

DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE POLITICHE
Cattedra di Sociologia dei Fenomeni Politici

ABSTRACT

**Chechen Terrorism: a historical-sociological
analysis**

RELATORE
Professor Alessandro Orsini

CANDIDATO
Sofia Cecinini
Matr. 067872

ANNO ACCADEMICO 2013-2014

Abstract

The objective of this study is the reconstruction of the causes and the actors which characterized both the conflicts between Russia and Chechnya that took place in 1994 and then in 1999, in order to analyze the phenomenon of the Chechen terrorism and the motivations that lead those individuals to martyrdom.

The first chapter of this work, entitled “The story of the Russian-Chechen conflict, since its start till today”, focuses on the origins and motives of the contrast between those two nations. In order to understand the historical and sociological dynamic that lies under these events, we need to make an analysis of the relations between the Chechen population and Russia. The very first moment in which Russia started to be interested in Chechnya was in the XVI century. Before going on with this investigation, we must have in mind the exact geographical position of Chechnya, which is located in North Caucasus. It is an autonomous Republic of the Russian Federation, and it borders at North with Dagestan, which occupy entirely also the eastern border; at South it borders with Georgia and finally the its West side borders with Inguscetia and, for a short space, also with the North Ossetia. The capital of Chechnya is the city of Groznyj, situated in the middle of the region and beside the Sunza river. The history of Chechnya can be defined as an “eternal return”, because issues, characters, wars and peaces always seem to repeat after a certain period of time. In order to interpret and analyze the current situation in Chechnya, we have to consider its past in all of its facets. There are two main characters who mostly influenced the course of Chechnya's history and tried to establish a theocratic State in the northern Chechnya, based on islamic religion. The first one is Mansur Usurama, who proclaimed himself *imam* at the end of 1700. He started to preach islamic religion in the North Caucasus, but he did not succeed because he was trapped by the Russians with the accuse of huge damages to the Russian empire. The second character that need to be mentioned is Šamil, the *imam* who was transformed in legend by the Chechens, because of his preaching about islamic culture. After 150 years two other important persons like Dudaev, and the insurgent's leader Šamil Basaev, tried to follow Mansur and Šamil's traces. Dzhokhar Dudaev became the President of Chechen Republic at the time of the first Russian-Chechen conflict. He established the *sharia* and wanted Chechnya to become independent from Russia. The 1st November of 1991 he proclaimed the independence of Chechnya without any formal

permission of Russia, provoking Eltsin's reaction, the first President of the Russian federation since 1992. From that moment on, the events that took place inevitably led to the first war between Chechnya and Russia. That ended up only in 1996, with the victory of Chechnya and the defeat of the Russians. One of the main features of that struggle was the involvement of civilians, who became the majority of the victims. During that years emerged another fundamental character who is Šamil Basaev, the authentic founder of Chechen terrorism. He became well-know after the attack at Budėnnovsk hospital (south Russia), that took place in 1995, in which he managed to escape with all of his supporters thanks to a diplomatic deal with the first Russian Minister Černomyrdin, who permitted him to leave the hospital and the hostages without being captured or attacked. After that episode, on the 19th of June of the same year, peace agreements between Chechnya and Russia should have provided the withdrawal of the Russians troops from the Chechen territory. Those agreements did not manage to reach a conclusion until 1996, because of the amount of terrorist attacks of the Chechens insurgents, which led to new struggles between the two nations. On April 21st a Russian missile hit the residence of President Dudaev, 20km far from Groznkj, killing him. His successor was vice-President Zelimxan Yandarbiev, who finally subscribed peace agreements with Mosca on the 27th of May 1996. After the end of the conflict in October, Yandarbiev started the islamization of the State. Then he introduced a new penal Code based on the *sharia*, and on the 11th of November he proclaimed Islam as the State's official religion. Next presidential elections were won by Alsan Maskhadov, who became the new President of Chechnya in 1997, against the other candidate Šamil Basaev, who was asked to become Prime Minister. During the years between the two wars, the terrorist attacks increased. Another important phenomenal was the penetration of wahhabism in Chechnya, which is the “purist” islamic school founded in the middle of XVII century in the actual Saudi Arabia. Šamil Basaev himself supported those Chechen fundamentalist and became soon their leader. In the analysis of the causes that led at the second war between Russia and Chechnya, is significative to consider the fact the the Russians, in a first moment, did not try to stop the wahhabist's offensive. The key year was 1999, because during it all of the geopolitical balances were determined. Between August and September 1999, Basaev and other Chechen and Dagestan leaders managed to penetrate in Dagestan with the target of establishing an islamic State. President Maskhadov did not condemn those facts, and so Russia felt legitimate to start a new struggle.

