

# THE UNITED STATES' INVOLVEMENT IN THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION OF MODERN CHECHNYA

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This summarizes the history of modern Chechnya's human rights situation. It deals specifically with the persecution of minorities on ideological grounds, exploring the cultural background and the motivations of the Chechen ruler, Ramzan Kadyrov. The involvement of the United States in the region in the time surrounding the Cold War exacerbated the ideological opposition to Chechnya's long-time occupier, Russia. This paper suggests that the ideological opposition to Russia, which is associated with western values in Chechen thought, has led to an increased focus on the modern state's Islamic roots. It proposes Kadyrov's attacks on and purges of homosexual men in 2017 and 2018, as well as the country's broader return to brutal tribal politics, are a result of this increased focus, which was kickstarted by the anti-Russian ideological fighters armed and trained by the United States in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Chechnya, part of the contested North Caucasus region, has a long history of violence and turmoil in its interactions with Russia and its own people. Its troubling human rights record has come to international attention since the 1980s as the United States' involvement in some of the key factors of conflict has become apparent. Chechnya's current situation, whereby a renaissance of tribal and traditional Islamic values is curtailing the rights of its citizens, is tied to American and Russian rivalries across the globe.

This paper contextualizes the current state of human rights within Chechnya by briefly tracing the country's history since it came to its current form and state of conflict in 1864. The main focus will be on the United States' effect on the state since 1980, demonstrating how international input has affected Chechnya's own political forces and its constant struggle for independence. The paper also examines some of the relevant cultural influences in Chechnya, in order to clarify the goals and purposes of its domestic political forces.

Organized chronologically into four topics, this paper follows the historical direction the discussion takes: historical background, the effects of war, human rights, and United States' involvement, are all addressed in each section. The first section, which covers the history of Chechnya prior to the First Chechen War in 1994, is critical, as it serves not only to explain Chechnya's geographical situation, but also to relate some of the cultural facts which are important for the following discussion. The second section builds on the background established in section one and discusses the First Chechen War, its neglect of human rights, and its relevance to the following twenty years of history. Section three covers the Second Chechen War in 1999, the rise to power of the current Chechen President, Ramzan Kadyrov, and the political background of his rule. The fourth and final section details the disquieting human rights violations inherent in Kadyrov's rule today, and the United States' response to these abuses.

## Chechnya 1864 to the First Chechen War (1994-1996)

The conflict in Chechnya began in 1864, when the state was annexed along with several other states in the North Caucasus region by the Russian Empire (Tappe, 7). The annexation was met with severe resistance by native Chechens, who have struggled with the dominant Russian force ever since, provoking nearly "100 years of resistance" (Tappe, 7). Though still occupied or controlled in some form today, Chechnya has never accepted their place or participated in the Russian body politic (Tappe, 9). Dr. Svante Cornell wrote in 1999 that abuses of the Chechen people began in response to the rejection of Russian rule and have become integral to the relations between the Russian state and its territory ever since (Cornell, 85).

The Chechen state, which is traditionally tribal and centered around bloodline politics, has been in constant conflict since the fifteenth century. However, Islam's arrival in the region in the seventeenth century provided a uniting cause for the Chechen people resisting Tsarist Russia, and the religion became ubiquitous in the region as a symbol of Chechen independence from outside rule. The theological doctrine of "ribat," meaning guard duty at a frontier outpost, has become important in Chechen thought as their resistance was galvanized increasingly on religious terms (Long, 32). Foundational to the Chechen synthesis of Islamic values and tribal customs, the larger doctrine of ribat holds that the concept of states itself is a western invention, further motivating the rejection of Russian rule (Long, 44). The Chechen identification with Islamic peoples and struggles has emphasized Chechnya's physical position as a geographic fence separating Russia and the Islamic world (Long, 33).

