

**CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE
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INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC AND
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MASTER'S THESIS

**ANCIENT BLOOD,
MODERN VENGEANCE:
the Impact of Traditional
Culture and Blood Feud on
Violence in Chechnya**

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Thesis Project Proposal

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The Northern Caucasus is one of the most volatile regions in the world. Russia has fought two wars within its own republic in the last fifteen years in an attempt to stabilize Chechnya and keep the Northern Caucasus in the Russian Federation. Certainly a lot of material has been written on how the Russian Federation's actions have influenced and impacted this region, and have probably made the region less stable and more radicalized. In my thesis I would like to investigate another area that I believe has a big impact on how the conflict has been fought, why it has unfolded the way it has, and prospects for returning stability to this region: the blood feuds of the traditional culture of the highlands in the Caucasus. The paper will focus mainly on Chechnya, but it is almost impossible to investigate that area without also investigating Dagestan and Ingushetia.

First, some background must be established. It will be necessary for the reader to know the history and collective memory of the region and how this contributes to nationalism. In addition to this, I must also examine the beginning of the conflict in Chechnya. Then an in-depth look into Chechen society and its traditional culture will be necessary. This will focus on the clannish nature of the highlands society and the concept of honor, which contributes to the idea and practice of blood feuds. The majority of the thesis will focus on how traditional culture, especially the presence of blood feuds, has escalated the conflict through mobilization, radicalization, and the politicization and ideologization of violence.

Obviously the Russian Federation's answer to the conflict has not stopped the violence in the Northern Caucasus. Although last year the second Chechen war was declared over, the region is still rife with violence including, but not limited to, terrorism. This paper will attempt to find a new solution to the Chechen problem by looking at the conflict from a different angle.

Proposed Outline:

- I. Introduction
- II. Background
 - a. History – collective memory
 - b. Nationalism
 - c. Actual start of the conflict (1994, 1999)
- III. Examination of Chechen Society – Traditional Culture
 - a. Clannish society
 - b. Concept of honor
 - c. Blood feud
- IV. Escalation and Mobilization
 - a. Radicalization
 - b. Politicization of violence
 - c. Ideologization of violence
- V. Conclusion

Methods: Empirical social and political research

Potential Sources:

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Date: 12.12.2010

DECLARATION:

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work, based on the sources and literature listed in the appended bibliography. The thesis as submitted is 139,659 keystrokes long (including spaces), i.e. 70 manuscript pages.

Your name

Your signature

Date

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VOCABULARY

ADAT: Customary law

BEK/BEY: Turkish title for a chieftain, typically of smaller tribal groups

GAR: Vainakh term for clan; a few extended families with blood ties

GAZAVAT: Holy war

IMAM: Muslim leader, often with authority over a given population

MURID: Sufi adept; general term for a follower of Imam Shamil

NAQSHBANDI: Sufi order prominent in the North Caucasus, especially Chechnya, in the first half of the 19th century

NOKHCHO: Chechen

NOKHCHALLA: The Chechen character, Chechen code of honor

QADIRI: Sufi order prominent in the North Caucasus, especially Chechnya, in the second half of the 19th century

SHARIA: Muslim law

SHEIKH: Sufi leader, respected elder

SUFI: Islamic mysticism

TEIP: Vainakh for tribe; extended clan in Chechen society (teip and tribe are used interchangeably in this paper)

TAR: Offshoot of a taip

VAINAKH: Refers to the old tribes which are now the modern day Chechens and Ingush; it is also the only living branch of the Nakh languages

YAH: The essence / honor of man

INTRODUCTION

The Northern Caucasus is one of the most volatile regions in the world. Russia has fought two wars within its own borders in the last fifteen years in an attempt to stabilize the region and keep its breakaway republic, Chechnya, in the Russian Federation. These two wars, along with the notorious terrorist attacks originating from this region, have produced a multitude of material on how the Russian Federation and its security forces' actions have impacted the crisis in the Northern Caucasus. Contrarily, surprisingly little has been written on how Chechen culture itself has influenced the conflict and violence, specifically the traditional culture of the highlands and blood feuds. These ancient traditions and customs, which died out during the Middle Ages in many parts of the world, still survive and thrive today in the mountainous North Caucasus.

These traditions and customs still alive in Chechnya play a crucial part in the conflict, which have been overlooked by many, and will surely impact the solutions for peace and stability in the region. In fact it is the culture of the highlands and the ancient practice of blood feuds that has intensified much of the violence in modern Chechnya and radicalized many in the population. Examination into Chechen society will show that the continuation of traditional culture and ancient customs has played a major role in the conflict. The relative isolation of the mountainous North Caucasus from Russia due to geography, language, and culture made it difficult for the Russian regimes to first conquer and then successfully Russify the region. Thus, the traditional culture of Chechnya has persisted and thrived through the centuries. There are aspects of this culture that are revered, such as local hospitality and the concept of honor, which at times can promote peace and stability in the region. Even further, some of the customary laws found in traditional culture can be seen as appropriate for the administration of remote mountain villages, but others such as blood feud are detrimental. The practice of blood feud through the years, or even generations, creates an escalation of violence even in times of relative peace in the North Caucasus. But couple the perpetuation of blood feuds with the Chechen conflicts of 1994 and 1999 and the violence escalates exponentially.

To understand how these wars unfolded in certain ways and why Chechnya still remains an unstable and violent region, one must first delve into its past. Chechnya's

history and the development of the Chechen identity play an important role in modern Chechen life and how the people act and react against Russian forces. As with any study of a separatist movement, an examination of the particular nationalism and its beginnings is necessary. But perhaps even more important than the nationalism that sprang up in Chechnya after the fall of the Soviet Union is the Chechen identity itself, which had been crafted and molded over the centuries. In the case of Chechnya, nationalism led to two separate wars within as little as fifteen years, and at the core of these wars is the question of Chechen identity.

Much attention has been paid to how Islam impacted the wars and the radicalization of the Chechen separatist movement. Indeed the Islamist movement had a great impact of the politicization and ideologization of violence in the Chechen separatist movement and both wars, but a too often overlooked contribution to the radicalization of violence is Chechen culture itself. The continued practice of blood feud in the North Caucasus in particular had a major impact on how the people of Chechnya, and neighboring Dagestan, view the conflict and Russian Federal forces. In the mentality of this traditional culture, the invasion of federal forces the ensuing acts of violence against the people of the highlands were acts that deserved and even required retaliation in the practice of the blood feud. Parallel to the modern war that raged between Russian troops and separatist rebels was an ancient kind of war: a war of vengeance and blood retaliation as set by the concept of honor and the code of blood feud in Chechen clannish society.

The violence of the blood feud runs parallel to the war and the actual violence of the war, and became more and more interwoven as the conflict escalated. And over time even the concept of the blood feud became politicized and ideologized in Chechen society. Just as the Islamist movement became a mobilizing force for the separatist movement, so did the concept of the blood feud. In the end, the mentality that prevailed in many of the traditional villages of the highlands was that the Russian forces were now their sworn blood enemy and therefore deserved vengeance. Within Chechnya, blood feuds were also used to consolidate power and the legitimate use of force. Looking at the Chechen conflict in this aspect changes the motives and consequences of the violence. Thus reshaping how people perceive and understand the conflict.

PART I: INTRODUCTION TO THE SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHECHEN SOCIETY

The North Caucasus is one of the most linguistically and ethnically diverse regions in the world. The 1989 Soviet census recognized 19 native national groups in the autonomous republics of the North Caucasus, although there are dozens more that live in the region. The Chechens, or *Nokhchi* as they call themselves, are the most numerous nationality of the North Caucasus, and the Russian Federal Republic of Chechnya is their traditional homeland with a population of approximately one million predominately Muslim people.¹ The Caucasus mountain range and the isolation it brings is one of the major factors that has kept the region so diverse and allowed traditional culture and customs to thrive. These mountains even create a major distinction within Chechnya itself: that of the people in the lowlands, and the mountaineers of the highlands. There is a vast divide between the cultures and attitudes of the mountaineers and their lowland counterparts. The Chechen people of the highlands have been historically more independent-minded and very hostile towards Russian rule and assimilation, while the people of the lowlands have been much less resistant.² This study will focus primarily on the culture and traditions of the Chechen highlanders because it is the highlands where the Chechen separatist movement finds most of its rebels and support.

¹ Goldenberg, pg. 3

² Youngs, pg. 7

CHAPTER 1: CLANNISH SOCIETY

The Chechen people are one of the oldest indigenous ethnic groups in the Caucasus. Central to the culture and customs of the highlands are the numerous clans of Chechen society. Clans are the basic social structure of Chechnya and are the building blocks upon which all life in the highlands is created. The clan and tribal systems of the North Caucasus can seem quite complex and confusing to the outside observer. These systems can vary from society to society, and the formation of these tribes and clans was often a continuous process, where clan identity was capable of transformation. We will now draw our focus on the structure of the Chechen clannish society of the highlands.

Vainakh Teips

The term Vainakh is used to represent the land, the language, and the peoples of the modern Chechen and Ingush republics. These lands are ethnically homogeneous and the language they speak is derived from a common Nakh language. The culture and many of the customs of the Chechen and Ingush peoples are very similar, thus falling into the category of Vainakh culture. In fact, the Russians only divided the Vainakh people into Chechen and Ingush because their dialects were slightly different.³ In practical terms, when one is speaking of Chechen culture or Vainakh culture, it is one and the same. In order to understand the importance of clans and blood kinship in Chechnya and how it influences all aspects of life, the basic structure of clannish society must be outlined.

A few extended families closely related to one another formed a clan, or *gar*. The blood kinship of these families is based on an actual common ancestor, whom they can all name. It is several *gars*, which form a tribe, or *teip*. The members of a *teip* claim a blood relationship and also trace their roots back to a common ancestry, but unlike that in a clan, this relationship could be an actual blood kinship or merely putative.⁴ Clan membership and identity is the most important aspect of life in Vainakh society. While

³ Zelkina, pg. 11

⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 15

nearly class differentiates everywhere else in the world society, it is specific to Chechen society that people are rather differentiated by their region, or *tukhums*.⁵ A *tukhum* is a rural commune of several villages, several *teips*, which is the ultimate political entity among the Vainakh. In the highlands of Chechnya, natural borders, such as rivers, canyons, slopes, and hollows, together define the communal borders linking mountain villages, or auls. In essence a *tukhum* is a union of *teips*, not always linked by blood or origins. Rather they are a social structure of tribes that has formed over long periods of time. Nine *tukhums* form the Chechen nation.⁶ Within these *tukhums* the tribe, or *teip*, and its blood ties are still the most important aspect of one's identity and is the basis for all economic and legal relationships.⁷

The *teips* formed by the individual families of Chechen society vary in size where the number of members of a particular *teip* usually depends on antiquity. The oldest *teips* will be the largest ones and will also be the most respected within the larger community. Because of the age and size of these *teips*, many of the relationships are rather formal due to continuous migration. The younger *teips* are usually smaller and are typically composed of people from one village who are mutually related. These younger *teips* are generally created by single gars or even a single extended family that wishes to improve its own status by breaking away from their tribe to declare its own *teip*. It is because of such practices that the number of *teips* in Chechnya has risen from thirty to around 150 since the mid 19th century.⁸

For practical purposes, the *teip* serves as a broad collection of people with links to a particular village or district, meaning several extended families could be tied together into a single *teip*. Imperial Russia found it hard to penetrate these self-ruling clans and this kind of pre-modern grouping of society did not diminish even during Soviet rule, but in fact was strengthened due to the importance of social networks during times of

⁵ Souleimanov, "Chechen Society and Mentality"

⁶ "Chechen Ethnos," www.chechnyafree.ru

⁷ Zelkina, pg. 16

⁸ Souleimanov, "Chechen Society and Mentality"

economic scarcity.⁹ The geography of the highlands has also contributed to the ability of clannish society to persist through the centuries and resist outside influence and change. The Caucasus Mountains serve as its own member in the society of the Chechen highlands. The isolated territory and rugged terrain has played a major role in the history and development of Chechen society, mainly the preservation of clannish society and traditional culture.

While the importance of tribal identity has not been diminished over time, these teips are by no means static. In fact, the teip can be a very dynamic part of Chechen society. For example, when leaving a *teip* and resettling in a new area, clans could preserve their name and blood association or lose the sense of common identity. In addition, tribes would be named after real or putative ancestors, or could bear the name of the most famous man in the tribe or a name of origin.¹⁰ Although in this way the clannish society of Chechnya is always changing, there are many aspects within clan life that do not change. The patriarchal nature and traditional culture of families, villages, and teips have persisted through the centuries. *Teips* also come with very strong loyalties to members within the clan and neighboring clans, and with perhaps even stronger rivalries.

Social Structure

At the lowest level of the clan hierarchy is the extended family, which includes up to thirty people (the head of the family, his wife, the families of their grown male children and grandchildren). Historically all members of the extended family would share common property and have joint responsibilities. The head of the family would also regulate all economic activities, distribute jobs to the rest of the family members, give authorization for marriage. In total he was responsible for the well-being and good behavior of the entire family.¹¹ Chechnya remains an extremely patriarchal society where almost all decisions are made by the head of the family.

⁹ King, pp. 202-3

¹⁰ Zelkina, pg. 15

¹¹ Ibid., pg. 14

Within the *teips* it is the clan elders who establish the moral codes and make decisions affecting the entire clan. Each clan has its own supreme body, the council of elders. The council is typically constituted by the oldest and most respected *teip* members. The decisions made by the elders that affect the entire clan are declarations of war, establishing the harvest time, and similar affairs.¹² Of course the elders' power within the *teip* was far from absolute, and greatly relied on the strength of the concept of honor in Chechen society. It is this that reinforces the mutual respect and adherence to the moral code between the elders and individual families and among every *teip* member.

Interestingly, when the head of a family dies, power does not directly transfer to the eldest son, but rather to the most capable and respected male member.¹³ As Berzhe observed in 1859 Chechnya, the authority of the father is all-powerful until his sons reach weapon-wielding age, at which point the relationship between “father and children is shaped by the rights of the stronger.”¹⁴ This again shows the importance of the concept of honor and the impact strength and bravery have on the moral codes in Vainakh society. While the head of the family is truly the absolute ruler of his family, he must still abide by certain codes of conduct as set by the *teip* and ensure the rest of his family does the same. The members of a tribe share common responsibility for the tribe, and also enjoy the protection of the tribe. This kind of mutual responsibility is meant to ensure strict adherence to all regulations imposed by the clan and tribal authorities. Historically this basic moral code was as follows: first, there is an obligation of each member to follow the principles laid down by the tribe; second, there is a right to an equal share in the communal land-holding; third, the declaration by the entire tribe of blood revenge on another clan for the killing or humiliation of one of its members; fourth, supplying assistance to a family in need; fifth, unconditional implementation of the tribal regulations of the social and moral code; and last, absolute adherence to the decisions made by the tribe's elders.¹⁵

¹² Souleimanov, “Chechen Society and Mentality”

¹³ Zelkina, pg. 14

¹⁴ Jersild, pg. 69

¹⁵ Zelkina, pg. 16

Chechen *teips* are essentially nations within a nation. Each *teip* has its own moral codes and it is of the utmost importance that members support one another.¹⁶ No hereditary dynasties have ever been formed among the Vainakh people.¹⁷ Throughout their history the Chechens had neither a state of their own nor a kind of any kind. This further reinforces the importance of *teip*. Throughout the centuries the Chechens, especially those of the highlands, have resisted foreign rule, often using that indestructible member of its society, the mountains, as refuge from foreign invaders.¹⁸ Even when the Chechen lands did fall under foreign rule, outside powers had no actual power in the highlands, which remained self-governing through clan rule.

