
The War Against Terrorism and the Conflict in Chechnya: A Case for Distinction

SVANTE E. CORNELL

More than any other conflict, Chechnya epitomizes the old saying that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.” Since the first Chechen war began in 1994, the Russian government has portrayed the war as one against bandits and Islamic fundamentalists. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the label changed—now Chechens are referred to simply as “terrorists.” Western states have for the most part thus far refrained from accepting the Russian position at face value, seeing the conflict primarily as an ethnic war. While recognizing Russia’s territorial integrity, Western and Islamic states see the Chechen rebels as more or less legitimate representatives of the Chechen people, considering that the current Chechen president, Aslan Maskhadov, was elected in elections deemed free and fair by international observers in 1997. Moreover, the international community has condemned the Russian military’s massive human rights violations in the prosecution of the war. That said, during the course of the second war, which began in October 1999 and rages to this day, there has been an increasing concern with regard to the radicalization of parts of the Chechen resistance movement and its links to extremist Islamic groups in the Middle East.

The attacks of September 11 introduced a new paradigm into world politics, and Chechnya has since been one of the regions most affected by the increased focus on terrorism. Indeed, it did not take long after 9/11 for the Russian government to draw comparisons between the terrorist attacks on the United States and the situation in Chechnya. Only hours after the collapse of the World Trade Center, Russian state television broadcast a statement by President Vladimir Putin expressing

Dr. Svante E. Cornell is Deputy Director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute of the Johns Hopkins University-SAIS and Editor of the Institute’s publication, The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst (<http://www.cacianalyst.org>). Dr. Cornell is also Research Director of the Program for Contemporary Silk Road Studies at Uppsala University, Sweden.

solidarity with the American people. The very next caption showed Putin, several months earlier, warning the world that it ought to cooperate with Moscow against the common threat of “Islamic fundamentalism.” This marked the launch of a strategy aiming to capitalize on the tragic events in America by highlighting the alleged parallels with the situation in Chechnya. “The Russian people understand the American people better than anyone else, having experienced terrorism first-hand,” President Putin declared the day after the attacks.¹

The Kremlin’s pragmatic stance turned out to be the harbinger of a diplomatic campaign targeted at Western countries and intended to shore up legitimacy, if not support, for the Russian army’s violent crackdown in Chechnya.² Whereas

How much truth is there in the Russian claim that Chechnya is a war against terrorism comparable to the U.S. actions in Afghanistan?

European countries and the United States have kept a moderate but noticeable level of criticism against Russia’s massive human rights violations in Chechnya, Russia has had limited success in convincing Western observers that it is not fighting the entire Chechen people, but terrorists.³

The first achievement in Russia’s new diplomatic campaign came with the statement of German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder during Putin’s state visit to Berlin

on September 25, 2002: “Regarding Chechnya, there will be and must be a more differentiated evaluation in world opinion.”⁴ This remark was followed by U.S. President George Bush’s statement, in which he demanded that Chechen forces sever links to terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda.⁵ On the whole, the September 11 attacks have presented Russia an opportunity to reshape its relations with Europe and the U.S. who need Russian intelligence and cooperation in Afghanistan and in the overall prosecution of the “War on Terror.” A halt to criticism on Chechnya has become the foremost price Russia has managed to extract in return for its cooperation.

In this context, there are several questions regarding the Chechen war that deserve further treatment. For instance, how much truth is there in the Russian claim that Chechnya is a war against terrorism comparable to the U.S. actions in Afghanistan? The answer to this question requires an analysis of the roots of the Chechen conflict, the configuration of Chechen fighters, the Russian policies in Chechnya, and the international context with regard to the War on Terrorism.

CHECHNYA: ORIGINS OF CONFLICT

During the early nineteenth century the Chechens were part of the peoples of the North Caucasus that adamantly refused to accept Russia’s occupation of

the region. As the Circassian peoples to the west, Chechens and their neighbors in Daghestan fought an unequal battle until the 1860s to escape Russian rule.⁶ Under the legendary Daghestani chieftain Shamil, the areas today forming southern Chechnya and Daghestan comprised an independent Islamic state, an *Imamate*. Formed in 1824, it lasted until the Russian capture of Shamil in 1859.

Even after Chechnya's incorporation into the Russian empire, the area was never entirely pacified. Whenever Russia was experiencing difficult times either on the home front or abroad, Chechens staged rebellions of varying length and strength, such as during the Russian civil war of the 1920s.

In 1944, during the Second World War, Stalin accused the Chechens (and several other peoples) of collaborating with the invading German forces and ordered their wholesale deportation to Kazakhstan. During the entire ordeal, an estimated quarter of the Chechen nation died of cold, hunger, and epidemics such as typhoid.⁷ Chechens were allowed to return to their homeland in 1957, but the overall price was too heavy: the rate of population growth was set back an entire generation.⁸

It is difficult to overstate the significance of the deportation in the collective memory of the Chechen people. Chechens see it as genocide, an attempt by the Russians to physically exterminate the entire people.⁹ Most leaders of the Chechen independence movement of the 1990s were either born or grew up in exile in Kazakhstan. The deportation convinced many Chechens that there was no way for them to live securely under Russian rule and to a certain degree explains the refusal of the Chechens to surrender in the current war.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, most constituent republics declared their independence, as did two autonomous republics within the Russian Federation: Chechnya and Tatarstan.

