

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.¹ 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).²

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.³

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.⁴ 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

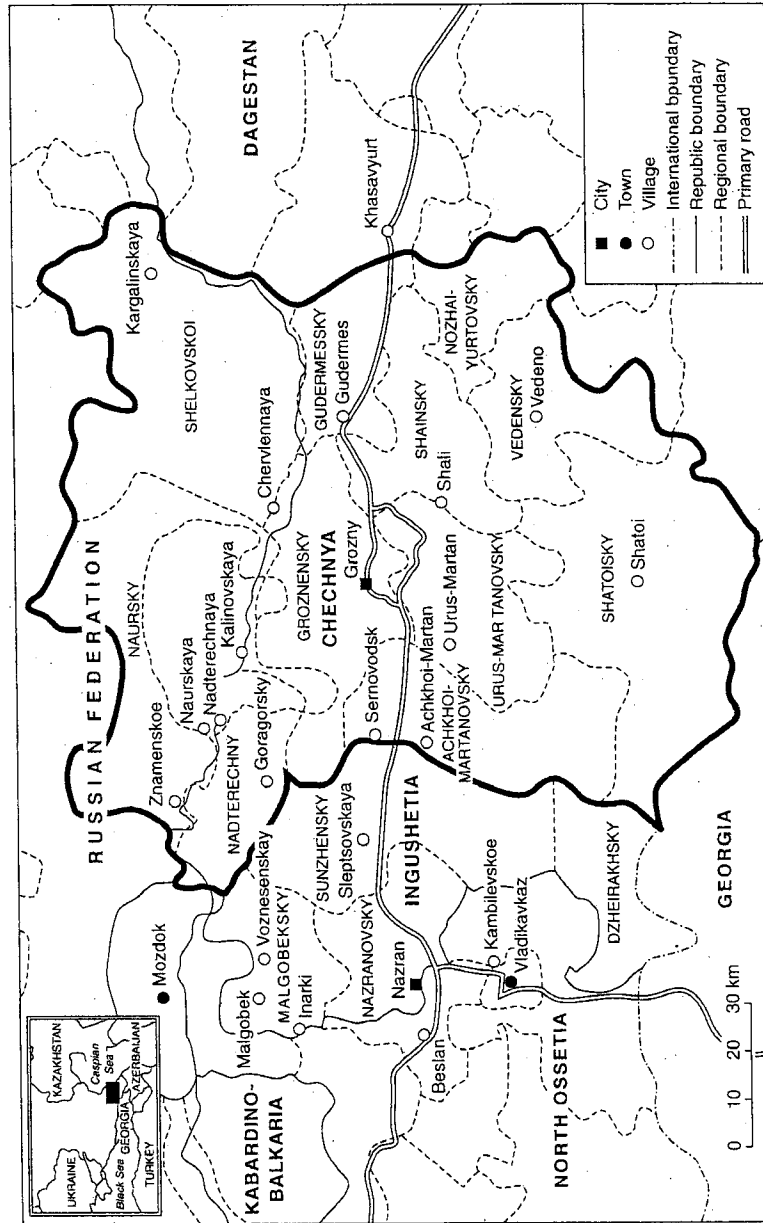


FIGURE 1. MAP OF CHECHNYA.

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸

(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'.⁹ 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'.¹⁰ 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'.¹¹ 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 2004.¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ (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'.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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 2004.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³

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'.²⁴ 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.²⁵

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.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹

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.³⁰ 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 2004.³¹ 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 2003.³² 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 Forces³³), 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'.³⁴ Boldyrev also noted that 'roughly one-third of the officers serving on [the MVD Regional Operational Staff] are from the Defence Ministry'.³⁵ (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'.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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,³⁸ 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).³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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'.⁴² 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'.⁴³ 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'.⁴⁴ 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'.⁴⁵ 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).⁴⁶ 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'.⁴⁷ 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'.⁴⁸ 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'.⁴⁹ 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'.⁵⁰

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'.⁵¹

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'.⁵² 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'.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ 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'.⁵⁵

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'.⁵⁶ A Russian MVD captain complained in June 2004 that 'attempts to deploy more *kontraktniki* in counterterrorist operations have not yet produced the desired results'.⁵⁷ 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'.⁵⁸ 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'.⁵⁹ 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'.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ 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 2004.⁶² 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.⁶³

Sales of weaponry and explosives by Russian troops to Chechen rebels remain common.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶ 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'.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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).⁶⁹

On the other hand, many Russian officers still commit basic mistakes that leave their forces vulnerable when on the move. All too often, for example, they fail to vary their daily routes or to send out more than one armoured column at a time.⁷⁰ Major-General Vladimir Abramov, the deputy OGV commander for planning, organisation, and security of troop transport, recently acknowledged that ‘the routes of the 30 daily convoys of Russian troops are well known, and the [Chechen] guerrillas by now have learned them well too’.⁷¹ Commanders also frequently neglect to bring along technicians and spare parts to fix equipment that breaks down. If armoured or transport vehicles do malfunction, as they are wont to in the forbidding terrain of southern Chechnya, the crews often have to wait for repairs alongside the roads, where they are highly vulnerable to attack.

