

# Who are the Chechen?

By Johanna Nichols, on Linguist list  
13 January 1995

*Author's note: I have been doing linguistic field work on Chechen and its close relative Ingush for many years. Though I am not an ethnographer or historian, I have tried to bring together here some general information about the Chechen people and their language in order to increase public awareness of the people and their situation, and to put a human face on a people of great dignity, refinement, and courage who have paid heavily for their resistance to conquest and assimilation.*

*This paper may be copied freely. If you disseminate it electronically or print it out yourself (which you are welcome to do), reformatting (font, spacing, etc.) is OK but please do not edit it.*

*johanna@uclink.berkeley.edu*

*Fax: 510 642-6220*

*Phone (510) 642-2979*

---

## **Introduction.**

The Chechens and their western neighbors the Ingush are distinct ethnic groups with distinct languages, but so closely related and so similar that it is convenient to describe them together.

The term "Chechen" is a Russian ethnonym taken from the name of a lowlands Chechen village; "Chechnya" is derived from that. (Both words are accented on the last syllable in Russian.) This term evidently entered Russian from a Turkic language, probably Kumyk (spoken in the northern and eastern Caucasian plain). The Chechens call themselves Nokhchi (singular Nokhchuo). Similarly, "Ingush" is not the self-designation but a Russian ethnonym based on a village name; the Ingush call themselves Ghalghay.

## **Demography.**

1989 census figures: 956,879 Chechen; 237,438 Ingush. The Chechens are the largest North Caucasian group and the second largest Caucasian group (after the Georgians).

## **Location, settlement.**

The Chechen and Ingush lands lie just to the east of the principal road crossing the central Caucasus (via the Darial Pass), extending from the foothills and plains into alpine highlands. The lowlands enjoy fertile soil, ample rainfall, a long growing season, and a small oilfield. Neighbors to the east are the various peoples of Dagestan (many of them speaking languages related to Chechen); in the plains to the north, the Turkic-speaking Kumyk and (as of the last three centuries) Russians; to the west the Ingush and to their west the Ossetians, who speak a language of the Iranian branch of Indo-European; to the south (across the central Caucasus range) the southern Ossetians and the Georgians.

There are two true cities in Chechen and Ingush territory: Grozny (pop. about 400,000 until 1995), the modern Chechen capital founded as a Russian fort during the Russian conquest of the Caucasus; and Vladikavkaz (pop. about 300,000; known as Ordzhonikidze in Soviet times) in the Ingush highlands at the Ingush-Ossetic territorial boundary, also originally a Russian military fort and founded to control the Darial pass. Nazran in the Ingush lowlands was traditionally and is now a large and important market town. The cities had substantial Russian and other non-Chechen-Ingush population; Vladikavkaz was mixed Ingush and Ossetic with significant numbers of Russians and Georgians. (Groznyj has now been destroyed and mostly depopulated by Russian bombing. Vladikavkaz and the adjacent Ingush lands were ethnically cleansed of Ingush in late 1992.) All Russian governments -- czars, Soviets, post-Soviet Russia -- have used various means to remove Chechen and Ingush population from economically important areas and to encourage settlement there by Russians and Russian Cossacks; hence the mixed population of the cities and lowlands.

### **Language.**

The Caucasus has been famed since antiquity for the sheer number and diversity of its languages and for the exotic grammatical structures of the language families indigenous there. This diversity testifies to millennia of generally peaceable relations among autonomous ethnic groups.

