

# **Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Terrorism in the North Caucasus: The Military Dimension of the Russian – Chechen Conflict**

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FOR MORE THAN FIVE YEARS Russian troops have been embroiled in a counter-insurgency war in Chechnya, the second war they have fought in that small Caucasus republic since the mid-1990s. The first war, from December 1994 to August 1996, ended when Russian and Chechen officials signed a peace agreement at Khasavyurt in the neighbouring republic of Dagestan.<sup>1</sup> The Khasavyurt accord, which led to the withdrawal of all Russian troops from Chechen territory and three years of quasi-independence for the republic, stipulated that the two parties would resolve the final status of Chechnya by the end of 2001. Before any negotiations about this matter could be held, however, a series of events beginning with deadly incursions by Islamic extremists from Chechnya into Dagestan in August 1999 culminated in a large-scale resumption of fighting between Russian federal forces and Chechen guerrillas — fighting that has continued ever since.

This article assesses Russia's counterinsurgency operations during the latest war in Chechnya and considers whether any lessons can be drawn from the Russian experience. The article begins by looking briefly at the geographical and military context of the war, the events that precipitated the renewed fighting, the early results of the conflict and the practical constraints on Russian military operations. It then examines the tactics used by Chechen guerrillas and the responses (or lack thereof) by Russian soldiers and security forces. The article considers why Russian troops and police, who outnumber the rebels by more than 50 to 1, have been unable to eliminate armed resistance in an area as small as Chechnya. It also highlights the growing emphasis the Chechens have placed on terrorist attacks against civilians both inside and outside the North Caucasus. The final section of the article lays out several conclusions about the conflict in Chechnya, the performance of the Russian army and security forces, and the implications for other counterinsurgency and counterterrorist operations.

The article is based in part on interviews I conducted with Russian Defence Ministry and Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) officials in Moscow in December 2003 and June

2004. It also draws, with due caution, on Russian press reports, official government and military documents, memoirs by former army commanders, published interviews with Russian soldiers, data compiled by Western and Russian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and analyses in Russian military journals, which have featured many articles about the two wars in Chechnya, including assessments of 'guerrilla tactics' (*taktika boevikov* or *partisanskaya taktika*), the operations of Russian forces, the broader lessons of the war, and prospects for the future.

*The setting for the ongoing war*

Chechnya is a landlocked region in southern Russia bordered by Dagestan to the east and north, Stavropol *krai* and Northern Ossetia to the northwest, Ingushetia to the west, and the republic of Georgia to the south (see Fig. 1 map). The capital and largest city of Chechnya, Grozny, is in the centre of the region. The total land area of Chechnya is 19,300 square kilometres, roughly the size of New Jersey (and one twenty-fifth the size of Iraq). The population before the start of the latest war was approximately 1.05 million, but it has shrunk during the war to around 700,000 (one thirty-fifth the size of Iraq) because 40,000 to 45,000 civilians have been killed, 50,000 are living as internally displaced persons, tens of thousands are external refugees, and a vast number have moved permanently elsewhere (to Moscow, other Russian cities or foreign countries).<sup>2</sup>

The terrain in Chechnya is highly diverse, ranging from plains in the north to wooded hills near Grozny and rugged, treacherous mountains in the southern half of the republic, especially along the southern and southwestern borders with Georgia and Ingushetia. Russian troops have had their greatest difficulty establishing control over the southernmost portion of Chechnya, where the terrain has been a key advantage for the guerrillas, enabling them to ambush Russian forces, to conceal ammunition and weapons, and to move almost unhindered between Chechnya and safe havens across the border in Georgia, Dagestan, and Ingushetia.<sup>3</sup>

Huge swaths of Chechnya were destroyed during the first war in 1994–96, and promises of large-scale reconstruction aid from Moscow never materialised. Although the federal government did provide a limited amount of assistance (mostly in the form of energy supplies and some grain), economic recovery and the rebuilding of destroyed facilities never made any headway. Further destruction occurred during the first year of the latest war, rendering many towns, including Grozny, almost uninhabitable.<sup>4</sup> The infrastructure of Chechnya has been obliterated, and basic services (running water, electricity, heat, natural gas, etc.) are non-existent or nearly so in large portions of the republic, including Grozny. Even if the war were to end and reconstruction were to begin on a serious footing, large areas of the republic would remain blighted for years to come.

Public order in Chechnya broke down almost completely during the first war in the mid-1990s, and it has never been re-established in any meaningful way. The three years of quasi-independence in Chechnya from September 1996 to September 1999 were marred by warlordism, rampant criminality, hostage takings, chaotic violence, grisly attacks on foreign aid workers and general lawlessness. Aslan Maskhadov was elected president of the republic by a wide margin in January 1997, but his government soon

