BARKING DOGS, BIG STICKS:
Repression and Radicalization in Chechnya and Xinjiang

“Chechen Rebels Claim Responsibility for Train Bombing.” “Uyghur Guantanamo Detainees Resettled in Bermuda.” These are the headlines emerging out of restive autonomous regions in the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China. In the post-9/11 world, these two areas draw attention for their oft-hyperbolized Islamic extremism. Both Moscow and Beijing have declared a “war on terror” against these Muslim separatists on their borders, and reports have circulated about Chechen and Uyghur connections to jihadist groups like al Qaeda. While questions remain over the legitimacy of these reports, their spread signals a new development in relations between the Russian and Chinese nations and what are termed their “most religious”¹ and “most turbulent”² Muslim populations. But where do the roots of this development in Chechnya and Xinjiang lie, and is it in fact identical in both regions?

The comparison between Chechnya and Xinjiang may seem too obvious to be worthy of analysis. The parallels between the two regions are striking; they are both Muslim dominant, Sufi influenced, and historically suppressed yet defiant outlying areas. They border what were once vast land empires, then ideologically-driven authoritarian states, and today, a quasi-democracy with a socialist hangover and a Communist state with major stakes in the global market. Would we gain more by comparing two more dissimilar separatist areas – Tibet and Tatarstan, for instance? The answer is that by plumbing the history of two places separated by over 2,000 miles yet so distinctly alike, we can discern finer points of divergence that ultimately lay bare more revealing implications.

¹ Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, Muslins of the Soviet Union (London: C. Hurst & Co, 1985): 186. The authors name the Chechens and the Ingush (their neighboring Muslims who they were united with as the Chechen-Ingush ASSR from 1934 until 1991) as the most religious of all Soviet Muslims, according to Soviet sources.
² Michael Dillon, Xinjiang – China’s Muslim Far Northwest (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004): ix. Dillon writes that Xinjiang has been referred to as China’s “most turbulent” region since the Strike Hard campaign began in 1996.
This paper takes as its framing premise the empirical observations that (1) Chechnya and Xinjiang experienced the growth of Islamic radicalism during the 1990s, and (2) Chechen radicalization has been more virulent and widespread, and asks why? To answer this question, it is inaccurate to point to a fundamental difference in the two regions’ cultural make-up, such as a “culture of violence” argument, as would likely be more apt in the case of a more contrasting pair. Instead, it is clear that Chechnya and Xinjiang followed a similar historical track up until the Chechens experienced increased radicalization in the 1990s, and this divergence opens up an analytical space in which to delineate more clearly the mechanism that fuels radicalism.

The secondary literature on the rise of radical separatism in Chechnya and Xinjiang often takes the line that repression, poverty, and traditional culture produced radicalism in both regions. In explaining the rise of extremist Islam among Russia’s Muslims, Shireen T. Hunter identifies three factors: the institutional weakness of Islam in post-Soviet Russia, the deterioration of social and economic conditions, and the region’s traditional values and lifestyle. On the Uyghur side, Michael Dillon makes the case that because Uyghur society in south Xinjiang is highly traditional and suffers from poverty and underdevelopment, it is “fertile ground in which militant separatist, and more recently, Islamist movements have flourished.” Moreover, Graham E. Fuller and Jonathan N. Lipman argue that the PRC’s recent heightened repression of Uyghur life may fuel a sense of desperation, causing the separatist movement to grow and become “more popular and spontaneous” in its use of violence. The argument that

---

3 This essay will employ the terms Islamic radicalism and Islamic extremism interchangeably to mean an uncompromising brand of Islam that condones the use of violence against innocents to achieve religious aims. Islamism and Islamic fundamentalism will also be used to refer to an ideological or political interpretation of Islam that seeks to implement Islamic governance and shari’a law, though not necessarily by means of violence.
5 Dillon, Xinjiang, 5-6.
repression, poverty, and traditional culture cause radicalism is not new; it has been common in broader debates over terrorism, which have risen in pitch and ferocity since 9/11. However, these characteristics are risk factors, not direct causes of radicalism. Inequality, for instance, certainly contributes to an environment in which radicalism could take root, but does not ipso facto give rise to extremism.  

