

Review Essay

The Tragic Tale of the Chechen Independence Struggle

Ilyas Akhmadov & Miriam Lanskoj, *The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost* Foreword by Zbigniew K. Brzezinski New York/Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan (St. Martin's Press), 2010, 270 pages. ISBN: 978-0-230-10534-8.

Ilyas Akhmadov & Nicholas Daniloff, *Chechnya's Secret Wartime Diplomacy: Aslan Maskhadov and the Quest for a Peaceful Resolution* Translated by Anatoly Semenov Preface by Mark Kramer New York/Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan (St. Martin's Press), 2013, 296 pages. ISBN: 978-1-137-33878-5.

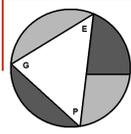
Caspar ten Dam

An abbreviated version of this review essay will be published in the peer-reviewed journal Iran and the Caucasus (Brill) in one of its issues this year; its editorial board has given permission for the current extended version to be published here in our own journal. NB: citations and other references from each of the books under review are indicated by its year of publication and the relevant page numbers, e.g. '(2010: p.1)'; '(2013: p.100)'; etcetera. These references are different in format than the other source references in this review essay.

Introduction

Ilyas Akhmadov's book *The Chechen Struggle: Independence Won and Lost*—with co-author Miriam Lanskoj, Director for Russia and Eurasia at the National Endowment for Democracy—is an insightful, searing and moving account of the Chechen independence struggle in the Northern Caucasus against Russia. The same is true for Akhmadov's more recent book *Chechnya's Secret Wartime Diplomacy: Aslan Maskhadov and the Quest for a Peaceful Resolution*—with Nicholas Daniloff, a renowned journalist and former Director of the Northeastern University School of Journalism, as the co-author.

The latter book presents in separate chapters the transcripts of twenty-four secretly sent audiotapes by Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov between 1999 and 2003 to Akhmadov as Foreign Minister of the separatist government abroad from 1999 to 2005. The last chapter presents a letter by Maskhadov to the European Union of 25 February 2005 shortly before his



violent death on 8 March 2005. Each chapter ends with a commentary by Akhmadov of each translated audiotape or letter in question.

The translations into English of these “surviving tapes” (2013: p.vii, A Note on Translation) have been shortened for reasons of a) readability as Maskhadov often spoke hurriedly and repetitively, being “constantly moving around to avoid capture” (Ibid: p.vii); b) the safety of people concerned, particularly those “wanted by the Russians for treason” (Ibid: p.viii); and c) the requirement to remain within the book’s word limit. The full copies of the tapes, 60% in the Chechen language and 40% in Russian (Ibid: p.vii), will become available “for perusal by specialists after a period of at least 15 years” (Ibid: p.viii).

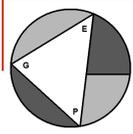
It remains unclear exactly how many audiotapes from Maskhadov to Akhmadov and vice versa—and to others and vice versa, like the ones to Maskhadov’s military commanders—have survived, and how many have been destroyed or lost. One wonders about the full, exact content of Akhmadov’s own audiotapes (and occasional short conversations by satellite phone) to Maskhadov.

Arguably *Chechnya’s Secret Wartime Diplomacy* would have been even more comprehensive and grounded if Akhmadov would have been able and willing to transcribe and publish his own audiotapes (if any survived) to Maskhadov as well.¹ Hopefully other audiotapes by Maskhadov—and others—to other individuals (associates, allies, rivals, etc.) and vice versa will resurface, be transcribed, translated in English and published in order to have a more complete understanding of the history of the Chechen independence struggle.²

Particularly in the *Chechen Struggle*, but also in *Wartime Diplomacy*, Ilyas Akhmadov (b. 1960) recounts his own active participation in Chechnya’s independence struggle and his travails as Chechnya’s Foreign Minister abroad to defend (the justifiability of) the struggle and find a peaceful resolution to the conflict. But these books also recount the roles of many more, generally more well-known figures in that struggle.

Furthermore, Akhmadov offers penetrating observations of the heavy odds arranged against Chechnya’s independence from the very start, odds that would have been extremely difficult to surmount even if (m)any of the major figures on both sides would or could have avoided the fateful decisions or mistakes they have made.

The odds described by Akhmadov roughly correspond to Lanskoj’s identification of “five over-arching problems” accounting for “Chechnya’s failure to develop into a functioning state” and “avert the catastrophe of a second war with Russia” by the end of the twentieth century: i) “absence of resources for postwar reconstruction”; ii) “profound confusion about the structure of the new state” mainly due to “surprising and unpredictable combinations of traditional, Soviet, Islamic and democratic norms” (Lanskoj 2003: 187 (quotes)); iii) “weak political leadership in the person of President Aslan Maskhadov”; iv) the “proliferation of private armies”; and v) “failure in Moscow to undertake constructive policies for building relations with Chechnya” (Lanskoj 2003: 185 (quotes)).³



Akhmadov tends to be more forgiving of the shortcomings exhibited by Maskhadov and other major players in the tragic tale of Chechnya's independence, arguing that they have had few if any opportunities to act differently than they did. Both of his books therefore contain several laudable and impressive features.

