

## Islamizing an Insurgency: Considerations on Radicalization in the North Caucasus

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines the radicalization of the insurgency in Chechnya and the Northeast Caucasus during the conflict of the 1990s and 2000s. In the post-Soviet era, the separatist movement in the region shed its secular and nationalist roots and assumed a more radical and Islamist character. This research analyses whether counterinsurgency tactics employed by Russian forces contributed to the radicalization of the insurgency or if this radicalization was the result of external factors, such as the influence of foreign fighters and their ideologies that were not native to the North Caucasus region. In the North Caucasus, the Russian Federation employed an enemy-centric approach to counterinsurgency, rather than a population-centric approach common to the United States and other Western countries. This research concludes that the presence of foreign missionaries, fighters, and ideologies were the main catalysts that caused the conflict to become religiously inspired. The internal factionalism of the independence movement also facilitated this process, with certain leaders aligning with foreign, Islamist radicals who promised to support the Chechen cause. While Russia's counterinsurgency tactics did contribute to radicalization and inflicted severe psychological trauma on the population, they were not the ultimate cause of the insurgency's transformation.*

**Keywords:** Russia, North Caucasus, Islam, Chechnya, Insurgency

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## İsyanı İslamlaştırmak: Kuzey Kafkasya'da Radikalleşme Üzerine Değerlendirmeler

### Özet

*Bu makale, Çeçenistan ve Kuzeydoğu Kafkasya'daki isyanın 1990'lar ve 2000'lerdeki çatışmalar sırasında radikalleşmesini incelemektedir. Sovyet sonrası dönemde, bölgedeki ayrılıkçı hareket seküler ve milliyetçi köklerini saldı ve daha radikal ve İslamcı bir karakter kazandı. Bu araştırma, Rus kuvvetleri tarafından kullanılan karşı-direnış taktiklerinin isyanın radikalleşmesine katkıda bulunup bulunmadığını ya da bu radikalleşmenin yabancı savaşçılar ve Kafkasya'ya ait olmayan ideolojiler gibi dış etkenlerin sonucu olup olmadığını analiz etmektedir. Kuzey Kafkasya'da Rusya Federasyonu direnişe karşı, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve diğer Batı ülkelerinde ortak olan nüfus merkezli yaklaşım yerine, düşman merkezli yaklaşım kullandı. Bu araştırma, yabancı misyonerlerin, savaşçıların ve ideolojilerin varlığının, çatışmanın dini açıdan ilham almasına neden olan ana katalizörler olduğu sonucuna varmaktadır. Bazı liderler Çeçen davasını destekleme sözü veren, yabancı, İslamcı radikallerle işbirliğinde bulduklarından dolayı, bağımsızlık hareketinin içsel hizipçiliği de bu süreci kolaylaştırdı. Rusya'nın radikalleşmeye katkıda bulunan direniş karşıtı taktikleri halkı ağır psikolojik travmalara maruz bıraksa da isyanın dönüşümünün asıl nedeni değildir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Rusya, Kuzey Kafkasya, İslam, Çeçenya, isyan

### 1. Introduction

“Chechnya is not a subject of Russia, it is a subject of Allah” (Smith 125). So reads a popular Chechen independence slogan. The conflict in the North Caucasus has proven a valuable case study by which the execution, efficacy, and consequences of Russian counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy can be studied. While the region's historical instability is well documented, Russian policy itself has not garnered as much attention and public concern for atrocities committed in the region is low (Laruelle 5) (Russell, Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens before and since 9/11 101). Therefore, it is worthwhile examining Russian COIN tactics in their own right as an important element of the broader regional landscape. The conflict in the North Caucasus has had profound

domestic and international consequences; it serves as an inflection point around which recent Russian history can be fixed, with the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) on one end and the resurgence of a more confident and belligerent Russian Federation on the other. Indeed, it has profoundly contributed to Russia's national "sense of self" in the post-Soviet era (King 249). It continues to color the Kremlin's foreign policy with respect to the Middle East and Western Europe (King 244-245) (Laruelle 22). In its prosecution, the counterinsurgency operation has also strengthened Vladimir Putin's grip on power (Myers 152-153). However, the primary goal of this paper is to trace the insurgency's gradual transformation from a separatist, nationalist cause into an Islamist one, subsumed into the larger War on Terror (Zhemukhov 35-64).

With this defining aspect of the case in mind, this paper examines Russia's tactics, characteristic of the enemy-centric approach to counterinsurgency, and considers whether or not they had a catalyzing effect on the radicalization of the insurgency in the North Caucasus. Drawing upon classical COIN theory, the enemy-centric paradigm is defined by its emphasis on the military defeat of insurgents; it understands the nature of COIN as being akin to conventional warfare (Christopher 1023) (Gentile 4). In contrast, the population-centric paradigm shifts the focus to the broader environment, i.e. the population of the area in which the insurgency is active. An insurgency cannot be effective, this theory contends, if it does not maintain the support of the local population (Christopher 1022). Measures to stabilize the region are undertaken so as to lessen its vulnerability and undercut the insurgency by depriving it of its base of support (Schaefer 19).

One hypothesis suggests that the enemy-centric approach employed by the Russians, combined with their willingness to label Chechen separatists as terrorists, encouraged secular-nationalist Chechens to adopt fundamentalist Islam and led to their acceptance of terrorism as a tactic (Russell, *Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens before and since 9/11*). This paper also considers whether radicalization may have instead been the product of

external factors; the introduction of non-indigenous, radical interpretations of Islam to the region by missionaries and other individuals associated with Salafi jihadist groups is also taken into account (Russell, Chechnya – Russia’s ‘War on Terror’ 75). Finally, factionalism within the Chechen independence movement is considered as a factor contributing to the conflict’s radicalization (Sakwa 607).

This case warrants closer examination by Western policymakers and practitioners of COIN because of Russia’s distinct prosecution of the conflict, in which it has pushed the enemy-centric model of COIN to its extremes, going beyond merely pursuing insurgents by deliberately waging a ruthless campaign against the broader population. Today, a low-level insurgency and sporadic terrorist attacks belie the notion that the issues at the root of the insurgency have truly been settled in a meaningful way (Zhemukhov 62-63). This is important, especially in light of the recent research by Nasritdinov et al. that finds that feelings of grievance are a significant factor increasing one’s vulnerability to radicalization (Nasritdinov). Since the fundamental issues at the core of this frozen conflict remain unresolved, the region should continue to be watched closely. Furthermore, this case provides insight into how and why the goals and motivations of insurgents change, especially when confronted by an adversary whose COIN strategy is executed in such an aggressive manner. If the radicalization of the conflict in Chechnya and the North Caucasus can be attributed to the tactics employed by the Russian armed forces, population-centric theorists will have a prime example of a flawed COIN approach that, instead of stabilizing the region, caused extremism to develop and flourish within it. Conversely, if it can be said that the Russian approach succeeded in suppressing the insurgency, and its radicalization is shown to be the result of external forces, Western practitioners of COIN will be presented with a case illustrating that the population-centric model is not the only, or perhaps even most effective, way of combating insurgencies.

