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Russia's Forces Unreconstructed

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Three and a half years ago, the previous Russian invasion of Chechnya ended in disaster when a determined force of 5,000 Chechen fighters suddenly invaded the Chechen capital Grozny. The Russians had occupied the capital since February 1995, and had garrisoned 10,000 Russian Ministry of the Interior (MVD) soldiers there. The Chechens managed to split the Grozny garrisons into several dozen small pockets of resistance and to beat back and decimate several Russian armored brigades that tried to oust the militants.

The surprise Chechen counteroffensive in August 1996 came after 20 months of intermittent fighting and after the Russian authorities asserted once and again that all organized resistance had been "wiped out." The Russian authorities in 1996 also claimed that the Chechen population had "turned away from the separatists" and supported Russian rule.

Still, after sustaining repeated ground attacks and aerial bombardments, the Chechen militants managed not only to keep intact a hard core of professional fighters, but also commanded enough support among the Chechen population to mobilize a fighting force that won the final battle of the war.

In 1996, Russian generals insisted that they could "liberate" Grozny only by totally destroying the city with massive heavy gun and aerial bombardments, but such an indiscriminate attack was not approved by the Kremlin. In 1996 the Russian public, military and political elite were fed up and opted to withdraw Russian troops. Anyway, the destruction of Grozny in August 1996 was hardly a reasonable option: Thousands of

MVD troops were trapped in the city and most likely would have perished together with the Chechens. Today heavy bombs and guns are used against Chechen towns and villages without limitations.

When the Russian troops crossed into Chechnya in October 1999, Russian generals and Kremlin leaders claimed that the lessons of the previous war were learned and that the new war would be very different, that lives would be saved and that Chechen "terrorists" would be annihilated quickly, cleanly and efficiently.

The first Chechen campaign should have been a showcase of rapid deployment and success by the "mobile forces" created by General Pavel Grachev, Russia's defense minister from 1992 to 1996. It was planned that Russian troops would mimic the West's lightning successes during the ground offensive phase of the Gulf campaign in 1991.

However, the plan turned into a disaster. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, all Russian tank and motor-rifle divisions were reduced to near-cadre state(2); therefore, they could not be used in combat operations as whole units. The Russian armored columns that moved on Grozny on 11 December 1994 were ill-fitted conglomerates combined task forces hurriedly put together from small bits and pieces of different army and airborne units. Many of the soldiers never fought or trained together. The Chechen fighters were much better motivated and more familiar with the terrain.

The Russian defense ministry also failed to gather sufficient forces that could have overwhelmed the rebels by sheer numbers. By 11 December 1994, the task force of army, MVD and "mobile force" airborne units assembled for war consisted of 23,700 men. By 31 December 1994, the Russian forces assembled near Grozny numbered 38,000 men. In fact, during the 20-month campaign of 1994-1996, the overall strength of Russian forces in Chechnya never exceeded 45,000 troops.

To fight today's war in Chechnya Russia's defense and interior ministries put together a much larger force than any assembled in 1994-96. Official Kremlin spokesman Sergei

Yastrzhembsky put the number of troops in Chechnya (including logistic units) at the end of January at 93,000: 57,000 from the Ministry of Defense (MoD) and 36,000 from the MVD.

After the fiasco in the first Chechen war, the Russian defense ministry created "permanent readiness" army brigades and divisions that should be almost fully manned and ready for deployment to deal with local conflicts. But the basic quality of the Russian troops has not changed dramatically. It turned out that the "permanent readiness" units could not be moved to the front as full-strength brigades and divisions. During recent combat in Chechnya, Russian military staffs were forced to use combined "operational groupings." Instead of a traditional system of divisions, regiments, brigades and battalions, combined tactical groups were formed, often built around battalions with strong reinforcements, especially of artillery.(3)

Intelligence analyst Michael Orr believes that such a system of tactical groups "will represent a significant modernization of the cumbersome Russian command system, but it will require much higher professional skills than have so far been demonstrated by the average Russian officer at battalion level." However, Russian generals bemoan their inability to use traditional units. They believe that well-trained, full-strength divisions and brigades would have performed much more efficiently than the "tactical groups" they are forced to use today.

The Russian forces in Chechnya do not have any good infantry units capable of swiftly attacking Chechen fighters at their weakest moment without massive air and heavy artillery support. Instead of seizing the initiative to exploit unexpected opportunities, Russian field unit commanders continue to execute battle plans approved in advance by their superiors.

