

History as a Means of Conflict and Conflict Resolution in the North Caucasus/Chechnya

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Starting from the example of the post-Soviet space, this article is interested in how conflicts are caused by – or result in – tensions between groups promoting different types and versions of historical memory. In the neo-authoritarian, (post-) conflict setting of Chechnya, Jan Assman's concept of cultural and communicative memory offers an interesting entry point to analyse the different types and levels of conflict, between the Chechens and Moscow, and within society in Chechnya proper. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the nationalisation of historiography in the 1990s, the new elites of Chechnya formulated local alternatives to the dominant Russian (and Soviet) narrative of the past. During the second war in Chechnya in the early 2000s, and with the strengthening of authoritarianism under the Kadyrov regime, the formerly open conflict with Moscow was again pushed underground. Ramzan Kadyrov's instrumentalisation of history as a means to legitimise his cult of the Kadyrov family and the political choice for Moscow, that is, for Vladimir Putin, plays an important role in fuelling these grievances. Civil society, and especially young people are an important actor in this conflict between official (or cultural) and popular (or communicative) forms of historical memory – a new conflict that is smouldering within the Chechen society, only waiting to eventually break out.

Keywords: Post-Soviet Space, Memory Conflicts, Chechnya, Cultural Memory, Communicative Memory, Cult of Personality.

Introduction

The newly-gained independence or aspirations for autonomy and self-determination borne out of the collapse of the Soviet Union have put in motion the redefinition of national and ethnic identities, which has often resulted in armed conflicts between minority groups and their mother states. Whereas most of these conflicts have been pacified or “frozen” militarily, the socio-political tensions persist and create an ongoing risk of re-escalation.¹

This still today characterises all regions of the post-Soviet conflict space that have seen a larger armed conflict. The conflict areas in the Caucasus and Ukraine, even the latter where the guns are still smoking, largely disappeared from the attention of policy makers and the headlines of the international media: they are silenced, not only in a military sense, but also as a topic of world policy. This article will touch upon an aspect that is silenced even more thoroughly, the role of history and historical memory in conflict – as a means for mobilisation and confrontation, but also for peacebuilding.

Historical narratives of the remote and the recent past play an important role in

practically all post-Soviet conflicts, both in fuelling and neutralising them; fuelling in a sense of contributing to political intolerance and nationalist discourses about war and hostilities within and between different interest groups in the North Caucasus; neutralising by developing a view on history that is “responsible”² in a way that it seeks a truthful, balanced and non-partisan account of the past and allows for a pluralist exchange between different interpretative approaches.

Being part of a larger project that plans to tackle the issue with a considerably bigger geographical and thematical scope,³ this article is interested in how different types of conflicts are caused by (or result in) tensions between different types of collective memory. Notably, it will concentrate on the link between historical memory in the North Caucasus (Chechnya) as a case study. The questions to be addressed are: What are the conceptual links between conflict and historical memory in general, and where does history play a role in the conflicts of the post-Soviet space? And, more specifically, what are the dividing lines, actors, dynamics in the memory conflicts of the North Caucasus/Chechnya?

The paper is based on the conceptual debates that are conducted in the framework of our project, reflecting on the different types of conflict in the post-Soviet space, and trying to localise history and historical memory in them. Further, it will refer to data collected during my recent trip to the North Caucasus. Methodologically, Jan Assman’s concept of communicative and cultural memory will serve as an entry point for the analysis, helping to deconstruct the memory conflicts in the North Caucasus.

1. The conflicts of the post-Soviet space: attempt at a typology

When analysing the conflicts and the peacebuilding arrangements of the post-Soviet space, it is important to distinguish different types and levels of conflict, which differ not only with regard to the period in which they occur (belonging to a certain generation of conflict), but also in terms of causes and involved actors, or their location in society.

In a nutshell, the conflicts of the post-Soviet space fall into three categories, which are the ideological, ethno-territorial and local-intrasocietal conflicts (working definition). This is rather a typology than a periodisation, since all three types co-exist to a certain degree at different levels of society in all conflict settings of the post-Soviet space. However, certain periods show a concentration of one or another type of conflict, depending on important developments in the domestic and international context.