## 2. The Russian Invasion of the Northeast Caucasus in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Russia's overwhelming and brutal use of force in the region is hardly a recent phenomenon. Indeed, the Russian Empire's conquest of the northeast Caucasus over the course of the Russian-Caucasus War (1817-1864) saw the use of tactics not altogether dissimilar from those employed in the recent conflict (King 238). Russian general Aleksey Petrovich Yermolov is particularly remembered for his campaign of ethnic cleansing against the peoples of the region. Under Yermolov's direction, villages were burned, crops destroyed, and local populations forced into the inhospitable climates of the Caucasus Mountains, profoundly scarring the region for decades (King 73-77) (Richmond 18-22) (Gammer 33). Yermolov, like many other Russian commanders, was a veteran of the Napoleonic Wars. However, the type of warfare that confronted them in the North Caucasus was radically different. Among the local commanders opposing the Russians were the Chechen Sheikh Mansur, Imam Shamil, the Avar head of the Imamate state in Dagestan, and many other leaders of the local resistance (Murphy 11). Russian commanders found that their conventional tactics were ineffective against the Dagestanis, Chechens, and other indigenous forces better suited to fighting a guerilla war. Unable to fight the local forces in traditional battles, the Russian military response grew increasingly punitive.

The Russian invasion of the region did much to unite the otherwise quarrelling peoples of the northeast Caucasus. In this area that encompasses both Chechnya and Dagestan, Islam acted as the mobilizing force behind "a new military-political movement" that the Russians referred to as "Muridism." The term itself is derived from the word *murid*, describing a disciple of a Sufi leader, or *murshid* (King 68-69) (Derluguian 85). Although the relationship between murid and murshid was fundamentally religious at its core, a political dimension was quickly introduced, culminating in the founding of the Caucasus Imamate; Sufi leaders proclaimed Ghazi Muhammad, a Dagestani imam and Shamil's ally, its first leader in 1828 (Askerov 120) (Gammer, The

Beginnings of the Naqshbandiyya in Daghestan and the Russian Conquest of the Caucasus 217). In his assessment on the conquest of the region, Cohen notes how “over time, the radical members of the imamate intensified pressure on Shamil to revise [his hit-and-run] tactics and become more aggressive.” (Cohen 8) Schaefer likewise recalls Yermolov’s strategy, explaining that he “lost the battle for the Chechen hearts and minds, and poisoned entire generations.” (Schaefer 61). He continues, invoking language reminiscent of the contemporary debate over population-centric COIN:

Because the Tsarist government never had a chance to be perceived as trustworthy or legitimate, once fundamentalist Islam was firmly established in the region with its complete package of government and moral and legal codes, *there would be no chance for the Russians to construct a competing ideology* (Schaefer 61).

Yermolov’s brutal tactics, Schaefer contends, encouraged the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in the region (Schaefer 61-62). The local religious leaders’ insistence that Imam Shamil confront the Russians more directly and aggressively is supportive of this claim. The salience of Islam as an element shaping the local opposition is not merely an historical curiosity. It must be considered in light of the recent conflict in the North Caucasus, and it is for this reason that this examination of the region’s history has been undertaken.

Conversely, an emphasis on Russian tactics risks obscuring local factors that caused the conflict to develop a decidedly religious undercurrent. A crucial element in the North Caucasus peoples’ struggle against Imperial Russia is the concept of *gazavat*. In the regional context, the term is roughly comparable to jihad, here meaning holy war (Schaefer 56) (Cohen 9). During the Russian-Caucasus War, religious leaders preaching the local version of Islam in Dagestan, the Naqshbandi sect of Sufism, called for the proclamation of *gazavat* (King 65) (Zelkina 144). It was feared that the invading Russians would otherwise impose upon local Muslims a system of governance that was not based on Shari’a, the Islamic religious law (Tucker 255). By its very nature, a government rooted in anything other than Shari’a would be

considered illegitimate (Gammer 211). To force such a system upon Muslims would not only threaten the people of the North Caucasus but also the Muslim community of believers at large, the *ummah* (Firestone 118). Movladi Udugov, one of the chief Chechen ideologues of the First Russian-Chechen War, echoed this sentiment more recently, proclaiming:

[Shari'a] is the only law prescribed to Muslims...only Shari'a never changes, because it is not human conjuring, but the Law, granted by God...What relation to the Sunnah, willed to us by the Prophet...does the demand to observe "international law," "the rules of the UN," and "democracy" have? And we answer – not any! (Askerov 229) (Hahn 79).

This pronouncement is significant because it, apart from being made by the main propagandist of the contemporary Chechen cause for independence, reflects the ideological motivations of an increasing number of insurgents.

Still, the historical dynamics of the region make it difficult to infer that Udugov's statement is broadly representative of regional sentiment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While Russian rule promised the imposition of a foreign jurisprudence, Shari'a was not the only, or even primary, system of governance that risked being supplanted. Indeed, one of the issues that defined religious and political concerns of the time was the tension between the universalistic tendencies of Shari'a and local *adat*, customary tribal codes rooted in regional norms, practices, and traditions that predated the introduction of Islam (Zürcher 14-15). Shamil and Ghazi Muhammad both found themselves confronted by opposition from locals who were not inclined to abandon their traditional practices for Shari'a (King 70-71) (Zelkina 138-141). Its totalizing nature threatened to undermine the privileges and rights that *adat* afforded to many local elites. Ware and Kisriev write:

In the course of organizing a North Caucasian resistance to Russian conquest, murid leaders also declared war against the independent mountain 'republics' and 'principalities' in order to unite all Muslims under the banner of purified Islam. Essentially, the war against *adat* on behalf of Shari'a meant a rejection of the

constitutions of [traditionally localized communities] with a view toward the unification of the imamate (Ware ve Kisriev 20, 47).

For the people of the northeastern Caucasus, Islam and opposition to the Russians served as rallying points around which they could mobilize (King 66). This mobilization was essentially political but also inextricably religious in nature and, as one scholar contends, “was in many ways comparable to the contemporary Wahabi [*sic*] movement” (Allen 47-48). However, it would be a mistake to assume that the opposition was a united front. King explains that today, as in the nineteenth century, “there has never been a unified ‘Islamic resistance’ to Russian power.” (King 65). Still, the development of Muridism as a political and religious movement represented the most advanced articulation of opposition to the Russians at the time, and it was as much conditioned by internal factors as it was by external forces. The interplay between these two distinct strains of politico-religious thought, an innovative Muridism on one hand and the traditional adat-based system on the other, further added to the complexity of the regional situation confronting both the Russians and the local opposition aligned against them.

