To what extent is Chechen separatism driven by religion?

Separatist activity and the desire for self-determination in the region currently known as Chechnya can be traced back as far as the 18th century (Pokalova, 2010:430; Wilhelmsen, 2005:36); making it what some argue is one of the oldest ongoing separatist movements (Sidall and Chugh, 2013). Separatism is the "advocacy or practice of separation of a [certain] group of people from a larger body on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or gender" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014) Chechen separatists have sought to establish the region as its own sovereign state, realising this briefly between 1917 to 1922 and 1991 to 1994 (Beary, 2011:29; McFaul,1995:149). Most scholars maintain that Chechen separatism has been predominantly driven by ethno-nationalism (Gammer, 2002:125; Giuliano, 2006:287). In recent years however, many argue that Chechen separatism has now somewhat been co-opted by the worldwide jihadist movement (Gammer, 2006:838, Garner, 2013:419; Wilhelmsen, 2005:52).

This essay will examine the extent to which religion has driven Chechen separatism. It will begin by providing some contextual background of Chechnya and Chechen identity. This will facilitate better analysis of the Chechen separatist movement. This paper will then examine Chechen separatism through key periods of history; from the U.S.S.R occupation of the region, to the two Chechen wars, leading to study of the Chechen separatism activity in more recent years. It will also consider the role religion had in the independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria - the most recent period of Chechen independence between 1991 and 1994.

Chechen Identity – The role of religion.

Chechnya is an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation located in the North Caucases (Spangler, 2005:164). The 2010 National Census found that Chechnya was comprised of 93.5% Chechens and 3.7% Russians. This demonstrates that an overwhelming majority of people identify themselves as Chechen not Russian (Sterio, 2013:134). Chechens are an ethnic group of people with their own distinguishing language and strong cultural traditions (Swirszcz, 2008:60), which Sterio (2013) describes as "sharply different" to the rest of the rest of the Russian Federation. Chechens have resided in the North Caucases mountainous region for centuries (Bhattacharji, 2010; Wixman, 1984:44), however at different points in history have been subjected to prejudice, ethnic cleansing and deportation. They have been traditionally hostile towards foreign powers (Dunlop, 1998; Wilhelmsen, 2005:35).

Gammer (2005) argues that for a large majority of Chechens, Islam has been an integral part of their identity. The religion has been present within the region since the advancement of the early Arabic caliphate (Swirszcz, 2009:80). Chechnyans have traditionally practiced a moderate from of Sunni Islam (see appendix 1), more specifically following the *Naqshbandiyyah* and the *Qadiriya* schools of *Tariqah* from within the Sufism branch of Islam (Tishkov, 2004:164; Vatchagaev, 2014:1). Swirszcz (2009) however highlights that Islam is a "multi-faceted factor" within Chechen identity and that it is difficult to establish its direct influence. This is because Islam amongst Chechens has merged with ancient societal customs including a system of secular traditions broadly known as *Adat* (Dunlop, 1998:21;

Swirszcz, 2009:59; Tishkov, 2004:164). Nevertheless Chechens are identified as the third-largest ethnic Muslim group within the Russian Federation, making up nearly 10% of Russia's Islamic population (Pew Forum, 2011:129).

Chechen separatism during the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and post-Soviet independence.

Tishkov (2004) argues that the Chechen desire to establish an independent state of Chechnya has strong origins in nationalism; strengthened by their persecution during Soviet rule. During the USSR's control of the region, the Bolshevists significantly victimised Chechens. They attempted to "Russianize" the ethnic group (Dunlop, 1998:23). Chechens strongly opposed the ruthless collectivisation, societal, economic and religious changes imposed by the USSR leading to uprisings taking place during the 1930's (Campana, 2007:2; Dunlop, 1998:23). On February 23rd 1944, Joseph Stalin attempted to eliminate the threat of the resisting Chechens. He accused Chechens collectively of collaborating with Nazi Germany during the Second World War and ordered their deportation from the North Caucases to Asia and Siberia (Campana, 2007:2; Gammer, 2005:834). Chechens were loaded onto carts and displaced from their homeland; thousands died as they were left to survive in harsh cold conditions with little to no provisions (appendix 2). For Chechens this particularly affected their national identity as many of their secular traditions place importance on their North Caucases homeland.