1.1. Ideological conflicts

The clash of Western and Eurasian geopolitical formations is a typical phenomenon of Cold War ideology; after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991,

as it is usually stated, the Cold War is over, the relations between East and West are normalised and Russia and the other former Soviet republics have entered a period of post-empire based on political equality and liberalism.⁴ However, others say that the aspiration for a bi-polar world order underlining the importance of the own empire status and seeking respect and distance from Western states and strategic alliances has always remained strongly rooted in the political elites of the post-Soviet space, especially in Russia.⁵ At the latest since the annexation of Crimea, the Syrian crisis and the outbreak of the war in Donbass, the return to geopolitical power games became obvious.⁶

This confrontation with or even negation of Western values and interests by key decision makers in the post-Soviet space⁷ is to be rated not only as a clash between (post-) Soviet and Western states and strategic alliances. Rather, it also shows the increasing alienation between neo-authoritarian governments and their own populations in the post-Soviet states themselves. In other words, this type of Cold War-style ideological conflict takes place not only at a geo-political level and opposes not only states from the West and the East, but also different interest groups within the post-Soviet states and societies (see also the description of the civic identity conflicts in paragraph 1.3).

1.2. Ethno-territorial conflicts

The collapse of the state and the disintegration of Soviet identity led to a fragmentation of nationalist ideas, usually based on territorial and ethnic affiliations. These ethno-territorial conflicts typically oppose not whole states, but different groups and ethnic minorities, aiming at a re-definition of identity and a re-distribution of political status. In the post-Soviet space, these claims for autonomy, independence or secession were not mainly directed against Moscow as a (former) coloniser, but often against the new “mother states”. *Matrioshka Nationalism* is the term Ray Taras uses to describe this process of nationalistic fragmentation, comparing the hierarchy of nationalisms in the former Soviet south to the multi-layer structure of the famous Russian doll: in many cases the inner, politically subordinate slices of ethnic minorities appealed to the outer (Soviet, later Russian) umbrella to fight the repressive rule of their local centres.⁸

The ethno-territorial and inter-group character is typical for the conflicts in the post-Soviet space of the 1980s and 1990s, but also for the more recent crisis in Ukraine.⁹ After an initially hot phase, these conflicts were all frozen militarily, but not resolved politically. As a result, they continue to exist under the surface of a relative security based on military control and “negative peace”,¹⁰ and can easily re-escalate.¹¹

Ethno-territoriality is also the main narrative used by Russian analysts and policy makers to explain the conflicts of the post-Soviet space.¹² While this might

make sense for the conflicts that broke out on the coattail of state disintegration in the 1990s,¹³ at a later stage, the Moscow Kremlin's self-presentation as a neutral peacekeeper who is not directly involved becomes less credible: at the latest after the turn of the millennium, Russia's increasing assertiveness and its engagement as an active player in the conflict settings of post-Soviet space became evident, often in relation with the civic upheavals also referred to as "Colour Revolutions" in the former Soviet south.¹⁴

Ethno-territoriality or inter-society conflict is also the common lens through which international peace researchers and policy makers viewed the conflicts of the post-Soviet space.¹⁵ This has not changed much to the present day. Even more so, the almost exclusive concentration by local and international researchers and practitioners on the "ethno-territorial" dimension of conflict obscures the fact that the situation in the post-Soviet space has changed, and the conflicts now oppose not mainly ethnic and territorial groups, but they take place within these very societies (intra-society conflicts, see also paragraph 1.3). For example, the conflict in south-eastern Ukraine is much more than a mere collision of interests between Russia and Ukraine, Kyiv and the Donbass.

Although the conflict is definitively fuelled by external actors, its dividing lines are not geographic; they run through the heart of the Ukrainian society and even families, opposing people adhering to different world views.

