

The Battle of Grozny

Lessons for Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain

by Captain Chad A. Rupe

Strategic Overview

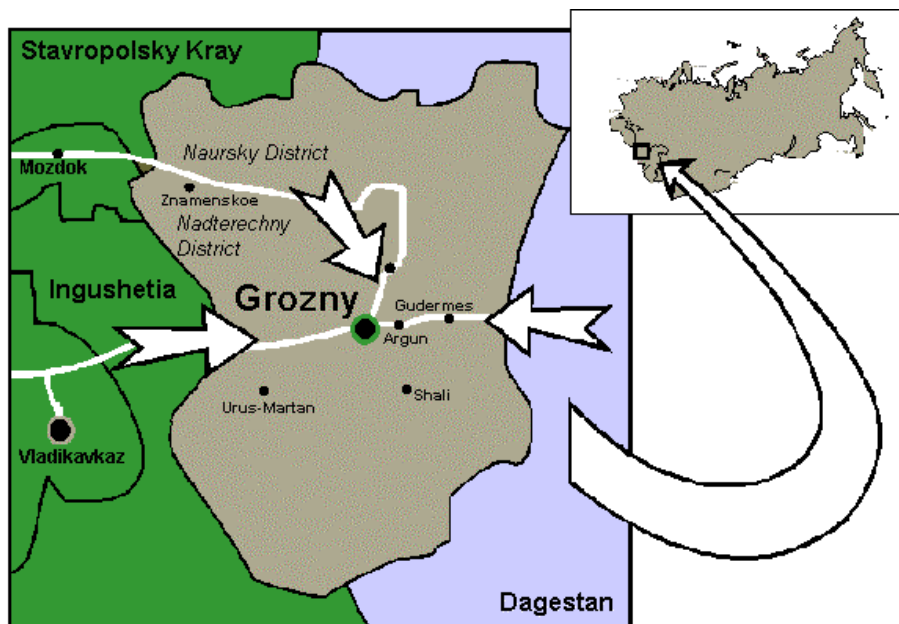
In a civil war on the southern border of Russia, three nationalities — the Chechens, Russians, and the Ingush — fought from 1991 to 1996 throughout the region of Chechnya. The conflict remains unresolved. The key battle of the war, the battle of Grozny, provides insight into the reasons for the prolonged conflict and offers lessons to apply to future warfare in an urban environment.

After the Soviet Union collapsed and the Baltic States broke off, the Chechens demanded autonomy for their homeland. Dzhokhar Dudayev, a former Soviet Air Force general and ethnic Chechen, rose to lead the Chechen Popular Congress in 1991. Most of his support came from the rural population in the south of Chechnya and the areas surrounding the capital city of Grozny, and it included units of the National Guard.⁴

The Ingush, the second most populous nationality in Chechnya, formed a party to oppose Dudayev. Allied with the Russians, the Ingush wanted more autonomy within the Russian federation, rather than independence. Although the Ingush maintained support from Boris Yeltsin, the opposition party lost influence in Chechnya. From October 1991 to November 1994, Dudayev consolidated his power against the opposition and limited their area of control to the northern regions of the republic, far away from the capital.⁵

Supported by Russian advisors and air power, the Ingush retaliated with an advance on Grozny in November 1994. Meeting fierce resistance from armed Chechens and National Guard troops, the opposition party failed to dislodge Dudayev from the capital. The opposition party's only recourse was to ask Yeltsin for a full-scale intervention.⁶

In fact, Yeltsin had declared his support of the Ingush prior to the offensive, and had demanded the disarmament of illegal formations and assemblies in Chechnya.⁷ Since the attack was unsuccessful in enforcing his order, he had to act to regain



Map shows the initial Russian invasion plan for Chechnya,¹ a tiny republic in the southwest corner of the former Soviet Union. The Chechen demand for autonomy was opposed by another minority, the Ingush, who sought Russian help to quell the uprising.

