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## Noble Robbers: The Theatricality of Terrorism in the Northern Caucasus

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# **Noble Robbers: The Theatricality of Terrorism in the Northern Caucasus**

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

By

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## Introduction

Few in the US will ever forget the events of April 15, 2013. Having hosted the Boston Marathon without incident for over one hundred years, the city was looking forward to another one on the penultimate weekend in April. At approximately 2:49 that afternoon, as the runners were nearing the final stretch, two homemade bombs went off. Three died, but over 200 victims suffered severe injuries ranging from blown-off limbs to injuries caused by flying shrapnel.

The bizarre events of the next eighteen hours would prove just as horrific. After they were identified as the perpetrators via camera stills taken just prior to the bombings, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev fled law enforcement, leading the Boston PD on a wild chase throughout the cities of both Boston and nearby Watertown. Having run over and killed his brother with an SUV and an MIT security guard in a firefight, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev finally surrendered after being cornered in a neighbor's backyard. He had sought refuge by hiding in a dingy parked in a nearby backyard, bleeding profusely from the wounds he had sustained in the days prior to his capture. In the legal melee afterward, Tsarnaev justified the actions of both he and his brother as retribution for US military airstrikes and civilian casualties in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the immediate aftermath, the mainstream media attributed the event to another callous and horrendous act of extremist Islamic terrorism. However, the dramatic standoff, the wild chase through the streets of Boston, and the overall theatrical nature of the entire episode suggest an entirely different set of motives and tactics compared to that of "conventional" terrorists who had struck in the US, or that of their counterparts in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. Both brothers came from an old world, traditionalist Muslim family from the Caucasus; they

were originally Chechen and Avar, but the family was forced to move to Central Asia under Stalin's orders following WWII. Caucasian and Central Asian Muslims, while just as devout as that of other sects, predominantly belong to the secular Salafism sect of Islam and do not usually live in countries ruled by Sharia law, like those of the Levant.

Read within the context of the Caucasus region's history of ideologically- and religiously-motivated violence, the Tsarnaevs' actions are almost pedestrian. We need only look at campaigns such as that of the Murids and Imam Shamil in the 1800s to see where the Tsarnaev brothers drew inspiration. More recent examples include the "Black Widow" phenomenon, where female Caucasian bombers target public areas in order to create as much carnage as possible in retaliation for losing a relative at the hands of Russian forces, and that of the sporadic episodes of suicide terrorism seen in the Caucasus both during and after the Chechen Wars of the 1990s and 2000s.

Suicide terrorism has traditionally been thought of as an occurrence that only happens in countries during times of great social unrest and upheaval. Academics such as Robert Pape, who specialize in studying suicide terrorism, compare ethnic Russian and Caucasian separatists to that of their counterparts like the Kosovars in former Yugoslavia and the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, both of which operated in countries that were in the midst of bloody civil and regional wars. However, not all Chechen and other Caucasian extremists can so neatly fit into this narrative. While the Tamil Tigers and Chechen separatists had similar goals — achieving statehood and official recognition for minority groups separate from the majority government — Caucasian suicide terrorists have adopted modus operandi that extend beyond this. The difference is that they continue to lash out even in the absence of a sanctioned, ongoing active conflict.

Additionally, suicide terrorism in the Caucasus is much more of a guerrilla tactic than is found elsewhere. Part of the success of Russian-based and Caucasian suicide bombers in creating as much as carnage as possible is that they act individually or in cells with only a handful of people, particularly during the last Chechen war and in mainland Russia in the 2000s. In contrast, suicide bombers found elsewhere — such as those of al-Qaeda in the Middle East — often operate as a collective outpost of a large organization. These include those involved in the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center, or any one of the bombings of US military bases and consulates in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Kenya and Yemen suffered in the late 1990s and early 2000s. However, lone wolf actors are becoming more prevalent; the advent of the Internet has given rise to websites and social media that are fertile ground for groups such as the Islamic State to recruit volunteers for their causes.

Mainstream groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda claim opposition to US military presence in the Arabian peninsula as their motive behind engaging in such a distinct form of terror. Since 1990, the US has engaged in several conflicts such as the Gulf War, two Iraqi civil wars, and the ongoing Syrian and Yemeni civil wars, as well as maintaining its long established alliance with Israel. Like the US in the Arabian peninsula, Russia has maintained a military presence in its Caucasus region for hundreds of years, dating back to before the Tsarist era. However, Caucasian suicide bombers continue to act even when the Russian army is not pursuing an active conflict in the region. Officially, the Chechen wars took place from 1994 to 2009, with a brief respite from 1996-1999, between various Chechen separatist leaders and their forces, and that of the Russian government and its army. Today, there remains an insurgency movement in the region that has

continued to pit the Caucasus against Russia, despite the existence of a precarious 1996 peace treaty.

This challenges Pape's claims that suicide bombers in the Caucasus are motivated solely by "strategic ploys to coerce modern governments into making concessions", to instill fear in their civilian victims, or "to gain supporters and recruit members".<sup>1</sup> Insurgents and suicide bombers in the North Caucasus have acted mostly out of a mixture of personal vengeance, an expression of ultimate frustration, fatalism and genuine fanatical belief in the possibility of an independent Caucasian state (or states) influenced by the history of the Caucasus as an area of rebellion against their Russian suppressors. We see this in the roots of their nineteenth-century counterparts, who established a narrative of righteous pious Murids versus the heathen imperializing and savage Russian Empire, who were hellbent on crushing the Caucasian people underfoot. But even the legendary Murids were inconsistent in their objectives, with many famous warriors fighting mostly for the sake of fighting. War was a calling in itself.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism." *American Political Science Review* 97.3 (2003).





## Chapter 1: The Emperor Strikes First

In the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombings, the media and intelligence community honed in on any ties that Tamerlan or Dzhokhar Tsarnaev held to foreign anti-American aggressors. The FBI in particular scoured over the details of Tamerlan's six-month trip to Russia in 2012, where he visited relatives in Chechnya and Dagestan.<sup>2</sup> As the world would see later with ISIS, it appears that Tamerlan was almost entirely self radicalized, watching online videos that advocated for extremist Muslims to wage individual war against the infidel US, but interestingly neither he nor his younger brother belonged to a particular mosque.

In fact, much like their fellow Chechens in the Caucasus, it is possible that both brothers acted not out of religious conviction but irrational anger, and distress at their family's failure to assimilate into American culture. The family matriarch, Zubeidat Tsarnaeva, was fired from her job for refusing to serve men in a nail salon, protesting that her religion prevented mixing of men and women. She and Anzor Tsarnaev eventually moved back to Kyrgyzstan and divorced. After the bombing, when it was found that her sons were the perpetrators, she argued that they were innocent and that the "US would pay". Similarly, when he was training to box for the United States Olympic team, Tamerlan bragged that he didn't understand Americans and had no American friends, preferring the company of other Chechen-Americans. Only Dzhokhar — known as "Jahar" to his friends — seemed to be able to adapt to life in the US. He wrestled in high school and won a partial scholarship to study at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Masha Gessen, *The Brothers: The Road to an American Tragedy*. (New York, NY: Riverhead, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Gessen, *The Brothers*, 33.

Examined closely, this taste for violence follows a similar script seen in the Northern Caucasus region, dating back to the nineteenth century, and even before. As a coveted area bridging the continents of Asia and Europe, the Caucasus has been subject to hundreds of military campaigns over thousands of years. Alexander Pushkin and Leo Tolstoy waxed poetic about the area, writing about its abundant natural beauty and resources, while they were stationed there as soldiers in the Russian army in the late 1800s. Tsar after tsar sought to conquer the wild peoples of the Caucasus for these very reasons, which resulted in brutal retaliation on both sides. This also gave way to the popular folklore heroes of the day, many of whom are still revered for their deeds and bravery in the Caucasus in standing up to the Russian imperialists.

The most famous and beloved of these heroes were Sheikh Mansur, Imam Shamil, “The Lion of Dagestan,” and Hadji Murat. In the precursor to the Caucasian War that Shamil and his cohorts fought in, Sheikh Mansur led a series of revolts against Catherine the Great’s expansion into the Caucasus and aided the Turks during the Russo-Turkish War of the 1780s. Mansur’s rebellion inspired the Murid movement that Shamil aimed to erect in the Caucasus. Mansur’s entire rebellion was predicated on the religious differences between the predominantly Muslim population of the Caucasus and that of the Orthodox Russian mainlanders — a major facet mirrored in Shamil’s Murid movement. However, it would be Imam Shamil’s deeds that would capture the Caucasian peoples’ imagination.