Ethos of teip

“The norm of Vainakh ethics is the code of wise truths of people that reflect their ideals.”

- Edi Isaev

Each *teip* had an obligatory ethos and the higher the social standing of a man within that *teip*, and then the more fervently he was to adhere to that ethos.¹⁹ While the adherence to the moral codes of old are not as strictly enforced today, the same basic characteristics of the *teip* are still the driving force of the moral code for every family. These codes of honor are meant to reflect the ideals of the Chechen people. Respect for one's elders is still of the utmost importance in Vainakh society, and it is said that every Chechen family, without exception, respects and cares for the elder generations. There is also a mutual responsibility that is felt between the generations. The old and the young feel the need to look after one another and share responsibility. In many cases the parents will continue living with one or more of their adult sons and their families, and if not, they will most likely live in a small house built for them by their sons, right by the wall of their sons' house.²⁰

¹⁶ Souleimanov, “Chechen Society and Mentality”

¹⁷ Zelkina, pg. 19

¹⁸ Souleimanov, “Chechen Society and Mentality”

¹⁹ Isaev

²⁰ “Inside the Family,” www.waynakh.com

The collective spirit of the Vainakh *teip* also still echoes in modern day Chechnya. The members of clans and tribes still feel an obligation to help those in need and live through mutual assistance. But it does not stop at basic and economic needs. The family shares in everything, the achievements and shortcomings of one man will be felt by the entire extended family. A dishonor by one family member brings shame upon the entire extended family; their faces “will darken,” and the entire family will live with bowed heads. And on the other hand, if someone has done well, people will say, “nothing else could be expected from a member of that fine family,” or “the son of such a father could not behave in a different way.”²¹ This kind of family honor represents how others see the family and the *teip* as a whole. Honor is the most important aspect of Chechen society. In order to create and sustain a family’s honor a certain sense of competition is needed.

Vainakh *teips* also encourage a healthy competitive culture; with other *teips* and also within the tribe itself. Many family traditions are competition oriented. It is expected that each child should be, and want to be, *yah*, or better than everyone else²². *Yah* is seen to be the main virtue of the Chechen character. It is the driving force of every Chechen man.²³ The elders believe there should be no circumstances where their child is worse than its playmates. The elders also believe that while a child could be competitive, he should also protect those children that are weaker, and never be the first to start a fight.²⁴ Of course, competition in *teip* society goes beyond that of childish games. There has been a continuous spirit of competition between *teips*, which can lead to serious tensions and fluctuations of the social standing of particular *teips*. Clans are often trying to prove themselves worthy of their social status through displays of courage. Alongside family honor, this idea of the fearless hero is engrained in Vainakh society as the highest character. Memories of past defeats of the battle can greatly diminish the standing of *teip*, or success raids on neighboring tribes can boost the reverence others feel for that *teip*.²⁵

²¹ “Inside the Family,” www.waynakh.com

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Isaev

²⁴ “Inside the Family,” www.waynakh.com

²⁵ Souleimanov, “Chechen Society and Mentality”

Respect for elders, mutual assistance, and chivalry are the principles that most appear in everyday life of Chechen society. These stem directly from the ethos of a *teip*. Violators of these virtues of the Vainakh *teip* were, and still today, condemned by their fellow members of the *teip*. Regardless of one's standing within the *teip*, to go against the ethos of the tribe would bring shame and denunciation upon oneself and family.²⁶ This concept of honor is so central to the Chechen character and mentality that it has enabled the continuation of traditional society and old customs that are still present in modern highland culture.

Adat, Traditions, and Customs

“The teip is the fortress of adat.”

- Chechen Proverb

Adat is the customary law of the Caucasus, or the local codes of conduct. This customary law is the set of rules for daily life in the clan and family units; a code of conduct that is a compilation of all the moral norms and traditions of Vainakh society that brings together all different aspects of communal life. *Adat* is passed down through the centuries, and while some aspects may change and evolve over time, the basic moral codes have remained.²⁷ *Adat* in Chechnya set laws for self-help within *teips*, but most importantly was the obligation to gain and sustain respect and honor in the eyes of the general public.²⁸ Berzhe described *adat* as a unique feature of the Chechen ethnic identity, held onto by the Chechens throughout the years as a way to free themselves from foreign domination. He saw *adat* as indigenous to the region and the genuine custom of the people, which was the basis for the formation of social life and enforcement of social norms in lieu of a firm and stable state.²⁹ The strong sense of honor in *adat* is what paves the way for blood feud and sworn kinship, ancient features of customary law that are still in practice today.

²⁶ Isaev

²⁷ “Modern Culture and Traditions,” www.chechnyafree.ru

²⁸ Souleimanov, “Chechen Society and Mentality”

²⁹ Jersild, pg. 69

The unwritten rules of the Chechen clans, and much of the North Caucasus, have survived the centuries due to several factors. The mountainous terrain has kept many of the peoples of the North Caucasus isolated from their surrounding civilizations and modern progress. Throughout history the Caucasus have not only been the merging point of two worlds, but also the dividing line between dynasties and empires.³⁰ This has made the region notoriously hard to conquer and control, thus leaving many of the clans and tribes resistant to outside rule and out of reach of foreign influence, especially in the highlands. The introduction of Islam to the region did not have much of an impact on *adat* as the Chechens remained opposed to sharia law, which was alien to Vainakh customs. Instead *adat* thrived in the land instead of Muslim law, which was seen as an encroachment upon patriarchal Chechen society.³¹ When Imperial Russia could finally claim victory over Chechnya in 1859, the majority of the clans and tribes of the highlands were still self-governing. Many Russian officials at that time warned that the introduction of Russian courts in the region would be dangerous. It was felt that Russian forms of administration would provoke “at first discontent and then straightforward rebellion.”³² In fact, instead of Russifying the Chechens, Imperial officials sought to codify *adat* and transform “fluid cultural and legal ideas and relationships into reproducible rules.”³³ It was this kind of policy from Russia that helped to preserve the ancient customary laws and perpetuates them into the 20th and even 21st centuries.

The absence of traditional states in the North Caucasus and the inability of foreign rulers to govern locally, especially in the inaccessible mountains, left all responsibility of law and governance up to the tribes and individual clans. The preservation of the Vainakh *teip* and clannish society in Chechnya has enabled the preservations of *adat* and its supervision by the tribe. Even without the presence of a formal state, the Caucasian mountain societies were able to establish and keep these clearly defined codes of standards and rules that prevented chaos in the anarchic nature of the absence of a governing state. This was one of the advantages of the blood feud: while harsh, it was an

³⁰ Goldenberg, pg. 4

³¹ Schandermani, pg. 85

³² Jersild, pg. 92

³³ *Ibid.*, pg. 89

imperative means for preventing anarchy, chaos, and despotism.³⁴

Today many Chechens believe that *adat* is there to “elevate man, help him become better.”³⁵ It is within *adat* where one finds chivalry, hospitality, respect for elders, and the concept of honor. While *adat* in modern Chechnya stems from very old customary law, it is important to distinguish between *adat* and the rules of pagan law, *lamkerst*, which is still practiced in some parts of Chechnya, but rejected by most. The influence of the more severe *lamkerst* in society is negligible. Followers of *adat* feel that those who practice pagan law feel free to steal, show off, use force, and may kidnap, rape or even kill a girl. *Adat* forbids Chechens to harm small children, women and elderly people and excluded them from blood feuds. *Adat* demands that a man keep order where he lives, in his private home and public, the village square. *Adat* would also dictate that if a man kidnaps a girl with the purpose of marriage, but she loves another, then the kidnapper would then be turned into matchmaker.³⁶ This is how Chechen ethnographer Said-Magomed Khasiyev describes the present and future of *adat*. He sees the respect of *adat* as the path to the revival of public morality. “There will be no revival until everyone learns to ask themselves what good deeds they have done today. Chechens used to believe that every day man I given nine chances to do good and nine chances to go wrong. Tread not on a bug, keep from saying bad words, throw evil thoughts out of your head. This way you will learn to do good. This is a way to high standards of public morality.”³⁷

The Chechen mentality is quite different from what is expected in much of the Western world. *Teip* and *adat* have endured through the centuries in Chechnya and with them traditional culture. As was mentioned earlier, this is quite a distinction between the Chechens of the highlands, and those of the lowlands. For obvious reasons, lowland Chechens are fairly more Europeanized and tolerant of outside views and more tolerant in general. The mountaineers are much more rooted in traditional notions of honor and

³⁴ Souleimanov, “Chechen Society and Mentality”

³⁵ Said-Magomed Khasiyev, “Daimekhkan Az”

³⁶ Jaimoukha, pp. 124-125

³⁷ “Modern Culture and Traditions,” www.chechnyafree.ru

dignity.³⁸ These two mentalities can often clash when culture gets lost in translation. There is a particular mountain etiquette of the Chechen highlands that calls for strict and precise adherence. This code of conduct is referred to as *nokhchalla*. This code is a complex set of rules and standards of behavior, that if not followed could have fatal consequences.³⁹ *Nokhchalla* also refers to the Chechen character itself. Of course, central to this character is honor. Chivalry, gentility, diplomacy, masculinity, generosity, and reliability are the qualities a man of a devout Chechen family must possess.⁴⁰ This code of conduct and ethics has regulated Chechen society for centuries, and while it has evolved and been updated over time, its roots are still firmly placed in the ancient world. The surviving version of *nokhchalla* is that of the common man, which all good Chechens obey with their own free will or from fear of being ostracized by the *teip*.⁴¹ Etiquette requires that one should carefully weigh his words, facial expressions, and gestures. This applies when talking about another person or his relatives, especially female relatives. Especially harsh or obscene words are unthinkable. It is also not appropriate to get drunk, spit, or mishandle the property of others. Spitting upon meeting another person, unsheathing a dagger during a dispute or disrespectfully handling another man's hat are all the equivalent of a slap in the face and also considered blood offenses.⁴²

There are other attributes of the Chechen character that contribute to the creation, evolution, and survival of adat, traditional culture, and Vainakh society. The most important is the concept of honor, which is understood in a very broad sense. It is from this strong concept of honor that all of the other Chechen characteristics spring. A man is expected to keep his word, support his family materially and spiritually so that the entire family can lead a dignified life. Chechen honor requires faithful friendship, but also strong independence.⁴³ The honor found in fierce independence and freedom has driven the Chechen people for centuries. Vainakh honor also supports courage, fearlessness,

³⁸ Souleimanov, "Chechen Society and Mentality"

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ "The Chechen Character," www.waynakh.com

⁴¹ Jaimoukha, pg. 123

⁴² Souleimanov, "Chechen Society and Mentality"

⁴³ *Ibid.*

hospitality, honesty, and purity of women.

All of the societies of the Caucasus are known for their courage and bravery, but it is the Chechens who are always considered the boldest.⁴⁴ Deeply implanted in the Chechen psyche is the importance of honor, and the best way to come of this psyche is through bravery. There is a very strong hero culture in Chechen society, especially among the mountaineers. Bravery is held in such high regard that Chechens seem to have a significantly diminished instinct of self-preservation, and instead an instinct of irrational courage.⁴⁵ Their highly developed sense of human dignity and fear of shame is such that a Chechen would gladly lay down his life in the name of bravery, dignity and shamelessness.

The drive to obey *adat* and serve as good members of Chechen society is not derived from a fear of punishment by some central authority, but rather by the fear of dishonoring the family and *teip*. Social standing in the eyes of one's own community and other *teips* is of the utmost importance. There is also the fear of retribution from neighboring *teips* where there has been a transgression against the *adat* of the land. Conversely, while bravery is so revered in Vainakh society, the fear of shame can also have a stifling effect on a man, diminishing his boldness.

Truly it is the *teip* that is the keeper of *adat* and traditional Vainakh culture in Chechen society. Ancient customs and traditions that died out in the middle ages in the Western world, such as blood feud, are alive and well in the mountains of Chechnya. The clannish structure has endured for centuries and enabled the ancient customs of the Vainakh people to continue into the modern era. Isolated from the progress of the outside world, *teips* and *tukhums* in the Chechen highlands have governed themselves using *nokhchalla* has their code of conduct, emphasizing the concept of honor, through mechanisms such as blood feud.

⁴⁴ Souleimanov, "Chechen Society and Mentality"

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPT OF HONOR

As described earlier, central to the clannish culture of the Chechen highlands is the concept honor, especially among men. The honor a man holds in his family and in his society is worth life and death, even in Chechnya today. The honor of women is also extremely vital to the clan and is measured by purity and fidelity. These ancient ways have continued almost unchanging through the centuries and thrive in the volatile and violent highlands of the Northern Caucasus, even against the backdrop of a modern world. Freedom and honor remain the highest values of the mountaineers of Chechnya. A deeper examination of how the Chechens understand honor will provide context and a better understanding of how the blood feud works in the highlands and how it has survived into the 21st century.

Nokhchalla

The best way to understand Chechen honor is to understand the Chechen character, or *nokhchalla*. *Nokhcho* is the Vainakh word for Chechen, and *nokhchalla* brings together all the specific characteristics of what makes a good Chechen man.⁴⁶ It is the code of conduct and the system of ethics that regulates Chechen society and defines the norms of personal and social behavior.⁴⁷ This can also be described as the Chechen code of honor, or a condensed formula of the Chechen way of life. By this code it is chivalry, gentility, diplomacy, manliness, generosity, and reliability that makes a good Chechen man. When it comes to reality, it is important to remember that *nokhchalla* is the sheer ideal of how a Chechen man should be, not necessarily how he truly is. These are simply the characteristics and virtues that are most revered among the mountaineers. While the highlands have remained fairly resistant to progressive influence, it is increasingly difficult for the Chechen man to adhere to this code of conduct in an increasingly modern world.

