

# Chechnya's Warrior Culture:

## Masculinity, Militarization, and MMA

By Cassidy Keppler

---

### Introduction

Chechnya is a small, semi-autonomous republic in the Russian Federation led by Ramzan Kadyrov, a controversial Chechen warlord with close ties to Vladimir Putin. Despite its small size, Chechnya has played an important role in international affairs, often attracting attention due to its outsized participation in Russian and regional conflicts. It has a tumultuous history; it battled Russian imperial occupation throughout the 19th century, experienced Stalinist deportations in the 1940s, and more recently fought for independence from Russia in the two Chechen wars in the 1990s. However, today, Chechnya has become well-known for the success of its fighters in the Ultimate Fighting Championship, (UFC), the presence of its military in Russia's international armed conflicts, and the persecution of LGBTQ+ community across the republic.

Underpinning its contemporary role in global affairs lies a strong tradition of warrior culture that encourages men to become excellent physical fighters and to embody traditional notions of masculinity. The development of this culture was often necessary due to the nation's long history of warfare and battle; becoming a proud fighter was necessary to ensure the security and survival of the Chechen identity.<sup>1</sup> Today, considering Chechnya's inextricable links to Russia and its strong support for Russian military incursions, it is more relevant than ever to understand how and why Chechen culture produces so many fighters. Chechnya's violent and painful history has informed the development of its contemporary warrior culture, in which being a strong and skilled fighter is highly valued and fostered through militarization, rhetoric on masculinity, and national sport.

### Militarization

Russia historically viewed the broader Caucasus mountain region in Central Asia as a strategic location that was critical to the power and security of its empire. Consequently, Russia invaded the region first in the 19th century, seeking to dominate diverse Caucasian ethnic groups like the Chechens, and integrate them into the Russian empire. In order to avoid assimilation and maintain their independence from Russia, Chechnya fought wars and foreign invasions for centuries, necessities for national survival. During the 19th century, the Russians used brutal military tactics against the Chechens like guerilla warfare, scorched earth tactics, and forced deportation, which were meant to suppress

### “Every Chechen man is first a warrior.”

and subjugate Chechen nationalist movements.<sup>2</sup> However, Chechnya's mountainous landscape made the Chechen people also skilled at urban warfare, baffling the Russian conception of warfare in the 19th century and further antagonizing the Russian incursion. As a result of the heightened hostility and military challenges, Russians attributed their military losses in the region to the Chechen's superior fighting skills and their primitive, “beast-like” fighting methods. Thus, Russians inadvertently contributed to reinforcing Chechen warrior culture and also reinforcing their international reputation as “excellent, fierce fighters.”<sup>3</sup>

Today, the Russian state relies on Chechen fighters and its warrior culture to support its foreign incursions. Kadyrov's robust security apparatus and state military provide support to Putin in Syria, Ukraine, and the Central African Republic.<sup>4</sup> Chechen fighters' reputation for ruthlessness, skill, and stamina in battle also make them an important psychological weapon for Russia, since the presence of Chechen fighters in any conflict invokes fear and self-doubt in the opponent, while strengthening the perception of Russian power.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, since the aftermath of the Chechen wars led to high unemployment and economic stagnation, the only viable opportunities for citizens are available in the security services or the military. According to Chechen social standards, these occupations are perceived to be lucrative and prestigious due to their association with fighting and combat.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, a career in the military or security is often the only opportunity for men to elevate their social status and economic security without jeopardizing their cultural traditions.<sup>7</sup>

### Rhetoric on masculinity

“Every Chechen man is first a warrior.” This Chechen expression highlights the importance of fighting in Chechen cultural understanding of masculinity and what the role of a man should be in society. These sentiments became internationally relevant in 2018, when the Chechen state was accused by the international community of purging society of LGBTQ+ members, with Kadyrov even going as far as to claim that “there are no gays in Chechnya”.<sup>8</sup> Namely, Chechen society prizes machismo and conservative, patriarchal values. Macho culture and narrow perceptions of masculinity

further extends to LGBTQ+ rights, where men are persecuted, murdered, or kidnapped and tortured for being gay.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, it is considered the gravest sin for a man to be gay because it violates Chechen social mores and its hierarchy about masculinity and combat culture. According to this logic, a gay man cannot be a “real man” because it implies that he willingly emasculates himself and he is spiritually and physically weak. Any suspicion of homosexuality stains the social status of the entire family for generations.<sup>10</sup> As a result, contemporary Chechen rhetoric about masculinity upholds the idea of a physically strong man, a “warrior,” as the ideal to strive for, it undermines any notion of masculinity that deviates from this ideal.<sup>11</sup>

