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A Self-fulfilling Prophecy: The Seeds of Islamic Radicalisation in Chechnya

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Introduction

> The Russian invasion was extremely cruel under the famous Russian General Ermolov, who destroyed village after village, massacred, expelled and tortured the population. His campaign of terror in fact fuelled the Chechens' hatred of the Russians, as well as their desire for freedom and their willingness to fight and die for it. The Russian invasion had completely disrupted the traditional way of life. The people were about to lose their independence as well as their identity to the Russian anti-Islamic policies. Moral decadence increased under influence of Russian habits. The ruling house of native Dagestani princes had compromised itself in the eyes of the population by choosing to hold on to their titles in return for their allegiance to the Russians. In short, the beginning of the 19th century in the North Caucasus was marked by social and political turmoil, which constituted a fertile ground for the ideas of the Naqshbandiya. The Naqshbandiya rose up again in the 1820s under Sheikh Efendi, which marked the start of the famous 'Caucasian wars' that would last until 1856. (Hertog, 2001, p. 29)

With some changes to names and dates, this description of an episode of almost two centuries ago would be wholly applicable to the situation in Chechnya just before and during the first Russian invasion in 1994. The atrocities committed by the Russian army during the war are widely known by now and have been regularly condemned by human rights organisations: villages were levelled to the ground, people burned alive in their own houses, the inhabitants executed after surrender, hospitals attacked despite a white flag displayed, market-places bombed with fragmentation bombs and nail bombs, the now notorious filtration camps were set up in order to 'filter' fighters from ordinary people. The further away the expected easy, quick victory seemed, the more determined the Russian forces became not just to win the war, but also to break the entire Chechen population, which was sustaining its fighters with bases, food and support, through terror. The losses and horrors of the war radicalised the Chechen national identity, alienated the Chechen people even more from the Russians and strengthened their determination to resist. The radicalisation of Islam that took place

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during the first war consequently found a fertile soil in the postwar political and social turmoil. In August 1999 a group of 'Wahhabis' under the command of Shamil' Basayev invaded the neighbouring Republic of Dagestan in order to establish an Islamic state. This meant the beginning of the second Chechen war, which continues to this day.

In this article I would like to elaborate on the initial process of radicalisation on the Chechen side on the eve of and during the first Russian invasion. A more detailed exploration of the state of society in Chechnya before the war will make it clear that as such there did not exist a political or social basis for radicalisation. The Russian invasion of 1994, however, started a specific new dynamic in which religion played an important, but not always rightly assessed, role. The conflict is not a holy war, waged by Islamic fundamentalists; but to say that religion does not play a role at all is not true either. The truth has to be found, as usual, in the middle, the more so since the role of religion has been changing in the course of the conflict and in the dynamics of reciprocal revenge. The history of Chechen resistance against Russian domination, which has lasted for more than 200 years, offers in this regard a large number of parallels, insights and lessons for the current conflict.

The Role of Islam on the Eve of the First Chechen War

After *perestroika* a religious revival began in most parts of the Soviet Union. In the North Caucasus there was a strong revival of Islam, but it started mainly with the legalisation and the restoration of the symbols of religiosity: mosques were reopened or newly built, classes in Arabic and the study of the Quran were openly organised, restrictions on the *hajj* – the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca – were lifted. Although the revival of Islam had a major influence on the lives of individuals and on society as a whole, it did not play such an important role in the political life of the Muslim republics of the Caucasus in these first years.

In Chechnya-Ingushetia, Islam was almost completely legalised in 1990, but it did not appear to be a contentious issue in Chechen politics (Henze, 1995, p. 37). Except for two religious parties, the political groups that were emerging did not have any specifically Islamic objectives, nor did they favour the creation of an Islamic state. There was nothing distinctly Islamic about the state structure that was worked out during the first part of 1992. The Constitution was entirely free of religious or ethnic particularism. Although it is proclaimed in the name of the 'Almighty', there are no further references to Islam. The liberal spirit of the Constitution is reflected in the articles dealing with religion, ideology, social justice and human rights, such as Article 4:

> Democracy in the Chechen republic is implemented on the basis of political and ideological pluralism. ... No ideology can be established as an official ideology. ... Political parties and other public organizations which propagate racial, national, social, religious, or class hatred are forbidden as well as those which appeal to violence. (Henze, 1995, p. 35)

The two religious parties that emerged on the political scene gained only a very limited following. The Islamic Path Party (*Islamsky put'*), formed in 1990 by Bislan Gantemirov,[1] served more the personal interests and ambitions of its founder than any common Islamic goals, although its programme included the fusion of *sharia* (Islamic law) and *adat* (customary law), the creation of an Islamic state and the

establishment of relations with Islamic countries of the Middle East. The Islamic Path party functioned within the framework of the National Congress, but was irrelevant in the political process. The party consisted mainly of businessmen, although some of its members were radicals who envisaged violent action to achieve political ends. The second party, the fundamental Islamic Revival Party (*Islamskaya partiya vozrozhdeniya*), was never officially registered in the republic.

