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The Russian Chechen Wars

Three Lessons for U.S. Defense Planners

By DANIEL T. CANFIELD

The Russian Chechen wars (1994–2000) were the last major conflicts of the 20th century. Though overshadowed by America’s amazing success in the first Gulf War and the tragic events of 9/11, Russia’s ongoing conflict in Chechnya provides a glimpse into the future evolution of warfare. It also serves as a stark reminder of the cruel realities inherent in urban combat and the difficulties associated with military occupation and conducting counterinsurgency among a shrewd and determined enemy.

Background

Russia’s strategic and territorial ambitions first collided with the mountainous, clan-based peoples of Chechnya in the late 17th century.¹ For the sake of brevity, the roots of the contemporary conflict may be traced to the waning days of the former Soviet Union. In December 1994, the Russian army entered Chechen territory in an ill-fated attempt to regain control of the breakaway republic.² By late December, three heavy Russian columns converged on Grozny. After a calamitous New Year’s Eve assault, the Russians, quite unexpectedly, found

themselves confronting a protracted and well-organized insurgency led by Jokhar Dudayev.³

Russian forces, employing massive amounts of indiscriminate firepower, eventually seized Grozny in March 1995. Most of the battle-hardened Chechen fighters, however, simply melted into the mountainous countryside, regrouped, and continued to fight. After nearly 2 years of desultory warfare, Chechen irregulars retook Grozny in August 1996. By November, a defeated and demoralized Russian army withdrew from the republic.⁴ But the conflict was far from over. Regrettably



Russian Interior Ministry soldiers conduct sweep for suspected rebels in Grozny, Chechnya

AP/Wide World Photo (Yuri Turov)

for both sides, it merely metastasized into something far more dangerous.

After years of social, economic, and political fragmentation, the Chechens proved incapable of self-governance in the wake of the Russian withdrawal. Original nationalistic goals and intentions gave way to a witch's brew of corruption and competing self-interests fueled by organized crime and the rise of radical Islamist ideology. In August 1999, 500 Wahhabist fighters, including many non-Chechens, crossed the border into Dagestan and seized control of several villages as a precursor to the establishment of a greater Islamic state in the Transcaucasus.⁵

The Russians responded decisively. Vladimir Putin, with the strong backing of the Russian people, ejected the rebels and sent 50,000 troops to the Chechen border. In October, a large Russian army, adapting to the painful lessons of the original 1994 invasion, crossed the border and laid siege to Grozny. By February 2000, Russian troops seized the capital and, once again, forced what remained of the splintered Chechen resistance into the mountains.⁶ The Russian occupation continues to this day. The conflict has consumed nearly 14 years, required the sustained commitment of thousands of troops, cost an incalculable sum, and led to the deaths of an estimated 6,000 Russian soldiers and an untold number of civilians.⁷

A careful examination of the Russian experience in Chechnya reveals a plethora of valuable lessons.⁸ This article, however, focuses on just three. It argues that the paucity of human intelligence, conundrum of urban combat, and political ambiguities associated with the application of conventional military force against a nonstate actor constitute the three most prominent, relevant, and challenging issues for contemporary and future U.S. defense planners.

Human Intelligence

Despite over 2 centuries of experience in the Caucasus, the Russian military embarked upon its initial 1994 campaign with a surprising deficiency of cultural and human intelligence. The Russian government, once masters of political subterfuge and covert action under the

Soviet regime, not only failed to engineer a coup but also found itself strangely naïve to the tactical and political realities confronting its forces on the ground. Once committed, Russian intelligence services proved ineffective and slow to adapt to the irregular character of the conflict.⁹

The American defense establishment, sobered by its own intelligence failures, should take careful heed of Russian shortcomings. Throughout the Cold War, the United States, like the Russians, became infatuated with the temptress of technology at the expense of developing traditional human collection capabilities.¹⁰ The Russians, as evidenced by their ability to locate, target, and kill several prominent Chechen "terrorists," realized the errors of their ways and have seemingly adapted their methods accordingly.¹¹ Seven years after 9/11, however, America's global interests and responsibilities still far exceed its human intelligence capabilities. Technology, of course, has its role, but spy satellites and computers have limited use against terrorists and insurgents operating within a hostile or ambivalent population. Not surprisingly, intelligence success in such a war remains the province of bold and determined human beings, not machines.

Urban Combat

Despite all our illusions of sophistication, urban combat remains a bloody and costly endeavor in which the defender possesses numerous tactical advantages. It is a tough, up-close, and personal fight that negates advantages in mobility, firepower, and technology. Success on the urban battlefield requires prodigious amounts of dismounted infantry; tenacious, adroit small unit leadership; and a reluctant acknowledgement of the costs in terms of casualties and the inevitable destruction of local infrastructure. The Russian experience only reinforces these long-held truths.¹²

The Russians, forced to destroy Grozny in order to take it, are viewed through the lens of the conflict's limited historiography as bumbling and unsophisticated novices who cruelly bludgeoned their way to an imperfect victory. It may be helpful to temper such self-promoting rhetoric with a realistic assessment of how the United States, or any one else, would have performed under the same circumstances. Urban warfare remains both firepower- and manpower-intensive. Ironically, the United States has trained, organized, and equipped an expensive, high-tech force

Grozny Before and After Conflict



December 16, 1999, before carpet bombing



March 16, 2000, after carpet bombing



Sources: Photos from "Chechnya: Urban Warfare Lessons Learned," lecture delivered Spring 2000 at Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School. Satellite images from "Understanding the Guerrilla," Nation Building Seminar by Chris Shepard, May 2005, Chicago-Kent College of Law, Illinois Institute of Technology.

