

1. Conflict Studies Research Centre

SOME PROVISIONAL NOTES ON CURRENT RUSSIAN OPERATIONS IN DAGESTAN & CHECHNYA

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3 Dec 99

Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the UK Ministry of Defence.

These notes are intended to provide some immediate thoughts on the current Russian operations in Dagestan and Chechnya and in particular to examine what these operations tell us about the present state of the Russian armed forces. They are provisional because they are inevitably based on very limited sources. At a suitable time in the future I hope to produce a more considered study of the operation, with comparisons to the Chechen War of 1994-96. More material will be posted in mid-December; its content will depend on the development of the Russian operation but it is hoped to cover Russian doctrine and training for this war and also the "information warfare" aspects of the conflict.

MOBILIZATION AND DEPLOYMENT FOR OPERATIONS AUGUST-DECEMBER 1999

It is generally agreed that a major reason for the Russian Army's failure in the first war was its inability to mobilize and deploy a combat effective force to Chechnya. A grouping of about 40,000 Ministry of Defence troops was put together from all over Russia, along with units of the Internal Troops and other "force" ministries. So-called "composite units" were raised from every military district and fleet. They were formed en route for the front and even down to section level total strangers were being thrown together. For example over a hundred ships and sub-units of the Baltic Fleet had to be combed to raise a composite battalion of naval infantry. Men were posted into specializations for which they had no training (for example a radar operator might become a sniper). Units never operated at anything approaching their notional strength. 20 Guards Motor Rifle Division deployed from its base in Volgograd with a total strength of 1700 men, only about two-thirds of the wartime establishment of a single regiment. The quality of the troops was notoriously low. They were not trained in the type of combat in towns and mountains which they faced and some were hardly trained at all. Eventually, in response to pressure from families in an election year, President Yeltsin was forced to decree that only conscripts with at least six months training should serve in Chechnya, and then only if they volunteered and their parents agreed.

Since 1996 the Russian Army has been trying to improve its manpower situation. The number of formations and units has been drastically cut, enabling fuller manning of those that remain. Much has been heard of the creation of "permanent readiness" forces which should be almost fully manned and ready for deployment to deal with local conflicts. The results of these reforms have been seen in this new Chechen War. The Ministry of Defence has raised a force of 90,000 men or more and there are also nearly 30,000 Internal Troops in Chechnya and the surrounding republics. (See Annex for a list of ground forces units identified in the current operation). This much greater force is being handling with greater caution than at the start of the first war. Developing the tactics which were used in the later stages of that conflict, the Russians have relied on massive firepower to "cleanse" limited zones in front of their ground troops and have not tried to occupy villages and towns until any Chechen guerrillas have withdrawn. Military historians might remember the First World War tactical slogan, "Artillery conquers, infantry occupies", which seems to sum up what the Russians are trying to achieve, adding air power to artillery.

It is also claimed that this force is better trained than its predecessor and that at the operational level of command the various force ministries have practised working together in a series of command-staff exercises over the last two years. The command structure has been simplified, so that the Ministry of

Defence, in Yeltsin's words, "plays first fiddle" and co-ordinates all the forces involved in the operation. The chain of command runs from the General Staff in Moscow, to the North Caucasus Military District and then to a Unified Command of all federal forces, under an army general. Below him there are three "operational groupings", Northern, Eastern and Western, which are again all commanded by army generals. At the lowest level, the traditional division/regiment/battalion or brigade/battalion system is being replaced by a new structure of tactical groups. These seem to be built around battalions with strong reinforcements, especially of artillery. The aim has been to ensure that every motor rifle, parachute or naval infantry company is directly supported by its own battery of artillery or mortars, which requires tripling the peacetime allocation of artillery. Tactical groups are given their own sector, under a "zonal-objective" system of command, in which the combined arms commander is responsible for reconnaissance and targeting. In a major change from the traditional practice inherited from the Soviet Army, tactical commanders can order their own fire plans, without having to work through much higher levels of command.