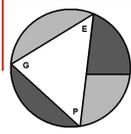
Portraits of Maskhadov and other Figures in the Chechen Independence Struggle

First of all, *The Chechen Struggle* and *Chechnya's Secret Wartime Diplomacy* offer close and personal portraits of the characters, apparent motivations, political convictions, personal relationships and fateful decisions of major figures in that struggle. These portraits include some of the most famous or notorious ones, including:

- General Johar Musayevich Dudaev (b. 1944), the first elected President of the self-styled, separatist and unrecognised Chechen Republic of "Nokhchi" (*Noxçiyın Respublika Noxçiyçö*, NRN) or "Ichkeria" ⁴ in October 1991 until he was killed in April 1996 reportedly by a Russian air- or ground missile ⁵;
- General Aslan Khalid Maskhadov (b. 1951), chief-of-staff of Nokhchi's armed forces since March 1994 and Nokhchi's Interim Prime Minister and Defence Minister after Dudaev's death, until he was elected President in January 1997 (he was killed on 8 March 2005 after Russian forces finally cornered him); and
- Shamil Salmanovich Basaev (b. 1965), commander-in-chief of the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (*Konfederatsiya narodov Kavkaza*, KNK) involved in Abkhazia's violent separation from Georgia in 1992-1993, and commander of the Abkhaz Battalion in late 1994, playing crucial roles in the defense of Grozny in December 1994 and its recapture in August 1996.

However, Basaev became a 'Wahhabist' or rather Salafist ⁶ notorious for his 'terrorist' acts like the Budennovsk hostage crisis in June 1995 in southern Russia, and the incursion into Dagestan in August 1999. He was killed in July 2006 in Ingushetia, reportedly by an explosive of Russia's secret service, the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (*Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, FSB), though different versions of his death exist, including one by "accidental explosion" (Askerov 2015: xxii).⁷

One of Basaev's close allies was Samir Salih 'Abdalla al-Suwaylim (b. 1969), a Saudi or Jordanian (sources differ on his national background) ⁸ called 'Emir Khattab', 'Ibn al-Khattab', 'al-Khattab' or simply 'Khattab' after 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (second caliph, 634-644 AD). A *mujahid* ("holy-warrior"; from Arabic "struggler" (*mugahid*); plural: *mujahideen*) in Afghanistan during 1987-1992, he became from 1995 onwards Ichkeria's main or at least most notorious foreign-volunteer commander, spearheading a violent brand of Salafism in close cooperation with Basaev.



Khattab reportedly participated in major events like Grozny's famous New Year's Eve 1994 battle—and led with Basaev the short-lived 'invasion' of neighbouring Dagestan in August 1999 in a vain effort to establish a Chechen-Dagestan Islamic republic there. FSB commandos finally managed to track him down and kill him (by poison) on or around 20 March 2002 (precise date of his demise remains contested).

Obviously, *Chechnya's Secret Wartime Diplomacy* primarily deals with Maskhadov; through this book the reader gets to know him better and more intimately than through any other published English-language accounts of the Chechen conflict to date. Indeed, one must empathise with Maskhadov's ordeals as leader of Chechnya's independence struggle and his attempts to "end the war and find a political solution through negotiations" (2010: p.184) with Russia with help from the West until his violent death in 2005.

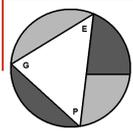
Akhmadov counts as many as six stillborn peace plans between 2001 and 2003 alone (2013: pp.236-239), most of them proposed by Russian politicians that envisaged Chechen autonomy rather than independence, but also one proposed by Akhmadov himself based on the example of Kosovo and reluctantly supported by Maskhadov: conditional independence through a UN protectorate for an interim period of ten to fifteen years (2010: pp.211-215 ('Akhmadov plan')).

Maskhadov's diplomatic efforts seem practically doomed in hindsight, given Russian President Vladimir Putin's utter unwillingness—despite some formal, shallow, insincere overtures as asserted and described in both of Akhmadov's books—to negotiate with Maskhadov or other representatives of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI)⁹ so as to avoid granting any legitimacy to the latter.

Maskhadov's voice—often desperate, isolated and paranoid, but also brave, persistent and thoughtful—is heard loud and clear through the transcribed and translated audiotapes. Maskhadov "knew full well that he would be a target of the Russians" (2013: p.4)—and knew full well that his predecessor Dudaev was reportedly killed "while using a satellite phone"¹⁰ which thus led him to "employ the most primitive but reliable method of courier mail" (Ibid) which came to include the said audiotapes—actually "mini-cassettes because they were easier to hide in cigarette packs or elsewhere than ordinary cassettes" (Ibid: p.27).

Maskhadov also assigned his successor by decree if he were to be killed or rendered incapable to continue his duties as President and supreme commander of ChRI's armed forces; this he told Akhmadov in his 17th audiotape in November 2001, though he did not divulge the intended successor's identity. It turned out to be Abdul Khalim Salamovich Saidullaev (b. 1956), but the latter did not last long: (pro-)Russian forces killed him in June 2006.¹¹

Maskhadov probably has made the extensive audio recordings also for posterity's sake, especially if the worst would happen to him—or to his country's survival and freedom,



despite his frequently expressed 'desperately-optimistic' assertion that the latter scenario would never happen.

Yet one sign of Nokhchi's impending collapse at the time is the increasing difficulty and danger of maintaining communications abroad and safeguarding i.e. hiding the state's archive at home against Russian search parties. The tapes sent back and forth became increasingly rare, with an interruption of over nine months between Maskhadov's 22nd and 23rd transcribed audio-tapes to Akhmadov from April 2002 till January 2003 due to Akhmadov's visa problems in the US after Russia had asked Interpol to arrest him.

