

International Peace Research Foundation Association

Small Research Grant

Final Written Report

Project Title: *Chechens: Those Who Create, Those Who Destroy*

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Overview

This IPRAF project entails the write-up of a primary source analytical research document that examines crucial socio-cultural beliefs and trends of the Chechen national group in the context of the current armed conflict in the Republic of Chechnya. The project research methodology consists of A) Qualitative field research, and B) Document analysis of relevant published materials. The goal of the study is to provide a valid analysis of the “lived experiences” of a range of “ordinary” Chechens (i.e., those not engaged at the pivotal leadership levels) – including wives, mothers and civilian men, academics and educators, former fighters, community leaders, residents and refugees, etc., and the multi-dimensional roles of each. The analysis provides insights into the socio-cultural complexities of the Chechen war; these insights aim to be useful to a range of policy makers interested in a peaceful resolution of the ongoing Chechen conflict, and ultimately to locate potential towards this resolution.

Primary field research was conducted prior to the IPRAF project grant application, and was the result of 10 years consecutive, direct work and living experience with Chechens in the North Caucasus and Turkey, from May 2001 to March 2011. During this time, I served as a humanitarian worker, activist, consultant, neighbor and member of Chechen communities.

The grant funds, \$3000, were requested to cover my “time and basic expenses involved in the primary field research write-up, and for expenses related to the investigation and analysis of supplemental document research to support, compare and contrast the primary findings.” A total of \$3000.00 was requested to complete this study, and the time-frame for completion of the study was estimated at 6 months.

Project Methodology

I lived and worked with Chechens for ten years, in the Republic of Ingushetia, North Caucasus, and in Istanbul, Turkey. In the North Caucasus setting, from May, 2001 to September, 2003, the work entailed education and community projects for Chechen refugees, via employment with two international aid agencies, and partnership with a Chechen non-governmental association. In Istanbul, Turkish authorities did not permit foreign nationals to

work officially for the needs of Chechens, and so my work in Turkey, from September, 2003 to March, 2011, consisted of informal advocacy. In addition, I lived in a Chechen refugee camp in Istanbul, for eight years, taking part in most of the responsibilities shared by women in the camp, and living to a major extent, according to Chechen *adat* (cultural rules). During this ten-year period, I was not formally researching Chechens, but was working towards Chechens' human rights and humanitarian needs in the war context.

In ten years of living and working with Chechens, I uncovered many patterns of Chechen language and behavior, and recognized those that were widespread, repeated continuously, and those not. Due to this extended time, it was possible to locate general and particular, dominant and marginal.

This ethnography is constructed through inductive analysis, built on field findings. Through direct participation and observation in Chechen communities, this researcher examines patterns, conversations, events, and relationships, to understand meanings, of cultural structures and norms.

The ethnography does not attempt to arrange meanings into what might be potentially, artificial categories. Rather, the analysis outlines recurring themes, concerns, and behaviors in Chechens' lives, which Chechens themselves narrated. In particular, repeating adjectives, phrases, and stories comprise much of the data for this ethnography. Generalizations are included when apparent, as are notable differences.

The main sources of data for this ethnography, thus, are direct field conversations, discussions, observations, and participation in the lives of Chechens. I did not conduct formal interviews, or collect written materials, other than within the scope of participatory needs assessments for humanitarian project work with Chechens. The bulk of the foundation of data collection for this research is spoken narrative, and empirical interactions and relations in daily work and community activities.

I had access to a range of Chechens: men, women, and children; fighters and former fighters; civilians and pacifists; intellectuals, writers, and artists; employed and unemployed; highly educated (formal schooling) and less educated, including those who never attended formal schooling; religious extremists; nationalists; pro-Russian Chechens, and a variety of others. Thus, there is a wealth of "voice" in this ethnography.

Research Questions

There are 13 main research questions for the project.

