

Che Guevaras in Turbans

The Twisted Lineage of Islamic Fundamentalism in Chechnya and Dagestan

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Events in the North Caucasus have taken a dramatic new turn. The predominantly Chechen Islamic expeditionary corps struck in neighboring Dagestan, which thus far had remained a loyal republic of the Russian Federation. The stated goal of invasion was to help the native Dagestani Islamists to dislodge the corrupt pro-Russian government. A further goal was the creation of a larger “post-national state united by Islam” (to quote chief propagandist Movladi Udugov). A month after war resumed in the Caucasus and the Islamic expedition had suffered its first defeat, Russian cities were shaken by a series of devastating explosions in residential buildings with the resulting horrifying loss of human lives. Russian authorities blamed this—likely the most violent terrorist campaign ever—on the Chechen side (an accusation the Chechen commanders vigorously denied). Yet there is plenty of circumstantial evidence and plausible argument suggesting that the Islamist insurgents in the North Caucasus could be culpable. For instance, Russian heavy artillery and airplanes have been used in the past months to bomb suspected guerrilla bases situated in Chechen villages. Inevitably, such bombardments caused massive destruction and civilian casualties, putting pressure on the Chechen commanders to show that they can reciprocate, if not protect their own population. Although in the midst of recent fighting, the authorship of terrorist explosions in Moscow and Volgodonsk as well as many other key details remained obscured by the clashing propaganda machineries, one observation seems uncontested. The Chechen revolution—which started in August 1991, was radicalized during 1993–1994 in increasingly violent factional

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clashes, and in 1996 won an incredible victory in the patriotic war—on its ninth year embarked on revolutionary conquest. In the process, the Chechen revolution changed its ideology from the original predominantly secular anti-imperialism with strong undertones of socialism and developmentalism to an Islamic radicalism of anti-Western and loosely anarchist tone. In my opinion this shift reflects the ongoing processes that in an exceedingly generic fashion are currently lumped under the rubric of globalization. This warrants a two-step analysis: we must first characterize in essential details the main protagonists and the context of attempted Islamic takeover in Dagestan before meaningfully discussing the current situation and its future prospects.

On August 7, 1999, caravans of well-armed bearded men, wearing camouflage fatigues and Islamic skullcaps or headbands, crossed from Chechnya into the mountains of Dagestan. They were led by the two most famous field commanders in the recent Chechen war of independence—Shamil Basayev and Khattab.¹ Basayev gained worldwide notoriety in June 1995 when his detachment briefly seized the town of Budionnovsk in southern Russia. Barricaded in a hospital with almost 1600 hostages, in a dramatic televised standoff, he forced Moscow to halt its immensely destructive offensive in Chechnya and accept negotiations with the rebels. The uneasy truce lasted only as long as it took Moscow to reshuffle its top generals (yet another time) and realize that the rebel forces exploited the lull to rebuild their confidence and infrastructure, badly battered in the heroic and near-suicidal defense of Grozny during the initial phase of the war. Meanwhile the puppet government of Chechnya that consisted of the pre-1991 Chechen nomenklatura elite and a few former revolutionaries who had since quarreled with separatist Chechen President General Djohar Dudayev, tried with Russian help to create its own military units, governmental authorities and a newly elected regional parliament. The hostilities fully resumed towards the end of 1995 with increasing ferocity on each side. In April 1996 another Chechen detachment dealt a spectacular humiliation to the Russian army when an armored regiment was ambushed and annihilated in a mountain pass near Yarysh-mardy. This triumphantly videotaped slaughter instantaneously made current the name of Khattab, a mysterious Arab from Jordan who had allegedly acquired his military skills while fighting on the mojaheddin side in Afghanistan and later in Tajikistan's civil war.

Khattab rushed to Chechnya in the first days of the Russian invasion and created the multiethnic guerrilla brigade that fought under explicitly Islamist colors, rather than the banner of Chechen nationalism. Khattab's small army was reputedly among the best-equipped and most ruthless units fighting against the Russians in Chechnya. Its apparently generous sources of financing remained no less a matter of speculation than the elusive identity of its commander. After the war ended in August 1996, Khattab maintained an active training program for

¹ Khattab is a *nom de guerre*, or guerrilla nickname. It means the "firewood logger." It is his first name; formally adopted by the father of Shamil Basayev (to make the two heroes brothers), he is now called Khattab Basayev. Chechen propagandists call him Amir Khattab, just like Amir Shamil Basayev ("emire," or war chieftain).

young Islamist mujaheds, who were said to be recruited from Muslim areas throughout the former USSR and the Middle East. He married a Dagestani woman and thus became an honorary native. The Russian press frequently blamed Khattab and his associates for many terrorist bombings and hostage-takings in Chechnya and as far away as Uzbekistan, but could never prove the charges.