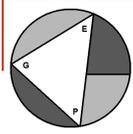
The reliance on infrequent smuggled audiotapes for information, feedback and simple human contact was affecting Mashkadov's position and state of mind. He told Akhmadov more than once that he was "in a terrible condition due to lack of the news from you and impossibility to call you" (2013: p.187). He repeatedly urged Akhmadov to send him a cassette once or even twice a week as he was "tired of being in the dark ..., from not knowing what is going on there [abroad]" (Ibid: p.167)—an impossible demand, given the logistical difficulties of transporting these cassettes in secret across different countries and time zones.

Both Mashkadov and Akhmadov also have had numerous disagreements and misunderstandings on the particular texts and formulations of official documents like those on peace overtures and negotiations. The actual physical distance and consequent perceptual difference between them exacerbated these differences. In his last surviving and transcribed audiotape to Akhmadov dated 30 March 2003, Mashkadov states angrily (as he has done more than once) that "you are man who is absolutely unaware of what is going on here" (2013: p.242). Still, Akhmadov commendably keeps showing deep sympathy and understanding for him despite the latter's often harsh criticism of the former.

Maskhadov also wanted to defend through the tape recordings his oft-criticised policies and decisions, such as his continuing if ambivalent efforts to work with jihadists, secular militants, bandits and corrupt politicians. Already in the first transcribed audiotape to Akhmadov of late July 2000, he argues that if he had confronted or even sought to isolate and defeat the likes of Shamil Basaev during 1999 or even earlier, it would have deepened the split in Chechen society between secularists and Islamists. This would have weakened Chechnya's position even further vis-à-vis Russia. Additionally "I did not want a civil war to be a cause for Russia to begin its aggression" in late 1999 by invading Chechnya again (2013: p. 12).

And that was why Maskhadov did not publicly condemn people like Basaev, former Information Minister Movladi Udugov¹² and former Vice-President Zelimkhan Yandarbiev (2013: p.12 & note 11, p.259). He even tried in vain to pacify the latter by such measures as introducing (or proclaiming to introduce) *Shari'a* (Islamic law) in February 1999.

Akhmadov understands and sympathizes with Maskhadov's predicament; yet the latter repeatedly "employed the same maneuver, and it proved to be fatal. He tried to implement



his opponents' program" (2010: p.99). Indeed as the radicals "did not make similar compromises, his compromises became one-sided concessions" (Ibid: p.78).

Maskhadov thus rarely condemned the beliefs and actions of both jihadist and secular militants in public when he was, either formally or informally, the political and military leader of the independence struggle from 1994 till his death in 2005. He did privately condemn the beliefs and actions of his radical(ised) rivals on his confidential audiotapes. Thus he repeatedly berates commander Ruslan Gelaev—involved in Basaev's Confederation of the Mountain Peoples (KNK) and the Abkhaz Battalion in the early 1990s and a major commander in the First Russo-Chechen War—for his apparent insubordinations.

Maskhadov thus condemns Gelaev for the latter's supposed refusal to engage the Russian forces in the early days of the Second Russo-Chechen War—even though Gelaev's troops fought "a whole series of battles" (2013: p.52) according to Gelaev's own account and that of many sources. Thus at the Battle of Komsomolskoe (Saadi-Kotar) in March 2000, Gelaev's troops were decimated during the village's siege by Russian troops. Maskhadov blames Gelaev for "turning 600-800 of our most desperate fighters into corpses" (Ibid: p.69) at the village there, though other estimates speak of 'just' several hundred Chechen fighters killed against several dozen or more Russian casualties.

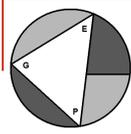
Maskhadov demoted Gelaev and branded him a deserter for moving his dwindled troops to the remote Shatili valley in Georgia in late 2000 and then to that country's Pankisi Gorge by early 2001, and recuperate and train there indefinitely and in fact until 2002. Akhmadov argued against Gelaev's demotion "for fear of driving a deeper wedge in relations with the radical commanders" (2013 : p.261, note 4 (p.69))—thereby showing himself to be the greater pragmatist at least on this occasion.

After his return Gelaev was "continually ostracized" even though Maskhadov reinstated him, which according to Akhmadov eventually drove him to try to return to Pankisi; he was killed on 28 February 2004 during the attempt (2010: p.183 (incl. quote)).¹³

Akhmadov's Role in the Chechen Independence Struggle

The second laudable feature of *The Chechen Struggle* and also *Chechnya's Secret Wartime Diplomacy* is that they offer intriguing, insightful and moving accounts of Akhmadov's own role in the Chechen independence struggle, and of his frequently fraught, ambivalent yet close relationships with some of the major figures in that struggle.

Thus Akhmadov attained a closer relationship with Maskhadov, and—perhaps surprisingly—Basaev, than with Dudaev, possibly due to the latter's oft-reported irascibility, aloofness, secretiveness and intolerance of other viewpoints. Akhmadov served under each of them in different capacities, and can be considered a major if lesser-known figure in the independence struggle.



Akhmadov served as a senior civil servant in the Chechen Republic's Foreign Ministry's political department under President Dudaev since early 1992 (or late 1991; sources differ or are unclear on this). Then he became a senior aide to Basaev tasked with training, equipment and record keeping in the latter's Abkhaz Battalion in July-August 1994, until he sustained a "knee injury" by "accidentally" stepping in a hole (2010: p.15)¹⁴ at the battalion's base when Basaev's main force was attacking one of the anti-Dudaev forces in Argun, those led by notorious gangster Ruslan Labazanov.

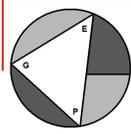
Akhmadov received treatment in St. Petersburg—he was invited there by one of his university friends, presumably from the time he studied political science at Rostov State University—and thus was absent when Basaev's battalion defeated and drove Labazanov's forces out of Argun on 4-5 September 1994.

