



# **Battlefield Analysis: The Battle of Grozny**

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## Abstract

Russia's invasion of Chechnya in late 1994 proved to be a fiasco from the start of the war. The culmination of this disaster was the Battle of Grozny, which was fought from December 31<sup>st</sup> 1994 until February 13<sup>th</sup>, 1995. This battle saw the obliteration of an entire Russian motor-rifle regiment, the deaths of roughly 4,000 Russian soldiers, 25,000 residents and rebels, and the displacement of 300,000 civilians. At the end of the battle, the myth of the cold war Soviet juggernaut army lay amongst the ruins of Grozny.

## Introduction

The Battle of Grozny began on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1994 in Grozny, Chechnya. The battle pitted the highly decorated Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev and three motor-rifle regiments of 40,000 men against the Chechen First Deputy Chairman of the Defense Counsel Aslan Maskhadov and roughly 5000 fighters equipped with small arms and anti-tank rockets. This battle is a textbook example of the consequences of sending a motorized force into an urban area without proper infantry support and coordination. This battle also emphasizes the folly of sending marginally trained and poorly motivated conscripts into combat against fanatical volunteers who don't play by textbook rules. Four primary sources were used for this analysis: *The Battle of Grozny*, by Captain Chad A. Rupe. *Lessons in Urban Combat* by Adam Geibel, *David Slays Goliath: A Chechen Perspective on the War in Chechnya* by LtC Timothy Jackson and *Battle For Grozny* by Timothy L. Thomas.

## Strategic Setting

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1990 and officially ceased to exist in December, 1991. Many ethnically diverse Soviet Republics rose from the ashes of this disillusion to demand their independence from Mother Russia. Chechnya, a tiny province in the Caucasus mountains of Eurasia, became one of these rogue provinces in November of 1994. Chechnya's population frothed with a volatile mix of a fiercely independent and ethnically Muslim Chechen majority, a Russian sympathetic Muslim Ingush plurality, and an Eastern Orthodox Christian Russian minority.

Russia began to fear this internal instability and drew up plans to invade Chechnya with an operation that would echo the success of the 1956 Budapest uprising. Three motor-rifle columns would enter the city, capture the presidential palace, and assert the power of Russia. The entire operation would be finished in a couple of hours.

On paper, the Russian order of battle was a steamroller of cold war equipment. Russia committed 81<sup>st</sup> Motor Rifle Regiment, the 131<sup>st</sup> Motor Rifle Brigade, the 20<sup>th</sup> Motor Rifle

Regiment and the 104<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division. This force consisted of 80 T-72 and T-80 tanks, 208 BMP-2s, BMDs, and BRT-70s, and 182 Self-propelled guns and mortars. The main effort was supported by Sukhoi Su-25 ground-attack fighters and Mi-24 Gunships.

While the array of Russian equipment was impressive, the leadership and motivation of the Russian soldiers was far less formidable. Some Russian soldiers did not know where they were or why they were there. Morale was low. Soldiers were frequently drunk. The Russian army suffered from an acute lack of technical and procedural knowledge at the noncommissioned officer level. There weren't enough maps to go around, and the ones they had weren't large scale.

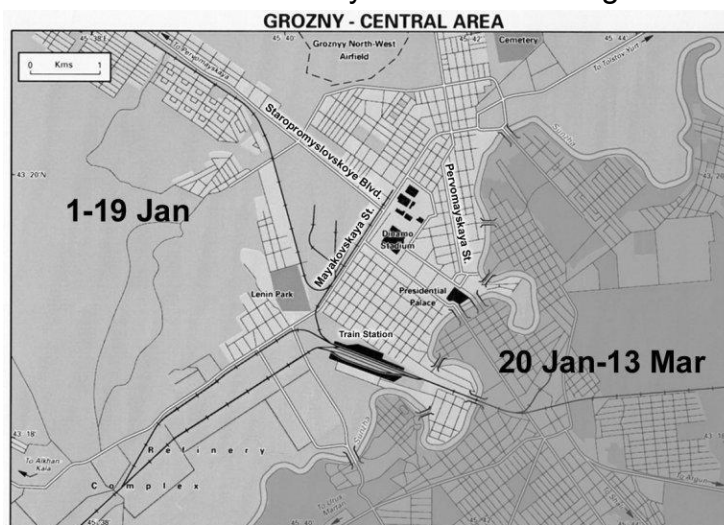
Russian urban doctrine stemmed from their extensive experiences with urban combat during World War II. Russian leaders assumed that they would fight in mostly empty cities where they would not need to consider civilian policing and restoring essential systems as part of their operational spectrum. No civil or breaching engineering assets were attached to the mission.

The Chechen order of battle consisted mainly of small arms, RPG-7 and RPG-18s, roughly 60 guns and mortars, 30 Grad rockets, 150 poorly-maintained tanks and APCs and Molotov cocktails.

What the Chechen fighters lacked in armament, they made up for in spirit. Chechen forces were highly motivated and fighting on their own turf. Every Chechen was a volunteer who wanted to be there and knew why he was fighting. These rebels were also driven by a religious fervor that was stoked by the fires of sectarian hatred.

Some of the Chechen rebels had been conscripts in the Soviet Army, so they were familiar with the inflexibility of Russian doctrine. Chechen forces operated in anti-tank hunter-killer cells of 15 to 20 men each. These cells were subdivided into five or six teams of three to four men. Each team had an RPG gunner, a machine gunner, an ammunition bearer, and a sniper.

