

## THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO THE CHECHEN WARS

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### Abstract

*The aim of this essay is to assess the impact of the Chechen Wars on the international community and to analyze the motives behind the modest international response to the issue. While the first section of the paper provides an overview of the conflicts, their background and their nature, the second section analyzes the international context in which the wars occurred and attempts to offer scholarly results to the following questions: What caused the indifferent international reaction to the Chechen Wars? What was different in these wars that prompted the neglect of the Western policy makers?*

**Keywords:** international community, wars, conflict, international reaction, policy makers

### Introduction

The 1990s saw the international arena consumed with numerous conflicts which prompted many scholars and policy makers alike to question the stability of the post-Cold War era. The humanitarian crises in Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda are but a few examples of conflicts which appalled the Western publics and prompted interventionist

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reactions from the policy makers. However, not all the decade's conflicts were met with the same interest and involvement on the part of the international community. Such an example is represented by the Russo-Chechen Wars, which did not trigger any firm response from the West, despite their acknowledged atrocious effects. Although spanning throughout the entire decade and afterwards, the Chechen Wars remained a neglected issue on the international agenda.

The aim of this essay is to assess the impact of the Chechen Wars on the international community and to analyze the motives behind the modest international response to the issue. While the first section of the paper provides an overview of the conflicts, their background and their nature, the second section analyzes the international context in which the wars occurred and attempts to offer scholarly results to the following questions: *What caused the indifferent international reaction to the Chechen Wars? What was different in these wars that prompted the neglect of the Western policy makers?*

### **Background and nature of the Chechen Wars**

The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought political and social turmoil in the ex-Soviet republics seeking their independence. In the case of the Caucasus region, one of the major factors of conflict after the weakening of the USSR was Soviet ethnofederalism, which Christoph Zürcher defines as "the territorialization of ethnicity: administrative units with a defined titular nation."<sup>1</sup> While this system was of great help in preventing secessionist movements during the Soviet rule, it was also the main incentive for nationalist ambitions after the implementation of Gorbachev's policies of liberalization. Titular nations in each Soviet entity felt they had the legitimacy to create their own independent states. Unfortunately, the story of independence movements in the Caucasus is far less successful than that of, for instance, the Baltic States, with consequences still affecting Caucasus peoples nowadays. The hierarchy established by the Soviets between the various entities meant

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<sup>1</sup> Cristoph Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars. Rebellion, ethnic conflict and nationhood in the Caucasus*, New York: New York University Press, 2007, p. 23.

little possibility for the construction of strong, viable states in the post-Soviet era and facilitated the further disintegration of the newly created countries or the collapse into violence of former Soviet republics which never managed to secure their independence.<sup>2</sup>

The Chechen conflict, which started in 1991 as a fight for independence but remains unresolved to date, is a telling example of the abovementioned struggle in the ex-Soviet space. In fact, it is viewed as “one of the most protracted of all the post-Soviet conflicts”<sup>3</sup> and as “by far the bloodiest of all the conflicts in the post-Soviet Caucasus.”<sup>4</sup> We consider two main characteristics of the Chechen people to be of the utmost importance when analyzing the causes of the conflict. The first one is the strong sense of Chechen identity, perceived in opposition to other group identities, especially to the Russian one. As this section explains, this sense of identity emerged throughout the history of war which preceded Chechnya’s inclusion in the USSR in 1922. The second feature is the traditional organization of the Chechen people into clans ruled by councils of elders and their resistance to the creation of modern state institutions. After the fall of the USSR and the complete dismantling of the former Soviet institutions, the Chechen society was unable to create new viable institutions which would have secured a functioning independent state. Apart from these two characteristics, the religious element – Islam as the main religion – is also of relevance. The reason why we rank it as secondary lies in its becoming manifest only in the later stages of the conflict, while it was not the trigger of the struggle in the early 1990s.

