

# **The Wolf in the Red Square: Chechen Terrorism in the 20th and 21st Centuries**

Rachel Phyllis O'Donnell  
Appalachian State University

On January 24, 2011, an explosion shook the Domodedovo Airport in Moscow, Russia, one of the city's main travel hubs. Shortly after yelling "I will kill you all," a single suicide bomber blew himself up in the international arrivals hall of the airport.<sup>1</sup> Both the United States and the Russian Federation declared the attack an act of terrorism, and many suspected that it was orchestrated at the hands of Chechen terrorists. The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) later reported that Chechen terrorist leader Doku Umarov claimed responsibility for the attack, warning that the "war in the Caucasus was coming to Russia's main cities."<sup>2</sup> This attack serves to remind the people and government of the Russian Federation that the vengeance of the Chechens—and the terrorism that accompanies it—is still a legitimate cause for concern in the twenty-first century. The Chechens are slowly bringing the fight to Russia. Russian soil is no longer safe. The oppressive Russian response to Chechen bids for autonomy has forced the Chechen resistance to defend themselves, their culture, and their ethnic identification. As a lesser power fighting a greater power, the Chechens have elected to use terrorist tactics, after a failure at traditional warfare, to seek retribution against the Russians and to gain their long sought after freedom.

Chechnya is a semi-autonomous republic in the Northern Caucasus region of Russia, and its people are largely Muslim, a minority within the Russian Federation. Though it has been ruled by Moscow for the past two centuries, Chechnya has made numerous attempts to gain independence from the Russian Federation since 1991.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1990s, Chechnya moved for sovereignty with the creation of the Chechen All-National Congress.<sup>4</sup> Following a failure to achieve autonomy, however, a "terrorist ideology that sought to separate Chechnya from Russian

---

<sup>1</sup> "Moscow Bombing: Carnage at Russia's Domodedovo Airport," *BBC News*, January 24, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> "Chechen Warlord Doku Umarov Admits Moscow Airport Bomb," *BBC News*, February 8, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa M. McCartan, et al., "The Logic of Terrorist Target Choice: An Examination of Chechen Rebel Bombings from 1997-2003," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31 (2008), 61.

<sup>4</sup> Preeti Bhattacharji, "Chechen Terrorism (Russia, Chechnya, Separatist)," Council on Foreign Relations.

control in order to make the country a sovereign nation” developed in the region.<sup>5</sup> As a result, Chechen nationalists have been collectively dubbed Chechen rebels, and terrorism against the Russian nation has become widespread.

Chechen terrorism gained international notoriety due to the escalation of violence in the region as a result of the Russo-Chechen Wars of 1994-1996 and 1999-2006.<sup>6</sup> To combat the Russian invasion, the Chechen resistance implemented guerilla warfare traditions, especially by means of “asymmetrical and unconventional terrorist tactics.”<sup>7</sup> There were reports from the Russian front that it was difficult to distinguish between a Chechen warrior and a civilian, and the terrorist tactics the rebels employed made that distinction practically pointless in Western eyes.<sup>8</sup> However, before delving into the complex issue of terrorism in the Northern Caucasus, it is important to understand the background and driving ideology behind Chechen terrorism. This requires an examination of the First and Second Russo-Chechen Wars, which reveal what the Chechen people are fighting for today and how they developed and implemented their combat strategies.

The First Russo-Chechen War began in December 1994. Russian troops entered the Caucasian territory under the orders of Boris Yeltsin. This was a response to Chechen attempts in 1991 to gain independence, efforts led by then-Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev.<sup>9</sup> After a disastrous attempt to invade the Chechen capital of Grozny on New Year’s Eve 1994, the Russian tank divisions succeeded in taking the city during the opening week of January 1995.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Bhattacharji, “Chechen Terrorism (Russia, Chechnya, Separatist)”.

<sup>6</sup> British Broadcasting Company (BBC), “Time Line: Chechnya”.

<sup>7</sup> Richard H. Shultz Jr. and Andrea J. Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias: Warriors of Contemporary Combat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 127.

<sup>8</sup> Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 136.

<sup>9</sup> BBC, “Regions and Territories: Chechnya”.

<sup>10</sup> Tom de Waal, “Chechnya: The Breaking Point,” in *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, ed. Richard Sakwa (London, Anthem Press: 2005), 182.

Due to the heavy destruction caused by the Russians' heavy artillery and bombing, Grozny was nearly unrecognizable when the fighting subsided. "Chechnya's main urban center... home to its university and oil institute — was totally destroyed... at a stroke Russia's bombers set back Chechnya two generations."<sup>11</sup> To add to the horror of such stark devastation, the approximately 100,000 Chechen civilians living in Grozny had not been evacuated.<sup>12</sup> Despite the desire of the Russian armed forces to target predominantly hostile combatant threats, Chechen civilians had been, and later continued to be, caught in the crossfire. This lack of respect for human rights caused great outrage in Russia and the West and is still being examined today.<sup>13</sup>

The fighting in Chechnya, specifically in urban Grozny, took on the tendencies of old tribal "forest warfare." Anatol Lieven defines this as the replacement of the natural forest by the modern "forest" of a different sort: the city.<sup>14</sup> Thus, urban guerilla warfare emerged as a predominate characteristic of the First Russo-Chechen War. This new urban warfare gave the advantage to the Chechen resistance, who already excelled in guerilla tactics that stemmed from their traditional tactics of tribal warfare. The "new urban forest" offered the Chechen forces many of the same advantages as traditional forest warfare: "opportunities for sniping, mines, booby-traps, and ambushes."<sup>15</sup> In addition, Chechens made good use of their knowledge of the city's layout and of new technology such as the rocket-propelled grenade (RPG), which they used to destroy Russian tank regiments.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> de Waal, 183.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>13</sup> Lieven, 107.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>16</sup> Lieven, 117.

