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# Islam in the North Caucasus: A People Divided

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Close-up of the North Caucasus Region

## Executive Summary

Religious diversity has had a dramatic impact on the development of the North Caucasus region. People do not identify primarily with either a national or international Islamic community.

The fundamentalist Vakhabite (or Wahhabi) community has become a major regional force during the past decade in spite of numerous efforts to suppress its influence.

Official suppression of the Vakhabites has resulted in the emergence of a clandestine Vakhabite network supported from abroad.

Islamic radicals throughout the region (mostly Saudi and North African Arabs) have joined with the Khattab group in order to receive military training in camps which are operated to support Arab terrorists. Khattab was born in Saudi Arabia.

The Chechen Diaspora that has played a major supporting role in the modern Middle East, especially in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, is returning its children to Chechnya. And now, the return of Chechen Jordanians such as Shamil Bassayev and Ipek Fath has helped to radicalize many young Chechens who became active combatants in the Chechen wars.

Money, armaments, and soldiers (mujahideen) provided by radical Islamic groups from abroad have played a major role in strengthening the Chechen resistance movement.

After the first Chechen war (1994-1996), religious differences between the Sufi movements and the Vakhabite movement began to have a deleterious political impact in the region. While Sufi Muslims called for creation of a secular state that would preserve traditional social patterns, the Vakhabites have demanded a purification of Islam and the eradication of local customs that have tainted and undermined pure Islam.

## Preface

While ethnic animosities have a long history in the North Caucasus, the religious flavor of those conflicts appeared more recently. With time, Islam became a uniting force that helped many people of the North Caucasus assert their struggle against the oppression of those whom they viewed as “men without faith.” However, while Islam served as a rallying point for disparate groups within the region, Islam itself did not assume a unified organizational model. Local customs and paganism had a profound impact on Islam as it developed throughout the North Caucasus. Almost no expression of faith could be characterized as “pure Islam.”

When the religious element emerged as a significant one in this part of the former Soviet Union, it varied greatly whether one encountered it in Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya, North Ossetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, or Adygeiya. With the appearance of perestroika, religious diversity has a dramatic impact on the traditional Islamic community. It may be that the only common element in the Islamic community was the religious fervor that gripped so many people. New mosques appeared by the score and Dagestan combined with Chechnya produced more pilgrims for the annual hadj than the rest of the USSR combined.

Islamic diversity was driven by a variety of factors. One of those was the influx of foreign money from Middle Eastern Islamic states. The persistence of local traditions was another but the most important was the increased prominence of the Vakhabite movement within the Islamic community. The central theme of this movement was that Islam in the North Caucasus had been distorted by misunderstandings as well as by the “impure” influences.

Along with some other North Caucasian peoples, the Chechens converted to Islam on the eve of Russian expansion into their ancestral lands. For a variety of reasons they largely adopted the Sufi forms of worship and followed Shamil, the third Imam of Dagestan, in his efforts to impose the Sharia (Islamic Law) on the faithful while defending their homeland from the encroachments of the Russian Empire in early 19<sup>th</sup> century by waging a holy war (Ghazivat). Our first Chechen paper (Religious Brotherhoods in Chechnya: Their Relevance for the Chechen Conflict) explained how the Chechens were bled during these wars and then left the Naqshbandiya tradition in droves to follow a later Sufi tradition, the Qadiri, under the leadership of the nonviolent “Chechen Gandhi,” Kunta Hadji of Kishiev.

When Kunta Hadji was captured by the Russians and died in captivity, his followers eschewed non-violence and joined with the Naqshbandis in periodic uprisings against the Tsarist regime and its Soviet successor. Each effort to regain some vestige of independence was cruelly suppressed. Between 1944 and 1957, the Chechen people were removed from their indigenous lands and deported to central Asia in order to be punished for alleged collaboration with the German Nazi regime. Only the death of Stalin allowed people to return to Chechnya and attempt to rebuild the nation.

**Ethnolinguistic Groups in the Caucasus Region**



The diversity of languages and nationalities makes the Caucasus region a melting pot

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 allowed independence-minded Chechens to seize the opportunity and declare Chechnya an independent nation for the Russian Federation. Fearing that other North Caucasian peoples might want to follow the Chechen example, the Russian Federation under President Boris Yeltsin decided to make an example of the Chechens and defeat them utterly as a warning to other indigenous peoples from the Black Sea to the Caspian. After two desultory wars the Russians seem in control but the Chechens continue to resist aided by volunteers from other Islamic lands who want to impose a more militant, fundamentalist Islam on the Muslims of the Caucasus.

This paper examines the North Caucasus religious situation and contrasts two points of view. First, historian Ya. Z. Akhmadov examines the religious situation as the North Caucasus prepares to enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As one of Chechnya's officials, Akhmadov runs the information department of the Russian-supported Chechen government. He is a Chechen patriot who sees the nation being further punished and perhaps destroyed by a stubborn persistence in a debilitating conflict for foreign Islamic interests.

Following Akhmadov's paper we present the view of another Chechen, Albert Avduev, who is a doctrinaire advocate of continued warfare and the purification of the faith. The two points of view are representative of the dilemma facing the Chechen nation, a nation that seems unable to find a niche anywhere except the two extremes.<sup>1</sup>

Both Akhmadov and Avduev attended the Conference on North Caucasus Issues held by the Center for Security and Science (known at that time as the William R. Nelson Institute) in Chisinau in the Moldovan Republic on October 7 and 8, 2000. Each is an ardent proponent of a very distinctive view (the two extremes) of the future of Chechnya and the role of religion in the southern Caucasus. Their encounters during the conference were direct, confrontational and sometimes emotional. In fact, more than anything else, Akhmadov, Avduev and the other participants from the region demonstrated the diversity of opinion on contemporary issues, the future, and the past.

The views of these polar opposites are set forth below along with commentary and analysis provided by the Center staff.

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<sup>1</sup> Yo'av Kamy, *Highlanders: A Journey to the Caucasus in Quest of Memory*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), p. 266.

## Background

In 1877, the people of Chechnya and Dagestan launched a major rebellion against the Russians who enjoyed control over their region. Although the rebellion was a failure that served primarily to produce new tactics on the part of the Sufi brotherhoods of the North Caucasus, the victorious Russian authorities responded not with oppression but rather with tolerance toward the Islamic religion in Chechnya. The religious tolerance of the post-rebellion years of 1877 to 1917 has led Chechens to speak of Tsarist colonialism with nostalgia. One Chechen rebel commander, Shirvani Bassayev, brother of the well-known Chechen guerilla commander Shamil Bassayev, recently noted that had the Romanov dynasty retained power, Russia would have been a very different nation. The key, Bassayev noted, is that men without faith, such as the Communists, “are more dangerous than those who accept God as a higher power.”<sup>1</sup>

The spirit of rebellion, coupled with religious fervor, continues to give the politics of the North Caucasus a turbulent, violent flavor. Local people who have cooperated with “men without faith,” most significantly the Russian authorities who occupy much of this region, increasingly find themselves the targets of rebels for whom this struggle has assumed a spiritual as well as a political relevance. A typical incident was reported in the summer of 2000 when Ruslan Khamidov, the mayor of Alkhan-Yurt, a small town near Grozny, was approached by “unidentified assailants” at his home early one morning. When he stepped outside his house, Khamidov was shot eleven times, an action generally viewed as another warning for those who cooperated with the “Godless invaders.” This killing coincided with an attack on a Russian troop train on the rail line near Grozny. The bombing, which was carried out by remote controlled mines, was followed by a small arms attack which lasted for forty minutes. The incident left seven Russian military casualties and more than a hundred yards of destroyed track.<sup>2</sup> While outside observers might view such events as little more than another expression of the terrorism that has plagued so much of the former Soviet Union, many participants in this struggle have an entirely different perception. For them, the murder of Ruslan Khamidov was actually another episode in the continuing struggle between “men of faith” and the infidels determined to destroy their way of life.

To better understand the logic of conflicts in the North Caucasus, a brief description of the patterns of the region’s religious and social life is necessary. The most important characteristic of this society is its strict division along tribal and religious lines. This is best illustrated in Chechnya. Although the Chechens are a separate ethnic group clearly distinct from their neighbors, they seldom identify themselves with that group. In everyday life, their identity is defined by two most meaningful concepts: teip - a union of households tracing their descent from a common ancestor, or clan, and tuhkum—a union of teips which do not claim a common ancestor but historically have

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<sup>1</sup> John B. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 33

<sup>2</sup> Associated Press, 16 July, 2000.



preserved their military and economic ties and spoken one of the dialects of the Chechen language. Traditional kinship ties are of paramount importance to the Chechens, and their loyalty belongs first and foremost to their clan and then to their tuhkum, which leaves the nation itself the least relevant notion on their list of priorities.



