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Chechen women in war and exile: changing gender roles in the context of violence

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The article analyzes Chechen women's everyday experiences of war and violence and outlines their multiple effects on women's roles and identities. Particular attention is paid to how these effects are shaped by generational differences. The study is based on 35 oral history interviews with Chechen women in Austria, Germany, and Poland. The experience of two Russo–Chechen wars reinforced domesticated forms of femininity. It also exposed women to intensified nonmilitary forms of gendered violence. At the same time, some of the traditional roles were transformed, for example, when women became the main breadwinners for their families. Women's heightened realization of their importance in securing the well-being of their families and communities empowered them and created a sense of solidarity and responsibility reaching beyond their households. This has generated a level of insecurity among some sections of Chechen society and the Moscow-backed Chechen administration of Ramzan Kadyrov puts considerable effort in instructing women about their "proper place." In exile, women's ability to continue fulfilling their gendered responsibilities in a new environment serves as an important coping mechanism. Different generations of women adopt distinct adaptation strategies that relate to their roles during the war as well as to the conditions of their socialization.

Keywords: Chechnya; gender; violence; generation; refugee women

Introduction

> No one thought that there'd really be a war. Of course, we knew about the Second World War, with the Germans. But to us, it seemed like in a different world, like in a black-and-white movie. Was it really possible that people killed each other like that? We learned about it at school. And indeed, the planes came and started to bomb, *really* drop bombs on us! (Rosa, 39, emphasis by the narrator)[1]

Two minutes into our interview, which was supposed to be about the story of Rosa's life, she was already talking about the war. As a Chechen refugee living in Germany, it is not surprising that she mentions the war so early. Asylum seekers' life stories have to be molded into a justification of their asylum claims. Even outside the immigration interview situation, refugees may unwittingly frame their stories as a legitimation of their presence in the foreign country. However, the importance of the war in Rosa's account and her deep shock at the time of its outbreak reflect a more general pattern present in many of the 35 oral history interviews I conducted with Chechen women in Austria, Germany, and

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Poland in 2010 and 2011.[2] It indicates how strongly they identified with the Soviet and later the Russian state. Despite the armed conflicts taking place in other parts of the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s and notwithstanding gradual militarization of Chechen society, war, for these women, was something from the distant past, from school textbooks where the Soviet army was always on the right side.

Back in December 1994, few Chechens, let alone ethnic Russians living in Chechnya, imagined that such a large-scale armed conflict was about to take place in their small republic. As Luisa (50) put it:

> I couldn't believe that there could be such a catastrophe; that there could be such a big war. That Russia, that *our* Red Army, Soviet Army, the one we were so proud of, that they could start shooting at us. [emphasis by the narrator]

And hardly anyone would predict that one armed conflict (1994–1996) would be followed by another after just a couple of years (1999 – disputed). The experience of massive military violence exercised by the state they grew up in proved to be deeply shattering, especially for those who encountered it as young adults and older. Not only did they start to perceive the world around them as a fragile and unpredictable place, but also their roles and identities as women underwent significant transformations.

In this article, I examine the gendered dimension of Chechen women's experiences of the "continuum of violence" (Cockburn 2004) launched by the First Chechen War. Drawing on the narratives of women of different generational cohorts living in exile, I analyze the effects of military violence on their position in the family and their perception of themselves. The focus is not only on the times of open military conflict, but also on the volatile periods after the large-scale hostilities ceased and more targeted violence continued. Toward the end of the article, I also consider the present situation of women in Chechnya based on secondary sources and I discuss how changes in women's gender roles and identities play out in their lives in exile.

Over the past two decades, Chechnya has become synonymous with violence, precarious statehood, and warlordism. Much has been written about the reasons for and the geopolitical implications of the Russo–Chechen conflict (Gall and De Waal 1998; Lieven 1998; Smith 2001; Evangelista 2002; Sakwa 2005; Souleimanov 2007; Hughes 2008; Akhmadov and Lanskoy 2010; Marten 2012). However, only few academic publications analyze its impacts on different segments of the civilian population, including their interaction with the Russian armed forces and other armed groups (Tishkov 2004; Gilligan 2010; Murphy 2010; Raubisko 2011a, 2011b; Regamey 2012; Molodikova and Watt 2013; Le Huérou 2014). These issues have mostly been covered in autobiographical accounts of the survivors (Baiev and Daniloff 2003; Terloeva 2006; Zherebtsova 2011; Komitet "Grazhdanskoye sodeystviye" 2013) and by journalists and human rights organizations (Brežná 1997; Amnesty International 2000; Human Rights Watch 2000; Nivat 2001; Baisaev and Grushkin 2003; Politkovskaya et al. 2003; Procházková 2003; Seierstad 2008). In the accounts of the latter, the focus has for obvious reasons been on those hit hardest by the conflict, the victims of the most outrageous acts of violence. Less scholarly attention has been paid to the more ordinary conditions of survival and the lasting impact of everyday encounters with violence on the population. Thus, the broader aim of this article is to contribute to the analysis of social processes that determine long-term transformations in this war-affected society.

