

## Controlling the Russian Soldiers' Mothers and Chechen Mothers

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### The Story of a Hidden War

*This paper offers an overview of the place of mothers in the first and second Chechen wars. It provides an understanding of the Committees of Russian Soldiers' Mothers, which represent today a very strong voice in dictatorial Russia. They constitute a real social movement in a state where usually any human rights group is quickly silenced. Like the Madres de Playa de Mayo in Argentina, it is an extraordinary phenomenon worth studying. The paper also offers a broad examination of the use of mothers and motherhood in the Chechen conflicts. The contention is that the control of Chechen mothers' bodies and souls, and the control of Russian mothers' words and actions are in fact the two targets of a clearly genocidal war accompanied by a reformulation of a masculinist and heterosexist Russian nationalism. In the first part, I will recall the history of the Chechen conflicts to illustrate how the first war was about the control of the territory and the second war about the control of mothers. In the second part, I will describe the Committees of Russians Soldiers' Mothers as a social movement and discuss their fight against the masculinist state apparatus. Finally, I will try to demonstrate how Chechen mothers and mothers-to-be bodies are objectified and in fact the very stake of the conflict.*

Throughout time and place, motherhood has always been highly symbolic. In peace time as well as in war time, motherhood-as-process represents ultimately an arena of control. Mothers play two particular social roles: as child-bearers, they reproduce members of a group; and as caregivers, they are the bearers and transmitters of cultural and identity markers of said group. It can be deduced, then, that for those who want to destroy a group, mothers are the key target. Likewise, for those who want to reformulate a masculinist conception of nationalism, mothers and women are key actors. This explains why rape is so prevalent a weapon of war, particularly in conflicts in which nationalist

antagonism is strong. The wars in Yugoslavia come immediately to mind and have been the objects of much research (see, for example, Bracewell 563-590; Allen; Stiglmyer). Through a brief comparison between the first and second wars in Chechnya, this paper argues that there was indeed a shift in objective. The first war was predominantly for territorial control, whereas the second war (which officially ended in April 2009) was more about the control of Chechen mothers' bodies and souls, and the control of Russian mothers' words and actions. In this context, rape has moved from being an instrument of warfare to being part of a genocidal policy. Furthermore, what young drafted Russian soldiers are forced to experience also conveys a clear political goal: to break ties with their mothers and to reinforce male bonding (Peterson 43) within the Russian nation as it was envisaged by Vladimir Putin. The second war in Chechnya was a silent war with few information leaks. This paper tries to fill a gap. In the first part, I will recall the history of the Chechen conflicts to illustrate how the first war was about the control of the territory and how the second war was and still is about the control of bodies. In the second part, I will describe the Committees of Russian Soldiers' Mothers as a social movement and discuss their struggle against the masculinist state apparatus. Finally, I will try to demonstrate how Chechen mothers and mother-to-be bodies are objectified and are in fact the very stake of the conflict.

### **From the Control of Territory to the Control of Bodies**

The two wars waged on the territory of Chechnya after the collapse of the Soviet Union can be considered as continuations of a much older conflict between Russians and Chechens—an Indigenous people of the Caucasus. The conquest of the Caucasus was the last phase of the expansionist and imperialist move of Czarist Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their territories formally annexed to Russia, the peoples of the mountains had never really been conquered in terms of allegiance to the centre, Moscow, as exemplified by the heroic resistance of Imam Shamil until 1859. With the outbreak of the Revolution in 1917, Chechnya sought independence and created the Mountainous Republic of the Northern Caucasus. Although they fought the White Russians and supported the Communists, the autonomy promised by Soviet authorities was not fulfilled. In 1920, this independent entity was incorporated into the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Later, during the Second World War, Chechens, like other Caucasian Indigenous peoples, were accused of collaboration and deported under Stalin's orders (this was the second time for the Chechens, as they had been deported once before in 1864, in an event known as the *mukhadzhirstvo*).

Considering their past of hardship and antagonism, with the admixture of the Soviet policy of ethno-territorial policy (Lapidus 9), it is not surprising that a Chechen secessionist movement emerged and proclaimed the independence of Chechnya in 1991. Indeed, this secessionist movement is also the outcome

of the careful crafting of ethno-linguistic territorial groups by Soviet authorities (Roy 62-68). Although Russia broke away from the USSR (constituted of 15 Republics), it was to remain intact territorially, i.e., its constituting units were not recognized as having the right to secession. The former Russian SFSR became the Federation of Russia—composed of 89 different sub-units. From late 1991 to 1994, Russia had very limited success in managing its transition to a properly institutionalized federation. The tension between the regions and the periphery was very high and observers feared that federal Russia would disintegrate. The tension was not new; it had been an issue throughout the Soviet period and Gorbachev's Perestroika was first and foremost a policy of decentralization (Radvanyi 218). As Gail Lapidus (17) argues, "In the summer and fall of 1994, major changes in the configuration of Yeltsin's government involving the dismissal or resignation of reformist advisers and the growing influence of a hawkish coalition prompted a shift in policy toward Chechnya." It marked the beginning of the first Russia-Chechnya war that ended with Russia's "humiliating" defeat in 1996.

