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Portrayals of Chechen Identity During the Second Chechen War

Desiree Dube

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Abstract:

It was 21 January 2000, only a few months into the Second Chechen War, when Vladimir Putin, acting president of the Russian Federation, stated that “neither today nor in the near future will the intensity of the information battle lessen, either inside the country or abroad.” Of central importance to this information battle was the fight to define Chechen identity. Throughout the Second Chechen War the Russian government, Chechen rebels, Chechen civilians, and journalists sought to define who Chechens were in order to further their own various goals. During the war, Chechens were labeled with many conflicting identities. They were alternately identified as dangerous criminals and terrorists, separatists, normal people, and helpless victims. I argue that the Russian government’s label of Chechens as dangerous won this war and had the greatest impact on the daily lives of Chechen civilians.

Introduction

It was January 2000, only a few months into the second Chechen war, when Vladimir Putin, acting president of the Russian Federation, stated that “neither today nor in the near future will the intensity of the information battle lessen, either inside the country or abroad.”¹ This information battle was of central importance during the second Chechen war as throughout the war, a battle of words was fought between the Russian government, Chechen rebels, Chechen civilians, and the media to portray who Chechens, as a people, were. Chechens were alternately portrayed as dangerous, separatists, normal, and helpless. I argue that the picture of Chechens as dangerous had the greatest impact and negatively affected how Chechens were viewed during the war.

The Russian Government’s Information Battle

It is necessary to situate portrayals of Chechen identity within the scope of the information battle conducted by the Russian government during the second Chechen War. This information battle consisted of many players, the most notable ones being the Russian government, the media, Chechen rebels, and Chechen non-combatants. It was launched by the Russian government in order to gain the support of Russian citizens for the second war in Chechnya. The government could not risk the war being portrayed in a manner that would boost support for the Chechen rebels or that would make the government or the military look bad. Because of this, the information battle largely consisted of the government seeking to control and filter all of the available information on the war. Their efforts often took the form of controlling media coverage of the war. Thus, journalists and human rights organizations faced many

¹ Vladimir Putin, “Opening Remarks at a Meeting of the Russian Interior Ministry’s Board,” *President of Russia*, January 21, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21505>.

obstacles in reporting on the war and often the only information available on events was what the Russian government allowed.

Russian and foreign journalists were often prevented from gathering information on the war and from reporting on it in an objective manner. They faced significant government pressure to report in a way that positively portrayed the Russian war effort. This is illustrated by Thomas de Waal's statement that

Russian journalists were routinely summoned for interviews in which they were reminded of their patriotic duty in reporting the 'anti-terrorist operation'. Strenuous efforts were made to keep foreign correspondents out of the combat zone altogether. Those who went there without proper accreditation risked being denied visas, while Moscow-based correspondents were called to the Foreign Ministry and reprimanded for their anti-Russian coverage.²

With obstacles such as these, it was difficult for journalists to get accurate information on what was happening in the war and to report unbiased facts to the Russian public.

De Waal illustrated this biased and incomplete coverage with his discussion of a massacre in Grozny's Central Market which had been caused by Russian missiles.³ This event was not covered objectively by most Russian media sources. For example pictures were not reported, there were denials that the event even occurred, and it was blamed on the Chechen rebels.⁴ Many Russian journalists did not or were not able to cover this event or the war objectively. Though some of this bias may have been due to patriotism, it is likely that many journalists knew that there would be consequences if they reported in a manner that blamed Russian forces and the government for its actions in Chechnya.

These consequences were exemplified by the firing of Leonid Parfyonov, a journalist

² Thomas de Waal, introduction to *A Dirty War*, translated by John Crowfoot, (London: The Harvill Press, 2001), xxvi.

³ *Ibid.*, xxx.

⁴ *Ibid.*

from NTV, after he aired an interview with a Chechen rebel leader's widow.⁵ It was widely speculated that the firing of Parfyonov was politically motivated.⁶ He was fired because of his coverage of the war and the Russian government. The article detailing this event also cited the takeover of NTV, which had once been an independent news source, by the government.⁷ The leader of NTV, Vladimir Gusinsky, was forced to flee Russia due to "fraud charges most observers said were meant as political punishment for NTV's sharp-edged coverage."⁸ The firing of Parfyonov and the takeover of NTV were two of many examples of the dangers of portraying the Russian government and its war effort in Chechnya in a bad light. Punishments such as these made it clear that negative coverage would not be tolerated unless it was aimed at the Chechen side.