There was thus no evidence of radical Islamic motivation in the Chechen rising for independence, despite the spectre raised by some journalists and political figures in Moscow of an Islamic fundamentalist uprising in Chechnya (Henze, 1995). Although Dudayev and his supporters were accused of planning the creation of an Islamic republic, Dudayev explicitly ruled this out.[2] In the autumn of 1991 he said that Islamic fundamentalism in Chechnya represented no danger, but maintained that hostile actions by Russia could push Chechen nationalism onto a more extremist, Islamic path (Henze, 1995, p. 37).[3] Although he took his oath on the Quran, he was not inclined toward Islamic militancy himself and there was almost nothing about Islam in his preelection programme. Dudayev was definitely aware of the place of Islam in the Chechen republic and its potential role, but especially in the first years he seemed to be determined to keep it separate from politics. According to Anna Zelkina, he was partly motivated in this by his ambition to be a mediator between the conflicting peoples of the Caucasus and to unite them, Christian as well as Muslim peoples, in one federation (Zelkina, 1993, p. 122). Consequently, he wanted to combat every potentially disintegrative factor, including religion or ethnicity. He saw the role of Chechnya as a 'bridge between the Muslim East and the Christian West of the Caucasus' (Zelkina, 1993, p. 122).

Nevertheless, there were already some signs of political Islam present in this prewar period. These signs came especially from Yandarbiyev, Dudayev's ally and successor,[4] who is believed to be the one who introduced Dudayev to the possibilities of political Islam (Lieven, 1998, pp. 363–64). Whether he spoke from conviction or from political opportunism, his views clearly testify to the power of survival of Islam in Chechnya. As will be seen below, Islam had indeed remained an organic part of Chechen society, despite Russian colonialism and 70 years of Soviet atheism, repression and deportation. The Islam that had survived, however, was of a particular, but non-radical kind.

> Today, minarets of newly built mosques poke above the low roofs where the Soviets once thought they had eradicated religion. On calm summer evenings, the muezzin's voice calls in Arabic for the faithful to come to prayers. Old men with carved walking sticks and white beards come up the road. Behind them are young children in bright skull caps, already being instructed in the faith. ... Not a word of Russian is spoken. Whichever autonomous republic you are in – from Dagestan, to Kabardino-Balkaria or Adygea – the scene is the same. The map says you are on the southern border of the Russian Federation, but this is in theory. In fact, you left Russia long ago and you have now entered the ancient, enduring and tragic world of Allah's mountains. (Smith, 1998, p. 4)

Islam came to Chechnya only in the late sixteenth century, when the first Chechen tribes in lowland Chechnya converted to Islam under the influence of missionaries both peaceful and militant. It took a century and a half for Islam to reach the tribes of the mountainous parts of Chechnya and only by the second half of the eighteenth

century was Islam generally adopted as the official religion among the Chechen tribes.[5] Islam came to the North Caucasus in the form of Sunni Islam. In contrast to Dagestan, there were almost no Muslim schools or *madrassahs* and only few well-educated scholars in Chechnya, and knowledge of Islam and the Arabic language always remained very basic. Such Muslim and Arabic learning as existed was almost exclusively transmitted by scholars from Dagestan. Rather than by learned scholars and through Islamic institutions, Islam in Chechnya was disseminated by divinely inspired holy men, to whom all kinds of supernatural powers were ascribed and who formed the centre of religious life in Chechnya.[6] Due to the lack of Islamic institutions and well-educated scholars, Islam in Chechnya always remained relatively superficial and popular in character, especially in the high mountains, a situation which allowed pre-Islamic beliefs to survive.

When Islam came to the North Caucasus, the prevailing beliefs there were pagan with some distinct Christian influences.[7] The pre-Islamic beliefs of the Chechen tribes rested on an elaborate pantheon of various deities, good and evil spirits who lived in the forests, the mountains, the water and the sky, and the veneration of dead ancestors. For centuries Christianity had dominated religious life in the area since it had spread in the sixth century through Byzantium and Armenia. From the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, when Georgia was the dominant political power in the region, the influence of Christianity was at its strongest. Despite the activities of Catholic missionaries from Venice and Genoa in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the influence of Christianity declined, but left its traces in the prevailing pagan belief system. Even after Islam was adopted by the Chechen tribes, paganism with some traces of Christianity continued to influence their religious lives. Some pre-Islamic beliefs were modified and acquired Islamic colouring, while some Islamic elements were altered to accommodate to the existing belief system.[8] Other pagan beliefs survived despite their obvious clash with Islamic ones. By the late eighteenth century Islam had become the dominant religious system in the north-east Caucasus, but highland Chechnya was still ruled by a religious syncretism.

