The Russian Counterinsurgency Operation in Chechnya Part 1: Winning the Battle, Losing the War, 1994 - 1996

By Matthew N. Janeczko
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Introduction

Between 1994 and 1999, Russia’s campaigns in Chechnya, labeled a counterinsurgency conflict by the Russian government, caused an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 civilian casualties with as many as 300,000 refugees in a nation of under a million. In a nation the size of New Jersey, roughly one out of every two inhabitants had been killed or displaced in the decade following 1994.

At the end of this decade of war and death, the Russian response maintains that the counterinsurgency operations were successful, and that the insurgency movement has been largely crushed and relegated to occasional fringe attacks. This article aims to analyze the operation conducted in Chechnya and the North Caucasus by the Russian military between 1994 and 2004. In both the First (1994 – 1996) and Second Chechen Wars (1999 – 2004), the Russian Federal forces enjoyed overwhelming superiority in all aspects of conventional war, and yet were forced into a premature cease-fire in 1996 and suffered immense casualties. By utilizing unconventional and guerilla tactics, the Chechen insurgents adapted to the needs of urban and hit-and-run combat much more quickly and efficiently than their adversaries. While the Russian military entered the second war much more sure of themselves and their abilities to combat the insurgents, their success was marred by their inability to engage the insurgents in pitched battle, by the continued effectiveness of the insurgents, and most crucially, in their failure in the parapolitical struggle for legitimacy in the population.

The Russian forces’ overconfidence in regards to the Chechens’ organizational effectiveness in conducting guerilla warfare was directly proportional to their inability to react with any amount of speed and efficiency in changing their tactics to meet new threats. Perhaps the greatest mistake the Russians made was in approaching the conflict with an enemy-centric, conventional mindset, sharply divergent from their own rhetoric of counterinsurgency and population-centric benevolency.

Mired in the political culture of post-Soviet secessionism, the wars between Russia and Chechnya seemed set to fit the mold of so many other post-colonial conflicts between a recalcitrant and self-realizing satellite and its reeling and unstable metropole. Yet the inability of Russia to recognize this, and the resultant rhetoric underscored the desire of Russia to paint the war in terms of a counter-terrorist fight which precluded them from the moral obligations present when confronting an insurgent force within a civilian population. The inherent similarities in Russia's war with Chechnya with the current United States nation building/counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan highlight the importance of critically analyzing what exactly went wrong when Russia won the battles, but lost the war for Chechnya.
Background

Between August and December of 1991, all Union republics in the Soviet Union had declared independence, including Chechnya. In November of 1990, the National Congress of the Chechen People (OKChN) formally elected former Soviet Air Force General Dzokar Dudaev as leader of the Chechen nation.[2] In his quest to create a stronger national identity. The development of Chechnya into a modern nation occurred alongside other national movements throughout the Soviet Union in the 1980s and was a reaction to perestroika and the call to nationhood being heard throughout the developing world.

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In 1994, the Russian Federation, under the leadership of Boris Yeltsin, invaded Chechnya to end the separatist movement and bring Chechnya back into the Federation. Much has been written on the Russian decision to invade, though for the considerations of time and space, little analysis is given to this critical debate in the current project.[3] Suffice it to say that a likely reason for the decision to invade lay in the need for Russia to reassert itself in the international arena. The economic woes of a struggling nation came as a distressing reality check to a country that had once rivaled the United States in military prowess. The need for Russia to prove to itself and the world that it continued to be a viable superpower went hand-in-hand with the need to end the fragmentation of the Federation which had begun with the declaration of independence of Lithuania in 1990. Russia’s international military prowess may have been temporarily in doubt, but no one thought the war in Chechnya would be anything but a short and reassuring show of power.

The First Chechen War

In December of 1994, ground forces moved into Chechnya and the capital city of Grozny was nearly completely leveled by air and ground artillery. In the greatest shelling since World War II, Grozny and the surrounding towns were reduced to rubble in a siege that lasted until early March and cleared the way for the heavily armored Russian troops.[4]

Yet from the beginning, it was clear that this would not be a conventional war between two standing armies. Impatience, arrogance, and incompetence on the part of the Russian troops led them to march headlong into the city center of Grozny, ill-equipped for urban warfare and undereducated on the tactical resourcefulness of the Chechen fighters. Much like in Prague in 1968, the Russians marched into the city in a show of force, hoping the presence of tanks and an organized and impressive army would deter further bloodshed—especially after their awesome display of aerial and fixed position artillery bombardment of the country. In direct contravention of tactics learned during World War II’s urban and unconventional theaters of war, the Russians entered the rubble strewn city with a column of tanks, followed by mounted infantry in APCs and jeeps, followed then by dismounted infantry.[5] The result was a military catastrophe. The Chechens were able to paradoxically overwhelm the far numerically greater foes through the superior use of small arms tactics and front-on ‘swarm’ attacks which simply overran the Russian troops within the city of Grozny.