As the Chechen struggle became synonymous with the Islamic world's struggle with the western world, the spiritual divide between Muslims and nonbelievers also began to entail a physical divide, and Chechen independence gradually became understood as a holy war—a reclamation of Islamic territory (Long, 33–5). Hannah Notte notes that Chechen nationalism

is fundamentally different from Chechen-Islamic extremism; however, after the state's annexation by the Russian Empire, the two forces became increasingly conflated in light of their identical goals of Chechen independence (Notte, 61). The religiously- and politically-unified Chechens engaged in a drawn-out rebellion, beginning in 1918, which took Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin six years to stop (Tappe, 7). Additionally, strict measures imposed by Soviet Russia heavily restricted the rights and crippled the civil wellbeing of the Chechens, to the point that today it is difficult to find older people who did not grow up in some sort of military camp (Tappe, 7).

In the 1980s, American efforts to stop Soviet influence in the Middle East involved the sponsorship and training of Afghani insurgent groups, some of whom migrated to Chechnya to continue the fight against Russia (Powelson, 298). Michael Powelson writes that Mujihadeen fighters in Afghanistan were originally supported by the United States, as they served to disrupt and unseat Soviet influences (297). He clarifies that while U.S. support was not rooted ideologically, the fighters were motivated to repel Soviet ideologies and ways of life (Powelson, 299). Consequently, the people armed and trained under U.S. supervision continued to develop their skills in combination with their radical ideologies and have been linked to many instances of international terrorism (Powelson, 298).

Coinciding with the failed coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991 and the disintegration of the USSR, the Chechen struggle for independence resumed, as did both the prevalence of widespread abuses of civilians and fighters and the strong, unforgiving hand of Islamic extremism. In 1989, Chechnya's neighboring country, Dagestan, was the first of the North Caucasus states to see modern Islamic radicalism (Ware, 164). Its 1991 secession attempt was aided by radical fighters who ultimately made their way into Chechnya, eager to serve as borderland guards in the fight to reclaim Islamic lands from Russia (Tappe, 1).

## The First Chechen War, Human Rights Abuses, and Modern Issues (1994-1996)

The First Chechen War began in 1994 when Russia deployed troops into Chechnya in response to a new Chechen declaration of sovereignty. Russian interest in the region is driven primarily by Chechen oilfields which they are ever-reluctant to lose (DiPaola, 3). The Russian troops, which had been in and out of the region since the failed coup and attempted secession in 1991, had been combatting radical fighters as the Chechen state began to expel everyone who was not Chechen or Muslim in order to purify society (Tappe, 1). Though Russian troops killed over 80,000 people during the course of the first Chechen War (Cornell, 86), the problems of the region were greatly exacerbated by both the Muslim fighters' unwillingness to surrender and the coinciding independence declaration of Azerbaijan, which went largely uncontested by Russia at the time (Tappe, 10).

Shamil Basayev and Ibn al-Khattab, two Islamic fighters who trained by the U.S.-supported groups, were actively involved in the Chechen armed struggle (Powelson, 302). Basayev, who was a tribal warlord in the traditional Chechen style, commanded a group of fighters who were composed chiefly of men from Afghanistan (Powelson, 301). Al-Khattab was later linked in a leaked FBI memo in 2001 to Osama bin Laden's operations in Afghanistan (WashingtonsBlog 2013). One year later, the Russian Prosecutor General, Vladimir Ustinov, released a video showing al-Khattab with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan, further reinforcing the links between the Chechen insurgents and the Americans in Afghanistan (Powelson, 302).

The first war in Chechnya was one of the most destructive conflicts in the region's history for the civilians involved. The Russian army, facing a force composed mainly of nonmilitary insurgents, had to engage many civilian targets (Cornell, 86). Chechen cities, especially the capital, Grozny, suffered what has been called "the worst shelling since World War II," the

violations of war codes and human rights far exceeding any humane standard during the Russian involvement (Cornell, 86-87). Although scholars place the blame mainly on the Russian military, which at that point lacked any legislative limits or guidelines on the use of deadly force (Solvang, 215), it is worth noting that Chechen fighters regularly held their own citizens hostage as a way to tempt Russian forces into committing atrocities (Cornell, 87).