Attempts at peace between Russia and Chechnya came in two waves: once in 1996 and again in 1997.<sup>17</sup> The first peace treaty initiated between the Chechen resistance and the Russian government under Yeltsin came as a response to a critical attack led by the Chechen war hero Shamil Basayev. On June 14, 1995, an armed brigade under Basayev moved through Russian-controlled territory to the town of Buddenovsk, forty miles from the Russian-Chechen border.<sup>18</sup> The town was assaulted and approximately 1,600 hostages were held at a local hospital. Basayev threatened to kill the hostages unless Russian forces withdrew from Chechnya. One hundred and five people were killed in this example of terrorism during the first Chechen War.<sup>19</sup> Despite accusations and cries of terrorism, Basayev maintained that his actions had been honorable. As he stated, “I am not a terrorist or gangster. I am an ordinary Chechen who rose up in arms to defend his people.”<sup>20</sup>

The no-holds-barred attack on Buddenovsk signaled to the Russian government that the Chechens were not going to abandon their dreams of autonomy without a prolonged, bloody fight. Car bombs in Grozny and the notorious planting of radioactive materials in Moscow provided the final push for a cease-fire. In April 1996, Chechen President Dudayev was assassinated in a Russian missile strike, and one month later, his successor agreed to sign informal cease-fire accords with Yeltsin.<sup>21</sup> Later, on May 12, 1997, Yeltsin and newly elected Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov signed a formal peace accord, bringing an official end to the First Chechen War.<sup>22</sup> The accord, however, failed to address the issue of Chechen independence. The Chechen desire for freedom from Russian control had been temporarily

---

<sup>17</sup> “Timeline: Chechnya.”

<sup>18</sup> Lieven, 124.

<sup>19</sup> Emma Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War* (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 2010), 127-129.

<sup>20</sup> Gilligan, 129.

<sup>21</sup> “Territories and Regions: Chechnya.”

<sup>22</sup> Lieven, 145-146.

checked, but their hopes for independence had not disappeared and resentment of the Russians continued to simmer under the surface.

Following the end of the First Chechen War, there was an unstable period of peace between Russia and the Chechen resistance as the accords hung precariously in the balance. However, the peace did not last longer than the fall of 1999, when the Chechens provoked the Russians into the Second Chechen War. Contrary to the first conflict's origins, this second war was the result of Chechen aggression rather than Russian entry into semi-autonomous Chechen territory.

On August 17, 1999, a band of Chechen resistance fighters, once again led by Shamil Basayev, crossed the border into neighboring Dagestan "in pursuit of the proposed Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus."<sup>23</sup> The Chechen fighters, however, met Russian resistance in the region, inciting two months of violence across the Russo-Chechen border with very few periods of peace. The Russian government was taken aback by the emergence of a new Chechen extremism among the rebels that contained aspects of radical Islamism. "The existence of linkages between the Chechen resistance and transnational radical Islamic organizations expanded, fueled by religious ideology."<sup>24</sup>

Following the invasion of Dagestan, the combat of the Second Chechen War took a drastic turn from the urban guerilla combat of the First Chechen War, and solitary acts of terrorism became the *modus operandi* of the Chechen resistance forces. Instead of outright aggression, Russia responded with more political and reactive measures; the Russian government did not, for instance, make an official declaration of war.<sup>25</sup> In 2000, then-President Vladimir Putin made a move regarding negotiations with Chechen leadership that "in effect defined all

---

<sup>23</sup> Gilligan, 31.

<sup>24</sup> Shultz and Dew, 144.

<sup>25</sup> Gilligan, 32.

Chechen nationalists as terrorists and isolated the Chechen resistance fighters, leaving them with little alternative... [but] to sabotage and [use] terrorism.”<sup>26</sup> The Second Chechen War was sold as a Russian counter-terrorism operation to the public.

It is important to note that during the early years of the Second Chechen War, the Chechen people suffered greatly at the hands of the Russian *zachistka*, a word that literally means to clean something out. During a *zachistka*, or sweep operation, Russian troops surrounded a Chechen village and barred locals from entering or leaving. The troops then conducted thorough searches of every house. The resident Chechens were grouped together “to be checked, detained, or executed, usually on the outskirts of a targeted village.” The program was therefore eerily similar to the ethnic cleansing programs of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi Germany or the *dekulakization* campaigns of the 1930s in the then-Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the Russian government seems to have believed that violating the Geneva Convention’s rules of war was a small price to pay in order to “clean up” terrorism in Chechnya. With the Chechens’ tradition of blood feud and the tribal customs of Caucasian *adat*, it is easy to see how *zachistka* added fuel to the fire of hatred towards the Russians, demanding exact retribution.