The survival of pre-Islamic beliefs and practices within and together with the Islamic religious system was due to the predominant role of mystical Sufism in the spread of Islam in the North Caucasus. Sufism emerged in the eighth and ninth centuries in parallel with the development of Islamic law, and focused more on an interior spiritual life (Esposito, 1995). 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 emphasises detachment from the distractions and the deceptiveness of this world.[9] Sufis tend to stress inwardness over outwardness, contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of the soul over social interaction. It is much more attractive to a vast majority of Muslims than the more developed theological systems that are 'largely negative and substituted for the vivid personal relation between God and man presented by the Qur'an an abstract and depersonalised discussion of logical concepts' (Esposito, 1995, vol. 2, p. 104). Sufism intensifies the ritual life of Muslims by focusing on the remembrance of God's name as commanded by the Quran, which is for Sufis the *raison d'être* of all Islamic ritual. Sufis have also developed an elaborate shrine culture around the tombs of famous Sufi sheikhs or 'saints' who are believed to perform miracles even after their death. The saint's shrine is the focal point of important rituals, such as the pilgrimage, the asking for divine blessing, the *zikr* rituals and the annual festival of the saint. The Sufi shrine culture is repeatedly criticised by other tendencies within Islam as *bida* or heretical innovation to authentic early Islam.

Sufism started among the spiritual elites, but by the twelfth century it had already grown into a popular mass movement. It won the hearts of the educated and non-educated alike by its spiritual vision and ritual practices, as well as by its more inclusive, accommodationist and syncretist tendencies. Sufism spread throughout and beyond the Muslim world through a vast network of Sufi brotherhoods or *tariqa*. '*Tariqa*' in Arabic means 'path' or 'way' and refers to the mystics in early Muslim history who developed their personal spiritual paths. They gathered around themselves groups of followers who were identified and bound together by the special mystic path of their 'guide' or 'sheikh'. Out of these groups the brotherhoods emerged as the major social organisations in the Islamic community. Usually the leadership of a brotherhood would pass from one sheikh to another together with the specific Sufi knowledge. Some sheikhs acquired a lot of social and political influence, which brought them throughout history into conflict with the Islamic scholars or *ulama* as well as with secular authorities. The Sufi brotherhoods played a major role in the expansion of Islam because the less legalistic approach of Sufism allowed adaptation to local customs and beliefs. This helped Islam to become part of popular religious activity with a minimum of conflict. The accommodation of 'foreign, un-Islamic' beliefs and practices by the Sufis has always been condemned by the more law-centred *ulama*. Sufi brotherhoods have also provided significant organisation and support for movements of resistance to colonial rule throughout the Muslim world, especially in the nineteenth century.

In the North Caucasus, Islam became widely rooted through the efforts of two Sufi brotherhoods, the Naqshbandiyya and the Qadiriyya. The Naqshbandiyya, one of the most widespread and vigorous brotherhoods, spread into Dagestan and Chechnya at the end of the eighteenth century, when larger brotherhoods of all types were expanding into many different regions. The brotherhood was founded in Bukhara in the fourteenth century.[10] The essential characteristics of the Naqshbandiyya are strict adherence to the *sharia*, a sobriety in devotional practice, which means the shunning of music and dance, and a tendency to political involvement.[11] The Qadiriyya, founded in Baghdad in the twelfth century, was the most widespread of the brotherhoods and arrived in the North Caucasus in the second half of the nineteenth century.[12] Although they have a distinct religious, social and political profile, both brotherhoods have played a crucial role in the religious life and history of the North Caucasus. They provided the many different peoples of the Caucasus with a sense of common identity. Traditionally strong and politically active, they also laid the foundations of and provided the active leadership for the militant resistance against Russian colonisation of the North Caucasus in the nineteenth century.

With the revolution of 1917 an era of religious persecution began. The Soviet authorities tried to undermine the influence of Islam by emphasising national differences, closing *madrassahs* and mosques and outlawing *sharia* courts. The frontal assault on Islam began in 1928: the brotherhoods were outlawed; Sufi and other Muslim leaders were arrested and their property nationalised. The Second World War brought yet another tragedy to the Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus. In 1944 Stalin liquidated the Chechen-Ingush Republic and ordered the whole population to be deported to the steppes of Kazakhstan and Siberia. The official reason for the deportation was the alleged collaboration of the Chechen people with the Germans during the Second World War, although the Germans had never reached Chechen territory. The real reason was most likely the wish of the Soviet leadership to get rid of this rebellious nation once and for all. Their name was effaced, their cultural symbols were destroyed and history was rewritten as if the Chechens had never existed.

As a matter of fact, the deportation considerably strengthened the role of religion among the exiled peoples. As cultural and educational activity came to a halt, and as there were no newspapers or books in the native language, 'what after all, could the people turn to, if not religion?' (Henze, 1995, p. 24). The brotherhoods, and with them Islam, began to flourish again and gained many new adherents.[13] They became incorporated into the social structure, to the point where each individual had not only family and clan loyalties, but also a Sufi brotherhood loyalty (Zelkina, 1993, p. 120). The role of religion, strengthened through the brotherhoods, became even more solid, since the brotherhoods, and through them religion, were the crucial actors in preserving the common identity of the Chechen people in exile.