The term "tactical group" has also been employed in the Kosovo deployment, but very little has so far emerged in the Russian military press about its practical details. If it can be made to work, it will represent a significant modernization of the cumbersome Russian command system, but it will require much higher professional skills than have so far been seen in the average Russian officer at battalion level.

In the press, Russian generals have loudly insisted that they have learnt the lessons of the first war and that the Army is now a much more capable force. The mobilization and deployment to the theatre of operations of a force of over 100,000 men is certainly impressive and a great improvement on the performance of 1994-95. However despite a major effort to control the reporting of the war it is possible to find evidence that the Russian Army has not been completely transformed as yet.

The sheer size of the deployment creates its own problems and reports suggest that far from every unit is being properly supplied. Maintaining a force of this size for any length of time will be very difficult. If the total Ministry of Defence force really does approach 100,000 men, then it appears that between a quarter and a third of the ground forces will have been deployed. The commander of the airborne forces has said that the VDV have over 5,000 men in the operation, out of 11,000 deployed somewhere in the "hot spots". This means a third of the airborne forces are deployed away from their bases. Western armies may have invented the term "over-stretch" but the Russian Army is taking the concept to a new level. General Kazantsev, c-in-c of the joint federal grouping, has said that the war might last one year or three. However the Russian Army is not able to maintain a force of this size for such a length of time. This must be a factor in planning operations against Grozny. A long siege or blockade may not be a realistic option.

The mobilization has revealed that serious manning problems remain. Many units began to deploy with recently-joined recruits in their ranks. In response to popular concerns, Yeltsin briefly raised the length of service required before a conscript could be asked to serve in a "hot spot" to a year. This caused such a problem for the army that the decree was almost immediately reversed. Now conscripts have to have served only six months and cannot refuse a posting. Even so, some units were found to have almost 50% of their strength composed of men with less than six months service and one unit (believed to be part of 3rd Motor Rifle Division, a new "permanent readiness" formation) arrived in theatre with over 90% of its men having served only two or three months. Over 600 men had to be returned to their base. This problem may have arisen because when 3rd Motor Rifle Division was raised in 1997 it was necessary to form some units entirely from men of the same conscript class and these would all have been due for release in the spring of this year. Replacing such a proportion of a unit's strength on the eve of action is bound to have adverse effects on its combat performance. It is claimed that many of those who were sent back wanted to stay in their units and that there are many volunteers arriving at military commissariats asking to go to Chechnya. Even if this is true, untrained men, however willing, and men who have not trained with others in their trench or APC, cannot be fully effective soldiers. It has been admitted that a significant proportion of the initial casualties were caused by driving accidents or through poor weapon handling, reflecting low training standards.

Another problem is that the deployment coincides with the bi-annual conscription period. Thus the longest-trained men in units are now due for release. An effort is being made to persuade them to sign contracts to remain in the ranks. Apparently some, facing unemployment or with a desire for action, are prepared to do so. A special allowance of three times the national minimum wage is being paid (or promised) to those serving in the war, which is obviously more than many time-served conscripts can hope to earn at home. Senior officers have said that only 7% of the rank and file were contract servicemen originally, reflecting the ground forces problems in recruiting a more professional force. It is hoped that this figure may rise to 17% but even so, signing a Russian army contract does not really make a man a professional soldier.

Training problems will not be confined to the tactical level. Although the North Caucasus Military District has run a series of command-staff exercises for its own troops and the local internal troops, border guards & c

over the last couple of years, the operational grouping headquarters created from within the military district are now having to command subordinate headquarters from several other districts, with whom they have not exercised their procedures. This may be one reason for the slow progress of the Russian advance, as cooperation between various levels of command is being learnt "on the job". Despite claims about better co-ordination between the ministry of defence and the other ministries, there has already been at least one incident of internal troops being hit by their own air force.

