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**MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE CONFLICT IN CHECHNYA:
THE INFLUENCE OF ORIENTALISM**

Freedom or Jihad

As compared to other conflicts in the post-Soviet arena, the conflict in Chechnya attracted the most attention of the global media as well as that of policy makers and experts worldwide. It was certainly one of the most brutal post-Soviet conflicts, but perhaps not the most exceptionally cruel (the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan had also a high incidence of massacres and ethnic cleansing). The fact that the conflict has occurred on the territory of Russia and the latter is one of the sides of the conflict which plays a very significant role in drawing the attention of the media and academicians. The Russian-Chechen conflict raised three important issues – the future of Russia as a state with its status of multinational federation, human rights and terrorism. All three themes were high on the agenda of the post-Cold war era, characterized by the rise of nationalism, religious antagonism, and ethnic conflicts. Accordingly, perceptions about this particular conflict evolved around these three issues.

Initially, when Chechens¹ declared their independence from the USSR and Russia in 1991, the international community debated about the right of self-determination and secession. The Western perception was dominated by the theme of freedom-seeking mountaineers fighting against the Russian “bear”. During the First Chechen War (1994-1996), overall sympathy was on the Chechen side, which suffered greatly from indiscriminate killings by the Russian military machine. Journalists and reporters made known numerous accounts of massacres, such as in Samashki, where the Russian troops killed between 100 and 300 civilians. Massive human rights abuses and the failure of the

¹ A term “Chechens” or “Russians” is used conditionally in this paper. As argued by several scholars, not all Chechens were pro-independent supporters. Similarly, many Russians were opposed to a military solution of the conflict with Chechnya.

Russian army to win the war prompted condemnation by many states and human rights organizations and caused them to call for a peaceful solution of the conflict.

However, the theme of freedom later was replaced by Islamic *jihad* and terrorism. Between the First and Second Chechen wars the breakaway region plunged into chaos which resulted in an internal clash for power, massive kidnappings, and terrorist attacks on the neighboring regions. During the Second Chechen War (1999-2009)² the Russian Army pounded overwhelming force on the small autonomous republic and committed even more war crimes than during the First Chechen War. However, the attention of the global media and scholars had shifted towards Islamic terrorists. A plethora of books appeared with words highlighting jihad: Sebastian Smith's (2006) *Allah's Mountains: the Battle for Chechnya*; James Hughes' (2007) *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*; Yossef Bodansky's (2007) *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror*; Robert Shafer's (2011) *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad* and some others.

Studies of the Russian-Chechen conflict can be grouped in two categories: journalistic works – some of which produced excellent, vivid and painfully tragic account of the wars³ – and academic studies. Recent publication trends (leaving aside those influenced by the “jihad/terror” theme) have provided some deep analysis of the roots and the dynamics of the conflict (Tishkov 2004, Zürcher 2007, King 2008), but such studies remain limited.

The First Chechen War was disastrous for Russia in terms of political and military outcomes as well as informational warfare. Chechens were perceived as an oppressed ethnic group, seeking independence from the Russian empire. The leaders of the Chechen fighters, especially information minister Movladi Udugov, did a great job in attracting and welcoming foreign media representatives. By contrast, the Russian army neglected and disdained the media; as a result, Moscow lost the war on all fronts.

Everything changed during the Second Chechen War. If in May 1999 Russian president Boris Yeltsin barely escaped impeachment for his military failure and conduct during the First War, in few months – in October 1999 – the Russian public overwhelmingly supported the opening of a military operation against the breakaway republic (Thomas,

² The timeline of the Second Chechen War is still debated. While the beginning is marked by August 26, 1999, many scholars argue that the war is still ongoing. While the conflict between Chechen rebels and Russian authorities is not over, I mark the end of the active military phase (which corresponds to the word “war”) with April 16, 2009, when Moscow officially declared the end of the “counter-terrorism” operation.

³ In my view, the best books in this category are the following: Lieven 1998, Gall, de Waal 1999, Goltz 2003, Jagielski, Gauger 2009.