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## *The Lion of Dagestan*

The popular narrative surrounding Imam Shamil is that of a revered “Muslim holy warrior” or guerrilla, akin to a Caucasian Robin Hood-like figure. Born in modern-day Dagestan, he was an ethnic Avar and waged a series of wars against Russia during the 1830s and 1840s, until surrendering himself to the Russians, after which he was exiled to St. Petersburg in 1859.<sup>4</sup>

What distinguished Shamil from that of his fellow anti-Russian counterparts is his framing of the Russian-Caucasian conflict as a holy war between devout Muslim citizens and violent infidels impeding upon the Caucasians’ undeniable religious and geographic autonomy, not unlike that of the insurgency that exists today. A true guerrilla war, the conflict between Shamil and his soldiers and that of the Russian army was fought on the mountain steppes of the Northern Caucasus in what is now modern-day Chechnya and Dagestan. The Russian army suffered one humiliating defeat after another, as they found themselves in unfamiliar alien territory wherein Shamil and his soldiers would launch devastating attacks despite being vastly outnumbered. The result was that Shamil was able to wield popular opinion in the Caucasus to his advantage, thriving on the dramatic theatrics of this war to justify himself as a leader of the much-maligned Muslim minority population in the Russian Empire.

Part of what brought Shamil to the forefront as the archetypal Chechen warlord was his unrelenting devotion to Avar-Dagestani customs, which prized savagery in battle and strict adherence to societal norms. Lesley Blanch’s history *The Sabers of Paradise* depicts a warlike people who proudly collected severed body parts as spoils of war and boasted of how many people

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<sup>4</sup> Lesley Blanch, *The Sabres of Paradise: Conquest and Vengeance in the Caucasus*. (London: Macmillan, 1960.)

they had beheaded in battle. One's social status was determined by one's prowess in battle; bride dowries were determined by the amount of people a bachelor had killed in battle, and each family's "worth" depended on how many eligible men it had who were fit to fight. Similarly to the contemporary idea of "honor killing," every slight — imagined or otherwise — required a violent response to restore the wronged party's honor, seemingly normalizing and glorifying violence for violence's sake, under the Caucasian ethical structure known as *adat*, which granted wronged parties the "right of revenge." *Adat* is best described as the Muslim counterpart to the western world's medieval chivalric code. Both prescribe how members of society are expected to behave, what traditions and practices they must honor. Pape's argument fails to take into account that the Caucasian peoples — specifically those found in Dagestan and Chechnya — had long histories of committing violence for violence's sake, independent of the recent activity in the immediate lead-up and aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union.

Even among the pious Chechen and Dagestani peoples, Shamil stood out. Before he assumed his role as head of the Murid warriors, he built his reputation as that of a Herculean athlete (he stood over 6'3") and an extremely pious Muslim. He made the required pilgrimage to Mecca in 1829, a long trek to the Arabian peninsula from southern Russia, and studied Arabic and the Koran extensively, memorizing Islamic law, theology and philosophy.

Shamil proved his valor even before assuming the head of the Murid rebellion; during a particularly bloody battle in October 1832, the Murids found themselves outnumbered five hundred to ten thousand Russians in a sneak attack in Ghimri, a remote village in the Dagestan countryside. The Russians' orders were to capture Imam Khazi Mollah, then head of the resistance, dead or alive. Shamil was said to have been only one of two survivors, making a daring escape

after having “leapt clean over the heads of the very line of soldiers about to fire on him and landing behind them, whirling his sword in his left hand, [cutting] down three of them, but was bayoneted by the fourth, the steel plunging deep into his chest...he seized [it], pulled it out of his own flesh, cut down the man, and with another superhuman leap, cleared the wall and vanished into the darkness...the whole business had taken, perhaps, a minute and a half.”<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not the story was true, the legend of Shamil’s strength in battle and skill as a warrior took root and further cemented his legacy as that of the great defender of the Caucasian peoples. He also replaced the customs and tribal legal system that had long existed among the mountainous Chechens and Dagestanis, instituting Sharia law, and a strict sense of retributive justice, in order to unite both Dagestan and Chechnya under the Caucasian Imamate. One popular account states that Shamil even ordered that his mother be lashed for asking that he surrender to the Russians to spare any further bloodshed. This all added to the theatricality of his reputation as an extremely pious, unrelenting and savage leader so devoted to his beliefs that he would turn on his own family. Considering that the Tsarnaev family had Avar ancestry, it is clear where Tamerlan and Dzhokhar may have taken inspiration from in committing the acts following their bombing of the Boston Marathon.

The ferocious Russian response to Shamil’s feats helped to solidify his role in the Caucasian imagination. Many conquerors over millennia coveted the Caucasus region for its prime real estate, as it provided a land bridge between Asia and Europe. Genghis Khan and the Mongols had a particular affection for the area. The area is only 750 miles wide, though it is predominantly mountainous; the highest peak, Mount Elbrus, reaches 18,510 feet. Tsar Nicholas I’s frus-

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<sup>5</sup> Blanch, *The Sabres of Paradise*, 82-83.

tration at this tiny but treacherous region's ability to fight off the mighty Russian Empire laid the groundwork for Imam Shamil to establish his extensive legacy.

Shamil is not an anomaly within the region. Pape's assertion that Caucasian separatists can neatly fit into his theory of what drives separatists to suicide bombing does not take into account the regional customs and particularities of Caucasian history, such as that of Shamil and his exploits. Shamil's contemporary Hadji Murad, memorialized in Leo Tolstoy's novella, exemplified the gangland nature of the Russian-Caucasian conflict. During his rise to power, Shamil saw Hadji Murad as a threat due to his anti-Murid stance and ordered him killed, kidnapping his family in the process and setting off years of conflict between the two which saw Murad shift alliances between the Russians and the rebels several times. Paradoxically, it was the Russians who glamorized and admired the Caucasian warrior and vengeance culture, as seen in the works of authors such as Lermontov, Pushkin and Tolstoy. Tolstoy describes Murad as an equally devout and savage leader compared to that of Shamil, writing:

*Everybody in succession praised [Murad's] courage, his ability, and his magnanimity.*

*Someone mentioned his having ordered twenty six prisoners to be killed, but that too was met by the usual rejoinder, "What's to be done? A la guerre, comme al la guerre!"*

*"He is a great man."*

*"Had he been born in Europe he might have been another Napoleon," said the stupid*

*Georgian prince with a gift of flattery.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *Hadji Murat*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. (New York, NY: Vintage Classics, 2009.)

Here is where the legends of Murad and Shamil diverge. Shamil's entire ethos was based on the fight for Caucasian independence, ensuring him that his legend would live on. Murad seems to have had less of a consistent, or staunch cause, merely following the Chechen or Caucasian "script" for how a warrior should act. Though he fought alongside Shamil for a time, Murad's devotion to his cause was called in question after he denounced Muridism and then fled from Shamil, after which time his family was kidnapped, suggesting that his actions were personally motivated, not politically, like those of Shamil.

Murad's actions were informed by Chechen *kanly*, or vendetta, ingrained into the overall code of *adat*, which guided Murad's actions as he shifted alliances between Shamil and the Russians at times to fulfill an agenda of protecting his family. Those who he temporarily aligns himself with are merely a means to an end, "The execution of a long-cherished plan: the payment of an old debt...an action purely incidental to battle".<sup>7</sup> Murad escaped being labeled a turncoat because shifting alliances were "part of the ebb and flow of battle" according to Shamil, "[and] there were several examples of such pliancy...they were generally combined with an extreme courage and daring".<sup>8</sup> Additionally, religious doctrine was considered separately from political necessity, from which we can understand how Murad's earlier anti-Murid stance was tolerated because of his initial support for Shamil.<sup>9</sup> Both shared an initial virulent hatred of the Russians, and Murad's battle prowess initially proved advantageous for Shamil as he was first building his

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<sup>7</sup> Tolstoy, *Hadji Murat*, 128.

<sup>8</sup> Tolstoy, 258.

<sup>9</sup> Tolstoy.



army. Murad, however, would later switch alliances and begin working with the Russians as it was convenient for him after Shamil kidnapped his family.

