

# The battle(s) of Grozny<sup>1</sup>

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**O**n New Year's Eve 1994 a large Russian force tried to storm Grozny, the capital of Chechnya. The attempt failed and a drawn out urban battle raged until the Russians claimed to be in control of the city two months later. That, however, was premature. One year later a Chechen force entered the city for a few days, and in August 1996 the Chechens retook Grozny in an offensive which paved the way for the Khasavyurt Peace Agreement which led to the withdrawal of the Russian forces from Chechnya.

The purpose of the following is to give a brief outline of the battles of Grozny and discuss why the numerically and materially superior Russian forces had such difficulties in conquering and holding a medium size city.

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## *1. The Setting*

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In November 1991 the Chechen President, Dzhokhar Dudayev declared Chechnya to be independent. Russian President Boris Yeltsin reacted by sending Interior Ministry troops to Grozny, but the mission failed due to opposition from Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and the Russian Supreme Soviet. One year later, Russian troops deployed to contain the North Ossetian/Ingusjetian conflict moved towards the Chechen border, but stopped when Dudayev mobilised his troops for defence of Chechnya.

Then followed a period of half-hearted Russian economic blockade of Chechnya and a power-struggle in Moscow between

Yeltsin and the Russian Supreme Soviet, which more or less left the Chechens to themselves. However, the Duma elections in December 1993 strengthened the nationalists and communists in Russian politics and Yeltsin moved politically in a more nationalistic as well as authoritarian direction.

Yeltsin appointed a number of ministers and advisers with a hawkish and decidedly anti-Chechen attitude to influential positions. At the same time Chechnya became increasingly isolated, and domestic Chechen politics degenerated into violent confrontations between Dudayev and a number of armed opposition groups. Furthermore, the international game about how oil from the Azerbaijani fields in the Caspian Sea should be transported

to the international market made the Russian government anxious to get full control over the Baku-Novorossysk pipeline, which runs through Chechnya.

Originally, the Russian leadership thought it could gain control over Chechnya by supporting the pro-Russian opposition to Dudayev with money and weapons, or at least that the opposition – with covert Russian support – could create a military stall-mate, legitimating a Russian “peacekeeping” intervention like the one in the North Ossetian/Ingushetian conflict in 1992.<sup>2</sup>

However, the opposition’s attack on Grozny in late November 1994 failed miserably, and it was revealed that Russian soldiers, secretly hired by the security service, the FSK, had taken part in the attack and some of them been taken prisoners by Dudayev. Russia and the Russian army had been humiliated. In that situation Yeltsin quickly decided to make a full-scale military intervention in Chechnya in order to “re-establish constitutional order” as it was officially said.<sup>3</sup>

On Sunday December 11, 1994 at 07.00 the Russian forces commenced their attack which the secretary of the Russian Security Council, Oleg Lobov, expected to be “a small victorious war”. It lasted for 21 months and ended in a complete military failure for Russia.

To the extend that there was a plan for the conquering of Chechnya, it had four phases:<sup>4</sup>

1. Border troops should surround Chechnya while the air force surveyed and controlled the air space over the republic. On the ground three groups of army and Interior Ministry troops should move in from North West, West and East towards Grozny and surround the city leaving an opening towards the South through which the Chechen forces can leave the city. Grozny was not to be stormed. This phase was expected to take three days.

2. Securing of Grozny through occupation of presidential palace, other government buildings, television and radio stations and “other important objects”. This phase was expected to take four days.

3. Clearing the lowlands through push-

ing the Dudayev forces into the southern mountains while establishing a pro-Russian government in the “liberated” areas. This phase was expected to take between five and ten days.

