

Fighting in a Fortified Village

In the Second Chechen War

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Military operations on urban terrain (MOUT) is currently a hot topic in the U.S. Army, with computer simulations and field training exercises focused on how to survive a battle in a metropolis. Most of the world's people, however, still live in small villages more like those of the people of the 18th or 19th centuries. In the rugged mountains of the Caucasus, the Russians have re-

learned just how hard it is to take a fortified village garrisoned by well prepared and determined defenders.

With the capital city of Grozny abandoned by the Chechens in early February 2000, the next stage of the Second Chechen War moved south—into the mountains, where the Russian command believed that up to 8,000 armed Chechens awaited them. The Argun

and Vedeno Gorges cut deep into these mountains and served as major supply and movement corridors for the Chechen fighters.

The Argun Gorge had been heavily contested in the First Chechen War (1994-96) and was still reportedly littered with burned-out armored fighting vehicles (AFVs) from that conflict. Federal units had been fighting the

Chechens at the entrance to the gorge for weeks, even before the capital fell.

On 21 February, Federal troops moved on Shatoi (25 miles south of Grozny), seized heights near the villages of Makhety and Selmentazhen (east of the gorge). By this time, the Russians estimated that the Chechens had 4,500 men under arms in the Argun Gorge.

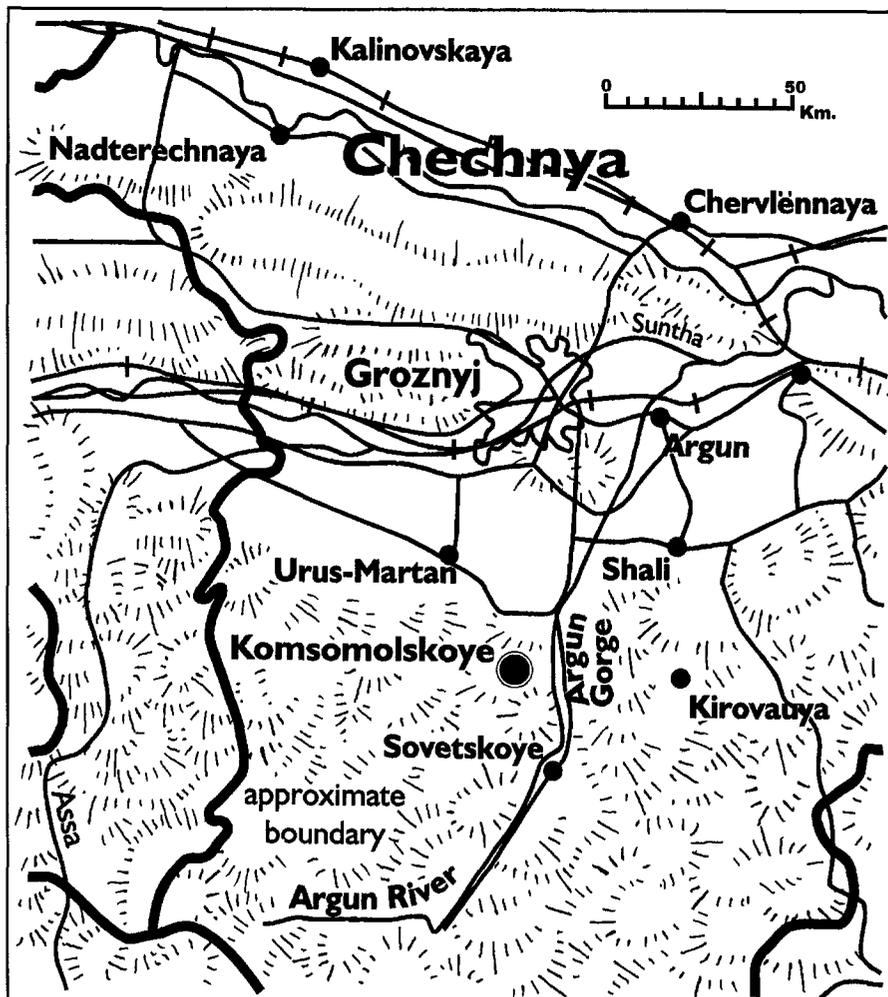
Since the war had moved into a phase where tactics similar to those of the Mujahideen favored the defense, securing the mouth of the gorge meant sweeping any Chechen units from the hillside villages. Small units could easily hit Russian logistical convoys and return unhindered to their village bases.