In the aftermath of the Chechen victory and Russian withdrawal in autumn 1996, Shamil Basayev made a surprising effort to recast himself into a cosmopolitan civilian and secular statesman. Unlike the elements of local artistic intelligentsia, who in the early nineties became the ideologues of Chechen independence and during the war proudly changed into all kinds of fatigues and shepherd sheepskin hats, Basayev shied away from such markers of nativist and warrior identity. He was, after all, a war hero and a native villager. Instead Basayev trimmed his trademark beard, sported elegant woolen cardigans with a silk scarf, and regularly shared his dreams of one day starting a computer dealership or a bee farm with hordes of visiting journalists (who could not resist fascination with Basayev's romantic personality). Undoubtedly this was part of Basayev's presidential campaign strategy, which also included mocking his fellow runners for their hypocritical newly found Islamism, a solemn promise to travel to Budionnovsk with the mission of repentance and reconciliation, and an emphatic appeal to ethnic Russians to stay in independent Chechnya and become its citizens.²

Many people, however, doubted at the time that Moscow or Western governments could recognize the recent terrorist of Budionnovsk as the head of a prospective independent state. Besides, Basayev was barely thirty and his higher education ended after the first semester at the Moscow Land Survey Institute when, in Basayev's fond recollection, he failed to pass the math exam to none else than Konstantin Borovoy. In the 1980s Borovoy had to moonlight as part-time lecturer at less prestigious colleges because his Jewish background was a hindrance in obtaining the security clearance required for a comfortable career in the Soviet military-industrial complex. The skills, contacts and the nimble dispositions acquired during this period proved, however, an asset once the Soviet system began to lose its coherence. After several fabulously profitable computers-for-scrap metal deals in 1989–1991 Borovoy became an early celebrity millionaire and subsequently founded the Party of Economic Freedom in an earnest attempt to consolidate his new social status. Borovoy used his own meteoric example to enthusiastically promote the image of the former intelligentsia transforming itself into a new elite of idealistic liberal capitalists. The public commitment to liberal values inevitably led Borovoy to sharp criticism of Yeltsin's policies, particularly the bloodshed in Chechnya. The first Chechen president Djohar Dudayev was apparently killed by a Russian missile guided at the beam of his satellite phone when he was dialing up Borovoy. Given the actual rules of the Russian power game, his maverick liberalism soon cost Dr. Borovoy both his political career and much of his fortune.

² From leaflets distributed at Basayev's electoral rallies in January–February 1997.

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In the Chechen presidential elections of January 1997 Basayev nonetheless scored 23.5 percent of the vote, which (according to exit polls) came overwhelmingly from younger Chechens, who regarded the victorious Col. Aslan Maskhadov as the symbol of old Soviet habits and hierarchy—precisely the same reasons cited by the larger half of Chechens who supported in Maskhadov’s candidacy the promise of returning to normalcy.³ Basayev spent the next couple years intermittently between Maskhadov’s government, where he regularly rebelled against futile bureaucratic routines, and the opposition of disgruntled war veterans who neither disarmed nor found for themselves any appealing civilian occupations. Largely for this reason the nascent national state was never able to disarm its erstwhile defenders and achieve the primary condition of statehood—monopolization of the means of violence. The war-ravaged Chechnya had neither the internal resources nor the international recognition that could bring the external resources necessary to strike the social and political bargains needed to sustain the new regime. Thus the Chechen revolution failed to end after the great patriotic victory.⁴ Its mutations continued in the now almost totally obscure internecine struggles before bursting into the open with the attempted Islamic conquest of Dagestan in August-September 1999. In retrospect, however, we can trace the general logic.

During the elections of 1997 I met in Grozny with the university professor whom President Maskhadov had just appointed Dean of the newly created guerrilla retraining faculty and only half-jokingly promised to make Brigadier-General for better respect among his special students. The prospective dean, a respected Soviet-era academic disgusted with “Yeltsin’s war” yet openly nostalgic for past relations between Grozny and Moscow, was wondering how he could replace the burnt libraries, labs and benches in the gutted lecture halls. His main concern, however, was what application his future graduates could expect for their diplomas of engineering, agronomy, and, in a sign of new times, computer analysis and business management. The oil deposits of Chechnya have been nearing depletion since the late seventies. Its rusting industrial park, decrepit infrastructure and badly strained social services were nearly paralyzed by the generalized bankruptcy of the Soviet economy even before the war’s devastation in 1994–1996. In the best of Soviet times an estimated 40 percent of the rapidly growing rural Chechen population was chronically unemployed and, like most rural areas of the Caucasus, depended on seasonal migrations to Russia and Central Asia.⁵ Exploiting the inherent labor shortages in Soviet industrial centers and the informal managerial mechanisms of fixing shortages of all kinds, teams of migrant workers used to bring handsome incomes, which helps account for the solid brick houses that appeared in most Caucasian villages in the seventies and eighties. In 1990 the collapse of the Soviet economy shut this valve, which arguably played a role in the 1991 Chechen revolutionary mobilization. In 1991–

³ The exit poll samplings were conducted by the author and Andrei Fadin.

⁴ See the astute analysis of historical precedents by Arthur L. Stinchcombe, “Ending Revolutions and Building New Governments,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 1999, 2: 49–73.

⁵ V. A. Guzhin and N. I. Chugunova, *Selskaia mestnost Checheno-Ingushetii i ee problemy*. Grozny, Gosudarstvennoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo, 1989, pp. 41–49.