Some of the broader effects of the information battle were illustrated by Rachel Denber with Human Rights Watch.⁹ Denber, in her discussion of the international response to the second war in Chechnya, detailed the obstacles the OSCE Assistance Group and Council of Europe representatives faced in the documentation of human rights abuses.¹⁰ She stated that the Russian government made such "prodigious efforts at presenting obstacles" that the OSCE Assistance Group faced lengthy delays in deploying to Chechnya after the start of the second war.¹¹ It took them more than a year to establish a presence.¹² Likewise representatives from the Council of

⁵ Alex Rodriguez, "Russia Sacks Top TV Journalist After Chechnya Interview: Kremlin Silences Media's Criticism," June 3, 2004, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2004-06-03/news/0406030372_1_leonid-parfyonov-ntv-vladimir-gusinsky.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rachel Denber, "Glad to be Deceived": The International Community and Chechnya," accessed April 19, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/wr2k4/download/7.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ibid., 8.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

Europe were unable to travel and investigate in Chechnya without restriction.¹³ Denber also stated that their reports “generally contained little information that could not be found in other sources and information on human rights abuses was often of a general nature.”¹⁴ Obstacles such as these greatly lessened the available knowledge on events and possible abuses during the war, the influence of the international community on the conduct of the war, and the degree to which international agencies were able to help Chechen non-combatants. The Russian government would not allow these agencies to have a role in reporting on the war because this would negatively impact how the war was viewed by the Russian public and the international community.

With such heavy handed government influence on media coverage of the war, much of the news coming out of Chechnya was biased towards the Russian side. The government wanted its story to be believed and was prepared to limit freedom of the press to do so. It was also prepared to go against international agencies and to interfere with their efforts to help civilians in order to preserve that image. Because of these things the Russian government’s portrayal of the war and Chechens had the most impact.

Chechens as Terrorists

An integral part of the government’s information battle against the Chechen rebels was its portrayal of them as international terrorists. Though terrorism was in fact used as a tactic of war by the Chechen rebels, this portrayal was partly motivated by the need of the government to justify a second invasion of Chechnya, to erode any potential support for the Chechen rebels, and to downplay the rebels’ separatist ambitions. Unfortunately, this label had other, more concrete

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 8-9.

consequences for Chechen non-combatants as they were often subject to gross human rights abuses committed by Russian forces. Strikingly, surveys show that knowledge of these abuses did not much affect Russian public opinion on the war and that instead, the government's manipulation and restriction of media was working to not only shield Russians from knowledge of the abuses but also to gain support for the fight against terrorism. Finally, the Chechen rebels often sought to refute the portrayal of their efforts as motivated by international terrorism and to instead emphasize their separatist aims.

The portrayal of the Chechen rebel movement as one of terrorism is not entirely undeserved, even if it fails to capture the true complexities of the rebel side. The rebels, having grown sufficiently desperate after suffering major defeats in the first Chechen war, turned more and more to using terrorist tactics. The first in a list of major attacks occurred in 1995 when forces led by Shamil Basayev attacked the Russian town of Budyonnovsk. Basayev's goals in this attack were to convince the Russian government to withdraw from Chechnya and to begin negotiations between the Russian and Chechen sides.¹⁵ His aims were met with success as Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomydrin agreed to halt Russian military actions in Chechnya and to begin negotiations if the hostages were released.¹⁶

Through developments such as these in the first Chechen war, the use of terrorism by the Chechen rebels was seen in a positive light in Chechnya.¹⁷ Though terrorism was and is against international law, after the first war it was seen as something heroic because it turned the tide of the war and, ultimately, won it for the Chechen side.¹⁸ According to Diane Sumner, after the

¹⁵ Diane Sumner, "Success of Terrorism in War: The Case of Chechnya," master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, 1999, <http://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/9039/successofterrori00sumn.pdf?sequence=1>, 35.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 60.

¹⁸ Ibid.

attack “Shamil Basayev, already previously renowned for his combat leadership skills, was elevated to hero status.”¹⁹ This and other attacks also served to demoralize Russian citizens and “eliminated popular support for Russia’s war effort.”²⁰ This demoralization and the brief cessation of hostilities agreed to after Budyonovsk also caused the Russian army to suffer setbacks in their war effort in Chechnya.²¹ Because the attack and its results were so successful, terrorism was deemed an effective tactic and was repeated throughout the first and second wars.²²

Importantly, one of the sparks for the second war was the bombing of apartment buildings in Moscow, Buynaksk, and Volgodonsk in September of 1999. These were purportedly committed by Chechen terrorists. However, it was widely suspected that the attacks were orchestrated by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) as a means to justify a new war. According to the French documentary, *The Assassination of Russia*, an attack in Ryazan was foiled and FSB agents were revealed to be the perpetrators.²³ It was later covered up as an FSB training exercise.²⁴ Though terrorist tactics were definitely used by the Chechen rebels during the first and second war, in this instance it may have been an effort by the Russian government to justify the second invasion of Chechnya and to begin to frame the war as one against terrorism.

After terrorist tactics were used by the Chechen side, the Russian government situated the Chechen war effort as part of a wider movement of international terrorism. It often emphasized the presence of foreign fighters, foreign support, and international connections to the Chechen rebels. This is illustrated by Vladimir Putin’s statement at the start of the second war that “They

¹⁹ Ibid., 38.

²⁰ Ibid., 51.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 60.

