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Vladimir Putin and Chechnya: Putin's Private War on "Terror"

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Vladimir Putin and Chechnya:
Putin’s Private War on “Terror”

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Abstract

Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999 with the resignation of Boris Yeltsin. He inherited a Russia rampant with crime and on the brink of economic collapse, where rich oligarchs controlled the vote in many regions. Putin needed to gain control of his country quickly. The former KGB officer had one tool that he knew how to use well: violence. Putin began to eliminate private media, he killed or imprisoned all the oligarchs, and he nationalized the country’s oil. Yet there was one issue that Putin would use to grow his country’s military power, which was a laughing stock since the fall of the iron curtain: Chechnya. Invading it was one of the first things Putin did when taking office. When 9/11 made extremist Muslims world enemies, Putin gained free reign to increase the military and not many people asked questions when Russian troops went into Chechnya. 9/11 didn’t just change our military operations in the United States; other countries’ leaders like Putin used it to their advantage. In Putin’s case he used it to tie Chechen fighters to groups like Al-Qaeda and Hamas. As long as he describes them as terrorists, it seems Putin’s extreme violence against the Chechen people is beyond reproach. With private media all but destroyed in Russia, and no other powerful political activists to question him, it seems Putin will reign over Russia so long as there is a breath in his body.

Introduction

When he came to power in 1999, no one thought that Vladimir Putin would last very long. He was Yeltsin’s sixth appointment to the job of Prime Minister in eighteen months. Russia was faced with several great problems in the late 1990’s. Their once
strong military had just been brought to a standstill by Chechen fighters. A handfull of billionaire oligarchs controlled the country’s capital and resources and large portions of voting blocs were also controlled by these oligarchs.¹

Putin needed to act quickly if he wanted to solve these problems, and prove his critics wrong. To hold his seat as Prime Minister, Putin had to find a platform. That platform was Chechnya, the tiny state in the Caucus whose tenacity had been holding off Russian Premiers for centuries. The once mighty Soviet Union military was now a stumbling and incompetent force, which was “begging” for release of hostages on national television.²

The new Prime Minister was quoted on the new war with Chechnya, “We will pursue the terrorist everywhere... You will forgive me, but if catch them in the toilet, we will wet them even in the outhouse.” To “wet” someone in Russia is prison slang to kill them at close range with a knife and “wet” them with their own blood. For Putin violence would be a governing tool.³

With Putin’s words echoing in their ears, Russian troops soon leveled the capital of Chechnya, and launched many forays into the countryside, killing anyone in their path, civilians and military combatants alike. Many human-rights organizations blamed Putin’s language directly for the lack of discretion shown by the Russian military in Chechnya.

² IBID
³ IBID
A western newspaper printed the headline “Rudest Ever P.M. Wins Over Russia.”

Late in 1999, Yeltsin resigned, which made Putin, the Acting President, the front-runner in the 2000 presidential race. Putin represents a strong leader that the Russian people need to govern them. A history of centralized power has created a culture in them that lends itself to autocratic rule. In the Spring of 2000 he was elected, and the reign of Putin had begun. He would serve as president for the next eight years, his rule would be characterized, by the elimination of private media, the jailing, assassination, or exile of all the oligarchs, the nationalization of the country's oil, and most importantly, the battle against the “Islamic threat” in Chechnya. With 9/11 Putin had an excuse to pursue further violence against Chechnya and to increase the size of the military to Cold War proportions.

Since Putin has left the Presidency little has changed. At the ceremony to celebrate the election of Dmitry Medvedev, Putin's successor, troops filed past to pay homage, and then, with Medvedev at center stage on live national television, Putin leaned to say something to Medvedev. Medvedev stepped back and Putin who held no elected office, stepped up while Medvedev left the stage; “It was Medvedev's day. It Remained Putin’s time.” Even though Medvedev is the official leader of the country, it is painfully obvious that Putin is pulling the strings.

Putin's Russia has retreated to Soviet practices. In this paper I intend to show that an incident in Beslan, Russia, in September of 2004, gave Vladimir Putin the link he needed between the Chechen fighters and Islamic extremism. Because of the change

\[4\] IBID
the world went through after 9/11, Putin could use this link to centralize power "retreat to Soviet practices." I will do this through analysis of his actions following Beslan, rhetoric in the media, and historical trends in Russia.