Chechen and Ingush, together with Batsbi or Tsova-Tush (a moribund minority language of Georgia) make up the Nakh branch of the Nakh-Daghestanian, or Northeast Caucasian, language family. There are over 30 languages in the Northeast Caucasian family, most of them spoken in Daghestan just to the east of Chechnya. The split of the Nakh branch from the rest of the family took place about 5000-6000 years ago (thus the Nakh-Daghestanian family is comparable in age to Indo-European, the language family ancestral to English, French, Russian, Greek, Hindi, etc.), though the split of Chechen from Ingush probably dates back only to the middle ages. The entire family is indigenous to the Caucasus mountains and has no demonstrable relations to any language group either in or out of the Caucasus. Like most indigenous Caucasian languages Chechen has a wealth of consonants, including uvular and pharyngeal sounds like those of Arabic and glottalized or ejective consonants like those of many native American languages; and a large vowel system somewhat resembling that of Swedish or German. Like its sister languages Chechen has extensive inflectional morphology including a dozen nominal cases and several gender classes, and forms long and complex sentences by chaining participial clauses together. The case system is ergative, i.e. the subject of a transitive verb appears in an oblique case and the direct object is in the nominative, as is the subject of an intransitive verb (as in Basque); verbs take no person agreement, but some of them agree in gender with the direct object or intransitive subject.

97% or more of the Chechens claim Chechen as their first language, though most also speak Russian, generally quite fluently. Chechen and Ingush are so close to each other that with some practice a speaker of one has fair comprehension of the other, and where the two languages are in contact they are used together: a Chechen addresses an Ingush in Chechen, the Ingush replies in Ingush, and communication proceeds more or less smoothly.

Chechen was not traditionally a written language. An orthography using the Russian alphabet was created in the 1930's and is used for various kinds of publication, although for most Chechens the chief vehicle of literacy is Russian. Traditionally, as in most North Caucasian societies, many individuals were bilingual or multilingual, using an important lowlands language (e.g. Kumyk, spoken in market towns and

prestigious as its speakers were early converts to Islam) for inter-ethnic communication; any literacy was in Arabic. Russian has now displaced both Kumyk and Arabic in these functions. Particularly if the Chechen and Ingush economies continue to be destroyed and unemployment and mass homelessness continue to undermine the social structure, there is danger that Chechen and Ingush will be functionally reduced to household languages and will then yield completely to Russian, with concomitant loss of much of the cultural heritage.

## **History.**

The Chechens have evidently been in or near their present territory for some 6000 years and perhaps much longer; there is fairly seamless archeological continuity for the last 8000 years or more in central Daghestan, suggesting that the Nakh-Daghestanian language family is long indigenous. The Caucasian highlands were apparently relatively populous and prosperous in ancient times. From the late middle ages until the 19th century, a worldwide cooling phase known as the Little Ice Age caused glacial advances and shortened growing seasons in the alpine highlands, weakening the highland economies and triggering migrations to the lowlands and abandonment of some alpine villages. This period of economic hardship coincided with the Russian conquest of the Caucasus which lasted from the late 1500's to the mid-1800's.

In all of recorded history and inferable prehistory the Chechens (and for that matter the Ingush) have never undertaken battle except in defense. The Russian conquest of the Caucasus was difficult and bloody, and the Chechens and Ingush with their extensive lowlands territory and access to the central pass were prime targets and were among the most tenacious defenders. Russia destroyed lowlands villages and deported, exiled, or slaughtered civilian population, forcing capitulation of the highlands. Numerous refugees migrated or were deported to various Muslim countries of the middle east, and to this day there are Chechen populations in Jordan and Turkey. Since then there have been various Chechen rebellions against Russian and Soviet power, as well as resistance to collectivization, anti-religious campaigns, and Russification.

In 1944 the Chechens and Ingush, together with the Karachay-Balkar, Crimean Tatars, and other nationalities were deported en masse to Kazakhstan and Siberia, losing at least one-quarter and perhaps half of their population in transit. Though "rehabilitated" in 1956 and allowed to return in 1957, they lost land, economic resources, and civil rights; since then, under both Soviet and post-Soviet governments, they have been the objects of (official and unofficial) discrimination and discriminatory public discourse. In recent years, Russian media have depicted the Chechen nation and/or nationality as thugs and bandits responsible for organized crime and street violence in Russia.

