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Wounded Bear: The Ongoing Russian Military Operation in Chechnya

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When people are entering upon a war they do things the wrong way round. Action comes first, and it is only when they have already suffered that they begin to think.

Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War

On December 11, 1994, units from the Russian Ground Forces and the Ministry of Internal Affairs entered Chechnya to restore Russian sovereignty and to thwart the proclaimed independence of Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev. A year and a half later, despite their combat experience and numerical superiority, the Russian Armed Forces still have not crushed the Chechen fighters. The Russian military experience in Chechnya, however, is not unique. During the Cold War, the Soviet Army fought for nine years in Afghanistan without achieving military victory over the Mujahideen resistance. With the end of the Cold War, regional conflicts are becoming more common and other armies are finding themselves fighting local conflicts under similar circumstances. The Russian experience should serve as a lesson for all military organizations on the folly of committing inadequately-trained and equipped troops to battle. While this type of operation would have been difficult for any army, the Russian performance has been especially poor.¹ Learning from the problems and mistakes of the Russian Armed Forces can help other militaries avoid these same pitfalls on a future battlefield.

Western and Russian analysts knew that the combat readiness of the Russian Armed Forces was in decline, yet few people foresaw the poor performance that Russian forces displayed during their initial incursion into Chechnya and the follow-on assault on the capital city of Grozny. In comparison with the successful coup that Soviet forces carried out against Kabul (the capital of Afghanistan) in December 1979, the storming of Chechnya proved an embarrassment for the Russian government.²

BACKGROUND

Over a hundred and eighty years ago, Russia annexed Chechnya and Russian General Aleksei Ermolov moved to subdue the Chechen tribes in the Caucasus mountains. His heavy-handed, brutal, punitive raids united the Caucasian people against the Russian military. After more than thirty years of fighting, the Russians finally defeated the opposition.³ Past Russian military experience carries a clear warning regarding the risks of a protracted conflict in the region.⁴

Two major reasons explain the current intervention: oil and the territorial integrity of Russia. Major Russian oil pipelines run from the Caspian Sea through Chechnya to the Black Sea. Rebuilding those pipelines to go around Chechnya is financially prohibitive. Furthermore, during recent negotiations with Western oil companies, Russia insisted that the oil from the Caspian Sea region be transported across its territory (i.e. through Chechnya) to terminals in Novorossiisk (a Russian city located on the Black Sea) rather than through Georgia to Turkey or Iran.

This routing represents sizable potential profit for the Russian government and businesses.⁵ The bottom line is that Russia intends to continue to ship oil through Chechnya.

Russian territorial integrity is the second important factor. Most Russians view Chechnya as an internal problem. Russia does not recognize the sovereignty of Chechnya. Over a period of three years Russia tried to coerce, bully and then demand that Chechen President Dudaev back down from his proclamation of independence.⁶ When the Russian-backed Chechen opposition forces failed to topple Dudayev in November 1994, Yeltsin decided to take stronger measures. On November 30, 1994, Yeltsin issued an ultimatum to the "participants" demanding that they disarm themselves and free all prisoners taken in the previous fighting.⁷ After several days of fruitless negotiations between the Russian Defense Minister, General Pavel Grachev and Chechen President Dudaev, Yeltsin sent Russian troops into Chechnya.

CONDUCT OF THE OPERATION

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

October 1991 - Dzhokhar Dudayev becomes President of Chechnya in a coup d'etat.

December 1991 - First armed clashes between followers of Dudayev and opposition forces.

August 1994 - Moscow-backed Chechen forces announce the "dismissal" of Dudayev.

September 1994 - Fighting breaks out between Chechen factions.

November 1994 - Opposition forces (clandestinely reinforced with Russian soldiers) attempt an armed overthrow of Dudayev. Dudayev's forces rout the opposition.

December 1, 1994 - Russian President Boris Yeltsin declares "State of Emergency"

December 6-8, 1994 - Chechen President Dudayev and Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev meet to discuss terms to reduce tension and secure release of hostages captured during November fighting.

December 11, 1994 - Russian forces enter Chechnya.

In the initial organization for the operation, the assault units were divided along separate axes which complicated unity of command (See Figure 1). The overall headquarters did not have an on-going staff-planning relationship with these separate units.⁸ Command and control of the operation was spread among several different ministers. A direct chain of command did not exist. The North Caucasus Military District Command Structure (the district which included Chechnya) was by-passed and decisions for the operation were made by the Russian Defense Minister, General Grachev.

As originally planned, the Chechnya operation had four phases:

Phase I: (28 November - 6 December 1994) Create four task forces from the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) forces.

Phase II: (7 - 9 December 1994) Advance on three axes under the cover of Army and Front-level aviation to the city of Grozny and encircle it. Establish an inner and outer encirclement. The outer encirclement would run along the republic's border while the inner encirclement would encompass Grozny itself.

Phase III: (10 - 13 December 1994) MOD units from the north and south, together with units of the MVD and Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK) unite at the demarcation line of the Sunzha River and seize the Presidential Palace, government buildings, television and radio stations and other important objectives.

Phase IV: (5 - 10 days) MOD units stabilize the situation and prepare to transfer responsibility to the MVD.⁹ The operation did not achieve its missions on time. From the beginning the operation faced significant hurdles and ambiguous orders from the top only compounded the problem. More than seventeen months after the start of the operation, the MOD and MVD are still actively trying to destroy all of the Chechen forces.

