechen grievances, and have in fact exacerbated tension between Chechnya and Moscow. Paradoxically, Dudaev’s and Maskhadov’s governments were initially driven by secular nationalism, and the Islamization which developed in Chechnya in the mid-1990s came about not by the design of Chechen leaders, but mainly as a result of the radicalizing experience of military conflict with Russia from 1994 forward, directly attributable to Putin’s stringent counterinsurgency operations.

#### A SCORCHED EARTH: PUTIN’S COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS

Authoritarian behavior also distinguished Putin’s counterinsurgency operations in Chechnya. Putin’s policy was a marked departure from Yeltsin’s policy in dealing with

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<sup>202</sup> Hughes, James P. *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* p. 124.

Chechen insurgents. Rather than engaging in negotiations or diplomacy, Putin's tactics focused on heavy bombardment. The remains of the Chechen capital city of Grozny from the first war were essentially razed by sustained artillery and aerial bombardment ordered by Putin in December 1999. As stated in Emma Gilligan's *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War*, "[This] second aerial assault ruined what was left of Grozny and rained bombs on some forty towns and villages from September 1999 through February 2000."<sup>203</sup> Maskhadov was forced to call for a retreat, and Chechen forces dispersed into the highland mountains, and some were even forced to escape to the remote Pankisi Gorge in the neighboring country of Georgia. The global jihadist network targeted Chechnya as a hub of terrorism. If the first war had the characteristics of a guerrilla war, with regular engagements between military forces, the second war soon settled into a pattern that had more of the characteristics of a military insurgency and counterinsurgency, with terrorism and counterterrorism focused more on the civilian population.

Major problems developed during the Chechen operations, largely a result of lack of proper Soviet training, and failed experiences in Afghanistan in the 1980s. While special forces, *spetsnaz*, were deployed to hunt down Chechen insurgency leaders, much like the model employed by the American-born "war on terror," Russian operations in Chechnya were inadequate. They consisted of mostly contracted soldiers, and special

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<sup>203</sup> Emma Gilligan. *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War*. Princeton University Press: 2009. p.2

paramilitary police units (OMON).<sup>204</sup> However, many of the soldiers had little training, and were frequently under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or engaging in abuses of the Chechen civilian population. The Russian decision to compensate for this, as well as “insure a victory over Chechnya,” by the use of unnecessary force and destruction in hindsight, was a strategic error on the part of the Russian forces.<sup>205</sup> Because of such harsh measures, they suffered an ability to properly collect intelligence, and further alienated the Chechen population. Consequently, this action only served to radicalize Chechen insurgent forces further, by this time having already adopted an Islamist fundamental platform as an instrumental aspect of their struggle.

Russia recognized that at this point in the course of Russo-Chechen relations, it could no longer win over the hearts and minds of the Chechen populace, who had become resolute in their assertion to independence after a long history of oppression, and the influence of Islamic radicals who promised a victory over the Kremlin. Negotiations had been tried and failed. Putin’s course was one solely of coercion and control. In pursuing this trajectory, Putin employed a tactic of what Hughes terms “Chechenization,” here meaning the cooption of Chechen defectors and persons of influence within Chechnya.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Hughes, James (2013-03-01). *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century)* (p. 117). University of Pennsylvania Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>205</sup> Hughes, James (2013-03-01). *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century)* (p. 117). University of Pennsylvania Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>206</sup> Hughes, James (2013-03-01). *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century)* (p. 117). University of Pennsylvania Press. Kindle Edition.

This process both inspired intra-national conflict between Chechens, who were now wary of who they could trust in their struggle for independence, and led to the establishment of the Kadyrov regime, which continues present-day. A cursory evaluation of Putin's process of Chechenization and the underpinnings of today's Kadyrov presidency provide the final context to trace the path of Islamic radicalism in Chechnya, and evaluating its future implications.

The Kadyrov regime is widely known as a proxy government, under the financial influence of Putin.<sup>207</sup> The utilization of a proxy system, in this case the cooption of Chechen insurgents and leaders, has historically been a device used by imperialist powers to maintain their territories. As political scientist Kalyvas explains, such measures divide and rule the resistance by sowing a form of covert, and often not so covert, civil war.<sup>208</sup> The Russians attempted to use such a plan, and fostered selective violence by relying on local agents. As Kalyvas states, such reliance drives "a wedge within the native population."<sup>209</sup> This method of Chechenization, begun in the early 1990s, continues to color Putin's policy regarding Chechnya today. Putin's popularity and platform were dependent upon an effective end to the conflict in Chechnya, an integral part of which was maintaining Chechnya as Russian territory and the elimination of Islamic radicalism connected to Al-Qaeda. Throughout the 1990s, Putin made use of a variety of so-called

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<sup>207</sup> See Nicholas Waller, "A Chechen War By Proxy," *Foreign Affairs*, April 1, 2015.