It is difficult to contend that the Russian incursion alone was responsible for the rising influence of religion in the region. Likewise, to argue that it was solely the byproduct of indigenous influences and local forces is also flawed. Rather, it is more likely that these two forces interacted in such a way that caused the radicalization of both sides, and hence intensified the religious nature of the conflict. For example, Gammer notes that religious practice assumed a greater role in the daily lives of the Chechens and Dagestanis as a result of the Russian invasion. He explains, “[Yermolov’s] activities rather intensified hatred of Russia, stiffened resistance to it and helped to enhance the role of Islam, in the form of the spread of the Naqshbandi [school of Sufism].” (Gammer 124). The elements necessary for religious radicalization were not spontaneously created by the Russian invasion but were pre-existing. Instead, the incursions provided the circumstance needed for the development of a coherent, religiously motivated opposition; the attacks served as a catalyst, “activating” these



elements and bringing them into mainstream thought while imbuing them with a tangible quality that the average Chechen or Dagestani could grasp. That is to say, the religious motivations for opposing the Russian invasion were rooted in longstanding local interpretations of Islam. Even Muridism, with its emphasis on the primacy of Shari'a, has its origins in local Islamic practices (King 69-70). But it was the Russian invasion of the region that caused these religious and political forces to coalesce in the form of a coherent ideology of opposition, Muridism. That Muridism developed as a quasi-nationalist movement in response to foreign aggression is not surprising; nationalisms in the non-Western world often emerged as cultural responses to colonization and domination by Western nation-states and empires (Bougarel 7-9). This examination of the Russian Empire's conquest of the northeast Caucasus is necessary because of the crucial importance of historical remembrance as an emotional catalyst in the contemporary conflict. Imam Shamil and other leaders, for example, continue to be hailed as heroes and feature prominently in the imaginations and folklores of locals (Baiev, Daniloff, & Daniloff, 2005, s. 30-31). Although COIN doctrine was not developed as a military science in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tsarist Russia's recourse to brutal, punitive measures lends itself to a better understanding of how Russians perceive Chechens (and others in the region) and vice versa, even to the present day.

### **3. Counterinsurgency in the Soviet Union**

The Chechens are not the only people to have fought an insurgency against Russian forces. Indeed, one of the USSR's formative experiences in conducting counterinsurgency operations occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The Soviets were confronted with anticommunist insurgencies in the country's western regions including Ukraine, Moldova, and the Baltic republics. The Baltic States, which were independent during the interwar period, had been annexed to the USSR in 1940 before being invaded by Nazi Germany in 1941. The Soviet expulsion of German forces in 1944-45 was not popularly characterized as a liberation. Instead, the Soviets were considered

to be a new occupying force (Juozas 40-41). Armed resistance officially came to an end in 1953 but it was only in 1965 that Soviet Interior Forces eliminated the last remaining active partisans (Juozas 21).

Russia's COIN strategy as it was known in the North Caucasus was largely developed during the 1979-1989 Soviet-Afghan War. For example, the *zachistka* sweep operation, which became a characteristic element of the Russian strategy in Chechnya, finds its origins in Afghanistan (The Russian General Staff 106-111). The Afghan experience also significantly impacted the post-Soviet conflicts in the North Caucasus. Many Chechen and Russian combatants were veterans of the Afghan conflict, where they had participated in Soviet tactical and COIN operations (Lieven 275-276). Chechen president Dzhokhar Dudayev received several awards for his involvement in bombing raids, which were often conducted in conjunction with sweep operations (Hughes 22) (The Russian General Staff 106). The Russian Minister of Defense during the First Russian-Chechen, Pavel Grachev, also fought in Afghanistan. In Chechnya, he came to be known for his corruption and incompetence; while other Russian generals warned that a conflict in the region could turn into "another Afghanistan," the overconfident Grachev boasted that his forces would conduct a "bloodless blitzkrieg" and bring about a swift victory (Eichler 43) (Lieven 275-277). The Ingush general Ruslan Aushev, one of the main mediators in the Chechen conflict, also fought in Afghanistan and was awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union for his service (Feifer 138-139). These commanders' experiences in Afghanistan would impact military operations in Chechnya.

#### **4. The Post-Soviet Struggle and its Causes**

The severe nature of Russia's counterinsurgency strategy in the post-Soviet period was matched by the penetration of radical ideologies in the Chechen independence movement. The region's history under the Soviet Union provides several insights into this development. Because the USSR espoused a policy of state atheism known as *gosateizm*, religious expression was severely repressed and churches, synagogues, and mosques across the

country were closed (Ware ve Kisriev 90). The implementation of gosateizm was not, at least initially, undertaken to promote atheism itself. Instead, its measures were aimed at dismantling the vestiges of the old regime, in which the Orthodox Church and the Tsarist state were closely aligned (Peris 24). In the predominantly Muslim areas of the North Caucasus, these measures were similarly intended to delegitimize local religious leaders and transfer their authority to Soviet functionaries (Schaefer 97). The closure of mosques, madrassas and other Islamic institutions also made it easier for Soviet security forces to track those who publicly rejected atheism, since the few remaining places of organized Islamic learning could be surveilled more effectively (Vatchagaev 220-221). Also of tremendous consequence for the Chechens' later religious and ideological transformation was their deportation in 1944 to Central Asia on the orders of Joseph Stalin (Nekrich 58-59). When his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, permitted them to return to Chechnya in 1957, a significant intergenerational divide among Chechens had already emerged. Chechens born in exile did not maintain their ancestral connection to the traditional Sufi Islam of the region. Upon return to Chechnya, those who desired to reconnect with these religious traditions faced extensive state repression and religious discrimination (Cohen 16).

The loss of traditional religion would have profound religious and political implications for the Chechens. Cohen explains, "This religious and cultural vacuum in the region became fertile grounds for the new Salafi forms of Islam that infiltrated [the] North Caucasus in the 1990s, and encountered little competition from the traditional, moderate forms of Islam." (Cohen 17). By the 1980s, many in the Chechen elite had grown more willing to accept foreign ideas and teachings that were being promulgated by groups and individuals from the Middle East (Al-Shishani 274-275). This paradigm shift in attitudes regarding Islam would reach a turning point in the aftermath of the First Russian-Chechen War when the religious landscape was ripe for transformation. This changing environment would be showcased in the ideological progression of the Chechen opposition and insurgent forces of the

1990s and 2000s. It would also shape public perceptions of the conflict and Russia's COIN strategy at large.