As early as October 1994, according to later press reports, members of the Russian Army General Staff were planning the upcoming operations in Chechnya.¹⁰ With this amount of advanced planning, it is difficult to understand their initial coordination problems. Some of the blame could be placed on the planners' underestimation of the tenacity of the Chechens, but this explanation is not completely plausible since the Russian government had armed the Chechens and knew their capabilities.

The Ministry of Defense formed three groups or task forces to carry out the assault on Chechnya: The Northern Task Force - on the Mozdok axis; the Western Task Force - on the Vladikavkaz axis; and the Eastern Task Force - on the Kizlar axis. The Ministry of Internal Affairs also created a separate Task Force of Internal Troops.¹¹ Naval infantry units were also added to the force structure.¹²

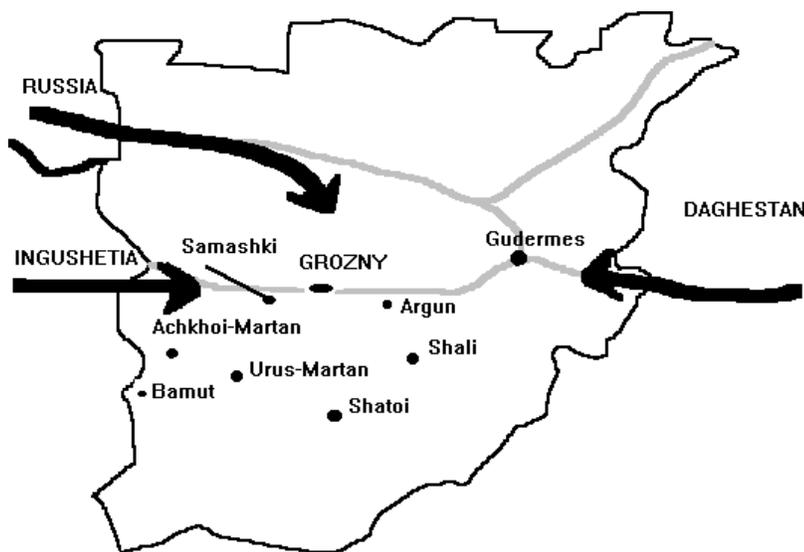


Figure 1- Figure 1 Initial Russian Deployment into Chechnya

One problem which contributed to the Russians' misfortune in Chechnya was the use of MVD troops along side the soldiers of the Army or Ground Forces. MVD Internal Troops are not designed nor organized for large scale combat operations.¹³ Most MVD units have no organic artillery or armor. These units also do not regularly train with units from the Armed Forces. The lack of coordination between units from the MOD and MVD was the source of numerous problems during the fighting in Chechnya and especially during the battle for Grozny.¹⁴

Initial movement into Chechnya proved more difficult than predicted when the first columns of troops were delayed even before they could cross the border into the republic. On 12 December, the armored vehicle column on the Vladikavkaz axis was held up by the local populace. The column on the Kizlar axis faced similar delays due to civilian protesters.¹⁵ Only the Northern task force, advancing along the Mozdok axis, experienced initial success. But they were stopped by Chechen forces on 13 December before they could reach Grozny when the Chechens conducted a heavy attack supported by cannon and rocket fires. The Northern task force finally reached the bridge over the Sunzha River on 20 December (a week late according to the plan).¹⁶ The Russian forces now faced a new situation. Their initial plan had not survived contact with enemy and the situation demanded more than minor adjustments.

After their initial advance into Chechnya, Russian forces concentrated on taking the capital of Grozny. They began Phase III of the operation before completing Phase II, the encirclement and blockade of Grozny. Political and not military considerations probably led to this premature decision. This was a critical mistake considering the size of the Chechen forces, which consisted of from 20,000 to 30,000 combatants.¹⁷

On 31 December 1994, the Russian forces launched an attack to seize the city of Grozny. The main attack centered on the railway station (which is located several blocks southeast of the Presidential Building). Fierce resistance by the Chechens forced the Russians to fall back from the city center and regroup. A heavy fog blanketed parts of the city and prevented Russian helicopters from providing accurate fire support. Chechen fighters separated the tanks that were spearheading the attack from their infantry support and systematically destroyed them. At the conclusion of the battle, one correspondent counted seventeen burned-out tanks and armored vehicles in front of the railway station.¹⁸ After withdrawing from the city center the Russians relied on artillery fire to keep pressure on the Chechens and to reduce the number of buildings that could be used as fighting positions. In the 131st Motorized Rifle Brigade, the losses during the New Year's assault were devastating. Only 18 out of its 120 vehicles escaped destruction in the city fighting and almost all of the Brigade's officers were killed. One of the officers who survived said that his unit received fire from all sides near the train station. While they were receiving sniper, grenade and mortar fire, his unit did not receive any of the requested fire support, reinforcements or ammunition resupply.¹⁹

After the New Year's Day debacle, Russian forces again tried to take the city. Fighting around the train station and Presidential Palace intensified as the Russians fired on the Palace with tanks and armored personnel carriers. On 9 January 1995, the Russians seized the train station and continued to advance throughout the city in an attempt to cut off access to the Palace. On 19 January, the Russians finally captured the burnt-out remnants of the Presidential Palace. President Yeltsin prematurely declared that the military stage of the operation was over and members of parliament wanted to decorate the commander of the unit that seized the palace with the order of the Hero of Russia.²⁰

During the month of January, Russian troops concentrated on completing Phase II by encircling Grozny to prevent Chechen reinforcements from reaching the city. For unknown reasons, the Russians still failed to block all of the access routes into the capital and the Chechens routinely resupplied their forces. The city was not completely sealed off until 22 February 1995. The Chief of Staff of the Joint Forces in Chechnya, Colonel-General Leonty Pavlovich Shevtsov, claimed that, "such a decision was dictated by motives of humaneness, because it allowed the peaceful population of Grozny to escape to the mountains."²¹ Vague directives and poor military discipline were probably the real reasons behind this failure.