A History of Centralized Power

Until 1991, Russia had known nothing but the absolute rule of one person or regime. When the iron curtain fell, Russia was the closest they had ever been to democracy, and it seems as close as they ever will be.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia became a fledgling democracy in 1991. It should have been an opportunity for the nation to demonstrate that murder and mayhem were not embedded in the Russian DNA, that the notion of centuries-long continuum of violence was fatally flawed. The czars and the dictators were gone; tyranny no longer ruled the land. But its people quickly learned that democracy Russian style could be ruthlessly bloody. A historic tradition seemed to be reasserting itself. The chosen style of rule-tyranny or democracy or something in between – seemed to matter little.⁵

It is not that Russians prefer dictatorship—or is it? They have submitted to autocratic rule even when an alternative is present. As the years after 1991, proved,

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⁵ Steve LeVine, Putin’s Labyrinth Spies Murder, and the Dark Heart of the New Russia (New York: Random House, 2008), 10
"Russians in a sense have chosen to live in the tradition of their medieval ancestors."  

There does seem to be a straight line from the Russian political scene of today and Ivan the Terrible and the Russian Tradition of fear-based rule.  

Putin embraces this history. He tells the people to be proud of Russian past. Putin holds the mass killings of Joseph Stalin in the 1930s to be an exaggeration by those who want to harm Russia, and "[he] would glorify leaders and events regarded as odious by much of the outside world." In an interview taken before a news conference with George W. Bush, Putin was asked about his commitment to democracy. He answered, "Fourteen years ago Russia made a choice in favor of democracy. Of course, the fundamental principles of democracy and democratic institutions must be adapted to the realities of Russian life today, to our traditions and our history. And we will do this ourselves." 

At the end of the 90s, Yeltsin stepped down from the presidency. The man that would follow him was a former KGB spy, thrown to the forefront of Russian politics by powerful men who thought they could mold him—but he would end up outwitting all of them: "Once again, Russia would be ruled by a strongman."
The Man From Nowhere

When appointed Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin was an unknown, outside Boris Yeltsin’s inner circle. He was a former KGB operative, but not all too successful at that post; “To be a reasonably successful spy, one should land an assignment in the capital of an important enemy state, such as Washington or London... By comparison, the apex of Putin’s career was a six-year posting to East Germany, a Soviet satellite with few secrets to learn,”12 So why Putin? The only post he had before reporting to Yeltsin in Moscow was in St. Petersburg, as deputy to the Mayor: “As former KGB boss, Oleg Kalugin, put it, he was ‘a man of Prussian-style obedience.’ that quality, so rare in Russia, combined with his willingness to work hard and avoid the spotlight, swept him into the most powerful post in the country.”13

Domestic Russian Politics and a series of terrorist attacks that shook the country in the latter half of 1999 were instrumental in creating the Putin we know today.14 There were four bombings throughout the country that killed more than three hundred Russian civilians and injured hundreds more. These attacks came at the dusk of Yeltsin’s reign and the dawn of Putin’s. He had to define himself as a strong-willed stone-faced head of state, and not the quiet lapdog the Yeltsin administration believed he was. As one of his first acts as Prime Minister, he launched the second Chechen war, which has continued in the North Caucasus until today.

12ibid 16-17.
13 ibid 16
14 ibid 19.
Putin’s retaliatory assault on breakaway Chechnya – ‘transformed the Russian political landscape,’ wrote Paul Klebnikov, a Forbes magazine reporter. ‘Prime Minister Putin declared the nation besieged. Paranoia swept Russian cities...’ The fearful populace craves a strong leader and six months later elected Putin president with 52.6 percent of the vote. The results were a stunning turnaround from his popularity rating of a mere 2 percent when, as a stranger to the population he was first appointed prime minister.15

The people continued their support of Putin. His aggressive tactics against Chechnya gave the people of the Russian Federation confidence in their new leader. With the country behind him, Putin began his centralization of power. He started this by prosecuting the oligarchs—men who controlled most of Russia’s wealth, which the state desperately needed. “In 2000 Putin forced two of Russia’s seemingly invincible oligarchs—Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky into exile and turned their broadcast empires into pro-Kremlin propaganda vehicles.”16