Tishkov (2004) argues that this level of persecution by the Soviet Union led Chechens to believe that their only option was to take control of the republic. This is supported by Grammer (2006) who also believes that the "deportation" heightened national consciousness amongst Chechens, whilst also intensifying the opposition

towards "Russian/Soviet rule". This is unsurprising as historically the persecution of ethnic groups has led to the strengthening of ethno-nationalism. This is supported by Wilhelmsen (2010) who argues that during the early 1990's the ideologies of Chechen separatist movements were ethno-nationalist. Other examples of this can be seen when studying the case studies of Bosnians and Jews. Ethnic nationalism combines the desire for self-determination and authority of a specified territory with references to shared ethnic identity as a basis for these demands (Olzak, 2013:2). Tishkov (2004) goes further to claim that in the early post-Soviet period it was "collective suffering, rather than religion, culture, or language [that] cemented Chechen identity" (Tishkov, 2004:53). Wilhelmsen (2010) upholds the view that the deportation of Chechens strengthened Adat and Chechen traditions as opposed to Islamic identity.

The argument that Chechen separatism during and post-Soviet rule was driven by ethno-nationalism, rather than religion is reiterated through a consideration of the constitution of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. This was the independent state that declared succession from Russian/Soviet control in 1991 (Swirszcz, 2005:74). Although the elected president Dzhokhar Dudaev "took his oath on the Quran" the constitution of the independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria did not contain any religious particularism (Hertog, 2005:240-241). Chechnya was established as a secular state (Swirszcz, 2009:75). The constitution legislated that "religious organisations are separate from the state, administer their affairs autonomously, and operate independently from state organs" (Hunter, Thomas and Melikishvil, 2004:151). Instead ethnocracy was sought by President Dudaev (Dunlop, 1998:134).

One can argue that had religion at this time been the driving factor behind Chechen separatism it would have been recognised in the early constitution of the new independent state. Instead, president Dudaev sought to keep religion out of politics stating in 1992 that "religion should play an exclusively important role in the spiritual development of the people in moral and humane attitudes" (Swirszcz, 2010:75). Nevertheless Islam remained part of Chechen society and Dudaev himself stated that "the place for Islam in Chechnya will depend on the political situation in the republic and on the external pressure which will be exerted ... with the increase of negative internal factors Islam is bound to grow" (Swirszcz, 2010:75). This was realised between 1994 and 1996 when the Russian Federation attempted to take control of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

Separatism during the First Chechen war, 1994 to 1996.

The independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria was a nominal success for the Chechen people. The country struggled economically and there was a constant conflict between Dudayev and opposition leaders. A sense of anarchism was felt within the state (Dunlop, 1998:149). The Russian Federation permitted the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria their independence for three years as it was confronting other regions also struggling for autonomy (Radnitz, 2006:245). In 1994 however, the president of the Russian Federation Boris Yelsin ordered 40,000 Russian troops to invade Chechnya and seize the Chechen capital of Groznyi (Szászdi and Lajosm, 2008:35). It is still debated as to why Yelsin decided to invade Chechnya, however he claimed that the Russian Federation sought to bring order to the state and stop internal conflicts (Akande, 2013, Dunlop, 1998:209).

This invasion brought about the First Chechen war. Chechens responded with guerrilla warfare to protect their homeland. Human rights violations carried out by the Russian Federation and the death of between 80,000 and 100,000 people led many Chechen civilians to become alienated and radicalised (Hill et al, 2005:55; Radnitz, 2006:245). Chechen leaders and warlords used legends of Chechen history along with Islam to rally the Chechen civilians against Russia (Vatchagaev, 2005:5). Gammer (2005) and Wilhelmsen (2010) both support the notion that Islam became more prominent in Chechen society during the first Chechen conflict. It became increasingly associated with Chechen national identity and used accordingly to assert ethno-nationalist separatist support. When people experience war often their religious faith can strengthen. In Chechnya Islam became both a "source of comfort on the personal level" and a when politicised it "served as a means of interpreting and organising an extreme situation" (Wilhelmsen 2010:38).