In 1957, after the death of Stalin and with Khrushchev in power, the Chechen republic was officially restored and the Chechen people were rehabilitated and allowed to return to their homeland. After their return, the Soviet atheistic propaganda machine started to work at full speed again. A special 'army of atheistic experts' flooded the inhabitants of Grozny with antireligious lectures.[14] Hostile attitudes to Islam were routinely expressed in the press and mass media. The Chechen people were in all sorts of ways discouraged from practising Islam. Many of the active Sufi adepts were hunted down and arrested.

This renewed attack on religion gave birth to what came to be called 'parallel Islam'. The anti-Islamic campaigns had destroyed the material and structural basis of the Muslim and Sufi leaders, but this did not mean that Islamic belief and practice were eradicated altogether. On the contrary, the deformalised but still vibrant faith of the Chechen people was absorbed into the informal networks of the brotherhoods. The brotherhoods were so strongly developed and had built such extensive networks during the deportation period that they were now able not only to ensure the survival of Islamic belief and practice amidst constant atheistic militancy, but also to nourish it underground. This development had of course implications for Islamic faith and practice.

The destruction of the material and structural basis of the Muslim leadership evaporated the hitherto rigid separation between the official, formal 'mosque' stream of Islam and the informal 'non-mosque' stream of the Sufi networks. One of the most remarkable features of this period of 'parallel Islam' was the suspension of the traditional competition between these two tendencies, to the extent that the majority of Muslim clerics who were still in the region belonged to one of the brotherhoods. This also meant that the belief and practice of Islam in Chechnya became even less theological and juridical. With the disappearance of formal, institutionalised religion the faith of the people became unavoidably more inward-looking, and more emphasis was put on the ceremonial side of religious practice.

An invaluable role in the preservation of the Islamic faith during this period was played by the Sufi shrine culture. Because of the restrictions on going on pilgrimage to Mecca many Chechens went regularly on pilgrimages to one of the innumerable local shrines of Sufis and martyrs all over the country.[15] Although most of them had been destroyed by the Soviet authorities, the Chechens remembered everything and had restored them as best they could. The shrines assumed the role of spiritual centres as a result of religious gatherings in which the Sufis played a paramount role.

> The pilgrimage exercises a determining influence on the preservation of religious feelings in the population. During the pilgrimage *zikr* ceremonies are performed and religious fanatics carry on open religious propaganda.... Pilgrims come from everywhere, from the villages and the cities, and when

> they return home, they sing religious songs and behave as active propagandists of holy places.[16]

Islam in Chechen society was indeed preserved not only as a religion, but also, maybe even more so, as a way of life. Not only Islamic beliefs but also the main religious rites persisted throughout the atheistic campaigns. The vast majority of the people continued to observe the Muslim rites at births, marriages and deaths, and celebrated the birthday of the Prophet in addition to praying, fasting and going on pilgrimage. There was an 'exceptional attachment, on the part of believers and non-believers alike, to a set of practices which constitute the "Muslim way of life"'.[17]

The wide diffusion of the Sufi brotherhoods throughout Chechen society assured the continuity of the faith among the younger generation. A particular feature of Sufism in Chechen society is its congruency with the clan system. The leader of a clan and the head of a Sufi group in one area are often one and the same person, so that clan and *tariqa* loyalty overlap and have a mutually reinforcing effect (Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 21). The strong social structure of Chechen society with its emphasis on family solidarity and clan loyalty assured the continuity of religious practice among the younger generation, since many were simply born in a family that has for long been associated with a particular brotherhood.[18]

Despite the destruction of their institutional structures, the constant and systematic activity of the Sufi brotherhoods ensured the victorious survival of Islam, both as a religion and as a way of life (Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 19). There was not a single mosque in the Chechen-Ingush Republic from 1943 to 1978, and yet it remained, together with Dagestan, 'the most religious territory of Soviet Islam' (Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 18). 'Parallel Islam' was practised throughout the Muslim territories of the Soviet Union but nowhere as much as in the North Caucasus.[19] Although the outer shell of Chechen society became more and more sovietised, the Muslim spirit was still pulsing in its veins. Before the start of the first Chechen war there was, however, no social or political basis in Chechnya for Islamic radicalisation. The form of Islam that had withstood all the ordeals of the Soviet period in the beginning of the 1990s 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. In mountainous Chechnya, which had after all remained more immune to the Soviet influence, Islam was not just a way of life but had maintained more power as a religion in itself. Some leading figures in Chechnya may well have been genuinely devout Muslims in the early 1990s, but for many of them Islam had become more an aspect of Chechen national tradition and national pride than a central motivating force in its own right (Lieven, 1998, p. 363). The sociopolitical situation before the war seemed to confirm the view that Islamic radicalisation could be created only by political opportunists and thus shallowly, or, as Dudayev already said in 1991, under the pressure of growing Russian hostility.

