

Russian Counterinsurgency in the North Caucasus: Methods and Results

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Abstract

This article examines the radicalization of the insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. The North Caucasus nationalist and secular movement of the 1990s became radicalized and Islamized by the 2010s. This research analyzes whether or not Russian counterinsurgency tactics contributed to the radicalization of the insurgency or if this process was the result of external factors, such as the influence of foreign fighters and ideologies not native to the North Caucasus region. In the North Caucasus, the Russian Federation employed the enemy-centric approach to counterinsurgency, rather than the population-centric approach common to the United States and other Western countries. This research concludes that the influence of foreign missionaries, fighters, and ideologies was the primary reason that led to the conflict becoming religiously inspired. While the Russian counterinsurgency tactics also contributed to radicalization, they were not the cause of the insurgency's Islamization.

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

1. Introduction

“Chechnya is not a subject of Russia, it is a subject of Allah.”¹ 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 much attention and

¹ Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains: The Battle for Chechnya* (New York: Tauris Parke Paperbacks, 2006), 125.

public concern for atrocities committed in the region is low.² It is therefore 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 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.³ It continues to color the Kremlin's foreign policy with respect to the Middle East and Western Europe.⁴ In its prosecution, the counterinsurgency operation has also strengthened Vladimir Putin's grip on power.⁵ However, the primary interest of this paper is the insurgency's gradual transformation from a separatist, nationalist cause into an Islamist one, subsumed into the larger War on Terror.⁶

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

² Marlène Laruelle, "Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 99, Ifri, March 2017, 5; John Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves: Russian Demonisation of the Chechens before and since 9/11", *Third World Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2005): 101.

³ Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 249.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 244-245; Laruelle, "Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?", 22.

⁵ Steven Lee Myers, *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015), 152-153.

⁶ Sufian N. Zhemukhov, "The North Caucasus: How Islam and Nationalism Shaped Stability, and Conflict in the Region," in *Religion, Conflict, and Stability in the Former Soviet Union*, eds. Katya Migacheva and Bryan Frederick (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), 35-64.

COIN as being akin to conventional warfare.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ As a result, this conception of COIN is sometimes equated with nation-building and is often associated with the American experience in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq.¹⁰

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 insurgents to adopt fundamentalist Islam and led to their acceptance of terrorism as a tactic.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 mercenaries, missionaries, and individuals associated with Salafi jihadist groups is also taken into account.¹² Finally, regional factionalism is considered as a factor contributing to the conflict's radicalization.¹³

⁷ Christopher Paul, "Moving Beyond Population-Centric vs. Enemy-Centric Counterinsurgency," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 6. (2016): 1023; Gian Gentile, "A Strategy of Tactics: Population-Centric COIN and the Army," *Parameters* 39, no. 3 (2009): 4.

⁸ Paul, "Moving Beyond Population-Centric vs. Enemy-Centric Counterinsurgency," 1022.

⁹ Robert Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad* (Santa Barbara: Praeger Security International, 2010), 19.

¹⁰ Gentile, "A Strategy of Tactics," 3.

¹¹ Russell, "Terrorists, Bandits, Spooks and Thieves," 109-110.

¹² John Russell, *Chechnya – Russia's 'War on Terror'* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 75.

¹³ Richard Sakwa, "The Revenge of the Caucasus: Chechenization and the Dual State in Russia," *Nationalities Papers* 28, no. 5 (2010): 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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, specifically 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 operation 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 the radicalization of the conflict 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 even most effective, way of combating insurgencies.

¹⁴ Zhemukhov, "The North Caucasus," 62-63.

¹⁵ Emil Nasritdinov, et al. "Vulnerability and Resilience of Young People in Kyrgyzstan to Radicalization, Violence and Extremism: Analysis across Five Domains." (presentation, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, Washington, D.C., February 21, 2019).

2. Russia's Invasion of the Northeast Caucasus

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.¹⁶ Russian general Aleksey Petrovich Yermolov is particularly remembered for his campaign of ethnic cleansing against the peoples of the Caucasus. 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.¹⁷ 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. Opposing the Russians were the Chechen Sheikh Mansur, Imam Shamil, the Avar leader of the Imamate state in Dagestan, and other leaders of the local resistance.¹⁸ 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

¹⁶ King, *The Ghosts of Freedom*, 238.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 73-77; Walter Richmond, *The Circassian Genocide* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 18-22; Moshe Gammer, *The Lone Wolf and the Bear: Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 33.