1994, during the relatively peaceful years separating Chechnya's unilateral declaration of independence and the Russian military invasion, many enterprising Chechens discovered an alternative in cross-border petty trade. Hundreds of chartered flights a year shuttled between Grozny and the shops of Middle Eastern countries weaving an informal network of market exchanges that most states, Russia in particular, would consider contraband.⁶ After 1996, Moscow, apparently in an attempt to make its Grozny counterparts beg for federal subsidies, effectively blockaded what Russian officials called the "criminal free trade zone."

Politically the situation in Chechnya remained hostage to Russia's unwillingness to recognize its independence, which prevented the rest of the world's governments from extending diplomatic recognition and any kind of officially sanctioned aid to Chechnya. Apprehension at angering Moscow is the most obvious reason, yet the tacit position of the US is likely a stronger factor. Policymakers in Washington view the Chechens in accordance with the wonderfully succinct definition found in the recently published American encyclopedia: "A fiercely anti-Russian, Muslim mountain people of the North Caucasus."⁷ Arguably there are seminal disagreements in Washington on whether to continue the Cold War strategy of containing the Russian bear (whose malicious nature is claimed to be historically immutable) or engage and support what came to be construed as Russia's transition to a capitalist democracy. There is, however, an overriding fear of radical Islamism, as well as a simple limit to the number of overseas crises Washington can keep in the focus of its attention. Chechnya was thus relegated to the category of Russia's many internal problems. These are the most obvious reasons for the continued isolation of Chechnya.⁸ Far more important is the demise of the Cold War geopolitics that in previous decades allowed successful rebellions in the Third World almost automatic access to global solidarity campaigns and open and covert aid from the competing superpowers. Furthermore, the forceful reduction of the international ideological field to opposition between the reigning neo-liberal orthodoxy and nativist reactions (as depicted in best-selling formulations like Benjamin Barber's *Jihad versus the MacWorld* and Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*) indeed shows the power of self-fulfilling prophecy by channeling the protests of newly marginalized groups and areas worldwide into the pattern of nativist contestation. The current re-Islamization of Chechnya provides an explicit example.

⁶ The global emergence of the "people's" transborder markets is a relatively new and poorly studied phenomenon. For a case study on Turkish materials and an attempt at theorization along the lines of Fernand Braudel's distinction between everyday life markets and capitalist countermarkets see Hatice Deniz Yenil, *The Transnationalization of Braudellian Market: The Case of Shuttle Trade*. Sociology Department, Binghamton University 1998 (unpublished manuscript).

⁷ *An Ethnohistorical Dictionary of the Russian and Soviet Empires*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 146.

⁸ The public reactions or, rather, the non-reactions of Western governments to the Russian invasion of Chechnya are described in the articles of Gail W. Lapidus, "Contested Sovereignty: The Tragedy of Chechnya," *International Security*, Vol. 23:1 (Summer 1998), pp. 5-49, and Svante E. Cornell, "International Reactions to Massive Human Rights Violations: The Case of Chechnya," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51:1 (1999), pp. 85-100. Both authors easily find proof for the pessimistic conclusion that the West will not press the issue of human rights when it might hurt Western interests. Both articles omit the awkward question of the West's attitude towards Chechnya's growing Islamism.

The weight of historical tradition and the presumably constant Islamic factor beset the generally gloomy analyses of developments in the culturally Muslim areas of the former USSR. It is useful to remember that this was not always so. In the 1960s Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus were commonly described as a showcase of modernization, and this was not mere propaganda.⁹ The socioeconomic indicators looked impressive, and many inhabitants of the Soviet Muslim zone in those years genuinely felt optimistic. The reversal of attitudes was marked by the bristling book of H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse, which appeared in France in 1978 and was almost immediately published in English by *Newsweek*.¹⁰ Its political message was timely and comforting to the West—Moscow faced an imminent Iranian-inspired revolution within its realm. Using Soviet statistics, Carr  re d'Encausse argued that the Soviet modernization advances of previous decades have been overwhelmed by huge demographic growth in Central Asia and the Caucasus, where the population remained deeply Islamic and for this reason resentful of Russian domination. Soon jumping on the bandwagon were the Orientalists who previously languished in academic and political obscurity. The renown French academic of Russian descent Alexandre Bennigsen and his disciples effortlessly turned what was essentially a catalogue of various Muslim popular cults in the territory of the USSR into a fabulous canvas of huge political mobilization waiting to burst open.¹¹ The undeniable scholarly authority of Bennigsen *et al* combined with political expediency made their later publications a standard reference for political experts and journalists whose combined efforts helped establish the Islamic factor in Sovietological analyses. (It is illustrative of the changing epochs that in the different political climate of the sixties Bennigsen romanticized the Tatar Bolshevik Mirsait Sultan-Galiyev, portrayed as the Muslim Communist alternative to Stalinism and the forgotten father of Third World revolution.¹²) This school and its numerous emulators experienced a deep blow when the USSR did collapse, but for entirely different reasons.¹³ Why, a decade later, is the specter of Islamic revolution again roaming the Caucasus and Central Asia? To answer, let us return to the trajectory of Shamil Basayev.

