

RUSSIAN TACTICAL LESSONS LEARNED
FIGHTING CHECHEN SEPARATISTS

BY

TIMOTHY L. THOMAS
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Please forward comments referencing this study to:

FMSO
ATIN-F MR. THOMAS
731 MCCLELLAN AVENUE
FT LEAVENWORTH KANSAS 66027-1350

COM: (913) 684-5957
DSN: 552-5957
FAX: (913) 684-5960/5959

E-MAIL: TIM.L.THOMAS@US.ARMY.MIL

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INTRODUCTION

On 11 December 2004 Russian newspapers recognized the tenth anniversary of the start of the war in the Russian Republic of Chechnya. The so-called “first war” lasted from December 1994 to September 1996. The “second war” started in 1999 and is still ongoing. In these wars the Chechen Republic has sought its independence from Russia, a geostrategic undertaking that Russia feels it cannot tolerate if it is to maintain peace and stability in the North Caucasus region. Russia is afraid that a Vietnam era concept, the domino effect, will ensue if Chechnya becomes independent. That is, Chechnya’s independence would set off a chain reaction of independence-seeking republics in the region sympathetic to the Chechens cause.

During the conflict in Chechnya, both the Chechen and Russian sides have employed a variety of methods to either conduct an insurgency or to counter one, respectively, and both sides have attained great skills at each. On the Chechen side, these skills include the extensive planning and construction of hostage taking and ambush sites, the use of deception, the development and employment of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide bombers, attacks against leading security and law enforcement officials (to include the assassination of the Chechen President), and the utilization of the Internet and mass media as information outlets to further their cause. On the Russian side, the counter insurgency skills developed by its armed forces include the ability to recognize ambush sites and IEDs, the ability to spot and disarm mines, the use of friendly Chechen subunits as reconnaissance groups, and the establishment of a special information center to feed the official Russian version of events to the media.

In the days of the Soviet Union and the Cold War, it was difficult to find Soviet “lessons learned” (for example, from the fighting in Afghanistan) while the conflict was unfolding. This is no longer the case. The depth and scope of the discussion over current operations in Chechnya is a clear departure from past practices. To a Western reader these lessons learned may not be too revealing but to former Soviet specialists these insights are more interesting, detailed, and current than anything available in the past. These insights have filtered down to public view through the Russian journals and papers granted access to captured documents and to interviews with combatants.

This report includes lessons learned based on captured Chechen documents, first hand battle experience of Chechen and Russian combatants in the region, the experiences of Chechens fighting for the Russians against Chechens, and combat experience passed down in military journals. Various security ministries have provided some of the lessons learned (the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian Military in particular), and Special Forces troops have provided other lessons. Lesson learned issues include cultural lessons, and lessons by branch of service, terrain, and training issues. In many cases they are not listed as “lessons learned” but rather as problems to overcome.

One of the primary sources for training based on the Chechen experience, included as Appendix One to this article, is the writing of the trio of Lieutenant General

Gennadiy Kotenko, Major General (retired) Ivan Vorobyev, and Colonel Valeriy Kiselev. Writing for the Russian armed forces journals Armeyskiy Sbornik (Army Journal) and Voennaya Mysl (Military Thought), these authors covered the following topics during the past three years: small unit tactics, counterterrorist military training, tactical operations in armed conflict, training for combat operation deployments, recommendations for combat team training, tactics in urban combat, training for territorial defense, and training drills for rifle subunits.

US forces fighting in Iraq are confronting many of the same scenarios that Russian soldiers have faced for years. In fact US soldiers hunting for Osama bin Laden might find solace in the research of Russian author Vadim Rechkalov. He has outlined in detail why Russian forces have taken 10 years (and counting) to find Chechen fighter and, from a Russian perspective, bin Laden counterpart Shamil Basayev in a land that is only 30 by 70 miles. Rechkalov's explanation of why Chechens continue fighting is also instructive for US forces:

During the first war, the rebel gangs rarely killed Chechen policemen, but now they just mow them down. No one worries about vendettas anymore but they bound people together in the past. This left a vacuum, and Wahhabism filled it. It is a mobilizing ideology. Put yourself in the place of a young man unburdened by an excess of spirituality or intellect. A jihad is being fought, the homeland has been occupied, and it is the duty of every Muslim to fight the infidels—and the Russians are the infidels. The soldiers are the only Russians the young man has ever seen in his life. All of the other Russians left Chechnya long ago...besides, anyone fighting in this jihad gets a small salary and is guaranteed a place in paradise. Why should he not do this?¹

Grozny, Airplanes, Robberies, Subways, Beslan

The year 2004 saw an extensive array of Chechen insurgent attack methods used against the Russians. While the focus of the fighting remained within Chechnya there were several attacks on civilians outside of Chechnya and even in the capital of Moscow. On 21 August 2004, some 250 Chechen insurgents, many reportedly dressed as policemen, attacked simultaneously in twelve different parts of the Chechen capital of Grozny. The timing of the event, a few hours before Russian President Vladimir Putin's surprise visit to the grave of assassinated Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov, was apparently designed to embarrass Russian authorities just days before the next Chechen presidential election.² This surprise attack was both tactical and strategic, and was carried out on terrain very familiar to the insurgents (there have been four major fights for control of the city of Grozny since 1995—in January 1994, March 1996, August 1996, and January 2000) and with urban tactics familiar to the Chechens.

¹ Vadim Rechkalov, "Why the Special Services Cannot Catch Shamil Basayev. Reason No 5: Basayev's Ideology," *Izvestiya*, 10 December 2004 as downloaded from Johnson's list.

² Steve Rosenberg, "Russia Reports Battle for Grozny, BBC Moscow correspondent, 24 August 2004.

A few days later, two airplanes were blown out of the dark night sky as female suicide bombers on board detonated their charges. Hundreds died. Two months earlier Chechen insurgents, dressed as local policemen, had seized control of Nazran, the capital of the neighboring Russian republic of Ingushetia and stopped and executed police who came to, as they thought, “support” their brothers under attack. In early September, after indications of an extensive repositioning of equipment and planning, insurgents captured the school of Beslan in Ingushetia and took its 1200 inhabitants hostage. Attackers, some 32 in number among which only two survived, reportedly wore NATO-issue camouflage uniforms, carried gas masks, compasses and first-aid kits. They used hand-held radios and brought along two sentry dogs, suggesting extensive surveillance and rehearsals.³ The gas masks, dogs, and the fact that the insurgents destroyed all of the windows in the school indicated that they were prepared to handle any Russian gas attacks similar to the one at the Nord-Ost Theater in Moscow. Between 300-500 Russian children and adults died in the attack.⁴

Clearly, the Chechen insurgents against whom the Russians are fighting possess several key insurgent skills. All of these successful attacks were conducted in a three-month span, indicating that the Chechens are capable of executing consecutive operations and are especially well versed in deception and planning initiatives. Their surveillance and positioning of weapons in the school in Beslan ahead of time (some two or three months) is indicative of this initiative as is their extensive use of police uniforms to blend in with their environment in both Nazran and Grozny (other reports indicate that stolen police or military trucks were used to transport the insurgents to Beslan). The insurgents are motivated ideologically beyond reason or logic, making it all the more difficult to predict their next move. As one report noted

Special subunits were created already in the USSR, including for the conduct of counter-terrorist operations. However, in those times the terrorists, as a rule, advanced specific demands, and the seizure of hostages were not so massive in nature. They usually demanded money and the ability to leave the country...today the situation is totally different. Contemporary terrorists advance global demands. They do not take casualties into account and are prepared to destroy hundreds and hundreds of innocent civilians. It is senseless to conduct any negotiations whatsoever with them.⁵

Further, insurgents are capable of using the entire panoply of guerrilla instruments, both old and new: cell phones, remote detonators, misdirection, suicide bombers, and so on. A combination of these tactics has been used in cities, in buildings, in the countryside, in subways and on airplanes, and at festival events (President Kadyrov was executed while

³ C.J. Chivers and Steven Lee Myers, “Russian Attacks grow in Cunning,” Anchorage Daily News, 6 September 2004, p. A-1, A-6.

⁴ Susan B. Glasser and Peter Finn, “Russian Government Admits Cover-up,” Anchorage Daily News, 6 September 2004, p. A-7.

⁵ Vladimir Ivanov, “The Russian President has Explained that the Weak Get Beaten,” Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye, 10 September 2004, as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web sit on 14 September 2004.

watching a parade, and a suicide bomber blew herself up at the entrance to a rock concert in Moscow).

The “brains” behind most of these attacks is Shamil Basayev, a Chechen who fought the Russians during the first war and still continues to evade Russian military and law enforcement authorities, even though he lost a leg in 2000. What follows is an account, from a Russian perspective, of why he remains on the loose.

The Hunt for Basayev, the Death of Maskhadov

Shamil Basayev has masterminded several of the most dramatic and tragic terrorist events in Russia over the past ten years. Russians view him the same way Americans view Osama bin Laden. Basayev has evaded Russia’s armed forces, its security services, and others who have tried to track him down. He operates in an area much smaller than bin Laden making it all the more frustrating for the Russians.

