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THE PEOPLE AND THE LAND

The ethnic and linguistic composition of its population probably makes the 1,100-kilometres-long and 32 to 180-kilometres-wide range of the Caucasus the most varied area in the world. It is home to more than seventy native ethnic groups, the largest of which consists of the Chechens who in 1989, in the last Soviet census, numbered about a million people.

Chechnya, the Chechens’ land, is a quadrilateral located in the north-eastern part of the Caucasus, demarcated by the Terek and Sunja rivers in the west and the north, the ‘Andi range in the east which separates it from Daghestan, and the snow-covered twin range of the Caucasus in the south which separates it from Georgia. Like the rest of the Northern Caucasus, Chechnya is divided by parallel, gradually decreasing ranges running north-west to south-east. The northernmost and lowest of these are the Terek (Terekiskii) and Sunja (Sundzhenskii) ranges located between the rivers after which they are named. The heartland of Chechnya—the low-land—lies between the Sunja range and river and the ‘black mountains’ (chernye gory). 2 It is in fact the widest of the valleys running between the different ranges. It is crossed by the Sunja’s numerous tributaries, which cut through the mountain ranges in deep ravines and canyons. Their high water occurs, as all over the Caucasus, in the summer, when snow and ice melt in the higher altitudes.

Most of Chechnya is situated within the forest zone of the Caucasus. Before the Russian conquest it formed one dense primeval forest and even at the beginning of the 21st century the country still

2 So called because being covered by dense forests they look dark against the background of the snow-covered main range.
had a great number of wooded areas, especially in the mountains. Thus it imposes a combination of two of the most difficult and complicated modes of war on any regular army used to pitched battle: mountain and forest warfare. In all the battles with the imperial Russian and Soviet armies the Chechens displayed great mastery in using these features to their advantage. In the 1990s they also proved their ability to adjust to modern conditions by imposing urban warfare on the Russian Federal forces and transforming the cities—first and foremost the capital Groznyi—into latter-day forests.

The Chechens derive their by now international name from the village of Chechen Aul, where the Russians first encountered them. Their self-appellation is Nokhchhi, meaning ‘people’ or ‘our people’. They are closely related to the Ingush living to the west and to the Kists who live south of the main range in Georgia. Both groups are considered by the Chechens to be Chechen tribes, although the Ingush regard themselves as a separate people. The languages they speak are mutually intelligible and belong to the Nakh sub-group of the north-eastern group of the Caucasian linguistic family. Accordingly, all three—Chechens, Ingush and Kists—are also referred to as Vaynaks.

The Nakh languages are related to the language of the Hurrians, the founders of the ancient kingdoms of Mittani and Urartu. This gave rise to the claim of Chechen nationalist historiography that the Chechens are the descendants of these peoples, states and cultures and as such were the bearers of civilisation when in the fourth century BCE they moved north to their present habitat. Some Russian ethnographers too hold that the high moral demands of the nokhchalla—the norms and code of honour obligatory on each Chechen—are signs that these people are the remnants of a highly

3 The Chechens and Ingush are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school. The Kists are Orthodox Christians.


5 L. O. Bubakhin and Dolkhan A.-A. Khozhayev, ‘Potomki Nefertiti’, Komso-
omskoe plienia (Groznyi), 11 February 1989, p. 10; Lena Usmanov, Nepokorennaya Chechnia (Moscow: Izdatskii dom Parus, 1997), pp. 32–4; and cf. Yakub Vaga-
developed ancient civilisation. However, very little is known of the Chechens’ history before their encounter with Russia, since both imperial Russia and the Soviet Union discouraged its study. In a typically colonialist attitude the Chechens, like almost all the other non-Slavic peoples of the Soviet Union, were described as a geschichtslose Nation to whom Russia brought the light and blessings of civilisation.

When encountered by Russia, the Chechens shared with all the other ethnic groups of the Northern Caucasus a common culture. In spite of ethnic and linguistic differences all these groups defined themselves as ‘Mountaineers’ (gortsy in Russian) and regarded themselves as akin to each other. Within a certain range of variation they all led a similar way of life, wore similar clothes and had similar traditions and customs. Some anthropologists classified their culture as belonging to the nomadic-patriarchal type. What they meant was:

1. Even though the Mountaineers were not nomads, and while farming was their main occupation, the basis of economic life was livestock. Consequently people kept their wealth in herds of horses, cattle and especially sheep and goats.
2. Society was divided along patrilineal lines into extended families (dōzal or ts’ in Chechen), clans (gar or neq’i), tribes (te’ip) and tribal confederations (tuqum). These served, with a different emphasis at each level, as foci of identification and mutual responsibility and were at the basis of the political, social and economic structures. One result of this configuration was extreme vigilance over one’s freedom and the strong rejection of any authority external to the kin group. Another, in the case of murder, was vendetta (kanly).

6 For example, Ian Veniaminovich Chesnov, ‘Civilization and the Chechen’, *Anthropology and Archaeology of Eurasia*, 34, 3 (winter 1995–6), pp. 28–40.
8 Lewis J. Luzbetac, *Marriage and Family in Caucas: A Contribution to the Study of*
3. They were a ‘martial race’, to use a nineteenth-century British term, raised to be warriors. Frequent mutual raids were a manifestation of this spirit. People were seldom hurt in these raids, their object being almost exclusively the capture of cattle and/or horses without becoming entangled in a blood-feud. However, despite the economic importance of capturing the animals, such raids had greater significance: they were first and foremost an initiation test for young warriors in which they could prove their courage and prowess.

