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Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya

by MAJ Raymond C. Finch, III

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PAGE

Introduction	1
Background	2
What Prompted the Decision?	3
How Not to Fight a War; Violation of U.S. Principles	5
Leadership Failure	11
Conclusion	14
Endnotes	15
Photo Credits	19

Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya

by MAJ Raymond C. Finch, III

“You have won....We have defeated the rebellious Dudayev regime.”
President Yeltsin, speaking to Russian soldiers in Grozny, 28 May 1996¹

“By issuing the edict on troop withdrawal (for the remaining two Russian brigades), Yeltsin signed an act of surrender.” --Russian newspaper article, 27 November 1996²

Introduction

Nations usually resort to using military force when lesser means of persuasion have proven inadequate. Conflict results when one country or people has been unsuccessful in forcing another country or people to submit to its will. As Clausewitz remarked, “War is merely an extension of politics by other means.” In the modern understanding, the decision to employ force often rests upon the assumption that lesser means of persuasion have failed. Many maintain that using the military instrument of power prior to exhausting the more civilized methods of resolving conflict reflects aggression, imperialism, or at least, impatience. Modern, democratic behavior rests upon the assumption that military force should be used only as a last resort.

In this era of peacekeeping, an equally valid argument, however, can be made for the early and preventative use of force. Applying firm and decisive military force prior to the onset of hostilities can often serve to deter the potential aggressor. Crudely expressed, spilling a little blood today may preclude spilling a lot tomorrow. When dealing with those who don't share the same liberal beliefs toward conflict resolution, exhaustive diplomatic maneuverings, sanctions and warnings are interpreted as weakness and lack the persuasive power of a resolute, though limited, use of force.

In the recent Russian military involvement in Chechnya (October 1994-September 1996), a sloppy mixture of these two approaches is evident. Russian tanks crossed into Chechnya in December 1994 to “establish constitutional order in Chechnya and to preserve the territorial integrity of Russia.”³ This drastic step was the last in a series of increasingly forceful and largely unsuccessful attempts to remove Chechen President Dzhokar Dudayev from power, crush the Chechen claims of independence and impose the Russian Federation's political and economic control of this region. Tens of thousands of casualties later, with much of Chechnya in ruins, Russian forces were withdrawn from this region, having been largely humiliated in nearly two years of vicious fighting. This study will examine some of the reasons behind the Russian decision to employ conventional military force against the Chechens and why their security establishment suffered a defeat.

Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya

Background

Ever since their forced annexation to the Russian empire in the last century, the Chechens have never willingly accepted Russian rule. However, since the population of Chechnya has never been more than a fraction of the Russian, the Chechens have had to wait until Russia was weak or distracted before attempting to assert any new claim of independence. During the Russian Civil War (1917-20), the Chechens declared their sovereignty and established a “theocratic democracy,” until the Red Army finally suppressed them in 1920. The scene was repeated during the German drive east in World War II, when many Chechens joined the Nazi’s anti-Communist campaign. For this “treachery,” the entire people was deported to the deserts of Central Asia. It is estimated that 30-40 percent of the population died either during transit or in the brutal conditions of forced exile.

Again, in mid-1991, sensing weakness and confusion within the Kremlin, nationalist leaders within the Chechen republic began to press demands for independence. A new government, led by former Soviet Air Force General Dzhokar Dudayev, declared Chechen independence in November 1991. Other, more immediate problems prevented the central authorities from taking vigorous action against these Chechen claims. The situation continued to deteriorate, with Chechnya gaining both a self-declared independence and the reputation as a “gangster state.” Using a variety of means, the Chechens acquired a large portion of former Soviet military equipment which had been deployed on their territory and began creating an effective military force.

By the spring of 1994, Russian authorities were attempting to reassert their control over Chechen territory. Russian government officials accused Dudayev of creating a criminal state and, working clandestinely within the Chechen opposition, urged the Chechen people to topple him.⁴ Fighting continued throughout the autumn between forces loyal to Dudayev and the Russian-backed opposition. The Russians finally resorted to supplying Russian tanks and crews to assist the opposition. This covert attempt failed and was soon made public.⁵ Realizing that their Chechen proxies were unable to defeat Dudayev (and to avoid charges of Russian complicity in the failed attempt), the Russian “power” ministers convinced President Yeltsin to deploy regular Russian forces openly into Chechnya.⁶ On 11 December 1994, the Russians marched into Chechnya.

Having relied on clandestine measures to remove Dudayev, detailed planning for a wide-scale conventional military operation did not begin until two weeks prior to the commencement of hostilities. This haste resulted in considerable confusion in command and control which plagued the Russian military throughout the entire 21-month conflict.⁷ Not surprisingly, deployed units were not ready for combat.⁸ This lack of preparation resulted in a near knock-out blow to the Russian forces, so that by the beginning of January 1995, “the army was close to mutiny, almost refusing to obey the ridiculous orders of its commanders and the government in Moscow.”⁹ As later events would prove, the Russian security establishment never fully recovered from this inauspicious beginning.

Foreign Military Studies Office

Exacerbating the lack of preparation was the sorry state of Russian military forces. Ever since the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe in 1989, Soviet, and then Russian military forces had been subject to budget shortfalls and endless, half-measures at reform, resulting in a military where only a fraction of units were combat-ready. (Recall also that many of the defects revealed during the fighting in Afghanistan had not been addressed, but continued to fester.) According to one source, “from the moment Russia’s armed forces were created (1992), not a single regiment, brigade or division-level tactical exercise involving combat fire had been conducted.”¹⁰ To create the Chechen invasion force, brigade- and company-size units were deployed from all over Russia. Rather than taking the requisite time to form, train and equip these composite units into a combat-ready force, they were hastily cobbled together and ordered to march.¹¹

Besides this lack of preparedness, there were legal and moral grounds which hampered the execution of this mission. One of the articles of the Russian military oath (signed by President Yeltsin in January 1992), had each new recruit swear “not to use force against his own people.”¹² The Chechens still belonged to the Russian Federation, and hence, using military force against them was, strictly speaking, illegal. Because of this, the Deputy Commander of Ground Forces would rather resign than lead this unprepared, motley force into combat.¹³

What Prompted the Decision?

