

CULTURE · POLITICS · TECHNOLOGY Stream

A Graduate Journal of Communication • Spring 2009 • 2(1) • ISSN 1916-5897 • www.streamjournal.org

Stream: Culture/Politics/Technology is a peer-reviewed, open-access e-journal published by the Communication Graduate Student Caucus at Simon Fraser University.

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Memories, Identity and Mother Russia: A Study of the Russian-Chechen Conflict

Chelsea Sambells

The present Russian-Chechnya conflicts are based upon a long history of colonization and domination, inflicted upon the Chechen people by the Tsarist, Soviet and modern Russian Federation governments, all of which have denied Chechnya of political and religious autonomy. In 1944, the Stalinist regime, in an attempt to exert its power and control, deported and exiled half a million Chechens. These deportations inflicted a deep wound upon the collective memory of the Chechen people. Since 1944, the Russian Federation has repeatedly failed to acknowledge the oppression and brutality of the deportations and consequent exile (Atrokhov, 1999). Although the historic conflict relies upon an underlying mentality of “us” versus “them,” this assumption does not serve as the core identity marker of Chechen identity. Instead, Chechnya’s national identity today is primarily grounded upon the collective memories of the 1944 deportations (Williams, 2000). This suggests that when an ethnic group has experienced genocide and deportation, their historic memories will serve a greater role in collective identity construction than any other relationship they have with that adversary. This research will further suggest that in order to construct a positive relationship between Russia and Chechnya today, the Russian government must directly acknowledge responsibility for the 1944 deportations, which will both help to legitimize Chechen victimization and recognize Russia as a perpetrator of ethnic discrimination. The Russian-Chechen conflict is a significant area of research, as it exemplifies the importance of communication in validating victims’ identities in war, which is beneficial to peace and a nation’s foreign policy.

Chechnya’s collective history

Nicholas Machiavelli once wrote in his work, *The Prince* (1999):

Indeed, there is no surer way of keeping possession than by devastation. Whoever becomes the master of a city accustomed to freedom, and does not destroy it, may expect to be destroyed himself; because, when there is a rebellion, such a city justifies itself by calling on the name of liberty and its ancient institutions, never forgotten despite the passing of time and the benefits received from the new ruler. (p. 21)



Machiavelli's words suggest that a nation that desires to rule another's lands must do so through total devastation and destruction. If a nation does *not* break the people, the land and the spirit of that nation, then the attempts to colonize and subordinate an entire nation will never be forgotten by those peoples. These sentiments are manifested within the example of the Russian-Chechen conflicts. The past and present Russian governments have never fully succeeded at totally destroying the Chechen people, while the Chechen people have unified and rallied around those past grievances that are remembered within their collective history.

In 1783, Tsar Nicholas II turned the Russian troops that had just defeated Napoleon's armies towards Chechnya. The Tsar claimed to be protecting Russian Christians from warring Muslim bandits, but it is well known that the Chechen land would serve as a strategic "buffer between Russia and neighboring Islamic territories" (Atrokhov, 1999, p. 369). Unlike other colonizing nations that desired economic resources and capital from their colonies (i.e. Cote D'Ivoire), Chechnya was seen as a territory that would help to relieve and absorb the fear of the Eastern religions. In 1816–1826, General Aleksei Ermolov ruled Chechnya and relocated many Chechens, while simultaneously populating Chechnya with Cossacks (Atrokhov, 1999). After many oppressive years of rule the Russians withdrew, as Russia's attention was diverted towards other conflicts, leaving Chechnya in a relative autonomy (Atrokhov, 1999).

During the Russian Revolution of 1917–1919, both the Red and White armies sought Chechnya as their prize, although neither army could defeat the natives' strong resistance (Atrokhov, 1999). After the formation of the Soviet Socialist government, Chechnya was promised full autonomy. However, the Soviet government only merged Chechnya with neighboring Ingushetia and never fulfilled the promised independence (Atrokhov, 1999).

When Joseph Stalin came to power, he promised to solve the "Chechen problem" by finishing the task begun by the Tsar a century earlier. On February 23rd, 1944, divisions of the Soviet government (similar to the KGB) "surrounded all Chechen villages and brutally herded the entire Chechen population on to cattle cars... (destined for) the plains of Kazakhstan, the taiga of Siberia and the mountains of Kyrgyzstan" (Williams, 2000, pp. 108–109). One particular village, by the name of Khaibakh, was one of the first to be attacked by the Soviet officers. The personal narratives describe that the soldiers gave them only ten to fifteen minutes to go to the nearby train station; anyone who resisted, escaped or misunderstood was shot (Williams, 2000). Possessions, from household items to cattle, were confiscated, giving incentive to soldiers to "prevent deportees from bringing their possessions with them to places of exile" (Williams, 2000, p. 110). The deportations were

compared with the Nazi trains to Poland, when Jews were shipped to concentration camps. “Thousands of Chechen mountaineers died on the sealed carts due to lack of water and food, poor sanitary conditions and trauma” (Williams, 2000, p. 104). Chechens, along with other ethnic “undesirables,” such as the Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, Karachais, and Balkars, were eradicated from the USSR’s ethnic map (Williams, 2000). In 1946, the government officially charged those in exile with conspiring with German officers, although German troops “never came within fifty miles of the region” (Atrokhov, 1999, p. 371).

