



## The Long Arm Of The Dead: Traumas And Conflicts In The Caucasus

By: **Anatoly Isaenko** and **Peter Petschauer**

### Abstract

Anyone who has read about, or seen on TV, the destruction of Grozny in Chechnya during the fall and winter of 1994-5 comes away with at least three impressions. One is that Russia attacked the Chechen capital without serious provocation, forcing the Chechen rebels to fight for the freedom of their territory and people. Another is that the conflict is the outcome of many local ethnic rivalries that are somehow related to rejection of Russia's renewed imperialism in areas of the former Soviet Union. In both these scenarios, the American reader may imagine similarities to the struggle of the Baltic states against the Soviets, or to the revolt of the American colonies against the British.

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## Anatoly Isaenko and Peter Petschauer

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Anyone who has read about, or seen on TV, the destruction of Grozny in Chechnya during the fall and winter of 1994-5 comes away with at least three impressions.<sup>1</sup> One is that Russia attacked the Chechen capital without serious provocation, forcing the Chechen rebels to fight for the freedom of their territory and people. Another is that the conflict is the outcome of many local ethnic rivalries that are somehow related to rejection of Russia's renewed imperialism in areas of the former Soviet Union. In both these scenarios, the American reader may imagine similarities to the struggle of the Baltic states against the Soviets, or to the revolt of the American colonies against the British.

The third impression is related to analyses that go deeper than the simple comparison to the struggle of subordinate states against their overlords. Some have discussed the long-standing ethnic rivalries in the region, especially between Ossetian, Ingush, Chechen, and Russian ethnic partisans, and the eagerness of such groups to establish predominance in the area north of the Caucasus mountains, or simply to survive as a people. Others have dared to say that for years some Chechens

have promoted a sophisticated, mafia-style trade regime for weapons, drugs, gold, cars and other lucrative businesses that has resulted in a vicious environment conducive to instability. The murder of an anti-mafia TV personality in Moscow in March, 1995, suggests that those in Russia and the Caucasus who may have considered articulating this stance will now for the most part be publicly silent. Still other analysts have noted the difference between the portrayal of Russian and Chechen leadership in the West: Boris Yeltsin was often depicted as a bumbling member of the old guard, while Dzhokhar Dudaev, the Chechen president, tended to be described as a hero leading his oppressed people to freedom.

While these analyses are helpful, they do not fully illuminate the complex interactions that characterize the relationships between ethnic groups in this troubled area. This essay will attempt to shed more specific light on the trials and tribulations of the people living in this region, paying special attention to the formation of ethnicity in some of the groups.

In the history of nations, as they are called in the area, or ethnic groups, as they are now usually called in the West, the past plays a very important role in dealing with and accommodating the present. Ethnic groups in part are born of the space they occupy on the globe, the landscape that nourishes them, the language that becomes their access to the world, the songs that offer enjoyment in their adulthood, the God or the gods who provide solace in their hardships, and the common values

that all members speak about frequently. They also become a distinct group by elaborating their own past and thereby separating themselves from others who live in the same area. By keeping alive past events and personages which focus them as a peculiar people, they are able to provide substance to the language they utter, the songs they sing, the prayers they offer, the land they populate.

Many factors define a group. Historic events and personalities, glorious battles and miserable defeats, or great deeds and tragic deaths of individuals are all important aspects of group identity. For most ethnic groups, it is relatively easy to deal with the glorious moments, the heroes, and the martyrs. But, as Vamik Volkan and Norman Itzkowitz (1994) show in their recent book *Turks and Greeks*, most ethnic groups encounter greater difficulty in dealing with the defeats. Such traumatic losses may enter the very essence of a group because the loss is too painful to be openly elaborated within it, and finds expression only in campaigns against those who won. The glorious moments and the great heroes do not leave a residue of hostility and resentment, or urges for revenge that are created by the often-traumatic and mythologized memories of defeats. Hundreds of years may have passed since an event's occurrence, like the Turk's defeat of the Serbs at Kosovo in 1389 or the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, yet the need for atonement persists. Serbs and Greeks, unable to mourn these momentous events, have woven them into a clearly visible and felt thread of their ethnic identity by hoping and working for revenge; thus today Serbs accuse their Moslem neighbors of being Turks, and Greeks see an expansionist Turkey that must be stopped. Part of the mechanism involved in this process is that the defeated ethnic group feels humiliated or victimized; in their inability to mourn the event and thus integrate it realistically into their behavior, they are unable to move on with life and positively contribute to their region.