The Role of Islam in the First Chechen War

That is exactly what happened. Under the influence of the imminent threat of war Islam started to play a different role. Islam constituted an inseparable part of the Chechen national identity, which was defined in more radical terms in the face of Russian aggression, and as such the religious and the ethnic factors were mobilised together in the resistance against Russia. Islam and ethnicity were historically intertwined and mutually reinforcing components of the Chechen national identity.

The ethnic identity of the Chechens, which had always been very strong, was compounded by a religious element with their conversion to Islam in the seventeenth century. The real symbiosis of ethnicity and religion occurred for the first time in the eighteenth century, when Islam became a vast part of the Chechen identity, and always became more powerful in times of direct confrontation with Russia.

More then 200 years of Chechen resistance provide ample evidence of this. The first *jihad* or holy war against the Russian Empire was led in Chechnya by the Ottoman Naqshbandi Sheikh Mansur Ushurma from 1785 to 1791. Whereas the campaigns of the Vainakh (the historical name for the Ingush and Chechen people) against Turkish and Persian invaders, for many centuries the rivals of Russia in the area, had never fostered Muslim sentiments, let alone the development of a sense of unity based on Islam, this changed when Russia became the principal enemy in the Caucasus. In many ways Sheikh Mansur set the example for all later resistance movements. He was a charismatic Naqshbandi leader who preached a simple programme with three principal points: return to ascetic Islam; the application of the *sharia*; and *jihad* against the 'infidels'.[20] Under his leadership many superficial Muslims were effectively converted and for the first time different peoples of the North Caucasus were united under the banner of Sufi Islam.

During the following half century, in which the Russians were trying to get the North Caucasus under their control, the Chechen resistance evolved as well. Initially Sufi sheikhs were preaching authentic inner purification, both individual and social, as the prerequisite for reestablishing freedom and independence from Russian occupation. Consequently more emphasis was put on the supremacy of the *sharia* in both public and private life, on the obligation of the Muslim ruler to maintain that priority and his duty to preserve the Muslim community, and on resistance to domination by the 'infidels'. Rather than a goal in itself, *jihad* against the Russians was initially a means of ensuring the establishment of the *sharia* and the Muslim way of life. The persistent and bloody aggression of the Russians, however, switched the emphasis more and more to the organisation of a massive resistance movement under the auspices of the Sufi brotherhood. The leading Sufi figures of the Muslim community were at the same time also the military leaders of the resistance campaign and eventually also the political leaders of the state. Under the rule of Imam Shamil, a Sufi sheikh who led the resistance against Russia for 25 years and who is up to the present day regarded as probably the most important national and religious hero in Chechnya, the different Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus were for the first time in their history united for a relatively long period on the basis of their religious identity. The transcendent ideal of Islam had for the first time subordinated tribalism.[21] This was to a high degree realised through the creation of an Islamic state in 1834 according to the strict norms of the *sharia*. Since the first goal of the Islamic state was the enactment of the *sharia*, for which resistance to Russian rule and independence were a *sine qua non*, it was spiritual idealism that bound the different tribes together in the first place rather than the secular aim of independence. In his person and under his rule Shamil succeeded in combining Sufi spirituality and *sharia* legality, two Islamic trends which have always been in tension throughout the history of Islam in the North Caucasus. He personified a harmonious synthesis between an external way of action and a profound inner life of prayer (Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 9). Up to the present day this historical period is referred to as 'the era of the shari'a' and 'the golden age' (Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 7). After all, Shamil and his ill-equipped mountaineers had withstood the Russian armies for 25 years without external support, sustained only by their faith and martial prowess (Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 7).

In the second half of the nineteenth century the Qadiriyya appeared and quickly gained popularity. It was introduced by the Dagestani Kunta Haji Kishiyev, who initially preached mystical detachment, concentration on self-purification and abstention from politics, a message that was welcomed by the war-weary mountain-dwellers. Russia, however, feared new uprisings under the auspices of this rapidly growing brotherhood and attempted to crush it.[22] As a self-fulfilling prophecy, the Qadiriyya also consequently developed an ideology of resistance. The Qadiriyya together with the Naqshbandiyya were the main organisers of the anti-Russian revolt of 1877–78 in Chechnya and Dagestan. Despite defeat and severe repression, the brotherhoods maintained their positions and became even more rooted through successive resistance movements, after the revolution of 1917 and during the deportation.