Outside Grozny, Russian forces began to extend control along the major lines of communication running to Dagestan. Actual control of Grozny remained in the hands of the Chechens. The Chechens played a cat and mouse game with the Russians by retreating into the suburbs and blowing up bridges across the Sunzha River. This made it difficult for the Russians to reinforce units under attack.

The Chechens continued to separate Russian units into small components which could be effectively ambushed. They would then leave before the Russians could send reinforcements and organize support. Poor communications between Russian units facilitated the Chechens' use of this tactic.

After several setbacks the Russians began to use massed artillery routinely as a substitute for maneuver combat. Previous Russian concerns about civilian casualties vanished in the face of the limited success from massed artillery strikes against the Chechens.

On 13 February 1995, Russian and Chechen forces reached a cease-fire agreement limiting the use of heavy weapons. The agreement covered aviation, artillery and mortars. The rationale behind the deal was not clear, but neither side completely adhered to the agreement and on 21 February, the Russians again began large-scale artillery and aviation attacks on Chechen positions in the cities of Gudermes, Argun and Samashki (See Figure 2). During the last weeks of February, Russian forces began a major push to take Argun, the capture of which would make it possible to assault Gudermes. These two cities sit astride the main road that runs through Chechnya from Daghestan to Ingushetia, but perhaps more importantly, Gudermes is a critical junction on the oil pipeline which links Azerbaijan to Russia.²²

On 1 March, Russian Minister of Defense General Pavel Grachev boasted that the army would easily capture the remaining Chechen strongholds of Argun, Shali, Gudermes and Samashki. Russian forces surrounded the village of Samashki, notified the Chechens of their intent to storm the village, and then launched a heavy artillery attack on the village. Following the artillery barrage, a Russian column of armored personnel carriers and tanks isolated the village and then cut the road linking the Chechen towns of Samashki and Achkoi-Martan. Russian forces continued this tactic throughout March on other villages and towns throughout Chechnya.

When Russian forces captured Samashki on 8 April 1995, the International Red Cross announced that approximately 250 civilians were killed during the assault on the town.²³ By this time, Russian Armed Forces were showing little concern for collateral casualties and damage while tracking down Chechen forces. This resulted in a noticeable "stiffening" of the Chechens' resolve not to surrender. Combat in April around the village of Bamut²⁴ demonstrated that the Chechens would fight for every village. The Russian military hoped to temporarily halt their operation by 9 May, to observe the 50th Anniversary of the defeat of Germany in World War II. Chechen forces, however, did not allow the Russian forces their reprieve and attacked Russian positions in Grozny. This was by now a Chechen pattern. Whenever international interest in the conflict waned, the Chechens would stage new assaults in Grozny - preferably on a holiday or significant anniversary. These counter blows gained international attention and embarrassed the Russian government, but did not stop the Russian advance into Chechnya.

By May 1995, the Russians controlled the main Chechen cities and towns and pushed the fight into the mountain villages of Chechnya. The fatalistic feeling among the Chechen forces was summed up in the comments of the deputy commander of the Chechen battle group deployed outside of Grozny, "There is no winning. We know that. If we are fighting, we are winning. If we are not, we have lost. The Russians can kill us and destroy this land. Then they will win. But we will make it very painful for them."²⁵ Combat during this period resembled a large scale chess match, with



Figure 2- Figure 2 Map of Chechnya

neither side able to check the other decisively. Russian forces deployed to surround villages. Chechen fighters inflicted damage on the Russian columns as they moved into position. The Russians would shell the village until return fire ceased and then move in. The Chechens would redeploy to another village and wait for the next column of Russian vehicles. This type of fighting has been interrupted by several cease-fires and the hostage dramas at Budyonnovsk and Pervomayskaya.

On 14 June 1995, a group of approximately 100 Chechens attacked the Russian town of Budyonnovsk, located 70 kilometers north of the Chechen border. The purpose of their raid was to seize hostages to force the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya. The Chechens seized the town hospital and held the civilians hostage. Russian Interior Ministry and Special Forces troops botched the raid on the hospital, killing numerous civilians in the process. The drama ended when the Russians allowed the Chechens to leave the town in a convoy of buses and return to Chechnya, where they were hailed as heroes. Once again, a poorly coordinated military action and political pressure to "do something" led to disaster.

The raid on Budyonnovsk did not significantly change the political situation in Chechnya. Cease-fire talks between the Russians and Chechens continued throughout June and July. Both sides signed an agreement on 30 July ending combat and reducing the number of deployed Russian forces. The Russians conducted small-scale withdrawals in September. Chechen fighters continued the selective use of small-scale attacks throughout the rest of the year. These included the attempted assassination of General Romanov, the MVD General charged with negotiations. The frequency of their attacks increased as the Moscow-sponsored December elections neared. Grozny remained a center for Chechen resistance throughout the year with monthly grenade and sniper attacks on Russian forces.

