

Terrorism in the North Caucasus: The Endurance of Russian and Chechen Tactics

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LUKE SEMINARA, MAR 23 2021

The now-dormant conflict between Russia and Chechnya has been a continuous cycle of resistance and reprisal.^[1] Throughout the epochs of imperialism, socialism, and federation, the inhabitants of the North Caucasus have blunted the Russian spearhead through asymmetrical warfare. At the core of Chechen martial doctrine lies the practice of hostage-taking. Since Russia's first incursions into the region, highlanders have made the exchange of abductees a prolific enterprise. Their imperial adversaries followed suit, using Caucasian methods to subdue Caucasian unrest. This continued trade of lives would be complemented by a trade of deaths in the nineteenth century, and during the Caucasian War, terrorism became a punitive measure employed by Chechens and Russians alike. The tit-for-tat atrocities committed by both Slavs and Caucasians served as the animus for warfare lasting well beyond the imperial era.

However, the events of the recent Chechen Wars appear to be beyond the scope of these historical tactics. Global media sources attributed the hostage crises at the Dubrovka Theater in 2002 and Beslan School Number One in 2004 to foreign Wahhabi militants. On the other hand, Putin's consolidation of authority over domestic news outlets has led to an understatement of the state terrorism perpetrated by Russian forces.^[2] Nonetheless, when trying to rationalize the macabre tactics of the recent Chechen Wars, we must examine the historical precedents of terrorism and hostage-taking in the Caucasus.

The Imperial Era

The practice of kidnapping by the highland tribes was commonplace long before their contact with the Slavs. Essential to inter-village cavalry raids, or *nabegi*, was the capture of hostages as collateral.^[3] Abduction was culturally integral to the region—mountaineer mythology depicted “sport thefting” as a heroic, ancestral pursuit. Caucasian hostage-taking also had precedents in the practice of bridal kidnapping, which the highlanders inherited from the Arabic, Turkic, and Mongol peoples that had filtered through the region over time.^[4] The mountaineers readily expanded such methods during the mid-sixteenth century when Ivan the Terrible sent the first Cossack settlers into the region. The unpredictable threat of *nabegi* terrorized the tsar's expeditions. Most Russian captives were auctioned in the Ottoman slave trade, making mountaineer raids a profitable endeavor. By 1551, the tsardom had imposed a nationwide tax to pay off ransoms for abductees, while the Cossacks took matters into their own hands, holding Chechen prisoners of war hostage. At the early half of the seventeenth century, around 150,000 to 200,000 Russians had been captured by the highlanders.^[5] These mass abductions later subsided under Romanov rule with the creation of the defensive North Caucasus Line over the following century. The perimeter consisted of Cossack garrisons and watchtowers along the Terek River and allowed for Slavs and Caucasians to gradually intermingle as hostilities abated. Legitimate commerce replaced the exchange of prisoners to a remarkable extent.^[6]

The relations between mountaineers and the Russian Empire deteriorated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which prompted the Chechens to resort to *nabegi* in self-defense. In 1816, the jingoistic General Alexei Yermolov was appointed commander of Caucasus operations. Envisioning the acquiescence of mountaineers to imperial rule, he boasted to the tsar: “I desire that the terror of my name should guard our frontiers more potently than chains or fortresses.”^[7] Yermolov ignited the decades-long Caucasian War by ordering his soldiers to advance beyond the

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North Caucasus Line. The Russians reinforced their offensives by constructing fortresses such as Grozny, a base on the Sunzha River infamous for its massacre of hundreds of mountaineers in a single night.^[8] Yermolov also appropriated the highland method of hostage-taking. He negotiated for Pavel Shvetsov, an officer abducted during a *nabeg*, by haphazardly arresting large swathes of Chechen villagers and holding them as counter-hostages until the marauders obliged.^[9] Moreover, Yermolov ordered scorched-earth offensives into the highlands, wielding terrorism and collective punishment against the mountaineers. Most notable of Yermolov's retaliatory strikes was the 1819 massacre at the Chechen village of Dadi-Yurt, ordered in response to mountaineers driving off Russian workhorses. The highlanders refused to surrender, so Yermolov's Cossacks incinerated houses and obliterated them with cannon fire. Following their pillage of Dadi-Yurt, the soldiers captured women and children, while "only fourteen men remained alive."^[10] The terrifying, disproportionate use of force integral to the "Yermolov system" galvanized Chechen unrest beyond the general's demotion in 1827, setting the stage for the Murid War, the next phase of the Caucasian conflict. Yermolov's repressive tactics had undermined themselves entirely.^[11]