Unlike Shamil, whose picture is still displayed in many ethnic Caucasians' homes who have fled the ongoing violence in the region, Hadji Murad is not assigned the same degree of reverence and fame.<sup>10</sup> His opposition to Shamil further problematizes Pape's claim. Not all violent actors in the Caucasus can neatly be described as "conventional" terrorists uniformly committed to destroying Russian intervention that can be compared to other separatist campaigns he names in his article. Murad, after all, fought for the Russians too. Murad's memory is primarily literary, as preserved within Tolstoy's novella, which, even then, was not granted the same recognition as his longer epic novels. Murad's main objective for fighting both Shamil's army and that of the Russians was personal. Similar to the Tsarnaev brothers' desire to go out in a blaze of glory, Hadji Murad meets his death during a battle fending off both the Russian army who betrayed him and the Chechen insurgents who kidnapped his family, rather than meeting his end languishing in a Russian prison, like that of Imam Shamil:

*Yet his strong body continued the thing that he had commenced. Gathering together his last strength he rose from behind the bank, fired his pistol at a man who was just running towards him, and hit him. The man fell. Then Hadji Murad got quite out of the ditch, and limping heavily went dagger in hand straight at the foe.*

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<sup>10</sup> Oliver Bullough, *Let Our Fame Be Great: Journeys Among the Defiant People of the Caucasus*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010.)

*Some shots cracked and he reeled and fell. Several militiamen with triumphant shrieks rushed towards the fallen body. But the body that seemed to be dead suddenly moved. First the uncovered, bleeding, shaven head rose; then the body with hands holding to the trunk of a tree. He seemed so terrible, that those who were running towards him stopped short. But suddenly a shudder passed through him, he staggered away from the tree and fell on his face, stretched out at full length like a thistle that had been mown down, and he moved no more.<sup>11</sup>*

Hadji Murat's vendetta was fueled by a thirst for personal revenge, not Islam, nor a protest against intervention. We can see Shamil's influence was large. Still, whether of the Shamil or Hadji Murat variety. The ongoing violence in the Caucasus was partly a recurring historical pattern. The Imam Shamil Front still exists as a military group based in Dagestan to promote and protect ethnic Avars' interests. Imam Shamil's best known follower without a doubt is Shamyl Basayev, the militant general who stylized himself during both Chechen wars as the commander of the independent government's military under Dzhokhar Dudayev, and briefly as Imam of the Caucasian Front, as a reincarnation of the original Imam Shamil himself.

Ironically, it was the ongoing violence itself that spelled Shamil's downfall in the late 1850s. Thirty years of fighting in the Murid War saw most of the northern Caucasus ripped to shreds, with thousands slaughtered on both sides of the conflict. A new, more "progressive" ruler also had come into power in Russia in 1855 - Tsar Alexander II. He was, "First of all, benign... he detested force and had inherited none of his father's impassioned militarism. Reports of the wounded soldiers' sufferings... had so tormented him that he had with difficulty been restrained

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<sup>11</sup> Tolstoy.

from offering himself in the capacity of a hospital orderly”. This new shift towards the Russian army demobilizing was surprising; Caucasians also “began to believe in a peace which might be obtained without loss of honor. This was no Infidel tyrant sent to oppress them by Nicholas the hated Sultan of the North”.<sup>12</sup> The tribes on whose loyalty Shamil so greatly depended quietly submitted to Alexander II’s plans to expand the Russian Empire beyond the Caucasus in exchange for ending the bloodshed. Shamil’s desperate attempts to entice his crucial Kabardian and Osset allies back into war fell on deaf ears. He himself did not meet his end fighting a spectacular duel to the death as Hadji Murad had, but “the Great Imam was conquered — not by the weight of Russian arms, but by love — Love for his family and remaining followers”.<sup>13</sup>

Out of concern for the safety of those in his last remaining stronghold, Shamil completely cast off the role of the great Caucasian warlord, and embraced “honorable” exile as a kind of VIP prisoner in Russia. The pattern of Shamil’s surrender was repeated in the two Chechen Wars of the 1990s with the succession of the pro-Kremlin Kadyrov family of Chechen-warriors-turned-functionaries. On the other hand, Shamil’s ancestors — beginning with his son and grandson Khazi Mohammed and Saïd Shamil — returned to their Caucasian roots, ready to fight and die for their Caucasian brethren against the evil Russian Empire.

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<sup>12</sup> Bullough, *Let Our Fame Be Great*, 390.

<sup>13</sup> Bullough, 407.



## Chapter 2: Stalin's Wrath, Yeltsin's Vietnam

Despite his promises to be more lenient than past rulers, Tsar Alexander II proved almost as repressive as his predecessor. He mobilized quickly after Shamil's defeat to continue a historic campaign against ethnic Circassians, a minority group in the Northern steppes along the Black Sea who had faced repression under the Russian Empire since the 1700s.

As a result, ethnic Circassians (self-identified as "Adyghe") either fled, or were expelled or killed off by the thousands beginning in 1864, after the end of the Russo-Circassian War, and lasting until 1867. Descendants of those who fled in the major diaspora are mostly found in Turkey, and other parts of the former Ottoman Empire. Others were forcibly moved further south in the Caucasus, where their movements could more easily be controlled. This pattern would continue on throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, up until the present day, particularly in the midst of WWII under Stalin.

In order to ensure uniform obedience and loyalty to the new ruling party, the Communist Party quashed almost any sense of ethnic pride in the Soviet Union — which meant the Caucasians had traded one set of dictators for another. Amidst the distraction and fallout of both WWI and the 1917 Revolution, Chechnya and Dagestan existed as a short-lived independent republic from 1918 to 1920, the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus.

Later, as punishment for alleged collaboration with the Nazis, Stalin deported thousands of Chechens and Dagestanis to Central Asia in 1944 — members of the Tsarnaev family among them. The next fifty years proved as brutal for the Chechens as everywhere else in the Soviet Union, but the mass expulsion and forced emigration of Caucasians from the Northern steppes to

Central Asia continued the pattern of systemic violence against and from the ethnic Caucasian peoples in the USSR.

One of the most famous instances of continuing anti-Caucasian sentiment in the newly established Soviet Union can be traced back to the response to Chechen and Ingush-led protests in the late 1920s and 1930s. Most of the Soviet Union's precious resources, especially that of fuel and oil, were concentrated in Chechnya and Ingushetia, close to Baku and Georgia. In response to Stalin's policies of agricultural collectivization which began in 1929, the million-plus population of Chechens and Ingush rebelled. At the time Soviet leaders were able to easily brand enemies of the state as *kulaks*, or bourgeois peasants who were enemies of the people, a label most liberally applied to Ukrainians and Belorussians. However, their history of collective resistance pre-dating WWII and cultural identity distinct from that of ethnic Russians allowed the Caucasians to resist being named as such.<sup>14</sup> Stalin instead branded them fifth-column "enemies of the state" for resisting the effects of the 1917 Revolution and his plans for agricultural collectivization. The mystery and interest surrounding the circumstances of Imam Shamil and his followers reemerged in the early 1920s with the emergence of his grandson, Saïd Shamil, who briefly helmed a post-Revolution separatist campaign.<sup>15</sup> However, it was their supposed collusion with Hitler's troops that would see the Chechen and Ingush peoples face yet another slaughtering.

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<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Burds, "The Soviet War Against 'Fifth Columnists': The Case of Chechnya, 1942-4". *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 42, No. 2, April 2007, p. 267-314.

<sup>15</sup> Sultan Murad, "The Jihad of Saïd Shamil and Sultan Murad for the Liberation of the Caucasus." *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 10, No 1/2, 1991, p. 181-187.

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## *Operation Lentil*

In 1940, there began a small but highly organized guerrilla campaign in which Chechen and Ingush commanders rebelled against Soviet soldiers seeking to stop Nazi troops from penetrating further into the Soviet Union once Hitler had reneged on the Soviet-German anti-aggression pact. Despite differing motivations — the Nazis seeking military victory, and the Chechens and Ingush peoples seeking an ultimate goal of self-determination and autonomy — the Soviet Union associated the two as a common enemy to be destroyed at all costs. In their quest to incorporate the Caucasus, the Germans sought the help of the Caucasian tribes in exchange for supporting the Vainakh revolt against the Soviets.<sup>16</sup> In retaliation, the Soviet army bombed the Chechen and Ingush territories. The Caucasian fighters were punished for their collusion with Hitler's camp and in 1944, Stalin ordered the mass deportation of the Ingush and Chechen peoples from their homes to Central Asia. This resulted in the displacement of over half a million people, and hundreds of thousands more died during this brutal crackdown and subsequent roundup, which was not unlike Hitler's "Final Solution" for the Jews of Europe.<sup>17</sup>

The history of WWII shows against how shallow Pape's claims are in explaining resistance in the Caucasus. The Chechens supported an outside invader — the Germans — to avenge their debt of honor against Stalin. However, the Caucasians' struggle did not end after their forced exodus to the mountains of Central Asia and the Soviets' victory at the end of WWII. Fol-

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<sup>16</sup> Collective name for Chechen and Ingush people. From Refworld, the UN Refugee Agency, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/58c0116e4.html>

<sup>17</sup> Yossef Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad: Al-Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007).

lowing their inhabitants' deportation to Kazakhstan, Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan were repopulated with ethnic Russian civilians, and the Red Army destroyed all cultural relics such as mosques, gravestones and religious textbooks in an effort to erase Chechen and Ingush cultural identity from the collective consciousness.