As the Soviet Union began to collapse in 1990-1991, Chechens launched their bid for independence. To that point, Chechnya was considered an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, federally subordinate to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). The rationale for preventing Chechnya's independence is clear. Post-Soviet states such as Ukraine, the Baltics, Georgia, Armenia, and the Central Asian countries had existed as constituent republics within the USSR, whereas Chechnya was considered a part of the larger RSFSR. This federal designation was preserved upon the creation of the Russian Federation, the legal successor state of the USSR, in December 1991. If Chechnya were permitted to declare its independence, the Kremlin feared that the newly formed Federation might disintegrate with other constituent republics and regions following Chechnya's lead by declaring independence (Lieven 101) (Cohen 19) (Feifer 274-275). Indeed, separatist movements had become active in Russia's Muslim majority republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan (George 68) (Ginsberg). The Kremlin considered such a prospect unacceptable. An example would have to be made of Chechnya in order to salvage what remained of the Russian Federation (J. Myers 4).

In October 1991, two months prior to the final dissolution of the USSR, Chechens elected Dzhokhar Dudayev as President of the Autonomous Republic of Chechnya (Askerov 89). Witnessing the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Dudayev declared Chechnya's independence, setting in motion a process of events that would lead to the First Russian-Chechen War (Cohen 20). Russian President Boris Yeltsin declared a state of emergency in Chechnya the following month, but the general chaos created by the collapse of the USSR prevented him from responding to the situation in the North Caucasus. As a result, Chechnya, now styled as the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, experienced a period of de facto independence between 1991 and 1994 (Cohen 20). In this time, however, Chechnya steadily descended into lawlessness, with Dudayev unable to effectively control various quarrelling

factions. The Chechen government was increasingly controlled by various criminal elements and the nascent state began to draw the attention of foreign actors (Cohen 32) (Bodansky 28). For example, the first and only state to recognize Chechnya's independence was Taliban-controlled Afghanistan (Schaefer 77).

### **5. The First Russian-Chechen War**

The Russian invasion of Chechnya on December 11, 1994 set the stage for the full development of Russia's enemy-centric COIN strategy. The Russian assault temporarily mended divisions in Chechnya (Akhmadov ve Lansky 15). Russian armored columns, approaching Chechnya from the north, east, and west were set to converge on Grozny, the republic's capital. The ensuing military operation would become a case study of poorly executed urban warfare. The First Battle of Grozny, though a Pyrrhic victory for the Russians, showed how armored columns could be obliterated in the narrow streets and thoroughfares of cities. Chechen insurgents, disbursed in small groups of three to five men, effectively trapped entire columns of tanks and armored personnel carriers by disabling the lead and rear units within the column. These Chechen "fighting troikas," as they came to be known, usually consisted of a sniper, a grenade launcher, and a submachine gunner (Cohen 25). The disabled lead and tail crews gave Russian soldiers elsewhere in the column the false impression that it would be safer to remain inside their vehicles. This, however, effectively rendered the entire column a stationary target, unable to maneuver in the streets past those units already destroyed. Chechen fighters could then use rocket propelled grenades and other heavy weaponry to destroy the remaining vehicles in the column. Those soldiers who attempted to escape from their burning vehicles were then targeted by machine gun and sniper fire, inflicting heavy casualties upon the Russian forces.

Mounting losses resulted in the opening of peace talks in spring 1995. President Dudayev and Aslan Maskhadov, the Chechen defender of Grozny, represented the more moderate nationalists fighting against the Russians. Their moderate attitude was likely the result of their common experience in Soviet

institutions, namely the army. Dudayev, who married a Russian woman and spoke Russian better than Chechen, distinguished himself fighting the mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan War (Zürcher 76-77). Having made his career outside of Chechnya, he eventually obtained the rank of general in the Soviet Air Force before returning to Chechnya in 1990 (Askerov 88-89). Maskhadov, who was considered a secularist, served as an artillery commander until retiring in 1992 with the rank of a colonel. Both men were also the products of Stalin's deportations; Maskhadov was born in Kazakhstan and Dudayev spent the first thirteen years of his life there (Askerov 156-157) (Zürcher 86).

However, a radical faction led by Shamil Basayev, another prominent field commander and leader of separatist forces, was ascendant (Askerov 58-59). Basayev had previously traveled throughout the South Caucasus, interacting with Arab and Islamist insurgents. He also fought in the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, and even received training in mountain warfare and special operations from Russian military intelligence (Bodansky 36-37). This training would serve Basayev well when he eventually took up the cause of Chechen independence and became one of the foremost insurgent leaders. The trajectory of his involvement in the Chechen conflict matches the insurgency's development into a radical, Islamist struggle. Basayev is particularly notorious for leading a 1995 attack on a hospital in the Russian city of Budyonnovsk, some seventy miles north of the border with Chechnya (Akhmadov ve Lanskoj 53). One of his associates notes that it was around this time that Basayev's thinking underwent a significant transformation, such that "he changed from a Chechen patriot into an Islamic globalist." (Bodansky 41). The hospital assault at Budyonnovsk would serve as a harbinger of future acts of terrorism committed in the course of the conflict. In the raid, hundreds of hostages were taken, including many women and children. This, combined with the Chechen recapture of Grozny in August 1996, forced Yeltsin's hand and brought him to settle for peace. After Basayev's exploits in Budyonnovsk, one prominent Russian newspaper ran the headline "Moscow is on its knees." (Murphy 23-24). Russian media maintained extensive coverage of

the conflict, contributing to a general rise in war-weariness. The Chechens had outlasted the resolve of the Russians. An increasing number of Russians struggled to justify why such a small territory located on Russia's southern border was worth retaining (Lieven 196-197).

The Khasavyurt Accord was signed in August 1996 by Maskhadov and the Russian representative Alexander Lebed, but not before Russian forces were able to kill Dudayev. His successor as Acting President, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, represented a more radical, religiously inspired faction of the Chechen independence movement (Akhmadov ve Lanskoj 68). The formal peace treaty that followed the Khasavyurt Accord effectively returned Chechnya to its pre-war status. The language of the accord invoked national and ethnic rights, which were confirmed in the subsequent treaty. It reads:

The esteemed parties to the agreement, desiring to end their centuries-long antagonism and striving to establish firm, equal and mutually beneficial relations, hereby agree: (1) To reject forever the use of force or threat of force in resolving all matters of dispute. (2) To develop their relations on generally recognized principles and norms of international law. In doing so, the sides shall interact on the basis of specific concrete agreements. (3) This treaty shall serve as the basis for concluding further agreements and accords on the full range of relations (Russia-Chechnya).

Chechnya remained a *de jure* part of the Russian Federation, but for all intents and purposes, it continued its *de facto* independence. In a show of this independence, a presidential election was conducted in 1997 in which the moderate Maskhadov was elected over Yandarbiyev. However, the strength of radical groups and their ability to impose a degree of order on the otherwise chaotic society of interwar Chechnya would force Maskhadov from his traditionally nationalist and secularist convictions and compel him to make concessions to Islamists. The introduction of Shari'a law in February 1999 was one such concession (Askerov 157).

