

Red Storm

The Russian Artillery in Chechnya



Russian 2S3 152-mm Self-Propelled Artillery

stationed large amounts of artillery in Eastern Europe in anticipation of a future conflict with NATO forces.

Chechnya—Urban Combat

Several recent articles in Russian military publications discuss artillery employment in the cities and villages of Chechnya. The common theme throughout these articles is the realization that the quantity of fire employed during a battle depends on the situation and can't be planned using standard rules of engagement.

This is a radical departure from traditional Russian normative fire planning. One Russian, Colonel Sergey Leonenko, stated bluntly in his 1995 article for *Armeyskiy Sbornik* [Army Digest] that "It is obvious there can be no recommendations for employing artillery in taking a city either in terms of duration or method of fire. The fact is that in one case, troops take a city using all weapons without restriction and, in another case, under orders to preserve the city as a cultural and economic center."⁴

Urban combat is extremely manpower-intensive. No military force today has a workable doctrine on how to fight in

by Major Gregory J. Celestan

*You can't describe the moral lift,
When in the fight your spirit weary
Hears above the hostile fire
Your own artillery.*

From the native poem "Vasily Terkin"
by Aleksandr Tvardovskiy¹

The conflict in Chechnya provides the first view of Russian artillery tactics since the war in Afghanistan ended in 1989. Lessons from the Russian experience in Chechnya are relevant to many armies due to the changing nature of warfare on the eve of the 21st century. Increasing urbanization guarantees that, regardless of the region, conflict in the future will involve the use of artillery in close proximity to civilians.²

The Russian Army depends on its artillery assets, not only as combat support, but also as a shock weapon to demoralize and break opposing forces. Fighting in Chechnya supports this view.

During World War II, the Red Army used its artillery to achieve stunning victories over German forces on the

Eastern Front. The current commander of Artillery and Rocket Troops of the Russian Ground Forces, Colonel-General (Lieutenant General) Niklolo M. Dimidyuk, stated that during World War II, "Artillery rightly was named the 'God of War' for the fact that its fire destroyed 80 to 90 percent of enemy targets in the tactical zone."³

At that time, the Red Army depended on the firepower provided by artillery brigades, divisions and corps. This reliance continued into the Cold War when the Soviets



built-up terrain by the population in place without inflicting heavy civilian casualties and causing heavy collateral damage.⁵ Additionally, combat in cities typically generates large numbers of casualties for the attacking forces. The fighting in Grozny, the capital city of Chechnya, was no exception.

The units that the Russian government deployed to Chechnya in December 1994 were thrown together piecemeal. The Russian forces fighting in Chechnya were composed of units from the Russian Ground Forces, the Ministry of the Interior (MVD) and Naval Infantry forces. Most of these units had not trained together prior to entering combat.⁶

As in the past, Russian artillery destroyed the bulk of the targets on the battlefields of Chechnya. (See Figure 1 listing the Russian artillery systems employed in Chechnya.)

2S1 122-mm Self-Propelled Howitzer
2S3 152-mm Self-Propelled Gun-Howitzer
2S19 152-mm Self-Propelled Gun
2S23 120-mm Self-Propelled Howitzer-Mortar
BM-21 Grad 122-mm Multiple Rocket Launcher
BM-22 Uragan 220-mm Multiple Rocket Launcher

Figure 1: Russian Artillery Employed in Chechnya

The main difference in Chechnya was the use of artillery as a means, in itself, as opposed to being used as part of a combined arms team. Commanders were reluctant to assault Chechen positions without large quantities of artillery “support.”

Russian Artillery Tactics and Techniques

Soviet doctrine stated that the artillery battalion was the most effective means of attacking targets.⁷ Massed, centralized artillery was recognized as the best means to destroy targets on the battlefield. The reality of modern urban combat, however, led the Russians to employ previously developed methods.

Large armored formations proved impossible to control in the streets of Grozny. The initial disastrous assault on the city of Grozny on New Year’s Day 1995 was blamed on the decision to

send armored columns into the city without adequate fire preparation or infantry support. One of those units, the 131st Motorized Rifle Brigade, had 102 out of 120 of its armored vehicles destroyed during the New Year’s Day assault.⁸

After the first month of combat, the Russians modified their tactics to avoid suffering the same level of casualties. Russian commanders decided to break up the larger combat formations and assign small artillery sub-units to these miniature task forces. The task force commander assumed responsibility for the artillery sub-unit as he employed it by platoons or individual pieces during the street fighting.⁹

This method is in contrast to the Russians’ highly centralized tactics in conventional warfare doctrine. The decision to employ artillery units in this fashion was based on the mission and enemy situation. These same methods were used by the Soviet Army during World War II. During the battle for Berlin, the Soviet Army deployed artillery batteries as part of “storm groups” to take individual buildings or city blocks.¹⁰