### **Kadyrov's fight clubs**

Since violence has been such a large part of Chechen history, many fathers enrolled their sons in fighting or wrestling clubs so they could train and protect themselves in everyday life or an armed conflict. Families still uphold this tradition by strongly encouraging young boys to fight one another, even in casual settings. A son who is a brave and skilled fighter is a great source of pride and honor for a Chechen family, because it signals his readiness to protect and defend the nation from external threats. This mentality, coupled with the Soviet Union's legacy of sponsoring and expanding martial art combat sports like sambo, allowed Chechnya to foster its fighting traditions through a network of pre-existing fight clubs.

Today, Kadyrov sponsors modernized fight clubs and recruits Chechen boys and young men to participate in fighting as a national sport. Named after Kadyrov's father, Akhmat Kadyrov, the sports club “FC Akhmat Grozny” and stadium “Akhmat Arena” are part of a broader campaign to promote Chechen fighters, physical culture and combat sports in Chechen society.<sup>12</sup> In an authoritarian and heavily censored society still grappling with collective trauma and devastation after two wars against Russia, state-approved cultural symbols and activities like combat sports became a safe way for Chechens to reconcile their ancient cultural traditions with their post-war realities.

### **UFC: a national sport**

Chechnya and the North Caucasus region produce many famous UFC fighters like Khabib Nurmagomedov from Dagestan or Khamzat Chimaev from Chechnya. Due to UFC's global popularity, these famous fighters represent their small, relatively unknown nations on the world stage. However, Chechen fighters are distinguished from other famous fighters because of their involvement in Chechen politics or personal affiliation with Ramzan Kadyrov's fight clubs.<sup>13</sup> Kady-

rov personally intervenes in UFC affairs concerning Chechen fighters and uses their image to bolster a national identity centered around a warrior tradition. For example, when Khamzat Chimaev got into a physical fight with Daghestani mixed martial artist Abubakar Nurmagomedov after a UFC fight night, Kadyrov took credit for resolving the conflict. He posted a screenshot of himself video chatting with the two fighters and credited himself with personally ensuring there were no problems between the men.

It is important to Kadyrov to demonstrate his personal and political attachment to sport, especially UFC. UFC not only reinforces Chechnya's warrior tradition through sponsoring its fighters, but it offers a convenient vehicle for Kadyrov to project an international image of Chechens as strong, tough fighters to be respected rather than humiliated. Furthermore, UFC provides an extremely lucrative and popular international platform in which Kadyrov can exert his own power and bolster his relevance in order to reinforce Russian economic and political support for Chechnya.<sup>14</sup> This platform is significant for Kadyrov because without Russia's continued economic and political support for Chechnya, the republic would face even more underdevelopment and fragility.

### **Conclusion**

Chechnya's violent history of war, invasion, and forced deportation contributed to the development of a warrior culture that produces skilled fighters. Although this tradition originally developed out of a necessity to defend and protect the nation's survival, today it has acquired international political and cultural relevance. Chechnya capitalizes on the foundation of its combat culture by creating a society of excellent fighters who successfully fight alongside the Russians in international conflicts, yet clearly distinguish themselves as Chechens in order to project an image of Chechnya's superior fighting ability and toughness.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, national sport reproduces Chechen warrior culture by highlighting historical cultural values, establishing fight clubs, and using poor economic conditions to encourage Chechen men to participate and perpetuate combat culture in the military or UFC. Chechnya's anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and policies further reinforce notions of a warrior culture that eliminates any perceived sign of weakness or passivity, while aligning with traditional Chechen conceptions of masculinity. Today, the state promotes and instrumentalizes Chechnya's deeply embedded combat culture and warrior tradition through fighting in Russia's military incursions, participating in UFC and fight clubs, and enforcing strict notions of masculinity, in order to bolster Chechnya's international relevance and national security. Chechen warrior culture and its historical relationship with Russia has broader implications for understanding Russia's international military ambitions and interventions today, particularly in Ukraine, the Central African Republic, and Syria.