Gender and generation in the Chechen "continuum of violence"

It is common to talk about armed conflicts in terms of "before," "during," and "after." While this is useful in capturing the dynamics of the conflict, it can lead us to overlook deep links

between types and occasions of violence, which may be present in all these phases. Cynthia Cockburn suggests that especially when considering the gendered dimension of armed conflicts, it may be more suitable to talk about the "continuum of violence" (1999, 2004). In the case of the Chechen conflict, it is particularly difficult to differentiate between war and postwar, let alone war and peace. The first war, which lasted from 1994 to 1996, was followed by a period of instability and continuing insecurity (Akhmadov and Lanskoy 2010; Merlin 2012; Sokirianskaia 2014). This, in the end, turned out to be just a pause before another round of major military violence erupted into the second war in 1999. The end of this conflict is disputed. The strategy of massive bombing was gradually replaced by frequent "cleansing operations" by the army and the police in 2000 (Gilligan 2010). This violence later became more targeted as the operations were transferred to Chechen forces loyal to Moscow in the process of "Chechenization" (Akhmadov and Lanskoy 2010; Le Huérou et al. 2014). In 2009, the end of Russia's "anti-terrorist operation" in Chechnya was announced. Nonetheless, human rights violations continued after this date and they are being committed, underreported, and unpunished until this day (Human Rights Watch 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014; Memorial 2010; Action by Christians for the Abolition of Torture 2013). The conflict has now long vanished from the media headlines, but the residents of Chechnya continue to leave the country in search of asylum in Europe and elsewhere (Szczepanikova 2014). Many of the women I interviewed insisted that for them, the war has not ended.

To understand the transformation of Chechen women's roles and identities through the wars, it is useful to think about the continuum of violence as gendered. It means to analyze the links between gender and experiences of violence in different phases of the conflict. There is a growing body of literature documenting that men and women are affected differently by armed conflicts both in the short and in the longer term (Lorentzen and Turpin 1998; Jacobs, Jacobson, and Marchbank 2000; Giles and Hyndman 2004; Eifler and Seifert 2009; Sjoberg and Via 2010). This has certainly been the case in Chechnya, where, as in other conflicts, the wars exacerbated militarized forms of masculinity and domesticated forms of femininity (Enloe 1998; Connell 2005; Žarkov and Mulders 2005). At the same time, the Chechen case demonstrates that the traditional gender division of roles cannot be sustained during the upheaval caused by the armed conflict. As I will demonstrate in the following, Chechen women's association with domesticity in terms of their responsibility for caring for relatives and the household gained new significance during the conflict. These duties were intensified to the point of being transformed because the content of domesticity has been dramatically changed by the wars. This effectively questioned the traditional division of gender roles and had long-term consequences both in Chechnya and in exile.

This article focuses on women who did not take an active part in the conflict, but it is important to point out that women do not always play nurturing, supportive, or maternalist roles. A small group of Chechen women joined the pro-independence fighters in the first war or took part in terrorist attacks against Russian targets during the second war and their motives have been widely discussed (Nivat 2005; Speckhard and Ahkmedova 2006; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; Murphy 2010). There is also growing evidence that men's roles during a war need to be analyzed in the broader context of gender research rather than being presumed based on the stereotype of militarized masculinity (Connell 2005; Carpenter 2006; Eichler 2006, 2012). Civilian men in Chechnya constituted the most vulnerable part of the population during the two wars. They could become targets of violence solely based on their age, gender, and ethnicity which sufficed to make them potential combatants in the eyes of the armed forces (Gilligan 2010). This restricted their mobility

and the ability to provide for their families. The insecurity made many men dependent on the economic activities of women who preferred to keep their husbands and sons at home while taking on the role of the main breadwinner (Procházková 2003; Raubisko 2011a). When it came to making use of the limited economic opportunities or gaining access to political power after the first war, men who did not gain credentials and contacts by participating in the fighting were often excluded and marginalized. As the former Foreign Minister of Chechnya put it: "This is how we wound up with factory directors in military uniform and unemployed engineers" (Akhmadov and Lanskoy 2010, 80).

Gender is obviously not the only category that shapes people's experiences of war. As in any other conflict, people's socioeconomic status influenced how they lived through the wars as well as whether and when they left for safety. With regard to refugees in Europe, this played a role in determining how and where they arrived. What emerges from women's narratives is that age played a crucial role in shaping their experience of war and violence. Age matters in the sense of determining the conditions in which the women were socialized and the life stages they were in during the wars. My analysis accentuates differences between two generational cohorts of Chechen women. I call them the Soviet generation (born in the 1950s to the mid-1960s) and the perestroika generation (born in the late 1960s to the early 1980s).[3]

Women in Soviet Chechnya

Chechen women made significant advances in terms of education and professional careers during state-socialism. Many families experienced remarkable social mobility after they were allowed to return from exile in Central Asia in the late 1950s.[4] For example, most of the women with higher education I talked to had mothers who were illiterate. The parents of the Soviet generation women, marked by the harsh experience of deportation, were determined to give their children better opportunities in life. Thus, their daughters were able to obtain degrees despite the fact that they often came from families of five or more children. They studied and worked in ethnically diverse and gender-mixed environments and felt confident in the predominantly Russian environment of the Chechen capital of Grozny with its modern social and cultural facilities. Their fluency in the Russian language went hand in hand with fondness for Russian culture.

