

Main Article—Review Essay

The Tragedy of the Chechen Conflict

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.

Ali Askerov, *Historical Dictionary of the Chechen Conflict* Foreword by Jon Woronoff Lanham/Boulder/New York/London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, 285 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4422-4924-0.

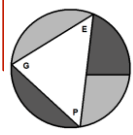
Caspar ten Dam

This review essay is an adapted version of the one published in the Winter 2016 issue of our journal (see Ten Dam 2016), with more explicit and elaborate attention given to Askerov's book this time. Moreover, the new version is also written in response to criticisms (i.e. effective, new anonymous peer-reviews) from some colleagues that I should approach the subjects (topics and personalities) under review more critically—by amongst other things applying terms like 'separatism' and 'insurgency' that imply more critical distance, rather than adopting terms like 'armed struggle' and 'independence struggle' preferred by the author(s) under review. Therefore, this review essay more closely resembles the one that will come out in the journal Iran and the Caucasus (Brill) in its last issue this year (as announced in Ten Dam 2016: 57).

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 account of the Chechen insurgencies in the Northern Caucasus



against Russia after the demise of the Soviet Union. 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.

Ali Askerov's *Historical Dictionary of the Chechen Conflict* offers a more neutral and broadly oriented account of Chechen insurgencies from the eighteenth century onwards, through a series of over 500 informative and cross-referenced descriptions in alphabetical order of major personalities, concepts, organisations, (violent) events, and cultural, social, economic and other phenomena. For this reason it can serve as a useful counterpoint and counterbalance to Akhmadov's thought-provoking yet arguably more partisan accounts.

As series editor Jon Woronoff stresses, Askerov “has gone to great pains to state facts as clearly as possible without taking sides” (2015: viii). Thus Askerov states that Akhmadov's “criticism of [Chechen] suicide bombings and hostage takings earned him a moderate image” (Ibid: p.36)—without indicating or arguing whether that image is deserved or not.

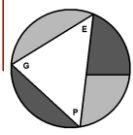
Askerov, born and educated in Azerbaijan and presently teaching peace and conflict studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), has written multiple other works on related topics, including those directly to do with Chechnya (see References).

Still, most attention is paid here to Akhmadov's *Chechnya's Secret Wartime Diplomacy*, if only because this book reveals new documents that have been generally hidden from view till its publication. It 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 readability, the safety of people concerned, and the book's word limit (Ibid: pp.vii-viii). 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).

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. Other audiotapes between Maskhadov and others did exist, though most of these are probably lost or destroyed forever. Maskhadov occasionally refers to these other audiotapes, like those received by and sent to his then Deputy Prime Minister Akhmed Zakaev.

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 insurgencies during the 1990s and beyond.



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

The heavy odds arranged against Chechnya's independence from the very start 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" (Ibid: 185 (quotes)).

Portraits of Maskhadov and other Figures in the post-1991 Chechen Insurgencies

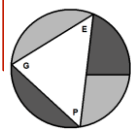
Akhmadov's *The Chechen Struggle* and *Chechnya's Secret Wartime Diplomacy*, and Askerov's *Chechen Conflict*, offer insightful portraits of the major figures among Chechnya's separatists. These portraits include those of:

General Johar Musayevich Dudaev (b. 1944), the first elected President of the self-styled Chechen Republic of "Nokhchi" (*Noxçiyın Respublika Noxçiyçö*, NRN) or "Ichkeria"¹ in October 1991 until he was killed in April 1996 reportedly by one or more Russian air- or ground missile (2010: p. 64 & note 1 (p.250); 2013: pp.4,18; 2015: p.89);

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.

One of the most well-known and controversial figures was 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 Salafist² notorious for violent 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: pp.xxii (quote), 59).



One of Basaev's close allies was Samir Salih 'Abdalla al-Suwaylim (b. 1969), a Saudi or Jordanian (sources differ on his national background)³ 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 most notorious 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 Khattab down and kill him (by poison) on or around 20 March 2002; the precise date of his demise remains contested.

Akhmadov's *Wartime Diplomacy* primarily deals with Maskhadov; through this book the reader gets to know him more intimately than through any other published English-language accounts of the Chechen conflict to date.

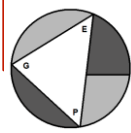
Thus Maskhadov appears to have attempted to "end the war and find a political solution through negotiations" (2010: p.184) with Russia with help from the West. Akhmadov counts as many as six stillborn peace plans between 2001 and 2003 alone (2013: pp.236-239), most of them proposed by Russian politicians that envisaged Chechen autonomy rather than independence, but also one proposed by Akhmadov himself based on the example of Kosovo: conditional independence through a UN protectorate for an interim period of ten to fifteen years (2010: pp.211-215).

