RANDOM OR RETRIBUTIVE? Indiscriminate Violence in the Chechen Wars

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DOES a state's use of indiscriminate violence incite insurgent attacks? The conventional wisdom suggests that it does—Stathis Kalyvas[1] cites dozens of studies and historical cases where collective targeting of the noncombatant population provoked greater insurgent violence. But others have pushed back against this claim.[2] These scholars have made significant advances that allow us to understand and explain when, why, and how the world's militaries have used indiscriminate violence against noncombatants with shocking regularity.

This study builds on these contributions. We use interviews we conducted with ex-combatants and eyewitnesses of the Chechen wars to provide a critical reexamination of the current theoretical debate concerning indiscriminate violence. In doing so, we argue that treating the concept of indiscriminate violence as an essentially random counterinsurgency tactic obscures the important distinction between random and retributive indiscriminate violence deployed against civilians. The distinction raises crucial questions of location and timing that have hindered efforts to evaluate the efficacy of indiscriminate violence in irregular war.

Even if indiscriminate violence does lead to a short-term decrease in insurgent activity in the targeted locations as prior research has shown, it does not follow that indiscriminate violence is necessarily effective, for two reasons. After a period of recovery, many local insurgents and prospective avengers from the targeted villages in Chechnya retaliated. But it took prospective Chechen avengers at least six to nine months to

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[1] Kalyvas 2006, 146–72.

[2] Downes 2008; Lyall 2009.

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recover and to coordinate their attacks, which explains why indiscriminate violence might appear effective in the short term. Moreover, and more important, indiscriminate violence deployed *retributively* against village communities in Chechnya led to retaliation *in different areas* to ensure that covillagers were not targeted in retribution. This explains why rebel violence deployed in response to retributive indiscriminate violence might not be observed in the same location. By contrast, because rebels are less fearful of retribution when indiscriminate violence is deployed *randomly* against village communities, would-be avengers from the targeted villages and local insurgents tended to strike back *in the same area* and to target randomly picked personnel from the counterinsurgent forces, but again with delays of at least six months for recovery and operational planning.

The reaction of the rebels was therefore not observed immediately (in the case of both random and retributive violence), and was not observed in the same location (in the case of retributive indiscriminate violence). Any analysis of the effectiveness of indiscriminate violence, however sophisticated, that fails to account for this delayed timing (and in the case of retributive violence, the alternative location) is bound to mistakenly attribute the lull in activity to the efficacy of the counterinsurgency's use of indiscriminate violence. Using interviews with ex-combatants and eyewitnesses of the Chechen wars from targeted Chechen villages, we show that this interpretation of the data is flawed. Our findings suggest that we need to better understand the social and political context that shapes how populations react to different forms of violence. Although the counterinsurgency contributed to a short-term decline in insurgent activity *within* the targeted localities, rebel violence often resurfaced in the longer term. And when violence was deployed *retributively* against village communities, it created a whack-a-mole dynamic that merely moved rebel violence elsewhere. As a result, both forms of indiscriminate violence reduced rebel activity in the short term, but rebels often sought vengeance in the longer term and, in response to retributive indiscriminate violence, retaliated in other areas.

There is a substantial body of scholarship on what caused the transformation of the Chechen insurgency from an ethnonationalist rebellion to a jihadist rebellion.[3] But these studies have paid insufficient attention to the particular techniques used by the Russian military during

[3] Hughes 2007; Russell 2007; Souleimanov 2011; Blank 2012; Sagramoso 2012; Kim and Blank 2013; Toft and Zhukov 2015. For an extensive and current review, see Ratelle 2015. For a study on the demand for ethnic separatism in the North Caucasus, see Siroky, Dzutsev, and Hechter 2013.

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the Second Chechen War, and to their effects on the insurgency's motivation and capacity to strike back.[4] A number of works (for example, one by Gordon Hahn)[5] assess the peculiarities of the Russian military–led counterinsurgency. Other works examine how, since around 2005, the massive deployment of pro-Russian Chechen paramilitaries helped Moscow stem the tide of the local insurgency, while still other studies explore how the government's ability to obtain intelligence shaped its use of indiscriminate violence in the North Caucasus.[6] However, except for a single study by Jason Lyall,[7] no published work has shed light on the impact of indiscriminate violence on Chechen village communities or on insurgent activity.

Needless to say, governments that target civilians—whether randomly or selectively for retribution—are violating international legal and ethical standards. Since all governments have signed the relevant treaties, such as the Geneva Conventions, they are considered bound by customary international law to follow these principles. Although certain controversial techniques might be effective for counterinsurgent forces, these armies are nonetheless committing war crimes.

This article proceeds as follows: The first section offers a critique of the dominant literature on indiscriminate and selective violence, paying special attention to the development of a new distinction between random and retributive indiscriminate violence and to the methodological limitations of sophisticated microlevel approaches to the study of violence in civil wars. The second section investigates the issue of indiscriminate violence's efficacy. The third section describes the original ethnographic data and methods used in this study. The fourth section assesses village communities as specific targets of indiscriminate

[4] One exception is Toft and Zhukov 2012, which studies the effect of "denial" and "punishment" coercive strategies on the subnational diffusion of armed conflict, and finds that denial is most effective at containing violence and punishment is least effective. For a study of the pitfalls of the Russian counterinsurgency during the earlier period of the war, see Kramer 2005, which identifies four factors that prevented Moscow from achieving a clear-cut military victory over its adversary: breakdowns of operational command, troop morale problems, strategic flaws, and conventional force vulnerability to guerrilla tactics. In an attempt to explore the causes of Russia's military victory in the initial, conventional phase of the armed conflict, Miakinkov 2011 shows the utility of force as a key determinant in asymmetric warfare. Campana and Légaré 2010 explain the formation of Moscow's counterinsurgency in Chechnya as being "a result of institutional competition" between three of the main federal agencies involved: the presidential administration, the secret service, and the army. Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015a show how the sociocultural codes of retaliation, hospitality, and silence gave Chechen insurgents an asymmetric advantage over the much stronger Russian military in the 1990s, while Moscow's deployment of Chechen counterinsurgents in the 2000s helped the Russian military strip Chechen insurgents of this asymmetric advantage.

[5] Hahn 2008.

[6] Souleimanov 2015a; Siroky and Dzutsev 2015.

[7] Lyall 2009.

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violence and examines the logic of random versus retributive indiscriminate violence during the First and Second Chechen wars. The fifth section specifies three mechanisms that explain the effects of retributive versus random indiscriminate violence against Chechen village communities, and then addresses potential criticisms. The final section offers a conclusion.

Random or Retributive?

The vast majority of current scholarship on irregular warfare distinguishes between indiscriminate and selective violence. Typically, these are differentiated based on whether the subjects of violence are participants in the armed conflict (in which case it is selective) or are not participants (in which case it is indiscriminate). To cite a widely used definition, in selective violence, "individuals are targeted based on personalized information about their actions."[8] Apart from combatants as direct participants in armed conflict, current definitions identify potential targets of selective violence as "limited to people who actually provide material support—food, shelter, other supplies, information on the enemy's movements, or sanctuary from discovery—to the adversary."[9] Although this definition of selective violence signifies a clear-cut departure from the international law categories of combatants (those taking part in combat), and noncombatants (civilians who do not take part in combat), it provides analytic insight because almost all insurgencies hinge on support from noncombatants.[10]

By contrast, indiscriminate violence occurs "when individuals are targeted solely on the basis of their membership in a group perceived to be connected with the opposition and irrespective of their individual actions . . . groups [that] may be based on ties of kinship, location, class, ethnicity, etc."[11] Alexander Downes defines indiscriminate violence as "targeting everyone in a particular village or district with no effort to determine guilt or innocence,"[12] and Lyall echoes it: "the collective targeting of a population without credible efforts to distinguish between combatants and civilians."[13]

Current definitions of indiscriminate violence may be useful for some purposes, but they suffer from three flaws. First, they include

[8] Kalyvas 2004, 101.
[9] Downes 2007, 421.
[10] Krüger and Davenport 2012, 4–5; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; Siroky 2016.
[11] Kalyvas 2004, 101.
[12] Downes 2007, 421.
[13] Lyall 2009, 358.

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nonparticipant populations (civilians) who refrain from taking any part in the armed conflict—providing no material support either directly (by means of combat) or indirectly (for example, by giving the combatants shelter or information). Second, civilian populations are only guilty by association, in the sense of sharing ethnicity, religion, class, or contiguity. Third, current definitions implicitly treat the targeting of village communities of a few hundred people the same as the targeting of entire ethnic, subethnic, and confessional groups. Those broader groups often lack personal knowledge of other group members, hierarchical structure, local decision-making mechanisms, and mutual attachment at the interpersonal level. As a result, the literature has failed to distinguish between the different effects that indiscriminate violence may have upon the distinct groups subsumed into the umbrella category of victims of indiscriminate violence.

