

The Perils of Counterinsurgency

Mark Kramer

Russia's War in Chechnya

For more than five years, Russian troops have been embroiled in a counterinsurgency 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 neighboring Republic of Dagestan. The Khasavyurt accord, which led to the withdrawal of 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. The article begins by looking briefly at the geographic and military context of the war, the events that precipitated the renewed fighting, and the early results of the conflict. It then examines the tactics used by Chechen guerrillas and the responses by Russian soldiers and security forces. The article considers why Russian troops and police, who outnumber the rebels by more than fifty to one, 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 both inside and outside the North Caucasus. The final section provides a net evaluation of Russian efforts.

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The author is grateful to Pavel Baev and Matthew Evangelista for their detailed and very helpful comments on an early draft of this article. He also wants to thank Deborah Yarsike Ball, Theodore Gerber, Stephen Hanson, Sarah Mendelson, and Brian Taylor for their astute advice. His initial work on this topic was supported under contract No. W-7405-Eng-48 with Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, managed by the University of California for the U.S. Department of Energy. The views expressed here are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of any of the individuals or organizations mentioned.

International Security, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Winter 2004/05), pp. 5–63
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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 North Ossetia to the northwest, Ingushetia to the west, and the Republic of Georgia to the south. The capital and largest city of Chechnya, Grozny, is in the center. The total land area of Chechnya is 19,300 square kilometers, 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 to around 700,000 (one thirty-fifth the size of Iraq) because 40,000–45,000 civilians have been killed, tens of thousands are living as refugees (50,000 internally, the rest externally), and many others have moved permanently elsewhere.

The terrain in Chechnya is highly diverse, ranging from plains in the north to wooded hills near Grozny and treacherous mountains in the south along the 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 guerrillas, enabling them to ambush Russian forces, conceal ammunition and weapons, and move almost unhindered between Chechnya and safe havens across the border in Georgia, Dagestan, and Ingushetia.

Huge swaths of Chechnya were destroyed during the 1994–96 war, and promises of large-scale reconstruction aid from Moscow never materialized. Although the federal government provided a limited amount of assistance (mostly energy supplies and grain), economic recovery and the rebuilding of destroyed facilities never made any headway. Further destruction occurred in 1999–2000, rendering many towns, including Grozny, almost uninhabitable. Chechnya's infrastructure has been obliterated, and basic services (e.g., running water, electricity, heat, and natural gas) are nonexistent or nearly so in many areas, including Grozny.¹ Even if the war were to end and reconstruction were to begin on a serious footing, most of Chechnya would remain blighted for years to come.

Public order in Chechnya broke down almost completely during the 1994–96 war and has not been reestablished in any meaningful way. The three years of quasi independence in Chechnya from September 1996 to September 1999

1. For a sobering overview, see Médecins Sans Frontières, *The Trauma of Ongoing War in Chechnya: Quantitative Assessment of Living Conditions and Psychosocial and General Health Status among the War-Displaced in Chechnya and Ingushetia* (Amsterdam: Médecins Sans Frontières, August 2004).

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 Chechnya by a wide margin in January 1997, but he soon came under challenge from more radical elements, especially those led by Shamil Basayev (who had run unsuccessfully in the presidential election) and Hattab, an Islamic extremist of Saudi origin. Maskhadov was unable to suppress Basayev's and Hattab's forces, and the power of warlords, criminal gangs, and Islamic extremists (including foreign terrorists) increased. The Islamic fundamentalists set up terrorist training camps in Chechnya and recruited aspiring jihadists (holy warriors) from all over southern Russia and Central Asia, giving them military training as well as political and religious indoctrination.² Maskhadov was the target of several assassination attempts in 1998–99, and although he still enjoyed broad popular support, he exercised little effective control. 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 Maskhadov and did nothing to ease his task of governance.

The combined pressure from radical Islamists and from the Russian government made Maskhadov's position untenable. In August 1999 forces led by Basayev and Hattab launched raids into Dagestan for the ostensible purpose of setting up a Wahhabist (fundamentalist Islamic) state in the Caucasus. The Russian government hurriedly ordered the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the Federal Security Service (FSB) to rebuff the incursions, a task they accomplished only with considerable difficulty. The tension created by these raids and by subsequent clashes was still acute when a string of five highly publicized terrorist bombings in Russia in the late summer of 1999 killed nearly 300 people and wounded 2,100. The circumstances of the attacks were never adequately explained, but the Russian government promptly blamed the Chechens. The bombings and raids into Dagestan were cited by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in late September 1999 when he ordered Russian troops to reassert control over Chechnya using "all available means."³

2. For a detailed (and chilling) account of the establishment and operation of these camps, see the recently declassified portions of a top-secret U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report, "Intelligence Information Report/Swift Knight—Usama Ben Laden's Current and Historical Activities," October 1998, released October 30, 2004, through a Freedom of Information Act request submitted by Judicial Watch.

3. Quoted in "Na svoei zemle my vprave navesti poryadok" [On our own land we are entitled to

The conflict escalated in October–November 1999 when Russian forces occupied northern Chechnya and then crossed the Terek River toward Grozny, surrounding it from the west, north, and east. Russian units sought to crush organized resistance and reestablish control of the capital and all other major towns and transportation routes. The fighting caused extensive bloodshed on both sides and inflicted enormous damage on Chechen cities, particularly Grozny, which was almost completely leveled 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 in most of Chechnya and at least nominal control of all major towns (though not of southern villages).

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 Russian President Boris Yeltsin 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 farther south. Nonetheless, even after the evacuation of Grozny, Chechen fighters continued to inflict heavy losses on Russian troops, especially during two highly publicized ambushes in late February and early March 2000, which came only hours after the Russian MVD chief, Vladimir Rushailo, had boasted that "the military phase of antiterrorist operations in Chechnya is drawing to a close."⁴ 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 Chechen insurgents. Putin himself rejected this notion and promised to "wipe out the terrorists and bandits."⁵ His decisive victory on March 26 signaled public approval of his tough line.

Since mid-2000, Russian forces 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 (headed by Ahmad-Haji Kadyrov from June 2000 until his assassination in May 2004), and consolidating a long-term military presence. The re-

establish order], *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, October 1, 1999, p. 1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Russian periodicals and newspapers cited here are published in Moscow.

4. Cited in Igor Rotar, "Pobeda ne stol ochevidna" [Victory is not so obvious], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, March 2, 2000, p. 1.

5. Quoted in Yuliya Skvortsova and Sergei Zharnikov, "Nachinat li peregovory s terroristami?" [Should we start negotiations with terrorists?], *Komsomolskaya pravda*, March 24, 2000, p. 2.

sults of these efforts thus far have been meager. When command of Russian operations in Chechnya was transferred from the FSB to the MVD in 2003, it was supposed to herald the “gradual end of counterterrorist actions” in favor of the more routine “maintenance of public order.”⁶ But this projected reorientation never materialized. The first deputy commander of the MVD Internal Forces in the North Caucasus, Lt. Gen. 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.”⁷ Abrashin emphasized that Russian “forces are so busy just trying to ensure their own security” that they “almost never can counter the resurgent guerrillas.”⁸

Although Chechen rebels 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 has been notoriously corrupt from the time it was formed by Russian troops in June 2000, and it enjoys scant popular support, relying instead on violent coercion. Reconstruction efforts in Chechnya have been almost nonexistent, and tens of thousands of Chechens still live as refugees outside the republic (mostly in private homes or abandoned buildings in Ingushetia and other neighboring regions). Until recently, vast numbers of Chechens had taken refuge in squalid, makeshift camps in eastern Ingushetia, but Russian soldiers forcibly disbanded these camps in 2003–04. Guerrilla operations within Chechnya and in 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 Russia 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 widespread torture, rape, forced disappearances, mass arrest operations, kidnapping, and summary executions. Far from seeking to rectify these abuses, commanding officers frequently have condoned them or turned a blind eye. The Chechen

6. See the comments of FSB Director Nikolai Patrushev and MVD Chief Boris Gryzlov in Vladimir Vasilev, “FSB sdaet, MVD prinimaet” [The FSB is yielding, and the MVD is taking over], *Trud*, July 30, 2003, p. 1.

7. Lt. Gen. Evgenii Abrashin, “Teraktov v Ingushetii i Beslane možno bylo ne dopustit” [The terrorist attacks in Ingushetia and Beslan should not have been allowed to happen], *Izvestiya*, September 24, 2004, pp. 1–3.

8. *Ibid.*

guerrillas, for their part, have often used civilians as human shields and have perpetrated grisly revenge attacks against suspected collaborators. They also have engaged in kidnapping for ransom.

The human costs of the conflict have been great not only for Chechen civilians but also for Russian troops. 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.⁹ (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.”¹⁰ The rate of casualties among Russian soldiers increased still further in late 2003 and 2004 because of a sharp rise in the number of injuries, which more than offset a slight decline in the number of deaths. Russians who have been taken captive by the guerrillas have often suffered appalling 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. The Russian government most likely will have to maintain 75,000–100,000 military, MVD, and FSB troops in the region indefinitely.

Even with the presence of these soldiers, however, the security situation in Chechnya will remain precarious. The flurry of assassinations, large-scale ambushes, and terrorist attacks in the spring and summer of 2004 underscored the intractability of the conflict. The police force set up by the pro-Russian Chechen government, numbering 13,000–14,000 men, is incapable of maintaining order. Corruption pervades the force, and Russian military officers have complained that Chechen police routinely turn over crucial information to Chechen guerrillas to help them prepare ambushes and lay explosives. In addition, many policemen have reportedly carried out attacks against Russian troops. In August 2004, for example, two police commanders in Chechnya were accused of supplying weapons and explosives to guerrillas. Another officer from the pro-Moscow government’s Presidential Guard was charged with “perpetrating terrorist attacks” and providing weapons, explosives, and safe passage to rebel leaders.¹¹ The following month, the procurator-general

9. Ilya Maksakov, “Ubiistvennaya statistika” [Murderous statistics], *Izvestiya*, February 19, 2003, p. 1.

10. Quoted in Vladimir Mukhin, “Moskva uvelichivaet voiskuyu gruppировку v Chechne” [Moscow is increasing its force grouping in Chechnya], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, June 9, 2003, p. 1.

11. “Za posobnichestvo boevikam zaderzhany militsionery” [Policemen have been arrested for colluding with the guerrillas], *Severnaya Ossetiya* (Vladikavkaz), August 21, 2004, p. 1.

for the North Caucasus disclosed that two dozen local police had abetted a series of devastating raids by Chechen and Ingush guerrillas against Russian forces in Ingushetia in June 2004. Russian soldiers have grown so wary of the Chechen police that they often avoid sharing any information about sensitive topics. The lack of a reliable police force in Chechnya has left a security vacuum. 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. Calls for revenge against Russia have gained increasing salience in Chechnya throughout the war. Nonetheless, this sentiment has not translated into widespread support among Chechens for continued fighting. The ascendance of Wahhabist guerrilla leaders, and the damage caused by the war, 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 (85–90 percent) in each case undoubtedly was inflated, and the results of the voting were obviously rigged; but even when the figures are adjusted to compensate for official manipulation, the rate of participation was surprisingly high. This, along with other evidence, suggests that many Chechens are eager for an end to the fighting.¹²

Irrespective of the popular mood, however, it is doubtful that the war will be over anytime soon. The resilience 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. 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."¹³ Although Sergeev is no longer defense minister, Russian

12. See, for example, the eleven monthly and semimonthly surveys conducted in Chechnya in March–November 2003 by the polling firm Validata, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie naseleniya Chechni ob aktualnykh problemakh respubliky* [The Chechen population's opinions about the republic's most urgent problems] (Moscow: Validata, December 2003). Even in 1999 most Chechens were dismayed when Basayev launched incursions into Dagestan that provoked new Russian attacks against Chechnya. See Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars: Will Russia Go the Way of the Soviet Union?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2002), pp. 68–69.

13. Quoted in Capt. Mikhail Sevastyanov, "Obustroistvo voisk v Chechne—eto nadolgo i vserez" [The stationing of troops in Chechnya will be prolonged and intense], *Krasnaya zvezda*, November 2, 1999, p. 1.

leaders are more determined than ever to hold on to Chechnya, and the room for compromise is minuscule at best. Putin has spurned any hint of “negotiations with terrorists” (by which he means negotiations with political actors in Chechnya other than the pro-Russian government), but in the absence of such talks the insurgency will undoubtedly continue.¹⁴

Russian Counterinsurgency Operations and Chechen Tactics

Although the Chechen guerrillas currently number only around 1,600–1,800, they have outmaneuvered 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, unwinnable war. The guerrillas hope that if the current stalemate continues, the cumulative setbacks for Russia will reshape strategic calculations in Moscow, as in 1996. The next eight sections consider why Russian troops have failed to break the stalemate.

BREAKDOWNS OF OPERATIONAL COMMAND

During the 1994–96 war, the lack of coordination among units from different ministries and services was one of the major factors responsible for Russia’s dismal performance. To mitigate that problem in the latest war, the Russian government created the Unified Grouping of Federal Forces (OGV) with jurisdiction over all military and security troops in Chechnya in four main operational sectors: North, East, West, and South.

Russia’s counterinsurgency and counterterrorist operations in Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus, including the OGV’s operations, are supposed to be overseen by the Regional Operational Staff for Control of Counterterrorist Operations in the North Caucasus, which since July 2003 has been subordinated to the MVD. Prior to that, the regional operational staff was under the FSB, which for two-and-a-half years was the agency in charge of counterinsurgency and counterterrorist efforts in Chechnya. (The transfer of operational authority from the Defense Ministry to the FSB in January 2001 was intended to augur a shift from full-fledged warfare to a low-intensity counterterrorist mission, but most operations by Russian troops since then are more accurately described as counterinsurgency.) Under a decree signed by

14. “Vladimir Putin: Rossiya ne vedet peregovorov s terroristami” [Vladimir Putin: Russia does not conduct negotiations with terrorists], FK-Novosti Newswire, February 26, 2004, item 11.

Putin in late June 2003, the MVD took over the regional operational staff in July 2003 and gained broader control of counterinsurgency and counterterrorist actions in the North Caucasus as of September 2003. In principle, the MVD's role extends even to the mountainous areas of Chechnya, which have been the site of the most intense fighting since 2000.

In reality, the operational command structure in Chechnya has been much less unified than its name suggests. The delineation of responsibilities and functions among several key Russian officials—the OGV commander, the commander of the North Caucasus Military District, the head of the MVD's Regional Operational Staff, the first deputy defense minister for counterterrorist operations, and the FSB deputy director overseeing the North Caucasus—is murky at best. Ostensibly, the head of the MVD's Regional Operational Staff directs all the OGV's operations and all the combat training and preparations in the North Caucasus Military District, but experience on the ground has shown that the Defense Ministry and FSB also still play salient operational roles in Chechnya, especially in mountainous regions.