The first Russian-Chechen war had classic war features. It was primarily about the control of territory and its immediate causes were political, geopolitical and economic. Politically, war with Chechnya was a way for Boris Yeltsin to change his "liberal" image and to re-assert his authority, as well as to send a message to other regions that Russia would defend its territorial integrity. Geopolitically, it was a signal to the U.S. that their presence in Transcaucasia was not welcome. Economically, the main pipeline exporting the Caspian oil goes through Grozny—the Chechen capital—thus showing the strategic position of Chechnya in the big Caspian oil and gas game. Therefore, the main objective was clearly the control of land, of territory. Militarily, the first war also developed along classic lines: from dirty tricks aimed to put pressure on secessionists, to ultimatums and military intervention. In Moscow, politicians thought it would be a "bloodless blitzkrieg" or "a small but victorious war" (Lapidus 20). Mothers were soon at the forefront of the war as Lapidus (20) reminds us: "In the initial days of the operation, large numbers of civilians, including women and children, sought to block the passage of troops, leading several officers to refuse to continue the operation." Violence escalated. The conflict was classical at the same time as numerous extrajudicial exactions were committed; "filtration camps" were already opened. The Russian military showed its state of despair: on one hand, troops were demoralized; on the other hand, the hierarchy did not answer the order of the President. With a majority of the Russian population opposed to the war (Lapidus 21), Yeltsin sent Alexander Lebed to conclude peace.

The first Chechen war was the scene of countless human rights violations; in particular, the separation of many families and a high number of rapes. Allegations of genocide were numerous (Cornell 90). But the control of Chechen souls and bodies (by their physical and mental destruction) was not the main objective at the time. The target was the control of territory, which is illustrated

by the massive destruction of the capital, Grozny, (starting on New Year's eve of 1994) which resulted in many ethnic Russian casualties as "Russians had formed a majority in the city" (Cornell 88). Yet, controlling territory without controlling the people who live on it is pointless. This fact and the numerous unresolved points in the Khasavyurt agreement soon led to the second war in Chechnya. My contention is that the second war served two main purposes, which differ from the first war's objective: Putin's decision to return to war in 1999 aimed at 1) fostering masculinist Russian bonding to re-affirm old Russian nationalism; and 2) controlling Chechen mothers' bodies and souls to achieve ethnic cleansing, if not a genocide of the Indigenous Chechen people. As Laura Sjoberg and Caron Gentry explain:

During the first Chechen war, images of motherhood and femininity were crucial in turning Russian public opinion against the war. Russian and Chechen women together vocalized objections to the fighting.... The rhetorical transformation of Chechens from rebels to terrorists at the beginning of the second Chechen conflict was crucial to the government's gaining and maintaining public support in Russia.... The emphasis on the 'black widows' as terrorists ... provided support for the use of force generally in Chechnya ... and specifically against Chechen women. (91)

As I discuss in the next two sections, the control of women—Russian and Chechen—is paramount to these two objectives.

### **Masculinist Control of Words and Actions of Russian Mothers**

The policies of Glasnost and Perestroika offered the possibility for the burgeoning of citizens' organizations in the 1980s. In 1989, using this margin of freedom, a group of Russian women established the first Committee of Soldiers' Mothers (CSM). This initiative was born out of many concerns about the rights and lives of servicemen in the Soviet army. In the renamed Russian army, these already atrocious conditions worsened after the financial disengagement of the new "liberal" Russian State in the 1990s. Poor health services, not enough food, and above all the well-known *dedovshchina*, the cruel hazing of new conscripts plagued the army. Anna Politkovskaya explained in an interview (Wrubel): "The young soldiers live in terrible conditions for months. It's needed for a few weeks not to wash himself, to eat very poorly. Fear, alcohol, feet that have been rotting from dirt, a human being has been slowly changing into beast."