During the 1970s and 1980s religion, ethnic pride, anticommunism and anti-Russian feelings became so interlinked and mutually reinforcing among Chechens that it is impossible to separate one attitudinal strand from another (Henze, 1995, p. 26). Indeed, the religious gatherings organised by the Sufi brotherhoods often evolved into political demonstrations. The relative importance of religion may have declined at the beginning of the 1990s in favour of a stronger nationalist component within this symbiosis, but they were still inseparable. The basis for the latest independence movement in Chechnya was undoubtedly secular nationalism, but as a result of the influence of Islam and the Sufi brotherhoods in society Chechen nationality was nevertheless interpreted in ethnic and religious terms. Under the immediate threat of war in 1994 the powerful symbiosis of ethnic and religious identity came alive once again. As a matter of fact, the symbiosis is so strong, and in a sense so 'natural', that one could say there is no nationalism without Islam and no Islam without a national element in Chechnya. The power of the symbiosis of Islam and ethnicity can be illustrated with the *zikr* ritual, which played an important role in the Chechen resistance.

> In the still point in the centre of the world, the Chechens dance. Old men with tranquil eyes and taut faces form the circle, moving in a dignified shuffle, singing their prayers. Their black coats flap in the black winds, their words are swallowed up by the night, but their stately astrakhan hats bob on in an endless act of worship.
>
> Their prayer-dance, the zikr, has gone on for centuries. The Chechens danced before Islam came to the mountains. They embraced the faith of the Sufis – the whirling dervishes of the East – and the dance went on. They have danced throughout the hard years that followed, drawing strength from their prayers to continue the fight against the Russians who invaded their austere home from the plains of the north.
>
> The dance and the faith, which merged at the moment of the first Russian advance, are the most potent symbol of defiance Chechens have against the violent marriage forced on them by the Tsar's big guns. For, like the zikr, Chechen history since that marriage has turned in repeating cycles, cycles of war and not-war, suppression and oppression, blood and rebirth. ... and a Chechen prophecy that their tiny nation will be brought to the brink of extinction at Russian hands every fifty years has come true over and over again. (Bennett, 1998, p. 1)

The practice of the *zikr* has always given birth to many fears, fantasies and myths among outsiders, who have interpreted it as a purely folkloristic event, a mystical phenomenon or a manifestation of extreme fundamentalism. *Zikr* is basically the remembrance, the invocation of Allah by constantly repeating his name, based on the command in the Quran to 'remember God often' (Lieven, 1998, p. 366). It is the most fundamental ritual of the Sufi brotherhoods, but it can be performed in different manners.[23] The circular motion of the dance is meant to imitate both the passage of worshippers round the Kaaba in Mecca, and the movement of the universe, as well as to bring the dancers into a state of religious ecstasy (Lieven, 1998, p. 367). The Russian authorities saw this intriguing phenomenon as the chief element in sustaining collective religious fervour, which needed but a spark to turn into militant resistance against the Russians.

> The Chechens could rise as one body in response to a religious summons to arms: it is enough that one audacious preacher take up his sabre against the Russians for dozens of thousands of sabres to be drawn and that dozens of thousands of men are willing to die with the certainty that they die for their faith.[24]

Clearly perceiving the potential of the *zikr* for political mobilisation, the Russian authorities consequently organised a 'mission' to repress '*zikrism*' as a religiopolitical movement.

The Soviet authorities likewise feared the *zikr* in the context of the symbiosis of religion and nationalism. Soviet analysts even suspected the clerics and Sufis in Chechnya of deliberately conflating religion and nationalism: 'By every possible means they try to consolidate these ties, to give a religious colouring to nationalism, and a national meaning to religious feelings.' [25] That there should be such a symbiosis is not however so surprising given the facts that militant Soviet atheism had aimed at the eradication of Islam, that is, of an important element of the Chechen identity, while the Soviet system had even denied the Chechens their right to exist as a nation. In the practice of the *zikr*, Islamic, ethnic, nationalistic, anticommunist and anti-Russian feelings all became intermingled. As such, the very practice of the *zikr* was a potent statement against the status quo. It is thus not surprising that the resistance to the Russian invasion in December 1994 was formally inaugurated by a public *zikr* session in Grozny and that impromptu *zikr* sessions were held by groups of fighters throughout the country.

In rituals such as the *zikr*, religion and the traditional martial spirit of the Chechens strengthen each other. Chechen society is indeed penetrated with a martial spirit, which is linked to a very strict code of honour and dignity: every man is considered first and foremost a warrior. His weapons are his dearest possessions and more than one Chechen warrior has written a love-poem in honour of his dagger (Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 3). Since colonisation began the fighting skills of the Chechens have been praised by friend and enemy alike and they have built up a reputation as brave, fearless, intelligent fighters and masters in guerrilla tactics. This image of the Chechen fighter and his unique fighting skills are immortalised in the poems and the works of the great Russian Romantics Pushkin, Lermontov and Tolstoy, who were inspired by their own visits to the Caucasus. Their masterful depictions of the Chechen people have entered the Russian psyche and they still exert a strong influence on Russians' picturing of and attitude toward people from the Caucasus.