At the same time, high fertility and strict gender division of labor guided by traditional patriarchal norms and values characterized Chechen society in the late-Soviet times. In Chechnya, as in other Soviet Muslim societies, Soviet measures for the protection and emancipation of women transformed but not necessarily weakened the traditional social structures. Kandiyoti (2008) calls this "the Soviet paradox." On the example of Central Asian Soviet Republics, she explains that gender progressive measures coexisted with economic, nationality, demographic, and antireligious policies that stimulated rather than undermined traditionalism (Kandiyoti 2008, 607). Her analysis is applicable also to the situation in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR.

Soviet economic and nationality policies in the republic produced ethnically stratified society with an uneven distribution of economic benefits. The oil industry, engineering, infrastructure, and vital services were dominated by ethnic Russians, while low productivity agriculture, light industry, and trade were dominated by Chechens and Ingush, who also suffered most from structural unemployment (Tishkov 2004, 41; Derluguian 2005, 245). The economic activities were reflected in the degree of urbanization, which was 41%, while the Soviet average was 73%. Chechens represented more than half of the republic's inhabitants but constituted less than one-third of its urban population (Tishkov 2004, 41).

This resulted in the predominance of rural households partially dependent on subsistence farming and income from men's seasonal labor migration to other parts of the Soviet Union.

Chechens have traditionally attached high value to large families (Jaimoukha 2005). Soviet pro-natalist and maternalist policies further bolstered this preference. According to the last Soviet census of 1989, 46% of families in the republic had five or more children compared to 3% of families in Russia (Tishkov 2004, 151). Despite the provision of public services such as free kindergartens and health care, high fertility tends to have a negative impact on women's health, and contributes to their lower levels of education, employment, and participation in public life (UN 2010). Relevant for the situation in post-Soviet Chechnya is Caprioli's (2005) quantitative analysis, in which she demonstrates that gender inequality, as indicated by high fertility rates and low women's participation in the labor market, increases the likelihood of intra-state armed conflicts.

As in other parts of the Soviet Union (Ashwin 2000), women in Chechnya, who were employed outside of the home, were also expected to do all the housework (or share it with other women). This "double burden" was particularly demanding for women in Chechnya who were living in large households, often without labor-saving devices and adequate amenities. It was especially true for newly wed women who typically moved in with their husband's families (see also Raubisko 2011a, 120). If their husbands earned enough to provide for the household, women often left their jobs after getting married. Indeed, most economically well-established men would prefer to have their wives stay at home rather than be employed outside.

One of the outcomes of Soviet antireligious campaigns in Muslim societies was the increased "privatization" of religious practices and their relegation to the domestic sphere (Kandiyoti 2008, 610).[5] The division between a "Sovietized" public sphere and a "traditional" private sphere (Kandiyoti 2008, 610) was apparent in many of the women's narratives. Despite being exposed to secular Soviet-style education, in their homes, they were introduced to Chechen customary laws that blended with traditional Sufi Islam.[6] This socialization also made them internalize gender norms and values that differed from those espoused by their Russian classmates.

Chechen norms of appropriate conduct are based on a strict separation of male and female activities and spaces (Raubisko 2011a, 118–122). This gender order is based on a complex set of rules that cannot be described here in detail. In order to understand the position of a woman in a Chechen family during the Soviet times, it is useful to consider Kandiyoti's discussion of "classic patriarchy" with its cyclical nature of women's power (Kandiyoti 1988, 278–279). The key to the reproduction of a patriarchal family is the patrilocally organized extended household (Kandiyoti 1988, 278). As noted earlier, after marriage, most young Chechen women moved into a household headed by their husband's father where they were subordinate not only to all the men but also to the more senior women, especially their mother-in-law. The husband's family appropriated both their labor and children (Kandiyoti 1988, 279). Women's compliance with this system was supported by the promise of economic protection and social status as well as the expectation that their hardships as young brides would eventually be compensated by the control and authority they would gain over their own daughters-in-law (Kandiyoti 1988, 279). Having sons who would take care of them in the old age was crucial. Notwithstanding the Soviet laws, women in Chechnya remained effectively excluded from the inheritance of land and real estate.

Women belonging to the Soviet generation were able to navigate between the Soviet and the Chechen social systems. They made strategic use of opportunities provided by the former while relying on the support structures of the latter. They obtained education and employment experiences in the relative tranquility of late socialism with its fixed

horizon of expectations. These were important sources they could later draw on during the wars and in exile. Many women belonging to the perestroika generation also managed to obtain an education before the war, but their employment experiences (if any) were often short and sketchy. The formative period of their lives was shaped by transition and upheaval during perestroika and in post-Soviet Russia when women's social protection by the state was dramatically eroded.