Acts of Chechen terrorism against the Russians have continued from the 1999 Moscow apartment bombings to the recent attack on the international arrivals hall of Moscow’s Domodedovo Airport on January 24, 2011.<sup>28</sup> The Chechen dilemma has moved from the time period directly associated with the Second Chechen War (1999-present) into a period of sustained Chechen terrorism (2002-present) with the same objective of independence in mind. Terrorism in Chechnya has now gained international notoriety, and according to the Center for

---

<sup>26</sup> John Russell, “A War by Any Other Name: Chechnya, 11 September, and the War Against Terrorism,” in *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, ed. Richard Sakwa (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 253.

<sup>27</sup> Gilligan, 50-54.

<sup>28</sup> “Timeline: Chechnya.”

Strategic and International Studies, violence in the Caucasus has markedly increased since 2008.<sup>29</sup> The Caucasians are a proud and independent people who have been subjected to foreign control for most of their existence, and in the past fifteen years, Chechen terrorism has undergone a unique transition from an ethnocentric nationalist force to a resistance with vestiges of Islamic radicalism. “It [had become] customary in the mid-1990s to define oneself and others by ethnic affiliation,” and therefore, during the course of the First Chechen War, the Chechen opposition developed an ethnocentric viewpoint.<sup>30</sup> By 2002, during the Second Chechen War, “currents within the movement had abandoned the self-image of a national separatist movement and began to adopt an increasingly strong Islamist discourse.”<sup>31</sup>

In examining the ethnocentric tendencies of the Chechen resistance in the mid-1990s, one must first understand the chosen traumas and shared memories of the Chechen people concerning Russia. The Chechen people have been fighting against the Russians since the late 1700s, and their “detailed memory of past defeats and traumatic losses”<sup>32</sup> has carried over into the current Chechen-Russian conflict; they remember the brutality they suffered at the hands of the Russians. The Chechens as an ethnic group feel violated by the Russians due to the Russians’ total disregard for local religion, customs, and beliefs. They specifically resent the Russians’ disrespect of the traditional *adat* culture of the Caucasus.<sup>33</sup> Amazingly, the Chechen people have managed to retain these basic values that make up traditional Caucasian culture “throughout the intense changes that [Chechnya] has undergone since its first contact with

---

<sup>29</sup> Bhattacharji, “Chechen Terrorism (Russia, Chechnya, Separatist).”

<sup>30</sup> Anatoly Isaenko, *Polygon of Satan: Ethnic Traumas and Conflicts in the Caucasus* (Dubuque: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2010), 87.

<sup>31</sup> Gilligan, 123.

<sup>32</sup> Isaenko, 60-61.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

Russia: Islamisation, adherence to the Sufi brotherhoods, modernisation, urbanisation, [and] Russification.”<sup>34</sup>

*Adat* is the ethical and moral code of the Caucasus area that has garnered more respect in the area than the Russian legal code could ever hope to achieve. Predating Islam in the region, and still remaining an integral part of Chechen heritage today, *adat* addresses the appropriate responses after one community member kills another. In such a case, *adat* dictates that the victim’s family take the life of a member of the killer’s family in recompense. In this way, *adat* resembles the idea of “an eye for an eye” from Hammurabi’s Code of ancient Babylon: a demand of equal retribution for the slightest or most grievous of crimes. *Adat* sometimes instigated a string of revenge killings that eradicated an entire clan from the area; it was therefore not a matter to be taken lightly. Although non-Chechens are not usually included in the law of *adat*, one can see the Chechens’ blood vendetta against the Russians as a form of intercultural *adat*.<sup>35</sup>

Similar to the cultural *adat*, there are five building blocks of ethnicity that mark cultures such as that of the Chechens. These blocks are the following: biology, language, shared history, religion, and nationality.<sup>36</sup> When these building blocks are “threatened or damaged more than once, or regularly, then the memory of victimization” on the part of the Chechens becomes acute.<sup>37</sup> The Russians, as previously stated, have repeatedly violated the sanctity of Chechen culture throughout history. Nikita Khrushchev, for example, created a policy revolving around the idea of a “Soviet Nation” that “closed all native-language schools in all autonomous republics ... such as all Chechen schools in Chechnya.”<sup>38</sup> With this policy, the Russians violated

---

<sup>34</sup> Moshe Gammer, *The Lone Wolf and the Bear: Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2006), 7.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Ford, “Chechens’ Eye-for-Eye Vendetta Shape War,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 8, 1995.

<sup>36</sup> Isaenko, 98-99.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>38</sup> Isaenko, 81.

the Chechens' language autonomy, sparking tensions between the two groups. Another example of block violation—specifically that of the nationality block—can be seen in the *pogroms* of deportation following World War II. In 1939, there were approximately 407,690 people living in Chechnya, and 387,229 people were forcibly deported via railways.<sup>39</sup> The Chechens were thus uprooted from traditional tribal lands and forced onto lands with which they did not historically identify.

