

Tsarnaevs' Story Reveals Web of Ethnic Ties and Tensions in CIS

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Dzhokhar Tsarnaev

When the parents of "Misha," the enigmatic Ukrainian-Armenian convert to Islam who allegedly helped radicalize Boston bombing suspect Tamerlan Tsarnaev, moved to the United States in the 1990s, they likely could not have imagined that their son would eventually be accused of coaching a Muslim terrorist.

Yury Allakhverdov, a Christian Armenian, and his Ukrainian wife Lidia moved with their son Mikhail, or Misha, to the U.S. from Baku, escaping the persecution of Armenian Christians in the capital of the newly independent and predominantly Muslim republic of Azerbaijan.

Being half-Armenian but a convert to Islam, Mikhail Allakhverdov has drawn close scrutiny from observers familiar with the long-standing hostilities between Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan. The fact that Allakhverdov would become a Muslim is particularly striking given that his family fled persecution in Baku.

With Allakhverdov now suspected of having mentored the ethnic Chechen Tsarnaev, the complexity of the inter-ethnic ties and tensions in the Caucasus and across the former Soviet Union have come into renewed focus.

The stories of those brothers, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, and others in their saga serve as a reminder of how the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 unleashed a deluge of bottled-up tensions, many of which endure to this day.

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At the same time, their stories show that certain ties fostered by the Soviet Union still bind. Dzhokhar, whose parents moved him and his siblings from Russia to Kyrgyzstan, then back to Russia, before emigrating to the U.S., had two close Russian-speaking friends at university in Boston who hailed from Kazakhstan. The array of countries involved has also reminded Western audiences of the complex geography of the Caucasus and the former Soviet Union.

Ruslan Tsarni, the Chechen uncle of the Tsarnaev brothers, was apparently the first person to mention Misha, referring to him as an Armenian who "somehow ... just took [the] brain" of his nephew Tamerlan, allegedly leading him toward a strict version of Islam. Other relatives of the Tsarnaev brothers have made similar statements about the influence of "Misha."

In an interview with the New York Review of Books, Allakhverdov denied preaching radical Islam to Tamerlan, saying: "If I had been his teacher, I would have made sure he never did anything like this," referring to the bombings at the Boston Marathon that killed three people and wounded more than 200.

Whatever Allakhverdov's true role, the fact that he is half-Armenian and suspected of radicalizing a bombing suspect has set off verbal battles steeped in the historical tensions of the Caucasus.

Tsarni clearly recognized the potential for such disputes, calling the U.S.-based Armenian Mirror-Spectator newspaper last month to apologize to the Armenian community for his remarks about "Misha."

"Armenia has a very strong culture, therefore, I want to stress that his [Misha's] ethnicity has nothing to do with it," Tsarni told the newspaper.

Animosity between Armenians and Chechens spans centuries, with Russian poet Alexander Pushkin saying in a poem that "Armenian" was one of the strongest curses a Chechen could make against a compatriot. In addition, a Chechen contingent led by Shamil Basayev fought against Armenians during the Nagorno-Karabakh war.

That six-year war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which began in 1988, led to a stalemate that continues to this day, with almost daily exchanges of gunfire along the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh border.

Verjline Svazlian, the leading ethnographer at Armenia's National Academy and the daughter of a survivor of the Turkish genocide of Armenians in 1915-1923 that claimed the lives of at least 600,000 people, still shares many of the ethnically charged sentiments common to countries in the region.

"The fact that there is a Chechen and an Armenian in this story means that the U.S. and Britain just want to declare all Caucasians terrorists and separate the Caucasus from Russia," she said by phone from Yerevan. "We have suffered from these plots before and thus we recognize them easily."

Just as stress in U.S.-Russian relations has hindered cooperation in the investigation into the Boston bombing case, historical ethnic tensions can be a stumbling block in countries' fight against terrorism, according to Alexander Krylov, a Caucasus expert at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of the World Economy and International Relations.

"Islamic terrorism is international in its nature, so it's not very important whether terrorists are Chechen, Avar, or Armenian," he said. The Tsarnaev brothers' mother is Avar, one of the largest ethnic groups in the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan. "Ethnic rifts only hinder attempts to unite international efforts against this global threat."

According to Krylov, different countries have used the media attention related to the Boston bombings to exploit their own ancient grievances.

"Azerbaijan would point out that the terrorists were brainwashed by an Armenian, while Armenians will talk about a plot against Russia," he said. Armenia is one of Russia's closest regional allies, and both are predominantly Christian.

The increased tensions and physical conflicts that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union led many people to lose their identity as "New Soviet Man," fostered by Soviet ideologists as a concept that would unite the country regardless of citizens' diverse origins.

But as with the Communist International, the organization created by the Soviets that sought the "overthrow of the international bourgeoisie," global jihad gives people a sense of meaning in life that is not directly tied to their ethnic, religious, or social background, Krylov added.

As a result, ethnicity may not have been a key consideration for Tamerlan Tsarnaev himself, despite apparent leanings toward Chechen nationalism. If he was tied to Misha primarily through religion, Tsarnaev might not have been concerned with the fact that his mentor was Armenian.

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