## Identity in the Caucasus

In the Caucasus, the ethnic content of each group's sense of itself may be traced back at least as far as the Mongolian (or Tatar) period, that is, the first half of the thirteenth century. The Caucasus is topographically, climatically, ethnologically, and linguistically one of the most varied regions on earth. All the same, the region attained a historical unity because of its important position as a mountain range between two seas and a crossing point of international trade routes. For these two major reasons alone, the Caucasus has been a battleground of peoples, cultures, and religions since ancient times. Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs, Turks, Mongols, and Russians all were involved in the Caucasus and have fought over it. But it was the Mongol conquest of the area in the 1220s and 1230s, and the later raids by Timur, that determined the future of the Caucasus. The way each group reacted to the Tatars—how they rejected or integrated the invasions and the occupation—led to ethnic differentiation. Those who retreated into the mountains built stone fortresses and established a mountain culture; those who cooperated with the Tatars remained in the fertile plains north of the Caucasus and in time became an ethnically mixed group with a different feudal pattern for sustaining themselves.

The invasion, the lengthy occupation, and the rejection or accommodation of the various groups who then lived in the area became one anchor around which different ethnic identities were formed. Even before the invasion of the Mongols, the various ethnic groups in the region told their histories and tied their people together through epic poetry, such as the Ossetian *Legends of the Narts*. In this way, each group recalled and elaborated events that had taken place hundreds and even thousands of years earlier. But the Mongolian invasion was of such intensity that it became *the* defining moment for the many ethnic groups who lived north of the

Caucasus. In particular, the groups who retreated into the mountains recalled and constantly elaborated on the terrible defeats suffered at the hands of the Mongols—defeats so devastating that they could never be resolved. These memories, which one may call *chosen traumas* (Volkan, 1991), were readily substituted for an accurate and systematic written history.

Today it is difficult to define precisely how each individual traces his or her ethnicity to the Mongol invasion and occupation, in part because some of the same stories characterize all the ethnic groups in the area. For example, Tatars, Ossetians, Ingushs, and Chechens see the Alans, who settled in the northern Caucasian region in the first century, as their ancestors. North Ossetia now even alternately calls itself Alania.

Many people's ethnic connection to the Alans comes from the ruins of their mountain cities, the eerie necropoli, and the abandoned fields. Most moderns have visited these ancient sites, with their piles of stone and their houses of the dead, where bodies of mountaineers still lie, and have looked out over the fields where traces of long-forgotten boundaries are still visible. Yet most know few facts about these remarkable vestiges beyond that they are the remnants of brave peoples of their distant past. Only the specialist can still recreate their lives with some degree of accuracy and can describe the sophisticated agriculture and architecture which dates back to the Middle Ages. But on a more emotional level, the legacy of the ancient cities still resonates in the minds of the public. The ruins even speak to outsiders and gave the American co-author a sense of the immense power they exert on every ethnic group in the region, thanks in part to the knowledgeable guidance of Professor Maks Bliev, one of the leading historians of the area.

For many people, the ruins are as much a reminder of the aggression of the

Russian imperial army against their ancestors in the 1830s as they are of the ancient Alans. In the nineteenth century, the cities were demolished by Russian artillery bombardments and the inhabitants were resettled in the plains north of the mountains. Today, while some groups remember this war as no more than an occurrence in the distant past, to others it is but one more reminder of the losses inflicted by outsiders. For the latter, Russians are little different than the Mongols of five centuries before.

As we push further into the past, it is possible to illuminate how the defeat of the Alans in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries became the chosen trauma for some of the ethnic groups in the Caucasus, and how this defeat then became linked with the Russian artillery barrages of the nineteenth century. We will thus deal with both the ancient Alans and the modern Ossetians, Chechens, and Ingushs.