Dudayev had been in power for over three years, and so it seems odd that Russian political and military leaders were anxious to launch an attack during the worst time of the year when, because of poor weather, the overwhelmingly superior Russian Air Force would be unable to support the untrained ground forces. From a military perspective, such a decision made no sense. There were, however, other compelling factors.¹⁴

President Yeltsin felt pressure to show he was still in control. A year prior to the Russian attack into Chechnya, the country was poised on the verge of civil war. In October 1993, a showdown between the Russian Parliament and President Yeltsin was fought out on the streets of Moscow. With the help of his Minister of Defense, General Pavel Grachev and a company of T-80 tanks, President Yeltsin persuaded the stubborn parliamentarians to vacate their legislative dwelling, and to agree to new parliamentary elections and the ratification of a new constitution. The results of the elections were not, however, what the President expected.

By the end of 1993, a large percentage of the Russian people had had their fill of empty political promises and unsuccessful economic reforms. Simply put, they were sick of the quasi-democratic and increasingly corrupt political process. One candidate, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and his so-called “Liberal Democratic Partillery of Russia” appealed both to their popular discontent and frustration with Russia’s transition from a communist state. His partillery, and those of the former communists who were promising a return to “normalcy,” posted strong showings in the December 1993 parliamentary elections. Faced with a growing challenge to his authority, President Yeltsin began to look for an opportunity to reassert his control.¹⁵

Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya

For almost three years, Chechen president Dudayev had been thumbing his nose at the Russian government. He had expelled most of the Russian representatives from the military and security agencies, suppressed internal opposition and continued to proclaim full Chechen independence. Russians living in Chechnya were subject to brutal discrimination, and as many as 200,000 fled the republic. There were economic reasons as well. Chechnya was fast becoming a criminal safehaven, where millions of dollars in illegal profits were disappearing.¹⁶ More importantly for Russia, loss of control in Chechnya would likely jeopardize the potential revenues from the planned trans-Chechen oil shipments from the Caspian sea.¹⁷ Yeltsin felt compelled to act.

Other members of the Russian Security Council had their motives in invading Chechnya. The FSB's "black operation" to unseat Dudayev had been an embarrassing failure, and its director, Sergei Stepashin, feared a possible investigation. The Internal Forces (MVD) considered the volatile situation in Chechnya as destabilizing the entire North Caucasus region, where they were already heavily engaged. There was little chance of restoring internal security to the region as long as Dudayev and followers were involved in all sorts of illegal activity. A portion of the military leadership also had their reasons to get involved.¹⁸ With charges of corruption coming ever closer, the Russian Minister of Defense General Grachev, was anxious to demonstrate his martial prowess and personal loyalty to the president.¹⁹ A quick victory in Chechnya would deflect criticism, distract his accusers and solidify his position with the commander in chief.²⁰

It is hard to understand how these high-level Russian security officials could believe that the fight against the Chechens would be short and relatively easy. They were certainly aware of the tsarist army's 25 year-long struggle in the 19th Century against the Chechens. Why did they think it would be any easier this time around? Besides his boast that he could topple Dudayev in a couple of hours with a single parachute regiment, Defense Minister Grachev is reported to have convinced members of the Security Council that the operation "was going to be a bloodless 'blitzkrieg,' that would not last any longer than December 20th."²¹ The available sources suggest a variety of reasons for such an inflated assessment.

The members of the Russian Security Council considered Dudayev and his army as a criminal, disorganized gang of rebels, who would be intimidated at the first sign of a Russian tank. They failed to understand that for the past three years, the Chechen leader and his entourage had fostered the notion of Chechen independence, transforming the region from a Russian republic into a quasi-Muslim, well-armed state, led by a committed core of dedicated fighters. Dudayev and many of his key lieutenants were Soviet military veterans, who were well aware of Russian capabilities and weaknesses.²² Traditionally, the Chechens are a warrior people, for whom resistance and fighting are national virtues. Having appropriated the lion's share of the arsenal left behind by the Soviet/Russian military, President Dudayev and other clan leaders had created small, effective guerrilla groups. The Dudayev government had also managed to enlist numbers of well-trained mercenaries who had vested interests in fighting the Russians.²³ From the day Dudayev had declared independence in 1991, many Chechens had been preparing for a Russian attack.

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Members of the Russian security establishment both underestimated their opponent and overestimated the fighting capabilities of its own forces, especially those belonging to the Ministry of Defense. General Grachev ought to have known the actual state of Russian military combat-readiness. The unprepared state of Russian military units should have come as no surprise to the Kremlin leadership. For the previous two years, key Russian generals had been warning that the military was quickly falling into disrepair. His ignorance can be partially explained by his role as President Yeltsin's "personal" defense minister. Grachev had the reputation of spending more time in Moscow than inspecting units outside of the capitol. More ominous were the frictions between Grachev and other senior military leaders. Grachev's support in the autumn of 1993 reversed his earlier claims that the "military would remain outside of politics." As defense minister, Grachev had the unenviable task of reforming and shrinking the bloated Russian military, and was, therefore, not well respected by a large portion of the senior military leadership. Subordinate commanders probably showed Grachev just what he wanted to see.²⁴ In turn, Grachev was more than willing to share this inflated assessment with his political patron, President Yeltsin.