Stalin's death nine years later and Nikhil Khrushchev's subsequent policy of "Destalinization" in 1956 led the government to allow the displaced to return to their native lands beginning in 1957. However, this was merely a formality, as the survivors of the forced exodus began trickling back to their native lands as early as 1953, the year Stalin died.<sup>18</sup> The last known survivor of the "Aadarkh" returned to Chechnya as late as 2000.<sup>19</sup> This forced departure, combined with hundreds of years of persecution under a revolving door of imperialist rulers and a fierce enduring cultural strain of anti-Russian sentiment, is what drives the modern-day resistance, not a neat counterpart to the greater terrorism "culture" that Pape claims it is a part of in the communities he examines in his paper.

Following the forced exile to Kazakhstan, in addition to finding Russians occupying their former land, the Chechens and Ingush found that the disappearance of the Vainakh languages from all forms of public life put them at a serious disadvantage, as Russian was not their native language or even a lingua franca in the Caucasian republics. As a result, tension flared up between the Russians who had now moved to Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia and those of the returning natives, further perpetuating the historic pattern of conflict that existed between Russians and that of other ethnic minorities, long before the current day terrorism crisis that Pape

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<sup>18</sup> Tony Woods, *Chechnya: The Case For Independence*. (New York: Verso Books, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> The Nakh word for the forced migration of Chechens and Ingush to Central Asia during WWII.



notes. The social phenomenon of “shabashka” — the mass migration of Caucasian peoples to mainland Russia for economic reasons or to escape violence — and the discrimination and violence Caucasian peoples faced was a spillover effect that emerged in the major Russian cities following WWII.

Because of such discrimination, desperate Chechens and other Caucasian migrants often turned to illicit means of work, which led to a burgeoning organized crime syndicate and higher rates of poverty, unemployment and crime.<sup>20</sup> This gave rise to the popular conception of the region as being one of total lawlessness and anarchy, especially in the late 1980s and 1990s. Beginning with his election in 1985, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev established policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* that forced “the Chechen question” into the open, as anti-Chechen rhetoric had previously been relegated to isolated attacks and general mistrust of Caucasian migrants in the major Russian cities where jobs were most plentiful, and where the Chechen mafia had a presence. Even today, ethnic Chechens face discrimination on par with that of other minority groups such as the Roma people in Europe and the Kurds in Iraq.

In conjunction with the new open policy on addressing social issues in the public realm came yet another resurgence of nationalist pride in Chechen identity on a scale similar to Imam Shamil’s Caucasian War. The subsequent separatism campaign that came about, however, proved more viable than any seen before. In 1989, the Chechen-Ingush arm of the Soviet Communist Party elected an ethnic Chechen as its leader, Doku Zavgayev. In response, a political faction

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<sup>20</sup> See the popular conception of the “Chechen mob.”

calling itself the “Chechen National Congress” declared an independent Chechen-Ingushetia Republic, with Dzhokhar Dudayev as its leader.<sup>21</sup>

By the end of 1991, Gorbachev had been unseated and Boris Yeltsin elected as the President of the Russian Federation. In August of that year, however, there was a failed attempt at a coup to remove Gorbachev entirely from power as many within the Communist Party resented his liberalizing policies and the economic hardships it entailed. This inevitably meant the end of the Soviet Union, and became the catalyst for the first Chechen War.

In November, Dudayev declared Chechnya a separate nation from Ingushetia, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. In between late 1991 and 1994, thousands of Russians and non-Chechens fled the republic, citing ethnic tensions and anti-Russian sentiment for their abrupt departure. However, reports of such alleged attacks on Russians were likely exaggerated or outright inflated, as the Russian population in these republics was a minority. During the wars, the republic had fewer than a million people, far less than the mighty Russian Federation, and was much more demographically homogenous, suggesting that the allegation of Russians being subject to random ethnically motivated attacks was statistically improbable. Chechnya today is scarcely bigger; comparatively, it is roughly the same size as the state of New Jersey and its population is still barely over a million.

In response to the allegations of Russians being attacked in Chechnya, Yeltsin declared war in 1994 and sent in Russian military troops. The ferociousness with which the Kremlin re-

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<sup>21</sup> Anatol Lieven, Alexey Malashenko, and Dmitri V. Trenin, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia*. (New York, NY: Brookings Institution, 2010).

sponded to this attack on Russian authority was predicated on the territorial and economic losses an independent Chechnya would pose to the Russian Federation. In the five years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the six Warsaw Pact countries (Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania) had declared independence, with the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) following suit in 1990. However, it was Chechnya's geographic position that posed the biggest potential threat; the pipeline that supplied Russia with much of its oil ran to Baku, and passed through Chechen territory. An independent Chechnya could potentially gate-keep or outright prevent the Russians from accessing the pipeline, posing a major economic threat to Russia's gas-and-oil dependent economy. Additionally, in a changing geopolitical world, losing its territorial control if Chechnya were to secede would threaten Russia's position as a major world power, which was already being questioned with the fall of the Soviet Union. The events of the First Chechen War would accelerate the rate of this downfall even more.

Unlike previous campaigns for independence in the Caucasus, the first Chechen War proved to be a success for the Chechen rebels and leaders, although it came at a bloody cost. Initially, Yeltsin's decision to invade Chechnya had popular support in Russia. The Russian army far outranked the Chechens both in terms of numbers of soldiers and military might. With the new Russian Federation's economy in tatters after Gorbachev's failed economic reforms, going to fight as a soldier in Chechnya was a viable career option for many young Russian men.

However, what Chechen resistance fighters lacked in numbers and weaponry, they made up in fierce nationalistic pride and strength in guerrilla tactics. The Russian soldiers were also ill-equipped to traverse the Chechen and Dagestani mountainside, where most of the rebels fled to safety, leading the Kremlin's soldiers vulnerable and open to attack in alien territory. The deep history of resistance and violence in response to Russian attempts at imperializing is most evident here; indeed, the roots of the modern-day resistance as a continuance of this history can also be seen in Shamil Basayev's rise in the First Chechen War.

Public opinion quickly turned against Yeltsin and the Russian presence in Chechnya in 1995. In the first month alone, between December 1994 and January 1995, two thousand Russians were killed. This gave rise to the press's reports that up to four thousand bombs were being detonated per hour in the capital of Grozny, leading to hundreds of thousands of people being displaced, as much of the Chechen population directly effected by the war was concentrated to the Grozny metro area.<sup>22</sup> Officially, the rationale for doing so was to liberate and protect

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<sup>22</sup> Tony Wood, *Chechnya: The Case for Independence*. (London: Verso Books, 2007.)

Chechen civilians trapped between Russian soldiers and their pro-Russian Chechen allies, and that of the clandestine Chechen offensive which was hellbent on eradicating the Russian presence in Chechnya. To make up for their lack of preparation and low morale, the Russians conducted bombings and airstrikes, indiscriminately targeting both Chechen rebels and civilians, creating such carnage and destruction that it gave rise to the social theory of “Chechen syndrome” among Russian veterans, similar to the phenomenon of shell-shocked veterans returning from WWI. Morale was so low among Russian soldiers that the army sanctioned looting, pillaging, and raping of Chechen civilians.<sup>23</sup>

The most celebrated and notorious of the rebels was Shamil Basayev. Named after the eponymous Imam, Basayev would come to be the leader most synonymous with the anti-Kremlin Chechen insurgents. Before Basayev, Dudayev had named Aslan Maskhadov the Chechen republic’s senior military official; Mashkhadov would be instrumental in mediating the peace accord that would end the first war in 1996. Sewing the seeds of peace, however, was not the goal of Basayev.