4. Elimination of pockets of resistance in the southern mountains. It was expected that this phase could be quite long.

The Chechen plan was to avoid set battle with the advancing Russian troops in the open terrain but to slow down their advance through pinpoint and ambush attacks in forests and hilly terrain primarily against the Russian rear and MVD troops. A first set battle was planned to take place a few kilometres outside Grozny. However, this should not be a drawn-out battle either. The purpose was to delay the Russian advance in order to gain time for preparing the defence of Grozny, where the Chechens planned for the decisive confrontation.<sup>5</sup>

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## **2. Order of Battle**

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It is extremely difficult to give a precise account of the forces involved in the

Russian-Chechen war. Not only the sources are problematic and contradictory. Most of the Russian units were composite units and even so not always fully manned. Terms such as regiment, brigade etc. should not necessarily be understood as full units. Even greater difficulties are connected with getting a reasonable picture of the rather casually organised Chechen units with impressive names.

According to Defence Minister Pavel Grachev the original Russian force consisted of 23,800 men – approximately 19,000 from the Army and 4,700 from the Ministry of the Interior. The force had 80 battle tanks, 208 APCs and 182 artillery pieces. However, during the following weeks reinforcements were brought in from all Russian military districts until the number reached 58,000 in March 1995.<sup>6</sup>

Most of the air assets came from the 4<sup>th</sup> Air Army in the North Caucasian Military Districts but were supplemented with aircrafts from other parts of Russia. The total number of air-crafts is unknown, but it was very large. The Army Aviation

provided 55 helicopters during the initial phase of the war.<sup>7</sup>

Although it is difficult to give a precise picture of the Russian order of battle, it is nothing compared to the difficulties in describing the Chechen forces. The sources give all kinds of figures from 1,000 to 45,000 men. One of the reasons is, that there were relatively few organised military units. At the same time a considerable number of Chechen men took up arms when Russian troops moved into their local area, but went back to their daily chores, when the Russians left the area.

Another difficulty is, that besides the organised forces of the Dudayev regime, there were the forces of the non-Russian financed opposition to Dudayev. Almost all of them joined in fighting the Russians as soon as the war began.

Finally there is the uncertainty about the number of non-Chechens from abroad who came and fought on the Chechen side. Several Russian sources have fanciful reports about thousands of muhajeddins from Afghanistan and female

snipers in white tights from the Baltic countries. In fact there were relatively few mujaheddins in Chechnya and no western journalist ever saw any of the amazons from the Baltic States.

At the time of the invasion the organised Chechen units were probably only the following:<sup>8</sup>

- President Dudayevs National Guard consisting of about 120 men.
- Shamil Basayev's so-called Abkhasian Battalion of around 350 men.
- A tank unit (called regiment) with between 12 and 15 working tanks (T-54, T-62)
- An artillery unit of approximately 80 men and 30 light and medium heavy artillery pieces.
- A motorised "Commando Battalion" of approximately 250 men and lead by Ruslan Galayev.
- And finally, the Chechen MVD force of maybe 200 men.
- The Chechen air force consisted of about 15 L-29 or L-39 trainers all of which were destroyed on the ground in the first hours of the war.

These figures about the Chechen forces are not only uncertain but also highly controversial. Russian sources generally give much higher figures for Chechen tanks, APCs, and - particularly - airplanes. Thus, for example, the chief of the Russian Airforce, Colonel General Petr Denykin, claimed that his forces had destroyed 266 Chechen planes. Although it is true, that the Chechens had more than the approximately 15 trainers mentioned above<sup>9</sup>, the planes had not been maintained and the Chechens had only a handful of pilots.

What was important, was the huge amount of light arms and ammunition possessed by the Chechens. A considerable part of that dated back to the chaotic withdrawal of the Russian forces from Chechnya in June 1992. Some claim that the Chechens forced the Russians to leave their stocks, others that they were handed over to the Chechens as part of a formal or tacit agreement between Defence Minister Pavel Gratyov and President Dudayev.<sup>10</sup>

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### ***3. The Invasion***

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The Russian invasion force consisted of three groups. The Northern group advanced from Mozdok, the Western group from Vladikavkas and Beslan through Ingusjetia, and finally, the eastern group moved in from Dagestan. The troops advanced in columns with the airborne troops first, then followed the other army units and in the rear the MVD units. From the air the advancing troops were supported by Mi-24 helicopters and SU-25 close support planes.<sup>11</sup>

Even before they reached the Chechen border they were met with civilian resistance in Ingusjetia and Dagestan which confused and delayed the troops. Once inside Chechnya they met sporadic armed opposition - even in the areas north of the Terek River, which traditionally is the most pro-Russian part of Chechnya. Finally bad weather hampered the advance and limited the air support. It was not before the last days of December that the Russian forces reached the outskirts of Grozny.