The forced exile was incredibly detrimental to the mental and physical well-being of the Chechen people. Within the first five years, over a quarter of the Chechen population perished (Atrokhov, 1999). Those in exile were forced, under the supervision and brutalization of camp commanders, to spend their time in positions of hard labour, such as the building of railroads in Siberia (Williams, 2000). During the exile years, Chechens grew a strong distrust of the Soviet system. They were not allowed to leave their “special settlement” areas to search for lost family and friends and those who did were sentenced to five years in forced labour camps (Williams, 2000). However, these experiences did not break the spirit of the Chechen people. One Soviet nationalist, after observing the prison camps, wrote of the Chechens: “Only one nation refused to accept the psychology of submission...no Chechen ever tried to be of service or to please the authorities” (Williams, 2000, p. 114).

Meanwhile, in the Chechen territory, a permanent Soviet administration was established to cleanse the territory of the Chechen inhabitation (Williams, 2000). During this time, mosques were destroyed, Chechen literature was burned and the Chechen graveyards were desecrated (Williams, 2000). Especially important were the “Russification” of Chechen town names and the repopulation of the territory with a nationality called “Laks” (Williams, 2000). Thus, when the Chechens returned from exile after Khrushchev had made a “secret” speech to the Twentieth Party Congress, denouncing Stalin’s treatment of the Chechens and Ingush, the Chechens had to fight both the Soviet infrastructure, as well as the new populations who inhabited the region (Atrokhov, 1999). (It is important to note that Khrushchev’s “secret” speech was, in fact, secret. It was not a national address or an apology, but rather a removal of the charges of treason laid against Chechens in 1944 for conspiring with German troops [Williams, 2000]).

From 1957 until the fall of the USSR in 1991, Chechen hostilities remained at bay. The fall of the USSR brought about a renewed sense of hope for Chechen independence, since the new Russian Federation was both unstable and conflict-ridden during the early 1990s. During this time, strong separatist movements began to emerge and Dzhokar Dudaev was elected

as chairman of the All-National Congress of the Chechen People (ANCCP) (Atrokhov, 1999). An attempted coup in Moscow and the proclamation of Chechnya as an independent state spurred Boris Yeltsin into declaring that Russia was in a state of emergency (Atrokhov, 1999). The Russian Parliament voted to conduct negotiations with Dudaev, which were fruitless because Russia would not negotiate Chechnya's independence and a consequent stalemate occurred from 1992-1993 (Atrokhov, 1999). In 1994, the Russian government supported Dudaev's opposition parties and invaded Grozny, the capital of Chechnya in November (Atrokhov, 1999). Due to poor preparation and overconfidence, 90,000 Russian troops were outmaneuvered by only 1,600–1,800 Chechen guerrillas for two long years (Kramer, 2005).

The Khasavyurt Accords, signed in 1996 between Russia and Chechnya, were the first attempt at peace negotiations. Unfortunately, vague terminology and an “unamendable Russian constitution” resulted in the failure to negotiate any form of autonomous state (Atrokhov, 1999, p. 384). In August 1999, a series of events, beginning with a deadly incursion by Islamic extremists from Chechnya to Dagestan, created a large-scale resumption of fighting between Russian forces and Chechen guerrillas. This still continues today (Kramer, 2005). Most casualties from these wars are primarily civilians, estimated at around 300,000 since 1999 (Kramer, 2005). The detrimental effects of these wars are insurmountable, affecting the basic necessities of hundreds of thousands of individuals. Unfortunately, Russia and Chechnya are no closer to solving this conflict, since the Russian government has not openly accepted responsibility for the historical grievances of the Chechen people. As Machiavelli stated, a nation that is still unified and not entirely broken by their “rulers” will never forget the past (1999).

The “us versus them” mentality and the “trump” of victimization

Since 1783, Russia has attacked and continually warred with Chechnya. Although the origins of these conflicts are found in the Tsarist desire for a “buffer” territory, it is important to acknowledge that Chechnya always formed group cohesion and solidarity through war with their principal enemy: Russia. This antithetical relationship with Russia grants Chechnya a solid foundation for establishing a consistent group identity.

