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1. Introduction

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Lived Experiences versus Ideal Norms

*Chechens: Culture and Society* is an ethnographic analysis of the sociocultural norms of the Chechen collective nation. In particular, the book portrays the “lived experiences” of Chechens, and the meanings of cultural norms, in the context of the ongoing war in their homeland. The primary purpose of the ethnography is to present a rich but realistic portrayal of the Chechen nation, the oppression in their history, the disharmony due to hardship that plagues their collectivity, and the fact that few Chechens are extremists.

Chechens are an ancient cultural group. Dolkhan Khojaev, writing for the website *Vaynakh Online*, states, “The Chechens are the native inhabitants of the central North-East Caucasus. Their own term for themselves is ‘nokhchi’ (the grandsons of Prophet Nouh). The Nakh tribes arrived here and settled by the first millennium AD.” Similarly, Amjad Jaimoukha writes, “It is traditionally accepted that the Vainakh have existed in the Caucasus, with their territory as a nucleus of a larger domicile, for thousands of years, and that it was the ‘birthplace’ of their ethnos” (2005, p. 23).

Chechen collective culture retains early idealisms of beliefs, values, and behaviors. Chechens are a distinct collectivity; their beliefs and behaviors greatly revolve around a code of sociocultural rules, *adat*. They teach their children *adat* very young, communal mechanisms protect and reinforce *adat*, and the perpetuity of Chechen norms is thus ensured through generations. Chechens change very little.

Chechens have a common saying: *It is hard to be a Chechen*. Chechen norms are strict, allowing for little variation or deviancy, and the collective nature of Chechens ensures that every individual and family is held accountable to these norms.
Adat is a set of ideals—indisputable, propagated, and internalized. In extraordinary times of conflict, however, ideal is difficult to achieve. Moreover, though the Chechen nation is a palpable collectivity, during the hardships of war, competing goals fracture the nation. What began in 1994 as a war of independence against Russia now resembles a struggle of Chechens against Chechens.

Nokhchalla, or Chechen culture, is not undocumented. Yet this is a time of cultural exploration for Chechens, perhaps a revival, perhaps destruction. In reality, Chechen norms are in play, at a contested juncture, and are quite difficult to live up to in a fluid oppositional context.

This ethnography, thus, especially highlights Chechen differences and disputes in current times. The study examines the Chechen nation’s cultural “ideals” but also strives to locate the humanity in Chechens—in short, their fallibilities.

Self-Determination and Development

This author also possesses a practitioner-activist aim in producing the present book. Chechens are an oppressed national group, having been subjected at least once to genocide and to continuous grave human rights violations of their people. This author advocates two goals for the Chechen people: peace for themselves and their neighbors, and self-determination, both of which are human rights.

The concept of “self-determination” is controversial and disputed in international law and across sovereign states. This author, however, adopts the position that Chechens, as an indigenous nation, have the right to exercise their free will to determine their political status and their social and economic development, and to preserve their distinct culture.

Whether or not the Chechen nation achieves full, internationally recognized independence remains to be seen. Certainly, a continuing war is destructive to all. It may be that a lasting peace will be achieved only through a restructuring of ties with Russia. As many Chechens assert, Russia should be a neighbor, not a ruler. Nevertheless, at this moment in time, Chechens are neither prepared to function as a peaceful, independent state, nor are they capable of doing so.

This ethnography, which offers a realistic portrayal of Chechens, seeks an audience of policy makers who are working to secure a lasting
peace for Chechens and their neighbors. This book presents the cultural resources at Chechens’ disposal, on which to build much that is constructive. It also outlines Chechens’ limitations that policy makers should take into account.

For what it is worth, the book also aims at Chechen readership—designed to talk to, not just about, Chechens. Interestingly, in this time of much uncertainty and conflict, many Chechens keep abreast of what others write, say, and do about them. They know of Russian policy and plans, international measures, who are their advocates, the political propaganda of their various factions, and much of the significant literature written about them. Chechens are not passive.

This author hopes and anticipates that Chechens, through any forum, will respond to this study. Some particular Chechens may take issue with this study’s inference that extremism could destroy Chechens’ culture and future. Others will concur with this conclusion. Most will welcome the presentation of Chechens’ hardship to a world audience. At present, there are few channels of communication between Chechens and the world at large, whether on an individual or on a national basis. Yet this author hopes that every reader will appreciate the objective portrayal of Chechens as both honorable and fallible. Chechens: Culture and Society is designed to be not a conclusion but a dialogue.

Historical Context of Chechen Conflict

The Chechen nation is a people of ancient origins, indigenous to the North Caucasus region. Islam appears to have disseminated into Chechnya gradually, though it was not until late eighteenth century that a definitive majority of Chechens embraced Islam: “The form of Islam practiced in Chechnya today, the Sufism of the Naqshbandi and Qadiri tariqats (orders), arrived from Dagestan in the late eighteenth century.”

At the last federal census taken, in 2010, the number of Chechens within the homeland borders totaled about 1,300,000. The Ingush peoples, who number less than one-half million, are the closest ethnic relatives of Chechens, and together the two nations are known historically as the “Vainakh” nation. Chechnya borders Ingushetia to the east, and the republic of Dagestan to the west.

North Caucasus has been a fought-over region for centuries and finally came under Russian dominance in the sixteenth
Chechens

century. Although part of the Russian Federation under the Russian Constitution, a secessionist movement in Chechnya began in 1990 and, in October 1991, Chechen leadership declared Chechnya’s independence. In March 1992, this leadership also adopted a Chechen constitution that neither the Russian Federation nor the international community recognized. An uneasy period followed, which culminated in heavy Russian offensives inside of Chechnya in 1994. After a protracted war, with heavy casualties on both sides, Russian forces, unable to defeat resistance fighters in the mountainous south, withdrew from Chechnya in August 1996. In all, tens of thousands of people died, or became homeless, and much of Chechnya was destroyed.