Today, Ossetians number somewhat more than five hundred thousand, including those who live in diaspora in the central Caucasian highlands; they are the only people still speaking, even if in corrupted form, the language of their once numerous and mighty ancestors, the Caucasian Alans. The first Alans entered this area about two thousand years ago and subdued a related group, the Sarmatians, as well as remnants of the Scythians, and later also conquered the local Caucasian (non-Iranian) tribes. In the Middle Ages, the area east of the Kuban River Valley, up to Daghestan, was named "Alania." This vast territory, which sometimes also included the southern flanks of the central Caucasian range, was ruled by the Alans, whose Christian princes and princesses often intermarried with the royal houses of Georgia, Armenia, Kievan Russia, and the Byzantine Empire. Over time, the conquerors and conquered became more assimilated, though aspects of Alan culture remained (Sulimirski, 1970).

These early Alans survived the Hunic and Avar onslaught at the end of the sixth century and the Altai Turks and the Khazar assault which began about AD 650. But they were not successful in rejecting the Tatar attacks. The Tatars, that is, the Mongolians of the thirteenth century and those led by Timur in the fourteenth century, ended Alan domination in the region. The final and disastrous defeat came in the 1390s. Many Alanic warriors were killed in numerous battles and a great proportion of the rest of the Alanic population was slaughtered; the remnants were driven into slavery or brought into service of the Mongols. The invaders sacked the cities and set them on fire, ruined centers of education and churches, demolished fertile fields and pastures, and disrupted trade. The Mongol dominance had other effects as well. The Alan population was gradually reduced from more than two million people in the beginning of the thirteenth century to barely one-eighth of this number by the end of the fifteenth century. And even these survivors were pushed from the plains and foothills of the Northern Caucasus to the wild gorges of its center (see Isaenko and Kuchiev, 1994).

Although the Mongols attempted for more than two centuries to crush the remaining Alan resistance, those who endured never recognized Mongol dominance. They barricaded themselves in the gorges and highland valleys behind huge walls and stone embattlements and in numerous castles and fortresses; they repulsed practically all Mongol attempts to penetrate and to seize their mountain strongholds. From their secure places, they also engaged in lightning raids on the Mongolian settlements in the open plain. The Mongols in turn were able to strike back successfully only once, under Timur, when they broke through the fortresses into the western part of Ossetia, the Digoria. The memory of these heroic and tragic times still lingers among the common people and is reflected in their folklore. For example, every child in Ossetia

is familiar with these words from the folk ballad *The Cry of Zadaleski Mother*: "Bloody rain is falling on the land of Digoria" (see Magometov, 1968; Kaloiev, 1971).

### Russians in the Caucasus

The Russians were the last in a long series of invaders and foreign rulers, although Russian contact with the Caucasus goes far back. For example, from the tenth through the twelfth centuries, the strong Russian principedom of Timutarakhan dominated the Low Kuban, an area with a mixed population that probably included Alans. The road to the Caucasus was completely opened to Russians when Ivan the Terrible conquered the Tatar successor khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan in the sixteenth century. Once established on the northern shore of the Caspian Sea, Russia inevitably became a Caspian power whose interests spread to Tarqu and Darband (Daghestan), Chechnya, Kabarda, Ossetia, and beyond the Caucasus to Georgia.

Firuz Kazemzadeh (1974) notes that the acquisition of Astrakhan in 1552 enabled Russia to influence the affairs of the North Caucasian peoples, including the Avars and the Kumyks of Daghestan, the Chechens, the Ossetians, the Kabardians, and the Circassians (Cherkes). All the same, these ethnic groups retained many of their past ways; they were independent, unruly, and virtually unconquerable before the introduction of modern weaponry. Year after year, and century after century, the mountaineers of the Northern Caucasus formed intricate alliances among themselves and also frequently with the Crimeans, the Turks, and sometimes the Persians. As successors of the Khanate of Astrakhan, the contemporary Muscovite and later Russian tsars inherited these local conflicts. They tried to resolve them, however, in a manner inappropriate and not understandable to the mountaineers whose customs and way of life were quite different from those of the Russians.



minds of leaders and populace alike, but also played an important role in recreating and redirecting the image of the outsider. For many years, the outsider, the enemy, had been the Mongols and Persians; now it became the Russians. The psychological link between Mongols and Russians inspired subsequent generations to seek "holy revenge" against the new enemy. Indeed, the dead of the Caucasus acquired very long arms.