1.3. Civic identity conflicts

Among others, the new assertiveness of political elites, often under the lead of Moscow, manifested itself during the civic upheavals or Colour Revolutions that broke out in Georgia (Rose Revolution, 2003-2004), Ukraine (Orange Revolution, 2004-2005 and Euromaidan, 2013-2014), Kyrgyzstan (Tulip Revolution, 2005), Uzbekistan (Velvet Revolution, 2005) and other post-Soviet states. Pavel Baev defines the phenomenon of Colour Revolution as the "[...]organised unarmed public uprising in a post-Soviet state aimed at replacing a discredited regime that orchestrated an electoral victory with a government formed by an alternative and usually more pro-Western elite coalition[...]" and adds that "[...]external influences, particularly from Russia, the EU and the United States, are often crucial".¹⁶

These civic identity conflicts oppose not primarily different states or groups, but rather citizens and their governments, or citizens and other citizens within the same territorial setting (intra-group or intra-societal conflicts). They are comparable to the "Arab Spring" category of conflicts, as addressed by Oliver Ramsbotham et al.¹⁷

In Georgia (2008), or most prominently in Ukraine (since the "Maidan" upheaval in 2013), this has provoked a massive Russian "counter-revolutionary offensive".¹⁸ However, even more than a direct actor to the conflict, Russia (or the Soviet Union)

plays an indirect role in these conflicts: they are the enemy number one for more nationalist and pro-Western parts of the post-Soviet societies, or protecting power and source of inspiration for others. Thus, again, the narrative of “Russia against the West” or “Russia against the pro-Western governments of Ukraine, Georgia, etc.” obscures the deep trenches between the societal factions within the post-Soviet societies themselves. This intra-society type of conflict must be kept in mind when trying to understand the nature of today’s conflicts in the post-Soviet space, especially also when it comes to their socio-cultural dimension and the use of history.

2. History as a means of conflict and peacebuilding

History and memory are topics referred to by different groups in selective ways to justify their actions and to legitimise political and military outcomes. Interpretations of the past have profound implications on identity, on the “self” that defines individuals and groups and their feeling of belonging. National and local civil society, especially at an elite level, plays an important role in the creation and cultivation of historical memory, and in their translation into action.

When reflecting on the link between history, conflict and peace, it becomes clear that at stake here are less the historical narratives themselves. Rather, the focus is on their translation into action, thus into conflict (or into the absence of such). This translation can either be exclusive and contribute to political intolerance and nationalist radicalisation within and between different interest groups (irreconcilable narratives enabling conflict). On the other hand, historical narratives can also seek a truthful, balanced and non-partisan account of the past and allow for a pluralist discussion between different interpretative approaches (balanced narratives). One task to be tackled here will be to examine the question of how these two types of actors and interventions through historical narratives can be differentiated.

There exists an abundant literature about the “irreconcilability” of historical narratives, also with regard to the conflict contexts of the post-Soviet space.¹⁹ This analysis is interdisciplinary and includes by far not only historians and political scientists, but also sociologists, linguists, cultural scientists and psychologists.²⁰

The literature about history as a balancing force is a lot scarcer and has emerged only recently. The Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding²¹ included two articles on the role of history and memory as an element to be considered in official peace processes.²²

History dialogue is one possible approach to make of historical memory an instrument of peacebuilding. Barkan and Bećirbašić, for instance, see a necessary involvement not only at an elite level, but at all levels of civil society. Drawing upon the experiences in the Balkan conflicts, the authors underline the need to develop

a commitment for history dialogues as a means to develop a balanced, non-nationalistic account of the past to de-escalate or prevent conflicts in the present.²³

3. Understanding memory conflicts: Jan Assman's theory of communicative and cultural memory

This article wants to better understand how conflicts are caused by (or result in) tension between mnemonic actors promoting different forms and versions of historical memory.

The conceptualisation of the link between historical memory and conflict is not possible without reference to the classics of memory studies. An important step in the conceptualisation of memorialisation processes was taken by the French sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs, who introduced the notion of social memory. To be distinguished from individual thoughts or experiences, the social memory is an important pillar of a group's collective identity, a base of its "social self".²⁴

In his more recent, but nevertheless already classical work, Jan Assman goes one step further and distinguishes two levels of collectivity, which results in a total of three levels of memory and identity. At the inner level, one has individual memories, whereas at a collective level, Assmann distinguishes a communicative and a cultural memory. The differentiation between these two levels of memory is crucial and very useful for our analysis: as it will become clear on the example of Chechnya among others, an important dimension of the conflicts in the authoritarian setting of the post-Soviet space lies notably in the collision of these two different types of memory, the cultural and the communicative one.

