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CHANGING RUSSIAN URBAN TACTICS: THE AFTERMATH OF THE BATTLE FOR GROZNY

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Combat in cities is not an easy option for any army and makes inordinate demands on logistics and available manpower. Soviet urban tactics were designed to complement large-scale high-tempo offensive operations on the territory of a foreign country. Undefended enemy cities would be captured from the march. Defended cities would be bypassed. The enemy was a foreign professional soldier who had no desire to participate in the destruction of his own cities and would prefer declaring an open city instead of seeing it reduced to rubble. Today's political and military reality no longer fit the underlying Soviet assumptions of urban combat. Now, irregular forces, whose political agenda is strengthened by the destruction of cities, fight Russian forces on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Recent fighting for Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, led to the revision of Russian urban tactics. While the initial Russian attack was a debacle, the Russian Army pulled itself together and eventually captured the city. Since then, the Russian Army has been slowly improving on its performance, refitting its forces and concentrating on finishing the fight. Since much went wrong, the Russians are studying the lessons from that combat and updating their urban tactics.

Unlike Afghanistan, the Russian press has released much information on the fighting as it occurs. The author used these articles and conversations with soldiers and journalists as background but based this paper primarily on the following: Aleksandr Frolov, "Soldaty na peredovoy i polkovodtsy v Mozdok" [Soldiers at the front line and commanders in Mozdok], *Izvestia* [News], 11 January 1995, 4; A. Kavashin, [Troops acquired combat maturity in grave ordeals], *Krasnaya zvezda* [Red star], 2 March 1995, 3; and Sergey Leonenko, "Ovladenie gorodom" [Capturing a city], *Armeyskiy sbornik* [Army digest], March 1995, 31-35.

What went wrong initially.

The Russian Army had no money and little support. The army had not conducted a regiment or division-scale field training exercise in over two years and most battalions were lucky to conduct field training once a year. Most battalions were manned at 55% or less. Approximately 85% of Russian youth were exempt or deferred from the draft, forcing the army to accept conscripts with

criminal records, health problems or mental incapacity. The Russian Army lacked housing for its officers and had trouble adequately feeding its soldiers and paying them. The Russian Army invaded Chechnya with a rag-tag collection of various units, without an adequate support base. When the Chechens stood their ground, the state to which the Russian Army had sunk became apparent to the world.

Prior to the Russian invasion, rebel Chechen forces, hostile to the incumbent Chechen government, were trained, supplied and supported by the Russians. A force of 5,000 Chechen men (and 85 Russian soldiers) and 170 Russian tanks attempted to overthrow the Chechen government with a *coup de main* by capturing Grozny from the march ala Prague and Kabul. They failed and lost 67 tanks in city fighting. Instead of regrouping and waiting to regain surprise, the Russian Army was ordered into Chechnya. Since there are no fully ready divisions in the Russian Army, small units were assembled into composite units and sent to fight. Infantry fighting vehicles had their crews, but little or no infantry on board. In some cases, officers were driving since soldiers were not available. Intelligence on the situation in Grozny was lacking, only a few large-scale maps were available and there were no maps available for tactical commanders. The city was not surrounded and cut off. The Chechen government was able to reinforce its forces throughout the battle.

When the Russians first attempted to seize Grozny (on New Year's Eve 1994), they tried to do it with tanks and personnel carriers but without enough supporting infantry. What infantry was available had just been thrown together and many did not even know the last names of their fellow soldiers. They were told that they were part of a police action. Some did not have weapons. Many were sleeping in the carriers as the columns rolled into Grozny. Tank crews were not issued machine gun ammunition. Lax preparation for this assault reflected the hubris of the Defense Minister, General Pavel Grachev, who had boasted earlier that month that he could seize Grozny in two hours with one parachute regiment. The Russians drove into Grozny expecting to capture the city center and seat of government from the march--a Soviet and Russian technique that is used only when the enemy is not in strength, has not had time to prepare defenses and is completely surprised. None of these conditions applied.

Tanks and personnel carriers in the city without preceding dismounted infantry cover were easy targets to antitank gunners firing from the flanks or from above. The initial Russian armored columns were swallowed up in the city streets and destroyed by Chechen gunners. The Russians lost 105 of 120 tanks and personnel carriers and fell back to consolidate for the long, building-by-building battle.