After Chechen fighters forced Russian forces to retreat, which is a point of immense pride among many Chechens (We defeated a great army!), Chechnya experienced a period of de facto independence, from 1996 to 1999. In August 1999, Chechen rebel incursions into the Republic of Dagestan took place but Russian forces pushed these back into Chechnya. During the same period, bombs in apartment buildings in Moscow and two other Russian cities killed over 300 people. The Russian government blamed the Chechen rebels and, in October 1999, Russian forces once again moved into Chechnya and launched heavy attacks. Thousands of Chechens fled to seek refuge in neighboring republics, including Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, other areas of the Russian Federation, and abroad. The Russian Federation once again secured its rule in Chechnya, through the backing of a pro-Russian Chechen leadership, headed by Ramzan Kadyrov.

During the past ten years, the political landscape of the Chechen conflict has changed perceptively. Russian federal political authorities have consolidated their efforts into forcing a resolution of the seemingly intractable conflict. A variety of strategies have been designed to give the impression that the Chechnya conflict has stabilized, resistance forces have been eradicated, and that the general Chechen population rejects independence and opts to remain within the Russian Federation.

A referendum on state status, a presidential election, and a variety of “carrot” incentives, including amnesty laws, destroyed property compensation, and public announcements of reconstruction plans, are proffered to the Chechen population as proof of federal authorities’ victory, and goodwill toward peaceful rehabilitation of the republic and cohabitation with Russia. With the help of Russian federal finance, building
and infrastructure repair continues in Chechnya, with Grozny hosting what is now the “largest mosque in Europe.”

However, whatever changes have occurred in political strategy, conditions in Chechnya remain precarious. Armed conflict continues in Chechnya and neighboring republics, between federal and pro-Russian Chechen forces, and resistance fighters. Numerous human rights abuses continue, including kidnapping, arbitrary detention, torture, and summary executions. Suicide bombings and other acts of hostility at the hands of insurgents are ongoing.

One of the greatest concerns voiced by human rights supporters is federal authorities’ lack of will and action to investigate grave violations committed by their own security forces. Oleg Orlov, head of the Russian human rights organization Memorial, states, “All of these cases [that Memorial filed] exemplify the participation of law enforcement agents in violent crimes, such as murders, rapes and torture. In all of these cases, the crimes’ perpetrators have remained unpunished so far. In most cases, criminal investigations were launched, but the crimes have not been investigated” (Dzutsev, 2012).  

A 2010 Council of Europe report clearly describes the “climate of fear” and impunity that pervades Chechnya today:

In the Chechen Republic, the current authorities continue to maintain a generalised climate of fear, notwithstanding the undeniable successes in the sphere of reconstruction and the distinct improvement of the region’s infrastructures, which had been laid to waste by two cruel and devastating wars. Nevertheless, the human rights situation and the functioning of justice and democratic institutions continue to give cause for the gravest concern: successive disappearances of the government’s opponents and human rights defenders still remain widely unpunished and are not elucidated with due diligence.

Russian authorities portray the current Chechen armed conflict that began in 1994 as “finished,” or “completed,” when referred to as the “anti-terrorist operation.” Yet it continues, not diminished, but metamorphosed. What began as a national, unified, drive for independence is now a highly conflictive struggle for history, cultural meaning, and survival.

In short, the threat of violence in Chechnya is imminent, ongoing, and certain. Current-day Chechnya is a police state, reinforced
by the personal police forces of pro-Russian leader Ramzan Kadyrov. In Chechnya, this repressive environment is divisive, but also fuels a burning demand for revenge on the part of many groups. Social structures are in upheaval, divisions are sharp and deadly; mere words can give reason to be killed.

Many Chechens claim the current strategy of Russian authorities is “psychological warfare”—beating down the Chechen population to force them to acquiesce, through threat, intimidation, and indiscriminate violence. Meanwhile, a large proportion of the able population is yet unemployed, infant mortality rates rival some of the poorest regions of the world, diseases like tuberculosis are widespread, and Chechens cite a recent alarming trend of “sudden death” in youth and young people—a phenomenon they say is caused by long-term crushing stress.

Perhaps one-third of the Chechen nation is living outside of the Chechen Republic, as internally displaced inside of Russia, or as refugees scattered throughout the world. Like those remaining inside of the Chechen Republic, Chechen refugees around the world exist largely without prosperity, development, or perspective for future.

Geographically, the conflict has spread throughout the Caucasus region into the heart of Russia, to the west through Europe, and southward through Turkey and parts of North Africa and the Middle East. Terror attacks and revenge killings associated with the Chechen conflicts occur in many areas of Caucasus, and Russia proper: cities, airplanes, schools, and officials are targets. Increasing assassinations abroad, including in Europe, Turkey, Dubai, and other countries, are evidence of the spread, not containment, of this war.

The Chechen armed conflict is far from over; there is ample evidence to suggest that it is widening in geographical scope, and deepening in national division. Internal divisions and the promise of “revenge,” promise to drive this conflict well into the coming decades.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

_Chechens: Culture and Society_ seeks to contribute to an understanding of the Chechen conflict, with solid realistic reflection on how Chechens interpret themselves, and how they explain the conflict. The text is designed to present the multidimensional nature of Chechens, and the ongoing violence in the Chechen homeland.
Chechens are a little known, largely misunderstood, and often misrepresented, tiny nation with a worldwide population of perhaps not more than 3 million. Historically Chechens have remained isolated—geographically, and also politically—under the dome of Russian oppression. Chechens are also extremely self-isolating: they are a highly secretive, closed collectivity, sharply suspicious of any manner of threat from outside.

To Russia, Chechens are a nuisance, a danger, an embarrassment, and a need. Russia needs Chechnya—its oil and mineral resources, but especially its territorial location and integrity. Chechnya is geopolitically important because of its location between Russia and southern neighbors, and because of the symbolism of Chechnya. Russia, reduced with the fall of the Soviet Union, cannot acquiesce to Chechen independence, at the risk of enticing other Caucasus nations to demand the same.

To stomp out this threat, Russian media (which is vastly state controlled) typically brands Chechens as “bandits” and “terrorists,” while federal and pro-Russia Chechen authorities maintain a police state in the region, exterminating resisters, and removing witnesses, including both local and foreign human rights defenders and humanitarian assistance organizers. The US government has listed the Chechen insurgent movement as a “terrorist organization,” a designation that for the uninformed public demonizes the entirety of the Chechen nation.