These basic values are reflected in the image of the wolf (borz), the centrality of which in Chechen self-perception is attested by its having been chosen as the emblem of the republic after independence. In 1997 the martial qualities of the wolf were emphasised by the Chechen author Lema Usmanov:

The lion and the eagle are both embodiments of strength, but they attack only the weak. The wolf is the only creature that dares to take on someone stronger than himself. The wolf’s insufficient strength is compensated for with limitless audacity, courage and adroitness. If, however, he has lost the battle he dies silently, expressing neither fear nor pain. And he always dies facing his enemy.10

No less significant are its other qualities that the Chechens cherish: the wolf is loyal to its pack and is ready to sacrifice its life for them. Even more important, it loves freedom, cannot be tamed and would rather die resisting than surrender.11 Marcho—freedom—is a central

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North Caucasian Ethnology and Customary Law (Vienna-Mödling: St Gabriel’s Mission Press, 1951). Of course the peoples of the North Caucasus were not nomads and differed in many spheres and respects from the Eurasian nomads roaming to their north.


10 Usmanov (note 5), p. 42.

11 The wolf has, however, one evident characteristic that the Chechens tend to keep silent about not to emphasise—it is a predator hunting, sometimes with extreme cruelty, any weaker, unprotected animal. With modernisation and Sovietisation destabilising the patriarchal, patrilineal structure of society and eroding the respect for the nokchchalla, incidence of such behaviour became more frequent. The wars of the 1990s, which ruined the social fabric and morality of
concept in both Chechen culture and the Chechen psyche. Although Chechen nationalists attach to it modern Western political connotations, traditionally its meaning went far beyond that of either the Western or the Islamic sense of the word. In the Chechen language the word also contained the connotation of ‘peace’ and ‘well-being’. This is clearly demonstrated in daily greetings: welcoming a male guest Chechens say ‘marsha woghiyla’ (‘yoghiyla’ to a woman; literally ‘enter in freedom’). Good-bye is ‘marsha ghoyla’ (go in freedom). Sending regards Chechens say ‘marshalla doiytu’ (wish freedom to...) and proposing a toast they say ‘Dala marshall doila’ (may God provide freedom).

To Chechens freedom also means equality. Traditional Vaynakh (and part of their Daghestani neighbours’) society was not stratified. The Russians referred to the tuqums (and their Daghestani equivalents usually known as jama’ats)\(^\text{12}\) as ‘free societies’ (vol’nye obschestva). Land was owned communally and all men belonging to the tuqum were free—uzdens—and equal members of the community. Each tuqum was a sovereign polity. Matters common to some or all tuqums were decided in the Mehq-Qel (Council of the Land).\(^\text{13}\) Consequently freedom, equality and non-acceptance of outside authority have been strongly embedded in the Chechen psyche. One can often hear young men and even teenagers asserting ‘I am a free man and obey no one.’ When confronted with the fact that they obey their seniors in their own family, the usual reply is: ‘Yes, but I do it of my own free will.’ Furthermore, these notions of freedom, equality and disobedience are strongly connected to the concepts of honour and manhood. Thus in the early 1990s one could often hear recently demobilised young men boasting how of in the Soviet army (known for its rigid discipline) they had not obeyed their sergeant or officer and had even beaten him up.

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\(^{13}\) Naturally, contemporary Chechen historiography regards the Mehq-Qel as the full equivalent of a modern democratic parliament. Recent studies indicate that, contrary to what had been believed, the Mehq-Qel was not necessarily and not always a meeting of all the Chechen tribes, and that ‘local’ Mehq-Qels were also convened.
Grasping these concepts is crucial if one is to understand the long Chechen resistance to Russian rule. Generally Chechen society has retained these values throughout the intense changes it has undergone since its first contact with Russia: Islamisation, adherence to the Sufi brotherhoods, modernisation, urbanisation, Russification and Sovietisation.\textsuperscript{14} The nokhchalla contained such demands on a man as ‘chivalry, noble feelings, hospitality, honour, faithfulness in friendship, a spirit of self-sacrifice for the common good, courage in war, modesty in everyday life and yet vindictiveness bordering on inhumanity when fighting a treacherous enemy.’\textsuperscript{15} These qualities were declared ‘primitive and savage’ by the Russian conquerors—who ‘were endowed with many [but not all] of these qualities’—and banned by the Bolsheviks, who ‘were absolutely devoid of them’, as ‘“bourgeois-nationalist prejudice” and condemned to disappear for the sake of “communist re-education”’.\textsuperscript{16} Consequently, accepting Russian rule was to the Chechens more than losing freedom in the Western sense of the word: it was losing one’s manhood and—more important—one’s soul.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} If there has been any erosion, mainly since the ‘deportation’ (see chapter 13 below), it has been felt in a loosening of the adherence to the high moral standards of the nokhchalla among urbanised Chechens, especially among those living ‘abroad’, i.e. in other parts of the former Soviet Union. The collapse of social and moral values in the 1990s is mainly the result of the Russo-Chechen wars (see chapter 15, note 36).


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 169.

\textsuperscript{17} Still, like almost all human societies under similar circumstances in history, the overwhelming majority of Chechens had to carry on with their lives after the Russian occupation and to negotiate their own compromises with reality. As in all other cases in history, those who chose openly to defy, resist and confront the Russian authorities—and suffer the consequences—were a tiny minority, as were those who chose to cooperate with the authorities.