Planning for urban combat.

Russian intelligence missed the Chechen rapid construction of robust defenses in Grozny. Chechen forces cut off Russian columns, moving on parallel but nonsupporting axes, and destroyed them. The Russians now conclude that high-tempo mounted thrusts to seize cities are obsolete and that contemporary urban combat requires deliberate reduction. First, the city must be isolated by sealing off all approaches while conducting detailed reconnaissance. Second, key installations and buildings on the outskirts of the city must be taken following artillery preparation and occupation of assault positions. Third, the city's residential, industrial and central

sections must be taken successively. Fourth, enemy units which are trapped must be eliminated, mines cleared, weapons collected and military control and curfew established. Collateral damage, never a major consideration when fighting on foreign soil, is a particular worry when fighting in your own cities where your own people live.

Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield.

The Russians did their initial planning on 1:50,000 and 1:100,000 scale maps. They lacked necessary, detailed, larger-scale maps in scale 1:25,000 or 1:12,500. Aerial photographs and current intelligence were essential for planning, but Russian satellites had been turned off to save money and few aerial photography missions were conducted. Lower-level troop commanders also needed aerial photographs and large-scale maps, but they did not receive any. The intelligence picture was very unclear, but planners failed to take elementary precautions or forecast how the Chechens might defend the city. As the Russian columns moved to Grozny, they encountered snipers, road blocks and other signs of Chechen determination to defend the city, yet they failed to prepare for a serious fight. Now, as a planning tool, Russians determine that the first objective are major industrial plants located on the outskirts of cities covering axes into the city. Such plants, with their concrete and stone walls and underground rooms and passages, are ideal for a lengthy, stubborn defense. In the city proper, Russians expect to find tanks and direct-fire artillery set up in corner buildings or behind breaks in walls, while dismounted infantry occupy all stories of buildings. Snipers and artillery observers are normally located in high-rise buildings, attics, and towers.

Storm groups and detachments.

Soviet and Russian tactical methodology called for organizing *storm groups* and *storm detachments* for city fighting. A *storm group* is usually a motorized rifle company reinforced with a tank platoon, artillery battery, mortar platoon, AGS-17 automatic grenade launch platoon, engineer platoon and chemical troops. It advances with a covering and consolidation group (a motorized rifle platoon reinforced with antitank guns, grenade launchers and 82mm mortars) and an obstacle clearing party (combat engineers and mine-sweeping tanks). A *storm detachment* is usually a motorized rifle battalion reinforced with at least a battalion of artillery, a tank company, an engineer company, an air defense platoon and flamethrower squads and smoke generator personnel. More artillery and air support is available from division assets. Although *storm groups* and *detachments* were formed for urban combat following the New Year's Eve defeat, experience shows that their formation was often counterproductive. The formation of special groups destroyed what unit integrity existed in platoons, companies and battalions and gave the commander more assets than he could readily deploy and control. It was better to use the TO&E tactical unit and then reinforce it with select weapons systems where needed. For example, a motorized rifle platoon could field storm squads and cover and support squads and motorized rifle company could field storm platoons and cover and support platoons. The cover and support units would pin the enemy down by fire while the storm unit moved to the attack. After the attack, the cover and support unit would become a reserve.

The Russians learned that troops need to wear something distinctive (and easily changeable) during the assault to avoid fratricide. They used direct-fire artillery, RPGs, automatic grenade

fire and machine gun fire to pin-down the Chechens while attacking through smoke to seize a building. They tossed grenades into windows and doors before entering. Engineers blew entry ways into the walls. Two-three man combat teams cleared each room. Once a building was captured, it was prepared for defense and defended. Approaches through the sewer were mined and mines and booby traps placed along paths the enemy was expected to use.

Since the battle for a city continues non-stop, the Russians needed fresh troops and adequate reserves. The Soviets liked to have a 4:1 advantage in troops for urban combat. Some 60,000 Russians and 12,000 Chechens were involved in the fighting in Grozny, yet the Russian's 5:1 advantage was sometimes not enough, since they had to guard every building that they took.

Tactics, techniques and procedures.