The terrain around Grozny consisted of high-rise Soviet era apartment blocks that



ranged from 10 to 15 stories in height. These high apartment blocks would later prove to be deadly to Russian forces as their height prevented most Russian tanks from elevating their weapons systems to

engage threats on the roof and in windows. Three major highways lead into the city from the north, east and west. A major rail line and depot sat at the southwest corner of the city, and the Sunzha River ran from northeast to southwest on the south side of the city. The weather was cold enough to warrant the issuance of 150% extra rations to every Russian soldier, although muddy terrain on the outskirts of Grozny largely prevented much of this food from going forward to combat troops.

### The Action

The mission was straightforward. Two motor-rifle regiments, one motor-rifle brigade and one airborne division converged on the city from the north, west, and east with the goal of capturing the southwestern rail depot and the presidential palace. The operation relied on shock and speed with the assumption that the rebel population would be cowed into submission by this mighty display of Russian armored power. But

problems developed from the start. The 19<sup>th</sup> motor-rifle division, moving from the west, was late for the attack. The 104<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division never linked up with the 129<sup>th</sup> MRR. This left three motorized columns, the 131<sup>st</sup> MRB, the 81<sup>st</sup> MRR and the 20<sup>th</sup> MRR, driving into the city from the north, their armored column stretching out over a mile.

The Chechen rebels were ready. The small, flexible, Chechen hunter-killer teams swarmed the concrete buildings and apartment blocks of the northern approach. The 81<sup>st</sup> MRR cut left and headed toward the presidential palace as the 131<sup>st</sup> traveled toward the train station at the south of the city. The Chechens let them come.

The rebels opened up on the 81<sup>st</sup> MRR just as it approached the presidential palace. Chechen RPG gunners destroyed the first and last vehicles in the Russian armored columns. Machine guns raked BMPs, preventing the dismount of troops. Snipers killed Russian tank commanders in their turrets. Russian tanks and BMPs tried in vain to engage the Chechen forces, but the guns of their armored vehicles could not elevate high enough to hit targets on the floors above.

The first battalion of the 131<sup>st</sup> MRB reached the train station, unaware of the wholesale



slaughter underway less than a mile northeast of their position. Within minutes of their arrival, the 131<sup>st</sup> MRB came under attack from Chechen rebels hidden in buildings around the train station. The second and third battalions of the 131<sup>st</sup> MRB responded to the distress calls from the first battalion, but both battalions ran into a Chechen trap before they even got close to the train station.

Night fell, and the Chechens moved in to finish off the 131<sup>st</sup> at the train station, firing, moving, throwing grenades and Molotov cocktails as they moved. The Russian brigade commander moved his remaining troops and weapons into the train station. After fighting for two days with no relief and with almost all of his officers killed, he made the decision to abandon the train station on January 3<sup>rd</sup>. Out of the entire 131<sup>st</sup> MRB, only 160 men made it back to friendly lines.

The next few days went better for the Russians as they slowly adapted to Chechen small unit tactics. ZSU-23-4 self-propelled anti-aircraft guns turned out to be perfect for high-angle fire. The Russians pressed these units into service to suppress Chechen hunter-killer teams that lurked on every rooftop as the Russian Army stomped further into the city. Instead of driving their tanks down the road as if they were on parade, the Russians methodically cleared each block of infantry resistance – or blasted it to smithereens with air support, rockets, and artillery. Progress was also held up by the friction caused from dealing with civilians on the battlefield. Instead of fighting in an empty city, Russian soldiers had to fight and simultaneously deal with angry Russian citizens of the apartment blocks they just liberated, who just wanted their water, power and heat turned back on.

The Russians finally captured the Presidential palace on January 18<sup>th</sup>, but this was a Pyrrhic victory. Before midnight, the remaining Chechen resistance slipped across the Sunzha river, including Aslan Maskhadov, the Chechen commander. The number of Chechen rebels killed during the assault remains unknown.

## **Significance**

### **1. Short Term**

The Battle of Grozny showed just how far the mighty bear had fallen when it came to conducting a military operation. This was not the Red Army of World War II. This was not even the Red Army of Afghanistan. This was an army that was effectively drunk, entirely unmotivated, and patently arrogant.

The battle also displays the folly of sending armored vehicles into a city without proper infantry support. The Russians allowed the Chechens to shape the battlefield with their use of novel hunter-killer tactics, while the Russians stuck to the Stalingrad playbook,

long after it proved to be disastrous to follow.

## **2. Long Term**

Long term lessons of the battle echo in the restructuring of Russian forces. Russia had long been flirting with the idea of creating a more professional force, but was reluctant to do so due to the cost. This battle increased the pace of development for the volunteer or – “Kontraktniki” – program. This program showed its usefulness during the 2008 South Ossetia War, where semi-professional Russian soldiers defeated South Ossetian Georgian sympathizers in just five days.

### **Analysis**

The Russians failed to carry the day at Grozny due to an enormous amount of overconfidence in the ability of the Red Army to steamroller all opposition. Russian soldiers were not trained to standard on their weapons or equipment. They had poor, or in some cases, no, maps. Their weapons platforms were entirely inappropriate for the mission, and they were fighting people who had the ability to shape the battle to their own liking.

What the Russians should have done was to stay outside the city and tailor their weapons and equipment to meet the threat. Urban combat requires special teams, equipment, and specific logistics – hand grenades, vehicles with anti-armor cages, high angle fire capabilities- that were sorely lacking in the initial Russian assault.

Today, wars are won in the media almost as much as they are won on the battlefield. The tactics of razing entire city blocks to kill just one sniper simply don't fly in today's 24 hour media cycle.

As the American Army faces the possibility of full-spectrum operations all over the world, it would be wise to take these Russian mistakes into account and adjust our plans accordingly.

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