The European Court of Human Rights continues to decide cases in favor of Chechens, against the Russian Federation. Yet Russia has world standing and power, and a far-reaching military apparatus. A handful of local and foreign humanitarian and human rights organizations remain active in the Chechen conflict, yet are routinely blocked access, are heavily repressed, their members threatened, removed, and/or murdered. A range of human rights organizations has documented serious crimes of kidnapping and murder at the hands of the Russian-backed Chechen leadership.

The cycle of violence is self-perpetuating, because revenge attacks for those crimes are mounting, and planned for the unforeseeable future. The entire Chechen civilian population lives under constant threat, their alliances acutely questioned and ubiquitously under surveillance, and disappearances are a usual state of affairs in Chechnya. Recent assassinations of Chechen refugees abroad, including in Austria
and Turkey, reveal that international borders do not provide protection against this violence.

Now and then, the Chechen story appears in Western mainstream media, but usually only when the subject is a threat to non-Chechens, such as subway suicide bombers in Moscow, a school hostage situation in a republic in the south of Russia and, more recently, the Boston Marathon bombing in the United States. In the contemporary context of the “global war on terrorism,” the common international portrayal of Chechens remains obfuscated and confined within the bordered category of “Muslim terrorists.”

There is some headway in the production of academic texts that identify the multifaceted character of the Chechen population and war context, including discussion of the changing role of Islam in the conflict, and evidence of the significant role of cultural conflict and differences in prolonging and expanding the war. Much of this documentation is an historical examination of leadership factions; other documents intricately describe ancient Chechen sociocultural norms and structures. There is a void in the literature, however, of detailed analysis that shows how Chechens themselves are experiencing this conflict and differences.

Chechens are no friends to themselves, and they lose allies as quickly as they gain them. Chechens consistently repeat a multitude of strategic, tactical, diplomatic, and social mistakes. Having at least once been victims of genocide at the hands of Russia, living for decades under the iron fist of the paranoiac Soviet system, and now under a heavy dome of military, political, social, and cultural oppression, Chechens are quick to blame others but rarely perceive their own mistakes. They are the self-imposed outsiders, and their fractiousness renders them incomprehensible and unreliable.

Chechen’s cross-cultural skills are limited and reticent. They have existed in isolation from the rest of the world for most of their history, with the exception of unfavorable encounters with Russians, Cossacks, Kazakhs, and a spattering of Ukrainians and other minorities who settled in the area. Self-defense mechanisms include an extreme distrust of everyone, including other Chechens: in the current climate, everyone is suspect.

The Chechens are in a fight for their very existence—they believe the war is an onslaught against their culture, a repeat of the 1944
Introduction

Genocide ordered by Soviet leader Stalin. They believe high infant mortality rates are the result of Russians poisoning their babies in the womb; they cite high rates of stillbirths and child deformities as evidence of genocide. Many believe that Russia and the West together are involved in a massive conspiracy to destroy the Chechen culture and way of life—to force Chechens to be like them, or to eliminate the Chechen nation.

Earlier in this conflict, through a trial and error attempt at international diplomacy, Chechen leadership began an appeal to Europe, the United States, and Middle East, for support for independence, and for halting Russia’s participation in the wide-scale destruction of cities, villages, and populations in the Chechen Republic. Chechens received little support for their efforts against Russia. Over time, the majority of Chechens have lost faith in these efforts and this has embittered them to the motives of foreign states and peoples. The prevailing mentality is that everyone is against them, and they do not need anyone’s help—they will defend themselves. Violent radicalism has taken root in this mentality: since justice did not prevail earlier, all means of war are now legitimate. This in turn has pushed other Chechens to alternate extremes for protection—under the umbrella of Russian-backed forces.

Efforts to communicate on the world stage, to reach peaceful solutions through dialogue and diplomacy, have failed. Now the Chechen insurgency leadership has changed, and with this change, moderates and moderate methods have been eliminated. This has prolonged the war and divided the population. Chechens who seek peaceful means and goals lack the mechanisms, structures, voice, and capability to promote or defend a sustainable resolution of the conflict.

Russia has insisted that the “Chechen Problem” is an internal affair, and has effectively barred foreign aid and rights organizations from monitoring and assisting the situation. Local organizations conduct their affairs under extraordinary threat and repression from the Russian and Russia-backed Chechen authorities.

The cause of Chechen “victimization” may have commanded a larger, sympathetic audience earlier in the conflict. Prolongation of the conflict, however, and the persecution and elimination of moderates, has given rise to the dominance of radical approaches and ideologies. Worldwide alienation of the Chechen population has begun in earnest,
self-perpetuated from within, by missteps, mistakes, and violence. Sharp, desperate social divisions have resulted in the phenomenon that even Chechens do not trust Chechens.

Paradoxically, the ancient collective Chechen identity, centered on pride, honor, tradition, and cemented by oppression, remains intact. The collective identity mandates that whatever the mistakes, Chechens are one’s own, and a lesser evil than the unknown and uncertain outside world. Thus, in the end, the self-fulfilling prophesy prevails: Chechens remain outsiders—impervious to friends, and ever-prepared for the advances of foes.

Due to many factors, there is limited real access to the complexities of the Chechen nation. Humanitarian and human rights organizations have documented the war to a fair extent, but this analysis focuses mainly on emergency needs. When an extraordinary event occurs, the mainstream media picks it up. Unfortunately, most interpretations of these events are off the mark: the truth is hidden from them via power structures, and limited long-term access means that media must rely on hearsay as a substitute for solid analysis.

This current text is also relevant and timely to a larger world audience, given the importance of the “Muslim” question to the analysis. Chechens practice Islam. Yet, many Chechen traditional cultural norms can be explained outside of religious beliefs. In fact, under Soviet repression of religion, a sizeable number of Chechens never learned to pray, though prayer is mandatory according to Islam.

A number of ancient, traditional Chechen norms parallel Islamic beliefs and traditions, and reinforce one another. Interestingly, a great many of those norms are benevolent and humane, mirroring the best beliefs of all main religions: the centrality of caring for family, mandatory respectful and generous treatment of guests and neighbors, polite social behavior, and so on.

