

The Russo-Chechen Conflict: An Environmental Justice Perspective

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I

Rarely have researchers explored environmental justice in the context of war. On the one hand, this is because Environmental Justice is such a new field in and of itself. In fact, the idea that Social Justice and the Environmental Movement could have any common goals didn't begin to emerge until about the time that *Silent Spring* was published in 1962. And, it is only within the past couple of decades that Environmental Justice as a discipline appeared in educational institutions and even became a discussion topic amongst high-ranking government officials (EPA).

On the other hand, the literature may not be so extensive because collecting the data necessary for examining war's effects on the environment and the subsequent consequences of those effects for humans and particularly vulnerable populations of them would endanger researchers. For instance, collecting soil, water, plant, and other samples in war zones could result in them being taken prisoner, accidentally perishing from weapons such as land mines, or even being directly killed, especially by guerillas.

However, on the basis of the literature that does exist, I would like to explore the following: what has been the environmental impact of the Russo-Chechen conflict as it pertains to Environmental Justice? Essentially in the following pages I will synthesize researchers' findings and offer ideas about the conflict's implications for Environmental Justice in Chechnya.

II

Before diving in allow me to briefly summarize the geographic characteristics of Chechnya and the history of the Russo-Chechen conflict. Chechnya is located in the Caucasus Mountains, and while landlocked by Russia (including other indigenous territories) and Georgia, it is on a relatively narrow strip of land between the Black and Caspian Sea. The conflict dates

back to at least the 1700's (Ingold) but reached a turning point in the late 1850's when the Russian Empire successfully seized the territory for its own ("Chechnya Profile"). Since then Chechnya's struggle for independence has been a continuous and bloody struggle. While at present Chechnya is a semi-autonomous state, it still is legally under Russia's control. In recent years Chechen terrorism has been a concern for Russians, while stereotypes about it have become a political tactic used by the Russian government to demonize Chechens especially, but also people from the Caucasus more generally.

The downfall of the Soviet Union was pivotal for Chechen separatists who were able to take advantage of Russian destabilization and chaos throughout the 90's. However, Putin's rise to power in varying capacities throughout this time period and his iron grip (i.e. militaristic brutality), in combination with concessions to increased autonomy, semi-effectively quieted the storm. The two most recent Russo-Chechen wars officially took place from 1994-1996, and 1999-2009 ("Russian 'Ends Chechnya Operation'"). Nonetheless, the Russo-Chechen relations have been, and remain, highly volatile.

III

Speaking generally, "All too frequently, armed conflict is inextricably entwined with the environment. Natural resources can contribute to conflict, fuel armed conflict, and be targeted by combatants; natural resources can also facilitate post-conflict peace building and recovery. Shortages of water and other natural resources can exacerbate existing ethnic and political tensions, and may contribute to the causes of war" (Mossalanejad). Much of this applies to the Russo-Chechen conflict. In terms of national interest, oil is a driving force for involvement in Chechnya. This is not surprising, considering that according to the United States Energy

Information Administration (EIA) Russia is the world's second greatest exporter of oil, with only Saudi Arabia exporting more.

But, how have Chechnya's natural resources and ecology more generally been affected by decades of conflict?

In part due to the conflict subterranean oil spills have occurred, and now many Chechens rely on amateur refinery, a highly dangerous activity, to earn a living. The problem is that whereas in professional refineries only 10% of the product is wasted, in amateur refining as much as 50% is wasted, and for that matter, not disposed of properly (Ingold). In this way, poor unemployed (or underemployed) men have become a vulnerable population – it is unlikely that if the men were less desperately poor, but still without wealth, that they would compromise their health or risk their lives in the same way. We can infer too that the wasted product, without being disposed of properly, poses a health risk to others, especially in urban centers such as the capital Grozny, where people are more densely concentrated.

Amateur refining activities have also allegedly contributed to air pollution, and not just because of production, but also because of *destruction*: “About 15,000 of these ‘mini-refineries’ were the cause of the spread of oil contamination from Grozny to the countryside³ [author's endnote]. Many of the refineries later were blown up, either by the Russian army or by retreating Chechen fighters. Not only did the rate of oil leakage increase at this point, but plumes of thick, black smoke poured into the air” (Ingold). Have locals, especially children and/or the elderly, been significantly affected by this pollution?