Fulfilling and transforming gender roles in the context of violence

Women's experiences of the wars were shaped by their attempts to keep together "the fine fabric of everyday life, its interlaced economies, its material systems of care and support, its social networks, the roofs that shelter it" (Cockburn 2004, 35). Lubkemann (2008, 18) points out that studies of conflict often wrongly assume that war violence somehow renders all "normal" concerns for engagement in ongoing social life insignificant. Chechen women's accounts of the wars were indeed structured around their coping with the effects of violence on their families and households, and their attempts to maintain some sort of everyday normality. They recounted how seemingly insignificant details of everyday life gained new importance. For example, some Chechen women defied the degradation and humiliation of their everyday war existence by paying particular attention to their appearance (see also Brežná 2003a; Procházková 2003). Khava (47), a music teacher who had always taken great care of her looks, remembers how she ended up taking shelter in a stranger's house during the first war. All she took with her when running from her Grozny flat was food, children's clothes, and her cosmetics bag. As there was not much to do, she said to herself, "Why not use some cosmetics?" So she applied one of her beautifying masks to her face. Her host could not believe it when she saw her: "They are bombing us and you are lying here with a mask?" She told women from the neighborhood and they came to have a look. They burst out laughing when they saw Khava lying on a sofa. "So what?" she told them, "I want to die beautiful!"

On the one hand, it might appear that predominant gender roles were reinforced during the conflict. Women were typically left to care for children and other relatives, and they felt responsible for restoring their homes. On the other hand, fulfilling these roles during the war was so difficult and strenuous that it pushed the boundaries of the domestic realm. Thus, in protecting their children, some women inadvertently became politicized. Also, caring for children during the wars gained new meanings that made women reconsider their role as mothers. In providing for their families, they became the main breadwinners – the role traditionally occupied by men. When reconstructing their houses and apartments, they carried out hard physical work and learned to do things they had never done before. These intensified responsibilities came at a great cost to the women. Many of my interviewees continued to suffer from psychosomatic health problems as a consequence of stress and exhaustion. At the same time, these accomplishments also gave them a sense of independence and pride.

Caring for children

Women in Chechnya fought (and continue to fight) for the release of their children, mostly sons, who were detained, charged with trumped-up offenses, and tortured into making confessions (Human Rights Center "Memorial" 2001; Politkovskaya et al. 2003; Murphy 2010). This was the case during the two wars and continues into the present. Since it was more difficult to accuse women of belonging to or supporting the combatants, they

were in a better position to engage in this prolonged and perilous dispute with the Russian and later also Chechen authorities. The women of the Soviet generation who were most likely to have teenage or adult sons during the wars were most likely to find themselves in such a situation.

Liuba Vladovskaya's (55)[7] story illustrates how caring for children could turn into an act of political activism. Prior to the war, she worked as a shopkeeper in a department store in Grozny. She lived through both wars mostly staying in Chechnya. She was strongly attached to her house and the neighborhood in the center of the city. Despite all the material losses her family suffered during the two wars, it never occurred to them to leave Chechnya further than to neighboring Ingushetia. However, the war experiences paled in comparison to what she had to endure after the major military operations ended:

> We lived through the war, through floods, through cold and hunger, but all that was nothing compared to when they were stealing children, when they made them disappear. And you didn't know where he was, where they put him. That was something. On 7 May [2003], they stole my son from me.

The story of Liuba and her son is typical and unusual at the same time. It is typical in the amount of energy and financial resources she invested into the struggle for his release and in her enormous courage to systematically explore all possible avenues of the "legal system."[8] Laughing, she remarked that the experience of trading in the street markets of Grozny during and between the wars equipped her with the skills necessary to tackle the officials and armed forces. She also got support from the Human Rights Center Memorial. At the same time, the story is unusual because Liuba eventually succeeded in getting her son out after he had been tortured and imprisoned for two years, but was threatened by a much longer sentence (Estemirova 2005; Politkovskaya 2005). Liuba became more and more vocal in her opposition to the practice of unlawful detention and torture and served as an inspiration to other women fighting for the release of their relatives. In the end, her struggle for justice for her son and her numerous public appearances endangered her own life in Chechnya. She was explicitly warned by one of the more sympathetic judges that simply by insisting on her son's innocence, she was entering politics. In the end, Liuba was physically attacked by a group of unidentified armed Chechen men and had to leave the country in great haste.

Some women came to reconsider their motherhood when, in the face of acute danger, they performed their role as mothers in a radically different way. Lisa (38) and her husband provided various kinds of support to the Chechen fighters during the second war. Eventually, the information about their activities got through to the federal forces and armed men started visiting their house on a regular basis, most commonly at night or early in the morning. She and her husband were often beaten in front of their children. The children were afraid to go to bed so Lisa gave them sleeping pills in the hope that they would sleep through these traumatic visits. Petimat's (43) little daughter got seriously ill when they were sheltering from the bombing in a school in the mountains during the second war. Petimat thought that the girl would surely die and remembered how she prayed for her daughter to find a quiet death. In retrospect, she found it hard to explain that back then, while seeing children dying and injured from the bombing all around her, she even thought it would be good for her daughter if she could just die quietly at home.