While Ernest Gellner emphasizes the “dogs that didn’t bark” – or, the lack of nationalist mobilization among certain populations – the Chechens and Uyghurs are dogs that barked loudest at certain historical moments. Received wisdom would predict that the two regions would see significant radicalization during periods of intense repression, but Chechnya and Xinjiang in fact saw large-scale armed insurrection after the promise of national independence had been dangled and then denied, not simply under repressive duress. What scholars overlook are the complex dynamics at work in the interaction between Chechnya and Xinjiang and the nation-making project.

In examining the history of these two populations since the turn of the 20th century, it is possible to delineate a cyclical process moving between the promise of liberalization, Muslim grabs at autonomy, state repression, and radicalization. Two sequences of promise and suppression run through Chechen and Uyghur history. The first cycle moves from the promise of the Bolshevik and 1911 Revolutions to the suppression of the regions’ claims to independence to the resultant uprisings being met with severe repressive measures. The second cycle begins with Soviet softening and glasnost and Deng Xiaoping’s reformist policies, next the divergence

---

7 Terrorism expert Louise Richardson has argued that if poverty were a direct cause of radicalism, then we would expect to see the highest levels of extremism in sub-Saharan Africa – the poorest continent on the planet. She quotes others who have pointed to the relative affluence of many individual terrorists, like 9/11 architect Muhammad Atta and billionaire Osama bin Laden, as evidence that there is no direct relationship between poverty and radicalism (Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat*, New York: Random House, 2006, 56).

between the secession of union republics in the USSR and the Tiananmen Square massacre, and finally the first and second Chechen Wars and the dual policy of Develop the West and Strike Hard in the PRC.

This essay will argue that the mechanism behind rising radicalism in Chechnya and Xinjiang is the dialectic between the promise and opportunity of opening-up and the application of repression that formed the nation-building process in Russia and China. It will rely on Mark Beissinger’s theory on the way in which the patterning of a regime’s repressive practices conditions expectations among nationalist movements⁹ to explain why Chechnya saw an upsurge in radicalism in the 1990s while Xinjiang’s level of radicalization remained comparatively low.

EARLY HISTORY OF RESISTANCE

The regions’ early resistance to imperial rule formed a foundation of Islamic opposition that fed later conceptions of Chechen and Uyghur nationhood. Two figures stand out in the history of Chechen resistance to Russian conquest: Sheikh Mansur and Imam Shamil. The people of the North Caucasus are Sunnis of the Hanafi School but they are also strongly influenced by Sufism, predominantly the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya orders. This network of Sufi brotherhoods became a force for popular resistance against the Russian empire, and Sheikh Mansur, a Chechen adherent of the Naqshbandi order, led a revolt against the Russians from 1785 until his capture in 1793.¹⁰ Thirty years after Mansur’s defeat, Imam Shamil – a Daghestani Avar who was a leader of the Sufi Muridism movement – led a revolt from 1825 to 1859. Shamil coalesced the gorets people of the mountainous region into a semi-unified regional army and founded an Islamic imamate in 1834 centered around shari’a law implemented by muftis and a secular

---

¹⁰ The first president of secessionist Chechnya, Dzhokhar Dudayev, is said to have placed a print of Mansur in his presidential office (James Hughes, Chechnya: From Nationalism to Jihad, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, 13).
administration system of village governors (naibs).\textsuperscript{11} Shamil eventually became “the single most important iconic historical figure in the resistance to Russian colonialism”\textsuperscript{12} and his “image is alive and well in Chechnya today.”\textsuperscript{13} Despite Shamil’s defeat in 1859, the North Caucasus “remained unstable for most of the period of tsarist rule,” prompting the empire to suppress Sufi orders and ban some religious practices. However, tsarist policy was not as aggressively assimilationist as in Tatar Crimea, most likely because security concerns remained primary.\textsuperscript{14}

