

# Small War Big Lessons : Chechen Conflict

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## Introduction

**D**isintegration of the erstwhile Soviet Union brought into focus the Islamic underbelly of Russia. Its southern borders have now opened onto a massive Muslim landmass, stretching from Xinjiang (China) in the East, running through Central Asian Republics (CARs) to the Arab world in the West, whereas the southern limits of this expanse rest on the Afghanistan- Pakistan region. With the resurgence of radical Islam this belt has been identified as the most restive and volatile region in the world; the very epicentre of terrorism. Some of the deadliest terrorist organisations flourish here brandishing virulent Islamic ideology. Echoes of these uprisings found resonance in Chechnya – a Muslim dominated region in the Russian Federation, where Chechens revolted for independence from Russian suzerainty – a dream cherished for centuries. Though majority Chechens have now reconciled to peaceful coexistence with Russians, some fringe elements continue to rebel and even participate in Jihadi movements the world over. Having already declared Chechnya a ‘*Walayat*’<sup>1</sup> (province of the Caliphate) in support of the Islamic State (IS), the secessionists have dispatched a large contingent of its cadres to bolster the Jihadi struggle in the Middle East. The Chechens had masterminded some of the most daring and lethal strikes deep inside Russia inflicting heavy loss of lives and property thus inviting its wrath. Russia reacted with all its might to brutally quell the uprising. Their deft, ingenious, strategic and tactical handling of operations, which led the Russians to ultimate victory, was laudable and highlights many lessons for professionals.

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## Chechens through History

The history of Chechnya is engulfed in turbulence, violence and bloodshed having endured series of foreign invasions at the hands of Mongols, Safavids (Persians), Ottoman and Slavic Russians. The Chechens valiantly fought against invaders to preserve their freedom, culture and beliefs. Their continuous struggle made them, as the Russians call, “the most bold and stubborn nation, expert in guerrilla warfare”. Believers of Sunni Islam, the Chechens are highly influenced by moderate, liberal Qadri and Nakshabandi Sufi sects. Russian expansion towards Caucasus started in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, under the rule of Ivan, the Terrible,<sup>1</sup> who after the capture of Astrakhan made inroads into lowland Chechnya.<sup>2</sup> By 1557 the Russians had settled a large number of Cossacks in that area, making it a base for further expansion into Caucasus. This encroachment disturbed the demographic balance in the region, a justifiable cause for strained relations between the two nations. The hatred intensified with continuous Russian ingress into the region, manifesting into bloody clashes. The period between 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Centuries saw a triangular scramble amongst regional powers to dominate Caucasus region. Moscow, under ‘Peter, the Great’, annexed Dagestan from Persia under the ‘Treaty of Gulistan’<sup>3</sup> (Russo-Persian war 1803-1813) and Georgia became its protectorate under the Treaty of Georgievsk (1783).

Discovery of oil in Grozny (Chechnya) in 1803 and subsequently in Caspian basin further enhanced the geo-strategic importance of the region. In order to secure its southern frontiers and strategic oil fields, Russia, in 1813 defeated the Persian army of Fateh Ali Shah Qajar and liberated Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.<sup>4</sup> By 1826 Moscow had consolidated its hold on the entire Caucasus region. By 1859, after two decades of bitter war, Chechnya was formally annexed by Russia. During the Bolshevik revolution, the Chechens allied with the communists as they promised greater autonomy to the province. In 1936, the Russians proclaimed it to be an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Chechen-Ingush Republic. But during the Second World War, the Chechens were accused of collaborating with the Germans. To punish the Chechens for the alleged sedition, Stalin deported them *en masse* to Siberia and CARs.<sup>5</sup> Those who refused were killed or burnt alive. Destruction of religious places, heritage sites, historical texts/

literature and even replacing the Chechen names with Russian ones was a conscious, institutionalised 'Russification' of the region. In 1957, however in the course of de-Stalinisation, Khrushchev permitted them to return to their homeland. These attempts at reconciliation failed to dampen the spirit of nationalism amongst the Chechens. Surge in Islamic fundamentalism in the Muslim world and its political, religious and financial support bolstered the Chechens' resolve to shake off the Russian yoke. Terrorism as tactics gave impetus to the military potential of these battle hardened guerrillas. Taking advantage of the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991, Chechnya demanded sovereignty in line with other provinces, particularly equating itself with three adjoining Caucasian republics – Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. This declaration left no room for accommodation and set the stage for another bitter war for secession.