Thus, since Assman's view on collectivity is interesting for the conceptualisation of the link between memory and conflict, it is worth taking a closer look at it in the following. "Communicative" and "cultural memory" both have their distinct forms and tools, are cultivated and transmitted by different actors, and have a different scope and political impact (see Table 1).

Communicative memory, on the one hand, is the non-institutionalised memory of social groups and appears in everyday interactions and oral history. It is transmitted by the members of these groups (e.g. civil society associations, families, etc.) and is thus limited in time, encompassing the (approximately three) generations that can physically interact. Even though weakly institutionalised, communicative memory is influential in defining the actions of social groups and their members, notably when they are opposed to more official structures, such as the state. For example, they can cultivate personal feelings of victimhood, social alienation or oppression.

Memory	Identity	Form	Actors	Impact
Individual memory	Inner self	Individual	Individuals	Individual behaviour
Communicative memory	Social self	Oral history, everyday communication	Social groups (e.g. families, NGOs, etc.)	Psycho-social processes (e.g. victimisation)
Cultural memory	Cultural identity	Institutionalised, externalised, objectified memory (monuments, history textbooks, conferences, museums, etc.)	“Memory professionals” (e.g. historians, specialised institutions, state)	Identity-building, political mobilisation

Table 1. The levels of memory and identity, Jan Assman (2008, 109-118).

Cultural memory, on the other hand, is an externalised and objectified form of memory that is created by common symbols, such as traditions, museums, monuments, textbooks, etc. These symbols create a feeling of primordial unity of a group sharing the same origins and cultural values. The cultural memory usually refers to the past in a punctual way, with a preference for events that are part of remote, ancient history. It is created and transmitted by memory professionals, such as historians, specialised historical associations, memory institutes, etc. Due to its official and objectified appearance, cultural memory can develop a strong impact on the psychological situation and the political actions of individuals, social groups and states, and is often used to create group coherence through historical identity.²⁵

4. The conflicts in Chechnya as a clash of “memory projects”

In the Caucasus, the call for a re-definition of ethno-territorial hierarchies of the late 1980s – early 1990s was particularly strong and provoked violent clashes between different minorities and their central governments; the ethno-territorial conflicts, also described under paragraph 1.2, form only the top of this iceberg.

Whereas the trouble spots in the former Soviet south are manifold and the causes, actors and lines of conflict are often blurred and change in time, I would like to concentrate here on the topic of history and its role in the conflicts between Russia and the Chechens, as well as at an intra-society level in Chechnya itself.

4.1. The 1990s: Democratisation, separatism and a new cultural memory

As in all over the post-Soviet space, also Chechnya was a place of nation- and identity-building in the 1990s; among other things, this also meant a democratisation and de-colonisation of historical memory, and the creation of a historical narrative that supported its own nationhood.

Forming an integral part of the secessionist movement under the de-facto independent presidency of Dzhokhar Dudayev in the early 1990s, local historians, artists, writers and other members of the *intelligentsia*²⁶ created an image of Chechnya's 150-year-long history of victimhood and rebellion against Russian oppression.²⁷

The new focus on ethnicity and socio-cultural self-determination of the 1990s is also reflected in the work of historiographers. In the 1980s, *Glasnost'* and *Perestroika* brought the destruction of the Soviet myth of an empire that was unified under Russian guidance and legitimised by a Soviet Marxist ideology of class struggle and *druzhba narodov*.²⁸ The post-imperial re-definition of socio-political hierarchies fosters conflict between former or actual oppressors and the oppressed. Unequal relationships, historical grievances and chosen traumas, caused by forced incorporation, deportation, and war, creates a deep feeling of victimisation and increases the danger of an aggressive restoration of rights and political power.²⁹ One of the battlefields on which this conflict is fought is historiography.

4.1.1. Revival of Chechnya's "old" heroes

An important memory conflict between the North Caucasians and Moscow is reflected in their diverging accounts of the Caucasian War, i.e. the Russian military campaign that lasted for several decades and resulted in the North Caucasus' incorporation into the Russian empire in the mid-19th century. Under the universalising cover of Soviet historiography, the Caucasian War was only marginally mentioned in the official historiography.