One such small village was Komsomolskoye, in the Urus-Martan district very close to the mountains. (It is four kilometers west of the mouth of the gorge, seven kilometers from the district center of Urus-Martan, and 25 kilometers south of Grozny.) As the spring thaw approached, the town was described by Russian sources as the last major pocket of "rebel" resistance in southern Chechnya.

Opening Shots

Fierce fighting was reported around the villages of Komsomolskoye and Roshni-Chu on 3 March 2000. The next day, the Russians would claim that Yaroslavskaya Oblast (Special Unit Militia Detachment) UVD (Internal Affairs Administration) destroyed a 100-man Chechen unit near Komsomolskoye.

On 5 March a Chechen Mujahideen unit "slipped in and took control" of the small town. The Russians estimated that this garrison initially contained 500 Mujahideen—Chechens, Arabs, Ukrainians, and Chinese, and even some Russians led by field commander Ruslan Gelayev.



The Chechens must have prepared the town well in advance, however, since Russian servicemen later described every house as a pillbox. Beneath almost every building, there was a two-level cellar with strong ceilings. These strongpoints were linked by underground communications trenches (or tunnels), with covered earth and timber firing points in the back yards and at select crossroads.

Most of the pillbox homes had to be stormed with airpower and artillery. Russian artillery targeted the town on the 6th in an effort to oust the fighters. By midday, almost all the buildings on the southern edge of the town had been

destroyed. One unnamed Russian officer manning a checkpoint near the town claimed that up to 50 Russian troops had been killed in action and many others wounded since the 4th.

The next day the Russians claimed to have had 700 to 1,000 Chechens bottled up in Komsomolskoye. They realized that this was equivalent to a regiment and that odds of three-to-one would be necessary to clear the village. In the first week of the siege, Interior Ministry troops—including SOBR (special rapid reaction detachments), OMON (special-purpose militia detachments), and special troops of the Justice Ministry's main penal department—managed to clear only the center and northern outskirts of the village. (On 17 March the Human Rights Watch group told a news reporter in Nazran, Ingushetia, that some 2,000 civilians were trapped in Komsomolskoye for several days under fierce bombardment before Russian forces finally let women and children out.)

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Second Chechen War was still being fought as this article was written. The following was assembled from media sources—Russian, Western, and Chechen. Since there is little chance that either side will ever issue an official history, my efforts here are an attempt to reconstruct the events surrounding the siege of the village of Komsomolskoye. (Corrections, additions, and photographs would be welcome, care of the editor of INFANTRY.)

A note on spelling: The town name was also spelled "Komsomolskaya" in some Russian reports and called "Saddi-Yurt" by the Chechens, with the alternate spelling of "Saadi-Khutor." For simplicity, I have kept the spelling used in most western reports.

The initial absence of motorized, naval, or airborne infantry conformed with Russian strategy during the Second Chechen War, in which Interior Ministry units (whose personnel are as much policemen as they are soldiers) were charged with "mopping-up" operations.

On the 7th the Russians estimated that the Chechen force had grown to 700 but that Gelayev's deputy commander, Khamzat Idigov, had been killed. The Russians admitted that it was difficult to locate Chechen communication points, since they didn't use radios or satellite communication systems. Russian artillery targeted positions within the town with round-the-clock strikes, while fighter-bombers made low-altitude passes every five to 10 minutes, dropping bombs and firing rockets.

Some Komsomolskoye residents fled the bombing, spending the night in a nearby field. They said the Russians were preventing civilians of surrounding hamlets from bringing food or water in to them, and that the fighters had taken up positions in the village mosque. Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev told the press that up to 1,000 fighters were believed to be in or around Komsomolskoye.

Toward sunset on 8 March, Federal forces were "mopping up," the village occupied only by small groups of fighters offering stubborn resistance while trying to break out of the encirclement.

The Chechens said that the fighting had expanded, during 7-9 March, to the villages of Goyskoye, Alkhazurovo, and Rozhni-Chu. They claimed that about 70 Russians were killed, four taken prisoner, and three AFVs knocked out near Saadi-Khutor and Goyskoye.