### **Geo-Strategic Importance**

Please refer to **Map 1**. The Caucasus mountain range is geographically subdivided into 'The Great Caucasus', dominated by Muslim inhabited areas of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia (Russian Federation), whereas 'The Less Caucasus', is occupied by Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia (former Soviet Republics). These natural barriers configure into a formidable defence system between Middle East and Russia. For centuries, the region has been a hotbed of many wars amongst Persia, Ottoman empire and Tsarist Russia, scrambling to dominate the area with a view to providing a security cushion to their respective dominions. Caucasus range forms a formidable bridge between Black Sea on the West and Caspian on the East. The Black Sea is an important water outlet into the Mediterranean and is economically a viable trade route; Petersburg and Vladivostok being the two extremes of the vast Russian landscape. Caspian on the other hand is rich in hydrocarbons and sea food. The Russian oil pipe lines pass through Caucasus to converge at the Black Sea for export.

Map 1<sup>6</sup>

Annexation of Crimea by Russia gives added security to its sea lanes. The whole region is in essence the commercial heart of Russia, hence its security is of utmost interest. To ensure safe transit, Moscow actively asserts its influence over Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, unilaterally supporting the quasi-independent status of Nagorno Karabakh, an ethnic Armenian pocket in Azerbaijan and Abkhazia and Ossetia (ethnic Russian) in Georgia. Azerbaijan and Armenia form part of the Russian sponsored Commonwealth of Independent States, but Georgia has sought refuge in the European alliance and is desperately seeking NATO membership. These overtures infuriated Russia and invited its indignation in 2008. The phenomenal rise of Islamic radicalism across the Muslim world is causing great security concern to the Kremlin as its southern underbelly consisting of Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia is vulnerable to Islamic extremism. Muslims constitute about 14 per cent of the total Russian population. It is not only the largest minority community in the country, but the largest Muslim population in Europe.

### The Battle Lines

The conflict started amidst the crumbling Soviet empire. Chechen declaration of independence in Dec 1991 went somewhat unnoticed in Moscow. Its belated reaction came in Dec 1994, the beginning

of the First Chechen War which the rebels fought in the spirit of nationalism inflicting heavy casualties on the Russians. The two years war remained inconclusive as the Chechens claimed victory whereas the Russians retained a somewhat tenuous political hold on the province. The Second Chechen War commenced in 1999 when thousands of Jihadis, from all over the Muslim world, congregated in support of the Chechens giving the conflict a radical Islamist colour – a Jihad, thrusting nationalism into the shadows. The Chechen strategy envisaged taking war deep into the Russian heartland by executing spectacular terrorist attacks in metros, subways, civil aviation aircraft, theatres and schools.<sup>7</sup> 400-500 hardened Jihadis, including highly indoctrinated ‘Black Widows’<sup>8</sup> were readily available to carry out suicide missions. Coupled with this, psychological threats to use weapons of mass destruction (radioactive, chemical and biological) were conveyed to keep Russia under constant anxiety and tension with a view to breaking its will to resist. Guerrilla warfare being their forte they sought to deploy these tactics in urban and mountainous terrain, and simultaneously engage the Russians in the plains employing their leftover heavy armaments. The Russian reaction was equally decisive and backed with a resolve to exemplify the inviolability of its territorial integrity.

### **Russian Response**

**Strategy.** Vladimir Putin assumed Presidency of Russian Federation in 1999. His leadership was inspiring, decisive and resolute against the debilitated stewardship of Boris Yeltsin. Putin’s political message was loud and clear; to finish the war conclusively on Russian terms. The Russian strategy stipulated destruction of fighter aircraft and helicopters in a pre-emptive strike. The war zone was isolated, particularly from the South, denying the rebels their traditional supply routes from the Islamic world. Approach along Georgia was deliberately left open to channelise the infiltrators into a crafty maze of traps. In a planned offensive rebels were pushed deep into the mountains, particularly during winters to endure treacherous living conditions without proper shelter and logistics. Relentless pressure was maintained, denying the rebels the flexibility to move to the plains for combat during summer. A new approach (elaborated subsequently) was conceived to flush out rebels from their urban strong holds to minimise own losses. Dastardly terrorist attacks were relentlessly exposed and publicised

to seek condemnation and gain moral support from the international community and vindication for Russia against human rights violations. The Al Qaida orchestrated 9/11 attack in the US, at the same time, silenced western criticism and forged institutionalised cooperation with Russia to annihilate Al Qaida and its ilk spearheading the Chechen war. That strengthened the Russian moral fibre to deal with rebels with all means at its disposal. As the old saying goes, “when the tactics are wrong and the strategy is also wrong the war will be quickly lost. When the tactics are right and the strategy is wrong, battles may be won but the war will be lost. When the tactics are wrong and the strategy is right the battles will be lost but the war will be won. When the tactics are right and the strategy is also right the war will be won quickly”.