As seen in the last several hundred years, Chechnya and the autonomous republics had long preserved a fierce sense of distinct cultural identity and resistance towards Russian attempts at assimilation and conquering. However, what turned the Russian-Caucasian conflict from being yet another clash of ethnocentric territoriality into an all-out civil war in the 1990s was Basayev’s ability to covert this strain of long dormant, historic anti-Russian sentiment into a full-

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<sup>23</sup> James Hughes, *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008.) Pg. 81.

scale embracing of outright virulent nationalism, fueled by fervent ultraconservative radical Islamic rhetoric, mirroring what Imam Shamil had accomplished a hundred and fifty years earlier.

As author James Hughes writes in *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*, despite Dudayev's incorporation of Islam into the Chechen constitution upon its declaration of independence, Chechnya remained a secular republic until the beginning of the First Chechen War, as it had been after the population's mass liquidation in 1944:

*“The Chechen Republic is a sovereign and independent democratic law-based state, founded as a result of the self-determination of the Chechen people. It exercises supreme rights over its territory and national wealth; independently determines its internal and foreign policies; the adopted constitution and laws have superiority on its territory. The state sovereignty of the Chechen Republic is indivisible.”*<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to Basayev, Dudayev and Maskhadov first aimed to exhaust all of their options through negotiations and diplomatic channels before declaring war on the Russian Federation. The government's argument was predicated on Chechnya's right to sovereignty and self-determination as an independent state, while Basayev's and that of his followers was based on a spiritual conviction not unlike that of his predecessor, the famous Imam.<sup>25</sup>

Originally, Basayev did not enjoy much popular support among Chechen civilians, who did not share the separatists' goals, and remained neutral while the rebels conducted the holy war

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<sup>24</sup> Hughes, *Chechnya*, 65.

<sup>25</sup> Seva Gutinsky, “The Lessons of Chechnya in Iraq: A Realist Approach to Civilian Warfare.” *The National Interest*, November 19, 2003. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1943188> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1943188>

against the Russians. Like the Imam, Basayev lived a quiet early life in the Caucasian countryside, in a family with a history of fighting against Russian imperialists. After starting his military career fighting in the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict in 1991, Basayev moved to Chechnya and became the most prominent leader in the separatist insurgency, helming a faction called the “Abkhazia Battalion.”<sup>26</sup> His faction was one of the last to retreat from Grozny, when it was clear the Russian army had won the Battle of Grozny. This took place from December 1994 to February 1995, during which thousands of soldiers on both sides died. Basayev’s commitment to seeing the conflict through — to the point when it was clear the Russians had prevailed — echoed his predecessor’s “never back down” mentality and unqualified devotion to his cause, even at the expense of his soldiers.

Basayev’s role in the First Chechen War is best illustrated in his roles in the Battle of Grozny and the 1995 Budyonovsky hospital hostage crisis. The hospital siege four months after the Battle of Grozny marked a turning point in the war, of which Basayev played a major part. In June 1995, the general and his battalion — numbering some hundred or so soldiers — raided the southern Russian town of Budyonovsky and took fifteen hundred people hostage. In the midst of the Russian army’s failed attempt to stop the separatists, they holed up in the local hospital, and began threatening further violence, randomly selecting hostages to kill in a dramatic standoff between the rebels and the Russian soldiers. Basayev also called for journalists to be sent in to cover the conflict, the results of which directly contradicted the propagandistic reports that the

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<sup>26</sup> Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.)

Russian government published stating that the Kremlin was winning the war against Chechen terrorists.<sup>27</sup>

Whereas Dudayev and the Chechen government sought an official recognition of an independent Chechnya from Russia, Basayev and those of Chechen separatist leaders like him chased loftier and more idealistic goals. In negotiating with the Kremlin, Dudayev hoped to provide Chechnya with some stability and political legitimacy as an independent nation. However, in contrast, Basayev and other militia leaders framed the war as a jihad against anti-Muslim forces and an end to the “Russian genocide in Chechnya.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, Basayev’s goal was to Islamicize the opposition forces, and establish himself as the “Chechen hero who instilled terror in the Russian army,” much like the man he was named after.<sup>29</sup> His rhetoric in the interviews he gave to journalists during the Buyonovsky siege reflected this jihadist, idealistic goal; Basayev stated that the “Chechens are Muslims with strong faiths,” and cited a desire to continue preaching a push towards Wahabbist Islam. While Central Asia and the Caucasus were predominantly Muslim, the sect they practiced honored traditional rites and codes of conduct unlike that found in predominantly Arab countries — hence Basayev’s wish to also “Arabicize” the Chechen population.<sup>30</sup>

The trajectory of the war also began to shift during this time. Since the Russian army had suffered prior heavy losses, Yeltsin cautiously approached the idea of negotiation to spare further

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<sup>27</sup>Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Journey From Gorbachev’s Freedom to Putin’s War*. (London: Atlantic Books, 2015.)

<sup>28</sup> Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad*, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Bodansky, 49.

<sup>30</sup> Bodansky.



bloodshed. Here is where we can best see Imam Shamil's "take no prisoners" rhetoric best reflected. In response to the Russians' initial resistance to yield to any of the separatists' demands, such as sending in reporters to cover the chaos, Basayev and his fellow militia members began randomly shooting hostages in another dramatic demonstration of power, with no real end goal to conceive.<sup>31</sup> After a few dozen hostages were shot in response to the Russians' hesitation, Yeltsin began the process of negotiation with Dudayev and his fellow Chechen officials. However, this was less the result of Basayev's effectiveness in coercing the Russian government and more of a heeding of the Russian public's demands to end the bloodshed. Millions of people on both sides of the conflict had already been killed or injured, and his popular ratings plunged the longer the war endured. Even so, after the ceasefire began as a result of the 1995 incident, it was clear that neither Basayev nor his fellow Chechen rebel leaders were interested in securing a central government for Chechnya, as they continued military operations after the war ended.<sup>32</sup>

After the hospital siege, Basayev gained more popular support; the temporary ceasefire revitalized and strengthened the opposition, and garnered attention from the international community, who began denouncing the Russian army's presence in Chechnya as a human rights abuse and violation of an independent republic's sovereignty.

The Russian army suffered more losses before General Aleksandr Lebed brokered a tentative peace accord in 1996 with Mashkhadov, after Dudayev died in an air strike in 1995. After signing the Khasavyurt Accords in August 1996, the Russians formally withdrew from Chechen territory. However, the worst was yet to come.

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<sup>31</sup> Lieven, *Chechnya*, 124.

<sup>32</sup> Alex Goldfarb and Marina Litvenenko, *Death of a Dissident: The Poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko and the Return of the KGB*. (New York, NY: Free Press, 2007.) Pg. 95



### Chapter 3: Putin's Iraq

If the First Chechen War was fought over ethnic differences and Chechnya's right to self-determination, the second war was more purely ideological. The history of Imam Shamil and Hadji Murat and their influences on Chechen popular identity in the Russian imagination are best seen here, particularly in regards to Basayev and the increasing role that religion and cultural identity played in the conflict.

September 1999 witnessed a series of strikes blow up apartment buildings in Buinaksk, Moscow, and Volgodonsk. Over three hundred civilians died, and thousands were injured. Between the Khasavyurt Accords' ratification and the apartment bombings, Chechnya was considerably worse off than it had been pre-1994. Since the Russians had bombed the republic "back to the Stone Age," Grozny remained a shell of a city, destroyed infrastructure meant that villages and towns had no access to jobs or medical care, and thousands of Chechen survivors remained traumatized from years of abuse, rape and torture at the hands of Russian soldiers. Chechnya had also had its first elections in 1995, which were derided as a Russian-sanctioned sham. Mashkhadov then rapidly "Islamicized" the state, replacing secular courts with a Sharia-based law code.<sup>33</sup> Akhmad Kadyrov, the Chief Mufti of Chechnya under Dudayev (and later Mashkhadov) denounced this push towards sectarian extremism, and declaring his opposition to Wahhabism, the sect that most of the Chechen militia leaders belonged to.<sup>34</sup>

In the meantime, Basayev and his cohorts had crossed borders and began rebuilding his army in neighboring Dagestan, where he kidnapped a Russian army general. At the time, Boris

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<sup>33</sup> Wood, *Chechnya*, 90.

<sup>34</sup> Hughes, 104.

Berezovsky was Yeltsin's Deputy Secretary who was instrumental in ratifying the Khasavyurt Accords with Akhmed Zakayev, Dudayev's Prime Minister. In the three-year period between the first and second wars, the Caucasian republics devolved into an anarchic region in which kidnappings and executions of foreigners, journalists and civilians became a booming business to which Chechen and Dagestan warlords turned to fund their military operations.