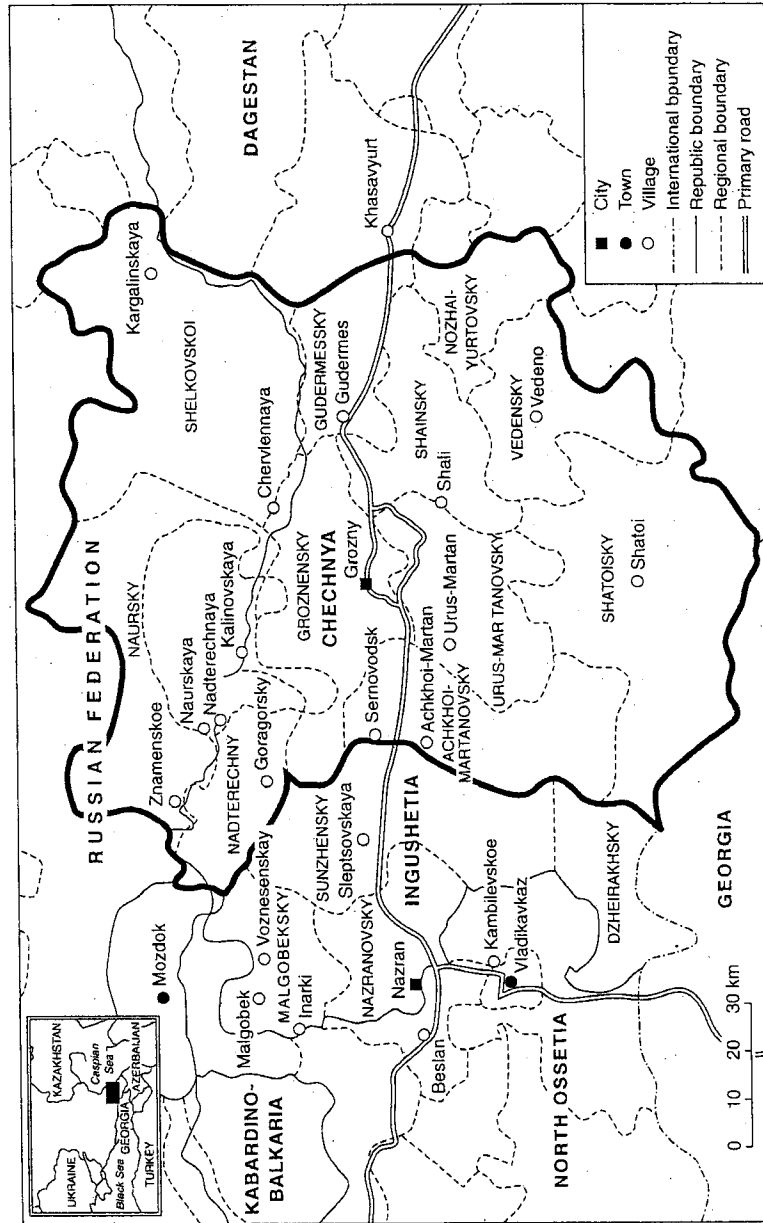


FIGURE 1. MAP OF CHECHNYA.

came under challenge from more radical elements, especially those led by Shamil' Basaev (who had lost out to Maskhadov in the presidential election). Maskhadov was unable to clamp down on Basaev's forces, and the power of warlords, criminal gangs, and Islamic extremist groups (including some foreign terrorists) increased. The Islamic fundamentalists set up terrorist training camps in Chechnya and recruited aspiring 'jihadists' from all over southern Russia, giving them military training as well as political and religious indoctrination.<sup>5</sup> Maskhadov was the target of several assassination attempts in 1998-99, and although he still enjoyed a good deal of popular support, his government exercised little effective control in the republic. Under growing pressure from Islamic radicals, he imposed strict *sharia* law throughout Chechnya in February 1999, a move that was widely unpopular and that emboldened the extremists. The Russian authorities, for their part, were deeply suspicious of and hostile to Maskhadov (particularly because he would not renounce the goal of independence), and they avoided taking any steps that would ease his task of governance.

The combined pressure from the radical Islamists in Chechnya and from the Russian government made Maskhadov's position untenable. In August 1999 Basaev and another Islamic extremist fighter, Hattab, who was of Saudi origin, launched several raids into Dagestan for the ostensible purpose of setting up a Wahhabist (fundamentalist Islamic) state in the Caucasus.<sup>6</sup> The Russian government hurriedly sent troops from the MVD and the Federal Security Service (FSB) to rebuff the incursions. The Russian forces eventually managed to drive Basaev's and Hattab's guerrillas out of Dagestan, albeit with considerable difficulty. The tension created by these raids and by the subsequent clashes was still acute when a string of five highly publicised bombings in the late summer of 1999 — at the Manezhnaya shopping complex in central Moscow on 31 August, at a military housing facility in the Dagestani town of Buinaksk on 4 September, at a large apartment building in Moscow on 9 September, at another apartment building in Moscow on 13 September, and at an apartment building in the southern Russian city of Volgodonsk on 16 September — killed nearly 300 people and wounded more than 2,000. The circumstances of these bombings were never adequately explained, but the Russian government promptly blamed them on the Chechens.<sup>7</sup> The bombings and the raids into Dagestan were cited by the new Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin, in late September 1999 when he ordered the Russian army and internal security forces to reassert control over Chechnya using 'all available means'.