**Training and Preparation.** Hastily assembled Russian forces, ill-trained and under prepared, were pressed into service in the First Chechen War, only to fall prey to the battle hardened, wily guerrillas. They lacked professionalism in guerrilla warfare, isolated combat and fighting in built up areas.<sup>9</sup> Russian infantry would not disembark from their armored personnel carriers to clear streets/ rooftops and were sitting ducks for the rebels who stood on the balconies and lobbed grenades on them. Russians had committed a similar mistake while fighting in Afghanistan (1979- 1989) incurring heavy losses and a mortifying defeat at the hands of ‘rag tag’ Mujahidin. In 1980, a Vietnamese delegation, with rich experience in guerrilla warfare from Indo-China War, visited Afghanistan and advised the Soviets to employ small sub-units of Special Forces, supported by helicopters to take on the Afghan mujahidin.<sup>10</sup> However Marshal Sokolov had rejected the proposal. Russians were not to repeat this mistake in the Second Chechen War. In revised battle preparedness the troops were put through a rigorous reorientation capsule. A ‘Divisional Battle School’ was established in Siberia in environments akin to the operational area. Particular emphasis was laid on mountain warfare, guerrilla tactics, small team combat, employment of Special Forces (SPETSNAZ), use of helicopters in support of ground operations and fighting in urban areas. This training was essential to change the conventional mindset. Unconventional war cannot be won by conventional means.

**Intelligence Build-Up.** The process takes years to mature into a reliable network, providing actionable intelligence. This important aspect was overlooked in the First Chechen War. In true earnest



the efforts to raise the quality of intelligence commenced in 1999 and by the Second and Third Chechen War became an effective component of the Russian security apparatus engaged in Chechnya. With Western and Israeli cooperation the Russians were able to infiltrate deep into militant outfits in the Muslim world supporting war in Chechnya and were able to successfully intercept supplies / reinforcements to the rebels. By 2006, the Russian Secret Service (FSB) and its Military Intelligence (GRU)<sup>11</sup> could claim 1000 quality informers in Chechnya; so much so that most Chechen militant organisations were compromised. Unarmed PACHELA spy-planes were extensively employed to monitor rebel movement. Locals – disgruntled, demoralised and disillusioned with conservative, radical Wahhabi Islam and reconciled to end bloodshed and further destruction of their homeland— came forward to share valuable intelligence. Surgical raids by Special Forces and sabotage badly mauled the key rebel leadership. Ibn al-Khattack, a Jordanian jihadi, mastermind of many deadly attacks, was killed in one such sabotage. His mother's letter sent through a courier, was intercepted, laced with NEUROTOXIM a deadly toxin, and then delivered to him causing inevitable death. Shamil Basayev, Ilayas and many other important leaders were likewise exterminated leaving the movement rudderless leading to its ultimate collapse. Similarly, a ship loaded with war material meant for Chechen rebels was craftily manoeuvred to a pre-arranged location and blown up to smithereens by the Russian intelligence. Superior intelligence is an assured route to success. Lack of it leads to a wild goose chase, a shot in total darkness, a directionless effort which expectedly causes fatigue, frustration and demoralisation amongst troops.

**Fighting in Urban Areas.** In the First Chechen War the Russians had suffered heavy losses with maximum casualties incurred while clearing built up areas. The broad plan now envisaged isolation of cities/ towns, division of the area into specific zones, identification of rebel strong holds and then plastering these with intense bombardment from heavy weapons of all calibre. Collateral damage was accepted as a price to be paid. A particular flank was deliberately left unguarded to lure fleeing rebels into a well laid out and crafty web of improvised explosive devices, booby traps and mines. Storm Detachments, comprising assault infantry, tanks, BMPs, supported by 122mm/ 155mm self-propelled Howitzers and

helicopter gunships, were infiltrated through safe lanes to establish 'Strong Holds' at pre-determined areas to clear rebel pockets/remnants. These tactics proved decisive as excessive casualties suffered by the rebels shattered their spirits and confidence to confront Russians in a set piece battle. These shattering blows had a demonstrating impact on the population who thereafter began disassociating from the movement and came out in large numbers to support the process of peace and reconciliation.