The air campaign started before the ground invasion on December 11. In the period from November 29 to December 2 Russian planes had attacked the two airports in Grozny with the purpose of eliminating all Chechen airplanes. In parallel with the ground invasion, the air force attacked other Chechen airfields, bridges, and major roads, a tank repair facility and the television tower in Grozny. Also several towns were attacked in this phase among them Shali and Urus Martan, which incidentally had been political bases of non-Russian financed opposition to President Dudayev.

With no Chechen air force and only limited Chechen air defence, the Russians had from the start of the war total air superiority which was used in an indiscriminate bombing campaign, which particularly in Grozny took a heavy toll among the civilians - including the many Russians - living there.

The military invasion, and the indiscriminate air campaign in particular, quickly changed the nature of the war from the declared disarming of illegal

formations into a total war on the population of Chechnya. This undoubtedly strengthened the Chechens' will to resist and was thus an important factor determining the nature of the war.

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#### ***4. The New Year's Offensive***

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The Chechen forces did not leave Grozny through the opening towards the south as foreseen in the Russian plan. On the contrary, they used the opening for bringing in reinforcements to the city.

On December 26 Yeltsin decided in a meeting of the Russian Security Council that Grozny should be stormed immediately even if the military leaders wanted another two weeks to prepare the attack. Since the invasion the Russian forces had been reinforced with units from the Leningrad, Volga and Ural Military Districts. The total strength had now reached 38,000 men, 230 battle tanks, 353 APCs and 388 artillery pieces. According to a hastily composed plan the attack should take place along four axis converging on the city centre while two Spetsnaz groups de-

ployed by helicopters should disturb the Chechen rear south of the city.<sup>12</sup>

The Chechen defence of Grozny was lead by the Chechen Chief of Staff, Aslan Maskhadov, from the basement of the so-called presidential palace. An important role was played by "field commander" Shamil Basayev and his Abkhas Battalion. Other units as well as a large number of smaller groups joined them.

The defence was organised district by district and each district had a number of groups, which operated quite independently. A typical group could consist of 8 to 10 men armed with one or two anti-tank weapons, a light machine-gun, one or two sniper rifles and the rest of the men equipped with Kalashnikovs. Some groups, however, were smaller. The Chechens knew the city and were very mobile - moving through passages, back alleys and even sewers. They communicated by cellular phones.<sup>13</sup>

The attack commenced on December 31, but again the Russian plans fell to pieces when confronted with reality. The advancing Russian troops met with unex-

pected opposition. The advancing tanks and APCs were not protected by dismounted infantry and thus became easy targets for the Chechens who were able to attack with their anti-tank weapons from prepared positions in the buildings and ruins of the city.

The Chechen leadership decided to let the Russian forces move into the build-up areas of the city and fight them there, where the individual units could be surrounded, isolated and were without effective artillery or air support. The isolated tanks and APCs would then be attacked with anti-tank weapons in quick hit-and-run actions. In several cases the Russian columns were lured into narrow streets where first the front and rear vehicles were destroyed and then the rest of the column thus caught in an ambush from which they could not escape.

Of the advancing Russian groups it was only the northern under the leadership of general Lev Rokhlin, which reached the centre a few hundred meters from the presidential palace, where the Chechens had their headquarters. The 131<sup>st</sup> Inde-

pendent Motorised Infantry Brigade (the Maikop Brigade) took the railway station. The other groups from east and west reached the centre nearer. In the following battle around the railway station almost the whole 131<sup>st</sup> Brigade was wiped out. It lost 20 of its 26 tanks and 102 of its 120 APCs. Its commander, Colonel Ivan Savin and almost 1000 officers and men died and 74 were taken prisoners. As for the two Spetsnaz groups from south of the city, they surrendered to the Chechens after having tried to survive without food for several days.

