



From Chechnya to the US – with anger

Boston The violent history of the suspects' homeland could help explain why the bombings happened, writes Kim Traill.

In the aftermath of the Boston bombings, moderate Muslims around the world prayed their fellow faithful weren't responsible. The moment of relief when pictures of the suspects showed white, Caucasian faces was short-lived.

The news that the suspects were ethnic Chechens has once again put the spotlight on a long-running conflict that has periodically seen acts of sickening terrorism and brutal reprisal. But for the first time people of Chechen descent have targeted Americans.

The act prompted frenzied media speculation over possible motives for 26-year-old Tamerlan Tsarnaev – killed in a shootout with police, and his 19-year-old brother Dzhokhar now recovering from gunshot wounds in a Boston hospital – to commit such a heinous act.

What did their North Caucasian roots have to do with their crime? Were they part of a wider plot, masterminded by jihadi groups in the turbulent region? Was Stalin to blame? And was Tamerlan named after a savage Mongol warlord?

Whatever theories were offered, one thing was certain. The Boston bombings fit the Russian government's profile of "Chechen as dangerous terrorist". Now Putin could justifiably say, "I told you so" to the West, where until now some still viewed the Chechen-Russian conflict as a David and Goliath battle: the freedom-fighter Chechens versus the brutal Russian military, determined to hold on to the tiny, territory on its southern border.

I was in Moscow in 1999 when a series of apartment bombings blamed on Chechen rebels whipped up mass hysteria throughout the country. Soon after, prime minister Putin's decision to re-invade the separatist republic won him the presidency. I travelled through the region as thousands of terrified refugees fled Russian bombardments. In camps in neighbouring Ingushetia, in February 2000, I heard horrendous tales of Russian atrocities – stories of murder, rape, ears cut off, eyes gouged out, claims of genocide against the Chechen nation. I will never forget the shell-shocked faces of tiny children who had witnessed relatives killed.

But it was also clear that the Chechen rebels were no longer just plucky freedom fighters. The republic had turned into a black hole of crime. Militant jihadists had taken advantage of the chaos to seize control of the rebellion. The Russian attacks seemed as likely to fill their ranks as deplete them.

A stunned young Russian soldier told me of a small boy staring at him as he and fellow soldiers ransacked a house. "That boy will grow up hating the Russians forever," he told me. "We are only creating more terrorists."

Since then, the world has seen the Nord-Ost theatre siege of 2002, the Beslan school tragedy of September 2004, multiple Moscow metro and airport bombings, all carried out by terrorists from the North Caucasus.

Despite the fact the Tsarnaevs had for the most part grown up in Central Asian Kyrgyzstan, any sympathy for the Chechen cause evaporated following the Boston bombings. Putin offered to help Obama with investigations and American politicians called for tighter immigration controls. Suddenly Chechens were suspect, and the world focused in on the Caucasus.

The Russo-Chechen conflict began over two centuries ago with the Russian Empire's encroachment into Chechen heartland, which spreads from the north of the Caucasus mountains, a rugged territory of steep ravines and deep gorges, into the lowlands around the Terek and Sunzha rivers. Chechens have stubbornly resisted Russian rule ever since. In 1944, Stalin ordered the deportation of the entire Chechen-Ingush population to Siberia and Central Asia.

Hundreds of thousands died, and the survivors never forgot the injustice.

The Tsarnaev family were among the exiles, settling in the town of Tokmok, in the then Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic. Tamerlan was born there in 1986. After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Chechnya declared independence. The family moved to the Caucasus in 1992 and Dzhokhar was born the following year in the republic of Dagestan – between Chechnya and the western shores of the Caspian Sea – where his mother, Zubeidat, had family.

In 1994, Yeltsin sent tanks into Chechnya, beginning a bloody two-year war which killed and injured an estimated 50,000 people. The Tsarnaevs returned to Kyrgyzstan as refugees. Tamerlan's Kyrgyz school-teacher from that time recalled the young boy seemed traumatised by his experiences.

The Tsarnaevs returned to Dagestan in 1999 and migrated to the US in 2001, where the boys' father, Anzor, "hoped they would live peacefully and free from judgment".

Dagestan had initially served as a transit point for jihadis from the Middle East travelling to Chechnya to fight against the Russians. Preaching the more extreme Salafist Islam in a traditionally Sufi area, the "Wahhabists" converted many young locals to their extremist views. By the end of the first war, the rebel's nationalist cause had become a jihad.