Soviet doctrine designates the artillery *battalion* as the lowest tactical unit.¹¹ The rationale behind the doctrine was that the increasing number of armored targets on the battlefield required large concentrations of fire to destroy. An artillery battalion could supply the minimum amount of firepower necessary to destroy these targets yet still remain flexible.¹²

In Chechnya, each battalion-sized task force had a battery of self-propelled howitzers, one to two batteries of mortars and one to two batteries of divisional artillery, which were broken down into smaller detachments to fight. (Only Russian Ground Forces units have organic artillery assets; therefore, the MVD units had to depend on attached artillery assets.)¹³

The Russians thought this amount of artillery was necessary to counter the fortifications the Chechens built in the Grozny. The Chechens built fortified strongpoints in the city “a la Stalingrad” in buildings and along crossroads.

After the disastrous New Year’s assault, the Russians used artillery pieces to pave the way for the rest of their forces along city streets. Direct fire became the approved method to destroy strongpoints and fortified buildings.¹⁴ Inside Grozny, the Russians typically employed their artillery pieces at a range of 150 to 200 meters.¹⁵ The prominent

use of direct fire by the Russians reflects that this method was the easiest to control with unskilled personnel and weak communications.

Outside of Grozny, the Russians have used artillery fire almost exclusively as a substitute for maneuver. Past doctrine stated they would first fire an *artillery preparation of the attack* followed by *supporting fires* until the maneuver units closed with the enemy defenses.¹⁶

In Chechnya, on most occasions, the entire operation consisted of Russian artillery and aviation units conducting several hours of bombardment until the local commander felt all resistance had been destroyed. A mounted patrol was dispatched, and if it encountered any return fire, it withdrew and the bombardment commenced again.

This method became so predictable that Chechen fighters abandoned the village as the Russian artillery forces replaced and then filtered back before the Russians conducted patrols. There is little, if any evidence, of coordinated maneuver unit and artillery assaults on villages.

The Chechen operation posed several problems for fire support coordination. During the initial assault into Chechnya, Russian forces approached Grozny on three axes with four task forces. These units were formed into temporary organizations that did not have a habitual working relationship and had never trained together. Under ideal conditions, fire coordination is difficult to achieve among units, but under combat conditions with no prior training and coordination, synchronized fire support is almost impossible. As a result, the Russians were unable to mass their significant artillery assets.

Target acquisition appears to have been conducted by artillery unit commanders in conjunction with maneuver unit officers. On many occasions, Russian units came under fire and deployed personnel to attempt to determine the shooter’s location. There has been no evidence of sophisticated fire location systems being employed and interconnected into an integrated counterbattery system.

In one instance, a military lawyer on a fact-finding mission helped to locate a Chechen Grad BM-21 122-mm multiple rocket launcher (MRL).¹⁷ In most cases, however, the artillery unit commander served as the observer. During operations outside of one Chechen village, the commander of a Grad MRL

battery left his unit's position with the chief of intelligence of the Army-level artillery to observe fires for his battery.¹⁸

Due to the lack of consistent Chechen counterbattery fire, the Russians didn't habitually conceal their positions or displace their artillery after firing. When Russian forces were static, artillery units could fire harassment and interdiction missions on possible Chechen lines of communication. Designated sections of Russian artillery units remained on three-minute call, and the entire battalion had to be ready to fire in 15 minutes.¹⁹ The operational tempo of some units was so great that artillery crews rarely left the turrets of their self-propelled howitzers.²⁰

The poor level of training among the Russian soldiers is a common theme in the Russian military press. In one artillery unit, the 805th Guards Artillery Regiment, the chief of staff complained that his battalions had only received a small percentage of the trained crew members necessary to fire the weapons. The rest of the crew members were taken from whatever sources were available. Many of the unit's members, to include the officers, learned their trade "on the fly."²¹