Tatarstan, encircled by Russia proper, negotiated with the Kremlin and in 1994 secured a wide autonomy. Chechen nationalist forces, on the other hand, were less compromising. General Dzhokhar Dudayev, who had seized power from the former communist leadership in September 1991, was elected presi-

dent of Chechnya in October and declared its independence soon thereafter.¹⁰ Russian President Boris Yeltsin made an abortive attempt to rein in Dudayev, but the federal center had many other problems to tend to in the early 1990s, and it was not until four years later that Yeltsin was ready to launch a military campaign against the defiant Chechens. By 1994, Russia had strengthened as a state, and Yeltsin had consolidated his power after physically silencing his parliamentary opposition in October 1993.¹¹ As a result of this confrontation, his government became indebted to the military and security forces. Moreover, Chechnya's *de facto*

The deportation convinced many Chechens that there was no way for them to live securely under Russian rule.

independence and Dudayev's anti-Russian rhetoric were foiling Russian plans of asserting control over the south Caucasus states of Azerbaijan and Georgia and particularly over the westward export of the Caspian Sea oil resources. The only existing pipeline carrying oil from Azerbaijan to world markets passed through Grozny, Chechnya's capital, on its way to the Black Sea coast. With this in mind, Russia feared that oil companies would be reluctant to send their oil through a republic led by an erratic secessionist leader. Hence, for both internal and external reasons, the Russian government looked to "solve" the problem of Chechnya. Personal enmity between Dudayev and Yeltsin further made any serious negotiations futile.¹²

THE FIRST WAR

The Kremlin had hoped that the ragtag forces under Dudayev would disintegrate when the powerful Russian army rolled into the breakaway republic, whereas, in fact, the Russian threat rallied erstwhile skeptics around Dudayev.

The worst shelling of Grozny, counted by the number of explosions per day, surpassed the shelling of Sarajevo in the early 1990s by a factor of at least 50.

Aided by the dismal level of preparedness on the part of Russian troops, Chechen forces were able to resist the invasion. It took two months of massive air and artillery bombing for the federal army to capture Grozny—at the cost of thousands of own casualties, over 20,000 civilian lives, a total destruction of the city, and displacement of hundreds of thousands of people.

In August 1996, Chechen forces managed to stage a counter-offensive and retake three major cities, including Grozny, in three

days of fighting. Despite the fact that Dudayev was assassinated by the Russian forces earlier in April, the first Chechen war ended in a total humiliation for the Kremlin.

According to estimates, the first war resulted in roughly 50,000 deaths,¹³ and, in comparison, cost the Russian army much more than the Soviet Union's war in Afghanistan. In 1984, the worst year of fighting in Afghanistan, almost 2,500 Soviet soldiers were killed. In Chechnya, Russian losses surpassed this number within four months of the intervention. In another statistic, the worst shelling of Grozny, counted by the number of explosions per day, surpassed the shelling of Sarajevo in the early 1990s by a factor of at least 50.¹⁴ The destruction of Grozny has since been widely compared to the battle of Stalingrad in the Second World War.¹⁵

The Khasavyurt peace accords, signed in August 1996 and complemented by a formal peace treaty in May 1997, granted Chechnya *de facto* independence, but deferred the issue of its status until December 31, 2001. In the meantime,

Chechnya was given an opportunity to build what in practice amounted to an independent state. That, however, was not to be. Russia consistently prevented Chechnya from seeking outside financial help, and while it committed funds to the reconstruction of the war-ravaged republic, \$100 million disappeared before they even reached Chechnya. In a celebrated statement, President Yeltsin publicly admitted that "only the devil" knew where the money had gone.¹⁶

Chechnya was also awash with young, unemployed war veterans with arsenals of weapons and loyal to individual field commanders rather than to the central Chechen government. With the economic depression deepening, Maskhadov's authority gradually diminished, and the government became unable to uphold law and order. Various

criminal groups engaged in smuggling and kidnapping. Most alarmingly, warlords Shamil Basayev and the Jordanian-born Khattab began planning for the unification of Chechnya with the neighboring republic of Daghestan. As Maskhadov was either unwilling or unable to rein in these warlords, perhaps fearing a Chechen civil war, Basayev and Khattab recruited hundreds of Daghestanis and other north Caucasians, including Chechens, into what they termed an Islamic Brigade based in southeastern Chechnya.

*As the invasion failed to
"liberate" Daghestan, it
achieved the exact opposite,
serving as an invitation for
thousands of Russian troops
to gather near the Chechen
border.*

THE SECOND WAR

The immediate roots of the present war date back to mid-1999. The Kremlin had later claimed that the decision to re-invade Chechnya came in response to Basayev and Khattab's strike into Daghestan in August. Puzzlingly, Russian military sources had informed U.S. officials of the Kremlin's planned action in Chechnya back in April.¹⁷ Further questions can be asked as to how Khattab and Basayev thought to conquer Daghestan with a relatively small force of no more than 2,000 fighters. They may have possessed intelligence that Daghestan was ready for a full-scale rebellion against Russia. This assumption, reportedly based on information fabricated by the Russian secret services in order to lure the Chechens into another deadly ordeal, proved incorrect.¹⁸ As the two warlords came to realize, Daghestanis generally sided with the Russian government, interpreting the events as the onslaught of militants belonging to an alien and radical brand of Islam.

As the invasion failed to "liberate" Daghestan, it achieved the exact opposite, serving as an invitation for thousands of Russian troops to gather near the

Chechen border. In another interesting coincidence, the invasion also resulted in the sacking of Russian Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin and his replacement by

Putin seems to have learned from his predecessor's "mistakes" and has restricted the media's access to the conflict.

the rather unknown head of the FSB Vladimir Putin. Soon after Putin's appointment, Russia was shaken by a series of apartment bombings in Moscow and Volgograd and the deaths of several hundred people. As the Russian government and media readily blamed the explosions on "Chechen terrorists," and anti-Chechen sentiment reached a high in Russia, the stage was set for a renewed conflict.