**Borgha-Kash Mausoleum – circa. 1405**  
Such monuments are spread over the territory of the Caucasus republics

The same pattern, although perhaps not as strongly expressed, can be observed in Chechnya's religious life. Islam not only unites the Chechens but also brings about significant divisions in the society. Again, the Chechens and other people of the North Caucasus identify themselves with smaller religious groups rather than a nationwide Muslim community. They belong to virds – autonomous religious sects headed by ustaz - religious teachers. Every vird has its specific rules, principles and canons which may differ considerably from dogmas accepted elsewhere. The members of virds – murids -

pledge allegiance to their sects and are obliged to obey the orders of their religious teachers. Thus, Chechen sects are in essence religious orders or brotherhoods held together by common principles, discipline and subordination. Virds are united into two major religious unions - tarikats - each headed by a sheikh: "naqshbandiya" and "qadiriya" (one of the most famous sheiks of the latter was Kunta-Hadji Kishiev). Both of them represent currents of Sufi Islam.

Sufi Islam in the North Caucasus has a number of peculiarities which distinguish it from the Islam accepted in Asia and the Middle East. The traditional kinship values, ancient customs and norms and pagan beliefs that regulated the highlanders' lives for centuries were so deeply entrenched in the mentality of the people of the North Caucasus that Islam had to adapt and transform in order to be accepted. Consequently, the so-called "traditional" Islam that developed here was characterized by a strong influence of local customs and paganism. It is different in many ways from "pure" Islam as it exists in some other countries, and its influence on social life has always been severely limited by values and norms that had formed before the adoption of Islam.

## Religion In the North Caucasus

The “men of faith” praised by Shamil Basayev and others had a dramatic impact on the development of the North Caucasus in previous centuries as well as contemporary times. The first of these men were Christians but, by the 8th century, Arabs began to convert many of the Caucasians to Islam. In the first part of this study we will focus on the role of religion in Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya. We will also examine the situation in some of the less frequently studied parts of the North Caucasus.

### Dagestan

The Republic of Dagestan spreads over 50 thousand square kilometers and has a population of approximately two million people. The overwhelming majority of them are Muslims - 85%, while 4% are Shiites, primarily Azerbaijanis, and 8.5% are Orthodox Christians. There are also small communities of Catholics and Baptists. Dagestan once had a Jewish community of over 30,000, but most of them moved to Israel. As a result, the Jewish population now numbers only 1,000 people.

Thus, Islam is the overwhelmingly dominant religious group in contemporary Dagestan. Spiritual leadership and governance in Dagestan began to change with the appearance of perestroika and the subsequent social disintegration. Up to that time, there had traditionally been a single dominant Muslim leader for Dagestan. During this disruptive transitional period, numerous independent Muslim leaders appeared and gained local followings and cultivated their own acolytes. Consequently, one may identify the following communities as those having independent spiritual governance (muftiyas): Avartses with a population of 600,000; Dargintses with a 320,000 population; Kumyks with 260, 000; Lezghins with 240,000; and Laktsts with 100,000. This diversity reflects the national composition of Dagestan. There are 95,000 Chechens-Akkins in the region, 30,000 Naghaitses, and an assortment of about forty additional national groups. Most of Dagestan’s Sunni Muslim population belongs to the shafiit mazhab organization. During the last decade, the Sufi brotherhoods, which had lost importance during the Soviet era, have been restored.

Currently there are over 40 Sufi brotherhoods in Dagestan. The major representatives of modern Sufism in Dagestan are theologians Said Chirkeisk and Tadjuin Hasavyurt. Together, these men hold the allegiance of many devout Muslims who are adherents of a strict interpretation of the Koran. Historians will record that in this region of the Northern Caucasus there are other people, individuals such as Maghomed Djeranskyi, who are less concerned about theology and, through their violent actions, bear much responsibility for the violence in the Caucasus. Djeranskyi, of course, is not alone as there are many others who share his militant attitude.

In Dagestan there are approximately 1700 large and as many as 6000 small “district mosques.” There are nine Islamic spiritual educational institutes and 600 mosque schools throughout the republic. In addition, a significant number of

Daghestani students study in Muslim schools abroad. Of the 17,000 –18,000 Russian citizens participating in annual hadj, no less than 13,000 to 14,000 of them are citizens of Dagestan. It is, therefore, reasonable to conclude that the Daghestanis are more active in Muslim affairs than the entire populations of Tatars, Bashkirs, and other Muslim nationalities.

A group that has attracted great attention in recent years is the Vakhabites or Wahhabis, as they are known elsewhere. They are referred to as fundamentalists in much of the Western literature on Islam. They first appeared in the North Caucasus in the 1980's and emerged as a serious force in the next decade. Most recently, their main communities were in Mahachkala and Hasav-Yurt.

Today Vakhabite activity is prohibited in Dagestan. As a result, their schools and organizations operate secretly and they are involved in a variety of clandestine activities. There are three main Vakhab factions in Dagestan. The first faction is under the leadership of Ahmed Ahtayev, an activist with a long history of clandestine work. The second faction is led by Baghaudin Muhammad Daghestani. Because of official pressure against his activities, he left Dagestan and is now based in Chechnya. The third faction is based in communities in the Astrakhan region, a stronghold of Vakhabite support, but has no prominent individual leader.

In August 1999, many Daghestani radicals began training in the camps run by a Saudi Arabian calling himself Khattab. Khattab's group had joined Chechen extremists and numerous Arab terrorists who invaded Dagestan. The goal of this union of Islamic radicals is to bring about the secession of Dagestan from the Russian Federation. While this association failed to achieve its immediate goal, it did bring about the introduction of Russian forces into Chechnya, a situation that has greatly increased hardships throughout the region. Many feel that this was probably one of the objectives of those who organized the attacks in Dagestan.

One of the main reasons for the growth of Vakhabism in Dagestan and Chechnya is the difficult social and economic situation in the North Caucasus as well as the generous financing of the Vakhabites from abroad. Thus, it is not surprising that the joint attacks by the Daghestani and Chechen militants coincided with the aggravation of tensions in the Middle East and the renewed international confrontations over oil and gas routes.

## Chechnya

Before the military clashes of 1994-1996, Chechnya covered a territory of 17,300 square kilometers with the population of 1,200,000 people. Of this group, 800-850,000 were Chechens, 200-250,000 were Russians, 20,000 were Ingush and about 15,000 Armenian.

As a result of the conflict, Chechnya's population has been reduced to 500,000



**Grozny: A Devastated City**

people, with a Slavic population of only 10,000 people. The physical destruction of the region is widespread and capital Grozny itself is now gradually being covered by new forests as few people are willing to invest the resources required for rebuilding the devastated city.

The Chechens and the Ingush are Muslims-Sunnis.

Approximately 90% of the Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians of the Chechen Republic belonged to the Christian Orthodox church, while the others belonged to the Evangelical and the Baptist Churches. During the late 1990's, several Christian priests in Chechnya were kidnapped and murdered.

The intensity of religiosity in Chechnya can be measured by two important indicators. First, several thousand mosques, both regional and district ones, were built during the last 15 years to serve the spiritual needs of this community. Second, in the Russian Federation, only Dagestan exceeds Chechnya in terms of the number of pilgrims who journey to Mecca. One to two thousand Chechens participate in the hadj each year.

Spiritual governance of Chechnya since the early 1990s was in the hands of a body known as the Council of Ulems and of an individual known as the Muftiya. The former is a group of theological scholars and the latter is the head of Muslims. From 1995 until early 2000, the Muftiya was Ahmad Hadji Kadyrov, who has recently been appointed as the head of Administration of the Chechen Republic. In the summer of 2000, a new Muftiya was elected by the Council of Ulems. That individual is the former Iman of the Shatoi, region Ahmed Adji Shaman.

For already several centuries Chechnya's traditional Islam has been represented by two Sufi trends: the Naqshbandi and the Qadiri. The best known of the naqshbandi are the brotherhoods of Yusup-Hadji and Tashu-Hadji. The most numerous quadiri brotherhood is the Kunta-Hadji Kishiev order. The relations between these two Sufi brotherhoods have traditionally been very positive. Their representatives never engaged in conflicts with each other, and never criticized the shaykhs of the other communities. While there was an element of competition inherent during election of the imam of the village mosque or Quadiri of the community, that competition never evolved into dogmatic disputes.

There is no exact information on the emergence of Vakhbism in Chechnya, nor about their first preachers. Many scholars associate its appearance with the

establishment of the Islamic Party in 1991. Yet, Beslan Ghentaimirov, the first head of that party had nothing to do with Vakhabism. Furthermore, according to reliable accounts, leaders of the Islamic Party, have been known to indulge in the excessive use of alcohol. Given the hostility of the Vakhabites toward any use of alcohol, such behavior would indicate that the Islamic Party leadership would not meet the standards for a Vakhabite organization.

Others suggest that the appearance of Vakhabism is more correctly associated with an individual known as Adam Deniev or, by many people, simply as “One-legged Ahmed.” Deniev has been a candidate member of the shaykh of Quadiri since 1995.