The potential for conflicting chains of command was underscored in late 2003 by Army Gen. Vladimir Boldyrev, who was then commander of the North Caucasus Military District. He revealed that “the so-called mountain grouping [of forces], which is responsible for operations in the south of the republic, is still under the command of my deputy, General [Arkadii] Bakhin.”¹⁵ Boldyrev also noted that “roughly one-third of the officers serving on [the MVD's Regional Operational Staff] are from the Defense Ministry.”¹⁶ 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 Defense Ministry and MVD have divided [Chechnya] into zones of responsibility.”¹⁷ He explained: “Although command of the Unified Grouping of Federal Forces has now been assigned to the MVD, the Defense Ministry's units and formations continue actively working in mountainous regions of the republic. Chechnya is now divided into spheres of influence: The

15. Interview transcribed in Andrei Pilipchuk, “General-polkovnik Vladimir Boldyrev: My—lyudi derzhavnye, i Otechestvo sumeem zashchitit’” [Colonel General Vladimir Boldyrev: We are people who serve a great power, and the Fatherland will be able to defend us], *Krasnaya zvezda*, October 16, 2003, p. 1.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Interview with Boldyrev transcribed in Sergei Konovalov, “Kontrterroristicheskaya operatsiya: Voennye i militsiya podelili Chechnyu na zony otvetstvennosti” [Counterterrorist operation: The military and the police have divided Chechnya into zones of responsibility], *Kommersant*, January 19, 2004, p. 6.

part of the republic with flat terrain is controlled by the [MVD's] Internal Forces, whereas in the mountains a 33,000-strong Defense Ministry grouping has been established. . . . However, the demarcation into spheres of responsibility does not signal the start of a new phase of counterterrorist operations. No fundamental changes in the structure and tasks of the [Unified] Grouping have occurred."¹⁸

Even if the MVD had retained exclusive operational control, coordination of the OGV's activities would have been difficult. The grouping consists of units from the MVD Internal Forces (including special operations contingents), the Special Operations Police Detachments (heavily armed antiriot forces known as OMON), FSB special operations forces (*spetsnaz*), Federal Border Service patrols (now subordinated to the FSB), paratroopers from the Airborne Forces (numbering 3,900, an increase of roughly 1,400 since June 2003), reconnaissance personnel from the Foreign Intelligence Service, reconnaissance and *spetsnaz* units from the main intelligence directorate (GRU) of the armed forces, pilots from army aviation, missile and artillery units from the Ground Forces, armored and infantry detachments from the 42d Motorized 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 Railroad Troops, and search-and-rescue squads from the Ministry for Civil Defense, Emergencies, and the Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters. 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.

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 was the MVD's recent decision—without informing the OGV or the federal railroad troops command—to acquire its own armored railway train for MVD units in the North Caucasus. The head of the OGV's main operational staff, Col. Gennadii Zhilin, disclosed that “the commanders of the grouping of railroad troops and all the OGV commanders were baffled when the MVD's new train suddenly appeared at Khankala,” the main base for the OGV.¹⁹ Zhilin said that “there was no logical reason for deploying this addi-

18. Ibid.

19. Col. Gennadii Zhilin, “Opyt boevogo primeneniya voisk na Severnom Kavkaze” [Experience with the combat employment of troops in the North Caucasus], part 2, *Soldat Otechestva*, No. 47 (June 16, 2004), p. 5.

tional ‘armored train,’” which he described as a poorly designed “monster” lacking vital features: “We already had more than enough armored trains in the North Caucasus, not to mention an ample number in reserve.”²⁰ The acquisition of this superfluous train—and the squandering of resources, which the Russian government can ill afford—were 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 many costly setbacks in 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.”²¹ 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.”²² 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’s Committee on Security determined that the “lack of coordination among federal and regional security services and the army” was the main factor that “enabled the terrorists to strike at Russian units with impunity.”²³ Unless the Russian government makes a clearer commitment to consolidate the OGV, the sorts of problems that Kadyrov highlighted will persist.

PROBLEMS OF TROOP MORALE

The command system may eventually be rectified, but an even greater shortcoming is the low morale of Russian troops. Although Russian forces have per-

20. Ibid.

21. Interviews by the author with Russian MVD officials, in Moscow, December 2003 and June 2004. All thirty-seven of the Russian military and MVD officers I interviewed (twelve of them twice and twenty-five once) requested that they not be identified by name.

22. Cited in Vladimir Ivanov and Vladimir Mukhin, “Takie raznye voiny s terrorizmom” [Such are the different wars on terrorism], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 45 (December 26, 2003), p. 2.

23. Cited in Igor Plugatarev, “Ukhod nachalnika Genshtaba Kvashnina predopredelen: Kremlogotovitsya nazvat osnovnogo vinovnika za sluchivsheesya v Ingushetii” [The departure of General Staff Chief Kvashnin is preordained: The Kremlin is preparing to designate him the main culprit for what happened in Ingushetia], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 24 (July 2, 2004), pp. 1–2.

formed better during the current war than in 1994–96, the prolonged fighting has taken a heavy psychological toll on Russian soldiers, especially conscripts. The problem is not simply the constant danger of encountering ambushes, land mines, snipers, or suicide bombers. In addition, 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).²⁴ According to recent surveys, *dedovshchina* has accounted for “more than 50 percent of the casualties suffered by [Russian troops in Chechnya] and up to 80 percent in some units.”²⁵ 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 live under such miserable conditions that they just want to get out of there and leave the army before they are sent back.”²⁶ Russian commanders in Chechnya have frequently complained about the conscripts’ poor psychological state and their “lack of dedication when performing the assigned tasks.”²⁷ In April 2004 Army Gen. Vladimir Tikhomirov, who was then commander in chief of the MVD Internal Forces, acknowledged that serious problems had arisen with conscripts in Chechnya. He emphasized the “urgent necessity” of hiring more *kontraktniki* (volunteer soldiers earning higher pay). “These professionals,” he argued, “are the only ones who can fight effectively against bandits and terrorists.”²⁸

The problem, however, is that even among *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 re-

24. See Human Rights Watch, *The Wrongs of Passage: Inhuman and Degrading Treatment of New Recruits in the Russian Armed Forces* (New York: Human Rights Watch, October 2004).

25. Mikhail Khodarenok, “Na grani razlozheniya” [On the brink of disintegration], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 37 (October 5, 2001), p. 8.

26. Interview by the author with Russian Ground Forces captain who served in Chechnya until October 2003, in Moscow, December 2003.

27. Aleksei Peslis and Ruslan Pasyukov, “Glavnyi vrag na granitse—sindrom privykaniya k obstanovke” [The main enemy on the border is the syndrome of excessive complacency about the situation], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 31 (August 20, 2004), p. 1.

28. Interview with Army Gen. Vyacheslav Tikhomirov in Aleksandr Babakin, “Voiska pravoporyadka” [Troops of law enforcement], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 14 (April 16, 2004), p. 1.

garding 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 described as the “restoration of constitutional order.”²⁹

When a journalist in Chechnya asked an OMON commander why he was fighting, he responded: “Because of the political ambitions of someone back in Moscow.”³⁰ Another MVD officer remarked that “service there [in Chechnya] is not like serving anywhere else. No one in Moscow understands what a demoralizing effect this assignment has on our troops.”³¹ The mood among *kontraktniki*—who account for only a tiny percentage of Russian troops deployed in Chechnya, mostly in OMON units—has not been helped by the frequent long delays they have encountered in receiving wages and combat bonuses. In late August 2004 a group of 71 OMON officers filed a lawsuit against the MVD and threatened to go on strike because they had not received 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.”³²

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.”³³ A Russian MVD captain complained in June 2004 that “attempts to deploy more *kontraktniki* in counterterrorist operations have not produced desirable results.”³⁴ Under the latest plans and budgets for the MVD and Defense Ministry, *kontraktniki* will continue to represent only a small fraction of Russian

29. Vadim Solovev, “Severnyi Kavkaz: Retsidiv 22 iyunya 1941 goda” [The North Caucasus: A reprise of June 22, 1941], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 24 (June 25, 2004), p. 1.

30. Cited in Anna Politkovskaya, *Vtoraya chechenskaya* [The second Chechen war] (Moscow: Zakharov, 2002), p. 37.

31. Interview with Russian Ground Forces captain who had commanded both *kontraktniki* and conscripts in Chechnya, in Moscow, June 2004.

32. Olga Allenova, “Chernye stranitsy: Bukhgalteriya terrora” [Black pages: The financial book-keeping of terror], *Kommersant-Dengi*, No. 43 (November 1, 2004), p. 22.

33. Dmitri V. Trenin and Aleksei V. Malashenko, *Russia's Restless Frontier: The Chechnya Factor in Post-Soviet Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004), p. 140.

34. Interview by the author with Russian MVD captain who returned in May 2004 from Chechnya, in Moscow, June 2004.

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 remain.

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.”³⁵ Russian commanders in Chechnya have argued that without troops who are “highly motivated” to conduct “nontraditional forms of warfare,” it will be impossible to carry out the “complex, wide-ranging tasks” needed to “crush the resistance.”³⁶ 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.”³⁷ 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 not only has detracted from their fighting capability, but has also contributed to unsavory phenomena that benefit 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. In many cases when Chechen guerrillas have bribed Russian conscripts or officers, they have gained access to sensitive facilities or have been allowed to drive explosive-laden vehicles near government buildings without going through checkpoints. The Russian government has acknowledged that corrupt MVD officers were paid off by Chechen terrorists who seized hostages in a Moscow theater in October 2002 and a Beslan school in September 2004. A Western journalist who

35. “General-polkovnik Vladimir Boldyrev: ‘Voiska okruga zanimayutsya svoim delom’” [Colonel General Vladimir Boldyrev: “The district’s troops are busy with their own affairs”], *Voennyi vestnik yuga Rossii* (Rostov-na-Donu), No. 46 (November 10, 2003), p. 3.

36. Lt. Gen. Gennadii Kotenko, Maj. Gen. Ivan Vorobev, and Col. Valerii Kiselev, “Taktika—netraditsionnaya, rezultat—optimalnyi” [The tactics are untraditional, and the result is optimal], *Armeiskii sbornik*, No. 7 (July 2003), pp. 32–33.

37. Interview in Vadim Udmantsev, “Mne nravitsya moya rabota’: Spetsnaz GRU vypolnyaet v Chechne polovinu vseh boevykh zadach” [“I like my work”: The GRU *spetsnaz* are carrying out half of all combat missions in Chechnya], *VPK—Voenno-promyshlennyy kurer*, No. 16 (December 24–30, 2003), p. 5.

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."³⁸ Sales of weaponry and explosives by Russian troops to Chechen rebels remain common. Although the Chechens have not obtained new supplies of tanks and armored vehicles (which they used during the initial stages of the war), they have been able to acquire a large array of arms and munitions.³⁹

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, Col. Gennadii Zhilin, recently noted that ambushes often begin with the detonation of roadside bombs that cause disarray, 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 fire on the troops' vehicles relentlessly 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."⁴⁰ Zhilin also reported that the Chechen rebels "constantly launch surprise attacks" against Russian forces traveling by rail. Many of the "special railroad cars" used by the OGV to move soldiers and equipment "are not configured to return gunfire" and are therefore vulnerable to "ambushes by Chechen guerrillas who bombard the trains" with high-powered rifles, machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades.⁴¹ In addition, the Chechens have

38. Paul Quinn-Judge, "No Way Out?" *Time*, October 13, 2003, p. 15. Among many similar accounts is Vadim Rechkalov, "Ideologiya Basaeva: Pochemu spetssluzhby ne mogut poimat Shamilya Basaev [Basayev's ideology: Why the special services cannot catch Shamil Basayev], *Izvestiya*, December 14, 2004, pp. 1–2.

39. See Vadim Rechkalov, "Pochemu spetssluzhby ne mogut poimat Shamilya Basaeva: Prichina No. 1" [Why the special services cannot catch Shamil Basayev: Reason no. 1] *Izvestiya*, December 6, 2004, pp. 1–2.

40. Col. Gennadii Zhilin, "Opyt boevogo primeneniya voisk na Severnom Kavkaze" [Experience with the combat employment of troops in the North Caucasus], part 3, *Soldat Otechestva*, No. 47 (June 16, 2004), p. 5.

41. Zhilin, "Opyt boevogo primeneniya voisk na Severnom Kavkaze," part 2, p. 4.

undertaken large-scale raids against Russian bases and camps, especially at night.

These attacks against troop convoys, military rail transport, and fixed bases are intended to “create a constant, high level of psychological stress on [Russian] servicemen and to undermine their morale.”⁴² Ambushes have been especially effective in the southern areas of the North Caucasus, where the road system is largely nonexistent 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 spurred the commander in chief of Russian Ground Forces, Army Gen. Nikolai Kormiltsev, 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.⁴³ The new regulations, Kormiltsev argued, would “take account of the results of combat operations and other actions by [Soviet] troops in Afghanistan and [Russian troops] during the first and second Chechen campaigns.”⁴⁴ 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 safeguard military outposts: “To impede the guerrillas’ leeway for maneuver, 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 when approaching, 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).”⁴⁵ On the other hand, many Russian officers still commit basic mistakes that leave their forces vulnerable when on the move. All too often, they fail to vary their daily routes or to send out more than one armored column at a time.⁴⁶ Maj. Gen. Vladimir Abramov, the deputy OGV commander for planning, organization, and security of troop transport, recently acknowledged that “the routes of

42. Quoted from a set of “instructions on the waging of combat operations” (*instruktsii po vedeniyu boevykh deistvii*) issued by the Chechen guerrilla commander Hattab in 2002. The document was captured by Russian forces after Hattab was killed. Excerpted in Zhilin, “Opyt boevogo primeneniya voisk na Severnom Kavkaze,” part 3, p. 5.

43. Quoted in Vladimir Mukhin, “Chechnya kak obshchevoiskovoi poligon” [Chechnya as a combined-forces training ground], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 42 (November 28, 2003), p. 2.

44. Quoted in *ibid.*

45. Lt. Gen. Gennadii Kotenko, Maj. Gen. Ivan Vorobev, and Col. Valerii Kiselev, “Kogda front povsyudu” [When the front is everywhere], *Armeiskii sbornik*, No. 12 (December 2003), p. 39.

46. Interviews by the author with Russian Defense Ministry and MVD officials, in Moscow, December 2003 and June 2004.

the thirty daily convoys of Russian troops are well known, and the [Chechen] guerrillas by now have learned them well, too.”⁴⁷ Russian commanders also frequently neglect to bring along technicians and spare parts to fix equipment that breaks down. If vehicles malfunction, as they are wont to in the forbidding terrain of southern Chechnya, the crews often have to wait for repairs along the roads, where they are highly vulnerable to attack.

Furthermore, the multilayered defenses used by Russian troops to protect their bases and encampments are far from impregnable. Chechen rebels have relied on specially trained animals, including mine-sniffing dogs, to circumvent the defenses, enabling guerrillas to infiltrate Russian positions and carry out deadly attacks. Russian units camped in mountainous regions have been especially vulnerable, a point that was underscored in December 2003 when dozens of well-armed Chechens ambushed Russian FSB patrols along the Dagestan-Georgia border. In a series of raids, the guerrillas killed 9 federal personnel and seized more than a dozen hostages before dispersing into smaller groups and escaping through the mountains.

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.⁴⁸ General Abrashin, the first deputy commander of the MVD’s Internal Forces in the North Caucasus, recently emphasized 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 repulse surprise attacks] have been half-hearted and completely ineffective.”⁴⁹ The severity of this problem was underscored 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—“is smaller than the number assigned to just a single [Soviet] *spetsnaz* 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.⁵⁰

47. Interview with Gen. Abramov transcribed in Capt. Dmitrii Chartorizhskii, “General Vladimir Abramov: ‘Vykhodnykh zdes ne byvaet’” [General Vladimir Abramov: “There are no days off here”], *Suvorovskii natisk* (Khabarovsk), April 15, 2003, p. 4.

48. Cited in Yurii Demidov, “Strategiya i taktika nuzhdayutsya v izmeneniyakh” [Strategy and tactics are in need of change], *Shchit i mech*, No. 4 (January 22, 2004), pp. 3–5.

49. Quoted in Abrashin, “Teraktov v Ingushetii i Beslane možno bylo ne dopustit,” p. 3.

50. Quoted in Sergei Ptichkin, “Spetsnaz v Nazran ne doletel” [The *spetsnaz* did not reach Nazran], *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, June 24, 2004, p. 2.

