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Is time on the Chechen side? -- A military analysis of Russia's war in Chechnya (with appendix detailing Russian casualty figures)

Skelton, Jill
Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

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Boston University
Is Time on the Chechen Side? -- A Military Analysis of Russia's War in Chechnya (with Appendix Detailing Russian Casualty Figures)

By Jill Skelton

The Russian military has blamed the political leadership for its humiliating defeat in the Chechen war of 1994-96. Then, as the military tightened the noose around the neck of the Chechen resistance, the politicians decided to negotiate. This happened twice, once in the Summer of 1995 and again in the Summer of 1996. On both occasions the military had squeezed the Chechen resistance into the mountains, where they were holding only a handful of villages. The Chechens responded by staging dramatic raids; in 1995 Shamil Basaev seized a hospital in Budennovsk and in 1996 Aslan Maskhadov's men overwhelmed the Russian positions in Dzhokar (previously Grozny). This suggests that the Chechen fighters are well aware of the psychological power of guerrilla tactics and know exactly how to utilize them. Will things be different this time? Will the military continue to have a free hand even as international criticism, Chechen resistance, and Russian casualties begin to mount?

Decision-making in the Kremlin remains obscure and it is not known precisely when, how and for what reason the Russian authorities decided they would pursue an all-out war against the Maskhadov government. However, since mid-September, when a set of military measures was adopted by President Boris Yel'tsin, the Kremlin has eschewed a negotiated or political solution, and, to use Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's phrase, sought to fight "to the end, until complete victory." (Boston Globe, 3 Nov 99) This goal may become increasingly unattainable as the operation will face a whole spectrum of factors ranging from
inclement weather and tough terrain to eroding domestic support and a rising crescendo of international criticism.

As of this writing, Russian forces are poised on Dzhokar's doorstep. Troops have positioned themselves in elevated spots surrounding the city, bombarding the capital with artillery and aircraft. That eventually they will try to take the city, despite having promised not to wage a full-scale war earlier in the campaign, seems a foregone conclusion. As little as a week after the introduction of troops into Chechnya, Russian leaders were still unclear as to what their next move would be. Would they stop with establishment of the security cordon or penetrate deeper to suppress finally Chechen resistance? (Agence-France Presse, 9 Oct 99) How did the Russian military find itself in this position for a second time in five years? And what challenges will it face next?

**Russian objectives**

From the beginning, Russia's publicly held objectives have been inconsistent with the policies used to pursue them. If the operation was meant to arrest terrorists, why was it necessary to take on Maskhadov and to establish a puppet government in the north? Clearly, Russia has expanded beyond the original objectives in recent weeks with the advance of its ground forces, first into northern Chechnya and then into the central/southern region. In addition to the avowed objectives, there must be other less overt objectives that, although unspoken, are increasingly driving military strategy. Some of these were discussed in the previous Behind the Breaking News briefing (6 Oct 99) and include Russian ambitions in the republics south of the Caucasus, Kremlin intrigues, desire for revenge, ethnic hatred and military credibility.

The first operational objective was to establish a security cordon around Chechnya to contain the Chechen "terrorists" and prevent their penetration into neighboring territories: Stavropol Krai, Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, and Georgia. This aim is joined to a second, more ominous, objective -- to destroy the
"terrorists" and their means of operation. (ITAR-TASS, 15 and 21 Oct 99; via World News Connection) The open-ended nature of this second objective and the broad definition used by Moscow in identifying "terrorists" has allowed the Russian leadership to conduct a "no-bounds" military operation. Apparently, the Russians define "terrorists" and their base of operations as including the entire republic of Chechnya: its people, territory, and government. In characterizing military operations as a fight against terrorism, Russian leaders are counting, at a minimum, on the passive acquiescence of the international community.

Underlying these publicly stated objectives are other, more subtle but no less real, objectives. These include: Russia's -- specifically the Russian military's -- need to regain credibility after its ignominious performance in the last war; the Russian need to reestablish a firm hand on wavering North Caucasus territories as well as to cower Azerbaijan and Georgia; and finally, the need to put a positive spin on Prime Minister Putin's leadership in view of upcoming Russian presidential elections. Currently there is strong Russian public support for military operations in Chechnya based on the allegations that recent apartment bombings in Russia where conducted by Chechen terrorists. This support will continue provided the war does not go on for too long and the public perceives Russian casualty figures as low.