The first group in Chechnya to be openly associated with the Vakhabites and to actually receive money from them consisted of Islam Khalimov, Isa Umarov, and Movladi Udugov. Udugov, who was the Minister of Information in the Dudayev government, arranged for the regular broadcasts the sermons of Vakhabite preachers on Chechen television. This small circle of Vakhabites build an organization based on kinship principles while avoiding any direct challenges to the established Islamic community in Chechnya. In this early period, its operational principals were based on absolute secrecy and the avoidance of open conflicts with the Islamic community.

The first Chechen war radicalized much of the population and eventually resulted in the legalization of fundamentalist youth groups represented by the “Djamaat” battalion. This move was facilitated by foreign involvement in the person of a Chechen-Jordanian Ipak Fath. He was an elderly man who came from Jordan to assist in the development of fundamentalist groups in Chechnya. Fath had been a participant in the Afghan war during which he helped organize suicide detachments of idealists motivated by the honor of dying in a holy war against the infidels. Eventually, Ipak Fath succumbed to disease but not before making a great contribution to the fundamentalist cause in Chechnya. As a result of Fath’s influence, Khattab and other veterans of the Afghanistan war were enlisted for combat service in Chechnya.

The Jordanian connection was established approximately a century ago and continues to have an impact on develops in the North Caucasus region. In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thousands of Chechens as well as some Ingush traveled through Turkey into the Middle East where they made their homes in Iraq and Jordan. Two



**Mujahideen praying before combat**

Chechen-Ingush villages still exist in Iraq today. In Jordan, the Chechens founded four towns, one of which evolved into what is now the kingdom’s second largest city, Zarqa. As a result of this migration, the Jordanian diplomatic and military community today reflects strong Chechen influences. In fact, during the 1948 war with the Palestine Liberation Army,

Jordan's foremost tank officer, Abdul-Latif Benno, was a Chechen and, in 1978, became Jordan's first military attaché in Moscow.<sup>2</sup>

Vakhabite influence increased significantly during the first Chechen war because Dudayev refused to provide alternate financing. In the face of the severe funding crisis, Ipaq Fath and his colleagues played a major role in purchasing armaments and providing food and clothing for the Chechen forces. The foreign Vakhabite money was channeled through Maskhadov's organization. Consequently, he was forced to make promises to introduce Shariat governance following the war.

As a result of the radicalization of society and the effective use of foreign funds, by 1996 the Vakhabites not only had a military organization in Chechnya, but also their own courts, mullahs, and scholars. To take advantage of this environment, Baghaudin Khebedov left Dagestan to join his radical brethren in Chechnya. Other fundamentalists such as Shamsudin from Prigorodnoye established reputations for themselves as Shariat judges and numerous Chechen preachers who had taken refuge in Jordan were able to return to their homeland.

After creation of the main state institutions of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria at the beginning of 1997, the Vakhabites were rewarded by being able to legalize some of their military formations and to establish a base for training their military personnel led by commander Khattab. Their representatives were



**President Aslan Maskhadov**



**Khattab and Shamil Bassayev**

placed in numerous official government positions, especially those relating to the courts and public security bodies. The growing Vakhabite influence in the Maskhadov government eventually resulted in a very serious political crisis brought about by demand for curbing the Vakhabite influence. The Muftiat headed by Khadyrov demanded that President Maskhadov take decisive steps against those whom he denounced as "enemies of Islam and the Chechen nation."

In June 1998, the crisis led to armed clashes with the Vakhabite detachments near Gudermes. In those battles, a group of government field commanders defeated the Vakhab forces and it was only the intervention of President Maskhadov and Vice President A. Arsanov that saved them from a devastating, final defeat. After these battles, two Vakhabite generals who had demonstrated crass incompetence were reduced to enlisted ranks. Khattab was ordered to close his training camps and to leave Chechnya.

<sup>2</sup> Karny, pp. 273-285.

For the government the victory was not complete. While the order to disband his camps was published, Khattab ignored it. The Vakhab forces regrouped in the town of Urus-Martan and Khattab formed an alliance with Shamil Bassayev. The financial support from abroad enabled the Vakhabites to function without any financial support from the state bodies of Ichkeria. A fortified outpost was set up in Urus-Martan. At this stage of their evolution, the Vakhabites utilized more mundane tactics, such as theft and kidnapping, various actions against the young Chechen state, and personal attacks against president Maskhadov. Several assassination attempts were made against Maskhadov and Khadyrov. Thus, they concentrated on political and criminal activities as a means of opposing the Islamic establishment of Chechnya while avoiding open, large-scale military clashes.

In the fall of 1999, Bassayev's detachments joined Daghestani Vakhabites and, with the help of Arab mujahadins, made military strikes against Dagestan authorities. While the attacks were a military failure, they did bring about concessions from Maskhadov. In an effort to appease his opponents, Maskhadov included Bassayev in the State Defense Committee and appointed him as a military commander.



**Khattab leading combat operations**

Today Vakhabites are excluded from the religious life of Chechnya and Khadyrov now prohibits all forms of Vakhabite propaganda. This is part of an effort to restore the prestige of the traditional Muslim faith. Unfortunately, during this period, the social role of religion in general has declined; thus, even if the traditional Islamic community regains its lost prestige, Islam will not enjoy the prominent position it once held.

The presence of over 100,000 Russian troops on the territory of the Republic and the endless

Russian military activities are a major source of discontent among the population. Many Chechens, however, are stoic in the face of such adversities and regard them as divine punishment for their arrogance and their willingness to admit the Vakhabites, whom they denounce as "servants of Devil" into their country.

At present, Muslim clergy in Chechnya are mullahs and imams. Muslim clergy in Chechnya are highly educated people who were trained in Islamic institutions of Chechnya, Dagestan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan and Egypt. In addition, Chechnya has its own theological institutions and schools. There are Sunday Arab Koran schools in every village. In other words, the prestige of Islamic clergy has increased in Chechnya as they have withdrawn from politics. The important point is that Islam is not being politicized as the Vakhabites wished. In this new environment, the Islamic clergy can express themselves freely on major issues without fearing for official persecution.

## Ingushetia

The small Republic of Ingushetia covers an area of 3600 square kilometers. It has a native population of 300,000 and about as many Chechen refugees. In ethnic and linguist terms, the Ingush are very close to their Chechen neighbors. Their religious cultures, however, are different since the Ingush were converted to Islam later and embraced it with less intensity. Moreover, there has been no tradition of militant Islam in Ingushetia, a factor which has had a major and positive impact on their relations with Russians.<sup>3</sup>

Like most of the Chechens, the Ingush people are Muslim-Sunis. Currently Ingushetia is experiencing a revival of religiosity and boasts a total of over 400 mosques, most of which were constructed in recent years. Over 1,000 Ingush receive a religious education each year, either in Ingushetia or abroad. Spiritual leadership is directed by the Muftia Albogachiev who maintains good relations with the neighboring republics. But unlike Chechnya, the spiritual leaders of Ingushetia do not claim to direct participation in the state governance and have not demanded the introduction of the Shariat law.

For the most part, the Ingush are associated with one of the two traditional orders of Islam. The Naqshbandi order is represented in Ingushetia by the brotherhood of Deni Arsanov, a highly respected figure whose descendants are held in equally high regard. The son of the Shaykh, Ilias Arsanov, left Chechnya in 1996 because of the conflict with Ichkeria authorities and is currently residing in Ingushetia.

The Qadiri order in Ingushetia is primarily associated with Kunta-Hadji Kishiev and has close relations with their coreligionists in Chechnya. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the brotherhood of Batal-Hadji appeared in the Ingush village of Surhahi. Members of this brotherhood strictly observe their Charter. They are very well disciplined and united under the leadership of the descendants of Batal-Hadji.

Learning from the tragic example of Chechnya, which suffered so much as a result of religious disputes, the Ingush Muslims have managed to resist ideological and dogmatic extremism. In 1998 Vakhbism was formally banned in Ingushetia. Vakhb emissaries were expelled and theological schools allied with them were closed. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ingushetia was given responsibility for the suppression of Vakhbism.

While some of the young Ingush citizens, motivated by a sense of religious obligation, participated in military activities during the first Chechen war, they avoided involvement during the second conflict. Their opposition to the second war was a result of their rejection of Vakhbism as well as the slave-trade often associated with it. Many Ingush families suffered as a result of that slave-trade.

## Northern Osetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, and Adygeiya

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<sup>3</sup>Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 100



Northern Osetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayevo-Cherkessia, and Adygeiya are located in the central and northern-west regions of the North Caucasus. The population adheres to ethical norms of mountaineers, rather than to religious values. Unofficial Sufi brotherhoods never played a significant role in this region. By the 1970s religious traditions such as circumcision, having a mullah's blessing for all marriages, and others had been eliminated.

In the 1990's new phenomena of spiritual life related to the interest in the Muslim values and "the great past" started to appear in the national republics of the Central and Northern-West Caucasus. Religious governance headed by muftias was introduced throughout the region. Islamic educational institutions, including higher educational facilities, were opened. Most were created with encouragement and funding from abroad. Mosques were restored in practically all communities of Balkaria, Cherkessia, and Ossetia. Eight mosques were opened in Karachayevo-Cherkessia, even though Muslim population amounts for only half of the population there. The other half of the local population embraces Orthodox Christianity.