On 9 January 1996, Chechen fighters, led by the son-in-law of Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudaev, seized a hospital and maternity home in the town of Kizlar, Dagestan. As in Budyonnovsk, they demanded the withdrawal of Russian troops from Chechnya. The events were played out in a similar fashion as in Budyonnovsk. The Chechens and their hostages were allowed to move and then were blocked at the Chechen border and were forced to retreat into the village of Pervomayskaya, where Russian forces attacked them. The Russian assault caused numerous civilian casualties and the village suffered heavy damage, but the leader of the Chechen group escaped. The Chechens did not conduct any major combat, after this operation, until March 1996, when they launched coordinated surprise attacks against Russian forces in Grozny. On April 17, 1996 Chechen forces ambushed a Russian armored convoy approximately 50 kilometers south of Grozny. Russian losses from this ambush were estimated to be 53 soldiers killed, making this one of the worst single incident death totals in a year. These events indicate that the Chechen fighters still have not given up their goal of using military force to seek independence.

WEAPONS EMPLOYMENT

Following Desert Storm, Russian officers evaluated the use of precision guided munitions in modern warfare and concluded that these weapons would play a major role in future conflicts. However, during the assault on Grozny the Russian Ground Forces used less-effective "dumb" munitions to pound the Chechens. Several theories, from a lack of trained personnel to insufficient stocks and the costs of such weapons, have been offered to explain why the Russians choose not to use the equipment that they had in their inventory during the fighting in Chechnya.

The equipment used in the initial assault was poorly maintained and was not "top of the line" material. During the road march into Grozny, two out of every ten tanks fell out of the formation due to mechanical problems. Most of these tanks were T-72s that had been previously overhauled two or three times. In addition, many of the armored vehicle drivers had enormous difficulty driving on the thin, muddy asphalt roads which are the main highways through the region.²⁶

Although initial analysis of the conflict might indicate that the heavy use of artillery and close air support to level urban areas was the result of a lack of planning, the employment of artillery during the battle for Grozny was actually in line with the Russian traditional employment of artillery in cities. During the "Great Patriotic War" the Red Army used their artillery assets to achieve stunning victories over German forces on the Eastern Front. The current commander of Russian Artillery forces, Colonel General Nikolay Mikhaylovich Dimidyuk stated that Russian artillery was responsible for the destruction of 80-90 percent of enemy targets in the tactical zone during World War II.²⁷ The

Red Army learned to depend upon the firepower provided by artillery brigades, divisions and corps. This legacy continued into the Cold War when the Soviets stationed large amounts of artillery in Eastern Europe in anticipation of a future conflict with NATO forces. The Russian respect for artillery has not diminished.

Urban combat is an extremely manpower intensive operation. Currently, no military force has a workable doctrine on how to fight in built-up terrain without inflicting heavy casualties on the civilian population and causing heavy collateral damage.²⁸ Additionally, these operations typically generate large numbers of casualties for the attacking forces. The fighting in Grozny was no exception.

The lack of trained personnel and the absence of a clear plan for defeating insurgents in an urban environment left the military with few options for a speedy victory. Domestic considerations excluded a negotiated political solution. This left the costly (in terms of manpower) method of clearing cities building by building. Another method was to reduce cities and villages to rubble through aviation, artillery and rocket attacks. While politically distasteful, this option did have military merit because it accomplished two goals: it eliminated potential fighting positions for the Chechen fighters; and it drove most of the civilian population out of the combat zone, thereby reducing the opportunity for the combatants to hide among the civilians.

Several recent articles in Russian military publications discuss the use of artillery in an urban environment. The common theme throughout these articles is the realization that the amount of fires employed during a battle is dependent on the situation and can not be planned using normative solutions and standard rules of engagement. One Russian colonel bluntly stated that "It is obvious there can be no recommendations for employing artillery in taking a city either in terms of duration or method of fire."²⁹

The Russians had the necessary equipment to carry out precise, surgical artillery strikes, however there has been no evidence that shows that the Russians employed their precision-guided munitions in this operation.³⁰ The use of these weapons would not have necessarily changed the outcome of the battle but they could have reduced the number of Russian casualties from Chechen artillery and strong points. The weapons systems which can fire precision artillery warheads like the *Krasnopol*³¹ are deployed in Chechnya, but these warheads were not available. Two other precision artillery munitions, the *Smelchak* mortar round and the *Santimetr* artillery round were also available but not used in Chechnya.

International Defense Digest reported that "the word in the higher command is that these highly advanced armaments were too expensive to be wasted' in Chechnya and needed to be kept for more serious contingencies."³² The Russians have also developed a version of the American Dual-Purpose Improved Conventional Munition (DPICM) for their Smerch 300mm Multiple Rocket Launchers. This munition would have been highly effective in denying avenues of approach to the Chechens, however the Russians never employed it.³³

There is no evidence that the Russians employed counter-battery radar to locate Chechen artillery. Considering the lack of coordination among the MVD and Federal Troops (and the fact that MVD units do not have organic artillery assets), the use of radar may have been counterproductive since there would be no way to verify friendly firing locations. For counter-battery radar to be effective, the exact location of friendly artillery must be known to avoid erroneous targeting.