**Military operations**
The Russian objectives have been translated into a two-phase military strategy to encircle and then destroy the Chechens. Since the beginning of October, Russian forces, under Phase One, have formed a barrier around Chechnya using troops from the defense and interior ministries and border guards from the Federal Border Guard Service. Defense and interior troops are aligned along Chechnya's borders with Ingushetia and Dagestan (west and east); in addition, defense forces entered Chechnya's northern territory, establishing a cordon along the Terek River and taking control of the northern third of Chechnya. Russian border guards hold the southern cordon along the Chechnya-Georgia
Although Russian forces initially allowed civilian refugees to exit the ring, primarily into neighboring Ingushetia, the established exit corridors were closed for a period with the initiation of Phase Two of military operations, namely, the destruction of Chechen "terrorists." A single security point was opened again on 31 October-1 November to allow civilians to leave Chechnya, but the going is slow with border guard and defense forces closely scrutinizing refugee papers. By some accounts the refugees are being charged a fee to leave. Only 100-200 refugees, out of several thousand, reportedly were allowed to cross the border at the security checkpoint on 1 November. On 3 November, the "window" was opened more widely for a brief time. This practice is reminiscent of actions taken by Russia during the 1994-96 war. (Jamestown Foundation Monitor, 26 Oct 99)

Within the cordon since the end of September, Russian fighter and bomber aircraft have conducted an aggressive air campaign which, Russian military leaders state openly, is patterned after the NATO air campaign over Yugoslavia. This reference to NATO places European and US leaders in an awkward position in criticizing Russian actions. Of course, the Russians play both sides of the argument. In his recent talk at Harvard University, Col Gen Valeri Manilov, first deputy chief of the Russian General Staff, condemned the air campaign over Yugoslavia based on its failed results but then admitted Russian strategists were mimicking the strategy for its effectiveness. When asked if the same failures he attributes to the NATO campaign will befall the Chechen campaign, the answer was, "no -- different place, different situation."

By Russian accounts, targets for the Phase One air/artillery campaign were primarily "terrorist" camps, logistic depots and routes, command and control infrastructure, and sources of "terrorist" financing. Dzhokar as well as numerous cities and villages throughout Chechnya were bombed heavily, with large civilian causalities reported.
Ground operations under Phase One have been primarily carried out by elements of the 58th Army motorized rifle and infantry brigades supported by other deployed defense and interior ministry units. Numbers reportedly have increased from an initial estimated 60,000 at the beginning of October to over 100,000. (Interfax, 22 Oct 99) It is unknown whether this number includes interior troops, or perhaps, Stavropol Krai Cossacks, local militias, and Dagestani irregulars. Additionally, Moscow has exceeded the quotas for heavy military equipment it may deploy in the North Caucasus under the revised Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, which is to be signed at the OSCE summit in Istanbul on 18-19 November (and which already raised the total permitted on Russia's "Southern Flank"). (US Department of State Press Briefing Number 128, 8 Oct 99; via www.state.gov)

Chechen forces are made up of a loose alliance between the troops under Chechen President Maskhadov, and those under independent field commanders Basaev and Khattab. Their numbers are a mere estimate, and vary depending on who is counting. Russian estimates are between 20,000 to 40,000. The Chechens are much more lightly equipped with primarily small arms and some antitank and antiaircraft systems. Antiaircraft systems are reported to include some Stinger missiles received from Taliban supporters. (RFE/RL Newsline, 19 Oct 99)

Beginning the first of October, Russian forces moved into northern Chechnya largely unopposed. Chechen forces withdrew to the more mountainous central/southern region, wisely avoiding major conflicts with heavy Russian armor as it moved across the favorable flat and open terrain. Russian forces halted at the northern bank of the Terek River, effectively forming the northern segment of the Russian cordon and closing the ring. Russian leaders have been quick to "normalize" their occupation of northern Chechnya, stating they intend to establish a new government under military command. In the absence of credible
civilian administration, the military will set up local authorities to manage humanitarian aid, establish social services, restore power and water, and pay pensioners and salaries! However, civilians in northern Chechnya report they have yet to see Russian promises fulfilled and go further to recount stories of harsh, brutal treatment at the hands of the Russians. (Le Monde, 17 Oct 99)

In the middle of October, Russian forces entered into Phase Two of military operations. The primary objective of this phase, as initially stated by Russian leaders, was the destruction of "terrorist" forces. However, as of the first of November, Russian leaders are clearly pulling off the gloves, talking increasingly of taking the whole of Chechnya with whatever force and time were required, thereby eliminating Chechen resistance. Defense Minister Igor Sergeev stated on 28 October that "we have come here to stay for good." (RFE/RL Newsline, 29 Oct 99)

Russian ground forces have moved in from the north, east and west to the ridges overlooking Dzhokar and appear to be preparing a full assault on the capital, if necessary. Advancing Russian forces are forming a second interior security zone around Dzhokar, cutting off the evacuation of civilians and militants from the city. (ITAR-TASS, 21 Oct 99; via World News Connection) They had expected to complete the cordon around the capital by the end of October. Similar ground attacks are occurring around Gudermes (Chechnya's second largest city), Bamut and other key towns and cities deemed critical by Russian military planners.