2005). In an effort to gain support from the international community and the foreign media, Russia has portrayed its struggle in Chechnya as part of the fight against international terrorism. These efforts were facilitated by a significant transformation within Chechnya and the Chechen movement. What started as a secular independence project after the victory in the First Chechen war turned into a pro-Islamic movement. It is necessary to note that already during the war against the Russian empire in the nineteenth century, the leader of North Caucasus Sheikh Shamil proclaimed himself not only a military but also a spiritual leader, and subsequently called for “holy war” against the Russians – *gazavat*. However, in 1991, Chechen separatists were quite far from religious sentiments. Stuart Hughes, having analyzed the sixty presidential decrees of the first Chechen leader Djohar Dudayev, concluded that no substantial reference to religion was made, except one formal recall of Allah (Hughes 2007, p. 67).

Many experts argue that the transition to jihad happened under the pressure of the Russian army. Terrorism is the last resort of the weak side in resistance to the overwhelming force of an enemy. The influence of Al Qaeda and the Wahhabist movement sponsored from the Middle East was also arguably present in Chechnya. Some writers, mostly journalists, view this transformation to religion as a plot of Russian intelligence. Former Russian defected intelligence officer Alexander Litvinenko even accused the FSB (Russian secret agency) of conspiring and organizing the explosions of residential apartments in Russian cities in 1999, which was used as a reason for the second invasion of Chechnya. The book which he co-authored with Yuri Felshtinsky describes the actions of Russian intelligence behind the terrorist attacks on Russian cities in 1999 (Feltshinsky, Litvinenko 2007). Many assertions in the book, however, lack proper reference and documentation.

Others points to the well-known fact that one of the prominent leader of Chechens, Shamil Basayev, was a FSB recruit who was fighting against the Georgian army in Abkhazia. Shamil Basayev was the main instigator of an attack on Dagestan in 1999, and this military operation made much it easier for Moscow to explain the necessity of military action in order to protect other Russian regions from the chaos and the threat of Islamic fundamentalism. There are reports that the earliest Wahhabi preachers in Chechnya – such as Adam Deniev – were KGB agents (Maass and Kubanek 2003).

Apparently, Moscow, instead of helping Aslan Maskhadov (successor of Djohar Dudayev) to establish a viable government, between the two wars encouraged and condoned the Wahhabists. In the mid-1990s, an anecdote was widely repeated in the Caucasus about Russian Premier Sergey Stepashin who had visited Wahhabist enclaves in Dagestan. Stepashin said on television: “Well, I have been there; they are normal guys

planting potatoes” (Isaenko 2007). Ahmad Kadyrov, Chechen official leader who was installed by Moscow to replace democratically elected president Maskhadov in 1999, was the chief mufti of Chechnya. Many religious activists and clerics – Christian, Muslims, Jewish, etc. in the former USSR were in one way or another related to KGB.

Most academicians dismiss claims about the involvement of the Russian secret services as stemming from unsupported conspiracy theories. Chechnya was historically home to various religious movements – Sufism, Muridism, etc. The traditional and patriarchal structure of the society made it prone to religious ideas. However, there is no evidence on the other side for such a speedy and abrupt transition from secular independence in 1991 to an Islamic movement taking off strongly in 1996.

In this regard, it is worth recalling the situation in Azerbaijan during the fight for independence (1988-1991). Zardusht Alizade, one of the early leaders of the Azerbaijan’s national-liberation movement, recalls a meeting with Viktor Polyanichko, the second man in command in Azerbaijan’s communist hierarchy – a position which was held traditionally by an ethnic Russian sent from Moscow. Polyanichko during the meeting with the leaders of the Azerbaijan’s Popular Front advised them to jettison secular democratic ideas because these ideas, in his view, were out of touch with the masses. Instead he advocated for *Turkism* – or simply put, ethnonationalism – and for the introduction of ideas from the Koran. Alizade recounts:

Victor Polyanichko bent down and picked up [the] Koran: “While in Afghanistan I read and reread this wise book. And here I am reading it every day, ponder its verses, analyze, compare with the life and destiny of men and nations. What kind of divine wisdom and depth in this book” – almost ecstatically, he uttered the last words, and suddenly, going to a normal conversational tone, he asked: “Why the program [of the Popular Front] has nothing about the spiritual basis of your people – Islam?” Tofiq Bey [one of the leaders of the Popular Front] looked like he had gotten something precious. He was all lit up, his clear bright eyes flashed, long thin fingers nervously were running around the skinny bony body: “Yes, we will make a whole section about Islam in the program, and you will jump on it and declare to the world that a fundamentalist movement was created in Azerbaijan.” (Alizade, Agayev 2006)

As a matter of fact, when Moscow sent troops to Baku on January 20, 1990 to quell the national-liberation movement, one of the excuses was a threat of the establishment of an Islamic state. For leaders of many countries, the Islamic “threat” became a good excuse for human rights abuses and mistreatment of the population. The Soviet Union and Russia were not an exception in this regard.