Russian authority in the region, ordering the Russian Army to invade Chechnya with a final objective of the Presidential Palace in Grozny. By seizing the palace, Yeltsin planned to remove Dudayev from power.⁸

In December 1994, the Russian Army assembled three army groups consisting of 23,800 soldiers and special police units equipped with 80 tanks (T-72s, T-80s⁹), 208 IFVs and APCs (BMP-2s, BMDs, BTR-70s¹⁰), and 182 guns and mortars. (These numbers vary depending on the report.)¹¹ Planning to attack the city from the north, the main effort advanced from the north border of Chechnya with the 81st MRR, the 131st MIBR (SPT), and the 20th MRR. Supporting efforts advanced from the east with three airborne divisions and from the west with a marine regiment, an MRR, and an airborne brigade.¹² Each were supported by air and special operations.

The Chechens faced this advance with a total of 15,000 personnel. The population armed itself with 60 guns and mortars, 30 Grad multiple rocket launchers, 50 tanks (most were non-operational), 100 IFVs,

and 150 anti-aircraft guns. Within Grozny, two battalions, Abkhazian and Muslim, defended the city along with a special brigade.¹³ The Chechen command created three defensive lines concentrically around the Presidential Palace. The inner defense was at a radius of 1.5 km, the middle defense from 2 to 5 km from the palace, and the outermost defense extended to the city's outskirts. The outer and middle defenses depended on strong points. The inner defense used prepared positions for tank and artillery fire.¹⁴

The Battle of Grozny

On December 31, 1994, the Russians surrounded the city and seized high ground to the south to ensure lines of communication. Without waiting for the supporting efforts from the east and west, the commander of the northern force advanced alone into the center of the city to seize the Presidential Palace with the 131st Motorized Rifle Brigade, the 81st Motorized Rifle Regiment, and the 20th Motorized Rifle Regiment.¹⁵ From the east, the airborne divisions entered the city on 1 January and seized the suburbs



The Presidential Palace in Grozny, objective of the Russian invasion,² at top, and after weeks of street fighting.³

containing hazardous ecological material and railroad stations to relieve the main force.¹⁶ Impeded by civilian blockades in the approach to Grozny, the western forces failed to advance to the city.¹⁷ When the Russian columns advanced into the center of Grozny, the men expected to disband poorly trained civilian mobs through a show of force by the Russian Army.

Ordered not to fire unless fired upon, the vehicle commanders did not bother to load their machine guns. Infantrymen slept in the back of their personnel carriers. Vehicle commanders had the audacity and confidence to navigate through the city without large scale maps or guides.¹⁸ But as they ended up on dead-end streets and in gardens, the columns quickly lost their confidence and their lives.¹⁹

Hunter-killer teams of Chechens brought the columns to an explosive halt. They operated in groups of 15 to 20 personnel,

broken down into five or six teams consisting of three to four men each. Each team had an antitank gunner, equipped with an RPG-7 or RPG-18, a machine gunner, an ammunition carrier, and a sniper. As the Russians advanced, the rebels moved in behind and parallel to the columns. Using hand-held radios, rebel scouts, "hunters," coordinated with infantry, "killers," to establish ambushes. A group of 15 to 20 personnel moved to overlook each armored column from multi-story buildings.²⁰ Initiating ambushes with RPG fire on the lead and trail vehicles, the rebels quickly destroyed all personnel and vehicles.²¹

Lacking air cover and all support, the main effort was annihilated short of its final objective. Only 18 of the 120 vehicles in the 131st MRB escaped destruction. Almost all of its officers died.²² The Russian Army took until 7 January to recover from this initial disaster. Learning quickly, the Russians formed com-

bined arms teams, using infantry to clear buildings,²³ supported by teams of two fighting vehicles and a tank.²⁴ Additionally, each battalion received supporting indirect fires at a range of 150m to 200m from a battery of artillery, two batteries of mortars, and an attachment of a battery from division artillery.²⁵ Yet, even with these rejuvenated efforts, the Russian Army still took until 22 February to seal off the city from the rest of the republic.²⁶ Despite losing their capital and leader (Dudayev had been assassinated with an exploding cell phone), the Chechens continued the fight for their homeland.