This failure has significant implications for the validity of a central assumption in the literature: that *indiscriminate* violence is defined by a high degree of randomness. The very notion of indiscriminate violence hinges upon the presumption that civilians who refrain from participating in armed conflict are targeted *randomly*, purely on the grounds of a set of group-based attributes assigned to them by perpetrators of violence who do not distinguish between those who are involved in the armed conflict and those who are not. As far as the "level at which guilt (and hence, targeting) is determined," targeting occurs without preselection.[14] Hence, at the microlevel, the targeting of civilians is random.

Yet "very little, if any, violence in civil war is random or actually indiscriminate."[15] Indeed, at the macrolevel, indiscriminate violence still postdates group-based target selection, since the perpetrators of violence target only some members of a larger group that they associate with the adversary, but not others. As Kalyvas and Matthew Kocher point out, "violence is selective when targeting requires the determination of individual guilt; it is indiscriminate when targeting is based on guilt by association or collective guilt."[16] In other words, targeting based upon information about an individual's armed conflict-related activities—*individual* guilt—is a marker of selective violence, whereas the targeting of entire population groups on the basis of *collective* guilt is tantamount to indiscriminate violence.

Ethically speaking, individuals involved in a given insurgency may

[14] Kalyvas 2008, 405.
[15] Hultquist 2012, 5.
[16] Kalyvas and Kocher 2007, 188.

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be "guilty" of fighting for their country's freedom, whereas the counterinsurgent would be "guilty" of violently repressing a native population's legitimate aspirations. We use the term "guilt" as an important analytical (rather than legal or ethical) category that helps to distinguish between individuals who are involved in the hostilities on the insurgents' side, either as combatants or noncombatants, and those who are not, because this is the distinction made by the counterinsurgents themselves. Thus, what makes individuals "guilty" is the state's perception of collective responsibility, that is, guilt by association.

Against this backdrop, the notion of retributive violence appears to replicate the distinction between indiscriminate and selective violence; it is also centered on the premise of guilt, but is more fine-grained. When based on the premise of individual guilt, retributive violence is akin to selective violence at the microlevel. At the macrolevel, retributive violence deployed against entire groups that the perpetrator of violence associates with the adversary is based on the premise of collective guilt. Current scholarship implicitly regards the targeting of individuals based on the premise of collective guilt as indiscriminate (and thus random), inasmuch as this form of targeting fails to establish—or to follow from—the logic of individual guilt.[17]

We suggest that it is useful to distinguish between random and retributive forms of indiscriminate violence. Random indiscriminate violence involves air strikes, artillery shelling, or sweep operations (*zachistka* in the singular, *zachistki* in the plural) carried out against villages without regard to prior local activity (such as insurgent targeting of local counterinsurgency forces). Retributive indiscriminate violence involves similar actions against villages, but is triggered by the insurgency's prior targeting of local counterinsurgency forces. This distinction matters conceptually and empirically, as we show in this article. Whether violence was random or retributive had a critical impact on the temporal and spatial distribution of subsequent insurgent violence. Random violence prompted locals to retaliate in the same area, which was easier because they could rely on their extended networks of relatives and covillagers, and they were familiar with the terrain. Retaliation against the Russian military often took at least six months from the initial incident of random targeting.

By contrast, retaliation against *retributive* violence was riskier, since

[17] Our analytical distinction between retributive and random violence is important for explaining the behavioral response of the local population and the insurgents to the government's actions. However, it goes without saying that both random and retributive violence aimed at noncombatant populations are equally indiscriminate and are considered war crimes from the perspective of the customary International Humanitarian Law, as stipulated by Article 13(2) of Additional Protocol II (§ 156) to the Geneva Conventions, enacted June 8, 1977.

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it involved relying on more distant networks and traversing less familiar terrain. Transporting arms across the region increased the chance of detection and the likelihood of a Russian response against one's village. Nonetheless, locals often sought to retaliate in a different area to make sure their village communities were not targeted in reprisal, and this undertaking often took at least nine months. In other words, whenever the locals felt that an ambush against Russian troops in the vicinity of their village might bring retributive violence against their whole community, they retaliated in a different area. Under certain conditions, which we discuss below, they renounced retaliation altogether. From this perspective, retributive violence is partially productive, since locals do not retaliate in the same area, and it is also unproductive, since it merely displaces the violence to more distant areas.

Can Indiscriminate Violence be Effective?

Currently, there is a general consensus that "[i]n order to be efficient, violence generally needs to be selective."[18] Yet as a rule, we tend to consider violence to be indiscriminate solely on the basis of our partial information regarding the knowledge and incentives of the perpetrators of violence.[19] Civilians tend to free ride rather than join insurgent units and risk their lives for the sake of a distant and uncertain goal from which they themselves might not benefit. But when civilians are faced with indiscriminate violence, they may reconsider their nonparticipation in armed conflict so as to better balance the costs and benefits to themselves. As Kalyvas and Kocher note, free riding is effective as long as the costs of abstaining are lower than the costs of joining the insurgency.[20]

Indiscriminate violence thus raises the costs of nonparticipation relative to participation, thereby driving civilians into the arms of the insurgency. The mechanisms underlying this shift are twofold. First, civilians are often driven to support (or even join) the insurgency by a desire to retaliate for losses inflicted upon themselves and their families.[21] Second, indiscriminate violence drives individuals to insurgent groups to seek protection from the incumbent[22] since nonparticipation no longer guarantees individual safety.

An alternative strand of scholarship asserts that indiscriminate violence actually weakens insurgencies. When accompanied by population

[18] Kalyvas 2006, 7.
[19] Kalyvas 2006, 148.
[20] Kalyvas and Kocher 2007.
[21] Anderson 2005, 46–47; Hashim 2006, 99–104; Souleimanov 2007.
[22] Mason and Krane 1989; Goodwin 2001; Kalyvas 2006, 151–59.

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resettlement—either enforced explicitly by the incumbent, or caused by the extensive shelling of civilian areas—indiscriminate violence may have the effect of disrupting the resources (and the social and economic base) of an insurgent group.[23] Furthermore, indiscriminate violence may alienate local populations, who blame the insurgents for the suffering inflicted upon them. We know of cases in which civilians defected to the incumbent's side,[24] pleaded with insurgents to cease their resistance,[25] or even resisted insurgents militarily within their respective areas.[26]

In Chechnya, Lyall demonstrates that the indiscriminate violence deployed by the Russian military against Chechen villages during the period 2001–2005 actually reduced the level of insurgent violence within the targeted areas by nearly one-quarter within the ninety-day period.[27] We agree with the main thrust of Lyall's study—that indiscriminate violence can be effective—but we question the interpretation. Once we distinguish between random and retributive forms of indiscriminate violence, evaluate their efficacy in a longer window to account for the time needed to retaliate, and take seriously the possibility that rebels and civilian sympathizers often strike back in different areas so as not to bring their village under retaliatory fire, we find that the interpretation of the evidence looks very different.[28]

For this study we conducted interviews with participants and witnesses of the violence in Chechnya, meeting with them at various sites where Chechen refugees fleeing the conflict have settled. Our interlocutors provided information directly relevant to the questions at hand: what types of violent acts by the Russian state's armed forces produced what types of retaliation from the Chechen side, where and when, and which conditions meant that no revenge attacks occurred. These interviews indicate that Lyall's focus on rebel violence in the same area within ninety days is too short a time period for individuals to mobilize and carry out retaliatory attacks. Avengers needed several months longer than ninety days to reach out to local insurgent groups, gain their

[23] Bennigsen-Broxup 1992; Downes 2008, 156–77.
[24] Gammer 2006, 286.
[25] Elliott 2003; Daly 2007.
[26] Anderson 2005; Weinstein 2006.
[27] Lyall 2009.
[28] Lyall focuses on rebel violence in the same area within a period of ninety days. But this is too short a period for individuals to mobilize and carry out retaliatory attacks. Avengers needed some time to reach out to local insurgent groups, gain their trust, mobilize, and organize the attacks, all of which took several months longer than ninety days. Moreover, whenever indiscriminate violence was deployed retributively (rather than randomly) against village communities, locals often chose to retaliate outside their own areas to make sure their covillagers and relatives were not attacked in response.