### War with Russia

Russian military administrators began laying the foundations for Russian colonization of the foothills of the Northern Caucasus in the 1760s by building fortresses and pushing forward a line of Cossack villages to block all the exits from the mountains. What followed was nearly one hundred years of intermittent war with Caucasian mountaineers. First came a broad anti-Russian religious and political movement headed by Sheikh Mansur (1785-1791) which involved many groups throughout the Caucasus, but especially Chechens. Although the mountaineers were unsuccessful in turning back the Russians, a new campaign began in the late 1820s, ending in 1839 with the defeat of the movement in Daghestan. Another war soon erupted in 1840 through a Chechen rebellion and did not end until the capture of the Imam Shamil, their famous leader of the Caucasian War, in 1859.<sup>2</sup>

The resistance of the peoples of the Caucasus had many causes (see Bliev and Degoev, 1994), but here one needs to stress only the most obvious, namely the fear and dislike of intruders which was especially strong in the isolated, self-reliant, and independent mountain villages. The mountaineer's detailed memory of past defeats and traumatic losses was again awakened by the Russian treatment of local rulers. For the most part, Russian military commanders acted arbitrarily and bru-

tally. At the same time, the Russians remembered the traitorous behavior of local chieftains; they believed, not without reason, that gentleness, or even decency, would be interpreted by the mountain population as weakness. They knew that neither the Persian shahs nor the Turkish sultans ever gained respect through mildness. So, the Russians became worthy heirs of the odious and cruel Persian Shah Agha Mohammad Khan Qajar.

There is ample evidence of the brutality of the Russian commanders. During his term as commander in Georgia, Prince P.D. Tsitsianov, a Georgian, told a Muslim chieftain: "You have the soul of a dog and the mind of an ass ... So long as you do not become a faithful tributary of my great sovereign, the Emperor, so long I desire to wash my boots in your blood."<sup>3</sup> General Alexei Petrovich Ermolov later gained fame for his intemperate language and his vicious cruelty in suppressing resistance.<sup>4</sup>

To these accounts one may add the confession of an aristocratic Russian officer who was a participant in many battles of the Caucasian War. He wrote: "Our actions in the Caucasus are reminiscent of all the miseries of the original conquest of America by the Spanish" (Fadeev, 1960, p. 208). And the greatest Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin, upon observing the actions of his compatriots in the Caucasus, wrote in his *Journey to Erzerum*: "The Cherkess hate us. We have forced them from their wide open pastures; their pastures are ruined, whole tribes are exterminated" (1967, p. 309). Yet Shamil, the leader of the uprising, used the same methods. According to one of his contemporaries, he mercilessly put to death the population of every Chechen village which sought peace with the Russians, burnt these villages to the ground, and in order to continue the resistance, forced the remaining Chechens into the mountains with their belongings. Vitaly Borisovich Vinogradov (1991) demonstrated how

brutality and bravery often merged in the mentality of the mountaineers. He noted that Chechens and Ingushs often gave their children the names Sipso and Bokkalu so as to remember the two Russian generals Nicolas Sleptsov and Ivan Baklanov who were terrible and brutal enemies in combat but merciful victors after it. In the meantime, the ordinary Russians in the Caucasus who lived in constant fear of mountaineer raids and attacks gradually created in their ballads the image of Chechens as evil robbers ready to kill, from ambush, every unsuspecting villager.

Bliev (1991) showed recently how the leadership on both sides created, fixed, and spread the enemy image among common people to attain and retain power over them. Thus the famous Mullah Khazy, the first Imam of the Caucasian War, rejected all claims of control by either Russians or the feudal lords of Daghestan over the "free societies" of the mountaineers. After all, these powers were his main competitors. His sermons therefore revived again and again the image of the enemy in the minds of the mountaineers. He taught that "For a Muslim, following the *shariat* (Islamic Law) without *gazavat* (the war against the infidels, in this case the Russians) is not salvation. He who follows the *shariat* must arm himself no matter the cost; he must abandon his family, his house, his land, and he must not spare his very life. God will reward in the next life those who follow my counsel" (Bushnev, 1939, p. 75). One needs to note that during the recent events in Chechnya, Dudaev revived this ideology and called all Chechens to a Holy War against Russia.

This ideology served two functions. It not only motivated the mountaineers to fight their "evil" enemy, but also created the positive image of a charismatic deliverer and means to salvation. The numerous disciples of the Mullah Khazy therefore proclaimed him to be a prophet and sustained this reputation by all means possible. And so, using demagoguery and cast-

ing aside all powers except those which pointed to him as the "inspired prophet," he strengthened his absolute power as theocratic dictator (Bliev, 1991).