As all biographers will point out, Basayev grew up in a rural Chechen family where Islamic rituals and norms were an integral part of socialization. His first name invokes Imam Shamil, the legendary Dagestani leader of the nineteenth century popular movement that sought to stave off Russian conquest and impose

⁹ The most representative and authoritative was perhaps the study by Alec Nove and J. A. Newth, *The Soviet Middle East: a model for development?* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967).

¹⁰ H  l  ne Carr  re d'Encausse, *Decline of an empire: the Soviet Socialist Republics in revolt*. (New York: Newsweek Books, 1979).

¹¹ Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).

¹² Alexandre Bennigsen et Chantal Quelquejay, *Les mouvements nationaux chez les musulmans de Russie*. Paris, Mouton 1960 and Alexandre A. Bennigsen, S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim national communism in the Soviet Union: a revolutionary strategy for the colonial world*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

¹³ For a perceptive analysis of the rise and demise of predictions of Islamic revolution in the USSR see Muriel Atkin, "The Islamic Revolution that Overthrew the Soviet State," in Nikki R. Keddie (ed.), *Debating Revolutions* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 296–313.

central order on the anarchic micro-world of petty principalities and self-governing mountain communities of the Northern Caucasus. The state-building program of Imam Shamil relied on the existing framework of Sufi brotherhoods and the intrinsically Islamist imagery of Prophet Muhammed's political efforts to unify warring Arabian tribes for the Holy War against the infidel empires. Furthermore, the home of Shamil Basayev is the village of Vedeno that a century and half earlier was Imam Shamil's last stronghold in Chechnya. All this certainly matters, but to say that this is *all* that matters (which is the common point of many commentaries) would amount to reducing the actions of social individuals and groups to the mechanical impersonation of presumed traditions.

Fortunately, Basayev himself defies the stereotypes of such predetermination. During his brief period as a student in Moscow, aside from the fateful Professor Borovoy, Basayev met with the Cubans and learned from them about Ernesto Che Guevara. The young Chechen commander carried the picture of Che in his breast pocket through the Abkhazia war of 1992–1993, where he was rescuing fellow Abkhazian mountaineers from marauding Georgian warlords (and where he was apparently trained, supplied, and supported by the Russian military, who saw their own interest in subverting Georgia's independence). Basayev had that picture on him during the raid on Budionnovsk and—who knows—may still cherish it today. This is not peculiar to Basayev: his former superior at the Confederation of Mountaineer Peoples of the Caucasus Musa Shanibov claims that the Russian translation of Bourdieu's *Choses Dites* was the most important book in his life after the Qur'an. In 1992 Shanibov led the popular mobilization that nearly overthrew the entrenched nomenklatura in his native Kabardino-Balkaria, and these days he only half-jokingly threatens to stage another revolution if they once again deny him the long overdue full professorship. Dr. Shanibov has taught social sciences at the Kabardino-Balkarian University since 1968. Back then he was, very typically, a vaguely neo-Marxist campus reformer; thirty years later, after decades of repression and obscurity, he is still an ambitious rebel but, in his own words, "life has shown that to our people the true democracy will come with the restoration of traditions and genuine Islam."¹⁴ Or take the brilliant and wonderfully opportunistic journalist Movladi Udugov, the autodidactic master of Chechen war propaganda, who blends quotations from Gramsci, Samuel Huntington and the al-Quran into his anti-American diatribes and the caustic philippics directed against the "so-called Russian democrats." All this looks scarcely more eccentric than Latin American liberation theology.

Basayev and other Chechen commanders began the transition to Islamism in the latter half of the nineties, during the Chechen war of independence and its no less traumatizing aftermath. Islam first emerged as a purely symbolic marker of the border drawn by the war between Chechens and Russians. The requirements of war discipline accorded relevance to the austerity, simplicity and severity of the Islamic sharia laws (to the degree that most Chechens could remember the religious code). After the war, the builders of new Chechen statehood faced the

¹⁴ Georgi M. Derluguian, "Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: Embedded Networks, Shifting Ideologies, and Political Contention in Kabardino-Balkaria" (work in progress).

dilemma of either continuing with the familiar legal codes and institutions inherited from Soviet times, or creating something new that would resonate with the new image of independence and hopefully elicit obedience from the population. The lack of a clear political and cultural center in Chechnya assured that both options were pursued at the same time and that neither seemed to work. The parallel creation of a Soviet-like Ministry of Internal Affairs and armed groups called the Sharia Guards institutionalized the situation of dual power. The net outcome was an increasingly violent chaos that direly perplexed the Chechens in the first place. Talk of the hand of Moscow or even a Zionist plot became commonplace. The miraculous victory over the imperial Goliath bred in Chechen society the wildest expectations of the hard-won peace, including that prosperity and world-recognized dignity would be accorded to the undefeatable small Caucasian nation. Nobody in Chechnya seemed prepared to recognize that their country was noticeable in world politics only insofar as it continued to irritate Russia, that it was redundant in global markets, and that the bandits who revived the legendary mountain practice of abductions for ransom were indeed Chechens rather than foreign infiltrators. The subsequent disillusionment and sense of betrayal by the entire world were traumatic and utterly disorganizing.