Retreat without Peace

After the Battle of Grozny, the rebels continued a guerrilla war against an army of occupation for the next two years.²⁷ As the Russian Army advanced through regions to complete the destruction of the Chechen revolt, the rebels blended in with the villagers. Special police followed directly behind the lead Russian units to identify and kill the rebels. Rather than showing any discretion or idea of law and order, the police raped, murdered, and molested the villagers, to include children.²⁸ Then the Russians arrayed a series of outposts to supervise the "cleared" villages.

These tactics fueled the Chechens' desire for justice, and subsequently, many Russian army soldiers would die because of the actions of the police thugs. Once the majority of the Russian force moved on, the rebels ambushed the outposts and destroyed the isolated units. Then Chechens infiltrated back into "cleared" areas to continue the fighting.²⁹ Facing a war of attrition that had no visible end, Yeltsin declared victory in November 1996 and told his Army to pull out of Chechnya.³⁰

Casualties/Aftermath

During the first 10 months of the conflict, the Russians lost over 300 armored vehicles, 2,000 men KIA, 600 men MIA, and 6,000 men WIA. In the Battle of Grozny, it is estimated that 25,000 residents, rebels, and Russian soldiers died.³¹ When the Russians finally withdrew from Chechnya, they had still not gained control of the republic. To this day, Chechnya remains a semi-autonomous state, and a thorn in Yeltsin's side. Some members of the international community conduct business with the republic, but no one has recognized the state as truly independent. Thus, the conflict remains unresolved and a new chapter is waiting to be written in blood.

Lessons for Military Operations On Urbanized Terrain

INTELLIGENCE

Issues from the battle:

Intelligence played a decisive role. The Russians ignored this battlefield operating system and paid the price. Their arrogance led them into a false sense of security. They did not see a need to prepare for a fight. Their intelligence overlooked the rebels' will to fight, and ignored the information about rebel tactics, disposition, and composition from November's battles. They miscalculated the center of gravity of the Chechen revolution to be the leaders in the Presidential Palace rather than the true focal point, the perspective of the Chechen farmers as being oppressed. The Russians chose the Presidential Palace as the final objective, thereby hoping to stop the revolution, but the Chechens continued the fight without their original leadership structure so that they could gain freedom. The Russians never made any attempt to convince the farmers that the rebels were the reason for the oppression. Finally, the actions of the special police, who raped, molested, and murdered villagers, gave the rebels a valuable propaganda initiative. The Chechens used this information to solidify support for their movement. Conversely, the Chechens capitalized on their information about the Russian columns to maneuver and destroy their foe. Chechen intelligence focused on the immediate fight around the corner in order to provide valuable information to the platoons that fought in the severely restricted terrain.

Lessons for the application of intelligence:

Prior to entering the theater of operations, battalions should conduct threat briefs to ensure soldiers understand the task organization, equipment, and tactics of the threat from recent battles that gave rise to the deployment. Once in the theater, all squads should receive street maps and large-scale maps to accurately depict the buildings and streets where they will fight. Additionally, dismounted infantry platoons should receive floor plans on buildings that will be critical to the fight. If possible, scout sections should use friendly locals as guides and human intelligence assets. Using these guides, scouts conduct route reconnaissance along the city streets in preparation for the attack in order to confirm enemy locations. Maintaining very close contact with the main

force, the scouts are then able to conduct battle hand-over quickly or are able to break contact without suffering large numbers of casualties.

MANEUVER

Issues in Task Organization from the Battle:

In severely restricted city streets, the ability to achieve mass is maximized through task organization of the mechanized or motorized infantry platoon. The Russians relearned this lesson after their initial catastrophe in the streets of Grozny. They organized armor, infantry, and fire support assets at the lowest level so that they could destroy enemy resistance as they advanced. Yet, they could have improved their capabilities by clarifying tactics and adding additional assets.

Technique for Maneuvering in Urban Terrain:

A tank section, light infantry platoon, mortar section, combat engineer vehicle, and sapper platoon attaches to the mechanized infantry or armor company team. The company team commander or company executive officer coordinates these additional assets to support the lead platoons.