However, the populations of the North Caucasus have always maintained an active communicative memory of the Caucasian War that was at the same time their chosen trauma, and their nostalgic experience of resistance and liberation, and a glorious period in the own national history. The local intellectuals and political leaders of the 1990s could draw upon this officially long-suppressed, but informally always active myth, formalising it in monuments and history textbooks and thus bringing it from a level of local communicative to cultural memory.

With the emergence of the Chechen national discourse and this new cultural memory in the 1980s and 1990s, the Caucasian War is again more or less a *Great Gazawat*, a Holy War against the Russians, as can be read in new local textbooks.³⁰ The revival of the heroes from the Caucasian War (who almost all died in custody or in war against Russia) since the 1980s and 1990s was a symbol of the Chechen

nation, which had to fight for cultural and political independence from Moscow – see for example the following figure.



Sheikh Mansur
(1760-94)



Imam Shamil
(1797-1871)



Mulla Tsontoroevskiy
(1804-44)



Gazi-Muhammad
(1833-1902)

Figure 1. proza.ru©.The “new old” Chechen heroes of the 1990s.

4.1.2. Coming to terms with Stalinist repression

The deportations of 1944 are another important set of historical grievances of the Chechen population against Moscow that were translated to cultural memory in the 1990s. In early 1944 a good part of the Muslim population of the North Caucasus was deported to forced labour camps in Central Asia. The reproach was due to secret support by the Caucasus highlanders to Nazi Germany; however, there are indications that the strike was planned from a long hand, in order to punish (real or potential) rebellious or conspiratorial elements in the Caucasus. Thus, whereas men were then mostly fighting at the front of World War II, the whole remaining parts of the population of Chechens, Ingushs, Balkars and Karachays, “except for those who worked for the NKVD”,³¹ were packed into railway wagons for cattle and deported to Kazakhstan on one single day (23 February for Chechens and Ingushs; 8 March for Balkars and Circassians). Close to half of the people lost their lives during the journey or in the camps. Further, witnesses report horrible massacres in villages which were too high or inconveniently located for deportation and therefore simply annihilated by bombings from the air, as this was the case in Khaybakh. The survivors of the deportations were allowed to return to their homeland under Khrushchev in 1957. However, despite the legal framework,³² rehabilitation was difficult, as the deported people continued to be considered as untrustworthy by large parts of the Soviet society. Incidentally, this intra-societal distrust is a tendency which has become popular again since Putin’s arrival to power: “*Bez ognja dym ne byvaet*” (“without fire no smoke!”)³³ is a frequent reaction by Russians when asked about the motivations of the Soviet leadership for the 1944 deportation of the populations from the Caucasus.

