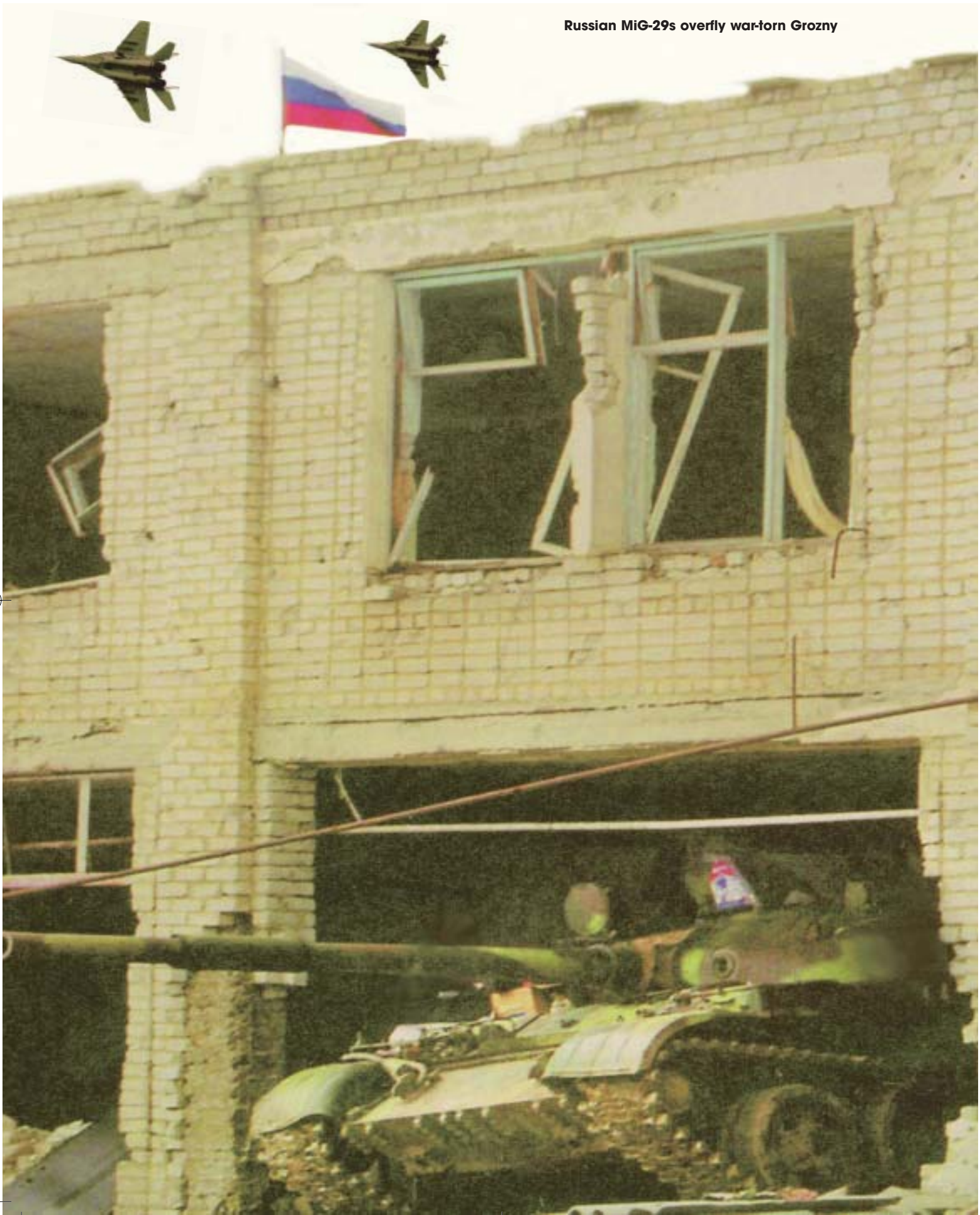


Russian MiG-29s overfly war-torn Grozny





# *The use of Russian Air Power in the Second Chechen War*

By Major Marcel de Haas RNLAf

**T**his paper describes part of the second Chechen conflict, which started in the fall of 1999. The purpose of this document is not to provide a comprehensive study of this conflict; others have already done so.<sup>1</sup> This study offers an analysis of the use of Russian airpower and the Chechen response to the use of military force.

For pragmatic reasons I have divided the conflict into two parts. The first part comprises three military actions in Dagestan, from August – September 1999. The second part describes the second conflict in Chechnya, which started in September 1999 and still continues.

In my assessment I will provide a comparison of the use of airpower between the present conflict and the first Chechen conflict (1994-1996).



Fig 1. Levels of strategy in the conflicts in Dagestan and Chechnya (1999 — )

## RUSSIAN AIRPOWER IN DAGESTAN (AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 1999)

At first I will provide a brief overview of the conflict. Following this, I shall elaborate on the different levels of strategy of the Russian forces and of the Chechen insurgents. I will end by adding a few assessments.

### BACKGROUND AND COURSE OF THE CONFLICT

Dagestan is a republic within the Russian Federation, three times the size of Chechnya, a population of just over two million and 30 different, primarily Muslim, ethnic groups. In August and September 1999 Russian forces conducted three operations in Dagestan. The Russian Federal forces had to counter two assaults from Chechen Islamic insurgents in two districts of Dagestan and to put an end to the Islamic rule, which had been installed in a different area of Dagestan a year before.<sup>2</sup>

Tensions had raised in the border region between Chechnya and Dagestan, early in August 1999. The first operation of the Russian forces was in response to an invasion by groups of armed Islamic fighters, possibly around 1,500 men, led by the Chechen field commanders Basayev and Hattab, who from 2 August had infiltrated from Chechnya into the Botlikh and Tsumadin districts of western Dagestan, occupied some villages, and declared the area to be under Islamic law. The second operation of the





Prime Minister Vladimir Putin

*The objectives that the military-political leadership had laid upon the Federal armed forces were to cut off the rebels' fuel and financial base in Chechnya*

Russian forces, commencing on 29 August 1999, was in an area consisting of the villages of Chabanmakhi and Karamakhi in the central Dagestani district of Buynaksk, to bring an end to Islamic control, which had been installed there a year before. On 5 September Federal forces for the third time were employed, on this occasion to counter a second incursion by a force in the order of 2,000 Chechen Islamic fighters in the Novolaksk district, north of the earlier invaded districts. After two incursions and a number of (sniper) attacks on Russian troops on the border between Dagestan and Chechnya, the conflict escalated to Chechnya. On 7 September Colonel General Valery Manilov, First Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff, officially announced the first air attack on Chechnya.<sup>3</sup> After some 45 days of fighting the insurgents were driven back to Chechen territory. According to Russian authorities, 1,500 rebels were killed during the operations. The joint Federal forces lost approximately 300 men and close to 1,000 were wounded.