The second Chechen-Russian conflict was characterized by the presence of the new Russian President, Vladimir Putin. Since the first phase of his warrant, Putin became the military leader and decided to approach at the war in an opposite way from Eltsin. He literally razed the city of Groznyj, and other Chechen's areas, bending the Chechens insurgents. In the February of 2000 the capital was demolished. There is still a veil of mystery that covers the real behavior of the Russian troops did have against the Chechens population. The media were silenced about that, and no one in the West managed to know any certain news about that struggles. Many correspondent were killed, like the Italian journalist Antonio Russo, and the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaja. The informations that they collected about the Russians troops and Chechens population were too dangerous to be spread by the media.

Even if many could say that the Chechen-Russian conflict is not over yet, in 2003 Russia established a new administration and police in Chechnya, creating also a new Constitution with which Chechnya managed to have a little autonomy, and Akhmad Kadyrov was elected new Chechen President. Since the State's islamization do not deplete the causes of the second war, the economic factor has to be analyzed too. The question is about the presence of large reserves of oil and natural gas in the area of the Caspian sea. The oil pipeline exporting the Caspian oil to Western markets passes through Chechnya. Therefore, the Russian government could lose the trafficking and licensing taxes as well as the strategic influence provided by controlling the route if the Chechens succeeded in breaking away.

Taking in consideration the second chapter of this study about Chechnya, it contains a historical-sociological analysis of the terrorism's birth inside that area during the years of the conflicts. It specially focuses on the examination of the rebel's leader Šamil Basaev. To start investigating that phenomenon, some words should be spent on the Islamic culture and religion's diffusion in the Chechen area. Islamic religion played an important role since the XIX century, when it started spreading through the Chechen population, and it ended up joining the need of independence. Thanks to the preaching of Šamil, the Islamic religion was diffused in the version of sufism (an ancient Islamic religious movement), which preach the contempt of material things, the pursuit of poverty and the union of the spirit with God. Those principles can lead to *jihad*, that is an expression full of meanings and different facets, like the war against the infidels. In that specific case it has to be used the word *ghazawāt*, that means “assaults”.

The Islamic religion's penetration ended up involving in the two conflicts of the 1990s, especially after the war of 1994, in the version of Wahhabism. That specific religious current comes from its founder Muhammad Ibn-'Abd-al-Wahhab (1703-1787), and it is identified with the Islamic fundamentalism. In Chechnya it started its influence during the first conflict, especially when the president Maskhadov wanted to establish a theocratic State based on *sharia*. Anyway the Wahhabism was in contrast with many aspects of the Sufism and Muridism, the two versions of Islamic religion that were widespread in Chechnya long before it. The fundamentalists were convinced that the Muridism was opposite to the original precepts of Islam to which they referred. The Chechen President went wrong thinking that those differences would have led to real problems, and in a couple of years, the Wahhabism demolished its domain. The leader of Wahhabist rebels soon became Šamil Basaev. He was born in 1965 near the city of Vedeno (south Chechnya), in a family who belonged to the clan of *Yalxoroy*. He took part immediately in the first Chechen-Russian conflict, organizing great actions, like the one in Budėnnovsk in 1995. In 1998 he totally embraced the Wahhabist cause, and changed his name in the Arabic one Abdallah Šamil Abu-Idris. Most important aspect, is that he is still today considered the founder of the Chechen terrorism.

To analyze and explain the phenomenon of the Chechen terrorism, this dissertation takes in consideration one work of the scholars Irina Mukhina entitled "Islamic Terrorism and the Question of National Liberation, or Problems of Contemporary Chechen Terrorism", which was published on "Studies in Conflict & Terrorism" in 2006. In it, she analyzes some options about the birth and the main causes of Chechen terrorism. First of all she gives four different hypotheses. The first one is referred to the long story of the struggles between Chechnya and Russia, but the scholar challenges that this option just lead to conclude that Chechnya was right to rebel against Russia, and that Russian long-term policy caused many problems in the Caucasus area. The second hypothesis taken in consideration by the Mukhina is the one which was used by the media that blame the Russians policies use against Chechens, and identify the causes of the terrorism in the refusal of Russia to let Chechnya independent. The supporters of this explanation see the Chechen terrorism as a war of liberation. Others identify the economic collapse and the war's destruction as the cause of the development of terrorism. Finally, the fourth and most common hypothesis is that terrorists are religious warriors.

