

Similarities Stain the Kremlin's Warfare on Chechens and Ukrainians

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The Russian war in Ukraine continues with daily news reports from besieged cities documenting humanitarian disasters, growing civilian casualties, and fleeing refugees. Many commentators have compared this war in Ukraine initiated by President Vladimir Putin with the one that he waged in Chechnya at the start of his presidency in 1999, known as the second Chechen war. However, Moscow's current military campaign has more similarities with the first Russo-Chechen war, which was launched by President Boris Yeltsin in 1994, and which notably ended in disgrace for the Russian army in 1996. Even if their territorial and population sizes are vastly different, numerous similarities between the Russian wars in Chechnya and the current war in Ukraine can be pinpointed. Examples include blurred strategies and identity issues, demoralized and violent Russian troops, and indiscriminate bombing campaigns meant to destroy civilians and culture.

Prizing Local Government Loyalty

Out of six main similarities, the **first** is the driving force behind the resistance. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the population of both Chechnya and Ukraine experienced the strengthening of national identity,, a process accelerating in reaction to Russian aggressiveness. So grew peoples' willingness to fight and die for their nations and countries. This can be observed in particular with the Russian campaigns in Chechnya and Ukraine, both of which were/are two-part armed conflicts. There were two distinct wars in Chechnya, from 1994 to 1996 and 1999 to 2009. In Ukraine, the current military campaign followed the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, which has been going on since 2014. In both cases, in the "interim" period, nationalist sentiment and resolve grew stronger among the defenders. This applies not only to the people of Chechen and Ukrainian ethnicities, but also to the Russian population that lives in these

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places. Ukraine and Chechnya witnessed many cases when ethnic Russians volunteered to fight against the aggression coming from the Russian Federation.

The underestimation and inclusiveness of the Ukrainian national identity, as Russian opposition politician Ilia Yashin [observed](#), was a gross miscalculation by Putin, who counted on administrative collapses and warm welcomes. Regions that the Kremlin thought of as “Russian” in Ukraine’s south and east, and the cities of Mariupol, Kharkiv, Melitopol, and others, have resisted Putin’s aggression either peacefully or by actively joining the military defense. In sum, both peoples were very strongly committed to the sovereignty and defense of their nation against Russian hostility, and the trajectory of such sentiment increases.

The **second** similarity is the apparent lack of motivation of the Russian troops and the absence of clear enthusiasm for the aggression by a large part of Russian society. Before and during the first Chechen war, there were many cases when high-ranking Russian military officers and members of civil society publicly protested the war and even sacrificed their careers opposing the Yeltsin regime. This disagreement, to a large extent, was coming from the bonds that both nations still possessed after decades of living in the same country. People had good memories, shared work experiences, and mixed marriages, which made the war incomprehensible for many.

Arguably, there is no strong inter-ethnic hostility between Russians and Ukrainian. This may change rapidly for the worse depending on events during the war. One reason may be, as Paul Goode [documented](#), that media coverage shown in Russia of the war has been lacking consistent messaging: Ukrainians are depicted as kin of the Russian nation, but state propaganda also [shows](#) them as Nazis, all the while claiming mass support for Putin’s actions. The Kremlin has tried to dehumanize Ukrainians and label them as dangerous to Russia; it did not put as much effort in the Chechen case while preparing for the second war. [According](#) to Norwegian researcher Julie Wilhelmsen, it took years for Russian propaganda to make the second Chechen war acceptable to most Russians, even though societal xenophobia had already existed toward the Chechens back then. There was not obviously massive xenophobia toward the Ukrainians amongst Russians just two months ago.