A significant number of Chechen warlords fighting for Chechen separatism became increasingly radicalised and their Islamic beliefs increased in importance. Many Chechen fighters turned to Wahhabism (Giuliano, 2006:211) – an ultraconservative doctrine of Islam (Souleimanov, 2005). This is unsurprising as Chechens (who had received little support from western states) received backing from foreign radicals who joined the fight believing it to be a religious struggle (Swirszcz, 2008:76). Chechens separatist movements began to gain support and financing from foreign radical Wahhabis.

Discourse from one of the most famous Chechen commanders and separatists Shamil Basaev contends that Islam became a more important personal motivator for some of the separatists during the conflict. At the start of the first war Basayev's

stimulus to fight came directly from a desire to realise Chechen independence from the Russian Federation. In the early years of the conflict he made no reference to fighting a religious war or wanting to establish an Islamic independent Chechen state (Wilhelmsen, 2010:37). In 1995 however at the end of the first Chechen war, Basayev stated in an interview "we see ourselves as warriors of Islam and therefore don't fear death" (Basayev, 1995 cited by Wilhelmsen, 2010:37). In this instance he is identifying himself as a warrior of Islam rather than a Chechen separatist. This is significant as Basayev later ran in elections for presidency and became vice-prime minister of Chechnya during the interwar period.

Despite the increase in the significance of Islam for Chechen national identity, some scholars still assert that the majority of Chechens "fought under the banner of national liberation and self-defence" - thus the war and Chechen separatism during this period of history is presented as having little to do with religion (Henkin, 2006:194). It was only the few radicalised Chechens who saw Islam as a defining part of their ethnicity that drew on religion as a motivating factor for their separatist activity. Nevertheless, evidence demonstrates that while Islam was not the cause of separatist resistance, increased Islamification was a product of the conflict.

Chechen Separatism during the interwar period

After two years of intense fighting a peace treaty was signed by the former separatist leader and new president of Chechnya, Aslan Maskhadov and Russian President Yelsin (Bhattacharji, 2010). Chechnya was given "de facto independence" (Radnitz, 2006:245) and in 1997 Chechens elected the President Maskhadov. The elections are significant in showing the evolution of Islam during the first war. In less than a decade the region had shifted from a secular state to one that saw many candidates

in its elections using Islamic rhetoric. Other electoral candidates went as far to propose the implementation of Shari'ah law and the establishment of Chechnya as an Islamic state. Religion began to take more influence in Chechen national identity.

The interwar period like the early independence of the Chechen Republic of Ichara was not prosperous. The new president Maskhadov, like his predecessor, faced strong opposition. Such opposition emerged from some separatists such as Basayev not content with the de facto arrangement claimed that Maskadov was pushing the republic back to the Russian Federation (Farooq, 2013). Maskadov faced further conflict from the warlords of the first Chechen war, many of whom now followed radical forms of Islam. Foreign radical Wahhabis residing in the region proved even more problematic as they provided funding for these opposition groups and some set up jihadi training camps.

Islamic fundamentalists attempted to impose a more ultraconservative society within Chechnya. This however was not welcome amongst a greater majority of Chechens who wanted to maintain their ethnic traditions and Sufi practices. Some Chechens were however drawn to radical Wahhabism aligned with jihadi activity. They saw the movement as an opportunity to avenge the Russian Federation for the personal losses experienced in the first war, and to realise full Chechen self-determination once again (Souleimanov, 2005:54). It is estimated that only 10% of Chechens at this time followed Wahhabism, however this 10% proved to be a sufficient number to enable extremists to politically influence the state (Henkin, 2006:197).

Conflict between the Maskadov's government and radicalised Chechen Muslims forced Maskadov's to declare Chechnya as an Islamic state. Maskadov was unable to reject the demands of the warlords who by this time had recruited small armies

(Giuliano, 2005, 212). In early 1999 a new draft constitution was commissioned leading to the implementation of Shari'ah law across Chechnya (Wilhelmsen, 2010:49). Upon further pressure from radical opponents Maskhadov decreed the establishment of an Islamic council called a Shura. Opposition later replaced this with a new Shura led by Shamil Basayev (Giuliano, 2006:213).