- 1. What are the historical traditional socio-cultural norms and relations of Chechens?*
- 2. What cultural concepts and attributes are historically common to the "Chechen Identity," such as pride, honor, freedom, loyalty, "Chechen?"*
- 3. What main socio-cultural symbols and rituals are relevant to Chechens' lives?*

4. *What forms and patterns do gender roles and relations assume amongst Chechens?*
5. *What is the formulation of “Chechen Identity” in relation to guests, neighbors, strangers, and foreigners?*
6. *What are the parameters of “Islam” in Chechen culture, social relations, and politics?*
7. *What patterns of subsistence strategies (i.e., “earning a living”) are common amongst Chechens?*
8. *What main concerns do Chechens have, taking into account differences, towards daily needs and perspective for future – both individual and collective?*
9. *How do Chechens, taking into account differences, explain the current war conflict?*
10. *What are the main socio-cultural-political differences, opinions, and conflicts that are prevalent at present amongst Chechens?*
11. *What major socio-cultural commonalities amongst Chechens may be located?*
12. *How might serious socio-cultural-political differences amongst Chechens be seen as exacerbating or prolonging the conflict, as obstacles to peace and well-being?*
13. *How might Chechen socio-cultural commonalities,*
 - *Preserve the uniqueness of the Chechen nation, while at the same time,*
 - *Prepare the Chechen nation to peaceably co-exist in the world community, with prosperity and well-being for all Chechen people?*

Reliability and Validity

In ethnographic work, the researcher herself is a main instrument of data collection and analysis. Therefore, issues of reliability hinge on a range of factors inherent in this type of research. Every ethnography is foremost a relationship between researcher and peoples included in the study. It is certain Chechens with whom I interacted to some degree often strategically introduced and altered tales and behavior, based on what and whom they felt the author represented.

For example, many Chechens viewed me as a representative of the West, and wished me to know stories, to learn about Chechen history, culture, and problems, and so they revealed much. Others were certain I was “CIA”, or a spy from Russia, and so they produced particular tales through this perception. Many wished me not to know many things, and so they revealed little. Certainly, ethnography to a great extent, is a product of perceived roles and relations in the ethnographic field.

This document's validity is solid, due to the long period of time I spent with Chechens, the depth of interactions, and the range of perceptions, beliefs, and people included in this study. Further, I strive for transparency in her aims and opinions in this document, which enhances the document's validity. Lastly, this study, the document's findings, and my perceptions, are gladly open to debate and discussion, and dispute. I genuinely hope such debate will lead to a greater understanding of Chechens' conditions and concerns.

Finally, language may be an issue in the research's validity. I spoke mainly Russian with Chechens, and spoke very little Chechen language. This was a matter of feasibility: I did not utilize translators or interpreters, other than the two and one-half years spent in the North Caucasus. During the time spent in the North Caucasus, I also did not utilize interpreters much of the time, as many Chechens with whom I worked, spoke English. I knew Bosnian language (which is related closely to Russian language) upon arrival in the North Caucasus, and so built upon this to learn Russian quickly in order to function in the field.

On the other hand, it would not have been feasible to conduct the research solely or even mainly in Chechen language as few Chechens know their mother tongue fluently. Since Chechens routinely blend Russian and Chechen languages, and most know spoken Russian fluently, communication between me and these Chechens took place largely in Russian language. Moreover, I learned Russian language wholly from Chechens, through listening and speaking. Thus, the language on which this research is based is "Chechen Russian;" this was our common language.

Variation Between Grant Proposal and Final Research Document

In the original IPRAF grant proposal, I included sub-questions for each of the 13 main research questions. Some of the sub-questions proposed to examine academic published materials to compare and contrast the primary field research findings. The specific areas I proposed to include academic supportive materials included Chechen historical socio-cultural norms, symbols, and rituals; gender patterns and relations; Chechen interpretation of guests, strangers, and foreigners; the role of Islam in Chechen culture; and, Chechen patterns of subsistence. In the final research document, I did include some supportive literature, mainly in the footnotes sections. For several of these sub-questions, however, I purposefully did not intertwine published literature into my analyses. I detail my rationale for excluding this literature as follows.

After I formulated the exact structure, i.e., chapters and sections, to document my direct field findings, I needed to present most of these findings from the Chechen "voice," and I wished to remain authentic to this voice. In the ten years I spent with Chechens, I examined very few academic sources related to this national group. When I first began work in Ingushetia, in 2001, I did research some basic materials about Chechen history and norms, to introduce myself to the nation and region. At that time, I found these materials not easily relatable, as they were written in academic form and tone, and I was working primarily with less educated individuals, in a very dynamic context. As time passed, I focused on my field-work – constructing projects through participatory methods, and so I was interested in the direct perspectives of Chechens with whom I lived and worked.