RPG and sniper fire focused on the exposed Russian troops, small groups of 10-20 Chechen fighters moved in and out of buildings and the surrounding mountains to engage the heavily armed and armored Russian troops. The Chechen teams would attack in shifts, some attacking while the others rested, so that a force of no more than 50 often held entire battalions at bay, bottle-necked in the narrow streets of the cities, or the treacherous defiles of the mountains.[6]

The Chechen utilization of information and space, and their highly sophisticated networking allowed them a tremendous advantage in terms of physical combat, and an even more important advantage in terms of the psychological impact upon their enemy. Rather than a group of ragtag insurgent fighters fueled by
hatred and national fanaticism, the Chechen fighters were highly trained, disciplined, well-equipped and knowledgeable of the terrain.\[7\] From the individual up through army level, the Chechens held the advantage in all but airpower and fire support. The Chechen fighters proved better trained, equipped, technically skilled and fed, and demonstrated remarkably higher morale and motivation, in addition to an intimate knowledge of the hazardous terrain.\[8\]

Throughout the First Chechen War, Chechen fighters – many of them former Soviet soldiers with combat experience in Afghanistan – dug into the hills and fought a defensive and fierce war of attrition with the Russian troops not unlike their former Afghani counterparts.\[9\] Although both sides engaged in acts of brutality to weaken the enemy’s resolve to fight, Chechen fighters far outdid their Russian counterparts in these ‘grisly psychological tactics’:

They hung Russian wounded and dead upside down in the windows of defensive positions, for example, forcing the Russians to fire at their comrades in order to engage the rebels… Both Russian and Chechen dead were routinely booby-trapped by the Chechens, who showed sophisticated insight into the likely actions and reactions of the average Russian soldier.\[10\]

In addition, Chechen fighters used dirty tactics collectively learned from dozens of asymmetrical guerilla conflicts before, such as instructing snipers to aim for the legs of Russian troops, injuring, but not incapacitating them; and then shooting free-range at the subsequent rescue parties that were sure to come. Some snipers aimed specifically at the groin, dealing a crippling and humiliating wound that resulted in a slow and painful death.\[11\] Chechens routinely dressed in Russian uniforms to gain access to bases, and used these opportunities to launch surprise attacks from behind enemy lines.\[12\] Each Chechen took seriously the notion that the center of gravity in war was no longer the enemy’s army, but rather the enemy’s people.\[13\] Tactics were devised to attack the psyche of the Russians, aimed at creating a ‘constant, high level of psychological stress on [Russian] servicemen and to undermine their morale.’\[14\] Hardened by a united sense of purpose in driving out the invader, the Chechen troops terrified and terrorized the Russian troops, slowly bleeding out their morale and willingness to fight.

The Russian troops, many still in their teens, were woefully underprepared and undertrained in comparison. In a study of 1,312 Russian soldiers involved in the war, 72% showed signs of psychological illness, such as depression, lethargy, insomnia, hypochondria and panic attacks.\[15\] The result of such a disparity in morale and military expectations had tragic consequences. According to one Russian participant, ‘the men on the ground, shaken and angered by their losses, were just taking it out on anyone they found. There was revenge in the air for those comrades who had been killed.’\[16\] Without recourse to set-piece conventional battle, the Chechen insurgents had arguably achieved ‘the acme of skill’ by subduing their enemy largely before the fighting began. Utilizing B. H. Liddell Hart’s ‘indirect approach’ in choosing the time, place, and method of fighting, the Russian soldiers were defeated often without ever seeing the enemy.\[17\] At the same time, the Russians, with their vast superiority in military firepower, failed to use it to tactical and strategic advantage. By employing ‘air and space power thoughtlessly or unimaginatively, [the Russians’ power was] less effective or even disastrously impotent.’\[18\]

The war escalated quickly, and Russian public support continued to plummet as journalist reports continued to highlight to the Russia public the reality of war. Under the aegis of the Soviet media, the success of the troops was a given, and the heavy censorship of all media would have ensured that anything contrary to the official party line be treated with hostility and suspicion. Not so in the new Russian media. With woefully little public support for an increasingly unpopular and embarrassing war, the Kremlin was faced with a crippling hostage crisis in the southern Russian city of Budyonnovsk. Led by Chechen
warlord Shamil Besaev, about a hundred Chechen terrorists seized some 1,500 civilians at gun-point and barricaded themselves in a hospital.