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trust, mobilize, and organize the attacks. Moreover, whenever indiscriminate violence was deployed retributively (rather than randomly) against village communities, locals often chose to retaliate outside their own areas to ensure that their covillagers and relatives were not attacked in response.

Survivors of random indiscriminate attacks were much more willing and able to retaliate, and frequently did so in close proximity to their own village because they did not fear retribution. In contrast, when survivors of retributive indiscriminate violence sought revenge against Russian forces, they typically did so in areas that were not close to their home communities to avert further retribution. Using this evidence, we also identify three distinct mechanisms of anti-insurgent village-based collective action that elucidate the variation in how, where, and when villagers reacted to indiscriminate retributive violence in retaliation and the conditions under which it was effective—that is, where no revenge attacks occurred. Having offered these conceptual distinctions and arguments, we now proceed to summarize the data and methods used in the study.

Data and Methods

To date, there is no qualitative study of these issues.[29] This lack is likely due to a number of factors. First, except for the times when Chechens have taken their causes to European human rights courts, most civilian victims of violence have shown little willingness to disclose information about their suffering to outsiders. In the conservative Chechen society, with its strict codes of silence and honor, any perceived failure to avenge such violence would bring individual and familial shame, which is widely interpreted as a sign of weakness. Second, given the near absolute impunity enjoyed by Russian and Chechen law-enforcement agencies and authorities, civilian victims have minimal trust in the judicial system. Indeed, Chechen civilians (and their Chechnya-based relatives) have often been targeted for having sued federal and local authorities in Chechnya; understandably, this has rendered Chechen victims largely silent. Third, due to the draconian restrictions imposed on the work of human rights organizations within both Russia and Chechnya, coupled with the ongoing elimination of media freedoms in both territories, information with regard to human rights violations in this North

[29] This study is not as formalized as Lyall recommends, and it lacks the field experiments he favors, but it is very much in the spirit of process-tracing causal mechanisms. See Lyall 2014.

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Caucasian republic has been largely absent in both federal and local media.

Last, the Kremlin itself is understandably reticent regarding its wartime atrocities in the region, whether that behavior was a matter of official policy or initiated by a few bad apples. As a result, most of the evidence comes from the victims of violence rather than the state-sponsored perpetrators of it. Moreover, attempts by journalists and scholars to gather data from Russians (and even Russian-based Chechens) have generally ended in failure.

Due to this lack of secondary data and the inability to conduct research in Chechnya and elsewhere in Russia, members of Chechen émigré communities based in various European countries served hitherto as the main source of information for our research. In fact, the inevitable security concerns of prospective interviewees made it impossible to conduct concentrated fieldwork on this topic in Russia in general, and in Chechnya in particular. Therefore, during the period from the middle of 2007 to the end of 2014, we scheduled a total of thirty-two semistructured interviews with Chechen emigrants in Aarhus, Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen, Dresden, Hamburg, Istanbul, London, Oslo, Paris, Toulouse, and Vienna. The interviews revealed a remarkable degree of consistency. Because the vast majority of interviewees asked to remain anonymous, their names have been changed.

We used our long-term contacts within the Chechen communities in Russia and various European countries to locate our interviewees, and selected them on the basis of their direct experience with the researched form of violence. Their experience was gained as a result of either their membership in targeted village communities, their close ties (usually by means of kinship) with members of targeted village communities, or their status as former insurgents operating in targeted areas.

All the incidents to which the interviewees refer took place from 2001 to 2005.[30] Compared to established macrolevel analyses, which focus on the structural causes of civil wars and insurgencies,[31] and to experimental techniques, this approach allowed us to look below the

[30] Our evidence draws on the incidents of indiscriminate retributive violence that took place in Chiri-Yurt, Shali district (May–July 2001); Assinovskaya, Sunzha district (July 2001); Novie Atagi, Shali district (September 2001); Chechen-Aul, Grozny district (June 2002); Sernovodsk, Sunzha district (July 2002); Mesker-Yurt, Shali district (November 2002); Dyshne-Vedeno, Vedeno district (May 2003); Ersenoy, Vedeno district (May 2003); and Katyr-Yurt, Achkhoy-Martan district (November 2005).

[31] For an analysis of the predictive accuracy of structural models on civil war onset, see Muchlinski, Siroky, He, and Kocher 2015.

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surface of violent conflict to examine the motives and choices of individuals facing indiscriminate and selective violence in conflict zones.

While our evidence is drawn almost entirely from sources on the Chechen side of the conflict—the victims of violence rather than its perpetrators—we corroborated the events with alternative sources. In addition, we triangulated the testimonies of noncombatant eyewitnesses of the First and Second Russian-Chechen wars and former insurgents. In almost every instance of retributive violence, several eyewitnesses testified to the same event, which increased our confidence in the inferences of the Chechen interlocutors on the subject of Russian intentions. We also discussed various aspects of the evidence with journalists and political analysts who are leading experts on the violence in Chechnya, including Alexander Cherkasov, Irina Gordienko, Tanya Lokshina, Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, Ivan Sukhov, Ljoma Tsjabajev (Lema Chabayev), Mairbek Vatchagaev, and others who prefer to remain anonymous.[32]

Village Communities and Indiscriminate Violence

Rural village communities differ considerably from other groups whose targeting is commonly considered indiscriminate. First, unlike city dwellers or members of ethnic or religious communities, members of a village community are typically fewer in number and more concentrated within a geographically restricted area.[33] By implication, villagers are intimately familiar with one another and often highly interdependent.[34] The deep sense of belonging they share is generally absent among members of larger communities who reside in more anonymous environments.[35]

Second, the concentration of a limited number of people within a geographically confined area enables intense communication among members on a daily basis. Other groups (ethnic, religious, linguistic, socioeconomic, etc.) in the modern era rarely achieve that level of communication. Collective decisions are more easily made in a village due to its small population, the intensively used channels of communication,

[32] Interviewees' testimonies were also compared with the data contained in the online archives of Memorial (available at www.memo.ru). In most cases, the interviewees' testimonies coincided with data provided by Memorial, particularly with regard to the retributive character of sweeps or shelling. In addition, the interviewees' testimonies provide insight that is missing in Memorial's reports.

[33] In Chechnya, as elsewhere in the North Caucasus, the population of most villages is no more than a few thousand.

[34] Goudy 1990.

[35] Tönnies 2005 [1912]; Anderson 1991. Inhabitants of the same village in Chechnya and neighboring areas are often related by kinship ties. Their mutual attachment is cemented by a substantial number of intermarriages and their knowledge of local genealogies within the village.

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villagers' personal knowledge of one another, and the existence of locally tuned organizations. All of these factors are less prevalent in cities and among larger ethnic and religious communities.

In Chechnya, as in some other parts of the Caucasus, each village historically has its own village council consisting of adult males and led by elders, or *vokkhstag*, who often are heads of their respective village-based clans.[36] These councils meet periodically to make decisions on matters of common interest, such as pastures, crop sowing, blood feuds, external threats, epidemics, migrations, famine, and so on, much like the way Elinor Ostrom famously describes governing the commons in other contexts.[37] These hierarchical decision-making mechanisms have traditionally helped to overcome the collective action problem on the village level in the Caucasus. Though modernization and urbanization have caused Chechnya's traditional village councils to dwindle in recent decades, the vokkhstag have retained a great deal of authority. In fact, the vokkhstags' authority has remained quite untouched in rural—and particularly mountainous—areas, where the insurgency has its strongest base.

Third, unlike the indiscriminate sweeps of entire cities, city neighborhoods, or provinces, which are inevitably random in nature, *retributive* sweeps of villages tend to be exhaustive—that is, involving nearly *all* (male) household members. Similarly, in contrast to the shelling of entire cities or provinces, the shelling of villages makes it more likely that the members of a village community will be targeted by random fire, raising the costs of their prospective support to insurgents. Holding entire village communities hostage has effectively removed the option to free ride. Even villagers who refrained from participating in hostilities or providing active support to insurgents have been targeted indiscriminately, simply because of their membership in the village community and on the grounds of their presumed collective guilt.[38]

The Scope of Indiscriminate Violence and the Evolution of the Russian Counterinsurgency

During the First Chechen War, the Russian military relied mainly on the same stronghold strategy used in its previous counterinsurgency campaign, the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979–1989. Russian troops were

[36] Historically, these village communities would be led by heads of village communities (*kup-da*).
[37] Ostrom 1990.
[38] Indiscriminate assaults upon civilian city dwellers or upon the inhabitants of entire provinces have been far less effective because of their weaker group identity, anonymity, and vague external borders. In such communities, the notion of collective guilt would be more difficult to establish among civilians, which might reduce the psychological impact of indiscriminate retributive violence.