¹⁸ Paul Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam: Russia and the Faces of Chechen Terror* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's Inc., 2004), 11.

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*.¹⁹ Although the relationship between murid and murshid was fundamentally religious at its core, a political dimension was steadily 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 1828.²⁰ 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.”²¹ Schaefer likewise recalls Yermolov’s strategy, explaining that he “lost the battle for the Chechen hearts and minds, and poisoned entire generations.”²² He continues, invoking language reminiscent of the contemporary debate over population-centric COIN:

Because the Russian 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.*²³

Yermolov’s brutal tactics, Schaefer contends, encouraged the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in the region.²⁴ 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

¹⁹ King, *The Ghosts of Freedom*, 68-69; Georgi Derluguian, “The Forgotten Complexities of the North Caucasus Jihad in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Caucasus Paradigms: Anthropologies, Histories, and the Making of a World Area*, eds. Lale Yalcin-Heckmann and Bruce Grant (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2008), 85.

²⁰ Ali Askerov, *Historical Dictionary of the Chechen Conflict* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 120; *Ibid.*, 187; Moshe Gammer, “The Beginnings of the Naqshbandiyya in Dagestan and the Russian Conquest of the Caucasus,” *Die Welt des Islams* 34, no.2 (1994): 217.

²¹ Cohen, *Russia’s Counterinsurgency in the North Caucasus: Performance and Consequences* (Carlisle Barracks: United States Army War College Press, 2014), 8.

²² Schaefer, *Insurgency in Chechnya*, 61.

²³ *Ibid.*, 61. Italics in the original.

²⁴ Schaefer, *Insurgency in Chechnya*, 61-62.

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 Russia is the concept of *gazavat*. In the regional context, the term is roughly congruous to jihad, here meaning holy war.²⁵ 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*.²⁶ The invading Russians might otherwise impose a system of governance upon the local Muslims that was not based on Shari'a, the Islamic religious law.²⁷ By its very nature, a government rooted in anything other than Shari'a would be considered illegitimate.²⁸ To force such a system upon Muslims would not only threaten the peoples of the North Caucasus but also the Muslim community of believers at large, the *ummah*.²⁹ Movladi Udugov, one of the chief Chechen ideologues of the First 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!³⁰

²⁵ Ibid., 56; Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency*, 9.

²⁶ King, *The Ghosts of Freedom*, 65; Anna Zelkina, *In Quest for God and Freedom: The Sufi Response to the Russian Advance in the North Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 144.

²⁷ Ernest Tucker, *Russian-Muslim Confrontation in the Caucasus*, eds. Thomas Sanders, Ernest Tucker, and Gary Hamburg (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 255.

²⁸ Gammer, "Naqshbandiyya," 211.

²⁹ Reuven Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 118.

³⁰ Askerov, *Historical Dictionary*, 229; Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 79. Emphasis in the original.

This pronouncement is significant because it, apart from being made by one of the main propagandists for the Chechen cause, 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 nineteenth 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.³¹ In one manifestation of this divide, Shamil and Ghazi Muhammad found themselves confronted by opposition from locals who were not inclined to abandon their traditional practices for Shari'a.³² 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.³³

For the peoples of the northeastern Caucasus, Islam and opposition to the Russians served as rallying points around which they could mobilize.³⁴ But it would be a mistake to assume that the opposition was a united front, as if there was no dissension among the

³¹ Christoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 14-15.

³² King, *The Ghosts of Freedom*, 70-71; Zelkina, *In Quest for God and Freedom*, 138-141.

³³ Robert Bruce Ware and Enver Kisriev, *Dagestan: Russia Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2010), 20; *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁴ King, *The Ghosts of Freedom*, 66.

forces. King explains that today, as in the nineteenth century, “there has never been a unified ‘Islamic resistance’ to Russian power.”³⁵ The development of Muridism is but one form of opposition rooted in Islam, 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 similarly 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].”³⁶ 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 Russians

³⁵ Ibid., 65

³⁶ Moshe Gammer, “Empire and Mountains: The Case of Russia and the Caucasus,” *Social Evolution & History* 12, no. 2 (2013): 124.

(as recalled above) 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.³⁷ 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.