²³ Yuri Felshtinsky and Alexander Litvinenko, *The Assassination of Russia*, documentary, directed by Jean-Charles Deniau and Charles Gazelle (2002; London: Transparences Productions, 2011.), YouTube Video.

²⁴ Ibid.

have to understand that we are not fighting Chechen people, but international terrorism and the most violent form of ideological and religious extremism.”²⁵ With this Putin discouraged any sympathetic view of the Chechen resistance and justified the war as one against international terrorists rather than as a fight against separatism.

Unfortunately this picture of the war in Chechnya as a fight against terrorism had consequences for Chechen non-combatants. In a January 2000 interview with ORT Channel, Putin’s interviewer stated that “the generals made some political blunders, for example, when they branded all Chechens aged between 10 and 60 as suspected of terrorism.”²⁶ Putin replied that this was a necessary measure, if not the best way to find terrorists.²⁷ He stated that they were forced to use this broad label because of the constraints of the Russian Criminal Code: “If we could detain and arrest people not for two or three days as set out in the Russian Criminal Code, but for 10, 20, 30 or 60 days, many things would be different. This is the main reason, and it also explains why the statements made by our military are sometimes inaccurate.”²⁸ To further the war effort and the war against Chechen terrorism, he was willing to sacrifice Chechen non-combatants’ rights as Russian citizens. This measure was not in line with international methods of dealing with terrorism. For comparison one may examine the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) 2001 “Bucharest Plan of Action for Combating Terrorism” Clause 11 which states:

Participating States/Permanent Council/ODIHR/High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM)/Representative on Freedom of the Media: Will promote and enhance tolerance, co-existence and harmonious relations between ethnic, religious, linguistic and other groups as well as constructive co-operation among participating States in this regard. Will provide early warning of and appropriate responses to violence, intolerance, extremism and discrimination against these

²⁵ Vladimir Putin, “Interview with the RTR TV Channel,” *President of Russia*, January, 23, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24126>.

²⁶ Vladimir Putin, “Interview with ORT Channel,” *President of Russia*, January 15, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24377>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

groups and, at the same time, promote their respect for the rule of law, democratic values and individual freedoms. Will work to ensure that persons belonging to national minorities have the right freely to express, preserve and develop their ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity.²⁹

This clause outlined ways in which to prevent conditions favorable to the development of terrorism by emphasizing tolerance and respect for minority groups that live in OSCE member states such as the Russian Federation. The idea that all Chechens between the ages of 10 and 60 should be suspected of terrorism went directly against Clause 11 as it labeled almost all Chechens as terrorists and legitimized any mistreatment of and discrimination against Chechen non-combatants, potentially adding fuel to the fire and embittering more Chechen citizens against Russia.

Further going against international norms, Russia's general conduct of the war often victimized non-combatants. According to Rachel Denber with Human Rights Watch

Five months of indiscriminate bombing and shelling in 1999 and early 2000 resulted in thousands of civilian deaths. Three massacres, which followed combat operations, took the lives of at least 130 people ... Russian forces arbitrarily detain those allegedly suspected of being, or collaborating with, rebel fighters and torture them in custody to secure confessions or testimony. In some cases, the corpses of those last seen in Russian custody were subsequently found, bearing marks of torture and summary execution, in dumping grounds or unmarked graves. More often, those last seen in custody are simply never seen again—they have been forcibly disappeared.³⁰

As Denber stated, the victimization of non-combatants was prevalent in the second war. Much of this violence against civilians may have been due to the impunity with which Russian forces could commit crimes against them. In April 2001 the Russian government illustrated this when it “made available a list of criminal investigations related to the Chechnya conflict.”³¹ Denber stated that this list made it clear that many cases were not being investigated or prosecuted in

²⁹ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, “The Bucharest Plan of Action for combating terrorism,” December 4, 2001, <http://www.osce.org/atu/42524>.

³⁰ Rachel Denber, “‘Glad to be Deceived’: The International Community and Chechnya,” 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

court and that the government was not investigating accusations of torture.³² Though this impunity was no doubt a factor, when confronted with such violence against innocent civilians, one must also consider other possible motivations and means of rationalizing the violence. It is likely that the label of nearly all Chechen non-combatants as terrorists had some impact in the process of normalizing violence against civilians as it legitimized treating them all as potential terrorists and rebels even if there was no definitive proof.

Further illustrating the real-life impacts of this portrayal of the Chechen war effort were the many human rights abuses committed by Russian forces during the second war. Human Rights Watch outlined many instances in which Chechen non-combatants were “disappeared” after Russian forces conducted “sweep operations” in Chechnya to confiscate weapons and to find “those believed to be collaborating with Chechen rebels.”³³ In one instance two men were walking back to their village when they were told that a sweep was occurring there.³⁴ The two men waited outside the village while the sweep went on and were detained when two military vehicles passed by their location.³⁵ Witnesses stated that “ten or twelve persons in camouflage uniforms seized them by the arms and threw them into one of the APCs” and that “the men in uniform did not ask any questions and did not check the identity papers of the young men.”³⁶ Later their dead bodies were discovered in a quarry near the village.³⁷ In another instance, a Chechen rebel ran into a courtyard and was shot dead by soldiers.³⁸ Two young Chechen men were detained simply for living and being in the courtyard.³⁹ The parents of the two men later

³² Ibid.