In very recent years, some factions in Chechnya have seized Islam as the ideological basis of warfare, and aim to “reform” the Chechens themselves. Many Chechens strongly oppose this ideological misuse of their religion, and claim that this trend was purposely imported into Chechnya, and fear it will eradicate Chechen traditional culture altogether, thereby destroying the nation itself. This is an important lesson for policy makers interested in the current and future shape of the Chechen conflict.
Chechens: Culture and Society is timely and highly relevant in the worldwide context of division and mistrust between Western states and non-Western Islamic cultures. These global divisions primarily are based on strategic purposes, but their fuel is sourced from cross-cultural multilayered misunderstandings. They are also connected with the intercultural conflicts that many Western societies are currently struggling with, and with the most recent upheavals in several Middle Eastern countries. Chechnya, a tiny nation in the North Caucasus mountain range, is a highly relevant piece of this conflict puzzle. The most recent conflict in Chechnya began not as an Islamic question, but as a struggle for national sovereignty. This conflict, however, has transformed since the early 1990s, in ideology, leadership, and geographical scope, and the national reference has been to some extent sublimated to a battle over religion and culture.

Lastly, the study of Chechens as refugees is particularly significant given that a large number of Chechens remain outside the homeland. Moreover, refugee studies hold much global relevance, since millions of people worldwide are on the move—within borders, and fleeing across borders to escape persecution, armed conflict, or to secure quality of life. This is an unfinished problem in our modern world. Research that centers on the effects of “refugeeism” on culture offers much utility for the analysis of refugee conditions related to objectives of integration, opportunity, and development.

Summary

By now, there is ample documentation that Chechens are kidnapped and killed, and that particular Chechen groups are involved in planning and carrying out terrorist activities. Much less is known about the intercultural conflicts inside of Chechnya, and how Chechen mentality and differences are contributing to the prolongation, change, and escalation of this conflict. Russian information has served largely as a source of misinformation, and other foreign Western sources are often biased and uninformed in their portrayals of the Chechen conflict and peoples. The Chechen international voice is virtually nonexistent, shrouded in secrecy, faction, and miscommunication.

Meanwhile, the Chechen conflict has no end in sight, and a forced peace will not endure. There are ample signs that this conflict maintains imminent potential to escalate and deepen. This is dangerous
to both Chechens and their neighbors. The conflict needs to be reexamed for knowledge and information that provides understandings on common platforms for policy makers and others involved in the Chechen situation. Finally, there are lessons to be learned in this conflict, about cultural change, differences, adaptation, and prospects for peace. Chechnya, ancient in collective identity and norms, is engaged in a very modern battle for cultural preeminence and survival, and the lessons of this battle are relevant worldwide.

The Chechen conflict, like many global conflicts, is in part an ideological battle, and the fate of the people of the entire nation of Chechens, and their neighbors, is at stake. Most backs have turned on Chechens, but the issue can be reexamined for complexity and clarity, to reveal resources that could lead to peace.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Work and Research Background**

This author lived and worked with Chechens for ten years, from May 2001 to September 2003, in the North Caucasus republics of Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria, and in Istanbul, Turkey, from September 2003 to March 2011. In the North Caucasus setting, from May 2001 to June 2002, the US-based humanitarian organization, International Rescue Committee (IRC), employed this author to coordinate its Education and Community sector. Work with IRC entailed education and community projects for Chechens who had fled to Republic of Ingushetia due to the armed conflict in neighboring Chechen Republic. Specific projects included developing and coordinating schools in temporary settlements for Chechen children, vocational training, youth sports and artistic projects, teacher training, and material and technical support for Chechen academics and artists.

While at IRC, a well-known Chechen academic and writer, Mr. Musa Akhmadov, approached this author with a proposal to open a local nonprofit agency to support the teaching and dissemination of Chechen history and culture. In armed conflicts, other emergencies, and within humanitarian work environments in general, most established sponsors do not prioritize cultural support in needs assessments.
and budgets, and Mr. Akhmadov made a case for the urgency of these needs. Through Akhmadov’s idea and proposal, this author’s coordination, and IRC’s support, the Center of Chechen Culture and Education was born. Through this center, this author supported the work of training Chechen teachers in areas of Chechen history, culture, and language, cultural education for school children, publication of cultural texts, exhibition of artists’ work, and dance and theater productions.

From June 2002 to May 2003, the author was employed by UK-based Center for Peacemaking and Community Development (CPCD). At CPCD, the author served as Coordinator of CPCD’s Ingushetia office, and additionally supported the operations of temporary settlement schools, vocational training, and youth peace building and life skills projects. In May 2003, this author relocated to Kabardino-Balkaria and from there worked as a private consultant to support capacity building for local humanitarian organizations, until she left the Russian Federation in September 2003.

During this time spent in the North Caucasus, this author did not travel to the Republic of Chechnya. Russian Federation officials did not allow international workers, other than lead UN or other intergovernmental officials to travel to Chechnya. UN security protocol also advised against this travel, and all nongovernmental organizations in the region coordinated their efforts under the UN umbrella. Both IRC and CPCD explicitly upheld this security restriction.

In early 2002, just after Ruslan Aushev retired as president of Ingushetia, Russian Federation officials commenced a concerted campaign to push Chechens out of Ingushetia, to return them through force if necessary, to the Chechen Republic. Russia had declared the “anti-terrorist operation” in Chechnya over, and the presence of large numbers of refugees in Ingushetia contradicted this announcement and was an embarrassment to Russian officials. By mid-2002, significant incidents signaled that this forcible return had begun, including sightings of Russian troops and tanks surrounding Chechen settlements, and soldiers entering the settlements to threaten or otherwise induce the populations to return to Chechnya. Suspicious fires in settlements also destroyed schools and other program sites, and reports circulated of disappearances and detainments of Chechen males living in the settlements.
During these events, this author developed a “monitoring and capacity building program,” to monitor and record protection conditions in Ingushetia settlements, and provide detailed protection reports to UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations working in the region. Importantly, at this time, local Russian Federation security services and officials began a systematic campaign of harassment against humanitarian agencies and individuals working in Ingushetia. Work licenses and visas were suddenly difficult if not impossible to obtain, and security forces raided humanitarian program offices and confiscated computers and documents.