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grouped into about a dozen garrisons and relied on a limited number of checkpoints. They were extended across the country's key strategic points to seize control of the main roads, communication routes, and cities. Their self-imposed isolation meant that their control on the ground was superficial, limited to the immediate proximity of their garrisons and checkpoints. Meanwhile, the rest of the countryside was more or less controlled by the insurgents. Often, at nightfall, effective control over the contested areas devolved to the insurgents. Having failed to establish a firm grip over Chechnya, Russia's military efforts became largely confined to pitched battles, the protection of its immediate territories, skirmishes with Chechen ambushers, and episodic raids into Chechen cities and villages.

A common practice, particularly during the First Chechen War, was the "carpet shelling" of entire Chechen villages and cities—that is, random indiscriminate violence. Given the lack of intelligence on the ground, these large-scale bombings were carried out in an essentially random manner. The sweep operations, or zachistki, were something of a rarity during this 1994–1996 war. At that time, the troops generally avoided direct contact with the armed insurgents, seeking instead "to liquidate them mainly using artillery and air strikes. Such an approach, taken in mostly wooded terrain, caused suffering to the civilian population, while the insurgents endured only minimal losses."[39]

Russian military planners learned their lesson in the First Chechen War. During the Second Chechen campaign, they deployed garrisons and checkpoints near the majority of villages, particularly the large and/or strategically located ones. Across Chechnya, with its 357 villages and towns, just over 200 military garrisons were settled in the early 2000s. That left about 40 percent of Chechnya's villages and towns with no garrison at all.[40] The deployment of Russian troops near Chechen villages gave the military more control over local populations than had been the case during the previous military campaign.

As one interviewee put it, "The Russians practically merged into our village, they used the same source of water, they took away our cattle when they pleased, they used the same roads as we did, and over time, they came to know some of the people whom they came across every day."[41]

Hence, the quality of information from the ground increased enough

[39] *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie* 1995.
[40] Maksakov 2000.
[41] Interview with "Aslan."

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to enable the Russians to use more retributive violence. According to Russian journalists, "The local inhabitants have ties to the bandits and can influence their behavior. If they are afraid [of reprisals], they will be able to stop the bandits. The decision on the deployment of garrisons was obviously made using this logic: surely they will not have the audacity to explode bombs and shoot in their own villages."[42]

Efforts to contain the insurgents by controlling their potential support base among the local population paved the way for mounting clashes. As Emil Pain, a prominent Russian sociologist, noted,

> Maintaining a big army and many garrisons leads to big losses, since the groups of soldiers moving from one garrison to another are the main target of partisan attacks. The many garrisons found in nearly all of the country's district centers are making a maximum effort to defend themselves. More important, of course, is the fact that this whole network of garrisons magnifies the theatre of interaction of the army with the civilian population, provoking violent behavior on both sides.[43]

Russian journalists commenting on the deployment of garrisons in Chechen villages said, "As the guerrilla war drags on, the Russian military becomes increasingly inclined to the idea of the Chechens' co-responsibility for the insurgents' activities."[44]

Commenting on the shift toward retributive violence in the Russian counterinsurgency campaigns of the early 2000s, Memorial, the Russian human rights organization that has followed violence in Chechnya since 1994, reported, "[I]n response to sabotages, ambushes and terrorist acts carried out by armed [Chechen] groups fighting Russian authorities, federal troops increasingly deployed terror against the peaceful population."

The Memorial report notes a symptomatic incident that took place on May 17, 2001, when a Russian military vehicle was blown up near the village of Starie Atagi and eight soldiers were killed. The next day, the commanders of the 205th mechanized infantry brigade traveled to the village's mosque, where the elders had gathered for Friday prayer. The general demanded that the elders put an end to the attacks on the locally stationed Russian garrison, warning, "[I]f the fighters [*boeviki*] continued their attacks . . . [the federals] would target the village." The elders replied that "ultimatums should be given to the combatants, and

[42] Goltz and Kovalskaya 2001.
[43] Quoted in Radio Ekho Moskvy 2014.
[44] Goltz and Kovalskaya 2001.

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asked [the Russians] to stop retaliating against the civilian population for the actions of the fighters."[45]

The deployment of military garrisons in the vicinity of Chechen villages did lead to more retributive indiscriminate targeting of those village communities believed to bear coresponsibility. But much of the Russian military's indiscriminate violence remained entirely random, based on the army's widely applied practice of "disturbing fire" (*bespokoiashchii ogon'*).[46] Following the conceptual tenets of previous Soviet doctrines of counterinsurgency warfare, the Russian military still practiced large-scale shelling of entire areas prophylactically to restrict insurgent mobility. That strategy necessarily entailed large-scale losses among the local populace.

Whether random or retributive violence was deployed depended largely on the organizational structure of the military garrisons. On the one hand, there were large district- and subdistrict-level garrisons that held hundreds and sometimes thousands of soldiers.[47] These military units fell under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defense, and contained army detachments that often served as long as two or more years. As a rule, the detachments spent all or most of their deployment in the same garrison, and were relatively well trained, well equipped with tanks and armed vehicles, and relatively determined to engage in combat. The garrisons usually had access to better intelligence because of their *kadyrovtsy* units,[48] the pro-Moscow Chechen paramilitary force of several thousand fighters. They also cultivated networks of local informants.[49]

Most instances of retributive violence from the garrisons were carried out during zachistki. Having monitored their assigned areas for prolonged periods, stationary garrisons could sometimes keep track of retaliatory ambushes and attacks. Indeed, Russian officers could associate

[45] "Kontrterroristicheskaya operatsia"; Poselok Starye Atagi, Sentyabr 1999–May 2002 g. Narushenie prav cheloveka i norm gumanitarnogo prava v khode vooruzhennogo konflikta v Chechne" ["A Counterterrorist Operation"; the Village of Starye Atagi, September 1999–May 2002. The Violations of Human Rights and the Norms of International Law in the Course of the Armed Conflict in Chechnya]. 2002. In Sh. Akbulatov and O. Orlov, eds., *A Report by Memorial*, vol. 3. Moscow, Russia: Zvenya. At http://www.memo.ru/hr/hotpoints/N-Caucas/atagi/Chapter10.htm, accessed January 6, 2016. On Memorial, see fn. 32.

[46] Lebedev 1984, 373–75.

[47] Maksakov 2000.

[48] *Kadyrovtsy* is an informal term used to designate the pro-Moscow Chechen paramilitary force established in the early 2000s with the main goal of fighting local insurgents. This force was named after and led by the ruling Kadyrov family (father, Akhmad, who was assassinated in 2004, and son, Ramzan). Formally, kadyrovsty are subordinated to Russia's Ministry of Interior.

[49] Interview with a renowned Chechen political scientist in Prague, June 2014. On the salience of local networks for obtaining intelligence on the ground in the North Caucasus, see Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015b.

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violence deployed against them with previous acts of violence that they themselves had perpetrated against Chechen village communities, making the identification—and penalization—of presumably guilty villages more straightforward.[50]

On the other hand, there were smaller garrisons containing an average of one hundred troops. The core of these garrisons comprised Ministry of Interior personnel from across Russia, who served six-month deployments (*komandirovki*). According to Irina Gordienko, a journalist with the liberal *Novaya gazeta* and an expert on the North Caucasus, these garrisons had "little interest engaging in combat . . . instead, all they wanted was to get back home safe and uninjured."[51] Ivan Sukhov, a prominent journalist with *Kommersant* who covered the war on the ground, supports this observation:

> [Within larger army garrisons] the troops had better chances of adaptation [to the local environment] . . . Obviously, during three months, no adaptation took place [in smaller police unit–based garrisons], since they were aware of the fact that "we're leaving [soon] anyway."[52]

Unlike larger and longer-term army garrisons, the smaller garrisons could not continuously monitor their assigned areas because they lacked the network of local informants that was essential to establishing the neighboring villages' degree of guilt for insurgent assaults.[53] Random indiscriminate violence was most common in the villages where these smaller, more temporary units were assigned, and in the villages with no garrison at all. This situation can be explained by the counterinsurgents' inability to establish the source of insurgent violence.[54] Usually, a lack of proper training and hardware—tanks, armored vehicles, combat helicopters—made these units less willing to engage in retributive

[50] Of course, in some instances, retributive zachistki were all but selective in that they were carried out against a group of suspected villages and based on the intensity of previous incidents of counterinsurgent violence.