The majority of the Chechen fighters are affiliated in some way with a brotherhood and participate widely in these rituals, especially the *zikr*, which deepen the sense of the Absolute and the core values of Islam. As such they infuse religious zeal into the martial spirit of the Chechens and nourish their impulse to sacrifice. This interaction finds its culmination in the phenomenon of the *gazi* or holy warrior. The *gazi* makes a solemn vow to fight the *gazavat* or holy war for which he is prepared to die. After a public declaration and formal ceremony, he is regarded as somebody already dead to this world (Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 45). The holy warrior is indeed presumed to fight as one already dead, and not 'just' as somebody prepared to die. Penetrated already by the certitude of a greater life hereafter, he displays the superhuman courage that became so legendary during the first Chechen war (De Waal and Gall, 1997).

Although not so many fighters make the vow, the behaviour of the holy warrior in the struggle sets an example to the other fighters who become in turn inspired and encouraged (Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 45). In the light of the above, it is not surprising that the members of the original Naqshbandi brotherhood, to which also the famous field commander Shamil' Basayev belongs, are reputed to be the finest at fighting.

Under the influence of the war Islam started to adopt more radical forms on the political scene as well. The rhetoric of political Islam became insistent. Initially this was more a symbol and expression of national feeling than a detailed programme in its own right, but later even Dudayev could no longer ignore the importance of the Islamic dimension in the internal articulation of the resistance. The peculiar logic of the development of the Chechen form of nationalism seems to have propelled Dudayev into taking Islam more and more seriously as a rallying force for the nation and, possibly, as a value and goal in its own right (Lieven, 1998, p. 363). Dudayev, however, never presented himself as the combined religious, political and military leader, as his historical predecessors had done, and the Chechens were not united in their resistance under the banner of Islam as such.

The two important pillars of traditional society in the north-east Caucasus, namely traditional Islam and *adat* (customary law), form as such an important buffer against the influence of fundamentalism. The war in Chechnya and the grievous socio-economic situation, have, however, undermined traditional society. Although the majority shares the view that 'Wahhabism' as such is alien to the peoples of the North Caucasus, this fundamentalist movement has nevertheless acquired a visible place in society.

Conclusion

Overall, it seems that the Chechens were probably fighting in the first place out of a secular zeal for their right to self-determination, which would then consequently provide them with the opportunity to build a state and society including an authentic place for Islam as an intrinsic element of their culture. It is clear from the history of the Chechen resistance that ethnicity and religion have always formed a powerful, inseparable symbiosis when confronted with a threat from Russia. It is especially through the rituals and the wider cultural and spiritual context in which they should be seen that Islam in Chechnya played such an important role in generating, sustaining and channelling the resistance against the Russians. The radicalisation of Islam that started during the first war continued in the '*interbellum*': the influence of 'Wahhabism' became stronger, the *sharia* was introduced and the Chechen Republic was declared an Islamic state. Islam became even more politicised. Rival groups with diverging interests applied the Islamic discourse extensively in their quest for power

and legitimacy. The socioeconomic situation, the influence of radical Islamic organisations from abroad and the second Russian invasion in 1999 consequently all helped the growth of fundamentalism in Chechnya. These factors contributed to the fact that the dynamic that was started because of the first Russian invasion in 1994 ended up in a call for '*jihad*' against Russia.

The Russian invasion is certainly not the only reason for the consequent radicalisation and politicisation of Islam in Chechnya, but it definitely lies at the roots of it. Although the dynamics that developed on the Chechen side because of the war definitely had specific characteristics, 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 too often transform moderate believers into extremists: the 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.

Notes

1 Gantemirov was a former police sergeant, used-car dealer and minor mafia boss in Moscow who returned to Chechnya in 1990 and went into politics. He was the mayor of Grozny in 1991–93, went into opposition, became mayor again in 1995, was arrested and imprisoned in 1996, and then resumed his position of mayor until May 2001. For his 'vague' attitude toward Islam see Lieven, 1998, p. 364.

2 In his words: 'Where any religion prevails over the secular constitutional organisation of the state, either the Spanish Inquisition or Islamic fundamentalism will emerge' (Lieven, 1998, p. 363).

3 A similar view was expressed by Chechen information minister Udugov in 1992: 'The task the Dudayev government has set itself is to create a democratic constitutional government, and so far the people support this. But if Moscow creates terrorist acts and blames it on Dudayev, and this leads to civil war, then this could lead to a victory of the Muslim fundamentalists' (Lieven, 1998, p. 364).

4 Yandarbiyev was vicepresident from 1993 until 1996. He then became president until the elections of January 1997.

5 The islamisation of the Ingush also started only at that time and was not completed until the second half of the nineteenth century. This was in part a consequence of their geographical position along the Daryal gorge, the main route between Georgia and Russia, which put the Ingush tribes first under the strong influence of Christian Georgia and then, from the eighteenth century, of Russia.