The storming of Grozny had utterly failed and the failure forced the Russians to withdraw, re-evaluate their opponent and change operational plans and tactics. This was one of the most critical phases for the Russian forces during the whole war. The soldiers' moral was near to collapse and large parts of the officers' corps on the verge of disobeying orders.

In the meantime new reinforcements were sent to Chechnya, including marines from the Pacific, the Northern and the

Baltic fleets as well as Spetsnaz and MVD units. The forces were regrouped into storm groups at battalion and lower levels and a new offensive commenced on January 3.

Now the battle of Grozny became a systematic offensive similar to the Soviet Army's conquering of cities during the Second World War. The city was taken sector by sector after initial artillery, air bombardment and infantry battles from house to house. The Russian civilians still left in the city again took some of the heaviest casualties. Although President Yeltsin again ordered one of his stops for air bombardments of the city - this time from midnight between January 4 and 5 - the pause lasted only a few days.

The Chechens put up an impressive resistance but were gradually pressed out of the city. In one of the few examples of Russian precision bombing two concrete-piercing bombs hit the presidential palace and destroyed several floors. On the night between January 18 and 19 Maskhadov moved his staff from the base-

ment of the presidential palace to a hospital on the south side of the Sunzha River a few kilometres further to south-east. The following day the Russian forces stormed the presidential palace. However, already during the New Year's battle President Dudayev had moved his headquarters to Shali, 25 kilometres south of Grozny.

On the day when the Russian forces took the presidential palace, President Yeltsin declared that the military phase of the operations in Chechnya was almost completed and that responsibility for establishing law and order in Chechnya was transferred to the Ministry of Interior. Deputy Minister of the Interior, Colonel General Anatoly Kulikov, was appointed commander of the combined federal forces in Chechnya.

Three days later the Russian forces managed to close the "hole" in the southern part of central Grozny and thus preventing the Chechens from reinforcing the city. The Chechens established a new front along the Sunzha River in the south-eastern part of Grozny and for a while there was again a front in the war.

The Russian forces commenced with heavy air and artillery bombardment of the Chechen positions on the south side of the Sunzha River, which made the Chechens give up this last part of Grozny. Shamil Basayev withdrew almost all of his men from the city and on March 7 the Russians could finally declare full control over Grozny.<sup>14</sup> That, however, proved to be wishful thinking.

The battle of Grozny had been exceptionally costly, and it was the civilian population, which had taken the majority of the casualties. Sergej Kovalev, the Russian Duma's commissioner for human rights and President Yeltsin's adviser on human rights, who had been in Grozny during part of the fighting, estimated the number of dead to 27,000.<sup>15</sup> At the same time the Federal Migration Service put the number of displaced persons at 268,000. The official Russian figures for soldiers lost in the battle of Grozny was 1,376 killed and 408 missing.<sup>16</sup> The actual figure could very well be higher. The Chechen losses are not known.

After the fall of Grozny the war turned to the lowlands and other cities and towns. That part of the war is outside the topic of this article. However, Russian control of Grozny was far from complete. Violent episodes continued, particularly at night. The pro-Russian governments – first under Salambek Khadiyev and later under Doku Zavgayev – lived almost under siege in Grozny. The Zavgayev government had – during later Chechen attacks – to take refuge at the Russian headquarters at the Khankala air base, which gave him the nickname: “Doku Aeroportovich”.<sup>17</sup>

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### ***5. Retaking Grozny***

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During the early months of 1996 the Russian forces – under the programme called “peace and concord” – conducted a very violent campaign against Chechen towns and villages trying to shell them into submission and – often – payments to the local Russian commanders.

Then on March 6 between 1,500 and 2,000 Chechen fighters who had infil-

trated into Grozny, launched an attack. Some of the fighters just arrived on the morning train from Gudermes dressed up as militiamen. Several members of Zavgayev's militia joined them. The fighters gained control over a considerable part of the city – some sources say one-third, other three-quarters. That, however, is not important.