## **RUSSIAN GRAND STRATEGY: ACTORS AND OBJECTIVES**

At the political-strategic level of the Russian Federation (RF) two actors were deeply involved in the operations in Dagestan. Vladimir Putin, just appointed as Prime Minister, regularly expressed his views in the media on the official policy towards the conflict and visited the area together with the Chief of the General Staff (CGS), Army General Anatoly Kvashnin, on 27 August. CGS General Anatoly Kvashnin kept a close watch on the execution of the military operations and accompanied visits of Putin and of the Minister for Internal Affairs (*Ministerstvo Vnutrennykh Del* [MVD]), Vladimir Rushaylo, to the conflict area. As early as 17 August Kvashnin announced that if necessary, enemy bases inside Chechnya would be targeted.<sup>4</sup>

From the start of the counter-insurgency operations media coverage was restricted. According to official sources the reason for media limitations was to prevent the enemy from acquiring intelligence on the

course of action. Another reason must have been to give the Russian population the impression of a smooth operation and to keep up the morale of the forces. A third reason was to prevent the rebels from spreading propaganda.<sup>5</sup>

The objectives that the military-political leadership had laid upon the Federal armed forces were to cut off the rebels' fuel and financial base in Chechnya (illegal gasoline trading), to destroy their main arsenals and training centres in Chechnya and to prevent further incursions.<sup>6</sup> Another objective was to put an end to the already existing independent Islamic rule in a central district of Dagestan. In sum, Federal law and order over all of Dagestan was to be restored.

## **RUSSIAN MILITARY STRATEGY: COMMAND AND CONTROL STRUCTURE**

The Russian forces involved in the operations in Dagestan initially consisted of Ground and Air Forces of the RF Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Internal Troops of the MVD (*Vnutrennyye Voyska* [VV]). The ground component, with an original strength of 4,000 up to 10,000 men at the end of the operations, was at the start made up of two brigades, 136 Brigade (MoD) and 102 VV Brigade (MVD). During the conflict reinforcements were sent comprising airborne and naval infantry units from distant locations such as the Siberian Military District and the Northern Fleet.<sup>7</sup>

At first, operational command of the Federal forces, i.e. MoD and MVD forces, was given to the MVD. However the Commander in Chief of the VV, Colonel General Vyacheslav Ovchinnikov, who himself led the operation, had no experience in commanding troops of different RF departments (MVD and MoD).<sup>8</sup> Already during the conflict the inadequacies of the MVD troops and their failure to properly co-ordinate became public when an Army commander of the Ground Forces uttered this complaint in the media. This meant MVD troops had to cope with fierce resistance, as were not used to procedures of calling in the necessary artillery fire support or close air support. Therefore the situation demanded a change of command. On 17 August the command was transferred from MVD to MoD in order to improve the conduct of the operation of repelling the incursion. CGS General Anatoly Kvashnin put Colonel General Viktor Kazantsev, Commander of the North Caucasus Military District (NCMD), in command of the Joint Grouping of Forces in Dagestan. On 27 August, after finishing the first operation in the Botlikh and Tsumadin districts, operational command was returned to the MVD to start the second operation in the Buynaksk district of central Dagestan. On 4 September, following a meeting attended by MVD Minister Rushaylo, CGS Kvashnin and Commander NCMD Kazantsev, command of the Joint Grouping of Forces was once more transferred from MVD back to MoD. Lieutenant General Gennady Troshev, Deputy Commander NCMD, would now lead the second operation of the Russian forces, in the Buynaksk district.<sup>9</sup>

## **RUSSIAN OPERATIONAL LEVEL: ORGANISATION OF AIRPOWER**

### **COMMAND AND CONTROL STRUCTURE**

The Russian air component in the Dagestan operation consisted of two parts. The Russian Air Forces (*Voyenno-Vozdushnyye Sily* [VVS]) formed the larger part of the air component of the Russian Federal troops. The other part was made up of army aviation (*Aviatsiya Sukhoputnykh Voysk* [ASV] or *Armeyskaya Aviatsiya*). The VVS component of the RF forces operating in Dagestan was commanded by the 4th Air Army, headquartered at Rostov-na-Donu. Later a forward HQ for the VVS component was



Mi-24 Hind attack helicopter



*The backbone of the air component in Dagestan consisted of Hip and Hind helicopters and Su-25 Frogfoot fighter-bomber aircraft*

placed in the Dagestani capital Makhachkala. Co-ordination was established with MVD forces, to make preparations for cooperation between ASV, VVS and air assets of the MVD. Mozdok, close to the western border of Chechnya and earmarked as the main operational base, was linked to mobile command and co-ordination posts in the front line of the ground troops.

#### **FORCE BUILD-UP**

Assets that ASV deployed in the Dagestan operation were especially the Mi-24 Hind combat helicopter and the Mi-8 Hip transport helicopter. ASV also employed the Mi-26 Halo heavy lift helicopter. VVS' input consisted of the Su-25 Frogfoot fighter-bomber, Su-27 Flanker fighters, Su-24M/MR Fencer D/E fighter-bomber/reconnaissance (recce) aircraft, An-30 Clank photorecce aircraft and A-50 Mainstay early warning aircraft. The backbone of the air component in Dagestan consisted of Hip and Hind helicopters (ASV) and Su-25 Frogfoot fighter-bomber aircraft (VVS). VVS quickly sent reinforcements to the conflict area. Between 12-15 August 16 aircraft were flown over to the airfield of Makhachkala.<sup>10</sup> In the end the number of Hinds had raised to more than 120 helicopters. The total number of air assets used in the Dagestan operation, i.e. helicopters and aircraft, counted up to 300 by mid-September.<sup>11</sup>

## RUSSIAN TACTICAL LEVEL: APPLICATION OF AIRPOWER

### COUNTER-AIR OPERATIONS

Flankers fulfilled Combat Air Patrol (CAP) missions, to prevent reinforcements of the rebels by air. The Chechen rebels did not have an organised air-defence system with radar and missiles. Their air-defence armament essentially consisted of some man-portable SAMs (Surface-to-Air Missiles), heavy machine-guns and ZSU 23/2 twin barrel anti-aircraft guns on trucks. The Chechens did not possess an air component, so the Russian air forces had air supremacy in this operation. Therefore counter air operations could be limited to CAPs, as mentioned above, and occasionally Suppression of Enemy Air Defences (SEAD), during Offensive Air Support (OAS) missions and supporting air operations.

*The Chechens did not possess an air component, so the Russian air forces had air supremacy in this operation*

### ANTI-SURFACE FORCE AIR OPERATIONS

Fencer-D and Frogfoot aircraft and Hind helicopters conducted OAS and Air Interdiction (AI) missions. Frogfoots attacked targets such as bunkers and mortar positions. Apart from attacks against strongholds, Frogfoots were also used to mine mountain roads. Another task was to cut off the supply routes of the rebels between Dagestan and Chechnya. To achieve this objective Frogfoots carried out missions on rebel camps and supply bases in the border area. By performing Tactical Air Reconnaissance (TAR) missions, and thus supplying targeting, terrain and other intelligence, Fencer-E aircraft supported OAS and AI of fighters and combat helicopters.

*Mainstays provided airborne early warning over Dagestan and Chechnya*



*By demolishing fortifications, bridges, supply and ammunition stores, destroying or mining all major routes . . . the air component had taken its share in achieving the expressed military-political objectives*

#### **SUPPORTING AIR OPERATIONS**

ASV's Hip helicopters were used to deliver special (Spetsnaz) and conventional airborne units behind enemy lines, transporting airborne command and control posts, for medical evacuation (medevac), (Combat) Search and Rescue (CSAR) and lastly recce purposes. In these missions Frogfoots provided cover for the Hips by means of SEAD and CAS. Halos took care of supply and transport tasks. The Clanks conducted photorecce missions. And finally Mainstays provided airborne early warning over Dagestan and Chechnya.