According to Monica Duffy Toft, the successive waves of conquest throughout history ingrained a strong sense of distinctiveness and identity into the Chechen people. They also instilled into them the sense that it was their duty to resist all foreign attempts at domination, to protect their homeland and to aim for independence. Before the direct clashes with the Russian Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the Golden Horde in the 1300s and afterwards the Ottoman Empire that attempted to subdue the

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> James Hughes, “Chechnya: The causes of a protracted post-Soviet conflict”, 2001, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/641/1/Hughes.Chechnya.Civil\\_Wars.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/641/1/Hughes.Chechnya.Civil_Wars.pdf), consulted 9 July 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

Caucasian peoples, the Chechens among them. It was during the period of Turkish domination that the Chechens added another significant element to their identity, namely Islam. This new feature would later add to the friction with the Russian Empire and afterwards with the USSR, both hostile to the practicing of Islam. In this sense, the episode of the Caucasian rebellion against the Russian Empire, under the leadership of Imam Shamil, is telling. Against the Russian attempt to disarm and subdue them, the Chechens cemented their identity as an Islamic people by seeking protection and guidance in this military and spiritual leader.<sup>5</sup>

The clashes between the Chechens and the colonizing actions of the Russian Empire led to the creation of a strong Chechen “nationalist narrative.” In other words, for the Chechens, the Russians became the “Other” that they needed to resist at all cost:

“In the Chechen nationalist narrative, the Russian conquest of the North Caucasus and the colonial wars against the Chechen tribes are the first of many instances of a genocidal policy of the Russian state against the Chechen nation.”<sup>6</sup>

When Chechnya was later incorporated into the USSR, the Soviet abuses against the Chechens only managed to strengthen even more their determination to resist any attempt at Sovietization. As stated in the Introduction, the Soviets used ethnonationalist policies in order to subdue the conquered peoples. This is true in the case of Chechnya, which was included in 1934 in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR:

“By giving them something to gain or lose, namely recognition – thus making them more cooperative – and by creating tension among the groups through competition for recognition, the Soviet Union hoped to reduce the instability that the existence of such groups presented.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Monica Duffy Toft, *The geography of ethnic violence*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003, pp. 65-66.

<sup>6</sup> Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Duffy Toft, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

However, the mass deportation of Chechens after the Second World War and the continuous repressive policies of the USSR only proved to the Chechens that their only chance of survival was resistance. As part of the Soviet repression, the cleavage between Russians and Chechens increased because of the inequality with regards to career and political opportunities in the ASSR. Thus,

“In the Soviet Union, it was difficult to have a career as a Chechen. Even within their *own* republic, key political and economic positions were by and large beyond the reach of Chechens. This was in contrast to other ethnic republics, in which representatives of the titular nations had good career chances up to a certain point.”<sup>8</sup>

The Chechen resistance was most evident in their opposition towards Soviet institutions and the preservation of traditional Chechen forms of organization, which led to the “parallel existence of two normative systems.”<sup>9</sup> As the following paragraphs explain, this was of great importance after the fall of the USSR and explains why Chechnya did not manage to become a viable state.

The Chechen Revolution, which started in 1990 and resulted in the Chechen Declaration of Independence in 1991, was possible due to the weakening of the USSR and the wave of secessionist movements in other Republics. During this period, there was general mobilization among the Chechen society, which successfully rallied around their leader Dudayev against the external Russian threat. The Revolution was thus essentially an ethnic conflict between the Chechens and the Russians. However, between 1991 and 1994, with the temporary withdrawal of the Russian intervention, Chechnya was gripped by internal conflicts, no longer ethnic, but between the different warlords and their warring factions who started to claim their right to power and to challenge Dudayev.

