

Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Terrorism in the North Caucasus: The Military Dimension of the Russian – Chechen Conflict

MARK KRAMER

FOR MORE THAN FIVE YEARS Russian troops have been embroiled in a counter-insurgency war in Chechnya, the second war they have fought in that small Caucasus republic since the mid-1990s. The first war, from December 1994 to August 1996, ended when Russian and Chechen officials signed a peace agreement at Khasavyurt in the neighbouring republic of Dagestan.¹ The Khasavyurt accord, which led to the withdrawal of all Russian troops from Chechen territory and three years of quasi-independence for the republic, stipulated that the two parties would resolve the final status of Chechnya by the end of 2001. Before any negotiations about this matter could be held, however, a series of events beginning with deadly incursions by Islamic extremists from Chechnya into Dagestan in August 1999 culminated in a large-scale resumption of fighting between Russian federal forces and Chechen guerrillas — fighting that has continued ever since.

This article assesses Russia's counterinsurgency operations during the latest war in Chechnya and considers whether any lessons can be drawn from the Russian experience. The article begins by looking briefly at the geographical and military context of the war, the events that precipitated the renewed fighting, the early results of the conflict and the practical constraints on Russian military operations. It then examines the tactics used by Chechen guerrillas and the responses (or lack thereof) by Russian soldiers and security forces. The article considers why Russian troops and police, who outnumber the rebels by more than 50 to 1, have been unable to eliminate armed resistance in an area as small as Chechnya. It also highlights the growing emphasis the Chechens have placed on terrorist attacks against civilians both inside and outside the North Caucasus. The final section of the article lays out several conclusions about the conflict in Chechnya, the performance of the Russian army and security forces, and the implications for other counterinsurgency and counterterrorist operations.

The article is based in part on interviews I conducted with Russian Defence Ministry and Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) officials in Moscow in December 2003 and June

2004. It also draws, with due caution, on Russian press reports, official government and military documents, memoirs by former army commanders, published interviews with Russian soldiers, data compiled by Western and Russian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and analyses in Russian military journals, which have featured many articles about the two wars in Chechnya, including assessments of 'guerrilla tactics' (*taktika boevikov* or *partisanskaya taktika*), the operations of Russian forces, the broader lessons of the war, and prospects for the future.

The setting for the ongoing war

Chechnya is a landlocked region in southern Russia bordered by Dagestan to the east and north, Stavropol *krai* and Northern Ossetia to the northwest, Ingushetia to the west, and the republic of Georgia to the south (see Fig. 1 map). The capital and largest city of Chechnya, Grozny, is in the centre of the region. The total land area of Chechnya is 19,300 square kilometres, roughly the size of New Jersey (and one twenty-fifth the size of Iraq). The population before the start of the latest war was approximately 1.05 million, but it has shrunk during the war to around 700,000 (one thirty-fifth the size of Iraq) because 40,000 to 45,000 civilians have been killed, 50,000 are living as internally displaced persons, tens of thousands are external refugees, and a vast number have moved permanently elsewhere (to Moscow, other Russian cities or foreign countries).²

The terrain in Chechnya is highly diverse, ranging from plains in the north to wooded hills near Grozny and rugged, treacherous mountains in the southern half of the republic, especially along the southern and southwestern borders with Georgia and Ingushetia. Russian troops have had their greatest difficulty establishing control over the southernmost portion of Chechnya, where the terrain has been a key advantage for the guerrillas, enabling them to ambush Russian forces, to conceal ammunition and weapons, and to move almost unhindered between Chechnya and safe havens across the border in Georgia, Dagestan, and Ingushetia.³

Huge swaths of Chechnya were destroyed during the first war in 1994–96, and promises of large-scale reconstruction aid from Moscow never materialised. Although the federal government did provide a limited amount of assistance (mostly in the form of energy supplies and some grain), economic recovery and the rebuilding of destroyed facilities never made any headway. Further destruction occurred during the first year of the latest war, rendering many towns, including Grozny, almost uninhabitable.⁴ The infrastructure of Chechnya has been obliterated, and basic services (running water, electricity, heat, natural gas, etc.) are non-existent or nearly so in large portions of the republic, including Grozny. Even if the war were to end and reconstruction were to begin on a serious footing, large areas of the republic would remain blighted for years to come.

