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The Parapolitical War

The Second Chechen War was notably more violent, protracted, and extreme both in terms of Russian violence and Chechen retaliation. The resort to indiscriminate shelling of villages was widely publicized and broadcast throughout the world, yet the rhetoric of Russia fighting back the waves of Islamic terrorists found resonance with the Russian public.

Both the Russian military command and the political establishment had learned the valuable lessons of the successful psychological component used against them in the First Chechen War. Political propaganda meetings for soldiers were made mandatory, daily and weekly newspapers, bulletins, flyers and leaflets with anti-Chechen agitation and tales of Russian gallantry and bravery were distributed to boost morale. Psychological preparation courses were provided for troops before they entered Chechnya, including simulated combat scenarios and drills on self-regulation and self-motivation; additional medical and psychiatric personnel were at hand, and mobile groups of psychologists, specializing in psychoanalysis, psychodiagnostics and rehabilitation, neurologists and counselors were present in much higher numbers. The Russian military command also instituted more effective unit rotation schedules and conducted training exercises with full units which would improve group cohesion and an esprit de corps.[1]

Recently elected President Vladimir Putin declared that ‘Russia is really standing at the forefront of the war against international terrorism. And Europe ought to fall on its knees and express its great thankfulness that we, unfortunately, are fighting it alone.’[2] The rhetorical delegitimization of the Chechens as ‘terrorists’ dehumanized them by pointing to their ‘otherness’, portraying the conflict as not only a struggle against a local fundamental Islamist threat, but against the bulwark of the international jihad. The enemies in the North Caucasus were no longer national separatists, as they had been in the First Chechen War; they were Islamic terrorists; not wolves, the national symbol of Chechen resistance, but werewolves (oborotni).[3]

By the Second Chechen War the ‘conflict idiom’ of the Chechens Islamist radicals had shifted as well, often paradoxically proving the fears of many Russians. The shift in what Clifford Geertz calls ‘parapolitical warfare’ included a change in language and dress on the part of many Chechen fighters. Whereas the Russian forces in the First War were often described with ethnic or secular terminology such as ‘the federals’ or ‘occupiers,’ by 2000 the Chechen Islamists framed the war as a jihad by mujahidin (religious fighters) and shahids (martyrs) against the kafirs (infidels) and munafiqs (traitors to the true faith). Chechen fighters grew their beards long and shaved their heads in traditional Mujahidin style.
Many, including Shamil Besaev, adopted Islamic names (his was Abdallah Shamil Abu-Idris) and wore the emblematic green headband of martyrdom.[4]

One aspect of this insurgency-war which Russia found increasingly difficult to properly handle was the flexible notions of civilian and soldier. As the established Chechen military units were increasingly pushed into the mountains and driven from their forward operating bases, the distinction between civilian and soldier became blurred. Fighters whose units were dismembered or disbanded took refuge in the villages and continued the fight, more often than not donning civilian garb. To remedy this, the Russian forces regarded all Chechen civilians as criminals, bandits, or worse. The terminology in use – especially during the Second Chechen War – was aimed to dehumanize and humiliate the Chechens and delegitimize their cause for self-determination, regardless of their political or ideological affiliation and regardless or their self-perception as fighters or civilians. While the Chechens waged war on the Russian military, the Russian military waged war on the Chechen people. Thus, paradoxically, ample cause was given for formerly insurgent fighters or non-insurgent victims to adopt radical religious identities and resort to terrorist methods to exact revenge.

Even as the Russian forces brought forth the experience, confidence, national public opinion and resources to win the parapolitical war with the enemy, their heavy-handed measures and enemy-centric approach, rather than population-centric approach, only ensured stiffened resistance and actually created a radicalized public that had largely not existed before.