Furthermore, the elaborate, multi-layered defences that are supposed to protect Russian military bases and encampments are far from impregnable. Chechen rebels have relied on specially trained animals, including mine-sniffing dogs, to circumvent the defences, enabling small bands of guerrillas to infiltrate Russian positions and carry out deadly attacks.⁷² Russian units camped in mountainous regions have been especially vulnerable, a point that was underlined in December 2003 when dozens of well armed Chechen rebels ambushed Russian FSB patrols operating along the Dagestan–Georgia border. In a series of well coordinated raids, the guerrillas killed at least nine federal personnel and seized more than a dozen hostages (all of whom were subsequently released) before dispersing into smaller groups and escaping through the mountains.⁷³

A number of senior Russian officers have argued that the basic problem is a ‘lack of sufficient troops and resources to detect and defend against guerrilla units’ that carry out ambushes. The first deputy commander of the MVD Internal Forces in the North Caucasus, Lieutenant-General Evgenii Abrashin, recently emphasised that ‘chronic shortages of personnel and equipment’ have prevented Russian troops from ‘undertaking preventive operations against rebel groups’ and have meant that ‘the only measures actually taken [to forestall or repulse surprise attacks] have been half-hearted and completely ineffective’.⁷⁴ The severity of this problem was highlighted in June 2004 by a GRU *spetsnaz* officer who noted that ‘the total number of helicopters deployed by all Russian *spetsnaz* forces’ in Chechnya — the forces that are supposed to provide immediate assistance to units that have been ambushed by Chechen guerrillas — ‘is smaller than the number assigned to just a single [Soviet] reconnaissance detachment in Afghanistan’ in the 1980s. The ‘dearth of assault helicopters’, he added, has ‘prevented *spetsnaz* forces from undertaking airborne assault operations’ and has left them ‘unable to respond coherently to the extreme conditions’ of a surprise attack.⁷⁵

Some Russian army and MVD officers have maintained that if their units could obtain greater firepower, more up-to-date equipment (look-down radars, electronic surveillance devices, manoeuvrable armoured vehicles, and night-vision gear), and increased logistical support, they would have a better chance of thwarting and even deterring rebel ambushes.⁷⁶ Although these suggestions for improvements have been endorsed by other officers, there are inherent limitations on their effect. Military experts generally agree that firepower is crucial in all forms of combat and that superior firepower is a key element of counter guerrilla operations, but the problem in Chechnya is that firepower alone is largely irrelevant if the insurgents can escape

before Russia's heavy weaponry is brought to bear. A Russian military journalist recently noted that Russian ground forces assigned to the OGV had plenty of firepower but were unable to manoeuvre rapidly enough to evade or thwart ambushes:

The large and powerful but disorganised federal units, which are devoid of any genuine support among the local [Chechen] population, often have been powerless when confronted by much smaller but mobile bands of guerrillas in the region. . . . [The Russian government] usually gauges its military strength [in Chechnya] by tallying up the number of soldiers, tanks, guns, and helicopters, but experience shows that in Chechnya — and in the North Caucasus more generally — all of these indicators are of little relevance. Our troops, aside from trying to protect themselves against attack, are often unable to do anything.⁷⁷

Unless Russian soldiers can engage the rebels in combat almost immediately — something they have consistently been unable to do, especially in mountainous and forested areas — extra firepower alone will be of little or no efficacy.

With regard to the need for improved technology, Russian officers concede that the outdated equipment used by troops in Chechnya has been a glaring deficiency and that 'our combat experience [in the North Caucasus] confirms how undesirable it is to rely on such equipment', but they fear that the problem is unlikely to be remedied soon.⁷⁸ Commanders of the North Caucasus Military District have complained that 'we don't have enough modern weapons, including means of electronic warfare', and that 'our existing equipment needs to be comprehensively modernised and replaced'. They recently warned that if nothing is done, 'we will lag even further behind the leading states in the world'.⁷⁹ Their unease appears well-founded. Despite endless talk about 'military reform' over the past decade, the Russian armed forces (including many commando units of the security services) remain in woeful shape. Little has changed since the end of 2001 when a prominent Russian general argued that reform of the army was making almost no headway:

If we consider the results of military reform, then, in my view, they are utterly dismal. One of the main goals when reorganising the military is to increase the effectiveness of the armed forces. . . . Unfortunately, this has not happened. Over the stretch of a decade we have talked about reform of the armed forces but have made only a few feeble attempts in that direction.⁸⁰

Although defence spending and other 'counterterrorist' outlays have increased modestly since 2000, concrete improvements in fighting capability have not yet materialised. Equipment shortages are still rife in all branches of the armed forces, and the Russian military remains stuck in the pre-digital age.⁸¹ A detailed study of the Russian defence-industrial complex published in Moscow in August 2004 warned that 'the low quality of Russian weapons and military equipment has undercut the country's defence capability' and 'has left Russian forces vulnerable to attack during combat operations in Chechnya'.⁸² The head of the Federal Border Guards in the Argun region of Chechnya, Colonel Yurii Radionov, acknowledged that 'the results of many recent armed clashes [in Argun and other parts of the North Caucasus] have shown that the [Chechen] guerrillas are equipped a lot better than our own troops are'.⁸³ The commander of an Airborne Forces brigade in Chechnya likewise complained that 'almost all the combat equipment our troops have been receiving is

of an obsolete vintage'.⁸⁴ Most Russian soldiers still have not been given advanced navigation and targeting systems and secure means of communication, and they lack the gear needed to operate at night or in inclement weather. Many Russian ground units are forced to make do with 'transport, road, and engineering vehicles that are unprotected against bullets and shrapnel' and that are too unwieldy to evade ambushes, especially if the guerrillas use explosives, burned out vehicles, boulders and large tree trunks to create barriers along the roads.⁸⁵ Moreover, although some OGV forces have belatedly received MTU-20 and TMM pontoon bridges to manoeuvre across rivers and washed-out stretches of road, this sort of equipment has not been distributed widely enough to preclude further ambushes.