To add fuel to the fire, when the Chechen people were repatriated, they found that their traditional lands had been overrun by people of other ethnic identities.<sup>40</sup> Again, tensions between the Chechens and Russians grew as the Chechens continued to see nothing but abuse at the hands of the Russians. Consequently, their aims became ethnocentric, and their organized resistance was born. The famous Chechen Sheikh Kunta-Haji Kishiev highlighted the need to preserve the Chechen culture no matter what the cost: “If they touch your wives, force you to forget your native language, culture, and customs, stand up and fight to the very last man!”<sup>41</sup> A call to action was issued on the basis of preserving basic cultural values that serve as the foundations for Caucasian and Chechen society.

Because the Russians had trampled upon the Chechen ethnicity for so long, the Chechens' objective became the achievement of independence from the Russian Federation. Purportedly, after this independence was achieved, the Chechen people would be free to practice their traditions and culture freely. Following this move, their ethnocentric nationalism would shift from an initial violent stage to a later democratic stage. Nevertheless, as events during the Second Chechen War prove, such a transformation did not take place.

---

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 84, table 2-1.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-86.

<sup>41</sup> Emil Souleimanov, *An Endless War: The Russian-Chechen Conflict in Perspective* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007), 69.

With the start of the Second Chechen War in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Chechen ideology experienced a shift from ethnocentrism to radical Islamism. This shift had its roots in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989. The Soviet Union was presented as an atheistic nation, and after its fall, a wave of Islamic revivalism swept across the Northern Caucasus. This revival was mainly of the Sufi brotherhoods that had survived the Soviet Union and the Salafist influence from the Middle East.<sup>42</sup> In Chechnya and most of the Northern Caucasus during the First Chechen War, Islam proved to be a distinguishing factor and a uniting force against the Orthodox Christian Russians. The shift from ethnocentrism to radicalism may have been accelerated by the *zachistka* cleansing programs. Brutalized families were recruited to the “green banners of professional jihadism with an accent on *shahidism* (martyrdom).”<sup>43</sup> In turn, radical Islamist tendencies crept into the methodology and justification of Chechen terrorism. In addition to these changes, the Chechen resistance during the Second Chechen War began receiving outside assistance from *mujahidin* guerilla fighters from other Islamic countries. Most of this *mujahidin* aid came from men who had fought in Afghanistan against the Soviets in 1979-89, and were therefore well acquainted with hatred for the Russians.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, the influence of the Saudi Arabian Wahhabism has recently spread, and Chechen leaders such as Shamil Basayev have embraced this new radical Islamist ideology.<sup>45</sup> Wahhabism is a puritanical Sunni Islamic movement from Saudi Arabia that was developed by Muhammad bin Abd al Wahhab in the eighteenth century and that seeks to purify Islam.<sup>46</sup> In Chechnya, however, the religious practices associated with Wahhabism are not emphasized as

---

<sup>42</sup> Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, “Assessing Unholy Alliances in Chechnya: From Communism and Nationalism to Islamism and Salafism,” *Journal of Communist Studies & Transition Politics* 25 (2005): 83.

<sup>43</sup> Isaenko, 287.

<sup>44</sup> Gilligan, 128-129.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>46</sup> U.S. Congress. Congressional Research Service. *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafism*. (C. Rpt. 21695). Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2008.

strongly as its elements that promote the resistance movement; instead, is “deeply entangled with the radical nationalism of [rebel] field commanders,” who use it to advance personal goals and the goal of the Chechen cause.<sup>47</sup> The young men of the Caucasus who are fighting this war embrace the Wahhabi idea of armed jihad rather than the Islamic doctrines it promotes, which go against the traditional Sufi Islam of the Caucasus.<sup>48</sup> Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, ethnically Saudi and born in Jordan, is often cited as a prominent reason for the rise of radical Islam and Wahhabism in the Caucasus. After marrying into neighboring Dagestan, he established a school that offered “ideological indoctrination as well as training in combat and guerilla warfare.”<sup>49</sup> When Khattab, Shamil Basayev, and other leaders discovered that they could use Islamic discourse to gain the support of other actors abroad, they did so. Thus, the Chechen resistance movement took on radical Islamic characteristics.

The Dubrovka Theater crisis in 2002, during which the resistance stormed the theater and took hundreds of hostages while demanding the freedom of Chechnya, is widely regarded as the first operation truly to showcase these new radical Islamist tendencies. Reports from the theater tell of banners written in Arabic, militants reading passages from the Koran, and Arabic music playing during the siege. In addition, the demands video with the conditions for the release of the hostages was shown first by Al Jazeera. The female terrorists present wore black veils and *jilbabs*. With all the accouterments of an al-Qaeda operation, one must “note the union of Islamism and nationalism—a call for the cessation of the war in Chechnya packaged in Islamist discourse.”<sup>50</sup> In 2007, Doku Umarov gave a statement calling for jihad in Chechnya

---

<sup>47</sup> Elise Giuliano, “Islamic Identity and Political Mobilization in Russia: Chechnya and Dagestan Compared,” *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 11(2005): 210.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 211-212.