The completion of the Islamization process in these republics has been associated with at least one constant theme. The radical Islamic organizations have worked to fill in the vacuum that appeared after the disappearance of the communist ideology. The "Daavat" groups have popularized Vakhabism and recruited youth from the mountain regions into military groups. During the period from 1996 to 1999 dozens of young people from Balkaria and Karachi were trained in the camps of Khattab near Sejen-Yurt. They were active participants in military activities during the 1<sup>st</sup> Chechen war.

Traditional Islam is regaining its lost status primarily among the peoples who suffered from deportation during World War II, especially among Balkars and Karachayevos. Many elements of Sufi practice have been restored in the communities populated by those who have returned from internal exile.

The hostility of traditional believers towards the Vakhabites has grown stronger because the Vakhabites, who view only Vakhab traditions as legitimate, do not recognize the customs and traditions of the mountaineers as valid. In Kabardino-Balkaria fight against Vakhabism has been especially determined and often bitter. Authorities have eliminated the most ardent armed extremists and have expelled or disbanded a number of suspicious organizations financed from abroad.

There are up to 2000 Vakhabites in Karachi, but their ranks often include common Muslim radicals who have not formally embraced the Vakhab faith. While it is a tribute of dubious merit, one must note that it was the Karachi Vakhabites who were recruited to commit acts of terrorism in Moscow and Volgodonsk.

The heads of both Christian Orthodox and Muslim communities deny that there has been a religious intrusion into the territory of the North Caucasus. That is why the Russian Orthodox Church has not given any special blessing for the war in Chechnya either during the 1<sup>st</sup> or the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chechen Wars. It disapproves of the cruel treatment of local civilians by the army but takes no public position on any of these concerns.

## Vakhabism and the Chechen Conflict

While the focus of this study has been the North Caucasus region, the impact of religion on the region's conflict has been most dramatic in Chechnya. In contemporary Chechnya, as noted above, traditional Islam is challenged by a new phenomenon called vakhabism. Originally, this movement emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and was named after its founder Al-Vakhab. He claimed that Islam was distorted and called his followers to "purify" it and return to Islam's fundamentals. Nowadays vakhabism is spread across the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia, where it is accepted as an official ideology of the royal family. Vakhabism in Chechnya (as well as Tajikistan), however, does not relate directly to vakhabism as it is understood by Sunni Muslims in the Middle East countries. Although the main idea is the same—the purification of Islam from both "pagan" and modern influences—Chechen vakhabism has a set of characteristics that distinguish it from religious values and practices in Saudi Arabia.

The Vakhabite movement has deep implications for Chechnya's religious, social and political life. Its call to purify Islam challenges Chechnya's traditional Islam, something which is heavily influenced by the local system of beliefs and norms, as well as an elaborate structure of religious communities and brotherhoods. In fact, Vakhabism attempts to "return" the population to what it views as "original" Islam, rejecting Chechnya's unique historical experience. The key to this transformation is the application of rules, norms and practices accepted among the radicals in the Middle East to the Chechen social and political life. Hence, traditionalists (who constitute the overwhelming majority of the population) associate Vakhabism with foreign influence, which poses a threat to their religious customs and identity. For their part, the Vakhabites view the supporters of traditional Islam as backward sectarians who distort Islam. The conflict between fundamentalists and traditionalists, along with less sharp but nevertheless significant divisions among Sufi sects, since the early 1990s, have had a profound impact on Chechen politics and the ongoing Russian military operation in the region.



**Former Chechen  
President,  
Diokhar Dudayev**

During the 1994-1996 military operation, the Russian federal troops were a common enemy for most Sufi brotherhoods and Vakhabites. Both were mobilizing the population against the federal government (most Chechen leaders identified themselves with Sufi brotherhoods to secure the support of their members; for example, President Dudayev declared that he belonged to the Kunta-Hadji brotherhood). Therefore, their differences were temporarily put aside. Moreover, the Vakhabites managed to strengthen their position in Chechnya. Money, armament and fighters provided by their radical counterparts from abroad were crucial to the Chechen resistance against the federal forces and enabled Vakhabites to become an influential group in the republic. The relations between Sufi brotherhoods and Vakhabites deteriorated dramatically after the end of the 1994-1996 campaign. Their religious differences spilled over into politics.

In the political realm, traditionalists and fundamentalists disagreed over how the Chechen state ought to be organized and what its policy towards Russia should look like. Sufi Muslims advocated a secular state that would preserve Chechnya's traditional social structure and its unique Islamic culture. Their position on the future of Russian-Chechen relations was not uniform and ranged from calls for independence to the development of a "special status" within the Russian Federation. There is no evidence that Sufi brotherhoods had any interest in protracting the conflict or extending it beyond Chechnya's borders. Vakhabites were determined to build a "pure" Muslim society which would be organized and regulated according to the Shariat law (as opposed to adat – traditional norms developed in Chechnya before the adoption of Islam). "Just Islamic order" as they believe it had existed in the times of the Arabic caliphate became the goal of Chechnya's religious extremists. Furthermore, they embraced the idea of creating a larger Islamic state in the Northern Caucasus which would include Dagestan, Ingushetia and possibly other Russian regions. Since those regions chose to stay in the Federation and their predominantly Muslim population did not sympathize with fundamentalism, the only means of achieving this objective was aggression against Russia and then gazavat (or jihad) – holy war against non-believers (in Dagestan, since the early 1990s the population rejected the ideas of vakhabism and the leadership declared them "undesirable" in the republic. In June, 2000 all Vakhabite organizations were prohibited in Dagestan by an act of its parliament).

Thus, Vakhabites challenged the official Chechen leadership (President Maskhadov and its supporters) and posed a serious threat to the foundations of the Chechen society. As a result, official Grozny was becoming more and more critical of vakhabism in its statements and declarations. However, Maskhadov took no decisive action, as he feared that would exacerbate the situation in the republic. Confrontation between traditionalists and

radicals resulted in violence several times; for instance, as noted above, Vakhabites clashed with Sufi Muslims in May, 1998 in Gudermes and Urus-Martan and then again in Gudermes in July, 1998 (approximately 50 people were killed that day). Fearing that fundamentalists will destabilize the situation in the republic and attempt to rebel against Grozny, Maskhadov declared the state of emergency, dissolved and disarmed the Shariat Guards and Islamic regiment, and ordered to



**Combat in Gudermes**

exile the well-known warlord Khattab, a mercenary from Jordan who allegedly cooperated with radicals. On July 23, 1998 there was an attempt in Grozny to assassinate Maskhadov, an attempt probably organized by Vakhabites. Observers from Russia,

Georgia, Azerbaijan and Chechnya itself agreed that at that point the republic was on the brink of civil war.

Despite their relatively strong positions, Vakhabites were not able to assert their influence throughout the republic, much less impose their ideology in its entire territory. However, they went ahead with their plans to occupy neighboring Russian regions and invaded Dagestan in August, 1999. Although members of Sufi brotherhoods may have participated in the invasion as well, the idea and its implementation are blamed by the Russian government and the local population primarily on Vakhabites. Subsequent investigations and the fact that the officials Grozny from the very beginning announced that they did not have anything to do with the events in Dagestan and condemned the aggression further convinced Moscow that fundamentalists had started their jihad and the situation in Chechnya was out of control. Vakhabites were perceived as a major threat to peace and stability in the Northern Caucasus and the territorial integrity of the Federation. The invasion of Dagestan and the Vakhabites' plans to wage a holy war against Russia until the creation of a "purely" Islamic state in its southern territories were the top reasons that prompted the federal government to start a military operation in Chechnya immediately after the defeat of those who attacked Dagestan.

As the federal troops advanced into Chechnya, however, they had to fight not only Islamic extremists but also the members of Sufi brotherhoods who, like in 1994-1996, Russian control for various reasons opposed. Unlike fundamentalists, Sufi Muslims do not fight for a religious cause and tend to have more reasonable positions on issues. Moreover, their dissatisfaction with the situation in the



**Russian soldiers in a mass grave**

republic in the 1996-1999 period encouraged them to cooperate in a number of cases with the Russians. As a result, many of the Sufi communities engaged in negotiations with the federal representatives and avoided armed conflict. Some of them openly supported the military operation and organized volunteer troops to fight against both Sufi and Vakhabite rebels on the Russian side.