As I began writing the final research document for this IPRAF grant, aside from the purposes of constructing the grant proposal, I also did not purview published materials. In the course of my writing and analysis, I did not wish to be influenced by these bodies of literature. There was a risk, I perceived, of borrowing published categories, and supplementing them with my own field findings. My original goal, however, was the reverse – to construct and analyze field findings, and then support them with published literature. Moreover, once I had documented the Chechen voice, I found that intertwining published materials would dilute that voice, through the addition of passages of outside voices and sources.

Further, the primary goal of my field research document was to present an analysis of the “lived experiences” of Chechens. Published literature, however, particularly of Chechen socio-cultural norms, largely is representative of “ideal” norms. Most Chechens, to various degrees, may recite ideals, but many do not necessarily live those ideals. Published materials may be authentic, but they are often academically analyzed and categorized. This categorization and analysis is not something most Chechens do, or are capable of doing. These published materials, therefore, may not be representative of the “lived experiences” of most Chechens.

Importantly, locating literature about “lived experiences” as comprehensive as mine would be difficult, and utilizing such literature for comparative purposes would be problematic, as I constructed my research through direct, personal interactions with Chechens. This fact does suggest questions regarding the reliability of my research, which is a controversial element of qualitative research in general.

Lastly, the task of documenting the “lived experiences” of Chechens was huge, and so in retrospect, it may not have been within the feasible scope of my research document to include a large component of published literature. Nevertheless, this remains a valuable opportunity for further research, debate and discussion, and to challenge the validity of my field findings.

Research Document Contents and Conclusions

Each section of the research document depicts particular distinct elements of Chechens’ lived experiences. Sections II-VIII, following this Introduction, aim for authentic portrayal of Chechens’ voices and perceptions, in their elaboration of cultural norms, behaviors, and conflicts. Section IX details Chechens’ conditions and experiences as refugees, in Istanbul, Turkey. This section represents a hybrid voice – the objective conditions of Chechens in Istanbul, how Chechens’ perceived and lived their lives under these conditions, and the author’s analysis of the circumstances. The final section, X, is particularly devised as this author’s advocacy for the Chechen future.

Section II, “Living in Tales,” displays a rich array of Chechen perceptions related to the current conflict, including explanations for the conflict, ranging from an assertion that Chechen lands are a vast treasure of *gold*, to the humorous: *Russia loves Chechens too much to let them go*. Many of these tales contain significant cultural understandings that are rooted in the 1944 genocide of Chechens. Recounting of important historical leaders in Chechen collective memory is included in this section, all of whom are nearly universally revered; current leader Kadyrov is

included, though not viewed as hero, many Chechens grant him support. “Tales of Associations” are included in this section, illustrating the differences in Chechen loyalties and preferences to particular political groups and beliefs. These associations are socially constructed and ever changing, in parallel with the political conditions and situations in Chechnya.

Section III, “Cultural Symbolisms,” outlines several central concepts in Chechen culture, critical to Chechen values and beliefs, and that provide guiding rules for behaviors and relationships. The section illustrates abstract symbols and describes their meanings, including honesty and responsibility, and particularly the notion of *freedom*. Freedom is a central but multi-faceted value in Chechen culture, connected to *nationalism* and *pride, self-rule*, and the role of the individual.

Section IV, “Men and Women,” details to some length the ideal Chechen *man* and *woman*, and how Chechen culture delineates gender roles in the collectivity, including gender role formation, and relationships between men and women. Chechen culture is patriarchal, with men retaining much authority over public decisions and cultural meanings. Role separation between men and women is rigid. Chechen women, however, are resilient and proud, not docile and passive, taught like men *never to hang their heads*. Treatment of Chechen woman in her personal life often depends upon the character of the Chechen man.

Section V, “Managing the Collective,” illuminates several structures and norms significant to managing relations within the Chechen collective. Particularly elaborated is the central concept of *equality*, with its connotations of egalitarian democracy, along with Chechens’ aversion to *sheep-like* behavior. *Respect* is a critical norm in the collective, and entails specific mannerisms and behaviors. *Elders*, including elderly people but also other figures, play important roles in conflict resolution. Chechens emphasize the preeminence of *guests*, and rules regarding their treatment are mandatory. *Enemies*, who come to be guests in a Chechen’s home, receive the utmost in hospitality.