Thus armed with false notions over his own and the enemy's abilities, President Yeltsin ordered the attack of Russian units into Chechnya. The initial results were a disaster. The list of tactical and operational blunders were indicative of "an overall lack of competence" among the Russian forces which improved only marginally during the course of the war.²⁵ This is not to imply that the Russians never displayed solid leadership, heroism and tactical competence. As the war progressed, some units fought well and with valor. Their sacrifice and efforts, however, were overshadowed and undermined by a failure to apply the principles of war and problems within the senior leadership.

How Not to Fight a War; Violation of U.S. Principles

1. Objective: The stated objective was to preserve the territorial integrity of Russia and establish constitutional order in Chechnya. There were two problems with assigning this dual mission to the military. First, Chechnya was not going anywhere, in the sense that the region is geographically (and economically) tied to Russia. If the Russian government was intent on winning the hearts and minds of the Chechen people, and convincing them to remain a part of Russia, then carpet bombing and massed artillery strikes on civilian targets were the wrong tools. Having failed to apply lesser means of persuasion, use of the military was premature. As General Vorobyov remarked when turning down the command (and being forced to resign), "I believe that it is criminal to use the military against one's own people."²⁶

Second, Russian leaders ought to have considered the constitutional basis for using the military to establish order in Chechnya. Although the new Russian constitution (December 1993) granted the President wide authorities (wide enough to justify the use of force against any foreign enemy), the decision to use the military against the internal threat in Chechnya was never put before the Russian Duma, and, thus, never gained the support of the Russian people. Use of armed forces to quell internal disputes had in the past been relegated to the Internal Forces (MVD). As mentioned earlier,

Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya

employing the military against Russian citizens was establishing a dangerous precedent, and was widely criticized in the Russian media. Throughout the 21-month conflict, little effort was made to generate public support. This arbitrary decision to use force against the Chechens, made in relative isolation and without the support or knowledge of the Russian populace, would return to haunt the Kremlin leadership.



Figure 1 - Russian BTR North of Grozny.

The real objective was to unseat Dudayev, destroy his clan power-base and replace him with someone who would comply with the Kremlin. After the failed “black” operation to unseat Dudayev was exposed by the independent Russian press, Russian military and political leaders grew impatient with the clandestine or surgical approach, and unleashed the fury of an “impotent military which can only bite into your leg with toothless gums.”²⁷ For almost a month, Russian military forces slogged their way into the capital city of Grozny, taking heavy casualties and destroying much of the city. Even after operational control was passed to the internal forces (MVD), there appeared to be little change in the tactics: destroy any and all rebel forces and pay little heed to the collateral damage. An air of insincerity and threat characterizes the many attempts made by the Russian leadership to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the Chechens.²⁸ While political leaders were talking about ceasefires and peace negotiations, military forces continued to conduct combat operations.

Foreign Military Studies Office

Despite their painful history, only a fraction of the Chechen population harbored any open hostility toward Russian leadership at the onset of hostilities. Indeed, many Chechens supported the early Russian efforts to unseat Dudayev. The Chechen president had succeeded in bringing the region to the brink of economic collapse. However, as the war and the destruction progressed, the Chechen population (and many of the Russians living in Chechnya), began to consider the Russian military as the enemy. In their sloppy attempt at chopping off the head of the Chechen leadership, the Russian military and internal forces not only agitated Dudayev supporters, but also alienated nearly the entire Chechen/Russian population. The often indiscriminate slaughter confirmed their worst fears and recalled their deadly exile during World War II.

2. Offensive: No one can accuse the Russian forces of failing to go on the offensive. However, the pre-condition for successful offensive operations is a well-trained and thoroughly prepared force. Rushing into combat for the sake of political exigencies or other non-military objectives will often result in slaughter. The initial assault into Grozny is an apt illustration. Rather than identifying a main effort, Russian forces moved along three isolated and mutually unsupported columns. There were reports of commanders promising personal favors to those subordinates who achieved their objectives on time.²⁹ Securing the designated hills and villages was paid for in extremely heavy casualties. Although Russian forces were finally able to raise the Russian flag over the burned out shell of the Chechen presidential building, they were never able to fully seal off the city.

As the fighting progressed to the areas south and west of Grozny, the Russians succeeded in clearing the region of Chechen rebels. Their hold was tenuous, however. The Chechens would return again and again (especially at night) and regain the initiative. Despite their overwhelming advantages in firepower, the Russians never enjoyed freedom of action (except in the air). Unable to realize their objective, not surprisingly, the principle of offensive came to be interpreted as the tons of ordnance dropped on the target.³⁰

3. Mass: Preparing for the last war is a potential problem for any military. Reading the history of the Soviet Great Patriotic War (World War II), one is struck by the sheer scale and mass of Soviet military operations. However, the concept of massed force which worked against the Nazis in 1944-45 failed against the Chechens in 1994-96. There were three reasons for this:

A. Thousands of untrained troops, poorly led and fighting for a dubious cause proved no match for well-trained, committed patriots fighting for their homeland. Despite the advantage in firepower, heavy armored forces are of limited value in low-intensity operations.

Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya



Figure 2 - Russian Artillery near the Village of Shali.

B. For the principle of mass to work, all forces must be synchronized into a “closed fist.” The various branches of the Russian defense establishment were not well-coordinated. Indeed, there were numerous reports of Russian units not cooperating with each other, and in some cases, deliberately firing on each other.³¹

C. For the principle of mass to be successfully employed, there must be a responsive, well-stocked logistical system. For a number of reasons, military supplies often never reached their intended consumer. Regardless of mass, hungry, poorly clothed and equipped soldiers do not fight well.³²

4. Economy of Force: Without thorough planning and preparation, it is impossible to gain economy of force. Problems with command and control resulted in the sloppy employment and distribution of forces. Unable to accurately target the Chechen rebels (i.e., those who were actively fighting against the Russians) and crush the Chechen center of gravity, Russian forces adopted a “shot gun” approach. They delivered tons of ordnance in the hope of taking out individual Chechen snipers. This unjudicious employment of combat power served to alienate a large percentage of the potentially neutral Chechen population and transformed them into active combatants.