Two of the main tragedies caused by terroristic attacks were the one at Dubrovka Theatre in 2002 (Moscow), and the one at the Beslan's school in 2004. In both of these

actions the terrorists kidnapped innocent people, in the first the spectators and the theatre's staff, and in the second children, parents and teachers. The terrorist commandos were formed by men and women. The women belonged to the Black Widows group, a commando founded by Basaev, formed by females who have lost husbands, brothers or other male relatives because of the Russians soldiers. Chechens terrorist were responsible also of recent attacks, like the one at the Boston marathon in April 2013, which involved two Chechen brothers, Džochar e Tamerlan Carnaev. Since the two brothers comes from Chechnya, the FBI do not exclude possible links with the islamic terrorist. Anyway days after the attack, the Caucasus Emirate posted on the site kavkazcenter.com an announcement, in which it declared that the two brothers were not sent by them, because the *mujaheddin* are actually fighting against Russia and not America.

Speaking about the terrorist tactics that have been used by Chechens, the martyrdom seem to be one of the most employed since late 1900s. In order to try to understand the motives that drive those individuals to terrorism, Anne Speckhard and Khapta Ahkmedova's work about the analysis of martyrdom can be taken in consideration. The scholars report that since 2000 there have been an amount of 28 acts of suicide terrorism, including the two kidnappings at Dubrovka theatre and at the Beslan's school. Israel, Sri-Lanka and Turkey are the countries which have been mostly affected by that practice, which is also the terroristic tactic that most scares the modern democracies. From the research of the two scholars emerges that one important element is the presence of women in these kind of actions. They also report that in most of the cases, there's a terrorist organization behind the individuals, that trains and prepare them to face death in honor of God. Sometimes there is no organization behind, and the individuals act by them-selves without any orders, and in that case of course the motivations are different. In the specific case of Chechen terrorism, the motivation is provided not only from a possible organization, but from their religious culture. Wahhabism is in fact at the base of those terrorist groups, which are also influenced by the circumstances in which they live. Chechen terrorist asks for the withdrawal of the Russian army, and for the independence of their nation. The two scholars report also that the fact of using violence against children, as it happened in the episode of Beslan's school, was willing to attract the media's attention on the terrorist's requests. Anyway the specific personal motivation that lead to terrorism are always difficult to analyze , because every individual have a different history behind. In the third chapter of this

dissertation a precise sociological analysis of this issue is reported.

The third chapter of this dissertation is entitled “The Black Widows”, and is focused on the analysis of this commando of women, created by Basaev, but also on the specific analysis of what leads those person to kill others by killing themselves.

First of all, the Black Widows are Chechen women whose husbands, brothers, or sons, or any other male relatives, have been killed by the Russian army. The first action in which some of them participated actively is the one in Dubrovka theater in 2002. Since that moment all of the terrorist attacks included also women. Those women in Russian are called “shakhidki”, which means “holy warriors who sacrifice their lives”; in the media they are known as “black widows”, because of their black chadors, and ready to kill to redeem their male relative's death.

Taking in consideration the investigation that the Russian journalist Julija Jukiz have done, that is entitled “Brides of Halla”, we can understand many important details about women's involvement. The author write that, first of all ,a distinction between the Chechen terrorism and the other terrorist groups, need to be made. In many other countries like Palestine, Afghanistan, Turkey, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka both women and man can be kamikaze; in Chechnya the journalist report that only women blow themselves up, not the men, who have a strong consideration of their own lives. Talking about the black widows, she divide them into two different categories: the unfortunate and the brides. At the first group belongs the ones who generally are between thirty and forty years old, and might have lost husbands or sons because of the Russians, or maybe they might have a difficult history behind. Those type of women are individuated by the terrorists and easily converted to this extreme version Wahhabism, because of their unstable state of mind. The other category, the brides, are generally young girls that already belongs to wahhabist families, or young girls who have lost all the possible male relatives that one day could revenge their dishonor or their eventual death. Since they attended a wahhabist education, they use to submit to men, and maybe they already have had many unofficial weddings before. The journalist write that these girls are kidnapped by terrorist with the deception of a marriage, but in reality they are raped and filmed, in order to create compromising material. In a situation like that a girl knows she cannot have a future because of the big dishonor, so she starts being indoctrinated to become suicide terrorist. After all of the interviews and researchers that the journalist Juzik have done, she reports that sometimes those women, after their indoctrination training, are not ready to be kamikaze yet At this point man give them drugs, in order to

make them obey. When the right time to kill comes for a girl, she must do that sacrifice, and if she does not want, men action their bomb-belts from distance. At the end of her investigation, Julia Juzik states that Chechen women rarely decide to commit suicide. In order to analyze what really happens inside the mind of those women or other individuals, it is necessary to refer at the work of the terrorist scholar Mia Bloom, “Bombshell”, in which she makes a precise analysis of that issue.