## **6. Interwar Chaos**

The most striking change in Chechnya after the first war was the rapid development of Islamic radicalization. This, in turn, shaped the Russian perception of the Chechens and significantly impacted Russia's COIN approach. A heavy-handed, enemy-centric strategy would presumably raise fewer objections if the Chechens could be characterized as Islamic radicals and terrorists (Russell, Chechnya – Russia's 'War on Terror' 58-59). As Putin explained during one speech in 1999, "We will chase terrorists everywhere. If in an airport, then in the airport. So if we find them in the toilet, excuse me, we'll rub them out in the outhouse. And that's it, case closed" (Oliphant). The first war left Chechnya's economy in ruins. Taking advantage of the situation, radicals propagated fundamentalist interpretations of Islam. Particularly susceptible to fundamentalism were those Chechens born in Chechnya after the repatriation of their nation in 1957. As noted earlier, the native Sufi religious institutions and traditions at the core of the Chechen identity had been lost. This, combined with the chaos wrought by the transition away from a planned economy, created a climate in which radicalism could take root. The more secular leaders of the first war, such as Dudayev and Maskhadov, viewed Islam through the lens of Chechen nationalism. Islam, important though it might be, was but a single aspect that contributed to one's identity as a Chechen. Dudayev was not known to have been a practicing Muslim himself (Williams 79). He even distinguished himself in Afghanistan fighting many of the very forces that would eventually support the Chechen cause (Williams 80). In the aftermath of Dudayev's death, Maskhadov would discover that developments in Chechnya had steadily undermined the nationalist impetus that he and Dudayev had once championed.

### **6.1. The International Context: Islamism and Identity in the Post-Communist World**

The post-Cold War world saw several important developments that influenced the conflict in Chechnya. The conclusion of the Cold War was not only marked by the collapse of a superpower. It



also saw the end of a defining era and undercurrent in geopolitics. Francis Fukuyama's famous assertion that man had reached "the end of history" may seem naïve today, but it captures the sentiment, common at the time, that liberal democracy had definitively triumphed as the supreme form of government (Fukuyama 3). Fukuyama's thesis has since received much criticism, including from scholars who predicted that Islamism, among other forces, would come to challenge Western liberal democracy (Barber). Critics would also seize upon the conflicts in Bosnia and Chechnya as refutations of Fukuyama's theory in favor of Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations." In any case, as communism receded in the 1990s, radical Islamism would assume its role as one of the chief opponents of Western liberalism. It is within this geopolitical context that the conflicts in Chechnya and Bosnia ought to be considered. This would become especially important in the Chechen case following the September 11 terrorist attacks.

Just as the prevailing geopolitical narrative was being redefined, so too were the identities of Muslims in the post-communist world. The situation of the Chechens during this time has already been explored at some length above, but it is helpful to consider their case in light of another of Europe's Muslim populations, the Bosniaks of the former Yugoslavia. Islam as a defining political ideology in Bosnia emerged soon after the breakup of Yugoslavia and found surprising strength among an otherwise secularized population (Bougarel 3-4). In response to the Bosnian War, Bosniaks found it necessary to form national Muslim institutions, which contributed to the formation and "re-Islamization" of their identity during and after the war (Bougarel 141-146). In response to Serbian aggression against the Bosniaks, Bougarel explains how "a wave of solidarity with [the Bosniaks] swept over the Muslim world" (Bougarel 237). Like Chechnya, the Bosnian conflict also drew the attention of al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, and other Islamists. Unlike Chechnya, however, fundamentalist Islamism and jihad failed gain much traction among the Bosniaks (Bougarel 240-241). Bosniaks had rediscovered their Muslim identities but this did not lead them to

become Islamists. The reasons for this are many and unique to the Bosniak case, and have been explored at greater length elsewhere. The attempt to transplant fundamentalist ideology during the Bosnian War shows how foreign groups sought to spread pan-Islamist ideology in the post-Cold War world, with varying degrees of success from region to region. Where it failed to take hold in Bosnia, it succeeded in Chechnya.

## **6.2. Encroaching Islamism**

The interwar period, which lasted until 1999, saw an aggressive Islamization campaign in Chechnya. Before Maskhadov had taken office, Yandarbiyev set out to reshape Chechen society. In attempting to establish Shari'a law, Yandarbiyev invited Islamists from the Middle East to visit Chechnya and he reworked the Chechen legal code to resemble Saudi Arabia's (Cohen 34). During the 1997 presidential campaign, Maskhadov took to saying that he would create a "Chechen Islamic state." The reasons for this are not entirely clear but the statement was suggestive of the situation on the ground in Chechnya (Sokirianskaia 123). Evidently, a growing segment of the population would find the establishment of an Islamic state to be desirable, so much so that the once secular Maskhadov felt compelled to co-opt the slogans of the Islamists. But even now, a distinction is to be made between Maskhadov and Yandarbiyev as it pertains to their understandings of Islam. Maskhadov was a close ally of Akhmad Kadyrov, who, as chief mufti of Chechnya, represented the religious establishment threatened by these foreign forms of Islam. Both men actively campaigned against the rising influence of Wahhabist, Salafist, and other fundamentalist ideologies (Cohen 35).

Foreign radical groups adeptly exploited the lack of central authority in Chechnya during the interwar years. Islamic radicals began to establish themselves in towns and villages across Chechnya, where Maskhadov's authority was weakest. As Cohen notes, the forces that had been loyal to Maskhadov during the first war were "underfunded, undermanned, and demoralized" (Cohen 37). Meanwhile, Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second in

command, was arrested and later released in the neighboring republic of Dagestan in 1997 (Cohen 35). Maskhadov's inability to control various factions helped to facilitate the spread of radical Islamism. The most consequential faction formed was that which saw an alliance between Shamil Basayev and a foreign fighter, Ibn al-Khattab. Khattab, a Saudi, traveled to Chechnya during the First Russian-Chechen War. He was a veteran of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan and is even suspected of having been trained by the CIA over the course of that conflict (Akhmadov ve Lanskoj 123). He would eventually establish a training camp in the countryside that attracted individuals drawn to the new and foreign teachings that had been spreading in the region as a result of Yandarbiyev's campaign and the influx of foreign preachers (Akhmadov ve Lanskoj 123). The insurgents trained in this camp would be imbued with Khattab's fundamentalist views, contributing to the insurgency's radicalization.