Third, similar to the first campaign in Chechnya, Russia’s military goals in its war on Ukraine are muddled – and yet, the simplicity and immorality of an unprovoked invasion of a sovereign state make regional and global opposition to Russia’s actions very easy. When Chechnya first declared independence, Russia said it aimed to “restore the constitutional order.” Disarming of the “Chechen illegal gangs” and dismounting the “power-usurped government” were other often-named goals of the war. In an echo of today’s misplaced Russian confidence, Russian General Pavel Grachev in 1994 said he could take over Grozny in hours with two regiments and [overthrow](#) Chechnya’s leader Dzhokhar Dudayev. In Ukraine, Moscow has provided a variety of rationales and goals

for its “special military operation,” initially deciding to (only) recognize the independence of Luhansk and Donetsk in order to stop the “genocide” of ethnic Russians in those areas. However, the planned military operation was projected well beyond those regions, which necessitated more and different justifications. Hence, the Russian leadership [included](#) goals such as “denazification,” “demilitarization,” “stopping Ukraine from getting nuclear weapons,” “stopping a NATO attack,” and stopping it from [building](#) a “plutonium-based dirty bomb.” Denazification has no meaning in practical terms: it is not a problem in Ukraine (the president is Jewish), and there is no method for the Russian military to identify Nazis among Ukrainians. The lack of clarity on military goals undermines the morale of the Russian army, which was rather low even before the actual invasion, in both cases under focus.

The **fourth** similarity between the two wars can be drawn from Russia’s political strategy. Same as in Chechnya, Russia tried and did not manage to discredit the existing elected governments at the time of the invasion of Ukraine. Moreover, the decision to start these wars resulted in enormous popular support for the legitimate local authorities. In preparation for both wars, Russia used nearby territories to prepare for political transitions and mount attacks. In Chechnya in the 1990s, Russia set up a puppet government (a Chechen “Novorossiya”) in the northern districts where it trained and armed “opposition” forces, using the area also as a bridgehead and rear guard during the fighting. Similar to the “governments” in Luhansk and Donetsk, the Chechen opposition lacked popularity and could not claim leadership of the whole republic. The puppet government that Russia set up in Grozny was literally residing in the military airport, ready to be evacuated at any moment of danger.

The attempts to use local interlocutors to advance a Russian political agenda were more successful during the second Chechen campaign when Russia recruited Akhmat Kadyrov, father of Ramzan, and the mufti during the pre-war time of Chechen de facto independence in 1991-1994. The same plan might have worked for Ukraine if Russia had been able to find someone like him. However, every potential candidate to lead a pro-Russian government realized that they would exist in direct opposition to the people of Ukraine. For instance, Yuri Boiko, who [competed](#) in the presidential elections of 2019 and had, to some extent, a pro-Russian agenda, quickly and clearly distanced himself from leadership roles. Russia has not found a Ukrainian Kadyrov willing to side with the Kremlin against his own nation. As the military campaign falters and as Russia’s coffers for [buying support](#) increasingly empty, the prospect of finding a fitting pro-Russian leader for Ukraine dims by the day.

The **fifth** point of comparison in the wars in Chechnya and Ukraine is international media coverage and the support of the world community. On a much smaller scale than in the case of Ukraine, morally, the world was on the side of the Chechens during the first Russo-Chechen war. To a large extent, this was due to the international media coverage and work of journalists who were welcomed and protected by the Chechens. Their reports

depicted the war and suffering of the Chechen people, which encouraged the support of the world population and pressured the governments to criticize Russian actions, even if there were no sanctions imposed on Russia at that time. Realizing this, for the second campaign in Chechnya, President Vladimir Putin closed the access of foreign journalists to Chechnya while at the same time [taking control](#) over the main independent media outlets and television channels in Russia. By doing this, he allowed the actions of the Russian military to go unseen, as he unleashed ruthlessness and terror on the civilian population.

The Kremlin's control over domestic media during the second Chechen campaign ensured the dominance of Russia's view of the war and allowed for the creation of an extremely negative image of Chechens as dangerous terrorists who blow up apartment buildings. This accusation was later [debunked](#), but the September 11 attack in the United States and the ensuing global war on terrorism favored Moscow's attitude, which painted an independent Chechnya as an unstable Islamist republic. At the time, Washington received Russia's support in the Iraq and Afghan wars while ignoring the atrocities in Chechnya. Russia cannot exercise any such media control in Ukraine. Technological and Internet progress, numerous and evolving social media platforms, possibilities for international media to connect with and cover the Ukrainian side, and the size of the Ukrainian diaspora in many countries ensure an unstoppable information stream, which is disadvantageous for Russia. Limiting access to independent foreign media and strengthening domestic propaganda has been the only option for the Kremlin, but that only works in Russia on Russian citizens. While there were some similarities in sympathy for Chechens in the first war and for Ukrainians, there is a vast difference in media coverage and international support between the second Chechen war and the Ukrainian war, which has also been framed as an invasion of Europe itself.