Some Russian army and MVD officers have maintained that if their units could obtain greater firepower, more up-to-date equipment, and increased logistical support, they would have a better chance of thwarting and even deterring ambushes. Although these suggestions 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 counterinsurgency 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 maneuver rapidly enough to evade or thwart ambushes: "The large and powerful but disorganized 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. . . . Our troops, aside from trying to protect themselves against attack, are usually incapable of doing anything."⁵¹ Unless Russian troops can engage the guerrillas in combat almost immediately—something they have 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 is 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 anytime soon.⁵² Commanders of the North Caucasus Military District have complained that "we don't have enough modern weapons" and that "our existing equipment needs to be comprehensively modernized and replaced."⁵³ They recently warned that if nothing is done, "we will lag even further behind the world's leading states."⁵⁴ Their unease appears well founded. Despite endless talk about "military reform" in recent years, the Russian armed forces remain in woeful shape. Although defense spending has increased modestly since 2000, concrete improvements in

51. Vadim Rechkalov, "Budut lokalnye stychki s zhertvami do 100 chelovek, a voyny ne budet" ["There will be local skirmishes with up to 100 dead, but there will not be a larger war"], *Izvestiya*, August 2, 2004, p. 1.

52. See Maj. Gen. Adam Nizhalovskii's contribution in the series of untitled commentaries by senior military and MVD officers under the rubric "Kruglyi stol: Boevaya podgotovka" [Roundtable: Combat preparations], *Armeiskii sbornik*, No. 6 (June 2000), p. 11.

53. Pilipchuk, "General-polkovnik Vladimir Boldyrev," p. 1.

54. *Ibid.*

fighting capability have not yet materialized. Equipment shortages are still rife in all branches of the armed forces, and the Russian military remains stuck in the pre-digital age. A detailed study of the Russian defense-industrial complex, published in Moscow in August 2004, warned that “the low quality of Russian weapons and military equipment has undercut the country’s defense capability” and “left Russian forces vulnerable to attack during combat operations in Chechnya.”⁵⁵

The head of the federal border guards in the Argun region of Chechnya, Col. Yurii Radionov, echoed this concern: “The results of many recent armed clashes [in the North Caucasus] have shown that the [Chechen] guerrillas are equipped a lot better than our own troops are.”⁵⁶ The commander of Russia’s Airborne Forces, Lt. Gen. Aleksandr Kolmakov, likewise complained that “almost all the combat equipment our troops in Chechnya have been receiving is of an obsolete vintage more than 30 years old.”⁵⁷ Most Russian soldiers still have not been given advanced navigation and targeting systems and secure means of communication, and they lack gear needed to operate at night or in inclement weather. Many Russian ground units are forced to use “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 block off the roads.⁵⁸ Moreover, although some OGV forces have belatedly received MTU-20 and TMM pontoon bridges to maneuver 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 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. Soldiers often have been forced to scavenge parts from broken-down vehicles and

55. “Brakovannaya tekhnika podryvaet natsionalnuyu bezopasnost: Rossiiskii oboronno-promyshlennii kompleks rezko snizil kachestvo produktsii” [Defective equipment is undermining national security: The Russian defense-industrial complex has sharply lowered the quality of its production], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 29 (August 6, 2004), p. 5.

56. Interview with Radionov in Pelsis and Pasyukov, “Glavnyi vrag na granitse,” p. 1.

57. Quoted in Aleksandr Babakin, “Desant poluchaet novoe vooruzhenie” [The paratroopers are receiving new armaments], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 30 (August 13, 2004), p. 4.

58. See General Nizhalovskii’s commentary in “Kruglyi stol,” p. 13.

weapons. 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.”⁵⁹ Without adequate supplies of basic 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 overcome rebel ambushes, those weaknesses have gone unredressed. The Chechens’ rate of success in ambushing Russian forces has been increasing, not diminishing, particularly in mountainous and forested regions. Even in urban areas and along major transport routes, Chechen fighters have been able to strike Russian troops and police almost at will.

The commander of the North Caucasus Military District recently acknowledged that the “constant ambushes along the roads” in Chechnya 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.⁶⁰ No sooner had he spoken than a group of 250 Chechen and Ingush fighters launched a series of deadly nighttime raids in June 2004 against Russian MVD, FSB, and army units in Ingushetia and in the capital of Dagestan. These well-coordinated ambushes killed 98 Russian troops and officials and wounded 104 within a few hours. Both the MVD and the army came under sharp criticism afterward for their “appallingly slow and disorganized response” to the attacks, as all but two of the rebels escaped unharmed.⁶¹ Three weeks later, on the night of July 12–13, 70 Chechens ambushed FSB and police units in the Chechen village of Avtury, killing 18 troops, wounding 10, and taking a dozen hostage. The guerrillas held the town for nearly forty-eight hours and escaped without suffering any losses.

These ambushes were a notable setback for President Putin, who only a month earlier had proclaimed that “normalization in Chechnya is well under way.”⁶² A few days after the attacks in Avtury, Putin replaced the chief of the Russian General Staff and several other high-ranking army, FSB, and MVD officers responsible for operations in the North Caucasus. Presidential aides

59. Interview by the author with Russian Ground Forces colonel, in Moscow, June 2004.

60. Quoted in “General-polkovnik Vladimir Boldyrev,” p. 1.

61. Solovev, “Severnyi Kavkaz,” p. 3.

62. Quoted in Ilona Vinogradova, “Chechenskii konflikt vykhodit za predely respublikii” [The Chechen conflict is extending beyond the republic’s borders], *Izvestiya*, June 24, 2004, p. 2.

claimed that the personnel changes would foster “major improvements” in the OGV’s ability to “prevent further ambushes and attacks.”⁶³ On the ground, however, the reshuffling of commanders made no appreciable difference. In early August 2004, two weeks after Putin acted, Chechen rebels ambushed Russian forces in Kizlyar in northern Dagestan, killing 8 and wounding 5. A few weeks later, more than 250 Chechens undertook raids in Grozny and other Chechen cities that killed at least 120 Russian soldiers, OMON officers, and government officials. Grozny had been heavily fortified in anticipation of the Chechen presidential election on August 29, but 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.⁶⁴

Although Russian military and MVD officers had boasted as recently as April 2004 that “the [Chechen] bandits are no longer a credible fighting force,” the spate of large-scale ambushes in the summer of 2004—and 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 but in all parts of the North Caucasus.

THE DEADLY “MINE WAR”

The Chechens’ use of explosives has posed daunting problems for Russian troops, causing roughly 40 percent of the casualties they have suffered during the latest war.⁶⁵ Col. Gen. Nikolai Serdtsev, the head of the Russian army’s Engineering Forces, which are responsible for deactivating explosives, has argued that 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

63. Yurii Spirin, “Prezident nakazal silovikov za ingushskii proval” [The president has punished the power ministries for the Ingush debacle], *Izvestiya*, July 20, 2004, p. 1.

64. Gen. Vladimir Baranov, then-commander of the OGV, cited in “Chechnya—Nash bol” [Chechnya—Our affliction], *Zakavkazskie voennye vedomosti* (Tbilisi), No. 28 (April 28, 2004), p. 4.

65. The proportion of casualties was cited by Col. Vladimir Trushkov, head of engineering forces of the Russian airborne commando staff in Chechnya, in “Za vremya kontrterroristicheskoi operatsii na Severnom Kavkaze pogibli 22 sapera desantnika” [During the counterterrorist operation in the North Caucasus, 22 of the paratroop mine-clearers have perished], *Agentsvo voennykh novostei* [Military News Agency], April 19, 2001, item 9, and was confirmed by two commanders of engineering units in the North Caucasus, interviews in Moscow, June 2004.

with the earlier one, we find that its intensity has sharply escalated and the number of casualties among combat and technical personnel has sharply increased. All of this confirms that the terrorists are now more organized 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.⁶⁶

The head of the OGV's bomb-disposal units, Col. Vladimir Shcherbakov, claimed that during the first eleven months of combat his troops had to contend with 1,920 land mines and nearly 4,800 other explosives planted by the Chechen rebels—an average of roughly 20 devices a day.⁶⁷ Although the mine-clearing engineers reportedly neutralized 90 percent 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.⁶⁸

The intensity of the mine war increased precipitously after the rebels evacuated Grozny in February 2000. From then on, Chechen guerrillas 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). The rebels' success in laying explosives has created immense challenges for the OGV's bomb-disposal squads, who have to conduct daily inspections of 450 kilometers of roads used by the army and MVD (particularly 100 kilometers of the most heavily traveled roads), nearly 500 kilometers of railways, and the perimeters and grounds of army bases, airfields, and other military sites, including those in mountainous regions. All told, more than 1,000 minesweeping personnel are assigned to these inspections.

66. See Serdtsev's remarks in the series of untitled commentaries by senior military and MVD officers under the rubric “Kontrterroristicheskaya operatsiya na Severnom Kavkaze: Osnovnyye uroki i vyvody—Kruglyi stol” [The counterterrorist operation in the North Caucasus: The main lessons and conclusions—A roundtable], *Voennaya mysl*, No. 4 (July–August 2000), pp. 5–24. Serdtsev's commentary is on pp. 21–24.

67. Cited in Vadim Udmantsev, “Bez prava na oshibku: Okhota na saperov—neotemlemaya chast minnoi voiny v Chechne” [Without the right to make a mistake: The hunt for mine-clearers is an integral part of the mine war in Chechnya], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 38 (October 13, 2000), p. 2. General Nizhalovskii cited larger numbers of explosives discovered by OGV minesweepers, but his figures evidently include devices laid by Russian as well as Chechen forces. According to recent estimates, more than 500,000 land mines are deployed in Chechnya, nearly one for every man, woman, and child. See Aleksandr Tiranov, “Listovki v minnoi voine” [Leaflets in the mine war], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 21 (June 11, 2004), p. 2.

68. Shcherbakov cites the figure of 90 percent in Udmantsev, “Bez prava na oshibku,” p. 2.

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 has repeatedly warned that unless mine-clearing units in Chechnya carry out “full-time surveillance and sweeps of the roads,” they cannot “guarantee the safe passage of troop convoys.”⁶⁹ On a typical day in February 2004, the bomb-disposal units found “approximately 100 explosive devices, including 18 land mines,” planted near buildings, under bridges, on roads, and next to railway tracks.⁷⁰ This tally was higher than the average number of bombs they were discovering a year earlier—a trend that was disappointing for Russian military and MVD officers, who had undertaken preemptive raids against Chechen positions in 2003 to prevent the rebels from stepping up their production and use of mines and IEDs. The volume of explosives that turned up dropped slightly in the summer of 2003, but the pattern soon reversed, eclipsing the peak level of a year earlier.

By mid-2004 the number of IED attacks had risen so high that a senior correspondent for the Russian parliament’s daily newspaper expressed 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.’”⁷¹ The correspondent added that “the vast quantity of explosives available to rebel groups” would enable them to “continue their ferocious mine war indefinitely.”⁷²

The quality of munitions and detonators used by Chechen rebels also has increased since the war’s early stages. The OGV commander reported in September 2003 that 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.”⁷³ The same point was stressed by General Abramov, the OGV deputy commander responsible for

69. Quoted in “Kontrterroristicheskaya operatsiya na Severnom Kavkaze,” p. 21.

70. “Nedelya v Chechne” [The week in Chechnya], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 6 (February 20, 2004), p. 2. Valuable information about the use of explosives by Chechen guerrillas (and Russian forces) can be found in sections on “Chechnya” and “Russia” in annual reports of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the most recent of which is *Landmine Monitor Report, 2004* (New York: Human Rights Watch, November 2004).

71. Quoted in Aleksandr Bykov, “Na minnom fronte bez peremen” [On the mine front, where the situation is unchanged], *Parlamentskaya gazeta*, July 28, 2004, p. 3.

72. *Ibid.*

73. Interview with Gen. Vladimir Baranov (then OGV commander) transcribed in Aleksandr Oliinik, “Basaev seichas v Chechne” [“Basayev is in Chechnya right now”], *Russkii kurer*, September 26, 2003, p. 2.

minesweeping 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."⁷⁴ According to a senior military officer, roughly 90 percent of the Chechen IEDs "have been constructed out of mines and 122-, 130-, or 152-millimeter shells" obtained from Russian minefields and munitions stockpiles.⁷⁵ In 1999 Maj. Evgenii Pasyonok, the head of Engineering Forces in Grozny, noted that at least 190 tons of such explosives were located in the capital alone, providing an almost endless supply for the guerrillas.⁷⁶

Chechen bomb makers during the latest war also have built devices that incorporate military plastic explosives, with yields roughly five to ten times greater than that of regular dynamite (nitroglycerin) or trinitrotoluene. This type of ordnance was used extensively by Russian GRU *spetsnaz* forces in 1994–96, and the unexploded remnants have been adapted by the Chechens, who also have steadily improved their skills in planting explosives. Remotely detonated IEDs hidden along roads and bridges have proven highly effective against Russian troop convoys, which often include vehicles without sufficient armor protection. Even the most heavily armored 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 Zhilin, the head of the OGV's main operational staff, "daisy chain" devices have been "extremely detrimental to the combat operations of [Russian] MVD and ground forces."⁷⁷ Zhilin also has acknowledged that "IEDs laid in well-chosen places along railroad tracks, under rail bridges, and at way-stations and crossings" have been a "potent means of destroying or disabling" the "armored trains carrying Russian troops."⁷⁸ The growing sophisti-

74. Chartorizhskii, "General Vladimir Abramov," p. 4.

75. Interviews by the author with Russian Defense Ministry and MVD officials, in Moscow, December 2003. See also Col. Gennadii Zhilin, "Opyt boevogo primeneniya voisk na Severnom Kavkaze" [Experience with the combat employment of troops in the North Caucasus], part 1, *Soldat Otechestva*, No. 39 (May 18, 2004), p. 3.

76. Interview transcribed in "Evgenii Pasyonok, nachalnik inzhenernoi sluzhby voennoi komendaturny Groznogo: Pervogo cheloveka ya ubil v noyabre 99-go" [Evgenii Pasyonok, head of the engineering service of the Grozny military command: The first time I killed a man was in November 1999], *Izvestiya*, May 20, 2003, pp. 1–2.

77. Zhilin, "Opyt boevogo primeneniya voisk na Severnom Kavkaze," part 1, p. 3.

78. Zhilin, "Opyt boevogo primeneniya voisk na Severnom Kavkaze," part 2, p. 5.

cation of techniques used by Chechen bomb experts was emphasized by Maj. Gen. Adam Nizhalovskii, the 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, well-trained specialists who have extensive experience waging a 'mine war.'"⁷⁹

In addition to relying on mines and IEDs made from leftover mortars and artillery shells, Chechen fighters have found ingenious ways to conceal grenades and other smaller explosives. Many Russian soldiers have fallen victim to bombs disguised as cigarette packages, videocassettes, pocket lighters, cellular telephones, water bottles, soft-drink cans, and door handles.⁸⁰ Russian troops also have encountered explosives when fending off sniper attacks.⁸¹ 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.⁸²

General Nizhalovskii 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 U.S. intelligence unit known as the Terrorist Explosive Device Analytical Center (TEDAC), which has been scrutinizing bomb fragments from around the world, recently concluded that Islamic extremists in many regions, including Chechnya, may have shared techniques and materials for manufacturing IEDs.⁸³ 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. 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

79. "Kruglyi stol," p. 10.

80. Oleg Petrovskii, "Adskie syurprizy" [Diabolical surprises], *Utro.ru: Ezhednevnaia elektronnaia gazeta*, February 12, 2002, <http://www.utro.ru/articles/print/2002021201565961400.shtml>.

81. Col. Andrei Pilipchuk, "Urok po taktike, ili O chem rasskazalo odno pismo" [A lesson in tactics, or what one letter recounted], *Krasnaya zvezda*, June 7, 2003, p. 2.