In a series of five articles, Izvestia correspondent Vadim Rechkalov offered five reasons why Basayev hasn’t been caught. Many of the reasons mirror why the US hasn’t caught bin Laden. Rechkalov wrote that:

1. Basayev has some 13,000 accomplices, not the 1500 that the Russians believe. Support includes safe routes, reconnaissance, food, documents, weapons, medical treatment, and other assistance. He is a hero figure for many and for kids in particular. “Chechens would never go against their family or even distant relatives. There are very many families where one brother is a gunman and another serves in the Interior Ministry [police]. They always come to each other’s help.”⁶
2. Basayev has places to hide. There are over 2500 camps and shelters in Chechnya. Safe houses are located on the edge of a forest or in a dead-end, as such locations offer an escape route and no one can drive up unnoticed. Camps in the forest cannot be reached via a path, and spiral routes to an encampment are developed. There are two exits to each dugout, one leading to a river and one leading to a hillside.⁷
3. Basayev is a wealthy man, and is supported by Chechen businessmen in the oil profession who pay him tribute. He has also received money from contacts in the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Germany. After three years with a ten million dollar prize on his head, no one has turned Basayev over to the authorities.⁸

⁶ Vadim Rechkalov, “Why Secret Services Cannot get Shamil Basayev. Reason One,” Izvestia, 7 December 2004 as reported in Johnson’s List.

⁷Vadim Rechkalov, “Basayev’s Bases. Why the Special Services Cannot Capture Shamil Basayev. Reason No. 2,” Izvestiya, 7 December 2004, pp. 1, 6 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 7 December 2004.

⁸ Vadim Rechkalov, “Why the Special Services Cannot Capture Shamil Basayev. Reason No. 3,” Izvestiya, 9 December 2004, pp. 1, 6 as downloaded from Johnson’s List 9 December 2004.

4. Basayev travels only along roads and with people he trusts completely. He travels more freely nowadays as only one road is really under state control. His inner circle consists of people he has known since birth.⁹
5. Russia's ideological stance on Chechnya is weak. It makes Wahhabism look appealing as an ideology of social justice. Rechkalov believes this is the main reason for Basayev's success. Basayev accuses Russia of hypocrisy, brutality, and deception and he promises the Chechens social justice and paradise.¹⁰

Analysts at the US think tank known as STRATFOR differ with this opinion. They wrote recently that Basayev is now extracting food and materials from people in his home region of Vedeno. In the past local residents there willingly gave food and attention to their local hero. STRATFOR foresees that Basayev's local support is growing weak due to his increased reliance on Wahhabist elements. This has shifted Basayev's goal from an independent Chechnya toward a more jihadist ideology.¹¹ Whether Rechkalov or STRATFOR is correct is not known but both interpretations of events lead to very different scenarios in the region.

The scenario for former President Aslan Maskhadov, Basayev's theoretical boss, ended on 8 March 2005 in the city of Tolstoy Yurt, located to the northwest of Grozny. The story is that an unnamed local citizen informed on Maskhadov's position and received a million dollars for the information. Maskhadov and three others were allegedly hiding in the basement of a house. Local and state security officials surrounded him, and he was killed by one of his men before his capture to prevent interrogation and torture. Initial stories about his capture and death varied, however, making it uncertain if this is the way events really transpired.

Basayev, Maskhadov, and other leaders have trained a new generation of fighters. What follows is a look at Chechen tactics from the pages of Russian journals, books, and other media outlets, from interviews with combatants on both sides from captured documents, interviews, and from web sites addressing the conflict that have enabled the Chechen resistance. Both Chechen tactics and Russian responses are addressed.

Chechen Tactics
The journal Soldat Udachi

A primary and purportedly credible open source on Chechen tactics for many Russian veterans of the war in Chechnya is the Russian journal Soldat Udachi (Soldier of Fortune). From Autumn 2003 to January 2004 the journal carried a series of articles on Chechen tactics. The journal's editor noted that the information was taken from "actual militant documents."

⁹ Vadim Rechkalov, "Basayev's Routes. Why the Special Services Cannot Capture Shamil Basayev. Reason No. 4," *Izvestiya*, 9 December 2004, pp. 1, 6 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 9 December 2004.

¹⁰ Vadim Rechkalov, "Why the Special Services Cannot Capture Shamil Basayev. Reason No. 5," *Izvestiya*, 10 December 2004, pp. 1, 6 as downloaded from Johnson's List on 10 December.

¹¹ "Chechnya: The Separatist Struggle's Shifting Dynamics," STRATFOR, 10 January 2005.

First, in the September 2003 issue of Soldat Udachi there appeared orders on operations from one of the primary (now deceased) leaders of the Chechen rebels, the Black Arab Emir Khattab. A part of this article described his orders to subordinates. Khattab noted that Russian soldiers were finding Chechen bases far too easily. The suggestion was that they (the Chechen fighters) had located their bases too near forest roads, the bases were poorly camouflaged, or their location became known to Federal Security Agency (FSB) personnel from informers. Russian forces will use artillery on the base and then send in the infantry to conduct a sweep of the area, Khattab noted. A second method is to conduct a surprise attack on the base, attacking either at daybreak or at night.¹²

To confront the Russians, Chechen tactics must adjust. First of all Chechen fighters must conduct more security missions (300-400 meters away from bases in the daytime, 50-100 meters at night). The base and approaches to it must be mined, and a trap must be laid in the base if the occupants are forced to desert the premises.

It was stressed to Chechen fighters that the creation of “base-traps” is a most important issue. “Base-traps” are deception operations designed to lure Russians to an abandoned or fake base of operations. Typical base features must be created at a site along with information leaks as to its whereabouts. Then fighters must give Russian scouts something to see (smoke from a fire, a horse tied to a tree, etc.) and wait for the Russians arrival. Mine the territory. Set off all explosions at the same time if possible. Prepare an ambush at the same time, luring the Russians to an area where it is easy to fight. In an order to subordinates, the Supreme Military Majlis-Shura (Khattab) ordered commanders to prepare for and carry out no less than one-two “base-trap” operations.¹³

Second, Khattab noted that more reconnaissance must be conducted. This is particularly important when Russian troops are moving. Third, roads must be mined that approach the base site. Explosions below ground and in the trees must be set off when the Russians are within range. This sows panic everywhere. For large operations, a group of 25 men should be put together. This group includes snipers, machine gunners, and grenade launcher operators.¹⁴ Such an organization is similar to the Chechen ambushes conducted in Grozny in January 1995 (see description below about the battle for Grozny).

Khattab asked Chechen fighters to find ways to bring the *munafeqin* (a Chechen non-believer who claims to be a Muslim but supports Russia) into contact with the Russians in such a way that the former would lose all faith and trust in the latter. For example, put bullets in the garden of a *munafeqin* and then “rat him out” to the authorities. The Russians will then arrest one of their own supporters, and this will cause the *munafeqin* to gradually lose faith in the Russians. Each commander should carry out two such operations. Children should be organized to shout “Allah akbar” to cut Russian

¹² “Militant Tactics,” Soldat Udachi (Soldier of Fortune), 3 September 2003 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 19 August 2004.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

morale. Women's committees shall be organized to initiate protests (each will be attached to a sector and a sector commander).¹⁵

After this introduction from Khattab, the Soldat Udachi article then discussed the structure and fundamentals of Chechen tactics. A Chechen armed formation was described as including representatives of one or several related *teyps*, and potentially supplemented by mercenaries and mine warfare specialists, snipers, antitank guided missile operators and others. Organizationally there is a commander, a headquarters, and two groupings of approximately 500 men each. These groups include a combat grouping and a reserve grouping with the latter supplementing the men in combat. Armed formations are divided into five or six detachments led by emirs (field commanders). A detachment consists of three groups, a central group (combat ready, no permanent location), a group situated in a population center (reconnaissance, mining, snipers, saboteur-scouts), and a group of "assistants" who await orders from the emir, carry them out, and return home.

The Soldat Udachi article sites other Chechen organizational options from documents seized in July 2000. A major change was the adoption of a basic *jama'at* (squad, group) combat element. Composed of up to 15 men, there are 4-5 *jama'at* in a detachment, or about 60-75 men. Each *jama'at* has five man squads that march in one of several formations: single column, a column of twos, inverted 'V' formation, mixed battle formation, and in five-man battle groups. A five-man patrol squad can distance itself from the combat patrol by up to 20-200 meters. Bases are organized on the principle of one base for one detachment. The base is generally located near where the majority of the detachment's members live. A basing area can be from one by one to two by two kilometers in size. Bases are 300-500 meters away from one another. Russian forces that occupied one former basing area found bunkers, caves, and shelters in which were a BTR-80, BMP-1, GAZ-66, SPG-9 with 20 rounds, air defense weapons, 20,000 rounds of ammunition, and other equipment.¹⁶ A base area signature includes

The presence of a forest with convenient accesses to a population center; the presence of well-worn, dead-end roads that are passable for all-terrain vehicles and that end in a forest; the presence of water sources (rivers, streams, springs); a radio operating from one and the same area; the running motor of a power generator in the forest; and the operation of air defense weapons in a given area.¹⁷

Chechen reconnaissance of a target site must be thorough and includes reporting on the disposition of Russian forces, what they are preparing for, and the routes of travel to the enemy's position. Rebel forces contingency plans, if the march is interrupted, include knowing where to meet, how long to wait, what to do, how to get back if you lose your way, and so on. Instructions are provided on what equipment to take and what information to collect. The optimal manning level is 8-11 men when the group is on the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

move. The *emir* is always up front when moving in columns and always in the middle when moving in ranks.¹⁸