**Role of Special Forces and Hit Teams.** Highly skilled Special Forces were extensively employed for intercepting reinforcements, eliminating top rebel leadership, destruction of safe havens and to execute high risk rescue operations to free hostages from the terrorists. Border Guard Units<sup>12</sup>, Special Police Units (OMON, PMON) and two SPETSNAZ Units – VOSTOK (East) and ZAPAD (West) composed exclusively of Chechens proved combat effective. Chechen Special Forces were employed in the high risk rescue operations to free hostages from the Beslan School siege. The local intelligence units operating under the supervision of FSB and GRU had greatly enhanced the combat effectiveness of the 'Special Forces' and 'Hit Teams'. Moscow took a bold decision to send Chechen Special Forces<sup>13</sup> in guise of protection force to Russian construction and engineer units working in Lebanon. It was tasked to hunt down Chechen Jihadi elements hiding in southern Lebanon and Palestinian refugee camps in addition to gathering intelligence about the Arab sympathisers of the Chechen cause. Surgical operations based on reliable, actionable intelligence can unnerve the toughest of insurgents. *One of the important lessons of this war is the faith and trust reposed in the locals to fully integrate them into the security apparatus to fight rebels.*

**Winning Hearts and Minds.** It was a classic example of political manoeuvring, diplomatic sagacity and a genuine commitment towards development and reconstruction of the province. Sensing the mood swing amongst the locals, Moscow took some bold initiatives to win over the hearts and minds. By 2006 the Chechens were incensed with the Wahhabi, conservative and radical Islam. Strict dress codes, draconian punishments under Sharia and a virtual monopoly by the Arab Jihadis, putting the nationalists to shame, invited the ire of the locals. Amnesty to the rebels who surrendered and appointment of Ramzan Kadyrov, a popular local Sufi cleric as the President of the province helped assuage the



political and religious angst of the people. A large number of rebels defected to join government forces. Development and reconstruction was undertaken on a massive scale that reflected a genuine and committed effort by Kremlin. To demonstrate Moscow's trust in the Chechens, the provincial forces were entrusted with maintaining law and order and security of the State. In a way, the Chechens under President Ramzan Kadyrov were allowed to run the affairs of the state, eliminating any trust deficit and unwarranted interference from Moscow. By the end of 2006, the Arab radicals were isolated, demoralised and frustrated and had started withdrawing from the conflict. *Winning a war is one part of the story, ensuring peace and stability in a war ravaged state another, much more difficult at that, which is impossible without the support of the people.*

### **Conclusion**

A professional army trained in guerrilla warfare and backed by reliable intelligence can successfully counter insurgents. The Jihadi elements of different backgrounds and ethnicity who congregate to give impetus to the Muslim dominated movements in various parts of the world are not indefatigable when faced with a resolute and determined opposition. These elements bring with them a radical, extremist and conservative brand of Islam which the locals invariably resent due to their own liberal and tolerant religious beliefs. This undercurrent, if suitably exploited, can wean the population away from the rebels and can prove to be a turning point in the successful conduct of counter-insurgency operations. Winning hearts and minds requires a transparent, committed and genuine effort to have the desired impact. Half-hearted attempts may prove counterproductive. "In counter-insurgency people are not the means to achieve objective but are the objective".<sup>14</sup> A retired British General Rupert Smith has rightly called it a 'war amongst people'. The local security apparatus must be rejuvenated at the earliest to gradually take over the mantle of fighting insurgency. On a larger canvas, the foreign troops, even super powers, have repeatedly failed to find resolution of such conflicts. On the contrary they have vitiated the atmosphere and further complicated the situation. It is the prime responsibility of the national forces to stand up and be counted to fight this menace. Iraq and Afghanistan have learnt this lesson after suffering immense destruction, loss of life and political instability. I have termed this

conflict as a 'small war' owing to its scale and dimensions as it remained confined to a small region within the vast Russian empire. But it is not to undermine the valuable military lessons that it has thrown up in the context of counter-insurgency operations. Historically, never since the Malay campaign (1959-1960) has an insurgency been so decisively neutralised as in Chechnya. Russians, true to their inherent resilience and dogged determination have invariably turned the tide against un-surmountable events; Chechnya being no exception.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/islamic> state of Iraq and the Levant.
- <sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/history\\_of\\_Chechnya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/history_of_Chechnya).
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>4</sup> Kaushik Roy, War and Society in Afghanistan from the Mughals to the Americans, 1500-2013, p. 51.
- <sup>5</sup> [www.info-please.com/encyclopedia/world/Chechnya-history.htm/](http://www.info-please.com/encyclopedia/world/Chechnya-history.htm/).
- <sup>6</sup> [www.sras.org/chechnya](http://www.sras.org/chechnya).
- <sup>7</sup> Time Magazine, 16 Aug 2010, by Simon Shuster/Moscow, p. 12-17.
- <sup>8</sup> Yossef Bodasky, Chechen Jihad- Al Qaida's Training Ground And The Next Wave Of Terror, p. 258.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 246/247.
- <sup>10</sup> Kaushik Roy, op. cit., p.169, para 2.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 378, para 3.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 382, para 2.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 384, 385.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, p. 236, para 1.