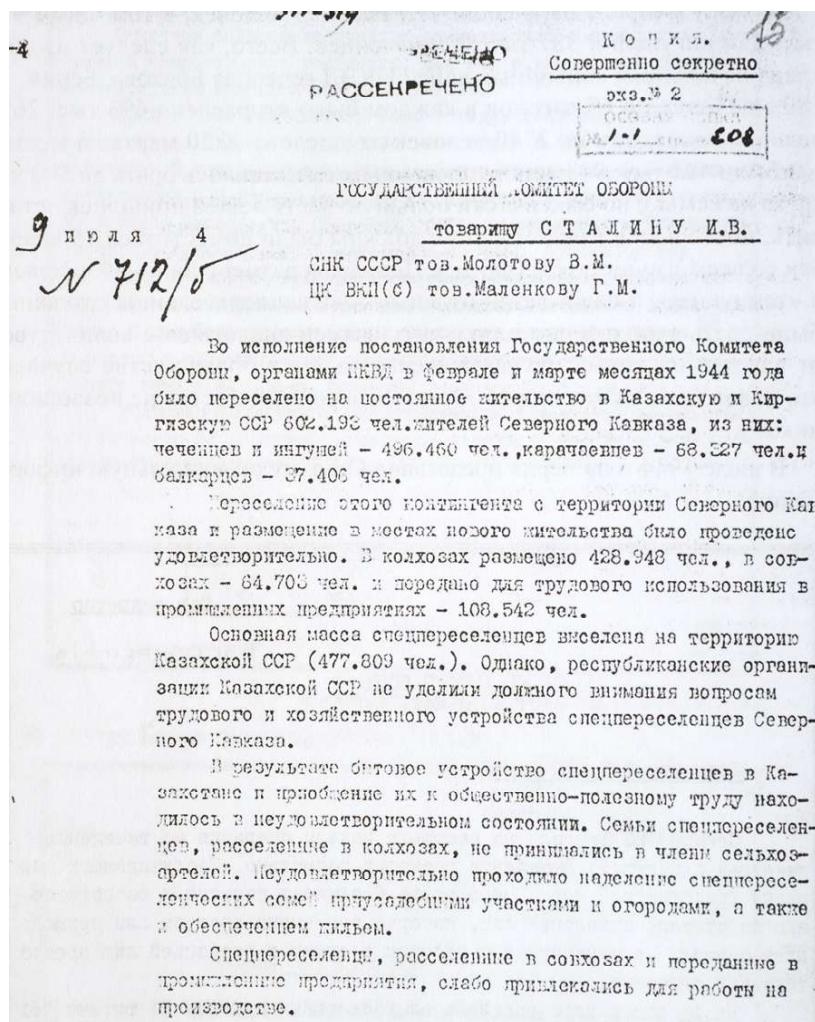


Figure 2. Photographed by Dolgieva©, 2019. Segment from a letter by Beria to Stalin, giving a detailed account about the implementation of the deportations.³⁴

Under Soviet rule, the memory of the deportations and terrible experiences such as the massacre of Khaybakh was thus silenced at an official level, and banned to informal memory practices (i.e. to a level of communicative memory). This changed rapidly in the 1990s, when activists started to collect a large number of oral history testimonies from survivors, and exhibitions, memorial sites and local holidays were created. For example, below you can see the memorial site in Nazran/Ingushetia (figure 3), dedicated to the victims of the deportations of 1994 (the Chechen deportation memorial was again demolished in the 2000s).

4.2. The 2000s: the historiographical counter-mobilisation

During the 1990s, the intellectual climate in the post-Soviet space was relatively free, and an 'ethnicised' interpretation of the past, such as the one in Chechnya, supported identity building in a moment of ideological and institutional crisis. The situation changed again drastically after the turn of the millennium.



Figure 3. Photographed by Cécile Druey ©, March 2019. Memorial in Magas, Ingushetia, for the victims of the deportation. It symbolises the journey from the departure in 1944, until the return in 1957.

This also reflects important evolutions in the general political context. In January 2000, Vladimir Putin replaced Boris Yel'tsin as the second President of independent Russia. As a result, Moscow's expansionist attitude towards its former Soviet subjects in the near and the inner abroad increased again, and the political tone became continuously more assertive. In addition, the attack on the Twin Towers in New York (09/11) created a further reason for Western and Eastern Great Powers to prioritise their national interests and set the ground for a new War against Terror against Muslims and other non-aligned groups at home and abroad.

4.2.1. Russian historians and the Caucasus

Obviously, the historical narrative of rebellion and national self-determination that was developed by the Chechen intellectuals of the 1990s was severely contested by historians in the non-Caucasian parts of Russia.

In his interesting study about Russian history textbooks, Victor Shnirelman shows that the historiographical discourses in Russia on Russian-North Caucasian relations have changed significantly during the past decades. Whereas Soviet historians focused on unity based on Marxist ideology, downplayed differences and played a rather balancing role, the analytical works of the 1990s concentrated on intra-Russian and intra-Caucasian ethnic differences. In turn, the 2000s saw the evolution of a new, more aggressive and irreconcilable approach. This new approach presents the conflicts in the North Caucasus (and Russia's role in them) as a kind of clash of civilisations and underlines the incompatibility of Russian

and North-Caucasian values, especially due to the latters' Islamic origin.³⁵ Thus, if we again take the example of the Caucasian War: instead of speaking about colonisation, the Russian historians of the 2000s, here represented by M.N. Zuyev, refer to the Russian campaign in the Caucasus as an inevitable measure to preserve the (Russian) civilisation from the aggressive and un-civilised (Caucasian) highlanders, that uncertain link to the historical enemy (thus, the Ottomans and the English).³⁶ This development in the historiographical narrative of the 2000s goes back to a general change in Russia's political philosophy and a revival of the "Russian Idea"³⁷ which, among others, proclaims Russia's national prevalence and its civilisatory mission in the post-Soviet space.