<sup>208</sup> Hughes, James (2013-03-01). *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century)* (p. 118). University of Pennsylvania Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>209</sup> Stathis N. Kalyvas. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge University Press: 2006, p. 171

proxies, among them Zavgaev, and Avturkhanov. Following the successful ouster of Maskhadov as president, Putin's next task became finding a high profile person capable of winning over the Chechen constituency. This task only became realizable when former Mufti Akhmed Kadyrov abandoned the insurgency in favor of stability, which he saw possible only through cooperation with Putin and the weight of the Russian forces.<sup>210</sup>

Kadyrov may have been motivated by the potential for personal gains and the allure of power in Chechnya, impossible to achieve otherwise, but he was also a pragmatic man. He recognized that many in Chechnya were already tired of fighting, unemployment reigned, the country desperately needed to be rebuilt, and the resonance of Islamism was not carried on the lips of every Chechen who died from Russian counterinsurgency measures.<sup>211</sup> Putin's scorched earth policy left no room for negotiations, and the disproportionate force Russia was willing to employ in ceasing Chechen separatist activity rendered any Chechen opposition futile. In addition, increasing Wahhabi influence and supplies from Al-Qaeda had driven Kadyrov away from the resistance movement.<sup>212</sup> Kadyrov, an open critic of Maskhadov, who he felt failed to effectively curb external Islamic radical influence during his term as president, was removed as Mufti in August of 1999. Shortly after, he renounced the separatist

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<sup>210</sup> Hughes, James (2013-03-01). *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad (National and Ethnic Conflict in the 21st Century)* (p. 119). University of Pennsylvania Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>211</sup> [http://www.rferl.org/content/What\\_Direction\\_For\\_Chechnya/1182441.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/What_Direction_For_Chechnya/1182441.html)

<sup>212</sup> These reasons for abandoning resistance to Russia were spelled out by Kadyrov in an interview with Anna Politkovskaia of 24 July 2000. In particular he stressed that he wanted to "save my nation" and "root out" Wahhabism. Politkovskaia (2001), 192– 201, cited in James Hughes, *From Nationalism to Jihad*, p. 233

cause and began speaking out against Wahhabi influence. He was appointed by Putin in 2000, just after Putin's rise to power. Putin now had an in-country collaborator, and pro-Moscow Chechen administration willing to sacrifice the cause of independence, and combat the Islamic extremism that had penetrated the country.

Current Chechen President, Ramzan Kadyrov, son of Akhmed Kadyrov, has done well to establish a relative stability in the Chechen nation.<sup>213</sup> Since his rise to power, Kadyrov's regime has undertaken a series of efforts at restructuring and rebuilding the Chechen economy. For example, in March of 2006, Dukhvakha Abdurakhmanov, chair of the Chechen People's Assembly, stated that Kadyrov "has proven his capability to govern the economy, not only the power structures." Abdurakhmanov also remarked on how under Kadyrov, the Chechen government had already successfully reconstructed two large Grozny avenues, had repaired local roads, and was in the process of building new mosques, sports centers, and hospitals.<sup>214</sup> However, despite the relative successes Kadyrov has been able to effect, stability and peace in Chechnya remains precarious. Insurgency from Islamic radicals continues to threaten destabilization and conflict in the region.<sup>215</sup> Most Chechens are simply tired of fighting and are acceptant of his presidency, despite his close ties with President Putin. However, Chechnya is still very much a hub of Islamism, and its connection to the global *jihad* network make it both a pressing concern, and difficult to combat

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<sup>213</sup> [http://www.rferl.org/content/What\\_Direction\\_For\\_Chechnya/1182441.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/What_Direction_For_Chechnya/1182441.html)

<sup>214</sup> "What Direction For Chechnya?" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Svoboda*.

<sup>215</sup> "Is Chechen Stability Tenable or Deceptive?" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Svoboda*

## Chapter 4 THE FUTURE OF CHECHEN JIHAD: CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Tsarnaev brothers' Patriots Day attack raised a host of questions. Why was America suddenly the target of self-made Islamic radicals from Chechnya? Were the Tsarnaev brothers in some way connected to Al Qaeda? The Tsarnaev brothers' Boylston Street attack brought back to the forefront the issue of Islamism in Chechnya for the first time since the most recent Russo-Chechen peace accord.

Chechnya came into contact with Russia beginning with Imperial Russia, during Tsarist campaigns into the Caucasus. The Russians quickly learned that they were dealing with an impressive people, who possessed a distinct and multi-faceted identity. Islam has historically comprised a fundamental aspect of this identity. But it was only one of many identities endemic to the Vainakh peoples. In the context of such a complex, and multi-faceted culture and nationality, Islam provided a means of unification. Chechen political culture was often divided, and egalitarian in nature. Initially, the banner of Islam was used as a rhetorical device in order to operationalize Chechen combatants against the Tsar.

But during the Soviet period, the idea of a nation proper, in terms of statehood, began to take hold. Simultaneously, incidents such as the mass deportation of the Chechen people, contributed to growing anti-Russian sentiment, and helped form the backbone to a determinist interpretation of Russo-Chechen history. Chechens began to see themselves

as the perpetually oppressed, and Russia the oppressor. While this historical logic is parsimonious in its understanding,<sup>216</sup> ultimately, the Chechen separatist rhetoric proved powerful, and their nationalist movement could not be quelled. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Chechens were presented with a window to realize their independence.

The political vacuum left by the Soviet Union was seized upon by the Chechens. But rather than a cogent state, it resulted in a failed attempt at state-formation. This led to a condition of instability and volatility. Following this failed experiment at nation-building, General Dudaev came to power, and facilitated the advent of Islamic radicalism in Chechnya. Shortly afterward, ties to the global jihad network were established, and Islamism in Chechnya became a tenacious and sobering issue.

The future of Chechen jihad is likely to be a complex one. As we have discussed, in combatting Muslim radicalism, Putin has used unnecessarily harsh measures and instilled an autocratic regime predicated on the need for a hardline against the “global war on terror.” However, Islamic insurgency continues to be a pressing issue in the region. And while anti-Russian sentiment remains resonant among Chechens, the current state of affairs had led many to advance ideas of cooperation and compromise with the Russian bear. Putin’s use of soft authoritarianism and power plays in the Northern Caucasus will

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<sup>216</sup> There were incidents of Russo-Chechen cooperation and collaboration throughout the history of Russo-Chechen relations

likely be the critical juncture, around which the future of Chechen nationalism, as well as Islamism in Chechnya will develop.

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