#### **TACTICS**

Hinds operated in combat groups of two or four, attacking from a height of 3,500 to 4,000m, with steep diving descents down to tens of meters, followed by making surprise pop-ups from different directions, with one pair covering the other two after attack. Thus suppressive attacks on rebel positions were conducted. Two to four Fencer-Ds or two to four Frogfoots generally carried out tasks, such as "search-and-destroy" or "bomb-storming" missions. The former, flying at high altitudes (at least 3,500m), and therefore protected against portable air defence systems, often bombarded with high precision weapons. The Frogfoots attacked from lower altitudes (1,000-3,000m) and with their high-maneuvrability, normally used conventional arms in the bombardments.<sup>12</sup>

#### **FAILURES OF AIRPOWER**

On 12 August due to a lack of enemy awareness one MVD Hip came under fire, among others three MVD generals were wounded.<sup>13</sup> Two other helicopters were destroyed approaching the Botlikh landing strip. A second mistake was the accidental bombing of a village in Georgia, by a VVS Frogfoot. A third error was in the field of friendly fire (blue-on-blue attacks). A MVD detachment was attacked by VVS.<sup>14</sup> To a large extent these failures in using airpower were the result of shortcomings in the co-operation between VVS, ASV and MVD. In reviewing the operations in Dagestan Russian military leadership concluded that in future operations these shortcomings could be avoided by creating a single system of aviation control in joint operations. Another measure to improve the co-ordinated use of airpower was to install air support controllers in ground component units.<sup>15</sup>

#### **SUCCESSES OF AIRPOWER**

ASV and VVS had flown more than 1,000 combat sorties in which four to six helicopters and one to three fixed-wing aircraft were destroyed.<sup>16</sup> By demolishing fortifications, bridges, supply and ammunition stores, destroying or mining all major routes between Dagestan and Chechnya, the air component had taken its share in achieving the expressed military-political objectives.

## **CHECHEN INSURGENTS: STRATEGY AND OPERATIONS**

With regard to the political-strategic level (grand strategy) it must be stated that both commanders of the Chechen insurgents, Basayev and Khattab, seemed to operate independently of the Chechen government of President Maskhadov. The Chechen fighters invaded Dagestan with the objective to change it into an Islamic state, seceded from Russia. Following this, their next objective would be unification with Chechnya in order to form an Islamic republic. The Chechen intruders misjudged their potential support in Dagestan for establishing an Islamic state in that republic. The ethnic diversity in



*It was mainly luck other than well-prepared defence, which enabled them to shoot down some helicopters and aircraft*

Dagestan and historic confrontations between Chechens and Dagestani worked against local support. In some villages the Chechen fighters had to face resistance from local inhabitants even before Federal forces arrived. Since Basayev and Khattab apparently operated independently, the military-strategic level was absent. Both commanders were only active on the lower levels of strategy.

Concerning the operational and tactical level it was rather remarkable that the Chechen insurgents in Dagestan changed their way of warfare a number of times. At first they invaded in the form of an irregular raid, not as conventional armed forces. This was of course also due to their mostly light armament. Because of the lack of local support after occupying some areas of Dagestan, they resorted to building fortified strongholds to defend themselves against Federal troops. This can be considered as a form of regular warfare. Being out-numbered and badly equipped, the insurgents were not capable of launching counter-offensives against the Russian forces. However, being aware of the limitations of the Russian forces under bad weather and night conditions, they took advantage of this by operating especially under these circumstances. After they had been forced to leave the occupied villages and return to Chechnya, the insurgents again changed over to partisan warfare.<sup>17</sup> For instance by using snipers, mining roads and laying ambushes. With regard to air defence it was mainly luck other than well-prepared defence, which enabled them to shoot down some helicopters and aircraft.

## ASSESSMENT

Assessing the conflict I will follow the same approach as already mentioned, describing the different levels of strategy of both sides.

### RUSSIAN STRATEGY AND WARFARE

On the grand strategy level it was remarkable that not RF President Yeltsin but Prime Minister Putin took the lead in the operations in Dagestan. By tradition the Russian Prime Minister would deal with internal socio-economic affairs and not with (military) security. Two reasons come forward for the fact that Putin was deeply involved in the Dagestan conflict. First of all, it was indicative of his interest in security affairs, being a former intelligence officer. Secondly he was climbing the ladder of political hierarchy. Victory in Dagestan would promote his career.

Another point of interest at the political-strategic level was how the media were dealt with. The RF authorities restricted media coverage on the operations in Dagestan. In the first Chechen conflict the unrestrained reporting by the press, especially of civilian casualties, had a negative impact on public opinion and on morale of the soldiers. Due to political demands it also limited military operations, especially with regard to targeting. By controlling the media the Russian authorities gained a success in information warfare.

Regarding the military-strategic level it turned out that the command and control structure of the joint Federal Forces failed on various occasions. Since the MVD forces were not capable of handling the situation, operational command was moved a number of times between MVD and MoD. Undoubtedly this must have had a negative influence on the outcome of the operations. Bearing in mind similar experiences of the first Chechen conflict, the failures in co-ordination during the operations in Dagestan proved that co-operation between MVD and MoD troops was still insufficient. Just like in 1994-96, MoD and MVD units not earlier than in battle learned to co-operate with each other.

On the operational level the conclusion must be made that the original ground component of the Federal forces, consisting of two brigades, was not capable of defeating the insurgents. Reinforcements had to come from distant peacetime locations and from elite forces such as airborne and naval infantry troops. This was an indication of the low level of combat readiness of a large part of the Russian armed forces.

## *The Chechens have a history of showing fierce resistance against Russian occupation, which goes back to the expansion of the Russian tsarist empire in the 19th century*

Another observation at this level is that the air component made a number of mistakes, mostly due to shortcomings in the co-ordination between VVS, ASV and MVD. With regard to the use of airpower, co-ordinated mission planning between VVS, ASV, Ground Forces and MVD troops should already, prior to the Dagestani operations, have been considered imperative for achieving joint military objectives and avoiding blue-on-blue attacks.

Overall, in spite of a number of shortcomings, the operations in Dagestan were successful. This was especially due to a change of conduct at the tactical level, compared to the 1994-96 conflict. The Dagestani operations showed that the Federal forces had altered their tactics. Only after heavy artillery and air bombardments did ground forces start their assault to destroy the rebels.<sup>18</sup> Modern, high-tech precision arms, part of the RF defence capability, were used, especially in the initial bombardments. In the first Chechen conflict modern weapons were less used and ground forces were often from the very beginning in direct contact with the enemy. This approach had resulted in a high casualty rate and had affected morale. The new approach of employing ground troops only after initial artillery and air bombardments, seemed to have been more successful.

### **STRATEGY AND WARFARE OF THE CHECHEN INSURGENTS**

At the political-strategic level the Chechen insurgents incorrectly assessed popular support for Islamic rule in Dagestan. Not only did they lack support, in some cases Dagestani actively resisted them. The lack of Dagestani support was probably due to the ethnic diversity of the population, who were not united in favour of secession from Russia. Nor did the majority of the Dagestani people feel drawn towards radical Islamic ideas, which were propagated by the Chechen intruders.