### **6.3. Radical Ideologies**

The form of Islam spreading in Chechnya at the time is more accurately described as being Salafist in its orientation than Wahhabist, but is more likely still to have been a complicated mix of Salafism, Wahhabism, and traditional Sufism. Salafism as a distinct movement emerged in Egypt during the nineteenth century in response to Western imperialism. As Hahn explains, "[Salafism] is as much a revolutionary political movement as a religious trend." (Hahn 25). One figure commonly associated with the formulation of modern Salafist thought is the Egyptian Islamist theorist, Sayyid Qutb. Wahhabism can be understood as a particular strain of Salafism (Sudiman ve Saiful Alam Shah Bin 1-3). It is similarly puritanical and austere in its interpretation of the Quran and hadiths. Its adherents view Wahhabism as Islam in its purest form and seek to eliminate what they perceive to be doctrinal deviations and other innovations in Islam (Askerov 239). At the time, Russian forces would make no distinction between the two ideologies that, while sharing some similarities, are nevertheless distinct. Later, both Chechen insurgents and the Kremlin distinguished between Wahhabism, as the Kingdom of

Saudi Arabia's state ideology, and Salafism, as an Islamic movement newly introduced to the Caucasus (Smirnov). The Wahhabis, such as Khattab, were able to exploit what Akhmadov and Lanskoj call "a tremendous ignorance of religion in Chechnya." (Akhmadov ve Lanskoj 125). After joining forces with Basayev, their regional exploits would precipitate the onset of the Second Russian-Chechen War and cause the insurgency to develop increasingly religious characteristics.

Basayev's political marriage of convenience with Khattab led to the creation of a military force that would launch an invasion of neighboring Dagestan in August 1999 (Gammer 213). Still, a distinction existed between the two at this point that is important to identify. Basayev was firmly in the radical camp of Chechen separatists, as evidenced by his actions in Budyonovsk; he had been willing to commit acts of terrorism that Dudayev and Maskhadov were not prepared to sanction or condone. However, Basayev was not a Wahhabi like Khattab and, as noted, was still chiefly motivated by political separatism and nationalism rather than religious fervor. However, he may have broadened his separatism to include the wider North Caucasus as a result of the rhetoric of the foreign jihadists like Khattab. The predominantly Muslim areas of Russia were considered to be oppressed regions of the larger ummah. This pan-Islamist narrative, also important in heretofore-considered Bosnian case, inspired many foreign fighters. The narrative is also reminiscent of the Soviet war in Afghanistan, where the conflict was framed as a holy war against the evil, atheistic Soviet Union (Feifer 132). Basayev, while still a nationalist, likely adopted much of this rhetoric, molded it to fit his convictions, and rationalized it by contending that the Russians had historically oppressed the Muslim peoples of the Caucasus. By drawing upon this shared history of struggle, he could hope to unite the various peoples of the Caucasus in a struggle against Russia, not unlike his historical namesake. It is also quite possible that Basayev's alliance with Khattab was purely a pragmatic calculation. Basayev's ultimate motive as a nationalist may have been to strengthen the Chechen cause by appealing to and accepting support from fundamentalist radicals who expressed a

willingness to fight Russia, especially given Western powers' lack of support for the Chechens (Williams 188). Making appeals to religion was but one additional way to further the nationalist cause (Vatchagaev 205). Whatever the case, Basayev's actions are demonstrative of the lack of internal cohesion in Chechnya during the interwar period. Basayev illustrates how certain leaders and factions within the Chechen movement began to align with foreign Islamists who took advantage of the turmoil in the region (Kepel 233). This chaos ultimately led to the Second Russian-Chechen War, a conflict whose character differed radically from the first.

### **7. The Outbreak of the Second Russian-Chechen War**

Khattab and Basayev's invasion of Dagestan provided the *casus belli* needed for the Russians to invade Chechnya a second time. The Kremlin, now led by President Vladimir Putin, was keen to avoid the mistakes that contributed to the defeat in the first war. In this conflict, the Russians would respond with a similar use of overwhelming force but were careful to avoid costly urban warfare. To this end, the Russians launched a massive artillery bombardment of Grozny, leveling much of the city before any Russian forces had even entered it. (Cohen 43). But of even greater importance was the narrative that the Russians constructed around the conflict. In a certain respect, the Russians did seek to win hearts and minds during the second war, but these were the hearts and minds of the Russian people, not the Chechens (Schaefer 199). Unlike during the first war, the media's access to this conflict was greatly restricted, hiding from public view the war crimes being committed by Russian forces in Chechnya (Cohen 43). The Russian leadership immediately portrayed the campaign as one being waged against lawless terrorists. Average Russians might be forgiven for accepting this narrative, given the incursion into Dagestan and general chaos in Chechnya during the interwar period.

Chechens were broadly characterized as terrorists who posed an imminent threat to the average Russian citizen. For example, in the aftermath of the 1999 apartment bombings in several Russian

cities, the Russian newspaper of record, *Izvestiya*, published an article alleging a Chechen connection under the title “Wolf Tracks.” *Argumenty i fakty*, another newspaper, ran the headline “The Chechen wolves have been driven back to their lair, but for how long?” (Russell 106). The portrayal of Chechens as wolves had long been used to as a demonization tactic. Terrorism, of course, is a tactic that can be employed by separatists (Russell, Chechnya – Russia’s ‘War on Terror’ 60). But in the Chechen case, it should not be construed as being representative of the entire separatist movement. Certain factions, such as Basayev’s, were more willing to target civilian, but it would be a mistake to assume that this was a coordinated strategy among pro-independence Chechens. Nevertheless, Putin and the Kremlin would find that by characterizing the conflict as a war against terrorists, public and international support could more easily be maintained.

#### **8. The Final Formulation of Russia’s Postwar Counterinsurgency Approach**

Russia’s contemporary COIN approach became fully developed during and especially after the Second Russian-Chechen War. Vladimir Putin’s Kremlin deliberately sought to frame the conflict in Chechnya in terms of the “Global War on Terror” (Russell, Chechnya – Russia’s ‘War on Terror’ 90-91). Tactically speaking, Russia developed its own enemy-oriented methods that differed significantly from the Western population-oriented approaches to COIN. The Kremlin’s approach proved so unique and brutal that the subsequent literature on the conflict directly adopted the use of the Russian term, *zachistka*, to describe the counterinsurgency’s sweep, or “cleansing,” operations. Though the term may be rendered in this way, it is not a precise translation. The sweeps conducted in Chechnya have little comparison elsewhere and so the term is left largely untranslatable from the original Russian, in a way similar to such words as *glasnost* or *sputnik* (Gilligan, Propaganda and the Question of Criminal Intent; The Semantics of the *Zachistka* 1040-1042).