Figure 3 - Russian Artillery Massed near Grozny.

Whether directing armor forces into Grozny without infantry support, sending naval infantry into unfamiliar urban combat, carpet-bombing city blocks or destroying entire villages, Russian military leaders failed to economize their resources or effectively task-organize. With a callous regard toward human life, Russian generals not only committed their own soldiers to suicidal attacks, but often destroyed anything or anyone incident to their pursuit of Chechen rebels. Rather than destroying the “brain” of Chechen command and control, Russian forces engaged all targets indiscriminately. Given their well-developed security network and advances in guided munitions, it appears that there were other reasons for the Kremlin’s inability to remove the Chechen leadership.³³ As one of Russia’s political commentators remarked: “We have not won anything in Chechnya; rather we have acted like a blindfolded, robust child, thrashing around blindly with an ax.”³⁴

5. Maneuver: Despite their complete dominance in every type of weapon system, Russian forces proved largely unable to place the Chechens into a disadvantageous position. The Chechens knew the territory, and although outmanned and undergunned, the Chechens knowledge of the territory allowed them to keep the Russian forces off-balance. The one notable exception where the Russians gained an advantage “was the large-scale use of combat helicopters and helicopter-transport assaults.”³⁵ Russian forces often resembled a steamroller, which would simply crush whatever came before it. Unfortunately for the Russians, the steamroller soon ran out of steam, and so the Russian units were forced to adopt a “firebase mentality.”³⁶ Russian forces would often move predictably along a given azimuth, and having secured the major lines of communication, would consolidate and dig in. Even the highly renowned Spetsnaz/reconnaissance units were sometimes unable to effectively maneuver because of command and control problems and equipment shortages.³⁷ On occasion, Russian planning illustrated a serious lack of flexibility. During offensive operations (most

Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya

notably, the original plan to seize Grozny), when unexpected resistance altered the plan, instead of adapting, the Russians continued in their frontal assault.

6. Unity of Command: Alongside and related to the problems in leadership, the single, over-riding cause behind the Russian defeat in Chechnya was the dissension among the various levels and branches of command. This lack of unity plagued the Russian effort from day one. Discord existed at every level - from the halls of the Kremlin down to the trenches surrounding Grozny. While President Yeltsin was proclaiming various cease fires and peace proposals, his military commanders were conducting aggressive combat operations. Neither the generals in Moscow nor the soldiers in the mud around Grozny, across the wide spectrum of Russian defense and police forces operating in Chechnya, rarely understood who was in charge. Ground force units were wary of the internal troops, air forces felt little concern toward supporting those fighting on the ground, and there were open conflicts between contract soldiers and draftees.³⁸ Injured Russian ground soldiers were turned away from interior forces' medical facilities.³⁹ Hardly anyone wearing a uniform trusted the politicians in Moscow. This confusion and absence of cooperation, starting at the top, led to contradictory orders and to an overall poorly coordinated effort.

The war has shown just how deeply divided the Russian armed forces are. It is not only the lack of cooperation between the troops of the ministry of defence, the ministry of internal affairs and the federal security bureau, which could have been predicted. It is the backbiting between units and senior commanders within the army itself which is so alarming. The Russian command is no "command of brothers" but a squabbling group of careerists. There appears to be no concept of professional solidarity within its ranks.⁴⁰

7. Security: More than once, the Chechens were aware of Russian plans before the commanders in the field. Both the former Security Council Secretary and chief Russian peace negotiator claimed that there was a high-level leak somewhere between the commanders in the field and the political leaders in the Kremlin. The Chechens were apparently aware of every major Russian operation, from the initial attack in December 1994, to the deployment of forces into the capital in August 1996.⁴¹ One of the more flagrant security breaches occurred in June 1995, when a company of Chechen fighters slipped across the border north into Stavropol and took an entire hospital hostage. The continued resupply of Chechen forces (and not just those weapons which were supplied by Russian soldiers), illustrated the Russian inability to isolate the theater of operations. Security was no better at the tactical level. Ill-disciplined, poorly fed and supplied (and often drunk) soldiers performed poorly in security tasks. Russian tactics aggravated their inability to secure an area. As the war progressed, and Russian operations became ever more heavy-handed (and the Chechen response more desperate), nearly every Chechen was transformed into a guerrilla, making security almost impossible.

8. Surprise: Again, except for air-targeting, the Chechen forces seemed well-briefed on every major Russian plan. The initial invasion plan was predicated upon catching the Chechens off-guard. Indeed, General Grachev had met with Dudayev during the first week in December 1994 and assured the Chechen leader and all of Russia that “there would be no war.”⁴² Instead of waiting a reasonable amount of time to develop an effective deception plan, the order to attack came within the next 72 hours. The Chechens were hardly surprised.

9. Simplicity: To coordinate the many disparate elements involved in any modern combat operation and transform them into a “simple” whole requires thorough training, solid leadership and intensive preparation. This was especially true in Chechnya, where Russian forces were drawn from a host of different security agencies and were unfamiliar with working with each other. Lacking experience in interoperability, this menagerie of Russian units never achieved simplicity, and their performance can best be summed up by a Russian intelligence officer at the end of the conflict: “There are an awful lot of bosses here, and they have brought in more-than-enough troops, but no one knows how to give a sensible order.”⁴³

Leadership Failure

Although serious, given enough time and effort, tactical incompetence can be remedied on the battlefield. If it were just the above violations, Russian forces could have learned from their mistakes, and although it might have taken another year or so, they could have ultimately defeated the Chechens. What finally undermined the Russian effort were grievous breaches in the realm of leadership. This failure of leadership occurred at the highest of levels, from the critical juncture where policy is translated into military action, to subsequently infecting the entire operation with pessimism and skepticism.