³³ “Detention and ‘Disappearance’” in *The “Dirty War” in Chechnya: Forced Disappearances, Torture, and Summary Executions*, Human Rights Watch, March 2001, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/chechnya/>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

saw a news recording which pictured one of their sons dead and labelled as a Chechen commander.⁴⁰ When the parents pressured the local military for answers regarding their sons' whereabouts, they were given little information.⁴¹ Eventually it was revealed through the bribery of a military office that both of their sons had been killed and buried in unmarked graves.⁴² It is clear from these examples and the many others detailed in the Human Rights Watch report that the guilt of Chechen men of military age was assumed because of the simple fact that they were Chechen men of military age.

The label of the Chechen rebel movement as terrorist in nature and the inclusion of almost all Chechens as suspect of terrorism may have greatly impacted Russian conduct of the war. The two situations cited above were by no means isolated incidents. Discrimination against and the brutal treatment of non-combatants was prevalent. Interestingly however, information on these human rights abuses did not much affect Russian public support for the war in Chechnya. Instead, people were much more concerned about the threats of terrorism and separatism. In a survey representative of Russian public opinion, only 4% of respondents listed "Shame that our troops violate human rights and international norms" as something they felt when asked about "reports about the activities of federal forces in Chechnya during the last several months."⁴³ People were much more concerned with the number of Russian casualties, the cost of the war, and the inability of Russian troops to quell the rebels.⁴⁴ Notably, 12% felt "Pride that Russia is fighting terrorism."⁴⁵ Though this number is small, it is still three times the number of Russians concerned about human rights abuses. In the same survey when participants were asked "How

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Theodore P. Gerber and Sarah E. Mendelson, "How Russians Think about Chechnya," PONARS Policy Memo No. 243, January 2002, http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/pm_0243.pdf, 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

important are the following to your assessment of what's happening in Chechnya," only 16% said very and 32% said somewhat for the category of "Reports of human rights/international norms violations by our troops."⁴⁶ In contrast, when responding to "The necessity of the struggle against terrorism," 65% said very and 28% said somewhat.⁴⁷ Taken together this data shows that opposition to the war on the grounds of human rights abuses and the victimization of Chechen non-combatants had much less powerful an impact on the Russian public than the Russian government's depiction of Chechens and the aims of the war.⁴⁸ The authors of the survey concluded "that the government's efforts to define the conflict in terms of national security (the war on terrorism, protecting Russia's territorial integrity, supporting troops) are not only effective, but also produce the intended result: this framing increases support for military action."⁴⁹ The information battle was having the desired impact.

After the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States Putin further attempted to frame the Chechen conflict as an extension of international terrorism as he sought to situate it within the War on Terror. In a speech on the one year anniversary of the attacks in the United States, Putin highlighted Shamil Basayev's links to al-Qaeda.⁵⁰ He stated that "For a long time the source of extremism and terrorism in our country has been the Chechen Republic where international terrorist organizations, including notorious al-Qaeda, unfolded their activities on a full scale."⁵¹ This effort to situate Chechnya as a part of international terrorism helped create a negative image of Chechnya and Chechens in the West.

This is highlighted by the lack of any significant international reproach of Russia for its

⁴⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁵⁰ Vladimir Putin, "Speech at a Meeting of the Heads of Security and Military Agencies," *President of Russia*, September 11, 2002, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2002/09/11/0000_type82912type82913_151644.shtml.

⁵¹ Ibid.

actions in Chechnya after 2001.⁵² After 2001 international response consisted of actions such as the OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya failing to reestablish its presence in Chechnya after the Russian government discontinued its mandate and sought to strip it of its “human rights and political dimensions,” a failed European Union (EU) resolution, and a failed resolution in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) “to postpone a constitutional referendum” in Chechnya due to “escalating conflict and persistence of human rights abuses and a poor security environment.”⁵³ Though this weak international response to events in Chechnya was prevalent throughout the war, Chechnya’s situation within the War on Terror seems to have solidified it.