82. Calculated from data for September 1999–March 2003 in International Committee to Ban Landmines, *Landmine Monitor Report, 2003* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2003), p. 718. For similar data, see the table in "Kontrterroristicheskaya operatsiya na Severnom Kavkaze," p. 22.

83. David Johnston, "U.S. Agency Sees Global Network for Bomb Making," *New York Times*, February 22, 2004, pp. 1, 9.

no doubt that some foreign jihadists—perhaps as many as 400 to 500—have fought alongside the Chechens at various points,⁸⁴ and it is conceivable that they provided help with bomb construction. Still, it is not clear that this factor alone could account for the efficacy 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 Chechens 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. General Abrashin recently complained that "our minesweeping personnel are poorly trained and are not equipped with essential locator equipment."⁸⁵ The head of the army's mine-clearing units, General Serdtsev, has conceded that "the quality of the training for our engineering forces remains very low," a problem that 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."⁸⁶ His sentiments have been echoed by numerous other Russian military officers, who point out that the OGV's 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 manpower has been declining every 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 improve. Naturally, this ailment has taken a heavy toll on the Engineering Forces."⁸⁷ 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 motorized infantry . . . has severely detracted from their effective-

84. See National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, July 2004), pp. 58–59, 64, 125, 149, 160, 165–166, 191, 233. The declassified October 1998 DIA report on al-Qaida (cited in n. 2 above) recounts Hattab's and other Chechens' close links with al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden in the mid- to late 1990s. Recent books about al-Qaida have briefly discussed Chechen links with the organization, but without much detail. See, for example, Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), especially pp. 135, 179–180.

85. Abrashin, "Teraktov v Ingushetii i Beslane možno bylo ne dopustit," p. 3.

86. See Serdtsev's commentary in "Kontrterroristicheskaya operatsiya na Severnom Kavkaze," p. 23.

87. Sergei Severinov, "I vzryvom mogut upravlyat" [They can also control an explosion], *Krasnaya zvezda*, January 21, 2004, p. 2.

ness 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.”⁸⁸

The OGV’s bomb-disposal personnel are further hindered by their equipment, which in many instances is obsolescent. Serdtsev highlighted the magnitude of the 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.⁸⁹

The most advanced equipment, such as robotic deactivation vehicles with movable arms and video links, has never been available to the OGV. Nor have Russian mine-clearing units received enough heavily armored 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 ancillary gear needed to cross rivers. In addition, as 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.”⁹⁰ 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, Chechen rebels have quickly taken effective countermeasures. In an interview in January 2004, Col. 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 detonate radio-controlled explosives did not prove to be of any

88. Comments in “Kontrterroristicheskaya operatsiya na Severnom Kavkaze,” p. 23.

89. “Nauka i promyshlennost ne gotovy udovletvoryat trebovaniya armii” [The scientific and industrial base is not ready to fulfill the demands of the army], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 29 (August 6, 2004), p. 5. See also Serdtsev’s detailed complaints in “Kontrterroristicheskaya operatsiya na Severnom Kavkaze,” pp. 22–24. This point came up repeatedly in interviews I conducted with Russian army and MVD officers, in Moscow, December 2003 and June 2004.

90. “Nauka i promyshlennost ne gotovy udovletvoryat trebovaniya armii,” p. 5.

lasting benefit: “The bandits have changed their tactics when laying 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 and have been relying on special equipment to suppress radio signals. But this has just meant that the [Chechen] guerrillas increasingly refrain from using these types of explosives. The other types they have started using are much harder to counter, which is why tragedies are occurring.”⁹¹ Russian commanders in the North Caucasus Military District have vowed to allocate extra resources to upgrade and expand the mine-deactivation units, but they are aware that continued funding shortfalls will likely preclude any significant improvements. At a time when “the services of explosives engineers [in Chechnya] are in demand around the clock,” the dearth of highly skilled personnel and state-of-the-art equipment puts a dangerous crimp on Russian efforts to counter the rebels’ mine war.⁹²

VULNERABILITY OF AIR ASSETS

The Chechens’ success in shooting down Russian helicopters and aircraft has been another serious impediment to the OGV’s counterinsurgency operations. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Chechen fighters accumulated large stocks of Soviet-made air defense missiles from numerous 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 mechanized infantry division in the North Caucasus Military District. Subsequently, Chechen guerrillas acquired shoulder-held SAMs 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 a discount. The Igla missiles are especially sophisticated, offering a lethal means of attacking low-flying helicopters and aircraft (i.e., those below 3,500 meters). 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.⁹³ The rebels tried, unsuccessfully, to

91. Cited in Elena Shesternina, “Boeviki pomenyali fugasnuyu taktiku” [The guerrillas have changed their tactics in the use of explosives], *Russkii kurer*, January 16, 2004, p. 2.

92. Severinov, “I vzryvom mogut upravlyat,” p. 2.

93. SA-16s exported to non-Warsaw Pact countries did not include IFF interrogators, but the advanced versions deployed by Soviet and East European forces—and subsequently obtained by

disable the IFF systems during the 1994–96 war. By the end of the 1990s, however, Chechen specialists had discovered how to deactivate the IFF. Hence, Russian pilots in Chechnya now know that their helicopters and planes are vulnerable to Chechen missiles.

Although the Chechens do not possess other essential components of an organized air defense network—fighter aircraft, long-range SAMs, warning and tracking radars, and ground control systems—they do have important assets that supplement the threat posed by portable air defense missiles. In particular, they have amassed machine guns, submachine guns, assault rifles, ZSU-23-2 antiaircraft artillery, antitank guided missiles (ATGMs), and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) to attack Russian helicopters and aircraft. Because of the accuracy and relatively high-yield warheads of heat-seeking and wire-guided ATGMs, they can destroy slow-moving helicopters and planes during takeoff or landing. RPGs, ZSU-23-2 cannons, machine guns, submachine guns, and assault rifles differ from ATGMs in being unguided, but Chechen fighters have been able to use these weapons with deadly accuracy against low-flying helicopters. Large-caliber (12.7- and 14.5-millimeter) machine guns have been especially lethal against Russian helicopters, but Chechen guerrillas also have inflicted extensive damage with smaller-caliber (7.62-millimeter) machine guns and assault rifles, particularly by firing rounds that penetrate the cockpit glazing, killing the pilots. The Chechens have used ZSU-23-2s not only against helicopters but also against planes that are taking off or landing.

Throughout the latest war, Chechen guerrillas have enjoyed considerable success in damaging and shooting down Russian helicopters and aircraft. On the first day of combat in Dagestan in August 1999, Chechen fighters used mortars and ATGMs to destroy two Russian transport helicopters. Two days later they used a large-caliber machine gun to shoot down another Russian helicopter carrying 6 FAPSI troops, all of whom were killed or seriously wounded. During the first six months of the war, at least four Russian helicopters a day crashed or made forced landings, and another four experienced significant combat damage. The Russian military press confirmed that the forced landings and crashes “resulted mostly from hostile ground fire.”⁹⁴ Al-

Chechen rebels—did include IFF systems. See Steven J. Zaloga, *Soviet Air Defense Missiles: Design, Development, and Tactics* (Carlson, UK: Jane’s Information Group, 1989), pp. 115, 123–124.

94. Evgenii Smyshlyaev, “Vertolety nad Chechni: Sistemu ekspluatatsii tekhniki reformirovat v khode konflikta” [Helicopters over Chechnya: The system for exploiting technology is to be reformed during the conflict], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 38 (October 13, 2000), p. 6, including table 2, which summarizes data on combat damage and forced landings.

though many of the damaged helicopters eventually returned to combat after undergoing repairs, at least eighteen helicopters were permanently lost during the initial six months of the war. Of these, nine were directly brought down by enemy fire.⁹⁵ (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 maneuvers needed to evade SAMs or gunfire placed great stress on the pilots and helicopters.) Chechen rebels were particularly successful when they sent missiles or clouds of shrapnel into the tailfins, rudders, propellers, or central part of the helicopters' fuselage. 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.

In addition to targeting helicopters, the guerrillas during this same period used SAMs 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. In a particularly notable case in mid-December 1999, a Chechen Igla missile forced a Su-25 to crash south of Grozny in the Shatoi district of Chechnya. 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 three Russian army helicopters arriving from Mozdok (a city in North Ossetia that briefly served as the OGV headquarters) to rescue any survivors. The Chechens brought down one of the three helicopters, an Mi-24V Hind gunship, killing the two pilots. Both of the other helicopters in the group—an Mi-8MT and another Mi-24V—suffered grave damage from hostile fire, and the Mi-24V had to turn back. The Mi-8MT eventually picked up the Su-25 pilot and flew 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 was killed by Chechen machine gun rounds that struck his helicopter and another Mi-8 over the same part of the Shatoi district in which the Su-25 was shot down.

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 have continued to rely heavily on helicopters for key missions, including transport, attack, close air support, aerial reconnaissance,

95. Ibid., p. 7, table 4.

medical evacuation, and search and rescue.⁹⁶ 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 shot down thirty-six helicopters during the first three years of the war (including the nine destroyed in the first six months), killing hundreds of soldiers.⁹⁷ The downed helicopters represented nearly 55 percent of the total deployed by the OGV and more than 65 percent of the helicopters that were regularly in service.

The most dramatic shutdown occurred on August 19, 2002, when a Chechen Igla missile brought down a Russian Mi-26 Halo military transport helicopter over Khankala, the OGV's main headquarters. The helicopter was ferrying soldiers from the large Russian base in Mozdok to the OGV command center, a frequent route for 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 on board that day, including 127 who died when the helicopter was shot down as it approached the Khankala airfield.⁹⁸ 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 August 31 by a Chechen Igla missile in southern Chechnya, killing both officers on board. These three incidents in the span of just two weeks sparked widespread apprehension within the OGV (and the political establishment in Moscow) about the rebels' ability to wage a deadly "antiaircraft war."

The Chechens' success in destroying or disabling 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's headquarters in Khankala remained exceedingly hazardous. In both 2003 and the first half of 2004, Chechen Igla missiles, RPGs, and machine guns brought down at least one Mi-8 or Mi-24 helicopter a month, killing dozens of Russian soldiers and

96. Ildar Berdetinov, "V nebe Kavkaza" [In the skies of the Caucasus], *Aviatsiya i kosmonavtika*, No. 2 (February 2004), pp. 11–13.

97. Evgenii Matveev, "Tridtsat pyaty: V srednem federalnye voiska teryayut v Chechne po vertoletu v mesyats" [The thirty-fifth: On average the federal forces are losing a helicopter each month], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 30 (August 30, 2002), p. 1; and Vladimir Urban, "Protivovozdushnaya voina boevikov" [The guerrillas' air defense war], *Novye izvestiya*, September 3, 2002, p. 2.

98. Two others subsequently died from injuries suffered during the crash, bringing the total death toll to 129.

making a mockery of the statements by military and MVD commanders that the “skies over the North Caucasus are now safe for Russian aircraft.”⁹⁹ In addition to the helicopters that were shot down, many others crashed either in accidents or while evading enemy ground fire, resulting in dozens more deaths.

Some Russian military officers have blamed the heavy losses of helicopters in Chechnya on the inadequate training of Russian combat pilots, especially for very low-altitude flights. The average annual flying time for helicopter pilots fell by roughly 90 percent in the 1990s.¹⁰⁰ In a lengthy critique published in early 2004, Maj. Dmitrii Chartorizhskii noted that Air Force and army aviation 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.¹⁰¹ Although flight training did increase to 21 hours in 2002 and 28 in 2003, Chartorizhskii said it was “ludicrous and outrageous” that these increases were being trumpeted as a “significant achievement” when in fact the “amount of flight time is still grossly inadequate.”¹⁰²

The impact of the decreased flying time has been especially significant during the latest Chechen war because the most experienced helicopter pilots (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 military in ever greater numbers. Some of the pilots are retiring because they are too old to fly combat missions, whereas others have become dissatisfied with the low wages, poor living conditions, and lack of government support.¹⁰³ The exodus of seasoned and highly trained pilots has inevitably detracted from the performance of Russian helicopters against Chechen air defenses.

Another factor often cited by OGV commanders to explain the success of the Chechens’ antiaircraft war is the low quality and poor maintenance of Russia’s “increasingly obsolescent helicopter fleet.”¹⁰⁴ In an interview in early 2004, a

99. Cited in Vladimir Barinov, “Mi-8 sbili v usloviyakh plokhoi vidimosti” [They shot down the Mi-8 in conditions of poor visibility], *Gazeta*, August 11, 2003, p. 4.

100. Alexander Mladenov, “Russia’s Second Chechen War,” *Air Forces Monthly*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (January 2003), pp. 66–71, especially p. 69.

101. Maj. Dmitrii Chartorizhskii, “Vozdushnaya trevoga” [Air alert], *Suvorovskii natisk* (Khabarovsk), January 31, 2004, p. 2.

102. *Ibid.*

103. Mladenov, “Russia’s Second Chechen War,” pp. 69–70.

104. Interview with Gen. Vladimir Baranov, then-commander of the OGV, in “Iz pervykh ruk: Po instruktsiyam ‘Al Kaidy’” [From a firsthand source: According to the instructions of al-Qaida], *Voenna-promyshlennyyi kurer*, No. 1 (January 14, 2004), p. 3.

high-ranking army aviation official, Maj. Gen. Nikolai Bezborodov, described the “alarming state” of his troops’ equipment: “The average age of all helicopters in Russian military aviation is 15–20 years, and the average age of the Mi-24s is well over 20 years. Roughly 70 percent of our military helicopters are in need of immediate repair.”¹⁰⁵ According to official data, Russian army aviation from 1995 to 2004 did not receive a single new combat or transport helicopter.¹⁰⁶ Most of the Mi-8s and Mi-24s deployed in Chechnya were produced at the beginning of the 1980s for the Soviet war in Afghanistan and have not been upgraded since then. Their armor protection is inadequate; their avionics are from the pre-digital age; their fuel systems are not crash-resistant; their rotor blades are in a state of decay; and their altimeters, Doppler radars, and navigation equipment are old and unreliable. Almost all of the Mi-8s and Mi-24s lack transponders that would allow them to receive real-time data from Global Positioning System satellites. Their communications systems are obsolete, and their air-to-ground transmissions are vulnerable to being intercepted by Chechen rebels equipped with modern multifrequency scanners. (In numerous cases the Chechens also have used state-of-the-art transmitters to redirect Russian pilots into dangerous areas.) An August 2004 study by a Russian military expert concluded that “the obsolete and defective weapons used [by Russian pilots] during combat operations in Chechnya” contributed directly to the “frequent shootdowns of Russian helicopters and aircraft.”¹⁰⁷

In addition to the problems posed by outdated technology, Russian helicopters in Chechnya have been chronically short of spare parts and have not been properly maintained. Many Mi-8s and Mi-24s have been grounded indefinitely for want of vital parts. The crews have had to fly without bulletproof helmets, fire-resistant flight suits, and modern survival kits. Moreover, unlike during the Soviet-Afghan war, neither the Mi-8s nor the Mi-24s are equipped with infrared engine exhaust suppressors. The omission of the suppressors enhances engine power, but it leaves the helicopters more vulnerable to enemy SAMs.

The woeful state of the helicopter fleet is compounded by the aging and decrepit equipment at Russian airfields, which rely on radar, navigation, meteorological, ground-control, and communications systems dating back thirty to forty years. Repair and maintenance facilities at the airfields are obsolete and

105. Cited in Chartorizhskii, “Vozdushnaya trevoga,” p. 2. See also Elena Loriya, Dmitrii Safonov, and Aleksandr Chuikov, “Vertoletnyi park armeiskoi aviatsii iznoshen na 70 protsentov” [The helicopter fleet of army aviation is short by 70 percent], *Izvestiya*, July 16, 2002, p. 3.