The aim was not to conquer and hold the city, but to demonstrate that neither Zavgayev nor the Russians were in control. It took the Russians two days to assemble the necessary air borne troops, tanks and artillery to initiate a counter-offensive. On the third day the Chechen fighters withdrew carrying with them a number of captured weapons. The Chechen fighters simply “melted away” after having proved their political point.

“This sustained attack on Grozny from several directions with that size of forces has brought about a new dimension in the Russian-Chechen conflict” wrote the OSCE Assistance Group in Grozny in its situation report.<sup>18</sup>

The action humiliated the Russian forces and Zavgayev's government. It was probably no coincidence that the attack took place shortly after Defence Minister Grachev had been on an inspection in Grozny and immediately before a scheduled meeting in the Russian Security Council to discuss the situation in Chechnya.

Together with President Yeltsin's problematic standing in the public opinion surveys, here only three months before the presidential elections, the Chechen storm on Grozny undoubtedly influenced Yeltsin's decision to launch a so-called peace initiative on March 31. It led to a more or less rigorously observed cease-fire in the run-up to the election. The Russian, however, took up fighting again as soon as Yeltsin's re-election was secured.

But then on August 6 1996, three days before Yeltsin were to be inaugurated for his second term as president; the Chechens launched a new attack on Grozny. Again more than 1.500 Chechen fighters - led by Shamil Basayev - moved in by trucks and cars in a carefully orchestrated assault.

Some took up positions on the approaching roads, guarding against Russian counter-attacks, while more fighters worked their way on foot towards the centre of the city.

Within hours they had overrun the key districts, laying siege to the Russian posts and base and advancing on the government compound in the centre, in spite of the fact, that the Russians had about 12.000 troops in and around Grozny. Russian troops in Argun and Gudermes were also surrounded in their garrisons. To a Moscow radio station Maskhadov said: "The actions in Grozny have a single aim - to show that the war in Chechnya is not over yet".<sup>19</sup>

The immediate Russian reaction was to fire from tanks and mortars outside the centre of the city and from helicopters hovering over it on buildings where the Chechens were thought to take cover. Chechen fire brought down four helicopters. It was not before the morning of the second day that the Russian commander organised a column of tanks and APCs to move into the city in an attempt to rescue the Russian units which were trapped

by the Chechens. Another column was sent in the following day. But as had been the case during the New Year's offensive 19 months before, they ran into ambushes and the Chechens blew up many tanks and APCs.

On the fifth day 900 men of the 276<sup>th</sup> regiment tried to take the centre of the city. In two days they lost 150 dead and 300 wounded.<sup>20</sup> It looked as if the Russians had learned nothing.

The following day, Aleksandr Lebed, secretary of the Russian Security Council, flew to Dagestan and drove into Chechnya where he met Maskhadov. Their talks lead to a cease-fire, and further talks to the Khasavyurt Agreement, which ended the war and lead to a total withdrawal of the Russian troops from Chechnya. On January 27, 1997 Maskhadov was elected president of Chechnya in an election which the OSCE declared to be "free and fair".

It is that election as well as the Khasavyurt Agreement Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin recently has declared illegal.



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## 6. Explanations

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In spite of overwhelming superiority in men and material, it took the Russians almost three months to gain military control over Grozny - a city, a little smaller than Tallinn - and the degree of Russian control was not, as has been shown, all that definitive.

The central question to ask is thus: Why did the armed forces of the former superpower have such great difficulties with conquering Grozny? That question is, of course, part of the larger question: Why did Russia lose the 1994-96 war against Chechnya?

Explaining Russian failures one could start with a quote from Leo Trotsky: "The Army is a mirror of society and suffers from all its ills - usually at higher temperatures". Explanations for Russia's failures in Chechnya have to be found at all levels from the political decision-making in the Kremlin via military planning to the lack of motivation and moral among the troops.

The decision to start the military campaign was taken hastily, without the necessary analysis and planning. President Yeltsin and a small group of "power ministers" and advisers took it. Likewise, the decision to storm Grozny on New Year's Night 1994 was taken by the same political leadership in spite of the fact that the army wanted another two weeks to prepare for the attack.