With regard to the operational-tactical level, after losing the battles in three successive operations, the intruders were driven back to Chechen territory. It can be concluded that apart from defending fortified strongholds, which was an example of regular warfare, the Chechens mainly operated as insurgents, using tactics of irregular warfare.

## **THE SECOND CHECHEN CONFLICT (OCTOBER 1999-PRESENT)**

As in the previous part on Dagestan, I will first provide a setting on Chechnya in general. After that I will deal with the course of the conflict. Subsequently I shall examine the different levels of strategy of the Russian and of the Chechen forces, followed by some assessments.

### **BACKGROUND ON CHECHNYA**

Chechnya is a small Russian republic. To really understand the Chechen conflict two premises are essential. First, the Chechens have a history of showing fierce resistance against Russian occupation, which goes back to the expansion of the Russian tsarist empire in the 19th century. Second, to the Chechens tribal adherence outweighs a one nation state.

I will now elaborate on the first argument, the Chechen resistance to occupation. In fall 1991, Chechen leader and former Soviet VVS General Dudayev, taking advantage of the disarray after the attempt of a coup d'état in Moscow, declared Chechnya independent from the USSR. Due to the disorder after the break up of the USSR, it was not until 1994 that Russian President Yeltsin deemed it necessary to respond to this secession. From December 1994 until August 1996, Russian forces intervened Chechnya, later known as the first Chechen conflict. However, as a result of heavy casualties and several hostage situations as well as the recapture of cities such as Grozny by the Chechens, the

Russians were forced to sign a truce. Defeated, the last Russian forces left Chechnya in December 1996. From 1996 until 1999, Chechnya regained its independent status. However, the country became a centre of anarchy, in which abductions, especially of foreigners, turned out to be the major source of income for local warlords.<sup>19</sup> In October 1999, Russian forces for the second time invaded Chechnya. The second premise is Chechens preferring clan adherence to loyalty to a one nation state. Chechens belong to some 135-150 clans.<sup>20</sup> Recent history makes it clear that as a result of a lack of 'national feeling' and in the absence of the 'foreign invader', Chechens will fight against each other. For instance, President Dudayev as well as his successor Maskhadov have experienced a number of assassination attempts. Especially under Maskhadov, central power lacked and warlords ruled over large parts of Chechnya. The two premises I described hamper any attempt to establish solid governance over Chechnya, either by the Russians or by the Chechens themselves.

## Course of the second Chechen conflict

I will divide the course of the conflict into five phases. The air campaign in September 1999, followed by the installation of a security cordon in northern Chechnya (October-November 1999), after which a larger part of Chechnya was occupied, including Grozny (November 1999-February 2000). Then came the fourth phase, which was conquering the mountainous part, south of Grozny (March 2000-January 2001), and finally the fifth phase, which was restoring Russian Federal law and order, under command of the internal security service, FSB (Federal'naya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti) (January 2001-present). I will now describe in detail these five successive phases of the conflict.

**Phase one: the air campaign (September 1999).** For weeks Russia mounted an air campaign against Chechnya in which not only the insurgents, withdrawing out of Dagestan, were targeted, but also strategic objectives such as telephone and electricity infrastructures, water reservoirs and the airport of the capitol, Grozny. Tactical targets that were destroyed were military bases, bridges, roads and vehicles. Although denied by VVS Commander-in-Chief, Colonel General Anatoly Kornukov, many civilians were killed as a result of the air strikes.<sup>21</sup>

**Phase two: the installation of a security cordon in northern Chechnya (October-November 1999).** Putin's statement, that the authority of Chechen President Maskhadov and of his Government was illegitimate, on 1 October, was the signal to start the ground campaign. The objective was to capture territory to establish a security zone until the river Terek, north of Grozny, officially to prevent any further incursions into RF territory. The Russian forces used "go-slow" tactics, sending in infantry only after heavy artillery and air barrages, to avoid the heavy casualties of the first Chechen conflict. On 15 October, the Commander of the Joint Grouping of Forces, General Kazantsev, announced that the security zone, comprising one-third of Chechnya, was complete. After this, and although officially denied, Russian troops made efforts to encircle Grozny in preparation of an invasion of the Chechen capitol. On 12 November Gudermes, Chechnya's second largest city, was taken. At the end of that month Russian forces largely surrounded Grozny and held more than 50 percent of Chechnya.

**Phase three: the occupation of the larger part of Chechnya, including Grozny (November 1999-February 2000).** On 4 December Grozny was fully blockaded by Russian troops. By 13 December the Russians had regained control of Grozny's airport. As of the next day, Russian forces met fierce resistance in advancing into the outskirts of Grozny. On 3 February 2000 the Federal forces held half of Grozny. In the following days 2,000 Chechen fighters pulled out of their capital into the southern mountains. The Russians had recaptured Grozny.

**Phase four: the battle for the southern mountains (March 2000-January 2001).** From mid February 2000, VVS bombed Chechen positions in the southern mountains, where around 8,000 fighters were

believed to be hiding. The Chechen benefited from the mountainous terrain by their hit-and-run attacks on the Russian troops. Still lacking a sufficient counter-insurgency doctrine, the Russian forces were unable to deal with the Chechen guerrilla tactics and to complete the operation.

**Phase five: the swift change from a military operation to an FSB-led anti-terrorist operation**

**(January 2001-present).** In January 2001, President Putin announced that the military campaign in Chechnya was successfully completed and that this allowed turning over command of the “anti-terrorist operation” from the military to the FSB.<sup>22</sup> The FSB would further restore Russian Federal law and order in Chechnya by employing special units (spetsnaz) in conducting extensive search-and-destroy operations against rebel groups and their commanders. Although Russian officials claimed that the military conflict had ended, the Chechens continue their guerrilla warfare not only in the southern mountains, but also throughout Chechnya and even by bomb attacks and incursions into Dagestan and Ingushetia. In September 2002, three years after the second Chechen conflict had started, the official total number (MoD forces and troops of the power ministries) of Russian soldiers who were killed was 4,500, which exceeded the loss of around 4,000 servicemen in the first Chechen conflict. Also according to Russian officials, at that moment 12,500 Russians were wounded and nearly 14,000 Chechen fighters were killed.<sup>23</sup>

## Russian grand strategy: actors and objectives

Economic, internal and external politics, as well as military and ideological grounds gave rise to the second Russian invasion of fall 1999. The motives for this invasion can be divided into structural and opportunistic ones. Structural motives are present in the fields of economy, geo-strategy and internal politics. The economic drive was the presence of oil in Chechnya and the area of the Caspian Sea. Oil was and is an important source of income for Russia. Furthermore, Russia considers the Caucasus to be of vital strategic importance, as it leads towards Turkey and the Middle East. In order to maintain its influence in that area, a stable southern border, on which Chechnya is situated, was an essential prerequisite. Concerning internal politics, Russia considered the secession of Chechnya as a threat to its integrity. This could create a domino effect of separatism; other entities within the RF might follow this example, which eventually could lead to the break up of the RF.