<sup>50</sup> Gilligan, 132.

against Russia. Even if it was not intended to do so, the statement publicly cemented the transition from nationalism to Islamic radicalism.

The move from ethnocentric nationalism and the definition of people by ethnicity to the justification of radical Islam and its accompanying terrorism still begs the question of why the Chechen resistance changed stances. Did the concept of *jihad* in Islam give the rebels the justification they needed for the bloody fight against the Russians? Or did the resistance simply need support from outside of the Caucasus to make the Chechen plight known? The answer appears to lean toward the latter, but either way, the Chechens have employed terrorist tactics more readily since the start of the Second Chechen War. Hostage situations and suicide bombings have become increasingly common since 1999.

When discussing the terrorist actions of a nation or resistance fighters, it is vitally important to understand the major actors and groups that participate in the conflict. There are three prominent Chechen rebel leaders throughout the course of this conflict: Shamil Basayev, Omar Ibn al-Khattab, and Doku Umarov. In addition, a relatively new terrorist phenomenon known as the Black Widows has become influential in Chechen terrorist operations.

Shamil Salmanovich Basayev was Russia's most wanted man during the course of the Second Chechen War and until his death in 2006. Basayev was a "leading Chechen field commander behind some of the most violent and high-profile attacks in the war for Chechen independence."<sup>51</sup> The United Nations Security Council officially designated Basayev as a terrorist in 2003 after the United States declared him a threat.<sup>52</sup> Basayev's involvement with

---

<sup>51</sup> Elisabeth Smick, "The Chechen Separatist Movement," Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>52</sup> "Obituary: Shamil Basayev," *BBC News*, July 10, 2006, accessed December 1, 2010.

many large scale terrorist attacks has led nations to brand him as an extremist rebel; this label has also caused polarization within the Chechen resistance, which varies in degrees of violence.

Going back further in his history, it is evident that Basayev was heavily involved in the terrorist actions in the First Chechen War, including the siege of Buddenovsk. Later, he was the leader of the 1999 Chechen charge into Dagestan, which led to a direct shooting conflict with Russian troops and helped start the Second Chechen War.<sup>53</sup>

Shamil Basayev was most notable for his major roles in the June 1995 Buddenovsk hostage crisis and hospital siege, the October 2002 seizure and hostage crisis of Moscow's Dubrovka Theater, and the September 2004 Beslan School Hostage Crisis, although he participated in many other smaller terrorist attacks as well. In 2006, he was elected vice president of the Chechen rebel movement.<sup>54</sup> On July 10, 2006, however, he was killed in an explosion in Ingushetia believed to have been orchestrated by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB).<sup>55</sup> Since Basayev's death, the Chechen resistance has lacked a strong figurehead and leader. Until late in the decade, this had resulted in a decrease in terrorist attacks in the Northern Caucasus.

There has long been a search for connections between Islamic radical groups in the Middle East and the Chechen resistance groups in the Caucasus. Evidence of this connection can be found in the personage of Omar Ibn al-Khattab. Al-Khattab joined the Chechen resistance movement in 1995. Previously, he claimed to have fought the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1979-89 Soviet-Afghani war. Al-Khattab was a native of Saudi Arabia, the motherland of al-Qaeda, and a follower of the radical Wahhabi Islamic movement.<sup>56</sup> Whether or not al-Khattab

---

<sup>53</sup> Gilligan, 31.

<sup>54</sup> Smick, "The Chechen Separatist Movement."

<sup>55</sup> Steven Lee Myers, "Explosion Kills Chechen Rebel Tied to Carnage," *The New York Times*, July 11, 2006.

<sup>56</sup> Shultz and Dew, 129.

actually knew any of the leaders of al-Qaeda (i.e. Osama bin Laden), he was ideologically and financially supported by the terrorist group.<sup>57</sup> Until his death in 2002, when he was poisoned by a letter sent from the Russian FSB, Al-Khattab served as Shamil Basayev's right-hand man.<sup>58</sup>

After his death in 2006, Shamil Basayev was succeeded by Doku Umarov. Umarov fought in the First Chechen War, and during the interim peace of 1996-1999, he served as the head of the Chechen Security Council.<sup>59</sup> In 2006, Umarov became the President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. Early on in his combat and political career, Umarov rejected the use of terrorist tactics in the fight against the Russians. However, insurgent groups under his command have recently claimed responsibility for the November 2009 "Nevsky Express" derailment and other smaller terrorist acts. As of April 2010, Umarov himself claimed responsibility for the March 2010 Moscow metro suicide bombings.<sup>60</sup> In June 2010, the United States Department of State formally designated Umarov as a terrorist.<sup>61</sup> In August 2010, Umarov appeared in a video stating that he was retiring and that he was going to name his successor. A few days later, however, Umarov appeared in another video in which he asserted that the first video was fraudulent and that he was not retiring.<sup>62</sup> As of early 2011, Doku Umarov was still the leader of the Chechen resistance, although the movement has lost much of the clout that it had gained under Shamil Basayev.

In the last case of examining people and groups of the Chechen resistance, it is important to look at a group that is predominately unique to the Chechen movement: the Black Widows.