Then it was time to go after the big money-maker: the oil industry. Before Putin, Russia’s oil industry had been in the hands of a few private businessmen, the richest of whom was Mikhial Khodorkovsky. By the time Putin had finished with Khodorkovsky, the richest man in the country had been sentenced to eight years in prison and his private oil company was owned by the Russian Federation.17 “Putin has consolidated the

15 Ibid 19.
16 Ibid 28.
17 Ibid 28.
Kremlin’s control over key economic sectors—oil, gas, pipelines, aircraft and vehicle manufacture, arms dealing, banking and metals—and the billionaires have been brought under the Kremlin’s sway.\textsuperscript{18}

To westerners it might have seemed as if Russia was once again headed by a totalitarian leader who wanted to put the nation under his thumb.

It was altogether possible of course, that Putin and his circle intended to convey precisely the menacing impression foreigners had of them, sending a message that said, Don’t mess with Russia. But that seemed like over thinking. The greater likelihood was that Putin was simply being Putin.\textsuperscript{19}

After the chaotic years following the fall of the Soviet Union and the rule of Yeltsin, Putin’s politics of violence and charismatic manliness, which was covered religiously on state television, sent Putin’s approval rating to 70 percent.\textsuperscript{20} Russia finally had the strong, masculine leader she had lacked since the iron curtain fell. It leads to question: is there something about a strong central leader the Russian people need? The Czars, Lenin, Stalin, and now Putin: there is always one face at the front of Russian politics, one person the country can look to as the leader. Is that why Russia as never adopted the kind of democracy the West would have liked to see? If so the Russian

\textsuperscript{18} (Chivers 2008)
\textsuperscript{19} (LeVine 2008)
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid 28
people need a strong central leader that answers to no one; power is the only thing they respect, so Putin would amass as much as he could.

**Islamic Radicalism in Chechnya**

Putin would like people to believe that Islamic radicalism has deep roots in Chechnya. Yet it is a new concept to the people of Chechnya, a monster it seems that Putin has created himself, with his regime of violence against the people in the north Caucasus. The sect of Islam in Chechnya is not Sunni or Shiite, the sects we hear about most in the United States, but Sufism, a more spiritual and less traditional form of Islam.

Before the start of the first Chechen war there was ... no social or political basis in Chechnya for Islamic radicalization. The form of Islam that had withstood the ordeals of the Soviet period in the beginning of the 1990’s was of a popular variety, an Islam more mystical than theological, more ceremonial than juridical. In lowland and urban Chechnya the role of Islam was largely ceremonial and confined to rites and public occasions.\(^\text{21}\)

This supports the conclusion that the radicalism that exists in Chechnya today was created by continued persecution by the Russians. Terrorism steadily increased in Russia since the first Chechen war in 1994, and through Putin’s second term.\(^\text{22}\)


\(^\text{22}\) Warhola, James “Religion and Politics Under the Putin Administration: Accommodation and Confrontation within ‘Managed Pluralism’” *the Journal of Church and State*
<table>
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<th>Year</th>
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<td>32</td>
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<td>360</td>
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Data from: *Russian Regional Report* vol 9, no 17 (17 September 2004)

Forays into Chechnya did not start with Putin, The Russian Empire first tried to expand into the North Caucasus in the mid 1500s. The Chechen people have been in a perpetual struggle to escape from under Russian oppression. From the Czars, to the Soviet Union and now Putin, the Chechen people fight for freedom as they have been doing since before Islam came to Chechnya.

Islam has been the solid rock for the people of Chechnya since it became widely practiced in the early 17th century;23 “the Russian invasion is certainly not the only reason for the consequent radicalization and politicalisation of Islam in Chechnya, but it definitely lies at the root of it.”24 Islam had held the people of Chechnya together through the worst of times.25 In the face of Russian tyranny the only reliable help was faith. It is logical to assume that when Putin initiated the largest military offensive to

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23 (Hertog 2005)
24 (Warhola 2005)
25 (Hertog 2005, 249)
date against the North Caucasus Republic, that its people would revert to the most radical aspects of the religion that had led them stand up the threats posed by Russia before.  