By late 2002, the Center of Chechen Culture and Education had established itself as an independent local organization, and this author continued to work with the center until September 2003. This work entailed capacity building of the center, including consultation on sponsorship, proposal writing, and budgetary concerns.

In September 2003, in order to renew the work visa for the Russian Federation, this author travelled outside the country, as was necessary according to visa laws, to Istanbul, Turkey. Once in Istanbul, however, the Russian consulate would not grant a renewed visa, and so this author remained in Istanbul. Having travelled to Istanbul with a group of Chechen women who shop there for items to resell in markets at home, this author was quickly approached by Chechen refugees in Istanbul, who complained that living conditions in Istanbul were substandard for these refugees. Hoping to initiate new humanitarian programs, Chechen refugees invited this author to live in a Chechen refugee camp and coordinate such projects.

After a few aborted attempts to develop these projects, it became clear this context was highly politicized and divisive, as detailed in further sections of this text. In addition, Turkish authorities did not permit foreign nationals to construct humanitarian programs for Chechen refugees. Therefore, this author’s work in Turkey, from September 2003 to March 2011, consisted of advocacy, including reporting to the UNHCR and local humanitarian agencies on the conditions and needs of Chechen refugees. The author continued to live in a Chechen refugee camp in Istanbul for nearly eight years, taking part in most of the responsibilities shared by women in the camp, and living, to a major extent, according to Chechen adat. During this ten-year period, this author was working toward Chechens’ human rights and humanitarian needs in the war context.
The Ethnographic Context

This ethnography is based on direct observations and experiences with Chechens in two different locations—the Republic of Ingushetia, and Istanbul, Turkey. The research derives all analysis of Chechens’ lived experiences from these two contexts alone. It is a valid question, therefore, to evaluate the contexts of this ethnographic research, their similarities and differences.

The conflict in Chechnya directly and immediately affected the lives of every Chechen with whom the researcher had contact. This, then, is the main, and most significant, similarity in these two contexts: Chechens in Ingushetia had fled to that republic to escape the war in Chechnya, as Chechens in Turkey had fled from their homes. In neither case were these Chechens members of a diaspora from another time or conflict. However, the main difference between the two populations was distance: Ingushetia was close enough to Chechnya so that many of the Chechens living there actually traveled to their hometowns in Chechnya on a regular basis, sometimes daily. The geographical distance between Chechnya and Turkey, however, was greater.

Further, living conditions in Ingushetia were quite poor for Chechen refugees, just as they were for Chechen refugees in Turkey. Humanitarian assistance provided for basic needs of both populations, but living facilities were poor. The security situation in Ingushetia, however, was quite precarious, especially in 2002–2003, when Russian forces forcibly closed down Chechen settlements and forced the refugee population back into Chechnya. Though psychological stress was high in Istanbul, Turkish authorities did not use force against the general Chechen population there.

Next, in Ingushetia, the researcher worked with Chechens who were gainfully employed in the humanitarian sector, but also had significant contact with Chechens who were the principal recipients of humanitarian aid. In Istanbul, nearly all Chechen refugees were unemployed, with the exception of a handful of men, and many women, all of whom worked unofficially, and for very low income.

Conflicts over humanitarian aid profit definitively split Chechens with whom the researcher worked, in Ingushetia. These conflicts destroyed relationships, and at one point brought humanitarian projects to a standstill. In Turkey, Chechens had less control over
humanitarian aid delivery, but conflicts over its profits defined the daily lives of the refugees.

Overall, there were far more similarities than differences between these two contexts, particularly in the range of beliefs, behaviors, and conflicts. The researcher first encountered the conflicts and concerns over *Wahhabism* while in Ingushetia. It was there that the researcher first heard debates about culture and religion, what it meant to be pro-Russia, or anti-Russia. In Ingushetia, some wished to support fighters, others wished to remain apolitical. These same differences were evident among Chechens in Turkey.

Chechens in Ingushetia first introduced the researcher to the concern that Chechen cultural norms are under attack, from both within and without. The first laments over children’s behavior were heard in Ingushetia: *These children are primitive.* In Turkey, Chechens exclaimed, *These are not children!*

In Ingushetia and Turkey, Chechen historical tales were identical, as were depictions of cultural norms and beliefs. These tales are etched into the consciousnesses of women and men, collectively known and shared. Especially apparent, however, was the shared dissonance—between recited tales of ideal norms, and the real difficulty of living up to those norms in situations of extreme conflict.

The context of living as refugees in Turkey, moreover, particularly reveals layers of social structure in Chechen communities, divisive effects of conflict on these social structures, and the discord over maintaining cultural standards during these fluid and difficult times. As refugees, Chechens struggled to maintain cultural identities in foreign environments. Maintenance of one’s identity as distinct and coherent, however, functioned as a reference point and survival mechanism. This struggle, nevertheless, also divided Chechens among themselves, and separated and isolated them from the host environment.

**Research Questions**

Several research questions underpin this ethnographic study, and encompass a range of themes and topics. The author has organized analysis of many of these themes into separate chapters in this text, but also interweaves parts of the analysis throughout the text.

1. **What are the historical traditional sociocultural norms and relations of Chechens?** How does the traditional formulation of these norms
compare with the lived interpretations and experiences of Chechens today? Do Chechens see their norms as changing today, due to what factors? Are there differences among Chechens as to interpretation and practice of these norms? What differences do they attribute to political-social forces and factors, how, and why?

2. What cultural concepts and attributes are historically common to the “Chechen Identity,” such as pride, honor, freedom, loyalty? How do Chechens describe these meanings? How do Chechens perceive and practice these concepts in lived experience today? Are there differences among Chechens as to the interpretation and practice of these norms? If so, how do Chechens perceive these differences?

3. What main sociocultural symbols and rituals are relevant to Chechens’ lives? What main common symbols and rituals do Chechens share, such as holiday rituals, weddings, foods and food preparation, accommodation of guests, clothing style, child rearing, and social relations? How do Chechens describe and explain these symbols and rituals? What are the differences among Chechens in practicing these symbols and rituals?

4. What forms and patterns do gender roles and relations assume among Chechens? How do Chechens describe and explain these gender roles and practices? What are the differences among Chechens in practice and understanding of gender roles?