Secondly, opportunistic motives can be found in the fields of internal, military and ideological politics. Regarding internal politics, as I described in my assessment of the Dagestani conflict, in fall 1999 Putin was on his way to the leadership of the country. A successful campaign in Chechnya would strengthen his position for the presidential elections of March 2000. The military motives were twofold. Firstly, the Russian generals were vindicated to having their revenge for the humiliating defeat they suffered in the first Chechen conflict in 1996. Secondly, the top brass wished to increase the defence budget with the intention of modernising and strengthening the armed forces. A victory in Chechnya would increase their influence in the Kremlin in order to reach this target. Finally, the ideological argument being the threat of Islamic-fundamentalism, which is a constant theme in Russian foreign as well domestic policy. Internationally, Russia pointed at the Islamic terror attacks in Central Asia, developments in Afghanistan, and domestically at the incursions by Islamic-extremists in Dagestan and the installation of Islamic rule in Chechnya. Often these developments have been portrayed as connected, especially by Osama bin Laden's terror network.

The most likely direct motives, that gave rise to the decision of using military force against Chechnya, were the aforementioned incursions of Chechen insurgents into Dagestan and a number of bomb attacks in Russia. The latter occurred in Dagestan, one explosion, Moscow, three explosions, and one



*Russian authorities justified the invasion using the Chechen incursions and the bomb blasts as reasons. However, to this very day no proof has been given that Chechens were behind the bomb attacks.*

in Volgodonsk, all between 31 August-16 September 1999.<sup>24</sup> Russian authorities justified the invasion using the Chechen incursions and the bomb blasts as reasons. However, to this very day no proof has been given that Chechens were behind the bomb attacks. On the contrary, quite often it is the FSB, which is accused of these terror attacks. Another point of interest is that the invasion of Chechnya was well-organised, which makes the option of a sudden decision to use military force not so likely. Probably a reason was found for conducting an already planned military campaign.

## **Russian military strategy: command and control structure**

At the outset of the second invasion into Chechnya, in October 1999, the estimated number of the forces, the majority being MoD troops, was 100,000. In August 2000 the Joint Grouping of Forces consisted of 80,000 men, of whom 50,000 were MoD troops.<sup>25</sup> In January 2001 it was announced that the total personnel strength of the forces in Chechnya, MoD and MVD troops and militia (military organised police), was to be reduced to 50,000-60,000 men.<sup>26</sup>

Initially the Joint Grouping of Forces, under command of Colonel General Kazantsev, Commander NCMD, conducted the operations in Chechnya. The Joint Grouping of Forces was divided into five parts: the western, northern, eastern, southern and Grozny (later Argun) groups. Each group consisted of MoD troops (ground, air, naval infantry and airborne forces) and troops of the power ministries (MVD, FSB, Civil Defence and border guard forces).<sup>27</sup> The main headquarters of the Joint Grouping of Forces was originally based in Mozdok, west of Chechnya, and then moved to Khankala, near Grozny.<sup>28</sup>

Since January 2001, the FSB has taken command of the operations in Chechnya. With regard to command and control, a Main Staff of Operations was formed, consisting of the Director of FSB, the heads of the so-called "power ministries" which had troops employed in Chechnya, such as the MVD, and of members of the Joint (military) Staff. The Joint Staff had until then been in command of the Chechen campaign. Furthermore a Regional Staff of Operations was formed, led by a Deputy Director of the FSB, and made up of representatives of the power ministries and of the local authorities in the southern district of the RF. For the command and control of military units the Joint Staff was continued.<sup>29</sup>

## **Russian operational level: organisation of airpower**

### **COMMAND AND CONTROL STRUCTURE**

All air assets, both MoD and power ministries, were under unified command of Lieutenant-General Valery Gorbenko of the Joint Staff.<sup>30</sup> Just as in the Dagestani conflict, the air component of the Joint Grouping of Forces was made up of fixed-wing aircraft of VVS and rotary wing aircraft, belonging to army aviation ASV. The VVS component comprised air regiments assigned to the 4th Air Army, and some separate units from the Moscow Air and Air Defence District.<sup>31</sup> Roughly half of the ASV helicopters were divided over the different groups of the Joint Grouping of Forces; the remaining half was used as reserve of the Joint Grouping of Forces.<sup>32</sup>



**Su-24M FENCER-D fighter bomber**

## *Hip and Hind helicopters and Fencer-D and Frogfoot fighter-bombers have formed the core of the air component*

The former bomber base of Mozdok, North-Ossetia, some 90 km northwest of Grozny, was again the primary staging base for the fixed-wing part of the air component, as well as the main airhead for supplies from elsewhere in Russia. Clearly, military operations in this region had been planned in advance. The airbase received an order, which stated that within two months, June and July, the runway had to be prepared for operational use.<sup>33</sup> Other bases used by the air component were Budennovsk, on RF territory, and locations in the republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia.<sup>34</sup>

### **FORCE BUILD-UP**

The aircraft of the air component in the second Chechen conflict were for the most part similar to those used in the Dagestan. Rotary wing aircraft employed by ASV were the Mi-24 Hind combat helicopter, the Mi-8 Hip transport helicopter and the Mi-26 Halo heavy lift helicopter. The latter was extensively used for the forward movement of troops. In September 1999 the contribution of ASV for the operation was 68 helicopters, consisting of 32 Hinds, 28 Hips and 8 Halos. Three years later, in September 2002, the number of helicopters was reduced to 40, 22 Hinds, 17 Hips and 1 Halo.<sup>35</sup>

VVS' fixed-wing aircraft were the Su-25 Frogfoot fighter-bomber, Su-27 and Su-30 Flanker fighters and Su-24M Fencer-D fighter-bomber aircraft. For air recce Su-24 MR Fencer-E and MiG-25RBK Foxbats-D aircraft were utilized. From Mozdok operated at least a squadron each of Fencers and Frogfoots.

Intelligence gathering was conducted by AN-30B Clanks (photo surveillance), A-50 Mainstays (AWACS) and by Il-20 Coots (signal intelligence).<sup>36</sup> So again Hip and Hind helicopters and Fencer-D and Frogfoot fighter-bombers have formed the core of the air component.

## **Russian tactical level: application of airpower**

### **COUNTER-AIR OPERATIONS**

At the outset of the conflict, the Chechens were reported to use two helicopters for flying in supplies. In order to prevent this, VVS carried out Offensive Counter-Air (OCA) missions, by keeping two Flankers and two Frogfoots on constant alert for conducting CAPs. In these missions Mainstay AWACS aircraft provided aerial radar cover. To secure RF airfields and cities against possible air attacks, Defensive Counter-Air (DCA) missions were conducted.<sup>37</sup>



*In the second Chechen conflict more than in the first one, emphasis was placed on effective recce and intelligence collection*

#### **ANTI-SURFACE FORCE AIR OPERATIONS**

Fencers and Frogfoots took the large share of the amount of strike sorties. Initially, the missions were conducted in support of the ground campaign and were targeted against bridges, major roads and buildings. Another task was to mine mountain roads and areas, in order to cut off supply routes and diminish freedom of movement. Hinds carried out missions of tactical suppression of suspected rebel positions. With the start of the fourth phase, missions were directed against camps and hardened shelters in the mountains and to cut Chechen supply routes from Georgia. Pairs of Frogfoots conducted “free-hunt” missions, to suppress new strongholds in conquered territory.<sup>38</sup>

