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Russian Lessons Learned From the Battles For Grozny

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Two years ago, Mr. Thomas gave a conference briefing on the Russian lessons learned from the first battle for Grozny (January 1995). Apparently, a conference participant put his notes of the briefing on the Internet and these notes have enjoyed a long run. However, some of the notes were slightly exaggerated from the original presentation. With the third battle of Grozny just concluded (second battle was August 1996, third battle January 2000), The Marine Corps Gazette decided to reprint the original lessons learned with minor adjustments from Mr. Thomas, and add FMSO's Russian lessons learned from their subsequent battles for Grozny. The latter represents the joint work of Mr. Thomas and Mr. Grau.

Grozny 1 (January 1995, an eventual Russian victory)

The Russian Army invaded Chechnya in December 1994, and immediately moved on Grozny, encircling it from three sides. In the subsequent fighting, the armed forces learned many lessons about fighting in cities. These include:

1. You need to culturally orient your forces so that you don't end up being your own worst enemy simply out of cultural ignorance. Many times Russian soldiers made serious cultural errors in dealing with the Chechen civilians. Once insulted or mistreated, they became active fighters or supported the active fighters. Russians admit they underestimated the affect of religion and culture on the conflict.
2. You need some way of sorting out the combatants from the non-combatants. The days when battles are fought in empty cities are over. Local civilians have nowhere to go to and will stay in place. The Russians were forced to resort to searching the pockets of civilians for military equipment, checking shoulder blades for bruises from firing weapons and forearms for powder burns, and to sniffing them for the smell of gunpowder and gun oil.
3. The psychological impact of high intensity urban combat is so intense that you should maintain a large reserve that will allow you to rotate units in and out of combat. If you do

this, you can preserve a unit for a fairly long time. If you don't, once it gets used up, it can't be rebuilt.

4. Training and discipline are paramount. You can accomplish nothing without them. You may need to do the training in the combat zone. Discipline must be demanded. Once it begins to slip, the results are disastrous.
5. The Russians were surprised and embarrassed at the degree to which the Chechens exploited the use of cell phones, Motorola radios, improvised TV stations, light video cameras, and the Internet to win the information war. The Russians admitted that they lost control of the information coming out of Grozny early in the operation and never regained it, and vowed never again to lose the "information war."
6. The proliferation of rocket propelled grenade launchers surprised the Russians, as well as the diversity of uses to which they were put. RPGs were shot at everything that moved. They were fired at high angle over low buildings as mortars, and were also used as area weapons against advancing infantry, antitank weapons and, on occasion, as air defense weapons. They were sometimes fired in very disciplined volleys and were the weapon of choice for the Chechens, along with the sniper rifle. Not only were the Russians faced with well-trained, well equipped Chechen military snipers, there were also large numbers of designated marksmen who were very good shots using standard military rifles. These were very hard to deal with and usually required massive fire power to overcome. The Chechen standard hunter-killer team consisted of a RPG gunner, machine gunner and sniper. Three to five hunter-killer teams would work together in a sector.
7. As expected, the Russians reiterated the need for large numbers of trained Infantrymen.
8. They found that boundaries between units were still tactical weak points, but that it wasn't just horizontal boundaries they had to worry about. In some cases, the Chechens held the third floor and above, while the Russians held the first two floors and sometimes the roof.
9. Ambushes were common. Sometimes they actually had three tiers. Chechens would be underground, on the ground floor, and on the roof. The ambushers would concentrate

fires against targets when possible. Multiple RPG rounds flying from different heights and directions limit a vehicle commander's ability to respond. Escape routes were always predetermined.