Eventually Akhmadov flew to Rostov, and drove to Grozny with a friend (bribing Russian soldiers to let them through on the way), arriving in the Chechen capital on December 30—right before Russia's disastrous New Year's Eve offensive into the city. He "experienced the battle of Grozny as total chaos. I couldn't understand what was happening on the next block, or sometimes, in the next building" (2010: p.17). The Russian armed forces eventually occupied the entire city by early March 1995 or at least claimed they had full control over it, but only after massive bombardments and (thus) inflicting and sustaining heavy losses.

When Akhmadov was finally able to meet up with Basaev (then commander of the Grozny garrison) in February 1995, the latter suggested that he should join Maskhadov's newly formed general staff then located near Argun and help set up "an analytical or information service" (2010: p.26) as Basaev put it. At first the commander-in-chief remained quite aloof when Akhmadov met him for the first time, while he became a much closer friend of Maskhadov's aide-de-camp, Husein Iskhanov.

Still, Akhmadov were to increasingly identify himself with Maskhadov and his political viewpoints, progressively distancing himself from an increasingly radical and unpredictable Basaev—who first became widely known and notorious to the outside world with his raid into Budennovsk in southern Russia and the consequent hostage crisis at the hospital there in June 1995. Yet in the 14th transcribed audiotape of August 2001, Maskhadov asks Akhmadov straight out why and how he continues to maintain close contacts with self-proclaimed Islamists like Basaev, Udugov and Yandarbiev. Akhmadov claims that Maskhadov misunderstood the extent and nature of these contacts, exacerbated by the lack of "constant and systematic communications" between them (2013: p.147).

During many travails and narrow escapes from Russian bombs and other dangers (like contracting tuberculosis in late 1995, for which he was able to receive treatment and recover in France over several months), Akhmadov stayed in Maskhadov's general staff as a kind of public affairs chief, at least up to the end of the First Chechen War (1994–1996).¹⁵ Thereafter, he had a short-lived political career as founding chairman of Basaev's small, "radical separatist" (Sokirianskaia 2009: 223) and unsuccessful *Marshonan Toba* (Freedom Party)—



until he, heavily disillusioned, dissolved the party in the Winter of 1999. Apparently, this constitutes the last activity and period in which he has tried to work with Basaev, the “leader and the inspiration” of *Marshonan Toba* (2010: pp.94, 141(quote)). Why he still tried to work with Basaev remains obscure; probably a strong sense of friendship and loyalty must have played a role in this.

In the meantime, Maskhadov had been democratically elected as Ichkeria’s new President in January 1997, due to his leading role in the remarkable recapture of Grozny on 6 August 1996 and the signing of the peace accord with the Russian government at Khasavyurt, Dagestan, on 30 August 1996.

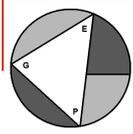
Maskhadov eventually appointed Akhmadov as Ichkeria’s Foreign Minister in late July 1999 (confirmed by parliament in September), who left Chechnya the same year to represent and promote the fledgling self-styled state abroad and mainly in the United States until he was finally dismissed sometime in 2005 by Maskhadov’s successor, Abdul Khalim Saidullaev. To this day, Akhmadov—who sought political asylum in the United States in 2002 and eventually received it in 2005—has been unable to revisit his homeland, let alone safely settle there.

As its main foreign representative, Akhmadov had to deal with the persistent isolation of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) abroad, while it was losing the information war against both the Russian state(-controlled) media and those of internal opponents like Movladi Udugov’s increasingly Islamist *Kavkaz Tsentri* (Kavkaz Center) website at the expense of Akhmed Zakaev’s generally secular-nationalist *Chechenpress* website. The former website became the main voice-piece of the ‘North Caucasus Emirate’ (later renamed ‘Caucasus Emirate’) declared by Saidullaev’s successor Doku Umarov in October 2007, which effectively abolished the ChRI apart from a residual government-in-exile in London.

In November 2007 Zakaev resigned as Ichkeria’s Foreign Minister in protest against President Umarov’s declaration of a ‘(North) Caucasus Emirate’, only to be re-elected as Prime Minister by the parliament-in-exile, which formally took the President’s post away from Umarov but seemed powerless to stem Islamist irredentism as the expressed goal of most remaining insurgents on the ground.

Consequently, long before the announcement of the Caucasus Emirate, there was a “lingering suspicion in the United States that our government ... might be harboring terrorists or allowing extremists into the leadership circle” (2013: p.86). Akhmadov believes Maskhadov’s refusal to distance himself from *Kavkaz Tsentri* and shut it down was the latter’s “biggest mistake” of all: “this website destroyed our ability to present ourselves as anything other than radicals and terrorists. Maskhadov should have nipped it in the bud” (2010: p.184 (quotes)).

Above all the frequent kidnappings (including foreigners) in and around Chechnya were mainly blamed on factions, Islamist, criminal-opportunist or otherwise, within or loosely associated with Ichkeria’s increasingly fractious and fractured government. These



kidnappings hurt its authority and credibility at home and abroad, even though many an abduction appears to have been orchestrated by (pro-)Russian actors. In this regard Akhmadov's analysis of how "the hostage trade grew out of the treatment of prisoners" (2010: p.101) during the First Chechen War—particularly due to the far worse treatment of prisoners on the Russian side at the time—is insightful and convincing.