For another two years the post-war Chechen state drifted without functioning institutions and a coherent ideology of state-building. The neo-liberal market orthodoxy appeared utterly misplaced in a place like Chechnya, while the old-style Third World developmentalism was neither politically available nor materially supported by the promise of aid. The dire social and economic crisis strained to its limits the traditional survival strategies of subsistence, labor migrations and extended family cooperation. The destruction of modern institutions inherited from the Soviet past radically increased uncertainty and insecurity, aggravated by the brutalizing effects of recent war. The remaining population was forced to seek the favor and protection of various warlords. These clientilistic security arrangements actualized the memories of traditional highlander clans—and certainly not the other way around. The advent of neotraditionalism was considered a disaster by many Chechens—a new Dark Ages that devalued and rendered useless the hard-won social status, skills, lifestyle and expectations they had developed in the modern urban environment. It is indicative that the propagation of new Islamic piety spread only in the social and political fringes of Chechnya, yet Islamism met with no organized alternative and thus assumed a structuring role. Eventually every powerful man in Chechnya, starting with President Aslan Maskhadov, scrambled to acquire a degree of Islamic discourse and representation (beards grew longer, prayers became conspicuous, and women were expelled from the remaining offices they held). The symbolic shift alone, however, could not help what was a fundamentally political and economic crisis. Chechnya was widely assumed to be on the brink of self-destructive internecine war. Evidently at this point Shamil Basayev, Khattab and their allies in the opposition to Maskhadov resolved to break the vicious circle by literally cutting through the Russian blockade in what seemed the most promising direction—Dagestan and the Caspian Sea.

In August 1999 Khattab and Shamil Basayev practically without a shot occupied several Dagestani villages, thus proving that the Russian state had no effective presence in these remote mountains. This little secret was actually well known locally. More than a year earlier at least one sizable Dagestani village, Karamahi, experienced a peaceful takeover by the native young Islamists who had been apparently trained at Khattab's camps in Chechnya. These radicals were commonly called the Wahhabites, despite the official refusal of the Saudis to recognize such movements as the legitimate offspring of the official sect reigning in the conservative Arabian monarchy. Indeed, Islamic doctrinaire intricacies aside, the Dagestani "Wahhabites" behaved more like classical Third World revolutionaries with a distinctly anarchist streak. Their theology was a crude and militant mixture of the contemporary Islamic teachings from Pakistan or Sudan, which had to be disseminated mostly in Russian translations. Their protest was directed primarily against the local ethnically based clientelist networks and the traditional Islamic institutions (mainly the very Sufi brotherhood of Naqshbandia that in the nineteenth century Imam Shamil employed in his Holy War), which the revolutionaries accused of becoming the pillars of unjust and oppressive order. The new moral order would emerge from the shining fundamentals of communal simplicity that must be reached by scraping the layers of adulterating traditions, specifically the existing spiritual and secular hierarchies. As their opening act the "Wahhabites" expelled or forced to resign the local police and state functionaries, not unjustly blaming them for corruption, insulting behavior and general redundancy to the population. Liberated from official extortions, Karamahi emerged as a booming marketplace where the prices for local produce and the cheap merchandise imported from Turkey and the duty-free zone of Abu-Dhabi were said to be a third lower than elsewhere in Dagestan. This fact was possibly proof that the Karamahi Islamists had independent means to finance their operation, including the radio station and the elaborate Russian-language website on the Internet.¹⁵ Perhaps, they were familiar with the Latin American concept of guerrilla *foco* as the base for armed propaganda.

For a year Moscow and (by implication, the outside world that continues to watch the rest of Russia's realm through the Moscow lens) simply ignored the emergence of the Chiapas-like revolutionary enclave around Karamahi. Moscow was absorbed with the collapse of the speculative market of Russian state bonds and the drastic fourfold devaluation of the ruble. The disaster was commonly attributed to the 1998 world slump in oil prices, the "Asian contagion," and the ensuing panic among international investors—but these are only excuses. The true cause was obvious enough—reckless greed, the Kremlin's substitution of politics with palace intrigues, and the unpredictability of the long-term future—which induced in Russian elites the behaviors of Versailles' Louis XV "après nous, que l deluge!" The artificially high ruble-to-dollar exchange rate—which according to

¹⁵ The website www.kavkaz.org was raided and mockingly defaced by Russian hackers at the end of August but still remained operational. The BBC reported on September 9 that the American FBI promised various forms of assistance to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs in dealing with the Islamic terrorists, including the virtual destruction of the enemy computer networks and communications.

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respected Russian economist Andrei Illarionov over the three “stable” years of 1995–1998 cost Russia 73 billion dollars in very real debt—benefited those forces in Russia that disposed of large quantities of ruble cash (importers, financial tycoons, and collectors of legal and illegal “racket” tributes), and who pillaged IMF credits and converted them into “strong” rubles and then back into Western real estate and bank accounts. The IMF turned a blind eye to the entire affair, which is astonishing, given the quality of economic analysts gathered under its roof.