Much the same problem applies to the need for increased logistical support. Although Russian officers are abundantly aware that the dearth of logistical support in Chechnya has greatly hindered Russian troops' efforts to counter the insurgents, almost nothing has been done to ameliorate the situation. Many Russian units endure prolonged shortages of ammunition, fuel, spare parts, flak jackets, combat gear, tents, radios, medical supplies, food, and fresh water.⁸⁶ Soldiers often have been forced to scavenge parts from trucks and other vehicles as well as broken-down weapons systems. The basic problem, as one Russian colonel put it, is that 'we send units out to fight but have never committed enough resources to sustain them in the field. We keep on talking about logistics, but nothing ever improves'.⁸⁷ Without adequate supplies of basic items and equipment, Russian soldiers inevitably are more vulnerable when confronted by surprise attacks.

In short, even though Russian military and MVD officers have repeatedly highlighted the major shortcomings of Russian efforts to prevent (or, if necessary, thwart) rebel ambushes, those weaknesses for the most part have gone unredressed. When two battalions of the 104th Regiment of the 76th Airborne Forces Division were replaced in Chechnya in February 2004 the division commander, Major-General Stanislav Semenyuta, claimed that the new troops had 'undertaken all necessary preparations, including company and battalion-level exercises, to be capable of fighting localised battles in mountainous, forested and flat terrain'.⁸⁸ Although it is true that the Airborne Forces, including the 104th Regiment (which has been on duty in Chechnya since July 2003), have bolstered their training for these types of contingencies, they still are unable to cope with daily raids and surprise attacks. The rate of success that Chechen guerrillas have achieved when ambushing Russian forces has not diminished, particularly in mountainous and forested regions, which almost all of the rebels now use as their main base. Even in urban areas and along major transport routes, Chechen fighters have been able to strike Russian troops and police almost at will.⁸⁹

The commander of the North Caucasus Military District recently acknowledged that the 'constant ambushes along the roads' in Chechnya and neighbouring republics were killing a 'worrying number' of Russian troops, and that 'the bandits' systematic attempts to expand the scope of their combat operations' were fueling an 'extremely tense situation' in the North Caucasus.⁹⁰ No sooner had he spoken than a group of at least 250 Chechen and Ingush fighters launched a series of deadly nighttime raids against Russian MVD, FSB and army units in three regions of neighbouring Ingushetia and in the capital of Dagestan. These well coordinated ambushes, in June

2004, killed 98 Russian troops and officials and wounded 104 within a few hours.⁹¹ Both the MVD and the army came under sharp criticism afterward for their 'appallingly slow and disorganised response' to the attacks, as all but two of the rebels escaped unharmed.⁹² Three weeks later, on the night of 12–13 July, another group of 70 Chechen fighters ambushed FSB and police units in the Chechen village of Avtury, killing 18 troops, wounding ten and taking a dozen hostage.⁹³ The guerrillas held the town for nearly 48 hours and escaped without suffering any losses of their own.

These ambushes came as a notable setback for Putin, who only a month earlier had proclaimed that 'normalisation in Chechnya is well under way'. A few days after the attacks in Avtury, Putin issued a number of decrees replacing the chief of the Russian General Staff and several other high-ranking army, FSB, and MVD officers responsible for operations in the North Caucasus.⁹⁴ The president's spokesmen indicated that the personnel changes were designed to foster 'major improvements' in the OGV's ability to 'prevent further ambushes and attacks'.⁹⁵ On the ground, however, the reshuffling of commanders made no appreciable difference. In early August 2004, two weeks after Putin issued his decrees, Chechen rebels ambushed Russian forces in Kizlyar in northern Dagestan, killing eight and wounding five.⁹⁶ A few weeks later, more than 250 Chechen fighters undertook raids in Grozny and other cities that killed at least 120 Russian soldiers, OMON officers, and government officials.⁹⁷ Although Grozny had been heavily fortified in anticipation of the Chechen presidential election on 29 August, the guerrillas were able to carry out devastating attacks in the heart of the city, confounding assurances by army and MVD commanders that the capital was secure.

Russian military and MVD officers had boasted as recently as April 2004 that 'the [Chechen] bandits are no longer a credible fighting force', but the spate of large-scale ambushes in the summer of 2004 — as well as the smaller attacks that occurred every day — left no doubt that Chechen rebels can still operate with a remarkable degree of effectiveness not only in Chechnya itself but in all parts of the North Caucasus.

The deadly 'mine war'

The use of landmines and other explosives by the Chechen guerrillas has posed daunting problems for Russian troops, causing roughly 40% of the casualties they have suffered during the latest war.⁹⁸ Colonel-General Nikolai Serdtsev, the head of the Russian army's Engineering Forces, which are responsible for deactivating explosives, has argued that the mine-clearing units assigned to the OGV — four companies and many separate squads — face much greater difficulties during the current war than in 1994–96:

[Chechen fighters] are using booby-trap mines and explosives made from aerial bombs, artillery shells, mortars or some combination more widely than before. . . . If we compare the scale of the 'mine war' in the current campaign with the earlier one, we find that the intensity of it has sharply escalated and the number of casualties among our combat and technical personnel has sharply increased. All of this confirms that the terrorists are now more organised in their preparations, in their accumulation of stockpiles of high-explosive munitions, in their development of a network of clandestine laboratories to construct improvised explosive devices and radio-controlled detonators, and in their plans for laying mines and explosive barriers.⁹⁹

