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Echoes of Chechnya Warfare Resound in Moscow, Quantico

Experiences gleaned in Caucasus urban battles shape Russian doctrine, but raise more questions for U.S. Marines planning future operations.

By Robert K. Ackerman

Several months of Russian attacks have shifted the balance of power in Chechnya and changed U.S. thinking about urban warfare. After suffering stunning public defeats just a few years ago, Russian forces applied painful lessons learned then to drive Chechen forces out of their capital city, Grozny, this year. Yet, according to U.S. analysts, this may have merely altered the thrust of battle, not resolved it. And, the tactics employed by both sides are forcing U.S. experts to take another look at the concept of urban warfare.

Where Russian forces entered Grozny in almost a parade-type atmosphere in the first Chechnya operation in 1994 to 1995, they began their most recent conflict last year by applying massive artillery strikes that changed the playing field by leveling parts of the city. They coordinated their brute-force strengths to define the combat on their terms as much as possible. The infrastructure of Grozny proved expendable in the drive to defeat rebel forces operating there.

On the other hand, the Chechen rebels were quick to adapt to changing strategic, as well as tactical, situations. Recognizing the value of information operations, they employed advanced commercial communications systems that actually exceeded the quality of the military gear issued to the Russian army. Lacking Russia's vast manpower resources, Chechen forces withdrew from indefensible positions to rugged territory that more easily negates many of the Russian army's strengths.

Despite the Russians' success in taking Grozny this year, the operation unveiled harsh lessons about urban warfare. For the U.S. Marine Corps, which is intensifying its urban warfare training, many of the Russian tactics are anathema to U.S. operations. Similarly, the brute-force approach to crushing indigent resistance leaves unresolved issues such as how to wage room-to-room combat in high-rise buildings without suffering significant casualties or committing large forces for extended periods. Some U.S. analysts are convinced that these lessons may yet be taught to Russian forces in Grozny in the near future.

"Despite some of the things said in the press that the conflict in Chechnya is over, it is by no means over and is still continuing," states Arthur L. Speyer III, Europe/Eurasia analyst

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with the Marine Corps. While Grozny has been taken by Russian troops, Chechen rebels continue to provide small levels of resistance. "The bottom line is that the Russians have not seen the last of urban combat in Grozny," he emphasizes.

Speyer notes that the Russians learned from some of their well-publicized mistakes in the first conflict. Nonetheless, they also have fallen back on some of their traditional ways of operating, and they are still making mistakes in urban warfare.

Their first mistake in 1994, Speyer offers, was that they failed to understand the cultural aspects of the conflict. Russians basically saw Chechens as guerillas or bandits who could not stay and fight, in contrast with the reality of a hardened, dedicated ethnic group possessed of a history of fierce fighting for their longtime homeland against high odds. Once the Russians entered Grozny, they quickly realized that their adversary was much more determined than expected.

According to David Dilegge, a Marine Corps urban operations analyst, another major problem was that many Russian army units in 1994 were still badly fragmented from the breakup of the Soviet Union. Both individuals and entire subunits of regiments or battalions were missing and were replaced by a smorgasbord of forces from various parts of Russia. Many of these diversified groups had never operated together, which caused its own command, control and communications problems.

Dilegge notes that Aslan Maskhadov, who commanded Chechen forces during the first Grozny operation, described the first Russian onslaught as a parade up to the presidential palace, where he was located. Longtime Russian urban warfare doctrine--from Berlin in 1953 through Budapest in 1956 and Prague in 1968 to Kabul in 1979--features long ribbons of forces striking deep into a city from different sides toward a common goal. They eschew building-to-building, room-to-room operations in favor of column attacks converging on the one area of key political or military significance.

Following their tried-and-true plan, Russian forces in this first invasion entered Grozny from four directions. Maskhadov waited until the Russian forces were in place, and then he called the Chechen forces throughout the city to head toward the palace and attack according to prearranged plans. The partisans struck the lead and trailing armored vehicles, blocking escape for the long lines of mechanized forces and leading to what Dilegge describes as "a turkey shoot." This provided a tremendous boost to Chechen morale and confidence, and within a few days individuals were arguing over whose turn it was to kill a tank. The Russian lack of dismounted infantry spelled doom for the trapped armored vehicles.

The lack of small, skilled infantry units at company levels and below also plagued Russian forces throughout the operation, Speyer adds. Coupled with this was the absence of a "strategic corporal" in the Russian army who provides experience and leadership for a

small unit in combat. Lacking noncommissioned officers in a highly skilled infantry can become costly in an urban environment. Some of the Russian airborne, naval infantry and special forces interior units, which have more cohesive structures, performed better in Grozny against the Chechens even in the first conflict, Speyer notes.

The Russians were also handicapped by their failure to employ reconnaissance assets to support ground units, Dilegge notes. Their maps were outdated and tended to be out of scale. On the other hand, the Chechens emphasized detailed reconnaissance and updated maps as part of their doctrine.