106. Chartorizhskii, “Vozdushnaya trevoga,” p. 2.

107. “Brakovannaya tekhnika podryvaet natsionalnyu bezopasnost,” p. 5.

often useless. As a result, emergency repairs and overhauls have lagged far behind schedule. The Russian Defense Ministry recently warned that “if fundamental improvements are not made urgently, Russian military aviation by 2010 will present a greater threat to its own country (to pilots, passengers, and others) than to a likely adversary.”¹⁰⁸

Even when the guerrillas have not succeeded in shooting down Russian helicopters, the threat posed by Chechen air defenses has forced Russian pilots to make undesired and potentially dangerous adjustments in flight patterns, especially in mountainous regions. A Russian military journalist noted that helicopter “pilots in Chechnya have to carry out their missions under maximum physical and psychological stress” not only because of the excessive number of flights ordered by the OGV, but also because of the hostile ground fire they expect to encounter.¹⁰⁹ Russian pilots have been particularly leery of “operating in mountainous areas at altitudes above 2,000 meters,” where the insurgents hide from view while preparing to fire SAMs or guns at Russian aircraft that draw near.¹¹⁰ Although the pilots can adopt countermeasures, all such steps have their drawbacks. If helicopters stay out of areas in which they are likely to encounter enemy fire, they presumably will be safer, but this tactic is impossible for pilots assigned to major routes such as Mozdok-Khankala, Grozny-Khankala, and Gudermes-Grozny, all of which are heavily traveled every day. To mitigate the risks of being shot down by SAMs, a helicopter on these routes might rely on “nap-of-the-earth” flying (i.e., moving at rapid speeds just above treetop level) to prevent rebels on the ground from taking aim and firing their missiles before the helicopter is out of range. The trade-off, however, is that RPGs and heavy guns are especially useful against low-flying targets, as the Soviet Army learned in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Moreover, the demonstrated effectiveness of Igla missiles against Russian helicopters at extremely low altitudes indicates that nap-of-the-earth flying is no guarantee of safety even against SAMs.

Other countermeasures, such as the use of flares, chaff, decoys, jamming devices, and infrared engine exhaust suppressors, can help thwart enemy SAMs, but there are limits on the effectiveness of these techniques in the Russian-Chechen war. The Igla is equipped with an infrared guidance system that distinguishes flares from engine exhaust. Moreover, as noted earlier, engine

108. Chartorizhskii, “Vozdushnaya trevoga,” p. 2.

109. *Ibid.*

110. *Ibid.*

exhaust suppressors, which were widely used on Soviet Mi-8s and Mi-24s in Afghanistan to counter portable SAMs, have not been installed on Russian helicopters in Chechnya. The resulting increase in engine power is offset by the greater vulnerability to Chechen missiles. Nor have Russian helicopters yet been equipped with reliable sensors to warn of approaching SAMs.¹¹¹ Recent tests of a new Mak infrared sensor on an Mi-8MTV revealed it to be highly deficient. Furthermore, even if the SAM threat could be eliminated, flares, chaff, and other countermeasures (both active and passive) are of no use in deflecting gunfire and unguided shells.

Helicopters can try flying at night to elude visual detection by enemy gunners below, but the OGV cannot rely predominantly on nighttime flights. Many combat and support missions in Chechnya (e.g., ground attack, rapid redeployments, search and rescue, and medical evacuation) must be performed during the day, especially in mountainous regions. Moreover, transport flights for major routes are already so tightly planned that it would be infeasible to regroup all of them into a nighttime schedule. Technological limitations also are a severe hindrance to nighttime flying for the OGV. Until recently, even the most advanced Russian military helicopters lacked elementary night-vision gear and were unable to operate effectively at night. The Russian government launched a program in 1998 to reconfigure a small number of Mi-8MTV transport helicopters to make them night-capable. The upgraded Mi-8MTKOs, which were sent to Chechnya in mid-2000 after they were hastily completed, have been able to perform a limited range of nighttime missions, but only three such helicopters have actually been deployed there, and they have often been grounded because of a dearth of spare parts.¹¹² Aside from a few highly publicized flights (which were intended mainly to attract foreign customers), the impact of the Mi-8MTKOs on the war has been negligible.

To expand the possible range of nighttime missions, the Russian Defense Ministry initiated a program in 2000 to reconfigure a small number of Mi-24s. In early 2004 senior officers claimed that a “fully modernized” version, the Mi-24PN, would be “capable of performing combat missions around the

111. Mladenov, “Russia’s Second Chechen War,” p. 69.

112. “V VS Rossii prodolzhat zakupki vertoletov Mi-24PN i Mi-8MTKO dlya chastei armeiskoi aviatsii—glavkom” [The Russian Armed Forces are continuing to purchase Mi-24PN and Mi-8MTKO helicopters for army aviation units—commander in chief], Interfax, March 11, 2004, item 3; and Nikolai Soiko, “Na sluzhbe otechestvu” [Serving the fatherland], *Krylyya Rodiny*, No. 4 (April 2003), pp. 7–8. This point was confirmed during interviews by the author with Russian army officers, in Moscow, June 2004.

clock and in all types of weather," but preliminary tests of the first five helicopters revealed that in fact "the Mi-24PNs are not truly capable of being used at night or in adverse weather."¹¹³ A Russian military journalist who scrutinized the test results concluded that the Mi-24PNs were "completely useless" and that the hype surrounding them was intended solely to generate sales abroad.¹¹⁴ (It is telling that the initial five models were designated for export to Uganda rather than for use in Chechnya.) The journalist contended that without a true night-capable helicopter, Russian troops in Chechnya would suffer "further horrendous casualties" from the air:

Since 1999 we have had roughly 20 Mi-24s in our permanent grouping of forces in Chechnya shot down. Another dozen or so Mi-24s were damaged and then cannibalized for spare parts. . . . Statements about the "great survivability of Mi-24s" are just empty rhetoric intended, one assumes, to bolster the prospects of finding customers in Africa. . . . Experience proved long ago that an ordinary combat helicopter cannot be transformed into a night-capable machine simply by placing unwieldy night-vision goggles on the pilot, as is being done for the Mi-24PN. . . . Since the start of the latest Chechen campaign it has been clear that (as knowledgeable observers predicted) without night-capable, all-weather strike aviation there is no way to operate in those mountains. Funds were promptly allocated [in 1999] for the accelerated construction of a fully night-capable helicopter, but . . . five years have now passed, and there still is no sign of such a helicopter. . . . Even if the generals are unable to distinguish a night-capable helicopter from one that operates during the day, we should at least expect them to give us an accounting of how they spent the money designated for the construction of "night-capable" machines.¹¹⁵

Another Russian expert on military affairs echoed this view, arguing that the Russian army would remain "catastrophically short of night-capable aviation . . . until we find the resources to buy genuinely new helicopters."¹¹⁶ Although Russian military aviation officials have claimed they will finally acquire a true "fifth-generation" helicopter when the Mi-28N enters production in 2007 or 2008, the projected capabilities of this system have yet to be proven.¹¹⁷ Judging

113. Cited in Pavel Felgengauer, "Nochnoi vertolet" [Nighttime helicopter], *Novaya gazeta*, February 2, 2004, p. 4.

114. *Ibid.*

115. *Ibid.*

116. Konstantin Makienko, deputy director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, quoted in Nikolai Poroskov and Dmitrii Starostin, "Esli zavtra voina" [If war breaks out tomorrow], *Vremya novostei*, September 12, 2002, p. 1.

117. Nikolai Poroskov, "'Nochnoi okhotnik' zamenit 'letayushchii tank': Armeiskaya aviatsiya poluchaet novyi vertolet" [A "nocturnal hunter" is replacing a "flying tank": Army aviation is receiving a new helicopter], *Vremya novostei*, April 1, 2004, p. 2.

by the hopes that were dashed when the Mi-8MTKOs and Mi-24PNs actually appeared, it seems unlikely that the Mi-28Ns will match the hype of today's Russian military press releases. Furthermore, even if the Mi-28Ns do perform much better than the Mi-24PNs, the impact on operations in Chechnya will be nil. Russian commanders have made clear that they will not be sending any Mi-28Ns to Chechnya even if the war drags on interminably. The ostensible reason for not assigning Mi-28Ns to the North Caucasus is that "this type of helicopter is not currently needed there," but the more plausible reason is that one or more helicopters might promptly be shot down, causing great embarrassment for officers involved with the program and risking the compromise of key technologies.¹¹⁸

The vulnerability of Russian helicopters to Chechen SAMs and guns has been further exacerbated by the recent transfer of the army aviation branch of the Ground Forces to the Air Force. This reorganization, which began in late 2002 and was completed in December 2003 (a year later than initially planned), was prompted by the uproar that ensued after the Mi-26 debacle in August 2002. Russian military and civilian experts warned at the time that the proposed transfer made no operational sense, but political leaders and General Staff officers wanted to find scapegoats and to give the appearance of "doing something" to prevent further disasters.¹¹⁹ At Putin's behest, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov issued a directive in late August 2002 codifying the move. Although Air Force commanders welcomed the reorganization (believing it would strengthen their bureaucratic clout vis-à-vis the Ground Forces), senior army aviation officers publicly condemned the idea as "deeply misguided and flawed."¹²⁰ Shortly after Ivanov issued his directive, Maj. Gen. Valentin Rog predicted that the transfer would reduce the combat effectiveness of Russian army aviation by at least 25 to 30 percent, leading to "widespread confusion" and "increased loss of life."¹²¹ He called on the government to reverse the move, but to no avail.

After the transfer was completed, other high-ranking army aviation officers voiced "dismay" that the reorganization had "undermined the combat capabil-

118. Ibid.

119. "Aviatsiya Sukhoputnykh voisk voidet v sostav VVS" [The Ground Forces' aviation is transferring to the Air Force], *Kommersant*, August 27, 2002, p. 4.

120. Maj. Gen. Valentin Rog, "Zlovrednaya konyunkturshchina: S perepodchineniem armeiskoi aviatsii ognevoe porazhenie snizhenno na tret, a vysadka desanta—na chetvert" [Pernicious opportunism: The resubordination of army aviation has diminished its firepower by one-third and its airborne capacity by one-fourth], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 43 (December 6, 2002), p. 5.

121. Ibid.

ity” of Russian helicopter forces. The Air Force, they argued, “has no resources, economic incentive, or realistic plan to develop army aviation.”¹²² The former commander of army aviation, Col. Gen. Vitalii Pavlov, declared that he “could not find even the slightest justification for the Defense Ministry’s action,” an action that in his view ran “contrary to the twenty years of experience we have gained from wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya.”¹²³ Pavlov added that the move had “replaced experienced officers and pilots with paper-pushers” and had contributed to the “departure of nearly 200 of our best helicopter pilots.”¹²⁴

The continued threat to Russian helicopters in Chechnya shows how the different types of tactics used by Chechen guerrillas reinforce one another. One of the main reasons that pro-Russian Chechen officials and OGV commanders have relied so heavily on military helicopters for transport over relatively short distances is that Russian ground vehicles face the constant risk of being destroyed by enemy mines, IEDs, or ambushes. For a brief while after the August 2002 shutdown of the Mi-26, Russian commanders hoped they could transport more soldiers and equipment by rail, but problems with mines, IEDs, and ambushes along the railroads prevented any major shift. A Russian commentator noted that “as long as republic leaders and [Russian] military commanders believe that air defense missiles are less threatening than explosives planted by the road or railway tracks, we will continue to see big targets appear in the sky over the [Chechen] capital numerous times a day.”¹²⁵ A senior Russian military officer drew an even gloomier conclusion: “One thing we can accurately predict is that, along with the ‘wars’ of land mines and ambushes, another type of war—an anti-aircraft war—will continue to plague the federal forces in Chechnya.”¹²⁶

SNIPERS

The vulnerability of Russian soldiers to Chechen snipers has long posed serious problems for the OGV. Although losses from sniper attacks constitute only

122. Cited in Evgenii Matveev, “Daite poletat khot na chem-nibud’! V VVS ne znayut, chto zhe delat’ s armeiskoi aviatsiei” [“Let’s fly on anything that comes along!” The Air Force has no idea what to do with army aviation], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 3 (January 30, 2004), p. 2.

123. Interview with General Pavlov transcribed in Vladimir Mukhin, “Vertolety padayut iz-za nerazberikhi v upravlenii” [Helicopters are crashing as a result of the disarray within the directorate], *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, No. 38 (October 24, 2003), p. 3.

124. *Ibid.*

125. Ilya Maksakov, “Itogi ‘chernogo ponedelnika’ v Chechne” [The results of “Black Monday” in Chechnya], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, September 19, 2001, p. 7.

126. Urban, “Protivovozdushnaya voina boevikov,” p. 2.

a relatively small percentage of the death toll among Russian troops, the purpose of the attacks is threefold: to keep Russian soldiers constantly on edge, to disrupt the work of specialized squads (e.g., mine-clearing units), and to create havoc in the Russian chain of command.¹²⁷ Some Chechen snipers work together, targeting convoys of Russian troops, whereas others operate individually against small numbers of soldiers. In either case, the snipers take up positions in abandoned buildings, trenches, mountain ridges, and other sites that allow them to remain concealed. They also periodically go out on broad patrols, actively searching for new targets.

For various reasons, Chechen snipers have carried out most of their urban attacks at night. Nighttime control of the streets in Grozny and other Chechen cities is largely nonexistent, allowing the snipers to move freely into suitable positions. They face little if any danger of being detected by night-vision devices, which are unavailable to most Russian troops in Chechnya. Although streetlights in Grozny frequently are left off (either deliberately or because they are not working), snipers have used a number of means to ensure proper targeting without having to rely on night-vision weapon sights. Often, for example, they have waited for Russian soldiers to take out pocket lighters or matches to light cigarettes, offering a conspicuous target. Largely for this reason, most Russian troops who have been killed by snipers at night have been shot through the jaw. Chechen rebels also occasionally have aimed for the groins of soldiers to inflict a crippling, humiliating injury that necessitates help from at least one other soldier, who himself then becomes a target for attack.

Russian military commanders have tried to reduce the lethality and frequency of sniper shootings by providing better training for soldiers and by alerting them to the risks of unprotected movements. Despite these efforts, reports to Khankala from officers in the field make clear that training and education alone have not overcome the challenge posed by Chechen snipers.¹²⁸ For example, Russian tank crews still often leave the hatches of their vehicles open for prolonged periods in urban areas, exposing themselves to sniper fire from the upper floors of surrounding buildings.

SUICIDE BOMBINGS AND ASSASSINATIONS AGAINST OFFICIAL TARGETS

Chechen rebels have repeatedly carried out suicide bombing attacks against Russian troops and facilities. These sorts of attacks began early in the war, par-

127. See, for example, Kotenko, Vorobev, and Kiselev, "Kogda front povsyudu," p. 37.

128. Konstantin Rashchepkin, "Tovarishch komanduyushchii" [Comrade commander], *Voin Rossii*, No. 1 (January 2004), pp. 80–87.

ticularly after the guerrillas evacuated Grozny in February 2000. Initially, suicide bombings were directed mainly at small groups of Russian soldiers at urban checkpoints, but in the late spring of 2000 the rebels shifted their approach. In June 2000, two Chechen women drove a bomb-laden van into the headquarters of a Russian OMON unit in the Alkhan-Yurt district of Chechnya, killing at least 2 police commandos and wounding many others. Four days later, a Russian mercenary working for the Chechens attempted to drive a car bomb into an OMON checkpoint on the outskirts of Grozny. When guards stopped him and demanded to inspect his vehicle, he detonated the bomb, killing at least 2 OMON officers and wounding several others. The following day, a Russian soldier who was secretly aiding the Chechens triggered a powerful car bomb at another OMON checkpoint in a settlement adjacent to Grozny. The Chechens followed up on these bombings with dozens of surprise attacks against Russian military units in Chechnya, a spree that killed many soldiers and fostered a siege mentality within the OGV.