Sixth, unfortunately, in both the Chechen and Ukrainian wars, we see little to no consideration of the human lives lost owing to Russia's military actions. The indiscriminate bombing and shelling, as well as the apparent targeting of civilian populations, the cutting off of humanitarian food and medical supplies, and the blaming of the opposing side for casualties, were widely used tactics of the Russian political and military leadership during the wars in Chechnya. The justification for this inhumanity happening in Ukraine is the same. Russian propaganda [accuses](#) "Nazis" of "hiding behind civilians or inside populated buildings," a tactic that is turning Ukrainian cities into the completely razed Grozny of 1995, or the Dresden of World War II. It is no surprise that Susan Glasser on CNN [likened](#) Putin's strategy in Ukraine to the "Groznyfication" of the war.

It is important to note that the targeting of civilians is not just a war crime or merely an inhumane approach to war-fighting. It is strategic in the sense that it stops collective action in the form of crowds or mass protests, and it also literally weakens urban populations in terms of their ability even to survive, which puts additional pressure on

the Ukrainian government to accept a ceasefire or an unfair peace deal. The record-breaking refugee flows are evidence that many Ukrainians see the danger of staying in place, given the increasing threat of Russian bombs, artillery, and missiles, making resistance even by just remaining in the country very costly. We have not seen thus far retaliatory violence against Russian civilians by Ukrainians within Russia, which did occur in the context of the Chechen war, [namely](#) in the campaign to “bring the war to Russia.” One of the most infamous actions of this kind was the hospital hostage crisis in [Budyonovsk in 1995](#), which became a key example of Chechen terrorism in Russia.

On the other hand, there are succinct but substantial differences between the wars in Chechnya and Ukraine: the size of the territories and populations, and the deep external support. Ukraine is thirty-five times larger than Chechnya territorially and population-wise. It is the second-largest country in Europe after Russia, almost as big as Texas, whereas Chechnya is about the size of Connecticut. The number of troops and administrators required to take over Ukraine is enormous in comparison to what was needed in Chechnya. Also, while there were some foreign fighters in the second Chechen war as there are now in Ukraine, the latter receives massive levels of foreign assistance from numerous countries. Ukraine’s third-party assistance both monetary and arms, and its large territory (and entry points), make it far more difficult to control than Chechnya.

Conclusion

The goal of any war is peace. It is a specific vision of peace that wars are waged for. This analysis suggests that Putin may have imagined peace in Ukraine similar to Chechnya after the campaign of 1999-2009, with a local government loyal to him/Russia. The outcome of the Ukrainian war, however, is currently looking much more like the first Chechen war of the mid-1990s when, after an eighteen-month-long military conflict, many civilian casualties, and Russian military losses, Yeltsin [signed](#) a peace treaty with the Chechen Republic.

The unprecedented unity of the world against Russian aggression, its financial, military, and moral support of Ukraine, and the readiness of businesses and governments to support economic sanctions against Russia, have made it hard for Russia to achieve, thus far, the scenario of the second Chechen war. However, in the face of domestic economic collapse and the prospect of further military losses, Russia might resort more and more to massive bombing and population cleansing. The cruelty of this strategy, as the second Chechen war demonstrated, can not only create a deep hatred between the peoples of Russia and Ukraine, but the civilian and humanitarian toll, if it continues to worsen and if it lasts for a long time, could also weaken national resolve, and swing the population toward pressuring the government to accept Russian terms. The time necessary for this change depends on the morale of the Ukrainian people, their readiness to sacrifice their own lives, and their willingness to fight long-term to protect their state.

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