The renewed fighting escalated in October-November 1999 when Russian troops moved en masse into the northern part of Chechnya and then crossed the Terek and Sunzha rivers into the heartland around Grozny, surrounding it with major thrusts from the west, north, and east. Elsewhere as well, Russian troops engaged in large-scale military operations to crush organised resistance and re-establish control of all major towns and transport routes. These operations resulted in extensive bloodshed on both sides and inflicted enormous damage on Chechen cities, particularly Grozny, which was almost completely leveled in a sustained, ferocious bombardment by Russian air and artillery forces. By February 2000 the Russian army had taken control of Grozny, and by mid-2000 Russian troops, despite suffering heavy casualties, had gained a firm presence through most of Chechnya and at least nominal control of all major towns.<sup>8</sup>

(They did not, however, secure control of smaller villages in the southern rim of Chechnya along the border with Georgia and Dagestan.)

Putin earned public acclaim in Russia for his conduct of the war and became by far the most popular figure in the Russian government. When President Boris El'tsin suddenly resigned at the end of 1999, he designated Putin as his successor. Putin's standing rose still further in February 2000 when most of the Chechen guerrillas left Grozny and shifted to positions further south. Nonetheless, even after the evacuation of Grozny, Chechen fighters continued to inflict heavy losses on Russian troops, especially during two highly publicised ambushes in late February and early March 2000. In the first incident, on 29 February, several dozen Chechen guerrillas killed all 84 members of a Russian paratrooper unit from Pskov. The following day some 50 Chechen fighters attacked a convoy of nearly 100 heavily-armed police commandos (OMON) near Grozny, killing 40 and wounding 35. The two incidents came only hours after the Russian MVD chief, Vladimir Rushailo, had boasted that 'the military phase of the anti-terrorist operation in Chechnya is drawing to a close'.<sup>9</sup> These ambushes and other deadly attacks against Russian forces in early 2000 spurred some of Putin's rivals in the March 2000 presidential election to call for negotiations with Maskhadov and the Chechen insurgents. Putin himself rejected any such notion and promised to 'wipe out the terrorists and bandits'. His decisive, first-round victory on 26 March, with 53% of the vote, seemed to convey public approval of his tough line (a sentiment borne out in most opinion polls), but his election was tarnished just a few days later by another large-scale ambush of Russian soldiers, this time against a convoy of MVD Internal Forces in southern Chechnya. At least 37 of the 41 MVD troops were killed, and many other soldiers from a nearby unit that tried to rescue the besieged convoy were also killed or seriously wounded.

Since mid-2000, Russian military and security units in Chechnya have sought to rely on standard counterinsurgency operations aimed at maintaining control of urban areas, isolating and eliminating the guerrillas, preventing suicide bombing attacks, restoring a semblance of 'normal' life in major towns, bolstering the pro-Russian government (which was headed by Ahmad-Haji Kadyrov from June 2000 until his assassination in May 2004), and consolidating a long-term military presence. The results of these efforts thus far have been meager. When overall command of Russian operations in Chechnya was transferred from the FSB to the MVD in July-September 2003, it was supposed to herald the 'gradual end of counterterrorist actions' in favour of the more routine 'maintenance of public order'.<sup>10</sup> But this projected reorientation never really materialised. One of the highest-ranking Russian MVD officers in the North Caucasus, Lieutenant-General Evgenii Abrashin, later complained that the government was 'rash and premature in declaring an end to counterterrorist operations' at a time when 'the missions assigned to our troops in Chechnya far exceed their capabilities'.<sup>11</sup> Abrashin emphasised that the OGV's 'forces are so busy just trying to ensure their own security' that they 'rarely can take any steps to go after the resurgent guerrillas'.

Although the Chechen rebels, who now number around 1,600-1,800, have not yet regrouped into a unified resistance, and although many ordinary Chechens have long wanted an end to the conflict, the armed confrontation with Russian troops seems likely to continue indefinitely. The pro-Russian Chechen government, which has been

notoriously corrupt from the time it was set up by Russian troops in June 2000, enjoys very little popular support and has relied mainly on violent coercion. Reconstruction efforts in Chechnya have been almost non-existent over the past decade, and as many as 200,000 Chechens still live as refugees outside the republic (mostly in private homes or abandoned buildings in Ingushetia and other neighbouring regions). Until recently, tens of thousands of Chechens had taken refuge in squalid, makeshift camps in eastern Ingushetia, but Russian soldiers forcibly dismantled these camps, closing the final one, at Satsita, in June 2004.<sup>12</sup> Guerrilla operations within Chechnya and in neighbouring Ingushetia, Dagestan and North Ossetia have stymied attempts by Russian troops to establish firmer control in the North Caucasus. Moreover, the Chechens' increasing resort to terrorist attacks in Moscow and other cities has stirred deep public unease.