Second Chechen War, 1999–2002

In 1999 the Islamic International Peacekeeping Brigade (IIPB), a group of Chechen warlords, invaded Dagestan with the hopes of inciting an Islamic revolution. Their intention was to expand Chechnya and protect the Muslim population in the North Caucases (Smith, 2000:4; Vidino, 2005). This coincided with the bombings of an apartment block in Buynaksk. In response, the newly elected President of Russia Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Chechnya revoking their de facto independence. He declared that the region would be governed federally by Russia (Hill, 2005) and that the invasion was part of a wider anti-terrorism operation.

Putin had an uncompromising approach, waging full scale war on the Chechen region, including non-targeted bombing (Tuathail 2009:3). Giuliano (2005) argues that this only consolidated anti-Russian opinions amongst Chechens. Wilhelmsen (2010) argues that "Russia's policies in the second war, together with the influx of jihadi money and fighters, have contributed to tilting the balance within the separatist movement further in favour of the radicals". In 2000 Russia captured the Chechen capital Grozny. Although Russian forces were in control of Chechnya radicals and rebels continued to fight Russian forces and adopted terrorist tactics.

Chechen Terrorism, Separatism and Islam

Chechen separatism has been associated with a rise in cases of terrorism within the Russian Federation. There is significant debate surrounding the motives of the many terrorist attacks. Some scholars argue that the terrorist attacks taking place in Russia are a continuation of the Russo–Chechen conflict (Dunlop, 1998). It can be argued that Chechen separatists have used terrorism as a last resort - having been unsuccessful in negotiations with the Russian Federation when seeking self-determination and failing to achieve in independent Chechnya through traditional warfare.

Conversely, there is increasing discourse that claims that Chechen terrorism is just part of a wider jihadi movement and has become the international Islamic terror network's frontier on Russia. Putin exploited 9/11 to assert that "terrorism equals separatism" (Calzini, 2005:21). This sparked an association between Chechen separatism and Islamic extremism. Putin took advantage of this perception to justify the actions of Russian troops during the second Chechen war; portraying it as a war on terror (Calzini, 2008:21).

To fully understand what has driven the Chechen terrorist attacks the demands made by terrorists can be analysed. In 2005 approximately 80 Chechen separatists launched an assault on the Russian town of Budyonnovsk (Kohan, Fischer and Zarakhovich, 1995). During their retreat the separatists took a hospital hostage with approximately 2000 people inside. In 1995 Michael Specter reported that the Chechen separatists killed five random hostages and "shot them to show the world they were serious in their demands that Russian troops leave their land" (Specter, 1995). No references were made denoting any motivation related to Islam, for Russians to leave their land.

In 2004 terrorists took a school in Beslan hostage. Whilst the perpetrators were comprised of a mixture of Chechen, Ingush, Russians, Arabs, Ossetians, Tartars, Kabardinian and Gurans, they defined themselves as 'mujahedeen' (Institute for war and peace reporting, 2004). The coordinator of the attack Basayev made demands for the release of the school hostages, however these demands did not explicitly state or make any reference to Islam. Basayev sought: the release of captured militants, the withdrawal of the Russian federation from the Chechen region, and a renewed recognition of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (Basayev, 2004; Forster, 2006:2). Again, no reference to religion was cited, the motive of the attack was separatist. Religion was not a motivating factor but a facilitating factor as involvement of Islamic extremism brought about funding and support. Basayev monopolised the jihadi ideology to assist in his ethno-national separatist motivated activities.

It is clear that separatism has been driven by ethno-nationalism due to the strong defining cultural heritage which has formed Chechen identity. Persecution throughout their history has spawned a strong desire amongst Chechens for self-determination, a resistance against occupation and a commitment to protect their unique identity. Islam does play a part in the Chechen identity however the importance of this has fluctuated over different periods, as it has merged with old secular traditions. "The islamification of the conflict in Chechnya was a reaction to conditions rather than a cause, and any external factor was of secondary importance" (Malashenko et al, 2004: 79).

Religion has been used as a rallying point to mobilise the Chechens in times of conflict, however it has not always been used to gain support for resistance against

external powers. The importance of religion varies from one individual to another. It is important to recognise that whilst Chechens are portrayed collectively as a radical Islamic group of people it is only a small percentage who have extremist views. It is true that Chechen separatism has used religion to support its movement, however the main driving factor has been the distinct ethnic differences between the Chechen people, and the persecution they have received by the previous Soviet Union and Russian Federation.