Qing control over Xinjiang similarly faced constant political and religious resistance despite a heavy military presence and little interference in religious practice. Yakub Beg – a Naqshbandi \textit{khoja} – led the most significant opposition to Qing rule, establishing an independent khanate based in the southern oasis town of Kashgar in 1865. Beg then began to extend his influence into northern Xinjiang, fueling rivalry between the British, Russians, and Chinese over control of the area against the backdrop of the Great Game. In 1877, Qing troops reconquered northern Xinjiang, Beg killed himself, and shortly thereafter the central government took control of the whole region.\textsuperscript{15} Beg, like Imam Shamil, became a symbol of the Uyghur struggle for independence from Chinese rule, especially among “influential figures from the religious circles and upper classes of the Moslems in Xinjiang.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{THE BROKEN PROMISE OF REVOLUTION}

The two revolutions that destroyed the tsarist and Qing empires appealed to Muslims as partners and seemed to hold the promise of independence. Lenin and the Bolsheviks actively

\textsuperscript{12} Hughes, \textit{Nationalism to Jihad}, 69.
\textsuperscript{14} Hunter, \textit{Islam in Russia}, 15.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 104.
sought Muslim support in the civil war that followed the October Revolution in 1917. In December, the Bolsheviks issued the “Appeal to All Laboring Muslims of Russia and the East”:

Muslims of Russia… Chechen and Mountain Peoples of Caucasus, and all you whose mosques and prayer houses have been destroyed… your beliefs and usages, your national and cultural institutions are forever free and inviolate. Organize your national life in complete freedom… Know that your rights, like those of all the peoples of Russia are under the powerful safeguard of the revolution… Lend your support to this revolution and its government.\(^\text{17}\)

This kind of rhetoric supporting religious freedom and self-determination convinced many Muslims to fight on the Bolshevik side, including Chechens who formed the Chechen Red Army under the command of the Bolshevik Aslanbek Sheripov.\(^\text{18}\) In 1919, while the civil war still raged, *mullahs* established the Mountain Republic of the North Caucasus with Bolshevik support.\(^\text{19}\) The autonomous region was influenced by Naqshabadi Sufism, and its leadership included Said Bek, great-grandson of Imam Shamil.\(^\text{20}\) After the defeat of the White troops in 1921, this symbolic “puppet government” was replaced by a series of autonomous regions, including the Chechen *oblast* in 1922.\(^\text{21}\) Despite the Chechens’ armed participation on behalf of the Bolsheviks and the Revolution’s rhetoric of self-determination, Lenin and his supporters chose an expedient strategy for stability over upholding their bargain with their Muslim partners.

The anti-imperialist Revolution of 1911 provided an opportunity for Xinjiang to stage an anti-Qing take-over, and as in the North Caucasus, rebels espousing the revolution’s aims seized power. In December, uprisings broke out against the Qing in Yining and Dihua,\(^\text{22}\) organized by members of the secret revolutionary groups, *Ge-lao-hui* (Older Brother Society) and the *Tong-


\(^{18}\) Ibid. Sheripov’s younger brother Mayrbek would later lead an uprising against Stalin in the 1940s.

\(^{19}\) Ibid, 27.

\(^{20}\) Seely, 75. Seely calls the Mountain Republic “a puppet government” used to “curry support with both the religious and the secular elites

\(^{21}\) Seely, 77. The Chechen and Ingush regions were united into an enlarged *oblast* in 1935 and then an autonomous republic the next year, considered part of the Russian Federation unlike the full union republics.

\(^{22}\) Yining is alternatively called by its Russian name Ili or Ghulja by Kazakhs and Uyghurs. Dihua is known today as Urumqi, which is Xinjiang’s modern capital.
men-hui (League Society). The Qing governor Yuan Dahua quickly suppressed the Dihua insurrection, but in Yining, the rebels succeeded in seizing power and setting up a semi-autonomous province. When the Chinese republic was formally inaugurated on January 1, 1912, Dahua fled Dihua, transferring power to Yang Zengxin, a warlord who Peking recognized as de facto civil and military governor of Xinjiang in May. Reinforced with 2,000 Hui troops, Zengxin reached a bloodless agreement with the Yining group, some of whom were later sentenced to death for treason. Zengxin was then able to consolidate direct control over the region, secretly executing the Ge-lao-hui leaders and establishing heavy garrisons at Yining and south of the Tianshan mountains in a “divide and conquer” strategy to counter growing pan-Turkic consciousness. After encouraging the Uyghurs to rise up against Qing rule, the Republican revolutionaries abandoned the newly established government in Yining in favor of a warlord system aimed at ensuring security.