⁴⁶ “The Chechen Character,” www.waynakh.com

⁴⁷ Jaimoukha, pg. 123

The surviving code of ethics in Chechnya today is that of the commoners of the feudal era, which is now universally applicable, although there are some local variations among *teips*. The *teips* of Chechnya are very tight-knit communities and do have to anonymity of modern society that those in the Western world enjoy today. This closeness of society creates a fear of infamy and of dishonoring one's family among the tribe. Along with a man's free will, it is this aspect of society that also forces him to obey the code of conduct. Although the Chechens are strictly bound to their moral code and others usually meet behavior against it with true bewilderment, disputes are inevitable. For this purpose there are special councils to help work out the kinks in Vainakh society.⁴⁸

A true Chechen man is a diplomat in all matters. He should have the ability to deal with people without showing his privileged position and should be very polite and accommodating so as to not hurt anyone of lesser standing. For example, if a man is riding on horseback and meets another man walking, the man on horseback shall be the first to make greetings. But if the man walking is older, the rider should dismount his horse to greet his elder. Politeness, willingness to compromise, and helping and supporting each other are all very *nokhchalla* characteristics. There have been neither princes nor serfs among the Chechen people, so maintaining equality in society is a great virtue. *Nokhchalla* also puts great importance on friendship. A true Chechen friendship should last a lifetime: in joy and in sorrow. The highlanders hold friendship as a sacred institution. Thoughtlessness or impoliteness could be forgiven if shown to a brother, but to a friend — never!⁴⁹

Hospitality is another sacred institution to the Chechens. The *auls* of the mountains are still run in very communal ways where mutual aid and assistance among Chechen brothers is common. The harsh conditions of mountain living have made it imperative for Chechens to work together and help each other. Should the head of a family die; the entire *aul* would feel responsible for the grieving family. If it happened

⁴⁸ Jaimoukha, pg. 123

⁴⁹ "The Chechen Character," www.waynakh.com

that an elderly villager was doing some kind of work, his neighbors are expected help him and more often than not, it is the neighbors who will finish the job.⁵⁰ This custom goes back centuries and continues today. This part of the Chechen character also extends to guests. During a Chechen uprising in 1877, an entire aul was burnt to the ground and most of the villagers slaughtered because they refused to turn over a rebellion leader, their guest, to the Russians. The village elders' response, "General! You can ask from the people anything that is possible. You surely know how hard it would be for us to part with the graves of our fathers and our native soil. Nevertheless, we cannot surrender Umma to you. Umma is our guest."⁵¹ No matter how humble, any Chechen without a moment's hesitation should open the door to any other Chechen, no matter how influential or high-ranking. Solicitation, adulation, begging and humiliation are not Chechen words.⁵² Hospitality is so highly regarded in Vainakh society that a Chechen would even offer shelter to his enemy. It is the honorable thing to do.

Nokhchalla not only embodies general virtues, but also encourages the specific ways a man should act. The head of the family, husbands, and fathers should taciturn and thoughtful. A good Chechen man should always think well before he acts, or pronounces judgment on a neighbor. Restraint is also revered in the Chechen man. A "lack of self control exhibits foolishness, patience demonstrates good manners."⁵³ In all circumstances the utmost restraint should be used, also in speech. The use of unprintable words, especially about a woman, is most revolting to the Chechens. This sheds light on one the particularly important aspects of what it is to be a good Chechen: a woman with loose morals is the biggest disgrace that can befall a Chechen family. Some such women have even been lynched in the Chechen Republic for their actions.⁵⁴

The boldness of Chechen courage would seem contradictory to the restraint that is also expected from Chechen men, but in fact having *nokhchalla* is attaining a balance

⁵⁰ "Mutual Aid and Assistance in Chechen Culture," www.waynakh.com

⁵¹ Souleimanov, "Chechen Society and Mentality"

⁵² "Chechen Ethnos," www.chechnyafree.ru

⁵³ "Modern Culture and Traditions," www.chechnyafree.ru

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

between these two virtues that rule the highlands. Great valor is one of the most respected traits of a Chechen man. One of the most respected *tukhums* in Chechnya was so because “its members according to family tradition had a reputation of fearless heroes; such a person could not be born or live among them, who would have the slightest room for even the slightest sense of fear in his heart.”⁵⁵ *Nokhchalla* rules out any and all attempts at subjugation. The spirit of freedom and readiness to fight is essential to the Chechen moral code. Chechen boys, since time immemorial, have been brought up to be disciplined freedom fighters — protectors who are trained to bear arms.⁵⁶ One who is always ready for self-sacrifice. Freedom and independence are synonymous with life for the Chechens. The oldest surviving Chechen greeting translated literally as “come again free.”⁵⁷ While valor on the battlefield is essential, so is honor. The story goes that when Imam Shamil finally surrendered to the Russians in 1859, one of his comrades-in-arms hailed him several times, but he never turned around. When asked later why he did not turn around to respond, Shamil explained that he would have been killed if he had. “We Chechens never shoot a man in the back.”⁵⁸

Chechen songs, fables, and epics often end with the phrase, “May no mother ever give birth to a son without *yah*!” *Yah* is seen as the main virtue in man. A man with *yah* wholly embraces fortitude, valor, courage and bravery, but is not slave to these virtues.⁵⁹ A man with *yah* is a man that fully embodies *nokhchalla*. Of course a good Chechen man will strive to exemplify all the characteristics of *nokhchalla* to be a better man, but perhaps more importantly to gain the respect of his family and *teip*. “Whenever you hear that a person has no *yah*, this means the person in question commands no respect within his or her circle. Describing a man as having no *yah* is a good as saying he is no man at all. Stating that a man possesses *yah* is the highest possible praise to that man. A man with *yah* in him is a model to emulate. He possesses all the qualities that the Vainakhs

⁵⁵ Souleimanov, “Chechen Society and Mentality”

⁵⁶ “The Chechen Character,” www.waynakh.com

⁵⁷ “Chechen Ethnos,” www.chechnyafree.ru

⁵⁸ “Modern Culture and Tradition,” www.chechnyafree.ru

⁵⁹ Isaev

deem positive in their ethical code.”⁶⁰

While having *yah* calls for a man to be strong and courageous, it also calls for a man to be modest, temperate, generous, and responsive to the needs of others. To gain the respect of others a man should also show the best results in labor, battle, and sport. The Vainakh family code insists that parents instill these competitive qualities in children. Teacher of Vainakh folklore Adam Dolatov best explains the importance of respect of *yah* in Chechen society: “Gain the deepest possible insight into yourself and your ancestry. Retain your *yah*. Never lose decency or dignity. You are mortal, but never be fearful of your physical death. The only thing to be really feared is life without decency, dignity, spirit, faith, or *yah*. He who loses them loses his freedom as well.”⁶¹ Indeed, in the Chechen highlands and man without *yah* is no man at all.

Sworn Brotherhood

“Liberty, equality, and brotherhood of men form the basic nucleus of Chechen society.”⁶² The Chechens fierce love for freedom has been well documented throughout the ages. From Shamil and his freedom fighters of the mid 19th century to the separatists after the fall of communism the Chechens have ferociously fought for freedom and the right to be independent in their own lands. As intense as the Chechens are about independence, it is with the same intensity that they approach friendship. The sworn brotherhood of the Vainakh raises friendship to its highest peak. As one proverb goes, “a worthy man always has friends.”⁶³ Just as a man is measured by the respect he carries in the community, he is also measured by the friends he keeps and the way he treats his friends. It has already been said that inattentiveness and discourtesy towards an actual brother can be pardoned, but never towards a friend. It is this ethic of sworn brotherhood that has long been considered the foundation of relations between the Chechen people.⁶⁴ Undoubtedly, sworn brotherhood shows the true honor of a Chechen man.

⁶⁰ Aliroyev and Medzhidov, 1992

⁶¹ Isaev

⁶² “Chechen Ethnos,” www.chechnyafree.ru

⁶³ Isaev

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

To the Chechens, sworn brotherhood is a very special occasion. The ritual is performed in front of the relations and friends of both sides. There are three kinds of brotherhood. The first brotherhood is one solemnly sworn before friends and the elders. The second is sworn by the drinking of milk from a single cup with a gold ring so as not to rust the friendship symbolizing faithfulness. The third brotherhood is sworn by the mixing of blood. The two men cut their fingers to mix drops of blood, making them as close as brothers as possible. After the ritual, the sworn brothers exchange items, such as felt cloaks, that symbolize the sworn brotherhood. Lev Tolstoy was famously friendly with many highlanders and described them as his sworn brothers. He wrote the following about Sado Miserbiev: “He proved his faithfulness risking his life, but this was of no importance for him. It was a custom and pleasure for him” Miserbiev even gave Tolstoy a sword as a symbol of true friendship.⁶⁵ Perhaps it is even the sworn brotherhood where the Chechen displays the most honor; the honor of a friend being more important than one’s own life.

Honor of Women

It is important to highlight the role women play in the Chechen concept of honor, not just because a woman’s purity is so highly valued, but also because women are often at the center of mountaineer conflicts. Many times women are the victims of crimes in the highlands. Gender and sexuality are still problematic aspects of Vainakh culture⁶⁶ and can often lead to blood feud. Indeed life in the highlands was, and still is, especially harsh for women. The treatment of women in Chechnya is quite backwards, by Western standards. In the 19th century a woman in Chechnya often faced the prospect of kidnapping and rape if she dared to decline a marriage proposal and this practice still persists to this day. In one documented case, her relatives even participated in such a rape because they supported the family marriage alliance.⁶⁷ At times kidnap and rape is used to persuade the victim to marry the perpetrator, because of the utmost importance is that a

⁶⁵ Isaev

⁶⁶ Jersild, pg. 102

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 103

woman remains pure. As was stated previously, a woman with loose morals will bring the greatest shame on her family. An impure woman has absolutely no prospects for marriage in the highlands, even if it is the product of rape. Old tradition even stipulated that a woman's screams would have to be heard in order for her to lodge a complaint of rape. Further still, "women who are well known for their debauched behavior are not allowed to charge someone with rape." On the other hand, historical custom justifies the murder of a perpetrator of rape by the victim's family.⁶⁸ Not surprisingly, this often leads to blood feuds between families. Thus the cycle of violence in the Chechen highlands is often centered on women. And fittingly enough, no one but a woman can break off a blood feud.

While Chechen women live in a fiercely patriarchal society that can have fatal outcomes for those women who do not obey the female moral standards, there is special attention paid to how a good Chechen man should treat a good Chechen woman. A true Chechen holds each woman for a saint.⁶⁹ Chechen mothers in particular enjoy special social status. From time immemorial it is the woman of the family who has kept the fire; and the Chechens have always held in the highest esteem those who keep the fire — it is a privileged position. In fact, one of the worst things a Chechen could say to another is, "I wish the fire went dead in your fireplace."⁷⁰ While indeed Vainakh society is very patriarchal, this shows the respect that is also shown for maternal virtues.

In order to maintain virtue, contact between men and women not of the same family is extremely limited. One anecdote perfectly displays how fragile is the honor of a woman and the great lengths a virtuous man would go to preserve it. A Chechen man asked for overnight shelter in a village house. He would never have gone to that particular house had known there was no one but a young woman inside. The woman, being a hospitable Chechen, gave him a meal and then guarded his sleep by sitting awake all night in the front room. It was not until morning that the man was aware of this. And

⁶⁸ Jersild, pg. 104

⁶⁹ "Chechen Ethnos," www.chechnyafree.ru

⁷⁰ "Modern Culture and Traditions," www.chechnyafree.ru

while washing, he accidentally touched her hand with his little finger. In an extreme display of chivalry, he cut off the finger with his dagger before leaving the house.⁷¹ Only a man brought up in the true spirit of nokhchalla would go to such pains to protect a woman's honor.

It is Chechen honor that lies at the center of the tradition of blood feud. A man's honor and respect from the community are his greatest virtues. Along with a man's honor and respect, Chechens also hold the respect and honor of their women in the highest regard. If either of these feels threatened, a man of true Chechen character will turn to violence to protect the honor of himself and his family as well as to gain and keep respect. Thus a cycle of violence is perpetuated in Chechnya through the mechanism of the blood feud in the traditional culture of *teip* society.

⁷¹ "Chechen Ethnos." www.chechnyafree.ru

CHAPTER 3: BLOOD FEUD

The blood feud is an ancient Vainakh custom that has survived into the modern world. A tradition that was once found in all parts of the world but faded away with the demise of the feudal system and the rise centralized states. This did not happen in the highlands of Chechnya. Along with other traditional customs, the blood feud has endured in traditional Chechen culture. And today, the Chechen highlands have become quite infamous for this medieval practice. The persistence of blood feuds in Chechnya gives great insight into the Chechen mentality and why conflict and the cycle of violence has continued there, almost unabated, since the fall of the Soviet Union. In a society where honor, a fierce passion for freedom, and the principle of collective responsibility are highly revered combines with the practice of blood feud combine in an unstable environment, the outcome is especially deadly.

Ancient Custom

“When shall blood cease to flow in the mountains?

When sugar cane grows in the snow.”

- Chechen Proverb

Blood feuds have been waged in Chechnya for centuries according to the ancient laws of *adat*. While this practice along with the proscribed set of cultural traditions can be used as a deterrent to help mitigate Chechen-on-Chechen violence and preserve the Chechen culture and population,⁷² blood feuds can also become devastating. The emphasis on collective responsibility in Vainakh culture means there is imposed shared responsibility for any misdeed on entire families, clans, or tribes, and in some cases entire *tukhums*. Long lasting blood feuds involving whole teips can lead to the mutual extermination of entire male populations.⁷³ The strength of the concept of honor and the

⁷² Schaefer, pg. 251

⁷³ Zelkina, pg. 44

fear of shame have kept this ancient custom alive in the highlands.

The historical absence of a stable state structure in Chechnya has played a major role in the persistence of the widespread and destructive mountain tradition of blood feud.⁷⁴ With no central state to regulate and enforce laws, it is left up to the *teips*. The lack of central authority left the blood feud as the major restraining factor in disputes between clans, if those involved were wise enough to avoid going to such extremes as blood feud. It was the clan elders who oversaw the blood feuds and helped to reconcile the feuding parties.⁷⁵ While blood feud is notoriously harsh and vicious, traditionally *adat* did forbid children, women, and the elderly to be harmed in a blood feud⁷⁶. In this absence of the traditional state, clannish society was able to thrive, and along side it its ancestral culture, *adat*, and blood feud.

The *teip* is the most important part of Chechen identity and the collective nature of *teip* society means that an offense on one man is an offense to the entire clan. It is then a matter of clan honor to avenge this offense in the appropriate manner. A blood feud is generally declared by the men of a family; and if the offense is great enough, the men of the entire clan. Blood feud formally extends to all male relative of the offender, usually only his father, his sons, and particularly his brothers. In some cases, a blood feud can span centuries.⁷⁷ Causes for blood feud include, the taking of land, serious injury, murder (intended or accidental, the Vainakh make no distinction),⁷⁸ or serious insult. One of the greatest dishonors is that of a woman or a girl. In this case blood feud is usually declared by the entire clan and aimed against all of the men of the clan that caused the insult.⁷⁹ In such a situation it is the honor of the entire clan that is now on the line.

⁷⁴ Jersild, pg. 69

⁷⁵ Isayev, "Blood Feud"

⁷⁶ "Modern Culture and Traditions," www.chechnyafree.ru

⁷⁷ Souleimanov, "Chechen Society and Mentality"

⁷⁸ Zelkina, pg. 44

⁷⁹ Souleimanov, "Chechen Society and Mentality"

The manner of the highland blood feud ritual is compelling. When a person is killed, harmed, or otherwise insulted in a dispute and the offender is known and the facts against him, then the members of a neutral *teip* will go to the offending family to announce that a blood feud has been declared. Feuding parties are forbidden to live in the same village; when a blood feud has been declared, the offender and his entire family are given a certain amount of time in which they must move away. There have been cases where families have moved away, selling all their homes and possessions at rock-bottom prices, and left not just the village, but the whole of Chechnya. All of this done is fear of retribution.⁸⁰

Originally a person would take his revenge solely on the person responsible for the deviant act. But over time this rule evolved and at times one would take revenge on one or more of the offender's male relatives, usually a brother. This choice was up to the mistreated family. For instance, if the offender was not well respected within the community, then the decision might be made to kill his brother who was well-liked and respected, thus even further punishing his family.⁸¹ The killing of multiple male relatives also re-illustrates the importance of collective responsibility in highland society. Making a Chechen man truly his brother's keeper. It was also possible for a wronged family to accept blood money instead of declaring a feud upon the offending family. But often in the eyes of the community, accepting such blood money would bring dishonor and humiliation upon that wronged family.⁸² There was no honor in accepting money as retribution for murder, but great honor in declaring vengeance for a slain clan member.

