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Chechnya

# The crushing of Chechnya's aspirations for independence:

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**The murder of French teacher Samuel Paty earlier this month by a young man of Chechen origin was the occasion for an Islamophobic and xenophobic campaign joined not only by the right but also by left-wing leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Mélenchon has since retracted his stigmatizing references to the “Chechen community,” but not his simplistic characterization of Chechen veterans as “partisans of a religious wars,” an assessment as absurd as it is in line with the official line from Moscow. To bring some nuance to this discussion, Philippe Alcoy interviewed historian Tony Wood, who has worked on Russia for many years.**

**Can you tell us a bit about the Chechen people, their social position under Czarist Russia and the USSR, and their relations with state power?**

The Chechens are one of a complex patchwork of ethnic groups inhabiting the North Caucasus, a region that was incorporated into the Russian empire in the 19th century through a protracted and bloody process of colonial warfare. (Incidentally, ‘Chechen’ is a Russian designation, after a village where ethnic Russian settlers fought a battle with local inhabitants in the 18th century; the Chechens actually refer to themselves as ‘Nokhchi’).

Many of the Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus suffered imprisonment and exile in the Tsarist period, with as many as quarter of a million Circassians forcibly deported to the Ottoman Empire in the wake of the Crimean War. The Chechens remained in their homeland, subjected to the same poverty and land hunger as other of the empire's inhabitants, but with their way of life under additional pressure from the arrival of Russian settlers. At the end of the 19th century, the discovery of oil turned the capital, Grozny, into a major industrial centre for the region—though the working class employed there was overwhelmingly ethnically Russian. The outbreak of the Revolution and Civil War brought these colonial tensions to the surface, but at the same time produced some new alignments, as many Chechens rallied to the Bolshevik promise of ‘Peace, Land and Bread.’

The 1920s brought some notable advances for Chechens, in line with early Soviet nationalities policy—increased literacy, state support for Chechen-language publishing and radio, and even a new Latin alphabet. But with the consolidation of Stalin's rule in the 1930s, Soviet policy towards the Chechens took a punitive turn: collectivization of agriculture was imposed by force, and the rural unrest this provoked was ruthlessly suppressed, while Soviet security services imprisoned prominent Chechens accused of ‘bourgeois nationalism.’

During the Second World War, the Soviet government's repressive approach to the North Caucasus shifted onto an entirely different, genocidal scale. In the winter of 1943, after part of the region had been occupied by German troops, Stalin accused its Muslim peoples of collaborating with them, and sentenced them all—men, women and children—to deportation en masse (there is little evidence of collaboration; on the contrary, thousands of North Caucasians volunteered for service in the Red Army).

The Chechens were among several entire ethnic groups—Karachais, Balkars, Meskhetian Turks and Crimean Tatars—to be loaded into cattle trains and sent to Central Asia. Many died along the way, while thousands more perished in the harsh conditions of the steppe. All told, each of these groups lost between 20–30 per cent of their total populations as a direct result of the deportation. In my view, this trauma became a founding moment for Chechen nationalism. It was only under Khrushchev that Chechens began to be allowed to return from exile. In the late Soviet era, they gradually repopulated their homeland, but often remained shut out from skilled employment—and importantly, from political and administrative power, which remained in the hands of ethnic Russians. These tensions, too, played a role in the rise of nationalist sentiment.

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**Chechen nationalism grew during the final years of Soviet Union, leading finally to the outbreak of the first Chechnya war. How can we explain the growing desire for independence among the Chechen people?**

The Chechen national movement emerged during perestroika, a time of real political ferment across the USSR, when a huge variety of ideas and currents that had been suppressed surged into the open. In a sense, nationalism provided a coherence and focus that was otherwise lacking in this new political landscape. But in the Chechen case, the trauma of the deportations added an urgency to the nationalist imaginary: many of the leaders of the movement had been born in exile, and were committed above all to ensuring the same disaster never befell their people again. Sovereignty became the means for achieving that.