The hostilities in Chechnya dragged on. Pro-Moscow cleric, Akhmad Kadyrov, installed by Putin in 2000, was assassinated in 2004, eventually to be succeeded by his son, Ramzan. By 2009, Kadyrov Jr's ruthless

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militia had driven what remained of the separatist movement into the forests, creating a facade of stability in Chechnya itself.

At Russia's expense, Chechnya's capital, Grozny, now boasts shiny new skyscrapers and Europe's largest mosque, built on the rubble of the decimated old city. Tribal rivalries however, still run deep. Those with ties to the tyrannical Kadyrov are secure, but no dissent or criticism is tolerated.

Running Chechnya as his personal fiefdom, Kadyrov lives the high life, driving flash cars while much of the population lives in abject poverty. Women are forced by law to wear headscarves, polygamy is encouraged and Kadyrov has publicly declared honour killings are part of Chechen culture.

Tanya Lokshina, deputy director of Human Rights Watch's Moscow office told me by phone: "There are still arbitrary arrests, and people are tortured, imprisoned or 'disappeared', often without charges. These actions constitute major crimes against humanity."

After the Boston bombers were identified as Chechens, Kadyrov was quick to respond: "Any attempt to draw any connection between Chechnya and the Tsarnaevs – if they are guilty – is futile," he wrote, proceeding to blame the US. Radical Islamist and Chechen nationalist groups also denied affiliation with the Tsarnaevs.

Friends and family expressed disbelief the brothers could have carried out such a horrific act. Dzhokhar was by all reports a well-liked medical student. Tamerlan was a former boxing champion, married to an American, who had converted to Islam for him. He had, however, recently been denied US citizenship and was unemployed.



Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev.

In about 2010, he started to take Islam more seriously. He quit drinking and boxing, began to pray and apparently influenced his mother to begin wearing a hijab. Investigations revealed an interest in Islamic theology and Chechen nationalism. Tamerlan's extreme transformation attracted the attention of Russia's security services, the FSB, who apparently advised the FBI "he was a follower of radical Islam and a strong believer". According to the boy's mother, Zubeidat, the FBI had been monitoring her son for the past five years.

In 2011, and again in 2012, Tamerlan visited his parents, who had returned to Dagestan. Now Russia's most dangerous, corrupt and unstable republic, multi-ethnic Dagestan is also acknowledged to be its most radicalised, the epicentre of an insurgency aspiring to create a pan-North Caucasus Islamic state, the Caucasus Emirate, with rebel leader Doku Umarov as emir.

It has Russia's highest levels of unemployment. As in Chechnya, "there are constant cases of torture, arbitrary arrests and imprisonment without charges", says Lokshina. It's little surprise the insurgency enjoys reasonable support from locals.

US investigators are in Dagestan, piecing together Tamerlan's movements during his six-month visit. His father, Anzor, with whom he was staying in the capital, Makhachkala, denies Tamerlan made contact with Islamists. Given the militants are extremely suspicious of outsiders and difficult to locate, fearing capture by the FSB or local authorities, this could be plausible.

Whether or not Tamerlan met with insurgents, their message is not hard to find. A week after the bombings, Doku Umarov declared on vDagestan.com: "The Caucasus fighters are not waging any military activities against the United States of America. We are only at war with Russia, which is responsible for the occupation of the Caucasus and heinous crimes against Muslims."

Back in 2007, however, Umarov's tone was different: "Today in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Palestine, our brothers are fighting," he said. "Our enemy is not Russia only, but everyone who wages war against Islam."

Investigators now believe Tamerlan was self-radicalised, through his own internet research. Dzhokhar, now in a fair condition in a Boston hospital, has confirmed this, telling investigators he and Tamerlan acted alone, "inspired by US actions in Muslim lands".

"It's somewhat ironic that it has taken this act to draw attention to the region," says Lokshina, who fears media demonisation of Chechens will have "negative influences on immigration policies of the US and European countries".

She scoffs at Russia's claim that Chechnya is safe. My mind returns to the children in the camps, to the Russian mercenary, to his fear he had created a terrorist.

The Tsarnaevs' act may have turned public opinion against the Chechen cause, but it seems unlikely Russia's continued crackdowns on radical Islam in the region will ever solve the problem.

Kim Traill has reported on the Caucasus region for SBS's Dateline programme.



From top, main: The Jawbone UP wristband in a variety of colours; Pebble watches; the first Smart phone (in a shoe), and Google Glass. PHOTOS: JEFFREY GLORFELD/AFP