

Кавказа гордые сыны,	Proud sons of the Caucasian mountains,
Сражались, гибли вы ужасно;	You fought and died so terribly;
Но не спасла вас наша кровь, . . .	But even our blood did not save you, . . .

From Alexander Pushkin,  
*Prisoner of the Caucasus*, 1820–1821 (author’s translation)

## **BACKGROUND**

In December 1994, Russian troops embarked on a painful and bloody effort to wrest the city of Grozny, in the breakaway region of Chechnya, from secessionist forces. Despite expectations of easy victory, the city lived up to its name, which in Russian means “terrible” or “menacing.” After taking numerous casualties and nearly destroying the city, the Russians eventually succeeded in capturing it. They then maintained control of Grozny for over a year, overcoming mul-

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Author’s note: In this analysis, I use the terms “rebel,” “insurgent,” “guerrilla,” and “resistance” to refer to individuals and groups fighting the Russian forces with the goal of establishing and maintaining an independent Chechen state, the Republic of Ichkeria. These terms are not meant to connote any judgment on my part of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of any cause or action. Rather, I believe they conform to common usage for conveying that the individuals and groups referenced seek to secure independence from Russia. I also use the term “Chechen” to refer to these same individuals and groups. In doing so, I do not intend to imply that all individuals of Chechen descent, or all residents of the Chechen Republic, are involved in the effort to achieve independence from Russia. But because the effort was and is in most ways a Chechen nationalist one, I believe the use of the term is appropriate. When I refer to Chechen groups supporting Russian rule, I use modifiers such as “loyalist” to make that clear.

tiple Chechen attacks. But at the end of August 1996 an unexpected Chechen counteroffensive proved successful, and a subsequent negotiated settlement ended the Chechen conflict. Despite that agreement's commitment to joint rule, Russian forces soon left Grozny and Chechnya.

But this conflict had deep roots and it was far from over. Russians have fought to control the northern Caucasus region for centuries, battling the ancestors of those who live there now. The prize, then as now, was forested mountainous terrain that gives its defenders many advantages. Victory, when attained, has always been fleeting and costly. Moreover, throughout the centuries, each return of Russian forces fanned the flames of local hatred for Moscow's rule, spurring renewed rebellion. With this history in mind, it should come as no surprise that having left in August 1996, Russian soldiers returned to Grozny in December 1999 to once again battle Chechen rebels in the city's streets.

## **WIDER IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHECHEN WARS**

This latest bout of fighting in Chechnya and its cities, towns, and villages has important implications for understanding and forecasting the future of war—and for U.S. military thinking and planning. However decrepit, undermanned, and undertrained the Russian military may be, it is the successor to the Soviet Army, and in some ways still the same force. For many years, Soviet military preparation, like that of the United States, focused almost exclusively on war in central Europe against a highly skilled, technologically advanced adversary. In Chechnya, Russia found many of these skills and capabilities to be incommensurate with fighting a comparatively low-technology enemy, especially in an urban environment where it repeatedly failed to anticipate the extent and capacity of enemy resistance. This is an important lesson, and not just for the Russians. The enemies that U.S. forces will face in the future are far more likely to resemble the Chechen rebels than the Russian Army, and the battlefield will very likely look more like Grozny than central Europe.

What happened to the Russians in Grozny and Chechnya's other towns and villages? Was the debacle of New Year's Eve 1994–1995 a result of military incompetence, or were the high casualties and ineffectual combat products of disadvantages inherent in fighting to

capture, rather than defend, a city? Was the purported success of five years later a true victory, or a public relations whitewash of yet another slaughter? What does the sum of these battles for Grozny reveal about urban warfare specifically and Russian capabilities generally? What lessons can this experience teach the United States as it develops its own approaches to urban combat?

With these questions as a guide, this report explores the events of 1994–1996 and those of 1999–2000, comparing them and drawing lessons from both. While focusing primarily on urban combat, this analysis also discusses many general aspects of Russian operations in the Chechnya war. The conclusions it draws are neither clear nor easy ones, for there is truth to be found in a wide range of competing and sometimes incongruous-seeming explanations. All of them must be studied and understood. As one of the largest-scale urban operations of our time and a major test of the Russian armed forces, Grozny offers significant lessons to students of both the Russian military and urban combat.

## **APPROACH AND ORGANIZATION**

This report provides a detailed look at the weapons and tactics employed during urban combat in Chechnya in 1994–1995 and 1999–2000, focusing primarily on the Russian experience. The analysis is informed by primary and secondary published and Internet sources and by interviews and discussions with military officers and other experts. This includes a comprehensive review of the Russian professional military press between 1995 and 2000 (*Armeiskii Sbornik*, *Voennaia Mysl*, and others). Journalistic sources include Russian- and English-language media reports and press interviews with soldiers and officers on the front lines. Moreover, the research was informed by the already substantial literature on the Chechnya conflicts written by Russian and Western analysts.

The report is organized chronologically, with Chapter Two examining the 1994–1995 Chechnya campaign and Chapter Three focusing on the 1999–2000 campaign. Because there are already a number of authoritative analyses of the earlier campaign, Chapter Two relies more heavily on secondary sources. Rather than taking a detailed look at the campaign, the chapter summarizes the mistakes of and lessons learned by the Russian military. Chapter Three is more

detailed in its description of the combat and relies more on primary source material. It discusses the major tactical aspects of urban combat and the innovations introduced by the Russians. Chapter Four provides overall conclusions regarding the preparation of the Russian armed forces for the type of urban combat they experienced in Chechnya, the extent of learning, and the potential lessons from the Russian experience applicable to other militaries.