Yet Russian President Vladimir Putin remained unwilling to negotiate with Maskhadov so as to avoid granting any legitimacy to the latter. Maskhadov's voice—often desperate, isolated and paranoid—is heard loud and clear through the audiotapes. Maskhadov also assigned his successor by decree if he were to be killed or rendered incapable; 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 he did not last long: (pro-)Russian forces killed him in June 2006.

Maskhadov probably has made the extensive audio recordings also for posterity's sake. Yet the tapes sent back and forth became increasingly rare, with an interruption of over nine months between Maskhadov's 22nd and 23rd transcribed audiotapes from April 2002 till January 2003 due to Akhmadov's visa problems in the US after Russia had asked Interpol to arrest him.

Maskhadov 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). Both of them also had numerous disagreements and misunderstandings on particular texts and policies; the physical distance and consequent perceptual difference between them exacerbated these differences. Still, Akhmadov keeps showing sympathy and understanding for him despite the latter's often harsh criticism of the former.

Maskhadov also sought to defend through the tape recordings his oft-criticised efforts to work with jihadists, secular militants, bandits and corrupt politicians. Thus 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 and would have weakened its position even further vis-à-vis Russia. That was why he did not condemn people like Basaev, former Information Minister Movladi Udugov ⁴ and former Vice-President Zelimkhan Yandarbiev (2013: p.12 & note 11, p.259). He even tried in vain to pacify the latter by introducing *Shari'a* (Islamic law) in February 1999.

Thus according to Akhmadov, Maskhadov 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).

Akhmadov’s Role in the Chechen Insurgency

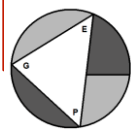
The *Chechen Struggle* and also *Wartime Diplomacy* offer insightful accounts of Akhmadov’s own role in the Chechen insurgency, and of his ambivalent yet close relationships with some of the major figures in that insurgency.

Thus Akhmadov attained a closer relationship with Maskhadov, and—rather surprisingly—Basaev, than with Dudaev, possibly due to the latter’s oft-reported irascibility and intolerance of other viewpoints. Akhmadov served under each of them in different capacities. He 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 Akhmadov sustained a “knee injury” by “accidentally” stepping in a hole (2010: p.15)⁵ at the battalion’s base when Basaev’s main force was attacking one of the anti-Dudaev forces in Argun, those led by Ruslan Labazanov.

Akhmadov received treatment in St. Petersburg and thus was absent when Basaev’s battalion defeated and drove Labazanov’s forces out of Argun in early September 1994. Eventually Akhmadov flew to Rostov, and drove to Grozny with a friend, arriving in the Chechen capital on December 30—right before Russia’s disastrous New Year’s Eve offensive. 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 (2015: p.xvii), but only after massive bombardments and heavy losses on both sides.

When Akhmadov was finally able to meet up with Basaev 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). At first the commander-in-chief remained quite aloof when Akhmadov first met him. Still, Akhmadov were to increasingly identify himself with Maskhadov, while distancing himself from an increasingly radical and unpredictable Basaev.

During many travails and narrow escapes from Russian bombs and other dangers, 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).⁶



Thereafter, Akhmadov 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 episode in which he has tried to work with Basaev, the "leader and the inspiration" of *Marshonan Toba* (2010: pp.94, 141 (quote)).

In the meantime, Maskhadov had been elected as Ichkeria's new President in January 1997, due to the astounding 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. He 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.

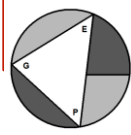
As its main foreign representative, Akhmadov had to deal with the persistent isolation of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI) abroad, while it was losing the information war against both the Russian state(-controlled) media and those of internal opponents like Movladi Udugov's increasingly Islamist *Kavkaz Tsentri* 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.

Consequently, long before the announcement of the Caucasus Emirate, 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 associated with Ichkeria's government. These kidnappings obviously hurt its authority and credibility, even though many an abduction appears to have been orchestrated by (pro-)Russian actors. In this regard Akhmadov offers an insightful if perhaps contestable 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.

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—including from organisations that may have had anti-Russian agendas and outlooks of their own, like 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 hardly surprising 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); such meetings 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. Thus he decided 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. quote)).

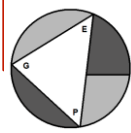
At the time Akhmadov was acutely aware that the United States, despite their criticism of Putin's authoritarian and arguably brutal policies in Chechnya (and elsewhere), "considered Chechnya to be an integral part of the Russian Federation" and that "the Chechen resistance was unlikely to get any assistance in combating the Russians as the Afghans had received after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan" (2013: p.115). Obviously the US would never 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.

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.

Thus 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 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 worsen and solidify Ichkeria's isolation in the West.