In the second part of the series on Chechen tactics, the editors of Soldat Udachi discussed basic tactics of the Chechen rebels. Authors of the article discussed how a rendezvous of several groups is organized, how to overcome danger zones, the conventional signals for combat command and control (ambush execution, revoking an order, executing an ambush, etc.), how to set up an ambush, how to select a place to destroy the enemy, how to facilitate a successful ambush, how to put the ambush plan together, and how to organize an attack on a sentry post. It also offered information on camouflage and concealment. While this second article in the series was interesting these elements and operations are familiar to most western audiences.¹⁹

Part three of the Soldat Udachi series discussed “fighter tactics.” The article described the tactics of the Chechen’s in August-September 1999, when they entered Dagestan, a neighboring republic. This occurred just before the start of the second war with Russia in October 1999. The idea was to recruit Dagestan citizens and use them against the Russian authorities. A secondary goal was to begin the creation of a second Islamic front with which the federal forces would have to contend. For this operation, Basayev marshaled some 3,000 fighters according to the journal. They were divided into battalions of 50-70 men, companies of 15-20 men, and platoons of 5-7 men. Of particular interest is how intense the Chechen side videotaped everything, to include reconnaissance work. During combat operations, videotaping was also used. Later these materials would be used to raise the Wahhabites’ fighting spirit.

Videotaping was also used to support one of the Chechens most important assets, its extensive Internet sites. These sites assisted in the cyber mobilization of fighters both at home and abroad. When Russian officials would renounce the Chechen versions of an event, the sites played the videotaping of an ambush or a battle and completely destroyed official Russian credibility. It was nearly impossible to renounce a taped version of events that proved the Russian account wrong.

Chechen information and propaganda both supported Chechen morale and enticed other people of like persuasion to join their cause. Just as in Iraq, where web sites play a key role in “show” executions and transmitting the tapes of Osama bin Laden and other key insurgent actors, the Internet has been a key element of Chechen information and propaganda to the outside world.

The year 2000 book The Armed Caucasus offered an interesting insight into Chechen information-psychological and propaganda operations early in the second war.²⁰ According to the book, the Chechens considered their ‘moral-psychological’ factor as

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “Militant Tactics (continuation of article from 3 September 2003),” Soldat Udachi, 3 December 2003 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 19 August 2004.

²⁰ Dzhangir Aras, Vooruzhenny Kavkaz, Reference Book on Military Systems of North Caucasus Nations, Volume III, 2000, p. 51.

extremely high. Not less than 30 per cent of the population between the ages of 14-50 voluntarily took part in the fighting according to the author. The main characteristics of the Chechen fighters included patriotism, nationalism, religious fanaticism, decisiveness, being prepared to die, aggressiveness, strict internal discipline, the capability to continue fighting under extreme conditions, contempt for the enemy, unpredictability of actions, and revenge. Information-propaganda and political support to the Chechen campaign were viewed as independent activities. This included political and psychological work with personnel in the armed forces and society; the use of special propaganda PSYOP against the enemy and various sectors of his society; diplomatic support for the actions of Chechens, to include use of the foreign press; and legislative support of military activity.²¹

Work within the armed forces included the use of slogans, swearing allegiance on the Koran, and acceptance of the Jihad. Nationalism, Islamic values, and the military history of Chechnya were often used in this regard. Islamic slogans were frequently tied to weapons and armored vehicles. Work among the population included the development of several factors: a base of social-political support for the armed forces; the galvanizing of the population against Russians operating in their areas; the conduct of mass meeting, and teaching how to spread rumors; and the spread of Chechen military traditions and the ideas of Islam using audio-video cassettes, leaflets, radio, TV and the press.²²

The Armed Caucasus noted that a Minister of Information and Propaganda, as well as offices of propaganda and external relations within the General Staff of Chechnya, information centers, agents, and the press were required to implement this work. The coordinator for Chechen PSYOP was the Minister of Information and Press of the Chechen Republic, Movladi Udugov. Russian authorities often refer to Udugov as the Josef Goebbels of the Chechen movement. They respect his ability to motivate and persuade people as much as they despise his activity.

Of greatest interest to a student of military history is the Armed Caucasus's listing of Chechen principles for organizing PSYOP. It requires a combination of propaganda methods: a demonstration of real facts; keeping quiet about or negating real facts; specific distortion of facts for a particular use; and premeditated disinformation. These methods are aimed at Russia's armed forces, its population, and government leaders, as well as foreign audiences. Channels include the Internet and electronic mail, the Russian press, lobby groups and agents of influence, political organizations and movements in Russia, the intellectual and cultural élites of Russia and other countries, the Chechen Diaspora, and social organizations such as antimilitary, humanitarian, and human rights groups everywhere. Channels to spread PSYOP among the Russian armed forces appeared to contain nothing new — agitation, leaflets, loudspeakers, and radio stations. Deception included measures such as wearing Russian uniforms to capture Russian soldiers.²³

²¹ Ibid., p 52.

²² Ibid., p. 53.

²³ Ibid., pp. 54-7.

Work among the civilian population included utilizing to the maximum degree Russia's press services. It was estimated during the first Chechen war that nearly 90 per cent of the information from the zone of conflict came from Chechen sources that helped formulate favorable conditions for influencing social opinion and spreading information 'pictures'. Missions included forming an anti-military mood and a desire to stop military activity, discrediting the activities and military-political leadership of Russia, and misinforming Russia's leadership about future Chechen plans. Exploiting the destabilizing psychological factor of losses among Russian forces, and threatening the potential use by Chechnya of nuclear weapons helped accomplish this. The Chechens believe that work to agitate the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers in Russia greatly damaged the Russian armed forces draft in 1995.²⁴

Work with foreign audiences was also discussed. It included forming a positive image of the armed forces, strengthening international support, and weakening the international position of Russia. This would be accomplished by exploiting the thesis of Chechnya fighting for liberation from Russia, accusing Russia of violating international norms and laws on the conduct of war and using banned weapons, demonstrating cruelty by Russia's forces as well as a disregard for the ecology of Chechnya, and keeping quiet about or negating similar actions by Chechnya's forces.²⁵ Chechens listed unofficial news outlets in the following countries: Jordan, Azerbaijan, Poland, Latvia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Ukraine, Denmark, Great Britain, Belorussia, Russia (since closed), Germany, the US, Lithuania, Turkey, France, Estonia, Georgia and Finland.²⁶

Chechen Radio Practices

Both the insurgents and the Russians have used radio and other telecommunication assets extensively over the past ten years. The tactics of the insurgents, and the responses of the Russian military, have been fairly standard. Variations are very much a factor of terrain undulations and equipment modernization. In principle, the action and counter action to these transmission tactics includes the following:

1. Chechens—shift frequencies during radio transmissions to avoid intercepts; Russians—continually scan all frequencies while retaining active ones already intercepted
2. Chechens—misinformation and overt intelligence “give-aways” used to fool federal forces and conceal real intentions; Russians—focus attention on “conventional words” and specific terminology used along with the bait.
3. Chechens—use more than one language when transmitting to confuse listeners; Russians—keep several interpreters on duty at any one time
4. Chechens—place radio sets and antennas in operational mode on trees as repeaters to avoid detection and remain intact if fired upon by artillery; Russians—use additional course and bearing indicators mounted on helicopters to locate more than one point of transmission.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 57-8.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 58.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

5. Chechens—use deep ravines and canyons as natural corridors for radio waves to make intercepts impossible; Russians—place radio intercept equipment on vectors of transmissions on axes of ravines and canyons in plateau areas of Chechnya
6. Chechens—use radios as auxiliary facilities only for notification of when and where to meet a messenger with information; Russians—pay particular attention not only to contents of transmission but to location of both respondents
7. Chechens—constant change of nicknames and call-signs to produce uncertainty as to who is on the air; Russians—learn not only frequencies and nicknames but also personal linguistic traits of respondents
8. Chechens—intercept federal forces transmissions to gain intelligence; Russians—use alternative media and channels unavailable to insurgents.²⁷

The Russians learned that the greater the disparity in tactics and equipment between federal forces and the insurgents, the greater the requirement for makeshift and impromptu techniques.

Russian Colonel Sergei Kulikov on Chechen Tactics Lessons Learned

Colonel Sergei Kulikov is a former Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) Special Forces battalion commander who served in Chechnya and is therefore well acquainted with Chechen tactics and operations. He was in charge of a unit named “Skif.” In an article entitled “The Tactics of Insurgent Groups in the Russian Federation’s Republic of Chechnya,” written for the US publication Military Review, he discussed lessons learned from his perspective.