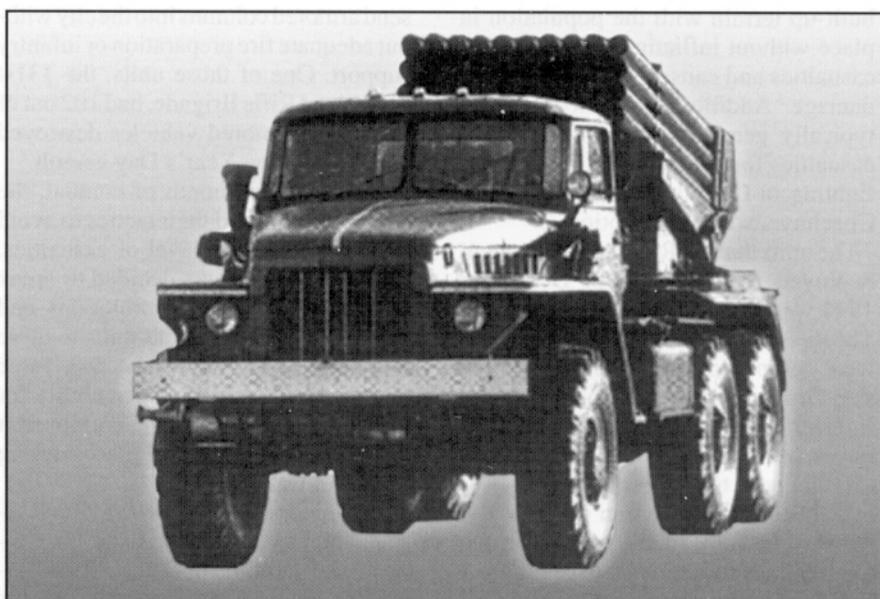
During the battle for Grozny, the main losses suffered by the Russian forces came from Chechen artillery and mortar fires.²² (See Figure 2 for a listing of Chechen artillery assets.)

2S1 122-mm Self-Propelled Howitzer

2S3 152-mm Self-Propelled Gun-Howitzer

BM-21 Grad 122-mm Multiple Rocket Launcher

Figure 2: Chechen Artillery Systems



Grad 122-mm (40 round) MRL in Traveling Configuration

Russian forces had the opportunity to reduce these losses through counterbattery fire. Even though they had counterbattery radars, there is no evidence the Russians employed them to locate Chechen artillery. Considering the poor level of training of the soldiers fighting the battle and the lack of coordination between the various Russian units, trying to use the radars may have been counterproductive as there would have been no clear method to verify friendly firing locations.

The Russians' IL219 artillery target acquisition radar can pinpoint the shooter of incoming artillery fire within 30 meters.²³ This asset could have been quite effective when paired with the 2S19 MSTA 152-mm self-propelled howitzer, a highly accurate weapon that can fire laser-guided munitions such as the *Krasnapol* projectile.

Two other precision artillery munitions, the *Smelchak* mortar round and the *Santimetr* artillery round, are also in the Russian inventory but were not employed in Chechnya. *International Defense Digest* reported that "the word in the higher command is that these highly advanced armaments were too expensive to be 'wasted' in Chechnya and needed to be kept for more serious contingencies."²⁴

Chechen Tactics and Techniques

During the initial assault into Chechnya and the fighting in Grozny, the Russians experienced difficulties in coordinating and massing their artillery assets. The Chechens exploited this weakness by employing hit-and-run tactics with their artillery. By ambushing Russian forces with one or two artillery pieces, they could disperse their assets quickly after an attack.²⁵ These tactics precluded the Russians from organizing or launching preplanned artillery strikes on enemy artillery formations, as dictated by their doctrine.

Another popular tactic the Chechens used was to monitor the Russian forces' radio transmissions (which implies the Russians routinely transmitted in the clear) and determine Russian unit locations. They would then quickly displace several Grad launchers and fire a volley at the Russian forces.²⁶ Throughout the fighting, the Chechens rarely fired more than a couple of salvos of either rockets



The 2S19 MSTA 152-mm self-propelled howitzer is a highly accurate weapon that can fire laser-guided munitions such as the *Krasnapol* projectile.



Uragan BM-22, 220-mm (16 round) MRL

or cannon rounds before displacing their pieces.

Conclusion

The fighting in Chechnya has exposed several problems in the Russian armed forces. Some of the worst criticism of tactics and capabilities has come from within the Russian forces. Weeks after the conflict began, Russian military officers were questioning the disjointed manner in which the operation was conducted. Deputy Defense Minister Colonel-General Boris Gromov commented

that "the operation was carried out without the relevant study and in a hurry because any other result was hardly possible. And the considerable forces that were mustered piecemeal across Russia were simply unable to collaborate without training."²⁷

Initial assessments of equipment employed in Chechnya indicate the Russians are pleased with the performance of their multiple launch rocket systems Grad and Uragan, the latter, the BM-22 220-mm MRL. Overall, the shock effect of these weapons combined with their ability to destroy large areas with one volley complemented

the Russian style of combat in Chechnya.²⁸

A book containing several Russian lessons learned has already appeared in Moscow.²⁹ Two of the most relevant comments from the book are that city fighting is the most difficult form of combat activity and that reliable destructive fires on the enemy are necessary for success.³⁰

As time passes and the Russian military reflects on its performance in Chechnya, we'll get a clearer picture of the impact of artillery forces in the conflict.



Major Gregory J. Celestan is a Eurasian Foreign Area Officer who served a tour as a Military Analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office, Training and Doctrine Command, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, before attending the 1996-1997 Command and General Staff Officer Course at Fort Leavenworth. He commanded two batteries and served in several staff positions in the 42d Field Artillery Brigade in Germany. Major Celestan was a Senior Fellow at the Marshall Center for European Strategic Studies, Germany, and is a graduate of the Defense Language Institute (Russian), Monterey, California. He also holds a Master of Art in International Relations from the University of Washington. Major Celestan won the 1991 US Field Artillery Association's History Writing Contest.