INSURGENCY AND SUPPRESSION

This initial cycle of broken promises in the revolutionary era fueled large-scale uprisings among the Chechens and Uyghurs – more Islamic in character in Xinjiang than the Caucasus. While Islamic extremism did not develop significantly at this point, this period of “great rebellion” became part of the ethno-nationalist narrative in both regions that eventually fed into the rise of radicalism.

Chechen resistance came in two distinct waves prompted by unfolding events in the Caucasus but mobilized by an anti-Bolshevik fervor that was likely fueled by the Chechens’ suppressed hopes of independence during the Revolution. In 1928, Stalin initiated an anti-religious campaign that included massive closure of mosques and large-scale persecution of

---

Muslim clergy, concurrent with the collectivization push that forced Chechen peasants and others onto state farms through starvation-inducing grain requisition. A year later, disturbances across the Chechen region required the deployment of tens of thousands of Soviet troops. Strikingly, Chechen secular Communist leaders led these revolts, and they occurred despite the “passivity” of many other groups in the Soviet Union facing similar policies. Anatol Lieven explains:

They [Chechen Communist leaders] had acted then out of… a belief in Soviet progress and egalitarianism, but also, and more importantly, in a belief that Lenin’s promises concerning the genuine autonomy of the non-Russian peoples, and respect for them by the Russians would be honored.

After four months of violence, Soviet military planes dropped leaflets over the mountains promising amnesty to those who lay down their weapons. Many Chechens returned to their homes only to face a wave of arrests; some 35,000 Chechens were shot, imprisoned, or exiled during this period. After a decade passed, Chechens staged another uprising; in January 1940, a former leading Communist intellectual Hassan Israilov initiated a guerilla campaign in the mountains that grew as the Nazis’ Operation Barbarossa got underway in June 1941. However, after the German surrender at Stalingrad in February 1943, the Red Army drove the guerillas from their strongholds, and Stalin launched the mass deportation of whole ethnic groups as punishment for collaboration with the German forces. Out of an estimated 600,000 people

---

24 Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 29 – 30. The number of mosques was reduced from 26,000 in the Russian Empire to 1,312 by 1942.
26 Ibid. Four infantry divisions, one rifle division, three artillery divisions, and two regiments of mountain infantry were brought in to quell the Chechen uprisings.
28 Seely, 78.
29 Seely, *Russo-Chechen Conflict*, 319. The Chechen rebels issued a declaration stating that the Nazis would only be welcome in the mountains if they recognized the Chechens’ right to independence.
30 Ibid, 82. Russian historian Sergei Arutuinov supports the contrarian view that the deportations in the North Caucasus were not in fact punishment for collaboration with the Nazis, but retribution for the region’s resistance to collectivization and other Soviet policies before the war.
deported from the North Caucasus in 1944, the vast majority were Chechens and Ingush (400,000), and approximately one-third died in transit to Siberia and Central Asia.\(^{31}\)

As Soviet repression grew in scale and regularity, epitomized by the infamous deportation, Chechen resistance dwindled to scattered incidents. Thirteen years after the deportations, Khrushchev granted the right to return to deportees as part of his de-Stalinization campaign and the Chechen-Ingushetian ASSR was reconstituted, though under intensive control of conservative Party bosses.\(^{32}\) Broad anti-religious policy did not dampen under Khrushchev, however.\(^ {33}\) It is striking, therefore, that there were no significant acts of violence or resistance as the Chechens returned to the Caucasus.\(^ {34}\) Moreover, Lieven writes that the next thirty years “were among the most peaceful in Chechen history.”\(^{35}\) Though many scholars and journalists point to the experience of the deportations as the linchpin in creating Islamic radicalism in Chechnya, they did not in fact hold the radicalizing effect of the “broken promise cycle.” While the brutal deportations and years in exile were certainly a period seared into Chechen collective memory, they were also part of a rising string of suppressive measures against the North Caucasus, dating from the widespread starvation under collectivization to the arrests and executions in the 1930s. Applying Beissinger’s concept of “the patterning of repression across time [creating] internalized expectations about the possibilities of successful challenge”\(^{36}\) to the Chechen case, it can be argued that the period of consistent, high-grade repression following initial challenges to Soviet rule was not nearly as radicalizing as had been expected.