In addition to possessing accurate friendly location data, there must also be a controlling authority who can clear counter-battery fires and resolve problems as they arise. This would have been especially difficult in the Chechen operation because Russian forces approached Grozny on three separate axes with four separate task forces. These units were formed into temporary organizations which did not have an on-going working relationship. Under ideal conditions fire coordination is difficult to achieve between separate units, but under these conditions would have been almost impossible. The drawback of this type of situation is that the Russians were unable initially to mass their artillery. The Chechens exploited this weakness by employing hit and run tactics with their own artillery.³⁴ By ambushing Russian forces with one or two artillery pieces, they were able to disperse their assets quickly after an attack.³⁵ The prominent use of direct fire by the Russians (to include using multiple rocket launchers in a direct fire mode) reflects that this method is the easiest to control with unskilled personnel and weak communications.

In the early 1990s the Soviets proposed the creation of combat groups of two tanks and a BMP or two BMPs and a tank.³⁶ The Russians utilized this concept only after the initial disastrous attempt to use tank-pure forces to seize Grozny. This change in the employment of forces in and around the city center helped the Russians eliminate Chechen pockets of resistance around the train station during the battle for Grozny by providing infantry support for the tanks.

Large armored formations proved impossible to control in the streets of Grozny. The initial disastrous assault on the city of Grozny on New Year's Day, 1995, was blamed on the decision to send armored columns into the city without adequate fire preparation or infantry support. After the first month of combat the Russians modified their tactics to reduce casualties.

Russian commanders decided to break up the larger combat formations and assign small artillery subunits to these miniature task forces. The separate task force commander assumed responsibility for the artillery sub-units as they employed artillery platoons or individual pieces during the street fighting.³⁷ Soviet doctrine designated the artillery *battalion* as the lowest tactical unit.³⁸ In this situation, however, decentralized control allowed the individual maneuver commanders to attack targets without time-consuming coordination with their headquarters.

The assault task forces that the Russians formed to fight in the city had large quantities of artillery attached to them for the battle. Each battalion-sized task force had a battery of self-propelled howitzers, one-two batteries of mortars and one- two batteries of divisional artillery. As mentioned earlier these units were broken down into smaller detachments to fight in the city. The Russians felt that this amount of artillery was necessary to combat the fortifications that the Chechens built in the city.

The Chechens built fortified strong points in Grozny "a la Stalingrad" in buildings and along crossroads. After the disastrous New Year's assault on the city, Russian forces used artillery pieces to pave the way for the rest of their forces along city streets. Direct fire was used to destroy strong points and fortified buildings.³⁹ Inside the city the Russians typically employed their artillery pieces from a range of 150-200 meters.⁴⁰

During the initial assault into Chechnya in December 1994, the Russian Air Force destroyed the few Chechen aircraft and airbases that existed. The lack of an organized Chechen air force or air defense system allowed the Russian Air Force to fly at will. In eighteen months of fighting only three fixed-wing airplanes were shot down by the Chechens. Employment of aviation during the Chechen operation, however, was as problematic as other aspects of the fighting. Many of the same problems that plagued the ground forces, such as insufficient fuel, ammunition and spare parts, and the lack of trained personnel, stymied the air force.

Communications problems between the ground forces and aircrews led to numerous cases of fratricide. On several occasions the Chechens entered the Russian air control radio net and targeted the Russian's air assets against their own troops.⁴¹ The Russians' use of conventional "dumb" munitions and the high altitude from which they dropped their ordinance exacerbated the situation. Problems with the forward air controllers (FAC) caused the ground forces to stop employing aviation assets close to their forward forces. Apparently much of the radio traffic was in the clear since, on several occasions, FACs broadcast their own coordinates only to have Chechen artillery hit them shortly thereafter.

LESSONS LEARNED

The military operation in Chechnya has suffered from a variety of problems over the past eighteen months. Several lessons in particular, however, should be highlighted.

The Russians were not prepared.

The Russian military press has been full of articles about the failure of the Russian forces in Chechnya. Most of the articles acknowledge that the Russians were not prepared for the assault and subsequent military operation in Chechnya.

In the days leading up to the initial assault in December 1994, Minister of Defense Grachev was extremely confident that his forces were prepared and ready to carry out the mission. His subordinates, however, did not agree with him. Eleven general officers, in an appeal to the Duma, complained that the ground forces would have difficulty performing the tasks expected of them. They emphasized this with the statement that there had not been a division or regimental-level training exercise conducted since 1992.⁴²

Weeks after the conflict began, military officers throughout the Russian Armed Forces were questioning the inept manner in which the operation was conducted. Deputy Defense Minister Colonel-General Boris Gromov commented that "the operation was carried out without the relevant study and in a hurry because any other result was hardly possible. And the considerable forces that were mustered piecemeal across Russia were simply unable to collaborate without training."⁴³ In 1939 the Red Army suffered similar setbacks when they fought against the Finns in the Winter War without sufficient preparation or training.

The Russians failed to anticipate the type of combat that they would fight in Chechnya.