Notes:

1. Translated by Chris Bellamy, *Red God of War*, (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1986).
2. In a recent article in *Parameters*, author Ralph Peters describes how most military organizations are ill-equipped to fight in cities and villages: "The US military, otherwise magnificently capable, is an extremely inefficient tool for combat in urban environments. We are not doctrinally, organizationally or psychologically prepared, nor are we properly trained and equipped for a serious urban battle, and we must task organize radically even to conduct peacekeeping operations in cities." Ralph Peters, "Our Soldiers, Their Cities," *Parameters* (Spring 1996), 43.
3. Colonel-General Nikolai Mikhaylovich Dimidiyuk, "Bog Voinii Na Perelome" ["The God of War at the Turning Point"], *Armeyskiy Sbornik [Army Digest]*, No. 7 (July 1995), 10.
4. Colonel Sergey Leonenko, "Ovladenie Gorodom" ["Capturing a City"], *Armeyskiy Sbornik [Army Digest]*, No. 3, (1995), 31-35.
5. Dr. Jakob Kipp, a Senior Analyst at the US Army Foreign Military Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, pointed out that no military force currently has a working doctrine to fight insurgents in a modern city. The US Army's doctrine on fighting in an urban environment is already 17 years old and does not fully address the problems that would be encountered while fighting a three-dimensional battle in a city. Our army's experience in Mogadishu demonstrates the difficulty of fighting in a city with the population in place.
6. Anatoly S. Kulikov (Translated by R. Love), "Russian Internal Troops and Security Challenges in the 1990s," *Low-Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, Volume 3, (Autumn 1994) Number 2, 209.
7. "Artilleriyskiy Divizion v Boyu" ["The Artillery Battalion in Combat"], (1984) as reported in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, JPRS-UMA-85-012-L (1 May 1985), 7.
8. Viktor Litovkin, "Rasstrel 131i Maikopskoi Brigadii" ["Shooting the 131st Maykop Brigade"], *Izvestia [News]*, 11 January 1995, 4.
9. Leonenko, 32.
10. Bellamy, 204.
11. "Artilleriyskiy Divizion v Boyu," 9.
12. "By making the battalion the main unit, but at the same time giving its commander more authority and perhaps independence, the Soviets have created a unit which achieves the right balance between power and manageability." Bellamy, 186.

13. Kulikov, 209.
14. N. Novichkov, V. Snegovskii, A. Sokolov and V. Shvarev, *Rossiiskie Voopyjennii Silli V Chechenskom Ronflikte: Analiz, Itogi, Vivogi [Russian Armed Forces in the Chechen Conflict: Analysis, Results, Conclusions]*, (Hoveg-Infoglov: Moscow, 1995), 54.
15. *Ibid*, 64.
16. Translated by Chris Bellamy, *Red God of War*, (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1986), 169.
17. Lieutenant-Colonel Nikolay Astashkin, "Likvidirovano eshye odno logovo 'cherhykh volkov'" ["One More Den of 'Black Wolves' Eliminated"], *Kraznaya Zvezda (Red Star)*, February 22, 1996, 1.
18. Mikhail Lukanin, "Napravlenie-Shatoy!" ["The Axis-Shatoy!"], *Kraznaya Zvezda (Red Star)*, June 14, 1995, 1.
19. Captain Artur Gulko, "V Gorakh Pod Vedeno" ["In the Mountains Near Vedeno"], *Kraznaya Zvezda (Red Star)*, 2 February 1996, 2.
20. *Ibid*.
21. Lieutenant-Colonel Sergei Kryazkov, "Artilleriya ne Znaet Tishini" ["The Artillery Does Not Know Silence"], *Kraznaya Zvezda (Red Star)*, 15 March 1995, 1.
22. Novichkov, 161.
23. *Ibid*.
24. "Russian Military Assesses Errors of Chechnya Campaign," *International Defense Digest*, No. 4 (1995), 6.
25. The Chechens also used automobiles as mobile mortar platforms for their ambushes. Colonel Aleksandr Kostychenko, "Uroki Groznogo" ["Lessons of Grozny"], *Armeyskiy Sbornik [Army Digest]*, No. 1 (1995), 29.
26. Novichkov, 99.
27. Livia Klingl, "Idiots Are Responsible for the Organization," *Kurier (Courier)*, (5 January 1995), 5, as reported in Foreign Broadcast Information Service Eurasian Report, FBIS-SOV-95-003, 10.
28. Novichkov, 138.
29. *Ibid*, 54.
30. *Ibid*, 65.