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<sup>8</sup> Zürcher, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, *loc. cit.*

The most cited causes of the outbreak of the First Chechen War are Russia's concern that Chechnya's independence might prompt other Republics to secede from the federation and Yeltsin's decreasing popularity in Russia and his hope of increasing his chances of being elected President over a short, successful war with Chechnya. The first argument constitutes what Monica Duffy Toft calls "the logic of precedent setting."<sup>10</sup> As negotiations between Yeltsin and Dudayev reached a stalemate due to Dudayev's unwillingness to compromise over Chechnya's independence, Yeltsin believed in the possibility of a quick victory that would bring the Republic back under Russia's control. This rationale is captured in one of Yeltsin's speeches: "We cannot stand idly by while a piece of Russia breaks off, because this would be the beginning of the collapse of the country."<sup>11</sup> To this logic, the Chechens answered with a "survival rhetoric", which "accused Moscow of robbing Chechnya of its cultural heritage and economic assets." The Chechen resistance during the First War was fierce, based on "the notion that Chechnya must be ruled by Chechens and the perception that Chechens had an obligation to defend their homeland."<sup>12</sup> The results of the First War were the killing of Dudayev by Russians in 1996, a humanitarian disaster consisting of thousands of civilian deaths, both Chechen and Russian and the conclusion of the Khasaviurt agreement. However, this agreement avoided the crucial question of Chechnya's status and proved to be of no use in securing peace, as the Second Chechen war broke out in 1999.

So far, Chechen arguments for independence had centered around the idea of survival and self-determination, without relying very much on the religious aspect. As Marc Jansen states, "originally Dudayev had not aimed at making Chechnya, traditionally a tolerant country with respect to religion, an Islamic republic."<sup>13</sup> However, in 1999, the new Chechen leader, Mashkadov, was forced to introduce Sharia legislation by the different

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<sup>10</sup> Duffy Toft, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, *loc. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 80.

<sup>13</sup> Marc Jansen, "Chechnya and Russia, between revolt and loyalty", in Françoise Companjen, László Marác and Lia Versteegh (eds.), *Exploring the Caucasus in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Amsterdam: Pallas Publications, 2010, p. 97.

warlords who were financed by Emir Khattab. Of these warlords, the most influential was Shamil Basaev, who “grew into a devout Muslim” and under whose command “the Chechen revolt degenerated into a fight for the forming of a caliphate from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea, if not the Volga; a holy war against Russia, justifying a carnage.”<sup>14</sup> Following a series of explosions in Russia, the new President Vladimir Putin accused the Chechens of being terrorists and of making Chechnya “a scene of jihad”, thus legitimizing a new Russian military intervention. The Second Chechen War was the scene of atrocities perpetrated by Chechen and Russian militants alike. On the one hand, of the Chechen civilians, “on suspicion of contacts with rebels, during so-called purge operations, many people were arrested, often robbed, tortured, raped, killed, or they disappeared.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, according to a Human Rights Watch researcher, “Chechen fighters, particularly those among them who consider themselves Islamic fighters, have shown little regard for the safety of the civilian population”, while there is also “convincing evidence that Chechen fighters have executed captured Russian soldiers in this conflict.”<sup>16</sup>

In light of the abovementioned features, the Chechen wars are clearly an example of what Herfried Münkler calls the “New Wars.”<sup>17</sup> The Russo-Chechen Wars were fought between a state and one of its independence-seeking regions and therefore cannot be categorized as inter-state wars. The privatization of war is illustrated by the emergence of powerful warlords and their warring factions in Chechnya instead of a unitary “Chechen” army. Finally, the result of the wars was a civilian death toll much more significant than the military one, as “it is Chechen civilians who have borne the brunt of the Russian offensive in this war.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 101.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Bouckaert, “War Crimes In Chechnya and the Response of the West”, testimony before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 2000, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2000/02/29/war-crimes-chechnya-and-response-west>, consulted 9 July 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Herfried Münkler, *New Wars*, UK: Polity Press, 2005, pp. 193-194.