In December 1996, after Chechen warlord Salman Raduyev kidnapped and held hostage a group of twenty-one Russian policemen on the Chechen-Dagestan border, Berezovsky brokered their release and developed a covert rapport between Russian government officials and Chechen warlords such as Raduyev and Basayev. Two years later, in August 1998, Berezovsky brokered a back channel deal between the Russian government and armed separatist forces in Dagestan, not unlike that of Hadji Murat and his double dealings with both the Russian army and Imam Shamil. With Deputy Interior Vladimir Rushailo, Berezovsky was able to secure release of two British nationals in exchange for allowing the separatists to remain in Dagestan.<sup>35</sup>

This enduring episode, combined with the apartment bombings, provoked the Russians to declare a second war on Chechnya and invade in 1999. This was predicated on a popular belief that the "Chechens were responsible" for the apartment bombings, growing Russian nationalism, and Vladimir V. Putin's rise to power, despite that Chechen connections to the apartment bombings were tangential at best.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Goldfarb and Litvinenko, *Death of a Dissident*, 144-145.

<sup>36</sup> David Satter, "The Unsolved Mystery Behind the Act of Terror That Brought Putin to Power." *National Review Online*, 17 August 2016. <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/439060/vladimir-putin-1999-russian-apartment-house-bombings-was-putin-responsible>.

To date, no one has ever been prosecuted for the attacks, though it has been posited (with some evidence) that the Russian intelligence services planted the bombs to justify invading Chechnya a second time.<sup>37</sup>

Much like in the US following the events of 9/11, the apartment bombings and Putin's subsequent claim that Chechen terrorists were responsible led to a resurgence in anti-Caucasian sentiment which lent further credence and popular support to the Russians' second invasion of Chechnya. However, due to the horrific repercussions of the First Chechen War, Chechen opposition forces were much less prepared to face a reinvigorated and beefed up Russian military. Because of these effects and the newly established Sharia government, Chechnya was considered a "failed state," part of the monolithic Western belief (and Russian-perpetuated myth) that all Muslim-majority states were repressive regimes and thus less likely to receive international support or recognition. This belief, along with US sympathy following the 9/11 attacks, unofficially allowed the Russians to carry out full-scale human rights abuses that far surpassed anything seen in the previous war.

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<sup>37</sup> Karen Dawisha. *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014.) Pg. 212.

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## Operation *Zachtiska*<sup>38</sup>

The First Chechen War was seen as a failed attempt on the Russian government's part to reunite the country and "restore constitutional order."<sup>39</sup> However, the second war in 1999 was framed as an anti-terrorist operation, in response to incidents such as the apartment bombings and reports of Russian civilians being kidnapped and disappeared in Dagestan and Chechnya. If the first war was seen by many Russians as an unnecessary and bloody foray into Chechen territory, the second war was sold as the Russian Federation justly defending its civilian population from extremist terrorist attacks.

While the first war was mainly an insurgency, the second war resembled more of that of a counterterrorist operation, wherein the Russian army continued to pillage and raze Chechen villages as they had done in the first war, but under cover of fighting a "legitimate war." During this time, Vladimir V. Putin had been appointed Prime Minister of Russia and barred journalists access to cover the conflict, so that troops were able to conduct themselves under the cloak of confidentiality and preserving national security. The human rights abuses that journalists and dissidents such as Anna Politkovskaya, Natalia Estemirova, and Alexander Litvinenko documented reached their zenith during the second war. Young Russian enlisted men were often disappeared while fighting in Chechnya, either kidnapped by Chechen rebels or betrayed and sold off by their

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<sup>38</sup> The Russian word for "cleansing," used to refer to Russian paramilitary troops' targeting Chechen villages during the Second Chechen War.

<sup>39</sup> Emma Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

bored, cruel superiors, for food or vodka or money.<sup>40</sup> In turn, any Chechen civilian was suspected of being a potential terrorist and subject to torture or extrajudicial killing. Putin famously proclaimed, “We will rub every Chechen out, even in the toilet.”<sup>41</sup> Russian officers were allowed to act with impunity, slaughtering, bombing, and raping civilians on par with that of a genocide campaign. Even in extreme cases, such as the Elza Kungaeva incident, the Kremlin escaped any real threat of punishment or accountability.<sup>42</sup>

Following his meteoric rise in the Chechen separatist movement, Shamil Basayev continued his campaign of religiously driven terrorist tactics, and the Chechen side in the second war took on a much more hardline religious and moralistic tone. The theatrical public spectacles that categorized his later attacks, such as the 2002 Moscow theater hostage siege, and the 2004 Beslan school bombing, recall Imam Shamil’s theatrical battle antics against the Tsarists in the 1850s.

Basayev’s rival, Akhmad Kadyrov, defected to the Russian forces in 1999, after growing disillusioned with Basayev and other Chechen militia leaders’ embracing of Wahabbism, much like Hadji Murad and his disapproval of the Murid movement. Putin would later install Kadyrov as the pro-Kremlin leader of Chechnya in 2000. What Pape’s argument fails to take into account is that the history of suicide terrorism in the Caucasus repeated itself, quite literally, before the

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<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Rubin, “Only You Can Save Your Sons.” *The New York Times Magazine*, July 8, 2001. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/08/magazine/only-you-can-save-your-sons.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Rubin, “Only You Can Save Your Sons,” 7.

<sup>42</sup> In 2000, Russian Col. Yuri Budanov kidnapped, raped and killed a 17-year-old Chechen girl under the guise of imprisoning her as a suspected separatist sniper.

Andrew Yurkovsky, “Mirror of a War.” *World Press Review*, 30 January 2002. <http://www.worldpress.org/Europe/921.cfm>.

attacks he points to in the mid 2000s, or that they were part of an overall historical pattern over hundreds of years. In the spirit of Imam Shamil and the Caucasian Imamate, Basayev established his own Islamic International Brigade to pursue Chechnya's holy war against a foreign enemy, as well as for political reasons of wanting to establish an independent Chechen nation. Contrarily, Kadyrov denounced the separatist movement, for personal reasons of disagreement in ideology, in favor of the new Russian Empire — Putin's Russia.

The episodes that characterized the second war in the early 2000s, the 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis and the 2004 Beslan school siege, emphasize the Kadyrov-Basayev conflict best, and how they played out as a successor to the Hadji Murad-Imam Shamil rivalry. In 2000, in installing Kadyrov as Chechnya's leader, Putin reestablished Russian rule of the region. Between the two wars, the state had split into two ruling parties: Aslan Mashkhadov's separatist government and Chechen warlords such as Basayev, Dokku Umarov, and uncle-nephew team of Arbi and Mosvar Barayev. During the beginning of the second war, Russian forces killed thousands of civilians and Chechen guerrillas at a much quicker and horrifying rate than seen in the First Chechen War, through the use of airstrikes, ground raids, and disappearing civilians and rebels. In response, the separatist militias emphasized using more guerrilla tactics such as roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs), assassinations of high-ranking Russian military officers, and suicide bombings through the 2000s.

Because of their effectiveness in creating as much carnage, confusion and fear as possible, Beslan and the Moscow theater crisis are looked to as the most exemplary events of the second war, though they were the rare occasions in which the Chechens acted to coerce the Russian government into acceding to their demands, as Pape argues. The majority of the war was fought



in minor, boots-on-the-ground skirmishes. Almost identical to the Budynovvsky episode, during the Moscow theater crisis, Basayev demanded that media personnel be allowed in to cover the war from the Chechen perspective, that the Kremlin hold a rally within Red Square declaring its intent to end the war in Chechnya, and that the army pull its soldiers from the area. On the night of October 23, 2002, in response to Russian killings of civilians, Basayev and Movsar Barayev led a 50-strong coalition and stormed the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow during a showing of the popular Russian musical “Nord-Ost.” Over the next three days, Barayev, Basayev, and their comrades held over a thousand Russian civilians, while shouting their demands and simultaneously terrorizing their hostages. During that time, Russian special forces surrounded the building, trying to break in. In the end, they unleashed a poison gas and freed the hostages—in the midst, killing over 130 of those trapped. Movsar Barayev died in the chaos, but Basayev—much like the Lion of Dagestan in the 1850s — escaped being captured.