## The Return of War

Because of this long history of mutual bloodshed, the modern conflicts in the Caucasus probably reached what one may call a "hot stage" earlier than in other parts of the world. It has been said that real wars today are instigated by fictitious wars in the media—all the same, media wars are not fought on an emotionally empty landscape. Unresolved losses of the past are the first to be reinterpreted by intellectuals and politicians. For example, long before the war in Kharabakh, both Armenian and Azerbaijan historians, using the same historical sources but interpreting them differently, proved to their own satisfaction and to that of their respective peoples that this or that piece of land "originally" belonged to *their* ancestors. Such interpretations of the past reinforce the foundation of memories of loss and the connected image of the enemy.

It must be stressed once more that modern demands for territorial adjustments often rest on a genuine loss of land and people; this essay, however, investigates some of the emotional underpinnings which drive them. Unresolved conflicts of the past play a very important role in the present. Often the simple revival of mutual suspicions is enough to rekindle dormant mutual hatred, and historians, political scientists, and other intellectuals certainly play a role in the reviving of past traumas and their transmission to the media and politicians, and then to the public.

In the 1980s, several American scholars (Schroeder, 1983) analyzed in detail the development of the Transcaucasian republics in the post-Stalin era. They arrived at the following conclusions: economic development and modernization of



all Transcaucasian Soviet Republics had continued at a fairly rapid pace; living standards had improved greatly, especially in comparison to their probable stagnation or decline in pre-Stalin years; and the region was far ahead of its Middle Eastern neighbors, although well behind Western Europe, and somewhat below the All-Union (Soviet) average.

Considering these findings, the authors doubted if this economic success would have been possible if the three Transcaucasian republics had developed as independent countries, especially given their low starting point and their rather poor natural resources. The authors left it to philosophers, however, to debate whether the comparatively faster economic progress under the Soviet regime compensated these states for the loss of national independence and cultural freedom. We are not these philosophers, but the last few years have shown that comparatively rapid economic development under the Soviet Union could not effectively suppress the emotional undercurrents associated with the loss of cultural freedom and national independence, or the traumas of the past. In fact, as soon as the pace of development slowed with the collapse of the USSR, nationalistic intellectuals reminded the public of old wounds that had never fully healed. Writers, politicians, media, and public alike realized that the return to economic progress and modernization would be very long and arduous, and it became necessary to find someone to blame for this misfortune. The stress of economic uncertainty rapidly revived unresolved conflicts that remained just below the surface.

Georgia provides an excellent example of what happened next. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a writer, a fighter for human rights, and a prominent dissident during the Soviet period became the new head of its government, assuming power on a wave of general enthusiasm. But like so many other post-Soviet leaders, he was

incapable of foreseeing and preventing the inevitable consequences of the sudden rupture first with the Soviet Union and then with the other republics. In response, he turned to a common practice of dictators: in unfavorable circumstances he tried by all means possible to preserve his personal power. He blamed the grief and losses of the young and unprepared Georgian state on "outsiders" and "late coming guests," that is, the national minorities, those "agents of Russian imperialism and communism." Those who supposedly damaged Georgia were the Ossetians, Abkhazians, Tatars, and of course, Russians. Through careful manipulation, the irritation of the Georgian majority was quickly turned against these new, but also old, enemies. And because of the disappearance of the Soviet Union, ordinary Ossetians and Abkhazians found themselves between two independent countries: a declining nationalistic Georgia and a relatively flourishing Russia.

Real history and real problems were soon replaced by an appeal to emotion. Prominent historians reminded the disappointed Georgian population that the "Ossetian barbarians" had been ruining Georgian villages ever since the Middle Ages. They accused them of helping the Bolsheviks end the independent Georgian state in the 1920s. The eighty-five thousand Abkhazians were accused of committing all possible and impossible sins against Georgia. The Georgian media, under control of Gamsakhurdia's clique, joined the fray and fueled the wave of hysteria. Gamsakhurdia finally called his subjects "to sweep all the rubbish out of Mother Georgia." The slogan "Georgia for Georgians" was the final step.