This spate of suicide car bombings in June 2000 was overshadowed a few weeks later when Chechen rebels drove large truck bombs into five separate Russian army and MVD facilities in a single day. The deadliest of the five truck bombings was in Argun, where 24 MVD officers were killed and dozens were wounded. The other attacks that day—in Novogroznenskii, Urus-Martan, and two regions of Gudermes—killed 14 troops and wounded hundreds. The bombings were devastating not only in their human toll but also in their psychological impact, revealing a degree of coordination that was nearly impossible to overcome.

These car and truck bombings in mid-2000, and many similar incidents over the next few months, were the first in a long series of vehicle-bomb explosions and other large-scale suicide attacks against Russian military, security, and administrative personnel in the North Caucasus—attacks that by the autumn of 2004 had resulted in more than 1,200 deaths and many thousands of injuries. The number of lives lost was significant every year, but it escalated after the October 2002 hostage crisis in Moscow (discussed below). The flurry of attacks spurred the commander of the North Caucasus Military District to acknowledge that even though important steps had been taken to prevent suicide bombings against Russian forces, “we can never fully exclude the possibility of further terrorist acts, no matter what efforts we make.”¹²⁹

129. Pilipchuk, “General-polkovnik Vladimir Boldyrev,” p. 1.

In addition to targeting Russian troops and administrative personnel in the North Caucasus, Chechen rebels have waged a deadly campaign against the pro-Russian government in Chechnya, relying on tactics similar to those used by the Vietcong in South Vietnam, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria. Through a combination of targeted assassinations, suicide bombings, hostage-takings, and other violent acts, Chechen guerrillas have sought to destabilize and demoralize the government, to deter Chechens from supporting it, and to create the appearance of official weakness and turmoil. Small-scale terrorist operations have occurred every day in Chechnya in recent years, and much larger attacks also have been common, including a suicide bombing in October 2002 that destroyed the local security headquarters in Grozny, killing at least 25 people. This incident, coming just two weeks before the hostage crisis in Moscow, heralded a sharp escalation of major attacks on the pro-Moscow government. In December 2002 Chechen guerrillas drove two Kamaz trucks, each packed with more than a ton of explosives, into the Chechen government's main complex in Grozny. The bombs destroyed the buildings, killed 85 people, and wounded hundreds. In May 2003 a powerful truck bomb leveled the Chechen government's regional headquarters and the FSB's regional administrative building in Znamenskoe. Many other attacks of comparable scale occurred in Chechnya in the latter half of 2003 and 2004.

Most of all, the Chechen guerrillas sought to kill the leader of the pro-Moscow administration, Ahmad-Haji Kadyrov, and other senior officials—an objective they finally achieved on May 9, 2004, during Victory Day celebrations held in Dinamo stadium in Grozny to commemorate the defeat of Germany in 1945. An IED made of two 152-millimeter artillery shells was planted in the concrete support structure below the section reserved for high government officials. The bomb went off an hour-and-a-half into the ceremony, shortly before Kadyrov and his entourage were scheduled to leave for Khankala to take part in a parade. The explosion instantly killed Kadyrov and the head of the republic's state council as well as two of Kadyrov's bodyguards. Numerous other Chechen and Russian officials also were killed, and nearly 60, including the commander of the OGV and the military commandant of Chechnya, were severely wounded. The bombing came at almost the same moment that Putin, in a Victory Day speech in Moscow, was boasting of his government's success in "combating international terrorism."¹³⁰ The guerrillas swiftly followed up

130. "Vystuplenie na voennom parade, posvyashchennom 59-i godovshchine pobedy v Velikoi

on the assassination by ambushing Russian military and OMON units south of Grozny, killing 12 soldiers and wounding at least 35.

Subsequent investigations revealed that although Chechen fighters did not know in advance that Kadyrov would be attending the festivities (he originally was going to be out of town and changed his plans at the last minute), they deliberately targeted the special tribunal in which high-ranking officials would be seated. The investigations also revealed that the stadium had not been under round-the-clock guard during repairs in April and early May, prior to the Victory Day celebration.¹³¹ Hence, Chechen rebels were able to enter the stadium unhindered to plant bombs in what should have been the most secure section. Observers in Russia initially speculated that a member of Kadyrov's inner circle must have colluded with the attackers, but it now appears likely that two more mundane factors—the MVD's sheer carelessness in failing to guard the stadium in the weeks before the celebration, and the army's inability to sweep the area for explosives in a timely manner on May 9—accounted for the rebels' success.

Having eliminated Kadyrov, Chechen fighters sought to replicate the feat against his successors. In July 2004, on the same day that Chechen guerrillas ambushed Russian forces in Avtury, another rebel group set off a bomb in Grozny that nearly killed the acting president of Chechnya, Sergei Abramov. The bomb was detonated as Abramov's motorcade headed toward his residence, and the guerrillas then fired submachine guns and rifles at the president's car. Three of Abramov's bodyguards were killed or wounded, and, according to an observer, "it was only through pure luck that [Abramov himself] avoided death."¹³² At least one further attempt was made on Abramov's life before the Chechen presidential election in late August 2004. Aslan Maskhadov and other Chechen separatist leaders had declared in advance that "it would be only a matter of time" until "the person chosen by Moscow to win the [Chechen] election" would, like Kadyrov, "fall victim to a warrior's hand."¹³³ After the Russian government announced that its favored candidate,

Otechestvennoi voine" [Speech at the military parade celebrating the 59th anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War], official transcript at <http://president.kremlin.ru>, May 9, 2004.

131. Abrashin, "Teraktov v Ingushetii i Beslane možno bylo ne dopustit," p. 1.

132. "V Groznom vzorvan kortezh i.o. prezidenta Chechni" [In Grozny the motorcade of the acting president of Chechnya has been bombed], *Zerkalo (Vologda)*, July 14, 2004, p. 1.

133. Andrei Riskin, "Chechenskii krizis snova vykhodit za ramki respubliki" [The Chechen crisis is again extending beyond the republic's borders], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, August 3, 2004, p. 2.

Alu Alkhanov, had won the election, Chechen guerrillas warned that the new leader would “meet the same fate that awaits all puppets of Moscow.”¹³⁴ Alkhanov himself conceded, upon taking office in early October 2004, that “as head of the government I have now become Target Number One for the extremists.”¹³⁵

Attacks against the pro-Russian government are intended not only to deter other Chechens from cooperating with Moscow but also to thwart Putin’s attempts at “Chechenization” (the devolution of power to local authorities). Beginning in early 2003 the Russian president claimed that Kadyrov’s government would assume much greater responsibility for preserving order in Chechnya with the aid of local police. The Chechen guerrillas, for their part, were determined to prevent the pro-Russian government from establishing a firmer hold. The rebels repeatedly targeted police officers, especially the ones who (at Kadyrov’s behest) had conducted mass roundups similar to those carried out by Russian troops. Many deadly attacks against the Chechen police occurred in 2003 and 2004, culminating in waves of violence in the four months between the assassination of Kadyrov and the election to replace him. Further bombings after Alkhanov’s electoral victory killed dozens more Chechen police, despite vigorous efforts by the Russian MVD and FSB to prevent such attacks.

Although the strategy of Chechenization was thrown into doubt by the wave of terrorism in August–September 2004, Putin has indicated that he still hopes to turn over greater power to the Chechen government. Many Chechen officials, however, have questioned whether the Russian army is genuinely willing to proceed along that path. Russian military and MVD officers have never concealed their doubts about the loyalties of the Chechen police, and they have been averse to relying on local personnel who might later betray them. Ever since Chechen guerrillas killed a high-ranking Russian military envoy, Lt. Gen. Igor Shifrin, in Grozny in November 2002—apparently after learning of his motor route from Chechen police officials—Russian commanders have been intent on “avoiding further acts of treachery.” The Russian General Staff has warned mid-level Russian officers that “all information

134. Message posted on Chechen rebel website <http://www.kavkazcenter.com>, cited on “Segodnya” [Today], NTV television news, August 31, 2004.

135. Quoted in Iлона Vinogradova, “Alu Alkhanov poluchil derzhavu Chechni” [Alu Alkhanov has received the supreme mantle of Chechnya], *Izvestiya*, October 6, 2004, p. 1.

pertaining to the deployment of federal forces [in Chechnya] is a military secret" and must not be divulged to the Chechen authorities.¹³⁶ In January 2004 the OGV commander said that "it will require a lot of time—a minimum of several more years—before the Chechen police can be trained to function normally. Right now they obviously do not meet the necessary standard."¹³⁷ A few months later, one of the highest-ranking Russian MVD commanders declared that "because of the turbulent situation in [Chechnya] and the low level of professionalism of the Chechen police, it would be inadvisable to transfer greater command authority to local Chechen officials."¹³⁸ This sentiment waxed ever larger after the catastrophic breach of security in Grozny in May 2004. A senior official in the pro-Russian government recently emphasized that, regardless of what Putin might say, "Russian generals [in Chechnya] have zero enthusiasm" for relinquishing control of the republic.¹³⁹ Even if Russian military and MVD officers were far more supportive of Chechenization, the devastating attacks against the Chechen government and Chechen police have largely derailed the whole strategy.

To make matters worse, the campaign of suicide bombings and assassinations against the pro-Russian government in Chechnya has increasingly spread to other parts of the North Caucasus. In late August 2003 a bomb detonated by two Chechens in Makhachkala, the Dagestani capital, killed the Dagestani minister of nationality policy, the latest in a long series of Dagestani officials who have been assassinated since the current war in Chechnya began. Chechen rebels carried out many other attacks against regional and local government targets in Dagestan in late 2003 and 2004, including the bombing of state-controlled oil and gas pipelines near Makhachkala in early April 2004. The bombing forced the cessation of all energy deliveries to and from Azerbaijan for several days and was far more damaging than the Chechens' previous efforts to disrupt Russian energy supplies in the region. Chechen fighters also have repeatedly targeted police patrols, police stations, and OMON units in Dagestan. These attacks occurred so frequently in 2004 that

136. Musa Muradov, "Navstrechu referendumu: Ogranichennyi izbytochnyi kontingent" [In the lead-up to the referendum: The limited surplus contingent], *Kommersant*, March 4, 2003, p. 1.

137. Interview with Army Gen. Vladimir Baranov, then-commander of the OGV, transcribed in Andrei Fefelov, "Chechnya trevogi nashei" [Chechnya of our anxiety], *Zavtra*, No. 2 (January 9, 2004), pp. 1, 3.

138. Interview with Army Gen. Vyacheslav Tikhomirov transcribed in Babakin, "Voiska pravoporyadka," pp. 1, 3.

139. Cited in Muradov, "Navstrechu referendumu," p. 1.

Dagestani officials expressed “doubt that the law enforcement organs can ever restore order.”¹⁴⁰

Chechen guerrillas have been even more active in Ingushetia, which Russian officials say has “been converted into a full-fledged base for Chechen guerrillas, enabling them to undertake repeated combat incursions and to plan and prepare terrorist acts.”¹⁴¹ The president of Ingushetia, Murat Zyazikov, was the target of at least two recent assassination attempts. In April 2004 Zyazikov barely escaped death when a Chechen suicide bomber drove a car alongside the presidential motorcade and detonated it, causing extensive damage to nearby houses as well as to the motorcade. The heavy armored plating on Zyazikov’s Mercedes limousine was the only thing that saved him. A further surge of violence in Ingushetia in the spring and summer of 2004 bore out the misgivings of two Russian observers who warned in late 2003 that the OGV was ill prepared to respond if the fighting in Chechnya continued to “infect” other regions: “It now seems clear that members of the illegal armed formations can move wherever they want in the North Caucasus without any problem. One gets the impression that it is not the police who are tracking down the guerrillas, but the guerrillas who have declared open hunting season on the law enforcement organs. . . . The danger is that the federal government, having sent all its forces to hold on to Chechnya, has ‘lost’ control over other Caucasus regions. The guerrillas have been quick to exploit this situation. The epidemic of terror is spreading to the entire North Caucasus.”¹⁴²

During the first few years of the latest Russian-Chechen war, many parts of the North Caucasus were largely immune to the violence that plagued Chechnya, but the situation by mid-2004 had become far more volatile. Suicide attacks against official targets had spread not only to Ingushetia and Dagestan but also to North Ossetia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and other regions, all of which were included in Shamil Basayev’s newly “widened zones of combat operations.”¹⁴³ No matter where Russian troops and govern-

140. Vyacheslav Izmailov, “Boi na Severnom Kavkaze” [Battles in the North Caucasus], *Novaya gazeta*, March 15, 2004, p. 6.

141. Svetlana Gomzikova and Andrei Riskin, “Kavkaz rasstrelnyi: Epidemiya terrora rasprostranilas na vse regiony, okruzhayushchie Chechnyu” [The Caucasus under fire: The epidemic of terror is spreading to all the regions surrounding Chechnya], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 1, 2003, p. 6.

142. *Ibid.*

143. Cited in Andrei Serenko, “Vverkh po lestnitse, vedushchei v nikuda: Ni odin stsenarii razvitiya situatsii v Chechne ne vyglyadit optimistichnym” [Up a staircase that leads nowhere:

ment officials were located, they were vulnerable to suicide bombings and other deadly strikes.

TERRORIST ATTACKS AGAINST UNOFFICIAL "SOFT" TARGETS

In addition to targeting Russian institutions in the North Caucasus, Chechen rebels increasingly have sought to extend the war to the rest of Russia, especially Moscow. Chechen fighters carried out a few large-scale terrorist attacks against "soft" targets in Russia during the 1994–96 war, most notably in June 1995, when Shamil Basayev led a raid on the municipal hospital in Budennovsk and seized more than 1,000 hostages, and in January 1996, when a rebel group organized by Salman Raduyev seized roughly 2,000 hostages in the Dagestani town of Kizlyar. Basayev's success in extracting key concessions from the Russian government, and Raduyev's ability to elude capture by federal troops, had a crucial effect on Russian public opinion and on the outcome of the conflict. During the latest war, Basayev and other Chechen commanders have resorted to terrorism in Russia far more frequently and have emphasized suicide bombings, a tactic they eschewed during the previous war. Evidently, the Chechens hope that large-scale terrorist attacks in the Russian capital will turn public sentiment against the war (as the Budennovsk and Kizlyar raids did in 1995 and 1996) and leave the Russian government with no alternative but to pursue negotiations.

The first major terrorist attack against a civilian target in Russia occurred in May 2002 when Chechen extremists detonated a shrapnel-filled IED during Victory Day celebrations in the Dagestani city of Kaspiisk, killing 45 bystanders (mostly children and elderly people) and wounding nearly 200. Subsequent investigations revealed that the bombers concealed the device in shrubs near the parade route shortly after the area had been checked by a police bomb-disposal squad that was not equipped with explosives detectors. Chechen terrorists extended their campaign to Moscow five months later with a dramatic, three-day hostage crisis that began shortly after a powerful car bomb (apparently planted by Chechens) exploded outside a McDonald's restaurant in the Russian capital. On October 23, 2002, a group of 53 heavily armed Chechens seized the crowded Dubrovka theater in central Moscow during a performance of the *Nord-Ost* musical.¹⁴⁴ The captors declared that unless Russia granted in-

Not a single scenario for the emerging situation in Chechnya appears optimistic], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, January 13, 2004, p. 11.