This examination of the Russian conquest of the northeast Caucasus is important for two reasons. Firstly, the conduct of the Russians and the forces aligned against them in the nineteenth century display certain parallels to the recent conflict in Chechnya and the broader region. While COIN doctrine was not developed as a military science then as it is today, the Russian 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. Second, and more important still, is the historical memory of the resistance against the Russians. Imam Shamil and others continue to be hailed as heroes, featuring prominently in the imaginations of locals.³⁸

3. The Post-Soviet Struggle and its Causes

With this history in mind, we can examine the chronology of the latest Chechen conflict, beginning with events preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union. This will provide for a better understanding of the situation of Chechen society before the outbreak of the First Russian-Chechen War in 1994. Founded upon communist ideology, the Soviet Union (USSR) adhered to a policy of state atheism. Religious expression was severely repressed and churches, synagogues, and mosques across the USSR were

³⁷ King, *The Ghosts of Freedom*, 69-70.

³⁸ Khassan Baiev, Ruth Daniloff, and Nicholas Daniloff, *Grief of My Heart: Memories of a Chechen Surgeon* (New York: Walker & Company, 2005), 30-31.

shuttered.³⁹ In the North Caucasus, these measures were intended to delegitimize local religious leaders and transfer their authority to Soviet functionaries.⁴⁰ The closure of mosques, madrassas and other Islamic institutions also made it easier for the Committee for State Security (KGB) to track those who rejected atheism, since the few remaining places of organized Islamic learning could be surveilled more effectively.⁴¹ Also of tremendous consequence for the Chechens' later religious and ideological development was their deportation in 1944 to Central Asia on the orders of Joseph Stalin.⁴² When his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, permitted them to return to Chechnya in 1957, a significant intergenerational divide 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 that desired to reconnect with these religious traditions faced extensive state repression and religious discrimination.⁴³

The loss of traditional spirituality 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."⁴⁴ 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

³⁹ Ware and Kisriev, *Dagestan*, 90.

⁴⁰ Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya*, 97

⁴¹ Mairbek Vatchagaev, "The Chechen Resistance: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," in *Volatile Borderland: Russian and the North Caucasus*, ed. Glen E. Howard (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2012), 220-221.

⁴² Aleksandr Nekrich, *Punished Peoples: The Deportation and Fate of Soviet Minorities at the End of the Second World War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1981), 58-59.

⁴³ Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency*, 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

individuals from the Middle East.⁴⁵ The religious landscape was ripe for transformation, and this paradigm shift in attitudes regarding Islam would reach a turning point in the aftermath of the First Russian-Chechen War.

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, the Central Asian countries, Georgia, and Armenia 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, it was feared that the newly formed Federation might disintegrate with other constituent republics and regions following Chechnya's lead by declaring independence.⁴⁶ Indeed, such separatist movements became active in Russia's Muslim majority republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan.⁴⁷ The Kremlin considered such a prospect unacceptable. An example would have to be made of Chechnya in order to salvage what remained of Mother Russia.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Murad Batal Al-Shishani, "The Rise and Fall of Arab Fighters in Chechnya," in *Volatile Borderland: Russian and the North Caucasus*, ed. Glen E. Howard (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2012), 274-275.

⁴⁶ Lieven, *Tombstone of Russian Power*, 101; Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency*, 19; Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 274-275.

⁴⁷ Julie George, *The Politics of Ethnic Separatism in Russia and Georgia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 68; Thomas Ginsberg, "Russian Region Plays Independence Card in Referendum," last modified April 19, 1993, <https://www.apnews.com/67d09a3b50d0c8e0f395a0726ba40f11>.

⁴⁸ Joseph Myers, "The Counter-Insurgency Operation in Chechnya" (Master's thesis, University of Leeds, 2013), 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.⁴⁹ Witnessing the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, Dudayev declared Chechnya's independence, setting into motion the events that would lead to the First Russian-Chechen War.⁵⁰ 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 1994.⁵¹ 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.⁵²

4. The First Russian-Chechen War

This division was temporarily mended when, in December 1994, it became apparent that a Russian assault on the secessionist state was imminent.⁵³ 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 come to exemplify urban warfare executed poorly. The First Battle of Grozny, though a Pyrrhic victory for the Russians, will be studied as a cautionary example of how armored columns can be

⁴⁹ Askerov, *Historical Dictionary*, 89.

⁵⁰ Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency*, 20.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 32; Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 28.