[51] Provisional garrisons often blended with mobile District Detachments of the Interior (ROVD: *raionnoe otdelenie vnutrennikh del*). Gordienko also notes that provisional garrisons containing small detachments were less willing to engage in combat on their own, due to the fear of being overwhelmed by the insurgents in villages held by hostile populations. They usually sought backup, which did not always arrive. Online interview with Irina Gordienko, November 7, 2015.

[52] Online interview with Ivan Sukhov, November 9, 2015.

[53] These smaller garrisons, which the interviewees often referred to as checkpoints (*blokposty*), were formed by individual police detachments and the military units stationed there at the time. Once these units were withdrawn to Russia, relocated to Chechnya's other areas, or rejoined their regiments, a new infantry company would replace them.

[54] This is not to say that incidents of retributive violence never occurred in the areas assigned to smaller garrisons or areas with no garrisons. The interviewees recall cases of special army or SWAT-type units being deployed from outside their area for several days to penalize allegedly guilty villages, but this was not an established practice.

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zachistki on their own, even when they could establish the guilt of nearby villages. Instead, such garrisons would either avoid retribution entirely or request reinforcements from the Russian army. Since those reinforcements would often appear after substantial delays or not at all, retributive violence was rarely used in such cases.[55]

Disentangling Random and Retributive Violence at the Village Level

Our interviewees were usually able to distinguish between random and retributive attacks carried out by Russian troops. They assigned a particularly powerful psychological impact to the latter form of violence. In the case of random violence, "often, the Russians would just open fire at you, crossing your village on their tanks or armed vehicles . . . just for fun. In this case, we developed the habit of hiding in our homes whenever we heard the noise of approaching motors."[56] While villagers became resigned to waiting out the random violence, they were still frustrated by their own inability to organize a response that would help their communities avoid future targeting, but they rarely gave up the idea of avenging the attacks in some form.[57]

By contrast, according to the interviewees, the deployment of retributive zachistki and shelling had a more significant impact on village communities. "People were afraid . . . that [Russian troops] could strike virtually at any time, coming to your household and killing anyone they met."[58] One interviewee recounted, "The worst situation came when we spotted shooting or explosions. This meant that the fighters [*boeviki*] had engaged the Russians in a shootout from some place close by, within kilometers of the village, which implied that soon, the Russians would show up in a zachistka or just bomb you."[59] Usually, villagers working in nearby fields or walking their cattle to pasture would spot the fighting and immediately spread the alarm among fellow villagers.

Interviewees told us that sometimes, ordinary Russian troops carrying out retributive assaults would openly reveal their goals during zachistki—referring to retaliation for their murdered comrades-in-arms as their motivation. Often, and with increasing frequency toward the

[55] In addition, Russian military reporters noticed that "taking into consideration that the [low-quality] radio stations with which our troops are equipped are virtually useless in the mountains, these garrisons would be incapable of just summoning reinforcements." Goltz and Kovalskaya 2001.

[56] Interview with "Ahmad."

[57] Interview with "Umar."

[58] Interview with "Said."

[59] Interview with "Zaurbek."

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mid-2000s, commanders of Russian units in charge of zachistki specifically informed the community, particularly the elders of the assaulted villages, that the violence was in retribution for earlier targeting of their units or garrisons by locally operating insurgents. Such revelations were clearly intended to warn the local populace of the consequences of harboring or providing support to insurgents. Indeed, Lema Chabayev, a Chechen journalist with the North Caucasus service of Prague-based Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty confirmed that after virtually every Russian shelling of a Chechen village during the Second War, "Chechen villages dispatched elders as negotiators to the Russian troops to ask for mercy. And they always received the same answer: This is because your fighters [*boeviki*] opened fire at us, killed our guys."[60]

A Timetable of Retaliation

Following random and retributive indiscriminate violence, villagers were often driven to avenge their killed and injured relatives and neighbors, the destruction of their property and livestock, and the humiliation they endured, especially by zachistki. Still, interviewees pointed to two fundamental factors that hindered immediate retaliation. First, the survivors had to come to terms with the destruction, killings, and injuries caused by the violence. In the context of war-torn Chechnya, obtaining medical care for an injured relative or neighbor was a huge challenge. It often entailed months of travel to gather the necessary funds and contacts from relatives scattered across Chechnya or in refugee camps in Ingushetia, in Russian cities, or in Chechen émigré communities all over Europe, Turkey, and elsewhere. Then the survivors had to secure the necessary medicines, a qualified doctor, and a bed in one of the handful of hospitals still functioning in Grozny, Gudermes, Urus-Martan, or Argun.[61]

In addition, Chechen men faced the risk of capture and subsequent "forced disappearance" by Russian troops who had mushroomed across the republic in hundreds of *blokposty* (checkpoints), and by military garrisons that controlled the main roads and other key locations.[62] Thus traveling across the republic was extremely risky for many Chechens and considerably reduced their mobility. Survivors also had to care for damaged livestock and cope with destroyed property, tasks made even more difficult by the harsh winters in a republic where unemployment

[60] Online interview with Lema Chabayev, December 19, 2015.

[61] Those with the necessary funds and contacts would usually aim to transport their injured relatives to hospitals in southern Russia.

[62] Usually, Russian troops levied a "tax" on Chechens traveling across these blokposty.

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was nearly absolute, savings were gone, and construction material and livestock were largely unavailable.

According to interviewees, handling these prosaic problems was of primary concern for any prospective avengers—Chechen men who had to prioritize the survival of their families over (immediate) retaliation. Yet given Chechnya's long tradition of honor-imposed revenge, many Chechens still sought to retaliate.[63] But these would-be avengers postponed their retaliation by about six to nine months, which appears to be the minimum period they needed to cope with the destruction caused by the previous violence and to organize a retaliatory attack.[64]

Organization and logistics were also significant issues for those determined to retaliate following an act of indiscriminate violence. To carry out an attack, prospective avengers had to obtain weapons or explosives. But, as noted above, many Chechen men were reluctant to travel across Chechnya, and transporting weapons presented an even bigger challenge. An attack required planning and coordination, so prospective avengers were also faced with the task of rallying a group of relatives determined to carry out the retaliation or willing to aid the avenger in doing so. If no relatives or none with the necessary military skills were available, prospective avengers had to contact insurgent groups to obtain weapons, information, or aid. However, contacting insurgent groups was fraught with problems because the insurgents were rightly concerned about their ranks being infiltrated by pro-Moscow Chechen agents. Avengers seeking to win the insurgents' trust usually needed to use their ethnic networks.[65] In addition, the emergence of an increasingly pro-Russian camp within the Chechen population, and the severe punishment for collaboration, made organizing retaliation difficult and time consuming. It is mainly for this reason that, as Lyall demonstrates, the pacifying effects of random indiscriminate violence were manifest in the short run.[66]

Even though the Chechens' cultural obligation of blood revenge remained strong, it took time to organize a response, especially when the target was far from the site of the original Russian attack. By limiting the possible response to ninety days, Lyall missed the retaliations that, according to our interviewees, took at least six to nine months. Organizing and carrying out a retaliatory act in the prospective avenger's

[63] For a thorough analysis of blood revenge in the Chechen wars, see Souleimanov and Aliyev 2015b.

[64] Of course, in cases where violence recurred during this period, it took prospective avengers even more time to cope with newly incurred destructions, which again postponed retaliation.

[65] Lyall 2010; Lyall, Shiraito, and Imai 2015.

[66] Lyall 2009.

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home village typically took a minimum of six months, including the period of recovery. Retaliatory acts outside the prospective avenger's home area usually took at least nine months because of the additional logistics required to carry out an attack in a distant territory, and because the attacker needed to identify the specific individual or military unit of the Russian armed forces responsible for the previous incident of retributive violence.[67] This timetable is at least three to six months longer than the three-month window used in Lyall's assessment of the effects of indiscriminate violence on Chechen villages, and explains his finding that indiscriminate violence was effective in quelling violence in the targeted area in the short term.