144. For an illuminating account of the crisis and the implications for similar types of hostage

dependence to Chechnya and immediately withdrew its troops from the region, they would blow up the building with roughly 980 hostages inside. Although most of the hostages were saved when Russian *spetsnaz* forces stormed the theater on October 26, the rescue operation ended with the deaths of nearly 130 hostages, all but 2 of whom succumbed to the potent anesthetizing gas used by the rescuers.¹⁴⁵

The boldness of the hostage-taking signaled a sharp escalation of the Chechens' earlier attempts to "bring the war to Moscow's doorstep."¹⁴⁶ Many other terrorist attacks occurred in Russia over the next two years, albeit in a different form. Until the seizure of a school in North Ossetia in September 2004, Chechen terrorists eschewed further mass hostage-takings and resorted instead to suicide bombings against civilian targets, a tactic favored since the early 1980s by the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka and more recently by Palestinian terrorist groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. The commonalities between Palestinian and Chechen suicide bombers—with similar designs of explosives, the same types of bomb vests, and the use of female as well as male bombers—suggest that some Chechen terrorists may have received training, equipment, explosives, and advice from the Palestinians. There is ample evidence that at least a few Chechens traveled to the West Bank after 1999, but the extent of cooperation beyond that is unclear. Whatever the case may be, the use of suicide bombers (known as *shahidin*, or martyrs) against "soft" targets both inside and outside the North Caucasus was the most notable shift in Chechen tactics in 2003–04.

In 2003 alone, nine suicide bombings in Moscow were attributed to the Chechens, and more than 600 other terrorist bombings occurred elsewhere in

emergencies, see Adam Dolnik and Richard Pilch, "The Moscow Theater Hostage Crisis: The Perpetrators, Their Tactics, and the Russian Response," *International Negotiation*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2003), pp. 577–611.

145. Afterward, Russian Health Minister Yurii Shevchenko averred that the gas was a fentanyl derivative, but this claim is not borne out by anesthesiological data. See Josef Rieder, Christian Keller, Georg Hoffman, and Philip Lirk, "Moscow Theatre Siege and Anaesthetic Drugs," *Lancet* (London), March 29, 2003, p. 1131. Most likely, the rescuers used a much more powerful incapacitating agent of the sort prohibited by the 1993 Chemical Weapons Convention and the 1925 Geneva Protocol on Chemical Warfare. Apart from Shevchenko's general statement, the Russian authorities refused to identify the gas or to divulge anything about it. Even the medical personnel who provided emergency care to unconscious hostages were not informed what type of gas had been used and therefore did not know the proper antidotes to administer. As a result, some hostages who might have been saved ended up dying of asphyxiation. Other hostages died even sooner because of the lack of adequate emergency care on the scene.

146. This slogan was used by Basayev going back to the earliest stages of the war. See Mark Franchetti, "Muslim Warns of Moscow War," *Times* (London), September 19, 1999, p. 4.

Russia, especially in or near the North Caucasus.¹⁴⁷ Most of these attacks caused little bloodshed, but some resulted in large numbers of casualties. In early July 2003 two Chechen women wearing shrapnel-filled bomb vests blew themselves up outside the Tushino aerodrome stadium in Moscow, where a rock-and-roll concert was under way. The first explosion caused minimal damage, but the second killed 15 bystanders and wounded more than 80. Four days later, another Chechen woman wearing a bomb vest tried to blow up a restaurant on one of the busiest streets in downtown Moscow, but was apprehended when the device failed to explode. An FSB bomb-disposal expert was killed when he tried to deactivate the device, but he was the only direct casualty. Even so, the revelation that a second suicide bombing was barely averted—and that other Chechen *shahidin* were still present in Moscow—came as a psychological blow in a city that was already on edge.

A further rash of terrorist bombings over the next few months in cities outside Moscow sparked even greater tension. The deadliest incident occurred in early December 2003, two days before Russian parliamentary elections, when four Chechens blew apart a crowded commuter train as it approached the Essentuki station in southern Russia, killing 46 and wounding more than 200.

The attacks outside Moscow exacted a high death toll, but they were overshadowed when large-scale suicide bombings resumed in the capital. Four days after the train in Essentuki was destroyed, two Chechen women wearing nail-studded bomb vests blew themselves up in front of the National Hotel just outside Red Square in Moscow. The blasts killed 6 people, wounded nearly 100, and caused severe disruption in the heart of the Russian capital. By all indications, the intended target was the nearby building of the Russian State Duma (the lower house of parliament). Evidently, the bomb vest of at least one of the women detonated prematurely. This incident led to a further sharp tightening of security precautions in Moscow, but in early February 2004 two Chechen suicide terrorists, aided by a native of Karachaevo-Cherkessiya (a small region west of Chechnya), set off bombs on the Moscow subway, demolishing a train headed for the Paveletskaya station. At least 41 people died, and more than 130 were seriously injured.

Over the next several months, bomb attacks (and threats of attacks) attributed to Chechen terrorists caused upheaval in many of Russia's largest cities.

147. Data compiled by the Russian chief procurator's office and presented to the Russian parliament's upper chamber, September 2004. See Natalya Ratiani, "Siloviki dolozhili senatoram obstanovku po Beslanu" [The power ministries reported to the senators about the circumstances in Beslan], *Izvestiya*, September 21, 2004, p. 1.

In early June 2004 a bomb leveled a crowded outdoor market in Samara, killing 11 and wounding 90. The following month, powerful bombs destroyed bus stations in Voronezh on two successive days, killing several, wounding dozens, and sparking widespread panic. Threats soon abounded of imminent attacks by Chechen terrorists in St. Petersburg and Moscow. In late July 2004 a senior MVD official, Nikolai Ovchinnikov, claimed that 150–200 Chechens had entered St. Petersburg and Moscow to undertake large-scale terrorist operations.¹⁴⁸ Ovchinnikov tried to assure residents that extraordinary security measures had been implemented to prevent such attacks, but he conceded that “the situation will remain extremely tense and volatile” in the lead-up to the Chechen presidential election on August 29.

Expectations that Moscow would fall victim to new terrorist attacks as the Chechen election approached proved well founded. On August 24, two days after Chechen guerrillas killed dozens of Russian troops and officials in Chechnya, two Chechen women wearing bomb vests boarded flights at Moscow’s Domodedovo airport heading to cities in southern Russia. The women obtained tickets at the last minute and passed through the security checkpoint without undergoing thorough screenings. Once the two flights were airborne, the women detonated their explosive belts, causing the planes to crash almost simultaneously, killing a total of 90 people. The Russian government initially denied that terrorists caused the planes to go down, but a few days later, after investigators found traces of hexogen (a powerful explosive used previously by Chechen terrorists) at the two crash sites and obtained detailed information about the two Chechen women, the authorities acknowledged the terrorist link. Security measures in the Russian capital were reinforced almost to a wartime footing, but on August 31, two days after the Chechen presidential election, another Chechen woman blew herself up during rush hour at the Rizhskaya station of the Moscow subway, killing 11 and wounding nearly 70. Investigators determined that the subway bomber was a sister of one of the women who destroyed the airliners a week earlier, and they also learned that a close relative of the other airline bomber was still in the Moscow area, presumably waiting to strike elsewhere.

The wave of terrorism accompanying the Chechen presidential election reached its peak on September 1, 2004, when at least 33 heavily armed attackers, mostly of Chechen and Ingush origin, seized Middle School No. 1 in

148. Interview transcribed in Roman Kirillov, “MVD k teraktam gotovo” [The MVD is prepared for terrorist attacks], *Izvestiya*, July 31, 2004, p. 2.

Beslan, a North Ossetian town near Ingushetia. As the traditional first-day-of-school celebrations were under way, the terrorists surrounded the school and forced more than 1,300 students, parents, and teachers into the gymnasium, holding them captive there under horrific conditions for the next fifty-two hours. The hostage-takers laid mines around the perimeter of the building and strung up powerful explosives all over the gymnasium so that they could blow it up instantaneously. Having learned from the October 2002 crisis, the terrorists broke the windows in the gymnasium to disperse any gas that might be pumped in, and they took numerous other steps, such as monitoring the schoolgrounds constantly on all sides and sealing off the plumbing and ventilation systems, to ensure that they could not be overpowered by Russian security forces before detonating the munitions.

The crisis came to a gruesome end on September 3 when a bomb in the gymnasium exploded, apparently by accident, and spurred some of the hostages to try to flee, prompting the terrorists to open fire on them. The commotion inside the school provoked gunshots from outside, which in turn impelled the hostage-takers to return fire and to detonate their explosives, causing the gymnasium ceiling to collapse. Fierce exchanges of gunfire continued for hours, until the last of the hostage-takers either fled or was killed. The explosions, shooting, and ensuing chaos resulted in the deaths of more than 400 hostages (338 confirmed dead and more than 70 officially “missing” and presumed dead), including at least 200 children. Nearly 700 of the survivors were hospitalized, many with life-threatening injuries. In addition, 29 MVD, FSB, and army troops were killed during the siege, and at least 75 were seriously wounded. The deaths of 8 FSB Alpha commandos were the heaviest losses ever suffered by that elite squad.¹⁴⁹

Coming in the immediate wake of other terrorist attacks in Moscow and the North Caucasus, the Beslan crisis had an electrifying impact in Russia. Recriminations against the local and regional security forces and governments, and to some extent against the central authorities, spurred Putin to replace several high-ranking officials in North Ossetia and other parts of the North Caucasus. Putin also used the opportunity to introduce changes in the Russian political system that greatly strengthened his own power, ostensibly so he could wage a more effective fight against international terrorism, which he blamed for the Beslan massacre.¹⁵⁰ Although opinion polls showed that many Russians dis-

149. “Besprezidentnye poteri ‘Alfy’” [Unprecedented losses for “Alpha”], *Kommersant*, September 6, 2004, p. 4.

150. The joint parliamentary commission that was set up to investigate the incident reported in

agreed with the proposed measures, Putin encountered little difficulty securing parliamentary approval. Opinion polls also showed that, regardless of what Putin pledged to do, a large majority of Russians were convinced that Chechen terrorists would strike again.

The Chechens' frequent success in carrying out terrorist attacks in Russia has been facilitated by the grave deficiencies of the main Russian security agencies—the FSB and MVD. The two organizations have often clashed and have been reluctant to share intelligence or pursue joint operations. Moreover, both agencies have repeatedly (and sometimes disastrously) failed to infiltrate Chechen terrorist cells. In recent years, FSB and MVD officials have avoided even trying to recruit Chechens, in part because they do not trust them. As Aleksandr Litvinenko, a former FSB officer, recently explained: “In the FSB they naturally fear and know that at any moment [a Chechen recruit] might elude their control and turn against them. The damage from his actions would then vastly exceed the benefit they might have gained.”¹⁵¹ To mitigate this risk, the FSB and MVD have eschewed Chechen informants and have been left without anyone on the inside.

Although the two agencies have sought to gain intelligence through electronic means, the effectiveness of this technique is limited. According to Litvinenko, intercepted Chechen communications have been almost useless because so few ever get translated. In the 1990s, he noted, the FSB had only one Chechen-speaking translator on its staff, and the situation has improved little if any since then.¹⁵² During the October 2002 hostage crisis, the FSB intercepted the terrorists' phone conversations but was unable to translate them. The magnitude of the problem was underscored in August 2004 by a prominent Russian journalist, Vadim Rechkalov, who noted that “during the many times I have been to Chechnya over the past several years I have never met a single Russian soldier or FSB official who knew the Chechen language.”¹⁵³ Rechkalov added that “Russian MVD troops who guard checkpoints do know a bit of Chechen—but only the phrases for ‘open your trunk’ and ‘twenty rubles,’

late November 2004 that it had “found no direct evidence of any involvement by foreign special services in the hostage seizure.” The commission noted that it had reached this preliminary conclusion after receiving materials from Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service. See Oksana Ushakova, “Parlamentskoe rassledovanie: Beslanskii terakt” [Parliamentary investigation: The Beslan terrorist attack], *Parlamentskaya gazeta*, November 29, 2004, p. 2.

151. Quoted in Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, “Spetsy po terroru: FSB prevrashchaetsya v armiyu” [Specialists on terror: The FSB is being converted into an army], *Versiya*, No. 49 (December 2003), p. 10.

152. *Ibid.*

153. Rechkalov, “Budut lokalnye stychki s zhevtvami do 100 chelovek, a voyny ne budet,” p. 3.

which they pronounce without an accent.”¹⁵⁴ The most serious obstacle of all to the FSB’s and MVD’s counterterrorist efforts is the corruption that plagues the two agencies. Russian leaders have acknowledged that corruption among MVD personnel facilitated some of the recent terrorist incidents, but the problem is much more widespread and entrenched (and extends far higher up the chain of command) than the government has admitted.

Not surprisingly, the Chechens’ success in attacking “soft” targets in Russia has had a far-reaching impact on Russian public opinion, though not always in the way the perpetrators intended. The apartment bombings in 1999 that were blamed (rightly or wrongly) on the Chechens hardened public resolve and generated widespread support for the reintroduction of Russian troops into Chechnya. Similarly, the Dubrovka theater crisis in October 2002 led to a sharp increase in the number of Russians who opposed any “concessions to terrorists” and who wanted a tougher policy in Chechnya.¹⁵⁵ More recently, however, the effects of Chechen suicide attacks have been more mixed and sometimes contradictory. The terrorist incidents in Moscow in 2003 and early 2004 generally caused a significant but fugacious hardening of public sentiment, giving way to a more fatalistic sense that the war in Chechnya would “drag out interminably” and that further attacks on civilians were “inevitable.”¹⁵⁶ Although a few polls in the first half of 2004 indicated that a majority of respondents favored “peace negotiations”—a finding contradicted by other polls—almost no one who espoused this view was able to specify suitable partners for negotiations.¹⁵⁷ The one consistent aspect of the polls through the first half of 2004 was that very few Russians believed that a “major escalation of Russia’s military effort” in Chechnya would end the war or diminish the risk of terrorism.¹⁵⁸ The spate of attacks in August–September 2004, especially

154. Ibid.

155. See the surveys from late October, November, and December 2002 in Vserossiiskii Tsentr Izucheniya Obshchestvennogo Mneniya, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie, 2002* [Public opinion, 2002] (Moscow: VTsIOM, 2003), pp. 147, 153, 161.

156. See, for example, three countrywide survey reports compiled in 2004 by the Fond Obshchestvennogo Mneniya (Public Opinion Foundation): *Vzryv v moskovskom metro: Opros naseleniya, 19.2.2004* [Explosion in the Moscow subway: A survey of the population, 19.2.2004], Moscow, February 2004; *Na Yuzhnom fronte bez peremen: Opros naseleniya, 20.5.2004* [On the Southern Front, where the situation is unchanged: A survey of the population, 20.5.2004], Moscow, May 2004; and *Situatsiya v Chechne: Opros naseleniya, 09.09.2004* [The situation in Chechnya: A survey of the population, 9.9.2004], Moscow, September 2004.

157. See the interviews with Yurii Levada and Dmitrii Polikanov transcribed in Aleksandr Gudkov, “Obshchestvennoe mnenie: Segodnya lyudi vinyat rossiiskie vlasti” [Public opinion: Nowadays people blame the Russian authorities], *Vremya novostei*, September 2, 2004, p. 3.

158. Analiticheskii Tsentr Yuriya Levady, *Kak pokonchit s terrorizmom v Rossii? Statistika oprosa, 10–*

the carnage in Beslan, sparked increased public hostility toward Chechens (a sentiment that was already strong) and a desire to crack down on the separatists, but the polls also revealed a continued streak of fatalism and a lack of any consensus about how to prevent further atrocities.