In the same way that the fear of shame drives a Chechen mountaineer to adhere to a *nokhchalla* life, it is the same fear that can also drive a man to declare a blood feud. If offense or humiliation has been laid upon a family, then many times the only appropriate course to pursue is that of the blood feud. *Adat* prescribes for blood feud under certain circumstances, and if a man does not follow through he will bring even more shame and

⁸⁰ Isayev, Blood Feud

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Zelkina, pg. 44

dishonor upon and family and perhaps entire clan. A man's standing in society depends on his ability to avenge his family and his honor. But this does not come from a wild thirst for vengeance, but rather, as Leontiy Lyulye described in the 19th century: "Among the mountain people the blood feud is not an uncontrollable permanent feeling such as the vendetta is among the Corsicans. It is more like an obligation imposed by the public opinion."⁸³ In theory, once vengeance has been carried out and a blood feud satisfied and reconciled, the clans should be able to move forward. But this is not always the case in actuality, there are times when neither side is willing to yield and a feud can spiral out of control.

When it has been decided that a blood feud should be reconciled, an entirely new ritual must take place. On a designated day, several hundred relatives and villagers of the offender, all in black with covered heads, gather outside the village of the victim.⁸⁴ Depending upon the size of the village, sometimes thousands of people may gather for a reconciliation ceremony. The offender and his relatives come to plead for forgiveness and wear cloaks covering their faces because they are not allowed to look at many member of the injured clan. The closest relative of the victim the publicly shaves the head and beard of his blood foe, signifying that he has been forgiven. The genesis of this particular custom is unknown, but many believe that if a man can resist the temptation to slit his enemy's throat while shaving him, then he must have truly forgiven him.⁸⁵

Imperial Russia tried to regulate and limit the blood feud because the regime feared the perpetuation of several different and potentially interminable feuds. Blood feud was declared illegal by decree in 1859, but the tradition remained in tact because it was so deeply woven in the fabric of highland society. The tradition of the blood feud long predates any Russian rule and represented a shadow government, providing justice and resolving disputes according to the terms and traditions of *teip* society, out of reach of Imperial officials. It even happened that the family of a murder victim would hide the body so they could then enact their own revenge according to the terms of the blood

⁸³ As quoted by Souleimanov, "Chechen Society and Mentality"

⁸⁴ Isayev, Blood Feud

⁸⁵ Ibid.

feud.⁸⁶ Tsarist Russia and Soviet Russia both tried to suppress the tradition of blood feuds, but to no avail as the practice continued throughout the secluded Chechen Mountains.

There is no time limitation for how long a blood feud might last. In the previous centuries, some feuds were known to have lasted hundreds of years. Thankfully today, many of the outstanding blood feuds are being reconciled and canceled, due in large part to the efforts of neutral *teips*. But this is not always the case. When the harsh realities of war collide with the hot tempers of the land and the modern world, many current blood feuds have run out of control. When neither side is willing to yield, dozens can end up dead.

Modern Feuds

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, blood feuds in Chechnya have been on the rise. In fact, there has been a sharp increase due to the two wars Chechnya has been over the past twenty years. A society at war is the perfect environment for the blood feud to thrive: it is that much easier to find the offender and exact revenge.⁸⁷ War has hardened the Chechen people; many are now less likely to forgive those who have wronged them and more likely to seek revenge for those loved ones they have lost. Traditional acts of blood revenge continue in the mountains, but some blood feuds have been taken into the 21st century.

While blood feuds continue in Chechnya in their traditional manner, as a result of a murder, injury, or insult, a special commission for reconciliation of families in the state of blood feud was created in August 2010. One special commission source stated, “Within less than three weeks, it managed to consider and settle 18 such cases. It is a very good result, especially if we remember that reconciliation of feudists is a very hard task. In some cases the blood feud lasts not for years, but even for decades, and it’s

⁸⁶ Jersild, pg. 98

⁸⁷ Isayev, Blood Feud

very difficult to convince feudists to refuse from revenging.”⁸⁸ As of September 2010 the special commission reported that 56 families were currently in the state of blood feud with 40 cases pending consideration. The same source credits the former Chechen president for the improvement of the state of blood feuds, “starting from 2002, due to the efforts of Ahmat-Hadji Kadyrov, the previous President of Chechnya, 349 blood feudists have been reconciled.”⁸⁹ While it is difficult to confirm or refute such statements, the mere fact that a commission has been formed to specially deal with the problem of blood feuds in Chechnya is a huge step in the right direction.

The former President’s son and current President Ramzan Kadyrov, has also put his own twist on blood feuds in Chechnya. He has repeatedly stated that if a militant kills a law enforcement officer, a blood feud will cover all of the militant’s relatives. On the other hand, the families of killed members of the armed separatist insurgency have no right to openly announce blood feud on any kind of law enforcement⁹⁰. It is in cases such as these that one sees a blood feud transform into terrorism.

A Very High Profile Feud

Along side the typical blood feuds of the highlands, there have been some very high profile vendettas in recent years. The most famous feud occurring after a seemingly innocuous traffic meeting ended in gunfire. On 14 April 2008 the motorcade of the current Chechen president, Ramzan Kadyrov, ran into a convoy carrying a member of the Yamadayev clan in Gudermes. When Yamadayev refused to move his car for the President’s motorcade, a firefight ensued. Later, Yamadayevs started getting killed. First was Ruslan Yamadayev, a decorated military commander and former member of the Russian Duma. On 24 September 2008 he was shot ten times at an intersection in the center of Moscow. Six months later, his brother Sulim was shot in a parking garage in Dubai on 30 March 2009. Sulim was a Hero of Russia, the highest award in the country, and former head of Vostok battalion. An attempt was made on Isa, the third brother, in

⁸⁸ Ibragimov, “Muftiyat of Chechnya”

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

July 2009, but the assassin failed and was sentenced to 8 ½ years in jail. The hitman told authorities that Kadyrov had ordered the hit, but the president has adamantly denied the accusation. Isa Yamadayev has remained defiant in true Chechen style: “even if we’re all killed, we are a big clan. Our deaths will not go unpunished.”⁹¹ But many of the details are still unknown and situation quite complex.

Before he was killed, Sulim Yamadayev conveyed his belief that Kadyrov was not behind his brother’s murder, but rather those who wished to create a clash between his family and the president. He also emphasized the seriousness of the blood feud: “Such murders are very dangerous in Chechnya, and Ramzan knows it. And I think many people knew that recently we have had a conflict with Kadyrov. And those people have killed Ruslan to cause a clash between me and Ramzan Kadyrov.” Sulim also insisted he had not declared a blood feud on anyone as blood revenge is “a very serious matter,” and rejected any media accounts that he had said otherwise.⁹² Yamadayev originally fought on the side of the separatists in the First Chechen War, but then fought with Russian federal forces in the Second Chechen war. He then headed the Vostok battalion, a special military unit that takes orders directly from Russia’s General Staff and is considered to be one of Chechnya’s most efficient military units.⁹³

For quite some time the Yamadayev family has been in conflict with president Kadyrov. The Yamadayevs are a strong and powerful clan, easily a threat to Kadyrov’s consolidation of power. The president accused the commanders of the elite Vostok unit, including Sulim himself, of being involved in killings and abductions in Chechnya. And in May 2008, he was removed from his duties as battalion leader and that summer was put on a wanted list by Chechen prosecutors.⁹⁴ He also accused Sulim of involvement in the assassination of his father, Akhmad Kadyrov, the first elected president of Chechnya following the second war, saying he had “70% proof.” Kadyrov even went so far as to say he believed the Yamadayevs were actively plotting to poison him. Nevertheless,

⁹¹ Shuster, *Time*

⁹² “Murdered Colonel’s brother”

⁹³ “Chechen Hero of Russia Shot Dead”

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

some time after these accusations, Sulim was shot dead in Dubai. Dubai police chief Dhahi Khalfan Tamim said after the killing, “The Chechens have taken their grievances outside Chechnya. They are killing each other abroad. As a federative state, Russia hold full moral and state responsibility for allowing these criminals and killers to solve their disputes on our land.”⁹⁵ Tamim’s statement is quite illuminating, and marks how a blood feud, real or imagined, set in a time of modern warfare can also change with the times.

After Sulim’s death, his brother Isa continued to posit that Sulim never threatened the president or announced a blood feud. An Investigatory Committee at the Prosecutor’s Office of the Russian Federation came to similar conclusions; there were not enough facts to prove Sulim threatened Kadyrov’s life. Although, earlier Isa had stated that his brother Sulim intended to announce the blood feud to Kadyrov via telephone, but the information never reached the president. Strangely enough, for months after Sulim’s death, Isa and a fourth brother, Musa continued to proclaim that Sulim was in fact alive and only awaiting a complex surgery.⁹⁶ Isa later accepted his brother’s death and then went on to accuse Kadyrov and Adam Delimkhanov, Duma deputy and close Kadyrov ally, of organizing Sulim’s murder.

Whether a true blood feud was declared or not, it is obvious the two parties were in conflict and finally came to a reconciliation on 25 August 2010 with the presence of Kadyrov and Delimkhanov at Sulim Yamadayev’s commemoration ceremony, or *tezet*. Local observers believe their presence at the Yamadayev house in Gudermes for the mourning ceremony signals the final reconciliation of the conflict. According to one local expert, “If we remember that Isa Yamadayev had accused Ramzan Kadyrov and Adam Delimkhanov of organizing his brothers’ murders, the fact that they were admitted to the *tezet* means that they were pardoned. That is, it is refusal from blood feud against Kadyrov and Delimkhanov.”⁹⁷ According to Kadyrov, he went to the reconciliation exclusively under the request of “respectful people” after the elders had emphasized that

⁹⁵ “Chechen Murder Case Gets Entangled”

⁹⁶ “Investigation”

⁹⁷ Ivanov

Isa Yamadayev had apologized for earlier statements implicating the president in his brothers' deaths. "I visited the mourning ceremony and expressed my condolences; I also visited Sulim's mother, who was very touched," said Kadyrov.⁹⁸ The president also told reporters, "I forgave Isa Yamadayev for his incorrect statements. He lost two brothers. I feel bad for him."⁹⁹ The fact that both Kadyrov and Delimkhanov were both admitted to the *tezet* convinces some observers that this is the final reconciliation. But one observer did note that while Isa received the condolences, he did not shave his beard, which means he was not going to refuse from revenging his brothers' killers.¹⁰⁰ It is hard to tell what the true motives of either party are in this case. Only time will tell.

And there remain many unanswered questions for some. Is the Yamadayev clan simply plotting a trap for Kadyrov? Have they abandoned their sense of honor? Was the reconciliation forcefully orchestrated by Moscow? These questions remain unanswered, but Kadyrov did succeed in pacifying his long time rivals. Now that the Yamadayevs have seemingly bowed down to Kadyrov, there are no more significant opposition figures in Chechnya. Now all are loyal to Kadyrov. The Yamadayev clan ran the only battalions that were independent of the president's rule, and they disbanded in spring 2008. This is yet another piece of the big plan to force all of the Chechen clans into line behind Kadyrov. In the past few years, the violent separatist insurgency has been pushed out of Chechnya into its neighboring republics, due in large part to Kadyrov's tactics, which many say include widespread torture and summary executions.¹⁰¹ Kadyrov has the full backing of the Kremlin and this does not seem likely to change because he has proved himself the only man who can maintain order in Chechnya.

Whether or not these killings are a result of a traditional Chechen blood feud remains to be seen, but the impact is still great. While these are particularly extraordinary circumstances because they involve the current president of Chechnya and his ongoing struggle to secure all state power and authority in Chechnya, these murders

⁹⁸ Ivanov

⁹⁹ Shuster, *Time*

¹⁰⁰ Ivanov

¹⁰¹ Shuster, *Time*

perfectly illustrate how the practice of blood feud can be used for political motives and as a weapon of war. So powerful is the concept of blood feud that it can be used to consolidate power to run a republic. The power blood feud has in the general population must not be forgotten. Many have died in Chechnya over the past two decades, and whatever the exact cause of death, most relatives would point to the two wars fought by Russian federal forces as the root cause. The violent death of a family member often changes a person's attitude; especially one with such strong family ties as it is in Chechnya. The dead all have family members — brothers, sisters, children — who would now be more willing to exact revenge for their loved ones.

PART II: THE ROAD TO WAR

CHAPTER 4: A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHECHNYA

What is important about the history of Chechnya is how great an impact it has on Chechen identity and the Chechen mentality itself. In her book about her travels in the Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Suzanne Goldenberg emphasizes the import and precariousness of history: “History is a dangerous thing in the Caucasus. Disasters, betrayals, or rare moments of stability remain close to the surface no matter how remote in time. At the beginning of nearly every interview, I would be interrupted and admonished: ‘First you must understand our history.’ Inevitably, the account that followed would be at odds with the version I had just heard.”¹⁰²

It is understandable that there are competing histories in the Caucasus. It is a region where different worlds and cultures collide; where outside rulers try to assert their dominance; an isolated society where ancient customs have thrived; and a land where its people have always had a fierce thirst for freedom and an unbridled willingness to lay down their lives for independence. It is these aspects of Chechen history, which shape Chechen identity and set the background for the modern conflict.

The Borderlands

For centuries the Caucasus have been on the threshold between the Christian and Muslim worlds: the gateway between Europe and Asia. In ancient times, the Caucasus mountain range was a natural barrier, with the northern Eurasian steppes on one side and the more advanced civilizations of southern Mesopotamia and Anatolia on the other. In the more near past, the region’s location on the edges of empires has caused the peoples of the Caucasus to be swept up in the struggles of competing powers.¹⁰³ After 1556, various powers surrounding the North Caucasus began vying for power over the region:

¹⁰² Goldenberg, pg. 10

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pg. 10

the Ottoman empire and the Crimean khanate to the west, the Shanybanis of Turkestan to the east, Muscovy and the Great Nogay Horde to the north, and Iran to the south.¹⁰⁴ Often the dividing line of empires would run right through the middle of the Caucasus; its position on the periphery making the region that much more fiercely contested and more exposed to attack.¹⁰⁵

By the late 18th century, Russia had begun its systematic offensive against the North Caucasus. And although the peoples of the North Caucasus were not united socially or linguistically, it would be many years until the region was firmly under the grip of the Russian empire.¹⁰⁶ During this period of struggle between Imperial Russia and the native clans and tribes, the North Caucasus was truly the frontier between two worlds. To the north was the Russian empire, heir to the modernizing vision of Peter the Great, reaching south to tame and cultivate the peoples, those primitive highlanders, between the Black and Caspian Seas.¹⁰⁷ The continuous onslaught of outside forces attempting the rule of the peoples of the North Caucasus has made the Chechens a fierce people. They have been fighting for freedom for centuries, and will continue to do so. The people would also remain fiercely independent, loyal to their own traditional culture and customs, and unwilling to accept cultivation from foreign empires.