The military leadership was divided. Many officers were opposed to the war - including Boris Gromov, Deputy Minister of Defence, and Aleksandr Lebed. Less publicly even the Chief of the General Staff, Mikhail Kolyesnikov, was sceptical. The Commander of the North Caucasus Military District, Colonel General Aleksey Mityukin, and the second in command of the land forces, Colonel General Eduard Vorobev, refused to take command of the Chechen Campaign.<sup>21</sup>

Yeltsin signed the new Russian military doctrine in early November 1993. According to the doctrine the most immediate danger of war came from "social, territorial, religious, national-ethnic and

other conflicts".<sup>22</sup> However, the military doctrine gave no specific guidelines for how this threat should influence Russian military planning and training. There was much talk about the need for military reform, but almost nothing was done in practice.

Many problems of the Russian armed forces were due to the increasing mismatch between structure and economy. Thus the equipment was not maintained, training and exercises not conducted and officers and men not paid on time. During the initial march towards Grozny 2 out of every 10 tanks could not keep up with their columns due to mechanical failure. Helicopters could not navigate in bad weather due to obsolete navigation instruments. Since 1992 there had been no exercises at division level. Many pilots had only had 20 to 30 flying-hours per year. And so on.<sup>23</sup>

Manpower was another crippling problem. There were not enough conscripts to fill the units. Younger age cohorts and increased possibility for avoiding military service as well as plain desertion meant

that most units were undermanned – some were only cadre units. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies no combat units were above 75 per cent of their nominal strength. About 70 divisions were on less than 50 per cent of their nominal strength.<sup>24</sup>

This meant that the units to be used in Chechnya had to be composed by combining parts of different units. Thus many units were sent into battle without ever having trained together. Furthermore, many of the privates were recruits, who had not yet finished their basic military education. Some did not even know how to handle their personal weapon.

All these problems meant that co-ordination between the Russian troops in Chechnya was extremely poor. This was the case not only in relations between army, air force and MVD-troops in general; it was also the case in relations between single units in the field.

The troops had been told that they were in Chechnya in order to “disarm illegal armed formations” and “re-establish constitutional order”. They did not, however,

have clear “rules of engagement” in the sense that this term is used in the West. Many officers and soldiers simply thought that they had come to liberate the population from an oppressive dictatorship. The resistance they met, not only from Dudaev’s forces but from civilians as well thus surprised them. As one Russian general put it: “Everyone from the generals to the privates were psychologically, organisational and tactically unprepared for battle on their own territory and against an enemy of unclear identity”.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most damaging Russian problems was lack of intelligence (in the sense of militarily relevant information!). The Russian leaders had no understanding of Chechen society. They had no understanding of the popular support for Chechen independence. They did not understand that as soon as Russian troops crossed into the republic the majority of Chechens would put their internal disagreements aside and fight under Dudayev as their symbol of national independence. At the operational and tactical levels intelligence was just as bad. That was often

due to the most banal problems, such as for example lack of maps of the area of operations.<sup>26</sup>

Again and again the Russians were taken by surprise. Just to give an example: The second-in-command of the 131<sup>st</sup> Motorises Infantry Brigade has told that the security service (FSK) informed him, that it did not expect strong opposition during the New Year offensive in Grozny.<sup>27</sup> The timing of the operation was also bad. The weather was cold in Chechnya in the December-February period and often overcasts made the effective use of helicopters and close air support planes difficult.

More fundamentally, however, it was an asymmetrical war between regular and irregular forces. But the Russian planning had not taken sufficiently account of that. Later in the war, the southern mountains served as bases for the Chechen fighters in the same way as they had done for Imam Shamil during the Russian conquest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The guerrilla war outside Grozny, in the lowlands, in the foothills and in the mountains is, however, outside the scope of this article.