Ichkeria's increasing isolation, lack of funds and damaged reputation explains why both Mashkadov and Akhmadov so eagerly embraced and lauded any outside support they received, like from the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya, one of whose co-chairs, former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, wrote the Foreword to *The Chechen Struggle*.

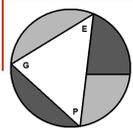
At times Akhmadov rather excessively praises Ichkeria's rare supporters abroad, like Brzezinski (e.g. 2010: pp.195-196; 2013: pp.62-63); but this is understandable given Ichkeria's severe predicaments including its factionalism and very survival at home. Brzezinski's Committee for Peace in Chechnya actually helped to sustain Western sympathy for the Chechen cause as understood by the proponents of Chechen independence.

Yet Akhmadov's reach remained limited: through Brzezinski's committee he did have "good access to members of Congress but almost no ability to meet high US officials" (2013: p.114); the meetings with two senior State Department officials, secretly yet quite friendly with one of them in October 2000 (Ibid: p.120) and publicly if quite frigidly with the other in March 2001 (Ibid: pp.114-115; 2010: p.196) were exceptional.

Moreover, there were "only a few hundred Chechens in the United States and I had no means of reaching them" or trying to "mobilize them" (2013: p.185). Doing this would have violated and undermined his precarious status of being a "simple foreign visitor" rather than a "registered foreign representative" (Ibid) in the States—and that of an asylum seeker after he learned in May 2002 that an Interpol arrest warrant had been issued against him on Russia's request.

On the point of "becoming a man without a country" unable to travel abroad (his Russian passport about to be expired) he made the "excruciating difficult" decision to "ask for political asylum" while remaining Ichkeria's Foreign Minister for a considerable while after his asylum had been granted a few years later (2013: pp.248-249 (incl. quotes)).

At the time Akhmadov was acutely aware that the United States, despite their criticism of Putin's authoritarian policies and (consequent) Russian brutalities in Chechnya (and elsewhere), "considered Chechnya to be an integral part of the Russian Federation" and that "the Chechen resistance was unlikely to get any assistance in combating the Russians as the Afghans had received after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan" (2013: p.115). The latter case was arguably or at least to some extent a case of foreign aggression by a superpower against a fragile neighbouring state. But the case of Chechnya was quite different. Obviously the US



would never dare or even contemplate to intervene militarily within the internationally recognised territory of a major nuclear superpower like Russia, or offer military aid to opponents of Russia's territorial integrity.

Yet in 2001 Mashkadov still hoped that countries like the US with "large organizations that have huge financial capabilities" (according to Akhmadov, Mashkadov had particularly the "Central Intelligence Agency in mind") would come to their aid (2013: p.123 & note 1 (quotes)).

However, the US-led War on Terror in response to '9-11', arguably the most destructive terrorist act to date, effectively dashed any hopes and prospects of substantial US aid to Ichkeria: on 11 September 2001, a dozen members of Osama Bin Laden's Islamist-fundamentalist *Al Qaeda* ('The Base') network hijacked airplanes and plunged them into the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC, killing 2973 people, almost all civilians, 2749 of them in New York.

Russia's President Vladimir Putin "understood immediately how he could benefit from Al-Qaeda's attack" (2010: p.200). Putin had an easy time to convince the West, and the US Administration of President George W. Bush in particular, to consider and ostracise most or all Chechen separatists as Al-Qaeda-like or Al-Qaeda-connected terrorists. Putin's task was made all the easier as Chechen separatists, increasingly relying on actual terrorism, gangsterism and foreign *mujahid* assistance, already had made a bad press for themselves.

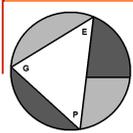
The post-9-11 world also put Maskhadov in an near-impossible quandary: severing the ties with Basaev, Udugov, Khattab and other 'terrorists' as demanded by the US would severely, perhaps fatally weaken the armed struggle *and* "practically justify the aggression, Russia's genocide" (2013: p.161) in Chechnya by such an 'admission of guilt'; but refusing to do so would—and did—worsen and solidify Ichkeria's isolation in the West.

As Maskhadov understandably put Ichkeria's immediate survival above the improvement of its international standing, he chose to disregard the American demand. Still his decision had detrimental effects on the independence struggle as it gave Putin more free rein in Chechnya than before, with tacit US acquiescence. Akhmadov observes that the intensified "Russian-American antiterrorism cooperation" after 9-11 was "short lived, but had ... profoundly negative consequences for the Chechens" (2010: p.200).

Akhmadov's Analysis of Brutalities during the Chechen Independence Struggle

The third laudable feature of Akhmadov's two books is that both contain controversial and counter-intuitive yet thought-provoking, plausible and convincing observations on the Russo-Chechen conflicts in general and some major violent incidents during these conflicts in particular.

Above all Akhmadov's thoughtful comments on *brutalisation*, a 'degenerative' process of increasing violations of local and/or international norms of violence, are worth mentioning—and are highly useful to the reviewer's ongoing research and testing of his Brutalisation



theory, which nowadays consists of the variables *violence-value* (variable 1), *combat-stress* (variable 2) and the conflict-inducing (variable 2) and conflict-induced (variable 4) motivations of *grievance*, *avarice*, *interest* and *ideology* (Ten Dam 2015a: 5 & note 2; see on older version theory: Ten Dam 2010: 332; see further Ten Dam 2015b: 9-11).

