

SECOND TIME LUCKY?

EVALUATING RUSSIAN PERFORMANCE IN THE SECOND CHECHEN WAR

Michael Orr

The First Chechen War is usually seen, both in Russia and internationally, as proof of the decline of the Russian Army. The general view is that poorly-trained and badly-organized units were thrown into battle by careless and incompetent generals. The war will always be associated with images such as the burning tanks and BMPs on the streets of Grozny on New Year's Day 1995. At tremendous cost in military and even more, in civilian lives, the Russian Army occupied Grozny and the other major towns in Chechnya, only to lose them when the rebels launched a dramatic series of attacks in August 1996. The Russian people would not support the failing campaign any longer and the government was forced to negotiate a peace which gave the Chechen Republic an undefined independence. Since August 1999 a new war has been in progress, Grozny has once again been captured and most of Chechnya occupied. Government spokesmen claim that the complete conquest of the rebel republic is only weeks away.

The second war has certainly brought political benefits, raising Vladimir Putin from obscurity to favourite in the March presidential election. Public support for the armed forces is higher than at any time in the last decade. Questions, however, remain. How real is the military victory in Chechnya? Why is the Russian army fighting more successfully than in 1994-96? Will this success bring a long-term peace to the North Caucasus? Time will tell, but a detailed analysis of the preparation and conduct of the present campaign provides some indication of the strengths and weaknesses of the Russian position.

Although the war was provoked by Chechen incursions into Dagestan and a series of bombings in Russian cities, it is clear that Russian preparations for new operations in Chechnya began almost as soon as the last war finished. The high command never formally admitted defeat in that war, claiming that it was stabbed in the back by politicians. Nevertheless the Russian military leadership has acknowledged a number of deficiencies and since 1997 a series of reforms have been introduced. The political and military leadership have had a variety of aims in this programme. The politicians wanted to reduce the military burden on Russia's economy; Marshal Sergeyev, the minister of defence, has tried to raise the status and funding of his own service, the Strategic Rocket Forces, at the expense of general purpose forces. Events since the middle of last year, indicate that for a group of officers around General Kvashnin, the Chief of the General Staff, the major objective of reform has been to improve the Russian armed forces' ability to fight a local war. In fact, their aim has been to fight this particular local war and wipe out the disgrace of defeat, re-establishing Russia as a military force to be reckoned with. Most of this group held senior command posts in the last war and some of generals have personal motives for revenge, having had sons killed or wounded in Chechnya.

The reasons for the failures of the first war are not easily summarized, defeat was deeply rooted in the whole structure and ethos of the Russian armed forces. However, the general staff has particularly focussed on four or five areas for improvement. Firstly, there is command and control. The army generals believe that the problems of co-ordination with other force ministries, such as the Internal Troops of the MVD, and their subordination to the MVD for much of the war, were fatal weaknesses. Secondly the whole manning and mobilization system was shown to be inadequate. Units assigned to the Chechen campaign were little more than cadres and had to be brought up to strength from other under-strength formations. As a result, the army fought as a collection of "composite battalions" with little opportunity for personnel to train together before they saw action. Training generally was another major weakness. Russian infantry were not trained for the battles in cities or mountains which they faced; their clumsy tactics led to crippling casualties. All these weaknesses were exposed to view in the Russian and world media. Russian

generals never understood why their own press and television were no longer "on side", as the Soviet media had usually been during the Afghan War. It was generally admitted that the army had lost the "information war" to the Chechens. Lastly, there were many complaints about the quality of the Russian equipment and the need for the latest weaponry. In fact, although there were some crucial deficiencies, especially with obsolescent radios, the real problem was how the equipment was used.

Some such analysis seems to have been at the root of many of the reforms since 1997 and it is in these areas that Russian performance has most improved. Command and control has been significantly better than in the first war, perhaps because this is most directly under general staff control. The first step was to obtain political approval to change the status and responsibilities of military districts. Most of them have been re-configured as "operational-strategic commands" (OSK in the Russian abbreviation). The old military districts were primarily administrative structures, with responsibility for Ministry of Defence units and establishments within their boundaries. An OSK is an operational entity, intended to command all the armed forces on its territory, including border guards, internal troops, civil defence &c. The concept is still new and it would be rash to assume that the other ministries have willingly surrendered primacy to the ministry of defence. However, as result of this change, military districts have been organizing a series of exercises involving all force ministries and with Chechen-type scenarios. New command structures have been tested and army procedures practised by the other forces. Given the financial restraints on the Russian armed forces, these have been mostly command post exercises, but when possible they have been combined with field training by "permanent readiness formations" which have formed the backbone of the new Chechen deployment.