Hertog writes that, "[the] Chechen example shows clearly how a war plants the seeds of religious extremism in a society that would not be inclined to this otherwise. Injustice and violence all to often transform moderate believers into extremists." In 2004, Russia saw how far they had pushed the extremists. In September of 2004, masked men and women stormed school No. 1 in Beslan during their end of the year awards ceremony, taking all students and faculty hostage. In the Russian military siege of the school, over 300 hostages lost their lives most of them children. Had Putin and his new regime pushed Chechnya too far, into Islamic radicalism? Whatever the case, Chechen separatists crossed a line that would change the face of Russian politics forever.

Chechens practice of Sufism leads them more to focus more on inward conditions than outward actions. Islam is simply a part of their culture something the Chechen people could always go to in the face of Russian tyranny. Islam is not the reason for Chechen separatism; Russian tyranny, and in this decade specifically, the tyranny of Vladimir Putin, is the reason Chechnya fights.

26 Ibid 249
27 Ibid 250
Islam and the West After September 2001

Before September 11, 2001, most westerners knew very little if anything about Islam. In the days following the attacks, the media attention on Islam exploded.28 The United States leapt into action in Afghanistan, and was soon in Iraq. After both invasions, Congress appointed the 9/11 Commission. One of the things stated in the Commission’s Report was the new foreign policy the U.S. should have towards the Muslim world. The report holds that the United States is not at war with Islam, and that most Muslims “can be disconnected and discouraged from Al-Qaeda’s vicious anti-American agenda.”29 However, the report also states “Islamist terrorism has no common ground with the United States and must be destroyed or isolated.”30

No matter how good the United States’ intentions are in the Middle East, it is doing little to abate the hostility and anger felt towards it. The U.S. still “conducts, and the public overwhelmingly supports, a global war on terror aimed at eradicating the elusive (terrorist) brown-skinned enemy.”31

This attitude has opened the doors for those world leaders of emerging powers that seek favor with the U.S. In the Cold War years, if there was a rebellion that a leader needed to put down violently, and he did not want negative press in the western media, he deemed the rebellion Communist. Today, if a leader wants to put down a particular group of people with the support of the west, the rebels are called terrorist.

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28 Mahmood Mamdani, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism.” *American Anthropologist* 104, no.3 (2002) JSTOR
30 Ibid 108
31 Kathleen Moore. “A Part of US or Apart from US; Post September 11 Attitudes Toward Muslims and Civil Liberties.” *Middle East Report* 244, no. 1 (2002) JSTOR
An ideology of antiterrorism seems to have filled the post-Cold War void as the political control mechanism, of the mass media. Generally, it helps to mobilize the population against a poorly defined enemy and legitimizes measures that may potentially threaten freedom in an otherwise democratic society.  

Putin has done this with the Chechen fighters. Because they are Muslim, Putin can link them to the “Islamist terrorism” that the United States is combating. This connection has allowed Putin to make cutbacks to democracy, commit acts of violence on Chechen civilians, and replace private media with Kremlin propaganda machines. This connection is not legitimate; but is simply a connection Putin has created to gain support from the west in his ever-expanding campaign against Chechen Separatist.

Beslan Russia’s 9/11

Twelve days after Beslan, in a special cabinet meeting, Putin held that unity of the country was “the main condition for conquering terrorism.” Many consider the measures he would put in place to “unify the country” to be in direct violation of the Russian constitution and international human rights laws. First, Putin abolished the direct elections for regional leaders; also, he advocated for nationwide political parties like his United Russia party, labeling regional parties troublesome.

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33 (Lemaitre 2006, 370)
34 Ibid 370
United Russia would be the nationwide party to defeat terrorism and bring the country together. Originally, Putin was never a member of the United Russia party, but its members backed Putin and were all loyal to him. In 2003, United Russia won two-thirds of the seats in the Duma in an election that international observers condemned.\(^{35}\)

This new law allowed Putin to gain control of the country’s oil and remove it from private hands. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the CEO of Yukos, the country’s biggest oil company, was “funding several opposition parties.”\(^{36}\) Because of his support for regional parties that opposed United Russia, Kodorkovsky was arrested and his oil company was forfeited to the state at a time when oil prices were rising to record heights. Beslan gave Putin the power to make these new laws that he employed to gain money that his once proud nation now desperately needed. Now that Russia was back on the economic fast track, Putin needed to silence the critics.