Chechnya had a fertile ground for Islamism; however, it seems that the Russian intelligence had a hand in instigating and proliferating pro-religious sentiments, although speaking academically there is no direct proof of such involvement. The growing presence of militant Islamists was advantageous for Moscow. Even before the beginning of the First Chechen War, Russian president Yeltsin tried to present the Russian efforts against separatists as a fight against religious radicals. The Second Chechen War was even easier to justify for Russian leaders. The most precious “gift” to Moscow was the August 1999 incursion by Chechen militants to Dagestan – it is still unclear why and under what circumstances the Chechens, led by Shamil Basayev and Amir Khattab, decided to invade the neighboring republic. Shortly after that event, several explosions shook Russian cities and Chechen terrorists were blamed, despite the fact that the latter denied any responsibility.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 in the U.S., the Russian information apparatus skillfully used Chechen terror acts to solicit the support of Western countries against Chechen independence. According to Timothy Thomas, Moscow implemented three measures to win the information war: firstly, Russia introduced strict military censorship and allowed only “filtered” journalists to visit the region; secondly, the Russians studied NATO’s press-service experience with the war in Kosovo, and applied it to their own conflict; thirdly, experienced people were appointed to handle media affairs (Thomas 2005). When the Second Chechen War broke out, the majority of Western journalists were not present – either they were scared of kidnappings or Moscow would refuse to issue them a visa.

In sum, a combination of factors – internal and external – has changed the perception about the conflict. In the Western media and even in academia, the dominant theme on the conflict became the religious factor. However, the presence and growing influence of Islamic radicals does not devalue the initial cause of the conflict – Chechen aspiration to secession and the creation of an independent Chechnya.

Roots of the conflict: history, memory and the colonial legacy

The usual suspects of the reasons behind ethnic conflicts in post-Soviet areas are ethnonationalism and economic hardship. With regard to the latter, several scholars have pointed out that in many instances the Soviet republics enjoyed a relatively high level of economic development and social safety. Zuercher (2007) notes, however, that in Chechnya the situation was different; high unemployment and deprivation of many

rights and entitlements – which was the legacy of discrimination and Stalin’s deportation – made the situation in Chechnya highly explosive. Valery Tishkov (2004) argues that high unemployment was present in all North Caucasus, but only Chechens went to war. A number of scholars stress a legacy of Russian imperialism and Soviet authoritarianism as a reason of the current conflict. The dominant reasoning for the ongoing conflict between Russia and Chechnya was the history of four centuries’ struggle of the North Caucasian people against Russian dominance.

Russian scholars dismiss historical grievances as the root of the conflict. Valery Tishkov (2004) opines that the past of the Chechen people was not exceptional; all peoples of the Soviet Union went through repression, most of them underwent deportation and exile, but not all were willing to fight against Moscow. For Russian nationalist historians, Russian-Soviet rule brought the light of progress and modernization to the peoples of the North Caucasus. Tishkov (who cannot be dubbed a “nationalist”, but rather a liberal) admits that misconduct of Russian authorities under president Yeltsin was a factor which exacerbated the conflict. In Tishkov’s view, the conflict was instigated by a complex combination of factors: local leaders trying to rip the benefit of the war, nationalists on both sides, peculiar circumstances of post-Soviet Russia characterized by chaos and the rise of national and religious sentiments. People in Chechnya were subjected to various propaganda and external influences, and once violence began it caused a vicious circle of revenge, counterattacks and brutality.

Stephen Hughes (2007) also somewhat agrees with Tishkov’s opinion about the insignificance of the historical roots of the conflict. He treats such an approach as pregnant with historicism, “ancient hatred” and “ethnic enmity”. Few scholars nowadays subscribe to the idea of ancient hatred or “primordialism” and in most cases the idea of predetermined ethnic hatred is rejected by the academic community. However, this theme is well entertained by the media, local leaders and various nationalist groups worldwide. Hughes and other academicians are right in dismissing claims of ethnic hatred between Russians and Chechens. This topic was exploited in other post-Soviet conflicts, such as the Armenian-Azerbaijani, and Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts. As history shows, conflict between ethnic groups is a relatively recent phenomenon, related to the rise of the nation-state, nationalism, and national-liberation movements, coupled with the legacy of colonialism.