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The international responses to the First Chechen War showed a cautious attitude toward the issue, largely passing it off as an internal Russian problem (DiPaola, 1). However, in response to the Russian military's disregard for Chechens' lives, the International Court of Justice ruled on January 6, 1995 that Russia violated human rights on a major scale (Cornell, 89). Concurrently, the United States unofficially sympathized with the Russian struggle despite voicing criticism of the state early on, and U.S. aid to Russia did not lessen during this period (Cornell, 91). Two reasons that international help was not freely available were the image of Chechnya as a "gangster republic" and the belief that independence of a Muslim territory surrounded by Russian territories was impossible (Tappe; 9, 11).

Since 1991, no other country has recognized Chechnya's independence, but DiPaola suggests that the many international implications from United States' participation in Afghanistan to the International Court of Justice's 1995 ruling have made the Chechen problem an international issue (DiPaola; 6, 2). In 1994, the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe opened an office in Chechnya and began monitoring human rights violations there, according to a report they made before Congress in 2003 (U.S. CSCE; 1, 8). Though the United

States took no definite stance on the Chechen conflict and routed all aid through Russia to treat its dissident state, this monitoring suggests that the U.S. was actively aware of the predicament of the Chechen people.

As the Russians withdrew from Chechnya in 1996, ending the First Chechen War, a semblance of independence was reached and the dominant Islamic forces in Chechen society rose to the forefront. In the dubiously victorious country, Islamic rule became the norm as the ideologically-motivated independence fighters held most of the political power and nearly all military force (Solvang, 159). Socially, Chechnya began to develop an image of itself more completely in line with the performance of ribat and the idealistic defense of the Islamic world.

The importance of ribat was emphasized heavily by the fighters in Afghanistan, who carried the ideology to Chechnya in the early 1990s (Long, 35). This ideology grew until 1999, when Chechnya effectively became a fully Islamic society, and the dominant political forces began to agitate to spread the ideology over the North Caucasus (Ware, 157).

## **The Second Chechen War and Ramzan Kadyrov's Rise to Power (1999-2009)**

In 1999, Russia tired of the Chechen independence and moved to re-involve itself in the region. Russia's decision to engage in the region once again was spurred by Chechen fighters' intrusion into neighboring Dagestan, claiming that it too was independent and attempting to establish it as an Islamic territory. The Second Chechen War began as a war on terrorism and Islamic extremism which Russia feared would overtake the region, and Putin's exclusively counter-terrorist intentions resounded with American goals, especially after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (Notte, 60). The international community reacted more favorably to this commitment, and in 1999 President Clinton endorsed Russia's goals

in Chechnya while condemning their methods, still wary of the atrocities of the First Chechen War (Notte, 63).

Russia created and pursued a plan of Chechenization, which basically entailed the destruction of rebel forces and the establishment of leadership loyal to Moscow. The increased Russian concern with the region also led it to attempt to isolate Chechnya from the rest of the world and treat it entirely as its own internal problem. One of the first casualties of the involvement was the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) office, which was shuttered and prevented from monitoring the rights and violence after late 1999 (U.S. CSCE, 8). Simultaneously, a Russian human rights organization, Human Rights Watch, began to operate in Chechnya, fielding reports of abductions and extrajudicial executions; however, their investigations were seriously hampered by Russian attitudes toward Chechens, who were perceived only as terrorists (Solvang, 209-10; Notte, 62).

In the Second Chechen War, three main groups were involved in the conflict. In 2000, as part of Russia's Chechenization strategy, Putin installed former rebel Akhmad Kadyrov as Chechnya's head of state in exchange for his loyalty, the conversion of former rebels, and military support against the extremist elements of Chechen society (Campana & Ratelle, 123). Effectively, Russia and the newly-instated Chechen forces faced the insurgent warlords whose militias, again, were composed of many Afghani fighters (Campana & Ratelle, 121). According to a collection of 2006 cables from American Ambassador William J. Burns in Moscow, Russia was fully confident in the abilities and loyalty of Kadyrov and his converted soldiers (Burns, 28). However, installing Kadyrov legitimized the religious and extremist ideologies of many Chechens and gave their cause a strong foothold in the region.