Public order in Chechnya broke down almost completely during the first war in the mid-1990s, and it has never been re-established in any meaningful way. The three years of quasi-independence in Chechnya from September 1996 to September 1999 were marred by warlordism, rampant criminality, hostage takings, chaotic violence, grisly attacks on foreign aid workers and general lawlessness. Aslan Maskhadov was elected president of the republic by a wide margin in January 1997, but his government soon

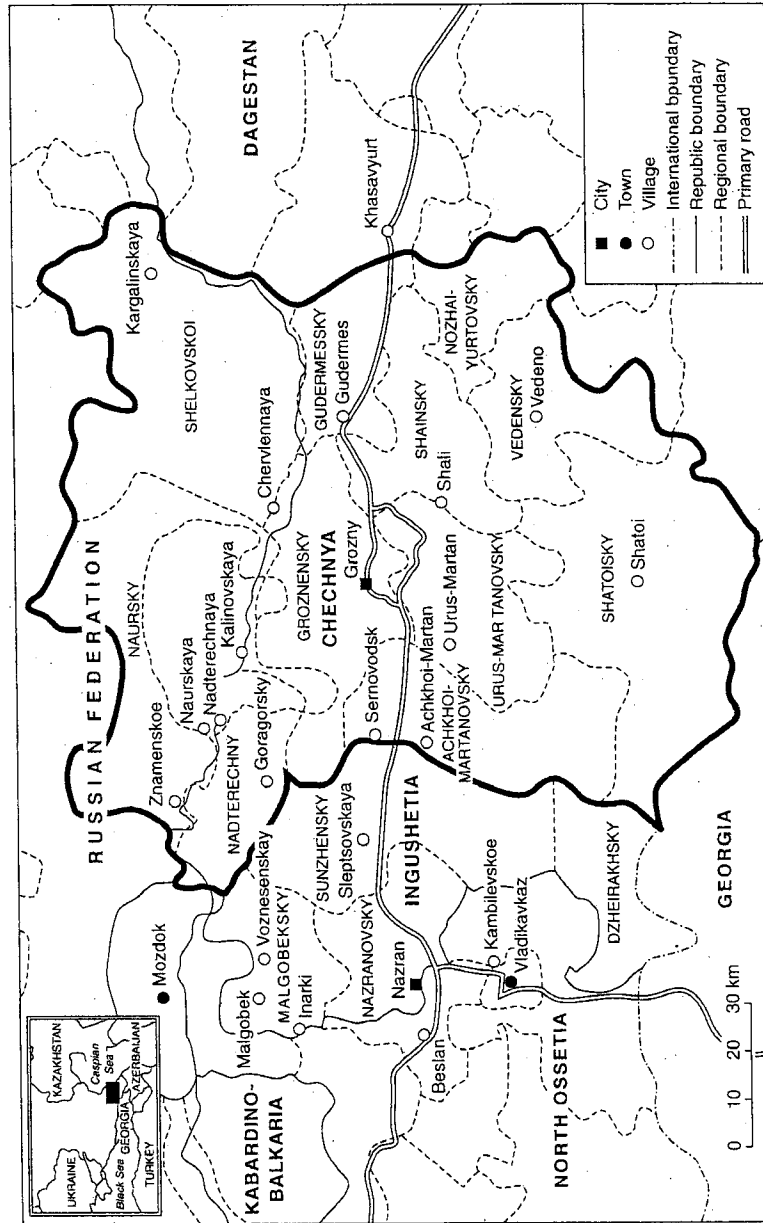


FIGURE 1. MAP OF CHECHNYA.