Russian tanks and howitzers in direct-fire mode, supported by pairs of fighter-bombers, pounded the village on the 10th. The commander of one Russian motorized rifle regiment would later admit to losing 32 of his men during the siege. A tank battalion commander known only as "Sanya" said, "We stood up above, in the foothills, and attempted to not let the guerrilla reinforcements into the village. At first, I sent one [tank] crew to assist, they set it on fire, the second went in, and it also

caught fire—just like a candle. The lads called fire in on themselves. And that's all.... They were less malicious in the last war, but right now they have come in waves, they moved like they were in a psychic attack! We were trashing them using direct laying and they kept coming and coming....When we beat them back with difficulty, we found 150 of their corpses."

Speaking unofficially, Russian troops told the press that they had lost 11 KIA since the fighting started on the 5th. The Chechens counterattacked and forced a Russian unit back to the edge of the village, claiming 100 Russians KIA in the fight. The Mujahideen occupied positions beyond the village, controlling the road to Surat and two nearby tactical heights.

That same day, General Gennady Troshev (acting head of Russia's forces in the North Caucasus) said that Gelayev had been seriously wounded in fighting at Komsomolskoye. Colonel-General Valery Manilov (first deputy chief of the general staff) noted that the village was "tightly encircled" and that the Chechen force numbered 300-700.

A two-hour morning firefight followed, after which the Chechens announced the loss of 23 KIA and 30 WIA. They also noted that two Russian attempts to entrench within the settlement, as well as an assault on Chechen positions later that day, had failed. According to the Chechens, 75 Russians were KIA and two personnel carriers were knocked out when mobile Mujahideen units ventured out several times and attacked Russian units north of the town. During one of these firefights, the 22-man Irkutsk SOBR lost Lieutenant Vladimir Idashin and Private Salim Konchir-oola to a Chechen sniper.

The Chechens said that they handed over the bodies of 26 Russian Spetsnaz (special forces) soldiers and evacuated 37 of their own wounded, during a mutual cease-fire negotiated with the Russian command on the 14th. They added that 60 Russians had been killed for the loss of nine Mujahideen, but a Russian spokesman named Baranov admitted to only five army servicemen KIA and ten WIA on that day. Other Russians said that Gelayev had slipped out of Kom-

somolskoye. Defense Minister Sergeyev claimed that Federal troops foiled an attempted breakout by 120 fighters, at least 20 of whom had been killed.

When the cease-fire ended several hours later, combat resumed with a vengeance; Russian artillery and multiple rocket launchers pounded the town.

Around 1200 Moscow time on 15 March, Colonel Mikhail Revenko (deputy commander of the western federal group in charge of equipment and armament) was killed while suppressing a pocket of Chechen resistance in the west of the village. He had positioned his tank to fire at them point-blank and came under Chechen grenade fire as he left the vehicle.

After ten days of fighting, the Russians announced that they had taken the village on the 15th. Soldiers in mopping-up operations had to exercise extreme caution in the village, since the cellars and ruined homes still held fighters, booby-traps, and mines. Sniper fire kept Russian forces from advancing; two interior ministry generals came under fire near the settlement but escaped injury.

The Mujahideen claimed to have beaten back five separate Russian assaults on the village before retiring into the mountains.

On the 16th, "Alpha" and OMON units were working under thick plumes of smoke to clear out Chechens still holed up in the village. The Kremlin said that about 300 bodies and 90 fresh graves had been discovered in the village that day, a report that was impossible to verify. One Russian officer (going by the name of "Oleg") admitted that they suffered an unspecified number of casualties to several dozen Chechen fighters who had stayed behind and attacked Russian positions during the night.

Russian losses continued to mount, particularly on the 17th in one tragic incident from a case of fratricide. The Irkutsk SOBR had just taken a small hill after a difficult fight when they came under fire from a lone Russian tank. The Irkutsk unit had radioed that the Chechens had fallen back and were shocked when the tank fired up the very hill they had just taken. Newly pro-

moted Majors Aleksey Rybak and Andrey Fedotov, along with trooper Aleksey Koshkin, were killed and five others wounded. (The units' 12 survivors were sent home on the 20th, presumably because the SOBR men wanted to start a fratricide investigation).