Throughout the conflict, atrocities have been committed by both sides, usually at the expense of civilians. Russian troops have engaged in systematic human rights abuses, including torture, rape, forced disappearances, mass arrest operations (*zachistki*), kidnapping, and summary executions.<sup>13</sup> Far from seeking to rectify these abuses, commanding officers frequently have condoned them or at least have turned a blind eye. The Chechen guerrillas, for their part, have often used civilians as human shields and have resorted to grisly revenge attacks against suspected collaborators. They also have engaged in kidnapping for ransom.<sup>14</sup>

The human costs of the conflict have been great not only for Chechen civilians but also for the Russian army and security forces. In the period from August 1999 to December 2002, according to official data, more than 4,730 Russian servicemen in Chechnya were killed and roughly 15,550 were wounded.<sup>15</sup> (Unofficial estimates are two to three times higher.) Further heavy losses occurred in 2003 and 2004. In the first half of 2003, according to data from the Russian General Staff, 'no fewer than 100 Russian troops were killed each month'.<sup>16</sup> The rate of casualties among Russian soldiers increased still further in the latter half of the year and 2004 because of a sharp (and as yet unexplained) rise in the number of injuries, which more than offset a slight decline in the number of deaths.<sup>17</sup> Russian troops who have been taken captive by the guerrillas have often suffered cruel and degrading treatment. Hence, even though Russian military and security forces will probably be able to retain Chechnya within the Russian Federation for as long as the fighting drags on, that is a dubious 'accomplishment' at best. At a minimum, the Russian government will have to maintain a large-scale military presence in the region indefinitely. The 46th Brigade of the MVD Internal Forces, the 42th Motorised Rifle Division of the Russian army (a unit that now consists entirely of contract soldiers rather than conscripts), and some 20 regional military command staffs are all slated to be 'permanently deployed' in Chechnya. Numerous other Russian units will be remaining or rotating there in coming years.

Even with the presence of these soldiers, however, the security situation in Chechnya is likely to remain precarious. The flurry of assassinations, large-scale ambushes and terrorist attacks in the spring and summer of 2004 underlined the intractable nature of the conflict. The pro-Russian Chechen government has set up a police force numbering 13,000–14,000 men, but these police are incapable of maintaining order.<sup>18</sup> Corruption pervades the force, and Russian military officers have complained that many of the Chechen police routinely turn over crucial information to Chechen guerrillas to help them prepare ambushes and lay explosives. In addition, a sizable

number of the police are reported to have taken part in attacks against Russian troops.<sup>19</sup> In August 2004, for example, two of the highest-ranking police officials in Chechnya were accused of having supplied weapons and explosives to the guerrillas. Another officer from the pro-Moscow government's Presidential Guard (a separate security force headed by Kadyrov's son, Ramzan Kadyrov) was charged with 'taking part in terrorist attacks' and providing weapons, explosives and safe passage to rebel leaders.<sup>20</sup> The following month, the procurator-general for the North Caucasus disclosed that some two dozen local police had abetted a series of deadly raids by Chechen and Ingush guerrillas against Russian MVD and army positions in neighbouring Ingushetia in June 2004.<sup>21</sup> Russian soldiers have grown so wary of the loyalties of the Chechen police that they often avoid sharing any information about Russian helicopter flights and troop movements.<sup>22</sup> The lack of a reliable police force in Chechnya has left a security vacuum, which Russian troops have not tried to fill. Although a semblance of order is present in some towns, much of Chechnya remains on the verge of chaos, and criminal gangs still operate freely.

After many years of war and upheaval, it is hardly surprising that misery and despair prevail almost everywhere in Chechnya. Until the refugee camps in eastern Ingushetia were forcibly disbanded by Russian troops in 2003 and 2004, hundreds of thousands of Chechens preferred to stay in those camps rather than return to the desolation and pervasive violence of their homeland. The rampant abuses by Russian security forces in Chechnya, especially the systematic round-ups of Chechen males (a lot of whom are never heard from again), have reinforced the deep antagonism that many Chechens have come to feel toward Russia. It is therefore not surprising that calls for revenge against Russia under the traditional Chechen code of law, known as *adat*, have gained increasing salience in Chechnya from the time the latest war began.

Nonetheless, the desire for revenge has not translated into widespread popular support for continued warfare. The ascendance of Wahhabist leaders among the guerrillas, and the damage caused by the fighting, have reduced the appeal of the separatist cause. The war-weariness of the population was evident when the pro-Russian Chechen government held a referendum in March 2003 and presidential elections in October 2003 and August 2004. The large reported turnout in each case (nearly 90% for the referendum, 87% for the first presidential election and 85.5% for the second presidential election) undoubtedly was inflated, and the results of the voting were obviously rigged (particularly by the disqualification of all credible rivals to Putin's chosen candidate in each of the presidential elections); but even if the figures are adjusted to compensate for official manipulation, the rate of participation was surprisingly high. This, along with other evidence, suggests that many ordinary Chechens are eager for an end to the fighting.<sup>23</sup>

Irrespective of the popular mood, however, it is doubtful that the war will be over soon. The tenacity of the Chechen guerrillas (despite the loss of several key fighters in 2004) and the Russian government's firm desire to preserve Chechnya as an integral part of the Russian Federation militate against a peaceful settlement. The room for a lasting compromise is as tenuous as ever. When the war began in the autumn of 1999, Marshal Igor' Sergeev vowed that, unlike in August 1996, Russian troops 'will never leave Chechnya again'.<sup>24</sup> Although Sergeev is no longer defence minister, Russian leaders are more determined than ever to hold onto Chechnya. Putin has repeatedly

ruled out holding 'negotiations with terrorists' (by which he means negotiations with any political actors in Chechnya other than officials in the pro-Russian government), but in the absence of such talks the situation seems unlikely to improve in any meaningful way; and Russian troops in the North Caucasus will continue to be threatened and attacked by Chechen guerrillas.<sup>25</sup>

*Russian counterinsurgency operations and Chechen tactics*

Although the Chechen guerrillas now number only around 1,600–1,800, they have been able to hold out against 90,000 Russian troops and police by turning tactical advances into strategic gains. The rebels overcame huge initial losses in 1999–2000 and continued to inflict enough damage on Russian soldiers to erode their morale and create the appearance of an endless and unwinnable war.<sup>26</sup> The guerrillas hope that, if the current stalemate continues, the cumulative setbacks for Russian troops will reshape strategic calculations in Moscow, as in 1996. To this end, Chechen fighters have not only continued their military efforts against Russian forces but also increasingly resorted to large-scale terrorist attacks in Moscow and other Russian cities.