Providing for the family

Both during and between the wars, women were becoming the main breadwinners when it was too dangerous for men to venture outside, and/or when they were physically or

psychologically incapable of providing for their families. This was a highly unusual situation in the context of the traditional gender division of labor in Chechen society. The most typical economic activity women engaged in was street-market trading. After its declaration of independence in 1991, Chechnya removed itself from Russia's sphere of legal regulations and customs. The republic was also gradually being cut off from the federal budget. However, in reality its 300-km border with Russia was not treated as an international border, and it was easy to fly from Grozny to Baku or the Middle East, from where goods could be imported. As its official economy gradually dissolved, Chechnya became "the former Soviet Union's biggest black market emporium" (Gall and De Waal 1998, 125). People who lost their regular jobs moved into trade. As in other parts of the former Soviet Union, women in Chechnya were particularly strongly represented among the traders.

Market trading was one of the few economic activities continuously available to people in the republic during and between the wars. Some women found pride in supporting their families through this work. For example, Mariam (55), who worked as a security guard in Russia before the war, supported her three adult sons with her market trading. Together with her stepmother and aunts, she traveled and traded across Russia and Ukraine. The work was exhausting, but they were successful at identifying the products in demand at a given time and could make some profit. After the first war, it was furniture and household wares as people were reconstructing their houses. During the second war, Mariam sold sunflower seeds in Grozny. She remarked:

> During the war, people who stayed in Grozny had nothing to do, so they ate sunflower seeds. They sat at home, could not go out, could not work, it was like in a prison, very sad. But the seeds sold very well during those days.

Whole families were supported through women's trading activities. Zarema (30) describes how her older sister maintained her, her brother, and their sick mother through her trading with the Russian soldiers. Zarema felt uneasy when talking about this source of income:

> There were many contract soldiers (*naiomniki*). And they bought lots of vodka and food. And, well, people were selling; most people traded with the Russians. There was no other way. People did not want to sell to Russians, to enemies, what they wanted to eat and drink, but they had no other way out.

It was the paradox of this war economy that the soldiers were at the same time the main source of life-threatening danger and the main opportunity for making a living (Regamey 2014, 212).

Other, especially university-educated women with professional careers had to overcome feelings of shame and degradation when they switched to working in the market. Luisa (50), a teacher of Russian language and literature, initially considered it undignified to do this work:

> My sister, who was a teacher of physics and math, started importing products from Turkey and Iran and reselling them in Grozny. She told me, "I'll be bringing stuff and you'll be reselling it since we live so close to each other." Oh, how ashamed I felt! How ashamed I felt to stand there and argue about the prices. Well, it should not have seemed shameful to me, but back then, I, a teacher, found it very degrading to stand in the street market. Later on, I got used to it. Well, that was what we [her husband and two children] lived on. I also kept working in a school, but they didn't pay me anything there.

The situation of extreme scarcity of opportunities forced women like Luisa to reconsider their own position within the family and their status in society.

Reconstructing homes

Loss of property as a result of bombing, shelling, looting, and deliberate destruction by Russian soldiers was a form of violence with long-term consequences for the civilian population (Regamey 2014). During the two Russo–Chechen wars, such losses were massive. In the early 1990s, many Chechens invested their savings into buying apartments in Grozny from Russians and others who left the increasingly unstable republic.[9] Very often, this property was to be enjoyed only for a couple of years or even months. According to some estimates, after the first war, over 120,000 houses and flats were fully or partly bombed, together with all central medical clinics and over 400 educational institutions (Tishkov 1998, 73, cited in Sokirianskaia 2009, 203). Given that the end of the second war is much harder to determine, it is difficult to get a similar overview of material losses for the second campaign. More areas were bombed and shelled during this conflict, including some previously less affected rural areas. And the federal army almost completed the destruction of the already heavily damaged capital Grozny. What was particularly painful about the property loss during the second war was that often houses rebuilt or restored during the interwar period were destroyed yet again.

Women in Chechnya worked hard to recreate a sense of normality by reconstructing their houses and apartments. Memories of destruction and reconstruction efforts figured prominently in their narratives. For example, Liuba's (55) account of the two wars and the interwar period was structured around the partial destruction of her house in central Grozny during the first war, then its partial reconstruction during the interwar period, its complete demolition in the second war, and yet another partial reconstruction in its aftermath. She worked very hard to make the house inhabitable again. Although her husband helped her to some extent, it was clear that she was the main driving force behind this effort. In the end, she had to sell her house in order to finance the lawyers for her imprisoned son. Talking to me in her cold and dark rented apartment, she connects her sense of uprootedness with the fact that she no longer owns either a house or a plot of land.