The Southern Ossetian and the Abkhazian independent press reacted immediately, reminding *their* people about Georgian oppression of their culture and education, and the brutal actions of the Georgian army in 1920 when troops under the command of Valiko Dzhugelyu-

ined and sacked Southern Ossetia's capital, Tskhinval, and many other villages, killing thousands of civilians and forcing many to flee to North Ossetia. As a result of such memories of victimization, the rejuvenation of ethnic identity in Georgia soon resurrected the monster of radical nationalism. Bloody wars in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which were provoked by aggressive nationalists, left thousands of victims of all ethnic communities: dead and wounded, homeless refugees, ruined economies, desolation of former luxurious cities and health-resorts. There were no winners.

### Chechnya

The bloody 1992 conflict between Ingusheta and North Ossetia, and the terrible war between Russia and Chechnya, differ only in the historical routes by which they reached this point. Both conflicts were primed by a similar revival of traumatic ethnic memories and the image of the enemy long before they reached their "hot stages." Here one only needs to point out once more that the Chechens were one of the leading forces of mountaineer resistance to the tsarist Russian invasion of the Northern Caucasus. Their region was ultimately annexed to Russia after one hundred and fifty years of determined fighting in which the Chechens were driven into the most barren reaches of the Caucasus mountains. But even then, the Chechens continued sporadic resistance for the next half century. Even after their total defeat seemed assured, Chechen leaders continued to take advantage of the internal difficulties that plagued Russia following the Communist Revolution. Thus, they assisted the Bolsheviks in eradicating Cossack villages in their region during the Civil War (1918-1920), they revolted against the newly formed Soviet Union in 1920 and 1929, and they resisted total collectivization in 1942-43. Except in the elimination of the Cossacks, they were defeated each time, adding another

chapter to their history of chosen traumas and the image of their enemy. Their greatest modern tragedy occurred in 1944. As the Germans pushed toward the Caucasus, Stalin feared that Chechens and Ingushs would side with the enemy; but because Soviet troops quickly stopped the German advance into the Caucasus, the feared linkage was not made. All the same, almost the entire population of these two ethnic groups was ordered deported to Kazakhstan. Virtually every Chechen now over age thirty-five was born in exile. This fact alone could account for the fierceness and loyalty of Chechen fighters during the latest war between Chechens and Russians (see Cuny, 1995).

When the exiles returned to the region in 1956-57, they found that much of the land they considered theirs had been taken by people from neighboring areas. These people had themselves been forcibly resettled there at Stalin's behest, most likely because the Chechens had helped the Bolsheviks in the extermination of Cossacks. It was a bitter return for the exiles; yet in their reflections, they neither took into account their role in the campaign against the Cossacks, the forced settlement of their neighbors, nor their own compensation by Khrushchev with land in the fertile districts of Stavropol. To make matters worse, modern Russian legislators adopted the principle of "territorial rehabilitation." They thus added more fuel to a trauma that had now fully permeated the ethnic identity of these unfortunate people. Ingushs and Chechens, having been defeated so many times before, readily transferred all of their hostility to the latest generation of Russians and Ossetians.

### The Future

In a recently published article, Robert Cullen (1994) reported on an interesting 1932 letter of Albert Einstein to Sigmund Freud. Einstein by then may already have envisioned the destructive power that

physics was about to place in humanity's hands. He was troubled that totalitarians who had made racial and ethnic hatred the basis of their official policy were ascending to power. So Einstein asked Freud if psychoanalysis could devise a kind of vaccination to prevent the horror he foresaw. "Is it possible to so guide the psychological development of man that it becomes resistant to the psychoses of hatred and destruction?" he wondered. Freud's reply should give pause—he said that men make war because it feels good. Killing one's enemies, and thus satisfying the dead who are calling for revenge, gratifies a fundamental aggressive instinct. That instinct will not go away, and Freud saw no sense in wishing that it would. He wrote: "Why don't we accept it as we do so many other painful calamities of life? It seems to be a natural occurrence, biologically well-founded and ... scarcely avoidable" (see Cullen, 1994, p. 30). Taking all this into account, one may think that the history of the Caucasus is nothing but a continuous chain of bloody conflicts, manifestations of mutual hostility, assertions of ethnicity, and gratification of aggressive drives. But this is too simple a response; although many accept Freud's view in light of endless bloodshed in Yugoslavia, Rwanda and other places, there is another side to the history of the Caucasus that offers some hope.