The head of OGV bomb disposal units, Colonel Vladimir Shcherbakov, claimed that during the first 11 months of the war his troops had to contend with 1,920 landmines and nearly 4,800 other explosives planted by the Chechen rebels — an average of roughly 20 devices a day.¹⁰⁰ Although the mine-clearing engineers reportedly managed to neutralise 90% of the bombs they uncovered during that period, their rate of success in dealing with ‘explosives constructed from munitions and shells left over from earlier battles’ was markedly lower.¹⁰¹ From the outset General Serdtsev was concerned that ‘the separatists will be extremely active in laying explosives, usually at night, but even during the day if we let down our guard and fail to conduct patrols’. He repeatedly warned that unless the mine-clearing units in Chechnya carried out ‘full-time surveillance and sweeps of the roads’ there would be no way to ‘guarantee the safe passage of our troop convoys’.¹⁰²

The intensity of the ‘mine war’ increased precipitously after most of the rebels evacuated Grozny in February 2000. From then on the Chechens sought to avoid large-scale direct confrontations with Russian troops and to rely instead on ‘irregular’ means of warfare, including the widespread use of mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).¹⁰³ The rebels’ success in laying explosives has created immense challenges for OGV bomb disposal squads, who have to conduct daily inspections of up to 450 kilometres of roads used by the army and MVD (particularly 100 kilometres of the most heavily traveled roads), nearly 500 kilometres of railways used for logistics and reinforcements, and the perimeters and grounds of military bases, airfields, checkpoints, and helicopter landing sites, including those in mountainous regions.¹⁰⁴ All told, more than 1,000 minesweeping personnel are assigned to these inspections.

On a typical day in February 2004 the bomb disposal units found ‘approximately 100 explosive devices, including 18 landmines’ planted near buildings, under bridges, on roads and next to railway tracks.¹⁰⁵ This tally was higher than the average number of bombs they were discovering a year earlier — a trend that came as a disappointment to Russian military and MVD officers, who had undertaken a series of pre-emptive raids against Chechen positions in 2003 in order to prevent the rebels from stepping up their production and use of mines and roadside IEDs. The volume of explosives that turned up did drop slightly in the late summer and early autumn of 2003, but the pattern was soon reversed, eclipsing the peak level of a year earlier.¹⁰⁶ By mid-2004 the number of IED attacks had risen so high that a senior correspondent for the Russian parliament’s daily newspaper sounded a note of alarm: ‘The mine war waged by the guerrillas in Chechnya has become so intense that the daily operational reports [from the OGV] are overflowing with dispatches about the latest “roadside bomb attacks”’.¹⁰⁷ The correspondent added that ‘the vast quantity of explosives available to the rebel groups’ would almost certainly enable them to ‘keep up a ferocious mine war indefinitely’.

The quality of the munitions and detonators used by the Chechen rebels has also improved since the early stages of the war. The commander of the OGV reported in September 2003 that the Chechen ‘fighters have changed their tactics in the use of mines. They now have begun laying more of the so-called “surprise” bombs and explosives with two or three additional charges’.¹⁰⁸ The same point was stressed by the deputy commander of the OGV responsible for mine-sweeping operations:

The explosives [used by the Chechens] are increasingly sophisticated. When they were still using ordinary mines that exploded on contact, our bomb disposal forces had an easier time. But it is quite a different matter to have to deal with improvised explosive devices made out of artillery shells and mines. They plant them on roads or on the roadside, or they hang them on tree branches. They detonate them by means of a radio signal, using 'Kenwood' transmitters.¹⁰⁹

According to a senior military officer, roughly 90% of the Chechen IEDs 'have been constructed out of mines and 122-, 130-, or 152-millimetre shells' obtained from Russian minefields, military stockpiles, and artillery depots.¹¹⁰ Major Evgenii Pasynok, the head of engineering forces in Grozny, recently noted that at least 190 tons of such explosives were located in the capital alone, providing an almost endless supply for the guerrillas.¹¹¹

Chechen bomb makers during the latest war have also built devices that incorporate military plastic explosives, with yields roughly five to ten times greater than that of regular dynamite (nitroglycerin) or trinitrotoluene.¹¹² This type of ordnance was used extensively by Russian GRU *spetsnaz* forces during the first war in Chechnya, and the unexploded remnants have been adapted by the Chechens, who also have steadily improved their skills in planting various forms of explosives. Remotely detonated IEDs hidden along roads and bridges have proved highly effective against Russian troop convoys, which often include vehicles without sufficient (or any) armour protection. Even the most heavily armoured combat vehicles and reinforced trailer trucks have been destroyed by 'daisy chain' explosives (multiple bombs linked together), a configuration mastered by Chechen engineers. According to Colonel Gennadii Zhilin, the head of the OGV's main operational staff, 'daisy chain' devices have been 'extremely detrimental to the combat and transport operations of [Russian] MVD and ground forces'.¹¹³ Zhilin also has acknowledged that 'IEDs laid in well chosen places along railway tracks, under rail bridges, and at way-stations and crossings' have been a 'potent means of destroying or disabling' the 'armoured trains carrying Russian troops' from one part of the North Caucasus to another.¹¹⁴ The growing sophistication of the techniques used by Chechen bomb experts was stressed by Major-General Adam Nizhalovsky, deputy head of the Russian army's main military engineering school: 'The laying of IEDs along transport routes indicates that the groups of bandits include highly skilled and well trained specialists who have extensive experience in waging a "mine war"'.¹¹⁵

In addition to relying on mines and IEDs made from left-over mortars and artillery shells, the Chechen fighters have found ingenious ways to conceal grenades and other smaller explosives. According to Russian military and MVD officers, soldiers in the field need to be especially wary of bombs disguised as cigarette packages, videocassettes, pocket lighters, cellular telephones, water bottles, soft drink cans, and door handles.¹¹⁶ All these modes of camouflage have been used by the Chechens, with deadly results. Russian commanders have also warned troops to beware of explosives when fending off sniper attacks.¹¹⁷ In some instances a Chechen sniper inside a building will fire several shots at a group of Russian soldiers outside, hoping to lure them into the building, where a variety of booby-trap mines will await them. This has contributed to the persistently high rate of

casualties — at least 65–70 soldiers a month, including 30–40 fatalities — caused by explosives.¹¹⁸