Resistance culminated in Xinjiang in the establishment of two independent republics as

\(^{31}\) Hughes, *From Nationalism to Jihad*, 10. Seely puts the number of Chechen deportees at 700,000.
\(^{32}\) Seely, 87. No Chechen was allowed to lead the Chechen Communist Party in the republic until 1989.
\(^{33}\) By 1963, which Hunter marks as the height of Kruschev’s anti-religious campaign, the number of mosques was reduced to about 400 in the whole USSR and the clergy to between 2,000 and 3,000.
\(^{34}\) Hughes, 11.
\(^{35}\) Ibid, 88.
\(^{36}\) Ibid, 383.
Uyghurs fought for the self-determination they had been denied by the new Republican leaders in 1912. In the 1930s, during the Chinese Civil War, support gathered around the amirs of Khotan in south Xinjiang, and the most senior amir, Muhammad Amin Bughra, emerged as the leader of a movement that proclaimed the Turkic-Islamic Republic of East Turkestan in 1933. This independent state was formed around a program of shari’a alongside social reform, and though it was defeated a year later by Sino-Muslim forces under the warlord Ma Zhongying, it is a powerful symbol in Xinjiang today. A decade later, the Xinjiang governor’s decision to requisition a large amount of horses triggered guerilla activity, leading to a Soviet-backed insurrection that established the East Turkestan Republic (ETR) with Yining as its capital. This second incarnation lasted four years and became known as the Three Districts Revolution in Chinese history. In 1949, after CCP victory over the Nationalist forces, the ETR government surrendered to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) in what was dubbed the “peaceful liberation” of Xinjiang. The CCP subsequently invited eight ETR leaders to Beijing to negotiate the Xinjiang-PRC relationship, but they were killed when their plane crashed en route – an episode many Uyghurs regard as a Communist set-up.

Once Xinjiang fell under CCP control, repressive measures mounted, and Uyghur resistance became more limited. In 1950, Beijing launched two national policies: a program to encourage Han migration to the east and a land reform program, which specifically included the confiscation of mosque-owned waqf land in Xinjiang. In addition, the region faced campaigns against pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism that left half a million people killed or deported to labor camps. When the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region was officially created in 1955, the CCP

---

37 Dillon, *Xinjiang*, 20-21. The republic’s flag of a star and crescent is revered by Uyghur separatists today as the symbol of a “once and future state,” and Muhammad Amin is seen as a nationalist hero in the line of Yakub Beg. He was also involved in anti-Communist agitation in Xinjiang in the 1950s.
38 Ibid, 34.
also established a quasi-military Han corps, which operated “almost as a state within a state” in the region. There were two major uprisings in Xinjiang during this period. The first was a series of disturbances in Khotan in 1954 revolving around opposition to the collectivization push that swept China in advance of the Great Leap Forward of 1958. The movement was organized by Sufi shaykhs and supporters of Uyghur nationalist leader Muhammad Amin Bughra intent on establishing an Islamic state, though all the group succeeded in doing was launching small-scale attacks on local forced labor camps. The second event was the 1962 riots in Yining over the grain rationing system and Han in-migration that the CCP blamed on the Soviets.

These uprisings were far more limited than resistance efforts prior to CCP control but they constituted a stronger strain of opposition than existed in Chechnya during this period. This difference likely stems from the constraints and conditioning experience imposed by the Stalinist deportation policy and the relative underdevelopment of CCP repressive mechanisms alongside the Soviet system founded over 30 years earlier. It is also significant that Uyghur uprisings were more religious-based compared with those led by the secular Communist Chechen leadership prior to the deportation. The factor driving the relative Islamicization of resistance in Xinjiang may have been that the CCP never included the Uyghurs in its structure after gaining control in 1949 whereas the Bolsheviks initially incorporated Chechens in their ideological system. The Uyghurs’ only political outlet remained their particular Sufi-influenced version of Islam.

