Chechen Redux

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Insights from the Past and Current Events

John T. Kuehn

Does this sound familiar?

“The objective was a quick victory leading to pacification and reestablishment of a pro-Russian government. The result, however, was a long series of military operations bungled by the Russians and stymied by ... guerrilla forces.”

This is a description...of the First Chechen War, 1994-1996. So what we are seeing now in the Russo-Ukrainian War is nothing new when it comes to the Russians--a Chechen Redux. Some review, the Russians tried to first overthrow the separatist regime of former Soviet pilot Dzhokar Dudayev by accusing it of “repressing political dissent, of corruption, and of involvement in international criminal activities.” That sounds familiar, too, does it not? It didn’t work. They next tried the Spetznaz/little green men approach in late 1994. When that failed the Russian Army invaded along THREE axes with Grozny as the objective for all three spearheads. They used conscripts in second rate equipment, some did not even know how to operate the equipment they were provided. This also proved inadequate.

Russians go home, right? Chechnya achieves its independence? No. The Russians came back with the full fire power of the Russian Military and secured Grozny block by block as Dudayev fled to the west to continue a guerilla war that lasted well beyond the official 1996 end of the war. Dudayev did not survive and was probably killed by a munition that homed in on his satellite phone.

So those of you looking at Ukraine need to ask yourselves, why have so few referenced this freely available military history showing that the Russians might not try the same quick war gambit again? Against a perceived weaker foe? So, now their action makes more rational sense. Ukrainians aren’t Chechens after all, and we all know how fierce Chechens are. Another Russian assumption that didn’t work out.

And why should the same initial result, Russian humiliation, surprise us? Which begs the question what next? We can only hope that Russia does not bring its side-lined air
force and all its firepower down off the shelf and opt for barbaric war as seen in Grozny in 1994-1996. I suspect the chances that they will employ the Grozny-Chechen model are quite high. Finally there is the irony, recently discussed by Michael Kofman on a War on the Rocks podcast, of Russia bringing in the “pros” from Grozny to fight FOR them in what appears—so far—to be a Chechen Redux. [3]

I hope I am wrong, but as a historian, as a military historian, I think the Russians might indeed double down on the Chechen solution based on their perceived success in 1996.


[2] Ibid.


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“The objective was a quick victory leading to pacification and reestablishment of a pro-Russian government. The result, however, was a long series of military operations bungled by the Russians and stymied by ... guerrilla forces.....” [1]

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So those of you looking at Ukraine need to ask yourselves, why did no one believe the Russians might not try the same quick war gambit again? Against a perceived weaker foe? So, now their action makes more rational sense. Ukrainians aren’t Chechens after all, and we all know how fierce Chechens are. Another Russian assumption that didn’t work out.

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I hope I am wrong, but as a historian, as a military historian, it appears the past is indeed the present.
Hand Grenade of the Week