⁵³ Ilyas Akhmadov and Miriam Lanskoj, *The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 15.

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 “fighting troikas,” as they came to be known, usually consisted of a sniper, a grenade launcher, and a submachine gunner.⁵⁴ The lead and tail crews, having been disabled by the Chechens, 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 insurgents 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 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 involvement 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.⁵⁵ Having made his career outside of Chechnya, he eventually obtained the rank of general in the Soviet Air Force before returning to Chechnya in 1990.⁵⁶ Maskhadov, who was considered to be a secular-minded person, served as an artillery commander until retiring in 1992 with the rank of a

⁵⁴ Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency*, 25.

⁵⁵ Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 76-77.

⁵⁶ Askerov, *Historical Dictionary*, 88-89.

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.⁵⁷

However, a radical faction led by Shamil Basayev, another prominent field commander and leader of separatist forces, was ascendant.⁵⁸ Basayev had previously traveled throughout the south Caucasus, interacting with Arab and Islamist fighters. He also fought in the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, and even received training in mountain warfare and special operations from Russian military intelligence.⁵⁹ This training would serve Basayev well when he eventually took up the cause of Chechen independence. He 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.⁶⁰ One of his associates also 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."⁶¹ The hospital assault at Budyonnovsk would serve as a harbinger of future acts of terrorism committed in the course of the Russian-Chechen conflict. In the raid, hundreds of hostages were taken, including many women and children. This, combined with the 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."⁶² Russian media maintained extensive coverage of the conflict, contributing to a general rise in war-weariness. In effect, the Chechens had outlasted the resolve of the Russians. An

⁵⁷ Ibid., 156-157; Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, 86.

⁵⁸ Askerov, *Historical Dictionary*, 58-59.

⁵⁹ Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad*, 36-37.

⁶⁰ Akhmadov and Lansky, *Chechen Struggle*, 53.

⁶¹ Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad*, 41.

⁶² Murphy, *The Wolves of Islam*, 23-24.

increasing number of Russians struggled to justify why such a small territory located on Russia's southern border was worth retaining.⁶³

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.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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. Conditions in interwar Chechnya, however, would force Maskhadov from his traditionally nationalist and secularist convictions and compel him to make concessions to radical Islamists. The introduction of Shari'a law in February 1999 was one such concession.⁶⁶

⁶³ Lieven, *Tombstone of Russian Power*, 196-197.

⁶⁴ Akhmadov and Lanskoj, *Chechen Struggle*, 68.

⁶⁵ Peace Treaty and Principles of Inter-relation between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, Russia-Chechnya, May 12, 1997, Transitional Justice Peace Agreements Database (University of Ulster, Transitional Justice Institute, Incore).

⁶⁶ Askerov, *Historical Dictionary*, 157.

5. Interwar Chaos

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 Chechen identity had been lost. This, combined with economic destitution in the wake of the first war, created a climate in which radicalism could take root. The more secular leaders of the first war, such as Dudayev and Maskhadov, viewed Islam in light 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.⁶⁷ Interestingly, he had distinguished himself in Afghanistan fighting many of the very forces that would eventually support the Chechen cause.⁶⁸ 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.

5.1 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 reworked the Chechen legal code to

⁶⁷ Williams. *Inferno in Chechnya*, 79.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

resemble Saudi Arabia's.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹

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."⁷² Meanwhile, Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second in command, was arrested and later released in the neighboring republic of Dagestan in 1997.⁷³ 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 was originally

⁶⁹ Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency*, 34.

⁷⁰ Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, "Ideology and Conflict: Chechen political nationalism prior to, and during, ten years of war," in *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*, ed. Moshe Gammer (London: Routledge, 2008), 123.

⁷¹ Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency*, 35.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 35.

from Saudi Arabia but had 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.⁷⁴ He would eventually establish a training camp in the Chechen 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 missionaries.⁷⁵

5.2. 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 mix of Salafism, Wahhabism, and traditional Sufism. Salafism 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.”⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸ At the time, Russian forces would make no distinction between the two ideologies that, while sharing some similarities, are still distinct. Later, both Chechen insurgents and the Kremlin distinguished between Wahhabism, as Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's state

⁷⁴ Akhmadov and Lanskoj, *Chechen Struggle*, 123.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷⁶ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 25.

⁷⁷ Mohamed Bin Ali and Muhammad Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman, “Salafis and Wahhabis: Two Sides of the Same Coin?” *RSIS Commentary*, no. 254 (2016): 1-3.