Riding on a high tide of popular support, Putin quickly sealed off Chechnya's borders with the rest of Russia and launched a military campaign, rapidly conquering the northern third of the republic. By summer 2001, the second war had surpassed the first one in terms of its duration, the number of both military and civilian casualties, and indeed the human rights violations committed against the civilian population.

HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE

The humanitarian situation in Chechnya today defies description. As Russian and international human rights organizations have documented, Russian forces have amplified the use of concentration camps, such as the infamous Chernokozovo camp outside Grozny.¹⁹ Moreover, there are documented instances of Russian forces using vacuum bombs against Chechen villages, as well as more conventional violations of the laws of war.²⁰

While the Russian leadership has for over a year claimed that the war is over and Chechnya is returning to normalcy, reality is far more gruesome. The shooting down of several Russian military helicopters in the fall of 2002 serves as one of many indications that the war is far from over. And the so-called "mopping up" operations, *zachistki*, executed by the Russian military and special forces as they move into particular villages with the pretext of searching for Chechen fighters, continue unabated as well. In the words of *Human Rights Watch* (HRW),

[Mopping up operations] are routinely the occasion for abuse, particularly arbitrary detention and subsequent torture, ill-treatment, and "disappearances." Soldiers also killed numerous civilians, both during and beyond the context of sweep operations, in indiscriminate shootings. Masked soldiers conducted numerous nightly raids, detaining men who subsequently "disappeared."²¹

According to reports issued by human rights groups, as well as eyewitness accounts by French journalist Anne Nivat in her book *Chienne de Guerre* and Russian reporter Anna Politkovskaya in her book *A Dirty War*, Russian forces indiscriminately and arbitrarily select males aged 14 to 60, whom they either beat, torture, kill, rape, sequester without formal accusations.²² If a Chechen male is taken into custody, he often “disappears,” or is “killed while trying to escape.” The more lucky ones are released upon the payment of large ransoms by relatives to Russian commanding officers.²³

In spite of a substantial and growing body of evidence of human rights violations, investigations and prosecutions number only a few, and so far not a single perpetrator has been convicted. As of April 2001, 72 percent of investigations into disappearances of civilians had been suspended. No one has been held accountable for 130 civilian deaths perpetrated by the Russian military in the villages of Alkhan-Yurt, Saropromyslovski, and Aldy between December 1999 and February 2001. Neither have the Russian authorities investigated a mass grave discovered in February 2001 less than a mile from a main Russian military base in Dachny, Chechnya. To the contrary, Russian authorities have tried to prevent, delay, or harm the investigation. As Amnesty International reports,

Investigations into allegations of extrajudicial execution, torture, ill-treatment, and looting or destruction of private property are infrequent, inadequate and rarely lead to prosecutions. Despite compelling evidence from the victim or witnesses as to the identity of the individual perpetrator or the unit responsible, these investigations are often closed, due to the authorities' apparent “inability” to locate the perpetrator. Russian authorities regularly use amnesty provisions to exculpate members of Russian forces accused of less serious cases of assault against civilians.²⁴

So far, only one high-profile case has led to the arrest and trial of a Russian officer, Colonel Yuri Budanov, who is accused of having raped and brutally murdered a young Chechen woman. In spite of Budanov admitting to abducting the woman, taking her to his office, killing her in anger, and ordering her to be buried in the woods, the murder charge against him was dropped in June 2002, with part of the explanation being that Budanov was a decorated military officer. Psychiatrists of the Serbsky Institute of Psychiatry in Moscow had declared him “temporarily insane” at the time of the murder, hence arguing that he could not be held responsible for his actions.²⁵ The Russian Constitutional Court has since overturned the lower court's ruling and ordered a re-trial, but so far this particular example serves as another proof that even in high-profile cases with overwhelming evidence the Russian judiciary fails to uphold justice with regard to crimes committed against Chechen civilians.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO WARS

While the level of destruction and suffering brought onto Chechnya in the present war is comparable to the first conflict, they are different. On the federal side, Vladimir Putin seems to have learned from his predecessor's "mistakes" and has restricted the media's access to the conflict, and so far it has served Putin's

Arguably, it is an accomplishment of the Russian secret services that have successfully split the Chechen resistance.

political purposes well: whereas publicity over Russia's military losses in the first war eventually turned public opinion around, support for the second war has remained high despite the army's heavier losses.

With respect to the Chechen side, two major differences must be noted. Firstly, whereas in the first war the Chechen forces were united under a single command, in the present war they remain dispersed under the influence of field commanders that seldom coordinate their efforts and are often at odds with each other. Arguably, it is an accomplishment of the Russian secret services that have successfully split the Chechen resistance. Discord in their ranks may also be one of the major reasons why a counter-offensive, similar to the one in August 1996, has yet to occur.

Perhaps even more importantly, the very nature of the Chechen resistance has changed to a large degree. The first war was wrapped in an almost exclusively nationalist rhetoric. Very little mentioning was made of Islam, though Islamic faith undoubtedly played a major role in the struggle against Russian rule. In the second war, however, the Chechen resistance has acquired a much stronger Islamic character. The use of Islamic vocabulary such as *Jihad* (Holy War) and *mujahideen* (resistance fighters) has increased manifold, as has the active support for the Chechen cause by radical Islamic groups in the Middle East.²⁶ In many ways, this change is natural: the suffering of the first war caused an increase in religiosity both among civilians and fighters; moreover, since the use of Western conceptual arguments of human rights, democracy, and self-determination brought no support from the West, Islamic rhetoric remains the only option available to Chechen rebels to attract the desperately needed foreign assistance.