Also displaying the success of Russia’s approach to portraying the second Chechen war as one against terrorism was the evolution of the views of President George W. Bush on Russia and the war. In a February 2000 interview Jim Lehrer requested Bush’s response to the fact that “On Chechnya and Russia the U.S. and the rest of the western world has been raising Cain with Russia from the beginning, saying ‘You are killing innocent civilians.’ The Russians have said essentially ‘We’re fighting terrorism, and, by the way, mind your own business.’ What else—what else, if anything, could be done by the United States?” Bush responded by suggesting cuts to the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) aid to Russia “until they heard the message loud and clear” and stated that “Putin ... has come to power as a result of Chechnya” and by “handling the Chechnya situation in a way that’s not acceptable to peaceful nations.”⁵⁴

One may compare this somewhat hard stance on the issue of human rights abuses in Chechnya to his statement in November 2001, that “the challenge of terrorism makes our close

⁵² Rachel Denber, “‘Glad to be Deceived’: The International Community and Chechnya,” 1-2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁴ George W. Bush, interview by Jim Lehrer, *PBS News Hour*, February 16, 2000, transcript, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/politics-jan-june00-bush_02-16/.

cooperation on all issues even more urgent. Russia and America share the same threat and the same resolve. We will fight and defeat terrorist networks wherever they exist”⁵⁵ and that the two countries needed to “develop a new strategic framework that enables both of us to meet the true threats of the twenty-first century as partners and friends, not as adversaries.”⁵⁶ And further with direct regard to Chechnya that “We are encouraged by President Putin’s commitment to a political dialogue in Chechnya.”⁵⁷ Bush’s approach to the Chechnya question changed dramatically after it was situated as part of the fight against international terrorism.

Rebel Response to Portrayals of them as International Terrorists

Interestingly, Chechen rebels responded directly to the government’s portrayal of them as international terrorists when they sought to reclaim the label. Examining a video released by Basayev, a Western journalist stated that

Shamil Basayev, apparently seeking to make a claim of containing the long-simmering war, pledged to refrain from terrorist acts in other nations. ‘We are not planning any attacks outside Russia, even though we have the capability to do so,’ he said ... ‘We will not even target Russian officials who committed massacres against the Chechen people if they are in foreign countries.’⁵⁸

With this statement, Basayev sought to show that the Chechen fighters could not be identified as international terrorists because they were not fighting an international war. Later in the article, the Western journalist quoted Basayev’s assertion that “we are not planning any operations in foreign countries ... Unlike the Russians who assassinated our former leader in Qatar.”⁵⁹ Basayev was redirecting the label of international terrorist and applying it to the Russian

⁵⁵ George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, “The President’s News Conference With President Vladimir Putin of Russia,” (news conference, White House, Washington D.C., November 13, 2001), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/youtubeclip.php?clipid=64429&admin=43>, 0:49

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:30.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 4:50.

⁵⁸ C.J. Chivers, “Rebel Leader of Chechens Resurfaces on Videotape,” *New York Times*, July 4, 2004. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/04/world/rebel-leader-of-chechens-resurfaces-on-videotape.html>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

government. He fully admitted to using terrorist tactics, but also accused Russia of using those same tactics.

The Criminalization of Chechens

As with the portrayal of the Chechen rebels as terrorists, the portrayal of the rebels as criminals was not entirely unwarranted. Crime was quite prevalent in Chechnya after the first war. Accordingly, the Russian government capitalized on this and framed the war in Chechnya as one meant to fight against crime. This had consequences for Chechen civilians, even those who took no part in crime. Ironically, this war against crime also had the effect of creating more crime in Chechnya and Russia as it allowed the perpetuation of crime in Chechnya and allowed Russian forces who had committed human rights abuses with impunity to return to their jobs far more likely to commit those same crimes against Russian civilians.

After the first Chechen war, Chechnya was faced with many serious problems, one of which was the rampant nature of crime. According to James Hughes, “Maskhadov’s government simply did not have the capacity to manage these challenges” of “criminality in Chechnya, in particular ... hostage-taking,” and of reigning in the “many armed groups in Chechnya.”⁶⁰ Hostage-taking, ransoming, and assassination had become useful sources of income and also served as “retaliation and exchange for the many hundreds of Chechens who were detained by Russia in ‘filtration’ camps.”⁶¹ Hughes cited a total number of 506 hostage-taking cases.⁶² This lends credibility to one BBC journalist’s statement in 1999 that “Chechnya has earned itself the

⁶⁰ James Hughes, *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 2007), 96.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

unenviable label of kidnap capital of the world.”⁶³ Indeed, lawlessness in Chechnya continued to the point that one warlord, Basayev, was able to raise an army and invade the neighboring republic of Dagestan. This was a spark for the start of the second Chechen war.