Structurally, the insurgent groups are composed of a field commander and one or two deputies who make up his staff; a team that protects the commander; a reconnaissance team and a network of scouts (civilian and military); signalmen; Special Forces; snipers; and riflemen. Detachments consist of 60-100 people ranging in age from 20-50. Detachments can, however, be as small as 10-15 men. They are usually regional in construction yet, when conducting attacks over large areas, these small detachments give the impression of a “universal presence.” Reservists include sympathetic groups of the populace. They may have hidden weapon caches or they may perform intelligence work or spread disinformation. Training is generally in weapons, raids, terrorism, field survival, camouflage and propaganda with the local populace.²⁸

As Colonel Kulikov noted the insurgents employed typical mujahideen actions: careful consideration of the correlation of forces and means, and extensive use of ambushes, land mines, and barriers. They also employed standard military actions such as psychologically exhausting law enforcement personnel by shooting at them all the time. They try to “point” movement by Russian personnel in the direction of nearby posts and garrisons to induce “friendly fire” incidents between Russian units. The Chechens also

²⁷ Discussion with Russian officer in Moscow, January 2004.

²⁸ Sergey A. Kulikov, “The Tactics of Insurgent Groups in the Russian Federation Republic of Chechnya,” translated by Robert Love, Foreign Military Studies Office. This article later appeared in the November-December 2003 issue of Military Review.

make extensive use of the media to, according to Kulikov, disseminate lies or distort facts.²⁹

Colonel Kulikov mentioned the following as key principles of the insurgents: do not enter into direct combat with Russian forces; never remain in contact with the force of order for very long; attempt large-scale strikes only when sufficient forces are available; use small units to attack individual soldiers or to obtain weapons; maintain psychological pressure on federal forces by firing on them regularly; use mortars and howitzers when attacking important objectives; and conduct an organized withdrawal when faced with a surprise attack. Kulikov noted that insurgents obtain weapons either by buying them from third countries or by capturing them from Russian troops during ambushes.

When attacking objectives, after a thorough reconnaissance, insurgent groups of about 30 men conduct the attack. They are divided into a point reconnaissance, guard take-down, covering team and main body. A diversionary group may also be used. At night, insurgents attack outposts by allowing one member of their group to fire on the outpost and thereby draw federal forces' fire. The remainder of the insurgent group then fires on the answering weapons from other directions. Drive-by shootings on federal forces also occur.³⁰

Ambushes are a particular problem for Russian forces, and the Chechens have done a very good job at employing them. According to Colonel Kulikov, the Chechen ambush detachments consist of a fire or strike group; a diversionary group; a blocking group; a reserve group; and a group that handles communications and informs Chechens on the situation at hand. The Chechens have used three types of ambushes: the head-on or meeting ambush, the parallel ambush, and the circular ambush. The type of ambush is dependent on the terrain, the correlation of forces, the mission (impede, destroy, force a premature deployment or alter the direction of an advancing force) and the combat situation. The size of the Chechen ambush can vary from 10-20 people for a parallel ambush to up to 100 for the circular ambush.³¹

Kulikov noted regarding a *meeting ambush* that

The meeting method of ambush is usually stationary and is set up on the movement route of the units with the goal of pinning them down or destroying the advance units. This method is often used on small units and the transport assets that follow behind them independently. The ambush site is set up well in advance, reserve and false positions are prepared, and withdrawal routes are designated. The meeting ambush is often used in combination with a simultaneous feint on some other objective in order to cause reserve forces to move toward that objective.³²

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

In the *parallel ambush* insurgents move along a convoy's axis of advance on one or both sides, usually focusing on the security force, reconnaissance, and rear columns, and sometimes on the main force. The *circular ambush* is the most difficult to prepare and execute. In this ambush, two or three groups of insurgents position themselves along the perimeter of a prearranged site. The site is usually somewhat circular in shape. One of the groups opens fire on the advancing Russian convoy and after the convoy returns fire and focuses on the area, another group opens fire, and so on. The objective is to cause chaos and confusion among the Russians and encourage the loss of command and control.³³

Snipers are used with some frequency, so much so that some refer to the fighting as a sniper war. Snipers are adept at wounding a soldier, and then finishing off the soldier and those who come to his aid. An insurgent engineer will mine a sniper's firing position after the latter leaves it. While snipers aim to kill or maim, hostage taking includes another set of objectives. These include collecting ransom money to support the purchase of weapons and equipment, exchanging hostages for insurgents held prisoner, or using the hostages for "show" executions to demoralize or frighten local inhabitants and federal troops. Hostage taking also includes a thorough reconnaissance of an area such as a market place, a coffee house, a food stand or a water source. The snatch team consists of an attack team of two or three people and a cover and evacuation team. A well-timed moment is chosen to take the hostage, such as when the person's hands are busy or their attention is distracted.³⁴

Chechen Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs)

A few years ago the Russian journal Vlast (Power) published photos of some Chechen IEDs that were precursors to what is now being uncovered by US forces in Iraq. The photos showed a book that, when opened, exploded in the hands of the reader; a beer can that, when the "pop a top" was pulled, exploded; and a flashlight that, when turned on, set off an explosive charge in the canister.

Komsomolskaya Pravda military commentator Viktor Baranets, well known for his books on former President Boris Yeltsin's relations with Russian Generals, discussed other types of IEDs. These included IEDs hidden under piles of firewood. Russian conscripts would often go into the woods to get kindling to keep warm, and these devices were planted under piles of wood to blow them up. Mine warfare of this nature, according to Baranets calculations, account for up to 75 per cent of personnel losses and 100 per cent of vehicle losses. There were also Chechen devices that kill but don't blow up. For example, Baranets noted how the Chechens used classic methods of partisan warfare such as poisoning drinking water.³⁵ In another example, Chechens purportedly

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Viktor Baranets, "Endless Warfare! We Just Managed to Depart Shatoy... Why Can't the Federal Army finish off the 'Uncoordinated Bands'?" Komsomolskaya Pravda, 20 September 2002, pp 4-5 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 20 September 2002.

gave Russian soldiers vodka laced with poison.³⁶ In addition to explosives and ambushes, another favorite Chechen tactic when in the field was to encase your body in cellophane so as to avoid detection by infrared instruments on Russian aircraft.³⁷

Colonel Kulikov discussed insurgent mine use as well. He noted that mines were often disguised as piles of trash, construction material and so on or hidden in destroyed equipment or vehicles. A blast mine consists of artillery rounds of various calibers, an electrical blasting cap, and an extra TNT charge along with an ignition wire. They are usually placed on or along roads. Individual mines are often located in trees or in the lamp of a power-line pole in order to kill troops sitting on the outside of vehicles or foot patrols. Trip wires may be set up as single wires or as part of an elaborate “spider web.”³⁸

*Chechen Urban Tactics during the Battle for Grozny, December-February 1994*³⁹

Chechen lessons learned from fighting in cities are worthwhile to study for their insights on fighting a force that greatly outnumbered them and was theoretically more organized for urban warfare. The best example of these lessons was the fighting that took place in early 1995, for it pitted an insurgent force against a regular army force.

The Chechens offset Russian superiority by fighting in a non-traditional way, with rapid mobile units instead of fixed defenses. One key lesson was the importance of the sniper and the RPG gunner, or a combination of the two. For example, snipers were employed to draw fire from a Russian force, and then a Chechen ambush position overlooking the activities of the sniper would open fire on the Russian column fighting the sniper. Additionally forces could operate successfully in an independent mode. Both regular and volunteer forces learned to work in a specific area or respond to calls for assistance. While command was less centralized than in the Russian force, it was coordinated through the use of Motorola radios. Chief of Staff (now Chechen President in exile and rebel commander) Aslan Maskhadov directed his forces to fight in small groups, although this limited their ability to engage in extended combat. When the Chechens were able to force Russian soldiers from a building

They left at most five of their fighters in the building. After some time, the Russians would counterattack and concentrate at least a company against the building...but having taken back the building they invariably found only a few bodies of Chechen fighters. Also whenever the Russian soldiers took up defensive positions, they customarily positioned several people in every building, thus diluting their forces.⁴⁰

³⁶ Story related to the author by a Russian officer, October 2003.

³⁷ Baranets.

³⁸ Kulikov.

³⁹ This section of how Chechens fought in cities was taken from Timothy Thomas, “The 31 December 1994-8 February 1995 Battle for Grozny,” in *Block by Block: The Challenges of Urban Operations*, edited by William G. Robertson and Lawrence A. Yates, 2003, pp. 188-193.

⁴⁰ Stasys Knezys and Romanas Sedlickas, *The War in Chechnya*, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, Texas, 1999, p. 108.

It was also reported that the Chechens would fire a "fuga" into a window before attacking. A "fuga" was an RPG-7 round with two 400-gram pieces of trotyl explosives attached with adhesive tape. The Chechens also attached napalm to antitank grenades, which would help damage the turret of the target.⁴¹

The most detailed Chechen lessons learned came from interviews with Chechen fighters some three or four years after the fighting ended. In one interview, entitled "Chechen Commander: Urban Warfare in Chechnya," a Chechen commander listed some recommendations for conducting urban operations against both regular and irregular forces based on his Chechen experience.⁴² First, study the people. One must understand the enemy in detail, and not only from a military and political sense, but from a cultural sense as well. Chechen forces suffered only minimal psychological trauma due to their warrior ethic, heritage of resistance to Russian control, and sense of survival. Chechens also used non-combatants to exercise psychological deception on the urban battlefield. They declared some villages and suburbs as "pro-Russian" or non-committed when in fact these same areas were centers for strategic planning, command and control, and logistic purposes. This was a well-conducted information operation against the Russians.