Major Daniel T. Canfield, USMC, wrote this essay while a student at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. It won the Strategy Article category of the 2008 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Strategic Essay Competition.

with a disturbing paucity of dismounted infantrymen at the very time the explosive growth in global urbanization and irregular warfare has rendered the employment of such a force dangerously inadequate.

Force

Clausewitz's famous dictum that war is a continuation of policy by other means dominates contemporary Western thinking about war.¹³ Yet in an increasingly complex world, a troubling issue arises: can traditional military force be applied against a nonstate actor, and if so, how? This question, significantly beyond the scope of the current article, nonetheless constitutes one of the dominant issues of our time. It also strikes at the heart of the Russian Chechen conflict. While the traditional nation-state employs violence within the constraints of its responsibilities for self-preservation and the general betterment of its citizenry,



Multinational Corps Iraq—Information Operations (Samuel Bendel)

Iraqi man and child wait as Soldiers prepare to search their home

the nonstate actor—possessing no capital, people, or industry to protect—suffers no such inhibitions. How does a nation-state, therefore, prevail against an enemy whose ethnic and/or religious zealotry trumps the logic of self-preservation and usurps the responsibilities inherent in the traditional social contract?¹⁴

The Russians confronted this dilemma long before 9/11. Initially ceding political defeat in 1996, they were forced to return in overwhelming numbers when Chechnya descended into social anarchy and became a breeding ground for radicalized splinter groups that hijacked the political process and placed their religious ideology over the interests of the fledgling Chechen state.¹⁵ Though the Russians, at tremendous cost, succeeded in suppressing the once vibrant insurgency, it remains to be seen whether they or the United States in Iraq

and Afghanistan will consummate military victories with enduring political success. Failure to accomplish the latter renders the achievement of the former, no matter how nobly fought or adroitly conceived, irrelevant.

While the nature of war remains constant, the conduct of warfare appears to be morphing in new and dangerous ways. Chechnya has a great deal to teach us about the realities of urban combat, the challenges of military occupation, the nature of contemporary counterinsurgency, and the absolute imperative of a well-crafted national strategy that employs all instruments of national power while balancing military means with political ends. The Russian Chechen Wars also serve as a model for the type of hybrid/complex irregular warfare that America's enemies are likely to employ now and in the future.¹⁶ At present, the United States wields a national political/military instrument dangerously ill suited to defeat irregular threats. It also seems strangely unconcerned about the dangers of employing indecisive military force and the strategic opportunity cost associated with protracted, desultory warfare that, in many ways, conforms to the nonstate actor's strategy of deliberate provocation.

If Afghanistan was Russia's Vietnam, will Iraq become America's Chechnya? In the years ahead, nation-states, like former colonial powers, will continue to find their authority, influence, and power increasingly challenged by nonstate actors. Perhaps the real legacy of Chechnya is not the obvious realization that the people represent the center of gravity for both the insurgent and the government, but rather the sublime realization that an ounce of political prevention is worth a pound of military cure. We should not hold the Russians in contempt or hypocritically criticize their military proficiency; we should learn from them. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Bruce Empric, *Chechnya: Russia's Quagmire* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Army War College, 2002), 3.

² For a general overview, see Olga Olikier, *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994–2000: Lessons from Urban Combat* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2001), 9–27.

³ Richard H. Shultz, Jr., and Andrea J. Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists, and Militias: The Warriors of Contemporary Combat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 122–123.

⁴ Ibid., 126–131. Also see Lester W. Grau and Timothy Smith, “A ‘Crushing’ Victory: Fuel-Air Explosives and Grozny 2000,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 2000, 30–34.

⁵ Ibid., 132; Olikier, 39–41.

⁶ Shultz and Dew, 133.

⁷ Precise casualty figures remain elusive. Russian losses in the first Chechen war (1994–1996) are generally estimated at 6,000 killed in action. See Robert M. Cassidy, *Russia in Afghanistan and Chechnya: Military Strategic Culture and the Paradoxes of Asymmetric Conflict* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), 1. Estimates of Chechen and/or civilian casualties vary widely. For example, see Scott E. McIntosh, *Thumping the Hive: Russian Neocortical Warfare in Chechnya* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2004), 17. Shultz and Dew claim that 27,000 Chechen non-combatants were killed in Grozny alone during the initial 1994 assault. See Shultz and Dew, 125.

⁸ See Olikier, ix–xv; Gregory J. Celestan, *Wounded Bear: The Ongoing Military Operation in Chechnya* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1996); and appendix J: “Lessons Learned from Russian Military Operations in Chechnya 1994–1996,” in Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3–35.3, *Military Operations on Urban Terrain*.

⁹ Shultz and Dew, 123; Olikier, 10–14.

¹⁰ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: Norton, 2004), 407.

¹¹ Shultz and Dew, 130.

¹² Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3–35.3, 1-1–1-21.

¹³ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 80–81. Clausewitz is referring to *war* and not *warfare* in section 11. He clearly sees a distinction between the terms. While he believes the goal or object of war is the political objective, he believes it is the destruction of the enemy's means to resist (that is, his armed forces or, in his day, the enemy army) in warfare. In section 11, he refers to this as “the will to overcome the enemy and make him powerless.” For a contemporary account of the disturbing propensity of modern policymakers to focus on the planning and conduct of war (that is, the means at the expense of the political objective), see Fred Ikle, *Every War Must End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 1–16.

¹⁴ See Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

¹⁵ Shultz and Dew, 131–136.

¹⁶ For a discussion of hybrid or complex irregular warfare, see Frank G. Hoffman, “Complex Irregular Warfare: The Next Revolution in Military Affairs,” *Orbis* 50, no. 3 (Summer 2006).