<sup>18</sup> Bouckaert, *op.cit.*

## The international response to the Chechen wars

Russia's actions in Chechnya entailed serious violations of human rights, the authors of which were never punished domestically. However, what most scholars find confusing is the lack of reaction on the part of the international community, which chose to ignore the plight of Chechen civilians and to concentrate its attention on other conflicts. Criticism for the lack of reaction has been primarily directed towards the United States, especially in light of its interventionist stance in other conflicts throughout the 1990s. As Elizabeth Bagot explains,

“Given the U.S.'s recent record of militarily intervening in cases of international human rights abuse, its failure to take a decisive stance regarding Russia's invasions of separatist Chechnya in the 1990s came as a surprise.”<sup>19</sup>

The very first international reaction to the outbreak of violence in Chechnya was to “proclaim the crisis in internal Russian affair.”<sup>20</sup> In the beginning, very little attention was given to the events in Chechnya, a neglect which many authors attribute to the nascent cooperation between the West and the democratizing Russia. As Cornell puts it, “there seemed to be a consensus that Chechnya should not be allowed to become an obstacle in the Western relationship with Russia and Yeltsin.”<sup>21</sup> This holds true especially in the case of the United States, whose “strategic interest in supporting the new democratically-elected Russian government”<sup>22</sup> prevented it from voicing more than “mild criticism of the Russian conduct.”<sup>23</sup> Western Europe took a more firm stance and condemned the atrocities in Chechnya,

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<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Bagot, “US Ambivalence and the Russo-Chechen Wars: Behind the Silence”, in *Stanford Journal of International Relations*, vol. XI, no. 1, Fall 2009, p. 33, [https://web.stanford.edu/group/sjir/pdf/Chechnya\\_11.1.pdf](https://web.stanford.edu/group/sjir/pdf/Chechnya_11.1.pdf), consulted 9 July 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Svante E. Cornell, *Small nations and great powers. A study of ethnopolitical conflict in the Caucasus*, London and New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 223.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, loc.cit.

<sup>22</sup> Bagot, loc.cit.

<sup>23</sup> Cornell, loc.cit.



considering even the imposition of economic sanctions on Russia, although no concrete action was taken.<sup>24</sup>

Even if the American lack of reaction can be explained by Chechnya's lack of strategic interest to the US, this attitude remains hypocritical. Given that "international law had already established that massive human rights violations were not to be treated as the internal matters of the state"<sup>25</sup> – an argument frequently invoked by the US to legitimize other interventions – e.g. in Somalia or Bosnia-Herzegovina – the US should have expressed a vocal condemnation of the war crimes in Chechnya. However, the difference in the case of Chechnya was that the US did not want to antagonize Russia, in which it saw a strategic partner in, for example, the fight for nuclear disarmament. In other words, "the US simply could not risk upsetting the delicate balance already in place with Russia."<sup>26</sup>

When Vladimir Putin was elected President in the wake of the Second Chechen War, he used the American past interventions in order to justify its own actions in Chechnya. The example of NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999, in violation of international law, was skillfully deployed by Russia in order to secure the non-intervention of the international community in its affairs with Chechnya. The same past interventions also prevented the US from voicing any harsh criticism, as it would have put Russia in a position to also criticize the American conduct in other conflicts.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the Chechen Wars exhibited the features of "New Wars" and developed from being an ethnic Russo-Chechen conflict to incorporate religious aspects. Despite the fierce Chechen resistance, the two wars did not secure the Republic's independence and the conditions were never created for a viable Chechen state to emerge.

Although the humanitarian crisis in Chechnya bore no difference to the crises in other conflict areas, it did not receive the same international attention because of the strategic interest that Russia presented to the West

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 224.

<sup>25</sup> Bagot, *loc.cit.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.

and to the United States in particular. It was not the conflict in itself that caused its non-internationalization, but the broader context of the 1990s and the fresh emergence of international politics from the bipolarity of the Cold War, which prompted the West to prioritize the consolidation of its relations with Russia over the tragedy of the Chechen civilians.

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