The company then controls a battlespace of one to two adjacent streets with a depth of 1 to 2 kilometers. Two scout sections from the task force conduct route reconnaissance along two streets at a distance of 500m to 2km in front of the company team. They locate the enemy and conduct battle hand-over to the company team. The company team advances along the two streets and travels with less than 50m between vehicles, using column or staggered column formation. Vehicles alternate gun tubes to scan for enemy at different levels. Dismounts and infantry vehicles observe the top floors of buildings, tanks and dismounts scan the ground level, and dismounts scan below ground level.

The company team uses the following order of march along each route: a tank, dismounted infantry platoon or mechanized infantry squad, mechanized or motorized infantry platoon vehicles, and a CEV or sapper platoon. A mortar section and a reserve consisting of a tank and dismounted infantry platoon follow the main effort.

Infantry are used to clear buildings adjacent to vehicles. Tanks immediately suppress or destroy targets at the maximum

range (at least 90m) and are used as a base of fire for the maneuver of infantry. Infantry vehicles and tanks use HEAT and HE rounds due to the proximity of friendly troops, and maintain at least 35m from the point of impact (allows the detonator to arm). The dismounted infantry and reserve commit along the flanks (buildings or adjacent streets) to seize the objective and clear surrounding areas. The CEV reduces obstacles along paved streets and the sapper platoon breaches obstacles in areas out of reach of mechanical assets.

Technological Issues:

The Russians lost numerous tanks in the city streets to RPG fire from above. Tanks need to be equipped to withstand this high angle fire. Open hatches are also a problem. Crews open their hatches to see better in the city's streets and to maneuver in narrow spaces between buildings, but this exposes the crew. Neither Russian nor American tanks can acquire targets at high angles with their main guns or coaxial machine guns. Only the commander's and loader's machine guns can be brought to bear, leaving the tank at a firepower disadvantage. The Russians overcame the firepower imbalance by using their ZSU 23-4s in the direct suppression mode against the top floors of buildings. They also used wire mesh on the sides of the tank to disrupt the impact of RPGs. The U.S. Army needs to address this issue through additional research.

Mobility/Counter-mobility/Survivability:

The Chechens had a marked advantage in counter-mobility because of narrow streets and high rise buildings. City streets were easily blocked and then used as ambush sites. The Russians needed more engineers to breach buildings and create routes out of a line of fire. Additionally, the concrete buildings and underground structures provided the Chechens with great survivability positions to withstand machine-gun fire. Better task organization with their engineers may have helped the Russians in these street battles.

BATTLE COMMAND

Issues from the Battle:

By emplacing retrans sites on the high ground outside of the city, the Russians made a vain attempt to control their advance. Yet they lost control of the fight

by not supporting the main effort with an advance from the east or the west. Additionally, the Russians did not master their control of the close fight. The infantry, when used, could not use radios to coordinate with the vehicles. When threatened, the soldiers did not have rules of engagement that allowed for a graduated response. Finally, leaders at all levels failed to enforce discipline. Unloaded machine guns and sleeping soldiers during an attack are unforgivable mistakes.

TTP for MOUT:

At the platoon level, the tanks and infantry fighting vehicles must be able to talk to the infantry for close coordination in the attack. The use of radios for short distances is crucial. However, the capability quickly decreases and a plan for relay stations and retrans on dominant terrain must be executed and verified in order for the company team and the task force to maintain coordination of adjacent elements. Additionally, the rules of engagement must be clear, simple, and trained to the squad level. Every soldier must be able to memorize approved responses so that when they are faced with unforeseeable incidents, they protect their own lives and act within the command's intent. Finally, fratricide must be a key consideration in battle handover of targets. The platoons must maintain a weapons-tight posture and ensure positive identity before engaging.

Air Defense:

The Russians had no air threat, and the Chechens were ineffective against the Russian air. Anti-air missiles and machine-gun fire are the most effective weapons in this environment. The Chechens could have easily observed air avenues of approach by simply designating one vehicle or fire team to observe the air corridor running above the major streets. By failing to position observers, the Chechens lost lives unnecessarily.