As it was one of the sparks for the second war, it makes sense that crime in Chechnya was often used to justify a second invasion. Hughes outlines how Putin’s security service background may have contributed to his approach to problem-solving in Chechnya.⁶⁴ He stated that

Putin would have been party to the argument of the ‘power ministries,’ best exemplified publicly by former minister of defense Kulikov, which repeated the mantra-like formula that Chechnya was ungovernable, a ‘bandit’ and ‘terrorist’ state, increasingly dominated by fanatical Wahhabis and intent on wider destabilization in the North Caucasus ... According to this script, Russia’s de facto recognition of independence for Chechnya only served to promote further chaos and the growth of ‘terrorism.’⁶⁵

Indeed, this was the course that Putin’s rhetoric regarding crime in Chechnya took. In his 2000 “Open Letter to Voters,” Putin portrayed Chechnya as a haven for criminals.⁶⁶ He stated that “A whole constituent republic of the Russian Federation, Chechnya, was taken over by the criminal world and turned into its fortress.”⁶⁷ He then asserted that because of Russia’s successes in the war, criminals “can no longer look to assistance from or find shelter in Chechnya. A terrible blow has been dealt to the world of bandits.”⁶⁸ In this “Open Letter” Putin treated the war in Chechnya as part of his war on crime in Russia and made Chechnya appear as one of the chief sources of criminality in Russia.⁶⁹ Notably, this statement also failed to distinguish between Chechen civilians and criminals. Because he said that criminals found refuge in Chechnya, Putin

⁶³ “Russian Deadline Over Chechen Kidnap,” *BBC*, March 7, 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/292251.stm>.

⁶⁴ James Hughes, *Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad*, 107.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Vladimir Putin, “Open Letter to Voters,” *President of Russia*, February 25, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/statements/24144>.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

made it seem as if all Chechens were susceptible to and welcoming of criminal activity.

Illustrating the impact of the portrayal of Chechnya as a criminal nation on average Chechen civilians was Politkovskaya's story of Arslan Gatiev, a man from Dagestan who was living in Moscow at the start of the second war.⁷⁰ When re-registering his documents, he was detained by the police and heroin was planted on his person.⁷¹ One of the officers informed him that "We have a slogan now: 'Chechnya for the Chechens.' Go back to your own country."⁷² The policemen wished to detain Chechens and stated that "while we're at war with Chechnya, we must put you all in prison."⁷³ Though Arslan had done nothing wrong, he was labeled a criminal and put in prison for simply being from the North Caucasus. He wasn't even Chechen, but felt the impact of this label.

A child's essay on their homeland recorded by Politkovskaya also reveals the impact that criminalization had on Chechen civilians.⁷⁴ The child stated that "The soldiers from Russia are killing children, our sisters and brothers. They say they are bandits. But they are not bandits, they are defending the homeland."⁷⁵ This not only reveals the child's perception of the war as one against a Russian invader but also highlights the injustice the child feels at the Russian forces' excuses for victimizing non-combatants. It is clear that even children felt the burden of this label and its consequences.

Ironically, while purporting to be countering criminality in the whole of Russia by pursuing war in Chechnya, by failing to pursue violations of human rights by Russian forces in Chechnya, Russia not only embittered more Chechens against Russia, but also allowed the "Tens

⁷⁰ Anna Politkovskaya, trans. John Crowfoot, *A Dirty War*, (London: The Harvill Press, 2001), 52.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

of thousands of police and security forces” who “have done tours of duty in Chechnya” to return home unpunished and more likely to mistreat Russian civilians in police custody.⁷⁶ This has been dubbed Chechen syndrome a phenomenon “among police who served in Chechnya—a particular pattern of physical abuse and other dehumanizing treatment of people in custody.”⁷⁷ Denber stated that this Chechen syndrome was “undermining efforts to promote the rule of law in Russia’s criminal justice system.”⁷⁸ Though the Russian government portrayed its efforts in Chechnya as a war against crime, the actual effects of the war were just the opposite. The experience of law enforcement officers who fought in Chechnya, having been allowed to commit human rights abuses with impunity, may have caused them to believe it was acceptable to commit those crimes in Russia.

Denber’s assertions are supported by an article by Radio Free Europe which quotes Sergei Yushenkov as saying that “‘Everybody [serving in the war] understands that unlawful actions are allowed in Chechnya, and they can’t understand why this sort of behavior should be forbidden here [in Moscow, or] in other Russian cities and villages.’”⁷⁹ The brutal war in Chechnya and the lack of justice and proper conduct during it set a dangerous precedent for the Russian security forces that served there.

Similarly, a full scale war and the devastation of Chechnya were not the best methods to combat crime there. If anything, it allowed for the perpetuation of crime. In an interview with Politkovskaya, Said Magomedov, head of the trade union committee at a factory in Grozny, stated that “the authorities don’t realize that without jobs there’s no way of saving Chechnya.

⁷⁶ Rachel Denber, “‘Glad to be Deceived’: The International Community and Chechnya,” 3.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Valentinas Mite, “Russia: Police Who Serve in Chechnya Bring Trauma of War Back Home,” *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, June 27, 2002, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1100113.html>.

The plant must work and that will be the best cure for banditry.”⁸⁰ He realized that the war in Chechnya had done nothing to stymie crime rates and that without the presence of legitimate sources of income, the prevalence of crime would never decrease and lives would never return to normal.

Chechens as Separatists

Throughout the second Chechen war many journalists portrayed the Chechen fighters as separatists. The Chechen fighters themselves almost always cited their separatist credentials and aspirations. Conversely, the Russian government categorically denied that the rebel movement was one of separatism and instead stated that it was only a clever front for international terrorism.