For Luisa (50), it was a great satisfaction that she managed, mostly through her own efforts, to reconstruct her apartment in Grozny. In September 1999, when the bombs started falling on Grozny again, having invested so much into this flat was one of the reasons why she opposed her husband's decision to leave the republic:

> After the first war, well, I had two apartments [in Grozny]. One was partially destroyed, the other one survived. Only the things bought from our savings were all stolen, of course. But the flat survived. And then, during the peaceful time, we managed to reconstruct and furnish it again. I did that reconstruction so nicely. And, ah, my soul found rest in that apartment. I lived there for less than a year when the second war began.

It was not unusual for women in Chechnya to be engaged in demanding physical labor even before the wars. What is striking about their repair efforts is the eagerness and ingenuity with which they took up these tasks, often teaching themselves new technical skills. Amidst the ubiquitous violence, destruction, and insecurity, their houses and apartments were their anchors.

At the same time, neither houses nor apartments were spared from becoming scenes of violence perpetrated by the armed forces. These private spaces were often raided and their inhabitants insulted, threatened, beaten, dragged away, raped, or killed. In such cases, reconstructing a home as a source of privacy and safety proved to be a more difficult and long-term task. As mentioned earlier, Lisa's (38) home has turned into a place of fear through repeated visits of the federal soldiers beating her and her husband in front of their children. When I met her more than seven years after they left Chechnya, she

and her older children were still suffering from nightmares. The sense of fear could swiftly be evoked even in the relative safety of their new home, for example, by the sound of a truck engine outside the house.

These examples of women caring for their children, providing for their families, and reconstructing their households in the context of violence illustrate the new and enhanced responsibilities they were able – and required – to shoulder. Their contribution to their families and communities at a time when the existence of very basic social institutions was threatened provided women with greater awareness of their capabilities. A combination of this increased self-esteem and women's outrage at the continuing human rights violations has found its expression in their strong representation among human rights activists in Chechnya (Murphy 2010, 249–255). They have been at the forefront of assisting the victims of violence and documenting the atrocities committed against civilians (Brežná 2003b; Hapke 2009; Murphy 2010, 249–255). However, the murder of the well-known activist Natalya Estemirova in 2009 and other attacks on human rights defenders working in Chechnya (Gilligan 2010, 161–163)[10] show how perilous this role can be in the Chechen continuum of violence.

Exposure to nonmilitary violence

While women of the Soviet generation realized their increased capabilities, many of the perestroika generation experienced heightened vulnerability to nonmilitary forms of violence. Their stories illustrate that one of the effects of war is lowering of social barriers against the use of violence also in the private realm. Younger women were in a precarious situation for at least two reasons. First, they were more exposed to the threat of sexual violence by Russian soldiers and its perceived disastrous consequences for their position in the family and the community. Second, the wars led to deaths of their family members and the dispersal of relatives at the point when their support and protection were extremely important for the women.

These two factors come together in the story of Milana (31). She was only 15 years old when she was married to a man in his thirties at the beginning of the first war. This was her grandmother's idea. She thought that in such turbulent times a husband would be Milana's best protection. This was not uncommon, as many families worried that their unmarried daughters were in great danger of having their future destroyed by sexual violence committed by Russian soldiers. In Milana's case, this protection was precarious. Soon after the wedding, her relatives left the country while she stayed behind with the in-laws. When her husband started beating her up, she had no one to turn to for help. She gave birth to a child. After the war ended, Milana's relatives took her away but the child had to stay with the father.[11] Thus, for Milana, the war created multiple sources of violent experiences. She had a hard time living through the war with a baby on her hands and a violent husband, but it is the separation from her child that haunts her most to this day. She is convinced that had it not been for the war, she would have never gotten married so early.

Rukiyat's (35) story also illustrates how the absence of familial support weakened her position when entering a marriage under pressure. She, too, got married to a man she did not know and did not want to marry. It happened on the initiative of her sister-in-law, who wanted to please her cousin, who was a fighter, with a beautiful young wife. She put great pressure on Rukiyat to comply. This was during the first war, and Rukiyat's adult sisters, who under different circumstances would have stood up for her and prevented

this marriage, had fled to neighboring Dagestan. Only when the war was over and they came back did they support Rukiyat in leaving her husband. She recounts:

> I stayed with this man for about three months. But, you know, he was useless. He was a fighter. He liked to drink and he didn't think about the future. From my childhood, I was longing for my own house, for some kind of coziness and I understood that nothing would come out of that with this man. He did nothing around the house; he was at war during the day and drank during the night. He only lived for the present and didn't think about the future, he didn't strive for anything. After my sisters returned and talked to our father, he agreed I could return home.

The story of her unhappy marriage with a fighter might be perceived as unpatriotic. She was not concerned with what he was fighting for. She did not see him as a hero, but as an obstacle to fulfilling her dream of a family life, which she was determined to pursue in spite of the war.

Both Milana and Rukiyat experienced violence in their marriages. It is impossible to determine whether the violent behavior of their husbands was a result of the conflict. Human rights groups have documented many cases in which fighters as well as civilian men who were subjected to torture in the hands of Russian soldiers turned violent against their wives and children (Khatueva 2012). However, it is clear that the wars had disruptive effects on the women's traditional sources of support and protection, which increased their vulnerability to nonmilitary forms of violence.