**THE OPENED DOOR**

During the 1980s, after decades of anti-Islamic oppression and brutal socialist policies, the USSR and the PRC both experienced liberalization, a movement swifter and more drastic in the Soviet Union from its outset. The promise of opening-up spurred a surge of Islamist

---

39 Dillon, Xinjiang, 35.
41 Ibid, 56.
separatism in Chechnya and Xinjiang, laying the groundwork for a clash of expectations and reality.

As softening under Brezhnev turned into full-scale liberalization under Gorbachev, Chechens and Muslims in Russia generally became increasingly politically active, opening the door to a resurgence of Islamist separatism. Under Brezhnev, the antireligious campaign took on a less hostile tone. The USSR became set on cozying up to anti-Western Arab states in the 1960s, and Islam was transformed into a “progressive” religion, though this new Soviet line met challenges after the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Gorbachev’s launch of perestroika and glasnost in 1985 further opened up a space for the resurgence of Muslim nationalism as it removed barriers to religious activity and Muslim contact with the Islamic world. Nationalist political activity took some time to appear in Chechnya, but by the late 1980s, a number of groups had formed, including the Confederation of Caucasian and Mountain People, the All-National Congress of Chechen Peoples (OkChN, later the NCCP), and the Party of the Islamic Way (Path). At the first meeting of OKChN in 1990, the organization declared Chechen sovereignty as well as its willingness to sign a new union treaty, though not as part of the Russian Federation, and chose for its head General Dzkhokhar Dudayev. While Chechens gained new self-assurance during this period, their political activism did not necessarily spell the rise of radicalized separatism. As Beissinger continually reminds us in Nationalist Mobilization, the collapse of the Soviet Union was “one of the most notoriously unanticipated developments of modern history” abroad and behind the Iron Curtain. Chechens and other historically

---

42 Hunter, *Islam in Russia*, 32-33
43 Seely, *Russo-Chechen Conflict*, 90. The Confederation was a union of the intelligentsia of the northern Caucasus but found little success as it was dominated by Abkhazian interests and tarred by allegations of KGB involvement.
44 Hunter, 39-40.
45 Seely, 90.
46 Beissinger, 2.
suppressed groups had been conditioned by decades of regular, predictable Soviet repression, and it would take more shocks to the Soviet system before Chechens would demand independence outright.

A reformist era in the PRC offered the Uyghurs a similar, if less extensive, opportunity to express their Islamic identity. Uyghur separatists had earlier taken advantage of the chaos of the Cultural Revolution to establish the East Turkestan People’s Revolutionary Party (ETPRP) in 1967 – a collection of clandestine groups that scholars believe to have been “the single largest resistance organization in Xinjiang since 1949.”\(^47\) While this resurgence in Islamic-oriented separatism did not come about as result of regime-proffered promise, the factional strife during the Cultural Revolution offered an opportunity as the disintegration of central authority later did for the Chechens. Furthermore, mirroring Gorbachev’s reform-minded program, Deng Xiaoping inaugurated a post-Maoist era of “reform and opening” in the PRC in 1978, aimed at economic reform cast in a socialist mold. As China opened up increasingly to the international community in the 1980s, the Uyghurs built stronger connections to the wider Islamic community as more Chinese Muslims participated in the hajj\(^48\) and communication and trade relations grew with Central Asia.\(^49\) During this period, Uyghur separatist activity increased, culminating in the riots led by Islamic extremists in southern Xinjiang in 1990 that were suppressed by PLA troops.

**THE PIVOT POINT**

The pivot point in the history of resistance in Chechnya and Xinjiang was the divergent patterning of repression by the USSR and the PRC in responding to heightened separatist threats in the 1990s. As the Soviet Union experienced a breakdown in central authority and witnessed the secession of its union republics, expectations were built among remaining separatist groups,

\(^{47}\) Dillon, 57.  
\(^{49}\) Starr, ed., *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland*, 170.
like the Chechens, that the USSR lacked the institutional capacity to respond to nationalist challenges. The CCP, on the other hand, conditioned expectations of nationalist groups with the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, which sent the signal that the Party was ready to respond to challenges to its authority with severe repression. These two divergent responses to growing social protest formed the pivot point that set Chechen radicalism afire and alternatively stalled Uyghur separatism for the next decade.