Addressees of Retaliation

Because the enduring custom of blood revenge in Chechnya stipulates that the addressees of retaliation be closely connected to the offender, Chechens usually preferred to retaliate against the direct culprit of violence.[68] Thus prospective avengers sought to establish contacts with all those who might have information that could help them identify and locate the Russian officers or troops who had been in charge of shelling their village or carrying out zachistki that cost the lives or health of their relatives. In some instances, Chechens contacted Russian troops directly, bribing them to get information on the direct offenders. In other situations they didn't retaliate until years later, for example, when they murdered federal officers in their homes in other parts of Russia. A notorious case is the 2011 killing of Colonel Yury Budanov, convicted of the 2000 rape and murder of a young Chechen girl, Elza Kungayeva. The colonel was sentenced to ten years in 2003, but was controversially released on parole in 2009. Although he frequently changed his address to escape blood revenge and his killer was never found, the investigation pointed to a clear "Chechen trace."[69]

According to Russian journalists, hundreds of would-be Chechen avengers have not abandoned the idea of retaliation, even those who have joined kadyrovtsy paramilitaries or switched to the pro-Moscow

[67] These are minimal time frames, as retaliation often took longer. These minimal time frames are related to retaliation against *any* member or unit of Russian military, a much easier task compared to retaliation against a *select* member or unit of Russian military, which required additional time for prospective avengers to identify, locate, and target the culprit. Likewise, these minimal time frames are related to individual retaliation with firearms, an easier task than retaliation with explosives or a collective ambush, which also demanded additional time to organize and carry out.

[68] Prospective avengers from among the affected villages were usually able to identify the military unit responsible for carrying out attacks against their villages because they knew that their village fell into the jurisdiction of that particular military facility.

[69] Parfitt 2011.

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Chechen camp. These journalists reported on the requests made by Chechnya's pro-Moscow authorities to federal authorities for the personal data, including pictures, of particular Russian veterans of the Second Russian-Chechen War. Yevgeny Kirichenko, a retired Russian colonel and popular military reporter, reflecting on Budanov's murder noted in 2011 that:

> Some people from Chechnya gather information about those who fought against them . . . I've been called from the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. They are receiving official requests from Chechnya's Prosecutor's Office [to give them] the identities of the servicemen who stood on a specific checkpoint on a specific day at a specific hour. [Or belonged to] a specific garrison. And sometimes also their home addresses.[70]

Mairbek Vatchagaev, a long-time expert on the region, observed that whenever there was the slightest chance of identifying the direct culprits of an offense, Chechens

> continued to search for them, targeting closely dislocated garrisons. . . . Even after the war, there were some cases when [offenders] were located in Russia and assassinated in their apartments. . . . Megalitres [of vodka] were spilled to get the addresses of those in charge of [sweep] operations in one village or another. A lot of attention was paid to find those who would betray their fellows.[71]

Those not lucky enough to find the immediate offender sought to retaliate against the narrowest possible group associated with the culprit that they were able to identify, locate, and target: perhaps a company, a battalion, or a garrison. As the war dragged on, some prospective avengers ceased to discern between a narrow group of offenders and the broader (ethnic, religious) categories associated with them. They started targeting Russian troops—or even Russians as a whole, which led to increasingly lethal terrorist acts in Russian cities.[72]

The Logic of Retribution

Concerned about the likelihood of retributive attacks, many prospective avengers renounced retaliation in their respective areas, while others remained determined to retaliate. Generally speaking, two main options were available to prospective avengers: to retaliate selectively against the actual culprit of the previous violence, or to retaliate against a random member or unit of the Russian military. Some (larger) garrisons

[70] Varavin and Treshchanin 2011.
[71] Online interview with Mairbek Vatchagayev, November 7, 2014.
[72] Souleimanov 2015a.

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remained in the same place for years, whereas others relocated soon after attacks. Depending on whether or not the "guilty" individual or military unit was within reach of prospective avengers, the decision was made to target an individual or the individual's unit, to attack the garrison, or to renounce retaliation. As a rule, "guilty" individuals or military units were targeted if they were relocated to other areas in Chechnya and sometimes even if they were relocated outside Chechnya. Fearing further retribution against their villages, prospective avengers of indiscriminate retributive violence usually avoided targeting garrisons or military units based in their home areas, whereas those subjected to random indiscriminate violence were less fearful of retribution and thus more likely to retaliate in the same area.

When avengers of retributive violence were unable to retaliate against the offenders themselves, some were driven to retaliate in distant areas. But because identifying the perpetrator was often costly and sometimes impossible, such retaliation was generally not well-tailored. Instead, it was aimed at randomly chosen Russian soldiers who bore no responsibility for the preceding violence. In such a depersonalized conflict environment, other prospective avengers were not as determined to retaliate and thus renounced retaliation. Below, we theorize three mechanisms that served to quell the cycle of violence in Chechnya.

The response of villagers and prospective avengers to indiscriminate retributive violence generally varied according to three key factors. The first was the decision of individual village communities, guided by local elders, either to support or tolerate the operation of insurgent groups in the vicinity of their villages or to persuade the insurgents to leave the area. The former was in line with the notions of hospitality, clan, and neighborhood solidarity that are embedded in local, customary law. But persuading the insurgents to leave was typically preferred, because it ensured the survival of the elders' families and neighbors.

Second, responses depended on the rebels' willingness to comply with the elders' pleas for them to leave, which was usually conditional on whether the rebels had highly personalized—kinship or neighborhood—ties to the village in question. The rebels' willingness to leave an area often hinged on their ideological backgrounds. Some nationalists felt bound by the norms of customary law and hesitated to challenge the elders' requests; they typically left the area. Jihadists, on the other hand, had less respect for customary law, and frequently ignored the village elders.

Third, responses varied according to local norms of honor and violence. According to the local, customary law, individuals who have been

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humiliated by murder, injury, or destroyed property are required to retaliate to cleanse their honor. Even though their action was incompatible with local norms, some rebels and would-be avengers abandoned or postponed retaliation due to the high likelihood of retributive violence against their villages if they pursued retaliation.

In the next section, we use additional testimony from our interviews with eyewitnesses and ex-combatants to discuss three general mechanisms that elucidate the manner in which the social and political context shaped how populations reacted to violence. We also examine why retributive violence was sometimes (and in certain respects) effective, or at least more effective than random indiscriminate violence.

Mechanisms

Mechanism 1: Villagers Coerce Insurgents to Refrain from Attacking Local Troops

When faced with random violence, villagers preferred to wait it out. Usually they did not try to persuade the insurgents to leave; nor did they try to thwart the attacks conducted by locally operating insurgents on nearby Russian garrisons. As a result, random indiscriminate violence was quite ineffective in the long term because it led to retaliatory attacks. By contrast, retributive indiscriminate violence prompted village-level collective action to stem the violence, at least in their area.

Interviewees explained how members of their village communicated after (and sometimes in anticipation of) attacks on Russian garrisons or checkpoints undertaken in the vicinity of their villages. Usually, in line with Chechen tradition, the village elders and other adult men would direct these efforts. "When this [zachistka] first happened in the summer of 2001, elders [*starshie*] gathered to discuss what could be done to save lives."[73] The village elders' authority among the populace, concentrated in village councils, ensured adherence to the communal hierarchy.[74] In addition, the persistence of community-based decision-making mechanisms within Chechen villages, along with established forms of internal communication, facilitated collective action.

Sukhov reminds us of the frequent requests made by the commandants of Russian garrisons to the representatives of the local communities, usually village elders, to extradite or expel the rebels as a "precondition for [the Russian military] not to conduct an armed assault

[73] Interview with "Ahmad."
[74] Gould 1999.

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or zachistka."[75] But from the very outset, attempts to resist the activities of insurgents in their areas were controversial and often half-hearted. In fact, these pragmatic efforts to avoid bloodshed were enacted in stark contrast to the customary law, *adat*, which required villagers to show hospitality and support to the insurgents. As one interviewee explained:

> *Nokhchalla* [the social code, related to adat] required not only that we not banish [the insurgents], but that we provide them with any necessary support, since they were Chechens, Muslims, as we were. . . . Sometimes, they were our relatives. Yet the risks were too high to sustain, so the elderly sent someone to the woods [insurgents] asking them to cease attacks on the Russians from within five kilometers or so of our village.[76]

When a single retributive action—either a zachistka or a shelling—failed to force the villagers to reach a common understanding and expel the insurgents, interviewees revealed that "the horrible experience with two or more such punishments" usually achieved this goal.[77]

As a rule, village council decisions were unanimous and irreversible. Yet in some instances, community dissidents objected to such measures. Usually, aside from tradition-based motives, the opponents' main claim rested in the perceived amorality of such a move. "Why should we expel those who did the fighting [for our own sake], instead of aiding them?" asked one interviewee.[78] Often, these dissident voices arose from the ranks of male villagers who were themselves the most common targets of attacks, since "the Russians primarily abducted males of conscript age who evoked the most suspicion" or "who were treated as potential fighters."[79] But over time, some of these male dissidents "disappeared," while others simply left their villages, either joining the insurgents or leaving Chechnya altogether. On some occasions, dissident males were said to have been flipped and to have joined kadyrovtsy paramilitaries to avoid indiscriminate retributive violence.