The new situation of perpetual balancing on the brink of state bankruptcy undercut the main power mechanism developed by the Yeltsin regime at its mature stage after 1994. Since the darkly symbolic date of August 17, 1998, Russia’s central government could no longer rely on its ability to manipulate the provincial governors, various branches of the military, the new business oligarchs, and the noisy but divided and fairly docile parliamentary opposition through budgetary redistribution (both legal and “corrupt”) that throughout the nineties has remained the main source of wealth in the ostensibly privatized Russia.

In Dagestan the emergence of the free Islamic enclave somewhere up in the mountains was at first overshadowed by a bout of fierce intra-elite struggles centered on the capital city of Mahach-kala. The impoverished and chronically overpopulated Dagestan, which depended especially heavily on Moscow for subsidies, was brought on the verge of internecine war even before the open devaluation of the Russian ruble. In the nineties Dagestan—with a territory roughly that of Portugal and a population of two million—came to be dominated by approximately two hundred powerful families, or six to seven thousand people, that possess nearly 85 percent of the local wealth.¹⁶ The leading families secure their powers through extended patronage networks (another 200,000 more or less handsomely paid retainers and clients) that the journalists commonly call “clans” by the Sicilian analogy. The clans establish and zealously control some kind of economic monopoly, which is impossible without some political clout, usually in the form of ethnic cultural associations. Weapons play a growing role in the power struggles, therefore the Dagestani patronage clans either appropriate units of the official security apparatus, or create private militias. The division of political power in multiethnic Dagestan resembles the Lebanese model and is no less fraught with conflicts. It is the only national republic within the Russian Federation that has no presidency. Instead there is an indirectly elected State Council that consists of fourteen members—one for each major recognized nationality. The council’s role is to continuously negotiate and regulate the quotas of each ethnic group in the distribution of official portfolios and budgetary allocations. The State Council is dominated by seasoned old-time apparatchiks who so far have been able to sustain the familiar Soviet pattern of national corporatism and bureaucratic balancing in the new conditions. They used Dagestan’s multiethnic composition and its proximity to secessionist Chechnya as

¹⁶ These estimates, made by Dagestani sociologist Enver Kisriyev and verified by several surveys, were quoted by Sergei A. Arutyunov, “Kavkazskaia likhoradka: diadnoz i lechenie.” *Itogi*, N 34 (24 August 1999), p. 17.

trump cards in bargaining with Moscow for a continued stream of subsidies and the State Council's exclusive right to redirect this stream within the mountain republic (Dag-e-stan means literally the Mountain Land.)

For largely the same reasons—the subsidy dependence, stabilizing presence of the Russian troops, the vagaries of post-Soviet criminalized markets and the universal fear of bloody turmoil—Dagestan voted heavily for the Russian neo-Communists (CPRF) in every election of the nineties. The stolidly conservative CPRF of Mr. Zyuganov is quite correctly considered here the party of Soviet imperial nostalgia associated with the good old times of unchallenged security, clear hierarchical order, and relatively generous social spending, especially in the USSR's national peripheries. An additional factor favoring the neocommunist vote is the strength of patriarchal traditions in Dagestan. The family elders are expected to debate among themselves and articulate opinions on all public matters, and they know no times better than the stability of Brezhnev's placid reign or even the cult of Stalin.¹⁷ In the nineties this pillar of authority, however, was rapidly eroding. The young males pose a particular problem. They are predominantly unemployed and cannot escape observing the increasing poverty, the effects of new wealth and the crucial role of violence in the making of new wealth. This induces the cynical attitudes and the ruthlessly pragmatic gang-like patterns of peer socialization—frequently compared to “packs of young wolves.” Islam indeed begins to appear in this disaggregating environment as the only force capable of replacing the lost certainty and the clear social orientation that was previously provided by the Soviet system. Of course, it was not the passive ritualistic Islam of the village elders.

These generational processes were reflected in the local field of power (this term very suitably captures the inseparable character of power in Dagestan). In the nineties the Soviet-era national nomenklatura entrenched in the State Council was hard pressed to share its power with the ascending new strongmen who rose outside the bureaucratic framework. They were predominantly the former shadow market operators and successful racketeers, an indivisible category that may be generically described as violent entrepreneurs.¹⁸ At the end of Gorbachev's perestroika these men realized the advantages of politicizing their ethnically and village-based patronage networks. The networks of clients and various retainers served as the organizing stem of larger national movements. Downplaying the ethnic and personal competition in a curious example of pragmatic solidarity, during 1995–1997 the new political entrepreneurs proved capable of acting as a unified front or, rather, an informal cartel against the old nomenklatura entrenched in state offices. The opposition's key demand looked perfectly democratic—direct popular elections at all levels and thus a share of state offices.

¹⁷ A remarkably comprehensive field study of a Dagestani village by Russian scholars can be found in the volume called *Dagestan: the village of Hushtada* (T.F. Sivertseva, M.Yu. Roshchin, V.O. Bobrovnikov, otv. red., *Dagestan: selo Khushtada* (Moscow: The Institute of Oriental Studies, 1995).