The civilisatory approach and the "cultural racism"³⁸ that is largely represented in the Russian cultural memory since 2000 is a frontal clash with the cultural memory that emerged in Chechnya in the 1990s and is dangerous for at least two reasons. Firstly, it impacts on the mentality and political behaviour of social groups in Chechnya, and on the behaviour of the local elites. Underlining the non-rightfulness of the Chechen national discourse, it motivates a forced russification of the co-opting elites, but at the same time feeds radically anti-Russian tendencies in large parts of society. Secondly, the focus on socio-cultural differences and incompatibility of Russian and Caucasian (Islamic!) values prepares the ground in the Russian society for renewed (military) action and builds legitimacy for the restitution of Russia's imperial cultural and geo-political control of the non-Russian parts of the former Soviet south.

This attempt, reiterated already several times in the past centuries, has always caused a high degree of human suffering on all sides, and has always failed.

4.2.2. The cult of Kadyrov as an alternative "cultural memory" in Chechnya

Whereas the conflict between Russian and Chechen historiographers can be assigned to the older wave of ethno-territorial conflicts that erupted during the 1990s (Chechens against Russians), the 2000s also witnessed an increasing alienation between authorities and citizens, and between different social groups in Chechnya itself (Chechens against Chechens).

Since 2003, the new rulers in Grozny have practiced an uncompromisingly pro-Russian course and established a neo-authoritarian state in the state, based on a strong security apparatus, Islamic tradition and an all-present cult of personality. Akhmat Kadyrov, the former president who was killed in 2004, is the main exponent of this cult of the new leaders of the nation, supplemented by his son and current president Ramzan Kadyrov, and by Vladimir Putin as the unmistakable head of the nation. By the way, even mentioning and ironically commenting on this 'Triumvirate' can become very dangerous: a friend of one of my Chechen interlocutors was jailed and severely beaten when ironically referring to the all-present

leaders as the “Holy Trinity”³⁹

During the past decade, the extent of this Ahmad cult has become extreme: portraits and quotations by *Ahmad-hadji* ornate every corner of Grozny, one of the most important squares, a museum and the avenue of fame in the city centre are named in his honour, as well as the new mosque (one of the biggest in Europe!), and even a soccer club *Akhmat* (see figure 4).



Figure 4. Photograph by Cécile Druey©, March 2019. Symbols of the “Ahmad cult” in Grozny .

4.2.3. Intra-societal conflicts in Chechnya

The new leaders are not only producing and imposing their own version of memory, but they also actively repress alternative views of others, thus representing an exclusive and irreconcilable interpretation of the past. Already a bone of contention in the conflict with Russia, the deportation issue particularly became an object of intra-societal conflict between communicative and cultural memory in Chechnya proper (intra-society conflict).

It looks as if the Kadyrov administration had decided to exterminate critical thinking and a pluralist memory of the past, replacing it by an authoritarian version of a new, official cultural memory. This Kadyrovian narrative of the past, although still fostering a glorious image of Chechnya’s historical achievements, restores Russia as a lawful partner and legitimises the quasi-totalitarian leadership of its local “henchmen”⁴⁰.

Against a background of re-militarisation and the re-assertion of authoritarian rule, it again became very dangerous for local intellectual elites and civil society

to challenge the official historical discourse, especially when drawing analogies to the recent past (i.e. to the wars in Chechnya since 1996). Ramzan Kadyrov and his security apparatus conduct a veritable witch-hunt to purge (real or potential) anti-Russian elements from Chechen society: in 2016, the memorial site to the 1944 deportation was removed from the centre of Grozny and never reinstalled; the memorial day for the victims of 1944 was moved from 23 February to 9 May and thus devaluated and ridiculed (mixing up the glorious victory with the darkest consequences of World War II); conferences dedicated to the memory of the deportations were cancelled, the organisers arrested and jailed.⁴¹ Further, in his recent public questioning of Imam Shamil as a legitimate historical leader, Ramzan Kadyrov aggressively purges all rebellious voices and presents Chechnya as Russia's best friend and historical ally.⁴²

It is evident that there is a clash of memories going on between the Chechen authorities and the population. However, people obviously cannot be stopped from remembering. Thus, the act of remembering and the coping with past grievances are once more driven underground and take on a form of informal, communicative memory that exists in parallel or even opposed to the externalised, official cultural memory. In this situation, oral history and informal societal networks, typical forms of communicative memory again fulfil functions that in peaceful times and under democratic conditions would be part of the state's cultural memory. For example, they collect and preserve historical data (e.g. eyewitness accounts of the recent wars and of the deportation of 1944) or lead critical discussions about historical topics, therewith also representing alternative views on the past.