General Nizhalovsky and other Russian officers have alleged that the main reason the Chechen guerrillas have become so proficient in the use of explosives is that they have received help from foreign Islamic terrorists. Whether those allegations are well founded is hard to determine. A secretive US intelligence unit known as the Terrorist Explosive Device Analytical Center (TEDAC), which has been scrutinising bomb fragments from around the world, recently concluded that Islamic extremist groups in many regions, including Chechnya, may have shared techniques and materials for the manufacture of IEDs.¹¹⁹ The TEDAC investigators believe that a global terrorist bomb-making network is largely responsible for the much more sophisticated explosives, fuses, and detonators adopted over the past few years in car bombs and IEDs. The forensic analysis indicates that the same bomb designs and materials used in Chechnya have turned up in Africa, East Asia, and the Middle East. There is no doubt that some foreign 'jihadists' — perhaps as many as 400–500 — have fought alongside the Chechens at various points,¹²⁰ and it is conceivable that they provided extensive help with bomb construction. Still, it is not clear that this factor alone could account for the potency of the rebels' 'mine war' against Russian troops. In any case, regardless of the precise role that assistance from foreign terrorists may have played, the point to be emphasised here is that the insurgents in Chechnya have developed a formidable capacity to build and plant explosives.

Even when Russian troops discover mines that have not yet been detonated, the increasing number and sophistication of the explosives have often stymied Russian bomb disposal engineers, whose skills in many cases are deficient. The first deputy commander of the North Caucasus MVD Internal Forces district, Lieutenant-General Evgenii Abrashin, recently complained that 'our minesweeping personnel are poorly trained and are not equipped with essential locator equipment'.¹²¹ The head of the mine-clearing units, General Serdtsev, has conceded that 'the quality of the training for our engineering forces remains very low', a problem he attributes to the 'inadequate attention that is paid to this function. The training of explosives engineers is deemed to be of secondary importance and is not given the emphasis it deserves'.¹²² His sentiments have been echoed by numerous other Russian military officers, who point out that OGV de-mining squadrons have been plagued by the same ills that afflict the Russian army as a whole:

Although remote [defusing of] mines is one of the main priorities for the engineering forces, the quality of the manpower pool has been declining year after year. It is increasingly rare for us to find young servicemen who have a decent education and are physically qualified. All we can do is hope that things will get better. Naturally, this ailment has taken a heavy toll on the engineering forces.¹²³

To make matters worse, the tasks assigned to Russian mine-clearing units in Chechnya have often been wholly inappropriate. General Serdtsev complained that 'the use of explosives engineering squads as motorised infantry ... has severely detracted from their effectiveness in performing the tasks they are supposed to be carrying out'. The 'numerous cases of diversions', he argued, 'have resulted in needless loss of life'.¹²⁴

OGV bomb disposal personnel are further hindered by their equipment, which in many instances is obsolescent. General Serdtsev emphasised the magnitude of this problem during an interview in August 2004:

Unfortunately, Russia's scientific and industrial base is incapable of meeting the tactical and technical requirements we [in the mine-clearing units] now have for the latest types of armaments. Russia is lagging far behind technologically in the production of minesweeping equipment, devices to safeguard troops against explosives, engineering munitions, and robotic engineering gear. An especially onerous problem is the protection of troops against mines. This has been strikingly evident in the North Caucasus region. . . . Our experience in Chechnya has shown that the engineering forces are in dire need of more modern (and thus higher quality) armaments.¹²⁵

The most advanced equipment, such as robotic deactivation vehicles with movable arms and video links, has never been available to OGV engineers. Nor have Russian mine-clearing units received enough heavily armoured cars that can detect buried ordnance. Most of the vehicles they use are unsuitable for the mountainous terrain in southern Chechnya and are not furnished with the ancillary gear needed to cross rivers. In addition, as General Serdtsev has noted, nearly all of the equipment deployed by Russian bomb disposal engineers is prone to extended breakdowns and therefore 'cannot be maintained in combat-ready shape for any sustained period'.¹²⁶ As a result, the daily survey and mine-clearing operations are far more perilous than they should be.

Moreover, even when appropriate bomb deactivation equipment is supplied to Russian troops in the field, the rebels have taken countermeasures. In an interview in January 2004 Colonel Igor' Kashenkov, a senior aide to the commander of the North Caucasus Military District, pointed out that although some minesweeping units had acquired special combat vehicles fitted with RP-377(B) jamming devices, their efforts to block transmissions that would set off radio-controlled explosives did not prove to be of any lasting benefit:

The bandits have changed their tactics for the laying of mines and explosives. They are taking greater pains to camouflage them, and because they know the schedule of [Russian] troop movements, they are building timing mechanisms into the explosives. We have been trying to learn how to jam the radio-controlled detonators. To this end we have been relying on special equipment to suppress radio signals. But this has just meant that the [Chechen] fighters increasingly refrain from using these types of explosives. And the other types they have started using are much harder to counter, which is why tragedies are occurring.¹²⁷

Russian commanders in the North Caucasus Military District have vowed to allocate extra resources to the upgrading and expansion of the mine deactivation units, but they are aware that continued funding shortfalls will preclude any significant improvements in the near future. At a time when 'the services of explosives engineers [in Chechnya] are in demand around the clock', the paucity of highly skilled personnel and state-of-the-art equipment puts a dangerous crimp on Russian efforts to counter the effectiveness of the rebels' 'mine war'.¹²⁸