The scholar writes that the actual motivations of individuals are really complex, but they can be viewed both positive and negative. The ones who strongly believe in a cause are willing to sacrifice all in order to reach their target. There is a real martyrdom culture that influence the personalities of those individuals. The knowledge and admiration for a pantheon of heroes and martyrs are factors that motivates many recruits to radical political movements. Another element that Mia Bloom write to be fundamental, is the family tradition that preserve memories and provide moral comfort to the fighters. She also reports that in many cases women's involvement is due to the fact that they have been abused, victimized or targeted in ways that live them little choice but to join terrorism in hope of reclaiming their honor. In the last part of her work, Mia Bloom makes a scheme called “The Four Rs plus one”, with which she tries to explain the motivations that push those women to become martyrs. The first R is *revenge* for the death of a close family member; the second one is *redemption* for past sins; the third one is *relationship*, and it is crucial for understanding how women are mobilized. The last R is *respect* if their community, and finally the plus one R is *rape*. The scholar writes that of course the individual's motivations are really complex to be deeply understood, but from her researches comes out that the individuals who radicalize themselves are not necessary the poorest or the less educated in the society. In the final part of this dissertation is indispensable to make reference to the most important sociologists. Till now a particular prospective of describing the external factors to explain facts have been used, and it can be defined durkheimianan, since the sociologist Durkheim defined the social action as the ways of acting, thinking, and feeling outward the individual and endowed of a coercion power thank to which they are imposed. There is another approach, that can be defined weberian, which focuses on individual's rationality and intentionality. The sociologist Max Weber assumed that the individual's actions depends from their states of mind and from their representations of the surrounding world. Weber os also known as the founder of the “sociology of action”, which includes the principle of “methodological individualism”. The sociology

of action is the method with which the social phenomenal should be studied, starting from the individual's actions. On the basis of Weber studies, the french sociologist Boudon said that methodological individualism assumes that all of the individuals have rationality and intentionality. Taking in consideration those fundamental principles, it is necessary to make reference at the fact that the rationality at which Boudon refers, is limited. Also Alessandro Orsini use that concept in one oh his article about the explanation of terrorism. In it the scholar elaborated a special model called STAM, which helps to investigate on the terrorist's motivations. Every letter of STAM refers to a precise dimension:

- S is the “social dimension”, the space that the terrorist shares with the other members of the group;
- T is the “temporal dimension”, which is the time that the terrorist spends with the other members of the group;
- A is the “affective/emotional dimension”, which is the attachment to the other members, and which includes the feelings of love or esteem that bound the terrorist with the other members of the group;
- M is the “moral dimension”, which concerns the ideology's content, and is extremely important because it indicates what the individuals should think and do.

In the case of Chechen terrorism, the ideology took in consideration is the religious one. Following the scheme of the STAM bond, a terrorist is able to kill when he completed the ideological process at the end of which he got reed of his humanity. Orsini explains that the victim's dehumanization comes before their physical elimination, and the religious ideology is the first factor that rouse the murderer fury.

In conclusion of that work about Chechnya and the birth of terrorism inside that particular area, some consideration can be reported. First of all, talking about the Chechen-Russian conflict's aspects, in both wars the political element has been the dominant one. The economic and the strategic factors must not be considered less important, because. The geopolitical position of Chechnya and the importance of the Caucasus oil deposits, made the Russia wanted to impose its domain on that areas, and so that Chechnya would have reclaimed its independence.

Regarding the terrorism issue, it is a problematic area of study because of the difficulty of researching and having true sources. Chechen terrorist have developed many tactics

of violence, including the suicide one, with the women's involvement. The personal motivations plays a fundamental role in deciding to become a martyr, but also the external circumstances need to be considered. When there is a society that is torn by economic and social crisis, the religious factor can influence even more on the individual's personality, promoting also the *jihad* and the glorifications of the martyrs. The combination of those two factors can lead to terrorism.