Almost the same exact circumstances occurred two years later. In the two years between the Moscow theater siege and Beslan, Russia had maintained its presence in Chechnya under Akhmad Kadyrov’s presidency. Grozny slowly began to rebuild itself, and the rebels were mainly confined to villages and towns outside of the capital. The jihadist fervor of the war was waning.<sup>43</sup> It is important to note that the US-led War on Terror emerged at this time; this suggests that Chechnya was no longer considered an international catastrophe, but rather a niche example of the more global threat of terrorism threatening the world order. Feared warlords like Basayev were seen as opportunistic agents of broader terrorist networks like al-Qaeda, rather than charismatic leaders of a historic campaign to protect the rights and interests of a long-persecuted ethnic

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<sup>43</sup> Bodansky.

and cultural minority. At the same time, Putin justified the army's brutality in the Caucasus using the nationalistic and protectionist rhetoric of the War on Terror that the US had begun to utilize immediately following the events of 9/11.

To divert attention back to Chechnya, Basayev reembarked on a campaign targeting high-ranking Russian personnel. While some of these failed (such as the suicide bombing attacks targeting Ingushetia President Zyazikov, who survived), the religious terrorists succeeded in riding Chechnya of its own millennial-era Hadji Murad — President Akhmad Kadyrov, who had betrayed the Chechen cause, much like Hadji Murad had turned on Imam Shamil to embrace the Russians. On May 9, 2004, during a (pro-Russian) Victory Day celebration in a Grozny soccer stadium, Basayev and his forces succeeded in detonating a bomb that killed Kadyrov and several members of his entourage, which helped reinvigorate the separatist cause and prompted another Russian strongman response.

Four months later, in September 2004, Chechen separatist forces captured a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, a republic west of Chechnya. For three days, the rebels held 1,200 school-children, teachers and parents in an elementary school. Interestingly, though the siege is frequently cited as another example of the separatist campaign to drive Russian military personnel out of Chechnya, few of the terrorists involved were actually Chechen. The leader of the attack, Ruslan Khuchbarov, was actually Ingush, and his commander was a Saudi national who went by the name Abu-Zeit.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the terrorists involved cited the attack as revenge for “[Attacks] committed against Muslims all over the world,” such as the brutality Palestinians faced under Israeli rule and Iraqi civilians caught in the US war, not solely Muslim civilians who suffered

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<sup>44</sup> Bodansky.

violence at the hands of Russian militiamen in Chechnya.<sup>45</sup> In his role as the major architect of the Beslan school siege, Basayev firmly argued his role as the Imam's successor, a spokesman for the global devout Muslim community, much like Shamil's self-proclaimed role as spokesman for the Caucasian Murid community.

The ensuing chaos, in which over 300 hostages and hostage-takers died when the school collapsed in on itself, eclipsed whatever demands the terrorists had made. The overall disorganization and melee of the Beslan school siege suggested that this was a hastily drawn and desperate attempt to recapture the Chechen collective attention, rather than a continuance of the campaign to establish an independent Chechnya. Much of the resulting media coverage also focused on the Russian response, and how ill-prepared and incompetent the government was to prevent a tragedy like this from reoccurring, rather than noting how the hostage-takers had acted to divert international attention back to the Chechen-Russian conflict, which wholly contradicts Pape's claims that such terrorists act in ways to specifically attain some goal or terrorize a government into submission. A June 2004 raid in neighboring Ingushetia also supported this notion. Basayev and Umarov's forces orchestrated an attack on a series of Russian government buildings for the "mere" purpose of displaying reemerging military strength and gaining access to a stockpile of weapons, in the process killing sixty-plus Russian government and military personnel.

A year later, in October 2005, associates of Basayev raided a group of Russian military buildings in Nalchik, the capital of the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic, another state west of Ingushetia.<sup>46</sup> Over one hundred were wounded, and fifteen died. The event heightened fears and

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<sup>45</sup> Bodansky.

<sup>46</sup> Hughes.

suspicious that the conflict had now reached insurgents in other parts of the Caucasus, suggesting that Basayev's rhetoric had spread to terrorists outside of Russia, representing a fraction of the global threat of terror that the US and Russia banded together to eradicate.

Beslan and Moscow represented last-ditch attempts to rescue the Russian collective consciousness, and refocus the narrative of Chechnya-versus-the oppressor. Elsewhere, other agents of the Chechen cause continued the historic work of Imam Shamil and Hadji Murad well into the 2000s and 2010s. The most prime example is that of the Black Widows of Chechnya and Dagestan.

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## *Brides of Allah*

Throughout the war, the agents who arguably inflicted the most damage upon Russian forces were not warlords like Basayev or Barayev and their men, but a more surprising and inconspicuous demographic: women. In Chechen society, women were expected to be subservient to men, leading by example in what constituted a “good” wife and mother: virtues of piousness, modesty, and utmost devotion to child-rearing and maintaining the family household, while men provided safety and made sure that basic needs —food, shelter, stability—were met. However, unlike other Muslim-majority areas, Chechnya was relatively progressive in terms of gender equity. Women were “much more emancipated than their Arab sisters...and it [was] common for Chechen women to attend university and to hold full-time jobs outside their homes.”<sup>47</sup>

In contrast to Chechen men, however, who were immediately targets of suspicion and persecution, Chechen and Dagestani women were less likely to attract military attention and scrutiny. Most secular Muslim women in Russia did not don traditional Islamic garb like the *hijab* or *burqa* that were prevalent in other Muslim countries such as Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia, but with the rise in Wahhabist thinking among the Chechen separatists, the practice of women being made to cover up became more commonplace. What made the Black Widows so effective was their ability to conceal explosive devices while wearing such clothing and walk into a public place such as a marketplace or busy street and detonate such explosives, able to evade suspicion from public officials who were on alert for male Chechen terrorists in the area.

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<sup>47</sup> Khapta Akhmedova and Anne Speckhard, “Black Widows: The Chechen Female Suicide Terrorists.” *Female Suicide Terrorism: Dying for Equality*, Ed. Yoram Schweitzer. (Tel Aviv: Jaffe Center for Strategic Studies, August 2006.) Pg. 63-80.

Black Widows were characterized in both the Russian and western media as wronged female combatants, grief-stricken at losing a father, brother or husband at the hands of Russian forces and hellbent on revenge. One of the first documented cases in which a Black Widow posed a serious threat to the Russian offensive in Chechnya was in June 2000, when Luisa Magomadova and Khava Barayev drove a truck laden with explosives into a Russian military facility in Chechnya.<sup>48</sup> Bombings attributed to Black Widows became routine throughout the second war. Nineteen of the forty-one Chechen combatants in the 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis were Black Widows, including Arbi Barayev's widow, Zura Barayeva. All of the women "had eleven pounds of explosives strapped to her waist, and each held a pistol in one hand and detonators, linked to short wires attached to the explosives, in the other."<sup>49</sup> Similarly, many of the perpetrators of the Beslan school siege were Black Widows whom Basayev had recruited and directed during the event from afar.

Other notable Black Widow attacks include the December 2003 bombing of a commuter train in Yessentuki which killed forty-six, the bombing of two Russian airplanes in August 2004 which killed ninety people, and the 2010 Moscow Metro bombings, which killed forty. In the latter attack, one of the perpetrators, Dzhanet Abdullayeva, was just seventeen years old, a widow of a Chechen warlord whom the Russians had killed the year before.

It is important to note that while indeed some of these women had suffered at the hands of Russian military personnel—whether through losing a relative or loved one, or a personal attack—many of them were simply trying to achieve martyrdom status, and/or express political

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<sup>48</sup>Nicole Detraz, "A Gendered Understanding of Terrorism." *International Security and Gender*. (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012). Pg. 94-131.

<sup>49</sup> Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya*, 132.

and personal anguish at the state of affairs in their homeland. On July 5, 2003, two young women dressed and prepared for a party before going to a concert in Moscow. They blew themselves up before entering the concert venue, killing fourteen and wounding sixty.<sup>50</sup> However, it emerged in the investigation afterwards that while the attackers' rationale for committing such an act was personal, it was by no means meant to achieve any sort of political end, nor was it even solely religion-driven in many cases. It was written about one of the women, Zulikhan Yelikhadzhiyeva, that,

*“[She was] hardly touched by the war. She lived with a relatively affluent family, studied at [her] village’s medical vocational school, and worked for a local clinic; none of her family members had been killed in the conflict...[her] transformation from young Chechen woman to suicide terrorist was...ideological...As letters found on her body revealed, [she] had fallen in love with her stepbrother...they escaped together and had sex...but if her transgression were discovered, she could no longer live in this dirty world and [would go to] hell for her sins....[she was convinced] that the only way to ensure reaching heaven was to become a shakhida on the path of Allah.”<sup>51</sup>*

With such conflicting rationals for committing such a specific and signature form of terrorist activity, Pape’s claim that Chechen terrorism was part of a larger pattern of suicide terrorism that can be applied elsewhere is easily debunked. Other countries such as Palestine, who also utilized female suicide bombers, only did so as a last resort as women were less likely to be

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<sup>50</sup> Bodansky.

