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A View from Chechnya:
An Assessment of Russian Counterinsurgency
During the two Chechen Wars
and Future Implications

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Abstract

Following the 11 September 2001 attacks, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the myriad of smaller engagements taking place around the world in conjunction with the global war on terrorism, military academia has increasingly focused study on historical counter-insurgencies. The study of historical counter-insurgency has been very beneficial to the conduct of contemporary counter-insurgency operations. Although lessons can be learned from historical study, any conclusions tend to be subjective and are time, space and country specific.

Notwithstanding this, historical case studies of counter-insurgency operations reveal a number of consistent themes. These themes include: the recommended approaches towards the conduct of information, security, hearts and minds, and reconstruction operations, the use of allied indigenous forces, the importance of unity of effort between the various counter-insurgent forces, the correct use of air power, the manipulation of the media, the proper training of counter-insurgent forces, logistics operations, and the importance of morale during counter-insurgencies.

In the last two decades Russia has fought two counter-insurgency conflicts in Chechnya. The First Chechen War (1994-1996) was conducted by an underprepared, poorly coordinated Russian military. The First Chechen War was a disaster for the Russians because they simply had no road map for their ultimate objective of returning Chechnya to the Russian Federation. As a result, the Russians were severely mauled by the committed Chechen ‘warrior patriots’ and were forced to withdraw in 1996. Following this war, the Russian military began examining lessons from the first war and other counter-insurgencies with an eye to re-invading Chechnya. When that invasion commenced in 1999, the Russian forces were better prepared and more successful. They saturated the tiny republic with enormous firepower and manpower which made it difficult for the Chechen insurgents to manoeuvre. Although the war lingers on today, the Russians had control over the majority of the country within a year.

Despite this victory, the Russian campaign was flawed; and its conduct has major implications for the future of Russian counter-insurgency operations. While heavy quantities of firepower and manpower were able to put down the insurgency in Chechnya, it is questionable whether Russian firepower and manpower would be successful in putting down an insurgency in a larger country with a larger population.

For Roland Joseph Michael William Renaud,
Always treasured, forever remembered.

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Glossary

AO – Area of Operations

APC – Armoured Personnel Carrier

COIN – Counterinsurgency

FAPSI - Federal Agency of Government Communication and Information

FARC – Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Columbia

FSK – Federal Counterintelligence Service

HN – Host Nation

IED – Improvised Explosive Device

IPB – Information Preparation of the Battlefield

MChS - Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defence, Emergencies and Natural Disaster Relief

MOD – Ministry of Defence

MVD – Ministry of Internal Affairs

NCMD – North Caucasian Military District

NKVD – The Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs (Early Soviet Secret Police)

SSR – Soviet Socialist Republic

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republics