However, the colonial legacy in the Russian-Chechen conflict did play an important role in the conflict. This is not so much characterized by ancient hatreds but rather by the legacy of colonial rule – both Russian tsarism and the Soviet Union – including the

especially tragic imprint on Chechens left by the Stalin's deportation of the entire Chechen population in 1944. Contrary to that, Tishkov argues that the past (especially that which has not been personally experienced) cannot be adduced as the reason for the Chechen conflict. Then, he contradicts himself by producing the tragic accounts and testimonies of those who suffered themselves or whose parents underwent through the brutal deportation of 1944. Sebastian Smith (2006) in *Allah's Mountains* recalls his conversation with Shamil Basayev, one of the prominent rebel leaders, who speaks first about the experience of deportation of his parents and ancestors.

"When Stalin deported us [in 1944]," Basayev begins, "the Russians took over our empty homes and they ripped the stones out of our graveyards, then they used them to make roads, bridges, pigsties." His voice is quiet, but filled with hatred. "When the Russians stormed Grozny [in 1994], they fired their tanks from the memorial," Basayev says. "On the hill over Alkhan-Kala, the soldiers took stones from the graveyard there and built toilets for their camp" (Smith 2006, p. 1-2).

In Chechen collective memory the mass resettlement of the 19th century and the tragic consequences of the 1944 deportation are very much alive. The same applies to their fight against Russian-Soviet rule. The recurrence of two themes – Russian oppression and Chechen resistance – has a significant place in Chechen history and memory. A number of scholars argue that professional history and memory are two different narratives (e.g. Ben-Amos, Wejssberg 1999). However, it is difficult to identify what constitutes professional history and memory. Post-structuralism argues that there is no such thing as objective history – everything is pinned to personal experience shaped by the dominant ideology. History, according to Dening (1996), is culturally shared public knowledge which is expressed under the impact of cultural and social systems. "We cannot describe the past independently of our knowing it" Dening (1996, p. 41) further stresses that history ties us to our own previous experiences and, more importantly, to the experiences of generations before us.

Pierre Nora (1989) asserts that history and memory are doomed to mutual confrontation. "History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it" (p. 9). In the Chechen context, the official history was shaped by tsarist Russia and then by Soviet ideology, which selected and interpreted "moments of history" to fit their needs. Chechen oral history became what Michael Foucault (1977, pp. 113-138) termed "counter-history". This type of memory falls under Foucault's concept of popular memory and counter-memory and largely relates to the dominant vision of the past, which is linked to the practices of power. Foucault was concerned about the

practices of shaping popular memory and determining who assumes control of the process.

Popular perceptions were also linked to the memories (sometimes traumatic) of past violence – namely, the manner in which the state exercised power in the particular case of Chechnya under the Soviets. Foucault distinguishes two types of memory – dominant (state-sponsored) and popular (opposition/dissident). In post-authoritarian states, the former popular memory becomes the dominant memory – this is what exactly happened in Chechnya. This phenomenon can be observed in many post-Soviet countries today.

The struggle of the North Caucasian people against the Russians has a long and brutal history. The Russian empire gradually approached the North Caucasus from the 15th century onward. By the end of the 18th century, Russia had managed to conquer the North and by 1830 the South Caucasus. In 1785, the first mass uprising against Russian rule broke out in the North Caucasus led by Sheikh Mansur. The most prominent war was fought by Sheikh Shamil, who was captivated in 1859 but the hostilities lasted until 1864. The Russian military, led by General Alexei Yermolov, used cruel tactics – extermination of whole villages, forced deportation and resettlement: “I desire that the terror of my name should guard our frontiers,” the general proclaimed (Baddeley 1908, p. 97).

During this time, Russian military leadership was destroying settlements, crops, and cattle to force Chechen and other North Caucasian people (all are referred in many historical documents and studies as Circassians) to leave their habitations. After the conclusion of the war in 1864, Russian authorities launched a massive resettlement policy, which resulted in the expulsion of Circassians to the Ottoman Empire. It is estimated that about 200,000 people left the Russian empire to settle in the Middle East (Fadeyev 1889, p.204).

The battles of the 19th century and the Russian massive deportation of Circassians were both repeated during the reign of Stalin. As Sebastian Smith points out, “battles were fought in exactly the same places, with the same tactics and the same slogans as 100, even 200 years before” (Smith 2006, p. 4). The struggle of the North Caucasian people against Russian rule is not a myth, although some of the events and personalities were mythologized. Behind the collective memory of Chechens is real fight against Russian domination.