¹⁸ The apt term “violent entrepreneurs” was suggested by Vadim Volkov, “Violent Entrepreneurship in Post-Communist Russia,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 51:5 (1999), pp. 741–754.

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The patriarchs of the State Council relied on their own clientilistic dependencies, plus the deep knowledge of bureaucratic intrigue and highly placed contacts in Moscow. In bitter struggle they defended the key Dagestani institution, the collective presidency of State Council. But in the process, according to the conventions of Dagestani power games, they offered some valuable concessions to the newcomers.

As a result, the recently elected mayor of Dagestan's capital of Mahach-kala was at the same time leader of the Darghin national movement, the master of the town's shops, bazaars and key banks, and the survivor of at least a dozen assassination attempts—one that left him paralyzed from the waist down, another that destroyed several houses and killed 16 people. One more example was the former chairman of a rural trade cooperative (with his own ethnic movement and militia) who was given the management of the Dagestan petrol distribution company; another was the new head of the state fisheries and thus, one could surely assume, a leading figure in the poaching of Caspian sturgeon and caviar.¹⁹ The most colorful representatives of the new generation arguably were the Hachilayev brothers, who began their careers as martial arts instructors. (The elder brother in 1987 won the European karate championship.) They come from a relatively minor nationality, which is probably why they compensated with ardently Islamic propagation that explicitly contradicted the existing Islamic hierarchy. The Hachilayevs spent much effort denying the widespread accusation of murdering the respected mufti of Dagestan, the head of official Islam. The younger and more flamboyant Nadir-shah Hachilayev boasted his political friendships with Afghan taliban leaders and Muammar Qaddafi. Indeed, the foremost African-American Islamic Reverend Louis Farrakhan stopped in Dagestan during his provocative 1997 world tour of the Islamic demons so loathed by Washington officials.

The temptation of establishing the supremacy of any single patronage network over others was evidently outweighed by the frightening prospect of major bloodshed and the destruction of the tenuous balance of power and the state itself. This ongoing deadlock helped to maintain the appearance of consensual multiethnic democracy in Dagestan. The assassination of competitors nevertheless became the common malaise in the nineties, though the tactic of choice remained the anonymous bomb blast. In May 1998, Nadir-shah Hachilayev broke the rules by daring a rather inept coup in Mahach-kala. His armed supporters briefly hoisted the green Islamic banner over the State Council's offices before fleeing into their native villages and into Chechnya. This immediately produced the widespread speculation that the radical Chechen commnaders could use the Hachilayev revolt to break out of their blockaded and devastated homeland gaining strategic access to the Caspian Sea through Dagestan. For a year it remained one of myriad wild speculations that envelop the politics of the post-Soviet Caucasus.

¹⁹ Magomed Shamsiev, "Klanovaia operatsia" (the inventive title of this informative exposé article literally translates from Russian as the "Clanned Operation") *Kommersant-vlast*, No. 20, 1998, pp. 40–44.

The massive guerrilla advance in August 1999 rendered untenable Moscow's policy of ignoring the incipient Islamic revolution in Dagestan. In 1999 the beginning of the new war in the Caucasus looked almost exactly opposite of the Russian invasion of Chechnya five years earlier. It was the Chechens who invaded this time, although the belligerents for their own propagandistic reasons claimed that the intruders were not intruders at all, but the native Dagestani Islamic volunteers (in the attackers' version). Alternatively, Russian and Dagestani officials blamed their initial failures on the Chechen "terrorists," the mercenaries from the Middle East and even the evidently mythical "incredibly huge Negroes." The alleged backing of the invaders by Usama bin Laden, America's most wanted global enemy, could be another myth or may prove true. In context, however, this allegation appears part of Moscow's attempts to repair its image—battered by the confrontation over Kosovo and the recent financial scandals involving IMF loans—in Washington. In any event, from the beginning there was little doubt that the core fighters were Chechen veterans of the previous war. The Russian army, which was suffering from chronically unpaid wages and the dire scarcity of combat-capable men and materiel, did not look even like the ghost of its recent superpower self. The forces of Basayev and Khattab, to the contrary, no longer resembled the ragtag guerrillas of all ages who in the winter of 1995 sold their family valuables to buy grenade launchers and Kalashnikovs, and in a spontaneous patriotic surge poured from their villages to make what appeared a suicidal stand in Grozny. From whatever footage available last August, one could see an army of professional warriors.