Even if Freud's conclusion is valid, one must point to another instinct in the human psyche—that of self-preservation. This instinct opposes, even restricts, the fundamental aggressive drive, as illustrated in a different historical trend among the numerous Caucasian ethnic groups.<sup>5</sup> This other version of history is best illustrated in Ossetia. During its modern history, the Ossetians paid a high price for joining the Russian Empire at the end of the eighteenth century and for receiving some lands in the fertile plain. Indeed, joining Russia and receiving lands helped them overcome a land shortage in the mountains and to survive and develop their culture. But Ossetia's alliance had an additional

cost: official statistics show, for example, that among all the peoples of the former Soviet Union, the proportion of Ossetians who became Heroes of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) is the highest relative to the total population of all other Soviet ethnic groups. Almost every second man of the Republic did not return from the front. There is a bitter Ossetian proverb: "We envy our neighbors: they have their old men, but the land of our republic is one mass grave."

The countless Ossetians who died in battle, however, are recalled not as victims to be avenged, but as heroes to be remembered—their sacrifice contributed to a great victory rather than an un-mournable defeat. This memory is therefore quite different from those of the Chechens. The perished heroes of World War II do not call for revenge from their graves—they call for peace. That is why the feeling of aversion towards war is so strong among the common people in Ossetia. Knowing this, one should not be surprised that the many different ethnic groups of the Republic (about one hundred of them) elected as their president not one of the many generals, but a professor of philology, the former rector of the North Ossetian State University, Akhsarbeck Galazov. He chose as the main goal of his policy the preservation of inter-ethnic and civil peace both inside and outside the Republic. The first step of the new administration was public condemnation of ethnic-targeted demagoguery.

This policy matches an unique request of Akhurbeck Magometov, the present rector of North Ossetian State University. He asked the scientists of the Republic to ferret out past *positive* inter-ethnic experiences. In studying original sources, historians and others learned of several methods and practices through which their ancestors limited conflict.<sup>6</sup> Modern scholars already knew that the mountaineers depended upon cattle breeding and agriculture for survival, yet

the soil of the highlands is very poor. This lack of fertile pastures and fields was the principal reason for many conflicts between the different ethnic groups. The scholars were not aware, however, that the elders of the different groups had elaborated a system of conflict prevention to avert mutual hatred and extermination. It was a mechanism of resistance to the feuds and of rules for reconciliation of clans once they had entered a vendetta. This mechanism was an important part of the *adats*, or the common laws of the mountaineers, and they were strictly preserved by each community. Violators of these laws were usually ostracized.

Hospitality was another mechanism that prevented collisions between different clans. Anyone in the Caucasus who was able to speak the words "I am your guest" to the master of a clan, or family, was received as a friend, even if he had been an enemy of the family. The guest was given the seat of honor, but his host did not ask him whether he would like to eat, as this might be considered an indication of avarice; he simply offered him whatever was available and waited on him personally. To sit down or to eat in the guest's presence was considered unseemly. At his departure, the host accompanied his guest until far beyond his *aul* (village), often as far as to the next hospitable house. In case of an attack by brigands, he defended his guest even at the peril of his own life.

The *kunac* (fraternization) served similar purposes. This practice was inherited by the Caucasians from their Scythian and Alan forerunners. The ritual of the ceremony was first described by Herodotus and has not changed visibly since that time. The two participants of the ritual dropped some blood in a cup (originally it was a horn), drank it, and in this way became kinsman and accepted the obligations to help each others' families in all situations. The sacred authority of the ritual was so strong that such a newly

acquired relative was considered more reliable than a natural kinsman. The protection of the *kunac's* family, or clan, was generally given to those of the fraternity when they needed it. Thus, almost all ethnic communities had *kunac* family units in its midst, and blood revenge between these families was thereby usually forbidden or avoided.

When the threat of an inter-ethnic collision arose, the authoritative eldersmen from *kunac* families, who were frequently connected to several ethnic groups as a result of numerous intermarriages, were asked to enter into preventive negotiations. During these talks, the mediators asked both sides to articulate their demands openly to each other and to trade insults. It was thought that this openness would let "the bad spirit, i.e., the negative emotions and suspicions, out." Prominent and skillful mediators were greatly respected in all ethnic communities and were invited to reconcile even blood vendettas. During these talks, the mediators usually defined for each sides' eldersmen the form and sum of ransom to be paid by the offending side.