5. What is the formulation of “Chechen Identity” in relation to guests, neighbors, strangers, and foreigners? What is the traditional Chechen interpretation of these roles and relations? How are these roles and relations practiced in Chechen communities? How do context and situation correlate with the actual practice of these social relations?

6. What are the parameters of “Islam” in Chechen culture, social relations, and politics? What patterns of Islamic practice and interpretations are apparent? What differences exist among Chechens regarding perception of the role of Islam in significant social, cultural, and political institutions?

7. What patterns of subsistence strategies (“earning a living”) are common among Chechens? What are the sociocultural rules of these patterns (labor choices, labor conduct and relations, and gender references)? How do Chechens describe these patterns?

8. What main concerns do Chechens have (taking into account differences), regarding daily needs and perspective for future—both individual and collective?
9. How do Chechens (taking into account differences), explain the current war conflict? What are the sources of the conflict? Why did the conflict begin and why does it continue today? How might the conflict end?

10. What are the main sociocultural-political differences, opinions, and conflicts that are prevalent at present among Chechens? According to Chechen perspective, how are these differences defined, how are they manifested, what are their sources, and what are their consequences?

11. What major sociocultural commonalities among Chechens may be located? How do Chechens describe these commonalities?

12. How might serious sociocultural-political differences among Chechens exacerbate or prolong the conflict, as obstacles to peace and well-being?

13. How might Chechen sociocultural commonalities
   - preserve the uniqueness of the Chechen nation, while at the same time,
   - prepare the Chechen nation to coexist peaceably in the world community, with prosperity and well-being for all Chechen people?

Data Collection and Analysis

The author constructed this ethnography through inductive analysis, built on field findings. Through direct participation and observation in Chechen communities, the author examines patterns, conversations, events, and relationships, to understand meanings of cultural structures and norms. In ten years with Chechens, this author observed many patterns of Chechen language, beliefs, and behavior, and recognized those that were widespread, repeated continuously, and those that were not. Due to this extended time, it is possible to locate general and particular, dominant and marginal.

During these ten years, this author willingly socialized into Chechen sociocultural norms, and lived the experiences of Chechens as completely as possible (notwithstanding particular social and political obstacles to doing so). The author’s primary motive in working with Chechens was to effect positive humanitarian and human rights for Chechen individuals and groups.

In addition, given the perils faced by Chechens, along with the secretiveness of their general norms, it was not appropriate to
Introduction

This author conducted interviews with Chechens in both Ingushetia and Istanbul, and observed conditions and humanitarian programs, in order to assess needs and formulate options for solutions. Much of the data from these interviews and observations were included in humanitarian program reports in Ingushetia, and a “Situation Report” and e-mails to humanitarian organizations in Istanbul. Aside from these informal methods, this author did not collect documents or conduct formal interviews. The main sources of data for this ethnography, thus, are informal interview notes, direct field conversations, discussions, observations, and participation in the lives of Chechens.

Data collection for this research, therefore, derives from direct experience and observations, empirical interactions, and relations in daily work and community activities. In this book, the author particularly documents spoken narrative, recorded from ten years’ memory of situations, conversations, events, and immersion in Chechen communities.

The ethnography does not attempt to arrange meanings into what might be potentially artificial categories. Rather, the analysis outlines recurring themes, concerns, and behaviors in Chechens’ lives, which Chechens themselves narrate. In particular, repeating adjectives, phrases, and stories comprise much of the data for this ethnography. Generalizations are included when apparent, as are notable differences.

In this book, the author presents Chechens’ narratives—paraphrases of Chechen anecdotes, phrases, terminology, expressions, and beliefs, in italicized font, throughout and woven into the main themes of text. Italicization highlights Chechens’ voices, and separates them from this author’s analysis. All italicized passages in this text are phrases, expressions, and opinions attributable and shared by groups of Chechens. No italicized passages are attributable uniquely to one person. This author strived to locate generalizations and differences among and across groups, versus focusing on the opinions of individuals.

For ten years, this author had access to a range of Chechens: men, women, and children; fighters and former fighters; civilians and pacifists; intellectuals, writers, and artists; employed and unemployed; highly educated (formal schooling) and less educated, including those
who never attended formal schooling; religious extremists; nationalists; pro-Russian Chechens; and a variety of others. Thus, there is a wealth of “voice” in this ethnography.

Reliability and Validity

This author is acutely aware of the concrete boundaries between herself and members of the Chechen community, and the limits these boundaries place on research validity. A researcher strives to locate “truth” in findings, but this truth may be elusive due to several factors. Particularly relevant to qualitative research, a researcher cannot assume perfect knowledge on the part of the subjects of the study.

Further, though Chechens may be defined as a bounded national group, there are distinct differences among individual Chechens—in the level of formal education, personality and communicative styles, conditions and circumstances, access to information, and roles in relation to “outsiders.”

In ethnographic work, the researcher herself is the main instrument of data collection and analysis. Therefore, issues of reliability hinge on a range of factors inherent in this type of research. Every ethnography is foremost a relationship between researcher and the peoples included in the study. It is certain that Chechens with whom the researcher interacted to some degree often strategically introduced and altered tales and behavior, based on what and whom they felt the author represented.

This author is not a Chechen, and this fact most likely had a strong influence on relations with Chechens. Chechens framed consideration of the choice and form of information to convey to this author, with this consideration in mind, for a variety of motivations. What Chechens did not convey, on the other hand, may be of significance.

For example, many Chechens viewed this researcher as a representative of the West, and wished this author to know stories, to learn about Chechen history, culture, and problems, and so they revealed much. Others were certain this researcher was “CIA,” or a spy from Russia, and so they produced particular tales through this perception. Many wished the researcher not to know many things, and so they discussed little. Certainly, ethnography, to some extent is a product of perceived roles and relations in the ethnographic field.
This ethnography’s validity is solid, due to the long period of time the researcher spent with Chechens, the depth of interactions, and the range of perceptions, beliefs, and people included in this book. The main advantage of the author’s long-term status with Chechens, however, is the ability to witness repeated patterns, changes, and actual behaviors over time.

Further, the author strives for transparency in her aims and opinions in this document, which enhances the book’s validity. This study, the book’s findings, and the author’s perceptions, are gladly open to debate and discussion, and dispute. The author genuinely hopes such debate will lead to a greater understanding of Chechens’ conditions and concerns.