In October 1999, 93 percent of all privates and sergeants in the Russian army and MVD units in Chechnya were conscripts badly trained and badly commanded teenagers. The morale of the soldiers is low. On 18 January 2000, Russian Army General Mikhail

Malofeev tried desperately to lead Russian MVD troops who did not want to go forward. Not only did the troops not follow, they actually fell back, leaving the general to his fate. (Malofeev's body was found only a week later.)

To compensate for the low quality of their fighting units in Chechnya, Russian military chiefs adopted a strategy that tried to mimic NATO's actions in the Balkans in 1999: Bomb until victory and win without heavy casualties. This strategy of victory by bombardment inevitably has led to massive war crimes, as the Russian military bombarded Chechen towns indiscriminately with heavy weapons, killing civilians in total disregard of international treaties that Russia signed and ratified.

There is ample evidence, including TV footage, of the use of TOS-1 multiple rocket launchers against Grozny, its suburbs and other Chechen towns. (TOS stands for "heavy fire-throwing system.") These rockets are filled with a flammable liquid that causes terrific aerosol explosions at impact, killing persons, destroying property and causing fires. The third protocol of the 1980 Geneva Convention (signed and ratified by Russia) forbids the use of such "air-delivered incendiary weapons" even against military targets in populated areas.

In reprisal attacks on Chechen towns and villages, Russian forces have also used "Tochka-U" ballistic missiles that can fly 120 km and can cover up to 7 hectares (17.3 acres) with cluster shrapnel on impact. The use of such mass-destruction weapons as aerosol (fuel) weapons and ballistic missiles against civilian targets was authorized by the Kremlin; thus, Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well as his top military chiefs, are implicated in war crimes.

However, such indiscriminate massive attacks did not make the second Chechen war a "low-casualty" engagement. On 17 February 2000, the first deputy chief of the General Staff, General Valery Manilov, told journalists that the Russian forces "lost some 1,500 servicemen in the course of the anti-terrorist operation in Dagestan and Chechnya." Unofficial casualty rates from the non-governmental Soldiers' Mothers Committee put

the death toll of Russian servicemen at no fewer than 3,000. The official number of wounded is over 5,000, while unofficial estimates are closer to 6,000 to 7,000. (Since then, Chechen ambushes have added substantially to Russian casualties.)

It may be assumed that the number of dead, sick and wounded in the ranks of army and MVD forces in the Caucasus now amounts to 10 percent of the overall force of approximately 90,000 men. In fact, the official propaganda slogan of a "low-casualty war" was dropped after the battle for Grozny, where Russian forces lost up to a 1,000 troops. (The official death toll grew from 400 in mid-December, when the Grozny battle began, to 1,500 in mid-February.)

High casualties and the need to replace conscripts who have completed compulsory military service is already straining the manpower capabilities of the Russian armed forces. Colonel General Arkady Baskaev the commander of the Moscow MVD military district that has sent 5,000 men to fight in Chechnya told the author in late January that replacement is becoming an acute problem and that in several months he will simply have no one to send. Baskaev believes the Chechen conflict will continue for several years and that Russia should immediately begin to form an all-volunteer, professional corps of 30,000-50,000 men (composed equally of interior ministry and defense ministry troops) to fight after the inefficient conscript army totally runs out of steam. Baskaev's position is supported by the MVD high brass.

In an attempt to keep troop strength high in Chechnya, the Russian military leadership has already begun a massive campaign to recruit volunteers. The target is to increase the number of contract soldiers in Chechnya to 30 percent of all troops before May.

Contract soldiers serving today in Chechnya are recruited from two different sources. Some are conscript soldiers and sergeants who "volunteer" to continue fighting in Chechnya after their term of compulsory military service is over (there could be some pressure coming from the authorities to keep the best-trained troops from going home). Russian officers say that these young war veterans make good fighters.

The other source of contract soldiers consists of volunteers recruited in different Russian provinces from the ranks of Russia's vast pool of military reservists. In fact, these contract soldiers are quite often men from the general public who served in the Russian Army at least a decade ago and who have had no military training since. Reportedly these "kontraktniki" are sent to Chechnya without any proper screening or training. Russian officers complain that such "kontraktniki" are highly unreliable in battle and badly disciplined.

Today soldiers in Chechnya are paid well according to Russian standards (800 rubles per day, or approximately \$28). Thus many enlist, but the screening process of volunteers for Chechnya is superficial and they are sent into combat without any further selection or training. Many of these volunteers are drunks, drug addicts and other undesirables. Russian generals lament that these contract soldiers are even less well-trained or disciplined than the teen-aged conscripts. Moreover, 90 percent of Russian sergeants today are 19-year-old conscripts who cannot possibly discipline the mercenaries who volunteer.