**Effectiveness of military forces**

To date Russian forces have clearly succeeded in meeting their first stated objective to establish a security cordon around Chechnya. Early indications were that this cordon was well-defended and tightly maintained. Within the last week Russian security forces replaced Ingush border guards on the Ingush-Chechen border and federal border troops have stepped up security measures on the Chechen-Georgian border. Russian forces have secured the northern third of
Chechnya and have advanced since 15 October to the outskirts of Dzhokar. They retain absolute air supremacy, having destroyed the Chechen air force’s one biplane. However, this air supremacy has not come without some cost. The Russians have lost at least four aircraft (Su-25 fighters and Su-24 light bombers) since the beginning of the conflict. These losses resulted from Chechen antiaircraft fire. The downed planes constitute an insignificant proportion of Russia’s air force but may have impact on the morale of Russian pilots.

With the initiation of Phase Two operations, Russian forces have entered into a much more difficult and risky period, which has the potential of repeating the mistakes of the 1994-96 war. Russian forces must go after the Chechens in the mountains, an environment more suited to guerrilla warfare, at the beginning of what promises to be a difficult winter. The Chechens are said to maintain heavy defense fortifications within Dzhokar and state they are ready to make their stand. However, it is questionable whether they will be able to make a stand in Dzhokar, considering the heavy bombardment of the city. Despite the obvious qualitative advantages, the Russians must not underestimate the Chechens, who are on their home territory, fighting a battle they have successfully fought before. They are more combat-hardened and better-equipped then they were. They will not surrender; they will have to be destroyed. There is little chance of breaking Chechen resolve. The Chechen resistance survived the 1995 death of Dzhokar Dudaev. If someone of Basaev’s stature were captured, the others probably would continue the fight. The recent announcement of a $1 million bounty on Basaev’s head (Interfax, 25 Oct 99; via nexis) testifies to Russia’s own low estimation of its ability to catch him and the high estimation of how much damage his capture would inflict on the resistance.

Two crucial factors favor the Chechens: the physical environment and time. As the Russians move into the mountainous terrain with their heavy armor, they can be expected to become bogged down. The Chechens will force them into assuming more "search and destroy" tactics, and, if the Russians move into the
cities, street-by-street fighting. The longer the Chechens can hold out and the war goes on, and the higher Russian and civilian casualty numbers climb, the more likely it is that Russian public support will erode and international criticism will increase. As this happens Russia political leadership will have to re-establish control over what are currently almost exclusively military decisions. War is not just about technology and military operations; it is also about psychology and politics. The Chechens know how to exploit Russian fear. They will wait to strike, and when they do, they will do so with daring. Their actions will be planned to cause high Russian casualties. They will create the impression they cannot be defeated, as they did when they conducted raids in 1995 and 1996. They will continue to decry the "inhumane civilian tolls" the Russians are exacting, causing the international pressure to mount. Already the Chechens are reporting civilian casualty counts in the thousands, overwhelmingly women and children.

The Russians have two options at this point. One, strike very quickly to accomplish their objectives before they must eventually bow to public and international pressure, in order to sweep through Chechnya and eliminate the opposition. Two, continue to maneuver slowly and methodically to contain and destroy Chechen resistance. Which option is more likely? The first choice would compel the Russians to engage in close combat, where casualties would mount very quickly. The second option would take too long and ultimately play into Chechen hands. So what is left? Will the Russian leadership negotiate now, while it controls the "commanding heights?" Past behavior is not encouraging.

Appendix: Russian Casualty Figures

How many Russian fatalities have there been so far? The following list of official cumulative tallies shows clearly that the Russian government is under-representing the number of servicemen they have lost. If 243 were lost by 18 September, how on earth could the official tally stand at 222 on 29 October?
According to the official Chechen statement of 17 October, 1,500 Russian servicemen have been killed in the conflict thus far.

The following table represents an attempt to keep a daily tally of the official claims of both sides as to the number of Russian casualties. As can be readily seen from the table, the information is not reported in a consistent and regular manner. The chief source used was the Russian Defense Ministry Press Service, via ITAR-TASS and Interfax. Specific citations are available from the author.

Key: R--Russian official statement for the day   C--Chechen official statement for the day

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<th>Dead R</th>
<th>Wounded R</th>
<th>Wounded C</th>
<th>Captured C</th>
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<td>125</td>
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<td>15 Oct</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>81</td>
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The Chechen side reported that a group of RF military intelligence officers was killed without saying how many servicemen were in the group.

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