The beauty and danger of this place has drawn many travelers, intellectuals, and artists over the centuries. In the 19th century, the Caucasus drew the likes of Lermontov, Tolstoy, and Pushkin. But there are a constant two sides that enticed people; a sense of awe and terror that drew people in. The region as homeland to both nobles and savages: proud highlanders who bravely fought against the onslaught of foreign empires, or backward mountaineers whose “propensity for violence was matched only by their cultural chauvinism.”¹⁰⁸ This dichotomy of the North Caucasus is still alive today. Fascination and danger for the contemporary traveler lay in the political struggles,

¹⁰⁴ Broxup, pg. 1

¹⁰⁵ Goldenberg, pg. 10

¹⁰⁶ Broxup, pg. 2

¹⁰⁷ King, pg. 5

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pg. 5

banditry, rivalries, ethnic violence, and nationalist uprisings. The beauty of the Caucasus, of course, remains and echoes the words of Robert Ker Porter from 1817, “I know not who could behold the Caucasus and not feel the spirit of its sublime solitudes awing his soul.”¹⁰⁹

An Isolated Society in the Caucasian Mountains

“Nature’s bulwark, between the nations of Europe and of Asia.”

- Robert Ker Porter, 1817

Geography itself is the greatest reason for the isolation of many of the different peoples and cultures of North Caucasus, and Chechnya is no different. Twenty-five million years ago, the two great landmasses of Europe and Asia crashed together with such force that the “longest and loftiest of all mountain ranges” was formed.¹¹⁰ The Caucasus Mountains have kept the tribes and clans of highlands cut off from many of the developing societies surrounding them, and up until the middle of the 16th century, the North Caucasus remained isolated from the international arena. During this time of isolation, the peoples of the North Caucasus even remained isolated from one another. The various clannish societies spread through the region professed different religions: the western tribes were mostly Christian, the eastern tribes predominately Muslim, and the tribes in the center (the Chechen and Ingush) still retained many of their pagan roots.¹¹¹ Even after the North Caucasus became the center of a great game played by all the surrounding powers, many of the peoples, including the Vainakh, remained impervious to outside influence. The land may have technically changed hands between various empires, but many clans, especially those in the Caucasus Mountains persisted in self-governance and retained their traditional culture.

Although the natural conditions of the mountains were quite harsh, they also provided the means of living and survival for the highlanders of Chechnya, mainly

¹⁰⁹ As quoted by King, pg. 5

¹¹⁰ King, pg. 3

¹¹¹ Broxup, pg. 1

pasture for cattle grazing. The mountaineers would have to constantly be on guard to protect their mountain villages, *auls*, and cattle from outside tribes and the mountains would serve as a natural defense against invaders. The *auls* were used as permanent defense and usually well armed and fortified. The objective of the fortified auls was to protect the land, property and lives of the villagers by standing together. When the villagers worked together and even several auls joined forces, the resistance of foreign attackers could last for weeks. The Chechens consider the mountains as shelter, a refuge where they feel truly safe. This reality of life in the highlands has also come to define much of the Chechen mentality that each day is a struggle for survival.¹¹²

The mountains have served not just as a safe haven to the people, but also to the culture of Chechnya. The mountainous terrain made it easier for the people to resist Imperial rule and thus preserve traditional culture. This has led to what is now an obvious distinction between highlanders and those from the lowlands. Living in the mountains has had a fundamental influence on the mentality of many of the Chechen people, and has kept teip society and traditional culture alive in some of the Chechen population.

The Rise of Russian Rule and the Defeat of Imam Shamil

“The Caucasus may be likened to a mighty fortress, marvelously strong by nature, artificially protected by military works, and defended by a numerous garrison.”

- General A. A. Veliaminov, 1828

The Russian quest to conquer the North Caucasus began in the late 18th century, and ruthlessly continued into the next century, using genocidal tactics to subdue the Caucasian peoples. In 1824 began the era of the *gazavat*, or the holy wars. The most well-known and perhaps impressive holy war was the Great Gazavat of Imam Shamil from 1834 to 1859. His followers were called *murids*, members of a Sufi Islam order, but

¹¹² Souleimanov, “Chechen Society and Mentality”

also holding on to the old traditions of the highland clannish societies.¹¹³ These Sufi orders, in particular the Naqshbandi, informal and populist in nature, were the best equipped to hold influence and provide the structure and leadership needed to rebel against imperialism.¹¹⁴ The native peoples of the North Caucasus resisted Russian encroachment with guerilla warfare, culminating in Shamil's war that only ended with his surrender in 1859. The conquest of the North Caucasus was finally completed with the defeat of the Circassians in 1864.¹¹⁵ It was much more than a military conquest, but also a frontier process to try and assimilate the peoples to the south into the Russian Empire. While Tsarist Russia could claim to have control of the lands of the North Caucasus up until the revolution, they could never claim control over all of the people.

By 1813 Russia had asserted its right to the North Caucasus over the other powerful empires of the time, but recognized the need to more fully conquer the peoples of the region. As appointed governor and chief administrator of Georgia and the Caucasus, General A. P. Ermolov said in 1816, "The existence of independent or semi-independent states or communities of any description, whether Christian, Musulman, or Pagan, in the mountains or in the plain, was incompatible with the dignity and the honour of his Master [the Russian Tsar], the safety and welfare of his subjects."¹¹⁶ To fully incorporate the North Caucasus into the Russian Empire, Ermolov applied the 'siege policy' and waged continuous military campaigns against those who resisted the Russian advance. He also enacted policies to attempt to reorganize societies to better capitulate to Russian rule. His drastic measures greatly disrupted the traditional way of life, and the people of the North Caucasus coordinated many armed rebellions. These uprisings were brutally put down by Ermolov through terror on a massive scale where executions of entire villages were used for the fault of just one or a few of its people.¹¹⁷ His techniques of malicious destruction of property, mass deportation, and indiscriminate killing were all done in the name of bringing "true freedom and enlightenment to backward tribal

¹¹³ Broxup, pp. 2-3

¹¹⁴ Zelkina, pg. 74

¹¹⁵ Barrett, pp. 578-9

¹¹⁶ As quoted by Zelkina, pg. 69

¹¹⁷ Zelkina, pp. 69-72

peoples.”¹¹⁸ Ermolov was the quintessential frontier conqueror and Tsarists, Bolsheviks, and the Russian generals of the 21st century would use his ruthless methods.¹¹⁹

It was in the mid 19th century that Islam emerged as the only dominant political force able to cross tribal or ethnic divides and unite the peoples of the North Caucasus in their anti-colonial efforts. It was a Chechen, Imam Mansour, who first advocated a pan-Caucasian military and political alliance in the late 18th century to combat Russian colonization of the North Caucasus. It was appropriate that he was Chechen because the Chechen were exposed to Russian policies later than other peoples, and thus quick to react to the challenge. Their readiness to mount resistance was intensified by the absence of ruling elites or princely dynasties that could be influenced and manipulated by the Russians. Mansour could not ignite in the Chechens and mountain Dagestanis the strength needed to overcome the Russians because some were still reluctant to join military campaigns outside their own locality.¹²⁰ His battles against the Russian forces would also establish a pattern that would last for over 200 years: the Russians send in large forces and raze Chechen villages while the Chechens retreat to the dense forests and high mountains to rally around their leader who then announces a holy war to expel the Russians; under his leadership, Chechens then kill Russian soldiers through well-planned and well-executed guerilla attacks.¹²¹ Mansour’s ideas would also remain in the collective memory of the people, and when these ideas met the institutional power of Sufi organization and a strong leader, a new wave of resistance would develop.¹²² It would actually be a Dagestani who would later unite the Chechens and wage the best-fought campaign against the Russian Empire.

In autumn of 1834, after the murder of the previous Imam, Shamil was proclaimed as the third — and last — Imam of the Caucasian Imamate. Although his first two years as leader were spent consolidating his authority among the old forces and

¹¹⁸ King, pp. 45-6

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 45

¹²⁰ Zelkina, pp. 73-4

¹²¹ Schaefer, pg. 57

¹²² Zelkina, pp. 73-4

defeating local rivals, he was the imam capable of garnering the most widespread support in Dagestan and Chechnya.¹²³ Shamil initially sought reconciliation with the Russians, but they would not accept his conditions, mainly the continued practice of sharia law. Russia also did not trust Shamil, so instead of negotiating any kind of peace deal the Empire offered only the option of unconditional surrender, either voluntary or by force. Shamil of course refused this surrender and thus started another long Russian march through the North Caucasus. It was devastating to the local populations, but convinced many of the people to support Shamil, sustaining his insurgency for nearly thirty years. He led a brilliant guerilla war against the Russian Empire for decades,¹²⁴ and although he preached the conservative brand of Naqshbandi Islam and advocated *sharia* law over local customary law, he was still able to draw support from the highlands where the people were typically less religious and more militant.¹²⁵ Shamil's imamate included the many different ethnic groups of the Northeast Caucasus. In 1859, Shamil was finally captured by Russian forces, which then set upon the Northwest Caucasus with a vengeance.¹²⁶ Even after the North Caucasus fell firmly under Imperial rule, his *gazavat* against the Empire served an even greater purpose. He had proved that a small group of guerillas, if they fought hard enough and believed hard enough in their cause, they could take on the Great Russian Empire.¹²⁷ This legacy would go on to inspire many boys from the North Caucasus to take up the mantle of Shamil and take on the Russians. In fact, one of his namesakes born in 1965 would grow up to eclipse the original Shamil's notoriety among Chechens.

Even after Russian forces had incorporated the North Caucasus firmly into the Empire, they will still be unable to fully control the local populations and impose the imperial system. "The North Caucasus remained relatively untouched by imperial rule before 1917, a sensitive and rebellious frontier region with cultural links to worlds

¹²³ King, pg. 78

¹²⁴ Schaefer, pp. 64-5

¹²⁵ Zelkina, pg. 176

¹²⁶ Jersild, pp. 21-2

¹²⁷ Schaefer, pg. 64

beyond the borders of the Russian Empire.”¹²⁸ The bloody and protracted struggle of many of the mountain societies against Russian rule led regime officials to proceed cautiously in the region. This created conditions that distanced these peoples from the Russian system. Chechen and Dagestani mountaineers did not serve in the Imperial army and instead paid a three-ruble-per-person tax in exchange for their exemption. Even after the onset of World War I when the army became desperate, the regime was simply unable to compel highlanders to serve. The Chechen mountaineers were also not in Imperial schools,¹²⁹ leaving all aspects of child rearing and education up to the individual *teips*. Romanov rule over the Empire was a “patchwork of disparate territories, brought together in largely piecemeal fashion.”¹³⁰ This incomplete nature of Russia’s conquest of the North Caucasus and the unsatisfactory nature of integration left traditional culture to thrive in the mountains of Chechnya.

The Caucasus War of the mid 19th century though Russian officials much about the dangers of Russian influence in the North Caucasus. Any attempts to administer mountain regions according to Russian laws only intensified mountaineer opposition to the Russian presence. Russian practices forms of rule were often inappropriate for the peoples of the borderlands, who preferred the ancient tribal forms of administration and justice. Instead, Imperial officials experimented with codifying customary law, *adat*, in the courts, and resolving conflict according to local traditions, especially in Chechnya.¹³¹ There remained a great strength of many of the national feelings in the Caucasus, especially in Chechnya, despite the bloody wars and savagery of both sides over the years. Languages and traditions were jealously guarded regardless of the attempts at Russification and secularization, which were at their most zealous in the North Caucasus. The basic fabric of society remained largely intact.¹³²

¹²⁸ Jersild, pg. 36

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-6

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 37

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 92-3

¹³² Goldenberg, pg. 6

Under Soviet Rule

Russian's weak rule in the North Caucasus "crossed the divide of revolution," as Sufi orders grew during Soviet rule. In 1925, 70-80% of Chechen men over eighteen had some kind of connection to a Sufi brotherhood. Sufi-led fighting continued in the mountains of the North Caucasus until 1947.¹³³ The Soviets not only objected with the influence of Islam in the region, but also saw the traditional customs of the people as backwardness, directly in opposition to the Soviet Universalist ideology of progress. In 1927, Soviet officials declared *sharia* and *adat* as unacceptable guides to the administration of justice, but still were unable to actually control or even monitor such evens in the North Caucasus.¹³⁴ Other customs, such as *nokhchalla*, were outlawed in Chechnya. While these practices were officially banned by the state, they by no means died out.

Some Bolsheviks even identified with the Chechen people because they saw ethnic minorities along with the working class as victims of the Imperial regime. But what the Soviets did not realize was that Chechens would not welcome their rule that would bring them out of their mountaineer backwardness; the Chechens preferred their ancient customs and traditions and had no intentions of being brought into the 20th century.

The Soviets dealt the North Caucasians another great injustice, one that would prove to be a powerful symbol during later national revivals, Stalin's deportations. This is a wholesale persecution that is still very much a part of the living memory of the Chechen people. On 23 February 1944, Red Army day, 200,000 Chechens and 90,000 Ingush were deported from their homelands to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, along with several other ethnic minorities from the Caucasus. Although they were taken completely by surprise, some Chechens managed to escape into the mountains where outlaw gangs remained up until 1951. The official line was that the deportations were necessary for wartime security, or suspected Nazi collaboration, or simply the "unreliableness" of

¹³³ Jersild, pg. 37

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8

Caucasians, but Stalin's ulterior motives are obvious. The Chechens were the most numerous and rebellious nation, making their deportation an attempt at destroying natural leadership in the region.¹³⁵

The consequences of the deportations were severe for many in the North Caucasus. Not only were people forcibly removed from their homes, but also entire histories were rewritten. The names of towns and villages were changed, territories were wiped off the map, other territories given over to other republics, and the Karachai and Balkar peoples officially ceased to exist. The stigma on the deported peoples also followed them home after they were finally allowed to return. It was only after Stalin's death and Khrushchev's Secret Speech denouncing him in 1956 that the beginnings of reparation were made to the deported peoples. In February 1957, a law was passed restoring the territories of Checheno-Ingushetia, Karachai-Cherkess, and Kabardino-Balkar.¹³⁶

The North Caucasus remained through the Soviet period one of the least Russified regions of the USSR. Fewer Russians settled in the Caucasus than any other part of the Soviet Union,¹³⁷ and the spread of secularism and education did little to weaken clan affiliations and clan culture. The Chechens especially held on to their strong national feelings and their distinct customs. The collapse of the Soviet Union would prove to be the perfect time for a revival of traditional culture and a new kind of nationalism.

Chechnya: Breakaway Republic

“He turned his back oh his native borders

And flew off to a far-away land,

Alongside the merry ghost of freedom.”

- Aleksandr Pushkin, *Captive of the Caucasus*, 1822

¹³⁵ Goldenberg, pp. 194-5

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 197-8

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7

During the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 and exactly one month after he is elected President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, General Dzhokhar Dudayev declared independence from Russia on 27 November 1991. He did so in the wake of the many constituent republics that declared independence from the USSR after the failed coup attempt. Dudayev was also quick to call for a return to the traditional culture, including adat that had been suppressed by the Soviets. By this time the Russian Federation had also declared its independence from the Soviet Union with Boris Yeltsin as its president. Yeltsin was unwilling to accept Chechen self-determination and immediately declared a state of emergency in the republic, sending troops to Grozny, the capital. But the new president quickly backed down when he saw violence would be opposed by still Soviet President Gorbachev and fellow new President Dudayev.¹³⁸ However this reluctance towards violence on Yeltsin's part quickly vanished and in December 1994 Russian Federal forces began bombing Grozny and then fully invaded Chechnya in what would become the First Chechen War.