As the fighting in Chechnya continued, the international community reacted with unprecedented force. The United States, especially after its own unfortunate experience with terrorism in 2001 and the subsequent declaration of the Global War on Terror, grew closer to Russia, and

American national security advisor Condoleezza Rice even advised the Chechen rebels to submit to Russia's regional plans to avoid further conflict (Notte, 66-7). At a 2001 summit in Slovenia, President George W. Bush partnered with Putin to fight Chechen terrorism, which they agreed threatened the wellbeing and freedom of the rest of the world, as the religious extremism which motivated their agitation had global implications (Notte, 64). This necessarily entailed a lessening of scrutiny on Russia's rights violations, as discretion in that area was viewed as expedient to the goal of clearing out terrorists (Notte, 64). However, after 2002, when the United States began to focus on its own War on Terror, Russia's terrorist narrative apparently became less immediate to the U.S.. Subsequently, the relationship between the countries deteriorated as Russia felt as if its terrorism concerns were not being treated with urgency (Notte, 69). One of the last interactions between the two countries was a September 2002 letter to Putin volunteering aid to Russia and Chechnya, and tactfully recognizing Putin's claim to Chechnya's territory (U.S. CSCE, 21).

The physical conflict of the Second Chechen War was as rife with abuses as the first. Once again Russian forces found themselves engaging mainly in populated areas with enemy combatants indistinguishable from civilians. The warlords, and especially the predominant leader, Shamil Basayev, knew this and intentionally operated in ways that drew Russian troops into bad circumstances. Certainly, Akhmad Kadyrov's native knowledge of the land and politics of Chechnya helped Russian forces in the fight against the insurgents, however Kadyrov himself still held the ideal of Chechen independence, and especially resented the continued Russian control of Chechnya's oil. In 2004 he was killed by a bomb prior to a meeting with Russian authorities where he intended to demand control of Chechnya's natural resources (Campana & Ratelle, 123). Though his death was officially attributed to Basayev, many Chechens blamed Russia. In 2005, Kadyrov's successor, Aslan Maskhadov, was killed as well, presumably for his rebellious activity and refusal to aid the Russians (Campana & Ratelle, 122). In 2006, Maskhadov's successor,

Abdul-Khalim Sadulaev, was killed. Soon after, Sadulaev's own successor, the insurgent leader Shamil Basayev, was also assassinated (Campana & Ratelle, 122). Kadyrov's son, Ramzan, who had served in the Russian army during the First Chechen War and thereafter worked as his father's personal bodyguard, quickly advanced through Chechnya's political hierarchy. In 2007, Ramzan superseded his nominal political roles and assumed active power in the family name.

## Modern Chechnya's Human Rights Abuses

After the Second Chechen War ended in 2009 and the counter-terrorism operation was officially concluded, Ramzan Kadyrov was left to more freely conduct his business in Chechnya in exchange for his broad loyalty to Putin, in a deal similar to what his father enjoyed. Kadyrov's accession in 2007 was less a function of official Russian policy and more akin to a private arrangement between Putin and himself. After his accession, Kadyrov hunted down and killed Basayev's soldiers, who were reportedly responsible for the bombing that resulted in his father's death, making first use of the broad leeway Putin granted him (Russel, 514). He began to act as if he were not beholden to any leader, aware that Moscow needed him in order to maintain some semblance of Chechen peace.

The blind eye Russia turned to his actions became one of his most powerful tools, and his Islamic reformation of Chechen society has continued in the style of a medieval dictator (Walker, 2; Šmid, 82). Kadyrov appeared live on television in 2009 personally interrogating prisoners in scenes designed to inspire fear and display his power (Russel, 524).

Kadyrov's human rights record after the Second Chechen War is perhaps the worst in the country's recent history. Though no longer subject to the strains of war,

the country is now ruled by a nominally loyal Russian-appointed ruler who actively champions separatist causes and a radical Islamic reform of society (De Bruyn, 7). When Russian counter-terrorism operations ceased, radical fighters appeared only a month later, swearing tentative loyalty to Kadyrov and beginning to train under his supervision with Russian resources (Russel, 510; Smith, 3). The arrangement Putin and Kadyrov reached essentially allowed Chechnya to operate as an independent state with a private military arm available at Putin's leisure. The former rebels now under Kadyrov's control use threats of force to create compliance with theological reforms, and Putin is free to command Kadyrov's troops where his own cannot go—most notably into Ukraine in 2014 (Shuster, 36).