Since mid-2000, the rebels have focused on four types of targets within Chechnya and other regions of the North Caucasus and three types of targets in the rest of Russia. Targets within the North Caucasus have included: (1) convoys, groups, and facilities of Russian troops and administrative personnel; (2) Russian military helicopters and aircraft; (3) individual Russian soldiers; and (4) officials and buildings associated with the pro-Russian Chechen government that was installed by Russian forces in mid-2000. Outside the North Caucasus, Chechen rebels have focused mainly on (1) crowds of civilians in Moscow and elsewhere; (2) key transport systems and government buildings; and (3) other civilian 'soft' targets.

To attack clusters of Russian troops and their support facilities in the North Caucasus, Chechen guerrillas have relied primarily on ambushes, landmines, remotely detonated explosives, and suicide bombings.<sup>27</sup> To shoot down Russian military helicopters and aircraft, Chechen fighters have used shoulder-held air defence missiles, anti-aircraft artillery, anti-tank guided weapons, rocket-propelled grenades, large-calibre machine guns, and a variety of lighter firearms (small-calibre machine guns, submachine guns, and assault rifles). For attacks against individual Russian soldiers and administrators, the rebels have deployed snipers as well as mines and improvised explosive devices. Attacks against pro-Russian Chechen officials, police, and government buildings have come mainly in the form of hit-and-run raids, suicide bombings, and assassinations.

When targeting civilians in Moscow and other Russian cities outside Chechnya, Chechen fighters usually have resorted to three types of terrorist actions — suicide bombings, remotely detonated bombs, and seizure of hostages.<sup>28</sup> The incidence of suicide bomb attacks in recent years has been higher in the North Caucasus than in Israel, causing widespread disruption and apprehension. Bombings of this sort have been so common in the republics adjoining Chechnya (not to mention in Chechnya itself) that they often draw little mention in the Russian press. Only when a large number of people have been killed has there been any sustained attention.<sup>29</sup>



Guerrilla attacks against Russian soldiers and facilities in the North Caucasus have remained intense over the past several years, even though they are rarely covered on Russian television. (No doubt the lack of coverage is at least partly attributable to the fact that all major Russian television stations have been brought back under state control.) Terrorist bombings and other strikes against civilian targets outside Chechnya — especially targets in Moscow — have received the most attention in the Russian and Western media, but those sorts of incidents are much less common than the bombings, ambushes, and sniper attacks directed every day against Russian troops. The discussion below will highlight the significance of the Chechens' growing use of suicidal terrorism, but it will focus just as extensively on guerrilla tactics within Chechnya.

#### *Breakdowns of operational command*

During the 1994–96 war the lack of coordination among combat and logistical units from different ministries and branches was one of the major factors responsible for Russia's dismal performance. To mitigate that problem in the latest war, the Russian government created a 'Unified Grouping of Federal Forces' (*Ob'edinennaya gruppировка federal'nykh voisk*, or OGV), which exercises jurisdiction over all military and security troops in Chechnya.<sup>30</sup> The region covered by the OGV is divided into four main operational sectors — North, East, West, and South. The deputy commander-in-chief of the MVD Internal Forces, Colonel-General Valerii Baranov, was appointed commander of the OGV in September 2003 and was still serving in that post when he was severely wounded in the bomb attack that killed Kadyrov in May 2004.<sup>31</sup> A deputy minister of internal affairs, Colonel-General Mikhail Pan'kov, who also headed the MVD directorate for the Southern Federal District, was appointed interim commander of the OGV after Baranov was incapacitated, though he was replaced in July 2004 by another deputy minister, Lieutenant-General Vyacheslav Dadonov.

All of Russia's 'counterterrorist operations' in Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus, including operations by the OGV, are supposed to be overseen by the MVD 'Regional Operational Staff for Control of Counterterrorist Operations in the North Caucasus' (*Regional'nyi operativnyi shtab po upravleniyu kontrterroristicheskoi operatsiei na Severnom Kavkaze*); which since July 2003 has been headed by a deputy internal affairs minister, Rear-Admiral Yurii Mal'tsev. Prior to Mal'tsev's appointment, the regional operational staff was under the jurisdiction of the FSB, which for two-and-a-half years was the agency in charge of 'counterterrorist' efforts in Chechnya. (The transfer of operational authority from the Defence Ministry to the FSB in January 2001 was intended to augur a shift from full-fledged warfare to a simpler 'counterterrorist' mission.) Under a decree signed by Putin in late June 2003, the MVD took over the regional operational staff in July 2003 and gained broader control of all 'counterterrorist' efforts in the North Caucasus from September 2003.<sup>32</sup> In principle, the MVD role extends even to the mountainous areas of Chechnya, which have been the site of the most intense fighting since 2000.