The tribes of the North Caucasus unified the following decade under the Avar imams, who enlisted the Chechens and their tactics to resist imperial conquest. The unified Caucasian Imamate triumphed under the prowess of Shamil, the final imam. Shamil made *nabegi* a potent force of terror, destroying Russian strongpoints with his cavalry and taking imperial soldiers captive in guerilla ambushes.^[12] The longevity of the Murid resistance stemmed from Imam Shamil's proficiency in *amanaty*, the diplomatic use of hostages. Shamil deterred Russian encroachments with captured imperial soldiers held in underground pits, or *zindan*.^[13] During his 1837 battle in the village of Tilitl, Dagestan, Shamil's forces were encircled by the Russian army of General Fese. In exchange for a temporary armistice, he offered his last-resort captives to his Russian counterpart; Fese agreed to end the siege, giving Shamil crucial time to retreat. The imam proclaimed: "Giving hostages...we concluded a peace with the Russian Emperor."^[14] The Murids used this decisive ceasefire to reconstruct their fortress at Ashilta bordering Chechnya, keeping Shamil in the war.^[15] Shamil likewise employed *amanaty* in 1854, capturing two Georgian princesses to recover his son, who was held hostage by the Russians.^[16] Although Shamil was routed in 1859, he demonstrated the capacity of terror and hostage-taking in contesting the numerically-superior forces of the tsar.

The Socialist Era

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the mountaineers were given yet another chance at freedom amidst the turmoil of the Russian Revolution. Still, the Mountain Republic they established was fragile, and it would fall under Red Army occupation by 1920. The Chechens went into revolt against their Bolshevik hegemony, yet Soviet secret police crackdowns decapitated resistance leadership and disarmed the populace substantially by the beginning of Stalin's five-year plans.^[17] To enforce regional agricultural collectivization efforts during the 1930s, Chekists revived Murid War tactics, using *amanaty* to discipline the mountaineers.^[18]

Regardless, Russification and Soviet persecution of Islam would lead to another Chechen insurrection that coincided with the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. In 1944, Stalin commissioned collective punishment in retaliation for Caucasian "collaboration" with the German foe.^[19] Operation Lentil, the NKVD's mass deportation of mountaineers to the Kazakh and Kyrgyz SSRs, was a totalitarian update to Yermolov's ethnic cleansing strategy. By mechanizing the imperial practice of state terrorism, the Soviets effectively demoralized the Chechen cause. Systematic forced labor and exposure to the elements killed an estimated 144,704 of the approximately 650,000 relocated to "special settlements."^[20] Following de-Stalinization, the survivors were allowed to return to their homeland, only to be subdued by decades of Soviet indoctrination that sought to eliminate their cultural identity. But, amidst the nationalist zeitgeist of the Gorbachev era, the mountaineers were once again enchanted by separatist ambitions.^[21]

The Federal Era

The traditional tactics of the Caucasian War reemerged as the Chechens rose in solidarity from the fracturing Soviet Union to declare the independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in 1991. When Boris Yeltsin sent an invasion force into Dzhokhar Dudayev's nascent country in 1994, *nabeg* and *amanaty* became viable, historically-proven resistance methods. Hostage-taking resurfaced during the First Chechen War, as lightly armed guerillas attacked convoys, abducting ill-prepared Russian conscripts.^[22] Employing the counter-hostage method of Yermolov, Russian soldiers

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abducted Chechen villagers and leveraged them against the warlords—this practice of *obmennii fond* often involved the detainment of random civilians.^[23] The exchange of captives therefore thrived under the unrest of the First Chechen War, preserving the methods developed during the Shvetsov incident almost two centuries prior.

Facing significant losses, the Russian Federation recommissioned the terroristic Yermolov system. The army fought a war of obliteration; chauvinism was nearly as rife under the Yeltsin administration as it was at the beginning of the nineteenth century.^[24] When insurgents pushed the initial Russian advance out of the Chechen capital of Grozny, the Kremlin responded by ordering the destruction of the city through indiscriminate bombardment, throughout which 25,000 civilians perished. At the very location where Yermolov built his first fort in 1818, relentless artillery strikes echoed the imperial general's bravado.^[25] This heavy-handed terror campaign utterly failed to extinguish the Chechen rebellion, instead hardening the resolve of the mountaineers.