As Maskhadov sought to 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 thus argues 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 Insurgency

Akhmadov's two books contain controversial and counter-intuitive yet thought-provoking observations on the Russo-Chechen conflicts—particularly those on *brutalisation*, a 'degenerative' process of increasing violations of local and/or international norms of violence, given the reviewer's own Brutalisation theory (see 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. According to him, 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). Thus in the Russian "filtration camps" (*Glavnoe Upravlenie Operativnykh Shtabov*, GUOSH) "thousands if not tens of thousands people were tortured and humiliated" (Ibid: p.115).

Thus 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, as underfunded as ordinary contract soldiers (2013: p.34), looted and demanded bribes from hapless citizens or plundered their belongings after they killed them, especially during cleaning-up operations (Ibid: p.56).

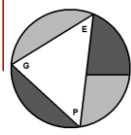
Actually Askerov confirms that "OMON was accused of many human rights abuses in Chechnya such as abducting, raping, torturing, and killing civilians" (2015: p.175)—though he refrains from offering his own assessment of the veracity of these reports and allegations. Yet at his 'Human Rights' entry he does state that both "the Russian and Chechen sides have seriously violated human rights throughout the First and Second Chechen Wars" (Ibid: p.117).

Though Askerov does not explicitly assign most weight and blame on one of the warring sides, also his descriptions of Russian brutalities appear to be generally more grave and on a much larger scale than the Chechen-separatist ones (2015: pp.117-118).

Be that as it may, Akhmadov's own observations on violence broadly concord with the reviewer's own conceptions of brutality and brutalisation, and with his own definitions 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).

In contrast, Askerov just states that due to all the mentioned events “where civilians were involved, Basayev was labeled a terrorist” (2015: p.59). At any rate, 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 and Prospects of the Chechen Insurgency

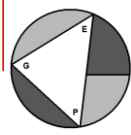
The given of Russia’s political and military superiority vis-à-vis a small nation such as the Chechens, begs the question why so many Chechens were ready to forcibly secede from Russia in the 1990s. At least five interrelated factors appear to account for Chechnya’s extraordinary ethno-territorial conflict:

- i) the saliency of historic grievances like the wholesale deportation of the Chechens in 1944 on orders of Stalin;
- ii) the still vibrant martial culture of defiance that obliges Chechens to avenge such historical wrongs;
- 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) whereby some ethnicities get more privileges in defined territories than others (Ibid: esp. 116-120).

It is the combination of all these factors that appear to 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). One also needs to account for “why an ethno-nationalist conflict emerged in Chechnya, and diffused and transformed into a Wahhabi/Salafi religious conflict” (Rezvani 2014: 871 (quote); see further esp. 886, note 57).

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). Yet Rezvani 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: indeed these are “crucial factors, which in combination can explain the Chechen conflict” (Rezvani 2013: 249; see also Rezvani 2014: 886).

Last but not least, 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.

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, many 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.

Still, many reluctantly accepted the amnesty offer by Chechnya’s President Ramzan Kadyrov (b. 1976), effectively installed by Putin in 2007. Insurgents had assassinated his predecessor and father, former Grand Mufti of Chechnya Akhmad Kadyrov (b. 1951), through a bomb blast in Grozny on 9 May 2004 that killed dozens of people (estimates vary). This lethal bomb attack, 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, intimidates the populace into submission—for now.

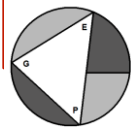
At present, however, “Chechens are exhausted and to survive they have to accept Kadyrov’s reign, hang his portrait everywhere, and pretend that the conflict is over” (2010: p.246). But eventually “the spring [toward independence] will uncoil with greater force” (Ibid).

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 eventually be unable to control them.

The Kadyrovs actually belong to and lead the *benoy* 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.⁷ 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 very 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 the particular observations expressed by Maskhadov, Akhmadov and also Askerov 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. 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.
2. 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).
3. 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” (2015: p.119).
4. 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.
5. 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. Indeed, according to Askerov, Akhmadov “volunteered in fighting against the Russian forces” (2015: p.36).
6. Reportedly, Akhmadov “retired to private life” (Askerov 2015: p.36) right after the end of the war in August 1996; see also e.g. www.waynakh.com/eng/2008/05/ilyas-khamzatovich-akhmadov/ (last acc. 26 Sep 2016).
7. I “translate *gar* and *neqi* as “clan” and *teip* as “tribe””, and “*tuqum* (Persian for family, clan) as multi-tribal commune” (Ten Dam 2011: 248, footnote 15). Other scholars apply other translations, definitions and/or classifications of these terms—like Askerov, who translates *teip* as “clan” (2015: p.222).

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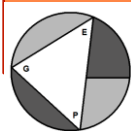
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