Identity Crisis

Even without the backdrop of a tremendously violent war, many Chechens faced a national identity crisis as a result of the dissolution of the USSR. In the absence of a unified and declared purpose to the war, combined with the trauma of constant warfare, many Chechens were unsure as to who ‘the enemy’ even was. Individualized conflicts occurred as a result of unstable, fluctuating national identities of both the Chechens and Russians, and just as an individual Chechen’s identity may have been ‘tribal, Soviet (class-based), religious, ethnic, nationalist, gendered, rural or urban,’ the larger conflict may have been deemed an ethno-nationalist war, Soviet-style class struggle, a racial struggle, or an Islamic holy war.[5]

While most Chechens were self-declared Muslims, they often turned to religion as a fundamental core of their self-identity only after they experienced traumatic loss.[6] Family members of suicide bombers often spoke about the significant change in religious beliefs as only one step in their path to terrorism, with these beliefs functioning as a psychological mediator that helped the terrorist to cope with their fate. [7] The level of ‘psychological traumatization’ is likely the most significant motivational factor which attracted these individuals to embracing radical religious and terrorist ideologies and led, eventually, to individual terrorist acts. To those recently exposed to the violent death or injury to a loved one, a jihadist ideology provides a simple and culturally acceptable psychological coping method to deal with the stress and trauma of war and personal loss. One aspect of religion is that it gives meaning to suffering, both the personal suffering, and to the suffering of those who one deems as innocent, who suffered otherwise without reason.[8] A reconstruction of a personal identity and the reconstruction of a worldview that incorporates and explains the traumatic event are allowed through an immersion into a religious sect which can act as a secondary, powerfully binding social group.[9]

While invading ostensibly to beat back the throngs of religious fanatics who sought to establish a regional caliphate over the North Caucasus, the abysmal failure of the Russian forces in ‘winning the hearts of minds’ of the Chechens resulted in actually creating those forces Russia so feared in the first place.
The Second Chechen War

Using similar tactics as in the first war, the highly mobile Chechen fighters utilized RPGs, sniper rifles, light and heavy automatic rifles, anti-tank weapons, military grade C4, anti-personnel pressure-sensor mines, dynamite, and surprisingly sophisticated night-vision equipment. From seemingly out of nowhere, the self-described wolves of Chechnya would materialize in small groups and attack convoys, military helicopters and isolated Russian soldiers.

From August 1999 to December 2002, more than 4,730 Russian servicemen in Chechnya were killed, with 15,550 wounded. In 2003, no less than 100 Russian soldiers were killed each month. Unofficial estimates are two to three times higher. Once again, despite the improved mental and physical preparation, the Russian military behemoth seemed unable to come to terms with the elusive Chechen troops. One problem on the part of the Russian command was the reliance upon Soviet-style top-heavy bureaucracy to run an over-crowded and poorly organized operation. The number of federal agencies, organizations, departments and branches – often with three letter acronyms – is enough to make the most efficient bureaucrat cringe. The newly-created OGV, or ‘Unified Grouping of Federal Forces’ was comprised of units from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), anti-riot Police, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Federal Border Patrol, special forces (spetznaz), all military branches, the Federal Service of Railway Troops (FSZhV) and even surveillance specialists from the Federal Agency for Government Communications and Information (FAPSI).

To make matters even more confusing and disorganized, the chain-of-command in Chechnya included the Commander of the OGV, commander of the North Caucasus Military District, head of MVD Regional Operational Staff for Control of Counterterrorist Operations in the North Caucasus, First Deputy Minister responsible for Counterterrorist Training and Combat Operations, and FSB Deputy Director responsible for the North Caucasus. The utter lack of coordination among branches and commanders and the apparent insistence upon fitting as many top-brass officers in one chain-of-command as possible is a primary reason the Chechens were able to operate so successfully, so often, and with so few casualties.

The inability of the Russian authorities to rectify this dearth of effective communication had dire consequences for their troops. On 28 February, 2000, MVD chief Vladimir Rushailo boasted that ‘the military phase of the anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya is drawing to a close.’ Over the next two days Chechen fighters ambushed and killed all 84 members of a Russian paratrooper unit and attacked a heavily armed convoy killing 40 and wounding 35. In mid September, 2001, several days after OGV commanders declared the Chechens were no longer capable of putting up large-scale resistance, thirteen officers including three generals and eight colonels were killed when Chechens shot down an Mi-8MT command helicopter with a shoulder-held Strela-3 missile in downtown Grozny. On the same day a daring daylight raid was carried out in Gudermes, killing 20 troops. Between 1999 and 2002, more than eight helicopters were shot down with an assortment of Soviet-era and newer, more sophisticated missile systems, killing more than 20 high-ranking military leaders. In one instance 127 men, many of them junior-grade officers, were killed in one helicopter strike.