The Chechens claimed that the total Russian casualty count for the Komsomolskoye battle to that point was 400 killed and 37 AFVs knocked out, for 30 Mujahideen killed and 37 wounded. Only Chechen mobile "covering" and "special" units remained in the area around the village.

But Russian television showed footage of the streets, strewn with bodies of Chechen fighters and dead farm animals. Leaving several dozen fighters behind to play a cat-and-mouse rear-guard action, the majority of Chechen defenders broke into teams of three to ten men each and slipped away into the forests or to Alkhazurovo (just east of Komsomolskoye), which sent that town's citizens fleeing as well. Russian intelligence claimed that other Chechen sub-units were regrouping in the Veden, Kurchaloi, and Nozhai-Yurt districts, intending to break through to Dagestan.

Two Chechen fighters (17-year-old "Adam" and his friend "Mansur") would later tell AFP how they exfiltrated. Mansur noted that the Russians were "frightened of us." He went on to say, "In the mountains there are no clashes, just bombardments. When we left Komsomolskoye they were 50 metres (150 feet) from us. A soldier saw us go past, he told his neighbor who warned a third and then nothing happened. They fired on us when the column of 150 fighters was already a kilometre away."

Shifting their defense to a new town would force the Russians to divert units to block the Chechens, or face leaving their rear service elements open to night attacks by small bands of Mujahideen.

Knowing this, Russian units withdrew from Komsomolskoye to a safe zone about a mile away, set up artillery, and prepared to renew their offensive against Komsomolskoye on the 19th, since a band of about 400 Chechens were still holding out in the southern

SHARO-ARGUN

Colonel General Georgy Shpak, commander of the Russian airborne troops, told the Russian press: "The rebels are constantly on the move, appearing in one village of the republic or another. Groups of 15 to 20 rebels infiltrate villages in the plains from Chechnya's mountainous areas.... They easily blend in with the peaceful residents, making it difficult to identify them. They are civilians by day, and armed bandits by night."

The Russian command had stumbled onto what was originally reported as a "well-fortified Chechen base deep in the mountains" on 16 March, in a settlement called Sharo-Argun (about 15 miles southeast of Urus-Martan). The Russians initially estimated that the Jordanian field commander, Khattab, and 500 fighters were

based in a stronghold that included a field hospital and a munitions dump and fortified with dug-in tanks.

Sergei Yastrzhembsky announced that a mopping-up operation was to begin that day and the Russians dumped as much ordnance on the fort as they could bring to bear, and the Chechen units displaced on the 17th.

This easy victory could be explained by AVN, in that Sharo-Argun was actually only a temporary base on the infiltration route into the Botlikh and Tsumadinsk districts of Russia's Dagestan republic. Mopping-up operations were still going on by the 21st, however, against what the Russians described as "kamikaze snipers who are mostly foreign mercenaries or irreconcilable Wahhabis."

part of the village. (This prudent move still did not deter a Mujahideen daylight attack on a multiple-launch rocket system (MLRS) battery near Martan-Chu, which resulted in three Russian wounded on the 20th.)

Gennady Troshchev claimed that his troops had killed 42 Mujahideen and, under occasional sniping, were combing the village's ruins in search of surviving fighters who may have been hiding in cellars.

The Russians also theorized that Gelayev, whose radio call sign was "angel," had been killed on the 19th, since no one had heard from him for days afterwards. (These claims later turned out to be false.) Troshchev added, "Five guerrillas we took captive say the rebels' leader, Ruslan Gelayev, is hiding with his two sisters in one of the cellars. Most of the surviving bandits have understood the hopelessness of their predicament and have fled in different directions."

However, Defense Minister Sergeyev said that Russian forces killed 45 Chechen fighters at Komsomolskoye in a 24-hour period on 19-20 March. The resistance—mostly sniping—was kept up by an estimated 50 Chechens.

A tank company fired point-blank at the Mujahideen-held houses for 60 minutes. At around 1500 Moscow time,

the Mujahideen offered a truce to Federal troops, but the offer was rejected and, an hour later, the Chechens started surrendering (this time was also reported as 1400). Up to 76 fighters (including two women) supposedly surrendered before a Russian flag was hoisted over the village that evening.

Komsomolskoye had been flattened, and the Russians claimed that up to 700 fighters had been killed. However, Russian military sources told the Russian Military News Agency (AVN) that Federal forces had lost more than 50 KIA and 300 WIA in the siege and storming of Komsomolskoye.