came under challenge from more radical elements, especially those led by Shamil' Basaev (who had lost out to Maskhadov in the presidential election). Maskhadov was unable to clamp down on Basaev's forces, and the power of warlords, criminal gangs, and Islamic extremist groups (including some foreign terrorists) increased. The Islamic fundamentalists set up terrorist training camps in Chechnya and recruited aspiring 'jihadists' from all over southern Russia, giving them military training as well as political and religious indoctrination.⁵ Maskhadov was the target of several assassination attempts in 1998-99, and although he still enjoyed a good deal of popular support, his government exercised little effective control in the republic. Under growing pressure from Islamic radicals, he imposed strict *sharia* law throughout Chechnya in February 1999, a move that was widely unpopular and that emboldened the extremists. The Russian authorities, for their part, were deeply suspicious of and hostile to Maskhadov (particularly because he would not renounce the goal of independence), and they avoided taking any steps that would ease his task of governance.

The combined pressure from the radical Islamists in Chechnya and from the Russian government made Maskhadov's position untenable. In August 1999 Basaev and another Islamic extremist fighter, Hattab, who was of Saudi origin, launched several raids into Dagestan for the ostensible purpose of setting up a Wahhabist (fundamentalist Islamic) state in the Caucasus.⁶ The Russian government hurriedly sent troops from the MVD and the Federal Security Service (FSB) to rebuff the incursions. The Russian forces eventually managed to drive Basaev's and Hattab's guerrillas out of Dagestan, albeit with considerable difficulty. The tension created by these raids and by the subsequent clashes was still acute when a string of five highly publicised bombings in the late summer of 1999 — at the Manezhnaya shopping complex in central Moscow on 31 August, at a military housing facility in the Dagestani town of Buinaksk on 4 September, at a large apartment building in Moscow on 9 September, at another apartment building in Moscow on 13 September, and at an apartment building in the southern Russian city of Volgodonsk on 16 September — killed nearly 300 people and wounded more than 2,000. The circumstances of these bombings were never adequately explained, but the Russian government promptly blamed them on the Chechens.⁷ The bombings and the raids into Dagestan were cited by the new Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin, in late September 1999 when he ordered the Russian army and internal security forces to reassert control over Chechnya using 'all available means'.

The renewed fighting escalated in October-November 1999 when Russian troops moved en masse into the northern part of Chechnya and then crossed the Terek and Sunzha rivers into the heartland around Grozny, surrounding it with major thrusts from the west, north, and east. Elsewhere as well, Russian troops engaged in large-scale military operations to crush organised resistance and re-establish control of all major towns and transport routes. These operations resulted in extensive bloodshed on both sides and inflicted enormous damage on Chechen cities, particularly Grozny, which was almost completely leveled in a sustained, ferocious bombardment by Russian air and artillery forces. By February 2000 the Russian army had taken control of Grozny, and by mid-2000 Russian troops, despite suffering heavy casualties, had gained a firm presence through most of Chechnya and at least nominal control of all major towns.⁸

(They did not, however, secure control of smaller villages in the southern rim of Chechnya along the border with Georgia and Dagestan.)

Putin earned public acclaim in Russia for his conduct of the war and became by far the most popular figure in the Russian government. When President Boris El'tsin suddenly resigned at the end of 1999, he designated Putin as his successor. Putin's standing rose still further in February 2000 when most of the Chechen guerrillas left Grozny and shifted to positions further south. Nonetheless, even after the evacuation of Grozny, Chechen fighters continued to inflict heavy losses on Russian troops, especially during two highly publicised ambushes in late February and early March 2000. In the first incident, on 29 February, several dozen Chechen guerrillas killed all 84 members of a Russian paratrooper unit from Pskov. The following day some 50 Chechen fighters attacked a convoy of nearly 100 heavily-armed police commandos (OMON) near Grozny, killing 40 and wounding 35. The two incidents came only hours after the Russian MVD chief, Vladimir Rushailo, had boasted that 'the military phase of the anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya is drawing to a close'.⁹ These ambushes and other deadly attacks against Russian forces in early 2000 spurred some of Putin's rivals in the March 2000 presidential election to call for negotiations with Maskhadov and the Chechen insurgents. Putin himself rejected any such notion and promised to 'wipe out the terrorists and bandits'. His decisive, first-round victory on 26 March, with 53% of the vote, seemed to convey public approval of his tough line (a sentiment borne out in most opinion polls), but his election was tarnished just a few days later by another large-scale ambush of Russian soldiers, this time against a convoy of MVD Internal Forces in southern Chechnya. At least 37 of the 41 MVD troops were killed, and many other soldiers from a nearby unit that tried to rescue the besieged convoy were also killed or seriously wounded.