10. The most common response by the Chechens to the increasingly powerful Russian indirect and aerial firepower was hugging the Russian unit. If the hugging tactics caused the Russians to cease artillery and air fires, it became a sergeant's and platoon leaders war—the level of command at which the Russians are weakest.
11. Both the physical and the mental health of the Russian units began to decline almost immediately upon initiation of high intensity combat. In less than a month, almost 20% of the Russian soldiers were suffering from viral hepatitis. Viral hepatitis and cholera were the two major diseases that Russian medical personnel had to deal with. Shigellosis, enterocolitis, diphtheria, malignant anthrax and plague were also problem diseases. Lack of clean drinking and dishwashing water was the source of these diseases. Viral hepatitis fell off during the summer months, but was replaced with severe bowel infections. Lack of shower and bath facilities close to the combat led to outbreaks of lice.
12. According to a survey of over 1300 troops, about 72% had some sort of psychological disorder. Almost 75% had an exaggerated startle response. About 28% had what was described as neurotic reactions, and almost 10% had acute emotional reactions. The Russians recommended 2 psycho-physiologists, 1 psycho-pharmacologist, 1 psychiatrist, and 1 medical psychologist at each Russian corps-sized unit. Although their experience in Afghanistan prepared them somewhat for the physical health problems, they were not prepared for this level of mental health treatment. Many permanent combat stress casualties resulted from the soldiers not being provided proper immediate treatment.
13. Chechens weren't afraid of tanks and BMPs. They assigned groups of RPG gunners to fire volleys at the lead and trail vehicles. Once they were destroyed, the others were picked off one-by-one. The Russian forces lost 20 of 26 tanks, 102 of 120 BMPs, and 6 of 6 ZSU-23s in the first three day's fighting. Chechens chose firing positions high enough or low enough to stay out of the fields of fire of tank and BMP weapons. Russian conscript Infantry simply refused to dismount and often died in their BMP without ever firing a shot. Russian elite Infantry did much better, but didn't coordinate well with armored vehicles initially. An initial problem was that there were not enough dismounts. Many of the BMPs initially destroyed had few or no dismounts on board. The Chechens used mobile tactics and "let the situation do the organizing" while the Russians relied more on brute strength.

14. Russian wounded and dead were hung upside down in windows of defended Chechen positions. Russians had to shoot at the bodies to engage the Chechens. Russian prisoners were decapitated and their heads placed on curbs leading into the city, over which Russian replacements and reinforcements had to travel. Both Russian and Chechen dead were routinely booby-trapped.

15. Russians were not surprised by the ferocity and brutality of the Chechens, but they were surprised by the sophistication of the Chechen use of booby traps and mines. Chechens mined and boobytrapped everything, showing excellent insight into the actions and reactions of the average Russian soldier. Mine and boobytrap awareness was hard to maintain.

16. Russians were satisfied with the combat performance of most of their infantry weapons. The unprotected tank was dead meat (too vulnerable, too awkward, not agile, no visibility, poor weapons coverage at short ranges). Self-propelled artillery, ADA guns, and BMPs were more effective in the city, but not by a considerable margin. Some non-lethal weapons, such as riot gas and tranquilizer gas, were recommended for future use. The flamethrower was also designated as a very useful Russian weapon, especially the RPO-A thermobaric round. Ultimately, a strong combined arms team and flexible command and control meant more than the individual weapons used by each side. Armored vehicles with reactive armor survived while others were in trouble. Flank and top shots were most dangerous.

Grozny 2 (August 1996, a Chechen victory)

Grozny 2 occurred when Chechen forces infiltrated the city following a complete reconnaissance. The reconnaissance was performed by guerillas who readily blended with the civilian population over the course of two or three months. The Chechen force simultaneously attacked key points within the city. Russian occupation troops were not operationally surprised (MVD Minister Anatoliy Kulikov was repeatedly calling for more troops at the time, having foreseen the attack) but were tactically unable to prevent the attack or to repulse it. They withdrew precipitously. Shortly afterward, negotiations brought an end to the fighting leaving the Chechens in control of Grozny. Russian lessons learned from Grozny 2 include:

1. Once a city has been taken, it must be garrisoned and guarded. The military, as the most visible representative of the government, will have to assume many civilian responsibilities to include reinstating health care, public sanitation, public works, public safety, public transportation, power, food distribution, water purification, and rudimentary government. The Russian force did garrison the city to a considerable

degree, but to no avail in this instance. When reinforcements were needed, they were not provided.