After the initial assault into Grozny was repulsed on 1 January 1995, Russian soldiers who were taken prisoner did not even know where they were. Some had been told that their mission would be to "protect roads," while others asked the reporters, "Can you please tell me who is fighting whom?"⁴⁴ Lieutenant-Colonel Yuri Klaptsov, Deputy Commander of the 131st Motorized Rifle Brigade, was told to expect little resistance when his troops advanced on Grozny on 31 December 1994. The outcome of their battle with the Chechens turned out to be a different matter. The Brigade Commander was killed in the fighting, 12 out of 20 armored vehicles were destroyed and most of the crew members were killed.⁴⁵

Russian planners should have known that the Chechens were well equipped with tanks, multiple rocket launchers and anti-aircraft weapons. Most of this equipment came from Soviet Army stockpiles in Chechnya and was transferred with the approval of the Russian Ministry of Defense.

Lack of training.

On 15 December 1994, after four days of fighting, Russian forces failed to complete the announced encirclement of Grozny. Reporters began to question Grachev's boast that he could take Grozny with one airborne regiment in six hours. As the fighting intensified, reporters noticed the lack of combat readiness of the Russian forces and one reporter commented that "the Russian Armed Forces appear to be no longer capable of carrying out any more or less serious operations."⁴⁶

In one artillery unit, the 805th Guards Artillery Regiment, the Chief of Staff complained that his battalions had only received a small percentage of the trained crew members necessary to fire the weapons. The rest of the crew members were taken from whatever sources were available. Many of the unit's members, to include the officers, learned their trade "on the fly."⁴⁷

"Ad-hoc" nature of Russian units.

The units that were thrown into Chechnya had not worked together prior to the invasion. Many of them came from different military districts if not different services. Several of the units had to be "fleshed" out before they could deploy and some commanders even refused to deploy due to the poor shape of their units. Peacetime under-staffing of units led to several "composite" units being formed so that they could be deployed. This led to units working together for the first time after they were deployed to Chechnya.

Most of the units did not conduct rehearsals for the deployment and, in many cases, the chain of command (particularly field-grade officers and below) did not know the combat mission prior to arriving in Chechnya.

High number of casualties from "friendly fire."

Poorly trained soldiers were blamed for the accidental detonation of an explosive device in February 1995, in which 25 Russian soldiers were killed. The Russian military has even openly commented on the high number of casualties from "friendly fire" and the misuse and abuse of weapons by poorly trained and unskilled troops.⁴⁸ The lack of qualified personnel combined with insufficient coordination between units led to an incident in January 1995, in which a six hour battle took place between a Russian tank unit and a Russian motorized rifle unit before each could identify the other.⁴⁹

CONCLUSIONS

The Russian experience in Chechnya demonstrates the folly of committing poorly trained and equipped forces to combat. Budget constraints, lack of support and squabbles among the various ministries in the Russian government led to disaster on the battlefield. The Russian government never established a clear chain of command for the Russian combatants in Chechnya. Since the fighting began in December, 1994, Russian forces have had over eight major changes of senior command. There was no clear consensus between the MOD and the MVD over who should control the operation.

Despite the time available to plan the operation prior to the main assault in December 1994, the Russian military failed to adequately prepare their units for the rigors of combat. Logistics support for the operation was not developed for sustained combat operations in Chechnya. A thorough Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield does not appear to have been conducted (if it had, the Russian units would have known about the Chechen forces waiting for them in Grozny).

Some of the problems experienced by the army in Chechnya are indicative of the breakdown of the conscription system. The whole process has been disrupted with the breakup of the Soviet Union. Now less than 50% of the conscripts who are supposed to report for the annual call up ever make it to the armed forces.⁵⁰ The number of deferrals has been steadily rising over the past few years. This problem is compounded by the lack of a professional Non-Commissioned Officer Corps in the Russian Army. The present system takes soldiers and gives them several months of training before promoting them to the rank of sergeant. With little experience, these NCOs are not only ineffective but they also must compete with the system of *dedovshchina* (hazing of young soldiers by senior soldiers) which pervades the armed forces. A report by the Russian Academy of Sciences stated that there was an 80% probability of a young man entering the Armed Forces being physically assaulted (30% of this number in a "particularly savage or humiliating form) and a 5% chance of his being the victim of homosexual rape.⁵¹

The Russian Armed Forces performed poorly during this conflict. Political considerations aside, the military leadership sent inadequately trained and equipped forces into a conflict with ambiguous guidance. Morale among the soldiers deployed to Chechnya was extremely low and the situation will probably not improve in the near future.

On 31 March 1996, President Yeltsin stated that he had a plan for ending the conflict. His plan included a halt to military operations and a partial withdrawal of troops. The plan did, however, allow "special operations against terrorists." Combat operations continue despite the proposals. As of April 1996, Russian forces control the major

roads in Chechnya, but are fighting Chechen forces to regain control of major cities and towns. Despite the reported death of Chechen President Dudaev on 24 April 1996, neither side in this conflict shows signs of giving in.

The Russian armed forces are a shell of their former selves. They are under funded, undermanned and poorly led. Their ability to conduct combined arms operations against a major power is questionable and only military tradition seems to hold them together as a "coherent" force. Despite the best efforts of Russia's career leaders, the continual government neglect of their armed forces has caused the deterioration of the former superpower's military to a point of ineffectiveness.