Finally, the second war has had larger regional implications. Russia has specifically used the conflict to blame the neighboring Georgia for sheltering Chechen "terrorists" in the Pankisi gorge in the mountains of northern Georgia, bordering Chechnya. Russian pressure on Georgia, involving cuts of energy supplies and the imposition of a discriminatory visa regime, has grown to such an extent that it now threatens Georgia's internal stability and development.²⁷ Russia has also threatened Georgia with military action, but has failed

to provide evidence that Chechen fighters are indeed entering Chechnya from the Georgian territory.

Overall, the increased religious rather than ethnic rhetoric poses a larger threat for Russia, as it runs the risk of inciting anti-Russian and pan-Islamic sentiments in other republics of the North Caucasus. Whereas in 1994-1996 a few north Caucasians fought alongside the Chechens, numerous young men from the neighboring republics of Daghestan, Karachai-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria have now joined the war.²⁸

AN ANTI-TERRORIST OPERATION?

In view of the preceding, though incomplete, summary of the conflict, can the war in Chechnya be considered an anti-terrorist operation? Moscow argues that its military response was necessitated by Chechnya developing into a breeding ground for terrorism, as evidenced by the September 1999 apartment bombings in Moscow and Volgograd and the attack on Daghestan. In the aftermath of 9/11, government officials on both sides of the Atlantic have highlighted the link between Chechen groups and Middle Eastern extremists, directly implicating the Chechens in several terrorist acts. In the most daring of them, in October 2002, a group of about 50 Chechen fighters, led by a radical Islamist commander, assaulted a Moscow theater, taking over 700 people hostage. Significantly, half of the hostage-takers, who demanded an end to the war, were young Chechen women who had strapped explosives around their bodies. After a long siege, the Russian special forces broke into the theater using a lethal gas that killed over 120 hostages and some hostage-takers. The remaining rebels were shot point-blank.

Analysts have been led to believe Basayev and Khattab were fooled by the FSB disinformation campaign.

In another alleged terrorist strike, on December 27, 2002, a truck packed with explosives passed all security barriers and rammed into the government building in Grozny, destroying the center of Russian power in the republic and killing 46 people.²⁹

Both of these incidents have fueled the Russian claims and in March 2003 moved the United States to add three Chechen groups to the State Department list of terrorist organizations. And there is no doubt that the hostage taking in Moscow constitutes a terrorist act. However, the course of events in mid-1999 is confusing and often contradictory, as are some elements of the hostage taking.

The illogical character of Khattab and Basayev's attack on Daghestan in August 1999 has given birth to a variety of speculations. There being no plausi-

ble explanation as to how these experienced fighters expected to conquer Daghestan with their small force, analysts have been led to believe they were fooled by the FSB disinformation campaign into believing they would provide the spark for a rebellion in Daghestan.³⁰ Other observers have gone as far as to allege that Basayev himself is on the Russian military intelligence's payroll.³¹ While this theory is counterfactual given that Basayev's forces are most heavily involved in the military struggle against the Russian army, war reporters with experience covering the conflict have said that the safest place in Chechnya is next to Basayev: for whatever reason, be it his shady connections or his military genius, Russian rockets never hit anywhere near his positions.³²

The apartment bombings provide another mystery of 1999. In justifying his decision to invade Chechnya, Putin had cited not only the events in Daghestan, but also the apartment bombings. According to the Russian version of the story, explosions were orchestrated by the Chechens. Yet, this allegation lacks credibility.

Russian officials have insisted that the bombs that exploded in the residential buildings in Moscow and Volgograd were planted by Chechens in order to terrorize the Russian population. Yet, only days after the blasts in Moscow, a peculiar incident in the city of Ryazan, 60 miles south of the capital, forced the Russian public to scrutinize the official story. Residents in yet another apartment building noted a suspicious vehicle with tampered tags parked outside their building and called the police. Police officers arriving on the scene searched the building and discovered suspicious bags with what appeared to be sugar in the basement. When a bomb squad performed a standard chemical test, the content

If the Ryazan event was not a drill, it represents a plan by the FSB to blow up a civilian apartment building in a Russian city.

of the bags tested positive for Hexagen, the same explosive that had caused the blasts in Moscow and Volgograd. The police immediately arrested three persons on the site, and all three flashed FSB identity cards.

Within hours the FSB had taken control of the investigation, and 48 hours later government officials announced that the event in Ryazan had simply been a drill to test the alertness of Russian citizens.³³

Naturally, this statement raised further questions. To most independent observers, the story simply did not make sense. If it was a drill, why was a live bomb with a detonator and a timer placed inside the building? Why was such a drill instigated at all, considering that no similar exercise had ever been reported in Russia previously?