The exercises tested a command concept based on "Temporary Operational Groupings" (*Vremenniye Operativniye Gruppировki*, or VOG) which are composed of a mix of forces, drawn from several ministries. Such a grouping was organised in the spring of 1999 as tension rose along the Chechen-Dagestan border. Originally the VOG was under MVD command, as the crisis lay on Russian soil, but after the August attacks on Dagestan, the ministry of defence took control. Since then the Chechen campaign has been commanded by the Joint Grouping of Forces in the North Caucasus, generally known by the Russian abbreviation OGV. The OGV is commanded by Colonel General Viktor Kazantsev, commander of the North Caucasus Military District and Kvashnin's chief of staff in the first war. Under him are a number of subordinate groupings, responsible for particular directions. Initially there were three of these, the Northern, Eastern and Western Groupings. Again their commanders were army generals (see Diagram). As the war has developed other Groupings have been added to command the cordon around Grozny and the battles in the south of Chechnya. With a clear chain of command, co-ordination between the units of the various ministries has been better than in 1994-96, although it is still far from perfect. There have been incidents of air strikes hitting MVD troops because they could not communicate with the air force and the long-standing distrust, even hatred, between the ground forces and the internal troops has not yet disappeared. General Malofeyev, one of the army's rising commanders, was killed when trying to lead an attack by unwilling MVD troops in circumstances which are still unclear.

The subordinate groupings directly command the units in their areas, a mix of elements from the ground forces, airborne and naval infantry troops, the air force, internal troops, border guards, FAPSI (government communications troops), Federal Security Service, Emergencies Ministry and so on. Their exact composition varies with their operational responsibilities and units and sub-units are moved between them as the situation demands. The Southern Grouping under major general Ashurov appears to have been organized in January for operations to block the mountainous southern border with Georgia and to consist of about 5,000 men, mostly drawn from the airborne forces, naval infantry and border guards.

The organization of the ground forces units within the joint groupings reflects another improvement in Russian capabilities since 1994. There are no references now to "composite units"; instead there are "regimental and battalion tactical groups". The difference is due to the improvement in manning levels and the creation of "permanent readiness units" which was made possible by drastic reductions in the number of formations and units cluttering the order of battle. Permanent readiness formations and units are theoretically manned to 80% of their war-time establishment and other military districts have sent at least one such element to reinforce the North Caucasus MD. There have been some problems because units had to release conscripts with less than 6 months service at the start of the operation and have also been obliged to send back conscripts whose two-years service expired in October & November, if they could not be persuaded to volunteer to stay. In units of the 3rd Motor Rifle Division from the Moscow MD this may have amounted to a return flow of several hundred men in the first months of the war. However a replacement system is working reasonably smoothly. In the Siberian MD, for example, a training centre was established by a division. This has been preparing troops for mountain warfare and has sent over a thousand replacements for the 7,000-plus contingent of Siberian troops in Chechnya. As the whole Russian deployment has been better prepared than in 1994 and was much less rushed, units are much more combat-effective.

Tactical organizations have also been re-thought over the last few years. The phrases "regimental tactical group" and "battalion tactical group" are now standard terminology. They are developments of ideas tried during the Afghan War and in peace-keeping deployments such as Tajikistan and Kosovo. Units are reinforced with other assets, particularly additional artillery elements to make much more powerful combined arms groupings which work together over periods of time. In many respects they appear to be closer to the standard practice in NATO armies than the traditional Soviet model. For example a battalion tactical group, formed around a naval infantry battalion of the Northern Fleet, includes a reconnaissance company from the Black Sea Fleet, a Nona 2S9 SP mortar battery from the Caspian Flotilla and a 2S1 SP artillery battery, engineer company and other assets from the Northern Fleet. Within the artillery "mixed regiments" have been organized, which include tube and rocket artillery sub-units. Some of these have been included in regimental tactical groups and others retained under control of Joint groupings to reinforce important sectors.

Sometimes sub-units are organized for specific tactical missions and titled accordingly. Thus there have been references to "storm groups and detachments" for fighting in built-up areas, which is a traditional term. But there have also been mentions of "manoeuvre groups" operating outside the towns, although with little detail on their composition and missions.