The footage of Chechen fighters, incidentally, was scarce and in all instances propagandistic. Unlike the Chechen war of 1994–1996, where hundreds of journalists roamed the battlefields and interviewed the warring sides with an almost bizarre freedom (which was chiefly responsible for the crop of journalistic books on Chechnya that has matured by 1998), in 1999 no reporter or outside observer dared to approach the Chechen side out of the almost assured prospect of abduction for ransom. This proved a surprisingly major disadvantage to Basayev, who had once enjoyed widespread sympathies from the Russian media even during his terrorist raid on Budionnovsk. Back in those days he was seen by the majority of Russians, let alone Chechens themselves, as a desperate though strictly disciplined commander who was trying by whatever means to stop the senseless carnage in his native country ordered by Yeltsin and the Kremlin clique. The widely rumored detail that the 1999 invasion was scheduled to begin on August 7 as a present on Khattab's birthday, regardless of its veracity, mightily added to the symbolic reversal—on January 1, 1995, it was the Russian Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev who was to be congratulated on his birthday with the "lightning" capture of Grozny. In 1995 Yeltsin's decision to invade Chechnya was met in Russia with almost universal consternation and disgust. In 1995 the man who defeated the USSR from within and declared himself the "guarantor of Russian democratic reforms" could find support for his Bonapartist experiment only among the extreme nationalist fringe, in the snobbish group of Moscow journalists and intellectuals who fathomed themselves like nineteenth century

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British empire-builders, and in the self-serving bureaucracy—Yeltsin's main basis of support. In 1999 Yeltsin was assailed from every corner for playing political games with his rapidly growing collection of former prime ministers, instead of organizing proper defenses, while neglecting the disastrous social conditions in the Northern Caucasus.

Meanwhile the official Chechen government of Aslan Maskhadov, the former Soviet Colonel who in 1994–1996 was accepted by the Chechen guerrillas as their chief coordinator and strategist and effortlessly became the president of Chechnya after the war, struggled clumsily to describe the actions of Basayev and Khattab as their private matter, an internal affair of Dagestan, and even as a plot masterminded by Moscow. We have no evidence of the attitudes in Chechen society. After the euphoria over the Russian defeat in 1996 and de facto confirmation of Chechnya's independence in the first and only free elections in February 1997, which brought the landslide victory of Maskhadov, Chechen society seems to have lost its voice.

Perhaps the most surprising of all was the attitude of the Dagestani population. The invaders by all accounts were impeccably polite and civil. They paid for all supplies, they treated the captured local police as mistaken brothers, and they promised to bring peace, prosperity, and new moral order to the impoverished areas long neglected by the corrupt and aloof government. They did not keep anyone by force, and as a result the majority of local people fled almost immediately. Of course, the villagers might rightly have feared that the Russian military would soon resort to its typically inaccurate bombardments. Yet, the deep anger shown by the refugees toward their professed liberators seemed quite genuine. Furthermore, hundreds of Dagestani men joined the self-styled defense militias and loudly demanded weapons from Moscow authorities. One could suspect that the majority of these volunteers (many of them brought their own guns) were in fact retained by Dagestani violent entrepreneurs. This does not change the overall picture. Like many historical attempts to export revolution, the Chechen invasion was staked on the wishfully inflated expectation of an immediate end to the rotten political regime next door. The fractured vertical integration of Dagestani politics and society along clientelist clans is inherently fraught with horizontal conflicts at the elite level but at the same time is a major obstacle to an uprising from below. Furthermore, recent battles indicate that external conquest forced the Dagestani clans to unite against the common threat.

So far, Shamil Basayev did not perish like Che Guevara—although it would not be prudent to bet on his surviving the next twelve months. Russian authorities have allegedly issued a million-dollar reward for him, which will hardly prevent the emergence of more Basayevs and Khattabs in the future. In fact, some cynically far-sighted Russian analysts suggest that the perennial threat of Chechen terrorism both provides a welcome justification for the restoration of the KGB, and assures it a continuous stream of funding.

There is little doubt that the war has only begun. It cannot be excluded that at some point Dagestan might fall and Basayev would emerge as Napoleon of the

Caucasus or, closer to the point, a new incarnation of Imam Shamil. The nineteenth-century historical precedent of Islamic warrior empire in the North Caucasus particularly captivates present-day experts. The biggest gap in such rationalizations concerns the social and political constitution of the hypothetical Islamic state. Unlike Napoleon, Trotsky or Che Guevara, the Chechen fighters have neither a positive program of socioeconomic reform nor a vision of transforming the world. Their Islamism aside, they are familiar Third-World type rural anarchist guerrillas—which does not generate much optimism for their future prospects. Therefore the likeliest outcome of the new war would be the partial reconstitution of Russian military might, this time likely as the combination of a centrally controlled highly technological and professional army with regional militias of the type that already exists in Dagestan, Ingushetia and North Ossetia. This is not the most optimistic or desirable outcome of the Caucasian wars, but it is the most likely. It offers no immediate solution to the dire social and economic problems of the region, although the reconstitution of a relative monopoly of violence would probably alleviate the most predatory aspects of today's power situation. Furthermore, the leaders of former Soviet republics that in the wake of 1991 achieved internationally recognized statehood were able to defy Moscow and maintain a semblance of independent policy insofar as they could repress the internal protests and feel relatively safe against their neighbors. The prospect of Islamic revolution may change the whole geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus by playing into the hands of those Russian factions who in 1991 decided to dump the burdensome Soviet Union for the sake of a new, market-based informal empire. The major outcome would be the semi-peripheral state formation that in a more or less overtly coercive manner contains violence in the large zone of Eurasia that was once the Soviet Union. This might be enough to buy the new Russia an acceptable place in the global division of labor. Whether such an arrangement may endure will depend on the political framework of the world economic order and, to a significant degree, on the forms that popular protest acquires in the future.

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