Vulnerability of air assets

The Chechens' success in shooting down Russian helicopters and aircraft also has been a serious impediment to OGV counterinsurgency operations. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Chechen fighters were able to accumulate large stocks of Soviet-made air defence missiles from a number of sources, including more than 150 Strela-3 (SA-14) and Igla (SA-16 and SA-18) portable surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) that until 1991 had belonged to a Soviet mechanised infantry division based in the North Caucasus Military District.¹²⁹ Subsequently the Chechen guerrillas were able to acquire additional supplies of shoulder-held air defence missiles from unguarded warehouses in southern Russia, from stockpiles captured during ambushes (as in Ingushetia in June 2004), from criminal gangs, and from Russian troops who sold them at discount rates.¹³⁰ The Igla missiles are especially sophisticated, offering a lethal means of attack against low-flying helicopters and aircraft (i.e. below 3,500 metres). Initially most of the portable SAMs deployed by the Chechens were equipped with identification-friend-or-foe (IFF) interrogators and receivers that prevented the warheads from detonating if the missiles were fired at 'friendly' (i.e. Soviet or Russian-made) helicopters and aircraft.¹³¹ The rebels tried to disable the IFF systems during the 1994-96 war but were unsuccessful. By the end of the 1990s, however, Chechen specialists had discovered how to deactivate the IFF. Hence Russian pilots in Chechnya now know that if their helicopters or planes are targeted by an Igla or Strela-3 missile they can no longer count on emerging unscathed.¹³²

Although the Chechen rebels do not possess other essential components of an organised air defence network — such as fighter aircraft, long-range SAMs, warning and tracking radars, and ground-control systems — they do have some important assets that can supplement the threat posed by portable air defence missiles. In particular, they have been able to rely on machine guns, submachine guns, heavy and light assault rifles, ZSU-23-2 towed anti-aircraft artillery, anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) to attack Russian helicopters and aircraft.¹³³ Because of the accuracy and relatively high-yield warheads of heat-seeking and wire-guided ATGMs, they can serve as potent means of destroying slow-moving helicopters and planes that are taking off or landing. RPGs, ZSU-23-2 cannons, machine guns, submachine guns, and assault rifles differ from ATGMs in being unguided, but Chechen fighters who are skilled in aiming RPG-7s, RPG-18s, DShK-38s, AK-47s, AK-74s and other guns have been able to use them very effectively, in volleys, against low-flying helicopters. Large-calibre (12.7 mm and 14.5 mm) machine guns have been especially lethal against Russian helicopters, but Chechen guerrillas have also been able to inflict extensive damage with smaller-calibre (7.62 mm) machine guns and assault rifles, particularly by firing rounds that penetrate the cockpit glazing and kill the pilots. The Chechens have used ZSU-23-2s not only against helicopters but also against planes, especially when they are taking off or landing.

From the time the latest war began, the Chechen guerrillas have enjoyed considerable success in damaging and shooting down Russian helicopters and aircraft. On the very first day of combat in Dagestan in August 1999, Chechen fighters used mortars and ATGMs to destroy two Russian transport helicopters, and two days later

they used a large-calibre machine gun to shoot down another Russian helicopter carrying six FAPSI troops, all of whom were either killed or seriously wounded.¹³⁴ During the first six months of the war at least six to eight Russian helicopters a day experienced combat damage, including an average of four each day that had to make forced landings. According to reports in the Russian military press, the forced landings and crashes 'resulted for the most part from hostile ground fire'.¹³⁵ Although most of the damaged helicopters were eventually able to return to combat after undergoing repairs, at least 18 were permanently lost during the initial six months of the war. Of these, nine were directly brought down by enemy fire.¹³⁶ (The other crashes were attributed to pilot error, faulty equipment, or adverse weather, but it is worth noting that hostile fire was a contributing factor in almost every case. The manoeuvres needed to evade SAMs or gunfire placed great stress both on the pilots and on the helicopters.) The rebels were particularly successful when they sent missiles or clouds of shrapnel into the central part of the helicopters' fuselage or the propellers. Strikes that pierced the tailfins and rudders also proved highly effective. The most deadly attacks occurred when Chechen gunners managed to shatter the windshield in the pilots' cabin, to sever the hydraulic and fuel systems, to snap the tail rotor control wires, or to destroy the propeller blades.¹³⁷

In addition to targeting helicopters, the guerrillas used SAMs during the same period to shoot down at least three Russian Su-25 Frogfoot ground-attack aircraft, one Su-24 Fencer-C ground-attack plane, and one Su-24MR Fencer-E naval reconnaissance aircraft.¹³⁸ In a particularly notable case in mid-December 1999, a Chechen Iгла missile forced a Su-25 to crash south of Grozny in the Shatoi district of Chechnya.¹³⁹ The Russian Air Force sent an Mi-8 Hip search-and-rescue helicopter carrying a *spetsnaz* squad to try to recover the pilot, who had ejected from the plane. But the Mi-8 was shot down in a hail of machine gun fire by Chechen guerrillas, who then turned their attention to a group of three Russian army helicopters arriving from Mozdok (a city in North Ossetia that briefly served as the OGV headquarters in 1999) to rescue any survivors. The Chechens brought down one of the three helicopters, an Mi-24V Hind gunship, killing the two pilots on board. The two other helicopters in the group — an Mi-8MT and another Mi-24V — both suffered grave damage from the ground fire, and the Mi-24V had to turn back. The Mi-8MT eventually picked up the Su-25 pilot and managed to fly far enough amid a continued barrage of machine gun fire to reach an OGV base. This episode took a final ironic twist a month later when the pilot of the Mi-8MT, Colonel Nikolai Maidanov, was killed by Chechen machine gun rounds that struck his helicopter and another Mi-8 over the same part of the Shatoi district that had been the site of the earlier Su-25 downing.¹⁴⁰