After three failed attempts by MVD and special forces (spetsnaz) troops to storm the building, dozens of civilians lay dead. Hundreds more were wounded. Yeltsin finally agreed to the terrorists' demands and signed the ceasefire. The Russian public had not responded well to the Kremlin’s propaganda campaign, and now harshly criticized the Russian security forces’ inability to secure peace more than they criticized the tactics of the Chechen terrorists. The Chechen fighters came out the victors, hailed as heroes within Chechnya and seen as saviors of the battered country. The Russians, who for once should have held the moral high-ground, had failed to protect the Russian citizenry from the overspill of an already unpopular war. Through ‘incompetence and heavy handedness,’ more people were killed by the Russians’ attempts to storm the building than in the original attack on the city.[19]

While the war continued for several months more, the political will of the Russian people had evaporated. According to one survey, 3% of respondents answered favorably towards questions concerning maintaining military operations in Chechnya near the end of the war, while 70% opposed it from the beginning.[20] During the initial 1994 invasion of Chechnya, most early observers would be hard-pressed to give favorable odds to a Chechen victory, yet at war’s end the Chechens could only be seen as ‘the overwhelming victors,’ and the Russians were forced into a shameful cease-fire. [21] After a dismal failure against a former Soviet Republic, Russian President Yeltsin began negotiations, and signed the Khasavyurt Accord, ending the war.[22]

The Interwar Struggle

From 1996 to 1999, a tenuous peace hung heavy over Chechnya. The emergent state was torn by the secular post-colonial crises familiar to many emerging post-communist fringe states. Lawlessness, warlordism, rampant criminality and chaotic violence marred the interwar period and the government struggled to maintain its legitimacy. A lack of centralized funds, the inability of the government to rebuild the state’s infrastructure and the inability or unwillingness to control the militarized groups of First War fighters was only exacerbated by the economic blockade by Russia, resulting in an state remarkably similar to interwar Berlin: ripe for a political takeover. The fragmentation of Chechen national identity went hand-in-hand with the largely unwelcome intrusion of Wahabbite influences as rival factions fought for control of the state. The economic crisis brought about by the war, combined with Chechnya’s high unemployment rate and general lack of upward social mobility for opportunity of advancement gave limited choices to the Chechen people, encouraging large-scale organized crime, gang warfare, bank robbery, kidnapping, and in some instances terrorism.[23]

The culmination came in 1999, when Shamil Besaev led a Wahabbi incursion into neighboring Ingushetia in an act of war intended to unite the North Caucasus into a greater Islamic Republic under strict shari’a law. Russia invaded to stem the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, and the Second Chechen War began.


[3] A number of works address the identity crisis of Russia after the dissolution of the USSR and have
The document discusses the reasons for Yeltsin's decision to invade Chechnya and when to invade. For more information, see the following sources: King, *Extreme Politics*; Peimani, *Failed Transition, Bleak Future?*; Tolz, *Russia*; Trenin and Malashenko, *Russia's Restless Frontier*; Zurcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*.

5. Oliker, *Russia's Chechen Wars*, p. 5
7. McIntosh, *Thumping the Hive*, p. 16.
8. Safranchuk, *Chechnya: Russia's Experience*.
10. Ibid., p. 218.
12. McIntosh, p. 28.
13. Ibid., p. 11.
15. McIntosh, p. 29.
16. Ibid., p. 28.
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**About the Author**
Matthew N. Janeczko

Mr. Janeczko received his BA from North Central College in German, Political Science, and History and is currently pursuing his Master’s Degree in Modern European History and Political Violence at Loyola University Chicago. The current paper is a chapter in a developing book on the genesis of suicide terrorism in Chechnya. Versions of this paper have been presented at the Midwest Slavic Conference, in Columbia, OH; Windy City History Conference, in Chicago, IL; and the Central Eurasian Studies Society’s Annual Conference in Bloomington, IN.


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