Finally, language may be an issue in the research’s validity. This author spoke mainly Russian language with Chechens, and spoke very little Chechen language. This was a matter of feasibility: the researcher did not utilize translators or interpreters, other than the two and one-half years spent in the North Caucasus. During the time spent in the North Caucasus, the researcher also did not utilize interpreters much of the time, as many Chechens with whom the author worked spoke English. This researcher knew Bosnian language (which is related closely to Russian language) upon arrival in the North Caucasus, and so built upon this to learn Russian quickly in order to function in the field.

During the time in North Caucasus, Chechen staff members who spoke capable English helped to translate in field interactions. The author also made a concerted effort to learn Russian language, and over time acquired ability to converse in spoken Russian. Once in Turkey, however, the author deeply immersed in Chechen communities without translation assistance, and so becoming fluent in Russian language became imperative.

It would not have been feasible to conduct the research solely or even mainly in Chechen language as few Chechens know their mother tongue fluently. Since Chechens routinely blend Russian and Chechen languages, and most Chechens know spoken Russian (except for those who grew up outside of Chechnya), communication between the researcher and these Chechens took place largely in Russian language.

Importantly, the researcher learned Russian language wholly from Chechens, through listening and speaking. Chechens’ Russian language
abilities are largely acquired outside of Russia proper and through practicality more often than formal instruction. The accents accompanying Chechens’ spoken Russian are quite different from a Muscovite’s, for example. Russian language is not Chechens’ mother tongue, and geographical differences, experiences, and understandings are likely distinguish the language by cultural group.

One might describe Chechen-spoken Russian language as “Chechen Russian.” Chechens taught this author that language. In daily interactions with Chechens, there was need for both parties to communicate. Particularly while in Turkey, where Russian language was largely non-existent, the language issue became an endeavor of mutual effort. Thus, the language through which this research was developed is “Chechen Russian”; this was our common language.

Ethical Considerations

Chechens are a historically oppressed collective, small in number. Perhaps up to one-fourth to one-third of all Chechens currently live outside their homeland—many are diaspora who fled earlier wars with Russia, and many Chechens are currently on the move and seeking asylum from the hazards of this most recent conflict. Chechens are certain that Russian officials closely monitor them wherever they reside, and many are certain that Russian security forces are responsible for the assassination of individual Chechens on the territories of Turkey, Austria, Qatar, and elsewhere. Though Russia claims that the war in Chechnya is officially over, there are ample reports from reliable human rights organizations that kidnappings, extrajudicial killings, and tortures continue. Depending on their loyalties, many Chechens feel besieged by a range of potential assassins, including Russian forces, pro-Russia Chechens, and Chechen insurgents or loyalists.

Many Chechens believe there is purposeful intent, on the part of Russia and perhaps the West, to eliminate the Chechen national collective permanently, to erase first the culture, and then the people. Chechens are by circumstance and perhaps character extraordinarily secretive, closed, and guarded. Moreover, Russian Federation officials have long maintained either media blackout of Chechen events, or selective reporting that stereotypes Chechens derogatorily, while Western
mainstream media coverage largely seizes upon the acts of Chechen extremists.

Given these considerations, ethical concerns must be preeminent in the intimate, ethnographic depiction of Chechen individuals and groups. Written documentation and formal interviews would not have been feasible or appropriate as sources of data in this book. This author makes every effort to protect the identity of persons and communities with whom she had contact, other than those Chechens who produced published materials, some of which the author references in this book. Persons’ names are not included, and the author purposely excludes any and other details that could potentially identify specific persons, such as age, region of birth, family links, and other affiliations.

NOTE

For ten years, this author was a guest of Chechens, and a colleague. In Ingushetia, the author worked together with Chechen (and Ingush) staff, to coordinate and develop a range of programs to ensure that Chechen children continued their school studies, to provide vocational training for youth and young adults, and to support the capacity of Chechens to develop their lives, neighborhoods and nation, in a time of extraordinary turmoil.

When terrorists flew planes into the New York “twin towers,” this author was in Ingushetia, working with Muslim people. On the evening of the attack, Chechen staff knocked on the author’s door, requesting return to the office. Together, the author and staff sat transfixed to the TV screen images of those horrible events, played repeatedly. Those Chechens said, “This was not Muslims. This could not be the work of Muslims. Muslims would not do this.” They offered their condolences and prayers for the victims and their families. The mood was somber, shocked, and time stood still in the room.

This was also a time when many Chechens admired the United States and the West in general. They maintained hope, that “America” would support Chechens in their struggle for independence. Chechens knew the value Americans place on “freedom.”

This author returned to a post-9/11 United States—a country changed in many ways. The world had changed in many ways as well: divided into poles—us versus them, “them” being Muslim. It was not
politically correct to speak of Muslims in general, unless such conversations derided the Islamic faith. Chechens also had committed horrible acts—the Moscow Nord-Ost theater siege in 2002, the 2004 Beslan school hostage atrocity, and the Moscow subway bombings in 2010. When two Chechens attacked the Boston Marathon, most Americans would hear the name “Chechen,” for the first time, under the worst circumstances. Chechens, it seemed, had measured up to the standard Russia had imposed on them: they were “terrorists,” “bandits.”

Chechens had invited this author into their homes, and offered culinary delicacies they could afford only on special occasions. They had made this author their audience for dance, songs, and theater. Chechens had invited this author to their weddings.

Not all Chechens were so kindly. In Istanbul, this author met a Chechen Imam, who asked within minutes, “So, has anyone offended you?” Just as the Imam knew, and this author learned, not all Chechens are the same. Rather, thinking back on Chechen colleagues and friends, who worked so hard to build and preserve Chechnya, this author was offended at those who worked equally hard to destroy it.

When this author returned to the United States in 2011, Russian military no longer dropped bombs on Chechen villages, or carpet-bombed towns filled with civilians, or shot at those who were fleeing, from helicopters circling overhead. Instead, the Chechen homeland was now a police state. Russian authorities claimed the war was over, but obviously, it was not.