The Black Widows are defined as "women who have lost a husband, child or close relative to the

---

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>58</sup> Smick, "The Chechen Separatist Movement."

<sup>59</sup> Liz Fuller, "News Profile: Who is Doku Umarov?," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 1, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> "Timeline: Chechnya."

<sup>61</sup> United States. Department of State. Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Designation of Caucasus' Emirate Leader Doku Umarov* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> "Timeline: Chechnya."

[Russian] ‘occupation’ and killed themselves on [terrorist] missions to even the score.’<sup>63</sup> The infamous Chechen terrorist Shamil Basayev boasted on several occasions that he was the one to train the Black Widows of the Northern Caucasus.<sup>64</sup> The first noted case of a Chechen Black Widow terrorist attack was in June 2000. A woman named Hawa Barayev killed 27 people when she and a male companion drove an explosive-laden vehicle into a structure housing Russian Federal Security operatives.<sup>65</sup> According to a study by the Chicago Project on Security in Terrorism, an astounding forty percent of Chechen suicide bombers are women. In addition, eight out of ten terrorist attacks on Moscow have been carried out by women.<sup>66</sup> These women often feel that they are being humiliated in front of the world as a result of living under Russian occupation. With such a dismal existence, they see the paradise described in the Koran and by Islamic extremists as a place where all of their problems will be resolved; consequently, they willingly give up their lives to attain it. For these women, the peace that accompanies the death of a martyr is preferable to a life of war, grief, and violence.<sup>67</sup> Their actions thus underscore the transition of Chechen nationalism into Islamic radicalism.

This radicalism can be seen in a number of Chechen terrorist attacks conducted in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. On September 9, 1999, a block of apartment buildings Moscow suddenly exploded. Sixty-four people died as a result of the bombings, and although responsibility has not formally been claimed for the attacks, it is widely believed that they are the responsibility of Chechen terrorists.<sup>68</sup> These bombings, in combination with the invasion of

---

<sup>63</sup> Robert A. Pape, Lindsey O’Rourke, and Jenna McDermit, “What Makes Chechen Women So Dangerous?,” *The New York Times*, March 30, 2010.

<sup>64</sup> “Obituary: Shamil Basayev.”

<sup>65</sup> Debra Z. Zedalis, “Female Suicide Bombers,” *U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute*, June 2004.

<sup>66</sup> Pape, O’Rourke and Jenna McDermit, “What Makes Chechen Women So Dangerous?”

<sup>67</sup> Anne Nivat, “The Black Widows: Chechen Women Join the Fight for Independence—and Allah,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28 (2005): 418.

<sup>68</sup> Bhattacharji, “Chechen Terrorism (Russia, Chechnya, Separatist).”

Dagestan (led by Shamil Basayev and Omar Ibn al-Khattab), are believed to be the two main provocations for the Russian instigation of the Second Chechen War.

Another instance of terrorism occurred during October 23-26, 2002, in Moscow at the Dubrovka Theater. Chechen terrorists, including Black Widow female suicide bombers, stormed the theater where a sold-out showing of “Nord-Orst” was playing. Capturing 850 hostages,<sup>69</sup> the terrorists demanded a removal of Russian occupation in Chechnya and independence for the region. After a three-day standoff with the rebels, Russian Special Forces launched a rescue mission to recover the hostages. Opium gas was used to incapacitate the terrorists, but unfortunately resulted in the deaths of many hostages as well; at least 120 were dead by the end of the rescue operation.<sup>70</sup> Shamil Basayev claimed responsibility for the attack.<sup>71</sup>

In December 2002, the Chechen rebels posed an attack that can be connected directly to frustration with Russian occupation and control. Two explosive-laden vehicles drove into the city center of Grozny in Chechnya. The drivers broke through a government building that housed the headquarters of the Russian-controlled government. From there, the attack turned into a suicide bombing. Eighty-three people were killed and over 170 were wounded. Once again, Shamil Basayev claimed the attack, admitting that he had trained the suicide bombers.<sup>72</sup>

Yet another attack in December 2003 is a prime example of the type of assault mounted by the Chechen Black Widows. A female suicide bomber detonated herself in Moscow’s Red Square, killing five people and wounding many others. The attack was believed to have been

---

<sup>69</sup> Isaenko, 288-289.

<sup>70</sup> Bhattacharhji, “Chechen Terrorism (Russia, Chechnya, Separatist).”

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Isaenko, 288.

aimed at the State Duma; the bomb was detonated along the west wall of the Kremlin, several hundred feet away from the Kremlin itself.<sup>73</sup>

The next serious instance of a terrorist attack was a prominent feature of world news in 2004. On September 1, a day traditionally celebrated as the first school day of the academic year, the students, teachers, and parents of School No. 1 in Beslan, North Ossetia, were stormed and held hostage. Chechen terrorists under the leadership of an absent Shamil Basayev took 1,254 hostages.<sup>74</sup> The conditions of the besiegement were abhorrent. All hostages were forced into the gymnasium and made to sit among bombs that were strung from the ceiling and attached to trip wires. The hostages were denied “food, water, medicines, and access to the bathroom.”<sup>75</sup> Shamil Basayev released a recorded video tape in which he demanded the independence of Chechnya in return for the freedom of the hostages. Finally, on September 3, a sudden explosion in the gymnasium led to heavy fire from both sides and the flight of hostages from the building as it began to collapse. According to the contemporary figures, 339 people died, 179 of which were children. At least 600 people were also injured,<sup>76</sup> and almost 200 people remain missing or unidentified. The Beslan hostage crisis is still widely considered the most violent attack of Chechen terrorism.