It is true that many ethnic groups of the Soviet Union experienced deportation; however, for Chechen and a few others (Meskhetian Turks, Crimean Tatars) it was comprehensive and overwhelming. Stalin did not spare a single Chechen in 1944 – the whole

population was deported within a short period of time, and thousands of Chechens died from hunger and illnesses during the deportation and after the arrival to the barren steppes of Central Asia. While Meskhetian Turks and Crimean Tatars after the Stalin's death did not receive the right for physical return, Chechens came back, and continued to enjoy an administrative status of autonomy. This factor – autonomy – allowed Chechens to form a secessionist movement within a certain legal framework.

The Chechen aspiration for independence began as a peaceful protest against the communist regime during Perestroika. The exacerbation of the Russian-Chechen fight and the transition to the violent nature of the conflict was conditioned by various sets of factors. I agree with those scholars who believe that the militarization of the Russian-Chechen disagreements was not inevitable (Zuercher 2007; Tishkov 2004; Hughes 2007 and some others). Historical grievances, although strong enough, did not constitute a compelling enough element for turning the stand-off into a civil war. The quest for a new status for Chechnya might have gone a peaceful way, but a number of internal and external influences distorted this path.

First of all, Moscow was interested in the radicalization of the conflict. The Chechen leader Djohar Dudayev made numerous attempts to meet the Russian president Yeltsin, but the latter refused to grant such a meeting. In the absence of a dialogue, Chechnya had no choice other than to undertake unilateral actions. Furthermore, the illegal trade of arms, facilitated and condoned by Moscow, militarized the region. Internally, Chechnya was divided into several powerful clans, and later the religious factor played greater role, radicalizing the elements within the secessionist movement. Dzhabrail Gakaev (2005) argues that the incomplete process of modernization of Chechnya during Soviet rule created favourable conditions for Islamic propaganda propelled by leaders such as Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, who peddled myths about the cultural war against Russia based on Islam and traditionalism. “The saddest thing is that the Chechen national-radicals willingly or unwittingly allowed themselves to be drawn into the conspiracy against their own people” (Gakaev 2005, p. 27).

Thus, the second misperception about the conflict evolved around the initial cause of the conflict. Several layers of internal and external conditions, some of which are debatable, nevertheless should not cover the Chechen aspiration for independence and their determined fight against Russian rule. It is true that certain ethnic groups within Russia are quite satisfied with their administrative status, but for Chechens the Russian yoke in recent history has resulted in such tragedy and calamity that they would not accept anything except full independence. Moscow in its turn did a little to soothe

historical grievances inflicted by tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. The First and Second Chechen wars were fought brutally *a la Yermolov*, which once again resembled old methods employed by both empires.

Brutality

The conflict in Chechnya was the bloodiest among all wars in post-Soviet area. It is estimated that during the two wars about 53,000 civilians died and 12,000 Russian soldiers and 7,000 Chechen fighters perished (Zuercher 2007, p. 100). The two wars triggered huge refugee movements, and almost the half of Chechen population was affected by displacement. The mass media portrayed the horrible picture of the Russian aerial bombardment of Grozny and other cities in Chechnya. Human rights organizations reported numerous cases of arbitrary killings, detention and tortures. Chechen fighters also resorted to violence, kidnappings and terror acts in resisting the Russian military pressure. Targets chosen by Chechen terrorists horrified the world – the high school in Beslan, the hospital in Budenovsk, and the theatre in Moscow.

The media in the West portrayed the gruesome atrocities of both sides. The theme of brutality of the Russian-Chechen fight was not new – it was already present in the nineteenth century. As it was mentioned already, the tsarist army resorted to scorched-earth tactics during the Caucasian war. The deportation of 1944 by the Soviets was exercised with the same negligence to human lives. Russian writer Anatoliy Pristavkin, who became famous in the USSR for his novel «*Nochevala tuchka zolotaya...*» (English version is “The Inseparable Twins”) which describes the resettlement of an orphanage from Moscow to Chechnya in 1944, recalls the execution of 7,000 Chechens living in a remote village whom the Soviets were unable to deport – instead, the Soviets decided to exterminate them. Pristavkin mentioned a village called Khaybakh where 700 people were burnt alive, including children and the elderly. The writer emphasized the sufferings of Chechens: “I specifically give a broad picture of Stalin’s “purge” to more clearly show the place of the Caucasus and small Chechnya in the overall tragedy of other peoples of Russia” (Pristavkin 2004). As I mentioned before, the Chechen people were not the only people who suffered from Stalin’s deportation, but this ethnic group was punished with particular severity.