The United States has responded to the military discretions and violent transformation of Chechen society as information became available. In contrast, Russia has largely turned a blind eye to the problems, resistant to acknowledge their very existence. Aurélie Campana and Jean-François Ratelle Campana, write that the violence in Chechnya has increased since 2003, and the rapid changes in leadership have further destabilized the region (115). The lax initial response of the U.S. was quickly subsumed by a more active response in reaction to Chechen fighters' attempts to spread ideological conflict across the North Caucasus

and disrupt the convenient relationship between the United States and Russia (Campana & Ratelle, 117; Cornell, 97). In contrast, Russia actively obstructed the opening of offices to investigate Chechen affairs, presumably because of the undeniable evidence of wrongdoing by Russian forces in the region (U.S. CSCE, 5). In 2003, a mass grave was found outside the Chechen village

Pervomayskaya, containing the bodies of hundreds of civilians abducted by Russian Federation forces during the Second

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Chechen War (U.S. CSCE, 3). The American commitment to fight terrorism with Russia coincided with many international exchanges exhorting Moscow to investigate and be more transparent about the region's wars (U.S. CSCE, 9-10).

Some of the most powerful actions by the U.S. are enabled by the Magnitsky Accords, which allow the leveraging of sanctions by the American government in response to human rights abuses or corruption in other countries. The first Magnitsky Accord, officially known as the Magnitsky Accountability Act of 2012, was designed to lessen the economic freedoms of countries under corrupt governments. The act was forwarded in reaction to Russian abuses of a corruption investigator (Magnitsky 2012, sec. 402). The second Magnitsky Accord was passed in 2016 as the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Act and expanded on the President's sanction-leveling power in response to abuses of human rights in other countries (Magnitsky 2016, sec. 1263). Cornell writes that governments today are emphasizing the importance of human rights much more than in the past and are more willing to become involved in related issues than before, which could explain the recent invocations of the Magnitsky Accords' powers (95).

Most recently, Kadyrov has targeted specific groups in Chechnya in attempts to create a society in line with Islamic tradition (De Bruyn, 7). Human rights watchmen such as Oyub Titiev and journalists like Anna Politkovskaya have been abducted and killed for reporting on Chechnya's reformation, and minorities, most recently homosexual men, have been specifically selected as targets of violence and execution (De Bruyn, 7; Russel, 514). In fact, the event which inspired the second Magnitsky Accord was Ms. Politkovskaya's murder, following her October 7, 2016 article detailing the abduction and torture of homosexual men in Chechnya (Russel, 514). Campana and Ratelle note that many of the insurgent movement's actions are aimed at creating goodwill toward Islamic rule in Chechnya in the rest of the radical Islamic world, so publicity about the persecution of the men is not altogether to be avoided (126).

In fact, since 2016 Ramzan Kadyrov has become more open in his defiance of both standards of human rights and Russian oversight. Tomáš Šmíd writes in his account of Kadyrov's economic position that the ruler may have been pushed into overt criminal activity because the security of his oil-related relationship with Russia and his military domination mean that legality is only a barrier to his profit and there are no consequences for not obeying moral or legal restrictions any longer (Šmíd, 74-5). In February 2017, Kadyrov made a public statement in which he promised that all homosexuals in Chechnya would be gone by Ramadan (May) of the same year (De Bruyn, 10). On April 1, the *Novaya Gazeta*, a Russian newspaper, published an article detailing the kidnapping, torture, and execution of gay people in a government-sponsored purge in Chechnya (De Bruyn, 1).