Endnotes

1. In a recent article in *Parameters*, author Ralph Peters describes how most military organizations are ill-equipped to fight in cities and villages: "The US military, otherwise magnificently capable, is an extremely inefficient tool for combat in urban environments. We are not doctrinally, organizationally, or psychologically prepared, nor are we properly trained or equipped, for a serious urban battle, and we must task organize radically even to conduct peacekeeping operations in cities." Ralph Peters, "Our Soldiers, Their Cities," *Parameters*, Spring 1996, p. 43. [BACK](#)

2. In *Military Misfortunes*, authors Eliot Cohen and John Gooch discuss the types of failures that can overcome a military organization. They conclude that catastrophic failures occur when a military organization experiences three kinds of failure simultaneously (failure to learn, anticipate or adapt). The Russian military experience in Chechnya initially demonstrated two of the three characteristics. As the authors explain, if all three types of failure occur simultaneously, total defeat and political collapse are likely. Eliot A. Cohen, John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*, The Free Press: New York, 1990. [BACK](#)

3. See Dr. Robert F. Baumann, *Russian-Soviet Unconventional Wars in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Afghanistan*, Leavenworth Papers Number 20, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, 1993. [BACK](#)

4. For a political-military analysis of the Chechen conflict see Timothy L. Thomas, *The Caucasus Conflict and Russian Security: The Russian Armed Forces Confront Chechnya*, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1995. [BACK](#)

5. Stephen Kiselyov & Azer Mursaliyev, "Who Stands to Gain From the Invasion?", *Moscow News*, December 23-29, 1994, p.2. [BACK](#)

6. Dzhokhar Dudayev was a former Major General of the Soviet Air Force. He commanded a division in Estonia in 1990 and retired from the service in 1990, when he became Chairman of the Executive Committee - All National Chechen People's Congress. He was killed by a Russian air strike in April 1996. [BACK](#)

7. Natalya Pachegina, "Kreml' gotovitsya k vvedeniyu chrezvychaynogo polojeniya v chechne" [Kremlin Prepares to Declare State of Emergency in Chechnya], *Nezavisimaya Gazetta (Independent Newspaper)*, November 30, 1994, p.1. [BACK](#)

8. The operational plan was prepared by the General Staff, the staff of the North Caucasus Military District and a combined staff in Mozdok. No one was clearly in charge and no one wanted to take responsibility for the outcome of the decisions. "Russian Military Assesses Errors of Chechnya Campaign," *International Defense Review*, No. 4/1995, p.6. [BACK](#)

9. Description of the phases of the operation taken from Novichkov, N., Snegovskii, V., Sokolov, A., Shvarev, V., *Rossiyskie Voorujennye Sily v chechenskom konflikte: analiz, itogi, vivogi* [*Russian Armed Forces in the Chechen Conflict: Analysis, Results, Conclusions*]. (Holveg-Infoglov: Moscow, 1995), pp. 28 - 29.[BACK](#)
10. Igor Korotchenko, "Initsiativa - v rukakh rossiyskikh voysk" [Initiative in the Hands of Russian Troops], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta (Independent Newspaper)*, 31 December 1994, p. 1.[BACK](#)
11. Colonel-General Leontiy Shevtsov, "Polgoda boev v chechne" [Six Months of Fighting in Chechnya], *Kraznaya Zvezda (Red Star)*, 8 June 1995, p. 3.[BACK](#)
12. Jay Willis, MEVATEC Corp., CIS News Item, 1221B, 21 December 1994. All CIS News Item footnotes refer to this online computer news service.[BACK](#)
13. Anatoly S. Kulikov (Translated by R. Love), "Russian Internal Troops and Security Challenges in the 1990s," *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement*, Volume 3, Autumn 1994, Number 2, p. 209. "For all practical purposes, the Internal Troops have no heavy weapons or military hardware, and they are not capable of carrying out large-scale combat actions."[BACK](#)
14. Dr. Jacob Kipp, a Senior Analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office, commented that President Yeltsin faced a constitutional/legal dilemma here. Law and doctrine said that Armed Forces could only be used inside the Russian Federation if an extraordinary situation was proclaimed. Without this proclamation, internal order belonged to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In an attempt to maintain surprise, Yeltsin did not proclaim an extraordinary situation, thus limiting legal basis for MOD - Federal Counter-Intelligence Service (FSK) - MVD cooperation and coordination.[BACK](#)
15. Baku Radio Turan, 12 December 1994, as reported in FBIS-SOV-94-239, 13 December 1994, p. 26.[BACK](#)
16. The Sunzha River runs through the center of Grozny.[BACK](#)
17. One estimate lists 20,000 Chechen combatants of which approximately 3,000 were mercenaries. Shevtsov, p. 3. General Pavel Grachev, Russian Defense Minister estimates that Chechen forces numbered approximately 30,000 before the fighting started (plus 6,000 mercenaries). Mikhail Shevtsov, ITAR-TASS World Service, 28 February 1995 as reported in FBIS-SOV-95-040, 1 March 1995, p. 29.[BACK](#)
18. CIS News Item, 0102B/B1, 2 January 1995.[BACK](#)
19. Viktor Litovkin, "Rasstrel 131i maikopskoi brigadiy" [Shooting the 131st Maykop Brigade], *Izvestia (News)*, 11 January 1995, p. 4.[BACK](#)
20. CIS News Item, 0121B, 21 January 1995.[BACK](#)
21. Shevtsov, p. 3.[BACK](#)

22.Dr. Elaine Holoboff, "Oil and the Burning of Grozny," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol. 7, No. 6, pp. 253-257.