The ordinary (Russian) soldier’s and officer’s contempt and loathing for that “brothel in the Kremlin” was extreme, open and, as far as I can tell, virtually universal. If the dominant cliché to be heard on the Chechen side is that “One Chechen is worth a hundred Russians,” one frequently heard on the Russian side is: “A fish rots from the head.” The “head” in this case means not just Yeltsin and his entourage, but also Defense Minister Pavel Grachev and, to an extent, the entire military hierarchy, riddled as it is with outrageous corruption and outright theft.⁴⁴

In a very real sense, the fight against the Chechens was lost within the walls of the Kremlin.

Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya

The tragedy for the Russian military/security establishment is that there were many Russian officers and soldiers who attempted to carry out their duties in a professional manner. Unfortunately, the poor example of a number of senior level officers poisoned the morale and fighting spirit of the entire force. Those that betrayed their military/security vocation succumbed to one or more of the following leadership failures:

1. *Pleasing their political leaders or higher headquarters by insisting upon the execution of absurd or infeasible military orders.* A glaring example was General Grachev's insistence to continue the initial attack upon Grozny in January 1995, despite the unprepared state of the invasion force. Other examples include the many attempts on the part of the military leadership to end the war by certain dates (e.g., in time for the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in May 1995; before President Yeltsin's visit to the G-7 summit in June 1995; before the presidential elections in June 1996). Their motives were being driven by considerations external to the conflict or the welfare of their men.

Not all senior-level officers succumbed to this desire to curry favor. Consider the example of General E. Vorobyov. As first deputy commander for Russian ground forces, he was dispatched to Mozdok in mid-December 1994 to take command of the invasion force. After familiarizing himself with the mission and the readiness of his units, he realized that the "operation was badly thought out, a sheer adventure." He did not soften his criticism when General Grachev arrived, and then, after explaining his reluctance to either employ military force against Russian citizens or lead this untrained force into combat, was advised by Grachev to submit his resignation.⁴⁵ A handful of other senior Russian officers would also be forced to resign. Unfortunately for the Russian military, there were too many other high-level generals who acted in a less heroic manner.

2. *A casual disregard toward the fate of both soldiers and civilians.* Russian military actions displayed an almost complete indifference toward casualties. The remains of Russian soldiers, Chechen rebels and innocent civilians were left to rot on the streets for weeks. Russian fire planners targeted cultural landmarks, hospitals, and markets in their pursuit of rebel forces.

In the conflict with the secessionist Republic of Chechnya, Russian forces continued to commit numerous, serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. Russian forces used indiscriminate and excessive force without regard for the presence of noncombatants, prevented civilians from evacuating areas of imminent danger, blocked humanitarian assistance from reaching civilians in need, mistreated detainees who may or may not have had any links with separatist forces, and tolerated incidents involving groups of federal soldiers engaging in murder, rape, assault, extortion and theft.⁴⁶



Figure 4 - Aftermath of Battle near Gudermes.

Their callous conduct quickly transformed the Russian forces from possible liberators from the Dudayev regime into eternal enemies.

3. *Failure to take care of the soldier.* From the opening days of the conflict until the Russian capitulation in August 1996, Russian soldiers were inadequately fed, clothed and sheltered. Discipline was arbitrary or nonexistent. Untrained soldiers were sent into combat without adequate or with substandard equipment.⁴⁷ Russian conscripts were maltreated, and desertion was commonplace. Some Russian soldiers surrendered to the enemy without a fight, or sold their arms to the Chechens for food or drugs and alcohol.⁴⁸

4. *Corruption.* This was the cancer which finally rendered the Russian military ineffective and, again, it started at the very top. In Soviet times, the communist partillery and its enforcement structures were entrusted with restraining the less-noble aspects of military members. Although dictatorial, if a soldier or officer stepped out of line, the political commissar/KGB representative could enact swift and severe punishment. In a move to depoliticize Russia's armed forces, the political commissar was removed from the ranks to be replaced by a representative from the FSK (Federal Security Service - successor to the KGB). Unfortunately, both the oversight authorities and the military structures themselves have become equally infected with the prevalent societal norm: a raw sort of capitalism, where the only moral consideration is profit. Throughout this conflict, there have been numerous reports of widespread corruption.⁴⁹

Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya

Conclusion

For the time being at least, the war in Chechnya is over, and it appears that the Chechens have won their independence. The ceasefire agreement, however, which ended the hostilities, merely postpones the final determination of Chechnya's political status until 2001. The negotiations are certain to be difficult. Russian political leaders continue to insist that Chechnya remain a part of Russia, while Chechen leaders openly proclaim their sovereignty.

Regardless of political status, the final tally from the 21-month conflict is grim. The Chechens have undoubtedly gained a greater degree of autonomy, but the region is in ruins, the economy and infrastructure largely destroyed, and 10-15 percent of the population is either dead, wounded or have been displaced from the region.

The results from the Russian side are even more discouraging. Besides the thousands of Russian soldiers and civilians killed, wounded or missing, the fighting in Chechnya has revealed deep flaws within the entire Russian security establishment. The fighting in Chechnya has helped to sink morale within the Russian military to an all-time low. In the political realm, the Chechen war has stripped President Yeltsin of most of his liberal supporters. For all practical purposes, the Chechens have gained their independence, further weakening the already feeble centralized control of the Kremlin. In the international realm, this conflict has done much to discredit Russia both as a superpower and as a country which is moving toward democracy.