The alternative explanation advanced by numerous analysts, including independent publication *Novaya Gazeta*, is indeed sinister. If the Ryazan event was not a drill, it represents a plan by the FSB to blow up a civilian apartment build-

ing in a Russian city. And if the FSB is responsible for attempting to blow up a building in Ryazan, it is logical to assume it may also be responsible for the detonated bombs in Moscow and Volgodonsk. This allegation is further strengthened by the puzzling fact that within hours of the blasts, the authorities brought construction machines to clean up the rubble, thereby destroying all evidence that could possibly have helped in the investigation.³⁴

Lacking any evidence, the authorities have not been able to prove the Chechen link to the blasts. In 2001, they indicted 26 people—all ethnic Russians and Cherkess. Curiously, this and many other discrepancies have done little to force the Kremlin to reconsider its course of action. In fact, the official response seems to have followed a compelling logic. The blasts in Moscow and Volgodonsk incited popular anti-Chechen sentiments, and the public opinion strongly supported the war. President Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned on New Year's Eve 2000, leaving power to representatives of the secret services, personified by Vladimir Putin, who then built his presidential campaign on the promise to crush the Chechens.

The truth behind the events of September 1999 may never be known, but considerable circumstantial evidence suggests that the Russian secret services themselves planted the bombs to create a wave of public outrage against the Chechens. In comparison, the hostage taking of October 2002 represents a clearer case of Chechen rebels using terrorist tactics to gain attention to their struggle. Yet, even here there are cracks in the marble.

First, the leader of the Chechen terrorist group, Movsar Barayev, had allegedly disappeared from Chechnya two months prior to the attack on the theater.³⁵ According to Russian military intelligence, the GRU, he had been arrested by the Russian authorities. Furthermore, the mothers of two female terrorists told French journalist Anne Nivat that their daughters had been arrested in late September and taken to an unknown location.³⁶ Neither Barayev nor the two women had been seen after their detention in Chechnya until they appeared almost magically in the Moscow theater. Related to this, it is puzzling how a fully armed group of 50 Chechens could travel all the way to the Russian capital in vehicles loaded with explosives, eluding numerous checkpoints along the road. Finally, not a single explosive was detonated by the supposedly suicidal terrorists during the siege by the Russian special forces. In fact, it seems that they simply sat back watching the theater fill with smoke.

These puzzles and the fact that the Russian special forces did not detain a single hostage taker for questioning, but shot even those who had already been

*Activities of the Russian
forces and Chechen
separatist groups are deeply
intertwined, as both sides
are involved in smuggling
of and trade in arms,
drugs, bodies, and persons.*

incapacitated by the deadly gas, have given rise to many rumors, the most obvious one being that the Russians had staged the attack in order to discredit the cause of Chechen separatism. This theory is doubtful, given the loss of prestige this would imply for Russia and for President Putin personally. That having been said, Moscow is yet to clarify many details of the hostage-taking ordeal.

The confusion surrounding the invasion of Daghestan, the bombings in Moscow and Volgograd, and the Moscow hostage taking suggests that the situation in Chechnya cannot be drawn in black and white. Activities of the Russian

*The radicals have added
an international dimension
to the Chechen conflict,
a dimension that damages
the Chechen cause.*

forces and Chechen separatist groups are deeply intertwined, as both sides are involved in smuggling of and trade in arms, drugs, bodies, and persons. Both sides are fragmented: on the Russian side, the military, the Interior Ministry, and the FSB all maintain presence in Chechnya; on the Chechen side, power and authority are dispersed along a whole continuum of different groupings that range from the secular nationalist forces

under President Maskhadov to more criminal and/or extremist religious groups. Typically, one Chechen group would fight, say, the FSB and the military but enjoy "business" relations with the Interior Ministry troops (MVD); another would fight the military and the MVD but deal with the FSB units.³⁷

None of this, of course, denies the fact that some of the Chechen groups have resorted to terrorist tactics and may have links to the global "Jihadi" movement. Indeed, the Chechen groups that have espoused the Wahhabi form of Islam have attracted significant support from Islamic charities and underground organizations in the Middle East.³⁸ This link was personified by Amir al-Khattab,³⁹ who led the invasion of Daghestan in 1999. A Saudi Arabian veteran of the Afghan war against the Soviet Union, as well as the civil war in Tajikistan, flamboyant Khattab, with his long hair, high-profile strikes, and skillful use of the media, can be termed a kind of Che Guevara of the Islamic Jihad. Khattab and his forces had staged some of the most daring and suicidal raids against Russian units before he was finally poisoned under mysterious circumstances in May 2002.⁴⁰

It is often said that Khattab was connected with Osama Bin Laden.⁴¹ While such links are possible, the only proven ones date back to their common struggle against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, when the CIA itself sponsored the Islamic Jihad. Ultimately, whether or not Khattab and his successor, the more reclusive Abu al Walid, another Saudi who joined the war in Chechnya via Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina,⁴² have had links to al-Qaeda is of little importance. What is important, however, is that similarly to the insurgency in Kashmir in the 1990s, the radicals have added an international dimension to the

Chechen conflict, a dimension that clashes with the traditional norms of Chechen society, damages the Chechen cause, and complicates attempts to find political solution to the conflict.