**Chechen burying their dead**

In brief, a certain Sufi community may or may not fight the Russians or Vakhabites depending on their traditions, history, kinship ties, religious idiosyncrasies and even geographic position (the population in the mountains is generally perceived as very militant and hostile even to fellow Chechens from the flatland, whereas the northern part of the republic has been loyal to Moscow). On the other hand, Vakhabites are, almost by definition, inclined to resist the Russian military operation and subsequent restoration of peaceful life and order. Therefore, the Russian government, the military and the population at large view Vakhabites or any other radical Islamic movement as the biggest obstacle to the stabilization of the situation in Chechnya. Traditional Sufi groups are Moscow's most valuable partners in the struggle against extremism when they choose to cooperate, and therefore the federal government

makes efforts to support traditional Chechen institutions mentioned above - teips, tukhums, virlds and tarikats. There is a belief that they will help prevent the spread of extremism and facilitate the return to normal life.

## The Vakhabite Perspective

We first need to emphasize a number of important points. First, Chechen society has a very complicated structure and is fragmented along the lines of kinship and religious identification. All politics is local and driven by narrowly defined interests of clans or brotherhoods. A nationwide movement, whether pro-Russian or anti-Russian, is not likely to emerge as long as the present tendencies persist. The roots of and the solutions for the Chechen crisis are in interactions among different factions of the society, not in national interests or aspirations of an ethnic group asserting itself. Second, Sufi brotherhoods play an important role in mobilizing public support either for or against the central government or any other authority; their decisions and actions are best explained individually on the case-by-case basis. Third, religious extremism does exist in Chechnya and for various reasons is accepted among a certain portion of the population. It calls for the redesign of the Chechen society in accordance with the principles of fundamentalist Islam and the conquest of neighboring lands, thus antagonizing traditionalists within Chechnya and the federal government. The confrontation between them and Sufi Muslims has been one of the most dramatic aspects of the Chechen crisis. Fourth, Vakhabites triggered the next round of violence, and the events in Dagestan became the reason why the federal government responded with a military operation. Fifth, since Vakhabites are currently the biggest threat to Moscow's interests, the federal government has supported traditional Chechen institutions, including religious brotherhoods in the assumption that they will effectively resist foreign radical ideas, although they also often deny Russian authority.

In order to better understand the perspective of the Vakhabites, Mr. Albert Avduev, a member of the Chechen Diaspora who works as an oil engineer, has presented his view of this phenomenon. While he privately describes himself as a "secret Vakhabite" he is very open in his efforts to promote a better understanding of the principals of those people who wish to cleanse Islam of its alien characteristics.

Avduev prefers not to use the term Vakhabite, insisting that this term itself is a result of Russian propaganda. He maintains that Russian historians have distorted not only Islam but the movement that seeks to reform Islamic practice. For Avduev, Russian colonization led to a situation in which both the Islamic faith and Islamic society were corrupted. The flight of Russian serfs from the oppressive Czarist administrators was a significant factor that enabled Russians to penetrate the Caucasus as well as other portions of southern Russia.

Avduev explains this process as one which was driven by an extreme Russian prejudice against all people of the North Caucasus in general but against Chechens in particular. The Russian mass media, he argues, have long presented the Caucasus

people are being “more like orangutans than humans”. Russia’s aversion to the people of Chechnya and Dagestan led to a deliberate policy of genocide as early as the 19th century. “Religious traitors” and Russians, he maintains, worked to distort the true Islamic faith. According to Avduev, a “holy war against non-believers” was the only option for devout Muslims. With the weakening of communist rule, the true believers of the North Caucasus were able to work to restore their legitimate rights. Russian authorities, Avduev insists, have undertaken a renewed genocidal campaign to prevent the restoration of a true Islamic society in the North Caucasus.

## Concluding Remarks

While Islam has been very important in the development of the North Caucasus region, the peoples living there do not identify with any single sect or doctrine. Historically, the Islam of this region was suffused with many pre-Islamic customs and traditions. The North Caucasian federation forged by Shamil, Imam of Dagestan, waged a holy war (ghazavat) against the old ways in order to impose Islamic law throughout the Imamate and against the Russian Empire in order to preserve its independence. Shamil, a Sufi of the Naqshbandi order, demanded great sacrifices from his peoples but was eventually conquered by the Russians .

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century another Sufi order took root in the North Caucasus. This was the more pacifistic Qadiri order founded by Kunta-Hadj Kisinev. The Qadiri participated along with the Naqshbandi in various insurrections and revolts during the twilight of the Russian Empire and throughout the Soviet period. By the time Chechnya unilaterally declared its independence in 1991, the Qadiri rite had evolved to become the dominant form of Sufism in Chechnya

During the 1990s and based on its support of Chechen independence, the fundamentalist Vakhabite movement has become a major regional force despite of numerous efforts by the Qadiri Chechens to suppress its influence. This official suppression has resulted in the emergence of a clandestine Vakhabite network supported from abroad, particularly the Middle East and Afghanistan.

The Chechen Diaspora, which has played a major supporting role in the modern Middle East, especially the former Ottoman Empire and successor states such as Iraq and Jordan, has provided aid and soldiers to support their Chechen cousins. The money, armaments, and soldiers (mujahideen) provided by various radical Islamic groups from abroad have also played a major role in strengthening Chechen resistance.

After the first Chechen war (1994-1996), religious differences between the Sufi movements, and the Vakhabites began to have a deleterious political impact in the region. While Sufi Muslims called for the creation of a secular state that would preserve traditional social patterns, the Vakhabites have demanded a purification of Islam and the eradication of local customs that have tainted and undermined pure Islam.

The Russian Federation was greatly humiliated by its loss of the first Chechen war through the peace brokered by General Lebed in 1996. Many important politicians and military officers longed for an opportunity to avenge this loss and regain national honor. The Vakhabite effort to spread a pan-Islamic fundamentalist revival by invading Dagestan in 1999 gave Russia the opportunity it sought to redeem itself.

Within Chechnya, a divided people are confronted by two polar choices: either to work within the Russian Federation and survive physically or to sacrifice the nation upon the altar of jihad. Other Caucasian peoples (Circassians, Balkars, Ingush, Avars and Kumyks among others) have opted to stay within the Russian Federation. Only the Chechens seem unable to moderate in the name of coexistence.

## Appendix

### A Vakhabite View

by Albert Avduev



Albert Avduev

#### Preface

Not much is known about Chechen history and the information that is known comes mostly from Russian sources which cover the period from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The bias of the Russian bureaucrats and official historians has an explanation. The military and those interested in ethnography wrote about the Caucasus most. Historians used exclusively Russian documents, justifying that by alleged absence of the Chechen literature. However, it is known that Russia withdrew and destroyed Chechen historical documents. Up to this date some survived documents are kept in secret Russian archives.

As for the Russian sources, they are represented only by the writings that serve Russia's imperial interests and its colonial policies. Any resistance to Russian colonial expansion by Chechens and Ingush, as well as all other Caucasus peoples, is portrayed as riots and robber raids and Islam's militant offensive against Christianity. Therefore, they cannot be objective. It will not be unnecessary to mention the description of the Russian national character compiled by a German traveler in the 16<sup>th</sup> century who wrote about evil-mindedness of the Russians towards other peoples and among themselves.

The data provided by Russian sources should be treated critically. The historiography of the Chechens began long before the Russian penetration in the Caucasus. The existing sources contain information about:

- The ancestors of the Chechens and Ingush;
- their political and social structures many centuries before the Russian colonization of the Caucasus.

For instance, in an ancient Georgian chronicle "Kartpice Ikhovreba", monk Leonti Mroveli in detail described the country of Vainakhs, their origin, traditions and state institutions, referring to earlier Greek, Byzantine and Persian sources. Also, there is some information from Arab historians and explorers.

In different times historians from different countries called the country of Chechens and Ingush differently. The contemporary territory of Chechnya and Ingushetia almost precisely coincides with the central part of the ancient state of our ancestors. Unfortunately, these sources are not studied sufficiently. At the same time, already examined materials irrefutably proved the existence of statehood in the Chechen and Ingush lands since the 6<sup>th</sup> century. They suggest that it was not an amorphous formation but a political entity playing an important role not only in the Caucasus region but in a larger area stretching from Byzantine to Persia.

In the country inhabited by the Vainakhs there were towns and settlements, where an advanced art of building and treating of stone existed. Religious and civil architecture, as well as fortifications show a high level of the art of building. Houses, towers and bridges were built by special architects. Defensive fortifications and burial structures in the territory of Chechnya and Ingushetia are masterpieces of architecture. Therefore, the ancient ancestors of the Chechens and Ingush are considered to be the founders of the stone architecture in the Central Caucasus. Some buildings have inscriptions that allow us to determine the time of construction and the names of the architects. Vainakh architects were building stone structures throughout the Caucasus. Georgian sources indicate that stone architecture came to Georgia from the Vainakhs. Unfortunately, ancient sources, except for existing legends and stories, are not sufficiently examined to this date because of colonization.

The Chechens still keep in their memory the times of the Mongol invasion.

At the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century in Central Asia events occurred that left a trace in the history of many countries. The emerged Mongol state soon became a huge empire. As a result of the Mongols' conquest in Europe and Asia one of the most tragic periods of history began for the



peoples inhabiting these areas. It affected all of the Caucasus peoples and the ancestors of the Chechens and Ingush in particular.