Many Western journalists seem to have striven for neutrality in their discussions of the second Chechen war and may consequently have portrayed the Chechen rebels as separatists. One example of this is a June 2001 article in *The Washington Post* which focused on the lives of civilians during the conflict. This focus may have put the journalist directly opposed to the Russian government’s labels of Chechens as terrorists and criminals. She quotes Stanislav Ilyasov, Chechnya’s prime minister, as referring to the rebels as “armed criminals in camouflage and masks.”⁸¹ She then goes on to describe the consequences of these labels by stating that “Chechen civilians... are subject to roundups by Russian troops and risk summary execution if they cannot convince them they are not rebels. Teachers complain that schoolboys can't even

⁸⁰ Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War*, 214.

⁸¹ Sharon LaFraniere, “Grozny Experiences Peace in Name Only; Despite Russian Assurance of Safety, Chechen Capital Lives under Siege,” *The Washington Post*, June 25, 2001, A01, http://go.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.utk.edu:90/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA75814091&v=2.1&u=tel_a_utl&it=r&p=AO NE&sw=w&asid=49a424ffa4feabcdbeb8819fd786c85b.

come to class without fear of arrest.”⁸² This may be the reason that throughout the article the journalist only referred to the Chechen fighters as “secessionist rebels”, “guerrillas”, “militants”, and “rebels.”⁸³ Instead of reinforcing the negative labels put forth by the Russian government, the journalist chose to use the more neutral label of the rebels as separatists.

Another example of this is a 2003 article in *The Times* which labeled the Chechen fighters as “rebels”, “militants”, and “separatists.”⁸⁴ These labels seemed intentional as the article discussed several different terrorist attacks but never referred to the Chechen rebels as terrorists. Interestingly, the journalist also never called the Moscow Theater attack a terrorist attack, though it is commonly referred to as one. He only referred to it as the “theatre siege in Moscow last year” and “the storming of the theatre”.⁸⁵ With this and his neutral labels of the Chechen fighters, the journalist seemed to intentionally emphasize the separatist nature of the Chechen forces rather than their use of terrorist tactics. Though this and the article mentioned above represent only two examples of journalists referring to the rebel movement as one of separatism, there are many more instances of this and it seemed to be one of the most common ways of referring to the rebels.

The rhetoric of journalists was in line with what many Chechen fighters thought of themselves and their goals. This is evidenced by Politkovskaya’s interview with Lema and Ruslan, two Chechen fighters. This interview revealed what some Chechen fighters thought about their role in the war and their motivations for fighting. Lema stated that “I am liberating my country from enemies and infidels. I see Chechnya as a free Islamic republic, and want it to

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Robin Shepherd, "Chechen Jailed for Moscow Siege Role; Russia," *The Times (London, England)*, June 21, 2003, 19.
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA103893609&v=2.1&u=tel_a_utl&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w&asid=18447f6a61d4ee8d249b61fc8b720043.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

become one.”⁸⁶ With this statement he affirmed that he saw himself as a separatist and a defender of his nation against a Russian invader.

Conversely, the Russian government almost always framed the rebels’ claims of separatism as a lie meant to gain the support of the West. Putin stated in a January 2000 interview with *RTR TV Channel* that “they disguise their ambitious terrorist plans under the cover of a fight for national independence.”⁸⁷ In this quote Putin refuted the rebels’ and media’s assertions that the Chechen rebels were separatists. He did this to justify the war and delegitimize the rebels. By framing them as criminals and terrorists rather than as separatists, the government was also able to fight back at any international support for the rebels.

Chechens as Normal People

Chechen citizens, the Western media, and the Russian government have all at times and for various reasons tried to portray Chechens as normal people. These definitions of “normal” differ greatly and could obscure what Chechens might believe to be a normal Chechen identity. Chechens and Western media tried to make Chechens appear as a people who only wished for peace, while the Russian government tended to define Chechen normality by willingness to collaborate with the Russian government’s plans for Chechnya.

Disappointingly, Chechen sources such as autobiographies and journals are scant. Frequently, the only instances of Chechen voice that can be found are in the newspaper articles and books of Western and Russian journalists. Thus, my discussion of Chechen sources is intertwined with that of Western media sources. Though problematic, because the Chechen voice is filtered through another source with its own motives and biases, these sources still highlight

⁸⁶ Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War*, 167.

⁸⁷ Vladimir Putin, interview by Nikolai Svanidze, “Interview with the RTR TV Channel.”

what Chechen civilians might have experienced and show how they might have wished to be portrayed.

One such source is a 2001 article which emphasized the impact of the war on Chechen civilians.⁸⁸ By choosing to focus on the fear and danger present in the daily lives of Chechen civilians, the journalist presented Chechens as a people who only wished for peace. This was evidenced by an interview with Marian Iskhahov who stated that "“Our biggest need is that this war is over. We will be able to live ...We just want this to stop.””⁸⁹ With this article, the author showed that Chechens only wanted the peace and safety required to carry on their lives as normal human beings.