Women in postwar Chechnya

Women in Chechnya remain subjected to both state-sponsored and private gendered violence. Under Ramzan Kadyrov, who positions himself as "the guardian of Chechen traditions," the two forms of violence have become closely intertwined. He has embarked on a forceful campaign to revive the "spiritual-moral culture" of Chechen society. It is part of the reconstruction effort aimed at erasing the signs of war and cementing his authoritarian power. Although they are not the only target group, women have figured prominently as objects of this campaign. Since the presidential decree of 2007 (and in contravention to the Russian constitution), all women employed in the public sector as well as students are obliged to wear headscarves. Kadyrov has also publically condoned polygamy and encouraged men in his surrounding to take more wives despite the fact that it is prohibited under the Russian law (BBC 2006; Lokshina 2014). In 2010, women who were not dressed in the prescribed way were attacked on the streets with paintball guns and later harassed by groups of men in traditional Islamic dress and police officers (Human Rights Watch 2011; Lokshina 2014). This campaign went hand in hand with Kadyrov's public pronouncements about women's inferiority and suggestions that "if a woman does not behave properly, her husband, father, and brother are responsible" (Human Rights Watch 2011, 10).

Such a discourse amounts to the legitimation and privatization of violence against women and creates an environment in which the so-called honor killings – when women are killed by their relatives for the supposed loss of honor they caused to their family – meet with little sanctions from the authorities. As a matter of fact, Kadyrov officially condoned these acts on a number of occasions. He claimed that they were inherent to (his version of) Chechen tradition (Human Rights Watch 2011, 9). Most of these acts of violence go not only unpunished but also unreported. Nonetheless, numerous reports indicate that they are on the increase in Chechnya (Marx 2012; EASO 2014; Lokshina 2014).

Defining control over women's behavior as men's responsibility is also an important appeal to Chechen masculinity, which has been strategically utilized by Kadyrov. In his public address toward Chechen men in exile, he stated that when they can no longer

control their women who can call the police if they are beaten by their father or their husband, they should no longer consider themselves as proper men (Littell 2009). He was thus suggesting that they could "regain their masculinity" by returning to Chechnya.

The strong presence of women among human rights activists in Chechnya proves that women will not easily be threatened into subservience. However, the regime's efforts to shape the socialization of young women and men can have long-term consequences for women's position in society. For example, children as young as kindergarten age are being taught the "right" Islam, which involves instructing boys to watch over their sisters to ensure that they behave decently (Magomedova 2012). Changes can already be observed. For example, there has been an increase in young women getting married early and dropping out of education (Marx 2012; EASO 2014). A journalist and a women's rights activist based in Chechnya who wanted to remain anonymous comments on this trend:

> Today, to see a 14 year-old girl getting married doesn't shock anyone, though 15 years ago, it was really shocking. … Kadyrov himself is known as someone who has several wives and numerous mistresses, and most of them are very young. So he serves as a perfect model for other men.

Raubisko interprets Kadyrov's policy as an attempt to appeal to the population of a war-torn country by reestablishing a sense of a stable, traditional order (2011a, 150). If there is indeed a demand for the reinvention of traditions based on the imperative of women's subordination, it is an indirect affirmation that women's roles have changed during the wars. This transformation poses a threat to the neo-traditional patriarchal order that Kadyrov is trying to impose on Chechen society.

Chechen women in European exile

Women's wartime experiences continue to influence their adaptation to new conditions in European exile. Most of them experienced their emigration as a major disruption in their lives. However, their ability to draw on continuities between their gendered everyday responsibilities back home and in exile proved to serve as an important coping mechanism. Similar trends were observed among various refugee groups in different host countries (Kibria 1993; Franz 2003; Ong 2003). What has, however, rarely been taken into account is that women of different generations often adopt distinct adaptation strategies. This study demonstrates that such differences can be understood by reconsidering women's roles during the war and the conditions of their socialization prior to the conflict.

Women of the Soviet generation continue to be at the forefront of securing their families' needs. Even in exile, they are often the main breadwinners and actively engage with the authorities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to obtain various kinds of support. Their experience of navigating between the late-Soviet and traditional Chechen social systems has equipped them with important capital that can also be utilized in the context of their new host societies. Indeed, older, well-educated Chechen women often act as informal mediators between their community and the host society. However, their feeling of uprootedness, a lack of prospects for the future, and psychosomatic health problems prevent them from making full use of their potential (Szczepanikova 2014).