Russian politicians, generals and analysts will continue to debate how this conflict might have been avoided, or perhaps how it might have been won. While many Russians continue to insist that Chechnya remain a part of Russia, few are now willing to advocate the use of conventional military force to preserve this unity. Paradoxically, as Russia continues in its painful transition toward a democratic state, this may be the most valuable lesson derived from this conflict.☪



ENDNOTES

1. “Yeltsin Arrives in Grozny, Congratulates Russian Army,” *Interfax*, 1026GMT 28 May 96, as reported in FBIS-SOV-96-103 (on-line).
2. Ilya Bulavinov, “The First Victims of Military Organizational Development,” *Kommersant-Daily*, 27 Nov 96, p. 3, as translated in RUSPRESS, 27 Nov 96.
3. Aleksandr Goltz, “Shtoby pravil’no ispol’zovat’ voennuyu silu, eyu kak minimum nado raspologat’” (In order to make correct use of military force, you must at least have it at your disposal), *Krasnaya zvezda*, 7 Sep 96, p. 2.
4. By the summer of 1994, Dudayev had lost much of his support among those living within Chechnya. According to a number of sources, Dudayev had placed the Chechen republic on the brink of political and economic catastrophe. Political and military leaders in Moscow failed to understand that open Russian interference gave the Chechen leader the pretext to suspend all semblances of democracy and to direct the fractious clans at a single enemy: Russia.
5. This humiliating failure was probably the spark which ignited the large-scale Russian military involvement. According to a close advisor of Yeltsin, “The president was utterly humiliated, and that could only lead to disaster.” For a journalistic look at the Chechen conflict, see: David Remnick, “Letter from Chechnya,” *The New Yorker*, 24 July 1995, pp. 46-62. Specific comment attributed to presidential advisor, Emil Pain, p. 55.
6. Loosely defined, the “power” ministers within the Russian security establishment are those leaders which have armed forces at their disposal: the Minister of Defense (MOD), the Minister of Internal Affairs (MVD), the Federal Border Service (FSG), the Secretary of the Security Council; the Chief of the Federal Security Service (FSB; formerly KGB), and the chief of the Presidential Security Force. There remains some doubt as to which ministers were responsible for convincing Yeltsin that the Chechen crisis could be best handled by force. Likely candidates include the MOD (Grachev), MVD (Yerin), FSB (Stepashin), Yeltsin’s chief bodyguard and chief of the presidential security force (Korzhakov), and the Secretary of the Security Council (Lobov).
7. According to one report, Grachev bypassed the General Staff, and delegated detailed planning for the operation to the commander of the North Caucasus Military District. See comments by the deputy commander for Ground Troops, Col-Gen E. Vorobyov in Remnick, p. 58. An article written shortly after the invasion began places the blame for confusion on the fact that Grachev detailed two officers out of the General Staff Main Directorate of Operations (who were unaware of the local conditions), to draw up the invasion plan. See, Mariya Dementyeva, “Operation Following Mozdok-Arbat Recipes; the Lessons of the Last Phase of the Chechen Operation,” *Segodnya*, 15 Feb 95, p. 9, as translated in JPRS-UMA-95-009, 15 Feb 95 (on-line).
8. Pavel Felgengauer, “A War Moscow Cannot Afford to Lose,” *Transition*, 31 May 1996, pp. 28-31.
9. Ibid, p 29.
10. Aleksandr Frolov, “Soldaty na peredovoi i polkovodtsy v Mozdoke” (Soldiers on the frontlines and Commanders in Mozdok), *Izvestiya*, 11 Jan 95, p. 4.
11. For an excellent synopsis of the Russian military performance in Chechnya, see: Charles Blandy and David Isby, “The Chechen Conflict,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, Special Report No. 11, 1996.
12. *Voyennaya sluzhba v sovremennoy Rossii (Military Service in Contemporary Russia)*, (St Petersburg, Russia: Center for Technical Development, 1995), p. 143.

Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya

13. Remnick, pp. 58-9.

14. For an extremely detailed account of the many factors which finally prompted the Russian leadership to employ military force against the Chechens, see: Timothy L. Thomas, **“The Caucasus Conflict and Russian Security: The Russian Armed Forces Confront Chechnya,”** *Foreign Military Studies Office Blue Book*, June 1995.

15. This view is supported by both current and past Yeltsin advisors. For an excellent ground to the Chechen conflict, see: Emil Pain and Arkady Popov, **“RAND: Chechnya Case Study,”** at: <http://www.rand.org/publications/CF/CF130/>. Also see **“This is Yeltsin’s Vietnam,”** *Der Spiegel*, 22 Jan 96, as translated in FBIS-SOV-96-016, 22 Jan 96 (on-line), where former Yeltsin advisor, Gregory Yavlinksiy, claims that it was a desire to reassert his authority which prompted Yeltsin to use military force in Chechnya.

16. The economic factors which compelled Russia to initiate combat actions against Chechnya are distressing and quite complex. As General Lebed remarked, “The Chechen war is a mafia squabble at state level. The roots are primarily economic, then political, and only after that military.” See Ravil Zaripov, **“Interview with General Aleksandr Lebed,”** *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 19 Mar 96, as translated in FBIS-SOV-96-057, 22 Mar 96, p. 23. When Dudayev began to restrict Russian access to this “free economic-criminal zone,” Russian leaders decided he had to be removed. “It appears that mafia henchmen are entrenched at the very top of the Russian political pyramid. They used Dudayev’s Chechnya as a sort of black hole down which countless trillions (rubles) disappeared through financial weapons and oil scams.” See: Sergei Roy, **“Aw, What a Lousy War,”** *Moscow News*, March 1996, p. 3.