This is evidence of greater tactical sophistication in the Russian army and perhaps we are seeing a start of a tactical revolution. But the army's personnel problems still impose severe limitations on its capabilities. This is still basically a conscript army and moreover an army which has been complaining about the quality of its recruits, conscript and professional, for many years. It is clear that the generals are not confident in their soldiers' ability to match the Chechen guerrillas in close combat and there have been several incidents in which Russian units have been worsted in close-quarter battle. The high command has tried to plan for this and to avoid contact battles. They have employed overwhelming firepower, or the threat of firepower, as much as possible. Villages have been surrounded and the local leaders pressed to persuade the guerrillas to leave. Where this has not been successful, air and artillery strikes have been called down until it is safe for ground troops to advance without opposition. Any contact halts the advance while new strikes are organized. It is calculated that 80% of fire missions have been carried out by fixed or rotary wing aviation, and 15-17% by artillery. The air strikes are split roughly equally between the helicopters and the fixed wing SU-24s and SU-25s.

Such tactics may seem closer to the mythical "Russian steamroller" than a sophisticated army of the 21st century, but there has in fact been a significant change how this firepower is applied. In the past

both air and artillery strikes were planned and tightly co-ordinated at the operational level of command. The First Chechen War made it plain that this did not provide the speed and flexibility of response that the modern battlefield requires. In the present war tactical commanders have been able to plan and control their fire support in a way which is foreign to traditional Russian practice. Regimental and battalion commanders have been given their own zone of responsibility for reconnaissance and destruction by fire (the "zonal-objective" system). Within those zones artillery support has been generously allotted, to a norm of at least one artillery or mortar battery per company. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that much of this artillery has been applied at short ranges. The proportion of artillery missions involving direct rather than indirect fire has probably not been equalled in Europe since 1914.

Air support, or at least helicopter support has been organized on a similar principle. Helicopters have operated in "aviation tactical groups" (ATG) composed of 2-4 Mi-24 attack helicopters and 1-2 Mi-8 transport helicopters. ATGs are assigned to regiments with a forward air controller in regimental headquarters. More FACs are found at battalion and sometimes company level. This provides more responsive air support to the tactical commander, but there are teething troubles. The Russian army does not have enough trained FACs and casualties among them have been high. One-month courses are being run to provide more FACs as the war continues. Meanwhile the Mi-24s often rely on the accompanying Mi-8s to direct their attacks. The Mi-8s are also ready to recover the crews of downed attack helicopters. About two-thirds of attack helicopter strikes have been organized in this way. In addition, pairs of Mi-24s on "free hunt" have sought for and attacked their own targets.

Despite the complaints about inadequate equipment after the first war, the present conflict has not seen the Russians introducing new weaponry in significant quantities. Given the well-known problems of the Russian defence budget and the almost total lack of spending on weapons procurement this is not surprising. There have been reports of some new weapons systems being used on an experimental basis. There were early references to the deployment of Ka-50 and Mi-24N attack helicopters but older models have borne the brunt of the battle. The BMP-3 infantry combat vehicle has probably been used for the first time. The Sevastopol Motor Rifle Regiment has been mentioned as part of the Siberian contingent and it was identified in 1998 as the only regiment completely equipped with BMP-3. There has been a reference to the need for a reserve of BMP-3 power packs. The trials of the "Stroy-P" pilotless tactical reconnaissance system seem to have been a success as the ministry of defence has recently ordered one system. One weapon which may not have been successful is the V-94 12.7mm sniper rifle. There are reports of sniper detachments returning their weapons and drawing the older SVD rifles. Apparently the weapon is too heavy, it is too noisy when fired and the sights shift after prolonged firing. One report, with a photograph, showed a pair of TOS-1s in action. TOS-1 is a heavy flame-thrower system on the T-72 chassis, the big brother of the RPO-A infantry flame-thrower which has certainly been used in Chechnya. In the civilian press TOS-1 is described as having a "vacuum bomb" warhead, which is the usual term for a fuel-air explosive. There are unconfirmed reports that FAE bombs have been used, although this has been denied by senior air force officers. Certainly fuel-air explosives are ideally suited to the tactics which the Russians have been using.

