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Ethnic Conflicts In The Caucasus And Women Suicide Bombers

By: Anatoly Isaenko

Abstract

On August 28, 2012, Aminat Kurbanova committed suicide in the Dagestani village of Chirkei, killing the spiritual leader of the two major Sufi orders in the North Caucasus, and six other people. Earlier, Maria Khorosheva (and her husband Razdobud'ko) perpetrated a suicide attack on a Dagestani police station. But these are just two examples. Overall, 46 women (sometimes in groups) committed 26 terrorist acts in Russian territories during the last 12 years; most of them in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Moscow.

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of Nazism (2012). Together, Jeansonne and Luhrssen have co-authored *Changing Times: The Life of Barack Obama* (2009) and *Elvis Presley: Reluctant Rebel* (2011). They may be contacted, respectively, at gsj@uwm.edu and dave@shepex.com.



Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus and Women Suicide Bombers

Anatoly Isaenko—Appalachian State University

On August 28, 2012, Aminat Kurbanova committed suicide in the Dagestani village of Chirkei, killing the spiritual leader of the two major Sufi orders in the North Caucasus, and six other people. Earlier, Maria Khorosheva (and her husband Razdobud'ko) perpetrated a suicide attack on a Dagestani police station. But these are just two examples. Overall, 46 women (sometimes in groups) committed 26 terrorist acts in Russian territories during the last 12 years; most of them in Chechnya, Dagestan, and Moscow (*Kavkazskii Uzel*, viewed Sept. 4, 2012, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/179683>).

Some specialists argue that these suicides are the result of a long-standing confrontation between radical Islamists and moderate Muslims in the ethnically and religiously torn area of the North Caucasus (Anatoly Isaenko, *Polygon of Satan: Ethnic Traumas and Conflicts in the Caucasus*, 227-306).

While one can explain Kurbanova's act as revenge—Russian forces had killed her husband, a Salafist militant, and she lost everything in one of the regional wars—the idea that widows and other Caucasian women are bent on revenge because Russians have abused them is an exaggeration. Thus, I agree with Paul Murphy that it “is a valuable propaganda tool and is aggressively promoted by those interested in blaming the Kremlin for Russia's current terror. The idea was first promoted by the [Chechen] leader of the Dubrovka [Moscow Theatre] siege [in 2002] and picked up by Russian journalists who dubbed the women [terrorists] at Dubrovka ‘black widows’” for their black attire (Paul Murphy, December 28, 2004 interview with the Center for Defense Information, published

in *Johnson's Russia List*, No. 9005, January 5, 2005, 4-5). But among these 19 women there were only a few widows; some others were unmarried teenage girls, while still others accompanied their husbands, family members, or friends. Like Kurbanova and Khorosheva, some of them were well established and professionally successful. For example, Kurbanova-Saprykina was an actress in the Dagestan Russian Theatre and Khorosheva a student of the Pyatigorsk Linguistic University in Stavropol Krai.

In *Polygon of Satan*, I utilized numerous interviews to obtain people's reactions to the societal crisis in the Soviet Union and Russia in the late 1980s and early 1990s. These interviews indicated that violent solutions became the norm in Russia proper and the Caucasus after 1991. Ordinary individuals had begun to understand that their political leaders, and the political and mafia elites that backed them, would employ the most ruthless measures to attain personal goals. Oligarchs, tycoons, godfathers, corrupt bureaucrats, and regional ethnic elites grabbed any opportunity that expropriation of the so-called common property opened. Few analysts understood that an "all-dimensional dependency had begun to assume both obvious and latent economic...and extra-economic forms." These new forms "determine the numerous power relationships and are associated with coercion, violence, and the constant threat of the use of either" (Volodymyr Polokhalo, *The Political Analysis of Post Communism*, 7).

Overall, people's stories then and now depict an atmosphere of social injustices and helplessness to redress them. In a multi-ethnic society, a multi-sided crisis can be transformed into conflicts between different ethnic groups. In agreement with Marta Cullberg Weston, one may argue that "when resources are scarce, envy and distrust between the different groups tend to build and group antagonisms tend to grow. If the leaders in such a society actively play on group antagonisms to further their political agenda, the society is on a collision course with disaster" ("When Words Lose Their Meaning: From Societal Crisis to Ethnic Cleansing," *Mind and Human Interaction* 8: 1,1997: 22). This is exactly what happened in the Caucasus under the post-Soviet leadership, as ethnocentric elites played on the antipathies and fears of ordinary citizens, exacerbating their chosen traumas and encouraging ethnic ha-

treds with the help of “historic” myths. Their reading of reality coalesced with their claim to power and drew on each group’s own uncertainties and fears. This linking of past traumas and current reinterpretations of history led ordinary people into ethnic wars.