Pristavkin’s novel is the best symbol of brutality caused by Russian rule. In the novel, orphans are sent from Moscow to the Caucasus without any allowances and food. They search and beg for food, and steal wherever possible. On route to Chechnya, they see

empty villages, destroyed houses, fear and darkness of the deported and abandoned land. At the end of the novel, one of the hungry twin orphans was brutally killed by Chechens for an attempt to steal cornstalks - his belly was ripped and filled with the cornstalks he grabbed on the field. Violence begets violence, concludes Pristavkin.

In the Russian media, Chechens are frequently portrayed as unruly savage people, prone to banditry and various other criminal activities. The presence of Russian rule was justified to tame the uncivilized people. The “civilizing mission” was repeatedly invoked by tsarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and modern Russia to explain the noble goal of modernization. Interestingly enough, the topic of modernity became a trap for academicians as well. Richard Sakwa (2005), explaining the causes of conflict, stresses that the 1944 deportation destroyed ‘modernized’ group like the intelligentsia and Communist Party bureaucracy. Dzhabrail Gakaev (2005) points to the “incomplete modernization process” in Chechnya (p. 2-3). Tishkov (2004) blames “demodernization” for the Chechen inability to cope with violence (p. 12-13).

Discourse on demodernization fits perfectly the need for the “civilizing mission”, and such political phraseology invokes sympathy not only in Russia, but also in the West. More than 100 years ago, British writer John Baddeley noted in this regard: “Politically, it is difficult to see where justice came in, but in this respect Russia was only doing what England and all other civilized States have done, and still do, wherever they come in contact with savage or semi-savage races. By force or by fraud a portion of the country is taken, and, sooner or later, on one excuse or another, the rest is bound to follow” (Baddeley 1908, p. 97).

The misperception about Chechnya in the West has two layers: one with regard to Russia – which is seen as incomplete semi-European and semi-Asian empire, prone to brutality – and another with regard to Chechen people as savage Asiatic Islamic militants. With regard to the first script, it is hard to draw a line between the military tactics of aerial bombardments employed by the Russian army during the Second Chechen War from the similar methods used by NATO in Kosovo or the U.S. in Iraq, or more notoriously known in Vietnam. As for the second script, the West and Russia had a similar colonial approach to subjugated people – to whom they see themselves as bringing “the light of civilization”. Therefore, the image of the Chechen “savage” was wholeheartedly supported by the Russian media as well.

Chechen history is tragically exceptional, and as such it was never explained and brought to the public in Russia, because it runs contrary to Moscow’s imperial interests. Such attitude prevailed both before and after the collapse of the USSR, and the Russian-

Chechen conflict made even more acute the need to portray Chechens as savage and bandits. Pristavkin (2004) wrote: “The line of alienation is a history of silence, hiding the real tragic events, the training and indoctrination of distorted notions of inferiority and even the criminal nature of certain nations into the minds of the rising generation. For the Chechens, »alienation« continued after the return of an unhappy and humiliated nation – half of them already having been killed – back to their homeland”.

The common perception which prevailed both in Russia and the West is that Chechnya cannot be ruled by Chechens due to the influence of traditions and Islamic fundamentalism, which makes it impossible to install a democratic regime. The chaos, brutality and banditry which characterized the interwar period (1996-1999) are brought to explain the need for Chechnya to be subjugated to a “better” power – in this case, Moscow seems to be the only choice.

However, as I argue in the first chapter, referring to a number of reputable scholars, the Islamization and militarization of Chechnya occurred under the influence of external factors, including first of all those propelled by the Kremlin. Chechnya at the beginning of its independence had greater opportunity to be a pro-democratic and secular society. Reputable London-based NGO International Alert reported in October 1992 that “Chechen society is characterized by a remarkable degree of political openness and freedom of expression” (International Alert 1992). However, such a scenario was unacceptable for Moscow, especially for president Vladimir Putin who stifled freedoms and human rights in Russia. Chechnya could not be an island of openness and democracy, let alone an independent one.