Logistics:

The Chechens relied on captured equipment to maintain their fleet. Most of their tanks were not operational throughout the fight due to a lack of spare parts. They never recovered from a failure to maintain an industrial base to support mechanized warfare. The Russians also did not support their forces to the level needed. They failed to provide the maintenance and logistical support to the vehicles and the soldiers. However, the most profound effect was poor training and planning for

casualty evacuation. This had a tremendous effect on their morale.³²

FIRE SUPPORT

Issue from the Battle:

Both the Chechens and the Russians used massive artillery barrages and supported their forward maneuver forces with direct fire artillery. These tactics were very effective at destroying armed resistance in the city streets. However, without any regard for precision strikes, it also killed many civilians.

TTP for MOUT:

Mortars firing WP and HE rounds equipped with VT fuzes are the most responsive weapon for support of the infantry due to the high angle of trajectory. Train mortar sections to focus on immediate suppression and immediate smoke to support the attack and breaching operations. Mortar rounds tend to have a smaller impact on the surrounding civilian population than other types of fire support.

Civil Affairs:

The Russians failed miserably at civil affairs, and lost the war as a result. Although this is not one of the battlefield operating systems, this aspect of the battle brought the attack from conventional warfare against a limited target to the realm of total warfare against a people. The special police reinforced the Chechen will to fight by raping, murdering, and molesting the Chechen population. A basic respect for life was never a part of the rules of engagement, and was never enforced. When the Russian Army left Grozny, they faced a war of attrition instead of a defeated population.

In conclusion, the Russians lost the initial fight for Grozny and the prolonged war in Chechnya by failing in almost every aspect of the Battlefield Operating Systems. Most notably they failed with intelligence and battle command. Additionally, an active disregard for civil affairs caused the war to drag on indefinitely. As an army, we can learn many lessons from this fight and apply them to improve our doctrine in Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain.

Notes

¹Celestan, Major Gregory J. "Wounded Bear: The Ongoing Russian Military Operation in Chechnya." Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Foreign Military Studies Office, August 1996, p. 3.

²Chechen Republic Online.

³Ibid.

⁴Smeets, Rieks H.J. and Egbert G.Ch. Weselink. "CHECHNYA, ONE YEAR OF WAR: A Pax Christi International Report." 11 December 1995. Chapter 5, Paragraph 5.1, Prelude.

⁵Smeets, Chapter 5, Paragraphs 5.3-5.5.

⁶Smeets, Chapter 6. War. Subparagraph 12 of Paragraph 6.1.

⁷Smeets, Chapter 6. Paragraph 6.2. First Phase of the War, December 1994 - July 1995.

⁸Thomas, Timothy L., "The Caucasus Conflict and Russian Security: The Russian Armed Forces Confront Chechnya," Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Foreign Military Studies Office, 1996, p. 5.

⁹Geibel, Adam, "Red Dawn in Chechnya," Caucasus Nightmare / A Campaign Chronicle, Armored Warfare Planning Conference: Chechen Republic Online - Articles, 1999, p. 3.

¹⁰Ibid, p. 4.

¹¹Thomas, Table Two: Russian and Chechen Force Structure, p. 34.

¹²Ibid, p. 35.

¹³Ibid, p. 36.

¹⁴Ibid, p. 6.

¹⁵Ibid, p. 3, 35.

¹⁶Ibid, p. 35.

¹⁷Geibel, p. 5.

¹⁸Thomas, p. 5.

¹⁹Ibid, p. 6.

²⁰Grau, p. 1.

²¹Thomas, p. 6.

²²Celestan, p. 4.

²³Geibel, p. 9.

²⁴Celestan, p. 9.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid, p. 5.

²⁷Thomas, p. 24.

²⁸Ibid, p. 8.

²⁹Smeets, Chapter 6.

³⁰Finch, p. 1.

³¹Smeets, Chapter 6.

³²Thomas, Page 26.

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