2. Counter-reconnaissance is a primary concern in holding a captured city. All city entry and exit points must be closely monitored. The difficulty with a city the size of Grozny is that with 123 exit roads, it becomes almost an impossible task. The force is spread too thin. Indigenous police, if they can be trusted, are invaluable in monitoring these check points.
3. The occupying force must conduct a "hearts and minds" program to win over the civilian populace. A hostile populace is a constant source of intelligence to the opposition. A neutral populace is better than a hostile populace, but a populace that feels the occupying army has its best interests at heart will furnish reliable information to the occupying army. Russian local intelligence from the populace did exist, but so did rebel intelligence. The latter appeared to be the stronger of the two.
4. The misbehavior of Russian soldiers alienated the populace of Grozny, to include ethnic Russians. Russian soldiers were always looking for food and drink and would obtain it by selling military equipment, theft or looting.
5. Rapid reaction forces and reserves are an essential part of an occupying army. If all forces are fully committed to holding real estate, no forces are available to counter planned, simultaneous attacks.
6. Once the fighting has moved beyond the city, the tendency is to garrison the city with troops that are less-trained and not as well-equipped as the forward combat units. Armor, artillery and air support are particularly lacking. This lack will be most apparent when the opposition attacks unexpectedly.

Military Thought article, 1998

Some two years after Grozny 2 and two years before Grozny 3, an article appeared in the authoritative Russian military journal *Military Thought*. Titled "New Views on Urban Combat," the article addressed several key considerations for MOUT operations. In hindsight, the article offered an incisive look into future Russian MOUT strategy and tactics.

The article highlighted the requirement first to block a city and concentrate around it a large force with the assets to impose psychological intimidation. These included the use of ultimatums. The Russians issued a number of ultimatums via leaflets during the 2000 battle for Grozny. Second, if a peaceful settlement appears impossible, the article called for a special operation to capture the city after civilians have left. This operation would require both MVD and armed forces special detachments, such as OMON, GRU, and SOBR forces. These forces served as the advance guard, and were supplemented by the Chechen force of former Grozny Mayor Bislan Gantamirov. Third, it would be necessary to supply the force with non-lethal weapons. Obviously, this was not done. The potential use of chemical weapons or chlorine bombs was continuously threatened, but no significant use of these weapons was made by either side. Fourth, it would be necessary to identify precisely the lines of contact between friendly troops and enemy forces in any future MOUT operation. Pagers were suggested for this process, but it was more successfully accomplished through the use of radar signatures. Fifth, it was recommended to use the full potential of army aviation. Helicopter use and aviation assets of the air force were deployed much more widely in the 2000 battle for Grozny than earlier. Finally, advancing troops must understand the basics of working with radio cables, water and gas mains, seismic sensors, and other devices in the city. This meant much more preparatory work in mock towns and participation in tactical exercises than in the past. The Russians did conduct several exercises in preparation for entering Chechnya, but it is unknown just how thorough their preparation was for MOUT.

Grozny 3 (January 2000, Russian victory)

In 1995 Russian forces moved directly into Grozny with little or no artillery or reconnaissance preparation of the city. In 2000, an entirely different approach was used. The Russian force surrounded the city and used an "indirect approach" that offered success at varying levels. In spite of the pessimistic appraisals of most Western analysts, a comprehensive review of the Russian MOUT method in 2000 demonstrated that Russia's commanders learned and applied many lessons from the first battle of Grozny. If the Russians received an F for their first fight in Grozny, they earned a C for Grozny 2000. First, the Russians won the information war in the mass media, reporting their version of events and thereby keeping the populace on the side of federal forces; second, somewhat like the use of Kit Carson scouts in Vietnam, the Russians used the talents, connections, and knowledge of Bislan Gantemirov (a former Mayor of Grozny and a Chechen) and his men (a Chechen militia) to help spearhead the fight against the Chechen rebel force in Grozny. This force was able to ascertain the situation and obtain intelligence from the local population that federal forces could not get; third, this time around there was a healthy respect for the RPG-7, the king of battle in the city. As a result armored vehicles, except on rare occasion, were kept out of the city fight. Instead, tanks and artillery were positioned on the side of hills overlooking and surrounding Grozny, and these pieces fired into the city. This was a Russian version of "remote war" as exercised by NATO forces against Kosovo, executed in a much cruder and more imprecise manner; fourth, there were much fewer frontal assaults. Instead, Russian reconnaissance forces (along with Gantemirov's forces) entered the city and tried to locate resistance pockets. Then artillery or air power was called in on these objectives; fifth, the Russians reportedly introduced communications equipment into theater that encrypted messages, in particular the Akveduk radio, in November. In the first battle the Chechens intercepted radio transmissions nearly at will; sixth, the Russians completely surrounded the city and left no easy