Information operations proved to be a key element of urban warfare. Russian forces also were subjected to massive onslaughts of disinformation. Dilegge reports that Russian units "were almost frozen" by confusion sowed in part by the Chechens. In one case in 1996, Chechens broadcast fake radio traffic from imaginary units in the clear for the Russians to deliberately hear.

Speyer explains that the Russians were sloppy in talking in the open on their communications systems. Almost all Chechens speak Russian, and they were able to listen to Russian messages and transmit misleading instructions that redirected Russian artillery and aircraft missions. Russian interior troops in particular were careless about unsecure radio communications, Speyer adds.

Dilegge adds that Russian forces ignored many other basic communications security procedures. In addition to not using cryptography, they did not regularly change frequencies because of the logistics challenges of synchronizing the process among every unit. U.S. forces, by comparison, change their communications format every 24 hours. Chechen officials claim that they could intercept Russian tactical communications on their own commercial off-the-shelf radios. Code phrases used by the Russians in open communications were easily deciphered and understood. Helicopter traffic, aircraft communications and satellite telephony all were intercepted, the rebels claim.

In contrast, the Chechens had a native form of secure communications. While virtually every Chechen speaks Russian, almost no Russians speak Chechen. By adding a few simple code phrases, the rebels could communicate in the open without fear of interception in a manner similar to that of the U.S. Army's Navaho code talkers in the European theater. In addition, most of the Chechen radio operators recognized each other by voice.

In Grozny, Chechen forces operated in seven- or eight-man teams. Each team was equipped with a new commercial Motorola handheld radio purchased abroad. Russian forces, on the other hand, were using tactical radios as old as 30 years that did not operate well in urban or mountainous environments. The Chechen Motorola radios were much more technologically advanced than anything the Russians had, Dilegge reports. Speyer

concurs that "at the tactical level, the Chechens had better communications than the Russians." He adds that Chechen officials, who also equipped women and children with these radios for intelligence purposes, say these handheld units were so valuable that they would have equipped every rebel with one if they could have afforded it.

The Chechens also had six large Motorola base relay stations, which they placed on the high ground. The Russians could see the sites and their antennas during the day, but they only risked attacking them at night. By then, Chechen forces would have moved the sites. The Chechens claimed that they were in radio communications at distances of up to 100 kilometers (65 miles). They also had Inmarsat capabilities for their headquarters operation.

For the assault on Grozny that began in 1999, the Russians applied greater amounts of indirect and aviation assets against the city before sending in troops. Even this was not well coordinated compared to U.S. Army or Marine Corps standards for close air support, Dilegge maintains. The Russian support basically took the form of leveling targets ahead of the mechanized forces.

Speyer attributes the key to Russian success as "massive use of artillery." This included both indirect and direct fire modes using self-propelled artillery in close ranges. Speyer relates that the ratio of artillery to infantry units was virtually 1 to 1.

This struck at the very nature of urban warfare. Where conventional ground operations tend to be two-dimensional, urban warfare amid multistory buildings is three-dimensional. This three-dimensional environment forces troops to clear buildings room-by-room and then leave a holding force in each building to prevent adversaries from sneaking back into a structure and wreaking havoc behind the lines.

The Russians addressed this problem by reducing the three-dimensional environment to a two-dimensional one. Massive artillery strikes leveled buildings, eliminating any inherent threats within and precluding the likelihood of their use later in the operation. "You basically reduce all the elements of three-dimensional urban warfare that give the advantage to your opponent by flattening it to one giant pile of rubble," Speyer points out.

The Russians also used the artillery to compensate for their poor-quality infantry. "Because they did not have a large number of good infantry teams to go into the city, they absolutely leveled an area for two days straight with artillery," Speyer allows.

The targeted use of their smaller, more effective infantry units paid dividends. These forces were more cohesive and, in some cases, experienced from the first Chechnya operation. They would engage Chechen forces to draw them into combat, at which point the Russian forces would call in air strikes or artillery on the rebel positions. The specialized forces then would mop up any surviving resistance.

The Russians also were aware, as were the Chechens, that the rebels are relatively limited in number--compared to Russian forces--and cannot sustain high casualty figures over an extended period of time. "Russian forces have no problem taking large numbers of battlefield losses and replacing them with additional troops," Speyer observes. "The Chechens cannot do that."

The Russians avoided using helicopters in and around Grozny. Officers believed that the threat from rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), manportable surface-to-air missiles and anti-aircraft artillery was too great, Speyer relates. Russian helicopters almost never dropped troops on rooftops, landed in city squares or provided close air support in the urban environment.

Speyer notes that the Chechens found two of their weapons systems to be "absolutely devastating" inside the urban environment. One is the RPG, which many Chechens now refer to as their national weapon. In Grozny, each of the Chechen forces' seven- or eight-man teams included one or two RPG gunners. These forces were widely distributed throughout the city, with RPGs used against personnel, armor and structures.

The second-most useful Chechen weapon was the sniper, Speyer relates. In a city, the value of a sniper increases exponentially, he declares. The Chechens used independent sniper scout teams deployed in small numbers in buildings throughout the city. The Russians also relied significantly on snipers, mostly in direct support of infantry.