Thus Akhmadov frequently refers to the morally corrosive tit-for-tat retributions, with ever declining respect for the Geneva Conventions and its provisions like decent treatment of prisoners. This brutalisation particularly took hold since the “Russians introduced cleansing operations, *zachistky*, ostensibly to identify fighters, but they mostly killed and terrorized the population”—while “on the Chechen side this process evolved more slowly and was more a reaction to what was being done to us than a deliberate policy” (2010: pp.38-39). Indeed, in the Russian “filtration camps” (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Operativnykh Shtabov*, GUOSH) “thousands if not tens of thousands people were tortured and humiliated” (Ibid: p.115).

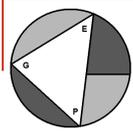
Maskhadov was fully right by late 2000 to be “speechless” in shock about the Russian “brutalities, cruelties”, especially by underfunded, impoverished “contract soldiers”, taking place in his homeland (2013: pp.21(quotes)-22); he repeatedly refers to these brutal cleaning-up operations (*zachistky*) on the audiotapes.

According to Maskhadov, even special police OMON (*Otrjad Mobilnij Osobogo Naznatsjenija*, Special Purpose Mobility Unit) and military intelligence GRU (*Glavnoye Razvedyvatel'noye Upravleniye*, Main Intelligence Directorate) forces were as underfunded as ordinary contract soldiers, with the Russian military command unable or unwilling to pay them the promised “1,000 dollars a month” allowance or offer any other compensation (2013: p.34). Thus they looted and demanded bribes from hapless citizens or plundered their belongings after they killed them, especially during cleaning-up operations, encouraged by the Russian authorities to “Grab, rob, do what you like” (Ibid: p.56).

These contract soldiers also forced husbands to undress their wives to supposedly check whether they bore the marks (imprints, scrapes) of sniper or other armed activities on their bodies, but only did this to humiliate both husbands and wives—and “take away and rape” the latter (2013: p.210).

Maskhadov’s harsh and bleak assessment of Russian misdeeds and atrocities appears to be generally true; by and large Chechen violations of humanitarian and human rights law, though grave and recurrent, did pale in comparison both in severity and scale to those committed by the Russians during the 1990s and the first decade(s) of the 21st century. He insists that “I have been doing everything within my power to keep actions of the Chechen resistance within the internationally recognized rules of war” even if he could not prevent all terrorist and other brutal(ised) actions by “isolated elements of the resistance” (2013: p.253).

Be that as it may, Akhmadov’s own observations on conflict and violence broadly concord with the reviewer’s own conceptions of brutality and brutalisation, and with his own



definitions of terrorism and other forms of (atrocious, brutal) violence, like terrorism as “sudden lethal violence without preceding warning of the act for whatever purpose against (groups of) unarmed or weakly armed and thereby effectively defenceless civilians, unarmed off-duty security personnel, soldiers and policemen, and other defenceless non-combatants” (Ten Dam 2015a: 16).

For instance Akhmadov argues that he cannot put the June 1995 Budennovsk hostage crisis “in the same category as other acts of terrorism” (2010: p.52), as “there was no cruelty toward the hostages; there were no cases of rape, or other types of abuses” (Ibid; pp.52-53).

Indeed, unlike the hostage crises at Moscow’s Dubrovka Theater during the performance of the musical *Nord-Ost* (North-East) in October 2002 and at Beslan’s primary (and secondary) school in North Ossetia in September 2004—Basaev claimed responsibility for both, though Akhmadov believes he was only truly responsible for and involved in the latter hostage-taking action (2010: pp.205, 223)—“in Budennovsk the hostage-takers took risks to get water” for the hostages as “none was being supplied” from the outside (Ibid: p.53 (quote); pp.224-225 (comparing Beslan and Budennovsk)).

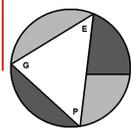
Akhmadov also argues that Khattab “wasn’t a terrorist” (2010: p.202), as his “cruelty in the form of beheadings and cutting of limbs” of either dead or alive Russian soldiers” should be regarded as “war crimes and gross violations of the Geneva Conventions” rather than terrorism (2010: p.203): “Khattab never acted against the civilian population and his actions were directed against military targets” (Ibid).¹⁶

Whether that assessment is true or not, the scale and degree of terrorism and other forms of excessive violence by Chechen insurgents has continued to pale in comparison to those committed by the Russian state. Thus in both ‘Nord-Ost’ and ‘Beslan’ the Russian responses to ‘neutralise’ the hostage takers showed little if any regard for the well-being of the hostages, with hundreds of casualties among the latter that could well have been avoided.

Conclusion: Causes, Dynamics and Prospects of the Chechen Independence Struggle

The given of Russia’s political and military superiority vis-à-vis a small nation such as the Chechens, begs the question why so many Chechens were ready to forcibly secede from Russia in the 1990s, as most of them would have known full well that the long-term prospects of Chechen independence would be slim at best against Russia’s might. At least five interrelated factors appear to account for Chechnya’s extraordinary independence struggle and the consequent ethno-territorial conflict:

- i) the saliency of historic grievances like the wholesale deportation of the Chechens people (amongst others) in 1944 on orders of Stalin;
- ii) the still vibrant martial culture of defiance that obliges Chechens to avenge such historical wrongs when given the chance and seek safety from such wrongs in the future through independence;



- iii) the Chechens being by far the biggest indigenous nation in the North Caucasus, thus having the demographic critical-mass to at least try to secede from a major power like Russia (Ten Dam 2010: esp. 333-334, 345-349; Ten Dam 2011: esp. 247-252); and because
- iv) Chechnya exhibits the “so-called *mosaic* type of ethno-geographic configuration” of “highly homogeneous pockets of ethnic concentration” (Rezvani 2013: 15) which makes it vulnerable to conflict, especially if combined with
- v) a “*politicization of ethnicity*” (Rezvani 2013: 55) in a hierarchical-territorial ethno-political system whereby some ethnicities get a higher autonomy and/or nationality status and thus more privileges in defined territories than others (Ibid: esp. 116-120).