6 This may be explained by the assumption that the missionaries who preached Islam to the Chechen tribes had at least some Sufi affiliation. However, it was not until the eighteenth century that Sufism came to play a crucial role in the religious life and history of the Caucasus.

7 In Dagestan Islam encountered Judaism and Zoroastrianism.

8 Whereas the bodies of the dead ancestors formerly descended to the Other World located beneath the earth, the advent of Islam transformed the Other World into Heaven, to which the souls of the dead ascend along a ladder. The Muslim conception of the Earth being surrounded by mountains did not correspond with the observations of the people in Chechnya, so the creation story was altered: since God had first created the Earth three times larger than He wanted to, He squeezed it in order to make it smaller, thus forming the mountains in the middle. (For these and other examples see Zelkina, 2000, pp. 36–39.)

9 The original meaning of '*sufi*' was 'one who wears wool', a term which in the eighth century came to be applied to Muslims with more ascetic inclinations who wore woollen garments. Various theories exist about the origin and nature of Sufism, but it is generally understood by scholars of religion to be the living spirit of the Islamic tradition. It is difficult to draw a strict line between Sufis and non-Sufis, but the distinction has nothing to do with the religious law schools, the Sunni/Shiite split, geography or social class.

10 The inspiration of the Naqshbandiyya can be traced back to the early Sufi Abu Yazid al-Bistami of the ninth century.

11 The brotherhood was given a wholly new impetus in the seventeenth century by Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi, the 'Renewer of the Second Millennium', who gave birth to the Mujaddidi branch of the Naqshbandiyya. The Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidi brotherhood in turn received a new impetus at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the Khalidiyya branch was founded by Mawlana Khalid al-Baghdadi, who attempted to create a centralised and disciplined order focused on his own person. He also took an active political stance, aiming at the supremacy of the *sharia* within Muslim society and at repelling European aggression. Although Dagestan had been acquainted with the Naqshbandiyya since the end of the eighteenth century it was the Khalidiyya branch that transformed Dagestan into Naqshbandi (-Mujaddidi-Khalidiyya) territory. The Khalidiyya in Dagestan aimed to replace the non-Islamic customary law by the *sharia* and to resist the imposition of Russian rule.

12 The name is derived from Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, who is regarded as the founder or sponsor of the brotherhood. Better known as a preacher at funerals than for his Sufi activities, he nevertheless acquired the reputation of a holy person. He left no system, no instructions and no *tariqa* of his own, but this gap was filled by relatives and followers who elaborated a Sufi brotherhood in his name. Eventually he became one of the most popular saints in Islam and by the fourteenth century the Qadiriyya had become a fully fledged brotherhood.

13 There was even a new branch of the Qadiriyya that emerged during the deportation and introduced many innovations in the practice of the *zikr*, namely the use of musical instruments such as violins and drums (Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 17).

14 There were 251 antireligious lectures in Grozny in 1967 alone (Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 18).

15 These were mostly tombs of local sheikhs, but also locations of massacres or executions. The most popular were the tombs of Uzun Haji and of the mother of Kunta Haji.

16 Two Dagestani Soviet antireligious experts in a report of 1975, as quoted in Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 20.

17 According to sociological research by Soviet academics, as quoted in Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 18.

18 In a village of about 500 people in the later Soviet period there would be about 25–30 active Sufi adepts while the rest of the population consisted of non-active adepts of the Naqshbandiyya or Qadiriyya brotherhood (Zelkina, 1993, p. 120).

19 The number of practising Sufis in the Chechen-Ingush and Dagestani Republics in the 1970s was estimated at 200,000, 'a fantastic number for an underground society banned by Soviet law' (see Shah-Kazemi, 1995, pp. 19–20).

20 The return to ascetic Islam was in contrast with the prevailing decadence and immorality among the mountain-dwellers, symbolised by their adoption of the Russian habits of drinking and smoking. The application of the *sharia* had to counter the supremacy of the *adat*. The *jihad* was in the first place aimed at the infidels within the Muslims' own territories, and only later at the Russians.

21 According to the Prophet, 'there is no tribalism in Islam'. Allegiance to Islam should take precedence over all other lower-level affiliations (see Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 8).

22 Kunta Haji was arrested in 1864 and died a few years later. Despite the attacks and deportations of Qadiri adepts, the movement continued to grow. It split into five branches which have survived to the present day.

23 Naqshbandiyya followers practice the 'silent *zikr*', as a rule sitting or standing and repeating the name of Allah in silence. Qadiriyya followers, on the other hand, perform the 'loud *zikr*', which crystallised around Kunta Haji in the second half of the nineteenth century. They move in circles, stand and shake their heads, or make jumping movements, constantly pronouncing, and sometimes singing, the name of Allah.

24 From an official report from 1868 by Ippolitov, captain of the gendarmes in Chechnya and charged with the mission to repress *zikrism*, as quoted in Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 12.

25 Soviet analyst Makatov as quoted in Shah-Kazemi, 1995, p. 21.

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