



LESSONS IN URBAN COMBAT

Grozny, New Year's Eve, 1994

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The Russian Army's invasion of Chechnya in late 1994 was characterized by total confusion from the outset. That army was not the Soviet juggernaut of the Cold War, nor did it consist of units hardened on the battlefields of Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of combat veterans had been put out of the Army, and many units were critically undermanned.

As a result, the units sent into Chechnya were ad hoc, thrown together in early December. Their ranks were filled with young draftees, most of them poorly motivated and undertrained. In addition, the command structure was burdened by too many layers, the supply system did not function, and intelligence on the opposing forces was weak.

Yet the Kremlin was confident that the army's three columns would brush aside the Chechnyan rebels, seize their capital, and restore order. Any remaining "bandits" would fade into the mountains. From there, it would become an Interior Ministry problem.

Two of the three invasion columns were attacked before they even crossed their start lines. Some units took fire the minute they left their secure assembly areas, and others were subject to constant sniper harassment at night and bold guerilla RPG (rocket propelled grenade) attacks during the day.

In Northern Chechnya, the rebels launched several company and battalion-sized counterattacks. Some had armor support; all drew Russian blood. For the first three weeks of December, the Russians were exposed to the very real danger of cold weather injury. Morale was low, and drunkenness was common. (When Chechen grandmothers blocked one road and asked the soldiers why they were there, they could not honestly answer.)

The rebels, on the other hand, were on familiar home ground, operating among a mostly friendly population, and well supplied with food, weapons, and ammunition.

orders were to allow the Russians to break through, then to attack them from the rear. He noted that Russian response was panic and disorientation, as tank after tank exploded.

The commander of one of the Malikop Brigade's ZSU-23-4s, self-propelled antiaircraft vehicles tasked to provide flank suppression, notes that the brigade took fire immediately after crossing the Sunzha River. The two lead tanks were knocked out, but the men pressed on. The brigade never linked up with the battalion they were to reinforce and, as night fell, the commander's own ZSU was knocked out.

Some Russian armor even made it to the Palace area, but the tanks were not accompanied by infantry. They fired at Dudayev's building, more in frustration than from tactical necessity.

Motorized rifle battalion BMP-2s took the brunt of the slaughter at the railway station; 30 survivors spent the next ten days barricaded in two nearby apartment buildings. One tank unit of the Kantimir Division was surrounded near the same railway station, and all its survivors were taken prisoners. A few blocks away, a group of cut-off paratroopers dug in and waited for help.

One of the airborne reconnaissance platoons discovered a rebel ambush in the Sunzha Heights region. This was part of a larger rebel force gathering nearby. The unit engaged an estimated 100 rebels for six hours. In the end, the paratroopers counted 80 Chechen killed, plus four rebel KAMAZ trucks, two tanks, and two BMPs destroyed.

Civilians wandered throughout the fighting; an old man and some boys huddled around a fire built in an old barrel, within sight of Russian troops. It was unclear whether they were innocent bystanders or rebel lookouts.

At some point during the day, the paratroop command realized that they were not coordinated into the assault. Columns of paratroopers headed into the city to help their mechanized and armored comrades.

The rebels were active even outside the city, attacking the Russians' second echelons and artillery positions. They

Considering that most of the rebels had been in the Soviet Army at one time or another, they would have had the same training.

attacked airborne company soldiers in the Andreyev Valley, as well as an artillery battalion. The commander of the artillery battalion, his men subjected to an artillery ambush, deployed his unit for a counterbattery mission, then beat off the attack by a platoon of rebels.

The Chechens used ancient tactics worthy of the Afghans—disabling a vehicle with an RPG or Molotov cocktail, then shooting the panicked occupants as they bailed out. One driver fired back with his Kalashnikov as Chechen guerrillas closed in and finished him off with a grenade.

By late afternoon, Chechen RPG gunners, fueled by religious fervor, eagerly roamed about, still searching for targets.

Chechen television continued to broadcast live throughout the fighting, the tape running uncut and the commentator silent.

The day ended with rebels looting the Russian dead and crippled vehicles, taking weapons, ammunition, and anything else that was useful. Scattered Russian units were

The Soviets planned to use armor in their city fighting as part of the assault force or in close support of infantry.

pinned down. Confused and low on ammunition, all they could do was wait for daybreak and the arrival of close air support.

Chechen fighters boasted of 50 tanks destroyed. Film footage later showed a massacre: a square full of smoking BMP-2s, an isolated and shattered BTR, rebels firing from the cover of a pair of disabled reactive armor-fitted T-80 tanks, a street full of burned-out T-72 and BMP-2 hulks. Russian and western press counted nine AFVs knocked out in the Central Square alone.