Observers did not hesitate to speak about thousands of young conscripts that, each year, died while performing their military service (McIntosh Sundstrom 62). Consequently, the movements of the soldiers' mothers spread rapidly and local committees were created in more than 70 areas. The wars in Chechnya added a new role to the CSM: denouncing the disappearance and maltreatment

of Russian soldiers in Chechnya. Mothers were involved in negotiating to get their sons back home. In 1996, after a leadership issue, the movement split. Valentina Melnikova—the most well-known figure of the movement—created the Union of Committees of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia (UCSMR). It is mainly to this movement I refer in the following section (later, in 2004, Melnikova also spearheaded the creation of the United People's Party of Soldiers' Mothers; see Glasser).

These mothers' movements constitute some of the few remaining active social movements in Russia. Putin's policy has been devoted to controlling, if not silencing, these mothers' voices. The Committees worked through the 1990s to collaborate with Russian state authorities to improve the conditions encountered by servicemen. They vocally denounced the atrocities of the war in Chechnya and played a major role in turning public opinion against the first war. Yeltsin's Russia was far from respectful of human rights; and the state's coercive forces did what they could to prevent, or at least hinder, the activities of NGOs. Nevertheless, they were under the lights and could not be completely silenced; still, the State tried to control them in some measure.

The election of Putin to the Presidency in 2000—based on repetitive racist discourses and the renaissance of traditional Russian nationalist discourse (Russell 108)—changed the rules of the game. To reach his objective—putting Russia back on the world map as a “respected,” i.e. feared, world superpower—Putin had to re-affirm masculinist and militarized nationalism. In this context, Russian mothers who spoke out became enemies. Pro-Kremlin politicians and journalists engaged in a smear campaign against Mothers' movements. The most frequent attack (along with accusation of madness, hysteria and political incompetence) was that they are “foreign agents,” a critique well-known from the Soviet era (“Soldiers”). Moreover, the harshest criticisms often came from women themselves, especially from the party “Women of Russia” who supported the wars in Chechnya despite the fate of women in these conflicts. On the other hand, some mothers have been at the forefront of the antiwar movement. As Marina Liborakina (2) explains: “The women's anti-war movement has challenged not only the authorities, but the entire ‘hero's Mother’ myth so popular in Soviet culture. Mothers of soldiers killed in Afghanistan were encouraged to deliver speeches on international solidarity, and not be seen in tears in public.” In many cases, women were used by Russian authorities to counter the effectiveness of mothers' groups (Glasser 4). In other words, Putin and his acolytes used “vulnerable women” to maintain the notion of “patriotic mothers” (Eichler 489, 494) challenged by the Soldiers' Mothers movements. Since Putin's election, it has become increasingly difficult for NGOs and activist networks to operate, as exemplified by the re-registration campaign of NGOs (Mendelson 61). Similarly, the Party of Soldiers' Mothers has experienced constant harassment from Russian authorities (Glasser 3-4).

Russian mothers have engaged in a dialogue with Chechen mothers, and have even worked together with them, creating agreements on exchanging

prisoners of war. As Maya Eichler (495) puts it: “By cooperating with Chechen mothers, many have espoused a conception of motherhood that crosses national and ethnic boundaries. Through their actions they have rejected the image of the “hero’s mother,” and instead used motherhood as a platform from which to voice their critique of the military and the war.”

More generally, soldiers’ mothers’ movements have been strong advocates for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. In February 2005, they met Chechen separatist representatives (the Maskhadov branch) and signed a memorandum entitled “A Route to Peace in Chechnya” (Ossipova). Despite numerous threats and vicious attacks, Russian mothers remain active. They are fed up with seeing their sons arrested in parks and shipped in Chechnya where they find death or come back completely destroyed physically and psychologically. Their sons are indeed transformed into beasts. But this is, arguably, Putin’s actual objective: to send Russian sons to Chechnya, transform them first into beasts and later into docile Russian men ready to defend the nation. It is a way of re-structuring Russian masculinity—said to have been humiliated with the defeat in 1996—in a fashion more in line with the old Soviet times. Putin understood that his re-conceptualization of Russian nationalism had to go through a reformulation of masculinity and femininity, as well as motherhood and patriarchy. To do that, Putin reactivated the war in Chechnya—a central element in his agenda “to strengthen the state and renew Russian patriotism” (Eichler 487). His strategy was to silence Russian mothers’ voices—especially by muzzling the media (Eichler 488 and 500) and control, if not destroy, Chechen mothers’ bodies and souls.