17. Like the U.S.-led actions against Iraq, there have been a number of theories which posit oil revenues as the root cause of the Chechen conflict. However, given the fact that Chechnya possesses less than 1 percent of Russian oil reserves and that transit lines for the Caspian oil reserves will likely be pumped over numerous routes, it seems doubtful that oil alone drove the Russians to attack. The RAND study notes that influential representatives from the Russian oil and gas industry were dead set against the use of force. See Azrael and Pain, p. 5. The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. For examples arguing that oil was the root cause, see: **“Mobilized and Summoned by Competition,”** *Kommersant*, 10 Sep 96, as translated in FBIS-SOV-96-183, 10 Sep 96 (on-line). Interestingly enough, the major oil pipelines and refinery stations in Chechnya came out of the war almost unscathed.

18. For an extremely thorough background to the reasons behind the Russian attack into Chechnya (from a retired Russian officer’s perspective), see: Igor’ Bunich, *Khronika Chechenskoy voiny (Chronicle of the Chechen War)*, (Saint Petersburg, Russia: Oblik Press, 1995).

19. General Grachev had assumed the role of Defense Minister after displaying loyalty to President Yeltsin during the botched coup attempt of August 1991, and later, confirmed his loyalty during the constitutional showdown with the Parliament in October 1993. Practically from the day of his appointment, there had been rumors and allegations that Grachev was linked to corruption within the Russian military. Just a month prior to the Russian attack, a prominent Russian journalist, who had been investigating high-level military corruption, was murdered. Whether Grachev was linked to his death is unclear, but there is little doubt that he was at least involved in covering up for those subordinates who “plundered the military department, pilfering away sections large and small.” See Yuliya Kalinina, **“Minister oborony-diagnos” (Minister of Defense-Diagnose),** *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 11 Oct 96, p. 2. For a thorough study on the problem of corruption within the Russian armed forces, see: Graham H. Turbiville, **“Mafia in Uniform: The Criminalization of the Russian Armed Forces,”** *Foreign Military Studies Office*, July 1995.

Foreign Military Studies Office

20. The press accusations implying his direct involvement in corrupt practices, combined with the failed “‘black’ operation to unseat Dudayev, Grachev” was in no position to stop the operation and risk his position.” See: Felgengauer, p. 29.

21. In denying Russian military involvement in the failed covert operation, Defense Minister Grachev had claimed that from a military perspective, he would never have sent tanks into Grozny, and that “if the Army had fought...one airborne regiment within two hours would have been able to handle the whole thing.” See Pavel Litovkin, “**Ministerstvo oborony RF: versiyu ob uchastii rossiiskoi armii v chechenskom konflikte General Grachev nazyvayet bredom,**” (Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation: General Grachev calls the version about Russian army participation in the Chechen conflict “nonsense”), *Izvestiya*, 29 Nov 94, p. 1.

22. “Oh, what tangled webs we weave” is an apt epitaph for Russian involvement in the Caucasus since the collapse of the USSR. The Kremlin leadership has been playing a double game with the peoples of this region, often to its own peril. For example, the Russians were upset with the intransigence of the Georgian leadership with regard to military-basing rights and oil pipeline routes. They were determined to show the Georgians why they should maintain warm relations with Russia. To prove their point, the Russians began to provide military assistance to the Abkhazians in their fight for independence from Georgia. In the process, however, they inadvertently helped to train Chechen forces, who were also helping the Abkhazians. One of these Chechen fighters, Shamil Basayev, learned his lessons well, and two years later, helped to rout the Russians out of this region.

23. Thomas, pp. 18-20.

24. Grachev assumed the position as Defense Minister by his personal pledge of loyalty to Yeltsin during the August 1991 coup attempt. He was certainly not the senior Russian officer at the time of his appointment. This rapid promotion, combined with Grachev’s airborne ground, alienated him from much of the senior (ground forces) leadership. His reputation was never very high and continued to decrease during the course of fighting in Chechnya. There were some within the ranks who would like nothing better than for Grachev to fail. For a brief assessment, see: Alexander Zhilin, “**Generals Divided Over June Election,**” *Moscow News*, 11-17 April 1996, p. 4. Also see: Benjamin S. Lambeth, “**Russia’s Wounded Military,**” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1995, pp. 86-98.

25. Peter Rutland, “**Military Lessons of the Chechen War,**” *OMRI Analytical Brief*, No. 427, 31 October 96, (on-line).

26. Remnick, p. 58.

27. Aleksandr Prokhanov, “**Interview with A. Lebed; Strike with a Fist!**,” *Zavtra*, August 1995, No 34, pp. 1, 3 as translated in FBIS-SOV-95-185-S, 25 Sep 95, pp. 10-14.

28. Prime Minister V. Chernomyrdin was on the verge of reaching a settlement with the Chechen leadership in November 1995, “when some elements in Moscow sabotaged it.” See: A. Kennaway, “**The Russian Black Hole,**” *Conflict Studies Research Center*, Nov 96.

29. Dementyeva.

30. Using the military to rout out Dudayev and his clan was simply the wrong tool for the job. For a number of reasons, there will probably never be an accurate accountability of the amount of ordnance used by the Russians. The Stalingrad landscape of Grozny would indicate that it was a lot. Just one indicator of the intensity: during the most intense bombing of Sarajevo “there were 3,500 detonations a day, while in Grozny, the winter bombing (94-95) reached a rate of 4,000 detonations an *hour*.” Remnick, p. 48.