As elsewhere in the former USSR, the Chechen national movement developed initially out of 'informal associations' set up in the late 1980s. These initially focused on discussions of history and culture, but were soon joined by environmental concerns, and then these in turn quickly drew mass mobilizations of a nationalist character. An independent Chechen nationalist party was formed in the spring of 1990, and in late 1990 the first Chechen National Congress was held.

This coincided with an escalating contest for power in Moscow, between Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet head of state, and Boris Yeltsin, who became head of the Russian component of the USSR in 1990. In a bid to attract the loyalties of Russia's many ethnic groups, Yeltsin famously told regional governors to 'take as much sovereignty as you can swallow.' In most cases, this was a matter of squabbles over resources between central and regional elites.

The Chechen case was an exception: there was genuine mass popular support behind the push for sovereignty. Many in Chechnya saw their country's situation as comparable to that of the Baltic States, as small nations annexed by Russia who now sought sovereign status. Over the course of 1991, as several Soviet republics sought to leave the Union fold, the centrifugal momentum gathered pace in Chechnya too. In October 1991, elections there propelled Dzhokhar Dudaev, leader of the Chechen National Congress, to the presidency on a platform of full sovereignty, and on taking office on 1 November, he declared Chechen independence. This original democratic mandate is largely forgotten these days, drowned out historically by the two wars that were fought to overturn it.

**You have remarked that the first Chechnya war (1994-1996) was "Yeltsin's Vietnam" but the second Chechnya war (1999-2000) was "Putin's Falklands," referring to the short war between Argentina and Great Britain in 1982. Can you explain? [\[1\]](#)**

In December 1994, Yeltsin launched an invasion of Chechnya to 'restore constitutional order,' as he put it, expecting a short operation that would quickly topple Dudaev and impose a more congenial government in Grozny. Instead, over the next two years the Russian army was fought to a demoralizing standstill by Chechen forces, in a conflict that Anatol Lieven described as 'the tombstone of Russian power'. The number of casualties remains unclear to this day, but the most conservative estimates give a figure of 45,000 civilians and soldiers; others suggest the total may be nearer to 100,000. The war was hugely unpopular domestically, partly because TV images of the senseless destruction visited on Chechnya were being beamed into Russian homes by a still independent media – hence the comparison with Vietnam. The outcome was a negotiated peace which recognized Chechen sovereignty de facto while putting off a definitive solution.

All of this had changed by the time the second invasion was launched in 1999. The trigger for the war was an incursion by Chechen Islamist forces into neighbouring Dagestan that August. A few weeks later, a series of bombings in apartment buildings in Moscow and two other Russian cities were also blamed on Islamist extremists from the Caucasus, bringing a wave of patriotic outrage that created a favourable climate for the invasion. There was also a strong element of revenge for the humiliation of the 1994–96 war: if Chechnya had epitomized Russia's decline from great-power status, could it now be the place where that strength was restored?

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Previously a little-known figure, Vladimir Putin became Prime Minister just before the invasion, which overnight turned him into a wartime leader. He has become such a fixture of the international scene over the past twenty years, coming to be almost synonymous with Russia itself, that it is often forgotten that this was far from inevitable. It was to a large extent the Chechen war that catapulted him to the presidency by the end of the year – hence the comparison with the Falklands war, which rescued Thatcher's premiership and won her a landslide in 1983. The second time around, the war was fought very differently: not with an army of raw teenage conscripts but with professional 'contract' soldiers, and not in full view of TV cameras but with media access to the warzone tightly constrained. Opposition to the war was minimal, and the outcome was the crushing of Chechen aspirations to independence.

**Many war crimes were reported against Chechen civilians during the last war. Those crimes were legitimized as part of the fight against terrorism. Can you tell us how the official discourse managed to turn all Chechens into suspected terrorists?**

When Putin launched the second invasion in 1999, he labelled it an 'anti-terrorist operation'. The ostensible targets were the Islamist groups who were presumed to have committed acts of terrorism on Russian soil. But very quickly it became clear that the war was directed against the Chechen people as a whole: the Russian army set up 'filtration camps' for adult men and carried out sweeps in villages, pre-emptively capturing or even killing many men of fighting age, as well as terrorizing and assaulting their families. From early 2000 onwards, the 'anti-terrorist operation' became a full-blown military occupation, with a whole apparatus of coercion devoted to keeping the Chechen people down.