In reality, though, the command structure for operations in Chechnya has been much less 'unified' than its name suggests. The delineation of responsibilities and functions among several key Russian officials — the commander of the OGV (General Dadonov

from the MVD), the commander of the North Caucasus Military District (Army-General Aleksandr Baranov from the army's Ground Forces<sup>33</sup>), the head of the MVD Regional Operational Staff for Control of Counterterrorist Operations in the North Caucasus (MVD Rear-Admiral Mal'tsev), the first deputy defence minister responsible for counterterrorist training and combat operations (Colonel-General Aleksandr Belousov), and the FSB deputy director responsible for the North Caucasus (Colonel-General Nikolai Lisinsky) — is murky at best. Ostensibly, the head of the MVD Regional Operational Staff oversees all the operations of the OGV and all the training and preparations in the North Caucasus Military District, but it is clear that the Defence Ministry and, to a lesser extent, the FSB also still play salient operational roles in Chechnya, especially in the mountainous southern regions.

The potential for conflicting chains of command was underlined in late 2003 by Army-General Vladimir Boldyrev, who was then commander of the North Caucasus Military District (a post he retained until July 2004). In an interview with the Defence Ministry's daily newspaper, Boldyrev revealed that 'the so-called mountain grouping [of forces], which is responsible for conducting operations in the south of the republic, is still under the command of my deputy, General [Arkadii] Bakhin'.<sup>34</sup> Boldyrev also noted that 'roughly one-third of the officers serving on [the MVD Regional Operational Staff] are from the Defence Ministry'.<sup>35</sup> (Presumably the rest are from the MVD.) Further questions about the allocation of responsibilities arose in January 2004 when Boldyrev claimed that 'a new scheme for control of forces in Chechnya has been devised' and that 'the Defence Ministry and MVD have divided [Chechnya] into zones of responsibility'.<sup>36</sup> He explained:

Although command of the Unified Grouping of Forces has now been assigned to the MVD, the Defence Ministry's units and formations continue actively working in the mountainous regions of the republic. Chechnya is now divided into spheres of influence: The part of the republic with flat terrain is controlled by the [MVD] Internal Forces, whereas in the mountains a 33,000-strong Defence Ministry grouping has been set up. . . . However, the demarcation into spheres of responsibility does not signal the start of a new phase of counterterrorist operations. There have been no fundamental changes in the structure and tasks of the [Unified] Grouping.<sup>37</sup>

Even if the MVD had retained exclusive operational control, coordination of OGV activities would have been difficult. The grouping consists of units from the MVD Internal Forces (including the 46th Special Forces brigade and other special-operations contingents), OMON anti-riot police detachments, FSB special-operations forces (*spetsnaz*), Federal Border Service patrols (which are now subordinated to the FSB), paratroopers from the Airborne Forces (now numbering more than 3,500 in Chechnya, an increase of roughly 1,000 over the number deployed there in June 2003), reconnaissance and logistical personnel from the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), reconnaissance personnel and *spetsnaz* forces from the main intelligence directorate (GRU) of the armed forces,<sup>38</sup> attack and transport helicopter pilots from army aviation, combat and logistical personnel from the missile and artillery branch of the Ground Forces, armoured and infantry detachments from the 42nd Motorised Rifle Division (now permanently based in Chechnya), communications and surveillance specialists from the Federal Agency

for Government Communications and Information (FAPSI, now subordinated to the FSB), military transport regiments from the Federal Service of Railway Troops (FSZhV), and search-and-rescue squads from the Ministry for Civil Defence, Emergencies, and the Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters (MChS).<sup>39</sup> Coordination of these diverse units in joint operations has been better during the current war than in 1994-96 (when the near-total lack of coordination was a grievous weakness), but significant problems have still arisen.<sup>40</sup>

Among other things, the involvement of so many ministries, agencies, and branches has led to a vast amount of duplication and waste. One of the more egregious examples, which only recently came to light, was the MVD's decision — without the prior knowledge of either the OGV or the Federal Service of Railway Troops (FSZhV) — to acquire its own armoured railway train for the transport of MVD units and their equipment in the North Caucasus. A high-ranking OGV officer, Colonel Gennadii Zhilin, disclosed that 'the commanders of the grouping of railway troops and all the commanders of the OGV were baffled when the new MVD train suddenly appeared at Khankala', the main base for the OGV.<sup>41</sup> Zhilin said 'there was no logical reason for deploying this additional "armoured train"', which he described as a poorly designed 'monster' lacking vital features: 'We already had more than enough armoured trains in the North Caucasus, not to mention an ample number in reserve'.<sup>42</sup> The acquisition of this superfluous train — a move that entailed a considerable squandering of resources, which the Russian government can ill afford — was typical of the OGV's inability to coordinate combat operations and military-economic efforts in the North Caucasus.