When it became apparent that this author had exhausted efforts to improve the conditions of Chechens in Turkey, upon return to the United States the author also realized that the humanitarian work was not completed. The Chechen collective, in its complexity, controversy, and urgency, is a common member of our shared humanity, and deserves accurate representation and humanitarian advocacy.

CONTENTS

Each chapter of this text depicts particular distinct elements of Chechens’ lived experiences. Chapters 2–5, following this Introduction, aim for authentic portrayal of Chechens’ voices and perceptions, in their elaboration of cultural norms, behaviors, and conflicts. Chapter 6 details Chechens’ conditions and experiences as refugees, in Istanbul,
Turkey. This section represents a hybrid voice—the objective conditions of Chechens in Istanbul, how Chechens' perceived and lived their lives under these conditions, and the author’s analysis of the circumstances. Chapter 7 is particularly devised as this author’s advocacy for the Chechen future. The final section, chapter 8, addresses additional relevant literature, and briefly discusses certain topics not detailed in other sections of the text.

Chapter 2, “Living in Tales,” displays a rich array of Chechen perceptions related to the current conflict, including explanations for the conflict, ranging from an assertion that Chechen lands are a vast treasure of gold, to the humorous: Russia loves Chechens too much to let them go. Many of these tales contain significant cultural understandings that are rooted in the 1944 genocide of Chechens. Recounting of important historical leaders in Chechen collective memory is included in this chapter, all of whom are nearly universally revered; current leader Kadyrov is included—though not viewed as hero, many Chechens grant him support. “Tales of Associations” are included in this chapter, illustrating the differences in Chechen loyalties and preferences to particular political groups and beliefs. These associations are socially constructed and ever-changing, in parallel with the political conditions and situations in Chechnya.

Chapter 3, “Cultural Symbolisms,” outlines several central concepts in Chechen culture, critical to Chechen values and beliefs, which provide guiding rules for behaviors and relationships. The chapter illustrates abstract symbols and describes their meanings, including honesty and responsibility, and particularly the notion of freedom. Freedom is a central but multifaceted value in Chechen culture, connected to nationalism and pride, self-rule, and the role of the individual.

The chapter also illuminates several structures and norms significant to managing relations within the Chechen collective. Particularly elaborated is the central concept of equality, with its connotations of egalitarian democracy, along with Chechens’ aversion to sheep-like behavior. Respect is a critical norm in the collective, and entails specific manners and behaviors. Elders, including elderly people but also other figures, play important roles in conflict resolution. Chechens emphasize the preeminence of guests, and rules regarding their treatment are mandatory. Enemies, who come to be guests in a Chechen’s home, receive the utmost in hospitality.
The chapter includes a section on important religious rituals and meanings, and describes the connection of Islam with Chechen traditional culture. Due in part to the lifting of religious repression characterized by Soviet rule, the Chechen collective is now exploring their religion. The collective exploration is besieged by political conflicts, however, with more than one side claiming the correct role of religion in Chechen culture and community. This section outlines the “Wahhabism versus Chechen culture” dichotomy and debate.

Chapter 4, “Men and Women,” details to some length the ideal Chechen man and woman, and how Chechen culture delineates gender roles in the collectivity, including gender role formation, and relationships between men and women. Chechen culture is patriarchal, with men retaining much authority over public decisions and cultural meanings. Role separation between men and women is rigid. Chechen women, however, are resilient and proud, not docile and passive, taught like men never to hang their heads. Treatment of a Chechen woman in her personal life often depends upon the character of the Chechen man.

Chapter 5, “In the Looking Glass, and Looking Out,” contains several reflections of how Chechens look upon themselves. Drawing on the English word “Caucasian,” many Chechens speculate, from their Caucasus’ origins, that their nation is the root of civilization. Many view themselves as European, which also serves to differentiate them from Asians. They are victims, claim they are feared by other nations, and Chechens are never slaves. Unfortunately, Chechens can be deceived: in their opinion, they tend to be naïve. This chapter also reveals Chechens’ perceptions of others in the world, much of which is framed by strong paranoia and a sense of lies and betrayals. Chechens tend to divide much of the world into West (United States and Europe); Asians (Turks, Kurds, many of the southeastern nations of the former Soviet Union); Arabs; Israel and the Jews; and Negroes. There is some lost love in their feelings toward United States and Europe, while they fairly well admire Japanese and Chinese. They have mixed feelings toward Jews, and they consider Turks, Arabs, Russians, and Negroes to be stupid, dirty, or primitive.

Chapter 6, “Chechens as Refugees,” particularly depicts Chechen relationships and cultural norms under stress, when Chechens are far from their homeland. Many of the tales that comprise this ethnographic research emanate from conversations and experiences with Chechen
refugees in Istanbul. Although geographically far from home, Chechens never leave the homeland behind. Much that it is inside Chechnya followed Chechens to Turkey: the collective historical memory, the bonds of cultural belief and, importantly, the intra- and intergroup conflicts. It is through the daily experiences of refugees, stretched between a beloved homeland and a place of asylum, that one can see a great dissonance between “ideal” norms, and the necessities of survival under adverse conditions.

Chapter 7, “Development,” is particularly representative of this author’s voice. Though this section advocates self-determination for the Chechen nation, and, ultimately, internationally recognized independence of a Chechen state, this is a conditional conviction. Chechens are not currently prepared, equipped, or capable of maintaining a peaceful, sustainable, functioning political entity. Although Chechen culture is rich with constructive assets and values, several limitations restrain Chechens’ abilities to develop a viable political entity. Some limitations stem from exclusivity norms of the Chechen collective, which impedes Chechens in both inter- and intra-collective relations. Others derive from educational needs and skills training, including human rights and international law, non-governmental capacity building, and fair economic norms and standards. Importantly, Chechens are a fractured nation at present, and lack legitimate, experienced leadership to reliably, and appropriately, represent their nation on the world stage.

Chapter 8, “Additional Literature and Discussion,” highlights some important literature related to the Chechen conflict. Significant publications that elaborate themes of Chechen culture and social structures are mentioned, along with other materials that investigate the issue of Islam in the current conflict, and an important work on Chechen refugees in another context. Further useful sources are indicated, including Internet websites.
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*Italic* entries are cultural concepts, phrases, or non-English words.

**Bold font** entries are names of individuals, places, or historical events.

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