Another key factor contributing to the Russian victory in the Second Russian-Chechen War was the use of ethnic Chechen units; exploiting local factionalism would be a major component in later Russian counterinsurgency strategy. The period of open warfare largely concluded by May 2000, when the Chechen government was forced underground and replaced by a pro-Russian regime. This new government was led by Akhmad Kadyrov who, after growing disillusioned with Maskhadov's leadership, switched sides at the beginning of the second war (Russell, Chechnya – Russia's 'War on Terror' 42). The installation of Kadyrov would enable the Russians to transform the nature of the conflict, with the Kremlin growing less willing to negotiate with various separatist bands and leaders (Russell, Chechnya – Russia's 'War on Terror' 42). In any case, the separatists were now uniformly portrayed as fundamentalist terrorists, precluding any negotiation.

### **8.1. Framing the Conflict in Terms of the War on Terror**

With the battle phase of the war over, the Russian focus turned to counterinsurgency specifically. The September 11 terrorist attacks would impact the trajectory of the insurgency and Russian response to it (Vatchagaev 213). Putin and Russian commanders had convinced many everyday Russians that the Chechen conflict was one fought primarily in the name of combatting radical, Islamic terrorism. The attacks in America were conveniently used by the Kremlin to link the Chechen conflict with the broader "War on Terror" (Russell, Chechnya – Russia's 'War on Terror' 109). Indeed, the Russians would characterize their counterinsurgency in Chechnya as an "antiterrorist operation." This was a particularly consequential designation. Firstly, this characterization was used to legitimize Russian tactics in the eyes of the broader international community (Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War* 71). The United States and other nations engaged in the War on Terror would hardly want to be seen criticizing another country's campaign against supposed terrorists. Secondly, this designation altered the way Russia responded to the insurgency in the region,

employing brutal and indiscriminate tactics (Richmond 86). A major distinction exists between COIN and counterterrorism, but this difference was steadily, even purposefully, blurred (Baev 151).

## **8.2. Zachistki as a Form of Collective Punishment**

One of the most ubiquitous components of the Russian COIN strategy in the years immediately following the second war were the sweeps of villages suspected of harboring insurgents. These sweeps, or *zachistki* (singular, *zachistka*), were ostensibly conducted to root out insurgent forces hiding among the general population and were most frequently undertaken between 2000 and 2003 (Baev 150). In practice, however, the *zachistka* became a form of collective punishment (Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya* 16). On the tactic, Gilligan writes:

The sweep operation embodied all the features of a standard counterinsurgency tactic. Formally, it was defined as a ‘special operation aimed to check residence permits and identify participants of the illegally armed formations.’ A sweep ranged in duration from one to twenty days. In the majority of cases, a village was encircled and sealed by heavy artillery, armored vehicles...military trucks, and helicopters, preventing civilians from entering or exiting (Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya* 50-51).

Once this process of encirclement had been complete, Russian Special Forces, often without identifying their rank or affiliation, would conduct a methodical, house-by-house search through the village. By 1999, the term “*zachistka*” had entered the public domain, even though it had been military slang since at least 1995 (Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya* 52-53) (Gilligan, *Propaganda and the Question of Criminal Intent; The Semantics of the Zachistka* 1043). The use of sweep operations is hardly unique to Russia as a component of COIN strategy. But the distinguishing element of the *zachistka* is its systematic nature, brutal execution, and repeated use.

One of the most notorious examples of a *zachistka* occurred in the Chechen village of Novye Aldy in 2000. On the morning of February 5, some one hundred unmarked soldiers surrounded the



village. Over the course of the operation, these forces killed anywhere between sixty and eighty civilians. Having looted many homes, the forces doused houses in kerosene and left the village to burn. One report on the massacre noted that “soldiers were pushing people into their homes, throwing grenades into basements full of civilians, and setting houses alight with people inside.” (Williams 177). It is suspected that the perpetrators of the Novye Aldy massacre were members of the OMON, an interior paramilitary police force (Williams 54-58) (Laruelle 14) (Gilligan, Propaganda and the Question of Criminal Intent; The Semantics of the *Zachistka* 1044). The intensity of these “mopping-up operations”, as they were also called, increased into 2002, with certain villages being subjected to as many as forty sweeps (Williams 69).

Gilligan characterizes the *zachistka* as a form of torture, meant to inflict physical, and more significantly, psychological damage. She notes, “[The *zachistka*] was used to assert the dominance of the Russian forces, to create a broader landscape of fear, and to neutralize potential fighters or those who were hors de combat.” The majority of those detained in these sweeps were eventually released, but only after having being subjected to torture in “filtration camps,” such as the one that existed at Chernokozovo (Williams 71) (Gilligan, Terror in Chechnya 59). The Russian human rights organization Memorial estimates that upwards of 200,000 Chechens were detained in filtration camps at one point or another, inflicting major psychological trauma (Askerov 99). *Zachistka* operations and filtration camps are two of the most glaring manifestations of the campaign of state terror in Chechnya. After the humiliating collapse of the USSR and defeat in the First Russian-Chechen War, the second war was seen as an opportunity to redeem the prestige of the armed forces and restore Russian confidence and national pride (Gilligan, Terror in Chechnya 71) (Satter 98).

## **9. Western Perspectives on the Russian Approach to Counterinsurgency**

The frequency of *zachistka* operations steadily diminished after the summer of 2003, but by then they had already significantly impacted the nature of the conflict (Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya* 71). Today, Chechnya is one of the least violent republics in the Caucasus, ten years after the Russians declared the end of their “counterterrorist” operation in the region (Dunlop 50) (Moore). Given this reduction in violence, should the Russian counterinsurgency operation be considered a success? The prospect of this being the case has important implications for the way Western formulators and operators think about COIN. It raises the possibility that a more effective, albeit heavy-handed, means of conducting COIN exists. Ultimately, both the Western approach and the Russian approach are concerned with the issue of achieving stability. The means by which this stability is obtained is where the two approaches diverge. The Russian approach, with its numerous abuses, is considered inimical to the values of the West while the Russians consider the Western approach to be ineffective or overly idealistic. After all, the United States remains involved in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, none of this is to say that the Chechen conflict has been definitively settled. If one of the objectives of COIN is to address and resolve the underlying reasons for the insurgency in the first place, the Chechen case is most definitely not resolved. Chechnya remains firmly under Moscow’s grip. Today there exists no real prospect of it gaining independence, and Chechen nationalism has been redirected and effectively neutralized through the imposition of a pro-Kremlin regime under Akhmad Kadyrov’s son, Ramzan. However, this status quo in the region is brittle and relies upon the close relationship between Kadyrov and Putin (Cohen 74). If either man is removed from office or otherwise incapacitated, the region will likely be thrown into disorder once more.