⁷⁸ Askerov, *Historical Dictionary*, 239

ideology, and Salafism, as an Islamic movement new to the Caucasus.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the Wahhabis, such as Khattab, were able to exploit what Akhmadov and Lanskoj call “a tremendous ignorance of religion in Chechnya.”⁸⁰ After joining forces with Basayev, their regional exploits would precipitate the onset of the Second Russian-Chechen War.

Basayev’s political marriage of convenience with Khattab saw the two develop a force that would launch an invasion of neighboring Dagestan in August 1999.⁸¹ Still, a distinction exists between the two that is important to identify. Basayev was firmly in the radical camp of Chechen separatists, as evidenced by his actions in Budyonnovsk; he had been willing to commit acts of terrorism that Dudayev and Maskhadov were not willing to sanction or condone. However, Basayev was not a Wahhabi like Khattab and, as noted, was still primarily motivated by political separatism 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, which attracted many foreign fighters. This narrative is reminiscent of the war in Afghanistan, in which the conflict was framed as a holy war against the evil, atheistic Soviet Union.⁸² 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

⁷⁹ Andrei Smirnov. “The Kremlin’s New Strategy to Build a Pro-Russian Islamic Chechnya,” *North Caucasus Weekly* 7, no. 9 (2006), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-kremlins-new-strategy-to-build-a-pro-russian-islamic-chechnya-2/>.

⁸⁰ Akhmadov and Lanskoj, *Chechen Struggle*, 125.

⁸¹ Gammer, *The Lone Wolf and the Bear*, 213.

⁸² Feifer, *The Great Gamble*, 132.

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 fundamentalist radicals who would be more than willing to fight Russia.⁸³ Making appeals to religion was but one additional way to further the nationalist cause.⁸⁴ Whatever the case, Basayev's actions are demonstrative of the lack of internal cohesion in Chechnya during the interwar period. This chaos ultimately led to the Second Russian-Chechen War, a conflict whose character differed radically from the first

6. 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.⁸⁵ 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

⁸³ Brian Glyn Williams. *Inferno in Chechnya*, 188.

⁸⁴ Vatchagaev, "The Chechen Resistance", 205.

⁸⁵ Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency*, 43.

Russians, not the Chechens.⁸⁶ Unlike during the first war, the media's access to the conflict was greatly restricted, hiding from public view the war crimes being committed by Russian forces in Chechnya.⁸⁷ 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 and were portrayed as posing an imminent threat to the average citizen, who might become the victim of a terrorist attack. 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?"⁸⁸ This association with wolves had long been a feature of the Russian demonization of Chechens. Terrorism, of course, is a tactic that can be employed by separatists.⁸⁹ But in the Chechen case, it should not be construed as being representative of the entire separatist movement. Putin and the Kremlin would find that by characterizing the conflict in such a manner, they could more effectively maintain public support.

7. Russia's Postwar Strategy

Another key factor contributing to the Russian victory in the Second Russian-Chechen War was their use of ethnic Chechen units; exploiting local factionalism would be a major component in later Russian counterinsurgency strategy. The period of open

⁸⁶ Schaefer, *Insurgency in Chechnya*, 199.

⁸⁷ Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency* 43.

⁸⁸ Russell, *Russian Demonisation*, 106.

⁸⁹ Russell, *War on Terror*, 60.

warfare largely concluded by May 2000, when the Chechen government was crushed and replaced by a pro-Russian government. 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.⁹⁰ The installation of Kadyrov would enable the Russians to transform the nature of the conflict, with the Kremlin being less willing to negotiate with various separatist bands and leaders.⁹¹ In any case, the separatists were now uniformly portrayed as fundamentalist terrorists, precluding any possible negotiation.

7.1. Framing the Conflict in Terms of the War on Terror

With the battle phase of the war over, the Russian focus now turned to counterinsurgency. The September 11 terrorist attacks would impact the trajectory of the insurgency and Russian response as well.⁹² To this point, 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 particularly useful, in the Kremlin's calculation, as they allowed for the Chechen conflict to be subsumed into the larger "War on Terror."⁹³ 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.⁹⁴ The United States and other nations engaged in the War on Terror would hardly want to be

⁹⁰ Ibid., 42.

⁹¹ Ibid., 42.

⁹² Vatchagaev, "The Chechen Resistance", 213.

