

The Story Behind the Moscow Airport Attack

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Chechen Landscape, July 2008 **Andrei Muchnik**

I have great respect for Fareed Zakaria — not just an award-winning journalist, but a renowned political scientist and author. That is why I was so puzzled about his [article](#) published in Time magazine in the aftermath of a horrible terrorist attack at the largest Moscow airport, Domodedovo.

Zakaria laments the victims but focuses on blaming the Russian government for everything that's going on in the region. The term "Russian government" in this case encompasses the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union and today's Russian Federation — three very different countries, both in terms of geography and the form of government. I don't know whether Zakaria did research for the article himself, but the historical background is wrong in more than one way.

Russia didn't fight a war with Chechnya 200 years ago because there was no Chechnya back then. It seems that to Zakaria the whole of the Caucasus is Chechnya, whereas it's only a small part of it.

The Caucasus war started in the late 18th century, and it was a military conquest of a region with many ethnic groups, not just the Chechens. In particular, Dagestani ethnic groups played an important role, ostensibly even more so than the Chechens. The famous leader of insurgents, Imam Shamil, was from Dagestan.

Zakaria correctly calls this "a war of colonial expansion" but omits the fact that this was something all the major powers were engaged in at that time, not just Russia. You can't apply today's values to events that took place more than 200 years ago.

To quote Zakaria, "Chechnya's struggle against Russia, at root, has nothing to do with Islam." But by that time of the Caucasus war, most of the ethnic groups in the Caucasus were Muslim, read Leo Tolstoy. The word insurgents used for the war against Russia was *gazavat*, a local equivalent of jihad, the holy war.

Zakaria alleges that, "As soon as the Czar's rule ended in Moscow, the Chechens began clamoring for independence, which they were granted in 1918." Apparently Zakaria is not aware that the Russian Empire was ruled from St. Petersburg, not Moscow, which shows his general grasp on Russian history. The North Caucasian Emirate was established in 1919, not 1918, under the protectorate of the Ottoman Empire, so it was not exactly independent.

Stalin deported several North Caucasus ethnic groups, not just the Chechens during World War II. Khrushchev didn't let them come back to the Caucasus because they "retained their identity and national desires" but because he was trying to reverse many of Stalin's mistakes.

Zakaria doesn't mention that four years passed between 1990, when "a national convention of all Chechen political groups united in a call for immediate independence from Moscow" and the start of the first war. He doesn't mention that between the "two ferocious wars" there were three years of Chechen independence, when its parliament was disbanded and Sharia law was introduced. And most importantly, Zakaria doesn't mention any of the horrible atrocities committed by militants, only those by Russians.

I honestly believe that articles like this by misinforming international public opinion and decision makers can exacerbate the conflict in the North Caucasus. And I hope Zakaria will do a better job next time or hire better research assistants.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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