This need for normality was also highlighted by Politkovskaya’s interview with a steel worker who told her “I want to make steel, like I’ve been doing for the last 25 years. Tell that to Moscow. I’m no bandit. There’s nothing I want apart from to make steel again, and then go home, tired after a day’s work.”⁹⁰ He wanted the world to know that he was just a normal person who wanted to live a normal life.

The Russian government took a very different approach to portraying Chechen normality. In a 2004 discussion of the assassination of Akhmat Kadyrov, Putin asserted that “In everything he [Kadyrov] did he showed in the most convincing fashion that there can be no equating an entire people with bandits and terrorists.”⁹¹ This distinction between the rebels and civilians is interesting because Akhmat Kadyrov was not only an ex-rebel leader but also a person who rose to power in the new Chechen government through collaboration with Russia. This shows that

⁸⁸ Sharon LaFraniere, “Grozny Experiences Peace in Name Only; Despite Russian Assurance of Safety, Chechen Capital Lives under Siege.”

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War*, 214.

⁹¹ Vladimir Putin, “Statement at a Meeting with Ramzan Kadyrov,” *Russian Presidential Executive Office*, May 9, 2004, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22454>.

anyone who cooperated with the Russian forces and government was viewed as an upstanding, normal citizen and that anyone who did not risked being branded as “bandits and terrorists.”⁹² With this statement, Putin asserted that only those Chechens willing to collaborate with the new regime would be considered normal.

Chechens as Helpless

The Russian government also often stated that Chechen civilians were being harmed by the criminal and extremist nature of the Chechen government and rebels in order to justify the war. In January 2000, Putin justified intervention in Chechnya as the liberation of the Chechen people.⁹³ He did this by asserting that Chechens lived under constant fear of the rebels and the Chechen government.⁹⁴ Putin stated that Russia, “upon the completion of the main or armed stage of the operation, will be tasked with restoring peaceful life step by step, and most important of all, to free people from the fear in which they have lived for many years.”⁹⁵ Likewise, Putin suggested that when Western representatives “go to the scene and meet the local population, when they have a better idea of what is going on ... change their opinion about the essence of these events.”⁹⁶ Here, Putin was saying that Chechen civilians needed the war and that if only one spoke to a Chechen civilian, one would be impressed by their support for the war.⁹⁷ Similarly, in a February 2000 speech, Putin proclaimed that “our sacred duty is to help them regain their statehood and restore order in their land.”⁹⁸ This meant that not only were Chechens

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Vladimir Putin, “Opening remarks at a meeting of the Russian Interior Ministry’s Board.”

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Vladimir Putin, by Nikolai Svanidze, “Interview with the RTR TV Channel.”

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Vladimir Putin, “Opening Speech at a Security Council Meeting on the North Caucasian Counter-Terrorist Operation and Measures to Help Chechnya’s Transition to Peacetime,” *President of Russia*, February 25, 2000, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24143>.

the helpless victims of their government, but that they were dependent on Russia to save them from their plight. This label of helplessness was a clear attempt to justify the Russian invasion of Chechnya.

Similarly, in his interview with Politkovskaya, Akhmat Kadyrov stated that as head of a provisional Chechen government appointed by Putin his “task is to save the Chechen nation from the path that it has repeatedly been deceived into following for the last 300-400 years.”⁹⁹ Here Kadyrov highlighted international ties to Chechen rebel movements, those in the past and current ones, and said that though he himself had been deceived into following those ways, he had realized the right path—to be part of Russia—for the Chechen people and would steer them in that direction.¹⁰⁰ This statement sought to reinforce the conception of the Chechen people as helpless victims of the intrigues of international terrorists that needed to be saved by the Russian government and its war in Chechnya.

These assertions of Chechen helplessness and the necessity of war become absurd when one considers that the Russian government was suggesting brutal, devastating warfare as the only solution to the criminalization and radicalization that had occurred in Chechnya. When this is taken into consideration, it is clear that this label was only used to justify a second invasion of Chechnya and to gain popular support for the war.

Conclusions:

The information battle made it so that any opposition to the government’s portrayal of Chechens and the war in Chechnya such as illustrations of human rights abuses and the portrayal of Chechens as normal Russian citizens and as people who just wanted peace had very little

⁹⁹ Anna Politkovskaya, *A Dirty War*, 192-193.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

impact on the Russian public support for the war. The story put forth by the government that the Chechen rebels were dangerous criminals and terrorists that needed to be defeated at all costs was accepted. Likewise, the rebels' claims to separatism did nothing to lessen the ire against them and only fueled fears people had about the possible disintegration of the Russian Federation. The impact of this portrayal of the war on Chechen non-combatants was overwhelmingly negative. It created a stigma against Chechen citizens and allowed Russian forces in Chechnya to victimize Chechen non-combatants with impunity. There is no doubt that the Russian government won the information battle.

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