Russian forces quickly realized how effectively an enemy sniper could tie down an entire unit. In some cases, Chechens even used their own snipers as bait to draw Russian forces into a trap or divert them from a crucial area.

One Russian solution was to employ self-propelled artillery as an antisniper weapon. A suspected sniper perch would not last long under a direct barrage of high explosives. If a sniper was well concealed and protected inside a building, the artillery could remove the shooter's advantage simply by collapsing the building out from under him. Another piece of hardware, the 2S6 anti-aircraft weapon, which fires up to 5,000 rounds per minute, also proved useful in attacking sniper perches.

Another technology the Russians reportedly used in Grozny was thermobaric weapons. Dilegge allows that their use could have a significant effect on urban operations. Russian forces use the RPO-2 round, which is an overpressure weapon designed to defeat adversaries firing from shelter in built-up areas, in the field and in mountainous conditions. When fired into a building, it wipes out everything inside without collapsing the structure, depending on the type of building. The flame burst and pressure released when the round ignites "can go around the corner" and cause internal bruising wounds that may defy battlefield medical diagnosis.

For U.S. analysts, not all of the Russian lessons learned can be applied to U.S. urban warfare doctrine, Dilegge warns. "The bottom line is that we are not going to be able to afford to do business like the Russians did. We won't have the luxury of destroying a city to save it," he warrants.

Speyer agrees. "If nothing else, Chechnya has been a good battlefield lesson," he declares. "Obviously, the U.S. military cannot act like the Russian military does. However, there are some lessons to be learned from both the Russians and the Chechens."

U.S. forces have learned how to clear a building room-to-room fairly well, he continues. The difficulty lies in reaching the building through the "tunnels of death" on the streets. U.S. analysts must examine the three-dimensional nature of urban warfare to identify the tunnels of death. "One of the biggest things we can do is not to totally focus on that one objective but to focus on [what is] all around the objective," Dilegge offers.

During the Marine Warfighting Laboratory's advanced warfighting experiment last year, the laboratory generated a series of scenarios to boil down urban warfare to a smaller level. In these vignettes, the best outcome U.S. forces could achieve still resulted in 40 percent casualties. In some cases, the casualty rate approached 90 percent.

In a wargaming exercise three years ago, general officers and colonels were given a scenario called urban canyon. They had to secure and hold a 20-block section of a high-rise commercial district of downtown Seoul, South Korea. With a 10-to-1 favorable casualty rate and an average of 10 seconds to clear a room, experts calculated that securing this 20-block area would take as long as 18 months and require 62 infantry battalions.

Whether or not U.S. forces would employ the types of weapons used by Russian forces in Grozny, Marine Corps planners still must prepare for the possibility that these weapons would be used against U.S. troops in an urban environment. Defending against thermobaric weapons, for example, could pose a significant difficulty.

The degree to which the Russians were handicapped by their lack of good maps is not lost on U.S. analysts. Most U.S. maps are scaled to 1:50,000, which proved problematic during early operations in Haiti, Dilegge relates. For an urban environment, forces should have maps scaled to 1:12,500, he suggests. "We need good baseline urban intelligence before we ever think about going into an urban operation," he emphasizes. This increases in importance as prominent urban landmarks such as buildings disappear during conflict.

Having good cultural intelligence also has grown in importance. U.S. forces encountered problems in Somalia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo when dealing with a populace whose opinions could "change with the wind," Dilegge observes. This intelligence is

valuable both for dealing with adversaries and for understanding noncombatants in the conflict area.

For Chechnya, the future is even less clear. Both Dilegge and Speyer predict fighting to continue for some time, after the Chechens regroup in the mountains south of Grozny. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that the Chechens are adamant about retaking their country," Dilegge states. "The Russians cannot afford to stay in Chechnya, with the amount of forces they have right now, without a heavy financial burden on their economy."

The overall key to victory for both sides in Chechnya lies in Grozny, Speyer declares, adding that "the battles for Grozny are not over." The overall key to urban warfare in Grozny is the human will to fight in that environment over a long period of time.

That will is strong among Chechens, Dilegge notes. "People talk about 400 years of history of Chechen-Russian conflict," he continues. "But, what especially hits home for the Chechens is the forced exodus beginning in 1944 and continuing into the 1950s. Basically, an entire Chechen population was removed to other Central Asian districts, and some accounts maintain that a third of the Chechen population died during that period."

Until the fall of the Soviet Union, almost 100 percent of Chechen adult males were conscripted into military service. In addition to the military training they received there, Chechens have a strong tradition of passing down tactics, techniques and procedures on guerilla or partisan warfare from father to son.

"You cannot underestimate the will of the Chechen people," Dilegge warns. "They have an Asian sense of time--'it doesn't have to be done overnight.' They will not forget."

The urban environment "leveled the playing field between the forces," Speyer relates. A guerilla force that knows its way around an urban setting can use this environment to even the odds and reduce the advantages of a larger, Russian-style military force on the offense.



Back to May 2000 's Home Page

Back to *SIGNAL*'s Home Page