Interviewees observed that the association of a zachistka with an ambush mounted from close proximity to a given village would soon initiate a sequence of actions and retributive actions—and thus served to weaken the position of local dissidents. "Whenever someone spoke of the necessity of helping our boys [insurgents], five others would argue

[75] Online interview with Ivan Sukhov, November 9, 2015.

[76] Interview with "Musa." For the ways in which Islam has served to forge a common identity among disparate groups in the Caucasus, see Siroky and Mahmudlu 2015.

[77] Interview with "Aslan."

[78] Interview with "Zaurbek."

[79] Interview with "Zaurbek."

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that this would only cause more suffering, since at the end of the day we would be held accountable for all these attacks."[80] Attesting to the pervasive sense of despair, one interviewee admitted that "the situation was really desperate . . . there was nothing to be done except to make sure that the insurgents [*boeviki*] left us alone."[81]

The insurgents reacted in a variety of ways to village requests to be "left alone"—it depended largely on the whim of the leaders of particular insurgent groups. For instance, Alexander Goltz and Galina Kovalskaya recall an incident when the elders of Shatoy village asked Ruslan Gelayev, a prominent insurgent leader, to leave their village to ensure the survival of its inhabitants. Gelayev, a well-known Chechen nationalist, allegedly responded, "Fine, I will leave . . . but tell me, where should I go? Which villages do you not feel sorry about? Or should we go away completely and leave our homeland—our heart—to be dishonored by the occupants?" Often, insurgent leaders submitted to pressure from locals and left the area. The adat-based generational dimension played a significant role, since "the insurgents had to take seriously what was told to them by the elders."[82]

The factor of blood kinship, and the intrinsic emotional attachment between the insurgents and their covillagers also appear to have played a significant role. This was further reinforced by the immense authority enjoyed by the village elders as leaders of the insurgents' own respective clans. Bound by Chechen traditions, insurgents often found themselves obliged to submit to the elders' authority, and to the majority decision of their fellow community members. Moreover, since the insurgents were often related to local villagers, they also had a great deal at stake during zachistki. They were all too aware that their continuing attacks on Russian troops would threaten the lives of their loved ones.

Particularly in the initial stages of the insurgency, but also later, these men often depended on their village-based relatives for supplies—food, medicine, clothing, weapons, and ammunition.[83] This often prompted the insurgents to either cease attacking local Russian troops or to move to a different area.[84] As one interviewee observed, the insurgents "had nothing to eat [which was a considerable problem in winter]. Either

[80] Interview with "Luiza."
[81] Interview with "Aslambek."
[82] Interview with "Ilyas."
[83] However, this factor was not as widespread as it might seem; in many reported cases, relatives abstained from providing support to the insurgents.
[84] Usually, this meant gaining resources from sympathizers among the local population (due to the tradition of hospitality or to those siding with them ideologically) and less commonly from their clan-based relatives located in other areas.

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they had to force us into aiding them, or they had to leave our mountains. Quite soon, they left."[85]

Mechanism 2: Villagers Collaborate with Local Russian Troops to Expel Insurgents

Many village communities failed to expel the insurgents from their areas. When the insurgents refused to leave, villagers often tried to strike deals of nonaggression with nearby Russian garrisons and checkpoints.[86] First and foremost, interviewees pointed to the fact that it was virtually impossible to force "alien" insurgents—those unrelated to their village communities by bonds of group membership or blood kinship—to desist from attacking Russian troops from the vicinity of those villages. "When [the insurgents] were alien to our village, they didn't know us and we didn't know them, they wouldn't really care about our requests . . . [since] they owed us nothing."[87] As Goltz and Kovalskaya note, "the ideological rationale behind punitive operations is that the locals are bound up with the bandits and may thus influence their behavior. . . . For some reason, the federals are sure the bandits are always from a neighboring village, which is very often not true."[88]

Second, many interviewees asserted that the crucial determinant of whether the insurgents would remain in the area or leave it was the personality of the leader(s) of the insurgent group in question. "[The insurgent commanders] did what they considered appropriate; we lacked any tool to force them."[89] Several interviewees suggested that the more the commander of a given insurgent group inclined toward the ideology of Wahhabism (a pejorative term, widespread in Russia and the North Caucasus, for Salafi-jihadism), the greater the likelihood that he would disregard the villagers' requests.[90] "Wahhabists didn't really care about the common people; they would just say they were leading a holy war and were happy to sacrifice their lives for the sake of jihad [and becoming *shahids*, or martyrs]. They said it was nothing bad for us to become shahids, too, since that was praiseworthy [*bogougodnoe delo*]."[91] The occasional movements of such insurgent groups were largely dictated by tactical or seasonal needs, irrespective of the preferences and

[85] Interview with "Mairbek."
[86] Newsru.com 2001.
[87] Interview with "Ruslan."
[88] Goltz and Kovalskaya 2001.
[89] Interview with "Isa."
[90] Salafi-jihadism is a puritanical branch of Sunni Islam that advocates the cleansing of Islam from essentially non-Islamic practices. Interview with "Ramzan."
[91] Interview with "Ramzan."

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activities of village communities. By contrast, those commanders who were identified as (secular) Chechen nationalists tended to be more empathetic toward the villagers.[92]

Another factor was the disparate approach to local, customary law that characterized the two main groups of insurgents: nationalists and jihadists. Nationalists acknowledged the validity of customary law, which elevated elders to the highest social stratum and meant that their authority had to be respected. Jihadists despised customary law, viewing it as essentially non-Islamic; they frequently refused to submit to the elders' authority.

If attacks on Russian troops persisted, the villagers inevitably faced the threat of multiple sweep operations, which in turn led them to take alternative measures to ensure their security. Sometimes, villagers would ask the commanders of the Russian troops in their area to give them arms, so that they themselves might expel the insurgents. In all reported cases, the Russian commanders refused to arm Chechen villagers. In a number of instances, villagers then approached the Grozny-based pro-Moscow Chechen authority of Akhmad Kadyrov (and from 2004 onward, of his son, Ramzan Kadyrov) to supply weapons and ammunition or to form local self-defense units. They often received a positive response.

Yet the helpfulness of the commanders of kadyrovtsy paramilitaries was conditional. Young men from the villages in question were required to join the kadyrovtsy units that were based in Grozny, in some other large regional centers (such as Urus-Martan, Shali, Gudermes, and Shatoy), and increasingly in smaller towns and villages all over Chechnya.[93] This helped to ensure the loyalty of new recruits and reduced the chances that they would defect to the insurgents, taking their newly acquired weapons and ammunition with them. Once removed from their villages, new recruits were gradually deployed in combat against insurgents in Chechnya's mountainous areas, as well as in zachistki against the relatives of the insurgents.

This practice quickly cemented the new recruits' loyalty to the Kadyrov clan. Their deployment in combat was compounded by attacks on the insurgents' relatives and supporters, which pitted parts of the Chechen population against each other and massively multiplied

[92] Interview with "Adnan."

[93] Alternatively, many young Chechens joined kadyrovtsy units not just to expel local insurgents, but to provide security for themselves and their family members in the face of unceasing zachistki, since membership in the units was taken as a sign that they were "untouchable." See, for instance, Souleimanov 2015b.

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incidents of blood feud between groups of Chechens. With their route back to normal life in jeopardy and the fundamental need to ensure their own survival and that of their relatives, the new recruits were forced to pledge allegiance to the Kadyrov clan and to their brothers-in-arms. As one interviewee put it, the new recruits "literally put their heads on the block, because if they or some of their relatives shifted their allegiance, these guys would have been killed."[94]

Over time, contingents of kadyrovtsy paramilitaries began to form in allied villages across the country with the aim of expelling insurgents from their respective areas. These units were created against the backdrop of the pro-Moscow Chechen authorities' pleas to the Kremlin to permit the deployment of Chechen paramilitaries instead of the Russian military, largely because of the latter's inability to target more selectively. As Akhmad Kadyrov stated when driving through the replacement of Russian Army–led sweep operations with kadyrovtsy, "[W]hen [Russian] soldiers arrive at a village with [their] military hardware, it causes panic and frightens people. Furthermore, such measures are entirely ineffective. The soldiers just arrest everybody indiscriminately, including the completely innocent."[95] Soon, the Chechen paramilitaries engaged in combat against the local insurgents, often aided by units of Grozny-based kadyrovtsy. Their presence added to the available intelligence regarding the insurgent forces in the area and the social networks that supported them. "Things changed once some of our guys began telling kadyrovtsy where the fighters hide, who they get supplies from, or who their relatives are."[96] As a result, the largely random indiscriminate attacks previously carried out by Russian forces were replaced in many villages by more selective retributive attacks by coethnic Chechen paramilitaries.[97]

Mechanism 3: Villagers Dissuade Potential Avengers from Joining the Insurgency

Some village men sought to join the insurgency in an attempt to retaliate for the humiliation, deaths, and injuries inflicted upon themselves and their relatives during previous counterinsurgency operations. In these cases, according to the interviewees, the men were usually urged by villagers to move to a distant location so as not to bring retribution on their fellow villagers:

[94] Interview with "Said."
[95] Quoted in Riskin 2003.
[96] Interview with "Shamil."
[97] See Lyall 2010; cf. Lyall, Shiraito, and Imai 2015. But villages that were still exposed to more random indiscriminate violence had no motivation to collaborate with the Russian authorities or with their Chechen proxies.