On the other hand, the contemporary capacity of *amanaty* was reasserted by warlord Shamil Basayev, Dudayev's deputy. By mid-1995, the Chechen units were pushed back into the mountains and splintered by Russian artillery barrages. On June 14 of that year, Basayev led a detachment of mountaineers to the town of Budyonnovsk in Stavropol Krai; they held 1,600 residents at gunpoint and forced them into the local hospital, demanding an immediate ceasefire and arrangement of peace talks. After a failed raid by Russian commandos, Basayev executed hostages and used human shields to deter further attempts. After five days, Yeltsin conceded, providing the militants with safe passage to Chechnya. Basayev's actions proved decisive for the war effort.^[26] The exhausted Chechen resistance movement recuperated during the ceasefire, regaining the strength to push Russian forces out of Grozny the following year.^[27] Violating international humanitarian law, Shamil Basayev renovated the tactics of his namesake. Just as Imam Shamil staved off Russian forces at Tilitl by releasing captives, Basayev harnessed hostages to extort the Yeltsin administration 158 years later, demonstrating the tactical reliability of *amanaty* well into the First Chechen War.

In October 1999, Russia invaded Chechnya once again under the leadership of Vladimir Putin. The military operation was "justified" by a series of apartment bombings carried out across Russia that were immediately blamed on Basayev and his affiliates, so the Kremlin readily christened the conflict as a "war against international terrorism."^[28] The "bold and dangerous people" despised by General Yermolov were targeted using the more modern designation of "terrorists."^[29] The Chechen government collapsed following Putin's well-organized invasion, ushering in another insurgency. Chechen ambushes were swift, with *nabegi* harassing Russian detachments; following their hit-and-run attacks, guerrillas would flee through nearby villages into the mountains. These "collaborating" communities were collectively punished with Russian artillery fire often far after the militants had departed. One such village was Duba-Yurt, which was destroyed by federal troops in February 2000, "out of revenge and bitter sorrow for their perished comrades."^[30] That same month, residents of the town of Novye Aldy pleaded with a local Russian detachment to cease artillery strikes. The next day, Special Purpose Police forces conducted a counterterrorism "sweep," razing and looting households at random. Without provocation, the soldiers shot 56 civilians.^[31] The strategic initiatives behind such retaliatory tactics paralleled those behind Yermolov's attack on Dadi-Yurt in 1819. To deal with the people of the highlanders, terror was once again fought with terrorism.

Hostage-taking was also a substantial element of counterinsurgency tactics during the Second Chechen War. Putin's soldiers entered the profitable Caucasian industry of ransom-seeking through the "cleansing" operations of *zachistki*. Under the guise of searching for terrorists, Russian patrols encircled Chechen villages with armored vehicles, forcing civilians through "temporary filtration points," where "militants" were arrested and tortured with electrocutions, beatings, and mock execution.^[32] In the village of Makhety, soldiers improvised *zindan* with garbage pits for storing prisoners—they were released once the community accumulated enough money to pay off the Russians. If the burdensome ransom was not paid in time, the "militants" disappeared.^[33] *Zachistki* evolved the historically lucrative trade of captives into an instrument of repression.

Initially, Russia's use of state terrorism against the Chechens in the twenty-first century was as ineffective as it was during the nineteenth century. Relentless collective punishment and *zachistki* resulted in desperate separatists returning to terroristic *amanaty*.^[34] Movsar Barayev, an affiliate of Basayev, led a contingent of Chechen insurgents to seize Dubrovka Theater in Moscow in October 2002. In the ensuing standoff, the Chechens thought federal

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representatives were “coming for talks” and freed some of the 979 hostages, namely children and pregnant women, in good faith.^[35] The Federal Security Services decided otherwise, pumping a fentanyl-based gas into the theater, eliminating all of the separatists and 139 of their captives. Although many of these militants had lost entire families to Russian operations, the state and the global media connected the incident to international Islamic terrorism.^[36] Still abiding by the vengeful Yermolov system, Russian soldiers executed the civilian administrator of Alkhan-Kala, Barayev’s village.^[37]