<sup>51</sup> Shakhida: A suicide bomber, used in reference to female Chechen suicide terrorists (Black Widows). Bodansky.

stopped and searched at Israeli checkpoints during periods of heightened tension between Israeli forces and Palestine.<sup>52</sup>

In turn, while other groups around the world have utilized female terrorists in their campaigns, such as the Shining Path in Peru, the Basque separatist leader Idoia López Riaño, or the Kurdish women in the PKK, the Black Widows are so associated with the popular image of religious terrorism in Russia to the point that they can only be understood within the context of the Second Chechen War. Thus, they cannot be applied wholesale to the pattern of terrorism that Pape defines in his paper.<sup>53</sup> The Black Widows are another product of specific adherence to Caucasian tradition. Even in the 1800s, when women were given much less autonomy than their modern counterparts, the Caucasian women “[too] knew how to fight, for they were believed to descend from the Amazons. Beneath their veils they wore a dagger...Such was their desperate resistance. Such was this climate of violence.”<sup>54</sup>

Much like the Tsarnaev brothers’ campaign and the deeds of Imam Shamil, Black Widow attacks are the ultimate example of fatalism and theatricality as characterized of the Chechen separatist movement. Given the indiscriminate brutality that the Russian army inflicted upon innocent Chechen civilians — whose only crimes were being Chechen — it is irrefutable that the Russian military response to such actors would be to act with even more violence and brutality towards targets they deemed to be actively threatening the Russian Federation.

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<sup>52</sup> Akhmedova & Speckhard, “Black Widows,” 73.

<sup>53</sup> Detraz, “A Gendered Understanding of Terrorism,” 112-113.

<sup>54</sup> Blanch, 11.





## Chapter 4: Recovery?

Officially, the Second Chechen War ended in April 2009, when Putin gave the order for troops to withdraw. At this point, with the exception of Dokku Umarov, the most important separatist leaders had been killed: Dzhokhar Dudayev in 1995, Aslan Mashkhadov in 2005, and Shamil Basayev in 2006. Akhmad Zakayev, the separatist government's leader-in-exile, received asylum in the UK in 2003, rendering his role in the Caucasus largely symbolic.<sup>55</sup>

After Vladimir Putin nominated him as President of the Chechen Republic in 2007, Ramzan Kadyrov continued in his father's footsteps, actively supporting the Kremlin while cracking down on dissent and pro-separatist sentiment within the tiny republic. After the First Chechen War, Russia adopted a policy of "Chechenization," in which the Kremlin appointed pro-Kremlin leaders in the Caucasian republics who were tasked with eradicating separatist terrorism themselves, a tactic that continues to this day under the strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. Today, Chechnya—particularly the capital, Grozny—has recovered marginally in comparison to the early- and mid-aughts, though it remains very much a police state, and instances of human rights abuses of civilians are pervasive.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the existence of a sanctioned conflict between Russia and the Caucasian states, suicide and insurgency terrorism remains a pressing issue today within Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia, with sporadic attacks occurring both within the Caucasus and mainland Russia, such as in the case of the 2010 Moscow Metro bombing, and even that of the recent Saint-Petersburg Metro bombing in April 2017. After Basayev's death, his militant group, the Caucasian Front,

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<sup>55</sup> Goldfarb and Litvinenko, 293.

<sup>56</sup> Bodansky.

was absorbed into the Caucasus Emirate, of which Doku Umarov was Emir, seeking to continue his and Basayev's goal of an independent Islamic Caucasian nation. Umarov himself died sometime in 2013 after declaring his continued opposition to Russian involvement in Chechnya, vowing that the 2014 Sochi Olympics would be a target of further Chechen attacks.<sup>57</sup>

The Caucasus Emirate itself has largely been dormant since most Caucasian fighters have joined the Northern Caucasian outpost of the Islamic State, which has heavily recruited volunteers to fight Russian and Western forces in Syria and Iraq, leading the Caucasian fighters to essentially "abandon" their cause in the face of a larger war. The Russian military's involvement both in Ukraine's Crimea region and Syria has also diverted government attention from addressing most instances of violence in the Caucasus, so that the violence in the Caucasus has largely been swallowed into the larger debate surrounding the War on Terror.

Given the historical pattern that religious insurgent terrorism in the Caucasus followed, the events of the Boston Marathon Bombings were relatively tame. The public reaction in the US was angry and visceral, demanding that the Tsarnaev brothers be immediately brought to justice and made to answer for their deadly actions. In the four years after the events of April 15, 2013, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev has since been put on trial and sentenced to death by lethal injection. When he was made to answer for the destruction and horror he had unleashed, the remaining Tsarnaev reaffirmed his faith in Allah, and the media focused on the incoherent message he had written while bleeding from his wounds in the boat he was captured in:

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<sup>57</sup> Miriam Elder, "Russian Islamist Doku Umarov calls for attacks on 2014 Winter Olympics." *The Guardian*, July 3, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/03/russia-islamist-attack-olympics-sochi>.

*“I’m jealous of my brother who has received the reward of jannatul Firdaus [highest part of paradise] (inshallah) before me. I do not mourn because his soul is very much alive. God has a plan for each person. Mine was to hide in this boat and shed some light on our actions. I ask Allah to make me a shahied to allow me to return to him and be among all the righteous people in the highest levels of heaven. He who Allah guides no one can misguide. Allah Akbar!*

*The US Government is killing our innocent civilians but most of you already know that. As a [illegible] I can’t stand to see such evil go unpunished, we Muslims are one body, you hurt one you hurt us all. Well, at least that’s how Muhammed (pbuh) [peace be upon him] wanted it to be forever, the ummah [community of people] is beginning to rise [illegible] has awoken the mujahideen, know you are fighting men who look into the barrel of your gun and see heaven, now how can you compete with that. We are promised victory and we will surely get it. Now I don’t like killing innocent people it is forbidden in Islam but due to said [illegible] it is allowed. All credit goes [illegible].”<sup>58</sup>*

The ambiguity of this rambling message and his equivocation at trial when asked to provide a “justifiable” reason for committing such atrocities suggest that the attacks were political, and yet Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev’s ties to any known terrorist organization or political objective were nonexistent, if not tangential at best. The United States, even in its distant support of Russia during the Kremlin’s own “War on Terror,” never intervened in Chechnya or Dagestan.

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<sup>58</sup> Gessen.

The answers lie in looking to the Caucasus' own history and traditions, and its probable influence on the Tsarnaevs. Given that they were both Chechen and Avar, the Tsarnaev brothers almost certainly heard fabled tales of both Hadji Murad and Imam Shamil's deeds growing up, and were exposed to the history of the culture of "justifiable" violence in which both lived. The events of the bombings itself bear the hallmarks of both men's campaigns. The fanatical violence and cartoonish theatricality of the bombing and the events afterwards — the car chase, the fire-fights, and the dramatic standoff in Watertown — echo that of Imam Shamil, including the meticulousness of planning the bombings itself.

Months prior to the event itself, Tamerlan Tsarnaev allegedly went to a mosque in the Dagestan capital of Makhachkala that had served at least one of the 9/11 bombers, after which he began loudly proclaiming his opposition to the US upon returning from Russia. Similarly, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev's actions echo that of Hadji Murad. Though he was born in Russia, the younger Tsarnaev was the only member of the family to fully assimilate, learn English and thrive in the US, in which he embarked on a successful academic and sporting career. His sudden reverence and devotion to extremist Islam and supposed hatred for the US's treatment of Muslims suggest a cognitive dissonance and malleability in beliefs and ideals not unlike that of Hadji Murad, who sacrifices his own ideal position within the Murid movement.

Given that Pape's argument predicates itself upon the notion that conventional terrorist campaigns—which include isolated incidents such as that of the Boston Marathon Bombings—are committed to elicit tangible government responses to resolve the situation in question, neither the current-day situation in the Caucasus nor that of the Tsarnaev brothers apply to Pape's greater argument.



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