As Chechen nationalists watched the ability of the Soviet central authority to hold onto its union republics rapidly deteriorate, their expectations for success in gaining independence gained in momentum. From 1989 forward, the Soviet Union saw the surge of nationalist mobilization build into a “tidal” effect (to use Beissinger’s terminology), which overran the ability of the police and military to impose order.\(^{50}\) By the time of the 1991 coup against Gorbachev, the erosion of Soviet power broke the power of past repressive patterning, and multiple segments of the USSR rose up in violence.\(^{51}\) The Chechen independence movement seized this opportunity to oust the Communist authority in Chechnya and form a new republic with the NCCP’s Dudayev at the helm. While the run-up to the outbreak of war in Chechnya is rife with political twists, its significance in terms of explaining the rise of radicalism is that the Chechen people did not expect the level of severe military repression that the Yeltsin administration brought down on the region, which Beissinger writes was counter-cultural to the norms of force application in the Brezhnev and Gorbachev eras.\(^{52}\)

This clash of expectations and reality jolted the Chechen nationalist movement into a radicalization stage. While Dudayev initially led Chechnya as a secular nationalist, he began to use Islamism as a mobilizing force as the war progressed, declaring Chechnya an Islamic state in

---

\(^{50}\) Beissinger, 371.
\(^{51}\) Ibid, 375.
\(^{52}\) Beissinger, 329.
The rising visibility and power of Shamil Basayev and his Saudi-born deputy Amir Khattab also spoke to the progressively extremist version of Islam that became tied to the concept of Chechen nationalism. While religion often moves to the national forefront during periods of sustained armed conflict, the uncompromising, violent brand of Islam that arose and gained a voice in Chechnya was born of the encounter between the promise of national independence created by the deterioration of the Soviet Union and the reality of Moscow’s determination to recentralize and “draw the line” at Chechnya through renewed use of repression.

While the Chechens saw the door swinging wide, the Uyghurs encountered a Communist regime determined to keep the door shut on the opportunities for separatism inherent in reform. Beijing used extreme violence at Tiananmen to unambiguously condition expectations about the success of opposition movements, succeeding where the Soviet regime failed as a “regime of repression.” As a result, while Xinjiang saw periodic violent uprisings in the 1990s, including the growing use of bomb attacks, there has been no broad-based opposition movement with the ability to mount sustained armed insurrection against the state. Moreover, as the situation in Chechnya unfolded, the CCP doubtless took note of spiraling radicalization in that province—another ripple in Beissinger’s tidal effect of nationalist mobilization. The two-pronged strategy the CCP developed to prevent similar radicalization in Xinjiang hinges on economic development in the region (“Develop the West”) and strict crackdown on religious and political activity (“Strike Hard”) – a dual strategy likely spawned by Chechen lessons. We can draw our own lessons from the Chechen case in terms of predicting the future of separatism in Xinjiang. It seems unlikely that the Uyghur opposition movement will gain the popularity and self-assertion

---

53 Hunter, 151.
54 Dillon writes that Chinese officials named the war in Chechnya as one of the reasons behind the “Strike Hard” campaign in 1996 (85).
that Chechen separatism developed in 1991 unless the same forces of political destabilization or economic dislocation erode the PRC’s sovereignty, as occurred in the USSR during the glasnost era.

CONCLUSION

Sun Tzu counsels military leaders in *The Art of War* to hide their “shape” from their opponent, or in other words, to deny their adversary knowledge of the pattern of their actions on the battlefield. The comparison of Chechnya and Xinjiang holds the opposite lesson for authoritarian regimes managing separatist movements. Repression is most effective when its “shape” is easily interpretable by nationalist opponents and can act as an inhibitory mechanism. The Chechen-Uyghur divergence in the 1990s also holds implications for non-authoritarian states confronting the rise of Islamic radicalism among their Muslim minorities, such as states in the European Union. Since the “big stick” threat of repression is not easily accessible to democratic regimes, they must make credible promises that show their shape in other ways, applying a “soft power” approach to domestic population management. By following a modified model of PRC tactics, such democratic states can appeal to their Muslim minorities through the use of consistent and credible guarantees and perhaps avoid the cycle of rebellion and resistance that has plagued the Muslims of both Chechnya and Xinjiang.
WORKS CITED


