The term “dirty war” has been applied to various periods of political violence and armed conflict around the world: the dirty wars of Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, the dirty war in Chechnya, and even the dirty war in Israel. Yet, given its broad spectrum of application, there is no established definition explaining what a dirty war is. These conflicts all titled “dirty wars” occur in different times, different locations, and for different reasons. Such ambiguous use of this term in such different environments is extremely confusing.

This project set out to establish a working definition for the term, dirty war, by tracing the term through history. The Latin American dirty wars represent the first instances in which the term dirty war was widely used to describe the violence, but is not where the principles of a dirty war originated. Various historical progressions occurred in the decades before the 1970s to develop the techniques that would ultimately be transformed by military governments in Latin America into the first occurrences of dirty war. This project follows these ideas retroactively from Latin America to France, North Africa, Vietnam, and China.

Dirty war is a technique used during an armed conflict by national militaries to achieve a political goal and is characterized by a major episode of violence known as politicide. The perpetrators of a dirty war create the illusion of war by manipulating the social perception of threat. Using this constructed social fear of violence, perpetrators of dirty war commit acts of violence they justify as necessary measures to prevent a greater violence. These actions create a submissive society allowing for the standing government to undo the political reforms carried out by its predecessors. The use of dirty war as a technique is justifiable motivation for foreign military intervention on the basis of humanitarian protection as defined by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty’s report, The Responsibility to Protect.

The Chilean case is considered to be the prototypical example of dirty war. This project uses the Chilean case to show how a dirty war presents itself with examples of the techniques mentioned above. After establishing this foundation, the project compares the Chilean and Argentine cases of dirty war. This comparison forces the working definition of dirty war to adopt a degree of flexibility to account for differences that can exist between events that are veritable dirty wars. While these differences do exist in the techniques applied during a dirty war, the most striking differences are found in how effectively the political goals of a dirty war are achieved. This is critical to understand because the social reconstruction element representative of a dirty war’s political goals will determine how and why a society reconciles with the violence of a dirty war.

This project applies the constructed conceptual framework to a more contemporary instance of “dirty war” in the Russian Republic of Chechnya to prove that the Chechen case is
not a dirty war as defined by the Chilean and Argentine cases. The Chechen case is a civil war in terms of loss of life, destruction, and military mobilization. It is “dirty” because the armed conflict in Chechnya is clouded by unknown political motivations and goals, elements of genocide, and transnational terrorism. “Dirty war” here is used by journalists to draw attention to these issues and to persuade the Russian people to end the conflict.