Second, know the territory. Key terrain in a city is at the micro level. Do not rely on streets, signs, and most buildings as reference points. Use prominent buildings, and monuments instead as they usually remain intact. It was better to conduct reconnaissance by day and attack at night, which the Russians did not like to do. When 40 Ukrainian volunteers signed up to support the Chechens, they were required to conduct detailed reconnaissance with Chechens before entering combat.

Third, study your oppositions weapons and equipment, and how they might employ this equipment in an urban environment. The "national weapon" of the Chechens was the RPG. The destruction of Russian armor was a great psychological defeat for the Russians and a great morale booster to the Chechens. The most effective weapon system employed against pure infantry was the sniper, a casualty producer, psychological weapon, and quicksand to rapid movement. Nothing could slow down a force as much as the sniper.

Chechens feared the Russian mortars more than any other weapon in the city, but employed them with great skill as well. The Chechen force began the battle for Grozny with individual protective equipment but soon discarded it because it impaired mobility in the urban environment. The Motorola hand-held radio was the primary communications device. There was one radio for every six combatants but it would have been preferable to have one per combatant. Little encryption was used, only the Chechen language. At the national equivalent of headquarters, access was available to INMARSAT.⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "Chechen Commander: On Urban Warfare in Chechnya," working draft received from the Marine Corps, 1999.

⁴³ Ibid.

The Chechen force also was very successful in redirecting Russian artillery and fighter fire onto Russian forces. Chechen hunter-killer units would sneak between two Russian positions in the city, especially at night, and fire in one direction and then the other before moving out of the area. Thinking they were under attack, the Russian units would fire at each other, sometimes for hours. Many such episodes of fratricide were reported among the Russian ranks.

The Chechens were also very interested in capturing or obtaining any Shmel thermobaric weapon system available. The Shmel is a 93 mm caliber Russian flamethrower that is 920 mm long and weighs 12 kg. It has a maximum range of 1,000 meters, a sighting maximum of 600 meters, and a minimum range of 20 meters. The Shmel strongly resembles the U.S. Army's light antitank weapon (LAW) of the 1970s. The Russian force, to explain the extensive damage to buildings in Grozny, stated that the Chechens had captured a boxcar full of Shmel weapons and were now using them indiscriminately. The Shmel was important because both sides realized a "heavy blast" direct-fire weapon system was a must for urban warfare. They also can be used against vehicles and fortified positions as a breaching device.

Finally, the Chechen force (by necessity) went into battle as light as possible. Mobility was the key to success against the slower and heavier Russian force, in the opinion of the Chechen commander. Organizationally, the Chechen force had seven man subgroups (armor hunter-killer teams, a number slightly different than the six man groups reported earlier) that contained three riflemen/automatic riflemen/ammunition bearers, two RPG gunners, one sniper, and one medic/corpsman. Three of these subgroups made up the majority of a 25-man group or platoon, and three of these platoons formed 75 man groups. The Chechen force exploited Russian disorientation by moving behind and parallel to the Russian force once it entered the city. Snipers set up in hide positions that supported their respective platoons. The Chechen commander described the ambushes/assaults in the following manner:

Each 75-man ambush group set up in buildings along one street block, and only on one side of the street—never on both sides of a street because of the cross fires a two-sided ambush would create. Only the lower levels of multi-story buildings were occupied to avoid casualties. One 25-man platoon comprised the "killer team" and set up in three positions along the target avenue. They had the responsibility for destroying whatever column entered their site. The other two 25-man platoons set up in the buildings at the assumed entry-points to the ambush site. They had responsibility for sealing off the ambush entry from escape by or reinforcement of the ambushed forces. The killer platoon established a command point (platoon HQ) with the center squad. As the intended target column entered the site, the squad occupying the building nearest the entry point would contact the other two squads occupying the center and far building positions. Primary means of communications was by Motorola radio. Once the lead vehicle into the site reached the far squad position, the far squad would contact the other two squads. The commander at the central squad would initiate or signal to initiate the ambush. Minefields were employed to reinforce ambushes by taking out

reinforcing armor and to relieve pressure on the killer platoons in case the ambush bogged down.⁴⁴

U.S. Marine Corps Intelligence Activity analyst Arthur Speyer, speaking about the battle for Grozny to an audience at RAND, noted several Chechen weaknesses from a U.S. perspective. First, the greatest weakness of the Chechens was their inability to conduct an extensive engagement. The small size of the Chechen units, coupled with their limited ammunition supplies, caused them to avoid large-scale battles. The Russians discovered that drawing the Chechens into a long engagement would allow the Russian force the time to surround the position and use overwhelming fire support. Control was another problem for Chief of Staff Aslan Maskhadov. He stated that many of the independent groups decided for themselves when, where, and how long they would remain in combat. On more than one occasion Maskhadov noted that local militia forces would simply pick up and go home when they got bored, tired or cold. Troops were required to withstand long periods of intense combat with limited re-supply and rest.

Other significant Chechen lessons learned and related by the Chechen commander were: (1) The tracer round is useless in urban areas due to serious negative trade-offs. (2) OPSEC is especially important in the urban fight. Chechen commanders were so concerned about secrecy that they did not brief their men about the objective of an operation until they were already on the way to their objective. (3) Chechen commanders did not move by "flanking maneuvers" but instead by "chess-like" maneuvers to hit the Russians where they least expected it. "Hugging" techniques were also used (setting up positions within 50-250 meters from Russian positions to render Russian artillery and rocket fire ineffective. (4) As a rule, the Chechens did not place mines or booby traps inside buildings. The possibility of "friendly" casualties was not worth any possible benefit gained.

The lessons of the fight for Grozny are many and quite sobering for anyone who contemplates using troops in an urban environment. While some of the lessons learned by Chechen combatants are peculiar to that region, others have wider applicability. No army wants to engage in urban combat, but increasing urbanization and the danger of strikes from high-precision weapons may well force the fight into the city, where the defender has all the advantages. The Chechen decision to continue to fight from "successive cities" is indicative of their reliance on this tactic.

There were other Russian lessons learned as well. They were printed in numerous journals, and the most important of these lessons are listed at Appendix Two.

Russian Lessons Learned from a Spetznaz, GRU, Reconnaissance Point of View

One of the interesting Russian books written about fighting insurgents is Special Forces of the GRU. Authors K. Nikitin and S. Kozlov, the latter the major contributor to the book, wrote on reconnaissance missions during counterinsurgency warfare. The Chechen conflict was included in this work. One section was on "The Twelve

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Commandments for Servicemen in Chechnya,” commandments that were actually tips on cultural sensitivities for Russian soldiers. They are as follows:

1. *Always maintain your authority among the local population!* The Chechens are very critical of people who try to create a false authority for themselves. A so-called 'patronizing attitude' toward others usually afflicts those who cannot gain authority through other means. This authority is gained through energetic, effective actions and exemplary behavior. Do not permit any instances of theft of military property and its subsequent sale to the local population. In their eyes you will be a thief, and nobody likes a thief.

2. *Avoid unwarranted confiscations and unlawful requisitions of food and property!* Such arbitrariness is unacceptable. It arouses a sense of bitterness and deprivation of rights among the local inhabitants. Furthermore, such actions give the local inhabitants grounds to equate the federal troops to the bandits from whom the troops are there to protect.

3. *Be fair!* Every local inhabitant must be dealt with firmly, but fairly. Injustice gives rise to a negative attitude in any person. You must understand that in the situation that has taken shape in Chechnya, when the militants' propaganda organs create a sensation around even minor human rights violations, any injustice can be used by them with great success. Do not give the enemy such an opportunity.

4. *Reward a Chechen who performs his assigned task well!* Chechens do not like to work, but they like very much to lead. In order to accomplish a task that you need to get accomplished, choose the most authoritative person among the local inhabitants and get him to carry out the task. If he does the job right and does it quickly, you should reward the elder by giving him additional authority or by giving him some kind of gift.

5. *When dealing with Chechens, display a sense of calm and self-worth: you will achieve more through this than through screaming obscenities! Never beat a Chechen!* Chechens are a proud people with a very intense sense of pride and self-worth. Therefore, you will achieve nothing by humiliating them, by screaming at them and by abusing them. You will only embitter them. Even in casual conversation, do not give orders and do not use profanity that you might normally use as interjections. For the people of the Caucasus, the concept of 'mother' is sacred. Therefore, the expletive "F*** your mother!" would be taken quite literally and you would gain another enemy for yourself. Chechens are very vindictive, therefore, if you hit a Chechen, especially if it is not deserved, and even more so if he cannot respond in kind because you are armed, you can be assured that he will take revenge.

6. *Avoid any statements addressed to Chechens that would make it understood that you consider them an inferior race!* Never, even in a fit of rage, ever call Chechens "blockheads," "black asses," etc. Chechens consider themselves a people worthy of respect, a warrior people. And indeed, they fight pretty well. They hold strength, agility and bravery in high esteem. Our troops are not on the territory of Chechnya in

order to enslave these people as the militants' propaganda asserts. On the contrary, they are there to protect the people from the bandits.

7. *Respect Chechen women, girls, old men and children as if they were Russians!* Always remember that Chechens respect manly qualities, therefore, never permit any disrespect or vulgarity with regard to their women. True, among Muslims women are not regarded as equals to men as far as rights are concerned, but the men are obliged to protect their families and, it goes without saying, their wives, mothers, sisters and so forth. In Chechnya, like everywhere in the Caucasus, they hold old men in very high esteem, and therefore, you must deal with them with great respect. Never allow yourself to curse at defenseless people in revenge for the outrages of the militants against Russian women, old men and children.