Several days after Vladimir Putin’s reelection speech in 2004, in which he promised to quickly and decisively end the conflict, a convoy of MVD troops was ambushed and 37 out of 41 were killed. A few months later, as Putin gave a Victory Day speech boasting of his government’s success in ‘combating international terrorism,’ and comparing the war on terror with his role model and predecessor’s war with the Nazis, a bomb rocked central Grozny, killing Akhmed Kadyrov, the Moscow appointed president of Chechnya, the head of the republic’s state council, and numerous Chechen and Russian officials.
By June 2004, a top military commander publicly acknowledged the toll, both psychologically and physically, of the constant ambushes. That same night, a group of Chechen fighters launched a series of raids, killing 98 troops and wounding 104 while suffering only two casualties. Just three weeks later, 70 Chechen fighters ambushed FSB and police units, killing 18 and wounding 10. As a result of the sudden wave of insurgent successes, Putin dismissed the chief of the Russian General staff and several other high-ranking army, FSB and MVD officers responsible. Within the next month and a half, Chechens ambushed troops in Kizlyar, Dagestan, and conducted raids on Grozny and other surrounding cities, killing at least 120 security forces.[17]

The success of the insurgents, and their unconventional tactics, only served to intensify Russian frustration. Chechen soldiers often disguised bombs in cigarette packages, videocassette cases, lighters, cell-phones, water bottles and soft drink cans. Mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were scattered over the rough terrain and poorly mapped roads. Snipers often gave away their position within abandoned, booby-trapped buildings as a lure to ensnare unsuspecting Russian troops.[18] The Russian troops’ wrath often was directed at the only targets they actually could see: the nearby citizenry. Russian troops would evacuate a village, detaining and often torturing the men of fighting age, only to later reoccupy the same village with a vengeance after insurgents struck again.

Conclusion

The First and Second Chechen Wars demonstrated aspects of both interstate and civil wars, and often exemplified the most destructive aspects of both. As we have seen, the Chechen Wars must be described above all as identity wars, and as data shows, identity wars, wars for political rights, and wars fought for dignity or self respect are often far less negotiable and less easily settled than interstate wars, leading to higher mortality rates and an increase in brutality.[19] In Chechnya, the tremendous and violent experience of war brutalized combatants on both sides, resulting in a callousness and disregard for human life which rose above racial or religious prejudices – a common trait shared with civil wars.[20] The inability and/or unwillingness of the Chechen and Russian leaders to establish a dialogue was in large part due to what Chaim Kaufman calls the ‘irreconcilable visions of the identity, borders, and citizenship of the state’ and was only complicated by the lack of consensus between the Chechen leadership and combatants themselves.[21]

The Russians’ use of indiscriminate violence can, in most situations, be seen merely as a result of weakness borne out through their inability to assert control over the insurgents. The desire for conventional battle, combined with the ‘hardships of war’ led to what even the Russians labeled bez predel , a war without limits. The constant fear of attack was only exacerbated by the often brilliant successes of the insurgents’ ambushes and the ever-present threat of snipers, mines and most terrifying of all, suicide bombers. The knowledge that the relative safety of numbers or location has been erased by the suicidal willingness of Chechens to attack anywhere, at any time, with near impunity brought about a numb desensitization of troops. What has been described as ‘the core problem of the Russian military establishment’ was a lack of discipline and a rampant unprofessionalism at the non-commissioned officer and enlisted ranks, aided by the flagrant disregard for the well-being of civilians by the high-ranking military officers.[22]