All independent media outlets would be closed and taken over by the state. With the terror attacks of 9/11 still fresh in everyone’s minds Putin saw an opportunity he had to seize. The now state run media in Russia had the opportunity “to link Chechen terrorism with the global war on terror, which is being led by the United States. In doing this Russian authorities hope to reduce criticism of the Chechnya campaign, a calculation that seemed to be working.”\(^{37}\) It would be difficult to show that Beslan

\(^{35}\) Ibid 373  
\(^{36}\) Ibid  
\(^{37}\) (Simons 2006), 580
created a “new Putin,” who was more violent than ever, but the bloodshed definitely created new opportunities to expand the powers of the president.\(^{38}\)

With Beslan creating empathy for the Russian Federation, Putin acted quick to distribute his own brand of “democracy,” which was tailored to Russian “reality.” In 2002 he said, “[r]egional leaders are elected by the people in a secret ballot. That is how it is prescribed in the constitution and that is how it will remain.”\(^{39}\) After Beslan, his mind was changed and the constitution set aside. Putin said, “the system of executive power must be fundamentally reorganized to ensure the unity of the country and the consistent development of federalism.”\(^{40}\) Gubernatorial elections were abolished, and a system of executive appointment was put in place. Putin would nominate a candidate for governor of a region and the regional assembly would “approve” of the candidate 90 days before the incumbent was to leave office. This sounds fair, but in practice, the new law favors the United Russia party. They can place their candidates in gubernatorial offices, because in almost every regional assembly United Russia holds an absolute majority.\(^{41}\)

Putin did not defy the constitution completely; the Constitutional Court had to rule on the new legislation. The Court supported Putin and the new legislation by holding, “the constitution operates in an evolving socio-historic context,”\(^{42}\) giving Putin free reign to amend the constitution as he saw fit to meet the needs of the country. This is not difficult for him to do, because the Federation Council the lower house of Russian

\(^{38}\) (Lemaitre 2006, 373)
\(^{39}\) Ibid 374
\(^{40}\) Ibid 374
\(^{41}\) Ibid 375
\(^{42}\) Ibid 382
legislature only needs a 51% majority to approve a constitutional amendment and "One-half of the members of the federation Council are appointed by the governors." If Putin wants to amend the constitution all he has to do is put the pen to paper --- and it will happen.

Since Beslan, Russia has been moving farther and farther away from democracy and closer and closer to a Soviet-like autocracy: "From a political perspective, the power of the center over the regions is definitely at its strongest since 1991. Russia threatens to become a federal state in form but centralist in content likes its predecessor, the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic." Now Putin could nominate his favorite governors, who do not need to be connected to the region they are governing: "Loyalty to the Kremlin is valued above all. This breeds incompetence and powerlessness among local officials." 

The attacks on the school at Beslan gave Putin an incident he could relate to 9/11. When separatists fighters that were culturally Muslim attacked civilians, Putin labeled them terrorist. This gave him an excuse to begin centralizing power at exponential rates. He could claim that his country was under attack by Muslim extremists, and the west would look the other way while he whittled democracy in Russia to an almost unrecognizable state.

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43 Ibid 383
44 Ibid 377
45 (Warhola 2005,) 88
Contributing Causes to the Chechen Conflict

In the next three sections I will outline, the main factors, which have allowed Putin to mold the conflict with Chechnya, to start limiting democracy, and centralizing power to Soviet-like proportions. These last sections will clarify the steps Putin has taken to almost completely solidify his position as leader of Russia. Fist, the takeover of the media by Putin’s administration has allowed them to influence the minds the Russian people with very specific rhetoric concerning Chechnya. Second, the Russian people themselves and the culture engrained in them that has allowed Putin to expand power as far as he has. Lastly, the fact that Islam is the dominant religion in Chechnya as enabled Putin to tie Chechen fighters to Islamic fundamentalist.