Recently, in March 2010, two different stations of the Moscow metro were attacked by female suicide bombers during the morning commute period. The first explosion occurred at 7:56 A.M. at the Lubyanka station as a train arrived. The symbolism here lies in the fact that the Lubyanka station is located directly below the headquarters of the FSB, the Russian Federal

---

<sup>73</sup> Steven Lee Myers, “Suicide Bombers Kills 5 in Moscow Near Red Square,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 2003.

<sup>74</sup> Isaenko, 289.

<sup>75</sup> Gilligan, 138.

<sup>76</sup> Isaenko, 289.

Security Service.<sup>77</sup> Fifteen people on the train and eleven on the platform were killed by the explosion. Almost an hour later, at 8:38 A.M., a second explosion occurred at the Park Kultury station near Gorky Park.<sup>78</sup> Fourteen people onboard the train there were killed. Over 100 people were injured in the explosion. When the dust had settled, the death toll from the terrorist attacks totaled forty people. Doku Umarov later claimed responsibility for the orchestration of the attacks.<sup>79</sup>

In October 2010, three militants entered the Chechen Parliament complex in Grozny. A suicide bomb was detonated as the men ran into the building, shouting in Arabic and firing at the guards. During the attack, six people were killed and seventeen people were wounded.<sup>80</sup> All three of the militants avoided capture by detonating suicide bombs. This incident is still under investigation, but it is possible that the attack took place as a statement against Russia in general, since the Russian Interior Minister, Rashid Nurgaliev, was in Grozny at the time. No group has yet been implicated in the attack.

Strangely, despite this string of attacks by Chechen rebels, the United States Department of State chose to leave the Chechen rebel group off of its terror list during the annual review in April 2010.<sup>81</sup> This action has been widely contested by experts of the Caucasus area who believe that the Chechen rebel force is a viable terrorist operation and that by leaving them off the list, the security community runs the risk of underestimating and undervaluing the Chechen movement. Soon after the 2010 review, a member of the House of Representatives submitted a

---

<sup>77</sup> "Moscow Metro Hit by Deadly Suicide Bombings," *BBC News*, March 29, 2010.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Bhattacharhji, "Chechen Terrorism (Russia, Chechnya, Separatist)."

<sup>80</sup> Steve Rosenberg, "Attack on Chechen Parliament in Grozny Leaves Six Dead," *BBC News*, October 19, 2010.

<sup>81</sup> Josh Rogin, "State Department to Leave Chechen Rebel Group off Terror List," *Foreign Policy*, April 29, 2010.

resolution to the House urging them to designate the Caucasus' Emirate a terrorist organization.<sup>82</sup> However, since then, the bill has made no news and it appears to have been ineffective.

The struggle for Chechen independence over the last two centuries has been one stained by ethnocentric nationalism, blood revenge, radical Islamic tendencies, and dozens of violent terrorist attacks. As the Russians go on with their attempts to control the Chechen people, the resistance will only continue to expand until the Chechens achieve what they desire most: sovereignty. As a culture with a tradition of violence and independence, the Caucasian mountaineers continue to be a people willing to use any and all means to achieve their desired end. Although their motives and methods have evolved since the beginning of the conflict, the Chechens have time and time again shown the Russian government that they have no intention of giving up. They are willing to take the fight to the Russians, and they have. Unless Russia changes its policy in dealing with the Chechen people, the stunning and violent attacks will continue and evolve to meet new issues that arise.

The challenges that lie ahead for the Chechen resistance are not small. They must find a newer, stronger leader to fill the gap left by Shamil Basayev. They must learn how to gain both notoriety and respect for their desire of independence on the international stage. The resistance must reevaluate the use of traditional terrorist tactics as a means to an end; thought must be given to whether those tactics serve to impede or bolster the Chechen cause. Most importantly, they must determine whether they still aim for ethnocentric freedom or if they are entering into a new phenomenon of *jihad* by associating themselves with major Islamic terrorist organizations and ideology.

---

<sup>82</sup> House, *Urging the Secretary of State to designate the Caucasus Emirate as a foreign terrorist organization*, 111th Cong., 2d sess., H.R.1315.