It is known from legends and historical documents that in the period after the Mongol invasion the statehood of the Chechens and Ingush ceased to exist. The Mongols first clashed with the ancestors of the Chechens and Ingush in the first quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century; they were defeated and went farther to the north. However, some time later they returned, invaded the country of the Vainakhs and besieged their capital whose name according to some sources was Magas (the contemporary settlement of Ankhal-Kola). The siege lasted for about a year, which testifies a fierce resistance against the Mongols. Because of the persistent resistance, the Mongols almost completely destroyed the population in the plain part of the country. However, despite their military strength, the Mongol troops could not conquer the mountainous part of Vainakh's country. Still, hundreds of settlements in the plains disappeared, as well as an ancient state.

As a result of the invasion, an abundant population concentrated in the mountainous areas of contemporary Chechnya and Ingushetia, which appeared to be in a very difficult economic situation derived primarily from the lack of land. The population in the mountains was forced to isolate itself from the plains dominated by the conquerors. This forced isolation has had a noticeable impact on many aspects of the subsequent existence of the Chechens and Ingush. Thus, the process of the development of the Chechen statehood was interrupted and delayed for several centuries. Only with the fall of the Golden Horde did it become possible for the Chechen's ancestors to return to their flatland, but by that time political isolation had led to political disunity which would affect the future of the Chechens and Ingush.

### **The penetration of the Russians in the Caucasus**

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Russia, already a centralized state in many respects thanks to the Golden Horde rule, became a successor in the territory of the former Golden Horde.

At that time serfdom was developing in Russia, prompting not only individuals but entire families and settlements to escape to the south and south-east, including the Caucasus. This is how the penetration of the Russians into the Caucasus began.

Those fugitives did not constitute a homogeneous ethnic group. From the very beginning, their settlements were multiethnic. Subsequently, however, they appeared to be an instrument of Russia's policy in the Caucasus.

As early as at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century this migration became the source of raids on the Caucasus peoples (including the Chechens and Ingush) by Russian Cossacks whose troops consisted of fugitive serfs, robbers and thieves. One of the well-known leaders of such bands was S. Razin, known among the Chechens by his raids on their villages in the lower reaches of the Terek river where it flows into the Caspian Sea.

The ethnic territory of the Chechens and Ingush at the time spread from the northern slopes of the Caucasus Ridge to the Terek basin and from the basins of Baksai and Sulak to the contemporary city of Vladikavkaz. Over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the territory inhabited by the ancestors of the Chechens and Ingush was expanding.

The political structure of Chechnya and Ingushetia was characterized by the existence of autonomous communities which were run by elected leaders and regulated relations among themselves in the councils of communities. The Chechens preserved traditional ties among themselves, particularly in the area of foreign policy. With the intensification of Russian expansion at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the role of the state council Myahk-Khel increased to facilitate the creation of a common policy. At the same time the role of Islam in Chechen political and economic life increased. The unification of the Chechens and Ingush was underway along with the development of a new law based in the Sharia law since the existing adats – customary law – were not adequate to the realities of Chechen and Ingush life. The penetration of Islam in the Caucasus began in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, but subsequent invasions and unfavorable economic conditions, as well as political disunity inhibited its acceptance among the population. It was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that Islam strengthened its position among the Chechens and Ingush. At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in the territory of Chechnya and Ingushetia the first Islamic centers emerged. By that time the Islamic mindset affirmed itself in Chechen communities. Later it became the pivot of the struggle for the independence of the Chechens, Ingush and Dagestan's peoples.

As I mentioned above, the supreme state organ was Myahk-Khel, whose leader was chosen among its members. All Chechen and Ingush communities were represented in Myahk-Khel. Originally the state council was established by the alliance of ten communities, and the symbol of this union was a big boiler with the names of 9 teips (communities) who founded the union.

The names of these communities and many of their leaders who left a trace in the Chechen history are known from popular stories and legends.

### **The beginning of colonization**

If in the earlier times the penetration of the Russians in the Caucasus was periodic/sporadic and limited to raids on Chechen and Ingush settlements in the Terek river basin, in the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Russians started to seize Chechens' primordial lands in the Terek basin.

For instance, in the 1720s the Russian tsar Peter I carried out a raid in the lands of Dagestan and Derbent. After attacking Dagestan's settlements, tsar Peter I invaded the possessions of the Chechens but was repulsed by the Chechen troops. He was defeated and miraculously escaped captivity, the event after which he had to forget about his plans to subjugate the Chechens for a long time.

At the same time, the Russians managed to build their military outpost at the mouth of the Terek river by the Caspian Sea and surround it with Russian settlements. This process of forcing the Chechens out has been underway for 100 years. It is remarkable how tsar Peter I tried to conceal his true intentions when he was invading Dagestan and Chechnya. In his message to the communities inhabiting these territories he assured them that his troops did not come to capture their lands but just wanted to proceed to Derbent to punish people who allegedly robbed and assaulted Russian merchants. As a result, he managed to reach Derbent without any obstacles, robbed it and on his way back robbed and burned the villages that had let him on their lands. The Mongol hordes used the same strategy in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when opposed by a united army of Khazars and Vainakhs. Mongol envoys persuaded the Khazars to abandon their allies arguing that the Khazars are the Mongols' ethnic kin and the Mongols would not attack them. Later, however, the Mongols attacked and defeated the Khazars.

These have been the methods inherent in Russian policies throughout the history of Russo-Caucasus relations since the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. I will cite the document entitled "The message of Chechen communities to the Russian administration bordering them":

You assured us that your monarch does not oppress anyone and deceived us. This deception allowed you to become our masters. Moreover, you took our land without our consent. You filled the air between the earth and the sky with oppression, and the day has turned into the night for us!

Using this strategy, Russia was penetrating deep into the territory of Chechnya and Dagestan. The Russian government was building military settlements and forcing out the indigenous peoples, populating this territory with ethnic Russians, mostly serfs, prisoners and Cossacks whose ancestors were runaway serfs and robbers.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the role of Islam in the life of the Chechen and Daghestani peoples increased, which promoted the unification of all Muslim peoples of Caucasus in one coalition against foreign invasion. The first attempt to create such a union was carried out by sheikh Mansur. He created a foundation for the unification of the Caucasus peoples on the basis of Islamic law and cultural, spiritual and historical commonalities.

Not much information can be found about sheikh Mansur in Russian sources, and data is sometimes contradictory. There are essays by Russian bureaucrats based on reports from the military. Russian generals, trying to explain their defeats, were assuring in those reports that sheikh Mansur was not a Chechen but an Italian or a French, a member of a powerful Catholic order who had special military education and financial support from Muslim and Western countries.

In 1783 the united forces of Chechens and other Caucasus peoples, headed by imam sheikh Mansur attacked Russian troops. They destroyed several fortifications on the Terek river and drove the Russians back. In 1794 sheikh Mansur was either killed in the city of Anapa or captured and put in the Schlisselburg fortress in St. Petersburg.

After Mansur's death the attempts to unite the Caucasus peoples were not consistent. I will try to determine the factors that inhibited unification below. Despite relentless military aggression on the part of the Russian Empire Chechnya and Dagestan were going through the complicated processes of internal renewal within their societies. In that period the population accepted the Sharia law instead of the customary law of highlanders (adat), and thanks to such a reform all of the differences that had existed before and that had impeded unification were eliminated.

In 1815, after the defeat of Napoleon, the Russian Empire was able to send more than 300,000 troops to the Caucasus and then increase this number up to 600,000 troops, which was the reason for Russia's military success in the next fifteen years when it was carrying out its plans

to conquer new territories. The treaty of George of 1783, which made Eastern Georgia Russian protectorate, was also an important factor.

The Russian government justified the necessity to subdue the Northern Caucasus by the fact that in 1807 the Eastern and Western kingdoms in Georgia were disestablished and virtually all Transcaucasus was controlled by Russian military administration. Thus, "free peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan, being independent, spread the rebellious spirit and aspirations for independence among other peoples subject to the Russian Empire."

In 1816 the Russian emperor Alexander I appointed general Ermolov the commander of the Caucasus expeditionary corps. The events that made the Chechens perceive everything Russian negatively are associated with Ermolov's name.

Ermolov became the founder of the idea of total extermination of the Chechens. He wrote to emperor Alexander I:

In this year, 1818, I will establish a fortification on the Sunzha river and bring the project to an end the next year if the Chechens do not hinder it. Then I will declare the rules for to live by and the obligations of the villains who live between Terek and Sunzha, which will explain to them that they are subjects of your imperial majesty and not allies as they still dream.

I will cite one of the documents that can help explain those rules and obligations:

The conditions prescribed to submitting highlanders.