Until recently, some Russian military and MVD officers claimed that the OGV could operate effectively even without a highly integrated command structure. But after Russian troops suffered a number of costly setbacks in 2003 and 2004, this position was no longer tenable. High-ranking officers now acknowledge that 'our forces in Chechnya have not been able to coordinate their actions during times of stress. The system is in utter disarray'.<sup>43</sup> Ahmad Kadyrov, who headed the pro-Russian Chechen government until his death in May 2004, complained in late 2003 that 'the entrenched problem of coordinating [Russian forces] has still not been resolved, and there still is no unified command structure set up. Each of the power ministries goes off and does whatever it wants'.<sup>44</sup> Kadyrov's concerns were amply borne out in June 2004 when Chechen and Ingush guerrillas killed or wounded more than 200 Russian personnel in a single night of attacks on MVD and army positions in Ingushetia. At a closed hearing after the raids, the Russian State Duma Committee on Security determined that the 'lack of coordination among the federal and regional security services and the army' was the main factor that 'enabled the terrorists to strike at Russian units with impunity'.<sup>45</sup> Unless the Russian government makes a clearer commitment to consolidate the OGV, the sorts of problems that Kadyrov highlighted will undoubtedly persist.

#### *Problems of troop morale*

The shortcomings of the command system may eventually be rectified, but an even greater obstacle to Russia's counterinsurgency operations is the low morale of Russian troops. Although Russian forces have performed better during the latest war than in

1994–96, the prolongation of the fighting has taken a heavy psychological toll on Russian soldiers, especially conscripts. The problem is not simply the constant danger of encountering ambushes, landmines, snipers or suicide bombers. In addition to that, Russian troops in Chechnya have been hindered by deficient training, outdated equipment, poor nutrition, abysmal health care, and the physical and psychological tribulations of *dedovshchina* (violent bullying).<sup>46</sup> According to one recent study *dedovshchina* has accounted for 'more than 50% of the casualties suffered by [Russian troops in Chechnya] and up to 80% in some units'.<sup>47</sup> Abuse of alcohol and drugs by Russian soldiers has been widespread. As one Russian military officer lamented in December 2003: 'We went [to Chechnya] to defeat the terrorists, but our servicemen in the region live under such miserable conditions that they just want to get out of there and leave the army before they are sent back'.<sup>48</sup> Commanders of Russian units in Chechnya have frequently complained about the conscripts' poor psychological state and their 'lack of dedication when performing the assigned tasks'.<sup>49</sup> In April 2004 Army-General Vladimir Tikhomirov, who was then commander-in-chief of the MVD Internal Forces, acknowledged that serious problems had arisen with the use of conscripts in Chechnya. He emphasised the 'urgent necessity' of spending billions of rubles to hire more *kontraktniki* (volunteer soldiers earning higher pay). 'These professionals', he argued, 'are the only ones who can fight effectively against the bandits and terrorists'.<sup>50</sup>

The problem, however, is that even among the *kontraktniki* and senior officers in Chechnya, morale has often been poor. A Russian military expert who interviewed dozens of professional soldiers in the OGV highlighted their disaffection and cynicism:

These soldiers believe that the circumstances in which they have been placed in the North Caucasus undermine the effectiveness of their struggle against local terrorism. As always, there is a striking degree of political hypocrisy regarding the actions of troops. On the one hand, the official line is that a peaceful situation exists in Chechnya and adjoining regions. On the other hand, the troops are obliged to conduct full-scale combat operations and must be constantly ready to fend off the 'mountain warriors', as was done many years ago [in the nineteenth century], when Russia was bringing the Caucasus under its dominion. Back then this sort of thing was called a war, but nowadays it is ludicrously termed the 'restoration of constitutional order'.<sup>51</sup>

When a journalist in Chechnya asked the commander of an OMON unit, Colonel Aleksandr Ponomarev, why he was fighting, he responded: 'Because of the political ambitions of someone back in Moscow'.<sup>52</sup> Another MVD officer remarked that 'service there [in Chechnya] is not like serving anywhere else. No one in Moscow understands what a demoralising effect this assignment has on our troops'.<sup>53</sup> The mood among *kontraktniki* — who account for only a minuscule percentage of Russian troops deployed in Chechnya, mostly in OMON units — has not been helped by the frequent long delays they and other soldiers have encountered in receiving wages and combat bonuses.<sup>54</sup> In late August 2004 a group of 71 OMON officers felt compelled to file a lawsuit against the MVD demanding payment of their combat bonuses for service in Chechnya. Although they suspended the lawsuit and strike threats after the Beslan massacre in early September, they and other OMON officers have continued to complain about 'endless delays in getting paid and the destitute existence of our forces'.<sup>55</sup>

Nor is there any evidence that *kontraktniki* in Chechnya have been more inclined than conscripts to fight against the guerrillas or to take casualties. On the contrary, as two Russian experts recently noted, the *kontraktniki* 'excel [only] at inflicting unnecessary cruelties on the local population'.<sup>56</sup> A Russian MVD captain complained in June 2004 that 'attempts to deploy more *kontraktniki* in counterterrorist operations have not yet produced the desired results'.<sup>57</sup> Under the latest plans and budgets for the MVD and Defence Ministry, *kontraktniki* will continue to represent only a small fraction of Russian troops in Chechnya for the indefinite future; but even if most of the units taking part in the war could be converted to a fully professional basis (something that is not in the offing), the fundamental problem of motivating them would persist.