By August 1996, Russian troops were forced out of Grozny, but Dudayev did not live to see their retreat. Zelimkhan Yandarbiev and then Aslan Maskhadov had already replaced him when this single military act convinced Yeltsin to seek a political settlement. The settlement and cease-fire did not bring so much peace as simply an absence of war. The two years of war had radicalized an entire generation of young Chechens, intensified the cleavages within the Chechen leadership, and proven that violence could provide a livelihood.¹³⁹ After the first war, the Islamic element of the struggle became more pronounced, although the foreign Islamist presence was never as prominent as was often claimed or depicted in the Chechen conflict.

Reciprocal assassinations became commonplace, as well as continuous violence and kidnappings. Within a few short years the spiral of violence in Chechnya had spun into a second war when Russian Federal troops again invaded Chechnya in October 1999

¹³⁸ King, pp. 233-4

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 236-7

headed by new president Vladimir Putin.¹⁴⁰ The Second Chechen War would prove to be even more brutal than the first on the parts of both the federal forces and the separatists. This time around, some of the former separatists had defeated over to the federal side in favor of official pro-Kremlin Chechen government, such as the Yamadayev clan. The separatists too had changed their game plan; the Islamist faction was growing and their tactics changing. Under the leadership of Shamil Basayev, terrorist methods would replace the more traditional guerilla tactics of the first war, such as the 2002 Moscow Theater bombing, the 2004 Beslan school siege, and numerous suicide bombings.

Russian forces killed Basayev on 10 July 2006 and Doku Umarov took up leadership of the separatist movement. By this time the Russian campaign in Chechnya was less like a traditional war and more like a counter-terrorist operation. Umarov had also elevated the separatist movement further into the Islamist realm and declared a rebel United Caucasian Emirate, with himself at the head. Meanwhile, former rebel Ramzan Kadyrov becomes president of Chechnya in 2007 and consolidates his power with the backing of the Kremlin as being to only man who can control Chechnya. The actual “end” to the Second War is disputed because of the ever changing tactics and morphing conflict that has pushed most of the rebel forces out of Chechnya and into neighboring republics.

Kadyrov declares an end to Chechen counter-insurgency operations in March 2009, and then President Medvedev officially declares an end to the Russian counter-terrorism operations in Chechnya on 27 March 2009. The real tragedy of this long-running war in Chechnya is not that there was no one to speak for the people, in fact there were probably too many, but that those who took up the mantle, whether they be in Moscow, Grozny, or the highlands, preferred a pyrrhic victory over a long lasting peace.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ King, pp. 238-9

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 241

CHAPTER 5: CHECHEN IDENTITY

It has already been discussed what it means to have true Chechen character, but what does it mean to be Chechen? How do the Chechens see themselves? For centuries clannish society provided all the identity the people of Chechnya wanted and needed. In the modern era, it is necessary for nations; especially those seeking their own nation-state, to have a cohesive identity of what it means to belong to that nationality. Since the fall of the Soviet Union the Chechen people have had to cultivate their own sense of identity. They have created the Chechen identity using collective memory and in turn creating nationalism that can sustain the separatist movement.

Collective Memory

In war and conflict, the collective memory of a people, what they see as their own shared history, is just as important and perhaps more so than the actual history. How a people perceive their past is going to be the same way they perceive their future.

Russia's efforts to conquer the North Caucasus and then subjugate the peoples of those lands into first the Imperial regime and then the Socialist regime, are the events that most shape the collective memory of the Chechen people. The biggest mistake of the Russian regimes was that while they conquered the lands of Chechnya, they never conquered the people. Instead, the independent spirit of the Chechens and their strong thirst for freedom never died, but simmered for over a hundred years. The Russians did not rule the Chechens through total devastation and destruction, but rather left the people to their own devices. As Niccolo Machiavelli wrote in his evocative work *The Prince*,

For, in truth, there is no sure of holding other than by destroying, and whoever becomes master of a City accustomed to live in freedom and does not destroy it, may reckon on being destroyed by it. For if it should rebel, it can always screen itself under the name of liberty and its ancient laws, which no length of time, nor any benefits conferred will ever cause it to forget; and do what you will, and take what care you may, unless the inhabitants be scattered and dispersed, this name, and the old order of things, will never cease to be remembered, but will at once be turned against you whenever misfortune overtakes you...¹⁴²

¹⁴² Machiavelli, pp. 29-30

This passage perfectly illustrates the experience of Chechnya. Machiavelli suggests that an invading regime must break the will of the people it means to rule if it would rule them successfully. If their will is not broken, then the history and spirit of the people will live on, and the attempts at colonization and subjugation never forgotten. In fact, these events will forever be embedded into the memory of the people. It is these past grievances by the Russians that have had such a strong impact on the collective memory of the people of Chechnya and been a unifying element and battle cry for the Chechen separatists.

The brutality of General Ermolov's campaigns to conquer Chechnya, which would be the blueprint for subsequent attempts at quelling the rise of the Chechen nation, still live on in the Chechen mind to such an extent that resistance to Russian rule has become a vital part of Chechen identity. Ermolov did take a page from Machiavelli's playbook and tried to fully subordinate the Chechen people by any means necessary. His attempts at the full destruction and devastation of Chechnya were drastic and greatly disrupted the traditional way of life in the region, and the people staged numerous armed rebellions that were brutally put down. Because Ermolov was convinced that "gentleness in the eyes of the Asiatics was a sign of weakness,"¹⁴³ he saw terror as the only method appropriate for the Chechens. He also claimed he "desire[d] that the terror of my name should guard our frontiers more patently than chains of fortresses, that my word should be for the natives a law more inevitable than death."¹⁴⁴ Although Ermolov's tactics were extremely harsh, they were not enough to fully break the Chechen people. Instead, it is figures like he and the experience of his policies that has stuck in the Chechen mentality. These experiences have ingrained a sense of rebellion and resistance towards Russia in the Chechen identity. For centuries the Chechen people have seen their relationship with Russia as us versus them. In many societies this kind of mentality can create powerful group cohesion and solidarity, and Chechnya is no different.

¹⁴³ As quoted in Zelkina, pg. 72

¹⁴⁴ As quoted in *ibid.*, pg. 72

Alongside this feature of resistance in the Chechen identity is the celebration of Chechen heroes like Sheikh Mansour and Imam Shamil. These figures are strong symbols for the Chechen people that can also produce cohesion and solidarity among the people. Sheikh Mansour led the first organized uprising of mountaineers and declared a *gazavat* against the Russian “infidels” under the banner of Islam. He consolidated Chechens, Dagestanis, Circassians, Kabardians, and Adygeans to protect their homelands from the Russian invaders. Mansour successfully recruited thousands of men for his campaigns against the Empire’s advance into the North Caucasus, mostly Chechens and Dagestanis, who fought bravely for several years against Imperial forces until his capture in 1791.¹⁴⁵ While Mansour inspired many people, he lacked the kind of support needed to stage a resistance strong enough to defeat Russian forces. Sheikh Mansour is an especially important figure for the Chechens because he was the first such resistance leader, a Chechen himself, and the main influence for the military-Islamic state of the more famous and more successful Imam Shamil.

Imam Shamil would prove to be one of most powerful symbols used by the Chechens to promote their cause for independence. One of the most advantageous features of collective memory is that it can be selective. Shamil’s image evoked strong feelings among many Chechens, as his imamate was regarded as symbolic of the desire for national independence across the North Caucasus. But this was a form of idealized version of reality;¹⁴⁶ the accurate history of Shamil’s fight against the Russians in the mid 19th century was quite different from the fight for independence being waged in the 1990s. The Chechen leaders of the day “self-consciously resurrected the memory of Mansour and Shamil,”¹⁴⁷ regardless of the appropriateness of the comparison. Shamil and his memory would inspire many of the warlords that came out of the Chechen wars. The most famous, Shamil Basayev, would relish his connection to his namesake and the imagery it could stir up among the people. While the beginning of the Chechen separatist movement did not very well match the struggles of Mansour and Shamil, the subsequent

¹⁴⁵ Souleimanov, “North Caucasus Resistance Leader Sheikh Mansour”

¹⁴⁶ King, pg. 83

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 234

leaders of the movement would eventually evolve themselves to better match the Islamic quest for freedom.

Joseph Stalin picked up on Machiavelli's method where Ermolov left off. He sought to solve the "Chechen problem" and break the people by scattering them from their homeland in the deportations of 1944. This was devastating to the some 300,000 Chechens who were uprooted from their lives. The deportation was not only an attack on the religion of the Chechens, but also their way of life. Removing so many Chechens from their villages greatly disrupted clannish society and its structure. But in many cases, because they were so far away from home, the *teip* ties among the people grew even stronger. While this period of exile increased the importance of clan relationships, it also inspired a new sect of Islam in Chechen society: Wahhabism. The Wahhabis were fundamentalists and openly hostile to the traditional Sufi sects, who incorporated pre-Muslim Chechen traditions and promoted a moderation of faith.¹⁴⁸ But the overwhelming majority of Chechens were not converted to this form of Islam that promoted the need to purify the current Islam. Stalin's plan was also short-lived, and by the mid-1950s, many Chechens along with other nationalities were being repatriated back to their homelands. But the damage was done; the deportations were another feature of the attempted Imperial and Soviet destruction of the Chechen people.

This history of exile under the Soviets is a true part of the Chechens' living history. The deportation plays such a powerful role as grievance in collective memory because it so recently happened. Many of those affected are still alive today. In a 2003 interview to Oregon Public Broadcasting in the segment *Bridging World History*, Ramzan Magomedov explains what it means to be Chechen and emphasizes the deportation as told by his grandmother as one of the defining features. Magomedov recalls her story:

It was cold, it was really cold outside and there was a knock at the door. My grandmother opened the door and there was an officer and two soldiers who told her that she had fifteen minutes to gather whatever she can — whatever she can

¹⁴⁸ Zelkina, pp. 35-8

carry. And take her child and be on that truck that is sitting out there, one of the trucks that was in the village, and they'll be taken to the city, and they are being deported — as they said — to Siberia. Of course, in actuality it was to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, but to Chechens it really didn't make any difference at all. It was still deportation, a forceful deportation to a faraway land that they had no affiliation with at all. When my grandmother talked about it, I don't remember a single time when she didn't cry. Every time, even many, many years later, brought tremendous pain to her to remember those events.

One can see how easily these stories of deportation, and there are tens of thousands of them just the same, can have an impact of the identity of an entire nation and play a major role in that nation's quest for independence. In the construction of a collective identity, historical memories are especially important. These memories will go on to serve a greater role than even the experience of current clashes with an adversary.

Nationalism

For centuries the Vainakh people have fought against foreign invaders and their influence for the right to live their lives as their own and in their own way with their distinctive customs and traditions. In the modern context this fight has shifted somewhat. No longer is it just a fight to be free, but one of self-determination: the right of a people to live in a state that is their own. To create a nation-state, the people need to develop a sense of nationalism. In Chechen society this was not so easy. For hundreds of years, a Chechen's primary identity came from his village and membership in his *teip*. While collective responsibility was an important aspect of life, the Chechens have always remained a very independent-minded people with their own language, culture, and territory, but no centralized authority. The Chechen people have managed to bring many of the ancient customs into modern times, creating a distinctive culture to help define themselves as a people. The Chechens also already had their own land and language necessary for self-determination, but still more was needed to connect the clans of Chechnya as one nation. A new national identity more important than *teip* identity was needed to create nationalism convincing enough to require independence.

This concept of self-determination is a tricky one. Emerging from Woodrow Wilson after World War I, it centers on the idea that every people (nationality) has the

right to their own state. For self-determination to work, the people in question must be a true nation with particular defining characteristics. Valerii Tishkov pointedly points out that “the rhetoric of self-determination has always been basically an emotional political argument to justify disintegration and violent conflict.”¹⁴⁹ Regardless of the legitimacy of self-determination, any one would argue after declaring independence and then fighting two wars over said independence, like Chechnya has done, strong nationalism is needed. The best way for the Chechens to do this is simply to promote their radical cultural distinctiveness from Russia and use collective memory to create internal solidarity in the fight for an independent state. Again it is necessary to label the Russians as the aggressors who have oppressed the Chechen people for centuries. Despite any differences between the many clans of Chechnya, there are still those features of society that bring them together, especially their collective history of resistance against Russia.

Interestingly, an instrumental factor in the emergence of the Chechen nationalist movement was the structural legacy of Soviet nationality policy and its principle of ethnoterritorial federalism, despite the actual repression of any national aspirations. The existence of these “tactical nation-states” cultivated the development of national elites and cultures, however unintentional.¹⁵⁰ Negative historical experiences with Russia in combination that particular Soviet policy would help to consolidate and reinforce group identity and solidarity among many Chechens, culminating with that declaration of independence in 1991. It was that rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union that created the space for the ideological and political liberalization of the Chechen nationalist movement.¹⁵¹ The movement would grow and evolve over the next twenty years, most notoriously taking on an Islamist aspect.

Dudayev would also play a critical role in increasing Chechen nationalism by emphasizing Vainakh culture: an identity that reached across clan ties. After declaring independence of the still Checheno-Ingush Republic in 1991, he proclaimed, “There is a

¹⁴⁹ Sakwa, ed., pg. 159

¹⁵⁰ Lapidus, pg. 9

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11

single and indivisible Vainakh people with a place of honor for each of its five member-nationalities: Chechen, Ingush, Orstkhoy, Melkhistin, and Akkin. Today, history gives us a unique chance to establish that fact by creating a single Vainakh statehood.”¹⁵² His statement reflects a larger idea to incorporate as many historic communities as possible in the Chechen entity in order to widen its geographic span and deepen its cultural legacy. While Tishkov aptly points out that having spent a majority of his life outside Chechnya Dudayev was less than experienced to be able to extrapolate on Chechen nationalism. Nevertheless, his sentiments were not so off the mark. As Tishkov’s informant explained, “In the past, those groups (Orstkhoy, Melkhistin, Akkin) may have rated as separate *teips*, but they can scarcely be described as present-day nationalities. In 1988-94, they gained much stronger standing among the Chechens.”¹⁵³ Incorporating these groups into the Chechen nationalist movement would help to bolster it and reaffirm the overarching qualities that join Chechens together: their Vainakhness.

The Rise of Islamic Nationalism

Throughout most of the 20th century, the rise of nationalism was the biggest concern for political scientists, especially in the aftermath of two world wars born out of nationalism. When multi-ethnic socialist unions like Yugoslavia and the USSR collapsed in the beginning of the 1990s, it appeared nationalism would continue to be on the rise, with so many ethnicities stirring for independence. But another movement was on the rise nearing the end of the 20th century that surprised many scholars: the religious political movement. Religious extremists hijacked the Iranian revolution in 1979; the religious right was becoming more prominent in US politics during the 1980s; and September 11th brought the Islamist jihad movement into the international sphere. Indeed there was a worldwide rise of religious fundamentalism, and Chechnya was not immune.¹⁵⁴ The first Chechen conflict in the 1990s was one of an organized group of separatists fighting for independence from Russia. While Islam is a part a Chechen identity, the fight was still a secular one. The majority of Chechen rebels had yet to be Islamized.