The United States responded quickly to the news in several waves of activity. On April 7, 2017, the U.S. State Department released a statement condemning the Chechen state's actions, and on April 17, the U.S.'s Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, bore a report requesting Russian and Chechen authorities investigate the issue (Toner 2017; Haley 2017). On May 5, Putin responded, ordering an investigation in Chechnya, but his officials reported nothing, even denying the existence of homosexuals in Chechnya (De Bruyn, 3-5). After receiving the negative Russian report alongside news of continued persecution from international news sources, June 28-29, 2017 saw similar resolutions introduced in the U.S. House and Senate, urging the imposition of sanctions in accordance with the Magnitsky Accords in response to Kadyrov's continued violence (U.S. Congress, H5127).

Before any sanctions could be imposed, however, Kadyrov issued a new statement. On July 14, 2017, Kadyrov stated that not only were there no homosexuals in Chechnya, but that there never had been, and even if there were, he would depend upon Chechen citizens to perform honor killings and maintain the traditional propriety of the country (De Bruyn, 10). In response, on October 30, 2017 the Senate passed a bill recognizing the atrocities and officially

condemned the violence in Chechnya, requesting the activation of economic sanctions (U.S. Congress, S Res 211). On December 10, 2017, the U.S. Treasury Department leveraged sanctions against Kadyrov and four Russian officials also involved in the extrajudicial killings of prisoners (Schectman, 2017). These sanctions prohibited aid to Chechnya, with the understanding that postwar reconstruction money was being used illegally to support Kadyrov's violent reformation of Chechen society (U.S. CSCE, 5). Kadyrov responded to the announcement of sanctions, which included bans on his travel to any U.S. territory or participation in U.S. economic activity, saying that he is proud to be at odds with America, to whom he attributes the ongoing terrorist problem in his country (Schectman 2017).

People continue to suffer in Chechnya and the story is still developing today. According to a Council of Europe report, in January of 2018, Kadyrov began attacking human rights defenders, calling them "foreign agents" who make false accusations for money. Russia, eager to keep good relations with Chechnya, remains silent (De Bruyn, 11). By mid-2018, at least 100 men were imprisoned during the purge of homosexuals. They are known to still be alive in prison, though researchers maintain that imprisonment within Chechen prisons is itself a violation of human right to life (Artunyan 2018; Solvang, 213). The most recent development in the United States' involvement in Chechnya was on June 28, 2018. The U.S. State Department sent a request to Moscow requesting the release of rights activists who had been agitating against Kadyrov's actions, but that request was ignored.

## Conclusion

The human rights situation in Chechnya is an unfortunate but unavoidable result of the ideological turmoil historically inherent in the region. That turmoil has been exacerbated in recent history by the United States' conflict with Russia in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which involved the arming and training of radical fighters who later dispersed over the Middle East and North Caucasus regions. The increased religious

fervency which drove early Chechen conflicts set the stage for militant groups and ideologues to seize power and control the tribal society. Consequently, a renaissance of traditional Islamic values, combined with the radical need to be free from centuries of Russian rule, foments violence which continues to upset Chechen society, as it resists western values and involvements.

The human rights situation in Chechnya has remained the same, whether by Russian force in the First Chechen War, terrorist and Russian forces in the Second Chechen War, or by its own hand in contemporary times. Abuses of human rights are systemic in Chechnya, and its ruler has the convenient excuse of American involvement to blame as the root of the issue, despite even the United States' outright and repeated rejection of the violence. The current Chechen administration enjoys the privilege of a nearly commitment-free relationship with Russia's Putin, which it freely exploits. Consequently, expectations for civil rights in Chechnya are constantly disappointed as the number of not-yet-persecuted groups grows ever smaller.

Current tensions between the United States and Russia present a serious set of obstacles to any U.S. involvement in the issue beyond the reactive and punitive sanctions currently in effect. Despite Chechnya's resistance to the concept, their country's close connection with Russia places the ability to act on rights abuses almost entirely within Putin's grasp. The ideological nature of Kadyrov's reforms may be largely immune to the U.S.' economic measures, especially with the political support of Russia for their regime. However, the history of the conflict at hand cautions against further involvement, demonstrating the inevitable dangers of manipulating ideologically charged groups. Clearly demonstrated, too, are the significant risks of a western power acting at all within a system predisposed to reject western influence.

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