It is the combination of all these factors—acting as either necessary or sufficient-making conditions—that account for the Chechen conflict, as “there are many cases of ethno-territorial groups in the (post-)Soviet space that enjoy territorial autonomy and a dominant demographic position therein, but nevertheless have not waged a war of independence” (Rezvani 2013: 249).¹⁷

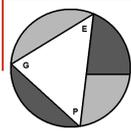
One also needs to account for these factors themselves, i.e. identify the factors-behind-the-factors, to explain thus “why an ethno-nationalist conflict emerged in Chechnya, and diffused and transformed [to a considerable degree] into a Wahhabi/Salafi religious conflict” (Rezvani 2014: 871 (quote); see further esp. 886, note 57).

The three impressive features of both books described earlier do not mean that either *Wartime Diplomacy* or even the broader-oriented *Chechen Struggle* exhaustively cover the characters and lives of all the major personalities in the Chechen independence struggle, let alone all the apparent reasons, events and complexities of that struggle. Such exhaustiveness would have been too much to ask for, given the limited size, (auto)biographical focus and topical range of both books.

Even so, Akhmadov’s descriptions of his own role and motives in the Chechen independence struggle, those of some major figures in that struggle and his relationships with them, and some crucial aspects, developments, outcomes and prospects of that struggle, remain more ambiguous and equivocal than they could have been.

Nevertheless, one should not put too much weight on such shortcomings, if only because these may be at least partially due to Akhmadov’s understandably sensitive position in the United States and beyond as a once major figure in the Chechen independence struggle. Concurrently, he may not wish to divulge too much of his own personal beliefs, motivations and judgments of his own role and that of his compatriots and (former) participants in that struggle.

Moreover, he is right in suggesting that his own participation in the struggle and the positions he occupied have been significant, but not such that he could have had full insights



of the motivations and actions of all the major participants: “I knew all the main Chechen leaders, but even so, there are many things about which I can only speculate” (2010: p.235).

Be that as it may, Akhmadov’s expectation that “the Chechens will seek to control their own affairs again” and once more “will seek independence” (2010: p.247), that the “desire for independence has been pushed underground only temporarily” and will rise again “in 50 years” time if not sooner (2013: p.240), is not as farfetched as it may seem at first glance.

Despite the horrors of the first Russo-Chechen War of 1994–1996 and the second Russo-Chechen War that started in late 1999 and arguably continues to this day, both Islamist and secularist Chechens refuse to acknowledge defeat. Even those who have laid down their arms still try to sabotage Russia’s hold over their homeland by any means—and take up arms again whenever they see the slightest chance to succeed.

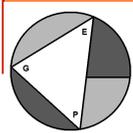
This resolve can also be found among former rebels and supporters who are presently exhausted and demoralised. Many reluctantly accepted the amnesty offer by Chechnya’s President Ramzan Kadyrov (b. 1976), effectively installed by Russia’s President Vladimir Putin in 2007. Insurgents had assassinated his predecessor and father, Akhmad Kadyrov (b. 1951) through a bomb blast in Grozny on 9 May 2004 that killed dozens of people (estimates vary).

Akhmad Kadyrov was once appointed Grand Mufti of Chechnya by Dudaev in 1995 and one-time proponent of independence in the First Russo-Chechen War—until he switched sides, apparently because he considered Islamism of Wahhabi and Salafi varieties a greater threat to Chechen society than Russian domination. Many observers discern merely or mainly self-serving motives, yet Akhmadov’s view of Akhmad Kadyrov is more nuanced than most. Thus he rejects allegations that Akhmad was a FSB agent and suggests that his “aggressively anti-Wahhabi” stance was a major and perhaps primary reason that “he had gone over to the Russian side” (2010: p.164 (quotes)).

The lethal bomb attack in May 2004 that killed Akhmad Kadyrov and scores of others, for which Basaev claimed responsibility, was followed by the ‘election’ of Alu Alkhanov as the new President. Nowadays the latter’s successor, Ramzan Kadyrov, a former warlord notorious for his ruthlessness (some who surrendered disappeared), intimidates the populace into submission—for now. At present “Chechens are exhausted and to survive they have to accept Kadyrov’s reign, hang his portrait everywhere, and pretend that the conflict is over” (2010: p. 246). But eventually “the spring [toward independence] will uncoil with greater force” (Ibid).

Indeed some analysts refer to a trend of *Kadyrovisation*, the unintended (side-)effect of Putin’s so-called *Chechenisation* policy of installing an indigenous yet pro-Moscow government by making the Kadyrovs so powerful locally that even Moscow may be unable to control them fully or even partially.

The Kadyrovs actually belong to and lead the benoy clan clan (*gar, neqi*), which reportedly “amounts to 15% of the Chechen population” (Sokirianskaia 2005: 456), apparently making it the largest Chechen clan, as large or larger than many a *tuqum* or (multi-)tribal union of multiple clans.



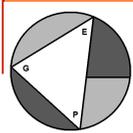
Thus one reason for the Kadyrov family's power and influence—and the decision by Putin to utilise them—appears simply to be the immense size of the clan they belong to. This in fact by itself may paradoxically further Chechen autonomy and even (de facto) independence on the long term.