#### **STRATEGIC AIR OPERATIONS**

Although initially VVS authorities suggested that the strategic bomber force (strategicheskaya aviatsiya) might be employed, VVS commander Kornukov later on repeatedly insisted that the necessity to do so was absent. There is no evidence that the Russian strategic bomber force was ever used in the conflict. However, in addition to OAS missions, ASV and VVS conducted offensive missions to destroy strategic targets. Thus the air component carried out missions against strategic targets, such as telecommunications (telephone, radio and TV) installations, command, control and communications networks, as well as against the oil refinery and the airport of Grozny.<sup>39</sup>

#### **SUPPORTING AIR OPERATIONS**

Hips were extensively used to transport ground forces (for instance Spetnaz units of MoD and MVD), to interdict communications and supply lines, to react to guerrilla raids, CSAR missions, as well as to transport supplies and ammunition into the mountains. In these missions Hinds or Frogfoots provided cover for the Hips.<sup>40</sup>

In the second Chechen conflict more than in the first one, emphasis was placed on effective recce and intelligence collection. Clanks, Mainstays and Coots were used to gather (electronic) intelligence and Fencer-Es, Frogfoots and Foxbat-Ds conducted air recce missions. However, entering phase four of the conflict, intelligence gathering became complicated, because enemy bases in the mountains, without meaningful signals to intercept, were hard to detect.<sup>41</sup>

#### **TACTICS**

As in the Dagestani conflict, ASV operated in groups of two to four Hinds and one or two Hips. These formations were described as aviation tactical groups (ATGs). In a ATG Hips would direct Hinds to their targets. Another task of the Hips in the ATGs was CSAR, in support of downed Hinds. ATGs were assigned to regiments, together with a forward air controller (FAC) in the regimental HQ. FACs were

also posted at lower levels, on battalion and sometimes even at company level. Two-thirds of the CAS missions of ASV were organised in this way. In addition to this tactic, without support of Hips, pairs of Hinds also carried out “free hunt” missions, which comprised the remaining third of the total number of missions. Targets of these missions were similar to those of the aforementioned “free hunt” missions of Frogfoots.<sup>42</sup> Helicopter strikes involved energetic manoeuvring, simultaneous attacks from opposing directions and dives from a formation outside anti-aircraft defence range.

### **VVS COMMANDER’S APPRECIATION OF TASKS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

In July 2000, reviewing the operations in Dagestan and Chechnya, VVS commander Kornukov gave an explanation of the tasks and lessons learned so far.<sup>43</sup> He defined the tasks of the air component as follows:

- Air support for ground forces (Anti-Surface Force Air Operations);
- Security against air attacks (Counter-Air Operations);
- Psychological warfare, by harassing the enemy;
- Air recce of assigned areas (Supporting Air Operations);
- Relay of command and control (Supporting Air Operations);
- Transport of troops and supplies (Supporting Air Operations).

According to Kornukov, the effectiveness of airpower had to be increased by improvements in the field of maintenance of aircraft and equipment, training and number of pilots and troops, upgrading of aircraft with state-of-the-art avionics, procurement of newly developed aircraft, combat readiness of units and airbases, command and control structure of airpower as well as manuals on the application of airpower. However this ‘shopping list’ would not prove to be very realistic in the light of structural cuts in the defence budget.

### **FAILURES, PROBLEMS AND LOSSES OF AIRPOWER**

A number of failures arose in using airpower. Although fewer than in the earlier conflicts, friendly fire now and then still occurred. For instance in March 2000 an OMON (special police unit) detachment was wiped out by friendly fire from VVS.<sup>44</sup> Although improvements had been made since the first Chechen conflict, co-ordination between forces/troops still was not optimal.

Airpower was mostly used as air support for ground troop operations. However, using aircraft as ‘flying artillery’, instead of platforms for precision weapons, caused collateral damage in the form of numerous civilian casualties, which subsequently left a negative impression with the public.<sup>45</sup>

In the fourth phase of the conflict, the lack of sophisticated equipment thwarted effective application of airpower against the mountain hideouts of the Chechens. Dispersed troops were hard-to-find targets and therefore difficult to detect and to destroy. Airpower was not an effective weapon against guerrilla warfare and urban terrorism.

Problems in the areas of finance, arms as well as personnel, owing to constant cuts in the defence budget, had affected the operational capabilities of the forces. The air campaign in Chechnya influenced the combat readiness of the VVS as a whole; in February 2000 it had usurped up to 60% of the annual budget of VVS. Deputy Prime Minister Klebanov stated that VVS had not received any new aircraft since 1992, and



was not likely to receive any the coming year. The Federal forces, and especially its air component, were not capable of operating neither in bad weather conditions nor during the night.<sup>46</sup> Just as in Dagestan and in the first Chechen conflict, the lack or absence of expensive precision guided munitions (PGMs), high-tech communications, navigation and targeting systems, as well as all-weather and day/night capabilities, made airpower less effective than it could have been. According to the commander of the air component of the NCMD, another negative development influencing combat readiness was the fact that Federal forces lacked fuel, spare-parts and maintenance. In official as well as independent newspapers, VVS commander Kornukov openly admitted and discussed a number of these problems. Air component commander Gorbenko also confirmed these problems.<sup>47</sup>

As a result of the low funding levels pilot training and combat experience were insufficient. In 1999 average annual flying hours for attack aviation were around 23 and for bombers around 25 hours, whereas during the Cold War average Soviet flying hours were 150. By Western air force standards the minimum of flying hours for a skilled pilot is 80 hours.<sup>48</sup> The lack of flying hours resulted not only in a higher rate of aircraft losses but also in less effective fulfilment of missions, for instance by dropping bombs too early.

The losses of the air component were as follows. Until March 2000 the air component lost two Frogfoots, one Fencer-E and 18 helicopters. In addition to this 24 aircraft had suffered combat damage. Only half of the helicopters were lost as a result of enemy fire. In June 2000, the number of helicopters lost counted up to 22, including 10 Hinds. In three years, from September 1999-2002, ASV would lose no fewer than 36 helicopters, which was an average of one per month.<sup>49</sup> As aforementioned, this large number of rotary wing losses was only partly caused by enemy fire; other causes could be found in insufficient pilot training and lack of maintenance, due to the reduced funding of the MoD.

### **SUCCESSSES OF AIRPOWER**

Airpower (CAS) took care of a large share of the bombardments prior to employing ground forces. VVS and ASV conducted 70-80% of the fire missions, as opposed to 15-17% by artillery.<sup>50</sup> Between October 1999 and February 2000 airpower was used for than more than 4,000 combat sorties, of which the majority were strike sorties. The air strikes caused the destruction of a huge amount of armoured vehicles, ant-aircraft guns, armament-production facilities, weapon storage bunkers, oil refinery factories, fuel warehouses, as well as radar and relay stations.<sup>51</sup> Conclusively, airpower, above all by providing air support to the operations of ground forces, formed a vital contribution to the successful Russian campaign during the first three phases of the conflict.

## **Chechen strategy and operations**

To reach a good understanding of the political-strategic level (grand strategy), the Chechen resistance needs some background explanatory. Russian authorities have always portrayed all Chechen fighters as "bandits and terrorists". However a distinction can be made between three different groups of Chechen armed resistance.<sup>52</sup> First, the official Chechen Government, represented by President Aslan Maskhadov, a former Soviet army Colonel.<sup>53</sup> The Government is mainly made up of moderate, pro-Western people. The objective of the Chechen Government was to maintain an independent Chechnya. Second, small locally orientated armed groups, whose main interest was the revenge of killed relatives. They can best be described as uncoordinated "soldiers-of-fortune". They missed any specific political or military objective. The third group is the militarised and well-structured extremist-Islamic organisation of the so-called Wahhabists. The Chechen commanders in charge of the incursions into Dagestan, Basayev and Khattab, belonged to this group. Their objective was not only to throw the Russians out of Chechnya, but also to install Islamic rule in Chechnya and in Muslim areas on RF territory.