Women of the perestroika generation tend to be more eager to make use of the new opportunities in the host countries available to them in terms of further education and employment. As opposed to the Soviet generation, they often strive to build a new professional career and dream of buying a house to pass on to the next generation. They are also reconciled with the fact that due to their young children, they are likely to stay in

exile for an extended period of time. Single mothers are particularly determined to provide a better future for their children. They are perceived as vulnerable by the state and NGOs in the receiving countries, and tend to have better access to social services and support in terms of learning the language and accessing housing, education, and employment than married women. On the one hand, they bear the burden of being solely responsible for the well-being of their children and of being exposed to heightened social control by other Chechens. On the other hand, they do not have to balance their activities outside the home with cultivating the role of a wife and a daughter-in-law, which can be highly demanding in a Chechen family (Szczepanikova 2014). Thus, in a changed cultural and institutional setting, women's vulnerability can be turned into a resource.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to examine Chechen women's everyday experiences of war and violence and to outline some of their multiple effects on women's roles and identities in Chechnya and in exile. Women's accomplishment of their traditional responsibilities, such as caring for their families and households, in conditions of continued violence and economic deprivation gained new contents and had transformative effects on their self-perceptions as mothers, wives, and citizens. While often paying a high price with their health, they have gained an empowering sense of their capabilities. This self-esteem could be mobilized while reconstructing their lives in exile, but it has been perceived as a threat in Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechnya. At the same time, the wars have made especially younger women vulnerable to sexual and domestic violence and thus exacerbated their unequal status in society.

Under the neo-traditional gender order imposed by the present Moscow-backed regime, some of these gender vulnerabilities have effectively been institutionalized. Violence against women has been legitimized and social control over their behavior politicized. During Soviet times, Chechen women often faced gendered pressures and limitations imposed by their families. However, the Soviet state did not directly interfere into the sphere of women's primary socialization and did not condone physical violence targeted specifically against them. In Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechnya, the state exercises informal – but no less effective – power to impose practices that oppress women as a policy for the whole republic. The state of women's rights in Chechnya is not only shaped by the legacy of the conflict, but also by the continuum of violence in which violence against women serves as an important resource of Kadyrov's political power.

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Notes

1. The number indicates the age of an interview partner at the time of the first interview. Pseudonyms have been used throughout the text except for when explicitly stated otherwise.
2. Austria, Poland, and Germany have been among the main host countries of Chechen refugees in Europe since the 2000s (Szczepanikova 2014). The women in this study were recruited by a snowball method. Many Chechen refugees have extensive family networks that span a number of European countries. Once introduced by a relative or a person respected in the community, it was usually not difficult to find further willing interview partners. Other points of access were NGOs assisting Chechens in the three countries. The selection of informants was guided by the aim of achieving diversity in terms of age, education, family status, region of origin in Chechnya, and length of stay in Europe. The interviews were conducted in Russian. At the beginning of each interview, the women were given the same instruction: to talk about their lives as long as they wanted starting from whatever period they chose. Further questions were asked only after the flow of their narrative stopped or when they prompted me to ask them questions. Wary of making them relive past suffering, I did not explicitly ask about their experiences of war and other kinds of violence. It was up to them to bring up these topics.
3. For an analysis of how gender roles and identities of different generations of Chechen women have been transformed in European exile and for an account of the younger generation of women born shortly before the war, see Szczepanikova (2012, 2014).
4. Together with other nationalities, Chechens were deported en masse to Central Asia (primarily Kazakhstan) in 1944. Stalin had accused them of collaboration during the German occupation of the Caucasus. It is estimated that around one-third of the population died during the deportation and as a result of the harsh living conditions in exile (Pohl 2002).
5. According to Soviet estimates of 1970, about 90% of the Chechens married according to Muslim rituals, 99% of the dead were given religious funerals, and 98% circumcised their sons (Ro'i 2000, 81–82 cited in; Gammer 2006, 192).
6. In this way, the Soviet antireligious policies contributed to Islam becoming a privileged marker of ethno-national affiliation (Kandiyoti 2008, 610; Swirszcz 2009).
7. Liuba insisted on having her real name published. While not entirely common, some Chechen women have Russian-sounding names like hers. Another unusual thing about Liuba is that she has a non-Chechen husband, which is very rare for Chechen women. Hence her non-Chechen-sounding surname.
8. The ongoing violence in Chechnya has been described as a situation of lawlessness, chaos, or a state of de-modernization (Tishkov 2004; Rigi 2007). In their studies based on extensive fieldwork in Chechnya in the second half of the 2000s, Kvedaravicius (2008) and Raubisko (2011a) insist that the problem is not the absence of law, but the fact that violence in Chechnya can effectively be carried out within the framework of the law and even be facilitated by the use of the existing legal framework.
9. The last Soviet census indicates that the Slavic community in Checheno-Ingushetia (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians) was over 300,000 in 1989. Most resided in Grozny. Some of those who sold their property were forced to do so at gunpoint (Gall and De Waal 1998, 115).
10. For example, in 2013, Madina Magomadova, the Head of the NGO "Mothers of Chechnya," was physically attacked in Moscow after meeting the press regarding the preparation of the international photo exhibition dedicated to abducted civilians in Chechnya (Civil Rights Defenders 2014).
11. As noted earlier, patriarchal family norms prevalent in Chechen families make the father and his family primarily responsible for a child in case of marital separation. Women may sometimes be allowed to bring up their children after the divorce. However, when the husband's family insists on keeping or taking back the child, the mothers usually have to give in to the pressure.

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