Rhetoric and The Media

Since Putin nationalized the media, the voices against the state have been limited to a few bold newspapers and a small number of internet bloggers. He is using the state run television outlets to promote anti-Islamic and, in turn, anti-Chechen feelings. Terrorists are often compared to Nazis, and Beslan is constantly compared to 9/11. The comparison of terrorist to fascists creates the historical image in one’s mind of the United States, and Great Britain teaming up with the Soviets to defeat a great evil: Hitler. This rhetoric exhibits the theme of unity against Islamic radicalism, just as the world came together to defeat the Nazis.\(^{46}\) Also domestically in Russia defeating the Nazis has a more significant meaning, because the beat the Nazis on their home soil,

\(^{46}\) (Simons 2006, 580,581)
and pushed them back to Berlin. The image of uniting together to defeat the terrorist; resonates even more domestically with the Russian people than it does with Westerners.

One thing Putin and his media had to wrestle with was how to define a terrorist, Putin has called for an international definition of terrorist: “We believe that there should be not only the same definition of terrorism for everybody but we should also mean the same things when we talk about it.” Putin is tired of double standards; “[h]e attempts to narrow the perceived difference between terrorism in Russia and the West through selective examples.” New York and Washington are compared to Beslan and Nord Ost. The rhetoric is always heaviest around the anniversary of 9/11. On the fourth anniversary, the Duma issued a statement to speak out against the “double standard” of the terrorist that U.S. was fighting and the terrorist the Russians were fighting, claiming the west lumped terrorist into “good and bad categories”

When we speak of the 9/11, Nord Ost and Beslan, we speak of tragedies the world will never be able to forget. The memory of the victims and grief, the awareness of responsibility before future generations will have us do everything possible to put a barrier to new terrorist attacks. The will of all nations across the world should be focused on achieving precisely that goal.

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47 ibid 584
48 Ibid586
49 Ibid589
50 Ibid 585
The fact that the Chechen fighters are Muslim helps Putin narrow the distinction between the Sufi separatists in his country and the heavily Sunni and Shiite terrorists that are committing acts of violence in Western Europe and the United States. Putin has used the mass media to accomplish this. He has kept domestic opposition on the defensive by labeling them as naïve or traitors. He has established the “we” and “they” mentality that “we” are good and righteous and must do all in our power to defeat “them.”

The media has very distinct relationship with the people. “The mass media are a conduit through which society obtains their images through which they will derive their sense of reality."

In democratic societies, the media is heralded as the watchdog, keeping the government in check and the people informed of their governments’ actions. In Russia, the media no longer plays that role. It is a tool used to by the Kremlin to transmit their message of unity, which is being broadcast to national and international audiences.

Without his attack on the oligarchs, he would not have been able to obtain the media outlets; now the only news people in Russia can get is the same news it got during the Cold War: state reported news.

**The Russian People**

One of the reasons Putin has been able to amass the power he has today is the Russian people themselves. They were so sick of being poor and Putin pulled them out

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51 Ibid 582
52 Ibid 598
of it. Most do not mind that their constitution is being violated at the highest levels of government, because constitution does not mean anything to them --- it is just a piece of paper. They do not mind that others suffer under Putin because they are playing along and reaping the benefits of the economic boom he has brought.

There is something different about the Russian people, something we as westerners do not quite understand, because in the west we have not been faced with violence like the Russian people have. “Russian history taught its people to be indifferent toward the suffering of others at their death... It’s hard to say whether history produced the culture or culture produced the history.” Whichever it is, the culture in Russia and the disposition of the Russian people have given Putin the perfect conditions to take power and begin to expand it.

Putin admits that Russia is different than any other democracy, and that the basic democratic principles must be tailored to fit the Russian “reality.” In fact, however, the Russian “reality” is that democracy has no place in Russia. A history of centralized power has fostered an attitude in the Russian people that can only be ruled by a strong central figure: the Czar, the Party, and now Vladimir Putin.

The years of perestroika and those that followed showed the world that the Russian people could not handle democracy. Crime rates were at all-time highs, organized crime controlled most of the country, and the democratic government in the Kremlin was unable to stop them. Putin took office and filled the void that Russia had been missing since the fall of the Soviet Union.

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53 (LeVine 2008) 4
This culture of the Russian people is something that has not been adequately considered; I believe that without this historical experience of the Russian people, Putin would not have the latitude that he has today to expand his powers. It is not the only factor that benefits Putin in his move to gain absolute power in Russia, but it is a foundational one that has been overlooked by most westerners.