Section VI, “Islam in Chechen Culture,” describes “the Chechen Muslims,” including important religious rituals and meanings. Due in part to the lifting of religious repression characterized by Soviet rule, the Chechen collective is now exploring their religion. The collective exploration is besieged by political conflicts, however, with more than one side claiming the *correct* role of religion in Chechen culture and community. This section outlines the “Wahhabism versus Chechen culture” dichotomy and debate.

Section VII, “Chechens in the Looking Glass,” contains several reflections of how Chechens look upon themselves. Drawing on the English word “Caucasian,” many Chechens infer from their Caucasus’ origins, speculation their nation is the *roots of civilization*. Many view themselves as *European*, which also serves to differentiate them from *Asians*. They are *victims*, claim they are *feared* by other nations, and Chechens are never *slaves*. Unfortunately, Chechens can be deceived: in their opinion, they tend to be *naïve*.

Section VIII, “Chechens Looking Out at the World” reveals Chechens’ perceptions of others in the world, much of which are framed by strong paranoia and a sense of *lies and betrayals*. Chechens tend to divide much of the world into *West (U.S. and Europe); Asians*

(Turks, Kurds, many of the southeastern nations of the former Soviet Union); *Arabs*; *Israel* and the *Jews*, and *Negroes*. There is some lost love in their feelings towards U.S. and Europe, while they fairly well admire *Japanese* and *Chinese*. They have mixed feelings towards *Jews*, and they consider *Turks*, *Arabs*, *Russians*, and *Negroes* to be stupid, dirty, or primitive.

Section IX, “Chechens as Refugees,” particularly depicts Chechen relationships and cultural norms under stress, when Chechens are far from their homeland. Many of the tales that comprise this ethnographic research emanate from conversations and experiences with Chechen refugees in Istanbul. Although geographically far from home, Chechens never leave the homeland behind. Much that it is inside Chechnya followed Chechens to Turkey: the collective historical memory, the bonds of cultural belief and, importantly, the intra- and inter-group conflicts. It is through the daily experiences of refugees, stretched between a beloved homeland, and a place of asylum, that one can see a great dissonance between “ideal” norms, and the necessities of survival under adverse conditions.

Section X, “Development,” is particularly representative of this author’s voice. Though this section advocates self-determination for the Chechen nation, and ultimately internationally recognized independence of a Chechen state, this is a conditional conviction. Chechens are not currently prepared, equipped, or capable of maintaining a peaceful, sustainable, functioning political entity. Although Chechen culture is rich with constructive assets and values, several limitations restrain Chechens’ abilities to develop a viable political entity. Some limitations stem from exclusivity norms of the Chechen collective, which impedes Chechens in both inter- and intra-collective relations. Others derive from educational needs and skills training, including human rights and international law, non-governmental capacity building, and fair economic norms and standards. Importantly, Chechens are a fractured nation at present, and lack legitimate, experienced leadership to reliably, and appropriately represent their nation on the world stage.

Use of Grant Funds, and Project Time-Frame

As per the grant proposal for this project, I requested \$3000 to cover “time and basic expenses involved in the primary field research write-up, and for expenses related to the investigation and analysis of supplemental document research to support, compare and contrast the primary findings.” I estimated the time-frame for completion of the study to be 6 months. I completed the final document in 13 months.

At the time I applied for the IPRAF grant, I was working as a part-time Adjunct Instructor of Political Science, at Tallahassee Community College in Tallahassee, Florida. I supplemented this income with additional part-time work, including freelance document editing, care-giver for a woman with Alzheimer’s, and also pet-sitting. When IPRAF awarded me the research grant, I continued to work as a political science instructor, but I terminated all other part-time work in order to focus on the IPRAF research grant document. Thus, I utilized a large bulk of the IPRAF grant to supplement my income, and that enabled me to complete the document.

I utilized the remainder of the grant funds for some material purchases related to the grant. These materials are itemized as follows:

- Laptop Computer (used): \$250.00
- Epson WF-2530 (printer): \$79.99
- Printer Cartridges: (4x\$12.99) \$51.96
- Printer Paper: (3x\$6.50) \$19.50
- Books:
 - o Tishkov, V. (2004). *Chechnya: Life in a War-torn Society* \$31.95
 - o Jaimoukha, A. (2005). *The Chechens: A Handbook* \$135.98
 - o Akhmadov, I. and Lansky, M. *The Chechen Struggle* \$39.00