exit as they did the first time, making it much more difficult for the rebel force to get resupplies or to move out of the city and rest; and seventh, Russians continued to rest men at every opportunity, recognizing the stress factor as something worthy of the closest attention.

Russian lessons learned during Grozny 3 include:

1. Instead of a coup de main against Grozny, a determined march was mounted first into Chechnya and only later against Grozny. Altogether, more than 100,000 soldiers entered Chechnya, and reportedly some 50,000 eventually surrounded the city. This was nearly two and one half times the size of the first intervention force, and several times larger than the forces that entered Grozny in 1995.
2. The military did not permit moratoriums or ceasefires, which they said allowed the Chechens to regroup and resupply in the first battle for the city. This also eliminated federal force complaints that the politicians were keeping Russian forces from winning.
3. Russia's use of force included several new aspects. First, city plans were studied much closer than for the first battle to ascertain the location of sewers, oil pipelines, etc. Many more officers had maps, and there were several exercises conducted during 1999 to prepare the command and staff elements for the intervention. This included the assignment of a career army officer (Colonel General Leontiy Shevtsov) to the position of MVD commander of the North Caucasus region to improve MVD-armed forces cooperation. Second, the most important equipment development was the fuel air explosives (both the jet propelled "Bumblebee" 93mm flamethrower with a 600 meter range and capable of shooting a thermobaric round; and the TOS-1, a flamethrower mounted on a T-72 chassis and capable of shooting a thermobaric round over 3.5 km). In addition, electronic and reconnaissance warfare received much more attention than in the first conflict, and the Russians were much more successful in protecting their own communications and intercepting Chechen transmissions. Finally, Russian artillery forces used a zonal-target method of firing at Chechen forces, a method that allowed an artillery or mortar battery to reinforce a motorized-rifle company.
4. Chechen tactics remained versatile and flexible. They boarded up first floor windows to slow Russian access to buildings, continued to "hug" Russian forces in the suburbs to limit the use of Russian artillery and supporting fires, and operated in a very centrally controlled fashion instead of in the "defenseless defense" or "let the situation do the organizing" mode of 1995. This was an obvious adjustment because the Russians refused to enter the city exposed and in mass formations. The Chechens used trenches more than in the first battle in order to move between buildings. They also positioned snipers in a "misdirection" tactic (soldiers habitually entered the city looking up at windows to find

snipers). They constructed escape routes from their firing positions, and interconnected these positions. Finally, the Chechens continued to exploit hand-held Motorola radios, and even Iridium satellite system handsets.

5. Problems remain for the Russian force. These include the absence of a reliable friend or foe system; night vision devices for pilots; a reliable method for "organizing for combat" in cities; and instruction on MOUT operations in the academies. Additionally, enemy "off-the-shelf" equipment (especially communications gear) continued to negate the effectiveness of even brand new Russian communications developments. MVD-armed forces joint operations still lacked proper coordination and cooperation, even after several joint exercises. And finally, there remained problems with the discipline of the force. It was still possible to bribe soldiers or buy weapons from them, and soldiers still mistreated both prisoners and civilians.

Over the next few months, many more lessons will continue to be uncovered. There indeed is much for western forces to learn from both the Russian and Chechen experiences.