8. *When conversing with Chechens, always mention the difference between Chechens and the militants!* Since a significant portion of the Chechen population has grown tired of the war and the anarchy created by the militants, the Chechens prefer that they be seen not as militants or their accomplices. If you need to level any criticism, blame the militants for everything. When criticizing the Chechens, you should do so sternly, but fairly and politely.

9. *Exercise restraint when discussing religion with Chechens!* Chechens must be ensured complete freedom of religion. However, you should know that the militants follow Wahhabism -- an extremist branch of Islam that rejects Chechnya's traditional Tariqatism. Wahhabis do not honor the relics of Islam, they do not recognize any authorities, and that means they do not honor elders. These are the arguments that should be used in conversation if it cannot be avoided.

10. *Keep your distance when dealing with Chechens!* When conversing with them, remain confident. Try to say little, but stay on the matter at hand. In conversation, try to listen more. Such behavior gives the impression of a strong person, and strong people are respected in the Caucasus. At the same time, you should not take everything they say as the truth. First of all, being a man of the East, a Chechen loves to embellish, to throw dust in your eyes. Even if he is telling the truth, divide any number given by at least 10 and then you will get information that is close to reliable. Secondly, always remember that to the Chechens you are *giaour*, an unbeliever, and so you will always remain to them. Islam does not condemn, but quite the contrary esteems deceiving a *giaour*. Generally, try to learn as much as you can about them and tell them as little about yourself as possible. And finally, thirdly, never show your weaknesses, neither in actions, nor in words. This will definitely be used against you. In conversation, a Chechen will definitely try to seize the initiative and if possible to frighten you with false information.

11. *Study and be respectful of national traditions!* The more you know about the Chechens' national traditions, the more you will understand their behavior. That means you will be able to predict their actions. At the same time, a person that respects the local traditions will be respected himself. It is a good thing if you study and use very

simple expressions and phrases [in their own language] when engaging with Chechens. When you use words such as 'hello,' 'thank you,' 'good bye' and so forth in conversation, you make it known that you respect the speaker and Chechens as a whole.

12. *Always remember that the abovementioned commandments apply to the fullest extent possible to the local inhabitants and they do not apply at all to the militants!* Never forget that you are in a region where there are insurgents against whom you are at war. Therefore, you can never be certain that the person with whom you are speaking is not helping the militants. Under conditions of guerrilla warfare, it is better to turn down an invitation into someone's home and to risk offending the host than it is to take advantage of his hospitality and end up being an easy catch for the insurgents.⁴⁵

This same chapter by Nikitin and Kozlov provided comments on ambushes as well. First, the authors underscored the importance of obtaining information (intelligence) on bandits and their guerilla tactics. Information must be complete, objective and reliable. Second, it was pointed out that a main mistake of Russian troops was the absence of clear rules of conduct with regard to the local population. The twelve commandments cited above should help alleviate some of this problem. Third, agents must be inserted into the insurgent's ranks and agents recruited from among the local population. Fourth reconnaissance must be performed by aerial, radio and radio-technical means as well as troop reconnaissance on the ground. Special forces should not be used for guard duty on pipelines, escorting convoys, guarding generals and other jobs that take them away from their specialty. Fifth, victory will go to the side with the more diverse tactics, the one who is looking for new means of executing an action. Sixth, at an observation post the most important document is the surveillance log. Also of importance are surveillance equipment, technical equipment, and explosives and incendiary devices. Finally, patience was noted as one of the most tremendous virtues of a member of the Special Forces.⁴⁶

Kozlov wrote other essays without Nikitin. One essay was on counter ambushes. The most effective way of countering them, of course, is not to fall into an ambush in the first place. "A true wise man is not the one who is capable of finding a way out of an awkward situation, but rather the one who does not end up in such a position in the first place" the saying goes. Other tips Kozlov offered were to insure that the march formation is constructed in the right manner. This entails putting out effective front and lateral reconnaissance assets. Insurgent ambush locations were chosen with care:

In the mountains they have been set up at the entrances into and exits from ravines, on passes and mountain roads, where maneuvering forces and equipment is either out of the question or at least complicated. Fire subgroups are positioned on the slopes or on tactical ridges so that the militants blend in better with the background of the terrain.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Spetsnaz GRU, 2002, pp. 572-588 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 25 January 2005.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Spetsnaz GRU, 1 January 2002, pp. 483-503, as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 25 January 2005.

In population centers ambushes have been setup behind reinforced fences as well as in specially equipped and fortified houses and structures. There have been instances when ambushes occurred at dead ends into which militants disguised as non-combatants directed military convoys with the help of fake road signs which they had installed. In large population centers during a ‘sweep,’ they would set up consecutive ambushes along the streets. This noticeably complicated the movement of troops and inflicted tangible losses...in the words of the participants of the first Chechen War, the order of battle would usually consist of three subgroups—two fire subgroups, one of which was positioned for destroying the lead vehicle and the second for striking at the flank or the rear, and a support subgroup, which as was the case in Afghanistan, covered the militants retreat.⁴⁸

These ambushes usually varied in number of Chechen participants from 7-15 men all the way up to 100 men or more. The militants always reported on approaching convoys, which enabled the ambush site personnel to prepare for specific targets ahead of time. The commanders would reallocate missions and redistribute fires as needed. Command and control vehicles were hit regardless in order to rob the convoy of its ability to maneuver.⁴⁹ Russian forces were always on the lookout for ambushes and tried to stay prepared. In the case of one Russian five-vehicle convoy in May, 1996 there was a 30-man reconnaissance group assigned as protection.⁵⁰

With regard to general ambush guidance, Kozlov offered the following:

1. First and foremost mobilize your will, knowledge and experience, no matter how difficult this may be, in order to reestablish command and control, repulse the enemy attack, seize the initiative, and report the situation (call in air support and reinforcements from the reserves if necessary).
2. If the terrain allows, get your main forces out from under the ambush. Attempt to ram damaged vehicles in your way. Pull away from wherever the main fires are focused. Ensure that precise battle drills have been rehearsed regarding ambushes before departing headquarters.
3. Order personnel to dismount and disperse, organize a fire system, deny the enemy the ability to maneuver or limit his ability to do so. Establish strict control over the expenditure of ammunition at the start of the ambush, and do not stop but continue to escalate efforts to improve or organize your positions.
4. Put a clamp on the guerilla’s first echelon of operations and don’t allow the enemy to cover their second echelon of guerillas.
5. Simultaneously organize the evacuation of the killed and wounded and the evacuation of damaged equipment.⁵¹

Russian Lessons Learned from using “friendly” Chechen fighters

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

As the war lingers on debate rages in Russia over whether the armed forces are learning lessons from their counterterrorist in Chechnya. Respected Russian analyst Vitaly Shlykov, one of the best defense analysts in Moscow, stated that “some elementary lessons have been learned, but they don’t amount to a reform. Apart from a sobering effect, these campaigns have had no impact.”⁵² He added that Chechen loyalists on the side of Russia (most notably the Vostok and Zapad battalions) have been given more of the burden of fighting and they have proved to be effective in search-and-destroy missions.⁵³

Chechen loyalists were also used in the first war but not to the same extent. In the second war the former mayor of Grozny, Beslan Gantamirov, actually helped plan and lead the assault on the city. The Russian Ministry of Defense developed the Chechen teams. The commander of the Zapad (West) battalion, Said-Magomed Kakiyev, led a 25-man special forces group that seized several buildings and was the first to raise the Russian flag in Grozny in 2000 according to one account.⁵⁴ Earlier reports by Russian commanders indicated relations between Russian and Chechen MVD forces were going smoothly. The Russian commander of the MVD’s 46th Brigade, Colonel Vyacheslav Rozhko, noted that “the extent of trust between Chechen MVD and Russian MVD forces has gotten better. The two forces are patrolling together and caution “is now a secondary consideration.”⁵⁵ He added that tracks for armored vehicles and storage batteries for night sights were two items that required more spare parts. He recommended reviewing their usage norms since they were wearing out so fast. He added that the brigades combat readiness coefficient never falls below 95% and its personnel staffing never falls below 95%.⁵⁶

One negative report suggested that the Chechen loyalists were not so successful. Ksenia Solyanskaya, writing for the Gazeta.ru website on 17 August 2004, said the new federal troop policy (a reference to a speech by Defense Minister Ivanov, who said two new mountain brigades will conduct operations in the mountains, emphasizing small, highly mobile counterinsurgency operations rather than the MVDs techniques) amounts to a declaration of no confidence in the indigenous Chechen interior troops (but apparently not to the Chechen special forces).⁵⁷

Another article on Zapad Commander Said-Magomed Kakiyev, noted above, stated that he fought in the anti-Dudayev opposition. Kakiyev stated that he works in close coordination with Vostok (East) commander, Sulim Yamadayev. As a Chechen fighting Chechens, he is opposed to people like Basayev and Doku Umarov. He considers

⁵² Saradzhyan, “Army Learned Few Lessons from Chechnya,” Moscow Times, 15 December 2004.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Oleg Petrovskiy, “If You Are Ever Facing a Mission into the Mountains,” Utro.ru WWW-Text, 19 July 2004 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 31 August 2004.

