



Post-Soviet Jihadism

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Summary

The topic of my dissertation is the emergence and development of jihadi ideology in the Russian language, from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s. I analyze the intellectual environment that gave birth to the propaganda of militant jihadism in post-Soviet Russia, with special emphasis on the North Caucasus. I study how the Russophone ideologists of Jihadism called for jihad and how they justified their fight. The selection of protagonists whose texts I analyze is guided by the attempt to cover personalities of various periods/generations, and of various groups within the jihadi resistance in the North Caucasus. I also take into consideration the different educational and professional backgrounds of the activists, as well as their prominence and the degree to which they have become known to a broader public.

In the first part of this thesis the reader will find some well-known names, in particular the first president of independent Chechnya/Ichkeria, Dzhokhar Dudaev (1944-1996); his successor Zelimkhan Yandarbiev (1952-2004); as well as Movladi Udugov (b. 1962), the creator of *Kavkazcenter*, and Shamil Basaev (1965-2006), who for many years was Russia's most-wanted terrorist. These men all belonged to what I call the first generation of Chechen Islamists; individually and as a group, they shaped the emergence of a modern discourse that enrooted jihad in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. These are the most well-known figures of the movement in their time, and they all were avid writers who experimented with practical and theoretical justifications of jihad.

The second part of the present work mainly focuses on a younger cohort of actors that, I argue, brought about important changes and innovations in the discourse of jihad. For Daghestan, my analysis starts with Nadirshakh Khachilaev (1958-2003), who – like Dudaev, Udugov and other Chechens of the first generation – oscillated between politics and militancy. The chapters of this second part of the book then analyze in more detail the life and works of Iasin Rasulov (1975-2006), who worked on a PhD dissertation on the local history of Islamism before he gained notorious fame as the ideologist of the Daghestani “Sharia” movement; Anzor Astemirov (1976-2010), leader of the Kabardino-Balkarian jama'at (Islamic community), and subsequently Sharia judge of the “Caucasus Emirate”; Said Buriatskii (Aleksandr Tikhomirov, 1982- 2010), probably the most prominent speaker of the Caucasus Emirate; as well as the jihadi singer/songwriter Timur Mutsuraev (b. 1976), who still has a

significant fan community in Russia. The final chapter presents Airat Vakhitov (b. 1977), a Tatar Islamist whose jihadist career brought him to Chechnya, Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, and Turkey; Vakhitov is also the only person whom I had the occasion to interview. All of these men gained utmost prominence in Russia, by their writings and their actions. They all actively participated in military actions and contributed to the spread of violence.

In the individual chapters I first study the biographical trajectories of the jihadi ideologists, in order to identify the key moments or events that shaped their worldview; then I proceed to analyze their own writings. This approach allows me to make evidence-based assumptions about the ideational roots of their ideological interpretations, and to reconstruct the intellectual context in which this ideology emerged.

The core argument of the present thesis is that the Russophone jihadi propaganda discourse resulted not only from a Muslim influence "imported" from abroad. Rather, in the first place it fed from domestic post-Soviet processes that unfolded in the cultural sphere of the country. My work implies that jihadism in Russia must be regarded as a variant of a broader post-Soviet radicalism, which had its base in domestic ideational and intellectual trends.

My research demonstrates that there was not much specifically Islamic in the Russian-language discourse of the jihadists. Rather, what could be established is that post-Soviet jihadists make references above all to particular Russian, Soviet and European authors who already obtained popularity among Russian-speakers in the late Soviet and post-Soviet eras, or to writers who had once been prominent in Soviet official or semi-official narratives. One major non-Muslim personality whose thinking is constantly evoked in jihadi texts is the Russian anthropologist Lev Gumilev, who is widely seen as one of the founding fathers of Neo-Eurasianism.

Contentwise, the jihadi ideology of the era under consideration reflects the ideas and concepts, terminologies and stylistics that we also find in the texts of those non-Muslim authors. This must be explained by the Soviet and post-Soviet experiences and socialization of the first generations of jihadists; as a rule, they lacked a proper Islamic education and did not know the Arabic language. But even the ideologists that did obtain an Islamic education, primarily in the countries of the Middle East, reveal in their programmatic writings tropes, images, discursive strategies, and expressions that must be considered as typical Soviet or post-Soviet, and that feed from Russian literature and education. Even Russian musical

traditions can be found back in jihadi culture. The Russian jihadi discourse therefore emerged, and was shaped, by these non-Muslim sources.

My dissertation demonstrates that the Russian and Soviet cultural field was broad and adaptable enough to also give room to Islamic radicalism. This raises the question to which academic discipline the study of North Caucasus jihadism belongs. Traditionally it falls into the field of Islamic studies and North Caucasus area studies. I argue, however, that the study of contemporary Islamist propaganda also speaks to specialists of Soviet and Russian culture.