One area in which the Russians can certainly claim to have improved their performance is in their control of the media. In 1997 the ministry of defence press service was re-organized as the first step to producing a co-ordinated information policy. At the start of second war, the Russians had a great advantage compared to 1994 because the Russian and outside media had effectively withdrawn from Chechnya after a number of incidents of hostage-taking. Access to the area of operations through Russian lines was controlled by a joint media centre in Mozdok, which accredited only journalists who accepted the official line. Like the Russian use of firepower, their control of the media has been crude but effective. After the bombings of Russian cities, the Russian media had apparently forgotten its usual visceral distrust of the military. Both sides in the war bombarded the

media with obviously over-stated claims of success which there was no way of checking. On the whole this was more to the Russian army's advantage than the Chechens. There was a period of crisis in January when Russian casualty figures were becoming obviously unrealistic and the press began to look harder for the truth. On the whole, though Russians have been content to believe the official versions of events in the North Caucasus. As with most of the Russian campaign, it is the long term which is the problem. If the campaign suffers a major check and the flow of "Load-200s" (military coffins) approaches the rate of 1994-96, the media will realise that it has been duped and will look for its revenge on the generals. In the international media concerns are growing about human rights abuses and it is doubtful that the Russian military have the skills to "spin" the history of the Chechen campaign as successfully as they claim NATO managed to win the information war in Kosovo.

Despite the ever-louder claims of victory from Moscow the Second Chechen War is not yet over. In fact, the Russians may be facing its most dangerous phase. Holding the ground they have won will be more difficult than occupying it. Plans have been announced to base a motor rifle division (a new 42nd MRD) in Chechnya but army leaders have made it clear that they expect the Internal Troops to assume the main responsibility for maintaining Russian rule in the long term. This will require different tactics, of a type for which neither the Internal Troops or the ground forces have in fact shown any talent. In 1996 the Russians lost control of Chechnya because their troops sat in their blockhouses and allowed the guerrillas to move freely throughout the country until they were deployed to strike. If the present campaign does not cause so much attrition among the guerrilla bands that they cannot recover, the Russian occupying force faces a long guerrilla campaign, perhaps accompanied by a new and larger terrorist offensive in metropolitan Russia. That will be a severe test of the Russian army's morale and of the nation's support. The Russian army, despite the experience of Afghanistan and other "hot spots" has never really developed a doctrine for a protracted insurgency campaign.

The problem in assessing the success of the present campaign is that we do not know what Russia's objectives are. It is claimed that the aim has been to "restore constitutional order" in Chechnya and to destroy the international terrorists operating there. But what sort of constitutional order do the Russians hope to impose? Is Chechnya to remain a republic within the Russian Federation? If so, is there any Chechen political leader acceptable to the Russian government and the Chechen people? How long can Russia rely on direct military rule in the province? Will Chechnya be partitioned, with the region north of the River Terek being restored to the Stavropol region and perhaps the rest of the country being forced into a new union with Ingushetia? None of the alternatives promises a quick or easy return to peace and it may well be that the Russian government has thrown away the best chance of accommodating Chechnya by not learning to work with President Maskhadov after the first war. The Chechens have been fighting Russia for nearly two hundred years. They have been defeated before but have continued to resist. The difference between the nineteenth century and today lies in the rise of terrorist movements. At the start of this war, "international terrorism" in Chechnya was much weaker than Russian propaganda claimed. By turning Grozny and much of Chechnya into a wasteland the Russian army may have won Mr Putin an election and increased the defence budget for a while. But sooner or later the flaws in the Russian military machine will be revealed. General Kazantsev claimed before the war that the re-birth of the Russian army would begin in southern Russia. We must wait to see whether we are looking at a re-birth or a stillbirth.

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NOTES:

1. Southern and Grozny Groupings added during December 1999.
2. Little has been heard of the Northern Grouping; it is probable that its task is to secure the Russian base of operations north of the Chechen Republic.
3. Lt Gen Troshev became first deputy commander of the Joint Grouping of Forces in early January 2000, being replaced by his deputy, Maj Gen Makarov.
4. The order of battle of individual groupings has varied considerably during the campaign, depending on the tactical situation and their missions.



Second Chechen War Phase One Operations in Dagestan Aug/Sept 1999



Second Chechen War Phase Two Isolation of Chechnya/Occupation of Security Zone North of R. Terek Late Sept to Mid Oct 1999



Second Chechen War Phase Three