⁵⁵ Vadim Udmantsev, “Combat Readiness,” Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kuryer, 31 December 2003 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 6 January 2004.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ “The Chechnya Weekly: News and Analysis on the Crisis in Chechnya,” The Jamestown Foundation, 25 August 2004, Vol V, Issue 32.

them as people who have lost their dignity and who are not human beings. Muslims, he adds, would never do the things that Basayev, Umarov, and others do.⁵⁸

Conclusions

The Russian Army's combat experience in Chechnya has taught it many lessons about Chechen tactics and how to deal with an insurgency. Primary among the lessons is the urgency to understand the ideological underpinnings of the struggle, and the cultural issues affecting the will of the combatants on both sides. Culture is extremely important. An intervening force must be able to comprehend the strength of family ties and respect for elders in a community. It must understand the will of the people in question and their feelings about the intervening force. Such issues provide powerful clues on who will direct command and control issues and how significant surveillance priorities will be. "Will" is a powerful indicator of the type of struggle that lies ahead. It can be more important than ideology since "will" represents the end result of a combination of family, history, philosophy, religion, and other issues. It is buried in the soul of the people.

The Russian Armed Forces also became expert at foreseeing and predicting areas where IEDs or mines might be placed or used, usually in concert with deception or ambush techniques. This ability to foresee and forecast is a vital tool no less important than an understanding of "will" that must be taught, acquired, and maintained by a force entering an insurgency operation. Russian commanders stated that it is the side that knows how to utilize "diverse tactics" that will usually do well. In the case of Chechnya, the Chechens have been able to use the diverse tactic of planning and preemption to kill the former President of Chechnya, Kadirov, with a bomb planted in a viewing box perhaps some months before detonation; and the Russians were able to kill Chechen leader Khattab with a poison letter. Diverse tactics.

Deception and ambush operations go hand in glove, and represent the deadliest of combinations. What appears normal isn't, and forces make mistakes as a result. Without expertise in this area, a force is doomed to make irretrievable mistakes that will cost a unit equipment and lives. It is also clear that insurgents are adept at executing consecutive operations. These operations can run concurrently for up to a week before a lull sets back in as the insurgents regroup and rearm.

Cyber and information technologies have greatly empowered deception and ambush techniques. It is now easier to put explosive charges together and to hide them in the fabric of modern life. What looks like and feels like a simple telephone line may in actuality be something far different, a detonator cord painted black for example. The Internet is now a prime place for recruiting new fighters, for demonstrating the impotence of another army's ability to capture them, and for conducting operational deception. Of particular interest is that the Internet or e-mail can be used as a demonstration of real facts if it helps your cause; or a place to keep quiet about or negate real facts if they hurt your cause. Specific facts can be distorted for a particular use. They can be mass e-mailed

⁵⁸ German Pronin, "Spetsnaz go into the Attack for Allah and Putin," Utro.ru, 24 March 2004 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 20 December 2004.

as a form of premeditated disinformation. These methods are aimed not only at Russia's Armed Forces, its population, and government leaders, but at foreign audiences as well.

Further, Russia has learned that insurgents often try to make a falsehood out of the truth. They have to be careful when evidence points against one of their trusted agents. Chechen insurgents have been known to plant evidence in the garden of a Chechen citizen who is a pro-Russian supporter, and then through the use of rumors, have the Russian forces uncover the arsenal of ammunition or weapons. As a result Russian forces arrest a true supporter.

Naturally, Russian forces also learned to recognize and confront Chechen tactics of movement, uncover Chechen base-camp operations, and recognize the Chechen leadership's organizational paradigms and tactical methodologies. They learned how to use agents within Chechen society and they improved their reconnaissance and surveillance as the war unfolded. It is hoped that the Russians soon provide even more detailed lessons learned about insurgent tactics. If they do such lessons will be closely studied by US forces spread around the world.

APPENDIX ONE

Russian “Lessons Learned” from the Journal Armeyskiy Sbornik

A survey of the Defense Ministry’s own publications, such as the Army’s Armeisky Sbornik magazine, reveals a number of thorough and rather objective articles analyzing the experience of one or several units of one of the branches of the armed forces operation in Chechnya, but no comprehensive analysis of the entire campaign.⁵⁹

The journal Armeyskiy Sbornik reported on a series of issues that actually come closer to problems encountered than “lessons learned.” However knowing these problem areas is nearly as important. These problem areas (and adjustments to them) included checkpoint security, engineer and medical support, new training methodologies, the conduct of territorial defense, and rear support during operations in Chechnya.

With regard to checkpoint training, one report noted that armed forces troops would have to be ready to assume the duties of MVD troops, such as troop security, guarding important facilities, security lines of communications and towns in a combat situation. This will require that the armed forces subunits be prepared to study problems such as checkpoint (blockpost in Russian) duties.⁶⁰ Thus this indicated a new mission for the ground forces, assuming MVD duties. Another issue of Armeyskiy Sbornik highlighted the most complex missions for the armed forces, which in the authors’ opinion included the prevention of enemy saboteur-terrorist operations and fire assaults, combating ambushes, snipers, mines, and reconnaissance teams. Special skills were also mentioned, and it was here that the ability to eliminate the consequences of facilities posing a radiation, chemical or biological hazard was discussed. Of particular mention were methods to impose quarantine during epidemics.⁶¹ So the Russian military did not neglect the fact that the insurgents might use chemical or biological weapons.

With regard to rear service support, the main task of the joint grouping of forces in Chechnya included accumulating enough reserve materials for a force of over 50,000 men for a period of more than 60 days. Food supplies for no less than 30 days were always on hand, but problems were encountered with the KP-130 trailer kitchen whose door wouldn’t open after mud covered it after a march. The most difficult problem was providing water to units, which eventually involved organizing engineering, chemical, medical, and food supply services to accomplish the mission. Difficulties arose due to inadequate transportation assets to move fuel for helicopters and ground-based combat equipment on bad roads. Providing sweaters, woolen cap comforters, rubber boots, and sleeping gear to soldiers was also an acute problem. The ability to receive, process,

⁵⁹ Simon Saradzhyan, “Army Learned Few Lessons from Chechnya,” Moscow Times, 15 December 2004.

⁶⁰ Gennadiy Kotenko, Ivan Vorobyev, and Valeriy Kiselev, “There Also is this Kind of Mission: Features of Training Motorized Rifle Subunits for Checkpoint Duty,” Armeyskiy Sbornik, No 9, 2004 pp. 32-35.

⁶¹ Gennadiy Kotenko, Ivan Vorobyev, and Valeriy Kiselev, “The ‘Infantry’ also has These Concerns,” Armeyskiy Sbornik, No 10, 2004 pp. 23-26.

identify, and send bodies of soldiers off for burial was also a huge problem. In all 2699 people provided medical aid.⁶²

Another issue or lesson learned was current Russian armed forces shortcomings in handling 21st century military challenges. This article noted that since a frontline practically no longer exists, it is now necessary for the Russian military to better prepare the theoretical tenets for the preparation and conduct of tactical operations in coordination with other force structures. This situation currently is inadequate. It is necessary to learn to study the interrelationships among various methods of tactical operations of force structures; and to learn how to develop a better assessment methodology for units in armed conflict. This means that the structure and composition of subunits must be changed, to include those units learning to use advanced weapons. The proper weapons for a joint special (counterterrorist) operation should be prepared ahead of time and not after conflict erupts. The full combat potential of units involved in mountain or urban fighting is also seldom achieved and this situation must be corrected. In particular this means learning how to use night vision and terrain illumination equipment, training gunner-operations to destroy enemy targets before entering their fire zones, and preparing for and executing marches on mountainous and forested terrain.⁶³

Tactics were another issue of concern to the Russian leadership. The basis for Chechen tactics was identified as relying on the principles of commando-terrorist operations. These tactics included avoiding direct clashes against superior forces on open terrain; avoiding fixed operations (unless defending key objectives in the mountains); operating in small detachments and groups; arranging ambushes in gorges, passes, hairpin turns, woods and other ideal spots; target selection; using mobile methods of confrontation (rapidly concentrate forces and then disperse just as rapidly); and using explosives and demolitions.⁶⁴

The Russian armed forces must be equipped and prepared to prevent such surprise events and learn to encircle and seal off enemy groups. It was noted regarding Russian tactics that

During the counterterrorist operation in Chechnya, task detachments and groups were established to conduct probing reconnaissance, raiding, denial, and assault operations; to make envelopments; to secure facilities and lines of communication; to deploy outposts; and for combat escort of motor transport columns. Additional unconventional elements of the battle formation were the tactical maneuver groups used for independent execution of missions arising suddenly and for combating enemy mobile groups; strike-fire delivery groups consisting of raiding, enveloping and assault detachments; destruction anti-

⁶² Vladimir Moskovchenko, "Combat Training: The Lessons of Chechnya," *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, No 7, July 2000, pp. 41-46.

⁶³ Sergey Batyushkin, "The Platoon and the Company—Are Also a Force," *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, No 10, 2004 pp. 30-34.