The same trend can be observed with the issue of brutality prevailed during the war. Violence was used first by Moscow, and resulted in violent reaction from Chechens. Bombardments, torture, and indiscriminate killings made Chechen militants prone to even greater degree of cruelty. As one Chechen militant said: “I’m fed up to the teeth with Dudayev, but my soul is crushed by the atrocities of the Russian army as well” (Tishkov 2004, Foreword, XIII).

Conclusion

Edward Said (1979) revealed the inherent stereotypes underlying the Western attitude towards the East – especially Islamic cultures – caused by imperial interests. A central idea of *Orientalism* is that Western perception about the East is not based on facts, but rather is formed from preconceived archetypes that envision all Oriental cultures in certain fashion

– they are predisposed to autocracy, brutality, patriarchalism, and religious fundamentalism. The assumptions about the Russian-Chechen conflicts and Chechnya discussed above perfectly fit the framework of the *Orientalist* approach. In this regard, the stereotypes evolved during the Russian-Chechen conflict about Chechnya should be explained in the context of prejudices constructed by the West and Moscow in what scholar Talal Asad called “the closed, self-evident, self-confirming character of that distinctive discourse” (Asad, 1980, p. 648). Russia herself had a strong Orientalist approach, which emerged early in the nineteenth century, especially with regard to the North Caucasus. Prominent Russian poets and writers Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy fashioned the way Russians would perceive “mountaineers” for many decades ahead.

The domination of *jihad* theme, the troubled discussion about Chechen secession and Chechen character, was predetermined by both the West and Russia, though distinctively in each case. For the West, Chechnya is an untamed land which is fighting a giant brutal empire, and at the same time cannot handle their own region due to the presence of Islam and respective culture. For Moscow, Chechnya is an important geo-strategic hotspot, the secession of which can destroy Russian itself, and the region prone to criminal activity which should be guided by more “civilized” Russians.

However, one should be careful about generalizing, when speaking about Russian perception of the North Caucasus. For Pushkin and other humanists of the nineteenth century, free spirit and fight for freedom of North Caucasian people invoked some degree of sympathy, and, accordingly, anti-sympathy towards their own autocratic rulers – the Russian tsarists. For liberal-minded modern Russian thinkers and human rights activists Chechnya is the symbol of oppression by Moscow’s repressive machine, and its litmus paper test for the respect for or negligence of human rights. Unfortunately, such publicists and activists remain marginalized and their voice is less and less heard in contemporary Russia.

Chechnya is a conquered land; oppressed and repressed brutally in a manner which is inherent to all empires (Russia has no “exclusive” right in this regard). Chechen leadership began their campaign for freedom in the 1990s in a civil manner with the idea of building secular state (not necessarily fully independent from Russia). Moscow responded first with negligence and then with atrocity, recalling the Chechen experience during tsarist Russia and Stalin’s deportation of 1944. The trajectory of the war, dictated by Moscow, made almost inevitable the rise of radicalism. The result was devastating: Chechnya was destroyed; its manpower was exterminated or forced to migrate; the region’s leadership became criminal – as much as those who fought against them.

The current dormant state of the conflict reflects the situation in Russia as a whole – the inability of people to fight for freedom and human rights due to repression and subsequent apathy (though sporadic protests in Moscow show potential for change, thus far it is limited to a big megalopolis). On the other hand, apparently, the leadership of Russia and Chechnya managed to install stability and a certain degree of economic welfare which the local population enjoys. Probably, the majority of Chechens fears the threat of extremism and opted out for a secular Russia-controlled model.⁴ More and more Chechens in diaspora are inclined to see Chechnya in the framework of Russia, but preferably in refurbished one. However, the long-term solution to the Russian-Chechen conflict has not been found yet, and it seems that the stand-off will remain protracted.

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⁴ There is no statistical data to confirm this observation as it is impossible to conduct the genuine free opinion polls in Chechnya.

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Fareed Shafee

Misperceptions about the conflict in Chechnya: The influence of Orientalism

This paper examines the misperceptions about the Russian-Chechen conflicts, trends of which can be observed in the Western media and academia. The first section investigates issues related to Islamic fundamentalism in Chechnya, while the second section looks into discussion about the roots of the conflict. The third section is devoted to the issue of brutality – the most debated topic in the Western media. I argue that an overarching misperception about the Chechen conflict was caused not only by Russian propaganda, but also by the inherent attitude prevailing in the West. This attitude should be understood in the framework of Orientalism as was explained by Edward Said.

keywords: *Russia, Chechnya, conflict*

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