When looking at the battles of Grozny in particular, the Russians made many fundamental errors. To what extent this was due to political pressure for a quick solution, a catastrophic underestimation of the opponent or sheer military incompetence is difficult to say. But it is surprising when considering that there probably is no army in the world, which has as much experiences in urban combat as the Russian army.

According to Russian doctrine there are two ways how to take a city: If it is only weakly defended it can be taken by surprise through a quick entry and occupation of strategic positions. If, on the other hand, it is heavily defended, a much more systematic approach is required. Then the conquering forces have to be organised in storm groups and storm detachments and the ground troops are only to be brought into action in close co-ordination with artillery and air bombardment.<sup>28</sup>

It the New Year attempt to take Grozny, the Russian commanders were either under the misperception that it was only a

weakly defended city and that it could be taken by surprise or – as seems most likely – under strong political pressure to move before they were ready.

Particularly about the New Year's offensive in Grozny one must emphasise the following failures:<sup>29</sup>

- poor tactical intelligence;
- great problems of command, communication and control which lead to lack of co-ordination between the units;
- no infantry cover for the tanks moving into the city or, when such cover existed, it got separated from the tanks;
- lack of combat engineers to break through Chechen barricades;
- troops without prior training in urban combat.

It was only after the catastrophic failure of the New Year offensive, that the Russians switched to the other approach. But even so, they had great difficulties. This was partly due to the fact, that most of the troops had no training for this type of combat.

Irrespective of all the other factors mentioned, the crucial factors, however,

were moral, motivation and discipline. That was what made the determining difference between the Russian and the Chechen forces.

Turning to Chechen successes, they are, of course, in many cases just the other side of the coin. The main strength of the Chechen fighters was their high moral and motivation. Contrary to the Russian soldiers, the Chechens knew why they were fighting and what they were fighting for. And that – combined with fearlessness and a pre-modern concept of honour – was undoubtedly their greatest asset.

Other Chechen advantages are also the opposite side of the coin of Russian weaknesses. The popular support, the terrain and the intimate knowledge of the local geography were crucial factors. The Chechens fought a guerrilla war where the fighters could – to borrow a phrase from Mao Zedong – swim like fish in the sea of the population. The Chechens throughout the war exploited the fact that the Russians had great difficulties in differentiating between Dudayevs fighters and non-combatants. Areas, which the Russians

claimed to have conquered, were soon to be re-infiltrated by Chechen fighters.

The Chechens also knew their Russian enemy from many years of experience. President Dudayev had been a Soviet air force general, and Aslan Maskhadov had been a colonel in the Soviet artillery. Many Chechen fighters had got their military education as conscripts in the Soviet Army.

Where both strategic and tactical intelligence was a problem for the Russian forces, the Chechens often seemed to have perfect tactical intelligence. In many cases the Chechens were also able to listen in on Russian communications and occasionally also sending false orders to the Russians. In several instances this interfered in the communication between Russian units and for example in communication between forward air controllers and pilots.

### ***7. A New Russian-Chechen War***

At the time of writing a new Russian-Chechen War is being fought and a new

and very different battle of Grozny is ranging. The Russian political and military leadership clearly wants revenge for the humiliating defeat in the 1994-96 war. And they clearly want to avoid a repetition of the failures of the earlier attempt to take Grozny, but the exact nature of their plans has not yet been revealed.

The Russians have brought far more troops to the area than during the earlier war. The estimates say about 100.000. That is four times as many as when they intervened in December 1994 and almost twice as many as when the Russian troop strength, in the spring of 1995, reached its peak in the earlier war. In the initial phase they took control over the lowlands north of the Terek River. From there they gradually moved in on Grozny while heavy bombings by airplanes, helicopters and artillery was brought to bear not only on Grozny but on a large number of towns and villages, claimed to be harbouring "international terrorists".

It seems as if Grozny is to be completely destroyed and the defenders worn down before Russian troops will move

in. Russian Defence Minister, Igor Sergeev, has stated that he expects to take Grozny by the middle of December, i.e. after six to seven weeks of continuous bombardment. Other Russian officers have said that Grozny should not be rebuilt after the war, thus indicating a wish to see the city completely destroyed.