After the OGV drove the rebels out of Grozny in early 2000 the intensity of Russian air operations (especially by fixed-wing aircraft) diminished, but Russian commanders throughout the war have continued to rely heavily on helicopters for a variety of missions, including transport, attack, close air support, aerial reconnaissance, medical evacuation and search-and-rescue.¹⁴¹ Chechen fighters, for their part, have kept up their efforts to damage and destroy as many Russian helicopters as possible. According to official data, the rebels managed to shoot down 36 helicopters during the first three years of the war (including the nine destroyed in the first six months), killing hundreds of soldiers.¹⁴² The downed helicopters represented nearly 55% of the total

deployed by the OGV and more than 65% of the helicopters that were regularly in service.¹⁴³

The most dramatic of the shootdowns occurred on 19 August 2002 when a Chechen Iгла missile brought down a huge Russian Mi-26 Halo military transport helicopter over Khankala, the main headquarters of the OGV (roughly 90 kilometres northwest of Grozny).¹⁴⁴ The helicopter was ferrying officers and troops from the large Russian base in Mozdok to the OGV command centre, a route frequently traveled by Russian pilots. Because only two Mi-26s were operating in the North Caucasus at the time, Russian commanders often tried to crowd as many people as possible onto each flight. Although the helicopter was built to accommodate a maximum of 82 people, more than 145 were actually on board that day, including 127 who died when the helicopter was shot down as it was about to land at the Khankala airfield.¹⁴⁵ This incident came only four days after a Russian Mi-24 helicopter was brought down near Grozny by a rocket-propelled grenade, and it was followed almost immediately by the loss of another Mi-24, which was shot down on 31 August by a Chechen Iгла missile as it was flying from the paratrooper base in Khatuni to Malaya Allera in the Vedeno district of Chechnya. Both officers on board were killed.¹⁴⁶ These three incidents in the span of just two weeks sparked widespread apprehension within the OGV — and also within the political establishment in Moscow — about the rebels' ability to wage an ever more deadly 'anti-aircraft war'.

Spectacular as the downing of the Mi-26 may have been, it did not mark the first time that a substantial number of high-ranking Russian military and MVD officers were killed when their helicopters were struck over Chechnya. On 17 September 2001 an Mi-8MT transport helicopter carrying a Russian Defence Ministry delegation was destroyed by a Chechen Strela-3 missile roughly 30 metres above Minutka Square in central Grozny. Among the 13 people killed were two generals and eight colonels from the Russian General Staff.¹⁴⁷ This incident was especially notable because it occurred on the same day that several groups of Chechen guerrillas launched a fierce assault against Russian strongholds in Gudermes, the second largest city in Chechnya, killing more than 20 MVD troops.¹⁴⁸ The combined attacks came only a few days after OGV commanders had declared that 'Chechen fighters are no longer capable of putting up large-scale resistance', a claim that, in the wake of the events in Grozny and Gudermes, seemed 'utterly absurd', as one Russian journalist put it.¹⁴⁹ Quite apart from that, the downing of the Mi-8MT became a *cause célèbre* when a prominent Russian journalist claimed that Russian troops themselves had mistakenly shot it down in a 'friendly fire' incident.¹⁵⁰ Although this allegation turned out to be wrong, the OGV was still left with the unpleasant task of finding out how such a grave breach of security could have occurred (anyone who fired a missile at such short range would have had to penetrate the dense police cordon in the capital).

Another costly incident took place a few months later, on 27 January 2002, when Chechen guerrillas using either an RPG or an Iгла destroyed a Russian Mi-8T transport helicopter as it flew roughly 50 metres over the Shelkovskoi district of Chechnya. The helicopter, which exploded into a fireball, was carrying a group of high-ranking MVD officers, including Lieutenant-General Mikhail Rudchenko, the deputy minister of internal affairs for Russia's Southern Federal District; Lieutenant-General Nikolai Garidov, the deputy OGV commander for the MVD Internal Forces

(and commander of the Group of Internal Forces in Chechnya); Colonel Yurii Orlenko, a deputy OGV commander from the MVD; Yurii Stepanenko, the deputy head of the operational group of police organs in Chechnya; and other senior police and security officials.¹⁵¹ All told, 14 people were killed. Two days after that, Chechen guerrillas used heavy machine-gun fire to bring down another Mi-8 as it was traveling from Khankala to Vedenno.¹⁵² The helicopter, carrying 13 soldiers and four crew members, crashed near the village of Dyshne-Vedenno in the Vedenno district of Chechnya. That incident was followed less than a week later, on 3 February 2002, by the forced landing of a Russian Mi-8 helicopter in Northern Ossetia and the unexplained crash of a Russian Mi-24 helicopter near Khankala, killing three FPS officers.¹⁵³ Four days later, yet another Mi-8 crashed as it was taking off in Khankala, killing five GRU *spetsnaz* officers and four other soldiers who had been taking part in rescue missions.¹⁵⁴ These five incidents, coming in such rapid succession, temporarily instilled greater caution regarding the use of helicopters in Chechnya. For a brief while the Russian Defence Ministry imposed a ban on further flights in the region.¹⁵⁵ Nonetheless, given the lack of viable alternatives, the OGV quickly resumed its extensive reliance on helicopters, paving the way for the August 2002 shutdown.