Chechnya's Brand of Islam

Chechens have been fighting Russia before Islam came to the North Caucasus. The people of Chechnya have been opposing Russian tyranny since the 1550's and Islam was not widely practiced in Chechnya until the early 1600s. The Chechen people are little concerned with jihad; they just want their autonomy from Russia. Their goal is not killing the "infidels", and spreading Allah's word at the tip of a sword. Their goal is a free Chechnya that does not have to answer to the Kremlin. As Americans, we think freedom is important to us; freedom is more important to Chechens; it is engrained in their language and culture.

Although Chechen nationalists attach to freedom modern Western political connotations, its traditional Chechen meaning went far beyond that of either the Western or Islamic sense of the of the word. In the Chechen language, the word also connotes peace and well-being. This is clearly demonstrated in daily greetings: welcoming a male guest Chechens say Marsha Woghiyla, Literally, “enter in freedom.”

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54 (Hertog 2005, 241)
55 Gammer, Moshe The Lone Wolf and the Bear Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006). 6
Freedom is fundamental to the culture of Chechnya, but they have never experienced true political freedom and that is why they fight. "The conflict is not a holy war, waged by Islamic fundamentalist; but to say religion does not play a role at all is not true either." The Chechen cause, religion is much like religion was for the IRA in Northern Ireland. It helps to define them, but is not the reason they were doing it.

The brand of Islam to which Chechens subscribe is not that of the Jihadist who are fighting the Allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Jihadists preach sharia, which is in direct conflict with Sufism that is practiced by the Chechens. Sufism practice, developed in 8th and 9th century, parallel to the strict sharia practice.

Whereas Islamic law or sharia delineates a Muslim’s duties and way of life, Sufism embodies the spirit of Islam, is the living tradition, the inner path that emphasizes detachment from the distractions and deceptiveness of this world. Sufis tend to stress inwardness over outwardness contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of the soul over social interaction.

The principles, by which Chechen Muslims practice Islam, are far removed from the principles held by the Muslims in groups like Al Qadea and Hamas. It is like the

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56 (Hertog 2005, 240)
57 Ibid 242
58 Ibid 242
differences between Catholic and Protestant, they have the same goal, but they seek to achieve it differently. The Chechen people have simply been pushed too far by an oppressive Russian government. Terrorist attacks have steadily risen in Russia since the Putin started the second Chechen war in 2001. (see table on page 10) These trends suggest the extremist actions of Chechen separatists are fueled by Russian tyranny and not by the words of the Quran.

After September 11, 2001, the world’s view of Islam was forever changed. A religion of which most westerners were previously ignorant took center stage in the years following those tragic events. The west’s view of Islam was tainted by that day and Vladimir Putin knew this. When the school is Beslan was taken by Chechen separatists, Putin exploited his opportunity. Russia was to suffer a large-scale terrorist attack while 9/11 was still fresh in the minds of the world.

Immediately after Beslan, the rhetoric of global unity to combat terrorism became dominant. Putin began to talk about double standards and how the Muslim terrorists were the same in Russia and in the Middle East. Using historic imagery, he compared Islamic fundamentalism to fascism. By tying the Chechen fighters to Islamic extremist, and comparing them to Nazis, Putin created a common enemy that would resonate especially well in Russia. He used the fear created first by the terrorist on 9/11 then the he tied that fear to the Chechen separatist. Western ignorance of Islam overlooked the fact that Sufism is a completely different form of Islam than that practiced by the 9/11 terrorists. With the people of the world in fear of Islamic
radicalism, Putin helped paint that label on a group it did not apply to, and the fear of the people gave him the latitude to begin his vast centralization of power.

Conclusion

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, the subsequent attacks in London, and Madrid the west’s attitude towards Islam has changed radically. The west has started a very wide war on terror led by the United States: there is one enemy, the Muslim terrorists, and they must be destroyed or isolated.\(^5^9\) Now there is a stigma around the word “terrorist;” if the right group is labeled as terrorist they become the enemy. Vladimir Putin has exploited this new attitude. He used Chechnya as a platform to gain popularity in Russia. Days into his appointment in 1999 he leveled the Chechnya capital.\(^6^0\) He has intentionally pushed the Chechen people to a breaking point. He has done this to create an enemy he can vilify in his state run media, an enemy that gives him a reason to centralize the power and limit democracy in Russia.