At the operational and tactical level the personnel strength of the Chechen resistance was estimated at 20,000 men, of which between 3,000-6,000 fighters defended Grozny.<sup>54</sup> When the overthrow of Grozny came near 2,000 Chechen fighters pulled out of their capital into the southern mountains, where around 8,000 fighters were believed to be based.<sup>55</sup>

From the outset of the Russian ground campaign, Chechen fighters offered little resistance, apart from defending prepared strongholds, realising that they were no match for the large and heavily armoured Russian forces. However, in December 1999 Chechen militants started counter attacks, employing guerrilla tactics. From areas where they could not cope with the strength of the Russians, Chechen fighters withdrew, with the intention of attacking the enemy in and from the southern mountains. The Chechen militants exploited the deteriorating weather conditions to step up attacks on Federal troops and made well use of the mountainous terrain. After the recapture of Grozny in February 2000, the Chechens have continued their guerrilla warfare not only in the southern mountains, but throughout all of Chechnya and even in the neighbouring RF republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia. The guerrilla tactics employed by the Chechens were hit-and-run attacks, mining, ambushes, assassination of individual soldiers, urban terrorism in the occupied villages and cities, as well as sniper and (suicide) bomb attacks.

Next to countering the RF ground forces, the following can be said about Chechen (anti-) air force warfare. In the beginning of the conflict, the Chechen air component reportedly possessed two transport helicopters and one utility aircraft, an An-2 Colt, which was supposedly used for transport of arms and ammunition. At the end of September 1999, during the attack of the airport of Grozny, the aircraft was destroyed.<sup>56</sup> Since the start of the conflict no further mention has been made of the two helicopters. So again, the Russians had air supremacy in this conflict. The air defence capability of the Chechens was similar to the one used in Dagestan. An organised air-defence system with radar and missiles was absent. Man-portable SAMs, heavy machine-guns and ZSU 23/2 twin barrel anti-aircraft guns on trucks were the arms available for air defence.<sup>57</sup>

The Chechens were successful in disturbing the interface between Russian air and ground operations, by waging information/ electronical warfare against the Russian FAC system. Chechens, as former RF conscripts, used their experience, by monitoring FAC radio transitions and impersonating Russian FACs, to misdirect CAS missions, conducted by ATGs and other formations of the Russian air component. Furthermore, FACs were prime targets of Chechen snipers.<sup>58</sup>

## Assessment

### RUSSIAN STRATEGY AND WARFARE

At the political-strategic level emphasis was on influencing public opinion, which might also be described as information or psychological warfare. Two objectives lay at the foundation of employing information warfare in this conflict. The first objective was to convince the Russian nation of the inevitability of waging war against Chechnya. The second objective was to sustain public support during the conflict.

The bomb attacks of August/September 1999, as well as the Chechen raids into Dagestan and finally the traditional dislike of Chechens, created a solid foundation in Russian society in favour of conducting a war against Chechnya for a second time. Putin's leading role in the campaign guaranteed popular support for his election as President, in March 2000.

To meet the second objective, tight control of the media was meant to ensure an impression of a smooth operation in Chechnya, and thus sustain support in society. The destruction of Chechen

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mass-media facilities (radio and TV) was also part of the information warfare, to prevent broadcasting of other information than desired. The Russians tried to copy NATO's media campaign in the Kosovo conflict. For instance, VVS commander Kornukov showed pictures and videos to prove that targets were hit, without causing any civilian casualties.<sup>59</sup> However, public support decreased as casualties mounted. The authorities were blamed for understating casualty figures and for making the same operational-tactical mistakes as in the first conflict. In addition to this, foreign non-governmental organisations and media reported on human rights abuses and disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force. So in spite of all efforts to control the media, eventually Russian authorities were unable to maintain a strict control on information.

Although the Russian political-military leadership achieved a military victory over Chechnya, they did not win the war politically. The Russians have failed in combining military objectives with realistic political objectives. Occupation and oppression will encourage the Chechens to continue a protracted insurgency war against the Russians. As long as the Kremlin does not recognise that this conflict can only end by a political solution, the war will continue.

At the military-strategic level, the change in command, from the military to the FSB, was a remarkable move. For two reasons this seems to have been a wrong decision. At first, it was an error with regard to the difference in capabilities between the armed forces (MoD) and the troops of the power ministries. The Russians should have learned from the first Chechen conflict and the recent Dagestani conflict that a sound command and control structure was of vital importance for a military campaign. In the aforementioned conflicts command by the MVD had failed, mostly because of poor co-operation with MoD forces, especially with regard to calling in artillery and air support. This time another power ministry, the FSB, was ordered to take over command from the military. The choice for the FSB might have to do with Putin's background in the security services (career in foreign intelligence and former Director FSB). However, with the example of failed command of the MVD, it was not unlikely that the FSB would face similar problems, having no experience of conducting above all military operations. Secondly, changing the command to the FSB, was a mistake regarding command and control. As a consequence of the FSB taking over command of the operation, new staffs were installed. This was another remarkable decision, which went against earlier experiences. The first Chechen conflict had shown that a divided chain of command had disastrous results. Now, once again staffs were created in addition to the unified (military) Joint Staff. It was not unlikely that the two staffs, led by the FSB, would compete with respectively the General Staff in Moscow and the Joint Staff in Chechnya. In this case, clearly a lesson was not learned.

Gradually, co-ordination between MoD forces and troops of the power ministries has improved, especially by creating a Joint Staff, consisting of all forces and troops involved, and by installing FACs as interface between ground and air operations. According to air component commander Gorbenko, after the installation of a unified command no further problems had arisen between MoD and MVD. Blue-on-blue incidents still occurred, but fewer than in the previous conflicts in Dagestan and Chechnya. Co-ordination and co-operation depended to a large extent on the desire to do so. On several occasions criticism, especially from VVS commander Kornukov on ASV, Ground Forces and MVD, revealed that a true desire for co-operation, shared by all commanders involved, had not reached yet.<sup>60</sup> The 35th loss of a helicopter, a Halo, which was destroyed approaching Khankala airbase on 19 August 2002, would cause a watershed in airpower command and control. A week later MoD sources announced that ASV was to be resubordinated from Ground Forces to VVS, by the end of 2002.<sup>61</sup> The reason for this decision was probably the 'misuse' of helicopters by ground forces commanders. For instance by overloading them, as was the case with the Halo, shot down in August 2002. This decision

## *Apparently the Russians had discovered that weapons are not the only way to wage a war*

would mean a strengthening of VVS in command and control of MoD airpower, as well as a decline in military power of the Ground Forces. The conclusion can be drawn that this alleged resubordination of ASV, which would encourage unified command of airpower, is an important lesson learned from the second Chechen conflict.