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23.CIS News Item, 0412B, 12 April 1995.[BACK](#)

24.Bamut was a former strategic missile site for the Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces.[BACK](#)

25.Khamzat Aslambekov as quoted in CIS News Item 0512C, 12 May 1995.[BACK](#)

26.Novichkov, p. 25.[BACK](#)

27.Col.-Gen. Nikolay M. Dimidyuk, "Bog voyniy na perelome" [The God of War at the Turning Point], *Armeyskiy Sbornik (Army Digest)*, No. 7, 1995, pp. 9-12. Gen. Dimidyuk, Commander of Ground Forces Missile Troops and Artillery, explains how the Soviets used the "artillery offensive" to support the actions of the ground forces.[BACK](#)

28.Dr. Jakob Kipp, a Senior Analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office, pointed out that no military force currently has a working doctrine to fight insurgents in a modern city. The U.S. Army's doctrine on fighting in an urban environment is already seventeen years old and does not fully address the problems that would be encountered while fighting a three dimensional battle in a city. The U.S. Army's experience in Mogadishu demonstrates the difficulty of fighting in a city with the population in place.[BACK](#)

29.Colonel Sergey Leonenko, "Ovladenie gorodom" [Capturing a City], *Armeyskiy Sbornik (Army Digest)*, No. 3, 1995, pp. 31-35. "The fact is that in one case troops take a city using all weapons without restriction, and in another case [they are] under orders to preserve the city as a cultural and economic center."[BACK](#)

30.An exception may be the reported use of a self-guiding missile that homed in on the transmission of Chechen President Dudaev's satellite phone, killing him as he stood in an open field on 21 April 1996.[BACK](#)

31.The *Krasnopol* is an 152mm laser-designated artillery projectile that can be fired from the 2S19 self-propelled gun and older artillery systems such as the 2S3.[BACK](#)

32."Russian Military Assesses Errors of Chechnya Campaign," *International Defense Digest*, No. 4, 1995, p. 6.[BACK](#)

33."The basic 9M55K rocket fired by the Smerch has a high explosive cluster warhead that carries 72 unguided, dual-purpose bomblets to attack personnel and the vulnerable upper surfaces of armored vehicles." Smerch Submunitions Make Show Debut,' *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 30 September 1995, p. 15.[BACK](#)

34.In an article in *Jane's Intelligence Review*, the author estimated that the Chechens had an artillery regiment consisting of 30 light and medium artillery pieces. There have been numerous cases, however, of the Chechens employing BM-21 multiple rocket launchers during the campaign. Dr. Mark Galeotti, "Decline and Fall - What Went Wrong in Chechnia?", Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 98. A more accurate assessment of the Chechen's capability is probably the one in *Kraznaya Zvezda* in which the author states that the Chechens had about 200 artillery pieces to include 18 BM-21s. Shevtsov, p. 3.[BACK](#)

35. The Chechens also used automobiles as mobile mortar platforms for their ambushes. Colonel Aleksandr Kostyuchenko, "Uroki groznogo" [Lessons of Grozny], *Armeyskiy Sbornik (Army Digest)*, No. 11, 1995, p. 29.[BACK](#)
36. Les Grau, *Soviet Non-Linear Combat: Challenge of the 90s*, Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1989.[BACK](#)
37. Leonenko, p. 32.[BACK](#)
38. Artilleriyskiy divizion v boyu [The Artillery Battalion in Combat], 1984, as reported in JPRS-UMA-85-012-L, 1 May 1985, p. 9.[BACK](#)
39. Novichkov, p. 54.[BACK](#)
40. Ibid, p. 64.[BACK](#)
41. "Frontal and Army Aviation in the Chechen Conflict", Conflict Studies Research Centre, The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Camberley, England, June 1995, p. 4. This report was based on the book *The Russian Armed Forces in the Chechnya Conflict* (see footnote #9).[BACK](#)
42. Igor Chernyak, "Skandaly: pekhotnye generaly atakuyut Gracheva" [Scandals: Infantry Generals Attack Grachev], *Komsomolskaya Pravda (Komsomol Truth)*, 10 December 1994, p. 2.[BACK](#)
43. Livia Klingl, "Idiots Are Responsible for the Organization," *Kurier*, 5 January 1995, p. 5 as told in FBIS-SOV-95-003, p. 10.[BACK](#)
44. "Vesti" newscast, Moscow Russian Television Network, 3 January 1995 as reported in FBIS-SOV-95-002, 4 January 1995, p. 10.[BACK](#)
45. CIS News Item, 0115D, 15 January 1995.[BACK](#)
46. Dmitriy Kamyshev, "People in Grozny Are Not Afraid of Assault," *Kommersant-Daily*, 14 December 1994, p. 1. As reported in FBIS-SOV-94-241, pp. 42-43.[BACK](#)
47. Lieutenant-Colonel Sergei Knyazkov, "Artillery ne znaet tishinii" [The Artillery does not Know Silence], *Kraznaya Zvezda (Red Star)*, 15 March 1995, p. 1.[BACK](#)
48. CIS News Item, 0225A/A1, 25 February 1995.[BACK](#)

49. CIS News Item, 0114 A/A1, 14 January 1995. [BACK](#)

50. In 1995 the Russian government received only 24 per cent of the available number of conscripts. "The Russian Armed Forces: From Super Power to Limited Power," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 14 February 1996, p. 17. [BACK](#)

51. Charles Dick, "The Russian Army - Present Plight and Future Prospects," *Jane's Intelligence Review Yearbook 1994/1995*, p. 41. [BACK](#)