Putin staunchly avoided repeating the embarrassment of Budyonnovsk; the consequential collateral damage was excusable in his War on Terror. Overstating Wahhabi extremism justified the Kremlin’s refusals to parley with the Chechens. Deemed irrational actors by the government, Chechen separatists could not leverage *amanaty*.^[38] In Putin’s own words: “Russia doesn’t negotiate with terrorists. It destroys them.”^[39] At Basayev’s next major hostage crisis in September 2004 at Beslan School Number One in North Ossetia, the Russian government blocked off negotiators and limited press coverage; state-run outlets falsely reported that Basayev made no demands. In the inevitable storming, 334 captives died, 186 of them children.^[40] The transaction of hostages was rendered non-negotiable as Chechen nationalism was equated with global Islamic terrorism, for even the Western media proclaimed Beslan to be “Russia’s September 11.”^[41] The separatists still desperately sought negotiations, for Basayev reiterated, “I am not a terrorist...I am an ordinary Chechen who rose up in arms to defend his people.”^[42] By asserting that the Chechens were unreliable extremists, the Russian government refused the historical solution of *amanaty* and stifled separatist pleas for peace.

Conclusion

Thus, Russian-Chechen combat remained characterized by acts of terroristic retribution well into the twenty-first century, resulting in the deaths of thousands of combatants and civilians. Despite the misconstrued claims of foreign Islamic terrorism at Moscow or Beslan, the flagrant war crimes committed by both Russian and Chechen belligerents were seldom unprecedented in motive and execution. After this predictable resurgence of taking and trading lives, it appears as if the Yermolov system has overcome the indigenous tactics of the mountaineers. The counter-insurgent doctrine of bombardments and *zachistki* may have fulfilled the ambitions of Yermolov, for Basayev and his associates have perished. With the region under the reign of Chechen warlord and Putin loyalist Ramzan Kadyrov, the separatist movement lies dormant, concluding another chapter of the Russian-Chechen conflict. That being said, it is impossible to ascertain whether the “bold and dangerous” spirit of the Chechens has been vanquished; after all, history has proven the stubbornness of the mountaineers following decades of Russian hegemony. If separatist aspirations return once more, the Chechens may incite another cycle of resistance and reprisal with the terrifying, traditional tactics of *nabegi* and *amanaty* at their disposal.

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Notes

[1] Dzutsati, "Despite Demise of Insurgency in North Caucasus, Russian Authorities Still Wary of Its Remnants."

[2] Boykewich, "Russia after Beslan."

[3] Moore, "Counter-Insurgency and Counter Hostage-Taking in the North Caucasus."

[4] Grant, *The Captive and the Gift: Cultural Histories of Sovereignty in Russia and the Caucasus*, 67-68.

[5] Ibid., 23.

[6] King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus*, 30-41.

[7] Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya: Roots of a Separatist Conflict*, 14.

[8] Baddeley, *The Russian Conquest of the Caucasus*, 107-108.

[9] King, 54.

[10] Baddeley, 132.

[11] Dunlop, 17.

[12] King, 80-81.

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[13] Meier, *Chechnya: To the Heart of a Conflict*, 39.

[14] Baddeley, 302-305.

[15] *Ibid.*, 306-307.

[16] King, 58.

[17] *Ibid.*, 187.

[18] Dunlop, 51-52.

[19] *Ibid.*, 57.

[20] *Ibid.*, 62-70.

[21] King, 211.

[22] Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?*, 37-39.

[23] Akhmadov and Lansky, *The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost*, 102.

[24] Evangelista, 33.

[25] King, 235-237.

[26] Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War*, 127-129.

[27] Evangelista, 40-42.

[28] Gilligan, 206.

[29] Dunlop, 14.

[30] Politkovskaya, *A Small Corner in Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya*, 46.

[31] Gilligan, 55-58.

[32] *Ibid.*, 62-65.

[33] Politkovskaya, 47-50.

[34] Toft and Zhukov, "Islamists and Nationalists," 25.

[35] Gilligan, 134.

[36] *Ibid.*, 135.

[37] Politkovskaya, 222.

[38] Toft and Zhukov, 21.

[39] President of Russia.

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[40] Boykewich.

[41] Gilligan, 143.

[42] Ibid., 129.

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