Since mid-2000, Russian military and security units in Chechnya have sought to rely on standard counterinsurgency operations aimed at maintaining control of urban areas, isolating and eliminating the guerrillas, preventing suicide bombing attacks, restoring a semblance of 'normal' life in major towns, bolstering the pro-Russian government (which was headed by Ahmad-Haji Kadyrov from June 2000 until his assassination in May 2004), and consolidating a long-term military presence. The results of these efforts thus far have been meager. When overall command of Russian operations in Chechnya was transferred from the FSB to the MVD in July-September 2003, it was supposed to herald the 'gradual end of counterterrorist actions' in favour of the more routine 'maintenance of public order'.¹⁰ But this projected reorientation never really materialised. One of the highest-ranking Russian MVD officers in the North Caucasus, Lieutenant-General Evgenii Abrashin, later complained that the government was 'rash and premature in declaring an end to counterterrorist operations' at a time when 'the missions assigned to our troops in Chechnya far exceed their capabilities'.¹¹ Abrashin emphasised that the OGV's 'forces are so busy just trying to ensure their own security' that they 'rarely can take any steps to go after the resurgent guerrillas'.

Although the Chechen rebels, who now number around 1,600-1,800, have not yet regrouped into a unified resistance, and although many ordinary Chechens have long wanted an end to the conflict, the armed confrontation with Russian troops seems likely to continue indefinitely. The pro-Russian Chechen government, which has been

notoriously corrupt from the time it was set up by Russian troops in June 2000, enjoys very little popular support and has relied mainly on violent coercion. Reconstruction efforts in Chechnya have been almost non-existent over the past decade, and as many as 200,000 Chechens still live as refugees outside the republic (mostly in private homes or abandoned buildings in Ingushetia and other neighbouring regions). Until recently, tens of thousands of Chechens had taken refuge in squalid, makeshift camps in eastern Ingushetia, but Russian soldiers forcibly dismantled these camps, closing the final one, at Satsita, in June 2004.¹² Guerrilla operations within Chechnya and in neighbouring Ingushetia, Dagestan and North Ossetia have stymied attempts by Russian troops to establish firmer control in the North Caucasus. Moreover, the Chechens' increasing resort to terrorist attacks in Moscow and other cities has stirred deep public unease.

Throughout the conflict, atrocities have been committed by both sides, usually at the expense of civilians. Russian troops have engaged in systematic human rights abuses, including torture, rape, forced disappearances, mass arrest operations (*zachistki*), kidnapping, and summary executions.¹³ Far from seeking to rectify these abuses, commanding officers frequently have condoned them or at least have turned a blind eye. The Chechen guerrillas, for their part, have often used civilians as human shields and have resorted to grisly revenge attacks against suspected collaborators. They also have engaged in kidnapping for ransom.¹⁴

The human costs of the conflict have been great not only for Chechen civilians but also for the Russian army and security forces. In the period from August 1999 to December 2002, according to official data, more than 4,730 Russian servicemen in Chechnya were killed and roughly 15,550 were wounded.¹⁵ (Unofficial estimates are two to three times higher.) Further heavy losses occurred in 2003 and 2004. In the first half of 2003, according to data from the Russian General Staff, 'no fewer than 100 Russian troops were killed each month'.¹⁶ The rate of casualties among Russian soldiers increased still further in the latter half of the year and 2004 because of a sharp (and as yet unexplained) rise in the number of injuries, which more than offset a slight decline in the number of deaths.¹⁷ Russian troops who have been taken captive by the guerrillas have often suffered cruel and degrading treatment. Hence, even though Russian military and security forces will probably be able to retain Chechnya within the Russian Federation for as long as the fighting drags on, that is a dubious 'accomplishment' at best. At a minimum, the Russian government will have to maintain a large-scale military presence in the region indefinitely. The 46th Brigade of the MVD Internal Forces, the 42th Motorised Rifle Division of the Russian army (a unit that now consists entirely of contract soldiers rather than conscripts), and some 20 regional military command staffs are all slated to be 'permanently deployed' in Chechnya. Numerous other Russian units will be remaining or rotating there in coming years.