The low morale of Russian troops has greatly impaired their combat proficiency. In November 2003 the commander of the North Caucasus Military District acknowledged that 'a number of units in the district, unfortunately, are still receiving poor performance ratings'.<sup>58</sup> Russian military and MVD commanders in Chechnya have argued that without troops who are 'highly motivated' to conduct 'non-traditional forms of warfare', it will be impossible to carry out the 'complex and wide-ranging tasks' needed to 'crush the resistance'.<sup>59</sup> The low morale of Russian soldiers has been a particular impediment to mountain warfare. A senior Russian military intelligence (GRU) officer recently averred that 'the GRU *spetsnaz* forces have had to undertake at least half of all federal operations [in Chechnya] because no forces other than the *spetsnaz* dare to venture into mountainous regions'.<sup>60</sup> This claim, though perhaps overstated, is suggestive of the daunting obstacles that Russian commanders have faced when trying to motivate their troops.

The cynical and dispirited mood of Russian soldiers has not only detracted from their fighting capability but also contributed to a number of unsavoury phenomena that work to the benefit of the Chechen rebels. Russian units in Chechnya have been plagued by rampant corruption and have been linked with narcotics trafficking, prostitution rings, illegal arms dealing, and kidnappings for ransom.<sup>61</sup> In many cases when Chechen guerrillas have bribed Russian conscripts or officers, they have been able to gain access to sensitive facilities or have been allowed to drive explosive-laden vehicles near government buildings without going through the customary checkpoints. The Russian government has acknowledged that corrupt MVD officers were paid off by Chechen terrorists who seized hostages at the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow in October 2002 and at Middle School No. 1 in Beslan in September 2004.<sup>62</sup> A Western journalist who witnessed numerous instances of bribery during a brief stint in Grozny in the summer of 2003 described a typical scene:

At a concrete and barbed wire checkpoint [Russian soldiers] inspecting cars and buses don't catch any rebels. They occasionally rough up the drivers and often demand bribes, but the guerrillas know very well how this game is played. 'Stick some money out the window, and they don't check anything', says a self-described mujahid.<sup>63</sup>

Sales of weaponry and explosives by Russian troops to Chechen rebels remain common.<sup>64</sup> Although the Chechens have not obtained new supplies of tanks and armoured vehicles (which they used during the initial stages of the war), they have been able to acquire a large array of arms and munitions, including shoulder-held

missiles, anti-tank guns, mortars, artillery shells, rocket-propelled grenades, automatic rifles, and other firearms.

*The difficulty of countering ambushes*

In classic guerrilla style, Chechen insurgents have repeatedly carried out hit-and-run attacks against Russian forces. The rebels frequently operate in small detachments, lying in wait for Russian troop convoys. The head of the OGV's main operational staff, Colonel Gennadii Zhilin, recently noted that the ambushes often begin with the detonation of roadside bombs that cause disarray in the convoys, enabling the guerrillas to follow up with heavy gunfire:

After the explosives are detonated, especially if the convoys are relatively small, the bandits move in and launch ferocious waves of gunfire at the troops' vehicles for 5–15 minutes, using all types of weapons. They then seize as many weapons, documents, and prisoners as they can and swiftly disappear into the thickets of the surrounding mountains and forests.<sup>65</sup>

Zhilin also reported that the Chechen rebels 'constantly launch surprise attacks' against Russian military and MVD forces traveling by rail. Many of the 'special railway cars' used by the OGV to move soldiers and equipment 'are not configured to return gunfire' and are therefore highly vulnerable to 'ambushes by Chechen guerrillas who bombard the trains' with high-powered rifles, machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades.<sup>66</sup> In addition, the Chechens have undertaken large-scale raids against Russian bases and camps, especially at night.

The aim of all these attacks — whether against troop convoys, military rail transport, or fixed Russian bases — is to 'create a constant, high level of psychological stress on [Russian] servicemen and to undermine their morale'.<sup>67</sup> Ambushes have been especially effective in the southern areas of the North Caucasus, where the road system is largely non-existent and Russian military vehicles are confined to well-known routes.

The attrition and psychological toll exacted by ambushes during the first several years of the war helped spur the commander-in-chief of Russian Ground Forces, Army-General Nikolai Kormil'tsev, to call for new Combat Service Regulations that would 'cover all practical questions of preparing for and waging war', including steps to prevent and repel guerrilla attacks.<sup>68</sup> The new regulations, Kormil'tsev argued, would 'take account of the results of combat operations and other activities by formations, units, and sub-units of [Soviet] troops in Afghanistan and [of Russian troops] during the first and second Chechen campaigns'. Although the new regulations were not slated to take effect until 2005, Russian officers began almost immediately to devote more attention to ways of countering ambushes. The results of their efforts have been mixed. On the one hand, Russian commanders have taken steps to prevent ambushes on military outposts:

To impede the guerrillas' leeway for manoeuvre, the roads leading to military posts and bases are now usually protected by minefields and explosive barriers and by remotely detonated mines. Moreover, to ensure that the enemy will be detected as soon as he approaches, a number of materials are being adopted on an ad hoc basis to create noise effects (tin cans, slate, roofing iron, glass and other items).<sup>69</sup>