⁹³ Russell, *War on Terror*, 109.

⁹⁴ Emma Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 71.

seen criticizing another country's campaign against supposed terrorists. Secondly, this designation altered the means by which Russia could respond to the insurgency in the region.⁹⁵ A major distinction exists between COIN and counterterrorism, but this difference was steadily, even purposefully, blurred.⁹⁶

7.2. 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.⁹⁷ In practice, however, the *zachistka* became a form of collective punishment.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹

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 1995.¹⁰⁰ Sweep operations are hardly

⁹⁵ Walter Richmond, "Russian policies towards Islamic extremism in the Northern Caucasus and destabilization in Kabardino-Balkaria," in *Ethno-Nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*, ed. Moshe Gammer (London: Routledge, 2008), 86.

⁹⁶ Pavel K. Baev, "The Targets of Terrorism and the Aims of Counter-Terrorism in Moscow, Chechnya and the North Caucasus," in *Volatile Borderland: Russian and the North Caucasus*, ed. Glen E. Howard (Washington, DC: The Jamestown Foundation, 2012), 151.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁹⁸ Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya*, 16.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

¹⁰⁰ Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya*, 52-53.

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 sweep, 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.”¹⁰¹ It is suspected that the perpetrators of the Novye Aldy massacre were members of the OMON, an interior paramilitary police force.¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³

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.” She also explains how the majority of those detained in these sweeps were eventually released after having been subjected to torture in “filtration camps,” such as the one that existed at Chernokozovo.¹⁰⁴ The tactics employed by Russia had psychological implications for those that they targeted and those that carried them out. Russian general Anatoli Kvashnin was recorded

¹⁰¹ Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya*, 177.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 54-58; Laruelle, “Kadyrovism”, 14.

¹⁰³ Brian Glyn Williams, *Inferno in Chechnya*, 69

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 71; Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya*, 59; Askerov, *Chechen Conflict*, 99.

as saying, “We will beat the Chechens to a pulp, so that the present generation will be too terrified to fight Russia again.”¹⁰⁵ After the humiliation of the collapse of the USSR and defeat in the First Russian-Chechen War, the second war was also seen as an opportunity to redeem the prestige of the armed forces and restore the confidence of the broader Russian population.¹⁰⁶

8. 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 impacted the conflict’s landscape.¹⁰⁷ Gilligan argues that the *zachistki* undermined the legitimacy of the Russian COIN operation in Chechnya. However, she appears to be making this evaluation from a distinctly western approach to COIN. There is little in the Russian conduct in Chechnya that would be viewed as acceptable to western operators and formulators of COIN doctrine. Perhaps it is the case that the Russians, in their conception of COIN, are less interested in garnering support and legitimacy from the population than they are in providing stability, whatever the cost. The metric by which success in COIN is measured is thus fundamentally different in the Russian and Western experiences. 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 republic.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Pavel Felgenhauer, “Degradation of the Russian Military: General Anatoli Kvashnin,” *Perspective* 15, no. 1 (October—November 2004), https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2004_12/acprint.

¹⁰⁶ Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya*, 71.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁰⁸ John Dunlop, “Putin, Kozak and Russian Policy Toward the North Caucasus,” in *Volatile Borderlands: Russia and the North Caucasus*, ed. Glen E. Howard, 50; Lucy Moore, “Violence in the North Caucasus,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2 September 2010, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/violence-north-caucasus-6>.

The prospect of considering the Russian COIN strategy as being successful is a particularly unwelcome consideration for many western practitioners and theorists of 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 likewise consider the Western approach to be ineffective or overly idealistic. After all, the United States remains involved in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is hardly to say, however, that the case of Chechnya has been 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 settled. 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.

Two interesting comparisons to non-Russian COIN experiences can be made. The first is the French operation in Algeria during that country's war of independence. In the aftermath of France's defeat in Indochina, Algeria presented itself as an opportunity for the French to regain their national pride, much in the way that Chechnya had done for Russia. The second is the American experience in Vietnam, specifically as it relates to the Russian policy of Chechenization. Like Vietnamization, Chechenization was intended to shift responsibility of fighting the insurgency from Russian forces to local, pro-Kremlin