The success that Chechen guerrillas achieved against Russian helicopters and aircraft during the first three years of the war continued in late 2002, 2003, and 2004. Helicopter flights to and from Grozny and the OGV headquarters in Khankala remained exceedingly hazardous. In late October 2002 a Chechen Iгла missile struck an Mi-8 helicopter as it flew over Khankala, forcing it to crash nearby.¹⁵⁶ All four MVD officers on board were killed. The incident came as a jolt to Rudnik Dudaev, the head of the Security Council of the pro-Russian government in Chechnya, who said it was 'incomprehensible how [the guerrillas] can shoot down helicopters over Khankala, where such an enormous number of [Russian] troops are concentrated'.¹⁵⁷ No sooner had Dudaev spoken, however, than Chechen fighters shot down another Mi-8 in the vicinity of Khankala, again with the use of an Iгла. The crash killed all nine military officers on board, including the deputy commander of the 58th Army, Colonel Stanislav Marzoev.¹⁵⁸ That incident was followed within a week by the crash of another Russian military helicopter near Khankala, this time an Mi-24.¹⁵⁹ The conspicuous demise of so many helicopters in Chechnya in the immediate aftermath of the Nord-Ost hostage crisis — a crisis that cost the lives of 129 hostages — was dismaying not only for the OGV but also for Russian political leaders, who vowed that Russia would step up its efforts to wipe out 'terrorist elements' in Chechnya.

Despite the tough rhetoric, numerous other Russian helicopters were shot down over the next two years, making a mockery of the statements by senior military and MVD officers that the 'skies over the North Caucasus' had finally become 'safe for Russian aircraft'. The continued dangers awaiting Russian pilots in Chechnya were evident in late February 2003 during a large-scale clash between Chechen guerrillas and several dozen Russian naval infantry troops in a remote mountainous area of the Vedenno district. Six of the Russian troops were killed and 15 were wounded after the guerrillas surrounded them. The OGV urgently dispatched three Mi-8s and two Mi-24s from Khankala to rescue the trapped soldiers, but the guerrillas used Kalashnikov submachine guns to shoot down one of the Mi-8s. Although the Mi-24s did eventually manage to ferry the surviving troops to safety, the downing of the Mi-8 made clear

that Russian helicopters entering Chechen airspace would 'always be in danger of coming under deadly attack'.¹⁶⁰

Through the rest of 2003 and into 2004, Chechen Igla missiles, RPGs and machine guns brought down at least one Mi-8 or Mi-24 helicopter a month, resulting in the deaths of dozens of Russian soldiers. The downing of an Mi-8 by large-calibre machine gun rounds shortly after it took off from the Bachi-Yurt airfield in the Kurchaloi district of Chechnya in July 2003 was especially costly, killing five high-ranking officers from the Grozny and Kurchaloi military commands and wounding 14 others.¹⁶¹ The officers had been intending to fly to Khankala for a high-level military conference. The head of the Kurchaloi military command, Colonel Roman Boevitov, and the chief of staff of the Grozny military command, Colonel Anatolii Tolmachev, were among the dead. That incident occurred the same day that another Mi-8 was shot down by an Igla missile immediately after taking off from Khankala to fly to Grozny, killing four officers from the 42nd Motorised Infantry Division and wounding 11 others.¹⁶² A few weeks later, another Mi-8 was downed by an Igla missile in the Vedeno district, killing three special operations officers.¹⁶³ In addition to the numerous helicopters that were shot down over Chechnya in 2003 and 2004, many others crashed either in accidents or while evading enemy ground fire, resulting in dozens more deaths.¹⁶⁴

Some Russian military officers have blamed the heavy losses of helicopters in Chechnya on the inadequate training that Russian combat pilots receive, especially for very low-altitude flights. The average annual flying time for helicopter pilots fell by roughly 90% in the 1990s.¹⁶⁵ In a lengthy critique published in early 2004, Major Dmitrii Chartorizhsky noted that Air Force pilots 'in the past were required to fly at least 100–150 hours a year', whereas pilots in 2001 were spending less than 14 hours a year in the air.¹⁶⁶ Although flight training did increase to 21 hours in 2002 and 28 in 2003, Chartorizhsky said it was 'ludicrous and outrageous' that these increases were being trumpeted as a 'significant achievement' when in fact the 'amount of flight time [for army aviation pilots as well as Air Force pilots] is still grossly inadequate'.¹⁶⁷

The impact of the decreased flying time has been especially significant during the latest Chechen war because the most experienced helicopter pilots (i.e. those who flew for the Russian army in the 1994–96 war or for the Soviet army in Afghanistan, where the mountainous terrain is similar to that in Chechnya) have been leaving the armed forces at an ever greater rate. Some of the pilots are retiring because they are too old to continue flying combat missions, whereas others have become fed up with the low wages, poor living conditions, and lack of government support.¹⁶⁸ The exodus of seasoned and highly trained pilots has inevitably taken its toll on the performance of Russian helicopters against Chechen air defences.

Another factor often cited to explain the success of the Chechens' 'anti-aircraft war' — a factor emphasised by OGV commanders — is the low quality and poor maintenance of Russia's 'increasingly obsolescent helicopter fleet'.¹⁶⁹ In an interview in early 2004, a high-ranking army aviation official, Major-General Nikolai Bezborodov, described the 'alarming state' of his troops' equipment: 'The average age of all the helicopters in Russian military aviation is 15–20 years, and the average age of the Mi-24s is well over 20 years. Roughly 70% of our military helicopters are in need of immediate repair'.¹⁷⁰ According to official data, Russian army aviation from