First he would not have been able to do this without a culture that has been engrained in the Russian people—a culture of violence and submission that lends itself to a strong central leader. The history of centralized power in Russia, along with the long list of violent acts and injustices the Russian people have endured, has created a culture of apathy towards personal liberties and democracy; their government is functioning

\(^5^9\) (Mednicoff 2005, 108)  
\(^6^0\) (Chivers 2008)
and making them money again, so they do not question Putin’s moves to limit their liberties and centralize power.

When he came to power in 1999, Putin knew of this need the people had for a strong leader, so he picked a way to display that he meant business, and used Chechnya. Chechnya had been trying to break away from Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union and the Chechen fighters had embarrassed the once strong Russian military. Putin flexed his muscles and started the campaign against Chechnya that continues today. This move against Chechnya was designed intentionally to increase Putin’s popularity, and to create an enemy that Russia had been lacking since the Cold War ended.

After 9/11, Putin knew he could draw a connection between the Chechen fighters and the Muslim extremist that attacked the United States. The new attitude towards the Muslim world was creating a stigma about the religion, a stigma that would help Putin open the door to further centralize his power, and solidify his position as his country’s leader.

Other world powers have used the United State’s campaign against Muslim extremism to their advantage. In 2006, Israeli forces engaged Hezbollah fighters in Lebanon; If not for the Global War on Terrorism, Israel would not have been able to invade foreign soil so easily. China also exploited the new attitude towards religious extremism. When protests against the Chinese government broke out in Tibet before the Beijing Olympics Chinese officials put the protest down with violence. To keep from breaking under the pressure from the west the Communist Party in China adopted

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61 Ibid
similar rhetoric to Putin’s to describe “Tibetan independence activists.”

The West’s new attitude toward Islam and religious extremism in general enabled these two nations to do what Putin has done and put down a rebellion by labeling their enemies terrorist.

Putin has never really cared for outside opinions towards Russia; the empathy for Russia held by the Western powers was simply a bonus. The rhetoric used in the media to exploit the new stigma concerning Islam helped to limit domestic resistance to Putin’s campaign against the Chechens. Putin had successfully tied Chechen fighters to the jihadists in the Middle East, and took advantage of that link to start centralizing power.

However, the Islam of Chechnya is far removed from the Islam of groups like Hamas and al-Qaeda. Sufism a more mystical form of Islam preaches inward focus over outward action. Putin knew he would have to push them to commit an act that he could compare to 9/11. He did just that. In the years since his first invasion of Chechnya in 1999 acts of terrorism have increase 2,800%. Vladimir Putin’s campaign against the Chechen people pushed them to commit acts comparable to those committed by al-Qaeda in New York, London, and Madrid.

After the incident in Beslan, Putin had his 9/11. The campaign he had started against Chechnya had come to a point he desired. Twelve days after the attack Putin put

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63 (Warhola 2005, 77)
an end to the popular election of regional governors and began the formation of the United Russia party, saying the only way to champion over the terrorist was to unite under one banner.\textsuperscript{64} With his United Russia party currently claiming majorities in national and regional legislatures, the support for Putin is unwavering.

Vladimir Putin knew his people needed a strong leader, so to gain their support he attacked Chechnya at the outset of his political career. He knew he could use Chechnya to represent the enemy that Russia had been missing since the Cold War. He needed a reason to vilify the Chechens: Islamic fundamentalism was that reason. With his state-run media calling for unity against the terrorist and his United Russia party ruling the country, the parallels between Putin’s Russia and Soviet Russia are unmistakable. With Chechnya still attacking Russian civilians as recently as March 29 of 2010, it seems Putin will always have Chechnya to blame; he will be able to keep building his power. Even though he is not the sitting president, he is “the closest thing to an all-powerful czar that Russia had known since the rule of Josef Stalin.”\textsuperscript{65} If not for the enemy he created in Chechnya, Putin probably would have failed like every other post-Soviet ruler, but it seems the first successful post-soviet leader will be the only Russian leader for some time.

\textsuperscript{64} (Lemaitre 2006, 373-375)
\textsuperscript{65} (Levine 2008, 157)
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