The impact of Chechen terrorism on the Russian government has been more clear-cut. Far from inducing (or compelling) the Russian authorities to embark on peace negotiations, the terrorist incidents in 2003 and 2004 reinforced Putin's determination to "wipe out all terrorist scum, no matter where they are."¹⁵⁹ By the same token, the Chechens' adoption of rhetoric and tactics (notably suicide bombings) that have been the hallmark of terrorists linked with al-Qaida has made it far easier for Putin to depict the Chechen war as an integral part of global efforts against international terrorism. The Chechen terrorists who seized the Dubrovka theater sent a prerecorded video to the Arabic news organization al-Jazeera showing the female captors wearing Islamic chadors in front of a banner inscribed with the Arabic words "Allahu akhbar" (God is great).¹⁶⁰ Throughout the video the captors used al-Qaida-like rhetoric, including the slogan (borrowed word-for-word from Osama bin Laden) that "we yearn for death even more than you yearn for life." The Dubrovka terrorists' conspicuous emulation of al-Qaida in the video provided an enormous fillip to the Russian government's efforts to discredit the armed resistance in Chechnya, and the shocking brutality of the hostage-takers in Beslan (who also used phrases suggestive of al-Qaida) reinforced those efforts. Putin and other Russian leaders now regularly claim that the aims of the Chechen rebels and al-Qaida are "absolutely identical" and that the Chechens "have been receiving tens of millions of dollars from abroad for the training of suicide terrorists," especially the so-called black widows (Chechen women who resort to suicidal revenge attacks after their male relatives have been killed by Russian troops).¹⁶¹

13 *sent'yabrya 2004 goda* [How can terrorism be ended in Russia? Results of a survey on 10–13 September 2004], Moscow, September 2004. See also Gudkov, "Obshchestvennoe mnenie," p. 3.

159. "Obrashchenie prezidenta Vladimira Putina, 4 sent'yabrya 2004 goda" [Address by President Vladimir Putin, 4 September 2004], *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, September 5, 2004, pp. 1–2.

160. Until recently the video was available online at the Chechen rebel website <http://www.kavkazcenter.com>, but this website was shut down by the Lithuanian government in September 2004 under strong pressure from the Russian authorities. When the website was resurrected (apparently from a server in Great Britain) in December 2004, some of the earlier videos, including this one, were no longer available. The video, however, was featured in a documentary produced by Mark Franchetti, "Terror in Moscow," broadcast on HBO, October 23, 2003.

161. Comments cited in P. Sergeev, "Po sledam terroristov: 'Ledi smert po-ichkeriiski'" [On the trail of the terrorists: "Lady Death, Ichkerian-style"], *Krasnyi voyn*, No. 69 (September 20, 2003), pp. 11–13. See also Yuliya Yuzik, *Nevesty Allakha: Litsai i sudby vsekhn zhenshchin-shakhidok*

These accusations are not wholly unfounded, but they do not tell the whole story. On the one hand, it is true that some Chechen fighters have forged links with al-Qaida and that a considerable number of foreign jihadists, including several who were running terrorist training camps in Afghanistan until late 2001, have come to Chechnya at various times to take up arms against the Russian “infidels.” (Among those who sought to join the Chechen struggle against Russia in the late 1990s were Ayman al-Zawahiri, who later became deputy head of al-Qaida, and Mohammed al-Atta, the chief organizer of the September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States.) It is also true that two of the most prominent guerrillas in Chechnya in recent years—Hattab and Abu al-Walid, one of the main figures responsible for the February 2004 bombing of the Moscow subway and other suicide attacks in Russia—were of Saudi origin and were instrumental in obtaining help from foreign terrorist groups. Although Hattab was killed by Russian forces in April 2002 and al-Walid was slain two years later, other Arab jihadists apparently have taken their place.

On the other hand, Putin’s attempt to dismiss all pro-independence elements in Chechnya as mere “pawns of al-Qaida” is problematic.¹⁶² Up to now, even the most radical Chechen terrorists have confined their attacks to the Russian Federation and have focused their demands solely on Chechen independence, rather than wider Islamic causes. The only partial exception came in March 2001 when three maverick Chechens seized a Russian airliner after it took off from Istanbul en route to Moscow. The hijackers diverted the plane to Saudi Arabia, where they hoped to draw attention to the plight of Chechnya and demand an end to the war, but they were quickly overpowered by Saudi commandos who stormed the plane. Other than this hijacking, Chechen fighters have not carried out suicide operations, taken hostages, or set off bombs outside Russia’s borders. Although 13 Turkish gunmen seized 120 hostages at a luxury hotel in Istanbul in April 2001 and issued a condemnation of Russian policy in Chechnya, no Chechens were actually involved in the attack, and the commitment of the hostage-takers to the Chechen cause was murky at best.

Similarly, although a group of Arab terrorists who had undergone training in the 1990s with Chechen guerrillas were planning in late 2002 to attack the

vzoravshikhya v Rossii [Widows of Allah: The personalities and fates of all the female-*shahidin* who have blown themselves up in Russia] (Moscow: Ultra Kultura, 2003).

162. Cited in Egor Kholmogorov, “‘Terrorizm’ konchilsya: Nachalas vojna” [“Terrorism” has ended, and the war has begun], *Krasnyi sever (Vologda)*, September 7, 2004, p. 1.

Russian embassy in Paris in order to avenge the death of Hattab and the killing of the Dubrovka theater hostage-takers, they devised this scheme on their own, without any involvement by Chechen separatists. The conspirators in Paris, like other terrorists connected with al-Qaida, invoked Chechnya as an issue of concern, but they relied only on Arabs, not Chechens, when pursuing their plot, which was thwarted by counterintelligence forces from the French Directorate of Territorial Security in December 2002. To be sure, some Chechens since the late 1990s have joined with Islamic extremists in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other South Asian and Middle Eastern countries, but they have done so individually, rather than to internationalize the Russian-Chechen conflict. No doubt, the endless violence and upheaval of the two wars with Russia—and the dismal experience with self-government in Chechnya from 1996 to 1999—have radicalized many of the Chechen guerrillas and have pushed them toward a fundamentalist brand of Islam, but this does not necessarily mean that Wahhabism has displaced nationalist separatism (and the desire for revenge) as the chief motivating force for all Chechen fighters.

It is conceivable, of course, that Chechen terrorists will begin to operate collectively outside Russia's borders and will seek to promote the global spread of Wahhabism rather than focusing (as they have up to now) on Chechen independence. A statement attributed to Shamil Basayev in late March 2004 warned that Russians abroad might be targeted in future terrorist attacks to avenge the February 2004 assassination of the exiled Chechen guerrilla leader Zelimhan Yandarbiyev, who was killed in Qatar when a bomb hidden in his car by Russian special agents exploded. The subsequent killing of another leading rebel commander, Ruslan Gelayev, the slaying of Abu al-Walid in April 2004, and the capture of Mahomed Hambiev (who served as defense minister in the separatist Chechen government) sparked further promises of revenge attacks against Russian personnel "no matter where they are." But in early July 2004, a few days after a Qatari court sentenced two Russian intelligence officials to lengthy prison terms for the assassination of Yandarbiyev (a verdict that was denounced in Moscow), Basayev explicitly stated that his future activities would be confined to the Russian Federation.¹⁶³ Although Putin and the chief of the Russian General Staff, Army Gen. Yurii Baluevskii, declared after the Beslan massacre that the Russian army was ready to "eliminate terrorist

163. Basayev's comments, broadcast on al-Jazeera, are reproduced in Aleksandr Danilchuk and Anton Ivanitskii, "Katar pomog terroristu Basaevu vyiti v efir" [Qatar helped the terrorist Basayev to appear on television], *Gazeta*, July 5, 2004, p. 3.

bases in any region of the world," Basayev did not publicly renounce his pledge to eschew terrorist operations abroad.¹⁶⁴ It is impossible to know whether the two sides will actually refrain from attacking each other overseas, but if the conflict does spread abroad, it will pose untold risks.

Even if Basayev's forces limit their operations to Russian territory, the danger for the Russian government is that Islamic extremism will continue to strengthen, inspiring Chechen terrorists to pursue increasingly desperate and brutal actions of the sort that occurred in August–September 2004. As recently as October 2002, the terrorists who seized the Dubrovka theater put forth demands and sought negotiations. Although they were willing to sacrifice their lives if necessary (as reflected in their behavior and rhetoric), their operation was not akin to the preemptory mass slaughter in the United States in September 2001, Bali in October 2002, and Madrid in March 2004. The Chechens' greater emphasis on suicidal terrorism after the Nord-Ost crisis was a sign of increased radicalization and a portent of escalating attacks such as the bombings of the two Russian passenger jets and the massacre at Beslan. Russian officials have even begun to worry that Chechen guerrillas will seek to blow up a water reservoir, chemical waste dump, or nuclear power plant—a concern that prompted the tightening of security at all nuclear energy installations after the wave of terrorism in August–September 2004.¹⁶⁵

There is also a risk that if Chechen rebels continue to expand their terrorist campaign, they will broaden their objectives beyond the independence of Chechnya, which heretofore has been the fundamental goal of all Chechen terrorist groups, including those who seized the Dubrovka theater and the school in Beslan. Ruslan Aushev, the former president of Ingushetia who was an intermediary during the Beslan crisis, later argued that the main demands put forth by the Beslan hostage-takers—for Russian troops to be pulled out of Chechnya, for Chechnya to be included as an independent republic in the Commonwealth of Independent States, for Chechnya to remain in the ruble zone, and for Russia to help the Chechens in restoring order—were narrow enough to have "offered a basis for compromise" if the standoff had not come to such a rapid and violent end.¹⁶⁶ Whatever the merit of this argument, there

164. Cited in Nikolai Poroskov, "Ispravlenie glavnogo udara: Rossiiskii Genshtab planiruet s terroristami za rubezhom" [Fixing the main strike: The Russian General Staff is planning to act against terrorists abroad], *Vremya novostei*, September 9, 2004, p. 2.

165. "Rossiiskie energoobekty vzyaty pod usilennuyu okhranu" [Russian energy installations have been placed under stricter guard], *Izvestiya*, September 2, 2004, p. 1.

166. "Press-konferentsiya byvshego prezidenta Ingushetii Ruslana Ausheva" [Press conference of

is no doubt that the terrorists' demands, which were presented to Aushev in writing and conveyed to the Russian government, were much more concrete and less outlandish than the Russian authorities claimed at the time. Aushev conceded that the attackers were ruthless "fanatics who would not stop at anything" and were willing to commit mass bloodshed in pursuit of their goals, but he warned that "the more repression and force we use [against the Chechens], the more of these types of extremists we will create." Aushev saw in the Beslan terrorists "a new generation of fanatics" who would seek to carry out ever deadlier and more spectacular attacks, "perpetuating a cycle of grisly violence." He worried that unless the Russian government heeded his concerns and sought a "political settlement with moderate rebels," the "whole of the Caucasus might be consumed in a conflagration."¹⁶⁷

Net Assessment and Outlook

On balance, the latest war in Chechnya has witnessed some notable improvements in Russia's counterinsurgency operations compared to the disastrous showing in 1994–96. It is unlikely that the Chechen guerrillas will be able to mount a counteroffensive similar to the one they carried out in August 1996. Russian soldiers have maintained a tighter hold on Grozny and most other cities than they did at any point during the earlier war, and they have avoided repeating some of their gravest mistakes, especially with regard to urban warfare.

Nonetheless, the seemingly endless conflict has also revealed major weaknesses. Large numbers of Russian troops are still being killed by Chechen guerrillas who rely on ambushes, explosives, air defense weapons, and suicide bombings. Moreover, Chechen fighters increasingly have launched terrorist attacks against "soft" targets in Moscow and other cities. Putin's strategy of Chechenization has been thrown into disarray by the continued turmoil and violence. Far from diminishing, the intensity of the war has increased, and the Russian government has indicated that it will expand the number of troops and security forces in the region, contrary to Putin's earlier hopes. In a military sense, an end to the conflict appears as elusive as ever.

the former president of Ingushetia, Ruslan Aushev], Interfax transcript, September 28, 2004, pp. 8–9. See also Vladimir Voronov, "Tragediya Beslan" [The Beslan tragedy], *Novoe vremya*, No. 52 (December 26, 2004), pp. 8–9.

167. "Press konferentsiya byvshego prezidenta Ingushetii Ruslana Ausheva," pp. 15, 22.

A protracted stalemate will not necessarily work to Putin's advantage. His handling of the war was the main reason for his rapid political ascent in late 1999 and his election as president in March 2000. But his overwhelming reelection in March 2004 had nothing to do with the war, which was almost never mentioned during the electoral campaign, in part because the government avoided raising the subject on television. If further spectacular terrorist incidents occur in Moscow and elsewhere, and if the pro-Russian Chechen government remains as precarious as it is now, the failure to achieve a long-promised victory may erode public support in Russia not only for the war but also for Putin. Polls in 2004 showed that 80–85 percent of Russians believed that “developments in Chechnya” could eventually have a “negative effect” on Putin's standing.¹⁶⁸ Although Putin's approval ratings over the past few years have remained extraordinarily high despite the deteriorating situation in Chechnya, the support he enjoys has been largely attributable to Russia's brisk economic growth. If the economy deteriorates, the stalemate in Chechnya could become a source of recriminations and debate. Putin's decision in September 2004 to appoint a trusted aide, Dmitrii Kozak, as plenipotentiary of the Southern Federal District (overseeing the North Caucasus) and as head of a new Federal Commission on the North Caucasus links the president more closely than before to the war in Chechnya. If Kozak is unable to turn the situation around and if further terrorist attacks occur, Putin himself might have to bear the consequences.

To be sure, in the past, large-scale guerrilla wars continued for many years or even decades in countries such as Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, Turkey, and—not least—the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union it took roughly a decade, from the mid-1940s through the mid-1950s, before armed insurgencies in western Ukraine and the Baltic states could be crushed through the use of unstinting violence. In Ethiopia it took thirty years of a bloody civil war, costing more than 250,000 lives, before Eritrean separatists finally broke away and established their own country in the early 1990s. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that neither the Soviet Union nor Ethiopia was governed by popularly elected officials. In a country that holds regular multiparty

168. See, for example, *Analiticheskii Tsentri Yuriya Levady, Moskvichi o sobytiyakh v Beslane: Rezultaty blits-oprosa, provedennogo s 7 po 8 sentyabrya 2004 goda* [Muscovites on the events in Beslan: Results of an instant survey conducted on September 7 and 8, 2004], Moscow, September 2004; and *Fond obshchestvennogo mneniya, Situatsiya v Chechne i gibel Akhmada Kadyrova: Opros naseleniya* [The situation in Chechnya and the demise of Ahmad Kadyrov: A survey of the population], Moscow, May 2004.

elections for the highest office, leaders are apt to find that a costly and prolonged counterinsurgency campaign will spawn public restiveness and cynicism.

Although the Russian government has insisted that it will treat Chechnya as a “rebellious province” akin to Aceh (in Indonesia) or Kashmir (in India), the prolonged bloodshed in Eritrea and elsewhere provides a sobering reminder that insurgents can continue fighting for decades, causing hundreds of thousands of casualties.¹⁶⁹ Whether such an outcome in Chechnya will be acceptable to the Russian public is uncertain.

Russia undoubtedly would have fared better in Chechnya were it not for the corruption, cronyism, indifference, and administrative incompetence that pervade the Russian army, security forces, and political system. In most Western countries, these sorts of phenomena are much less acute. The problems Russia has encountered in Chechnya are thus partly of its own making. Nonetheless, the Russian-Chechen conflict provides a sobering reminder, for all governments, of the difficulty that a tenacious insurgency is likely to create.

169. This phrase has been used frequently by Russian leaders over the past decade and is often cited scornfully on Chechen rebel websites. See, for example, Marina Volkova, “Myatezhnaya respublika glazami Putina” [The rebellious republic through Putin’s eyes], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, October 12, 2004, p. 3.