In other words, one can read Putin’s control of Russian mothers’ words and actions within a new policy designed to reaffirm Russian masculinist and patriarchal nationalism. The framework proposed by Spike Peterson on heterosexist nationalism can be very useful to analyze this policy. Peterson discusses first how women are framed as “heterosexual / biological reproducers of group members” as well as “social reproducers of group members and cultural forms” (44–48). As said, vocal Russian soldiers’ mothers have been described by Putin’s administration and its allies as bad, insane, hysteric and incompetent mothers. They should stay at home; take care of their domestic duties; and support the transformation of their sons into monsters and killers. This is a part of a broader policy implemented by Putin to send Russian women home to “make babies” in order to tackle the demographic challenge of Russia (which is losing thousands of inhabitants every year partly because of its low birth rate). Soldiers’ mothers do not comply with their “expected” social and cultural function by challenging the myth of the “heroic mothers.” Their role as mothers should be to bring up tough and strong sons who fit in the heterosexual civilized white Russian male mould; and not to “whine” about the atrocities of the war. Putin’s reformulation of Russian nationalism operates with opposite binaries. Russian mothers have to be heroic to support the discursive construction of the Chechen mothers as “black widows.” In

the same vein, Russian men are constructed as “civilized and white,” while Chechen men must be perceived as “barbarian and black.” In order to achieve his goal, Putin does not hesitate to use other women’s groups to criticize the Russian mothers’ movements. The first effect is to divide women and make sure that the movements do not grow in terms of membership. The second effect is to diminish the role played by women in the formulation of Russian nationalism. As Peterson (51) suggests, “To be effective, women are drawn toward masculinist strategies.” It is a way for Putin to reassert gender hierarchy. Furthermore, Putin’s strategy also relies on a racialized discourse, doubled to a genderized discourse. Again, Peterson (53) notes that “gender is always racialized and race genderized.” Indeed, even if the UCSMR has clearly put motherhood on the top of its agenda and has crossed ethnic lines to form alliances with some Chechen mothers during the first conflict, surely it has become practically impossible in the second war because of the accelerated racialization of the political discourse and the depiction of the UCSMR and anyone willing to work with the Chechens to find a peaceful resolution as “enemies.” And indeed, this strategy seems to have worked as an increased number of women in Russia are convinced that all Chechen mothers are dangerous “terrorists.” The reverse is also true: many Chechen mothers now perceive Russian mothers as enemies whose sons and husbands have killed their sons and husbands. The next section discusses the fate of these Chechen mothers.

### **Masculinist Control of Bodies and Souls of Chechen Mothers**

Rape in Chechnya is a very prevalent phenomenon. According to the comparative work produced by Kathryn Farr (14) on extreme war rape, Chechnya can be considered as the most illustrative case of rape use during conflicts. Further evidence of the sheer scale of rape in Chechnya was provided by a British NGO that interviewed 35 Chechen asylum seekers; of the latter, 17 (16 women and one man) said they had been raped or sexually tortured (Farr 27). According to available data, 85 percent of rapists and torturers are members of Russian forces (Parfitt 1291).

Rape can be used in three ways in a conflict: as a “weapon of war”; as a “strategy of warfare”; or as part of an established genocidal policy (Farr 4). Without a doubt, the first two motives were part of the Russian strategy during the first war; but the third represents a key characteristic of the second war in Chechnya. Raping Chechen women is part of Putin’s genocidal strategy. It has two important outcomes. Firstly, Indigenous Chechen culture is strongly patriarchal and heavily influenced by Islam; a Chechen woman who is raped—if she survives—will be killed by male members of her family (and extended clan) if she dares to come back to her community. Anna Politkovskaya describes one of the many horrific stories illuminating the control of Chechen women’s bodies:

On the ground, to their feet, three naked young women were lying, aged 13 or 14, who were not even trying to roll themselves into a ball or even cover themselves with their hands. They were alive but probably insane. They were covered of blood, bruises and mud. A sign, hanged on a post buried in the ground, states: “it is what to be expected from all of you, fucking bitches. You are going to sleep with us.” ... A well-known and respected woman Argoun arrived. A teacher. Without asking any questions, she had the raped girls transported to her place. And very quickly, she sent them, it is said, to another locality, and again to another one... so that the traces of these young women disappear forever. Because it was their only chance to stay alive.... Such are the local traditions. If a normal judicial process were to be followed, the Chechen girls would assuredly die from the very hands of the men of their families. (39-40, author’s translation)

The Russian authorities are perfectly aware that the use of rape against Chechen women means death for them. As such, it is a way of organizing mass murder. Considering that nothing has ever been done by the Russian officers to stop repetitive rape, it is reasonable to wonder whether or not it is, indeed, intentional, and thus constitutive of genocide.