Chechen society is among the most conservative Islamic societies in the former Soviet Union, but Chechnya's brand of Islam is widely divergent from the austere Salafi kind espoused by the radical groups, including the Wahhabis. Salafi beliefs are strictly monotheist. They reject the veneration of "saints" or holy men, as well as any local customs that are not derived from their interpretation of Islam. In Chechnya, however, Islam has traditionally been of the Sufi variety, based on a more esoteric, spiritual, and tolerant interpretation of the tenets of Islam. Chechens have long managed to merge their pre-Islamic social customs, or *Adat*, with Islamic identity, often giving precedence to *Adat* over Islamic Sharia in cases when the two conflicted. Moreover, the underground Naqshbandiya and Qadiriya Sufi orders, or brotherhoods, serve as cornerstones of Chechen Islam. They had sustained much of the resistance to Czarist Russia and kept Chechen society together during deportation. Chechen Islam gives importance to the veneration of saints and hence deeply contradicts the Orthodox Salafi beliefs that Wahhabi groups are trying to impose on Chechen society. As a result, the Wahhabi groups are widely despised by ordinary Chechens.⁴³

Thanks to the financial resources provided by Islamic charities from the Gulf region, the Wahhabi groups that operate in Chechnya enjoy access to sophisticated weaponry and supplies and have been able to gain influence at the expense of original centers of Chechen resistance—the secular and nationalist forces led by Maskhadov and his allies. The Wahhabis have the support of a small minority of the Chechen population and even form a relatively minor part of the Chechen fighters. They are the ones typically embarking on high-profile suicidal operations against the Russian military. At the same time, the very use of such tactics ultimately damages the Chechen cause, part of which is gradually being hijacked by the radicals who are playing into Russia's hands: the Chechen struggle for self-determination is being increasingly depicted as an Islamic terrorist assault against Russia and Europe. It is this myth that fuels Moscow's insistence on crushing the Chechen rebellion by force.

Chechens have long managed to merge their pre-Islamic social customs, or Adat, with Islamic identity, often giving precedence to Adat over Islamic Sharia in cases when the two conflicted.

ENDING THE WAR TO END TERRORISM

This argument does not hold up to closer scrutiny. The extremist-terrorist dimension of the conflict in Chechnya is a distinctively alien phenomenon grafted upon the Chechen struggle. It is a result of the war, and not, as Moscow argues, its cause. Foreign Islamic radicals gained ground in Chechnya in the midst of anarchy that followed the republic's total destruction in the first war. Even during the chaotic period of *de facto* Chechen independence in 1996-1999, the radicals were isolated to a small area in southeastern Chechnya. And in 1999, President Maskhadov warned Moscow of their possible intentions and asked the Kremlin for help to combating them. He, of course, received no response.⁴⁴ Moscow had opted to isolate and blackmail Maskhadov, linking the cause of Chechen independence to radical Islam. In fact, however, it is the continuation of the war that makes it possible for foreign radical groups to thrive in Chechnya. And however minor their following may be at present, it is clearly on the rise.

This process, which can be termed as "Afghanization" of Chechnya, threatens to destroy the very fabric of Chechen society. Most civil wars shake the country and endanger lives of citizens during wartime. Yet, that does not necessarily preclude the society from a successful recovery once hostilities cease. The economic and psychological effects of the war may be tremendous, but a basic econ-

omy, education, health care, and social norms of behavior remain. In other words, the social capital of society remains in place.

Moscow had opted to isolate and blackmail Maskhadov, linking the cause of Chechen independence to radical Islam.

Some conflicts, however, destroy the very foundations of society. Afghanistan is a prominent example. Twenty-three years of war directly affected its entire population. Out of roughly 20 million people who resided in Afghanistan before the fighting began, an approximate 1.5-2 million were

killed; a similar number was wounded or maimed; 6 million have become refugees in other countries, and several million have been forced into internal displacement. Beyond this staggering human toll, Afghanistan's entire infrastructure suffered. Systems of communication, from roads to telephones, were destroyed; the health care and academic institutions were wiped out. Economic livelihood had been further undermined by the presence of 10 million landmines, while the rule of law gave in to anarchy and lawlessness of the "Kalashnikov culture."

The very emergence of the Taliban testified to the destruction of both traditional and modern social norms in Afghanistan. The tribal structures of authority were undermined through the war; the traditionally tolerant Afghan society was invaded by alien, extremist ideas that gained dominance and culminated with

the Taliban—a group originating in Afghan refugee communities in Iran and Pakistan. These were young men who had never known peace; they grew up in war and knew nothing but war. Whatever we think of the Taliban's policies or worldview, we cannot ignore the fact that their existence and way of thinking were a direct product of the war that had devastated their families, their lives, and put them in exile where they were taken care of by extremist militias that inculcated them with austere and violent-prone beliefs.

The dire picture of Afghanistan painted above unfortunately applies to Chechnya in far too many ways. In terms of the human toll of the war, a similar share of Chechnya's population has been killed—perhaps over 100,000 people.⁴⁵ As in Afghanistan, over half of the Chechen population has been affected by death, injury, or

displacement. Likewise, the extreme brutality of the Russian military campaign in Chechnya has destroyed the foundation of Chechen society. People are being killed, maimed, abducted, tortured, and raped at will by the authorities that are supposed to uphold law and order. The economy and infrastructure, including oil production, have also been wiped out, exemplified by Grozny leveled to its very foundation. In the countryside, agriculture is nonexistent; livestock has either died during the war or been deliberately killed by Russian forces. A generation of Chechens is growing up either in destroyed villages under the constant threat of *zachistki*, or in refugee camps in Ingushetia. This generation, much like the Afghans in refugee camps outside Quetta or Peshawar, has no conceivable hope for a normal life in the future. As Anna Politkovskaya puts it while retelling her encounter with one of the hostage takers in Moscow in October 2002,

This is a certain generation of modern Chechens. Bakar is one of those who has known nothing but a machinegun and the forest for the last decade, and before that he'd only just finished school. And so, gradually, the forest became the only life that is possible.⁴⁶

The young generation of Chechens is already scarred beyond repair. Psychologists have noted the difference between children who arrived in refugee camps in Ingushetia at the beginning of the war in 1999 and those that came from Chechnya during the war. They say that whereas "it was possible to protect the first group from severe traumatic situations," the second group tends "to be withdrawn, irritable, quick to take offence or aggressive."⁴⁷ A recent study conducted by the World Health Organization concluded that 86 percent of the Chechen population studied suffered from physical or emotional distress, while 31 percent

*The longer the war goes
on, the longer the Russian
brutality continues, the
more recruits the Islamic
radicals will find among
the Chechens.*

was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress syndrome.⁴⁸ Whether or not these figures are accurate, the psychological consequences of the war on Chechnya's adult population, not to mention the children, are obvious. And among this generation of Chechens, the percentage that will be attracted to radical Islamic beliefs will almost certainly be considerably higher than among current fighters. The longer the war goes on, the longer the Russian brutality continues, the more recruits the Islamic radicals will find among the Chechens.