In late 1992 Russian tanks and troops, sent to the north Caucasus ostensibly as peacekeepers in an ethnic dispute between Ingush and Ossetians over traditional Ingush lands politically incorporated into North Ossetia after the 1944 deportation, forcibly removed the Ingush population from North Ossetia and destroyed the Ingush villages there; there were many deaths and there are now said to be up to 60,000 refugees in Ingushetia (about one-quarter of the total Ingush population). In developments reminiscent of today's invasion of Chechnya, in the weeks leading up to the action the Ingush were depicted (inaccurately) in regional media as heavily armed and poised for a large-scale and organized attack on Ossetians, and the Russian military once deployed appears to have undertaken ethnic cleansing at least partly on its own initiative. (My only sources of information for this paragraph are Russian and western news reports. Helsinki Watch is preparing a report for publication in early 1995.)

The invasion of Chechnya presently underway has meant great human suffering for all residents of the Chechen lowlands, including Russians, but only the Chechens are at risk of ethnic cleansing, wholesale economic ruin, and loss of linguistic and cultural heritage.

### **Religion.**

The Chechens and Ingush are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school, having converted in the late 17th to early 19th centuries. Islam is now, as it has been since the conversion, moderate but strongly held and a central component of the culture and the ethnic identity.

Economy, customs. Traditionally, the lowlands Chechen were grain farmers and the highlanders raised sheep. At the time of Russian contact the lowlands were wealthy and produced a grain surplus, while the highlands were not self-sufficient in food and traded wool and eggs for lowlands grain.

Chechen social structure and ethnic identity rest on principles of family and clan honor, respect for and deference to one's elders, hospitality, formal and dignified relations between families and clans, and courteous and formal public and private behavior.

Kinship and clan structure are patriarchal, but women have full social and professional equality and prospects for financial independence equivalent to those of men.

Academics, writers, artists, and intellectuals in general are well versed in the cultures of both the European and the Islamic worlds, and the society as a whole can be said to regard both of these heritages as their own together with the indigenous north Caucasian artistic and intellectual tradition.

### **Social organization.**

Until the Russian conquest the Chechens were an independent nation with their own language and territory but no formal political organization. Villages were autonomous, as were clans. Villages had mutual defense obligations in times of war, and clans had mutual support relations that linked them into larger clan confederations (which generally coincided with dialects). Each clan was headed by a respected elder. There were no social classes and no differences of rank apart from those of age, kinship, and earned social honor.

### **Select bibliography**

Anonymous. 1992. Ethnic cleansing comes to Russia. *The Economist*, November 28, 1992, p. 60.

Blanch, Lesley. 1960. *The Sabres of Paradise*. New York: Viking.

Comrie, Bernard. 1981. *The Languages of the Soviet Union*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Conquest, Robert. 1970. *The Nation Killers: The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities*. London: Macmillan.

Critchlow, James. 1991. "Punished peoples" of the Soviet Union: The continuing legacy of Stalin's deportations. Helsinki Watch Report. New York-Washington: Human Rights Watch.

Friedrich, Paul, and Norma Diamond, eds. 1994. *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, vol. VI: Russia and Eurasia/China. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.

Gamkrelidze, T. V., and T. E. Gudava. [Various dates.] Caucasian languages. *Encyclopedia Britannica* (e.g. in 1979 edition, *Macropedia*, vol. 3, pp. 1011-15; in 1992 edition, vol. 22, pp. 736-40, under 'Languages of the world').

Nekrich, Aleksandr M. 1978. *The Punished Peoples*. New York: Norton.

Nichols, Johanna. 1994. Chechen. Ingush. In Rieks Smeets, ed., *The Indigenous Languages of the Caucasus*, vol. 4: Northeast Caucasian Languages, pp. 1-77 (Chechen), 79-145 (Ingush). Delmar, NY: Caravan Books.

Wixman, Ronald. 1980. *Language Aspects of Ethnic Pattern and Processes in the North Caucasus*. (University of Chicago Department of Geography Research Paper no. 191.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press.