Apparently the amateur refineries and the destruction thereof have affected not only air directly, but also water and the ecosystems therein. “About 20,000 tons of oil leaked into the two rivers that flow from Grozny, the Terek and Sunzha. Eighty percent of the fish in some areas are

too poisonous to eat. Rivers are contaminated between 100 and 1,000 times the normal levels and there are concerns the pollution could spread into the Caspian Sea” (Ingold). In a wartime environment when resources are much scarcer than they would be otherwise, the fact that fish have been so detrimentally affected is discouraging. I do not claim, however, to know what percentage of the affected fish are used as food resources.

Drinking water has also been rendered dangerous because of “missile attacks on power stations. With no power, the motors that run wells are useless. The number of cases of typhoid has gone up in some parts of the region because people are drinking stagnant pond water” (Ingold). Thus, those in affected areas become much more vulnerable to disease. For those with limited access to healthcare, or access to limited healthcare, the results can be disastrous and diseases may spread more quickly than they would if adequate healthcare were present. Those already suffering from conditions compromising the immune system, this can quickly become a matter of life and death when it may not need to be.

What about land use? Agriculture is extremely important to the Chechen livelihood, but bombings have apparently decreased useable land and poisoned it to boot. According to Murad Batal Al-Shishani, an author whose work may be found on the Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst’s website, “40 percent of agricultural land in Chechnya is polluted to the extent that it is no longer arable.” So, those who rely on agriculture for their livelihood, such as farmers, are especially vulnerable regardless of the conflict’s direct violence.

There are two topics that must be discussed before I address limitations of my own synthesis and analysis, and possible directions for future research.

First, while my goal has been to examine the environmental impacts and corresponding justice issues without addressing nuclear technology and radioactive waste, I find that it cannot

be avoided in this discussion. This is because radioactive waste may be found in Chechnya, even in and around Grozny, and when “traditional” military tactics such as bombing occur, radiation that may have previously been contained becomes a much higher risk. To give an idea of scale, note that “Around Grozny, as many as 67 different sources of radiation have been bombed, including a radioactive waste dump site founded in 1965” (Ingold).

Second, I will briefly mention that while I am presently examining these issues in Chechnya, wind and water patterns simply do not respect human boundaries. As Christopher Ingold points out, Chechnya’s proximity to both the Black and Caspian Sea makes contamination an even more sensitive issue.

IV

In the midst of all of the environmental harm Chechens and Russians continue to blame each other. Environmental injustice, it seems, is simply another dimension of the conflict... one that is perhaps less official.

Coming full circle means addressing the limitations in current research, but this time with regards to the future. “Battle damage experts assess military effects, but they do not provide or retain detailed biophysical data for scientific study” (Jarrett). Where does this leave decision makers if they are not informed about the full range of consequences to their commands? What does it mean for Chechnya?

While collecting data (especially soil samples, etc.) would be exceedingly dangerous, the fact is that future research has already been compromised by our not knowing to collect pre-conflict (or between-conflict) samples. While nobody could be reasonably expected to have the foresight to do so, making causal claims about current outcomes from environmental degradation resulting from Russo-Chechen conflict is problematic at best without having a “compared to

what” foundation. That is only at the “Environmental Science” level, as well. Consider now the sensitivity of “disproportionately affected populations.” Without sufficient evidence in the future, protecting or ameliorating the hardship of these populations will be unspeakably difficult.

Another potential issue arises from the recovery that would need to take place even if a lasting peace were established tomorrow. Because of Russian bombing and internal violence on the part of separatists, a great deal of infrastructure has been destroyed. Unless newer (frequently expensive), clean technologies are used, even peace will continue the legacy of disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable.

The bright side, though, is that the potential for research is immense. This is especially true of the Environmental Justice discipline. Maps detailing pollution and how it spreads via air and waterways in the Caucasus specifically could be detailed and refined, and perhaps even serve as an example of war’s multidimensional harms in peace-building efforts.

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