Even with the presence of these soldiers, however, the security situation in Chechnya is likely to remain precarious. The flurry of assassinations, large-scale ambushes and terrorist attacks in the spring and summer of 2004 underlined the intractable nature of the conflict. The pro-Russian Chechen government has set up a police force numbering 13,000–14,000 men, but these police are incapable of maintaining order.¹⁸ Corruption pervades the force, and Russian military officers have complained that many of the Chechen police routinely turn over crucial information to Chechen guerrillas to help them prepare ambushes and lay explosives. In addition, a sizable

number of the police are reported to have taken part in attacks against Russian troops.¹⁹ In August 2004, for example, two of the highest-ranking police officials in Chechnya were accused of having supplied weapons and explosives to the guerrillas. Another officer from the pro-Moscow government's Presidential Guard (a separate security force headed by Kadyrov's son, Ramzan Kadyrov) was charged with 'taking part in terrorist attacks' and providing weapons, explosives and safe passage to rebel leaders.²⁰ The following month, the procurator-general for the North Caucasus disclosed that some two dozen local police had abetted a series of deadly raids by Chechen and Ingush guerrillas against Russian MVD and army positions in neighbouring Ingushetia in June 2004.²¹ Russian soldiers have grown so wary of the loyalties of the Chechen police that they often avoid sharing any information about Russian helicopter flights and troop movements.²² The lack of a reliable police force in Chechnya has left a security vacuum, which Russian troops have not tried to fill. Although a semblance of order is present in some towns, much of Chechnya remains on the verge of chaos, and criminal gangs still operate freely.

After many years of war and upheaval, it is hardly surprising that misery and despair prevail almost everywhere in Chechnya. Until the refugee camps in eastern Ingushetia were forcibly disbanded by Russian troops in 2003 and 2004, hundreds of thousands of Chechens preferred to stay in those camps rather than return to the desolation and pervasive violence of their homeland. The rampant abuses by Russian security forces in Chechnya, especially the systematic round-ups of Chechen males (a lot of whom are never heard from again), have reinforced the deep antagonism that many Chechens have come to feel toward Russia. It is therefore not surprising that calls for revenge against Russia under the traditional Chechen code of law, known as *adat*, have gained increasing salience in Chechnya from the time the latest war began.

Nonetheless, the desire for revenge has not translated into widespread popular support for continued warfare. The ascendance of Wahhabist leaders among the guerrillas, and the damage caused by the fighting, have reduced the appeal of the separatist cause. The war-weariness of the population was evident when the pro-Russian Chechen government held a referendum in March 2003 and presidential elections in October 2003 and August 2004. The large reported turnout in each case (nearly 90% for the referendum, 87% for the first presidential election and 85.5% for the second presidential election) undoubtedly was inflated, and the results of the voting were obviously rigged (particularly by the disqualification of all credible rivals to Putin's chosen candidate in each of the presidential elections); but even if the figures are adjusted to compensate for official manipulation, the rate of participation was surprisingly high. This, along with other evidence, suggests that many ordinary Chechens are eager for an end to the fighting.²³

Irrespective of the popular mood, however, it is doubtful that the war will be over soon. The tenacity of the Chechen guerrillas (despite the loss of several key fighters in 2004) and the Russian government's firm desire to preserve Chechnya as an integral part of the Russian Federation militate against a peaceful settlement. The room for a lasting compromise is as tenuous as ever. When the war began in the autumn of 1999, Marshal Igor' Sergeev vowed that, unlike in August 1996, Russian troops 'will never leave Chechnya again'.²⁴ Although Sergeev is no longer defence minister, Russian leaders are more determined than ever to hold onto Chechnya. Putin has repeatedly