Chechens.¹⁰⁹ This policy transformed the conflict into something of a civil war among the Chechens. Many of the pro-Kremlin forces under the Kadyrovs' command, the *kadyrovtsy*, are themselves veterans of the fight against the Russians during the 1990s.¹¹⁰ This paramilitary force largely assumed the place of the Russian federal security forces, although both were known to have committed widespread human rights abuses.¹¹¹

9. Russian Tactics and Islamic Radicalization

The concern of this paper is to examine whether or not Russian tactics led to the radicalization of the insurgency in the North Caucasus. As it seems, the primary causes for this were not rooted in the tactics employed by the Russians but were instead the result of foreign influence and domestic factors specific to the Chechen case. 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* or similar tactics against the Chechens. Yandarbiyev and Udugov were instrumental in forging ties with the Taliban in Afghanistan and visited that country during this period.¹¹² Gilligan likewise credits Yandarbiyev and Khattab for transforming the struggle in Chechnya from a national

¹⁰⁹ Maya Eichler, *Militarizing Men: Gender, Conscription, and War in Post-Soviet Russia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 53-54.

¹¹⁰ Russell, *War on Terror*, 87-88.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹¹² Cohen, *Russia's Counterinsurgency*, 30.

separatist movement into “an increasingly strong Islamist [conflict] couched in the language of jihads, caliphates, jamaats, and amirs.”¹¹³

9.1. The Foreign Factor

The attempt by foreign Wahhabis to establish an Islamic state in Chechnya during the interwar period has been well documented.¹¹⁴ 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.¹¹⁵ 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.¹¹⁶ For example, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan granted Chechnya full diplomatic recognition and lent material support to the Chechens.¹¹⁷ Explaining his interest in the conflict, Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, 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.¹¹⁸

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

¹¹³ Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya*, 123-124.

¹¹⁴ Marie Benningsen Broxup, “The Russian Experience with Muslim Insurgencies: From the North Caucasus in the 19th Century to Afghanistan and Back to the Caucasus,” in *Volatile Borderlands: Russia and the North Caucasus*, ed. Glen E. Howard, 104-105.

¹¹⁵ Vatchagaev, “The Chechen Resistance,” 221.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

¹¹⁷ Schaefer, *Insurgency in Chechnya*, 77.

¹¹⁸ Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya*, 137.

Inquisition or Islamic fundamentalism will emerge.”¹¹⁹ 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 goals of nationalists and Islamists may have differed, the support that foreign groups offered to the Chechens in their struggle was appreciated, especially in light of Western indifference to the conflict.¹²⁰

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.¹²¹ 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.¹²² This is evidenced by the rise in foreign missionary activity after 1991. Al-Shishani also writes that the Chechen elite’s slow acceptance of fundamentalist Islam was also conditioned their socioeconomic status from the 1980s onwards.¹²³ 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.¹²⁴ His targeted assassination may have also accelerated the conflict’s gradual spiral into radicalism. Following Dudayev’s death, Basayev was often seen travelling with Movladi Udugov, one of the individuals most responsible for the

¹¹⁹ Brian Glyn Williams. *Inferno in Chechnya*, 85.

¹²⁰ Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad*, 31; *Ibid.*, 42.

¹²¹ Murad Al-Shishani, “Arab Fighters,” 265.

¹²² James Hughes, *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2007), 68-69.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹²⁴ Akhmadov and Lansky, *Chechen Struggle*, 5.

propagation of fundamentalist Islam.¹²⁵ The underground resistance government has also fostered close relations with foreign Wahhabis and other extremists.¹²⁶ Clearly, religion had not been a central component of the Chechen struggle until the influx of foreign Wahhabis and other fundamentalist during the first war and in its aftermath.¹²⁷

10. Conclusion

How can we understand the complex causes 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 appears to suggest 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 grievances have largely been lost in the midst of the broader War on Terror. This matter ought to be of particular interest given the number of Chechen fighters who have been engaged in the recent conflict in Syria and Iraq.¹²⁸ This suggests that many of the underlying issues at the core of the Chechen conflict have been left unresolved, leading disaffected men to take up the jihadist banner.

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; Chechnya provides a case study of how insurgencies transform in response to external influences. Early scholarship on COIN focused primarily on separatist insurgencies. More recent

¹²⁵ Ibid., 26.

¹²⁶ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 37.

¹²⁷ Schaefer, *Insurgency in Chechnya*, 163.

¹²⁸ Askerov, *Chechen Conflict*, 123.

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 fighters in militant groups fighting in the Levant. As such, 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.

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