Two interesting comparisons to non-Russian COIN experiences can be made which relate to psychology and strategy. The first is the French response to the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) during Africa’s period of decolonization. In the aftermath of

France's 1954 defeat in Indochina, Algeria presented itself as an opportunity to salvage French national pride, much in the way that Chechnya had done for Russia after the dissolution of the USSR. The second is the American experience in Vietnam, specifically as it relates to the Russian policy of Chechenization. Although Vietnamization and Chechenization entailed different tactics, the underlying aim of both of these policies was quite similar. Chechenization, like Vietnamization before it, was intended to shift responsibility of fighting the insurgency from Russian federal forces to local, pro-Kremlin Chechens (Eichler 53-54). This policy transformed the conflict into something of a civil war among the Chechens. Many of the pro-Kremlin forces under the Kadyrov's command, the *kadyrovtsy*, are themselves veterans of the fight against the Russians during the 1990s (Russell, Chechnya – Russia's 'War on Terror' 87-88). This paramilitary force largely assumed the place of the Russian federal security forces, though both were known to have committed widespread human rights abuses (Russell, Chechnya – Russia's 'War on Terror' 58) (Askerov 130-131).

### **10. Radicalization from Within or Without?**

The concern of this paper is to examine whether or not Russian tactics led to the radicalization of the anti-Russian insurgency in the North Caucasus. The cause of this is not primarily rooted in the tactics employed by the Russians, though the serious psychological consequences of these measures should not be understated. Instead, the introduction of foreign, fundamentalist strains of Islam was responsible for the conflict's transformation, and this process was accelerated by the adoption of these ideologies by certain elites and insurgent leaders. Among these leaders, the lack of foreign concern likely caused many moderates to gravitate toward Islamism. The loss of traditional Sufism was not the result of Russian operations during the recent campaigns in Chechnya. Nor did Wahhabism naturally grow out of the historical circumstances of the Chechens; this was a foreign transplant that took root among disaffected Chechen separatists. If anything, much of the radicalization can be traced to the

interwar period, before the Russians had employed the *zachistka* and similar tactics on a large scale against. Yandarbiyev and Udugov were instrumental in forging ties with the Taliban in Afghanistan and visited that country during this period (Cohen 30). Gilligan likewise credits Yandarbiyev and Khattab for transforming the struggle in Chechnya from a national separatist movement into “an increasingly strong Islamist [conflict] couched in the language of jihads, caliphates, jamaats, and amirs.” (Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya* 123-124).

### **10.1. The Foreign Factor**

The attempt by foreign Wahhabis to establish an Islamic state in Chechnya during the interwar period has been well documented (Broxup 104-105). It has also been shown that the region experienced a significant influx of Islamic missionaries in the wake of the collapse of the USSR, bringing to Chechnya an Islam foreign to the region (Vatchagaev 221). Vatchagaev also argues that the Chechen embrace of Islamism was precipitated by the realization that Western governments would not come to the Chechens’ aid. As a result, the Chechen leadership looked elsewhere and found allies among radical groups (Vatchagaev 208). For example, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan granted Chechnya full diplomatic recognition and lent material support to the Chechens (Schaefer 77). Explaining his interest in the conflict, Osama bin Laden wrote:

This [Chechen] Muslim nation has been attacked by the Russian predator which [*sic*] believes in the orthodox Christian creed. The Russians have exterminated an entire people and forced them into the mountains, where they have been devoured by disease and freezing winter, and yet no one has done anything about it (Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya* 137).

This sentiment differs from that voiced by Chechens such as Dudayev in the early 1990s, even if the assessment of Russia’s historical actions in the region are accurate. Dudayev firmly desired the establishment of a secular state. He warned, “Where any religion prevails over the secular constitutional organization of the state, either the Spanish Inquisition or Islamic

fundamentalism will emerge” (Williams 85). This statement is a testament to the extent to which Chechnya was radicalized in the years following Dudayev’s death in 1996. On the whole, while the motivations of nationalists and Islamists may have differed, the support that foreign groups offered to the Chechens in their struggle for independence was appreciated, especially in light of Western indifference to the conflict (Bodansky 31, 42).

## 10.2 The Tactical Factor

Chronologically, the emergence of the *zachistka* occurred after a significant degree of radicalization had already taken place. The tactic, as noted, was primarily employed between 2000 and 2003. Al-Shishani, a specialist on Islamist movements in the North Caucasus, notes that Salafi-Jihadist groups were already active in Chechnya by 1997, during the interwar period (Al-Shishani 265). Hughes adds that the steady increase in religiosity in Chechnya could already be detected prior to the military conflict with Russia, during Dudayev’s presidency when he sought to establish a secular state (Hughes 68-69). Al-Shishani also writes that the Chechen elite’s acceptance of fundamentalist Islam was also conditioned by their socioeconomic status from the 1980s onwards (Hughes 275). Nonetheless, the First Russian-Chechen War remained primarily motivated by nationalism and separatism. Even the more radical pro-independence forces, like Basayev’s, remained ideologically close to the nationalist and secular-minded Dudayev (Akhmadov ve Lanskoj 5). Following Dudayev’s death, Basayev was often seen travelling with Movladi Udugov, one of the individuals most responsible for the propagation of fundamentalist Islam (Akhmadov ve Lanskoj 26). The underground resistance government has also fostered close relations with foreign Wahhabis and other extremists (Hahn 37). Clearly, religion had not been a central component of the Chechen struggle until the influx of foreign Wahhabis and other fundamentalists during and after the First Russian-Chechen War (Schaefer 163).

## 11. Conclusion

How can we understand the complex nature of the recent Russian-Chechen conflict? Additional research into the roots of radicalization should be undertaken to obtain a fuller picture of the changing nature of this conflict. The evidence thus far suggests that the Russian tactics *themselves* were not responsible for the radicalization of the insurgency in the North Caucasus. As the Chechen conflict has progressed, the original nationalist motivations were gradually lost. Instead, the conflict's radicalization has caused it to be considered as another front in the Global War on Terror. This matter ought to be of particular interest given the number of Chechen fighters who have fought for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (Askerov 123). This suggests that many of the underlying issues at the core of the Chechen conflict have been left unresolved, leading disaffected young men to take up the jihadist cause.

The insurgency in Chechnya ought to be examined closely by theorists and operators of COIN doctrine. While the tactics employed by Russia might be considered unacceptable by Western standards, there is still a utility in evaluating them; the Chechen case provides insights into how insurgencies transform in response to external influences. Early scholarship on COIN focused primarily on separatist insurgencies. More recent literature has emphasized Islamist insurgencies. Both of these elements are present in the Chechen case. Finally, Chechnya remains a land where historical grievances continue to simmer. Discontent in the region remains, as evidenced by the presence of Chechen combatants fighting in the Levant. Therefore, additional research into the factors that increase one's vulnerability to extremism would benefit this study. Although the most violent phase of the conflict in the North Caucasus has passed, this borderland between Europe and the Middle East will continue to be of consequence for Russia, the United States, and beyond in the future.

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