

Do Not Blame Chechnya for Boston Bombings

by Nadia Vancauwenberghe

If the bombs that exploded Monday [15 April 2013] in Boston were indeed set off by two Chechen brothers, it would be the first time radicals from the small, mostly Muslim semiautonomous Russian republic have carried out a terrorist attack outside Russia.

The second Chechen conflict — in which Russian troops waged a merciless war against radical separatists and the civilian population alike — officially ended in 2000 and unofficially in 2009, with the installation of a pro-Russian government.

Even so, the unrest in Chechnya has been constant since then as radical fighters have moved away from battling the Russian military to targeting civilians.

Moscovites are familiar with Chechen terrorism. In the past 15 years, hundreds of civilians have been killed in a series of hostage situations: 130 in a Moscow theater in 2002; more than 330 in a school in the Caucasian peninsula in 2004; 40 in a suicide bombing in a Moscow metro in 2010; and 37 in a bomb in Moscow's Domodedovo Airport in 2011.

During the wars in Chechnya more than a decade ago, the West stuck to an idealized view of the early Chechen freedom fighters even as the first signs of Muslim radicalization began to emerge. Islamist "brothers" from Russia joined the cause of Chechen independence while fundamentalist "Wahabites," as Middle East recruits were referred to, fought alongside the rebels.

Chechen fighters were no longer the proud, mostly secular rebels who fought for independence in the first war (1994-96). By the second war (1999-2000), most democrats had died or fled, leaving the country in the hands of mostly criminal clans and radical fighters. By 2000, radical Muslims were using the Chechen war front as a jihadist playground.

This radicalization was engineered by Russia — not only through its use of disproportionate violence and the commission of war crimes but also by arming and playing clans against each other in the period between the two wars. The Russian army not only crushed the rebels but turned Chechen civilians into a population of martyrs.

By the time the Russian troops left, the Chechen capital of Grozny had been reduced to rubble. During the 2002 theater hostage disaster in Moscow, Russian special forces ended up killing the hostages they were supposed to free with lethal gas. Putin shamelessly instrumentalized the tragedy to boast about his tough stance on terrorism and boost his popularity.

Now, Chechen terrorists may have hit America. An entire nation is waking up to the existence of Chechnya, a place they wouldn't have been able to find on a map a day earlier. They see Muslims and hear jihad — one more place harboring extremists who hate America.

Indeed, in recent years, a new generation of Chechen rebels have been advertising their goal of creating a radical pan-Caucasian emirate ruled by sharia, strict Islamic law.

"Our enemy is not Russia only, but everyone who wages war against Islam and Muslims," proclaims their leader, Doku Umarov.

Are the Chechens trying to bring their cause to the international stage? Or are they just Muslim recruits in the global jihad against the western Satan?

Probably the latter.

There were news reports, for example, of a Danish man released from Guantanamo saying he wanted to join Muslim Chechens in their fight against Russia. Today, international media are speculating on whether Chechens were sent to Guantanamo. No matter what, it wouldn't be surprising if some Chechens joined an al-Qaeda-style jihad. Oppressed, war-ravaged nations are the breeding ground for great warriors as well as evil terrorists, from Afghanistan to Palestine.

Meanwhile, it is important that Americans see another Chechen people: a nation that has been the victim of ongoing oppression and endless pain. During Russia's "anti-terrorist operations" (Russia never called it a war), more than 100,000 civilians died. Grozny was reduced to rubble, its inhabitants forced to live in cellars; women were raped, men imprisoned and tortured.

In Chechnya, during the 1990s, what was all too common was the dead gaze of the mothers of murdered children and mournful widows, the wide-eyed children deprived of joy and sunlight and the quiet hopelessness of the elderly, all living in cellars like rats in a city being pounded by Russian artillery. There were no more men.

In 2001, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum placed Chechnya on its Genocide Watch List. Meanwhile, more than a decade later, Grozny has risen from the ashes, a glittering capital with its new wealth on display everywhere. However, that just masks the true situation there: increasingly conservative Islam diktats from the government and arbitrary arrests and murders under the iron-fisted rule of pro-Kremlin ruler Ramzan Kadyrov.

This horrible tragedy in Boston has now put Chechnya on the map for Americans. But Americans should not blame a nation for isolated crimes committed by individual radicals.

Dictator Kadyrov clearly stated that linking the Tsarnaev brothers to his country would be unfair.

"They grew up in America; their views and convictions were formed there," he said.

He might have a point. The Chechens have seen too much bloodshed and have other battles to fight.

The outline of infantry tactics presented on [this website](#) is drawn about equally from my study of the First Chechen War, the Mongols under Chinggis Khan and the Apaches under Geronimo. So I am in no way a partisan for Chechen independence; I am just a student of military history. Also, I am only interested in the First Chechen War, not the second. Vancauwenberghe writes:

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People who criticize me for discussing Chechnya always get it backwards: They insist that Russia invaded Chechnya in 1994 *because* of the Beslan school siege. That was in 2004, at a time when most Chechen men were dead, which is why the siege was carried out by women. Also, while a school is not the best choice of targets, the high casualties among the hostages were mostly the result of Russian Special Forces' use of at least three [RPO Shmel](#) thermobaric (fuel-air explosive) rockets, an horrific incendiary on the surface that also has the effect of sucking the air out of bunkers, causing entrenched soldiers' lungs to collapse. – Victor Aguilar