There have been numerous reports that these contract soldiers are the Russian troops who are shooting and raping civilians, as well as marauding in Chechen villages. The likely end result of war crimes perpetrated by Russian generals and atrocities committed by increasingly undisciplined troops is an increase in the number of new Chechen recruits willing to join rebel forces to avenge the death of relatives and destruction of property. Present Russian actions in Chechnya are self-defeating and can only perpetuate the conflict.

It's obvious that, once again, Russia entered Chechnya without a capable, professional army and without the modern military equipment necessary to fight low-intensity antiguerrilla wars. For 10 years, the Russian defense ministry has been talking of creating a corps of professional sergeants to form the backbone of a professional army. And yet, since 1997 the defense ministry has been spending all of its procurement

money on new ICBMs SS-25 and SS-27. The Russian forces in Chechnya have no night-capable attack planes or helicopters.

The main reason the Russian military is so stubbornly resisting professionalization is that Russian generals want to keep the capability to raise huge armies to fight major regional or even global non-nuclear wars, while retaining the capability to fight nuclear wars as well. The idea of creating a relatively small, effective, well-trained and equipped force to fight in local/regional conflicts while entrusting more global threats to the domain of nuclear deterrence has been rejected time and again by the Russian military establishment. In fact, the new Russian draft military doctrine that most likely will become law in Spring 2000 insists that Russia should continue to maintain the potential to mobilize millions of reservists and also a massive industrial mobilization potential to enhance manifold defense production in times of crisis.

However, personnel concerns are not the only issues earning the Kremlin's special attention. In February 2000 (then-acting) President Vladimir Putin signed a decree enhancing the powers of the Federal Security Service, or FSB, military counterintelligence officers in the armed forces members of the notorious "special departments." Putin's decree in effect legalizes some of the practices the former KGB employed de facto, including the right to recruit informers, thus giving the Kremlin's FSB watchdog in the armed forces some additional muscle.

Today Putin seems to be very popular in Russia and in the armed forces. Increased Soviet-style surveillance by the secret services and renewed massive recruitment of KGB informers today would seem to be overkill. However, sources in the FSB say the decree was actually prepared over more than a year. A year ago President Boris Yel'tsin's regime was very unpopular and there were constant rumors in Moscow of possible military coups that could have toppled him.

The decree to enhance the powers of the FSB military counterintelligence service was most likely put forward to prop up the highly unpopular Yel'tsin regime, but Putin fully

embraced it. Maybe Putin, as a former KGB operative, simply believes that increased Soviet-style surveillance and recruitment of KGB informers constitute the best approach to make Russia and its armed forces great again. Maybe Putin simply believes in the virtues of a police state.

Putin likes to call himself a "military person," but for the true uniformed military he is only a KGB spook. The morale of some elements of Russian forces in Chechnya is not high today as the betrayal of General Malofeev by his own men revealed. If the Chechen war evolves into an endless, bloody guerrilla campaign, Russia's top brass may try to pin the blame on the Kremlin. The honeymoon between Putin and the Russian military may be short-lived and then the Kremlin will surely need the FSB spooks and their informers inside military units.

The war in Chechnya, which may continue for years, and the ravaging war propaganda that has accompanied it have enhanced the political strength of Russia's generals. Putin has already promised that he will spend more on the military and on new arms procurement. It seems likely that, in the coming years, the Russian military-industrial complex will be able to resist attempts to demilitarize Russia's industrial base. Continued militarization of Russia will surely impede the ability of Russia's militaries (MoD & MVD) to fight effectively in Chechnya or other local conflicts and will also surely impede overall economic growth and modernization. Putin and his generals who are managing the war in Chechnya seem intent on running Russia into the ground the same way the USSR leadership destroyed the state by over-investing in the military-industrial sector and invading Afghanistan.

Notes:

1. Pavel Felgenhauer is an independent defense analyst based in Moscow.
2. An army "cadre" division is one that is equipped with all the heavy armaments of a full-strength motor-rifle or tank division, while having only skeleton personnel strength. The officers and men of a cadre division focus primarily on maintaining the armaments and other heavy equipment in working condition. During mobilization in wartime, such a

division should be beefed up to full manpower strength; however, in peacetime a cadre division is unfit for any combat.

3. Michael Orr, *Some Provisional Notes on Current Russian Operations in Dagestan & Chechnya*, 3 December 1999 (Conflict Studies Research Centre, UK Ministry of Defence).

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