Word Count: 3006

Appendicies

Appendix 1: Religious Diversity Amongst the Caucases:
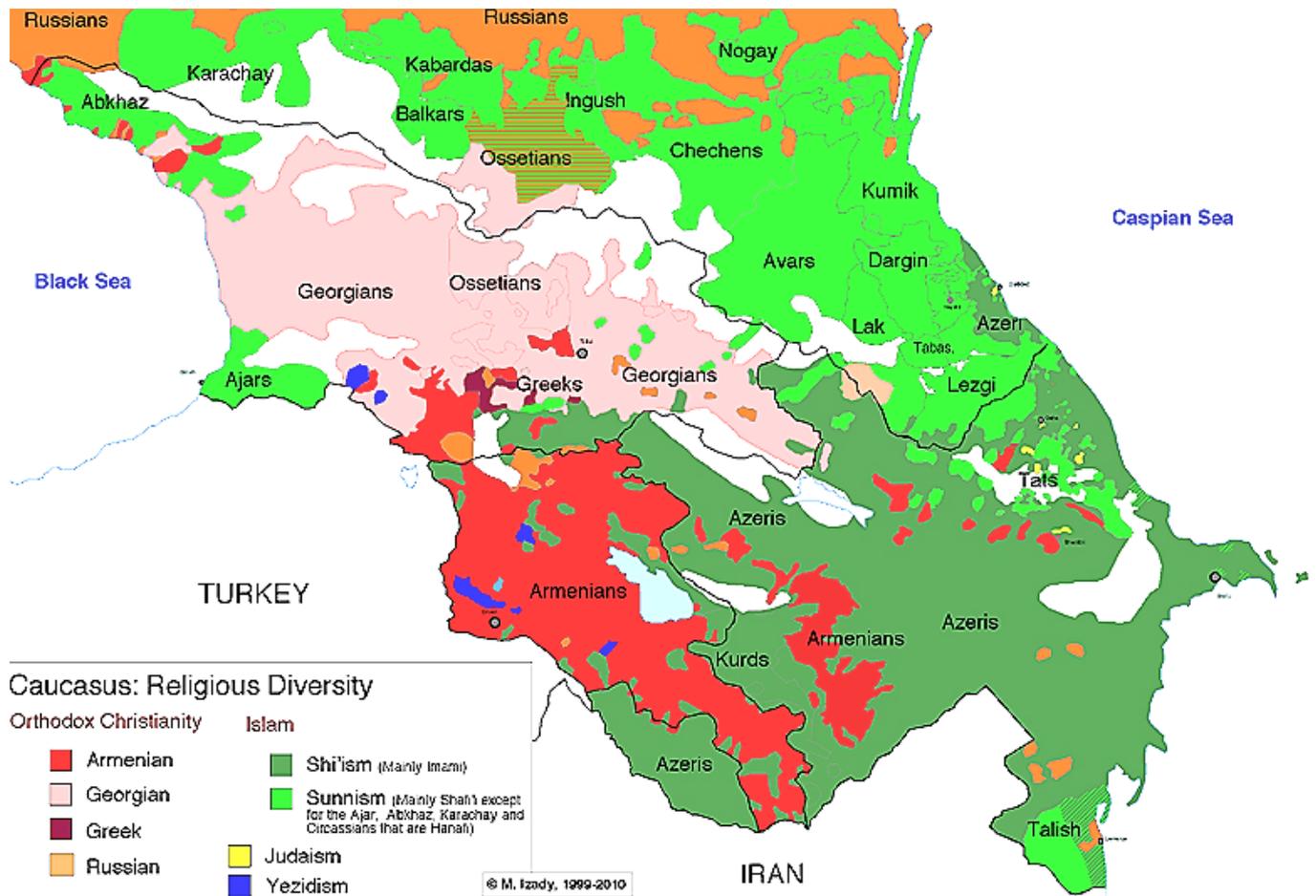
Adapted map sourced from: Doupeux, C. (2012) 'To understand the position of Russia in the Syrian conflict - the Caucasus: an area under high voltage'. [Online] *WorldwidePress,* Available at: <http://bit.ly/1iv8cOB> [Accessed: 03.05.14

Appendix 2: Photographs of the deportation of Chechens during 1944.

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