4.3. The importance of critical voices

One of the characteristics of these diverging memory projects and the (intra-society) conflict in Chechnya is that we have a highly authoritarian regime with a high readiness for violence on the one side, and an active, strong and often similarly violent, but hardly unified and completely incontrollable civil society on the other.

Critical voices are rare, and therefore all the more important. An interesting example in this regard is the blogger Tumso Abdurahmanov. His activity is not limited to the sphere of classical communicative memory, as he challenges Kadyrov's way of governing and history writing in a direct and very political way. His video blogs, published on Youtube under the name of *Abdu-Saddam Shishani*, are very critical and extremely popular and themselves became a kind of cultural memory of critical thinking⁴³.

Among others, Tumso tackles Kadyrov's presentation of the Chechens as a people who historically always stood on Russia's side: "Those who really studied the history of Chechnya know that our ancestors by faith and truth served their father-

land – Russia, and did never break their oath. In difficult times they were among the first to step forward for the fatherland..." (Ramzan Kadyrov, as quoted by Tumso⁴⁴). In the ironic way that is typical for him, Tumso dismantles this narrative of history as not only simplistic, but false. He counters it with the argument that, actually, the vast majority of Chechnya's historical heroes have not died peacefully, but either at war against Russia, or in Russian custody.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Since *Perestroika* and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, history and historical memory became an important element in the conflict between Russia and its subjects in the North Caucasus, as well as in the intra-societal clashes in the Caucasus itself. However, the content, the actors and the dividing lines of these memory conflicts considerably changed during the past decades.

With the de-centralisation of power in the 1990s, the local accounts of the past became more important, often over-writing the Soviet and Russian ones. Thus, in Chechnya, these "old" national narratives – be it as fighters for independence in the Caucasian War, or as victims of Stalinist repression – were more or less successfully established as cultural memory by the local elites. Moreover, they served as a legitimising force of the Chechen fight for separatism, during the first war (1994-1996) and the period of Chechnya's de-facto independence (*Republic Ichkeria*, 1991-1999).

In the early 2000s, with the end of the armed phase of the second war in Chechnya, a new phase of conflict started, located inside the society of Chechnya and opposing pro-Russian elements and supporters of independent Chechnya. Since then, the new leaders, first Ahmad Kadyrov (2003-2004) and later his son Ramzan (since 2004), who were installed with strong financial and military support from Moscow, started to again contest much of the cultural memory that was recently formalised by the intelligentsia of independent Chechnya. Kadyrov promotes his own version of history and produces his own controlled version of cultural memory. It is neo-imperial and neo-authoritarian, putting great emphasis on Chechen and Russian patriotism and greatness, and glorifying military power, war and victory. As a result, the historical narratives of the 1990s were again contested at an official level and driven underground, to the bottom (or the heart) of society.

Thus, in an authoritarian setting, with the impossibility to lead open debates about cultural memory, communicative memory promoted by families and civil society again becomes extremely important as a means of "responsible" historiography (which pays attention to a balanced account of the past, to the truthfulness of sources, the integrity of alternative and critical historians, the security of archives, etc.).

However, communicative memory should not be idyllised as a means of democ-

ratisation either. Critical voices, as exemplified here by the blogger Tumso Abdurahmanov, represent a civil society that is active and strong (despite the attempt of the leaders to impose absolute control!), and often not less ready for violence than the authoritarian leaders they are victims of. Thus, if not addressed properly, communicative memory and its underground-discourse of trauma and suffering can create a dangerous ground for a (re-) escalation of conflict and unrest – an experience that is unfortunately only too well known in the Caucasus.

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Endnotes

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