In recent years the military press has been full of complaints about the lack of resources for training. Driving and weapon skills for example have not been exercised on the scale employed in the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany in Cold War days. In 1994-96 Russian troops had not been trained in urban warfare. It has not been suggested that funds have been available since then to build training facilities so there is no reason to believe that the average Russian soldier is any better prepared for urban combat than he was at the end of the first war. Even the limited funds available have been swallowed by show exercises such as "Zapad-99" earlier this year. It may have made a point to NATO during the Kosovo crisis but it used most of the year's training budget. In terms of individual and small unit tactical skills this was probably not the best year to start a war. Since August, units intended for Chechnya have received some intensive training, but crash courses lasting a few days are no substitute for a thorough professional training.

There is already a steady flow of evidence that morale and discipline are not significantly stronger than they were four or five years ago. Conscripts have been by-passing military censorship by giving letters to refugees to send on to their families, pleading to be rescued from the Caucasus. The commander of the 1st Guards Motor Rifle Division, in Kaliningrad, admitted that there were initially many requests from conscripts not to go to Chechnya, but claimed that the situation had improved in October. It may not be a coincidence that in October conscripts lost the right to opt out of service in the hot spots. There are reports of looting, with the connivance or sometimes under the orders of officers. It was even reported that an army unit and an internal troops unit fought for the right to "pacify" a village that was said to contain a cognac distillery. A 22-year old girl in Ingushetia was shot by drunken soldiers scavenging for more drink. They came from the Leningrad Military District's 138th Motor Rifle Brigade, supposedly an elite "peace-keeping" formation with experience of many of the hot-spots. Once again there are reports of Russian soldiers selling their equipment. The deployment of a tank battalion of the same 138th MR Brigade was apparently halted when it was discovered that soldiers had been selling the explosive from their tanks' reactive armour.

So far the Russian operational plan seems to have been reasonably successful and the mobilization and deployment phase has been completed more effectively than five years ago. In other words the mechanics have worked better, but, the psychological aspects of the Russian Army's combat effectiveness have not yet been really put to the test. Large scale actions, particularly in built-up areas have been avoided. There have, however, been some skirmishes and the Russians have not generally come off best. The chief of staff of 136th Motor Rifle Brigade was badly wounded in one of the first battles and in hospital attributed the brigades' casualties to poor training and poor junior leadership. A battalion of paratroops from 31st Airborne Brigade, supposedly a good unit, was ambushed recently with many casualties. The Russian plan seems to be to wear down Chechen resistance by massive and indiscriminate use of firepower, but if this fails and it is necessary to commit their troops to close-contact battles, the indicators are that, in comparison to 1994, the Russian Army may only have mobilized and deployed twice as much cannon fodder into Chechnya.

ANNEX – FORMATIONS AND UNITS REPORTED AS BEING DEPLOYED TO THE CHECHNYA THEATRE AS AT 1 DECEMBER 1999

(Note this list includes the names of units and formations which have been seen by the author in the Russian press and is not claimed to be comprehensive. It does, however, illustrate the scale of the Russian deployment. It should be noted that in many cases only elements of the unit or formation named will have been deployed.)

GROUND FORCES

North Caucasus Military District

58th Army HQ & support elements

136th Motor Rifle Brigade

205th Motor Rifle Brigade

19th Motor Rifle Division

Moscow Military District

3rd Motor Rifle Division

(Mention of troops from 2nd (Taman) Guards Motor Rifle and 4th (Kantemirov) Guards Tank Divisions

Leningrad Military District

138th Motor Rifle Brigade

Volga Military District

A "tactical group" from 27th Guards Motor Rifle Division

Urals Military District

A "permanent readiness" Motor Rifle Regiment (believed to be part of 34th Motor Rifle Division)

Siberian Military District

A "permanent readiness" Motor Rifle Brigade (possibly 74th MR Brigade)

AIRBORNE FORCES (VDV)

5 battalions, drawn from 7th (Novorossiysk), 76th (Pskov), 98th (Ivanovo) and 106th (Tula) Guards Airborne Divisions and 31st (Ulyanovsk) Airborne Brigade.

NAVAL INFANTRY

Battalions from the Northern, Pacific and Baltic Fleets

Ground & Coastal Defence Forces of the Baltic Fleet

1st Guards Motor Rifle Division (a motor rifle regiment (apparently 208th) or a "tactical group" of that regiment).