As scholars, historians, anthropologists and social scientists in particular, we can and should try to predict, or at least assess, with our theories, hypotheses and empirical research which of Maskhadov's and Akhmadov's particular observations turn out to be prescient of Chechnya's seemingly doomed attempt to definitely break away from Russia. But in the end only the future will tell.

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Endnotes

1. *Wartime Diplomacy* does not clarify the fate of Akhmadov's own tapes to Maskhadov. If many, most or all of these tapes or transcripts have survived, Akhmadov's reticence to publish these may be due to their sensitive content and his own contentious asylum bid in the US at the time.
2. Other audiotapes between Maskhadov and others did exist, though most of these are probably lost or destroyed forever. Maskhadov refers to these other audiotapes more than once, like those received by and sent to Ichkeria's then Deputy Prime Minister Akhmed Zakaev (2013: e.g. pp. 175,191,206,215).
3. Miriam Lansky, 'Chechnya's Internal Fragmentation, 1996–1999' *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* Vol.27 No.2, Summer/Fall 2003, pp.185-205; "adapted from a chapter of her dissertation, entitled, "War of the Russian Succession: Russia and Chechnya, 1996-1999." (p.185)—also known as *The War of the Russian Succession: Russia and Chechnya between the Wars* PhD thesis, Boston University, 2003.
4. Also called the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (*ich ker*: "place over there" in Kumyk) or ChRI, after the south-eastern 'heartland' of Chechnya. The ChRI actually encompasses the entire Chechen region within the former Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) or ASSR Checheno-Ingushetia.
5. The "way Dudayev was killed remains mysterious"; the one being "killed by a [air or ground] rocket that identified and targeted him from a signal on his satellite phone" constitutes just one if "dominant" version of the event (2010: p.250, note 1 of Chapter 4; see p.64). In *Wartime Diplomacy* Akhmadov reiterates that Dudaev was apparently killed by a ground (or air) rocket "while using a satellite phone", though the "exact nature of his death has still not been entirely clarified" (2013: p.4; see also p.18).
6. Just like Wahhabism, Salafism is a purist version of Islam within the Sunni branch (see on the similarities and differences between Wahhabis and Salafis: Ten Dam 2011: 245-246).
7. Ali Askerov thus asserts that "it is very likely that he [Basaev] was killed accidentally" (Askerov 2015: 59). Though I do not always agree with his observations, I recommend Ali Askerov's *Historical Dictionary of the Chechen Conflict* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) as a useful and insightful source of reference; I plan to write a book review on it in the near future.

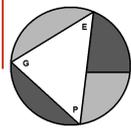


8. Akhmadov himself speaks of “a Saudi guerrilla fighter named Ibn al-Khattab” (2010: p.123) by which he clearly means the famous or rather notorious “Khattab” whom he met “several times” (Ibid). Askerov also states that “Thamir Saleh Abdullah Al-Suwailem” was “born in Saudi Arabia” (Askerov 2015: 119).
9. See note 4.
10. See note 5.
11. Maskhadov seemed to have considered Saidullaev as capable and willing to “carry out his policy” and “develop reasonable relations with his internal opponents” (2013: p.174; see also 2010: pp. 229-234).
12. Udugov “left Chechnya but remained very influential as the dominant propagandist of the radical wing and force behind the Kavkaz Tsentr website” (2010: p.185). His whereabouts remain unknown.
13. Akhmadov states that Gelaev was “killed on February 28, 2005” (2010: p.183)—but that probably is a typo error, as sources generally agree that he was killed on 28 February 2004 while attempting to withdraw (alone or with a few of his surviving troops) into Pankisi Gorge after a (failed) raid into Dagestan (see e.g. Waynakh Online, www.waynakh.com/eng/2008/05/khamzat-ruslan-gelayev/ (acc. 14 Nov 2016)).
14. Akhmadov’s account of his injury differs from those of other sources. Thus *Waynakh Online* claims that “Akhmadov was wounded during the fighting with forces of Ruslan Labazanov in Argun” in August 1994: www.waynakh.com/eng/2008/05/ilyas-khamzatovich-akhmadov/ (acc. 7 April 2014), suggesting that he was in the thick of it.
15. Reportedly, Akhmadov “retired to private life” right after the end of the war in August 1996: see e.g. www.waynakh.com/eng/2008/05/ilyas-khamzatovich-akhmadov/ (last acc. 26 Sep 2016).
16. However, beheadings and other cruelties against soldiers and other combatants who have surrendered, been wounded or otherwise rendered unable to defend themselves should be regarded as acts of terrorism—even if the victims are formally still combatants rather than non-combatants (see e.g. Ten Dam 2015a). Such acts of terrorism are then at the same time violations of humanitarian law.
17. Babak Rezvani acknowledges the relevance of multiple factors accounting for internal armed conflicts—particularly grievances of severe deprivations in the past and demographical size and dominance of the initiating (rebellious) party (Rezvani 2013: esp. 227-249 (Chechnya); Rezvani 2014 (on Chechnya); Rezvani 2015 (updated, shortened and improved version of Rezvani 2013)). Yet he stresses that such factors only make any conflict truly likely, in a time of interethnic tensions and state fragmentation, when the ethnicities concerned live next to each other in concentrated pockets (mosaic configuration) within ethno-politically constructed territories. Thus “in addition to their demographic dominance in their autonomous homeland, the burden of trauma caused by their genocidal deportation [in 1944] as well as a certain peculiarity of the Caucasus—probably its mosaic type of ethno-geographic configuration—are crucial factors, which in combination can explain the Chechen conflict” (Rezvani 2013: 249; see also Rezvani 2014: 886).

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