The Kremlin would argue that it must destroy the "terrorists" and restore order precisely because Chechnya is becoming a hotbed of extremism. But for over three years that Russia has been fighting this war, it is no closer to victory than it was at the outset. And as long as Moscow does not win, it will continue to lose. Chechens are able to resist Russian pressures, bomb the most secure Russian strongholds in Grozny, and even stage terrorist acts in the Russian capital. As long as the war goes on, the spiral of violence will continue, and the Chechen population will become increasingly radicalized. Around 20,000 children are born in Chechnya every year. If only one in 20 is attracted to Islamic extremism, the number could grow to a thousand of new militants a year.

CONCLUSION

The obvious conclusion of this analysis is that the war being fought in Chechnya is not an anti-terrorist operation but a brutal assault against an entire people. The indiscriminate bombings of Chechen villages, presence of non-conventional weapons such as vacuum bombs, the systematic use of concentration camps, and the brutality of *zachistki* all point to the genocidal nature of this war. And as it continues, it generates anarchy and chaos, which in turn breed criminals. The war allows Islamic extremists alien to Chechnya to find a base there and to gradually influence a generation of Chechens that is growing up with no hope for a future. It is Russia's war in Chechnya—the so-called "anti-terrorist operation"—that creates this extremism and plants the seeds of terrorism.

Unfortunately, in the wake of 9/11, Russia has been able to capitalize on the global anti-terrorist sentiment to minimize criticism and adverse consequences of its campaign in Chechnya. There may still be time, however, for the West to make good on its statements that its anti-terrorist campaign is not an anti-Muslim crusade. ■

NOTES

1 RTR (Russian State Television), September 12, 2001. See also Francesca Mereu, "U.S.: Russia Says Chechen Conflict Aids 'Understanding' of U.S. Tragedy," RFE/RL, September 14, 2001.

2 See Janusz Bugajski, "Beware of Putin Bearing Gifts," *Washington Times*, October 10, 2001.

3 The record of Russian violations of the laws of war are amply documented by Human Rights Watch, <<http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/russia/chechnya/>> (accessed April 9, 2003).

- 4 Roland Eggleston, "Germany: Schroeder Hints at Change in Opinion on Chechnya," RFE/RL, September 26, 2001.
- 5 See Roland Wattson and Vanora Bennett, "Bush Sides with Putin against Chechen Rebels," *The Times*, September 27, 2001.
- 6 Marie Bennigsen Broxup, ed., *The North Caucasus Barrier* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1992); Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War* (Basingstoke: Pan Books, 1997), 37-55; John Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-40.
- 7 Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya*, 56-75.
- 8 In 1926-1937, the Chechen population increased by 36 percent. In another 11-year period between 1959 and 1970, the growth figure was 46 percent. But in between these years, during the 20-year period from 1939 to 1959, the rate of population increase went down to 2.5 percent. See Robert Conquest, *The Nation Killers: The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities* (London: MacMillan, 1970), 160.
- 9 Avtorkhanov, Abdurahman, "The Chechens and Ingush during the Soviet Period and its Antecedents," in Broxup, ed., *The North Caucasus Barrier*.
- 10 For detailed account of this period, see Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2001), 205-211; Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, 85-124.
- 11 In early October 1993, forces loyal to President Boris Yeltsin clashed with the opposition protesting against his earlier suspension of the Parliament. The opposition leaders, among them Supreme Soviet Chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov and Vice-President Aleksandr Rutskoi, surrendered after troops loyal to Yeltsin shelled and captured the parliament building. Around 150 people were killed in two days of armed clashes in Moscow.
- 12 See Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya*.
- 13 John B. Dunlop, "How Many Soldiers and Civilians Died During the Russo-Chechen War of 1994-96?" *Central Asian Survey* 19 (3/4) (2000): 328-338.
- 14 Charles Blandy, "The Battle for Grozny," *Jane's Intelligence Review* 7 (2): 53-56.
- 15 Glen Howard, "Chechnya: Quo Vadis?" Presentation at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, May 12, 1999; *Toronto Globe and Mail*, January 29, 1997; Andreas Ruesch, "Grozny: Memorial to Russian Destructiveness," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, June 2, 2000. Duan Schattle, "Joint MOUT Mission Area Analysis and Mission Need Assessment" in Russell W. Glenn, *The City's Many Faces: Proceedings of the Arroyo-MCWL-J8 UWG Urban Operations Conference, April 13-14, 1999* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2000), 264.
- 16 Peter Ford, "Yeltsin Admits Aid Misses Chechnya," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 19, 1997. Only \$21 million of the \$138 million committed eventually reached Chechnya.
- 17 Personal communication, Washington D.C., April 2000.
- 18 Personal interviews with Western intelligence sources in Washington, D.C., Istanbul, Brussels, 2001.
- 19 Human Rights Watch, *The "Dirty War" in Chechnya: Forced Disappearances, Torture, and Summary Executions* (New York: Human Rights Watch, March 2001); RFE/RL, Interview with Andrei Babitsky, February 29, 2000; Patrik Lanning, "Missing Russian Reporters Heard 'Screams of Torture,'" *The Guardian*, March 1, 2000; Omar Khanbiev, "Chechnya Today," Lecture at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University-SAIS, June 2001.
- 20 John Sweeney, "Revealed: Russia's Worst War Crime in Chechnya," *The Observer*, March 5, 2000; "Russians Urged to Stop 'Vacuum' Bombings," *BBC News Europe*, February 15, 2000; Human Rights Watch, "Backgrounder on Russian Fuel Air Explosives ('Vacuum Bombs')," February 2000.
- 21 Human Rights Watch, *Memorandum to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights on the Human Rights Situation in Chechnya*, New York, March 18, 2002.
- 22 Regarding occurrence of rape, see "Rape Allegations Surface in Chechnya," Human Rights Watch Release, January 20, 2000.
- 23 Human Rights Watch, *Swept Under: Torture, Forced Disappearances, and Extrajudicial Killings During Sweep Operations in Chechnya* (New York: Human Rights Watch, February 2002); International Society for Human Rights, *Human Rights in Chechnya 2001: Growing Atrocities after the 11th September 2001* (Frankfurt: ISHR, 2002); Liz Fuller, "Is Russia Hell-Bent on War 'to the Last Chechen?'" *RFE/RL Newsline*, October 1, 2002.
- 24 Amnesty International, *Failure to Protect or Punish: Human Rights Violations and Impunity in Chechnya*, Memorandum to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, January 2002.
- 25 *Pravda*, June 17, 2002; *The Guardian*, June 28, 2002.