¹⁵² As quoted by Tishkov, pg. 50

¹⁵³ Tishkov, pg. 50

¹⁵⁴ Fox, pg. 717

The Second Chechen War was much less organized on the side of the separatists, but the biggest difference was the role Islam was to play in the fight. Many of the rebel leaders had become Islamized and their tactics changed drastically. There was also the introduction of some foreign fighters into the conflict, specifically Wahhabis. While fundamental Islam became a new quality of the conflict, that is not who the Chechens really are. The media and the rebels themselves exaggerate the extent of which foreign mujahideens participate in the conflict, and the fact that fundamental Islam is a part of Chechen society, it is not. Approximately 80% of Chechens disagree with Wahhabism or any kind of fundamental Islam.¹⁵⁵ Most people still identify with traditional culture and *teip* society, especially in the mountains. The current Chechen government has not helped the Islamic image of Chechnya. President Kadyrov has enacted sharia laws, or attempted to, that promote conservative and fundamental Islamic ideals that are not congruent with the true nature of the majority of the Chechen people.

Most Chechens, especially those in the mountains, still identify much more with *teip* society and traditional culture than with fundamental Islam. While many are practicing Muslims, that is only one aspect of their identity, not their entire identity, as the features of Islamic fundamentalism would suggest. Traditional culture still plays a major role in the modern Chechen identity. And as such, traditional culture has also had its own impact on the violence in Chechnya.

¹⁵⁵ Politkovskaya, pg. 336

CHAPTER 6: CONFLICT

Both of the wars in Chechen in the recent past were a struggle for independence on one side and the fight to preserve the Russian Federation on the other. On the side of the separatists, the second war was dominated by the rise of the Islamist faction. Although less organized than they were in the first war, the later rebels would in fact cause more destruction and devastation in Chechnya and across Russia. The Islamist factor in the Chechen conflict played a major role in changing the nature of the conflict and has thus overshadowed many of the other causes of violence in Chechnya, one of these being traditional culture and the impact it has had on the Chechen mentality and its views towards violence and vengeance.

The First Chechen War

*“The war is over. The resistance put up
by the bandits and separatists has been crushed.”*

- Boris Yeltsin, 28 May 1996

During the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Chechnya followed the example of other nations within the union, and although it was not a constituent republic, and issued a unilateral declaration of independence from the USSR. Chechnya’s intense and bloody past with Russia, constituted by entrenched historical grievances and the shared experience of deportation,¹⁵⁶ made the republic especially poised to seize the unique opportunity at that time. The new president of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, also inadvertently motivated the declaration of independence by encouraging local elites to “take all the sovereignty you can swallow” in his fight against Gorbachev and Soviet central authority.¹⁵⁷ It was a quick road to war after Chechnya first asserted its right to independence, as the new Russian Federation was unwilling to see another part of it go. While the collapse of the USSR had been liberating at first, it was also a painful loss of

¹⁵⁶ Youngs, pg. 8

¹⁵⁷ Lapidus, pg. 12

empire for the Russians, after which fears were heightened that the Russian Federation itself might disintegrate.¹⁵⁸ The new regime did not want Chechnya to set a precedent for other nationalities within the Federation to break away.

Russia's erratic response following Chechnya's declaration and the failed first attempt at intervention only served to consolidate support behind Dudayev. Several factors contributed to Moscow's decision to invade Chechnya after two years of inaction. Again this fear that Chechnya might inspire other republics to secede from the Russian Federation was palpable. There was also the presence of a significant ethnic Russian population within Chechnya, around 100,000.¹⁵⁹ This would later become a staple of Russia's foreign policy: the protection of Russian citizens in the "near abroad." Support for intervention also grew within the Kremlin because of economic interests, mainly oil, in Chechnya and the belief that a "short and victorious war" would improve President Yeltsin's ratings. After the expiration of an ultimatum for Dudayev to surrender on 9 December 1994, Yeltsin authorized the use of "all means available" to disarm "illegal groups" and impose constitutional rule in the republic. Two days later the Russian army and interior ministry forces that had amassed along the Chechen border, crossed into Chechnya from three directions, about 35,000 ground troops.¹⁶⁰

The first attempt for federal forces to take Grozny on New Year's Eve was a catastrophic failure. Russian forces in terms of manpower and equipment were far superior to that of the Chechens, but their hubris in the belief that the Chechens would easily surrender lead to a humiliating defeat where as many as 2,000 Russians soldiers died.¹⁶¹ Violence escalated due to the widespread and unanticipated Chechen resistance. The Russian troops, already demoralized and severely ill prepared, found themselves confronted with guerilla warfare around every corner. In time they came to see virtually the entire civilian population as the enemy.¹⁶² Federal forces finally took the city through

¹⁵⁸ Lapidus, pg. 13

¹⁵⁹ Youngs, pg. 9

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 10

¹⁶² Lapidus, pp. 21-2

massive air and artillery bombardment, which ended with many civilian casualties. By December 1995 losses from the conflict were estimated to be somewhere between 26,000 and 50,000, including approximately 20,000 civilians.¹⁶³

There were many reasons, political and military, for the Russians' poor implementation of the war. Most important to the repercussions after the war was the actual state of the Russian troops. In many cases they were poorly trained and sent into battle with wildly inaccurate intelligence. There was also an extreme lack of discipline among the often frightened and brutalized Russian troops. This led to frequent reprisals against the civilian population, including the massacre of over 100 Chechens in the village of Samashki in April of 1995. The Russians also established 'filtration' center to help distinguish combatants from non-combatants. These too were a travesty against the Chechen people. Many detainees were tortured or summarily executed; thousands are believed to have died in captivity.¹⁶⁴ This is yet another shared experience to be filed away in the collective memory of the Chechens. This experience gave the people more grievances against Russia fueling the fires of resentment and increasing support for the rebels.

By May 1995 the situation of the rebels had deteriorated greatly as manpower, ammunition and medical supplies died out. In an attempt to reverse the situation we see the rise of Shamil Basayev. Acting without authorization from the Chechen leadership, he and his band of rebels mount an attack on the southern Russian town of Budennovsk, seize a hospital and take some 2,500 hostages. This led to an agreed cease-fire and direct peace talks with Moscow after their bungled attempt to storm the building. While negotiations that summer made progress, the peace process was brought to an end after a series of bomb attacks on Russian officials in Chechnya.¹⁶⁵ This is a method Basayev would become famous for utilizing, and the Russian forces perhaps more famous for their regular mismanagement of these situations.

¹⁶³ Youngs, pg. 10

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 11

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 11

Fighting resumed through the Moscow backed Chechen elections, where the Kremlin's man, former Communist leader Doku Zavgayev, won a large majority, albeit after a widespread boycott of the vote. In January 1996 the rebels carried out another hostage raid, which ended with another ill-advised Russian assault that further damaged the leadership in Moscow. After this second debacle and in anticipation of the presidential elections, Yeltsin proceeded with renewed fervor to seek a cease-fire that preserved the Russian Federation. The turning point came when Dudayev was killed by a Russian air strike in April 1996. His successor, Yandarbiev, then travelled to Moscow to negotiate an agreement, signed 27 May 1996.¹⁶⁶ Needless to say, Yeltsin's "victory" in Chechnya won him re-election but the declaration was premature because the cease-fire did not bring peace as violations continued. By August the rebels were in almost full control of Grozny. Peace did not seem imminent as the Russian forces had been through a war of attrition, and morale was very low. Yeltsin also desired the re-capturing of Grozny in addition to the withdrawal of federal forces, an impossible task.

The peace agreement was finally agreed to on 27 August 1996 in Khasavyurt, Dagestan, which brought an end to the fighting and was ambiguous enough to appease both sides. After the Russians realized it was futile to attempt to retake Grozny and more liberal elements had more sway in the Kremlin, it was Yeltsin's national security supremo, General Aleksandr Lebed, who pushed the negotiations through. He was the man who recognized that the war was both unwinnable and wrong for the Russians who could not restore constitutional order in Chechnya through air strikes and artillery shelling. He also made the negotiations with the Chechen leadership possible by his sensitivity to the psychology of the Chechen side.¹⁶⁷ The peace settlement also had a five-year postponement of the decision about the final status of Chechnya, and in the meantime the republic would remain in the federation, but with an autonomous government and fresh elections. The approximate total number of casualties from the first conflict was between 60,000-100,000 dead and 240,000 wounded. Aslan

¹⁶⁶ Youngs, pg. 11-12

¹⁶⁷ Lapidus, pg. 24

Maskhadov, former chief of staff and architect of the peace agreement, would win the 1997 Chechen presidential election,¹⁶⁸ but Chechnya would not last the five years until the second conflict broke out.

The First Chechen War lasted less than two years, but its impact was great. The physical destruction of Chechnya was devastating - entire sections completely wiped out; however it was the impact the war had on the Chechen people and their mentality that was most detrimental. The handling of the conflict by the Russian forces only bolstered the separatist cause and even helped to pave the way for a new addition to the cause: fundamental Islam. It was only after the first war that parts of society, albeit it small parts, began to be radicalized by Islamic fundamentalism. And as so much has already been written on this subject, religious fervor changed the nature of the conflict and the nature of the battle.

The Second Chechen War

“When people disappear from their families and no one will say where they are located, and then their relatives find their bodies, this gives birth to a minimum of ten new rebels.”

- Akhmed Kadyrov

The First Chechen War left Chechnya broken, and little was done, or could be done, to repair it following the end of the conflict. The hopes for a new political consensus and progress towards rebuilding that were brought by the peace settlement were premature. Promised aid from Russia’s federal budget never came. Widespread lawlessness, organized crime, and persistent political fragmentation kept Chechnya in chaos. Kidnappings, torture and murder were not uncommon; Maskhadov simply could not consolidate power and keep the republic in control. Following the first war, several factions of power emerged in Chechnya. The main force was Maskhadov, but two field commanders occupied local strongholds with growing independence from the Chechen

¹⁶⁸ Youngs, pg. 12-13

government: Shamil Basayev and Salman Raduyev.¹⁶⁹ Over time Basayev would become the most powerful warlord in Chechnya, with the help of Maskhadov's incapacities and the rise of fundamental Islam.

It would be Islam's role in the movement that would ultimately undermine Maskhadov completely. He and his followers remained a secular separatist movement. He attempted to ban Wahhabism, but many of those fighters had made an alliance with Basayev with the new goal of driving the Russians out of the entire North Caucasus and establishing an Islamic republic. Despite condemnation from Maskhadov, Basayev and his rebels began a campaign of attacks on military and police installations in neighboring Dagestan, and by August 1999 it was a major incursion of around two thousand militia fighters into Dagestan. In response Russian forces were dispatched to put down the rebel forces. Not finding the support for insurrection they had hoped, Basayev and his rebels were forced back into Chechnya.¹⁷⁰ Maskhadov had failed to achieve the monopoly of the legitimate use of force and clearly lost control of the effective rebel forces inside Chechnya.

The devastating Moscow apartment block bomb attacks in late August and early September 1999 added a new dimension to the crisis in Chechnya. Although the origin of the attacks would turn out to be quite controversial, newly appointed Prime Minister Vladimir Putin blamed Chechen and Wahhabi terrorists for the attacks¹⁷¹. The Russian response was considerably larger in scope than the 1994 invasion: over 90,000 federal forces from multiple branches advanced rapidly through northern Chechnya. The initial aim of the Russian forces was to destroy terrorist bases, but this was soon expanded to include the creation of a "security zone," and later the intention seemed all along to establish full control over the whole of Chechnya.¹⁷² Maskhadov called for the fragmented militia groups to unite together against the Russian threat, but to no avail, and the full force of the Russian military came down upon the Chechen people with the same

¹⁶⁹ Youngs, pg. 13

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-15

¹⁷¹ Kramer, pg. 7

¹⁷² Youngs, pp. 15-16

disregard for civilian life as in the first conflict.

While the various rebel factions were no match for the federal forces in traditional warfare, rebel groups, especially those of Basayev, were still able to cause heavy Russian casualties with guerilla warfare and terrorist tactics. This would only increase the brutality with which federal forces carried out their mission,¹⁷³ a brutality that would go on to color the entire conflict in a severely bad light for the Russians because of their numerous and notorious human rights violations. Many speculate on the reasons behind the harshness of the federal forces. An overzealous new president? Undisciplined and ineffectual military? Or simply retribution for the humiliation of the first war? While these are all probably correct reasons, along with many others, the impact is the same. These crises only further entrenched the idea of Russia and the Russians as the enemy in many of the Chechen people.

Throughout the mid 2000s the security situation in Chechnya remained precarious. The rash of assassinations, large-scale ambushes, and terrorist attacks in 2004 underscored the intractability of the conflict.¹⁷⁴ The brutal attacks Basayev and his followers became known for, such the 2002 Moscow Theatre attack and the 2004 Beslan school attack did more harm innocent people, they alienated the ordinary Chechen. While Chechens are Muslim, the vast majority reject fundamentalism and deplore such actions. The Islamist movement was dealt a blow when Basayev was killed by Russian forces in June, 2006, but Doku Umarov was prepared to take up the mantle and even declared a Caucasian Emirate in 2007 with himself as Emir, thus ending any kind of nationalist movement that could have been left for an independent Chechnya. The Russian operation in Chechnya was now a decidedly counter-terrorist one, and many of the rebels fled to the neighboring republics of Ingushetia and Dagestan.

Putin had plans for re-establishing “legitimate” authority in Chechnya to be run by Chechens. At beginning of 1999 war there were several Chechen splinter groups that

¹⁷³ Kramer, pp. 9-10

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 10

sided with Moscow: Kadyrovs, Khakievs, Yamadayevs. Although it was Beslan Gantamirov, former mayor of Grozny, who spearheaded the assault on Grozny that eventually gave victory to the Russians,¹⁷⁵ Putin appointed Akhmed Kadyrov to lead the new Chechen administration he was constructing,¹⁷⁶ thus “Chechenizing” the crisis in Chechnya.

Chechenization

As the second conflict in Chechnya continued, Moscow prescribed a set of policies that would gradually hand over responsibility for the conflict in the republic over to the Chechens themselves. The aim of Chechenization was to obviously relieve the Russian troops of some of the combat duties in Chechnya. But this transfer of power from federal forces to locals one also set in motion a struggle for power within the republic that would take years to subside.