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> Yes, there were such guys. We Chechens never leave insults unanswered, we have different customs. . . . But whenever a guy made a decision to go to the woods [join the insurgency], he was usually told by his relatives and the locals [*mestnie*] to leave the neighborhood in order not to bring attacks on our place.[98]

Owing to the high costs of dissident behavior, these arguments were generally persuasive. As one interviewee said, "It was commonly thought that this would cause more [common] harm than [individual] benefit."[99] Indeed, "the risks were too high: When you decide to take blood on the [local] Russians, you risk that your relatives will be wiped out. Well, it was not absolute, but the risks were still too high."[100] For that reason, interviewees asserted, some insurgents ultimately renounced retaliation.

Notwithstanding the probable costs to their relatives and fellow villagers, some men attacked locally positioned Russian garrisons, especially when the avengers knew the identities of the Russian troops and could establish their guilt. In such cases, Chechen males targeted the perpetrators:

> This was personal for them: When you see a [Russian] guy every day who had badly mistreated you or your relative a few weeks ago [in a zachistka], it's tough, you know . . . It was too difficult to remain cool-blooded and pretend nothing had happened, especially if you're a highlander [*gorets*], a Chechen.[101]

Interviewees differed on whether such attacks were justifiable. The traditionally minded favored retaliation, and usually referred to "honor" and the necessity for Chechen males to "wash off" the insult in order to "remain true Chechens."[102] Those who condemned retaliation stressed the immense risks for the whole community, calling such attacks "acts of egoism and jeopardy."[103]

When would-be avengers lacked precise information about the identities of the Russian troops in question, they tended either to move away from the area and join insurgent groups in different locations, or to renounce retaliation altogether—but only, as some claimed, "for the time being."[104] Indeed, since the Russian troops lived in entrenched garrisons and usually wore facemasks during zachistki, their identities

[98] Interview with "Hasan."
[99] Interview with "Albert."
[100] Interview with "Ahmad."
[101] Interview with "Magomad."
[102] Elster 1990; Nisbett and Cohen 1996; Shackelford 2005; Sommers 2009.
[103] Interview with "Fatima" and "Luiza." Interestingly, the Chechen women we interviewed (an admittedly small sample) appeared to be less supportive of blood revenge because of its dire consequences for their communities.
[104] Interview with "Mairbek."

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generally remained concealed from local Chechens. This anonymity was decisive. Yet

> for [some] avengers, it wasn't important who to [individually] murder for the sake of revenge, since they didn't know these Russians personally . . . so they'd have no problem retaliating on Russians in a different place, making sure their own relatives would not fall down as targets of a punitive zachistka.[105]

Compared to village communities exposed to indiscriminate retributive violence, Chechens who faced random violence were driven by a different motivation. Since "they would be targeted anyway, whatever they did or did not do, they just decided to die like a man [*kak muzhchina*]."[106] Lacking fear of retributive assaults on their villages, they frequently targeted Russian garrisons in their home areas. In these cases, the clear link between guilt and punishment at the village level—and the ability of that community to change the situation on the ground—faded away.

Conclusion

This study shows that when deployed *retributively* against village communities, indiscriminate violence can contribute to the counterinsurgent's success in counterinsurgency in that it reduces subsequent insurgent activity in the targeted areas in the short term. But indiscriminate violence can also produce a whack-a-mole dynamic that often merely displaces violent retaliation to other areas. The theoretical and empirical approaches taken in this article highlight the importance of understanding how the social and political context shapes how populations react to different kinds of violence, and when. Two basic features of indiscriminate violence—its logic and its target group—are crucial in this regard.

Interviewees with firsthand experience of various forms of indiscriminate violence (zachistki, artillery shelling, and so on) have stated their ability to distinguish more or less clearly between instances of random and retributive violence. When indiscriminate violence is deployed retributively—following an assault upon Russian troops mounted from the vicinity of a nearby village, for example—its psychological impact was often severe enough to trigger anti-insurgent collective action on the part of villagers. That action sometimes compelled the insurgents

[105] Interview with "Zaurbek."
[106] Interview with "Said."

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to relocate, particularly when they were nationalist rather than jihadist rebels. Thus Russian troops were able to significantly raise the costs for the members of a given village community of providing support to insurgents, or even of just tolerating insurgent activity in the vicinity.

Specifically, the experience of effectively being held hostage by the nearby Russian garrisons' use of indiscriminate retributive violence prompted many Chechen villagers to engage in collective action to increase the safety of their communities. Three fundamental mechanisms of village-based collective action have been identified in this regard: first, urging local insurgents to refrain from attacking Russian troops within the proximity of the village in question; second, establishing their own militia units to expel the insurgents from their area and collaborating with pro-Moscow Chechen paramilitary units against the insurgents; and third, coercing fellow villagers to renounce retaliation and to refrain from joining insurgent groups (or to join insurgent groups operating in other areas).

The targeted rural village communities—unlike other significantly larger groups, such as ethnic and religious communities, cities, or social classes—are characterized by dense interpersonal ties and multiple channels of communication. It is also significant that their decision-making mechanisms are reinforced by the authority of village elders as community and/or clan leaders. These factors enable these communities to overcome the collective action problem.

While the evidence is qualitative, the logic of the argument fits with—and the three mechanisms complement—existing, mostly quantitative, work. This study specifically builds on Lyall's pioneering research on the use of indiscriminate violence against Chechen villages in the first half of the 2000s.[107] Lyall's work is the sole piece of research to date that addresses this topic both on a theoretical level (that is, focusing on village communities and the deployment of indiscriminate violence) and on an empirical level (specifically emphasizing Russian army–led counterinsurgency in Chechnya). Instead of following the prevailing methodological approaches, such as list and endorsement experiments, our analysis uses painstakingly collected interviews with Chechen eyewitnesses and ex-combatants. This approach provides a more micro-level view of the incentives, motivations, and constraints, along with the actions and reactions, of the members of village communities. It also illuminates the logic behind the use of indiscriminate violence and the timing, location, and likelihood of insurgent retaliation.

[107] Lyall 2009.

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Although indiscriminate violence may reduce insurgent activity in the targeted locations for a period of ninety days or so, as Lyall demonstrates persuasively, this does not necessarily mean that indiscriminate violence is an effective means of counterinsurgency. Our findings support Lyall's result that the use of indiscriminate violence leads to a drop in insurgent activity, but our study strongly qualifies his findings by limiting their geographic and temporal scope. We show that indiscriminate violence was effective only when it was deployed retributively, and not when it was deployed randomly. We also demonstrate that its efficacy was somewhat ephemeral because prospective avengers often sought retaliation after a period of time needed to recover and organize an attack. Those willing to retaliate against retributive indiscriminate violence usually did so in other areas to make sure their fellow villagers and relatives were not targeted in subsequent retribution. Over time, this resulted in a high degree of mobility among the insurgents in the early 2000s. By the mid-2000s, when kadyrovtsy units started to deploy selective violence against insurgents and their family members en masse, the insurgents relocated into remote, sparsely populated areas in the southern part of the country.

Distinguishing between random and retributive forms of indiscriminate violence adds a crucial level of detail and a microlevel focus that quantitative analyses usually lack. It also allows us to examine the particular mechanisms on the ground that forced members of Chechen village communities to refrain from using violence against Russian troops, to coerce insurgents from so doing, or to carry out retaliation on Russian troops from other areas. All of these actions contributed to the short-term decline of insurgent activity near the villages in the targeted area. Further research on indiscriminate retributive violence—and on village communities as the target of such violence—is required. Future studies may explore whether the dynamics in Chechen village communities also apply to violence in other clan-based societies where similar sociocultural codes emphasize honor and elevate village elders in a hierarchical social structure that facilitates village-level decision-making and collective action.

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