Edward Said and some aspects of post-colonial theory investigate this opposing relationship between Russia and Chechnya. The notion of the “West” and the “Rest,” whereby a hegemonic entity exerts power over its weaker opposition, is claimed to have an inevitable relationship (Traicher, 2005). Russia might be considered the “West,” as the major religion is Christian and Russia carries a powerful position in the global economy and international communities. Chechnya, however, could be considered the “East,”

as the major religion is Islam, and Chechnya has been subordinated to the Western powers, with no international recognition or autonomy of its own. This division between “East” and “West” is inevitably destined for conflict, which can only result in disaster (Treacher, 2005). These perspectives on the “other” act as a reference point of self-identification, since both sides will always struggle to place self and other in a difference/similarity spectrum (Treacher, 2005). Said warns that “we are all subject and object to one another’s subject and object” (Treacher, 2005, p. 384). Obviously, this aspect of postcolonial theory applies to the Russian-Chechen conflicts, as both define themselves in opposition to the other (Williams, 2000).

While the “us” versus “them” mentality underlies Chechen identity, it does not serve as the core identity marker. Instead the experience of the 1944 deportations, immortalized within the memories of Chechen elders and passed down to new generations, has become the focal point in any discussion about present-day Chechen identity. The belief that communal histories can affect the identity of nations has been studied in other contexts. The most obvious example would be that of the post-Holocaust Jews of Israel whose memories of a tragic past have shaped their identity. Vamik Volkhan argues that when a group cannot communally mourn or reverse a traumatic event, overcome with humiliation of this victimization or retaliate for it, it passes on this task to the next generation (Williams, 2000).

Although the deportations and consequent exile were incredibly detrimental to the Chechen people, both experiences brought about unity and cohesion. Regardless of the high mortality rates, the birthrates among Chechens during the exile years were among the highest in all of the USSR. Chechens attributed their birth rate to a communal desire to “continue the people” (Williams, 2000, p. 112). According to Brian Glyn Williams (2000), the exile years also changed the identity of Chechens positively. The unity among clan-based people increased, as their experiences together as “Chechens” bridged any regional differences. Also, the considerable importance of the Sufi Islam faith became extremely important to the Chechens (Williams, 2000). Williams (2000) denotes that the exile experience, intended to break the spirit of the nation, ironically deepened the Chechen’s “sense of religiosity and ethnicity” (p. 113).

This suggests that when an ethnic group has experienced genocide and deportation, *their historic memories will serve a greater role in collective identity construction than any other relationship they have with that adversary*. As Machiavelli (1999) once stated “whatever the conqueror’s actions or foresight, if the inhabitants are not dispersed and scattered, they will forget neither that name nor those institutions; and at the first opportunity they will at once have recourse to them” (p. 21). Chechens have experienced victim-

ization, along with the unifying features of it, based upon a long history of “otherness” with Russia. Although this is a primary identity marker of today, it does not mean that tomorrow’s national identity will be based upon the deportations. Although Chechens may continue to refer to their antithetical relationship as a foundation of their identity, any new acts of victimization will “trump” the “us” versus “them” mentality.

Conclusion

Identity construction is an abstract process, mobilizing various aspects of ethnicity, history, and culture to interpret the present. Chechen identity today is established upon a foundation of opposition with Russia, while the primary identity referred to by the Chechens is related to a revival of the collective memories of the 1944 deportations. The Russian-Chechen conflict is a complex and historic relationship that will take generations to unravel and comprehend.

However, to help this process of understanding and healing, an apology by the Russian government to the Chechen people is required. By addressing, and taking full accountability and responsibility for the actions of the Russian governments’ treatment of the Chechens, Chechnya may be on the road to acceptance and forgiveness. A Chechen axiom states that “Nothing is forgotten, nothing will be forgotten” (Williams, 2000, p. 106). This indicates that the Chechens, above all else, will always cling to the memories of their past as a source of comfort and justification for modern behaviors. However, the Russian government could start to heal these historical wounds in the collective memories of the Chechens. One apology to the Chechen people would not stop the conflicts, by any stretch of the imagination. However, it would begin a process of discussion towards a mutual goal of peace between Russia and Chechnya. Although independence may never be granted to this small province, an apology would legitimize the historical trauma experienced by the Chechens, as well as include Russia in a conversation that would be based upon accountability and compassion.

In the words of Machiavelli: “It is necessary for a prince to have the friendship of the people; otherwise he has no remedy in times of adversity” (1999, p. 43). Friendship should become the topmost priority, rather than a will to dominate, so that future wars might be prevented.

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