Submitted highlanders must:

1. Turn over amanats (hostages) from settlements immediately. The commander has the right to determine how many and from which families these hostages should be given.
2. Declare allegiance and present alliance lists to the Russian administration.
3. Obey all requests and orders of a representative appointed by the Russian government.
4. At the representative's request, subjects must provide him with carts, labor for building roads and bridges and for the transportation of papers and orders, as well as with guides and troops for an escort in the land of the tribe.
5. Do not go from one village to another without permission.
6. Elect one "nady" who will carry out all orders of the Russian representative.
7. Elect one "starshina" who will carry out all orders of the administration.
8. Do not give shelter to murids and rebellious highlanders and renounce the pernicious teaching of Islam.
9. Turn over one good rifle from every 10 households as a tribute.
10. As a punishment, pay a fine of two sheep from each household.
11. Extradite all Russian fugitives hiding in the mountains

For not observing these conditions, highlanders will be fined and arrested. For failing to observe the most important of them, the defiant' property will be expropriated and the hostages from unruly villages will be sent to Siberia.

I think this is enough to understand Russian policy. I will also describe methods used to bring this policy into practice. At Ermolov's order, general-mayor Sysoev with his troop and Cossacks surrounded village Dad-Yurt on the Terek river. He offered the inhabitants to leave it, threatening to use force should they stay.

This is what he reported to Ermolov about the battle: "The Chechens did not listen to my suggestion and defended themselves fiercely. Almost every household and dwelling was surrounded by a high fence that had to be stormed. Many inhabitants killed their wives when soldiers were advancing to their houses in the fear that they would be in soldier's hands. Many women rushed to soldiers with daggers. The battle continued for the most of the day and we have not suffered such significant losses before: we lost 200 officers, and the enemies lost at least 400 people in the battle itself and many more were killed during artillery strikes. We also took 140 women and children as prisoners. Our soldiers got booty." This example is not the most striking episode but demonstrative.

Analyzing information about the Russian colonization of the Caucasus, I found an arsenal of insidious methods which are used in Chechnya today, strengthened by the Russian mass media. And it is not anything new either, there were lies and slander in the official Russian press in the past centuries as well. One of the most prominent writers of that time was Sollogub, who asserted that highlanders (the Chechens and other Caucasus peoples) looked more like orangutans than humans and invoked only disgust.

The aversion that Russians felt towards the Chechens was so strong that the population of Chechnya and Dagestan was reduced by half during twelve years of the Russian aggression. By 1830, the population of Chechnya and Ingushetia was 218,000 people. After the fall of Georgia

(1783-1861) Chechens and Ingush were surrounded by territories controlled by the Russian military administration. As a result, the Russians managed to isolate a weak Chechen economy.

Traditional trade relations between the Chechens and their neighbors were disrupted, which led to inevitable economic recession. The methods were very simple: after the destruction of towns and villages in the Terek and Sunzha basins, remaining settlements were separated from each other by fortifications and Cossack settlements, which hampered not only trade relations with neighboring peoples but also among the Chechens themselves. Merchants were arrested and their goods were confiscated. Moreover, merchants had to pay huge ransoms for their release. At the same time, Russian conquerors practiced killings of the Chechen leaders and arrests of rich people, using ethnic Chechens who fled Chechnya and were prosecuted for grave crimes. Subsequently these criminals would be used as guides, killers, scouts and even heads of submitted villages. In their reports to the government Russian bureaucrats gave them titles which did not exist in Chechnya - princes, etc. But the main source of economic recession was Russian raids during harvesting. Troops burned fields and orchards and took cattle which were the basis for food production.

Ermolov, commanding the Russian troops from 1816 to 1828, started the total extermination of Chechnya's population and the destruction of its towns and villages. Faced with fierce resistance, Ermolov deemed necessary the total annihilation of the Chechens. He reported to Emperor Alexander I: "I do not consider the Caucasus conquered as long as there is even one Chechen alive." In other reports he complained that "for some reason, the Chechens are not prone to any fatal diseases." He created all necessary conditions for that, filling springs with the bodies of Chechens and his soldiers.

It is remarkable that the memory about Ermolov's crimes is still alive. Up to this day mothers scare their children with his name.

### **The unification of Dagestan and Chechnya in the Imam: "Muridism"**

At the beginning of the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the peoples of Dagestan and Chechnya united in their struggle for independence in a state known by the name "imamat". The founders and leaders of imamat were wonderful and educated people who devoted their lives to serve their nation/to their nation's service. The first imam was Gazi-Magomed, the second – Gamzat-Bek and the third, perhaps the most prominent, – Shamil. Their followers – Suleiman-Efendi, Tashev-Hadji, Akhver-Magomed, Boisangur, etc. were also very generous and noble people.

The people who witnessed Shamil's rule (1834-1859) wrote about it: "After he purified the country from idolatry and dissipation, Shamil established order in the country and acted according to the Sharia law. He introduced muftis and muftasibs, appointed khadis and organized the army. Acting in accordance with the Koran, Sunna and laws of Sharia, he punished those who committed crimes and eradicated crime."

In a short period of time the troops of imamat managed to liberate many territories captured by the Russian occupants. The people of Dagestan and Chechnya cheered up again and took heart.

Thus, Islam appeared to be the force that united the peoples of Dagestan and Chechnya in their struggle for independence and the future of their descendants.

Later Russian historians attempted to portray the struggle of highlanders as a religious fanaticism. This position was especially popular in the Soviet Period of the Russian Empire. However, it should be mentioned that there were some attempts to give an objective interpretation of those events and of the role Islam played in them.

Historian Pokrovsky admitted in 1914 the positive role of Islam. Comparing imam Shamil and prophet Mohammed, he admitted that the power of both was purely democratic, based on the recognition by people. Pokrovsky wrote that Islam brings democratic reforms which are achievable with the help of the Sharia law. Comparing the Sharia law with adats based on local customs, he considered the former a positive development.

Russian officers-historians continue, as before, to allege religious fanaticism and highlanders' predatory behavior, defining it as "muridism". I assert that this definition is invalid.

The state of Dagestan's and Chechnya's peoples existed through 1859. Throughout the period of its existence the Russian Empire openly and covertly carried out aggression against imamat. The Russian Empire did not observe any of the peace treaties concluded and used them to prepare another aggression or a terrorist act. General Grabbe's prescription made on January 29, 1841 about the impending murder of Akhverda-Magoma is a good example:

"Information received from Chechnya suggests that there are people who agree to eliminate Akhverda-Magoma for a good reward. No doubt, with his elimination we would get rid of one of Shamil's most dangerous followers and the conquest of Chechnya would be a much less complicated enterprise.

Taking this into account, I informed the government about my opinion and decided to provide you with up to 2,000 rubles for extraordinary expenses. I suppose the matter should be given to general Olshevsky for implementation, and you will provide him with instructions and money unless you have a better plan. Anyway, I will be waiting to hear about your opinion and the efforts that you will undertake." This document testifies to a widespread use of terrorist acts by the Russian government. Along with terrorism, fraud and forgery were also an integral part of Russian policy.

The distorted texts of religious books were printed and distributed by bribed religious traitors. One of the centers for the training of religious saboteurs was the institute "Omarov's teaching" in Tiflis. There were traitors and hypocrites in Chechnya too, like Lad Arakansky, nady Magomed and nady Dunai.

Having the opportunity to influence the members of their communities, these renegades covertly conducted sabotage. Russian gold was an excellent stimulus for them. Exploring the ideological aspect of highlanders' struggle, Russian and Soviet historians, sticking to imperial philosophy and then communist ideology, asserted that there was a religious fanaticism based on the teachings of several religious activists – murshids, and had their followers (murids).

In their papers, historians call that "muridism". They think that muridism is a teaching based on Sufi Islam, whose central part is a blind, unquestioning submission of murids to their murshids, and the former encourage "religious fanaticism" in the latter. In effect, all this quasi-research was to characterize the struggle of Daghestani and Chechen peoples as a fanatic sectarianism. Sollogub, who was a very active propagandist of the highlanders' extermination, wrote: "Shamil encourages religious fanaticism in highlanders." I believe this characterization is not correct, and is simply an attempt to distort the very essence of the ideology based on the Islamic mindset of Dagestan's and Chechnya's peoples. There was no sectarianism, perhaps only some insignificant deviations.

I dare to assert that real sectarianism began to develop in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia only after the fall of imammat in 1859. The founders of this sectarianism are aforementioned religious traitors and graduates from the institute "Omarov's teaching" in Tiflis, who were introduced in Chechnya to separate Muslims according to an old imperial principle - divide and rule.

In 1840 the population of Chechnya and Dagestan was no more than 175,000 people and continued to decrease steadily as a result of Russian aggression. Despite the heavy losses that Russia suffered in this war (15,000 to 30,000 soldiers and officers every year), the Russian official press presented a victory over Shamil as a necessity and a matter of national importance.

Contradictions within imammat's leadership were used wisely by Russian propagandists to divide the people of imammat. Distorted rumors about the leaders of imammat, spread by those who worked for aggressors, worried and confused the isolated population. The rumor that Shamil wanted to make imammat a hereditary monarchy caused more damage than 10 Russian divisions.