## Bibliography

## Primary Sources

- Ford, Peter. "Chechens' Eye-for-Eye Vendetta Shape War." *The Christian Science Monitor*. March 8, 1995. Accessed on January 20, 2011. *Academic Search Complete*, EBESCOHost.
- "Moscow Bombing: Carnage at Russia's Domodedovo Airport." *BBC News*. January 24, 2011. Accessed on January 24, 2011. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12268662>.
- "Moscow Metro Hit by Deadly Suicide Bombings." *BBC News*. March 29, 2010. Accessed on December 2, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8592190.stm>.
- Myers, Steven Lee. "Explosion Kills Chechen Rebel Tied to Carnage." *The New York Times*. July 11, 2006. Accessed on December 1, 2010. [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/11/world/europe/11russia.html?\\_r=1&ref=Chechnya](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/11/world/europe/11russia.html?_r=1&ref=Chechnya).
- Myers, Steven Lee. "Suicide Bombers Kills 5 in Moscow Near Red Square." *The New York Times*. December 10, 2003. Accessed on December 1, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/10/world/suicide-bomber-kills-5-in-moscow-near-red-square.html>.
- "Obituary: Shamil Basayev." *BBC News*. July 10, 2006. Accessed December 1, 2010. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4727935.stm>.
- Pape, Robert A., Lindsey O'Rourke, and Jenna McDermit. "What Makes Chechen Women So Dangerous?" *The New York Times*. March 30, 2010. Accessed on December 1, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/31/opinion/31pape.html?ref=Chechnya>.
- Rogin, Josh. "State Department to Leave Chechen Rebel Group off Terror List." *Foreign Policy*. April 29, 2010. Accessed on December 2, 2010. [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/04/29/state\\_department\\_to\\_leave\\_chechen\\_rebel\\_group\\_off\\_terror\\_list](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/04/29/state_department_to_leave_chechen_rebel_group_off_terror_list).
- Rosenberg, Steve. "Attack on Chechen Parliament in Grozny Leaves Six Dead." *BBC News*. October 19, 2010. Accessed on December 2, 2010. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11571673>.
- U.S. Congress. Congressional Research Service. *The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafism*. (C. Rpt. 21695). Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2008.
- United States. Department of State. Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism. *Designation of Caucasus' Emirate Leader Doku Umarov*. Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 2010.

U.S. House. *Urging the Secretary of State to designate the Caucasus Emirate as a foreign terrorist organization*. 111th Cong., 2d sess., H.R.1315.

Secondary Sources

Bhattacharji, Preeti. "Chechen Terrorism (Russia, Chechnya, Separatist)." Council on Foreign Relations. Last modified April 8, 2010. [http://www.cfr.org/publication/9181/chechen\\_terrorism\\_russia\\_chechnya\\_separatist.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/9181/chechen_terrorism_russia_chechnya_separatist.html).

de Waal, Tom. "Chechnya: The Breaking Point." In *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, edited by Richard Sakwa. London, Anthem Press: 2005.

Fuller, Liz. "News Profile: Who is Doku Umarov?" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. April 1, 2010. Accessed on December 1, 2010. [http://www.rferl.org/content/News\\_Profile\\_Who\\_Is\\_Doku\\_Umarov/1999886.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/News_Profile_Who_Is_Doku_Umarov/1999886.html).

Gammer, Moshe. *The Lone Wolf and the Bear: Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule*. Pittsburg: University of Pittsburg Press, 2006.

Gilligan, Emma. *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War*. Princeton, Princeton University Press: 2010.

Giuliano, Elise. "Islamic Identity and Political Mobilization in Russia: Chechnya and Dagestan Compared." *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 11(2005): 195-220.

Isaenko, Anatoly. *Polygon of Satan: Ethnic Traumas and Conflicts in the Caucasus*. Dubuque: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2010.

Lieven, Anatol. *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

McCartan, Lisa M. et al.. "The Logic of Terrorist Target Choice: An Examination of Chechen Rebel Bombings from 1997-2003." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31 (2008): 60-79.

Moore, Cerwyn and Paul Tumelty. "Assessing Unholy Alliances in Chechnya: From Communism and Nationalism to Islamism and Salafism." *Journal of Communist Studies & Transition Politics* 25 (2005): 73-94.

Nivat, Anne. "The Black Widows: Chechen Women Join the Fight for Independence—and Allah." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28 (2005): 413-419.

"Regions and Territories: Chechnya." *British Broadcasting Company (BBC)*. Last modified October 9, 2010. Accessed on December 1, 2010. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Europe/country\\_profiles/2565049.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/Europe/country_profiles/2565049.stm)

- Russell, John. "A War by Any Other Name: Chechnya, 11 September, and the War Against Terrorism." In *Chechnya: From Past to Future*, edited by Richard Sakwa. London: Anthem Press, 2005.
- Shultz , Richard H. Jr., and Andrea J. Dew. *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias: Warriors of Contemporary Combat*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.
- Smick, Elisabeth. "The Chechen Separatist Movement." Council on Foreign Relations. Last modified July 18, 2006. Accessed on November 30, 2010. [http://www.cfr.org/publication/11121/chechen\\_separatist\\_movement.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/11121/chechen_separatist_movement.html).
- Souleimanov, Emil. *An Endless War: The Russian-Chechen Conflict in Perspective*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2007.
- "Time Line: Chechnya." *British Broadcasting Company (BBC)*. Last modified October 19, 2010. Accessed December 1, 2010. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country\\_profiles/2357267.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/2357267.stm).
- Zedalis, Debra Z.. "Female Suicide Bombers." *U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute*. June 2004. Accessed on December 1, 2010, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB408.pdf>.