Soviet and Russian tactical methodology specified that tanks would lead the assault in city fighting followed by infantry fighting vehicles and dismounted infantry. Tank columns would primarily move in herringbone formation along city streets. This proved totally inappropriate for the fighting in Grozny where the high density of antitank weapons threatened armored vehicles, while the depression and elevation of Russian tank guns kept them from engaging targets located in basements or in the upper floors of multi-storied buildings. Antiaircraft guns, such as the ZSU23-4 and 2S6 were effective against these targets. Helicopter gunships were also used against snipers and weapons in the upper floors. The helicopters flew in behind captured high-rise buildings and would "pop-up" to engage these targets. In Grozny, tanks and personnel carriers were formed into armored groups [bronegrupp] used to seal off captured areas, serve as a counterattack force, provide security for rear installations and support advancing infantry from outside the range of enemy antitank weapons .

The Russians took special precautions to protect their tanks and personnel carriers. Besides keeping them behind the infantry, they outfitted some with a cage of wire mesh some 25-30 centimeters away from the hull armor. These cages can defeat the shaped charge of the RPG-7 antitank grenade launcher, as well as protecting the vehicle from a Molotov cocktail or a bundle of antitank grenades. The Chechens fielded anti-tank hunter killer teams which moved toward the sound of engine noise to kill armored vehicles with volley RPG-7 antitank fire from above, the flanks and behind. The Russians learned to counter these teams by establishing ambushes on all approach routes and then running vehicles into selected areas as bait.

City fighting in Grozny required much larger stocks of hand grenades, smoke grenades, demolition charges and disposable, one-shot anti-tank grenade launchers (similar to the U.S. LAW) than expected. Each infantry soldier needed a rope with a grappling hook for entering buildings. Light-weight ladders were also very valuable for assaulting infantry. Trained snipers were essential, but were in short supply.

Tank-mounted and dismounted searchlights were very useful for night assault in the city. Searchlights (as well as pyrotechnics) temporarily blinded enemy night-vision equipment and dazzled enemy gunners. They produced a psychological attack against the enemy, while helping prevent fratricide in the assault.

Artillery.

The Russians learned that conventional artillery fires are used during the approach to the city and while capturing the city outskirts. Then, the Russians deploy the bulk of their self-propelled artillery in direct-fire support of tanks and infantry. Since massed artillery fires create rubble in the very areas through which a force wants to advance, direct-fire is preferable. Direct fire can be conducted by guns, howitzers, multiple rocket launchers and the 82mm Vasilek automatic mortar. When Russian forces arrived at Grozny, they had few fire support coordinators and forward air controllers. Motorized rifle officers were not skilled in adjusting indirect artillery fire, but could readily aim and adjust direct fire.

Air power.

The Russians used a lot of fixed-wing aircraft, but they were of limited tactical value in Grozny. They were used to provide support while artillery was moved into range. Since they could not be precisely targeted, attack fighter bombers concentrated on large "free-fire" zones. Fixed-wing aircraft proved of more value in attacking targets outside the city. Helicopter gunships were of much more value, but had to fly to and from the engagement area using the shelter of captured buildings.

Smoke and tear-gas.

Smoke and white phosphorus rounds were very useful in Grozny. White phosphorus, which burns upon explosion, creates a smoke screen and, since smoke is essential for movement in city fighting, every fourth or fifth Russian artillery or mortar round fired was a smoke or white phosphorus round. The Russians point out a side benefit of white phosphorus is that white phosphorus smoke is toxic and readily penetrates protective mask filters. White phosphorus is not banned by any treaty. Tear gas grenades were also very useful in the fighting in Grozny.

Conclusion.

The reality of urban combat in Grozny was different than the urban combat the Soviets planned for. The terrain, circumstances and enemy were different. Grozny could not be bypassed. The Russians were faced with the dilemma of having to destroy Grozny in order to save it. The Russian Army also faced the same problem it faced 136 years earlier when it also fought to subjugate Chechnya. The Chechens turned every city, village and hamlet into a fortress and inflicted serious casualties on the Russian columns. On both occasions, the Russian army performed poorly initially, but adapted and eventually triumphed in urban combat. These recent Russian lessons are now being incorporated in Russian urban tactics.