Despite the protestations of Russian officials and the insistence that the counterterrorist operation was a success and the insurgency crushed, the truth is far less optimistic. As recently as 2008 there were at least 400 attacks in the North Caucasus and almost 750 in 2009. In 2008, during a seven-month period, at least 173 Russian security forces were killed, with another 300 injured, while throughout the whole of 2008, 346 Russian security force were killed with 516 wounded. In 2009, nearly 350 Russian troops or police
were declared dead while over 650 were reported injured. With the Russian tendency to neglect reporting numbers of soldiers who died from wounds, the total death rate is likely substantially higher. In November 2010, there was at least one insurgent attack per day throughout the North Caucasus. When the situation is compared to Afghanistan, the picture becomes clearer: during the same time period of 2009, 520 soldiers were reported killed for the entirety of the coalition forces compared to 350 Russians dead. While Chechnya is five times smaller than Afghanistan and 1/25th the size of Iraq, the death rate continued to rise faster in Chechnya than in either Iraq or Afghanistan even as the Russian government insisted the counter-terrorist operation was completed.

While the Russians continued, and still continue, to declare an end to the operation in Chechnya, the forecast for the near future does not bode well for either side. [23] Corruption, police intimidation and a deliberate feeling of fear are still widespread. As of this writing, voter turnout in one precinct in Chechnya for now-reelected President Vladimir Putin exceeded 100%. Putin reportedly received 99.82% of the popular vote. One woman interviewed stepped away from the crowd and told reporters anonymously, ‘I hate [Putin], but, speaking honestly, we were forced to come here.’ [24]

The price paid by the Chechen nation for the rhetoric of counterinsurgency was an ‘apocalyptic demographic crisis.’ [25] By 2007 a survey of Chechen refugees found that two-thirds ‘never felt safe’, while in the past month alone, over 10% had been exposed to violence. 94% of Chechens reported exposure to violence since the war started, while 35% personally experienced physical violence. Almost a quarter of the Chechen population witnessed at least one murder. 5% had been witness to torture, a surprisingly large number given the Russian and Chechen tendency to kill those they tortured. Almost three-quarters had heard of a friend or relative being raped. A quarter of all Chechens had lost a nuclear family member, and over half responded to violence with a resort to religion. [26] Up to 80% of the adult population in Chechnya were unemployed in 2004, with illiteracy and juvenile delinquency on the rise. [27]

Most catastrophic of all was the creation of a nation with no memories of peace. ‘I am very pessimistic about the future,’ said Ilias Akhmadov, Foreign Minister of Chechnya, ‘and it will probably be more horrible than you would like to think. Because the young generation which is now growing up and which hasn’t seen anything but war and violence; who knows nothing except ‘Mr. Kalashnikov’; who are brave to the point of insanity; who don’t have a drop of mercy or regret because their relatives were killed in front of them, their sisters were raped, their houses were destroyed… These people have nothing.’ [28]

The Russian claim is that their counterinsurgency operations in Chechnya were successes: but at what cost?

Bibliography


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[3] Ibid., 1200.


[7] Ibid., 447.


[11] Ibid., 218

[12] Ibid., 218.

[13] Ibid., 213.

[14] Ibid., 233.


[16] Ibid., 243.


[18] Ibid., 228


[20] The literature on the longstanding questions of interstate vs. civil wars is immense both in quantity and quality. For more on civil wars in particular, see Kalyvas, The Logic of Violence, 54; Ellis, The Mask of Anarchy, 128; Henderson, When Colombia Bled, 51; Moyar, Phoenix and the Birds, 97-98; Lotnik, Nine Lives, 54-79


[23] Ibid., 3-4.


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Mr. Janeczko received his BA from North Central College in German, Political Science, and History and is currently pursuing his Master’s Degree in Modern European History and Political Violence at Loyola University Chicago. The current paper is a chapter in a developing book on the genesis of suicide terrorism in Chechnya. Versions of this paper have been presented at the Midwest Slavic Conference, in Columbia, OH; Windy City History Conference, in Chicago, IL; and the Central Eurasian Studies Society’s Annual Conference in Bloomington, IN.


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