However, according to official Russian figures, by mid November there were still 5000 Chechen fighters left in Grozny, and even if the city is reduced to rubble, it is far from certain that the Russians will be able to gain full control of it. The only certain conclusions which can be drawn at this time is, that the second Russian-Chechen war in the 1990s will be extremely costly in lives as well as in materiel resources, and that the Russian-Chechen conflict will not be solved by military means. On the contrary, the new war will only further embitter and prolong the conflict.

<sup>1</sup> Lecture at Baltic Defence College, November 1st, 1999

<sup>2</sup> Pavel K. Baev, *The Russian Army in a Time of Troubles*. London: Sage Publications, 1996,

142-143.

<sup>3</sup> Charlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya. A Small Victorious War*. London: Pan Books, 1997, pp. 152-173.

<sup>4</sup> *Nesavisimaja gaseta*, March 1, 1995 and *Krasnaja svesda*, March 2, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Usman Fersauli, July 1996.

<sup>6</sup> *Nesavisimaja gaseta*, March 1, 1995 and *Krasnaja svesda*, March 2, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Pavel K. Baev, "Russian Misuse of Air Power in the Chechen war" in Carsten F. Rønnfeldt and Per Erik Solli (eds.), *Use of Air Power in Peace Operations*. Oslo: NUPI, 1997, p. 77-93.

<sup>8</sup> Fersauli, op.cit.

<sup>9</sup> Dennis J. Marshall-Hasdel, *Russian Airpower in Chechnya*. Sandhurst: Conflict Studies Research Centre, March 1996, p. 11. See also Baev, "Russian Misuse...", op.cit.

<sup>10</sup> Pavel Felgenhauer, "The Chechen Campaign" in Mikhail Tsypkin (ed.), *War in Chechnya: Implications for Russian Security Policy*. Monterey, Ca.: Naval Postgraduate School, 1995, Chapter 3.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy L. Thomas, "The Russian Armed Forces Confront Chechnya: II. Military Activities 11-31 December 1994", *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 257-290.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; Felgenhauer, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Fersaul, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> Gall and de Wall, Op. cit., pp. 224-227.

<sup>15</sup> *On the Observance of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in the Russian Federation (1994-1995)*. Report of the President's Commission on Human Rights. Approved at the February 5, 1996 Session of the Commission. Moscow 1996, Section 1.

<sup>16</sup> M.A. Smith, *A Chronology of the Chechen Conflict*. Sandhurst: Conflict Studies Research Centre, June 1995, p. 33.

<sup>17</sup> Gall and de Wall, op. cit., p. 337.

<sup>18</sup> "Situation Report, Friday March 8, 12:00". Telefax from OSCE AG to CiO, March 8, 1996.

<sup>19</sup> Gall and de Wall, op. cit., pp. 331-334.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Moscow News* 23 December 1994 and 13 January 1995. See also Raymond C. Finch, "Why the Russian Military failed in Chechnya". United States Army Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. May 1997, p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> *Krasnaja svesda*, 19 November 1993.

<sup>23</sup> Baev, *The Russian. ...*, op.cit., p. 69; Gregory J. Celestan, "Wounded Bear: The Ongoing Russian Military Operation in Chechnya". United States Army Foreign Military Studies Office. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, August 1996 .

<sup>24</sup> *The Military Balance 1994-95*. London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1995, p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> "Russian Airborne Troops in Regional Conflicts", *International Affairs. The Russian Journal of World Politics, Diplomacy and International Relations*, Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 161-167.

<sup>26</sup> Lester W. Grau, "Changing Russian Urban Tactics: The Aftermath of the Battle for Grozny", *INSS Strategic Forum*, No. 38, July 1995.

<sup>27</sup> Celestan, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Adam Geibel, "Lessons in Urban Combat. Grozny, New Year's Eve, 1994", *Infantry*, November-December 1995, pp. 21-25.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.; Finch, op.cit.; for an official Russian military explanation, see Colonel General A. Kvasjnin in *Krasnaja svesda*, 2 March 1995.