In 1859 imam Shamil was captured in the battle with outnumbering enemy by the Gunib village. Since that time the state of the peoples of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia have ceased to exist. In this battle Shamil killed 26 soldiers with his own hands, but was knocked down and captured. Yet even after Shamil's imprisonment Russian troops were not able to destroy centers of resistance for another 20 years. A story was made up then about a voluntary surrender of Shamil. This story is exploited up to this day along with a forged will of Shamil in which he calls his people to submit to Russia. All these false documents were created in the Russian secret police and then developed further in NKVD-KGB-FSS.

Another example of a successful misrepresentation of information was a forged decree of a Turkish sultan distributed by the Russian military administration. The decree invited the Chechens and other Muslims from the Northern Caucasus to move to Turkey and the Middle East. As a result, entire villages were leaving Chechnya and disappearing until 1895.

In the wake of the fall of imammat the peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan found themselves in such a catastrophic situation that they had to resort to an unthinkable for highlander's step - to ask the Turkish sultan for help. The letter from the Muslims of Chechnya and Dagestan to the Turkish sultan, 1859 reads as follows:

From a Muslim population subjected to the rule of idolaters, from kadys, scientists, fair and noble people and other people of Dagestan who follow them, to the center of Islam, the supreme Muslim state which is established by God to strengthen Islam. We declare that we have lived in peace and security, and although we did not have a single ruler non-believers were unable to defeat us. We waged a holy war against non-believers and kept the Muslim honor, and fought those who wanted to subject us to their will. We turned to God for help. We were not scared by the numbers of our

enemies but made them afraid of us. Those who had been trying to become our rulers saw that they could not defeat us and they turned to the Russian tsar for help. Without any help except that of God we suffered a lot. We killed and we were killed. We robbed and were robbed. We thank our God, he helped us. Despite our small numbers and lack of equipment they could not defeat us and we beat them many times. Then non-believers understood that our weakness is in our disunity and rivalries among our rulers. Non-believers used the willingness of our rulers to accept money and presents to deceive us. They strengthened their position and started to encroach on the Muslims. As a result, we found ourselves in this terrible situation. They captured fortifications and settlements. We cannot expel them because of their large numbers. Powerful countries did not help us, and we are unable to resist. Therefore, we are waiting for help from someone. When the situation became intolerable and our suffering increased we did not find a shelter other than the great caliphate. We announce about our misfortunes and ask you to help us.

We wrote this letter hoping that the caliphate will help us in this terrible situation.

It will not decline on our request, will it? Help us!

Oh, the one who has the keys to all Muslim affairs! If we do not ask the sultan of Islam to help us and he does not liberate us, whom else can we ask for help and shelter? The tribes of non-believers seek help from their leader and he provides them with help. But what is he compared to the Khalif?

We ask the great sultan to attend to us as it has been the case for a long duration. We are a part of the Muslim community which obeys the orders of the Caliphate whenever possible.

Apparently, because of the existing blockade this letter, like others, was intercepted and did not reach its destination. But it is hard for me to imagine how this cry for help could have been heard then, as well as now.

Subsequently, the colonization was conducted with cruelty, vandalism and barbarianism inherent to the Russian conquerors. The submitted peoples were exterminated with and without justifications, expelled from their lands and isolated in the mountains, destined to extinction. The symbols and documents of the Chechen state were destroyed or transferred to Russia.

In 1917, the Chechens made a fatal mistake which I think predetermined their destiny for many decades. In the struggle between two major Russian groups, the Chechens supported the Bolsheviks. It is an amazing but explainable fact. The Chechens and Ingush associated their enslavement with the tsarist Russia. The Bolsheviks, using anti-monarchy slogans, managed to outwit a small and separated Chechen society which by that time did not have a single political platform and was on the verge of extinction. After the study of the materials from that period it becomes clear that none of the opposing groups – the Bolsheviks or the monarchists – intended to give up colonial territories. Subsequently, the peoples of the Caucasus attempted to establish their own state in 1922, but it was not successful.

Bolshevism did not change the old Russian policy towards the peoples of the Northern Caucasus when it came to power. It brought even more sophisticated methods of oppression; tactics changed and the ban on the freedom of religious beliefs was added, but the strategy remained the same – assimilation or extermination. The so-called internationalism was a form of russification of all peoples from Russian colonies.

Many prominent Chechens who spoke out against the communist rule were killed, arrested or sent to Siberia: Sheikh Ali Mitaev, a revolutionary and a leader of the Chechen troops Aslambek Sheripov, Gapur Akhriev and many others. Wise and educated people, as well as religious activists were sent to Siberia. The communists attempted to carry out collectivization in rural communities by force, which resulted in massive uprisings.

In 1942, uprisings took place in Chechnya, which were a struggle against Russian colonists. February 23, 1944, when the most capable part of Chechnya's male population was fighting for the Soviet Army (one of the examples of their courage is the Brest castle – the majority of its defenders were Chechens), our entire nation was deported to the Central Asian plains for alleged treason. In winter, without warm clothes or food the Chechens and Ingush were left in uninhabited areas.

The witnesses and victims of this tragedy who managed to survive cannot help crying when they think about it. It was nothing but genocide. According to official data, about a half-million was deported in 1944, and only 214,000 returned in 13 years. Think about these numbers.

I remember the stories that my father told me. In 1944 he was 15. He told me how in the dawn of a February day NKVD troops surrounded his village, announced the decree "About the deportation of the Chechens into Central Asia for permanent residence", and gave people 15 minutes to pack up. People were pushed out of their homes, organized in columns and led to platforms, where trucks were waiting for them. People who were slow to move or tried to escape were killed. The bodies of children, women and elderly were all over the roads. Then people were packed into train cars originally designed to transport cattle. Males older than 16 years old

were bound and put in separate train cars. All along the road to Central Asia people were dying of cold and starvation. Bodies were not buried but thrown away at railway stations. This is how my father described the tragedy. Some other families in the mountains were less lucky.

If in my father's village they killed selectively those who were too old to move around without assistance, up in the mountains they exterminated some settlements completely. It is impossible to describe the tragedy of our nation in 1944. The suffering and pain was so immense that it is hard to find appropriate definitions for them.

Knowing that the data provided by the Russians is a lie, I want to describe the fate of my mother's family as an example demonstrating the scopes of the tragedy.

In 1944 my mother was 12. She had parents, three brothers and four sisters. Her father and brothers were killed in February 23, 1944 in the day of deportation, and her mother and sisters died on their way to the Central Asia. This is the history of one family and it is not the most terrible.

Decades later, the contemporary generation of Chechens and Ingush knows that originally instead of deportation they planned a total extermination of our nation. A plan was developed to put trains with the Chechens and Ingush on ferry ships and sink them in the Caspian Sea. It is not a myth, but information from the historical documents.

Stalin's death and following political changes allowed the Chechens and Ingush to return to their land (1957-1959). But over those 13 years the very memory about our existence was destroyed on our land. Ancient monuments, mosques, etc. which were more than 1000 years old, were destroyed. Virtually nothing remained in the contemporary territory of Chechnya that was reminiscent of the Chechens. Even ancient tombs were removed and used to build pig-houses to insult the memory about the dead.

The territory of Checheno-Ingushetia was divided among neighboring regions. The remaining part was called the Georgian region. The contemporary borders have existed since 1957. Some originally Chechen lands are still ruled by Russia.

It may seem that the return of the Chechens to their historical motherland and the recognition that the deportation was a mistake would bring genocide to an end. But it did not happen! All rights and freedoms declared by the government were just slogans designed to conceal the real essence of policy towards the non-Russian population. The myth about equal opportunities and rights would prove to be invalid in any state organ. A Chechen or Ingush trying to use his/her declared rights would be shown his/her place by a few words about our alleged treason during the Second World War.

I will give you an example about how even in school the Chechens were taught to feel guilty before the Russian nation. My friend was expelled from school because he contradicted a Russian teacher when she said that the Chechens had betrayed Russians during the war against the fascists. He said that we did not betray anybody. If the Germans were fascists for the Russians, then the Russians were fascists for the Chechens.

Another example: in 1973, the Chechens and Ingush realized the impossibility of the restoration of their rights and gathered in the central square of Grozny demanding the implementation of the 1957 decrees of the Soviet government concerning rehabilitation. They were told that they had not been rehabilitated but forgiven. The meeting was dispersed and its activists were put in prison.

We know a lot about the politics of the Soviet Empire now, and the most colorful description of that period is in Avturkhanov's book "The Kremlin's Empire".

Every day the Chechens could see the reminder of their real status among "the family of the Soviet peoples" in the center of the city, where the monument to Ermolov was erected. Covert forms of discrimination in all spheres of life, the lack of the freedom of expression and religion are characteristic of that period of colonial oppression. Everything was subject to russification, and the history of the Chechens was falsified. Vainakhs (this is how Chechens and Ingush called themselves) had a choice between total assimilation and extinction. With this dilemma, they reached the year 1991 and the epoch that became a turning point in the contemporary history of the Chechen nation.

## About the Authors

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