⁶⁴ Gennadiy Kotenko, Ivan Vorobyev, and Valeriy Kiselev, "Unconventional Tactics, Optimal Results," *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, No 7, 2003 pp. 32-33 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 31 August 2004.

commando and helicopter-raiding detachments and groups; groups of armored fighting vehicles; mobile mine laying and obstacle clearing groups; small combat task groups (twos and threes); sniper teams and so on.⁶⁵

Further, Russian tactics included head-on, flank, or parallel ambush sites. Teams are established based on their mission associated with the ambush: observation, diversionary, fire, blocking, covering, and reserve.⁶⁶ Ambushes also include the use of flamethrowers. This latter piece of equipment has been used widely in Chechnya and probably does not enjoy the same emphasis in Western armies. It was noted in the article that flamethrowers operate as part of assault teams and they can destroy sheltered weapon emplacements, disabling lightly armored vehicles and creating centers of fire. Russian commanders feel that flamethrowers are close-combat weapons used where it is impossible to destroy targets by artillery or small arms fire. Flamethrower teams operate in teams of 2-4 people and at least two flamethrower operators are assigned to each target in order to fire from different directions.⁶⁷

The issue of training was another item addressed in Armeyskiy Sbornik. It was reported that subunits were not prepared to conduct close-in fire missions in populated areas, or in mountainous or forested terrain. The reason given for this shortcoming was that weapons training was conducted without consideration for this new 21st century battlefield. Nor was the low level of training among new recruits considered. As one article noted

We cannot forget that in recent years the amount of training materials required to do a good job in developing tasks for weapons training has increased three to five-fold. However, the amount of time given to weapons training has remained the same. In practice this has meant that because of the inadequate training of personnel the potential capabilities of combat vehicles' weapons and rifles in, for example, Chechnya have been realized by only 50 to 70 percent.⁶⁸

During the fighting in Chechnya a quick program was developed to institute weapons training. It included technical aspects of weapons and the rules for their use. The throwing of hand grenades (both upward and downward) in populated areas was also emphasized, as well as firing in groups of twos and threes.⁶⁹ In the first Chechen campaign the armed forces began training combat teams. Special emphasis was placed on the coordinated actions of combat teams with their supporting weapon systems of BMPs, guns, mortars, flamethrower operators, helicopter pilots, and combat engineers.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Gennadiy Kotenko, Ivan Vorobyev, and Valeriy Kiselev, "Tactical Operations in Armed Conflict," Armeyskiy Sbornik, No 9, 2003 pp. 27-31 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 31 August 2004.

⁶⁷ Gennadiy Kotenko, Ivan Vorobyev, and Valeriy Kiselev, "And a Foreign City at your Feet," Armeyskiy Sbornik, No 4, 2004 pp. 33-37 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 31 August 2004.

⁶⁸ Gennadiy Kotenko, Ivan Vorobyev, and Valeriy Kiselev, "Snipers are not just Born," Armeyskiy Sbornik, No 8, 2004 pp. 31-33 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 31 August 2004.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Integrated drill sessions enabled the proper timing and coordination of forces and assets.⁷⁰

Coordinated action was also a mandate of the Chechen fighters. It was reported that in one of the Chechen training centers of Chechen Field Commander Khattab, to attack an outpost required that

The team is divided into three parts: the RPG and PK (machinegun) take up a permanent position at a minimum of 50 meters from the post. The assault riflemen covertly approach the given target as close as possible. Combat begins after the first shot. The PK and RPK (Kalashnikov light machinegun) conduct continuous aimed fire against the post (the machine gunner and RPG man must be experienced). At this time the assault riflemen begin moving toward the target. Initially the flank teams run 15-20 meters toward the post while the central team fires. Then the flank teams take up the closest cover and open fire. The central team moves forward 15-20 meters in quick, short runs, then stops and opens fire. At this time the flank teams push forward, and so on until they reach the post.⁷¹

Russian trainers, based on operations in Afghanistan and Chechnya, realized that additional training was required in the combat zone after troops arrived. The first stage consisted of individual training and combat teamwork. The second stage included drills and live fire exercises. The training day lasted 10-12 hours, and 30% of the training occurred at night. The ability to uncover ambushes, mines, and decoys; combat the Chechen tactic of “raid-rearward bound”; refine methods to combat mobile fire teams, saboteur-terrorist activity, saboteur-reconnaissance teams, anti-sniper and anti-mine teams, and methods to negotiate obstacles, barriers, and mined terrain also received special emphasis. The study of the tactical-technical properties of Chechen weapons and their operating tactics also received special consideration.⁷² A final yet primary weakness that had to be worked on in training was the coordination of motorized rifle subunits with subunits of the MVD.

Morale-psychological support also was a training area for improvement. Of particular concern here were the mood swings that were observed among Russian servicemen during combat. The end result of such training would be to improve the servicemen’s fighting spirit, use of common sense and rationale to overcome confusion, the ability to act boldly, actively, and decisively in battle, and the ability to achieve one’s assigned goal.⁷³

⁷⁰ Gennadiy Kotenko, Ivan Vorobyev, and Valeriy Kiselev, “Let them be Small but Bold,” *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, No 1, 2004 pp. 48-50 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 31 August 2004.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Gennadiy Kotenko, Ivan Vorobyev, and Valeriy Kiselev, “In the Conflict Area,” *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, No 10, 2003 pp. 33-36 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 31 August 2004.

⁷³ Gennadiy Kotenko, Ivan Vorobyev, and Valeriy Kiselev, “Training Professionals,” *Armeyskiy Sbornik*, No 8, 2003 pp. 29-31 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 31 August 2004.

APPENDIX TWO

Lessons learned from other journals

Among the many journals that offered a list of suggestions or “lessons learned” three were chosen for this article. The first journal is Voyennyye Znaniya. A February 2002 issue of the journal featured an article by the head of the Ground Forces, Colonel General Nikolay Viktorovich Kormiltsev. He listed the following lessons learned:

- Due to their combat independence and versatility ground troops play the main role in performing missions in an operation’s first phase.
- Ministry of Internal Affairs Troops (MVD) should be assigned missions of disarming any bandit forces remaining after the main force departs, maintaining law and order in freed areas, conducting passport inspections, and securing and defending various important facilities.
- Only permanent-readiness units and formations with their permanent tables of organization and equipment, and own command and control entities, should be considered for action in a zone of armed conflict. These units should be used based on consideration of their operational purpose (peacekeeping, counterterrorist activities) and on the geographic conditions of the region (mountainous, wooded, desert, etc.).
- Command and control systems created in peacetime should support wartime missions.
- Skillful use of local customs and manners and close contact with local government representatives facilitates success and prevents losses.
- Subunits and units perform missions via uncharacteristic methods as part of various detachments and groups formed for special purposes.
- Organizing for combat and the command and control of units and subunits are complicated as a result of simultaneous and successive combat operations in different areas.
- The motorized rifle battalion is the basic tactical unit capable of performing combat missions as part of regiments and brigades and when acting independently.
- Establishing a balanced suite of arms and military equipment of force elements at the tactical level is a priority direction of the Ground Troops.
- An urgent need has arisen for improving a soldier’s combat gear and survival equipment.
- Training reserve officers demands more attention. It is necessary to raise their training to the point that their theoretical training and practical training corresponds to levels of graduates of higher military educational institutions.
- It is advisable to have reserve troops along with regular troops in the Ground Troop structure. Their numerical strength could be 60-70% of that of the regular troops.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Interview by Mikhail Sevastyanov of Nikolay Viktorovich Kormiltsev, “CINC Ground Troops/Deputy RF Defense Minister Colonel General Nikolay Kormiltsev,” Voyennyye Znaniya, 1 February 2002 pp 8-10 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 3 February 2003.

The second journal is Issue 5 of the 2004 magazine Soldat Udachi that contained an article on the “Encyclopedia of War.” It offered a list of some 39 ways that could guide a soldier in a zone of armed conflict. Some of these lessons were:

- Fighters can be anywhere, posing as peaceful citizens in the daytime and changing into killers at night.
- Don’t accept someone as a friendly just because they speak Russian and wear camouflage clothes.
- You don’t get a second chance in wartime.
- Never lose the feeling of danger, or the strength of the spirit of the Russian soldier.
- Never leave a base without the commander’s permission in the field.
- Never touch bright or expensive objects as they may be mined.
- Always organize uninterrupted observation of one’s surroundings.
- Stay about seven meters apart when entering a conflict zone so that a grenade doesn’t get a large group.
- In the mountains whoever is higher is stronger.
- Pay attention to the flanks as the basic maneuver of the insurgents is to get around your back and envelop your force.
- Know your commander’s voice and be able to discern it and other voices on the radio.⁷⁵

Finally, author Juliya Kalinina, writing in Moskovskiy Komsomolets, wrote in 2001 that the first Chechen war demonstrated that the Russian armed forces lacked expertise in two areas: command, control and communications equipment; and a combat operations information system.⁷⁶ This lack of C3 included proper coordination in this area between the MVD and the armed forces, and included incompatible equipment.

⁷⁵ Viktor Ivashenko, “Encyclopedia of War,” Soldat Udachi, May 2004, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Yuliya Kalinina, [title not provided], Moskovskiy Komsomolets, 17 May 2001 p. 2 as translated and downloaded from the FBIS web site on 17 May 2001.