In contrast to the command and control problems, Russian psychological warfare was quite successful. They used “hearts-and-minds” tactics, by persuading residents to force the rebels out of their villages and thus saving them from destruction. And before Grozny was invaded VVS aircraft dropped leaflets urging residents to leave, warning them that people staying behind would be destroyed as “bandits” and setting an ultimatum of five days.<sup>62</sup> Apparently the Russians had discovered that weapons are not the only way to wage a war.

Reviewing the operational-tactical level it was atypical that the Russians started the invasion in fall. This meant that Russian military leadership had to face deteriorating weather conditions. Heavy snow hampered the ground campaign, which gave rise to Chechens to increase their counter-attacks. Although politically opportune, commencing a military operation in the Caucasus in fall was a risky endeavour from a military point of view.

At first the Russian invasion gave the impression of being a smooth operation. The concepts of conducting heavy artillery and air barrages before sending in ground troops, as well as the “go-slow” tactic were successful and preserved the Russian troops from the heavy casualties they suffered in the first Chechen conflict. Nonetheless, after recapturing the larger part of Chechnya, the Federal forces, in controlling the area, had to cope with guerrilla tactics. Unfortunately, since the first Chechen conflict the Russians still had not developed a doctrine for a protracted insurgency conflict. As a result of this they still employed regular warfare tactics against the irregular tactics of the Chechens. Long-range air and artillery firepower, as used in the “go-slow” approach, were no answer to guerrilla tactics. This asymmetric warfare made the conflict undecided. It seemed impossible for the Russians to achieve a final victory over the Chechens.

A clear lesson learned from the first Chechen conflict was improving the command over air support and subsequently, improving the co-ordination between VVS, ASV and MVD. In the Joint Staff all air assets (of MoD and power ministries) were now under unified command. FACs were assigned to regimental levels and even further down to company level. In this way the tactical commander on the ground had direct access to air support, which meant more effective airpower. Yet, the effectiveness of airpower could have been much higher if structural cuts in the defence budget would not have affected combat readiness of materiel as well as of personnel.

### **CHECHEN STRATEGY AND WARFARE**

At the operational level the Chechen fighters followed an effective approach. Realising that they could not prevent the overwhelming superiority in numbers as well as in materiel of the Russian forces, they offered little resistance in the beginning of the Russian invasion. Chechen fighters withdrew with the intention of attacking the enemy, at first only in and from the southern mountains. The Chechen militants exploited the deteriorating weather conditions to step up attacks on Federal troops and made well use of the mountainous terrain. Since the recapture of Grozny in February 2000, the Chechens have continued their guerrilla warfare, not only from the southern mountains, but throughout all of Chechnya and even into RF territory. Although the Chechen fighters were unable to defeat the strong Russian forces, by employing irregular warfare they have been capable of damaging Russian control over Chechnya. Eventually this protracted insurgency conflict might result in the loss of public support and



force the Russians to leave, as was the case in the first Chechen conflict. At the political-strategic level this would mean a Chechen victory, not only by military force but also by way of patient psychological warfare.

At the tactical level the Chechens, in addition to employing guerrilla tactics, also waged a successful war against the Russian air component. They did well in disturbing the Russian FAC system, as well as in shooting down aircraft and helicopters.

## **ASSESSMENT: COMPARISON OF THE USE OF AIRPOWER IN BOTH CHECHEN CONFLICTS (1994 — 1996 AND 1999 —)**

The purpose of this article was to describe Russian airpower in the second (present) Chechen conflict, therefore I did not elaborate on the first conflict. The airpower aspects of the first Chechen conflict were well documented by others.<sup>63</sup> However, it is worthwhile to make an assessment of the use of airpower based upon a comparison of both conflicts. In doing so, I will first explain structural problems and secondly, I will go into detail on improvements or lessons learned.

### **Structural problems**

First, annual cuts in the defence budget resulted in limitations of materiel (aircraft) and personnel of airpower in the conflict. The consequences were a low level of combat readiness, limited use of airpower during night and bad weather conditions, as well as many losses of aircraft for other reasons than enemy fire.

Secondly, co-ordination and co-operation among MoD forces and between defence forces and troops of the power ministries were improved but were still far from optimal. For instance, friendly fire also occurred in the second conflict.

Thirdly, in both conflicts civilian casualties and collateral damage due to airpower, left a negative impression with the public. However, civilian casualties were not only caused by low currency of pilots and lack of PGMs. The fact that Chechen fighters would often hide in and use air-defence from urban areas also caused innocent victims, for which the Russians were wrongly blamed.

And finally, airpower was effective as long as ground forces were advancing. Airpower was not an answer to a protracted guerrilla war.

### **Improvements**

First of all, the establishment of a unified air component of VVS, ASV and MVD air assets in the second Chechen conflict improved co-ordination and co-operation and thus the effectiveness of airpower.

Secondly, air support for ground forces operations turned out to be more successful in the present conflict. I would perceive the following grounds for this improvement. By conducting air barrages prior to the advancement of troops, airpower created favourable conditions for ground forces and diminished the possibility of friendly fire. FACs proved to be more effective than in the first conflict. It seemed that more FACs were available this time. Because of their greater number, FACs could be deployed in more units

and at lower tactical levels, sometimes even at company level. And finally, FACs were apparently better trained and perhaps better equipped with more sophisticated communications instruments. Another ground for improved air support for ground forces operations was the formation of Aviation Tactical Groups (ATGs). By combining target-designation and attack helicopters, they proved to be highly effective tactical formations.

A third improvement in the use of airpower, related to the previous remark, was the comeback of rotary wing aircraft as part of the combat force of airpower. In the first Chechen conflict helicopters were mainly used for supporting tasks and were excluded from urban areas for fear of enemy air-defence. It was then thought that for combat tasks fixed wing aircraft, such as the Frogfoot, would replace rotary wing. However, in the second Chechen conflict, most likely due to the introduction of the successful ATG concept, helicopters were “back-in-business” for combat missions, which broadened the scope of airpower. Fourthly and finally, the intention of resubordinating ASV from Ground Forces to VVS will enforce central guidance of airpower, which in turn reinforces its effectiveness.

In conclusion, it is evident that the most important structural problem for Russian airpower was funding. Irregular warfare in Chechnya showed that lack or absence of expensive PGMs, high-tech communications, navigation and targeting systems, as well as all-weather and day/night capabilities, limited the effectiveness of airpower. But in spite of the financial problems, Russian airpower demonstrated that it was capable of enhancing its effectiveness without additional financial support, especially by innovations in command & control and by tactical improvements.

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## NOTES

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- <sup>45</sup> RF air component commanders, such as VVS commander Kornukov, repeatedly denied allegations regarding civilian casualties of air attacks: Babichev, "Bandity poluchat po zaslugam"; Babichev, "Zyeleznyye argumenty VVS".
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- <sup>49</sup> Komarov, "Chechen conflict drives call for air force modernization", p. 80; Hedge, "Air war over Chechnya" p. 22; Smyshlayev, "Vertolety nad Chechney"; Matveyev, "Tritsat' pyatyy: v srednem federal'nyye voyska terjayut v Chechne po vertoljotu v mesyats", *NVO*, No. 30 (300), 30 August 2002, p. 1.
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- <sup>58</sup> Hedge, "Air war over Chechnya" p. 22; Georgiyev, "Rol' armeyskoy aviatsii vozrastayet".
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