An *Izvestia* report claimed that the 131st Brigade's losses for the day totaled 20 of its 26 tanks, 100 of its 120 APCs, and half of its 1,000 men either killed, wounded, or missing in action.

The Russian artillery barrages finally ended around 0230 on 1 January 1995.

What the Russians Did Wrong

Training exercises conducted in the early 1980s pointed out the following chronic mistakes in urban fighting among Soviet troops:

- Poor target observation and shooting at the wrong target.
- Poor individual marksmanship, both dismounted and mounted.
- The inability of small units to react without orders.
- Poor personal concealment and camouflage, from a failure to appreciate its need and from incompetent attempts.
- Inability to throw grenades from cover. Throwing grenades on the run and firing while pinned down in hollows, the direct opposite of the correct procedure.
- Slow individual reaction to surprise.
- A massive lack of technical knowledge and leadership by junior noncommissioned officers.
- Poor individual performance underground and in very enclosed spaces—tunnels and sewers, room-clearing at hand-to-hand ranges.

It appears, from network footage of the fighting, that the Russian attackers—both soldiers and commanders—made

these same mistakes. In addition, the commanders also made the following mistakes:

- Underestimated the enemy's skill and willpower.
- Failed to train the infantrymen at the most basic levels.
- Failed to ensure good communications, coordination, and intelligence.
- Failed to form assault teams tailored to the environment.
- Failed to coordinate with other branches (paratrooper air assault).

It appeared as if someone in the higher echelons had just broken out the textbook on city fighting and followed the template on "attacking a city," without factoring in the reality that fast assaults work only when the attackers are well trained and supplied with good intelligence on the objective.

Evaluation

In analyzing both sides in this operation, only one comment applies to the rebel plan: They had rigged command-detonated mines in sections of the city, using the city's telephone system for control, but never activated them. A Spetsnaz team eventually dismantled the system in the second week of January.

On the Russian side, there are numerous things they could have done differently:

A "fast assault" was never possible. The rebels knew the attack was coming and, having sat through the same classes as the attackers, had taken the time to prepare a response by the book.

Given that the objective was the rapid assault and seizure of the Presidential Palace, and that the city's three main avenues were also the most likely avenues of approach, it should have been obvious to the Russians that the rebels would have built their defense around these avenues.

The Russians should have taken the time to build up supplies and refine their intelligence estimates, tailor specialized assault teams, and then train their men.

When the infantry assault groups were ready to go in, the artillery barrage and air strikes should have been saved until the hours just before the assault. The stockpiled rounds could have been fired at the highest allowable rate, with the assault units following just behind this curtain. Such a "time on target" would have been short and violent, dazing the defenders and reducing their ability to take advantage of the ensuing rubble.

The type of round called for should have been a mix of airbursts (clearing snipers from roofs) and concrete-piercing rounds (which penetrate a floor or so and take out snipers who are not on the roof).

The Russians also could easily have taken their armored advantage into the city with them. In addition to its obvious

firepower, the tank's physical bulk could have provided cover where there was otherwise none. Both BMPs and ZSUs have enough main-gun elevation (+74 degrees and +85 degrees, respectively) to suppress fire from many stories up.

Those 2S1 and 2S3 self-propelled guns that were not providing fire missions could have been attached to assault groups for direct fire support.

Combat engineers could have broken through the rebels' street barricades. No combat engineer vehicles (either blade-

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equipped BREMs or IMRs) were seen with these units until mid-January.

The Russians did, however, learn from some of their mistakes, but it took the Federal troops until 26 January to capture the Presidential Palace, and serious street-fighting was still going on at the end of February. By then, however, most of Grozny had been reduced to rubble, with only 100,000 of the city's original 400,000 residents remaining. The rest had become refugees.

The Russians took most of February and March to regroup while they laid siege to the remaining rebel strongholds of Shali, Argun, Gudermes, and Shamaski. When they did move, the Chechen positions fell quickly.

Finally, the last major fortified rebel town fell to an air-mobile assault on 8 June when the Russians surprised the defenders of the mountain village of Vedano, which they claimed to have taken without losing a single man.

As the United States Army faces its array of possible missions for the next century, we need to include military operations in urban terrain among our training priorities and to learn from lessons such as the Russian experience in Chechnya. Only then will we be able to meet the most demanding challenge facing the infantryman: dislodging a determined enemy in an urban environment.

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