This slippage between a rhetorical focus on 'terrorists' and the practice of targeting an entire population would become all too familiar in the rest of the world after 2001, and in Russia, too, it was based on an ugly combination of Islamophobia and militarism. But there were two elements that were specific to the Chechen case. One is the fact that, between 1996 and 1999, a semi-independent and severely damaged Chechnya came increasingly under the sway of Salafi Islamist groups, some of them receiving funding from donors overseas. By the time the Russians re-invaded in 1999, these Islamist groups were among the best organized and equipped fighters, and in practice, the cause of Chechen independence and that of a particular brand of Islam were now often conflated. The Russian authorities gladly seized on this overlap to discredit the Chechen struggle for independence.

Another factor to consider is the long history of Russian portrayals of Muslim peoples from the Caucasus as 'wild' or 'savage'—19th-century Russian literature, from Pushkin and Lermontov onwards, is full of such depictions. (Late in life, Tolstoy wrote a searing critique of Russia's Caucasian wars titled Hadji Murat; but this too owed much to the mirror-image stereotype of a noble mountain warrior.) These cultural stereotypes are very persistent, and formed a fertile substrate on which more hostile contemporary portrayals could grow.

**That war resulted in thousands of Chechen refugees around the world and a puppet government in Grozny. But while the official cause of the Russian government was the fight against Islamist separatist forces, the current government under Ramzan Kadyrov promotes a kind of political Islam. How does Putin's Russia accommodate to this situation?**

One thing to bear in mind here is that since Tsarist times, the Russian authorities have sought to cultivate official, acceptable forms of Islam across their many Muslim-majority territories. In the second half of the 20th century, the Soviet authorities did the same, establishing a Spiritual Board of Muslims of the North Caucasus in 1943. Yet while such bodies were designed to channel religious sentiment through controllable structures, there was also what experts refer to as a 'parallel Islam' that escaped its grasp—a much broader and more varied set of practices, rooted in Chechen traditions and social structures, in which two different Sufi orders have long played prominent roles. In the 1990s, new streams joined this unofficial Islam, notably including a Saudi-influenced Salafi current.

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I see the form of Islam propagated by Kadyrov as yet another attempt to harness a much broader and varied religious sentiment to the goals of the state—with the difference that in this case, the goals are not so much those of Moscow as those of Kadyrov himself. His brand of Islam may often make the Kremlin uncomfortable, but Putin tolerates it because, in a way, he has to. Having imposed this brutal figure on the Chechens and given him carte blanche to kill, torture, and oppress them in order to keep Chechnya formally part of Russia, the Kremlin now finds it difficult to rein in its creation.

**A few weeks ago in France, an 18-year-old Chechen refugee killed a teacher near Paris because he showed a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammad to pupils. Do you think that the denial of the Chechen people's national rights can partly explain the "radicalization" of some Chechen citizens?**

The crushing of Chechnya's legitimate aspirations to sovereignty has certainly had damaging effects on a whole generation of Chechens, whether they still live in their devastated and brutalized republic, or whether they are among those scattered into distant and often arduous exiles.

But I think explanations for the 'radicalization' of Chechen youths in Europe, the US, etc also have to be sought in conditions in those places themselves: the climate of Islamophobia in which they have been raised, the rise of broader anti-immigrant sentiment, the socio-economic deprivations they endure—all of this must produce very severe psychological pressures on all migrants of Muslim origin, not only Chechens. Only a tiny handful ever respond with violence, but their acts are rendered more visible because of their origins. The background to this particular horrifying case will no doubt become clearer. But the fact that the young man who committed this crime is Chechen is perhaps less relevant than the question of why his relation to the French context was so damaged and distorted.

Source [LeftEast](#).

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[1] *New Left Review*, No 11, September-October 2001 [Putin's Colonial War](#).