- 26 Yavus Akhmadov, Stephen R. Bowers, Marion T. Doss, Jr., and Yulii Kurnosov, *Islam in the North Caucasus: A People Divided* (Harrisonburg, VA: WRNI, 2001); Dmitri Glinski-Vassiliev, "Islam in Russian Society and Politics: Survival and Expansion," PONARS Memo No. 198, May 2001.
- 27 Jaba Devdariani, "Georgia Fears Russia's Anti-Terrorism Drive," *Eurasianet*, October 1, 2001.
- 28 Brian Williams, "The Russo-Chechen War: A Threat to Stability in the Middle East and Eurasia?" *Middle East Policy* 8 (1) (March 2001).
- 29 "Chechnya: Suicide Bombers Kill at Least 46 in Grozny," RFE/RL, December 27, 2002.
- 30 Personal interviews with Western intelligence sources, Washington, D.C., Brussels, 2001.
- 31 Personal communication with Ilyas Akhmadov, Foreign Minister of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Washington D.C., 2001.
- 32 See Anne Nivat, *Chienne de Guerre: A Woman Reporter Behind the Lines of the War in Chechnya* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001); Suzy Hansen, "Nothing Human Left," *Salon.com*, July 10, 2001, <<http://www.salon.com/books/int/2001/07/10/nivat/index.html>> (accessed April 9, 2003). One explanation is that Russia needs Basayev, Moscow's number one enemy, to remain alive in order to help legitimize the war.
- 33 For reports on the events in Ryazan, see Maura Reynolds, "Fears of Bombing Turn to Doubts for Some in Russia," *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2001; Jamie Dettmer, "Did Putin's Agents Plant the Bombs?" *Insight*, March 24, 2000; Yevgeniya Borisova, "Little Progress in Bomb Investigations," *St. Petersburg Times*, March 17, 2001; John Sweeney, "The Fifth Bomb: Did Putin's Secret Police Bomb Moscow in a Deadly Black Operation," *The Observer*, November 24, 2000.
- 34 "Does Buried Evidence Solve Blasts?" *Moscow Times*, September 21, 2001.
- 35 Anne Nivat, "Chechnya: Brutality and Indifference," *Crimesofwar.org*, January 6, 2003, <<http://www.crimesofwar.org/onnews/news-chechnya.html>> (accessed April 9, 2003).
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Personal interviews with Western and South Caucasian intelligence sources.
- 38 Brian Williams, "Unraveling the Links between the Middle East and Islamic Militants in Chechnya," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 12, 2003.
- 39 Khattab's real name is Samer bin Saleh bin Abdallah al-Sweleim.
- 40 Williams, "Unraveling the Links."
- 41 "Obituary: Chechen Rebel Khattab," *BBC News Europe*, April 26, 2002. Russian officials have made this claim on countless occasions.
- 42 His real name is Abd al-Aziz al-Ghamidi. See Andrew McGregor, "Amir Abu al-Walid and the Future of the Arab Jihad in Chechnya," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, February 26, 2003.
- 43 Nivat, *Chienne de Guerre*.
- 44 See Williams, "Unraveling the Links."
- 45 The best account of the numbers of civilians killed in Chechnya is Dunlop, "How Many Soldiers and Civilians Died during the Russo-Chechen War of 1994-1996?"
- 46 Anna Politkovskaya, "My Hours Inside the Moscow Theatre," IWPR Caucasus Reporting Service, No. 153, October 31, 2002.
- 47 Asiyat Vazaeyva, "The Mental Scars of Chechnya's Children," IWPR Caucasus Reporting Service, No. 165, February 6, 2003.
- 48 Ibid.