Why the Russian Military Failed in Chechnya

31. One of the more grisly episodes of this (intentional?) fratricide occurred during the fighting at Pervomayskaya in January 1996. For a thorough account which captures much of the flavor of fighting in this conflict and why the principle of “mass” must be built upon the precondition of well-trained units, see: Grigoriy Sanin, “**Diagnosis: The Hunt for Lone Wolves. The Intelligence Services and Journalists Sum up the Results of the Russian Pearl Harbor,**” *Segodnya*, 24 Jan 96, p. 3, as translated in FBIS-UMA-96-045-S, 6 March 1996, pp. 23-30.

32. Consider the following quote from: Petr Berezko, “**What did Lebed Learn from Top Secret Documents?,**” *Novaya gazeta/ponedelnik*, 7-13 Oct 96, p. 2, as translated in FBIS-SOV-96-198, 13 October 1996.

“No army can fight without a strong rear. Therefore, our 40,000-strong group of forces in Chechnya was defeated by embezzlers and impotent rulers in Moscow, not by Chechen rebels.”

Aggravating the situation was the fact that the once vaunted strategic reserves of the former Soviet Army had long since been privatised, and there was little within the civilian sector which could be mobilized.

33. Given their air superiority and well-documented targeting ability, why didn't the Russians remove President Dudayev before April 1996? From December 1995 until his death in April 1996, Dudayev was routinely giving interviews to members of the media. Much of the Russian failure is due to their inability to take out the Chechen C² (command and control) early on and economize their fighting power. The answer might be found in a secret agreement between Chechen and Russian officials, which stated that the Russians would not target Chechen leaders in exchange for Chechen assurances that they would confine their operations to Chechnya. See: S.I., “**Was There a Secret Deal With FSB,**” *Moskovskiy komsomolets*, 20 Jun 95, p. 1, as translated in RUSPRESS, 20 Jun 95.

34. Ilya Milshcheyn, “**Interview with Vladimir Lukin,**” *Novoye vremya*, Nov 96, No. 45, pp. 12-14, as translated in FBIS-SOV-96-236-S (on-line).

35. Blandy and Isby, p. 19.

36. “...as soon as darkness sets in, the federal forces find themselves almost everywhere effectively under siege' and under fire, so they, for their part, open fire in return at everything that moves” See: Aleksey Arbatov, “**Peace is Unlikely to Arrive Before the Election,**” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 4 Apr 96, pp. 1, 3, as translated in FBIS-SOV-96-068 (on-line).

37. For an assessment of some of the problems affecting the spetsnaz and reconnaissance units, see: Oleg Blotskiy, “**Chechnya: Voyna professionalov**” (**Chechnya: a war of professionals**), *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 22 Aug 96, p. 2.

38. “In the words of a GRU officer who participated in combat actions in Chechnya, it was in this period (Dec 94-Jun 95) that military pilots refused to fly into areas where the Spetsnaz was engaging the rebels.” See: Blotskiy.

39. Consider the following quote from a Russian eyewitness: “A wounded internal troops soldier is brought to the Ministry of Defense hospital and told: Take him to the MVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) hospital.” Frolov.

40. M.J. Orr, “**The Current State of the Russian Armed Forces,**” *Conflict Studies Research Center*, D60, November 1996, p. 11.

Foreign Military Studies Office

41. The abundance of Kremlin conspiracy theories makes distilling the truth rather murky. In an attempt to explain their poor performance, Russian generals were anxious to find some excuse. From the available evidence, it appears that there was a leak out of the Kremlin and that the Chechen leadership did have a heads-up on a number of Russian initiatives. Consider the following quote from: Masha Gessen, “**Letter from Moscow,**” *New Statesman and Society*, 19 Jan 96, pp. 39-51.

In a recent television interview, Arkady Volsky, the joint leader of the negotiating team on the federal (Russian) side, said that, on at least two occasions, when he sent secret messages on the negotiations to the Russian prime minister, Dudayev mysteriously had knowledge of the contents soon afterward.

For an even more disturbing report of a security breach, see: Kostantin Petrov, “**August in Grozny: Before and After; Did Russian Special Services Know of Attack That Was Being Prepared?**,” *Krasnaya zvezda*, 28 Aug 96, pp. 1,3; as translated in FBIS-SOV-96-168 (on-line). The answer to the question, according to the author of this article, is that, yes, the special services did know of the impending attack, but took no action to warn the military units stationed in the city.

42. Bunich, p. 150.

43. Oleg Blotskiy, “**Chechnya: vojna professionalov**” (Chechnya: a war of professionals), *Nezavisimoe voyennoe obozrenie*, 22 August 1996, p. 2.

44. Anatol Lieven, “**Russia’s Military Nadir: The Meaning of the Chechen Debacle,**” *The National Interest*, Summer 1996, pp. 24-33.

45. Remnick, pp. 58-9.

46. **Human Rights Report on Russia, 1996**; U.S. Department of State, 30 Jan 97, internet address: http://www.state.gov/www/issues/human_rights/1996_hrp_report/russia.html

47. Tanks were sent into battle without reactive armor, and some even without machine-gun ammunition. See Blandy and Isby, p. 20.

48. Prior to signing the ceasefire with the Chechens, the Secretary of the Security Council, A. Lebed, commented that “threadbare partisan forces in World War II were better clothed than the lice-infested Russian soldiers in Chechnya. He called them cannon-fodder.” See: “**Russia’s Humiliation in Chechnya,**” *New York Times*, 15 Aug 96, p. 26. For a more detailed analysis on the impoverished condition of Russian security forces in Chechnya, see: Aleksandr Kondrashov, “**Novaya taktika v staroy voyne**” (A New Tactic in the Old War), *Novaya gazeta/ponedelnik*, 5-11 Aug 96, p. 6.

49. Again, see report by Dr. Turbiville for catalog of corruption charges.

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