Secondly, Chechen society is based on kinship; culture and language are borne and transmitted by mothers. In other terms, Chechen mothers are the biological, but also the social reproducers of Chechen cultural forms (see Peterson 45-48). The death of Chechen mothers and mothers-to-be means that the Chechen language and culture cannot survive. In this sense, the control of the bodies and souls of Chechen mothers and women becomes not only a weapon of war, but ultimately the goal of this war. The second war—launched by Putin—is not about ensuring Russian territorial integrity by containing Chechen secessionist pressures (this goal was achieved early in the conflict); it is a genocidal war based clearly on racism (the conflict is described by Russian military and political authorities as “counter-terrorist operations”; and even if the war officially ended in 2009, the control of Chechnya is under the effective control of the FSB-former KGB). One key fact in support of this point is that Russian authorities put in place a powerful narrative that describes all Chechen women as “terrorists” (Sjoberg and Gentry 93). This is a sign that they are not in the midst of a “normal” conflict, in which a distinction is maintained between combatants and civilians. All Chechen women are potential “black widows” and therefore must be killed. It is not only a gendered rhetoric, but also a racialized one (Sjoberg and Gentry 93-94). This process of dehumanization—necessary for massive rape and genocide—was not difficult to implement as Chechens have always been considered by Russians as “barbarians” or “inferiors” (Russell 101-116). Dehumanization has become even easier in a post 9/11 international context. Russian State propaganda has focused heavily in constructing *all* Chechen women as “black widows.” They have emphasized



systematically women suicide attacks in order to break up ties among Russian and Chechen mothers.

The second war with its numerous *zachistki* (cleansing operations) put Chechen mothers in an impossible situation. During *zachistki*, they are raped or killed, and/or must witness their husbands and sons being killed, or see them taken away, never to return. Politkovskaya summarizes this situation well:

A meeting took place on the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2001. Some had white posters written in red: 'Give us back our mums!' They were children whose mothers were taken to an unknown destination, during a *zachistka* and whose names did not appear on any list of arrested people. Others had green posters written in black: "Give us back the corpses of our children!" They were mothers whose children had disappeared during *zachistki*, as if they had never existed. (81, author's translation)

It is this unbearable situation that led some Chechen women to commit suicide bombings. The only solution for Chechen mothers is to flee their country. Interviews with them in European capitals show well that they have indeed lost their souls and bodies. Putin may well be on the verge of realizing what no other Russian leader in the history has: controlling one hundred percent the peoples of the Caucasus Mountains.

## Conclusion

This paper intended to look at the paramount role played by Russian and Chechen mothers in the two conflicts that have shaken the North Caucasus region since the breakdown of the USSR. First of all, it was asserted that the two wars waged by the Russian authorities asserted two very different goals and thus strategies of war. The first war was a "traditional war": the objective was to re-affirm Russian sovereignty threatened by the Chechen secessionist movement. It was waged "classically" with grand military operations. As in any other war, unofficial camps, torture and rape were weapons used in some instances. The second war resembles more colonial/ anti-terrorist operations (in a similar fashion with the Algerian war). The aim was no longer the control of the territory (achieved in the first few months of the second conflict) but the control of the people, seen at best as rebels, and at worse as parasites. This war, decided by Putin, was an instrument to reformulate Russian nationalism along racist lines that excluded peoples from the Caucasus, depicted as uncivilized and barbarian. Therefore, in its conduct, this war was different. The military operations gave priority to "anti-terrorist" operations. Rape, torture and imprisonment in camps became the rule and anybody was a target. Because these two wars were different in nature, the role played by mothers has evolved. During the first war, Russian soldiers' mothers were very effective in forcing the authorities to stop the war. They organized into one of the

strongest social movements of their era. They managed to shift the citizens' minds about the war. They were engaged in a strategic partnership and worked closely with Chechen mothers to find peace and help their sons to get out of this quagmire. From this position of agents of peace, Russian and Chechen mothers were turned into principal victims of the second war. Russian soldiers' mothers' movements were the object of harsh attacks (verbal, organizational and physical) by the Russian State as they were challenging their rhetorical reformulation of Russian nationalism. Like during the Soviet times, they were accused of madness and treason; they were accused of being the enemy of the Nation by not fulfilling their expected role of "Heroic Mother." The Chechen mothers became the main victims of the second conflict as rape was used in a genocidal way. The multiplication of "cleansing operations" pushed some of them to commit suicide bombings; which were, then, instrumentalized by Putin's propaganda to define all Chechen women as "black widows." The horrors practiced by Russian men on Chechen soil as well as the increasing suicide bombings at the heart of the Russian republic itself led to a breakup of the solidarity existing previously between Russian and Chechen mothers. By bringing attention to these issues, this paper bears hope that a dialogue could be reopened between Russian and Chechen mothers; a dialogue that could be the foundation for peace and for a change in the sexist political identities of both Russia and Chechnya.

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