Akhmed Kadyrov was the first at the helm of new pro-Moscow administration in Chechnya. Kadyrov, along with many others now pursuing power in Chechnya, had fought against Russia in the first war, but in the second preferred aligning with old enemies against the new Islamist opponents.¹⁷⁷ Kadyrov’s key mission was to recruit and deploy pro-Moscow Chechen militia units in combat operations against any perceived separatists. This was to not only show loyalty to Moscow, but also to consolidate power in Chechnya firmly behind the Kadyrov clan.¹⁷⁸ The Khakievs and, of course, Yamadayevs still had power in Chechnya and behind them their own militias. Kadyrov was a ruthless tactician and as time passed convinced more and more rebels to switch sides.¹⁷⁹

After Akhmed Kadyrov’s assassination in May 2004, his son Ramzan became the de facto leader of the pro-Kremlin administration, although he would have to wait two

¹⁷⁵ Schaefer, pg. 251

¹⁷⁶ Ware, pg. 159

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 159

¹⁷⁸ Souleimanov, “Russian Chechnya Policy”

¹⁷⁹ Ware, pg. 159

years until he reached the legal age to officially become president. The younger Kadyrov proved to be even more ruthless than his father. He publicly stated the best way to deal with the insurgents in the mountains and forests was through their relatives. Ramzan and his men already had a reputation for unrestricted behavior, and after his father's assassination and the attack in Beslan, his methods of targeting the families of rebels became that much harsher.¹⁸⁰ This was not the only way in which Kadyrov applied the features of Chechen traditional culture, specifically collective responsibility and blood feud, to the conflict.

While the Kadyrovs were successful in consolidating power, their followers could still have problems. The Kadyrov clan had many enemies in Chechnya; enemies in a state of blood feud. Hence, it was conceivable that as long as at least one of the people who had declared blood feud against the Kadyrov clan was still alive, then neither he nor his relatives could feel completely safe. As the militias and their combat operations grew, these young men in Chechnya were becoming "bound by blood" to the Kadyrov clan by the constant killings, torture, and humiliation that occurred during these operations. This created a vicious cycle for the followers of Kadyrov where newly acquired enemies in blood feuds increased the insecurity and forced the men to bind themselves even closer to the Kadyrov clan in order to survive.¹⁸¹ While the former Kadyrov tried to mitigate this kind of violence, the younger did not. He did not share his father's cooperative spirit,¹⁸² and thus he was more successful in consolidating power, but with more violence.

While the Islamic factor of the nature of crisis in Chechnya receives a lot of attention, deserved attention, there are other factors of society that have been overlooked as having an impact on violence in the region. As we have seen in the past, the traditional culture of Chechnya is itself quite violent. The persistence of the ancient practice of blood feuds into the modern era shows how ingrained violence and vengeance

¹⁸⁰ Schaefer, pp. 250-251

¹⁸¹ Souleimanov, "Russian Chechnya Policy"

¹⁸² Schaefer, pg. 252

is in the Chechen mentality. While Islam can have a radicalizing effect on violence, so can the blood feud. The events that occurred, and continue to occur, after the Chechenization of the conflict show just how great the impact of blood feud is on modern society. Not only was power in Chechnya “Chechenized,” the violence was as well.

PART III: ESCALATION AND MOBILIZATION

CHAPTER 7: RADICALIZATION

While most analysis of the crisis in Chechnya focuses on Islamization and its impact on the radicalization of the Chechen populous, a radicalization of a different nature has been overlooked. The tradition of the blood feud Chechnya has not had so much a radicalizing effect on the people, but on violence itself. This radicalization has its basis in traditional Chechen culture, a constituting part of Chechen identity based on honor. In a society where the principle of collective responsibility is applied both by the state and by those struggling against it, and the law of the blood feud is still practiced, conflict is sure to “spread like wildfire.”¹⁸³

Traditional Culture in Mobilization and Radicalization

“Deep culture is the bedrock of social action.”¹⁸⁴ In all things man does, his culture and mentality play a critical role. This is especially true when it comes to social or political movements. It is our beliefs, traditions, and customs that shape how we see the world, formulate ideas about the world, and how we react to it. Our culture also gives us the tools, which we might use to do this. The Chechen people have kept traditional culture and customs alive for centuries through the maintenance of their teip system of society. The Chechens’ strong views on honor and freedom completely shape their world. This mentality makes it easier for mobilization against a perceived wrong and also the radicalization of reaction.

Clan structure has also had a huge impact on the mobilization of the Chechen people

¹⁸³ Souleimanov and Horak, pg. 279

¹⁸⁴ Johnston, pg. 331

during the Chechen wars. First and foremost in clannish society is an obligation to help one another. There is not only an obligation to the clan itself, but also to all clan members. This sense of collective responsibility is still quite strong in modern Chechen society. When *teip* ties are strong enough, one wrong deed against one person has the potential to mobilize hundreds of people to take revenge. During the wars, a great many wrong deeds were committed against a great many Chechens. Therefore much of the retaliatory violence against Russians in Chechnya is just as likely to come from the Chechen adherence to traditional customs than from an imported sect of fundamental Islam.

At times of crisis, clan loyalties grow deeper and strong and are more likely to emphasize customs such as blood feud. When action is deemed necessary, traditional culture can be used as a legitimizing factor for mobilization. It is especially during conflict and times of crisis that people cling to the things they know best, the things they most believe in. For the Chechens it is the *teip*, for the *teip* is the basis of identity. Membership in the clan is not fleeting. *Teip* is forever. Ideologies, such as Wahhabism, fail, or their leaders die, or they simply lose popular support, but the clan never fades away. There will always be the local factors; the traditions of Chechen culture that will drive armed resistance in the form of vengeance where it is needed.

It is the mechanism of blood feud that enables people to take revenge. The motto is simple: “You offend my brother (or father, son, mother, sister, grandfather, uncle, cousin) and I will do anything to take revenge on you, the whole of your family, and all your colleagues and friends.”¹⁸⁵ What greater offense is there than taking the life of a loved one? And so many Chechens have lost loved ones in the modern crisis in Chechnya. All Chechens can trace these deaths back to the Russians. Whatever the exact cause, the root of it can be found in the Russian invasion. For each person that dies, he might have ten relatives ready to take arms up against the offenders.

Absence of the legacy of centralized authority to apply the rule of law left justice up to the *teips* themselves. For centuries the *teips* have been militarized, not just to dispense their own justice but also for collective defense. They had to be to protect their land,

¹⁸⁵ Souleimanov and Horak, pg. 279

people, and villages from the continuous aggression by foreign forces. These organizations existed along blood and territorial lines, which in turn made them much easier to mobilize.¹⁸⁶ The survival of traditional culture, *adat*, blood feud also means the survival of militarized clans, and the same ease of mobilization through clannish society. This history of self-governance echoes today in what the West would call vigilantism, but to a Chechen is simply a personal carriage of justice, the only honorable way.

Individual avengers may also join armed groups in order to fulfill personal missions. In other words, the behavior of armed groups is not always determined by ideology. Membership in an expansive clan, or in cooperation with one, is a desirable alternative to being a lone wolf.¹⁸⁷ So it is very likely that for each rebel force in Chechnya there could be one man, if not many more, who was inspired to take arms against Russian forces not out of religious fanaticism, but out of a sense of person duty to avenge the honor of family. Vengeance is a very powerful sentiment and motivator that can easily radicalize a population.

In Pursuit of Revenge

The horrors and brutalities of the Russian campaigns in Chechnya have already been described. These atrocities had a big impact on the Chechen people, much like the 1944 deportations, and their mentality. Just as with the Caucasian wars of the mid 19th century and the Soviet deportations, the First and Second Chechen Wars will be implanted into the collective memory of the Chechen people. But there is an even more immediate consequence of these wars: the retaliation of the Chechens for the acts committed against them by the Russians. The traditional culture that is so ingrained in the Chechen mentality forces many people to pursue revenge for the action of federal forces. Russia's indiscriminate bombing and shelling of Chechen towns and villages, and "dirty war" tactics such as kidnappings and summary executions alone would be enough to radicalize many people, but coupled with strong the concepts of honor and freedom found in most sections of Chechen society has caused a radicalization on a much larger scale.

¹⁸⁶ Russell, pg. 18

¹⁸⁷ Souleimanov and Horak, pg. 278-9

The long history of Russian aggression in the North Caucasus has also labeled Russia as permanent enemy in the minds of many Chechens. In one of Dudayev's more rousing speeches in 1990, he deemed Chechnya to be in "a constant state of war" with the Russia.¹⁸⁸ This is a reflection of Chechen culture and society in how they view history. History is not to be forgotten. It is deeply ingrained in the Chechen culture. If history is to be relived in the memory of one man, or an entire people, and if that history is bloody it is relived again and again it seems only natural that a man could be radicalized by that memory, especially in a society where blood calls for blood.

The concept of honor and the fear of shame have been discussed at length, but its importance in Chechen society and to the Chechen people cannot be overemphasized. The Russian invasions into Chechen in the last twenty years and the subsequent actions of federal forces can be seen as a kind of humiliation of the Chechen people by the Russian government. In traditional Chechen culture, one of the worst insults on a man is that of humiliation. No true Chechen man with any kind of *nokhchalla* would accept humiliation. Retaliation is necessary, usually in the form of violent retaliation.

Public opinion still dictates the norm for how a man should act. A man is not only judged by his deeds, but also by how the community sees him. In the past, a man who admitted fear in public was banished from the community and lost all his friends, even his wife. Chechen highlanders felt ashamed even of a deed of their great-grandfathers. They were also proud to tell their sons the deeds of bravery and wisdom of one of his ancestors, which is a clear indication of the importance of honor. These same feelings persist today. Imagine that a misdeed has occurred against the family in the present. How else is a good highlander to respond, except through revenge. It is the characteristics of tradition culture that Forces a man to pursue revenge against Russian federal forces.

¹⁸⁸ Johnston, pg. 337

CHAPTER 8: POLITICIZATION AND IDEOLOGIZATION OF VIOLENCE

“War is a continuation of politics by other means.” Never has this famous quote by Carl von Clausewitz been so apt as with the Chechen experience. Like nowhere else in the world, Chechnya seems to almost skip over politics completely and proceed straight to war. But that by no means implies there is not politics in Chechnya violence. In actuality, it is quite the opposite. When violence is used in Chechnya it is almost always used as a political weapon. It is easy to determine much of the politics of modern violence in Chechnya: separatists vying for independence; Islamists fighting for fundamentalist ideas and a religious state; Russian forces attacking to keep the federation alive. Even centuries ago the violence of the blood feud had political implications and ramifications in Chechen society. Does this ancient form of political violence exist in modern Chechnya? Yes, of course.

While the separatists, Islamists, and Russians attract far more attention to their politicized violence, the politicized violence of traditional culture should not be overlooked. The fact that this political violence is harder to identify and even prove its existence does not diminish its importance or that role it has played in the Chechen conflict. With the Russian regime in the role of invader, the Chechen violence against Russian forces in retaliation can be seen as an act of defense not just of lives and land, but also of culture and society. Chechen revenge is not just revenge for revenge’s sake, it holds deep meaning. The cultural implications are enough, but in times of extreme crisis, these kinds of acts of defending Chechen honor can be politicized to first justify the actions for others and then mobilize more of the population.

Blood feuds were often used in the past as political means, whether it was simply defending the honor of one’s *teip*, or to increase the social standing of one’s clan. In both circumstances violence was seen as necessary. If an offense called for a blood feud, then it was a deserved vengeance, a righteous revenge. In the case of the modern Chechen war, it is in the Chechens’ right and duty to respond to the Russians with violence. It is

ingrained in the Chechen character, in the concept of honor, in the code of the blood feud. It must be done, or risk humiliation and defeat. It is in this way that the blood feud in the modern context becomes political. Violence can be promoted as a Chechens political duty to avenge the offenses made by the Russian regime. It is also a tool that can be used to radicalize more Chechens towards the same political violence.

The clans of Chechnya not only give societal structure to the people, but also political structure. “The social networks of *teips*, which had grown stronger during the period of Chechen exile, served as lines along which political forces could mobilize — even though people from the same clan might equally see themselves as mortal enemies.”¹⁸⁹ In the Russian forces there is the common foe that could bring even the biggest rival clans together. Together violence can be used as a grievance against the Russian forces. Traditional Chechen culture justifies this political violence and once this violence is justified through political motives as well as societal ones (traditional culture, blood feud), violence becomes its own kind of ideology.

The politicization of violence in Chechnya was not just used against outside enemies, but within as well. Ramzan Kadyrov’s approach to counter-insurgency famously uses the characteristics of a traditional Chechen blood feud. He is well known to target the family members of fighters, many times holding the relatives of insurgents as hostages under threat of death until the insurgent in question surrenders.¹⁹⁰ This idea of collective responsibility has never vanished from Chechen society, but Kadyrov’s institutional use of it is a new element. Kadyrov also used the blood feud to consolidate his power in Chechnya, and there is nothing more political than the consolidation of power. The very famous blood feud between the Kadyrovs and the Yamadayevs was extremely political in nature. The Yamadayev clan was the last thing standing in Ramzan’s way to absolute power in Chechnya. Sulim Yamadayev’s famous battalion was the only one that could still garner support in the republic that was not under the control or influence of Kadyrov. Sulim’s untimely death was quite timely for Ramzan. Although he would adamantly deny any involvement in Sulim’s death, or the earlier death of Ruslan Yamadayev, he

¹⁸⁹ King, pg. 234

¹⁹⁰ Schaefer, pg. 251

never seemed to deny the existence of a blood feud between the two clans. In fact, the blood feud was a very useful political maneuver for him. Not only would it strike fear in his enemies, but also it would command obedience and loyalty from his followers.

Kadyrov continues to use violence for political gains in Chechnya.

CONCLUSION

Chechnya is a unique place on earth not only because of its geopolitical location, but also because of the distinctive culture that has persisted among the people for centuries, especially in the highland of the republic. The isolated nature of society along with the maintenance of the clan structure has allowed the traditional culture and customs of the Vainakh people to live on into the 21st century. The blood feud is one of these ancient customs that is still practiced today by the Chechens. It is still practiced because honor and the fear of shame are still defining characteristics of modern Chechen man and society as a whole.

Chechen traditional culture and blood feud bring a unique aspect to the two Chechen wars fought over the past twenty years. Russian aggression did plenty by itself to radicalize the populace, along with the introduction of fundamental Islam, but the very nature of the Chechen society and the people's mentality had its own radicalizing effect on Chechen violence during these conflicts with Russia. Violence in the name of honor, blood feuds, still continue to this day and do indeed have an impact on radicalizing the population, especially within individual *teips*. It is in the Chechen nature for a person to have the desire to avenge any offense afflicted upon him. And because of strong clan loyalties, these desires and then actions can spread very quickly through entire families and villages.

The continued violence in Chechnya even after the war has been declared "over" by Russia and many of the Islamist insurgents have fled to neighboring republics, demonstrates how there is another factor motivating violence within society. This is the traditional mindset of the defense of honor that is so ingrained in the Chechen people and is then carried out through blood feuds.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact of traditional Chechen culture, especially the continued practice of blood feuds, on violence in the republic. First, an in depth discussion of clannish society is used to show how and why such traditional characteristics and ancient customs have been allowed to thrive among the Chechen people, especially those living in the highlands. The focus then turns to the strong concept of honor that flourishes in Chechen society as the main motivator of blood feuds. The more detailed discussion of blood feud itself and its ancient and modern practice show the potential for and realization of widespread violence in Chechnya. The Chechens are a people with deep historical roots and a strong collective memory. The events of the past, especially conflict with Russia, greatly influence the events of the present and future. The modern Chechen identity is a unique mentality, which combines role of teip and its strong influence on society with the rise of nationalism, and later Islamic nationalism. The recent wars in Chechnya have also had a defining characteristic on the Chechen people and their psyche. When this kind of crisis is combined with the traditional Chechen culture and a propensity for violence, the outcome can be devastating, especially when violence is radicalized and politicized and used as a mobilizing force.

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