This valuable inheritance was almost forgotten during the Soviet Period. Over the last few years, however, the government of the North Ossetian Republic has revived it and encouraged the creation of ethnic "cultural societies" headed by the most respected representatives of each ethnic community of the Republic. Ossetian, Russian, Georgian, Armenian, Jewish, Tatar, and other "cultural societies" soon formed and later united into the folk movement named "Our Ossetia."

While this movement has helped to revive and preserve all cultures, it has also already contributed significantly to the preservation of civil and inter-ethnic peace in the Republic. The usefulness of the societies showed itself during the war between Georgia and South Ossetia in 1992. During attacks by Georgian nationalists on Tskhinval, a truck filled with children and

aged refugees on their way to North Ossetia was destroyed, and a national crisis threatened to tear Ossetia apart (see *Helsinki Watch*, 1992; Suny, 1990). The relatives of the murdered immediately clamored for revenge, but due to the earlier establishment of the cultural societies and their leaderships' ability to assuage many constituents, a serious crisis was averted. Precautions were taken and no incidents took place; not even the classes in Vladikavkaz's Georgian school were stopped. The maintenance of emotional stability encouraged the Georgian side when talks to restore peace in South Ossetia were begun at the behest of Galazov.

Similar mechanisms were used in placing special detachments of peacemakers from both North and South Ossetia, Georgia, and Russia in the region, and were used again to bring a successful end to the military confrontation in Abkhazia. After the confrontation between North Ossetia and Ingushetia in November of 1992, "folk diplomacy" was used in talks between these governments as well.

Unfortunately, these positive experiences in inter-ethnic relations in the Caucasus were undermined by the "Chechen War." Indeed, it is not difficult to repeatedly provoke hatred in any society which has experienced so many losses and which for generations has sought and found "enemies." What lies in the future for Chechnya is therefore unclear. We can only hope that the experience of the peacemakers of the past and present will show the peoples of the Caucasus that a positive future for their "Caucasian home" can be assured not by violence, but by peace. Although it is difficult to break the infernal grip of the long arm of the dead, old accounts must be closed. Violence leads only to more enmity and extermination; peace at least offers the hope that each group may flourish in its own particular way.

## Notes

1. See D.K. Simes, "Russia's Imperial Consensus," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (January 2-8, 1995): 23-24; Lee Hockstader, "A Presidency on the Line," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (January 16-22, 1995): 17-18; same author, "The Nasty Little War That Won't Go Away," *The Washington Post Weekly Edition* (March 27-April 2, 1995): 16-17; and Gerhard Simon, "War in Chechnya—Consequences for Russia," *Swiss Review of World Affairs*, vol. IV (April 1995): 8-10. It is also helpful to read about heightened ethnicity in another part of the world; see Keith Richburg, "A Black American in Africa," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition* (April 10-16): 6-9
2. See Umarov, S. (1991). "Islam i Voina" ("Islam and War"), *Kavkaz ("Caucasus")*. Vladikavkaz: As-Madzal, pp. 6-7. For the earlier period, see Atkin, M. (1988). "Russian Expansion in the Caucasus to 1813," in *Russian Colonial Expansion to 1917*, ed. M. Rywkin. London and New York: Mansell, pp. 139-87. For a very pro-Russian account of the war in the Caucasus, see MacKenzie, D. (1974). *The Lion of Tashkent. The Career of General M.G. Cherniaev*. Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, pp. 26-8.
3. The quote by Tsitsianov may be found in *Akti i Sobranye Kavkozskoi Arkheographicheskoi Komissii ("Acts and Collections of the Caucasian Archaeographic Commission")*, 12 vols. Tiflis, 1868-1906: vol. II, p. N1414.
4. Later in Russian history, even during the 1970s and 1980s of the Soviet period, unknown persons periodically spoiled the monument to Ermolov in downtown Grozny; after each incident, the authorities restored the monument.

5. Unfortunately, this other side of history is not attractive to those journalists who are busy searching for sensational and terrifying facts. This other history is also not appreciated by ambitious leaders and intellectuals who prey on the traumas of the past for their own political and publishing ends.

6. For example, historians discovered many original documents from the chancellery of the Ataman of the Terek Cossacks which recorded what can be called "folk diplomacy." This sort of diplomacy managed to prevent many conflicts between Russian Cossacks villages and mountaineer communities.

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