The Russians caught one unit trying to break through the cordon to nearby Urus-Martan in a hollow south of Komsomolskoye. They claimed to have killed 30 Mujahideen and captured 40 in a three-hour battle on the night of 20-21 March.

Sergey Yastrzhembsky was telling the press that the battle was over (with 600 Mujahideen KIA and 88 prisoners taken) on the 21st, one of the Chechen leaders radioed the federal command and claimed that 150 fighters were ready to surrender. This turned out to be a ruse, and tank units had to eliminate separatists at several strong points. In the section of town that the Russians did control, they found 53 dugouts and

eight "long-term firing points," as well as a huge amount of munitions.

The last Chechen snipers were supposedly cornered in a basement on the 22nd and, after refusing a surrender offer, were blasted into silence by Russian tanks.

Army sappers started clearing the town of mines and other ordnance on the 23rd. Other Chechen units exfiltrated and tried to slip into the surrounding Sharoi, Vedenov, and Nozhai-Yurt districts. Federal intelligence said that the Chechens planned to take the villages of Shali, Dargo, and Urus-Martan on 25-26 March.

Aftermath

A month after the battle began, rotting corpses were still in the streets. Wrecked T-80 main battle tanks and APCs still sat in the streets. (*Since Russian journalists are not specialists in armor recognition, the tanks may have been T-72s.*) The village, quiet save for occasional sniper shots and the sound of helicopters, was described as "looking like a pile of shattered matchsticks—not a single building was left intact."

The Ministry for Emergency Situations workers, who were tasked with removing civilian corpses and taking them to the nearby village of Goyskoye for identification, said they had recovered 265 corpses over the previous week (including 58 on the 3rd alone). They also collected bodies lying by the river, some of which had ears, noses, or fingers sliced off. It was not known who had mutilated the bodies, or why.

More than 60 bodies from Komsomolskoye were delivered to Goyskoye

(20 kilometers south of Grozny) by Kamaz truck, but only six of them had been identified. Abdula Itskayev, headman of Goyskoye said that there were heavy casualties among the town's civilians and claimed to know whole families that had been killed.

Russian military casualties had been removed by the military before the Emergency Ministry workers arrived. According to Sergeant Andrei Alexeyev, "Our side suffered colossal losses. After bombardment by aviation and heavy artillery they sent 200-300 men in....Of them you'd get groups of two or three crawling back injured."

Serviceman Sergei Koshmarov described the helicopters carrying wounded soldiers leaving Komsomolskoye as being "like buses in a rush hour." One officer saw four helicopters carrying dead bodies leaving Komsomolskoye on one day. No one seemed to have a firm handle on how many servicemen died during the battles for Komsomolskoye. The Defense Ministry admitted to only 22 servicemen KIA and 100 WIA, while the Interior Ministry provided no relevant information.

The next day, doctors and Emergency Ministry experts estimated that 70 percent of Komsomolskoye had been sanitized. Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Koshmanm in charge of Chechnya affairs reported that 424 Mujahideen had been buried, as well as more than 360 cattle.

Special brigades were still searching for the dead among the rubble and more than 300 rebel bodies remained unburied on the minefields outside of the village. According to Emergency Ministry

spokesmen, federal sappers would start lifting the minefields after Komsomolskoye was completely cleared of explosive devices. The Unified Federal headquarters noted that 519 bodies had been buried, and on the basis of this count, estimated that the number of defenders had been 1,500. As the cleanup continued, a cache of large caliber machinegun ammunition was uncovered near the village on the 6th.

The Russian media announced that 33-year-old Chechen field commander Magomed Khaykharoyev (the younger brother of the "Bamut battalion" commander Ruslan Khaykharoyev) had been detained by federal forces during their sweep of Komsomolskoye. The Russians also reported that Khaykharoyev's relatives had proposed exchanging him for several captives.

By the time the Russians announced that operations ceased on the 10th, 552 Chechen bodies had been buried and 4,622 pieces of explosive ordnance had been cleaned up.

While we know little as to the exact casualty figures, it is most likely—given the experience, motivation, and tenacity of the Chechens, and the comparative inexperience of Russian units employed—that the Russian losses were several times those of the defenders.

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