From 1991 to 1994, again from 1999 to 2000, and once more in August 2008, as a result of the “hot stages” of the latest cycles of ethnic conflicts between Azerbaijanians and Armenians, between Ossetians and Ingushians, Georgians and South Ossetians, Georgians and Abkhazians, and between Russians and Chechens, out of a total of 25 million people living in the Caucasus almost two million people were forcibly displaced, thousands murdered, and hundreds of thousands were wounded and suffered psychological traumas (*Polygon of Satan*, Chapters 4-7; compare *Conflict in the Caucasus*, www.womenaid.org/press/infor/aid/conflict.html). Thomas Buck, Alice Morton, Susan Allen Nun, and Ferid Zurikashvili carefully analyzed the effects of these conflicts on internally displaced women in Georgia. In agreement with my findings, they found the following: (1) rapid decline in living standards; (2) traumatization; (3) drastic changes in the economic role of women; (4) lack of women’s political participation and representation; and (5) timid attempts to create women’s organizations (*Aftermath: Effects of Conflict on Internally Displaced Women in Georgia*, Working Paper No. 310, Washington: Center for Development Information and Evaluation, USAID, September 2000: 5-11). In addition, in the conflicts in which Muslims represented one side in the region, I observed a rapid neo-Islamization and radicalization among young women of traditional Muslim communities. Vamik D. Volkan showed very specifically that an individual under such stress “may project aggression and anxiety onto someone else, one ethnic group may attempt to deal with frustration by utilizing other nationalities or groups as ‘suitable targets of externalization’” (cited in Weston, “When Words Lose Their Meaning,” 23). A societal crisis that turns general assumptions about life upside-down undermines individual and group coping strategies. People react with anxiety, anger, depression, projection, or apathy.

This circumstance was immediately noticed and appreciated by the ideologues of Salafism and Jihadism. They saw it as a unique opportunity to reignite faith through offering support to their

brethren and women. Their goal remains building an Islamic state of Imeret Kavkaz as an enclave of a would-be worldwide caliphate. Thus, the new generation of women *shahids* (martyrs) trained by Salafist teachers are not interested in independence of their ethnic territories or in "social justice," which they have never experienced. For them, to sustain suffering, wounds, and a cruel death for such an abstract idea makes little sense. But a permanent jihad in the name of the caliphate itself gives a sense of everlasting life and its ultimate completion and self-sufficient realization. This is not an abstract idea because it connects *shahids* with the entire scope of Islamic values as they understand them. Their religious mentors teach them that a person who abandons her family, community, and people feels free from the hardships of life, a corrupt social environment that lacks social lifts, the hypocrisy of official religious authorities, and the injustices of politicians. In this new approach, they can live and do only that which corresponds to their belief; that is, the love they share with their peers, brothers, and sisters. In this way, these Salafist propagandists employ their charms and create a new generation of female proselytes.

Today, in one Karabudakhkent district of Dagestan alone, 150 mosques operate, forging cadres of new *shahids* of the regional and global jihad (Milrad Fatullaev, "*Kto v Dagestanskom Gubdene glavnyi* [Who is the Boss in Dagestani Gubden]?" *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, April 4, 2010: 3-4). The suicide attackers of the March 29, 2010 Moscow metro blasts were women from this area of Dagestan. Zulikhan, the woman who blew herself up at a Moscow rock and beer festival, apparently not only destroyed this "festival of infidels," but also cleansed "herself of an incestuous relationship with her step-brother." Murphy, in addition, cites the case of Zarema, who was caught in Moscow a few days later: "She desperately wanted to start a new life in Moscow with her daughter, but got caught by her family who shunned her," and she decided in this context to join the ranks of *shahids*. Other women died in suicide attacks because their teachers, like the terrorist Shamil Basaev, asked them to do so and because they believed that it guaranteed a way into "paradise." In a very real sense, they followed Khava Baraeva, the first Chechen woman suicide-bomber who killed herself on July 2, 2000 to inspire others to *jihad*.

In contrast to these women, other Caucasian women display a remarkable desire to survive and to fight for their human rights. A good example is the human rights activist Natalia Estemirova. Until her recent tragic death she helped people, including women who were victims of the arbitrariness of official structures and of Salafist extremists. Others, inspired by her struggle, are joining emerging NGO organizations in Dagestan, Chechnya, Kabardino-Balkaria, Ossetia, and other areas of the Caucasus. I believe that the future belongs to these individuals; their work greatly contributes to a genuine democratic transformation of their communities.

Anatoly Isaenko, PhD, took his doctoral degree at Moscow State University and was professor and chair of Medieval and Ancient History at North Ossetian State University prior to becoming a professor at Appalachian State University. His main interests are ethnic conflicts, terrorism, and the history of the Caucasus. He may be reached at isaenkoa@appstate.edu.



Part II: The Basis of Violence

Some Underpinnings of American Violence

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Many authors now write about the “two Americas,” and by this, they usually are referring to the current divide between liberals and conservatives in our country. Other divides are not highlighted as often, but they, too, are all around us. For example, another division has Americans moving into areas of the country that suit their cultural, educational, and political preferences (Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, 2008). But the divide that we rarely address is between the ideal images of the U.S. and the less than ideal behaviors of Americans. This divide underpins our inability to understand fully, and thus to tackle, the violent outbursts of a few and any traumatic consequences.